

Poems for a Dead Father by Geoff Goodfellow

Introduction

This guide complements the study of Poems for a Dead Father by Geoff Goodfellow, for Senior Secondary and Adult students.

Poems for a Dead Father is a narrative of remembering which takes us back through a violent childhood, while painting a picture of the man who taught Geoff love, loyalty and laughter.

The guide offers a selection of activities to help students form a deeper understanding of some of the themes and issues raised in the poems. The suggestions and models offered in the guide can be used as springboards to student writing.

Seven poems have been chosen to work with:

- [1. To Your Three Sons](#)
- [2. It All Happened in Copley Street](#)
- [3. A Report to the Captain](#)
- [4. The Accent](#)
- [5. Things Have Changed](#)
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1. To Your Three Sons



In this poem Geoff reflects on the way his father passed on his wisdom and values to his three sons. To do this Geoff trades off his father's language so we can hear his father's voice,

*you said you run once -
& you run for the rest of your lives*

There are many examples of the colourful language that was spoken in working class households in the 50s, full of metaphor, rhyming slang and pun.

*you said you don't use an aristotle
& you don't use a monkey's arse*

*you taught us when to shut-up
& when to shape up*

-- a reference to the boxing traditions of the Goodfellow family.

Geoff has shown us his father as teacher by constructing the poem like a series of instructions, both verbal and visual, from father to sons,

*you said . . .
you showed . . .
you told . . .
you taught . . .*

A recurrent technique in Goodfellow's poetry is the 'snapshot'. Geoff provides the reader with a photo frame created with words. Not only can we *hear* Geoff's father's voice, but also, we can *see* him down on the lino floor teaching his sons to box -and much more.

Throughout this poem as in all of the poems in this collection, there comes across the strong affection and respect of son to father.

ACTIVITIES

1. Think of something that a family member or friend says or said frequently. Write it down. See if you can add to it and make a list.
2. Think of the situation that best captures this person. Try to write down as many details as you can so you can place this person in a context. Remember the 'snapshot' idea.
 - a. Ask questions, 'Where are you, when is it, why are you there, who are you with?'
3. Do you have a special memory of this person. Did he/she show you how to do something - drive a car, kick a footy, cook a meal, ride a bike. Try to get down the details.
4. Think about the culture of fighting today. How has it changed? Is it still fists? What lessons have you learnt about fighting from your family? Write down what you know about street fighting today, weapons used, gangs, language, colours, tags, tactics, rules.
5. Find out what you can about fighting in other cultures, Greek, Lebanese, Aboriginal, Vietnamese etc. What are their rules and traditions? Pay attention to the notions of saving face, honour and shame. Does this raise the issue of being caught between cultures? Explore. You may like to write a poem on this topic.
6. Reflect on the concept of virtual fighting . . . on the computer. Has it replaced street fighting? Perhaps you could design a survey. Do your friends have 'computer parties'? What is the attraction?
7. Slang, what is it? Find all the slang words in the poem. Look up the meanings of any you're not familiar with e.g. larrikin and lair. What is the difference between these two words? What are today's equivalents? Make a list of today's street slang. Reflect on how much comes from America . . .

8.

MODELLING

Have a go at trying to write a poem using Geoff's poem as a model.

I wrote this one about a difficult relationship with my mother, who has also passed away. Like Geoff, I've tried to trade off my mother's words and I've used the "you said" structure. Also, I've focused on one vivid scene from my memory that sketches the image of my controlling mother.

Discuss the differences in the two poems.

To your only daughter... Mum

you said "you can't talk to boys
boys are dirty"

you said "don't wear black
black is for tarts"

you said "you'd look so much NICER
if you cut your hair
long hair is messy"

you said " be home early
or I'll have a palpitation"

you were always in my face
but whenever I tried to get close
saying " let me do your hair, Mum"
you'd say "don't touch my hair"
so I gave up
and walked away

and then one day
I'd just come home from school
first year high
I found you standing
in my room, Mum

you held up my diary
unlocked and opened
you dragged me
out the back
and down the yard
to the 44 gallon drum

you poured on the petrol
and said "BURN IT ! "
and I did

and I watched the innocent ramblings
the first love secrets
flicker and burn
along with my respect
for you, Mum

2. It All Happened in Copley Street



In this reflective poem Geoff looks back on his childhood with some fondness, but the 'good old days' of the 50s were hard, and he is happy to look ahead to the future.

ACTIVITIES

1. The 'sameness' of working-class suburbia in the 50s is shown by the repetition of the words 'everyone in Copley Street'. Repetition is a technique often used by Goodfellow for emphasis. Think of your neighbourhood. Can you generalise about it in the same way Geoff did? If you can't, why can't you? What has changed?
2. Make a map of your neighbourhood, streets, shops, parks, schools etc. How many people do you know? You might like to write a poem about it.
3. Think of your after-school, weekend or holiday experiences in your neighbourhood. Tell some stories.
4. Geoff reflects on the education system of the time when forty to a class was normal, milk was provided free to every primary school child and most students left school at age fifteen to get a job. How has school changed since the 50s?
5. What are some of the schooltime experiences that stand out in your mind? Write them down. Remember to use details to show the time, place and the feeling.
6. **Research.** Find out who 'Pig Iron Bob' and 'Honest Tom' were. Who or what were the 'bodgies and widgies'? Why was milk given out to school children? Work out the modern-day equivalents.
7. Do you have a photo of your house? You can use it to help you write a poem entitled, 'It All Happened in _____ Street'.

MODELLING

I wrote a poem about some of my experiences of growing up in the 50s. As you can see, I have used Geoff's style and structure to help me. See if you can pick the differences in tone. Have a go yourself! We all have stories to tell.

It all happened in Finlayson St

I grew up in the 50s in
Finlayson St, Netherby
where every night
I'd put the billy out
for the milkie
and every morning
we'd skim the cream
golden and gorgeous
from the saucepan on the wood stove

I grew up in
The House That Dad Built
post-war, with little money
but rich in skills
Dad made the bricks
and Mum, with me still inside her
knelt on all fours
nailing floorboards

I grew up in a house
where politics
was never discussed
I had to figure it out
 for myself
 and I did
while they said
"too good for us are ya
you're a radical
a bra burner
you're too independent"

I grew up in a house
where sex was a dirty word
brother's wet pyjamas
 nasty
don't touch
 dirty
all a mystery to me

where sex education
meant getting marched
down the backyard
to the pumpkin patch
"it's all about seeds and bees
pollen and flowers" Mum said
I found out another way

I grew up in a house
where discussion was rare
where narrow minds and prejudice
were the order of the day
and comments like
"don't suck that penny
a black man might've touched!"
were common
and shameless

I moved on from that house
in Finlayson St, Netherby
but there are shadows
from under its roof
that live in me
still

3. A Report to the Captain

In this poem we hear Geoff engaged in a monologue to his dead father in the early hours of the morning.

How frequently have we all had a conversation with someone close to us who has recently died or moved away?

Geoff creates the nostalgic mood right from the start,



G'day dad it's just turned
2 o'clock & it's mid-winter
& bloody cold

and there's

the rain on the corrugated
iron roof of the veranda

Then he begins to reflect on his life so he can 'report' the news to his father, as though he was just away on holiday.

He shares with us the familiar items that evoke strong memories of his father, the wedding ring, the false teeth, the glassblowing torch.

ACTIVITIES

1. Perhaps there is someone in your life who has died or gone away due to work commitments or family breakup.
2. Try to write a poem in which you 'talk' to this person. This is called a monologue. Perhaps you had an argument, and you want to explain. Perhaps you weren't able to say goodbye.
 - a. Try to use your own 'voice' in your poem. Reflect on words and phrases that you commonly use.
 - b. Try to use details to make your poem come alive. Make a list of the details about Johnny that are mentioned in Geoff's poem.
3. Make a list of the slang words used in the poem. Do you know what they all mean?
4. **Research.** Find out what RSL and TPI stand for. Who was Sir Mark Oliphant?
5. Read the poem 'Johnny's Reply', also from *Poems for a Dead Father*. It is another example of a monologue. In it, Geoff uses his dead father's voice as if he is replying to his own eulogy,

what a bloody funeral
I'm buggered if I know
how they did it

it was a bobby dazzler

MODELLING

Here is another idea for structuring a poem.
Sometimes you find a line in a poem that really grabs you and makes you remember.

You can use this line as a starting point for a poem.

I've done this with the line,

I really miss you then

We all know that there are special times when we remember people more than any others.

I've tried to write about some of those times with my Dad, reliving them through recalling the details, visualising the 'snapshot'.

I really miss you then

Xmas Day, Dad
I really miss you then
your plum pudding
boiling in its cloth skin
heaving with fruit
drunk with brandy
"who's got the threepence ?"
I'd hope it was me

Guyfawke's Day
November the 5th
"gunpowder, treason and plot "
your birthday Dad
you'd struggle through the door
arms laden with brown paper bags
"what d'ya get, what d'ya get ?"
I'd say
knowing there'd be
cartwheels
rockets
threepenny bungers
and the promise of colour and noise

we'd dance around the Guy
flames leaping
my face lit up with colour
how I still love the fireworks
and how I miss you then

Sunday mornings, Dad
you'd sit out the back
in the sun
pretending to be asleep
while I'd comb your hair
thick, dark and wavy
like mine
and I'd decorate it with flowers
 I can still feel the warmth
 of those mornings
with you

Cape Jervis jetty
sitting close
you and me, Dad
struggling with the wind
and the cold
dark chocolate for energy
and a thermos of tea
mixed with the squid ink
and tommy ruff scales

few words would pass between us
but words were unnecessary
I was in heaven
and now
I miss you
 still

4. The Accent

This poem focuses on how important the spoken word was for Geoff while he was growing up,

I enjoyed those days
& nights when television
hadn't yet arrived

There was singing, reading and telling stories,

while we four kids
giggled & nudged one another
to get closer to the fire

How times have changed!



ACTIVITIES

1. Go through the poem carefully and try to find the differences in the way Geoff grew up and the way you grew up. Here are some points to reflect on.
 - a. In the computer age has the language of technology replaced the colourful spoken word that filled Geoff's house?
 - b. Think of the language you hear in your home, try to analyse it.
 - c. Do we still know all our neighbours, or do we lead more isolated lives? Do we move to a new house often? Are we preoccupied with safety?
 - d. Can you imagine life without television? What would you do?
 - e. Discuss these points then write an essay [or poem] entitled, 'Growing up in your suburb/town in your decade'.
2. Geoff was brought up in the Irish Catholic tradition. He says,

it was the theatre -
the costumes
& the powerful performances
that drew me in

1. Do you have any religious affiliations? Do you attend a mosque, temple or Sunday School? Are you fascinated by the rituals or the colour or the poetry? Write about it.
2. Can you 'translate' the last eight lines of 'The Accent'?

If you are having trouble, don't worry, so did I!

put the wood in the hole is 50s Australian slang for 'shut the door'; *twig* is to understand; while *listen opium* refers to a 'slow working dope'. Geoff's father's language, rich with metaphor, was like a puzzle so the family was constantly challenged to think.

5. Things Have Changed

This poem looks at how the drug / American culture has invaded Australian society and imparted new meanings to our words, and our lives.

a fit was something
you'd have if we didn't do
the job properly

ACTIVITIES

1. How has our culture changed since the 50s? Use these categories to help you think.
 - film
 - advertising
 - clothes
 - work conditions
 - language
 - motor vehicles
 - food
 - sexual freedoms
 - fashion
 - multiculturalism
 - there are many more...

Choose one [or more] area, research it and prepare an oral presentation for the class, entitled 'Things have changed'. Try to use PowerPoint to enhance your presentation, especially if you choose 'technology' as your topic!



6. Miles Away

A poem which raises the issue of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder [PTSD], previously known as being 'bomb happy' or 'shell shocked'. In this poem Geoff refers to it simply as the madness,

I thought about the madness
the old man lived with
 & how he served
in the Middle East

The setting is the late sixties, early seventies, when young Australian men were placed in a lottery where the prize was a trip to Vietnam, the War that is. Geoff doesn't want any part of it.

ACTIVITIES

1. Why didn't Geoff want to go to war? What had happened in his childhood to put him right off the idea? Give examples from the poem to back up your answer.
2. How would you feel about going to fight in a war? What would the scene be like in your kitchen if you were 'called up'? Would you go? Discuss with your classmates.
3. Reflect on the concept of real as distinct from virtual violence.
 - a. Computer games with their realistic graphics, depicting killing, ambushing, wounding, maiming.
Conduct a debate, 'Virtual violence is desensitizing us to real violence'.
4. **Research** . . . What is PTSD? Find out as much as you can about it then write a news article.
5. Find out what you can about the Vietnam War, and Australia's involvement in it.
6. Listen to the song, 'Only Nineteen' by the band Redgum. Listen to Eric Bogle's '[No Man's land](#)' and '[And The Band Played Waltzing Matilda](#)' - both from 'The Gift of Years:the very best of Eric Bogle' Larrikin/EMI
7. Could you find Afghanistan on the map? Or Pakistan or the Sudan?
8. How much do you know about the current crisis that is threatening World Peace?
9. Do you believe everything you read and see in the Media?
10. Do some research on other theatres of war that Australia has been involved in during recent times e.g. The Gulf War, The Falklands, Korea.
11. Do you have a friend or family member who has been or is involved in a war?
 - a. If you can, interview him or her and get some feedback. How did they react when they came home? Why don't you see or read material on the effects of war? Are we sheltered by censorship?
12. Perhaps you could write a poem.
13. Read 'A Mirror to my Childhood', another powerful poem from *Poems for a dead father* which highlights the effects of war on families and how behaviour can be replicated through the generations.
14. Try to locate the Bill Bennett docudrama, *A Street to Die*. Find out what 'Agent Orange' is.

15. Geoff was determined not to go to the war in Vietnam, and his father supported him.

*don't go he said
I don't want you finishing up
as stupid as your father*

2. How did Geoff avoid the draft back in the 70s?

Here's a hint:



7. The Colour Blue



Poems are a bit like photos, they can bring memories to life in an instant. In this poem, Geoff finds his father,

drunk at my kitchen table
you were spread over it

but on further reading we discover that it was just a photo. However, it was enough to bring his dead father's presence into the room. Geoff goes on to explore other photos . . . and other powerful memories.

ACTIVITIES

1. Look at the largest photo of Geoff's father. What does it tell you? What are your first impressions?
2. Find a photo that you think you can talk or write about.
Look carefully at the photo. Note details, surroundings, occasion, time of year, who is there? Imagine what was being said. Remember it's just as important to contemplate what wasn't being said . . .
3. Reflect on the gazes, expressions . . . what do they tell you? And the body language?
4. Try to write a poem.
5. You might like to look for other photos of the same person depicted in different circumstances so as to build up a story. Then use this idea for a poem.