



The
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In Praise of Air

I write in praise of air. I was six or five
when a conjurer opened my knotted fist
and I held in my palm the whole of the sky.
I've carried it with me ever since.

Let air be a major god, its being
and touch, its breast-milk always tilted
to the lips. Both dragonfly and Boeing
dangle in its see-through nothingness...

Among the jumbled bric-a-brac I keep
a padlocked treasure-chest of empty space,
and on days when thoughts are fuddled with smog
or civilization crosses the street

with a white handkerchief over its mouth
and cars blow kisses to our lips from theirs.
I turn the key, throw back the lid, breathe deep.
My first word, everyone's first word, was air.

Simon Armitage



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Support Materials: The Sounds of Poetry

Skills: The Sounds of Poetry

In your first year of university study, you'll encounter quite a lot of poetry, including poetry written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Poetry can seem intimidating, particularly from a period so remote in time from our own. A good way to equip yourself for the kind of close reading of poetry that we'll be doing in lectures and seminars is to listen to the poetry that you're probably encountering all the time, without necessarily realising that it counts as 'poetry' because it's something that you are choosing to listen to, rather than being told to by a teacher/exam curriculum.

Song lyrics, rap, musicals like *Hamilton*, even adverts for Nationwide¹: the techniques of rhyme and rhythm that they all use are part and parcel of the pleasure we take from them. So, when you listen, keep your ears open for the different effects they employ. If you've got younger siblings, or once knew *The Gruffalo* by heart, that's useful too: children's books are often told in verse, the way the story is told being integral to its appeal.

You could also try listening to some spoken word performance, such as the work of George the Poet (www.georgethepoet.com). His podcast is a great example of how poetry can be used as a narrative form, telling stories.



On the next page is a list of some of the common poetic devices that you'll encounter in poetry through the ages – then and now. See how many you can spot when listening to the 'poetry of the everyday', e.g. song lyrics, rap, spoken word performance. How do these poetic effects add to the impact or enjoyment of the piece?

¹ <https://youtu.be/vfzsSbIIQU4>. Other mortgage providers are, of course, available.

Further reading

John Lennard, *The Poetry Handbook*, 2nd edn (Oxford University Press, 2006).

Rhyming effects

Masculine rhyme: when the rhyme falls on a final stressed syllable (e.g. bold/hold; impressed/undressed).

Feminine rhyme: the opposite, where the final, rhyming syllable isn't stressed (e.g. ending/bending). Feminine rhymes are almost always **double rhymes**, i.e. where two syllables rhyme (as here). A rhyme involving three syllables is a **triple rhyme** (e.g. comparison/garrison).

Imperfect rhyme: when the rhyme is similar, rather than exact (e.g. seeds/sides); also known as **slant rhyme, partial rhyme, approximate rhyme, pararhyme**.

Forced rhyme: when the usual pronunciation of a word gets altered in order to make the rhyme (e.g. 'Farewell, farewell, you old rhinoceros, / I'll stare at something less preproceros' [i.e. preposterous], Ogden Nash).

What's the effect of these different types of rhyme? How do they add to the experience of reading (or hearing) the poem?

Think too about the frequency with which rhymes come, whether they're close together or further apart. What effect does that have?

Rhythmic effects

Some questions to think about:

- *Is the beat strong and repetitive?*
- *Or is it more variable and subtle?*
- *Is the rhythm altering the way words are spoken, wrenching them away from how we'd usually say them? If so, what's the effect of that? (This can, for example, be comic.)*
- *How are rhyme and rhythm working together?*

Other forms of sonic patterning

Alliteration: repetition of the same sound in a sequence of nearby words, usually at the start of words, but not always (e.g. 'a great big, grey-blue humpback whale', Julia Donaldson, *The Snail and the Whale*)
Assonance: repetition of vowel sounds in nearby words (e.g. 'great big, grey-blue')

Anaphora: repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of a series of sentences, clauses, lines of poetry, or stanzas

As with rhyme and rhythm, think about the effect that these poetic devices have on what you're hearing. I like to think of these obvious forms of repetition operating a bit like a highlighter pen, drawing your attention to something, but sometimes the effect is purely aesthetic.

Wordplay

Pun: a play on words which sound the same but mean something different (e.g. 'And no, don't change the subject/ Cuz you're my favourite subject./ My sweet, submissive subject', Lin-Manuel Miranda, *Hamilton*)

Polyptoton: words derived from the root are repeated, but in a different form (e.g. 'with eager feeding food doth choke the feeder', Shakespeare, *Richard II*)