

Poetry Day Ireland – 7 May 2015

Lesson Plan for Post-Primary Schools

Lesson prepared by [Pete Mullineaux](#) for Poetry Ireland.

Suggested Level: 1st Year – 6th Year

Length: 40-45 mins

I'm very pleased to be offering this creative writing lesson plan to schools for Poetry Day Ireland. The main focus today is on *utilising the senses*, both in writing a poem and in appreciating a poem. This should appeal to all age groups at second level – from a common starting point there are suggestions later on for how older age groups (or anyone with enthusiasm!) might take different tangents. Note: I've gone into what might seem like quite a lot of detail in places, but that's purely for the benefit of the teacher – although it might appear 'wordy' on the page, in action it will all move much quicker.

Pre-writing

So, to begin: here is my own poem, 'Harvest Festival'. I've chosen it because I wrote it when I too was at school, (aged 13). It started as a homework assignment, found itself in a poetry anthology from Macmillan and was finally recorded on a record with music by Ewan MacColl & Peggy Seeger. You never know what you'll let loose once you start to write!

Harvest Festival

Bread, golden, crispy, curled and

Sculptured into intricate shapes.

Sniff the clean baked fragrance,

Long to break off that tiny, sharp,

Knobbly corner

And let it melt on the tongue

Tasting delicious.

Flowers piled high –
Gorgeous explosions of colour,
Russet apples, amber, yellow,
Crimson blazing.

Black frosty grapes,
Cabbages, green-leaved, crimped
And earthy,
Festival of food as summer fades.

Start by reading the poem out loud. Ask the class: did it *rhyme*? Point out how poetry doesn't have to rhyme – only if you want it too and if you feel it suits the poem's content/themes. So, does the poem have *rhythm*? Look at the last line, where rhythm is clearly there: ask them how many beats/stresses are in that line? (Answer 4) **Festival of food as summer fades**. It also uses *alliteration* – explain what that term means to the class if they don't know. What effects do the combination of alliteration and beat give the line in relationship to what is being said? Does the 'sound' of the line suggest a 'dying away' as in the ending of the season, heading into Autumn – is there a sense of loss?

Tell the class that as far as I can remember the 'craft' or technique in that last line happened by accident: I was probably too young to consciously know what I was doing. But poems I had read, or heard read by the teacher – their rhythms and pulse had no doubt sunk into my consciousness to some degree. So very important to read and listen to lots of poems!

Mark also how sometimes the best ideas happen by accident – or through the unconscious mind, where, like in dreams, there is so much creativity going on, bubbling away below the surface. We can link making contact with this amazing reservoir of creativity with what we call *inspiration* – helping us to discover new & unusual ways of seeing something.

Connecting to the above, tell the class that the poem was actually all *invention*. The story of how it was written is true and worth sharing with the class. My teacher had asked us to write a poem on the theme Harvest Festival. It was a once a year tradition in the school for pupils to bring in food and other things, which was collected up and distributed out into the community as a gift. Maybe I was over keen, because when I went into the school hall, all that had been collected at that point was *one tin of beans*, sitting sadly alone on the stage. I

asked my mother what to do and she presented the choice: write about the beans, or...use my *imagination*. So, yes, I made it all up!

So, that's a second thing we've established, a poem doesn't have to rhyme and you can also make it all up! On the other hand, where did the poem that came into my head, come from? Perhaps it was all there after all, like a 'bank vault' – stuff stored away from a multitude of observations over time: just waiting to be accessed. This is what we're going to explore.

(Fun thought: what if I'd written about the single tin of beans? Would it have necessarily meant a very short poem? Maybe it would have only provoked 'canned laughter' (Sorry for that, but I've found kids like jokes – even bad ones.) Perhaps it would have made a good story: 'the lost tin of beans' or 'the sad tin of beans.' Perhaps try it!)

The Senses

How many senses do we have? Ask the class to name them: (sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch.) (Some say we have a sixth sense: what is that? Can we call it intuition?)

Now listen again to 'Harvest Festival' and note how it appeals to the senses. Identify what we are invited to *see* in the poem, *smell*, *taste*, *touch*? Maybe there's nothing to actually *listen* to in the poem, but by extension, think how the imagination might wander to fields of corn or wheat blowing in the wind, the sound of a tractor, birds...'

So now we're going to make up a new poem:

Ask the class to close their eyes -

Imagine a field: ask them to say out loud what they can **see** in their field. (Be careful not to judge any contribution: encourage and acknowledge all observations). One person sees cows, another sees sheep. Probe: if someone says cows, ask what colour? Are their calves? If sheep – are they shorn – are their lambs? If someone says grass, is it cut or growing long? Point out how this is akin to someone painting a picture, except that we are filling 'a canvas' with words. So it is all about the detail. Does the tree have rough or smooth bark? Is it in leaf, or bare? (What does that tell us about the season?) Does it contain birds? What birds? Use your eye like a camera – first take in the whole picture: the breadth & width of the scene – big elements like the sky. Then, like a camera, zoom in on smaller detail – is that a mouse? A spider? An ant? A wrinkle in the farmer's face?

Note how *adjectives* help us capture the detail. You can refer back to 'Harvest Festival' – the grapes were 'black and frosty', the cabbages 'green leaved and earthy'. Also allow your imaginations to move away from the concrete and what might seem 'sensible' to more 'fanciful' description – this is allowed, even encouraged in writing poetry! This is also where we get more daring and take risks. (eg the cabbages were 'crimped' – the flowers were 'gorgeous explosions'.) This is what might make your poem (if you're going to write one

about a field) turn out to be original, unusual, startling. Imagination and invention rules OK! See also how words can be borrowed from their more usual contexts: 'crimped' would normally be used to describe dress material; 'gorgeous explosions' – maybe from firework displays. It is this borrowing and re-placing in the 'wrong' context that offers surprise – the resulting effect can be startling, arresting, unusual & yes, 'poetic'.

Note too how the picture of the field may come to life – things are happening as we observe: the wind blows, the dog runs – the scene is alive, dramatic.

The main thing is to think (and subsequently) write without fear, (of being 'wrong'.) What you see is what *you* see. (Even if it seems a little crazy at first.) Poems, visual art, music often have to be 'a little crazy' to break from the norm & typical – shake the reader out of their comfort zone: to be able to see even normal, everyday things in a fresh light. Some might argue this is the purpose of all 'art' to change the world by offering alternative perceptions of it.

Giving the other senses a chance

Close eyes and do the same with SOUND – what can they **hear** in their field? Again, accept and acknowledge each observation, but still probe: If it was a bird – was it a robin or a crow? Make the sound! 'peep-peep' is different to 'cawwww'. As they 'fill in the canvas' they are now building a scene from sounds. The detail is just as vital as with seeing! Fill the scene with sounds! Wind, tractors, cows – whatever comes into the imagination.

Close eyes and do the same for **smell, taste, touch**. Just ask the class to throw out examples –lots!!! Again, probe for detail – this is what will give a poem its rich texture.

Now it's time to write:

First Step -

- 1) You can ask everyone (individually) to write down now what they saw, heard, touched etc. Someone will probably ask: does it have to be a poem? Again, the answer to this question relates to banishing any 'fear' about writing poems – or the scary look of the empty page. Point out how 'Harvest Festival' is so easy to imagine writing, it is: a) mostly a **list** of *things*: bread, flowers, grapes etc. b) a few choice words to describe those things (mainly adjectives.) That shouldn't be too hard! (Like making a list to go shopping) They can start then by simply listing all the things that were in their field and a few words to describe them. Note: they can also add any new elements that might occur to them. This should be 'rough' work – it doesn't even have to be a list going down the page – they can write it all over their rough page if they want – more like a spider's web, or as if the title of the poem was dropped into a pond like a stone and all the word associations and ideas are spreading out from it like ripples. This has the added benefit of sometimes noting

accidental, even unusual connections between words – as they appear randomly on the page: useful perceptions and insights that might actually end up in the final poem.)

Now consider this generalisation: **All poems are observation (the detail) plus something else – the ‘magic ingredient’**. We have looked at the observation part: what then is the ‘something else’?

For the moment let’s call it **inspiration**, i.e. some way of capturing the initial detail but then going further to find something deeper. How do we get that to happen? The American poet Emily Dickinson said: “If you want to tell the truth tell it slant” I think this means come at it from an angle that takes the reader by surprise so they see things in a fresh way – that they wouldn’t have done otherwise. You don’t have to get too bogged down with this thought: most important thing is to consider what this ‘something else’ (inspiration) might be. One thing it will be is what you (uniquely) bring to your observations. This might include: your *feelings* about what you see, hear etc. Your *thoughts*: e.g. you can comment, make assertions, ask questions: even get philosophical. Remember, your thoughts and feelings too are ‘things’ which make up the picture. You are ‘observing’ your own responses to what you are experiencing. (Again think about the small detail as well as the bigger picture.) What do you think/feel say, when looking at a new born lamb. Joy, love, laughter, protectiveness, sadness, concern, envy?

(If we go back to ‘Harvest Festival’ – this thought/feeling is clearly present in the last line. While the line is made up of two concrete ‘things’ i.e. ‘food’ and ‘summer’ – the use of the words ‘festival’ to describe the food and ‘fades’ to describe the summer, adds an abstract quality to them as ‘things’. You might also notice how a noun (festival) is turned into an adjective and how ‘fades’ which is a verb, makes the summer *do* something. It fades. All of this does more than add detail – can you see how it also adds tone, feeling, thought – commentary? The crucial thing is the speaker/narrator has not just observed but has also put something of him/herself into the poem. This is where we ‘risk’ as they say – going out on a limb. (Remember teachers: ‘tread softly’ as Yeats said – these are their dreams.)

Step two

The main thing here is to take all pressure off expectations: of the poem being brilliant, earth shattering, meaningful, entertaining etc. Our highest expectation is one we can achieve without pressure – i.e. **simply describe what was there**. As if you were having to faithfully tell someone who *wasn’t* there – giving them all the detail. (‘Hey Gran, I was down in the field today.’ ‘Tell me about it.’) So, now along with the description you can add a bit of yourself, what your thoughts and feelings were. Just ask yourself: e.g. Were you happy, amazed, shocked, overwhelmed, sad – the list of feelings is endless. What thoughts came into your head? Write these words down as well – on your rough page – alongside or in between all the descriptive words and phrases already there. Be careful not to pick and

choose between what you might think are good words or correct words – far too sensible! Write down whatever comes into your head. You don't have to use it in the final poem, but then again you might want to.

Step three

Let your eye run over the words you have written, soak them up, absorb – allow them to penetrate into your consciousness. Shut your eyes again and imagine the scene in your imagination: see it, hear it, smell it, taste it, touch it, feel it. Wait for something to happen. If nothing happens, look at your page again – then close your eyes once more. Wait again for something to happen. You WILL have thoughts – things will go through your head. Some might make sense and some may seem odd – but TRUST that they are all worth considering.

You can start a new page for this, but still think of it as rough, experimental. Simply write down short or long phrases as they come to you – whatever it is – TRUST IT. It doesn't have to follow any order (although it might) just let it ramble onto the page – like a dream. You might have a phrase like: 'the sun shone' or 'the grass was knee high' or 'small birds sang in the bare branches' 'Scarecrow with only one leg' Just write it!!!

Keep the sense of your task simple: If you are able to 'capture' (even in a fleeting and disconnected way) what is going on in your field – so someone else can also appreciate/experience it – (in a fleeting and disconnected way) then you have done all that is required – you have 'taken them there' (for a fleeting and disconnected visit.)

BUT – it's possible that something else will happen too – as you go about the workable task of describing things, thoughts, feelings – no different really to tying your shoelaces – something else just might happen – a thought, a perception, an insight, a way of feeling that just strikes you. This is what we call inspiration, just as you were *not* trying – something happens. If it does, then put that into the poem as well – don't worry if it doesn't fit snugly or sits a little awkward, see if you can find a place for it somehow.

Read it out loud

Don't worry if it doesn't follow a logical/linear progression – it's more like those ripples on a pond – we can't even remember whatever 'stone' it was that was first thrown in – all we see are the after-effects, the echoes, the clues to something.

And it's OK if the reader/listener has to do a bit of work – to de-code it, figure it out. That means they are active participants – they have to do something too. If you say 'the sun was like a giant egg yolk' – there's a split-second when the reader has to 'get it' & they experience that lovely 'Ahhh – yes, I see it' moment.

(Note: but that way of describing the sun has been done now (it wasn't even mine) so they have to think of something else!)

Once the poems have been read out –

The teacher can note how these are first drafts. They might possibly stay like this. But sometimes, after reflection, the writer might want to make some alterations – e.g. start the poem in a different place, put the end at the beginning – or start in the middle and ‘flashback’ to the start; or perhaps change just one word, (discovering an even better option). You can experiment with changing the pronoun, e.g. try changing ‘I’ in the poem to ‘You’ and note the effect. Many poets change at least some of their poems over and over before they’re happy. (Note: But always keep the original, first raw (unworried, uncensored) version – it may have qualities you only appreciate yourself after some reflection.

Alternative Themes/Topics

You can try applying all of the above to contrasting situations. E.g. a poem about a disco or a music event. A disco, like a field, is full of sights, sounds, smells, taste, touch. Again, fill the canvas with ‘things’ – find colourful adjectives. Get in touch with the energy – the vitality, the atmosphere in a disco. How does this contrast with a field? The differences may be obvious but what similarities can you find? One way into either picture is to select (or foreground if you’re a visual artist) one character or group of characters (e.g. in a field it might be a scarecrow, a farmer or a donkey) (in a disco: a DJ, a group of dancers, one person dancing on their own.) Clearly the two scenes are hugely different in so many ways, but again try thinking about what the two scenes have in common. Are there rhythms, patterns, elements, colours, sounds that both share? E.g. the music/beat in the disco will be constant and repetitive – it will be the dominant factor in terms of the movement of the scene and also the ‘movement’ of the poem: the rhythm of language and words used to describe it. In a field there might be a tractor or a harvester circling – again, adding a constant sound and offering a possible rhythmic element to the language of the poem. Contrast the more random cheers, shrieks etc. of the dancers with the no less random, (yet constant) calling of birdsong and animal sounds. Think of more overlaps! You can even try to blend the two scenes together – what if the farmer in the field is imagining being in a disco? Imagine a scarecrow at a disco! Describe it – go on, I dare you. What about the animals dancing at night after the farmer has gone to sleep? Which animal would be your DJ? Have fun: write it! What if the farmer sleepwalked into this ‘dance’?

Remember – there are NO RULES - you can write what you like!

Finally, here's a poem by May Sarton.

Bears and Waterfalls

Kind kinderpark

For bear buffoons

And fluid graces –

Who dreamed this lark

Of spouts, lagoons,

And huge fur faces?

For bears designed –

Small nooks, great crags,

And Gothic mountains?

For bears refined –

Delightful snags,

Waterfalls, fountains?

Who ever did imagine

A waterspout as stool,

Or was black bear the wiser

Who sat down on this engine

To keep a vast rump cool,

Then, cool, set free a geyser?

Who dreamed a great brown queen

Sleeked down in her rough silk

Flirting with her huge lord,
Breast-high in her tureen? -
"Splash me, delightful hulk!"
So happy and absurd.

When natural and formal
Are seen to mate so well,
Where bears and fountains play,
Who would return to normal?
Go back to Human Hell?
Not I. I mean to stay,

To hold this happy chance
Forever in the mind,
To be where waters fall
And archetypes still dance,
As they were once designed
In Eden for us all.

Reflecting on the poem

Remember what we said at the beginning of this workshop – a poem is observation, plus something else. What does she observe? Consider the quality (not just quantity) of her observations. What senses does it appeal to most? Consider also the sensory experiences that are implied rather than said out loud e.g. the amazing **sound** the bears might make at any moment. Consider how the element of ‘touch’ figures in the poem. The observer would so love to climb over that wall and feel that fur – but she can’t. In fact, this leads us into the ‘something else’ part – what is she, May Sarton, bringing to this moment of observation. What are her thoughts/feelings as she watches the bears? Choose one word to describe her

main feeling. (In Harvest Festival we might say the main feeling is appreciation, or celebration) so what is it here? Part of her would love to be in there with them – away from the human world. Can we then say: *envy*? Can you see how by allowing this feeling to surface into her thoughts, she is *inspired* to see the scene ‘slant’ as Emily Dickinson said – offering a fresh, unusual and challenging way of seeing what is in front of her.

Always writer for pleasure and without fear (What are the fears? Fear of failing/being wrong/judged/marked/compared with others/not being the ‘best’.)

Robert Frost said a poem ‘begins in delight and ends in wisdom.’

Share your students’ work on www.poetryday.ie

We’d be delighted to receive a selection of the poetry created by the students in your class in response to this lesson plan. We will share a selection of the poetry created in schools around the country in the weeks following Poetry Day Ireland on www.poetryday.ie and via Poetry Ireland’s social media sites. Please email the work to writersinschools@poetryireland.ie or upload a video of your students reading their poems to YouTube or Vimeo and send us the link.

About Pete Mullineaux

Pete Mullineaux lives in Galway, Ireland. He is widely published, including the special edition: *Poetry Ireland Review 100* (Ed. Paul Muldoon) *The Stinging Fly* (Dublin) *Van Gogh’s Ear* (Paris) *Poetry Daily & about.com/poetry* (USA). ‘Harvest Festival’ written at school aged 13, was published in an anthology *Poetry & Song* (Macmillan) and recorded on ARGO records with music by Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger. His work was featured recently on Ireland’s leading arts/culture show, ARENA, & in *FUSION magazine*, Berklee college of Music, Boston. Pete has published three collections: *Zen Traffic Lights*, (Lapwing 2005) *A Father’s Day* (Salmon Poetry 2008) & *Session* (Salmon Poetry 2011.) Three plays have been produced by RTE radio – most recently ‘Butterfly Wings’ (2011). He is a mentor on Poetry Ireland’s writers in schools scheme and has also worked extensively on their Development Education through Literature project. In 2012 he designed a ‘poetry encounter’ workshop around global issues titled Tipping the Balance, for the Babaro International Children’s Arts Festival, a joint initiative of Poetry Ireland and Trocaire. *Just a Second!* – a book of plays on global issues devised with primary and secondary school pupils, was published by Afri (Action from Ireland) in 2014. Website:

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