Responding to unseen poems with confidence

‘In Memoriam’ by E.A. Mackintosh

Teaching notes

These notes and accompanying resource have been written by Trevor Millum, poet and curator of The Poetry Place. In this resource, it is assumed that students have had some experience of approaching unseen poems.

The time has come to plunge your students into the unknown – or rather the unseen. For their first attempt at the task without any preparation, give them as much time as you think appropriate and do not pose a specific question. Strict time limits can come later. Just remind them before they start to proceed in an organised way. This might be the order suggested in Tackling unseen poetry or your own preferred method. The poem, ‘In Memoriam’, is included with plenty of space for annotations alongside.

Feeding back

The debriefing is going to be very important now. Once you have read students’ work, go through the poem using their responses as a guide and annotate the poem as you go, using your Smartboard or a visualiser. Failing that, use a Word document and either Add Comments or put the poem into a table with each verse in a separate cell and a cell alongside for you to type comments, like this, and then use a projector so that the class can see it as you type.

| So you were David’s father  | And he was your only son, |
| And the new-cut peats are rotting | And the work is left undone, |
| And the work is left undone, | Because of an old man weeping, |
| Because of an old man weeping, | Just an old man in pain, |
| Just an old man in pain, | For David, his son David, |
| For David, his son David, | That will not come again. |
| That will not come again. | Oh, the letters he wrote you, |

Before getting into the close examination of the poem, ask a few simple questions which they can answer from memory:

- What’s the poem about?
- What are the writer’s feelings?
- Did you understand it / most of it? (The answer to this should be, overall, ‘yes’ – which will be reassuring for them.)
- Were there parts you didn’t understand? (The change from the writer addressing the father to addressing the sons may have caused some confusion. Again, reassure students that this is a sudden switch which is not clearly signalled and is perhaps a fault in the poem.)
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Now display the text, ready for annotations. Students could look at their worksheets as you go through the poem, circling or ticking points that they have also made. This also enables them to point out, at the end, things that they have found which you have not.

The following comments in the second column are suggestions which may be helpful. It’s important to derive as much as possible from the students, however, as it will help to build their confidence.

So you were David’s father
And he was your only son,
And the new-cut peats are rotting
And the work is left undone,
Because of an old man weeping,
Just an old man in pain,
For David, his son David,
That will not come again.

Officer writing to the father of a soldier killed
He imagines the grief of the father
Tone – sympathy

Use of first name and its repetition makes this very personal
Simple language and simple verse/rhyme form.

Oh, the letters he wrote you,
And I can see them still,
Not a word of the fighting
But just the sheep on the hill
And how you should get the crops in
Ere the year get stormier,
And the Bosches have got his body,
And I was his officer.

He would have had to censor letters and would know all about their lives

Contrast – life on the farm / life in the war
Sudden change from the image of the farm to the body of the dead soldier

You were only David’s father,
But I had fifty sons
When we went up in the evening
Under the arch* of the guns,

‘Only’ is a shock
Tone – ‘You’ and ‘I’ stress the personal again
Change of tone and time; now recalling the specific event
And we came back at twilight –
O God! I heard them call
To me for help and pity
That could not help at all.

Oh, I will never forget you,
My men that trusted me,
More my sons than your fathers’,
For they could only see
The little helpless babies
And the young men in their pride.
They could not see you dying,
And hold you while you died.

Happy and young and gallant,
They saw their first born go,
But not the strong limbs broken
And the beautiful men brought low,
The piteous writhing bodies,
They screamed ‘Don’t leave me, sir,’
For they were only your fathers
But I was your officer.

Exclamation – his emotional involvement made clear
Tone – helplessness

Change from addressing the father to talking to the men
Again, asserting a stronger connection

Contrast – what fathers saw/experienced versus what he has experienced

Simple adjectives – no need for anything more
Similar contrast – fathers’ experiences versus his
Also contrast of strong and beautiful with broken and writhing
Again, he is unable to help

Picks up last line of verse 2

* The only use of metaphor – what does this say about the voice or approach of the poet? Few poetic techniques. Relies on the power of simple words carried along by a clear rhythm and rhyme.

Poem of strong contrasts which moves from the grief of the father to the grief of the officer.

Goes against the accepted view that the parent’s loss is the greatest. (How far do they agree?)
Further exploration

You may wish to continue to explore the poem further. One way to do this would be to take one verse in particular to see what else might be said about it. Do not exclude any suggestions at this point; you never know what they might lead to.

**bold** – the writer asserting his importance over that of the father(s)

| Oh, I will never forget you, |
| My men that trusted me, |

Key words: ‘never forget’, ‘trusted’, ‘helpless’, ‘pride’

Repetition of I, my, my

| More my sons than your fathers’, |
| For they could only see |
| The little helpless babies |

This verse has an abstract quality – a general picture, not a specific one. Even in the following verse it is not David who is described but ‘they’. Why does he avoid describing David?

The contrast within the overall poem is also reflected in oppositions of helpless babies / young men; (young men) in their pride / (young men) dying.

| They could not see you dying, |
| And hold you while you died. |

There’s also a contrast of *I* and *my* with *they*
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Comparison

‘Mametz Wood’ by Owen Sheers is a poem which would make a good comparison with ‘In Memoriam’. It is widely available online.

Ask students in pairs or groups to come up with three points of similarity between the poems and three differences. They should try to vary the areas they cover. Here are some suggestions:

Similarities:

• Topic – the death of young men in the First World War. Both are powerful in their own ways.
• Tone – sense of sympathy and regret.
• Descriptions of death – skeletons paused in mid dance-macabre.

Differences:

• ‘Mametz Wood’ describes the distant past, ‘In Memoriam’ recent events
• ‘Mametz Wood’ is less involved, less personal or emotional
• ‘Mametz Wood’ uses many metaphors, ‘In Memoriam’ only one
• ‘Mametz Wood’ is written in free verse, ‘In Memoriam’ in a regular form
• The rhythm of ‘Mametz Wood’ makes it possible to be read as if continuous prose, though the language is clearly not that of ordinary speech. The form and rhythm of ‘In Memoriam’ immediately demonstrate that it is in verse form.
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