Touro Institute מכון טורו

In conjunction with

OpenLearn

Approaching Literature

Approaching plays

Introduction

Do you want to get more out of drama? This unit is designed to develop the analytical skills you need for a more in-depth study of literary plays. You will learn about dialogue, stage directions, blank verse, dramatic structure and conventions and aspects of performance.

It's not necessary for you to have previously read any of the plays mentioned in the unit before embarking on it, but to get the most from it you may like to obtain texts of the following:

Churchill, Caryl (1994) *Top Girls*, with commntary and notes by Bill Naismith, Meuthen.
Ibsen, Henrik (1992) *A Doll's House*, Dover Thrift Publications.
Shakespeare, William (2005) *As You Like It*, edited by H. J. Oliver, Penguin.

Shakespeare, William (1996) *Henry V*, edited by A. R. Humphries, Penguin.
Shakespeare, William (1996) *Othello*, edited by Kenneth Muir, Penguie

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- have an understanding of the basic technical terms associated with plays;
- be able to make the most out of a text of a play.

1 Approaching plays

Most people's experience of plays will be through seeing them on stage, or on television or video. Or, thinking of drama in a more general sense, we might be avid watchers of TV soaps or films. But, as a student of literature, you are sitting at home with a book open in front of you. It contains the text of a play. What, then, are you to make of the words on the page before you? If the script you were examining was intended for a film or a TV play it would look different from the examples that follow, since these media focus more on the visual aspect, and the conventions or presentation for a film or TV script are different from those of a play script intended primarily for the stage. In this unit, we shall be concentrating on play texts, but we shall also be offering some guidance for how to get the most out of watching a **performance**.

Example 1

ANGIE Wish she was dead.
KIT Wanna watch *The Exterminator*?
ANGIE You're sitting on my leg.
KIT There's nothing on telly. We can have an ice cream. Angie?
ANGIE Shall I tell you something?
KIT Do you wanna watch *The Exterminator*?
ANGIE It's X, innit.
KIT I can get into Xs.
ANGIE Shall I tell you something?
KIT We'll go to something else. We'll go to Ipswich. What's on the Odeon?
ANGIE She won't let me, will she?
KIT Don't tell her.
ANGIE I've no money.
KIT I'll pay.

Example 2

NORA *Really!* Did a big dog run after you? But it didn't bite you? No, dogs don't bite nice little

dolly children. You mustn't look at the parcels, Ivar. What are they? Ah, I daresay you would like to know. No, no – it's something nasty! Come, let us have a game! What shall we play at? Hide and seek? Yes, we'll play hide and seek. Bob shall hide first. Must I hide? Very well, I'll hide first.

[She and the children laugh and shout and romp in and out of the room; at last NORA hides under the table; the children rush in and look for her but do not see her; they hear her smothered laughter, run to the table, lift up the cloth and find her. Shouts of laughter. She crawls forward and pretends to frighten them. Fresh laughter. Meanwhile there has been a knock at the hall door but none of them has noticed it. The door is half opened and KROGSTAD appears, he waits a little; the game goes on.]

Example 3

KING HENRY Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more,
Or close the wall up with our English dead!
In peace there's nothing so becomes a man
As modest stillness and humility:
But when the blast of war blows in our ears,
Then imitate the action of the tiger;
Stiffen the sinews, conjure up the blood,
Disguise fair nature with hard-favored rage;
Then lend the eye a terrible aspect;
Let it pry through the portage of the head
Like the brass cannon; let the brow o'erwhelm it
As fearfully as doth a gallèd rock
O'erhang and jutty his confounded base,
Swilled with the wild and wasteful ocean.

Activity 1

First we would like you to look at the examples above from three scripts for plays, which all look different on the page, and which offer different challenges in interpretation. As you read, ask yourself what the extracts have in common.

The three extracts above may look very different on the page, but they have this in common: they are all intended for performance, and as you read you need to envisage actors moving around on stage, speaking the words. The first example comes from Caryl Churchill's play, *Top Girls*, published and performed in 1982. It is followed by an extract from Ibsen's play, *A Doll's House*, which was first performed in Copenhagen in 1879 and first reached the London stage in 1889. Finally, there is an extract from Henry V's famous speech before the battle of Harfleur. Shakespeare's play, *Henry V*, is thought to have been first performed in 1599, and first published in 1600.

I shall shortly be looking at the three extracts in detail, but for now I should like to focus on the main differences between them. There are no **stage directions** in the extract I have chosen from *Top Girls*, which consists simply of short lines of **dialogue** exchanged between two characters. In fact, I have cheated a bit here and deliberately chosen a passage which gives speech only; when I give the longer extract for discussion you will see that Churchill does give some directions. But on the whole there are relatively few in this play, unlike *A Doll's House*, where Ibsen gives many instructions to do with setting, action and expression. In the example here, the speech seems almost secondary to the action, and there are clearly actors on stage (the children) for whom no dialogue is written, though they are not silent, and another actor appears who is silent for some time. Henry V's speech is written in **blank verse**, a poetic form consisting of unrhymed **iambic pentameters** that was generally used in drama of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in combination with prose dialogue. The play script, put together after the performance, contains no stage directions beyond indications of entrances, exits, fights and flourishes. Obviously techniques that are used for analysing poetry and other texts can be relevant in reading a speech like this, but what is important to remember is that it is being delivered by an actor, in costume, to other actors, and to an audience.

This is where a play text differs crucially from a poem, a novel or a short story – it is a text for performance. Poems and stories may be performed in the sense that they may be read aloud, and in that event the way that they are read is itself an interpretation, but a play text is specifically a text for performance, and therefore it is necessary to read it with attention to the way the words will be brought to full life on stage; the performance will need to make not just an aural but also a visual appeal. Another important difference between drama and prose fiction, however, lies in the absence (generally speaking) of a narrator. There are exceptions to be found, for instance in the **chorus** in *Henry V* and *Romeo and Juliet*, or, to take two more modern examples, in Peter Schaffer's *Royal Hunt of the Sun*, and Robert Bolt's *A Man For All Seasons*. In a novel, the narrator, typically, will act as a guide and interpreter, shaping the narrative to give it a particular significance, evaluating character and commenting on the action. In particular, through the handling of point of view the narrator can direct the reader's sympathies. On stage, the play will be interpreted by the director and the actors, and the way in which the audience's sympathies are manipulated is less obvious; much will depend on the extent to which they can identify with one or more of the characters.

2 Dialogue

Here is a longer passage from the scene in *Top Girls:*

JOYCE's backyard. The house with backdoor is upstage. Downstage a shelter made of junk, made by children. Two girls, ANGIE and KIT, are in it, squashed together. ANGIE is 16, KIT is 12. They cannot be seen from the house. JOYCE calls from the house.

JOYCE Angie. Angie are you out there?

Silence. They keep still and wait. When nothing else happens they relax.

ANGIE Wish she was dead.

KIT Wanna watch *The Exterminator*?

ANGIE You're sitting on my leg.

KIT	There's nothing on telly. We can have an ice cream. Angie?
ANGIE	Shall I tell you something?
KIT	Do you wanna watch *The Exterminator*?
ANGIE	It's X, innit.
KIT	I can get into Xs.
ANGIE	Shall I tell you something?
KIT	We'll go to something else. We'll go to Ipswich. What's on the Odeon?
ANGIE	She won't let me, will she?
KIT	Don't tell her.
ANGIE	I've no money.
KIT	I'll pay.
ANGIE	She'll moan though, won't she?
KIT	I'll ask her for you if you like.
ANGIE	I've no money, I don't want you to pay.
KIT	I'll ask her.
ANGIE	She don't like you.
KIT	I still got three pounds birthday money. Did she say she don't like me? I'll go by myself then.
ANGIE	Your mum don't let you. I got to take you.
KIT	She won't know.
ANGIE	You'd be scared who'd sit next to you.
KIT	No I wouldn't.
	She does like me anyway.
	Tell me then.
ANGIE	Tell you what?
KIT	It's you she doesn't like.
ANGIE	Well I don't like her so tough shit.
JOYCE *(off)*	Angie. Angie. Angie. I know you're out there. I'm not coming out after you. You come in here.

Silence. Nothing happens.

In contrast to the dense blank verse of Henry's speech, most of the dialogue in Extract 1 is in alternating one-line speeches. The technical term for this is **stichomythia**, from the Greek ‘line talk’. It was frequently used in classical drama, to convey a kind of verbal parrying, accompanied by antithesis (opposites, contrasting ideas) and repetitive patterns, and is an effective way of creating tension and conflict. Although it has been used less since the classical period, Shakespeare and other dramatists have employed stichomythia, and it is not uncommon in plays of the twentieth century.

Activity 2

Does the stichomythia here work to create tension and conflict?

I think it does. We are told that the girls are aged 16 and 12, but there is no clear sense of the older girl taking charge of the younger one. Questions are asked and not answered immediately; actions are proposed and are met by objections. The prevailing tone is set by Angie's first speech: ‘Wish she was dead’. Thereafter, the debate about going to the cinema is refracted through a lens of negativity: of the individual speeches, thirteen contain clear negatives. Even the concluding stage direction is negative (‘*Nothing happens*’).

The language is not poetical in the usual sense and it employs the idioms of colloquial speech (‘Wanna’, ‘innit’, ‘tough shit’), but although we might say that this is naturalistic dialogue, it is still constructed; it does not resemble a transcript of real speech.

Activity 3

I have already drawn attention to the frequency of negative statements. What else do you notice about the patterning of the language? How does it help our understanding of the scene?

There are repeated references to money, to telling and to not liking. Kit's three-line speech stands out from the prevailing one-liners. Notice that it is written as three separate lines. I think this suggests that the actor should allow space between them, so that each receives individual focus, and we can hear that each line relates to a different component of the scene. The first line (‘No I wouldn't’) is a direct response to Angie (‘You'd be scared who'd sit next to you’). The second line contributes to the wrangle about who Angie's mother does or does not like. The third line (‘Tell me then’) seems to come out of the blue, and Angie's question that follows (‘Tell you what?’) emphasizes this. A reader of the play can look back through the text, though, and see that Angie has twice said, ‘Shall I tell you something?’ earlier in the scene. In performance, the scene is likely to play fast enough for the audience to retain an aural memory of these speeches. It is only after the punctuating *'Silence'* that Angie tells her story about being able to make things move. This, presumably, is what she offered to ‘tell’ earlier on.

Drama has been defined as a process of conflict and resolution. In this scene we have concentrated so far on the tension that builds up between the two girls, and that tension, which is a matter of rivalry and of closeness, is reflected in the use of space. The girls are placed in close physical contact in the makeshift hut, and the indication in the stage directions that they are ‘squashed together’ is emphasized in a speech: ‘You're sitting on my leg’. Later in the scene Kit says: ‘You're sitting on me’. So, despite the sparse stage directions a director would know how the girls should be placed onstage. Even within the confined space of the hut, the reversal of positions shows that movement is taking place and it is through movement that the audience can be made aware of the fluctuations in the relationship between the two girls. A further dimension of tension is created by the part that Joyce plays in the scene. The girls’ refusal to answer her call unites them against her, the adult; she represents the outside world within which their hut is a juvenile retreat, and a place of secrets. The rest of the scene is punctuated not only by the silences but by Joyce's calls to the two girls, and later we will see that the tension manifests itself in outright antagonism on the part of Angie.

3 Stage directions

Here is a longer passage from the scene from *A Doll's House* (The MAID referred to is the NURSE).

[RANK, HELMER and MRS LINDE go downstairs. The NURSE comes forward with the children; NORA shuts the hall door.]

NORA	How fresh and well you look! Such red cheeks! – like apples and roses. [*The children all talk at once while she speaks to them.*] Have you had great fun? That's splendid! What, you pulled both Emmy and Bob along on the sledge? Both at once? That *was* good. You are a clever boy, Ivar. Let me take her for a little, Anne. My sweet little baby doll! [*Takes the baby from the* MAID*and dances it up and down*] Yes, yes, Mother will dance with Bob too. What! Have you been snowballing? I wish I had been there too! No, no, I will take their things off, Anne; please let me do it, it is such fun. Go in now, you look half frozen. There is some hot coffee for you on the stove.

[*The NURSE goes into the room on the left. NORA takes off the children's things and throws them about while they all talk to her at once.*]

NORA	*Really!* Did a big dog run after you? But it didn't bite you? No, dogs don't bite nice little dolly children. You mustn't look at the parcels, Ivar. What are they? Ah, I daresay you would like to know. No, no – it's something nasty! Come, let us have a game! What shall we play at? Hide and seek? Yes, we'll play hide and seek. Bob shall hide first. Must I hide? Very well, I'll hide first.

[She and the children laugh and shout and romp in and out of the room; at last NORA hides under the table; the children rush in and look for her but do not see her; they hear her smothered laughter, run to the table, lift up the cloth and find her. Shouts of laughter. She crawls forward and pretends to frighten them. Fresh laughter. Meanwhile there has been a knock at the hall door but none of them has noticed it. The door is half opened and KROGSTAD appears, he waits a little; the game goes on.]

Unlike Caryl Churchill, Ibsen writes very full stage directions, which in this extract take up almost as much space as the dialogue.

Activity 4

What do you think is the significance of these directions?

In the first place the directions tell us about the movement of characters on and off the stage. We learn that three characters who have been onstage now leave, while the Nurse brings the children in and then leaves to go to the kitchen. Nora, consequently, is left alone with the children. Notice the careful direction that she should close the hall door by which the Nurse has entered with the children. We are aware of other people being in the house, but it is important that Nora should feel safely enclosed within her domestic space, and that Krogstad should come in as an outsider. His knock is not heard by Nora, who is so happily involved with the children, and when he pushes open the door, he stands for a moment as a silent observer of the scene. This emphasizes his exclusion from the domesticity enjoyed by the Helmers, and lends a slightly sinister element

to his appearance. As the scene continues we find that not only has he been excluded from the Helmers' life in another way (by being sacked from the bank), but that his intrusion into the Helmer household brings a threat to Nora's security.

Furthermore, the directions indicate not only movement but sound. No lines are written for the children, but they are far from silent; they talk and laugh and shout. Nora's questions in her first speech indicate something of what they say. Incidentally, her speech also indicates further action: 'No, no, I will take their things off, Anne'.

Speech and stage directions together give us a picture of a mother happy to play with her children at their level. When she takes their outside clothes off, she 'throws them about' rather than putting them tidily away, as a responsible adult might, and the directions tell us that there is a good deal of romping about for Nora and the children, and that it is Nora who hides under the table. The scene contributes to our view of her as a vigorous, playful young woman, and links with the way she is represented in other scenes in the play. Nora's passionate physicality is evident later, in a more sexual sense, in the scene when she dances the tarantella. And the way she addresses her children ('My sweet little baby doll!'; 'No, dogs don't bite nice little dolly children') recalls the way her husband has spoken to her in the first scene of the play ('Is that my little lark twittering out there?'; 'It's a sweet little spendthrift, but she uses up a deal of money').

Stage directions are perhaps the most obvious way in which a playwright will indicate how the text is to be performed, but they need to be interpreted as much as the speeches do, and will not necessarily be followed literally. Here, for instance, is the description of the Helmers' living room with which the play text starts:

SCENE – A room furnished comfortably and tastefully but not extravagantly. At the back a door to the right leads to the entrance hall; another to the left leads to HELMER'S study. Between the doors stands a piano. In the middle of the left-hand wall is a door and beyond a window. Near the window are a round table, armchairs and a small sofa. In the right-hand wall, at the farther end, another door, and on the same side, nearer the footlights, a stove, two easy chairs and a rocking chair; between the stove and the door a small table. Engravings on the walls; a cabinet with china and other small objects; a small bookcase with well-bound books. The floors are carpeted, and a fire burns in the stove. It is winter.

Activity 5

What is the impression created by this description?

What strikes me is the number of doors and the quantity of furniture! If you try to map out the stage, as though you were a director or stage designer, bearing in mind that the actors need to be able to move round the stage without treading on each other's toes or knocking into the furniture, you will see how difficult it is to fit everything in. I think that Ibsen is creating the impression of a comfortable but cluttered domestic interior. The piano, engravings, china and books indicate that this is a middle-class home with some interest in cultural pursuits, but the quantity of furniture limits the space in which the actors can move and this is, I think, an important way of indicating the constraints upon Nora.

This is *her* space (Torvald has his study offstage), and she is seen in it for almost the whole play, only being absent for the scene between Krogstad and Mrs Linde at the beginning of Act III. The visual impression should be of a claustrophobic interior, and this may be created in a literal way, following Ibsen's instructions as closely as possible. But it may also be interpreted more freely. The last production that I saw, performed by Shared Experience, actually included in the set a fairly large doll's house, large enough for adult characters to crawl in and out. This does not form part of Ibsen's directions, but is one way of interpreting the claustrophobia that the directions suggest, as well, of course, as giving literal expression to the title of the play.

4 Blank verse

The speech from *Henry V* offers a way of transferring skills you have acquired if you have studied poetry. As with any form of poetry, although there is no rhyme, the language is highly patterned, and it is important to pay attention to the ways in which this patterning is achieved. It is a good idea to get into the habit of marking up your text when you are doing a close analysis of a particular passage. The following shows how Henry V's speech (given in its entirety this time) might be annotated.

In this speech King Henry is performing a specific role. This is a public occasion of enormous importance, the first engagement of the English army against the French. The simple family men who have arrived in France must be transformed into a collective fighting machine, and he must achieve this end through **oratory.** In the first scene of the play the Archbishop of Canterbury has extolled the King's **rhetorical** skill; here we have a chance to witness it for ourselves.

Activity 6

Using the annotations in our example to help you, pick out some of the rhetorical devices in this speech which seem designed to encourage a communal fighting spirit.

Note	Text	Note
iambic pentameter	Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more,	apostrophe
	Or close the wall up with our English dead!	repetition
self-contained	In peace there's nothing so becomes a man	Englishness
	As modest stillness and humility:	run on
hard sounds	But when the blast of war blows in our ears,	
	Then imitate the action of the tiger;	
alliteration	Stiffen the sinews, conjure up the blood,	active & commands
	Disguise fair nature with hard-favoured rage;	
	Then lend the eye a terrible aspect;	
	Let it pry through the portage of the head	
simile	Like the brass cannon; let the brow o'erwhelm it	elongated &
	As fearfully as doth a gallèd rock	extended metaphor
	O'erhang and jutty his confounded base,	
echoes sound of waves?	Swilled with the wild and wasteful ocean.	emphasised -
	Now set the teeth, and stretch the nostril wide,	no pause after 'spirit'
hard sounds	Hold hard the breath, and bend up every spirit	
	To his full height! On, on, you noblest English,	suggests relentless inevitability
	Whose blood is fet from fathers of war-proof! –	
	Fathers that, like so many Alexanders,	
	Have in these parts from morn till even fought,	
	And sheathed their swords for lack of argument.	
biblical suggestion?	Dishonour not your mothers; now attest	emphasis on family
	That those whom you called fathers did beget you!	
	Be copy now to men of grosser blood,	
	And teach them how to war. And you, good yeomen,	
	Whose limbs were made in England, show us here	community - as in 'friends' line 1
	The mettle of your pasture; let us swear	
	That you are worth your breeding – which I doubt not;	
	For there is none of you so mean and base	
	That hath not noble lustre in your eyes.	
	I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips,	simile
build-up of short phrases, culminating in longer final 1½ lines - helped by use of caesura.	Straining upon the start. The game's afoot!	alliteration - emphasises eagerness?
	Follow your spirit, and upon this charge	
	Cry, 'God for Harry, England, and Saint George!'	

You may have chosen different examples, but these are some of the rhetorical devices that are used:

- **repetition** (‘Once more … once more’, ‘On, on’)
- **apostrophe** or direct address (‘dear friends’)
- **imperatives** or commands (‘imitate’, ‘Stiffen’, ‘conjure up’, ‘Disguise’, ‘Cry’)
- **simile** (‘like the brass cannon’, ‘like greyhounds in the slips’)
- **extended metaphor** (‘let the brow o'erwhelm it/As fearfully as doth a gallèd rock/O'erhang and jutty his confounded base,/Swilled with the wild and wasteful ocean.’)
- **allusion** or associative language (‘Dishonor not your mothers': reminiscent of the biblical ‘Honor your father and your mother’).

It is clear that the King is instructing his men in the requirements of the occasion:

> In peace there's nothing so becomes a man
> As modest stillness and humility.

Notice how the first line runs into the second one, a technique known as **enjambement** that here suggests that an *unquestionable statement* is being made about the way men behave in peacetime. This reasonable idea from a reasonable king is about to be shattered by one small word denoting change, ‘But’, which is immediately given additional emphasis by the alliteration of ‘blast’ and ‘blows’. Henry has to prepare his men's minds for battle. After satisfying them (and the audience) that he is a peace-loving, reasonable king, he then needs to get them to reject this image, throw off any constraints on their blood lust, such as ‘modest stillness and humility’, and act more like ‘the tiger’ than ‘ a man’. In a sense he is making it ‘all right’ for them, and the literary devices help him achieve this. He draws the men close to him by calling them ‘dear friends’, and by suggesting in the repeated ‘Once more’ that the ‘dear friends’ have been through this together before and have survived. Furthermore, the first person plural associates them all (him as well as them) with ‘our English dead’.

Throughout the speech there is a repetition of ‘blood’ to denote heritage, but in a context of bloodshed – where any escape from the fighting would result in ‘dishonor’ to the soldiers’ mothers. The soldiers are invited to offer themselves as role-models to ‘men of grosser blood’. The ‘good yeomen’ are being asked to demonstrate (or repay?) the goodness that England has given to them (‘The mettle of your pasture’). All this could be seen as a group of frightened people being made to feel guilty of this fear or appreciative of the opportunity to prove their gratitude. By the end of the speech Henry confidently envisages his men as ‘greyhounds in the slips/Straining upon the start’. But he fails to acknowledge (he cannot afford to acknowledge) that greyhounds are bred for little else, whereas his ‘dear friends’ have other considerations such as the ‘wives left poor’ and the ‘children rawly left’ (IV.1.130–42) which Williams, one of the English soldiers, draws attention to later in the play.

The dead will be ‘English dead’, and the speech has a strong sense of Englishness.

Activity 7

Try to find examples of the way language is used to suggest a sense of national identity.

I expect you have included the number of times England or being English is referred to (apart from the ‘English dead’, we have ‘noblest English’, ‘made in England’, ‘Cry, “God for Harry, England, and Saint George!”’). I'd like to take this a stage further and suggest that the audience is being invited to include itself in a very nationalistic bias which succeeds by virtue of a ‘them and us’ conflict. Notice how many times Henry uses ‘our’ (twice), ‘you'/'your’ (ten times), ‘us’ (twice) as part of his rhetorical strategy to gain his soldiers’ solid support. When he refers to ‘our English dead’ he is not simply uniting them with himself, but, by the addition of ‘English’ he is appealing to their sense of national identity and reminding them that they are not merely fighting for themselves but for their country (which includes their more personal loves of parents, wives, children and friends).

Those addressed – the soldiers outside Harfleur – are invited to identify with the ‘Harry’ who is part of the ‘England and Saint George’. The inclusion of Saint George reinforces the idea that God is already involved via this Saint's protection of England, so ‘Cry, “God”…’ is more a recognition of this support than a plea for it. Through his clever use of rhetoric Henry succeeds in stimulating patriotic fervor, convincing the men of the rightness of their action, suggesting to them the inevitability of the action, and utilizing their sense of manly pride which is closely tied up with their sense of being English. In the theatre this speech is commonly rounded off with resounding cheers and even in an age when people are more skeptical of patriotism, it still has the power to stir an audience. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that the next scene is one in which the common soldiers mock the rhetoric of this speech:

BARDOLPH On, on, on, on, on! To the breach, to the breach!

It is worth reminding you, too, that Shakespeare's play was performed before it was published. In discussing the language, I have made little reference to the performance aspects of this speech but, just as with Ibsen and Churchill, we need to be aware as we read about how, and in what context, the actor would deliver these lines. You will find an extract from *Macbeth* discussed from this point below.

5 Play structure

Just like a novel or a poem, a play will have some sort of structure. The traditional plot of a play will consist of an **exposition**, action leading to a **climax**, and a **denouement** or resolution. A certain amount of information about characters and events is necessary at the start of a play, and sometimes an explanation of what has happened in the past is required for the audience to make sense of what is to follow: all this is accomplished through the exposition. Some skill is necessary if the exposition is to be interesting, and subtle, natural-seeming, not holding the action up for too long. The plays of Ibsen offer a particularly interesting variation on this theme, since the action of the play is in fact to unravel those happenings in the past that have led to the present consequences that the play is concerned with. It has been said that his plays are one long exposition.

Many modern plays eschew this sort of structure. *Waiting for Godot*, for instance, which has been described as a play in which nothing happens – twice, has two acts that parallel each other rather than making any sort of forward movement. The idea of climax is subverted by the

absence of any excitement, the ‘action’ consists of intentions that fail to be implemented, and any sense of final resolution is denied. At the end of the play, the tree, which at the opening has been bare, may have gained four or five leaves, but the characters remain as they were in the beginning. In another break with tradition, the first act of *Top Girls* uses characters that are not seen or referred to at all in the rest of the play, and the final scene backtracks to a year before the previous one, so that the end of the play does not coincide with the end of the action it purports to represent. In the BBC performance on the video the order of the first two scenes is reversed, so that we are introduced to one of the characters who will be central in the rest of the play, but the scene in the Top Girls agency with which it now starts is not an exposition in the traditional sense. It perhaps makes more sense when discussing drama of the twentieth century and later to think of exposition in terms of themes.

In working out the structure of a play, particularly where the acts are divided into a number of scenes, as in Shakespeare, it can be helpful to make brief summaries of the scenes. These summaries will not only help to clarify the action, but are later useful for revision purposes.

Activity 8

Try making a summary of the three scenes of Act I of As *You Like It*. How does Shakespeare achieve his exposition? Do these scenes further the plot in any way?

The first scene introduces us to Orlando and his old servant, Adam. Through the dialogue of the old and the young man we learn of the difficult situation in which Orlando is placed, before seeing for ourselves the antagonism he faces when his elder brother, Oliver, enters the scene. Orlando out of the way, Oliver sets up a dangerous situation for him with the professional wrestler, Charles, but their conversation also acts as a preliminary exposition for the main plot, the banishment of Rosalind. It is not until the second scene that Rosalind herself appears with Celia and the exposition is completed. This scene is not purely expository since it includes the wrestling of Charles and Orlando and it starts the love interest between Rosalind and Orlando. By the end of Act I, the main plot has been moved forward significantly, since in scene 3, Rosalind, like her father, is banished from the court, and Celia resolves to go with her. A further subplot concerning Touchstone, Audrey and William, and another concerning Phebe and Silvius are revealed once the action moves to the forest.

Before the denouement can take place, there are two key features identified by Aristotle that are still important in any drama: **anagnorisis**, which can be translated as recognition or discovery, and **peripeteia**, or a change from one state of affairs to its opposite, a reversal of fortune. The famous example used by Aristotle to illustrate his theory is that of *Oedipus Rex*. Once Oedipus, king of Corinth, has recognized that it was he himself who, unknowingly, killed his father and thus condemned the city to relentless plague, he puts out his own eyes and goes into voluntary exile, thus reversing his fortunes.

Activity 9

Can you think of any scenes in *As You Like It* which mark moments of discovery/recognition or a reversal in the state of affairs?

In *As You Like It*, there are two main moments of discovery, one associated with the Oliver/Orlando plot and the other with the Rosalind plot, and in both cases they are linked with a change in the state of affairs. In a dramatic off-stage scene, Orlando saves a sleeping man from being attacked by a lioness. The man awakes, Orlando recognizes him as his brother, and their enmity is dispelled. Oliver meets and falls in love with Celia, resolves to marry her and to abandon the court for the life of a shepherd. The central scene of recognition, though, comes when, having set up an elaborate riddle for the various couples, Rosalind reveals her true identity and secures Orlando as her husband. This scene marks the climax of the play, and ushers in the denouement, or unraveling of the complications of the various relationships. There is yet a further moment of reversal, when at the very end of the play Jaques de Boys (brother to Orlando and Oliver) arrives with the news of the usurping Duke's sudden conversion to a life of religious solitude, and the reversion of the crown to his exiled brother, Rosalind's father.

We have just analyzed the play in terms of classical dramatic structure. Modern criticism has suggested other ways of looking at the play's structure, which you will find discussed in *Shakespeare, Aphra Behn and the Canon*. Interestingly, what all these analyses have in common is a three-part form, which at its most basic can be expressed as beginning, middle and end.

6 From text to performance

6.1 Performance and production

The idea that drama is a performed art should, by now, be one with which you feel familiar. What should also be clear from each of the examples discussed so far is that there is a range of factors to consider when approaching a dramatic text, and that to engage with any dramatic work we need to consider more than just the words on the page. Here, I'll be asking you to think about the language of the text, and about what's involved in moving outwards from the page to the stage. I will also be asking you to begin thinking about the text in relationship to its *production* and *reception*. This means acknowledging that the process of moving from the text to the performance involves making decisions about, among other things, delivery, movement, set design, sound, costume and lighting.

The following two extracts are very different; the first is from the Shakespearean tragedy, *Macbeth*, and the second from Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Both, however, also contain some similarities in terms of how they suggest performance possibilities. Here they are reproduced without the stage directions. Read the following extracts carefully, noting how the language implies possibilities for performance.

Extract 1

GENTLEWOMAN	Lo you, here she comes. This is her very guise, and upon my life, fast asleep. Observe her, stand close.
DOCTOR	How came she by that light?
GENTLEWOMAN	Why, it stood by her. She has light by her continually, 'tis her command.

DOCTOR	You see her eyes are open.
GENTLEWOMAN	Ay, but their sense are shut.
DOCTOR	What is it she does now? Look how she rubs her hands.
GENTLEWOMAN	It is an accustomed action with her, to seem thus washing her hands; I have known her continue in this a quarter of an hour.
LADY MACBETH	Yet here's a spot.
DOCTOR	Hark, she speaks.

Extract 2

HELMER	Nora, what do you think I have got here?
NORA	Money!
HELMER	There you are! Do you think I don't know what a lot is wanted for housekeeping at Christmas time?
NORA	Ten shillings – a pound – two pounds! Thank you, thank you, Torvald; that will keep me going for a long time.
HELMER	Indeed it must.
NORA	Yes, yes, it will. But come here and let me show you what I have bought. And all so cheap! Look, here is a new suit for Ivar and a sword, and a horse and a trumpet for Bob, and a doll and dolly's bedstead for Emmy -they are very plain, but anyway she will soon break them in pieces. And here are dress lengths and handkerchiefs for the maids; old Anne really ought to have something better.
HELMER	And what is in this parcel?
NORA	No, no! You mustn't see that till this evening.

There are obvious contrasts between the two extracts, both in the language used and in the way the subject of the dialogue is revealed to us. The first draws us into a dialogue, but one that is highly ambiguous as to its subject, at least at the start. It becomes apparent that this is a scene of voyeurism, in which those watching observe the somnambulant rituals of Lady Macbeth. The second extract presents an altogether more naturalistic scene; here there are identifiable characters, engaged in a dialogue about a discernible subject. There is however a sense in which the language in the two extracts is very similar, and that is in its *performative function*. Dramatic language often ensures that the dramatic situation is constituted in the speech-act itself; in the Shakespearean and earlier periods the verbal indicators of dramatic action were especially important, given the absence of the visual and technical means of presentation we have today. Here the speech of the Doctor and the Gentlewoman suggests a series of actions carried out by Lady Macbeth (sleepwalking, carrying a light, washing), while the dialogue between Torvald and Nora denotes various actions, gestures and dynamics; the counting of the money, the movement of Torvald towards Nora to look at the presents, and Nora's display of them, his curiosity in the parcel that Nora then refuses to let him see.

Activity 10

What are some of the implications for the performance of these extracts?

The first extract presents us with a number of performance considerations, the most challenging being how to direct the movement and actions of Lady Macbeth. She is carrying a light and is sleepwalking, so decisions about lighting and costume need to be considered. Does she, for example, occupy the main performance area, with the other characters looking on from the side in hushed conversation? Does she remain standing, or would you want her to be kneeling, perhaps implying remorse or the act of praying? When Roman Polanski directed Francesca Annis in this scene in his 1971 film version of *Macbeth*, he chose to present her without clothes, thus emphasizing her vulnerability, and in stark contrast to the scores of Lady Macbeths who roam the stage in a nightdress. How would you choose to portray her in this scene?

The second extract depicts a conversation between a husband and wife in an altogether more naturalistic scene, but is nonetheless dramatic. Performance considerations would centre on set design (it is Christmas time), costume and the dynamics between Nora and Torvald. The conversation is about money, and the characters occupy what could be described as parent and child roles in its exchange here. You might choose to emphasize this and direct Nora to play up to this role by suggesting that she makes the running here with Torvald remaining still, keeping the money out of her sight and reach. Or, if you chose to interpret the dynamic of the relationship as one in which Nora has the power (notice that it is she who beckons to Torvald to 'come here'), then you would need to consider a different approach to directing the movement of the characters.

These two extracts show us how dramatic language is constructed to influence and direct performance through signals and indicators of action. However, not all dramatic language is constituted in this way; some modern drama, for example, deliberately refuses such information, giving us little in the way of signs or directions.

Activity 11

Read the following extract, and note the main differences between this and the two extracts above. What are the main performance considerations?

Extract 3

Stage in darkness but for MOUTH, upstage audience right, about 8 feet above stage level, faintly lit from close-up and below, rest of face in shadow. Invisible microphone.

AUDITOR, downstage audience left, tall standing figure, sex undeterminable, enveloped from head to foot in loose black djellaba, with hood, fully faintly lit, standing on invisible podium about 4 feet high, shown by attitude alone to be facing diagonally across stage intent on MOUTH, dead still throughout but for four brief movements where indicated. See Note.

As house lights down MOUTH's voice unintelligible behind curtain. House lights out. Voice continues unintelligible behind curtain, 10 seconds. With rise of curtain ad-libbing from text as required, leading when curtain fully up and attention sufficient, into:

MOUTH … out … into this world … this world … tiny little thing … before its time… in a

> godfor– … what? … girl … yes … tiny little girl……into this … out into this … before her time … godforsaken hole called … called … no matter … parents unknown … unheard of… he having vanished … thin air … no sooner buttoned up his breeches … she similarly … eight months later … almost to the tick … so no love … spared that… no love such as normally vented on the … speechless infant… in the home … no … nor indeed for that matter any of any kind … no love of any kind … at any subsequent stage … so typical affair .. nothing of any note till coming up to sixty when- … what? … seventy? … good God! … coming up to seventy … wandering in a field … looking aimlessly for cowslips … to make a ball … a few steps then stop … stare into space … then on … a few more … stop and stare again … so on … drifting around … when suddenly … gradually … all went out… all that April morning light… and she found herself in the- … what? … who? … no!……she! … (*Pause and movement 1.*) … found herself in the dark …

You were probably struck by how detailed the stage directions are, and probably grateful for them, since without them, what are we to make of this? This is from the modern playwright Samuel Beckett's play, *Not I* (1972), and as with all of Beckett's plays, it concentrates on the mystery of existence, and the impossibility of making rational explanation of time, birth or death, in short the essential incommunicability of much of the would-be material of art. His characters therefore often enact the absurd patterns of the 'wait' for the end, sometimes obsessively uttering the frustration with the less than satisfactory nature of the medium: words. In *Not I* words dominate, but as an almost unintelligible droning, a manic re-enactment of a futile past. Syntax and structures are shattered, as the character plays out her dilemma.

Returning to the extract then, and the role of the stage directions, we get a sense of how this performance might look; lighting, performance space and acoustics are all important here. But even given the specifications of the set and the position of the character, we are far from knowing how to direct the action, or rather, the lack of it. What role does the AUDITOR play? What sort of performance space would suit this play? Given the potential intensity of this performance, and the nature of the subject, you might choose a performance space which enabled you to focus on the visual image of the MOUTH, and yet one which also allowed the utterances to be audible, so it would be a space which kept a close proximity between audience and performer. Given the domination of the words, it would be a good idea to emphasize the aural assault on the audience and minimize all movement, with the light focusing solely on the MOUTH. You would want to leave an audience almost breathless from the tirade; if read quickly, this play lasts approximately eighteen minutes. The greatest challenge, then, would be the actor's difficulty in delivering the lines; keeping up the momentum whilst retaining succinctness and clarity would be crucial in a play whose sole focus is words. When Billie Whitelaw played MOUTH in the 1973 Royal Court performance of *Not I*, she read the script at break-neck speed, strapped to a chair with her head fastened to the back. The play was performed in-the-round, with the AUDITOR to one side responding to the speech occasionally by flapping his arms helplessly at his sides in what the stage directions call 'an attitude of helpless compassion' (Beckett, 1990, p. 215).

This extract shows us that there are many more considerations than the stage directions suggest in directing a play, and that there are technical and practical as well as imaginative challenges involved.

6.2 Performance and reception

Our discussion of the performance possibilities for Beckett's play begins to reveal the author as someone who went to great lengths to articulate a particular artistic vision. The matter of how his plays were received was extremely important to him, and his presence at rehearsals is frequently recounted as an active, if not obtrusive one. Beckett was someone who sought extensive directorial control over the production of his work. Indeed, he made this the subject of one of his plays, in *Catastrophe: Tale of an Authoritarian Director* (1982) and wrote plays with particular actors in mind; Patrick Magees's voice, for example, was the one he 'heard inside his mind' when writing *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), and Billie Whitelaw's was the female voice he had listened to when he wrote *Not I*. For Beckett, the role of the author was one which extended beyond the writing of the text, and one which should be allowed considerable licence in seeing that text realized in performance. Central to his vision were the matters of authenticity and authorial intention. Let's consider these issues, for a moment, in a different context.

Activity 12

In 1864, a New York production of *Hamlet* cast a well-known and highly regarded actor, Edwin Booth, in the leading role. Sir John Gielgud also famously played Hamlet in London's New Theatre production of the play in 1934, as did Jonathan Pryce, at the Royal Court in 1980. Which of these is the real Hamlet, and why?

The short answer is none of them and all of them. I agree that this is not a very satisfactory answer, but it drives home the point that there can be no definitive interpretation of the character and that every performance of *Hamlet* will say something different both about the play and the context in which it is performed. A longer answer would elaborate these latter two points and explore issues of authenticity and authorial intention, as well as perhaps accounting for changing conceptions of the role of the author and performance.

I want to say something about these issues, but first I'd like to ask you to think about how you answered the question.

I can't anticipate every possible response to this question, but I'd be surprised if you hadn't taken into account that the three actors are young, white and male. Photographic stills of the actors would also reveal that each, despite their differences, has a somewhat romantic demeanor, indicative perhaps of the complex range of qualities associated with the role. You might well agree that so far nothing about each of these Hamlets challenges our traditional notion of what the character Hamlet is traditionally supposed to be like. But what if I had asked you to consider a 74-year-old Hamlet, or a female Hamlet? Would you then have been so convinced that this is what Shakespeare intended? I doubt it. You might have felt curious about what such interpretations of the part sought to achieve, or your doubts might have sent you back to the text, to the 'authorial source', to find some justification for these performance decisions.

At this point it is worth remembering that there are many versions of *Hamlet*, and that historically the editing of the play text reflects a desire to focus on the central character, emphasizing his psychological or emotional condition (Ryan, 2000, p. 163). It is also worth observing that the text, whilst occupying a privileged role in the field of drama today, would not have done so at the time *of Hamlet's* early performances. Similarly the author, who today commands a form of reverence among many of his readers and audiences, would not have been regarded with the kind of authority which we now ascribe to writers. Read the following extract and note down what you take to be the main points.

These plays [Shakespeare's] were made and mediated in the interaction of certain complex material conditions, of which the author was only one. When we deconstruct the Shakespeare myth what we discover is not a universal individual genius creating literary texts that remain a permanently valuable repository of human experience and wisdom; but a collaborative cultural process in which plays were made by writers, theatrical entrepreneurs, architects and craftsmen, actors and audience; a process in which plays were constructed first as performance, and subsequently given the formal permanence of print.

(Holderness, 1988, p. 13)

Holderness emphasizes the collaborative nature of drama and theatre, making the point that plays were the product of a combination of text, production and reception, and not simply sacred pieces of manuscript. He says that theatre was created by the collaborative efforts of playwrights, performers, and a whole host of other craftsmen, as well as through audience response. Indeed, he suggests that far from the text determining the performance, it was more likely to be the case that the performance signaled the direction the writing of the play script would take. Recall, for example, that the staging of *Henry V* took place *before* the play text was published.

To illustrate this point further, we can go back beyond Shakespeare to some of the earliest forms of drama where very few of the performers could read or write; in these ritual-based performances a text would not have been necessary, since the components of drama would have been handed down through an oral tradition. Our current valorization of the author and the primacy of the text are then, peculiarly modern concepts, and tend to render the role of the reader, or in the case of performance texts the audience, less significant. This point is made by the critic, Roland Barthes, whose highly influential essay, ‘The death of the author’ (1977), argues for a ‘re-birth’ of the reader as against the primacy of the writer:

A text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author … a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination … Classic criticism has never paid any attention to the reader; for it, the writer is the only person in literature. We are beginning to let ourselves be fooled no longer … we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author. (p. 146)

Read in the context of plays and performance, Barthes emphasizes the processes of writing, the multiplicity of perspectives and points of origin of texts, and deconstructs the traditional notion

that the author is the point of unity, drawing all the various strands of meaning together. The relevance of Barthes' argument for considering issues of performance and audience is to be found in the challenge it presents to approaches such as Beckett's. Barthes argues that our response should not be determined by author or playwright and that we need to avoid the tendency to think that in ‘getting close’ to the author, we are assured of a more authoritative meaning of the text.

6.3 Performance spaces

Dramatic texts intended for performance are, in an important sense, a ‘living’ art form. Plays are conceived with a particular space in mind, and to varying degrees the relationship between the text and its enactment is influenced by the kinds of theatre practices and spaces that have become conventionalized. Some plays lend themselves to particular kinds of performance spaces, such as Brecht's *Mahogonny* (1927), which carried over the boxing ring metaphor of the play's main theme to a literal method of staging: an in-the-round/arena space was specially constructed to function as a boxing ring for a performance of this play. Similarly, Jim Cartwright's modern play *Road* (1989) was written to be performed in a promenade performance space.

A history of the variety and development of performance spaces would show the changing social role and function of drama since its recorded origins in ancient Greece almost 3,000 years ago. It would serve to remind us that what we now recognize as the theatre is far removed from the vast open-air Greek **amphitheatres** capable of seating up to 24,000 people. We tend to regard going to the theatre as a much more rarefied experience than it would originally have been perceived to be, and came to be treated by play-goers in medieval times or in Shakespeare's time. We wouldn't usually associate it with a religious event, we certainly wouldn't expect to stand throughout a performance and would probably find it strange or even unnerving to be expected to participate in the action. We can trace the most significant changes in the development of performance spaces by looking at the shift in the spatial relationship between audience and performers. Figure 1 broadly illustrates the changes in the spatial relationships between what represents the ‘stage’ and what serves as the auditorium.

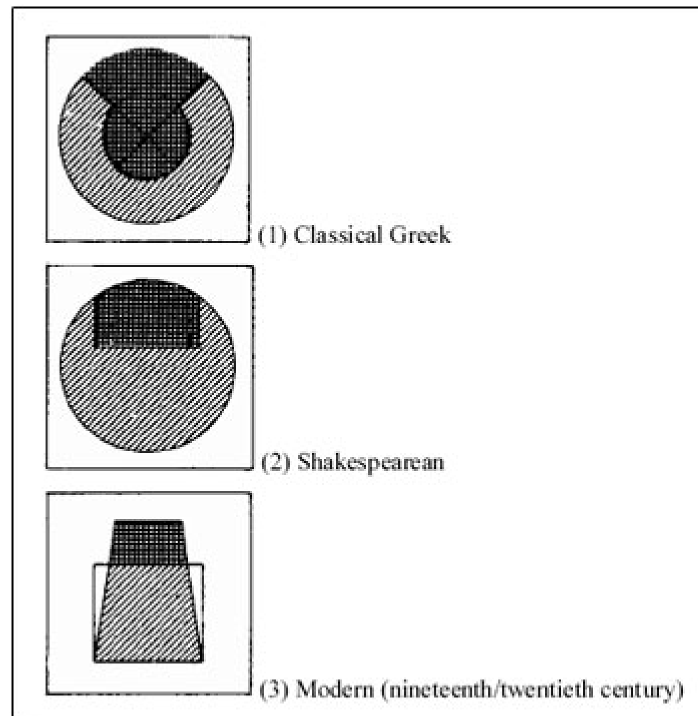

Figure 1: Performance spaces: from the classical to the modern

Activity 13

Look carefully at each, noting that the dark section signifies the performance area and the lighter section the viewing area. What is the main change you observe taking place?

You probably noticed a gradual shift away from a spatial relationship where the audience was grouped around the stage area in an extended semi-circle, to one which had effected almost a complete separation of the stage and the audience. This break started with the introduction of the **proscenium arch** in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, although the **proscenium curtain**, used in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, made the more decisive break.

Activity 14

Look at the diagram again. What do you think some of the implications are for performance in each of the performance spaces, as indicated by the spatial relationship between audience and players?

1. The classical model seems more akin to a modern sports stadium than a theatre. The vastness of the audience and semi-circular design of the performance space made the notion of an illusionist set or realist drama impossible. Although the acoustics were generally good, given the scale of even the smallest amphitheatre, I would say that the **naturalism** we associate with the drama of Ibsen, for example, which often requires intimate conversation to serve as dialogue, would be out of the question here. More appropriate is the stylized, and exaggerated, gesture-like acting which characterized classical Greek drama. This was often accompanied by symbolic

costume and masks, and of course, the chorus who commented on the action, addressing the audience directly. A good example is found in Aristophanes' 422 BCE comedy, *The Wasps:*

CHORUS: Now, ye countless tens of thousands,
Seated on the benches round,
Do not let our pearls of wisdom
Fall unheeded to the ground.
Not that you would be so stupid,
So devoid of common sense –
What it is to have enlightened
People for an audience!

2. We probably know more about the conventions of theatre in Shakespeare's time than we do about our own, so often are they themselves the source of dramatic portrayal, the film, *Shakespeare in Love*, being a recent example. What this diagram shows us is the proximity between audience and performers, and we can see that the audience still has access to the stage area on three sides. Unlike the amphitheatres of classical Greece, there is close contact between the actors and the spectators, and a further key difference is that these performance areas were housed in purpose-built theatres. Audiences would have been large (the Globe could hold two thousand), and socially disparate. Given the regular interaction between performers and audience, through **asides** and **monologues**, it would have been difficult to sustain the notion of dramatic illusion. There was little in the way of set design or décor to consider, thus enabling quick and easy scene changes.

3. The relationship designated by this performance space is the one we most commonly associate with our own experience of the theatre. The intimacy of the darkened space with a brightly lit stage is conducive to the same atmosphere of voyeuristic fascination as we experience in the cinema. We remain detached from the performers, looking into 'rooms' whose reality is sustained by scene changes through the use of the **proscenium** curtain, and the drama assumes a more 'autonomous' function. Set design, naturalistic acting and realistic situations create the illusion of reality, thus serving the conventions of the **realist** drama of, say, Ibsen or Chekhov. As with the other performance spaces, this has its limitations. The playful engagement with the audience by use of asides in Shakespearean and Restoration drama is severely hampered by the distance between audience and performers in this kind of space.

7 Dramatic conventions

7.1 Soliloquy

A **soliloquy** is a speech, usually quite lengthy, delivered by a character who is alone onstage. It is a convention of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods in particular, apparently giving direct access to that character's thoughts and feelings, divulging their intentions and reactions to events and to other people, and thus making that character more intimately known to the audience.

Activity 15

Read the following soliloquy (*Othello*, Act III, scene 3, 255–76) and think about what we learn about Othello.

OTHELLO This fellow's of exceeding honesty,
And knows all qualities with a learned spirit
Of human dealings. If I do prove her haggard,
Though that her jesses were my dear heart-strings,
I'd whistle her off, and let her down the wind 5
To prey at fortune. Haply, for I am black
And have not those soft parts of conversation
That chamberers have; or for I am declined
Into the vale of years – yet that's not much -
She's gone: I am abused, and my relief 10
Must be to loathe her. O, curse of marriage!
That we can call these delicate creatures ours
And not their appetites! I had rather be a toad
And live upon the vapour of a dungeon
Than keep a corner in the thing I love 15
For others' uses. Yet 'tis the plague of great ones;
Prerogatived are they less than the base.
'Tis destiny unshunnable, like death:
Even then this forkéd plague is fated to us
When we do quicken. Desdemona comes: 20

Enter Desdemona and Emilia

If she be false, O, then heaven mocks itself
I'll not believe't.

Othello refers to two other characters in this speech, praising the honesty of one, Iago (whom we, the audience, know, is far from honest), and showing his distrust of the other, his wife, Desdemona, in the metaphor of lines 3–6, in which he compares her to a hawk. The comparison suggests a desire for control, which is emphasized later (ll.11–13) when, exclaiming against the trials of marriage, he bewails the fact that men can never entirely possess women. He thinks of reasons for Desdemona's presumed decline of interest in him – his race, his lack of a courtier's eloquence, his age – thus revealing his own insecurities. The repugnance of the metaphor of a toad in a dungeon reveals the violence of his emotions and his attempt to convert love into loathing. The next few lines (16–20) are difficult, but the general meaning seems to be that cuckoldry ('this forkéd plague') is as inevitable as death, a fate that comes at birth, though the metaphor of disease also implies contagious suffering, as though infidelity is 'caught' from others. As Desdemona enters, however, he quickly changes his mind, and distrust is banished.

Through this speech, his first soliloquy, we see Othello's vulnerability and the precarious nature of the unwitting Desdemona's relationship with him. He reveals to the audience his state of mind, taking us with him through the tortuous twists and turns of his emotional suffering. But the audience, privy to Iago's machiavellian plans, realize that Othello, a man of action rather than of political intrigue, has been well and truly duped. Desdemona, who loves him for reasons other than the physical attributes he mentions, has no thought of infidelity.

Activity 16

Now read Iago's soliloquy from Act II, scene 3. What function is it fulfilling?

IAGO If I can fasten but one cup upon him,
With that which he hath drunk tonight already,
He'll be as full of quarrel and offence
As my young mistress' dog. Now my sick fool Roderigo,
Whom love hath turned almost the wrong side out, 5
To Desdemona hath tonight caroused
Potations pottle-deep; and he's to watch.
Three else of Cyprus, noble swelling spirits –
That hold their honours in a wary distance,
The very elements of this warlike isle – 10
Have I tonight flustered with flowing cups,
And they watch too. Now 'mongst this flock of drunkards,
Am I to put our Cassio in some action
That may offend the isle. But here they come;
If consequence do but approve my dream. 15
My boat sails freely both with wind and stream.

Iago tells us about his plans for the evening. Drink is going to be important. In the first place, he intends to make Cassio drunk and therefore quarrelsome – an easy task, since he (and the audience) knows already that Cassio cannot hold his drink. Secondly, he has set Roderigo, who has already drunk to the bottom of a two-quart tankard (a 'pottle'), to be on the alert. He has also set up three Cypriots in a similar way. In this alcohol-fuelled situation, Iago intends to provoke Cassio to some as yet undefined offensive action. The soliloquy ends as Cassio and his companions enter with wine; a rhyming couplet neatly clinches Iago's reflections as the action runs into the fulfilment of his plan.

This is a different sort of soliloquy from the one discussed above, since Iago is not telling us about his emotions and feelings. He has other soliloquies in which he purports, at least, to explain his motivation and inner feelings, but here he is explaining how he intends to further his plot against Othello. In this period, soliloquies are frequently given to the villain of the play, the manipulators of the plot. Their soliloquies, therefore, are a means by which the audience's knowledge can be kept ahead of that of the characters who are being duped or manipulated. The

audience is made complicit, and put in a position of being able to judge the effectiveness of the plan.

7.2 Asides

An aside is a shorter speech, maybe only a few words, spoken *sotto voce* to the audience. It is presumed that the other characters on stage cannot hear what is being said, unless the aside is between two characters. Unlike the soliloquy, which largely died out with the decline of poetic drama, the aside is a convention that was widely used until the rise of naturalistic drama early in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, it is still employed in those conventional dramatic genres, pantomime and farce. Asides are most likely to be used where there is intrigue and characters are acting with duplicity, whether this is in comedy or tragedy. It is noticeable that a history play like *Henry V* contains few (if any) asides; it is not a play of private intrigue but of political negotiations and warfare.

7.3 Masks and disguises

Masks were used in classical Greek theatre to exaggerate expressions so that they could be seen in the large open-air amphitheatres. Most of us are familiar with the famous stereotypes for tragedy and comedy, but masks were also identified with particular types, whether comic or tragic, such as old man, or king, courtesan or queen. Masks have not been part of the dramatic conventions in Britain, but have been used to reflect social conventions of the Restoration period. The connotations of ‘play’ make it appropriate that plays should incorporate the social play of carnival and revelry, occasions when it was customary for participants to appear masked. Thus in *The Rover* masks are used by the characters, male and female, who participate in the carnival as a form of disguise, so that ‘whatever extravagances we commit in these faces, our own may not be obliged to answer ‘em’, as Belvile admits (Act II, scene 1).

Masking is a particular form of disguise, but disguising through clothes is a much commoner convention. The actors in a play are of course already disguising themselves simply by assuming their roles in the play, but a further level of disguise is frequently added, as it is in *Henry V, As You Like It* and *The Rover*. Disguise may encompass cross-dressing; Shakespeare, for instance, was particularly fond of requiring his heroines (played by boys of course) to take on a male role, as Rosalind does in *As You Like It*. But it can also be effected without any change of costume. The Macbeths, for instance, welcome Duncan to their castle with murder in mind: ‘look like th'innocent flower,/But be the serpent under't’, Lady Macbeth advises her husband (Act 1, scene 5, Arden edition). Similarly, in *Othello*, Iago pretends honesty, in order to work on ‘the Moor’, who ‘is of a free and open nature,/That thinks men honest that but seem to be so’ (Act 1, scene 3). In *A Doll's House*, Torvald draws attention to the mask of hypocrisy that Krogstad must assume, and Nora in effect disguises herself in the costume of a Neapolitan fisher-girl for a fancy-dress party. She adopts elements of that costume when at the end of Act II she dances the tarantella that reveals so much of her inner anguish. For that is the interesting thing about disguise; it both disguises and reveals or liberates, since clothes constrain not only by their form, but also by the behaviour that is associated with them. When Rosalind fashions herself as Ganymede she does so initially to escape danger at the court and to make her way out of the city

without attracting notice. Similarly, the male disguise that Hellena adopts in *The Rover* allows her to behave with a freedom that would have been shocking in a woman. Disguise, then, can be used to escape danger, to titillate, or simply for fun, but it has the effect of exposing the dual nature of human beings, their repressed desires and impulses, as well as the self-consciousness of theatrical activity.

7.4 Doubling

The cast list for the first performance of *Top Girls* at the Royal Court Theatre, London in 1982 indicates that six of the actors played two or more roles each; only one actor had a single role, that of Marlene. This doubling is also used in a BBC recording of the play, but it is not prescribed by the playwright, Caryl Churchill, who in fact has reservations about its desirability.

Activity 17

What are the implications of having two characters played by the same actor?

The physical similarity suggests that there is some similarity between the characters; the audience is bound to look for comparisons and contrasts, which may be illuminating, but which may also be a distraction or invalid. Even though the doubling may be dictated by the need for economy, or by the desire to give actors a more substantial part to play, there may also be aesthetic issues at stake. This is less likely in a large-cast play where there are a number of 'bit' parts to be covered, but in a play like *Top Girls*, where each character is allowed to establish her own identity, the doubling of parts will be of significance. For instance, having the same actor play Dull Gret and Angie draws attention to their underprivileged social position and to their difficulties in articulation. But because Gret is able to assert herself at the end of the first scene, this underlines Angie's achievement in making the trip alone and unaided to London, and hints that maybe Marlene's prediction that the most she can expect out of life is to stack supermarket shelves is unduly pessimistic.

Glossary

Amphitheatre	a circular structure with seats rising behind and above each other around a central open space or arena; originating in classical Greece, they are the first known specifically designated theatre spaces.
Apostrophe	a rhetorical convention in which the speaker either addresses a dead or absent person, or an inanimate object or abstraction. An apostrophe can also refer to a speaker's address to a particular member or section of the audience.
Anagnorisis	a scene of recognition or discovery.
Aside	a short speech spoken *sotto voce* to the audience or another character on stage, with the presumption that other characters cannot hear what is being said.
Blank verse	unrhymed iambic pentameters.
Chorus	group of male singers and dancers who took part in and commented on the action of the play, providing a summary and a narrative link. The name Chorus

	is also given to the lyric or poetic sections of the play performed by the Chorus. In Elizabethan and modern drama the Chorus is usually a single actor.
Climax	the moment of crisis leading to the denouement or resolution.
Denouement	the unraveling of the complications of the plot at the end of a play.
Dialogue	speech between characters in a play.
Enjamb(e)ment	where the sense of the poetry runs on from one line to the next. The ends of the run-on lines are not marked by any punctuation.
Exposition	information given at the beginning of a play that is needed in order to understand the action of the play.
Iambic pentameters	the basic metre of verse written in English, in which each line has five unstressed syllables and five stressed syllables arranged in pairs, as in: 'Put out the light, and then put out the light'.
Monologue	varieties include the Dramatic Monologue, which is a kind of poem in which the speaker addresses a silent audience, and the **Soliloquy.** Samuel Beckett's *Not I*, in which there is only one character, is also an example of a monologue – an extended speech by a lone character.
Naturalism	naturalist drama of the late nineteenth-century emphasizes the roles of society, history and personality in determining the activities of its characters. It is often expressed as a conflict between the character and their environment; a style associated with the work of August Strindberg and Henrik Ibsen in dramatic art, and rooted in the naturalistic novels of Emile Zola.
Oratory	the art of public speaking.
Performance	the interpretation and presentation of a dramatic text on stage by actors. Like many of the terms associated with drama, this is a term with a range of meanings.
Peripeteia	a reversal of fortune, a change in the state of affairs.
Proscenium arch	the name derives from the Greek work, *skene*. Originally *skene* referred to a building for actors changing at the back of the acting area in a Greek amphitheatre; it therefore implied a version of permanent sc(k)enery. Thus, proscenium denoted a space in front of the back scenery. Proscenium is now taken to mean the front opening of the stage and its surround is called the proscenium arch.
Realism	theory of the real or representation of what the artist or audience broadly agree is true to life. This is one of the trickiest concepts in the analysis of art, performance or otherwise. Always remember that a play offers the representation of reality, not 'reality' itself.
Rhetoric	the art of using language, spoken or written, for persuasion. Rhetorical rules and figures of speech were formulated by classical writers and are still used today.
Soliloquy	a speech, usually quite lengthy, delivered by a character alone on stage. See also **Monologue**.
Stage directions	notes incorporated in a script to indicate entrances and exits, movement, style of delivery, details of location, scenery and effects.

Stichomythia	dialogue of alternate single lines.
Wings	both the side areas of the stage and the painted, canvas-covered flats masking that area and forming part of the set.

Acknowledgements

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the following sources for permission to reproduce material in this unit:

Shakespearetheatreco: Flickr.com
[http://www.flickr.com/photos/shakespearetheatrecompany/503643847/]

All other written material contained within this unit originated at the Open University

References

Aristotle, Horace, Loginus (1984) *Classical Literary Criticism*, translated with an introduction by T.S. Dorsch, Penguin.

Baldick, R., Radice, B. and Jones, C.A. (eds) (1964) *Aristophanes: The Wasps, The Poet and the Woman, and The Frogs*, Penguin.

Barthes, R. (1977) 'The death of the author', in *Image-Music-Text*, edited and translated by Stephen Heath, Fontana.

Beckett, Samuel (1990) *Not I*, in *Collected Shorter Plays of Samuel Beckett*, Faber and Faber.

Behn, Aphra (1996) *The Rover* in Owens, W.R. and Goodman, L. (eds) *Shakespeare, Aphra Behn and the Canon*, Routledge in association with the Open University.

Braunmuller, A.R. (ed.) (1997) Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Cambridge University Press.

Cartwright, J. (1989) *Road*, Samuel French Publishers.

Churchill, Caryl (1994) *Top Girls*, with commentary and notes by Bill Naismith, Methuen.

Holderness, G. (ed.) (1988) *The Shakespeare Myth*, Manchester University Press.

Ibsen, Henrik (1992) *A Doll's House*, Dover Thrift Publications.

Ryan, K. (2000) *Shakespeare: Texts and Contexts*, Macmillan/The Open University.

Shakespeare, William (1996) *Henry V*, edited by A.R. Humphries, Penguin.

Shakespeare, William (1996) *Othello*, edited by Kenneth Muir, Penguin.

Willet, J. and Manheim, R. (eds) (1994) *Bertolt Brecht, Collected Plays*, Vol. 2, Methuen.

Suggested further reading

Ashton, E. and Savona, G. (1991) *Theatre as Sign System: A Semiotics of Text and Performance*, Routledge.

Atkin, G., Walsh, C. and Watkins, S. (1995) *Studying Literature: a Practical Introduction*, Harvester/Wheatsheaf.

Hayman, R. (1999) *How to Read a Play*, Grove Press.

Wickham, G. (1999) (2nd edition) *A History of the Theatre*, Phaidon.

Approaching prose fiction

Introduction

This unit is designed to help you develop the analytical skills needed for studying literary texts at university level.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- recognize and discuss selected library texts from the Renaissance to the present;
- know how to approach literary texts in terms of genre, gender and the canon;
- understand and be able to apply technical analytical terms;
- engage in close analysis of narrative and poetic language;
- recognize performance is an interpretation of dramatic texts;

- engage in comparative work and draw general conclusion;
- use textual evidence to argue a case;
- understand and use academic conventions: referencing and bibliography.

1 Why do we read prose fiction?

Prose fiction, whether in the form of the novel or the short story, is unarguably the most popular and widely consumed literary **genre**. One only has to see the proliferation of bookstalls at railway stations and airports, for example, and the predominance of novels over other forms of writing made available in such locations to realize the appeal of fiction.

Take a few moments to think about *Why* we read fiction? *What* do we hope to gain from reading stories about imagined events that happen to imaginary people?

Robert DiYanni begins his impressively wide-ranging study *Literature: Reading Fiction, Poetry, Drama, and the Essay* (1997) with the following assertion about why we read:

We read stories for pleasure; they entertain us. And we read them for profit; they enlighten us. Stories draw us into their imaginative worlds and engage us with the power of their invention. They provide us with more than the immediate interest of narrative – of something happening – and more than the pleasures of imagination: they enlarge our understanding of ourselves and deepen our appreciation of life.

(p. 27)

Did your own answers to the question of why we read touch on any of the reasons DiYanni gives? I wouldn't be at all surprised if they did. It is, I think, true for all of us that there is an element of sheer escapism in our desire to read stories, to imaginatively engage with the incidents and events that befall the characters we read about. We often come to identify with these fictional characters, and think perhaps about how we would react and respond to the situations they find themselves in.

We can immerse ourselves in a fictional world in this way without necessarily applying a great deal of critical or intellectual effort, of course. But if fictional narratives are, as DiYanni puts it, to ‘enlarge our understanding of ourselves and deepen our appreciation of life,’ we need, perhaps, to read them in a more objective way, to subject them to a more critical scrutiny to see if they reinforce or challenge our existing ideas about the world around us. Close attention to the texts we read can only enhance our understanding, and this in turn can increase our pleasure in reading. In this unit I will concentrate largely on introducing you to the various elements that make up a fictional **narrative**; the events that make up a **story** and how they are arranged (the **plot**); the perspectives from which stories can be narrated; the act of **characterization**; the importance of **setting**, both in terms of time and place, and the actual language and style which writers adopt to tell their narratives. Above all, in what follows, and in your own readings of fictional narratives, I want to stress the importance of always keeping in mind the question of *why* you think writers use particular narrative strategies. There are an infinite number of ways in which stories can be told; the choices made by individual writers of individual texts are not

randomly made. We need to think about why those choices might have been made. There is no single authoritative answer to such questions. How we read is dictated largely by the experiences and contexts we each of us bring to a particular text, and for that reason no two readings are likely to be the same, even though we may be applying the same critical processes to our reading.

We have spent some time in this introductory section thinking about why we read and, indeed, what we are reading when we read a fictional narrative. I want to conclude this section with a quotation from Ian Milligan. This, I think, encapsulates the discussion I have tried to instigate here and gives an illuminating analysis of our reasons for reading and the need to develop our critical faculties. Keep Milligan's words in mind as you proceed through the rest of this unit.

Novels, then, are exciting machines (verbal machines) which transport their readers in space and time. They challenge us to meet the unfamiliar. They offer us a share in the pleasure of making because the designs they consist of are not simply there to be seen; they have to be understood, constructed, recreated by the reader out of the materials and according to the patterns which the fabric of their language contains – or conceals. When we become expert readers, we may begin to see some flaws in the workmanship or in the coherence of the design itself. But as beginning students our first task is to become aware of the pattern of meanings which can be discerned in the novel we are studying. It is only with practice and experience that we shall begin to see that the flood of books we call novels have features in common which allow us to group them together. Each novel has its own pattern, but as our experience widens we may begin to identify patterns running through the history of the form as a whole. These patterns cannot be assembled into a grand design, but the forms of fiction, the ways in which stories have been told, have their own history. An understanding of that historical pattern, haphazard and fragmentary as it may be, does give us some insight into the forms of life which literate societies have evolved in history, some awareness of their predominant interests, and of the myths and guiding principles which have sustained them. (Milligan, 1983, pp. 7–8)

2 The elements of narrative

2.1 The act of reading

The act of reading has been characterized by Robert DiYanni as involving three interrelated processes: experience, interpretation, and evaluation. The first thing we do when we read a novel is to experience it, that is to say, we respond to the development of the narrative and the characters presented to us. The story we read if it does its job effectively affects us on certain levels. We become involved in the events and incidents that befall the characters. The language of the narrative forces us to respond to it, maybe with pleasure or admiration, or sometimes with confusion. If we are engaged by the story on any level we will have feelings one way or the other about the outcome; we will all respond in different ways. That response is shaped by our reaction to the interplay of various narrative elements, which will be outlined now and discussed in detail later.

2.2 Narrative events

Any narrative is made up of a series of events or incidents, arranged in a particular way. This can be defined as the plot of the story. Consider, as an example, Ernest Hemingway's appropriately entitled 'A Very Short Story' (Hemingway, 1944, pp. 135–6). Different readers will summarize the story in different ways, allocating different levels of significance to various narrative events. If you can access a copy of the story, you might like to try and summarize it yourself and compare it with my summary in the box below. When preparing that summary, I had to think about the crucial narrative events and how they are arranged, so the box includes at least some of the key events. You or other readers might include others.

In reading any story we have to evaluate for ourselves which are the key moments. There are many events I have left out of my summary: the opening, in which the soldier is carried onto the roof to look out over the town; the couple praying in the Duomo; the fact that it was agreed that he would not drink or see his friends in America; the loneliness of Luz's life in Pordenone. I have omitted these events or descriptions because it could be argued that they are not crucial to the main narrative incidents. In that case, why would the author have included them?

An unnamed soldier, hospitalized with an unspecified injury meets and falls in love with a nurse called Luz. They try to marry before he returns to the front but are unable to do so. Luz writes to the soldier frequently to declare her continuing love for him. After the armistice they decide that the soldier should return home to get a job and that Luz will then join him and they will marry. However, they quarrel before parting. After the soldier returns home Luz meets and falls in love with an Italian major who promises to marry her. She writes to the soldier to end their affair. He does not reply, and she does not marry the Italian major. The story ends with the soldier contracting a sexually transmitted disease from a casual fling.

If you have read the story, you may disagree with the choices I've made. Nevertheless, whether or not another reader agrees with my analysis of the main events in this narrative, I hope you can see that it is possible to differentiate between the major and minor incidents in any story. What we judge as major or minor affects our interpretation of the narrative. As Seymour Chatman has argued 'narrative events have not only a logic of connection, but also a logic of *hierarchy*' (1978, p. 53, Chatman's italics). Certain narrative incidents have a direct influence on the direction of events. They are crucial to the maintenance of narrative logic. Others can be deleted from the narrative without affecting the outcome. What did you decide was the purpose of such narrative moments? Chatman contends that such events perform the function of 'filling in, elaborating […]; they form the flesh on the skeleton' (p. 54). Narratives without such elements would be much less interesting to read, indeed, would give us little incentive to read on.

Narrative events are arranged in such a way as to encourage us to read on to find out what happens next.

Activity 1

Below are the openings of three novels. Please read them now.

Narrative events are arranged in such a way as to encourage us to read on to find out what happens next. Here are the openings of three novels. Please read them now.

It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen. Winston Smith, his chin nuzzled into his breast in an effort to escape the vile wind, slipped quickly through the glass doors of Victory Mansions, though not quickly enough to prevent a swirl of gritty dust from entering along with him.

I was born in the city of Bombay … once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No, it's important to be more …On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact.

Lifetimes ago, under a banyan tree in the village of Hasnapur, an astrologer cupped his ears – his satellite dish to the stars – and foretold my widowhood and exile. I was only seven then, fast and venturesome, scabrous-armed from leaves and thorns. "No!" I shouted. "You're a crazy old man. You don't know what my future holds!"

How do these three openings try to convince us to read on? Which of the three would you be most likely to want to read further and why? Take a few moments to think about your response to these questions.

Your own predilections will dictate which of the three extracts you found most compelling (if any). But I think you'll agree that all three take very different approaches to 'hooking' the reader's interest.

The first extract, from the start of George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) begins with a somewhat mundane descriptive detail – 'It was a bright cold day in April' – which in itself is hardly likely to set our pulses racing, but is immediately followed by a disconcerting piece of information: 'the clocks were striking thirteen'. What did you make of this? It's an attention-grabbing device, isn't it? Straightaway we are presented with something unfamiliar and disturbing or unrealistic, perhaps. This moment of defamiliarization gives way to the introduction of a character with an ordinary, almost reassuring name. Winston Smith's appearance in the story at this early stage suggests that he is likely to be significant. The description of his first actions, struggling for shelter through a 'vile wind', trailing 'a swirl of gritty dust' in his wake, is a return to the kind of image we can identify as 'realistic'. But that odd detail, clocks striking *thirteen* still lingers, maybe suggesting a futuristic element? Did it make you want to read on?

What about the second extract? How would you characterize the narrative voice? Unlike the neutral, distanced tone of Orwell's third-person narrative voice, there's something insistent and conversational about the first-person **narrator** of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981). Did you note also the perhaps parodying use of that familiar story-opener 'once upon a time' – undercut straightaway by the narrator's change of mind: 'No, that won't do'. We are then given a

very specific setting, not just Bombay – a city perhaps exotic and unfamiliar to many readers – but also the name of the Nursing Home and an actual date and time: midnight on August 15th, 1947. The narrator tells us that the time 'matters, too.' Is the implied significance of time and date enough to make you want to continue reading? You may or may not already realize the momentousness of that exact point in history, but in any event Rushdie soon reveals it. The narrative continues:

Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world.

The fact that the narrator was born at such a time surely suggests to us that the story he will tell is likely to have some cultural, historical and maybe even political significance. Depending on your own concerns and interests, even your own background, this could well be enough of a motivation to keep on reading.

The third extract, like the opening of Rushdie's novel, introduces us to what will be for many of us an unfamiliar setting, but perhaps also intrigues us in another way, with its deliberate vagueness about time – 'Lifetimes ago' – and the juxtaposition of unlikely symbols, a banyan tree and a satellite dish. The astrologer's prophecy about the protagonist's 'widowhood and exile' raises initial expectations about the likely direction of the narrative, in spite of the narrator's fervent denial. In fact, the novel, *Jasmine* (1989), by Bharati Mukherjee does chart the events the old man foretells here. The narrator, Jasmine Vijh, is widowed and flees India for America, changing her name and identity at various points in her odyssey across the United States.

You might well say that a few lines from the opening of a novel are insufficient to sway our judgment one way or another as to whether we want to engage with the story it has to tell us, and I think I'd agree, though novelists invariably do want to grab our attention as early as possible. In the next section I want to discuss three longer openings from famous novels, with attention not so much to *what* is being told as to *who* is doing the telling; the narrative perspective, or **point of view**.

2.3 Narrative perspectives

Two of the most fundamental choices that face the author of a fictional narrative is to decide *who* is to be the narrator and *how* the story is to be narrated.

Activity 2

Read the below extract from the opening of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818). Who is the narrator? How would you characterize the narrative 'voice'?

No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy would have supposed her born to be an heroine. Her situation in life, the character of her father and mother, her own person and disposition, were all equally against her. Her father was a clergyman, without being neglected or poor, and a very respectable man, though his name was Richard, and he had never been handsome. He had a considerable independence,

besides two good livings, and he was not in the least addicted to locking up his daughters.

Her mother was a woman of useful plain sense, with a good temper, and, what is more remarkable, with a good constitution. She had three sons before Catherine was born; and instead of dying in bringing the latter into the world, as anybody might expect, she still lived on – lived to have six children more – to see them growing up around her, and to enjoy excellent health herself.

A family of ten children will always be called a fine family, where there are heads, and arms, and legs enough for the number; but the Morlands had little other right to the word, for they were in general very plain, and Catherine, for many years of her life, as plain as any. She had a thin awkward figure, a sallow skin without color, dark lank hair, and strong features; so much for her person, and not less unpropitious for heroism seemed her mind. She was fond of all boys' plays, and greatly preferred cricket, not merely to dolls, but to the more heroic enjoyments of infancy, nursing a dormouse, feeding a canary-bird, or watering a rose bush. Indeed she had no taste for a garden, and if she gathered flowers at all, it was chiefly for the pleasure of mischief, at least so it was conjectured from her always preferring those which she was forbidden to take. Such were her propensities; her abilities were quite as extraordinary. She never could learn or understand anything before she was taught, and sometimes not even then, for she was often inattentive, and occasionally stupid. Her mother was three months in teaching her only to repeat the 'Beggar's Petition,' and, after all, her next sister Sally could say it better than she did. Not that Catherine was always stupid; by no means; she learnt the fable of 'The Hare and many Friends,' as quickly as any girl in England.

Her mother wished her to learn music; and Catherine was sure she should like it, for she was very fond of tinkling the keys of the old forlorn spinet, so at eight years old she began. She learnt a year and could not bear it; and Mrs. Morland, who did not insist on her daughters being accomplished in spite of capacity or distaste, allowed her to leave off. The day which dismissed the music-master was one of the happiest of Catherine's life. Her taste for drawing was not superior; though whenever she could obtain the outside of a letter from her mother, or seize upon any other odd piece of paper, she did what she could in that way by drawing houses and trees, hens and chickens, all very much like one another.

Writing and accounts she was taught by her father; French by her mother. Her proficiency in either was not remarkable, and she shirked her lessons in both whenever she could. What a strange unaccountable character! For with all these symptoms of profligacy at ten years old, she had neither a bad heart nor a bad temper, was seldom stubborn, scarcely ever quarrelsome, and very kind to the little ones, with few interruptions of tyranny. She was, moreover, noisy and wild, hated confinement and cleanliness, and loved nothing so well in the world as rolling down the green slope at the back of the house. (Austen, 1818, pp.1–3)

This is what is known as third-person narration. The voice does not belong to a particular character in the novel, and in the extract it does not assume the perspective of any of the characters, merely describing their physical appearance, social status and relationships, and, in Catherine's case, her likes and dislikes, her accomplishments and pastimes. You will probably have noticed that this extract comprises a single, extremely long paragraph and is mostly

concerned with describing the young Catherine Morland. This amount of detail at the start of the novel suggests to us that Catherine is likely to be the central character, and so it proves.

At first sight the narrative voice seems to be fairly neutral and undemonstrative, like that at the beginning of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* above. But a closer inspection reveals greater subtleties. Indeed, it appears that the narrative voice is doing everything in its power to undermine our possible interest, while also drawing our attention to the kinds of expectations and conventions that often attend the process of reading particular kinds of fiction. Everything about Catherine seems to militate against the possibility of her being an interesting central character. According to the narrator, she was no-one's idea of a heroine, and her social and family connections are of little assistance in this respect too. Austen is poking fun here at the idea of the tragic heroine. The narrator sounds almost disappointed at the fact that Catherine is not a motherless waif whose plight can tug at our heartstrings:

Her mother was a woman of useful plain sense, with a good temper, and, what is more remarkable, with a good constitution. She had three sons before Catherine was born; and instead of dying in bringing the latter into the world, as anybody might expect, she still lived on – lived to have six children more – to see them growing up around her, and to enjoy excellent health herself.

Neither does Catherine have the classical beauty of the novelistic heroine, her unprepossessing looks in themselves rendering her ‘unpropitious’ for such a role. Furthermore, she clearly lacks aptitude and enthusiasm for the kind of accomplishments which young girls of this time were expected to acquire.

The overriding tone of this extract could perhaps be best described as coolly detached and above all ironic. As you will discover from reading further in Austen, irony was invariably the main feature of her narrative voices. In the case of the opening to *Northanger Abbey*, would you agree that this ironic strategy of seeming to deflate our enthusiasm is in fact a subtle device to heighten the reader's interest? If Catherine is such unlikely heroine material, what kind of narrative will it be that can feature her as its central character?

This would perhaps be a good point at which to say a little more about third-person narrators. These are often known as ‘omniscient’ narrators. An omniscient narrator is one that exhibits full knowledge of the actions, thoughts and feelings of each of the characters in the story. Austen invariably used this omniscient perspective, and it remains a popular means of narration amongst contemporary writers. Indeed, more recent authors have made great play of drawing attention to the narrator's role as an all-powerful figure, an embodiment of the author who has full control of the characters at his or her mercy. The beginning of Martin Amis' novel *London Fields* demonstrates this well:

This is a true story but I can't believe it's really happening.

It's a murder story, too. I can't believe my luck.

And a love story (I think), of all strange things, so late in the century, so late in the goddamned day.

This is the story of a murder. It hasn't happened yet. But it will. (It had better.) I know the murderer, I know the murderee. I know the time, I know the place. I know the motive *(her* motive) and I know the means. I know who will be the foil, the fool, the poor foal, also utterly destroyed. And I couldn't stop them, I don't think, even if I wanted to. The girl will die. It's what she always wanted. You can't stop people, once they *start creating*.

What a gift. This page is briefly stained by my tears of gratitude. Novelists don't usually have it so good, do they, when something real happens (something unified, dramatic and pretty saleable), and they just write it down? (1989, p. 1)

We might be forgiven for thinking that this is the direct voice of Martin Amis himself. After all, he is the author of the novel, the manipulator of events and characters. But as we read on we realize that this narrator is another character, an American writer called Samson Young, who is living in London in the flat of yet another fictional writer, Mark Asprey (note the initials). To further confuse matters a writer called Martin Amis also makes a cameo appearance in the novel! *London Fields* uses a variety of narrative perspectives. When Samson Young is actually present at the events described first-person narration is used; when he is not we have something akin to the omniscient narrator of the Austen extract in Activity 2, but we also have the sense that that narrator has a name and a role in the novel. But, at this stage, let's not get too embroiled in such complex approaches to story-telling as those Amis habitually uses. We'll turn instead to the more conventional strategies of Charles Dickens.

Activity 3

How would you describe the narrative voice and perspective of this extract?

My father's family name being Pirrip, and my christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So, I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip.

I gave Pirrip as my father's family name, on the authority of his tombstone and my sister – Mrs. Joe Gargery, who married the blacksmith. As I never saw my father or my mother, and never saw any likeness of either of them (for their days were long before the days of photographs), my first fancies regarding what they were like, were unreasonably derived from their tombstones. The shape of the letters on my father's, gave me an odd idea that he was a square, stout, dark man, with curly black hair. From the character and turn of the inscription, "Also Georgiana Wife of the Above," I drew a childish conclusion that my mother was freckled and sickly. To five little stone lozenges, each about a foot and a half long, which were arranged in a neat row beside their grave, and were sacred to the memory of five little brothers of mine – who gave up trying to get a living, exceedingly early in that universal struggle – I am indebted for a belief I religiously entertained that they had all been born on their backs with their hands in their trouserspockets, and had never taken them out in this state of existence.

Ours was the marsh country, down by the river, within, as the river wound, twenty miles of the sea. My first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things, seems to me to have been gained on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening. At such a time I found out for certain, that this bleak place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard; and that Philip Pirrip, late of this parish, and also Georgiana wife of the above, were dead and buried; and that Alexander, Bartholomew, Abraham, Tobias, and Roger, infant children of the aforesaid, were also dead and buried; and that the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dykes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes; and that the low leaden line beyond, was the river; and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing, was the sea; and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip.

"Hold your noise!" cried a terrible voice, as a man started up from among the graves at the side of the church porch. "Keep still, you little devil, or I'll cut your throat!"

A fearful man, all in coarse grey, with a great iron on his leg. A man with no hat, and with broken shoes, and with an old rag tied round his head. A man who had been soaked in water, and smothered in mud, and lamed by stones, and cut by flints, and stung by nettles, and torn by briars; who limped, and shivered, and glared and growled; and whose teeth chattered in his head as he seized me by the chin.

"O! Don't cut my throat, sir," I pleaded in terror. "Pray don't do it, sir."

"Tell us your name!" said the man. "Quick!"

"Pip, sir."

"Once more," said the man, staring at me. "Give it mouth!"

"Pip, Pip, sir."

"Show us where you live," said the man. "Pint out the place!"

I pointed to where our village lay, on the flat in-shore among the aldertrees and pollards, a mile or more from the church. The man, after looking at me for a moment, turned me upside-down, and emptied my pockets. There was nothing in them but a piece of bread. When the church came to itself – for he was so sudden and strong that he made it go head over hills before me, and I saw the steeple under my feet – when the church came to itself, I say, I was seated on a high tombstone, trembling, while he ate the bread ravenously. (Dickens, 1861, pp.3–4)

This is an example of first-person narration. The story is told by a character who is also a protagonist in the narrative. In *Great Expectations*, as in most **first person** narratives, the narrator is also the central character. The opening paragraph, with its emphasis on the narrator's family background, and the repetitions of his name – 'So I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip' – are an immediate suggestion that the character telling us the story is likely to be at the heart of it. This is further reinforced as we are then given more information about his family and his circumstances.

The story begins, then, with the narrator giving us an introduction to his own childhood, moving rapidly from the general to the particular and his meeting with the 'fearful man' he met in the churchyard. Again, the relation of this incident at the start of the novel leads us to attach some significance to the episode and its participants, raising expectations that are not fulfilled until much later in the narrative.

Here, and throughout *Great Expectations* there is in a sense a dual narrative perspective, presenting events narrated by the adult Pip which are at times mediated through the perceptions of the child Pip. The opening encounter in the churchyard, for instance, is enacted with a vivid immediacy. Look again at the point at which the narrative shifts from description to direct speech. The rapidity of the exchanges, with further repetitions of the main character's name and the allusion to his feelings of terror engage us much more directly with the boy's feelings of horror and dismay.

In reading a first-person narration we encounter a potential problem that we do not have when we encounter an omniscient third-person narrative such as Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. Can you think what that might be?

The factor I was hoping you would identify is that of the degree of reliability we can attach to a first-person narrative. As we read and discover more about a narrator we receive more and more indications that determine the extent to which we can trust the voice telling us the story. Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day* (1989) is narrated by its central character, an English butler called Stevens, who recalls various events and incidents from the past in such a way as to constantly cast doubt on the dependability of his narration. At one point we are presented with a prolonged and heated argument between Stevens and the housekeeper Miss Kenton about the butler's ailing father, also a member of the staff of the same country house. The argument is narrated in direct speech, suggesting an authentic recreation of the actual incident, but is followed by a piece of narration by Stevens that immediately undermines our trust in his version of events:

But now that I think further about it, I am not sure Miss Kenton spoke quite so boldly that day. We did, of course, over the years of working closely together come to have some very frank exchanges, but the afternoon I am recalling was still early in our relationship and I cannot see even Miss Kenton having been so forward. I am not sure she could actually have gone so far as to say things like: 'these errors may be trivial in themselves, but you must yourself realize their larger significance'. In fact, now that I come to think of it, I have a feeling it may have been Lord Darlington himself who made that particular remark to me that time he called me into his study some two months after that exchange with Miss Kenton outside the billiard room. By that time, the situation as regards my father had changed significantly following his fall. (p. 60)

There are numerous such examples of Stevens' 'unreliability' throughout the novel. These become more significant when placed against the wider historical and political backdrop of the story. Stevens had been butler to Lord Darlington, devoting his life to the service of someone he saw as a 'great man'. However, as the narrative unfolds, and in spite of Stevens' selective and constantly revised memory, Darlington is revealed as an unwitting pawn of Nazism. The

unreliability of Stevens' narration draws an implicit parallel between memory and history and shows both to be liable to distortion and manipulation, whether consciously or unconsciously.

We can see, then, that even when the identity of the narrator of a prose fiction is made clear to us, there are possibilities for uncertainty and ambiguity. So what are we to make of the next extract?

Activity 4

Please read the extract from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce now and consider what the narrative is describing, and try to characterize the narrative voice and perspective.

Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo….

His father told him that story: his father looked at him through a glass: he had a hairy face.

He was baby tuckoo. The moocow came down the road where Betty Byrne lived: she sold lemon platt.

O, the wild rose blossoms On the little green place.

He sang that song. That was his song.

O, the green wothe botheth.

When you wet the bed first it is warm then it gets cold. His mother put on the oilsheet. That had the queer smell.

His mother had a nicer smell than his father. She played on the piano the sailor's hornpipe for him to dance. He danced:

Tralala lala
Tralala tralaladdy
Tralala lala
Tralala lala.

Uncle Charles and Dante clapped. They were older than his father and mother but uncle Charles was older than Dante. Dante had two brushes in her press. The brush with the maroon velvet back was for Michael Davitt and the brush with the green velvet was for Parnell. Dante gave him a cachou every time he brought her a piece of tissue paper.

The Vances lived in number seven. They had a different father and mother. They were Eileen's father and mother. When they were grown up he was going to marry Eileen. He hid under the table. His mother said:

—O, Stephen will apologise.

Dante said:

—O, if not, the eagles will come and pull out his eyes.

Pull out his eyes,
Apologise,
Apologise,
Pull out his eyes.
Apologise,
Pull out his eyes,
Pull out his eyes,
Apologise.(Joyce, 1916, pp.11–12)

This is not at all an easy narrative voice to characterize. Indeed, it is difficult to define who is narrating at various points in the opening section of this novel. However, I hope you realized at least that, as with the other two extracts, this is an account of childhood experience. It even begins with the time-honored phrase used for telling stories to children – ‘Once upon a time’. The diction of the remainder of the opening sentence seems very childlike, an excited-sounding unpunctuated flow with repetitions of childish terms such as ‘moocow’ and nonsense words like ‘nicens’. We are a long way from narrative ‘**realism**’ here. As the novelist Anthony Burgess has implied, a more conventional representation of the child's impressions – ‘My first memories are of my father, a monocled hirsute man who told me stories’ – would have a very different effect on us as readers. Burgess described the beginning of *Portrait* as ‘the first big technical breakthrough of twentieth-century prose-writing’ (1965, p. 50) and I hope you were able to identify aspects of the extract that might warrant such a description.

The narrative seems to be made up of fragmented, unrelated associations; the father's ‘hairy face’; the mysterious Betty Byrne and her even more mysterious ‘lemon platt’; the random and sometimes distorted snatches of song and the sinister nursery-rhyme-like refrain ‘*Pull out his eyes /Apologise*’; and the unexpected reference to Michael Davitt and Parnell, which we need some knowledge of Irish politics to understand fully.

But can we detect some sort of order or pattern here? I think we can, though it is by no means obvious. The passage gives me the impression of an attempt to replicate a child's growing awareness of his world, the relationships between those who populate it, and the development of his facility for language. The novel begins with an episode of storytelling as we have seen, though we can't be sure whether the child or the father is the actual speaker at that point. The child's stumbling attempts at language are suggested by the nonsensical line of song – ’*O, the green wothe botheth*’ – which seems to be a corruption of the two lines quoted prior to that. A world of sensations, sight, sound, touch, smell, movement is invoked and gradually the wider world begins to impinge and we can see the child beginning to categorize and impose order on his growing knowledge; recognizing different smells and the ages of the adults around him. The family unit is then transcended as mention is made of the Vances and the ‘different father and mother’, again implying a developing awareness on the part of the child-narrator. The sense of

fragmentation remains strong, however, with the unexplained incident of the child hiding under the table (we are not told why he is there or why he must apologize). The critic Hugh Kenner has described the opening of *Portrait* as 'contrapuntal', and there are certainly at least two contrasting perspectives revealed in this extract; what Kenner calls 'an Aristotelian catalogue of senses, faculties, and mental activities' combined with 'the unfolding of the infant conscience' (quoted in Beja, 1973, p. 126).

The three 'beginnings' we have looked at here, by Austen, Dickens and Joyce represent a diverse range of approaches to storytelling. There are, of course, many other narrative methods open to novelists. For example, a novel might be written in the form of a diary, or be cast as a series of letters, or any one of a number of such devices. But as I hope you have discovered, the 'voice' which is used to tell a story and the perspective, or perspectives, from which it is told affect the way we respond to the events and characters described. But these events and characters are usually placed in specific locations and it is to the question of the 'setting' of fictional narratives that I now want to turn.

2.4 Setting

We can define the 'setting' of a story as the geographical location or locations in which the events of the narrative takes place, as well as the time in which those events are set. Location can refer to wider geographical entities such as countries or cities as well as to smaller entities such as households or domestic interiors. Time can refer to a general historical period or to the chronological boundaries of the story's events.

Let's look again at the beginning of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. How important is setting in this case? How does Rushdie's narrative style help us to evaluate the significance of the setting?

I was born in the city of Bombay … once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No, it's important to be more … On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world. There were gasps. And, outside the window, fireworks and crowds. A few seconds later, my father broke his big toe; but his accident was a mere trifle when set beside what had befallen me in that benighted moment, because thanks to the occult tyrannies of those blandly saluting clocks I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country. For the next three decades, there was to be no escape. Soothsayers had prophesied me, newspapers celebrated my arrival, politicos ratified my authenticity. (1981, p. 9)

Did you feel that setting was clearly very important here? We may not know exactly *why* at this stage, but the implication is that the time and place at which the narrator's story begins is of great significance. He describes himself as 'handcuffed to history' by the circumstances of his birth, and, as I suggested earlier, we are alerted to the possibility of a story to come which will have historical and political associations, reinforced by the assertion that the narrator's 'destinies' were

‘indissolubly chained’ to the future of his country. Location is surely important here; the place of the narrator's birth is the first thing we are told. You might further have noticed that the specific cultural environment is suggested by the image of ‘Clock-hands join(ing) palms in respectful greeting’, mimicking the Indian gesture of *namaste*. The references to ‘soothsayers’, ‘newspapers’ and ‘politicos’ further enhances our sense of a culturally significant environment, where traditional and modern values interact. The American writer Eudora Welty has claimed that ‘every story would be another story, and unrecognizable as art, if it took up its characters and plot and happened somewhere else’ (quoted in DiYanni, 1997, p. 67). Rushdie's use of place and time in this extract from *Midnight's Children* seems to bear this out; the narrative's entire meaning and significance rests on its setting, I hope you'll agree.

The surroundings in which characters are placed and in which narrative events take place can have other, more subtle effects on how we read and interpret stories. Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* (1862) is another novel rooted very specifically in time and place. Much of the action takes place in various country house settings, which represent different aspects of Russian society at the time. Into that environment comes the anarchist Bazarov, influenced by the ideas he has absorbed in the very different settings of the city and the university. As you will see from your study of the novel, the various settings come to represent different values, ideas and attitudes. This is equally true of smaller scale settings. We associate particular characters with the environments in which we encounter them, and the values associated with those places; characters often seem ‘at home’ in specific places, but not elsewhere. In *Great Expectations* Joe Gargery is uncomfortable when visiting Miss Havisham at Statis House, and awkward in Pip's London dwelling. Other characters, like Turgenev's Bazarov, are **characterized** by their failure to ‘belong’ in any of the locations they inhabit in the course of the story. Pavel Petrovich, seemingly the antithesis of Bazarov, also often seems ill-at-ease in his surroundings. He lives on the estate of his brother Nikolai, but is not originally from this sort of rural background.

Activity 5

Read the following description of Pavel's room and try to decide what the setting tells us about him.

But Pavel Petrovich returned to his elegant room, hung with fine dark-grey wallpaper and decorated with guns fixed on a colorful Persian rug, with walnut furniture upholstered in dark-green velveteen, a Renaissance-style bookcase in old dark oak, bronze statuettes on a magnificent desk and a fireplace. He flung himself on his sofa, folded his hands behind his head and remained there motionless, gazing almost with despair at the ceiling. Whether it was that he wanted to hide from the very walls themselves what was happening to his face, or for some other reason, he stood up, undid the loops holding the heavy window curtains and once again flung himself down on the sofa.

(1862, pp. 40–1)

The overall impression given by the very detailed inventory of Pavel's room is one of a bewildering array of cultural styles and influences, from different times and places. It is undoubtedly the room of someone with a well-developed aesthetic sense, but does it appear at all

comfortable or inviting? The very diversity of the décor seems to suggest a sense of rootlessness, reinforced by Pavel's behaviour here; the possibility that he is trying to ‘hide from the very walls themselves what was happening to his face’. Even in the sanctuary of his own rooms on his brother's estate he seems to find himself alienated amongst the no doubt impressive, yet strangely soulless artifacts he has gathered around him.

The significance of setting will vary from novel to novel, or from story to story, of course, and one of the questions you should continually ask yourself as you read is *how* important to the narrative events and characterization are the dual factors of time and place.

2.5 Characterization

How do writers of prose fiction make us respond to the imaginary people they create? In order to encourage us to continue reading writers must force us to react in some way to their characters, whether it is to identify, empathize or sympathize with them, to dislike or disapprove of them, or to pass judgment on their actions, behavior and values. As we have already seen, the fundamental question we repeatedly ask when we read a story is what happened next. Equally importantly we want to know to whom it happened, and we will only want to know this if we feel strongly, one way or another about the characters in the story. In this respect the author's skill at characterization is crucial.

We use the term characterization to describe the strategies that an author uses to present and develop the characters in a narrative. This use of descriptive techniques will vary from character to character. Some characters are central to a story; often there will be one main character, around whom the narrative revolves: Pip in *Great Expectations*, for example, or, we may reasonably surmise from the opening paragraph we looked at earlier, Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*. We expect that such characters, and others close to the heart of narrative events will be presented to us in great detail; we may be allowed access to their consciousness, either by the use of first-person narration or third-person **focalization**, and it is extremely likely that they will undergo some sort of significant personal change (for better or worse) as a result of their experiences. These kinds of characters are sometimes known as *dynamic*. Other characters, often described as *static*, may be much less thoroughly-drawn; they may be introduced to the narrative primarily to perform a particular narrative or thematic function, and will probably undergo little or no change in the course of the story.

Another useful distinction between types of characters was proposed by E.M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel*. ‘We may divide characters into flat and round,’ Forster suggested (1927, p. 65). What do you think he meant by these terms?

I expect you found this rather straightforward. The word ‘flat’ suggests a one-dimensional figure, and what Forster meant by ‘flat’ characters were those who are largely taken to represent a particular idea, human trait or set of values, much like the static characters described above. They are caricatures who can be easily and quickly summarized; Forster gives an example:

The really flat character can be expressed in one sentence such as “I will never desert Mr Micawber.” There is Mrs Micawber – she says she won't desert Mr Micawber; she doesn't, and there she is.

(ibid.)

The reference is to a character in Dickens' *David Copperfield* who does not change in any significant way in spite of the varied experiences she and her family encounter. ‘Round’ characters, by contrast, are described and developed in such a way as to achieve three-dimensionality, a physical and psychological complexity that mimics that of the real people we come to know in our everyday lives.

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* provides some interesting examples of ‘flat’ and ‘round’ characters. Note, however, that identifying those examples will largely depend on the reader's response to Austen's characters, but we might well place figures such as Mrs Bennett in the former category, and the central character, her daughter Elizabeth in the latter. As you may know, Austen sums up Mrs Bennet in three short, direct sentences at the end of the opening chapter of the novel:

She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news. (Austen, 1813, p. 3)

Compare this with the opening of the final chapter of *Pride and Prejudice*:

Happy for all her maternal feelings was the day on which Mrs. Bennet got rid of her two most deserving daughters. With what delighted pride she afterwards visited Mrs. Bingley and talked of Mrs. Darcy may be guessed. I wish I could say, for the sake of her family, that the accomplishment of her earnest desire in the establishment of so many of her children, produced so happy an effect as to make her a sensible, amiable woman for the rest of her life; though perhaps it was lucky for her husband, who might not have relished domestic felicity in so unusual a form, that she still was occasionally nervous and invariably silly. (ibid., p. 295)

These two descriptions of Mrs. Bennet, at the beginning and end of the novel are rare examples of Austen ‘telling’ us about this particular character. More often, she ‘shows’ us Mrs. Bennett by reporting her speech directly and allowing us to draw our own conclusions about Mrs. Bennet's attitudes and values. We are never given access to Mrs. Bennett's consciousness; events are never ‘focalised’ through her. Why do you think this is?

It is probably because Mrs. Bennet's main function in the story is to represent a particular attitude of the period in which the novel is set, that the best, or only chance for women's social advancement and financial security was through marriage. By representing this view from the outside, as it were, Austen leads us to scrutinize it in a more rigorous way. To describe Mrs. Bennet as ‘flat’ or ‘static’ is not to imply that she is necessarily a negligible character. She may

perform only one function in the novel, but it is a function that draws attention to the constrained position of women in the society Austen depicts.

That Elizabeth is a 'round', or 'dynamic' character is surely not in doubt. The entire novel revolves around her and we perceive much of the action through her eyes. The changes she experiences conform to Forster's template of 'roundness', and the contrast with Mrs. Bennet demonstrates the necessity for combinations of 'flat' and 'round' that Forster sees as necessary for the successful creation of fictional narrative:

The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat. If it does not convince, it is a flat pretending to be round. It has the incalculability of life about it – life within the pages of a book. And by using it sometimes alone, more often in combination with the other kind, the novelist achieves his task of acclimatization, and harmonizes the human race with the other aspects of his work. (Forster, 1927, p. 75)

2.6 Genre

In *The Realist Novel* Dennis Walder provides you with an extract from a detective novel to identify, and suggests that you'll find this relatively easy because it contains certain features that we expect in such a work. In other words, we each have a mental set of expectations that we use to categorize writing.

Activity 6

How would you categorize the extracts attached below (click on 'View document' to open), all of which are taken from novels? Think about your reasons for suggesting a particular category.

Extract 1

The town of Edinburgh stood on its ridge, with the Castle Rock at the top and the houses of its inhabitants outlined on the inferior slope. Behind the Rock was a range of green treeless hills. Other outcrops, more abrupt, reared themselves between the shore and the town.

Close at hand was the mouth of the river Leith, timber shored on each side, with some coasting vessels and a quantity of fishing-boats within a breakwater made of rough stobs and boulders. To left and right of the river stood a smoky collection of thatched cabins, kailyards, wood and stone warehouses, and a number of tallish houses of a more ambitious sort, with kilns and bakehouses and wooden sheds around them.

Among them was a single church spire, a well-head in a puddle, and a circular wall with an assortment of new stone and timber buildings inside. The King's Wark, Anselm Adorne had been told.

Extract 2

Stacy had never seen him before, but with those good looks she felt he should have been starring in the film instead of Paul Forbes. He was gorgeous, although the dark scowl on his face gave him a slightly satanic look. He had jet black hair, worn long over his collar but styled, piercing deep blue eyes that hinted at a steely determination, gave an impression that this man always got what he went after. He was very tall, well over six foot, his wide powerful shoulders tapering down to a narrow waist and firm muscular thighs, all shown to advantage in the black polo-necked jumper he wore and the fitted black trousers. Stacy guessed his age to be somewhere between thirty five and forty.

Extract 3

To confirm that it was indeed near death, the great vessel broke through into normal space with lingering slowness. The pain of the usually swift translation was prolonged as well, until the thousand, for all their strength, cursed and wept within their minds and became convinced that they would be trapped. It would be the gray limbo endlessly. That and pain.

But the Ship was doing its best. Sharing the agony of the passengers, it pushed and pried against the tough fabric of the superficies until there were flickers of black against the gray. The Ship and the people felt their anguish dim into a mere harmony of nearly musical vibrations that echoed, damped, and finally snapped off.

They hung in normal space, stars all around them.

How did you get on? The first extract is from an historical novel (Dunnett, 1993, p. 11). We can guess that it's set in the past because the detailed description of Edinburgh doesn't sound like a modern town. We know it's from a novel since, in the last paragraph of the extract, we are allowed to share a piece of information that one of the characters has been given: 'The King's Wark, Anselm Adorne had been told.' Anselm Adorne did exist – he was a merchant and magistrate in Bruges in the second half of the fifteenth century – but Edinburgh is described as he sees it, and this we know can only be a fictional reconstruction. This is a good example of what historical novels can do: they can imaginatively recreate the past, peopling it both with characters who really existed and with characters who are completely fictional.

The second extract is from a popular romance (Mortimer, 1980, pp. 12–13). We know this, I think, because of the emphasis on the smoldering sexuality of the male character and the admiring response of the female character to him. They are stereotypes, placed in a stereotypical situation, although it's perhaps worth pointing out that the male figure has sound literary antecedents in the form of Heathcliff and Mr Rochester, from Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* respectively.

The third extract is science fiction (May, 1982, p. 11). We might deduce this from the unfamiliar situation, the use of strange words such as 'superficies' and 'normal space' and the fact that the Ship is a space ship, surrounded by stars.

I hope you could classify these extracts without too much difficulty, because you were able to draw on concepts of various kinds of fictional writing, based on your knowledge and experience of reading. This is the kind of classification that Dennis Walder summarizes on page 9 of *The Realist Novel*, although he also points out that these classifications are not fixed or rigid.

2.7 Style and language

What do we mean when we talk of a particular writer's style? It might help us to think of style as a way of organizing and expressing narrative unique to the writer, as distinctive and personal a characteristic as the writer's handwriting or the prints on the fingers holding the pen. Just as no two sets of fingerprints are alike, so no two writers are alike. Writers write in a style that reflects their individual view of the world.

The word ‘style’ can generally be used to encompass the various literary devices that authors combine to convey their themes and the content of their narratives. Some of those devices, such as narrative perspectives and the representation of character have already been discussed, so I want to focus here on the language writers use and the effects of that language.

Activity 7

Please read the attached extract from a short story, ‘Kew Gardens’ (1919), by Virginia Woolf. How would you characterize the descriptive language Woolf uses here and the way in which she presents the thoughts and speech of her characters?

The figures of these men and women straggled past the flower-bed with a curiously irregular movement not unlike that of the white and blue butterflies who crossed the turf in zig-zag flights from bed to bed. The man was about six inches in front of the woman, strolling carelessly, while she bore on with greater purpose, only turning her head now and then to see that the children were not too far behind. The man kept this distance in front of the woman purposely, though perhaps unconsciously, for he wanted to go on with his thoughts.

‘Fifteen years ago I came here with Lily,’ he thought. ‘We sat somewhere over there by a lake, and I begged her to marry me all through the hot afternoon. How the dragon-fly kept circling round us: how clearly I see the dragon-fly and her shoe with the square silver buckle at the toe. All the time I spoke I saw her shoe and when it moved impatiently I knew without looking up what she was going to say: the whole of her seemed to be in her shoe. And my love, my desire, were in the dragon-fly; for some reason I thought that if it settled there, on that leaf, the broad one with the red flower in the middle of it, if the dragonfly settled on the leaf she would say “Yes” at once. But the dragon-fly went round and round: it never settled anywhere – of course not, happily not, or I shouldn’t be walking here with Eleanor and the children – Tell me, Eleanor, d’you ever think of the past?’

‘Why do you ask, Simon?’

‘Because I’ve been thinking of the past. I’ve been thinking of Lily, the woman I might have married … Well, why are you silent? Do you mind my thinking of the past?’

‘Why should I mind, Simon? Doesn’t one always think of the past, in a garden with men and women lying under the trees? Aren’t they one’s past, all that remains of it, those men and women, those ghosts lying under the trees … one’s happiness, one’s reality?’

‘For me, a square silver shoe-buckle and a dragon-fly –’

‘**For me, a kiss. Imagine six little girls sitting before their easels twenty years ago, down by the side of a lake, painting the water-lilies, the first red water-lilies I’d ever seen. And suddenly a kiss, there on the back of my neck. And my hand shook all the afternoon so that I couldn’t paint. I took out my watch and marked the hour when I would allow myself to think of the kiss for five minutes only – it was so precious – the kiss of an old grey-haired woman with a wart on her nose, the mother of all my kisses all my life. Come Caroline, come Hubert.’**

They walked on past the flower-bed, now walking four abreast, and soon diminished in size among the trees and looked half transparent as the sunlight and shade swam over their backs in large trembling irregular patches. (Dick, 1985, pp.90–91)

The descriptive language of the first and final paragraphs is intensely detailed. Various human figures pass by and butterflies flit from flower-bed to flower-bed – a scene we can easily visualize. But Woolf s use of terms such as ‘curiously irregular’ to describe the movement of the humans and ‘zigzag’ to depict the flight of the butterflies suggests a sense of vagueness and randomness. The change of focus, from the general scene to the positioning and attitudes of a man, a woman – he ‘strolling carelessly’, she moving ‘with greater purpose’ alerts us to anticipate that they will be the subject of what is to follow. Would you agree that there is almost a filmic quality to this narrative description? When I read this I imagine a camera panning across a wide screen before closing in on the two characters. The final paragraph of the extract, which describes how the husband and wife and their children ‘diminished in size […] as the sunlight and shade swam over their backs in large trembling irregular patches’ seems to me to suggest a gradually dissolving image, such as we might see when a film deliberately loses focus. In spite of the plethora of detail and description, then, I feel there is nevertheless a somewhat impressionistic feel to Woolf's scene-setting.

Did you notice how a similar ‘blurring’ effect seems to result from the second paragraph's shifts, first to the man's internal consciousness, as we are given access to his thoughts, and then to direct speech right at the end of the paragraph: ‘Tell me, Eleanor, d'you ever think of the past?’ There is only a dash to denote this second shift; on a first reading we may not even notice that Woolf has moved from a depiction of thoughts to the representation of speech.

And what of the conversation between the man and woman? Does this strike you as a naturalistic representation of dialogue? Probably not, I would suggest. There is something artificial and heightened about the woman's speech in particular:

‘Doesn't one always think of the past, in a garden with men and women lying under the trees? Aren't they one's past, all that remains of it, those men and women, those ghosts lying under the trees … one's happiness, one's reality?’

We might think that no-one would really speak like this, or relate a memory of ‘the mother of all my kisses all my life’ in quite such a mannered fashion. Only with the brisk command to her children – ‘Come Caroline, come Hubert’ – does the woman's speech appear naturalistic. I think it's safe to assume that this is not merely bad writing on Woolf's part; she has chosen her language and her means of representing it for a reason. Indeed, it may seem as though the language itself, rather than the actual narrative, is the main focus of this piece of writing. Woolf was one of a number of authors in the early twentieth-century who sought new ways of writing, challenging the conventions of previous generations that gave a primacy to realistic and naturalistic representation and fore grounded narrative events; stories that had a beginning, middle and end, a strong sense of closure, and a fixed authorial point of view. The narrative, such as it is, of Woolf's story ‘Kew Gardens’ is episodic rather than linear, and is a good early example of a style of writing that later came to be labeled ‘Modernist’ (James Joyce, whose opening to *Portrait of the Artist* we looked at earlier was another dominant figure in this movement). We could say, then, that ‘style’ seems to take precedence over subject-matter in writing such as this, and I hope you can see how Woolf's particular use of language contributes to this.

Activity 8

Now look at another extract; the closing section of a much more recent work, a short story, ‘Gazebo’, by the American writer Raymond Carver. Think again about the questions I asked you to consider in Activity 7 before reading the Woolf extract. How does Carver's style differ from that of Woolf?

“When we were just kids before we married?” Holly goes.

“When we had big plans and hopes? You remember?” She was sitting on the bed, holding her knees and her drink.

“I remember, Holly.”

“You weren’t my first, you know. My first was Wyatt. Imagine. Wyatt. And your name’s Duane. Wyatt and Duane. Who knows what I was missing all those years? You were my everything, just like the song.”

I go, “You’re a wonderful woman, Holly. I know you’ve had the opportunities.”

“But I didn’t take them up on it!” she goes. “I couldn’t go outside the marriage.”

“Holly, please,” I go. “No more now, honey. Let’s not torture ourselves. What is it we should do?”

“Listen,” she goes. “You remember the time we drove out to that old farm place outside of Yakima, out past Terrace Heights? We were just driving around? We were on this little dirt road and it was hot and dusty? We kept going and came to that old house and you asked if we could have a drink of water? Can you imagine us doing that now? Going up to a house and asking for a drink of water?”

“Those old people must be dead now,” she goes, “side by side out there in some cemetery. You remember they asked us in for cake? And later on they showed us around? And there was this gazebo there out back? It was back under some trees? It had a little peaked roof and the paint was gone and there were these weeds growing up over the steps. And the woman said that years before, I mean a real long time ago, men used to come around and play music out there on a Sunday, and the people would sit and listen. I thought we’d be like that too when we got old enough. Dignified. And in a place. And people would come to our door.”

I can’t say anything just yet. Then I go, “Holly, these things, we’ll look back on them too. We’ll go, ‘Remember the motel with all the crud in the pool?’” I go, “You see what I’m saying, Holly?”

But Holly just sits there on the bed with her glass.

I can see she doesn’t know.

I move over to the window and look out from behind the curtain. Someone says something below and rattles the door to the office. I stay there. I pray for a sign from Holly. I pray for Holly to show me. I hear a car start. Then another. They turn on the lights against the building and, one after the other, they pull away and go out into the traffic.

“Duane,” Holly goes.

In this, too, she was right. (Carver, 1981, pp.24–5)

The language is minimalist, pared down to the absolute basics, and heavily dialogue-led. We are given no indication of speech intonation; the only verb used to describe the dialogue is the verb ‘to go’, which gives us no clue as to how the words are spoken. This breeds a sense of uncertainty in the reader, I think, and as with Woolf's elevated tone and language this strategy is deliberate, I would suggest. Although the story is narrated in the first-person I get a strong impression that the narrator, Duane, does not fully understand the situation he is describing: ‘I pray for a sign from Holly. I pray for Holly to show me.’ Similarly, the sparseness of Carver's writing leaves the reader in a state of uncertainty. Although the dialogue is, I think you'll agree, much more colloquial and naturalistic than that of Woolf's characters, there seems to me to be a great deal left unsaid, and a sense that the two characters, while conversing, are not communicating. This is, I would argue, a direct consequence of Carver's choice of style and language.

3 Conclusion

In this unit you have been introduced to the main components of prose fiction and have been given the opportunity to develop and practice your critical and analytical skills. These are essential skills you will need to continue your studies in this area.

Glossary

Characterisation	The revelation of character through techniques such as physical description, action, dialogue, interaction with other characters, and the depiction of thought, emotion and belief.
Dialogic	Describes a narrative in which multiple voices, perspectives or discourses are present and engage and interact with each other.
Dialogue	Speech between two or more characters in a narrative.
First person	Narration from the point of view of a character, often central to the plot, who refers to himself or herself as ‘I’. Such narrators can often be deliberately ‘unreliable’.
Focalisation	The point-of-view being narrated. The distinction between ‘who speaks’ and ‘who sees’. Thus, although the narrator ‘speaks’ the focaliser is the character through whose eyes and perceptions the narrative is described. In third-person narratives such as *Pride and Prejudice* the narrator is the user of the third-person perspective, while the focaliser is the centre of consciousness being represented.
Free indirect speech	Speech that is represented, rather than directly related. Extremely flexible form of prose discourse, between indirect narrative commentary and direct speech, giving the impression of combining the two. Examples: **direct** speech – He said: ‘I love her’ **indirect**speech – He said that he loved her **free indirect speech** – He loved her
Genre	The classification of literary works according to common elements of content, form, or technique.
Irony	The expression of a meaning contrary to the stated or ostensible one.
Narrative	The description of the events and situations that make up a story as distinct from **dialogue**.
Narrator	the ‘speaking voice’ of a narrative; the voice and perspective through which a narrative is told, often, particularly in first-person narratives, a character in the work.
Omniscient	Describes a third-person point of view that allows an author to convey external details, description and information while also enabling the revelation of characters' internal thoughts, emotions and motivations. Omniscient narrators are able to comment on as well as describe events and themes.
Plot	The arrangement of narrative events in a story, organised in such a way as to create interest and involvement for the reader and to establish and emphasise

	causality.
Point of view	The perspective from which a story is narrated. There are two major perspectives, *first-person* and *third-person*.
Realism	A style of writing that seeks to convey the impression of accurate recording of an actual way of life in a recognisable time and place. Closely associated with the rise of the novel in the nineteenth century as the most effective genre for representing contemporary life, society and attitudes.
Setting	The background of location(s) and historical time against which the characters and plot of a story are set.
'Showing' and 'telling':	Showing – more dramatic presentation of events and characters through use of direct speech, dialogue, etc., without the overt involvement of the narrator
Telling	– the narrator describes what happens, what characters said, did, felt without directly relating it through dialogue.
Story	A narrated sequence of events arranged chronologically.
Style	The characteristic way in which a writer organises and expresses his or herself in writing; the combination of literary devices that a writer uses to communicate themes and narrative content.
Third person	A narrative perspective that does not belong to a specific character in the novel. Such narrators are often 'omniscient'; they are all-knowing and are able to recount the story fully and reliably and are able to enter the consciousness of characters in order to reveal their thoughts, emotions, beliefs and motivations.

Acknowledgements

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the following sources for permission to reproduce material in this unit:

Text

Woolf, V. (1989) 'Kew Gardens', *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*. The Hogarth Press; Joyce, J. (1978) 'Chapter 1, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Guild Publishing / Jonathan Cape Limited.

Unit Image

The Loopweaver: Flickr.com [http://www.flickr.com/photos/loopweaver/544751212/]

References

Amis, Martin (1989) *London Fields*, Penguin.

Austen, Jane (1818) *Northanger Abbey*, Penguin.

Austen, Jane (1813) *Pride and Prejudice*, Oxford World's Classics.

Baldick, Chris (1990) *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Oxford University Press.

Beckson, Karl and Arthur Ganz (1990) *Literary Terms: A Dictionary*, André Deutsch.

Beja, Morris (ed.) (1973) *James Joyce: Dubliners and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: A Casebook*, Macmillan.

Burgess, Anthony (1965) *Here Comes Everybody: An Introduction to James Joyce for the Ordinary Reader*, Faber.

Carver, Raymond (1981) *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love*, Harvill.

Chatman, Seymour (1978) *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, Cornell University Press.

Dick, Susan (ed.) (1985) *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, Hogarth. Dickens, Charles (1861) *Great Expectations*, Oxford World's Classics.

DiYanni, Robert (1997) *Literature: Reading Fiction, Poetry, Drama and the Essay*, McGraw-Hill.

Dunnett, D. (1993) *The Unicorn Hunt*, Michael Joseph.

Forster, E.M. (1927) *Aspects of the Novel*, Edward Arnold.

Fowler, Roger (1973) *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms*, Routledge.

Hemingway, Ernest (1944) *The First Forty-Nine Stories*, Jonathan Cape.

Ishiguro, Kazuo (1989) *The Remains of the Day*, Faber.

Joyce, James (1916) *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Jonathan Cape.

May, J. (1982) *The Many-coloured Land*, Pan.

Milligan, Ian (1983) *The Novel in English: An Introduction*, Macmillan.

Mortimer, C. (1980) *Brand of Possession*, Mills & Boon.

Mukherjee, Bharati (1989) *Jasmine*, Virago.

Murfin, Ross C. and Supryia M. Ray (1997) *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*, Bedford.

Orwell,George (1949) *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Penguin.

Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith (1983) *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, Routledge.

Rushdie, Salman (1981) *Midnight's Children*, Vintage.

Turgenev, Ivan (1862) *Fathers and Sons*, Oxford World's Classics.

Approaching poetry

Introduction

This unit is designed to develop the analytical skills you need for a more in-depth study of literary texts. You will learn about rhythm, alliteration, rhyme, poetic inversion, voice and line lengths and endings. You will examine poems that do not rhyme and learn how to compare and contrast poetry.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

- have an awareness of the role of analysis to inform appreciation and understanding of poetry;
- be able to identify and discuss the main analytical concepts used in analyzing poetry.

1 Approaching poetry

What is the point of analyzing poetry? One simple answer is that the more we know about anything the more interesting it becomes: listening to music or looking at paintings with

someone who can tell us a little about what we hear or see – or what we‘re reading – is one way of increasing our understanding and pleasure. That may mean learning something about the people who produced the writing, music, painting that we are interested in, and why they produced it. But it may also mean understanding why one particular form was chosen rather than another: why, for example, did the poet choose to write a **sonnet** rather than an **ode**, a **ballad**, or a **villanelle**? To appreciate the appropriateness of one form, we need to be aware of a range of options available to that particular writer at that particular time. In the same way, we also need to pay attention to word choice. Why was this particular word chosen from a whole range of words that might have said much the same? Looking at manuscript drafts can be really enlightening, showing how much effort was expended in order to find the most appropriate or most evocative expression.

Activity 1

Read and compare the two versions of William Blake's ‘Tyger’ attached below. The one on the left is a draft, the other is the final published version.

Tyger, Tyger, burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
[Could] [Dare] frame thy fearful symmetry?
[In what] [Burnt in] distant deeps or skies
[Burnt the] [The cruel] fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?
And what shoulder & what art
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat
What dread hand & what dread feet
[Could fetch it from the furnace deep
And in the/thy horrid ribs dare steep
In the well of sanguine woe?
In what clay and in what mould
Were thy eyes of fury roll’d?]
[What] Where the hammer? [What] Where
The chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? What the arm]
[arm][grasp][clasp] dread grasp?
[Could] Dare its deadly terrors [clasp]
[grasp] clasp?
Tyger, Tyger, burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What Immortal hand [or] & eye
Dare [form] frame thy fearful symmetry?

Tiger, tiger burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?
In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?
And what shoulder and wha !art
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? And what dread feet?
What the hammer? What the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? What dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?
When the stars threw down their spears
And watered heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?
Tiger, tiger, burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

The most obvious difference between the two is that stanza 4 of the draft does not survive in the published version, and an entirely new stanza, ‘When the stars threw down their spears’, appears in the finished poem. Significantly this introduces the idea of ‘the Lamb’, a dramatic contrast to the tiger, as well as the idea of a ‘he’ who made the lamb. One similarity between draft and final version is that each is made up entirely of unanswered questions. But if you look at the manuscript stanza 5, you can see revisions from ‘What’ to ‘Where’, and the struggle with the third line, where Blake eventually decided that the idea of an arm was redundant, subsumed in the notions of grasping and clasping. The two rhyme words are decided – grasp/clasp – but in which order should they come? ‘Clasp’ is a less aggressive word than ‘grasp’; ‘clasp’ is not quite as gentle as an embrace, but it is closer to embracing than ‘grasp’ is – so it must be for deliberate effect that we end up with ‘What dread grasp/Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

It is rare to have manuscript drafts to examine in this way, but I hope that this convinces you of the kind of attention writers pay to word choice. Let us take one more example. Think about this first stanza of Thomas Hardy's ‘Neutral Tones’ (1867):

We stood by a pond that winter day,

And the sun was white, as though chidden of God,

And a few leaves lay on the starving sod;

– They had fallen from an ash, and were gray. (Gibson, 1976, p. 12)

Notice that, in the last line, ‘oak’ or ‘elm’ would work just as well as far as the **rhythm** or music of the line is concerned, but ‘ash’ has extra connotations of grayness, of something burnt out, dead, finished (‘ashes to ashes’, too, perhaps?), all of which contribute to the mood that Hardy conveys in a way that ‘oak’ or ‘elm’ wouldn't.

To return to my original question then, ‘what is the point of analyzing poetry?’, one answer is that only an analytical approach can help us arrive at an informed appreciation and understanding of the poem. Whether we like a poem or not, we should be able to recognize the craftsmanship that has gone into making it, the ways in which stylistic techniques and devices have worked to create meaning. General readers may be entirely happy to find a poem pleasing, or unsatisfactory, without stopping to ask why. But *studying* poetry is a different matter and requires some background understanding of what those stylistic techniques might be, as well as an awareness of constraints and conventions within which poets have written throughout different periods of history.

You may write poetry yourself. If so, you probably know only too well how difficult it is to produce something you feel really expresses what you want to convey. Writing an essay presents enough problems – a poem is a different matter, but certainly no easier. Thinking of poetry as a discipline and a craft which, to some extent, can be learned, is another useful way of approaching analysis. After all, how successful are emotional outpourings on paper? Words one might scribble down in the heat of an intense moment may have some validity in conveying that intensity, but in general might they not be more satisfactory if they were later revised? My own

feeling is that a remark Wordsworth made 200 years ago has become responsible for a number of misconceptions about what poetry should do. In the Preface to a volume of poems called *Lyrical Ballads* (1802) he wrote that ‘all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’ (Owens and Johnson, 1998, p.85,11.105–6). The second time he uses the same phrase he says something that I think is often forgotten today: ‘poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion *recollected in tranquillity’* (my italics) (ibid., p. 95, ll.557–8). Notice the significant time lapse implied there – the idea that, however powerful or spontaneous the emotion, it needs to be carefully considered before you start writing. He goes on:

The emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquility gradually disappears, and an emotion kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation is gradually reproduced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins.

You don't have to agree with Wordsworth about what poetry is or how best to achieve it. (Would you always want a poem to express powerful emotion, for example? I referred to Hardy's ‘Neutral Tones’ above, where the whole point is that neither of the two characters described feels anything much at all.) But the idea of contemplation is a useful and important one: it implies distance, perhaps detachment, but above all re-creation, not the thing itself. And if we try to re-create something, we must choose our methods and our words carefully in order to convey what we experienced as closely as possible. A word of warning though: writers do not always aim to express personal experiences; often a persona is created (see discussion of ‘Voice’ in Section 8).

The poet Ezra Pound offered this advice to other poets in an essay written in 1913: ‘Use no superfluous word, no adjective, which does not reveal something’ (Gray, 1990, p. 56). And in the 1950s William Carlos Williams advised, ‘cut and cut again whatever you write’. In his opinion, the ‘test of the artist is to be able to revise without showing a seam’ (loc. cit.). That sewing image he uses appeals to me particularly because it stresses the notion of skilled craftsmanship. Pound and Williams were American, writing long after Wordsworth, but, as you can see, like countless other poets they too reflected very seriously on their own poetic practice. I hope this helps convince you that as students we owe it to the poems we read to give them close analytical attention.

2 Using this unit

In what follows, section headings like ‘Rhyme’, ‘Rhythm’, ‘Line lengths and line endings’, ‘Alliteration’, and so on, are intended to act as signposts to help you use this unit (if terms are unfamiliar, look them up in the glossary at the end of this unit). But these headings indicate only the *main* technique being discussed. While it is something we need to attempt, it is very difficult to try to isolate devices in this way – to separate out, for example, the effects of rhythm from rhyme. This doesn't mean that we shouldn't look for particular techniques at work in a poem, but we need to be aware that they will be interdependent and the end product effective or not because of the way such elements work together.

As you work through this unit, don't be discouraged if your response to exercises differs from mine. Remember that I had the advantage of choosing my own examples and that I've long been familiar with the poems I've used. On a daily basis, we probably read much less poetry than we do prose. This is perhaps one reason why many people say they find poetry difficult – unfamiliarity and lack of practice. But, like anything else, the more effort we put in, the wider the range of experiences we have to draw on. I hope that when you come across an unfamiliar extract in the discussions that follow you might decide to look up the whole poem on your own account, widening your own experience and enjoying it too.

Remember that language changes over the years. I've deliberately chosen to discuss poems from different periods, and given dates of first publication. Do keep this in mind, especially as you may find some examples more accessible than others. The idiom and register of a poem written in the eighteenth century will usually be quite different from one written in the twentieth. Different verse forms are popular at different times: while sonnets have been written for centuries, they were especially fashionable in Elizabethan times, for example. Don't expect to find free verse written much before the twentieth century.

If you are working on a poem, it can be a good idea to print it, maybe even enlarge it, and then write anything you find particularly striking in the margins. Use highlighters or colored pens to underline repetitions and link rhyme words. Patterns may well emerge that will help you understand the way the poem develops. Make the poems your own in this way, and then, if you are the kind of person who doesn't mind writing in books, you can insert notes in a more restrained way in the margins of your book.

If you prefer to work on your computer, you can do a similar thing by using an annotation tool on your word processor.

Whatever you do, always ask yourself what the effect of a particular technique that you identify is. Noticing an unusual choice of words, a particular **rhyme scheme** or use of **alliteration** (see Section 4 on alliteration below) is an important first step, but you need to take another one. Unless you go on to say why what you have noticed is effective, what it contributes to the rest of the poem, how it endorses or changes things, then you are doing less than half the job. Get into the habit of asking yourself questions, even if you can't always answer them satisfactorily.

3 Rhythm

All speech has rhythm because we naturally stress some words or syllables more than others. The rhythm can sometimes be very regular and pronounced, as in a children's nursery rhyme – ‘JACK and JILL went UP the HILL’ – but even in the most ordinary sentence the important words are given more stress. In poetry, rhythm is extremely important: patterns are deliberately created and repeated for varying effects. The rhythmical pattern of a poem is called its metre, and we can analyze, or ‘scan’ lines of poetry to identify stressed and unstressed syllables. In marking the text to show this, the mark ‘/’ is used to indicate a stressed syllable, and ‘x’ to indicate an unstressed syllable. Each complete unit of stressed and unstressed syllables is called a ‘foot’, which usually has one stressed and one or two unstressed syllables.

The most common foot in English is known as the **iamb**, which is an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one (x /). Many words in English are iambic: a simple example is the word 'forgot'. When we say this, the stresses naturally fall in the sequence:

x /
'forgot'.

Iambic rhythm is in fact the basic sound pattern in ordinary English speech. If you say the following line aloud you will hear what I mean:

x / x / x / x / x / x /
I went across the road and bought a pair of shoes.

The next most common foot is the **trochee**, a stressed syllable (or 'beat', if you like) followed by an unstressed one (/x), as in the word

/ x
'mountain'.

Both the iamb and the trochee have two syllables, the iamb being a 'rising' rhythm and the trochee a 'falling' rhythm. Another two-syllable foot known as the **spondee** has two equally stressed beats (/ /), as in

/ /
'blue spurt'.

Other important feet have three syllables. The most common are the **anapest** (x x /) and the **dactyl** (/ x x), which are triple rhythms, rising and falling respectively, as in the words

x x / / x x
'unimpressed' and 'probably'.

Here are some fairly regular examples of the four main kinds of metre used in poetry. (I have separated the feet by using a vertical slash.) You should say the lines aloud, listening for the stress patterns and noting how the 'beats' fall on particular syllables or words.

Iambic metre

x / x / x / x / x /
The cur- | few tolls | the knell | of part- | ing day

Trochaic metre

/ x / x / x /
Tiger | tiger | burning | bright

Anapestic metre

x x / x x / x x / x x /
She is far | from the land | where her young | hero sleeps

Dactylic metre

/ x x / x x / x x / x x
Woman much | missed how you | call to me, | call to me

The other technical point that you need to know about is the way the lengths of lines of verse are described. This is done according to the number of feet they contain, and the names given to different lengths of lines are as follows:

monometer a line of one foot

dimeter a line of two feet

trimeter a line of three feet

tetrameter a line of four feet

pentameter a line of five feet

hexameter a line of six feet

heptameter a line of seven feet

octameter a line of eight feet.

By far the most widely used of these are the tetrameter and the pentameter. If you look back at the four lines of poetry given as examples above, you can count the feet. You will see that the first one has five feet, so it is an iambic pentameter line; the second one has four feet, so it is a trochaic tetrameter line; the fourth and fifth also have four feet, so are anapestic and dactylic tetrameter lines respectively. Lines do not always have exactly the 'right' number of beats. Sometimes a pentameter line will have an extra 'beat', as in the famous line from *Hamlet*, 'To be or not to be: that is the question', where the 'tion' of question is an eleventh, unstressed beat. (It is worth asking yourself why Shakespeare wrote the line like this. Why did he not write what would have been a perfectly regular ten-syllable line, such as 'The question is, to be or not to be'?)

Having outlined some of the basic metres of English poetry, it is important to say at once that very few poems would ever conform to a perfectly regular metrical pattern. The effect of that would be very boring indeed: imagine being restricted to using only iambic words, or trying to keep up a regular trochaic rhythm. Poets therefore often include trochaic or anapestic or dactylic words or phrases within what are basically iambic lines, in order to make them more interesting and suggestive, and to retain normal pronunciation. Here is a brief example from Shakespeare to

show you what I mean. I have chosen a couple of lines spoken by Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Act 1, scene 2, and have marked this first version to show you the basic iambic metre:

x / x / x / x / x /
My fa- | ther loved | Sir Row- | land as | his soul,
x / x / x / x / x /
And all | the world | was of | my fa | ther's mind.

If you say the lines out loud in this regular way you can hear that the effect is very unnatural. Here is one way the lines might be scanned to show how the stresses would fall in speech (though there are other ways of scanning them):

/ / x / x x x x x /
My father loved Sir Rowland as his soul,
x / x / x x x / x /
And all the world was of my father's mind.

It must be emphasized that there is no need to feel that you must try to remember all the technical terms I have been introducing here. The purpose has been to help you to become aware of the importance of rhythmic effects in poetry, and it can be just as effective to try to describe these in your own words. The thing to hang on to when writing about the rhythm of a poem is that, as Ezra Pound put it, 'Rhythm MUST have meaning': 'It can't be merely a careless dash off with no grip and no real hold to the words and sense, a tumty tum tumpty tum tum ta' (quoted in Gray, 1990, p. 56). There are occasions, of course, when a tum-ty-ty-tum rhythm may be appropriate, and 'have meaning'. When Tennyson wrote 'The Charge of the Light Brigade', he recreated the sound, pace, and movement of horses thundering along with the emphatic dactyls of 'Half a league, half a league, half a league onward / Into the valley of death rode the six hundred'. But for a very different example we might take a short two-line poem by Pound himself. This time there is no fixed metre: like much twentieth-century poetry, this poem is in 'free verse'. Its title is 'In a Station of the Metro' (the Metro being the Paris underground railway), and it was written in 1916:

x x xx x x / / x x /
The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
/ x x x / / /
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Here you can see that the rhythm plays a subtle part in conveying the meaning. The poem is comparing the faces of people in a crowded underground to petals that have fallen on to a wet bough. The rhythm not only highlights the key words in each line, but produces much of the emotional feeling of the poem by slowing down the middle words of the first line and the final three words of the second.

For our final example of rhythm I've chosen a passage from Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Criticism* (1711).

Activity 2

Review the excerpt from *An Essay on Criticism*. Read it aloud if you can. Listen to the rhythm, and identify why it is appropriate for the meaning.

Soft is the strain when Zephyr gently blows,
And the smooth stream in smoother numbers flows;
But when loud billows lash the sounding shore,
The hoarse, rough verse should like the torrent roar.
When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw,
The line too labours, and the words move slow:
Not so, when swift Camilla scours the plain,
Flies o'er the unbending corn, and skims along the main. (Book!II,!ll.366–73)

Pope here uses a basic structure of iambic pentameters with variations, so that the lines sound as if they have a different pace, faster or slower, depending on what is being described. It is not just rhythm that contributes to the effect here: rhyme and alliteration (successive words beginning with the same sound) recreate smooth, rough, slow and swift movement. Rhythm is entirely dependent on word choice, but is also influenced by other interdependent stylistic devices. Pope's lines enact what they describe simply because of the care that has gone into choosing the right words. It doesn't matter if you don't recognize the classical allusions: from the descriptions it is clear that Ajax is a strong man and Camilla is quick and light. If you count the beats of each line, you'll notice that, in spite of the variety of sound and effect, all have five stresses, except the last, which has six. Strangely enough it is the last and longest line that creates an impression of speed. How is this achieved? Try to hear the lines by reading them again out loud.

There is really only one way, and that is through the words chosen to represent movement: the repeated 's' sounds associated with Camilla trip swiftly off the tip of the tongue, whereas Ajax's lines demand real physical effort from mouth, lips, and tongue. You will get a much stronger sense of this if you form the words in this way, even if you are unable to say them out loud. In an exam, for instance, silent articulation of a poem will help you grasp many poetic techniques and effects that may otherwise be missed.

This extract from Pope's *An Essay on Criticism*, like the whole poem, is written in rhyming **couplets** (lines rhyming in pairs). They confer a formal, regular quality to the verse. The punctuation helps to control the way in which we read: notice that there is a pause at the end of each line, either a comma, a semi-colon, or a full stop. This use of the end-stopped line is characteristic of eighteenth-century **heroic couplets** (iambic pentameter lines rhyming in pairs), where the aim was to reproduce classical qualities of balance, harmony, and proportion.

Get into the habit of looking at rhyme words. Are any of Pope's rhymes particularly interesting here? One thing I noticed was what is known as **poetic inversion**. The rhyme 'shore'/'roar' is clearly important to the sound sense of the verse, but the more natural word order (were this ordinary speech) would be 'The hoarse rough verse should roar like the torrent'. Had he written this, Pope would have lost the sound qualities of the rhyme 'shore'/'roar'. He would have had to find a word such as 'abhorrent' to rhyme with 'torrent' and the couplet would have had a very

different meaning. He would also have lost the rhythm of the line, in spite of the fact that the words are exactly the same.

Before we leave *An Essay on Criticism*, did you notice that Pope's subject in this poem is really poetry itself? Like Wordsworth, Pound, and William Carlos Williams, all of whom I've quoted earlier, Pope too was concerned with poetry as a craft.

4 Alliteration

Alliteration is the term used to describe successive words beginning with the same sound – usually, then, with the same letter.

To illustrate this I would like to use a stanza from Arthur Hugh Clough's poem, 'Natura naturans'. There is not enough space to quote the whole poem, but to give you some idea of the context of this stanza so that you can more fully appreciate what Clough is doing, it is worth explaining that 'Natura naturans' describes the sexual tension between a young man and woman who sit next to each other in a railway carriage. They have not been introduced, and they neither speak nor exchange so much as a glance. The subject matter and its treatment is unusual and also extraordinarily frank for the time of writing (about 1849), but you need to know what is being described in order to appreciate the physicality of the lines I quote.

Activity 3

Read the below stanza from Arthur Hugh Clough's poem, 'Natura naturans' and consider the following questions.

(a) What is the single most striking technique used, and what are the effects?

(b) How would you describe the imagery, and what does it contribute to the overall effect?

Flashed flickering forth fantastic flies,
Big bees their burly bodies swung,
Rooks roused with civic dim the elms,
And lark its wild reveillez rung;
In Libyan dell the light gazelle,
The leopard lithe in Indian glade,
And dolphin, brightening tropic seas,
In us were living, leapt and played: (Clough,!1890,!p.262)

(a) Visually the use of alliteration is striking, particularly in the first line and almost equally so in the second. If you took the advice above about paying attention to the physical business of articulating the words too, you should be in a good position to discriminate between the rapidity of the flies and the heavier movement of the bees, and to notice how tactile the language is. The effect is actually to create sensuality in the stanza.

(b) Notice that though we begin with flies, bees and rooks, all of which are fairly common flying creatures, we move to the more romantic lark with its ‘wild’ song, and then to the positively exotic gazelle, leopard, and dolphin. From the rather homely English air (flies, bees, birds), we move to foreign locations ‘Libyan dell’ and ‘Indian glade’, and from there to ‘tropic seas’. (Cod in the North Sea would have very different connotations from dolphins in the tropics.) Air, earth, and sea are all invoked to help express the variety of changing highly charged erotic feelings that the speaker remembers. The images are playful and preposterous, joyfully expressing the familiar poetic subject of sexual attraction and arousal in a way that makes it strange and new. Notice that in each case the image is more effective because the alliteration emphasizes it.

5 Rhyme

If a poem rhymes, then considering how the rhyme works is always important.

Rhyme schemes can be simple or highly intricate and complex; it will always be worth considering why a particular rhyme pattern was chosen and trying to assess its effects.

Activity 4

Click on ‘View document’ below to read ‘Love From the North’ (1862) by Christina Rossetti. What is the poem about, and how does the rhyme contribute to the meaning and overall effect?

I had a love in soft south land,
Beloved through April far in May;
He waited on my lightest breath,
And never dared to say me nay.

He saddened if my cheer was sad,
But gay he grew if I was gay;
We never differed on a hair,
My yes his yes, my nay his nay.

The wedding hour was come, the aisles
Were flushed with sun and flowers that day;
I pacing balanced in my thoughts:
‘It’s quite too late to think of nay.’ –

My bridegroom answered in his turn,
Myself had almost answered ‘yea’:
When through the flashing nave I heard
A struggle and resounding ‘nay’.

Bridesmaids and bridegroom shrank in fear,
But I stood high who stood at bay:
‘And if I answer yea, fair Sir,
What man art thou to bar with nay?’

He was a strong man from the north,

Light-locked, with eyes of dangerous grey:
'Put yea by for another time
In which I will not say thee nay.'

He took me in his strong white arms,
He bore me!on his horse away
O'er crag, morass, and hairbreadth pass,
But never asked me yea or nay.

He made me fast with book and bell,
With links of love he makes me stay;
Till now I've neither heart nor power
Nor will nor wish to say him nay. (Sisson, 1984, p.62)

'Love From the North' tells a simple story. A woman about to marry one man is whisked away by another, just as she is about to exchange vows. The form of the poem is very simple: the second and fourth lines of each of the eight 4-line stanzas rhyme. More significantly, because the last word of each stanza is 'nay', there is only one rhyme sound throughout. There are more internal rhymes relying on the same repeated sound, however, aren't there? Look at the last lines of stanzas 1, 2, 6, 7 and 8 where 'say' 'nay'; 'nay' 'nay'; 'say' 'nay'; 'yea' 'nay'; and 'say' 'nay' appear. In the second stanza, 'gay' occurs twice in line 2; stanza five and six both have 'yea' in line 3. What is the effect of this?

Do you think the effect might be to help over-simplify the story? Clearly the woman has doubts about the man from the south's devotion: he 'never dared' to say no to her. He seems to have no will of his own: he 'saddens' when she does, is 'gay' when she is, wants only what she does. On her wedding day she thinks: 'It's quite too late to think of nay'. But is she any happier with the strong man from the north? Who is he? Has he carried her off against her will? And what exactly do you make of the last stanza? Do the 'links of love' imply a chain? This strong-minded woman who imposed her will on the man from the south has 'neither heart nor power/Nor will nor wish' to say no to the man from the north. Is that good, or bad? And what do you make of the 'book and bell' with which she's made to stay? Certainly they imply something different from the conventional Christian marriage she was about to embark on in the middle of the poem – witchcraft, perhaps, or magic? And are the words 'Till now' particularly significant at the beginning of line 3 in the last stanza? Might they suggest a new resolve to break free?

How important is it to resolve such questions? It is very useful to ask them, but not at all easy to find answers. In fact, that is one of the reasons I like the poem so much. The language is very simple and so is the form – eight **quatrains** (or four-line stanzas) – and yet the more I think about the poem, the more interesting and ambiguous it seems. In my opinion, that is its strength. After all, do we always know exactly what we want or how we feel about relationships? Even if we do, is it always possible to put such feelings into words? Aren't feelings often ambivalent rather than straightforward?

It is also worth bearing in mind the fact that the poem is written in ballad form. A ballad tells a story, but it does only recount events – part of the convention is that ballads don't go into psychological complexities. It is likely that Rossetti chose this ancient oral verse form because

she was interested in raising ambiguities. But perhaps the point of the word ‘nay’ chiming throughout ‘Love From the North’ is to indicate the female speaker saying no to both men – the compliant lover and his opposite, the demon lover, alike? After all, ‘nay’ is the sound which gives the poem striking unity and coherence.

Keats's ‘Eve of St Agnes’ (1820) also tells a tale of lovers, but it isn't a ballad, even though the rhyme scheme of the first four lines is the same as Rossetti's quatrains. The stanzas are longer, and the form more complex and sophisticated. The rhyme pattern is the same throughout all 42 stanzas, the first two of which are reproduced for the following activity:

Activity 5

Click on ‘View document’ to see the first two stanzas of Keats's ‘Eve of St Agnes. How would you describe the rhyme scheme, and does it seem appropriate for the subject matter?

St. Agnes’ Eve – Ah bitter chill it was!
The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold;
The hare limp’d trembling through the frozen grass,
And silent was the flock in woolly fold:
Numb were the Beadsman’s fingers, while he told
His rosary, and while his frosted breath,
Like pious incense from a censer old,
Seem’d taking flight for heaven, without a death,
Past the sweet Virgin’s picture, while his prayer he saith.

His prayer he saith, this patient, holyman;
Then takes his lamp, and riseth from his knees,
And back returneth, meagre, barefoot,! wan,
Along the chapel aisle by slow degrees:
The sculptur’d dead, on!each side, seem to freeze,
Emprison’d in black purgatorial rails:
Knights, ladies, praying in dumb orat’ries,
He passeth by; and his weak spirit fails
To think how they may ache in icy hoods and mails.
(Owens and Johnson, 1998, p.380)

In comparison to the Rossetti poem the rhyme sounds form complex patterns, don't they? While ‘was’/‘grass’ in the first stanza and ‘man’/‘wan’ in the second do not quite produce a full rhyme (depending on your accent), the first and third lines do rhyme in subsequent stanzas. Using a letter of the alphabet to describe each new rhyme sound, we could describe the pattern like this: a b a b b c b c c (imagine sustaining that intricate patterning for 42 stanzas). This kind of formula is useful up to a point for showing how often the same sounds recur, and it does show how complicated the interweaving of echoing sounds is. But it says nothing about how the sounds relate to what is being said – and, as I have been arguing all along, it is the relationship between meaning and word choice that is of particular interest. To give a full answer to my own question, I'd really need to consider the function of rhyme throughout the poem. It would not be necessary to describe what happens in each stanza, but picking out particular pertinent examples would help me argue a case. With only the first two stanzas to work with, I could say that, if nothing

else, the intricate rhyme pattern seems appropriate not only for the detailed descriptions but also for the medieval, slightly gothic setting of the chapel where the holy man prays.

Activity 6

The extract attached below (click ‘View document’ to open) is from Tennyson's ‘Mariana’ (1830). Again, this comes from a longer poem, so it would be useful to look it up and read the rest if you have the opportunity.

With blackest moss the flower-plots
Were thickly crusted, one and all:
The rusted nails fell from the knots
That held the pear to the gable-wall.
The broken sheds looked sad and strange:
Unlifted was the clinking latch;
Weeded and worn the ancient thatch
Upon the lonely moated grange.
She!only said, ‘My life is dreary,
He cometh not,’ she said;
She said, ‘I am aweary, aweary,
I would that I were dead’
(Trilling and Bloom, 1973, p.396)

Read the extract and consider the following questions:

(a) Describe the rhyme in the stanza from Tennyson's ‘Mariana’.

(b) What is the first stanza about?

(a) As with the Keats poem, the rhyme scheme here is quite complicated. Using the same diagrammatic formula of a letter for each new rhyme sound, we could describe this as ‘a b a b c d d c e f e f. You might notice too that indentations at the beginning of each line emphasize lines that rhyme with each other: usually the indentations are alternate, except for lines 6 and 7, which form a couplet in the middle of the stanza. It is worth telling you too that each of the stanzas ends with a variation of the line ‘I would that I were dead’ (this is known as a **refrain)** so – as in Christina Rossetti's ‘Love From the North’ – a dominant sound or series of sounds throughout helps to control the mood of the poem.

(b) We may not know who Mariana is, or why she is in the lonely, crumbling grange, but she is obviously waiting for a man who is slow in arriving. The ‘dreary’/‘aweary’ and ‘dead’/‘said’ rhymes, which, if you read the rest of the poem, you will see are repeated in each stanza, convey her dejection and express the boredom of endless waiting. As with the stanzas from Keats's ‘Eve of St Agnes’, there is plenty of carefully observed detail – black moss on the flower-plots, rusty nails, a clinking latch on a gate or door – all of which description contributes to the desolation of the scene and Mariana's mood. Were the moated grange a lively, sociable household, the poem would be very different. Either Mariana would be cheerful, or her suicidal misery would be in

sharp contrast to her surroundings. It is always worth considering what settings contribute to the overall mood of a poem.

6 Poetic inversion

Poetic inversion, or changing the usual word order of speech, is often linked to the need to maintain a rhythm or to find a rhyme. We noticed Pope's poetic inversion in *An Essay on Criticism* and saw how the rhyme was intimately linked to the rhythm of the verse. The song ‘Dancing in the Street’, first recorded by Martha and the Vandellas in the 1960s, does violence to word order in the interests of rhyme – ‘There'll be dancing in the street/ A chance new folk to meet’ – but, because the words are sung to a driving rhythm, we are unlikely to notice how awkward they are. There's a convention that we recognize, however unconsciously, that prevents us from mentally re-writing the line as ‘a chance to meet new people’. (‘People’ rather than ‘folk’ would be more usual usage for me, but, as with the Pope example, this would mean that the rhythm too would be lost.)

7 Poems that don't rhyme

Are poems that don't rhyme prose? Not necessarily. Virginia Woolf (1882–1941), a novelist rather than a poet, and T.S. Eliot (1888–1965), known particularly for his poetry, both wrote descriptive pieces best described as ‘prose poems’. These look like short prose passages since there is no attention to line lengths or layout on the page, as there was, for example, in ‘Mariana’. When you study Shakespeare you will come across **blank verse**. ‘Blank’ here means ‘not rhyming’, but the term ‘blank verse’ is used specifically to describe verse in unrhyming iambic pentameters.

Although iambic pentameters resemble our normal speech patterns, in ordinary life we speak in prose. You‘ll notice if you look through Shakespeare's plays that blank verse is reserved for kings, nobles, heroes and heroines. They may *also* speak in prose, as lesser characters do, but commoners don't ever have speeches in blank verse. Shakespeare – and other playwrights like him – used the form to indicate status. It is important to recognize this convention, which would have been understood by his contemporaries – writers, readers, and audiences alike. So choosing to write a poem in blank verse is an important decision: it will elevate the subject. One such example is Milton's **epic** *Paradise Lost* (1667), a long poem in twelve Books describing Creation, Adam and Eve's temptation, disobedience and expulsion from Paradise. It sets out to justify the ways of God to man, so blank verse is entirely appropriate. This great epic was in Wordsworth's mind when he chose the same form for his autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*.

Activity 7

Click on ‘View document’ to compare the extract from Book XIII of *The Prelude*, where Wordsworth is walking up Mount Snowdon, with the extract from ‘The Idiot Boy’, one of his *Lyrical Ballads*. What effects are achieved by the different forms?

The!Prelude!(1799–1806),!Book!XIII,!ll.29–44

With forehead bent
Earthward, as if in opposition set
Against an enemy, I panted up
With eager pace, and no less eager thoughts.
Thus might we wear perhaps an hour away,
Ascending at loose distance each from each,
And I, as chanced, the foremost of the Band,
When at my feet the ground appear'd to brighten,
And with a step or two seem'd brighter still,
Nor had I time to ask the cause of this,
For instantly a Light upon the turf
Fell like a flash: I look'd about, and lo!
The Moon stood naked in the Heavens, at height
Immense above my head, and on the shore
I found myself of a huge sea of mist,
Which meek and silent, rested at my feet.
(Owens and Johnson, 1998, pp.169–7)

Both poems use iambic metre – an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable. The extract from *The Prelude* uses iambic pentameters, five metrical feet in each line, whereas 'The Idiot Boy' (like the ballad, 'Love From the North') is in tetrameters, only four, establishing a more sing-song rhythm. Other stylistic techniques contribute to the difference in tone too: the language of *The Prelude* is formal (Wordsworth's 'Ascending' rather than 'going up'), whereas 'The Idiot Boy' uses deliberately homely **diction**, and rhyme. Three simple rhyme words ring out throughout the 92 stanzas of the latter: 'Foy', 'boy' and 'joy' stand at the heart of the poem, expressing the mother's pride in her son. The moon features in each extract. In *The Prelude*, as Wordsworth climbs, the ground lightens, as it does in The Old Testament before a prophet appears. Far from being a meaningless syllable to fill the rhythm of a line, 'lo' heightens the religious parallel, recalling the biblical 'Lo, I bring you tidings of great joy': this episode from *The Prelude* describes a moment of spiritual illumination. Wordsworth's intentions in these two poems were quite different, and the techniques reflect that.

Other poems that don't use rhyme are discussed later in this unit ('Wherever I Hang'; 'Mona Lisa'; 'Poem'). Notice that they use a variety of rhythms, and because of that none can be described as blank verse.

8 Voice

Is the speaker in a poem one and the same as the writer? Stop and consider this for a few moments. Can you think of any poems you have read where a writer has created a character, or persona, whose voice we hear when we read?

Wordsworth's *The Prelude* was written as an autobiographical poem, but there are many instances where it is obvious that poet and persona are different. Charlotte Mew's poem, 'The Farmer's Bride' (1916) begins like this:

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.
(Warner, 1981, pp. 1–2)

Mew invents a male character here, and clearly separates herself as a writer from the voice in her poem. Some of the most well-known created characters – or personae – in poetry are Browning's dramatic monologues.

Activity 8

Consider the opening lines from three Robert Browning poems attached below (click 'View document'). Who do you think is speaking?

From 'Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister' (1842)
Gr-rr – there go, my heart's abhorrence!
Water your damned flower-pots, do!
If hate killed men, Brother Lawrence,
God's blood, would not mine kill you!
(Trilling and Bloom, 1973, p.500)

From 'My Last Duchess' (1842)
That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive…
(Trilling!and!Bloom,!1973,!p.502)

From 'Porphyria's Lover' (1842)
The sun set early in to-night,
The sullen wind was soon awake,
It tore the elm-tops down or spite,
And did its worst to vex the lake:
listened with heart fit to break.
(Jack!and!Fowler,!1988,!p.250)

Well, the first speaker isn't named, but we can infer that, like Brother Lawrence whom he hates, he's a monk. The second must be a Duke since he refers to his 'last Duchess' and, if we read to the end of the third poem, we discover that the speaker is a man consumed with such jealousy that he strangles his beloved Porphyria with her own hair. Each of the poems is written in the first person ('*my* heart's abhorrence'; 'That's *my* last Duchess'; *I* listened with heart fit to break'). None of the characters Browning created in these poems bears any resemblance to him: the whole point of a dramatic monologue is the creation of a character who is most definitely not the poet. Charlotte Mew's poem can be described in the same way.

Activity 9

Click on ‘View document’ below to read the extracts attached below from Anne Brontë’s Home’ and Grace Nichols's ‘Wherever I Hang’.

‘Home’ (1846) byAnne!Bronte

How brightly glistening in the sun
The woodland ivy plays!
While yonder beeches from their barks
Reflect his silver rays.

That sun surveys a lovely scene
From softly smiling skies;
And wildly through unnumbered trees
The wind of winter sighs:

Now loud, it thunders o’er my head,
And now in distance dies.
But give me back my barren hills
Where colder breezes rise;

Where scarce the scattered, stunted trees
Can yield an answering swell,
But where a wilderness of heath
Returns the sound as well.

For yonder garden, fair and wide,
With groves of evergreen,
Long winding walks, and border trim,
And velvet lawns between –

Restore to me that little spot,
With grey walls compassed round,
Where knotted grass neglected lies,
And weeds! Usurp the ground.

Though all around this mansion high
Invites the foot to roam,
And though its hall are fair within!–
Oh, give me back my HOME! (Barker, 1989, pp.95–6)

‘Wherever I Hang’ (1989) by Grace Nichol

I leave me people, me land, me home
For reasons, I not too sure
I forsake de sun
An de humming-bird splendor

Had big rats in de floorboard
So I pick up me new-world-self
And come, to this place call England
At first I feeling like I in a dream –
De misty grayness
I touching de walls to see if they real
They solid to de seam
And de people pouring from de underground system
Like beans
And when I look up to de sky
I see Lord Nelson high – too high to lie

And is so I sending home photos of myself
Among de pigeons and de snow
And is so I warding off de cold
And is so, little by little
I begin to change my calypso ways
Never visiting Nobody
Before giving them clear warning
And waiting me turn in queue
Now, after all this time I get accustom to de English life
But I still miss back-home side
To tell you de truth
I don't know really where I belaang
Yes, divided to de ocean
Divided to de bone
Wherever I hang me knickers !– that's my home. (Goodman,!1996,!p.292) **s**

(a) What do you make of the speaking voices in these stanzas?

(b) Are these poems personal private statements, or have the writers adopted personae, as Browning did in the examples above?

(a) Both poems are about exile, or quite simply, homesickness. They were written nearly 150 years apart, and that is reflected in the tone of speaking voice in each poem, in the diction, and in the choice of different verse forms. But what do you know about Anne Brontë, or Grace Nichols?

(b) Well, as far as their lives are concerned, we have this information. Anne Bronte was born in 1820. She went away to school and worked as a governess, but returned to her home between appointments, and died there in 1849. Grace Nichols was born in Guyana in 1950 and emigrated to Britain when she was 27. While they may have drawn on their experiences, there is no evidence to suggest that these are autobiographical poems. Both may well have felt

homesickness, but it would be rash to make the assumption that either writes in her own voice in these poems. When scholars examined manuscripts of Emily and Anne Brontë's poems, they discovered that many that had always been considered autobiographical had in fact been part of an epic story that the sisters wrote – their 'Gondal Saga' – and were spoken by characters in the story. When they published their poems, they simply removed references to the saga. This should be a salutary warning against assuming too quickly that the speaker of a poem is to be identified with the author.

Activity 10

What of Grace Nichols and 'Wherever I Hang'? Read the poem again carefully, paying attention to word choice and use of grammar, then ask what kind of character has been created.

The speaker is cheerful, adaptable, and not without a sense of humor. She's 'not too sure' why she left 'me people, me land, me home' which she remembers for its 'humming-bird splendor' but also for the less pleasant 'big rats in de floorboard'. There's a sense of amazement at 'de people pouring from de underground system', but the comment 'Like beans', given the emphasis of a line to itself, suggests that this is something that won't faze her. She continues to take things in her stride, changing her 'calypso ways' to learn English customs, such as not visiting 'Before giving them clear warning' and waiting 'me turn in queue'. There's a wry tone to 'clear warning' – a humorous suggestion that a visit might be a threat rather than a pleasure. Try reading both those lines with a standard English accent. It works well for the first line because of the use of grammar; but the Creole idiom of the next makes an English accent ridiculous. Instead of being preceded by 'the' (or 'de'), 'queue' appears without a definite article, making it sound slightly pompous and hinting at the speaker's amused contempt, even while she's prepared to conform to this English national characteristic.

Use of standard and Creole English dramatizes the poem's tensions. The speaker says she doesn't really know 'where I belaang' – 'belaang' here deliberately asserting her difference. In the last line, 'me knickers' instead of *'my* knickers' takes us back to 'me people, me land, me home' of the first line. But the very last phrase ' – that's my home' – comes down firmly in favor of standard English and the adopted country. She hangs her knickers up (on a washing line?) in England, so that is where she belongs.

Is the speaker one and the same as Grace Nichols? It would be a very rash assumption to make. The speaker of 'Wherever I Hang' has a flexible approach to difficulties as well as a sense of humor, qualities she may well share with the poet, but the speaker is very much an individual. One aspect of the poem that you might also like to consider is the reference in the title and the last line to the song 'Wherever I Hang My Hat', recorded by a number of male vocalists, Paul Young among others. 'Wherever I Hang' was first published in a volume called *Lazy Thought of a Lazy Woman and Other Poems* (1989); Nichols also wrote *The Fat Black Women* poems (1984). She herself may be black, but these are not self-portraits. Get into the habit of thinking of speakers as carefully created characters.

Imagine that you do not know the gender of the writer and then ask if the speaker of a poem is male or female. Can you find evidence within the poem itself? Nichols's speaker refers to her

underwear as knickers, so it seems to me safe to assume a female voice. But you may have automatically assumed that Anne Brontë's speaker was female simply because you know the poet is. Look back at ‘Home’ and see if you can find definitive evidence either way, remembering that this was a poem written for a character in the (no longer extant) ‘Gondal Saga’. Could the speaker have been a man?

Poems written in the first person are just as likely to be fiction as poems written in the third person. It is important never to assume that the ‘I’ of any poem is the direct voice of the poet.

9 Line lengths and line endings

Read the following prose extract taken from Walter Pater's discussion of the *Mona Lisa*, written in 1893:

She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants: and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has molded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands.

Activity 11

When W.B. Yeats was asked to edit *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892–1935* (1936), he chose to begin with this passage from Pater, but he set it out quite differently on the page. Before you read his version, write out the extract as a poem yourself. The exercise is designed to make you think about line lengths, where to start a new line and where to end it when there is no rhyme to give you a clue. There is no *regular* rhythm either, though I'm sure you will discover rhythms in the words, as well as repeated patterns. How can you best bring out these poetic features?

Of course, there is no right answer to this exercise, but you should compare your version to Yeats's, printed below, to see if you made similar decisions.

She is older than the rocks among which she sits;
Like the Vampire,
She has been dead many times,
And learned the secrets of the grave;
And has been a diver in deep seas,
And keeps their fallen day about her;
And trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants;
And, as Leda,
Was the mother of Helen of Troy,
And, as St Anne,
Was the mother of Mary;
And all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes,

And lives
Only in the delicacy
With which it has molded the changing lineaments,
And tinged the eyelids and the hands.

I wonder whether you used upper case letters for the first word of each line, as Yeats did? You may have changed the punctuation, or perhaps have left it out altogether. Like Yeats, you may have used ‘And’ at the beginnings of lines to draw attention to the repetitions: nine of the lines begin in this way, emphasizing the way the clauses pile up, defining and redefining the mysterious Mona Lisa. Two lines begin with ‘She’: while there was no choice about the first, beginning the third in the same way focuses attention on her right at the start of the poem. Yeats has used Pater's punctuation to guide his line endings in all but two places: lines 13 and 14 run on – a stylistic device known as **enjambment**. The effect is an interesting interaction between eyes and ears. While we may be tempted to read on without pausing to find the sense, the line endings and white space of the page impose pauses on our reading, less than the commas and semi-colons that mark off the other lines, but significant nevertheless.

Yeats's arrangement of the words makes the structure and movement of Pater's long sentence clearer than it appears when written as prose. The poem begins with age – she is ‘older than the rocks’ – and refers to ‘Vampire’, death, and ‘grave’ in the first lines. The decision to single out the two words ‘And lives’ in a line by themselves towards the end of the poem sets them in direct opposition to the opening; we have moved from great age and living death to life. The arrangement of lines 8–11 highlights her links with both pagan and Christian religions: the Mona Lisa was the mother of Helen of Troy and the Virgin Mary. The wisdom and knowledge she has acquired is worn lightly, nothing more than ‘the sound of lyres and flutes’, apparent only in the ‘delicacy’ of color on ‘eyelids and hands’.

The aim of the preceding exercise was to encourage you to think about form and structure even when a poem does not appear to follow a conventional pattern. Because you have now ‘written’ a poem and had the opportunity to compare it with someone else's version of the same words, you should begin to realize the importance of decisions about where exactly to place a word for maximum effect, and how patterns can emerge which will control our reading when, for example, successive lines begin with repetitions. It should have made you think about the importance of the beginnings of lines, as well as line endings. What has been achieved by using a short line here, a longer one there? How do these decisions relate to what is being said? These are questions that can usefully be asked of any poem.

Earlier, discussing the extract from Pope's *An Essay on Criticism*, I asked you to concentrate on the sound qualities of the poetry. Here, I want you to consider the visual impact of the poem on the page. It is a good thing to be aware of what a complex task reading is, and to be alive to the visual as well as the aural qualities of the verse.

Activity 12

Further exercise: taking Grace Nichols's ‘Wherever I Hang’, discussed in Activity 10, you could reverse the process carried out in the previous exercise by writing out the poem as prose. Then, covering up the original, you could re-write it as verse and compare your version with the original.

10 Comparing and contrasting

Often you will find that an assignment asks you to ‘compare and contrast’ poems. There's a very good reason for this, for often it is only by considering different treatments of similar subjects that we become aware of a range of possibilities, and begin to understand why particular choices have been made. You will have realized that often in the previous discussions I've used a similar strategy, showing, for example, how we can describe the rhyme scheme of ‘Love From the North’ as simple once we have looked at the more intricate patterning of Keats's ‘The Eve of St Agnes’ or Tennyson's ‘Mariana’. Anne Brontë's ‘Home’ and Grace Nichols's ‘Wherever I Hang’ treat the subject of exile in quite different ways, and looking at one can sharpen our understanding of what the other does.

Activity 13

View the document below and read the opening lines from two poems commemorating deaths. What can you identify to explain why they sound so very different?

‘Lycidas’ (1637) by John Milton

Yet once more, O ye laurels, and once more,
Ye myrtle brown, with ivy never sere,
I come to pluck your berries harsh and crude,
And with forced fingers rude
Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year.
Bitter constraint, and sad occasion dear,
Compels me to disturb your season due;
For Lycidasis dead, dead ere his prime,
Young Lycidas, and hath not left his peer.
(Bush,1966, p.141)

‘Felix Randal’ (between 1876 and1 889) by Gerard Manley Hopkins

Felix Randal the farrier, O is he dead then? my duty all ended,
Who have watched his mould of man, big-boned and hardy-handsome
Pining, pining, til time when reason rambled in it and some
Fatal four disorders, fleshed there, all contended?
(Gardner,!1953,!p.47)

If I had to identify one thing, I would say that the first begins more elaborately and with a more formal tone than the second. ‘Felix Randal’ tends to use language in an unusual way, but you

would probably agree that the first sentence is quite straightforward and sounds colloquial (or informal), as if the speaker has just overheard someone talking about Randal's death and wants to confirm his impression. ‘Lycidas’ opens quite differently. It is not immediately apparent what evergreens have to do with anything (in fact they work to establish an appropriately melancholy atmosphere or tone), and it isn't until line 8 that we learn of a death. The word ‘dead’ is repeated, and the following line tells us that Lycidas was a young man. While ‘Felix Randal’ has immediacy, the speaker of ‘Lycidas’ seems to find it hard to get going.

Both poems are **elegies** – poems written to commemorate death – and both poets are aware of writing within this convention, although they treat it differently.

Activity 14

What do the titles of the poems used in Activity 13 tell us about each poem, and how might they help us understand the different uses of the elegiac convention?

I think it would be apparent to most readers that ‘Felix Randall’ is simply a man's name, while ‘Lycidas’ is more mysterious. In fact Lycidas is a traditional pastoral name, but unless you know something about the classical pastoral tradition it might mean very little to you. The young man whose death Milton was commemorating was actually called Edward King, but, at the time he was writing, elegies were formal, public and impersonal poems rather than private expressions of grief. ‘Lycidas’ commemorates a member of a prominent family rather than a close friend of the poet's. Over two hundred years later, Hopkins, while working loosely within the same elegiac convention, adapts it. Felix Randal is an ordinary working man, not a public figure. In the seventeenth century it would have been unlikely that he would have been considered worthy of a poem like this.

If you were making a special study of elegies, there would be a great deal more to say. That's not the idea here, though. The point is that by comparing and contrasting the tone of the opening lines and the titles, and considering when the poems were written, we have come up with a number of significant differences.

Activity 15

Read the attached poem by Robert Browning (1812–1889; click ‘View document’ to open) carefully. Who is speaking, and who is being addressed?

Memorabilia (1855)

I

Ah, did you once see Shelley plain,
And did he stop and speak to you,
And did you speak to him again?
How strange it seems and new!

II

But you were living before that,
And also you are living after;
And the memory I started at –
My starting moves your laughter.

III

I crossed a moor, with a name of its own
And a certain use in the world no doubt,
Yet a hand's-breadth of it shines alone
'Mid the blank miles round about:

IV

For there I picked upon the heather
And there I put inside my breast
A moulted feather, an eagle-feather!
Well, I forget the rest. (Trilling and Bloom, 1973, p.542)

From the evidence of the poem we know that the speaker once walked across a moor, found an eagle's feather, and has a high regard for the poet Shelley (1792–1822). The person being addressed is not named, but we discover that he (or she) once met Shelley, and this alone confers status by association. The word 'you' ('your' in one instance) is repeated in 6 out of the first 8 lines. 'You' becomes a rhyme word at the end of the second line, so when we reach the word 'new' in line four – one of the two lines in the first stanzas that doesn't contain 'you' – the echo supplies the deficiency. 'You' clearly represents an important focus in the first half of the poem, but who exactly is 'you' ?

Thinking about this apparently straightforward question of who is being addressed takes us into an important area of critical debate: for each one of us who has just read the poem has, in one sense, become a person who not only knows who Shelley is (which may not necessarily be the case) but lived when he did, met him, listened to him, and indeed exchanged at least a couple of words with him. Each of us reads the poem as an individual, but the poem itself constructs a reader who is not identical to any of us. We are so used to adopting 'reading' roles dictated by texts like this that often we don't even notice the way in which the text has manipulated us.

Activity 16

Now read the Robert Browning poem again, this time asking yourself if the speaking voice changes in the last two stanzas, and if the person who is being addressed remains the same.

If the first half of the poem is characterized by the repetition of 'you' and the sense of an audience that pronoun creates, then the second half seems quite different in content and tone. The speaker is trying to find a parallel in his experience to make sense of and explain his feeling of awe; the change of tone is subtle. Whereas someone is undoubtedly being addressed directly

in the first stanza, in the third and fourth, readers overhear – as if the speaker is talking to himself.

At first the connection between the man who met Shelley and the memory of finding an eagle's feather may not be obvious, but there is a point of comparison. As stanza 2 explains, part of the speaker's sense of wonder stems from the fact that time did not stand still: ‘you were living before that, / And also you are living after’. The moor in stanza 3, like the listener, is anonymous – it has ‘a name of its own … no doubt’ – but where it is or what it is called is unimportant: only one ‘hand's-breadth’ is memorable, the spot that ‘shines alone’ where the feather was found. The poem is about moments that stand out in our memories while the ordinary daily stuff of life fades. It also acknowledges that we don't all value the same things.

Activity 17

Take another look at the poem. How would you describe its form?

The structure of the poem is perfectly balanced: of the four quatrains, two deal with each memory, so, although the nature of each seems quite different, implicitly the form invites us to compare them. Think about the way in which Browning introduces the eagle feather. How does he convince us that this is a rare find?

To begin with, the third and fourth stanzas make up one complete sentence, with a colon at the end of the third announcing the fourth; this helps to achieve a sense of building up to something important. Then we move from the visual image of a large space of moor to the very circumscribed place where the feather is found, but the reason why this ‘hand's-breadth’ shines out is delayed for the next two lines ‘For there I picked up on the heather’ – yes? what? – ‘And there I put inside my breast’ – well? – ‘A moulted feather’, ah (and notice the internal rhyme there of ‘feather’ with ‘heather’ which draws attention to and emphasizes the harmony of the moment), and then the word ‘feather’ is repeated and expanded: ‘an eagle-feather’ Clearly the feather of no other bird would do, for ultimately the comparison is of eagle to the poet; Browning knows Shelley through his poetry as he knows the eagle through its feather, and that feather presents a striking visual image.

There is an immediacy about the conversational opening of the poem which, I have suggested, deliberately moves into a more contemplative tone, possibly in the second stanza (think about it), but certainly by the third. We have considered some of the poetic techniques that Browning employs to convince us of the rarity of his find in the third and fourth stanzas. You might like to think more analytically about the word sounds, not just the rhyme but, for example, the repeated ‘ae’ sound in ‘breadth’ ‘heather’ ‘breast’ and ‘feather’. What, however, do you make of the tone of the last line? Try saying the last lines of each stanza out loud. Whether you can identify the metre with technical language or not is beside the point. The important thing is that ‘Well, I forget the rest’ sounds deliberately lame. After the intensity of two extraordinary memories, everything else pales into insignificance and, to reiterate this, the rhythm tails off. While the tone throughout is informal, the last remark is deliberately casual.

In order to come to an understanding of the poem, and to see how the sense of a reader in the text is constructed, we have discussed Browning's use of repetition, rhyme, rhythm, structure, and visual **imagery**. Our analysis has not by any means exhausted the poem's potential, but, as it is only through practice that we become confident readers of poetry, this is the moment to turn to something very different and see whether similar questions apply. 'Poem', by the American Frank O'Hara (1926–1966), was written in 1962, more than a hundred years after 'Memorabilia'.

Activity 18

Read the below 'Poem', by Frank O'Hara two or three times (click 'View document' to open), first to get a sense of what it's about, then as you re-read ask yourself if it has anything at all in common with 'Memorabilia'.

Lana Turner has collapsed!
I was trotting along and suddenly
It started raining and snowing
And you said it was hailing
but hailing hits you on the head
hard so it was really snowing and
raining and I was in such a hurry
to meet you but the traffic
was acting exactly like the sky
and suddenly I see a headline
LANA TURNER HAS COLLAPSED!
there is no snow in Hollywood
there is no rain in California
I have been to lots of parties
and acted perfectly disgraceful
but I never actually collapsed
oh Lana Turner we love you get up
(O'Hara,!1964,!p.78)

Your first thought may well have been that there are no similarities between the poems, and certainly in the long run there are probably more differences. Nevertheless, 'Poem' is also about hero worship of a kind – of a film star rather than a poet this time – and it too has a conversational tone as well as at least one reader in the poem, the 'you' who says it is hailing, the 'you' that the speaker is in 'such a hurry/to meet', and Lana Turner herself, to whom the last line is, comically, addressed.

One of the ways in which Browning achieved a sense of a speaking voice was in the repetition of 'and', stringing clauses of his sentences together so that they resemble spoken rather than written language. O'Hara also uses 'and' (seven times) as well as 'so' and 'but', which function in a similar way, joining ideas and clauses. We can't, however, talk of sentences in the same way here for, with the exception of two exclamation marks, there is no punctuation at all and, unlike Browning, O'Hara has not used capital letters to begin his lines. There is no rhyme either and, since we don't use rhyme schemes when we speak to each other in daily life, this too helps to create an informal tone. How is it that O'Hara has confidently conferred the title 'Poem' on his

work, then? What techniques has he used to ensure that we recognize that language is being used in a special way, or is this simply prose in disguise?

First, visually the words make a neat block of text on the page that we would not expect to find were we reading prose. In the absence of rhymes to govern line endings, though, are beginnings and endings of lines quite arbitrary? (If you have time, write out the poem as if it were prose, cover up the original, and then try to turn it back into verse as you did earlier with ‘Mona Lisa’. The same exercise would not work with ‘Memorabilia’, because the rhyme scheme there dictates the pattern.

How, then, is ‘Poem’ structured? Thinking about repetition helps, for once you notice repetition you begin to discern pattern. The arresting opening line, ‘Lana Turner has collapsed’, is repeated two-thirds of the way through, and the second time the upper case lettering of a news vendor's board is reproduced for our special attention, recreating the moment when the speaker sees it. The first part of the poem deals with ‘now’. There is a lot of weather, and I can't help feeling that had O‘Hara used the word ‘sleet’, there would have been no poem, for the deliberate patterning of

‘raining/snowing/hailing/hailing/snowing/raining’

in lines 3–7 is one of its great pleasures. Notice too the alliteration – ‘hailing’, ‘hit’, ‘head’ and ‘hard’ – recreating the effects of hail, especially as ‘hard’, coming at the beginning of a line, gets extra emphasis. Alliteration, like rhyme, is a special kind of patterning. The inventive image of the traffic ‘acting exactly like the sky’ – busy, unpleasant, coming from all directions – adds to the sense of movement, when suddenly in the midst of all the confusion the headline arrests the speaker's progress, and the poem. The last six lines are reflective, implicitly comparing ‘there’ with ‘here’ – there's no rain or snow in California, and the repeated sentence construction at the start of those two lines plays its part in slowing down the verse movement. The **pun** on meanings of ‘collapsed’ provides the comic ending to the poem.

The kind of analysis we‘ve been doing helps us to see how poems work. In each case, the apparently informal tone has been carefully achieved; in spite of the casual effect, each is highly organized. We have also begun to notice the way in which readers are constructed by the text, and this will always be important, whether we are reading poetry or prose.

Glossary

Alliteration	repetition of sounds, usually the first letters of successive words, or words that are close together. Alliteration usually applies only to consonants.
Anapest	*see under* **foot**.
Assonance	repetition of identical or similar vowel sounds.

Ballad	originally a song which tells a story, often involving dialogue. Characteristically, the storyteller's own feelings are not expressed.
Caesura	strong pause in a line of verse, usually appearing in the middle of a line and marked with a comma, semi-colon, or a full stop.
Couplet	pair of rhymed lines, often used as a way of rounding off a **sonnet**; hence the term ‘closing couplet’.
Dactyl	*see under* **foot**.
Dialogue	spoken exchange between characters, usually in drama and fiction but also sometimes in poetry.
Diction	writer's choice of words. Poetic diction might be described, for instance, as formal or informal, elevated or colloquial.
Elegy	poem of loss, usually mourning the death of a public figure, or someone close to the poet.
Ellipsis	omission of words from a sentence to achieve brevity and compression.
Enjambment	the use of run-on lines in poetry. Instead of stopping or pausing at the end of a line of poetry, we have to carry on reading until we complete the meaning in a later line. The term comes from the French for ‘striding’.
Epic	a long narrative poem dealing with events on a grand scale, often with a hero above average in qualities and exploits.
Epigram	witty, condensed expression. The closing **couplet** in some of Shakepeare's **sonnets** is often described as an epigram.
Foot	a unit of metre with a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. In the examples that follow, a stressed syllable is indicated by ‘/’, and an unstressed syllable by ‘x’: anapest: xx/; dactyl: /xx; iamb: x/; spondee: //; trochee: /x
Heroic couplet	iambic pentameter lines rhyming in pairs, most commonly used for satiric or didactic poetry, and particularly favoured in the eighteenth century.
Iamb	*see under* **foot**.
Iambic pentameter	a line consisting of five **iambs**.

Imagery	special use of language in a way that evokes sense impressions (usually visual). Many poetic images function as mental pictures that give shape and appeal to something otherwise vague and abstract; for example, ‘yonder before us lie/Deserts of vast Eternity’. **Simile** and **metaphor** are two types of imagery.
Metaphor	image in which one thing is substituted for another, or the quality of one object is identified with another. The sun, for Shakespeare, becomes ‘the eye of heaven’.
Metre	(from the Greek *metron*, 'measure’) measurement of a line of poetry, including its length and its pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. There are different metres in poetry. Most sonnets, for example, written in English are divided into lines of ten syllables with five stresses – a measure known as pentameter (from the Greek *pente* for ‘five’). The sonnet also tends to use a line (known as the iambic line) in which an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed one, as in this line: ‘If I should die, think only this of me’. Most sonnets, then are written in **iambic pentameters**.
Narrative	the telling of a series of events (either true or fictitious). The person relating these events is the narrator. However, it is often more usual in poetry to refer to ‘the speaker’.
Octave	group of eight lines of poetry, often forming the first part of a **sonnet**.
Ode	a poem on a serious subject, usually written in an elevated formal style; often written to commemorate public events.
Onomatopoeia	a word that seems to imitate the sound or sounds associated with the object or action, for example, ‘cuckoo’.
Ottava rima	a poem in eight-line stanzas, rhyming a b a b a b c c.
Personification	writing about something not human as if it were a person, for example ‘Busy old fool, unruly Sun,/Why dost thou thus,/Through windows and through curtains call onus?’.
Poetic inversion	reversing the order of normal speech in order to make the words fit a particular rhythm, or rhyme, or both.
Pun	double meaning or ambiguity in a word, often employed in a witty way. Puns are often associated with wordplay.
Quatrain	group of four lines of poetry, usually rhymed.
Refrain	a line or phrase repeated throughout a poem, sometimes with variations, often at the end of each stanza.

Rhyme	echo of a similar sound, usually at the end of a line of poetry. Occasionally, internal rhymes can be found, as in: ‘Sister, my sister, O *fleet, sweet* swallow’.
Rhyme scheme	pattern of rhymes established in a poem. The pattern of rhymes in a **quatrain**, for instance, might be ‘a b a b’ or ‘a b b a’.
Rhythm	the pattern of beats or stresses in a line creating a sense of movement. Sestet: group of six lines of poetry, often forming the second part of a **sonnet**.
Simile	image in which one thing is likened to another. The similarity is usually pointed out with the word ‘like’ or ‘as’: ‘My love is like a red, red rose’.
Sonnet	fourteen **iambic pentameter** lines with varying **rhyme schemes**.
Spondee	*see under* **foot**.
Syllable	single unit of pronunciation. ‘Sun’ is one syllable; ‘sunshine’ is two syllables.
Tercet	group of three lines in poetry, sometimes referred to as a triplet. **Trochee**: *see under* **foot**.
Turn	distinctive movement of change in mood or thought or feeling. In the **sonnet**, the turn usually occurs between the **octave** and the **sestet**, though the closing **couplet** in Shakespeare's sonnets often constitutes the turn.
Villanelle	an intricate French verse form with some lines repeated, and only two rhyme sounds throughout the five three-line stanzas and the final four-line stanza.

Acknowledgements

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the following sources for permission to reproduce material in this unit:

Text

Grace Nichols, (1989), ‘Wherever I hang’, *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman and Other Poems*, Virago Press. By kind permission of the author

Frank O’Hara, (1962), ‘Poem’, *Lunch Poems*, By permission, City Lights Books, San Francisco

Unit Image

kris247: Flickr.com [http://www.flickr.com/photos/kris247/18819091/]

References

Abrams, M.H. (1971) *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Barker, J.R.V. (ed.) (1985) *The Brontes: Selected Poems*, Dent.

Bush, D. (ed.) (1966) *Milton: Poetical Works*, Oxford University Press.

Bygrave, S. (ed.) (1998) *Romantic Writings*, The Open University.

Clough, A.H. (1890) *Poems*, Macmillan.

Gardner, W.H. (1953) *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, Penguin.

Gibson, J. (ed.) (1976) *The Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy*, Macmillan.

Goodman, L. (1996) *Literature and Gender*, The Open University.

Gray, R. (1990) *American Poetry of the Twentieth Century*, Longman.

Hutchinson, T. (ed.) (1936) (revised 1969 by E. De Selincourt) *Wordsworth: Poetical Works*, Oxford University Press.

Jack, I. and Fowler, R. (eds) (1988) *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, vol. III *Bells and Pomegranates*, Clarendon Press.

Matterson, S. and Jones, D. (2000) *Studying Poetry*, Arnold. O'Hara, F. (1964) *Lunch Poems*, City Lights Books.

Owens, W.R. and Johnson, H. (eds) (1998) *Romantic Writings: An Anthology*, The Open University.

Pater, W. (1893) (1998) *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. Adam Phillips,Oxford University Press.

Regan, S. (1997) 'Form and Meaning in Poetry: The Sonnet', in *A103 An Introduction to the Humanities*, Block 1 'Form and Reading', The Open University.

Sisson, C.H. (1984) *Christina Rossetti: Selected Poems*, Carcanet.

Trilling, T. and Bloom, H. (1973) *Victorian Prose and Poetry*, Oxford University Press.

Wain, J. (ed.) (1990) *The Oxford Library of English Poetry*, vol.II, Oxford University Press / Guild Publishing.

Warner, V. (ed.) (1981) *Charlotte Mew: Collected Poems and Prose*, Virago Press. Yeats, W.B. (1936) *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892–1935*, Clarendon Press.