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Introduction

GCSE or A Level?

This collection of classroom activities on poetry is designed for both GCSE and A Level classes. There has been a growing recognition of the need to provide challenging, varied and differentiated work for GCSE pupils and to find ways of bridging the gap between GCSE and A Level. Some of the activities in this pack are suitable for mixed ability GCSE classes; group work supports less able pupils: pupils can be offered different poems within an activity to meet their needs and interests and the activities are carefully structured to build confidence and provide support. Some of the activities might best be tackled with a smaller group of more able pupils. Others are more suitable for A Level. A lot will depend on the pupils' previous experience of poetry and the individual teacher's assessment both of individual needs and the needs of the whole group.

The activities

The activities are in a form that can be taken directly into the classroom.

A number of the activities exemplify a strategy or method of teaching poetry using a single poem or a group of poems. Different poems lend themselves to different approaches, so it is important for teachers to build up a wide repertoire of ideas that they can then select from and adapt according to the poem. For instance, adapting a poem as a screenplay works particularly well with 'Homecoming: Anse La Raye' because it is a poem with rich visual potential; however, it would founder with poems which lack this dimension. The aim of the pack is to suggest a wide repertoire of strategies, using poems that suit each strategy. The teachers' notes give a

rationale and highlight practical considerations, offering help in thinking about ways of adapting the strategy for future work on poetry. Some sections have more than one activity exemplifying a strategy. This is to give teachers a choice of poems at different levels of complexity.

In some cases the activities are based less on exemplifying a particular strategy and more on putting together a group of poems that make interesting connections and provide a coherent unit of work. Often units on poetry in coursebooks adopt a thematic approach. The units here are not so much thematically linked as linked by where they take the student in terms of exploring the nature of poetry, or seeing interesting relationships between texts. For instance the 'Reading trail' on Wordsworth's 'Daffodils' is a way of exploring what makes a text achieve a particular status and how its status is then used by other writers as a reference point in their writing. Likewise, the section on 'Poems as polemics' is an exploration of the way in which three poets use poetry to make a statement on political events.

In many of the activities, there is a relationship between reading poetry and writing it. Students are encouraged to experiment with writing around the poems they read, in order to gain insights into the process of writing poetry and the choices made by poets. Sometimes activities culminate in the writing of a poem, or give students the possibility of including their own writing as part of a critical piece on a poem.

Introduction

Using the pack

The idea behind the pack is that it should be a flexible resource for teachers to dip into. It is a large collection which is not designed to be used as a coursebook, being worked through from beginning to end, but instead individual activities should be selected so as to fulfil a specific need in terms of the overall course plan for a group of students. For instance, if a group is about to study Donne as a set text poet, the activities in 'Creating an image' might be a good way in. Or, if a group is lacking in confidence in presenting their ideas, one might do the 'Jigsawing poems' activity.

The activities are not presented in teaching order. Taken as a whole, they offer a wide range of options for work on poetry, some of which might be used as a week's work on poetry, others of which might expand to become a more sustained unit, for coursework, to support work on a set text poet or in developing critical reading skills for unseen exam papers.

Most A Level and GCSE courses involve a combination of work on set text poets, coursework and responses to unseen poetry. The activities do not aim to offer comprehensive work on set text poets because the choice of poets in different syllabuses is so vast. However, many could be adapted for use with a set text poet.

Whilst some of the student material and teachers' notes includes background context on particular poems or poets, in general the focus is much more on 'active ways into' poetry, rather than 'knowledge about' poems. This is not to minimize the importance of contextual information and it may be that teachers will want to offer background information at some stage, perhaps after students have done some work on a poem. However, background information needs to be handled with care, to make sure that it does not get in the way of students' own readings of poems. It can become yet another text, super-imposed on the text one wants them to explore and, if offered too soon, can become a burden rather than a help. Where contextual knowledge seems particularly important, as in the section on polemical poems, brief notes are provided.

The student sheets are designed to be as self-explanatory as possible, in order to give some autonomy to students. The aim is to make them aware of the whole process as they follow each stage. The teachers' notes are meant to complement the student material and only where the activity is more complicated do the notes take the teacher through each stage step by step. Teachers are advised to read both the notes and the student material closely before starting an activity.

1 Fragments of a poem

There are several different reasons why one might want to offer fragments of a poem to students before reading the whole poem. It is a strategy that benefits from being used with a definite purpose in mind rather than as just another way of getting students to do something with a poem.

A way into a difficult poem

One of the reasons for offering fragments is to give students a 'way in' to a difficult or long poem. It whets their appetite for what is to come. It lets them meet the poem with more confidence. It makes their reading more active, because they have their own expectations and ideas that they are measuring up to the poem as a whole. It also allows them to speculate and raise questions, removing the compulsion to come up with a quick answer to the question, 'What's the poem trying to say? What's it all about?' Often the urgency of students' need to pin down the meaning leads them to close down meaning too quickly. They plump for a single perspective without fully considering the range of possible meanings, the subtleties and ambiguities that make poetry so rich. It also allows them to look closely at individual words and phrases and their connotations, rather than skipping over the surface of the poem. A close focus on these phrases will then feed into their work on the poem, allowing them a familiarity, a close attention to language and a depth of thinking that can be drawn upon in talking about the poem as a whole. Teachers who have used this strategy have sometimes talked about the way in which it gives 'ownership' of parts of the poem to students.

A way of focusing on a particular aspect of a poem

One of the qualities an experienced reader of poetry acquires is an alertness to the range of language choices made by a poet in establishing such things as a mood, a tone of

voice, a set of visual images or a development of ideas. One can use the fragments strategy to focus on a particular aspect of a poem, to draw students' attention to the impact of language choices.

For instance, in a poem like 'My Last Duchess', the reader needs to explore the voice, not only to sort out who is talking and to whom, but also to go deeper into the way in which the poet constructs the voice of the Duke, the way in which past events are hinted at by the voice and the way in which the voice reveals the inner man. A close look at a few key phrases from the poem before reading the poem as a whole, or after a first reading of the poem, can allow readers to think just about the voice. In a poem like 'Valentine', by Carol Ann Duffy, extracting the parts of the poem in which the onion is used as an image allows students to explore the image in depth.

Introducing fragments

It is important that the climate for work on fragments should be one in which speculation and tentative exploration are encouraged. Students should be given clear messages that it is not a question of looking for a right or wrong answer and that they should keep open the possibilities rather than constructing their own 'story' for the poem on the basis of limited evidence. Expert readers reading whole poems will avoid dogmatic assertions, offering alternative readings of areas of complexity. So students using fragments should be encouraged to suggest different alternatives, rather than feeling that they have to make hard and fast decisions.

Two examples of fragmenting are offered in this section.

'Homecoming: Anse La Raye'

'Homecoming: Anse La Raye' is a challenging poem, probably most suitable for A Level. An alternative approach to the poem is offered in

Fragments of a poem

the section on 'Visualising poems,' where there is a more detailed account of the poem on Page 127 of the Teachers' Notes. In this activity the class needs to be divided into small groups, each group being given the same group of fragments.

'History'

'History' by Maura Dooley is a shorter poem, in which a group of images is offered as a way of reflecting on a relationship that is over. Focusing on particular phrases, for the mood they create and the underlying emotions or ideas, can allow an exploration of

the images and their connections. The page of fragments needs to be cut up, with different groups being given different fragments. When they have had time to annotate their fragments and think about possible meanings, the teacher should organise a brief report back from each group before handing out the whole poem. At the reporting back stage one can choose between telling students that all of the words and phrases come from the same poem or leaving them to make a judgement about that for themselves.

A poem

Group work

- 1 Look at this selection of words and phrases from a poem. Talk about what they suggest to you about:
- what is happening
 - where
 - issues and themes that might be raised in the poem
 - mood
 - the voice of the poet and the way it talks to the listener or reader
 - the kind of poem that it might be.

the shades
of borrowed ancestors

fish-gut-reeking beach

there are no rites
for those who have returned

one, with a politician's
ignorant, sweet smile, nods
as if

the seacrab's brittle helmets

spindly, sugar headed children

that far silvery freighter
threading the horizon like a toy

this clear, infinite,
boring, paradisaic sea

homecomings without home

Their curses melt in air

seem a tourist's

today, I am your poet, yours

- 2 Experiment with writing your own poem around these fragments, adding your own ideas and using as many or as few of the fragments as you want.
- 3 Discuss each group's views on the fragments.
- 4 Now read the whole poem and talk about it.

Homecoming: Anse La Raye

(for Garth St. Omer)

Whatever else we learned
at school, like solemn Afro-Greeks eager for
grades,

of Helen and the shades
of borrowed ancestors,
there are no rites
for those who have returned,
only, when her looms fade,
drilled in our skulls, the doom-
surge-haunted nights,
only this well-known passage

under the coconuts' salt-rusted
swords, these rotted
leathery sea-grape leaves,
the seacrabs' brittle helmets, and
this barbecue of branches, like the ribs
of sacrificial oxen on scorched sand;
only this fish-gut-reeking beach
whose frigates tack like buzzards overhead,
whose spindly, sugar-headed children race
pelting up from the shallows
because your clothes,
your posture
seem a tourist's.
They swarm like flies
round your heart's sore.

Suffer them to come,
entering your needle's eye,
knowing whether they live or die,
what others make of life will pass them by
like that far silvery freighter

threading the horizon like a toy;
for once, like them,
you wanted no career
but this sheer light, this clear,
infinite, boring, paradisaic sea,
but hoped it would mean something to
declare
today, I am your poet, yours,
all this you knew,
but never guessed you'd come
to know there are homecomings without
home.

You give them nothing.
Their curses melt in air.
The black cliffs scowl,
the ocean sucks its teeth,
like that dugout canoe
a drifting petal fallen in a cup,
with nothing but its image,
you sway, reflecting nothing.
The freighter's silvery ghost
is gone, the children gone.
Dazed by the sun
you trudge back to the village
past the white, salty esplanade
under whose palms dead
fishermen move their draughts in shade,
crossing, eating their islands,
and one, with a politician's
ignorant, sweet smile, nods,
as if all fate
swayed in his lifted hand.

Derek Walcott

'History' fragments



Group 1

These words and phrases are taken from a poem. What do they tell us about

- its subject matter
- its voice
- its mood
- possible themes.

Keep a record of your ideas.

cold	It's only a week	some god
postcards	small journeys	dry
slipping	the moon	dusty shelves



Group 2

These words and phrases are taken from a poem. What do they tell us about:

- its subject matter
- its voice
- its mood
- possible themes.

Keep a record of your ideas.

black chute	unremarkable	see the moon
phonecalls	in pieces	dry white papers
bone	changing borders	I queued



Group 3

These words and phrases are taken from a poem. What do they tell us about:

- its subject matter
- its voice
- its mood
- possible themes.

Keep a record of your ideas.

the moon in a box	your letters	history
you are slipping	I wait	
saint	strange cargo	kissing

History

It's only a week but already you are slipping
down the cold black chute of history. Postcards.
Phonecalls. It's like never having seen the Wall,
except in pieces on the dusty shelves of friends.

Once I queued for hours to see the moon in a box
inside a museum, so wild it should have been kept
in a zoo at least but there it was, unremarkable,
a pile of dirt some god had shaken down.

I wait for your letters now: a fleet of strange cargo
with news of changing borders, a heart's small
journeys. They're like the relicts of a saint.
Opening the dry white papers is kissing a bone.

Maura Dooley