

Cambridge O Level Literature in English 2010


Teacher notes: Poetry AO4

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

AO4: Communicate a sensitive and informed personal response.

Here are some notes to accompany the videos.

- 'Personal Response' relates to the whole of a learner's answer to a question, but you can practise expressing a confident overview in introductions and conclusions.
- Here too 'informed' means informed by language, form and connotations, not outside information about the life of the poet.
- This is where overall appreciation of the effects of **tone and mood** (see above) are important.
- The film about 'Tears, Idle Tears' shows the importance of going **beyond surface meaning**.
- Extended metaphors and series of similes (comparisons involving 'like' or 'as') can be linked and interpreted in order to construct a personal response.
- The information presented in the final section of the film is a distractor, while information is interesting and may help our understanding of a poem, what is important is that personal response is informed by interpretation of detail.
- Key skills to practise are commentary on words, phrases and images, explaining their effect and the ability to synthesise observations and bring them together through well-developed analysis to make a personal evaluation of the poem, summing up what it means to you. Encourage your learners to say what the poem means to them, instead of teaching them the 'right' answer. That means helping them to come towards well-developed, supported and sensible conclusions.

Visuals	Notes
 <p>SONG: TEARS IDLE TEARS ———— Lyric Poem</p>	<p>To explore assessment objective 4 – ‘Personal Response’ - we will be looking at Tennyson’s poem ‘Song: Tears, Idle Tears’</p> <p>Tennyson himself tells us that this poem came to him one Autumn on a visit to Tintern Abbey.</p> <p>Personal response is not just about your own memories or experiences. Even if you had been to Tintern Abbey, it would not influence your critical reaction to Tennyson’s poem.</p> <p>AO4 communicate a sensitive and informed personal response.</p> <p>‘Communicate’ suggests that a personal response involves writing as well as reading skills. You need to shape your writing in a way which communicates your sensitive engagement with the text.</p> <p>AO4 asks for your appreciation and evaluation of the poem.</p> <p>This requires at least two readings. An initial overview identifies the overall emotions communicated by the poem, but a deeper appreciation of the mood it creates in the reader, depends on analysing the tone of the writing.</p> <p>A personal response begins with an overview of the poem. The poem is called a song which tells you this poem is someone speaking or singing directly to you: a lyric.</p> <p>They are singing about a feeling of sadness or nostalgia for the past, which they can’t quite pinpoint or define.</p>
<p><i>Stanza 1</i></p> <p>Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean, Tears from the depth of some divine despair Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes, In looking on the happy autumn-fields, And thinking of the days that are no more.</p>	<p>In stanza 1 where are the emotive words, which appeal to your emotions and call out for a personal response?</p> <p>The image of tears rising in the heart makes no sense literally or scientifically, but it appeals to us emotionally because we metaphorically see the heart as the source of emotions.</p>
<p><i>Stanza 2</i></p>	<p>Stanza 2 is based around contrasting images of sails and sun: the ‘fresh’ image of arrival and the ‘sad’ image of the sinking sun and of departure.</p>

Visuals	Notes
<p>Fresh as the first beam glittering on a sail, That brings our friends up from the underworld, Sad as the last which reddens over one That sinks with all we love below the verge; So sad, so fresh, the days that are no more.</p>	<p>Does the painting here illustrate an arrival or a departure? What do these contrasting ideas have in common?</p> <p>The emotive heart of stanza 2 is obvious: 'friends' and 'all we love'.</p> <p>Notice how the images are coloured by golds and reds, and by contrasting rising and falling vocabulary and rhythms.</p> <p>We can also see that stanza 2 has a refrain, a repeated phrase from the end of the first stanza which is repeated in later stanzas: 'the days that are no more'.</p> <p>We now feel the poem is provoking a complex set of emotions in response to memories of the past, with images of both joy and sadness.</p> <p>The patterns of the poem suggest that it is full of comparisons, and the poet chooses similes to compare this experience to other experiences and perhaps encourages you to think of similar experiences of your own, whether in real life or in your reading.</p>
<p><i>Stanza 3</i></p> <p>Ah, sad and strange as in dark summer dawns The earliest pipe of half-awaken'd birds To dying ears, when unto dying eyes The casement slowly grows a glimmering square; So sad, so strange, the days that are no more.</p>	<p>Stanza 3 appears to be an extended metaphor and seems to tell a particular story or memory.</p> <p>The poem is full of patterns of repetition and small variations - compare 'so strange' here with 'so fresh' in the previous stanza.</p>
<p><i>Stanza 4</i></p> <p>Dear as remembered kisses after death, And sweet as those by hopeless fancy feign'd On lips that are for others; deep as love, Deep as first love, and wild with all regret; O Death in Life, the days that are no more!</p>	<p>In stanza 4 we have moved back from a particular idea to a series of more general similes.</p> <p>All of these comparisons try to define the 'tears' and link them to experiences, and finally we have a mysterious final line - 'O Death in Life, the days that are not more' - in which the abstract ideas of life and death are personified in order for you to picture what the speaker is weeping over.</p> <p>The days that have passed are a reminder of death in life, and an indication of mortality.</p> <p>The poem seems to be a <i>memento mori</i>, in other words a reminder of our own mortality.</p> <p>This is very gloomy subject and a first personal response might be that the poem is morbid, or depressing.</p> <p>However, poets use images and sounds in more complex ways than this, and the poem makes its sad and dark images appealing and not just gloomy. For example, the image of autumn could be</p>

Visuals	Notes
<p>‘memento mori’</p> <p>[NOUN]</p> <p><i>1. An object kept as a reminder of the inevitability of death, such as a skull.</i></p> 	<p>seen as beautiful and happy rather than sad and depressing.</p>
<p>INFORMED</p>	<p>We have so far focused on the ‘sensitive’ more than the informed part of AO4.</p> <p>We are sensitive to imagery and sound, and informed by the words of the texts. Is any other information needed for an ‘informed personal response’?</p> <p>How helpful is it to know what a poet said his poem was about?</p> <p>How helpful is it to know that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tennyson told friends that the poem was about feelings he often had as a young boy and it was not about ‘real woe’. • Tennyson’s poem ‘In Memoriam’, responded to the death of his friend who was buried south of Tintern.

Visuals	Notes
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The song was set to music many times, and was a 'hit' in Victorian times. • By the time the poem was published, Tennyson was an established poet and Poet Laureate. <p>All this information is interesting, but it does not replace your own personal response, and it shows you that the mood of the reader is more significant than the mood of the writer.</p> <p>Comments and information about their lives might help to reinforce your own interpretation, but they don't replace it.</p> <p>AO4 teaches us to trust our instincts, informed by the language and imagery of the text.</p> <p>You should think your own response is valid as long as it is firmly grounded in analysis and interpretation of the text.</p>

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

Your notes	
tone	
mood	
extended metaphors	
similes	
lyric	
patterns of repetition	
memento mori	

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