

Coastlands' poem of the week – a case study in how to develop a love of poetry – Wenda Davies from Coastlands Primary, Pembrokeshire

At Coastlands, we have the long-established routine of our 'cerdd yr wythnos' – poem of the week – in each class. In Foundation Phase the poem is generally a nursery or traditional rhyme, and the poems become challenging as the children progress through the classes. Each poem is displayed in the classroom. In the KS2 classes each child is given a print-out of the poem, which they add to their individual poetry folder. The children are welcome to annotate the poem as they wish. Some circle/underline/highlight certain sounds, words or phrases. It's up to them – it's their folder.

The poem is read each morning with the whole class. In my class, I tend to just read the poem aloud myself on the first day, perhaps explaining a little about the context of the poem or giving background about the poet. On the following day, I generally read the poem again and use a simple prompt like 'What do you notice about the poem?', giving the children time to think about it, discuss it with a partner and briefly report back.

On subsequent mornings we do a variety of short-burst poetry-reading activities. For instance, I might read part of each line of the poem, and the children need to pick it up straight away and read to the end of the line, making sure that their intonation takes account of the sense of the poem – especially when it includes enjambment. Similarly, I might read alternate lines with the class. A particular favourite activity of the class is when they are tasked with *someone (anyone!)* reading each line. I might choose who reads the title and, after that, individual children choose when to read a line; if two start to read it, one drops back. There's a great sense of achievement when the poem is read so it flows well, and the majority of the children are keen to take part. Sometimes they prepare a choral performance of the poem in groups. And of course, by the end of the week the children have all read the poem aloud several times.

Most weeks, the poem of the week is simply read and enjoyed each morning, building up the children's repertoire of known poems and poets. If it's a poem, I want to look at in more depth. I find Aidan Chambers' *Tell me* grid useful as a way in – with the children jotting down their likes/dislikes, anything that puzzles them and any patterns or links within the text or with other texts. Another useful open-ended approach to exploring a poem is Michael Rosen's idea of finding the poem's 'secret strings' – which might be repeated or related imagery, sound echoes (rhyme, alliteration, assonance, etc), the use of opposites, and so forth. Sometimes the poem becomes the stimulus for a whole lesson or series of lessons, and sometimes the children themselves can spot a great model in the poem and will ask if they can use it as a prompt for their own poetry-writing.

I always point out to my classes that even though I have a degree in English literature, as a student I always found poetry difficult to understand. It was something I had to work hard at. It's only since I started reading poetry regularly (when I started doing the poem of the week – around a decade ago) that I began to find poetry in general more accessible. I want them to know that it's okay if they don't feel like they 'get' everything about a poem, and that by reading lots of poems they're encountering some amazing vocabulary, images and ideas.

Poetry by Coastlands pupils, inspired by poems of the week

High Flight

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds, – and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of – wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air...

Up, up the long, delirious burning blue
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace
Where never lark, or ever eagle flew –
And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod

The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

by John Gillespie Magee Jnr

Deep Diver

Oh! I have swooped and swerved across the sunlit surface,
Leaving but a trail of bubbles in my wake.
Through channels to kelp forests I twist and turn my silky body.
I tumble, wheel, loop, as the open sea plays on rolling waves.
I slip, slide - like eel, but faster,
Twist, turn - like newt, but keener,
Dance, dip - like minnow, but smarter.
I have done a thousand things that you could only dream of.

Down, down the long unwinding darkened blue
Where never cod or dolphin ever knew -
Deep, deep, deeper I dive where only silence dwells.
I am the master of this world, where neither fox or man has ever been.
Yes, birds can fly but I - I can swim, swim,
Dipping to the depths of secret thoughts.

An otter by Ria Burton

Ria's poem is inspired by the poem *High Flight* by John Gillespie Magee Jnr. The influence of Robert Macfarlane's *The Lost Words* poems is also evident here. This poem came highly commended in the Live Canon Children's Poetry Competition. John Gillespie Magee (9 June 1922 – 11 December 1941) was a World War 2 Anglo-American aviator and poet. Magee served in the Royal Canadian Air Force, which he joined before the United States entered the war; he died in a mid-air collision over Lincolnshire in 1941.

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