

BBC Bitesize - Poetry

Episode 1 - Language, form and structure

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TESTAMENT: Yo yo, welcome to the Bitesize Poetry Podcast. I'm poet, educator and rapper Testament. In this series we're going to guide you through some of the key things you need to know to help you write about poetry in your exam. In this episode, I'm going to talk about language, form and structure. There's loads more about all of those on the Bitesize website, so make sure you check those out.

TESTAMENT: Right now, I'm joined by poet and teacher Caroline Bird. Hello Caroline.

CAROLINE: Hello, hello.

TESTAMENT: When you're writing about poetry it's important to say something about the poet's intention, why a poet has chosen to do something. Because we poets write poems to create meaning, don't we?

CAROLINE: A poem is trying to communicate what it feels like to be alive. And you don't have to have studied poetry, this could be the first poem you've ever read. Your interpretation is just as valid as anyone else's, and what it makes you feel, what you see in it, is completely yours. And you have the power of that.

TESTAMENT: You have the power!

CAROLINE: Yeah.

TESTAMENT: When you're writing about poetry it's always good to look at what perspective is the speaker of the poem speaking from. Is it a third person, he, him, she, they. Is it a second person, you, you're doing this, you're doing that. Or is it the first person, I'm doing this? You know what, Caroline let's dig more into the first person perspective.

CAROLINE: That directness of I, taking you straight in, can be really effective. But you have to ask other questions as well cos there are some poems written from the I that feel quite formal and don't feel chatty or intimate. Sometimes people talk about the speaker of the poem. And there's a distance between the poet and the speaker, like they are adopting a persona or a character.

So in the I there's still questions you can ask about, is it from the poet, is this really the poet [T: Yeah.] speaking directly to me?

TESTAMENT: Gotcha, so like the poet can sometimes be writing, I did this, I did that. But actually, they're taking on a character, a soldier or a nurse or whatever it is, they're taking on the perspective.

CAROLINE: Exactly

TESTAMENT: So, what is imagery? Well imagery is descriptive writing which appeals to one or more of the senses. Often imagery is creating a picture, but it can also be something that triggers smell or shows touch. And it might be describing a scene, or it can be figurative like a metaphor. So, a poem could use lots of nature imagery for example, to describe something happening to someone. So, if I got a text from my girlfriend and she said, oh sorry love it's over, I could wilt like a flower.

CAROLINE: The main thing that I use imagery for is to take a feeling, and to try and make it something I can see. And the way that you create feeling in a poem is through mental pictures. People often say a poem is trying to show, not tell, [T: Right.] right?

And what that means is yeah you are trying to bring it to life so that the reader can see it. For example, if we've got a massive crush on someone, we don't sit down and think, I really like this person, and just have a statement in our head, do we? No, oh we think about, you know, the way that they brush the hair out of their eyes, right?

We think of a picture in our head, and that is what creates the feeling in our hearts. And it's the same thing in a poem.

TESTAMENT: Okay, let's talk about the first and the last lines of poems. Why are they important?

CAROLINE: The first line of a poem is where the door opens. The first thing we hear, the first thing we see, it can sometimes lead us gently into the poem where we don't know where we're going yet. Sometimes it can set the whole scene in a first line. There are some poems where the first line is almost throwaway like, oh yes come in, whatever. And then some poems absolutely knock down the door of that first line like boom, we're off, you know?

TESTAMENT: And then what about the last line then?

CAROLINE: Well, a last line. Often, we think a last line is where the poem lands right? We think oh the last line, everything will be answered in the last line. But not necessarily. So sometimes a poem ends with a, the door firmly shuts, everything is clear, wrap a bow around it there we go. But often poems end with a door opened outward, they end on a bit of a mystery.

And there are some poems that don't seem to end at all, they just seem to hover menacingly in the air.

TESTAMENT: Okay let's talk about tense. So often when we're looking at poems sometimes, they write in the past tense, so it's happened before. Or sometimes the present tense, like it's happening right now. Or even sometimes in the future tense, what's gonna happen in the future. When poets write in different tenses, what do you think of the impact of these different, you know, past, present or future tenses are?

CAROLINE: Someone is saying something in the present tense, they don't know the ending of their own poem, right? Cos it's happening line by line, which ups the jeopardy, it ups the danger. It creates an intimacy, a directness. The past tense has more of a seeming security to it cos it's like, well this has happened, and I've definitely come out the other side of it as you can tell because I'm telling you now. The future tense is gonna have lots of hope and anxiety in it, but it's all emotional.

TESTAMENT: They're all tools that the writer's using isn't it to try and create mood, [C: Yeah.] tone, expectations. That's brilliant.

TESTAMENT: So, a quick word about form. Form's mega important. One of the first things I'll be looking at is stanzas, how has the poet grouped the lines together. Is it that this poem is actually groups of four lines? Or six lines? Is actually the whole poem one long group, one giant stanza? If they've broken up the lines, well why have they broken up there? Is each stanza, is each group about a different part of the story? And then there's also line length. Are all the lines really long, are all the lines really short, or are they varied? And what does that say about the emotion or the subject that the poet is writing about. So finally, we're gonna talk about line breaks, those gaps in the poems. Cos sometimes you look at a poem and it might not seem to make sense.

Like why does the line stop there in the middle of a sentence and then carry on, on the next line below? Tell us about that.

CAROLINE: Okay, like so geeky about line breaks. You are controlling where the reader breaths. Right if you'd written a poem about a massive argument, you might decide that all the line breaks are gonna come in really weird places. Because then that's gonna create an anxiety, right? Of if you've written a poem about a climb or a journey, you might wanna break some of the sentences so we can feel like an effort, like, Oh, this line is having to roll – over onto the next line. So, think about it, a line break is the breath of the poem

TESTAMENT: Um hm. The word left on the end of a line is often the word that a poet wants to emphasise, especially if it's at the end of a stanza. A line break creates a pause which makes the

reader reflect on that last word a little more. So, there's a bit more meaning. sort of it draws our attention to it at the end of a line. So, we've got to think why the poet feels that word is important.

TESTAMENT: Thank you, Caroline. Thanks for listening to the Bitesize Poetry Podcast. And don't forget there's loads more to check out, search Bitesize on BBC Sounds.