

OCR's English Language and Literature A Level will offer students and their teachers a broad range of texts and activities to engage with, including the study of extended non-fiction texts, novels, poetry and plays and opportunities for original writing. Some of these text choices will be familiar to you as teachers and some will offer fresh and stimulating opportunities to develop the range of texts that your students will encounter. We think there will be much that will be exciting across the specification.

The A Level overall seeks to develop particular skills in the different components. The pair of 'first sight' resources presented here engage with two of the important skills that students will acquire during the course: the close reading and stylistic analysis of texts and 'writing as a reader' where knowledge of narrative techniques acquired in narrative text study can be applied to their own original creative writing. These resources represent accessible and practical ways teachers can work with students to help develop both these skills.

Ways into close reading through language

Some critical readers draw on the field of stylistics when investigating the way a text is written. These readers don't simply pay close attention to language but use resources like corpora (large banks of language data) and strategies such as counting to analyse the text. Although you may think this is a coldly analytical way to approach a text, it can provide surprising insights and give you a very solid basis for developing an interpretation – the ultimate aim of stylistics.

In approaching a text in this way you will be focusing on:

- lexis (word choices)
- grammar
- sound/phonetic patterns
- graphological features (punctuation, lineation, layout).

This approach is exemplified below using Emily Dickinson's poem 'This World is not Conclusion' (pages 4-7).

Reading the text and a first interpretation

- Choose a short text or a section from a longer text.
- Begin by reading the text two or three times and making a note of your first interpretation. Put this to one side.
- Subject the text to a more objective linguistic analysis, drawing on some of the emphases suggested below. Note down any thoughts you have about what the analysis has revealed to you about the poem – has it confirmed your initial interpretation, challenged it, or revealed something new to you?
- Use your linguistic analysis as the starting point for developing a full reading of the text.



A linguistic analysis

Stage 1 – an initial focus on the open class (or content) words

Open class words are nouns, main verbs, adjectives and most adverbs.

- Organise your text into a table like the one shown here. Each line of the table represents a line of the poem, allowing you to see which of the open class words feature (and perhaps dominate) different sections of the poem.

What do you notice about the use of open class words in the text? Make a note of your observations.

Nouns	Main verbs	Adverbs	Adjectives

An A4 version of this table is available at the end of this document for printing.

Stage 2 – a closer look at word classes

A closer focus on nouns

Look again at the nouns listed in your table. Use the prompts below to help you analyse the nouns.

- Can you recognise any lexical groupings? Make a note of any lexical groups you recognise (for example, words associated with the natural world).
- Concrete or abstract nouns?
- Any unusual words which stand out from the rest? Neologisms (newly-coined words)?
- Syllable count of the words – particular use of monosyllabic words, for example?

A closer focus on the verbs

Look again at the verbs in your table and consider:

- Tense
- Concrete/abstract
- Active/passive
- Mood – infinitive (expresses the being, action, or feeling, in an unlimited manner, and without person or number); indicative (indicates or declares a thing or asks a question); imperative (expresses commands, advises, prohibits, entreats); potential (expresses the power, liberty, possibility, or necessity of the action or being, eg 'We must go'); subjunctive (represents

A focus on the closed class (or function) words

Now pay attention to the closed class (or function) words: of prepositions, conjunctions, determiners, pronouns. Is there anything interesting to note about the use of these words in the text?



Stage 3 – deviation, repetition, parallelisms

Linguistic deviation

Deviation in a text is anything which is not expected and so is foregrounded. A deviation can be external (the text 'breaks the rules' of the language in which it is written, or the genre, or the typical style of the particular writer) or internal (a pattern which has been set up in the particular text is broken). Some of the deviations you might notice are listed here:

A deviation in a text might be at the level of:

- discourse (a deviation from the expected conventions of a text type, for example a novel beginning in the middle of a story, a speech which
- lexis (a word used unexpectedly or a newly-coined word for example)
- grammar (for example, inversion of the expected word order)
- graphology (the layout of a poem, the use of upper and lower case letters, an idiosyncratic representation of an individual word on the page).

- Are there any deviations from the expected use of language? What is foregrounded as a result of this deviation?

Repetition

Is there repetition in the text? Some of the ways a writer might use repetition are listed here: Repetition in a text might be at the level of:

- lexis
 - sounds (alliteration or assonance, rhyme)
 - images
 - grammatical structures.
- Is there repetition in the text? What is foregrounded as a result of this repetition?

Parallelisms

Parallelism is a form of repetition in which the repetition produces parallel structures. for example:

- Are there any instances of parallelism in the text? If so, what is foregrounded or connected as a result of the parallelism?

Stage 4 – pulling it all together

After completing a detailed linguistic analysis, step back and consider the insights you have gained into the text. What strikes you as particularly interesting or meaningful? How could you use these insights to develop your interpretation of the text? The example on page 7 picks out just two features highlighted through the linguistic analysis and pursues their possible significance.



An example

- 1 This World is not Conclusion.
- 2 A Species stands beyond –
- 3 Invisible, as Music –
- 4 But positive, as Sound –
- 5 It beckons, and it baffles –
- 6 Philosophy – don't know –
- 7 And through a Riddle, at the last –
- 8 Sagacity, must go –
- 9 To guess it, puzzles scholars –
- 10 To gain it, Men have borne
- 11 Contempt of Generations
- 12 And Crucifixion, shown –
- 13 Faith slips – and laughs, and rallies –
- 14 Blushes, if any see –
- 15 Plucks at a twig of Evidence –
- 16 And asks a Vane, the way –
- 17 Much Gesture, from the Pulpit –
- 18 Strong Hallelujahs roll –
- 19 Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
- 20 That nibbles at the soul –

Reading the text and a first interpretation

This poem seems to be about religion and the tension between faith and evidence – what can be proved. It opens very assertively with a declarative sentence but ends with a sense of unease and continued uncertainty – the 'soul' being nibbled at. It feels to me as though those in a position of (religious) authority are being mocked somehow – maybe because they keep trying to prove something which relies on faith?



A linguistic analysis

Stage 1 – an initial focus on the open class (or content) words

Findings

Line	Nouns	Verbs	Adverbs	Adjectives
1	World Conclusion	is [not]		
2	Species	stands	beyond	
3	Music			invisible
4	Sound			positive
5		beckons baffles		
6	Philosophy	[don't] know		
7	Riddle the last			
8	Sagacity	[must] go		
9	Scholars	guess puzzles		
10	Men	gain [have] borne		
11	Contempt Generations			
12	Crucifixion	shown		
13	Faith	slips laughs rallies		
14		blushes see		
15	Twig Evidence	plucks		
16	Vane (??) Way	asks		
17	Gesture Pulpit			much
18	Hallelujahs	roll		strong
19	Narcotics Tooth	[cannot] still		
20	Soul	nibbles		

Commentary

Number of verbs striking, only 1 adverb, only 4 adjectives. Single nouns with series of verbs – suggests a very active poem – though that isn't what I've said about a poem wrestling with issues of faith.



Stage 2 – a closer look at word classes

Focus	Findings	Commentary
Open class words: nouns	2 lexical groups leap out immediately: – Learning: Philosophy, Riddle (?), scholars, Evidence, Sagacity – Religion: Pulpit, crucifixion, Faith, hallelujahs, soul	Are these groups opposed or not? Learning trying to control religion? Failing? Tension between some of the nouns in 2 groups (evidence v. Faith) but also within groups (Riddle and Sagacity, for example) Some odd nouns within the context of the poem: eg Tooth and Narcotics – consider further when thinking about deviations from expected language use/patterns.
Open class words: verbs	Present tense; many monosyllabic; number of verbs is striking – 21; verbs in the negative. Verbs more usually associated with people here used to describe abstract concepts?	Present tense verbs – referring to particular context in which written or timeless? Verbs connected with the 2 key semantic groups identified above: Learning: beckons, baffles, don't know, guess it, gain it Religion: slips, laughs, blushes, rallies, plucks, asks, cannot still, nibbles, have borne Philosophy/learning linked to verbs which suggest lack of learning; religion linked to verbs which suggest embarrassment, uncertainty – somehow they have a smallness about them. Could this impression be created by the fact that they are monosyllabic, present tense. There's also something rather childish about the verbs she has chosen. The abstract concepts Religion (represented in noun 'Pulpit') and Philosophy stand in for whole group of people?
Closed class	Only pronoun is 'it'. Conjunctions: 6 x 'and', 1 x 'but'	Surprised by the conjunctions – had the impression that this is a poem of oppositions, yet only one 'but'. This has made me look again at the poem – realised that it is not so much that learning and religion are being pitted against each other but that the attempt of the learned to 'prove' 'This world is not conclusion' is being mocked.



Stage 3 – deviation, repetition, parallelisms

Focus	Findings	Commentary
Linguistic deviation	Use of upper case for most, but not all, nouns. Tooth – odd choice of word within the context of the poem. Twig ('Twig of evidence') is also a striking choice – insignificant, minor, almost dismissing	Looking at more poems by Emily Dickinson suggests the use of upper case for nouns is the norm. So why hasn't she used upper case for 'scholars'? Or 'soul'? If 'Tooth' merits a capital letter, then surely you'd expect 'soul' to, as well?
Repetition/ Parallelisms	Parallel positioning of parallel grammatical structures in the poem: 'as Sound/as Music'; 'To guess it/To gain it'; 'Faith slips/Blushes/Plucks' Balancing within single line: 'It beckons and it baffles' Phonetic parallelism: 'roll/Soul'	Phonetic parallelism: draws attention to fact that strong hallelujahs cannot stop the questioning.

Stage 4 – pulling it all together

Before this linguistic analysis, the impression I had was that the poem explores issues of faith – perhaps criticising religious authorities for their need to find evidence, to prove 'This world is not conclusion'.

Two things in particular struck me on doing this linguistic analysis: the number of verbs in the present tense and two unusual internal deviations.

First the deviations. Emily Dickinson is famous for her idiosyncratic use of capitalisation and her preference for dashes over other more conventional punctuation. In this case what I found interesting was not her characteristic deviation from standard English but the internal deviation, that is the places where, in this poem, she deviates from her own rules or conventions

The first line is end-stopped – a declarative full sentence, following standard grammatical conventions by beginning with a capital letter and ending with a full stop, rather than with a dash. It is definite and conclusive: just as grammatically there is no ambiguity, the lines suggest there is no room for doubt about this 'world' not being 'Conclusion'. This grammatical and philosophical certainty is so atypical of Dickinson that it puts me on my guard. A dogmatic sentence endorsing religious dogma: surely the poet is using the grammar of the poem to alert her reader to the fact that there is nothing certain or settled about the 'beyond'. The remainder of the poem suggests to me that Dickinson is indeed being playful, ironic even, in this opening: it develops into a complex consideration of faith, as she forces the reader to wrestle with her knotty critique, reading and re-reading clauses, phrases, individual words punctuated with dashes. The first line may be endstopped, the poem is not: the second sentence never concludes, as the poem leaves on a dash, a held breath, an endless 'nibbling at the soul'.

In many poets capitalising words such as 'Evidence', 'Tooth' and 'Faith' would be curious, worthy of comment; in Dickinson's poem, it is her choice not to capitalise the noun 'scholar' that is intriguing. This internal deviation foregrounds the noun and in particular the lack of status she accords the scholars: through her graphological choice, Dickinson belittles the men who work so hard to prove what cannot be proved.

Who is it that 'slips', laughs, 'Blushes, if any see' and 'Plucks'? Grammatically it is the abstract noun 'Faith' which is made the subject of these verbs. Except, of course, it cannot be Faith itself which experiences the loss of faith. Whose Faith is it that proves so fragile? It seems to me that the poem is deliberately elliptical here and that the lack of conventional punctuation allows an ambiguity: it is the faith of the scholar, the philosopher, even, we are encouraged to infer, the priest (whose 'strong Hallelujahs roll' from the 'Pulpit'), which 'slips' and then 'plucks' at Evidence. The piling up of the present tense verbs increases the sense of mockery – monosyllabic, with a diminutive sound, perhaps even girlish connotations, they bring those who claim religious authority down to size.



Patterns and connections, created and broken

The poet Michael Rosen refers to poetry as having 'secret strings', in other words ways in which words and phrases connect with each other in a whole range of different ways. The strings that connect words might be to do with sound, or word groups (lexical fields), or repetitions, or contrasts. They set up echoes and reverberations, working on the reader in relation to each other.

Looking for Rosen's 'secret strings' and for the places in a text where the string is suddenly cut, or a new set of connections are created, can be an excellent starting-point for exploring both the way texts work and the underlying ideas. Start using this approach with short texts like poems, or short prose extracts, where it's possible to look deeply and in detail. Then apply a similar approach to longer texts, where you have more material to deal with and have to be more selective and make judgements about which are the most significant patterns you've noticed.

Here's one example of a text, annotated with the connections that one reader has noticed, to show you the kind of things you might notice.

Langston Hughes: A Wooing

I will bring you big things:
Colors of dawn-morning,
Beauty of rose leaves,
And a flaming love.
But you say
Those are not big things,
That only money counts.
Well,
Then I will bring you money.
But do not ask me
For the beauty of rose leaves,
Nor the colors of dawn-morning.
Nor a flaming love.

NATURE

Use of 1st person voice & 2nd person address is consistent but change of tone in use of imperative in final stanza.

NATURE

Parallelisms of these lines but change emphasised by use of 'Nor'.

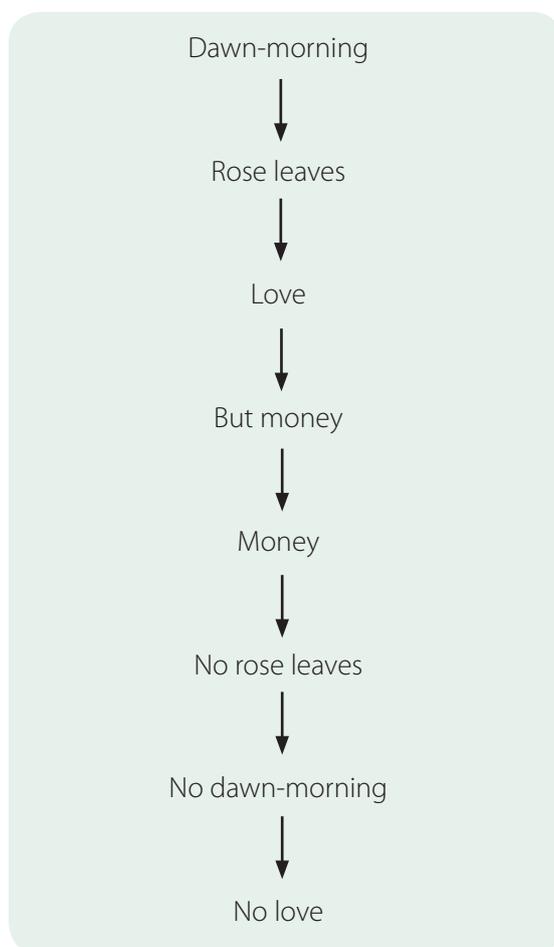
'Big things' is contrasted with 'not big things' at the centre of the poem. Childish simplicity of lexis.

But signals change pattern (secret string to And and Well and Then)

Patterns in use of definite and indefinite article. Why? (And lack of article in lines 2 & 3.)



Pulling out the structure



Once you've noticed the patterns, you can begin to speculate about what this shows you and what the impact is. Here's one example of following through a train of thought on the basis of some of these annotations.

Having noticed the pattern of 'I will bring you' in the first and last verse, it's clear that it's broken in the middle of the poem. The first 'I will bring you' is a glorious offer of love that ties in with the title 'A Wooing'. As a reader, I expect this to be a simple poem of love offered openly and with joy. However the 'But' in the middle of the poem suddenly breaks the pattern. 'But' is a word that explicitly counters what's come before. The joyful offer of love has been rejected in favour of something supposedly 'bigger' and therefore more valuable than the beauty of nature. The third verse's start with 'Well' has a colloquial, everyday weariness about it that again breaks the pattern of the almost ceremonial offer, 'I will give you.' Where the first verse is like a vow, this one is rather more mundane, more like an everyday transaction than a declaration of love. You could imagine someone saying 'Well then I will bring you money,' in response to the buying and selling of a piece of furniture, or the renting of a flat. In coming back to the sequence of images in the first verse though, the poet reminds us of what has been lost. Money will be given but in this cynical demand for financial wealth, the loved one loses all the other wealth that was promised, in the beauty of the natural world but most of all, the 'flaming love' that is now so brutally withdrawn. The repetition of 'a flaming love', in the very last line of the poem foregrounds the fact that it is love that matters most, but that when money is regarded as a 'big thing', values become distorted and love is lost.



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