

Cambridge O Level Literature in English 2010

Teacher notes: Poetry AO1

Note: These teacher notes accompany a video available on Resource Plus.

AO1: Show detailed knowledge of the content of literary texts in the three main forms (drama, poetry and prose), supported by reference to the text.

Here are some notes to accompany the videos.

- The purpose of the Dürer illustration is to introduce the techniques of personification and allegory also used in Emily Dickinson's poem and elsewhere. By **personification**, we normally mean treating an abstract idea as a person. In the print, the Four Horsemen are War, Sickness, Starvation and Death. The print is an **allegory** of the end of the world, and relates to Dickinson's metaphor of a carriage ride with Death to the grave: in allegory, there is a surface meaning but each character or detail of the text could stand for something else, a deeper meaning. Consider how poems you are studying use personification, allegory or extended metaphor.
- The films on Drama and Prose also emphasise that **biography** (the life of the writer) is not important knowledge for a literary understanding of texts. Very few poems are directly autobiographical: poets transform their own experiences through metaphors and create **personas** (or masks). The 'I' in a poem is not the same 'I' as the biographical poet, but a literary construct or invention. However, as shorthand we often call this 'I' **'the poet'**.
- In **allegory**, we need to look at who or what each part of the text might resemble. Sometimes the allegorical meaning in a text appears to be quite specific (consider, for example, the relationship of *Animal Farm* to the Soviet Union). However, in a literary text there is never just one interpretation or 'hidden meaning', and there are often different ways in which the allegory can be applied.
- **Definitions** of words used in poems need to consider not just their **denotation** (as found in a dictionary) but also their **connotations**: what does the choice of words suggest to a reader, for example about the relationship between the speaker in Dickinson's poem and death?
- **Textual references** mean brief quotations of phrases and some comment on those connotations.
- In the Dickinson poem, **images**, the visual element of the text and their sequence and place in the structure of the text, help the reader to understand the journey described.
- To **extend** the journey illustrated in the film, consider the final stanzas. The poem shows Time flashing past the poet and Death as they ride towards 'Eternity', the last word in the poem. Ask learners about the image of a 'House' in the ground in Stanza 5. This is clearly the grave. However, this is not the end of the poem. What has the poet 'surmised' or worked out in Stanza 6? How is the idea of 'Eternity' linked to the personification of 'Immortality' in the first line of Stanza 1? The literal meaning of the poem now requires a consideration of its allegory, and its more ambiguous, or debatable, deeper meaning. Is the poem pessimistic or optimistic?

Visuals	Notes				
	Cambridge O Level Literature in English asks you to study texts across the three genres of Poetry, Prose and Drama. Often it is poetry which learners worry about most. With prose and drama, there is a clear story, and narrative content to learn. Poetry is more abstract, requiring the reader to interpret a text in the same way as they might an artwork in a museum. Consider this painting by Albrecht Dürer. You need to know the horsemen are an allegory, which means they are personifications or images rather than people. The print was made at the end of the sixteenth century, in a period of increasing war and religious turmoil in Europe, and is based on a Biblical prophecy of how the world will end. Poetry works in a similar way: it gives us an image which is not realistic but needs to be interpreted.				
<table border="1"> <tr> <td data-bbox="181 617 488 786">KNOWLEDGE</td><td data-bbox="488 617 848 786">UNDERSTANDING</td></tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="181 786 488 965">LANGUAGE</td><td data-bbox="488 786 848 965">PERSONAL RESPONSE</td></tr> </table>	KNOWLEDGE	UNDERSTANDING	LANGUAGE	PERSONAL RESPONSE	When writing about poems for this examination, the assessment will be based around four objectives: Knowledge Understanding Language Personal response.
KNOWLEDGE	UNDERSTANDING				
LANGUAGE	PERSONAL RESPONSE				
It is about demonstrating a knowledge of the poem's CONTENT through reference to specific sections of the text.	What you need to know about a poem is often misunderstood. Some think it is important to know a lot about the poet's life before writing about the poems. But assessment objective 1 is not about that kind of knowledge. It is about demonstrating a knowledge of the poem's content through reference to specific sections of the text.				

Visuals	Notes
BECAUSE I COULD NOT STOP FOR DEATH <i>Emily Dickinson</i> Because I could not stop for Death – He kindly stopped for me – The Carriage held but just Ourselves – And Immortality. We slowly drove – He knew no haste And I had put away My labor and my leisure too, For His Civility – We passed the School, where Children strove At Recess – in the Ring – We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain – We passed the Setting Sun –	For now, we need only concern ourselves with the poem, not the poet. As an example, let's look at 'Because I could not stop for Death' by Emily Dickinson. The poem is an allegory. All those capital letters throughout the text indicate this. Lots of poems have a central, extended metaphor or idea. It is important to understand this right away. The other character in the poem is 'I'. Poems have a voice, but that speaker is not necessarily the poet her or himself.
<i>civility</i> [MASS NOUN] 1. Formal politeness and courtesy in behaviour or speech.	Death stops and takes the speaker on a carriage ride, so we already know that the poem will describe a journey. By making textual references we can show the different stages of that journey. We might want to think about the speaker's relationship with Death: his kindness and civility; her light, fashionable clothes, or the fact that 'The Carriage held but just Ourselves'. A good dictionary will help you understand key words and phrases in the text.
	We could also consider the way the poem explores the passage of time. Although the journey is apparently a slow one, time seems to go fast in this stanza, which may be the point, as a life seems to just flash past. From youthful images of childish games in school, to the idea of grain waiting to be harvested at the end of the summer, to the end of the day: all these images suggest the passage of time. As we read through the poem for the first time, questions may arise that cannot easily be answered. Make a note of such questions and carry on. In AO1, the key is to figure out WHAT is going on in terms of content, structure and word choice, and not so much HOW or WHY. We need a clear set of

Visuals	Notes
	images in our head before trying too hard to interpret them.

Here are some words which you may want to check your understanding of:

Your notes	
allegory	
Biblical prophecy	
extended metaphor	

Cambridge Assessment International Education
 The Triangle Building, Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge, CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
 t: +44 1223 553554
 e: info@cambridgeinternational.org www.cambridgeinternational.org

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