

Year 9 English Knowledge Booklet

Identity Poetry



Name:

Class:

Identity Poetry

BQ: Why study poetry?

BQ: What common themes link the poems in our anthology?

BQ: How does Agard convey his feelings in Half Caste?

BQ: What tone does Angelou use in Still I Rise?

BQ: What similarities are there between Still I Rise and Half Caste?

Identity Poetry

BQ: How does Nichols use language to express her point in *Island Man*?

BQ: How does the speaker in *The Emigrée* feel about her identity?

BQ: What unites the subjects of *Island Man* and *The Emigrée*?

BQ: How does Dharker use language to convey her point in *The Right Word*?

BQ: How is identity presented in *The Right Word* and another poem in the anthology?

Identity Poetry

BQ: How can we express a powerful view on identity through poetry?

BQ: Why has Bhatt chosen to include another language in her poem?

BQ: To what extent is Alexie's poem about identity?

BQ: Why does Ferlinghetti include two sets of people in his poem?

BQ: How are outcasts presented in Clown Punk?

Identity Poetry

BQ: How can we use different perspectives for effect?

BQ: How is identity presented in 'Two Scavengers...' and a poem of your choice?

BQ: What role do parents play in forming our identities?

BQ: To what extent is biographical information useful when interpreting a poem?

BQ: To what extent is age stereotyped?

BQ: How do writers use poetic voice to convey their message?

BQ: How is the relationship between appearance and identity explored in Plath's Mirror?

BQ: How is age or appearance explored in two of the poems we have studied so far?

BQ: How is age explored in Old Man, Old Man?

BQ: How does Zephaniah convey his point in The British?

BQ: How can I express my own identity through the medium of poetry ?



Key Vocabulary: poetic terms

Key vocabulary	Definition
juxtaposition	contrast, two opposing things being placed next to each other for effect
tone	the overall feeling, mood or atmosphere created by a writer. .
anaphora	the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive clauses
refrain	repetition of a line, usually at the end of each stanza.
enjambment	run on lines, when a phrase or sentence runs over more than one line in a poem.
caesura	a pause in the middle of a line of poetry, marked by punctuation.
contraction	the shortening of a word, usually indicated with apostrophes <i>i.e. won't, couldn't</i>
colloquial language	informal language, slang <i>i.e. lad, skiving, kick back.</i>
subvert	to undermine the power or authority of something.
perspective	point of view, individual attitude towards something.
dramatic monologue	a speech directed at a particular audience in which a character reveals their thoughts, feelings or views.
form	the structure of a text, in poetry this might be a sonnet or a ballad for example
free verse	a poem without a regular form
stanza	Is a section of a poem sometimes referred to as a verse.
theme	the ideas running through a piece of art
autobiographical	describes written work that is based on elements of the writer's own life.

Key Vocabulary: context

Key vocabulary	Definition
identity	the qualities, beliefs, personality, looks and/or expressions that make a person who they are.
concept of the 'other'	an individual who is perceived by the group as not belonging, as being different. Any stranger, outsider or minority becomes the 'other' as opposed to being the 'same'.
stereotype	a widely held but over simplified view of a certain type of person..
discrimination	unjust treatment of people or prejudice, often due to their race, age or gender.
migration	migration is the movement of people from one place to another. The reasons people migrate can be economic, social or political. Migration impacts on both the place left behind and the place of resettlement.
migrant	a person that travels to a different country or place, often in order to find work
immigrant	A person who has come to a different country in order to live there permanently
emigrée	someone who has had to leave their country permanently, usually for political reasons (feminine form of the word emigré)
refugee	a person who has escaped from their country for political, religious, or economic reasons or because of a war
half caste	usually means mixed race of any sort. It's a racial term because "caste" means pure, so if someone calls a person of mixed race "half-caste" they are calling them half pure.
civil rights movement	an organised effort by black Americans to end racial discrimination and gain equal rights under the law during the 20th century.
Windrush generation	the generation of Commonwealth citizens from the Caribbean who migrated to Britain between 1948-1971.
postcolonial	the aftermath of Western colonialism, relating to the impact of colonialism and imperialism on individuals and states.
tyrant	a ruler or authority figure who uses power oppressively or unjustly
Islamophobia	unreasonable dislike or fear of, and prejudice against, Muslims or Islam.
mother tongue	first language
punk	a member of a rebellious 1970s movement characterised by music with harsh lyrics that attacked conventional society, often expressing anger and alienation. Punk fashion includes tattoos, piercings and metal-studded or spiked accessories.

Key information

Poems about being an 'other':

Half Caste by John Agard (2005)

Agard was born in **Guyana** in 1949. His father is Caribbean and his mother is Portuguese, meaning he is of mixed race. In 1977, he moved to England where he became angry with people who referred to him as 'half-caste'. He believed people called him this without really thinking that it could be offensive. His poem is a message to these people. **Key features:** free verse, dialect, anaphora (type of repetition), direct address and juxtaposition of light and dark imagery to highlight how ridiculous it is for people to be described in this manner.

Island Man by Grace Nichols (1984)

Nichols was inspired to write about her own experience and those of other people nicknamed the 'Windrush Generation', who arrived from the Caribbean to the UK seeking work after the Second World War. Her poem focuses on the cultural identity of a Caribbean man who wakes up in London but is still dreaming about the country of his birth. She first came to the UK and London in 1977 and loved close to the busy North Circular Road in London and the traffic noise reminded her of the sea surf back in the Caribbean. It was first published in 1984 in her book 'The Fat Black Woman's Poems', which concentrates on cultural divides. **Key features:** juxtaposition of the two locations through imagery (including metaphor), free verse, enjambment (could suggest the continuation of the dream), alliteration (specifically sibilance), repetition

The Right Word by Imtiaz Dharker (2006)

Written after the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in New York on 11th September 2001, after which the profile of a typical 'terrorist' was discussed. The poem alludes to the Islamophobia that was, and to some extent still is, rife particularly in Western culture. Dharker is sensitive to this issue because she grew up in contrasting cultures: Pakistan and Scotland. **Key features:** stanzas follow a pattern, slowly changing the noun used to describe the person outside from a 'terrorist' to a 'child'. Informal language, rhetorical questions and direct address are used to create an open and familiar conversation with the reader about this issue.

Still I Rise by Maya Angelou (1978)

One of Angelou's most acclaimed works. Angelou was a black civil rights activist and writer. Broadly speaking, the poem is an assertion of the dignity and resilience of marginalised people in the face of oppression. Because Angelou often wrote about blackness and black womanhood, 'Still I Rise' can also be read more specifically as a critique of anti-black racism. **Key features:** refrain, determined/defiant/proud tone, similes, direct address, non-standard English.

The Emigree by Carol Rumens (1993)

Emigree is the female form of the noun émigré, meaning someone who has left their country permanently. The poem is about a displaced person who pictures the country and city where she was born. The speaker suggests that this place is now war-torn or under the control of a dictatorial government that has banned the language the speaker once knew. Rumens has not provided specific details, perhaps to make the poem as relatable as possible to various people who have had to leave their country of birth. **Key features:** juxtaposition of positive light imagery with negative language, suggesting perhaps a discord between the speaker's nostalgia and the current reality. Metaphor, simile, personification.

Search for My Tongue by Sujata Bhatt (1988)

This poem is about Bhatt being afraid that she was losing her identity as a Gurjarati-speaking Indian. It comes from a time when she was in America studying English and she feared she was being 'Americanised' and forgetting her first language (her 'mother tongue'). **Key features:** direct address, metaphor, enjambment, free verse, inclusion of another language (Gurjarati).

Key information

Poems about perspective/stereotypes:

Two Scavengers in a Truck, Two Beautiful People in a Mercedes by Lawrence Ferlinghetti (1968)

The son of an Italian immigrant, Ferlinghetti had a tumultuous youth. He spent time living in an orphanage as well as in the mansion of a wealthy family in New York, so was exposed to contrasting circumstances. As a writer, Ferlinghetti strongly believed that art should be accessible to all people, not just the highly educated elite. **Key features:** As such, his poem 'Two Scavengers' is written in simple language, free verse with enjambment suggesting a conversational style, and highlights the contrast between two very different sets of people while also implying their equality in this moment.

Clown Punk by Simon Armitage (2006)

Armitage was born in Huddersfield, Yorkshire in 1963 and has lived in this area for most of his life. He draws on the people and places of his own experiences in many of his poems. His use of Northern dialect contemporary vocabulary colours his poetry.

'Clown Punk' is a poem from *Tyrannosaurus Rex versus The Corduroy Kid*, his collection of poems published in 2006. In a recent radio interview, Simon Armitage explains how he regularly used to see "the clown punk" when he was driving around town. He explains how this character once pushed his face up against his windscreen when he was waiting at traffic lights. The occasion when he says he was "eyeball to eyeball" with this local man was sufficiently memorable to later be the subject of a poem. **Key features:** colloquial language, metaphor, simile, caesura, rhyme, half-rhyme (assonance), pun/ play-on-words.

Not My Best Side by U.A. Fanthorpe (1978)

Inspired by the 15th century painting 'St George and the Dragon' by Paolo Uccello. **Key features:** First person perspective from a different character in each stanza, subversion of stereotypes i.e. of the damsel in distress, chivalric hero, monster. Free verse and enjambment make this poem an easy read, whilst half-rhyme (assonance) and caesura focus the reader's attention on certain aspects for dramatic and humorous effect.

Poems about parents:

Digging by Seamus Heaney (1964)

Heaney's father owned and worked a small farm in Northern Ireland, whereas his mother was from a more 'modern' family of mill workers. The tension between this agricultural and Industrial heritage influenced his upbringing and poetry. Heaney left the farm and his birthplace after winning a scholarship before he became a writer and teacher. Heaney described his move as a removal from "the earth of farm labour to the heaven of education." **This theme of carving out his own identity by choosing a different occupation and turning his back on his heritage is explored in 'Digging'.** **Key features:** simile, metaphor, onomatopoeia, technical language.

The Mother by Jackie Kay (1991)

Jackie Kay was born in Edinburgh in 1961 to a Scottish mother and Nigerian father, and was adopted at birth by a white couple living in Glasgow. She had a happy childhood, in spite of racial bullying at school, and remains close to her adoptive parents. The birth of her own son spurred her to trace her natural mother. Her poems explore questions of personal, racial and sexual identity. "The Mother", published as part of 'The Adoption Papers', is written from the perspective of an adoptive mother, perhaps her own. **Key features:** caesura, informal tone, colloquial language,.

The Divorce by Jackie Kay (1991)

See above. Considering that Kay still has a good relationship with her adoptive parents, it is unlikely this poem is autobiographical. However, it could reflect the common experience of children distancing themselves from their parents as they grow older. **Key features;** enjambment, informal tone, caesura, direct address, simile, idiom.

Key information

Poems about age:

The Warning by Jenny Joseph (1961)

When writing, Joseph claims she wasn't concerned with discussing the social position of the aged. She argues it is purely a fantasy of a middle aged woman, rather than a realistic portrayal of old age. **Key features:** first person dramatic monologue, anaphora/ repetition of 'and' - listing, almost child-like, embracing and subverting age stereotypes, finding pleasure in the freedom of old age, conversational and determined/ defiant tone, notice the shift in modal verbs 'shall', 'can', 'must', 'ought', consider the change in stanza length as the poem continues, use of humour.

I Shall Paint My Nails Red by Carole Satyamurti

Satyamurti is a British poet and sociologist. Her poem explores what it means to be a woman, a mother, a lover. It explores the appropriateness of self-expression at a particular age. Students could compare this woman's 'reversible' choice to the 'indelible ink' of the Clown Punk's tattoos. **Key features:** anaphora/ repetition of 'because' as if the poem is in answer to a question of 'why?' by an unknown audience, connotations of the colour red, caesura, word play with 'moratorium', conversational and determined tone,, use of humour.

Mirror by Sylvia Plath (1961)

Plath's work was inspired by aspects of her own life: her troubled marriage to the poet Ted Hughes, the relationship with her parents and her experiences with depression. Plath dreaded the idea of growing old and settling down, wanting to hold onto "the rapture of being seventeen". She committed suicide at the age of thirty. *Mirror* is about appearances and identity, highlighting the powerful role a mirror plays in people's lives, particularly for some women. The mirror is presented to start with as something which provides objective view, but there is a shift in the second stanza as the mirror begins to take pleasure in the woman's suffering and reliance. **Key features:** personification, enjambment, imagery (simile, metaphor), free verse.

Old Man, Old Man by U.A. Fanthorpe

A British writer and a teacher, Fanthorpe also spent time working as a receptionist in a psychiatric hospital, where her observations of patients inspired some of her work. This poem is written from the perspective of someone intimate with the subject, perhaps a carer or relative. **Key features:** juxtaposition of subject's current state with his youth, particularly through use of noun phrases used to describe him ("lifelong adjuster", "lord once of sed", "world authority", "a dab hand" to simply "old man") enjambment, caesura, imperative, sympathetic tone, direct speech.

Other poems about identity:

Victory by Sherman Alexie (2015)

Alexie is a Spokane-Coeur d'Alene-American writer who draws upon his experiences as a Native American. His work often explores the despair, poverty and involvement in crime that often shapes the lives of Native Americans living on reservations. 'Victory' explores a poignant memory about self-discovery, guilt and shame. After focusing on his lack of wealth and possibly comparing himself to others, the boy learns what is most important to him. **Key features:** exclamation, caesura, enjambment repetition, dramatic monologue, metaphor.

The British by Benjamin Zephaniah

A poet, lyricist and musician who grew up in Birmingham, and Jamaica Zephaniah's work is strongly influenced by the music and poetry of Jamaica as well as what he calls 'street politics'. He gained a reputation through performing Dub (Reggae) poetry and set out on a mission to popularise poetry. 'The British' explores the issue of migration through highlighting how many different groups of people have arrived and settled in Britain over the centuries. The poem, which takes the form of a recipe, ends with an appeal to the British values of tolerance and respect. **Key features:** listing, free verse, imperative verbs, metaphor.

Homework

Week 6

Fill in the blanks for the following quotations:

- 1) Behind you _____ palm trees wave goodbye
- 2) walking good _____ in a mind-opening meeting of snow and sun
- 3) Explain yusef
wha yu mean
when yu say _____
- 4) yu mean when light an shadow
mix in de sky
is a half-caste _____?
- 5) Just like hopes springing high,
Still _____
- 6) Does my _____ offend you?
- 7) Morning
and _____ wakes up
- 8) the sun surfacing _____
from the east
- 9) Comes back to sands
of a _____ soar.
- 10) to surge of wheels
to dull _____ roar

Due date:

Homework

Week 8

Read the article 'Armitage, Simon: Why poetry is important' and bullet point 10

ideas from it below:

1)

2)

Due date:

3)

4)

5)

6)

7)

8)

9)

10)

Article Written By: Simon Armitage. This article first appeared in emagazine, Issue 10 November 2000.

Armitage, Simon: Why poetry is important

Simon Armitage considers the importance of poetry.

One of the discussion themes at this year's Edinburgh International Book Festival was, 'Does poetry matter?' Even if it doesn't, the topic seems to set people jawing on a regular basis; in August of this year, 'Is Poetry Pointless?' was the discussion theme for Radio 5's morning phone-in programme.

Lurking behind the issue are two, often quoted opinions, wheeled out and bandied about quite freely whenever the subject comes up. Shelley's statement, from his *A Defence of Poetry*, describing poets as "the unacknowledged legislators of the world," and W.H.Auden's observation that "poetry makes nothing happen." Of course, the world has changed a great deal since 1821. Even since 1939 it is an unrecognisable place, and unless we subscribe to the fanciful notion that poets speak with universal and everlasting accuracy (in which case, how come Shelley and Auden disagree) there's no reason on earth why those two statements should still be true or even relevant. But poets do still make big claims on behalf of their art. Seamus Heaney said recently that poetry was nothing less than an "anthropological necessity."

Poetry certainly does have a gloomy fascination with its own well-being, one in keeping with its image, perhaps, as a pensive, introspective art form. It's something that sets it aside from other fields of creative expression, even those which are capable of tackling the same morbid subjects. For example, it's hard to picture a bunch of violinists sitting around discussing whether or not classical music mattered, or to imagine a gathering of portrait artists coming to the conclusion that paint makes nothing happen. Maybe it's complimentary. It seems to imply that poetry might be capable of making a difference, and not just to everyday concerns such as the wobbly wheels of Tesco's shopping trolleys, the price of replica football shirts or the radiation levels of mobile phones, but the big issues. A free Ireland. Global warming. Clause 28. Equal opportunities. If poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world, then presumably political consciousness and cultural determinism of all types are well within its brief.

On the other hand, the implied criticism is that poetry is of no value whatsoever in the face of such pressing issues. The Tate Modern attracted hundreds of thousands of visitors after its grand opening. Newly-released films are seen by millions the world over. In comparison, poetry can only be measured as ineffective, small-time, and incapable of addressing all but a small number of people. Subtract from that audience the already-converted, and poetry's power to bring about change or affect attitudes would seem - well, limited.

My first reaction to such an issue is to make a personal and I suppose selfish statement. Poetry matters, because it matters to me. In saying that, I'm not trying to promote myself as the unacknowledged legislator of good taste - I'm just being honest. Firstly, poetry provides the majority of my income. Secondly, in psychological terms it has become a 'core construct' - the way I experience the world and the way in which the majority of my world experiences me. In that sense, poetry has become a way of life. In fact it's a kind of independence, a sort of freedom, and freedom is that ideal state of existence that many people in this world are said to be in pursuit of - very often with guns and bombs.

In those terms, poetry matters because I can recommend it to others as a system of belief, though it's important to remember that poetry is not a religion. Poetry has no divine right to go on existing forever simply because it's existed for a long time already. Neither is poetry a science or a fact. It is not a naturally occurring elemental substance that exists within the universe and therefore cannot be denied. Poetry is a synthetic material. Like nylon, like golf, like justice, like time. It's man-made, and would not have come into being without our presence.

Politics, though, is the framework within which these matters tend to be judged and the yardstick by which they are measured. And in straightforward political terms, I suspect that poetry is a better form of defence than attack, something that holds the line rather than joins up and goes to fight at the front. Poets make better goalkeepers than centre-forwards. Good poetry is a sort of code, a kind of resistance. Under oppressive regimes, it's often the form by which subversive ideas are kept alive and transmitted between people, especially when freedom of speech is restricted or outlawed. In the old Soviet Union, poets, we were told, would fill football stadia when they gave readings of their work, such was their status and the importance of their message. Interestingly, a news item last week reported that in present day Yugoslavia, football matches are the only occasions when crowds can legally gather. Supporters of Red Star Belgrade now put their lives at risk by singing chants - a kind of poetry - encouraging President Milosevic to hang himself (although the phenomenon I'm describing may well have more to do with soccer than with verse.)

Here in the West, poetry that crusades and campaigns often fails, in my view, because of its crudity, having what Keats described as "palpable designs" on the reader. It's an insult to the intelligence of most poetry readers to be told what to think. Neither do we simply want to agree with the poem because it has agreeable subject matter. We want to be persuaded or moved. We want to be swayed - sometimes literally. The reason why so much political poetry is so bad, or so difficult to write, is because many poets tend to be of the same political outlook, and their poems are little more than rehearsal of already established ideas, no matter how radical they might appear to readers of *The Sun*. Being boring is the greatest sin in writing.

Poetry carries the flag, bears the standard. The honest complexity of a poem like Auden's *The Fall of Rome* still has me pondering about the nature of huge political change set against the everyday details of ordinary life. And I've never really figured out what Dylan Thomas meant by the line, "After the first death there is no other." But it's a phrase that comes back to me again and again whenever I see news items jostling with each other over competing levels of tragedy, usually based on loss of life.

So I think poetry does matter, politically, even though it moves in mysterious ways. The reason I feel strongly about conservation and ecology isn't because I've been aroused by poems attacking capitalist society, written with passionate intensity by hunt saboteurs or anarcho-terrorists, but because I've read poems that speak to me about the nature and value of the world. Wordsworth's *To a Snowdrop*, Hopkins' *The Windhover*, Hardy's *Snow in the Suburbs*, Hughes' *The Bull Moses*, the dead deer in William Stafford's *Travelling Through the Dark*, Elizabeth Bishop's larger-than-life moose lumbering out of the woods to come face to face with civilisation in the headlights of a bus.

Poetry is a kind of truth. Not a factual truth, but a moment-to-moment truth in terms of how we perceive and scrutinise the world, and how we operate within it. Ideas and experiences don't come to us as prose sentences - they come as images and connections, which good poetry reproduces and communicates, often without being able to say why. Poetry comes closer to signalling the experience of being alive and comprehending the world than any other written form. Prose, for the main part, tends to be reasoned, logical, literal, linear, progressional, rational, and so on. Prose often makes 'sense', which is ironic, because the senses it hopes to replicate are the particular territory of poetry. What Anne Stevenson has called "electrical comprehension." The thing Peter Redgrove might be talking about when he refers to what it is to "sail close to the symphonic brink of the known world."

When we think about poetry we tend to think about a sub-division of literature, particularly associated with books and criticism. But poetry is everywhere, being utilised by many people - advertising agencies, songwriters, slogan makers, priests, stand up comedians, television presenters - the list is endless. Ask the *News of the World* if poetry matters, with their 'name and shame' campaign. It might have been a cheap way of upping circulation figures, with dubious moral value, but the title is pure poetry - rhyme, rhythm, memorable utterance, encapsulation of ideas - the lot. Poetry is intense, packed with information, a kind of bar-coding of the language, and language is still the greatest form of power on the planet. The history of civilisation is the history of the intelligent but puny being able to talk their way out of being beaten up by the strong but stupid. And using a great deal of fancy language - poetry - along the way.

Poem of the week: 'If I Were to Meet' by Grace Nichols

If I Were to Meet

If I were to meet the ghost
of my childhood running
with slipping shoulder-straps
and half-plaited hair
beside a brown expanse
of memorising water
and the mellow faces of wooden houses
half-hidden by a weave
of coconut, mango, guenip trees

I would say this was her childscape
this was where she was shaped
like first words formed on slate –

A raw and lyrical landscape
that witnessed her carelessness
of death, her fall from tree,
her near muddy-pool drowning
and how nothing seemed
to separate her from anything –
Not from the equatorial sun or sailing moon
or shooting stars of black tadpoles –

If I were to meet the ghost
of my childhood –
I would kneel beside her for a while –
this slip of a brown girl gazing at fish shapes
under brown sunlit water –
patwa, sunfish, butterflyfish –
mesmerised by their movement
and the silent scales of their music.

Then I'd straighten up
leaving her in her elementary world,
her bright aloneness. Oblivious of me.

This week's poem marks a return to the work of Grace Nichols with a reflection that itself accomplishes a return. It's from her ninth collection, *Passport to Here and There*, in which the major theme is a return visit to the country she left at the age of 27, Guyana. She explains in the introduction that, on a recent visit to Georgetown, entering the country from an airport with which she was unfamiliar, Ogle, instead of the main airport at Timehri, refreshed her perspective. "It was like seeing the city of my girlhood for the very first time."

Nichols spent her first eight years in the coastal village of Stanleyville, and it seems to be this smaller child we meet in the sea-washed imagery of the poem. Her opening stanza acknowledges the imaginary nature of the encounter: the speaker is not imagining a magic-realist meeting with her child self, but "the ghost / of my childhood".

The figure is seen running through the landscape, blended into the gentle "weave" of vegetation and the "brown expanse" of the water itself. The landscape is benign: the wooden houses have "mellow faces", the trees specified ("coconut, mango, guenip") are sources of nourishment.

Is there almost a suggestion that the child's image has been formed out of the "memorising water"? The adjective "memorising" is surprising and evocative. It acquires a visual dimension in this context: water reflects and appears to keep in shadowy form what it reflects. Yet the poem brings the child very much alive – casually untidy, investigating her world, intent on her own concerns. The poem might be unfolding a scene in which it will be revealed that the real person and the ghost have changed roles.

The conjecture, "If I were to meet ...", leads the reader to expect an encounter. But it's resolved, at first, in a low-key, introspective manner: "I would say this was her childscape / this was where she was shaped / like first words formed on slate". The formation of the child is seen in terms of language, written words formed on that ancient, elemental medium, slate. Delicate end-rhymes in these three lines evoke the soft, fading imprints left on wet mud. The images intensify the picture of the child in her original setting with a small myth of origins.

Now the speaker steps back to take the broader view of a "raw and lyrical landscape". Her own memory adds realist detail, describing the various dangers encountered by the child, but bringing these stories, too, into a mythic frame: "Nothing seemed to separate her from anything." The child's perception seems to be encapsulated in the image of "the shooting stars of black tadpoles" in the cosmological triad of the risks to which she's immune. The "equatorial sun" could really be dangerous, the "sailing moon" might have various magical implications, and/or evoke the end of childhood. Adults would be aware of these things. But the reference to the tadpoles seems to illustrate a strand from the child's own creative storytelling.

After the expanded narrative of these lines, the focus of the speaker and child fuse. The poem repeats its opening conjecture, “If I were to meet the ghost / of my childhood” and this time, it results in a closer physical encounter: “I would kneel beside her for a while.” Nothing is said: the speaker simply shares the young girl’s observation of “fish-shapes” as, like mother and child, both look silently down at the “patwa, sunfish, butterfish – / mesmerised by their movement / and the silent scales of their music”. This habit of intense looking unites the poet and the child across time and space.

The echo of “mesmerising” with the early “memorising” and the poetic pun on “scales” are touches of deliberately visible artistry that blend the poet’s identity into the texture.

The final action the narrator imagines is beautifully undramatic. The future self retreats, a kindly, sensitive, adult ghost that knows its place and refuses to intrude the complications of experience into the happily absorbed consciousness of the child.

This poem is from the first section of *Passports to Here and There, Rites of Passage*. It’s the prelude to a rich variety of further explorations by an imagination that travels freely and generously across the borders of place and time.

Wider Reading List

Other poems on the theme of identity:

John Agard—*Flag, Listen Mr Oxford Don, Checkin' Out Me History*

Maya Angelou—*Phenomenal Woman, Caged Bird, Women Work*

Imtiaz Dharker— *Minority, Purdah*

Grace Nicholls— *Blackout, Praise Song for My Mother*

Simon Armitage— *Kid, About His Person, Give*

Benjamin Zephaniah— *What If, We Refugees, The Race Industry*

Sujata Bhatt— *A Different History, Muliebrity*

