

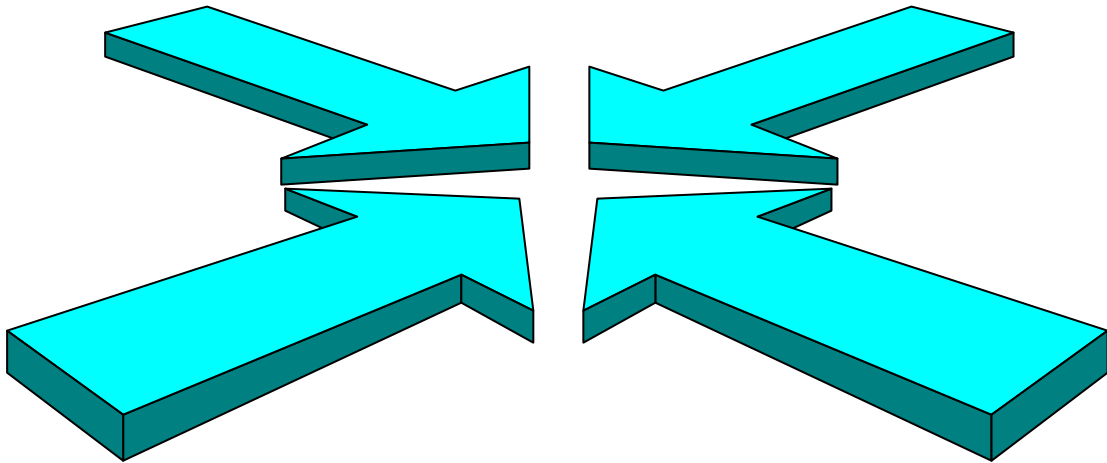


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# POEMS FROM OTHER CULTURES AND TRADITIONS

LANGUAGE

TRADITION



RACE

LOCATION

## **A STUDENT REVISION GUIDE**

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Spring 2000



# INTRODUCTION

The section of your NEAB English GCSE on "Poems From Other Cultures and Traditions" is an important part of your examination. You will only have about thirty minutes to answer on this section, so it is vital that you are fully in control of your material and aware of what the examiners are looking for. On the front cover there are four keywords which you should bear in mind when dealing with these poems:



**Language:** What do the poets have to say about their language? How do they show you that it is a part of their culture?



**Tradition:** What makes the writer's culture special? How does he/she express pride in his/her culture?



**Race:** Is the writer from a different ethnic background? How does this influence his/her approach to the question which he/she is addressing?



**Location:** Some of the writers are writing about different places. How does the sense of place inform the sense of a poem being from another culture?



**IMPORTANT!** You must remember that this is part of your English GCSE, so the examiners are looking for good English and good ideas as well as the ability to write good criticism.



# THE POEMS

In this section I have given brief summaries of what each poem is about and a few key ideas for you to consider. *These are to help you, but they cannot replace careful reading, re-reading and annotation of the poems.*

## From Search for My Tongue

This poem deals with the conflict which the poet feels exists between her "mother" (original) language and the language she has adopted in a new country. She feels that her original language will "rot" and that she will have to "spit it out". However, as she sleeps her mother tongue comes back to her: she uses the metaphor of the language being like a plant, which at the end of the poem "blossoms out of my mouth".



## KEY POINTS

- ✓ Notice the structure of the poem: the writer's original language seems to blossom in the middle, just as she says it blossoms from her mouth. Notice also the flowery nature of the way her language is written, which fits perfectly with her metaphor.
- ✓ Think about the pride she is expressing in her language and her culture – there is a conflict between her language and that of a new culture, but even though the new language tries to choke her old one her original language is strong and beautiful enough to keep its place, even though she may have thought she had rid herself of it. Again, the flower metaphor expresses the beauty of her language.
- ✓ Consider the way in which the writer views her new culture: it is oppressive, "foreign", trying to make her beautiful mother tongue "rot". Ultimately however her mother tongue triumphs. The writer is telling us that our original culture cannot be killed, it remains within us even if it only comes out in dreams.



## **From Unrelated Incidents**

*This poem has a comic tone. It is written phonetically in a Scottish accent. The poem begins with a narrative voice reading the news. The main thrust of the poem is that people will not believe the truth if it is not read out to them in a "BBC accent", i.e. Standard English. The poet is not only mocking the insistence on Standard English but also attacking his own people for not having enough pride in their own culture.*



### **KEY POINTS**

- ✓ *Think about what the writer is saying about language: do you think he believes that the way you talk, spell and punctuate matters? If he doesn't then why not, what point is he making about language and "trooth"?*
- ✓ *Who is the poem directly addressed to and who might the other audiences for the poem be?*
- ✓ *Look at the structure of the poem. Is the narrow way it is laid out commenting on the way the poet feels that his language is being constricted?*



## Half caste

In this poem John Agard is satirising the stupidity and offensiveness of the term “half-caste”. The poem is aggressive in tone, directly addressing the reader, making you responsible for thinking about why you might use the term. The poet uses a variety of clever techniques to show the absurdity of the term.



### KEY POINTS

- ✓ Notice the language used by the poet: his use of phonetic spelling and West Indian slang shows his pride in his language and his refusal to apologise for or tone down his culture.
- ✓ Look carefully at the wordplay – the jokes on “half a leg” and so on. You should comment on the way the poet uses humour to point out the absurdity of certain attitudes.
- ✓ The skill of the poet is a statement in itself: the use of language and imagery proves that he is not the half a man which the term “half caste” implies.



## Blessing

This is a poem which is more about the events within a particular culture than contrasting that culture with another. It is a deceptively simple poem about how water comes to mean everything to the dwellers of an Indian shanty town and what happens when they get an unexpected supply of water – the “Blessing” of the title. It is a poem which articulates suffering through drought but also the hope which a small simple gift can bring.



### KEY POINTS

- ✓ Notice the profusion of religious imagery in the poem: the “kindly god”, “congregation”, “blessing”. You should comment on the way that God has become physical to these people, represented through water. Water has become the focus of their lives.
- ✓ The writer conveys the crowded nature of the shanty town. Notice words like “roar” and “frantic” which give us a sense of the bustle of the culture.
- ✓ Notice the structure of the poem, beginning with dryness and despair, someone suffering who can only “imagine” water. By the end of the poem you have the children playing, “polished to perfection”. The writer is proud of his culture and is showing us that the capacity for joy is there if the people are given what they need.



## Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan

This is another poem which deals with living in an alien culture. The narrator does not know what Pakistan is like: she can only imagine from old photographs and the traditional clothes which her aunts send her. The writer gives us the sense that she feels isolated, torn between two cultures, half-English”, “of no fixed nationality”.



### KEY POINTS

- ✓ What do the clothes symbolise? The narrator longs for “denim and corduroy” and feels that the clothes on her are like “fire”, yet she admires them. She is expressing a pride in her heritage and yet feels that she cannot live that heritage.
- ✓ Note the irony in the poem – the aunts who send her such lovely clothes only want “cardigans from Marks and Spencers”, the schoolfriend asks to see her “weekend clothes”. The mother’s jewellery which was stolen from the car could symbolise the difficulties of imposing one culture on another.
- ✓ There is a wistful tone to the poem. The narrator tries to see her family in the mirrors on the clothes. She wants to know about her culture but throughout the poem there is a sense that that culture is far away and she can only observe it from a distance, not be a part of it.



## OGUN

This is an African poem which deals with the way in which someone can defend his culture when it is under attack. The poet's uncle is a skilled carpenter, but he is losing work as people prefer cheap plastic and rubber goods brought from abroad. His traditional way of life is under threat, so he fashions an ancient idol from a special native wood. He invests this idol with all the pride of his culture and the hatred he has of the culture which is taking over his.



### KEY POINTS

- ✓ Look at the way the writer describes the uncle and his work. Notice the pride in the language: smoothing, shone, wood caught fire. We are presented with a picture of a man who has something worth preserving. Is this a wider metaphor for traditional African culture?
- ✓ Notice how the imported goods are ugly, almost demonic: spine curving, bird bones, thin beds. The writer is showing us that just because people turn to a particular culture that does not necessarily mean that it is better.
- ✓ There is a huge amount of anger in the description of the idol: all the uncle's pain has gone into it. There is an implied threat: if the culture continues to be oppressed it will gather its forces in secret and rise up like the ancient thunder god or Ogun of the title.





## From Passengers

This is a poem by a writer from New Zealand. She is imagining what Charlotte O'Neill, a servant girl who emigrated from England in the nineteenth century, might be saying to her employers as she leaves. The poem is a metaphor for a wider issue: the poet is expressing the pride which former British colonies feel in establishing their own culture.



### KEY POINTS

- ✓ The rhythm of the poem is very important: it has a singsong quality which both expresses the freedom the girl feels as well as a certain amount of insolence in "cheeking" her employers.
- ✓ Notice the way things Charlotte had to do are placed in groups of three, and then the final group of three is the things she will do now, so the poem is going from the past to the present, grouping them in the same way to emphasise the contrast.
- ✓ The poem is mocking the traditional "British" view of things, particularly in lines 13 & 14 which are a paraphrase of a famous English hymn which claimed that God had ordered who was to be rich and who poor.



## An Old Woman

This is another poem which has a very strong sense of place. The poet does not want to be bothered by the old woman, but her remark blasts him from his complacency and makes him see how much she is suffering. It is a poem which asks us to consider everyone in the world and not be too bound up in our own self-importance.



### KEY POINTS

- ✓ The poem is divided into two very definite halves, pivoting around the only words from the old woman which are directly reported. The placing of the words in speech marks, instead of using reported speech at the start, shows their impact.
- ✓ Notice the poet's impatience and self-importance at the start of the poem – "You know how old women are". This can be contrasted with the end of the poem, where the woman's words have shown how unimportant the poet is, "so much small change/in her hand".
- ✓ The use of "you" puts the reader directly at the heart of the poem: the poet is asking you to consider if these are your attitudes.
- ✓ Notice the almost biblical imagery of "...the temples crack./And the sky falls." The suffering of the old woman becomes the suffering of the whole world.



## Hurricane Hits England

This poem is about the hurricanes which hit England in the late 1980s. It is implied that the poet did not feel comfortable in the alien culture of England until something Caribbean came to England, making her realise that everywhere is the same: "...the earth is the earth is the earth." It is a poem which extols the virtues of combining cultures, showing that one should keep one's cultural identity in foreign lands.



### KEY POINTS

- ✓ The author uses the language of her culture to describe the hurricane, comparing it to ancient African gods. She shows that she has not rejected her culture and is still capable of seeing things in terms of her native culture.
- ✓ The poet's heart is "unchained" by the hurricane which breaks "...the frozen lake in me." There is a clear implication that she has felt trapped in England and by riding the hurricane (a global event, of course) she finds her freedom.
- ✓ The final lines of the poem are a plea for multiculturalism and a pride in one's own culture. The poet has realised that she can only be free and happy in England if she stops yearning for her own culture and accepts that that culture is a part of her: she brought it to England with her just as the hurricane has brought a feeling of the Caribbean to England.



## Nothing's Changed

In this South African poem the poet returns to his home area after the end of apartheid. He finds that the same divide between black and white still exists, and the poem is an articulation of his anger, leaving the poet at the end wishing for a bomb to take revenge on the white people who are still excluding the black Africans from society.

- ✓ Notice how things have changed: the noticeboard saying the name of the district has gone, no sign says “whites only” at the inn. The writer is telling us that nothing has changed on a deeper level – he still can’t go into the inn even though there is no law saying he can’t.
- ✓ In the second verse it seems that the poet has suffered in this area before. He knows the area with his body, talking of the “labouring of my lungs” and the “hot, white, inwards turning/anger of my eyes”. Has he been teargassed here maybe, or had to do some work which left him damaged?
- ✓ The narration changes in the penultimate verse – it becomes like a white person talking, telling him to go away and eat down the road and “spit a little on the floor/it’s in the bone.” There is an obvious contrast with the clean beauty of the “whites only inn”. The bitterness the writer feels is very clear.



*It is vital that you remember to comment on at least two and preferably three or more poems in your exam answer. To help you I have made suggested groupings below under various themes.*

**CELEBRATING CULTURE**

Search for My Tongue  
Half-caste  
Blessing  
Charlotte O'Neill's Song  
Hurricane Hits England

**PRIDE IN RACE**

Half-caste  
Hurricane Hits England  
Ogun

**PRIDE IN LANGUAGE**

Search for my tongue  
Unrelated Incidents  
Half-caste

**FIGHTING OTHER CULTURES**

Search for My Tongue  
Unrelated Incidents  
Ogun  
Charlotte O'Neill's Song  
Nothing's Changed

**SENSE OF PLACE**

Blessing  
Presents from My Aunts  
Ogun  
An Old Woman  
Hurricane Hits England  
Nothing's Changed

**PRIDE IN YOUR CULTURE**

Search for My Tongue  
Unrelated Incidents  
Half-caste  
Presents from my Aunts  
Ogun  
Charlotte O'Neill's Song  
Hurricane Hits England