

Exploring first lines

Objectives

- To help students 'get inside' a poem by imagining the first line as an utterance that breaks a silence
- To explore first lines through creative writing, ideas from photography and film, and performance

Introduction

Next, we're thinking about how to get a reading or recitation of the poem off on the right foot, by encouraging students to pay careful attention to its opening line. First, an activity to "think inside" an opening line through a burst of creative writing; then Julie Blake, Poetry By Heart's Director, elaborates opening lines further; then teacher Alison Shaw describes helping students to lift poems off the page, starting with first lines.

Creative writing bursts

From the Poetry By Heart website homepage, click on "Learning Resources"; then find the Index of First Lines page. Browse the index, choosing 2-3 lines that catch your attention in some way but don't open the poem pages yet. Instead, write in a short burst what comes after the opening line, either in a poetic form or in prose. Try two or three short bursts, then share pieces of writing aloud. Where does the line go? What kind of poem or story does it set up? Who is the speaker? What is their situation? Why are they saying this, now? Afterwards, read the original poem the line is taken from, and compare!

Imagining photographic frames

In his handbook "On Poetry", Glyn Maxwell talks about a poem's conception as "the urge of a human creature, once, upon a time – to break silence, fill emptiness, colour nothing with something, anything." He invites us to think about the opening line of any poem as the precise moment at which the pressure of that silence breaks into an utterance that has to be heard. He suggests imagining any first line as a photographic frame. This "snapshot" invites us to slow down our reading, to think about the moment this voice starts to speak, where it's coming from and its orientation to us, its readers and hearers. He offers these key questions:

"How much of the frame is taken up by the face of the poet? Is his or her whole figure in the poem, is he or she farther away? Back to you, gesturing in the distance? Hovering spectrally above? Seated, standing, walking? Is the picture in colour? What does he or she think of you? Can you be seen at all? Is the poet present at all? Consider how he or she is there, how the poet is imprinted on the poem." It's a set of questions that can take us a long way, just with the first line.

POETRY BY HEART

Recitation competition

Storyboards

Maxwell also suggests storyboarding as a creative way of getting inside a poem.

Take a storyboard sheet and use the final frame to visualize the moment of the opening line. Sketch it and write in the first line as speech.

Then fill in the four or five frames before that. What happened to cause such a build up that the first line became inevitable? Sketch in the sequence.

To go further, look at the first and last lines, and consider how the poet might get from A to B, then read the whole poem.

Really exploring the first line is a great way to “get inside” the poem and to imagine the voice speaking.

Performance

I love Glyn Maxwell’s idea of the first line of a poem. It puts me in mind of the transition which is the hallmark of musicals – the sudden switch from speaking to singing, the giddy energy that leaps out when a character launches into song. Poems often burst onto the page in a similar fashion and it struck me that it would be illuminating and fun for students to explore what could have prompted that bursting forth and show it in a mini performance.

I chose some of Shakespeare’s sonnets – ones whose first lines were direct and immediately engaging. We read them through together and then pairs of students decided which one to make the climax of their drama. Improvised conversations sprang up all over the class. Friends started chastising friends; jealous lovers gave vent to their anger; there was a gradual crescendo then...there it was...‘Why didst thou promise such a beauteous day/ And make me travel forth without my cloak..’ uttered Priya, an accusing finger pointing at Emily; ‘Unthrifty loveliness, why dost thou spend/Upon thyself thy beauty’s legacy?’ said Ruth from the window corner, sitting back to back with her partner. The poems spoken in class were spoken TO someone; they had a real purpose; two of the secrets of great poetry, according to Adrian Mitchell. The students had personalised the poems, made them their own. I realised they had got the poem right off the page and into themselves and the more I could help them do that, the better.

So, when I saw the first line of Shelley’s ‘Ode to the West Wind’: ‘ O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn’s being,’ I knew my A level class would have to go outside. A blustery October day helpfully came along and we left the classroom and each student positioned themselves by a tree and shouted out the poem. Soon they were battling with the wind more than the poem – they wanted to get those words into the turbulent air. The ‘hear, O hear!’ took on a real power, an energy it could never have harnessed in the classroom.