

Lawrence Sail

The Poems



Teachers' Notes

Lawrence Sail's poems are often complex in terms of imagery and lexical expectations. However, underneath this the message is usually one which connects directly to most people with even a little experience of the wider world, if they can be bothered to look for it. Very little of Sail's poetry is for lazy minds. On the other hand, it is worth pointing out that sometimes Sail points fun at over-intellectual pretensions, and occasionally uses technical jargon for its own sake (i.e. recognising it rather than understanding it) – and there is an example of this in the poems offered here (*An Organ Recital*)

The little kit offered here works with six of his poems – four from his latest collection, published in 2006 called '*Eye-Baby*', and two from his earlier 2002 collection '*The World Returning*'. The way in which students, who must be of an advanced level of study, are asked to work is progressive, and should take one lesson of 90 minutes.

An important point for the teacher to remember is that when it comes to poetry, no one is the expert and no one has all the answers, even the poet themselves. While this is acceptable to students (and others) who study or favour what is loosely called 'Humanities', this is often a moment of terror for students who study such disciplines as management studies or economics, who appear to expect "answers". Bearing in mind that many advanced level students of English are, in fact, studying business in one form or another, a session devoted to poetry can be both a challenging experience and one that might appear to offer a dead-end in learning communicative language. Nothing, of course, could be further from the truth. Learning how to express your feelings about poetry – in English – is a perfect form of using language effectively, and students should be encouraged to realise that the point of the exercise is to use what they have already learnt effectively, challenge what they don't know – and put forward their own points of view. They don't have to like poetry, and they don't have to like the poetry presented. They simply have to be able to express why they take the stance they do.

The information is presented in the order we suggest it should be. There are no hard and fast rules here. Information for teachers is given in standard script and information for students is given in *italics*.

Poem 1

Child Holding a Yacht

Pre-teach vocabulary:

fit snugly	fit comfortably
sails hoisted	sails taken up into working position
burgee	triangular flag showing colours of the yacht club
masthead	highest point of the pole set to carry sails
heeled	turned
stiffening breeze	a wind getting stronger
gybed	(or <i>jibed</i>) change sails to alter course
nodded at anchor	moved up and down on the waves
tanglements	intertwined, confusions, traps
Sargasso	islands of weeds floating in N. Atlantic
outdone	overcome

Hand out copies of poem to students.

Read poem to students aloud.

Questions: What is the poet looking at? Why is the camera lying?
 What doesn't he believe he sees? Why?
 What makes him believe in the truth of the photograph.

Child Holding a Yacht

The camera must be lying - he knew
as soon as he saw the picture, with the yacht
shrunk to fit snugly under his arm,
even with the sails hoisted and the burgee
run up at the masthead.

It told him nothing of the boat he manned —
how it fronted the waves, heeled smartly over
in a stiffening breeze, or gybed to change course,
or nodded at anchor, its hull ribbed
with the lagoon's clear light.

You'd never think, to look, that capes
had been rounded, enormous seas weathered,
the tanglements of the Sargasso outdone —
and he as navigator, crew, skipper,
single-handed in all this.

But when he saw in his own face the joy
which had him shouting wordlessly
and not quite knowing what to do —
in this at least, he had to admit,
the camera did not lie.

Poem 2

The Nightmare

Pre teach vocabulary:

overfalls of sea-change madness	no real explanation; students might discuss possibilities, out of context
false bearings	map coordinates that were false
the swell of them heaved	the movement of the wave caused energy pushed
stare	constant look

Read poem aloud before handing out.

Hand poem out and then get a student to read it aloud (or do it again yourself if need be)

Questions:

Who is telling the poem – the father or the child?

What were the “false bearings?”

What was the delusion?

Is there a relationship between this poem and the previous one? i.e. is the child with the yacht the same person (but now grown up)?

NB - no ‘true’ answers here. The MBA students will hate you for this; all answers are right, if the intention was honest.

The Nightmare

Each time, the same:
his father standing
in the bedroom doorway,
staring in

But the truth was worse:
his father lost
in the gaining overfalls
of sea-change madness

Once he had radioed
the false bearings
there was no going back:
the trap worked itself

One lie broke
onto another:
the swell of them heaved,
racing to the horizon

Until deception
became delusion:
*/ catch things almost
before they start falling*

Once he recalled
a photo: of himself
at seven, proudly
holding a yacht

And more than once
he saw himself standing
in a doorway, returning
his son's stare

Poem 3 (2 poems)

This poem is presented as a pair – based on some young, perhaps new-born twins. Tell the students this information.

Students should work in pairs. One student has poem A and the other poem B. They do not show their poems to each other.

Each student reads their poem. They then try to describe the content of their poem without quoting or showing the poem to their partner. The other student then does the same. Students should speculate on the purpose of the twinned poems.

Student A then reads their poem to student B, then visa versa.



Student A

Twin Babies Waking

Rose

Drumming the air
with all four limbs
rigid, goes with
the daily manifesto's
exultant shout.

Such force, given
the proper attachments,
could surely power
a moderate village, or
a one-woman orchestra.



Student B

Twin Babies Waking

Grace

The world is there
to be observed,
taken in, studied,
its textures tested
one by one.

The day begins
with a slight frown
indicating that work
on the great research project
has now resumed.

Plenary session: the point of the double poem is.....?

Twin Babies Waking

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Poems 4 and 5

Divide the class into two groups. Try to ensure that each group has a reasonable mix of students of linguistic and arts/commerce abilities.

The idea is for each group to look at a different poem and to give their own interpretation of it. Each group does not have to come to a consensus, and it is important to stress this. However, if each group comes to more than one opinion then each opinion must be voiced.

Before doing this, try this vocabulary exercise as a whole class exercise:



Match the words or expressions with possible meanings.

little owl	sad, crying end
drifted	looking for, carefully
owl-light	land with fences
low swoop	sad-sounding messages
dips and rises	going up and down
bobbing	<i>Athene noctua</i>
forlorn morse	moved slowly
frayed edge	<i>crepúsculo</i>
fretted parkland	gliding close to the ground
scouring	ups and downs
sobbing coda	move rapidly
claw	fall down
fugue	hang uncertainly
racing flurries	extended tissue
echocardiogram	loose cover
flap	measure of heartbeat
stretched gum	fast, sudden movements
wavered about	<i>garra</i>
flopped	<i>fuga</i>
flutter	unclear, uncertain border

NOTE: The poem 'An Organ Recital' contains a lot of language which is technically redundant in that specific meaning is unnecessary (unless your students are buffs of 19th century pipe organs!). In this case it is important to point out to them that they only need to identify which items are technical (but not essential for understanding). This is where MBA students might become a bit unstuck!

Little Owl

It may be that the little owl
has drifted into my dreams at owl-light.

It may be that I have half seen
the turn of its wing, in a low swoop
as it dips and rises close to the ground.

It may be that the little owl
has held my stare in its own, by the road
where sometimes it sits on the tall post
or a pile of books, bobbing, bobbing.

And all of this may be half forgotten —
but never that call which rises from a steady
forlorn morse to a frayed edge
of fear, of anger rising, urgent.

Across the fretted parkland it carries
beyond all doubt, scouring the grass
with rage and its sobbing coda of regret.

Into my heart it sinks like a claw,
into the dark from which nothing escapes.

An Organ Recital

Even before we reached the Impromptu by Vierne,
in fact during the Prelude and Fugue in E Flat
by Bach (J.S.) - the key, it is thought, representing the Trinity, as might also the three
main subjects
of both prelude and fugue — my heart started
its tricks, its random *fugato* of racing flurries.

I thought of the echocardiogram, its absurd
pictures — of, for instance, the mitral valve with its flap
of something that could have been skin or stretched gum
and which lifted, wavered about and somehow flopped
back into place. I already had my own picture
of the atrium, all that blood pouring in from the veins.

Meanwhile, however, in the windchest the stickers opened
and closed the pallets on orders transmitted by
the backfalls and trackers. Draw-stops moved the sliders.
The swell-box waggled its Venetian shutters, the couplers
linked pedals with great. While the flue pipes thundered,
the reeds continued to flutter their metal tongues.

Such hidden systems, such faith in synchronism!
And all this even before we reached the Impromptu
by Vierne. Impromptu literally, on the spur
of the moment. Louis Vierne, the French composer
and organist who, blind from birth, died
in the middle of playing the organ in Notre Dame.

KEY

