

Irish Literature at GCSE

NEAB English Literature Syllabus 1614
(NEAB English Syllabus 1611)

English at Key stage 3

Studying and enjoying

Contemporary Irish Poetry

by

Gillian Goetzee

The Warrington Project Schools Programme

Pilot Scheme D : South Wirral High School

in association with

The Institute of Irish Studies, The University of Liverpool

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KEY STAGE 3

'The Troubles' and Contemporary Irish Poetry

Introduction for teachers

This study unit on contemporary Irish poetry was designed to address the GCSE NEAB English/English Literature Syllabus 1614. However, it may readily be used in all centres as an effective way of addressing the National Curriculum and teaching pupils to appreciate and enjoy poetry. It may be used in Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 5, as well as Key Stage 4.

The unit was tested in a mixed ability class with the help of pupils at South Wirral High School. As the pupils' assignments show, the unit proved a resounding success, both in encouraging an informed interest in poetry and in promoting knowledge and understanding of Ireland. Particularly gratifying was the work of LM and MP who usually write half a page but wrote instead almost six and five pages respectively.

The unit has also been used successfully with Year 9 children, although the tasks set have been modified to suit the lesser demands made on pupils at that Key Stage 3.

CONTENTS

The unit consists of this brief introduction, an anthology contemporary Irish poetry, a pupils' activity booklet (*Thinking about Contemporary Irish Poetry*) and examples of pupils' work.

USING THE STUDY UNIT

The pupils' activity booklet is intended to be a guide rather than rigidly followed.

The first activities on the environment may be omitted if this emphasis is not required.

The introduction to the environment of Ireland may be approached in a variety of ways. It may be the skeleton of a teacher-centred discussion, to be extended by the teacher's own knowledge and experience. The discussion points at the end of each section may be the prompts for a written response or for class or group discussion. The introduction has been included in the booklet as a reference for pupils as they respond to the tasks on the individual poems or to the summative assignments.

It is envisaged that teachers will use a few of the poems for whole class teaching to provide a model for the depth of appreciation required.

The pupils will then negotiate their own assignments and appropriate poems. Individuals, pairs or groups may work on the assignments. This will ensure differentiation and a more interesting personal response.

The pupils should work on the tasks for individual poems first, and then modify and use this to build an assignment.

MEETING THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM

This study unit of work fulfils some of the requirements of the National Curriculum, Key Stage 4.

Attainment target 1: speaking and listening

The unit contains tasks on individual poems. These tasks should be performed through class, group and pairs discussion as well as through writing, providing pupils with opportunities for 'exploration and hypothesis', 'consideration of literature', 'the development of thinking' and 'analysis' through talk.

Attainment target 2: reading

The unit gives pupils opportunities to develop the 'range of literature' they read and to 'study some texts in detail'. It encourages them to 'read more demanding texts' and gives them 'access to significant authors.' The poems 'feature a range of forms and styles', 'draw on literary traditions', 'extend pupils' ideas and their moral and emotional understanding' and 'use language in imaginative, precise and original ways'.

The unit also fulfils the requirement that 'pupils should read texts from other cultures and traditions that represent their distinctive voices and forms, and offer varied perspective and subject matter'.

Attainment target 3: writing

The tasks on individual poems and the summative assignments enable pupils to develop through 'review, analysis, hypothesis ... and summary' and to inform others through 'explanation, argument.'

NEAB GCSE ENGLISH LITERATURE SYLLABUS 1614 PEOPLE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The Unit is appropriate for NEAB GCSE English Literature Syllabus 1614. The syllabus is organised into thematic Areas of Study. This selection of poems will be under the Area of Study, 'People and the Environment'.

Coursework

The exploration of the poems will lead to assignments which may be chosen for coursework. Coursework, consisting of three assignments, provides 30% of the final assessment.

'People and the Environment' aims at:

- i 'interpreting and evaluating the interrelationship between people and their environment as presented in a range of history texts'; and
- ii 'examining how authors present and use a sense of place, exploring those aspects of a writer's craft beyond the literal'.

These aims will be served particularly well by the study of Irish poetry, written by poets experiencing a singular environment, written about people in this same environment.

Pupils will become aware of, and begin to understand, the experience and the environment of Ireland.

Terminal examination

'People and the Environment' is also an Area of Study in the Terminal Examination, and study of the Pilot Scheme's Anthology will inform and support pupils in their appreciation of the set texts for this examination. For 1996 and 1997, 'People and the Environment' is the theme for the Anthology set by the NEAB, consisting of short stories, poems and extracts. This Anthology is released by the Board prior to the examination and pupils respond to the material in Paper 1A, which is also Paper 1A for NEAB GCSE Syllabus 1611. Candidates who have already studied the Anthology of Contemporary Irish Poetry will be familiar with the idea and concept of people and the environment, and benefit accordingly.

NEAB GCSE ENGLISH LITERATURE SYLLABUS ALTERNATIVE A (1998)

The Unit is relevant to the proposed NEAB Syllabus for 1998, Alternative A, which involves writing an assignment on twentieth century poetry for the coursework component.

Irish Literature at Key Stages 3-5

An anthology

Contemporary Irish Poetry

Compiled by

Gillian Goetzee

'Ireland in Schools'
Pilot Scheme D : South Wirral High School
in association with
The Institute of Irish Studies, The University of Liverpool

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1. A Tourist Comments on the Land of his Forefathers

Take Dublin for instance:

What is it anyway?

You walk across O'Connell Bridge

little kids begging - gives the place atmosphere;

ya look around through a flea bitten crowd

and wonder why they stay here.

Their cousins in Milwaukee write,

saying COME ON OVER - WE'LL FIX YA UP.

But no, it's safer going to ceilis and mass,

please Goding and making themselves believe that

Grafton Street is elegant & an ice cream cone

in summer is high adventure.

As for me, I got some great shots of the place

and as soon as I get back to the U.S. of A.

I'll put them right where they belong:

first in the projector shining on our living room wall

and then in a bright yellow kodak box

next to all the others in my sock drawer

No offence meant.

Julie O'Callaghan

2. The House

My grandfather was so frail
that when bloothered
after a Saturday session
in the bookies and McConville's
I could lift him with one hand
and carry him
like a raincoat over my arm,
and just as easily hang him
against the side of the house
until I found his keys.

It's neither here nor there
why he drank.
Suffice to say when Violet died
he couldn't look
at another woman.
He'd got a little house
of his own, and sat all night
footering with the coals.
In that house
he couldn't look at another bottle.

Howard Wright

3. My Father Perceived as a Vision of St Francis

It was the piebald horse in next door's garden
frightened me out of a dream
with her dawn whinny. I was back
in the boxroom of the house,
my brother's room now,
full of ties and sweaters and secrets.
Bottles chinked on the doorstep,
the first bus pulled up to the stop.
The rest of the house slept
except for my father. I heard
him rake the ash from the grate,
plug in the kettle, hum a snatch of a tune.
Then he unlocked the back door
and stepped out into the garden.

Autumn was nearly done, the first frost
whitened the slates of the estate.
He was older than I had reckoned,
his hair completely silver,
and for the first time I saw the stoop
of his shoulder, saw that
his leg was stiff. What's he at?
So early and still stars in the west?

They came then: birds
of every size, shape, colour; they came
from the hedges and shrubs,
from eaves and garden sheds,
from the industrial estate, outlying fields,
from Dubber Cross they came
and the ditches of the North Road.
The garden was a pandemonium
when my father threw up his hands
and tossed the crumbs to the air. The sun
cleared O'Reilly's chimney
and he was suddenly radiant,
a perfect vision of St Francis,
made whole, made young again,
in a Finglas garden.

Paula Meehan

4. The Pattern

Little has come down to me of hers,
a sewing machine, a wedding band,
a clutch of photos, the sting of her hand
across my face in one of our wars

when we had grown bitter and apart.
Some say that's the fate of the eldest daughter.
I wish now she'd lasted till after
I'd grown up. We might have made a new start

as women without tags like *mother, wife,*
sister, daughter, taken our chances from there.
At forty-two she headed for god knows where.
I've never gone back to visit her grave.



First she'd scrub the floor with Sunlight soap,
an armreach at a time. When her knees grew sore
she'd break for a cup of tea, then start again
at the door with lavender polish. The smell
would percolate back through the flat to us,
her brood banished to the bedroom.

And as she buffed the wax to a high shine
did she catch her own face coming clear?
Did she net a glimmer of her true self?
Did her mirror tell what mine tells me?
I know her shrug and go on
knowing history has brought her to her knees.

She'd call us in and let us skate around
in our socks. We'd grow solemn as planets
in an intricate orbit about her.



She's bending over crimson cloth,
the younger kids are long in bed.
Late summer, cold enough for a fire,
she works by fading light
to remake an old dress for me.
It's first day back at school tomorrow.



'Pure lambswool. Plenty of wear in it yet.
You know I wore this when I went out with your Da.
I was supposed to be down in a friend's house,
your Granda caught us at the corner.
He dragged me in by the hair - it was long as yours then -
in front of the whole street.
He called your Da every name under the sun,
cornerboy, lout; I needn't tell you
what he called me. He shoved my whole head
under the kitchen tap, took a scrubbing brush
and carbolic soap and ice-cold water he scrubbed
every spick of lipstick and mascara off my face.
Christ but he was a right tyrant, your Granda.
It'll be over my dead body anyone harms a hair
of your head.'



She must have stayed up half the night
to finish the dress. I found it airing at the fire,
three new copybooks on the table and a bright
bronze nib, St. Christopher strung on a silver wire,

as if I were embarking on a perilous journey
to uncharted realms. I wore that dress
with little grace. To me it spelt poverty,
the stigma of the second hand. I grew enough to pass

it on by Christmas to the next in line. I was sizing
up the world beyond out flat patch by patch
daily after school, and fitting each surprising
city street to city square to diamond. I'd watch

the Liffey for hours pulsing to the sea
and the coming and going of ships,
certain that one day it would carry me
to Zanzibar, Bombay, the Land of the Ethiops.



There's a photo of her taken in the Phoenix Park
alone on a bench surrounded by roses
as if she had been born to formal gardens.
She stares out as if unaware
that any human hand held the camera, wrapped
entirely in her own shadow, the world beyond her
already a dream, already lost. She's
eight months pregnant. Her last child.



Her steel needles sparked and clacked,
the only other sound a settling coal
or her sporadic mutter
at a hard part in the pattern.
She favoured sensible shades:
Moss Green, Mustard, Beige.

I dreamt a robe of a colour
so pure it became a word.

Sometimes I'd have to kneel
an hour before her by the fire,
a skein around my outstretched hands,
while she rolled wool into balls.
If I swam like a kite too high
amongst the shadows on the ceiling
or flew like a fish in the pools
of pulsing light, she'd reel me firmly
home, she'd land me at her knees.

Tongues of flame in her dark eyes,
she'd say, 'One of these days I must
teach you to follow a pattern.'

Paula Meehan

5. The Dowser and the Child

When you were leaving
I always asked if you'd
brought an umbrella;
you made me think of rain
upon the hills. All our lives

there was a steady drizzle between us;
the sound of water in the distance.
Your hands, your eyes
dowsed over me, as if you
could divine things deep within me.

It seemed to me you moved beneath
a grey cloud. I remember
even on sunny days, you wore
a great wide hat, your eyes
in darkness under the cool verandah.

Some days you were a passing shower.
Some days you were a snowflake.
Some days your tongue was a bolt
of lightning that sent me
scuttling under the kitchen table.

Hours I'd sit there, listening
to the thunder of your things
rolling in the distance.
Nights when the wind blew,
I could hear it moan in your room,
creaking the bed. If I opened your door,
you blew it shut with a shout.
Once when I was lost in the forest
at the back of our house, I followed
the cold wind that led home to you.

I ran down the path to embrace you,
but you stayed distant like all my
rainbows, and told me, and told me,
and told me, not to touch your
delicate colours with mucky hands.

Tony Curtis

6. Going Home to Mayo, Winter, 1949

Leaving behind us the alien, foreign city of Dublin,
My father drove through the night in an old Ford Anglia,
His five-year old son in the seat beside him,
The rexine seat of red leatherette,
and a yellow moon peered in through the windscreen.
"Daddy, Daddy," I cried, "pass out the moon,"
But no matter how hard he drove he could not pass
out the moon.

Each town we passed through was another milestone
And their names were magic passwords into eternity:
Kilcock, Kinnegad, Strokestown, Elphin,
Tarmonbarry, Tulsk, Ballayhaderreen, Ballavary;
Now we were in Mayo and the next step was Turlough,
The village of Turlough in the heartland of Mayo
and my father's mother's house, all oil lamps and women,
and my bedroom over the public bar below,
and in the morning cattle cries and cock crows:
Life's seemingly seamless garment gorgeously rent
By their screeched and bellowings. And in the evenings
I walked with my father in the high grass down by
the river.
Talking with him - an unheard of thing in the city.

But home was not home and the moon could be no more out-flanked
Than the daylight nightmare of Dublin City:
Back down along the canal we chugged into the city
and each lock gate tolled our mutual doom;
and railings and parkings and asphalt and traffic lights,
and blocks after blocks of so-called "new" tenements -
Thousands of crosses of loneliness planted
In the narrowing grave of the life of the father;
In the wide, wide cemetery of the boy's childhood.

Paul Durcan

7. The Girl with the Keys to Pearse's Cottage

When I was sixteen I met a dark girl;
Her dark hair was darker because her smile was so bright;
She was the girl with the keys to Pearse's Cottage;
And her name was Cáit Killann

The Cottage was built into the side of a hill;
I recall two windows and cosmic peace
Of bare brown rooms and on whitewashed walls
Photographs of the passionate pale Pearse.

I recall wet thatch and peeling jambs
and how all was best seen from below in the field;
I used to sit in the rushes with ledger-book and pencil
Compiling poems of passion for Cáit Killann.

Often she used to linger on the sill of a window;
Hands by her side and brown legs akimbo;
In the sun red skirt and moon-black blazer;
Looking toward our strange world wide-eyed.
Our world was strange because it had no future,
She was America-bound at Summer's end.
She had no choice but to leave her home -
The girl with the keys to Pearse's Cottage

O Cáit Killann, O Cáit Killann,
You have gone with your keys from your own native place.
Yet here in this dark - El Greco eyes blaze back
From your Connemara postman's daughter's proudly
mortal face.

Paul Durcan

8. The End of the Day

The barn door shut with a shudder
as I placed the heavy triangles
of wood under the tractor's wheels.
It had been a long day. Leaning my
shoulder against the huge black tyre
I blew my tiredness into the night.

Kneeling, alone in God's darkness,
I thought of my father's grey mare
tired and steaming, there in the corner,
after a day ploughing in the high field.
Sally, he called it. Said he named it
after his only love, a girl he'd met in Doolin.

My mother's name was Margaret.

Tony Curtis

9. McGwinn and Son

Too many butchers
in the village
and alone in his shop
pretending to be busy
he suddenly hears
the long curse
he never knew was in him,
the throat of his own
with a shout
that goes back to the day
he put on his father's apron
and his mouth
turned into a purse.

Ted McNulty

10. Penance

And still they live in unforgiven places,
on the sides of arthritic hills,
where low walls hide the sea and the sea
hides the dead, though the dead still whisper
in their silent graves, "I'm cold, I'm cold."

Enough bog here to stoke the fires of Hell,
and stones so many you'd think they grew
in the soil. Though nothing ever grows.
God knows there was more wood on Calvary.

This morning, on a high road beyond Cleggan,
I passed the ruins of a deserted cottage,
and a ruined cottage that looked deserted,
only a man eyed me. I asked where the road went?
"To the end," he said, "the end." Then shuffled off.

Tony Curtis

11. Yeats's Fisherman

Though he does not exist,
I would wed him for life,
and count myself blessed
to be named as his wife.

In a cottage of thatch
I would simmer his broth,
preserving with patch
his old suit of grey cloth

for the man without guile
who can speak with his look,
whose orbital smile
relinquishes talk.

I would live out my span
by his provident stream,
with this Irish man,
who is only a dream.

Monica Hoyer

The Fisherman

(for comparison)

Although I can see him still,
The freckled man who goes
To a grey place on a hill
In grey Connemara clothes
At dawn to cast his flies,
It's long since I began
To call up to the eyes
This wise and simple man.
All day I'd looked in the face
What I had hoped 'twould be
To write for my own race
And the reality;
The living men that I hate,
The dead man that I loved,
The insolent unreprieved,
And no knave brought to book
Who has won a drunken cheer,
The witty man and his joke
Aimed at the commonest ear,
The clever man who cries
The catch-cries of the clown,
The beating down of the wise
And great Art beaten down

Maybe a twelvemonth since
Sudently I began,
In scorn of this audience,
Imagining a man,
And his sun-freckled face,
And grey Connemara cloth,
Climbing up to a place
Where stone is dark under froth,
And the down-turn of his wrist
And when the flies drop in the stream;
A man who does not exist,
A man who is but a dream;
And cried, 'Before I am old
I shall have written him one
Poem maybe as cold
And passionate as the dawn.'

W.B. Yeats

12. Voices

Another bloody day has passed
and it's reported
in shades of grey

as numerous as the dead,
too numerous to count.
The camera crews

are having a field day
filming green landscapes,
winter-dulled, windswept,

death-drabbed; and grey unprosperous
villages where black flags
slap the gables

of the waking homes;
Bandit Country, somebody
said

as if we were captured
in celluloid
just south of the Rio Grande.

Libelling us with labels or
slandering us with word-
sorcery. Tit-for-tat

tragedies earn them a living
but fools can flaunt
their failings

much too much,
make others believe.
Yet I've got

little else
to offer
but my words:

jejune at best,
inane at worst,
conceived in the mind's

parish of lies.
Shaped by tribal traits,
stories of histories

hatching, parables and
prayers and the
knowledge of the wedge

hammered home centuries
ago by outsiders
to keep the peace,

to separate like from like,
to create separate voices
echoing in the wilderness.

Damien Quinn

13. Northern Haiku

1

On an Antrim bog
a wall divides the wet land,
planted in the past.

2

Under the grey sky
hills, woods, rivers, bogs, small fields -
Ulster unionists.

3

A bridge on the Foyle,
a soldier's gun trained on me -
teaching nothing new.

4

Car windows misted,
waiting for a face that wears
its religion out.

5

Shot twice in the head.
Once in each astonished eye.
History is blind.

6

The quick skedaddle.
Having killed, where do they go?
Four pints please, Paddy.

7

Over the dark Foyle
the bark of the kalashnikovs,
an old Derry air.

8

After the bombing
Maguire was in Malone's pub
and Madden's garden.

9

Billy on his horse.
Giddy-up the I.R.A.
Photo-fit finish.

10

Squaddies at check-points
dream of Newcastle Brown Ale:
drink rain, shit and hate.

11

The twelfth of July,
King Billy's supporters sit
supping their Guinness.

12

Punishment shooting -
pleads remorse and forgiveness.
Jeans gone at the knees.

13

Witches, have pity,
freeze the present 'til stragglers
catch up from the past.

14

Protestant prayers,
Popish prayers. Funerals.
We go the same way.

15

A man out ploughing,
in one field he furrows from
Ireland to England.

16

A field day for art,
poetry, painting, drama,
the siege of Derry.

17

A blackbird's sweet song
lost in the wildness of hills,
prayer for the dead.

Tony Curtis

14. Postcard from Fermanagh

Chopper clatter bursting
Through the treetops
Above the chalet clearing
At eggs and bacon breakfast

The scout, nosing the forest
The gunship, a hawk shadow

Good day, sir
Do you have any identification?
In a soft lilt,
In a battledress

Later, a red Orion
Disgorges a black swat squad

Island Enniskillen
Still fortified, enchants
We are coming back here
Next year - sooner, perhaps

Where else can peace be enjoyed
So much, as on a front line?

Bill O'Keefe

15. Enemy Encounter

Dumping (left over from the autumn)
Dead leaves, near a culvert
I come on

 a British Army Soldier
with a rifle and a radio
Perched hiding. He has red hair.

He is young enough to be my weenie
-bopper daughter's boyfriend.
He is like a lonely little winter robin.
We are that close to each other, I
Can nearly hear his heart beating.

I say something bland to make him grin,
But his glass eyes look past my side
- whiskers down
 the Shore Road street.
I am an Irishman
 and he is afraid
That I have come to kill him

Padraic Fiacc

16. The Disturbance

A bomb shatters the silence of George Street,
sending clouds of dust down chimneys.
In seconds the dull thud dies away,
only a milk bottle rolling over the pavement
disturbs the silence with its circular sound -
Unshaven men in pyjamas stand like convicts
framed in the doorways of their cells,
or lean out windows like old farmers
on wooden gates, staring over concrete fields.
whose walls hold nothing in.
Women half dressed, still warm from sleep,
hold children's hands and let tired faces hang
like flowers withering after daylight or water.
While behind them kettles whistle
and toast burns under the grill.
Along another quiet road,
a man, pedalling on old bicycle,
whistles a familiar Irish air
as he creaks up a hill towards home,
the morning paper in his pocket,
secure, folded like a job well done.

Tony Curtis

Irish Literature at Key Stages 3-5

Thinking about

Contemporary Irish Poetry
Pupils' Activity Booklet

By

Gillian Goetzee

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Part one

The importance of environment

1. Environment - home and family

For this unit of study you need to have an understanding of what is meant by environment.

People are created by the environment they belong to. The first environment is home and family.

WRITE OR TALK OR THINK ABOUT YOUR HOME AND FAMILY ENVIRONMENT

The physical environment may create a mood and atmosphere.

A clean, uncluttered room decorated in blue and grey with angular furniture gives a cold, inhuman feeling perhaps.

Your family may have a collective belief or attitude which is important, such as religion, politics, cynicism or support for order and the establishment.

On a simple level, does your family express emotion or suppress it?

Perhaps the following words will help you:

cramped, confined, empty, hectic, relaxed, fear,
noise, tranquil, affection, indifference.

HOW HAVE YOU REACTED TO YOUR HOME ENVIRONMENT?
Do you belong, or are you in tension with it?

2. Environment - local area and community

The second environment is your local area and community, for example, Merseyside.

BRAINSTORM IMAGES AND IDEAS ABOUT MERSEYSIDE

Some of these may be from television, which you may debate.

Do you think accent is important?

Do you know people who think that Merseyside is special and different to other cities?

Do you have an idea of a typical 'scouser'?

Do you think you belong to Merseyside or do you feel separate from the image of the place?

How is The Wirral a different environment to Liverpool?

IF YOU DO NOT COME FROM MERSEYSIDE, THINK ABOUT YOUR OWN LOCAL ENVIRONMENT

3. Ireland as an environment

This unit of work explores the relationship between people and the environment which is expressed in contemporary Irish poetry.

The poets have been influenced by the whole environment of Ireland.

The poems themselves reveal interaction between the environment and the characters in the poetry.

BRAINSTORM IMAGES AND IDEAS YOU HAVE ABOUT IRELAND FOR A DISPLAY

Use as many sources as you can:

Irish Tourism advertisements

The news

Films: *Lamb*, *The Crying Game*, *The Commitments*

Television: *Father Ted*

Music: The Cranberries, Sinead O'Connor, Shane McGowan, U2.

4. Different environments

The word ENVIRONMENT as it is used in this unit has a complex meaning.

It is a combination of physical landscape (both rural and urban), history, religion, politics, family, language, etc.

The different poems in this unit emphasise different aspects of the environment, sometimes more than one.

RURAL IRELAND

Some poems are a response to the rural environment. Ireland has a particular landscape of hills, rivers, loughs and seashore. This landscape and its rural communities have helped to create the people who become poets.

Ireland is still a place where the country way of life is more dominant than city life. There are still family farms and small holdings where there are a few cows, pigs, hens and a few crops grown. The family tries to support itself and if there is any surplus it is sold to a local co-operative.

Even large farms are not as extensive or affected by technology as English farms. The electricity supply and water supply are not always efficient.

In the West of Ireland, especially, the family land is not all together but there is an acre here, half a mile away another acre and so on. Land used to be divided between all the sons, getting smaller by each division.

There is a lot of poverty and unemployment. It can be a narrow, claustrophobic way of life. British, Germans and Americans go to Ireland for an idyllic holiday. The Irish, including poets, try to escape the confined life.

The tension between wanting more freedom from the place, but belonging, leads to poetry. The landscape and way of life is written about with romantic celebration, rejection and a sense of loss.

CITIES

Dublin and Belfast have created their own city environments. Some poets have been formed by belonging here. There is still a wish to escape at times: escape from urban squalor to a new life, or escape to the security of a rural past.

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE ABOUT BEING BROUGHT UP IN THE IRISH COUNTRYSIDE?

WHAT WOULD YOU DISLIKE ABOUT BEING BROUGHT UP IN THE IRISH COUNTRYSIDE?

WOULD YOU PREFER TO BE BROUGHT UP IN AN IRISH CITY?

THINK ABOUT THE FILMS 'THE COMMITMENTS' OR 'THE SNAPPER' IF YOU HAVE SEEN THEM.

5. History and the environment

The environment of Ireland is affected by its history. Ireland was invaded and colonised by England for nearly a thousand years. Even though there are peace talks and a cease-fire at the moment, the worlds of Ireland and England, of Catholic and Protestant, South and North, have not integrated. There are still tensions and huge differences in outlook.

LIVING HISTORY

The ordinary people in Ireland, both North and South, are more aware of their history than English people. They write 'Remember 1690' or 'Easter 1916' on gable ends in Belfast. They feel passionate about their history. The English have a more secure sense of identity. The changes and conflicts between Celt, Saxon, Viking and Norman in England happened a long time ago. In Ireland change and conflict are happening now:

'if you are inside a changing society the
only kind of poetry you will write must
recognise changes going on'

Louis MacNeice

The inhabitants of the North, in particular, are unsure of themselves. The Protestants feel threatened by the Catholic South, and rejected by England.

LEAVING IRELAND

The potato famine in the middle of the nineteenth century meant the population of Ireland more than halved because of death or emigration. People still remember this, and many still have to leave Ireland because of poverty and lack of opportunity.

Many Irish poets have left Ireland at some time in their lives, both physically and spiritually, and a feeling of exile, homelessness, is in some of the poems.

WHY IS HISTORY MORE IMPORTANT TO IRISH PEOPLE THAN IT IS TO US?

WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT IRISH HISTORY FROM YOUR GENERAL KNOWLEDGE?

WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT THE RECENT TROUBLES?

6. Religion and the environment

The environment of Ireland is affected by religion. In England it is hard for most of us to understand the significance of religion as part of ordinary lives. How many people in school go to church every Sunday, ever go to church at all, believe in God?

In Ireland the people who want a united Ireland separate from Britain have become identified with the Catholic Church. The people who want a Northern Ireland, part of the United Kingdom, have become identified with the Protestant Church.

Both the Catholic Church and the Protestant Church have more power. They have power in the life of individuals. Religious attitudes to the role of parents, to sin, to sex are strong in many Irish families. Both Catholic and Protestant Churches are strict and old fashioned. Schools are religious institutions with more religious assemblies, lessons and attitudes than English schools.

The Churches have more power in the government of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, although this is beginning to break down. Divorce, re-marriage of divorcees, contraception and abortion are not part of society like they are in England.

This, too, can make life suffocating yet it is difficult to reject the world of your childhood and find new securities. Irish poetry is often about the rejection of, and fascination with, religion, and the search for new meaning. Religious imagery is a vivid part of poems yet is not always directly concerned with religion.

DO YOU KNOW ANYONE WITH STRONG RELIGIOUS BELIEFS?

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE TO THEIR LIVES?

DO YOU THINK CHURCHES SHOULD HAVE MORE POWER IN ENGLAND?

7. Language and the environment

The environment of Ireland is affected by language.

Part of your personal environment is your language. The way you speak is part of your identity.

In Ireland the poets are not even sure of their language. Irish is taught in all schools in the Republic. It is the patriotic language. Yet many people do not speak Irish naturally. Is the Irish language pointless and old fashioned or is it a powerful symbol of national identity? The poets from the Republic have to make this decision.

Many poets do choose to write in Irish nowadays. English translations can never capture the full meaning of their poems as sound is part of the effect of poetry. Irish, with more soft consonants and long vowel sounds, is gentler than English. Perhaps it expresses the insecurities and sorrow better.

Even the English spoken in Ireland is different to the English spoken in England. In Ireland poetry and poetic speech is part of ordinary life. There is more imagery and richness - or so the Irish claim.

WHAT WOULD YOU FEEL LIKE IF YOU WERE INVADED BY ANOTHER COUNTRY AND THEY TRIED TO STOP US SPEAKING ENGLISH?

DO YOU LIKE IT IF YOUR ACCENT IS LAUGHED AT?

8. Uncertainties of Irish poetry

The total environment of Ireland has led to poems which have a feeling of loss, of searching, of questioning. The Irish poets seem more aware of environment, exploring and commenting on the effect of it on themselves and on their characters.

The poets are in the centre of values, cultures, and languages which are hostile to each other. They make the reader actively involved in the uncertainties.

Part two

Tasks on individual poems

1. A Tourist Comments on the Land of his
Forefathers
Julie O'Callaghan

Why does the poet use dialect?

Why has the poet chosen not to use rhyme?

How do you know what the American feels about Dublin and Dubliners?

What does the poet feel about the American, and about Dublin and Dubliners?

What have you learnt about the experience of living in Dublin?

Do you agree with the American?

2. The House

Howard Wright

Why does the poet use dialect?

What does the narrator (I) of the poem feel about his grandfather?

Why do you think the grandfather drank?

Why is the poem called 'The House'?

What do you learn about the grandfather's environment?

Why do you think the poet chose not to rhyme?

3. My Father Perceived as a Vision of St Francis

Paula Meehan

Why do you think the narrator of the poem is very aware of her surroundings?

What do you think she is feeling in the first stanza?

Why do you think the poet has set the poem at Autumn time?

How do you know what the narrator feels about her father?

How is the father like St Francis?

Why is it a sad poem?

What do you learn of the experience of living in Dublin?

What does the narrator feel about the experience of living in Dublin?

4. The Pattern

Paula Meehan

Explore the relationship the poet had with her mother when she was a child.

Explore the personality and life of the mother.

‘The pattern’ is an image for a way of life, not just a literal knitting pattern.
Do you think it was hard for the mother to learn how to follow a pattern?

How do you know what the poet feels about her mother now?

5. The Dowser and the Child

Tony Curtis

A dowser is someone who can find supplies of water by instinct, perhaps magic.

What do you think the relationship is between the narrator, the child and the dowser?

What sort of person is the dowser?

What does the child feel about the dowser? Why does the child call her a dowser?

Think about why some sentences are long and some are short.

Why has the poet chosen water in nature as a central image?

6. Going Home to Mayo, Winter, 1949

Paul Durcan

How does the poet make the sense of childhood vivid on the journey?

What is the effect of the place names?

What is life like in the village?

Why does the child like this life?

How is it different from Dublin?

Look at the beginning and the end of the poem. How does the poet show his feelings about Dublin and its effect on people?

How do you know it is the poet as an adult feeling this, rather than the child?

How is this poem a lament showing a sense of loss?

7. The Girl with the Keys to Pearse's Cottage

Paul Durcan

Pearse is a common Irish name, but Irish readers would know that Patrick Pearse was a leader of a group called the Gaelic League. He campaigned to get Irish taught in schools and to create a new literature written in Irish. He himself wrote strong, lyrical poems in Gaelic. Pearse was involved in the Easter Rising of 1916 and was executed by an English firing squad on 3 May 1916, so he is a romantic figure.

El Greco was a Spanish artist whose paintings were full of emotion and drama.

Why is it appropriate that the cottage should have belonged to Pearse?

How old do you guess the person telling the story is now?

Why was Cáit Killann so attractive?

How does Paul Durcan make the poem feel like a song or ballad?

Why does he do this?

How can you tell that this rural past was not as idyllic as it might have been?

How does he feel about himself at 16 and his first experience of love now?

This poem is about one incident in a man's life but how does it reveal the Irish experience in general?

8. The End of the Day

Tony Curtis

Explain how the farmer is feeling in the first 6 lines.

What does he remember and why does he remember it now?

What does he feel about being a farmer?

What does he feel about his father?

9. McGwinn and Son

Ted McNulty

Explain how the butcher is feeling in the first four lines.

What does he remember and why does he remember it now?

Explain what he felt about becoming a butcher.

Why do you think he became one?

How did it change him?

How do you feel towards the butcher?

What do you learn of the environment of the village?

Why does Ted McNulty write the poem as just one sentence?

10. Penance

Tony Curtis

What atmosphere is created in the first stanza?

What is the significance of the religious imagery in stanza two?

What does the narrator feel about the place in stanza three?

Why do you think the poem is called 'Penance'?

What do you learn about the environment in this poem?

bog - peat, turf still used as fuel in homes in Ireland

Cleggan - small fishing village in Connemara

11. Yeats' Fisherman

Monica Hoyer

It is impossible to describe how important Yeats is to Irish people, never mind Irish poetry. He was a very famous popular poet who felt passionately about Ireland, its history and its culture. Some of his poetry celebrates the simple, rural life.

Why do you think the poet uses rhyme in this poem?

Why does she use a straightforward pattern (4 stanzas, 4 lines in a stanza, and six syllables in a line, and three stresses in every line)?

What would life be like married to the fisherman?

Why would the poet enjoy the life?

What makes the poem sad and a bit angry?

12. Voices

Damien Quinn

What has just happened?

Why are the camera crews having a field day?

What does the poet feel about the camera crew?

What do you think the poet wants to do? (stanza 9)

Why does he think he will succeed no more than the camera crew?
(*Jeune means immature and awkward.*)

How does he describe the nature of the troubles?

Has he in fact failed or succeeded in making you learn about the experience of life in the North of Ireland?

13. Northern Haiku

Tony Curtis

The last line in a Haiku is always the eye opener, the line that stops you and makes you think. Each Haiku has 17 syllables.

Chose seven Haiku. Explain what they make you think and how they are written which helps to give them power.

For example, Haiku 1:

The first two lines are about a real physical feature, a wall built on typically Irish marshy soil.

The last line reveals it is also a political boundary dividing a place which should be whole - the land is the same on both sides.

This boundary was created by the past, by history. It is sad that the present has been harmed by the past.

All this is contained in three lines, which are made more effective because of the alliteration of P.

Why has the poet chosen to use the Haiku form?

What have you learnt about the experience of living in the North from these poems?

14. Postcard from Fermanagh

Bill O'Keefe

What is the person telling the story of the poem doing in Enniskillen?

What is the narrator doing in the first stanza?

How does that contrast with the first line?

How is the first line made to surprise you?

What is the phrase 'nosing the forest' telling you about the scout? (stanza 2)

Why does the poet use a metaphor, to compare the gunship with a hawk? (stanza 2)

How does the last line of stanza 3 contrast with the first 3 lines? (How is the soldier talking to the narrator?)

How does the word 'disgorges' make you think of the Red Orion?

What do you think the poet means by the last stanza?

Would you want to return to Enniskillen?

What have you learned of the experience of living in Northern Ireland from this poem?

15. Enemy Encounter

Padraic Fiacc

How is a mood created in the first stanza?

How do you know what the poet feels about the soldier?

How do you know what the soldier feels about the poet?

Why is it a sad poem?

What have you learnt about the experience of living in the north of Ireland from this poem?

16. The Disturbance

Tony Curtis

Why are the men compared to convicts or farmers?

Why are the women compared to flowers?

What effect would a bomb have if it exploded in your street?

What effect has the bomb and the troubles on their lives?

How do you know what the man who detonated the bomb feels?

What have you learnt about the experience of living in Northern Ireland from this poem?

Part three

Assignments

1. Choosing your assignment

Choose the assignment you are interested in.

You may work together with a partner who chooses the same assignment.

Look at all the relevant poems.

Choose the ones you want to focus on.

Do preparatory work, using the tasks on each poem as a starting point.

Respond to these tasks at length, always using quotations to help you understand all the meaning of the poem.

Throughout, try to comment on *how* the poem is written: verse form, rhyme, dialect, speech, imagery, repetition, alliteration, etc.

Use this preparatory work to help you with the assignment. You may have several ideas which are not covered by the tasks and suggestions.

2. Assignments

1. Religion and contemporary Irish poetry

Choose four poems and show how religion has affected the way the poet sees the world.

You may think about:

- escaping from the confinement of religion
- how religion is part of the Northern Ireland troubles
- how parents are part of the religious environment
- how religion infiltrates poets' imagery and language

2. Dublin and contemporary Irish poetry

Look at the three poems:

- My Father Perceived as a Vision of St Francis
- Going Home to Mayo, Winter, 1949
- A Tourist Comments on the Land of his Forefathers

Show how the poets feel about the City of Dublin and the role of their fathers, or forefathers in this response to the City.

3. Parents and contemporary Irish poetry

Choose three or four poems about parents. Discuss the character of the parent. Explore the poets' or narrators' relationship with the parent. Think about how the relationship is linked with the poets' experience of living in Ireland, the environment of Ireland.

4. Rural landscape and contemporary Irish poetry

Choose three or four poems about rural Ireland. How do the poets describe the landscape and the life? What do they feel about this environment? Compare and contrast any attitudes.

5. 'The troubles' and contemporary Irish poetry

GCSE

Which three or four poems make you think the most about 'the troubles' in Ireland? How do they achieve this? What do the poets or narrators feel about the situation?

KEY STAGE 3

Look at the poems 'The Disturbance' and 'Enemy Encounter'. Both poets have something to say about living in Northern Ireland during 'the troubles'. What does each poet want to say? How do they choose to say it? Which poet do you like best and why?

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