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## Poetry

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### INTRODUCTION

A poem is a composition in verse, usually characterised by concentrated and heightened language in which words are chosen for their sound and suggestive power as well as for their meaning, and using techniques such as rhythm and metre. To read and hear good poetry is to appreciate the subtleties of cadence and rhythm, the variety of pace and pattern and all that goes to make up the music of poetry.

Every poem that we read adds to, in some degree, our total conception of poetry.

Of the eight poets in this selection, four are from the classical tradition: Donne, Milton, Blake and Coleridge. The other four are closer to contemporary times: Yeats, A.K.Ramanujan, Emily Dickinson and Kamala Das.

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## A Lecture Upon the Shadow

*John Donne was representative of the metaphysical poets of his time. He set the metaphysical mode by vibrancy of language and startling imagery, and a preference for a diction modelled on direct utterances. He was brought up as a Roman Catholic (later he converted to Anglicanism), and was Dean of St. Paul's Church till his death.*

*The total effect of a metaphysical poem at its best is to startle the reader into seeing and knowing what he has not really noticed or thought about before. Like all Donne's poetry this poem too reflects an emphasis on the intellect and wit as against feeling and emotion.*



John Donne  
1572-1631

Stand still and I will read to thee  
A Lecture, Love, in loves philosophy,  
    These three houres that we have spent,  
    Walking here, Two shadowes went  
Along with us, which we our selves produc'd;  
But, now the Sunne is just above our head,  
    We doe those shadowes tread;  
    And to brave clearnesse all things are reduc'd.  
So whilst our infant loves did grow,  
Disguises did, and shadowes, flow,  
From us, and our cares; but now 'tis not so.

That love hath not attain'd the high'st degree,  
Which is still diligent lest others see.  
Except our loves at this noone stay,



We shall new shadowes make the other way.  
As the first were made to blinde  
Others; these which come behinde  
Will worke upon our selves, and blind our eyes.  
If our loves faint, and westwardly decline;



To me thou, falsely thine;  
And I to thee mine actions shall disguise.  
The morning shadowes were away,  
But these grow longer all the day,  
But oh, loves day is short, if love decay.

Love is a growing, or full constant light;  
And his first minute, after noone, is night.

### Understanding the Poem

1. How do the shadows before noon differ from the shadows after noon? What do the two kinds of shadow represent?
  2. Love is described as light. What makes the poet talk about shadows?
  3. Comment on the use of the image of the shadows for the idea that the poet wants to convey.
  4. The poet seems to be addressing his beloved in the poem. What is the message he wishes to convey to her?
  5. Instead of 'A Lecture Upon Love' the poet calls the poem 'A Lecture Upon the Shadow'. What is the effect that this has on our reading of the poem?
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## Language Work

1. Notice the spelling of the following words

houres	shadowes	Sunne
noone	clearnesse	behinde

The 'e' that was used in Donne's period got dropped from English orthography later. Pick out the other words in the poem that have this peculiar feature.

2. Take note also that the apostrophe is not used for indicating the possessive form: loves philosophy.
3. Examples from other poems from this period:
  - How neatly **doe** we give one **onely** name
  - To **parents** issue and the **sunnes** bright starre!

## Try this out

Notice the adjectives in phrases such as 'infant loves' and 'brave clearnesse'. What is the meaning of these adjectives

- (i) in isolation
- (ii) as part of these phrases.

## Suggested Reading

'Go and Catch a Falling Star' by John Donne  
 'The Flea' by John Donne.

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## Poems by Milton

*John Milton began writing poetry at the age of ten. After finishing his formal education at Cambridge, he read almost everything available in Latin, Greek, Italian and English. He was appointed Latin Secretary where he worked so hard that eyestrain, from years of late night reading, caused him to become totally blind at the age of forty-five. In the final years of his life he wrote (through dictation) Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained.*



John Milton  
1608-1674

### I On Time

Fly envious *Time*, till thou run out thy race,  
Call on the lazy leaden-stepping hours,  
Whose speed is but the heavy Plummets pace;  
And glut thy self with what thy womb devours,  
Which is no more than what is false and vain,  
And merely mortal dross;  
So little is our loss,  
So little is thy gain.  
For when as each thing bad thou hast entomb'd,  
And last of all, thy greedy self consum'd,  
Then long Eternity shall greet our bliss  
With an individual kiss;  
And Joy shall overtake us as a flood,  
When every thing that is sincerely good  
And perfectly divine,  
With Truth, and Peace, and Love shall ever shine



About the supreme Throne  
 Of him, t'whose happy-making sight alone,  
 When once our heav'nly guided soul shall clime,  
 Then all this Earthy grossnes quit,  
 Attir'd with Stars, we shall for ever sit,  
 Triumphant over Death, and Chance, and thee O Time.

### NOTES

*Envious Time:* According to ancient mythology Cronos devoured each of his children at birth.

*Plummets:* A lead weight whose slow mechanism activates the ticking mechanism in a clock.

### Understanding the Poem

1. Why has the poet pitted the flight of Time against the 'lazy leaden-stepping hours' and 'the heavy Plummets pace'?
2. What are the things associated with the temporal and what are associated with the eternal?
3. What guides human souls towards divinity? Who is the final winner in the race against Time?

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### On Shakespear.\* 1630

What needs my *Shakespear* for his honour'd Bones,  
 The labour of an age in piled Stones,  
 Or that his hallow'd reliques should be hid  
 Under a Star-ypointing *Pyramid*?  
 Dear son of memory, great heir of Fame,  
 What need'st thou such weak witness of thy name?  
 Thou in our wonder and astonishment  
 Hast built thy self a live-long Monument.  
 For whilst to th'shame of slow endeavouring art,  
 Thy easie numbers flow, and that each heart  
 Hath from the leaves of thy unvalu'd Book,  
 Those Delphic lines with deep impression took,  
 Then thou our fancy of it self bereaving



Dost make us Marble with too much conceaving;  
And so Sepulcher'd in such pomp dost lie,  
That Kings for such a Tomb would wish to die.

*\*Notice the spelling of 'Shakespear' and of the words 'easie', 'conceaving'.*

### Understanding the Poem

1. Why does Milton feel it is not necessary to put up a monument in stone for Shakespeare?
2. What does the 'weak witness of thy name' refer to?
3. How does Milton describe Shakespeare as the source of inspiration for all succeeding generations of poets?
4. What is the best tribute that posterity has bestowed on Shakespeare?

### Language Study

Etymology is the study of the history of linguistic change. When applied to individual words, it is an account of (i) the history of a word (ii) the derivation of a word.

The dictionary meaning of a word is followed by notes on its origin.

For the word 'entomb'd' the information we get is: [late ME *entoumbe(n)* MF *entombe(r)*]. This means that

- The word is found in late Middle English
- The word is of French origin and is found in use from 1578
- Also, about 30 per cent of the words in English are of French origin. Borrowings from French reached its height after the Norman Conquest (1066)—between 1250 and 1400.

### Suggested Reading

'On his Blindness' by John Milton.

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## Poems by Blake



William Blake  
1757-1827

*William Blake was a poet, painter and engraver. He abhorred the rationalism and materialism of his times. What he saw and painted were human beings beset with evil, yet striving for the divine within them.*

*Blake's lyrics appeared in two sets of volumes: Songs of Innocence (from which The Divine Image has been chosen) and Songs of Experience (from which The Human Abstract has been taken) representing the two contrary states of the human soul. Most of the poems in the first volume have counterparts in the second.*

### I The Divine Image

To Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love  
All pray in their distress;  
And to these virtues of delight  
Return their thankfulness.

For Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love  
Is God our father dear,  
And Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love  
Is Man, his child and care.

For Mercy has a human heart,  
Pity a human face,  
And Love, the human form divine,  
And Peace, the human dress.



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Then every man, of every clime,  
That prays in his distress,  
Prays to the human form divine,  
Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace.

And all must love the human form,  
In heathen, turk, or jew;  
Where Mercy, Love, and Pity dwell  
There God is dwelling too.

II

### The Human Abstract

Pity would be no more  
If we did not make somebody Poor;  
And Mercy no more could be  
If all were as happy as we.

And mutual fear brings peace,  
Till the selfish loves increase:  
Then Cruelty knits a snare,  
And spreads his baits with care.

He sits down with holy fears,  
And waters the ground with tears;  
Then Humility takes its root  
Underneath his foot.

Soon spreads the dismal shade  
Of Mystery over his head;  
And the Caterpillar and Fly  
Feed on the Mystery.

And it bears the fruit of Deceit,  
Ruddy and sweet to eat;  
And the Raven his nest has made  
In its thickest shade.

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The Gods of the earth and sea  
 Sought thro' Nature to find this Tree;  
 But their search was all in vain:  
 There grows one in the Human Brain.

**Note:** Blake's poetry was published in a manner most unusual in literature and art history; he personally manufactured each copy. The verses were not typeset but were, with the engravings that illustrated them, cut into copper plates. The pages themselves he illuminated in water colours. Thus Blake can be called the first multi-media artist.

### Understanding the Poem

- How are these two matched poems related to each other in content? How is the human being depicted in the *Song of Innocence* and how is he/she depicted in the *Song of Experience*? Do we find both aspects working in an average human being?
- How would you explain the lines  
 For Mercy has a human **heart**,  
 Pity a human **face**,  
 And Love, the human **form** divine,  
 And Peace, the human **dress**.
- How do Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love get distorted in the human brain?
- Blake's poetry expresses one aspect of his multi-dimensional view of human experience—of mankind once whole and happy, now fallen into discord and tyranny, from which it must be rescued. Explain with reference to these two poems.

### Language Work

- Certain words in the poem have been capitalised. Can you think of reasons for this?
- Count the syllables in the lines of 'The Divine Image'. Do you see a pattern?  
 The first line has eight and the second line has six syllables. Two syllables make a foot in poetry. Here the first syllable of each foot is unstressed and the second syllable is stressed.



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### Try this Out

Read 'The Chimney Sweeper' in *Songs of Innocence*, and then 'The Chimney Sweeper' in *Songs of Experience*, and contrast the two. You could also read 'The Lamb' and 'The Tiger'.

### Suggested Reading

*Songs of Innocence* by William Blake

*Songs of Experience* by William Blake.

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## Kubla Khan

Or

### A Vision in a Dream: A Fragment

*S.T. Coleridge was imaginative even as a child. He studied at Cambridge. In 1797, he met Wordsworth; the two belonged to the first generation of Romantic poets. Coleridge was responsible for presenting the supernatural as real and Wordsworth would try to render ordinary reality as remarkable and strange. Byron, Shelley and Keats belonged to the next generation of Romantic Poets.*

*The genesis of this poem was a vision seen by Coleridge in a trance-like state of mind. He tried to capture its essence but an interruption caused an irreparable break in his poetic flow.*



S.T. Coleridge  
1772-1834

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan  
A stately pleasure-dome decree:  
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran  
Through caverns measureless to man  
Down to a sunless sea.  
So twice five miles of fertile ground  
With walls and towers were girdled round:  
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,

\* Kubla Khan founded the Mongol dynasty in China in the thirteenth century.

\* You will notice that this poem is incomplete. There is a reason behind this. In 1797, when Coleridge fell ill, some medicine was prescribed, from the effects of which he fell asleep in his chair while reading about Kubla Khan. In the three hours of profound sleep, he had a wonderful dream. On awakening he distinctly recollected it, and began to write it down, when he was interrupted by a chance visitor. The poem thus remained incomplete.



Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;  
And here were forests ancient as the hills,  
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted  
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!  
A savage place! as holy and enchanted  
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted  
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!  
And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,  
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,  
A mighty fountain momently was forced;  
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst  
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,  
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:  
And 'mid these dancing rocks at once and ever  
It flung up momentarily the sacred river.  
Five miles meandering with a mazy motion  
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,  
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,  
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean:  
And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far  
Ancestral voices prophesying war!  
The shadow of the dome of pleasure  
Floated midway on the waves;  
Where was heard the mingled measure  
From the fountain and the caves.  
It was a miracle of rare device,  
A sunny pleasure dome with caves of ice!

A damsel with a dulcimer  
In a vision once I saw:  
It was an Abyssinian maid,  
And on her dulcimer she played,  
Singing of Mount Abora.  
Could I revive within me  
Her symphony and song,  
To such a deep delight, 'twould win me,  
That with music loud and long,

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I would build that dome in air,  
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!  
And all who heard should see them there,  
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice,  
And close your eyes with holy dread,  
For he on honeydew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

### Understanding the Poem

*Find out where the river Alph is.*

1. Does the poem have a real geographical location? How does the poet mix up the real and the imaginary to give a sense of the surreal?
2. Pick out
  - (i) contrasting images that are juxtaposed throughout the poem.
  - (ii) images that strike the eye and images that strike the ear, both positive and negative.
  - (iii) the words used to describe the movement of water.
3. What is the discordant note heard at the end of the third stanza? Can we relate this to the grandeur and turmoil that are a part of an emperor's life?
4. Which are the lines that refer to magical elements?
5. What is poetic ecstasy likened to?
6. The poem is a fragment. What do you think has made it a lasting literary piece?

### Language Study

*Dulcimer* is a string instrument struck with two light hammers, used both in China and in Europe in different forms.

#### **TASK**

*Write short descriptions of five other rare musical instruments that are used by folk cultures.*

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### Try this Out

The poem is a product of subconscious fusion of dream images and ideas from Coleridge's wide reading. Which of the details in the poem do you think are factual, and which imaginary? Surf the internet to get interesting details.

### Suggested Reading

'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' by S.T. Coleridge  
'Christabel' by S.T. Coleridge.

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## Trees



Emily Dickinson  
1830-1886

*Emily Dickinson is regarded as one of America's quintessential poets of the nineteenth century. She lived an introverted and hermetic life, and published very few of her poems in her lifetime. Her output, 1789 poems in all, were published posthumously.*

*Her poetry is characterised by unconventional capitalisation and extensive use of dashes, along with unusual imagery and lyric style.*

The Trees like Tassels hit – and – swung –  
There seemed to rise a Tune  
From Miniature Creatures  
Accompanying the Sun –

Far Psalteries of Summer –  
Enamoring the Ear  
They never yet did satisfy –  
Remotest – when most fair

The Sun shone whole at intervals –  
Then Half – then utter hid –  
As if Himself were optional  
And had Estates of Cloud

Sufficient to enfold Him  
Eternally from view –  
Except it were a whim of His  
To let the Orchards grow –



A Bird sat careless on the fence –  
One gossiped in the Lane  
On silver matters charmed a Snake  
Just winding round a Stone –

Bright Flowers slit a Calyx  
And soared upon a Stem  
Like Hindered Flags – Sweet hoisted –  
With Spices – in the Hem –

'Twas more – I cannot mention –  
How mean – to those that see  
Vandyke's Delineation  
Of Nature's – Summer Day!



### Responding to the Poem

1. What imagery does the poet use to delineate Summer's day more picturesquely than any painter could?
2. What do you understand by 'Psalteries of Summer'?
3. In which lines are creatures attributed with human qualities? How does this add to the beauty of the Summer's day?
4. How would you explain the image of the 'Hindered Flags'?
5. Why are the pronouns referring to the Sun capitalised?
6. Give examples from the poem to show that great poetry is a result of close observation of natural phenomena.

### Language Study

You came across 'dulcimer' in the poem 'Kubla Khan'. Did you note down 'Psaltery' as another musical instrument? They are very similar. Look up the illustrations for the two in an illustrated dictionary. Find out in what ways they are different from one another.

### Suggested Reading

*The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson.*

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## The Wild Swans at Coole

*W.B. Yeats was an Irish poet, dramatist and mystic. He was one of the driving forces behind the Irish Literary Revival, and was co-founder of the Abbey Theatre. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923.*

The trees are in their autumn beauty, A  
The woodland paths are dry, B  
Under the October twilight the water C  
Mirrors a still sky, B  
Upon the brimming water among the stones D  
Are nine-and-fifty swans. E

The nineteenth autumn has come upon me G  
Since I first made my count;  
I saw, before I had well finished,  
All suddenly mount  
And scatter wheeling in great broken rings  
Upon their clamorous wings.

I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,  
And now my heart is sore.  
All's changed since I, hearing at twilight,