

Beyond *Dead Poets Society*

Developing Literary Awareness at A Level

Gary Snapper examines some of the tensions underlying the teaching of A Level English Literature and suggests some ways in which they might be resolved.

You either love it or loathe it: that's the conventional wisdom on *Dead Poets Society* amongst the many English teachers I've talked about it with over the years. Whichever way you swing, the film contains the most well-known representation of advanced level teaching of English literature (albeit in a private school in the States), and is a sure-fire winner for opening up good conversations with teachers, students - and most others, too - about what literature teaching is for and how it should be done.

Personally, I've always loathed it for its dishonest, romanticised portrayal of English teaching. In an essay entitled 'Dead White Male Heterosexual Poets Society', one feminist critic sums it up nicely:

Dead Poets Society is a profoundly regressive film, fixated on adolescence and a mythical moment in the past that it appears to repudiate but really longs for: a moment of repression and discipline and stable authority, represented by fathers, high school principals, and dead poets.

Modleski also points out one of the central ironies of the film:

The free-thinking English teacher Mr Keating, played by Robin Williams, insists on being called 'Captain' or 'Oh Captain, My Captain,' singling out the one [Whitman] poem that exhibits pious deference to male authority - the very authority the film pretends to be challenging... Thus the film challenges the literary canon and the orthodoxies of the 'discipline' of literary studies (represented, for Keating, by the 'realists' and by the textbook's editor whose introduction Keating instructs the boys to tear out), but returns us to this canon via a sanitised image of one of our most heterodox and sexually explicit authors.

In Modleski's view, then, the charismatic English teacher turns out to be an alternative source of repression - using a narrow and dogmatic view of English Literature, centring on an idealisation of the patriarchal authority figure of the romantic genius, to inhibit students' genuine development and mould their subjectivity.

Whether or not we subscribe to this view of the film, it's clear that *Dead Poets Society* can raise some interesting issues in relation to the teaching of literature.

Of course, it is a sentimental fiction and not intended as a manifesto for English teaching; as we all know, the reality of students' and teachers' attitudes to literature and the teaching of literature, and the tensions of the literature classroom, are much more complex than suggested by the film's simplistic oppositions. Yet the premises on which the film's conflicts are based are reflected in significant ways in the real world of the English classroom, and these aspects of the model of literature teaching represented by *Dead Poets Society* are perhaps worth further exploration in relation to current practice in advanced literature courses in schools, especially as we consider the current imminent re-write of A Level syllabuses.

John Keating, English Teacher

There are many ways in which we might (and many do) identify with Keating. For instance, his approach, bringing poetry to life through the encouragement of creative expression, and through its rousing challenge to authority, might speak particularly strongly to us at a time when we are very aware of the way in which literature is used in secondary education - often somewhat mechanistically - as an assessment tool. The idea of the charismatic teacher of literature who enlists students on a transformative moral-aesthetic odyssey through great works is also still a powerful one, perhaps particularly at A Level. Strongly influenced by Leavisite critical approaches, this is also related to broader ideas in English teaching, about developing personal response, and the encouragement of enjoyment in reading.

Keating's tearing up of the textbook in the film also has parallels in this tradition. Textbooks, on the whole, are anathema to English Literature teachers; in fact, English Literature traditionally prides itself in being the only subject not to use textbooks if it can possibly help it. This attitude may manifest itself in a reluctance to use teaching anthologies or books with activities for the classroom, or in using no secondary (critical) texts at all, or in opting for plain texts rather than critical editions. Behind this, perhaps, lies not only a concern for effective pedagogy but also an idea of reverence for the literary



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text, and faith that the text will find a way to speak for itself without paraphernalia, provoking authentic rather than stock responses. Thus far, then, Keating - though an extreme portrayal - seems clearly to represent many of the dominant attitudes and positions and significant concerns of literature teachers here and now.

Most of us, I imagine, would be thrilled if our students demonstrated the level of commitment that Keating's do; and there is certainly nothing wrong with charismatic teaching, if by that we mean teaching that interests and challenges students, engaging them strongly in learning by a variety of methods and approaches. Yet, although we may well enjoy the portrayal of Keating's idealism and non-conformity, and identify to some extent with his dismissal of whatever is contained within the introduction to his students' textbook (presumably, we are intended to think, an exam-oriented trudge through the cultural heritage), there are significant problems with his position, as well.

The Keating Model

Do we really see ourselves or our students - even untrammelled by the restraints of the exam system or the conventions of the discipline - submitting so unproblematically to the ecstasy of Literature mediated by the moral spirit and aesthetic values of the charismatic teacher, and thence going on to save the world from its problems? (In *Dead Poets Society*, of course, this does not happen either: Keating is sacked, and the boys (apart from the one notable casualty of the episode, who commits suicide) remain behind, going on presumably to complete their privileged educations, pass their exams, join fraternities and run corporations - albeit, we may like to reassure ourselves, a little more humanely than their fathers did - *despite* their formative exposure to Shakespeare and Romantic poetry.)

And, however much we may dislike some aspects of syllabuses and examinations and what they do to us, to what extent do we go along with the logical extension of Keating's approach - that English Literature is essentially a non-curricular activity; that 'doing' English Literature is about submission to the romantic creative spirit, and has no real place in the curriculum? Whatever the content of that textbook introduction, *Dead Poets Society* does seem to promote veneration of the (dead) poet whilst denying a role for the critical in literary study.

I imagine that most of us would recognise and acknowledge these troubling limitations of the Keating model. Yet we are not always good at confronting the issues they raise. As English Literature teachers - often as a result of the prescribed demands of syllabuses and examinations, but also often as a result of our own ambivalences - we seem to be perpetually hovering between the critical and the aesthetic, between literary study and the encouragement of enjoyment in reading, between personal and critical responses, between close reading and breadth of study, between learning for intellectual emancipation and learning for assessment, between the spirit of Keating's Whitman and the letter of

Keating's textbook, attempting, often with some difficulty, to reconcile a whole series of problematic tensions.

Loving Literature

Such compromises may be necessary, even positive at times; however, we don't always make *sense*. We profess to be concerned with the imaginative, the aesthetic, the creative - and yet too often we don't give our students opportunities to write *literary* texts - only *critical* ones - or to learn about the dynamics of aesthetic production and consumption. Our courses, on the other hand, are dominated by the need for our students to produce critical responses - and yet too often we don't require them to read *critical* texts - only *literary* ones - or to learn about the dynamics of critical production and reception.

We want our students to understand the broader contexts of literature, and yet many of them may only encounter eight texts (plus a few extra for the synoptic paper) in the two years of the A Level course, and may never set eyes on anything written before Shakespeare (and precious little after) or from a different country, culture or language. We want authentic responses from students, and yet we often circumscribe them in unhelpful ways, excluding rich areas of investigation, discussion and discovery (such as important aspects of literary history and language, the relationship between popular and 'classic' literature, the controversies surrounding the canon, and so on.)

In this regard, too, we tend perhaps to fetishise the idea of the inviolable literary text, attending serially to set texts in talmudic detail; the set text dominates our view of the subject, but we often neglect to deal comprehensively with broader notions about literature - form, period, genre, narrative, etc, as well as cultural and linguistic issues - restricting the range of texts and topics that students encounter, recoiling from the notion that students might profitably work with a variety of extracts and short texts as well as whole lengthy texts, or that they might demonstrate their literary sensibilities by intervening in or transforming texts or through their own creative writing. Despite our concern for the aesthetic unity of the text, our students also frequently lose sight of the life that the texts they study have outside the classroom.

Perhaps we also give off mixed messages about the kind of responses to texts that we expect - using the rather vague idea of literary 'appreciation' as a kind of distraction from significant issues concerning the (probably) diverse values that we and our students ascribe to literary texts and literary study, as well as from our ambivalence towards literary criticism and the paraphernalia of literary scholarship (which might, we fear, interfere with the aesthetic experience of the text and the imperative of enjoyment in reading).²

As English teachers, the commonplace goes, we are meant to teach our students 'to love literature'³. Ultimately, perhaps, this is the reason why Keating seems so attractive to many: he certainly has no problem there.

But the reality is more difficult. Loving literature can mean a variety of different things, and choosing to study it, or finding it interesting, is not necessarily the same as loving it; nor is loving reading necessarily the same as loving literature. A whole range of standard ideas about the nature and benefits of literature (and particularly English literature) might also be upset through even basic exposure to postcolonialism, narrative theory, and many others. But in any case, if we want our students to come to see the value of the subject, we don't always set about it the right way.

Of course there'll always be some students who are completely 'tuned in' to literature and to the project of studying it. But at a time of widening participation, in a media age characterised by less paternalistic attitudes to cultural choice, and in a post-theory, post-cultural studies age, we must be able to formulate a more inclusive rationale that accounts for a range of motivations for choosing A Level Literature. Most of our students are interested, willing to learn, motivated by questions about society, culture, language and texts, even if not always exactly lovers of literature. Is it actually possible to teach someone to love something, anyway? And what kind of critical disposition does such a project imply? We all know that the reality is more complex - and we all adjust to this reality in a variety of ways - yet the underlying modes and structures of our teaching, and of syllabuses and exams, often seem to pull against these complexities.

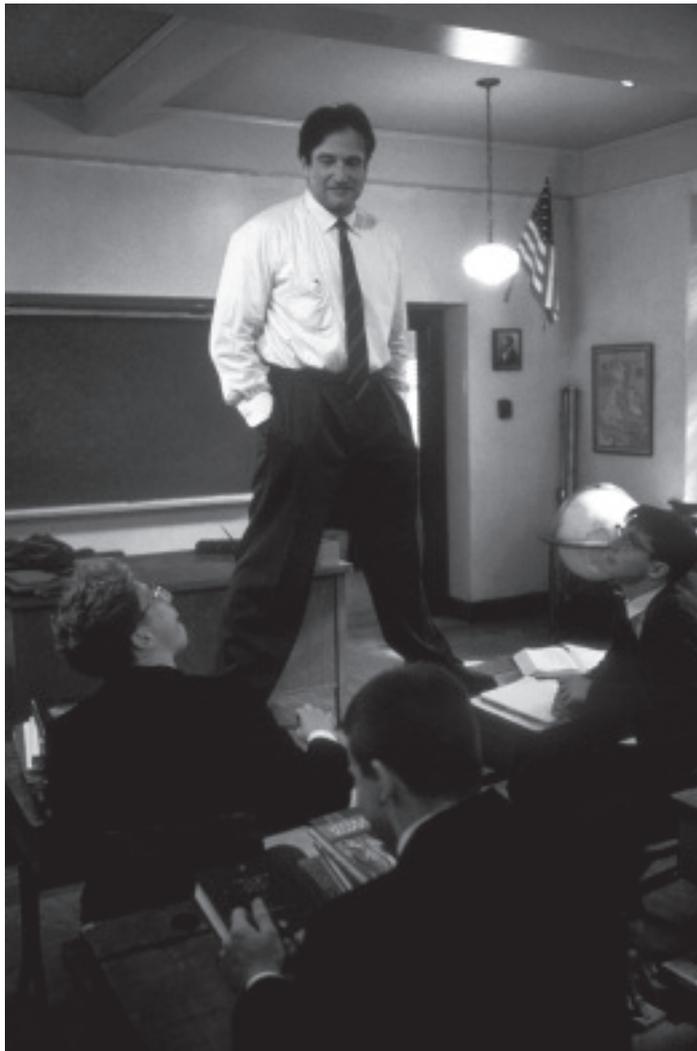
Beyond Dead Poets Society

Attractive though the character of Keating might be in many ways, it seems to me, then, that he does embody some significant problems inherent in current dominant modes of literature teaching. Assuming that most of our real-life students are unlikely to behave quite like Keating's in response to exposure to the great works, how successful are we at reaching the authentic responses of our students, rather than appreciative attitudes needed to pass exams? What exactly is an authentic response? What

is the difference between that and a critical response? What is the difference between reading and literary study? What do we do when students don't like, enjoy, or feel transformed by the literature they have to study? How might we develop valuable critical detachment as well as - or even perhaps sometimes instead of - passion and aesthetic-moral engagement in our students? And might we perhaps find something useful in Mr Keating's discarded textbook to help us with this project? (What, in the end, do Keating's pupils actually *learn* about poetry?)

Recent research I have conducted amongst first year

English undergraduates and lecturers - as well as plenty of anecdotal evidence from a range of HE institutions - suggests that - given the shock of encountering the subject at university (which differs from the subject at school probably more than in any other subject⁵) - many students find it difficult to cope. Unfamiliar with literary criticism and unable to place the kind of study they encountered at A Level in relation to new paradigms for literary study they have encountered (not only literary theory), they struggle with both reading and writing demands.



Far from being passionate about poetry, many of them feel alienated from it, and have very little knowledge or understanding of it, essentially wishing to see English Literature as being about reading and discussing novels. Many are at best ambivalent about Shakespeare study.⁵ They may have an encyclopaedic knowledge of their eight set texts, but many will have encountered little else, and are not readers of 'Literature' in their spare time (though they are likely to be keen readers nevertheless). At the same time, many students have little sense of the critical detachment required for literary study, of the breadth, scope and purposes of the discipline, or its relationships with linguistic or cultural studies. Even the keenest A Level students often find it a steep learning

curve. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that we may need to attempt to resolve some of these tensions through a careful reflection on what English Literature A Level is for and what kind of experience of literature and literary study it should provide, whether students are going on to read English at university or not.

The Problem of Set Texts

I have suggested above that some of the problems and contradictions which I perceive in our approaches to literature teaching stem from our own dispositions - but many of these stem in turn from the model of literary study which has been enshrined in A Level English Literature syllabuses for over fifty years, and indeed in the Higher Certificate courses that existed before them. Despite some small concessions to modernity, A Level still looks pretty much as it always has done, consisting largely of the atomistic study of eight or so set texts, with separate exam questions - of a certain sort, demanding a certain sort of appreciative response - on each text.

There have been changes for the better, of course. Questions are now considerably less explicitly value-laden, less explicitly inclined to direct students to particular answers and cut off profitable critical avenues. (One from 1972 demanded that students 'show that [they] have come to appreciate the qualities of Jane Austen.')

The set texts are perhaps more likely to be treated comparatively, in a limited way, in parts of the syllabuses. Synoptic papers go some way towards a broader approach (though arguably no more so than the compulsory unseen of yore). But set texts - often arbitrarily grouped and chosen arbitrarily from rather arbitrary lists of possibilities - still remain the chief *raison d'être*, and the structuring principle, of the A Level course - reinforcing attitudes to textual study mentioned above, and perpetuating the low status of a broader conception of literary knowledge and study.⁷

One of the defences of the role of set text as currently constituted is that it develops students' skills of close reading. Yet university lecturers and A Level examiners frequently complain that students' close reading and interpretive skills are poorly developed; rather, students want to talk in personal response modes about the 'trinity' of theme, character and plot. Further, lecturers say, too much emphasis on set texts can encourage spoon-feeding, transmissive approaches, and does not effectively develop independent, transferable reading skills. Another complaint of university lecturers is that the focus on detailed reading of the set text means that students know little of wider contexts or of the processes of interpretation - hence, the increased emphasis on 'context and interpretation' in Curriculum 2000. Ironically, however, the dominance of the arbitrary set text was in fact exacerbated by the simultaneous introduction, with Curriculum 2000, of the modular system, the division between AS and A2, and the allocation of assessment objectives to different modules, all of which further atomised the system, making it harder to make connections between different texts and different parts of

the course.⁸

By way of exoneration, perhaps, some say of A Level Literature that it now has far more modern literature in it, and so is more responsive to students' needs. But, whilst I think a modern literature course should embrace not only the modern but also the absolutely contemporary, I don't believe that simply substituting modern set texts for older ones is necessarily the way to do it. Rather, we need to make links between the modern and the old, consider the ways in which the old is reflected in and has formed the new, the ways in which the new understands the old, the ways in which the study of the old might be valuable now. There needs to be more literature in our course - more old, more modern, and more contemporary; in fact more texts of many kinds - and less narrow, high-stakes assessment.

Re-envisaging A Level Literature

So, perhaps we can re-envisage A Level as a course which might, for instance, take set texts and a wide range of other texts (including critical texts, extracts, texts from a variety of cultures and a range of periods, etc.,) and embed them in broad, meaningful contexts - 'the novel', 'poetry' and 'drama', for instance, at the most basic level - ensuring that students are always developing their grasp of literary forms, concepts, history, issues and debates, as well as their ability to attend to close reading and the details of the individual set text. Detailed reading of set texts should certainly have an important place in this project, but *not* as the organising principle of the course. Teachers might also have a considerably greater degree of freedom about which texts to teach - and to what ends - under this regime; and to explore a wider range of critical and creative responses.

Vitality, perhaps we can also envisage a different kind of assessment that does not tie us down to detailed, atomised readings of each set text condensed into 45 minutes of frenzied writing in exams. Perhaps one that allows sections of the course to be free from the constraints of external assessment in order to encourage wide reading, creative experimentation, and so on. Perhaps one that allows students, in at least some part of the syllabus, to discuss critical debates and issues, questions of literary value and interpretation, the significance and development of genres, the nature of literary criticism, the purposes of literary study, and so on - acknowledging developments in the discipline of literary studies over the last half century, giving students more access to the bigger picture and to 'the big questions' - political, linguistic, cultural - underlying literary theory which Robert Eaglestone convincingly suggests young people want to engage with.⁹ Mr Keating's impressionable students - ('Oh Captain, My Captain!') - might not have been quite such a pushover if they had had this alternative.

Models for change

This is not a straightforward project, and it is not one, I

think, that can be achieved through a standard QCA redraft of subject criteria, such as we are currently witnessing.¹⁰ By mooring an increase in the number of set texts to be covered in an A Level course, and reducing the assessment burden, QCA seems (albeit tentatively) to be suggesting that this is the direction we should move in, but there are considerable issues to do with teacher subject knowledge, with attitudes to theory, criticism and pedagogy, and with the relationships between the different elements of English, which need to be addressed explicitly through a more full and measured approach to change.

There are solid models and precedents for such change, however. The teaching of literature at advanced level at schools in Australia was completely overhauled along the lines I have suggested during the 1990s, by means of an extended (and not always comfortable) process of professional dialogue between teachers, teacher trainers and university lecturers in English and Cultural Studies, and substantial programmes of teacher training.¹¹ Robert Scholes gives, in his book *The Rise and Fall Of English* (Yale, 1998), an inspirational account of an advanced school English course developed, for similar reasons, by means of dialogue between universities and schools in the States.¹² The literature course in the International Baccalaureate diploma has some useful ideas;¹³ and some of the structures and principles of our own A Level courses in English Language and Film Studies (as well as the Advanced Extension Awards in English) provide valuable pointers to new ways of thinking about what an English Literature course might look like.¹⁴ Finally, universities in the UK have developed a wide variety of interesting approaches which we as A Level teachers could learn from and adapt (although many lecturers also have a great deal to learn from us about pedagogy); embarking on further dialogue with them must be an important step.

Whilst a radical change to A Level Literature might help, there is, however, plenty that we can do within the structures of the A Level course as it stands. The tyranny of the set text and the exam response can be broken with imagination and careful planning. Detailed set text study can be framed with broader contextual study of genre and period, and augmented with readings of critical texts, and creative assignments. Occasional weeks or lessons, and the fallow period between the AS exams and the beginning of the A2 course, can be set aside for explorations of literary issues, topics or debates, or for wide reading activities. The Advanced Extension Award, though designed for the most able, offers opportunities for students of all abilities to develop critical thinking and literary awareness.

Recently, through teaching various groups in various settings - PGCE students, gifted and talented A Level students, mixed ability A Level students, first year undergraduates, English teachers, and International Baccalaureate students - I have experimented with a variety of extension activities not directly related to set texts but designed to broaden and deepen students' understanding of literature. On the next page - based on

these explorations - I set out briefly some suggestions for topics to explore and activities to do at these times, addressing the teaching of poetry. A variety of other valuable activities focusing on questions of interpretation can be found in the English and Media Centre's book *Text, Reader, Critic*.

Rewriting the Introduction to Mr Keating's Textbook

The way forward, then, having torn up the introduction to the textbook, as Keating does in *Dead Poets Society*, is perhaps to re-write it in new ways. Rather than enlisting our students, like Keating's, in a mystical Romantic cult, we need to clarify, to demystify our subject, and find new ways of framing its critical project which are sensitive to students' own voices and cultural experiences as well as to the literary heritage; which reflect the way in which the discipline of literary studies has developed over the last half century; which are accessible, challenging, creative and wide-ranging; and which give students a strong sense of the subject's dynamic purposes, applications and implications.

Notes

¹Modleski, T., *Feminism without Women: Culture and Criticism in a 'Postfeminist' Age* (Routledge, New York, 1991).

²Some of these issues are explored in Atherton, C., *Defining Literary Criticism*, (Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2005) and McCormick, K., *The Culture of Reading and the Teaching of English*, (Manchester, 1994).

³See Goodwyn, A., 'Breaking up is hard to do: English teachers and that LOVE of reading' in *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* 1 (1), pp.66-78 (www.soe.waikato.ac.nz/english/ETPC) for further discussion.

⁴Andrew Green's study of transition between English A Level and university English - *Four Perspectives on Transition* (English Subject Centre, London, 2005) gives a valuable account of these differences.

⁵See, for instance, Ros King's article about teaching Shakespeare to undergraduates, 'Shakespeare in the Classroom,' in Issue 4 of *EDM*.

⁶Quoted in Pound, T., *The Function of A Level English Literature in the 16-19 Curriculum* (PhD thesis, Oxford, 1995)

⁷See Adrian Barlow, 'Set Texts 14-19', at www.qca.org.uk/english21 for further discussion.

⁸For a discussion of English in Curriculum 2000, see, for instance, Carol Atherton's article, 'Critical Literature', in Issue 1 of *EDM*

⁹Eaglestone, R., 'Active Voice!' *English Association Newsletter* 166, 2001. See also Eaglestone, R. *Doing English* (Routledge, London, 2000) for further discussion of the relationship between A Level and university English

¹⁰QCA, Draft A Level Subject Criteria, 2006

¹¹See Beavis, C., 'Literature, Subjectivity and Curriculum Change', *Research in the Teaching of English*, 36, 2001.

¹²See Gabrielle Cliff Hodges' article 'The Four Cs and Other Letters of the Alphabet' in Issue 5 of *EDM* for an outline of this course.

¹³See Snapper, G., 'Literature in the International Baccalaureate', *Use of English*, 55 (3), 2004.

¹⁴See Bluett et al, *Text : Message*, (NATE, Sheffield, 2005).

Demystifying Poetry – Classroom Investigations

Quite commonly, A Level students' experience of poetry is restricted almost entirely to one volume of late 20th century poetry and one of 19th century poetry (eg. *The World's Wife* by Carol Ann Duffy and Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* in AQA A) as well as a Shakespeare play. Whilst these volumes are clearly substantial objects of study, the set text approach can lead to certain assumptions being made about students' familiarity with, understanding of, or acceptance of certain aspects of the very idea of poetry. As with all set text approaches, emphasis can tend to be on the unified nature of the text in question and its meanings, rather than on broader literary, cultural or linguistic aspects of the form – including basic questions such as 'what are the origins of poetry / rhyme / metre?', 'who actually reads / writes poetry and why?', 'why does poetry command the status it does in art and in education?', 'what is poetic language?' Addressing primary questions such as these could help significantly with set text study, as well as decreasing students' sense of alienation or detachment from poetry. The following suggested topics, as part of a broad exploration of a range of poetry of all kinds, are designed to address some of the issues that underlie many students' fear and dislike of poetry by allowing space for them to get to grips with the nature of poetry as an art form and some of its uses rather than focusing on discrete analysis of individual poems or volumes.

i) An investigation into the interpretation of poetry. Often students come to A Level – and leave A Level – seeing poems as irritating little verbal puzzles set to test them in exams, to see whether they can get the right answer. A useful exercise to start to overcome this is to get students to discuss some 20th century art works (I use a Picasso, a Mondrian, a Dali, a Pollock, a Kandinsky and Munch's 'The Scream') and see what arises: a discussion about the sensual qualities of the art and its ambiguities, as well as the value of abstract art, usually. I then give them Ted Hughes' poem 'Lineage' from *Crow* to discuss. Immediately most students will try to identify 'a meaning' (pretty much impossible in parts of the poem at least), ignoring the sensual qualities of the poem and the deliberateness of its ambiguities. Useful comparisons usually emerge between the poem and the art works, and between the ways students respond to both. The art works serve as a useful reminder that poetry's primary purpose is aesthetic, and that ambiguity (represented particularly well in the Hughes poem) is a positive and deliberate aesthetic feature of much poetry. The discussion is also a useful way of raising the issue of the intention of the author. Who says what the poem 'means'? The poet? The teacher? Is it the job of the teacher to 'know' what a poem means and pass this on? This activity never fails to get valuable discussion going, but needs careful teacher guidance and planning to draw out the issues. This can also lead to a useful discussion about who actually reads poetry outside schools, and why, and what its value might be.

ii) An investigation into the relationship between the popular/oral tradition and the literary tradition of poetry. Understanding the relationships between music, narrative and poetry in the oral tradition can help students understand the nature of metre and rhyme in the literary tradition; and it is vital that students understand the differences, similarities and tensions between the two traditions – popular poetry, with its oral contexts, and literary poetry, with its written contexts – rather than seeing them as two entirely different things. Questions of intended audience and purpose, and cultural value, are central here. Having some sense of how the literary tradition diverged from the oral, and why, could also be a good lead to follow. The Faber edition of Paul McCartney's

poetry is a good starting point; also some of Eminem's lyrics (praised recently by Seamus Heaney), and Bob Dylan (frequently quoted by Christopher Ricks.) At the other end of the spectrum, medieval ballads and lyrics, and the oral narrative tradition of Old and Middle English (*Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain*) are all enjoyable for students to dip into and explore. The question of the 'poetry performance' nature of Shakespearean drama is a good focus: many students remain oblivious to the fact that Shakespeare wrote (mainly) in poetry, and even if they are aware of it, they often don't understand why. This also provides a good chance to look into the whys and wherefores of the iambic pentameter – try getting students to compare the players' Priam and Hecuba speeches in *Hamlet* with 'To be or not to be' to explore how Shakespeare subverts the pentameter by setting it in tension with natural speech rhythms – and get students reciting lines, clapping rhythms, and writing in the rhythms.

iii) An investigation into the differences between prose and poetry.

Ask students to define poetry; it is 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. A particularly valuable exercise is to present them with a poem in alternative forms – prose, the actual poem, and the poem in an altered form, to explore the differences that layout can make to meaning: this works best with blank verse or free verse. This can suddenly bring the point of poetic form into sharp relief for students. Found poems, the Carlos Williams 'plums' poem, and abstract poems such as the Pierre Coupey *Study No X* also make excellent talking points here. This discussion can lead on to all kinds of explorations of poetic language – looking, for instance, at the way prose texts use 'poetic' language, or the use of poetic devices in the media. The idea of rhetoric could be introduced here too.

iv) An investigation into the poet's voice. See Sue Dymoke's book *Drafting and Assessing Poetry* (Paul Chapman, London, 2003, available from NATE) for great ideas here. Examining poets' drafts – she sets out many examples – can be a revelatory experience for students. Another very successful approach is to look at Sylvia Plath's disturbing poem 'The Bee Meeting' and compare it with her diary account of the same event (published by Faber in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*). For students who want to believe (as many do) that Plath's poetic language is a direct, unmediated expression of her mental instability, it comes as quite a shock to see how far she was in control of her technique – but this is a valuable exercise even if students are not studying Plath.

v) An investigation into Shakespeare as a literary icon. Another very potent topic for classroom investigation and discussion – which goes considerably beyond poetry – is the idea of Shakespeare as a literary icon. Students need the opportunity to air their feelings about and experiences of Shakespeare, to discuss openly, and with careful teacher guidance, why Shakespeare is considered so central to education, why he is considered the greatest writer, etc. Such discussion clears the air and can support their study of set texts effectively. I use some materials from the Advanced Extension Award sample paper a few years ago, as well as a variety of newspaper cuttings (Shakespeare is always in the news one way or another), and extracts from critical discussions such as Alan Sinfield in *Political Shakespeare*. It's important here too to build the idea of the plays' primary function as drama rather than study material: use theatre reviews and accounts of theatre in education to examine responses to Shakespeare as theatre.