

## Personal Response - what's that about?



Both A level and GCSE (and other assessments beyond England and Wales!) place value on a 'personal response' from students but it's often easier said than done. Some students will need no encouraging to tell you or an examiner just what they think of a poem or a poet, from the 'I love it, it's great' variety through to the 'It's rubbish. Why doesn't he/she get a proper job?' end. Others will find it hard to make any personal response, not wanting to stray out of the comfort zone of things teacher has told them or points made on Bite Size.

As with so many things, it's good to start young. Before Secondary, of course! But definitely in KS3, do ask students for opinions on what they read, be it prose or poetry. It's always a two-part question: what did you think of X? Why / what makes you say that? Another way into this is through prioritising. Get them to list half a dozen or so poems in order of how much they like them. (They can't put them *all* at the bottom!) And be clear that you really are interested in an honest (and thoughtful) opinion. (See below, *negative feelings*)

Some students could be tempted into more sophisticated responses by being asked which poems they think are well written / have something important to say / will still be read in 20 years' time, and so on – and making that a question alongside that of personal like/dislike.

Points to make with students:

- You don't have to like a poem (or a story, novel, play, scientific law, maths theorem) in order to appreciate it.
- Outside of your friends (and your teacher, to some extent), no one is interested in whether you like or dislike a poem, just like that. They are interested in *why*.
- Some 'why' responses are more helpful / take you further than others. 'Because I don't understand it / it's boring' gets you a little way, but needs more. What makes it hard to understand / boring? Similarly, what is it about the sound of the poem you like? If it's got good images, what are they, how do they affect you?

When it comes to examination answers, a brief statement – often towards the end of an answer – giving a personal response will be viewed positively by examiners. 'Overall, I liked this poem because the rhythm, especially in the last two verses, makes you feel the movement of the sea, rather than just being told about it...' Should the writer add a 'However – ' they could be on the way to an even higher grade...

## PS Negative Feelings

I was thanked for my forthrightness regarding 'Afflictions of Margaret' and 'Song of the Old Mother' (which I regard as poor poems) but the teacher also wanted to know how to help less able students express negative feelings in a positive way - if you see what I mean. In other words, how to use that personal judgement to accrue marks! My first thought is to encourage the use of words like 'but', 'although' and 'however' as well, of course, as 'because'. Ask students to imagine that the poem in question has been written by someone they like - their boy or girl friend, mother, aunt or grandparent. They have to explain to the writer that there are some good things about the poem but... 'It begins well by getting our

sympathy for the mother, but I find that...'; 'Our attention is drawn to the mother's pain through, for instance, the exclamations and questions. However, after the first few verses, I feel that...'

A comparison carries even more weight. Depending on the question, it may be possible to criticise one poem by contrasting it with another. 'Wordsworth's many words in fact make less impact than the dozen lines of Ben Jonson...'

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