Let’s Think in English Lesson 4 : Decisions

Reasoning pattern : genre modelling

Overview
This activity presents two poems about making a difficult decision. They are both by the same poet (William Stafford), but this is not revealed to the students until the end of the activity. After the students have understood the poems and considered some features of how they are written, they are asked to consider whether the two poems are written by the same person, developing awareness of unrhymed verse with regular features and some of its differences from prose.

Key words
hood (in US sense of car bonnet), flanks, demure

Materials
Copies of Traveling through the Dark and Fifteen by William Stafford, printed on the two sides of a sheet of paper.
Powerpoint

Lesson plan

Concrete preparation

Do not explain that both poems are by the same poet. Present them just as two poems about decisions. Read them with the class and check that students understand what happens in each.

Social construction (groups)

Divide the class into two; each half to consider one of the poems. In their groups, students consider and develop views on:

- How does the person feel about their decision?
- How do we know?

Take feedback on Traveling through the dark, then Fifteen. On the first, students will often pick up on the alternatives (taking the deer to a vet, cutting the fawn out, moving the body a bit and driving on) and may say the first two are impractical and the third immoral. Some may notice such features as that the poet is alone, the silence and the poet’s self-consciousness (“around our group I could hear the wilderness listen”) and the significance of “swerving”. If not, draw these out by questioning.
If students suggest the poet should use his mobile phone to phone for a vet, explain that he is in the mountains (“wilderness”) miles from the nearest town. There is probably no signal and, if there is, it would take a long time for the vet to arrive. The fawn would be dead by then.

In *Fifteen*, students will often pick up the boy’s eagerness to ride away, the importance of his age (too young to ride a motorbike legally) and the use of the repeated line (emphasising his age and expressing sadness?). Some may comment on how the boy treats the motorbike like a friend or a living creature (horse?), the idea of freedom (“find the end of a road, meet / the sky on out Seventeenth”) and the dramatic placing of “Thinking” at the beginning of the last verse. Opinions may differ about the owner calling him “Good man”. Some may say he recognises the boy has behaved in a mature way and the boy feels proud; others that it’s ironic – the boy isn’t a man; if he was, he would have a motorbike. Perhaps he feels let down and a bit cheated. Again, draw these various points out by questioning if necessary.

**Cognitive conflict (groups)**

Ask students to consider in their groups: *Are the poems written by the same poet? If not, why not? If yes, what is the evidence for this?* Explain that they will need to give reasons for their opinion and there are probably several reasons.

Take feedback. Students will usually say the poems are by the same person. They often identify that both poems involve difficult decisions, are taken by a person by themselves, take place on roads, involve an accident, involve a vehicle and are set in America. Higher order responses include:

- both start by giving the location – Wilson River Road, Seventeenth
- the treatment of vehicles as living (“warm exhaust turning red”, “the car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights” hinting that the car wants to move on; “I led it gently to the road”, companion”, “patted”, “ran his hand over it”).
- both refer to wide open spaces (“wilderness”, “meet the end of a road”, “hills”).
- similar form – four verses with the same line lengths and a shorter separate verse at the end.
- no rhymes but a similar steady rhythm (pace).
- both express strong feelings by hinting, not stating.
- both are told as if they really happened to the person.
Students who think they are by different poets will often focus on differences of plot (one has a dead animal, the other not) and/or the narrator’s age (the driver of the car must be older than 15). A higher level response is that one has repetitions but the other hasn’t.

Eventually confirm that both poems are by William Stafford – biographical details on slide.

Metacognition (groups)

Ask students to think some more about how the poems are written by considering:

- These poems both tell stories of events that happened to William Stafford. He could have written them as normal stories, in prose with the text running across to the right margin.

- Has writing them as poems made them more interesting or enjoyable for you? If so, how?

- Or would you prefer them to be written as stories in prose?

Take feedback. Some students may say they prefer them as poems because they are shorter, taking less time to read. Higher level comments include that writing the stories as poems makes us notice things we wouldn’t notice in a story, such as the hushedness of “Beside our group I could hear the wilderness listen”; the repetition of “swerve” and that the second use is metaphorical; or the double meaning of “still” (and even the echo of ‘stillborn’) in “alive, still, never to be born” – the poem’s shortest line.

In Fifteen, students may mention the repeated line – this doesn’t happen in prose – and perhaps the horse imagery in verse 2, the implication of loneliness in “I stood with that companion, ready and friendly”, the rising excitement in verse 3, the placing of “Thinking” and the irony of “Good man”.

Students may mention how stories often include more factual details, such as saying why he was driving through the mountains at night or how much the boy wanted a motorbike. By leaving these things out, we have to work them out for ourselves or realise they’re not important. At the highest level, students comment that the poems are written differently from prose, e.g. words are omitted that would normally be included [“By (the) glow of the tail-light I stumbled (to the ) back of the car”] or changing normal word order

[“Beside that mountain road I hesitated” instead of “I hesitated beside that mountain road”] – this also happens in lines 14 and 16.

Hopefully this will lead towards a realisation that we notice these effects more in a poem because poems are set out differently from prose. Prose endlessly leads us endlessly onwards sentence by sentence as we want to find out what happens next in the story or
discussion. Poems break the line before it reaches the right margin and this pushes our eye back to the beginning of the next line. Because this is different from normal reading, it makes us more aware of how poems are written.

**Bridging (own work)**

- If the students have studied William Carlos Williams’ *This is just to say* and Flossie’s *Reply*, ask them to read them again. Thinking about all four poems, can you mention some things that make a poem a poem instead of chopped-up prose?

- Students find a narrative poem involving a decision that they like. They explain why they like it and what aspects of the way it is written make them think it is a good poem. (Heaney’s *An Advancement of Learning* is a possible starting point.)

- Students write their own narrative poem involving a decision.
Traveling through the dark

Traveling through the dark I found a deer
dead on the edge of the Wilson River road.
It is usually best to roll them into the canyon:
that road is narrow; to swerve might make more dead.

By glow of the tail-light I stumbled back of the car
and stood by the heap, a doe, a recent killing;
she had stiffened already, almost cold.
I dragged her off; she was large in the belly.

My fingers touching her side brought me the reason –
her side was warm; her fawn lay there waiting,
alive, still, never to be born.
Beside that mountain road I hesitated.

The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights;
under the hood purred the steady engine.
I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red;
around our group I could hear the wilderness listen.

I thought hard for us all – my only swerving –
then pushed her over the edge into the river.
Fifteen

South of the Bridge on Seventeenth
I found back of the willows one summer
day a motorcycle with engine running
as it lay on its side, ticking over
slowly in the high grass. I was fifteen.

I admired all that pulsing gleam, the
shiny flanks, the demure headlights
fringed where it lay; I led it gently
to the road and stood with that
companion, ready and friendly. I was fifteen.

We could find the end of a road, meet
the sky on out Seventeenth. I thought about
hills, and patting the handle got back a
confident opinion. On the bridge we indulged
a forward feeling, a tremble. I was fifteen.

Thinking, back farther in the grass I found
the owner, just coming to, where he had flipped
over the rail. He had blood on his hand, was pale –
I helped him walk to his machine. He ran his hand
over it, called me ‘Good man’, roared away.

I stood there, fifteen.