

SECTION

# 9

## POETIC APPRECIATION

# POETRY

## APPRECIATION

### Introduction

It is possible to read any poem in English, only for it to convey a surface meaning to the reader. Sometimes, beyond our understanding, poets have peculiar reasons for writing their poems. Think of poetry as a land with hidden treasures. In each line or stanza readers could find a serious event, someone's story or a particular happening in the society, buried. These deeper meanings need to be uncovered in order to appreciate the poem. Poems usually carry a deeper meaning than what you see when you read the poem for reading sake. As you look more carefully at a poem, and allow your thoughts to become more focussed, bring your knowledge of events that could fit into each line or on board and as a result, other ideas will emerge. In this way, your deeper reflection will enhance your understanding. That is what is meant by Poetry Appreciation. You might not instinctively enjoy the poem at the outset or even after a number of readings, which is normal. However, this approach should bring about a richer awareness of the ideas and linguistic impact the poem harbours/contains.

In Junior High School, you learned eight (8) interesting poems from the Cockcrow. Do you remember them? They included: *The Colour of God*, *Desert Rivers*, *Scribbler's Dream*, *Makola*, *Sleep Without Wake*, *A Wreath of Tears*, *Mama is a Sunrise*, and *A Minor Bird*. Which was your favourite poem and why? Do you know that you can interpret the same poem to have a deeper meaning?

This section will guide you to do reflective journaling by reflecting on your understanding of poems, exploring your emotional responses and connecting the recurring theme to your own life experience.

#### By the end of the section, you should be able to

- Interpret poems in context beyond literal meanings to show deeper connections.
- Discuss the dominant themes in a poem and analyse in detail how they develop throughout the poem.
- Using the Point, Evidence, Explanation (PEE) format, quote and discuss strong, appropriate textual evidence to support a personal analysis of short poems.
- Focus on the process of Reflective Learning for literary appreciation.

#### Key Ideas

- Interpreting poems means going beyond the literal meaning and looking at the deeper and wider meanings arising from the context.
- Two major ways of interpreting poetry beyond the literal meaning are using the PEE format and Reflective Journaling. PEE stands for (Point, Evidence, Explanation).

- In poetry, the theme is the central idea or the main message of a poem.
- Themes in poetry are revealed through thematic concept and thematic statement.
- A Journaling in literature allows learners to write down what they read, think, hear.
- The thematic statement is the message the poet is aiming to provide, whereas the thematic concept is the message the reader derives from the poem.

## Poetry Interpretation

In *How to Read a Poem*, Terry Eagleton defines poetry interpretation as the process of uncovering the ways in which a poem's language, form and structure create its meaning; this also comes from analysing the social, cultural and historical contexts of the poem.

### Considerations for Poetry Interpretation

To interpret a poem, consider the following:

1. Read the poem aloud: This will help you hear the different sound effects like rhymes and rhythms.
2. Explore the meaning: Look at the nouns and proper pronouns to identify the characters, especially the main figure whose perspective is shown.
3. Check punctuation: Use punctuation to break up the lines into smaller, meaningful parts.
4. Notice repeated images or symbols: These give hints about the poem's purpose.
5. Listen to the rhythm: Rhythm can enhance the meaning of the poem.
6. Identify poetic devices: Look for things like similes and metaphors.
7. Think about the form: Consider the type of poem, like an ode or epic.
8. Consider the overall effect: Think about how the poem makes you feel as a reader.

Note that poetry interpretation is not about paraphrasing or summarising the poem in your own words. It arises from an analysis of the deeper meaning of the poem's message. Poetry interpretation also involves annotation, which includes adding notes, comments and explanations to a poem to clarify its meaning.

#### Activity 9.1

##### Impact of connotation on meaning

The words in a poem can have multiple meanings. There is the literal meaning and the deeper meaning of the words of the poem. Pair with a friend and carry out the activities below:

1. Find the meaning of the word "connotation" or "connotative" from a dictionary.

2. Discuss how connotation impacts a poem and write your answers in your notebook.
3. Together with your partner, use your tablet to search for Wole Soyinka and John Pepper Clark's poems titled Abiku.
4. Make the necessary annotations for both poems.
5. Follow the discussion from your teacher at this point and contribute.
6. Based on the background information discussed with your teacher, answer the following questions to uncover the literal meanings of the poem:
  - a. Who are the voices in the poem?
  - b. What is the setting?
  - c. What ideas are being communicated?
  - d. What feeling is being created in the poem?
  - e. Why could have compelled the poet to write such a poem?

### Activity 9.2

#### Appreciating Unseen Poems

1. Read the unseen poem below and answer the questions that follow



#### CHILD

River bird, river bird.  
 Sitting all day long  
 On hook over grass,  
 River bird, river bird.  
 Sing to me a song  
 Of all that pass  
 And say,

## Will mother come back today?

2. Complete the table below using the above poem

Question	Response
Is the voice passive or active?	
What is the setting?	
What is the main idea of this poem?	
What is the mood of the poem?	
What poetic form has been used in the above poem?	
Which literary devices have been used/employed in the poem?	

### Activity 9.3

#### Relating themes to real life experiences

1. Your teacher will put you into groups of three, in your groups write a one and half page essay relating the themes in William Shakespeare's Sonnet 15 below using your real-life experiences.

When I consider everything that grows  
 Holds in perfection but a little moment,  
 That this huge stage presenteth nought but shows  
 Whereon the stars in secret influence comment;  
 When I perceive that men as plants increase,  
 Cheered and checked even by the self-same sky,  
 Vaunt in their youthful sap, at height decrease,  
 And wear their brave state out of memory;  
 Then the conceit of this inconstant stay  
 Sets you most rich in youth before my sight,  
 Where wasteful Time debateth with decay  
 To change your day of youth to sullied night,  
 And all in war with Time for love of you,  
 As he takes from you, I engraft you new

2. Based on textual evidence from the poem above, discuss with your class seating partner socially positive ideas and values derived from the poem.

# How Dominant Themes in Poetry are Developed

## Theme and Subject Matter

In poetry, the theme is the central or main idea the poem conveys to the readers. Simply put, the theme in poetry is the message of the poem. If the poem has something to say about life or human nature, that message it carries across will be the theme. On the other hand, the subject matter is mostly what the poem is about. For instance, Kofi Awoonor's poem, *The Cathedral* is about a tree and a cathedral. That is the subject matter. What the subject matter represents or symbolises is the theme. In Awoonor's poem, the tree and the cathedral represent the clash of tradition and modernity as a theme. There is also a theme of religion in the poem. A poem can thus be about one subject with many themes. Subject matter is usually concrete whereas the theme is a more abstract concept.

A dominant theme is the theme that usually re-occurs throughout the poem. Common dominant themes in poetry include love, spirituality, nature, beauty, ageing, immortality, desire, apocalypse, death, corruption, colonialism, racism, and many others.

Themes in poetry can be revealed in two dimensions sometimes known as thematic concept and thematic statement. The thematic concept is what the readers derive from the text; the thematic statement is what the writer explicitly provides about the subject. For instance, if a writer writes about the theme of marriage, that becomes the thematic statement, when a reader of the text derives the impact of unhappy marriage on women, without it being explicitly stated, that would be a thematic concept.

## Identifying Themes in Poetry

To identify the theme or themes in a poem, consider the steps below:

1. Read the poem slowly. Try reading aloud if possible.
2. Identify the persona or personae (plural) - the speaking voice or voices in the poem.
3. Once you have read and understood the poem, try to put the poem into your own words. This will help you to clarify fully, the 'meaning' of the poem.
4. Afterwards, try to identify the main idea of the poem. Try to express this in one or two sentences.

## Questions to guide your identification of a theme

Ask yourself the following questions to help identify the theme/themes in a poem.

1. Are there words, phrases, or actions that are repeated?
2. Does a central character learn anything by the end?
3. Is the poem trying to challenge the thinking of the readers?
4. Why do you think this subject was chosen for the poem?
5. Are there large issues or universal concepts considered in this poem?
6. What does the poem teach its readers if anything?
7. What is the theme of the poem?

## Activity 9.4

### Relating Themes to Real Experiences

1. Pick one theme from the poem below, explain it briefly using a textual evidence and real-life experience.

#### Africa my Africa

Africa of proud warriors in ancestral Savannahs  
 Africa of whom my grandmother sings  
 On the banks of the distant river  
 I have never known you  
 But your blood flows in my veins  
 Your beautiful black blood that irrigates the fields  
 The blood of your sweat  
 The sweat of your work  
 The work of your slavery  
 Africa, tell me Africa  
 Is this your back that is bent  
 This back that breaks under the weight of humiliation  
 This back trembling with red scars  
 And saying yes to the whip under the midday sun?  
 But a grave voice answers me  
 Impetuous child that tree, young and strong  
 That tree over there  
 Splendidly alone amidst white and faded flowers  
 That is your Africa springing up anew  
 springing up patiently, obstinately  
 Whose fruit bit by bit acquires  
 The bitter taste of liberty

(David Diop)

2. Your teacher will guide you to bring out the moral lessons in the poem.
3. Reflect and share the values you have learned from this poem.
4. Follow the discussion by your teacher on subject matter. You can use the following steps as guide:
  - a. Look out for repeated images/motifs/issues/ideas.
  - b. Put the related issues/ideas together.
  - c. Compile thematic statements.
  - d. Differentiate main/dominant themes from the sub-theme.
  - e. Take part in the process of understanding the themes of a poem through in-depth reading, annotations, discussions and research either individually or in groups.

- f. Relate the themes to real and personal experiences through reflection and journaling.
- g. Based on textual evidence, incorporate moral and positive societal ideas derived from the poem.
- h. Discuss the values learned through reflection by using ethically acceptable academic language.

Let us now look at how you can use the **Point, Evidence, Explanation (PEE)** format to interpret a poem beyond its literal meaning.

## The PEE Format

PEE stands for **Point, Evidence, Explanation** and is very useful for creating structured arguments and ensuring that essays are focused on ideas and are coherent enough to follow. It is usually useful in the main body after the introductory paragraph. This is what it involves:

1. **Point:** This is where you make a clear statement about the poem, identifying a key idea or theme. Your point should directly address the question or topic you are analysing. For example, “The poet uses imagery to convey the theme of loneliness.”
2. **Evidence:** After making your point, you have to provide evidence from the poem to support it. This usually involves quoting specific lines, phrases, or words from the text. For example, “In the line, ‘The empty streets echoed with silence,’ the word ‘empty’ reflects a sense of isolation.”
3. **Explanation:** This is where you explain how your evidence supports your point. You analyse (examine) the language, structure, or other literary techniques used in the evidence to show how they contribute to the poem’s meaning. For example, “The use of ‘echoed’ enhances the feeling of emptiness, as it suggests that the poet is in a place devoid of human presence, reinforcing the theme of loneliness.”

## How to Use the PEE Format in Poetry Analysis

To apply the PEE format when analysing a poem, follow these steps:

1. Read and Understand the Poem
  - a. Begin by reading the poem several times to understand its overall meaning, themes, tone, and mood.
  - b. Identify key elements such as language, structure, literary devices, and imagery that contribute to the poem’s meaning.
2. Identify the Focus of Your Analysis
  - a. Consider what aspect of the poem you are analysing, such as a theme, tone, imagery, metaphor, or any other literary device.
  - b. If you have an essay question, focus on addressing that. Always read the question with care, while considering its main aim for your essay. Ensure that you adhere closely to the subject of the question in your writing.



3. Start with a Point (P): Make a clear, concise statement about the poem.
4. Provide Evidence (E): Use a specific quote or reference from the poem to support your point. This could be a word, phrase, a line or a number of lines.
5. Explain the Evidence (E): Explain how the evidence you have provided supports your point. Analyse the literary devices, language, or symbolism used in the quote.

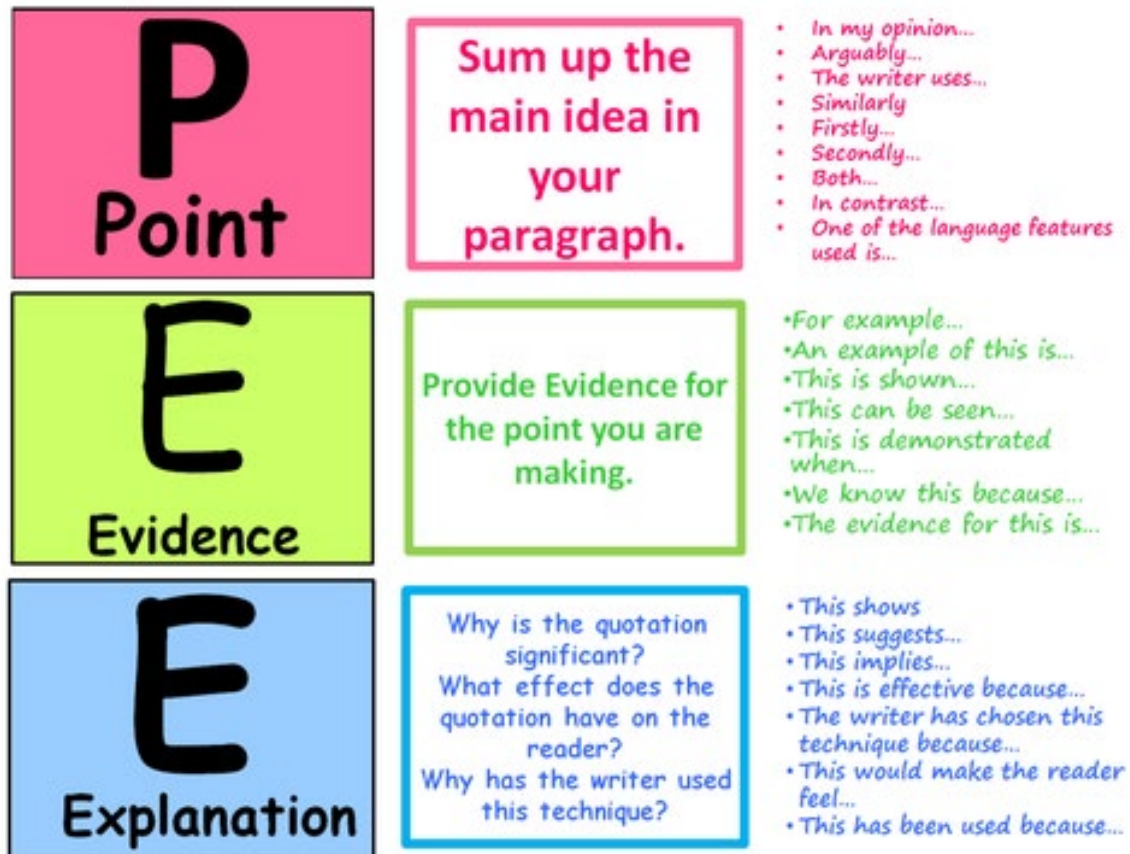


Fig. 9.1: A picture illustrating how the PEE format is used

### Activity 9.5

#### Eliciting learner response through 5 Whys

During your end of term examination, your teacher gave a question under poetry as “Examine the issue of clash of culture in Gabriel Okara’s poem Once Upon a Time. Using the 5 whys strategy model, respond to the question.

Use the PEE format while providing answers to the question in an essay.

1. Once Upon a Time has the clash of culture of a theme (Why?)
2. (Why) is cultural clash an issue in the poem?
3. The poem is dominated by this issue (Why?)
4. (Why) is the title of the poem giving a hint about cultural clash?
5. The poem ends with the line “once upon a time when I was like you. (Why?)

## Journaling in Literature

In literature, journaling refers to the practise of writing what you read, personal reflections, thoughts, feelings, discussions and observations based on a text. It is like a journey into one's internal world. It is often used as a method for learners or readers to engage more deeply with a literary work, express their interpretations and explore ideas that emerge from the reading process.

### A Guide to Writing a Journal on a Poem

Writing a journal on a poem allows you to reflect on its meaning, explore your personal reactions and analyse its themes, structure, and literary devices. Here is a step-by-step guide to help you write a thoughtful and reflective journal entry on a poem:

Step 1: Read the Poem Carefully. Tip: Underline or highlight any words, phrases, or lines that stand out for you.

Step 2: Record Your Immediate Reactions; feelings, impressions/thoughts, etc.

Step 3: Identify Key Themes

Step 4: Analyse Literary Devices and Language

Step 5: Reflect on your personal Connection; how you are able to relate to the poem.

Step 6: Ask Questions (Concerning meanings, specific lines, the poem in general).

Step 7: Reflect on Structure and Form (Be it a sonnet, ballad, etc)

Step 8: Summarise Key Takeaways

Reflect on the following while journaling

- 1 Recognise the point of view used.
- 2 Identify imagery used.
- 3 Identify how the characters are introduced.
- 4 Identify the purpose of the title.
- 5 Identify the parts of the plots and their sequence.
- 6 Determine the tone, mood and style of the writing.
- 7 Take into account the generalisations and arguments made in the text.
- 8 Identify evidence proving a universal truth or philosophy.
- 9 Relate the story to everyday life.
- 10 Identify relatable themes from the text.
- 11 Come up with creative renditions like artworks, story writing, sketches.

### Sample Journal Entry for Dylan Thomas' Poem, Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night

1. Initial Reaction:

Upon reading *Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night* by Dylan Thomas, I felt a mix of sorrow and determination. The repeated plea for strength in the face of death made me think about how we confront loss in our own lives.

2. Key Themes:

A central theme in this poem is the struggle against death. The speaker encourages resisting the inevitable with dignity and strength, using ‘rage’ as a metaphor for fighting against fate.

3. Literary Devices:

Thomas uses repetition effectively with the line ‘Rage, rage against the dying of the light.’ This repetition emphasises the intensity of emotion and reinforces the idea of fighting against death. The ‘light’ is a metaphor which represents life, making the fading light a symbol of approaching death.

4. Personal Connection:

The poem reminds me of my grandfather’s final days, when he refused to give up despite his illness. I can relate to the speaker’s desire to see his father fight against death, as it mirrors my own feelings during that difficult time, especially since I wanted him to live longer.

5. Questions:

Why does the poet use the word ‘rage’ instead of ‘fight’? Is he suggesting that the emotion needed to resist death is rooted in anger or frustration?

6. Structure and Form:

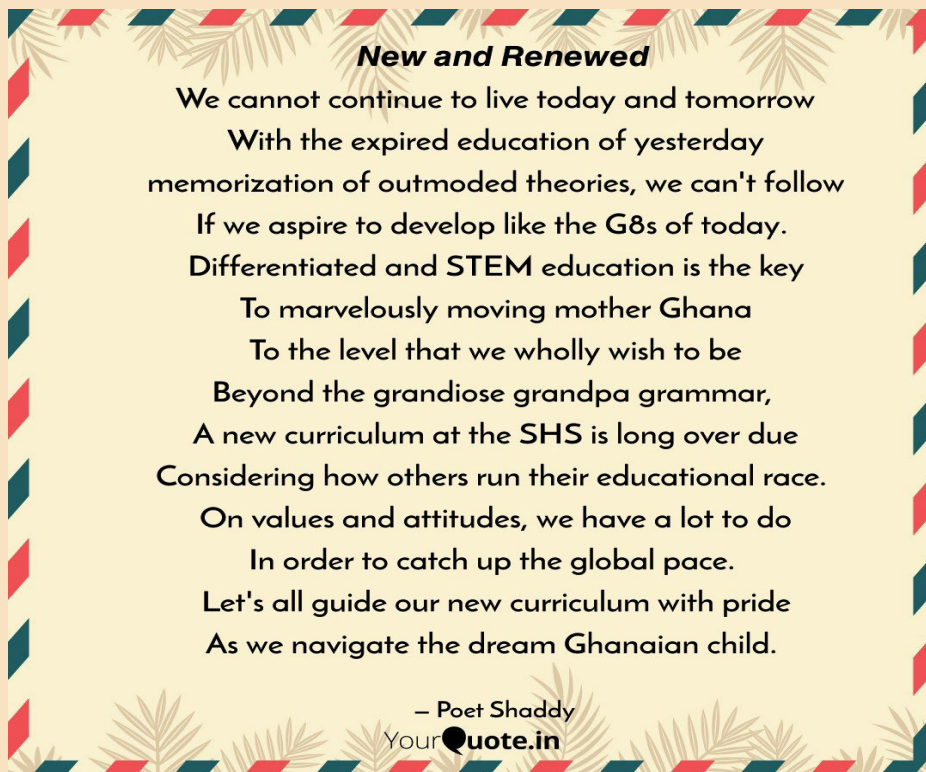
The poem’s villanelle form (a nineteen-lined poem of five tercets and a quatrain), with its strict repetition and rhyme scheme, mirrors the cyclical (repetitive) nature of life and death. The form seems to trap the speaker in this constant struggle, echoing (repeating) the fight against an inevitable end.

7. Conclusion:

After reflecting on the poem, I see it as both a reflection on the fear of loss and a call for strength. The poet’s use of repetition and strong imagery makes the emotional intensity clear. I now realise that Thomas is not only addressing his father’s death but also his own fear of mortality. The villanelle form allows the building of a general argument, which finally moves to the specific particular individual, the father.

# REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Explain poetry interpretation in your own words.
2. List at least three things to consider when interpreting a poem.
3. List five examples of dominant themes.
4. What does PEE stand for?
5. Why should poems be interpreted?
6. Explain what each of the alphabets in PEE stand for using the poem Caged Bird by Maya Angelou
7. How does connotation affect the meaning of a poem?
8. How will you interpret a poem?
9. How will you identify selected themes in poetry?
10. Analyse the theme of Racial Discrimination in Maya Angelou's Caged Bird. Use the PEE format.
11. Create a journal entry on the poem below



# ANSWERS TO REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Poetry interpretation is the process of uncovering the ways in which a poem's language, form and structure create its meaning
2. Consider who the voices in the poem are.  
Consider the setting.  
Consider the ideas that are being communicated.  
Think about the feeling being created in the poem.  
Consider what could have compelled the poet to write such a poem?
3. Love  
Peace  
Nature  
Beauty  
Ageing
4. P-Point  
E- Evidence  
E-Explanation
5. Poems are like folded clothes. You only see the beauty of it when you expand them/open them up (interpret them).  
Poems are like puzzle pieces. They need to be solved (interpreted) to bring their pieces together to create the perfect image they are meant to depict/reflect, which in this case is usually a story.
6. Point: In "Caged Bird," Maya Angelou uses the metaphor of a caged bird to represent racial discrimination and the oppression of African Americans, contrasting it with the image of a free bird to highlight the inequality between races.  
Evidence: Angelou writes,  
"But a bird that stalks  
down his narrow cage  
can seldom see through  
his bars of rage."  
Explanation: The "caged bird" symbolises individuals who are oppressed, particularly African Americans facing racial discrimination. The image of the bird "stalking" in a "narrow cage" reflects the limitations and confinement experienced due to widespread racism. The "bars of rage" represent both the physical and psychological barriers that prevent the bird from achieving freedom and equality. Angelou uses the caged bird's frustration and helplessness as a powerful metaphor

for the way racial discrimination restricts opportunities and creates an atmosphere of anger and bitterness. The fact that the bird “can seldom see through” these bars further emphasise the sense of hopelessness, as those suffering from racial injustice are often unable to see a way out of their oppression.

Through this metaphor, Angelou criticises the extensive nature of racial discrimination, suggesting that it not only confines people physically but also mentally and emotionally, limiting their potential and suppressing their voices. The caged bird’s struggle for freedom symbolises the ongoing fight for racial equality.

7. Poems are like stories told in pieces with the rest hidden. Connotation uncovers the hidden parts to bring the full story behind the poem to life.

8. Read the poem aloud.

Explore the meaning.

Check the punctuation

Notice repeated images or symbols.

Listen to the rhythm.

Identify poetic devices

Think about the form

Consider the overall effect

9. Read the poem slowly.

Identify the persona or personae (plural).

Put the poem into your own words to clarify the full meaning.

Identify the main idea of the poem.

10. Point: The poem “Caged Bird” by Maya Angelou explores the theme of racial discrimination by contrasting the experiences of a free bird and a caged bird, symbolising the difference between white and black individuals in society.

Evidence: Angelou writes, “The free bird thinks of another breeze... and dares to claim the sky”. In contrast, “The caged bird sings with a fearful trill of things unknown but longed for still.”

Explanation: The “free bird” represents those who enjoy freedom and opportunities without restrictions, much like the privileges experienced by white individuals in society. The “caged bird,” on the other hand, symbolises black individuals who suffer from systemic racial discrimination. The caged bird’s “fearful trill” reflects the pain and longing for freedom experienced by those who are oppressed. By contrasting the free bird’s carefree life with the caged bird’s confinement, Angelou highlights the stark differences in experiences due to racial discrimination. The caged bird’s song of longing and hope underscores the resilience and enduring spirit of those who face oppression.

## Additional Reading

1. Terry Eagleton (2007) How to Read a Poem
2. Kojouhar Senanu and Theo Vincent, A Selection of African Poetry

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# Acknowledgements



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