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Amy Winehouse gets into Cambridge

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As spoken verse, it may scan a little awkwardly, and the rhymes could be considered somewhat laboured. But Amy Winehouse might argue that her lyrics were never intended to be scrutinised by the poetry brains of Cambridge University.

To the surprise of final-year English literature students, when they opened their practical criticism exam they found the troubled singer's work pitted against Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth and Sir Walter Raleigh for literary analysis.

The verses from *Love is a Losing Game* may not quite make it as a sonnet, but the track, from Winehouse's *Back to Black* album, was deemed good enough for discussion on lyric poetry. The extract included verses such as: "Though I'm rather blind/ Love is a fate resigned/ Memories mar my mind/ Love is a fate resigned" and "Over futile odds/ And laughed at by the gods/ And now the final frame/ Love is a losing game."



Students expressed a mixture of surprise, irritation and no little admiration for their exam setters. "It was really bizarre," said one student, speaking on condition of anonymity while his paper was with the markers. "I sat there looking at the paper in shock. I wouldn't consider a controversial pop singer a literary figure."

The examiners posed the following question: "The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'lyric' as 'Of or pertaining to the lyre; adapted to the lyre, meant to be sung'. It also quotes Ruskin's maxim 'lyric poetry is the expression by the poet of his own feelings'.

"Compare poem (a) on the separate sheet [a lyric by Sir Walter Raleigh, written in 1592] with one or two of the song lyrics (b)(d), with reference to these diverse senses of 'lyric'."

"Lyric (d)", *Love is a Losing Game*, written by Winehouse and Mark Ronson and winner of an Ivor Novello award last week for being the Best Musical and Lyrical Song, was up against stiff competition.

The Raleigh text was *As You Came from The Holy Land*, which includes the lines: "As you came from the holy land/ Of Walsingham/ Met you not with my true love/ By the way as you came? How shall I know your true love/ That have met many one/ As I went to the holy land, That have come, that have gone?"

Students sitting the paper were also asked to compare the Raleigh poem with two other songs – *Fine and Mellow* by Billie Holiday and *Boots of Spanish Leather* by Bob Dylan.

Some students said they felt that comparing Winehouse to Raleigh – arguably the *enfant terrible* of his day, with a similar passion for smoking exotic substances – was entirely warranted. "I think it's cool," one said. "Poetry doesn't have to mean Keats and Byron. That said, there were a lot of surprised people."

Winehouse, best known for her song *Rehab*, was recently arrested after being secretly filmed at her home in East London, apparently taking drugs. Police decided not to press charges for lack of evidence. Her husband, Blake Fielder-Civil, is in jail awaiting trial on charges of conspiracy to pervert the course of justice.

A Cambridge University spokesman said of the exam, which was sat last week: "There is no right or wrong answer to this question – it is not a maths exam. The idea is to assess students' abilities at dealing with unseen writings from across the field of English literature. Seamus Heaney is on record admiring Eminem. Cambridge dons live in the modern world and can appreciate talent from myriad different fields just like anyone else."

In 2001 students were similarly bewildered to find a quotation from the Bee Gees in an exam on the subject of tragedy. The three-hour paper invited them to construct an essay on the basis of the lyrics: "Tragedy/ when the feeling's gone and you can't go on/ it's tragedy... Tragedy/ when you lose control/ and you've got no soul/ it's tragedy".

At the time John Kerrigan, Professor of English at St John's College, Cambridge, said. "The line in the Bee Gees song where he sings, 'The feeling's gone and you can't go on', is a fair summary of the end of *King Lear*."

Amy Winehouse

For you I was a flame
Love is a losing game
Five storey fire as you came
Love is a losing game
Why do I wish I never played
Oh, what a mess we made
And now the final frame
Love is a losing game
Played out by the band love is a losing hand ...
Taken from
Love is a Losing Game

Sir Walter Raleigh

As you came from the holy land
Of Walsingham,
Met you not with my true love
By the way as you came?
How shall I know your true love,
That have met many one,
As I went to the holy land,
That have come, that have gone?
She is neither white nor brown,
But as the heavens fair;
There is none hath a form so divine In the earth or the air . . .
Taken from
As You Came from the Holy Land