Introduction
This is not a resource about where to find a good example of anaphora or caesura in the work of a queer poet. Nor will it instruct you in which lexical set or semantic field you should ask your students to find. In my experience English teachers know precisely how to pick apart unseen poems with their classes and they don’t need my help there. Instead, this resource aims to offer you a range of poets and poems that you can celebrate in your classroom and some writing prompts for how you might encourage your students to write poetry of their own, particularly in our pandemic-ridden times. The poems you find via this resource might also be just the thing you have been looking for – for a coursework text, a mock exam or to use in a tutorial or assembly.

Context
I was lucky enough to start my PGCE in September 2003, the very same month that Section 28 was finally taken off the statute books. Section 28 or Clause 28, for those of you who do not know, was a 1988 amendment to the Local Government Act that stated that a local authority “shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality” or “promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship”. This law was sometimes used to prosecute people but, more than that, it frightened schools and libraries into silence about anything LGBT+, and the effects of this on the curriculum and collections can still be felt today. There were of course people who flouted the rule – I found out about Section 28 from my English teacher who explained that legally we shouldn’t be learning about Oscar Wilde, but we did anyway – and many fabulous protests including Lesbian Avengers bursting in on a live news broadcast. By the time I came to teaching it was pretty easy to slip queer writers into the classroom, and often they were already there in the set text lists. I’ve taught everything from The Hours and Angels in America to Trumpet and Surge – to teach these texts without talking about their queer context would have been impossible.

For LGBT+ teachers, it can be a source of fear and shame or indeed pride and principle to highlight the sexuality or gender identity of the writers they are teaching. For straight teachers, allies or otherwise, it can be a sometimes be a source of discomfort or embarrassment to confront these issues when perhaps all you want to do is get on with discussing enjambment or extended metaphors… but in my experience it is always worth it. Not only are you offering a greater contextual understanding of the texts you are teaching, you are offering a lifeline to the
queer kids in your classrooms (and there will be some). Allow them to see that they have a literary heritage where their experiences are explored and their lives are possible. It can make all the difference. It did to me.

Read more about Section 28 and its legacy here:
- Section 28 – Wikipedia
- Section 28 protesters 30 years on – the Guardian
- Section 28 explained – the Independent

Who to read? Who to teach?
LGBTQ+ poets are everywhere. They are laureates and makars and winners of prizes. Here is a list of 50 poets to get you started. If you already teach one or more of them then maybe you could just insert a bit more queer context into your teaching of them. Perhaps you were given one of their books for Christmas or picked it up because it won a prize but haven’t managed to read it yet. I’m willing to bet that you won’t have to go further than your own bookshelf or the school stock cupboard to find something you can teach for LGBT+ History Month.


Online resources to explore:
The Poetry Society website has a wealth of material to explore. There are Poetry Mixtapes by some of the poets listed above, So Mayer inspired Young Poets Networkers to write poems inspired by Bletchley Park where Alan Turning cracked the Enigma code and the Foyle Young Poets anthologies offer gems such as Steven Chung’s ‘Exception to Snow’.

If you are interested in American writers, head to the Poetry Foundation’s excellent themed collections of queer love poems and LGBTQ Pride poems.

And remember to support your local LGBT bookshop during these difficult times:
- London – https://www.gaystheword.co.uk/poetry
- Cardiff – https://paned-o-ge.wales/
- Glasgow – https://www.categoryisbooks.com/

Writing about non-binary poets
Your students will probably be able to tell you more about gender neutral pronoun usage than I will but do remember some of the poets you study might use they/them pronouns. Here is a link from Teen Vogue which I found useful to share with my department and students.
Some exercises

‘A Gay Poem’ by Keith Jarrett

Listen to Keith Jarrett perform ‘A Gay Poem’.

Read the poem here.

Discuss with your students what they think makes a poem ‘gay’. Does the poet have to be gay? Can a straight person write a gay poem? Can you think of examples of ‘gay poems’? What do they have in common?

‘The Window’ by Mary Jean Chan

Read the poem here.

Mary Jean Chan won second prize in the National Poetry Competition in 2017 for this heartbreaking portrayal of the struggle between a mother and daughter. She begins, ‘Once in a lifetime, you will gesture / at an open window, tell the one who / detests the queerness in you that dead / daughters do not disappoint’.

For teaching context, try the poet’s essay on queerness and language in a particularly stand-out issue of Modern Poetry in Translation: “I identify as queer, in all senses of the word in English. In Chinese, there are other names, ones which I seldom use, because those words and their specific connotations do not evoke the ways in which I have become – and am still becoming – queer. This discovery takes place within language, rooted in the tongues I speak.”

Writing prompts for students

• Write a poem describing a difficult conversation
• Write a poem addressed to a person you know who is having a hard time
• Write a poem about something you are glad you did not do
‘A Litany for Survival’
by Audre Lorde

I’m writing in February 2021, when it is not just LGBT+ people who are preoccupied with survival – we all are. I think it is always a good time to introduce your students to the writing of the self-styled ‘black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet’ Audre Lorde but now really is a particularly good time.

Read her poem ‘A Litany for Survival’ here.

Writing prompt for students:
• Write your own class version of the poem, thinking about your collective experiences of struggle and survival during the pandemic so far, or any other shared difficulty.

‘Poem About My Rights’
by June Jordan

While preparing this resource, I asked a number of people which LGBT+ poet they wish they could have studied at school. The overwhelming majority responded that they would have wanted to read the late June Jordan. You can find out more about her by watching Pratibha Parmar’s seminal documentary A Place of Rage (also incredibly useful if you are teaching The Color Purple).

Watch this animation and reading of ‘Poem About My Rights’.

Read the poem here.

This is a great poem to use when teaching the Assessment Objective ‘consider the context in which the text was produced and received’. Jordan wrote the poem in 1978. What was the context in which she was writing? How might it have been received at the time? Reading it now, what still rings true? How might geographical location, age, political persuasion, gender etc. change our response to this poem?

Community mourning

We are living in a time of deep grief and will probably live the rest of our lives in a legacy of collective mourning. The poetry of LGBT+ writers is a gift in such times.

Read about the history of poetry about the AIDS crisis here.

Read Jay Bernard’s collection Surge (pictured above), which mourns, and considers mourning rituals, for the victims of the New Cross Massacre, Grenfell Tower, friends, family members and Naomi Hersi, a Black trans woman from London who was brutally murdered by her partner in 2018.

Read Richard Scott’s collection Soho (also pictured above), and mourn queer geographies lost to gentrification and the passing of time.
In 2016, forty-nine people were killed in a mass shooting at a gay nightclub called Pulse in Orlando, Florida. In the aftermath, Alexis Pauline Gumb’s poem ‘Pulse’ went viral. Watch her read it here. Scroll down to see the text of the poem under the video. She writes about the loss of a community of people she had not yet met but was sure to have met, maybe just in passing, one day:

i was going to see you in hallways
and be too shy to say hello
you were going to come to the workshop
you were going to sign up for the workshop and
not come

Writing prompt for students:
• Write a poem addressed to someone who has died who you never met. This could a person in your family, a person from long ago, or perhaps an imagined victim of the pandemic who you imagine you might have run into one day if they had survived.

Emily Dickinson
‘Wild Nights – Wild Nights!’

Wild nights – Wild nights!
Were I with thee
Wild nights should be
Our luxury!

Futile – the winds -
To a Heart in port –
Done with the Compass –
Done with the Chart!

Rowing in Eden –
Ah – the Sea!
Might I but moor – tonight –
In thee!

‘Wild Nights – Wild Nights!’ by Emily Dickinson

There has been much speculation in recent years about whether exam board favourite Emily Dickinson was queer. Whether she was or not she certainly had some passionate attachments to the women in her life, and as someone who lived in self-imposed lockdown ruminating about death for most of her adulthood, Dickinson does seem to be a poet for our times. Not all of her poems were doom and gloom, though. The rush of longing and excitement dashed out here is full of joy and promise: “Wild nights – Wild nights! / Were I with thee / Wild nights should be / Our luxury!”

Writing prompts for students:
• Write a poem with abandon and full of expectation.
• Write about a night out you want to have after the pandemic.
• Write about the life you want after school and maybe after you leave home.
• Write about a holiday you want to go on.
• Remember to consider who are you writing your poem to. Is it a friend you haven’t seen for a while? A crush? A family member? Or is it addressed to a whole community? Maybe you are writing to strangers you want to meet?
• Whatever you write about and whoever you are writing to, try to channel Dickinson’s excitement.

May wild times come again for all of us soon. Happy LGBT+ History Month 2021!