

On Teaching Poetry

J.A. Kearney

After English Class

Jean Little

*I used to like 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening'.
I liked the coming darkness,
The jingle of harness bells breaking ... and adding to
.... the stillness,
The gentle drift of snow
But today, the teacher told us what everything stood for.
The woods, the horse, the miles to go, the sleep ...
They all have 'hidden meanings'.
It's grown so complicated now that,
Next time I drive by,
I don't think I'll bother to stop.*

As a Faculty of Education lecturer in the discipline of English I have had much cause for dismay in relation to students' analyses of poetry, and in what I have observed while on teaching practice visitations. When given an assignment that involves the analysis of a poem, few students seemed to have gained much from their school experience. Possibly the present matriculation mode of asking specific questions about a poem, rather than inviting comprehensive analysis, has led to this lack of competence. Teaching practice lessons are flawed in one or more of the following ways: (1) too abrupt a shift into teacher's questions. This is all the more glaring when the page on which a poem handout is printed also contains the

questions to be answered. In other words there is little chance for learners to have wholehearted contact with a poem in its own right without being immediately distracted by questions about it; (2) excessive contextualisation e.g. providing a vast amount of often unnecessary information about the life of a poet such as Yeats in order to prepare learners for, say, 'The Wild Swans at Coole'; (3) too sudden a leap into complex matter such as tone before more fundamental aspects have been unravelled; (4) perhaps worst of all, the tendency to seize individual words out of context, or to make lists of words garnered from various parts of the poem to make a point. A related and very frequent tendency is for students to seize on lines from various parts of the poem with little or no concern for the development of the poet's thought and feeling. It has therefore begun to seem to me that nothing short of a revolution in the teaching of poetry is called for. This paper is intended to be a kind of rallying cry for this revolution even if I have not succeeded here in offering a worthy new model.

What Joan Little's 'After English Class' (used above as a kind of epigram) makes me aware of principally is that a poem should be the centre of an active and enjoyable experience. Creating a sense of liveliness and variety is essential. So wherever possible, one should teach what one likes and enjoys. Of course at the senior levels one has to teach a set of listed poems, not all of which one specially cares for. What is also important is the teacher's personality and reading skill. Good reading comes from having thought intensely about the subject beforehand. When teaching poetry the focus should be POETRY. So, one should be careful not to allow historical background or other kinds of background to obtrude. Many opportunities for reaction should be encouraged; scope for the learners' full and active participation should be as essential in one's lesson planning as knowledge of the poet's life and knowledge of her/his period.

As with all subjects it is important to recognize the varying needs of different children. And the teacher needs to develop much sensitivity to students' language capacity. On the other hand, one needs to be ready to go beyond what the learners already like; they need, as often as possible, to be challenged. Of course one has to confront the aversion of some learners to poetry. It is not easy to find reasons for their dislike. Perhaps they just do not appreciate the ways in which poets recreate their experiences. Personally, I think it is more likely that they have been put off by some earlier teaching.

That is a recurrent problem for teachers in all subjects. In the course of this paper I offer various suggestions about trying to handle this problem which, if it involves several learners in your group and is not remedied, can result in wrecking a lesson.

One has to recognize that there are two main methods in the studying and teaching of poetry: critical and non-critical (analytical or non-analytical). But these do not have to be too rigidly kept apart. Probably it is best to avoid an analytical method in the foundation phase. But in the intermediate phase one can start to encourage a more critical awareness. This process should be steadily developed till by FET phase learners are able to engage meaningfully with analysis. At this stage I had best warn that in the suggestions for teaching poetry that follow, techniques will *not* be the main focus of my suggestions (though naturally one has to take them into account).

My intention in what follows is to give specific attention to the teaching of poetry at different levels. But I should like to emphasise that teachers in the more junior phases should take careful account of what I say about the more senior phases, and vice versa. I start deliberately with the junior phases and I would hope that, in this case, senior school teachers will take the opportunity to remind themselves how poetry is primarily to be enjoyed, not analysed. On the other hand, I believe that junior school teachers need to be fully aware of what lies ahead of their learners in terms of a more analytical engagement with poetry. So I would want to have all parts of this paper to be regarded as important by teachers of poetry at any level.

Let me start then by making some general points about what I would regard as important for a teacher's overall awareness of the exploration of poetry. First I must emphasise that there are no formulae for understanding a poem. One needs to know the main concepts and terms but when one faces a new poem it is actually important to let it 'take us over' in a way, and forget the concepts and categories for the time being. Let us allow 'Jazz-Snazzy and Hunny-Bunny' to take us over!:

Jazzy-Snazzy and Hunny-Bunny
Norman Silver

Here comes fresh
curly-pearly-twirly-whirly-hurly-burly-Shirley-girlie.
She hotfire and steamy-gleamy,

make boyhead go creamy-dreamy.

*What fool this
hunky-chunky-spunky-monkey-flunky-punky-funky-junkie!
He original murky-jerky,
how I roast this quirky-turkey?*

Delicious
rooty-sooty-fluty-cutie-snooty-tutti-frutti-beauty
Syrup smooth she inky-dinky,
twisty lemon slinky-kinky.

*Why he look
stubby-chubby-pubby-grubby-clubby-rubby-dubby?
Fashion boy dress randy-dandy,
inside he empty andy-pandy.*

For sure you
jolly-lolly-folly-dolly-holly-golly-polly-molly!
Pleasure we sticky-quickie,
ride goodstyle with tricky-dicky!

*Me know you
scruffy-chuffy-huffy-puffy-gruffy-roughie-toughie!
Meat and muscle scrawny-brawny,
Billy goat grow horny-corny...*

Cheap talk you
saggy-slaggy-braggy-naggy-faggy-draggy-shaggy-baggy!
Why nogood girl so boozy-choosy?
Your reputation woozy-floozy.

You one big
flappy-yappy-sappy-pappy-crappy-rappy-zappy-chappie!
Bibber loudmouth manky-swanky
pocket up your hanky-panky.

I hope you enjoyed this experience, and got thoroughly caught up in spontaneous response to the poem without any immediate thought of analysis. It is precisely this kind of free and open opportunity that we, as teachers, should offer our learners.

There is a need for general, open discussion of a poem to begin with. Any contributions are acceptable! But one needs equally well to discourage concerns with items such as sound effects and rhythm until the meaning has been fairly satisfactorily unravelled. Gradually one can build up with a class an awareness of the stages in the process of interpretation and evaluation. Random questioning should be avoided; careful advance preparation of questions is best. But in any case the poem should not be treated solely as a basis for questions. Furthermore, whatever questions one asks should always direct attention back towards the poem.

The vital aim is to induce students to ask questions themselves. So one must make sure to allow time for their questions. What is needed in any case is a constant interplay between response and analysis. At the higher levels it is important to stress how we are engaged in a **search** for meaning. Jonathan Culler, the structuralist critic, speaks of the 'drive to find meaning'. What I suggest, though, is that this search cannot be imposed; we need to create the right circumstances and mindset through which the desire to search for meaning will be a natural response.

I turn now to deal with what I call teacher's awareness, an awareness which does not need to differ much for teachers at whatever level. It is what they do with this awareness, and how their adaptations of it suit the needs of particular phases, that goes into the construction of lessons on poetry. In the material that follows on teachers' awareness, however, I shall assume that the teacher is making explicit use of these with a Senior or FET group.

After the stage of preliminary, free discussion, using only some prompting questions where necessary, there are two fundamental aspects that learners need to take into account: (1) what I refer to as the 'fictional situation of utterance', relying on Jonathan Culler's *Structuralist Poetics* (pp. 166-168); and (2) the question of whether the speaker of the poem is first—or third-person. The 'fictional situation of utterance' may be more simply termed the 'fictional situation' and refers to the construct we make of the circumstances, and possibly narrative aspect of the poem. One also needs to be specially careful to decide whether the first-person speaker is likely to

be the poet himself or herself, or another person to whom the poet is giving a voice. For illustration let us consider two poems:

Boy on a Swing
Oswald Mtshali

Boy on a Swing
Slowly he moves
To and fro, to and fro
Then faster and faster
He swishes up and down.

His blue shirt
Billows in the breeze
Like a tattered kite.

The world whirls by:
east becomes west
north turns to south;
the four cardinal points
meet in his head.

Mother!
Where did I come from?
When will I wear long trousers?
Why was my father jailed?

Piano
D.H. Lawrence

Softly, in the dusk, a woman is singing to me
Taking me back down the vista of years, till I see
A child sitting under the piano, in the boom of the tingling strings
And pressing the small, poised feet of a mother who smiles as she
sings.

In spite of myself, the insidious mastery of song
Betrays me back, till the heart of me weeps to belong
To the old Sunday evenings at home, with winter outside
And hymns in the cosy parlour, the tinkling piano our guide.

So now it is vain for the singer to burst into clamour
With the great black piano appassionato. The glamour
Of childish days is upon me, my manhood is cast
Down in the flood of remembrance, I weep like a child for the past.

One needs to be clear at the outset, before proceeding to any further kind of analysis or exploration, that in Mtshali's poem a boy is imagined in motion on a swing and that the speaker is not the boy himself, but a third person observer. In Lawrence's poem on the other hand we have a first-person speaker who imagines himself next to a woman playing a piano sonata. In this case one has no reason to suppose that the first-person speaker is not the poet himself. If one is unclear, confused or mistaken about these two basic aspects of a poem, the fictional situation and the speaker, little progress can be made in analysis.

Later one can use Culler's idea of a-temporality (*Structuralist Poetics*, pp. 165-166), to clarify how a poem differs from, say, a letter, or a report since it is not the 'record of an empirical speech act' (165). Of course there may be poems for which the term, 'fictional situation' does not seem quite appropriate, for example, if they are purely descriptive. By and large, however, the term should prove useful.

Also at the outset of more formal discussion, one should stress the expectation that a poem should be complete in itself, and that all aspects/parts of a poem should cohere to create an organic whole. Whatever categories, and order of categories one employs in trying to understand a poem, this is the overriding expectation—the unity of the poem. My impression is that learners are often given lists (some of them quite lengthy and in a rather arbitrary order) of technical terms or categories, and in this way the concept of unity is somehow bypassed or devalued. Intimately related to the question of the unity of the poem is the need to trace the development of the poet's thought and feeling over the entire course of the

poem. Teachers who encourage a line-by-line type of analysis have a misguided notion of development in mind. But most poems involve run-on lines (otherwise known as enjambment) so a rigid, line-by-line approach will generally prove artificial. The bizarre results of such training can usually be detected in the learner who, when reading a poem, pauses at the end of every line whether there is a full-stop present or not! Whether the poem is continuous or in stanzas one needs to stress the importance of observing how each part contributes progressively to the whole.

When learners feel secure about the fictional situation and the speaker, one could move on to consider aspects of the language used in the poem, especially major images and figures of speech. Some time will be needed to clarify just what an image is. Judging from students' initial responses when asked what an image is, I conclude that the majority of teachers talk of images as picture-painting through words. So one needs much counter-stress to emphasise that images are not merely pictures but may work on one or more of the senses. Apart from the conventional five senses there is also the kinetic sense to consider. What is crucial is to get learners to realize how images are *a way of expressing, highlighting, or exploring feelings/attitudes*. These two concerns—images and feelings or attitudes—should always be linked in teachers' discourse because the frequent tendency I have noted is for students to feel satisfied if they merely manage to point out an image.

But of course images often also involve figures of speech. Senior and FET learners need to know what the main figures of speech are: simile, metaphor, personification, oxymoron. Intermediate learners could engage with basic simile and metaphor. Perhaps metonymy and synecdoche could be included at Matriculation level. It would be almost a revolution if more teachers helped their learners to be aware that figures of speech, perhaps especially simile and metaphor, are our natural way of expressing emotion. Too often figures of speech come to be regarded as fancy poetic devices, having little to do with the world of everyday life.

In fact one needs to convince learners that we are always using figures of speech, that in fact we cannot communicate without them.

One should now be able to give some attention to typography or formal organisation. This will include concern with the arrangement of words in particular lines, as well as the division of the poem into lines (and

stanzas where relevant.) A structuralist exercise would help to begin with: take a piece of prose and write it out as if in verse. This piece can then be used to discuss the fallacy that if a piece of writing is written out in this way, then it is a poem. More is required than just the *appearance* or *typography*!

One needs also to distinguish between verse in metre and free verse, dismantling in the process, a favourite schoolchild fallacy viz. that free verse is devoid, not only of rhyme, but also of rhythm. It might be useful here to inform learners that free verse is a comparatively recent phenomenon, dating from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. One will need to demonstrate the difference between the carefully thought-out use of enjambment (or run-on lines) and the arbitrary divisions used in an artificially constructed adaptation from prose. When dealing with enjambment one needs to use the opportunity to correct any lapses into truncated line-by-line reading.

With regard to metre and rhythm there is no point in frightening or overwhelming learners or students. Somehow one needs find a mode of demonstration which will convince them that some scansion can be fun! To begin with one could use nursery rhymes, songs; or very short poems. It is important to stress that the best way to detect metre is by clapping or tapping out the stressed beats, as if one were keeping time to music. One might use the comparison of skeleton to flesh to help pupils grasp the difference between metre and rhythm respectively. On the other hand, if learners cannot cope with scansion, there is no point in labouring it. Mostly they are not expected to deal with it in examinations. Above all, it should not become an artificial activity that is separated from meaning. One could use a ridiculous example of a piece which has a wonderful metre though made up of nonsense words!

For senior and FET learners it is very useful to understand how iambic pentameter works. Perhaps one could take samples of particular lines to demonstrate what is meant by a foot, an unstressed and a stressed syllable, an iamb, and a pentameter. Transparencies of selected lines from Shakespeare plays could be used for this purpose. Filling in the stresses in colour above each syllable in a line is an effective device but one needs to shift from regular lines to some irregular ones. For such demonstrations it is imperative to do some practice in advance. If one fumbles and flusters while filling in the metre, one can hardly expect one's learners to feel confident! If

one feels insecure one can always have the scansion itself entered in advance, although this is not quite so dramatically effective.

Some will wonder why I leave sound effects and rhyme so late in my account. The main reason is to offset the exaggerated emphasis too often given to these devices of form. What I notice too in the lists some teachers give their learners is how each kind of sound effect, i.e. alliteration, assonance, and onomatopoeia, is given almost equal status with figures of speech and imagery or overall structure. This seems to me very misplaced. For this reason I deliberately group sound effects together so that learners become accustomed to looking out for any of the different types, even of these in combination, rather than becoming obsessed with one of them (invariably alliteration). Rhyme too can become a purely mechanical hunting exercise, abstracted from meaning and feeling. In any case schoolchildren have often adopted the fallacy that poems and rhyme are inseparable. They need to be swiftly disabused of this error.

Having decided on the fictional situation and the speaker of the poem, attempted to clarify the way the poet's thought and feeling develop over the course of the poem, and given attention to relevant features of language and structure, one should be in a position with learners to work more intensely on the meaning or crux of the poem. One should try to get them to test various hypotheses and then see which fits best. I favour the use of the word, 'crux' because its brevity suggests the need to arrive at a reasonably concise formulation of meaning

One might try to get pupils to work out various hypotheses about the meaning of the poem, preferably ones that are suggested by themselves, and then to see which fits best. At all costs one needs to avoid the imposing of a meaning by the teacher, and worst of all the situation where the teacher decrees, 'but here is the deeper meaning'. This approach has created generations of school children who have no confidence in their ability to discover meaning for themselves, but always feel that the teacher will tell us the 'deeper meaning'. In any case one needs to stress that decisions about meaning should be regarded as provisional. Further study or analysis might lead one to modify or radically alter the interpretation reaches at a particular time.

Finally of course one cannot shirk the task of evaluation. Just as one cannot decide on meaning till one has engaged comprehensively with the

various aspects of the poem, so one cannot reach a decision about its quality till one is fairly sure of what it means. So what is important above all, then, is to get pupils to realize that there is a **process** involved in interpretation. Although there is no formula for ‘getting it right’, one can use the various stages outlined above as a kind of checklist:

- Have I considered the speaker and the fictional situation (is the concept of ‘fictional situation’ actually relevant in this particular case?);
- Have I looked sufficiently at the language?
- Have I looked at the form or organisation?
- Have I been aware of how the poet’s thought and feeling develop over the course of the poem?
- Have I tried to grasp the overall unity and theme?
- Have I pondered on how much the poem means to me, how impressive or appealing or profound I find it?

A timely reminder! All that I have been saying has been concerned with what I call teacher’s awareness. Just how much of this one would use in a particular lesson with a particular class is cause for reflection. I cannot sufficiently stress however that one’s aim should always be that of facilitation to enable the learners to make the crucial discoveries for themselves. Of course a particular lesson might well be used to highlight a feature of analysis that the class keeps neglecting or just has not thought much about. Even so one might well find fairly unobtrusive ways for stirring in attention to this feature.

Next I would like to give separate attention to the teaching of poetry in the various phases, especially the more junior ones. This is not the moment for senior school teachers to switch off however. The examples I give are meant to renew enjoyment of poetry and to insist on the idea of a continuum between lower grade and higher material and approaches.

ECD/ Foundation Phase—strategies and Poems

In relation to this phase one needs to bear in mind that conscious criticism is unsuitable. Children at this age should read and enjoy poetry uncritically.

One needs to allow lots of opportunities for soundplay. In his book, *Teaching Poetry*, James Reeves notes the qualities that endear nursery rhymes to the young: vigorous and well-marked rhythm; concrete, familiar language; lots of sensory images; simple events or situations (p.30), and he points out sagely that there is no room in nursery rhymes for humanitarian sentiment (e.g. 3 Blind Mice!). The nursery rhyme world, he declares, has 'as its purpose the celebration of language' (31).

So one should use items in which sounds are prominent. As my example I take one of Reeves's own poems, 'Cows'. For such a poem one can allocate parts as choral speech is highly suitable for this phase. But the experience should not be turned into old-style recitation! Such poems should not simply become vehicles for stunts or exhibition.

Cows

James Reeves

Half the time they munched the grass, and all the time they lay
Down in the water-meadows, the lazy month of May,
A-chewing,
A-mooing,
To pass the hours away.

'Nice weather,' said the brown cow.
'Ah', said the white.
Grass is very tasty.'
'Grass is all right'.

Half the time they munched the grass, and all the time they lay
Down in the water-meadows, the lazy month of May,
A-chewing,
A-mooing,
To pass the hours away.

'Rain coming,' said the brown cow.
'Ah,' said the white.
'Flies is very tiresome.'
'Flies bite'

Half the time they munched the grass, and all the time they lay
Down in the water-meadows, the lazy month of May,
A-chewing,
A-mooing,
To pass the hours away

‘Time to go,’ said the brown cow.
‘Ah,’ said the white.
‘Nice chat.’ ‘Very pleasant.’
‘Night.’ ‘Night.’

Half the time they munched the grass, and all the time they lay
Down in the water-meadows, the lazy month of May,
A-chewing,
A-mooing,
To pass the hours away

The following comments are to suggest what might be in one’s mind as a teacher, not necessarily what one is actually going to say or teach. The poem involves imagined cow conversations. The repetitive phrasing, ‘Half the time ...’ and ‘all the time ...’ creates a drowsy effect to imitate the cows’ contented, lazy chewing of the cud. This effect is also created by the long lines at the beginning of each stanza with their rather slow rhythm. The typography itself highlights the chewing, and then the cows’ ‘conversation’.

Dramatic and choral reading can also be engaging even when the sounds are not so important a feature, as e.g. in ‘The Flattered Flying-fish’.

The Flattered Flying-Fish
E.V. Rieu

Said the Shark to the Flying-Fish over the phone:
‘Will you join me to-night? I am dining alone.
Let me order a nice little dinner for two!
And come as you are, in your shimmering blue.’

Said the Flying-Fish: 'Fancy remembering me,
And the dress that I wore at the Porpoises' tea!
'How could I forget?' said the Shark in his guile;
'I expect you at eight!' and rang off with a smile.

She has powdered her nose; she has put on her things;
She is off with one flap of her luminous wings.
O little one, lovely, light-heated and vain,
The Moon will not shine on your beauty again!

This poem is about a shark's cunning plan to make a meal of the flying-fish. From the title onwards the frequent alliteration helps to create a semi-comic atmosphere (f's; p's; l's). Visual imagery (as in 'shimmering blue' and 'luminous wings') helps one to imagine the scene. The poem is organized over three stanzas: the first stanza is the shark's proposal; the second stanza the flying-fish's reply; the last stanza the response of the flying-fish followed by the response of the third-person speaker (= poet?).

Older learners in foundation phase could be engaged in more concern with narrative development without becoming too analytical. So one might use 'The Flattered Flying-Fish' and ask questions (adapted here from Amy Davies' list in *How to Teach Poetry*) such as:

A: Fact-type Questions

- Who/ what is this story about?
- Does anyone know what a shark is like? Is it wise to go near a shark? Why not?
- Has anyone ever seen a flying-fish? (If not, tell the learners that it is an attractive fish that sometimes leaps out of the water and flies through the air before returning to the water.)
- What is the first thing the shark does?
- What does the shark ask the flying fish to do?
- What does he ask her to wear for dinner?
- He says something with 'guile' on the telephone. Does anyone know what 'guile' means?

- The poem is called 'The Flattered Flying-Fish'. Does anyone know what 'flatter' means?
- Does the flying-fish accept the invitation?
- What does the flying-fish do next?
- What will never shine on her again?

B: Inference and Generalization-type Questions

- If the moon will never shine on the flying-fish again, what does this tell us?
- Why did the shark invite the flying-fish to dinner then?
- What does the word, 'guile', tell us about the shark?
- Why do you think the shark smiles as he hangs up the phone?
- Why does the flying-fish accept the invitation?
- How does the shark flatter her?
- What would have happened if the flying-fish had refused the invitation?
- What lesson do we learn from this situation?

Some lyrics with a mixture of sadness and humour are suitable for foundation phase learners. My favourite for this purpose is 'The Hippopotamus's Birthday'.

The Hippopotamus's Birthday

E.V. Rieu

He has opened all his parcels
but the larges and the last;
His hopes are at their highest
and his heart is beating fast.
O happy Hippopotamus,
what lovely gift is here?
He cuts the string. The world stands still.
A pair of boots appear!

O little Hippopotamus,
the sorrows of the small!
He dropped two tears to mingle
with the flowing Senegal
And the 'Thank you' that he uttered
Was the saddest ever heard
In the Senegambian jungle
From the mouth of beast or bird.

The story is of a baby hippo who gets a gift he does not want. His attempt to appear grateful cannot hide his huge disappointment. The absurdity of the situation—a hippo with a present—is in itself very appealing. And the poet succeeds, through the contrast between the two stanzas, especially the shift from the exclamatory line, 'O happy hippopotamus', to 'O little hippopotamus' to evoke quite strong sadness and pity amidst the humour. One of the most effective devices in the poem is the pause in the middle of line 7 so that the reader is forced to pause with the little hippo, pent-up with eager hopes.

If things go well with a particular class, one might venture to offer more thought-provoking poems, even ones that begin to involve metapoetry (i.e. poetry about poetry) as in 'One that got away'.

One That Got Away
Julie Holder

Write a poem
About a lion they said,
So from memories
Of lions in my head
I wrote about
Tawny eyes and slashing claws,
Lashing tail and sabred jaws –
Didn't like what I had written
And begin to cross it out—
Suddenly with a roar of rage
It sprang from the cage of lines

On the page
And rushed away into the blue,
A wounded lion poem
Half crossed through!
It's one that got away
Haven't seen it to this day
But I carefully look,
In case it's crouching, growling,
Licking its wounds and waiting,
Under cover in the leaves
Inside some other book.

And here I sit
After all this time,
Still not having written
A poem about a lion.

Here the poet uses fairly strong *descriptive* images in the first part where the poet/child tells us about the poem he had written but did not like (look at lines 6 & 7). But when he evokes the moment of real inspiration, he relies instead on images of *action and sound*: see lines 10-11. What a clever use of pun in the phrase 'cage of lines'—this makes it seem that he has been almost taken over by a creative force from outside himself. In the rest of the poem the poet blends the image of a wounded lion with that of an unfinished, only partly achieved poem—so we have a 'wounded lion poem'! Free verse is used which enables the poet to give special force to those crucial lines, numbers 10 and 11.

Intermediate Strategies and Poems

The main work in this phase is to extend the range of appreciation, and increase the power of interpretation through speech. One can also take opportunities to initiate the rudiments of a critical or analytical approach.

So in this case, as an initial example, I have included a poem with more challenging imagery, the 'The Ballad of Red Fox'. Such a poem

provides opportunities for drawing attention to similes and metaphors, while leading learners to distinguish between them.

The Ballad of Red Fox
Melvin Walter la Follette

Yellow sun yellow
Sun yellow sun,
When, oh, when
Will red fox run?

When the hollow horn shall sound,
When the hunter lifts his gun
And liberates the wicked hound,
Then, oh, then shall red fox run.

Yellow sun yellow
Sun yellow sun,
When, oh, when
Will red fox run?

Through meadows hot as sulphur,
Through forests cool as clay,
Through hedges crisp as morning
And grasses limp as day.

Yellow sky yellow
Sky yellow sky,
How, oh, how
Will red fox die?

With a bullet in his belly,
A dagger in his eye,
And blood upon his red red brush
Shall red fox die.

The story poem, 'The Ballad of Red Fox', is based on three consecutive questions and answers as the poet traces the fox's fate. The short line stanzas pose the questions while the intervening ones with longer ones give the sad replies. *When* will red fox run? The cause is stated. *Where* will red fox run? An impression of the extensive landscape is given to emphasise the desperation and determination of the fox. *How* will red fox die? The horrific, unnecessary violence of his death is revealed. The image of the yellow sun is very effective though it is hard to say exactly why—maybe it works mainly as a colour contrast with the red fox. Also of course it's a colour of life and warmth whereas the poem moves relentlessly towards death.

It is also very likely that discussion of method (e.g. for dramatisation) may be the equivalent of indirect criticism. However, this should happen spontaneously so that learners are not made too self-conscious about what they are observing. On the other hand, there should be a place also for passive enjoyment. In other words, sometimes it is enough just to read poems to the class without exploiting the poems for any particular purpose. If the learners make comments, 'go with the flow' and just see what happens. They might actually learn more this way than otherwise.

With this phase I would make the most of opportunities to bring in poems that have distinctly moral concerns or leave one feeling somewhat uneasy such as 'The Turn of the Road'.

The Turn of the Road
James Stephens

I was playing with my hoop along the road
Just where the bushes are, when, suddenly,
I heard a shout.—I ran away and stowed
Myself beneath a bush, and watched to see
What made the noise, and then, around the bend,
A woman came.

She was old.
She was wrinkle-faced. She had big teeth.—the end
Of her red shawl caught on a bush and rolled

Right off her, and her hair fell down.—Her face
Was white, and awful, and her eyes looked sick,
And she was talking queer,

‘O God of Grace!’
Said she, *‘Where is the child?’* And flew back quick
The way she came, and screamed, and shook her hands!
... Maybe she was a witch from foreign lands!

In this first-person poem the speaker is very closely involved with the situation. For convenience’ sake I shall assume that the speaker is male because the poet’s name is male. Also I assume that the speaker is a child because of the first line: ‘I was playing with my hoop along the road’. The speaker hides on hearing a shout. The next event is the appearance of the woman. But the puzzling aspects of the poem begin here because we are not sure whether it was this woman who shouted. She is described as strange and rather frightening. But her words are a further puzzle, and cause us to be troubled. Who is she referring to? Is the child she refers to the same as the speaker? Yet she could not have seen him because he had hidden before she came round the bend. Is she in fact a witch as the speaker suspects? Had she wanted to seize a child for her witchcraft? Or is there some painful human tragedy lurking here? Surely a witch would not have said, ‘God of Grace’. So maybe the point of the poem is in fact the child speaker’s misunderstanding or misinterpretation of this strange woman. Maybe the poet is trying to show how difficult it is for a child to grasp tragic circumstances. You may wish to draw attention to the fact that there *is* rhyme in this poem and that most of the lines are in iambic pentameter, That metre assists the imagery in preventing us from treating the poem at all lightly.

This poem and ‘The Ballad of Red Fox’ also offer helpful contrasting opportunities for enabling learners to perceive how poems are structured. But one should let this happen through their own exploration—ask learners to try to work out how the poems are structured. They will probably find it fun, and especially interesting to note the differences between them.

One should be careful, at all costs, not to destroy the sense of mystery and wonder possessed by young children. If one grew up to dislike or even hate poetry, it may be useful to think back to how this might have been the result of misguided teaching. Whenever there is a chance, especially when one sees that learners have relished a poem, they should be encouraged to make their own poems. It does not matter if these are very derivative. They are still learning something about the creation of a poem. Furthermore, every now and then, especially when a lesson has gone well, one might ask learners to learn lines, stanzas or entire short poems that they enjoy, and present them after careful preparation at home.

Senior Phase: Strategies and Poems

We are now at a phase where direct engagement with analysis can be undertaken. But first I would like to deal with the fallacy of what is called the 'deeper meaning'. Initially I emphasised the need for concern with a 'search for meaning'. However, I did not say, 'search for a deeper meaning' simply because if one starts saying that, the implication is that one did not find the meaning in the first place. So what one is really looking for then is the meaning! Concern with a *deeper* meaning just fudges the issue. Sometimes, when people talk about a 'deeper meaning', what has happened is that they've mistaken the fictional situation for the meaning. So when they go on to analyse, that process becomes for them the concern with deeper meaning. But the fictional situation can never be the meaning; it is just the basis from which one has to start. Of course, as I have already stressed, often one does not grasp the full meaning of a poem for quite a while. Also sometimes one changes one's mind. But then what has happened is that one had not arrived at an understanding of the meaning in the first place. Only one's later efforts make one aware of it.

In this phase (but also possibly in earlier ones) one needs to be prepared for a negative reaction from some teenagers (especially boys) to all aesthetic matters. In any case it is best to avoid poems that might be thought childish. I would suggest that the best way of overcoming prejudice against poetry is to ensure that one has lots of humorous examples at hand such as 'A note or Something for Bruce'.

A Note or Something for Bruce
Richard Andrews

Did I tell you about the saxophonist
who was playing in a rock band
and who, on reaching a certain note
in their penultimate number
kept on playing that same note
And seemed to find unlimited breath for it
because he loved it so much;
and who, because he could not move
off this one note,
sent the rest of the band into total confusion
—a confusion of fingers and strings
and hair and sequins and things—
so eventually they had to unplug their instruments
and unravel themselves and leave him to it.
Meanwhile the audience were wondering
whether to clap or not, and finally
got up noisily from their seats and left
amid tumultuous coughing and complaining.
Which left the saxophonist on stage
playing this wonderful note
and looking to all intents and purposes
as if he would never stop playing it.

That's what the caretaker thought, anyway,
Who at midnight switched all the lights off
And carried the saxophonist offstage, still playing,
And put him in a taxi home
(though the driver shut the window between them)
and finally got him to bed,
still playing that same note.
His neighbours weren't very pleased.

Note:

Three years later and he's still playing it! He has a few problems

eating and so forth, but he has got into the *Guinness Book of Records*. An American composer called Lamont Purcell has adopted the note and called it ‘Non-variations on a note by Splikowski’ or ‘Something for Bruce’.

This is an amusing narrative poem which steadily becomes more preposterously farcical. It is about a saxophonist who could not stop playing the same note. So the first sentence, going on and on, seems to imitate the man’s (Bruce’s?) non-stop playing. And ‘note’ is the last word in no less than four lines. Comic images of the band (in lines 10-11, the only ones which rhyme, by the way), and of the audience (13-17) help to build up this hilarious situation where the saxophonist is left alone, still playing! The climactic moments of this farce are the caretaker’s having to carry Bruce out to a taxi; the driver’s having to block off that persistent repeated note; and the mention that Bruce was still playing the note in bed. Finally, the joke is extended into the *Note* accompanying the poem. This is deliberately intended to create the impression of a true story. Imagine what fun one could have turning this into a mini-play with a class. .

At this stage I need to stress that in these analyses, even for Senior Phase, I am dealing with *teachers’* awareness. One might not achieve all that I have suggested with a particular class. But until one has reached this stage of understanding for oneself, one should not begin lesson planning. When one *has* reached this stage, it will be easy to start devising questions, or dramatic activities, or other specific ways of encouraging learners to appreciate poetry.

Senior Phase learners should be able to handle first-person poems with a disturbing revelation such as Wilfred Owen’s ‘The Letter’ which was composed to imitate the *last* letter written by an imagined World War 1 soldier:

The Letter
Wilfred Owen

With B.E.F. June 10. Dear Wife,
(O blast this pencil. ‘Ere, Bill, lend’s a knife.)
I’m in the pink at present, dear.

I think the war will end this year.
We don't see much of them square-'eaded 'Uns.
We're out of harm's way, not bad fed.
I'm longing for a taste of your old buns.
(Say, Jimmie, spare's a bite of bread.)
There don't seem much to say jus now.
(Yer what? Then don't, yer ruddy cow!)
And give us back me cigarette!)
I'll soon be 'ome. You mustn't fret
My feet's improvin', as I told you of.
We're out in rest now. Never fear.
(VRACH! By crumbs, but that was near.)
Mother might spare you half a sov.
Kiss Nell and Bert. When me and you—
(Eh? What the 'ell! Stand to? Stand to!
Jim, give's a hand with pack on, lad.
Guh! Christ! I'm hit. Take 'old. Aye, bad.
No, damn your iodine. Jim? 'Ere!
Write my old girl, Jim, there's a dear.)

Cockney speech is used to give an authentic, realistic flavour to the poem e.g. 'Ere, Bill' (line 2); 'square-'eaded 'uns' (line 5) and 'Give us back me cigarette' (line 11). Accumulating realistic details initially have a semi-amusing effect. Then the sudden, intrusive exclamation in line 15 ('VRACH! By crumbs, but that was near') gives a bold hint of what is to come.

The ending is shocking: the writer is hit while trying to complete his letter to his wife. The short, stark phrases in line 20 convey this fateful reality. When the speaker gets his friend to inform his 'old girl', that final phrase, 'there's a dear', is extremely touching since normally such language would be unacceptable from one man to another. You'll see that a very intricate rhyme scheme underlies the poem. It looks in fact as if Owen chose to use a *sophisticated* technique to express his deep concern for the fate of a *common* soldier.

Learners in this phase should also be given the opportunity to immerse themselves in vivid imagery such as in Ted Hughes's 'Wind':

Wind
Ted Hughes

This house has been far out at sea all night,
The woods crashing through darkness, the booming hills,
Woods stampeding the fields under the window
Floundering black astride and blinding wet

The day rose; then under an orange sky
The hills had new places, and wind wielded
Blade-light, luminous black and emerald,
Flexing the lens of a mad eye.

At noon I scaled along the house-side as far as
The coal-house door. I dared once to look up—
Through the brunt wind that dented the balls of my yes
The tent of the hills drummed and strained its guyrope.

The fields quivering, the skyline a grimace,
At any second to bang and vanish with a flap:
The wind flung a magpie away and a black-
Back gull bent like an iron bar slowly. The house

Rang like some fine green goblet in the note
That any second would shatter it. Now deep
In chairs, in front of the great fire, we grip
Our hearts and cannot entertain book, thought,

Or each other. We watch the fire blazing,
And feel the roots of the house move, but sit on,
Seeing the window tremble to come in,
Hearing the stones cry out under the horizons.

Powerful tactile and kinaesthetic imagery is used here to create the experience of incessantly violent wind. Even the hills seem to have been moved. Forceful line arrangements together with intense sound effect can be observed in 'wind wielded/Blade-light' (6-7). In stanza 3 the first-person speaker gives a glimpse of himself (male poet) as if he is engaged in a sort of war. The wind seems even to 'dent' the 'balls of [his] eyes'. The very unusual metaphor for hills in line 12, tent and guy rope, is based on what the wind does literally to a tent—now the hills themselves are imagined as a battered tent.

There is a very good example of assonance in lines 14 to 16 through the repeated 'a' sound of the words, 'bang', 'vanish', 'flap', and 'black-back'. In pointing this device out, however, I need to give a warning: one should never give learners the impression that one can analyse meaning by picking words out of context. I would refer only to individual words, as in this case, for demonstrating a device like alliteration or assonance. The run-on lines 15-16 enact the idea of bending before we come to the word 'bent', and the slow rhythm reinforces the idea of bending slowly.

The way Hughes saves up 'Rang' for the first word of line 17 gives it enormous impact, enabling one to feel how the wind's power is penetrating the house. Now there is a glimpse of the house's occupants (two I assume): even the 'great fire' is not enough to comfort them. They cannot think of anything else but the wind. Even as the 'fire blazes', they feel that the 'roots of the house' (line 22) have shifted. The window's rattle makes it seem as if it is trying to come inside for comfort (how absurd in ordinary circumstances!), and the stones, lashed by the wind, seem to be crying out in agony.

So here Hughes offers a sense of an awesome, uncontrollable force, of how feeble and vulnerable everything else seems in comparison to the wind. Analysis of this kind, undertaken for oneself, should enable one to develop a lesson plan that would enable learners to be riveted by this poem. That entails enticing them *to see for themselves* what I have been noting.

There is no harm in introducing Senior Phase learners to the concept of metapoetry with accessible examples such as 'How to eat a poem' (p.4):

How to Eat a Poem
Eve Merriam

Don't be polite!
Bite in
Pick it up with your fingers and lick the juice
That may run down your chin.

You do not need a knife or fork or spoons
or plate or napkin or tablecloth.

For there is no core
or stem
or rind
or pit
or seed
or skin
to throw away.

This poem is just a way of encouraging readers to enjoy poetry, or, as I put it initially, of letting oneself be taken over by a poem. The first verse paragraph emphasises how a poem is always available and ready for our enjoyment. The second emphasises that the poem should be a delight and satisfaction in itself. The third verse paragraph elaborates this emphasis. It suggests that when the poem has been relished, it enters, as a whole, into one's mind because it functions as a whole.

FET Phase: Strategies and Poems

All the points I have made previously would be relevant again in relation to this phase. However, I shall use this opportunity to talk about some of the potential dangers one needs to look out for in teaching poetry at FET level (or Senior phase for that matter too).

First of course there is the danger of slack reading or sheer invention, when one has allowed one's own imagination to take over and import into the poem what is not there. In relation to Hardy's 'Beeny Cliff'

(see below) a slack reader might decide that ‘*The woman fell over the cliff*’! Some learners may be inclined to put form ahead of content (especially with regard to sound effects). This is usually the result of bad teaching at an earlier stage. If, when teaching ‘Beeny Cliff’, one were to wax excited about the ‘f’ sounds in line 2, or the ‘t’ sounds in line 6, divorced from the actual meaning or effect of those lines, one would be mishandling the poem by privileging form over content.

Beeny Cliff
Thomas Hardy

*O the opal and the sapphire of that wandering western sea,
And the woman riding high above with bright hair flapping free –
The woman whom I loved so, and who loyally loved me.*

The pale mews plained below us, and the waves seemed far away
In a nether sky, engrossed in saying their ceaseless babbling say,
As we laughed light-heartedly aloft on that clear-sunned March day.

A little cloud then cloaked us, and there flew an irised rain,
And the Atlantic dyed its levels with a dull misfeatured stain,
And then the sun burst out again, and purples pinked the main.

—Still in all its chasmal beauty bulks old Beeny to the sky,
And shall she and I not go there once again now March is nigh,
And the sweet things said in that March say anew there by and by?

What if still in chasmal beauty looms that wild weird western shore,
The woman now is—elsewhere—whom the ambling pony bore,
And nor know nor cares for Beeny, and will laugh there nevermore.

One needs to watch out for those who try to impose biographical knowledge. This is a great danger in first-person poetry: awareness that Douglas Livingstone was a marine biologist might induce a learner to twist Livingstone’s ‘Sonatina of Peter Govender, Beached’ till it emerges as a poem about marine biology. A related fallacy is the automatic assumption in

a first-person poem that the speaker is the poet. Consider how disastrous such a misreading of Livingstone's poem would be.

Sonatina of Peter Govender, Beached
Douglas Livingstone

Sometime busdriver
Of *Shiva's Pride*, *The Off-Course tote*,
The Venus Trap, and *The Khyber Pass Express*.
I've fathered five bright, beguiling,
Alert-eyed but gill-less children.
I had to fish:
First surf; then the blue-water marlin.
(I heard a Man once
walked water without getting wet.)
Old duels for fares:
The South Coast road—all we could get;
My left hand conning the wheel.

My last was *Dieselene Conqueror*
—night-muggings, cops,
knives, that coked and jammed injector
—right hand nursing in me a reel,
the cane cracking at the start of the day,
things of the land becoming remote.

My prime as oarsman:
Heroics of the offshore boat,
Catching all that steel slabs of sea could express.
My porpoise-wife is gone, seeded,
Spent, queen among curry-makers.
I'm old now, curt.

I've monosyllables for strangers
who stop by asking
questions while I repair my net.

Things learnt from the sea
—gaffing the landlord, the week's debt,
scooping in the crazed white shads,
twisting the great transparent mountains
past a wood blade—?
Contempt for death is the hard-won
Ultimate, the only freedom
(—cracking the cane at the end of the day—):
not one of the men I knew could float.

One one has to bear in mind also the tendency on the part of learners to substitute a paraphrase type of reductiveness for analysis. As an example I have paraphrased Vachel Lindsay's, 'Flower-fed Buffaloes', to demonstrate how it deflates the poem:

The buffaloes used to roam all over the prairies, feeding on flowers and grass. But the grass has been replaced by wheat, and the buffaloes, like the Red Indians, left long ago.

Flower-fed Buffaloes
Vachel Lindsay

The flower-fed buffaloes of the spring
In the days of long ago,
Ranged where the locomotives sing
And the prairie flowers lie low:—
The tossing, blooming, perfumed grass
Is swept away by the wheat,
Wheels and wheels and wheels spin by
In the spring that still is sweet.
But the flower-fed buffaloes of the spring
Left us, long ago.
They gore no more, they bellow no more,
They trundle around the hills no more:—
With the Black feet, lying low,
With the Pawnees, lying low,
Lying low.

Resistance to difficulty, rather than readiness to accept challenges, invariably generates disabled readings. This tendency may well become tangled up with resistance to valid interpretation (along the lines that everyone is entitled to his/her own!). Mostly this happens because one fails to test hypotheses about the meaning of the poem against its actual details and development. The meaning one has decided upon seems appealing so all alternatives are resisted. As an example consider James Wright's 'Evening' where such resistance, possibly as a defence after struggling with what seems difficult in the poem, might produce the idea that the poem is about a dead child who returns to haunt his father!

Evening
James Wright

I called him to come in,
The wide lawn darkened so.
Laughing, he held his chin
And hid beside a bush.
The light gave him a push
Shadowy grass moved slow.
He crept on agile toes
Under a sheltering rose.

His mother, still beyond
The bare porch and the door,
Called faintly out of sound,
And vanished with her voice.
I caught his curious eyes
Measuring me, and more –
The light dancing behind
My shoulder in the wind.

Then struck beyond belief,
By the child's voice I heard,
I saw his hair turn leaf,
His dancing toes divide

To hooves on either side,
One hand become a bird.
Startled, I held my tongue
To hear what note he sang.

Where was the boy gone now?
I stood on the grass, alone.
Swung from the apple bough
The bees ignored my cry.
A dog roved past, and I
Turned up a sinking stone,
But found beneath no more
Than grasses dead last year.

Suddenly lost and cold,
I knew the yard lay bare.
I longed to touch and hold
My child, my talking child,
Laughing or tame or wild—
Solid in light and air,
The supple hands, the face
To fill that barren place.

Slowly the leaves descended,
The birds resolved to hands;
Laugh and the charm was ended,
The hungry boy stepped forth.
He stood on the hard earth,
Like one who understands
Fairy and ghost—but less
Our human loneliness.

Then, on the withering lawn,
He walked beside my arm.
Trees and the sun were gone,
Everything gone but us.

His mother sang in the house,
And kept our supper warm,
And loved us, god knows how,
The side earth darkened so.

Such a poem might also inspire someone to a daring flight of symbolism, for example: *The boy is a symbol of the wonderful world of nature*. Unfortunately it is quite common for learners to leap dizzily into symbolism. My own advice is rather to avoid a symbolic level until it becomes absolutely clear that the literal level is inadequate.

Let me end with a reminder of my main emphases. Poetry lessons should have poetry as their dominant focus. They should involve a lively search for meaning, but not for 'deeper meanings'. The teacher should endeavour by every possible means to spur learners, through avid discussion, to make the crucial discoveries for themselves. Learners should not be offered anything like a formula for analysis. On the other hand, teachers should show how there are sensible and logical ways of grouping together the various categories of attention that exploration of poetry requires, and that the process of exploration involves taking account of certain features before others. Above all, teachers should try to create lessons in which learners have the opportunity to become engrossed with poetry, enchanted discoverers of that most fascinating of all the worlds created by language. *A luta continua!*

References

- Andrews, Richard 1983. *Into Poetry: An Approach through Reading and Writing*. London: Ward Lock.
- Culler, Jonathan 1975. *Structuralist Poetics*. Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press.
- Davies, Amy Z & Florence Stratton 1984. *How to Teach Poetry: An African Perspective*. London: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Jones, RT 1986. *Studying Poetry: An Introduction*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Reeves, James 1972 1958. *Teaching Poetry*. London: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Scholes, R 1969. *Elements of Poetry*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Strauss, P 1993. *Talking Poetry*. Cape Town: David Philip.

Sources of Poems

- Andrews, Richard 1993. A Note or Something for Bruce. In *Into Poetry: An Approach through Reading and Writing*. London: Ward Lock.
- Follette, Melvin Walter la 1971. The Ballad of Red Fox. In *Junior Voices: A Second Book*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Educational Books.
- Hardy, Thomas 1960. Beeny Cliff. In *Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy*. London: Macmillan.
- Holder, Julie 1987. One that Got Away. In *A Fourth Poetry Book*. Oxford: OUP.
- Hughes, Ted 1987. Wind. *Junior Voices: A Fourth Book*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Educational Books.
- Lawrence, DH 1970. Piano. In *Modern Poets Two*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Lindsay, Vachel 1984. Flower-fed Buffaloes. In Davies, Amy Z & Florence Stratton. *How to Teach Poetry: An African Perspective*. London: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Livingstone, Douglas 1984. Sonatina of Peter Govender, Beached. *Selected Poems*. Johannesburg: Ad Donker.
- Merriam, Eve 1984. How to Eat a Poem. In Davies, Amy Z & Florence Stratton. *How to Teach Poetry: An African Perspective*. London: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Mtshali, Oswald 1981. Boy on a Swing. In Chapman, M (ed): *A Century of South African Poetry*. Johannesburg: Ad Donker.
- Owen, Wilfred 1983. The Letter. In *Into Poetry: An Approach through Reading and Writing*. London: Ward Lock.
- Reeves, James 1991. Cows. In *A Puffin Quartet of Poets*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Rieu, EV 1984. The Flattered Flying-Fish. In Davies, Amy Z & Florence Stratton. *How to Teach Poetry: An African Perspective*. London: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Rieu, EV 1984. The Hippopotamuss's Birthday. In *A Puffin Quartet of Poets*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Silver, Norman 1991. Jazzy-Snazzy and Honey-Bunny. In *Words on a Faded T-Shirt*. London: Faber & Faber.

J.A. Kearney

Stephens, James 1987. The Turn of the Road. In *Junior Voices: A Fourth Book*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Educ. Books.

Wright, James Arlington 1971. Evening. In *Collected Poems by James Wright*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.

Jack Kearney
Faculty of Education
University of KwaZulu-Natal
KEARNEY@ukzn.ac.za