Sharing the gift of hope

By Clare Pollard

For teachers: introduction and history
Every December in London’s Trafalgar Square a huge Christmas tree – seventy feet tall (over twenty metres) – is put up and covered in lovely lights. Did you know that this tree is a gift from the city of Oslo, and that a tree has been given each year for over seventy 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.

For the last eleven 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.

Since 2009 The Poetry Society has commissioned a poet to write a new poem each year to be displayed around the base of the tree. The poem is inspired by dozens of poems written by primary school children who go to school near Trafalgar Square.

This year Clare Pollard has written a new poem, ‘The Gift’, for the tree. In this resource, she describes the ideas and the writing process behind the poem. She also presents some lesson ideas and activity sheets for your students to help inspire more poems on the theme of ‘the gift’ – in celebration of Norway’s gift of the Trafalgar Square tree to Britain.
Hello,

My name is Clare Pollard and I’m a poet. This year, I’ve been given the special job of writing a poem for the enormous Christmas tree that stands in Trafalgar Square.

The Mayor of Oslo (in Norway) gives the Christmas tree as a gift to the people of London every year, to thank them for their help in World War Two. The tree is grown in a Norwegian forest and shipped over the sea. It stands in Trafalgar Square, where it is seen by around three million people over Christmas!

In the UK, Christmas corresponds to the date of Solstice on the Roman calendar. It is the time of year with the shortest, darkest days. It makes sense that on these days we want feasting, presents, warmth and family. Candles, Christingles and fairy-lights to hold back the darkness and cold. It also makes sense that the end of December is a turning point of the year. A time associated with hope, when we look forward. A time of letters to Father Christmas and New Year’s Resolutions. A time for dreaming of brighter, warmer days to come.

Because of this, I chose hope as the theme for my Christmas tree poem this year’s theme, and asked children in primary schools across London to help me to describe darkness and light, and what hope feels like to them. I hope (ahem) we’ve made a fitting poem to go around the bottom of the tree in Trafalgar Square and be read at the lighting-up ceremony.

Today, I would like you to write your own poems about hope, to keep us cosy in these cold months.

Good luck!

Clare x
Lesson plans for teachers

To begin, read aloud the ‘Letter from a Poet’. Then, explain to the children the theme for their Christmas poem is hope.

A discussion about New Year’s Resolutions should provide some rich material for the poems.

Questions to explore:
• What are the children’s worries and fears, in their own lives and relating to the planet? What are their hopes?
• New Year’s Resolutions are one way we can make positive change – they are hopes for the future that we also promise to make reality. Have the students made new year resolutions before? Do they have any for next year?
• Do we all need to make new year’s resolutions for the planet – and what might they be?

One thing lots of children hope for at Christmas is toys! Christmas is often associated with magic, miracles and things coming to life – think about The Snowman, or the toys in The Nutcracker.

Can they imagine one of their toys coming to life? This is a literary technique called personification.

What would one of their favourite toys say if it could speak? What does it want or hope for? Get the children to write a letter in the voice of one of their toys – you might want to read out some of the brilliant letters in the picture book The Day the Crayons Quit by Drew Daywalt and Oliver Jeffers if they need some inspiration.

Get the class to think about what they associate with December. Think of the contrast between winter celebrations and the cold, dark weather.

Exercise

Exercise 1

Exercise 2

Exercise 3

Explain the difference between metaphors and similes. A simile is a phrase that describes something as being like something else, e.g. his hands feel like ice, whereas a metaphor says something is something else, e.g. his hands are ice.

There are no right or wrong ways to write metaphors and similes – they are about the individual, strange and beautiful connections each of us makes!

Ask the children to write similes and metaphors for darkness. Some examples from the schools I visited were:

The dark is like a closed curtain
The dark is like an injured look

Next ask the children to write similes and metaphors for candle flames:

The candle flame is like a seed
The candle flame is like a mango

The more surreal the better!

Encourage your students to use all the senses in their sentences.
Now, drawing on the last three exercises, it is time to write a poem about Hope.

If we personified hope what sort of person would it be? What would it say to us?

How about if we used metaphors and similes – what does hope look like? Smell like? Taste like? Sound like? Feel like? (Good poems often use all the senses!)

Is it a ‘thing with feathers’ as poet Emily Dickinson describes it, or is it, as essayist Rebecca Solnit suggests: ‘an axe you break down doors with in an emergency’? Is it a tiger or a cupcake with sprinkles?

The children should each write a poem that begins on a dark, cold December night with the speaker worried about the future, before hope comes to visit them.

It can begin: ‘It was the darkest night when I met Hope...’

About the author

Clare Pollard is the editor of Modern Poetry in Translation. She has published five collections of poetry with Bloodaxe, the latest of which is Incarnation (2017). Her translation projects have included a new version of Ovid’s Heroines (2013), which she toured as a one-woman show with Jaybird Live Literature, and a co-translation of Asha Lul Mohamud Yusuf’s The Sea-Migrations (2017) which was The Sunday Times Poetry Book of the Year 2017. She was a judge for The Poetry Society’s Popescu European Poetry Translation Prize 2015, and was the Trafalgar Square Christmas tree poet in 2019 in The Poetry Society’s Look North More Often project.

Photo: Justine Stoddart.
Can you imagine one of your toys coming to life?

The toy I’ve chosen is: ____________________________________________

In a normal day in the life of this toy, they sit ____________________________________________

They see ______________________________________________________________________________

Who plays with them? _____________________________________________________________________

If they came to life and could do whatever they wanted, they would want to __________________
                                                                                           ________________________________________________

They would feel __________________________________________________________________________

They would hope __________________________________________________________________________

They would be scared of ________________________________________________________________

If they could write a letter to one person, they would write it to ______________________________

Now it’s time to imagine write a letter from your toy using these ideas!
Remember to think about how your toy is feeling. What kinds of words would they use – really long, clever-sounding words? Angry words and short sentences? We’ve designed a template to help you design your letter – take a look over the page...
Dear

From
**Activity 2**

**Imagining darkness and candle flames**

Write some *similes* and *metaphors* about darkness and candle flames. Remember, there are no right or wrong ways to write metaphors and similes – they are about the individual, strange and beautiful connections each of us makes!

A *simile* is a phrase that describes something as being *like* something else, for example: *his hands feel like ice.*

A *metaphor* says something is *something else,* for example: *his hands are ice.*

Write some *similes* for darkness:

____________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________

Write some *metaphors* for darkness:

____________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________

Write some *similes* for a candle flame:

____________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________

Write some *metaphors* for a candle flame:

____________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________

**POET’S TIP**

If you’re stuck, think about about what darkness looks like, smells like, tastes like, sounds like and feels like. Good poems often use all the senses!
Write your own poem about hope

Now, it’s time to write a poem about hope. You might like to think about:

- if you **personified** hope what sort of person would it be? What would it say to us?
- how about if you used **metaphors and similes** – what does hope look like? Smell like? Taste like? Sound like? Feel like?

Write a poem that begins on a dark, cold December night, when you might be worried about the future, before hope comes to visit them. You can think about the time just before Christmas, when the nights are long and the sun is weak. Your poem can begin: ‘It was the darkest night when I met Hope...’

It was the darkest night when I met Hope...