

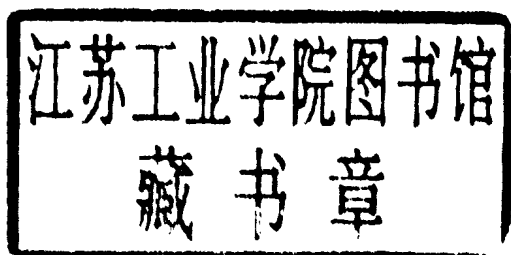
THE LANGUAGE
OF LITERATURE

Adrian Beard

ROUTLEDGE A LEVEL
ENGLISH GUIDES

THE LANGUAGE OF LITERATURE

Adrian Beard



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PREFACE

ASSESSMENT OBJECTIVES

The AS/A2 specifications in English are governed by assessment objectives (or AOs) which break down each of the subjects into component parts and skills. These assessment objectives have been used to create the different modules which together form a sort of a jigsaw puzzle. Different objectives are highlighted in different modules, but at the end of AS and again at the end of A2 each of the objectives has been given a roughly equal weighting.

The function of language that will be focused on in this book is how it is used in the creation of literary texts. That said, many students find writing about the language of literature difficult. It is one thing to comment on what was written about, quite another to write about how it was written. This book will help you to analyse literary texts by looking at the ways in which language has been used in their formation.

Each chapter contains a number of exercises. When the exercise introduces a new idea, there will usually be suggestions for answer immediately following. When the exercise checks to see if a point has been understood, suggestions for answer can be found at the end of the book.

See overleaf for assessment objectives that are focused on in this book.

English Literature

AO1: In writing about literary texts, you must use appropriate terminology.

AO2: You must show knowledge and understanding of literary texts of different types and periods, exploring and commenting on relationships and comparisons between literary texts.

AO3: You must show how writers' choices of form, structure and language shape meanings.

AO4: You must provide independent opinions and judgements, informed by different interpretations by other readers of literary texts.

AO5: You must look at contextual factors which affect the way texts are written, read and understood.

English Language and Literature

AO1: You must show knowledge and understanding of texts gained from the combined study of literary and non-literary texts.

AO2: In responding to literary and non-literary texts, you must distinguish, describe and interpret variation in meaning and form.

AO3: You must respond to and analyse texts, using literary and linguistic concepts and approaches.

AO4: You must show understanding of the ways contextual variation and choices of form, style and vocabulary shape the meanings of texts.

AO5: You must consider the ways attitudes and values are created and conveyed in speech and writing.

English Language

AO1: In writing about texts, you must use appropriate terminology.

AO3: You must show a systematic approach to analysing texts.

AO5: You must analyse the ways contextual factors affect the way texts are written, read and understood.

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This opening chapter will outline different aspects of literary language and look at the ways in which examination questions ask for the analysis of literary language. It will then introduce some of the main ideas in this book by exploring a short poem by Pope, plus two poems by Blake.

IDENTIFYING THE TASK

The first important point is to identify where you are being asked to analyse language in an exam question, and that instruction can come in a number of different forms. All of the following are used in exam questions, and all require language analysis in the answer.

The How Questions

The word ‘how’ should immediately alert you to the fact that the author’s method is under review. Here are some typical configurations using this keyword. Replace the word ‘author’ with an actual name if you are studying set texts:

How does (the author) present . . . ?

How is (the author’s) attitude to . . . revealed?

How does (the author) use language here?

How does (the author) communicate the significance of . . . ?

The Science Metaphors

Another way of indicating the requirement to look at language is to give an instruction at the beginning of the task, rather than asking a question. Here are some examples.

Examine the ways in which (the author) . . .

Explore the ways in which (the author) . . .

Look at (the author’s) handling of . . .

Discuss (the author’s) presentation of . . .

Comment on (the author’s) use of . . .

There are two things to note here. The first is the way that the imperative verbs, such as ‘examine’, ‘explore’, are often scientific metaphors of dissection and discovery. The second is that there are a number of terms which refer to an author’s method, such as ‘ways in which’, ‘handling of’, ‘presentation of’, ‘use of’.

Some of the tasks above ask you metaphorically to be a scientist, to explore and examine like a doctor would. It’s unlikely, though, that you would let someone explore and examine you if they confessed to having no method of enquiry and no experience. Commenting on literary language requires having a method, a method that is refined through practice.

HAVING A METHOD

The first and most important point about analysing literary language is that it should not be done in a vacuum. Do not isolate the language from everything else that is going on. Meanings and language work together, not separately. So, for example, you may well be aware that a text can be seen to belong to the time in which it was written, and to have links with other texts, but it also needs a response from you as a contemporary reader. In other words, looking at language will also involve looking at **context**. (For further ideas about context, see *Texts and Contexts* by Adrian Beard also published by Routledge.)

The following broad categories are helpful as starting points to thinking about literary language and each of them will be looked at in more detail during this book. They are inevitably fairly crude divisions, and will often overlap, but they are useful in identifying possible areas to look at when answering the question ‘how’.

-
1. **Genre:** Look for how whole texts fit into genres, how texts relate to other texts. Consider genre in terms of its shape/form, and in terms of its content. Consider the ways in which genre can be subverted, by mixing, for example, inappropriate content and form.
 2. **Shapes and patterns:** Look for titles, openings and closings, the connections between parts of the text. Look also at patterns of repeated words, repeated sounds (alliteration, assonance, rhyme, etc.), repeated **grammar** structures, semantic fields (i.e. words which cluster around the same area of meaning).
 3. **Narrative:** Look for the voices which ‘speak’ the texts, how much they know, their reliability, shifting narrators, the role of the reader in identifying narrative point of view, irony.
 4. **Voices in texts:** Look for the voices which speak in texts such as characters in drama, dialogue in novels. Consider the use of different levels of formality, regional speech and so on.
 5. **Creativity and play:** Look for metaphors and comparisons and work out what they contribute to meanings. Look for multiple meanings and how they are created. Look for ways in which authors use language creatively such as by using archaic words, inventing ‘new’ words, breaking grammatical rules, using unusual

graphology, playing with words and meanings, creating ambiguity, suggesting absence – what is not in the text but might be expected to be, making intertextual references.

The chapters in this book look at each of these topics in turn.

Exercise 1

The poem below, by Alexander Pope, is a useful starting point for putting some of these early ideas into practice. The following question is typical of the wording you might find in an exam:

How do the form and language of this poem contribute to its effect on the reader?

In order to help you break down the question into some important categories, make notes on these points:

- Research the term epigram – what expectations of an epigram do readers have? (**Genre**)
- What might be the significance of the poem's title? (**Shapes and patterns**)
- Find examples of repetition, variation and contrast in this poem. (**Shapes and patterns**)
- What is the role of the **narrative voice** or voices which are either heard or implied in this poem? (**Narrative**)
- What point is the poem making?

Epigram from the French

Sir, I admit your gen'ral rule
That every poet is a fool:
But you yourself may serve to show it,
That every fool is not a poet.

Alexander Pope (1732)

Suggestions for Answer

There is no point in talking about language if you ignore what the overall purpose of the language is. Before looking at this poem's structure, then, we need to say briefly what the poem seems to be about. Then, having looked at the poem's structure we will be in a position to refine those ideas about the poem's meanings.

In this poem Pope admits to an unnamed ‘Sir’ that as a general rule all poets are fools, but then adds that while poets may all be fools, all fools aren’t poets. In other words, being a poet and a fool is preferable to being a fool and nothing else.

All titles of texts are significant and are worth considering, not least because writers themselves usually give lots of thought to how they label their work. In this case the title tells us that the poem belongs to a certain genre – it is an epigram – and so experienced readers, who know about epigrams, will have a certain sense of what to expect. This sense of genre is an important one when thinking about structure. Just as buildings reflect other similar buildings in shape and purpose, so literary texts, while unique in some ways, are at the same time similar to other texts. Another way of describing this is to say that all texts in some way have **intertextual** links with other texts, and one way to think about such intertextual links is through reference to genre. In this poem, therefore, Pope signals in his title by using the word ‘epigram’ that he has written a short rhyming poem which will have some sort of satirical content.

The rest of the title is more puzzling, though. ‘From the French’ may simply mean that the poem is a translation, or it may have a more specific reference that is not available to us as modern readers. This sense of uncertainty is not necessarily a bad thing, and showing an awareness of significance that is not fully clear will still be rewarded in exams.

So far, then, we have looked at the title of the poem, which has signalled very specifically what genre this poem belongs to. At the end of the poem we are given the poet’s name and a date. In terms of the text’s context these may be useful, depending on what we already know and what we can research. For our purposes here it is enough to say that Pope is known as a satirical poet; many of his poems make moral comments about the behaviour of humans in general, or his enemies in particular – and he was a man with plenty of enemies.

Now that we have looked at some of the external structures, we can look at some of the more intricate details. Because this is an epigram, a short poem, we will be looking at precise detail, but the principles involved would be the same if we were looking at much longer texts. Seeing how the parts relate to each other and where the author has put emphasis are key aspects of looking at structure.

This poem is built on repetition and variation, as many poems are. The repetition comes in a number of ways: it involves the repetition of actual words, the repetition of grammatical units and the repetition of sound. The repetition of sound is made up of two parts: rhythm and rhyme. The rhythm of the poem involves a considerable number of stresses. In the first line, for example, the first three syllables are all stressed. In a poem made up of two rhyming couplets we would expect each line to end with a strongly stressed syllable. In the first two lines that is indeed the case, with ‘rule’ rhyming with ‘fool’. In the second pair of lines, though, Pope has a variation. This time the rhyme involves two syllables – ‘show it’ and ‘poet’ – with the stress falling on the first of the two syllables. In a poem where Pope is suggesting that he may be a fool, but at least a clever one, it seems natural that he should make a ‘clever’ rhyme to cement his point.

Repetition works alongside contrast in this poem, contrast being another form of repetition. So, while the words ‘poet’ and ‘fool’ appear in the second and last lines, each time preceded by ‘That every’, there is a reversal in the word order. Another form of repetition comes in the use of pronouns. Although the second word in lines one and three is a pronoun, there is a very important contrast between ‘I’ in line one and ‘you’ in line three. What the poem has, then, is two pairs of rhyming couplets, with the second pair echoing the first pair, yet at the same time subtly changing it. This sense of the two pairs of lines being separate yet connected is signalled by two things. The first is a piece of punctuation, the colon, which shows a shift of emphasis, yet at the same time a connection to what has gone before. The same effect is created with the **connective** ‘But’: as a connective it is clearly signalling a connection, yet in its meaning it signals separation and difference. The whole structure of the poem pivots on the colon and the connective ‘But’.

In the section on narrative later in this book you will find a detailed examination of the ways in which texts contain ‘voices’. The point to make here is that the voices created in texts are a vital part of the overall structure; they act as a sort of foundation upon which the text is built. Here there are two voices in evidence, the voice which narrates the poem and the voice which is reported.

The **narrative voice**, the ‘I’ of the poem, is not necessarily Pope himself – indeed it can be argued that even in highly personal writing, the very act of writing means that a new character is being created. It helps, therefore, to use the term **narrative persona** to describe the ‘I’ of a text. Even though Pope is a poet, and this is a poem which is in part about poetry and poets, this does not mean we should lose sight of the fact that Pope, rather like a dramatist, creates a voice within this poem. This is immediately evident with the formal address to ‘Sir’. We do not know who this ‘Sir’ is, certainly not from the distance of nearly three hundred years, but as with the persona we do not have to assume that it is a ‘real’ person.

Given that the poem goes on to say that the person being addressed is a fool, the created voice is less polite and formal than it may initially seem. The elegant construction of the poem, through its patterns and shape, belies a much more cutting and sarcastic edge. This would have been more clearly seen by Pope’s contemporaries than by modern readers, for whom the word ‘fool’ suggests a relatively light, even affectionate criticism. In Pope’s time, though, the word, derived from the French(!) for madness also had connotations of a jester, of a hired entertainer kept in large houses to entertain guests. Taking this sense of the word ‘fool’ into account, poets with their paying sponsors, and fools with their ‘owners’, were indeed doing much the same job.

The second voice is only reported, but is still important. The ‘Sir’ addressed is clearly a man of opinions, a man fond of making ‘gen’ral rule(s)’. There is a strong sense that this man has power and self-importance, but these qualities are undermined by the more dominant voice which narrates the poem.

The following ideas, then, have been looked at in the analysis of Pope’s ‘Epigram from the French’:

- The significance of genre in terms of the experienced reader's expectations of a text's shape and purpose
- The significance of external features of form such as the poem's title
- The potential significance of context, with regard to such things as what is already known about an author, his previous works and/or the time of writing
- The significance of repetition, variation and contrast. In the case of this poem, the repetition works through repeated patterns of words, sounds and grammar – and contrasting variations of these
- The role of the narrative voice or voices either heard or implied in a text

Exercise 2

Taking into account what has been looked at so far, this chapter now looks at two linked poems by William Blake.

Nurse's Song

When the voices of children are heard on the green
And laughing is heard on the hill,
My heart is at rest within my breast
And everything else is still.

'Then come my children: the sun is gone down
And the dews of night arise.
Come, come leave off play and let us away,
Till the morning appears in the skies.'

'No, no let us play, for it is yet day
And we cannot go to sleep.
Besides, in the sky the little birds fly,
And the hills are all covered with sheep.'

'Well, well go and play till the light fades away,
And then go home to bed.'
The little ones leaped and shouted and laughed
And all the hills echoed.

The same question that was used for the poem by Pope can apply again here:

How do the form and language of this poem contribute to its effect on the reader?

It can be broken down into the following shorter questions:

1. What is the genre of this poem and how do you know? (**Genre**)
2. What use does Blake make of sound patterns in this poem? (**Shapes and patterns**)
3. What words in the poem refer to sounds made? (**Shapes and patterns**)
4. What words are repeated in the poem? (**Shapes and patterns**)
5. What voices are heard in the poem? (**Narrative/Voices in Texts**)
6. What words and ideas are contrasted in the poem? (**Creativity**)
7. What do your answers to these questions tell you about the poem's possible meaning?

Suggestions for Answer

1. The poem's title identifies the poem as a *song*, and gives some sort of identity to the voice that is 'singing' the song – *nurse*. This title also identifies the **genre** of the poem; it tells the reader what sort of text it is.
2. As readers we have certain expectations of songs, including that there will clearly be 'musical' effects within the language. There is a very strong sense of rhyme in this poem, created sometimes by monosyllabic rhymes; these occur both at the end of lines ('hill'/'still') and within lines ('sky'/'fly'). There are also, though, less strong rhymes or half-rhymes. These are found, for example, in the first lines of stanzas one and two – 'children'/'green' and 'children'/'down'. This mixture of strong rhymes and less obvious echoes of rhymes contributes to the wider effect of the poem's very strong rhythm, with many of the syllables being stressed.

The last stanza has some subtle differences in the way its sounds come across. The third line, unlike all the other stanzas, has only a half-rhyme between 'leaped' and 'laughed'. The second line sets up the expectation of a very strong rhyming finish with the single syllable and stressed word 'bed'. Instead, though, there is the much more unexpected 'echoed'. If said with a modern two syllable stress, then the word falls very flat; if with a three syllable stress (ech/o/ed) then the word itself becomes iconic, in that it actually sounds like what it means. Instead of there being a finality to the poem, which there would have been with a strong rhyme, the children's laughter continues to reverberate and bounce back, so having even more value.

3. This poem announces in its title that it is a 'song' – in other words it is proclaiming that it has sound qualities, as we have seen above. The poem also, however, contains words that denote sound – 'voices', 'heard', 'laughing', 'shouted', 'laughed', 'echoed' – and the absence of sound in 'still'. Clearly making a noise and being heard are important to the poem's overall meanings.
4. As you would expect with a song, there are numerous repetitions of words. Often these repetitions are adjacent to each other: 'Come', 'come'; 'No', 'no'; 'Well', 'well'. Other repetitions include 'all', 'hill'/'hills', 'play', 'sky'/'skies', 'children', 'little' and 'laughing'/'laughed'. The idea of laughing, appearing as it does both

near the beginning and end of the poem, is clearly significant, suggesting innocent happiness. The word 'echoed' also involves the idea of repetition in its meaning. The hills are bouncing back the sounds of the children.

One word, though, appears ten times within the four verses of the poem. 'And' might on the surface of appear to be an unimportant word, but not when it is used this often. It is used at the beginning of a line, and so in a sense foregrounded, seven times, and sometimes in this position it is also stressed. The word 'and' contributes significantly to the apparent simplicity of the poem – using the connective 'and' is often seen as a childish thing to do. In a broader sense it also highlights the fact that we should not necessarily ignore the effect of the apparently less significant words when looking at texts.

5. Although we are told that this is 'the' or 'a' nurse's song, there are at least two 'voices' in the poem, possibly three. One sees the nurse urging care and caution; the other belongs to the children wanting carefree freedom. These voices are set in some sort of opposition to each other, with the children winning the argument. It is their laughter we hear at the end of the poem. If the narrator of the first verse is seen as different from the nurse, and that is possible, then there are three voices, and three viewpoints. If there is a third **narrative voice** in the poem, then it comes right at the start, and it establishes a strong point of view. If the nurse narrates the first verse, it is an opinion. If it is a narrative persona whose voice is heard in the first verse, it is a voice with authority.
6. Although the poem has no obvious metaphor, there is contrast in the poem between day/light and dark/night, which have potentially symbolic values. Traditionally we associate the light with positive aspects and the dark with negative. The cautious nurse wants the children home before dark sets in, before danger comes, but the children want to play longer, to take full advantage of the light, even if that might involve the risk of staying out too long.
7. We have noted above that the poem has very little obvious metaphor, as we would expect, having identified its simplicity of approach. It could be, though, that the whole poem is a metaphor, that children's voices being heard and the hills responding is a celebration of innocence. The experience of the nurse urges caution, but the exuberance of the innocent triumphs. Students who have studied any Blake will know that Blake wrote poems under the headings of *Innocence* and *Experience* and that these notions of adult responsibility and childhood innocence are major themes in his work.

It was noted earlier that analysing the language of literature serves little purpose if it is done in a vacuum, and that you should not isolate the language from everything else that is going on. Meanings and language work together, not separately.

The analysis of the poem above has looked at a number of structural aspects, and has commented on repetition and what it contributes to the poem. It has also implied that this very 'traditional' poem – traditional in the sense of its regular form, rhyme and so on – is in fact far subtler than it seems. If a range of meanings can be found in the poem, then, paradoxically, the poem's very simplicity will have contributed to its effect.

The meanings that have been hinted at in the analysis so far concern two opposing sets of voices which form a sort of debate. On the one hand are the children asking for ‘play’, and on the other the nurse who seems concerned for their safety. Childhood innocence is set against adult experience but not in an aggressive sense. The children ask for permission and the permission is granted. The third voice, which could be a narrative persona, or the nurse, or Blake himself, endorses at the start of the poem what happens at the end of the it; children’s voices/laughter produce rest and stillness in those who hear them. The **passive voice** when used in ‘are heard’ and ‘is heard’ could suggest that this third voice does not actually hear the voices; it just knows that others do – in which case it could even be the voice of God we are given at the start of the poem.

This idea of a religious dimension to the poem is endorsed by a number of words and ideas in the poem – light and dark, stillness, nature and so on. These do not have to be taken as religious, but they can be, especially when this poem is put in the context of other poems by Blake. Students studying Blake’s poetry as a set text would know that he has a reputation as a mystic poet, and would know other works by him which contain similar possibilities. But even those seeing this poem for the first time could look closely at the language and form of the poem and see that it has several potential meanings.

Exercise 3

William Blake wrote two parallel poems called ‘Nurse’s Song’. The poem from *Songs of Innocence* has been analysed above. As an extension exercise to work on the ideas introduced in this chapter, the other poem, taken from *Songs of Experience* will prove a useful contrast. It is likely that your study of poetry at AS/A2 will involve looking at a collection/selection of poems, so writing comparatively about texts, rather than about texts in isolation, is a skill you need to develop.

Suggestions for answer can be found at the back of the book.

Task: *How do the form and language of this poem compare to the other ‘Nurse’s Song’?*

Nurse’s Song (Experience)

When the voices of children are heard on the green
And whisp’rings are in the dale,
The days of my youth rise fresh in my mind:
My face turns green and pale.

Then come home my children, the sun is gone down
And the dews of night arise;
Your spring and your day are wasted in play,
And your winter and night in disguise.