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Poetry reading and writing activity: write a tanka

A guide to reading the tanka 'Night Owl, Reading' by Patrick Fisher (see below), exploring poetic techniques in the poem, and writing in response as a class and individually.

Getting started

Tell your class that you are going to read them a poem called 'Night Owl, Reading' by Patrick Fisher (see below). Recap the meaning of 'night owl' if needed. Who in the class likes reading when they can't sleep? What would they do if they wanted to read but a sibling or friend was fast asleep in the same room? Does it feel different reading at nighttime to daytime?

Ask them to sit with their eyes closed while you read the poem aloud. Which parts did they like? Which bits stuck in their heads? There are no wrong answers!

Getting to know the poem

This poem is a tanka. A tanka is a classical Japanese form, well over a thousand years old. The name means 'short poem' or 'short song', and it has become a popular form in English, too, with slightly different rules. An English tanka has 31 syllables split over five unrhymed lines: 5-7-5-7-7.

Ask your class, does this remind them of another poetic form? The first three lines are the same as an English haiku! (As with tanka, haiku are slightly different in the original Japanese tradition.)

Display the poem and read it again. Count out the syllables together. Did anything new stand out on this second reading?

Short poems

Why do they think a poet might choose to write a tanka? Why might they choose it over a haiku? What effect does a shorter poem have on the reader? Can a short poem paint a picture or tell a story? Can a short poem be as satisfying as a longer poem? Again, there are no wrong answers.

Metaphor

People sometimes use headtorches in the home for seeing in the dark, e.g. if there's a power cut. Who else needs a light to see their way, whilst keeping their hands free? Ideas might include mechanics, plumbers, search and rescue teams, climbers, campers, and others. If it hasn't come up already, discuss with your class how miners have worn torches on their helmets for over a hundred years.

The first four lines of the tanka are quite factual. Then the last line uses a metaphor to deepen our understanding of what the speaker is doing and how special it is, describing reading in terms of mining for words. Why do they think Patrick uses this metaphor? I think it suggests that the speaker is discovering something precious in the darkness.



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Metaphor, continued

What does the word 'silently' add? I think it makes us think about how reading is different to mining – you can discover and extract the meaning of the words, but they also stay on the page for someone else to find. They are a never-ending resource.

Precious words

This poem encourages us to think about the preciousness and power of words. What words do your class find particularly beautiful? Share some together, including your own.

Class warm-up

Jot down some ideas for hobbies on the board, and how you could make each one into a title like 'Night Owl, Reading' – for example, 'Ballet Dancer, Twirling', 'Footballer, Dribbling', 'Reader, Choosing from the Library', 'Painter, Colour Mixing', 'Gymnast, Leaping', etc.

Choose one together and discuss which aspects of the hobby you'd like to include. Then write a tanka as a class, counting out the syllables.

Either include a metaphor in the last line or try to make it surprising and memorable in some way.

Individual writing

Invite your pupils to write their own hobby tanka, thinking particularly about how to make the last line stick in the reader's mind.

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! Email us on tygertygermagazine@gmail.com for some personalised feedback.



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Inspired by the poem 'Night Owl, Reading' by Patrick Fisher

by



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Night Owl, Reading

A tanka by Patrick Fisher

You fall asleep first
long before I need to rest
so I turn to books.
I wear a secret headtorch
and silently mine for words.