Going Gently into Poems: Edward Thomas

Try to go gently into poetry with your students so that they do not rage against the dying of delight. Edward Thomas’ poetry is worth spending a little time with even if he is not on your syllabus or list of prescribed texts.

I think of Edward Thomas as a quiet poet.  In the edition I have, there is an introduction by Walter de la Mare and I discovered quite by chance I had chosen the same two poems which he quotes there. De la Mare goes on to say of Thomas’ poetry
‘It must be read slowly, as naturally as if it were talk, without much emphasis…  [the poems] tell also, not so much of rare, exalted, chosen moments, of fleeting inexplicable intuitions, but of Thomas’ daily and one might say, common experience.’

(By the way, there's a wonderful, relatively new edition of Thomas's Collected Poems with excellent notes by Edna Longley from Bloodaxe Books.)

Here's a poem by Edward Thomas on the theme of sleep. Students might like to think about how they would describe sleep and the process of going to sleep. Is it easy or difficult – in the same way that a road is easy or hard?  What other metaphors might be used? Sometimes it seems to me in a night when I've woken a number of times that I have been on a train journey and sometimes had to wait a long time on the station platform for the next train to come along. How would other modes of transport fit - different kinds of boat, aircraft, balloons, helicopters...

How might they describe waking up?  Is it swift and simple like a train arriving and getting off, or is it long and complex like being gradually washed ashore on a raft?

And in the midst of all that, how do dreams seem?  Are they entertainments in the night or disturbing visions or - ?

If you want to look more closely at Thomas' poem, you'll see how it melds the poetic with the conversational, the unusual rhyme scheme and the use of near rhymes. Even so, there are places where the rhyme seems a little strained (at least to me: track / crack, for instance) and I wonder if the poem would be better without rhyme. Ask students to rewrite it without rhyming and then read both versions aloud and see how they sound.

I have come to the borders of sleep,
The unfathomable deep
Forest where all must lose
Their way, however straight,
Or winding, soon or late ;
They cannot choose.
Many a road and track
That, since the dawn’s first crack,
Up to the forest brink,
Deceived the travellers,
Suddenly now blurs,
And in they sink.

Here love ends,
Despair, ambition ends ;
All pleasure and all trouble,
Although most sweet or bitter,
Here ends in sleep that is sweeter
Than tasks most noble.

There is not any book
Or face of dearest look
That I would not turn from now
To go into the unknown
I must enter, and leave, alone,
I know not how.

The tall forest towers ;
Its cloudy foliage lowers
Ahead, shelf above shelf ;
Its silence I hear and obey
That I may lose my way
And myself.

Take a look at this poem by Thomas, called ‘Words’:

Words

Out of us all
That make rhymes,
Will you choose
Sometimes -
As the winds use
A crack in a wall
Or a drain,
Their joy or their pain
To whistle through -
Choose me,
You English words?

I know you:
You are light as dreams,
Tough as oak,
Precious as gold,
As poppies and corn,
Or an old cloak:
Sweet as our birds
To the ear,
As the burnet rose
In the heat
Of Midsummer:
Strange as the races
Of dead and unborn:
Strange and sweet
Equally,
And familiar,
To the eye,
As the dearest faces
That a man knows,
And as lost homes are:
But though older far
Than oldest yew, —
As our hills are, old, -
Worn new
Again and again:
Young as our streams
After rain:
And as dear
As the earth which you prove
That we love.

Make me content
With some sweetness
From Wales
Whose nightingales
Have no wings, -
From Wiltshire and Kent
And Herefordshire,
And the villages there, —
From the names, and the things
No less.
Let me sometimes dance
With you,
Or climb
Or stand perchance
In ecstasy,
Fixed and free
In a rhyme,
As poets do.

I feel this is a poem the better for not being analysed. You might just read it to your students a few times – once a lesson for a week, perhaps – or display it line by line with a projector, gradually scrolling down the page with text in a biggish font.  And just let it sink in, with its quiet rhythms and thoughts.   Of course, your students may wish to think up a few new comparisons for words.

Words
You are as light as floating seeds
Frail as snowflakes
Yet indestructible as the earth.

Some students may like to play with the idea of extended metaphors

Words as light as floating seeds
Innocent and carefree
Blown by the breezes of conversation
Landing and sprouting in other minds
And growing into spiked thistles

Thomas is probably best known for 'Adlestrop' and 'As the Team’s Head Brass'.  'Adlestrop' is a perfect example of a gently observed moment, beautifully recorded. Even here, though, I would season my admiration with some reservation. In the lines ‘No whit less still and lonely fair / than the high cloudlets in the sky’. I feel the lines have strayed into the more deliberately ‘poetic’. ‘No whit less still’ seems awkward, striving too hard and therefore out of place.  It’s important to share critical thoughts, too, so that students become aware of gradations of response rather than ‘such and such is great’ and ‘so and so is rubbish’.  Even great writers write poorly at times.

Adlestrop is an enjoyable poem to imitate, either closely or just in approach.

Yes, I remember Leicester Forest East
Because one day of rain
Our bus drew up there unexpectedly.
It was late morning. A traffic jam.

Another feature of Thomas’ writing is the delightful brevity of some of his poems – ‘Thaw’ for instance – and here is one I particularly like and which can serve as a useful model for students’ own writing. Read it to students before they see it and discuss what kind of structure it might have. Is it in free verse, like ‘Words’? Do they pick up a rhyme here and there? It’s a good example of using a form as a subtle framework for a poem without letting it dominate.

Tall Nettles

Tall nettles cover up, as they have done
These many springs, the rusty harrow, the plough
Long worn out, and the roller made of stone:
Only the elm butt tops the nettles now.

This corner of the farmyard I like most:
As well as any bloom upon a flower
I like the dust on the nettles, never lost
Except to prove the sweetness of a shower.

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