

**LOCAL
ANAESTHETIC**

**A PAINLESS APPROACH
TO SINGAPOREAN POETRY**

Local Anaesthetic: A Painless Approach to Singaporean Poetry
A Lower Secondary teaching guide for teachers by teachers
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Pooja Nansi
&
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It's Only Polite to First Say Hello 😊

Hello Fellow Teachers!

We are so excited to share this poetry guide with you. Like you, we are passionate about making words and poetry something that is accessible and interesting for our students. The idea for this book came about when we went from course to course and heard over and over again about how teachers wanted to teach local poetry but found it impossible to find actual teaching guides and resources for it.

A lot of what we teach our students, and how we go about it, is often informed by what we ourselves have been exposed to, what we enjoy and feel we can convincingly deliver with some level of expertise. And while we are all trained professionals, it never hurts to have some help on hand. All of us come to the Literature classroom with different strengths and limitations. For some of us, teaching a play is our superpower, but ask us to teach a poem and we feel something in us twitch with uncertainty. Others amongst us don't feel so comfortable with specific genres, periods or authors. Having attempted to teach texts which were published a year before we brought them into the classroom, there were many times we found ourselves wishing someone had done this before: shared their teaching tricks and suggested approaches to us so that we could be freer and more confident in our delivery. So when we heard the call for a teacher's guide for local poetry, we empathised. We both love poems, and we feel strongly that there are loads of awesome local writers writing about internal and external spaces that are accessible to our students. Our hope is that this guide will help teachers feel more confident about bringing poetry, especially Singaporean writing, into the classroom.

We didn't merely want to provide you with an anthology of poems. So we'll be honest, we sacrificed some breath for depth. This guide is not intended to help you teach basic poetic techniques to your students, because we felt that there were plenty of tools out there which already exist for that. Instead, the 19 poems in this guide are worked tightly into a comprehensive unit. They are largely divided into three thematic sub units: "Bonds and Ties", "Place and Loss" and "Language and Belonging". The units are meant to be developmental. You will notice that some poems are analysed in more detail than others. This is because some poems are much less complex and therefore allow students an accessible entry point into the discussion of big ideas. Other poems allow for a much more technical and detailed analysis of techniques and language. We have tried to use each poem as meaningfully as possible and the poems are arranged in a manner which allows students to connect the understanding of one poem to the larger complexity of the next. We focused on unpacking each poem for you in detail, providing possible lesson plan suggestions in the forms of guided questions, proposed pre-lesson and follow up activities as well as possible writing and creative tasks.

Being teachers ourselves, we were careful to keep in mind what we would find most useful ourselves when trying to teach a meaningful poetry curriculum to our students. We know that each classroom is different, as is each teacher and their teaching approaches, so it was important to us that this guide book would empower your chosen approach. We've given you a few ways in which you can adapt and use this unit. You could choose to teach it thematically, or based on the difficulty level of the poems or even around a particular poetic technique you would like to explore with your students. Even the answers we provide are just suggestions. It is our deep hope that you and your students will come up with alternative interpretations that may be unique to your experiences which influence your reading of the poem.

About 80% of the poems in this unit are written by Singaporean writers, with a few chosen examples from other places in the world that leap off the local poems, and allow you to explore issues and techniques in a deeper manner with your students.

Our one regret is that we couldn't include every single poet and poem that we would love for you to share with your students. Nevertheless, we hope that this unit serves you in delivering meaningful and authentic lessons to your students – and that this, in turn, empowers them with a love for playing with language, and an appreciation of how poetry creates infinite possibilities for that. We hope that as a result, they are left curious and hungry for more.

BONDS AND TIES

The poems in this section are very accessible to students as they are all about relationships and their complexities. “My Mother’s Guitar”, “The Further Bank”, “Daddy’s Not Home” and “an afternoon nap” all present relationships between parents and children. Jacob Sam-La Rose’s “My Mother’s Guitar” and Rabindranath Tagore’s “The Further Bank” portray relationships of deep love and enduring connections. This is contrasted to the complex and confused relationship in Felix Cheong’s “Daddy’s Not Home”. Arthur Yap’s “an afternoon nap” depicts an antagonistic relationship between mother and son, centering around the mother’s ambitious hopes for her son’s academic achievement.

Kenneth Wee’s “My Paper Planes” is a bittersweet poem about the relationship between two brothers, told from the perspective of a brother who only learns to understand and appreciate his sibling’s carefree attitude towards life after the latter has left home. Tan Jwee Song’s “Filial Piety” explores family ties in a much darker way, ultimately suggesting that many rituals and ceremonies are not rooted in authentic feelings. Gilbert Koh’s “Old Folks Home”, Alfian Sa’at’s “Neighbours”, and Roger Jenkins’ “Ho Siew Ming, hawker” deal with different types of social relationships, but all poems ask versions of the same question: what do we owe to each other? Last but not least, “40-Love” by Roger McGough is a lovely little poem that explores the relationship between a middle-aged married couple with all its complex layers. It is also a poem that allows many opportunities for teaching extended metaphors and form.

The Further Bank by Rabindranath Tagore

The Further Bank² Rabindranath Tagore

I long to go over there to the further bank of the river,
 Where those boats are tied to the bamboo poles in a line;
 Where men cross over in their boats in the morning with ploughs on their shoulders to till their far-away fields;
 Where the cowherds make their lowing cattle swim across to the riverside pasture;
 Whence they all come back home in the evening, leaving the jackals to howl in the island overgrown with weeds,
 Mother, if you don't mind, I should like to become the boatman of the ferry when I am grown up.
 They say there are strange pools hidden behind that high bank,
 Where flocks of wild ducks come when the rains are over, and thick reeds grow round the margins where waterbirds lay their eggs;
 Where snipes with their dancing tails stamp their tiny footprints upon the clean soft mud;
 Where in the evening the tall grasses crested with white flowers invite the moonbeam to float upon their waves.
 Mother, if you don't mind, I should like to become the boatman of the ferryboat when I am grown up.
 I shall cross and cross back from bank to bank, and all the boys and girls of the village will wonder at me while they are bathing.
 When the sun climbs the mid sky and morning wears on to noon, I shall come running to you, saying,
 "Mother, I am hungry!"
 When the day is done and the shadows cower under the trees, I shall come back in the dusk.
 I shall never go away from you into the town to work like father.
 Mother, if you don't mind, I should like to become the boatman of the ferryboat when I am grown up.

General Commentary

This poem is written from the point of view of a child who observes the natural world around him, and speaks of his attachment to it. This sense of home is also closely linked to his relationship with his mother. The poem is a lyrical and moving exploration of a child's aspirations, the journeys he must take as he grows up, and his longing to maintain a close emotional bond with his mother.

² Rabindranath Tagore, *The Crescent Moon: Child Poems* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1913), 42-44.

Teacher's Note

What we love about this poem are the sheer possibilities it offers with what you can do with it in your classroom. There are also loads of possibilities for inter-disciplinary work. Here's an exciting list from us to you:

1. Teach them about lyricism as a style of writing. It is basically a way of describing something with an intense outpouring of emotion and expressing this emotion in an imaginative and beautiful way. Take for example the line in the poem: "They say there are *strange* pools hidden behind that high bank,/ Where *flocks of wild ducks* come when the rains are over...". Focus on words that make the lines or descriptions more intense or interesting. This could translate into their narrative writing exercises as well. Ask your students to take some of their own simple sentences and make them more lyrical.
2. Get your students to embark on a research project about Tagore and his life, looking at how he made important contributions to art and poetry in his country. Ask them to research an equivalent poet or art practitioner in Singapore.
3. There's also a lot you could do with painting and visual arts here. In particular because the poem is so rife with images, you could get your students to interpret any part of the poem with photography or painting, or in any medium except writing. Afterwards, they can write a thought piece about the elements they found interesting and why they chose to interpret them a certain way. You can guide them with some examples of poems based on paintings. An example is UA Fanthorpe's poem "Not My Best Side", based on the painting of *St George and the Dragon* by Paolo Uccello. Both poem and painting are easily found online.

Once you have covered a simpler poem about metaphors, this is also a great poem to teach your class about extended metaphors. In this poem, where the persona is a child speaking of what he longs to be when he is grown up, the river, boats and the physical journey all become an extended metaphor for a much larger emotional and spiritual journey that comes with growing up.

Exploring a Metaphorical Use of Language

You could begin by introducing your students to the idea of the river Styx in Greek mythology, that served as a boundary from our world to the afterlife or underworld. Tell them about Charon, the boatsman who carried the dead over to the afterlife. Ask them what the river then symbolises. Providing them with a chart similar to this one might also help them to see the movement from the literal to metaphorical use of an object in a poem. Alternatively you could make them think through the symbolic possibilities that lie in everyday objects themselves.

Object	Level of Interpretation		
	Literal	Metaphorical	Could be symbolic of /used as an extended metaphor for
Sun	Center of the solar system, provides heat to the earth	Light, Heat, Nourishment (for plants)	**think of properties that this object has, or the purpose it serves **generally you should be looking for abstract nouns here
			Good (Light vs Dark) , Life, Hope, Possibility

In Summary

By the end of this thematic unit your students should have learnt that:

1. Relationships are a necessary and unavoidable part of our lives.
2. Relationships can be a source of both joy and pain.
3. Most relationships are hardly ever entirely positive or negative but a complex combination of positive and negative elements.
4. Relationships can affect our identity in complex ways.
5. Our relationships with others affect the way in which we see the world around us and vice versa.

PLACE AND LOSS

The poems in this section are intimately connected with the Singaporean landscape, examining our relationship with the places around us and looking at the way in which we construct, conserve and destroy these places. They provide a great opportunity for students to examine the spaces in which they live, and will perhaps provoke them to think about familiar places in new and surprising ways. These four poems also offer interesting opportunities for learning journeys, allowing you to take students out of the classroom to experience first-hand the places that are described in the poems. We've no doubt that they are likely to have been there before – but perhaps now they might see them with new eyes and with a deeper appreciation for their inherent history and tensions.

Lee Tzu Pheng's "Singapore River" describes the operation to clean up the Singapore River in the 1970s and 1980s, and in doing so, she poignantly questions what we have lost in our attempts to reconstruct and sanitise our environment. Robert Yeo deals with a similar sense of loss in "Christian Cemetery" as he shows how history, inherent in the space of the cemetery, has to make way for "urban renewal". Boey Kim Cheng also foregrounds this tension in "The Planners", presenting our relentless drive to create the utopian modern landscape as one which disregards nature and eradicates our history. Finally, Alvin Pang's "Made of Gold" continues with this idea of Singapore as a utopian place – however, he interrogates this idea of utopia by presenting it from a migrant worker's point of view. Through his eyes, Singapore's prosperous landscape is both alienating and the source of deep disillusionment.

Missing by Alfian Sa'at

Missing¹⁹ Alfian Sa'at

He go to school.
Never come back.
I make police report.
Newspapers, Crime Watch.
They even put his picture,
He and the other boy,
On poster, with reward
From fast-food restaurant.

I ask from the RC man:
Can I have it from the
Lift lobby noticeboard.
He give me and also say sorry.
I have it in my bedroom.
Every morning with half-
Open eyes I remind myself
My son: the one on the left.

Got calls come in once.
Say they saw him in
Penang, selling videos.
Or in Bangkok, begging.
Child prostitute they say.
Sometimes no voice at all.
Hello? Hello? Who is this?
I am your son. Then hang up.

So many things to remember.
His school is still there.
I walk to it sometimes;
Pretend I am him.
Praying come kidnap me
Take me away now.
Got one artist try to draw
My son's grown-up face.

I ask him draw one
For every year. He say cannot.
Got one time I was on TV.
Crying, with schoolbag on my lap.
Keep saying, good boy, always help me
Do housework. Now I say let me
Do the housework. Let me wake up
To the mess he left behind.

General Commentary

Now that your students have gone through the task of understanding what language is in their study of "Apples" and examined its relevance and significance to cultural identity with "You have Two Voices", "Festival" and "White Comedy", a nice way to round up and bring it all home is to look at a poem written in a voice they will all be able to identify with.

This is a heartbreaking poem told from the perspective of a mother whose son goes missing. The poem deals with how she feels in the aftermath of his disappearance. To get your class more engaged, ask them to do some research on the famous case of the missing McDonald's boys in 1986, on which this poem is based. Two 12 year old boys went missing on their way to school. Despite a \$100,000 reward from McDonald's and a feature on television's Crime Watch program, no evidence surfaced to explain their disappearance and they were never found. This is a great poem to share with your class to teach them how powerful it can be when a poet is able to tell someone's story. It's also a powerful way to teach them the value of empathy.

Teacher's Note

Because this poem is written largely as a dramatic monologue and is pretty much a stream of thoughts, it is more productive to use it in class to talk about how poets can play around with language to create an authentic voice, rather than to nitpick on things like imagery and other techniques. You could, however, point out the shifts in the poem's tone as it moves from factual in the first stanza to pleading in the second, to confused in the third, and towards an intensifying grief in the fourth and fifth stanzas which culminates at the end of the poem.

Some Guiding Questions

1. Who do you think the persona is? What is their nationality? Is it a woman or a man? How old do you think the persona is? What do you think the persona does for a living?

Ans: The speaker is likely a middle aged Singaporean housewife. Ask your students what it was in the poem that led them to their conclusions. This is bound to be an interesting exercise which leads them to focus very closely on the language and voice of the poem, because there isn't anything concrete in there that pins down these details as facts. Yet, the way in which the poet has adopted this voice makes for quite an authentic character.

2. Why do you think the RC (Residents' Committee) man apologises to the persona?

Ans: He feels sorry for her loss as well as the confusion and heartache she must be enduring.

3. What can you say about the nature of the rumours she hears about her son? How do you think it makes her feel?

Ans: They all suggest that he is living a terrible life of hardship and suffering, and they must pain her very much.

4. Do you think the calls she gets from a person who claims to be her son are legitimate? If not, why do you think anyone would do that?

Ans: No. It is a heartless prankster or someone looking to capitalise on the fame of the story.

¹⁸ Alfian Sa'at, *A History of Amnesia* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2008), 41.