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Author

Hess, Natalie

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How to Unpack a Difficult Poem for Language Learning

Claiming that poetry is essentially an oral art and thus eminently suitable as discourse for language teaching and learning, the author guides readers through step-by-step strategies in how to make the pictures of poetry visible and the sounds of poetry audible for language-learning students. Using the poem “Ozymandias” by Percy Bysshe Shelley, the author presents strategies that allow us to see and understand the people, the place, and the drama felt throughout the poem. She makes clear that these strategies can be used with most poems. She chooses objects and moments from students’ everyday experiences to demonstrate each technique, and she explains how such ordinary objects and events can bring out the essence of each poem. These techniques also offer opportunities for the practice of all language skills, and they promote student group and pair work for vocabulary recycling and practice of structure as they enjoy literary content.

*A poem should be equal to:
Not true.*

*For all the history of grief
An empty doorway and a maple leaf.*

*For love
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea—*

*A poem should not mean
But be.*
(From “Ars Poetica” by Archibald MacLeish, 1926)

Introduction

Many of us have found inspiration in the poem above, but I suspect that even while accepting the paradigm expressed so well by MacLeish, most of us have quietly wondered just how to make that poem “be.” And if this is perhaps, after all, a question of meaning, then just what does

MacLeish mean when he tells us that “a poem should not mean but be?” My guess is that in MacLeish’s understanding of poetry, the text of a poem should enter our consciousness easily and naturally. I also, perhaps covertly, believe that MacLeish is rebelling against all those teachers of English literature who for generations kept asking their clueless students, “Just what does this poem mean?”

The language of poetry, as printed on the page, can, indeed, be a hostile and alienating environment for both students and teachers. Such alienation is truly unfortunate and misplaced because poetry is a vibrant form and can be very useful for teachers of language. As a language teacher, I have always thoroughly enjoyed using poetry in the language classroom, and from the positive student feedback received through a period of many years, I have ample evidence that my students have enjoyed it too. When asked the question, “Why use poetry?” Maley and Moulding in their seminal work of 1985 simply answer “Why not?” (p. 1). After all, poetry is just another form of English discourse. Besides, poetry is meant to be read out loud. Thus, it naturally gives us the tone and rhythm of language. What is more, poetry, because of its special arrangements, is easily pressed into our collective memories. This is why people so often quote their favorite lines of poetry when they want to make a point, and this is perhaps why folks who have never read his work so frequently quote Shakespeare. Much scholarly work (Carter & Long, 1987; Collie & Slater, 1991; Cook, 1994; Gill, 2008; Heard, 1998; Irwin, 1991; Lazar, 1993; Maley & Duff, 1989; Miller & Schwanenflugel, 2008; Walker, 2008; Weaver, 2002) reiterates that poetry often deals with subjects that remain relevant and touch human interest across culture, and that both the stress and rhythmic nature of poetry aid in promoting good pronunciation.

Poetry creates rich language-learning opportunities because it:

- Is short and concentrated;
- Allows for poetic license, which, at least momentarily, frees language learners from the chains of structure;
- Permits a zany use of words;
- Turns us on to comparisons through verbal pictures;
- Invites sharing of emotions;
- Arranges language into more easily remembered patterns;
- Permits and even invites repetition;
- Encourages reflection;
- Invites the use of all four language skills.

In spite of the above, I had assumed that the teaching of poetry had disappeared from classrooms in these days of phonics, word-count, and fluency practice. It seems, however, that my assumption was wrong. A brief look through any of the “core readers” assigned to school districts in the Southwestern US, where I serve as a teacher educator, displays a poem as one form of discourse in every single textual demarcation. The poems are well chosen and serve as reflective summaries for each section. Teaching poetry, can, however, pose a

challenge for the instructor, and this is why I still aspire to make poetry “be.”

Teaching Poetry to ELL Students

One year when I was working as an ELL consultant to an elementary school district, I was stopped in the hallway by a very conscientious 6th-grade teacher, who showed me a poem from her required core curriculum. The poem was “Ozymandias” by Percy Bysshe Shelley. “I have no idea what to do with this,” she said. “I know that it’s a very famous poem, and I think that I understand the message. But honestly, I think that it’s way too difficult for my students and, frankly, I have no idea what to do with it. Please help.”

MacLeish’s “be” demands that a poem spring from the page into the mind’s eye, imagination, and senses of its readers. Poets write words, but they think pictures—pictures and people and the sound of music. Poets create mental videos. It is the teacher’s job to make these pictures of the poem visible, to make the sound audible, and to make the people alive. That, to me, is what MacLeish’s “be” becomes, and this is what I try to bring to my students and to their teachers.

In the description that follows, I try to show how we worked to make Shelley’s “Ozymandias” “be” for a group of teachers and, subsequently, for their 6th-grade students. The activities described here are particularly geared to this poem, but they can, of course, be adapted and modified to many other poems.

Step 1: Getting Ready by Uncovering Images

Poetry is essentially an oral art meant to be shared. Most students can remember some form of poetry that has impressed them. At the beginning of a poetry unit, I have asked my students to remind themselves of poems they have enjoyed. These can be nursery rhymes, songs, or even prayers. In some of my classes, I have heard poems recited in countless languages. It did not matter that most of us did not understand the content until it was later translated. All of us heard the rhythms, stresses, and rhymes and emotions that were involved even if the imagery and the language were unknown.

Poetry allows readers to delve into strong imagery that awaits exploration. When reading any new poem, I first read it silently just to get a personal feel for it, and then I read it aloud once to internalize the sound. I begin to look for clarity for myself and my students. What pictures can we as a class see in the poem? Who are the people of that particular poem? Occasionally, reading the poem two or three times out loud to a class just so that students get a feel for the language and a glimpse of the imagery helps us to get started. As I read the poem out loud for the second or third time, I ask my students if any particular image has impressed them. I have discovered that even quite complex poems have immediate appeal. Complex poems tend to bring out universal concerns, and language learners often discover there is a possible escape from the prison of grammatical structure. That kind of escape into a more free language appeals to language learners. Poets write in words, but they talk about life, about people, and about pictures. In just about every poem, a certain clear visual seems to spring from the poem. In “Ozymandias” by Shelley, one particular picture

comes to life with almost cinematic clarity. It is the vast and desolate desert. There, in the desert, we find those huge incongruously placed legs. There is the shattered, half-twisted face on the ground, and there is the traveler in his or her discovery of the colossal wreck. There are, however, other images that must yet be reader created. Who is this traveler, and where in this vast desert do we place him or her? How do we get the sense of the vastness and the starkness of that desert? There is also that mysterious meeting between the narrator and the traveler. Where and how exactly does it happen? What about the people of the poem? Four distinct personalities make their appearance: the narrator, the traveler, the king, and the artist. What kind of people are they? How old are they? Is the traveler male or female? Can we truly “see” each? What about their mental or emotional perspectives? What about their specific talents?

It is time for the reader to take a look at our poem.

“Ozymandias”

*I met a traveler from an antique land,
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal these words appear:
“My name is Ozymandias, king of kings;
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.
(Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1818)*

Step 2: Further Acquaintance With the Poem— What Is the Social Drama of the Poem?

Many poems present a social drama. There is usually an interaction between or among people, and we are quickly prompted ask certain questions:

- Who are the people implicated?
- Where are they situated?
- Why are they there?
- How do they look?
- What do they say?
- How do they affect the story line of the poem?

We can ask these questions even when the interaction occurs simply between the imagined poet and the implied reader, but on other occasions the people of

the poem take center stage and can add immeasurably to our understanding.

In “Ozymandias,” the social drama of the poem is quite prominent. There are four people involved here, each possessing his or her own melodrama. First, there is the “I,” the narrator, who may be understood as the actual poet or taken for an assumed narrating persona, standing in for the poet. Next, we have the traveler, who obviously has an important story to tell and does manage to relate this story to our narrator, who subsequently tells it to us. In that story two more characters appear. There is the king, whose obvious megalomania is showcased. And finally, there is the artist, who understood the king’s personality so well that he was able to present it for generations to come by creating a face filled with egotistic narcissism, yet it is a face that could easily be flattered by the obsequious recognition of its inherent power. There is also an ineffable sense of the passage of time as the story moves through the narration of characters alive in different ages. I have discovered that all poems deal with persona, even if the persona is just the reader of the poem with his or her emotions, and the writer with his or hers.

Step 3: Setting the Stage With the Use of Everyday Objects or Situations

As soon as the actors in the poem have been established, it is time to set the stage:

- Where are we?
- Does the poet tell us or do we have to imagine the space with its furnishings, its ambience, and its internal music?
- Are we inside or outside?
- What kind of light do we have?
- What is the mood of the place?
- What objects do we see?

I enter this strategy by taking something from my students’ everyday experience that I can later tie back into the poem. For example, the famous poem “Richard Corey” by Edwin Arlington Robinson deals with a character of a man who has been misunderstood by all the people of a small town. When I introduce that poem, my students tell me about a time when their own first impression had been entirely mistaken. (See the Appendix for suggested poems and their accompanying objects.)

“Ozymandias” begins with a meeting between the assumed poet and the traveler: *I met a traveler from an antique land.* I imagined this as a chance meeting in a dark tavern, where the poet, deep in thought, is interrupted by a half-inebriated stranger, who has a story to tell and is looking for an audience. However, I did not want to start my lesson with my own vision. Instead, because the center of this poem is not a person but an object, a statue, I decided to make my opening gambit through everyday objects and tried to go from object to person. I wanted my students to see that the objects we carry with us display, in part at least, who we are.

Objects and Their Owners

We are all attached to certain objects. Often it is the one thing we would take with us were we to move across the world. My personal object would be an old rocking chair that I indeed have dragged across continents, but when I ask my students to visualize such an important “thing” in their lives, they often mention jewelry. (I eliminate photo albums as a choice, since these are really just memories of people.) The aim of the strategy presented below is to find a connection between the lives of the students and the essence of the poem. In “Ozymandias” the essence or central picture is an object—the shattered statue—but I have made such connections when the heart of the poem was to be found in nature, in people, or in a significant emotion. The whole idea lies in finding a real and viable connection between the students’ lives and the poem.

In this case, I used an old backpack as my example and told my class that I had just found this backpack and wondered if it, by chance, belonged to any one of them. Nobody claimed it. I suggested that we open the backpack to see what was there. As one student unpacked the satchel and held up each item, the class guessed about the identity of the owner. A stethoscope suggested “a medical student.” A diaper and a baby bottle suggested “the mother of a baby.” A French newspaper and a bilingual dictionary offered “a visiting student,” as did a textbook and a visa. The point I was trying to make was that the objects that belong to us do tell a story about the owners.

The class was divided into six small groups. They assumed the roles of archaeologists who had just dug up an ancient object. Their job was to decide on what the object was, how it had been used, and what it told us about the civilization from which it came. As my own example, I had brought an “ancient” sandal, which I claimed to be more than 2,000 years old. It was small enough to have probably belonged to a small woman or an older child. Its traces of sand placed it in a nomadic desert culture that must have raised sheep because knowledge of the use of leather and wool were both evident in the sandal.

My students did not have their real objects available. Their job was to imagine a possible object. Working in small groups, students described their objects. Among the imagined objects presented from the groups to the whole class were a statue of an elephant, clearly meant for a religious purpose; a small jar, which still held its fragrance and had, no doubt, been a perfume container; a large jar for wheat collection; and other charred receptacles for cooking. Each group held up its imagined object and told its story. One group produced an instantaneous poster of its imagined bead collection.

Step 4: Visualization and Discussion

I continued with what I have termed a “mental video” experience. The mental video opens a visual framework that will make the verbal meaning more accessible, more forceful, and more easily absorbed. Here is how it works:

- Students relax and close their eyes. I cannot check on their compliance because I too have closed my eyes.
- Students listen while I talk through the visualization. The one below

features scenery of this particular poem, but every poem offers a picture whether directly or indirectly presented.

How to Use Visualizations

Our students are bombarded with and embraced by the visual. From an early age, they play video games, converse with computer programs, watch full-length films, and experience an entire digitalized universe. The aim of the visualization strategy is to activate the students' own visual imaginations and have them build a landscape of their own mind—a special place that can be individualized and yet brought into the collective through the poem. Visualization offers practice in listening skills. It is an opportunity for vocabulary recycling. It presents moments of quiet reflection and individualization, and it allows silent participation. The key is to choose your vision of the poet's landscape and frame it in such a way that students are able to paint their own imagined picture within the frame you have suggested. It does not matter if the frame is a crowded room or a Wordsworthian flower, as long as you allow time and space for students' imaginations to flourish. It works well if a line from the poem can bring us to the climax of the visualization, as I have done below in "Ozymandias." I choose a dramatic moment in this poem to break up the visualization and bring us back to the collective study of the poem.

Text for Visualization

Below is my "frame" for the visualization in "Ozymandias" (to be read slowly, softly, and with feeling):

We are in an endless desert. There is sand and total emptiness all around us. There are mountains in the distance. This is like land on the moon—endless and vast. There is a sense of emptiness. Let's move very slowly through this wasteland. We feel the emptiness. (*Pause*). We walk slowly because we are so exhausted, so very tired. We take step after step, but we see nothing but desolation and emptiness. (*Pause*). In the distance, we suddenly see something mounting. What is it? What is it? We move closer, and we see two great columns rising from the sand. We go still closer. (*Pause*.) Now, we see that these are not just columns, but two very large, huge, gigantic legs rising from the ground. There isn't a body growing out of the legs, but we look around. There are broken stones everywhere. (*Pause*) We think that once there probably was a huge statue of a man here. We walk around these stones and we begin to hear music. (*Pause*). We bend down to look closer at some of the stones, and now we notice an inscription. At first, it is not easy to read what it says because some of the letters have been partially erased. But we keep on reading. And now we can really read it. Here is what it says:

*"My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"*

Students open their eyes and read the inscription on the board. Students

then participate in mingling activities, talking with at least three classmates about any one of the following:

- Why did the king want this inscription on his statue?
- How do you think that the artist who created this statue felt about the king?
- If we could see the face of this king, what would it look like?

The questions are later discussed with the whole class. The questions are the kind that will bring students back from the picture they have created and tie their individual visuals to the collective visual of the poem.

Step 5: Vocabulary in Context

I choose a few key words that will help to carry the meaning of the poem. There are, of course, many unknown words in every complex poem, but some of the words are extremely important in carrying the message of the poem. These are the key words to look for. In “Ozymandias” I teach the words *visage*, *sneer*, and *mocked*. We read the lines below from the poem several times, placing emphasis on the word “well.”

*Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown
And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read,
Which yet survive stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal these words appear:
“My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay*

The time has come to take a closer look at context. You might choose the words that I have chosen or by erasing other difficult words to see which words you really need to carry the meaning of the poem. To contextualize the words, follow several of the strategies below:

- Reestablish the first and last line and note the connection between them.
- Note the grammatical forms that are unusual and perhaps a result of poetic license.
- Have the poem read chorally by the whole class and chorally by assigned groups.
- Have individual students read parts of the poem.

- Have the class read some lines in whispering tones and shout out other lines.
- Ask students to look up some of the words in a thesaurus to find similes and try placing these in the poem for effect.

Step 6: Sharing Our Thoughts

At this stage, the meaning of the poem is clear and ideas have been formed. However, students are still not quite willing to speak out in the whole-class forum. They need time and support in sharing ideas, in sharpening their own thoughts, and in drawing conclusions. The mingling activity described here will allow such sharing and sharpening to take place. At the conclusion of the mingling students will be much more willing to speak out in the more public forum. The questions below demand a deeper analysis. They do recycle the content of the poem for those students who are just beginning to understand it, but they allow students who have grasped it completely to delve into their new understanding. In other words, these are open-ended questions that can be answered at many levels of understanding. These are the questions that should make this poem “be.”

Students mingle, talking about the questions below with several classmates.

Plot Questions

- What was the main event of this poem?
- What happened first? What happened later? What might happen in the future?

Character Questions

- Who is the hero of the poem?
- Who is the villain of the poem?
- Who is the most interesting character in the poem?
- When do we see most action in the poem?

Inference Questions

- Why do you think that the writer was inspired to write this poem?
- What is the message of the poem?

Personalized Questions

- Which line in the poem do you find most important or most interesting? Please explain.
- Find three words in the poem that you consider interesting or important. Please explain why they are interesting or important for you.
- Does the poem remind you of anything in your own life?
- Does the poem remind you of anything else that you have read?

Step 7: Concluding Activities

The concluding activities allow students to reread and rethink the whole experience of the poem, and to tie the whole experience back to their own lives. The exercise can, of course, be used for any text with the change of qualities and personalities.

- Individually, students rate the characters of the poem on a scale of 0-5 (5 being the highest score) on the qualities in the chart below. They discuss their scores, and the reasons behind those scores in small-group and in the whole-class framework.

Creativity Patience Pride Intelligence

Poet

King

Artist

- In small groups, students create three “Wh-” questions that someone reading the poem could answer. The questions should start with one of the following words: *Which, who, why, when, how*. The questions are passed to another group for discussion and answers.
- In small groups, students create new names for the poem. Suggestions have been: “The Great Statue,” “What Power Means,” and “Stories to Tell.”
- A letter to the artist giving an evaluation of his work becomes either individual or group writing.
- Each student writes an individual and original poem; this is my favorite strategy. The only framework I offer is that the poem must start with the words *I met* and consist of at least 10 lines. We write the poems in class, read them to partners, and start a revision process. The poems are rewritten at home, posted on the wall in our classroom, read out loud by the authors, and finally, in an impressive poetry reading, read out loud by another classmate. The best poems are voted on, and read out loud and displayed on PowerPoint in a parallel class. Here are examples of poems written by teacher-students:

“The Smile”

*I met a woman from San Francisco who said:
I loved the ocean, but I had no friends and
The college there did not fill my need
They told me I could not succeed
Frowned at me.
Downed me.
Here, Sunny days.
Different Ways.
Met my husband
At the lettuce fair
He said: Do you dare?
He smiled
I smiled.
We smiled at a book
We went to a nook.
We smiled at each other.
Nothing was a bother
We smiled into our coffee cups
We have had our downs and our ups
But, we are smiling still
And we will until ... until
Our finish is a start and Death do us apart ...*

“Meeting Sam”

*I met a puppy at the pound
And he was bouncy
And he was round
He put his small head on the side
Saying:
Look what you have found!
His bark was such a pleasant sound
And so I took him home with me.
And that is where he wants to be.
He welcomes me each single day
He says: “I love you.”
Every way
You need not worry
You’ll not be sorry
You’ll never be alone
As long as I am here at home
I am just your dog, Mam
Please, mam, just call me Sam!*

Reflection

Many poems, like Shelley's "Ozymandias," carry universal and timeless appeal. This is one reason the study of poetry continues to be so appealing. The concentrated meaning in a poem allows us to use a multitude of language experiences. In the above strategies we have covered all four language skills, with the addition of much thinking and a good dose of introspection.

The issues of pride and human desire to be recognized are as relevant to the lives of our students as they were to Shelley's readers. The poetic form allows our students to expand on the text by allowing it to enter their lives through its message, its language, its story, and its poetic structure.

Many teachers seem convinced that the teaching of poetry is too daunting. With the unpacking process, I hope to have communicated my enthusiasm for the richness of the genre. It is my wish that readers join me in seeing the emotional minidrama found in all great poems. The study of poetry can indeed put some life into learning and it can work well through the student-centered approach, as well as bring about critical thinking, social interaction, and much language learning.

Author

Natalie Hess, PhD, is professor of BME/ESL at the Yuma campus of Northern Arizona University. She is the author and coauthor of several ESL textbooks and teacher-resource books and of many articles on literary and pedagogical issues. She has served as a teacher and teacher educator in six countries.

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Appendix

Sample Poems and Their Objects

Here are some poems I have used following the pattern described above with the “objects” that started the ball rolling.

“Musée de Beaux Arts” by W. H. Auden

Chosen object: print of Brueghel’s *Fall of Icarus*

“Mending Wall” by Robert Frost

Chosen object: picture of a wall

“My Papa’s Waltz” by Theodore Roethke

Chosen object: A whiskey bottle