



POETRY SNAPSHOTS

A guide to encouraging reading poetry aloud as a means to inspire Vision, using tips from poet Glyn Maxwell's handbook *On Poetry* (Oberon Books, 2011).

Adaptable for all key stages

POETRY BY
HEART

The Sleepy Giant

My age is three hundred and seventy-two,
And I think, with the deepest regret,
How I used to pick up and voraciously chew
The dear little boys whom I met.

I've eaten them raw, in their holiday suits;
I've eaten them curried with rice;
I've eaten them baked, in their jackets and boots,
And found them exceedingly nice.

But now that my jaws are too weak for such fare,
I think it exceedingly rude
To do such a thing, when I'm quite well aware
Little boys do not like to be chewed.

And so I contentedly live upon eels,
And try to do nothing amiss.
And I pass all the time I can spare from my meals
In innocent slumber like this.

Charles E. Carryl

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In his excellent little handbook, *On Poetry*, the poet Glyn Maxwell talks about a poem's conception, the poem arising "from the urge of a human creature, *once, upon a time* – to break silence, fill emptiness, colour nothing with something, anything." He invites us to think about the opening line of any poem as the precise moment at which the pressure of that silence breaks into an utterance that has to be heard. The speaker simply has to speak.

Maxwell suggests letting photography help us think about this, imagining any first line as a photographic frame. Imagining this as a "snapshot" encourages us to slow down our reading, to really think about the moment at which this voice starts to speak, where it's coming from and its orientation to us, its readers and hearers. Maxwell suggests these key questions:

"How much of the frame is taken up by the face of the poet? Is his or her whole figure in the poem, is he or she farther away? Back to you, gesturing in the distance? Hovering spectrally above? Seated, standing, walking? Is the picture in colour? What does he or she think of you? Can you be seen at all? Is the poet present at all?... Consider how he or she is there, how the poet is imprinted on the poem."

This activity can be adapted for any poem. We suggest trying it again with Joseph Coelho's 'Eastbourne' or Stevie Smith's 'Fairy Story' Available at www.poetrybyheart.org.uk

It's a set of questions that can take us a long way into the poem. Try this using Charles E. Carryl's poem 'The Sleepy Giant'.

Read the poem aloud a couple of times, or listen to recordings, to get the gist of it. Then look closely at the opening line and use Glyn Maxwell's questions to explore what it is the poet wants us to see. Get them to sketch that "snapshot" of the opening line, however loosely, in the final frame of the storyboard. Then invite them to imagine the four or five frames of the film that led up to the final one. What happened to cause such a build-up of pressure that the first line became inevitable?

Once everyone has imagined their way into the start of the poem like this, try speaking the opening line in different ways that reflect the build-up. What tone of voice works best? How loud or how quiet? How fast or slow? Does the intonation go up or down, or stay entirely even?

Then try repeating the "snapshot" activity with the last line of the poem. Has the poet moved? Has the voice changed? What do you see now? How could you speak the last line to match this vision? And how could you use your voice to get from the vision of the first line to the vision of the last line?

By exploring the first and last lines of the poem as "snapshots", you're "fixing" two key moments that define the poem's shape and structure, mood and tone, and you're imagining who is speaking these thoughts and why. And you're lifting the poem off the page, into voice and breath, where it belongs.

