

Units from The Poetry Pack: Developing Critical Skills at 14-19



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Acknowledgements

This EMCdownload PDF resource draws on the Barbara Bleiman's popular *The Poetry Pack – Exploring Poems at GCSE and A Level* published by the English and Media Centre in 1997.

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1 Fragments of a poem

W.B Yeats' 'The Cold Heaven', Wilfred Owen's 'Anthem for Doomed Youth'

Using fragments of a poem to introduce it is a strategy that benefits from being used with a definite purpose in mind.

A way into a difficult poem

One of the reasons for offering fragments is to give students a 'way in' to a difficult or long poem. It whets their appetite for what is to come. It lets them meet the poem with more confidence. It makes their reading more active, because they have their own expectations and ideas that they are measuring up to the poem as a whole. It also allows them to speculate and raise questions, removing the compulsion to come up with a quick answer to the question, 'What's the poem trying to say? What's it all about?' Often the urgency of students' need to pin down the meaning leads them to close down meaning too quickly. They plump for a single perspective without fully considering the range of possible meanings, the subtleties and ambiguities that make poetry so rich. It also allows them to look closely at individual words and phrases and their connotations, rather than skipping over the surface of the poem. A close focus on these phrases will then feed into their work on the poem, allowing them a familiarity, a close attention to language and a depth of thinking that can be drawn upon in talking about the poem as a whole. Teachers who have used this strategy have sometimes talked about the way in which it gives 'ownership' of parts of the poem to students.

A way of focusing on a particular aspect of a poem

One of the qualities an experienced reader of poetry acquires is an alertness to the range of language choices made by a poet in establishing such things as a mood, a tone of voice, a set of visual images or a development of ideas. One can use the fragments strategy to focus on a particular aspect of a poem, to draw students' attention to the impact of language choices.

Introducing fragments

It is important that the climate for work on fragments should be one in which speculation and tentative exploration are encouraged. Students should be given clear messages that it is not a question of looking for a right or wrong answer and that they should keep open the possibilities rather than constructing their own 'story' for the poem on the basis of limited evidence. Expert readers reading whole poems will avoid dogmatic assertions, offering alternative readings of areas of complexity. So students using fragments should be encouraged to suggest different alternatives, rather than feeling that they have to make hard and fast decisions.

'The Cold Heaven'

Give students page 5 first. Share the ideas that emerge before allowing them to see the whole poem on page 6.

'Anthem for Doomed Youth'

Divide the class into small groups. Give each group one cluster of phrases, without telling them that they all come from the same poem. Ask them to report back on their clusters, exploring connotations and expectations. Then let them read and talk about the poem itself.

W.B Yeats: 'The Cold Heaven'

1. Here are some phrases from a poem, including its title. Talk about what you find interesting about the phrases?

- What do they have in common?
- What connotations do they have for you?
- What expectations do they set up for you about the poem?

The Cold Heaven

the cold and rook-delighting heaven

that seemed as though ice burned and was but the more ice

hot blood of youth

Until I cried and trembled and rocked to and fro,

Riddled with light.

Ah! when the ghost begins to quicken

The injustice of the skies

2. Here are most of the verbs from the same poem. Talk about what you find interesting about this use of verbs.

saw

seemed

burned

driven

vanished

left

crossed

took

cried

trembled

rocked

begins

sent out

stricken

-
3. Now read the poem and talk about your first ideas about it, drawing on the discussion you had about the fragments from it.

The Cold Heaven

Suddenly I saw the cold and rook-delighting heaven
That seemed as though ice burned and was but the more ice,
And thereupon imagination and heart were driven
So wild that every casual thought of that and this
Vanished, and left but memories, that should be out of season
With the hot blood of youth, of love crossed long ago;
And I took all the blame out of all sense and reason,
Until I cried and trembled and rocked to and fro,
Riddled with light. Ah! when the ghost begins to quicken,
Confusion of the death-bed over, it is sent
Out naked on the roads, as the books say, and stricken
By the injustice of the skies for punishment.

W.B. Yeats

Wilfred Owen: 'Anthem for Doomed Youth'

Group 1
Not in the hands of boys but no mockeries now for them nor any voice of mourning What passing-bells..? What candles...?

Group 2

Anthem

the pallor of girls' brows

a drawing-down of blinds

shall shine the holy glimmers of good-byes

their flowers the tenderness of patient minds

and bugles calling them from sad shires

Group 3

who die as cattle

the monstrous anger of the guns

The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells

The stuttering rifles' rapid rattle

doomed youth

Wilfred Owen: 'Anthem for Doomed Youth'

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
-Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,-
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.
What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of good-byes.
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

Wilfred Owen