

The Secret Life of Poetry: Developing Student Response to Poetry

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Developing Student Response in Advanced Literature Courses

I. Plan opportunities to introduce students to a wide range of texts and ideas in literature, e.g.

- Introduce students to a range of texts and examples of language use from a range of contexts, forms and genres, and discuss what is learnt from these. *When teaching poetry, discuss what poetry is and how it originated, show students poetic language and forms from a variety of periods, get them to think about who reads poetry and why. Teach the elements of poetic and narrative form.*
- Look at the way literature is represented in the media. Discuss questions to do with the literary canon and literary value with them. Give them short critical essays or extracts from longer ones to read and discuss. Plan short 'literary topics' between set texts *Why is Shakespeare so important? Was he really a genius? Is the Da Vinci Code bad literature? Should all school students have to study Shakespeare?*
- Create connections between ideas about literature and ideas about language, culture, politics, art, etc. *What is literary language? How is it different from normal language? What is literature and how is it different from the non-literary? What are the connections between literature, art and music? Between high culture and popular culture?*
- Help students to understand the parameters and frameworks of literary study. *Build in independent exploration of the literature section of the library. What kinds of things count as literary study? How do references and bibliographies work? How do editions of literary works work? How can you tell whether material on the internet is authoritative?*
- Don't forget multi-cultural, international perspectives. *All A Level subjects should prepare students for a globalised, multi-cultural, post-colonial world. Use some literature from the post-colonial world, literature in translation, literature in dialect.*

2. Develop a sense of the student as critic, and the many different ways in which texts are created, understood, valued and interpreted, e.g.

- Be realistic about **students' own cultural values and interests**. Allow themselves to distance themselves from the canon as presented in class and to understand the value of approaching those texts as a critic rather than necessarily as a 'lover of literature'. Ask *'why is this text in the classroom?'* *What can we learn from this text? How does this kind of text relate to students' own cultural interests?*
- Help students to understand that **texts have a life outside the classroom**, outside education. In order to understand a text, students **MUST** understand this. *Who / what kind of people read the text now / read the*

text when it was originally published? Why was it / has it continued to be considered important? What kinds of things have critics said about it? Under what conditions was it first read/performed? (NB particularly drama's life in the theatre.)

- Help students to understand the **motivations and craft** of the writer (and actor / director / publisher etc) , and how writers work within a tradition and cultural milieu. Let them hear, see and read writers' voices: *Why do poets write poetry? What is the difference between poetry and pop music? What drives a playwright or novelist? Why do they write the kind of thing they write? Is the voice of the poem the same as the voice of the poet?*
- Help students to understand the **processes of interpretation**. *What is the role of the teacher in interpreting a text in the classroom? Does the teacher have all the answers? What kind of answers does the teacher have? What is the role of York notes? What kind of answers are acceptable?*
- Help students to focus on the **textuality** of texts by encouraging greater attention to language, style, structure, form, genre, narrative and the way these things represent and manipulate our sense of reality.

3. **Encourage independent learning habits, student choice, and the development of the student voice, e.g.**

- Sometimes set tasks that ask students to apply what they have learnt in a context where they have to work independently, or in groups: e.g. model essay-writing by using one whole-class example, but allow students to choose their own essay topics, and ensure that all students write on something different so that they have to apply what they've learnt independently.
- Sometimes allow students their own choice of texts, or to find texts to bring into class for a particular exercise. Encourage independent choice or exploration of critical texts or literary topics. Devote time to exploring ways forward with individual students in workshop sessions.
- Students can explore their own personal voices and gain understanding of the creativity of the writer through creative writing and performance tasks, and through preparing topics to present to the class. Writing commentaries on what they have done encourages them to reflect on their own learning processes and frameworks.
- It is often a good strategy to allow students to read whole texts independently before beginning to work through them in class. This enables students to experience the whole text as a work of art, and to engage in open discussion about the entirety of a text before the teacher begins to mould and shape their experience of it.
- Frequently withhold information from students until they have discussed their own responses and posed their own questions. It is vital that they should not see the teacher as the sole repository of meaning.

***I. The Secret Life of Poetry: Response of the Reader
Questions of Meaning, Definition and Value***

Introduction to Poetry

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

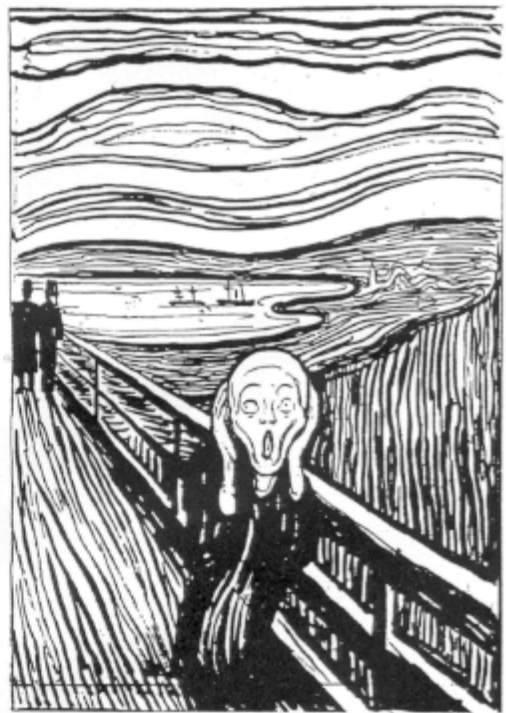
or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

Billy Collins



Lineage

In the beginning was Scream

Who begat Blood

Who begat Eye

Who begat Fear

Who begat Wing

Who begat Bone

Who begat Granite

Who begat Violet

Who begat Guitar

Who begat Sweat

Who begat Adam

Who begat Mary

Who begat God

Who begat Nothing

Who begat Never

Never Never Never

Who begat Crow

Screaming for Blood

Grubs, crusts

Anything

Trembling featherless elbows in the nest's filth

Ted Hughes

Study No. X

Pierre Coupey

chi ama, crede : mother
well
told me
unmaternally
for there was no sex involved (just
a
cosmos
of love) rare
in these times & spaces made of cracked-nut hearts; &
split
pea
skulls;
infanta! madonna! guernica! hiroshima!

)you are a catastrophe on the mirror of this earth
)you do not
let me
believe
(in hell
only: & it takes more courage
than red
wheelbarrows
give
to love
flesh & dust

The Red Wheelbarrow

William Carlos Williams

so much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water
beside the white
chickens

This Is Just To Say

William Carlos Williams

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox
and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast
Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

Sequence of Lessons: Defining Poetry and Poetic Language

Starter

Ask students to work in pairs to come up with a definition of poetry; it is in fact almost impossible to do so. Most offered descriptions – about self-expression, description etc – will be applicable to prose too; and many – about rhyme and metre, for instance – will not be applicable to all poetry. In fact, the only really workable definition of poetry is ‘writing in verse’, although of course even that might be disputed. The following exercises are designed to examine these issues further. Each exercise could be given to a different group in the class, or all the exercises to all groups.

1. Poetry v. Prose

Ask students to discuss the differences between poetry and prose. Then, introduce the idea of poetic language, and ask them to define or give examples of it. Show them examples of ‘found’ poems (see Abbs 1990 for instance) and/or William Carlos Williams’ poem ‘This is Just to Say’ – all of which play with the distinction between prose and poetry – to focus them on the nature of poetic and non-poetic language, and the differences between prose and poetry. Finally, prepare examples of poetry transformed into prose – i.e. laid out on the page as prose – and ask students to compare the original poem with the prose version. What difference does the different layout make? Is it possible to define the language as prosaic or poetic? Prose poetry (e.g. Heaney’s collection *Stations*) is useful here too.

2. Poetry v. Rhetoric

Show students the following text and a copy of Martin Luther King’s ‘I have a dream’ speech and ask them to discuss whether or not they are poetry:

*Born to reveal
the woman you’ve become.
Not just a perfume
A rite of passage.
Valentino.*

3. Poetry v. Song

Show students the lyrics of a number of pop-songs. Paul McCartney’s lyrics have been published as part of their poetry imprint by Faber, so one of his songs would be a good choice. As suggested in the introduction to this chapter, Amy Winehouse, Bob Dylan and Eminem are also good choices. Ask students to discuss whether these are poetry, and why they think the definition might be disputed. Are there any examples of lyrics that students think are definitely NOT poetry?

You may want to show students the notorious Cambridge Tripos question which asked students to compare ‘As you came from the holy land’, a lyric poem by Sir Walter Raleigh, with lyrics by Amy Winehouse (‘Love is a Losing Game’), Billie Holiday (‘Fine and Mellow’) and Bob Dylan (‘Boots of Spanish Leather’). A Google search on ‘Winehouse’ and ‘Raleigh’ brings up some interesting commentary on the issue, which could be shared with students too.

5. Poetry v. Verse

(i) Show students a section of verse dialogue and a soliloquy from a Shakespeare play. Are these poetry? Are they poems? And/or are they verse?

(ii) Show students a selection of verses from greetings cards. Are they poetry? And/or verse?

Finally: Why Poetry?

Ask students to discuss the question 'Why poetry?' - What is it for? Why is it valued? What useful functions might it fulfil? Show them the following texts, and ask them to discuss the difference in function and effect between the two sets of words:

(i) The words '*War is bad*' and the complete text of Wilfred Owen's 'Anthem for Doomed Youth'

(ii) The words '*The six hundred soldiers rode on bravely with gunshot all around them despite the danger that faced them*' and the complete text of Tennyson's 'The Charge of the Light Brigade'

(iii) The words 'Happy Birthday' and the verse:

*I'm wishing you this birthday
All the joy in the world
Surprises, fun and laughter
As another year's unfurled*

*I wish you all the very best,
As I have in other years.
Sharing with your happiness
Love and joyous tears.*

The objectives:

- (a) *To challenge conventional and simplistic ideas about the nature of poetry.*
- (b) *To highlight the fact that 'poetic' language may be found in many types of writing, not just in 'poetry'.*
- (c) *To highlight the fact that the layout of words on the page affects the way they are read.*
- (d) *To clarify the formal distinctions and aesthetic values that underlie distinctions between poetry, verse and prose.*
- (e) *To highlight the links between poetry, music and art, and increase awareness of the role of pleasure in poetry.*

Connecting with Poetry: Wide Reading and Thinking Activities

Anthologies: the informal selection of poems by students – perhaps for reading and/or performance to the class, perhaps for publication in a personal or class anthology – can do a great deal to build students’ image of themselves as independent readers of poetry. Poetry book boxes can be tremendously useful here, and the process of preparing readings of favourite poems can be valuable too. It would be wise to ensure that students have clear guidelines and are encouraged to be adventurous in their choices.

Other potentially valuable activities include:

- Shadowing poetry competitions (for instance by taking part in the T.S. Eliot Prize Shadowing Scheme, run by the English and Media Centre for 16-19 students in conjunction with the Poetry Book Society.)
- Getting students to interview parents, grandparents, friends, etc., about their own feelings about and experiences of poetry, and/or their favourite poems.
- Gathering reviews of recent poetry books from the review pages of newspapers and asking students to discuss what the reviewers seem to enjoy or find valuable in poetry.

Performance approaches

- Bring audio recordings into the classroom, whether on CD or on the internet. A particularly rich resource is *The Poetry Archive* (www.poetryarchive.org) which contains a wealth of readings by poets of their own work – even including historical recordings such as Tennyson reading ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’. *YouTube* and other more dedicated sites (such as the English and Media Centre’s *Poetry Station* at www.englishandmedia.co.uk) can also bring film recordings into the classroom. One word of caution: not all poets reading their own work are inspiring – though many are. Whether inspiring or not, hearing them read can nevertheless sometimes (though not always!) illuminate their work in interesting ways.
- Engage students in performance themselves. Group readings/performances of poems can motivate students, but they can also be a way for students to demonstrate their understanding of and response to poems: ask students to ensure that their performances reflect the tone, structure and/or sound patterns of the poem – for instance through the way they divide the lines between speakers, position themselves on stage, or adapt the poem to create particular emphases. These performances can also provide a good focus for class discussion.
- Get students to reflect on how visual and textual renderings of poems could illuminate their meanings. One approach here is to get students to plan and perhaps ‘storyboard’ a film or stage version of a poem, suggesting both the images and sounds that will make up the scenes. There are good examples of such filmic renderings available online, found, for instance, through ‘*YouTube*’. Students’ choices about how to represent the characters, settings, voices, themes, sounds, structures and language of the poem are likely to prompt lively discussion, and at advanced level have considerable scope for revealing symbolic meaning.

2. The Secret Life of Poetry: The Craft of the Writer Questions of Form, Tone and Voice

Understanding Poetry

Art or analysis?

Poetry in school is often presented as an object for analysis. Whilst analysis of poetry is in itself a valuable intellectual activity, it must be remembered that the *primary* purpose of poetry is as *art* rather than as material for classroom study. In order to understand poetry, it is vital to think about it as a dynamic *art form* rather than as an examination hurdle.

As in visual art and music, poetry can – and usually does – have an **aesthetic, emotional** or **sensual** impact, using strong *colours, images, patterns, sounds, messages* and so on, to create *mood* and *atmosphere* and to evoke a *response* in the reader. Poetry, however, uses words – rather than visual images or music – to create these effects. Because of its reliance on words, poetry can – and usually does – also have a more concrete **intellectual** impact than art and music, often in the form of *narrative, argument, or reflection*. The *meanings* of poems are also often more *concrete* and definable than the meanings of visual art and music.

When we analyse poetry, it is easy to fall into the trap of concentrating solely on the *intellectual* side – the detailed analysis of the meaning of a poem. But we must not forget the *aesthetic* impact, the immediate impact of the poem as a work of art. We should not forget that the primary purpose of poetry is *aesthetic*, not *educational*.

Two traditions

It's also important to remember that the kind of poetry which is usually presented for study in school is only one kind of poetry – the literary kind, which tends to have a strong intellectual emphasis. This type of poetry is, however, strongly related to another tradition of poetry – the more rhythmic and popular tradition of song lyrics, performance poetry and rhyme. These two traditions share the use of rhythm, rhyme, patterns, images, verbal textures, strong messages, and so on. However, literary poetry is intended more for reflective reading than performance.

Poetry v. prose

Another way of understanding poetry as a form is to consider how it is different from *prose*. In fact, it is very difficult to establish a definition of poetry. Almost all the types of content and language use that are commonly associated with poetry – 'poetic' language such as metaphor and description, wordplay, personal expression, philosophical reflection, rhythms and patterns, and so on, can be found in prose, fiction and non-fiction – with the exception of *rhyme* and *metre*. However, we cannot define poetry as containing rhyme and metre, as not all poetry does.

What almost all poetry does have in common is the way it is laid out – in verse (lines and stanzas) rather than paragraphs – and this may be the nearest we can come to a definition of poetry. However, we should also remember that the same words set out in poetic form and prose form usually seem very different – we read them differently, and focus on different

things. Poetry seems to demand that we focus more on individual words and phrases, on structures and patterns, on wordplay, and on symbolic meanings.

Understanding Poetic Form

The form of a poem is the way it is structured in terms of stanza length, shape, layout, rhyme and metre. Much modern poetry tends to play down or ignore elements such as rhyme and metre, and so often gives the appearance of being spontaneous and free. This is partly why poetry has gained a reputation for being about personal, emotional, spontaneous self-expression. But it is vital to understand that poets in fact usually write very carefully and deliberately, crafting their work, and often writing many drafts before they reach a final version, whether or not they use rhyme and metre. The form of a poem is usually carefully chosen and structured.

Different types of poetic form

The form of any poem can be described by identifying or describing the number and length of stanzas, the line lengths, and the use of rhyme and metre (although of course not all poems use rhyme or metre.)

- A poem may have a *regular* form, in which each stanza has the same number of lines, the same rhyme and metre, etc.
- There are some traditional 'set' forms such as limericks, sonnets, haikus, and so on, which have a specific number of lines with specific rhythms, rhyme schemes or lengths.
- Poems may have a wholly or partially *irregular* form, in which there is little or no regularity in rhyme, metre or layout.

Regularity v irregularity

Until the twentieth century, almost all poetry was written in regular forms. Many modern poets, however, have enjoyed the freedom of *irregularity*, although many others have continued to use regular forms either in a traditional way or in a new or experimental way.

In *regular* forms, the rhyme and metre can dominate, especially where lines and stanzas are short. The longer the lines and stanzas, the less dominant the rhyme and meter are likely to be. Poetry which is regular in line length, metre and/or stanza length, but which has *no rhyme*, is called **blank verse**. Poets may use blank verse if they want to have a regular structure but don't want rhyme to dominate the poem, often in longer, more serious or reflective poetry.

Modern poets often use irregular forms to make rhyme, metre, line length or stanza length even less dominant or noticeable, and to give the impression of freedom or spontaneity. Completely irregular poetry – with no regularity of stanza length, line length, etc – is called **free verse**. However poets will sometimes continue to use rhyme, metre, and so on, but will attempt to draw attention away from the regularity of form by hiding, disguising or subverting the metre or rhyme scheme.

Lines of poetry: end-stopping, caesura and enjambement

Sometimes, the grammatical sentences in a poem fit exactly onto the lines and stanzas. Where the end of a sentence coincides with the end of a line, this is known as **end-stopping**. Sometimes, however, the sentences run onto a new line, or even a new stanza. This is known as **enjambement**. By contrast, a sentence may finish in the *middle* of a line, creating a pause – or a pause may be necessitated in some other way. This is known as a **caesura**. Both

enjambement and caesura can create a tension between the artificial constraint of the form and the natural length of the sentences, drawing attention away from the regularity of the form.

Rhyme and other sound effects

There are different kinds of rhyme. 'Full' rhymes are the traditional kind – for instance where 'boat' rhymes with 'goat'. However, many modern poets use 'half rhymes' of various kinds, often again to draw attention away from the regularity of the poem's form:

Full rhyme	boat	rhymes with	goat
Half rhyme	boat	rhymes with	got
Vowel rhyme	boat	rhymes with	toad (<i>assonance</i>)
Consonant rhyme	boat	rhymes with	boot (<i>consonance</i>)
Visual rhyme	come	rhymes with	home

Sometimes there are rhymes or sound effects within a line rather than at the end of a line:

Assonance	'ground down'
Consonance	'creak and croak'
Alliteration	'gravelly ground'
Onomatopoeia	words sound like the thing they describe
Euphony	pleasing sounds – usually long vowels, soft consonants e.g. 'soothing and mellifluous music'
Cacophony	harsh sounds – usually short vowels, hard consonants e.g. 'they clashed on the bare black cliff'

The number of syllables that rhyme can have an effect:

Masculine rhyme	thorn, scorn
Feminine rhyme	water, daughter
Triple rhyme	prettily, wittily.

Masculine rhymes are heavy, feminine rhymes are lighter, and triple rhymes are usually humorous.

Metre

Metre is usually measure *rhythmically*, in which case the important element is the number of beats or stresses in a line. Sometimes it is measures *syllabically* (as in a haiku) in which case the number of syllables is the important factor.

Most metre derives from ancient Greek poetry. There are various types of metre, but the most commonly used is the iambic pentameter.

- 'Iambic' refers to the basic unit of the metre, the iambus (˘ –). (Each unit of a metre is known as a 'foot'. There are other different types of feet, such as trochees, dactyls, spondees, etc.)
- 'Pentameter' refers to the number of feet in the line. In a pentameter, there are five feet. So an iambic pentameter has five iambic feet:
(Other line lengths include tetrameters (four feet), trimeters (three feet), and dimeters (two feet)).

Metre is a very complex subject and at this point it is not necessary for you to know much about it, though it is useful to be able to recognise an iambic pentameter. It's also important to be aware that the *metre* of a poem is not necessarily the same as the *rhythm* of the poem: skilled poets often use *natural speech rhythms* and *sentence structures* to override the artificial constraints of the metre or draw attention away from it.

Wind

This house has been far out at sea all night,
The woods crashing through darkness, the booming hills,
Winds stampeding the fields under the window
Floundering black astride and blinding wet

Till day rose; then under an orange sky
The hills had new places, and wind wielded
Blade-light, luminous black and emerald,
Flexing like the lens of a mad eye.

At noon I scaled along the house-side as far as
The coal-house door. Once I looked up -
Through the brunt wind that dented the balls of my eyes
The tent of the hills drummed and strained its guyrope,

The fields quivering, the skyline a grimace,
At any second to bang and vanish with a flap;
The wind flung a magpie away and a black-
Back gull bent like an iron bar slowly. The house

Rang like some fine green goblet in the note
That any second would shatter it. Now deep
In chairs, in front of the great fire, we grip
Our hearts and cannot entertain book, thought,

Or each other. We watch the fire blazing,
And feel the roots of the house move, but sit on,
Seeing the window tremble to come in,
Hearing the stones cry out under the horizons.

Ted Hughes

a) Poetic Form

How does Hughes use the following in this poem:

Rhyme and other sound effects?

Metre and rhythm?

Line lengths, end-stopping and enjambement?

How might his methods relate to the meaning of the poem?

b) Imagery

Look at Hughes's use of imagery in this poem.

What kind of images does he use to convey the wind's powers? What do the images have in common?

1. The snail pushes through a green night, for the grass is heavy with water and meets over the bright path he makes, where rain has darkened the earth's dark. He moves in a wood of desire, pale antlers barely stirring as he hunts. I cannot tell what power is at work, drenched there with purpose, knowing nothing. What is a snail's fury? All I think is that if later I parted the blades above the tunnel and saw the thin trail of broken white across litter, I would never have imagined the slow passion to that deliberate progress.

2. The snail pushes through a green night,
for the grass is heavy with water
and meets over the bright path he makes,
where rain has darkened the earth's dark.

He moves in a wood of desire,
pale antlers barely stirring as he hunts.
I cannot tell what power is at work,
drenched there with purpose,
knowing nothing.

What is a snail's fury?
All I think is that if later
I parted the blades above the tunnel
and saw the thin trail of broken white across litter,
I would never have imagined
the slow passion to that deliberate progress.

4. The snail pushes through a green
night, for the grass is heavy
with water and meets over
the bright path he makes, where rain
has darkened the earth's dark. He
moves in a wood of desire,

pale antlers barely stirring
as he hunts. I cannot tell
what power is at work, drenched there
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What is a snail's fury? All
I think is that if later

I parted the blades above
the tunnel and saw the thin
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3. The snail pushes
through a green night,
for the grass is heavy
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He moves
in a wood of desire,
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of broken white
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I would never have imagined
the slow passion
to that deliberate progress.

Considering The Snail: Thom Gunn

Objectives:

- To consider the definition of poetry and the nature of poetic language
- To consider the nature, purposes and effects of poetic form in modernist poetry
- To develop understanding of half rhyme, syllabic metre and enjambement

Introduction:

Like the snail, packed tightly into its spiral shell, this poem is a slow-moving bundle of meatiness, packed tightly into three beautifully shaped stanzas. This lesson is designed to get students to focus on poetic form in modernist poetry, in particular the way the layout of a poem might affect its impact and the way it is read and understood. It also encourages them to think about the modern poet's toolkit and why s/he might make certain choices about how to write.

Resources needed:

- The Poetry Archive recording of Thom Gunn reading ['Considering the Snail'](#) and a copy of it in text form.
- Worksheet with versions of the poem (attached)

Teaching Sequence:

Starter:

Ask the group to work in pairs for a few minutes to write a definition of 'poetry'. Get each group to feed back their definition and discuss whether it works - i.e. does the definition fully define what poetry is?

Development:

1. Put the discussion about the definition of poetry aside and hand out or display the prose text, without telling students that it is the text of a poem. Ask students to discuss this text. First, they should think about the text's meanings and their response to the ideas in it and the language used. Discuss as a class.

Then, ask them to think about what kind of text it might be. Might it come from a longer text? If so, what kind of text? Could it be considered poetry - or, if not poetry, 'poetic'?

Next, ask the students to convert the text into verse. They can either take the words exactly as they are, or they can modify them in a way that they think would be effective, for instance by leaving words out or adding them. Share some of the students' work with the class and ask them to talk about what they did and why.

Does this exercise help them to refine their definition of poetry?

2. Hand out the sheet with two verse versions of the text. Ask students to work in pairs to read these two versions and compare them. Does the text seem different from the prose version because of its different layouts? Do they hear it or read it differently, and does this seem to change the meaning or impact of the text at all? How are the two different versions different, and which of the two seems more effective? What can they say about the form of

these poems - e.g., can they see any rhyme or consistency in line length or stanza length, or is it entirely free verse? What, if any, logic can they see in the way the lines and stanzas are laid out?

Ask students to prepare readings of the three different texts so far. Listen to some of the readings and discuss the way the layout of the text seems to affect them.

3. Now give students the actual poem 'Considering the Snail', without telling them that it is the actual poem. Ask them to read it, and discuss how this version is different from the other versions. Which do they prefer? What can they say about the form of this last poem?

Reveal to the students that the words they have now read in four different forms are the words of an actual poem. Ask them which of the three verse versions they think is the actual poem.

Play the Poetry Archive recording of 'Considering the Snail'. What do they think of the reading? Which of the three poetry versions does the reading suggest is the real one?

4. Reveal that the last version is the actual poem, and, if they have not already spotted it, draw out and discuss the elements of form in it - rhyme scheme using half rhymes (ABCABC), syllabic metre (7 syllables per line, apart from the last line which is 8 syllables), six line stanzas, frequent enjambement. Why do they think the poet has arranged the poem in this way? Does it enhance or illuminate the meaning in any way or change their response?

5. Develop a discussion of the ideas of half rhyme and syllabic metre, and help students to understand their significance within the tradition of modernism. Explain that these features were not commonly used in poetry until the modernist movement reacted against the conventions of traditional poetry.

Why might poets decide to use a 'hidden' form, with partially hidden rhyme and metre, rather than free verse or fully rhyming and metrical verse? What are the possible attractions or advantages of each from the perspective of (a) the writer and (b) the reader. Are the three types of verse particularly suitable for specific types of content or expression?

Plenary:

Return to the original question - what is the definition of poetry? Has the exercise (especially the transformation of a text from prose to verse) helped them to decide on a definition? Reflect also on what they have learnt about poetic form, especially the use of rhyme and metre.

Extension:

Show students a selection of expressionist paintings (e.g. Picasso, Kandinsky, Mondrian, Pollock) to help them to understand the idea of modernism, and the way in which modernist artists reacted against traditional forms but often incorporated elements of traditional form in original ways.

Further Reading and Listening:

Students could read Thom Gunn's 'The Human Condition' and Ted Hughes' 'Wind' as further examples of the ways in which modernist poets use elements of traditional poetic form but use them in new and original ways.

The Bee Meeting

Who are these people at the bridge to meet me? They are the villagers -
The rector, the midwife, the sexton, the agent for bees.
In my sleeveless summery dress I have no protection,
And they are all gloved and covered, why did nobody tell me?
They are smiling and taking out veils tacked to ancient hats.

I am nude as a chicken neck, does nobody love me?
Yes, here is the secretary of bees with her white shop smock,
Buttoning the cuffs at my wrists and the slit from my neck to my knees.
Now I am milkweed silk, the bees will not notice.
They will not smell my fear, my fear, my fear.

Which is the rector now, is it that man in black?
Which is the midwife, is that her blue coat?
Everybody is nodding a square black head, they are knights in visors,
Breastplates of cheesecloth knotted under the armpits.
Their smiles and their voices are changing. I am led through a beanfield.

Strips of tinfoil winking like people,
Feather dusters fanning their hands in a sea of bean flowers,
Creamy bean flowers with black eyes and leaves like bored hearts.
Is it blood clots the tendrils are dragging up that string?
No, no, it is scarlet flowers that will one day be edible.

Now they are giving me a fashionable white straw Italian hat
And a black veil that molds to my face, they are making me one of them.
They are leading me to the shorn grove, the circle of hives.
Is it the hawthorn that smells so sick?
The barren body of hawthorn, etherizing its children.

Is it some operation that is taking place?
It is the surgeon my neighbors are waiting for,
This apparition in a green helmet,
Shining gloves and white suit.
Is it the butcher, the grocer, the postman, someone I know?

I cannot run, I am rooted, and the gorse hurts me
With its yellow purses, its spiky armory.
I could not run without having to run forever.
The white hive is snug as a virgin,
Sealing off her brood cells, her honey, and quietly humming.

Smoke rolls and scarves in the grove.
The mind of the hive thinks this is the end of everything.
Here they come, the outriders, on their hysterical elastics.
If I stand very still, they will think I am cow-parsley,
A gullible head untouched by their animosity,

Not even nodding, a personage in a hedgerow.
The villagers open the chambers, they are hunting the queen.
Is she hiding, is she eating honey? She is very clever.
She is old, old, old, she must live another year, and she knows it.
While in their fingerjoint cells the new virgins

Dream of a duel they will win inevitably,
A curtain of wax dividing them from the bride flight,
The upflight of the murderess into a heaven that loves her.
The villagers are moving the virgins, there will be no killing.
The old queen does not show herself, is she so ungrateful?

I am exhausted, I am exhausted -
Pillar of white in a blackout of knives.
I am the magician's girl who does not flinch.
The villagers are untying their disguises, they are shaking hands.
Whose is that long white box in the grove, what have they accomplished,
why am I cold.

Plath's diary, June 7 1962

The midwife stopped up to see Ted at noon to remind him that the Devon beekeepers were having a meeting at 6 at Charlie Pollard's. We were interested in starting a hive, so dumped the babies in bed and jumped in the car and dashed down the hill past the old factory to Mill Lane, a row of pale orange stucco cottages on the Taw, which gets flooded whenever the river rises. We drove into the dusty, ugly paved parking lot under the grey peaks of the factory buildings, unused since 1928 and now only used for wool storage. We felt very new and shy, I hugging my bare arms in the cool of the evening for I had not thought to bring a sweater. We crossed a little bridge to the yard above where a group of miscellaneous Devonians were standing – an assortment of shapeless men in brown speckled bulgy tweeds, Mr Pollard in white shirtsleeves, with his dark, nice brown eyes and oddly Jewy head, tan balding, dark-haired. I saw two women, one very large, tall, stout, in a glistening aqua-blue raincoat, the other cadaverous as a librarian in a dun raincoat. Mr Pollard glided toward us and stood for a moment on the bridge-end, talking. He indicated a pile of hives, like white and green blocks of wood with little gables and said we could have one if we would like to fix it up. A small pale blue car pulled through the yard: the midwife. Her moony beam came at us through the windscreen. Then the rector came pontificating across the bridge and there was a silence that grew round him. He carried a curious contraption – a dark felt hat with a screen box built on under it, and cloth for a neckpiece under that. I thought the hat a clerical bee-keeping hat, and that he must have made it for himself. Then I saw on the grass, and in hands, everyone was holding a bee-hat, some with netting of nylon, most with box screening, some with khaki round hats. I felt barer and barer. People became concerned. Have you no hat? Have you no coat? Then a dry little woman came up, Mrs P, the secretary of the society, with tired, short blonde hair. 'I have a boiler suit'. She went to her car and came back with a small, white silk button-down smock, the sort pharmacist's assistants use. I put it on and buttoned it and felt more protected. Last year, said the midwife, Charlie Pollard's bees were bad-tempered and made everybody run. Everyone seemed to be waiting for someone. But then we all slowly filed after Charlie Pollard to his beehives. We threaded our way through neatly weeded allotment gardens, one with bits of tinfoil and a fan of black and white feathers on a string, very decorative, to scare the birds, and twiggy lean-tos over the plants. Black-eyed sweetpea-like blooms: broadbeans, somebody said. Then we came to a clearing, roughly-scythed, with one hive, a double-brood hive, two layers. From this hive Charlie Pollard wanted to make three hives. I understood very little. The men gathered round the hive. Charlie Pollard started squirting smoke from a little funnel with a hand-bellows attached to it round the entry at the bottom of the hive. 'Too much smoke' hissed the large blue-raincoated woman next to me. 'What do you do if they sting?' I whispered, as the bees, now Charlie had lifted the top of the hive, were zinging out and dancing round as at the end of long elastics. (Charlie had produced a fashionable white straw Italian hat for me with a black nylon veil that collapsed perilously into my face in the least wind. The rector had tucked it into my collar, much to my surprise. 'Bees always crawl up, never down,' he said. I had drawn it down loose over my shoulders.) The woman said: 'Stand behind me. I'll protect you'. I did.

Who are these people at the bridge to meet me? They are the villagers –
The rector, the midwife, the sexton, the agent for bees.
In my sleeveless summery dress, I have no protection,
And they are all gloved and covered. Why did nobody tell me?
They are smiling and taking out veils tacked to ancient hats.

I am nude as a chicken neck! Does nobody love me?
Yes, here is the secretary of bees with her white shop smock,
Buttoning the cuffs at my wrists and the slit from my neck to my knees.
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smell my fear, my fear, my fear.

The villagers are here to meet me at the bridge. Look – the rector, the midwife, the sexton,
the secretary of the bee society. I feel unprotected in my sleeveless summery dress, whereas
they all have gloves and protective clothing. Nobody told me about that! They all look happy
enough, and now they're taking out their protective hats. I feel almost nude in comparison!
Now, the secretary of the bee society has given me a smock to wear, and she's buttoning it up
for me. The smock is white, and so perhaps the bees won't notice that I'm afraid of them.

Understanding imagery and performing the creative act

Often, students have little difficulty in seeing individual images in poetry, but need help (a) to spell out the metaphorical significances of the images and (b) to see that the images in a poem might be connected, drawing on the same metaphorical field. Ted Hughes' 'Wind', discussed above, is an excellent example of a poem where most of the images metaphorically reinforce one idea – in this instance, the instability of otherwise stable objects in the face of an exceptional force. Understanding what connects the images leads to a fuller understanding of the poem. Isolating the imagery in a poem and asking students to discuss what the images have in common can therefore be an effective method to use to reveal the poet at work.

A similar approach might be to examine the images before reading the poem – an approach that can be demonstrated effectively with Seamus Heaney's poem 'Blackberry Picking'. The following is a list of selected images from the poem:

clot, flesh, thickened, blood, stains, tongue, lust, inked, hunger, scratched, bleached, burned, eyes, sticky, fur, fungus, glutting, stinking, sour, rot.

Put these on the board, and ask students to discuss what kind of poem this might be. Even better, ask students to *write* a poem – or a passage of prose – using all these words. The results are likely to verge on the obscene! Then reveal that the poem is, after all, 'only' about blackberry-picking; this will set up a lively discussion of why such images might nevertheless be appropriate and effective in such a surprising context.

In the exercises above, we are aiming to help students to see beyond the surface of the poem, to re-construct the acts of poetic imagination that have taken place in the creation of a poem, and thus to understand better the interaction that takes place between reader and writer. These exercises are effective, but perhaps there is no more powerful method than actually getting students to engage in creative writing themselves.

A few short activities can be enough to teach specific aspects of poetry and to give students a feel for what it is like to write poetry. Simple writing exercises can be dropped in to lessons, or used as very effective 'starters'.

Work on specific texts can be easily transformed into active reading/creative writing exercises – as in the examination of imagery in Heaney's 'Blackberry Picking' discussed above. The exercise on tone in relation to Plath's poem 'The Bee Meeting', also described above, could likewise be adapted, with students actually being asked to re-write the events of the poem in a different tone. The exercise on form in relation to Gunn's 'Considering the Snail' could lead to students experimenting with other ways of laying the text out on the page.

Quick and simple creative writing exercises do not have to be anchored to a specific text, however. Tightly controlled writing exercises designed simply to give students an insight into what might be going on in the mind of a poet can be very effective. The possibilities are endless. For instance, at a recent seminar, the poet Mandy Coe asked those present to suggest words and phrases they might associate with, or use to describe, snow. A long list duly appeared on the board. She then asked everyone to write a poem about snow *without* using ANY of those words: a superb lesson in how a poet might summon original and striking imagery by avoiding the obvious and embracing the metaphorical.