SONGS OF OURSELVES:
THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE INTERNATIONAL EXAMINATIONS ANTHOLOGY OF POETRY IN ENGLISH

IGCSE SYLLABUS 0486
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NOTES FOR TEACHERS ON THE SET POEMS

FOR EXAMINATION IN JUNE AND NOVEMBER (Years 2010, 2011, 2012)

[*NOTE: there is a separate document about the different selection of poems set for examination in years 2007, 2008 and 2009.*]

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Introduction: How to use these Notes

There are three key principles on which the format of these support materials is based:

1. The first is the fundamental assumption that no such materials can replace the teacher. It is the teacher's task to introduce the poem to the students and help them to form their own personal responses to what they read. Examiners can easily differentiate between students who have genuinely responded to literature for themselves and those who have merely parroted dictated or packaged notes. Teachers, establishing their dialogues in the classroom, need to encourage and trust students to arrive at their own points of view, insisting only that these shall based firmly on what is being studied. **This of course immediately rules out any thought of notes of 'prepared' answers to be memorised.**

2. The notes take for granted that each poem is unique and must be treated in a unique fashion. Examiners are often dismayed at the way some students seem to have been trained to follow strict agendas when dealing with poems, such as dealing first with imagery, then sentence structure, then prosody and so on, whatever the poem and whatever the question. Approaches such as this are almost always simplistic and superficial. By contrast, we wish to encourage students to identify what is *special* about a poem, what impact it makes on *them*, and work outwards from that perception. They shouldn't think of 'content' and 'style' as discrete areas to be ticked off a list; but instead should be encouraged to think of them together. So in these Notes students are constantly being enjoined to look simultaneously not only at *what* is said, but *how* it is said.

3. Each poem is considered to have a universal appeal, and the Notes try only to introduce extraneous knowledge insofar as it might help students to appreciate the poem. If there is or might be an underlying private concern, as for example in the case of Hardy's 'The Voice', biographical references are mentioned but deliberately downplayed to prevent this interfering with the direct communication between the poet and the twenty-first century reader in whatever part of the world s/he happens to be.

With this in mind, the notes on each poem – which are addressed to the teacher – are divided into four sections:

Background aims at putting the poem briefly into some sort of context. This can be embroidered as much or as little as the teacher sees fit. It is most important, however, that it should be dealt with quite quickly. Precious time should rather be spent on the poem itself. Teachers should remember that knowledge of historical/biographical context is *not* a formal Assessment Objective in this syllabus; students are not expected to show knowledge of it in the exam (not least as there is always the risk of their wasting valuable time in regurgitating second-hand details – for which they will gain no credit).

Teacher notes to assist a first reading aims at clarifying some areas of potential difficulty/obscurity mainly by simple glosses.

Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole is the most important section. It gives some suggestions to teachers for ways to get students to

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work individually or in pairs/groups on aspects of the poem which they can then discuss together. In the spirit of the syllabus, its aim is always to encourage students to deepen *their own* response to what they read. So, much of this section is a series of questions. These might be used in different ways. Teachers might allow the students to work through the questions (or their own modified version of them) as preparation for a lesson when answers can be compared and a discussion developed. Alternatively, the questions might be used as a basis for group or pair work within the lesson. They could also be used as a revision exercise *after* the teaching had been done. They are, in short, to be used at the teacher's discretion according to the individual circumstances of the class.

The final section, *Thematic Links between set poems in the anthology,* might be used as a route finder, to determine the order in which the poems are studied. This syllabus does not specifically require a comparison of poems, but sometimes exam questions might ask for treatment of *two* poems within one answer. Teachers might also use the thematic links guidance for encouraging such joint treatment. (For a few poems some suggestions for possible 'wider' reading have also been added. CIE is not responsible for the content of any websites referred to in this document.)

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1. Thomas Hardy: The Voice

Background

'The Voice' is one of the extraordinary group of poems written by Hardy between 1912 and 1913 after the death of his first wife, Emma. It is well documented that their marriage, especially in later years, was not a happy one. Nevertheless, her death was a real shock to Hardy. He had not anticipated it and may well have felt guilty about the lack of care he showed when she first became ill. He wrote: 'I wrote just after Emma died, when I looked back at her as she had originally been, and when I felt miserable lest I had not treated her considerately in later life. However, I shall publish them as the only amends I can make.' He also wrote in a letter: 'In spite of the differences between us, which it would be affectation to deny, & certain painful delusions she suffered from at times, my life is intensely sad without her.' In his bereavement, he often pictured Emma as she was in earlier years.

Teacher notes to assist a first reading

The poem is written using the second person**,** addressing the deceased woman herself. Much of the impact of the poem derives from its metrical complexity and its extended rhyming system. At this level, students are not expected to be able to do a sophisticated analysis of this, nor to know the technical vocabulary to describe it, unless, of course, they are able and ready to face the challenge. However, they should be able to respond to the way the rhythms communicate and define the poet's changing emotions.

Stanza 1: The syntax is quite convoluted but the sense clear, that is that the dead woman is trying to tell the poet that she is now like she was when they first met and they were in love, rather than the person she had become in later years.

Stanza 2: While the poem mostly concentrates on the woman's voice, we see here a poignant attempt at conjuring up from his memory a visual image of his wife, in a specific locality associated with his earlier deep feelings for her.

Line 11: *wistlessness*: a coinage by Hardy. The word 'wistful' is common enough. Its primary meaning is 'closely attentive'. So probably, the word 'wistlessness' suggests a 'fading away'.

Line 13: *Thus I*: introduces an image of the poet's state of mind as his brief vision of his wife fades.

Line 15*: thorn*: any bush with thorns, or perhaps, in this context, many bushes like brambles. There is no need to be specific; it is a metaphor for his state of mind.

from norward: from a northerly direction

Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Suggestions for students to work on individually or in pairs or groups and then discuss together.

- Get students to reflect on the biographical background of the poem and explore together how they think the poet is feeling as he writes the first

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stanza. The answer might not be simple. How much of this is communicated by the sound of the verse and the arrangement of the words? Students might consider, for example, the way the repetition of the words 'call to me' extends the length of the line and the effect of the prevailing metrical pattern on the tone of the stanza.

- Ask students to read the second stanza. How would they read out aloud the question which opens the stanza? How does the poet communicate his eagerness to bring back the memory of his wife, when she was younger, as he wants to remember her?

- Students might consider the change of tone in the third stanza considering how the poet's mood has changed and why, how this is communicated so strongly to the reader, and what the image of the breeze means to them,

- Ask students to consider the third line of the third stanza and write down what, at the simplest level, the words mean to them. Then, they might discuss what the way the poet has expressed this idea adds to their understanding and appreciation of his feelings.

- Get students to consider how the layout of the last stanza is completely different and what visual image is created.

- Get students to spend time considering the very last line of the poem and its effects.

Thematic Links with set poems

Relationships: *Dover Beach*, *Amends*, *Full Moon and Little Frieda*, *First Love*, *Marrysong, So, We'll Go No More A-Roving*, *Sonnet 43, Sonnet 29*

Marriage: *Dover Beach*, *Marrysong*, *Sonnet 43*

Time: *Time*, *Dover Beach*, *On the Grasshopper and the Cricket*, *So, We'll Go No More A-Roving, Sonnet 29*

Descriptions of nature: *Time, Amends*, *Full Moon and Little Frieda, Lament*, *On the Grasshopper and the Cricket*, *The Flower-Fed Buffaloes, Report to Wordsworth*, *First Love*, *Sonnet 29*

Strong memories: *Time, Full Moon and Little Frieda*, *First Love*

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2. Allen Curnow: Time

Background

Allen Curnow, who died in 2001, is one of the most celebrated New Zealand poets. This poem was written while he was still resident in Christchurch. However, it is included in his collection *Early Days Yet* which was published in 1997. These poems, both old and recent, had a thematic connection. They appear in reverse chronological order and are introduced by a quotation from Samuel Butler's *Erewhon:* 'The Erewhonians say that we are drawn through life backwards; or again that we go onwards into the future as into a dark corridor.' Allen Curnow once said that some of his poetry tried to explore 'the private and the unanswerable'. This poem might answer this description.

Teacher notes to assist a first reading

The first four stanzas might be regarded initially as containing random, almost subliminal, memories and individual significances need not be analysed at this stage, in too much detail.

Line 4*: Lupins* are a common sight on the South Island of New Zealand where they have become wild.

Line 5: *sole-charge teachers* are found in about 8% of primary schools in New Zealand. These are usually rural schools in isolated villages which consist of only one class and one teacher.

The last line 'I am … the Beginning and the End' is derived from the Bible: Revelation 22, v.13. There are also echoes of 'East Coker' (Eliot's *Four Quartets*) with its closing lines 'In my end is my beginning'.

The poem is in rhyming triplets, unusual in that all three lines of each stanza rhyme.

Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Suggestions for students to work on individually or in pairs or groups and then discuss together.

- Students might skip to the fifth stanza and discuss the metaphor/simile of the mountains and the mist. They might start by thinking why the poet compares the images of the first four stanzas to 'mist'. There may be more than one reason. A clue to some of the implications is in the last line of this stanza. Together students might try to work out the meaning of this line.

- At this stage in the students' investigation, it might be good for them to clarify what they understand by the phrase 'conscious carrier'.

- Now go back over the first four stanzas and look again at all those images. Each student might choose one they like and talk about what it represents to him or her and how it appeals to the senses.

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- Students might examine the images in greater detail They might try to compose a similar triplet, using memories of their own but using the same structure of verse. These could be shared.

- This might be a good time to consider the tenses in the poem. It is set resolutely in the present with 'I am' – but are there anywhere references to the past and the future? What are the implications of this exploration of Time?

- Ask students to look at the alliterative patterns in the verse and consider their effects.

- Discuss together the last stanza advising them that it may not be possible to tie down the full meaning precisely. One way for them to approach the whole poem might be for each of them to make a statement entirely in their own words about what the poem has communicated to them about Time. They might share these and compile a short paragraph of what the poem says to the group. The group might also make a list of things they do not understand and put this to other groups. They might not get them answered entirely to their satisfaction, but, if so, they might recall Curnow's phrase: 'the private and unanswerable'. Does that seem unfair to students? Or is it the nature of poetry?

Thematic Links with set poems

Time: *The Voice*, *Dover Beach*, *On the Grasshopper and the Cricket*, *So, We'll Go No More A-Roving*, *Sonnet 29*

Strong Memories: *The Voice*, *Full Moon and Little Frieda*, *First Love*

The Metaphysical: *Dover Beach*, *Amends*, *Full Moon and Little Frieda*, *On the Grasshopper and the Cricket*

Descriptions of nature: *The Voice*, *Amends, Full Moon and Little Frieda*, *Lament*, *On the Grasshopper and the Cricket*, *The Flower-Fed Buffaloes*, *Report to Wordsworth*, *First Love*, *Sonnet 29*

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3. Matthew Arnold: Dover Beach

Background

This poem was written in June 1851 shortly after Arnold visited Dover on holiday with his newly married wife, Lucy. However, it is perfectly legitimate – some would say preferable – to read the poem without reference to these biographical details. What is evident is that, in the poem, Arnold's agnostic approach to religion is very evident and clearly of great concern to him.

Teacher notes to assist a first reading

Line 3: *straits*: the strait(s) of Dover is the narrowest part of the English Channel just before it becomes the North Sea. The coast of France can often be seen over the water from Dover.

Line 6: can be taken as addressed to his companion, his new bride, in his hotel.

Line 11: *high strand*: the upper part of the beach

Line 15: Sophocles was a Greek tragedian. On several occasions he compares the misery of Man to the ebb and flow of his local sea, the Aegean. Here is just one example from the play *Antigone*:

'When a house has once been shaken by the gods, no form of ruin is lacking, but it spreads over the bulk of the race, just as, when the surge is driven over the darkness of the deep by the fierce breath of Thracian sea-winds, it rolls up the black sand from the depths, and the wind-beaten headlands that front the blows of the storm give out a mournful roar.'

Line 17: *turbid*: muddy; can be used figuratively to suggest muddy or confused thought.

Line 20: *this distant northern sea*: the English Channel as distinct from the southern sea of Sophocles, the Aegean.

Line 21: *The Sea of Faith*: a change to a metaphorical Sea – that of certainty of belief. At first it is depicted at high tide, later retreating.

Line 23: *girdle furled*: a belt or band, rolled up

Line 29: again reminding us that he is addressing the poem to his wife at Dover.

Lines 30-31: one might expect the couple to be optimistic as they start out on a holiday at the beginning of their married life together.

Line 35: *darkling*: dark, shadowy

Lines 36-37: Arnold seems to evoke here the picture of a battle by night. The armies are *ignorant* because, unable to tell who is their friend and who their foe, they are totally confused. It has been suggested that the poet refers to the battle of Epipolae in the Peloponnesian War, but the exact reference is unimportant.

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Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Suggestions for students to work on individually or in pairs or groups and then discuss together.

- Get students to read together the first stanza. They might try to describe what they see in their mind's eye. An artist among them might like to paint it. They should try to describe the atmosphere, and how the sound of the stanza contributes to it. (Spend a little time on this last question.)

- Get students to consider how the atmosphere changes or develops in the second stanza, again considering the sounds.

- Ask students what they understand by the phrase *The eternal note of sadness* in line 14, and how it is connected with the imagery of the movement of the sea. Does it fit in with the atmosphere that has been built up so far?

- The phrase is developed in the allusion to Sophocles. Students should make sure they understand this reference. Ask them in what ways the constant ebb and flow of the tides make a good image for 'human misery'.

- Students might try to explain in their groups what they think Arnold means by 'the Sea of Faith'. They should look at the 3 lines of the stanza and explore the images in it, then contrast them with the images in the remaining lines of the stanza.

- It is generally understood that Arnold is bewailing the lack of certainty in life. He was writing in the nineteenth century. Do students feel the same about life today, in the twenty-first century? Think perhaps about certainties in moral behaviour, of religion, of hope.

- Students might picture the couple standing at their bedroom window and feel the force of the words of the opening exclamation in the last stanza. How do they feel about Arnold's destruction of the 'dreams'? Do they think he is realistic or pessimistic? How does the verse communicate to them his pain?

  Get students to think about the image which ends the poem. How does it fit in with and/or extend their understanding of the main theme of the poem?

Thematic Links with set poems

Time: *The Voice, Time, On the Grasshopper and the Cricket, So, We'll Go No More A-Roving, Sonnet 29*

Relationships: *The Voice, Amends, Full Moon and Little Frieda, First Love, Marrysong, So, We'll Go No More A-Roving, Sonnet 43, Sonnet 29*

Marriage: *The Voice, Marrysong, Sonnet 43*

The present state of the world: *Lament, The Flower-Fed buffaloes, Report to Wordsworth*

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The Metaphysical: *Time*, *Amends*, *Full Moon and Little Frieda*, *On the Grasshopper and the Cricket*

The Moon: *Amends, Full Moon and Little Frieda*, *So, We'll Go No More A-Roving*, *Sonnet 29*

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4. Adrienne Rich: Amends

Background

Adrienne Rich (born in Baltimore in 1929) once wrote:'Poetry is, among other things, a criticism of language. In setting words together in new configurations, in the mere, immense shift from male to female pronouns, in the relationship between words created through echo, repetition, rhythm, rhyme, it lets us hear our words in a new dimension.'

These observations might be used to inform a study, not only of this poem but most of the others in the collection.

Teacher notes to assist a first reading

Nights like this: Teachers might recall the opening lines of Act 5 of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*:

> 'The moon shines bright. In such a night as this,
> When the sweet wind did gently kiss the trees
> And they did make no noise – in such a night . . .'

The scene is clear and students might be encouraged to picture the way the moon lights up various features as it progresses through the sky; but the moon is personified throughout the poem and students will need to discover the sensuous way her actions are described for themselves.

Line 11: *hangared fuselage*: the body of an aeroplane in a hangar

Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

- Get students to picture the scene.
- They should read again the first three lines, considering what tone is created (and what creates it) and what the place is of this brief description in the poem as whole – that is, before we settle into the description of the illumination of the moon.
- Next, they might chart the progress of the moon, noting down the features it covers.
- The most important exploration of the poem will be in exploring the way the moonlight is personified. Students might write down the verbs which Rich uses to describe the actions of the moonlight. They might discuss together how the moon is portrayed.
- Ask students to consider the effect of the repetition of 'as it'?
- The phrase changes to 'as if' at the end. Do the students think this makes a satisfying end to the poem? Does the last line place a different emphasis on the meaning of the poem for them? The title is 'Amends'. What does it mean for the students?

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- Get students to discuss together which of these words (or similar) – *sensuous; mysterous; peaceful; soothing; disturbing* – best describe the whole poem for them, and then to try to explain how Rich's poetry has made them feel this way.

Thematic Links with set poem

Relationships: *The Voice*, *Dover Beach*, *Full Moon and Little Frieda*, *First Love*, *Marrysong*, *So, We'll Go No More A-Roving*, *Sonnet 43*, *Sonnet 29*

The Metaphysical: *Time*, *Dover Beach*, *Full Moon and Little Frieda*, *On the Grasshopper and the Cricket*

The Moon: *Dover Beach*, *Full Moon and Little Frieda*, *So, We'll Go No More A-Roving*, *Sonnet 29*

Descriptions of nature: *The Voice*, *Time*, *Full Moon and Little Frieda*, *Lament*, *On the Grasshopper and the Cricket*, *The Flower-Fed Buffaloes*, *Report to Wordsworth*, *First Love*, *Sonnet 29*

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5. Ted Hughes: Full Moon and Little Frieda

Background

Frieda, the daughter of poets Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath, was about two when the poem was written and the family were living in the countryside of Devon in England, near Dartmoor. At that age, the little girl would have been taking delight in trying out new words.

Teacher notes to assist a first reading

It is very important that any explanation of individual words does not close down the richly suggestive meaning of this poem. It is always true of poetry that each reader must explore the words herself or himself. Here, it is especially true.

Line 2: In the second stanza, the images might be taken either as physical details in their own right or as metaphors to describe Frieda's intense listening.

Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Suggestions for students to work on individually or in pairs or groups and then discuss together.

- Ask students to note down, without pointing to any particular words or phrases, what sort of scene they envisage in their mind's eye and what sort of atmosphere the poem conjures up for them. When they compare notes, they might point to words and phrases which have made them feel this way.

- Students might also explore the way the poet suggests the sounds of the evening. How does he communicate the extraordinary stillness of the scene? What is the dramatic effect of the girl's sudden exclamation?

- Stanza 3 sometimes confuses readers, particularly the line 'A dark river of blood, many boulders'. Students might spend a little time exploring the words as visual images first, then exploring the associations of some of the words and finally exploring connections with the rest of the poem.

- At this point encourage students to read the poem out loud and to note down where they would pause, which words they might emphasise and how the movement of the lines affects the poem's impact. They might explore patterns in the sounds of the words, of consonants and vowels, and consider the impact of these.

- The focus of the poem is little Frieda. Students might spend some time examining the way she is presented in the poem. How do they respond to the direct speech?

- Finally, get students to consider the metaphysical aspects of the poem, the relationship of little Frieda to the universe. There are two references to heavenly bodies; in each case, they appear to respond to little Frieda. What does this show us about Hughes's vision of and feelings for the little girl? What meaning does 'like an artist gazing amazed at a work' have for the

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students? No single response to this will say everything about the simile – so students should listen seriously to any of the thoughts of their colleagues.

- This should lead candidates to think finally of what Hughes has communicated of his feelings for Frieda throughout the poem on this magical evening and what is special about the poem for them.

Thematic links with set poems

Relationships: *The Voice*, *Dover Beach*, *Amends*, *First Love*, *Marrysong*, *So, We'll Go No More A-Roving*, *Sonnet 43*, *Sonnet 29*

The Metaphysical: *Time*, *Dover Beach*, *Amends*, *On the Grasshopper and the Cricket*

The Moon: *Dover Beach*, *Amends*, *So, We'll Go No More A-Roving*, *Sonnet 29*

Descriptions of nature: *The Voice*, *Time*, *Amends*, *Lament*, *On the Grasshopper and the Cricket*, *The Flower-Fed Buffaloes*, *Report to Wordsworth*, *First Love*, *Sonnet 29*

Strong memories: *The Voice*, *Time*, *First Love*

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6. Gillian Clarke: Lament

Background

Gillian Clarke has created a very accessible homepage on the internet (http://gillianclarke.co.uk/home.htm) and students might be referred to this for a brief biography. All of the details which are woven through the poem are derived from newspaper items which distressed her at the time of the Gulf War of 1991.

Teacher notes to assist a first reading

Title: A *lament* is an elegy or a mourning of the passing of someone or something. Each item introduced by the preposition 'for' is being mourned.

Line 1: the *green turtle* is found in the Gulf. Nesting beaches occur particularly in Oman and Yemen.

Line 5: the *veil of iridescence* refers to oil slicks.

Line 13: the *hook-beaked turtles* are an endangered species as is the *dugong* (Line 14), a large herbivorous marine mammal. The small population in the Gulf was further endangered by the spillages of oil in the Gulf conflict.

Line 16: *terns* regularly migrate over enormous distances, some species from the Arctic to Antarctic. Some species of tern overwinter in the Gulf and some species breed there. *Waders* are long-legged birds which roam through marshes and coastal strips for food. Many of these also migrate. The word 'restless' refers to its movements as it searches for food. It is estimated that between 1 and 2 million birds overwinter or rest in the Gulf during migration.

It should be emphasised to students that these background notes are intended only as background information to provide a context for the real study of the poem which starts from here.

Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Suggestions for students to work on individually or in pairs or groups and then discuss together.

- After reading the whole poem, each student might be asked to write in one sentence – and not using any of the words which Clarke has used in the poem – exactly what or whom, in their view, the poem mourns.

- The *structure* of the poem might be explored next. What comments can students make about it?

- Take each stanza in turn now. There are two 'for's in the first stanza, two items to be mourned for. What are they? What feelings do the two words 'pulsing' and 'burden' suggest to the students? What is their response to the metaphor, 'nest of sickness'?

- If students do not know what a cormorant looks like they should find a picture of one and then explore the appropriateness of the metaphor, 'in his funeral

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silk'. Get students to consider how the metaphor is extended, and how the third line of the stanza interrelates with the first two lines. They might share their knowledge of the effect of oil on sea-birds; how effective do they find Clarke's representation of the environmental problem here?

- Students might look up the word 'lap' in the dictionary. Which meaning or meanings seems most appropriate here? What might the word 'stain' mean – literally first, and then metaphorically? Can the students find any other words or phrases which can be interpreted both literally and metaphorically?

- Now Clarke looks at the human cost. She starts with Ahmed. Why do students think she has chosen the name 'Ahmed'? Aside from the specific nature of the Gulf conflict, for a little while students might think of the more general tragedies of War in relation to the poem.

- The last three stanzas portray some of the environmental damage caused by the War. At the same time, the poet conjures up some of the atmosphere of the battleground itself. Get students to explore how she does this. They should remember that words can be used in different ways simultaneously. Can they find any words which are used here at both literal and figurative levels? The word 'veil' was also used in the second stanza. Does this have a relevance here?

- The poem ends, surprisingly perhaps, with a lament for 'vengeance, and the ashes of language'. In many ways, the poem reaches a climax at this point. How has the poet built up to it? Let students write down in their own way what the last line means to them and discuss together the results.

- Finally, after reading the whole poem, students should try to establish in their own minds how it should be read. First they should think of the tone of voice they would read it in. Is it sad or angry or a combination of the two? Does the tone change as one reads through the poem? How does the listing technique affect the tone? Do the associations of the words at different points of the poem affect the way they would read it? Where would they want to pause and where to stress certain words? Then they should try to read it – preferably out loud, or, at least, letting it sound in their heads.

Thematic Links with set poems

The present state of the world: *Dover Beach, The Flower-Fed Buffaloes, Report to Wordsworth*

Descriptions of nature: *The Voice, Time, Amends, Full Moon and Little Frieda, On the Grasshopper and the Cricket, The Flower-Fed Buffaloes, Report to Wordsworth, First Love, Sonnet 29*

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7. John Keats: On the Grasshopper and the Cricket

Background

Keats was born in England in 1795 and died of tuberculosis when he was just 25, by which time he had composed an astonishing amount of powerful poetry. This particular sonnet was written when he was 21. It is in the Petrarchan or Italian form of the sonnet with an octave (here quite clearly divided into two quatrains) and a sestet, without a rhyming couplet at the end. Like Milton, who also used this form, he wrote sonnets about many different subjects, not specifically, as early sonnet writers tended to, about love.

The poem was written as a response to a sort of competition between himself and his great friend, Leigh Hunt, as to who could write the best verse, in a short time, on a specified topic. Keats won on this occasion, although he generously avowed that he preferred the other poet's attempt.

Students' attention might be drawn to parallels with (e.g.) Aesop's fable 'The Ant and the Grasshopper' in which the grasshopper lightheartedly plays during the Summer, while the Ant toils. When Winter comes, the grasshopper, unlike the Ant is ill-prepared for its severity. (Cf. also Poems 40 and 41 in *Songs of Ourselves*: Isaac Watts, 'The Ant or Emmet' and Abraham Cowley, 'The Grasshopper'.)

Teacher notes to assist a first reading

Title: the grasshopper is a diurnal insect, the cricket nocturnal. They both like warmth, hence the reference to the stove as a home for the cricket.

Line 8: *weed*: the poetic use of this word denotes a small plant and is quite neutral, with no implications of not being wanted or being out of control.

Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Suggestions for students to work on individually or in pairs or groups and then discuss together.

- Students might first read the octave of the sonnet which deals exclusively with the grasshopper. Get them to write down three words of their own to describe the sort of atmosphere built up in the description of the height of summer.

- Get students to consider how the sounds of the octave help the reader to feel the atmosphere.

- Ask students to consider also the arrangement of the lines, considering how Keats achieves variety in the rhythms of the verse, and how he achieves emphasis. Ask one of the group to read the poem out loud while the rest of the group note where natural pauses occur.

- Students should look at the first line of the sestet now, comparing it with the first line of the poem. Ask them to consider what the effect is of the echo just at the beginning of the new 'paragraph' in the poem? The word order is rather unusual. Ask students to consider what the effect is of leaving the

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word ‘never’ to the end of the line, relating this also to the rhyme with ‘ever’ three lines later.

- Now get students to do the same with the sestet as they did with the octave – describe the atmosphere in three words of their own and then try to explore how the atmosphere is created, not forgetting the sounds of the words.

- The sound evokes memories of the grasshopper in the last line and takes the reader to the beginning of the poem again. In what ways does a consideration of this help them to understand the full meaning of the first line, 'The poetry of earth is never dead'? Ask students to try to explain their own view of what Keats is trying to say through this poem in one or two sentences.

Thematic Links with set poems

Descriptions of nature: *The Voice*, *Time*, *Amends*, *Full Moon and Little Frieda*, *Lament*, *The Flower-Fed Buffaloes*, *Report to Wordsworth*, *First Love*, *Sonnet 29*

Time: *The Voice*, *Time*, *Dover Beach*, *So, We'll Go No More A-Roving*, *Sonnet 29*

The Metaphysical: *Time*, *Dover Beach*, *Amends*, *Full Moon and Little Frieda*

Sonnets: *Report to Wordsworth, Sonnet 43, Sonnet 29*

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8. Vachel Lindsay: The Flower-Fed Buffaloes

Background

Vachel Lindsay was born in 1879 in Illinois, USA. He often sold his poetry on the streets and made long walking expeditions, trading his poetry on the way in exchange for food and lodging. As his poetry was often known for its experimentation with sound and as he often gave recitals, it is worthwhile listening to old recordings of his poetry which are accessible on the internet.

Teacher notes to assist a first reading

Line 1: It is hard to estimate how many buffalo once roamed North America but it is thought that there would have been between 30 and 75 million. By the time Lindsay was writing there were about 300.

Line 3: the first railroad in the area was the Illinois and Central Railroad chartered in 1851. The construction of the railroad hastened the depletion of the buffaloes. Shooting the beast from the windows of the railroad by passengers was popular and widely advertised.

Line 14: *Blackfeet* and *Pawnees* are two American native tribes. The population of the Pawnees in the early nineteenth century was about twenty to twenty-five thousand, but it declined rapidly in the later part of the nineteenth century mostly because of smallpox and cholera, but also through falling prey to traditional enemies.

Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Suggestions for students to work on individually or in pairs or groups and then discuss together.

- Get students first to read the poem aloud to themselves; they should try to read it slowly and savour the stresses in each line. They might explore also the patterns of sounds in the poem.

- Ask students to consider how the poet creates the scene in the first four lines. To answer this, students should pay attention partly to what they have already discovered about the sound, look at the choice of words and imagine the scene. Are the locomotives a discordant note in this scene as Lindsay presents it? Students should argue their case, not from what they might know about the role of the locomotives in destroying the scene, but from the cast of the poetry itself.

- Ask students to consider how Lindsay suggests the passage of time in the poem and how he suggests things which haven't changed.

- Get students to look up the word 'trundle' in a dictionary. Do they like the use of the word here to describe the movement of the buffaloes? What about the other ways he describes them? Do they help to capture their character? What effect does the repetition of 'no more' have?

- The phrase 'lying low' is repeated. First it applies to the prairie flowers and then to the Blackfeet and the Pawnees. Get students to consider what

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meanings it has for them. Check dictionary definitions. Ask students to consider the extent to which there are any sinister connotations and the effect of the repetition of the phrase in a line of its own at the end of the poem.

- Ask students to consider which of these words best describes the whole poem: *anti-progress; threatening; pretty; nostalgic; neutral; strange*. Students might argue for or against any of these words or come up with more appropriate descriptions for themselves.

Thematic Links with set poems

Descriptions of nature: *The Voice*, *Time*, *Amends*, *Full Moon and Little Frieda*, *Lament*, *On the Grasshopper and the Cricket*, *Report to Wordsworth*, *First Love*, *Sonnet 29*

The present state of the world: *Dover Beach*, *Lament*, *Report to Wordsworth*

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9. Boey Kim Cheng: Report to Wordsworth

Background

Boey Kim Cheng was born in Singapore in 1965. He now lives and works in Australia. This poem has echoes of several sonnets by Wordsworth. As the references are not merely cosmetic, but have real relevance to the themes of the poem, they need to be referred to as background. Three in particular are referred to in the next section. They are the sonnets 'London 1802'; 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge' and most important of all, 'The world is too much with us . . .'.

It might be noted that, while Wordsworth used the Petrarchan (or Italian) form of the sonnet (like Keats – see 'On the Grasshopper and the Cricket') Boey prefers here to use the Shakespearian (or English) form with the final rhyming couplet.

Teacher notes to assist a first reading

Line 1: the line starts with a direct echo of Wordsworth's

"Milton! Thou shouldst be living at this hour:
England hath need of thee . . .'

The poet traces a direct line from himself to Wordsworth to Milton. The themes of Wordsworth's poem in which he regrets the passing of certain values are similar to Cheng's. Wordsworth's 'We are selfish men' is reflected in 'insatiate man moves in for the kill'.

Line 2: There are many echoes of 'The world is too much with us . . .' These notes do not intend to be exhaustive in exploring the references. Here Boey alters the context of Wordsworth's phrase, 'we lay waste our powers' to 'She [Nature] has been laid waste . . .''

Lines 5 to 10: The references to the sea-gods are explicable with reference to Wordsworth's sestet in the poem mentioned above:

'It moves us not. Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn:
Have sight of Proteus coming from the sea;
Or hear old Triton, blow his wreathed horn.'

However, Boey moves us out of mythology to contemporary reality with his image of the beached whale and man moving in for the kill.

Lines 7 to 8: *Triton* was the son of Poseidon. He stilled the waves by blowing trumpets in the shape of conch shells. As with the image of the whale above, Boey brings a twentieth-century reality to the mythology as he shows the effects of pollution.

Line 11: Wordsworth ends his poem about a rainbow, 'My heart leaps up . . .', with the words 'And I could wish my days to be
Bound to each by natural piety.'

Line 12: again the poet pays homage to Wordsworth's poem 'On Westminster Bridge' while taking his last line out of context.

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Lines 13 to 14: It may be well not to close the poem down too much here as there are rich allusions to be explored. However, there is clearly a reference to the ozone layer in the *wound widening in the sky* which combines with the biblical echoes of the last line, perhaps in the Crucifixion account.

Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Suggestions for students to work on individually or in pairs or groups and then discuss together.

- The students might be given Wordsworth's sonnet 'The world is too much with us' to read. They might be asked to read the first four lines and asked to write down what they think Wordsworth is attacking in Man's behaviour.

- Ask students to list some of the issues concerning the environment that now preoccupy us, considering how far Wordsworth has identified the root causes of these. Then they could check their list against the poem.

- Boey not only alludes to environmental problems in his poem, but also stirs the reader's feelings about them. Get students to examine the first four lines of the poem and explore their imagery and sounds to see how he does this. Which images or words do they find particularly effective?

- Get students to read the next six lines and explore the way Boey has used the allusions to classical mythology that Wordsworth made. How does he add other dimensions to these allusions? Do they find his method successful?

- Students might consider for a few moments the phrase 'poetry and piety'. What do the two words mean to them separately and together? They might refer back to Wordsworth here. Do they think the two words go together? They might refer also to Clarke's poem 'Lament' which ends with the lament to the 'ashes of language'. Are they saying similar things or are they different?

- Get students to consider the effect of the last two lines.

- Get students to attempt a judgement: do they find the poem a clever game? Or is it powerful in its own right?

Thematic Links with set poems

Descriptions of nature: *The Voice*, *Time*, *Amends*, *Full Moon and Little Frieda*, *On the Grasshopper and the Cricket*, *The Flower-Fed Buffaloes*, *First Love*, *Sonnet 29*

The present state of the world: *Dover Beach*, *Lament*, *The Flower-Fed Buffaloes*

Sonnets: *On the Grasshopper and the Cricket*, *Sonnet 43*, *Sonnet 29*

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10. John Clare: First Love

Background

John Clare was born in 1793 and brought up in very poor circumstances in rural Northamptonshire in England. He was destined to become an agricultural labourer but was 'discovered' and groomed as a writer of very natural, inspired poetry. There was something of a cult for 'untutored' poets at this time, particularly those who were as close to the countryside as Clare was. However, there were tensions between him and the more sophisticated literary world in London.

This poem is about his love for Mary Joyce whom he met in his native village. She was the daughter of a wealthy farmer who was never going to let the relationship develop. He later married another young woman and had a family, but their relationship was never particularly happy. In later years, Clare became mentally ill and had to be confined in an asylum. One of his delusions was that he was Lord Byron, another that he had, in fact, married Mary Joyce and his marriage to his real wife was bigamous.

Teacher notes to assist a first reading

The vocabulary of this poem is very simple, although this in no way detracts from the vividness of expression. There are, however, some unusual images which are not easily explained. It would not be a good idea, however, to close down the poem for the students at an early stage. They should take pleasure in the challenge of trying to work at the meaning for themselves.

Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Suggestions for students to work on individually or in pairs or groups and then discuss together.

- Get students to start by trying to identify those emotions which together the poet calls 'love'. Then, they might explore just how he expresses the power of the impact of their meeting.

- Clare expresses the power of his emotions partly by analysing his physical symptoms. Get students to explore the way he does this and particularly, examine his loss of sight. What do these descriptions convey to them?

- Ask students to consider how the words of the poem express how disorientated the experience has made the poet and to explore the imagery.

- Students might have initial difficulty with understanding the last stanza. They should be encouraged to exchange views on the meanings contained in it. Together, they should discuss whether they think the poem is happy or sad or neither. As ever, they should refer at once to the explicit meaning, the associations of the imagery and the sound of the verse to assess the tone.

Thematic Links with set poems

Relationships: *The Voice, Dover Beach, Amends, Full Moon and Little Frieda, Marrysong, So, We'll Go No More A-Roving, Sonnet 43, Sonnet 29*

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Descriptions of nature: *The Voice*, *Time*, *Amends*, *Full Moon and Little Frieda*, *Lament*, *On the Grasshopper and the Cricket*, *The Flower-Fed Buffaloes*, *Report to Wordsworth*, *Sonnet 29*

Strong Memories: *The Voice*, *Time*, *Full Moon and Little Frieda*

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11. Dennis Scott: Marrysong

Background

Dennis Scott was born in Jamaica in 1939 and died in 1991. Many of his poems were written in a Caribbean vernacular.

Teacher notes to assist a first reading

The poem is about a marriage. The teacher might initially explain the central metaphor summed up in the short sentence, *He charted* (tried to make a map) – i.e. tried to make sense of the landscape of her personality.

Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Suggestions for students to work on individually or in pairs or groups and then discuss together.

- The poem repays very close study. Students might spend some time on the first sentence. Does the use of the word 'learned' surprise them? What does it imply? The word 'quite' appears at the end of the first sentence. Get them to consider how its position there adds to the meaning.

- Ask students to consider what these words and phrases add to an understanding of his experience of the marriage:

  year after year
  without seasons
  shifted
  under his eye

- The images of the changeability of her moods in lines 3 to 6 might be studied next. Ask students to consider how the writer makes the reader feel the hurt and anger of the first mood and the happiness of the second. They should look at the way the images are presented and the sound of the lines.

- Lines 7 and 8 are made up of four very short sentences. What is the effect of this for the student? (They should try to read them out loud.)

- Read the images in the next lines from line 9 to 15. The students might (perhaps in diagrammatic form) chart the twists and turns of the imagery. They might then write down how the nature of the imagery itself reflects the changing moods and personality of the woman in the marriage.

- The words 'jaunty' and 'helpless' are put together. Students might consider how far each word applies to the experience and then what the effect of putting the two words together is.

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- Ask students to consider which of these words are applicable to the writer's marriage experience, remembering to support their decisions:

  bewildering
  annoying
  exhilarating
  fulfilling

- The last three lines show a new phase in the relationship. Ironically, instead of journeying, he now 'stayed home'. This is a new twist in the extended metaphor. Ask students what it reflects about the development of their relationship, and the effect of 'wondered' as a one word sentence.

- Encourage students to look at the rhymes in the verse, considering what is interesting about them and how they add to the overall effect of the poem.

- Students might be asked to contrast the feelings expressed in Clare's poem about 'First Love' with those of this poem.

Thematic Links with set poems

Relationships: *The Voice*, *Dover Beach*, *Amends*, *Full Moon and Little Frieda*, *First Love*, *So, We'll Go No More A-Roving*, *Sonnet 43*, *Sonnet 29*

Marriage: *The Voice*, *Dover Beach*, *Sonnet 43*

Time: *Time*, *Dover Beach*, *On the Grasshopper and the Cricket*, *So, We'll Go No More A-Roving*, *Marrysong*, *Sonnet 29*

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12. Lord Byron: So, We'll Go No More A-Roving

Background

George Gordon Byron was born in 1788 and became Lord Byron on the death of his father in 1798. He is often thought of as the 'bad boy' of English Romantic poetry.

The poem is based on the sixteenth-century sea shanty 'The Maid of Amsterdam'. In many versions of the song, the words are rather risqué. Byron's poem was included in a letter to a friend and fellow reveller, Thomas Moore. The full context is included below. (Some teachers might find it helpful to evoke a rough modern equivalent – of going to a wild nightclub, perhaps!)

'I feel anxious to hear from you, even more than usual, because you last indicated that you were unwell. At present, I am on the invalid regimen myself. The Carnival – that is, the latter part of it – and sitting up late o'nights, had knocked me up a little. But it is over, and it is now Lent, with all its abstinence and Sacred Music.

'The mumming closed with a masked ball at the Fenice, where I went, as also to most of the ridottos etc. etc. and though I did not dissipate much upon the whole, yet I find the "sword wearing out the scabbard", though I have but just turned the corner of twenty-nine.'

Teacher notes to assist a first reading

Line 1: the word *So* links the poem with the extract of the letter printed above. The first person singular of the shanty is changed to the first person plural to include his friend.

Line 5: the reference to the sword echoes the image in the letter. By 'sword' Byron means his spirit and the sheath is his body. The general sense of the whole stanza is that 'the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak' or that all of his reckless activity is making him feel his age.

Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Suggestions for students to work on individually or in pairs or groups and then discuss together.

- Students might look first at the pattern of the verse, and at the rhythm and rhyme of the verse, and note down their observations. Get them to compare the first and last stanzas and find parallels between them.

- Still with the first and last verses, encourage students to explore what they think the word 'loving' suggests and what the associations of the moon at night are in this poem.

- Get students to consider whether there is anything in the sounds of the words which seem to suggest a slower pace in Stanza 2? Encourage them to look particularly at the long vowels and some of the repeated consonants. (They might try reading out the first verse in a jaunty style and contrasting it with a slow reading of the second verse.

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Ask students to consider which of these words best describes the tone of the poem:

- carefree
- regretful
- self-critical
- resigned.

They might find a combination of these the best way to describe the tone or might come up with other words to describe it, but, whatever their choice, they should be able to justify it with reference to the words of the poem.

Thematic Links with set poems

Relationships: *The Voice*, *Dover Beach*, *Amends*, *Full Moon and Little Frieda*, *First Love*, *Marrysong*, *Sonnet 43*, *Sonnet 29*

Time: *The Voice*, *Time*, *Dover Beach*, *On the Grasshopper and the Cricket*, *Sonnet 29*

The Moon: *Dover Beach*, *Full Moon and Little Frieda*, *Amends*, *Sonnet 29*

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13. Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Sonnet 43

Background

Elizabeth Barrett's love affair with the poet Robert Browning against the will of her father is well documented. The strength of her love is well evoked by the collection of sonnets she wrote entitled *Sonnets from the Portuguese* of which this is number 43.

She had health problems from an early age and was deeply upset by the death of her brother, Edward, who was killed in a sailing accident. Because of these factors and the strictness of her father, she became very reclusive. She did, however, write poems, one of which praising a work by Robert Browning caught the latter's attention and led to a correspondence between them. This, in turn, led to a strong and lasting love between them which had to remain secret at first because of her father's opposition.

The collection of sonnets was published in 1850, four years after the two lovers eloped together.

Teacher notes to assist a first reading

If the word 'thee' causes students any confusion (or seems alien), assure them it can be replaced by 'you'.

Lines 9 to 10: it is appropriate to use some of the biographical details outlined above to explain these lines.

This also apples to the 'lost Saints' of line 12 who might be considered to be her mother and Edward, her brother.

Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Suggestions for students to work on individually or in pairs or groups and then discuss together.

- Get students to start by considering the impact of the first line and the effect of the opening, and what tone is established from the beginning.

- To help gain some clarity about the meaning of the poem, get students to enumerate the different ways she loves him.

- The first 'way' is quite difficult to understand but, rather than struggling with establishing an 'exact' meaning (which might well escape us), get students to consider questions along these lines:
  – In the second line, what do the references to different dimensions tell us about her love?
  – What does the repetition of the '&' also emphasise?
  – What does the reference to being 'out of sight' in connection with these dimensions further emphasise?
  – Is the fourth line a reference to the physical or non-physical?

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– What do students understand by the word 'ends'? Might there be more than one meaning?
– What are the connotations of words like 'Being' and 'Ideal Grace' – what relevance does his understanding have on the nature of her love?

Then get students to put all their answers together and find two or three of their own words – not used in the poem – to describe these aspects of her love.

- Whereas the earlier lines seem to speak of infinity, the next two lines expressing the second 'way' bring us closer to ordinariness. Which words for the student express this most clearly? As with the previous activity, encourage students to suggest one or two words of their own which best sum up this aspect of love.

- What does the word 'freely' mean for the students as they ponder 'way 3'?

- What does the word 'purely' mean for them in the fourth 'way'? In considering this and the rest of the poem, encourage students not to force a precise, but reductive, understanding, and instead extend their general understanding of the ideal which the sonnet is trying to explore.

- Way 6 is 'childhood's faith'. How do students think this might be different from an adult faith? Is a 'childhood faith' in their view good or bad or neither?

- Way 7 might need to be considered with some biographical awareness. Perhaps the 'lost Saints' are her mother and brother. Get students to consider what effects the bereavements may have had on her.

- Get students to consider how the final lines convey the sense of climax.

- Students might now list the different ways in which they think Elizabeth Barrett Browning has described her love, trying to use their own words and starting with the adjectives or adverbs they used at the beginning of these exercises. Then they might summarise some of the ways that she has made them seem real and heartfelt.

Thematic Links with set poems

Relationships: *The Voice, Dover Beach, Amends, Full Moon and Little Frieda, First Love, Marrysong, So, We'll Go No More A-Roving, Sonnet 29*

Marriage: *The Voice, Dover Beach, Marrysong*

Sonnets: *On the Grasshopper and the Cricket, Report to Wordsworth, Sonnet 29*

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14. Edna St Vincent Millay: Sonnet 29

Background

Edna St Vincent Millay was born in 1892 in Maine in the USA. She relished the sonnet form partly because she felt that the form enabled the poet to challenge her readers' preconceptions about life. Most of her sonnets are about love and many show how much she admired Shakespeare. This sonnet first appeared in her collection *The Harp-Weaver and Other Poems,* for which she received the Pulitzer Prize in 1923.

Teacher notes to assist a first reading

The sonnet form is the Shakespearian (or English) form with four quatrains and a rhyming couplet at the end. (The effects of the rhyme scheme might be contrasted with the Petrarchan form in the poems by Boey Kim Cheng, John Keats and Elizabeth Barrett Browning in the selection.)

Line 14: *beholds*: sees

Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Suggestions for students to work on individually or in pairs or groups and then discuss together.

- Get students to look at the first 6 lines, examining the structure and rhyming of those lines. Get them to consider how the repetition of the words 'Pity me' affects the structure of the verse.

- Get students to consider what each of the items introduced by these words has in common. Why *might* the reader pity the woman of the poem? Why, do they think, does she not want them to pity her? There might be more than one answer to this.

- Ask students how they might describe the tone of the first six lines, and how the tone is created.

- The next two lines are linked into the structure of the first six – students should consider how the poet achieves this. There may be more than one way. They might then consider how this item may be considered to be *different* from the preceding ones. Do they think the tone changes, however subtly? In what ways and how is this emphasised?

- Get students to re-read reflectively the first 8 lines and summarise what they find effective about the way the poet has built up her verse to this point.

- Ask students to consider how the writer then signals that we are about to start a new phase in the argument of the poem. They might then examine the two images that are presented.

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- What do students consider the following words say to them about her conception of Love?
  blossom
  tide
  shifting
  wreckage
  gales

- Get students to consider whether and how the tone has changed.

- Get students to consider how the first words of the couplet link in with the rest of the poem, and what the first line of the couplet suggests about the poet's past experience.

- Get students to discuss the meaning of the antithesis in the last two lines, and the effect of presenting it as she does.

- Get students to consider which of these words seems to them to best describe the poet's view of Love, giving reasons for their choice:
  cynical
  resigned
  realistic
  hopeful
  self-pitying

Thematic Links with set poems

Relationships: *The Voice*, *Dover Beach*, *Amends*, *Full Moon and Little Frieda*, *First Love*, *Marrysong*, *Sonnet 43*, *Sonnet 29*

Time: *The Voice*, *Time*, *Dover Beach*, *On the Grasshopper and the Cricket*, *So, We'll Go No More A-Roving*

Sonnets: *On the Grasshopper and the Cricket*, *Report to Wordsworth*, *Sonnet 43*

The Moon: *Dover Beach*, *Full Moon and Little Frieda*, *Amends*, *So, We'll Go No More A-Roving*

Descriptions of nature: *The Voice*, *Time, Amends*, *Full Moon and Little Frieda*, *Lament*, *On the Grasshopper and the Cricket*, *The Flower-Fed Buffaloes*, *Report to Wordsworth*, *First Love*

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