Colluding in the 'Torture' of Poetry: Shared Beliefs and Assessment

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Abstract

Assessment is most often held responsible for teachers' and students' mechanical approach to poetry in class. This article shows how examination pressure leads a group of poetry teachers and A Level English students at a post-16 college in Malta to perpetuate an approach to poetry that is characterised by an emphasis on finding hidden meaning. However, it is also argued that to blame only assessment for this approach is to run the risk of ignoring the shared beliefs that teachers and students have about poetry.

Keywords

Poetry, literary analysis, beliefs, assessment, A Level

Introduction

In his keynote speech at the 2012 NATE Conference, the former poet laureate Sir Andrew Motion discussed how the overbearing pressure of the curriculum and assessment sometimes influences teachers' approach to poetry in the classroom.

> *You as teachers of English are asked to do things around poems as part of the National Curriculum which I think...run the risk at least of putting things the wrong way round; that's to say of looking at poems for what they have to say about a certain thing, a certain theme, rather than looking at the poetry of poetry.*   (Motion 2012)

The ideal situation would be for teachers to strike a balance between what a poem has to say and its poetry, which seems to transcend whatever meanings are conveyed by the poem.

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> *We want somehow to get – within a system that has to be assessed –*
> *we want to get to the state in which we're able to value a poem for*
> *what it precisely has to say about a subject that it engages with but*
> *at the same time we want to celebrate the fact that it runs off over*
> *the horizon with us lagging behind, runs over the horizon taking*
> *its meanings with it. That seems to me to be the ideal balance that*
> *we're always in pursuit of.*   (Motion 2012)

This article explores how teachers' and students' attitudes towards the study of poetry are possibly influenced by assessment. It shows how a group of poetry teachers and their A Level English students at a post-16 college in Malta feel pressured to use an approach to poetry that emphasises the discovery of hidden meaning. This article demonstrates that this approach is also a result of the beliefs about poetry that teachers and students seem to have in common.

The mystique of poetry

Out of the different genres that students come in contact with when studying English, poetry seems to be the one that is most often associated with negative feelings (Burdan 2004; Blake 2008). Poetry is the text type 'which seems to present the most people with the most challenges' (Dymoke 2009: 71) but at the same time it seems to be widely acknowledged that 'positive experiences at school are…important to laying the foundation for lifetime engagement with poetry' (BOP Consulting 2009: 5). However, the way poetry is being taught at school is failing to provide young people with such an outcome (BOP Consulting 2009; Booktrust 2010). Teachers play a crucial role in inspiring young people to enjoy poetry and the way they approach poems in class can help stimulate either a lifelong passion for the genre or an equally vehement rejection of it.

Some of the challenges that teachers face when teaching poetry are to a some extent related to the fact that poetry seems to possess an inordinate amount of cachet, ascribed to it in part by the notion of its difficulty. Certain definitions of poetry's nature underscore its 'superiority over other forms of expression and [have] perhaps done the genre no favours by placing it on so high a pedestal' (Dymoke 2009: 76). The idea that poetry is a difficult medium can 'lead potential readers…to reject its advances' (Dymoke 2009: 78). In fact, the older students get the more likely they are to see poetry as an elite form of art (Booktrust 2010). According to Motion (as cited in Gibbons 2000) in order to 'demystify poetry' in students' eyes, teachers need to be encouraged 'to get over the mental block that poetry was difficult to teach'. Demystifying poetry is crucial if students are to see poetry as something accessible and enjoyable, something they can read on their own without the teacher acting as a gatekeeper to meaning.

Gatekeepers to meaning

The stance adopted by teachers during poetry lessons can help perpetuate the myth that a poem is an enigmatic text that can only be made accessible by

means of the teacher's elucidation of its meaning. By adopting 'the position of supreme arbiter' (Stratta et al. 1973: 41), a teacher will not help students develop their own personal response to a text and will merely compel them to accept the opinion of an expert reader. This only serves to make students 'passive' and leads them to perceive reading as if it were 'a kind of detective work, a cracking of codes and solving of mysteries, having little or no relevance to life as they live it beyond school' (Stratta et al. 1973: 42). In turn, a mechanical analysis of poetry becomes the only appropriate way of reading a poem, something that should ideally be counterbalanced with activities that 'guide students into the study of poems without forcing them to accept the teacher's interpretations' (Elkins 1976: 190). Such activities would hopefully tap students' creativity and transform them from passive into active readers of poetry.

The way poetry is approached in the classroom also affects students' reading of a poem:

> *If classroom teaching has encouraged a view of poetry as something with a meaning stubbornly hidden in the text and revealed only to the fortunate few, many readers are likely to do no more than engage in making probing guesses, hoping that somehow the poem's meaning will occur to them.* (Dias and Hayhoe 1988: 35)

Some teachers attempt to give students the impression that the analytical approach used to unearth a poem's meaning is objective. Even when students come to realise that this is not so they still feel 'inhibited about trusting their own response' and embark on the unseen component 'in fear and trembling' (Scott 1989: 33). Such an approach obviously 'implies that poetry is something locked away like the best china, and that a special key needs to be fetched before you can get at it' (Strauss 1993: vii). Consequently the misconception arises that since the teacher is the one holding the key students should rely on their teacher to be given access to a poem's mysteries.

Benton (1999) reports that 'far from facilitating pupils' learning and engagement with poetry some teachers felt constrained to adopt strategies which they felt actively hindered it' (p. 521). These strategies are mainly those associated with a highly analytical approach to the teaching of poetry that assigns teachers the privileged role of explaining to their students the hidden meaning of a poem. Dymoke (2003) criticises 'The notion of poetry as a puzzle' which she finds to be 'a common perception among students (and their teachers) who engage in a hunt for the missing clue which will help them solve the poem' (p. 3). Burdan (2004) agrees with this and claims that 'For many students, literary analysis is primarily a means by which their teachers demarcate the gap between the students' naive or inept readings of literature and their own, more sophisticated ones' (p. 23). Rather than confidently exploring the poem students seek to guess what the teacher already knows is hidden in the text.

The belief that reading poetry involves an interaction with the poem during which the reader discovers meaning is responsible for such a lack of confidence on the students' part. According to Burdan (2004) 'This misunderstanding of reading is further complicated by a view of the literature classroom as a territory too perilous for uninitiated and inexpert readers to explore' (p. 23). Hence students adopt the guise of observers rather than participants and read in order to find out what the poet is saying or what they think their teacher understands the poet is saying (Burdan 2004). This seems to have a long-lasting effect. Pasquin (2010) describes the surprise of a group of student teachers when she asked them to avoid analysing a poem. She explains that this reaction was due to the fact that 'they had struggled with the meaning of poetry all through their high school years and now a poem presented itself as a problem to be solved, in a fashion that must please the teacher and the examiner' (Pasquin 2010: 256). By adopting the stance of gatekeepers to poetry, some teachers help to consolidate students' belief that a poem will remain inscrutable as long as a teacher is not present to help them unravel its meaning by means of a highly analytical approach.

Assessment backwash
Most authors in the field perceive the connection between poetry and assessment in a rather negative manner, especially due to the backwash effect that examinations have on poetry teaching and learning. Mathieson (1980) comments on how teachers' preoccupation with the way examinations are to blame for the problems they encounter when teaching poetry eclipses all other issues concerning the subject. However, Dymoke (2003) feels that this is still a relevant point of view: 'The place of poetry within public examinations and the effect that this has on teachers' and pupils' perception of poetry remain significant issues for the English curriculum in the twenty-first century' (p. 183). Despite the fact that there are other contributing factors at play, this article shows that both teachers and students tend to mostly blame assessment for the way they approach poetry in the classroom.

Some teachers feel that assessment forces them to adopt teaching methods that lead students to pass their examinations successfully rather than enjoy poetry. Benton (1999) found that teachers acutely experience the dilemma of being torn between 'the detailed analysis of poetry which they felt obliged to undertake for the purposes of examinations and…by their desire to let the pupils explore it for themselves' (p. 522). Assessment 'reduced their freedom to choose what and how they taught' and the apparent 'need to deliver the "right" answer has meant some teachers see themselves spoon-feeding classes too much and spending a disproportionate time on technicalities' (Benton 1999: 530). Even though teachers seem to value a response-based approach to the teaching of poetry, 'faced with the dilemma of preparing students for content-heavy examinations, they felt under pressure to ensure their candidates could deliver appropriate answers in the final exam' (Dymoke 2002: 86). This means that the creativity of a poetry lesson is stifled by the

almost exclusive focus on annotations meant to cover all possible examination questions.

It seems that teachers are unable to teach poetry as creatively as they would like to because of the pressure of examinations and Sedgwick (2003) calls this 'a dangerous state of affairs' (p. 99). Ofsted (2007), in fact, indicates that examination pressure dampens teachers' enthusiasm for poetry teaching and consequently their 'focus on technical analysis…can lead to dull and repetitive teaching' (p. 15). Poetry makes the teacher feel 'alarmed, naked and inadequate'; sensing that you are being compelled to decipher a poem 'is scary when an exam class is in front of you demanding to know what it "means" for the exam room' (Calway 2008: 60). The anxiety created by the belief that examiners are expecting a specific kind of response to a poem seems to be one of the leading factors for which some teachers probably use a restrictive kind of pedagogy when teaching poetry.

Students seem to share their teachers' fear of assessment and this has a negative effect on the way they engage with poetry during a lesson. In fact, 'students feel the need to "learn" the poem because of how the assessment system is structured, ending up reading poetry notes only to reproduce them in examinations in order to get more marks' (Camilleri 2005: 51). Snapper (2006) remarks that 'Often students come to A Level – and leave A Level – seeing poems as irritating little verbal puzzles set to test them in exams, to see whether they can get the right answer' (p. 32). However, A Level English examiners in Malta seek to dispel this myth by indicating, for example, that 'the overall aim' of the unseen poem component in the examination 'is neither a treasure hunt for meanings nor a chase after the "right" interpretation' (MATSEC 2009: 8). Despite these reassurances, teachers and students persist in perceiving poems as texts that need to be unravelled.

Ofsted (2007) suggests that students' view that the study of poetry is 'dull and pointless…was largely formed by the didactic approaches used by some teachers to prepare pupils for examinations' (p. 7). According to Snapper (2009) the 'exclusive emphasis on written literary analysis of poetry under exam conditions which dominates from GCSE onwards, along with a significant reduction in time spent on other modes of response (such as performance), and on creative writing' (p. 2) only serves to bolster students' alienation from poetry. Gordon (2010) argues that despite the problems that examiners identify in students' analytical writing on poetry, young people 'can indeed respond sensitively to poetry, though in ways not easily acknowledged by this established discourse of poetry in schools' (p. 40). Using an approach that is not entirely geared towards assessment outcomes but which also fosters student's appreciation of poetry and creative engagement with a variety of poems ensures that 'the dead hand of the exam' does not come to rest on students and 'lead them to reject poetry for ever once they have jumped their last exam hurdle' (Dymoke 2009: 95). According to Hanratty (2011) 'the educational and

imaginative benefits resulting from that engagement cannot be underestimated and they can undoubtedly transcend the merely academic benefits which can be measured by examination results' (p. 424). It is clear that an assessment-oriented approach to poetry has the potential of undermining students' engagement with the genre for much longer than the duration of their studies. This is especially so if students come to inherit the misbelief that a poem can only be interpreted in a conventional manner.

Study context

A total of eight poetry teachers and fifteen students took part in this study. The teachers all held Masters degrees or PhDs in English and only one of them had less than five years' teaching experience. The students were all aged between 17 and 18 and each one of them had at least one year of post-16 schooling. The study took place at the largest post-16 college in Malta where students enrol on a two-year A Level English course leading to a nine-hour examination. The latter includes two poetry components: a question on a set text (e.g. Wilfred Owen's war poems) and an unseen poem. Preparation for the first component is provided by means of lectures while training for the unseen poem component is held during literary criticism seminars.

Methodology

Every teacher was observed conducting one 60-minute literary criticism poetry seminar and the data was collected by means of an events checklist and note taking. The checklist incorporated a time sampling approach and it was used in order to record a list of pre-determined lesson events in every one-minute interval. Event frequencies were subsequently calculated in terms of percentages of the total lesson time.

After each in-class observation session the teacher in question took part in a semi-structured interview that was conducted in a one-to-one manner. Subsequently, a random sample of students from the eight observed sessions were also interviewed in this way. All the interviewees were asked to explain what they thought of poetry as part of the A Level course. They were also asked to read a copy of Billy Collins's (1988) 'Introduction to Poetry' and to think about whether it describes their experience during a poetry lesson. This poem was chosen because of its potential as stimulus material.

> *I ask them to take a poem*
> *and hold it up to the light*
> *like a color slide*
>
> *or press an ear against its hive.*
>
> *I say drop a mouse into a poem*
> *and watch him probe his way out,*

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

Poetry as a course component

Nearly all the teachers who took part in this study indicated that poetry is one of their favourite subjects. Three of them expressed the idea that they enjoy teaching poetry 'because it is more demanding' (Teacher C, henceforth TC) on them and their students; doing poetry 'challenges the mind' (TF). Given that 'poetry is elusive and forces you to go beneath the surface…students need to use their intuition to fully experience it otherwise it would just be damn difficult' (TA). At the same time, these teachers acknowledged that most often students find poetry difficult and that is why knowing how to analyse poetry is 'a skill that they need for life' (TF). This leads them to cultivate students' 'ability to dissect, to dig deeper' (TE) and makes them associate poetry lessons with a discovery process: 'it's more interesting to communicate what you have discovered and trying to urge the students to discover more in the poem' (TB). Here it becomes apparent that for these teachers poetry is prestigious because it is considered difficult. They also seemed aware that as experienced readers of poetry they play the role of gatekeepers to meaning in class.

Almost all the students mentioned the idea that poetry is a genre that they have to 'analyse' (Student J, henceforth SJ). While five students claimed to enjoy doing this because it is a transferable skill – 'now it's come into my life, like when I read a book I can't help but actually analyse it on my own…I actually look for the hidden meanings' (SJ) – the majority of them indicated that they seem to find it 'difficult' (SH). Three students mentioned that criticism of poetry in particular makes them feel 'nervous' (SC). According to one interviewee this happens because students are 'very picky with the message of the poem…if I get that wrong I'm afraid I'm going to get the whole thing wrong so I'm constantly focusing on the message…getting the meaning out of it…if I don't get it right I won't be able to continue' (SI). The students suggested that they feel somewhat uneasy about the literary criticism of unseen poems because it is 'a bit hard…it's not one of my favourite subjects' (SD). Another student claimed that 'we focus a bit too much on analysing it…and sometimes I think that's a bit too much' (SA). Four students stated that they

enjoy reading and discussing poetry in class but not analysing it critically because 'sometimes it's taken a bit too far…it's a bit insane how deeply we go into it during our lessons' (SA). These students also indicated that they do not like being asked to 'do a whole critical essay on it…I don't really like that…I find it difficult to analyse a poem' (SN). The students' feelings seemed to be in contrast with the feelings of those teachers who enjoy teaching poetry precisely because of its difficulty. However, just like their teachers, students seemed to consider poetry to be intrinsically difficult, leading them to feel in awe of it, especially because of the belief that in order to under-stand poetry one needs to employ the same analytical style of reading that their teachers use during their lessons. Ofsted (2012) considers 'an emphasis on analytic approaches at the expense of creative ones' to be one of the 'weaknesses in the teaching of poetry' (p. 44), partly because of this effect on students.

Contradictory pedagogies
The teachers seemed to share in the condemnation of the idea that poetry is made up of riddles to be solved (Dymoke 2003). The majority of them blamed students for harbouring the belief that poetry contains hidden mean-ings. More than half the teachers complained that students 'are preconditioned to look at poetry as having a buried meaning and that during crit we are meant to bring that out' (TG). One teacher clarified this by saying that 'a lot of students…believe that the key to a good critical appreciation is discovering what lies beneath the words. So they look at the poem as if they have to decipher a hidden code, which will tell them what the poem is about' (TD). These teachers affirmed that they 'discourage' (TG) students from adopting such a stance, insisting that 'all they have to do is read it carefully' (TF). They tell students that 'meaning can't exist without the poem's handling of lan-guage' (TA), that 'the language of the poem cannot be forgotten in trying to find some kind of hidden treasure' (TD). Three of these teachers said that they try to make students aware of the 'notion of poetry resisting meaning', but 'sometimes they fail to see that; they think it's all a mystery' (TA). During the interview these teachers sought to give the impression that they are aware of the importance of focusing on 'the poetry of poetry' (Motion 2012), rather than engaging in some kind of detective work when reading a poem (Stratta et al. 1973).

Nevertheless, in the observed lessons half the teachers did give a lot of impor-tance to a poem's content and they did ask students to think about its meaning. For example, at the beginning of the lesson one teacher asked her class, 'What do you think is it about? What's the meaning?' (TH). A colleague of hers told students, 'I'd like you to do it, to find things in the poem' (TB). All the teachers apart from one engaged in a line-by-line analysis of the poem, with the analyti-cal process being mentioned on a number of occasions. For example, one teacher launched his explanation of the poem by saying, 'Let's take it to bits' (TA). A colleague of his informed the class that 'For poetry you need analytical

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skills. That's what you're meant to take from crit' (TF). Another teacher used the metaphor of digging when talking about the analytical process and told students, 'Go deeper as I always tell you to' (TE). Two teachers selected poems typical of examination papers, with one of them informing students that 'It's important for you to be able to analyse this kind of poem' (TH). Students were often reminded that these analytical skills were needed in order to pass their examination: 'Remember that you'll be doing this on your own in the exam; I won't be there to help you' (TF). However, despite these references to learner autonomy, the classroom observation data shows that teacher talk predominated over all other lesson events, with teachers' explanations occurring 78% of the time. In contrast, students' initiations occurred for only about 20% of the time. This evidence confirms that there is a disparity between what teachers consider they (and their students) should be doing in class and what they actually do (Benton 1999). It is this reality that probably led the majority of interviewed teachers and students to identify with the situation presented in Billy Collins's 'An Introduction to Poetry'.

Torturing poetry
Just over half the teachers conceded that Collins's poem describes their experience during a poetry lesson, especially in the way it 'brings in the distinction of the pleasure of poetry as compared to the torture' (TF). Three of them declared that despite their efforts to 'make them appreciate poetry…you find students who try to do it mechanically' (TB). One teacher claimed that 'you want them to get curious and they just want to get the answer…their failure is in curiosity' (TA). Students end up 'torturing me to tell them. They want the answer, they think I have all the answers' (TA). The teachers not only found it easy to empathise with the poem's speaker but some of them also held the students accountable for the 'torture' of poetry.

The majority of students indicated that Collins's poem 'is quite similar to what happens during the lessons' (SB), with thirteen students agreeing with the idea that 'here it's telling you to appreciate a poem for what it really is but usually we just try to find a meaning' (SK). Students mentioned that during poetry lessons 'the emphasis isn't on feeling' (SA) but on 'forcing an interpretation out of yourself' (SD); it seems as if 'during the lessons we focus more on improving our grades than enjoying a poem' (SH). Half the students used the same metaphors used by teachers in order to describe this process: 'as students we have the tendency to constantly dig into the poem' (SJ). One student defended this attitude by saying, 'since the teacher already knows the meaning…I don't think they realise how hard it is for students to understand what the words are trying to say…if you've never seen it before you can't really decipher what it's about' (SC). These students seemed to give the impression that for them the teacher is privy to poetry's mysteries and during their lessons they are akin to initiates who are supposed to be learning the techniques of mastering a complex set of texts. However, in frustration they often resign themselves to being passive observers of the expert reader (Burdan 2004).

Inherited practices

Despite the fact that half the teachers blamed students for the practice of analysing poetry for meaning, they also admitted that what is partly responsible for students' attitude towards poetry is 'the way they are taught' (TD). According to one interviewee, teachers 'have this kind of fetish of showing or inculcating into their students the idea that a poem contains a message or a moral' (TC). Students torture poetry 'because basically that's what we are driving our students to do, to find the meaning for a poem' (TG). For another teacher it has to do with the fact that 'our students are not being given the chance to express themselves' (TA). A colleague of his agrees with this idea and pointed out that 'most of them are afraid of making a mistake because education has drummed into them that when you speak out in class you have to be right and the teacher has to applaud you' (TG). These teachers seemed to be aware that the emphasis they put on the practice of finding hidden meaning in poetry by means of analysis discourages students from responding to poems in other ways.

In contemplating their own lessons, nine students revealed that teachers are somewhat responsible for their perception of poems as texts to be analysed for meaning. A number of students indicated 'that sometimes they do instil this into us' (SJ); teachers 'analyse it in the same way we do; we imitate them in a way' (SN). One student explained that 'there are unfortunately many teachers who make poems look like a mathematical equation, like there's no other way, as if there are only two methods how to work it and that's how you have to do it' (SE). Another student showed she agreed with this idea and according to her 'teachers usually go for the meaning so that we can understand what it's all about', but the risk is that 'when [the teacher] goes about it in a way in which I can't really appreciate it, the poem loses its beauty' (SL). For one particular student 'those teachers who are passionate about poetry…do get it through a bit, but then they still focus obviously on the educational way in which we're meant to do it' (SH). This means being encouraged by teachers 'to identify all the things that we would need for the crit essay', especially since 'it's more the technical details that they focus on' (SI). Students indicated that the established approach of burrowing poems for meaning is something they have inherited from their teachers. Acting as if trapped in a vicious circle, teachers probably forged these practices out of their own experience of poetry at school, especially if the emphasis was predominantly on literary analysis rather than enjoyment (Ray 1999; O'Hara 1999). The bequeathal of such a conventional approach is in a way bound to continue undermining students' enjoyment of poetry.

A shared anxiety

In blaming themselves the teachers also mentioned that their behaviour is prompted by the fact that 'whatever we might think of poetry we are ultimately preparing them for an important exam' (TB). One interviewee explained that 'the dissection of a poem in class' could lead students to 'think that I'm dissecting it too much', despite any efforts 'to make it not look like

I'm analysing it too much, that I am enjoying it' (TF). She went on to say that 'I'd love them to think of me as a person who is making them enjoy poetry. Even though I don't read poetry I love it' (TF). These arguments foreground the fact that assessment hinders teachers from adopting a more creative pedagogy, but they also highlight Stevens's (2007) idea that those teachers who have limited experience of poetry are probably incapable of adopting such a pedagogy in the first place.

In line with their teachers' anxiety about assessment, the majority of students indicated that the practice of torturing poetry is mostly motivated by their awareness of the impending examination and of what they are expected to do when writing an essay on poetry. One student confessed that 'with poetry we don't enjoy it; we just think about the exam' (SC). Another student concurred by saying that 'if there are people who don't like poetry they're going to be constantly reading it in bits and trying to find a meaning in it and they mess up their whole understanding of the poem' (SL). They do this in the hope 'that if they really attack what's written then they'd get better marks' (SA) and some-times they 'panic because in the exam you only have one hour to write an essay about a poem' (SF). According to Ofsted (2012) this emphasis on analy-sing poetry is an example of 'the negative impact of tests and examinations' (p. 44).

For nearly half the students, 'poetry is sometimes difficult to understand and unless you do that you won't get it' (SN). One student explained that 'without the meaning we feel lost, with the meaning we feel secure; without it it would almost be impossible to write an essay' (SI). The following analogy probably best describes some students' feelings about the effect of such an attitude towards poetry: 'it's like a prisoner of war and they try to take every piece of information out of it to understand it and ultimately they just end up killing it' (SJ). Nonetheless, due to their beliefs in relation to what is expected of them in the examination, almost all the students seemed to concur with this view of things:

> *I see the viewpoint of Billy Collins as being accurate but I also think that what the lecturer actually does is more beneficial to the students as far as lectures go for the purposes of the exam; it's more useful. Appreciating it in the way that the poet here does is also correct; it's very good obviously, but I think that's more for personal gain rather than for the exam.* (SB)

Just like their teachers, students expressed the belief that despite the fact that it might not be the best way to respond to poetry, analysing a poem in order to extract meaning from it is ultimately justified, given what is expected of them in the examination and poetry's inherent difficulty. However, the failure to adopt a more creative approach to poetry makes it 'vulnerable to becoming a packaged commodity' (Hennessy and McNamara 2011: 217).

Conclusion

This article confirms the view that assessment is perhaps what is chiefly responsible for teachers' and students' common approach to poetry in class. It underscores Motion's (2012) idea that 'the poetry of poems is the essential thing, but it's also very vulnerable to any system of assessment'. Nevertheless, the results of this study show that to point the finger solely at assessment is to ignore its collusion with the shared beliefs that manifest themselves whenever teachers and students think about poetry. The practice of treating poetry as a genre set apart from all others, because of the notion that it is abstruse, is as damaging as the practice of encouraging only conventional ways of responding to poetry. Associating poetry with some form of underlying meaning that can only be extracted through a methodical analysis of every single word on the page only helps to inflate its cachet in a way that does poetry a huge disservice. This study is meant to encourage teachers to counteract the effect of those factors that consort with one another to shape the questionable way poetry is sometimes approached in class. By reflecting on the reasons for such an approach, teachers might feel motivated to stimulate change.

Acknowledgements

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