

Knowledge map: Poems from Other Cultures and Traditions

Introduction:

The unit will cover a range of poems from other cultures and traditions, written in a range of styles and forms. By the end of the unit the students will be more confident applying key terms and comparing poems, as well as having a better understanding of a number of different cultures and traditions.

Important poetic/structural devices and terminology:

Alliteration The repetition of sounds within close proximity

Connotation The meaning suggested by a word/the bigger picture

Denotation The most literal and limited meaning of a word

Hyperbole A figure of speech in which an overstatement or exaggeration occurs for effect

Imagery Language which describes something using sensory stimulation

Juxtaposition The arrangement of two things in similar moments for the purpose of comparison

Simile A comparison of one thing with another using "like" or "as"

Metaphor A comparison of two things, often unrelated (without "like" or "as")

Oxymoron Two contradictory terms used in a single phrase

Personification A figure of speech which endows non-human things with human form or character

Irony The general name given to literary techniques involving surprising, interesting contradictions

Stanza A major subdivision in a poem, similar to a verse in a song

Rhyme In poetry, a pattern of repeated sounds

Tone The author's attitude or mood towards his subject and audience

Theme Main idea or message conveyed by the piece

Symbolism A literary device that contains several layers of meaning, often concealed at first sight

Repetition Repeating of a word or phrase in order to improve emphasis

Syntax Refers to the way in which words and sentences are placed together in writing

Caesura A complete pause in a line of poetry

Onomatopoeia A word that imitates the sound it represents.

Enjambment A line of poetry that ends with no punctuation and consequently runs over into the next line

Speaker Narrator/Major character in poem

Point of View Perspective from which a story is told.

Setting The context in time and place in which the action of a story occurs.

Conflict A struggle between opposing forces

Free-Verse A poem that does not have a set pattern or rhyme scheme

Extended Metaphor The entire poem features the same metaphor running through it.

Auto-biography A poet's account of his or her life

Figurative Language An umbrella term for simile, metaphor and personification

Phonetic spelling Words that are written the way that they would sound when read aloud.

Dialect A particular form of a language which is peculiar to a specific region or social group

Assessment tasks:

Writing (to be completed at the start of the unit): write an autobiographical account of a moment in your life that defines your cultural background. OR a piece of travel writing, describing an extreme type of weather (to be completed after Hurricane Hits England)

Reading (to be completed at the end of the unit): Compare the ways that writers have used poetic and structural techniques to present ideas in any of the poems you have studied?

The Poems:

From Search For My Tongue by Sujata Bhatt

This is an auto-biographical poem written in first person and it features an extended metaphor. The poem is written in three sections: the first section in English; the central section of the poem is written in Gujarati, (the speaker's native language), with a phonetic spelling beneath each line; the final section is an English translation of the central section. The poem explores the difficulties that a bi-lingual person experiences when they don't use their native language regularly, and the internal conflict experienced by the speaker.

From Unrelated Incidents by Tom Leonard

This poem is written entirely in a Glaswegian dialect, and the poet uses phonetic spelling throughout. It challenges the reader about the assumptions that they make based on the way that people speak. It also has an unusual structure, the lines are very short and it is written as one long column, possibly representing an autocue that a newsreader would read from. In this poem, a 'BBC accent' refers to more traditional news broadcasts where the presenters would only speak using Received Pronunciation (the 'queens English').

Half Caste by John Agard

This is a metaphorical poem which explores the poet's experiences as a mixed race person. Agard considers different things that are 'mixed' or combinations of things, and challenges the reader to keep an open mind about the way that they view mixed race people. This poem is written in a Caribbean dialect, reflecting Agard's own background and culture. Agard is a performance poet, and the use of phonetic spelling in this poem reflects that it was written to be spoken out loud.

Not My Business by Niyi Osundare

This poem was written by Niyi Osundare, a Nigerian poet who believes that "African poets have no choice but to be political". The poem explores the idea of collective responsibility, and features a central character who ignores what is happening to the people around them. When eventually government soldiers arrive to take the central character away, there is nobody left to speak out against it. There is a clear moral in the poem that you should speak out against injustice, rather than just ignoring it. The poem is mainly written in quatrains, followed by a three line refrain. The structure changes at the end of the poem, possibly to represent the change in the speaker's circumstances.

Presents from My Aunts in Pakistan by Moniza Alvi

This poem by Moniza Alvi explores the conflict experienced by a young Pakistani girl being brought up in England. The speaker struggles to identify as either British or Pakistani, and the poem reflects a range of experiences in her life that lead to this conflict. The structure of the poem is very unusual, with lines that are indented in various ways throughout each of the 7 stanzas, which possibly suggests her disjointed experience of the life around her.

Hurricane Hits England by Grace Nichols

Grace Nichols is a Caribbean poet who has spent much of her life in England. This poem refers to a real event, when a hurricane hit English shores in 1987. The poet reflects on her Caribbean culture (and how hurricanes are a regular occurrence there) and she considers whether her homeland is following her to the UK. The poem

features irregular length stanzas throughout, and also contains a number of rhetorical questions, possibly representing the confusion caused during the event.

Limbo by Edward Kamua Braithwaite

Limbo is Braithwaite's reflection on the experience of his ancestors transported from Africa to the Caribbean as slaves. Space on slave ships was limited so Limbo dancing was used as a form of exercise, but the limbo stick was also used to beat the slaves by the traders. The poet uses the imagery and rhythm of limbo-dancing to describe the experience. Monosyllabic words have been chosen to emphasise a strong, drum-like beat which might accompany dancing. The reference to the gods and to music as saviours perhaps emphasise the idea that Braithwaite and other slave descendants are proof that the hell of slavery has been ultimately conquered.

Nothing's Changed by Tatamkhulu Afrika

'Nothing's Changed' is an autobiographical poem by the South African Tatamkhulu Afrika (1920-2002). He lived in Cape Town's District 6, which was then a thriving mixed-race inner-city community. People of all colours and beliefs lived together peacefully, and Afrika said he felt 'at home' there. In the 1960s, as part of its policy of apartheid the government declared District 6 a 'whites-only' area. The poem was written just after the official end of apartheid. He suggests that now the area is still excluding poor people, most of whom are black, so 'nothing's changed'. The poem has six stanzas of eight short lines. It is written in the present tense and contains onomatopoeia and alliteration at the start to create the sound of gravel and harsh ground. The glass at the end of the poem is a metaphorical and literal barrier between rich and poor - white and black.

Island Man by Grace Nichols

This poem records what is perhaps a common experience for those living in Britain who come from far off, less urbanised places. The poem neatly captures this split existence - between a fantasy of a simpler life and the daily reality of working in an urban environment. But perhaps it is not really a serious choice - if one were to stay on the island, then one would bring one's problems there, too. After reading the whole poem, one sees that it is ambiguous - the island is both in the Caribbean and Great Britain. The use of the present simple tense suggests that the island man returns to the island every morning, in his mind, as he is waking. The poem is written as free verse - the images follow in an unstructured series, possibly to reflect the confusion experienced when waking abruptly from a dream. The poet uses sound effects to achieve a sense of contrast: the breaking of the waves with the roar of traffic.

Blessing by Imtiaz Dharker

The poem is set in a vast area of temporary accommodation called Dharavi, on the outskirts of Bombay, where millions of migrants have gathered from other parts of India. Because it is not an official living area, there is always a shortage of water. When the poet imagines water, it is so special it is compared to a god. The main idea in this poem is that water - so essential to life - comes to be seen by people in a hot, dry country as supremely precious, a divine gift - a blessing. It is significant that short stanzas (with short, abrupt sentences) express what it is like to be without water, and longer stanzas (with flowing sentences) show what it is like suddenly to have water. She prefers irregular rhythmic patterns in her poetry.

Night of the Scorpion by Nissim Ezekiel

This is a narrative poem and it tells the story of how, one night, a scorpion stung the poet's mother. The poem is not really about the scorpion and its sting. It concentrates upon contrasting the reactions of different people to the incident. The poem is divided into two parts. The first very long section details how people frantically respond to the incident. The second short section stands in contrast. It highlights the quiet courage of the victim (the poet's mother) in comparison to the ineffective actions of those around her.