

**Lesson
24**

Comparing poems

Aims

By the end of this lesson you should understand:

- what features of a poem can be compared
- how the mood and tone of poems can differ
- how to analyse a poem
- how to compare poems on a similar theme
- how to compare modern and older poems

Context

This lesson revisits some of the earlier lessons in the Poetry section of this resource. It also looks more closely at how poets create mood and tone. Finally, it explores an important skill that you will eventually need if you do GCSE English (and which is worth learning in itself) – the ability to compare poems.



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What features can be compared?

Comparing poems is something you will probably be asked to do if you go on to do any exams in English. It is a helpful way of identifying the features of each poem and, in doing so, appreciating the poems more. It works because comparing makes you focus on the various choices that the poet has made in each case.

You will already be familiar with all the features that can be compared, but here they are again, as a list. The list also works simply as a reminder of what to look for in a poem.

- **Subject matter** – what the poem appears to be about.
- **Theme(s)** – in some poems the subject and theme are the same. In others, there may be an underlying meaning. For example, Edwin Brock's poem 'Song of the Battery Hen' (*OHY*, page 42) is *about* chickens, but at a deeper level it explores the themes of individual identity, freedom and human exploitation of animals.
- **Form** and **sound effects** – is it a particular type of poem, such as a sonnet or a ballad? Is it written in a set **metre**? Does it have a **rhyme scheme**? Does the poet use **alliteration** or **assonance**?
- Is it written in a **persona**, like 'Song of the Battery Hen'? Does the poet write as if he or she were another person?
- Does it tell a story, like a ballad? Does it recount a conversation? Does it simply describe one person, place or thing?
- What is the overall **mood** of the poem? Happy, sad, comic, nostalgic, tragic? Overlapping with this, does it have a particular **tone**? For example, ironic, playful, conversational? Mood and tone will depend partly on the language – the poet's word choice.
- What **imagery** does it use, if any? What is its effect?
- Are there any striking details – e.g. appealing to the senses?
- Does anything stand out as a possible **symbol**?
- What is the poem trying to achieve, and how successful is it?

Activity One

Think about how you would apply this list to a poem that you already know and like. Make notes if you find it helpful – perhaps on a copy of the poem.

	
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The table below applies the list of features to one poem. Read the poem and see if you agree with the comments.

'Walking Away', by C. Day Lewis (OHY, page 90)	
Subject matter	A father looks back on seeing his son walk away from him after a game of football. Perhaps the boy is at a new boarding school?
Theme(s)	Parenthood, love and loss, becoming independent: 'How selfhood begins with a walking away'.
Form, sound effects	Each verse has five lines of roughly equal length. 1st, 3rd and 5th lines rhyme – perhaps suggesting a tension between things connected (rhyming) and unconnected.
Persona	There is no obvious persona, and the poem is dedicated to 'Sean', Day Lewis's son. But the poet is recalling how he felt eighteen years earlier.
Does it tell a story?	It tells a fragment of a story: the poet's son plays his first game of football, possibly at a new school, and his father watches him walk away.
Mood and tone	The tone is tender, as if the poet is addressing his young son. The mood is quietly emotional, regretful. The poet is still troubled by his memory of the sense of loss he felt.
Imagery	'like a satellite/ Wrenched from its orbit' 'a half-fledged thing set free/ Into a wilderness' 'eddyng away/ Like a winged seed ...' 'the scorching/ Ordeals which fire ...'
Striking details	'A sunny day with the leaves just turning': the sun contrasts with the sad mood; the leaves show that it is probably September – the start of a new school year.

Symbol	'The touch-lines new-ruled' could symbolise the changing relationship between father and son. The son is now bound by the rules of the school. Also, the father may feel he cannot embarrass his son by hugging him.
How successful?	It paints just enough of the scene for us to imagine it. Its imagery conveys the father's feelings of love and protectiveness towards his son ('a half-fledged thing' – a young bird which must learn to fly alone). It also builds on this memory, as the poet's memory of his son 'eddying away', not going decisively in a straight line, makes him think of human life is full of indecisions ('irresolute clay'). It concludes with a strong lesson about allowing freedom to people we love.

Activity Two	Read 'The Icing Hand', by Tony Harrison (<i>OHY</i> , page 85). Then fill in the table below for this poem. When you fill in 'Persona', think about the poet's perspective. From what point in time is he writing the poem?
Subject matter	
Theme(s)	
Form, sound effects	
Persona	
Does it tell a story?	
Mood and tone	

Imagery	
Striking details	
Symbol	
How successful?	

Comparing poems

Now that you have read C. Day Lewis's poem and Tony Harrison's, and considered their features in some depth, you are ready to compare them. It is easiest – and perhaps most interesting – to compare poems with similar themes, to see how the poets have dealt with them differently. How are the themes in these two poems similar? How are there subtle differences? Both poems are about a father–son relationship, but who is the speaker in each poem?

A good way to compare two poems is to fill out two tables like the ones we have used (or one table for both poems, with the same features listed). Then compare the features you have identified.

A proper comparison – which you are going to write – is in essay form, not a table. Here are some tips for writing it:

- Make sure you know your two poems well and understand them as well as possible – bearing in mind that there may be things that are unclear or open to interpretation.
- Begin with an introductory paragraph looking at the obvious similarities between the two poems and touching on any obvious differences. Try to avoid this paragraph turning into a list of unconnected features. Aim for a logical flow. You will probably deal with the subject matter and themes here.

- Go through the rest of the list of features making comparisons where possible. It might work for you to give one paragraph to each feature. If you do this, try to mention both poems in each paragraph. This is usually better than writing all you have to say about one poem, then doing the same for the other one.
- Always bear in mind what effect the poet achieves (or is trying to achieve). It is not very helpful to point out technical features without saying what their effect is. For example, you could say 'The poet uses alliteration.' But it is better to say 'The alliteration of 'gritty with sandgrains, guides' suggests a certain toughness in the father which the little boy lacks.'
- Use the PEE formula: Make a **P**oint; give an **E**xample (a word or phrase from the text); **E**xplain how it proves your point.

Activity Three	Use these hints to help you write a comparison of 'Walking Away' and 'The Icing Hand'. Aim to write about 500 words.
	

Comparing older and modern poems

The same principles apply to comparing poems from different eras (times), except you need to bear in mind a few other points as well:

- Older poems are always written in a structure of some sort – usually in a set metre, and often with a rhyme scheme. It is acceptable for a modern poet to write in ‘free verse’, without any obvious structure. You can point out the differences, but be aware that a modern poet who uses a set structure has made an active choice to do so.
- Older poems may embody or refer to a particular value system. For example, the Shakespeare sonnet we looked at in our previous lesson (often called ‘Nothing like the sun’) refers to the rather rigid ideas of beauty that existed in Shakespeare’s England.
- Older poems are usually more formal in tone than modern ones.
- Even where subjects seem different, the same themes may exist in older poems and modern ones. Love, hate, ambition, grief, anger – have all existed for a long time!

Activity Four

In Lesson 23 you were asked to think about similarities and differences between ‘Sir Patrick Spence’ and ‘The Highwayman’ by Alfred Noyes (*OHY*, page 176). Make notes or a mind map to compare these poems. Think especially about:

- How much focus on individuals is there in each?
- How much detail is there?
- How far do they stick to the traditional ballad form?
- Which is more romantic, and why?
- Which makes you feel more, and why?



**Self-
assessment
test****Thinking back over this section**

1. Try to list, from memory, all the features to comment on in poems.
2. What should you do rather than just listing technical features in a poem?
3. What is the PEE technique?
4. What are the main general differences between older and modern poems?