

Six Centuries of Verse



A VIEWER'S GUIDE

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EPIISODE 1

CHAUCER–TED HUGHES, 1384-1984

What to Listen for . . .

... in the 14 poems read in this introductory episode: The wide variety of attitudes the authors adopt toward their subjects and the tones with which they address their audiences.

Questions to Consider

1. Based on what you've heard so far, what distinguishes poetry from prose? In other words, what makes a poem a poem?
2. What can you infer about the personality of each writer from the poems read here? Does poetry inherently reveal its author?

EPIISODE 2

OLD ENGLISH

What to Listen for . . .

... in "The Seafarer": The poet's ambivalent attitude toward the sea.

... in the selection from Beowulf: How the repetition of consonant sounds holds each line together, and how the poet mixes Christian imagery with a violent, pagan tale about a monster.

Questions to Consider

Apart from the language, what makes these poems seem strange or foreign? What makes them seem modern or relevant?

EPIISODE 3

CHAUCER, 1340-1400

What to Listen for . . .

... in the description of the Pardoner: The concrete details through

which Chaucer paints a word picture of his character.

... **in “The Pardoner’s Tale”**: The contrast between the tale’s theme and the Pardoner’s reasons for telling it.



Geoffrey Chaucer

Questions to Consider

1. Why doesn’t Chaucer give his characters names—either in the prologue or in “The Pardoner’s Tale”?
2. What do you think the old man in the tale represents?

EPISODE 4

MEDIEVAL-ELIZABETHAN, 1400-1600

What to Listen for . . .

... **in “They flee from me”**: The tension between innocence and eroticism.

... **in Tichborne’s elegy**: How Tichborne uses paradoxes and antitheses to create a mood.

... **in “The Lie”**: How Raleigh’s repeated use of imperative verbs gives the poem a sense of urgency and immediacy.

... **in “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love”**: How Marlowe uses images from nature to elicit emotions.



Christopher Marlowe

Questions to Consider

1. In “To Mistress Margaret Hussey,” why does Skelton repeatedly describe his mistress as a falcon and a hawk?

2. Both Wyatt’s “They flee from me” and Shakespeare’s Sonnet 129 focus on physical desire. How do the two poets approach the topic differently?

EPISODE 5

SHAKESPEARE, 1564-1616

What to Listen for . . .

... **in the opening chorus from Henry V**: How Shakespeare refers to specific sights and sounds to spark the audience’s imagination, while simultaneously acknowledging the limitations of the stage.

... **in the selection from King Lear**: Lear’s dawning self-knowledge in the midst of his confusion, and his daughter’s reactions to it.

... **in the selection from Antony and Cleopatra**: The numerous details Shakespeare creates in order to depict Enobarbus’s awe and contempt.



William Shakespeare

Questions to Consider

1. What makes these selections of dialogue poetic?
2. How do the poetic techniques used in the song from *Cymbeline* differ from those used in Hamlet’s soliloquy or Prospero’s speech?

EPISODE 6

METAPHYSICAL & DEVOTIONAL, 1590-1670

What to Listen for . . .

... **in “The Flea”**: How Donne uses religious language and imagery in a poem that’s obviously not about religion.

... **in “The Good-Morrow”**: How geography—both literal and metaphorical—informs Donne’s depiction of a perfect love.

... **in “To His Coy Mistress”**: How the mood of the poem changes from stanza to stanza.



John Donne

Questions to Consider

1. Why is the term “metaphysical” applied to many of the poems in this episode?
2. Why do many couples today choose “The Good-Morrow” as part of their wedding ceremony? Do you think it’s appropriate?

EPISODE 7

MILTON, 1608-1674

What to Listen for . . .

... **in “On His Deceased Wife”**: How Milton’s imagery becomes more celestial and abstract, until the last line.

... **in Satan’s speech from Paradise Lost, Book I**: The length and complexity of Milton’s sentences.



John Milton

Questions to Consider

1. What does Satan’s speech reveal about his character?
2. In the final selection read in this episode (from *Paradise Lost*, Book IV), how does Milton convey the majesty of the combat and its warriors?

EPISODE 8

RESTORATION & AUGUSTAN,
1660-1745

What to Listen for . . .

... **in Dryden’s “MacFlecknoe”**: The bouncy rhythm, tight rhymes, and topsy-turvy values.

... **in Swift’s “Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift”**: How Swift uses parenthetical dialogue to mock both himself and his “female friends.”

... **in Pope’s The Dunciad**: The classical allusions and personification of abstract qualities.

Questions to Consider

1. Several poems in this episode use humor to make their points. Which one do you find the funniest, and why?
2. Introducing the selection from Dryden’s “Absalom and Achitophel,” Gielgud calls it “public poetry.” What does he mean by that phrase? How would you distinguish between public poetry and other types?

EPISODE 9

ROMANTIC PIONEERS, 1750-1805

What to Listen for . . .

... **in Blake’s “The Tyger”**: The musical repetition of words and questions.

... **in the selection from Smart’s “Jubilate Agno”**: The irregular line lengths and lack of rhyme.

... **in the selection from Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan”**: The

consonance (repetition of consonant sounds) and assonance (repetition of vowel sounds) in each line.

Questions to Consider

1. Introducing these poems, Gielgud says, “In a sense, we are still Romantics.” What does he mean? What qualities of mind or sensibility do 21st-century Americans share with these writers from 200 years ago?
2. How does Blake’s word picture of the tiger compare to his etching of the animal? What do you make of the similarities or differences between the poem and its illustration?
3. In writing about his cat, Christopher Smart seems to ignore consistent rhythm and rhyme. What makes this selection a poem?

EPISODE 10

WORDSWORTH, 1770-1850

What to Listen for . . .

... **in “The Daffodils”**: The simple rhymes and the poet’s childlike wonder at nature.

... **in “Upon Westminster Bridge”**: How Wordsworth uses personification and natural imagery to glorify a scene of urban life.

... **in the selection from The Prelude**: The plain, straightforward language, as compared with some of the other poems in this series so far, such as Milton’s and Shakespeare’s.



William Wordsworth

Questions to Consider

1. In “The Solitary Reaper,” what exactly does Wordsworth admire about the maiden’s song? Does that provide insight into his approach to poetry?

2. How does Wordsworth’s vision of the city in “Upon Westminster Bridge” compare with Blake’s in “London,” from the last episode?

EPISODE 11

YOUNGER ROMANTICS, 1800-1824

What to Listen for . . .

... **in Shelley’s “Ozymandias”**: The economy with which Shelley portrays the statue and its setting.

... **in Keats’s “To Autumn”**: How the images appeal to all five senses.

... **in the selection from Byron’s Don Juan**: The surprising shifts in tone, from wistfulness to humor.



Lord Byron

Questions to Consider

1. How does Shelley’s attitude toward Ozymandias’s legacy differ from his attitude toward Keats’s legacy, as shown in the selection from “Adonais”?
2. Who (or what) is the subject of Keats’s “La Belle Dame sans Merci”?

EPISODE 12

VICTORIANS, 1837-1901

What to Listen for . . .

... **in the selections from Tennyson’s In Memoriam**: The tight rhyme scheme and structure of each stanza, and Tennyson’s leaps from idea to idea in each.

... **in Browning’s “My Last Duchess”**: How the speaker’s character slowly emerges through the course of the poem.

... **in Arnold's "Dover Beach"**: The rhythms that mimic the wash of the sea.

Questions to Consider

1. In Browning's "My Last Duchess," what clues does the poem give to the speaker's character?
2. Compare the image that opens "Dover Beach" with the one that closes it.

EPISODE 13

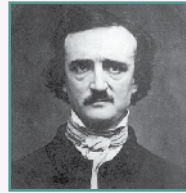
AMERICAN PIONEERS, 1855-1910

What to Listen for . . .

... **in Poe's "The City in the Sea"**: The elaborate musicality in the repetition of phrases, sentence structures, consonant sounds, and vowel sounds.

... **in the selection from Whitman's "Song of Myself"**: How the repetition of words and phrases works to much different effect than in Poe's poem.

... **in Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for Death"**: How the pauses add emphasis and suspense to the lines.



Edgar Allan Poe



Emily Dickinson

Questions to Consider

1. How does Poe's vision of death in "The City in the Sea" differ from Dickinson's in "Because I could not stop for Death"?
2. Both Herman Melville and Julia Ward Howe used religious imagery in the two war poems featured here. How are they different?

EPISODE 14

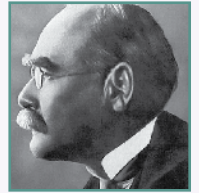
ROMANTICS & REALISTS, 1870-1920

What to Listen for . . .

... **in Hardy's "The Ruined Maid"**: The characteristics that distinguish the "ruined" maid from her country friend, and the irony of the final line.

... **in Hopkins's "The Windhover"**: The compound words and consonance in each line.

... **in Kipling's "The Story of Uriah"**: Kipling's use of ironic adjectives and his sardonic tone.



Rudyard Kipling

Questions to Consider

1. Why is this episode titled "Romantics & Realists"? What sensibilities do these poets share?
2. How does Hopkins's attitude toward aging in "I wake and feel the fell of dark" compare with A.E. Housman's in "Tell me not here, it needs not saying"?

EPISODE 15

EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY, 1914-1939

What to Listen for . . .

... **in Yeats's "The Second Coming"**: The differences in sentence length and structure between the first and second stanzas.

... **in Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"**: The poem's simple but tight rhyme scheme.

... **in Eliot's "A Game of Chess" from The Waste Land:** How the rhythms of the lines change over the course of the poem.

Questions to Consider

1. In completely different ways, both "The Second Coming" and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" hint at profound but obscure things. Why is each one so powerful and memorable?
2. By the end, Eliot's "A Game of Chess" has almost no rhyme and a very irregular rhythm. What makes it poetic?

EPISODE 16

TOWARDS THE PRESENT, 1934-1984

What to Listen for . . .

... **in Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night":** The alternating rhyme with "light" and "night" in the closing line of each stanza.

... **in Lowell's "Skunk Hour":** The shift in attitude and tone after the first four stanzas.

... **in Hughes's "The Thought-Fox":** How the sounds of the words, rhythms of the lines, and transitions between stanzas mimic the movements of the animal.

Questions to Consider

1. How do the poems in this episode compare in themes and forms to works from earlier episodes?
2. In "The Thought-Fox," Ted Hughes writes about composing a poem. How does his attitude toward the process compare with Shakespeare's in Prospero's last speech from *The Tempest* or to Whitman's in the selection from "Song of Myself"—both of which, in a sense, take artistic creation as their subject?

AVENUES FOR FURTHER LEARNING

Companion Book for the Series

Thwaite, Anthony. *Six Centuries of Verse*. London: Methuen London Ltd., 1984.

General Resources

Cronin, Richard, Alison Chapman, and Antony H. Harrison, eds. *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Pub., 2002.

Falk, Colin. *American and British Verse in the Twentieth Century: The Poetry that Matters*. Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2003.

Fussell, Paul. *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*, rev. ed. New York: Random House, 1979.

Gardner, Helen, ed. *The Metaphysical Poets; Selected and Edited by Helen Gardner*. London: Oxford University Press, 1967.

Hollander, John. *Rhyme's Reason: A Guide to English Verse*, 3rd ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.

Kohl, Herbert. *A Grain of Poetry: How to Read Contemporary Poems and Make Them a Part of Your Life*. New York: HarperFlamingo, 1999.

Mayes, Frances. *The Discovery of Poetry: A Field Guide to Reading and Writing Poems*. San Diego: Harvest/Harcourt, Inc., 2001.

Oliver, Mary. *A Poetry Handbook: A Prose Guide to Understanding and Writing Poetry*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1994.

Oliver, Mary. *Rules for the Dance: A Handbook for Writing and Reading Metrical Verse*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1998.

Pinsky, Robert. *The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998.

Prickett, Stephen, ed. *The Romantics*. London: Methuen, 1981.

Steele, Timothy. *All the Fun's in How You Say a Thing: An Explanation of Meter and Versification*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1999.

Strand, Mark, and Eavan Boland, eds. *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2001.

Woodring, Carl, and James S. Shapiro, eds. *The Columbia History of British Poetry*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

For a complete list of the poems performed in this program, visit athenalearning.com.

ENGLISH VERSE BY ERA

A broad outline of the evolution of English poetry

Old English (before 1066)

Beginning in the 5th century, after the fall of the Roman Empire, Germanic tribes from northeastern Europe invaded the British Isles. The poetry produced during this period—known as Old English, or Anglo-Saxon after the invaders—was the first truly English-language poetry, although it sounds like a foreign tongue today.

Owing much to the oral poetry chanted by traveling bards, Anglo-Saxon verse generally combined a melancholy, fatalistic worldview from Germanic traditions with redemptive themes from Christianity—a relatively new religion at the time in England. Old English poetry used heavy alliteration, bold imagery, and dramatic rhythms.

The Medieval Period (11th to 15th centuries)

For 200 years after the Norman Conquest, poets in England didn't write in English. Wealthy and titled people spoke French; clerics relied on Latin, the language of the church. What we now call "Middle English"—originally, a London dialect heavily influenced by French—began to emerge as the dominant language on the British Isles in the 14th century.

Geoffrey Chaucer—the giant of medieval English poetry—wrote in Middle English. His humor, irony, realistic characterizations,



"The Wife of Bath's Tale," from the Ellesmere manuscript (15th c.) of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*

and affectionate cynicism make *The Canterbury Tales* lively reading. In other parts of England, poets wrote religious and secular verse in their particular dialects, often displaying strong alliteration and rhythms similar to Anglo-Saxon poetry. Some romantic poetry borrowed from the courtly love tradition of French troubadours, which exalted the lover's unfulfilled passion for an idealized, unattainable lady.

The Renaissance (15th to 17th centuries)

The humanistic values cultivated in the Italian Renaissance first reached England during the late 15th century, but they didn't take root and blossom until the reign of Henry VIII. The 20th-century scholar and literary critic C.S. Lewis characterized the poetry of Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, and other late-Renaissance English writers as "golden" for the "strong, simple music of the uncontorted line."

Writing more than 150 years after this golden age, Dr. Samuel Johnson first applied the term "metaphysical" to the poetry of John Donne, George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, and similar early 17th-century writers. Adopting the term from a comment by John Dryden, Johnson used it to indicate intellectual distance from emotions. But it also came to characterize the poets' specific techniques, including their oratorical tone, erudition, use of paradox, and drawn-out metaphors (such as Donne's extended comparison of sex to an insect in "The Flea").

The Augustan Age (early 18th century)

The waning of the Stuart monarchy ushered in what some scholars call the Augustan Age—so named because the English writers of the time admired and emulated Virgil, Ovid, and Horace, who flourished during the reign of the Roman emperor Augustus. John Dryden, Jonathan Swift, and Alexander Pope embraced classical virtues such as restraint, rationality,

decorum, and objectivity. Their satires used humor to examine how people should behave in social and political contexts.

In translating, imitating, or parodying classics such as Virgil's *Aeneid*, Augustan poets adapted the "heroic couplet": rhymed pairs of 10-syllable lines, alternating unstressed and stressed syllables. Although the heroic couplet in English poetry stretches back to Chaucer, it became a favorite form for the neoclassicists of this period.



Federico Barocci, *Aeneas' Flight from Troy*, 1598

The Romantic Age (late 18th to early 19th centuries)

Fed by the intellectual energy of the Enlightenment and the political energy of the American and French Revolutions, the Romantic movement reacted against the classical values of the Augustan Age. Generally, poets such as William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats, and Lord Byron prized spontaneity, imaginative vision, and emotional self-expression. Truth, they believed, lay in the particular experience of the individual.

The spirit of Romanticism also spawned new poetic forms—not only for British poets like Byron, but especially for American ones. Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson—poetic and intellectual disciples of the great American Romantic, Ralph Waldo Emerson—developed distinctive voices free of confining rhyme schemes and traditional structures.

The Victorian Age (mid 19th to early 20th centuries)

During the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901), the British Empire reached its height. The wealth and power of the empire contrasted sharply with the urban poverty in newly industrialized Britain, leading to national and personal self-examination as a theme in Victorian verse.

In many respects, Victorian poets tempered the emotional exuberance of the Romantics with the more disciplined forms from the neoclassical tradition. For example, Tennyson, who profoundly influenced literature for 40 years as Britain's poet laureate, admired both Keats and Virgil. His Arthurian epic, *Idylls of the King*, embodied another prominent Victorian theme: nostalgia for ages past.



Gustave Doré's illustration of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, 1868

The 20th Century

In the years after World War I, poets in both Britain and America experimented with new language, new meters, and new forms. Symbolism—an artistic movement that invested objects and images with profound, often mystical meaning—influenced generations of poets, including William Butler Yeats. Poets like T.S. Eliot reclaimed techniques such as irony and wordplay from late-Renaissance English verse, especially that of Shakespeare and the metaphysical poets. And the American Robert Lowell employed a variety of forms—from free verse (unmetered and unrhymed) to tight structures borrowed from metaphysical poets—for his intensely personal, introspective work.

SELECT GLOSSARY OF POETIC FORMS

ballad: A light, lively lyric poem characterized by short stanzas and a refrain. Ballads usually tell stories about a particular character and often include something magical or supernatural, such as Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan.”

elegy: A solemn poem with a dignified tone in which the writer mourns a death or contemplates impermanence. Originally, an elegy pondered the transience of worldly things; the Old English poem “The Seafarer” represents an elegy in this sense of the term. Eventually, it came to describe any poem of deep, mournful reflection, especially about someone’s death.

epic: A long, narrative poem that tells the story of heroes performing culturally or cosmically significant deeds. Epics usually employ an elevated style and have a vast scope and setting, such as the Old English *Beowulf* or Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.

lyric: A rather short, melodic poem expressing the writer’s thoughts or feelings. In classical Greece, lyrics were words set to music and sung by a soloist, accompanied by a lyre (from which the word derives). Eventually, “lyric” came to describe any poem with a strong musical quality and one individual’s point of view, such as a sonnet or ode.

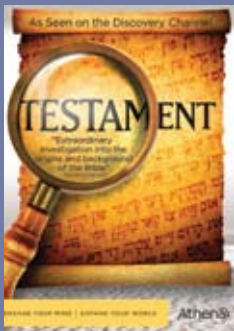
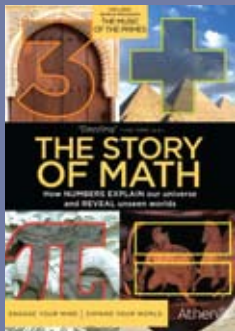
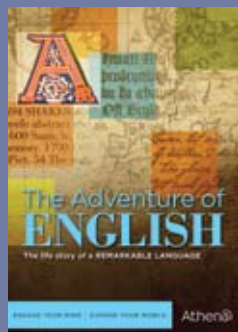
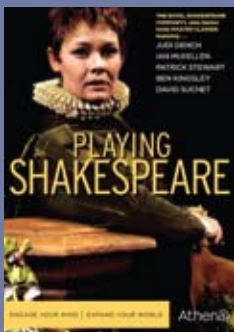
narrative: Any poem that tells a story, whether historical or imaginative.

ode: A lyric poem, distinguished by its elevated style and serious tone, advancing a single theme about a single subject. Odes originated in ancient Greek drama, sung or chanted by a chorus while dancing; the poems’ complicated structures mirrored the dance movements on stage. In English poetry, however, odes are usually simpler poems written in a single voice, such as Keats’s “To Autumn.”

sonnet: A 14-line poem, usually about love, with a specific rhyme scheme. While the rhyme scheme determines the particular sonnet type, all sonnets incorporate a transition between the first eight lines and the last six. The first part lays out a problem, sets a scene, or announces a theme; the second part resolves the problem or takes a surprising twist on the theme. Traditionally, English sonnets use iambic pentameter—a 10-syllable line with alternating unstressed and stressed syllables.

villanelle: A poetic form that originated in France—although the name derives from an Italian peasant song—featuring five three-line stanzas leading up to a final four-line stanza. The first and last lines of the first stanza recur as a refrain in the subsequent stanzas; together, they form a couplet that concludes the last stanza. Despite the rigid form, villanelles were originally light and playful verses. In the 20th century, however, Dylan Thomas (“Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night”) took a form once reserved for parties and gossip and applied it to a serious subject—death.

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