USING POETRY TO EXPLORE THE CONCEPT OF DISCOVERY

Poetry lends itself particularly well to an exploration of the concept of discovery as writers often use poems as means to record personal experiences of discovery. The unique nature of poetry allows writers to register their feelings as well as ideas about a particular discovery.

In some ways, the very process of writing a poem can be an act of discovery for the poet. As the American writer and essayist, Flannery O’Connor, said: *I write to discover what I know.*

Similarly, the process of responding to a poem can be an act of discovery for the reader. Poetry is often a complex, lexically dense written form; meaning can operate at different levels. Readers often arrive at an understanding of a poem through a gradual process of discovery.

Sonnets of Gerard Manley Hopkins

The sonnets of Gerard Manley Hopkins are particularly instructive in showing how poets can both represent discoveries in their poems and discover through the writing of their poems.

A typical structure for a Hopkins’ sonnet is an octave in which he records the experience of a discovery, followed by a sestet in which he reflects on the meaning of the discovery. This is well illustrated in ‘God’s Grandeur’:

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The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; bledared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.  
And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.
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The octave considers the greatness and power of God, in contrast to man’s putrification of the planet; the sestet comments on how God continues to look over the world despite man’s apparent indifference to God’s presence. Man devitalises: God revitalises regardless. Hopkins represents this discovery through contrast between the laborious internal rhyme and repetitive sound qualities used to suggest the harnessing and misuse of God’s energy in a dirty, smelly, industrial order (*e.g.* all is seared with trade; bledared, smeared with toil) and the lilting alliteration and dynamic images depicting God’s grace (*e.g.* flame out, like shining from shook foil).

Astute readers will discover fascinating ideas in this poem as they come back to it again and again. For example, Hopkins represents God at the start of the poem by a traditional patriarchal image to emphasise his power, using words such as *grandeur* and *rod,* but by the end he develops a daring matriarchal image to highlight God’s caring and protective love, using words such as *broods* and *breast.* Interestingly, references to light at both the start and end of the poem serve to unite the paradoxical images.

In ‘Hurrahing in Harvest,’ the poet arrives at the discovery of a deeper knowledge and love of God through his experience with nature:
Summer ends now; now, barbarous in beauty, the stooks rise
Around; up above, what wind-walks! what lovely behaviour
Of silk-sack clouds! has wilder, wilful-wavier
Meal-drift moulded ever and melted across skies?

I walk, I lift up, I lift up heart, eyes,
Down all that glory in the heavens to glean our Saviour;
And eyes, heart, what looks, what lips yet give you a
Rapturous love’s greeting of realer, of rounder replies?

And the azurous hung hills are his world-wielding shoulder
Majestic – as a stallion stalwart, very-violet-sweet! -
These things, these things were here and but the beholder
Wanting; which two when they once meet,
The heart rears wings bold and bolder
And hurls for him, O half hurls earth for him off under his feet.

In the first quatrain, Hopkins delights in the beauty
of a vivid, autumnal scene through lively alliteration
and playful compounding of words and images. In
the second quatrain, he registers his rising excitement
in the rhetorical first line before swooping down
to glean our Saviour, to discover Christ alive and
present in this wondrous expanse of nature.

The emotional intensity is maintained in the
concluding sestet by starting with And, continued use
of enjambment and radical use of sprung rhythm. The
startling simile, as a stallion stalwart, very-violet-
sweet!, combines contrasting images and sounds to
suggest that Christ’s majesty lies in his simultaneous
strength and gentleness.

Then the poet presents his discovery that the
landscape needed the poet’s perception to generate
the joy which soars towards God – that everything,
including mankind, is integrated with this energy,
this life force. There is even a kind of discovery in
the last line where the poet registers his awareness
that his enthusiasm to reach up to Christ is
inevitably checked by the reality that the soul is
bonded in body, spirit in matter (hurls for him, O
half hurls Earth for him).

If sonnets like ‘God’s Grandeur’ and ‘Hurrahing for
Harvest’ represent (mostly) positive experiences
of discovery, there are several later sonnets that
depict (mostly) negative experiences of discovery,
including ‘Carrion Comfort,’ ‘No worst, there is
none’ and ‘I wake and feel the fell of dark.’ Perhaps
the darkest of these is ‘No worst, there is none’:

No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,
More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring.
Comforter, where, where is your comforting?
Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?
My cries heave, herds-long; huddle in a main, a chief
Woe, world-sorrow; on an age-old anvil wince and sing —
Then lull, then leave off. Fury had shrieked ‘No lingering!
Let me be fell: force I must be brief’.

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne’er hung there. Nor does long our small
Durance deal with that steep or deep. Here! creep,
Wretch, under a comfort serves in a whirlwind: all
Life death does end and each day dies with sleep.
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In this octet, Hopkins represents his discovery that he has lost his connection to God. Words such as pitch and heave are exploited for their various connotations to depict his despair. Pitch, for example, can mean the hot, sticky substance used in medieval warfare (the poet's battle with God) or the black colour of that substance (the darkness of despair); in its past participle form it suggests hurled, as if the poet has been thrown aside or abandoned; the musical meaning of pitch might relate to the intensity of the poet's stress; pitch can also refer to a downward inclination, echoing the meaning of other words used in the poem such as steep, deep and creep.

In the sestet, Hopkins imagines the soul wandering amongst the mountains of the mind, plunging into abysses of horror. No-man-fathomed suggests depths not yet discovered by man. The sense and reverberation of sound in steep, deep and creep convey the notion of falling to the point of hopeless grovelling. There is cold comfort in the idea that death follows life, as sleep follows day.

Yet despite his discovery of apparently bottomless despair, the poet maintains his artistic control in this poem. He has been able to distance himself (the poet) from himself (the suffering wretch). Moreover, he has been able to represent his discovery in a highly wrought, metrically tight unit – the sign of a true artist.

Activities
Reinforcing the rubric ideas:
Read the interpretations of Hopkins' work with students and then ask them to find which rubric statements best match the ideas in this discussion. They then have to explain their choice.

Using the ETA Discovery resource:
The ETA –Discovery resource is full of activities that can be applied to related texts to reinforce the rubric even further.
Students can be given copies of Hopkins poems and a brief summary of context. They can then apply some of the activities and worksheets in the Discovery resource to come to a closer understanding of the text. The reading above can be given after students create their own readings and used as a point of discussion and comparison with their own readings.

Some resource activities that could be used are:
• The discovery wheel (p.15)
• Six step guide (p.16)
• Key Questions (p.17)
• Personal log (p.18)
• Metaphors and discovery (p37)
• Discovery and poetry (p.77)
• Framing discovery (p.46)
• Developing a thesis statement (p.53)

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT 2014

For the new syllabus:
Friday 21 February – Discovery Day
Saturday 22 March – Module A Standard and Advanced
Saturday 24 May – Extension 1: Focus on Comedy
Saturday 26 July – Module C Day

Regular events:
Saturday 10 May – Early Career Teachers day
November – Extension 2 Day

We will also be continuing our popular Head Teacher webinars and the Writing for NAPLAN workshops.