



Owen Sheers



Creative Writing Workshop

Information for Teachers

Owen Sheers is one of the most exciting and versatile contemporary English-language Welsh authors. He has written poems, novels, plays, screenplays, articles and extended non-fiction (his major works are listed on the following page). He has also presented various television programmes, most notably the six-part series *A Poet's Guide to Britain* (2009), where he examined poems that treated various aspects of Britain's diverse landscape.

He was born in Fiji and lived there and in Wales and London during his early years but settled in the Welsh border town of Abergavenny from the age of nine onwards. Consequently, much of his work draws on the surrounding landscape, especially the hill Skirrid Fawr (that gives its name to his second poetry collection *Skirrid Hill*) and the surrounding Black Mountains. However, while Wales and his Welsh heritage have influenced much of his work, he also believes it is important for writers to look beyond their national boundaries and engage with global issues and therefore some of his work ranges further afield.

Landscape and poetry are two of his passions. This is evident from the list of his professional affiliations. He is a patron of various literary organisations and enterprises, including the *New Welsh Review* journal and the Cheltenham Poetry Festival. He is also co-founder and a trustee of the Black Mountains College – an establishment set up to provide further education on sustainability and the environment.

He is also a keen educator. From early in his career he has expressed his desire to introduce more people to modern poetry. He is now Professor in Creativity at Swansea University with responsibilities for inspiring and organising collaborative creative projects between arts organisations and University researchers. He was a graduate of the first ever Beacons Project and therefore recognises its importance in engaging young people with writing.



This Lesson Plan – Guide to Use

This lesson plan is split into 2 parts.

Part 1 interacts with the first part of the film and aims to help the students relate to and get to grips with some of Sheers' major ideas.

Part 2 should be used in direct conjunction with the second part of the film, pausing where suggested to give the students time to do Sheers' exercises.

Clearly lessons can vary in length, as can discussions. There is almost certainly more than a period's worth of work in this lesson plan. It is completely up to the individual teachers how much or little they use or whether they choose to spread the material across classes, assign any as homework, etc. We would suggest that Part 2 is done as fully as possible and in one lesson, as this is the writing workshop.

The resources section at the end contains links to an article by Owen Sheers that echoes many of the concepts in the film, and to landscape poems by Sheers and other poets, a list of other useful resources, and a summary of the Sheers article mentioned above.

POSTCARD

Owen Sheers: Major Works

Poetry Collections

The Blue Book
Skirrid Hill

Long Poems

'Mametz'
'The Green Hollow'
'To Provide for All: A Poem in the
Voice of the NHS'

Novels

Resistance
I Saw a Man

Plays

The Passion (subsequently
novelised as *The Gospel of Us*)

Pink Mist

Unicorns, Almost

Non-fiction

The Dust Diaries
Calon

Lesson Plan

Before the lesson

Ask the students if they have any particular poems that they've read about landscape that they really like, and, if so, ask them to bring them to class.

It may also be helpful for the students to think in advance of landscapes about which they might want to write. There is some time provided for this during the lesson but some students may prefer to have more time to consider. Ask them to think about two or three possible landscapes but encourage them to remain flexible, as the workshop might inspire them to choose something completely different. They might also find that their choices do not fit well with the exercises Owen Sheers is suggesting and therefore wish to change. They can change their subject landscape whenever they like but considering the choice beforehand should mean they already have some ideas when doing the workshop.

The landscape they choose should be one they know well and one that is important to them in some way.



Lesson Part I

Supply the students with the following definition by Sheers of landscape. This is from his 'Introduction' to *A Poet's Guide to Britain*, but he says something very similar in the film.

"...without us, landscape would not exist. There would be nature, but no landscape. Landscape is what happens to nature when we turn up; when her hills, forests and seas are passed through the prism of our imaginations to be refracted again as a painting, a view, a memory. It is our perception that brings landscape into being."

From Owen Sheers, 'Introduction' in *A Poet's Guide to Britain*, ed. Owen Sheers (London: Penguin, 2009), pp. xvii–xxiii (p. xviii).

Ask them to discuss the definition briefly, in groups or as a class.

Do they agree with this division between landscape and nature?

How would they define landscape and/or nature?

Does it fit with their idea of landscape poems? They don't have to agree but bearing the definition in mind while watching the film and studying Sheers' poetry will clearly be helpful.

Watch the first part of the film (the part shot in the Black Mountains).

Ask the students to consider their personal responses to landscape and the outdoors.

What types of scene come to mind for them when the word landscape is used? Mountains, fields, town streets, city centres, woods, coastline, industrial estates, roads? As Owen Sheers emphasises towards the end of the film, it is important to remember that landscape can be urban, rural and anything in between.

Do they feel different outside? If so, different how? They may feel better, worse, or simply different. Or perhaps they do not feel any different which is also fine. Remember – landscape does not have to be attractive or life-affirming, it can be remote, frightening, hostile.

Read 'History' and the extract from 'Manhattan – A Poem to be Filmed' by Owen Sheers. These are the poems that he included in his article 'Poetry and Place' (link provided in the Resources section) in which he reinforces many of the things he says in the film. Skim reading the article or the summary provided may help with this exercise, as will having the article at hand for reference.

Then consider individually, or discuss in groups or as a class, how these poems represent the features about which Sheers has been talking.

How does the poetry represent the landscape?

What thoughts and feelings do reading these poems arouse?

Are either of these types of landscape (the bustling city and the mountain quarry) familiar? If so do the poems make you see them in a new light? If they are not familiar do the poems succeed in conjuring up an image of that landscape?

What can be learned about human history and culture, human relationships to the land, geological time, geographical location, from these poems?

How does the landscape affect the style and language of the poem; its vocabulary, line structure, rhyme scheme (or lack thereof), metre, imagery, poetic devices? Can it be said to be, in Sheers' words, "both subject and author," of the poem?

These poems represent two very different landscapes so compare them. How do they differ? Are there any similarities? Which one do you prefer? Which one do you think is more effective?

If students have brought in landscape poems by other poets, ask them to look at these poems in the same way, perhaps dividing them into pairs/groups, each looking at a different poem. Then have them report their conclusions to the class. As a class consider the differences between poems that describe different landscapes. If you have poems from different time periods, compare them with each other as well. Are there similarities in the way they talk about the landscape? Is landscape poetry timeless as Sheers claims?

Alternatively use the poems by other poets Sheers mentions in the film and article ('Woods' by Louis MacNeice, 'Binsey Poplars' by Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'Reservoirs' by R. S. Thomas, 'Grabualle Man' by Seamus Heaney) and/or one of the following poems from Sheers' collection *Skirrid Hill* for the same exercise. There are links to a copy of each poem in the resources section.

Owen Sheers poems

'The Hill Fort'

'Y Gaer'

'Border Country'

'Skirrid Fawr'

'The Steelworks'

'Farther'

Owen Sheers says very clearly in the film that poems about landscape are not always just about landscape. He mentions that they are usually about people and their interaction with the land. Towards the end he also mentions the possibility of using poetry to express environmental concerns, both directly, and by reminding people of what they will lose if climate change is allowed to continue unchecked. What other subjects could be discussed through the medium of landscape poetry? Ask the students to think for a few minutes and make a list then discuss as a class or in groups. Encourage them to keep the list and add to it as they think of more subjects.



Lesson Part 2

Watch the second part of the film (the workshop recorded in the bookshop), pausing when suggested by Sheers to allow the students time to complete the exercises. The exercises are listed below together with the film time. Watching the film is still important if at all possible as Sheers explains the exercises in far more detail than is given below.

The times given for exercises are only suggestions and teachers should free to lengthen or shorten where they deem appropriate.

Students will need writing materials for this section.

In addition to Sheers' suggested exercises, pause at 2:04 for 2 or 3 minutes to allow the students to decide what place they want to use.

They may already have a good idea, but allow them a few minutes to think about it in the light of Sheers' comments up to this point.

When they have decided, they should write down the name of the place, as Sheers directs. This can be its actual name or a fictitious name.

If the place has names in more than one language they may wish to think for a minute about which language name they will choose.

Once chosen, this name will be their poem's working title.

- **Restart the film, then pause at 3.51** to allow the students to describe their place/landscape in as much detail as possible. Give them 5–10 minutes to do this.
- **Restart the film, then pause at 4.44** to allow the students to do the sound exercise. They should think of a sound associated with their landscape/place and try to describe the sound in as much detail as they can. Allow 4–5 minutes for them to do this.
- **Restart the film, then pause at 5.39** to give the students a chance to think of and describe a smell associated with their place. Allow 4–5 minutes for them to do this.
- **Restart the film, then pause at 6.41** and get the students to think about the memory of an action (big or small, momentous or unimportant) that happened at their place. Ask them to follow Sheers' directions in describing that memory. Allow 4–5 minutes for them to do this.
- **Restart the film, then pause at 7.49** so the students can think about

the object that they will take from the place as a keepsake. Allow 4–5 minutes for them to do this.

- **Restart the film, then pause at 10.11** to allow the students to re-read what they have written and follow the suggestions given.

They should think about:

1. What is the writing about apart from landscape? What else is going on within their text?
2. What kind of language have they chosen?
3. What type of poem is likely to come from this writing? Short, long, lyrical, plain, structured, free? What is the feel and the music of the poem? Can they get a sense of that already?
4. Where will the poem start? And with what? The order of the exercises above is completely irrelevant – the poem can start and end anywhere.

Allow 5–10 minutes for this and stress that it is an exercise that can be ongoing. They don't have to answer those questions definitely there and then.

Watch the remainder of the film through to the end.

Encourage the students to undertake the suggested exercise of finding a short poem and modelling theirs on it as homework. Encourage them then to follow Sheers' advice and leave the poem for a bit before attempting to edit it.



Resources

Owen Sheers article 'Poetry and Place: Some Personal Reflections'
<http://www.owensheers.co.uk/pdf/geography.pdf>

Poems

Poems by Owen Sheers

'History' can be found at the end of the article 'Poetry and Place'

'Skirrid Fawr' – <https://genius.com/Owen-sheers-skirrid-fawr-annotated>

'Y Gaer (The Hill Fort)'

<https://genius.com/Owen-sheers-y-gaer-the-hill-fort-annotated>

'The Hill Fort (Y Gaer)'

<https://genius.com/Owen-sheers-the-hill-fort-y-gaer-annotated>

'Border Country'

<https://genius.com/Owen-sheers-border-country-annotated>

'Farther' – <https://genius.com/Owen-sheers-farther-annotated>

'The Steelworks'

<https://genius.com/Owen-sheers-the-steelworks-annotated>

The website also gives some background for each poem and a little analysis.

Other poems mentioned

Louis MacNeice, 'Woods'. This is the poem Sheers quotes in the first half of the film.

<http://www.blueridgejournal.com/poems/lm-woods.htm>

Seamus Heaney, 'Grabualle Man'. This is the poem by Seamus Heaney that Sheers discusses in the article 'Poetry and Place'. The Grabualle Man that is the subject of the poem is the body of a man that was discovered almost perfectly preserved in a bog in Denmark. Hence it is an excellent example of Sheers' belief that landscape can simultaneously display marks of the past and present and of human interaction with the land.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57044/the-grauballe-man>

R. S. Thomas, 'Reservoirs'. This is the R. S. Thomas poem that Sheers mentions in the article. 'Reservoirs' was written about the villages in Wales that were flooded to create reservoirs that provided water to English cities. As a result, 'Reservoirs' is something of a nationalist poem, though it also rebukes the Welsh for being too spineless to fight back. However, it is also another good example of landscape displaying the past and present alongside each other as the apparently serene surface of the current reservoir only just masks the ruins of the village beneath.

<https://allpoetry.com/reservoirs>

Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'Binsey Poplars'. This is the poem from which Sheers quotes right at the end of the first part of the film: "After-comers cannot guess the beauty been."

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44390/binsey-poplars>

Books

A Poet's Guide to Britain, ed. Owen Sheers (London: Penguin, 2009), pp. xvii–xxiii. In his introduction, Sheers elaborates on many of the things he says in the film, while the book itself offers a wide range of landscape poetry.

Websites

Owen Sheers' website provides a lot of information and useful resources, including links to reviews and videos of the author talking about his work.

<http://www.owensheers.co.uk>

The British Council website gives some background information about Sheers and an analysis of his work.

<https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/owen-sheers>

'An Interview with Owen Sheers' – The Poetry Archive.

<https://poetryarchive.org/interviews/interview-owen-sheers/>

Sheers' walking tour taking in the view of the Black Mountains from Hatterall Ridge. This is near the location for the first part of the film and is the landscape of Sheers' childhood.

<https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2016/jul/28/black-mountains-wales-walking-myth-folklore>

Article summary

This is a summary of Owen Sheers' article 'Poetry and Place: Some Personal Reflections' in which he reinforces many of the things that he says in the first part of the film. Quotations are all from the article.

'Poetry and Place: Some Personal Reflections'

Owen Sheers fell in love with landscape from a very early age, much earlier than he fell in love with poetry. He felt different, better, outside, particularly in the hills surrounding his home. But it was only when he discovered poetry that he began to be able to understand these feelings, and how and why the landscape affected him in this way.

Most of the poems he was drawn to as a teenager were rooted in specific rural landscapes; eg R. S. Thomas' poetry about the hill farming country of North Wales, Seamus Heaney's work set in the wet Irish countryside. The geographical setting of a poem can influence the writing of the poem itself, its language, metre, voice and so on. The landscape, "operated within the poems as both author and subject." In turn, the poems revealed hidden depths to the landscape, as both a physical and a mental location. He mentions Heaney's phrase, "countries of the mind," interpreting it as talking about, "geographical areas possessed of their own internal geographies of memory, history and language."

Sometimes the poem uses physical, concrete images to represent the culture and history. Two examples Sheers gives are Seamus Heaney's 'Grabualle Man' and R. S. Thomas' 'Reservoirs' (links to both poems are in the resources section). 'Grabualle Man' describes the body of a man found preserved in a bog, while 'Reservoirs' summons up the images of villages that were flooded to create the titular reservoirs. History and the present exist alongside each other in the landscape in both images.

These poems are also examples of a deeper relationship between poetry and landscape and how and why both can affect a person. Poetry and landscape can both translate abstract thoughts and feelings into a physical image or language. When looking over the Black Mountains near his home, Sheers sees a view which, "seems to embody and define a multitude of vaguer sensations and thoughts about the place..." These thoughts and sensations include the relationship between humans and the land, the geography originally carved out by glaciers so long ago, and the marks of more recent history, and make him feel and think differently. In the same way, good poems will 'situate' a reader by helping them pin down thoughts and feelings of which they are usually only vaguely aware.

To make these abstract feelings concrete, poetry and landscape will draw upon many influences. Landscape may use local or national history, people's interaction with that landscape, personal experience and memory, the light, the weather, the smell and sound of the place, while poetry uses devices like rhythm, metre, idiolect, imagery and rhyme. While landscape, like a picture, can often convey more just by being than words can ever manage (his graphic examples include a dividing wall in Belfast), Sheers argues that a poem is the most effective verbal equivalent – that an image can be 'translated' into a poem and explored because of the metaphoric qualities poetry and landscape share. They associate and suggest thoughts and feelings in the same way even if their methods of doing so are different.

The bulk of the article discusses rural landscapes but the same relationship between poetry and landscape exists even more potently in urban landscapes. When Sheers moved to New York he turned to the poetry written about it as a guide and discovered the city environment frequently affected the form of the poetry. Walt Whitman, for example, increased the length of his lines substantially after moving to the city in order to reflect the complexity of his surroundings. Similarly, when commissioned to write a poem about Manhattan, Sheers himself used a complex rhyme scheme (extract in the article).

Sheers finishes the article with a poem, 'History', that attempts to express what he has discussed in the article about the relationship between poetry and landscape.

