

## Odes

The word 'Ode' is derived from a Greek word meaning 'song', but unlike the ballads that we have already looked at, odes are invariably serious and far more structured. English poets, including Keats and Shelley, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Tennyson, all wrote numerous odes but they departed from the very rigid form of the original Greek choral ode. However, what they wrote still contains very disciplined patterns. Odes also tend to be rather long and therefore I have included here only a few sample verses. What I hope you will notice is the wonderfully rich language and imagery that they contain. The Odes written by poets of the past represent some of the finest poetry in the English language.

### from *Ode to a Nightingale* by John Keats

(This is the fifth of eight ten-lined verses. The same rhyming pattern of abab cde cde is followed in every verse)

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,  
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,  
But in embalméd darkness, guess each sweet  
Wherewith the seasonable month endows  
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;  
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;  
Fast-fading violets cover'd up in leaves;  
And mid-May's eldest child,  
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,  
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

### From *Ode to the West Wind* by Percy Bysshe Shelley

(This is the first of five parts, each part composed of 5 stanzas of 3,3,3,3 and 2 lines with a complex rhyming pattern of: a b a – b c b – c d c – d e d – f f)

O Wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being  
Thou from whose unseen presence the leaves dead  
Are driven like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,  
Pestilence-stricken multitudes! O thou  
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed

The wingéd seeds, where they lie cold and low,  
Each like a corpse within its grave, until  
Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow

Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth, and fill  
(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)  
With living hues and odours plain and hill;

Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;  
Destroyer and preserver; hear, O hear!

## WRITING EXERCISE 4

### A New Song of Similes by John Gay

*Pert as a pear-monger I'd be,  
If Molly were but kind;  
Cool as a cucumber could see  
The rest of womankind.*

*Like a stuck pig I gaping stare,  
And eye her o'er and o'er;  
Lean as a rake with sighs and care,  
Sleek as a mouse before.*

*Plump as a partridge was I known,  
And soft as silk my skin,  
My cheeks as fat as butter grown;  
But as a goat now thin!*

*I, melancholy as a cat,  
And kept awake to weep;  
But she, insensible of that,  
Sound as a top can sleep.*

*Hard is her heart as flint or stone,  
She laughs to see me pale;  
And merry as a grig is grown,  
And brisk as bottled ale.*

*The God of Love at her approach  
Is busy as a bee;  
Hearts, sound as any bell or roach,  
Are smit and sigh like me.*

*Ay me! as thick as hops or hail,  
The fine men crowd about her;  
But soon as dead as a door nail  
Shall I be, if without her.*

- 1 There are some words in this poem that may be unfamiliar to you. If so, look them up in a dictionary in order to be able to give the meanings of: pert, pear-monger, goat, grig, smit (short for smitten?)
- 2 A simile that is over-used may become a cliché. Make a list of those similes you think have become clichés.
- 3 Write a short poem of your own that contains a number of effective similes.

# GLOSSARY

## Glossary

*This section of the book lists the various devices that may be used to express ideas effectively in poetry; in each case it will give a definition and, where possible, offer examples of how poets have used the device. When you understand what the device is and how it works it should be easier for you to discuss the content of poetry and will help you to write your own.*

### **alexandrine (see hexameter below)**

**allegory:** a form of story that has two meanings, with the second meaning hidden or partly hidden behind the literal, more obvious first meaning. The most obvious example is to be found in John Bunyan's 'The Pilgrim's Progress'. It tells the story of one of the characters called Christian and his journey from his home to the Heavenly City; but what it is really about is the story of any Christian person and his or her journey through life.

**alliteration:** a device frequently used in poetry where a consonant, usually initial is repeated.

Example: "Water, water, everywhere, and not a drop to drink"  
(w – w – w – dr – dr)

**allusion:** a passing reference to some person, place, historical event, literary or artistic work, not explained but assumed by the writer to be familiar to the reader. Sadly this is frequently not so and we are either left wondering or flying around our reference books to find out what is meant. For example, if you look at the final verse of G.K. Chesterton's 'The Donkey' on page 62, there is an allusion to Christ's triumphant entry into Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday. Perhaps when Chesterton wrote the poem in the early part of the last century most people would have recognised the allusion; that is not necessarily true today.

**ambiguity:** openness to more than one interpretation. In poetry it is often just a word, as in the last line of Wordsworth's sonnet 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge' (page 34): "And all that mighty heart is lying still." The word *still* could mean *quiet, not moving* or it could mean *even yet*.

**anapest:** a metrical foot composed of two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable.