Analyzing poetry

Objectives
- To establish a strategy for approaching unseen poetry texts.
- To practise close reading of poetry texts.
- To look at examples of commentaries on poems.

Writing about poetry
In Chapter 1 we looked at how to approach the commentary and literary analysis in general. In this chapter we will look at ways of examining specific poems, together with giving examples of students’ commentaries on some of these poems. First, it is worth reminding yourself of the things you should do when you have to write about a poem or when you are sitting the Paper 1 examination.

- Read the poem through very carefully several times before starting to write about it.
- Avoid rushing into hasty judgements on it – this is not easy under exam conditions, but thinking before you write is essential.
- When you are with other students their comments can help you find a way into the poem, but in an exam only further close reading will help you.
- Having read the poem, make notes by marking lines, underlining words, and so on. In an exam, or if you have a photocopy, you can annotate the poem on the page. Twenty minutes spent making notes will pay dividends when you finally start writing your commentary.
- When writing under exam conditions, remember that you are not in a race. It is not quantity but quality that will gain you marks. The examiner will be aware of the time constraints that you are working under and will take them into account.
- Do not write down your comments in a haphazard fashion: try to organize your ideas under one main approach, depending on what you feel is the most important aspect of the poem.

Swifts
Fifteenth of May. Cherry blossom. The swifts
Materialize at the tip of a long scream
Of needle. ‘Look! They’re back! Look!’ And they’re gone
On a steep
Controlled scream of skid
Round the house-end and away under the cherries. Gone.

Activity
Working alone or with a partner, read the poem Swifts by Ted Hughes carefully, making notes under each of the headings given on pages 22–24.

"Sir, what is poetry?"
‘Why Sir, it is much easier to say what it is not. We all know what light is: but it is not easy to tell what it is.”
Samuel Johnson
Suddenly flickering in sky summit, three or four together,
Gnat-whisp frail, and hover-searching, and listening

For air-chills – are they too early? With a bowing
Power-thrust to left, then to right, then a flicker they
Tilt into a slide, a tremble for balance,
Then a lashing down disappearance

Behind elms.
They’ve made it again,
Which means the globe’s still working, the Creation’s
Still waking refreshed, our summer’s
Still all to come –
And here they are, here they are again
Erupting across yard stones
Shrapnel-scatter terror. Frog-gapers,
Speedway goggles, international mobsters –

A bolas of three or four wire screams
Jockeying across each other
On their switchback wheel of death.
They swat past, hard fletched,

Veer on the hard air, toss up over the roof,
And are gone again. Their mole-dark labouring,
Their lunatic limber scampering frenzy
And their whirling blades
Sparkle out into blue –
Not ours any more.
Rats ransacked their nests so now they shun us.
Round luckier houses now
They crowd their evening dirt-track meetings,

Racing their discords, screaming as if speed-burned,
Head-height, clipping the doorway
With their leaden velocity and their butterfly lightness,
Their too much power, their arrow-thwack into the eaves.

Every year a first-flying, nearly-flying
Misfit flopped in our yard,
Groggily somersaulting to get airborne.
He bat-crawled on his tiny useless feet, tangling his flails

Like a broken toy, and shrieking thinly
Till I tossed him up – then suddenly he flowed away under
His bowed shoulders of enormous swimming power,
Slid away along levels wobbling

On the fine wire they have reduced life to,
And crashed among the raspberries.
Then followed fiery hospital hours
In a kitchen. The moustached goblin savage
Nested in a scarf. The bright blank
Blind, like an angel, to my meat-crumbs and flies.
Then eyelids resting. Wasted clingers curled.
The inevitable balsa death.
Finally burial
For the husk
Of my little Apollo –
The charred scream
Folded in its huge power.

Ted Hughes

Here are notes for one interpretation of Hughes’s poem. Remember, however, that this is just one interpretation. As long as they can be supported by the text itself, a number of different ideas may be valid.

What is the text about? As the title tells us, the poem is almost entirely devoted to describing and “capturing” in writing the appearance, movements, and behaviour of swifts (they are fast-moving, fork-tailed birds related to swallows and martens).

Where and when? Although the setting is not obvious in the poem, the fact that swifts arrive in England in the summer and Hughes is an English poet suggests that the poem is set in England at the beginning of summer: “Fifteenth of May”, to be precise. From the words, “Look! They’re back! Look!” one can assume that their arrival is welcomed as the sign of the summer “Still all to come”.

Who is the speaker? In this case it is probably safe to say it is the poet, Ted Hughes, himself. It is written in the first person and addresses the reader directly. One feels that Hughes wants us to share his excitement and fascination with these remarkable birds.

Why has it been written? This is an example of a poem where there does not seem to be a deep, hidden meaning. The swifts are themselves, not a metaphor for anything else. Hughes wishes to celebrate their amazing flying skills and their vulnerability (“Rats ransacked their nests”). Young birds can fail to fly successfully, and when that is the case no human care can save them. Anyone who has tried to save an injured bird will empathize with the burial of the bird, “my little Apollo”. Apollo is the Greek god of youth, beauty, poetry and music. The comparison to Apollo highlights Hughes’s admiration and respect. But the burial also reminds us that there may be little point in interfering with nature. The rule of the survival of the fittest would ensure that a weak bird would not live long. The poem also mentions the cycles of the seasons. “They’ve made it again./ Which means the globe’s still working, the Creation’s/ Still waking refreshed”. The poem is about the inexorable processes of the natural world as well as being about the swifts in particular.
Structure and form. For the most part, four-line stanzas are used, but rather freely. Line lengths vary from two words to 11 and are frequently broken by caesuras (such as in the line “Nested in a scarf. The bright blank”). There are many run-ons from one line to the next (enjambment) as in lines 1 and 2, 2 and 3, and 3 and 4. The erratic nature of the form suggests the free, jagged, erratic nature of the flight of these birds.

Vocabulary, language, diction. As this is a descriptive poem it is not surprising that the poem is full of words that convey movement and sound: “scream of skid”, “toss up over the roof”, “crashed among the raspberries”, to give just a few examples. Many words describe the flying skills of the birds, with Hughes often borrowing the language of speeding vehicles to convey the speed and thrust of their movement.

Imagery. There is hardly a line in the poem which does not convey meaning through metaphor. As already mentioned, many words and phrases suggest the flight of planes or of speedway motoring. For example, “On a steep/ Controlled scream of skid”; and “with a bowing/ Power-thrust to left, then to right, then a flicker they/ Tilt into a slide…”. These are phrases that could be used of an air display. So too are words such as “switchback”, “whirling blades”, and “Shrapnel-scatter terror”, which also acknowledge their aggression and ability to frighten.

But as well as making the swifts sound powerful and dangerous, Hughes draws attention to their delicacy: they “flicker” and “tremble” and are “Gnat-whisp frail”. He frequently uses paradox to contrast their speed, which can seem blundering and uncontrolled, a “lunatic limber scampering frenzy”, with their small size and controlled grace. They have both a “leaden velocity” and “butterfly lightness”. Another aspect that Hughes captures is the way the swifts’ cries combine sound and movement. It is as if the birds are faster than the sounds which they leave trailing behind them like wires: “A bolas of three or four wire screams”. When they come into view, they: “Materialize at the tip of a long scream/ Of needle…”

The word “needle” conveys the sharp, piercing quality of the scream. A “bolas” is a small round mass which can be used as a weapon. The damaged bird is an “Apollo” but also a “moustached goblin savage”, suggesting something mischievous or even malevolent. It is also “like an angel” and its “inevitable balsa death” could refer to the lightweight balsa-wood coffin the bird is buried in. Balsa wood is light and brittle, so the wood encapsulates the feel of the tiny bird’s body, little more than feather and bones. The words “fiery hospital hours” and “Nested in a scarf” indicate the care and attention paid to the bird when the poet is nursing it.

Other literary features include alliteration, as in “The bright blank/ Blind…” emphasizing the lack of response of the bird to the attempts at feeding it; onomatopoeia, as in “long scream of needle” and “shrieking thinly”, where Hughes conveys the high pitch of their cries, and “first-flying, nearly-flying/ Misfit flopped in our yard”, where the repetition of the “fl” sound suggests the floundering and fluttering of the bird. There is no rhyme scheme to the poem, but
the varying length of the lines and the rhythmic pattern emulate the darting movements of the birds.

**Tone and atmosphere.** Much of the poem has a tone of excitement and hurry. The short, broken first five lines reflect the way the swifts dart in and out of sight. The poem has a breathless quality, reinforced by repetitions of "gone" and "here they are". The latter part of the poem is quieter and sadder, when there is mourning for the dead bird. But movement is always accompanied by a feeling of speed and danger.

This is a long poem and you will realize that many lines have not been examined in the above notes. Under examination conditions there is rarely time to comment on all aspects of a poem, so you have to select. From the notes above you could write a reasonable analysis of the poem in essay form. It is important to emphasize that the notes are not an essay. You need to organize them into a coherent analysis and explanation of the poem.

**Commentary**

Ted Hughes begins the poem by describing the time and one aspect of the natural surroundings associated with that time when the birds return:

> "Fifteenth of May. Cherry blossom."

The poet also shows how excited he is to see the returning swifts. This is shown by the use of exclamation marks and the repetition of the word "Look!" Almost immediately the poet goes on to discuss the speed of the swifts. He does this by saying that by the time a step has been taken the swifts are out of sight. This is a sign of the tone of the poem; the most striking feature is that of the way the poet describes the speed with which the swifts fly. The speed of the swifts is also shown by the poet by the way the different stanzas are written. The sentences are fragmented as they use exclamation marks, dashes, commas, and question marks. This gives the poem a sense of pace which is reflected by the way the swifts fly.

The language the poet uses in the first stanza shows how the swifts use power and agility to fly. This is best described in the lines:

> "Power-thrust to left, then to right, then a flicker they
  Tilt into a slide."

The swifts manage to use both power and agility to fly, which is something that man-made machines fail to achieve. A rocket has power but agility is reserved for machines such as gliders.

The poet also uses metaphors of nature to explain how the swifts arrived:

> "They've made it again.
  Which means the globe's still working."

This gives the connotation that the arrival of the swifts signifies that nature will continue to develop as long as they arrive after their winter break.

In the next few stanzas sporting metaphors are used and this helps again to highlight the speed at which the swifts fly. Examples of these are "Speedway goggles", "jockeying", and "Veer on the hard air". These are used because of the speed associated with them - speedway for fast motorbikes, jockeying as
In jockeying for a position in a race, and veering hard as in some other form of motor sport. These all help to give a sense of realism to the reader who may be unfamiliar with the sight of a swift flying.

The poet feels saddened when they have gone. He tries to find something to blame. In this case it is the rats who have destroyed their nests. The poet seems jealous that the swifts have gone. This is shown in the line that says they are “Round luckier houses now”.

This also shows the fondness which the poet has for the birds.

The next stanza best highlights the speed of the swifts. Again dashes are used in the sentence structure, which adds to the sense of speed. The way the poet describes how the swifts are “clipping the doorway” shows that the birds are flying so quickly that there is hardly any margin for error. They try to take short-cuts to reach their destination quicker and this could prove fatal.

The final few stanzas show the youth of the swift and how frail and vulnerable they can be. This is in great contrast to the agility and power with which they are described early in the poem.

The poet describes how in the early days, swifts, like any other birds, find it hard to fly. He uses language which again is in contrast to the language used earlier. Words such as “crawled”, “useless feet”, and “tangling” are in vast contrast with the sure and certain movements such as “erupting” and veering. These also show the power the young swift has to come.

The poet also describes how he once found a swift that had “crashed among the raspberries”. He attempted to care for it in his kitchen but the bird died. The poet describes the death of the swift as “The inevitable balsa death”.

This shows both the benefits and drawbacks of being, as balsa wood is when used for model planes, swift and light through the air but also frail.

The life the swifts lead is best described by “the fine wire”.

This shows that they live on the edge, risking their life by flying so quickly through the air.

It is not always easy to detect patterns or repetition in a poem. One way is to try colour-coding. Using a range of different-coloured pens or pencils, go through a poem marking the same ideas, images, diction and any form of repetition you can find with one colour. For example, you could mark words such as “scream”, indicating sounds, in green. Words indicating movement could be marked with yellow. This will show you the extent of one type of imagery or feature and thus help focus on what the poem is illustrating.

Activity

Read carefully the following poem, Blessing by Imtiaz Dharker, and make your own notes on it. When you have finished your notes compare your ideas with those that follow, which have been written by a student. You could also write out a copy of the poem and try to colour code it.