

POEMS HAPPEN WHEN YOU SPEAK THEM:

A new approach to the education of poetry.

By

Bryce Youngman and Hazem Shammas*

Teaching poetry is a tricky business.

Most students' first contact with poetry will be in school; often learning it by going round the class and reading a line at a time.

While there is nothing overwhelmingly bad about this practise, it does in fact become quite useful at a later stage, if it is the *only* exercise that is used, most students would be fighting off an early morning nap before it was their turn to speak.

An overbearing demand to master the dictionary definition of rhyming schemes or the use of onomatopoeia, assonance or alliteration can actually kill poetry.

There is a memorable scene in 'Dead Poets Society', during which the students rip out the front notation pages of their poetry books, which illustrates a simple fact:

If you understand poetry intellectually, but on no other level; it is a hollow experience.

That is certainly one of the things that we have tried to address in our performances of the Sha'man Productions 'Poetry in Performance Program'.

Poetry is an extremely specialized and specific form of language use. It has something very unique about it. Poetry differs, at least in high school study, in one major way from other forms of literature that the students have studied.

Once a student has started studying poetry we, as educators, are trying to move them beyond simply reading. It has become about interpretation.

The questions being asked are no longer "who has *read* this?" but "who *understands* this?", "what does this *mean*?" or "what do you *think* this means?"

In our research we've been told by students how they get frustrated because they don't understand a poem. They've been used to studying books that have a logical beginning, middle and end but suddenly they are presented with literature that, to them, is "difficult", "weird" or just "stupid".

It's an understandable response because largely we are a society that isn't used to poetry because we just don't *hear* it often enough, if at all. That's why this stuff can seem confusing.

That's why we need to approach poetry a little differently than other forms of literature.

What we have found works best in trying to communicate poetry to students is to help them understand that, essentially, a poem is a song that doesn't require music.

Breath and voice, combined with rhythm and feeling are subtle characteristics of poetry that are often forgotten.

And it is entirely understandable to see why.

The pressure on teachers to cover all the necessary lessons on rhythm, structure, rhyme, alliteration, assonance, juxtaposition, personification, symbolism, simile, antithesis and all the million other technical facets of poetry is immense.

Then we have to look at feminist interpretations, Marxist interpretations, political interpretations, the list goes on....

In a very short amount of time the students have to learn all these ideas and be able to write about them for exams.

This often leaves little time for the actual *exploration* of the poems.

What tends to happen is that what is essentially a song is deconstructed by students in search of literal meanings. This is not always possible in poetry and can be a frustratingly fruitless pursuit.

It can also be a shallow view of things that are actually deeper.

It's as if someone was to look at a painting but only in order to judge the technique or the brush stroke, completely missing out on the simple pleasure of enjoying the picture as a whole.

But what if there was a way to combine the two?

What if you could cover all necessary syllabus outcomes and be able to explore the poems at the same time?

What we have discovered during our research at Sha'man Productions is that it is possible to combine the two aspects of performance and syllabus requirements and really give the students skills they can use in later life.

THE PROGRAM

Poetry is about perception and ideas. Poetry is about feelings. The Sha'man Productions Poetry in Performance Program works to figure out what the poets' feelings are, what the poet is conveying to the listener.

We do this by reading poems as actors are trained to and allowing students to learn how to do it for themselves.

As actors we approach poems as scripts or little plays. When we do that we have to look at all the levels in the writing not just the obvious things such as learning lines.

For example, if we were to get a play and read it, we might get all the words right and understand what it means, but if we tried to perform it without committing any emotion, it would be a hopeless mess. As actors we have to look for the *emotion* of the text as well as the literal meaning.

Poetry is exactly the same.

It is possible to understand a poem completely technically, for a student to arm himself/herself with examples of assonance, alliteration or juxtaposition and get a pass mark in exams, but the emotions and the ideas of the poet could get lost in literal jargon.

If this were to happen, it is extremely unlikely that that student will really be impacted by the poems or go on to read or write poetry in their own time.

It would seem too much like hard work.

This means that you will forget what a poem is really about. Feelings. Emotions.

A poem is generally a series of emotions, thoughts and feelings constructed in special a way that tells a story or conveys an experience.

Words like rhyme, alliteration, assonance and onomatopoeia are used to create images and express feelings. They are ways of sharing experience. They are, if you like, performance tools.

Once you understand how they work they actually make the poem easier to understand because they show you *how* to speak it and where the meaning is. They're clues that let us take part in an experience a poet had sometimes hundreds of years ago.

But we are yet to find a student that has described poetry in that way. They usually say "a poem rhymes" or "it has to have big words".

Of course this can largely depend on the poetry being taught.

Komninos Zervos is not going to be as weighty or as difficult for students as John Keats, but they both have works which have been greatly influenced by their respective worlds.

THE QUESTIONS

In the workshops we have conducted with teachers these three main points have come to the surface:

- How do I get the students interested?
- How do I get them involved?
- How do I do that *and* satisfy the course outcomes?

These are three very broad and generalized examples of questions that have been asked. They are in no way meant to sum up teachers everywhere, but they do represent some of the more common obstacles.

And they are very real obstacles.

How does one get a student in 2005 interested in the writings of a guy who lived centuries ago and wrote about nightingales?

“What has John Keats got to do with me?”

“Why should I care?”

“Why shouldn’t I be listening to my iPod right now?”

We could go into the relevance of literature or the timelessness of human emotion but we have found the answer for getting kids involved is actually far more immediate and visceral.

HOW DO I GET THE KIDS INTERESTED?

Students tend to want to avoid poetry. To be perfectly honest some teachers do as well.

One teacher mentioned that when it came time to teach poetry she just kind of put her head down and ran through it as quickly as possible but poetry, especially classical studies of Keats, Coleridge or Shakespeare, needs a greater delicacy. And again unlike other forms of literature like novels, poems have a special requirement.

They *demand* to be spoken.

It may sound obvious but how obvious is it really?

To speak a poem and speak it well can be difficult, far more so than reading it on a page; yet the two influence each other.

It's almost a challenge from the poet.

“Open your mouth and say these words and be affected by them. Feel what I felt.”

It's the same as if you were to sing a song written by a rapper today. It's hard to say the words to Eminem's 'Lose Yourself' and not get swept up in the rhythm and the rhyme.

If students can grasp the concept that the distance between Keats and Eminem is not a large one, you have won.

If we again consider poetry as music; would it make sense to sit down and read the musical notes on a page without hearing the sounds the composer has written?

Of course not.

Most people wouldn't even be able to understand it without it being played. That is when the meaning of the piece will be discovered.

That is how we have been able to get students interested. We're no longer discussing words they are unable to pronounce or relate to; we are discussing emotions that they have themselves.

As a student once said:

“These aren't just fancy words on a page, they're somebody's feelings.”

It's confronting, sure, but poetry often deals with deep seeded human emotions and whatever form that may come in, it's never going to be easy.

And let's be honest; students, in general, are not going to be falling over each other to read John Keats aloud in class. That's a natural response. This is where we need to rely on others to actually speak the poems in full out to the children.

For some teachers it is just as confronting as it may be for students.

During one workshop a teacher said that she avoided reading the poems she liked because she was scared that students would make fun of them and destroy them for her.

As understandable as that is, if you are teaching a poem you love the battle is half won!

Speak the poem putting that passion and energy into it!

Say those words as if they were your own. That's easy to say, as actors we do that all the time, and it is challenging for those not used to it, but the change in students has been immediate and noticeable.

HOW DO I GET THEM INVOLVED?

By speaking the poem to the students they are already involved. They may be embarrassed, they may be excited, they may be stunned, but they're involved.

A student once said after a workshop that he understood now how poems worked. He had thought that a poem was made up of structure but that he now thought that it was more about the specific words a poet chooses rather than the structure.

That's being involved because ultimately the words a poet choose and how they sound and feel together, are the blood of a poem, they bring it to life, and the structure supports that.

Once students understand the difference between using the techniques of alliteration and the rest for the sake of it and doing it to paint an image with sound, then poetry will become less confronting and more involving.

That's when the sound and sense of the poet's world comes out. That's when instead of simply hearing words, students can hear the song.

HOW DO I DO THAT *AND* SATISFY THE COURSE OUTCOMES?

The combination of speaking poetry and discussing the emotions of the poet will aid students in learning the literary techniques which are so important and also in interpreting the poem.

They will ideally read the poems out loud for different emphasis and see how it changes the meaning.

An example might be:

As student reads

“My hearts aches and a drowsy numbness pains my sense.....”

What do we know about the poet?

He was dying when he wrote this.

He was in love when he wrote this.

He was young when he wrote this.

He was in pain when he wrote this.

So here is a guy whose life was slipping away; so let's explore that emotion for a bit.

Then you can start to explore it a bit more.

“What if I read that as if I was really excited about the idea of being numb and tired?”

“What if I read it like I was really falling asleep?”

These same basic ideas can be asked about any poetry regardless of who wrote it and when it was written.

By trusting in the clues and using them to create sound, we get something more than a literary concept.

We get a song. We share an experience.

SHA'MAN PRODUCTIONS TEACHING TIPS:

1. Here are a few thoughts and ideas that have helped in conveying these thoughts to students. We've often found that reassuring the students that it's okay to stumble over words and things helps them not become reticent in trying. Here are some phrases we've used:
 - It's television without pictures.
 - It's like painting with sound.
 - It's a form of entertainment that we've become distanced from; we don't have to learn it, we have to re-learn it.
 - It requires us as the audience to not be passive, we have to work which is something we aren't very used to.
 - Poetry needs us to use our imaginations and to be an active participant.
2. If you can pass on to your students the thoughts and emotions of the poem, the words become less daunting. They are mere vehicles for emotion. Sometimes a poet just chooses a word because it sounds good and that's reason enough.
3. Have fun! If it's boring for you it will be boring for them. Try to create activities that will keep you both interested.
4. Be honest! Students will sense when you are not enjoying the poems, so if it is the case use your own dislike to spark discussion does anyone disagree with you? Why don't you like it? We've often found that allowing a poem to be a joint discovery, even if you're revisiting it for the hundredth time, is the most rewarding approach.

*Bryce Youngman and Hazem Shammam are Artistic Directors of Sha'man Productions a new, youthful and exciting production company that is committed, among other things, to aiding teachers in their endeavours to teach poetry. For more information about the touring Sha'man Productions 'Poetry in Performance Program' contact Eva Gold at the English Teachers Association or call (02) 9399 6468.