

WORKSHOP 2

**WHY 'ENGLISH LITERATURE' DOESN'T ALL HAVE TO BE IN ONE
LANGUAGE**

OR: 'WHAT! YOU CAN'T WRITE POETRY LIKE THAT!'

We tend to think of 'English literature' as monolingual – in other words, as literature written in one language, English. But in fact, this idea of 'English literature' is a pretty recent invention: it really came into existence in the nineteenth century. In medieval Britain, for example, writers used Latin, French, Welsh, and Cornish (among other languages) as well as English. Indeed, the traffic between English and other languages has been ceaseless – something we can discuss in more detail in another session.

Even since the advent of 'English literature', many of its most influential practitioners have been multilingual: speaking more than one language (often with English as a second, third, or fourth language); writing in more than one language; and/or using more than one language in novels and poetry which is apparently in 'English'. Here are just a small selection. Do you recognise any of them?



(L-R, top-bottom: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Vladimir Nabokov, Salman Rushdie, Chinua Achebe, Jackie Kay, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, James Joyce, Arundhati Roy, Joseph Conrad)

As these examples remind us, multilingualism has been very important to the development of 'English literature' as we know it. It is also a significant dimension of much contemporary literature, whether written in Britain, or anywhere else in the world. For some writers, multilingualism is important for social realism: in most parts of the world, including much of contemporary Britain, people speak different languages and in different ways, and if literature is to feel 'real', then it needs to reflect this. But writers may use multilingualism in other ways, too – for example as a way to reflect on language, and our experience of it.

- Can you think of any kinds of stories, or experiences, which you feel you would need to use more than one kind of language to write about?
- Do you have any ideas about how you'd go about doing this? What would be the benefits, and what would be the pitfalls?
- Have you ever read any novels or poetry which you'd describe in this way?
- If so, what kind of a book, story, or poem was it? What kinds of effects were created by the language that was used? How did it make you feel, what did it make you think? Do you think that the writer would have been able to achieve the same kinds of effect on you as a reader in 'standard English'?
- If not – what do you make of this fact? Would you like to read literature like this? If so, why? If not, why not?
- Are there certain kinds of stories or experiences which would be harder to write about if you only used 'standard English'?
- Do you think that there are any kinds of language which *shouldn't* be used in poetry, stories, or novels?

In relation to these questions, you might like to listen to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED talk 'The Danger of a Single Story':

https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story

Now let's look at just a few examples of the different kinds of language which can be used in literature which is in 'English' – and also, think further about the kinds of *effects* which writers can create by using different kinds of language.

- 1) Does a poem have to be **all in one language**?
No! Example: Antoine Cassar, 'Gonbidapena'
Here's the poem, and its translation:
<https://antoinecassar.wordpress.com/muzajk/gonbidapena/>
- 2) Does a poem have to be in **standard English**?
No! Example: Daljit Nagra, 'Singh Song!'
Here's the poem:
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/sep/14/firstbookaw.gurardianfirstbookaward1>
Here are some BBC teaching resources on the poem for KS4:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english_literature/poetrycharacter/voice/singh_songrev1.shtml
- 3) Can you use **swearing** in poetry?
Yes! Example: Philip Larkin, 'This Be The Verse'
Here's the poem:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/48419>

4) What **other kinds of languages or forms** can poetry borrow from?

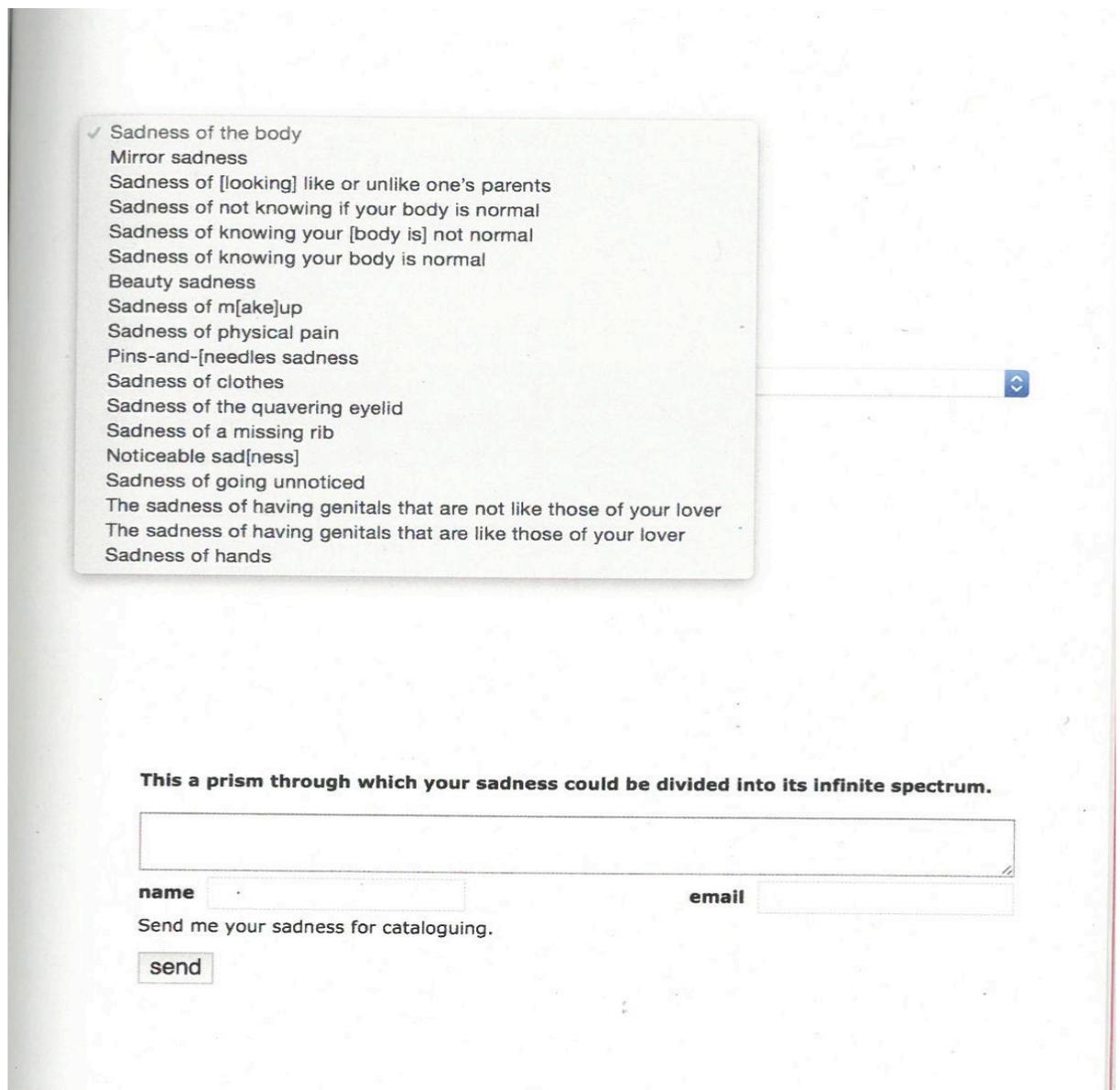
Any you like! Poetry is the most versatile literary form, and for that reason it can do most anything you can think of – in terms of how it sounds, how it is shaped, or how it looks. For example:

- It can mimic, and make you feel, the rhythms of **music** –
Example: Linton Kwesi Johnson, ‘Bass Culture’, which borrows rhythm, prosody, and language from Jamaican reggae.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mWaovED4tcs>

- It can borrow the language and forms of contemporary **electronic media** – like text messages, or social media.

Example: ‘Sadness of the Body’, by Abeer Kamran, from *OOMK! Zine*, which uses the visual form and language of the search engine.



The image shows a search engine interface. At the top, there is a search bar with the text "Sadness of the body" entered. Below the search bar, a dropdown menu is open, displaying a list of search results. The first result is "Sadness of the body" with a checkmark. Below it are several other results, including "Mirror sadness", "Sadness of [looking] like or unlike one's parents", "Sadness of not knowing if your body is normal", "Sadness of knowing your [body is] not normal", "Sadness of knowing your body is normal", "Beauty sadness", "Sadness of m[ake]up", "Sadness of physical pain", "Pins-and-[needles sadness", "Sadness of clothes", "Sadness of the quivering eyelid", "Sadness of a missing rib", "Noticeable sad[ness]", "Sadness of going unnoticed", "The sadness of having genitals that are not like those of your lover", "The sadness of having genitals that are like those of your lover", and "Sadness of hands".

Below the search results, there is a text input field with the placeholder text "This a prism through which your sadness could be divided into its infinite spectrum." Below the input field, there are two input fields labeled "name" and "email". Below the "name" and "email" fields, there is a text input field with the placeholder text "Send me your sadness for cataloguing." Below the text input field, there is a "send" button.

Abeera Kamran's *Literature of the Playlist* project, which you can find online, offers a new way for students to think about reading and writing, and it also invites the reader's participation. Here is Abeera's description of the project:

Literature of the Playlist

I no longer read the way I used to. There are no more afternoons in a quiet house page flipping and tea drinking, there are no more sitting in one place looking at ink and paper, feeling the materiality of the book in my fingers, bookmarking, underlining dog-earing. Now as I read, I google everything, I pause, I digress, I read a blog, reblog, browse, download and I might come back to the book. But when I do, the act of reading has been mutated and transformed. My virtual and physical worlds intersect at every opportunity with such aggressive frequency that it is no longer possible to take apart the two. This is what artist James Bridle calls the 'network'; the interweaving of us and the internet.

This website is an experiment in hacking traditional literary forms to create a cyborg literature in which the network is as much an author as the person who wrote the book. I have chosen extracts from books that I have enjoyed and penned them into the vernacular of the glorious world wide web.

I love reading books and this is a love letter to the all the afternoons I spent quietly reading and how happily I bid those afternoons goodbye today. This time around instead of me reading a book, the network reads it out to me, in its siren song of drop-down menus, mouse-overs, coded snippets, hyperlinks and automated emails. The book is dead. Long live the book.

Links can be found here:

Bio: <http://www.abeerakamran.com/about.html>

Email: info@abeerakamran.com

Project link: www.thebookinmybrowser.com

The point is that, just as we discussed in our first workshop, poets can use all the different parts of what we might call their language and cultural repertoire: the various kinds of language and cultural forms they have at their disposal. These are different for all of us, each of ours is unique and changing all the time, and all of them are potential resources for creativity. Different kinds of language might be used for their sounds, their rhythm, their shape, their meaning, or the experiences they are able to convey. Or indeed, they might be making a particular kind of point *about* language. You might think, for example, about Cassar's 'Gonbidapena', for example, where it's hard to see where one language ends and another begins; or Kamran's *Literature of the Playlist*, which challenges conventional literary separation of the 'real' from the 'digital', alphabetic text from emojis.

We all have our own individual 'language repertoire', our own range of ways of speaking and expressing ourselves; and *all* of this is our raw material when it comes to writing poetry or prose.

WRITING EXERCISE

Take one of the poetry examples we have looked at as the starting point for a poem as your own. For instance – you might want to write in response to it, or write your own version in your own voice, or take an idea that it has given you and work with that.

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FURTHER IDEAS AND RESOURCES

You could also try looking at two different versions of the ‘same’ story: Suhayl Saadi’s story ‘Extra Time in Paradise’, on Newcastle University’s *Devolving Diasporas* website:

<http://www.devolvingdiasporas.com/writing.htm>

Saadi, who is a Scottish Asian novelist, poet, and playwright, has written versions of the story in Scots (or as he puts it, ‘Glaswegian-ish’), and in English. Students might also want to discuss Saadi’s interesting formulation of what ‘being Scottish’ means to him, which can also be found on this webpage.