

KEY STAGE	AGE
EYFS	3-5
KS1	5-7
KS2	7-11
KS3	11-14 ✓
KS4	14-16 ✓
KS5	16-18 ✓

AT A GLANCE

- AT A GLANCE
- FEMINISM
- IMPERATIVE MOOD
- REPETITION FOR EFFECT
- EMOTIVE LANGUAGE
- LITERARY TRADITION

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POETRYCLASS: FRESH IDEAS FOR POETRY LEARNING FROM THE POETRY SOCIETY

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FOYLE YOUNG POETS

POETRY AS A CALL TO ARMS

OF THE YEAR AWARD

BY ASHLEY SMITH

This activity involves a close reading of Phoebe Stuckes' poem 'Daughters', one of the winning poems of the 2013 Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award (<http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk/content/competitions/fyp>) and reprinted here on page 3.

It uses aspects of the poem's language and structure to provide the springboard for writing a 'call to arms' poem. Other poems of a similar mood, theme or structure by John Agard, Selima Hill, Charlotte Higgins and Sylvia Plath are referenced as points of comparison and may be used to inform the structure and thematics employed by the students.

Getting started

Watch the spoken word piece at the start of this video of Sarah Kay speaking at the TED Conference 2011. (Avoid giving an explanation; just allow the students to listen and think.)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0snNB1yS3IE>

When the video is finished, ask the students whether they have been listening to a speech or a poem. Whatever opinion they express, ask them to qualify it with an explanation as to why. (It might be useful to jot down any notes on the whiteboard as the students give their input.)

If they are struggling to come up with ideas, you could ask them to consider the following, maybe by displaying them on the board as prompts:

- Rhetorical techniques
- Figures of speech
- Emotive/ persuasive language
- Context
- Delivery
- Repetition
- Patterns of three
- Pace
- Intended audience

...or any other aspects that seem interesting to you and/or the students.

After five or so minutes of discussion, ask the students whether they think a poem and a speech can ever be the same thing. Again, jot down any ideas that the students suggest for later reference.

Next steps

Explain that the aim of the lesson will be to create a piece which blurs the lines between poem and rhetorical speech (using words to inspire or persuade an audience). Then read out Phoebe Stuckes' poem 'Daughters' (page 3).

At this stage, I would avoid letting the pupils see the text. You want them just to listen and not to be distracted by having to read from the page as well. If you need to give the students a specific focus, ask them to listen for words and phrases that strike them as being particularly interesting and effective.

Now ask the students to spend a minute or two jotting down the various images and phrases that have stuck in their minds. In all likelihood, the phrase ‘Let us...’ will have stuck in the minds of the students. Ask them to explain why this is the case and discuss any of these ideas that may emerge:

- Repetition
- Imperative voice
- Audience inclusion (‘us’, rather than ‘I’ or ‘they’)

If they don’t suggest it themselves, you might also like to draw the students’ attention to the use of powerful adverbs and adverbial phrases being used in a rhetorical manner such as ‘Enough...’, ‘No more...’, ‘never...’, ‘no longer’. How do these help the reader to feel empowered by the ideas being expressed within the poem? How do they work together with well-chosen verbs such as ‘spit and snarl’, ‘anchored’ and ‘raving’ to make abstract metaphors into concrete ideas?

Hint: Some time spent mapping out the socio-cultural references in the poem might be useful, if you have time. For example, the references to ‘Amazons’ and the character of the “madwoman in the attic” of Charlotte Brontë’s ‘Jane Eyre’ merit some exploration, as do more modern references to ‘guitar heroes’ and ‘pulling off high heels to run’. How does Stuckes draw the reader’s attention to the historical struggle

for female emancipation through these various references and what point do the students think she is making with them?

One final reference which the students may have recalled from the first reading is the interesting final metaphor: ‘you Swiss army knife of a woman’. The image of an everyday object that is nevertheless powerful, versatile and potentially dangerous as a weapon is certainly one worth analysing in detail. When considered alongside the switch from ‘us’ to ‘you’ in this final stanza, how is the poet using her words ultimately as a “call to arms”?

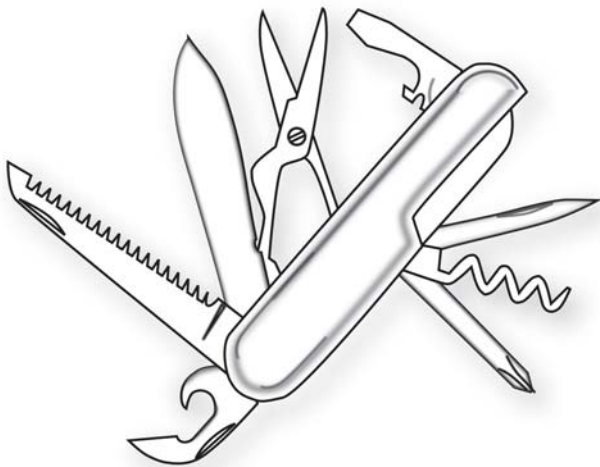
Get writing

Ask the pupils to start planning out some ideas for a “call to arms” of their own, using as their focus any (embattled) minority group, human or otherwise. Ideas worth sharing might be:

- Religious minorities
- Sexual minorities
- Racial minorities
- Nature/wildlife
- Younger or older generations

To provide further ideas you could play John Agard’s ‘Put the Kettle On’ (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lt-viSlQ6oc>) and ask your students to jot down any words and phrases that echo those used in Stuckes’ poem. This should then provide them with some useful line starters for their own writing. Does Agard use any repetition? If so, which words and phrases does he repeat and why? John’s poem also shows that their poem need not be overly earnest in tone. Indeed, subtle humour and irony can be used to add to the rhetorical power of a poet’s message.

Hint: If the students are struggling to get going, ask them to look through their rough notes and pick out their favourite line-starter, e.g. ‘Let us...’, ‘No more...’, ‘Never...’ Ask them simply to repeat this as the opening to each line that they think of during the first few minutes of writing. This can then be used as the framework around which to build the rest of the poem.



DAUGHTERS

Enough of pulling off high heels to run
Or else waiting alone in unclaimed ugliness.

No more crying out for guitar heroes
Or going back to old loves for the safety

Let us build bonfires of those unanswered prayers.
Let us learn how to leave with clean and empty hearts
Let us escape these attics still mad, still drunk, still raving
Let us vacate these badly lit odd little towns
Let us want none of what anchored our mothers
Let us never evolve to be good or beautiful
Let us spit and snarl and rattle the hatches
Let us never be conquered
Let us no longer keep keys in our knuckles
Let us run into the streets hungry, fervent, ablaze.

You
Are a mighty thing
A captive animal, woken with a taste for blood.
Feed it,

You Amazon, you Gloria, you Swiss army knife of a woman.

PHOEBE STUCKES

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Foyle Young Poets of the Year, 2013



FURTHER READING

Any of the following poems could be studied in the classroom or given to the pupils to research in their own time:

'Arson' by Charlotte Higgins – a powerful reimagining of the Cinderella story which could be used to inspire similar explorations of the world of fairy tales. (You could suggest to your students that they think of ways in which other fairy tales could be used as a framework upon which to build calls for emancipation in the modern era.) Higgins' poem is designed to be listened to, following the tradition of oral folklore, and so the points of comparison with Stuckes' rhetorical style are worthy of deeper exploration (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOt_XigBUBM). Students might be interested to hear that Charlotte Higgins was also a Commended Foyle Young Poet in 2010.

'Cow' by Selima Hill – a very different expression of feminist point of view, imagining a passive retreat from the burden of gender expectations, but which uses repetition and rhetorical language in similar ways to Stuckes' poem (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WO1aQfJppYs>).

'Mushrooms' by Sylvia Plath – one of the best known poems dealing with the theme of feminism. The message of Plath's poem is echoed strongly within Stuckes' and there could be a valuable discussion or debate to be had about the extent to which women have been successful in their struggle for equality since 'Mushrooms' was written (<http://www.bl.uk/learning/langlit/poetryperformance/plath/poem1/plath1.html>).