

In their own write.

From creative writing to creative reading

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A lot of teachers and an uncomfortably large number of students seem ill at ease with and would probably quite happily avoid “doing” poetry altogether, either in class or as exam texts. At the same time it is probably fair to say that most self-respecting teenagers write poetry about love, life and what is wrong with the universe. These poetic efforts are often considered to be angst-ridden, clichéd and/or predictable, and they often do not survive the early adulthood of their creators.

From a didactic point of view, this avoidance of poetry seems somewhat ill-advised, because in practical terms of all genres of literature which we can deal with in class, poetry seems an obvious choice. Poems are usually short enough to allow a careful reading in the classroom as well as some discussion within the frame of one or two lessons in ways novels clearly do not and most short stories tend not to; plays are also usually of a length which requires that much of the reading has to be done outside the classroom, e.g. as homework, and the discussion in class is usually limited either to a restricted selection of topics or to a short passage from the work.

On the basis of these considerations three points seem noteworthy: firstly, there is a clear disparity between students’ attitudes towards poetry and their actual production of it. Secondly, the way in which poetry is “done” at school may well be what prevents students from developing a less strained relationship towards it. Thirdly, in view of the at times prolific production of poems in adolescence, it would seem that the school fails to make use of a potential which would probably be beneficial to a more positive attitude towards as well as a better understanding of poetry.

Underlying these three points we can identify one fundamental problem, i.e. that what happens in the teaching of poetry seems to be largely responsible for the fact that the overwhelming majority of school leavers are highly unlikely to open a book of poetry again in later life. Because students become teachers, this attitude will in all probability influence how future students are taught. Generally speaking, problematic approaches to what is taught in schools tend to perpetuate attitudes among successive generations of students, creating a vicious circle that can only be broken if new methods and ideas can be introduced into the system. I shall return to this issue in more detail below.

It may be useful at this point to examine three factors which contribute to the problematic approach to poetry in the classroom. Firstly, poetry is often considered – as it has been traditionally – to be the most sublime of all literary genres. Take, for instance, John Dennis, who states in his “The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry” of 1704 “[t]hat Poetry is the noblest of all the Arts, and by consequence the most instructive and the most beneficial to Mankind”, which “may be prov’d by the concurring Testimony of the greatest Men, who have liv’d in every Age.” Wordsworth expresses a similar view in the “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads” where he famously describes poetry as “the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge”. Matthew Arnold quotes this in “The Study of Poetry” of 1880 and goes on to say that “the best poetry will be found to have a power of forming, sustaining, and delighting us, *as nothing else can*” (emphasis added). Even though few teachers would be familiar with these and similar references, they nevertheless seem to subscribe to the notion that poetry by nature is or should be the most awe-inspiring literary genre, being very dense, highly complex and therefore almost inaccessible to the average student.

Secondly, poems are expected to be saturated with meaning to a much larger degree than any other literary text, which compounds their inaccessibility to all but the brightest of students. Undoubtedly Helen Vendler is correct when she points out that because “poems are

short, they depend more on implication than longer works, such as novels, do” (150) and that therefore words in poems are often made to work harder for their literary living. However, there seems to be an additional factor which contributes to the difficulty some teachers and pupils have with poetry: the widespread notion that poems are vehicles for “messages”. Sidney Lea looks at this issue from a writer’s point of view, which one might do well to adopt: “Poetry is not ... criticism in reverse. A poem’s aim isn’t to start with a conclusion and then disguise it so that somebody smart can find the ... ‘hidden meaning’” (18). The unease that many teachers seem to have about working with poems in class may be based on this rather deep-rooted fallacy and the expectation that it is possible to crack the shell of a poem’s outward appearance, its form and its language, in order to get to the kernel of what it really means. However, if we consider that often poets a few years after writing a poem may no longer be absolutely clear about what was going through their mind when they wrote it, then perhaps The Meaning, immutable and hewn in stone, is not as pivotal to the appreciation as some teacher may think. One might even go one step further and suggest that there is no single meaning at all and that some poems evoke images or ideas that may have little to do with the poet’s intentions at the time of writing, which does not make these images or ideas any less valid, as long as – in critical terms – the reader can make a case for and appreciate their soundness. For the reader who reads for pleasure only, even this criterion may be irrelevant. Furthermore, in some cases meaning can prove elusive. As Cliff Yates, poet and teacher, puts it:

A great deal of the resistance against poems that I’ve encountered is because pupils have not learned how to approach them, how to savour the process of ‘getting it’ and how to tolerate and enjoy the process of not being able to ‘get it’. The very elusiveness can be a pleasure (42).

In practical terms this suggests that, even though some poems are obviously more accessible than others, we should perhaps free ourselves from the notion of understanding a poem

completely or, in fact, abandon (possibly not even embark on) the quest for “what the poet wanted to say”.

A third factor is that, given the elusiveness of meaning and the density of content of poetry, the way in which poems are dealt with at school is largely rational, if not to say, clinical. Mention may be made of the beauty of the language, the musicality of the lines and the cadences of the phrases, but much of what happens in a class on poetry focuses formal elements (with the discussion often suggesting a strong dichotomy of form and content) and on the analysis of poems. Maley and Moulding, who advocate the use of poetry in foreign language teaching, perhaps put it somewhat polemically when they say that

... one of the reasons that poetry provokes a shiver of awe or revulsion may be the dusty academic way in which it has so often been taught. The learner has been enmeshed in a net of iambic pentameters, sonnet rhyme schemes and classical allusions. The critical apparatus, like some unwieldy scaffolding, has obscured the clear lines of the poem constructed behind it. (136)

It would be unwise to deny that much can be gained from analytical discussions, e.g. an understanding of how the subject matter is presented, how form works and how certain effects in a poem are achieved, but appreciation, especially affective appreciation, which is probably the ultimate aim of such exercises, may prove elusive with such an approach. Good poems are more than the sum of the parts which we can find by analysis, which may be what T.S. Eliot had in mind when he said that genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood.

To sum up, it is probably fair to say that poetry is often avoided in the classroom because it is considered to be too lofty a form of literature, too concentrated in content as well as too full of inaccessible meaning for pupils, and that its dry analysis will yield some insights but is somewhat unlikely automatically to create positive affective attitudes towards the poem in question. I would claim, somewhat polemically perhaps, that any of these factors and often all of them together, are responsible for the reluctance of teachers to work with poems, an attitude which is passed on to the students.

As pointed out above, these approaches and attitudes are perpetuated by the school. Therefore, I feel, the time has come to look for alternative approaches. Strangely enough, it seems inconceivable that someone studying composition would do so without ever having to compose a piece of music. By contrast, and this is true mainly for non-Anglo-Saxon Europe, students of literature in general and poetry in particular can earn their degrees without writing so much as a haiku. By contrast, given that many students write their own poetry, it seems a shame not to make use of their readiness to put pen to paper.

Writing can be a very stimulating way to get students interested in what other writers are doing or have done, thus making it possible to gain entry into more relaxed ways of working with poetry. Experience shows that this can even work for students who may exhibit rather strong resistance; as Cliff Yates (like many others) finds, “[w]riting a poem has a refreshing, unpredictable quality, so that the most disaffected pupils can surprise themselves by what they write” (x).

Nevertheless, one of the reasons why teachers can be reluctant to encourage students to try writing poems is the underlying – and at times quite explicit – expectation that the results will quite probably be derivative, predictable and of inferior literary quality. To put it bluntly, why let students struggle to produce the mediocre when they can savour the sublime. Although I would not roundly deny that there is some truth in the above and that much of the writing may not be of a genuinely high literary standard, I would argue that not letting students try their hand at writing poetry for these reasons smacks of a misguided form of elitism; no language teacher, whether mother-tongue or second/foreign language, would seriously consider not setting essays for her/his class, even though it is fair to say that there are will be very few essays of a high literary quality. As for the problem of predictability and, probably related to this, the likelihood that much of the work of younger writers – as mentioned earlier – may well turn out to be angst-ridden and clichéd, I would like to suggest

that with considered teaching practice and carefully devised creative writing tasks, we can work towards a young writer's poetry that need not be clichéd, predictable or confined to a world contained within the rim of their navels. We can also work towards their awareness that there are certain writing techniques and skills of the craft that can be learnt and that creative writing is not a *carte blanche* for total freedom with the language. A good poem has to work linguistically.

In the following I would like to present a few activities that have been known to work. For ease of access they are taken from a teaching pack for creative writing called *Creative Ways* (2001), produced by the British Council and based on a series of broadcasts on the BBC World Service.¹ They are meant to show that there are ways of getting young people to write poetry while exploring some techniques and tricks of the trade, and at the same time to steer them towards a mind-frame that helps them to avoid clichéd and predictable writing.

The first activity is aimed at developing images by using one of the most widespread alienation techniques, the riddle. Students are asked to think of an object; advanced students may also venture on abstract concepts if they wish. They are then asked to brainstorm as many ways of describing that object as they can. In doing so the students will in fact be composing metaphors or at least imaginative language. The next step would be to weed out the more obvious descriptions. In a final stage the students are asked to revise the remaining descriptions to make them sound elegant, then either to read them out to the rest of the class or write them in decorative script and display them in the classroom. In English there are a wide range of example texts, some of the most well-known modern examples are “Metaphors” or “You’re” by Sylvia Plath. Another excellent source is Kevin Crossley Holland’s *The New Exeter Book of Riddles*.

¹ The teaching pack *Creative Ways* is downloadable free of charge from the following websites: http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/write/creative_write.shtml and <http://www.creative-writing.ch/creativeways.html>

To extend this idea we can make practical use of similes and metaphors by asking students to think of a person that means a lot to them, whose name they put in the centre of a large piece of paper. Around it, in mindmap fashion, they should put sentences and phrases about this person that should involve as many of the senses as possible and compare this person to concepts, experiences or ideas, e.g. a dish, a time of day/year, a flower, an insect, a period in one's life, a fruit, a musical instrument/piece of music, a kind of weather, a tool, a smell, etc. Afterwards students could be asked to write a poem about the person using the comparisons they have made and introducing each statement, or for instance every fourth one, with a phrase that is repeated; the simplest one being "You are ...". Examples for study are Adrian Henri's "Love is ...", excerpts from Roger McGough's "What you are", but also Shakespeare's Sonnet LXXIII "That Time of Year Thou May'st in Me Behold", all of which use comparisons to describe a person.

In order to develop insights into the notion that where we put line breaks in a poem has a strong impact on how the reader experiences the text, the following two approaches can be used. Firstly, the students are presented with short text and asked to put in line breaks. An example that works very well, but may be a little risqué with younger teenagers, is suggested by Sharon Bryan: "He just laid bare his heart and the young woman kissed him until he yelled 'Stop fooling around and get down to business!'" (183). Depending upon where we put the line breaks, we may end up with a text with a rather suggestive character. We can then present canonical poems as prose texts to the students, e.g. Auden's "Funeral Blues" and Whitman's "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer". The former works very well because of its clear rhyme scheme and thematic progression, which also permits one to determine where the stanza breaks occur; the latter is suitable, especially in the first part, because of its syntactic regularity. The students can then be asked to make the texts look like a poems again. Poems like Larkin's "Mr Bleaney" or Duffy's "Human Interest" are also very interesting because

they can be used to illustrate that there is no one place to break the lines; students are likely to have different ideas from the poets, who have used very clear rhyme schemes but mostly hide them by using run-on lines. Secondly, students could be asked to study Brownjohn's "Common Sense", which uses texts with mathematical problems from a maths book of 1917 and gives unusual weight to the brain teasers by breaking the lines in strategic places. Afterwards, using for example instruction leaflets, political party statements or manifestos, excerpts from self-help manuals or letters of advice from agony aunts, lonely hearts columns, etc., students could be asked to insert line breaks into the prose texts in the manner of *textes trouvés*.

A popular misconception is that poetry has to rhyme in order to be poetry. As a result, many students present their first efforts in what Paul Munden, director of the (British) National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE) once aptly described as a "flood of mindless rhyming". This is borne out by Bugeja, the American writing teacher and poet, who shows quite interestingly how often rhyming forces a text to go in directions it need not go (see Bugeja in *The Art and Craft of Poetry*, 205). The main problem tends to be that novice writers try to crowbar meaning into couplets, often regardless of scansion and textual logic. Apart from simply discouraging the use of rhyming we can try to ensure that the poem is not hampered by the handicap of having to make sense. Lewis Carroll's delightful nonsense poem "The Mad Gardener's Song" can serve as a good model for such an activity. The example below shows the form of the poem and clear instructions on how the blanks must be filled.

(l.1) He thought he saw a/the _____	complete with 1-2 stressed syllable(s)
(l.2) _____	3 stressed syllables
(l.3) He looked again and found it was _____	_____ rhyme from line 2
(l.4) _____	3 stressed syllables
(l.5) " _____ ", he said,	3 stressed syllables in gap
(l.6) " _____ "	3 stressed syllables
	_____ rhyme from line 2
	_____ rhyme from line 4

To ensure that no attempt can be made to give this text meaning, it is completed in groups with every student folding over the paper along the dotted line once she/he has completed the line. The only information that needs to be visible and placed into the appropriate boxes (l. 4 and l. 6) is the rhyming word, which should be easy to rhyme with. Because there are clear instructions as to the number of stressed syllables there is a fair chance that the scansion should work reasonably well.

In a very different way we can practise using the senses in the context of memories. One means of making a character “tangible” for the reader can be explored in an activity based on Norman MacCaig’s “Aunt Julia”. Students are asked to think of a person that they have a strong memory of, ideally a woman, older than they are and with whom they can no longer communicate, for instance because the person has moved on to somewhere else or has died. They then brainstorm experiences that they associate with this person, small details about where they used to go or be with this person, observations about quirky habits, special abilities, etc. Once more it is important to encourage students to try and relate the memories to all senses. Out of these elements they should then try to write a poem about this person.

To conclude this admittedly rather brief tour of creative writing activities to promote the reading of poetry in class, I would like to suggest a playful as well as perhaps slightly disrespectful activity, which represents a different approach to the classics and to the well-known poems from the canon, which so often fail to make an impact on younger readers. For this activity it is important that the students are familiar with very short formal poems, such as the haiku, the tanka, the cinquain (another syllabic poem consisting of five lines of 2, 4, 6, 8 and 2 syllables), etc. Then they are given the canonical text; in my experience, Blake's "The Fly" or "London", Wordsworth's "The Daffodils", Shelley's "Ozymandias", Keat's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" or Frost's "On Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" work quite well. The task is to rewrite the poem as one of the short formal poems mentioned above, with an option of limericks, heroic couplets or simple quatrains, if students prefer a rhymed form. In many ways what the students are asked to do corresponds to the traditional approach to a poem where the central theme (or themes) of a poem are to be identified, but by pursuing it in this playful manner and slightly disrespectful fashion, we avoid the overly serious and potentially off-putting reverence that so often prevents us from finding ways into the "poetry classics". What is more, there are very witty examples of such encapsulations, for example Wendy Cope's "The Wasteland Limericks".

It would be naïve to claim that using creative writing techniques to teach poetry does not raise questions. For reasons of space I shall restrict my discussion in this paper to two issues. One is the question what should come first, reading or writing. In the American literature on the topic the preferred method is often to present a poem to the students first, discuss it with them and then get them to work the ideas that have surfaced in the discussion into a poem of their own (for examples of this approach see Thomas' *Singing the Sun up* or Edgar's and Padgett's *Educating the Imagination*). Probably the most salient difference between this and the more traditional approaches is the fact that the discussion is rounded off by or developed

into a poem which the students write themselves. In my opinion this approach works well with students who no longer feel uncomfortable about working with poems; seasoned writing classes are in fact even able to produce results that may be rather different from the input poem. However, the fact of being confronted with the model of a published or canonical poem, which a budding writer and novice student of poems assumes to be exemplary, can make the task of developing one's own text rather a daunting one. There is a certain danger that this may block the writing or produce rather derivative work.

Generally, I prefer to have students write first, exploring some of the important features of the poem based on instructions by the teacher, then to present the model and discuss ways in which the students work is similar or different. It can be argued that many students write more freely when not dominated by a feeling that their work will never be comparable to the canonical text. At the same time the writing will sharpen their perception of what the canonical text does, once they have discussed their own work amongst themselves and with the teacher. I find the analogy compelling that anyone who has ever tried to make a pot, no matter how perfect or imperfect the result, will view what the master potter achieves in a different light and in some cases will even learn to appreciate something that he/or she has hitherto taken for granted.

This last point also highlights an aspect that we have not looked at as yet, namely the quality of the work students will produce as a result of these exploratory writing activities. This is clearly a thorny issue, but funnily enough one that many of the (American) self-help manuals on creative writing do not address or only cursorily. Clearly, we must aim, together with the students, to write material that is of the highest quality within the students' abilities, incidentally often much higher than one might at first assume. Care should be taken that the poems are grammatically, syntactically and in terms of the choice of words as carefully executed as possible, that where liberties are taken, they are taken with a specific effect in

mind, and that students learn that what they write is never hewn in stone but can, indeed must be improved through rewriting, pruning and rethinking, in short, through critical *editing*. However, as Yehudi Menuhin is quoted as saying on the Philosophenweg along the river Saane in Gstaad: irrespective of its final quality, all human beings should do something artistic in their life. If this helps to appreciate something as enjoyable as poetry, then surely we should let students try to do it “in their own write...”

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