Teaching notes

These notes and accompanying resource have been written by Trevor Millum, poet and curator of The Poetry Place. The purpose of this resource is to familiarise students gently with the process of looking at new, previously unseen poems.

Introduction: ‘Memory Lane’

Ask students if they have any particularly powerful memories from childhood.

This ‘Memory Lane’ technique is a good way of focusing on memory and its power.

Ask each student to bring to mind an event in the past which remains a vivid memory.

Tell them that you are going to ask them a series of questions and all they have to do is write down the answers. Suggested questions are given below.

Now comes the interesting bit. They are going to write ‘in the dark’. If they have access to computers, ask them to bring up a blank Word document, write their name and then turn off the monitor. If working with laptops which do not have this facility, they can set the font colour to white. If you are working on paper, give out sheets of unlined A4 and ask them to close their eyes and write their names at the top. (They will be surprised but they will be able to do it.) Not being able to see what they are writing prevents students from worrying about spelling and other surface features. It also allows them to concentrate on the memory they are recalling. It’s a powerful technique.

Where are you

Why are you there?

Who is with you?

What are you touching, holding/carrying?

What can you see?

What can you hear?

Is anything being said? If so, what?

What are you feeling?
When the text is revealed or eyes opened, you will have a collection of brief but very focused snapshots of the past. These could be worked up into prose pieces or poems. Often words do not need to be added - in fact sometimes they can be subtracted and the results demonstrate that less is more in some cases.

You may wish to share some of the snapshots - with permission from the writer of course.

Now, without telling students the title, read ‘The Piano’ by D.H. Lawrence to the class. Pause and then read it again. You might ask students how many of the questions they could answer as if they were Lawrence.

Ask for suggestions for a title for the poem. This should elicit some ideas about the theme. If not, you may need to prompt or offer a range of alternatives such as:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nostalgia</th>
<th>Childhood memories</th>
<th>Remembering musical evenings</th>
<th>I wish I was a child again</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Piano</td>
<td>Musical memories</td>
<td>The power of songs</td>
<td>Back to the past</td>
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Investigation

Tell students that they are going to work in groups of three or four. Give out copies of the poem and ask them to complete the four tasks.

Display a copy of the poem and take feedback from the groups. Highlight the poem to show present and past. There may be some grey areas; where does a phrase like ‘betrays me back down the vista of years’ belong? Then show how the poem is divided between events and feelings. You could use the PowerPoint presentation to display these contrasts.

The arrows to Lawrence’s feelings about the past get students to look more closely at language and its implications. ‘In spite of myself - betrays - my manhood is cast down’ all suggest Lawrence does not welcome these feelings. Perhaps also ‘it is vain’.

However, the attraction of the memory is obvious too, as these phrases show: ‘pressing the small, poised feet of a mother who smiles as she sings’ - ‘Sunday evenings at home with winter outside’ - ‘cosy parlour’. ‘The glamour of childish days’ is a slightly odd expression (is it there because it rhymes?) but clearly shows the attractiveness of the past.
Developing confidence with unseen poetry:
‘The Piano’ by D.H. Lawrence

Written response
Now is time to get some of these ideas down on paper so ask students to write a few sentences (about 100-150 words) to answer the question:

What are Lawrence’s feelings about childhood and how does he craft his choice of words to convey them?

Further investigation
So far we haven’t asked students to look for poetic techniques or the form of the poem. So, use a class session to discuss what techniques can be identified (including rhythm and rhyme) and what kind of structure the poem has.

There are only a few instances of imagery - flood of remembrance, for example - and few or no examples of assonance or alliteration. The point needs to be made that some poems do not use lots of ‘poetic techniques’ and that is something they may wish to comment on. That being the case, where does the power of the poem lie? It lies in Lawrence’s careful choice of words and the ‘melody’ of the lines.

Students will spot the regular pattern of rhyme, which helps that melody, but rhythm they often find more difficult. To appreciate Lawrence’s use of rhythm, read the first verse in an exaggerated ‘sing-song’ way which will bring out the regular stresses:

Softly, in the dusk, a woman is singing to me / Taking me back down the vista of years, till I see (and so on)

However, in the second verse, ‘the insidious mastery of song’ is a bully of a phrase and creates an awkward jolt. The pleasant rhythm returns in the last lines of the verse and then is disturbed again in the final verse, especially in line two: ‘With the great black piano appassionato’ - full of stressed syllables. Students often find rhythm - or discussing rhythm - difficult so it is helpful to give them as much experience as possible and also to listen to alternative interpretations they may provide.

Finally, try to bring out the difference between form and structure. The form of the poem is clearly stated, with its rhyming couplets divided into three stanzas and the fairly regular line length, extended at the close of each stanza. The structure works within this to alternate past and present, inner feelings and outer events - something which they will have seen from the first activity.
Comparing poems

In the GCSE English Literature specifications for first teaching from September 2015, there is a requirement to compare an unseen poem - with another unseen poem or a poem from an anthology. I have included a student activity to compare ‘The Piano’ with another poem about looking back on childhood, Sara Teasdale’s ‘Only in Sleep’.

Now students can use some of their experience and work, in groups, pairs or on their own, to tackle these questions.

The suggestions in brackets may be useful as prompts. They are not included on the student worksheet. They could use their notes for a written piece or to inform verbal responses.

- To what extent are the two poems about the same thing?

  For example, Teasdale’s memories are sparked by a dream, Lawrence’s by an event - but does the theme remain the same?

- Compare the tone of Teasdale’s poem with that of Lawrence. How similar do their feelings seem to be? What differences are there?

  Teasdale appears less anguished and emotional than Lawrence, for example.

- Compare the two poets’ use of language.

  For example, Teasdale, like Lawrence, uses simple descriptions of past events; unlike him, she does not employ more complex vocabulary.

- Compare the form and structure of the two poems.

  There are some obvious similarities and differences of form. In terms of structure, Teasdale’s poem, like Lawrence’s, moves between two areas but her poem moves outwards toward what others may feel while Lawrence becomes more and more focused on his own feelings.
Past and present

Use one colour to underline events happening in the present and another to show events in the writer’s past.

Draw arrows to those words which show that Lawrence does not want to be reminded so strongly of the past.

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
Betray 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.

Draw arrows to those words which show a positive feeling about what he remembers.

Insidious – treacherous or stealthy
Appassionato – a musical term telling the performer to use lots of emotion

Events and feelings

Circle those phrases or lines which describe an event, past or present. Use another colour to circle descriptions of the poet’s feelings.
Comparing ‘The Piano’ and ‘Only in Sleep’

Only in Sleep

Only in sleep I see their faces,
Children I played with when I was a child,
Louise comes back with her brown hair braided,
Annie with ringlets warm and wild.

Only in sleep Time is forgotten —
What may have come to them, who can know?
Yet we played last night as long ago,
And the doll-house stood at the turn of the stair.

The years had not sharpened their smooth round faces,
I met their eyes and found them mild —
Do they, too, dream of me, I wonder,
And for them am I too a child?

Sara Teasdale

Read Lawrence’s poem again and then try to answer the following questions.

- To what extent are the two poems about the same thing?

- Compare the tone of Teasdale’s poem with that of Lawrence. How similar do their feelings seem to be? What differences are there?

- Compare the two poets’ use of language.

- Compare the form and structure of the two poems.