



Poetry

INTRODUCTION

A poem is a composition in verse, usually characterised by concentrated and heightened language in which words are chosen for their sound and suggestive power as well as for their meaning, and using techniques such as rhythm and metre. To read and hear good poetry is to appreciate the subtleties of cadence and rhythm, the variety of pace and pattern and all that goes to make up the music of poetry.

Every poem that we read adds to, in some degree, our total conception of poetry.

Of the eight poets in this selection, four are from the classical tradition: Donne, Milton, Blake and Coleridge. The other four are closer to contemporary times: Yeats, A.K.Ramanujan, Emily Dickinson and Kamala Das.



12076CH06



1

A Lecture Upon the Shadow

John Donne was representative of the metaphysical poets of his time. He set the metaphysical mode by vibrancy of language and startling imagery, and a preference for a diction modelled on direct utterances. He was brought up as a Roman Catholic (later he converted to Anglicanism), and was Dean of St. Paul's Church till his death.

The total effect of a metaphysical poem at its best is to startle the reader into seeing and knowing what he has not really noticed or thought about before. Like all Donne's poetry this poem too reflects an emphasis on the intellect and wit as against feeling and emotion.



John Donne
1572-1631

Stand still and I will read to thee
A Lecture, Love, in loves philosophy,
 These three houres that we have spent,
 Walking here, Two shadowes went
Along with us, which we our selves produc'd;
But, now the Sunne is just above our head,
 We doe those shadowes tread;
 And to brave clearnesse all things are reduc'd.
So whilst our infant loves did grow,
Disguises did, and shadowes, flow,
From us, and our cares; but now 'tis not so.

That love hath not attain'd the high'st degree,
Which is still diligent lest others see.
Except our loves at this noone stay,



We shall new shadowes make the other way.
As the first were made to blinde
Others; these which come behinde
Will worke upon our selves, and blind our eyes.
If our loves faint, and westwardly decline;



To me thou, falsely thine;
And I to thee mine actions shall disguise.
The morning shadowes were away,
But these grow longer all the day,
But oh, loves day is short, if love decay.

Love is a growing, or full constant light;
And his first minute, after noone, is night.

Understanding the Poem

1. How do the shadows before noon differ from the shadows after noon? What do the two kinds of shadow represent?
2. Love is described as light. What makes the poet talk about shadows?
3. Comment on the use of the image of the shadows for the idea that the poet wants to convey.
4. The poet seems to be addressing his beloved in the poem. What is the message he wishes to convey to her?
5. Instead of 'A Lecture Upon Love' the poet calls the poem 'A Lecture Upon the Shadow'. What is the effect that this has on our reading of the poem?



Language Work

1. Notice the spelling of the following words

houres
noone

shadowes
clearnesse

Sunne
behinde

The 'e' that was used in Donne's period got dropped from English orthography later. Pick out the other words in the poem that have this peculiar feature.

2. Take note also that the apostrophe is not used for indicating the possessive form: loves philosophy.
3. Examples from other poems from this period:
 - How neatly **doe** we give one **onely** name
 - To **parents** issue and the **sunnes** bright starre!

Try this out

Notice the adjectives in phrases such as 'infant loves' and 'brave clearnesse'. What is the meaning of these adjectives

- (i) in isolation
- (ii) as part of these phrases.

Suggested Reading

'Go and Catch a Falling Star' by John Donne

'The Flea' by John Donne.



12076CH07



2

Poems by Milton

John Milton began writing poetry at the age of ten. After finishing his formal education at Cambridge, he read almost everything available in Latin, Greek, Italian and English. He was appointed Latin Secretary where he worked so hard that eyestrain, from years of late night reading, caused him to become totally blind at the age of forty-five. In the final years of his life he wrote (through dictation) Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained.



John Milton
1608-1674

On Time

Fly envious *Time*, till thou run out thy race,
Call on the lazy leaden-stepping hours,
Whose speed is but the heavy Plummets pace;
And glut thy self with what thy womb devours,
Which is no more than what is false and vain,
And merely mortal dross;
So little is our loss,
So little is thy gain.
For when as each thing bad thou hast entomb'd,
And last of all, thy greedy self consum'd,
Then long Eternity shall greet our bliss
With an individual kiss;
And Joy shall overtake us as a flood,
When every thing that is sincerely good
And perfectly divine,
With Truth, and Peace, and Love shall ever shine



About the supreme Throne
Of him, t'whose happy-making sight alone,
When once our heav'nly guided soul shall clime,
Then all this Earthy grossnes quit,
Attir'd with Stars, we shall for ever sit,
Triumphing over Death, and Chance, and thee O Time.

NOTES

Envious Time: According to ancient mythology Cronos devoured each of his children at birth.

Plummets: A lead weight whose slow mechanism activates the ticking mechanism in a clock.

Understanding the Poem

1. Why has the poet pitted the flight of Time against the 'lazy leaden-stepping hours' and 'the heavy Plummets pace'?
2. What are the things associated with the temporal and what are associated with the eternal?
3. What guides human souls towards divinity? Who is the final winner in the race against Time?

II

On Shakespear.* 1630

What needs my *Shakespear* for his honour'd Bones,
The labour of an age in piled Stones,
Or that his hallow'd reliques should be hid
Under a Star-ypointing *Pyramid*?
Dear son of memory, great heir of Fame,
What need'st thou such weak witness of thy name?
Thou in our wonder and astonishment
Hast built thy self a live-long Monument.
For whilst to th'shame of slow endeavouring art,
Thy easie numbers flow, and that each heart
Hath from the leaves of thy unvalu'd Book,
Those Delphic lines with deep impression took,
Then thou our fancy of it self bereaving



Dost make us Marble with too much conceaving;
And so Sepulcher'd in such pomp dost lie,
That Kings for such a Tomb would wish to die.

**Notice the spelling of 'Shakespear' and of the words 'easie', 'conceaving'.*

Understanding the Poem

1. Why does Milton feel it is not necessary to put up a monument in stone for Shakespeare?
2. What does the 'weak witness of thy name' refer to?
3. How does Milton describe Shakespeare as the source of inspiration for all succeeding generations of poets?
4. What is the best tribute that posterity has bestowed on Shakespeare?

Language Study

Etymology is the study of the history of linguistic change. When applied to individual words, it is an account of (i) the history of a word (ii) the derivation of a word.

The dictionary meaning of a word is followed by notes on its origin.

For the word 'entomb'd' the information we get is: [late ME *entoumbe(n)* MF *entombe(r)*]. This means that

- The word is found in late Middle English
- The word is of French origin and is found in use from 1578
- Also, about 30 per cent of the words in English are of French origin. Borrowings from French reached its height after the Norman Conquest (1066)—between 1250 and 1400.

Suggested Reading

'On his Blindness' by John Milton.



12076CH08



3

Poems by Blake



William Blake
1757-1827

William Blake was a poet, painter and engraver. He abhorred the rationalism and materialism of his times. What he saw and painted were human beings beset with evil, yet striving for the divine within them.

Blake's lyrics appeared in two sets of volumes: Songs of Innocence (from which The Divine Image has been chosen) and Songs of Experience (from which The Human Abstract has been taken) representing the two contrary states of the human soul. Most of the poems in the first volume have counterparts in the second.

The Divine Image

To Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
All pray in their distress;
And to these virtues of delight
Return their thankfulness.

For Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
Is God our father dear,
And Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
Is Man, his child and care.

For Mercy has a human heart,
Pity a human face,
And Love, the human form divine,
And Peace, the human dress.





Then every man, of every clime,
That prays in his distress,
Prays to the human form divine,
Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace.

And all must love the human form,
In heathen, turk, or jew;
Where Mercy, Love, and Pity dwell
There God is dwelling too.

II

The Human Abstract

Pity would be no more
If we did not make somebody Poor;
And Mercy no more could be
If all were as happy as we.

And mutual fear brings peace,
Till the selfish loves increase:
Then Cruelty knits a snare,
And spreads his baits with care.

He sits down with holy fears,
And waters the ground with tears;
Then Humility takes its root
Underneath his foot.

Soon spreads the dismal shade
Of Mystery over his head;
And the Caterpillar and Fly
Feed on the Mystery.

And it bears the fruit of Deceit,
Ruddy and sweet to eat;
And the Raven his nest has made
In its thickest shade.





The Gods of the earth and sea
Sought thro' Nature to find this Tree;
But their search was all in vain:
There grows one in the Human Brain.

Note: Blake's poetry was published in a manner most unusual in literature and art history; he personally manufactured each copy. The verses were not typeset but were, with the engravings that illustrated them, cut into copper plates. The pages themselves he illuminated in water colours. Thus Blake can be called the first multi-media artist.

Understanding the Poem

1. How are these two matched poems related to each other in content? How is the human being depicted in the *Song of Innocence* and how is he/she depicted in the *Song of Experience*? Do we find both aspects working in an average human being?
2. How would you explain the lines
For Mercy has a human **heart**,
Pity a human **face**,
And Love, the human **form** divine,
And Peace, the human **dress**.
3. How do Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love get distorted in the human brain?
4. Blake's poetry expresses one aspect of his multi-dimensional view of human experience—of mankind once whole and happy, now fallen into discord and tyranny, from which it must be rescued. Explain with reference to these two poems.

Language Work

1. Certain words in the poem have been capitalised. Can you think of reasons for this?
2. Count the syllables in the lines of 'The Divine Image'. Do you see a pattern?

The first line has eight and the second line has six syllables. Two syllables make a foot in poetry. Here the first syllable of each foot is unstressed and the second syllable is stressed.



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Try this Out

Read 'The Chimney Sweeper' in *Songs of Innocence*, and then 'The Chimney Sweeper' in *Songs of Experience*, and contrast the two. You could also read 'The Lamb' and 'The Tiger'.

Suggested Reading

Songs of Innocence by William Blake

Songs of Experience by William Blake.

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4

Kubla Khan

Or

A Vision in a Dream: A Fragment

S.T. Coleridge was imaginative even as a child. He studied at Cambridge. In 1797, he met Wordsworth; the two belonged to the first generation of Romantic poets. Coleridge was responsible for presenting the supernatural as real and Wordsworth would try to render ordinary reality as remarkable and strange. Byron, Shelley and Keats belonged to the next generation of Romantic Poets.

The genesis of this poem was a vision seen by Coleridge in a trance-like state of mind. He tried to capture its essence but an interruption caused an irreparable break in his poetic flow.



S.T. Coleridge
1772-1834

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.
So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round:
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,

- * Kubla Khan founded the Mongol dynasty in China in the thirteenth century.
- * You will notice that this poem is incomplete. There is a reason behind this. In 1797, when Coleridge fell ill, some medicine was prescribed, from the effects of which he fell asleep in his chair while reading about Kubla Khan. In the three hours of profound sleep, he had a wonderful dream. On awakening he distinctly recollected it, and began to write it down, when he was interrupted by a chance visitor. The poem thus remained incomplete.



Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!
And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
A mighty fountain momently was forced;
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:
And 'mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momently the sacred river.
Five miles meandering with a mazy motion
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean:
And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
Ancestral voices prophesying war!
The shadow of the dome of pleasure
Floated midway on the waves;
Where was heard the mingled measure
From the fountain and the caves.
It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure dome with caves of ice!

A damsel with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw:
It was an Abyssinian maid,
And on her dulcimer she played,
Singing of Mount Abora.
Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight, 'twould win me,
That with music loud and long,



I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!
And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honeydew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

Understanding the Poem

Find out where the river Alph is.

1. Does the poem have a real geographical location? How does the poet mix up the real and the imaginary to give a sense of the surreal?
2. Pick out
 - (i) contrasting images that are juxtaposed throughout the poem.
 - (ii) images that strike the eye and images that strike the ear, both positive and negative.
 - (iii) the words used to describe the movement of water.
3. What is the discordant note heard at the end of the third stanza? Can we relate this to the grandeur and turmoil that are a part of an emperor's life?
4. Which are the lines that refer to magical elements?
5. What is poetic ecstasy likened to?
6. The poem is a fragment. What do you think has made it a lasting literary piece?

Language Study

Dulcimer is a string instrument struck with two light hammers, used both in China and in Europe in different forms.

TASK

Write short descriptions of five other rare musical instruments that are used by folk cultures.



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Try this Out

The poem is a product of subconscious fusion of dream images and ideas from Coleridge's wide reading. Which of the details in the poem do you think are factual, and which imaginary? Surf the internet to get interesting details.

Suggested Reading

'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' by S.T. Coleridge

'Christabel' by S.T. Coleridge.

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5

Trees



Emily Dickinson
1830-1886

Emily Dickinson is regarded as one of America's quintessential poets of the nineteenth century. She lived an introverted and hermetic life, and published very few of her poems in her lifetime. Her output, 1789 poems in all, were published posthumously.

Her poetry is characterised by unconventional capitalisation and extensive use of dashes, along with unusual imagery and lyric style.

The Trees like Tassels hit – and – swung –
There seemed to rise a Tune
From Miniature Creatures
Accompanying the Sun –

Far Psalteries of Summer –
Enamoring the Ear
They never yet did satisfy –
Remotest – when most fair

The Sun shone whole at intervals –
Then Half – then utter hid –
As if Himself were optional
And had Estates of Cloud

Sufficient to enfold Him
Eternally from view –
Except it were a whim of His
To let the Orchards grow –



A Bird sat careless on the fence –
One gossiped in the Lane
On silver matters charmed a Snake
Just winding round a Stone –

Bright Flowers slit a Calyx
And soared upon a Stem
Like Hindered Flags – Sweet hoisted –
With Spices – in the Hem –

'Twas more – I cannot mention –
How mean – to those that see
Vandyke's Delineation
Of Nature's – Summer Day!



Responding to the Poem

1. What imagery does the poet use to delineate Summer's day more picturesquely than any painter could?
2. What do you understand by 'Psalteries of Summer'?
3. In which lines are creatures attributed with human qualities? How does this add to the beauty of the Summer's day?
4. How would you explain the image of the 'Hindered Flags'?
5. Why are the pronouns referring to the Sun capitalised?
6. Give examples from the poem to show that great poetry is a result of close observation of natural phenomena.

Language Study

You came across 'dulcimer' in the poem 'Kubla Khan'. Did you note down 'Psaltery' as another musical instrument? They are very similar. Look up the illustrations for the two in an illustrated dictionary. Find out in what ways they are different from one another.

Suggested Reading

The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson.



The first time on this shore,
The bell-beat of their wings above my head,
Trode with a lighter tread.
Unwearied still, lover by lover,
They paddle in the cold
Companionable streams or climb the air;
Their hearts have not grown old;
Passion or conquest, wander where they will,
Attend upon them still.

But now they drift on the still water,
Mysterious, beautiful;
Among what rushes will they build,
By what lake's edge or pool
Delight men's eyes when I awake some day
To find they have flown away?

Understanding the Poem

1. How do the 'trees in their autumn beauty', 'dry woodland paths', 'October twilight', 'still sky' connect to the poet's own life?
2. What do 'the light tread' and 'the sore heart' refer to?
3. What is the contrast between the liveliness of the swans and human life?
4. What contributes to the beauty and mystery of the swans' lives?

Language Study

Notice the rhyme scheme in the poem. Do you notice a consistent pattern? We use a new letter for every new sound at the end of the lines. The rhyme scheme for the first stanza is given alongside the lines. Do it for the rest of the poem.

Suggested Reading

The Green Helmet by W.B. Yeats

The Celtic Twilight by W.B. Yeats.



12076GH12



7

Time and Time Again

A.K. Ramanujan is one of India's finest English-language poets. He is best known for his pioneering translations of ancient Tamil poetry into modern English. At the time of his death he was professor of linguistics at the University of Chicago and was recognised as the world's most profound scholar of South Indian languages and culture.

His interests included anthropology and folklore. These influenced his work as a craftsman of English. This poem represents the complex distillation of a lifetime of unusual thought and feeling.



A.K. Ramanujan
1929-1993

Or listen to the clocktowers
of any old well-managed city
beating their gongs round the clock, each slightly
off the others' time, deeper or lighter
in its bronze, beating out a different
sequence each half-hour, out of the accidents
of alloy, a maker's shaking hand
in Switzerland, or the mutual distances
commemorating a donor's whim,
the perennial feuds and seasonal alliance
of Hindu, Christian, and Muslim—
cut off sometimes by a change of wind,
a change of mind, or a siren
between the pieces of a backstreet quarrel.



One day you look up and see one of them
eyeless, silent, a zigzag sky showing



through the knocked-out clockwork, after a riot,
a peace-march time bomb, or a precise act
Of nature in a night of lightnings.

Responding to the Poem

1. What did you think the poem was about when you read the first few lines?
2. From which line does the import of the title strike the reader?
3. What makes for the differences between the timekeeping of the various clocks? What is the implicit comparison?
4. Why is the act of nature described as 'precise'?
5. Which of the following reflects the poet's attitude towards communal disharmony
 - (i) Critical condemnation
 - (ii) Helpless acceptance
 - (iii) Wistful lament
6. Is the poet's attitude a representation of how the average Indian feels both towards human violence and nature's fury?

Suggested Reading

The Interior Landscape by A.K. Ramanujan

Poems of Love and War by A.K. Ramanujan.



12076CH13



8

Blood



Kamala Das
1934-2009

One of the greatest literary figures in Malayalam, Kamala Das was born in the year 1934 in Punnayurkulam, in South Malabar, Kerala. Her work, in poetry and in prose, has given her a permanent place in modern Malayalam literature as well as in Indian writing in English. She is best known for her feminist writings and focus on womanhood.

She has been the recipient of such famous awards as the Poetry Award for the Asian PEN Anthology, the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for the best collection of short stories in Malayalam, and the Chaman Lal Award for fearless journalism.

When we were children
My brother and I
And always playing on the sands
Drawing birds and animals
Our great-grandmother said one day,
You see this house of ours
Now three hundred years old,
It's falling to little bits
Before our very eyes
The walls are cracked and torn
And moistened by the rains,
The tiles have fallen here and there
The windows whine and groan
And every night
The rats come out of the holes
And scamper past our doors.
The snake-shrine is dark with weeds



And all the snake-gods in the shrine
Have lichen on their hoods.
O it hurts me she cried,
Wiping a reddened eye
For I love this house, it hurts me much
To watch it die.
When I grow old, I said,
And very very rich
I shall rebuild the fallen walls
And make new this ancient house.
My great-grandmother
Touched my cheeks and smiled.
She was really simple.
Fed on God for years
All her feasts were monotonous
For the only dish was always God
And the rest mere condiments.
She told us how she rode her elephant
When she was ten or eleven
Every Monday without fail
To the Siva shrine
And back to home again
And, told us of the jewel box
And the brocade from the north
And the perfumes and the oils
And the sandal for her breasts
And her marriage to a prince
Who loved her deeply for a lovely short year
And died of fever, in her arms
She told us
That we had the oldest blood
My brother and she and I
The oldest blood in the world
A blood thin and clear and fine
While in the veins of the always poor
And in the veins
Of the new-rich men
Flowed a blood thick as gruel
And muddy as a ditch.



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Finally she lay dying
In her eighty sixth year
A woman wearied by compromise
Her legs quilted with arthritis
And with only a hard cough
For comfort
I looked deep into her eyes
Her poor bleary eyes
And prayed that she would not grieve
So much about the house.
I had learnt by then
Most lessons of defeat,
Had found out that to grow rich
Was a difficult feat.
The house was crouching
On its elbows then,
It looked that night in the pallid moon
So grotesque and alive.
When they burnt my great grandmother
Over logs of the mango tree
I looked once at the house
And then again and again
For I thought I saw the windows close
Like the closing of the eyes
I thought I heard the pillars groan
And the dark rooms heave a sigh.
I set forth again
For other towns,
Left the house with the shrine
And the sands
And the flowering shrubs
And the wide rabid mouth of the Arabian Sea.

* * *

I know the rats are running now
Across the darkened halls
They do not fear the dead
I know the white ants have reached my home
And have raised on walls



Strange totems of burial.
At night, in stillness,
From every town I live in
I hear the rattle of its death
The noise of rafters creaking
And the windows' whine.
I have let you down
Old house, I seek forgiveness
O mother's mother's mother
I have plucked your soul
Like a pip from a fruit
And have flung it into your pyre
Call me callous
Call me selfish
But do not blame my blood
So thin, so clear, so fine
The oldest blood in the world
That remembers as it flows
All the gems and all the gold
And all the perfumes and the oils
And the stately
Elephant ride...

Responding to the Poem

1. What makes the depiction of a crumbling village house so authentic in the poem? Is this a common feature of most village houses in the context of rapid urbanisation? Is the poet speaking from actual experience?
2. What aspects of Indian society and history get highlighted in the poem?
3. Does the poem bring out the contrast between tradition and modernity? Illustrate your answer with examples from the poem.
4. While the poet respected her grandmother's sentiments of royal grandeur, we can also see that she revolts against it. Identify the lines which bring this out.
5. Which lines reveal the poet's criticism of class distinctions?
6. Is it 'selfishness' and 'callousness' that makes the poet break her childhood promise to her grandmother of renovating the house? Why does she do nothing about rebuilding the house?



7. What do you understand of the conflict in the poet's conscience?

Language Study

Comment on the changes in poetic expression in English from the time of Donne to that of Kamala Das with reference to

- prosodic features (rhyme, rhythm and metre)
- vocabulary
- language
- themes.

Suggested Readings

The Old Playhouse and Other Poems by Kamala Das
Summer in Calcutta by Kamala Das
The Descendants by Kamala Das.

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