
SIGHT/UNSEEN

Poetry.....



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The Anthology

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What Makes Poetry Special?

- Read these statements and discuss whether you agree or disagree with each one, or want to say 'it depends'.
- Flick through an anthology of poetry, looking for a poem that you think demonstrates each of the things you've chosen to agree with particularly well.
- Add any ideas of your own, by creating new statements.
- Keep your ideas about what makes poetry special in mind when you are looking at a particular poem, either in your anthology, or as an unseen poem for your exam. It will help you to write about it as a poem, as opposed to a story, or another kind of writing.

» Poems don't always have to 'make sense' in the way that other written texts do.

» Poems work on your emotions as well as your thoughts.

» The best poems can't be summed up easily.

» Poems are closer to music and to songs than they are to novels or short stories.

» A poem can be about absolutely anything.

» There's no such thing as 'poetic' language.

» You only know that a text *is* a poem because you find it in a book of poems or a poetry magazine or website.

» It's the layout of a poem that tells you straightaway what it is.

» Poems are so powerful because they're short enough to get a sense of the whole quickly.

How to Enjoy Puzzling over Poems

The box below lists what the best responses to poetry do.

THE BEST RESPONSES TO POETRY ARE ONES WHICH:

- » recognise that poems often aren't puzzles that can be neatly solved
- » recognise that the puzzling over a poem's meaning is part of the pleasure
- » recognise that poems often don't say things directly – they work more subtly by association, feeling, sound and sense
- » recognise that not everything in a poem can always be fully explained, or fully understood
- » don't try to close everything down by summing things up too neatly and quickly
- » explore different possibilities rather than just one
- » have fun playing around with the difficult bits rather than just ignoring them.

On pages 26 there's a poem which is interesting and intriguing. It can't be neatly summarised and its meanings can't be easily 'solved', so it seems very unlikely that a group of people reading it will all come to the same conclusions about it.

- Read the poem.
- On your own, brainstorm all your thoughts about it. Scribble everything and anything down – your first impressions, your first ideas on what it's trying to say or do, what you like or dislike about it, any competing theories you have about what it's up to, as a poem.
- In pairs or threes, talk to each other about all your first thoughts. Don't worry about 'getting it right'. Just listen to each other and think about what are the most plausible and interesting interpretations that are emerging. Build on each other's ideas by adding to what other people say, if you hear something good.
- Decide on one or two of your most interesting ideas to share with the rest of the class. Prepare what you're going to say. For instance, 'Our group thinks that...' or 'Our group loved the way that...' or 'Our group spent all our time puzzling over...'
- Share the ideas generated in the groups. Don't feel you have to come to any conclusions but do test out and challenge each other's ideas to see if they really hold up.
- Now, without further discussion, go away and write something about the poem. In your writing, try to weigh up some of the different ways in which one might interpret this poem, drawing on the ideas generated by your classmates, as well as your own ideas.

Sound

Poetry has a long tradition, stretching back to the days before many people were literate and even before writing itself was invented. It has close connections to song and music. This oral (spoken) tradition gives poetry one of its key aspects, the importance of sound, and the way that sound contributes to the mood, ideas or feelings expressed and the feelings of the reader or listener.

There are many different elements that make up the sound of a poem. Some of the key elements are listed below, with a brief explanation.

RHYME

- Words that connect with each other by having similar sounds in similar positions in the word, e.g. book/look or notion/potion.

RHYTHM

- Like the rhythm in music, the pulse or beat. This is also combined with the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in the words (the metre) to create a pattern of sound.

ALLITERATION AND ASSONANCE

- Alliteration is the repetition of consonant sounds, usually at the beginning of words, e.g. 'sending scouts under the stairs'
- Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds in words that don't necessarily rhyme, e.g. 'hissed'...'willows'...'willow-herb'...'whit'...'still'

ONOMATOPOEIA

- Words that sound like the thing they describe, e.g. 'hissed', 'smashed'

Poets on Sound

- Read what poets Patience Agbabi, Simon Armitage, Ian McMillan and Basil Bunting have to say about sound in poems (page 34).
- In pairs, come up with a brief soundbite to sum up something you want to remember about what the poets say, for example, 'Rhyme makes ordinary language special'.
- As a class, share your soundbites and anything else you found interesting or helpful about what the poets were saying.

Imagery

An Introduction to Imagery

WHAT ARE IMAGES?

An image in poetry is a picture or sense impression created only in words, to be seen or experienced in your imagination. It can conjure up a mood, a feeling, a belief, an idea or something else that it is tricky to communicate to someone else. Writers do this by using the techniques below.

DIFFERENT WAYS OF USING IMAGERY

- Comparing one thing to another using the words 'as' or 'like' to make this obvious (this is called a **simile**, for example 'being as quiet as a mouse').
- Describing one thing in terms of another, without drawing attention to the comparison (this is called a **metaphor**, for example calling your brother a 'couch potato').
- Using one thing to stand in for or represent something else (this is called a **symbol**, for example the use of the dove to represent or symbolise peace).
- Describing something that isn't human as if it has human qualities or feelings (this is called **personification**).
- Calling something not by its name but instead by something associated with it (this is called **metonymy**, for example referring to the US film industry as 'Hollywood', or the monarchy as 'the crown').

Sometimes the images we use are conventional and we hardly even notice that we're using them. For instance in everyday life we talk about 'dying to do something' or say that someone's 'heart is broken'. We also have shared knowledge of certain symbols. For instance, in Western culture a shared symbol for love is the rose, while the dove is a shared symbol for peace.

Poets, however, search for ways to surprise the reader with their imagery. They often try to use unusual or very precise images, perhaps to get the reader or listener to see or feel something clearly or to look at the world in a fresh way. Many poets also focus on using language economically, compressing the energy of the language into very few words. Imagery plays an important part in achieving this.

EXPLORING IMAGES IN POETRY – SOME EXAMPLES

- With a partner, discuss the use of images in the poetry extracts on page 38.
 - ▶ Think about what effect the poet might have been trying to create.
 - ▶ Decide what kind of image is being used in each case, using the list of techniques above to help you.
 - ▶ As part of your discussion, think about whether the image is a conventional one or an unusual one.

Form and Structure

When we talk about the form and structure of a poem, we are often thinking about one or more of the following:

THINKING ABOUT FORM AND STRUCTURE

- » The look of a poem on the page.
- » Its length.
- » Whether the poet has chosen a set 'form', such as a sonnet, ballad, haiku or ode, that follows particular rules, such as a given rhyme scheme or pre-determined number of syllables or lines.
- » Whether the poet has chosen a particular form for the stanzas, such as two line stanzas (couplets), three line stanzas (tercets), four line stanzas (quatrains) and so on.
- » How the poem starts, proceeds and ends – in other words how it is structured to set up ideas, create peaks of emotion, or introduce sudden shifts in mood or ideas. One example of this is the way that a sonnet can sometimes be structured to have a twist in the final couplet.

The Look on the Page – An Experiment

- Look at the poems on pages 43 and 44, where the words have been blanked out, leaving only the shape on the page.
- Speculate about which of these descriptions might go with which 'shape'.

» A short, tightly focused love poem exploring a single idea through the use of a single image. The image develops across a few stanzas.

» A poem that describes a house that the speaker lived in as a child – lots of descriptive detail building up a strong picture of the place but no real twists or turns. More a build-up of detail than a poem playing with an idea or creating an argument.

» A poem that is all about life and how short it seems, with everything ending so quickly. There is a refrain at the end of the first two stanzas that is taken up in the very last line in a powerful way, leading to a strong sense of completion.

» A very small, spare poem that simply lists images to describe something, with no explanation, trying to create a sense of something mysterious and difficult to define – what a baby's first movements in the womb feel like for the mother.

- Read the poems themselves (on pages 45-46). Did your decisions about shapes match what you discovered about the poems? Discuss what makes a shape work well for a particular kind of poem.

DRAWING ON WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED

- When you see a poem for the first time in an exam, don't forget to look at its shape on the page and think about what this tells you about the kind of poem it is and anything that is revealed about the poet's approach to the subject matter.