

## “Old poems have heart”: Teenage students reading early modern poetry

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*ABSTRACT: The proposals for the revised National Curriculum in English suggest limiting the pre-twentieth century poetry that GCSE pupils read to “representative Romantic poetry” (Department for Education [DFE], 2013, p. 4). This paper argues that poetry of the early modern period is challenging and enriching study for adolescent pupils and that narrowing the definition of pre-twentieth century poetry will limit the potential richness of the curriculum for teenage readers. The evidence is drawn from a pilot study exploring the ways in which GCSE pupils made meaning out of the poetry of the early modern period and how teachers supported their pupils’ meaning making. This paper reports on aspects that emerged from the data using Steiner’s (1978) notion of difficulty and Fleming’s (1996) discussions of how to approach poetry from a different time period. Pike’s (2000; 2003) work on teaching poetry from the canon and ways of motivating pupils is referenced as well as Marcus (1992) and Conroy and Clarke (2011) on the particularities of teaching literature from the early modern period. The work also draws on the work of Rosenblatt (1970), Iser (1978) and Gordon (2009), to explore the ways in which the classroom provided a space for the “Lifeworlds” of the pupils, the teacher and the poet come together.*

*KEYWORDS: Teaching poetry, Renaissance/early modern, aesthetic reading, difficulty, reader response.*

### INTRODUCTION

The curriculum in the subject of English is a recurring battleground for theorists, politicians and teachers. In England, since the establishment of the National Curriculum in 1989, there have been angry debates about what should and what should not be included in that curriculum. Poetry of the early modern period in England, that was written between the mid-Sixteenth and late Seventeenth Century, includes many favourite poets of the classical canon such as John Donne and Andrew Marvell, and has featured in GCSE syllabuses under the heading of pre-twentieth century literature for the last 24 years. The proposals for the revised National Curriculum in English suggest limiting the pre-twentieth century poetry that GCSE pupils read to “representative Romantic poetry” (DFE, 2013, p.4).

This paper reports on the findings of a pilot study preparing the ground for doctoral research into adolescent pupils and their encounters with early modern poetry. This paper explores the ways in which teenage readers made meaning out of the poetry of the early modern period and how teachers supported their pupils’ meaning making. This paper argues that poetry of this period is challenging and enriching study for adolescent pupils and that narrowing the definition of pre-twentieth century poetry to Romantic poetry only will limit the potential richness of the curriculum for teenage readers and proscribe the opportunities offered to teachers by teaching texts from other times.

This study was devised to explore two questions. The first question was: What are the ways in which teenage readers made meaning out of the poetry of the early modern period? The second question focused on teachers and asked: How do teachers support their pupils’ meaning-making when teaching early modern Poetry? The pilot study was qualitative in nature and focused on four pupils and one teacher. The study took place in a small comprehensive school and pupils were from a middle-ability group expected to be reasonably successful at their English GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education). The member of staff interviewed was an experienced and established teacher. The pupils were from Year 11, that is fifteen to sixteen years of age, and the lesson observed was on the poem “On My First Sonne” by Ben Jonson, written in 1603.

The data analysed consisted of semi-structured interviews with the teacher and four pupils. A key lesson was observed and the teachers and four pupils were audio-recorded during that lesson. The transcripts from the lesson were also included in the data. All the data were focused around the sonnet by Ben Jonson that he wrote reflecting on the death of his first son, who died at the tender age of seven. The sonnet is included here to illustrate much of the discussion that follows in the paper:

Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy;  
My sin was too much hope of thee, loved boy.  
Seven years thou wert lent to me, and I thee pay,  
Exacted by thy fate, on the just day.  
Oh, could I loose all father now! For why  
Will man lament the state he should envy?  
To have so soon ’scaped world’s and flesh’s rage,  
And if no other misery, yet age!  
Rest in soft peace, and asked, say, Here doth lie  
Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry.  
For whose sake henceforth all his vows be such  
As what he loves may never like too much.

In the sonnet, Jonson sadly bids farewell to his son who was only “lent” to him by God for a short time on this earth. The themes that emerged from the data, as the teacher and the students worked and reflected on the poem, will be explored. In analysing the data, one area of interest was the way in which the teacher created a classroom environment that supported her students to engage with the poetry that aligns with Rosenblatt’s (1970) concepts of reader response. Of particular significance are the qualities of early modern poetry that the pupils found challenging to engage with. In order to unravel what exactly the pupils did find challenging about the poetry, Steiner’s definition of difficulty is used to explore the pupils’ reactions, along with Iser’s definition of “repertoire” and the cultural associations of a text. Areas covered in the data include the ways in which the pupils responded to the various levels of difficulty in the text and how the teacher tackled those areas of difficulty. The teacher’s observations on accessing the different worlds of the poem are reported, along with the pupils’ responses to the poetic form of the work.

## THE CONCEPT OF DIFFICULTY

Teaching poetry has often been characterised as challenging (Andrews, 1991; Benton, 1988; Fleming, 1996). Early modern poetry offers particular dimensions of challenge to pupils, given the contextual and linguistic differences to our own age. Steiner, in *On Difficulty* (1978), proposed that the difficulty different readers may face when encountering poetry from the early modern period through to our own can be classified under four different typologies: contingent, modal, tactical and ontological.

“Contingent” (Steiner, 1978, p. 27) difficulties are located in the reader. A poem may deal with something about which the reader has no knowledge. These may be elements of the language or cultural context that need to be “looked up” (Steiner, 1978, p.29). In early modern poetry these may be words that are archaic, dialectal or have shifted in their meaning in contemporary usage. Because, as Steiner argues, language in a poem is charged with meaning and is perforce economical, the reader needs to do some research to understand what the elements of the “contingent” difficulty are. Steiner refers to aspects of reading Shakespeare, where the reader may look up a word for its lexical significance, for example the word “fortune”, which then leads the reader into probing topics of Elizabethan thought through the ramifications of the word’s meaning. Readers have homework to do, which, as our modern brands of literacy move away from the lexicon and cultural context of the time of a text’s production, could be “in a real sense, interminable” (Steiner, 1978, p. 26). Nevertheless, this difficulty can be surmounted through research and effort.

Modal difficulty is related to this first difficulty. Once the reader has “looked up” the various elements significant to the poem, there still remains something in the poem the reader may find “inaccessible or alien” (Steiner, 1978, p. 28), something which causes a barrier between the reader and the poem. Using another early modern poem as an example, Steiner teases out how Lovelace’s “La Bella Roba” can be understood in terms of theme and complexity of language, but that its central conceit of describing a whore as a thin skeleton and the prey of the huntsman, is repellent, and that this level of difficulty cannot be removed through research and homework. These first two difficulties are located in the reader.

The third difficulty, “tactical” difficulty (Steiner, 1978, p. 33), lies with the poet rather than the reader and is a deliberate choice by the poet to be obscure in order to force the reader to perceive the language used in new and revised ways. Steiner refers to metaphysical poetry as an example, where the poet is choosing to surprise the reader with a conceit, to force them to revisit and rethink the deliberate conjunction of two very dissimilar elements in an image. John Donne’s conceit of husband and wife as the two twin feet of a compass in “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning” exemplifies this, using a mathematical and scientific image to represent the separation yet union of the lovers. This difficulty is tactical in that it deliberately slows the pace at which the reader gains comprehension. Using the musical term *rallentando*, Steiner argues that this is a tactic to make readers apprehend new, different dimensions to the poetry, as “we are not meant to understand easily and quickly” (Steiner, 1978, p. 35).

The fourth difficulty, which also lies with the poet, is “ontological” (Steiner, 1978, p. 41), whereby poetry purposefully is not open to comprehension by the reader. This difficulty can be characterised by acknowledging that the reader is left knowing that

they are in the presence of a poem, but can no longer express with any clarity what that poem is about.

Steiner's definitions of difficulty provide a way of examining the challenges pupils might face when encountering early modern poetry. Michael Fleming looks at Steiner's ideas in *Poetry Teaching in the Secondary School: The concept of "Difficulty"* (1996). Fleming states that expectations of what poetry should mean and how it should function have changed over time. How readers read modernist poetry is a different matter from reading a Shakespeare sonnet. The art of teaching poetry from different periods is in the selection of material and approaches that enable pupils to make their own responses, but also to support those responses with enough insight into the contexts of production so that the pupils can make informed decisions about it. Fleming suggests that, “one of the decisions which the teacher has to make pertains to the appropriate lexical, syntactical, contextual or historical details which need to be supplied in order to provide enough clarity for the reader to be able to make an authentic response” (Fleming 1996 p.38). What the teacher has to decide is what information, contextually or otherwise, from the repertoire of the poem, needs to be given regarding the poem, and most crucially, at what time.

### **READER RESPONSE THEORY AND THE REPERTOIRE OF TEXTS.**

The details of reader response theory as explored in Rosenblatt (1970) provide another means by which to examine the ways that readers make meaning out of poetry, and by extension early modern poetry. Rosenblatt argues in *Literature as Exploration* that literary texts remain merely ink spots on the paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols. All readers will have a notion of what, to them, the “inkspots” or words on the page signify, but this will be different to the meaning and associations that others will have of the same word or group of words. Rosenblatt suggests that the same text will have a different meaning and value to us at different times or under different circumstances. It is in this way Rosenblatt suggests that a “live circuit” (Rosenblatt, 1970, p. 25) is set up between a reader and a text. The formation of a “live circuit” between reader and text is a process in which “the reader infuses intellectual and emotional meanings into the pattern of verbal symbols, and those symbols channel his thoughts and feelings” (Rosenblatt, 1970, p. 25). The reader brings their interpretation to the words or “verbal symbols”, and at the same time, by focusing the attention of the reader on the associations of those words, the words “channel” the reader's reactions. Thus reading is a two-way process, with the poem acting as both a stimulus for the reader, stimulating the reader's access to their memories and personal associations, and as a blueprint to reorder those associations in relationship to what is happening in the text and to respond to the text.

Benton, Teasey, Bell and Hurst (1988) explored the ways in which poems act as both “stimulus” for the reader to respond using their own experience and references and as a “blueprint” to guide how that reader responds to the poem. John Teasey worked with five pupils, looking at the ways in which they interacted with the poems, and how they, “looked at the world of the text, and to the world within him, generated by the text,” (Benton *et al*, 1988, p. 64). The reactions of one reader, Kristina, was used to trace in detail how she negotiated the text and responded to it. The activity of text as “blueprint” is seen to occur when Kristina's responses in the study move between

different details at different times, and she enters and re-enters the text, attending to different aspects in different ways at different times. She does not read sequentially, but moves around the text backwards and forwards. Kristina is then used to exemplify the notion of the text acting as stimulus, whereby she produces ten responses to the text, two of which relate to the text, and eight of which are “memories of self” (Benton *et al*, 1988, p. 67).

In Hurst’s examination of the use of group talk in the same volume, he looked at the way that students explored “The Stag” by Ted Hughes without any intervention from their teacher. By looking at the ways that the students used questions to construct their understanding of the poem, he suggested that there are different frames, through which the students explore their ideas about texts: the poem as a story, the poem as poet and the poem as form. The first frame, the poem as story, “involves a simple construction of the events which the text seems to be relating...and a positioning of the protagonists in a kind of mental theatre” (Benton *et al*, 1988, p. 176). This was the most immediate concern of the pupils in Hurst’s study, as he found that much time was spent on retelling the story of the text. The second frame that the students responded to was the poem as poet, that being the implied author, which can be clear in a text, or very obscure. With regard to “poem as form”, the pupils were continuously engaging with the form of the poetry, but they were not necessarily conscious of the effects that the language was having on their reading of the text.

Wolfgang Iser also proposed an interactive role for the reader. In his view a text contains potential meaning and this meaning is only actualised when a reader brings his/her own interpretation to it. In *The Act of Reading* (1978), Iser argued that a literary work falls between two poles: the text created by the author as one pole, the artistic, and the other pole being the aesthetic, which is the “realization accomplished by the reader” (Iser, 1978, p. 21). The literary work itself must lie in the middle, between the two end points, as the text only lives when it is realised by the reader. This realization cannot take place without the text itself, so the literary work must be dynamic and it exists virtually. The virtual existence of the literary work is the product of the interaction between reader and the text.

Within a text, Iser states that there is a set of shared meanings that are culturally acquired, which he terms the “repertoire”. This he defines as “all the familiar territory within the text” (Iser, 1978, p. 69). This “repertoire”, the representation of cultural norms or patterns, is shared, to a greater or lesser extent, by all of us. These patterns, or schemata as Iser calls them, provide a “hollow form” (Iser, 1978, p. 143) into which the reader can pour their own interpretations. This ensures that to some degree the meaning of a text, our interpretation, is fixed through the patterns or schemata that derive from our shared cultural repertoire and provide a shape for our interpretations. This is only one part of the reading process. The other aspect is the reader’s own subjective standpoint. The reader, according to Iser, “assembles” (Iser, 1978, p. 38) meaning out of what the text has given her. The schemata in the text provide the framework, the text functions to set off a sequence of mental images, which lead to the text translating itself into the reader’s consciousness. The actual content of these mental images will be shaped and influenced by the reader’s existing stock of experience. Therefore, the text becomes a literary work when there is a dynamic interchange between reader and text.

## TEACHING POETRY, REPERTOIRE AND “LIFEWORLDS”

Mark Pike has written extensively on teaching poetry from the canon (Pike 2000; 2003; 2004). In *Pupils’ poetics* (2000), Pike argues that pupils should be taught about literary criticism and reader response theory, so that they will be better able to understand what a poem is, an event, and therefore have more confidence when discussing it. His central thesis is that “what poetry is must be examined with those who study it” (Pike, 2000, p. 49). His study demonstrated that at GCSE level, pupils are capable of engaging with sophisticated concepts about the genre and of responding perceptively to challenging ideas from a reader response standpoint. He has written further on the ways in which the indeterminacy, the challenges presented by poems from a historical context, are motivating and actually more engaging than poems that are easily accessible.

With a particular focus on heard poetry in the National Curriculum, John Gordon works with a conception of poetry, which he puts under the umbrella term of “lifeworld” (Gordon, 2009, p. 165), in which a poem is “an articulation of the voice, history and culture – the *life* – of an individual (the poet or an adopted persona)” (Gordon, 2009, p. 166). In the classroom, any poetic encounter that occurs is therefore a meeting of two “lifeworlds”, on the one hand that of the listener or reader and on the other that of the new world of the writer presented as a poem. It follows, he argues, that we can conceive of classroom encounters with poems as being in the “lifeworld” of the classroom, where there are possibly thirty “lifeworlds” present in thirty children, along with that of the poem. Similar to both Rosenblatt and Iser, this idea suggests that a poem is an event in time, occurring between reader/listener and text or in interactions of the classroom between a group of individuals and a poem.

David Stevens looks at ways into working with classic poetry via an arts context. In *Draw your own conclusions: Teaching pre-twentieth century poetry in an arts context* (2007), Stevens explores how to enliven the teaching of pre-twentieth century poetry by locating the teaching of such poetry squarely within an arts context. He argues that poetry of the classical canon should be seen and taught within a broader arts tradition. He refers to the work of Eisner, who discusses what the arts enable the reader to do, to slow down and look at things more carefully. He also argues for the ways that:

historical, biographical and artistic contexts could be used as a means of both enhancing a sense of critical distance and wonder...and showing how the lives and times which gave rise to poetry in the first place were not after all so very different from the present in terms of anxieties and liberating possibilities. (p. 56)

Stevens argues that central to effective English teaching is the Romantic idea of wonder as the essence of art and poetry. The “critical distance and wonder” derive from the elements that are strange to the reader of the “repertoire” of the poem. Like Fleming, he argues that this “repertoire” needs to be provided in a sensitive and relevant fashion. However, Stevens proposes that this provision of context is most powerfully done through an aesthetic means, using works of art and music, folk traditions and ballads. Balanced with this, in a fruitful tension, is the need for pupils to relate to the text in a subjective and personal manner, which working with aesthetic approaches supports them in doing. Like Steiner, Stevens draws attention to the need

for a different kind of attentiveness to poetry, and particularly pre-twentieth century poetry, to read “rallentando” (Steiner, 1978, p. 35), slowly, deliberately and carefully.

## TEACHING LITERATURE FROM THE EARLY MODERN PERIOD

Conroy and Clarke (2011), in *Teaching the Early Modern Period*, suggest that the challenge of teaching texts from this period is to create a dialogue with the past that can accommodate the “dialectic of familiarity and difference” (Conroy & Clarke, 2011, p.1). Teachers need to facilitate the engagement of their students with the specificities of a particular historical moment. Conroy notes that this dynamic between what is familiar and what is different that encounters with the past engender constantly reappears in the literature on teaching the early modern.

She observes two key points that are relevant to this study. Firstly, that there is widespread agreement that emphasising only that which is familiar to students is not in the best interests of the students. Secondly, she asserts the pedagogical value of keeping a “sense of strangeness” (Conroy & Clarke 2011, p. 14) and resisting the temptation to stress that which is familiar and to play down the unfamiliar. Of significance to this discussion is the interplay between the terms “Renaissance” and “early modern”. Marcus (1992) argues that the term “Renaissance” connotes an era that is conceived of as one of cultural rebirth and the reawakening of an era conceived of as classic. The use of this term suggests an interest in the activities of the elite and that is overly optimistic and upbeat. She argues that “it buys optimism at too great a price – the neglect of other cultural currents and forms of cultural production, of a vast sea of human activity and misery that Renaissance either failed to include or included only marginally” (Marcus, 1992, p. 43). In contrast to this, the term “early modern” signals a disaffiliation by literary historians towards what they see as the elitism and cultural myopia associated with an older view of Renaissance history. The term “early modern” emphasises continuity with our own period. Gary Waller observes that the connotations of the term are that “we seem to face either similar issues, dilemmas and obsessions or be able to trace the history of our dilemmas and obsessions to that period” (Waller, 1993, p. 1).

There is a tension in the teaching of texts, and specifically poetry, from the early modern period, between that of regarding the period as one in continuity with our own, or as one that is very different to our own. This tension seems to be mirrored in the interplay between the two terms “Renaissance” and “early modern”. This study was designed to look at the ways in which these ideas played out in the classroom, by looking at the ways in which teenage readers made meaning out of the poetry of the early modern period and how the teacher supported the pupils’ meaning-making. Of interest is the pupils’ ways of coming to terms with the strangeness of the period, whilst the teacher tried to support their understanding of the areas of familiarity in the text.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to collect the data, the teacher was interviewed before the main lesson on the poem. The pupils had been introduced to “On my first sonne” briefly prior to the

lesson, but this lesson was designated to provide the main forum for work on this poem, given the time constrictions on the teacher to deliver the curriculum. The lesson was then observed by two observers – one observer making a running commentary of the teacher’s speech and actions, and the second observer observing the four designated pupils’ actions and body language. The teacher and four pupils were audio recorded, individually, during the lesson. Following the lesson, the four pupils were interviewed. A schedule was devised to observe the pupils, which built on Bales (1950) and Flanders (2004), using categories to analyse and describe the behaviour by individuals in a group situation. The four pupils, two male and two female, were designated to be interviewed subsequent to the lesson. In consideration of “inter-observer” reliability (Denscombe, 2007), the observers met to discuss and draw up the observation schedule for the pupils. Recordings were also made of the four pupils who were to be subsequently interviewed. These instruments were intended to pick up naturalistic events and activities to do with the pupils’ meaning-making of “On my first sonne”.

The teacher was interviewed in semi-structured manner. The questions were designed to be exploratory and open-ended. By contrast, the pupil questions were less open and had to take into account the age and ability of the pupils. The questions were written to elicit the pupils’ viewpoints, by being “neutral, singular and clear” (Patton, 1990, p. 295), whilst supporting them by not making the questions overly general. The interview design was therefore much more structured than that of the teacher’s, where the open nature of the questions acted rather as prompts and were followed up by questions or statements as the interview unfurled. The data obtained from the interviews were cross-referenced with the observation data obtained from the teacher’s classroom, to generate some “convergent” validity (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p. 138). The use of two observers and a variety of observation tools were designed to enhance validity. The data was anonymised to preserve confidentiality, and participants’ permissions were given for the publication of the work.

## FINDINGS

### Supporting students in their response to reading

In her discussion of her approach towards teaching poetry, and specifically early modern poetry, Natasha<sup>1</sup> placed oral work at the centre of what the pupils do. She valued pupils’ interaction with each other in a variety of ways as the starting point for working on a text. She referred variously to group, pair and whole-class discussion as central to exploring the poetry at every stage of the exploration of a poem. She looked for points of contact between the pupils’ experience and that which can be found in the poems in order to set up areas for discussion. In seeking to trigger the connection between the pupils’ ideas and the poems, she discussed the usefulness of “scraps”, either a visual image or small piece of text, which meant that the pupils had something about which they could safely speculate. Her emphasis was on empowering the pupils to contribute and in valuing the validity of what they said. Natasha referred to her use of a very small section of the poem on the interactive whiteboard as one example of her selection of particular “scraps” or “tiny details” as a

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<sup>1</sup> All names have been changed

way into a poem. She suggested that this was a way of tapping into the world which the pupils inhabited, reminiscent of Gordon (2009) “lifeworlds” (p. 165). Natasha characterised the pupils’ world as being different to that of the poet and even the teachers’ world and that to tap into these she believed that the pupils needed to be empowered to make their own contribution. Her use of prompts for speculation was a way in which she provided a safe forum for the pupils to do so.

In the observed lesson, the activities that the students were given were designed to guide them towards a detailed reading of the poem. They were taken through different aspects of the poem and were specifically asked to focus on language. In analysing the transcripts, even for a short piece of guided, group work, the pupils can be seen using cycles of discussion that make meaning for themselves out of the poem, while they are trying to answer the questions. All groups were concerned to grasp some idea of the story of the poem before they felt that they could answer the questions satisfactorily, and as Hurst’s (Benton *et al*, 1988) model suggests, their discussions were cyclic. One group discussed the narrative of the poem at the outset of their question answering, and then came back to it seven minutes into their discussion. This pattern of discussion occurred in all four transcripts, where the pupils were fascinated with Jonson’s life. At a number of points, when the teacher was circulating, she tried to refocus their attention from speculating about the life of Jonson and move them towards the poem as form. In asking the pupils what activities had helped them to feel that they understood the poem, three different answers were given. One pupil said very clearly that writing helped him, as it helped him organise his ideas cohesively. Another enjoyed actively working on the text of the poem, underlining details and being forced to look for answers to questions on the text in the text itself, as she appreciated support in her application to the task in hand. The third pupil responded that biographical detail was the key aspect that had helped him to relate to the poem and why Jonson had written it.

All four pupils understood that the type of reading required for poetry is very different to other types of reading. The complexity of the reading experience was acknowledged, when the pupils stated that any meaning cannot be obtained immediately. One pupil identified the complexity with being a rewarding experience: “If they’re really straightforward they just tend to bore me a little bit.” Two pupils commented on the nature of poetic writing. One equated it with writing a diary and saw poetry and diary-writing both as an exploration of emotion. Another responded to this aspect of the function of poetry, but in the context of the relationship of the poem to her own writing. She related her experience of the death of a loved one and writing a poem for him, reading it publicly at his funeral, to that of Jonson’s writing of the sonnet. The pupils also showed an awareness of the nature of poetic writing – that it is likely to be concerned with personal emotion and operates with varying levels of ambiguity. The complexity and ambiguity of the poetic writing was cited by two as being a source of interest and engagement to them. They found the “tactical” difficulty of the text stimulating. In approaching the sonnet “rallentando”, slowing the tempo of reading commanded by the form of the poem, the pupils became increasingly interested in the poem.

### The aesthetic response

In the data, the teacher characterised her conception of successful teaching as an aesthetic experience:

It's such a good feeling if you feel you've made something accessible to them that they would never have looked at on their own, and if they've then got that in their head, they can link with some subsequent experience or subsequent reading or....I mean it is great when some kid says, "I was watching this programme and they did that – you know that thing we were reading in that poem," and they actually link an emotion from *Eastenders* or something with an emotion that they've read about in a poem that you've carefully structured the study of. And it's fantastic when they say – or even in class, they say, "Oh, it's just like when so and so did this in that film," and you say, "Yes, absolutely," and that's what you want, don't you, for them to realise how relevant this literature is.

The teacher described how the text, acting as stimulus, brought to the pupils' consciousness various concepts and images (Rosenblatt, 1970). She also expressed the pleasure that she derived from facilitating that. Interestingly, the emotion the teacher indicates for the pupils is equated with emotion experienced through television or film, rather than directly with their own. The teacher is very conscious of the realms of experience within the pupils that she drawing on, and she talks in terms of visual literacy and the world of mediated images as being the field of experience that the pupils will draw upon to makes references for the poem.

The teacher deliberately chose to tap in to the pupils' visual literacy and equate that with a top-down approach to reading. She discussed the use of a "mystery picture" which provides a broad background to the poem, about which the pupils speculate in an open and exploratory fashion. Through discussing the background of the poem via a mystery picture, this can be combined with known details of the poem to facilitate some meaning-making for the pupils. The teacher clearly equated visual literacy with the reading of a written text. With the mystery picture the teacher starts with a small section of an image and the pupils generate ideas about that image. She then gradually reveals more of the image so that through discussion of the image the pupils are developing their ideas. The teacher used the technique of reading an image as a model for reading a poem, discussing the significance of detail. She felt that the pupils were very familiar with the visual medium, "they live in a very visual society, don't they?" She looked to exploit the visual world that the pupils were familiar with, along with using the possibilities of ICT, where possible.

There was evidence of Hurst's frame, "text as poet" (Benton et al, 1988, p. 184), being utilised by the pupils. Hurst divided this definition into three subcategories; the poet as character; the poet as participant and the poet "sensed within the text as expressing feelings and manipulating tone" (Benton et al, 1988, p. 185). At different stages the pupils discussed all three of these aspects of the text as poet. As an example, one pupil stated, "it's not just about him losing his child. It's also about his, like, his own childhood and about himself as well." The pupils needed a variety of readings and re-readings in order to build up their response, built up through a series of different viewpoints and structured through different activities. The teacher suggested that the reading of poetry has to be undertaken in a different manner to that of other texts, which for her was a process that might be closer to reading a picture or

visual text than a piece of text with a more functional purpose. This interpretation of the reading of poetry is aligned with Stevens' (2007) discussion of the Romantic tradition in teaching poetry. His discussion of this aspect of teaching pre-twentieth century poetry was with a focus on bringing classic poetry alive and, in order to do this, he argued that the poetry needs to be seen within an arts context so that the teaching can be seen to relate to the Romantic “idea of wonder” (p. 56). This certainly accords with the teacher's discussion of her poetry pedagogy.

### **“Lifeworlds” and the repertoire of text**

For the two male pupils, key to their engagement with the world of the poem was learning the background of the poet. One of the boys cross-referenced his reading of the poetry to his experience in history and maths lessons. For him, a sense of context was paramount. He used the term “actual” eight times in the interview, by which he seemed to mean that engagement with context was an engagement with reality, with his emphasis on “witnessing” or being “part” of a culture. He also used the word “background” seven times in the interview, as he was very aware that this poetry was coming from a place different in time to our own. He very interestingly picked up on aspects that he had learnt about the background of Ben Jonson, for example, “you can tell its old from that, because nowadays if you'd killed someone you wouldn't exactly be able to be a university professor would you?” The student had quickly picked up an understanding of the cultural context of the time, that the contexts of production and reception of poetry were different, that there was a “sense of strangeness” (Conroy & Clarke, 2011, p. 14) about the behaviour of a writer who was both a murderer and yet also successful and respected in his time and ours. He was musing on the different expectations of behaviour of a poet or a professional person now by comparison with what he could see of those of the early modern period.

The other male pupil stated that the fact that the poem was about a true incident and exploring the background to that enabled him to relate to it more effectively. This student was unfailingly positive in his opinion of the poem. His view on the poem was informed by a variety of factors. He felt that knowing the background was key to allowing him to understand the poem and in his interview he used the noun “history” three times, “background” twice and “culture” once. His religious beliefs were also a point of contact with the poem, as he related his reading of the bible with the language and spirit of the early modern era. He liked the language of the King James Bible and found that had given him a way into this poem. He was open about the fact that he was religious, and that he was familiar with the Bible and archaic biblical language. He felt that this aspect of his personal background equipped him well for encountering the poetry, although there was still clearly a challenge in it for him. This pupil concluded by attributing a very particular quality to the poetry, that he was not a fan of modern poetry but that that old poems had “heart”, that they were “fascinating” and that this was for him related to the quality of the language.

The idea of different worlds was referred to by the teacher in her interview. When reflecting on the observed lesson and what she had wanted the pupils to take away from the lesson, “that's in my head and in their head they're probably thinking about the weekend or whatever.” She followed this by suggesting: “The kids are just off in their own world really.” At another point, reflecting on a different lesson, she referred to a pupil with a particularly powerful personality, as being in “Christopher world”,

that is, being in his own world. She felt that her perception of what was successful in the lesson was completely different to what Christopher’s had been, except that they both agreed that the lesson had been enjoyable. The teacher contrasted the worlds inhabited by teacher and pupils, while the pupils were fascinated by the world of the poet.

All four of the students related “On his first sonne” to what they knew of Shakespeare, and their experience of Shakespeare seemed to influence their response to the poetry. The two boys who had responded to the narrative element of the poetry related their response to the narrative elements in the plays of Shakespeare. One commented that it was a great story and another responded in a positive fashion to the language of Jonson, reflecting her attitude to the language of Shakespeare, which she characterised as interesting and different to modern English. The pupils brought up the comparisons with what they knew of Shakespeare, recognising the repertoire of language and cultural associations that they had previously encountered in the curriculum.

### **Levels of difficulty**

At the centre of the teacher’s discussion of her pedagogy was the issue of confidence, which emerged through the interview, where the word was repeated ten times with regard to the pupils and their learning. In her answers throughout the interview, she described her process of scaffolding the pupils’ confidence. She suggested a variety of activities that prompted interaction with the poem in a lively, active fashion. She discussed the use of statements, peer questioning, utilising grids, all of which were group or paired activities. She suggested using the method of comparison halfway through the study of a particular poem, as a means of increasing pupils’ sense of ownership of their study. She used the metaphor of friendship to describe the way that, during the study of one poem, a new poem can be introduced. Once the new poem was introduced, the pupils regarded this poem as an “alien” or an “interloper” poem, and the poem with which they were becoming familiar with as their “friend”. She stressed the importance of confidence to the pupils in handling poetry, and this was reinforced by their sense of ownership of the familiar poem, in contrast to the new poem with which they were not familiar. This enabled them to feel a sense of achievement, in that they were confident about their familiar text. In addition, the terms that the teacher used characterised the pupils’ relationship with the poem as comfortable emotionally.

Some of the strategies outlined by the teacher dealt with “contingent” difficulties, as defined by Steiner (1978), in the text. The significance of grasping very small elements and then relating these small elements to a larger whole featured significantly in her discussion of her pedagogy. She outlined an opening activity on a poem, using a word, phrase or couplet, upon which pupils might speculate. She described how the grasping of details by the pupils could then be taken and related to the whole of a poem. She stated that work on small details enabled the pupils to grasp key ideas in microcosm, that could then be taken to the poem as a whole as a means of understanding it. “Contingent” difficulties were located in words and elements that needed to be researched, and in stressing the significance of working in detail to become familiar with them, the teacher was tackling these kinds of difficulties.

The pupils referred to what could be termed the “tactical” difficulties in the poetry. They observed the structure of the poem as a sonnet, and perceived that this structure was very deliberately slowing down the apprehension of the poem, that was clearly self-conscious and related to the function of the poetry. One observed that, “I like the way like he’s a bit unsure of himself as well, ’cos he keeps asking questions as if he needs us to kind of answer them for him.” This statement raises a number of issues stemming from the form of the sonnet. It acknowledges the questions but it also ponders on the function of poetry for the poet, and the relationship between reader and writer.

## CONCLUSIONS

Since the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1989, pre-twentieth century poetry has had a formal position in the English curriculum in schools. The consultation framework for the new National Curriculum in English indicates a narrowing of focus for pre-twentieth poetry at GCSE to that of only “representative Romantic poetry” (DFE, 2013, p. 4). The conclusions from this pilot study investigating the ways in which pupils made meaning out of early modern poetry, and the ways in which their teacher supported them, is that it is the very qualities of early modern literature that opened up opportunities for the pupils. This “dialectic of familiarity and difference” (Conroy & Clarke, 2011, p. 1) with the period was one that significantly engaged the pupils. The continuity with our period that the pupils related to was the emotional “lifeworld” (Gordon, 2009, p. 165) of the poem. They were responsive to the themes of death, loss and the impact that had on the speaker of the poem. They were able to see the relationship between the expression of those themes in the poem and their own lives. What was unfamiliar was the cultural “repertoire” (Iser, 1978, p. 69) embedded in the metaphor and associations of the language. The aspects of the repertoire that attracted the pupils’ attention was the difference in the issue of infant mortality, the Christian frame of reference of the poem and the differences in Jonson’s life as perceived with that of today.

Steiner’s (1978) definitions of difficulty provide a useful way in which to interpret the various ways that the teacher structured encounters with early modern poetry in the classroom of this study. To address the second difficulty, “modal”, the teacher provided a variety of strategies to enable the pupils to see where the poem was coming from in terms of cultural context. The pupils were fascinated with the background of Jonson and the interrelationship between what they knew of his life and the text of the poem. Natasha’s description of making the poem a “friend” implied the creation of a bond between pupil and text, with the reader overcoming any “modal” difficulties through opening up to the poem. Steiner’s third difficulty, “tactical”, emerged in the data in the reactions of the pupils to the sonnet form. The process of reading the sonnet and unravelling it was modelled to the pupils in the way that Natasha used a mystery picture. She demonstrated to the pupils in a visual way the ways in which the pupils could read through the detail of the language to slowly unravel the sonnet, “rallentando”, apprehending the poem slowly, deliberately and carefully.

The process by which pupils were encouraged to respond to “On my first sonnet” relates to the processes outlined by Hurst in *Young readers responding to poems*

(1988). The pupils responded to the poem as story as a frame for comprehension. Starting with a knowledge of what is happening or how people are feeling – Hurst’s “mental theatre” (Benton *et al*, 1988, p. 176) – the pupils got to grips with the characters, setting and experiences that they populated their stage of the poem with. They then began to move on to considering the “poem as form” (Benton *et al*, 1988, p. 176). The journey involved a variety of different ways of reading. Lines had to be revisited and viewed in new ways, with different frames, to elicit meaning. The teacher’s strategy of using small details as a mode of providing a framework supported this. The teacher was mindful of trying to support the pupils in making an “authentic response” (Fleming, 1996, p. 38).

Evidently the experience offered to these pupils by the early modern sonnet “On my first sonnet” was complex and multifarious. Pupils were able to relate areas of their own experience to the sonnet, such as dealing with death and loss. The art of the teacher ensured that the pupils were fully engaged in exploring the meaning of the text. The repertoire of the text fascinated the pupils, and they were responsive to the sense of strangeness that they found in the text. The teacher was very conscious of the classroom being a meeting point for all the “lifeworlds” in the text – that of the pupils, the poet and the teacher.

If early modern poetry as an option for pre-twentieth century literature is to be replaced by only Romantic poetry at GCSE, this will limit the potential richness of the curriculum for teenage readers and proscribe the opportunities offered to teachers for teaching texts from other times. Add to this mix a prescription of two texts by Shakespeare over these two years (DFE, 2013), then the challenging and enduring popular lyric poetry of the early modern period may well be unexplored territory to teenage readers of the future. The rich territory of early modern lyric poetry will inevitably be marginalised by pre-twentieth century being represented only by Romantic poetry and by the rather daunting requirement that two plays by Shakespeare be covered in detail at this key stage. Policy-makers in England might do well to reflect on this as the new English Curriculum is finalised and implemented. As one pupil observed about the cultural repertoire and context of the poem, “You can tell its old from that, because nowadays, if you’d killed someone, you wouldn’t exactly be able to be a university professor would you?” This surely is where the “sense of strangeness” (Conroy & Clarke, 2011, p. 14) and the richness of reading poetry from the early modern period are to be valued.

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