The Christmas Tree’s Secret

By Julia Copus

Introduction and history
Every December in Trafalgar Square in central London a huge Christmas tree – seventy feet tall (over twenty metres) – is put up, decorated and lit. Not many people know that this tree is a gift from the city of Oslo, and that a tree has been given each year for over sixty-five years.

A tree was first given in 1947 as a token of gratitude for British support for Norway during the Second World War. Britain had supported the government of King Haakon VII who was exiled in London after Norway was invaded by Nazi forces in 1940. Since then a tree is given each year from the city of Oslo to the city of Westminster as a symbol of continued thanks.

In addition to Oslo’s gift to London, the city of Bergen gives a tree to Newcastle each year, while the city of Stavanger ships one to Sunderland. There are also Norwegian Christmas trees in Cardiff, Edinburgh and Kirkwall.

For the last seven years The Poetry Society has collaborated with the Royal Norwegian Embassy, the Office of the Mayor of Oslo and Westminster City Council to organise an exciting and unique annual poetry programme, using the Trafalgar Square Christmas tree as a focal point.

The Society commissions a poet to write a new poem each year to be displayed around the base of the tree. The poem is inspired by many hundreds of poems written by Westminster primary school children who go to school near Trafalgar Square.

This year Julia Copus, is writing a new poem for the tree. She has provided worksheets for your class and an outline for her Christmas tree poem which you can follow to produce your very own poems in celebration of your Christmas trees, whether they are in your school, the local town centre or in your living room.

The structure below is provided as an outline, so feel free to use it as a jumping off point, to follow the children’s (and your) interests, coming back to it whenever you wish.
Hello!

My name is Julia and I’m a poet. This year, I’ve been asked to write a poem for the enormous Christmas tree that stands each Christmas in Trafalgar Square.

Every year since World War Two the Mayor of Oslo (in Norway) has presented a Christmas tree as a gift to the people of London, to thank them for their help in the war. The tree is grown and cut down in a forest in Norway and then shipped across the sea to Britain. It stands in Trafalgar Square for the whole of the Christmas season and is seen by about three million people!

In winter especially, the sight of an enormous green tree in the middle of the city is awe-inspiring. It’s a reminder that there is a second, secret world running alongside the everyday world of school and home – the intriguing, magical world of nature.

Today, I would like you to write your own poems imagining what a Christmas tree would tell us about this magical world – things that we might be able to find clues to if we pause for a while this Christmas to notice the nature that is all around us.

Good luck with your poems!

Love from

Julia Copus
Poet and children’s writer
The Christmas Tree’s Secret
Lesson plan for teachers

Introduction
The aim of this resource, and the two linked worksheets you’ll find on pages 7-9, is to encourage your pupils to explore the natural world around them, and to use their observations to create their own poem in the voice of the Christmas tree.

To begin, read aloud the ‘Letter from a Poet’ on page 2. Then, explain to the children the theme for their Christmas poem. I’d like them to base it on the idea that there is a second, secret world running alongside the everyday world of school and home: the intriguing and magical world of nature. The Christmas trees we find in the centre of towns, cities, schools and houses every year remind us of this.

Activity 1: Exploring the World Through Our Senses
This worksheet sets out activities that can be done outside or inside. If you are doing the activity inside, it will require some strong imagination, but can work just as well.

I’ve provided two versions of the worksheet, one for outside, and one for inside. The activities should get children thinking about what they hear, feel and see in the city at wintertime. If they are working outside, the children might benefit from working in pairs, so that they can ask each other questions about what they experience.

Observation
I can feel... the wind on my face
It reminds me of/It is like...
like sharp needles.

Observation
I can see... white frost sparkling in the grass
It reminds me of/It is like...
like crystals.

Observation
I can hear... frost crunching under my feet
It reminds me of/It is like...
like cornflakes.

N.B. The worksheet tells the children to pause after completing the first part so that you can lead them through the next part of this activity.

After the children have filled in their observations they should use the bottom of the worksheet to write similes based on those observations – I’ve provided some examples below. (If you’ve been working outside, this last bit can be completed in the classroom.)

Simile
A simile is a phrase that describes something as being like something else, eg as slow as a snail.
Activity 2: Our Animal Neighbours
Some animals, like foxes, have made their homes in the city. Which other animals live in the city?

If there is plenty of time, the children can do some background research into the various animals found in the city today. If time is short, they can choose from the city-dwelling animals listed in the circle below.

Ask the children to choose an animal and write a description that sums up the animals in one or two words (e.g. ‘podgy hedgehogs’ or ‘jewel-green parakeets’ or ‘bushy-tailed foxes’).

Then ask them to extend the sentence so that it shows the animals involved in some activity or other. For instance, ‘Podgy hedgehogs curl in nests of leaves’ or ‘Bushy-tailed foxes tiptoe through the streets at dusk.’

If they find it easy, they can choose a second creature and write a second description – and so on!

Write A Poem
The children should now be ready to have a go at writing their own Christmassy poems, following the outline provided on this worksheet to guide them.

About the author
Julia Copus is a poet and children’s author. She has won First Prize in the National Poetry Competition and the Forward Prize for Best Single Poem (2010). Julia’s children’s books – detailing the adventures of Harry the Hog and his best friend Candy Stripe Lil – are written in ‘tongue-tingling rhyming text’ and published by Faber. Her latest poetry collection, The World’s Two Smallest Humans, was awarded a Poetry Book Society Recommendation and shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize and the Costa Poetry Award. She lives in the Somerset countryside with her husband and a very furry Spanish water dog called Ruffle.
Activity 1: Exploring the World Through our Senses

It’s the middle of winter. The air is cold – but not so cold that you have to wear gloves. You’re walking somewhere – on the grass, or along the pavement, or perhaps in the woods. It could be a real place or it could be somewhere that exists only in your imagination. Take a few moments to decide where you are... After a while, you stop walking so that you can take some time to notice what is around you.

A. What can you hear? Cover your eyes. What noises are there around you? You can include natural and ‘unnatural’ sounds. (For example, you might be able to hear birdsong, or wind in the trees, but also traffic sounds or a siren.)

I can hear ..............................................................................................................................................

B. What can you feel? Imagine walking on a bit further now: what does the ground feel like underfoot?

The ground feels ...........................................................................................................................................

How does the air feel on your face and hands?

The air feels ..............................................................................................................................................

C. What can you see? What do things look like at wintertime? For instance, how does frost or snow make things look different? Think about the grass, the trees, the streets, whatever there is around you...

I can see .........................................................................................................................................................

Now stop! Your teacher will tell you what to do next.

A. I can hear ..............................................................................................................................................

B. I can feel ...................................................................................................................................................

C. I can see ....................................................................................................................................................
Activity 2: Our Animal Neighbours

Some animals, like foxes, have made their homes in the city. Which other animals live in the city?

Think of as many as you can, but pick just one.

My animal is a ........................................................................................................................................

Now think of a description to sum up your animal in just one or two words: for example 'a podgy hedgehog', or 'a bushy-tailed fox'.

I would describe my animal as ..................................................................................................................

Now think of what your type of animal does in the city and where they might be seen. Try and think of a short sentence that shows the animal engaged in an activity. You can write about just one animal or several. For instance, ‘Podgy hedgehogs curl in nests of leaves’ or ‘A bushy-tailed fox tiptoes through the streets at dusk.’ Write your sentence in the space below:

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Now that you have explored the outside world, and have described your animal, you are ready to create your Christmas poem!
Our Natural World (for outside)

Name of my partner: .......................................................................................................................  
(You should write the name of the person you’re working with here.)

As you work together, ask your partner the questions below and write their answers in the spaces. (Take it in turns, so that both of you have a turn.)

Activity 1: Exploring the World Through Our Senses

Ask your partner...

A. What can you hear? Cover your eyes. What noises are there around you? You can include natural and ‘unnatural’ sounds. (For example, you might be able to hear birdsong, or wind in the trees, but also traffic sounds or a siren.)

I can hear ..............................................................................................................................................

B. What can you feel? Take a little walk around: what does the ground feel like underfoot?

The ground feels ............................................................................................................................................

How does the air feel on your face and hands?

The air feels ................................................................................................................................................

C. What can you see? Take a look around you and choose something to describe. If it reminds you of winter or Christmas, so much the better!

I can see ..................................................................................................................................................

Now stop! Your teacher will tell you what to do next.

A. I can hear ..............................................................................................................................................

B. I can feel ................................................................................................................................................

C. I can see ..................................................................................................................................................
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Now that you have explored the outside world, and have described your animal, you are ready to create your Christmas poem!
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Use your answers from the previous worksheet to fill in the gaps and create your own Christmas poem.

Gather round: I’ve a tale to tell,
and if you’re wise, you’ll listen well.

In /On .................................... and ..............................................,
there is a second, secret world
beside the one you see.
It’s there in every ................. and ..............................................;
in every path and tree,
where................................................................................................
and ................................................................................................

There is a second, secret world
beside the one you hear.
It’s there in every .......... and ..............................................;
in every month of every year,
where ..............................................................
and ..............................................................

There is a second, secret world
beside the one you know.
It’s there in ..................; and tracks left overnight in snow.

And I have come here every year
to tell this message loud and clear:
........................................................................................................
and fill the town with Christmas cheer!

What YOU do here...
Write two places. You could use place names, like ‘In Green Park and Golden Square’, or you could use types of place, like ‘On roadside verges and gardens at night’.

Complete these lines with phrases from your worksheet, about what you can hear, feel and see (Activity 1).

Complete these lines with animal phrases from your worksheet (Activity 2).

Write your own message!

Remember that this is only an outline. If you’d like, use a fresh sheet of paper to add lines of your own or take lines out. This is your poem so write the poem you want to write. Good luck!