In my English classes, I teach students to understand poetry through the three registers of experience: linguistic, imaginary, and emotional. While poetry functions through an established system of language, it also challenges this system by operating through more primal modes of expression. Poets create images through a metaphorical language that evokes what is beyond adequate expression through non-poetic language. Images in poetry evoke the personal images of readers, as well as carrying wider symbolic resonances. Musical and formal elements evoke emotional responses beyond what is possible through 'ordinary' language. My students explore these levels of response to poetry including, but also going beyond, traditional linguistic meaning. This approach offers a thorough understanding of how poetry functions through the three registers while allowing students to explore their personal responses to poetic texts.

In taking this approach, I use several of Morris's dream or fantasy poems from *The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems*. Like dreams, many of these poems lack clear or specific meaning, and thus they force readers to focus more on visual, imaginative, and sensual experiences. Constance Hassett explains, *The Defence of Guenevere* works in a variety of ways to scrutinise, qualify, or prevent settled meanings. These poems are mysterious and atmospheric, and often anti-realist. They function through primary
processes of image and emotional tone. Their action often lacks clear causality and they further confuse by using non-referential pronouns. Some of the poems avoid clarity in key areas, while giving elaborate descriptions of minor details. They lack narrative concerns for logic and coherence and draw attention to the ambiguities of language and the pre-symbolic functions of poetry. Readers can use these poems to explore their own images, feelings, associations, and to create their own interpretations or responses. Poems like Morris's that confound linguistic meaning allow students a broader experience of poetic language.

**IMAGE TO WORD, WORD TO IMAGE WITH THE WATERCOLOUR POEMS**

One of my first goals is to encourage students to notice, explore, and describe the visual images that arise in their minds when reading poetic texts. Morris's poems 'The Blue Closet' and 'The Tune of Seven Towers' provide examples of poems derived from visual images, as they were both inspired by watercolours painted by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. I use these two Morris poems along with their respective paintings in order to get students thinking about how the mind transforms images into language and language into images. Jerome McGann writes about this specifically in terms of Rossetti: 'Rossetti shows every artist's understanding, that the only adequate interpretation of a work of art is a responsive work of art'. He explains, 'In this kind of model, images call out to images and their dialogue is the action of an artistic process of thinking'. I constantly encourage this kind of response in my students. I want them to use the imaginative works of others to engage their own imaginations.

Before having students read the poems, I devote one class period to the paintings. I begin with The Blue Closet, and have the students describe the contents of the image – translating the visual into words. After this, I have students engage their imagi-
nations more deeply by asking them to create a broader scene in their minds: they start with Rossetti’s image and expand it spatially by considering what else might be happening in the scene. Many imagine that the women are giving a concert or are performing at a festival surrounded by people; others see them alone singing praises to God in an old church. After expanding the image spatially in their minds, I ask students to expand the sensory experience from the visual to include other senses. Many will hear music; some imagine either a musty or perfumed smell in the air. Next, I ask students to create a short narrative based on the scene they have built from Rossetti’s painting. This requires them to expand the image temporally by considering what might have come before and what might happen after the scene.

After finishing The Blue Closet, the class does the same activity with The Tune of Seven Towers. With this painting, students may imagine a dying queen, or a princess meeting an undesirable suitor, or a lonely woman whose beautiful music captivates those around her. By the end of this activity, students have essentially created their own imaginative works in writing from the two paintings, which is exactly what Morris did in creating his poems. Among the many benefits of this kind of exercise, students learn to relate to Morris’s creative process before reading his works.

For the following class, I have students read the two poems. Beginning again with ‘The Blue Closet’, I hand out a storyboard sheet with six frames on each side (the kind that filmmakers use) to each student and tell them to imagine that they had to film the poem in six scenes; they then draw, to the best of their ability, each of the scenes on the story boards. Here instead of transforming an image into language, they transform language into a series of images. This activity gets students thinking about the poem visually, and also forces them to come up with an imaginative interpretation of the poem. Because of the poem’s ambiguity, students’ visualisations of it differ greatly and offer a starting point for discussions about how we might possibly interpret it. The different interpretations that necessarily arise also help
students toward a more relativist approach to poetic interpretation.

For ‘The Blue Closet’, as for ‘The Tune of Seven Towers’, a number of questions and ambiguities arise. In ‘The Blue Closet’, the setting is not completely clear, and the action is only slightly less vague. The poem presents four women, two queens and two damozels, who are trapped in some mysterious setting where they are allowed out only once a year on Christmas Eve so that they may sing in the Blue Closet. One of the queens, Lady Louise, recalls her dead love Arthur who may have been murdered. In the end, Arthur returns from the dead and takes the women from their prison to the land of the dead with him.

The atmosphere or mood of the poem, difficult to capture in a summary, is perhaps more important to the poem’s overall effect than the story. Throughout the poem a bell tolls for the dead, only to fall silent near the end. The setting never becomes clear, but the women exist ‘between the wash of the tumbling seas’ (line 2), and at one point water oozes up through the ‘tiles of the Closet Blue’ (line 33). Perhaps they live in an underwater realm, or near water; each student will portray their surroundings somewhat differently. The poem is full of strange and often vague images that allow the imagination to roam. In one of the more interesting images in the poem, Arthur says that he cannot weep for his love because his tears are “hidden deep under the seas; / In a gold and blue casket she keeps all my tears...” (lines 44–45). In one of Louise’s early memories of Arthur, he comes to her with snow in his hands and places it upon her head to melt. Then one of the ladies questions whether Arthur was strangled with the scarf that she wore. In the scene leading up to Arthur’s return, a lily rises up from the tiles of the Blue Closet. These strange details and images set a mood for the action, but explain very little. They invite the reader to interpret and imagine – filling in the elisions.

Margaret Lourie refers to the poem as ‘the quintessential example of Pre-Raphaelite dream-poetry’. Like a dream, not only are the contents of the poem somewhat vague, but the meaning of it is entirely confounding. The poem functions main-
ly through its eerie atmosphere and dark language in order to achieve its emotional and imagistic results in the mind of the reader. Lourie explains,

... it is largely the refusal of this poem to mean anything or to lend itself to rational interpretation that provides its special power; for in ‘The Blue Closet’ Morris transcends the normal processes of waking thought and cuts off the usual orientation of the mind toward the phenomenal world. As a result, he can journey down into the pre-logical and primary image-making reaches of the psyche. The many critics who accuse Morris of escapism are quite right; he does wish to escape from the world of external reality. But what they too often fail to see is that he escapes to a more universal internal reality. 6

Even though the language of the poem may cause confusion, Morris expresses a more primal level of meaning. The ladies clearly experience the emotional effect of their situation, as does the reader. A mysterious gloom or dread hangs over the ladies as they are confined in a state of limbo. They experience profound isolation and lack all hope. Some readers view the ladies’ deaths at the end of the poem as a positive occurrence. In death, the ladies may finally find peace or at least achieve an escape from their current miserable state. Many students will portray the group crossing the bridge to death in the poem’s conclusion with smiles on their faces, or they will portray the lovers reunited in an embrace and kiss.

I repeat this storyboard exercise with ‘The Tune of Seven Towers’, but because the poem lacks much real time action, I take a slightly different approach. After reading the poem, I ask my students to consider what may have led up to the scene Morris portrays, and what will happen after it. The scene of the poem presents Yoland of the flowers describing a desolate and haunted place, probably the castle of Seven Towers. She then seductively urges Oliver to return there for her effects—a mission that we sense will not end well for him. Again, much of the story is elided or left unclear. ‘The Tune of Seven Towers’ invites the reader to create a past story, and to speculate about the future.
For the first two frames on their storyboards, students create images portraying what may have happened before the scene in the poem; in the next two frames, they portray the action of the poem itself; then, in the final two frames, they portray what they think will happen after the scene of the poem.

Most readers can agree that some major catastrophic event has occurred at the castle to leave it empty and haunted. Morris leaves the reader to imagine what that past disaster may have been. In the ‘before’ frames, many students will portray a war, probably suggested by the mention of ‘battlements’, in which the inhabitants of the castle were defeated and massacred. Some students will modernise the poem and portray a nuclear explosion. Others imagine that a plague has occurred, or a fire. Readers are also invited to speculate about the pasts of the poem’s two characters. Perhaps they fled before the catastrophe. Perhaps Yoland was a queen having an illicit affair with the knight Oliver. Perhaps they were a king and queen who left their people to die. Perhaps Yoland is making the whole thing up, and has a very different past. Students will imagine an assortment of past stories for the poem.

Students’ representations for the frame portraying what is presented during the poem tend to vary less, though the poem does leave itself open to a variety of visual interpretations by leaving out much in the way of specific detail. In contrast to Rossetti’s richly coloured and minutely detailed painting, David Staines points out that ‘in this poem, remarkable for the comparative absence of concretely visualised details, Morris curiously refrains from borrowing any details from the painting’.

Students will, however, often use one frame to portray a scene with Yoland speaking to Oliver, similar to the scene portrayed in Rossetti’s painting. Most will also use at least one frame to portray the inhabitants of the castle described by Yoland in their ghostly forms.

In the final frames, most will follow the poem’s ominous tone and portray Oliver coming to some harm in the castle. While most imagine Oliver’s doom in the end, there may be some debate over the portrayal of Yoland. Some see her as troubled by
Teaching Morris’s Early Dream Poems

losing Oliver, portraying her in tears or even dying from grief. Others, however, see her as a *femme fatale*. Critics have also held a similar debate over the character of Yolandi. David Latham makes the argument for her as *femme fatale*, seeing Oliver as only one in a long string of her victims.\(^8\) He suggests that she was not even a castle maiden at all, but a sinister imposter in the castle.\(^9\) However, Charlotte Oberg and Carole Silver take more sympathetic approaches to her. To Oberg, Yolandi is a victim of fate who does not desire Oliver’s death.\(^10\) Silver similarly describes her as ‘simply fated to be fatal, she is as much a victim as her lover’.\(^11\)

‘The Tune of Seven Towers’, like the other dream poems from *The Defence*, opens up the reader to multiple possibilities for interpretation and imagination.

**EMOTIONAL AND IMAGINATIVE ENGAGEMENT WITH “THE WIND” AND “GOLDEN WINGS”**

Peter Faulkner describes Morris’s poem ‘The Wind’ as ‘a nightmare poem which we can hardly explain but which imposes its strange vision upon the reader’.\(^12\) In the poem, an old Norseman appears haunted by some unnamed dread. He views his surroundings with delusions reflecting fear and anxiety. Early in the poem, he slips into a strange dream that begins with his amorous pursuit of Margaret, and ends in his discovering her dead body. He awakes only to have a final haunting vision of ‘the ghosts of those that had gone to the war’ (line 81). The poem provides for multiple possibilities and forces readers to imagine what has happened and what its contexts may be. What exactly happens in the dream? What is the relationship between the speaker and Margaret? Do they have sex? Why and how does she die? What significance is the war? What might have motivated the dream? Along with these unanswered questions, the poem provides a number of symbols and metaphors that call for exploration.

Many of the details in the poem are obscure, but the refrain contains a number of images which set a clear tone. Repeated
eleven times throughout the fairly short poem, it reads ‘Wind, wind! thou art sad, art thou kind? /Wind, wind, unhappy! thou art blind, /Yet still thou wanderest the lily-seed to find’ (lines 4–6). Oberg regards the wind as a metaphor for the speaker’s ever-wandering memory.13 David Bentley emphasises the disruption of the natural cycle with the image of the wind seeking the lily-seed, which suggests ‘that the wind, like the dawn, has failed to discover new life in the speaker’.14 The wind also reflects chaos and the potential cruelty of fate, a theme powerfully evoked in the speaker’s dream where he feels helpless and confused by Margaret’s death. Because the action of the dream is portrayed so vaguely, the reader shares in his emotional experience of helpless confusion in the face of tragedy. We feel strong emotions over Margaret’s death, even though, or perhaps even more so because we cannot understand what exactly happened or why.

The action of the dream opens itself up to multiple interpretations. I use this poem to engage my students’ imaginations, asking them to try, creatively and logically, to fill the gaps in the text. One ambiguity in the poem leaves us wondering what exactly occurred between the two characters in the dream. Bentley and Oberg offer nearly opposite interpretations of this aspect of the text, which cause them to read Margaret’s death and the meaning of the poem very differently. Bentley argues that Margaret and the speaker do not engage in any sexual act, that the speaker appears to have propensity for inaction, and that ‘Margaret’s death has been caused, not by any identifiable act on the part of the speaker, of herself, or of persons unknown, but that it is to be seen as the result of the speaker’s failure to act, his failure to confront her sexuality’.15 Oberg, however, argues that Margaret and the speaker do have sex. Far from inactive, the speaker ravishes Margaret then perhaps murders her, or she commits suicide because of lost honour.16 The key lines, in terms of how one reads the action of the dream, come after the speaker has pursued her amorously and she appears to have given in. These suggestive lines read, ‘I kiss’d her hard by the ear, and she kiss’d me on the brow, / And then lay down on the grass, where the mark on the moss is now, / And spread her arms out wide
while I went down below' (lines 49–51). These lines are immediately followed by the refrain. Then the speaker says, 'And then I walk’d for a space to and fro on the side of the hill, /Till I gather’d and held in my arms great sheaves of the daffodil' (lines 55–56). Has the sexual act simply been implied but elided, or was it interrupted by his going 'down below' on the side of the hill to gather flowers?

We can also consider other possibilities for what exactly happens to Margaret. How we interpret the scene where 'her head fell back on a tree, / And a spasm caught her mouth' (lines 41–42), dictates our reading of the sequence that follows. When the speaker describes her at this point as 'fearful for me to see' (line 42), he may indicate that she is afraid of him or that she is attempting to hide something from him. Perhaps she is sick here, having a seizure, and attempting to hide her illness. Later, this illness that the speaker fails to notice kills her. Or, perhaps she has accidentally hit her head during their flirtation and is simply trying to hide it out of embarrassment. It is also possible that the injury sustained in this moment is what kills her. If we read the following lines, she remains mostly inactive other than, according to the speaker, returning a kiss. Perhaps she tries to conceal the severity of the injury, or perhaps the speaker leaves out some crucial information here that would implicate him in the injury and in her death. The aggressive descriptions of his pursuit of her may imply that he actually rapes her before covering her with flowers. The speaker certainly betrays some delusional perceptions at other points in the poem, so we may not want to take his version of the dream at face value.

Along with what happens in the dream, the reader is also invited to speculate about the motivation behind the dream. Bentley sees Margaret as an old love. He argues that the speaker relives a repressed scene in his dream. 17Ekbert Faas also sees Margaret as a former love, but is less sure about whether the dream reflects a real occurrence. He writes, 'One wonders whether the speaker is relating actual events or merely articulating homicidal fantasies'. 18 The dream, Faas suggests, may be motivated by hurt or angry emotions toward the former love object. Morris draws us
into the speaker’s emotional experience, without defining it specifically. We only sense that he appears haunted and deeply disturbed by something that becomes manifest in his delusions and in his dream. Faas writes that “‘The Wind’, like other of Morris’s poems, somehow embodies unconscious emotions more directly, prompting the reader to assume and re-enact them in the process.”

Another possibility for the speaker’s powerful emotional experience reflected in the dream could be that he is living, or has lived, in a state of war, witnessing its destructiveness. Isobel Armstrong brings up this possibility, seeing the wind as an ‘indifferent’ and ‘predatory force’. She reads Morris’s poetry as socially resistant in general and speculates that ‘The Wind’ is Morris’s Crimean-war poem. The dream of Margaret’s death could reflect the general destruction and confusion of war displaced into the dream situation. Or, perhaps Margaret was a former love who was actually killed in a war. This reading would make the connection more clear between the dream of Margaret and the ghost soldiers who march in afterwards.

While details of the poem remain ambiguous and allow for imaginative reading, the emotional tone is fairly clear. We can use this intensely emotional poem to encourage students to explore their own response to it, while also encouraging them to empathise with the characters and their emotional states. Students choose which stanza they feel most powerfully, without defining it. While some students will choose the climactic moment where the speaker discovers Margaret, others feel the speaker’s loneliness at the beginning more intensely; others will choose the more erotic moments in the poem, while some will feel fear in the moments leading up to the climax. After students have focused in on a particular stanza, they then try to describe what feelings that stanza evokes in them. Here students will come to see the difficulty of transferring a feeling into language. I encourage them to create their own metaphors, or to follow a chain of associations, to express their emotions. Finally, to get them even further into the experience, and to encourage empathy with the characters in the poem, students create their own fic-
tional first-person narrative where they imagine that they are one of the characters in the poem experiencing the deeply felt scene first hand. This allows students to explore the depth of an emotion, while also offering some distance.

The poem ‘Golden Wings’ functions through a similar ambiguity in action, while establishing a clear emotional tone. Faulkner writes of the poem that “‘Golden Wings”, like many other of these poems, is atmospheric and suggestive rather than very clear in the narrative, but in most cases this increases the reader’s involvement’. The poem achieves its emotional power through its extremes. It begins with a description of Ladies’ Castle, a paradise where flora and fauna flourish, peace abounds, and ladies and knights live and love in happiness. But Morris soon undercuts this Edenic vision by introducing Jehane who can feel no happiness in paradise because her love is not with her. Her love is not anyone in particular, but an ideal that she hopes will appear someday. In the end she goes out to seek him and is later discovered slain. After her death the early, happy imagery of paradise is reversed and the landscape becomes a cruel, ravished wasteland. In the poem’s final lines we discover another dead body, this time of a man.

The poem leaves us with one major question, which I focus on in class discussions. Did Jehane make the right decision in leaving the castle? The obvious or immediate answer may tend to be ‘no’ since it led to her death and to the destruction of her homeland paradise. Yet, we may admire Jehane for her independence or for her fearless quest for what is most important to her – love. Amanda Hodgson argues that Jehane desires action in the real world as opposed to the futility of the enclosed castle – but leaving leads to her death and the destruction of the ‘beautiful place’. Hodgson explains, ‘this extremely complex poem is concerned with the problem of a good which is incapable of development opposed to an evil which is destructive but contains elements of life-giving force’. Life in the castle seems like paradise initially, but perhaps it is inevitably doomed as it does not allow for growth or development.

I encourage my students to engage with the figure of Jehane by
responding to this creative work through their own creativity. Jehane’s story is told mostly from a third-person perspective, with the exception of the scene where she decides she must leave the castle. When Jehane does have a voice she expresses her passionate yearning for love. I have my students write a monologue from Jehane’s point of view while she is living in the castle. This encourages empathy with her so that students may try to understand why she makes her fatal decision to leave. After this, they do a second writing exercise whereby they imagine Jehane after she has left the castle, a scene not portrayed in the poem. This second part of the activity puts Jehane in a position where she may reflect on her decision. Students may also use this part of the activity to provide an explanation of what causes her death.

**PERSONALISING METAPHORS OF ‘SPELL-BOUND’**

By reflecting universal emotions linked to frustration, loss, and failure, ‘Spell-bound’ offers readers the opportunity to consider their own experiences as analogous to, though distinct from, those of the poem’s speaker. The speaker is a knight trapped in a desolate landscape and separated from his love by a Wizard’s spell. In his isolation, the knight envisions his love as she suffers for him. Silver explains that the knight’s reverie ‘projects the prisoner’s desires onto his lady and reveals his frustrated sexuality rather than hers’. As a dramatic monologue, the poem enables us to focus on the knight’s perspective, which is one of desperate yearning.

The poem’s rich metaphoric imagery adds to the tone of hopeless desperation. I use the poem to allow my students to explore the effects of metaphoric language as a particularly powerful means of emotional expression, and to apply the metaphors of the poem to their lives. The landscape in which the knight is trapped becomes one of the central metaphors. The speaker describes the unreaped corn that makes up his surroundings: ‘The year wears round to autumn-tide, /Yet comes no reaper to the corn’ (lines 5–6). This central metaphor reflects the theme of
the poem: unfulfilled potential – specifically, in the knight’s case, the unfulfilled potential for love. Once students have come to an understanding of the metaphor, then they may apply it to themselves. Students will free-write on what this metaphor means to them – what is the unreaped corn in their lives? This brings students in contact with their associations with the poetic metaphor, which allows for self-exploration and also enables them to understand better how the poem achieves its particular emotional power through metaphor. Many college students, particularly freshman, relate this metaphor to being away from home, often for the first time, separated from friends, family, and significant others. Others see the metaphor in terms of their unrealised potential as they seek to find their place in the world.

Following up on the unreaped corn metaphor, I then ask students to think of the wizard’s spell in these terms. As a metaphor, the wizard’s spell becomes the barrier to whatever the reader is trying to accomplish or realise. I ask students to consider what they wrote about the unreaped corn metaphor, and then write about what the wizard’s spell would be in their lives. It may be the circumstances that separate them from important relationships, or the thing that may keep them from doing their best in college. The wizard may be an external or possibly even an internal force. J. M. S. Tompkins writes, ‘the power that inhibits action seems intimately close, also part of [the speaker] himself’ – an ‘uncomprehended psychological hindrance’. 25 Reading the wizard metaphorically as a cause of the lack of fulfilment, or an obstacle, allows readers to consider the barriers that keep them from achieving their goals or realising their desires.

Finally, I ask students to think about defeating the wizard. In the poem, the knight’s sword appears to represent the means through which he could do this. At the poem’s conclusion, the knight imagines his love coming to him with his sword wherein he says, ‘My heart upswells and I grow bold’ (line 80). He recalls how it has served him well in the past when he first won her: ‘And you have brought me my good sword, / Wherewith in happy days of old / I won you well from knight and lord’ (lines 77–79). The sword represents safety, power, and joy, all associated with the
success of winning his love initially. It is the object that could help him realise his potential. Like the spell, this object could be external or internal. In considering the sword as a metaphor and relating it to their situations, students examine what might give them confidence or what would perhaps enable them to achieve their potential – to reap their corn.

CONCLUSION

Many of Morris’s poems allow us to imagine more detail, to expand on and explore various meanings, and to feel the emotions expressed by their speakers and characters. Like dreams, these poems function less through logic than through more primary processes of expression, and thus we experience them on a primal level. As we struggle to make sense of these texts, they give rise to emotional responses, as well as mental visualisations that we may explore. While the stories portrayed in these poems are idiosyncratic, readers relate to them emotionally because they express universal desires for love and happiness in the face of an often cruel and senseless reality. They also encourage the imaginative capacities of readers by leaving out information that would lead to easy or ‘obvious’ interpretations. The poems’ ability to thwart understanding encourages readers to create imaginatively some kind of comprehensibility or meaning by adding missing details themselves. These characteristics of Morris’s dream poems allow for a classroom approach that focuses less on settled meanings, and more on emotion and imagination. Through these poems, we can instill in our students a more relativistic and broader appreciation of poetic texts, while also allowing them to explore their expressive and creative capacities.

NOTES

1 Though typically associated with Lacan’s symbolic, imaginary, and real, my use of the three registers here is based
more on Mark Bracher’s identity registers described in *Radical Pedagogy: Identity, Generativity, and Social Transformation* (New York: Palgrave, 2006) and cognitive scientist Wilma Bucci’s multiple code theory described in *Psychoanalysis and Cognitive Science: A Multiple Code Theory* (New York: Guilford, 1997), as well as Freud’s classic dreamwork.


4 ibid., p. 23.


6 ibid., p. 195.


9 ibid., p. 52.


13 Oberg, p. 152.


15 ibid., p. 35.

16 Oberg, p. 150.

17 Bentley, p. 35.

18 Ekbert Faas, *Retreat into the Mind: Victorian Poetry and the*
19 Ibid., p. 183.
21 Ibid., p. 183.
22 Faulkner, p. 22.