



POETRY REVIEW TEACHERS' NOTES: FRESH IDEAS FOR WIDER READING

Introduction

Poetry Review, one of the world's longest established and most prestigious poetry magazines, presents exciting work by poets from around the world. Past contributors include T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, W.H. Auden, Philip Larkin, Seamus Heaney, Carol Ann Duffy and Jackie Kay. We hope with the help of the ideas in this resource it will provide your students with an excellent introduction to contemporary poetry and help them make connections between newly published work and their wider reading. In these notes we will draw links between canonical poems and these contemporary ones as well as identifying poems which can be taken straight into the classroom.

We are always keen to hear how teachers are using our publications so please get in touch if you have more ideas or suggestions at: poetryclass@poetrysociety.org.uk

1. Poetry and anonymity

This issue, Guest Editors, Moniza Alvi and Esther Morgan, asked eight well-known poets to send poems, which were presented in the magazine as if they had been submitted anonymously. The poets could write on whatever theme they wished, and use their usual style or experiment with a new voice. One poet said that their poem "thrived under the stricture of the Anon. invitation because anonymity gave me freedom to write about what I wanted to".

"Anon" is arguably the most famous author of them all and the Editors chose anonymity as a starting point to 'rehabilitate this as a creative rather than a destructive authorship'. They describe this choice in the editorial for the magazine (see panel, right).

Discuss the idea of writing anonymously with the class, and then ask all students to create a poem as "Anon". These will need to be typed up in a prescribed font so as to be truly anonymous. These poems can become an anonymous collection for the class to read and discuss; what did people choose to write about, and in what voice? What was the experience like for the students, and what does the collection reveal? With an older group you could also use this as an opportunity to discuss the Web as a publishing tool and how having both their words and pictures published online affects what and how they write.



Photo: Bob Coe

Esther Morgan and Moniza Alvi

What the Editors say

'Hardly a week goes by without a story which gives 'Anon', as it were, a bad name. Whether it's hacking, cyber-bullying or mindless trolling, anonymity in the digital age seems to offer the means of masking our worst instincts. [We were reminded that] the freedom anonymity brings can be a creative as well as a destructive space... Many poets are still working out their relationship with social media and how to navigate a world of instant communication which is at odds with the inward dwelling, time taking nature of writing poems. We wanted to offer writers... the truly blank page of an anonymous submission – a space outside the Web with its intricate (and sometimes sticky) threads of reputation and expectation.'

LISTEN UP

Listen to the Editors' fascinating discussion about the theme of anonymity in the podcast at <http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk/content/publications/review/pr1031/>
FREE TO DOWNLOAD



2. Poetry's literary heritage and use of language

'The Invisible Gift', by David Morley, is on p9. David Morley is a professor of writing at Warwick University and a poet. Originally trained as a zoologist, he often references ecology in his writing.

David Morley's poem here opens with the line 'John Clare weaves English words into a nest...'. The English poet John Clare (1793-1864) was the son of a farm worker and became a celebrated nature poet. Morley here links Clare's act of writing with the land, referencing nature throughout as he describes Clare creating a poem ('rhyme, like mud', 'hatches softly' and 'buds of muscle').

It is therefore interesting to compare Morley's contemporary poem about writing with Clare's poem 'Summer'. Discuss with the class what features in Clare's poetry they can also identify in Morley's.

Summer

Come we to the summer, to the summer we will come,
For the woods are full of bluebells and the hedges full of bloom,
And the crow is on the oak a-building of her nest,
And love is burning diamonds in my true lover's breast;
She sits beneath the whitethorn a-plaiting of her hair,
And I will to my true lover with a fond request repair;
I will look upon her face, I will in her beauty rest,
And lay my aching weariness upon her lovely breast.

The clock-a-clay is creeping on the open bloom of May,
The merry bee is trampling the pinky threads all day,
And the chaffinch it is brooding on its grey mossy nest
In the whitethorn bush where I will lean upon my lover's breast;
I'll lean upon her breast and I'll whisper in her ear
That I cannot get a wink o'sleep for thinking of my dear;
I hunger at my meat and I daily fade away
Like the hedge rose that is broken in the heat of the day.

David Morley's poem also lends itself to looking at the uses of language. Students could identify examples of onomatopoeia or metaphor. The nature metaphors that Morley uses to describe the act of writing could be compared to those used by Seamus Heaney in his poem 'Digging'. For further exploration, you could listen to and read the poem 'For John Clare' by John Ashbery on the Poetry Archive website (www.poetryarchive.org) and consider what Morley and Ashbery want to say to Clare, and the different ways they've chosen to communicate it.

3. Language, dialect and place

Anne Ryland's poem 'After a Spell in Essex' is on p16. Ryland grew up in Essex and moved to Berwick-upon-Tweed, Northumberland in 1999. She has described Northumberland as her 'true home'.

Anne Ryland uses a number of dialect words in her poem, which describes her return to her Northumberland home after time spent in her childhood home of Essex. Identify the dialect words, and even if their exact definitions are not known (one definition, for 'nither', is given at the end of the poem), see if the meaning can still be understood and discuss how this happens. Consider with students what effect her use of these words has in this poem, and ask them whether there are words or phrases that they use that are local or personal to them. If time allows, they could write their own 'After a Spell in...' poem, to use their own local vocabulary to describe an experience of returning home.



4. Poetic forms and their effects

Amaan Hyder is a poet, living in London. Hyder's poem 'At Hajj' can be found on p19. It can also be compared to the poem on p41-42 by Ángel González, 'Zero City'. González lived 1925-2008 and, as the biography on p43 describes, grew up during the Spanish Civil War.

'At Hajj' is a prose poem describing an event at Hajj, the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia. This festival involves a series of rituals, including walking anti-clockwise seven times around the holy central building, and hundreds of thousands of people converge to mark it each year. It may be helpful to use images or videos from the British Museum website (www.britishmuseum.org) if students don't know about Hajj, as the website has content from their 2012 exhibition including personal stories about the pilgrimage.

Discuss the event described in the poem, and consider Hyder's choice of form. Why might this form have been chosen, and what effect does it have? Remember to consider the shape of the words that appear on the page, too. A useful contrast can be found in 'Zero City', which uses a very different structure to describe living through war. Discuss how each poet's choice of poetic form works to support the events that they describe.

5. Metaphor, personification and sound

Zewdu Milikit is an Ethiopian poet who teaches in Gondar, Ethiopia. Milikit's 'Year of the Spider' is on p21. Note the comments from the translator about the inflection of the Amharic language at the bottom of p21.

Milikit chooses to make it the 'year of the spider' because 'everyone's weaving a ladder/ of cobwebs'. Discuss this choice of insect, and then have the students write their own 'Year of the...' poem, choosing an insect or animal to use as a metaphor for the present day as Milikit does. Students will have to personify their animals and choose which features make them an apt symbol for the year. Point out that the translators note that the original Amharic language text is full of inflections and that they explain how they have used half-rhymes and assonance to reflect this. Urge students to do the same in their own poems.

6. List poems, identity and character

Mona Arshi's poem 'On Ellington Road' can be found on p26-27. Arshi lives in Hounslow, west London, and is currently working on her first collection of poems.

Mona Arshi uses the form of a list poem to describe the inhabitants of Ellington Road, a road in west London. Read the poem and ask the students what we learn about not only the other residents but also our narrator through the list. Consider why she has chosen to list them in this way, and notice how a sense of character is created using small but telling details ('Aunty Kamel, knocking on our door, with her black plait undone,/ begging us to keep her for the night').

If time allows, the students can write a poem about their own local road, using the list form and creating character with tightly-described detail. What will they tell the reader about themselves through describing others? Google Street View can be used to spy on familiar or strange streets for inspiration.

Poetryclass: fresh ideas for poetry learning from the Poetry Society

The Poetry Society has a wide range of free downloadable poetry lessons for teachers, created by poets with extensive experience of working in schools. Visit the Poetryclass section of the Poetry Society website to view the complete range and select a resource: www.poetrysociety.org.uk/content/education/poetryclasshome/poetryclassresources

