This lesson plan explores Libby Russell’s ‘Love Poem to Young Offenders Support Workers’, a winning poem from the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award 2020.

The activities can be used in a single session, or over a series of sessions.

The activities stimulated by reading Libby’s poem should inspire students to explore the reasons why poets write love poems, think about the issues that underpin the poem, and use elements of the form to inspire their own writing.

Before you read the poem, look at these words. They are used more than once in the poem:

Here / know / or

What might these words suggest about the content or nature of the poem? Thinking also about the title, where do you think ‘here’ might refer to? What does the word ‘know’ suggest about what might be valuable in the poem? What impression does the word ‘or’ give us?
Look now at these words/phrases:

Brother / boys / young men

What do you think one of the themes of the poem might be?

Pull together your initial thoughts and make a prediction using this sentence starter:

*I think ‘Love Poem to Young Offenders Support Workers’ is a poem that will make me feel / realise / think about / understand…’*

Alternatively, do a similar activity with the extracts on A3 sheets of paper placed around the room and make sure students note down at least one comment on each sheet, circulating around the room.

Why do poets write about love? In groups of four, discuss why you think poets write love poems. Come up with four different ideas. Perhaps you got:

- They want to celebrate a crucial emotion we all feel
- They want to explore what it is like not to receive love
- They want to explore the different forms love can take
- They want to challenge our perception of what love is or can be

This could be carried out as a group discussion with class feedback or students could be issued with post-it notes and asked to stick their ideas to the whiteboard or an empty wall. The class discussion could then be about grouping the different ideas into themes or categories.

There is a long association between love and poetry. Poets have explored it in a variety of ways. Thinking about the title again, which of the reasons above/you identified do you think will apply to this poem? Do you think this is likely to be a conventional love poem? Why/why not? Does a love poem have to follow the convention of one person addressing another person, or can it be something different?

1. Listen to the poem being read aloud. You can watch the poet reading it at bit.ly/lovepoemyoungoffenders, or the teacher can read it. What do you notice/remember from this first full encounter?
2. Read the poem quietly to yourself. Highlight one thing you like and one thing you don’t understand.
3. Read the poem out loud with your partner, taking it in turns to read a line each. Did you notice anything different this time? How does the poem change when you have to read it yourself?
1. Take a moment to make some observations about the poem’s form (how it is built, what it looks like on the page, whether it is loose and free or tight and rigid). What true things can we say about it?

2. The poem has fourteen lines. It doesn’t have a regular rhythm, nor a set rhyme scheme. Could we call this a sonnet?

The sonnet is a common poetic form with a long history that traditionally has close associations with love. Its most famous practitioner in English is William Shakespeare (1564 – 1616) who wrote 154 sonnets in his lifetime but many, many poets have used the form and still do. Generally speaking, traditional sonnets have fourteen lines, can use a variety of set rhyme schemes and are often, but not always, written in iambic pentameter. Poets, however, love to push the definitions of form, and some contemporary sonnet-writers change rhyme schemes andmetrical patterns, and add or subtract lines.

3. Why has the poet chosen to use this form or at least to allude to it? Is the poet subverting our expectations of what a sonnet is or does? How? Why?

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1. What is a young offender? What is a young offenders support worker? Why would someone wish to write a ‘love poem’ to this group of people?

Think about this definition:

A young offender is a term used to describe someone under 18 years of age who has committed a criminal offence.

2. We talked at the beginning of the lesson about the word ‘know.’ It seems that knowledge has value – ‘currency’ – in this poem. Pick out or highlight the things that are talked about as known. What do they have in common? Why has the poet chosen these? Knowledge has value depending on your circumstances. What is valued in your world / society / culture / community? Why?

3. ‘Young offenders’ often receive negative representation in the media and society in general. Do you think this is fair? Why/why not? How does the poem view young offenders? How does the poem seek to explore the work of those who support and help them?
A great way to explore and understand a poem is to get inside it, or to let it get inside you! Spend time with the poem, trying to memorise it, working with your partner to test, coach and encourage each other to memorise as much as you can. Can we remember the whole poem as a class?

This is also great practice for GCSE where you may be required to memorise quotes for your exam!

Now look at the first and last words from each line.

Here         seen
more          currency
in            collars
or            school
or            know
how           pavements
their         sirens
and           know
what          faces
trembling     stones
and           here
where         cheap
There         know
the           home

What do you notice about them? Is there a difference between the kinds of words in the two columns?

Activity 6 First and last

The poem starts with the word ‘Here’. Now that you have read the poem, where do you think ‘here’ is? Is it ‘school’? Is it the ‘pavements’? Or is it somewhere like a young offenders institution? Why does the poet choose to start with ‘here’, suggesting a specific place, and yet not tell us directly where this is?

The poem ends with the word ‘home’. Why do you think the poet has done this? Are ‘here’ and ‘home’ the same place? What connotations does ‘home’ have?

Activity 7 Creative writing

Choose any word from the first column and pair it with any word from the second e.g. ‘Their faces’. This is the title of a new poem that you are going to write.

Write a poem in the voice of a person who is trying to help someone who is in trouble. You can write in any form, but if you want to challenge yourself, think about how you could use aspects of the sonnet form too.
Which other poetic forms do you know? Could you write in one of these forms, or allude to it? If you don’t know any other poetic forms, research some and choose one you like the look of. There are hundreds to choose from but some are more accessible than others!

Or, if you’d like to explore the sonnet form a bit more, Don Paterson’s 101 Sonnets is a good anthology, and Penned in the Margins’ Adventures in Form will introduce you to different types of sonnet, such as ‘breakbeat’, ‘double’ and ‘fractured’ sonnets.

Write a poem from the point of view of a young person who is in trouble, exploring their feelings. This type of poem could be said to be a ‘confessional poem’ where the speaker expresses and explores feelings based on their personal experiences, which they may not have necessarily voiced to anyone else. Many writers have adopted this tone (such as Sylvia Plath) and it remains popular today. Find an example of a ‘confessional poem’ and use it for inspiration for your own writing.

And finally…

Now that you know the poem better, think back to your prediction at the beginning of the lesson.

I think ‘Love Poem to Young Offenders Support Workers’ is a poem that will make me feel / realise / think about / understand…’

How accurate were you? Has your perception changed?
Libby Russell
Love Poem to Young Offenders
Support Workers

Here, where the streetlights have seen
more than any expert, there is a currency
in the green ghosts of cheap chains hidden under collars,
or in knowing somebody’s brother from school,
or in the phone numbers of people who know
how to scoop up boys spilling out onto pavements,
their limbs limp as weeds, without calling for sirens
and warrants and lights; people who know
what to say to young men with grey faces
trembling blood onto paving stones,
and how to empty their hand without trouble. Here,
where there are no newspapers, talk is never cheap.
There is a currency in handlebar seats, and boys know
the value of dragging each other home.

Libby Russell is a top 15 winner in the Foyle Young
Poets of the Year Award 2020. Libby thinks poetry is
very upsetting and difficult, but they keep doing it
anyway. They study sociology and social anthropology,
and like big cats and small cafes.
Libby Russell’s poem was a winner of the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award 2020. 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 week-long Arvon writing course, Youth Poetry Society membership and books. The Poetry Society also continues to support winners’ development with performance, publication and internship opportunities.

To find out more, or to request free copies of the most recent winners' anthology, You Speak in Constellations, along with the beautiful competition poster for your classroom or library, simply email fyp@poetrysociety.org.uk

Be sure to enter your students’ work by 31 July 2021 at foyleyoungpoets.org