SONGS OF OURSELVES:

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NOTES FOR TEACHERS ON THE SET POEMS

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NOTE: There are separate documents about different selections of poems set for examination:

- in years 2007, 2008, 2009
- in years 2010, 2011, 2012.

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INTRODUCTION: How to use these Notes

There are three key principles on which the format of these support materials is based:

1. The first is the fundamental assumption that no such materials can replace the teacher. It is the teacher's task to introduce the poem to the students and help them to form their own personal responses to what they read. Examiners can easily differentiate between students who have genuinely responded to literature for themselves and those who have merely parroted dictated or packaged notes. Teachers, establishing their dialogues in the classroom, need to encourage and trust students to arrive at their own points of view, insisting only that these shall based firmly on what is being studied. **This of course immediately rules out any thought of notes of 'prepared' answers to be memorised.**

2. The notes take for granted that each poem is unique and must be treated in a unique fashion. Examiners sometimes find that students seem to have been trained to follow strict agendas when dealing with poems, such as dealing first with imagery, then sentence structure, then prosody and so on, whatever the poem and whatever the question. Approaches such as this are almost always simplistic and superficial. By contrast, we wish to encourage students to identify what is *special* about a poem, what impact it makes on *them,* and work outwards from that perception. They shouldn't think of 'content' and 'style' as discrete areas to be ticked off a list; but instead should be encouraged to think of them together. So in these Notes students are constantly being enjoined to look simultaneously not only at *what* is said, but *how* it is said.

3. Each poem is considered to have a universal appeal, and the Notes try only to introduce extraneous knowledge insofar as it might help students to appreciate the poem. Biographical references are mentioned but deliberately downplayed to prevent this interfering with the direct communication between the poet and the twenty-first century reader in whatever part of the world s/he happens to be.

With this in mind, the notes on each poem – which are addressed to the teacher – are divided into four sections:

Background aims at putting the poem briefly into some sort of context. This can be embroidered as much or as little as the teacher sees fit. It is most important, however, that it should be dealt with quite quickly. Precious time should rather be spent on the poem itself. Teachers should remember that knowledge of historical/biographical context is *not* a formal Assessment Objective in this syllabus; students are not expected to show knowledge of it in the exam (not least as there is always the risk of their wasting valuable time in regurgitating second-hand details – for which they will gain no credit).

Teacher notes to assist a first reading aims at clarifying some areas of potential difficulty/obscurity and add to (rather than simply repeat) the glosses accompanying the poem in the anthology.

Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole is the most important section. It gives some suggestions to teachers for ways to get students to work individually or in pairs/groups on aspects of the poem which they can then discuss together. In the spirit of the syllabus, its aim is always to encourage students to deepen *their own* response to what they read. So, much of this section is in the form of questions. These might be used in different ways. Teachers might allow the students to work through their own modified version of the questions as preparation for a lesson when answers can be compared and a discussion developed. Alternatively, such questions might be used as a

basis for group or pair work within the lesson. They could also be used as a revision exercise *after* the teaching had been done. They are, in short, to be used or amended at the teacher's discretion according to the individual circumstances of the class.

The final section, **Thematic Links between set poems in the anthology***,* might be used as a route finder, to determine the order in which the poems might best be studied. This syllabus does **not** specifically require a comparison of poems, but sometimes exam questions might ask for treatment of *two* poems within one answer. Teachers might also use the thematic links guidance for encouraging such joint treatment.

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1 Sujata Bhatt A DIFFERENT HISTORY

Background

This poem explores the relationship between cultural identity and language. Bhatt was born in India in 1956, studied in the United Kingdom and United States, and lives now in Germany. The poem asks pointedly: 'Which language / has not been the oppressor's tongue?'

Teacher notes to assist a first reading

There is a recording of Bhatt reading *A Different History* on the www.poetryarchive.org website. In the introduction to her reading, she explains that Sarasvati, the Hindu Goddess of Knowledge, presides over the arts and is frequently worshipped in libraries.

Comparison is made between Greek and Indian gods: '[Pan] simply emigrated / to India', and 'Here [in India], the gods roam freely'.

Next the poem focuses on the reverential attitude towards books in a country where 'every tree is sacred'.

A clear shift in mood comes at the start of the second section with the first rhetorical question which takes us to the heart of what the poem is about: 'Which language / has not been the oppressor's tongue?'

Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Get students to read a copy of the poem carefully and to underline any words they find difficult or unfamiliar: perhaps students might need to consult a dictionary for the meanings of 'emigrated', 'oppressor' and 'scythe'. If students accept this responsibility for themselves, they will see how their own active learning can lead to an increased understanding of the poems they read.

At this early stage it would be helpful to use the internet to research the figures of Pan and Sarasvati mentioned in the poem. The goddess plays a particularly significant role in the first stanza.

With the research stage over, now would be a good moment to play the recording of Bhatt reading the poem. Does the reading by the poet herself provide any fresh insights for the students? Do they feel that a particular point has been clarified by the **tone** of voice in which Bhatt reads the poem?

The lineation of the poem makes the two sections of the poem stand out visually. Ask the students in general terms what differences they see between the two sections. They should look both at the **content** and the **language** Bhatt uses.

Next get students to look more closely at the language of the first section (up until 'from whose wood the paper was made'). How does Bhatt use words and phrases to convey how sacred trees and books are? They might consider the force of the verbs 'shove', 'slam', and 'toss', together with the subsequent phrases.

In pairs, ask students to read the poem again as they consider the effects of the **repetition** of 'a sin' and 'without' in the first section, and of the **rhetorical** flourish 'Which language ' in the second section.

Next get them to consider more closely the different **mood** of the second section, exploring the precise effects of particular words they find striking. How do they think these lines should be read? Is the **tone** bitter or sad? Does the tone of voice change at any stage – and, if it does, why?

Get them to consider the following **metaphors**: 'tongue' for language, and the soul 'cropped / with a long scythe swooping out / of the conqueror's face'. They should probe closely the meanings and effects of the underlined words.

How effective do they find the final two lines of the poem? Do they find anything amusing in the poem?

After their close investigation of the poem, they should have the opportunity to read the poem aloud, taking care to vary the tone as appropriate.

For homework and future revision, students might be encouraged to access the www.poetryarchive.org website to listen to other poems by Bhatt or indeed poems by other writers.

Thematic links with set poems

Identity and language:	*Continuum, The Cockroach*
Time:	*Horses, The City Planners, The Planners, Summer Farm*
Religion:	*Pied Beauty, Horses, A Birthday, Composed Upon Westminster Bridge*

2 Gerard Manley Hopkins PIED BEAUTY

Background

Hopkins was born in England in 1844 and died in 1889. This poem was published in 1918, some forty-one years after Hopkins wrote it in 1877, the year he became a Jesuit priest. His distinctive and innovative poetry found fame after his death rather than during the English Victorian age in which he lived, when more traditional verse was popular and perhaps more acceptable to the Victorian palate.

Teacher notes to assist a first reading

This is a short but densely packed poem, and it may be that less confident students seek refuge in literary terminology: the poem is a curtal (or curtailed sonnet). Instead of an octave, there are two tercets. Instead of a sestet there are four lines and a final line comprising two words. At IGCSE level, students are note expected to know such terms. And writing that 'the rhyme scheme is ABCABC' (in the first six lines) adds little to an appreciation of poetry – *unless* its relationship with the content is explored.

The important thing is for students to respond to what they find striking or original or beautiful in a poem which celebrates the breath-taking variety of nature in its many forms. Students will need both to visualise Hopkins' descriptions and to listen to his words.

But before they will be able to do this, they need to overcome the barrier of some of the language used. Some words such as 'adazzle' are **archaic** and others such as 'fathers-forth' have been coined by the poet. The Songs of Ourselves Anthology glosses a number of phrases, but students may need to look up other words. The internet might be as useful here as the dictionary: for example, what do brinded cows and rose-moles on trout actually look like?

Because of the relative complexity of the poem, students are likely to benefit from a highly structured approach to the study of this poem. The poem can be broken down into these manageable units:

Line 1 gives thanks to God for creating 'dappled things'.

Lines 2 – 5 provides a list of specific things which are 'dappled' and which cumulatively express delight at such variety in the natural world. In order, they are:

- skies presumably of blue sky and white cloud
- a 'brinded' cow – i.e. a cow streaked with different colours
- the trout with its specks of different colour ('stipple' is a speck)
- chestnuts glowing like coal – an image approaching the surreal, the black of the coal and the glow of the flame
- finches' wings
- landscape of fields 'plotted and pieced' like a patchwork, some planted, some fallow and some recently ploughed ('fold, fallow and plough').

Line 6 shifts attention from natural phenomena to the jobs that men (!) have and the different types of equipment they have. 'Gear' and 'tackle' are more recognisably comprehensible to the twenty-first century reader than the word 'trim' as used here.

Line 7 marks a **turning-point**. The language becomes more **abstract** in character, after the **concrete** detail of the previous lines. It might be helpful to look at the final two lines of the poem first: God is the creator of all things mentioned in the poem, and should be praised. Then go back to the adjectives in line 7: God is creator of 'all things counter, original, spare, strange'. These 'fickle' things are themselves 'freckled' with opposite qualities: swift / slow; sweet / sour; adazzle / dim.

Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

With this poem it might be worthwhile stating the obvious, namely, that some poems need to be read a number of times before even experienced readers feel they have a clear grasp of possible meanings.

Ask students to pay particular attention to the sounds as you read the poem aloud. On a copy of the poem ask them to make a note of distinctive sounds: e.g. **alliteration**, **rhyme**.

Get students to annotate their copy of the poem with the meanings of unfamiliar words, and follow up with research in the library or on the internet. Students are likely to benefit from seeing what trout, chestnuts and finches look like. They could do the research, and images could be projected on the board.

Ask them to consider the relationship of the first line to the rest of the poem. The central place of God as creator is picked up again in the final two lines. The 'dappled things' are listed in lines 2 – 5.

Get students to examine what it is precisely that God is being praised for. Look closely at the descriptions of cow, trout, chestnut, finches and landscapes. In what ways do the descriptions appeal to the sense of sight?

Before dealing with lines 7 – 9, ask them to consider the significance of the final two lines to the whole poem. What do they make of the made-up word 'fathers-forth' and the short final line 'Praise him' in the context of the overall poem?

Then ask the students to explore the meaning of lines 7 – 9. Unusually this might be an occasion to offer a paraphrase of the lines and afterwards unpick the words and meanings. What do they think 'things' refer to, and what do they make of of the four adjectives 'counter, original, spare, strange'? Encourage them to use a dictionary here: 'spare', for example, is among other things defined as 'surplus', 'leftover' and 'unwanted'. Which of these words do they feel to be the most suitable **synonym**, and why?

Ask students to consider how the list of opposites (lines 8-9) links with the idea of dappled things? Do they have a clearer idea now of what Hopkins is celebrating? Ask them to support their ideas by careful reference to the words of the poem.

How would students describe the **tone**? Do the references to God help them to answer this question? There is a note of religious devotion in this celebration of the diversity of God's creations.

Ask them to read the poem aloud (in pairs, and taking turns), taking care to bring out the rich variety of sounds. In what ways do they feel the sounds reinforce the poem's meanings?

Thematic links with set poems

Religion: *A Different History, Horses, A Birthday*

Nature: *Horses, Hunting Snake, Pike, The Woodspurge, Summer Farm,*

Where I Come From, Composed Upon Westminster Bridge

3 Allen Curnow CONTINUUM

Background

Allen Curnow was one of New Zealand's most celebrated poets. He died in 2001 at the age of ninety. He once said that some of his poetry tried to explore 'the private and unanswerable'.

Teacher notes to assist a first reading

Perhaps some parts of the poem seem to be more immediately comprehensible than others at first reading.

The poem begins with the **personification** of the moon: 'rolls over', 'falls behind' – except the speaker tells us he's describing himself, and not the moon after all.

The second and third stanzas capture a certain restlessness and the man's inability to sleep or 'think thoughts'. From his porch he looks across the privets and palms of his garden at the night sky, 'a washed-out creation' – 'a dark place'. Both of these phrases have metaphorical associations as well as literal meaning.

He observes two clouds: 'one's mine / the other's an adversary'. This observation is likely to be at the heart of student discussions. Why is one cloud his, and in what way? In respect of the other cloud, dictionary definitions of 'adversary' are helpful: 'opponent in a contest or conflict', 'a force that opposes or attacks', 'enemy'. Which of these meanings do they feel is most suitable here, and why?

He seems unaware of the time and cold: 'A long moment stretches', and 'the chill of / the planking underfoot'. Finally he returns to bed. The poem ends with an image of the poet observing himself as it were: 'cringing demiurge, who picks up / his litter and his tools'. This description of himself is central to the poem and its original observations about the nature of poetic inspiration. A demiurge is a craftsman plying his trade for the use of the public – which is an interesting metaphor for the poet. But why is the demiurge described as 'cringing'?

Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

After reading the poem, ask students to write in a paragraph a summary of what they think the poem is about.

Get them to consider the **mood** of the first two stanzas. What are their first impressions of the speaker? What does **personification** of the moon and the man's identification with the moon reveal about the speaker?

What do the students think about the meaning and **effects** created by sound in the phrase 'Better barefoot it out '? What is he trying to escape from?

Students are often quick to identify examples of **enjambment** but less adept at providing plausible reasons for its use. Ask them to look closely (and listen attentively) to the end of stanza two and the beginning of stanza three, and also the end of stanza three and the beginning of stanza four. What do they feel are the effects of the enjambment at these points in the poem?

Ask students to make a brief list of what the man actually does: e.g. they might begin with 'He goes outside to his garden and looks at the night sky '

Get them to consider any metaphorical associations of 'washed-out creation' and 'a dark place'. What do these descriptions reveal about the speaker's **mood**?

What indications are there that the poem is about the difficulties of writing a poem? Stanzas five and six will be helpful here. Get them to explore the following:

> ‘A long moment stretches, the next one is not / on time’
>
> ‘ for its part the night sky empties / the whole of its contents down’.

What do they feel the night sky’s ‘part’ is in all of this?

The end of the poem has the poet describing himself in a detached and objective way, as if looking at another person. The speaker closes the door behind on the author, we are told. Ask students to consider the words used to describe the author. Get them to look up possible meanings of ‘demiurge’ rather than rely solely on the gloss provided (‘creator’). Why is he ‘cringing’? What are ‘his litter and his tools’? What does ‘stealthily in step’ suggest about the poet’s state of mind? It might be useful to look at the different meanings a dictionary gives for ‘stealthy’.

Ask students what they feel Curnow’s reading of his poem adds to their appreciation. Follow this link:

http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoet.do?poetId=133

Thematic links with set poems

Personal reflection:	*A Different History, The Cockroach, Summer Farm, Where I Come From*
The natural world:	*Pied Beauty, Horses, Hunting Snake, The Woodspurge*, *Summer Farm, Where I Come From, Upon Westminster Bridge*

4 Edwin Muir HORSES

Background

Muir was born in 1887 on a farm in the Orkney Islands, where he lived a happy childhood. At the age of 14, he moved with his family to Glasgow, which he came to regard as a descent from Eden into hell. He became a critic and translator as well as poet. He died in 1959. This poem *Horses* should not be confused with his later more frequently anthologised poem *The Horses*.

Teacher notes to assist a first reading

The sight of horses now, in the present, leads the speaker to consider his feelings towards horses when he was a child: 'Perhaps some childish hour has come again'.

The main focus of teaching and learning is likely to be the various descriptions of horses and the speaker's feelings towards the horses. There is an other-worldliness about them, something magical. Admiration and fear are mixed. There is a clear **Romantic** feel about the poem: e.g. 'And oh the rapture '

Some **archaic** words are explained in the glossary. Here are other words that students might usefully probe more closely:

Stanza 1: 'lumbering' gives the impression that the horses are moving in a slow, heavy and awkward way.

Stanza 2: pistons in the machines in an ancient mill are used to describe the movement of the horses' hooves as the child 'watched fearful'. The use of **imagery** drawn from the early industrial age is interesting in what it tells us about the child's fear.

Stanza 3: the word 'conquering' suggests a reference to an even earlier age. The word 'ritual' and the descriptions 'seraphim of gold' and 'ecstatic monsters' hint at something pagan or pre-historic.

Stanza 4: the 'rapture' conveys a **Romantic** sense of worshipping these natural creatures: see lines 2 – 4.

Stanza 5: 'glowing with mysterious fire' links with the 'magic power', which describes the horses he sees in the present day (in the first stanza).

Stanza 6: the powerful force of the horses is captured in the eyes gleaming with a 'cruel apocalyptic light'. The religious imagery follows on from the 'struggling snakes' of stanza 5.

Stanza 7: the repetition of 'it fades' suggests loss, straightforwardly the fading of his memory. 'Pine' means to feel a lingering, often nostalgic desire.

Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Stanza 1: Ask them to look up the meaning of 'lumbering' and then consider the way it contrasts with the description in lines 3 – 4. They should look closely at the meanings of 'terrible', 'wild' and 'strange'. These are of course words common in everyday usage, but precise dictionary definitions of these words might yield unexpected and original ideas. They might also note that the horses are 'lumbering', whilst the plough is 'steady'.

Stanza 2: Check that they have understood the shift in time. The rest of the poem deals with the speaker's recollection of his feelings as a child. What impression do students feel is created by the **simile** of the 'pistons'?

Stanza 3: The references in this stanza are to a pre-industrial age. Ask students to consider the effects of these words: ‘conquering hooves’, ‘ritual’, ‘seraphim of gold’ and ‘mute ecstatic monsters’. They should consult a dictionary where appropriate.

Stanzas 4 and 5: What do students make of the **tone** in stanza four? Get them to explore the words used to describe the horses, and to consider what they reveal about the speaker’s **attitude**? What contrast is signalled by the use of ‘But when at dusk ’ at the beginning of stanza five? What do they make of ‘mysterious fire’ here and the ‘magic power’ attributed to the present-day horses in stanza one?

Stanza 6: Ask students to analyse the effectiveness of the imagery: the ‘cruel apocalyptic light’ of their eyes and the **personification** of the wind.

Stanza 7: Before considering the final stanza and reaching a judgement about its effectiveness, students might read the whole poem (perhaps working in pairs). Having studied closely the previous stanzas, how do they now feel that the final stanza should be spoken? How does the tone here differ from the tone in other parts of the poem?

In order to get students to focus on the sounds of the poem, they might in pairs or small groups practise reading the poem aloud. They should try to capture a suitable voice for the speaker as they read, and vary the **tone** as appropriate.

Finally, ask students to annotate a copy of the poem, indicating briefly the effects created by imagery and sound devices. In small groups each student should be encouraged to select an example of a device used in a particularly striking or vivid way; they should explain what it is that makes it striking for them. Students should seek clarification and challenge ideas where necessary.

Thematic links with set poems

Nature:	*Pied Beauty, Hunting Snake, Pike, The Woodspurge, Upon Westminster Bridge, Summer Farm*
Time:	*A Different History, The Cockroach, The City Planners, The Planners*

5 Judith Wright HUNTING SNAKE

Background

Judith Wright was an Australian writer, born in 1915; she died in 2000. She celebrated nature in many of her poems. In her later life she was a conservationist and campaigned for the rights of Aboriginal peoples.

Teacher notes to assist a first reading

Wright's poem recalls something of D. H. Lawrence's poem *Snake*. There is the same awe-struck observation, a sense of stopping dead in one's tracks.

There are three useful areas of content to focus on:

the description of the snake itself

the effect the snake has on the speaker and her walking companion

the brief mention of the creature being hunted.

Each stanza has four lines; each line has eight syllables; the rhyme pattern is similar for the first three stanzas but not the last: these are of course statements of the blindingly obvious. But a useful starting-point might be to focus on **structure** and how the content is arranged within and across stanzas.

Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Ask students to picture the scene depicted in the first stanza. What do the words 'grace' and 'gentlest' convey? How is the suddenness of their stopping suggested? Students should consider the contrast between 'Sun-warmed' and 'froze'.

Get students to discuss the words which describe the physical qualities of the snake. The word 'reeling' is interesting. Get them to look up meanings of the word in a dictionary. In what ways might it apply to the people as well as the snake?

Ask students to consider the majestic qualities of the snake. They might consider the force of 'the parting grass', 'glazed', 'diamond' and 'we lost breath'.

Get them to consider the effect of the **alliteration** in 'food', 'fled' and 'fierce' (in stanza three).

Students should chart the reactions of the speaker and her companion to the snake as described in each stanza. How do the words used convey their reactions? What do students make of the poem's final two lines and their relationship to the rest of the poem?

Some lines are **monosyllabic** and others almost so. Are there any lines where this feature particularly complements or reinforces the content? They should practise reading the poem aloud so as to bring out the distinctive way in which Wright uses sound, noting the effects created.

Thematic links with set poems

Nature: *Pied Beauty, Horses, Pike, The Woodspurge, Summer Farm, Where I Come From, Upon Westminster Bridge*

Personal reflection: *A Different History, The Woodspurge, The Cockroach, Summer Farm, Where I Come From*

6 Ted Hughes PIKE

Background

Ted Hughes was born in Mytholmroyd in the West Riding of Yorkshire, England in 1930. His poetry discards Romantic notions about the natural world. He became British Poet Laureate in 1984 and was so until his death in 1998.

Teacher notes to assist a first reading

In *Pike* Hughes offers a far from Romantic view of nature in his depiction of this primitive and malevolent fish.

Stanzas 1 – 4 offers a mix of **objective** description ('green tigering the gold') and **subjective** description ('their own grandeur).

Stanzas 5 – 7 include what appears to be personal anecdote of three pike kept at home inside an aquarium and then the grisly description of two large pike that had been locked in deadly combat: 'One jammed past its gills down the other's gullet'.

Stanzas 8 – 11 mingles personal recollection ('A pond I fished, fifty years across') with reflection.

As with other poems in this selection, it would be helpful at an early stage of teaching the poem to project an image of the creature being described, here a pike (perhaps after studying the first section up to the end of stanza four?).

Teachers will judge whether their students need assistance with visualising the colours mentioned ('emerald', 'amber') or with what water lily pads look like. The glossary accompanying the poem provides help for other words which that might be unfamiliar.

Listening to the recording of Hughes reading the poem would enhance students' learning. It can be found on the www.poetryarchive.org website:

http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoet.do?poetId=7078

Here Hughes gives a brief account of how he came to write the poem in the introduction to his reading.

Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Stanzas 1 - 4

Ask students to list what facts they learn about pike and their habitat. How does the use of colours add to the dramatic impact of Hughes' description?

Next get students to explore the **effects** of particular words or phrases: e.g. 'Killers from the egg', 'malevolent aged grin', 'submarine delicacy and horror', 'The jaws' hooked clamp and fangs', 'gills kneading quietly'. What do they make of the chilling line 'A life subdued to its instrument'?

What qualities do they think Hughes attributes to pike? They might start a detailed exploration of the language with the first and last lines of stanza two.

Stanzas 5 – 7

Get students to explain what happens in stanza five, which is a good example of the economy of poetry. Indeed students' explanations of what happens are likely to be longer than the stanza itself. What impressions are conveyed by the use of the word 'jungled'? This is another instance of a noun being made into a verb (see 'tigering' in the first stanza) -

though there will of course be more to observe than that. How effective do they find the final two-word sentence ‘Finally one’?

Get students to describe their feelings on reading the description of the two pike that begins on the third line of stanza six and ends in the final line of stanza seven. Then ask them to consider the precise effects of the words which make them feel as they do. What does the **simile** ‘as a vice locks’ add to the description?

Stanzas 8 – 11

Ask students to account for the shift in content and tone that occurs with stanza eight. The pond where the speaker went fishing in his youth is described as ‘deep as England’. Get students to consider this simile with its **connotations** of England’s rich history and also the more immediate context of a boy fishing.

Students should explore how Hughes conveys the eerie atmosphere and the boy’s fear in the final three stanzas. Ask them to look at the words and also to listen to the sounds. It is interesting to hear the long ‘o’ sound in ‘rose slowly towards’ in the last line. How effective do they find this use of **assonance** and other uses of sound devices in adding to the drama of the situation?

Get students to consider the **ambiguity** of the poem’s final two words: ‘me, watching’. Who is watching whom?

Thematic links with set poems

Nature:	*Pied Beauty, Horses, Hunting Snake, Summer Farm, Where I Come From*
Romantic v anti-romantic:	*Pied Beauty, Horses, Hunting Snake, A Birthday, Upon Westminster Bridge*
Time:	*A Different History, Continuum, Horses, The City Planners, The Planners, Summer Farm*

7 Christina Rossetti A BIRTHDAY

Background

Christina Rossetti was born in England in 1820 and died in 1894. She wrote this poem when she was twenty-seven. Perhaps nowadays she is more famous for her poem *Remember* and the words of the Christmas carol *In the Bleak Midwinter.*

Teacher notes to assist a first reading

The title of the poem makes sense when the final two lines of the poem are read. Here her love coming to her is described as 'the birthday of my life'.

The poem is saturated with sensuous vocabulary, which students should explore fully. Unfamiliar words such as 'dais' and **archaic** words such as 'vair' are explained in the glossary. Some students are likely to benefit from researching what pomegranates and peacocks look like.

There is a clear contrast between the content of each stanza. The first deals with actual images of nature and the second with the artificial and exotic images of nature (e.g. 'gold and silver grapes').

The first stanza describes the extent of the speaker's happiness. The final line makes it clear that she is happier than all the things she describes because her love is coming to her. In the second stanza she wishes to immerse herself in rich and beautiful surroundings in order to celebrate her love coming to her.

Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Get students to practise reading the poem aloud so that they can capture the exuberant, rhythmic chant-like quality of the first stanza. How would they read the three imperative verbs which relate to the act of creating something ('Raise', 'Carve', 'Work') in the second stanza? What other features of sound can they identify, and what effects do they create?

Then get students to explore the **idyllic** natural images in the first stanza: of the singing-bird, apple-tree and rainbow shell. What do the words (and sounds) reveal about the speaker's **mood**? Do they think this is all about happiness, as the last two lines of the first stanza would seem to suggest: 'My heart is gladder than all these'?

Ask students to consider how Rossetti vividly conveys the exotic nature of the things she describes in stanza two.

Next get them to note contrasts between the two stanzas, both in their **content** and **style**. They might usefully compare the last two lines of each stanza. They could work in pairs, producing an annotated copy for display.

Get students to consider the significance of the title: what do birthdays mean to them, and how do they think Rossetti uses the word in the poem's penultimate line?

Thematic links with set poems

Nature: *Pied Beauty, Horses, Hunting Snake, Pike, The Woodspurge, Summer Farm, Where I Come From, Composed Upon Westminster Bridge*

Religion: *A Different History, Pied Beauty*

8 Dante Gabriel Rossetti THE WOODSPURGE

Background

This poem is written by Christina Rossetti's brother, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828 – 1892). Leading light of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, he was as famous for his painting as for his poetry. This poem was written in 1856.

Teacher notes to assist a first reading

Like Christina Rossetti's *A Prayer*, this poem also employs images drawn from nature but without the poetic and sensuous intensity of his sister's poem. The title suggests that the woodspurge will be at the centre of the poem, but there is in fact no detailed description of this wild plant. Having stared at it during a mood of depression, the speaker learns just one thing about it: 'The woodspurge has a cup of three'. The **tone** is matter-of-fact. The earlier mentions of 'grass' and 'ten weeds' are not described in any poetic detail either.

What there is of nature in the poem is used as a backdrop for the speaker's depressed state of mind. He is carried along somewhat aimlessly by the wind until it stops. He sits down, his hair touching the grass, and among the weeds he notices the woodspurge. He seems to be in this position for some time: 'My naked ears heard the day pass'. We do not, however, learn what has caused him to be so sad and miserable.

The relative lack of description (compare his sister's poem) and the simple language perhaps serve to reinforce the speaker's gloomy state of mind. There is an unusual insistent rhyme scheme (AAAA, BBBB etc.) and many of the lines are **monosyllabic**. These features, too, may play a role in conveying the speaker's unhappy state of mind. Students may wish to consider how this might be the case, selecting examples and commenting on precise effects.

Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Get students to read the poem aloud and then to write a summary of the content of each stanza.

Ask students to consider the force of the **end rhymes** and the use of **monosyllables** in conveying the **mood** in the first stanza. They should explore the description of the wind (the word 'wind' appears four times) and the effect it has on the speaker.

Ask students for their impressions of the speaker from the first two stanzas. What do they make of his physical position and of the words he speaks? Do they find him a sympathetic figure (or perhaps overly melodramatic)? How do they respond to the **repetition** of 'My'?

Do the students think that stanza three depicts an authentic picture of depression? Or might it seem contrived? Is there anything in the description of being miserable that students themselves can identify with?

Get them to read the poem again and to consider what significance the title has to the whole poem. What do they think are the poem's deeper meanings? Does the woodspurge have a symbolic significance? Does it have to? This could broaden out into a wider discussion of the purpose/s of poetry.

Ask students to consider the first two lines of the final stanza. What effect is created by the use of **oxymoron** 'perfect grief'? Do these lines provide the key to the poem's meaning? Or do other lines provide the key? Ask them to support their answers by close reference to the words of the poem.

Thematic links with set poems

Nature:	*Pied Beauty, Horses, Hunting Snake, Summer Farm, Where I Come From, Composed Upon Westminster Bridge*
Personal reflection:	*A Different History, Continuum, The Cockroach, Where I Come From*
Anti-romantic:	*Pike*

9 Kevin Halligan THE COCKROACH

Background

Kevin Halligan was born in Toronto, Canada, in 1964. His collection *Blossom Street and Other Poems* is based on his travels.

Teacher notes to assist a first reading

On the surface the poem is about the speaker watching and describing a 'giant' cockroach and, in particular, its movements. In the final lines, however, the speaker identifies himself with the cockroach: 'Except I thought I recognised myself'.

This connection made by the speaker suggests the metaphorical significance of the cockroach in the poem. The movements suggest different stages in his life. Indeed a number of time references add to the impression that this is a reflection by the speaker on stages in his own life: 'At first' (line 3), 'But soon' (line 5), 'After a while' (line 10).

There is a sense of direction and purpose, perhaps, in the early stage:

> 'At first he seemed quite satisfied to trace
>
> A path between the waistcot and the door'.

But later 'He looked uncertain where to go.'

The **octave** is tightly structured with a regular rhyme scheme (ABABCDCD). The 'But' at the start of the second quatrain signals an important turning-point, as the cockroach's movements become less certain ('jog in crooked rings').

There is use of **enjambment** at the end of the octave and beginning of the **sestet**, which it may be fruitful to explore: 'a mild attack / Of restlessness'. Interesting, too, is the irregular rhyme scheme of the sestet (EFGEGF). As always when discussing rhyme, it is important for students to go beyond description. How do the rhymes contribute to specific effects in the poem?

Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Get students to read the poem, preferably aloud, in pairs or small groups. Make sure their readings do justice to the enjambed lines. Then discuss the meaning of the last three lines. What do they make of the **allusion** to reincarnation: 'due payment for some vicious crime'? What do they understand by the poem's final sentence: 'I don't know / Except I thought I recognised myself'?

Having made the connection between the speaker and the cockroach, get them to explore the **extended metaphor** in greater detail. What does the use of the adjective 'giant' add to the poem?

Students should list the movements of the cockroach in the order they appear in the poem. Begin with 'start to pace' and end with 'stopped. He looked uncertain where to go.' Tell them to make a note of references to time: e.g. 'start to', 'At first'. How might the various movements described convey stages in the speaker's life? What happens to the movements as time passes? Do they feel that these descriptions have a more universal application?

Then ask them to consider the way in which the content is organised in the **octave**. What change in the movement of the cockroach takes place in lines 5-8? Have they appreciated the structural significance of 'But' at the beginning of line 5?

Get students to probe more closely the following descriptions:

' soon he turned to jog in crooked rings'

'flipping right over to scratch his wings'

'As if the victim of a mild attack / Of restlessness that worsened over time.'

What does the word 'restlessness' reveal about the way the speaker views his own life?

Finally get students to discuss the contribution to the overall poem made by the last four lines, beginning 'And stopped'.

Thematic links with set poems

Personal reflection:	*A Different History, Continuum, Summer Farm, Where I Come From*
Sonnet:	*Composed Upon Westminster Bridge*

10 Margaret Atwood THE CITY PLANNERS

Background

Born in Canada in 1939, Atwood is an established poet, novelist and literary critic, perhaps best known to many as author of the dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (published in 1985).

Teacher notes to assist a first reading

The poem begins with a **satirical** attack on the sterile uniformity of the residential suburbs. People are conspicuous by their absence in her descriptions. In the first stanza the speaker opines: 'what offends us is / the sanities'. The *sanities* include houses in *pedantic* rows, *sanitary* trees and *discouraged* grass. There is nothing untoward; even the 'whine' of a power mower is described in an **oxymoron** as 'rational'.

In stanza two, however, 'certain things' are listed that 'give momentary access to / the landscape behind or under / the future cracks (stanza three). These things have the effect of disturbing the order: the smell of oil, a splash of paint, a plastic hose 'poised in a vicious / coil' (suggestive of a snake) and 'the too fixed stare of the wide windows'.

Stanza three anticipates the effects of the destructive power of nature with houses described as sliding into the clay seas 'gradual as glaciers / that right now nobody notices'.

The last few words of stanza three lead on to the 'City Planners' in stanza four, with their 'insane faces of political conspirators'. The final three stanzas convey the futility of planning, 'guessing directions' as the planners 'sketch transitory lines' in their attempts to impose order on the suburbs. The planners are described as remote figures 'concealed from each other, / each in his own private blizzard'.

Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Stanza 1

Ask students to write down their impressions of the suburbs described in the first stanza, making sure they have evidence from the stanza to support their points.

What evidence is there to suggest that the speaker is an outsider looking in? Consider the first two lines and also the significance of the dent in the speaker's car door. What does the word 'rebuke' refer to?

Get students to make a list of the words/phrases that capture the speaker's disapproving **tone** and to comment on the precise effects created. For example, what effects do they feel are created by the underlined words in this quotation: 'nothing more <u>abrupt</u> / than the <u>rational whine</u> of a <u>power mower</u>'? What do they make of the **oxymoron** 'rational whine'?

How do other words in the stanza convey the soulless atmosphere of the suburb?

Stanza 2

Get students to consider the contrast between the first and second stanzas. What do they make of the driveways that 'neatly / sidestep hysteria / by being even'? What do the words 'sanities' and 'hysteria' have in common? And how are they different?

The syntax is somewhat complex. But students will need to link the 'certain things' to what the speakers say they do (i.e. 'give momentary access to ') in stanza three. Get them to

list the things and to consider the words and sounds used to describe them. For example, how do they interpret the 'too fixed stare' of the wide windows?

Ask them to consider the effectiveness of the concise line 'certain things' and its positioning within this stanza.

Stanza 3

Get students to discuss the image of nature presented here, commenting closely on the effects of key words such as 'capsized', 'slide obliquely' and also the **simile** of the glacier.

Stanzas 4-6

Students should probe closely the descriptions of the City Planners (note the capitals here). What attitude towards them is revealed in these descriptions? Ask students to consider the following adjectives in relation to the planners' actions: *misguided, ignorant, futile*. Which of these adjectives (or any adjectives they might themselves suggest) best describes the planners here?

It is difficult to see in a blizzard: how effective do they find the use of the blizzard **metaphor** in stanza four?

How is their attitude towards the planners affected by what they read in stanza three?

Next get them to read the poem (practising in pairs or small groups), adopting an appropriate tone/tones. How do they feel the final two lines should be read, and how effective do they find the metaphors 'panic of suburb' and 'bland madness of snows'?

Finally, in small groups, each student should select a line s/he finds particularly striking, and explain precisely how Atwood has made it so striking.

Thematic links with set poems

The City: *The Planners, Composed Upon Westminster Bridge*

11 Boey Kim Cheng THE PLANNERS

Background

Boey Kim Cheng was born in Singapore in 1965. He now lives and works in Australia.

Teacher notes to assist a first reading

After the title, the planners are referred to anonymously as 'they' six times. The word is used twice in the first line and appears at the beginning of the first and second stanzas. 'They' are presented as all-powerful: nothing can stop them. In stanza one there is a sameness and uniformity about the city which creates an exact but soulless landscape (similar to that of the residential suburb in Atwood's *The City Planners*). The buildings are 'in *alignment'* and meet roads at '*desired* points'. The stanza ends with **personification** of both the sea that 'draws back' and the skies that 'surrender' in the face of such progress.

In stanza two there is a sense that history is being erased: the 'flaws' and 'blemishes of the past'. The drilling, we are told, 'goes right through / the fossils of last century'. Anything not up to scratch is removed: 'knock off / useless blocks with dental dexterity'. An extended dentistry metaphor runs through the stanza. The line 'Anaesthesia, amnesia, hypnosis' is followed by 'They [the planners] have the means'. This will be an interesting line for students to consider possible interpretations after considering carefully definitions of these words:

anaesthesia – state of having sensation blocked

amnesia – condition in which memory is disturbed or lost

hypnosis – sleep-like state in which the mind responds to external suggestion.

In the light of the first two stanzas, it will be interesting to see what students make of the final stanza, beginning 'But my heart would not bleed / poetry'. The words 'single drop' and 'stain' extend the blood/bleeding metaphor. The contrast between the final and first two stanzas could not be more marked.

Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Get students to read the poem (in groups of three – one student for each stanza), and then ask them to summarise the content of each stanza. The development of the poem is fairly straightforward.

How do they interpret the final stanza, and what do they feel is its relationship with the rest of the poem?

Then get them to probe the effects of particular words in stanza one. The words 'gridded', permutations of possibilities', 'points', 'grace of mathematics' are associated (broadly) with mathematics. What does their use here reveal about the speaker's attitude towards planners and city planning?

Get them to explore the **personification** of the sea and skies in the final two lines of stanza one. What do the images suggest about the relationship between man (more specifically, planners) and nature? What do they think is the speaker's view of planners?

Ask students to consider the effect of the **repetition** of the word 'They' and also where each instance of the word appears in the poem.

Get students to list each reference to dentistry and dental work in stanza two, and to consider closely the effect created by using each word/phrase. Does it enhance their appreciation of the poem to relate the descriptions here to their own experiences of going to the dentist?

Ask them to consult a dictionary for relevant meanings of the words in the line 'Anaesthesia, amnesia, hypnosis'. Then consider what contribution this line makes to the poem as a whole. What does it reveal about the speaker's attitude towards 'They'?

At this stage ask them to read the poem's first two stanzas again, practising getting right the tone (and any shifts in tone). Then they should consider the meaning of the last stanza (beginning 'But') and its relationship to the rest of the poem.

What do they make of the 'bleed poetry' **metaphor** in the context of the poem? His heart would not bleed 'a single drop / to stain the blueprint / of our past's tomorrow'. How do they finally interpret this, and do they find it an effective ending to the poem?

Thematic links with set poems

The city: *The City Planners, Composed Upon Westminster Bridge*

12 Norman MacCaig SUMMER FARM

Background

Norman MacCaig was born in Scotland in 1910 and died in 1996. *Summer Farm* contains MacCaig's characteristic blend of writing about nature and personal reflection.

Teacher notes to assist a first reading

The poem splits nicely into two parts:

- The first two stanzas offer descriptions of aspects of nature, chiefly concerned with what the speaker sees.
- The final two stanzas focus on the speaker: 'I lie, not thinking, in the cool, soft grass, / Afraid of where a thought might take me '

In this way the poem charts a movement away from the **concrete** to the **abstract**. The first two stanzas include descriptions which are certainly original, perhaps even startling: e.g. 'Straws like tame lightnings', 'ducks go wobbling', 'the dizzy blue'.

The mention, in stanza three, of fear 'of where a thought might take me' and the speaker's description of himself as 'a pile of selves' contribute to a more reflective and philosophical **mood** and type of writing. The speaker talks about lifting the lid of the farm 'with a metaphysic hand'. He ends the poem by stating that he is 'in the centre' of the farm. The phrases 'Self under self' and 'Farm within farm' perhaps convey the sense that he is only part of a long sequence of people connected with the farm. This is perhaps the thought that he was too afraid to countenance earlier in stanza three.

Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem

Get students to list the things the speaker sees in the first two stanzas, and then to consider the precise **effects** created by the specific words used in MacCaig's descriptions. For example, how effective do they find the lightning **simile** in describing the straw and the phrase 'hang zigzag on hedges'?

Then get them to discuss in small groups how effective they find the descriptions of:

- the water in the trough
- the ducks
- the hen
- the swallow
- the sky ('empty', 'the dizzy blue').

Next get students to comment on the contrast (in subject matter and tone) between the first two stanzas and the final two stanzas. They could record their judgements in a table with two columns headed 'Stanza 1' and 'Stanza 2'.

What is the speaker actually doing in stanzas three and four? What is the significance of the grasshopper which 'finds himself in space'?

Get students to consider closely the possible meanings and effects of the following **similes** and **metaphors** in the final stanza:

> 'Self under self, a pile of selves I stand / Threaded on time' [What does 'Threaded' means here?]
>
> 'Lift the farm like a lid and see / Farm within farm '

‘ in the centre, me.’

Next students should consider in what way the final stanza might explain these words from stanza three: ‘Afraid of where a thought might take me’.

Finally, ask them to comment on the effectiveness of the poem’s structure in relation to its subject-matter: they might consider the stanza arrangement and the effects of particular rhymes.

Thematic links with set poems

Nature:	*Pied Beauty, Horses, Hunting Snake, Pike, The Woodspurge, Summer Farm, Where I Come From*
Personal reflection:	*A Different History, Continuum, The Woodspurge, The Cockroach, Summer Farm, Composed Upon Westminster Bridge*

13 Elizabeth Brewster WHERE I COME FROM

Background

Elizabeth Brewster is a Canadian poet and academic, born in 1922. The description in the second stanza of this poem captures something of the rural Canada of her early years.

Teacher notes to assist a first reading

The first sentence in the first line is exemplified in the remainder of the first stanza. People have within them (in their characters) something of the places where they live or perhaps where they were born. She lists jungles, mountains, seas and the city. The greater part of the first stanza is devoted to city-dwellers in museums, glue factories, offices and subways.

Stanza two marks a shift from the city to a rural context, and with it perhaps a shift from present to past. The stanza begins with a repetition of the title 'Where I come from'. As with stanza one, there is a succession of images, though this time drawn from the countryside. The images are parts of the people's minds: pine woods, blueberry patches, farmhouses, and 'battered schoolhouses / behind which violets grow'.

The final four lines (straddling stanzas two and three) are central to the poem, and help to explain the formative influences on the speaker's mind. The focus is on the 'chief' seasons of spring and winter: 'ice and the breaking of ice'. The final line of the poem contributes to the wintry description with 'a frosty wind from fields of snow'. The metaphor of the door in the mind that 'blows open' demonstrates vividly the importance of the sense of place the speaker carries with her in her own mind.

Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Each student should divide a sheet of paper in two and list:

- the places in stanza one
- the places in stanza two.

Then working in pairs students should discuss the words and sounds used to describe each place. Which places do they feel are described more approvingly and which places less approvingly? They should justify their views by close reference to the poem, always commenting on the precise effects created by particular words.

Is there a sense that the description is uneven (with more given to the rural places)? Why do they think this is?

Do students agree with the poem's initial generalisation: 'People are made of places'? Or do they feel it is too sweeping? How does the beginning of stanza two reinforce this generalisation: 'Where I come from, people / carry wood in their minds'?

From their reading of the poem, what do they feel is the **tone** of stanza two? What effect is created by the phrases: 'burned-out bush', 'in need of paint' and 'battered schoolhouses'? What effect is created by the **juxtaposition** of violets growing behind the battered schoolhouses?

Students should next read the final four lines of the poem. How do they reveal the speaker's thoughts and feelings? What is meant by 'Spring and winter / are the mind's chief seasons'? How does this link with the content of the final two-line stanza?

How effective do they find the **metaphor** 'A door in the mind blows open'? How does this connect with the final line and the central idea of the poem?

Do students feel the poem has only a personal significance to the poet, or is it possible to detect a more universal significance? Is the metaphor of a door blowing open one students can identify with in relation to a place they feel is important to them?

Which sounds in the poem do students find particularly striking, and why? They could start their discussion with the **sibilance** in lines 4 and 5, or the emphatic **alliteration** in 'blueberry patches in the burned-out bush'. As always, they should think about the effects created by the use of such devices.

Do they feel that other **senses** are used to powerful effect in the poem? In small groups, they should discuss examples they find particularly striking, and explain why. Students should seek clarification and challenge others' ideas as appropriate.

Thematic links with set poems

Identity	*A Different History, Summer Farm, The Cockroach*
Nature	*Pied Beauty, Horses, Hunting Snake, A Birthday, Summer Farm*
The city	*The City Planners, The Planners, Composed Upon Westminster Bridge*

14 William Wordsworth SONNET: COMPOSED UPON WESTMINSTER BRIDGE

Background

Born in 1770 in the north of England, Wordsworth lived until the age of eighty. As a Romantic poet, he wrote of the beauty of nature. The moment he captures in this poem is when he and his sister, Dorothy, stood on Westminster Bridge one early morning before the city of London was awake.

Perhaps students could explore any similarities between Dorothy's diary entry and her brother's poem.

Teacher notes to assist a first reading

The language of the poem is fairly straightforward. In addition to the words glossed in the anthology, the meanings of words such as 'majesty' and 'splendour' might be given particular consideration as to how they are used in the poem. How do these words reveal the speaker's attitude, and how do they contribute to the overall **mood**?

This is a **Petrarchan** sonnet. The **octave** captures the beauty of this particular morning. Earth, personified, has nothing more fair to show, which is praise indeed coming from this worshipper of nature. The city, personified, is wearing only the beauty of the morning 'like a garment'. The bare list of things in line 6 provides in an extremely economic way the iconography of the city of London (largely familiar today - except for the ships). The rising sun makes everything 'bright and glittering'. The time of day is significant as such a beautiful image with its 'smokeless air' might be captured only before the city wakes up and gets to work.

The **sestet** expresses the speaker's view that the beauty of the city in early morning sunlight surpasses that of 'valley, rock or hill', more typical targets of praise in much romantic poetry. The effect on the poet's mood is considerable: 'Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!'

The final three lines have three instances of **personification**: of the river, the houses and the city itself, with 'all that mighty heart'.

Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Get students to read the poem and list all the views expressed by the speaker, starting with that expressed in the first line. They should annotate a copy of the poem, showing the effects of particular words: for example, what do they make of 'so touching in its majesty'?

Ask students to consider Wordsworth's use of description in the **octave**. How effective do they find the **simile** 'like a garment wear / The beauty of the morning'? And the simple list used in line six? How important do they feel is the time of day and the mention of 'smokeless air' to the mood?

Get them to discuss any change in subject-matter or change in tone, or any development in the argument, which occurs in the **sestet**. Why do they think people are absent from the poem?

Ask students to provide an explanation for the speaker's feeling of 'a calm so deep', making sure they provide pertinent reference to the poem. How do they feel the last three lines of the sestet contribute to the poem's mood?

Get them to annotate all examples of **hyperbole**, **personification** and **sound** devices Wordsworth uses. As always, such notes should focus on the precise effects created by

using specific devices. This is not an invitation to simply log features. Each student should select an example they find particularly memorable, and explain how Wordsworth's writing makes it so.

They might use the internet to search for Dorothy Wordsworth's diary entry for the day she and her brother witnessed this sight. They could explore the similarities and differences of poem and diary entry.

Thematic links with set poems

The city:	*The City Planners, The Planners*
Nature:	*Pied Beauty, Horses, Hunting Snake, Pike, Summer Farm*
Personal reflection:	*A Different History, Continuum, The Cockroach, Summer Farm, Where I Come From*