

The Heart of a Poem

Carol Rumble's Plenary Talk (Thursday 19.7.)

Heart Beat Open heart surgery! A poem is made up of more than its heart, just as a person is, but I want to look at the most fundamental elements that make a poem tick.

(pumping heart)

If we are speaking to children about poetry, it is essential that we, as educators, know what the essence of poetry is. What is it that makes a poem live? I've termed this essence 'the heart' of a poem. I want to look at the most basic elements, so that we can take, together, a little refresher course regarding the nature of a poem. I hope what we discover will help you as you teach poetry in English, and in your native tongue, and that it will enhance your own appreciation of poetry, whatever language it is written in. (visual)

1. Word Choice

Choosing words carefully

Picture Transfer: (Draw a simple picture blindly, only guided by what your partner says.)

Words 'create', have power, transfer, must be chosen carefully.

There is an unbreakable link between words and imagination. We can hear/read a word and immediately imagine. If someone tells us they've just met someone who was very angry, we understand what that means because we remember seeing an angry person ourselves, and can imagine facial expressions and atmosphere. The poet is aware of this link, and will choose his words carefully.

Word Chains: (Write free word associations starting from "tower"; make the chain as long as you can and see where you end up)

Words take our minds/imaginings/emotions on a journey. The poet is aware of this and will choose his words carefully. Words have meanings (and every classroom should house a dictionary of etymology), but they also have associations and sounds. The poet will use words for all their qualities, and get the most out of them.

Painting With Words: For the poet, words become brushstrokes, shades, colours.

Ordinary Words: The poet doesn't seek to impress with his extensive vocabulary. A poem is often formed with ordinary words.

Horace, the Roman poet (65-8 BC), said: "You will have written exceptionally well if, by skilful arrangement of your words, you have made an ordinary one seem original."

"Digging" by Seamus Heaney. On the copy of the poem, and underline the word "digging" or "dig". Notice how attention is brought to the word. It has great invested meaning. Heaney has, "made an ordinary one seem original."

Choosing Words For Their Sound

Most poems should be read aloud, so we can hear the 'sound effects' the poet has used; e.g.

soft sounds – feather,

hard sounds – rock,

clipped sounds – tut,

extended sounds – smooth.

(Coral read also presented and read:)

“Fire Dragon” Does this rhyme?

SOUND ECHOES - RHYME

NOISY POEM

Dolphins go SPLASH!

Hammers go BANG!

Plates go CRASH!

And bells go DONG!

Cars go ZOOM!

Fireworks go FIZZ!

Giants go BOOM!

And rockets go WHIZZ!

WHAT A NOISY POEM THIS IS!!

So, at the heart of a poem is skilled word choice.

2. Placing and timing words

Once words have been chosen, the poet has to decide what to do with them. The poet will usually choose to place and time his words with specific intention.

Joke Telling: Hear Swiss examples and English. Jokes play with words and time them carefully. Comedians play with words and place them with specific intention.

Visual Poetry: Excellent way of helping children understand that the poet gives thought to where words should go on the page.

Life sentence

BEHIND THE BARS the tiger's eyes BEHIND THE BARS the tiger's eyes BEHIND THE BARS

Show deep, deep longing and deep, deep soars

Cats can

Cats can stretch

And cats can cut

Cats can pounce

Cats can sit

And w and w
i i
l l
l l

And cats can laze

And purr into

A sleepy haze

(More visual poems in separate file)

Enjambment and Closure: free verse is often like a musical score of many movements. Enjambment races us on, makes us anticipate; closure stops us, and allows us to rest.

Free Verse Revisit “Fire Dragon”. Listen for the timing, the music.

So, at the heart of a poem is skilled word placement.

3. Image Choice. Choosing images carefully.

The poet loves to give his reader/hearer something to imagine through one or more of his senses. Metaphors and similes are an ideal vehicle for this. I’m sure you will have thought a great deal about metaphor, as you’ve worked with Cheryl and Franz, but we shouldn’t ignore simile. Similes are useful in themselves, but also as a stepping stone towards metaphorical language.

Simile I Spy (Instead of “I spy with my little eye *something beginning with...*” it’s “I spy with my little eyes something that *does x / looks like ...*”

So, at the heart of a poem is a skilled choice of images.

4. Pattern Choice. Choosing patterns with design.

Poets consciously, and sometimes subconsciously, make choices about patterns. Poetry has much to do with making patterns with language, even patterns on the page, as with verses, stanzas, strophes. Of course, rhyme can develop as a pattern in a poem. The poet will often choose to use a regular rhythm as a ‘backdrop’ for his poem, or he might choose to vary the rhythms all the way through. E.g. PET SHOP RAP. (Read)

Cinquains: Starting point:

Sun rays

Stream through the trees

...

So, at the heart of a poem is skilled decision making about language patterns.

5. Drafting.

Undertaking drafting and re-drafting, as part of the poetic process, is important. Most poets will admit to using a drafting process, despite the famed, inescapable power of the Muse, who, it is sometimes imagined, drags the poet on from one line to the next, not allowing the writer one moment to use his own discernment or creative intelligence! Coleridge defined prose as “words in their best order”, but poetry as, “the best words in the best order”. Not many, mere

mortals, can do that in one go! (Coral then showed us her notebook and the way in which poems take shape: word clay.)

So, at the heart of a poem is a drafting process.

I believe that these basic elements form the heart of most poems, and, once we know what we're looking for, we, as educators, will be better placed to lead our pupils in the study of, and writing of poetry. This afternoon we'll think about how we can apply all this in the classroom.

Coral Rumble's notes (with a few added explanations in brackets from Franz)