

Tyger Tyger Magazine

New poems for children



Exploring ‘Pirate Song’ by Jane Newberry

Key topics: Ballads · Rhyme and half rhyme · Class poem · Individual writing

Resource written by Rachel Piercy

Getting to know the poem

Ask your pupils to sit with their eyes closed and read ‘Pirate Song’ out loud to them. Ask them which words they liked and which parts stuck in their minds, and why. There are no wrong answers! Explain that ‘sea dog’ is an old term for an experienced sailor. Does describing the pirate as a “sea-dog” influence how we imagine him to look?

Telling a story

Jane’s poem shows four different scenes from a pirate’s life. They could be seen as separate, but they could also be seen as telling the story of one particular pirate battle: the pirate spots another ship through his telescope, readies the cannon, and then fights on deck.

Ask your class, does the pirate win the fight? What makes them think this? When you’re telling a story, you don’t always have to narrate the plain facts, one after the other. You can get your reader to understand a situation by bringing it to life instead, as Jane does with her piratical celebrations.

Rhyme and half rhyme

Divide the class in two and give one side *afar* to shout out, and the other side *y’aaargh*. Call and respond a couple of times. Repeat this with *fire* and *y’aaargh*, *power* and *y’aaargh*, and *hoorah* and *y’aaargh*. (It’s probably only fair to swap around the side who gets to yell *y’aaargh*...!!)

Ask your class, do these four words (*afar*, *fire*, *power* and *hoorah*) rhyme fully with *y’aaargh*, or only partly? ‘Pirate Song’ uses both full rhyme and half rhyme, where words share some sounds but don’t rhyme exactly. *Afar* and *Hoorah* rhyme (fairly) fully with *Y’aaargh*, whilst *fire* and *power* sound similar.

Poets use half rhyme for lots of reasons. It’s not as satisfying to the ear as a full rhyme, and this creates an interesting echoey, out-of-step feeling. It gives them more flexibility with their choice of rhyming words. And it stops the poem from sounding too polished and perfect, which suits the rough pirate lifestyle described here!

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Ballads

'Pirate Song' is a ballad, a very old and popular form of poetry. Ballads tell a dramatic story in rhyme and generally follow a rhythmical pattern of 4, 3, 4, 3 beats per line, in four-line stanzas also known as 'quatrains'. Lots of early ballads were learnt off by heart to be performed as entertainment. They were often passed along through being spoken and heard, rather than written down and read, since many in the audience could not read or write.

The pattern of 4, 3, 4, 3 beats is called 'ballad meter'. This pattern sounds very satisfying and it is memorable, making it easier to learn off by heart. Ballads often contain lots of repetition, as 'Pirate Song' does, which also makes them easier to remember.

"I chose this ballad form for 'Pirate Song' because the rhythm gives you *action* and excitement and that is what piracy is about, surely?

I started out writing songs and this poem is a bit like a sea shanty, the sort of sound which might encourage you to turn the capstan and raise the anchor on a big ship.

As a child I listened to a lot of ballads, like 'The Outlandish Knight' (author unknown), 'Beth Gêlert' (William Robert Spencer) and 'The Highwayman' (Alfred Noyes), and I learned what a great story-telling form the ballad is. In the sound of the words you almost feel the hooves of a galloping horse or the thump of dancing feet." – Jane Newberry

Bring the poem up on the board and read the first stanza together, over-emphasising where the beats fall. It may help to raise your hand and count out the beats with your fingers.

When the pirate's half-way up the mast
with his telescope lookin' afar –
what does the sea-dog pirate say?
He yells with a lusty *Y'aaargh!*

Class performance

Now that your class are familiar with the words of the poem and the rhythm, it's time for a class performance! Divide the pupils into four groups and give each group one of the four stanzas of 'Pirate Song'. They can choose how they share the lines between their group. Encourage them to

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be creative with pacing, volume and expression. Give them a few minutes and then put on a dramatic class performance of ‘Pirate Song’. Could you perform it in assembly, along with some of the poems they are going to write in response?

Class poem

Choose a storybook character as a class (you may like to choose from the list below) and discuss together some of their typical activities. Choose a word, phrase or noise they might often have cause to call out and then gather some ideas of words which rhyme fully or which sound similar.

Wizard · Knight · Alien · Dragon · Fairy · Superhero · Unicorn

Firstly, decide on the last two lines of your stanza, to be repeated four times as in ‘Pirate Song’. You can follow Jane’s pattern closely, deciding together on some new, impactful adjectives, or choose your own phrasing. Will your character “yell” like the pirate, or do you want to choose another verb to describe his/her exclamation?

What does the [adjective] [character] say?

She/he [verbs] with an [adjective] [exclamation]!

Then create the first two lines for each stanza, describing a typical adventurous day for your character. You could pick four unconnected activities or string them together to tell a story. If you have a good bank of rhyming and half-rhyming words, you can build your poem with a rhyme scheme, but this is optional, as is the ballad meter. Or they might come later, in a redraft.

Individual writing

Once your class poem is finished, invite your pupils to choose their own character and write a new poem inspired by ‘Pirate Song’. Again, the ballad meter and rhyme scheme are optional. They can follow Jane’s structure or come up with their own. But they should use lots of repetition.

Encourage them to redraft, scribble out and change things – poets almost never get their poem right first time and their notebooks tend to be very messy! When they’re ready to write it up neatly, you may like to use the blank print-out template below. What will they choose as their title?

Explain that if you have written a poem inspired by someone else, it’s important to acknowledge them – and the easiest way to do this is with a short line underneath the title (see below). We would love to see what your pupils come up with! Tag us on Twitter @tygertygermag with a picture or email us on tygertygermagazine@gmail.com for some personalised feedback.

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after 'Pirate Song' by Jane Newberry

by



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Inspired by a poem in *Tyger Tyger Magazine*

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Pirate Song

by Jane Newberry

When the pirate's half-way up the mast
with his telescope lookin' afar –
what does the sea-dog pirate say?
He yells with a lusty Y'aaargh!

When the pirate's rolling out the gun
and readying it to fire –
what does the sea-dog pirate say?
He yells with a lusty Y'aaargh!

When he's out on deck with his trusty sword
in a battle for pirate power –
what does the sea-dog pirate say?
He yells with a lusty Y'aaargh!

When the ship's cook bakes a mighty pie
and the crew call out *Hoorah!* –
what does the sea-dog pirate say?
He yells with a lusty Y'aaargh!

