

STUDENT DISCUSSION: WHY POETRY

Video transcript

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Rebecca: Not all poetry has to be understood in full in order to be enjoyed. Patterns and puzzles are a really important aspect of the emotional experience. I wonder, what do we gain from reading poetry? What's reading poetry for? Why do we do it?

Yinka-Maria: When we read poetry I think you gain an open mind to a lot of things. Everything's up for interpretation, whereas prior to coming to university everything's considered clear cut and black and white. So I like that poetry, reading it, one answer isn't the right answer. There's lots of different answers. And I think that gives an open mindedness in life in general. There's many different routes and many different ways of seeing things.

Rebecca: Yeah, it's a really kind of democratic process, isn't it? When we've got the same text in front of us and we all bring ourselves and our experiences to bear on it then there's that wonderful experience of really careful listening to other people with an open mind and hearing what they have to say, comparing it with what you have to say.

Alannah: I also think because maybe poetry is usually shorter than books, not always, usually, you kind of have more room to focus less on description and any kind of narrative and more kind of emotional space. So it can often be a bit more visceral to read.

Rebecca: Yeah, so there's a kind of intensity about it that comes from the format. That you're in this space. And it's your description of it as a kind of visceral experience and that that gets you in your stomach, that's really powerful.

Elliot: I think I very much agree with that. I think prior to coming to university I didn't do an English A-level. The last time I'd done any poetry was a GCSE, and it was my absolute least favourite form of literature.

Rebecca: OK.

Elliot: And it was once I got to university and we started breaking it down, really analysing it that I started to get more of an appreciation for that. Getting a familiarity with rhetorical devices, with the way that words work and sound and what effect that has on you. Looking at poetry, actually I think, had quite a big impact on the way that I read my other texts. Because it gave me a greater degree of sensitivity to that kind of thing, to the sounds of the words, to the way that they get used. And it really translated over well. I feel like it almost rounded out my ability to read other texts.

Rebecca: That's really interesting. And does that apply to your reading of words even outside the classroom, in your daily life, in your ordinary business, when you're not sitting around a table like this? Does it have any impact on your experience of the world?

Elliot: Massively so, I think, yeah. Just because that is how we communicate, we read words. Certainly anything written by anyone it will have been written by someone for a reason. And I think when you look at those words you become, certainly after reading poetry, certainly after reading literature, you're more sensitive to how it's being written and what effect that has on you.

Yinka-Maria: Although it might sound far fetched, I feel like poetry does give me more of an appreciation for life. I feel like I can practise mindfulness, so being present in the present moment. Before, like if you're just going somewhere, rushing from one class to another, you're not really thinking about anything.

But when there's nuances in poetry you learn to see the small things in life, all the different feelings and emotions, and things just like the trees, or anything that you can see in your daily life. I see them more clearly through reading poetry and through picking up on the little nuances.

Rebecca: That's wonderful.

Elliot: It's almost like a moment of mindfulness. And I think you're right, it's this moment where you have to share collaboratively almost what you-- because there's no right answer it becomes very much a what do you feel from this text.

And then you can work off of that and everyone sees something slightly different when they look at a poem. When they look particularly at a poem. And it's really interesting to share what you felt about that in a way that's very different from any other text.

When you sit down and you have to break down a poem with the same intensity that you're looking at a 200 page text, it becomes much more intense. And I love that it does almost freeze time. You're trying to puzzle out these sounds, these feelings, these words. It's very much a synesthetic experience. You have to work out how it feels, how it looks, and how all of that links together to some kind of narrative if there is a linear narrative of any kind. And it's just a very fun exercise.

Rebecca: Yeah, absolutely. And isn't it amazing when you do it in company and different people have different perspectives on a poem, and you think, I'd never thought of that. And that's really exciting. It can be a collaborative process.

But also if you read and then reread a poem it's almost like meeting yourself again and having that experience but with yourself. And you think, why didn't I see that the first time I read it? Or I feel differently about the world today. This poem reads differently to me. So there's that extraordinary relationship that we have with ourselves, and with other people, and with poetry.

Alannah: Yeah, and also because you bring so much of yourself to it, like we were saying earlier, it becomes a quite personal process.

All: Yes, it does.

Alannah: And you're kind of bringing your own life and your own experiences to the text and the sharing that with others is quite an emotional experience.

Elliot: A very intense one.

All: Yeah.

Yinka-Maria: I think it is intensely personal. I mean, I do language as well. So I used to be very meticulous about describing what's an adverb, what's the preposition, this and that. But with reading poetry you do bring a part of yourself to it. And it's almost like you're portraying your own feelings to your seminar group when you're reading the poetry. Basically poetry, I think, gives a voice to the feelings that are previously incomprehensible, really. So I think that's why it is personal.

Rebecca: Yeah.