

Short Poems are Scary!

An Upper KS2 Activity by David Harmer

- imagination
- haiku and tankas
- cinquains
- kennings



Be Very Afraid

Of the Spotted Pyjama Spider
which disguises itself as a spot
on the sleeve of your nightwear,
waits till you fall asleep,
then commences its ominous creep
towards your face.

Be very afraid
of the Hanging Lightcord Snake
which waits in the dark
for your hand to reach for the switch,
then wraps itself round your wrist
with a venomous hiss. Be afraid,

very afraid, of the Toothpaste Worm
which is camouflaged as a stripe of red
in the paste you squeeze
and oozes on to your brush
with a wormy guile
to squirm on your smile.

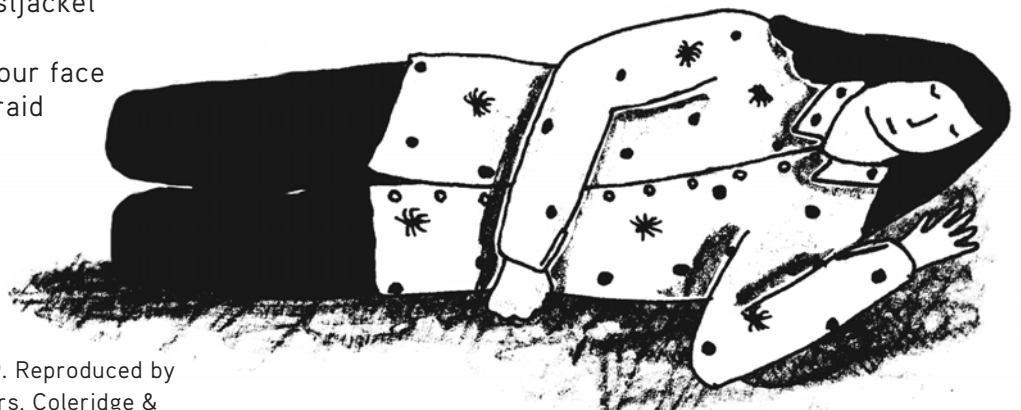
Be very afraid indeed
of the Bookworm Bat
which wraps itself like a dustjacket
over a book,
then flaps and squeaks on your face
when you take a look. Be afraid

of the Hairbrush Rat, of the Merit Badge Beetle,
of the Bubble Bath Jellyfish
and the Wrist Watch Tick (with its terrible nip)
or the Sock Wasp, of the Bee in the Bonnet
(camouflaged as the amber jewel
in the hatpin on it). Be afraid

of the Toilet Roll Scorpion,
snug as a bug in its cardboard tube
until someone disturbs it,
of the Killer Earring Ant,
dangling from a lobe
until someone perturbs it. Don't be brave —

be very afraid.

Carol Ann Duffy



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Introducing the surreal into the everyday can really spark children's imaginations. This activity looks to generate lots of ideas and then shape them using short poem forms or through creating nonsense verse monsters.

At night our classroom comes alive!

Generate a discussion with the class. What happens at night in your classroom? Do the tables run about on their legs? Do they dance with the chairs? Can they talk? How loud are they? What happens when books fly around? Are the exercise books different flying creatures from the hardbacked books? Do maths books fly in patterns? In circles? In triangles? In squares? Do the numbers in books run out and start to count each other? What happens if someone comes in? Does all this chaos stop very sharply or do they carry on?

This discussion will generate lots of ideas. The challenge is to focus them. Here's a small frame to get things started.

*The tables are...
My reading book flies...
The rulers are marching...
Pointy pencils...
Paint brushes are...
Look out, it's...*

This idea can be extended by asking children to flesh out each line with a simile or description.

*The tables are walking down the corridor
Like a long wooden caterpillar*

Another possible pattern is to give each line a number, so that it reads:

*One table is...
Two books are...
Three pointy pencils are...*

Another pattern is based on alliteration and parts of speech. The sequence is adjective, noun, verb, adverb, all using alliteration.

*Tall tables totter terribly
Big books bounce...
Pointy pencils...*

And so on.

The whole school comes alive

To add variety to the exercise, or to expand it further ask your children to consider all the bats and balls in the PE store, the cleaners' buckets and mops, the caretaker's ladders, hammers and screwdrivers. Do they come alive too?

POET'S TIP

The same ideas can be used with a long list of household objects, clothes and jewellery. All you have to do is give them the power to move and make noises. This is a good way into using personification in poems, so that objects, the weather, trees, and so on come alive and speak.

Short poetry forms

By Year Six it is reasonable to ask the children to try their hand at the following formal structures. However, these syllable counts should never be seen as hard and fast rules. There is nothing to stop children using the model poem as a source of ideas for short, snappy poems of three, seven and five lines that don't worry about syllable counts. Just using the line as a measure can be enough, especially if the children are encouraged to use simile, metaphor, alliteration and onomatopoeia. Again, Carol Ann Duffy's poem can act as a model for ideas, but obviously these forms can be used in many different contexts.

Try using haiku, tanka and cinquains to shape the ideas that came out of your class discussion.

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Tanka have five lines; the first three are of five-seven-five syllables like a haiku, then the last two lines have seven syllables. For example:

*Bedroom curtains flap
The wings of some giant bird
Trapped inside my house.
One day it will fly at me
And frighten me half to death.*

Cinquains are arranged in five lines with a sequence of two, four, six, eight, two syllables. The last line is often used to add impact to the poem. For example:

*Curtains
Slapping, flapping
Giant wings open wide
A monster bird inside my room
Scares me.*

Kennings are the basis of Anglo-Saxon riddles. They describe something, usually in two words (with the second ending in ---er or ---ers), but don't name it.

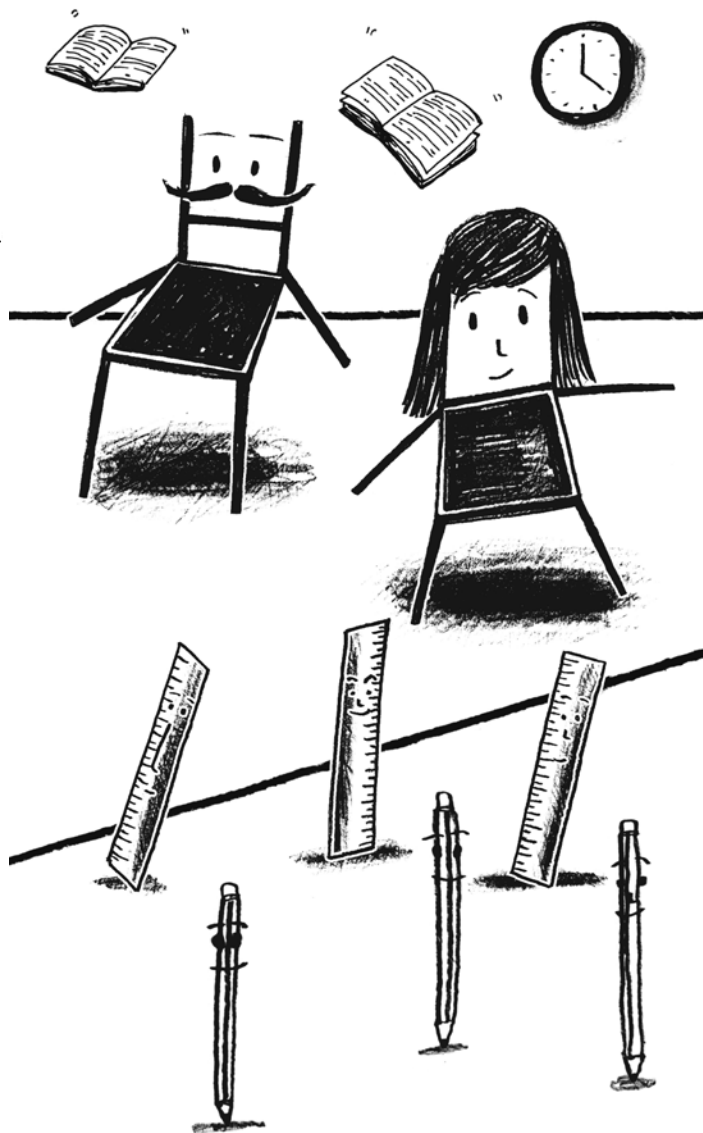
Using kennings you can ask your class to take Carol Ann Duffy's idea of bringing objects to life but make it shorter. Students can create a list poem of kennings, all describing an object. For example:

Pyjamas
*Sleep charmers
Spider fighters
Cosy keepers
Leg monsters
Dream bakers*

or

Toothpaste
*Tooth gleamer
Gum scrubber
Spit frother
Smile shiner
Breath minter*

Both these examples are based on words taken from the model poem. It is quite a rigid form but a great way to present everyday things (and people) in imaginative ways as Carol Ann Duffy does.



Nonsense monsters

In a sense, this technique is reversing the process Carol Ann Duffy uses. She takes ordinary things and turns them into monsters; this process invents a monster and puts it in an ordinary place. The following steps help students to create a nonsense creature.

1. Choose an adjective or descriptive phrase, for example: two-headed, slippery, slimy, three-toed, red, green, slinky, smelly, stinky.
2. Choose a creature, for example: worm, beetle, spider, fly, slug, snail, moth, creepy-crawly, dragon, monster, crab, shark, flea, bat, toad.
3. Choose a verb, for example: clings, hangs, wobbles, stinks, crawls, flies, hovers, flaps, stalks, screeches, squeaks.

With these you can create your own 'Be afraid of...' poems. For example:

*Be afraid of
The three-toed, stinky wombat
That creeps over your bedroom carpet.*

*Be afraid of
The tiny, slimy slug
Crawling down your curtain.*

To develop this, take each of the nouns and give them a designation, e.g. the carpet slug, the wallpaper wombat, the bathroom dragon, the wheelie-bin shark and so on.

*Be afraid of
The wheelie-bin shark
Chomping your rubbish*

*Watch out for
The sock-swallowing lobster
That rattles your wardrobe door.*

Extending this idea

Finally, if you are really brave, make up some class lists of revolting nonsense monsters and then put them round the classroom.

Now try this

Other supernatural poems, monster poems and nonsense poems can be used for gathering ideas.

'The Sockodile' and 'Walls Have Eyes' by Paul Cookson and 'There's A Monster In The Garden' and 'Next Door' by David Harmer from *It's Behind You! Monster Poems* by Paul Cookson and David Harmer (Macmillan Children's Books, 2013).

'The Tongue Twister' by Roger McGough from *You Have Been Warned! A Collection of Cautionary Verse*, Chosen by Roger McGough (Oxford University Press, 2008).

'The Walrus and the Carpenter' by Lewis Carroll, 'The Listeners' by Walter De La Mare and 'The Owl and the Pussycat' by Edward Lear, all in *The Oxford Book Of Children's Poetry*, Ed. Michael Harrison and Christopher Stuart-Clark (Oxford University Press, 2007).

Clear examples of haiku, tankas, cinquains and kennings can be found in *The Works*, Ed. Paul Cookson (Macmillan Children's Books, 2010).