

KEY STAGE	AGE
EYFS	3-5
KS1	5-7
KS2	7-11
KS3	11-14 ✓
KS4	14-16 ✓
KS5	16-18

#### AT A GLANCE

- WAR POETRY
- LETTER POEMS
- THE SUPERNATURAL
- HISTORY
- CREATING CHARACTERS

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**POETRYCLASS: FRESH IDEAS FOR POETRY LEARNING FROM THE POETRY SOCIETY**  
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# CLOTHES THAT ESCAPED THE GREAT WAR

BY PATRICIA McCARTHY

## Introduction

This poem was inspired by my mother who told me about her experience as a little girl in the First World War, when so many young lives were lost. The poem almost wrote itself as I was living her experience as she spoke.

My mother lived near a small market town called Thorne, in Yorkshire. In those days it hadn't been taken over by a mine, nor by a motorway and was surrounded by farms, with the river Don winding through it. In the first verse of the poem, the place names Thorne Waste and Waterside are real, and the wooden Gyne seat just on the edge of the town really was reputed to have the sound of ghostly chains clanking from it. The 'black barge' was the phantom barge of death at Waterside where the ghost of a dog, it was said, appeared only to children.

Before you begin, you might want to remind your class that not just men but horses too – serving valiantly – were casualties in the First World War. Many of these, as your pupils may know from *War Horse*, were family pets that were taken from their owners to play their parts in the war. My mother knew how horse-mad I was as a child so she probably deliberately wove her story around the horse to capture my interest.

Using this poem as my starting point, I have now written a whole sequence of poems, *Horses between our Legs* (available soon at [www.agendapoetry.co.uk](http://www.agendapoetry.co.uk)).

## Starting to investigate the poem

Take your class through the poem, picking over any sections where they are unsure of the meaning. The following questions should help guide you through a discussion of the poem. You can either work through them in sequence, or you could give each topic to a small group for them to look at.

### The clothes

- Name all the clothes you can find in the poem.
- Whose clothes are they?
- Why are they 'scary'? (line 4)

### The boys

- How old do you think the boys are? What clues do you have from the poem?
- Do we know anything more about the boys that were taken off to the war from the poem? What kind of life did they have?
- What kind of work did they do?



- What do you think happened to the boys and what makes you think this? Find a quotation from the poem to back up what you say.

### **The horse**

- Find words that link to the horse. How is the horse described?
- Pick out two words that describe the sound the horse made on the road and say how they work in the poem (here, for example, you could mention onomatopoeia).
- Do you think the horse in the poem will be made to go and fight in the war?
- What was wrong with the horse? Use two quotations to prove your point.

### **The mother(s)**

- What were the boys' mothers dreading?
- What words in the poem tell you that this is one of the poet's mother's memories?
- Do we learn anything about the poet's mother in the poem?

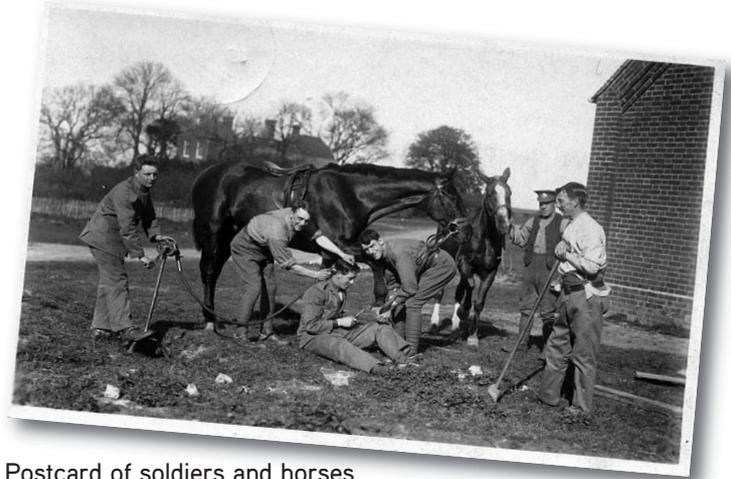
### **Ghosts**

- Give a reason for the poet opening with 'familiar' ghosts in the first stanza of the poem. Why do you think she does this? (Students can get some clues from the introduction above.)
- Why are the clothes seen as ghosts?
- And what was actually on the cart? Can you explain what the poet might mean here?
- In the last line of the poem, why do you think the cart was 'buckling'?
- In your own words, how do you think this poem is a kind of ghost story?

### **Language and style**

Discuss and list poetic devices with your class like similes, metaphor, onomatopoeia, repetition. Ask your class to see how many examples they can find and to think about why they have been used.

When you talk about these in a poem, make sure you comment on how they work in a poem and how effective they are. Otherwise you are merely picking out examples like currants from a bun, and they have no



Postcard of soldiers and horses, possibly East Kent Regiment, 1914-15, by Fred C. Palmer.

meaning. These "tricks" and sounds in a poem are important to the meaning, and, of course, to the music of the poem.

Some poems flow very simply with no ornate or figurative language; others are stuffed full with figures of speech and changes in tone. The questions below can help your class investigate the language of the poem.

- Would you say the poet here mainly uses direct language or is very ornate in her use of words? Give reasons for what you decide.
- What words in the poem show you that the poem is not about the world of today?
- Why do you think there is no obvious rhyme scheme?
- Find two examples of repetition in the poem and explain why you think the poet uses them and how they work.
- Find two examples of alliteration and say how you think they are effective.
- Find two examples of onomatopoeia and explain how they work.
- Find an example of a simile and describe how it works in the poem.
- Look at the title of the poem. Can you explain its irony e.g. what or who would you usually wish to escape war?

### Conclusions

Students have now looked through the poem in some detail. Their feelings about it may have changed, or their findings may have confirmed their initial impression. Ask them to summarise their impressions of the poem and explain how the language and the subject matter have shaped this opinion.

### Writing a letter poem

Ask your students to imagine they are one of the boys in the poem and are writing a letter to their mother or another family member at the outbreak of war, telling them how they feel about their new uniform and going off to fight. At the beginning of the writing exercise, they should just be getting their thoughts down on paper; they don't need to shape it into a poem just yet.

Ask students to think about how the descriptions of the uniform might reflect their emotions using both descriptive and figurative language. Describe the material, the shape and the detailing and use these as a way of getting across their feelings. The uniform might be stiff and scratchy; their shoes might pinch. They could compare these new clothes with their clothes from home.

Ask the class to think about the tone of the letter. Will it be sad, scared, homesick, trying to be reassuring? How will they convey this tone to the reader?



British wounded at Bernafay Wood, France, 19 July 1916, during the Battle of the Somme.

Once students have written a draft of their letter, ask them to begin to shape it into a poem. If they like, they can keep it as a letter-poem, starting 'Dear Mum' (or similar) and continuing as if writing home – or they can lose this framework if they chose, focusing instead on describing the young soldier's surroundings and emotional responses.

Either way, they should consider the poetic devices used in 'Clothes that escaped the Great War', and try to include some of them in their work. Is there a description that would be more vivid as a metaphor or simile? Can they find an opportunity to use onomatopoeia? Is there something important to express which could be enhanced through repetition? Where will they add their line breaks, and will they break the poem into verses? Encourage them to think about the best way to shape and group the lines.

Importantly, remind them that their poem doesn't have to rhyme. Best to let their words flow and to use the exact words they want, rather than be bossed by a rhyme-scheme.

Allow a couple of drafts to shape their language before sharing their poem with the rest of the class.

*Patricia McCarthy won the National Poetry Competition 2012 with her poem 'Clothes that escaped the Great War'. Her latest collection, Around the Mulberry Bush, is due from Waterloo Press in 2014. She is the editor of Agenda magazine.*

## CLOTHES THAT ESCAPED THE GREAT WAR

Not the familiar ghosts: the shaggy dog of Thorne Waste  
that appeared only to children, the chains clanking  
from the Gyme seat, nor the black barge at Waterside.

These were the most scary, my mother recalled: clothes  
piled high on the wobbly cart, their wearers gone.  
Overalls caked in dung, shirts torn from the muscle strain

of heavy hemp sacks, socks matted with cow-cake  
from yards nearby, and the old horse plodding, on the nod.  
Its uneven gait never varied whether coming from farms

where lads were collected like milk churns, or going back  
with its harvest of dungarees scented by first fags,  
notes in pockets to sweethearts; boots with laces undone,

jerseys knitted – purl, plain – around coke fires.  
And the plod, plod, quadruple time. Then the catch  
in the plod from the clank of loose shoes, from windgalls

on the fetlocks of the horse, each missed beat on the lane  
a missed beat in a heart. As a small girl she could see –  
at their windows – the mothers pressing memories

too young for mothballs into lavender bags, staring out  
propaganda posters, dreading the shouts of telegraph boys  
from lines of defence and attack. As the harness creaked

and the faithful old horse clopped forward and back,  
the lads were new-dressed in the years never to be had,  
piled higher than high over the shafts of the buckling cart.

### PATRICIA McCARTHY

*'Clothes that escaped the Great War' was the winner  
of the National Poetry Competition in 2012.*

*'purl' (line 13): a knitting  
stitch. Most socks, hats,  
gloves and jumpers were  
knitted using the simplest  
stitches, plain and purl.  
Complicated stitches such  
as cable stitch had to be  
followed usually  
in knitting patterns.*

*'coke' (line 13): a form of  
coal used in domestic fires  
and ranges.*

*A 'windgall' (line 15):  
a small, cushion-like  
swelling filled with fluid  
that develops on the  
horse's fetlock (ankle)  
– usually from hard work  
and wear and tear.*

*'fetlocks' (line 16) jut out  
above the hoof, like the  
horse's ankle; tufts of hair,  
often called 'feathers',  
grow from the back of it.*