



POETRY
READING
PACK

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Introduction

Thank you for your participation in the Inside Out Programme. This pack has been designed to help you develop your ability to read and enjoy literature, and poetry in particular. In addition, it aims to assist you in developing your own ability to communicate your thoughts and opinions more effectively in thinking about literature.

There are no definitively 'right' or 'wrong' answers to any of the questions found in this pack. Of far greater importance are the reasons you can provide for an opinion, and your ability to engage critically with views and interpretations that differ from your own, including those suggested in the reading questions, and those you might encounter in discussion and debate with other students.



Section 1 – Simon Armitage (1963-present)



Simon Armitage is the current UK Poet Laureate, having gone from working as a probation officer to becoming a full-time poet upon the success of his first book *Zoom!* in 1989. His background and upbringing in West Yorkshire has shaped the content and style of his work, known for its interest in social issues and family relationships, among other themes.

In this coming-of-age poem, Armitage imagines Robin – the sidekick to the DC Comics superhero Batman – finding his voice and independence from Batman. The poem takes the form of an address by Robin to Batman.

Kid

by **Simon Armitage**

*Batman, big shot, when you gave the order
to grow up, then let me loose to wander
leeward, freely through the wild blue yonder
as you liked to say, or ditched me, rather,
in the gutter ... well, I turned the corner.
Now I've scotched that 'he was like a father
to me' rumour, sacked it, blown the cover
on that 'he was like an elder brother'
story, let the cat out on that caper
with the married woman, how you took her
downtown on expenses in the motor.
Holy robin-redbreast-nest-egg-shocker!
Holy roll-me-over-in the-clover,
I'm not playing ball boy any longer
Batman, now I've doffed that off-the-shoulder
Sherwood-Forest-green and scarlet number
for a pair of jeans and crew-neck jumper;
now I'm taller, harder, stronger, older.
Batman, it makes a marvellous picture:
you without a shadow, stewing over
chicken giblets in the pressure cooker,
next to nothing in the walk-in larder,
punching the palm of your hand all winter,
you baby, now I'm the real boy wonder.*

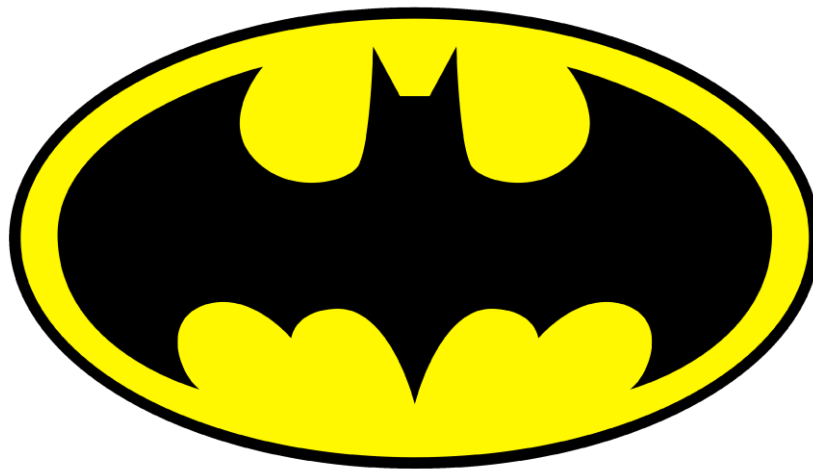
Reading questions

Consider the following questions once you have read the poem.

1. “well, I turned the corner” (line 5). What does Robin mean by this?
2. “now I’m taller, harder, stronger, older” (line 18). Should we believe what Robin says here, and why?
3. What impression does Armitage give us of Batman, and how? (Hint: focus on any particular words, phrases or images that Robin uses to describe Batman)
4. What feelings does Robin appear to have towards Batman in this poem? (Hint: there are several possible answers – think about why some emotions are more striking than others)

Points for discussion

- Try reading the poem out aloud. Are there any lines or sections that stand out when spoken aloud, and why?
- Has Robin actually found his independence from Batman in this poem, or is Batman not yet “without a shadow” (line 20)?
- Do you think the poem is really about Batman and Robin?



Section 2 – Fleur Adcock (1934-present)



Fleur Adcock is a poet from New Zealand who now lives in the UK, in London. Her poetry is known for its interest in relationships and the everyday experience, albeit alongside a tendency for dark humour, as can be seen in the following poem.

For Heidi With Blue Hair

When you dyed your hair blue
(or, at least ultramarine
for the clipped sides, with a crest
of jet-black spikes on top)
you were sent home from school

because, as the headmistress put it,
although dyed hair was not
specifically forbidden, yours
was, apart from anything else,
not done in the school colours.

Tears in the kitchen, telephone calls
to school from your freedom-loving father:
“She’s not a punk in her behaviour;
it’s just a style.” (You wiped your eyes,
also not in a school colour.)

“She discussed it with me first –
we checked the rules.” “And anyway, Dad,
it cost twenty-five dollars.
Tell them it won’t wash out –
not even if I wanted to try.

It would have been unfair to mention
your mother’s death, but that
shimmered behind the arguments.
The school had nothing else against you;
the teachers twittered and gave in.

Next day your black friend had hers done
in grey, white and flaxen yellow –
the school colours precisely:
an act of solidarity, a witty
tease. The battle was already won.

Reading questions

This poem is addressed to Adcock's goddaughter, Heidi, who coped with a difficult time during her schooling via a bold and distinctive choice of personal presentation. Consider the following questions once you have read the poem.

1. For each of the six stanzas, can you describe in your own words what happens?
2. "not even if I wanted to try" (line 20). How is the relationship between free will and conformity presented in the poem?
3. "The battle was already won" (line 30). What does the poet mean by this, and do you agree?
4. Do you find the poem funny to read (either as a whole or parts of it)? If so, where within the poem is the humour created? (Hint: does irony play any part in this?)

Points for discussion

- How effective is the "witty tease" of Heidi's friend in undermining the arbitrary power of the school?
- Could this poem be seen as being sad and funny at the same time? If so, how is this made possible?

Section 3 – Grace Nichols (1950-present)



Grace Nichols is a Guyanese poet who now lives in the UK, having previously worked in Guyana as a teacher and journalist. Her work is known for its strong interest in Caribbean culture and Guyanese folklore.

Praise Song for My Mother

You were
water to me
deep and bold and fathoming

You were
moon's eye to me
pull and grained and mantling

You were
sunrise to me
rise and warm and streaming

You were
the fish's red gill to me
the flame tree's spread to me
the crab's leg/the fried plantain smell replenishing replenishing

Go to your wide futures, you said

Reading questions

Nichols uses the traditional African poetic form of a praise song to give a personalised and moving tribute to her mother. The questions below are for you to work through once you have read the poem.

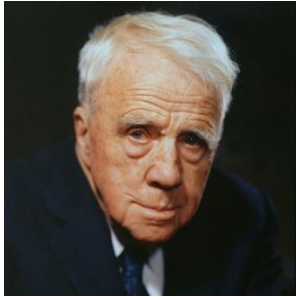
1. For each of the five sections of the song, can you describe in your own words what Nichols tells us about her mother?
2. Of the six metaphors that Nichols uses to describe her mother's impact, which do you find the most powerful and why?
3. "the flame tree's spread to me" (line 9). Why might the specificity of this image to the poet's background and upbringing in Guyana be important?
4. "the crab's leg/the fried plantain smell replenishing replenishing" (line 10). What effect does the use of food and cookery have upon the presentation of Nichols' relationship with her mother?

Points for discussion

- The song is written in the past tense – yet no indication is given of the mother's current circumstances or her relationship with her daughter in the present. Should we see the poem's focus as on the mother as an individual or only on her former relationship with her daughter?
- The poem is a personal tribute to her mother, yet we are given little to no specific details about her as a person. How, then, should we see this poem as being 'personal'?
- Try reading the poem aloud. The poem does not have a consistent rhythm, yet is titled and structured as a "song" – do you think it feels like a 'musical' poem?



Section 4 – Robert Frost (1874-1963)



Robert Frost was an American poet who lived through the late 19th Century and most of the 20th Century. He had an urban upbringing, growing up in the city of Lawrence, Massachusetts, yet his poetry is most well-known for using an appreciation of rural surroundings to explore deeper philosophical problems.

The Road Not Taken

BY ROBERT FROST

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Reading questions

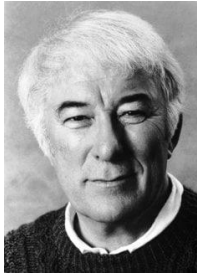
This is perhaps one of the most well-known and often-cited poems in English, and certainly the one with which Frost is most regularly associated. It explores ideas surrounding self-determination and the individual. Although some ways of interpreting it are already popularly established, try to explore its meaning and significance on your own – the below questions should help you to do this.

1. For each of the four stanzas, can you describe in your own words what happens?
2. Can you describe the importance and effect of Frost's choice of title: "The Road Not Taken"?
3. What do you think the "yellow wood" (line 1) symbolizes?
4. "I shall be telling this with a sigh" (line 16) – try reading the poem out aloud. What sort of tone do you use and what effect does this have upon the interpretation of the poem?
5. If both paths were trod "really about the same" (line 10), why does the speaker claim to have taken "the one less travelled by" (line 19)? (Hint: use your answer to Q4 to help you develop your answer)

Points for discussion

- This poem is often used to promote the idea of controlling your own destiny – do you agree with this interpretation?
- This poem has a consistent 'ABAAB' rhyme scheme in each of the four stanzas – do you know what this means? What effect do the rhymes have on how you interpret the poem?
- Try memorising the poem, then putting it away. Can you speak it out loud by heart?

Section 5 – Seamus Heaney (1939-2013)



Seamus Heaney was an Irish poet and writer who taught at Harvard and was Professor of Poetry at the University of Oxford. Much of his writing was during a period of intense political turmoil and violence in his native Northern Ireland, known in history as the “Troubles”.

Digging

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests: snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down
Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft against the inside
knee was levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
To scatter new potatoes that we picked
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.
Just like his old man.

...

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.

Reading questions

'Digging' was one of Heaney's first published poems, and explores the concepts of purpose and profession (. However, some of its ideas and images can be developed beyond these alone – the questions below will help you to do this after you read the poem.

1. What might the potato harvest of Heaney's father be taken to represent? (Hint: consider the extended metaphor likening farming to the composition of poetry, alongside Heaney's own Irish 'roots').
2. "comes up twenty years away" (line 7). Taking into account lines 8 and 9 as well, what effect does this use of time have upon our understanding of the poem?
3. "The cold smell of potato mould" (line 25). For what purposes do you think Heaney invokes such a vivid memory?
4. Finally, try reading the poem out aloud. What tone or emotions do you think Heaney is trying to convey, and how does the sound of the poem contribute to this?

Points for discussion

- What aspects of the work of a poet are highlighted by the comparison to potato farming?
- How close does the relationship between Heaney and his father in this poem appear to be?
- Should we see this poem as evidence of a tension between Heaney's Irish farming background and his profession as a poet and writer?



Section 6: William Wordsworth (1770 – 1850)



William Wordsworth was an influential poet who lived in the late 1700s and early 1800s, and under Queen Victoria was Poet Laureate. His work was known for its interest in the relationship between humans and nature.

I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud

BY WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

Reading questions

This is one of Wordsworth's most famous poems. Drawing upon inspiration from a walk in the Lake District with his sister, he uses his observation of his surroundings' physical beauty to explore a deeper connection with the natural world. For each of the four stanzas, can you describe what happens in your own words?

1. "Continuous as the stars that shine" (line 7). What properties of the daffodils might Wordsworth be trying to emphasise with this choice of comparison?
2. A reference is made in each stanza to the "dance" of the daffodils – how does this affect the speaker's "bliss of solitude"?
3. "What wealth the show to me had brought" (line 18). What sort of wealth does Wordsworth attribute to being contained within nature?

Points for discussion

- This is known as a 'lyric poem' – a style associated with the expression of personal feelings and emotion. What sort of feelings does Wordsworth convey in this poem, and how effectively does he do it?
- For this poem, Wordsworth employs a distinctive ABABCC rhyme scheme for the line endings within each stanza. Are there any pairs of words linked to one another by rhyme that stand out to you, and why?
- How musical does this poem feel to you, and why? Would it sound better spoken or sung to a melody?

Section 7 – Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792 – 1822)



Percy Shelley lived a short life, dying in 1822 before his 30th birthday. Shelley's poems are distinctive for their alignment with the political and social movement of Radicalism, which grew its following in the period of economic hardship in Britain that followed the end of the Napoleonic Wars with France. Below, you will find one of his most famous poems, called 'Ozymandias' (which was the Greek name of the Ancient Egyptian Pharaoh Ramesses II).

Ozymandias

BY PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

Reading questions

Ozymandias (p. 919)

Shelley explores the idea of memory and legacy, in this case of a powerful ruler of an ancient civilisation, his only remains being a dilapidated statue in the middle of the desert. Once you have read the poem, try to answer to the following questions:

1. What impression are we given of Ozymandias' personality in the description of his statue, and how does Shelley do this? (Hint: look at the specific adjectives and phrases used to describe the statue)
2. "Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" (line 11) - how could the meaning or significance of this instruction have changed from when it was first inscribed?
3. What do Ozymandias and his statue within the poem represent?
4. What political kind of point might Shelley be trying to get across to the reader? Do you agree with him, and why?

Points for discussion

- What tone or emotions might be used when speaking this poem aloud, and why?
- Taking into account Shelley's focus with British politics, why has he chosen to write about the ruined statue of a long-deceased Egyptian Pharaoh?

Section 8: Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)



Emily Dickinson was an American poet during the mid-1800s who wrote over 1500 poems during her lifetime. The focus of her poetry lies broadly in the themes of spirituality, faith and death. Dickinson led a lonely life, hardly ever leaving her bedroom in her later years - indeed, the vast majority of her poems were only discovered and published after her death.

“Hope” is the thing with feathers

BY EMILY DICKINSON

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -
And sore must be the storm -
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm -

I've heard it in the chillest land -
And on the strangest Sea -
Yet - never - in Extremity,
It asked a crumb - of me.

Reading questions

In this poem, Dickinson uses an extended metaphor of hope as a bird to explore its importance to the human soul. Read the poem, and then try to answer the following questions:

1. For each of the three stanzas, can you describe in your own words what is being conveyed?
2. “And sings the tune without the words –” (line 3). Within the extended metaphor of hope as a bird, what might “the tune without the words” represent? (Hint: there are several possible answers here – line 4 offers further clues)
3. This poem has a “ballad rhyme” scheme – i.e. each stanza has a rough ‘ABCB’ rhyme at the end of each line. Does this rhyme always work (e.g. “soul” and “all” in lines 2 and 4)? Would you describe this poem as a song, and why?
4. Finally, try reading out aloud this poem in full. You will see that there are no commas or full stops, only dashes (like this —). Do you ever pause when speaking the poem before the end? At which points between the lines or stanzas do you stop to breathe in? Does this make any words or phrases seem more or less important, and why?

Points for discussion

- Emily Dickinson was renowned for her solitary lifestyle, and for barely leaving her bedroom, never mind her house. Why might she have chosen to use geographical descriptions of having visited “chilliest land”, “strangest Sea” and “Extremity”?
- Do you find the description of Hope as “the little Bird” in a “storm” or “Gale” positive or negative? Is this an accurate description of the nature of hope?
- According to the poem, Hope “never stops – at all –” (line 4). Should we believe this, and why?

Section 9 – William Shakespeare (1564 – 1616)



William Shakespeare, a writer in the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, is most well-known for the dramatic plays he wrote for performance in theatres. Here, however, we look at a particular type of poem known as a ‘sonnet’.

Sonnet 130: My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun

BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare.

Reading questions

In this sonnet, Shakespeare (or the speaker) describes the physical appearance of one of his most recurrent poetic characters – the Dark Lady. Some of the language might be a bit harder to read, so try to focus on the overall meaning when reading through rather than getting stuck on individual words or phrases.

1. What impression do you have of the subject of the poem from the description we are given of her? (Hint: how much can we say about her personality compared to her physical beauty)
2. “Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks” (line 8). What effect does the verb choice of “reeks” have upon our impression of the mistress’ breath?
3. How sincere do you find the speaker’s professed love “by heaven” for his mistress?
4. What point (or set of points) might Shakespeare be trying to get across in this poem? (Hint: consider the various themes through which the poem might be viewed – love, relationships, human beauty) something about irony here too?

Points for discussion

- This type of poem is known as a Shakespearian or ‘English sonnet’
 - It consists of 3 quatrains (3 sets of 4 lines) with an ABAB rhyme, and ends with a rhyming couplet (a pair of lines that rhyme with each other)
 - Look at the word pairings that Shakespeare links using rhyme - what effect (if any) do the links between these words have on the overall meaning of the poem?
 - How effective is the concluding rhyming couplet (“moan” and “gone”) and why?
- The lines have a rhythm called ‘iambic pentameter’ - five metrical feet within each line, consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stress (sometimes depicted as - /). Read out aloud the poem again and see if you can identify the stressed syllables in a line - what is the effect of the metre on how we process the poem?
- Try memorising the poem, then putting it away. Can you speak it out loud by heart?

About this pack

The most difficult aspect of producing this was striking the balance between accessibility for those who, due to their circumstances, have limited access to educational resources and support, and offering challenge for the most able inside students who are otherwise limited from developing their full potential. As much of the prison education landscape has turned to remote self-guided learning due to the pandemic, the format of the resource is designed to be suitable both for individual self-guided study, and should future circumstances allow, guided group work as part of an Inside-Out class. In selecting the poetry for inclusion, alongside the need to balance accessibility with support, I tried to ensure a balance between contemporary and older works, but also offer a selection that included some of the most celebrated historical poets.

Of the 9 poets whose works were used, 3 are women, 1 is non-white, 4 are from England, 2 from America, and 1 each from New Zealand, Guyana and Ireland. Upon reflection, more could and should have been done to facilitate access to a more diverse demographic of writers. Yet within the 6-week period available to create the resource, the overall perspective provided is of a reasonably global nature, and more importantly a wide range of themes and styles is provided, ranging from coming of age to the process of writing to romance, in a variety of forms from praise songs to lyric poetry to sonnets. Although the fundamental outcome of this research may only be fully understood once the resource can be provided to inside students on the programme, it is hoped that the pack will be enjoyed by participants and effective in facilitating the objectives of the Inside-Out project.