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Lawrence, C. (2021) *Nurturing the inner anthology*. Teaching English, 25. pp. 41-42. ISSN 2051-7971

This is an Accepted Manuscript published by NATE in its final form on in March 2021 at <https://www.nate.org.uk/publications/teaching-english/>.

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Nurturing the Inner Anthology: reclaiming poetry for KS4 in a time of Crisis

Clare Lawrence argues that the removal of poetry as a compulsory element at GCSE may offer opportunities to engage in poetry in a different way.

Before Christmas there was an uproar at the government decision regarding the 2021 'Covid-light' GCSE curriculum for English that does not make the study of poetry compulsory. Scottish writer and teacher Kate Clanchy, for example, tweeted that dropping poetry at GCSE "sends a signal down the school that it's the dispensable bit of English".

However, the Covid crisis, and even the option of removing poetry study from the examination syllabus, may leave opportunities for poetry to flourish in other environments. Away from the heat of examination, perhaps poetry may regain some intrinsic value in the eyes of our young people.

Poetry for time of crisis

During 'lock-down' Game of Thrones actor Emilia Clark instigated the reading of 'therapeutic' poetry to help people manage loneliness and isolation, and BBC Radio 4 read a poem a day to keep the nation's spirits up. A little like religion, it seems, people may turn to poetry in times of crisis.

And we know it can, indeed, be a life-line. During their over four years of kidnapped captivity it is reported that John McCarthy and Brian Keenan frequently recounted and reconstructed together half-remembered poetry. They drew on their personal stores of verse ... and were, we are led to understand, grateful that they had these 'inner anthologies' on which to draw.

Exhorting school pupils to learn verse by heart in case they face incarceration is unlikely to be a successful pedagogy (I know; I tried it once with an A Level literature class, to their extreme consternation!). However, the question remains to be considered as to whether

we as English teachers are nurturing our pupils' 'inner anthologies'. After all, many of the poems that people can quote are ones that they learned at school. Are we supporting our young people to feed their internal libraries and, if not, how could we do so more successfully?

Memory and poetry

Zoe Jaques & David Whitley's discussion of the relative value of memorising poetry seems an excellent place to start. They offer 'another burst of enthusiasm' regarding the variably-valued practice of committing poetry to heart, situating this within an historical context and offering five 'theses' that aim to 'recover some fundamentals of experience that time may have obscured' (Jaques and Witley, 2019). Number one of these is that 'Memory is at the heart of poetry'. They make the important point that many 'devices' used in poetry are in effect mnemonics. When the Anglo-Saxon story-teller had to recount the legend of *Beowulf*, how much easier is it likely to have been with each line split into two, and a sound reference made across the two halves? Pupils seldom see the 'point' of alliteration; bringing it back to being a concrete, practical device may help them to understand that 'point', especially if they are encouraged to learn by heart themselves. They may also appreciate that without the Poetic Edda, with its various mnemonic tricks, their Marvel Cinematic Universe stories would not have made it into print, let alone to film.

Poetry in students' lives

We must be careful not to assume, though, that we are the 'curators' of poetry with the pupils assuming the role of mere receivers. Pupils from many and diverse cultures may have any amount of sacred or cultural verses already in their inner anthologies, including prayers, chants, hymns or songs, with these perhaps being tied particularly strongly to certain places, festivals or family members. This cultural heritage poetry can be very powerful and valuable, and we would do well to recognise and respect its value for our young people. What is more, pupils may be accessing new sources of poetry of which we are unaware. As part of the 'Old Blood' update to the hugely popular computer game *Warframe* (Digital Extremes, October 2019), the creators hid verse couplets within the gameplay for the player to find. These couplets, once collected, formed a full poem:

Requiem

From brooding gulfs are we beheld
By that which bears no name
Its heralds are the stars it fells
The sky and Earth aflame

Corporeal laws are unwrit
As suns and love retreat
To cosmic madness laws submit
Though stalwart minds entreat

In luminous space blackened stars
They gaze, accuse, deny
Roiling, moaning, this realm of ours
In madness lost shall die

Carrion hordes trill their profane
Accord with eldritch plans
To cosmic forms from tangent planes
We end as we began

This poem – its meaning, the ordering of the couplets, its place within the gameplay, the purpose of its creation and its context within the complex culture of the *Warframe* world – has fuelled lively debate on on-line gaming discussion forums. We must not assume that we as teachers, or indeed education per se, are source for all verse accessed by young people.

Nurturing the inner anthology

If we acknowledge the richness that already exists within pupils' personal anthologies, we are then in a position to nurture and to feed these with further material. Sharing poetry gleaned from our own personal repertoires is likely to have an authenticity that cannot be duplicated through lifting a printed volume off the shelf, especially one with 'GCSE texts' printed on the cover. We need to be willing to share what is valued by us, acknowledging that this involves an element of emotional risk, if we are to be honest about how valuable poetry really is.

'Your own calm space': a Covid Cento

During 'lockdown' Nina Alonso of the Poetry by Heart movement, invited her female friends from around the world to learn a poem and to video themselves reciting it. She compiled clips from these into a new '*video-poem*' (available at https://youtu.be/u8czUH_PGUE) that

made an original response to the Covid crisis. Inspired by this, I invited some recently qualified English teachers who had just completed their PGCE with me to send me one or two lines from a poem that they felt spoke for them about their experience last year. These fragments I wove into a Cento poem, a form of verse entirely composed of writings by other authors. This poetic form has impressive credentials in the ancient world; Hosidius Geta's poetic tragedy *Medea* is a Cento entirely constructed using lines and half lines by Virgil. More modern examples include *The Dong with the Luminous Nose* by John Ashbery (the title being 'borrowed' from Edward Lear) and Peter Gizzi's *Ode: Salute to the New York School*, but it is not a form that retains much popularity. This is a shame I think, as I believe it is rich for classroom use, and would enable a group of pupils, working together, to mine their inner anthologies and create something new and – potentially – interesting.

And finally...

So, in conclusion, I am not sure that anger is the only response to the government's (further) denuding of the English curriculum this year, although anger at the implications of what they are doing and the rationale behind it is certainly justified. Poetry was, arguably, never designed to be 'taught'. It exists, like a benign parasite, in each of our minds, fragmented, disembodied, lacking corporeal form but living on, ready to be enticed forward into our working memory, spoken aloud and shared. These fragments have value, ready to be re-joined to others and regain their original form or to be reworked into something different. Poetry already *is*, in each of us, and our job as English teachers is merely to nourish it. That sounds like so much more fun than trying to meet the AOs for Paper Two!

Your Own Calm Space: a Covid Cento

We were all hidden.	2
When trouble comes,	4
How to smile?	2
Find your hidden peace	3
Amidst the fear:	2
Stay positive	4
The straightforward path lost,	5

The voices of men and women wreck'd,	7
Move forward	4
While and all the while,	2
No matter what	3
Do not accept defeat	4
Any time	3
In all you do:	4
Love	6
Like it's the only thing you know	6
Like a sculptor filling a mould:	1
You have your own calm space.	3

Sources:

1. 'All I do is eat' Adham Smart
2. 'The Great Realisation' by Tom Roberts
3. 'Inner Peace' by Vanessa Hughes
4. 'Trouble but not defeat' by Byron Bulsifer
5. 'The Inferno – Canto 1' by Dante Alighieri
6. 'Milk and Honey' by Rupi Kaur
7. 'As I ebb'd with the ocean of Life' by Walt Whitman

References:

Alonso, N. (2020). Poetry By Heart blog: Like seeds that will bloom in their own rhythm
<https://www.poetrybyheart.org.uk/blog/like-seeds-that-will-bloom-in-their-own-rhythm/>

Jaques, Zoe, and David Whitley. "'Adieu, adieu, remember me!': whatever happened to poetry memorisation in schools?." *English in Education* (2019): 1-14.

Warframe: Digital Extremes, Toronto. <https://www.warframe.com/login> Poem and discussions available online, for example:

https://www.reddit.com/r/Warframe/comments/e9f8yf/requiem_mods_for_liches_may_not_be_completely/

