

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

AT A GLANCE

- READING
- WRITING
- LITERACY
- CONFIDENCE
- SOUND

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POETRYCLASS: FRESH IDEAS FOR POETRY LEARNING FROM THE POETRY SOCIETY

ECCENTRICITY AND SOUND

TWO POEMS BY EDITH SITWELL

BY JANE ANDERSON

2014 is the fiftieth anniversary of Dame Edith Sitwell's death (1887-1964). These materials look at two of her poems, and offer ways into looking at her fascinating, innovative style with KS3 and 4 classes, including suggestions for creative responses.

Reading Edith Sitwell's poems takes us back to a time when artists, poets and musicians broke away from rules and formality to experiment with style. Sitwell's poems were incredibly modern when she wrote them, although they may not seem it to a reader nowadays.

Like with rap lyrics, the sound and rhythm of Sitwell's poems is often the thing you notice first. But listened to more than once, or read again, there is often a story (a strange story, inhabited by quirky characters) that becomes clear.

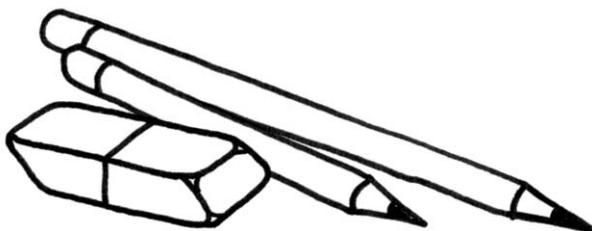
Sitwell's musical way of writing led to a collaboration with composer William Walton in 1922. He wrote music for her collection of poems *Façade*, which they performed together and recorded. You may be able to find the audio of this online, and you can see a performance of *Façade* by the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra.

Sitwell was known for being an eccentric and she made the most of this. Like an early-twentieth century Lady Gaga, Sitwell's unconventional appearance and unique dress style became part of her artistic persona. She wore large rings to emphasise her large hands, long coats, elaborate dresses and often bizarre head gear. A quick search online will bring up images of Edith Sitwell to share her look with your students. A good example is Cecil Beaton's photograph of Sitwell posing as a corpse! There is also more information included in our article on Young Poets Network.

Sitwell's Poems: 'Mariner Man' and 'Dark Song'

Introduce Sitwell and explain her eccentricity, possibly using images, as discussed above. Ask your students if they can think of a modern day eccentric and talk about how Sitwell was at the cutting edge of literature in her time.

Both 'Mariner Man' and 'Dark Song' were part of Sitwell's collection *Façade*, so explain to your class that they were performed to music, and briefly read them together (they are reproduced in full at the end of this resource).



Hearing the poems

Organise your class into groups of four. Give each group both poems, or one poem per group, depending on ability and Key Stage.

Again, remind the students that these poems were performed aloud over music. Explain that they are going to work on a prepared reading of one of the poems, their own performance.

Discuss how they might do this. For example, they might try to beat out the poem as they read it for the first time. (The lines in 'Mariner Man' have four main beats, with the exception of line twelve. Why do they think this line is different? The rhythms of lines vary in 'Dark Song', how will that impact on their performance?)

They might emphasise certain words by reading them in a singsong way, speed up or slow down, get louder or quieter for effect. They might add sound effects, compose a tune. It's fine to be over the top and eccentric in their reading, but they need to remember that they are using sound to bring out the meaning of the whole poem. They might find it useful to pay particular attention to the punctuation to help their performance.

As students are working on this, you might want to share examples of good work-in-progress.

Discussing the poems

When the groups have had a chance to complete the task, choose two or three group performances you think are most interesting. Share these and get the class to respond to them and discuss their ideas about the poems. The following prompts can be used to develop their thinking and begin to focus in on what Sitwell is doing in more detail.

- How does Sitwell use conversation – why do you think she does this?
- What is unusual about the worlds she creates in these poems and the characters that inhabit them? How does she manage to show us what's happening to these characters, or their personalities?

- What makes her use of images (like 'the fire was a furry bear', or the wood as 'hairy') unusual? Does it work? What do your students think about this?
- What do students think about the rhythm of her writing? Did it impact on the students' performance? Does it make it easier or harder to give a strong performance?
- What do students notice about rhyme when they read / hear these poems? Are the rhyme schemes unusual? How does this make the poem more interesting?
- Are these poems simply eccentric, or more than this? Do they have something to say to us? What do they think of the seemingly random connections she makes? (KS4)

A closer look at rhyme and repetition in 'Mariner Man'

Give students individual copies of the poem and coloured pens or highlighters.

Sitwell's use of rhyme is one of the keys to the musicality of her writing. Her use of assonance – the repetition of vowel sounds – combines with end rhyme in 'Mariner Man' to glue the poem together and make it sing.

- Ask students to identify rhyme within lines and highlight these on their copy.
- Look for vowel sounds within words. Starting points for this could be lines 4 and 5. Use a different colour for each internal rhyme.
- Ask them to look for words / sounds that are repeated and carry sounds across lines. Join these by a line.

Compare the highlighted poem with other students and discuss these sound connections. Which ones do they like best and why? (KS3) What impact does this make on the poem as a whole? (KS3 and 4)

Creative responses

Use the following ideas to encourage your students to write their own eccentric conversation poems. Once they've written these they could work with friends to create a tune or rhythm track, perform it and record or video it.

Getting started

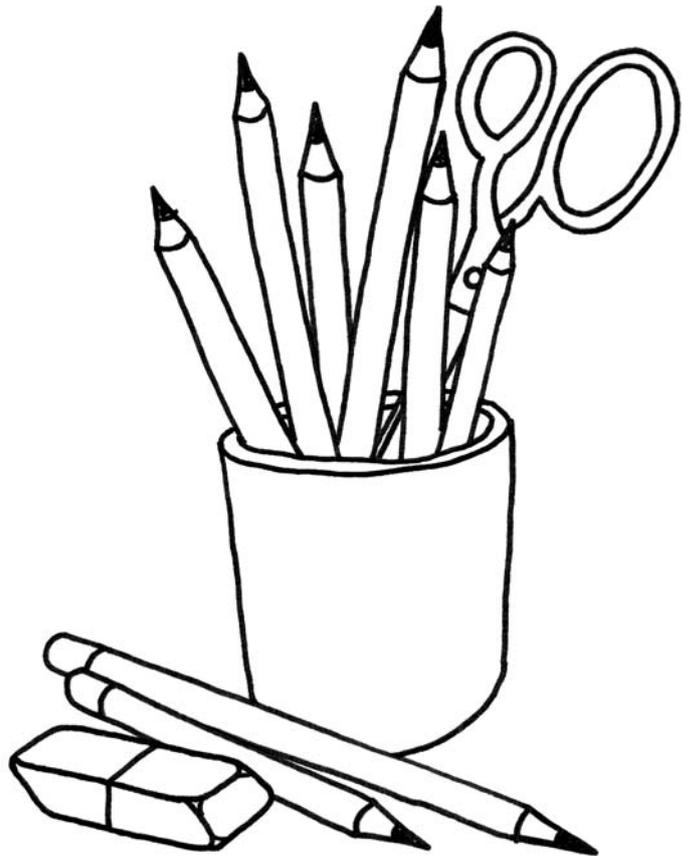
Tell your students to choose two characters who wouldn't normally meet. One could be young / modern, or maybe even a speaking object or animal; the other might have something they want to get off their chest. Brainstorm characters with a partner.

Depending on who / what students invent, they might be able to use their profession and give them an alliterative name like 'Mariner Man'. For example, if their character is a politician they could name him / her Person of Power, or Ruthless Rule-maker. This name might prompt the rhythm used in the poem; if so students could try repeating that rhythm throughout.

Next, get your students to decide what is it each character has to say. They can say things that don't seem to connect with the other character, at first. The contrast might be interesting. Or one character could gripe about the world, or have a personal longing they need to get off their chest, compared to a relaxed and easy-going character. Or one character might be keen to ask the other questions.

Students should write each of the characters' dialogue. Suggest that they give the reader ideas about what each character is like by what they tell us or what they do, like Sitwell. For example, one character might say more than the other. One character could describe or introduce the other, like in the opening lines of 'Mariner Man'.

Alternatively, students might want to start by creating a strange world by using unconventional images as in 'Dark Song', where Sitwell describes fire as 'furry as a bear'. This seems bizarre, but works because she extends the image and makes 'the flames purr'.



Writing the poem

Having used the ideas above, students can have a go at writing a first draft. The Tips and Hints box below is to support this.

Re-drafting the poem

Suggest students read their first draft aloud to themselves, and make any sound changes they think are needed. Then read their poem to a response partner. What do they like about the sound of the poem? What do they think could be stronger? You might decide to model this with the whole class. Students then tweak their own writing.

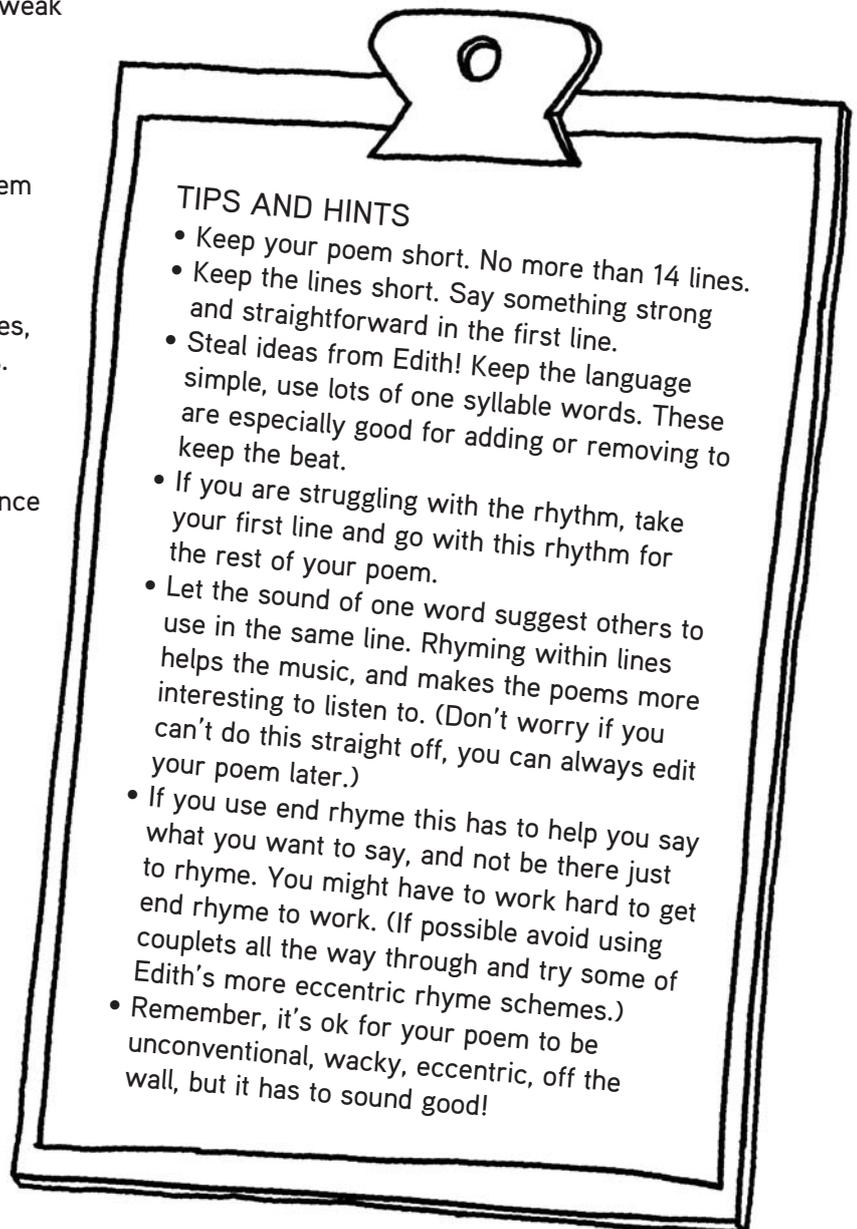
Extension ideas

Students could compose music for their poems, or create a background rhythm track and read the poem over this. Class musicians could be deployed to accompany the poems.

Give time for students to develop their performances, like with the mini-performances of Sitwell's poems. Make a recording or video these.

If your students don't have time to write their own poems, why not get them to work on the performance of 'Mariner Man' or 'Dark Song', and record these instead?

For additional writing prompts, take a look at our feature about Edith Sitwell on our Young Poets Network.



MARINER MAN

'What are you staring at, mariner man,
Wrinkled as sea-sand and old as the sea?'
'Those trains will run over their tails, if they can,
Snorting and sporting like porpoises! Flee
The burly, the whirligig wheels of the train,
As round as the world and as large again,
Running half the way over to Babylon, down
Through fields of clover to gay Troy town —
A-puffing their smoke as grey as the curl
On my forehead as wrinkled as sands of the sea! —
But what can that matter to you, my girl?
(And what can that matter to me?)'

BY EDITH SITWELL



DARK SONG

The fire was furry as a bear
And the flames purr...
The brown bear rambles in his chain
Captive to cruel men
Through the dark and hairy wood.
The maid sighed, 'All my blood
Is animal. They thought I sat
Like a household cat;
But through the dark woods rambled I...
Oh, if my blood would die!
The fire had a bear's fur;
It heard and knew...
The dark earth furry as a bear,
Grumbled too!

BY EDITH SITWELL

'Mariner Man' from *Selected Poems*
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