

Page Fright

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



*Dizraeli and Percy
Bysshe Shelley.*



Dizraeli & Percy Bysshe Shelley

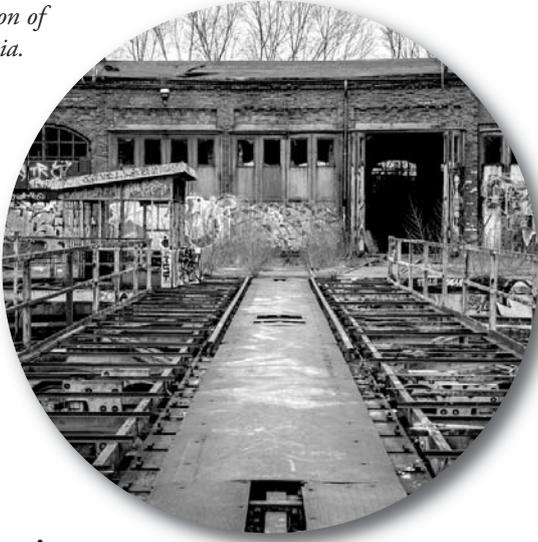
This Page Fright resource looks at the work of two poets: Dizraeli and Percy Bysshe Shelley. It is designed to support the filmed performances available at poetrysociety.org.uk/pagefright

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.

Dizraeli is a hip hop artist, singer, and spoken word artist whose style encompasses many genres from rap to folk. **Percy Bysshe Shelley** was a poet writing at the start of the nineteenth century. He was born into the upper classes and set to inherit a seat in Parliament, but held many radical views for the time, including atheism and a belief in free love. Both poems explored here, though taking different forms, look at the insignificance of man compared to the scale of history.

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 Dizraeli and Shelley.

A vision of dystopia.



Dystopia

Dizraeli's 'Celebrate' is a response rap to Shelley's poem 'Ozymandias'. It describes a dystopian future where the world as we know it has ended and society, structures and buildings have collapsed. Plants and wildlife have taken over the Houses of Parliament and vegetables grow in burned-out taxis at the sides of roads.

Have a go

Your challenge is to write a poem or spoken word piece that describes a dystopian future.

First, think about how the end of civilisation might have happened. Was it caused by humans or a natural disaster? What parts of society have changed the most? Has anything stayed the same? How are people surviving?

Now use your ideas to write a short poem. You could use whole lines taken from your notes, or write new lines. Focus on explaining what has happened and what has changed.

Think about how you can use language to reflect that the poem is set in the future. In 'Celebrate', Dizraeli sings a folk melody to echo a lost past. Could you use something similar, or use new forms of language to present a future society?

Sonnets, beats and rhymes

'Ozymandias' is an unusual combination of two forms of sonnet (bit.ly/1JvmJO2): the Petrarchan Sonnet and the Shakespearean (or English) Sonnet. Both of these forms use a particular rhyme scheme and structure. Shelley does not follow the rhyme scheme that would be expected by the sonnet form, using a more complicated one which is very powerful when it is read aloud. This effect is strengthened by the rhythm of the lines. These are written in iambic pentameter, or five units (called 'feet') of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (called an 'iamb').

There are many contemporary forms of poetry that use similarly strong beats and multiple same sound rhymes. For example, these devices are commonly used in rap lyrics.

Have a go

Your challenge is to write a fourteen-line poem or spoken word piece telling the story of a real or imaginary celebrity who rises to the height of fame and then loses their wealth and status. They could, for example, be a musician, actor, politician or sportsperson.

First, make notes on your celebrity and their story. You may want to consider the following questions:

- How did they become famous? How did this fame start to grow? Was it due to their actions or luck?
- How did they respond to their changed status? Did other people treat them differently?
- What did they spend their money on?
- How did they use their power and fame? Did they help people?
- What caused their downfall?

Start to write a poem in fourteen lines telling the story of your celebrity. Think about the sense of impermanence and isolation that Shelley creates in 'Ozymandias' and try to reflect this in your poem.

Divide your fourteen lines into four verses of three lines each, with each end word rhyming. Each verse can have a different end word to rhyme. (So the rhyme scheme will be aaa bbb ccc ddd). Think about the rhythm of your lyrics. Try and make sure they keep to a regular beat throughout.

For inspiration, watch ‘There was a rapper’ (bit.ly/1hQcoju) by Dizraeli and the Small Gods, which tells the story of a rapper’s rise and fall.

Revolutionary Shelley

As you will know from exploring the Page Fright web pages, Shelley had many revolutionary views. He was fiercely anti-military and described war as one of the forces that “hurt him into poetry” (bit.ly/1LxrKGB). His views were considered extreme in his lifetime. He used his poetry to express his radical political beliefs in a powerful and persuasive way, for example in the first two stanzas of ‘A Song: “Men of England”’:

‘A Song: “Men of England”’

Men of England, wherefore plough
For the lords who lay ye low?
Wherefore weave with toil and care
The rich robes your tyrants wear?

Wherefore feed and clothe and save,
From the cradle to the grave,
Those ungrateful drones who would
Drain your sweat – nay, drink your blood?

Read the rest of the poem (bit.ly/1Lxs87v).

Have a go

Your challenge is to write a poem or spoken word piece which argues for the rights of marginalised people. Select a group of people you feel are mistreated or undervalued within contemporary society. This could be, for example, asylum seekers, workers on zero-hour contracts, nurses or young single mothers.

Write notes on how the group are discriminated against, how this affects their lives and opportunities, and what they could do if these barriers were removed.

Now use your ideas to write a poem inspired by ‘A Song: “Men of England”’. Start your poem by addressing the group you are writing about, for example:

Wage slaves of England, why should you work
For the bosses who drain you dry?

Write as many four-line verses as you like, but try to keep the same rhyme scheme across the verses.

Create your own Page Fright film

We hope these writing exercises have allowed you to think about Dizraeli and Shelley’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