



Celebrating the Polish
poet **Zbigniew Herbert**
(1924–1998)

Scottish **Poetry** Library

Zielony Balonik
the Scottish Polish Book Club

Preface

Zbigniew Herbert (1924–1998) is one of the best known and most celebrated Polish poets of the 20th century. His life and work shed light on some of the major events of 20th century European history, including World War Two, the Cold War and the end of Communism in eastern Europe. Twenty years after his death, 2018 has been declared the Year of Herbert by the Polish Sejm (Parliament).

To mark the occasion, Zielony Balonik: the Scottish-Polish Book Group has commissioned Ken Cockburn to write this resource for use in secondary schools. A number of related public events and school sessions linked to Herbert's work have also been arranged with the help of the Scottish Poetry Library.

The resource aims to introduce Herbert and his work to teachers and pupils in secondary schools in Scotland (and beyond).

As well as a brief biography of the poet, one of his poems is presented in Polish and English translation, with ideas for using it in the classroom. Further ideas are given for working with other Herbert poems, together with a short booklist, and links to websites where his poems are available, along with background material.



Zbigniew Herbert (1924–1998)



Zbigniew Herbert was born in 1924 in Lwów in eastern Poland (now Lviv in Ukraine). His schooling was interrupted by the outbreak of war in September 1939, when Poland was invaded and partitioned by Germany and the Soviet Union. Two years later German armies occupied all Polish territory as they moved east to invade the Soviet Union, and Herbert became involved with the Home Army, the underground resistance movement.

After the war he studied in Kraków and Toruń, before working in Gdańsk and Warsaw for the Writers' Union and the Composers' Union, and as an economist. Under the post-war Stalinist regime he was unable to publish his work, but after the 'thaw' of 1956 two collections of poems appeared in quick succession.

Unusually for the times, he was able to travel abroad, and in 1962 he published a book of essays about Mediterranean culture. His poems began to be translated into English in the 1960s, and he visited the UK on several occasions. In October 1963 he travelled to Scotland and visited Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Inverness, Oban, Mull, Iona and Glasgow.

In 1968 he married Katarzyna Dzieduszycka in Paris, who he had met twelve years earlier when both worked at the Polish Composers' Union.

Critical of its Communist government, he nonetheless returned regularly to Poland, between longer and shorter stays in California, Germany and Paris. A supporter of Solidarity, the free trade union and broader anti-Communist political movement, he returned to Poland in early 1981 during the brief period of its legal existence, and remained in the country when martial law was imposed later that year.

Critical too of the Round Table talks between Solidarity and the Communist regime which enabled a peaceful transition of power in 1989/90, he and his wife returned permanently to Warsaw in 1992, where he died in 1998.

Journey to Kraków

As soon as the train got going
the tall dark type begins
and he speaks like this to the boy
with a book on his knees

—you like to read boy

—I like it—replies the latter
it makes the time go by
always plenty of work at home
here it doesn't bother people

—Well there you're certainly right
what is it you're reading

—The Peasants—replies the latter
very true to life
only a little too long
it's the right length for winter

I've also read *The Folk Wedding*
that's actually a play
very hard to follow
too many people

The Deluge is something else again
you read and it's like you'd seen it
really—he says—great
almost as good as a movie

Hamlet—by a foreign writer
also very interesting
only this Danish prince
is a bit too much of a sissy

tunnel
dark in the train
the conversation suddenly breaks off
the authoritative commentary ceases

in the white margins
the prints of fingers and the soil
have marked with rough thumb-nail
rapture and condemnation

**Translated by Czesław Miłosz
and Peter Dale Scott**

Podróż do Krakowa

Jak tylko pociąg ruszył
zaczął wysoki brunet
i tak mówi do chłopca
z książką na kolanach
- kolega lubi czytać

- A lubię - odpowie tamten
czas szybciej leci
w domu zawsze robota
tu w oczy nikogo nie kole
-No pewnie macie racje
a co czytacie teraz

- Chłopów - odpowie tamten -
bardzo życiowa książka
tylko trochę za długa
i w sam raz na zimę

Wesele także czytałem
to jest właściwie sztuka
bardzo trudno zrozumieć
za dużo osób

Potop to co innego
czytasz i jakbyś widział
dobra - powiada - rzecz
prawie tak dobra jak kino

Hamlet - obcego autora
też bardzo zajmujący
tylko ten książkę dunski
trochę za wielki mazgaj

tunel
ciemno w pociągu
rozmowa sie nagle urwała
umilkł prawdziwy komentarz

na białych marginesach
śląd palców i ziemi
znaczony twardym paznokciem
zachwyty i potępienie

Teaching Suggestions: Journey to Kraków

Notes

The poem was included in Herbert's second collection, *Hermes, pies i gwiazda* (*Hermes, Dog and Star*), published in 1957.

The Peasants (*Chtopi*) is a novel by Władysław Reymont (1867–1925), published in four parts between 1904 and 1909.

The Folk Wedding (*Wesele*) is a play from 1901 by Stanisław Wyspiański (1869–1907).

The Deluge (*Potop*) is a historical novel published in 1886 by Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846–1916).

Along with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, it is likely the boy has been set these books to read at school.

Kraków: a Polish city with a long literary history; it remained largely undamaged during World War Two. Since 1995 it has been a partner city with Edinburgh.

Reading

Why do you think 'the tall dark type' speaks to the boy?

What is the boy's home life like?

What is the boy's attitude to books and reading in general?

How would you describe the boy's character? And the man's?

What is the poem's point of view? Who is the narrator?

What contrasts are expressed in the last two stanzas?

What is the narrator's attitude to the boy, as expressed in the last two stanzas?

Responding

Summarise the poem in a single sentence.

Choose a line or phrase from the poem which strikes you, and say why you've chosen it.

Which aspects of the poems do you enjoy, and which don't you enjoy? Why?

Teaching Suggestions: **Journey to Kraków**

Discussion

Journeys

How do you pass the time on a journey?

How do you feel about speaking to strangers when travelling?

Reading

In groups, discuss what you are reading at the moment, in and out of school. You might include books and other types of reading material (websites, blogs, magazines, etc).

In groups, discuss your favourite reading material, and your favourite place to read.

Research

Polish Literature

Find out about one of the Polish texts mentioned in the poem.

When was it written and published, and how was it received at the time?

What is it about?

Describe briefly the life of its author.

1950s

The poem was written in the 1950s. Find out what sort of clothes the people on the train might have been wearing.

Find out what train carriages looked like in the 1950s.

Kraków

Using online resources and/or a printed map, plot a route through Kraków from the railway station (Kraków Główny) to the library (Biblioteka Główna). You might give the route as a set of written directions, a map, or a mixture of the two.

Teaching Suggestions: **Journey to Kraków**

Writing

Summarise

Sum up in a single sentence your thoughts about a book or books you have read, including both positives and negatives. Do the same with this poem.

Starting with...

Write a poem, or a story, which begins, 'As soon as the train got going', and includes a dialogue between two passengers who don't know each other.

Storyboarding

Sketch a storyboard for the poem, in say 7 to 10 images.

Use text from the poem if you like.

Visualise the scene on the train:

Where are the man and the boy in relation to one another?

Who else is in the carriage, apart from the boy and the man?

What else is in the carriage, by way of people's luggage and belongings?

What is the weather like outside the train?

As well as the scene on the train itself, you might want to visualise one or more of these elements:

copies of the books the boy refers to

the boy reading one of the books at home, at school or elsewhere

a scene from one of the books he refers to

the train travelling through the landscape

the train's destination, the city of Kraków.

You could add notes about sounds to accompany each image.

Develop one of the images more fully.

Make a display of the storyboards, and/or of these developed images.

Teaching Suggestions: Other Poems

These questions and activities can be used as a way of exploring any Herbert poem. Some may be more relevant than others to particular poems. A list of poems suggested by the editors is given below.

Presentation: Reading Aloud

Ask pupils to work in groups of about 4.

Give each group copies of a poem (each group might have the same poem, or each might have a different poem).

Ask them in their groups to read through the poem together, and to prepare to read it to the class.

Each member of the group should read part of the poem.

The reading should involve both individual voices, and choral speaking.

The group can stand or sit to read the poem, perhaps changing during it. They might move in other ways too – but the poem has to remain audible to the listeners.

After the reading, the other groups are invited to comment on what they liked, and disliked, about the reading, and the poem.

Discussion: Punctuation

Herbert rarely uses punctuation or capital letters in his poems.

How do you think this affects the way you read and understand them?

Do you find it helpful – annoying – a relief – confusing? Why?

Why do you think he chose not to use punctuation?

Research: Historical and Biographical Contexts

Choose a poem.

Herbert published 9 collections of poems between 1956 and 1998.

Find out in which collection the poem was published (see *The Collected Poems 1956–1998*).

Find out what was happening in the years just before the collection was published, when it's likely the poem was written:

in Herbert's life;

in Poland;

in the wider world.

Does any of this information affect the way you read the poem?

Teaching Suggestions: Other Poems

Writing: Planting Seeds

Choose a poem.

Select three lines or phrases from the poem.

Write your own poem which includes these.

Use one line as the title of your poem.

Use one line as either the first or last line of your poem.

Use the third line anywhere in your poem.

Some poem suggestions

The collection in which the poem first appeared is given in brackets after each title.

The page numbers refer to *The Collected Poems: 1956–1998*. These poems are available online at the websites Poem Hunter (PH) and Poetry Foundation (PF), or via Google Books (GB). See Booklist and Weblinks below.

I Would Like to Describe (from *Hermes, pies i gwiazda / Hermes, Dog and Star*, 1957), p.65, PH, PF

What Our Dead Do (from *Hermes, pies i gwiazda / Hermes, Dog and Star*, 1957), p.75, PH, PF

The Return of the Proconsul (from *Studium przedmiotu / Study of the Object*, 1961), p.184, PH

Elegy for Fortinbras (from *Studium przedmiotu / Study of the Object*, 1961), p.186, PH

Pebble (from *Studium przedmiotu / Study of the Object*, 1961), p.197 GB

Inner Voice (from *Studium przedmiotu / Study of the Object*, 1961), p.203 GB

Akeldama (from *Pan Cogito / Mr Cogito*, 1974), p.312, GB

Prayer of the Traveler Mr Cogito (from *Raport z oblężonego Miasta / Report from a Besieged City*, 1983), p.347, PH

Booklist and Weblinks

Herbert, Zbigniew *The Collected Poems 1956–1998* (ecco, 2007)

Translated and edited by Alissa Valles, with additional translations by Czesław Miłosz and Peter Dale Scott

Herbert, Zbigniew *The Collected Prose 1948–1998* (ecco, 2010)

Edited by Alissa Valles, with translations by Michael March and Jarosław Anders, John and Bogdana Carpenter, Alissa Valles

Herbert, Zbigniew *Selected Poems* (Penguin, 1968)

Translated by Czesław Miłosz and Peter Dale Scott

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/zbigniew-herbert>

An essay on Herbert's work, and a selection of poems in English translation

<https://www.poemhunter.com/zbigniew-herbert/poems/>

A selection of poems in English translation

<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=nqeWAwAAQBAJ>

Zbigniew Herbert: *The Collected Poems 1956 – 1998* (Atlantic Books, 2014)
on Google Books –the text is only partially available

<https://vimeo.com/2755761>

Seamus Heaney reading from Herbert's work

<https://bliskopolski.pl/poezja/zbigniew-herbert/>

In Polish: a selection of poems from each of Herbert's collections

<http://herbert.polskieradio.pl>

In Polish: recordings of Herbert reading his poems, and commentaries by others on his work; photographs of Herbert and Lwów (Lviv), where he grew up; photographs of manuscript pages and sketches.



Founded in 2006, **Zielony Balonik** meets six times each year, to read and discuss works of Polish fiction, poetry, reportage and biography which are available in English translation, though some members will choose to read the original Polish. Our membership is based in central Scotland (mainly Edinburgh and Glasgow) and consists of both Polish and UK nationals, with a variety of work and family links to Poland and its culture. Our only entrance requirements are an interest in Polish culture and an enthusiasm for discussing books – we are happy to welcome new members.

www.zielonybalonik-bookclub.org.uk

Scottish **Poetry** Library

The Scottish Poetry Library in Edinburgh is the only poetry house in the world to have an extensive lending library at its core. Books remain central to our mission to bring people and poetry together: we run our own reading groups and support public libraries with resources to promote poetry.

www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk

Ken Cockburn is a poet based in Edinburgh, who works regularly with schools. His work with secondary schools includes *Miłosz 2011*, also organised with Zielony Balonik, which highlighted the work of the Polish Nobel Laureate Czesław Miłosz (1911–2004). A new collection of poems *Floating the Woods* (Luath) appeared in spring 2018, followed by *Heroines from Abroad* (Carcanet), translations of poems by Christine Marendon.

<https://kencockburn.co.uk>

Programme supported by

Polish Ex-Combatants Association in Great Britain Trust Fund

Scottish Polish Cultural Association

Polish Consul General in Scotland

Designed by Emma Quinn Design www.emmaquinndesign.co.uk



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