This lesson involves exploring some of the ideas in Em Power’s poem ‘God in 80s movies’ which was one of the winning poems in the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award 2018.

The activities in this resource could be used in one or two lessons or spread across a series of lessons/home learning to inspire poetry writing. The activities use powerful memories and films as stimuli.

The class will read and discuss Em Power’s poem before drafting their own poem. The poem contains references to self-harm and/or abuse. You may wish to give a content warning before discussing the poem.

There is a list of words and phrases taken from Em Power’s poem on Worksheet 1. Write them out and stick them up around the room or lay them on tables. Get students to think about which words, images and ideas they associate with each word.

- What associations are common around the room?
- Do any themes suggest themselves (for example, films, the 80s, superficiality, religion)?
- Do the students think any of the phrases are gendered? Why or why not? Do the phrases suggest certain stereotypes that need interrogating?
The title of Em Power’s poem is ‘God in 80s Movies’. Ask students to predict what the poem will be about.

Read the poem aloud to the class. Have a quick discussion about what the poem is about, and whether they feel the content of the poem goes with the title.

Now, assign numbers 1-25 to students to read aloud. Then get them to read in that order, stopping and moving to the next person at each punctuation mark.

- Have a discussion about how the punctuation affects the rhythm.
- How and why does the punctuation help to isolate each scene?
- Can they assign an emotion or tone to each part that was read? (You may need to pre-teach feeling vocabulary for weaker groups to support with this.)
- Why have the words “this baby” been repeated when she is clearly not a baby in all of the memories? (It may be useful to know this is a reference to the film Dirty Dancing – see the Teacher’s Notes for more clues about the poems.)
- Does the structure of the poem remind them of any devices used in films? Can we read it as a montage of this person’s life?

Get students to go through the poem and try to work out a timeline or shot list of the poem. They can then track the emotions and mood of the poem on this timeline or their copy of the poem.

**Prompts**
- Do the emotions in the poem change as the character’s life goes on? If so, what might have caused this change?
- How do you feel for this person?
- What restrictions do you think this person has faced?
- What effect does the third person have?

- Highlight all the clichés taken from films, such as a woman taking her glasses off to become more ‘attractive’. How and why has the poet used these clichés? What effect do they have? Could you call the poem a parody or critique of the clichés in 80s movies?
- What words and phrases do you think symbolise how the main character feels about her place in society?
- Look at the simile ‘Like something costume design picked out for her’. What does this suggest about her?
- What does the alliteration in the imagery of the ‘bright burning blue eyeshadow stays’ suggest?
Give students 10 minutes to fill out the timeline of their life (Worksheet 2). If students are reluctant to share memories from their own life, they can make up a character or use a role model, family member, celebrity or fictional character as inspiration. This could also be a great pre-learning homework if you think students would benefit from research and thinking time.

Em Power’s poem uses clichés from 80s films to tell a story. Ask students to choose a different film genre (e.g. horror, romance, sci fi) and list as many clichés as they can from those films. Ask them to include any specific images or phrases they would associate with these films too – for instance, you might expect a spy film to reference: cocktails, tailored suits, or bookcases that turn into secret doors.

You can ask students to think about the associations and stereotypes they made in the first activity. Have they felt like they have had to face any restrictions or stereotypes in their life? Have they ever felt powerless or powerful? What memories do they associate with these feelings which they can put in their timeline?

**Writing Activity**

Using their timeline, ask students to write their own montage poem about their life or the life of someone who inspires them, in the style of a movie or film genre. If they like, they can focus on any restrictions placed on that person, perhaps because of their gender, race, class, religion or anything else.

**Teacher Notes**

It may be useful for you to know the inspiration behind the poem. The following is written by **Em Power**, the author of ‘God in 80s Movies’. You can choose how much of this to share with your class – and how much you’d like them to interpret the poem in their own way.

The repetition of ‘this baby’ is a reference to the 80s film *Dirty Dancing*. The poem’s alternate title was actually ‘Nobody puts baby in the corner’ (a famous line from the film). The poem isn’t about the film though – the inspiration was 1980s teen comedies in general. I knew I wanted to write about 80s teen movies because I really enjoy their aesthetics and premises (I love *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* so so much) but I couldn’t get anything solid down.

Then I remembered that in *Sixteen Candles* – my least favourite of John Hughes’ films due to some very poorly aged sexist and racist jokes – a scene takes place in a church. The main character, Molly Ringwald, begins the film as an average high schooler living in a three storey mansion whose busy parents forget her 16th birthday. She ends the film having received profuse and loving apologies from her parents, as well as a birthday cake from her unbelievably handsome boyfont who conveniently owns a Porsche. I thought the combination of religion with this inconceivably perfect view of suburban life was eerie and strange, and decided to use it as the basis for my poem.
Usually these 1980s romps focus on straight, white, conventionally attractive teens whose biggest worries are about their crushes and cars, as opposed to cultural or familial issues. (The Breakfast Club is different in this aspect. Very accurate depiction of problems teenagers face and their reactions to it. The Breakfast Club doesn’t come under this. Shout out to The Breakfast Club.) Many of these movies portray such a sanitised version of real life that the idea of the characters in them seeking spiritual enlightenment seems absurd.

It might sound silly, but I would often feel jealous of Hughes’ characters and their trivial problems. I wished all my questions about existence and thought and mental illness could be answered with a big synthpop dance montage at prom. I suppose the religious allusions in the poem serve to show that although these teen films are an idealized depiction of the world, they ultimately ring hollow. I feel in some ways the simple narrative points these movies hit - mean cheerleader, popular jock, nerdy girl who takes off her glasses and gets the guy – are so embedded in modern pop culture it’s hard not to compare yourself to them. I guess we’ve come to aspire to, and effectively worship, a palatable, Hollywood version of living that doesn’t exist. 1980s teen comedies are fun and occasionally insightful but it’s important to remember that the parts of life that are too ugly to be featured in them, like death and praying and existentialism, are what make being alive interesting.

All of that being said, I still wish I was born as a minor character in Ferris Bueller’s Day Off.”

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Enter the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award

Em Power’s poem was a winner of the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award 2018. 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 kick-started 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 be sure to enter your students’ work by 31 July at foyleyoungpoets.org
Worksheet 1
Word association

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Association/Imagery</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>heels</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shimmering</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>satin dress</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>prettily</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>this baby</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>three-storey house</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>screams</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>fade out</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blue eyeshadow</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>costume</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suburbs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>power ballads</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hymns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Worksheet 2
Your timeline

Where were you born? What sights and sounds were there?

What was the place like where you grew up?

Describe a time when you felt the most carefree.

What is your most powerful memory from your childhood?

Describe the last time you felt restricted.

What is your most powerful memory from the last two years? Describe the sights, sounds and feelings.
Em Power

God in 80s Movies

This baby is born in pink mood lighting, synths shimmering as her tiny raw hands claw at the vinyl ceiling. This baby is born in a three storey house – powder blue and Victorian. This baby has Coca Cola and Chicago running through her veins. This baby cries prettily, and her screams fade out when they’re not needed. This baby takes her glasses off and all of a sudden she’s just too beautiful. This baby kisses boys in the rain and her satin dress sticks to her like something made of flesh. Like something costume design picked out for her. This baby tries to scrub her face but her foundation is stubborn – five hot showers and the bright burning blue eyeshadow stays. This baby thinks of death. This baby goes to Church but all the walls are blank. This baby tries to pray but there’s nobody she can think to pray to. This baby attempts to draw a cross and breaks her wrist trying. When this baby shows her Mother the bruises – the violet tendrils crawling up her arm, the soft press of her pale body – her Mother doesn’t send her to the hospital. This baby doesn’t need a cast if her smile’s still working. This baby keeps hearing glossy power ballads when she tries to sing hymns. This baby runs as far away from the suburbs as she can but eventually she starts bleeding. Falls to the ground and paints an emerald lawn ruby. Her eyes turn glassy and the credits roll.

‘God in 80s Movies’ by Em Power was one of the top 15 winning poems in the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award 2018. Illustration © Chris Riddell.