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Let's watch a poem – analysing film poems

by Linda Wolfand



© Screenshots aus dem Film poem 'The Man with the Beautiful Eyes' by J. Haldson

Diese Unterrichtseinheit behandelt das neu entstandene Genre film poems, das die moderne, digitale Welt mit dem klassischen Feld der Lyrik vereint. Die Lernenden analysieren, interpretieren und diskutieren fünf film poems, beschäftigen sich zunächst mit dem Originalgedicht und beziehen dieses dann auf dessen Verfilmung. Dabei trainieren die Schülerinnen und Schüler zusätzlich zu den obigen Kompetenzen auch ihre Medienkompetenz und das Hör-Sehverstehen und lernen allgemeine Charakteristika von film poems kennen, wenden diese auf zeitgenössische Werbefilme an und produzieren abschließend ihr eigenes film poem.

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© Screenshots aus dem film poem 'The Man with the Beautiful Eyes' by J. Hodgson

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Competences and skills

The students enhance several **communicative competences**, especially their **reading** and (creative) **writing** skills as well as their **audiovisual comprehension**, and their **text** and **media competences** by working with different texts. They practice to analyse and interpret poems and discuss their results in partner and group work. Thus, this unit supports the **social competences** of the students, as well. Furthermore, the students apply their newly acquired knowledge by creating their own film poem at the end of the unit.

Overview:

List of abbreviations:

A: Analysis

D: Discussion

LC: Listening Comprehension

T: Working with the text

C: Comment

EV: Evaluation

M: Mind Map/Visualising

W: (Creative) Writing

CT: Creative Task

I: Interpretation

RC: Reading Comprehension

Topic	Material	Method
1: New York City	M 1–M 3	A, EV, RC, T
2: Habits	M 4	A, I, W
3: Childhood memories	M 5	A, I, LC, T
4: Immigration/Coats	M 6–M 8	A, EV, I, M, RC, T
5: Categorising film poems	M 9–M 10	A, C, D, EV, T
6: Poems in commercials	M 11–M 15	A, D, EV
7: Create your own film poem	M 16	CT

Let's watch a poem – analysing film poems

Film poems

Poetry offers great benefits for the EFL classroom: Poems are – in many cases – short yet exploitable because of their density. They allow the students to work with language in a meaningful way while decoding, analysing, interpreting and trying to find implications and messages. They provide many ways for creative output. They connect to a variety of themes taught in EFL and can be flexibly integrated into any topical unit. Poems often deal with universal concerns of humankind. Thus, they allow authentic language use when discussing these topics. In a nutshell, poems – if taught in a student-centered way and combined with creative tasks – can be great fun for teachers and students.

Poetry, however, does not enjoy the best reputation among both groups. In the past students were tortured with the impossible task of comprehending highly stylised and heavily coded poems of the canon, with the rigid analysis of stylistic devices, with trying to make sense of similes, metaphors, and symbols rooted in mythology and thus being way beyond their understanding. All of this happened in teacher-centered lessons with the teacher acting as the source of wisdom and the students trying to follow his or her interpretation or idea of what the 'author's intention' might be. As a result, poetry has been spoilt for students and teachers alike, leading to the avoidance of poems in school. Film poems, one could argue, allow both students and teachers a fresh start with the genre. Film poems combine poetry and film. They present poems in a new skin that in many ways might be more relevant to today's young adults. The graphic layer can provide new motivation to the visually oriented digital natives of contemporary society who have grown up with *YouTube* and *Instagram*.

Additionally, film poetry is a new art movement. It is 'happening right now' and offers students the chance to work with a contemporary art form as it is developing. Apart from Alastair Cook's manifesto on his website, not many theoretical texts have been published on film poems and especially with regard to ELT, the genre is still more or less an insider tip. However, streaming platforms such as *YouTube* and *Vimeo* are full of very

good film poems on both the classics and contemporary poetry. Thus, it is not hard to find film poems on any given topic.

Most film poems are between 5 and 10 minutes long. Their shortness makes them a predestined text-type for language arts lessons. Film poems share all the benefits that poetry offers for the EFL classroom. On top of the literature and language competences that can be acquired with poetry alone, film poems grant the chance to practise viewing comprehension, media competences, in particular film competences. Understanding and interpreting the film accompanying the poem demands a close reading and an in-depth analysis of the poem itself and the film with all its cinematic features such as camera movements and angles, soundtrack, use of colour etc. Thus, the complexity and density of film poems are a great chance for the EFL classroom. Their routine inclusion into English lessons can be a way to make poems fun for students and teachers again.

Notes on the materials

The following unit consists of seven topics. Five different film poems are watched, interpreted and discussed. The general approach is that the poem featured in the film is analysed first. The film poem is watched afterwards and discussed as a follow-up activity. The poems chosen increase in complexity and difficulty, and so do the accompanying film poems. After working with the first and the last film poem, the students use Alastair Cook's manifesto on film poems in order to learn about and reflect on the genre. The progression in the film poems and the competence-oriented approach throughout the unit results in the students working autonomously in the last two topics, in which they analyse commercials using (film) poems and create their own film poem.

Topic 1 deals with New York City. The students discuss parts of Walt Whitman's *Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun* and compare it to Alessio Cuomo's modern take on it in his *Ode to New York City*. After this first encounter with the genre, they get to know Alastair Cook's definition of film poetry. After checking Tom Barrance's website on film poems, the students add additional characteristics of the genre.

Topic 2 discusses Christine Hooper's *On Loop*. Different from *Ode to New York City*, in *On Loop* Hooper is the poet and the filmmaker. Thus, *On Loop* is composed as a film poem

in the first place and not as a visual take on a poem that already existed. Hooper's film poem is about the universal topic "habits", which gives students the chance to write their own poem as a creative task.

Topic 3 centers around Charles Bukowski's *The Man with the Beautiful Eyes* and brings up the themes "childhood memories", "growing up" and "finding one's own identity". After discussing the poem, the students watch Jonathan Hodgson's film poem and analyse the aspects of the poem the director uses in his version. *The Man with the Beautiful Eyes* is more complex than the first two film poems as it is a narrative poem. It is not as concrete as a visual ode to a city or a reflection on a personal habit but a dense piece of literature with symbols, connotations and implications that need to be analysed in the original and the visual text. Thus, the accompanying tasks are formulated as guiding questions that help the students to see the layer beyond the plot. Again, the students get the chance to creatively wrap up the topic in the last task.

Topic 4 concentrates on the symbol of coats in two different poems. Michael Symmons Roberts's poem *I Shake Out My Coat* is the most difficult poem in the unit with regard to complexity, content, language, literary devices, and implications. Alastair Cook's interpretation of it is also the most difficult film in the unit as it is not narrative but represents the poem in a dissociated way. Thus, guiding questions lead the students to close-read both film and poem and understand the relevance of word choice, symbols and metaphors as well as cinematic decisions. Subsequently, they get to know Mark Smith's *My Father's Coat* and compare the function of the coat in both poems. In the last step, the students reflect which aspects of the poem resonate with them personally.

Topic 5 provides a wrap-up of the results up to this point. The students read an excerpt of Cook's manifesto on the categories film poems can be divided into. They reflect on the film poems they have seen so far, decide which poem fits which category and critically discuss the categories.

By focusing on commercials using (film) poems, **topic 6** introduces a new text type. The students train their analytical skills by dissecting two commercials of their choice autonomously. On the one hand, they use what they have learned about film poems so far and, on the other hand, they apply new input on persuasive techniques in the language

of commercials. Finally, they wrap up the analytical-theoretical part of the unit by critically discussing whether commercials using (film) poems can be considered film poems and whether commercials can be art in general.

Topic 7 concludes the unit by giving the students the chance to create their own film poem. According to the principles of media literacy, critical reception but also own production should be practised. The students become artists themselves and creatively work with the findings they gathered during the unit. They are guided through the production process by the last task. They screen their film poems and appreciate each other's results in a classroom film poetry festival.

Topic 1: New York City

M1 Walt Whitman's *Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun*



Walt Whitman: *Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun* (excerpts)

[...] Keep you splendid¹, silent sun;
 Keep your woods, O Nature, and the quiet places by the woods;
 Keep your fields of clover² and timothy³, and your corn-fields and orchards; [...]
 5 Give me faces and streets! give me these phantoms incessant⁴ and endless along
 the trottoirs!
 Give me interminable⁵ eyes! give me women! give me comrades and lovers by
 the thousand!
 Let me see new ones every day! let me hold new ones by the hand every day!
 10 Give me such shows! give me the streets of Manhattan!
 Give me Broadway [...] – give me the sound of the trumpets and drums! [...]
 – Give me the shores and the wharves⁶ heavy-fringed with the black ships!
 O such for me! O an intense life! [...]
 The life of the theatre, bar-room, huge hotel, for me!
 15 The saloon of the steamer! [...] the torch-light procession! [...]
 People, endless, streaming, with strong voices, passions, pageants⁷;
 Manhattan streets, with their powerful throbs, with the beating drums, as now;
 [...] Manhattan crowds, with their turbulent musical chorus – with varied cho-
 rus, and light of the sparkling eyes;
 20 Manhattan faces and eyes forever for me.

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Annotations

1 **splendid**: great – 2 **clover**: Klee – 3 **timothy**: Wiesen-Lieschgras – 4 **incessant**: never stopping – 5 **interminable**: endless –
 6 a **wharf**: Kai/Pier – 7 a **pageant**: a colourful and impressive show

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