



Tyger Tyger Magazine

Poetry reading and writing activity: imaginary languages

A guide to reading 'Moon speaks in the form of a villanelle' by Emma Purshouse (see below), exploring poetic techniques in the poem, and writing in response as a class and individually.

Getting to know the poem

Tell your class that you're going to read something unusual: a poem in the imaginary language of the moon. Ask them to sit with their eyes closed and read the first 'moon language' poem aloud. Which words or phrases sounded good to them or stuck in their heads?

This poem is a villanelle. A villanelle consists of five three-line stanzas and one four-line stanza. The first and third lines of the first stanza are repeated, alternately, at the ends of the next four stanzas, and then used as a couplet at the end of the poem. There are only two rhyming sounds throughout.

Display the first poem and read it again, all together, enjoying the feel of the words. Then go through with your class and pick out the features of a villanelle.

Did anything new stand out on this second reading? Are there some familiar words amidst the unfamiliar ones? What kind of atmosphere do they build up? There are some nighttime predators in here, alongside words that make us think of music, brightness, and inspiration.

The sounds of the words

Emma has chosen a rich variety of sounds for her imaginary moon language, but the overall effect is quite soft. There are not many harsh-sounding words. There are lots of 's', 'm' and 'l' sounds throughout the poem, which create a hushed feel; go through and find some of these together. On the other hand, words like 'fox', 'stoat', 'archer' and 'were cry' remind us that the night is not entirely peaceful, and that lots of animals hunt under cover of darkness.

Translation

Translation is an important literary artform. It's how we understand poems from other countries, other cultures, other periods of history. Here, Emma makes an imaginative leap to suggest we can also hear and translate the languages of the natural world. Display and read the 'English translation' of the moon's poem. Pick out the repetition and rhymes of the villanelle form.

Ask your class, which lines do they particularly like? Compare those lines in the moon language version and the English language version. The moon does not necessarily speak with the same rules of grammar as we use in English! A poet-translator's job is to capture the spirit as well as the sense of the original poem, and to make it work as a poem in its new version – it's often not an exact word-for-word translation.

The translated poem is full of stillness and gentleness – can you pick out some of these words together? But as in the moon language poem, the translation does not offer us a simple scene. Words like 'tethered', 'dark dark', 'sun-struck', 'dead night', 'hunter', 'bleak', 'bite' and 'sad height' create a complex portrait of the moon's world.



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Moon language

Ask your pupils to make up a new sentence for the moon to utter, first in its own language (thinking about those soft sounds) and then translated into English. Share a few of these together.

Villanelles

Why do they think Emma might have chosen the moon to speak in the form of a villanelle, specifically? She could have chosen a sonnet, haiku, limerick, or any other kind of poetic form!

I think the repetitive form suits the way that the moon is endlessly shifting shape, disappearing, and returning.

Class warm-up

Explain to your class that you're all going to invent a new imaginary language for something from the natural world. You'll be choosing something which, like the moon, we normally think of as voiceless.

Gather ideas on the board for what you might hear 'speak': a butterfly, a leaf, a mountain, a star, a pond, snow, hail, a rainbow, a cloud, soil, a daffodil...

Choose one of these together and write the title '[X] speaks in the form of a cinquain'. (A cinquain is a five-line poem with a pattern of 2-4-6-8-2 syllables. It does not rhyme.)

As a class, write a cinquain in the imaginary language of your chosen speaker. Think about what kinds of sounds might suit your subject – for example, if you were writing about a mountain, you might want lots of big, booming words; if you were writing about hail, you might want lots of small, sharp, clattering words. You can include some familiar words that suit your subject, as in Emma's poem.

Once you've written your class cinquain on the board, ask each table to make their own English translation to share with the class.

Individual writing

Invite your pupils to write their own imaginary language cinquain and translation, choosing a new subject from the board or a new idea of their own.

Encourage them to be creative and to redraft, scribble out and change things – poets almost never get their poems right first time and their notebooks tend to be very messy! When they're ready to write their poem up neatly, you may like to use the 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! You can email us on tygertygermagazine@gmail.com for some personalised feedback.



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Inspired by 'Moon speaks in the form of a villanelle' by Emma Purshouse

by



Moon speaks in the form of a villanelle

Smoo elant sliver berant blé
Accent u poth streak smote
Muley mantal muse sleigh

Smutter smole smoo stir shé
Ixle fox fox fingle wingld stoat
Smoo elant sliver berant blé

Ich full anail milch flay
Sing zir song song licht mote
Muley mantal muse sleigh

Hole-light were cry earth clé
Archer slip orion sliver troat
Smoo elant sliver berant blé

Echo lunar bayble bauble
Tonnage setted dost en phote
Muley mantal muse sleigh

Plutain epistalaire rada shtay
Flute en pipair crust cloat
Smoo elant – Sliver berant blé
Muley mantal muse sleigh

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Moon speaks in the form of a villanelle

(an English translation)

Mine is a soft-silvered light.
I do not speak in code.
I'm goddess, a tethered kite,

gentle being, an ammonite
curled above field and fode.
Mine is a soft-silvered light.

I am your milky satellite,
your song on a dark dark road,
your goddess, your tethered kite,

sun-struck soul of a dead night,
hunter's torch, and mother lode.
Mine is a soft-silvered light

in a bleak mid-winter's bite.
Wreathed in cloud, wind-rode,
still goddess, a tethered kite

looking down from this sad height.
I wax. I wane. Am haloed.
I am soft – I'm silvered light.
I am goddess. Tethered kite.

by Emma Purshouse

** fode is a Black Country
dialect word for a backyard*