

Cambridge O Level Literature in English 2010

Teacher notes: Poetry AO2

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

AO2: Understand the meanings of literary texts and their contexts, and explore texts beyond surface meanings to show deeper awareness of ideas and attitudes.

Here are some notes to accompany the videos.

- AO2 is the assessment objective which requires that deeper understanding of the text. It also includes some understanding of contexts. In Cambridge IGCSE, contexts are not an assessment objective on their own, and learners do not need to refer explicitly to historical and social background. However, learners should explore how contexts, our own as well as the writers', affect the way we read and understand texts.
- There is no single meaning or context which is the correct one, so again it isn't about going back to the life and loves of the author or even their beliefs. For example, may be helpful to know that Emily Dickinson grew up in a heavily religious society which talked a lot about death and judgement in the afterlife, but it is not necessary to understand the poem. However, it is important when addressing AO2 to go beyond surface meaning and story, and to look at underlying ideas and attitudes.
- Deeper understanding means that we explore what is implied and not just the literal meaning. For example, in Dickinson's poem the images are allegories for youth, maturity and old age, so they represent the passing of time and the stages of life.
- The poem therefore suggests how quickly a human life goes by, and that young people are too wrapped up in their own fashionable lives (represented by the way the young woman is dressed) to notice this.
- Ask learners to consider the meaning of 'dew' and 'chills' in Stanza 4. How does an allegorical, rather than literal, reading make these images more sinister?
- If the poem is an allegory about a young woman's first realisation that she would die, what she 'first surmised', why does the poet say this happened 'Centuries ago'? This suggests the journey is actually a timeless one, not an autobiographical or individual event, but the lesson of hundreds of years of experience. Why are the poem's images and portrayal of Death far less frightening than that of Dürer? Dickinson is asking us to think not giving us answers. Consider the ways in which the poems your learners are studying are open to a variety of possible interpretations.

Visuals	Notes
Assessment objective 2 is about contexts . Plural not singular. There is no single meaning or context which is the correct one.	
BECAUSE I COULD NOT STOP FOR DEATH Emily Dickinson 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 – 	It is important when addressing AO2 to go beyond surface meaning and story, and to look at underlying ideas and attitudes. Not just the poet's, but our own. A second reading leads us to ask 'Why?' rather than 'What?' and these questions might have more than one answer. • Why does he open the door of the carriage so 'kindly'? Is this sarcastic? • Why won't the speaker 'stop for Death'? Is she in too much of a hurry to get on with her life? • Is 'Eternity' the grave? Or is it a suggestion that Death is not the end of the journey, and that there is life beyond the grave? Dickinson's beliefs, like those of many poets, were religious but not orthodox. In other words, she is asking us to think rather than giving us answers.
BECAUSE I COULD NOT STOP FOR DEATH Emily Dickinson 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 – 	A lot of the meaning of this poem is a matter of tone, and whether we read lines literally or with irony (that idea that lines can mean two different things at the same time).

Visuals	Notes
	Another context to bring in at this point is the role of women at the time the poem was written. Given the limitations of education for women at the time, how well equipped were they to answer big philosophical questions about life? Dickinson herself was highly educated and an independent thinker, so the deeper awareness of ideas and attitudes would confront these larger questions about life and death – or mortality. In nineteenth-century Puritan America. Such free thinking was unusual, especially for women. Dickinson's poems were unknown and unpublished in her own time, but mean more to us today.
Once you have explored the deeper meanings of a text, you can begin to form your own personal response.	

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

Copyright © UCLES March 2020