

Sweeney's Bothy

Schools workshops with Ken Cockburn

*I love the ancient ivy-tree,
the pale-leafed willow,
the birch's whispered melody,
the solemn yew.*

Seamus Heaney, from *Sweeney Astray*

In June, just before midsummer, I ran three writing workshops linked to *Sweeney's Bothy* for S5 and S6 pupils. The first took place in the Scottish Heath Garden at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, for pupils from Trinity Academy. A few days later I worked with pupils from James Young High School and Tynecastle High School at Jupiter Artland. Our focal point was Ian Hamilton Finlay's Temple of Apollo, near which sits Kevin Langan's woodland shelter modelled on it, built just a few days before our visit.

For each session I introduced the kids to the story of *Sweeney*, and the poem's engagement with both "beauties and severities of the natural world", as Heaney puts it. I read extracts from the long poem (section 40 in Heaney's edition) which names various woodland trees and lists their qualities, as well as articulating *Sweeney's* preferences for nature over culture.

We did all our writing out of doors. I first asked the kids to write simply about certain aspects of the garden or woodland – varieties of plants at the Botanic, Finlay's Temple, the woodland shelter, and a tree of their choice at Jupiter Artland – as a way of letting them find their bearings in these unfamiliar surroundings. Then I asked them to imagine *Sweeney* here, and to write a four-verse poem describing him arriving, settling, stating his preferences, and departing. To finish, I asked them to choose and write an extract from their poem onto a label, and to find a suitable spot to hang it.

The *Sweeney* myth gave them, I hope, a chance to write about woodland without being purely descriptive, or having to write personally; a simple narrative which lets them see what's around them more clearly. And the poem-labels force reflection and selection; the discipline of the editing process.

These are from notes I made after the sessions.

Friday 14, RBGE: overcast but fair; it grew brighter during the morning. On the walk I pointed out the trees – birch, alder, pine,

cherry – and also blaeberry. Small green cherries, whin flowering but not gorse, the smell of gin from the juniper.

While they were writing, the girls stuck together, as a pair and a three, both finding a pinus contorta to sit beneath; the two boys worked individually.

Wednesday 19, Jupiter Artland: sometimes overcast but mostly sunny. The garden was closed to the public. One boy, despite his grass allergy, lay down in the bothy, and declared it comfortable but midgy. Artworks as a distraction to the Sweeney myth, even the temple which was our focal point? But also interesting to have the man-made / natural contrast brought into focus. I liked the format, of giving them a myth on which to hang their description of the garden – simple character & narrative. I tried to emphasise to them the importance of being here – that they should take advantage of that, and write from what's before them.

The spots they chose to sit and write were, in the morning, on the log before the weeping girl, beneath the spruce near the woodland shelter, and by the Tenth Muse; in the afternoon they chose, again, the Tenth Muse, the Temple of Apollo, and by Suck, so far from the shelter.

The second group had time to look round before we started, so when it came to hang the labels, they used the cemetery and the rifle.

Here are the texts of the poem-labels.

RBGE, 14/6/13: Trinity Academy, Edinburgh

Surrounded by creeping,
crawling ivy, concealing
the copse
from which a coal-tit
escapes

Lachlan

He stared, amazed by his surroundings
at the stretching ivy stars
and thought how he enjoyed
their silence.

The juniper's flames
burn fierce blue –
strong as clear spirit.

Ms Swanson (teacher)

The ivy is my resting place
The cherry is my sustenance
The alder is my darling

Isobel Cockburn

I found an ancient pine there
gnarled and warped by time
like an ancient hand
cupped towards the sky

Cameron Edwards

The blanket of ivy
is my armour
and the birch
my shield

Lucy

I prefer the lavish
cushion of nature
to the synthetic imperfections
of an everyday bed

The only sound is
the rustle of leaves
as they come alive
whispering soft lullabies.

Jupiter Artland, 19/6/13

James Young HS, Livingston

I brush through the tall grass,
watching it flow like water,
guarding fallen trees,
nature's battlefield.

James Harrison

Out of nowhere
the stillness of their posture
frightens me.

Maria Amin

I shiver as the breeze surrounds me,
fluttering through ivy and leaves;
I enter a robust temple,
powerful words engraved in gold.

Melissa Duncan

Time stood still for a while.
Nature has a knack
for putting things
into perspective.

E.E.

The birches' whispered melodies
enchant me in the majestic
vast woodland. I stroll
aimless and bewildered.

Erin

Tynecastle HS, Edinburgh

But instead
see solitude,
& nothing but
the grass.

Matthew Scott

When I walk
through the valley of death,
shall I fear evil?

Douglas

A human structure,
so pure and bold,
whilst all I remember
is cruel and cold.

T.E.

The bright light and the soft
singing of the birds
are locking the evil
hidden within me.

Alecks Bacmago

I've arrived in
a cemetery. A cemetery
with no names.

Sarah Glass

Bathed
in a pool
of shadow.

Ashleigh King

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