The tree speaks back

For teachers: introduction and history
Every December in Trafalgar Square in central London, a huge Christmas tree 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 seventy years.

The first gift of a tree was in 1947 in thanks 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 has been given each year from the city of Oslo to the city of Westminster as a symbol of continued thanks. Every year, they select the biggest, most beautiful tree to send, named the ‘Queen of the Forest’ by people who live nearby. When the tree is cut down, it is usually fifty or sixty years old, and can reach up to twenty metres tall – that’s around five double-decker buses, or three giraffes high!

The tree is then brought to the UK on a ship, and travels to Trafalgar Square by lorry. It is decorated in traditional Norwegian fashion, with strings of lights.

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.

Since 2009, The Poetry Society has run an exciting and unique annual poetry programme, inspired by the Trafalgar Square Christmas tree. Each year, The Poetry Society commissions a poet to write a new poem to be displayed around the base of the tree for millions of people to see. When the Christmas lights are turned on, The Poetry Society’s new poem is performed by three local primary schoolchildren, in front of thousands of people. This year, Julia Donaldson, author of The Gruffalo, has written a new poem for the tree, inspired by its journey from seed to ship to Square. Julia’s poem is called ‘The Christmas Pine’.

Julia Donaldson. Photo: Steve Ullathorne. All illustrations by Gemma Correll. gemmacorrell.com
Teacher’s notes

We’ve created a teaching resource to help you use this poem in the classroom. The activities can be completed by individuals, in groups, or as a class. We recommend this takes two lessons.

The resource asks children to choose a plant that means something to them – real or fictional – and to find out more about that kind of plant, its history and its cultural significance. Their chosen plant could be a Christmas tree, another wintry plant like holly, mistletoe or ivy, or another plant entirely. We’ve left the choice open, so that children and schools of all faiths and none can take part, at any time of year. This could be a good moment in class to explore where various plants come from, learn about different climates, habitats and adaptations, and to share stories that different cultures tell about certain flowers and trees.

You might find online plant identification tools (such as the Woodland Trust) helpful for children who want to write about a plant whose name they don’t know.

The children are encouraged to follow the structure of Julia Donaldson’s poem ‘The Christmas Pine’ using the given outline, but more confident students may wish to change the frame or even start from scratch. You may want to explain that by speaking from the perspective of a plant, they are writing a dramatic monologue.

Using the introduction above, begin with the history of the Trafalgar Square Christmas tree, and then read Julia Donaldson’s poem ‘The Christmas Pine’ out loud as a class. Children can take turns reading each verse. Ask the pupils whether they like the poem, and why or why not. Which was their favourite line? Their favourite image? The ending could be read as sad and/or hopeful – how did it make them feel? You can show the children images of the Christmas tree and this project on The Poetry Society website.

Next, read through Activity Sheet 1 together. Let children choose their plant and fill in the sheet by researching their plant either in school or for homework.

In the next lesson, they can write and edit the poem using Activity Sheet 2. Feel free to create your own frame, or more confident writers might want to start from scratch. As an extension, pupils can copy their poem out and add drawings.

What makes a good poem?

In both exercises, encourage pupils to include their senses where they can – if their plant lives in the ground, what does it feel like to have your roots in the dirt? Can they hear the wind howling? Do they feel the warmth of sun or the coolness of shade? Be specific. These details will bring their poem to life.

When editing their poems, encourage pupils to read their poems aloud. Make sure that each line makes sense, sounds like normal speech, and flows. Rhythm is much more important than rhyme here. Encourage children to make each line roughly the same length. Avoid cramming lots of words into one line to fit to a rhyme scheme. But remember – there is no such thing as right and wrong in poetry. Everyone in your class can call themselves a poet – including you!

For more poetry teaching tips for primary school teachers, download Poetry Train for free. But for now – enjoy speaking as a plant, and good luck!

Note: The tree in Trafalgar Square is a magnificent Norwegian Spruce (Picea abies) so not botanically a pine tree (Pinaceae family). Julia Donaldson knows that the tree in Trafalgar Square is a Norwegian Spruce, but when she was composing the poem, she chose to use a word that’s more generic and which she found more poetic.
Julia Donaldson  
The Christmas Pine

Once upon a time I stood  
With brothers and sisters in a wood.  
The old trees told me I had grown  
From a tiny seed inside a cone.  
The whispering wind was a friend of mine.  
She said that I would grow and shine.

I grew up tall. I grew up high.  
I grew until I saw the sky.  
Then came the day they cut me down  
And carried me off to a distant town.  
I travelled far across the sea,  
And now I am a Christmas tree.

Here I stand, in a city square.  
I stand and shine in the winter air.  
The lions keep me company  
And Nelson keeps an eye on me,  
And people pass and stop awhile.  
I love to see them gaze and smile.

But more, yes, more than anything  
I love to hear the children sing.  
Songs of reindeer, songs of snow,  
Reminding me of long ago,  
Songs of kings who travelled far,  
And songs of light from a distant star.

I cannot stay forever here.  
Another tree will come next year,  
But think of me when I am gone;  
Remember how I grew and shone,  
And may the children grow and shine,  
Grow and shine like the Christmas pine.

“The Christmas Pine” was commissioned by The Poetry Society, © Julia Donaldson 2020.  
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About The Poetry Society

The Poetry Society is the leading poetry organisation in the UK. For over 100 years we’ve been a lively and passionate source of energy and ideas, opening up and promoting poetry to an ever-growing community of people. We run acclaimed international poetry competitions for adults and young people and publish The Poetry Review, one of the most influential poetry magazines in the English-speaking world. With innovative education and commissioning programmes, and a packed calendar of performances and readings, The Poetry Society champions poetry for all ages.

poetrysociety.org.uk

Schools and The Poetry Society

**Foyle Award teaching resources**, including lesson plans and online versions of the winning and commended Foyle Young Poets anthologies, are available on our website at poetrysociety.org.uk/fypresources

**Poetryclass lesson plans and activities**, covering all Key Stages and exploring many themes and forms of poetry, are easy to search and free to download. Each resource has been created by our team of poet-educators and teachers, with hands-on experience of developing an enthusiasm for poetry in the classroom. Find Poetryclass on our dedicated site: resources.poetrysociety.org.uk

**Page Fright** is an online resource, bringing historical poetry to life with contemporary spoken word performances. Page Fright poets such as Benjamin Zephaniah perform their own work, and explore historical poems afresh. poetrysociety.org.uk/pagefright

**Poets in Schools** help develop an understanding of and enthusiasm for poetry across all Key Stages. Whether you are looking for a one-off workshop or a long-term residency, an INSET session for staff or a poet-led assembly, The Poetry Society will find the right poet for you. Online and in-person options available. poetrysociety.org.uk/education

About the author

**Julia Donaldson**

Born in London in 1948, Julia Donaldson CBE is the author of some of the best-loved children’s books in the world, including Room on the Broom, Zog and The Gruffalo. Julia has worked closely with a number of famous illustrators including Axel Scheffler, Lydia Monks and Nick Sharratt. She has written over 150 books, and was Children’s Laureate 2011-2013. She decided she wanted to be a writer when her father gave her The Book of a Thousand Poems for her fifth birthday. juliadonaldson.co.uk

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poetrysociety.org.uk/membership

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The tree speaks back!

All plants are alive. They grow and change, they take in sunlight and drink water. They are living beings, just like you and me.

Today, we’re going to tell the story of an important plant to you, inspired by Julia Donaldson’s poem ‘The Christmas Pine’.

First, pick your favourite plant.

It could be a tree you pass on the way to school, a plant in your classroom or at home, a flower growing in a park you visit, a patch of grass you’ve played football or sunbathed on, or even the stubborn weed growing up through the cracks of the pavement. If you like, you could choose a plant from a story instead, or you could make one up!

Write down what kind of plant it is here: __________________________________________________

Why do you like it? What makes it special to you? If it were a human, what would its personality be?

You’re going to become investigators and imaginers.

We want you to find out the special name of your plant, and all about its history, where it comes from and the different beliefs and stories around it. You’ll use your discoveries – and then you’ll add your imagination, and that’s where the real magic begins.

You’re going to pretend that you are the plant. Finish these sentences with your findings. If you don’t know the answer, then make it up! Poets are allowed to invent things – and you’re a poet now.
What kind of plant am I? I am a ______________________________________________________
My family comes from ______________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________
Where they are from, they are surrounded by____________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________
But I live ______________________________________________________________________________
How did I get here? Well, ______________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________
If you’ve never seen me before, this is what I look like ______________________________________
I remind people of ______________________________________________________________________
Looking around, I can see ______________________________________________________________
I can hear ____________________________________________________________________________
There’s a story about me where __________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________
The most interesting fact about me is______________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________
What makes me happy is ______________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________
If I could change one thing about the world, it would be ____________________________________
People believe some strange things about me, like ________________________________________
The plant speaks back!

It’s time to get writing! Below you’ll find a frame for you to write your own poem.

You can include as many, or as few, of your ideas and research in the poem as you like. Be as specific as you can with the details you’ve discovered!

You’ll notice that some of the lines rhyme. But don’t worry if your lines don’t rhyme – most poems don’t! The rhythm of your poem is much more important. Make sure you’re not tripping over your words. Use your own words, and don’t worry about making the poem sound ‘poetic’. Read it out loud to check it sounds good and makes sense.

Once you’ve written your first draft below, you can write it out again neatly. If you find that you’d like to change some of the words we’ve given you, please do! Finally, decorate your poem with some pictures of your plant, and make sure to pin it up for all to see.

All illustrations by Gemma Correll. gemmacorrell.com
Good morning, good evening, good afternoon!
Do you know what I am? You will very soon.
I can see you looking – well, come close!
I’ll share where I’m from and how I’ve grown.

I am ____________________, I promise it’s true!
My ______________________ will impress you.
Come give me a sniff! I smell like ___________,
__________________________________________.

Good morning, good evening, good afternoon!
Do you know what I am? You will very soon.
I can see you looking – well, come close!
I’ll share where I’m from and how I’ve grown.

I’m from a long line of ___________, don’t you know.
We lived in ________________ a long time ago.
Back then, there was ________________ all around,
and _________________ was our favourite sound.
Now we live here, _________________.
I love watching _________________.
I love to hear _________________.
But most of all, I love _________________.

Good morning, good evening, good afternoon!
Do you know what I am? You will very soon.
I can see you looking – well, come close!
I’ll share where I’m from and how I’ve grown.

I’m full of surprises! Say, did you know
______________________________?
Most people don’t realise this, though:
______________________________.

I’m super important! Some people believe
______________________________.
Some even think ________________,
______________, and maybe they’re right!

Good morning, good evening, good afternoon!
I only speak once in a very blue moon.
So go spread the word, tell everyone you know:
come find me, and sit, and watch me grow.