Creating Voices

By Lyndsay Chand
Teacher Trailblazer, Ossett Academy & Sixth Form College

This lesson plan explores Enshia Li’s ‘unwritten letter from my great-grandmother to my great-grandfather, 1930’, a winning poem from the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award 2017.

The activities are suitable for KS4/5 and are designed to take place over five teaching sessions, although they can be adapted to the teaching time you have available.

Family stories are a rich source of inspiration and a great way to explore and engage with students’ different backgrounds. The activities surrounding Enshia Li’s poem will help to develop students’ skills and confidence when dealing with unseen poetry, and should inspire them to write their own poems exploring their own family history. This in turn will enhance their understanding of the choices writers make, and the effects these have. As such, these lessons would make a useful and engaging introduction to unseen poetry for GCSE and A Level English Literature classes.

Lesson One Building confidence with unseen poetry

Ask students to read the poem aloud (given here without the title or historical information). Without discussing the poem, ask students to sum up their first reaction in one word. If this is their first lesson on unseen poetry, they are likely to feel overwhelmed and unsure. Reassure students by discussing their feelings and your own initial reaction to the poem.

Students should then spend ten minutes filling in the worksheet in pairs or small groups (give them an A3 copy to write on as a group). This will help them to develop some first thoughts about the poem before discussing their responses as a class.

This is the whole poem, including the title and historical information. Read through it as a class. Discuss how this additional information adds to students’ understanding of the poem. You may wish to briefly return to the discussion points on Worksheet One.

Links to exam criteria

- Selecting appropriate references
- Confidence with using terminology
- Understanding of methods writers use to create meaning
- Analysis of the effects these methods have
- Confidence with unseen poetry
Lesson Two Developing understanding of a writer’s craft

Give students thirty minutes to answer the questions on an A3 copy of Worksheet Three in pairs or small groups. These questions will help them to explore the writer’s choices in more detail.

Discuss students’ ideas as a class and encourage them to add to their notes.

Lesson Three Developing analytical writing

Ask students to use their notes to help them write an analysis of the poem in response to this question:

*In ‘unwritten letter from my great-grandmother to my great-grandfather, 1930’, how does Enshia Li present the great-grandmother’s feelings towards her husband?*

Lesson Four Developing understanding of a writer’s craft: writing your own poem

In preparation for this session, ask students to fill in Worksheet Four. Ideally, this should be completed as homework to enable students to research their chosen figure and speak to family members if they wish to do so.

Explain that students are going to be writing about the ancestor or historical figure they researched for homework.

**Writing the poem!**
First, give students two minutes to come up with their titles, using the format of Enshia Li’s poem. Hear these – it may give inspiration to students who are struggling!

Give students 15 minutes to write their poem. This doesn’t sound like long enough, but having a short, focused time to write can really help students to get started. If they are nervous, remind them that this is just a first draft – there is no way they can produce a ‘finished’ poem in this time, so there’s no pressure!

If it’s helpful to some students you could introduce them to the idea of ‘free writing’, which many poets use. They have to try to keep writing, even if they write ‘I don’t know what to write’. This can help overcome the fear of a blank page. They can use Enshia Li’s poem as a model if they like, but you will probably find that by now, they are full of their own ideas!
I’d always advise teachers to write alongside students. It’s great for them to see you as a writer.

When the fifteen minutes are up, ask students to work in pairs. They should read their poems to each other and give their partner feedback. For example:

- What did you like about your partner’s poem?
- Was anything confusing/unclear?
- Was there a particularly effective image/metaphor/simile/rhyme?
- Do you like the beginning/ending of the poem, or could you suggest where the poem might start/finish?

Redrafting
Now give students fifteen minutes to reread and redraft their poem.

Lesson Five Exploring your choices as a writer

Worksheet Five
Give students ten minutes to annotate their poem in response to the following question:

How does the poet use language and structure to present this character?

Students could then use these annotations to write an essay analysing their own poem. This will further develop their understanding of poetic methods and the effects writers’ choices have.

Enter the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award

Enshia Li’s poem was a winner of the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award 2017. Now your students are writing their own poetry they can enter the competition themselves.

The Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award is the most prestigious award for writers aged 11-17. It is an annual competition that welcomes poems on any theme and entry is completely free.

Since it began in 1998, the Award has kickstarted the career of some of today’s most exciting new voices. Past winners include Sarah Howe, Helen Mort, Jay Bernard and Caroline Bird.

Winners receive a fantastic range of prizes, including mentoring, a residential Arvon writing course, Poetry Society membership and books. The Poetry Society also continues to support winners’ development with performance, publication and internship opportunities.

Find out more and enter your students’ work at foyleyoungpoets.org
On your own, read the text below:

the last hen died / fourteen days ago / while you puffed your chest / for faceless men. / look. she died / beak open, tongue latched / on a broken triangle / of night / like a babe suckling. / in the silence / her white feathers / curled, cabbage / limp. we were out / of cabbage / months ago, / your son’s belly / a rotten head / to match. / look. I want you / to go back & hold / your life / in an open mouth / like a beggar / & capture / white hills / of rice / & capture / a revolution / revolution / revolution / break up / that word / break up / its brush / strokes / scatter it / scatter / the pieces / across these / wrinkled fields / for us / for us / to fill / our shrunken / stomachs

Worksheet 1

Sum up your first reaction to this poem in one word. Be honest!

Now work in pairs or small groups to explore your first ideas about the poem by answering the questions below:
Now read Enshia Li’s poem again. This time, Li’s title and historical notes are included:

unwritten letter from my great-grandmother to my great-grandfather, 1930

By Enshia Li

*In 1927, the Chinese Civil War broke out between the Nationalists and Communists. Peasants joined the fight, not knowing nor caring which side they fought on. They often joined the army for the meals. Many perished, trying to escape starvation.*

the last hen died / fourteen days ago / while you puffed your chest / for faceless men. / look. she died / beak open, tongue latched / on a broken triangle / of night / like a babe suckling. / in the silence / her white feathers / curled, cabbage / limp. we were out / of cabbage / months ago, / your son’s belly / a rotten head / to match. / look. I want you / to go back & hold / your life / in an open mouth / like a beggar / & capture / white hills / of rice / & capture / a revolution / revolution / revolution / break up / that word / break up / its brush / strokes / scatter it / scatter / the pieces / across these / wrinkled fields / for us / for us / to fill / our shrunken / stomachs

How does this additional information change your understanding of the poem? Would you now change any of your answers to the questions on Worksheet One? Discuss as a class.
You are now going to develop your understanding of meaning, language and structure further. These are important areas to consider when exploring any unseen poem.

Working in your pair or group, answer the questions below in detail, using quotations to support your ideas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meaning</td>
<td>Now that you have read the poem again, what do you think it is about?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning</td>
<td>How would you describe the speaker’s tone and attitude towards her husband? Which words or images create this impression?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Choose one metaphor from the poem. What effect does it have?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Choose one simile from the poem. What effect does it have?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Question</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>List all the types of food Enshia Li refers to. How would you describe these sorts of food? What effect does this have?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>This poem is a prose poem, which means that it is not broken into lines (as we expect poetry to be). However, as you have seen, it does have other characteristics of poetry, such as symbols, metaphors and imagery. Why do you think Enshia Li chose to write this as a prose poem? What effect does this have?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>Where does the poet use repetition? What effect does this have?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>Why do you think the poet chose to write this poem as a letter – as an epistolatory poem – from a wife to her husband?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now answer this question...

Use your notes to write an answer to this question:

In ‘unwritten letter from my great-grandmother to my great-grandfather, 1930’, how does Enshia Li present the great-grandmother’s feelings towards her husband?
Worksheet 4
Planning your own creative writing

In your next lesson, you are going to write a poem inspired by ‘unwritten letter from my great-grandmother to my great-grandfather, 1930’.

In preparation, you should choose an ancestor, historical figure or literary character you would like to write about. Your poem will be written from their point of view as a letter, text, telegram, email, voicemail or some other kind of message. Gather key information about them by filling in the grid below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who are you writing about?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did they do / what happened to them?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When was this?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What historical information might your reader need to know?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What sort of text are they going to write? (A letter, text, email etc.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who might they be writing to?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do they want to say?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>How do they feel about the person they are writing to?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write down at least one metaphor and one simile you could include in your poem.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
On your own, read through the poem you wrote last lesson.

Annotate your poem in response to the following question:

**How does the poet use language and structure to present this character?**

When you have annotated your poem, write your ideas up into an essay. Make sure you think carefully about the effects of your choices.