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UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE INTERNATIONAL EXAMINATIONS

AS LITERATURE IN ENGLISH : SYLLABUS 9695

NOTES FOR TEACHERS ON POEMS SET FOR STUDY FROM

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

FOR EXAMINATION IN JUNE AND NOVEMBER 2007, 2008, AND 2009

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These notes are intended to give some background information on each poet and/or poem as an aid to further research and to stimulate discussion in the classroom.
They are intended only as a starting point and are no substitute for the teacher's and student's own study and exploration of the poems.

A suggested poem for comparison is given for each set poem, from this selection, from the wider anthology *Songs of Ourselves* (shown by 'SOO') or from elsewhere, (in which case the poem or a link is provided within the notes). However, the anthology has been put together to encourage comparisons across many of the poems and students should be encouraged to explore connections for themselves as a way of gaining understanding and insight into the individual poems.

Wherever one is available, we have provided a reference to a website giving further information on the poet, although there is not a suitable link for every poet in the collection.

We highly recommend:
***AS Level English Language and Literature*, Helen Toner and Elizabeth Whittome CUP (ISBN 00521 533376)**
- for further guidance on teaching poetry texts at AS and indeed AL.

Sujata Bhatt – 'A Different History'

In 'Search For My Tongue', another poem by Sujata Bhatt, she talks of the strangeness and difficulty of having two languages, and the fear of losing her "mother tongue", the language she was brought up to speak by her mother. Bhatt was born in India in 1956, moved to the USA in 1968, and now lives in Germany, so she is well aware of how much a change of culture and language can affect people.

'A Different History' is in two linked parts: lines 1-18, then lines 19-29. The first suggests that although life in India is – or should be – free, there is constant pressure to conform to other ways of life; the poet uses the way we should or should not treat books as an example or symbol of this. The gods roam freely, but because trees are sacred it is a sin to ill-treat a book in any way, in order not to disturb or offend Sarasvati or the tree from which the paper comes.

The second part of the poem returns to the idea of a foreign language; all languages, it says, have once been the language of an invader or an oppressor, but despite this there always comes a time when younger and newer generations not only speak the oppressor's language but they actually come to love it.

Some points for classroom discussion:
Are the two parts of the poem really separate, or have they a common theme that links them together? How *serious* is Bhatt in this poem? Is there any humour in it?

Suggested comparison:
Sujata Bhatt's poem 'Search for My Tongue' can be found on http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english/poemscult

There is some brief biographical material on these websites:
http://carcanet.co.uk
http://www.sawnet.org

Gerard Manley Hopkins – 'Pied Beauty'

Hopkins was born in 1844, and died just 45 years later, in 1889, but in this relatively short life he wrote some of the most startling and original poetry of the whole 19th Century. He was a deeply intellectual and religious man, and became a Jesuit priest in 1877, the same year in which he wrote 'Pied Beauty'.

Throughout his life Hopkins was deeply fond of the countryside and its beauty, in which he could see the work and power of God. In 'Pied Beauty' he expresses his delight and astonishment at the sheer diversity of nature.

'Pied Beauty' is a short poem, but a complex one in both its meaning and its form. The lines are generally iambic in basis, though while some are regular (lines 2 and 3, for instance, and line 10) others are certainly not, though the iambic beat can still be felt (lines 4 or 8, for instance). What effect, or effects, does this irregularity have? The short final line has been mentioned already, and its completion of the praise with which the whole poem began is very striking and very powerful. Given the brevity of the poem, too, the rhyme scheme is fairly complex (ABCABCDBCDC), though this is something that is unlikely to be noticed when actually reading the poem aloud; it does, however, ensure that despite the altering rhythms the poem never loses its tightness and focus. Given the date when Hopkins was writing, this is quite a daring style, far removed from much of the conventional formality of his Victorian contemporaries.

In lines 3 to 5, he is struck by the way in which so many things – skies, cattle, fish, leaves, birds, the landscape itself – all have different and multiple colours and shapes. Even man-made things are equally attractive, and he finds himself full of wonder at the constant changes and contrasts in everything that he sees.

The most powerful thing of all, however, is that all these changing things are created by God, for Hopkins the one unchanging being, and all he can do in the final line of the poem is to express his amazement in a short, utterly simple and almost breathless short line.

Some points for classroom discussion

There are some very unusual and initially difficult words in the poem, some of which Hopkins has apparently invented – 'couple-colour', 'fresh-firecoal', fathers-forth', for example. What do you notice about each of these words? What makes them so effective?

Suggested comparison

Walt Whitman from 'Song of Myself'.

Some useful material on Hopkins' life and work can be found on these websites:
http://victorianweb.org
http://poemhunter.com

Allen Curnow – 'Continuum'

Allen Curnow lived the whole of his long life (1911-2001) in New Zealand; initially he studied theology in order to follow his father's calling as a priest, but he later became a journalist, work that he continued for most of his working life. He edited a famous anthology of New Zealand verse, published in 1945, which provided the first coherent collection of NZ poetry. In his introduction he identified aspects of the poems he included that he considered peculiarly representative of NZ and identified what he called a "common problem of the imagination" for NZ poets. Later of his own poetry he said "I had to get past the severities, not to say rigidities, of our New Zealand anti-myth: away from questions which present themselves as public and answerable, towards the questions which are always private and unanswerable."

'Continuum' is not at first reading an easy poem to grasp, but its thoughts and feelings become more accessible and clear on re-readings. The poet is unable to sleep – a situation that we must all be familiar with – and goes out of the house into the front garden (stanza 3); he stands in the porch looking at the moon and the clouds, hardly conscious of either the time or the chill that he begins to feel (stanza 5); finally he returns to bed, perhaps having written this poem (do the first two lines of stanza 6 suggest this?).

What is fascinating about the poem is the way in which he writes about himself as another person or thing – in the first stanza he identifies himself with the moon; in the last stanza he writes as if he, the poet, is describing what he did to "the author", so that the pair walk "stealthily in step", as if half-afraid, and certainly unsure, of what is happening to him.

There is some brief biographical material on these websites:
http://carcanet.co.uk
http://bookcouncil.org.nz/writers/curnowa.html

Some points for classroom discussion
Is this just a poem about a sleepless night? Is it perhaps describing something of how a poem is created? In trying to answer these questions you may find that the poem gradually becomes clearer; try all the time to support your ideas and responses by referring to the actual words and phrases that Curnow uses.

Suggested comparison
Ted Hughes' poem 'The Thought Fox' can be found on http://www.poemhunter.com
Here, the poet also writes about writing a poem; there are some interesting parallels to explore here.

Judith Wright – 'Hunting Snake'

Judith Wright was born in Australia in 1915, and lived in that country until her death in 2000; she was intensely fond of the countryside and all that it meant to those who lived there, especially the Aboriginal people, and much of her writing also celebrates natural creatures. She once said of her own life and poetry that "the two threads of my life, the love of the land itself and the deep unease over the fate of its original people, were beginning to twine together, and the rest of my life would be influenced by that connection" (http://oldpoetry.com/authors/Judith%20Wright).

Although 'Hunting Snake' is clearly about a snake that the poem's speaker once saw, and about the fear and awe that it created in her, it may also perhaps be read as hinting at other aspects of ancient Australian life. The last two lines of the poem may perhaps be suggesting something of the contrast between an ancient way of life, the new ways that the poet feels and lives in, and the fact that while the two may sometimes meet they cannot co-exist in reality.

Some points for classroom discussion:

The poem is a very tightly controlled one, with traditional four-line stanzas, a simple rhythm and rhyme pattern; how, then, does Wright create her sense of shock, fear, admiration (look at lines 3, 8, 9-10 and 13, for example) and finally her relief when the snake passes by and the danger is over? Which words and which images are the most striking? Why do they have this effect?

Suggested comparison

In 'Pike' Ted Hughes writes of the mixture of awe and sheer fear that he had as a child when thinking about these fishes.

Some useful biographical material can be found on these websites:
http://www.carcanet.co.uk
http://www.oldpoetry.com

Christina Rossetti – ‘A Birthday’

This wonderfully happy poem was written when the English poet Christina Rossetti was 27 years old, and expresses the tremendous joy and excitement that you may feel when you see or meet the person you truly love. Why, you may wonder, is it called ‘A Birthday’? Well, look what the poet writes in line 15, when she says that her love coming to her is “the birthday of my life”, the day, she suggests, when her life really begins.

Everything in the first stanza speaks of the happiness she sees around her, and the repeated expression ‘My heart is like . . . ‘ stresses this joy, but she says at the end of the first stanza that she is even happier than all of these things – why? The second stanza says that she would like to surround herself with the richest and most exotic things to celebrate the arrival of “my love”. Look at how the language changes between each stanza – in the first (apart from the word ‘halcyon’) it is simple and easy, while in the second it is much richer and less everyday. Choose a few words from each stanza to illustrate and support this idea.

What is the effect of concluding the both stanzas with the same line?

You may like to compare this poem with ‘Song’, written when she was just 18 years old; in this she writes of the contrast between another woman’s true happiness, and her own sense that this cannot continue (how do we know this?):

> She sat and sang always
>   By the green margin of a stream,
> Watching the fishes leap and play
>   Beneath the glad sunbeam.
>
> I sat and wept always
>   Beneath the moon’s most shadowy beam,
> Watching the blossoms of the May
>   Weep leaves into the stream.
>
> I wept for memory;
>   She sang for hope that is so fair:
> My tears were swallowed by the sea;
>   Her songs died on the air.

There are many love poems in this anthology, but you should particularly compare Rossetti’s poem with at least two others: Henry Baker’s ‘Love’ (page 55) and John Clare’s’ First Love’ (page 131). Of these three, which seems to you most successfully to recreate the sense of young and truly innocent love? How does your choice succeed where the others do not?

Some useful material on Christina Rossetti’s life and work can be found on the following websites:
http://victorianweb.org
http://www.oldpoetry.com
http://www.carcanet.co.uk

Dante Gabriel Rossetti – 'The Woodspurge'

Compare this poem with 'A Birthday', written by Rossetti's sister Christina: hers is equally simple in style and language, but while she expresses great happiness, 'The Woodspurge', written in 1856 when the poet was twenty-eight, shows a man in deep grief and isolation. Like Christina's poem, this one also uses images of nature, and ends with focus upon a simple wild plant, the woodspurge. But is the speaker really *seeing* this plant? Why does he say at the end that the only thing he has learned from this experience is that "the woodspurge has a cup of three"? Is this *really* all that he has learned, do you think?

It is worth looking in some detail at the first stanza, to see how Rossetti is able, in a simple and almost unemotional way, to express his mood, and the way that it has swung from pain ('the wind flapped loose', but is now 'shaken out dead . . ') into a sense that he is so full of sadness that nothing matters any more ('I had walked on at the wind's will, - I sat now . . '), and indeed that what he is feeling is beyond human words (line 2 of stanza 2).

The critic David H Riede has written: "The poem's refusal to locate significance anywhere movingly expresses the hopelessness of deep grief." (http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/dgr/dgrseti12.html). Look at the extraordinary simplicity of the poem's language, and its rhythm and rhyme (how many other poems do you know that have an 'aaaa' rhyme scheme?). What effect does this have upon the way we react to the speaker's thoughts?

Some useful material on Dante Gabriel Rossetti's life and work can be found on these websites:
http://victorianweb.org
http://www.oldpoetry.com
http://www.carcanet.co.uk

Kevin Halligan — ‘The Cockroach’

Kevin Halligan was born in Toronto,Canada in 1964 He regards himself as an Anglophile and has spent long periods living in England, but has also travelled in Asia, where this poem was written. His collection *Blossom Street* is based on his travels and he often observes alien counties with detailed fascination. In this poem he apparently focuses an intense concentration on an insect, but in a powerful twist of focus the whole poem flips back to reveal that the poet himself is actually the subject.

Halligan hones his poems obsessively. He is able to use a variety of forms with great control, and deceptive ease. This seems at first quite a simple poem but it is tightly constructed with great skill.

Some points for classroom discussion
Consider the tone of voice of the narrator and what effect this produces on the reader.

Suggested comparison
Judith Wright ‘Hunting Snake’.

Margaret Atwood –'The City Planners'

Giving a lecture at the 1995 Hay-on-Wye Literature Festival, Margaret Atwood described how she first became a poet; she was still at high school in Canada, where she was born in 1939; becoming a poet, she seems to imply, was something that simply happened to her, almost without her being aware of it:

> "The day I became a poet was a sunny day of no particular ominousness. I was walking across the football field, not because I was sports-minded or had plans to smoke a cigarette behind the field house – the only other reason for going there – but because this was my normal way home from school. I was scuttling along in my usual furtive way, suspecting no ill, when a large invisible thumb descended from the sky and pressed down on the top of my head. A poem formed."
> (http://www..library.utoronto.ca/canpoetry/atwood/write.atm)

In 'The City Planners', the speaker is similarly driving fairly aimlessly through the residential suburbs of a modern city, and becomes aware of how dull and the *same* everything is (look for instance at lines 3-8, or lines13-16); why, do you think, she finds such sameness so very unpleasing? There is no obvious hint in the regular and carefully planned houses and streets of the huge and potentially destructive power of nature, which will – one day – return this suburb into "the clay seas"; however, the speaker does feel some clear unease at certain aspects of the housing estate – which lines best suggest this unease? The city planners, safe in their offices, appear blind to this, and indeed to each other, hiding from the truth by trying to cover it with strict plans and enforced order.

Some points for classroom discussion
Where are the human beings in this suburb? Why is everything so eerily quiet? Why does the poem end with the strangely contradictory but very powerful words "the panic of suburb" and "a bland madness"?

Suggested comparison
Boey Kim Cheng – 'The Planners'.

There are several useful websites, including:
http://www.cariboo.bc.ca/atwood
http://www.web.net.owtoad/biog.html
http://www.poemhunter.com
http://randomhouse.com/features/atwood

Boey Kim Cheng – 'The Planners'

Boey was born in Singapore in 1965, was educated there, but now teaches creative writing at an Australian university; perhaps this poem is critical of the way Singapore has been planned and built, though it could equally apply to any modern city. One critic has said that "the relation of the poet to his country has an abrasive element that can be sampled from 'The Planners'." (http://www.ethosbooks.com.sg).

Some points for classroom discussion
Is history being deliberately obliterated? (Lines 21-22) Does the poet *like* what is happening in the city? What do the last four lines of the poem, clearly central to what Boey is writing, say to you?
Is the poet more angry than sad? Or just resigned to what is happening?

Some brief biographical information on Boey can be found on these websites:
http://www.newcastle.edu.au/school/lang-media/staff/boeykimcheng.html

Suggested comparison
Compare what Margaret Atwood suggests about city planning in 'The City Planners' with what Boey Kim Cheng writes here; some parts of this poem, especially perhaps in the first two sections, seem strikingly similar in their ideas and images – which words and phrases suggest this? Atwood foresees a time when natural forces will take over again, and destroy everything that human planning has created; Boey's poem has a similar theme, though he seems even more critical of the way that men want to conquer and even obliterate any possible 'flaws' that nature might contain.

Norman MacCaig – 'Summer Farm'

Norman MacCaig was born in Edinburgh, the capital city of Scotland, in 1910, and spent much of his life in this and other Scottish cities until his death in 1996. His mother's family, however, came from quiet rural parts of the country, and this background is reflected in 'Summer Farm'. The poem begins with some utterly simple descriptions of what he sees, before concluding with the idea that by lying in the grass and looking at the farm he becomes aware of the many generations and many farms that have preceded this one – that he is "in the centre", but at the same time only part of a hugely long sequence of people and places – a thought that in line 10 he is even afraid to consider.

The crux lies in the final stanza, where the poet sees himself as part of a sequence of 'selves . . . threaded on time'; he is no longer just an individual, but 'a pile of selves' – what is he implying here? Similarly, he seems able to see beyond, or inside, the farm to visualise 'farm within farm'. An image perhaps reminiscent of the Russian dolls; as you open each one, another – smaller but similar – is revealed . . . .

It has been said of MacCaig that he was "a poet who could write in an unpretentious way about ordinary things and make them astonishing", and that he was "a master miniaturist". (http://www.jacobite.org.uk/maccaig) Until the final stanza there is perhaps nothing that is out of the ordinary – until you look at some of the words that he uses, for example the straws that are "tame lightnings", the ducks that "wobble by", or the swallow that "falls", and then returns to the "dizzy blue" – all expressions that startle, and make you think again about what they describe. Perhaps he is not quite such a simple writer as may at first appear.

Some points for classroom discussion

Why is the poet 'afraid of where a thought might take me'?

Suggested comparison:

James Baxter, 'The Bay'

Some brief biographical information on MacCaig can be found on these websites:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/scotland/arts/writingscotland/learning_journeys/place/norman_maccaig/works
http://www.jacobite.org.uk/maccaig/backgr.html

Elizabeth Brewster – 'Where I Come From'

Writing about an anthology of Canadian poetry published in 2000, one critic said this of the first few poems in the collection: "the bulk of the poems center round trees, oceans, cabins and childhood recollections, lulling the reader into a state of rustic complacency. 'Where I Come From' by Elizabeth Brewster summarizes this idea perfectly . . . . This sensation of being inundated with the natural is initially pleasant, like a fond recollection of a warm summer beach, then slowly becomes cloying. . . "
(http://danforthreview.com/reviews/poetry/coastlines.htm)

A key idea of the poem seems to be that a person's character is always formed at least in part by the place where he or she is born – "People are made of places". Wherever you go in life you will carry with you memories and echoes of your birthplace, whether it is a city, as in the first stanza, or the quiet Canadian countryside where Elizabeth Brewster herself was born in 1922 – "Where I come from, people/carry woods in their minds" – and certainly the picture she draws in the second stanza does seem at first to be idyllic and wonderful, strongly contrasting with the city images in the first stanza.

Some points for classroom discussion
This sensation of being inundated with the natural is initially pleasant, like a fond recollection of a warm summer beach, then slowly becomes cloying. . . "
How far – if at all – would you agree that this comment can apply to this poem?

Suggested comparisons
William Wordsworth - 'Upon Westminster Bridge'
Norman MacCaig – 'Summer Farm'

There is some very brief biographical information on the following websites:
http://www.writersunion.ca/b/brewster.htm
http://www.poets.ca/linktext/direct/brewster/htm

William Wordsworth – 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge'

Born in 1770 in the beautiful countryside of the north of England, Wordsworth often wrote of his deep love of nature and the countryside; in this sonnet, however, he recalls a moment when he and his sister Dorothy travelled to London and walked across Westminster Bridge in the early morning, before most people were awake. It is interesting that even when in the middle of England's biggest city he still compares what he can see with the hills and valleys of his home countryside in the Lake District.

The poem's language is remarkably simple – something that Wordsworth was always keen to manage in his writing – perhaps reflecting here the immediate and unsophisticated sense that he feels of how beautiful the London view is; the opening line, for instance, could hardly be more straightforward, and after a description of some of the sights that strike him so vividly Wordsworth ends the poem on a similarly and utterly simple note.

Some points for classroom discussion

What is the effect of the simple and straightforward listing of words in lines 5 and 6? How does Wordsworth make such plain description so effective? How many similes or metaphors are there in the whole sonnet? What happens in line 9, the beginning of the sestet? And what is the impact of the closing two lines?

Suggested comparison

Dorothy kept a diary for many years, and on July 27th 1802 she wrote this; you may like to compare what she wrote with what her brother's poem says. Which of the two accounts and descriptions do you find more striking?

> "It was a beautiful morning. The City, St Paul's, with the river and a multitude of little boats, made a most beautiful sight as we crossed Westminster Bridge. The houses were not overhung by their cloud of smoke, and they were spread out endlessly, yet the sun shone so brightly, with such a fierce light, that there was even something like the purity of one of nature's own grand spectacles."

Also see: Elizabeth Brewster ' Where I Come From '.

There is some useful biographical material about Wordsworth on these websites:

http://victorianweb.org
http://www.oldpoetry.com
http://www.poemhunter.com

James K Baxter – 'The Bay'

James Baxter lived most of his fairly short life (1926-1972) in New Zealand, and much of his poetry concerns the countryside and people of these islands, though never sentimentally or uncritically – he once said of his own writing that what "happens is either meaningless to me, or else it is mythology", and it may be that something of this uncertainty can be seen in 'The Bay'.

At first sight, the poem appears to be simply a description of a childhood memory, of the bay where "we bathed at times" and where "we raced boats"; the memory seems to be nostalgic and even wistful. Once looked at more carefully, however, the memory is perhaps not quite so straightforward; the road to the bay leads the poet to think of "how many roads we take that lead to Nowhere", surely a sense of how often in life we make wrong decisions (an echo possibly of Robert Frost's poem 'The Road Not Taken'?). And the final line of the opening stanza may also suggest that the memory he has is not in fact of an Eden, "that veritable garden where everything comes easy".

The second stanza again opens with what seem to be simple and happy memories, but it is worth noting some of the words towards its end – "autumnal", "cold", "amber", "the taniwha" – all hinting surely at a lack of warmth and happiness. The image of the threatening taniwha is quite a powerful and ominous conclusion to the stanza.

The third stanza opens with poisonous spiders, and despite the recurringly strong images of the cliffs and the surf the poem ends with a curiously hypnotic sense that the poet is transfixed by his memories, but also with an awareness that they are false – "the bay that never was". Is he perhaps saying that we do our best as humans to make our lives happier than they really are, that we hide behind happy memories?

Some points for classroom discussion
Look at the way the poet treats the theme of memory and our attitude to memories.

There is a lengthy article about James Baxter on this website:
http://nzbooks.com/nzbooks/author.asp?author_id=JamesKBaxter

Suggested comparison
Norman MacCaig: 'Summer Farm '

Arthur Hugh Clough – 'Where Lies the Land?'

Born in 1819 and dying in 1861, you might perhaps expect Clough to have been a traditional and convinced Christian; for much of his early life he was indeed a firm believer, but as an adult he became more and more uncertain about his real beliefs. It has been said that "Clough is for many the representative Victorian Doubter", and this poem perhaps reflects many of his uncertainties about not only this present life but also what might happen after death. It may have been written during or shortly after a period that he spent in Boston, in the United States of America, but it certainly suggests some experience on board an ocean-going ship.

The opening stanza is suggestive of a great uncertainty: the speaker does not know where the ship is going, nor where it is coming from – all he knows that both lie 'far, far ahead' and far, far behind'. Nonetheless life on board the ship (and life itself, possibly?) is full of joy and excitement, even when faced with storms.

Some points for classroom discussion
The poem's joy and excitement leads to no sure conclusion – the closing stanza is a simple repetition of the first. What effect does this repetition have on the whole poem?

There is some useful biographical material about Clough on these websites:
http://victorianweb.org
http://www.oldpoetry.com
http://www.poemhunter.com

Suggested comparison
It is interesting to compare Clough's language and images with those of William Wordsworth in a sonnet that he published in 1807, before Clough's birth.

Where lies the land to which yon ship must go?
Fresh as a lark mounting at break of day,
Festively she puts forth in trim array;
Is she for tropic suns, or polar snow?
What boots the enquiry? – Neither friend nor foe
She cares for; let her travel where she may,
She finds familiar names, a beaten way
Ever before her, and a wind to blow.

Yet still I ask, what haven is her mark?
And, almost as it was when ships were rare
(From time to time, like Pilgrims, here and there
Crossing the waters) doubt, and something dark,
Of the old Sea some reverential fear,
Is with me at thy farewell, joyous bark.

Les Murray – 'Morse'

The Australian poet Les Murray was born into a working-class family in 1938, and although he has become an internationally famed writer he has remained a fervent believer in the importance of his social and cultural background. While at school he was, like so many students, uninterested in literature; he has said that "Poetry . . . . was for us a remote and unreal form of writing which referred to the seasons and flora and class-ecology of an archipelago off the north-west coast of Europe . . . .it seemed sissy on the surface, and that was enough for us." Despite this, however, he also says that in private he read Milton's *Paradise Lost* "in a single long weekend sometime in my teens, but that was for the science fiction."

As an adult, he developed a more sympathetic view of poetry, and he goes on to say this about it, and about how students read his own writing: "Poetry makes things real, restoring their life and our perception of it, and the ways in which things in a poem refer to a wider world aren't usually as simple as the ordinary school notion of symbolism would suggest: the knack of reading on several levels at once isn't hard to suggest, though, and is usually picked up readily by senior students. I also warn them, as good teachers do, that there is no Great Golden Interpretation that will get them through their exams. If they want something of that sort, as many sadly do, I give them several." (http://www.duffyandsnelgrove.com.au/authors/murray.htm)

It is worth looking at 'Morse' with all these comments in mind. Bill Tuckett is clearly just an ordinary Australian soldier – a telegraph operator – but he carries out a life-saving and brilliantly courageous operation on another man, when in a remote and desert part of the Australian Outback
The poem appears initially to be in a very free verse form, but in fact there is a good deal of rhyme.

Some points for classroom discussion
Which of the rhymes seem particularly effective? – for instance, you might consider the fact that the soldier's name, Tuckett, rhymes nicely and amusingly with the end of line 21 ('Without you, I'd have kicked the bucket . . .').
Other men, the poem says, 'would have done their dashes' – what is the effect of the pun here? Or the one in lines 14-15 ('the first operation conducted/along dotted lines')? Or the effect of the stuttering opening to line 16?

There is some very interesting biographical and other material on the following websites:
www.lesmurray.org
http://carcanet.co.uk
http://www.onlinepoetryclassroom.org/poets/poets.cfm?prmID=230
http://www.poetryinternational.org/cwdk/view/18237
http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=3270

Suggested comparison
James K. Baxter – 'The Bay'.
Look at the use of landscape in both poems.

Thom Gunn – 'The Man With Night Sweats'

Thom Gunn (his first name was Thomson, but he preferred the shorter version) was born in Kent, England, in 1929, but spent most of his adult working life living and at first teaching in the USA, where he died in 2004.

In an interview with James Campbell, Thom Gunn once said, "Yes, I'm a cold poet, aren't I?" The scene that is described in this poem is perhaps cold – it is set in the middle of a night, when the speaker wakes up in cold and damp sheets, because of the night sweats that his illness (AIDS) has caused. The pain and discomfort is, however, offset by a kind of pride in his body: (see lines 9 and 10, for instance) while knowing that it is being painfully and inexorably destroyed – lines13-16, for example, or even more so the final three lines of the poem, with another startlingly cold image, death as an avalanche, contrasted with the powerlessness of his own hands.

It is worth noting the use of the word "shield", and the references to the shield having being "gashed" or "cracked" in the past, and the (despairing?) hope that his body can be shielded "from / The pains that will go through me" in the future.

Gunn's earlier poetry often shows a love of action and even violence, but he usually writes in a highly controlled manner. It is worth looking at this poem to see how tightly organised its rhythm and rhymes actually are, despite the desperation and power of its theme. The rhyme could be said to reflect this desperation: a half rhyme is introduced in the third quatrain, while in the fourth quatrain the rhyme is abandoned ("am"/"from") in lines 1 and 3, while lines 2 and 4 repeat "me". One critic commented on the "unflinching directness, compassion and grace" of his writing – a curious combination of ideas, but maybe they can all be found in this one poem. Perhaps it is "direct" rather than "cold".

Some points for classroom discussion
Consider the effects of the most important metaphors in the poem.

Suggested comparison
Robert Lowell 'Night Sweat'.

Thom Gunn's poems can be found at:
www.poemhunter.com/thom-gunn/poems/poet-6752.
There is some interesting comment on him at:
www.universalteacher.org.uk/poetry/gunn.htm

Robert Lowell – 'Night Sweat'

The American writer Robert Lowell was born in 1917 and died in 1977, having become, in the words of the Oxford Companion to English Literature, "a legendary figure in his own lifetime . . . [who] suffered from the claims made on his behalf as the greatest American poet of his time." His personal life was often turbulent and his mental health was sometimes precarious; some of his writing echoes this, while other poems are political in nature, reflecting his hatred of warfare, particularly the Second World War and the later conflict in Vietnam.

'Night Sweat' seems to have at least two inter-connected themes, and is indeed two linked 14-line sonnets. The poet writes in the first of the exhaustion and nervous strain caused by his life as a writer: he wakes repeatedly covered in sweat, which begins as "creeping damp" and later becomes "a heap of wet clothes, seamy, shivering", caused by "my life's fever . . . . one life, one writing!" The tension is extreme and it seems possible that it might derive from more than just the effects of his need to write.

The second section/sonnet opens with a slow and indirect appeal to his wife (although we do not at first know that this is so), and the language becomes increasingly nightmarish – "my leaded eyelids . . the grey/ skulled horses whinny for the soot of night" – as he speaks of his growing stress, and the calming but painful influence that she has upon him. We are told that he loves and respects what she does for him, and we know that he feels that what she is bearing for him is almost unbearable – "this world's dead weight and cycle on your back."

The rhyme scheme in the first part is regularly Shakespearean, but the second part has its own scheme after the octet, perhaps following the anguished sense of the poem. More than most poems, 'Night Sweat' repays reading aloud several times to become familiar with the sense.

Lowell wrote a poem entitled 'During Fever', in which he also uses the fractured imagery of fevered sleep to evoke some of the contradictory relationships he had with his parents.

Some points for classroom discussion
Look at the ways in which the images in the poem seem to create each other, one leading to another in a way that suggests fever or madness.

Suggested comparison
Thom Gunn 'The Man With Night Sweats'

Look for Robert Lowell's poetry at:
www.poemhunter.com/robert-lowell/poet-6707

Edward Thomas – 'Rain'

Edward Thomas was born in London in 1878. He married very young, while still at Oxford, and made a precarious living by writing – reviews, travel-writing and topography and the editing of anthologies. He started writing poetry in December 1914, encouraged by the American poet Robert Frost, and in two years produced his entire output. He enlisted in the army in 1915 and was killed in battle in 1917. 'Rain' was written in January 1916, when Thomas was in the army but still training in England. In spite of the war, much of Thomas's poetry reflects his deep love of the countryside, and seems distant from the fighting and death. This poem is in one sense distant from war – it does not mention it – but could equally be an expression of despair at being caught up in war. Equally, if this had been written by a civilian in peacetime, it might have suggested thoughts of suicide.

The bleakness of the poem reflects not just the weather (no doubt cold as well as wet) but the basic hut in which Thomas is writing, the darkness outside, his solitude, and his view of his future, summed up in the first three lines. Thomas had to fight recurrent depression. There is a thread of imagery, derived very generally from Christianity, running through the poem: he is washed cleaner by the rain (baptism); he blesses the dead in a phrase recalling the Beatitudes; he prays that no-one he has loved is dying or suffering as he is suffering; and he declares his love of death as something perfect. It is the statement of a man whose immediate circumstances match his state of mind.
There are only two sentences in the poem; reading it aloud would help recover the sweep of the thought and feeling.

Some points for classroom for discussion
It is worth examining the effects of repetition in the poem – e.g. rain itself, or the "Myriads of broken reeds all stiff and stiff".

Suggested comparisons
There are many literary works that depend on the effects of weather to reflect strong feeling. It is worth looking at Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Act 3 Scene 2, when Lear is homeless on the heath. Thomas Hardy's 'During Wind and Rain' is another example, perhaps closer in feeling to 'Rain' than *King Lear*.

All Hardy's poems can be found on this website:
www.poemhunter.com

Edward Thomas's works can be found at:
www.poemhunter.com/edward-thomas/poet-3512
Commentary on his work is at:
www.buzzin.net/english/engl-03.htm

William Cosmo Monkhouse – 'Any Soul to Any Body'

Like many poets, William Cosmo Monkhouse (1840-1901) was not a professional writer; in fact he was for most of his career a civil servant, working mostly in London but also South America. He was a very keen art critic, writing several articles and books about both contemporary and older painters. He married twice, and had several children, for whom he wrote a number of comic poems, including several limericks.

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* of 1911 remarked that "he had the rare gift of differing without offending", a talent that can arguably be seen in the quite sensitive and often moving material so gently and quietly expressed in 'Any Soul to Any Body'. The article ended by saying that "as a poet, his ambition was so wide and his devotion to the art so thorough, that it is difficult not to regret the slender bulk of his legacy to posterity."

'Any Soul to Any Body' is a serious poem about death, but it does have some light and even humorous moments, particularly perhaps in the first half of the fourth stanza. There is also some characteristically Victorian sentiment in the final stanza, but – given Monkhouse's strongly religious beliefs (he wrote a lengthy poem called 'The Christ Upon the Hill') – the religion here is perhaps rather understated.

Some points for classroom discussion

The poem hovers between humour, self-deprecation and belief as it reviews the life and the partnership as they approach their end.

Look carefully at how this is achieved through tone in the poem and the ways in which the two "voices" are characterised.

Suggested comparison

The poem lies within a tradition of such verse; perhaps the best known is example is 'A Dialogue between the Soul and Body' by Andrew Marvell (1621-1678), in which the embittered soul and body each see themselves as imprisoned by the other. The sentiment behind such verse derives perhaps from the struggle for Christian perfection in a fallen world, where the soul's health and its eventual happiness in Heaven depends upon the goodness of the mortal life. The outcome of such a judgement is often seen as doubtful, and these poems are usually uneasy if not fearful. Marvell's poem can be found at www.bartleby.com/105/120.html.

Anne Stevenson – 'The Spirit is too Blunt an Instrument'

Anne Stevenson was born to American parents in England in 1933, and was taken to America when she was only six months old. Since completing her education there she has lived and worked on both sides of the Atlantic. She has written a highly controversial biography of the American poet Sylvia Plath, as well as more than a dozen volumes of poetry.

An American poet and critic said of Stevenson that she is " . . . a contemporary Emily Dickinson, a poet who works on a small canvas, quietly, with big themes" (http://books.guardian.co.uk/print/0,3858,50289389936,00.html).

This comment could well apply to this poem. 'The spirit is too blunt an instrument' talks quietly and lovingly of the amazement felt by a parent looking at her child – how, she wonders, could any clumsy human passion have led to the creation of such utter and minute perfection as the baby represents. To almost everybody except the parents involved, a birth is an everyday event of little interest, but the thoughts aroused by the birth in the poem are truly enormous. The last three lines, in one sense almost off-hand and even comic, make a powerful and striking suggestion about our minds and emotions. And it is curious that the final word of the poems, after its marvelling at the beauty and perfection of creation, should simply be "pain".

Some points for classroom discussion

There is much in the poem that repays very close study; how do its precise and – perhaps – unfamiliar scientific terms, combined with what may appear to be an unemotional and even quite cold language, nonetheless create a sense of real wonder and joy?

Look at adjectives in the poem and the effects they create.

Suggested comparisons

It is noteworthy that few poems on this kind of topic have been written, especially by comparison with the number written about older children. Thomas Traherne (1637/8-1674) wrote a religious poem in which the wonders of the body are celebrated in a prayer:

O Lord!
Thou hast given me a body,
Wherein the glory of Thy power shineth,
Wonderfully composed above the beasts,
Within distinguished into useful parts,
Beautified without with many ornaments.
Limbs rarely poised,
And made for Heaven:
Arteries filled
With celestial spirits:
Veins wherein blood floweth,
Refreshing all my flesh,
Like rivers:
Sinews fraught with the mystery
Of wonderful strength,
Stability,
Feeling.

O blessed be thy glorious name!
That thou hast made it
A treasury of Wonders,
Fit for its several ages;
For Dissections,
For sculptures in Brass,
For Draughts in Anatomy,
For the contemplation of the Sages.

Sylvia Plath has written a poem in which the bodily beauty of the unborn is celebrated in terms of what might or should have been in 'Stillborn', although here the poem is as much about a poem that did not work as it is about a baby. Plath's poem can be found at: http://www.americanpoems.com/poetry/sylviaplath/1433.

Anne Stevenson runs her own website at www.anne-stevenson.co.uk/contact.htm

Tony Harrison – from 'Long Distance'

Harrison was born in the north of England in 1937. Much of his writing is about his family, and this – known as 'Long Distance II' – is a particularly moving account of the way in which his father cannot come to terms with his mother's death, and how, in turn, he cannot come to terms with his father's death. Although most of the poem talks of the way his widowed father continued to behave as if his wife was still alive, even two years after she had died, and although the poet clearly but very lovingly criticises him for this, the poem ends with an admission that now that both his parents have gone he still keeps their telephone number, and even still tries to call them.

There are several aspects of his father's inability to take in his wife's death – he still warms her slippers by the fire, he puts hot water bottles in the bed for her, he renews her transport pass, he even "*knew* she'd just popped out to get the tea". He seems embarrassed, even ashamed, by his own feelings ("as though his still raw love were such a crime"), and tries to hide this from the poet.

"I believe life ends with death, and that is all" appears to be the poet's own belief, and he tries by saying this to exclude all emotion and sorrow, although on the evidence of this poem he seems to share some of his father's views.

Harrison won a place at a prestigious school and grew up knowing that he was leaving his poorly educated parents behind. Harrison's father was of his time and place in the views he held about how life should be lived; Harrison's wider knowledge and opinions produced a tension within him and between him and his father. He knew his father's worth but was also greatly attracted to his studies (particularly in the classics) and this led to feelings of great exasperation and guilt. The concluding lines of 'Long Distance II', where for the first time he addresses his father directly, suggest that warmer feelings can be expressed now that his father is dead. They also suggest an understanding, through repetition, of his father's actions in his bereavement.

Some points for classroom discussion
Notice how very exact the poem's rhyme scheme is, and even its rhythm, while slightly uneven, is basically very steady. It is worth examining the effects of such strongly controlled writing in a poem that is so full of deep sadness, as is the tone of a man explaining himself to the reader, and to himself.

Suggested comparison
A different memory of an ancestor is James Baxter's 'Elegy for my Father's Father', (SOO).

There is a more understated regret and guilt about a dead parent in Thomas Hardy's poem 'The Self-Unseeing'.

All Hardy's poems can be found on this website:
www.poemhunter.com

George Meredith – 'Modern Love'

In 1862, George Meredith published a sequence of fifty poems – 16-line "sonnets" – with the overall title *Modern Love*; this poem is the first in the sequence, and tells of a couple whose marriage is effectively finished, each desperately unhappy, and each wishing "for the sword that severs all" (death? divorce?). Meredith had married in 1849, but nine years later his wife left him to live with an artist, and she and Meredith were never reconciled; the poems in *Modern Love*, while certainly fictional, seem nonetheless to reflect strongly the feelings that he and his wife must have had during their last years together, feelings of pain, guilt, anger, nostalgia, regret – all feelings that can be found in this one poem.

The poem opens, for example, with the wife in silent tears; the husband is torn between two feelings – in part gentle ("his hand's light quiver by her head"), in part full of hate ("Dreadfully venomous to him"). They are unable to talk, and lie "stone-still"; they cannot sleep, but look back "through their dead black years" (what dreadful pain there is here in these last words – try saying them aloud). Finally, the poet says, they lie as still as if they were carved of stone, like effigies on a tomb, but wishing for "the sword that severs all". It is perhaps hard to imagine a bleaker or more desperately sad poem; is there any light or hope in it at all?
It could have been no comfort for Meredith when he wrote this poem, but he did marry again in 1864, and lived a long and successful life after this, dying in 1909 at the age of eighty.

The tone of the poem is intensely personal; knowing what we do of Meredith's first marriage, it is almost impossible to separate the speaker in the poem from the poet. The title of the work, *Modern Love*, does however suggest a wider relevance to each of the constituent poems. Together, they trace a series of events and developments that are a picture of 'modern love'. The disenchantment goes deeper than the particular marriage. This is not the first 'sonnet' sequence about love, but it is perhaps the most despairing in its exploration of unhappiness when love dies within marriage.

The 16-line sonnet (some call it the Meredithian sonnet) is a form that resembles the traditional 14-line versions: its rhyme scheme is ABBA repeated four times rather than three, and there is no concluding couplet. (There is in this example a sort of break or transition in line eight.) It might best be seen as a poetic form slightly less tightly drawn than the traditional sonnet, but sharing its demands of economy and structure. It can stand alone, as it displays the sonnet's characteristic completeness, even when, as in this case, it is part of a much larger work.

Some points for classroom discussion
There are some powerful effects worth exploring. The threatening and funereal rhythm and sound, for instance, of "… and so beat/ Sleep's heavy measure, they from head to feet/ Were moveless, looking through their dead black years" prepares the reader for the tomb imagery that follows. The adjectives seem even sharper and more agonising when listed separately.

A fruitful approach to the poem would be to read it aloud, paying due attention to the sentence structure as well as to the individual lines.

Suggested comparison
'One Flesh' by Elizabeth Jennings at http://www.oldpoetry.com.

Walt Whitman – from *Song of Myself*

This extraordinary poem is just a small part of a very much longer one entitled *Song of Myself*, which the American poet Whitman wrote over a number of years; this was probably written in or about 1855, when he was in his thirties (he lived from 1819 to 1892). The full sequence contains 52 poems, totalling 1346 lines, in which, according to one critic, Whitman "sings a 'Song of Myself' but really speaks for the human race and universal harmony." (http://www.liglobal.com/walt/waltbio.html)

This idea – the combining of the personal and the universal – can certainly be seen in this poem, perhaps most clearly in the first six lines. But it also appears later, in a more indirect form, when he talks of presidency as "a trifle . . .[that will] still pass on"; the power of nature is so much stronger and greater than that of mere humanity, an idea that is developed and repeated in the last two sections of the poem.

All poems benefit from being read aloud, but Whitman's particularly so. There is almost a musical quality about some parts, with repetition and rhythm being of particular value and fascination; lines 4-6, lines 12-13, and the whole of the final section deserves especial note. The critic referred to above also says that "the musical nature of Whitman's poetry is evident in the fact that no poetry has been set to music more often than his." Music of course appeals directly to our feelings rather than our minds; poetry usually appeals to our minds first. Maybe Whitman's writing is indeed closer to music than to conventional poetry; some lines in this poem, for example, almost defy conventional explanation. It would be hard, even impossible, to "translate" what the final section *means*, but it is possible to *feel* some deep and powerful emotion.

Some points for classroom discussion
Whitman's work is much studied. Some useful information about it is at:
www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/poems/times.html

Suggested comparison
G.M.Hopkins 'Pied Beauty'

Thomas Hardy – 'He Never Expected Much'

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) lived at much the same time as Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889), and like Hopkins loved the landscape and beauty of his home countryside, but his beliefs and character were radically different. Where Hopkins always saw the power and wonder of God behind nature, Hardy could not believe in a kindly or positive God, and felt that life was ultimately cold and unfeeling towards all human beings. He regretted the loss of his earlier faith, and once described himself in a letter as 'churchy' – i.e. someone nostalgic about the practice of religion. In 'He Never Expected Much' he suggests that while he has not really achieved or enjoyed much in his long life (and he was 86 years old when he wrote the poem), he accepts that he was never promised much anyway. All he was promised, he says, were "just neutral-tinted haps and such"; compare this with what Hopkins saw around him.

This poem is presented as a statement by the speaker, during which the earlier words of the World are quoted, giving the sense and tone of a conversation. There are three stanzas of eight lines, with a rhyme scheme of AAABCCCB. The rhyme at the end of the second line in each stanza is a simple repetition of the last word or words of the first line. It is worth reading this poem aloud, paying particular attention to the sentence structure as well as to the lines. The tone is one of quiet conversation between two old people agreeing about the fundamentals of life, even though only one voice is speaking. The vocabulary suggests a simple style of life. There are some repetitions, the effects of which also sound like conversation, and there are some inversions which might reflect speech of ordinary people. The fact that the speaker is old can be deduced from an analysis of tone, vocabulary, etc.

The World describes various attitudes to life adopted by different people, but also suggests that none of these varying approaches to living were of any consequence, even though they may have been important to the people concerned. The speaker seems grateful for having been tipped off by the World at an early stage in life; he has never been in danger of disappointment, and now seems content with the bargain he has received.

Some points for classroom discussion

It was said by another poet, Laurence Binyon, that Hardy's writing was about "the implanted crookedness of things"; do you agree that this is how this poem can be described?

If this is a kind of revelation or belief, where does it come from, and what is the revelation?

Look closely at the possible meanings of, e.g., "fair" (line 8), "desperately" (line 13) and "serenity" (line 14). Other words are worth similar scrutiny.

Suggested comparison

Peter Porter 'A Consumer's Report'

Fleur Adcock – 'The Telephone Call'

Fleur Adcock was born in New Zealand in 1934, but she has spent much of her working life in Great Britain. Many of her poems are centred upon ordinary home life, but when her collected poems were published by Bloodaxe Books her writing was said to be "disarmingly simple in style" – perhaps she always says more than at first appears? The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* says that she is "known for her tranquil domestic lyrics intercut with flashes of irony and glimpses of the fantastic and the macabre." This might well apply to 'The Telephone Call'.

This apparently very simple poem focuses on the dream that many people have of winning a huge lottery prize, and perhaps also on the irritation that many people also have when receiving hoax telephone calls. It is a poem about values: no matter what people's non-material values may be, they are also immune to the greed that would welcome the (theoretical) possibility of sudden huge wealth.

The rush of words at the beginning (e.g. the name for the prize) reflects the gushing language of some unsolicited phone calls, when someone is trying to sell something. The recipient seems unbalanced by the news, giving increasingly detailed replies to the question about feelings, before becoming suspicious. Suspicion is overcome, as the voice can explain the absence of a lottery ticket, and the recipient is then set up for the denouement. A moment's thought would show that the news is ridiculous – but no time for thought is possible. The winning of huge sums can deprive us of rational thought.

Some points for classroom discussion

Consider the use of voices in the poem, how they are characterised and the values they might represent.

Is there some sarcasm here? Why should these questions be asked? Is the questioning voice implying some sort of ascendancy over the recipient? Does this make possible a new, retrospective reading of the sentence "And they laughed" a few lines before?

Suggested comparison

See also 'A Consumer's Report' by Peter Porter.

Peter Porter – 'A Consumer's Report'

Porter was born in Australia in 1929, but after education there, and working in journalism for some years, he moved to England in 1951, and has lived there ever since. He has written very many books of poetry, and has won a number of prizes for his writing.

Peter Porter worked in an advertising agency for some time, and he clearly uses some of this experience in 'A Consumer's Report'. The 'product' that he is testing in the poem is life itself, and he approaches it as if it were in fact simply something that can be bought and then used or discarded. He does, however, point out "it's very difficult to get rid of", and even "if you say you don't / want it, then it's delivered anyway". The poem makes fun of much advertising and consumer-report writing, but beneath the fun there is a truly and disturbingly serious set of ideas.

The structure of the poem suggests a series of answers to questions put to the 'respondent' in a questionnaire. The first 16 lines sound like the entries in boxes on the form, but after that the tone becomes slightly more generalised as if the respondent is becoming disenchanted with having to give limited answers to specific questions (there is a parenthesis berating the company for demanding this). The responses then become briefer and follow quickly on each other, but although the language is still that of the consumer report, the focus is more obviously on aspects of experience.

Some points for classroom discussion
How does the idea of a form to be filled in affect the structure and tone of the poem?

Suggested comparison
Thomas Hardy 'He Never Expected Much'
Fleur Adcock 'The Telephone Call'

Charles Tennyson Turner – 'On Finding a Small Fly Crushed in a Book'

Turner was born in 1808, one year before his brother, the much better-known poet Alfred Tennyson; the two published several poems together, but while Alfred grew into a widely loved and respected writer, Charles spent a comparatively quiet life as vicar of a church in Grasby in the English county of Lincolnshire. He changed his name to Turner in order to fulfil the dying wishes of a relative and to receive some money from his will. He died in 1879, several years before Alfred, having written some 340 sonnets during his lifetime.

The title 'On Finding a Small Fly Crushed in a Book' suggests that a reflective poem is to follow, prompted by the small discovery that follows the opening of a book. The tone at the opening is speculative, but the poet soon begins to develop the ideas prompted by the sight of the squashed fly.

The form of the sonnet is regular but seems to be adapted for this poem; the rhyme scheme is not exactly like that of a Petrarchan, Shakespearean or Spenserian sonnet, and if there is a 'break' in the meaning after the octet, it comes as much in the middle of line 8 as at the end of it. Perhaps the poem seems more personal as a result as the writer follows a train of thought with his own clear structure.

The title seems to belie what the poem becomes. Sonnets (or other kinds of poems) entitled "On…" are fairly common, but are usually about something weighty. John Milton (1608-1674), for instance, wrote "On the late massacre in Piedmont"; Thomas Gray (1716-1771) wrote feelingly "On the death of Mr Richard West"; and Muriel Rukeyser (1913-1980) wrote "On the death of her mother". Turner's title suggests something lighter, but the poem grows into a well-turned reflection on human responsibility for the state of the individual soul.

Some of the language is archaic: "pent" (imprisoned) is used now only in expressions like "pent-up emotions", and was old-fashioned in Turner's day; "wert" (were) sounds more like Keats or Milton. The use of "thee" and "thou" for "you" was possibly a contemporary dialect usage in Lincolnshire, but does not sound like the speech of Turner's time. A clergymen like Turner, however, might well have felt that archaisms suited the subject.

Some points for classroom discussion

Look at the ways in which the poem constantly relates the possible parallel fate of the human to the actual fate of the fly, drawing a melancholy conclusion that we might leave even less of a mark than the fly when the book finally closes upon us.

Suggested comparisons

Charles Tennyson Turner seems to have had a particularly amused interest in small flies, as his sonnet below suggests. However, while 'Calvus to a Fly' is entirely humorous, 'On Finding a Small Fly Crushed in a Book' certainly is not.

Calvus to a Fly

Ah! little fly, alighting fitfully
In the dim dawn on this bare head of mine,
Which spreads a white and gleaming track for thee,
When chairs and dusky wardrobes cease to shine.
Though thou art irksome, let me not complain;

Thy foolish passion for my hairless head
Will spend itself, when these dark hours are sped,
And thou shalt seek the sunlight on the pane.
But still beware! thou art on dangerous ground:
An angry sonnet, or a hasty hand,
May slander thee, or crush thee: thy shrill sound
And constant touch may shake my self command,
And thou mayst perish in that moment's spite,
And die a martyr to thy love of light.

See also 'The Grasshopper' by Abraham Cowley, included in this anthology.

Percy Bysshe Shelley – 'Ozymandias'

Shelley (1792-1822) was not strong or athletic as a young man, and partly for these reasons he was badly bullied by older boys when he was at school – he went to Eton College, the famous public school near London, in the early years of the 19th Century, where he became known as "Mad Shelley" and "The Eton Atheist". He became very radical in his religious and political beliefs, and said that he saw the petty tyranny of schoolmasters and schoolmates as representative of man's general inhumanity to man. He hated all forms of political power, writing once that "titles are tinsel, power a corrupter, glory a bubble, and excessive wealth a libel on its possessor." Ozymandias (perhaps the ancient Egyptian king Ramses II) called himself "King of Kings", and clearly wielded enormous and arrogant control; now, however, "nothing beside remains", and his once mighty empire is simply "boundless and bare". Shelley travelled a great deal in Europe in his last years, and died when his sailing boat was overwhelmed in a storm in the Bay of Spezia. He was cremated on the beach, in the presence of Byron; it was, perhaps, the ultimate Romantic end.

The poem follows the conventions of the Shakespearean sonnet as far as structure and rhyme scheme are concerned, but achieves a directness and a freedom in its flow by using the quoted words of the traveller, by ignoring the 'break' in sense that usually comes after line 8, and by enlarging the ironical comment at the end from the usual couplet to three lines. Reading the poem aloud suggests powerfully that there should be a pause after line 11, before the word "Nothing" deflates the pretensions of the King.

The poem is a strong statement against tyranny, full of the author's fiercely radical sentiments. Listen to the sounds of the words, particularly the assonance of the vowels.

Some points for classroom discussion

It is interesting to consider-who is the narrator of the poem and who is the audience?

Suggested comparison

Charles Tennyson Turner: 'On Finding a Small Fly Crushed in a book'

Stevie Smith – 'Away Melancholy'

Another of Stevie Smith's poems, 'Is It Wise?', opens with these words:

> Is it wise
> To hug misery
> To make a song of Melancholy
> To weave a garland of sighs
> To abandon hope wholly?
> No, it is not wise.

In 'Away Melancholy' she expands on this idea – whatever you feel, or whenever you feel depressed and sad, remember that life, both human and animal (though man "is an animal too") continues regardless; humanity is "superlative" and able to imagine a God, despite all the misery and suffering that surrounds us. We must, then, persevere and not fall into mere melancholy.

Stevie Smith was born in 1902, and lived almost all her life in a north London suburb with her increasingly elderly and ill aunt, while working for a firm of publishers. This life was outwardly ordinary and quiet, though her poems suggest an astonishingly lively and exciting mind, frequently written in unusual and even eccentric language (what evidence of this can you find in 'Away, Melancholy'?). She had an extraordinary will to live life to its fullest despite her own growing ill health (she died of a brain tumour in 1971).

She was never conventionally religious, but many of her poems, like this one, do speak quite positively of a belief in God; she once said that there was a danger that she might "lapse into belief" in God. 'Away, Melancholy' suggests a real uncertainty – we must resist melancholy because life is so good and energetic, and because man alone can imagine and perhaps create a God to believe in, even when life is outwardly so very dreadful, and even when "beaten, corrupted, dying / In his own blood lying" men still call out for God's help. One critic says this:

> "[the poem] is full of doubt, but is also . . . a brave attempt to face doubt without shrinking, to come to terms with the idea that God may well be a human construct, and to celebrate humanity in spite of the tears, tyranny, pox and wars that are part of the human condition."
> (http://www.strange-attractor.co,uk/stevirel.htm)

The language is oddly archaic in places: 'carrieth', 'meat' (i.e. food), 'speak not to me', suggesting the language of the Book of Common Prayer (1559) or the King James Bible (1611). Similarly, "With a hey ho melancholy' is reminiscent of an Elizabethan song, as is the use of the refrain 'away, melancholy'. (The fuller version of the refrain 'away with it, let it go' sounds much more modern.) 'Melancholy' itself suggests the old theory of the humours as an account of human personality and health. The melancholic was often on the point of madness.

The early sections are full of activity; in the middle of the poem the verbs are more thoughtful; and at the end the tone becomes anguished ("Beaten, corrupted, dying") before a final note of possible hope ("virtue").

The poem is perhaps a fitting one to place at the end of this collection: it is uncertain, anxious, and even desperate in its hope that God might exist, that humans are not alone in the universe; its final words, though, are surely positive, life-affirming, and optimistic? Whatever the pain and sorrow that modern life can bring, humans – hopefully with God's help – will always overcome and survive. "Away, melancholy, Away with it, let it go".

Some points for classroom discussion
The structure is more regular than may appear at first sight. Look closely at how the poem is structured.
Rhyme and half rhyme are used to subtle effect- consider these.

Suggested comparison
See also Stevie Smith's poem 'A Man I Am', (SOO)