

GCSE English Literature

Power and Conflict Poetry - Grade 9 Analysis · AQA Anthology

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AQA Anthology

26 entries

A grade-9 reading of all fifteen AQA Power and Conflict poems plus the comparison method examiners reward. Grade 9 is not summary: it argues what each poet is **doing** to the reader, names the **methods** (form, structure, sound, imagery) and treats the poem as a deliberate construct, not a window onto real events. Every poem below gives you a conceptualised thesis, the load-bearing methods, one short anchor quote and the context (AO3) that sharpens the argument. The clusters then show how to **compare methods, not just content** - the single move that separates Level 5 from Level 6. Keep quotations short and embedded; explore alternative readings; track how meaning shifts across the poem.

The 15 poems

Ozymandias
Percy Bysshe Shelley

Argument: tyrannical, self-aggrandising power is an illusion; time and nature outlast every empire, and ironically only the sculptor's art survives. **Methods:** a fractured, irregular sonnet whose disrupted rhyme enacts collapse; a frame narrative (speaker quotes a traveller who quotes the statue) distances the king so we never hear his power directly. The sneering verbs 'survive' tell us the artist *read* the tyrant truly. The vast empty desert of the sestet dwarfs the boastful inscription. **Quote:** 'Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!' - the command now mocks itself. **Context (AO3):** Shelley, a Romantic radical hostile to monarchy, writes amid distrust of Regency tyranny; the poem warns that human power is transient against nature.

London
William Blake

Argument: institutional power (monarchy, Church, commerce) manufactures human suffering, and the people have internalised their own oppression. **Methods:** relentless ABAB quatrains and the drumbeat anaphora of 'every' make misery feel total and inescapable. The coined metaphor 'mind-forg'd manacles' locates the chains in thought, not just law - oppression is mental. The oxymoron 'Marriage hearse' fuses birth and death, collapsing any hope. **Quote:** 'mind-forg'd manacles I hear'. **Context (AO3):** Blake, a dissenting visionary, attacks the establishment of 1790s London; 'chartered' streets show even public space is owned, the 'blackning Church' indicts religion's complicity in child labour.

Extract from The Prelude
William Wordsworth

Argument: nature holds a sublime, almost moral power that overwhelms youthful human arrogance and reshapes the mind long after. **Methods:** blank verse and enjambment first mirror the confident, gliding boat, then the volta - the looming 'huge peak' personified as it 'strode after me' - turns serenity to terror. First-person retrospective narration shows experience digested into wisdom; the 'huge and mighty forms' that trouble his dreams prove nature's lasting psychological grip. **Quote:** 'a huge peak, black and huge'. **Context (AO3):** Romantic pantheism - Wordsworth treats nature as a living, instructive force, a counter to industrial and rationalist values.

My Last Duchess Robert Browning	Argument: patriarchal, possessive power destroys what it cannot control, and the speaker condemns himself through his own voice. Methods: a dramatic monologue in tight iambic pentameter rhyming couplets - the closed form mirrors the Duke's controlling mind, while enjambment lets his menace slip past the rhyme. The chilling euphemism 'I gave commands' implies murder without admitting it. He treats his wife as an object: a painting behind a curtain only he may draw. Quote: 'I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together'. Context (AO3): based on Renaissance Duke Alfonso II of Ferrara; Browning critiques the male domination and commodification of women in aristocratic marriage.
The Charge of the Light Brigade Alfred, Lord Tennyson	Argument: celebrates the soldiers' obedient heroism while quietly indicting the leaders whose blunder doomed them - glory and futility held in tension. Methods: insistent dactylic 'Half a league' rhythm gallops like hooves; anaphora and the refrain 'the six hundred' ritualise the sacrifice. The blunt passive 'Some one had blunder'd' buries the guilty commander. Repeated imperatives ('Charge') and personified 'jaws of Death' frame the valley as devouring. Quote: 'Theirs but to do and die'. Context (AO3): Tennyson, Poet Laureate, responds to a real 1854 Crimean War catastrophe reported in the press; he honours the men yet cannot fully suppress the criticism of authority.
Exposure Wilfred Owen	Argument: the true enemy of the WWI soldier is not the Germans but nature itself and the deathly, purposeless boredom of waiting - war as slow attrition, not glory. Methods: the weather is the aggressor through personification - 'merciless iced east winds that knife us' - while pararhyme (knife us / nervous) leaves every line unresolved, like the stalled offensive. The despairing refrain 'But nothing happens' ends five stanzas, dramatising paralysis. Quote: 'But nothing happens'. Context (AO3): Owen writes from front-line experience to demolish the 'old Lie' of patriotic glory; his faith falters as religion offers no comfort in the freezing trenches.
Storm on the Island Seamus Heaney	Argument: human confidence in defending against nature is exposed as fragile; nature's power is terrifying precisely because it is intangible - 'a huge nothing'. Methods: reassuring blank verse and the collective 'we' open with control, then military imagery ('exploding', 'salvo', 'bombarded') reframes the storm as a war the islanders are losing. The opening eight letters spell 'Stormont', hinting at political conflict beneath the literal. Quote: 'it is a huge nothing that we fear'. Context (AO3): Heaney, a Northern Irish poet, can be read against the Troubles; the unseen, formless threat mirrors sectarian violence as much as Atlantic weather.
Bayonet Charge Ted Hughes	Argument: war strips a soldier of patriotic ideals and reduces him to raw animal terror; abstract 'honour' is exposed as useless under fire. Methods: in medias res - 'Suddenly he awoke' - plunges us into chaos with no context; visceral imagery and the simile 'cold clockwork of the stars and nations' make the war machine indifferent and mechanical. 'King, honour, human dignity, etcetera' collapses ideology into a dismissive 'etcetera'. Quote: 'King, honour, human dignity, etcetera'. Context (AO3): Hughes, son of a WWI survivor, writes after both wars to challenge the glorified, patriotic version of combat with the soldier's panicked inner reality.
Remains Simon Armitage	Argument: the deepest wound of modern conflict is psychological - guilt and trauma 'remain' long after the body is buried, and the war comes home. Methods: casual, colloquial monologue ('probably armed, possibly not') captures a soldier's uncertainty and the thin justification for killing. Enjambment and the structural shift from the foreign street to 'sleep' and 'drink and drugs' trace PTSD invading civilian life. The pun in the title fuses corpse and memory. Quote: 'his bloody life in my bloody hands'. Context (AO3): from Armitage's documentary work on veterans (The Not Dead); the soldier's lasting torment indicts the human cost of recent wars such as Iraq.

Poppies
Jane Weir

Argument: shifts the lens from soldier to mother, arguing that conflict's most enduring power is the private grief and loss it inflicts on those left behind. **Methods:** domestic, tactile semantic field (sewing, 'blockade', 'spasms of paper red') turns ordinary maternal care into the language of war and wounds. Free verse and fractured time mirror a grieving mind; the released 'dove' and 'released a song bird' image yearning for a son who may not return. **Quote:** 'I was brave, as I walked'. **Context (AO3):** deliberately undated so it speaks for mothers across Afghanistan and Iraq to the World Wars; poppies evoke Remembrance and the ritualised, public memory of loss.

War Photographer
Carol Ann Duffy

Argument: exposes the moral discomfort of representing suffering - the photographer agonises while a comfortable Western public consumes and forgets, raising the ethics of who profits from pain. **Methods:** ordered, regular sestets and 'spools of suffering set out in ordered rows' contrast structure with chaos, mirroring his attempt to control horror. The darkroom develops 'a half-formed ghost'; religious imagery ('priest', 'Mass') sacralises his task. **Quote:** 'they do not care' - the editor and reader. **Context (AO3):** Duffy was inspired by photojournalist friends; the poem critiques media commodification of distant conflict and Western apathy.

Tissue
Imtiaz Dharker

Argument: the paper power that really governs us (money, maps, Koran, receipts) is as fragile and translucent as tissue; true, lasting strength lies in transient human life, not man-made control. **Methods:** the extended metaphor of paper runs the whole poem; unrhymed quatrains gradually loosen and the final isolated line 'turned into your skin' enacts the dissolving of structures into the living body. Light passing through paper symbolises impermanence. **Quote:** 'paper that lets the light / shine through'. **Context (AO3):** Dharker, of Pakistani-Scottish-Muslim heritage, questions borders, religion and capitalism; the title puns on fragile paper and human 'tissue', the body itself.

The Emigree
Carol Rumens

Argument: memory and language give the exile a power no tyranny can confiscate; the remembered city stays 'sunlight-clear' even when the real one is occupied. **Methods:** the recurring motif of 'sunlight' resists the 'tyrant' and 'death' associated with darkness; the ambiguous, unnamed city universalises the experience. The shift to third-person threat at the close ('They mention me to the dark') leaves her defiant but watched. **Quote:** 'My city takes me dancing'. **Context (AO3):** Rumens leaves the city deliberately unnamed so it speaks for all refugees and emigres; the poem explores displacement, nostalgia and language as homeland.

Checking Out Me History
John Agard

Argument: a colonial British education is a weapon that erases black and Caribbean identity; reclaiming a suppressed history is an act of self-liberation and power. **Methods:** phonetic Creole spelling ('dem tell me') asserts cultural voice against Standard English authority. Structural contrast sets nursery-rhyme trivia ('1066 and all dat') in regular rhyme against italicised, free-flowing stanzas on black heroes like 'Toussaint' and 'Mary Seacole', whose light imagery ('beacon', 'star') dignifies them. **Quote:** 'But now I checking out me own history'. **Context (AO3):** Agard, Guyanese-British, attacks the Eurocentric curriculum and the power of those who control which history gets taught.

Kamikaze
Beatrice Garland

Argument: the pull of life, family and nature can overpower a militaristic ideology of honour - but a culture that demands such sacrifice punishes the survivor more cruelly than death. **Methods:** a third-person narrative frames the pilot's turn for home, then shifts to the daughter's first-person voice, distancing and then humanising him. Vivid natural imagery - 'shoals of fishes', 'dark shoals' - embodies the beauty that makes him choose life. The structural irony: shame makes loved ones treat him 'as though he no longer existed'. **Quote:** 'a tuna, the dark prince'. **Context (AO3):** WWII Japanese kamikaze pilots were honour-bound to die; Garland exposes the human cost of an ideology that values death over the natural ties of family.

Comparison clusters (and how to compare methods, not just content)

Human power and its illusion
Ozymandias . My Last
Duchess . London

All three anatomise the power of the individual or institution and expose its hollowness. **Compare the methods:** Shelley and Browning both use **structural irony** - the sonnet collapses, the Duke condemns himself - so power is undone by the very form that frames it; Blake instead uses **relentless anaphora and a closed ABAB** to make oppression feel inescapable rather than crumbling. Argue that Shelley sees tyranny defeated by **time**, Browning by **self-exposure**, Blake by **nothing at all** - his is the bleakest because power wins. The discriminator: compare how each **voice** is constructed (boastful inscription vs first-person monologue vs prophetic observer).

Nature's power over humanity
The Prelude . Storm on the
Island . Exposure

Each pits human confidence against an overwhelming natural force. **Compare the methods:** all three use **personification** to make nature an active aggressor - Wordsworth's striding peak, Heaney's bombarding storm, Owen's knifing winds - but the **effect differs**: nature instructs in Wordsworth, besieges in Heaney, and **kills** in Owen. Contrast the **form**: the Romantics' expansive blank verse implies awe and meaning, while Owen's stalled **pararhyme** and refrain 'But nothing happens' deny any resolution. Top-band line: nature in The Prelude has a moral purpose; in Exposure it is meaninglessly cruel - method choice encodes worldview.

The reality and futility of war
Charge of the Light Brigade .
Bayonet Charge . Exposure

All confront combat, but from **opposing ideological angles**. **Compare the methods:** Tennyson's galloping **dactylic rhythm** and ritual refrain glorify obedient sacrifice; Hughes shatters that with **in medias res** chaos and mechanical imagery to show terror, not honour ('etcetera' dismisses Tennyson's very values). Owen removes the enemy entirely, making **weather and boredom** the killer. Argue that the Victorian poem **celebrates** while constructing a hint of blame, whereas the modern poets **condemn** - the shift from external heroic narration to internal panicked focalisation tracks how attitudes to war changed.

Memory, loss and the cost left
behind
Remains . War Photographer .
Poppies

All three relocate conflict's power to **aftermath and memory** rather than the battlefield. **Compare the methods:** Armitage and Duffy both use **structure to enact intrusion** - the soldier's trauma bleeds from the foreign street into 'sleep'; the photographer's 'ordered rows' fail to contain the chaos that develops. Weir uses a **domestic semantic field** turned military to dramatise a mother's grief. Discriminator: Remains gives us the **perpetrator's** guilt, War Photographer the **observer's** ethical paralysis, Poppies the **bystander-mother's** private loss - three distances from the violence, three voices.

Identity, displacement and
reclaiming power
The Emigree . Checking Out
Me History . Kamikaze . Tissue

These poems locate power in **identity, memory and voice** against forces that erase them. **Compare the methods:** Rumens and Agard both fight erasure through **language** - her insistent 'sunlight' motif, his phonetic Creole and structural contrast - reclaiming a self the state would suppress. Garland and Rumens use **shifting narrative voice** (third to first person) to humanise the marginalised. Dharker's **extended metaphor** argues fragile human life outlasts paper power. Top-band move: compare whether each speaker **wins** - Agard's defiant present tense vs the watched, uncertain endings of The Emigree and Kamikaze.

Grade 9 comparison method (AQA comparative essay)

What the question and AOs
actually reward

AQA gives one named poem and asks you to compare it with one of your choice on a theme (power, conflict, memory, nature). Marks are AO1 (personal, conceptualised response with embedded quotation), AO2 (**analysis of methods and their effects - the biggest discriminator**) and AO3 (context used to illuminate meaning, not bolted on). There is **no AO4** here. Grade 9 = a sustained, comparative **thesis** about what both poets do, threaded through every paragraph, with exploratory analysis of how form, structure and language create meaning.

Structure: thematic, integrated paragraphs (not poem-by-poem)	Never write all about poem A then all about poem B - that is Level 3 ceiling. Build thematic paragraphs that compare both poems at once . A reliable shape: (1) conceptual topic sentence comparing the poets' ideas; (2) embedded quote from poem A + method + effect; (3) comparative connective + embedded quote from poem B + method + effect; (4) AO3 woven in to deepen, not summarise; (5) a 'so what' sentence returning to your thesis. Aim for three or four such paragraphs.
Compare methods, not content (the Level 6 move)	Weak answers compare what the poems say ('both are about war'); grade 9 compares how they say it and to what effect. Use precise comparative connectives: 'Whereas Owen denies resolution through pararhyme, Tennyson imposes it through a galloping refrain.' Track form, structure, voice, sound and imagery as deliberate choices. Best practice: show a shared method used to opposite ends (both personify nature - but one to instruct, one to kill) or opposite methods serving the same idea .
Weave context (AO3) - illuminate, do not bolt on	Context scores only when it changes the meaning of a method. Bad: 'This was written in WWI.' Grade 9: 'Owen's refusal to name a human enemy reflects his trench experience that the real foe was the weather - a deliberate rejection of the patriotic <i>dulce et decorum</i> myth.' Anchor each context point to a specific word or structural choice. Useful frames: Romantic pantheism, Victorian empire and the Crimean blunder, the WWI disillusionment, post-colonial identity, the privatised grief of modern conflict.
Conceptualised topic sentences (top-band openers)	Lead every paragraph with an arguable idea, not a feature-spot. Models: 'For both Shelley and Browning, human power is self-defeating - it is the art framing the tyrant, not the tyrant, that endures.' 'Where Tennyson ritualises sacrifice into glory, Hughes exposes it as mechanical terror, so the dignity of war dissolves into a single dismissive <i>etcetera</i> .' 'Both Rumens and Agard treat language itself as the last territory a tyranny cannot occupy.' These signal a thesis and method awareness in one line.
Embedding, alternative readings and a thesis-driven conclusion	Embed quotations inside your sentence ('the <i>mind-forg'd manacles</i> locate oppression in thought') and keep them short. Zoom to single words or sounds - a verb, a caesura, a half-rhyme - then widen to the whole-poem effect. Offer an alternative reading ('the ending may read as defiance, or as surveillance') to show exploratory thinking. Your conclusion should not summarise: it should land your overarching comparative judgement about which poet presents power or conflict more powerfully, and why their method makes it so.