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Harrow-on-the-Hill

Betjeman wrote many poems about places but this one is really about two places. First published in Harrow School magazine in 1949, then to a wider audience in Punch magazine in 1953, this poem contrasts the suburban, North London landscape with Cornwall – another place he loved and from where the poet had not long returned from holiday.

This is a great poem to introduce to your students, if you are interested in helping them to understand about the evocative nature of Betjeman's poetry, and the way in which writing about place is a core theme throughout his work.

It is also a great way of helping them to develop the skill-set at the heart of poetry analysis: understanding how the meaning of words is dependent upon the context within which they are used.

Any sections in red are extension activities.

Starter:

- Before revealing to the class the title of the poem, split the class into groups of three or four students.

Give half of the groups the following words:

- 'Stadium', 'railway', 'poplars', 'roof tops' and 'skyline'

And give the other half of the groups these words:

- 'surf-line', 'rocky', 'sailors' graves', 'caves' and 'harbour lights'

Ask them to work together to try to guess where in the UK, Betjeman has set his poem.

Encourage the groups to work quietly, so that they don't over-hear the words from the other groups.

Good answers from the first set of groups might associate 'Stadium' with Wembley, 'poplars' with suburbia and 'railway', 'rooftops' and 'skyline' with an urban environment. Similarly, the other group might be able to connect 'surf-line', 'rocky', and 'caves' with the idea of a rugged coastline, and 'sailors' graves' and 'harbour lights' with the concept of thriving fishing communities.

- Get a map of the UK up on the board, and ask a spokesperson from each group to come and put a mark where they think the poem is set. Ask them to explain their logic to the class as they do so.
- After they've all (hopefully!) been thoroughly confused, then you can share the full poem with everyone.

Lesson:

- You can talk about the moments in the poem where the setting of 'Harrow-on-the-Hill' and Cornwall overlap.
 - You could give the example of 'island' and talk about the island-like qualities of 'Harrow-on-the-Hill' (high up, and overlooks London; separated off from the 'mainland' of the city). Ask the class to 'think, pair and share' words where the location shifts or becomes uncertain.
 - This is an opportunity to talk about ambiguity in poetry: often students will feel that they are misinterpreting the meaning of a poem when they encounter ambiguity but here, the chance to consider how Harrow-on-the-Hill and Cornwall become places of overlap in Betjeman's memory should help students to see how these moments of confusion are actually indicators that they are getting closer to the heart of the poem's meaning.
- Talk about the word 'evocative': ask your class to work together to come up with a definition of the word.
- Consider the use of language in making this an especially evocative piece of writing. You could discuss the following:
 - The emotional climate of the poem and the way in which Betjeman uses personification to create an animated environment: ask your class to consider the effect of the words 'melancholy', 'trembly' and 'whispering' in stanza 1.
 - The poem's soundscape: Betjeman creates his comparison between Harrow-on-the-Hill and Cornwall chiefly through the use of onomatopoeic language. Consider the use of sensory language in helping readers to be transported to another place.

Plenary

- We started the lesson by considering how the meaning of words is dependent upon the context in which they are used (e.g. stadium – Wembley). To conclude, it is useful to consider the precision with which Betjeman is using words in his poem. To help you compound your point, you can introduce your students to this quote by Oscar Wilde: "I was working on the proof of one of my poems all the morning, and took out a comma. In the afternoon I put it back again."

Leave your students with two final thoughts:

- What happens if you take out the word 'only' from the final stanza: 'Can those boats be only roof tops': how does it change the meaning of the poem, and what might it reveal to you about the way that Betjeman feels about the landscape of Harrow-on-the-Hill compared to the landscape of Cornwall.
- Why does Betjeman end the poem with a question?