



Death in Leamington

Betjeman wrote this ballad while studying at Oxford University and it was published in 1932 in his first Collection. He went by train to Leamington Spa from Oxford, had lunch on the train, and returned at tea time. He walked around the town looking at its architecture and then wrote this, imagining the scene around the death of an old woman.

Studying 'Death in Leamington' offers students the opportunity to engage with two thematic preoccupations which are central to Betjeman's work: mortality and architecture. It is also a fantastic poem to study in order to introduce students to the concept of symbolic sympathy, and to equip them with the skills to manage challenging, open-ended questions.

Starter

- Ask the class to suppose that John Betjeman came into the classroom and recited the first line from his poem:

'She died in the upstairs bedroom'.

Without discussing with their neighbours, get them to individually write down three questions that they would ask him about that line. Give them three minutes to complete this.

- Questions might centre upon the conundrum of who 'She' is; what 'She' died of, and where 'She' was living. Select a few students to share their answers with the class. Use this as an opportunity to demonstrate how to turn initial feelings of disorientation, when faced with a challenging piece of literature, into probing questions which will give them the tools to unlock the deeper meaning of the piece.
- After your students have done this, they will have constructed the scaffolding to help them to cope with a really open-ended question.
- Allocate one quatrain each to 8 students, and get them to read through the poem to the class.
- When they have done so, ask them to work together, in small groups (of 3 or 4 students) and brainstorm why they think John Betjeman begins his poem with an ending: death.

- Stronger answers will pick up on Betjeman's interesting choice of using the ballad form (associated with narrative in poetry) to tell a story of a character which is over before it begins. They will also consider how the lady's death becomes symbolic of the greater decay of Leamington Spa (picking up on the power of stanza 6).

Lesson

- Explain the concept of symbolic sympathy: how the actions taken in the poem become invested with a symbolic power because of the way in which they complement the poem's preoccupation with death. Ask the students to 'think, pair and share' examples from the poem which exemplify this.
- They might, for example, pick up on the juxtaposition between the death of the woman, and the way in which the objects which she left behind are personified, almost animated in her absence: the crochet, for example, is described as 'lonely' and we are told how it 'lay patiently', in contrast with how 'the fingers that would have work'd it / Were dead as the spoken word'.
- They might also pick up on the phrase:

*But Nurse was alone with her own little soul,
And the things were alone with theirs.*

- Once your students have grasped the concept, ask them to consider the following question:

How does Betjeman oscillate between the mundane and profound in this poem?

- You can steer them towards certain images which create a sense of tension: they might pick up on the contrast between the powerful, metaphysical opening lines:

*She died in the upstairs bedroom
By the light of the evening star*

And the provincial, materialistic way in which this image of the starlight is literally framed by the 'plate glass window':

*That shone through the plate glass window
From over Leamington Spa.*

Plenary

- Ask the class about the significance of the sixth quatrain:

*Do you know that the stucco is peeling?
Do you know that the heart will stop?
From those yellow Italianate arches
Do you hear the plaster drop?*

- The purpose of this lesson is to encourage the class to gain confidence in their ability to tackle challenging texts and open-ended questions.
- In order to consider the impact of the sixth quatrain it is helpful to encourage them to zoom in as closely as possible on the wording on the text. You could encourage them to focus in on one word for example, 'the': 'Do you know that **the** heart will stop?'.
- Ask them to (again) write down three questions. Students should, by now, have gained confidence in this process, and might ask questions along the lines of 'whose heart'? or 'who is the 'you' who is being addressed here?' or 'why is the poet equating a heart that stops beating with peeling stucco and dropping plaster?'