

**Write a critical appreciation of the following poem. You may be helped by Ruth Pitter's own comment on the poem: "It was written on purpose to be sung, and I venture to hope someone will try to set it. It should at least be spoken aloud and with great energy."**

### The Swifts

Flying low over the warm roof of an old barn,  
Down in a flask to the water, up and way with a cry,  
And a wild swoop and a swift turn  
And a fever of life under a thundery sky,  
So they go, so they go by. 5

And high and high and high in the diamond light,  
They soar and they shriek in the sunlight when  
    heaven is bare,  
With the pride of life in their strong flight  
And a rapture of love to lift them, to hurtle them 10  
    there,  
High and high in the diamond air.

And away with the summer, away like the spirit of glee  
Flashing and calling, and strong on the wing,  
    and wild in their play, 15  
With a high cry to the high sea,  
And a heart for the south, a heart for the diamond  
    Day,  
So they go over, so go away.

### Ruth Pitter

Just as you have done with the unseen prose, when responding to poetry you should aim to identify techniques the poet uses and write why and how you think these techniques are effective. In this question you are told that the poem's **aural qualities** are very important, a feature, in fact, since the poet wants it to be set to music. It is therefore the **cadence** and shape of lines, the **sounds of words** and particular sonorous techniques that merit close attention such as **alliteration, onomatopoeia, assonance, rhyme, rhythm**. Look for **mimesis**, when the aural quality of words, phrase or lines mimes the poet's intended meaning.

I have set out below one or two features of the poem's techniques together with analytical comments of why such techniques are effective. It is by no means an exhaustive list of comments, just a few examples of the type of analysis that is credited. (A line by line analysis can be a little limiting, but you should certainly try to be as rigorous as possible.)

Line 1: Longer vowel sounds (assonance) suggest the swifts' graceful soaring through the sky. The line is also slow, rhythmically, and is therefore mimetic. This line contrasts sharply with:

- Line 2: which contains much shorter vowel sounds and more prepositions. The downward and upward movement is also suggested by the shape of the line, which dips in the middle to mime the birds' movement. The rhythm is jaunty and quick and this too mimes the swifts' flitting movement. So, in two lines, the poet has neatly shown, through aural and sonorous qualities, the two contrasting modes of flight that characterise her subjects.
- Lines 3, 4: Again, the balance in line 3, together with the alliterative "sw" sound mimes the speed and grace of movement. She also uses monosyllabic words in this line to further this effect. The repetition of "and", a connective, is a device she uses throughout to suggest the seamless transition from one type of flight to another. "Fever of life" is an interesting metaphor, since it has connotations with spring/summer, but also encapsulates the feeling of almost hysteria which characterises the unpredictability and mad "flitting" of the birds in flight. "Thundery sky" also helps to convey scale as the swifts are busy subjects set against a threatening background.
- Line 5: Repetition, like a mini refrain at the end of this and the last stanza. Suggests the scale of the migration.
- Line 6: Repetition of "and high". "H" sounds (aspirates) give this stanza a breathy quality. The cadence of the line is mimetic as it climbs incessantly. The "diamond light" becomes an extended metaphor, effectively portraying the brilliance of the refracted light from bright summer sunshine. The movement is also sharp and angular.
- Line 7, 8: The sibilance of "soar" and "sunlight" adds to the onomatopoeic "shriek" and mimes the sound the birds make. Again, the sparse backdrop of the sky is contrasted with the business of the dramatic spectacle that is the journey across it.
- Line 9: The poet projects a range of deep and base human emotions onto the birds, a type of personification that comes from both within and without. These emotions are perhaps the most personal expression from the poet of the feelings such strength and resolve evoke. They are monosyllabic and give the line a firmness and security which binds this stanza together. Structurally, it is the fulcrum, or centre point, of both the stanza and of the whole poem.
- Line 10: The "rapture of love" is a clear indication of the awe and wonder the poet feels and she projects these onto the birds to lift them further. The tone of this, and indeed the whole stanza is inspiring and uplifting – hardly surprising considering what she is describing. "Hurtle" is an interesting verb as it suggests speed but also that somehow these birds are protected by the love of which she spoke. It is also an aspirate which furthers the idea of "life-breath."
- Line 13 → The jauntness of rhythm and the succession of connectives continues the theme of wild, ecstatic freedom. This idea is developed through the stanza through repetition and monosyllabic movement ("With a high cry to the high sea") which maintains the momentum. The swifts' "go away" in a subtle variation of the last line in the first stanza, and somehow, the transience of the experience, related to the reader through the use of a range of techniques which appeal to the senses, is part of the intrinsic appeal of these birds. This transience (the line literally means "going across") tempers any sense of loss of either the poet or the reader.