

BBC Bitesize – Poetry

Episode 3 - Unseen poetry

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TESTAMENT: Yes. Welcome to the Bitesize poetry podcast. I'm Testament. I'm a writer, rapper and poet, and this is our series on how to write about poetry. This episode is focusing on writing about poems you've never seen before, unseen poetry. Stick with us, and we'll give you some keys about how to do just that. We've got a poet, teacher and legend, Caroline Bird, you're with me. Caroline, what's the first think you think when you look at a poem?

CAROLINE: Hello.

TESTAMENT: (laughs). Hello.

CAROLINE: I read it through. Read it from beginning to end and see what it does to me.

TESTAMENT: I mean often when I look at a poem for the first time, I'm trying to think well, what's it made me feel? What's it triggered in me? Has it given me an emotion? If this was a kind of person, you know, what kind of person would it be? Would it be an angry person? Is this an angry poem? Is it a joyful one? Is it one that's thinking about memories? Just relax and take a breath and let the poem speak to me.

CAROLINE: You're in the exam hall, you've got this piece of paper in front of you, it looks just like a load of words. How do you make these words come to life in your imagination? Sounds obvious, but read the whole thing, before you start trying to look at it like a crossword puzzle, from the title, all the way to end.

It might help you to mouth the words as you're reading them. What are you seeing? What is the journey like?

[music]

TESTAMENT: So, we've worked out how our initial response is to the poem ourselves, but what are we gonna write about it? So, my first piece of advice is really simple. Read the question. I'm gonna say that again. Carefully read the question. You might feel one thing, and wanna write a million pages and spend ages writing about one aspect of the poem, but actually it's not what the exam's asking you to do.

Read the question carefully. It can also give you clues within the question to what there is in the poem to unlock. It might help you understand the poem better. So for example, if the question says how does this poem use nature imagery to create a feeling of hope, then you know, next time you read it, you're gonna be looking for those clues, for those times in the poem, when nature is there, and you're

gonna underline everything to do with nature, or anything that might be helpful, and you can highlight and underline those bits, those important words, in the question, and then in the text.

CAROLINE: And I would even advise reading it through first, before you read the question, and then read the question, and read it through with that question in mind. And then you can start reading it with interpretation in mind.

[music]

TESTAMENT: Yeah, so when you're doing that, you're underlining key words in the poem, and when we look back at what we've underlined, I guess you could sort of work out like is there a theme here? What's a theme?

CAROLINE: Well, a theme is a recurring idea that goes through the poem. But it's not gonna be hidden. The thing about a them is if it's hidden, it's not a theme, right, ok.

TESTAMENT: Right.

CAROLINE: So, you can really like trust yourself with this.

TESTAMENT: So, it's always good to say something about what you think the theme, or themes, are in the poem. And remember, to find a word, or a line in the poem, or quote, to back that up. Now once you've read through the poem, look back again through it and see, can you spot any patterns, anything that the writer keeps doing? Identifying patterns is a great way to develop answers. If a poet's doing the same sort of thing in a few different places, group these quotes together when you're writing about them. You wanna think about tone. Ok, what do we mean by tone?

CAROLINE: Well, think about like tone of voice. If I was like oh well, I really, really like your shoes, you'd be like well, she sounds angry, I don't know why, you know.

TESTAMENT: (laughs)

CAROLINE: Or if I was like oh, it's just so wonderful to be here today like this. Think about the personality of the poem. Does it have an angry tone? Does it have an intimate, gentle tone? Does it have an anxious tone? Think about like voice, and how the poem is speaking to you, as a person.

TESTAMENT: I think that's great. And often poems can have a change of tone. Guess we've gotta look at the tone of the poem and go oh, it starts off hopeful and happy, and then there's a change of tone and we're left feeling like oh, confused, or despair, or something like that.

CAROLINE: Exactly, like we've all had arguments where there's been a change of tone halfway through right. Like where you're really irritated, ra ra ra ra, and then at the last minute you go maybe I'll pick you up a juice on the way back home, or I'm sorry for shouting. And there's suddenly a change of tone, right. It happens in life all the time.

TESTAMENT: So, look out for consistency of tone, so the tone might be the same throughout, or does the tone change, and where does it change, are there any quotes that back up how the tone started, and then how it's changed.

Ok. So you're in the exam. Carefully look at the question. Don't rush ahead. Really understand what is it asking for. Make your points and give a short quote to back it up, and remember to explore anything else that is interesting with that quote. So the imagery, the language, the perspective, and you don't need to write loads.

Caroline, final bit of advice on quotes.

CAROLINE: A good quote is not gonna run out of ideas on you, right. You can keep ripping on it and coming up with new things and yeah, just treat it like a – a kind of endless sponge that you can keep ringing water out of.

TESTAMENT: The infinite sponge.

CAROLINE: The infinite sponge.

TESTAMENT: Thank you, Caroline, and thank you for listening to this Bitesize poetry podcast. Remember, there's more about approaching unseen poetry on the Bitesize website. And you can listen again to these episodes, and get the info locked in your brain, and then check out all the other episodes where I'm comparing poems. You can find those, and all the other really helpful Bitesize podcasts, on BBC Sounds. See you later.