

THIS IS POETRY

A young woman with reddish-brown hair, wearing a denim shirt and shorts, is sitting cross-legged on a grassy field under a clear blue sky. She is holding an open book and looking down at it, appearing to be reading. The background is a bright, clear blue sky and a green field.

HIGHER LEVEL 2027

Brian Forristal & Billy Ramsell

Assonance and Alliteration

Sound is a crucial aspect of poetry. Poets often use assonance and alliteration to create memorable verbal music.

Alliteration occurs when a number of words in close proximity start with the same sound.

- The cold, crisp, crust of clean, clear ice
- The dark, dank, dungeon
- Cars crashed and collided.

Assonance occurs when a number of words in close proximity have similar vowel sounds.

- She shot a cool, foolish look across the room.
- The sun rose high in the bright sky.
- Go slow over the road.

Over to You

Consider the following examples of alliteration:

'bend/ Your force, to break, blow, burn'	'Batter my heart' by John Donne
'A spotted Shaft is seen'	'A narrow Fellow in the Grass' by Emily Dickinson
'Time slides slowly down the sash window'	'Them Ducks Died for Ireland' by Paula Meehan
'Aunt Jennifer's fingers fluttering through her wool'	'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers' by Adrienne Rich

1. What repeated sounds can you identify in the line from 'Batter my heart'?
2. What repeated letter or letters makes the lines from 'A narrow Fellow in the Grass' an example of alliteration?
3. Which words in the opening line 'Them Ducks Died for Ireland' start with a similar sound? Would you agree that these lines could also be considered an example of assonance?
4. Describe in your own words why the line from 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers' might be considered a good example of alliteration.

Now consider the following examples of assonance:

'Upon the brimming water among the stones'	'The Wild Swans at Coole' by W. B. Yeats
'A squirming glimmer of gills'	'Day Trip to Donegal' by Derek Mahon
'Love all alike no season knows nor clime'	'The Sun Rising' by John Donne
'he unrolled his feathers,/ And rowed him softer Home'	'A Bird came down the Walk' by Emily Dickinson

5. Mark the repeated 'o' sounds in the extract from 'The Wild Swans at Coole'.
6. Describe in your own words why the line from 'Day Trip to Donegal' might be considered a good example of assonance.
7. How many repeated vowel sounds can you identify in the extract from 'The Sun Rising'?
8. Which words in the extract from 'A Bird came down the Walk' feature repeated vowel sounds? Would you agree that these lines could also be considered an example of alliteration?

Take a look at the following lines and answer the accompanying questions:

'Too long a sacrifice/ Can make a stone of the heart'	'Easter 1916' by W. B. Yeats
'a cacophany of bone imploring sky for judgement'	'The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks' by Paula Meehan
'stained bright pink underneath, until/ they shrieked out of sight'	'The Armadillo' by Elizabeth Bishop
'O unworn world enrapture me, encapture me in a web'	'Canal Bank Walk' by Patrick Kavanagh

9. Consider the lines from 'Easter 1916' above.
 - a. Which words begin with a similar sound?
 - b. Which vowel sounds recur throughout the line?
 - c. Would you agree that the lines create a rather melancholic atmosphere?
10. Consider the line from 'The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks' above:
 - a. Mark the repeated 'o' sounds.
 - b. What sort of mood and atmosphere does this line generate?
 - c. Could this extract also be considered an example of alliteration?
11. Consider the lines from 'The Armadillo' above:
 - a. Mark all the words in this extract that begin with a similar sound.
 - b. Which vowel sounds recur throughout the extract?
 - c. Does the extract, in your opinion, create a pleasant or an unpleasant musical effect? Give a reason for your answer.
12. Consider the line from 'Canal Bank Walk' above:
 - d. Identify the repeated 'e' sounds in this extract.
 - e. Suggest why the extract might be considered a good example of alliteration?
 - f. What mood or atmosphere is generated by the poet's use of assonance and alliteration?

Our Whole Life

Our whole life a translation
the permissible fibs

and now a knot of lies
eating at itself to get undone

Words bitten thru words [5]

meanings burnt-off like paint
under the blowtorch

All those dead letters
rendered into the oppressor's language

Trying to tell the doctor where it hurts [10]
like the Algerian
who walked from his village, burning

his whole body a cloud of pain
and there are no words for this

except himself [15]

Annotations

[1] **translation:** the act of rewriting a text in another language; the act of altering an object's fundamental nature; the act of changing an object's position according to specific rules

[8] **dead letters:** letters that are undeliverable by the postal service

[9] **rendered into:** translated

[9] **oppressor:** someone who keeps others down by severe and unjust use of force or authority

[11] **the Algerian:** a victim of the Algerian War of Independence (1954 - 1962)

Exploring the Poem

1. The poet suggests that women's speech and writing is always a form of translation:
 - a. What does this suggest about the relationship between women and language?
 - b. Are phrases translated from one language to another always completely accurate?
 - c. True or false: Women are simply not permitted to speak the full truth about their lives.
2. Consider the phrase 'knot of lies':
 - a. How does this image combine something concrete with something abstract? How do we visualise such a 'knot'? Is this image effective, or is it too abstract and outlandish?
 - b. What does this image suggest about the relationship between women and the language in which they're forced to speak?
 - c. What phrases suggest that this knot will eventually unravel, that these lies can't be maintained forever?
3. The poet uses several other phrases to describe the complex relationship between women and language:
 - a. The poet suggests that women are forced to speak the 'oppressor's language'. What does this suggest about her attitude to English and other major languages?
 - b. The poet compares women's efforts at communication to 'dead letters'. What are 'dead letters'? What does this comparison suggest about women's ability to communicate?
 - c. The poet depicts a child attempting to 'tell the doctor where it hurts'. Why might a child have difficulty explaining how he or she feels to a doctor? How might this difficulty represent the plight of women when it comes to language?
4. The poet depicts a victim of the Algerian War:
 - a. Consider the term 'burning'. Does it refer to the man or to his village? Might it refer to both?
 - b. What incident do you think the man has witnessed?
 - c. Can you suggest why the man is walking, rather than running, away from this attack? Might there be more than one reason?
5. This poem is replete with violent and aggressive **imagery**. Identify as many examples as you can.
6. The poet imagines 'meanings' being stripped away like paint 'under the blowtorch'. What kind of 'meanings'

Focus on Technique

do you think she has in mind here? Does this image suggest that women might somehow be freed from male-dominated language? What might an alternative and more inclusive language be like?

7. There is very little **punctuation** in the poem. Does this make it easier or more difficult to understand? Would you agree that the poem might be described as a flow of images rather than as a sustained argument?
8. 'The poet believes that all languages are male-dominated systems, which inevitably exclude and oppress women. Women, therefore, can only express themselves in a way that is distorted and inaccurate, can never give an

Focus on Theme

account of their 'whole life'. Discuss this statement as a class.

9. '[A]nd there are no words for this// except himself'. What does Rich mean by this rather cryptic conclusion? Consider the following possibilities and rank them in order of plausibility:
 - It is impossible to express the horror of this situation in words. Only a photograph or other image will convey the misery of the man's plight.
 - The man is so traumatised by what he's witnessed that he can no longer even express his fear and rage.
 - The man cannot communicate with those who attack and dominate his country; they will not listen to him or even learn to speak his language.
10. Rich draws a comparison between the situation of the Algerian people and that of women everywhere. What similarities exist between these situations? In what ways are these situations different?



LINE BY LINE

‘Our Whole Life’ is a powerful meditation on the nature of language itself. The poem strikingly presents language as gendered and male-dominated. We’re inclined to think of language as a neutral tool for communication. According to Rich, however, language is anything but neutral. Instead, it’s extremely gender-biased. Every language (whether it be English or Chinese, Mongolian or Spanish) was created by a male-dominated society, evolving over time to suit the needs of men rather than women. When women speak or write, therefore, they are forced to use ‘the oppressor’s language’. They must use words created by the very men who keep them down. Women must use vocabulary and grammar designed to communicate a male, rather than a female, perspective on reality. This means that it’s extremely difficult for women to communicate the truth about their lives.

Certain aspects of female experience are simply impossible to express in these male-created languages. Other aspects can be expressed only in a blurred and distorted fashion. Rich refers bitterly to the ‘permissible fibs’, brilliantly capturing how male-created languages allow women to communicate only certain aspects of their beings, and then only falsely and imprecisely. The remaining aspects of women’s experiences can’t really be conveyed at all by means of male-dominated languages.

Rich uses several inventive comparisons to describe to describe the horror of women being forced to use an alien and inappropriate language. Women, she memorably declares, are bound in ‘a knot of lies’. Constrained by the binds of an alien language, there is little they can express. And what little they can say will be in an important sense untrue. Women’s experiences are compared to a surface that’s been painted over. The bare, unpainted surface might be thought of as women’s real, lived experience. The paint might be thought of as the alien or inappropriate language in which that experience must be expressed. The words women use, then, tend to obscure, rather than reveal, the reality of their experiences, just as a layer of paint obscures the surface to which it is applied.

Rich also imagines a child attempting to communicate with a doctor, endeavouring to explain the symptoms and sensations associated with his illness: ‘Trying to tell the doctor where it hurts’. We can imagine a child struggling to describe, for instance, a ‘recurring, shooting pain in the area around my solar plexus’ or a ‘persistent, throbbing headache’. Just as the child lacks the vocabulary to explain the nature of such discomfort, so women lack the linguistic tools to adequately express their experiences.

Rich also uses the metaphor of ‘dead letters’, which are pieces of mail that have gone astray within the postal service. A woman sets out to communicate her experience through language, just as a letter-writer sets out to correspond with his intended recipient. However, the woman’s true meaning is lost in the alien language she must use to express herself, just as the letter is lost in the postal system. The truth of women’s experience, therefore, can never be properly communicated, just as dead letters are destined to never reach their intended destination.

The poem’s most striking comparison, however, is surely that of the Algerian man ‘who walked from his village, burning’. Here Rich is probably referring to an image from a warzone that she saw in a newspaper or on television. ‘Our Whole Life’ was written during the Algerian War (1954–62), which was fought between France and the Algerian National Liberation Front. In this most bitter and bloody conflict, Algeria, which had been under French rule since 1830, finally gained its independence.

The image depicts a man on fire, his ‘whole body’ ablaze. Behind him is his village, which has just been firebombed by the French colonial army. Tellingly, the man walks rather than runs from his ruined home. It’s as if he knows there’s no hope of escape and therefore no point in running. It’s as if he’s been so ground down by years of conflict that he no longer has the physical strength or mental will to even attempt to run away.

This is a circumstance to which language cannot do justice. There are no words in English, French, Arabic or any other tongue that can adequately express such horror. Only the image of the burning man himself, rather than any verbal description, can adequately convey his plight: ‘and there are no words for this// except himself’. The experiences of women, according to the poet, are like the

image of the burning man. Neither can be adequately expressed through language. The image of the burning man cannot be adequately explained because its very horror strains the capacity of language. The experiences of women, meanwhile, cannot be adequately described or explained because women are constrained by the shackles of an alien language system.

FOCUS ON TECHNIQUE

‘Our Whole Life’ is written in the very loose style associated with Rich’s later work, a far cry from the tight, formal stanzas of an early poem like ‘Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers’. There is an element of what we might describe as ‘collage’ about the poem, as it combines different strips of language to make an exhilarating if disorientating whole. For instance, we move without explanation from the image of the blowtorch to the image of the dead letters, and from the image of the child at the doctor’s office to the image of the burning Algerian.

There’s an important sense in which the poem’s **form** enacts its meaning. The poem, with all its chopping and changing, resists and pushes beyond ordinary meaning, just as Rich seeks to resist and push beyond the male-dominated languages that surround her.

The poem uses several memorable **metaphors and similes** to describe women’s difficulties in communication. In a powerful simile, as we’ve seen, Rich compares the situation of women to that of the burning Algerian: ‘like the Algerian...’ Another simile compares women’s plight to the painted-over surface that just might be stripped clean by a blowtorch: ‘meanings burnt-off like paint...’.

Metaphors come into play when Rich compares women’s efforts at communication to ‘dead letters’ and when she says that they are bound within a ‘knot of lies’. This latter image is particularly bizarre and surreal. Lies are presented almost as living creatures – snake-like or worm-like entities – that have been woven together into a breathing, seething rope. The rope is described as ‘eating at itself’, as if the various lies that make it up can’t resist biting and tearing at each other: ‘Words bitten thru words’. And while such an image is difficult to visualise precisely, it powerfully conveys the constrictions that prevent women from expressing themselves.

The poem is dominated by **imagery** of pain and violence: the blowtorch, the knotted rope devouring itself, the child struggling to communicate with the doctor, the burning Algerian man. In one sense, this reflects the great harm that male-created language inflicts on women’s psyches. But it also reflects the almost violent desperation of Rich’s efforts to escape this and create a new, more equitable language of the future, one in which all genders will be able to express themselves.

THEMES

GENDER

This poem, like many by Rich, is concerned with the idea of gender. It suggests that somewhere deep in each of our unconscious minds there are both masculine and feminine aspects of ourselves, as well as memories of our earliest ungendered selves.

These aspects of our being, however, have been long forgotten and neglected, confined to the depths of our unconscious mind. They have been diminished and tarnished. It is like the wreck of a ship that has languished for years on the ocean floor

Yet the poem suggests that we can locate and access these aspects of our being, these long-forgotten memories, by exploring the unconscious mind, perhaps through meditation, therapy or analysis.

The speaker believes that our lives could be a whole lot richer if we connected with both the masculine and feminine aspects of ourselves, if we explored our original ungendered beings. She imagines that the memory of her ungendered self might contain a wealth of ‘treasures’, knowledge and understanding that could open up whole new ways of being and experiencing life and the world.

Ecclesiastes

God, you could grow to love it, God-fearing, God-
chosen purist little puritan that,
for all your wiles and smiles, you are (the
dank churches, the empty streets,
the shipyard silence, the tied-up swings) and [5]
shelter your cold heart from the heat
of the world, from woman-inquisition, from the
bright eyes of children. Yes, you could
wear black, drink water, nourish a fierce zeal
with locusts and wild honey, and not [10]
feel called upon to understand and forgive
but only to speak with a bleak
afflatus, and love the January rains when they
darken the dark doors and sink hard
into the Antrim hills, the shore, the heaped [15]
graves of your fathers. Bury that red
bandana and stick, that banjo; this is your
country, close one eye and be king.
Your people await you, their heavy washing
flaps for you in the housing estates — [20]
a credulous people. God, you could do it, God
help you, stand on a corner stiff
with rhetoric, promising nothing under the sun.

Annotations

Ecclesiastes: a book of the Old Testament. It is known not only for its wisdom and poetic beauty but also for its bleak view of human existence

[1] **God-fearing:** extremely religious

[2] **purist:** a person who insists on traditional rules or structures, especially in matters of language or style

[2] **puritan:** morally strict and judgemental, especially when it comes to luxury and pleasure. Also refers to a strict and severe form of Protestantism that emerged in the 16th and 17th centuries. The Protestantism with which Mahon grew up is descended from these original puritans.

[3] **wiles:** strategies used to deceive or manipulate others

[4] **dank:** unpleasantly damp and cold

[5] **shipyard silence:** Belfast was famous for its shipbuilding industry. On Sundays the shipyards would be closed and silent.

[5] **tied-up swings:** On Sundays, in the Northern Ireland of Mahon's youth, all work and play were forbidden. The public parks would be closed and the swings would be tied up.

[9] **locusts and wild honey:** the Biblical prophet John the Baptist adopted an extreme and self-punishing diet, eating only locusts and wild honey

[12] **afflatus:** divine inspiration

[16–17] **red/ bandana and stick:** a symbol of travel. A wanderer would fold his belongings into a bandana, which he would carry tied to the end of his walking stick.

[18] **close one eye and be king:** a reference to the old proverb that 'In the land of the blind the one-eyed man is king'

[21] **credulous:** gullible

[23] **rhetoric:** the art of persuasive public speaking, also suggests language that while persuasive is also insincere

[23] **nothing under the sun:** this line adapts a famous quote from the Book of Ecclesiastes: 'There is nothing new under the sun.'

Exploring the Poem

1. Consider the phrase 'You could grow to love it':
 - a. What exactly could the poet grow to love?
 - b. What feature of his background and personality means the poet is capable of developing such a love?
 - c. What phrase indicates that the poet has been pretending to be something he is not?
2. Mahon imagines becoming a kind of prophet in his native Belfast:
 - d. True or false: Mahon imagines preaching a kindly, gentle faith.
 - e. What kind of clothing would he wear? What kind of diet would he have?
 - f. What phrases suggest that as a prophet he would speak with absolute certainty?
3. The poet describes the rain that falls in Belfast and its surrounding areas:
 - g. What does it look like? What does it feel like?
 - h. What does this depiction of the rain symbolise about the culture in which Mahon was raised?
 - i. What phrase indicates that Mahon's ancestors have lived in this area for hundreds of years?
4. The poet again imagines becoming a prophet in his native Belfast:
 - j. What phrases suggest that such a prophet could become a leader of Belfast's Protestant community?
 - k. Mahon would have to 'close one eye' in order to adapt such a role. Can you suggest what this phrase symbolises?
 - l. What impression of Belfast's people do these lines create? Would you agree that the poet is being rather harsh in his assessment?
5. Consider the following images: 'dank churches', 'dark doors', 'heavy washing/ flaps'. What impression of

Focus on Technique

- Belfast do they create? Is it a flattering or an unflattering one?
6. Which of the following best describes the tone in which the poet is speaking: angry, regretful, contemptuous or despairing? Give a reason for your answer.
 7. 'In this poem, Mahon is actually talking to himself. He considers the possibility of abandoning poetry for religion because he realises that the poet and the preacher attempt to cast a spell by means of language.' Discuss this statement as a class.
 8. Can you suggest what Mahon means by 'the heat of the world'? Why might the prophet imagined by Mahon

Focus on Theme

- have to 'shelter' from such heat? What attitude towards women and children must be exhibited by such a prophet?
9. The poet has left behind Protestant Belfast and adopted a new way of life, one represented by a banjo, a stick and a bandana. Working as a class, can you suggest what each of these objects might symbolise?
 10. Mahon's personality, however, is still shaped by this upbringing. Can you identify two phrases that indicate this?

Derek Mahon reads his poetry

The sleeve of a spoken word album recorded by Mahon around the time of the poem's composition.

LINE BY LINE

Mahon left Northern Ireland when he went to attend Trinity College, Dublin. When he did so, he abandoned not only Belfast, but also the Protestant faith in which he had been raised. The poem is named after a book of the Old Testament, which is known not only for its wisdom and poetic beauty but also for its bleak view of human existence. The poem can be read as a kind of 'interior dialogue', in which Mahon is actually speaking to himself. He attempts to work out his thoughts and feelings on the city and culture in which he was raised. Mahon flirts with the possibility of returning to live in Belfast indefinitely. He imagines that he might re-embrace the Protestant faith in which he was raised. In fact, he considers doing so to an extreme extent, becoming a prophet or spiritual leader of Protestant Belfast.

This Protestant culture in which the poet was raised took the concept of the Sabbath very seriously. On Sundays, all forms of work and recreation were forbidden. Instead, people were encouraged to focus on prayer and the contemplation of God. On Sundays, the shipyards would be silent because no work was permitted to take place. The swings in the public parks would be 'tied-up' so that children couldn't use them. The shops would be closed and the streets 'empty'. The only busy places were the churches, which he describes as 'dank' or unpleasantly damp and chilly. The poet, however, tells himself that he could 'grow to love' these rather dismal Sundays in Protestant Belfast.

Ireland can be a pretty bleak place in January, especially when it rains. But Belfast, the poem suggests, is especially grim on such occasions. The poet, however, feels that he could 'grow to love' these 'January rains' that fall on the 'dark doors' of the city. He must learn to love the grim Antrim landscape: the dark

hard January rains, the dark doors of Belfast city, the bleak hills and the boggy meadows filled with the graves of his ancestors.

The poet imagines the self-punishing lifestyle he would adopt if he were to become a spiritual leader of his people. He must wear only black clothing. He would drink nothing but water. His diet would be one of extreme self-denial as he permitted himself only 'locusts and wild honey'. Such a lifestyle, he suggests, would 'nourish' or strengthen his religious commitment, making him a true spiritual leader.

The poet, if he wants to become a spiritual leader of his people, must adopt a particular mentality. He must let his heart grow 'cold'. He must leave behind all feelings of sympathy and empathy. He must avoid anything that is fun, frivolous or light-hearted. These aspects of life are regarded as a dangerous 'heat' that might thaw his cold heart: 'shelter your cold heart from the heat/ of the world'. He must be especially careful to minimise his contact with women and children.

The poet must learn to ignore the arguments, excuses and objections of others. He must 'not/ feel called upon to understand and forgive'. He must learn to speak with 'afflatus', with inspiration and authority that comes – or seems to come – directly from the heavens. Such afflatus would, however, be 'bleak', suggesting that it relates to judgement and condemnation.

This is a disturbing list, but especially unsettling is the mentioning of women and children. The 'bright' adorable eyes of children might cause a prophet to feel tenderness and kindness. Children, therefore, must be avoided. Women, meanwhile, are depicted as a form of 'inquisition', which means a prolonged and intensive questioning. Being around women, it is implied, will cause the prophet to question his vocation. They must, therefore, also be avoided.

We get a sense that the poet currently enjoys a laid-back, somewhat carefree existence devoted to travel and art. The banjo suggests his love of music, literature and art. The bandana and stick, meanwhile, suggest his love of travel. The speaker urges himself to 'Bury that red/ bandana and stick, that banjo'. This symbolises abandoning his current carefree way of life in order to become a spiritual leader of his people.

The poet, by embracing this prophetic role, could make himself a 'king' of Protestant Belfast. He imagines that the Protestants of Belfast are waiting for him, eager for him to assume the role of their spiritual leader: 'this is your country ... your people await you'. They will greet him not with flags or palm branches but with laundry dangling on washing lines. The poet refers to an old proverb coined by Erasmus: 'In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king'. At the moment, the poet is mentally 'fully sighted'; he is an intelligent, intellectually aware and

THEMES

COMMUNITY AND ISOLATION

This poem reminds us how communities can become stifling and controlling. The world of Protestant Belfast, as Mahon portrays it, is not one that tolerates dissent and diversity. It is a world where the swings are tied up and everyone goes to church. You live your life in a God-fearing manner and you are eventually buried in the 'heaped/ graves of your fathers'.

The poem also highlights the moral demands such a community can place on its members. The poet, as we've seen, feels that he could and, perhaps, should embrace the role of a joyless, hectoring prophet. The repetition of 'God' and 'you could' reinforce our sense of his horror at this realisation.

MAHON AND IRELAND

The poet presents a very negative portrait of the Protestant religion in which he was raised:

- This type of religion is described as 'puritan', meaning it regards nearly all pleasure and luxury as sinful.
- Its adherents are described as 'God-fearing', suggesting that they view God as a terrifying, vengeful force rather than as a being of love.
- Its adherents are described as 'God-chosen': they believe that they alone are chosen by God to be saved, that they alone know what it is to be righteous.

The poet left this religion behind a long time ago. But the bleak faith of his childhood still influences his personality. The poet attempts to conceal this influence. He uses various 'wiles' or ruses to conceal this influence. He 'smiles' to convince the world he is light-hearted and liberated rather than God-fearing. But deep-down he knows that he can never escape and that the influence of his childhood religion will always be with him.

open-minded young man. In order to become a prophet, he must give up some of this open-mindedness. He must 'Close one eye'. Yet he will never be as blinkered as the Protestant people of Northern Ireland. These people, it is implied, are completely intellectually blind. Metaphorically speaking, then, the poet will be a 'one-eyed man' among the blind. But in a land of blind people, being able to see out of one eye leaves you in a privileged, powerful position.

The poet imagines himself working as a prophet, preaching on a street corner to the people of Protestant Belfast. He imagines himself engaged in 'rhetoric', the art of public speaking. Rhetoric also implies deceit and insincerity, suggesting that this brand of religion is fake and not to be trusted. The poet would offer his people 'nothing under the sun'. This phrase implies that he will offer his people not the brightness and happiness we associate with the sun but only darkness and misery. It implies that he would promise his people nothing, and that all his promises are false. The poet imagines himself being 'stiff/ with rhetoric'. This suggests the straight-backed, imposing posture he will adopt as he preaches to his people. The term 'stiff' also suggests the severe and inflexible mindset you need to possess as a spiritual leader.

FOCUS ON TECHNIQUE

Verbal Music

The poem generates a powerful and consistent verbal music. It consists of four sentences that rush down the page, spilling from clause to clause, from commandment to commandment. This creates a powerful sense of urgency and raw emotion, suggesting how the poet is both fascinated and repulsed by the culture in which he was raised.

Word Choice

Mahon's precision when it comes to word choice is evident in 'purist', which refers to someone who insists on traditional rules and structures. This term, of course, suggests Mahon's precise and deliberate approach to poetry, but it also hints how he has been influenced, despite himself, by his Protestant upbringing, with its rigid and traditional approach to life.

Sensual Imagery

Mahon's gift for imagery is evident in his depiction of Belfast 'January rains'. These rains, we are told, darken the city, suggesting that the rain restricts visibility, making everything murky and dismal. Mahon describes how they 'sink hard' into the surrounding landscape. This suggests that the rains come pelting down, saturating the bogs and meadows and sinking deep into the soil.

W. B. YEATS SAMPLE ANSWER

‘Yeats’s poetry is both intellectually stimulating and emotionally charged.’ Discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the above statement. Develop your response with reference to the themes and language evident in the poems by W. B. Yeats that are on your course.

Despite being a century old, Yeats’s poems remain intellectually stimulating and present the modern reader with questions that are as relevant today as they were when the poet was alive. Questions concerning the role of violence in the world, especially as a means to a political end, and the purpose of the artist in the modern world, remain as vital today as ever before. And it is clear when we read Yeats’s poems that these issues affected the poet in a personal manner. To Yeats, these were not merely abstract academic questions; there is an emotional charge running through poems such as ‘September 1913’, ‘Easter 1919’ and ‘An Acre of Grass’ that makes these works all the more powerful and stimulating.

Good opening paragraph. Demonstrates a clear understanding of the question being asked.

Throughout his life Yeats wrestled with the moral issue of using violence to bring about change in the world. He clearly had great admiration for men and women who were willing to sacrifice their lives in the name of whatever cause they passionately believed in, but he was troubled both by the price these individuals had to pay and by the effects that their actions ultimately had on the greater world. In ‘September 1913’, for instance, Yeats celebrates the nobility and bravery of those who fought and died for Ireland, stressing that they were a ‘different kind’ of person to the penny-pinching merchants who dominated Ireland in 1913. Yet there is also a sense in which Yeats seems to have pity for these men who suffered the ‘loneliness and pain’ of defeat, exile and execution. In a fine **metaphor**, he captures how Ireland’s exiled soldiers journeyed throughout the continent, likening them to birds that flew away from Ireland and came to rest on each of Europe’s seas. Yeats questions whether their sacrifice was worthwhile, considering what Ireland has since become: ‘Was it for this the wild geese spread/ The grey wing upon every tide’.

Good writing. The student didn’t just say ‘a metaphor’. Instead he demonstrated exactly what kind of metaphor is present in the work.

Here the topic sentence clearly picks up on the point discussed in the previous paragraph.

A similarly complex attitude towards violence is evident in ‘Easter 1916’. Again Yeats celebrates the heroism and sacrifice of the people who fought and died for the Irish cause, acknowledging that they will be venerated forever ‘wherever green is worn’. But he is also clearly disturbed by the mindset required to act in this manner. In a memorable **metaphor**, Yeats compares the revolutionaries’ unwavering commitment to their cause to a ‘stone’ that disrupts the ‘stream’ of life: ‘Hearts with one purpose alone ... seem/ Enchanted to a stone/ To trouble the living stream’. Yeats is also quick to realise that the celebration of those who died in the Rising will spur others on to do the same. Three of the poem’s four stanzas end with the line, ‘A terrible beauty is born’, a refrain that captures the poet’s conflicted feelings about what has happened. There is something noble and heroic about the rebels’ actions, which for the poet signal the re-emergence of these qualities in a country that he had written off as shallow and farcical. However, their sacrifice is also ‘terrible’, because it involves violence and death, and Yeats fears that the Rising will provoke more bloodshed in the future.

The fear that bloodshed and violence will mark the future is nowhere better expressed than in ‘The Second Coming’. Though written in 1919, this is very much a poem for our times. For in our age, too, it seems that ‘things fall apart’, that chaos and anarchy are everywhere. Each day the media is full of reports from conflicts around the world; it’s easy to think we’re drowning in a ‘blood-dimmed tide’. To Yeats, it seems that the entire world is filled with confusion and disorder, and that ‘anarchy is loosed upon the world’. And perhaps most concerning of all is the fact that everywhere the voices of reason and moderation are silenced, while those of intolerance and extremism shout ever louder. As Yeats so memorably puts it, ‘The best lack all conviction, while the

Good writing. Linking Yeats’s poetry to the contemporary world reinforces the student’s answer.

worst/ Are full of passionate intensity'. Evil men pursue their goals relentlessly, while the good stand idly by. Civilisation, Yeats suggests, seems on the verge of being swept away by a tide of bloodshed.

Yeats's attitude to this impending catastrophe, however, is somewhat unclear. He confronts us with the 'beast', which serves as a terrifying **symbol** for the violence and chaos to come. Yeats knows intellectually that the beast is terrifying and will bring destruction in its wake. At the emotional and less rational level, however, Yeats finds himself fascinated by what the beast might cause. The poet was clearly unhappy with the current state of the world and seems to have believed that some form of mass-scale destruction, as represented by the beast, would change things forever; sweeping away our tired, worn-out civilisation and giving birth to a new era. But we have to question the reasoning involved here. How can such monstrous, destructive evil ever give rise to a better form of civilisation? How can unleashing a 'blood-dimmed tide' lead to a more humane world?

Effective reference to poetic technique.

Here the topic sentence clearly picks up on the point discussed in the previous paragraph.

The answer to the world's ills, Yeats seems to suggest, lies not with the politicians, but rather with the artists. Yeats views art as a continuous practice, a craft or trade that must be perfected throughout the artist's life. His most famous declaration of this belief comes in 'Under Ben Bulbin', where he declares that future Irish poets must 'learn [their] trade'. These aspiring bards must understand that poetry involves more than ideas and inspiration, that it requires practice, patience and determination. They must approach poetry the way an apprentice carpenter approaches the work bench, realising that they have a great deal to learn and that only hard work will grant them the mastery they desire. 'Sailing to Byzantium' presents a similar view of creativity. Despite his old age, the poet is determined to keep developing his craft. If anything, the nearness of death makes him all the more eager to reach his full artistic potential. The poem stresses that such improvement can be made only by studying the great artists of the past. Yeats, then, recognises that, no matter how old we are, we must engage with great works of art so that our souls can express themselves with ever-greater clarity and purpose.

Effective use of quotation, which demonstrates good knowledge of the theme

'An Acre of Grass' also emphasises the need for an artist to keep developing despite old age. Yeats declares his admiration for artists like Michelangelo, Shakespeare and William Blake, who continued, even in old age, to strive for artistic perfection. Yeats clearly wants to emulate the passion and energy exhibited by these past masters, who kept changing and developing until the very end of their lives. The artist, Yeats believes, should never feel satisfied or content with what they have already achieved. It is the artist's duty, even in old age, to remain restless and to constantly seek new ways to explore and reveal the truth. 'Grant me an old man's frenzy', Yeats movingly entreats, praying that he might still have the power of mind to 'pierce the clouds' and 'make the truth known'

The poet's function, as Yeats presents it in 'Under Ben Bulbin', is to 'cast [his or her] mind on other days', to remember and write about the past. Will Ireland become just another identical outpost of capitalism, just another banal node in an international network of technology? Only the poets, according to Yeats, can prevent this from happening. Only they can remind Ireland as a whole of what it once was and can be again. Through their words, they can spur us on to be 'indomitable' in the face of modernity, to create a future that resembles the best aspects of our past. And what more intellectually stimulating and passionate works can we hope to engage with than the poems of Yeats himself?