

# **Note to Teachers**

Teachers have been speaking about the lack of critical material on some of the literature set pieces (particularly the poems) selected for study at the Caribbean O'Level. Diverse interpretations make an exploration of literary material interesting and expansive.

This guide to the study of 'set' poems is a response to those who wish to be expansive in their analysis and appreciation. It is not intended to be a model commentary but an analysis or interpretation that will stimulate further discussion and analysis.

**This is a cost free publication offered to teachers.**

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## ANA AND MY PAPA'S WALTZ

Both poems 'Ana' and "My Papa's Waltz" deal with the theme of childhood. In "Ana" the daughter is seen through the eyes of the father.

In "My Papa's Waltz" the father is seen through the eyes of the child.

Though the experiences are different, they are similar in some aspects.

One of the striking differences is the picture the reader gets of the child's relationship with the father. In 'Ana' stanzas one and four, the reader sees the pride and admiration for daughter through images of beauty and calm. In "My Papa's Waltz" the only relationship between father and son is portrayed in the Waltz, through images of intense fear:

"But I hung on like death?"

Both poems show the agony inflicted on the father (In Ana') and the child (in My Papa's Waltz). Both poems have images of physical roughness. In 'Ana' "lunging for the throat, her sharp nicks, scratches on my arm" are images of violent behavior. In "My Papa's" Waltz, the movements of the father destabilize the child, and evoke intense fear.

"Make a small boy dizzy / romped / my right ear scraped a buckle" all show the agony inflicted on the child."

What is striking about this violence is, in both poems, it is not motivated by malicious intent. In 'Ana' the child considers her behaviour a game from which she derives great pleasure and fun. In "My Papa's Waltz", the father in a drunken state gives vent to his happiness by waltzing with his son.

In both cases the behaviour is innocent and pure; but the result is agonizing.

Both poems end with the children asleep.

In "Ana" the father is drawn to innocence and calm which the sleeping child portrays. This brings back memories of her early childhood. Her brutal fangs of life are now hidden under the cloak of sleep.

In 'My Papa's Waltz, the child is waltzed to bed with his hands still clinging to his shirt through his intense fear.

In "Ana" the father surrenders to the child's game and endures all the thorny assaults. In "My Papa's Waltz" the child does not at any time feel comfortable with her father's actions.

## Mood

'ANA' -The mood of each poem differs in some aspects.

In "Ana" the poem begins with a peaceful, calm and quiet mood. The mood shifts in stanza two where the father shows the mood of disgust at Ana's rough game. He is angry and disgusted. The last stanza recaptures the mood at the beginning – the child asleep is the picture of calm and peace.

In the poem "My Papa's Waltz", the mood is one of fear and disgust. The atmosphere created by the waltz is chaotic.

3

## The Simile

In Ana she 'curled in sleep like a comma', is a comparison between Ana and a comma. The manner in which she sleeps conveys to the reader the appearance of a comma. The simile is vivid and life-like.

## GOD'S WORK AND RICHARD CORY

## Theme

Both poems deal with characters who have gained the respect and admiration of people in the society. They differ in the treatment of both poems. 1. (The strength and courage which are associated with a man, of Mr Edwards stature. 2. What lies beneath the cloak of respectability - Richard Corey.)

# Contrast

The two characters are different. Mr Edwards in **God's Work** is portrayed as a strong, courageous and deeply spiritual man. He belonged to the world of nature from which he has gained endurance and strength. His pain and suffering in old age he attributes to God. 'God's Work'. He is brought alive.

Richard Cory on the other hand is portrayed as one who is schooled; and well respected. What we see are the external aspects of his character – his attire “quietly arrayed” and his manner of speech - always human when he talked.

Nothing is said about the “inner being” of Cory – Only at the last line we assume by his action – “put a bullet through his head” that he lacked the courage, the endurance to face life's challenges – unlike Mr Edwards.

The description of Character in Gods' work is more detailed – physical appearance, inner strength in his hours of suffering made him human and natural.

Cory in the other hand belongs to the sophisticated world – Nothing can be discerned about his inner feeling, only what is seen externally.

4

# Style

In **God's Work** the poet has used free verse or unrhymed verse. This makes the poem conversational and natural. It suits the character being portrayed.

In **Richard Cory** the poet uses rhymed verse – It gives a more formal tone to the poem – and is in keeping with the character.

While in **God's Work** the language is in some lines colloquial, in Richard Cory it is more formal and standard.

GOD'S WORK:

“Never sick a day until a day he sick.”

“Wind by the heart” This brings the character alive.

“Too strong for cry”

# Imagery

## Life-like images – In God’s Work

1. “strong black face, handsome old man  
Astry Cap of curled short hair”
2. “Ripping his guts away slowly.”
3. “Rain pelted down”  
“Floods rushed”  
“Storm lashed”  
“Spasms crumpling up his face”  
“Sweat dripping”  
“The gut contracting cry”

Through these images the reader can see and feel the experiences. Throughout the poem an appeal is made to the senses of sight and sound.

## In Richard Cory –

The character is more passive. We see him through the eyes of the people around him. He stands aloof, not intergrated with the folks .They look up at Him as “richer than a king”

There is a distance between him and the folks. They must have been devastated at what Cory did at the end. Perhaps they realized that appearances are often deceptive.

## GOD’S WORK AND RICHARD CORY

Qestions:

1. In each of the poem choose two striking images.  
Comment on their effectiveness. Are they suitable? Are they meaningful?
2. In what two ways are the characters in both poems different?
3. How do the two poems differ in themes?
4. Do you think the language of the two poems suitable? Give your reasons to support your answer.

## FROM THE EMMIGRANTS

The poem deals with Columbus' discovery of a new land, whose natural beauty would later be marred and tarnished by wars and conflicts.

### **Imagery:**

The imagery reflects the natural beauty.

Vivid pictures of the beauty in nature seen by Columbus:

The reflection of stars in the water

The morning brought to light

'birds circled flapping flag'

rocks rising solidly from the water

screaming parrots, the morning's fire

These all appeal to the visual sense and the sense of sound.

"The bearded fig trees", "the yellow pois "the highest ridges where our farms were hidden" give a picture of a land of plenty and of promise.

6

The poet juxtaposes images of war, conflict and inhumanity, the aftermath of the discovery - These would counteract much and tarnish the beauty Columbus envisaged. Stark and startling images show colonialism and slavery.

"Pike point and musket butt".

"bullet shot"

"black boot in my belly"

"the whip uncurled desire"

These atrocities no one could have predicted.

The poet's mood is one of lamentation - The pristine beauty of the land is destroyed by man's inhumanity to man.

## THE CARPENTER'S COMPLAINT

1. The theme of the poem: How people feel when they are discriminated against. The carpenter is deeply hurt by the fact he was not given to build the coffin of a dear friend whose house he had built. Instead the son of the deceased gave to a big shot, the job of making the coffin.
2. The poem is a monologue. The complaint is made by the carpenter while his friends listen.
3. The language in the poem is in the Vernacular. This is suited to the character. It very strongly and effectively shows the deep hurt the carpenter feels and his sense of pride. It makes the character come alive and captures the feeling of the carpenter in his native speech.

The **carpenter's descriptions** of the man's son and Mr Balnavis are **striking and vivid** to the reader –

“that mawga-foot bwoy”  
‘That big-belly crook”

7

The carpenter is complaining to people in a bar.

“Fix me a nice one, Miss Fergie”

## Colloquial Language

“Knock him waters “  
“who don't him arse  
From a chisel”  
“It burn me, it burn me for true”

These **colloquial expressions** give vent to the feeling of the carpenter and make the experience real.

How does the carpenter show his pride?

“Funeral? Me sah?” shows the resolve of the carpenter not to attend the funeral.

Why does the carpenter blame the man's son? “Damn magwa-foot bwoy

Is University turn him fool”

The carpenter feels that education has not instilled good values on the dead man’s son.  
The dead man’s son.

Example of Irony in the poem –

*because him is big-shot,  
fi-him coffin must be better  
than mine!*

The speaker does not really mean what he says. The true meaning is hidden. What he says and what he means are different. He is really being sarcastic by overrating the character Mr Belnavis.

## Intention of the Poem

The poet wants to show the deep sentiment that the poor expresses. Within the simple heart there is purity of feeling, caring and generosity as reflected in the Carpenter. The difference in character between the bigshot Belnavis and humble folk, the carpenter is clear.

“Will the carpenter leave two drunken men on the ground and walk away “cool, cool, cool”? Belnavis did it.

Will Belnavis make the coffin for nothing? No.

The Carpenter on the other hand would have don’t it “for nutt’n, for nutt’n.”

## COOLIE MOTHER

The self-sacrifice of a woman whose desire is to educate her son and improve the quality of his life.

The poet captures the character of the woman through a realistic picture of her life – what she does, what her ambitions are. Through the eyes of the poet the character is made alive and real.

# Imagery

Striking images of the handwork of a woman with a purpose. The images are reinforced by descriptions and similes well suited to the experience.

*“The hut in which she lives* Poverty Stricken.

*Is big like Bala shoe box”* The comparison tells of one deprived and almost destitute.

*“Beat clothes, weed yard, chop wood, feed fowl.”* - Verbs are expressive of her menial tasks to earn a living.

*“till she foot-bottom crack and she hand cut up.”* - physical hurt and pain resulting from hard work.

*“And curse swarm from she mouth like red ants.”* - frustration expresses itself in strong language.  
- The comparison - striking as well as amusing.

All these images show the physical hardship and the endurance of the woman's who is desirous of providing her son with what she has been deprived of. To her, education is the answer to her problems.

# The Mood

is one of admiration for a simple woman who is toughened by menial tasks and unending labour.

There is also a hint of resentment on the part of the poet –

*“For this body, and that body and evry blasted body. Perhaps the resentment comes out of pity for the poor woman – her willing acceptance of her fate – her determination.*

# Language

The use of the vernacular makes the character a life-like, real and vivid.

## COOLIE SON

The poem – a letter from a native Guyanese from England, to his friend in Guyana.

The language is the vernacular. The unrestrained rhythm of speech can be identified throughout the poem.

The style establishes a close proximity of the writer to the recipient. They share the oneness through language.

Wherever people go, it is difficult to uproot their indigenous culture – especially in language – Coolie Son retains the Guyanese dialect.

The character is made alive and vivid through the image the poet presents.

**Pride and elation** at being a toilet attendant –

Fascinated by the “the tie round the neck!

“Brand new uniform, one big bunch keys!” However menial the task is, the son sees in it a means of improvement.

The reader wonders if there is truth in what he writes about himself - “Soon, I go turn lawyer or doctor. But, passage money run out”.

Is he working for passage or for survival?

## Comparison

10

### Coolie Mother and Coolie son

**Style:** In Coolie Mother the style is more descriptive and more matter of fact. It suits the intention of the poet. In Coolie Son, the style is more friendly and simple. It conveys a feeling of closeness and warmth.

**Imagery:** In Coolie Mother the images are physical and real. They are sustained throughout and reinforce the character.

In Coolie Son, the images are not very striking but suited to the content and theme of the poem.

**Character Portrayed:** In Coolie Son, the character is seen through his writing, what he says, how he thinks, how he feels.

The character in both poems share a similar cultural background. Both characters are prototype. Each is representative of a class.

Coolie Mother represents all mothers living and working under the same conditions with the same aims and ambitions.

Coolie Son represents the native removed from homeland, alienated in a foreign land of promise.

**Similarity (language):**

Both poems are written in the dialect. The characters are made real and alive through the language.

## FOR MY MOTHER AND COOLIE MOTHER

**Theme:** Both poems treat female characters.

(differences) - Both women belong to different cultural background and educational status.

In 'For My Mother', the woman belongs to "petite bourgeoisie" – "studying to be teacher," while in Coolie Mother the woman belongs to the lower caste, without education. She performs menial tasks to eke out an existence.

**Language:** In 'For My Mother', the language is formal and standard.

In Coolie Mother the poet makes use of the dialect, the vernacular of the native. In both poems the language is suitable to the experience conveyed by the poets.

**Characterization:** In the poem 'For My Mother' the character of the mother develops in phases – marriage, motherhood, old age. The various phases flow into each other smoothly. It is biographical.

In Coolie Mother, the character of the woman is portrayed as she is in the present. She is representative of a certain level in society. No biographical details are given. The reader is left to draw his own conclusion of the character.

**Qualities:** Both parents (mothers) show devotion and dedication to offspring, and a commitment to education.

**Coolie Mother's** ambition for her son is to provide a good education for him.

In **For My Mother**, the daughter admires her mother for her strength of character, devotion and selflessness.

Lines 70-74 (For her hands grown coarse with raising nine children and for the pain she bore with the eyes of a queen.

In **Coolie Mother**, we see the same dedication of a mother, “Till she foot bottom crack and she hand cutup”, she never gives up. She “hustles to save one – one penny” for her son’s future.

Both women are toughened by their hard work.

In **For My Mother**, there are instances of joy and splendour – the pouring and revellry of the mother’s marriage.

In **Coolie Mother**, there is an absence of joy. There is only poverty and misery.

In **For My Mother**, the qualities for which the daughter admires her mother are easy to discern.

In **Coolie Mother**, the reader must draw his own conclusion of her character.

## THIS IS THE DARK TIME, MY LOVE AND SONNET FROM CHINA XV

### THIS IS THE DARK TIME, MY LOVE

The **theme** of this poem is about a people whose dreams for a better life have been threatened by the destructive power of the ‘strange invader’.

The **atmosphere** of the poem is one of tension, fear, anxiety.

“Everywhere the faces of men are strained and anxious.” This is because of the presence of soldiers: “all around the land brown beetles crawl about.”

Even nature is sympathetic to the cause of the people as expressed in the line “red flowers bend their heads in awful sorrow.”

The poet’s **mood is** one of lamentation for the misery of his people, the instability and sorrow brought about by the strange invader.

**Imagery:** The images appeal to the sense of sight and sound. They present visual pictures and are striking.

The picture of the soldiers, “all around the land the brown beetles crawl about”, in their thick armoury, the hand covering on their backs is like beetles.

Here you hear the tramping of soldier “whose boots of steel tramp down the slender grass”. You can also see the slender grass trampled upon and looking withered.

## Figurative Language

**Metaphor:** All around the land brown beetles crawl about.”  
The soldiers are compared to brown beetles.

**Personification:** “Red flowers bend their heads in awful sorrow.”  
The poet gives the flowers qualities of a human being – the emotion of sorrow.

**Irony:** “It is the **festival** of guns, the **carnival** of misery.”  
The words **festival** and **carnival** are indicative of joyous celebrations but what the country is really experiencing is **sorrow** not **joy**.

### SONNET FROM CHINA XV

**Theme:** The expression of a people besieged by armies of soldiers who have “laid waste the land and slain their young men”

The theme bears a similarity to “This is the dark time, My Love,” the fears and horror of war.

**Mood:** Both poems show the mood of expectancy and terror. They can expect an explosion at any time:

“The armies waited for a verbal error / with all their instruments for causing pain”.

As evening fell the day’s oppression lifted” (only at night this happens).

“Its women weeping, and its town in terror.”

**Imagery:** This sonnet gives a picture of the stark, gruesome and ghastly images of war. They make the reader see the ravages of war and evoke a feeling of pity:

“A land laid waste, with all its young men slain”

“Its women weeping and its town in terror”

In this poem wartime is part of the experience of conflict

“Across wide lawns and cultured flowers drifted.

The conversation of the highly trained.”

This presents a picture of soldiers in conversation.

**Style:** Both poems are not restricted by any formal rigid rhythm. They are conversational in style and flow easily.

**Intention of the poets:** The writers of both poems set out to show the horrors, misery and ravages of war and their effects on people.

## GOD'S GRANDEUR

The poem is expressive of God's presence in the natural world even through man's exploits have served to destroy nature and its freshness and purity. To the poet God's grandeur is ever pervasive, revealing itself like 'flame from shook foil'. The word 'flame' is significant as it conveys the brilliance of God as the shining light that foil gives off.

The poet employs the image of an electric charge, which develops into a flame or a light suggesting the power of his greatness.

God's light assumes a richness like the 'ooze of oil crushed' or pressed to its finest quality. As the oil gathers strength to richness so does God's greatness. The images are all interwoven and expanded to express the grandeur of God.

In stanza 2, though man is aware of God's greatness he still exploits through commerce and industrialization, blemishing the earth and destroying the freshness of nature.

The repetition, "generations have trod, have trod, have trod" conveys man's persistence in

his ruthless exploitation. The persistent repetition of words 'have trod' leading to 'smeared and bleared, tells of the poet's resentment or disgust at man's actions. 'Man's smudge' and 'smell' are expressive of a polluted and squalid environment, all due to man's uncaring attitude. Unthinking man cares not about the destruction he leaves; he seems not aware of what he has done to nature as is expressed in the words 'nor can food feel,' being shod.'

The language of stanza one, lines 5-8, reveals not only disgust but a protest against man's ruthlessness. The poet reacts to man's inhumanity and indignity with reasoned calmness, a protest without rage or anger for he is consoled by nature's presence as described in stanza two (2).

In stanza two (2), the poet tells that God's presence or power through nature is renewable or invigorating inspite of man's destruction. Nature is described as indestructible or inexhaustible:

For all this, nature is never spent  
There lives a dearest freshness deep down things.

The poem ends on a positive note, an assurance that springs from the poet's faith as he is convinced of the Holy Ghost's presence with vitality and life and all that is luminous," "warm breaths and bright wings" .

## COLONIAL GIRLS SCHOOL

In Colonial Girls School, the poet protests against a colonial system that has tried to emasculate and stifle natural speech, humour, physical appearance, dress, manners. She rebels against a system that imposed educational offerings, irrelevant and meaningless.

While some readers may agree with the poet's rant against the significance of Latin to the Caribbean mind, others will approve or be in agreement with an exposure to Shakespeare as significant in our lives.

The poet rails at cultural emasculation as she saw an attempt to transform personality, and character, to deny self-awareness and self-hood. Stanza one lists details,

Muffled our laughter  
Lowered our voices  
Let out our hems  
Dekinked our hair

which are all indicative of the impositions the system enforced or perpetuated.

The poet recalls an attempt to debase or devalue natural human behaviour “how our loudness, our laughter/debased us.

The repetition as conveyed in the choric ‘chant’ throughout the poem lays emphasis on a system that has denied self-hood, self-esteem and an indigenous cultural tradition. The expressions, “nothing about us/nothing of our landscape/feeling nothing/finding nothing about us” are all part of a denial of self, both mental and emotional.

The system of education-offerings of History, Geography and cultural tradition of an alien or foreign landscape, the political and civil affairs of distant lands have been meaningless. She asserts that these offerings are ‘mumbo-jumbo’, and irrelevant. The denial of indigenous offerings leaves her discontented.

But the poem ends on softer note with some measure of consolation that the colonial impostors during her schools years are now fading or disappearing for “northern eyes/in the brighter world before us now/pale.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER IN YOUR ANALYSIS OF THESE POEMS

### THE LYNCHING

1. What is the theme of the poem?
2. Which expression in Stanza one best describes the **lynching**?
3. Find the expression in Stanza two which best describes the act of lynching.
4. The lines in brackets  
Perchance ----- Fates wild whim” suggests that  
(a) the lynching was a divine act of God.  
(b) by some chance there was some sudden change in Fate.  
(c) man’s inhumanity to man cannot be explained.
5. Select two images in Stanza two that vividly describe the victim’s body.
6. What does the expression “study eyes of blue” suggest about the women?
7. Who do you think are the “little lads”?
8. The line, “Danced round the dreadful thing in friendish glee” is an example of (a) simile, (b) metaphor, (c) irony.  
Give a reason for your choice.

Which of the following shows the mood throughout the poem?

- (a) disgust      (b) anger      (c) sorrow      (d) hate

### DREAMING BLACK BOY

1. The theme of the poem is:  
(a) The boy’s dreams of a better life  
(b) The boy’s need for recognition  
(c) An uncaring society
2. What do the following expressions in Stanza one suggest?  
“wouldn’t go pass me today”  
“to hug me when I kick a goal.

3. How does the boy differ from his ancestors?
4. For what does the boy wish in Stanza two?
5. Find the expressions which show that the boy needs freedom and opportunities to grow.
6. What does the expression “spend me out opposing” suggest about the boy.
7. What does the boy wish for persons who break the law?
8. Quote the expressions in the last Stanza which show the suffering of the boy.

## TO AN ATHLETE DYING YOUNG

1. Describe the feeling or mood at the beginning of the poem.  
(b) Give a reason for the mood.
2. What does the word “shoulder-high” suggest in (a) Stanza one (b) Stanza two?
3. The poem is about
  - (a) A renowned runner
  - (b) A promising athlete
  - (c) Reflections on an athlete dying young.
4. “The road all runners come” suggests
  - (a) the route taken by all runners
  - (b) the path leading to death
  - (c) the road in which athletes compete.
5. Why does the poet refer to the athlete as “smart lad”?
6. “Eyes that shady might has shut” suggests
  - (a) the deep sleep of the athlete.
  - (b) the eternal sleep of the athlete
  - (c) tired eyes.
7. Give the meaning of “its echoes fade”.

8. Why do you think the “laurel” in Stanza seven remains **unwithered**?
9. The poet’s attitude in the poem is one of  
 (a) acceptance    (b) protest    (c) anger    (d) joy
10. The message that the poet wants to convey is  
 (a) athletes should die young.  
 (b) honour and glory are worn out by time.  
 (c) athletes are recognized only after they die.

## GOD’S GRANDEUR

1. Using your own words, express in about two to three lines the theme of the poem.
2. State the central contrast which this poem presents between God and man.  
 Explain it fully with reference to specific details.
3. Select one metaphor used in the poem and show how it is expanded.
4. Identify the lines in which the poet expresses  
 (a) disgust    (b) hope
5. Explain in your own words the meaning of the following lines.  
 (a) Why do men now not reckon his rod?  
 (b) And for all this, nature is never spent.
6. The poet uses the following devices. Select one example of each and comment on its effect:-  
 (a) Simile    (b) Alliteration    (c) Compression    (d) Repetition

## LE LOUPGAROU

1. What comparison is implied in the first line of the poem?  
 Why do you think it is appropriate? Show how the comparison is extended in the second line.
2. “A curious tale that threaded through the town  
 Through greying women sewing under eaves”

What special features of sound do you observe in these two lines?

3. What is suggested about the cause of Le Brun's ruin?
4. How is Le Brun described?
5. Who are "these Christian Witches"?
6. How did the graying women" react when Le Brun approached?
7. What do you think was the bargain Le Brun made? With whom was this bargain made?
8. What particular incident do "these witches" relate about Le Brun?
9. Which line tells us that the story of Le Brun was well-known?
10. Look at the movement in these two expressions: "slowly shutting jalousies", "tap-tapping cane". What do you find striking about each?
11. Give the meaning of the following as they are used in the poem: curious, slaving lycanthrope, hot on a scent, lugged its entrails.