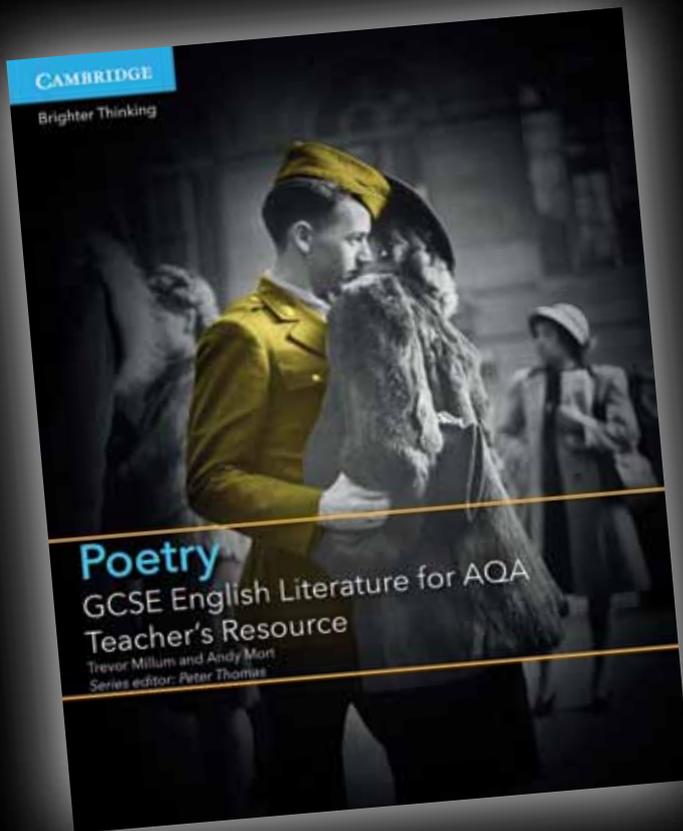


# HINTS AND TIPS FOR TEACHING POETRY



Written by **Trevor Millum**,  
on behalf of Cambridge  
University Press

## About the author:

Trevor Millum is well known for his work on creativity, poetry and the use of ICT. He has published many teaching resources, and is the creator of and poet in residence at Teachit's Poetry Place, where he has written over 150 Teaching resources.



## START EARLY

This is no help if you are now starting for the first time with a Year 10 class. However, if you also teach Years 7, 8 or 9 make sure you spend time with poetry. This does not mean a half term 'doing poetry'. It means sharing poems with students regularly. Don't do the same thing each time you present a poem. Sometimes you will just read it aloud. Other times you'll ask what they think and have a bit of a discussion. Sometimes you will go in for a bit of a deeper investigation. And sometimes you will use it as a stimulus for their writing or another creative activity. (I recall a Y6 teacher who read Ode to Autumn with her pupils, took them for a walk under some trees and then set them free to write - with results which amazed her. The two experiences together worked a kind of magic with a very mixed class in the middle of Scunthorpe.)

## BE GENTLE

Even if you can't start early, start gently. Mix in some readings of poems you like and that you think they will like with ones from the GCSE list. Don't present them with the whole batch all in one go. Introduce them to half a dozen 'set' poems over a short period of time without asking them to do much more than comment on them, perhaps picking out a line or phrase they like. You can come back to the poems in more detail a little later and they will feel a little bit familiar.

## BE VARIED

Introduce poems in different ways. For example:

- ▶ Read the poem aloud dramatically in two or more different ways.
- ▶ Record the poem with music in the background and play it to the class.
- ▶ Choose pictures to accompany the poem and show it as a PowerPoint presentation.
- ▶ Immerse the poem in prose.
- ▶ Collapse the poem into its constituent words.
- ▶ Remove the line endings so that it looks like prose.
- ▶ Display it on the wall with lots of key words missing. They won't be able to resist wondering what is in the blank spaces.
- ▶ Display the poem with annotations - but not the boring kind. **For example:**

I wandered lonely as a cloud  
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,  
When all at once I saw a crowd,  
A host, of golden daffodils;  
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,  
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Are clouds lonely?  
Not the ones I've seen recently.

A **crowd** of daffodils?  
Not a very attractive description!

OK, that's better.

## BE HONEST

Well, up to a point. Admit that such and such a poem doesn't appeal to you, that you find a particular line difficult or not very good (and explain why). Point out that poets aren't perfect and that even the greats wrote some dreadful stuff. The poems in the set list will probably contain one or two which, in your professional judgement, you don't rate very highly. See how your students react to them before damning them, though - no point in putting them off before they start. However, if they - or some of them - seem to find a poem difficult or simply not very good, it can be reassuring to share your feelings. And then do your best to see what is interesting about it.



## PERSONAL RESPONSE

The word 'interesting' is a key one. They don't have to like everything whether it's a poem or a play or a story. But they can learn to see what's interesting about it and what others might see in it. The theme of films or television programmes can be the starting point for a discussion. How do we get beyond saying that such and such a film is rubbish? That's hopeless. Why is that film, that song, or that programme rubbish – or really really good? Personal response is valued in GCSE answers but gut reaction without justification isn't.

## ASK WHY?

Why? This question has to be the follow up to any expression of liking or disliking. I dislike it because it's boring is not a helpful analysis. Why do you find it boring / what is it about it that makes it boring (to you)?

Ask them to compare a disliked poem with a poem they have liked; where does the difference lie?

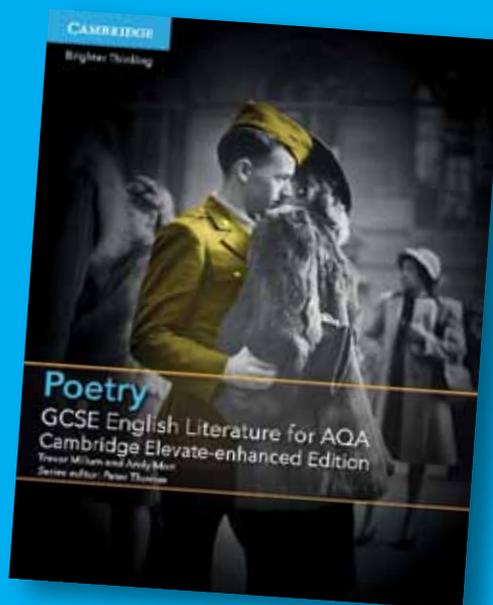
Most students have enjoyed poems like *The Highwayman* or *The Listeners* or *Jabberwocky* in the past, for example. What did those have that the poem under discussion does not? Perhaps this poem lacks action. Perhaps it lacks structure, especially rhythm. The poems cited have both. Poems set at GCSE are often more reflective and descriptive than ones encountered earlier in school. This is worth discussing. Are we growing up? Are we becoming more thoughtful, wanting more than a simple story? (Maybe not, but some students will recognise that poems with a questioning, reflective stance may echo the way that they have become more reflective themselves.)

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