

GCSE (9–1)

ENGLISH LITERATURE

**J352/02: Poetry across time
Youth and Age cluster**

Teacher Guide

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Introduction

Changes to the ‘Youth and Age’ cluster

OCR is committed to improving the diversity of English Literature texts studied at GCSE. Schools and colleges, stakeholders and external experts have been consulted and we have decided to refresh the Poetry Anthology ‘Towards a World Unknown’.

Unlike other parts of the specification, the selection of poetry for study and for unseen assessment can go beyond ‘literature of the British Isles’, although poems must have been originally written in English. There also needs to be a ‘representative selection of Romantic poems’ within each cluster. The initial

anthology included Romantic poetry by women, and a diverse range of modern poets, but we are pleased to be extending that diversity further by a selection of five new poems from contemporary and established poets of colour. These five new poems will replace some Victorian and Twentieth-century poems which have either become over-familiar through the assessment process, or which have proved to have unexpected difficulties or seemed less accessible for students.

Summary of the changes

Previous anthology poems	New anthology poems
‘When I have fears that I may cease to be’, John Keats	‘Theme for English B’, Langston Hughes
‘Spring and Fall: to a Young Child’, Gerard Manley Hopkins	‘Happy Birthday Moon’, Raymond Antrabus
‘Ode’, Arthur O’Shaughnessy	‘Prayer’, Zaffar Kunial’
‘Red Roses’, Anne Sexton	‘Tea With Our Grandmothers’, Warsan Shire
‘Farther’, Owen Sheers	‘Equilibrium’, Theresa Lola

'Theme for English B' by Langston Hughes (1901-1967)

The poet

Langston Hughes was one of the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance. He was a poet, activist in the Civil Rights movement, playwright and short story writer. Descended from slaves and slave owners, he grew up in Missouri in the Mid-West of the USA. He was elected class poet at school and studied at Columbia University but left because of racial prejudice shown by teachers and students. He spent some time drifting between jobs, which included a spell in England in the mid 1920s before finally graduating from Lincoln University in 1929. He lived the rest of his life in Harlem in New York. He never married and may have been gay. His poetry is influenced by jazz, folk and blues rhythms and has witing emphasise links between African Americans and other Black communities which has led to a huge international influence on Black cultural movements worldwide.

The poem

'Theme for English B' was published as part of a volume entitled *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951). The dream is a dream of black liberation. The persona of this poem reflects Langston Hughes's own experiences in Columbia University in the City of New York. It refers to a composition he has asked to write for his introductory English course ('English B'). The speaker has been asked by his 'instructor' or teacher to write a piece of 'true' personal writing, but this makes the speaker question who he is. He reflects on his mixed race and the different places where he has lived, ending up in Harlem at the YMCA, at the heart of African American culture. He uses the term 'coloured' which is the term used at the time: he is 'the only coloured student' in his class. Communication becomes a dialogue between the twenty-two-year-old and his teacher. He writes to express the identity of Harlem through an appeal to the senses. But he says, 'I hear New York too', challenging the idea that Harlem simply shuts out the rest of the city. The speaker challenges the prejudice that Black people are different: he has the same experiences and pleasures as a White student and his musical tastes are inclusive ('Bessie, bop, or Bach') linking Bessie Smith (a famous Blues singer), jazz ('bop') and the Western Classical tradition. He poses the question about whether his writing will be Black and different, or whether it will be equally eclectic. The speaker asserts that he is part of his instructor just as his instructor is part of him. In the context of this cluster, you could see the poem as a dialogue between youth and age, as well as the lessons that white privilege can learn from identity politics and poetics.

Responding to the poem

The poetry section of the exam assesses AO1 and AO2.

AO1: Read, understand and respond to texts: maintain a critical style; develop an informed personal response; use textual references, including quotations, to support and illustrate interpretations.

AO2: Analyse the language, form and structure used by a writer to create meanings and effects, using relevant terminology where appropriate.

Questions to ask about 'Theme for English B'

1. Whose voices do we hear in this poem? (AO1)
2. How do the hill and the journey to the speaker's room symbolise the difference between Columbia University and Harlem? (AO1)
3. Why does the poet keep questioning what is meant by 'true'? (AO1)
4. What is 'true' about the way the speaker and his teacher are part of each other and learn from each other? (AO1)
5. Why does the poet begin by asking a question? (AO1/AO2)
6. What is the effect of the list of places where the speaker has lived and what does this suggest about his life? (AO2)
7. How does the poet particularly stress that he 'hears' Harlem and what is the effect of the parenthesis (I hear New York, too)? (AO2)
8. What is the effect of linking 'Bessie, bop, or Bach' by alliteration? (AO2)
9. Why does Hughes metaphorically ask, 'will my page be coloured'? (AO2)
10. What is the effect of the final line and to what extent does the poem fulfil the task the teacher has set? (AO2)

Connections and contrasts with other anthology poems

- 'Holy Thursday' – the relationship between the privileged 'wise guardians of the poor' and the marginalised
- 'The Bluebell' – inspiration and personal happiness
- 'Midnight on the Great Western' – young people on a risky journey through life
- Out, Out – whether there is a future for underprivileged young people
- 'Baby Song' – what makes a young person feel comfortable and uncomfortable
- 'You're – celebrating new life and opportunities in America ('Fourth/Of July')
- 'Cold Knap Lake' – formative experiences and questions of identity
- 'My First Weeks' – celebrations of life
- 'Venus's-flytraps' - the experience of being marginalised and excluded
- 'Love' – how bonds are created between younger and older people
- 'Happy Birthday Moon' – different learning experiences
- 'Prayer' – powerful encounters between younger and older people
- 'Tea With Our Grandmothers' – ancestry and identity
- 'Equilibrium' – memories contrasted with forgetting

Think about how important encounters between younger and older people are for learning and a sense of identity.

Explore ways in which learning is also a two-way process.

Look at different ways in which marginalised people are presented and celebrated and whether they have an opportunity to make a better future for themselves.

Links for further research

A [reading of the poem by a Jamaican playwright Jermaine Ross](#) followed by an interesting presentation.

[A short analysis of the poem.](#)

Find out more about the [Harlem Renaissance](#).

'Happy Birthday Moon' by Raymond Antrobus (b. 1986)

The poet

Raymond Antrobus was born in Hackney in 1986: his mother was English and his father an emigrant from Jamaica. He writes about his mixed heritage and about deafness: his deafness was undiagnosed until he was six and he was at first thought to have learning difficulties. Both parents had 'a passion for poetry' and the love of his parents inspires his own writing. Antrobus is a performance poet who has appeared with Warsan Shire, Kae Tempest and others. *The Perseverance*, his debut volume, was published in 2016 and attracted much attention from shortlists for poetry prizes and books of the year.

The poem

This poem describes the poet struggling to learn to speak and read his own name, as his father patiently teaches him language to overcome the barrier of deafness. The form of the poem, which is sophisticated and mirrors French literary tradition, shows how the older poet has overcome the difficulties of his younger self, but also imitates the gradual and repetitive process of learning to read and articulate sounds. The Moon is reflected in the white spaces between the words which the boy is struggling to understand. Although the form of the poem is circular, there is a sense that the boy and his Dad 'really hear each other'. This poem has been set to music by Cerys Matthews.

Responding to the poem

The poetry section of the exam assesses AO1 and AO2.

AO1: Read, understand and respond to texts: maintain a critical style; develop an informed personal response; use textual references, including quotations, to support and illustrate interpretations.

AO2: Analyse the language, form and structure used by a writer to create meanings and effects, using relevant terminology where appropriate.

Questions to ask about 'Happy Birthday Moon'

1. What does the 'white space' and the Moon represent to the boy? (AO1)
2. How do the poets' pronouns set the father and son in opposition and then bring them together? (AO1)
3. What does the boy mean by 'I'd like to be the Moon'? (AO1)
4. Where do you find humour in the poem? (AO1/AO2)
5. Where do you notice subtle differences in tone in the repeated words? (AO1/AO2)
6. Is the ending of the poem simply a repetition of a pattern or has the meaning of the line changed? What difference does the change of punctuation make? (AO1/AO2)
7. How does the poet use language to imitate the boy's difficulties in communicating? (AO2)
8. Where does the poet use caesura to convey halting progress? (AO2)
9. This poem is a pantoum: how is it constructed and how does it develop the quatrain form? (AO2)
10. What is the effect of the poem's patterned repetitions? (AO2)

Connections and contrasts with other anthology poems

- 'Holy Thursday' - the education of young people in the past and today
- 'The Bluebell' - childhood memories and what they mean to us
- 'Midnight on the Great Western' - taking risks to learn
- 'Out, Out -' - how young people are treated
- 'Baby Song' - the bond between parents and children
- 'You're -' - different ways of communicating with children who lack language
- 'Cold Knap Lake' - exploring childhood experiences and what they tell us
- 'My First Weeks' - how children learn
- 'Venus's-flytraps' - contrast innocence and knowledge
- 'Love' - difficulties of bonding between parents and children
- 'Theme for English B' - how the process of learning is also about expressing your identity
- 'Prayer' - communication between different generations
- 'Tea With Our Grandmothers' - what we learn from our families
- 'Equilibrium' - learning and forgetting names and identity

Compare with 'The Perseverance' in the Love and Relationships cluster for a deeper understanding of Antrobus's relationship with his father.

Links for further research

[Listen to Antrobus perform this poem.](#)

Here are [some helpful notes on the poem.](#)

[Antrobus reads from and talks about the collection 'The Perseverance'.](#)

[Explore the poet's website.](#)

Raymond Antrobus [travelled back to Jamaica with the British Council.](#)

[Antrobus talks about his deafness.](#)

'Prayer' by Zaffar Kunial (b. circa 1987)

The poet

Zaffar Kunial is a British poet born in Birmingham. His mother was English while his father was Kashmiri and currently lives in Lahore. His mixed race identity shapes both the subject matter and form of his poetry. He studied at LSE and won a National Poetry Competition Award in 2011. He was poet-in-residence of the Wordsworth Trust in 2014. In that year, he also took part in creative centenary commemorations of World War One and had his first volume published as part of a *Faber New Poets* series. He has said he 'enjoys the legacy of exchanging words across centuries'. He addresses postcolonial concerns while engaging allusively with key poets of the English literary tradition. Zaffar Kunial currently lives in West Yorkshire and works as a full-time creative writer for Hallmark cards. In 2019 he published a volume of his cricket poems, *Six*.

The poem

In 'Prayer' written in 2018, and published as part of his collection *Us*, Kunial links his own birth to his mother's death. *Allah hu Akbar* is meant to express a submission to the will of God. Characteristically, Kunial links his father's diaspora Muslim culture to the English literary tradition by alluding to George Herbert, the great priest-poet of the seventeenth century. Herbert speaks of 'God's breath in man returning to his birth' and Kunial uses this to remember the moment of his own birth as his mother lies on her deathbed. He reminds us that Herbert rhymes 'birth' with 'heaven and earth' linking mortal life to ideas of eternity. Articulating a response to cancer, and his mother's fast decline to the moment when her jewellery was removed is harder for him to articulate, and he simply reiterates his thanks and love.

Responding to the poem

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AO2: Analyse the language, form and structure used by a writer to create meanings and effects, using relevant terminology where appropriate.

Questions to ask about 'Prayer'

1. What's the significance of the reference to breath as intrinsic to prayer? (AO1)
2. What do the final lines mean to you and how do they relate to the earlier idea of prayer as 'God's breath in man'? (AO1)
3. How does the poet parallel English and Arabic ways of praying? (AO1/AO2)
4. How does the poet make this poem so clearly personal from the very first line? (AO1/AO2)
5. What is the effect of using Arabic in line 2? (AO2)
6. How does Kunial remind us of Herbert's chimes and rhymes and with what effect? (AO2)
7. Explore the use of tense as the poet attempts to articulate the prayer he tried to say at his mother's deathbed. (AO2)
8. How does the phrase '*hurled language's hurt*' convey the animal noise of grief at his mother's diagnosis? (AO2)
9. Explore the effect of short lines and short sentences here. (AO2)
10. How does the poet use caesura and to what effect? (AO2)

Connections and contrasts with other anthology poems

- 'Holy Thursday' – references to religion and ritual
- 'The Bluebell' – formative memories
- 'Midnight on the Great Western' - the journey of life towards the unknown
- 'Out, Out-' – death and silence
- 'Baby Song' – different views of the miracle of birth
- 'You're' – how to articulate emotions at birth and death
- 'Cold Knap Lake' – memories of loss
- 'My First Weeks' – birth and identity
- 'Venus's-flytraps' – trying to make sense of life
- 'Love' – tracing your identity through the relationship of parents and children
- 'Theme for English B' – telling the story of where you have come from
- 'Happy Birthday Moon' – what we learn from the parental bond
- 'Tea With Our Grandmothers' – tracing our origins through the language of parents and grandparents
- 'Equilibrium' – coming to terms with loss through the cycle of life: birth and death

Links for further research

[Kunial reads 'Prayer'](#).

[Kunial talks about his work](#).

The British Council provides [a critical overview](#).

A fine [analysis of another poem by Kunial](#), 'Us', which gave its title to the volume.

[An interview with Kunial](#) about his poetry.

He talks more about his [early life growing up in Moseley](#).

'Tea With Our Grandmothers' by Warsan Shire (b. 1988)

The poet

Warsan Shire is a British writer who grew up in London but was born of Somali parents in Kenya. She migrated with her family at the age of one as a refugee and has written about this experience. Since 2015, she has been living in Los Angeles and she has performed her poetry all over the world and has been translated into many different languages. In 2016, her poetry featured in Beyoncé's films *Lemonade* and *Black is King*. She uses poetry to express the struggles of her people and family, and especially the experiences of women. She aims to 'use poetry to explore memory, voice and heal trauma'. She has published three chapbooks and her poems have appeared in many anthologies; she is working on her first full collection.

The poem

The poem is addressed to Warsan Shire's friend Basil and commemorates both their grandmothers from Somalia to Wales, using their languages (Arabic, Swahili and Welsh) to describe the grandmothers, while alluding to the food and cultures associated with them.

Responding to the poem

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Questions to ask about 'Tea With Our Grandmothers'

1. What do *habooba* and *ayeeyo* mean, and what is the effect of using these words? (AO1/AO2)
2. How is the grandmother's nurturing role linked to that of Noura? (AO1)
3. In what ways might the lines on Al-Sura's cheek be a '*tally of surviving*'? (AO1)
4. How do the final lines of the poem link with the title and purpose of the poem? (AO1)
5. How does the comparison of the grandmother's flesh to tamarind link to the portrait of her grinding cardamom? (AO2)
6. How does the poet give Doris an equally exotic and mythic identity? (AO2)
7. How is this poem structured around the stories of the grandmothers? (AO2)
8. How is enjambment used here to capture the moment of her death? (AO2)
9. What is the effect of conjuring the different languages that the grandmothers spoke and were addressed in? (AO2)
10. Explore the effect of the simile used to describe Al-Sura's tea pouring. (AO2)

Connections and contrasts with other anthology poems

- 'Holy Thursday' – the mythical role of the old as guardians for the young
- 'The Bluebell' – recollections of past influences when growing up
- 'Midnight on the Great Western' – what young people take with them on their journey through life
- 'Out, Out –' – neglect versus nurture
- 'Baby Song' – celebrating mothers and grandmothers
- 'You're' – finding images to invoke young and old
- 'Cold Knap Lake' – parents and grandparents as heroic figures
- 'My First Weeks' – first and last memories
- 'Venus's-flytraps' – having or lacking mentors and happy memories
- 'Love' – family bonding
- 'Theme for English B' – diverse identity and migration
- 'Happy Birthday Moon' – learning from parents and grandparents
- 'Prayer' – commemorating grandparents
- 'Equilibrium' – Elegies for the older generation

Links for further research.

[Shire's own website is still in development.](#)

[A critical introduction](#) on the British Council website.

This [presentation by Dr Shezia Jagot](#) provides a reading and brief introduction to the poem.

An [article in The New Yorker](#) describes her poetry and international fame.

In this film [Warsan Shire reads one of her best-known poems](#) 'Excuses for Why We Failed At Love'.

[Warsan Shire speaks up for refugees](#) in her poem 'Home'.

This website provides [a contextual introduction to her poetry](#).

'Equilibrium' by Theresa Lola (b.1994)

The poet

Theresa Lola is a British Nigerian poet based in London who has read at many landmark events and locations in the city. She was born in Lagos but moved to London when she was 13, eventually graduating from the University of Hertfordshire in 2015. In 2019, she was invited to read at the unveiling of Millicent Fawcett's statue in Parliament Square. She was the Young People's Laureate of London in 2019-20. She teaches creative writing in London schools and universities.

The poem

This poem comes from Lola's debut volume of poetry *In Search of Equilibrium* (2019), which has death and grieving as its subject. Many of the poems are elegies for her grandfather who suffered from Alzheimer's before his death. Here she remembers her brother's birth and naming ceremony as moments that marked the progress of her grandfather's disease. 'Equilibrium' therefore alludes to the cycle of birth and death.

Responding to the poem

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Questions to ask about 'Equilibrium'

1. What are the ironies of this link between birth and death? (AO1)
2. How do these ironies link with the titles of the poem and the collection? (AO1)
3. Why was the grandfather professionally acquainted with the idea of equilibrium? (AO1)
4. In this poem remembering is juxtaposed with forgetting. How would you characterise the poet's tone? (AO1/AO2)
5. We talk about someone's days being 'numbered' when they have a terminal disease: how does Lola's language build on this idea? (AO1/AO2)
6. Why does the poet choose the word 'wailed' to describe her brother's cry at birth? (AO2)
7. How does the metaphor of the stopwatches capture her grandfather's life ticking away? (AO2)
8. Explore the poet's use of enjambment between her first two stanzas. (AO2)
9. What makes the poet's simile in line 4 especially shocking? (AO2)
10. How does the caesura capture the hesitant pauses of the grandfather at the naming ceremony? (AO2)

Connections and contrasts with other anthology poems

- 'Holy Thursday' – ceremonies and the transitions in life which they mark
- 'The Bluebell' – finding equilibrium
- 'Midnight on the Great Western' – journeying to the future
- 'Out, Out –' – loss and tragedy
- 'Baby Song' – the sadness at the moment of birth
- 'You're' – equations of birth and death
- 'Cold Knap Lake' – troubling moments and shadows beneath the surface
- 'My First Weeks' – stories of life and death
- 'Venus's-flytraps' – knowledge of mortality
- 'Love - interpreting the meaning of birth and death
- 'Theme for English B' – naming, heritage and identity
- 'Happy Birthday Moon' – names and patrimony
- 'Prayer' – linking birth and death
- 'Tea With Our Grandmothers' – grandparents and our memories of them

Compare Danez Smith's 'alternate names for black boys' for prayers at birth, and ageing and loss in 'Sue Speaks to me In the Swan Room' by Malika Booker.

Links for further research

[Lola's own website.](#)

This link includes an [embedded clip of Lola reading](#) and articulating her loss of her grandfather to Alzheimer's.

This poem also shows [Lola's exploration of family relationships.](#)

This is a [helpful review of Lola's first collection of poems.](#)

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