

# sense and *sensitivity*

A Guide to Unseen Poetry for the  
GCE 'O' and 'N' Level Exam



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## CONTENTS PAGE

Chapter 1. Introduction to Reading Poetry	7
<b>Section I. Getting the Sense of the Poem</b>	
Chapter 2. The SMART Way to Understanding Poetry	15
<b>Section II. Sensitivity to Form</b>	
Chapter 3. Genres in Poetry	32
<b>Section III. Sensitivity to Words and Figurative Language</b>	
Chapter 4. Word Choice	43
Chapter 5. Simile and Metaphor	48
Chapter 6. Symbolism and Personification	53
Chapter 7. Hyperbole	59
<b>Section IV. Sensitivity to Word Order</b>	
Chapter 8. Word Order and Parallelism	67
Chapter 9. Juxtaposition, Oxymoron and Irony	72
Chapter 10. Capitalisation, Punctuation and Spelling	78

## **Section V. Sensitivity to Sound**

Chapter 11. Sound Devices 88

Chapter 12. Rhythm and Rhyme 95

## **Section VI. Sensitivity to Development**

Chapter 13. Development of Story and Conflict 105

Chapter 14. Development of Character 111

Chapter 15. Writing the Unseen Essay 116

**Practice Exercises** 124

**Appendix A: A Survey of Singapore Literature in English (A Personal Overview)** 137

**Appendix B: A Glossary of Literary Terms** 143

**Acknowledgements** 146

**Index** 151

# CHAPTER 1:

## *Introduction to Reading Poetry*

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### 1.1 Trigger Activity—*What is a Poem?*

#### Exercise 1A

Take a look at the following three texts. One of them is the original poem “As the Cat” written by William Carlos Williams.

Text A	Text B	Text C
As the cat climbed over the top of  the jamcloset first the right forefoot  carefully then the hind stepped down  into the pit of the empty flowerpot	As the cat climbed over the top of the jamcloset first the right forefoot carefully then the hind stepped down into the pit of the empty flowerpot	As the cat climbed over the top of the jamcloset, first the right forefoot carefully then the hind stepped down into the pit of the empty flowerpot.

#### Questions for discussion

1. Which text more closely represents a poem? Which text more closely represents prose?
2. What are some characteristics of a poem that differentiate it from prose?
3. Which text do you think is best composed (i.e. its arrangement best suits its meaning)? Why?

### 1.2 The Different Functions of Poems

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a poem is a “piece of writing in which the expression of feelings and ideas is given intensity by particular attention to diction (sometimes involving rhyme), rhythm, and imagery.” The term emerged in the late fifteenth century from the Greek term, *poiētēs*, which means “create.”

Poems refer to a specific genre of literary writing distinguished from prose and drama. The following are some common functions of poems:

#### 1. Emotive function

- A poem expresses deep emotions about the world as well as stirs the reader’s emotions.

- “Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility.” —William Wordsworth
- “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.” —T. S. Eliot

## 2. Aesthetic function

- A poem is aesthetically composed—each choice of word, arrangement of words, the use of rhyme, rhythm and other stylistic devices work to convey its meaning.
- “I wish our clever young poets would remember my homely definitions of prose and poetry; that is prose, words in their best order; poetry, the best words in the best order.” —S.T. Coleridge

## 3. Self-Discovery function

- A poem pushes us to reflect about our lives and discover something about ourselves.
- “I have never started a poem yet whose end I knew. Writing a poem is discovering.” —Robert Frost

## 4. Revelatory function

- A poem reveals insights about the world. It can work to defamiliarise everyday reality and push us to see things with a fresh lens.
- “The poet is the priest of the invisible.” —Wallace Stevens
- “A revelation in words by means of words.” —Wallace Stevens

## 5. Critical function

- A poem critiques existing social systems and values.
- “Poetry is, at bottom, a criticism of life.” —Matthew Arnold

Why do we read and write poetry? In the movie *Dead Poets Society*, Literature teacher Mr Keating tells his students:

“We don’t read and write poetry because it’s cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. And the human race is filled with passion. And medicine, law, business, engineering—these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love—these are what we stay alive for.”

To what extent do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

Exercise 1B:

**“How to Fly the Singapore Flag” by Daren Shiau**

last week of July,  
the Straits Times bore an article with a simple tag –  
it told us: How to Fly the Singapore Flag

it told us that  
we could display it in August  
but remove it by September  
no other flag or emblem above, or to its right  
no words or graphics upon it, and if it might  
be torn or worn  
hand it to the RC;  
if not, wash it separately –  
dry it indoors

i’ve seen it flown at construction sites,  
on bamboo poles outside provision shops,  
at farm-huts in Lim Chu Kang  
and the neon brothels in Geylang

i’ve seen it planted on a lonely crane, hanging  
over Shenton Way

and grasped in a toddler’s sweaty palms  
waving it frantically as her mother held sway,  
refusing to let it be coaxed away

– we cannot decide how a flag is to be flown;  
we can only raise it, give it winds  
and let it make change, on its own

**Question**

1. What different functions does the poem serve? Complete the table below.

The five functions of a poem	Examples from the text
1. <b>Emotive function</b> —what emotions does the speaker express?	
2. <b>Aesthetic function</b> —what interesting word choice, imagery and other techniques are used to convey the poem’s overall meaning?	

<b>3. Self-discovery function</b> —what memories are evoked as you read the poem? How does it push you to reflect on your own experiences?	
<b>4. Revelatory function</b> —what does the poem suggest about society and its people?	
<b>5. Critical function</b> —what could the poem be critical of and why?	

### Things to Note:

The five functions are not exhaustive. A poem may also not concern itself with all the five functions. For example, some poems place more emphasis on its aesthetic function while others on its critical function.

### 1.3 Making Observations about a Poem

Let's start with the first and most important skill. Before proceeding to understanding or analysing the poetry, we want to emphasise that the most important tool is your power of observation.

The following is a strategy you can apply whenever you encounter any poem:

#### 1. Read the poem once through.

#### 2. Make observations: I notice...

Now read it a second time and this time, annotate the poem by jotting down what you notice about:

- **The poem's title**—what does the title suggest?
- **The beginning of the poem**—what is described in the first line? What does it suggest?
- **The lines and stanzas**—what is striking about the arrangement of lines and stanzas?
- **Repeated words or ideas**—what words or ideas are emphasised?
- **Unusual or interesting words**—what unusual words are there? What do they suggest?
- **Connecting words**—what are three to five pairs of words that connect? What idea is emphasised?
- **Sounds**—what words contribute to sound in the poem? What overall feeling is created?
- **The ending of the poem**—what is described in the last line? What main idea stands out at the end?

#### 3. Respond to the text: I wonder... I think... I feel...

Imagine you were interviewing the author, what questions would you have? What feelings are evoked as you read the text. Use the following phrases as a start: I wonder... I think... I feel...

#### 4. Interpret:

Now pull your observations and responses together. What do you think the poem is about? How do its different elements work together to convey its overall meaning?

#### Exercise 1C:

#### **"Casabianca" by Felicia Hemans**

The boy stood on the burning deck  
Whence all but he had fled;  
The flame that lit the battle's wreck  
Shone round him o'er the dead.

Yet beautiful and bright he stood,  
As born to rule the storm;  
A creature of heroic blood,  
A proud, though child-like form.

The flames rolled on—he would not go  
Without his Father's word;  
That father, faint in death below,  
His voice no longer heard.

He called aloud—'say, Father, say  
If yet my task is done?'  
He knew not that the chieftain lay  
Unconscious of his son.

'Speak, father!' once again he cried,  
'If I may yet be gone!'  
And but the booming shots replied,  
And fast the flames rolled on.

Upon his brow he felt their breath,  
And in his waving hair,  
And looked from that lone post of death  
In still yet brave despair.

And shouted but once more aloud,  
'My father! must I stay?'  
While o'er him fast, through sail and shroud,  
The wreathing fires made way.

They wrapt the ship in splendour wild,  
They caught the flag on high,  
And streamed above the gallant child,  
Like banners in the sky.

There came a burst of thunder-sound—  
The boy—oh! where was he?  
Ask of the winds that far around  
With fragments strewed the sea!—

With mast, and helm, and pennon fair,  
That well had borne their part—  
But the noblest thing which perished there  
Was that young faithful heart.



## Questions

1. Make observations: Note your observations by completing the template below

<b>Title</b> What does the title suggest?	<b>Repeated Words or Ideas</b> What words or ideas are emphasised?	<b>Unusual Words</b> What unusual words are there? What do they suggest?
<b>Beginning</b> What is the first line? What does it suggest?	<b>Observation:</b> I notice...	<b>Connecting Words</b> What are three to five pairs of words that connect? What idea is emphasised?
<b>Lines and Stanzas</b> What is striking about the arrangement of lines and stanzas?	<b>Ending</b> What is the last line? What main idea stands out at the end?	<b>Sounds</b> What words contribute to sound in the poem? What overall feeling is created?

2. Responding: Jot down your thoughts in the space below.

I wonder...

I think...

I feel...

3. Interpreting: Combine your observations and responses to interpret the text.

What do you think the poem is about?

How do its different elements work together to convey its overall meaning?

### 1.4 How to Read Poetry: A Systematic Framework

Learning to make observations about poetry is the most basic and fundamental skill to reading poetry.

What happens after this? The primary purpose of this book is to sharpen your powers of observation by developing your sense and sensitivity to poetry.

Our systematic framework starts from getting a big-picture understanding or sense of the poem to critical close reading of the aesthetic composition of the text. In short, our framework involves six stages corresponding to the sections of this book:

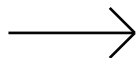
#### SENSE

and

#### SENSITIVITY

#### Getting the sense of the poem:

- Subject Matter
- Mood
- Attitude
- Reason
- Tension



#### Sensitivity to:

- Form (the genres of poetry)
- Words (word choice, similes, metaphors, personification, hyperbole, symbolism)
- Word Order and Punctuation (word order inversion, parallelism, oxymoron, juxtaposition, punctuation)
- Sound (rhythm, rhyme, sound devices)
- Development in story, conflict and characters