

Learning Objectives

Poetry has been used as a way of self expression for hundreds of years. This lesson aims to help students discover the nature and power of poetry and how a poem can sometimes be a way to say the unsayable.

- ✿ To enable students to identify with and use poetry in their every day lives. Challenging the idea that poetry must be complex, or that it is 'only for geeks'.
- ✿ To improve self awareness by expressing and reflecting on difficult feelings.
- ✿ To use poetry to develop and express empathy.

Total Time
45 mins
+15 mins
extension
activities

Teacher's Notes

It may be good to do some personal reflection about your own relationship to poetry in preparation for presenting this lesson:

- 1 Try to recall your first introduction to poetry and what it was like
- 2 Consider whether you have a favourite poem or poet and why
- 3 Think about an occasion when you might have been moved to write a poem yourself and what it was that moved you.

Remember: Poetry can be a powerful tool for self expression and self exploration which can also give rise to strong feelings of emotion and, not surprisingly, the urge for self protection. In a single lesson it is perhaps unrealistic to expect pupils to engage in the reading and/or writing of poetry without a certain level of apprehension, cynicism or resistance and this should be acknowledged and made space for from the outset.

Poems are often written in private but find their true value in being shared. It is very important that the time is preserved and the opportunity is made for any writing that is done within the lesson to be at least recognised and acknowledged if not read out.

Resources

Photocopy: Stimulus poems Uncoupling by Eamer O'Keeffe and Don't Flinch by Joe Asser
Also make them available as overheads or PowerPoint projections so they can be read aloud.

- ✿ Uncluttered desk/table space for writing and, ideally, room to move away from desks for private or personal reflection
- ✿ Flipchart pad or whiteboard for 'brainstorming'
- ✿ Paper and pens for individual writing
- ✿ Pre-cut strips of paper.

For extension activities: Large empty jar(s), old magazines for cutting and collage, scissors and Pritt Stick glue, paper for pasting collage.

Introduction

Start by asking the pupils the same questions you asked yourself about poetry to allow space for any negative comments or expressions of disinterest as well as to acknowledge the potential importance of poetry for some people. Invite brief general responses without much comment or discussion about each other's contributions.

Time
5 mins



Starter Exercise

Hand out copies of stimulus poem(s) and project as overhead or power point projection. Ask pupils to read through once, silently to themselves and then to read aloud together, twice. (Poems could be read first by going round allowing each pupil to take it in turn to read a line and then again by being read out loud by the teacher or a volunteering pupil.) Discuss using these prompt questions.

- ✿ What do you think the poem is about?
- ✿ What might have made the poet write this poem?
- ✿ Did hearing the poem make you think of an experience of your own?
- ✿ Who might this poem be good for? Why?
- ✿ What is the word or words you like best in the poem? Why do they work for you?

Time

10 mins



Core Activities

1 Introduce the exercise by explaining that sometimes the themes used in writing; LOVE, DEATH, HOPE, etcetera can seem very wide and general but that the art of great poetry is to find something specific and personal in those themes. Suggest that one of the major themes being explored in the two poems just read out might be FEAR – what fear feels like, what might trigger it and how we, or others, might deal with it. Explain that fear is one of those things that lodges itself differently inside different people for different reasons. Think for a moment about what kind of things trigger fear in you.

2. On a flipchart or whiteboard write WHAT SCARES US at the top and invite pupils to brainstorm and offer their suggestions while the teacher acts as scribe and lists these on the board. (They might, for example, suggest fear of heights, fear of spiders, fear of someone else's anger, fear of being attacked/mugged, fear of being caught, fear of strangers, fear of getting lost, fear of failing, fear of getting something wrong, fear of making a fool of oneself, fear of duty like a soldier in battle or police in a riot or a raid, etc.).

When the list is full ask the pupils to identify one thing off the list that feels most interesting or most true for them (it might be a suggestion they offered themselves or one that someone else contributed) and to discuss that briefly in pairs either recalling a real incident associated with that fear or imagining one. Then give pupils a minute or so to work individually to write one sentence or one line to describe that moment with some specific detail (like in the first stanzas of each of the poems looked at).

So, if they chose 'Fear of spiders' the pupil might write it like this:

It came towards me, large and black as though it was blind, without eyes, and would walk over anything to get where it was going.

or, 'Fear of heights' might become:

She walked along the ledge knowing that on either side below her the world was a long way away

Give out pre-cut strips of paper for pupils to write this first line/stanza on and collect these up. Shuffle the strips and hand them out randomly, so everyone has someone else's to look at. The pupils should consider the line they have been given and write a response line (like the second stanza in each of the poems which have been looked at) on their new strip of paper that suggests a way of dealing with that moment of fear or elaborates on the feelings that are aroused by that situation.

Time

20 mins



Teacher prompt – at this point it might be worth referring the pupils back to the two stimulus poems. In each of these poems the subject made a choice about how to respond to the fearful situation they found themselves in, even if that choice was simply to switch off (as in *Uncoupling*) or refusing to look away (*Don't Flinch*). You could open a brief discussion about 'choices' and what kinds of choices are available to us in moments of fear, e.g. running away, hiding, calling for help, perhaps even challenging or braving the situation in another way.

So with the response, the poem might become:

It came towards me, large and black as though it was blind, without eyes, and would walk over anything to get where it was going

I could only close my eyes too, thinking if we were both blind, at least we would be equal

Or:

She walked along the ledge knowing that on either side below her the world was a long way away

So somewhere between earth and stars she was suspended and imagined herself to be like a bird

Ideally there will be time left for each of these new two line poems to be read aloud which could be done anonymously or by their authors. Authorship should only be publicly acknowledged if it is the individual pupil's wish that it be so.

Optional Extension Activities

Exploring, through metaphor, the ingredients of pain

Invite the pupils to leaf through old magazines and cut out words, images and colours that in some way conjure up the idea of fear for them. Do this quickly and instinctively without too much thought and assemble a very rough collage of images.

Write these images as metaphors beginning each line of metaphor Fear is ..., for example if the magazine image is of a street at night the metaphor might be:

- * Fear is an unlit, rained on street, reflecting only the sharpest sliver of moon.

When writing the metaphors the pupils should be encouraged to really look at the image they have chosen and embellish the description in as detailed a way as they are able e.g. not just a dark street at night but an unlit, rained on street

Assemble these written metaphors into a list or collage poems, each line beginning Fear is

OR

Write on strips exactly what different kinds of fear feel like and where they lodge themselves in the body using all the senses. ie.

- * cold, sharp and tingly in the chest
- * dry like sandpaper scratching at the throat

Fold these strips of paper and put them into a jar labelling it **Ingredients of Fear**.

This jar can be the future basis for the writing of some poetry by separating out the ingredients and using individual ideas contained in there as starting points for poems.

15 mins
each
activity



Reflect and Discuss

Allow some time for a discussion of process. Was anyone surprised by the feelings they had when doing the writing? Did thinking about fear in this way allow anyone to imagine coping with fearful situations differently? Was anyone relieved or surprised that other people found the same things frightening that they did? What did it feel like writing a response line to someone else's real or imagined experience of fear?

Time
5 mins



Summary

Briefly ask the pupils to recall the poems that were read out at the start of the lesson. What do they remember about them? Were they what the students imagined when they thought about reading poetry? Is there an event or an experience, other than fear, that might prompt them to write a poem? Encourage students to plan a time they might write a poem or find another creative way of expressing feelings (music, art, writing etc).

Time
5 mins



Lesson by Cheryl Moskovitch

WORKSHEET

Worksheet 1

Uncoupling

Halfway
home, she
feels the
first
flicker of
fear from
midriff
to throat.

So she
flicks the
switch
in her
head to
dis-
connect
her face.

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Irish Survivor Poet

Don't Flinch

A depressed commuter
is standing unnaturally close
to the edge
of the platform.

As the tracks
begin to rumble,
I steel myself
for the fact that if

he really does
jump,
I won't
close my eyes.

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This version was adapted by the
author in October 2006.

Both Poems sourced from Beyond Bedlam: Poems Written out of Mental Distress,
edited by Ken Smith and Matthew Sweeney, Anvil Press Poetry 1997

For further information on emotional health and poetry contact The Poetry Society.

