

A person with their hair in a ponytail, wearing a dark hoodie and pants, sits cross-legged on a large, grey rock. They are looking out over a vast, hazy landscape of rolling hills and valleys. The sky is a warm, golden-orange color, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

THIS IS POETRY

ORDINARY LEVEL 2027

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Worksheets for Preparation, Reference and Revision

Rhyme Scheme and Stanza

Poems are often divided into stanzas, or groups of lines.

- Some poems are regular in terms of stanza, having stanzas that are all the same length.
- Some poems are irregular in terms of stanza, having stanzas that are different lengths.
- Some poems aren't divided into stanzas at all and appear as a single 'block' upon the page.

Rhyme is another important feature of poetry.

- Some poems have a regular rhyme scheme or rhyming pattern.
- Some poems have an irregular rhyme scheme or rhyming pattern.
- Some poems have no rhyme scheme at all.

Let's take a look at a few different poems.

Song: Go and catch a falling star (Lines 1 to 8)

If thou be'st born to strange sights,	A
Things invisible to see,	B
Ride ten thousand days and nights,	A
Till age snow white hairs on thee,	B
Thou, when thou return'st, wilt tell me,	B
All strange wonders that befell thee,	B
And swear,	C
Nowhere	C
Lives a woman true, and fair.	C

An Irish Airman Foresees His Death (Lines 1 to 8)

I know that I shall meet my fate	A
Somewhere among the clouds above;	B
Those that I fight I do not hate,	A
Those that I guard I do not love;	
My country is Kiltartan Cross,	
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,	
No likely end could bring them loss	
Or leave them happier than before.	

The Prodigal (Stanza 1)

The brown enormous odor he lived by was too close, with its breathing and thick hair, for him to judge. The floor was rotten; the sty was plastered halfway up with glass-smooth dung. Light-lashed, self-righteous, above moving snouts, the pigs' eyes followed him, a cheerful stare – even to the sow that always ate her young – till, sickening, he leaned to scratch her head. But sometimes mornings after drinking bouts (he hid the pints behind a two-by-four), the sunrise glazed the barnyard mud with red; the burning puddles seemed to reassure. And then he thought he almost might endure his exile yet another year or more.

We use capital letters when we talk about rhyme. Lines that rhyme with one another are given the same letter. We see this in 'Song: Go and catch a falling star' above.

1. Can you complete, using capital letters, the rhyme scheme for the above extract from 'An Irish Airman Foresees His Death'?
2. Using capital letters, can you mark, the rhyme scheme for 'The Prodigal' above?
3. Which of these two poems has a regular rhyme scheme? Which one has an irregular rhyme scheme?
4. In your copybook, using capital letters, write out the rhyme scheme for the first stanza of 'The Flea' (on page 48).

5. In your copybook, using capital letters, write out the rhyme scheme for 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' (on page 104).

We're now going to look at a number of poems from this book. Don't worry! You don't need to be familiar with the poems in order to answer the following questions about stanza and rhyme.

6. Consider 'A Christmas Childhood' (page 58):
 - a. How many lines are in each stanza of this poem?
 - b. Is it regular or irregular in terms of stanza?
 - c. Does it have a rhyme scheme?
7. Consider 'I felt a Funeral, in my Brain' (page 34):
 - a. Is this poem regular or irregular in terms of stanza?
 - b. In your copybook, using capital letters, write out the rhyme scheme for this poem.
 - c. Is this rhyme scheme regular or irregular?
8. Consider 'The Wild Swans at Coole' (page 108):
 - a. In your copybook, using capital letters, write out the rhyme scheme for this poem.
 - b. True or false: This poem has a regular rhyme scheme.
 - c. Is it regular or irregular in terms of stanza?

Hearth Lesson

Either phrase will bring it back —
money to burn, burning a hole in your pocket.

I am crouched by the fire
 in the flat in Séan MacDermott Street
 while Zeus and Hera battle it out: [5]

for his every thunderbolt
 she had the killing glance;
 she'll see his fancyman
 and raise him the Cosmo Snooker Hall;
 he'll see her 'the only way you get any
 attention around here is if you neigh'; [10]
 he'll raise her airs and graces
 or the mental state of her siblings
 every last one of them.

I'm net, umpire, and court; most balls [15]
 are lobbed over my head.
 Even then I can judge it's better
 than brooding and silence and the particular hell of the unsaid,
 of 'tell your mother...' 'ask your father...'

Even then I can tell it was money, [20]
 the lack of it day after day,
 at the root of the bitter words
 but nothing prepared us one teatime
 when he handed up his wages.

She straightened each rumpled pound note, then [25]
 a weariness come suddenly over her,
 she threw the lot in the fire.

The flames were blue and pink and green,
 a marvellous sight, an alchemical scene.

'It's not enough,' she stated simply. [30]
 And we all knew it wasn't.

The flames sheered from cinder to chimney breast
 like trapped exotic birds;
 the shadows jumped floor to ceiling, and she'd
 had the last, the astonishing, word. [35]

Exploring the Poem

1. The poet finds herself remembering her childhood, specifically the frequent arguments between her parents:
 - a. What posture did the young poet adopt at these moments? What does this suggest about her mental state?
 - b. What do the terms 'see' and 'raise' mean in the context of poker and similar card games?
 - c. What does Meehan's use of these terms suggest about the arguments between her parents?
2. Working in pairs, answer the following questions:
 - a. What do you understand by the terms 'fancyman' and 'airs and graces'?
 - b. Which phrase indicates that the father might have spent too much time and money betting on horses?
 - c. Which phrase indicates that the father, as the mother saw it, paid the mother very little attention?
3. The poet continues to reflect on the arguments between her parents:
 - a. True or false: The young poet didn't understand much of what was said in these arguments.
 - b. True or false: The poet preferred her parents' arguments to the periods when they ignored one another.
 - c. True or false: During these periods of silence the parents would use the young poet as a go-between.
4. The poet remembers how each week her father would give his wages to her mother:
 - a. What did the mother do with the wages one day at teatime?
 - b. '[N]othing prepared us'. Can you suggest why the family were so shocked by this gesture?
 - c. 'The poet views this gesture as the winning move in this argumentative game between her parents, the one to which there can be no response'. Discuss this statement as a class.

Focus on Technique

5. What sporting **metaphor** does the poet use to describe the argument between her parents? Is it an effective one, in your opinion?
6. 'The poet's **classical reference** to Zeus and Hera is playful and amusing, but it also highlights the feelings of dread and powerlessness she felt during these rows'. Discuss this statement as a class.
7. What **simile** does Meehan use to describe the flames as they consumed the pound notes? What other literary device is used in this passage? Do you think the flames really behaved in this fashion, or is this effect just in the poet's memory?

Focus on Theme

8. 'Either phrase will bring it back'. Can you suggest why these two phrases are linked in the poet's mind to this particular set of memories? What lessons do you think the poet learns from reflecting on these experiences?
9. Meehan writes frequently about the theme of poverty and hardship. What impact, according to the poet, did poverty have on her parents' relationship? Would you agree that the mother's 'astonishing' gesture demeans the father's role as worker and provider? Would you agree that this gesture is a self-defeating one, born of frustration and desperation?
10. Write a short letter to the poet, Paula Meehan, telling her about how this poem made you feel. Refer to the text of the poem in your answer.

Annotations

[5] *Zeus and Hera*: in Greek mythology, Zeus and his wife Hera were the king and queen of the gods and had a tempestuous relationship

[8–9] *see ... raise*: in poker, to 'see' is to match the amount being gambled by another player. To 'raise' is to increase the amount being gambled.

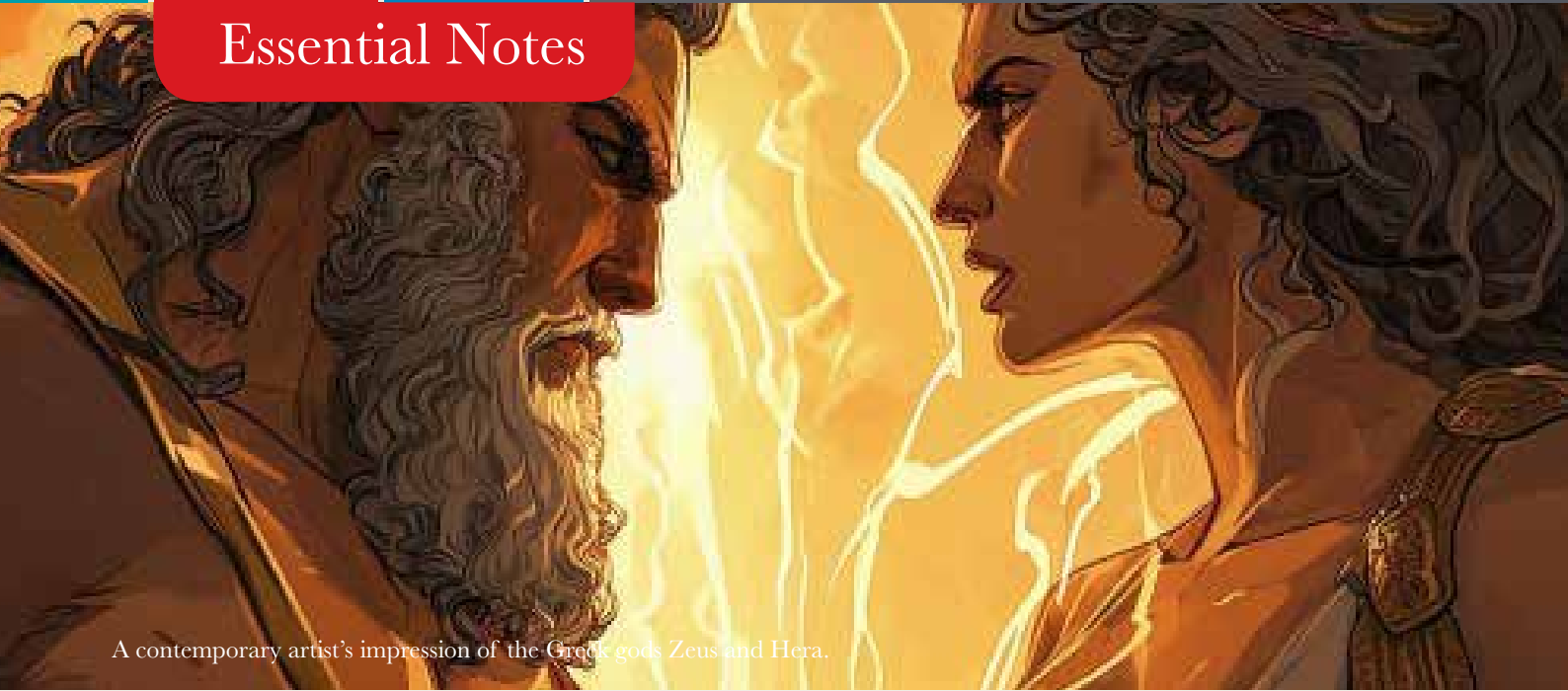
[8] *fancyman*: a married woman's male lover or a man with whom she flirts.

[29] *alchemical*: relating to alchemy, which was the medieval forerunner of chemistry and focused on transforming one substance into another

[32] *sheered*: swerved

[32] *chimney breast*: portion of a chimney which projects forward from a wall to accommodate a fireplace

Essential Notes



A contemporary artist's impression of the Greek gods Zeus and Hera.

A turbulent relationship

In this poem, Meehan remembers her childhood, specifically the years when she and her family lived on Seán MacDermott Street in Dublin's city centre. During this period the relationship between her parents was quite turbulent and they would regularly fight and argue. The poet remembers how she would crouch 'by the fire' while these arguments raged around her.

The poet wittily compares her parents to Zeus and Hera, who in Greek mythology were king and queen of the gods. Zeus and Hera, according to legend, were husband and wife but endured a famously fractious marriage. The poet compares her father's insults to the thunderbolts Zeus would hurl at his enemies. Her mother, meanwhile, looked at the father with such contempt that the young poet was reminded of Hera's 'killing glance' (Hera, according to legend, could cause those who displeased her to drop dead merely by looking at them).

The poet mentions some of the accusations that were traded between the parents during these rows. The father, for instance, would accuse the mother of having a 'fancyman', of being too friendly and flirtatious with another man. He would also accuse her of putting on 'airs and graces', of pretending that she is posher and more important than she really is. The mother, meanwhile, would accuse the father of spending too much time at the local snooker club. She would also accuse him of being too obsessed with horse-racing, suggesting that he spends all his time thinking about jockeys and horses, ignoring his wife completely. She would wittily suggest that the only way for her to get his attention would be to 'neigh' like a horse herself.

Raising the stakes

The poet compares her parents to two poker players gambling on which has the better hand of cards. Her father would open their brutal game with a particular criticism of her mother. Her mother would 'see' or match this, by saying something just as critical about the father. She would then 'raise' or escalate the row by saying something even more negative. Her father would not only 'see' or match this insult, but also escalate the row even further, saying things that are even more hurtful.

The poet also compares her parents' rows and arguments to the sport of tennis. The parents are compared to opposing players. The poet is compared to the net that divides them. The parents trade insults and jibes just as tennis players trade shots. Tennis players, of course, attempt to hit the ball over the net. Her parents, similarly, attempted to speak over the young poet's head. This suggests that they didn't want her know the precise nature of their disagreements and phrased their arguments in words she was unlikely to understand. The poet also compares herself to a tennis match's 'umpire' or referee. This suggests that at times she was called upon to adjudicate in her parent's arguments.

The final word

The poet views her parents' various rows and arguments as a single ongoing competition, the objective of which was to have the 'last word'. Both parents, she suggests, were attempting to come up with an argument or insult to which there could be no reply, which stunned the other into silence. This cruel game, we sense, dragged on for months or even years, with neither participant able to silence the other in such a definitive fashion.

Suddenly, however, their grim competition came to an end. And it did so in a manner no one in the household was 'prepared' for or expected:

- The poet's father at the time worked as a bookmaker's clerk. Every payday he 'handed up his wages' to the mother. She would then use the money to manage the household, purchase the groceries and pay various bills.
- The poet remembers one particular 'teatime' when the father handed over his wages as usual. The mother 'straightened' the notes he'd given her, as if she were preparing to count them and start budgeting for the week to come.
- 'Suddenly', according to the poet, the mother exhibited a great weariness. We can imagine her shoulders slumping and an exhausted expression flashing across her face.
- Then, without warning, she cast the entire week's wages into the fire.
- The mother accompanied this extraordinary gesture with a single, simple phrase: "It's not enough", she stated simply'.

But this simple phrase, accompanied by the gesture of burning the banknotes, is 'the last, the astonishing, word' in their long-running competition. The father, we imagine, stood there in a shocked and astonished silence while the money burned. For once, he had no comeback, insult or argument of his own with which to respond. The mother had finally and definitively won.

Focus on Theme: Poverty and Childhood

The poem highlights the toxic effects that poverty can have on a relationship. The poet, even as a child, understood that poverty caused the constant strife between her parents: 'Even then I can tell it was money/ the lack of it day after day,/ at the root of the bitter words'. The constant lack of money made both of her parents tense, irritable and frustrated. It led to unceasing tensions between them, blazing rows and 'brooding' periods of silence. This hardship, the poet emphasises, dragged on 'day after day', year after year, leaving the mother psychologically worn down. We see this when the poet describes how the mother was overcome by an extraordinary weariness as she contemplated the 'rumpled' notes.

'Hearth Lesson' provides a brutal and unflinching portrayal of childhood. The young poet's crouched position by the fireplace suggests the trauma she endured as she listened to her parents 'battle it out'. It also suggests her desire not to be drawn into these disagreements, to somehow escape this toxic environment. We can picture her staring into the fire, making herself as small as possible, wishing she was somewhere else. There is something witty about the poet's comparison of her parents to Zeus and Hera, but it also suggests the trauma she endured. To the young poet, the arguments of these fully grown adults were epic and explosive, like the clash of two vengeful gods.

Focus on Technique

The poet uses a number of **imaginative comparisons** to describe the arguments between her parents. She compares her parents to the gods Zeus and Hera, to poker players and to tennis players. Meehan's gift for **vivid imagery**, meanwhile, is on display when she describes the behaviour of the flames as they consumed the banknotes, capturing how they emitted a bizarre multi-coloured glow and skittered in the fireplace. She uses a vivid simile to capture the flames' brightness and vibrancy, comparing them to 'trapped exotic birds'.

'Hearth Lesson', though it is a serious poem, provides us with a hint of Meehan's trademark **playful language**. We see this when she compares her parents, two ordinary working-class Dubliners, to the Greek gods Zeus and Hera. Such light-heartedness is also evident in her depiction of the parents' insults; in the father's accusation that the mother's family are all crazy, for instance, or in the mother's claim that only by neighing like a horse could she get her husband's attention.



Allison Joseph

Allison Joseph was born in London, England, in 1967 to parents of Jamaican heritage. She grew up in Toronto, Canada, and in the Bronx, New York City. She went on to study English at both Kenyon College and Indiana University.

Joseph lives in Carbondale, Illinois, where she works at Southern Illinois University. There she teaches Creative Writing and runs the MFA programme in Creative Writing. She is also director of the Young Writers Workshop, a programme aimed at fostering the creativity of high school students from several surrounding states. She was married to fellow poet Jon Tribble for more than thirty years, until his death in 2019.

She has published eight collections of poetry, most recently, *Confessions of a Bare-Faced Woman*, which appeared in 2019 and won praise for its unique merging of the personal and the political as it engaged with themes of race, gender and self-realisation.

Her work is both autobiographical as well as historical, melding personal reflections with an exploration of Afro-Caribbean history and culture. Joseph has described her poetic approach in the following way: 'I write to be a recorder, observer, participant, and sometimes, even judge. I want to engage the world as I see it with my whole self — all those different aspects of it'.

My Father's Kites

were crude assemblages of paper sacks and twine,
amalgams of pilfered string and whittled sticks,
twigs pulled straight from his garden, dry patch

of stony land before our house only he
could tend into beauty, thorny roses goaded
into color. How did he make those makeshift

[5]

diamonds rise, grab ahold of the wind to sail
into sky like nothing in our neighborhood
of dented cars and stolid brick houses could?

It wasn't through faith or belief in otherworldly
grace, but rather a metaphor from moving
on a street where cars rusted up on blocks,

[10]

monstrously immobile, and planes, bound
for that world we could not see, roared
above our heads, our houses pawns

[15]

in a bigger flight path. How tricky the launch
into air, the wait for the right eddy to lift
our homemade contraption into the sullen

blue sky above us, our eyes stinging
with the glut of the sun. And the sad tangle
after flight, collapse of grocery bags

[20]

and broken branches, snaggle of string
I still cannot unfurl. Father, you left me
with this unsated need to find the most

delicately useful of breezes, to send
myself into the untenable, balance my weight
as if on paper wings, a flutter then fall,

[25]

a stutter back to earth, an elastic sense
of being and becoming forged in our front
yard, your hand over mine over balled string.

[30]

- [1] **assemblages:** artistic compositions made from scraps or odds and ends
- [2] **amalgams:** mixtures of different elements
- [2] **pilfered:** stole on a small scale; stole objects of little value
- [5] **goaded:** provoked or driven to do something
- [6] **makeshift:** a temporary, improvised and perhaps rushed or crude solution or device
- [11] **metaphor:** a literary technique that draws a comparison between two apparently dissimilar things
- [15] **pawns:** the least valuable pieces used in chess; people used by others for their own purposes
- [17] **eddy:** a circular movement of air or wind
- [18] **contraption:** a device or machine assembled in an odd and perhaps amateurish way
- [20] **glut:** too much of something; more than is necessary
- [22] **snaggle:** knot or tangle
- [23] **unfurl:** spread out or unfold something that has been folded up, such as a sail, an umbrella or a flag
- [26] **untenable:** can't be maintained or defended; often used to describe a weak argument or opinion

Exploring the Poem

1. The poet remembers the kites her father would make when she was a child:
 - a. What do the adjectives 'crude' and 'makeshift' suggest about the kites' appearance?
 - b. Mention three materials used in the kites' construction.
 - c. Discuss as a class the contrast drawn by the poet between the kites and the other objects that filled the neighbourhood.
2. The poet presents her neighbourhood as a static place where little movement occurs:
 - a. How is this suggested by the planes that can be seen flying overhead?
 - b. How is this suggested by the depiction of the cars? What does the adjective 'monstrous' suggest about the poet's attitude to these cars?
 - c. Working as a class, suggest how the father's kite-flying might have functioned as a 'metaphor' in this place of little movement?
3. The poet recalls the difficulties associated with launching the kites her father made:
 - a. The poet and her father needed to be patient. What did they wait for?
 - b. What effect did sunlight have on them as they waited?
 - c. What condition were the kites in when they came back down to earth?
4. The poet uses kite-flying as a metaphor for her approach to life and art:
 - a. What different types of experience might be described as 'untenable'? Why might the poet seek out such experiences? What phrase suggests that she can't get enough of such experiences?
 - b. The poet imagines balancing herself on 'paper wings'. For what type of experience, in this line, does kite-flying serve as a metaphor?
 - c. The poet imagines returning to earth with a 'flutter', a 'fall' and a 'stutter'. What does this image suggest about the difficulties that come with trying something new?
5. 'My Father's Kites' uses strikingly original **images** and phrases to capture the experience of kite-flying and

Focus on Technique

suggest its importance to the poet. Pick out five or six images or phrases that you find especially effective and explain why you have chosen each of them.

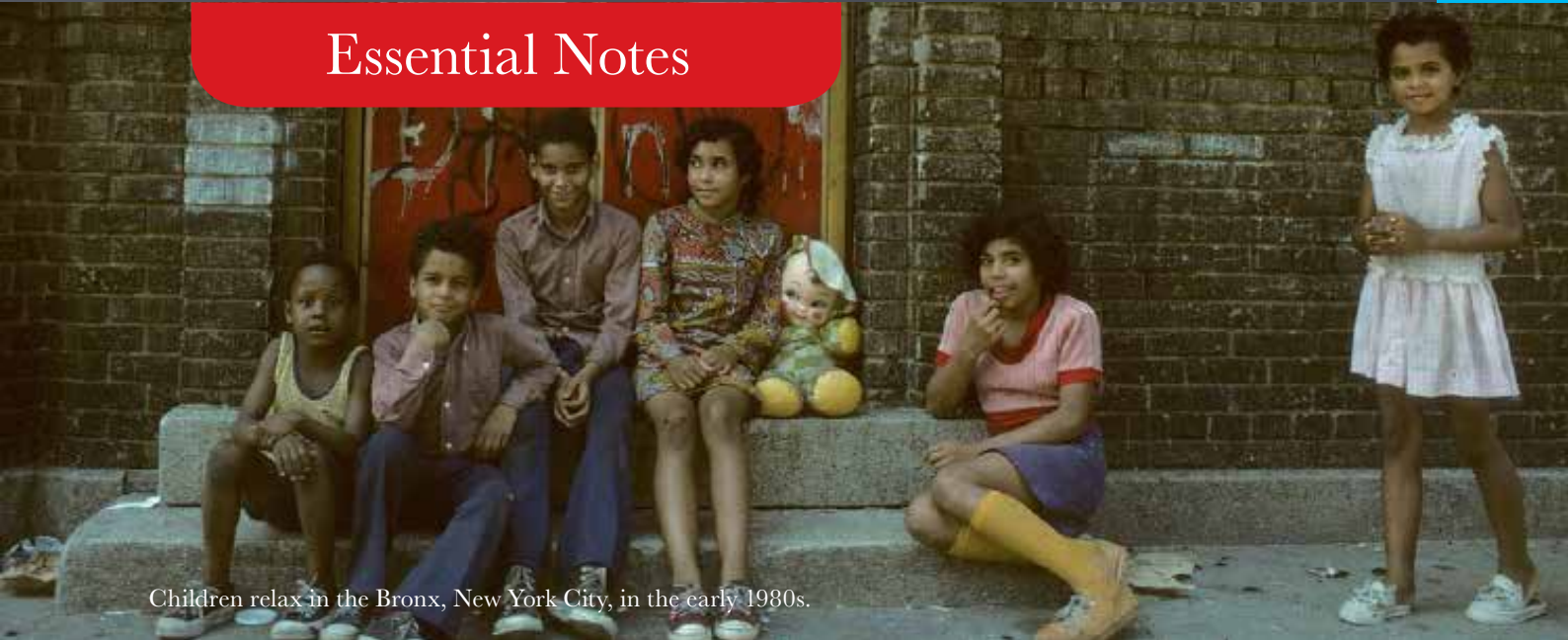
6. "My Father's Kites" is a skilful **character study**, one that paints a vivid picture of the poet's father using only a few words'. Write a paragraph in response to this statement.
7. Joseph uses several **evocative words and phrases** to describe the neighbourhood in which she grew up. What impression of the neighbourhood do we get from her descriptions?
8. The poet has inherited an attitude towards 'being and becoming' from her father. Describe his attitude in your

Focus on Theme

own words. What phrase, in your opinion, best suggests this sense of inheritance?

9. Consider the phrase 'I still cannot unfurl'. What does it suggest about the poet's feelings towards her father?
10. 'This poem uses kite flying as a powerful symbol of taking risks and following your dreams'. Discuss this statement as a class.

Essential Notes



Children relax in the Bronx, New York City, in the early 1980s.

A neighbourhood in the Bronx

The poet describes the neighbourhood of the Bronx, New York City, where she spent part of her childhood. It was a district that consisted of ‘stolid brick houses’, which suggests houses that might be serviceable but that lack any sense of style or beauty. The garden of the young poet’s house was a ‘dry patch/ of stony land’. And other gardens in the area, no doubt, were similarly unpromising. The neighbourhood, then, was by no means leafy or luxurious. We get the impression of a gritty urban environment, where people struggled with considerable poverty.

We’re told that many cars in the neighbourhood ‘rusted up on blocks’. These cars, we imagine, were once meant to be repaired or restored. Their owners had removed their tyres and set them up on blocks to make them easier to work on. Over time, however, the owners had run out of money or enthusiasm for these projects, leaving the cars, still on blocks, rusting in their yards and driveways.

Creating the kites

The poet remembers how her father would make his own kites and fly them through the neighbourhood. The poet describes the kites as ‘assemblages’ and ‘amalgams’, which wonderfully suggests how they had been put together from various scraps of material.

The kites’ bodies were formed from old ‘paper sacks’, while their frames were constructed from random lengths of wood that the father had ‘whittled’ or shaved with his pocket-knife until their surfaces were smooth and even. The body of each kite was connected to its frame by means of twine or ‘pilfered string’. The father also used twigs from his garden in the construction of the kites. We can imagine how the twigs might have been intertwined under the frame, making it stiffer and more durable.

The poet uses the term ‘crude’, suggesting that her father’s kites – being assembled from sticks, twigs and brown paper – were rough and basic appearance. It also suggests that the kites were rough and basic in terms of design. They were in no way sleek or aerodynamic and looked barely capable of flight.

Indeed, the poet seems amazed that her father managed to make his kites fly at all: ‘How did he make those makeshift/ diamonds rise [?]’ She describes how the ‘launch’ of the kites was always a ‘tricky’ process. For her father would have to wait for the right ‘eddy’ or current of air. Finally, when the right breeze came along, her father would release the kite, allowing it ‘grab a hold of the wind’ and begin to drift upwards.