

Poetryclass Fresh ideas for learning from The Poetry Society

Poetry, mythology and fairy tales

By Katherine Whittington

KS4

KS5

Topics at a glance

- Mythology
- Fairy tales
- Rhyme
- Structure
- Writing in another voice

Introduction

Isla Anderson is one of the 2014 Foyle Young Poets of the Year. Her poem, 'Prometheus Goes to A&E', is a highly-structured, satirical poem inspired by and based in ancient mythology and the figure of Prometheus. This resource is based on her winning poem and enables pupils to:

- Explore the reinvention of classic myths and legends in poetry
- Reflect upon and engage with the power of strict form and rhyme
- Draft and edit their own poem

Getting started

Give out copies of Isla Anderson's poem, reprinted in this resource. Select a student to read it aloud.

Discussing the subject

Begin by discussing the subject of the poem – the myth of Prometheus (see right).

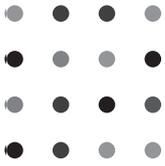
Talk to your students about the myth of Prometheus in relation to the poem. The following prompts could be used to develop your pupils thinking about the modernisation of mythology:

- How is Prometheus presented in Isla Anderson's poem, 'Prometheus Goes to A&E'?

The myth of Prometheus

Prometheus, one of the Titans in Greek mythology, was the god of fire and knowledge. Prometheus, whose name means "forethought", was a master craftsman and considered the wisest of his race. He was credited with the creation of humans and also with giving them skills and knowledge, including teaching them to make fire. For this last skill Zeus, King of the Gods, was furious with Prometheus and, as a punishment, ordered that he be chained to a rock on a mountain peak. Every day an eagle tore at Prometheus's body and ate his liver; every night the liver grew back. As an immortal, Prometheus could not die so he suffered endlessly. Heracles (Hercules) later slayed the eagle and freed Prometheus from his torment.

- What might we do if this were real, i.e. if Prometheus was a modern man and walked into A&E claiming to be injured?
- How does this affect our understanding of the myth of Prometheus?
- How is humour created? What is the importance of humour? How / why does the humour work?
- What is the impact and what might be the purpose of modernising this myth?



Discussing structure and form

In order to focus on the structure, ask your students to read in pairs. Ask them to place emphasis on the structure, metre and rhyme as they read. They may find it beneficial to read it out a few times, focusing on different elements with each reading.

Ask students to highlight or annotate any key elements of form and structure, e.g. enjambment, rhyme, dialogue, metre, imagery.

The following prompts could be used to develop their thinking about Isla's techniques:

- What is the purpose and impact of the rhyme?
- What feelings or emotions does the form engage?
Does this add humour?
- Why has Isla chosen the punctuation she has used – how does this work with the rhyme and metre?
- What is the effect of the final two lines?

Modernising myths – other examples

Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* was also given the title 'The Modern Prometheus'. From what students know about the characters of Frankenstein and his monster, how might that story re-tell the myth of Prometheus? How does it differ from Isla Anderson's version?

Alternatively, share copies of poems from Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife* with the class. You can find 'Mrs Midas' online at the Scottish Poetry Library website www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/poems/mrs-midas. Are there any similarities in the two poets' approaches to retelling myths?

Writing the poem

Ask the student to select a fairy tale or myth they would like to modernise. Begin with free writing, asking them to write a simple, short summary of how they will retell their chosen myth. Plot the key elements of the story. They may want to cover the whole story, or focus on one character or element in isolation. What feelings or emotions do they want the reader to feel?

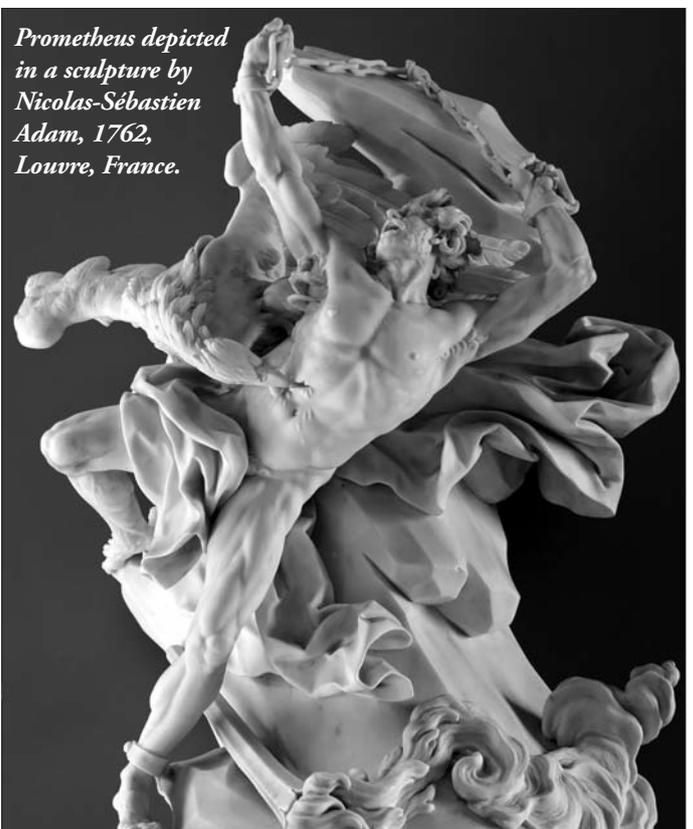
Ask students to flesh out the parts of the narrative they want to cover, and as they do this to shape their free-write into a poem.

Prompt them about the rhythm and rhyme. Encourage creativity by reminding the students to think about imagery and the sound of their words.

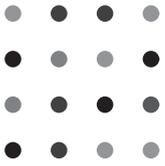
For more able students, ask them to think about the rhyme scheme. Do they want to introduce rhyme, as Isla does? Discuss the impact of using rhyme or not.

Editing and Re-drafting

Leave time for editing. Ask students to share their work in progress with classmates, and allow their peers to offer praise and constructive feedback, especially if any help is needed with metre or rhyme. Students should also discuss the effect of the modernisation of their chosen fairy tale or myth, in order to help develop their thinking about their retelling.



Prometheus depicted in a sculpture by Nicolas-Sébastien Adam, 1762, Louvre, France.



Prometheus Goes to A&E

By Isla Anderson

Beneath a torn and bloody shirt
they found his chest unscathed –
were baffled by his siren cries,
that tortured, pleading gaze.

The doctors checked his vital signs
and found him in the clear.
His pulse and temperature were fine;
they asked ‘Why are you here?’

and echo-gaunt Prometheus
could hardly speak the words –
he clutched his abdomen and cried
‘I beg you, stop the bird!’

The surgeons didn’t understand –
his liver was intact!
‘The man must be delusional;
his pain is so abstract.’

‘Go home, Prometheus,’ they said,
‘and don’t be so obscure’ –
they couldn’t hear the scratching of
the eagle at the door.

