

In for the long haul - Chaucer, Milton, Wordsworth and co

Jane Ogborn offers a training programme for coping with the marathon challenges of reading a long poem.

So what's the difference between sprinting and running a marathon? Obviously they both involve running, but the demands they put on the runner are very different. And the same goes for reading. By now you are probably a fairly well trained sprinter, over the short distances provided by most of the poetry you've studied. But how well suited are the techniques and strategies you have developed for reading these to the much longer poems you may now find yourself faced with for AS or A2? Just how will 'close reading', and detailed study of images and 'deeper meanings' really help you in the early stages of coping with a poem as long as a short story or a chapter in an autobiography? What's certain is that, like marathon running, reading long poems requires stamina and staying power, and adapting your reading methods to this kind of poetry will almost certainly require some changes in your training regime.

First of all, let's define a 'long' poem, as being one which takes up more than three pages of text. So Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale' doesn't qualify, and nor does Browning's 'My Last Duchess'; Tennyson's *In Memoriam* does, because, although it is made up of 131 short poems, they are sequenced to form a larger whole. Across all the different A Level specifications, the same names occur over and over again: Chaucer, Milton, Wordsworth, Keats and Tennyson, with Pope, Coleridge and Browning also putting in less frequent appearances. Their work covers 500 years, but the one thing they have in common is that they all wrote some poems which run for pages and pages! So whichever one of them you are studying, what follow are some ways of starting out on a long poem to help you to get a better grip on its content and meaning, before you work on the important question of what makes it poetry.

1. Check out the content

Give yourself something to hold onto by looking up your poem in one of the Companions to English Literature – Oxford or Cambridge, or preferably both. You'll find plenty of overlap in their summaries of content, but some useful variations in the amount of contextual information they include. The entries are short, which will stop you getting bogged down in too much information at this stage, and they are useful for whetting your appetite – for sex and violence in Chaucer's 'The Miller's Tale', perhaps, or at least letting you know what you are in for – as in Keats' reworkings of Greek mythology in *Hyperion* and *Endymion*. They might also point you in some useful new directions, once you have some idea of the content. For example, the Oxford Companion adds to its account of *Endymion* a reference to Keats' own assessment of the poem in his Preface: 'a feverish attempt rather than a deed accomplished', putting it alongside the comment of the contemporary critic, John Gibson Lockhart, in Blackwood's *Edinburgh Review*, that the poem is 'calm, settled, drivelling idiocy!' Something worth coming back to once you've made your own mind up about the poem, and are thinking about 'other readers' interpretations' of texts.

2. Go with the genre

Yes, OK, so they're poetry, not prose or drama, but within that, long poems come in a wide variety of types, including:

- narrative – Chaucer, Milton, Coleridge, Keats, Tennyson
- epic – Milton, Pope, Keats
- autobiography – Wordsworth
- poems of ideas (religion, society) – Tennyson
- philosophical – Keats

The poets also use a variety of poetic forms, including:

- blank verse – Milton, Keats, Tennyson
- rhyming couplets – Chaucer, Pope, Keats
- stanzas with various rhyming patterns – Coleridge, Keats, Tennyson
- linked sequences of shorter poems – Tennyson
- dramatic monologues – Browning

What long poems have in common, even the ones which seem to be mainly about ideas – like *The Prelude*, or *Hyperion*, or *In Memoriam* – is that they all have some sort of narrative thread, and it's a great help to identify that and hold on to it as you work through the poem. The poets take ideas for their narratives from all sorts of sources – folk tales, myths and legends, stories with a moral, stories from the Bible and history, even, in the case of Pope's *Rape of the Lock*, a story based on a recent event. Chaucer uses many different models for his *The Canterbury Tales*, and depending on which one you are studying, it is helpful to find out a little more about which kind he is basing your Tale on. Your knowledge of other literary genres, like memoir and autobiography, will be very useful when you start to read *The Prelude* and should help you to recognise the reasons for Wordsworth's long reflective passages, and to tune in to his voice. With dramatic monologues, you will also find it helpful to establish features such as the setting, the situation and the voice of the speaker, which you will be more familiar with when reading novels or plays. Even though they don't qualify as 'long' poems, Browning's 'My Last Duchess', or 'Porphyria's Lover' or Tennyson's 'Ulysses' would be useful early training for doing this.

3. Face up to (literary) fashions

Nowadays through the lists of set books for AS and A2 we still have to face up to the canon of literary texts – the 'literary heritage' alternative to the Big Read – but we don't really arrange different kinds of literature in rank order by genres. As individual readers, we probably have definite personal preferences for one genre over another, but is there any shared agreement that one kind of poem is definitely superior to others? The fact that most poetry published today is short lyric poetry may suggest that, but maybe it simply indicates our general preference in the twenty-first century for speed and shortness, and for the emotional, confessional and personal in poetry?

Two or three hundred years ago, things were very different. Then, in art, history paintings were considered by critics, artists and the public as the most prestigious form, large scale demonstrations of the artist's skills, and statements of national pride, or records of past events in the life of a nation, or

retellings of ancient stories. In the same way in literature, the epic came at the top of the rank order of kinds of poems. An epic has a lot in common with a history painting – it tells a story of heroic actions and struggles, often based on historic or mythical characters, and usually dealing with the conflict between good and evil – think *Lord of the Rings*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Homer's *Odyssey* (and also, in a comic up-ending of the conventions of the genre, *The Rape of the Lock* and Byron's *Don Juan*). Today we use the word to describe any book or film which covers a huge canvas and has a vast cast of characters, but to a poet like Milton, the epic was the only form grand enough for his treatment of the Bible story of Adam and Eve, and the Fall of man. For Keats, the epic represented a challenge he felt he must meet, and a way of proving his credentials as a real poet. Of *Endymion* he said in a letter to his brother George that his aim was 'to make 4,000 lines of one bare circumstance and fill them with Poetry'.

The epic is there as a model for all the writers of these poems, a genre with high status, and something to aspire to, and whatever angle they take on their subject matter, one thing it certainly means is length.

4. Be a sub-editor

One of the most off-putting things about most long poems is the way they look on the page – big slabs of print, going on without much visible break for page after page. So go to work on the text. Treat it as if it were prose, and put in paragraph breaks, headlines and subheadings about the content. Some poets do this for you. As Rick Rylance explains in his article on *The Ancient Mariner* in *emagazine*, issue 21, in later editions Coleridge added marginal notes, marking out where the scene and situation changes, and even pointing up the message at the end of it. In the margins of her long poem *Dart*, published in 2002, Alice Oswald indicates shifts of speaker and adds some explanatory notes in a similar way. But the important thing is to hack away at the text for yourself. Find the places where each section starts and ends, sort out where the poet moves the narrative on and identify where the poet goes off into lengthy description or comparison (both features of classic epic poetry). Check out unfamiliar names, and put in a brief note about their significance.

Rather than the condensed language and imagery that you have probably come to expect from shorter poems, be prepared for the poet to expand ideas, and elaborate points with many examples. Watch out for markers like ... 'As when ... ' which are likely to signal epic (i.e. long) similes, and expect lengthy lists, which expand and develop a description or an idea, often in quite a repetitive way.

Long poems give the writer scope to discuss, explore, illustrate, digress, and generally spread themselves. As a reader you need to let them do that, and learn to tolerate a much slower progress through the text than you may be used to: sub-editing will help you to be more aware of what the writer is doing and give you a place from which to start thinking about how they are doing it, especially in terms of structure.

5. Read it aloud

Yes, really. Although it's not always easy at first, when a poet is writing in an unfamiliar style, and altering normal word order to fit the rhythm and rhyme, there isn't any better way of making yourself concentrate on the meaning, and seeing and hearing how the sentences are working in the poem. Admittedly, Chaucer presents an extra layer of difficulty here – maybe that's a case for starting with a good translation, preferably one which uses the same verse form as the original, like Nevil Coghill's, and moving on to the original once you have a grip on the content.

As with everything else about them, sentences in long poems also tend to be long – reading them is a matter of taking bigger breaths, literally and metaphorically, something easier to do aloud than just with the eye. Reading aloud will help you to appreciate the ways the sentences are put together, and because they tend to be so long, will force you to pay attention to the punctuation – a lesson which will pay off when you work on shorter poems as well.

6. Find a friend

Both the last two strategies would be easier and more enjoyable done with someone else – you could compare marginal notes and suggested breaks, and take it in turns to read aloud and discuss what's going on in your set poem, and different ways of interpreting certain lines aloud.

And finally, but most importantly ...

7. What makes it a poem?

Everything I've suggested up to now is designed to help you get to grips with content and meaning. This spade work takes up a lot of time and energy, but you mustn't stop there – remember that you will eventually also be writing about how the poet's choices of form, structure and language shape meanings. Knowing something about the literary context of the poem – its genre – will help you to see how the poet is using the features of narrative, or epic, or first person reflection to shape their ideas. Then you can think about what their choice of form adds to that: Keats' complex rhyming stanzas in his mediaeval romances, *The Eve of St Agnes* and *Isabella*; Milton's Biblical-sounding blank verse and Wordsworth's reflective first person meditations, also in blank verse; Pope's and Keats' rhyming couplets, used for such strikingly different purposes – satire and wit in Pope's case, and epic rhetoric in Keats'. Once you feel you have got on top of the content and the form and structure of the poem, you can home in on details, picking out for yourself some memorable lines you can use to illustrate your knowledge of the poem, and your understanding of the poet's techniques.

Why bother with long poems?

It's possible that your teacher has protected you from having to deal with any long poems by not choosing one of these texts for you to study. You may think the long poems I have mentioned most are old fashioned and irrelevant. But if you are looking for a subject for your comparative essay, and want something different, why not consider putting a modern long poem alongside your chosen prose text? You could choose Alice Oswald's *Dart*, which traces the course of the River Dart from source to sea, and includes the voices of people who live and work along it – a wonderful text to put with any novel where the way the writer handles place and landscape interests you. Or there's *Killing Time* by Simon Armitage – 1000 lines written to celebrate the Millennium – which you could read against any novel which you feel captures the important issues of its time; or *V* by Tony Harrison – personal history, and social comment in his characteristic verse form and voice – one to compare with a first person narrative, perhaps; or if you are interested in women's writing, try 'Letter from a Far Country' by Gillian Clarke – a poem about memory, and the domestic, hidden aspects of women's lives. Just be aware that you'd have to consider a few more of Clarke's poems from the collection published as *Letter from a Far Country* to meet the A2 rules that you are using a whole text.

So don't run away from long poems. Learning to read them will extend your abilities as a reader, and build up your stamina – marathon reading with a spin off.

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