

What Does it Mean!?!?



The first question students ask when they meet a new poem is often **what does it mean?** As if it was some kind of alien message, (which to them, it can appear to be). However, as Ian McMillan pointed out, a poem is not a Rubik Cube, and you as teacher cannot necessarily provide the key to unlock a meaning.

I think it is worth having a discussion with your students about the whole question of meaning, especially (though not exclusively) with the more able. Here are a few starting points for such a discussion.

Why do we ask - What does it mean?

What is it about a thing that makes us ask, 'What does it mean?' We don't ask it of a tree or a field. It seems we only ask it of man-made things. Do we ask it of a building, a road, a ship? No, the question is ridiculous – they don't mean anything, except to cultural analysts. We rarely ask it of a book, a song, a film, a play – though we might now and then... We might ask it of a piece of abstract or conceptual art, a dance or – a poem.

So, then, it's a question which is asked only of certain cultural artefacts. Because someone has created say, the painting, we expect it to mean something. It is a question, though, which cannot always be answered satisfactorily. 'If I'd been able to explain what it meant, I wouldn't have painted the picture.' is the classic reply – though surely a bit disingenuous. It might simply be that the person is more of an artist than a writer. However, the underlying point is valid: the item in question is what it is and shouldn't need to be explained in terms of some other form.

Poetry, because formed of words, seems to me to be more subject to this demand than other forms of expression. It only applies to certain types of poetry, of course. No one asks of The Charge of the Light Brigade, what does it mean? If the question is asked of pre-20th Century poetry it's usually because of a difficulty of language or allusion, which can be glossed and explained.

A cultural product such as a sculpture or poem which is baffling offers 'experts' the chance to pontificate. The teacher in this case becomes the interpreter. Is this the role of the teacher? Does the teacher know 'the meaning'? If not, where does he or she go – to other 'experts'?

Do such artefacts always have a meaning? Do the creators always know what they 'mean' when they make something? It is quite possible to make a piece of sculpture which is visually appealing, tactile, interesting – without it having any 'meaning' as such. Similarly, with dance, music, painting... Can it also happen with words?

As we've remarked, poems, because composed of words, do seem to demand interpretation perhaps more than these other forms of expression. It is only human, when looking at a poem, to raise the question. It is not necessarily helpful, though, to rush for the meaning first.

Finally, 'meaning' can often wait...

There are, I think – suggest more if you think it's the case – three ways of looking at a poem. The meaning, the composition (structure/language/imagery etc) and the impact. By impact I mean how one reacts to it; it's a two-way thing really: impact/response.

You can start with any of these. I would recommend starting with impact on most occasions but sometimes going straight for its composition (e.g. 'Wow, you can't miss that rhythm!' Or, 'Look at that series of images, that list of nouns...'). And sometimes, yes, you might want to go straight for meaning.

All about Meaning: Diamond Activity

Try making some cards for a diamond activity – i.e., where students have to arrange statements in order of most important (1 card), quite important (2 cards), middling (3 cards), not very important (2), not at all important (1). Alter these suggestions, of course, as you/they wish. Rather than importance, it might be how they feel or how **useful** the statement is.

- There may be more than one meaning.
- Some poems have no meaning.
- There are other things to appreciate besides meaning.
- What you think something means today may be different to what you think next week.
- The meaning may emerge later.
- There may not be a meaning which can be expressed in words.
- The meaning might lie in the sound of the words or the feelings evoked.
- Different readers/listeners will interpret in different ways.
- More information may be needed for a meaning to become clear.

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