

## Cluster 4

# Relationships

Different types of relationship are the focus of this cluster. Some poems, such as 'Quickdraw' and 'Hour', deal with the positive and/or negative emotions inherent in romantic relationships. Some deal with family relationships and the complex feelings that can be experienced by parents and children, or brothers and sisters, as in 'Nettles' and 'Harmonium' or 'Brothers' and 'Sister Maude' respectively.

Some of the recurrent themes include conflict between couples, and the emotional vulnerability and pain that love can cause, whether it is between a father and his son or a couple at the start of a romantic love affair.

When studying this cluster, it might be useful for students to focus on some of the following considerations:

- What **form of relationship** is the focus of this poem? Is it a romantic or familial relationship? Is the poet drawing attention to any universal experiences as they portray this relationship in particular?
- From whose **perspective** is the poem written? Is it **first, second** or **third person** address, and how does this affect meaning? Who does the poem address? Or is it *about*, rather than directed to, someone? Does the form of communication affect the meaning? Is the poet speaking directly, or does the poet use a **persona** to communicate their ideas?
- Consider the **mood / tone** of the poem. Is it light-hearted or serious in tone? Is it making a serious point in a light-hearted way and, if so, why might that be?
- Why has the poet written this poem? What **feelings, attitudes** and/or **ideas** is the poet considering through their presentation of these relationships?
- How has the poet communicated their ideas? What aspects of **language, structure** and/or **form** are particularly significant in this poem? What **literary techniques** is the poet using to achieve their effects?

# The Manhunt

Simon Armitage

## Background and Context

This poem is taken from *The Not Dead*, a collection Armitage wrote for a Channel 4 documentary, 'Forgotten Heroes', commemorating the lives of ex-servicemen and examining the effects of their experiences on themselves and their families. In this programme, 'The Manhunt' was read by Laura, the wife of Eddie Beddoes, a UN peacekeeper in the Bosnian conflict who was eventually discharged due to extreme stress and depression. The 'relationship' is between a loving couple.

See page 42 for more on Simon Armitage

## The Manhunt

After the first phase,  
after passionate nights and intimate days,

only then would he let me trace  
the frozen river which ran through his face,

*Introduces metaphor of war planes, linking to rudder, parachute, rungs and metal*

only then would he let me explore  
the blown **hinge** of his lower jaw,

and handle and hold  
the damaged, **porcelain** collar-bone, *Delicate, fragile connotations*

and mind and attend  
the fractured rudder of shoulder-blade,

*Careful, tentative gestures*

and **finger and thumb**  
the parachute silk of his punctured lung.

Only then could I bind the struts  
and climb the rungs of his broken ribs,

and feel the hurt  
**of his grazed heart.** *Shortest second line, emphasises the cause of his pain*

*Tentative, exploratory verb*

**Skirting** along,  
only then could I picture the scan,

the **foetus** of metal beneath his chest  
where the bullet had finally come to rest. *Has connotations of vulnerability as well as the depth of his pain – and suggests it is going to grow and develop*

*Use of present participle suggests all his energy is focused on this aspect of himself – and that it is 'live', still active.*

Then I widened the search,  
traced the scarring back to its source

to a **sweating**, unexploded mine  
buried deep in his **mind**, around which

*Internal half-rhyme with 'mine' links to the idea of 'buried' as if the rhyme echoes the emotional action*

*Third repetition of this phrase suggests that he is reluctant to allow her close*

every nerve in his body had tightened and closed.

Then, and **only then**, did I come close.

*Ambiguous phrase could mean coming closer to him or close to finding a means of healing him*

*Half-rhyme with 'closed' using same root word suggests a drawing nearer*

### Themes and Ideas (A01)

'The Manhunt' is a first person, tentative account of a partner's attempt to console, heal and draw 'close' to her partner, whose experiences have damaged him, not only physically but emotionally. The poem uses the third person to refer to the partner, suggesting a distance between them. This is contrasted with the use of rhyming couplets, suggestive of partnership and togetherness. The contrast between these two techniques creates a tension between distance and closeness throughout the poem.

As the woman attempts to 'find' her partner, Armitage uses layers of metaphor to describe the injuries, both physical and mental, suggesting that the bombs and warplanes are an integral part of who this man has become. Her own 'mission' is described in metaphorical terms – she is on a 'manhunt', a 'search' of her own, just like her husband's role in Bosnia.

'The Manhunt' can also be interpreted as someone attempting to gain the trust and emotional proximity to their partner who has been through any traumatic, painful emotional experience. In this case, the conflict being presented through imagery of war becomes a metaphorical representation of 'emotional conflict'.

### Key Points about Language, Structure and Form (A02)

- *Structure* plays a key role in this poem. Each idea is contained in a couplet which links to the theme of partnership and togetherness. The mixture of full and half-rhyme suggests that the partnership is not total or complete: although the first three couplets use full rhyme, the pattern shifts towards half-rhyme with 'hold/bone', 'attend/blade' before returning temporarily with 'thumb/lung'. Armitage uses resonances of blazon structure to emphasise the love the partner feels.
- *Verb forms* create a sense of the man's passivity: the repetition of 'he let me' is the only verb related to him until the final couplet's 'tightened and closed', suggesting that his actions are reserved for self-preservation. The partner's verbs are active: she is allowed to 'trace', 'explore', 'handle'. The actions related to the woman are gentle, soothing and exploratory, which contrasts sharply with the *semantic field* of damage and pain – 'fractured', 'grazed', 'blown'.
- *Metaphors* add extra layers of meaning: the scar on the man's face is described as a 'frozen river', which could refer to its physical appearance, his inability to feel, or might suggest the emotional effects of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The 'foetus' is the beginning, almost the 'source' of the injury, as well as representing the inner vulnerability of the man. The title itself refers not only to her attempt to 'find' her partner again but also to his role in the conflict.

### Targeting C

How does Armitage use imagery to emphasise the theme of this poem? Ask students to identify and examine the use of different kinds of metaphor.

### Targeting A/A\*

Is it vital to know the original context of this poem in order to gain meaning from it? Students might want to consider whether reading the poem purely as a metaphor for the results of emotional 'damage' is as valid as understanding the original source material.

### Compares with...

'Nettles' – imagery of war / pain and protection

'In Paris with You' – emotional pain, repercussions of pain and trauma

'Quickdraw' – pain of romantic relationships

# Hour

Carol Ann Duffy

## Background and Context

'Hour', like 'Quickdraw', comes from Duffy's collection *Rapture* which won the T. S. Eliot Prize for Poetry in 2005. *Rapture* charts the course of a love affair with an anonymous, possibly unspecific, lover. The poems explore the negative as well as positive aspects of love – the contradictions, the passions and the heartbreak. 'Hour' comes in the early stages of the relationship: the heady beginnings of a passionate love affair.

## Hour

May suggest the luck associated with finding a coin as they have 'found' this hour	Love's time's beggar, but even a single hour, bright as a <b>dropped coin</b> , makes love <b>rich</b> .	Introduces central conceit of richness
Traditional, clichéd love tokens are rejected; richness is defined	We find an hour together, spend it not on <b>flowers</b> <b>or wine</b> , but the whole of the summer sky and a grass <b>ditch</b> .	Full rhyme with 'rich' creates a strong bond between these two ideas – the richness of simple pleasures
Alliteration emphasises the length of the moment as well as stressing 'kiss'; also, novel way of referring to time – not in hours or minutes, but seconds, to eke out and slow it down	For <b>thousands of seconds</b> we <b>kiss</b> ; your <b>hair</b> like treasure on the ground; the <b>Midas</b> <b>light</b> turning your limbs to gold. Time slows, for here we are millionaires, <b>backhanding</b> the night	Mythological character links with 'gold' image as well as possibly having a darker significance
Simile feeds the extended metaphor of richness	so <b>nothing dark</b> will end our shining hour, no jewel hold a candle to the cuckoo spit hung from the blade of grass at your ear, no chandelier or spotlight see you <b>better lit</b>	The gesture is easy – for now they are safe, not being approached by anything 'dark'
Introduces a shade of gloom to the dominant feeling of joy	<b>than here</b> . Now. Time hates love, wants love poor, but love spins <b>gold, gold, gold</b> from <b>straw</b> .	Plays with words – 'compare with' as well as 'light up'
Single word emphasises importance of moment and slows down time / pace of reading; again, idea of stealing / cheating time		Enjambment extends the focus of the 'spotlight'
Repetition suggests what they have is far more powerful and valuable than anything else		Ambiguous ending – is real love illusory or is it a kind of alchemy able to turn everyday materials into gold?

### Themes and Ideas (A01)

In 'Hour', Duffy subverts not only a traditional form but a traditional theme of love poetry – the idea of *carpe diem*, live for today. She suggests that time marches on, inexorably, and those moments shared by lovers in the first flush of romance must therefore be grasped and taken full advantage of. The 'hour' is described using extended metaphors of richness and light, suggesting it is far more valuable than any worldly richness, turning the lovers into 'millionaires'. This idea is well established amongst the metaphysical poets, for example John Donne's 'The Sun Rising' / 'The Flea', and Marvell's 'wingèd chariot' in 'To His Coy Mistress'.

The poem has a personal, reflective quality, directed as it is towards the unnamed lover using second person. There is a sense of shared experience as the speaker reflects on the intensity of the experience of this 'hour', using the present tense to reflect the idea that it is theirs to hold in their memories for ever. The strength of their love enables them to bend 'Time' completely, slowing it down until the spotlight highlights the predominance of 'Now.' The title itself puns on 'our' and 'hour', highlighting the themes of shared, relative experience of time.

There is a darker subtext, however. Myth and fairytale creep around the edge of the poem: Midas and Rumpelstiltskin, both punished for their greed by a lifetime of lovelessness, hover in the background, possibly foreshadowing later grief. The juxtaposition of ideas, a familiar element in Petrarchan sonnets, concentrates on richness/poorness, darkness/light. The couple 'backhand' the night – for now – but there is an almost subconsciously brooding sense of menace lurking behind the 'now' of the immediate present.

### Key Points about Language, Structure and Form (A02)

- *Form* – Duffy plays with the sonnet form, keeping some elements but manipulating others. The organisation of each quatrain and final couplet is reminiscent of Shakespearean regularity; ideas are introduced, developed, linked, summarised. However, the metre is subtly altered.
- *The rhyme scheme* also appears to follow a traditional sonnet sequence of *abab, cdcd, efef, gg*. Duffy uses shades of half-rhyme to introduce some insecurity into the rhyme pattern: 'hair/here', 'hour/ear'. These half-rhymes offer a slight sense of imbalance, as if a subtle shadow is being cast over the 'rapture' of the couple's feelings for each other. It could be argued that there is a sensuality to the rhyming, reminiscent of lovers 'connecting' and touching.
- *Extended metaphors of richness and light* fill the poem with a sparkling quality: 'coin', 'treasure', 'gold', 'jewel' 'millionaires' compounded with 'light', 'shining', 'candle', 'chandelier' and 'spotlight'.

### Targeting C

How does Duffy evoke the value of the hour spent with her lover? Students could examine the ways in which imagery and semantic fields add to the themes and ideas.

### Targeting A/A\*

Is Duffy using ideas from myths and fairytales to suggest anything darker about the nature of these kinds of feelings at the start of a romance? Students might want to explore the darker significance of the Midas and Rumpelstiltskin stories. Is there a suggestion that love is nothing more than a myth or fairytale – or that this hour can't last?

### Compares with...

'To His Coy Mistress' – *carpe diem*

'In Paris with You' – enjoyment of the moment

# In Paris With You

James Fenton

## Background and Context

James Fenton (1949–) is a critically acclaimed poet who has won several prestigious poetry prizes, including The Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 2007. He has worked as a war correspondent and a political journalist. His poetry often plays with form and structure, juxtaposing more traditional forms with contemporary language and themes. He is a prolific writer of not only poetry but also operatic libretto. He lectures regularly on poetry and was Oxford Professor of Poetry between 1994 and 1999. His book *The Strength of Poetry* is a highly-regarded publication of the best of his lectures. In addition to regular journalism, he is also recognised as an expert art historian, music writer and gardener. He has anthologised several important collections including the *The New Faber Book of Love Poems*.

## Exploring the Poem

### Stanza 1

- 1 'Don't talk to me' – poem begins with a direct instruction in the form of an imperative, suggesting that the instruction has great importance
- 2 use of internal rhyme 'tearful / earful' could 'hide' the real emotion in the line rather than stress it by placing it at the end, as well as creating a jokey, ironic tone
- 3 pun on 'walking wounded' – part of the playful language used throughout, perhaps to mask deeper feelings
- 4 use of war imagery with 'hostage' and 'wounded' suggests that love is dangerous; light-hearted play on words with 'marooned' to answer the rhyme hints at inner vulnerability
- 5 'But I'm in Paris with you.' – refrain used throughout the poem, with a euphemistic play on words

### Stanza 2

- 8 'I admit' – adopts a defensive tone here as though admitting his honest feelings would leave him vulnerable

### Stanza 3

- 11–13 rejection of clichéd romantic 'getaway' formula, using unromantic, 'unpoetic' language and slang

### Stanza 4

- 22–23 realistic tone created through focus on the shabbiness of the room

### Stanza 5

- 26 'I'm in Paris with the slightest thing you do' – literal refrain becomes more metaphoric as it becomes increasingly clear that 'Paris' is a euphemism for 'love' and that he is trying to resist defining what's happening by avoiding that term
- 28 'I'm in Paris with... all points south' – sensual imagery masked with ironic play on words

### Themes and Ideas (A01)

The light-hearted tone of this poem belies a strong undercurrent of vulnerability and anxious caution. The speaker, or persona, makes it clear that he has been hurt by love in the past; straightforward language describes his 'anger' at the way he has been betrayed, presumably by a previous lover. This straightforwardness carries through the whole poem, which becomes an ironic commentary not only on the rather clichéd behaviour of couples in love, but also on the language of love poetry itself.

The use of second person creates a direct, personal tone. The persona, whilst being comfortable with expressing the reasons for their vulnerability, appears unable to make the leap to an equally free expression of their love – as if frightened of using the word itself, which is completely rejected in the opening statement and again twice more in the poem ('Don't talk to me of love'). Perhaps, as well, he wants to resist defining this new relationship on those terms – setting out 'where are [they] bound' – possibly due to past disappointments in love.

What is ultimately ironic is that while the behaviour and attitudes of the persona himself remain focused on a mocking rejection of love in all its forms, he manages to betray the reality of his own feelings towards his lover. He focuses on the sensuality of the relationship, using light-hearted rhymes and euphemisms to refer to their love-making, but ends with a single line which sharply brings his true feelings into focus.

### Key Points about Language, Structure and Form (A02)

- *Repetition of the refrain* adds to the light-hearted tone, whilst also perhaps becoming a repeated euphemism for 'love'. The repetition makes the message gather strength until the final line, summing up the main message to his lover.
- *Straightforward, un-poetic language* rejects formulaic expressions of love as well as possibly hiding deeper feelings; the persona wants to 'say sod off to sodding Notre Dame' for example. Colloquialisms and clichés abound in this poem as does playing with language for comic effect: the playful use of 'talking wounded', as well as placing 'marooned' in the centre of the war metaphor, highlights the internal conflict between emotional honesty and fear of letting his guard down.
- *Structure* is used to highlight particular ideas: the third stanza is marked out by indentation as well as line length, suggesting as it does their 'separation' from the world in their hotel room. The final stanza breaks the pattern of five lines with the addition of 'Am I embarrassing you?'
- *Rhyme* is used for comic effect as well as creating a self-deprecating, humorous tone: 'wounded / marooned', 'rebound / we bound', 'Champs Elysées / this sleazy'...

### Targeting C

How does the persona really feel in this poem? Ask students to explain how the persona reveals their true feelings in spite of trying to do the opposite.

### Targeting A/A\*

How does the poet juxtapose irony and romance in this poem? Students could explore the purpose and effect of this juxtaposition.

### Compares with...

'Hour' – love and romance  
'Quickdraw' – the pain of love



# Quickdraw

Carol Ann Duffy

## Background and Context

'Quickdraw' comes from the collection *Rapture* which won the T.S. Eliot Prize for Poetry in 2005. Duffy was awarded an OBE for services to literature in 1995, a CBE in 2001 and became the first female Poet Laureate in 2009.

*Rapture* is an exploration of love – of the ways in which pain and joy can be inextricably woven into the feelings experienced during a romantic relationship. Duffy comments that it is a collection 'about deep feeling'. 'Quickdraw' comes from the middle of the collection, which as a whole takes a narrative journey through an experience of love. In this poem the first shadows of pain are being cast over the relationship.

## Quickdraw

Short phrase to emphasise her vulnerability; 'alone' highlighted by use of rhyme and enjambment

Metaphorical description of conversation

First break of sonnet structure

I wear the two, the mobile and the landline phones,  
like guns, slung from the pockets on my hips. I'm all  
alone. You ring, quickdraw, your voice a pellet  
in my ear, and hear me groan.

Suggests physical and emotional pain as well as possibly pleasure

You've wounded me.

Next time, you speak after the tone. I twirl the phone,  
then squeeze the trigger of my tongue, wide of the mark.  
You choose your spot, then blast me

through the heart.

Sonnet structure again broken

All suggest a critical moment in the relationship

Becomes more Shakespearean in form with strengthened iambic metre towards the end, before fragmenting again – still retaining an incomplete sonnet rhythm

Rhyme of 'kiss' with 'this' gives an aural suggestion of kisses

And this is love, high noon, calamity, hard liquor  
in the old Last Chance saloon. I show the mobile  
to the Sheriff; in my boot, another one's  
concealed. You text them both at once. I reel.  
Down on my knees, I fumble for the phone,  
read the silver bullets of your kiss. Take this ...  
and this ... and this ... and this ... and this ...

Alliteration of 'f' intensifies effect of the speaker becoming weaker



### Themes and Ideas (A01)

The extended metaphor of a Western gunfight enables Duffy to present the pain and pleasure of being in love and the difficulties of communication in a relationship, as well as parodying the modern reliance on the mobile phone as a means of contact. The tone is, on the surface, whimsical and light-hearted, almost flippant; irony is created through the presentation of a phone conversation between lovers as a 'last chance saloon' gunfight. However, the persona is 'all alone', giving and receiving words described as 'pellets'. The onslaught of messages and calls cause her to be 'wounded ... through the heart', and 'reel'. The words 'blast' her 'through the heart', suggesting the power language has to cause pain.

The ending is ambiguous. The speaker may be returning the lover's text 'kiss' with repeated ones of her own. She may herself be the recipient of these kisses. The 'silver bullet' suggests a point of weakness, an Achilles heel, leaving the speaker futilely attempting to defend herself against the 'attack' of emotion, on her 'knees'. Subverting the phrase 'take that', Duffy ends with repetition of 'take this ... and this ...', as if annihilated by a barrage of kisses which take over the conversation, repeated to also suggest a possible attack as the words fade into a more physical demonstration of feeling.

### Key Points about Language, Structure and Form (A02)

- *Extended metaphor* through the poem creates an overall picture of the dynamic of this relationship. Words are compared to bullets, quickly fired without thought and impossible to take back: 'your voice a pellet', designed to hurt. There is a sense of high stakes desperation about the battle, reinforced with mention of specific famous Westerns: 'High Noon' and 'Last Chance Saloon' – as if to suggest that this conversation marks some kind of turning point.
- *Sonnet sequence* of 14 lines is fragmented in two places, as if to echo the fragmentary nature of a real conversation. The break of lines also allows Duffy to draw attention to the two broken phrases: 'you've wounded me / through the heart', which contain a central conceit of their own and are physically highlighted on the page.
- *The rhyme scheme* is similarly broken: 'phones' should rhyme with 'alone' in a couplet, however placed at the start of the third line it emphasises her loneliness and vulnerability, foreshadowing 'groan' at the end of the first stanza. It is developed throughout the poem – 'phones/alone/groan/tone/phone/phone' – suggestive of the incessant sound of the phone itself 'ringing' through the poem. Half rhyme ('guns', 'wounded', 'noon', 'saloon' and 'down') also echo the emphasis on 'phone'. Most are internal rather than terminal, perhaps suggesting the fragmentary nature of a phone conversation, its inability to properly reflect or articulate feelings.

### Targeting C

How does the poet use an extended metaphor to examine the pain of an argument? Students could trace the development of the metaphor through the poem, examining how it reflects the feelings being described.

### Targeting A/A\*

How does Duffy use structure to emphasise the themes of love, pain and conflict? Exploring the manipulation of the sonnet sequence and use of rhyme should enable students to interpret her intention.

### Compares with...

'Manhunt' and 'In Paris With You' – use of imagery, emotional pain

# Ghazal

## Mimi Khalvati

### Background and Context

Mimi Khalvati was born in Tehran in 1944 and grew up on the Isle of Wight. Her poetry reflects this dual heritage, mixing Persian and British elements. She has been an actor and director in Iran and the UK and is founder of a women's experimental theatre group. Khalvati was nominated for the prestigious T.S. Eliot Prize in 2007.

'Ghazal' uses a traditional Persian form to explore the romantic relationship between two lovers.

### Exploring the Poem

- 1 'I' – first person pronoun introduces personal tone  
'grass and you the breeze, blow through' – long vowels, alliteration and onomatopoeia suggest sound of wind
- 2 'you the bird' – direct address to beloved through second person pronoun
- 3 'rhyme and I the refrain' – alliteration of 'r' links rhyme and refrain and hence the two lovers together
- 4 'come and I'll come too when you cue me' – innuendo
- 6 'tattoo' – permanent mark suggests love is forever
- 9 'laurel leaf in your crown' – images of victory suggesting success of seduction
- 15–16 'If I rise in the east as you die in the west, / die for my sake, my love, every night renew me.' – innuendo and reciprocity; the lovers complete one another
- 18 'Shamsuddin to my Rumi' – Rumi was a 13th-century poet and Sufi mystic famous for his ghazals. Shamsuddin was Rumi's great friend and muse. Some stories suggest Shamsuddin was murdered by other followers of Rumi who were jealous of their close relationship.

### Themes and Ideas (A01)

'Ghazal' is a poem about seduction. The lover uses a wide range of arguments to persuade the beloved, each of which explores different aspects of love. Love can be calm and contemplative as suggested by the 'grass' and 'breeze'; it can be natural and lead to procreation as in the 'rose' and the 'bird'. 'Ghazal' also contains numerous images of violence and pain, like 'iron fist', 'arrow', 'pierced', 'venomous' and 'serpent', which might suggest the violence and passion of the lover's feelings.

Innuendo is used to suggest the erotic side of love: the 'iron fist in the velvet glove' and 'come and I'll come too', for example. The lovers also entrance and bewitch one another. The lover sees herself as a 'flame' to her beloved's 'moth' and a 'shadow' to his 'hawk', both suggesting that the love between them is irresistible. Furthermore, the lover desires to be subdued and controlled by her beloved, as shown in 'tattoo me', 'use your charm' and 'subdue me'.

Love can also be platonic: 'just good friends', 'Shamsuddin' and 'Rumi'. The poem ends with the suggestion that love is all-encompassing and eternal, with references to the sun and moon and heaven and earth.

### Key Points about Language, Structure and Form (A02)

- **Form** The traditional Persian form of the ghazal explores different aspects of love. Ghazals contain at least five couplets or shers, each self-contained but developing a central argument. The shers are also linked through a refrain or radif which runs throughout the poem ('woo me', 'cue me', 'tattoo me'). This builds a powerful repetitive rhythm which lends itself to persuasion and suggests Khalvati's first name, Mimi (me me). It is almost as if each refrain is a knocking at the door of the beloved's heart and, with enough knocking, the door must surely open. Khalvati signs her name – 'twice the me' – in the final sher.
- *Ghazal's images often come in complementary pairs* with the whole greater than the sum of its parts; for example, a 'rhyme' and 'refrain' make up a poem but neither is a poem in itself. Examples in the poem include 'If I am the grass and you the breeze, blow through me' and 'If I am the laurel leaf in your crown, you are / the arms around my bark'. Most of the couplets begin with 'If', creating a condition which is fulfilled in the second half.
- **Repetition** of key words and phrases is used to complement the repetitive pattern of the ghazal form. 'Come', 'charm', 'arms' and 'die' are all repeated to create different effects.

### Targeting C

How does the speaker attempt to seduce her beloved? Which arguments do you find most persuasive and why?

### Targeting A/A\*

How does the form and structure of the ghazal lend itself to the poetry of persuasion and seduction?

### Compares with...

'The Manhunt' – couplet form

'To His Coy Mistress' – seduction

'In Paris with You' – addressed to lover

# Brothers

Andrew Forster

## Background and Context

Andrew Forster (1964–) was born and raised in South Yorkshire. 'Brothers' resonates with a strong sense of place, rooted firmly as it is in the childhood home which forms the setting for a group of poems examining autobiographical moments from the poet's childhood.

Forster has been described as a very 'visual' poet, and himself refers to the stimulus for this poem as a visual memory from his childhood of his younger brother holding up a coin. The difficult relationships between siblings is the focus for this very reflective, personal poem, which focuses on the beginnings of an emotional 'distance' between brothers.

## Brothers

*First word introduces the poet's resentful attitude towards his brother*

*Self-conscious attempt to look older*

**Saddled** with you for the afternoon, **me and Paul**

*Colloquial phrasing creates realistic tone*

**ambled** across the threadbare field to the bus stop,

talking over Sheffield Wednesday's chances in the Cup

while you skipped beside us in your **ridiculous** tank-top,

spouting six-year-old views on Rotherham United.

*Descriptions highlight embarrassment his brother causes*

Suddenly you froze, said you hadn't any bus fare.

*Carefree, unselfconscious verbs contrast with 'ambled' and 'stroll'*

I sighed, said you should go and ask Mum

and while you **windmilled** home I looked at Paul.

His smile, like mine, said **I was nine and he was ten**

and we must stroll the town, doing what grown-ups do.

*Poignant sense of self-mocking irony*

*Could this phrase have metaphorical significance?*

*Indicates the little boy's desire for connection with his older brother*

As a bus crested the hill **we chased Olympic Gold.**

**Looking back** I saw you spring towards the gate,

**your hand holding out** what must have been a coin.

I ran on, **unable to close the distance I'd set in motion.**

*Use of metaphor suggests the older boys are just as imaginative and youthful as the little brother*

*Becomes metaphorical in last line*

### Themes and Ideas (A01)

Forster presents a poignant, nostalgic account of a seemingly trivial childhood memory but one which has huge emotional significance – an event which represents his changing relationship with his brother, as well as having a rite of passage quality. Resenting the company of his little brother with his ‘ridiculous’ clothes and ‘spouting’ conversation, he takes advantage of an opportunity to get rid of him so that he and his friend can do ‘what grown-ups do’. Their apparent maturity and superiority is ironically mocked by the subsequent image of them ‘chasing Olympic Gold’ as they run for the bus.

The tone becomes regretful as he describes the little brother, from a distance, holding out a coin – and the poem ends with the speaker’s direct expression of regret that the ‘distance’ he has created between them, literally and metaphorically, will only increase with time. The speaker’s evident love for his brother is depicted through tender descriptions of his carefree playfulness, whilst the sense of remorse he feels comes across strongly in the painful description of the little boy with his ‘hand holding out’ a coin from a distance. This is an intensely personal poem, reflecting on the ways in which our relationships alter and develop with the passage of time.

### Key Points about Language, Structure and Form (A02)

- *Straightforward language* emulates age as well as dialect: Forster uses colloquialisms such as ‘Saddled with you’, and ‘me and Paul’ to give the persona a realistic ‘voice’ and suggest the speaker’s northern roots. Monosyllabic language – ‘said you should go and ask Mum’ – suggests youth as well as possibly a taut emotional tone, perhaps suggesting a reluctance to give full vent to his strong regret.
- *Verb forms* emulate character as well as attitudes: the older boys ‘ambled’ and ‘strolled’ in their attempt to appear nonchalant and older, contrasted with the childlike ‘skipped’ and ‘windmilled’ of the little brother. Whilst the little boy’s movement is carefree, that of the older boys is full of pre-teen self-consciousness.
- *Second person* is used to address the younger brother directly. This creates a confessional tone, as if the poet seeks to atone for his childish self-absorption. The use of past tense marks this memory as significant and symbolic, perhaps highlighting the moment when his relationship with his little brother began to alter as he moved towards adolescence, leaving early childhood behind.

### Targeting C

How does the poet use language to describe the differences between the poet and his little brother? Students could examine in particular the verbs used to describe the actions and movements of each boy.

### Targeting A/A\*

How does the poet use irony to condemn his own behaviour? Students could analyse the ways in which he mocks his younger self and explore his reasons for doing this. Is he suggesting that his own immaturity was one reason for his selfish behaviour?

### Compares with...

‘Sister Maude’ – sibling relationships

‘Les Grands Seigneurs’ and ‘The Hunchback in the Park’ – regret and unspoken emotion

# Praise Song for My Mother

Grace Nichols

## Background and Context

Grace Nichols was born in Guyana and grew up in a small coastal village before moving to the capital Georgetown at the age of eight. She moved to England in 1977 and an important theme in her poetry is a sense of being torn between two cultures – British and Guyanese. Nichols often writes in a mixture of Creole and standard English.

A praise song is a traditional African poetic form where the person eulogised is compared to a variety of other things.

## Exploring the Poem

- 1      'You' – direct second person address suggests close relationship  
       'were' – use of past tense creates elegiac tone
- 5      'eye' – suggests an ability to see clearly
- 6      'pull' – verb used as adjective suggests that her mother, and her influence,  
       are still active  
       'grained' – suggests depth, as in the grain of a piece of wood  
       'mantling' – suggests wrapping, as with a cloak; mother protects her
- 9      'warm and streaming' – suggests emotional warmth and generosity
- 13     'crab's leg' – suggests hidden depths, linking back to 'deep' in line 3;  
       the best meat is in the crab's leg but it is the hardest to get at  
       'smell' – sensory image evoking memory
- 15     'wide' – another image of extent (cf 'deep', 'fathoming', 'spread')

### Themes and Ideas (A01)

Nichols uses the traditional African form of the praise song to create a poignant and moving eulogy to her mother. Praise songs use a variety of images to extol the virtues of the subject. Natural images are used to evoke a natural bond between mother and daughter: successive stanzas compare the mother to the ocean, the moon, the sun and a range of living things.

Many of the images come from Guyana and create a strong link between mother and motherland. In the first stanza, 'deep' suggests depth of understanding and 'fathoming' develops this idea but also implies the mother's empathy and understanding. In Stanza 2, 'pull' suggests a physical and emotional bond and 'mantling' suggests the opposite of dismantle – a building or putting together. Stanza 3 evokes the mother's life-giving qualities through 'rise and warm and streaming'. In Stanza 4, 'gill' suggests breath and life, 'spread' suggests open arms and the food imagery of 'crab's leg' and 'plantain smell' suggests spiritual as well as physical nourishment.

The poem ends with a statement from the mother – 'Go to your wide futures' – suggesting the continuing influence she has on her daughter and that the relationship endures in spite of death or separation.

### Key Points about Language, Structure and Form (A02)

- *Structure* – Nichols uses a clear stanzaic structure within the form of the praise song. The poem begins regularly with each of the first three stanzas following a strict pattern. An initial metaphor is divided over two lines, the first of which is always 'you were'. The *direct second person address* suggests intimacy while the 'were' creates an elegiac tone. The third line then develops the metaphor through the use of three adjectives which often contain layers of meaning.
- *The fourth stanza alters the pattern*: it begins regularly but there are four metaphors, two of which – 'the crab's leg / the fried plantain smell' – are on a single line. This creates an emotional contrast with the first three stanzas. Perhaps Nichols is suggesting that a strict form cannot contain the massive admiration she feels; therefore the images come gushing out rapidly as a flood of memories and emotions. The pace is then slowed down with the final adjective 'replenishing'; the length of the word and its repetition encourage reflection on how the mother still provides spiritual sustenance. There is another long pause before the final inspirational line.
- *Imagery* – The images follow in a logical sequence. We begin with ocean and move on to the moon which controls the ocean through its 'pull'. As the moon fades it is replaced by sunrise – an image of new life. The sunrise is followed by animals and plants, all of whom gain their life from the sun and are linked by warm language – 'red', 'flame' and 'fried'. Nichols is portraying life as a cycle in which her mother exists whether alive or dead.

### Targeting C

How does Nichols show her admiration and love for her mother?

### Targeting A/A\*

How does the structure of the poem help to show the influence and importance of Nichols' mother?

### Compares with...

'Nettles' – parent and child relationship

'Ghazal' – ancient poetic form

'Harmonium' – tribute to parent



# Harmonium

Simon Armitage

## Background and Context

Marsden in West Yorkshire is Armitage's family home. Although he moved to Portsmouth to study for his degree, he returned to Marsden later and lives there now. As a young boy he was a choirboy at Marsden church and his father also had links with the church, using it as a venue for his musical productions. In 'Harmonium', Armitage explores the relationship with his father that has been a recurring theme in his personal poems, and which he also writes about extensively in *All Points North*, a collection of personal essays.

## Harmonium

	The Farrand Chapelette was gathering dust	No longer wanted
Suggests entrances/exits and links with 'nave' later in the poem; 'shadowy' also suggests that it is no longer in the limelight – it is past its prime	in the shadowy porch of Marsden Church.	
	And was due to be bundled off to the skip.	
	Or was mine, for a song, if I wanted it.	Cliché used to introduce the musical theme
	Sunlight, through stained glass, which day to day could beatify saints and raise the dead,	First suggestion of theme of death
	had aged the harmonium's softwood case	
Personification links with 'smoker's fingers' when describing father	and yellowed the fingernails of its keys.	
	And one of its notes had lost its tongue,	Connection with last line where it is Armitage who has lost his tongue
	and holes were worn in both the treadles	
	where the organist's feet, in grey, woollen socks	
Suggests great effort	and leather-soled shoes, had pedalled and pedalled.	
Reference to fathers and sons generally, highlights his own shared past with his father (never specifically named)	But its hummed harmonics still struck a chord:	Still a strong connection between them
	for a hundred years that organ had stood	Contrasts with later 'starved of breath' to highlight the difference between past and present
	by the choristers' stalls, where father and son,	
	each in their time, had opened their throats	
Reversal of simile creates internal rhyme with 'throats', as well as suggesting the singing was more poetic, more beautiful, than the simile itself	and gilded finches – like high notes – had streamed out.	Contrasts with 'box' in next stanza, possibly highlighting the freedom and strength that his father no longer has
Shift to present tense, possibly marking the passage of time	Through his own blue cloud of tobacco smog,	
	with smoker's fingers and dotted thumbs,	
	he comes to help me cart it away.	
Personified: like a body	And we carry it flat, laid on its back.	Use of cliché suggests his father's nearness to death as well as skimming over the reality of the fact, creating a light-hearted tone; 'dead weight' also suggest uselessness
Internal rhyme with 'freight' intensifies image of father as a burden	And he, being him, can't help but say	
	that the next box I'll shoulder through this nave	
	will bear the freight of his own dead weight.	
Use of parallel phrasing highlights the connection between father and son	And I, being me, then mouth in reply	Use of sibilance suggests whispering of the 'phrase', contained in rhyming couplet which creates a regretful tone – perhaps Armitage cannot bring himself to speak
	some shallow or sorry phrase or word	
	too starved of breath to make itself heard.	

### Themes and Ideas (A01)

Armitage's exploration of the relationship between himself and his ageing father uses an extended metaphor of the instrument itself – the 'harmonium' – to examine his feelings and present some of the complex dynamics that exist between father and son. The name of the instrument itself highlights the connection, or 'harmony', between them. Partly in first person and partly in second, Armitage moves between personal reflection and direct speech, bringing the event into sharper relief as he recounts the story and reflects on its significance.

Both instrument and parent are in the 'shadowy porch' of life, 'gathering dust' as if no longer needed or powerful. There are recurring images of uselessness and vulnerability: 'holes', 'bundled off to the skip' and 'laid on its back'. However, there is also a strong suggestion of beauty and creativity threaded through the everyday life described. In Stanza 2, Armitage reflects on the harmonium's glorious past – how, under the 'Sunlight, through stained glass', it encouraged voices to sing like 'gilded finches'. His admiration for his father's way with words is obliquely referenced in the final stanza, where the use of imagery and strong rhyme in his father's words contrast sharply with his own inability to do more than 'mouth in reply'.

Ultimately this poem reflects how our relationships with our parents can alter as they age. Whilst expressing regret at his father's vulnerability, he is also reminded of the strength and creativity of his past and, rather than bundling him 'off to the skip', he wants his father to remain a part of his life. Perhaps this poem also expresses regret for a missed opportunity to communicate his feelings to his father.

### Key Points about Language, Structure and Form (A02)

- *Personification* strengthens the metaphorical link between Armitage's father and the harmonium. The case is 'aged', its keys are 'yellowed [...] fingernails', it has 'lost its tongue'.
- *Colloquialisms and clichés* echo the speech patterns of Yorkshire dialect, as well as possibly suggesting a shared discomfort with exploring feelings openly, masking them with trite phrases – possibly a particular kind of masculine reticence. Beginning with 'for a song', Armitage remarks that memories of the past 'struck a chord'. His father jokes that he is a 'dead weight', which may suggest an underlying concern that he is a burden to his son as he gets older.
- *Internal full and half-rhymes* stress key words and ideas: 'flat/back' brings the coffin image strongly into focus, as does the stress on 'dead weight' when rhymed with 'freight'. The internal full rhyme of 'throats' and 'notes' stresses the shared musical past of 'father and son', possibly referring to himself and his father. The steady rhythm, particularly evident in the last stanza, slows the pace, reminiscent of walking with a heavy weight – or indeed a funeral march.

### Targeting C

How does the poet demonstrate his feelings for his father? Ask students to highlight and comment on the positive and the negative images presented.

### Targeting A/A\*

What does the use of imagery add to this poem? Ask students to explore the ways in which imagery allows the poet to examine some complex and difficult personal feelings.

### Compares with...

'Nettles' – parent and child relationships

'Brothers' – regret and missed opportunities

# Sonnet 116

William Shakespeare

## Background and Context

Shakespeare wrote 154 sonnets. The first 126 were addressed to an unknown youth. The next 26 were addressed to a mysterious dark lady. There has been much speculation as to the identity of the possible addressees and Shakespeare's real-life relationships with them; however, this may be missing the point. It is dangerous to associate Shakespeare too closely with the speaker in any of the sonnets. The speaker can often be seen as a persona or rhetorical device allowing Shakespeare to explore ideas from different perspectives.

## Sonnet 116

*Phrasing of opening suggests marriage ceremony, particularly 'impediments'; marriage in its legal sense also suggested in 'writ' in the final couplet*

<i>Double meaning – let in or recognise</i>	Let me not to the marriage of true minds	
	Admit impediments; love is not love	
	Which alters when it alteration finds,	
<i>See also 'bending sickle' suggesting time's ability to change people and their relationships</i>	Or bends with the remover to remove.	<i>Linked to 'mark' and 'star' through rhyme/assonance, perhaps to show how the bark needs guidance; the bark is linked to the speaker/humanity, the 'mark' and 'star' to love</i>
	O no it is an ever-fixed mark,	
	That looks on tempests and is never shaken;	
<i>As in jester; perhaps the 'rosy lips and cheeks' reflect the fool's make-up, making them illusory</i>	It is the star to every wand'ring bark,	
	Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.	
	Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks	
<i>Reflects shape of sickle and its ability to change things</i>	Within his bending sickle's compass come;	<i>Time is compared to the grim reaper: it brings death</i>
	Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,	<i>Human life is short</i>
	But bears it out even to the edge of doom.	<i>The last judgement which comes at the end of time (cf 'brief' above)</i>
	If this be error and upon me proved,	
<i>This could also suggest a legal contract</i>	I never writ, nor no man ever loved.	

## GLOSSARY

**bark** – a small sailing ship

**mark** – a beacon or lighthouse

## Themes and Ideas (A01)

The speaker attempts to define love and affirm its ability to remain constant in the face of change as represented by time – love does not ‘alter when it alteration finds’. The speaker compares love to ‘an ever-fixed mark’, a lighthouse or beacon which can guide him through the ‘tempests’ of life. Similarly, love is the pole ‘star’ which never alters its position and guides ‘every wand’ring bark’ across the difficult sea of troubles. Although physical beauty may fade, love can conquer time and even death. The final couplet suggests the truth of the speaker’s words as the poem is there to prove that he has ‘writ’.

However, things are not so straightforward. The speaker is exploring the ‘marriage of true minds’, suggesting that he is elevating a spiritual, ideal and Platonic love above that which is attainable in the real world. He seems very aware of what the ‘impediments’ to this love might be when exposed to the ‘tempests’ of reality. ‘[R]osy lips and cheeks’ will always provide temptation and, while spiritual love is not subject to ‘Time’s ... bending sickle’, we are. ‘Let me not ...’ could be read as a plea suggesting that the speaker knows how he should behave but recognises how difficult this will be in reality. Perhaps the speaker is using his pure definition of love to ward off temptation.

A Christian interpretation is also possible. Perhaps we defeat death and live beyond ‘brief hours and weeks’ through our belief in something we cannot ever truly understand and therefore achieve salvation by faith, despite our human shortcomings. Perhaps by adhering to this biblical ideal of love, albeit in an imperfect human way, we can gain a glimpse, however murky, of the divine.

## Key Points about Language, Structure and Form (A02)

- **Negation** The speaker’s argument proceeds in part through negation. The first and third quatrains as well as the final couplet define what love is *not*, suggesting the difficulty of saying what love actually is. The speaker tells us that ‘love is not love’, ‘love’s not Time’s fool’ and ‘love alters not’. Even in the final couplet there is recognition that the argument might be ‘error’.
- **Imagery** There is ambiguity in the imagery Shakespeare uses. The second quatrain stands out as an attempt to define love positively but, even here, there are difficulties. Love is compared to ‘an ever-fixed mark’ which on one level suggests a beacon providing light and guidance in a storm. On another level, ‘mark’ can also suggest a target, something to be aimed at but never reached. Even as a beacon, love remains distant and small in the face of the ‘tempests’. Similarly, the ‘star’ provides guidance but stars are cold and distant. Although it is possible to measure the ‘height’ of a star, its true essence or ‘worth’ remains ‘unknown’.
- **Structure** Sonnet 116 follows the usual structure of a Shakespearean sonnet. There are three quatrains (groups of four-lines) which explore the central idea in different ways, followed by a final couplet which concludes the sonnet and reflects on the ideas raised in the quatrains.

## Targeting C

How does the speaker present love as something which remains constant in the face of time?

## Targeting A/A\*

How does Shakespeare present the speaker as having doubts and uncertainties about the nature of love?

## Compares with...

‘Sonnet 43’ – sonnets defining love

‘In Paris with You’ – not wanting to define love

# Sonnet 43

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

## Background and Context

Elizabeth Barrett was born in 1806 at Coxhoe Hall in County Durham. Her family's wealth came from plantations in Jamaica which used slave labour. She suffered from an undiagnosed illness from the age of 20. When her brother Edward drowned in a sailing accident in 1840, she returned to the family home in Wimpole Street where she lived as a recluse for the next five years. She began to correspond with Robert Browning in 1844 and they met for the first time in 1845. Her father strongly disapproved of the relationship and the couple eloped to Italy in 1846. Barrett Browning was disinherited. *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (which includes Sonnet 43) was published in 1850.

Sonnet 43 differs from Sonnet 116 and 'To His Coy Mistress' in the sense that there is little, if any, distance between the speaker and the poet. *Sonnets from the Portuguese* was only published at Robert Browning's insistence. The sonnets are from Barrett Browning, whose pet name was the Portuguese, to her future husband. According to the *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, the title may well have been an attempt to disguise the personal nature of the sonnets by suggesting that they are translations. Like Shakespeare's speaker in Sonnet 116, Barrett Browning attempts to define love but in a more personal way.

## Sonnet 43

*Caesura creates pause to reflect speaker pausing for thought*

*Comma in each line creates caesura splitting initial statement from simile which explains it; the perfect echo of these lines is suggestive of repetition found in a prayer*

*Perhaps a reference to the Saints she believed in as a child; first person pronoun adds intensity*

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways! –  
 I love thee to the depth and breadth and height  
 My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight  
 For the ends of Being and Ideal Grace.  
 I love thee to the level of everyday's  
 Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight –  
 I love thee freely, as men strive for Right, –  
 I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise;  
 I love thee with the passion, put to use  
 In my old griefs, ... and with my childhood's faith:  
 I love thee with the love I seemed to lose  
 With my lost Saints, – I love thee with the breath,  
 Smiles, tears, of all my life! – and, if God choose,  
 I shall but love thee better after death.

*Another pause for thought*

*Words linked through assonance and consonance and emphasised through metrical stress on the nouns*

*Her love is 'everyday' as well as deeply spiritual*

*Ellipsis suggests that now is not the time to dwell on 'old griefs'*

*Rhyme of breath with death suggests ability of love to overcome death – the sonnet's final message; half-rhyme with 'faith' perhaps suggests that this is how death can be defeated*

### Themes and Ideas (A01)

Sonnet 43 begins with a question and answer that suggest the speaker's real enjoyment of contemplating her love. The exclamation mark in 'Let me count the ways!' suggests enthusiasm for the task ahead. Next, the speaker states that her love is limited only 'to the depth and breadth and height / My soul can reach'. By defining her love in this way, she suggests that she will not be guilty of hyperbole and that her conclusions are realistic. However, she is only limited by the full extent of her being and, through her 'soul', could be reaching for the infinite. She links her love to 'the ends of Being and Ideal Grace' suggesting that her love is something too wonderful and perfect to be defined in words.

Yet her love exists in the real world as well, providing for 'everyday's / Most quiet need' and sustaining her at all times – 'by sun and candlelight'. Love also has the power to transform; the 'passion' in her 'old griefs' now becomes something positive. It allows her to regain the lost innocence and certainty of 'childhood'. It replaces lost love and enables her to love other things more not less. Her love for her future husband is compatible with religious love and 'if God choose' can continue in an even purer form after death.

### Key Points about Language, Structure and Form (A02)

- *Repetition is used to emphasise the power of love.* 'I love thee...' is repeated eight times and fits perfectly with the iambic metre of the sonnet with the stress falling on 'love' each time. It also reflects Barrett Browning's genuine pleasure in repeating the words, as if she is speaking aloud to her beloved.
- *The metre reflects the emotions of the speaker.* Enjambment is used in lines 2, 3, 5, 9 and 11 perhaps to suggest that the sonnet form cannot constrain the power of her feelings and so they flow freely between the lines. This is contrasted with a beautiful moment of stillness and certainty in lines 7 and 8 – the centre of the sonnet – where two simple and perfectly balanced definitions of her love are expressed almost as lovers' vows or lines from a prayer. The metre of the penultimate line is broken by six punctuation marks, suggesting a rush of enthusiasm and creating a pause for reflection before the perfect iambic harmony of the final line which emphasises the simplicity and purity of the poet's conclusion.
- *The range of religious imagery and symbolism used* ('soul', 'Ideal Grace', 'candlelight', 'Right', 'Praise', 'passion', 'faith', 'Saints' and 'God') form a lexical set suggesting that love for her mortal lover is as important as, but does not contradict, spiritual love.
- *Sonnet 43 follows the structure of a Petrarchan sonnet.* The first eight lines form an octave in which Barrett Browning defines her love in the present. There is a volta or turn into the next six lines or sestet where she explores her love through references to the past and, finally, the future.

### Targeting C

In what ways does Barrett Browning love her future husband? Choose the three most powerful definitions and explain them in detail.

### Targeting A/A\*

How does the form and structure of the sonnet help Barrett Browning to express her emotions?

### Compares with...

Sonnet 116, 'Hour' – sonnet form

'Ghazal' – expression of love with male subject

'In Paris with You' – personal expression of love



# To His Coy Mistress

Andrew Marvell

## Background and Context

Andrew Marvell was born in 1621, the son of an Anglican clergyman. He was one of the leading metaphysical poets of the 17th century. Metaphysical poetry is characterised by the use of complex metaphors and conceits. On first reading, 'To His Coy Mistress' appears to be about seduction but it is also a *carpe diem* poem following a tradition started by the Roman poet Horace. *Carpe diem* means 'seize the day', in the sense of making the most of or enjoying one's time.

See page 268 for more on metaphysical poets

## Exploring the Poem

### Stanza 1

- 5 'Ganges' – an exotic river whose mention flatters the mistress
- 6 'rubies' – precious, take a long time to form, red to symbolise passion
- 7 'Humber' – a less exotic river suggesting the speaker's inferiority; also, a huge distance between the rivers
- 8 'Flood' – Story of Noah's ark from Genesis, first book of the Bible
- 10 'conversion of the Jews' – reference to the apocalypse from Revelation, last book of the Bible; suggests his love would last from the beginning to the end of time
- 11 'vegetable love' – love characterised by slow growth
- 13 'hundred years' – hyperbole, one example from many

### Stanza 2

- 21 'at my back' – time is in control, chasing the lovers
- 22 'Time's wingèd chariot' – reference to Helios, the Greek sun god; he was the sun personified and drove his chariot across the sky each day, going under the earth at night
- 24 'Deserts' – vast, empty places, bereft of life
- 26 'marble vault' – reference to a tomb; also, marble is cold and hard suggestive of the emotional mood of this section
- 29 'quaint' – heavily ironic
- 29–30 'dust, / And into ashes' – reference to the funeral service

### Stanza 3

- 33 'while the youthful hue / Sits on thy skin like morning dew,' – image of great beauty but a reminder of the passing of time; if life is a day, the dew only lasts for the morning
- 35 'transpires' – perhaps suggests the soul / her passion is being exuded through her skin and cannot be contained by her physical body
- 36 'fires' – passion
- 39–40 'devour/ [...] languish' – contrast between two very different verbs
- 40 'slow-chapt' – slow-jawed, suggests slow chewing rather than devouring
- 44 'iron gates of life' – the restraints life imposes on us; links to 'marble' earlier: another cold, hard material
- 46 'Stand still,' – sounds like a command, followed by comma to create dramatic pause before conclusion
- 'we will make him run' – the lovers are now in control of time



### Themes and Ideas (A01)

It is important to separate Marvell from the speaker of the poem as it is very unlikely it was addressed to anyone in particular. This is reinforced by the use of 'his' rather than 'my' in the title. The lovers can rather be seen as a metaphysical conceit to explore the idea of *carpe diem*.

The speaker presents an argument in three parts. Stanza 1 presents the thesis: if the speaker had all the time in the world, he would devote it to the adulation of his mistress without worrying about consummation. In Stanza 2, the word 'but' changes the mood and introduces the antithesis: they are mortal; life is short; beauty is fleeting. 'Now therefore' introduces the synthesis: as they love each other and time is short, they must consummate their relationship before it is too late.

However, there are other layers of meaning. The hyperbole in Stanza 1 suggests insincerity – perhaps Marvell is exploring the speaker's moral values as much as the 'coyness' of the 'mistress', and consequently the idea that rhetoric can overcome moral scruples if applied cleverly.

### Key Points about Language, Structure and Form (A02)

- *Pronouns suggest separation and togetherness.* In Stanza 1, first and second person singular pronouns predominate to suggest separation and loneliness. This continues in Stanza 2 to suggest that everyone is alone in death. In Stanza 3, first person plural pronouns take over (the final five couplets contain only those) to suggest the inevitability of his argument: that they are already a couple and that is how this courtship must end.
- *Pace of the metre reflects content of the argument.* For example, in line 11 the polysyllabic 'vegetable' causes the line to stutter, suggesting the slowness of his love's growth. Caesura and end-stopping isolate the final phrase and again suggest slowness, emphasised by the assonance of long 'o' sounds and reinforcing the slowness suggested by 'vegetable' in line 11. This is reversed in the final stanza where the last four couplets flow freely until the comma after 'Stand still,' which introduces a dramatic pause before the conclusion. This contrast of pace is backed up by Marvell's choice of verbs: compare the unhurried 'sit', 'think' and 'walk' of Stanza 1 with the urgent 'sport', 'devour', 'tear' and 'run' of the final stanza.
- *Stanza 1 ends with an unfinished blazon* (a poem complimenting a lover's features from head to toe). He starts with the eyes and forehead and moves down to the breasts and heart. Why does he stop? It could be an ironic comment to suggest that time is moving on so rapidly that he has no time to complete it, so emphasising the change of mood at the start of Stanza 2. It could be flattery, suggesting the heart is the most important part of the lady, or maybe he is ruefully suggesting that he cannot as yet comment on anything lower down (ironically pointing out the true direction of the speaker's thoughts and desires).

### Targeting C

How does the speaker use flattery to persuade his mistress?

What other techniques does the speaker use?

### Targeting A/A\*

How does the structure of the poem help to develop the speaker's argument?

What does Marvell achieve through the use of a persona as the poem's speaker?

### Compares with...

'Hour' and Sonnet 116 – battle between love and time

'Ghazal' – seduction by poetry

'The Manhunt' – use of blazon

# The Farmer's Bride

Charlotte Mew

## Background and Context

Charlotte Mew was born in Bloomsbury, London, in 1869. Her life was difficult and tragic at times. Two of her siblings were committed to mental institutions with the result that she and her sister Anne made a pact not to have children so as not to pass on mental illness to future generations. Anne died of cancer in 1926 and Charlotte committed suicide in 1928. Her poetry was greatly admired by Thomas Hardy and Virginia Woolf among others.

### The Farmer's Bride

Like buying a horse? Did the bride have any choice?

There is an age gap; also a note of doubt or perhaps guilt

Farmer too busy with work to think of romance

Possibly suggests he feels shut out

Fairy – another supernatural reference

Three Summers since I chose a maid,  
Too young maybe – but more's to do  
At harvest-time than bide and woo.  
When us was wed she turned afraid  
Of love and me and all things human;  
Like the shut of a winter's day  
Her smile went out, and 'twasn't a woman –  
More like a little frightened fay.  
One night, in the Fall, she runned away.

Perhaps ironic – she is still a 'maid' at the end of the poem

The farmer had no time for romance or did not take time to see whether the marriage would be a good one for him as well as her

Perhaps suggests something supernatural about the bride or that she seems that way to the farmer who cannot understand her

Suggests he knows what is right and proper. Perhaps it is significant that she runs away at bedtime

'Out 'mong the sheep, her be,' they said,  
Should properly have been abed;  
But sure enough she wasn't there  
Lying awake with her wide brown stare.  
So over seven-acre field and up-along across the down

Onomatopoeia

Isolates 'fast' at end of stanza and suggests turning of key; suggests farmer sees wife as his property

We chased her, flying like a hare  
Before our lanterns. To Church-Town  
All in a shiver and a scare  
We caught her, fetched her home at last  
And turned the key upon her, fast.

Bride is coursed like a hare

His home, not hers

Cold colours suggest winter, red suggests warmth that should be present at Christmas

Suggests more timid animal than earlier 'fay' and 'hare'

Emphasises farmer's loneliness and resentment that his bride thinks more of the animals than him

'She' isolated by commas to suggest him lingering on the word; perhaps reflects growing obsession

She does the work about the house  
As well as most, but like a mouse:  
Happy enough to chat and play  
With birds and rabbits and such as they,  
So long as men-folk keep away.  
'Not near, not near!' her eyes beseech  
When one of us comes within reach.  
The women say that beasts in stall  
Look round like children at her call.  
I've hardly heard her speak at all.

Shy as a leveret, swift as he,  
Straight and slight as a young larch tree,  
Sweet as the first wild violets, she,  
To her wild self. But what to me?

The short days shorten and the oaks are brown,

The blue smoke rises to the low grey sky,

One leaf in the still air falls slowly down,

A magpie's spotted feathers lie

On the black earth spread white with rime,

The berries redden up to Christmas-time.

What's Christmas-time without there be

Some other in the house than we!

She sleeps up in the attic there

Alone, poor maid. 'Tis but a stair

Betwixt us. Oh! my God! the down,

The soft young down of her, the brown,

The brown of her – her eyes, her hair, her hair!

Enjambment and comma emphasise 'alone';

perhaps reflects his feelings rather than sympathy for his bride

### Themes and Ideas (A01)

The poem explores a dysfunctional rural marriage. It is a first person monologue and we have to infer the thoughts and feelings of the bride through what the farmer tells us. The marriage is transactional from the start – there is no time for romance. After running away and being hunted down, the bride accepts some of her duties and ‘does the work about the house’ but remains emotionally distant from her husband who has ‘hardly heard her speak at all’; she distances herself physically by sleeping alone in the attic. The farmer becomes increasingly lonely and sexually frustrated; in the end he seems to be haunted by thoughts of the bride’s beauty and may be contemplating crossing the ‘stair’ that separates them.

Mew could be exploring the idea that a marriage based on one partner’s convenience is highly unlikely to become a fulfilled and equal romantic relationship. Perhaps the farmer was only following the customs of his time and community, and this type of marriage was common. Although he seems able to understand his bride’s behaviour, he desperately wants their relationship to be different. However, he seems to expect an emotional and physical closeness without considering, or caring about, her needs or feelings.

### Key Points about Language, Structure and Form (A02)

- *Realistic rural dialect* – The farmer uses naturalistic rural language: ‘us’ instead of ‘we’, ‘runned’ instead of ‘ran’, etc.
- *References to nature* – The deterioration of the relationship follows the path of the seasons. The poem begins in ‘Summer’, passes through ‘Fall’ and ends at ‘Christmas-time’. We never reach the farmer’s desired spring. The bride is ‘shy as a leveret’ and ‘sweet as the first wild violets’. Also, the farmer evokes a beautiful picture of winter in Stanza 5, suggesting a good deal of sensitivity – maybe they are Mew’s words suggesting the farmer’s private thoughts or perhaps the farmer is a victim of social constraints and feels unable to express this side of himself while maintaining his position of authority. Perhaps Mew empathises with his situation as well – or wants us to. Either way, the poem ends with both partners deeply unhappy: the farmer longs for the bride and human company, the bride longs for freedom from human company, particularly his.
- *Characterisation through nature* – Mew characterises the bride through her love of innocent nature. She is ‘Happy enough to chat and play / With birds and rabbits’ suggesting she is only able to maintain her freedom and innocence away from men. She seems to have no desire to have children; the ‘beasts in stall’ fulfil that role.
- *Syntax* – In the final stanza increasingly broken syntax disrupts rhythm and suggests farmer’s growing passion and sexual frustration. ‘Down’ and ‘brown’ are repeated and rhymed to provide a focus of his desire. ‘Her’ and ‘hair’ are homophones leading to the last four words sounding the same and suggesting the farmer’s obsession.

### Targeting C

How does Mew portray both partners as unhappy?

### Targeting A/A\*

How does Mew use natural imagery to explore the marriage?

### Compares with...

‘Sister Maude’ – first-person monologue, unhappy relationship

‘Harmonium’ – lack of communication, regret

# Sister Maude

Christina Rossetti

## Background and Context

Christina Rossetti was born in London in 1830. She came from a famous literary and artistic family. Her father was an Italian poet and her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti was a famous Pre-Raphaelite painter. 'Sister Maude' explores the ideas of a ballad popular in Victorian times from the point of view of one of the main protagonists.

## Sister Maude

*Repetition of 'told' highlights  
Maude's crime*

Who told my mother of my shame,  
Who told my father of my dear?  
Oh who but Maude, my sister Maude,  
Who lurked to spy and peer.

Cold he lies, as cold as stone,

With his clotted curls about his face:

The comeliest corpse in all the world

And worthy of a queen's embrace.

*Alliteration of hard 'c'  
suggests coldness and  
hardness*

You might have spared his soul, sister,

Have spared my soul, your own soul too:

Though I had not been born at all,

He'd never have looked at you.

*Sibilance creates hissing  
accusatory tone*

My father may sleep in Paradise,

My mother at Heaven-gate:

But sister Maude shall get no sleep

Either early or late.

*Rhyme with gown suggests  
togetherness of father and  
mother, unlike Maude who will  
remain alone*

My father may wear a golden gown,

My mother a crown may win;

If my dear and I knocked at Heaven-gate

Perhaps they'd let us in:

But sister Maude, oh sister Maude,

Bide you with death and sin.

*Suggests lovers will always be  
together in spite of Maud's  
actions*

*Reinforces togetherness in  
spite of Maude*

*Spitting / hissing sibilance  
again*

*Doubly emphasised through  
italics and metrical stress*

### Themes and Ideas (A01)

'Sister Maude' tells the story of how the speaker's true love was destroyed by the jealousy of her sister. We do not know the exact details but it is clear that Maude 'lurked to spy and peer' on the lovers and told her mother and father of the presumably illicit relationship. This led to the death of the speaker's beloved, who lay 'cold as stone'. Jealousy was clearly Maude's motive and her actions were futile anyway, as the speaker points out that her lover would 'never have looked' at her. Whatever part the mother and father played in the destruction of the relationship, the speaker has forgiven them and so too has God, as the 'father may sleep in Paradise, / My mother at Heaven-gate'. In any case, the parents appear to be dead. The speaker's anger is directed entirely at Maude who 'shall get no sleep' and will 'Bide [...] with death and sin'.

However, Maude does not have right of reply. The speaker is keen to bring down God's punishment on her sister – hardly charitable Christian behaviour. The poem leaves questions unanswered like how the lover or lovers died; the same is true of the parents. Perhaps the speaker is not blameless herself and is keen to shift responsibility to her sister. Whatever the truth may be, the lack of narrative detail focuses the reader on the speaker's emotion. Both sisters act sinfully: one from jealousy, the other revenge. Rossetti could be exploring the idea that actions springing from wicked motives will always lead to destruction and tragedy.

### Key Points about Language, Structure and Form (A02)

- *Ballad form* – Rossetti echoes the form of the original murder ballad 'The Twa Sisters' or 'The Cruel Sister'. The poem is written largely in tetrameter with occasional lines containing three stresses. The stressed syllables in the metre are often used to highlight key words. In the first stanza, 'told' is emphasised both through repetition and stress and carries an accusatory tone. This tone is further developed in the final lines of Stanzas 1, 3, 4 and 5, which contain three stressed syllables. In Stanza 1, the stresses fall on 'lurked', 'spy' and 'peer', highlighting Maude's underhanded and dishonest behaviour. The stresses in Stanza 3 fall on 'never', 'looked' and 'you' to emphasise the beloved's complete indifference to Maude. In the final stanza, the stressed syllables 'you', 'death' and 'sin' seal Maude's fate like the tolling of a funeral bell and link her punishment in death with her sinful life. Stanza 2 ends with four stressed syllables, probably because it describes the speaker's longing for her beloved, emphasised by the stress on the long vowels in 'worthy', 'queen's' and 'embrace'.
- *Imagery* – Rossetti uses rich, religious imagery to highlight how Maude will be punished. 'Paradise', 'golden gown' and 'crown' emphasise what awaits the righteous and, by extension, what does not await Maude.

### Targeting C

How does Rossetti portray the anger felt by the speaker towards Sister Maude?

### Targeting A/A\*

Why do you think Rossetti has omitted so many narrative details from the poem? What effect does this have on our reading of the speaker's character?

### Compares with...

'Brothers' – sibling relationships

'The Farmer's Bride' – unhappy relationship

Sonnets 43 and 116, 'To His Coy Mistress' and 'The Farmer's Bride' – rhythm, rhyme

# Nettles

Vernon Scannell

## Background and Context

Vernon Scannell (1922–2007) was originally from West Yorkshire. He achieved a great deal of acclaim in his lifetime for his writing, including some prestigious poetry awards. His name was originally Bain, but he changed it shortly after World War II as he had deserted from the army. His negative feelings about the effects of war have been a prevailing influence on his work – he was awarded the Wilfred Owen Association award for significant contributions to war poetry.

## Nettles

<i>First line sums up event as well as highlighting son's age</i>	My son aged three fell in the nettle bed.	
<i>Understated tone contrast with emotive word 'spite' in next line</i>	'Bed' seemed a curious name for those green spears, That regiment of spite behind the shed: It was no place for rest. With sobs and tears The boy came seeking comfort and I saw	<i>Military image Personification of nettles, another military image</i>
<i>Alliteration intensifies reality of the detailed description; plosive 'b' sounds suggest eruption of blisters</i>	White blisters beaded on his tender skin. We soothed him till his pain was not so raw. At last he offered us a watery grin, And then I took my hook and honed the blade	<i>Extension of rhythm pattern in this line, possibly suggesting futility of father's battle</i>
<i>Language highlights strength of father's passion</i>	And went outside and slashed in fury with it Till not a nettle in that fierce parade Stood upright any more. Next task: I lit A funeral pyre to burn the fallen dead. But in two weeks the busy sun and rain Had called up tall recruits behind the shed:	<i>Extended metaphor</i>
<i>Caesura highlights brief pause in ongoing battle to protect child</i>	My son would often feel sharp wounds again.	<i>This detail from the description suggests that battle is futile</i>
<i>Military imagery again</i>		
<i>Last line sums up father's realisation of his impotence to protect son from life's pain</i>		



### Themes and Ideas (A01)

This powerful account of an incident has an intensely personal tone: the strength and detail of the imagery allows the reader to visualise exactly what is being described. The incident is used to examine the moment in a parent's life when they recognise their relative impotence to protect their child from life's pain. Scannell brings this moment vividly to life with his first person account. His first priority is to 'soothe' his son, before mounting an offensive of his own on the nettles – an onslaught which proves ultimately futile. The nettles could be said to symbolise the relentless onslaught of potential threats in the world – the 'regiment of spite' which is ever-present, waiting to cause pain.

Although both first and last lines start with 'My son', in the first line we are invited to focus on the event itself, that specific moment when the little boy 'fell in the nettle bed', whereas the last line reflects on the wider significance of this incident. 'My son would often feel sharp wounds again' is the father's realisation that he is powerless to do more than slash in fury at life in order to protect his child.

### Key Points about Language, Structure and Form (A02)

- *Imagery* creates the sense of a battle being waged. Scannell uses an *extended metaphor* of war: nettles are referred to as a 'regiment' on 'parade', who return as 'tall recruits' – a 'regiment of spite' or the 'fallen dead'. The *semantic field* of 'pain' – established by 'raw', 'sharp wounds' and 'burn' – intensifies the immediacy of the child's physical injury, as well as the parent's emotional pain. This is contrasted with language presenting the child as vulnerable, 'tender' and 'watery', prompting the parent's desire to protect and shield.
- *Structure* is used to demonstrate the themes of love and battle. The use of *iambic pentameter* has resonances with a sonnet form, which has clear thematic links to his love for his son. This is also used to give a methodical rhythm, reminiscent of marching, possibly to link to the military theme, as well as suggest that any attempt by the father to fight against the inexorable onslaught of life's pain is futile.
- *The metre* is broken in line 10, lengthened to incorporate the description of the father 'slashing in fury' at the nettle bed, thereby intensifying this part of the account and creating a temporary hiatus which is soon reinstated – adding to the sense of battling against inevitable forces.
- *Rhyme scheme is systematic and ordered*, following a strict pattern of full alternate masculine (monosyllabic, single-stress) rhymes: 'bed / shed', 'it / lit', etc. This creates a tone of order and control – as if the father is trying to manage his strength of feeling – or indeed as if he is trying to control his environment in order to protect and shield his son from pain.

### Targeting C

Why has the poet used an extended metaphor of war to describe not only the nettles but the father's relationship with them? Ask students to identify all the words associated with this extended metaphor. What difference does it make to the mood and feelings in the poem?

### Targeting A/A\*

How does this account of one intensely personal experience relate to a wider context? Students may want to consider whether Scannell is exploring the wider issue of human suffering.

### Compares with...

'Born Yesterday' – protection of children

'Praise Song for my Mother' – parents and children

'Harmonium' – parents and children



# Born Yesterday

Phillip Larkin

## Background and Context

Phillip Larkin was born in Coventry in 1922. He was librarian at the University of Hull for more than 30 years. Larkin was offered the position of Poet Laureate on the death of John Betjeman in 1984 but declined, not least because he felt he had long since ceased to be a writer of poetry in a meaningful sense. 'Born Yesterday' was written for Kingsley Amis's daughter Sally who was born in 1954. It was published in Larkin's 1955 collection *The Less Deceived*; there is a clear link between the theme and title of the poem and the title of the collection. As here, form often reflects and enhances content in Larkin's poetry.

## Exploring the Poem

### Title

Suggests naïveté as well as a recent birth

### Stanza 1

- 1 'Tightly-folded bud' – endearing address suggests affection. The 'bud' metaphor suggests the beginning of life and foreshadows a flowering
- 10 'Well' suggests that it is possible but unlikely

### Stanza 1

- 11 'But' signals change of mood
- 20 '—' creates long pause after 'dull' to allow us to reflect and take in the surprising nature of his wish
- 21–23 '... skilled, / Vigilant, flexible, / Unemphasised, enthralled' – true positive qualities are saved until the end. 'skilled', 'vigilant' and 'flexible' are linked by shared consonant and vowel sounds\*
- 24 'Catching' is often associated with illness; also suggests that being happy will always rely on chance to some extent\* and that happiness is elusive

### Themes and Ideas (A01)

'Born Yesterday' explores an unusual aspect of relationships for this cluster by investigating an adult's feelings on the birth of a baby.

It is a poem in two halves. The first half deals with traditionally desirable qualities – all the 'usual stuff' people would wish for a baby girl. This includes being 'beautiful' and 'running off a spring / Of innocence and love'. This is not likely, however, and if things turn out that way, she will be a 'lucky girl'. In the second half, Larkin suggests more dependable, albeit surprising, ways of achieving 'happiness' – like being 'ordinary', 'average' and 'Not ugly, not good-looking'. Larkin settles on dullness as the quality to be prized before all others. This seems very odd until he lists the qualities that spring from 'dullness', such as being 'skilled', 'Vigilant' and 'flexible' and suggests that these qualities will lead to his final wish for the baby – an 'enthralled / Catching of happiness'.

Larkin explores happiness in general. Rachel Wetzsteon states, 'the fact that "flexible" rhymes with "dull" invites us to consider the connection between these words: is what others may deem unexciting (dullness) really an openness to change and growth (flexibility)? ... cherishing fresh starts as well as certain traits of character [that] enable us to feel we were "born yesterday", open to anything, even if we are forty or sixty or eighty years old.'

### Key Points about Language, Structure and Form (A02)

- *Structure* – the structure of 'Born Yesterday' builds tension. Larkin first tells us that he has wished for something but not what that wish is, whetting our appetites by telling us that it is 'something / None of the others would' wish for. He then provides a surprising list of wishes ending with a wish that she be 'dull', only explaining at the very end that this is what he feels is her best chance of achieving 'happiness'. Perhaps the form reflects life itself; life often does not turn out how we expect it.
- *Positive and negative qualities* – Larkin explores the idea of balance by examining what we see as positive and negative qualities. Beauty, 'love' and 'innocence' are desirable because Sally would be 'lucky' to have them. However, they would be 'unworkable', stop 'all the rest from working' and therefore pull her off her balance. Less traditionally desirable qualities like being 'average', 'ordinary' and 'dull' are seen by Larkin as positive and unlikely to disturb the balance and flexibility which will allow for happiness. Perhaps Larkin feels that striving for perfection will always lead to unhappiness. Helen Rumbelow wonders whether Larkin would have wished for Amis's son Martin to 'be ordinary'.\*\* Perhaps Larkin's wish for Sally reflects society's different expectations for boys and girls.

### Targeting C

What does Larkin wish for the young Sally Amis, and why?

How does Larkin build tension towards the surprise ending?

### Targeting A/A\*

What significance can you find in the title 'Born Yesterday'?

What can we learn about general ideas of happiness through Larkin's wishes for Sally Amis?

### Compares with...

'To His Coy Mistress' – developing an argument

'Ghazal' – form reflecting content

\* Contemporary Poetry Review, with thanks to Rachel Wetzsteon ([www.cprw.com/Misc/larkin1.htm](http://www.cprw.com/Misc/larkin1.htm))

\*\* ([www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/guest\\_contributors/article617621.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/guest_contributors/article617621.ece))

## Relationships

## Comparison Grid

	Traditional forms	Romantic love	Family	Emotional pain	Conflict	Protection	Imagery	Unusual attitudes	Time	Wishes and desires
'Born Yesterday'						✓		✓	✓	✓
'Brothers'			✓	✓					✓	
'The Farmer's Bride'	✓	✓		✓					✓	✓
'Ghazal'	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓		
'Harmonium'			✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
'Hour'	✓	✓					✓		✓	✓
'In Paris With You'		✓		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
'The Manhunt'				✓		✓	✓		✓	✓
'Nettles'	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
'Praise Song for My Mother'	✓		✓				✓			
'Quickdraw'	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
'Sister Maude'	✓		✓	✓					✓	✓
Sonnet 43	✓	✓							✓	
Sonnet 116	✓	✓					✓		✓	
'To His Coy Mistress'	✓	✓			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓