

# i know why the caged bird sings

AND OTHER 'SOCIETY' POEMS

## O Level English Literature

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## Process of Writing an Answer

So you chose to do English Literature for O/Ls. Good. Because the good things you reap out of it are numerous! Anyway, this book is designed to enhance your critical literary appreciation as well as your critical essay writing skills. I will be using model answers I wrote to illustrate certain points and to give you a better idea about how a good answer should be written.

First let's take a look at the process of writing an answer.

1. To write an answer, first you need to understand the question. This may be obvious enough, but **underlining the keywords in the question** is crucial as it helps your mind focus on the question better.

The majority of students (at least those I have encountered) do not plan ahead before they begin writing the answer. This is a big mistake. It is quite similar to trying to chop a tree without sharpening the axe. When you take a few minutes to sharpen the axe, the task at hand becomes significantly easier. It is also a bit like trying to build a house without a blueprint! For example if you forget to build the toilet, you might have to take space from the living room for that. You wouldn't want your answer to look like a house with the bathroom in the middle of the living room, would you?

2. So, take note that the second thing you need to do is to plan your answer. For that, you start by **brainstorming**.

Brainstorming is basically **inking down everything that comes to your mind about the keywords in the question** (relevant to the text it is based on of course). It may seem random and ridiculous if you are not used to it, but it is an efficient way to clear your mind, and to visually see all the points available to you on paper; this helps you to plan your essay better.

After you brainstorm, identify the key points that you can make, to support your answer. From the brainstorm you have completed, you can then select three main points and add sub-points to those. I will give you an example.

Question: I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is a **strong message against oppression**. Comment with reference to the text.

*Brainstorm – dawn bright lawn – free bird leaps – fat worms – dares/names the sky – caged bird stalks – grave of dreams, nightmare scream – fearful trill – distant hill – sings of freedom – contrast – repetition -*

Above is my brainstorming on the poem. However, when I brainstorm on actual hard paper, I make it seem like a chart or diagram, with arrows or something.

3. Anyway, after I complete the above brainstorming, the next step is **to make the plan**. For that, we need to first select three main points. These points have to uphold (justify the statement) the statement that the poem is a *message against oppression*. To do this, I look at not only the content, but also the devices that the writer has used to emphasize themes. Now, in this poem, the poet uses contrast to shed light on the injustice that one group of people face. So, contrast is a main part of the poem. Therefore, in the answer, I think my first point is going to be on the experience of the

free bird. That's because then I have solid ground to prove how the caged bird is treated not like a bird but like something worthless in comparison to the free bird.

So! In my first point I will illustrate how the free bird enjoys all the privileges, and has strong social security.

The second and third paragraphs will show how the caged bird is treated, in comparison to the free bird.

Second paragraph could be about how the caged bird is not able to enjoy freedom – freedom to live, to fly, to dream, to just be who they are.

The third stanza could be about the result of this dehumanization of the oppressed (how they become blind in their rage and the constant constrictions that they see themselves as inferior and how their ability to dream is taken away, making them a mere shadow).

When I write down the plan on paper, it would look something like this!

- Free bird – privileges/material prosperity (fat worm), social system favours them (float downstream till the current ends). They live a charmed life, and have the freedom to dream (dares to claim the sky). Ownership (name the sky) Naming as a powerful act.
- Caged bird – stalks – no space-opportunity-wings clipped, feet tied: the social system has chained them so that they cannot see progress, they cannot move forward. Grave of dreams – dreams are not allowed, Nightmare scream – dreams have turned into worst experiences.
- Caged bird – they see themselves as inferior – anger – hardly see through – have become a shadow of themselves – potential is concealed. BUT there is hope as they sing of freedom without stopping. Repetition of the poem helps emphasize that they don't give up, and it is fearful, possibly to the people hearing it, because it is menacing and powerful!

To be honest, it would be less than what's written above, but I have mentioned details more elaborately for your benefit (some of the above points I will write in two or three words if I have the concept in my head. When I see the plan and the words, I know the extension of it that I want to write in my answer. So the plan will be much shorter on paper).

Once I have quickly drafted a plan which contains three main points (which are arranged in such a way that it makes sense), I can start writing! Imagine how decisive and professional your introduction and writing will appear if you follow these few steps!!!

It is easy, you just need to practice. Also remember that if you are familiar with the concepts and the lines, you will have no trouble coming up with the plan. You might even be able to skip the brainstorming, and just make the plan because you are so familiar with the poem. But if you are not familiar with the text, you will end up spending too much time on the planning part and would not be able to complete a comprehensive answer. Point: You need to be familiar with the text!!!

4. Now that we have a solid plan with some relevant references to the text, the next step is to start **writing the introduction!**

Usually the introduction works as a map for the entire essay. It introduces the main argument which will be addressed in the essay and tells the reader what to expect. When the examiner reads a good introduction, he/she will be able to easily follow the points that you are trying to get through. Now, take a look at the introduction for 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings' I have written. See if it gives you an overview of the argument.

The first line or two should introduce the significance of the writer, and if necessary the context in which the poem is written. The last two lines gives the reader the stance (argument) that I am taking. It tells them what I believe, and how I am going to prove it.

5. Writing the Body – So, my first point is about the free bird and the luxury it enjoys. Here's the thing. I know I said three paragraphs for three points. But usually one point may need more than one paragraph. In this scenario, break the point into more paragraphs. Now take a look at the answer.

KEVIN DILHAN - THE WORDS ACADEMY

**Question 1: I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is a strong message against oppression. Comment with reference to the text.**

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is written by Maya Angelou and is named after her autobiographical novel. She is a black American and experienced the segregation throughout her life as a black woman; the poem can be seen as a commentary on the system of racism in America. In this essay I will explain how the free bird enjoys all the privileges in society and how, in contrast, the caged bird is denied them, and how it affects them.

The free bird enjoys a life of freedom and satisfaction. The verbs used by the poet to describe the free bird reflects the privileges it enjoys. 'Floats downstream till the current ends' connotes the ease with which the bird moves. It suggests how progress is such a natural thing for the free bird. In fact, the wind facilitates the movement; the obstacles to its advancement are minimal. This is a reference to how the social system that is in place favours one community. The laws, the opportunities, the resources are distributed in such a way that the community which enjoys power will possess almost all of it.

The use of the phrase 'dares to claim/name the sky' is significant as it shows how the free bird has the authority to name the sky. It connotes ownership and the ability to dream big and achieve those dreams.

The phrase 'fat worms' is a metaphor for the material prosperity that the free bird enjoys. The adjective 'fat' connotes the excessive supply of resources. The privileged community in society are thus satisfied with an abundance of resources, usually at the expense of the ones who were oppressed.

In comparison to the free bird, the caged bird is described with words such as 'stalks' and 'fearful'. These words connote the extreme difficulty in moving and the terror in which they live. A stalking person cannot keep his back straight and has to bend down and move, and in the poem, the bird has only the space of a 'narrow' cage to move around. The idea of being in this claustrophobic space when you are meant to flap your wings and glide through the skies is traumatic and disturbing. This is the reality in which the blacks in America had to live. Their 'wings are clipped' and 'feet are tied' is a very powerful visual phrase which reflects how the blacks were denied equal opportunities, denied resources and deprived of the dignity as humans. As opposed to the easy progress of the free bird, the caged bird cannot move beyond the cage even though it has the potential.

Due to the struggles the caged bird has to go through, they begin to feel devalued. The poem says that they can 'seldom through its bars of rage,' which reflects how the marginalized communities are not only caged by their oppressors, but also by their anger and their perception of themselves. The poet also writes that the cage bird 'stands on the grave of dreams,' meaning that their capacity to dream and their future hopes are stripped away by continuously being under the rule of the majority. They are referred to as a shadow. This is significant as the caged bird's identity as a bird is stripped away piece by piece. While the main thing that makes a bird a bird is its wings, the caged bird's wings are clipped. This is an allegory for the black man's freedom taken away from him, which is to take away the main ingredient about being human: Freedom. Without this, the marginalized communities become a mere shadow of themselves as they live in another's world. A shadow is just an outline of

the real object, without true value or significance. Likewise, the caged bird feels like a shadow; a mere outline of its true identity.

While the above paragraphs elaborate on how the comparison of the free bird and the caged bird shows the atrocities that are committed against the oppressed, it should also be noted that there is a presence behind the ‘clipped wings’ and the ‘feet that are tied.’ The bird was not born that way, but was tied by an external force. The writer emphasizes this reality by repeating the lines ‘wings are clipped and feet are tied.’ It can be taken as a call for action to fix the broken system which completely disregards the basic human dignity of the minorities.

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**Question 2: How does the poet highlight the tragic elements of racial violence in ‘Big Match, 1983?’ Discuss with reference to the poem.**

Yasmine Gooneratne wrote the poem ‘Big Match, 1983’ as a response to Black July, 1983, which marks one of the most harrowing and brutal instances of racial violence in Sri Lanka’s recent past. It captures the violence that gripped Sri Lanka and alludes to the politics that led up to that moment. This essay will elaborate on how the poet frames racial violence and then move on to analyze the poetic devices that emphasize the violence, and finally shed light on the possibilities that are presented in the poem.

The poet reflects on the ramifications of the ethnic tensions which are deeply rooted in the history of Sri Lanka. The title ‘Big Match, 1983’ acts as an appropriate double entendre: while one meaning is a matchstick which can set something on fire, the other meaning is of a cricket match which connotes a game played for entertainment and profit.

The poem maps out the matchsticks which ignited the fire according to the narrator. 1956 is mentioned, which is significant because of the implementation of the Sinhala Only Act. This instigated protests as the Tamil civilians of Sri Lanka were subjected to extreme inconveniences and injustice because of the Act. It was a political move which served to appease the Sinhala Buddhist majority of the country, which guaranteed the largest chunk of the votes. She also mentions 1958, when an anti-Tamil pogrom swept the nation. In this way she points out the political choices and other ramifications which stirred up the tragic elements of the ethnic tensions.

She uses strong visual imagery and juxtaposition to convey the extent of the violence which is perpetrated. A stout man under the bo tree – this phrase juxtaposes religious imagery with imagery of violence, which is ironic as it suggests the impotence of religion without true followers. The bo tree is a symbol of Buddhism which preaches love and kindness to all living beings. The Lord Buddha attained enlightenment under a bo tree. However, the poem captures a moment where cold-blooded violence is committed right under the symbol of love. By juxtaposing the venerated symbol of Buddhism and vicious violence, the poet exposes the hypocrisy of people. It is a tragic moment when a philosophy which advocates love and kindness is used to justify hatred and violence.

The poet writes ‘policemn looks away boy lies dead’. Which points out the deliberate ignorance of the policemen. This is ironic because the police is supposed to prevent crime. However, in the poem, they are portrayed as willfully facilitating crime, without interfering the atrocities which were unfolding right around them. This is even more dystopian because it is the institution of the state (the police) that seems to advocate the violence meted out against Tamils. When the state which is supposed to protect its civilians is willfully partisan to the violence, it is a most tragic situation to live in. The little boy that lies dead is a symbol of innocence and love. This is a disturbing, yet powerful image which suggests how innocence and love has been snuffed out by the hatred. The people have fallen to such a shameless position that even a child dead on the street is ignored. By using such devices and visual imagery, the poet effectively paints a grim picture of the tragic elements of racial violence.

The use of the metaphor ‘match’ to compare the violence connotes the callous opportunism of the political leaders. A cricket match is played for entertainment and profit. The civil war and the deaths are trivialized by politicians who use it for their own strategies for maintaining



their power. The lives of the soldiers are devalued; they are counted like scores in a match. The poet also points to the fact that civilians who want to end the violence are ‘powerless’ to do anything as the ‘game’ is in others’ hands. Thus, she emphasizes how the dehumanization of the soldiers and the inability of the civilians to end the violence is a tragic element.

A crucial element that is brought out through the poem is how possibilities of coexistence is denied and ravaged. The poet writes of how the narrator had sheltered and cared for the victims of racial violence and how she wants to do so. Even though the man says ‘some lines are still not cut’, we understand that in her helplessness, the narrator cannot change the fate of her friend. The tragedy is that they were friends across racial lines. She further states that ‘joys of our childhood, friendships of our youth’ are ravaged by pieties and politics. She laments the social destruction that is caused by racist ideologies, which prevent people from believing in one another and living in harmony. For the narrator, it is personal as she herself is unable to help her Tamil friend.

The poem explores the attempt to trace the escalating violence, and shows the irony and brutality of the violence in visual language. It also laments how racist ideologies spread xenophobia and hatred which discourages friendships between ethnicities and ignores the possibility of coexistence in harmony. The portrayal of these tragic elements of racial violence makes it an effective poem.

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**Question 3: The Poem Richard Cory nullifies the myth that wealth can guarantee your happiness. Do you agree with the statement? Explain with reference to the text.**

Edwing Arlington Robinson wrote Richard Cory in the backdrop of an economic recession that America experienced in the 1890's. I agree with the above statement. While the main theme of the poem is how appearances are deceptive, even the above statement is about how wealthy people present an image of themselves as happy; the poem challenges this belief. In this essay I will explain how Richard Cory is portrayed as a wealthy gentleman and how the narrator perceives him and how this perception is flawed.

From the outset, Richard Cory is described with words that connote perfection and consistency, especially with regards to his wealth and status. 'Whenever Richard Cory went downtown, we people on the pavement looked at him' implies the idea that he never failed to present the image of a gentleman. From head to sole he was a gentleman; nothing was out of place. He maintained the image very carefully. His appearance proved him to be an impeccable gentleman. This is reflected through his attire. The narrator says that 'he was always quietly arrayed,' which connote the dignity and style which he possessed. He was imperially slim, which adds to the idea of him being an authoritative person among the common folk. Even his behaviour aligns with the concept of a gentleman: 'he was always human when he talked/glittered when he walked.' The narrator idolizes Richard Cory while simultaneously envying his life. Glittering seems like exaggeration but it connotes the idea of gold, and therefore wealth. He is 'admirably schooled in every grace,' which adds to the idea of his wealth as it is the wealthy who receive education in social etiquette. The comparison 'richer than a king,' is the use of hyperbole which removes any doubt about his wealth. These details show the reader that Richard Cory is wealthy beyond a doubt.

The narrator is ready to trade his life for Richard Cory's as they think that Richard Cory has everything that anyone could ever need. They believed in the image that he presented of himself. The wealth and the good breeding he displayed seemed to be enough evidence that Richard Cory had all the reasons to be content with his life. The narrator perceives themselves as being in the dark, waiting for the light. Their existence is seen as something which is lesser than Richard Cory. For them, Richard Cory is in the light which connotes hope, life and a better future. The last stanza shows us how the narrator is not content with their life, as they 'went without the meat and cursed the bread.' For them, it is the lack of resources, or the absence of wealth to buy the resources which deprives them of happiness. They 'looked' at Richard Cory whenever he came downtown because they envied the clothes he wore, the wealth he bore and his genteel behaviour and the life he enjoyed. Being in poverty and destitution makes the narrator believe that if they were to somehow possess what Richard Cory possessed, they would be out of their misery. They would be happy with their life if they had what Richard Cory had.

But the truth which was hidden behind the mask that Richard Cory wore was not one of happiness, but of hopelessness and despair. Even though Richard Cory seemed to possess everything that money could buy, he lived a different reality behind the image he presented. The image of the wealthy gentleman who was envied by the locals appeared to be a façade which concealed the real struggles that he faced. The startling thing about this incident is that the narrator couldn't have predicted Richard Cory's decision to commit suicide because he never indicated his struggles to anyone. On the one hand, Richard Cory did not share his

feelings or struggles with the narrator. On the other hand, the narrator or his friends never imagined the possibility of someone like Richard Cory wanting to end his life. This is possibly because of the social belief that if someone is rich enough, they have everything to guarantee their happiness. The word ‘calm’ summer night is ironic and emphasizes the fact that no matter how joyful or financially secure (wealthy) a person seems to be, our perspective into that person’s inner struggles is very limited.

I have argued in the previous paragraphs that the poem portrays Richard Cory as a content and impeccable gentleman from the narrator’s perspective. The narrator wants to trade his life for Richard Cory’s. However, as explained above, the truth behind the image Richard portrayed is completely different and shows us how wealth cannot guarantee happiness or even a will to live.

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**Question 4: ‘Gabriel Okara in his poem Once Upon a Time expresses his regrets about his fake behaviour in modern society.’ Comment with reference to the poem.**

Gabriel Okara was a Nigerian author who wrote extensively on the changing society in Africa after colonization. The closely-knit community culture was uprooted and replaced by the capitalistic society which atomizes (alienates/isolates) individuals and makes them overly obsessed about their own sustenance above the community. The narrator in the poem looks at his son and sees in him a bygone era where people were more sincere about life and interactions. In this essay I will argue that through capitalism people have become increasingly selfish and deceptive, and that learning from children seems to be the only way of reclaiming the sincerity of our identity.

The poet laments that people who used to be genuine have turned cynical and opportunistic, invariably seeking their own gain. The metaphor ‘shake hands with their hearts,’ implies the genuine concern that people shared with one another. The word *heart* is a metaphor for truthfulness and sincerity. ‘They laughed with their hearts,’ writes the poet, suggesting the carefree and honest joy they found in each other’s company. This communal bond was something that was strong in Nigeria. After colonization, the social structures in Nigeria changed and the way people operated completely changed. With capitalism, money became a symbol of power and people became obsessed with it. This thirst for money made people less concerned about others in their society. They did not welcome others into their homes as often as they used to. It became a burden or an obligation rather than a joyful thing. Even though the say come again, it is not a truthful statement because ‘then I find doors shut on me.’ The social interactions have become a performance. Even when they shake hands ‘their left hands search my empty pockets,’ says the narrator. This reflects the opportunistic mindset of people who are more interested in the status of your finances rather than your well-being. The narrator himself admits that he has also learnt the above deceptive behaviours and regrets it. This is a result of capitalism which venerates profit over humanity.

The writer regrets that his identity has been reduced to a set of faces that he wears, ‘like dresses.’ This further emphasizes the devaluation of humanity and sincerity because social interactions have become nothing more than a performance. Just like the masks or costumes an actor wears for his performance, the narrator has become a sort of an actor who chooses which face to wear for which situation. Truthfulness has become an inconvenience. ‘Homeface, Officeface, Streetface, hostface, cocktailface...’ all capture how his identity changes according to context. He writes that there is something unnatural about it like ‘a fixed portrait smile.’ It is as if the freedom to express his true emotions or opinions is seen as offensive. He cannot speak his mind, but has to conform to the pressure of society. Wearing different masks or faces for different places results in a fragmented identity because the deception, when practiced long enough, becomes a part of a person. At this point it will be difficult to realize the life of lies that a person is living. But the narrator says he wants to change things.

The narrator expresses that he wants to unlearn the deception he learnt from society and learn to be truthful and sincere like his son. He identifies the fact that his behaviour is not innate. It is not the natural order of things. This is evident because he sees that his child is honest in his feelings and opinions. He is still untouched by the unnatural mindset of society. The narrator has been around long enough to witness how people and he himself began to change from

being sincere to being shrewd and selfish. He says that ‘my laugh in the mirror shows only my teeth like a snake’s bare fangs.’ This indicates how vicious and poisonous he has become beneath the amiable exterior. However, he wishes to become like his son, which seems like a paradoxical statement. He wants to unlearn the opportunistic, cynical, self-obsessive and avaricious ways of society and become innocent and transparent like his son. This is nostalgic and evokes a deep sense of regret, and a longing for a lost time.

The narrator understands how society changed into a more alienated and selfish one, and how he himself learnt to adopt a deceptive and untruthful way of life. However, in his son he sees a hope for the future; a future where he could once again become sincere with his feelings, thoughts and opinions.

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## VOCABULARY

When you write a critical essay on a poem or any other text, the register of language you use should be formal. It shouldn't be the style 'u use wen u txt sm1.' It shouldn't be the style you use to speak with your friends. There has to be a level of professionalism to it.

### Meta-Writing Verbs

We always use phrases like 'the poet says/ shows/ writes' or the phrase 'shows, means, says.' However, in essay writing, you need to use better verbs and should avoid using the same verb too often.

What are some of the easy verbs to learn which would make your writing much better? Here are some examples.

<i>Explore</i>	<i>Reflect</i>	<i>Highlight</i>	<i>Emphasize</i>	<i>Suggest</i>	<i>Imply</i>
<i>Elaborate</i>	<i>Explain</i>	<i>Convey</i>	<i>Compare</i>	<i>Juxtapose</i>	<i>Personify</i>
<i>Connote</i>	<i>Expose</i>	<i>Capture</i>	<i>Contemplate</i>	<i>Reminisce</i>	<i>Describe</i>
<i>Portray</i>	<i>Express</i>	<i>Present</i>	<i>Symbolize</i>		

### The words below are usually followed by The Writer/ Poet/ Author...

**Explore** is used in a general sense. You can use it in an introduction. (The poet **explores/elaborates/explains/expresses** the fear and possessiveness that grips a mother's heart in relation to her daughter.)

**Present** – The poet **presents** the narrator as belonging to the working class people who are possibly occupying the streets because they are unemployed (almost same as portrays).

**Expose** is used when the poet or the narrator or the words/phrases in a poem reveals a negative side about a person or thing. (The poet **exposes** the horrors of segregation in America).

**Portray** is basically the way a person, place or situation is described (presented) to the reader. (The writer **portrays** Nicholas as a mischievous boy with a sparkling imagination).

**Describe** (The writer uses strong visual imagery to **describe** the horrific atrocities of Black July/ The writer **describes** Richard Cory as an impeccable gentleman with riches that could buy him anything)

**Juxtapose** – When the writer places two contrasting things (images, concepts, places) in close proximity. (Yasmine Gooneratne **juxtaposes** images of violence with religious imagery to **expose** the hypocrisy of people who call themselves religious but do not live by their religion).

**Compares** – (The writer **compares** the free bird and the caged bird to **emphasize** the injustice that the caged bird experiences, as well as to expose the ignorance or the callousness of the free bird who turns a blind eye on its own).

**Personify** – When the writer gives human qualities to an inanimate object. (The writer **personifies** the fire of ethnic tension, effectively capturing the spread and terror of the violence by using the word ‘grip’).

**The following verbs are followed by The Narrator...**

**Reminisce** (the narrator) – To look back at the past with longing. (The narrator **reminisces** about better times when people used to be sincere and trustworthy).

**Contemplates** – to think deeply about something. (Jagan **contemplates** about the many rituals and traditions that he had to uphold at his wedding).

**The words below can be followed by The Writer/ Poet/ Author... as well as The Word/ Phrase (Or Quotation).**

**Capture** – when the writer or the word/phrase contains meaning just like a camera captures all the details of an image. (The author **captures** the whole plot in the first line of the novel in The Vendor of Sweets) / (The phrase ‘Fearful trill’ **captures** the deep anguish and the urgency of the caged bird).

**Highlights/Emphasizes** – To draw attention to something. (The writer **emphasizes** the struggle for freedom by repeating the phrase ‘opens its throat to sing’) / (The phrase ‘fat worms’ **highlights** the excessive material prosperity that the free bird, or the privileged communities enjoy at the expense of the oppressed).

**The following verbs usually follow The Word / Phrase.**

**Reflect** when word or phrase reveals something about the character, place or situation, just like in a mirror. (The phrase ‘bars of rage’ **reflects** the immense anger that blinds the caged bird, not allowing it to perceive its reality clearly) / (The word ‘game’ in this context **reflects** how the loss of lives is similar to entertainment or profit for politicians).

**Connotes /suggests /implies** – What a word implies or suggests (In addition to the literal meaning).  
(The phrase ‘dares to claim the sky’ **connotes / suggests / implies** ownership and the authority that the free bird enjoys).

**Symbolize** – When a word or phrase stands as a representation of a larger entity. (The phrase ‘till the current ends’ **symbolizes** the social system with its laws and social structures which guarantees an effortless and resistance-free life to the privileged community.)

**Conveys** – Means to carry a message. (The word ‘scuttle’ conveys the fear of the tourists as they are horrified by the violence that the country fell into).

**Nouns and Adjectives**

The poems ‘I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings’ and ‘Big Match, 1983’ both share similar themes. ‘Richard Cory’ and ‘Once Upon a Time’ share similar themes as well. This means that the critical essays on these poems will require you to be familiar with certain words that are able to express those themes with detail. Let’s take a look at the themes that revolve around the poems and the vocabularies that will come in handy!

***I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS / BIG MATCH, 1983***

<b>Vocabulary</b>		
<i>Nouns</i>	<i>Verb/Adverb</i>	<i>Adjective</i>
<b>Discrimination</b>	Discriminate	Discriminatory
<b>Segregation</b>	Segregate	-
<b>Oppression / Oppressor</b>	Oppress	Oppressive
<b>Atrocity / Atrocities</b>	Atrociously	Atrocious
<b>Horrible</b>	Horrify	Horrifying
-	Harrow	Harrowing
<b>Terror</b>	Terrify / Terrified	Terrifying
<b>Brutality</b>	Brutally	Brutal / Brutally
<b>Viciousness</b>	Viciously	Vicious
<b>Ruthlessness</b>	Ruthlessly	Ruthless
<b>Callousness</b>	Callously	Callous
<b>Trauma</b>	Traumatically	Traumatic
<b>Unconscionableness</b>	Unconscionably	Unconscionable
<b>Marginalization</b>	Marginalize	Marginalized
<b>Devaluation</b>	Devalue	Devalued
<b>Struggle</b>	Struggle	
<b>Dignity</b>	Dignify	Dignified
<b>Dehumanization</b>	Dehumanize	Dehumanized
<b>Resources</b>		
<b>Opportunities</b>		
<b>Privilege/s</b>	Privilege	Privileged
<b>Prosperity</b>	Prosper	Prosperous
<b>Xenophobia</b>		Xenophobic
<b>Coexistence</b>	Coexist	Coexisting
<b>Opportunism</b>	Opportunistically	Opportunistic
<b>Social System</b>		



***RICHARD CORY AND ONCE UPON A TIME***

<b>Vocabulary</b>		
<i>Nouns</i>	<i>Verb/Adverb</i>	<i>Adjective</i>
<b>Deception</b>	Deceive	Deceptive
<b>Appearance</b>	Appear	
<b>Façade</b>		
<b>Perception</b>	Perceive	Perceptive
<b>Perfection</b>	Perfect	Perfect
<b>Genuineness</b>	Genuinely	Genuine
<b>Sincerity</b>	Sincerely	Sincere
<b>Honesty</b>	Honestly	Honest
<b>Paranoia</b>	-	Paranoid
<b>Suspicion</b>	Suspect/suspiciously	Suspicious
<b>Cynic/Cynicism</b>	Cynically	Cynical
<b>Shrewdness</b>	Shrewdly	Shrewd
<b>Impeccability</b>	-	Impeccable
<b>Poverty/Destitution</b>	-	Destitute
<b>Despair</b>	-	-
<b>Performance</b>	Perform	Performative
<b>Capitalism</b>	-	Capitalistic
<b>Selfishness</b>	Selfishly	Selfish
<b>Reclamation</b>	Reclaim	Reclaimed
<b>Identity</b>		
<b>Invariable</b>	Invariably	-
<b>Community</b>	Communally	Communal
<b>Innocence</b>	Innocently	Innocent
<b>Conformity</b>	Conform	-

## **THEMES and KEY IDEAS**

### **I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings – Maya Angelou**

The poem uses comparison to emphasize the reality of the caged bird. Maya Angelou compares the life of the free bird and the caged bird. It is an allegorical poem which means, the birds represent a larger reality: the Oppressor and the Oppressed.

‘A free bird leaps  
on the back of the wind  
and floats downstream  
till the current ends’

This stanza suggests the freedom the bird enjoys. Leaping requires a lot of space and strength. As opposed to the caged bird which ‘stalks down his narrow cage,’ the free bird has space. This symbolizes how the social structures constrict the potential and progression of the people who are caged, or oppressed. The free bird ‘floats,’ which is an effortless movement. The current which makes it easy for it to glide along is an allusion to the laws, regulations, institutions and beliefs in society which all favour the privileged community: in Maya Angelou’s specific experience, the white Americans.

The free bird dares to claim/name the sky. Claiming and naming indicates ownership and authority over something. This is the ability of the privileged persons to reach their dreams, to build a future, to succeed within the social structures they live in. This is possible because they have ample opportunities and an excess of resources as is evident through the line ‘fat worms on a dawn bright lawn.’ They revel in their material prosperity.

However, the caged bird’s wings are clipped and feet are tied. The wings are a defining feature of a bird. Without it, their identity as a bird is confused. Likewise, freedom is a distinguishable feature of a person. When this is taken away, it is equal to taking away his dignity, his pride, his humanity and his identity as a person. Therefore, his wings being clipped symbolizes how the people in power oppress the minorities by taking away their freedom, their rights, their opportunities and resources; so much so that they are unable to progress, advance and build a hopeful future for themselves. Their feet are tied.

Their dreams are buried as there is no space allowed for them. Generations of slavery and being under the rule of segregation has disallowed them to dream of a future for themselves. However, the SONG that the caged bird sings becomes a hopeful symbol. It is a rallying cry for freedom. It is the song of all oppressed people beyond the landscape of this poem and in all the nations or distant hills, where people are struggling to claim their right to live as equals.

### **Big Match, 1983 – Yasmine Gooneratne**

The poem is a response to the Black July in 1983. The title has two meanings. The matchstick and a game of cricket. The poem attempts to trace where the spark of ethnic tensions began. It also emphasizes how the politicians view it as an opportunity to further their personal political interests, and therefore trivializes it to the level of a game (the game's in other hands in any case).

The poem mentions several significant years. 1948 is Independence, when Sri Lanka received freedom from Britain. However, the freedom received was not the same for Tamils as they felt as they were not considered a part of the nation. This escalated in 1956 when SWRD Bandaranaike implemented the Sinhala Only Act which made Sinhala the only official language of Sri Lanka, even though Tamil constituted about 25% of the population. This was a move which disregarded Tamils as citizens and denied them equal rights. It was a denigration of Tamil culture, literature and their existence as citizens. Many Tamils lost their jobs due to this, and they were unable to carry out many daily tasks as the government institutions (Post Office, Police, Schools, and Municipal Councils) suddenly switched to Sinhala. Imagine what it would've been like if Tamil became the only operational language in Colombo! How would you function?

1958 marks the anti-Tamil riots which shook the country. Gooneratne writes that this was the first sparks of the flame of hatred. Many Tamils were killed, their businesses were burnt to the ground and violence spread across the island.

The poet shows how the politicians uses the situation for their politics, as it is no more than a game for them. The soldiers who die are like scores in a cricket match. They are dehumanized.

In the last stanza she juxtaposes religious imagery with images of brutal violence. Under the Bo tree a man is stoned to death. The irony is that Lord Buddha achieved enlightenment under a Bo tree. It is a tree which symbolizes Buddhism, which advocates love and kindness to all beings. Likewise, violence and crime takes place right in front of the police who turn a blind eye. Though they are supposed to prevent crime, they ironically facilitate it in this instance. Crime and crime-prevention is juxtaposed. Likewise, the poet exposes the sheer hypocrisy of the people who proclaim religious fervor but do not live by what they preach.

'At the corner of Duplication road a child lies dead.' This line evokes horror and fear as a child is a symbol of innocence and truth. The image moves us deeply because it reflects how humanity is capable of falling to such unconscionable acts. It reflects the danger of xenophobic ideologies.

### **Richard Cory – Edwin Arlington Robinson**

The main themes of the poem are ‘appearances are deceptive’ and ‘wealth cannot guarantee happiness,’ which are two sides of the same coin.

The poem is told from the perspective of a working class person who is possibly looking for day to day work, as the poem is written in 1890’s, after America endured two economic recessions. The narrator lives in poverty and desires to trade his life for Richard Cory’s. The narrator and co looked at RC each time he passed by. Why? He was quite different to them. They lived downtown which is the heart of the city where the factories and all other industrial operations take place. When someone from the upper class (or aristocracy) arrived amongst them, it was rare. He looks, walks and talks different to them. He is presented as the perfect gentleman, lacking in nothing! ‘He was a gentleman from sole to crown,’ suggests that nothing was out of place about him. There was no outward indication whatsoever about his inward struggle.

But as we know, this image he presented was merely a façade which comes crumbling down as he decides to end his existence. The irony is that the narrator wanted to exchange his life for Richard Cory’s. They believed that they live in darkness (waited for the light). They keep hoping of a better future and go on living their life. Even though their current status is not glamorous or at least comfortable, they look forward for the day when things would be better. They had hope. In contrast, Richard Cory did not have hope. He could not find any reason to live even though he probably had money to buy anything that money could (richer than a king).

It should be noted that the poet builds a consistent image of Richard Cory, thereby making the reader believe that he is successful man with a fulfilling life. Even the form of the poem contributes to this predictability. The rhyme scheme is consistent, and the rhythm follows the iambic pentameter throughout. And the poet adds the adjective ‘calm’ to heighten the stability of the summer night before letting the unexpected bullet shatter all calmness.

There are two sides to the story. The narrator fails to see Richard Cory as a frail, human and weak person because of the image he presented of himself. The image seemed perfect on the outside. He appeared to be the impeccable gentleman. They envied him and idolized him. The fact that he says ‘he was human when he talked,’ suggests how they viewed him to be more worthy than themselves. Richard Cory could not access the world of the narrator. And the narrator could not enter into the world of Richard Cory. Because of this distance between the two parties, there was no way of communicating or sharing the struggle that Richard Cory was going through. This reflects how limited our understanding of other people are, and how easily we can fall into the trap of believing something which is completely inaccurate if we rely too much on appearances.

### **Once Upon a Time – Gabriel Okara**

The poem by Gabriel Okara is quite straightforward. The poet reminisces about a time when people were more direct about their intentions, when they were more true to themselves and their feelings. Taking into consideration the fact that the poet wrote extensively about the changing dynamics of community in Nigeria, the poem can be read as a commentary on how colonization transformed traditional and well-established methods of conflict resolution. It comments on how the community bond and the integrity among the people in the community has weakened, faded or completely disappeared.

The poet plays with the idea of acting. Faces, or masks, are used as a metaphor to suggest how the narrator has learnt to change his face or attitude depending on the context. It connotes the performative nature of his identity. He no longer lives true to himself, but puts on different masks at different places. 'Homeface, officeface... cocktail face,' suggest his shifty behaviour. This is a clear indication of the fading honesty and sincerity in his character. The poet says that he learnt it from society, and that he wants to unlearn it.

The poet also emphasizes how the love of money, or capitalism has made people overly obsessed about themselves to such an extent that they have forgotten to sustain the communal bond. When they shake hands, 'their left hands search my empty pockets.' This suggests the opportunistic mentality of the people, who would take every chance to exploit anyone. Colonization uprooted the social structures of Nigeria and brought in a culture which valorized the individual's interests. The humanity in their hearts has gone cold, and even human beings are seen as merely an opportunity to make money. They are dehumanized and devalued. The word 'human capital' used in economics is a word which reflects this reality.

However, the poet sees a possibility of going back to how he used to be by learning from his son. It sounds paradoxical (unlearning to learn), and trying to learn from his son may sound rather idealistic than realistic. But he reflects on how what he has learnt from society are 'muting,' meaning that they do not let him express himself honestly. He feels like he is loving a lie. He wants to be released from the burden of trying to fit in with society. People have become so paranoid, suspicious and cynical that he feels it burdensome to live in such a distrustful society. He wants to regain the innocence that his child still preserves. This, he believes, is the only way that he can become sincere and true to himself once again.

To study literature is to learn ways of looking at things. It enhances the imagination to absorb many different worldviews and perspectives. It enables us to see things through the eyes of different characters, and guides us through the emotions, opinions, ideologies and beliefs of protagonists and antagonists. Rather than just an A or B in the examination results sheet, literature is a life-changing experience, constantly refining our senses and sensibilities.

## **ENGLISH LITERATURE CLASSES**

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