

# Critiquing a Poem



We spend most of our time explaining poems rather than critiquing them. We feel students need to understand and perhaps even appreciate the text.

Firstly, it should be made clear to students that they don't have to like a poem – or a novel or a play. You might confess to disliking one or two yourself!

Secondly, a robust critique of a poem is a good exercise. Rather than accept the construction of a poem as being 'the best words in the best order' (Coleridge), subject it to a tough reading. Writers are not perfect beings and poems are not perfect artefacts.

Let's take for an example one of the best known of poems – 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' also known as 'Daffodils'. In groups, ask students to come up with critical comments, questions and suggestions. A start has been made in the accompanying PDF but some students will be able to get going on this without help.

A variation on this would be to set up a prosecution and defence. This would be an effective activity for Advanced level students as well as younger ones. If a written outcome is required, let it be in the form of a judge's summing up. It is always useful to practice a balanced 'on the one hand...on the other' piece of writing.

Finally, in the spirit of devil's advocacy, here is Housman's 'Loveliest of Trees'. Surely there is nothing to criticise about this little gem? However, one could ask: 'What does it actually tell us about the cherry tree except that it has white blossom?' And take it from there...

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now  
Is hung with bloom along the bough,  
And stands about the woodland ride  
Wearing white for Eastertide.  
  
Now, of my threescore years and ten,  
Twenty will not come again,  
And take from seventy springs a score,  
It only leaves me fifty more.  
  
And since to look at things in bloom  
Fifty springs are little room,  
About the woodlands I will go  
To see the cherry hung with snow.