

KEY STAGE	AGE
KS1	5–7
KS2	7–11
KS3	11–14
KS4	14–16
KS5	16–18 ✓

AT A GLANCE

- MENTAL HEALTH
- MUSIC
- EXPERIENCE
- MULTIMODAL
- POETIC FORMS

POETRYCLASS: FRESH IDEAS FOR POETRY LEARNING FROM THE POETRY SOCIETY

FOYLE YOUNG POETS **POETRY AND THE MIND**

BY ASHLEY SMITH

OF THE YEAR AWARD

Matthew Broomfield, at age 17, was one of the 15 winning poets in the 2011 **Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award** (read more at www.foyleyoungpoets.org). His winning poem 'Schizo' (full text included here) can be read as an exploration of a troubled mind written as an inner monologue. An anonymous individual undergoes incessant multi-sensory bombardment from internal and external experiences. The narrative is shrouded in ambiguity, leaving the reader questioning what is real and what is imagined. We detect multiple 'voices' intermingling from the worlds of fiction, advertising, memory and banal, day-to-day human interaction. A sense of foreboding is woven through the narrative as we wonder how the 'schizo' character can continue to function in society, trapped between outer reality and inner chaos.

Exploring sound

Give a sense of hearing multiple voices by asking your students to work in groups of 6-8 and take it in turns to play the role of the protagonist. The other members of the group form a circle around the reader and take it in turns to read the poem aloud phrase by phrase, as dictated by the punctuation. Reading the poem in this way, with minimal pauses (even overlaps) between phrases, conveys a sense of a vocal onslaught. For further demonstration of the effect created by this disjointed kind of monologue, students could watch a clip of Samuel Beckett's disturbing 'Not I', ([available on YouTube](#)) in which a

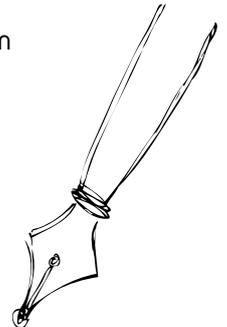
disembodied mouth vocalises memory in a barely coherent flow.

Creating context

Having explored the oral intricacies of the poem, students can consider where the various stimuli experienced by the protagonist may have come from. To do this, they can create a large mind map on a sheet of A3 paper with any number of possible 'sources' stemming from the central hub of the map (e.g. objective reality, advertising, religious texts, imagined voices, newspapers, catalogues, comics, film, medical literature...). If you have access to computers, the (paid-for) mind mapping software from Mindjet would suit this activity well. Students could then compare their mind maps to see what different interpretations they might have come up with for the origins of the protagonist's voices and how they link together. For example, in the lines:

Two rats gnawing an electric cable. [...] Frayed kettle-cord across hotplate. An accident. Sirens.

— are the two images describing the same experience, or is the former a hallucination or scene from a film that has become confused with the speaker's reality? Any number of questions without definitive answers can be posed around the experiences and voices described in the poem.



Continues overleaf

Ashley Smith, Head of English at St John's College School in Cambridge, is a Poetry Society Teacher Trailblazer. Teacher Trailblazers are teachers who have been recognised for their engagement with, and commitment to, poetry education. More information at: www.poetrysociety.org.uk/content/education

Get writing: experimenting with form

Tell the students to write a poem that conveys the inner workings of a troubled mind. It's vital to remember here that students might be writing from personal experience or could be basing their ideas upon an entirely fictional persona. Either way, it is clearly important to take a sensitive approach to any exploration of mental states, and students should be encouraged to resist stereotypes and research conditions that they describe.

They could explore OCD, depression, grief, or anorexia, or if it feels easier, you could ask them to describe an undefined condition. This might have the added benefit of freeing them up to be playful with their language rather than constrained by the need for verisimilitude; the collaborative poem, the 'Lục Bát of Insanity' (overleaf), by two twelve-year-old pupils who were inspired by 'Schizo', gives an example of this.

Fleshing out

Here are some other aspects that students could consider as they create their own poem:

- Consider the voice in the monologue. Is it single or multiple? Who can hear it?
- Where is the protagonist's condition heading? Are they at the beginning, middle or end of their turmoil? Is there an inevitable climax to which the narrative is pointing? Can you build up to it but leave the outcome unspoken, for your reader to imagine?
- Use vocabulary that pertains to your protagonist's preoccupations. A car obsessive will speak of carburettors, torque and fuel injection, whilst a mathematical whizz might see the world in terms of numbers and complex calculations. Make sure your language conveys the extent to which your protagonist is 'tuned in' to his or her specific preoccupation.

- Consider using unusual syntax, phrasing and punctuation. Whilst we are accustomed to writing and speaking in sentences, we rarely think in them. You might want to use phrases without verbs or long rambling lines, depending on the mental state you are trying to express.

Further resources: words and music

- Another interesting point of comparison might be Radiohead's 'Fitter Happier' from the 1997 album *OK Computer* (lyrics and audio available online), where lyrics are 'spoken' by a computerised voice. The ironic listing of consumerist buzzwords give a hypnotic effect similar to that of 'Schizo' and could stimulate discussion about the narrative voice of the song and provide inspiration for source material once students get writing. *Do note that the lyrics are powerful and include a swearword near the end.*
- American singer songwriter Kristin Hersh's song 'The Letter' (lyrics and audio available online) addresses her own experiences with bipolar disorder and shares the ominous sense of encroaching threat present in Broomfield's 'Schizo'.
- Consider sharing video or audio clips of the last 50 lines of Molly Bloom's soliloquy from James Joyce's *Ulysses* alongside the original text, with its intriguing lack of punctuation. Discuss how effectively Joyce conveys a convincing train of thought without the need for traditional grammatical constraints.

TOP TIP

Take a look at the useful Poetry Society lesson plan, '[Writing a monologue](#)', by Sue Dymoke, for another route into writing a persona poem.

LUC BÁT OF INSANITY

I hate feeling this way:
Stooping depression sway. Unsure
How the sky is: azure
Or red in tone so pure. The scream
Pierces my widening dream.
Magnifying light beams, knick-knack
Makes me want a Tic-Tac
Vendor sells bric-a-brac, it clots
My head with polka dots.
Cluttered dreams, shattered pots, death's choir
Claims my five-year-old fire
Bad dad (funeral pyre). Pipers,
'Death to windscreen wipers'
Kill me with a sniper. My Way.

RODDY AND ADAM (AGED 12)

This poem, along with the other winning poems, can be found in the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award winners' anthology. This poetry collection is created each year and sent to hundreds of schools and libraries across the UK. You can also read the anthology online at: www.foyleyoungpoets.org

SCHIZO

Everything is ugly. Dull light consumes
The evening's heat. Cityscape. Sundown.
Cockroaches are alive in the skirting-board.
Domestos swirls in the cistern. Suburban children
Sniff glue and smell of deodorant. Photons
Oscillate through the atmosphere. Skin cancer.
Maybelline. Lazarus. The truth is somewhere
Else. Men without jobs make love to women
With many children. They are all choking.
I am Legion I am Legion
The electric goes off again. Something takes hold
Of his hand and draws him on. Something
Is in his heart. Two rats gnawing electric cable.
His skull explodes. Alopecia. Sickle-cell anaemia.
True love. A child's drawing of a house.
Smoke spirals. Fridge magnets. His smile
Is nailed to his face. Chemotherapy. Particles
In motion in water. Poor children play football
In the shadows of chimneys. Mirages. They tell him
To lie down and he lies down. They say rise
And he rises. Guard dogs patrol these premises.
I am Legion I am Legion
Frayed kettle-cord across hotplate. An accident.
Sirens. A shotgun beneath the counter. Incinerator.
He is ashes in the wind. Gastric reflux. He burns
From the inside out. Washing-lines. The sun
Is enormous. Pakistanis. June. July. He tests
The blunt edge of a carving-knife with his thumb.
A baby with its fingers in the socket. A toddler
Tumbling into an open fire. Flyover. The sky.
Boredom. His bed is soaked with sweat. Soap.
I am Legion I am Legion

Continues overleaf

This poem, along with the other winning poems, can be found in the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award winners' anthology. This poetry collection is created each year and sent to hundreds of schools and libraries across the UK. You can also read the anthology online at: www.foyleyoungpoets.org

SCHIZO ctd

Everyone is insane. Scrap metal. Dogs in hot cars.
Dead flies. Sometimes he is Christ. They tell him
To be quiet and he screams. Vacuum cleaner.
Fish and chips. Vomit on the kitchen floor.
Trauma. Vertebrae crack. Little freak.
Lighter fluid. A crowd gathers round a dead
Child or animal. Alzheimer's. there is no replacement
For a mother's love. Paracetamol. A dull, lasting
Pain. Heat. They devour him entirely.

MATTHEW BROOMFIELD

.....
This poem, along with the other winning poems, can be found in the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award winners' anthology. This poetry collection is created each year and sent to hundreds of schools and libraries across the UK. You can also read the anthology online at: www.foyleyoungpoets.org
.....