Analyzing Poems

In this lesson we analyze a South African poem focusing on techniques that we have learnt. Pay attention to how the analysis has been worded – this is how you should word your answers in poetry tests and exams.

Lesson Outcomes

By the end of this lesson, you should be able to:

- read poetry for enjoyment
- analyze poetry and comment on its meaning

Curriculum Links

LO 2: Reading and Viewing poetry:
- recognize how word choices, imagery and sound devices affect mood, meaning and theme

LO3: Writing and Presenting
- identify and use stylistic and rhetorical devices

Lesson notes

Extract from “Paradise” by Achmat Dangor

Oh paradise, cool paradise of Africa,
what memories you recreate.
Oh why, why do you tighten the chains?

Style:
- His style is informal, and the language he uses is uncomplicated and direct. He asks a rhetorical question (“why do you tighten the chains”) and uses apostrophe to address Africa as if it were a person – adding to the informality of the poem.

Figurative language:
- Dangor is speaking directly to Africa – this figure of speech is called apostrophe. He asks Africa “Why do you tighten the chains?”. This is an example of a rhetorical question – the poet is asking this question for effect, he doesn’t expect an answer. By using these devices, Dangor’s close relationship with Africa is highlighted.
- Dangor uses a metaphor in the line “Tighten the chains”. The poet compares the feeling of chains being tightened, to difficult circumstances in his life. In this poem, “chains” symbolise oppression.

Structure:
- There are two stanzas, one with three lines, and the other with two. This is significant because in the first stanza the poet is praising Africa, whilst in the second he is asking a difficult question. The structure of the poem helps to highlight the poet’s conflicting feelings about Africa.
- Dangor has emphasised his love for Africa by repeating “paradise” and he strengthened the hurt and despairing tone, by repeating the questioning word: “why”.

Tone:
- The tone of Dangor’s poem is despairing and questioning (emphasised by the rhetorical questions) – he is trying to understand why Africa and his society treat him so harshly – “tighten the chains”.

Context:
- This poem was written during the Apartheid Era and its intention is to criticise the policies of racial segregation of the government of the time.
- We can work this out from the poet mentioning that Africa is a paradise, but that oppression or “chains” that are being “tighten(ed)” mar it.

Intention and Message
- We can imagine that the poet’s intention is to criticise Africa (or some African people) and encourage change.
- The poet’s message is to encourage the reader to realise the injustice of the society. His message is one of protest against injustice.

TASK

- Examine this poem that was also written by a South African poet.

“Learning” by Modikwe Dikobe

Learning has no limitations
Last year I made mistakes
The previous year I blundered
This year I shall do better.
In the Garden of Eden
I learnt to make fire
Clothe myself
And have children.
The world is boundless
Each one of us
Can contribute
Provided
We pluck off
Complexes, fear and mistrust.

- Analyse it in a similar way to the poem by Achmat Dangor. Remember to say what devices the poet has used to communicate his message and create the desired effect. Be guided by the sub-headings used to analyse Dangor’s poem.