

Page Fright

Connecting historical poems with contemporary spoken word: a resource for students from **The Poetry Society**



*Joelle Taylor and
Wilfred Owen*



Joelle Taylor & Wilfred Owen

This resource looks at the work of two poets, Joelle Taylor and Wilfred Owen. It is designed to support the filmed performances available at poetrysociety.org.uk/pagefright

Before you try the activities here, watch the films and explore the information provided alongside them. By exploring the Page Fright webpages you will see how contemporary spoken word artists continue to be inspired by historical writers and how the same themes can prompt very different responses and very different poems.

Joelle Taylor is a poet, spoken word artist and playwright. She founded and continues to lead SLAMBassadors UK, the national youth poetry slam championship. **Wilfred Owen** was one of the most famous poets of the First World War. His poems showed those back at home the brutality of life on the front lines. In the poems explored here, both poets are trying to bring to light experiences that they feel have been hidden from public view – either the experiences of frontline soldiers in the First World War, or of young people today.

These exercises will help you explore poetic techniques and will guide you through writing your own poems inspired by the themes, form and style of Taylor and Owen.

City landscapes

Joelle Taylor's poem, 'Last Poet Standing', is set in an urban landscape and explores gang culture, poverty, inequality and the power of poetry.

Have a go

Taylor's poem mentions a girl "perched on the lip of the tower block preparing to fly". Your challenge is to imagine the girl flying over the city of 'Last Poet Standing', and write a poem or spoken word piece describing what she sees.

Think about the journey she takes over the city and make notes about the sights, sounds, smells and feelings she might experience in different parts of the city. For each sight, sound etc think of an image to describe it. If you need something to get you started, use Taylor's line "every one of these tower blocks is a book". Use a similar structure for your images, for example:

- Every one of these crowds is a colony of ants
- Every car headlamp is a searchlight
- Every park bench has become a homeless shelter

Come up with as many as you can, and then starting with this list of images, refine your ideas. Edit down your list if it needs it, and expand upon your images, until you're happy with your poem.



British wounded at Bernafay Wood, France, 19 July 1916, during the Battle of the Somme.

Topical poetry

Both Joelle Taylor's 'Last Poet Standing' and Wilfred Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum est' address controversial issues that the poet feels are not known by the public. Owen uses poetry to expose the reality of war, whilst Taylor addresses urban poverty and the hardships that some young people face on a daily basis.

Have a go

Your challenge is to write a poem or spoken word piece from the perspective of someone mentioned in a news article. Your poem will tell the story from their point of view.

1. First, find a recent newspaper or magazine article which you find interesting. Pick a person involved in the story – they may only be referred to or the article might include a direct quote from them.

2. Give yourself five minutes to try and get inside that person's mind by imagining what their daily routine might be like. What do they do every morning? Who do they see on a regular basis? Where do they go, if anywhere? Jot your ideas down.
3. Now think about the news story. How does your character feel about it? Has their normal daily life been interrupted by the event in the news article? Do they want their situation to change?
4. Now use their daily schedule as a template to write your poem or piece. Write in the first person, explaining from your character's point of view how they experienced the events in the newspaper article.
5. Remember that you are trying to authentically create the voice of the character in the story.
6. Your poem does not have to include all the autobiographical details you have written down; just any that you feel would add authenticity. Edit and refine your poem until you are happy with it.

Truthful poetry

The poetry of Wilfred Owen, describing his experiences in the trenches, was radically different from much of what was being published at the time. It gave the general public an insight into what war is actually like – far from the honour and glory reported by the media. Owen said, “All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true poet must be truthful.” (bit.ly/1JmzhAT)

Have a go

Your challenge is to write a poem or spoken word piece in the style of a letter from someone involved in a conflict letting people know the reality of the situation.

First research either a historical war or a contemporary conflict (e.g. the First World War, the Somali Civil War, the Iraq War). Look for details of the events and read first-hand accounts from soldiers and civilians involved.

Now imagine being involved in the conflict and writing a letter to tell people the truth about what's happening. Maybe you're a frontline soldier having doubts about the war, or a civilian caught up in the fighting.

Start to write your letter in prose to get your ideas down. Begin 'Dear' and end with 'From' and your character's name. Focus on creating the voice of the person who is writing the letter. Consider the following:

- Who are you writing to? Your family? A newspaper? A politician?
- Where are you writing the poem from?
- How are you feeling?
- What have you experienced and seen?
- Are your views on the conflict different to those you have seen in the media?



Once you have written the letter, go back and shape it into a poem. You may need to elaborate on some ideas and cut others out. Look at the language you have used. Can you make it more descriptive? Can you be more concise?

For inspiration try the following:

- Read Owen's mentor and fellow poet Siegfried Sassoon's controversial letter to Parliament during the First World War (bit.ly/1hvKbOS)
- Watch 'To The English Teacher' by SLAMBassadors UK national champion Ollie O'Neill (bit.ly/1BMuk7I)
- Watch 'Dear Father' by American spoken word artist J. Ivy (bit.ly/1GyHBfu)

Poetic techniques

Both Joelle Taylor and Wilfred Owen use rhyme, internal rhyme and half rhymes. These create powerful rhythms and also draw attention to specific parts of the poems, allowing their messages to be made clear to the reader or listener.

Along with rhyme, both poems also contain assonance and alliteration to similar effect. Assonance refers to repeating vowel sounds within lines. For example the repeated 'i' sound when Owen refers to the "Five-Nines that dropped behind". Alliteration is a repeated consonant sound, such as the repeated 'g's of Taylor's "grin and gut graffiti".

Have a go

Your challenge is to re-draft one of the poems or spoken word pieces you have created from earlier writing challenges and to try and introduce rhyme, half-rhyme and assonance. You may want to do this to alter the rhythm and pace of the poem, or to pick out certain elements which you want to emphasise.

First, look at each line individually. Could you change some of the words to create internal rhyme within the line? Would adding alliteration or assonance change the rhythm, or help pick out a phrase?

Now look at groups of lines together. Could you add rhymes or half rhymes at the end of lines? What happens when you add them in the middle of lines? Experiment with as many of these techniques as you like and keep reading your piece out loud to hear the difference.

When you've finished compare your new draft with your original version of the poem. What effect have your changes made to it?

Create your own Page Fright

We hope these writing exercises have allowed you to think about Taylor and Owen's poems and to explore your own responses to the themes, forms and techniques they contain.

You can continue to edit and develop your response poems, or write a new poem in response to other themes these pieces have inspired you to think about.

Once you are happy with a poem, then you can have a go at creating your own Page Fright film at poetrysociety.org.uk/my-page-fright