

ENGLISH HOME LANGUAGE

Poems with
notes and activities

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Compiler's introduction

Poetry is present everywhere in our lives: pop songs (especially rap) and advertising jingles are two immediate examples. These use verbal play or language to mark themselves as different from ordinary uses of language like conversation and journalism (although these can include verbal-play). The verbal-play and skilful rhyming in the more interesting examples of rap or hip-hop mean poetry is really central in contemporary culture. Its popularity means that people do like and appreciate poetry, and hip-hop thus extends the tradition of poetry found in all cultures since the first song was sung.

This anthology approaches poetry both by acknowledging its heritage and history and by recognising it in the here and now. As such, the poems have been arranged in chronological order but can be studied in any order. If we recognise poetry in its contemporary forms, it should not be difficult to open up more “traditional” forms of poetry. The verbal play and the writer’s heightened self-awareness of her medium (language) are found in both older forms of poetry and in much of rap or other forms of contemporary spoken-word poetry.

This anthology includes as much variety as space would allow. In historical terms, the poetry stretches from work published as recently as 2006 (Gabeba Baderoon) all the way back to a poem published in 1557 (Thomas Wyatt). Some poems appear in this anthology for the first time (Dawn Garisch, Jacques Rousseau). There is also a variety of poetic forms: from the well-known Shakespearean sonnet to the free verse favoured by most contemporary writers. There is tightly-structured poetry from before the twentieth century, to the more contemporary forms such as the performance poetry of Linton Kwesi Johnson and Lebogang Mashile, as well as the rap of Prophets of da City. There are poems with the elegiac or sad tones typical of the elegy, and poems with the hilarious comedy of the limerick. There are some long poems and some short ones, the shortest one being Ezra Pound’s haiku “In a station of the metro”. The table on page xx provides a brief summary of the different forms of poetry that are included in this anthology.

The poems also come from a variety of places: 20 out of 60 poems are from South Africa, while 10 are from other African countries (for example, Malawi, Nigeria and Angola). There are poems by writers with roots in Asia (Malaysia, Korea and India), and poems by writers from the Caribbean (Grenada, Jamaica and St Lucia). Given the historical origins and development of poetry in English, the presence of poets from the United Kingdom and United States hardly needs mentioning. Many of the poets, especially modern ones, also have multiple geographical or cultural backgrounds, adding to the global reach and nature of this anthology: Cathy Song has Korean and Hawaiian roots, while Linton Kwesi Johnson was born in Jamaica but grew up in England. Derek Walcott grew up

Getting started: a framework

Introduction

People generally complain that poetry is difficult. A lot of poetry is difficult, but if we understand some basic things about poetry, then it will open up and let us in. What follows is a tutorial for learners – a suggested approach to understanding how a poem might work. I should stress “basic” and “suggested”. It is basic because it only touches on some aspects of the poem used in this tutorial, Adrienne Rich’s ‘Aunt Jennifer’s tigers’. It is a suggested approach because there is no particular right way to approach poetry.

I offer this model because it more easily allows us to understand poetry as a specialised use of language. But do not see this specialised use of language as an impossible obstacle. As the tutorial will show, it is not that difficult to overcome that obstacle.

Furthermore, studying poetry is not only about identifying metaphors and symbols or other formal aspects of poetry. It is not about listing formal aspects simply for the sake of it. Rather, formal aspects such as metaphor or rhyme become interesting because they tell us more about the poem. They add to the poem.

An easy way to approach poetry, then, is to ask two different questions of a poem:

1. What does it say? (Content)
2. How does it say it? (Form)

What?

The first question can also be rephrased as “What is it about?”. This is at the level of comprehension and is not difficult to answer. Sometimes, indeed, the answer/s are obvious. The first answer to this kind of question is normally very general: love, death, suffering, etc.

As an example, look at Adrienne Rich’s ‘Aunt Jennifer’s tigers’ (page 40 in this book). What is the poem about or what does it say? The obvious answer is: “It is about Aunt Jennifer’s tigers” (as the title says).

Now, more specifically, what about these tigers? What do we know about these tigers? They “prance across a screen”. What does that mean? It could be a television screen. (Look up other meanings of “screen” in a dictionary and see whether you can apply them to the poem.) Are these tigers real?

What information does the poem give us to help us decide if these tigers are real or not? Can you put “wool”, “ivory needle” and “screen” together? What does this tell us about the tigers?

Housing targets (1998)

Past tense

Somewhere in our past we believed in the future

We used to believe in the future; not any more. Lost hope?

5 that a better world would discover foundation under our feet, and we would be forever singing, in its kitchen.

Hope for 'better world' is a hope for something real and ordinary. i.e. not a soundbite, but has real meaning for ordinary people.

10 Bricks pile up in a field. Whether they will be enough

image of uselessness

no one knows How they fit together is anyone's guess

Sense that no one seems to care?

Men with darkening skins scribbled¹ on by weather
15 wait for their instructions.

Who? Politicians? Business executives? Celebrities?

From time to time limousines miraculously appear: there is always a somebody in a suit willing to smile
20 and shake their hands

No connection with reality, with ordinary people?

who lays the first stone.

Ceremony. But who benefits?

25 Then the camera lights and racing engines turn around, shrink back from where they came.

Just there to be seen? To be photographed? To look as if they care?

Those left behind stare at their own hands afterwards, puzzled at precisely what
30 has been transacted,³ why they are still being offered bonds

Mortgage bonds or bonds that tie-as in slavery?

squint⁴ between gnarled⁵ fingers
35 pace out the hopeful distances:
- there will be a flower bowl
- my bed is going here.

Still with hope, with dreams...

As for now the doorknobs have no doors.

Aren't doors more important? Doorknobs - finishing touch? Strange image - why?

40 Their windows peer out at no sky.

Notes to Housing Targets

Form: Free verse; no rhyme

NOTE: Sense of *futility/ uselessness/ hopelessness/ helplessness* almost throughout the whole poem. Even opening lines: 'Somewhere in our *past/* we *believed* in the future' (In the past we had hope, now...?)

Images of futility etc.:

- bricks pile up in a field – also a sense of emptiness, and of waste
- men waiting for instructions – they are there and ready, but not doing anything
- brief/ short visits by 'somebody'. Their involvement is ceremonial only (laying the first stone) or for publicity (cameras) but once they have left, we are back with the helplessness and the waiting.
- people stare at their hands, unsure of what happened
- 'the doorknobs/ have no doors' – strange image, but still sense of futility
→ What use is a doorknob without a door? Better to have a door without doorknob. Dreamlike, surreal: In my mind I see a doorknob floating in the air, without a door. Surely an image of uselessness. Absurd

Other senses of futility etc.: 'no one knows', 'anyone's guess' → sense that no one cares. Thus, another lack or emptiness. Creates sense of helplessness. Sense that no one cares for the people who hope for a house, unless a 'somebody' to be photographed; to be seen to be doing something.

Linton Kwesi Johnson (1952–, Jamaica/UK)

LKJ was born in Jamaica but moved to England as a child. He is known primarily as a dub-poet – his poetry is performed to the accompaniment of reggae. As such, his poetry is heavily influenced by the rhythms of reggae. While he has published books of poetry, his poetry is mainly distributed as reggae albums. His work focuses especially on the lives of black Britons of Caribbean descent and thus he uses the colloquial forms of Caribbean English.

Introduction

“Reggae sounds” can be called an art-theoretical poem. It is a poem about poetry and reggae and the art form that the poem uses. In short, “Reggae sounds” uses the reggae beat to drive it.

“Reggae sounds” is a form of dub poetry where the poem relies on the rhythm of reggae despite not being backed by a musical instrument. The rhythm is achieved through echoing and reverberation. The heavy influence of the Jamaican dialect evident in the poem enhances the sound experience of the poem.

Before reading (discussion)

► How important is music to you? Why is it so important? What is your understanding of reggae? Where did reggae originate from and why? If you have access to the internet, try to listen to a reading of this poem on YouTube by the poet himself.

After reading: What is it about? (written work)

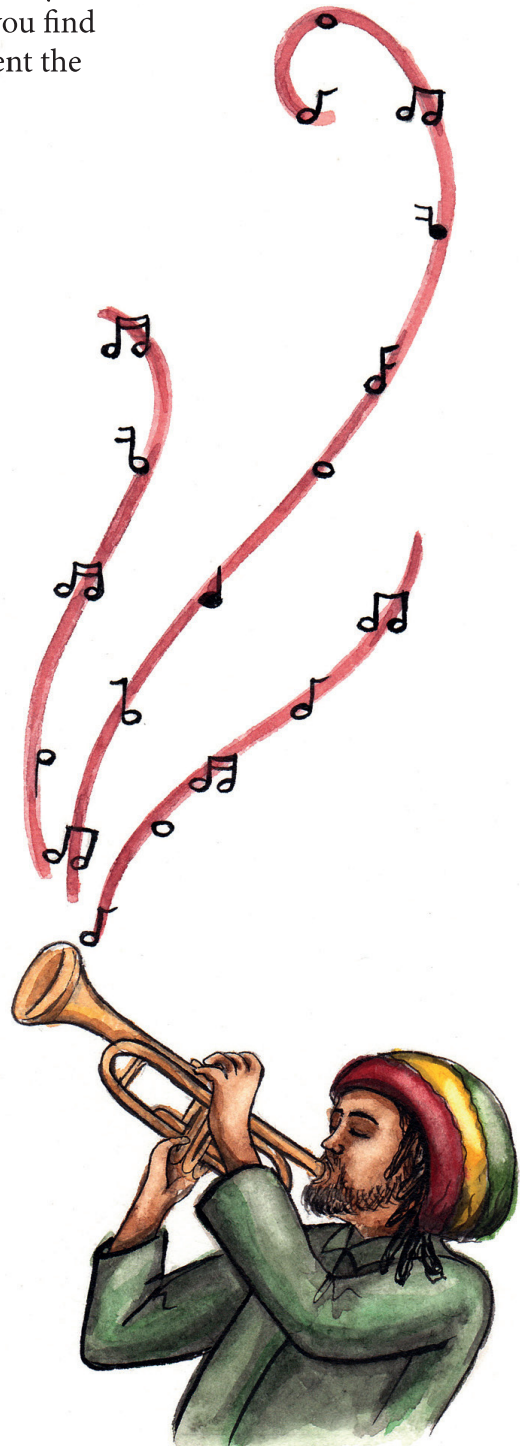
1. Name the four instruments that, according to the speaker, make up a basic reggae band. (4)
2. Refer to lines 4–5: “Bass history is a moving/is a hurting black story”. What is the speaker suggesting about this history of music (art) and about history in general? (3)
3. Quote a word from elsewhere in the poem which shows how the suggestion referred to in question 2 is extended in this poem. (1)
4. Discuss the effectiveness of the poet’s style. Do you think it allows for wider appeal? Justify your response. (2)

Extension activity

Read the poem aloud and see if you can emulate the beats and rhythms of a reggae song. Write a poem that protests against an issue you find pertinent to your lives using a reggae rhythm to drive it. Present the poem in a poetry reading to the rest of the class.

Reggae sounds (1975)

- Shock-black bubble-doun-beat bouncing
 rock-wise tumble-doun soun music
 foot-drop find drum blood story
 bass history is a moving
 5 is a hurting black story
- Thunda from a bass drum sounding
 lightning from a trumpet and a organ
 bass and rhythm and trumpet double-up
 team-up with drums for a deep doun searching
- 10 Rhythm of a tropical electrical storm
 (cooled down to the place of the struggle)
 flame-rhythm of historically yearning
 flame-rhythm of the time of turning
 measuring the time for bombs and for burning
- 15 Slow drop. make stop. move forward.
 dig down to the root of the pain
 shape it into violence for the people
 they will know what to do they will do it
- Shock-black bubble-doun-beat bouncing
 20 rock-wise tumble-doun soun music
 foot-drop find drum blood story
 bass history is a moving
 is a hurting black story



Gabeba Baderoon (1969–, South Africa/USA)

Gabeba Baderoon was born in Port Elizabeth, grew up in Cape Town and now lives in the United States of America. She holds a doctorate in English Studies from the University of Cape Town. Her first book of poetry, *The Dream in the Next Body* (2005), won the Daimler Chrysler Prize in South Africa. She has published two books of poetry subsequently, *The Museum of Ordinary Life* (2005) and *A Hundred Silences* (2006). A selection of her poetry has been translated into Swedish and published as *The Silence Before Speaking* (2009). She is also an academic scholar and has written on media portrayals of slavery and Islam in South Africa.

Introduction

“Give” describes the routine of a father going fishing. While he waits patiently to “sometimes” land a fish, more often he returns home with “nothing”. The speaker wonders at the patience and solitude of one who, faced with something vast, stands and waits until the moment is right for action.

The poem makes use of an extended metaphor of fishing. It compares the fishermen’s actions in front of a vast ocean to that of an individual faced with a system that is bigger than himself.

Before reading (discussion)

► What makes fishermen stand and wait for hours in an attempt to catch a fish? What sort of personality traits do you think are needed in order to be a fisherman?

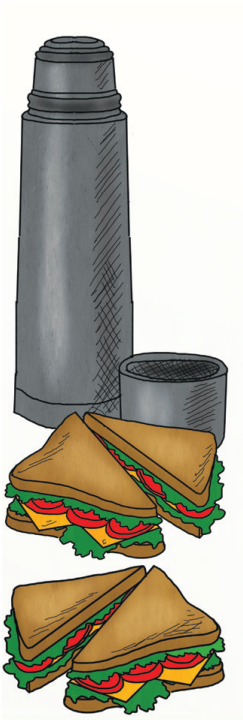
After reading: What is it about? (written work)

1. What time of day and when in the week do the father and ambulance driver go fishing? (2)
2. What is your understanding of the lines “but sometimes the leather cups holding the ends of their fishing rods strained”? (2)
3. How does the image in the third stanza enhance the sense of the angler’s isolation? (4)
4. Comment on the effectiveness of the angling metaphor in the last stanza. (2)

Essay

In an essay of approximately 250–300 words, critically discuss how the imagery in the poem contributes to the theme and content. (10)

Notice the figurative meaning of the title which refers to the slack on a fishing line. The choice of title reflects a sense of having time and memories “to give”.



Give (2006)

Before dawn, low voices briefly loud,
my father and his friend the ambulance driver,
his days off always in the middle of the week,
drive away from the house

5 with thick sandwiches and a flask of tea
and my father’s green and white fishing rod
whipping the wind behind the ’76 Corolla.

Camping by the sea,
we’d see him take his rod further down the beach,

10 walk waist-deep into the water, plant
himself with legs apart in the breakers,
reach back, cast the line
baited with chokka,¹ and pull,
giving then tightening the line, nudging
15 its weighted stream of gut to the fish.

But in this place on the West Coast
they never disclosed,²
they stand unwatched, out of reach
of each other’s lines, at their backs
20 a fire on the beach not stemming³
the dark but deepening it.

Often it would come to nothing,
their planting and pulling,
but sometimes the leather cups holding
25 the ends of their fishing rods strained
as they bent back against the high howl
of the reels being run to the limit
and holding.
Bowing forward and giving

1 **chokka** – squid used for bait

2 **disclosed** – revealed

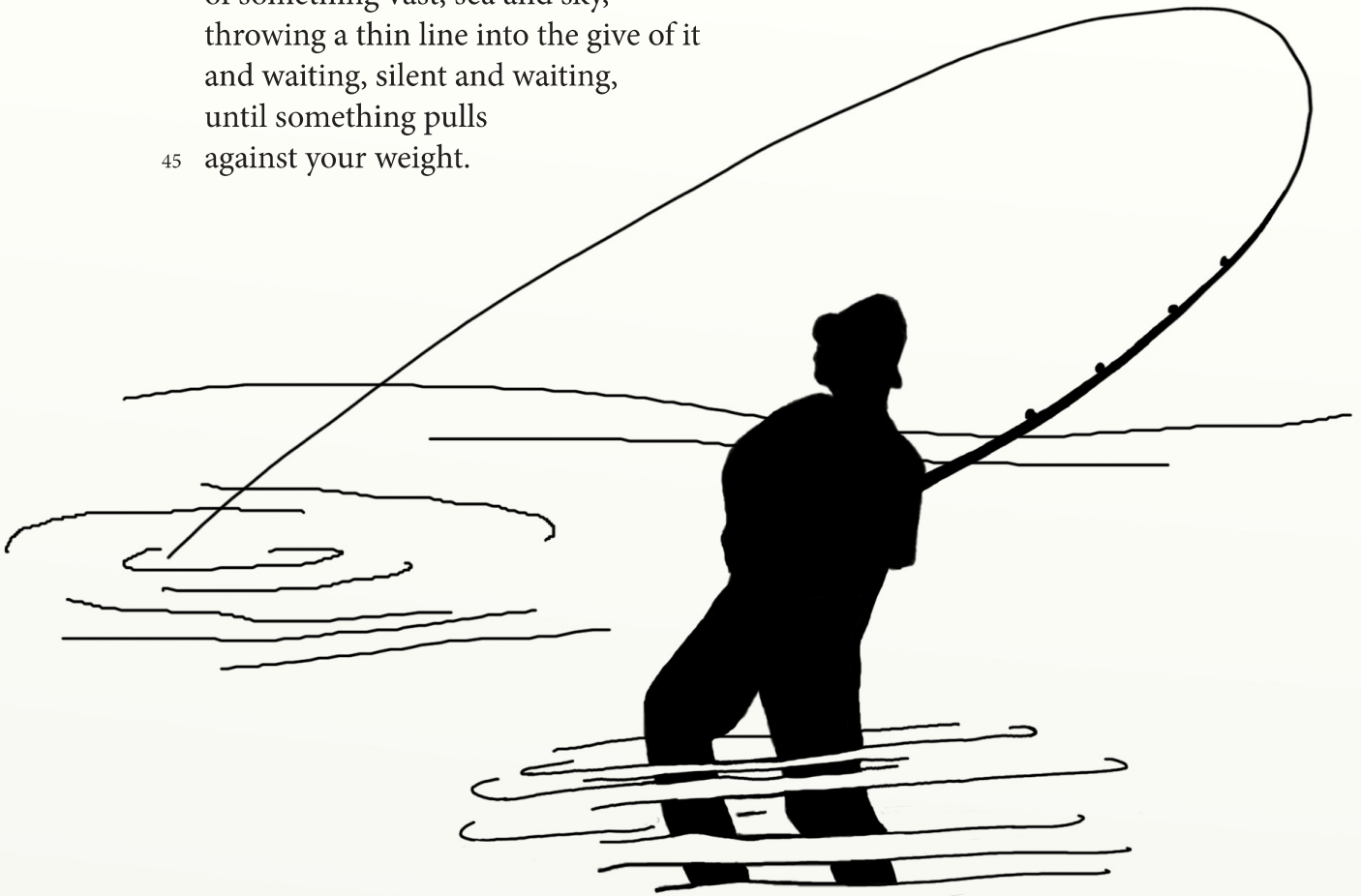
3 **stemming** – stopping or restricting

30 and leaning back and pulling,
their bodies make a slow dance nobody sees.

And at home the scraping of scales
from galjoen and yellowtail
and slitting the silver slick of skin
35 to make thick steaks for supper,
setting aside the keite⁴ for breakfast,
the head for soup and the gills and fat for the cats
while they tell us how they landed them.

I wonder about the empty days, more frequent,
40 the solitary standing in the dark at the edge
of something vast, sea and sky,
throwing a thin line into the give of it
and waiting, silent and waiting,
until something pulls
45 against your weight.

← The alliteration of the “s” sounds in this line imitate the slicing and cutting of the fish.



⁴ **keite** – (from Afrikaans “kuite”) long sacks of eggs inside fish (fish roe) and eaten as a delicacy

Enrichment

They flee from me (p. 2)

How? (class discussion)

By now we know that the poem is about the speaker being forsaken by lovers (“they”) and how he feels about this pattern of events. Now look at the poem more closely.

1. What is the power relationship between the speaker and “they” in the first stanza? That is, who has power over whom? Look at the main images: “naked foot”, “take bread at my hand”.
Elsewhere in the poem, can you find an image or images that turn this power relationship upside down?
2. This poem can be described as a **lyric**. What reason could there be for Wyatt’s use of **rhyme royal**?

Sonnet 130 (1609) (p. 4)

How? (class discussion)

Read the note on the **sonnet** form below. Now think again about question 3 above. As a class, discuss the connection between the tradition of love in the sonnet in general and Shakespeare’s approach to it.

The **Shakespearean, Elizabethan or English sonnet** has its roots in the Italian sonnet (“sonnet” is from the Italian word for “song”). English poets before Shakespeare made the Italian sonnet popular in England. Sonnets were typically about the poet or speaker’s love for someone. In most cases, this love was expressed in extraordinary terms; lovers were compared to goddesses, their breath was likened to musk, and so on. Even so, these early English sonneteers helped change the form of the sonnet until it eventually found shape as the Shakespearean sonnet.

The Shakespearean sonnet, like its Italian forebear, is highly structured – it uses a specific rhyme scheme and a specific metre or rhythm – and the skill of the poet rests in how well she or he can use this structure without it sounding artificial.

The rhyme scheme is made up of three quatrains (four lines) rhyming **abab, cdcd, efef**, and ending with a couplet (two, usually rhyming, lines) **gg**. The couplet normally signals a turn in the poem, in which the speaker makes a general comment that sums up or interprets the preceding information.

QUESTION 2: POETRY – CONTEXTUAL QUESTION**IX. [FUNERAL BLUES] – W H AUDEN**

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead 5
Scribbling on the sky the message He is Dead,
Put crêpe bows round the white necks of the public doves,
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

He was my North, my South, my East and West, 10
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now; put out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood; 15
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

- 2.1** Refer to line 3: “Silence the pianos and with muffled drum”. State two other objects that the speaker wants silenced in stanza 1. (2)
- 2.2** Refer to line 9: “He was my North, my South, my East and West”. Describe the person to whom this line refers. (2)
- 2.3** Comment on the effectiveness of the repetition of “my” in stanza 3. (2)
- 2.4** Comment on the effectiveness of the hyperbole in stanza 3. (2)
- 2.5** Do you agree with the interpretation that this poem is as much a poem about the depth of love as it is of loss? Justify your answer. (2) [10]

OR

the intimacy of the affair while also conveying its evanescence.

While content and diction is essential in all poetry, it is only brought to life by its communication, and thus the use of Wyatt's structure, form and sound devices is invaluable in conveying the speaker's confusion and loneliness after one encounter has left him lonely, emasculated and ineffective with women.

(10)

Sonnet 130 (p. 3)

What is it about?

1. The mistress is compared to (any two from) the sun✓, coral✓, snow✓, wires✓, golden thread✓, roses✓, perfumes✓, music✓, or a goddess✓. (2)
2. A Shakespearean sonnet consists of (any two from) 14 lines✓, rhyme scheme of **abab cdcd efef gg**, 3 quatrains and a rhyming couplet✓, 10 syllables per line✓, rhythm pattern of iambic pentameter✓ (unstressed followed by stressed syllable), or elevated language about love✓. (2)
3. Whereas most sonnets use elevated language to praise an ideal woman, Shakespeare writes that although music is easier to listen to✓, he does sincerely "love" to hear his mistress speak✓. (2)
4. The object of affection for the speaker is not an elevated goddess or angel who floats or glides above the ground✓; she is a more grounded and physical person who walks with him on earth and has her feet on the ground✓. (2)

5. The love expressed in this sonnet is very sincere and is not false✓. Although the speaker seems unflattering and critical, he maintains that his love is "rare" as he is able to interact with and share his life with his mistress✓. (2)

Essay

- Traditional sonnets are clichéd and insincere.
- Comparisons of women being goddesses are no longer grounded and appropriate.
- Having a mistress who you can interact with and appreciate is better than having an idealised or unrequited love.
- A lover should be someone who you accept as they are; they do not need praise and tributes.
- A true relationship will allow for criticism and plain-talking; it will not need romantic images and careful declarations all the time.
- Conceits and images that over-praise a woman's qualities are inappropriate and too widely used.
- Humour and rhyme can still be used to declare love, and this approach is probably more normal and real.
- In a sonnet one would expect comparisons to be heavenly and praiseworthy, rather than basic and simple, i.e. "wires", "snow", "reeks", etc.
- Iambic pentameter allows the syllables and ideas to build in a fun and consistent way which makes key ideas stand out for the reader.

continued ...