



## FESTIVALS, OR P IS FOR PAGAN RITUAL

Liz Morris

### P is for Petrified Pumpkins, and for Pips, and Piñata

Ask children to research the origins of the ancient festival of Samhain, and to consider the importance of such a festival in times past. What might our ancestors have hoped for as they celebrated the end of harvest? Discuss (and play!) some well-known Hallowe'en games and traditions. Read *Apple Pip* (p27) and *Hallowe'en* (p37) and consider voices that would suit each. Perform the poem(s) as a litany or 'round', each child using a special, appropriate voice for each word/line/refrain. Record the pieces and replay, so children can hear or see their own performance and consider possible improvements. For atmosphere, paint stones or small rocks in acrylic paints (orange, green stems, red mouths) or draw pumpkin faces on orange paper plates strung on lengths of black ribbon. A piñata in the shape of a bat or other spooky creature could be hung, and children could recite *Apple Pip* as they take turns to hit and break the piñata open.

### P is for Phantoms and Púcaí and Potatoes

Read *Mal Magú*, a light-hearted and lively poem by one small, would-be ghost (p88)

and *Old Witch, Young Witch* (pp18-19). Both poems are written in the first person, using a young girl's voice, both are mischievous and humorous in tone, and both express a desire for the power of grown-ups. List other similarities and differences, before brainstorming words associated with witches, ghosts and other phantasmal creatures. Use some of these to create an original magical spell, perhaps having listened to and chanted the famous incantation from Macbeth's witches first. Try to include references to the special powers of the *Púca* that is said to spit on autumnal fruits such as blackberries, making them unfit to eat after Hallowe'en celebrations. The traditional Hallowe'en dish of colcannon (mashed potatoes, scallions, milk, butter and kale or green cabbage) traditionally conceals a few prophetic charms: recite your spell while stirring the potato mixture.

### P is for Perception and Prayer

Older children might discuss the more serious elements associated with the festival of Samhain that traditionally marked the beginning of the New Year in the Celtic calendar. It was felt that this time belonged neither to the Old Year nor to the New, and there was a blurring of the boundaries between the temporal and spiritual worlds, allowing people a chance to show respect for their dead. Consider *Song of Cuhtahlata*, *Lost Cherokee Mother* (p89) that celebrates the life and death of a young Cherokee. List those images which are particular to the way of life of the Cherokee, and then write a poem celebrating the life and times of some young person, using imagery that would conjure for the reader a picture of another tradition.

### P is for Presents

Since the days of the Roman Saturnalia festivities of early December, some days between 6 December and 6 January have become occasions for exchanging gifts. Read *Santa's Poem* (p39), introducing dramatic actions gradually. Research ways that different cultures celebrate their particular gift-givers, eg Mama Baboushka in Russia, St Nicholas in Holland etc. and introduce some of these traditions to the classroom. Try reciting the poem while sticking cloves, fruits and sweets into oranges, or while carrying a lighted candle

in a tin with holes punched in festive patterns, as they do in the Philippines. Write original riddles or short verses, signed by St Nicholas, to accompany small gifts baked or made in class: in Holland, these verses indicate the recipient by identifying character or personality traits, and so require thought and effort.

### P is for Poetry and Pre-Christian and Pancakes

Read *P is for Poetry* pp148-150, paying particular attention to those verses that refer to pancakes, parades, presents and pantos. Ask children to compile lists of festivals celebrated by those in the school. Which festivals are commonly celebrated in Ireland, and which more usually celebrated in other parts of the world? Read aloud *The Recipe for Happiness* (p16) and discuss in terms of the spring festival, Pancake or Shrove Tuesday; while *In the Bakery* (p114) could be used to highlight further the pleasures to be had using ingredients creatively. Find information on history relating to pagan origins of celebrations of Pancake/Shrove Tuesday, Mardi Gras etc. Ask children to write their own recipe for pancakes, possibly in the form of a poem. Pancake poetry could be performed before eating pancakes cooked in class.

### P is for Playful and for Performance

Other poems that celebrate festivals or special dates or times of the year appear throughout this anthology. Some are particularly well-suited to class performance and dramatic interpretation: children might hop, skip or clap as they count beats and chant *Hoppy New Year* (p21), posing and freezing and sinking to knees, before using a similar scheme to compose a poem about holidays or seasons.

The wonderful, full-colour illustrations should also prompt a host of deeply personal responses to the poems, responses that would not necessarily have been provoked by word-portraits alone – these illustrations might even prompt painterly backdrops to class performances of these and the children's own poetry.

## FANTASY/ OTHER WORLD

Jane O'Hanlon

### Síofra Sí agus Mal Mágu

Tá na dánta *Síofra Sí* agus *Mal Mágu* oiriúnach do pháistí óga. Dán an-simplí faoi shióg na fiacaile, mar a thugtar uirthi, is ea *Síofra Sí*. Is deas an rithim a bhaineann leis agus is tarraingteach an focalstór atá ann. Taitneoidh an dán seo leis an aos óg agus tá greann ag baint leis an léaráid.

### Síofra Sí p37

#### SCRÍBHNEOIREACHT CHRUTHAITHEACH

- Abair gur tusa Síofra Sí. Scríobh isteach i do dhialann cad a chaithfidh tú a dhéanamh anocht.
- Tabhair cuntas ar na fadhbanna a bhí agat nuair a bhí ort scuab nua a cheannach.
- An bhfuil cosúlacht idir an scuab sin agus Nimbus 2000 Harry Potter? Déan comparáid eatarthu. (Tá *Harry Potter agus an Órchloch* ar fáil i nGaeilge – bíodh is gur Gaeilge an-saibhir atá sa leabhar.)
- Scríobh do dhán féin faoi Shíofra – nó faoi shióg ar bith eile.
- Scríobh amach na focail go léir a thosaíonn le 'B'.
- Scríobh dán nó alt agus na focail sin ann.

#### LÉARÁIDÍ

- Féach ar an bpictiúr. An dtaitníonn sé leat?
- Déan pictiúr de Shíofra Sí.
- Ildaite nó dubh is bán?
- An bhfuil sí beag nó mór?
- Cén sórt scaibe atá aici?

### Mal Mágu p88

#### SCRÍBHNEOIREACHT CHRUTHAITHEACH

- Scríobh liosta de na focail dheacra atá ann. Ansin, oscail an foclóir agus déan iarracht ar mhíniú a fháil orthu.
- Scríobh míniú Gaeilge ar na focail sin.
- Cén sórt taibhse is ea Mal? Mór millteach nó beag bídeach?



Deireann Mal:

*Chuirfinn eagla ar mo Mham,  
Is chrithfeadh Daid nuair a déarfainn 'Bú!'  
Theitheadh múinteoirí go beo  
Ón taibhse millteach, Mal Mágu.*

- Dá mbeifeása i do thaibhse, cad iad na rudaí go léir a dhéanfá?
- An dtaitníonn Mal leat? Cén fáth?
- Scríobh dán nó scéal faoi thaibhse.

#### LÉARÁIDÍ

- Déan pictiúr de Mhal nó de thaibhse ar bith.
- An gcuireann na léaráidí atá sa leabhar seo eagla ort? Cén fáth?
- An bhfuil púcaí agus taibhsí ann dáiríre? Abair cén dearcadh atá agat.
- An bhfuil scéalta faoi thaibhsí ar eolas agat? Scríobh síos an ceann is fearr leat agus léigh amach é.

#### COMPARÁID

- Cuir an dán seo i gcomparáid le *Síofra Sí*.
- Cad iad na cosúlachtaí atá eatarthu?
- Cad iad na difríochtaí atá eatarthu?
- Cén dán acu is fearr leat? Cén fáth?

### Angel Boy and The Lost Shoe

These are two very different poems about angels which can be used with slightly older listeners and readers. One is a straightforward rhyming poem whilst the other has a less obvious rhyming scheme.

### Angel Boy p58

#### CREATIVE/DESCRIPTIVE WRITING

- Read the poem through and then describe how Angel Boy is different from other boys.
- Would it be easy to pick out these differences if he was in your class?
- How does he 'act like normal'?
- Do you think this is hard for Angel Boy?
- Why do you think Angel Boy must wait 'till the world is older'?
- Interview Angel Boy. This could be imagined or done in the form of a role play. After the interview write your own piece about Angel Boy. This might be in the form of a radio broadcast, newspaper article, story or poem.

#### ILLUSTRATIONS

- What do you think of the illustration accompanying this poem? Do you think it is suitable?
- Create your own illustration for the poem.
- What do you think of the illustration on the opposite page? Could he be an Angel Boy?

#### STRUCTURE AND RHYME

- Pick out and underline the words that rhyme in the poem.
- Try to write a poem using the same rhyming scheme.
- Look at how the vowels, particularly 'o', help the poem to rhyme (assonance) and how internal rhyme (rhyme within the lines and parts of words) also contributes to the rhyming scheme of the poem.

### The Lost Shoe pp84-85

#### CREATIVE/DESCRIPTIVE WRITING

- A lot of different things are mentioned in this poem. Make lists of them and find out more about each one.
- Write out the various things that the angel says in the different languages and identify them. Try to learn one more phrase in each of these languages and write it out.
- Write out a description of the angel

from the details given in the poem.

- What kind of person is Percepta? What makes you think that?
- Do you believe in angels? Why?

## ILLUSTRATION

- Look at the illustration which accompanies this poem. Do you like it?
- Create your own illustration for the poem.
- The richness of the references to texture and colour could be explored in the form of a collage or a piece of artwork using found objects.

## COMPARISON

- Compare this poem to *Angel Boy* in terms of: its structure; the way angels are depicted; the language used.
- How are they similar? How are they different?
- Which do you prefer?

### **The House that Barks and Blue Willow**

Here are two complementary poems which – literally – bring the house and garden alive.

### **The House that Barks p50**

## METAPHOR AND SIMILE

This poem is made up of a series of strong and amusing metaphors (when an unusual comparison is made between one thing and another) such as

*three barking bedrooms  
that keep the lurking nightshadows  
at bay.*

- Write out the metaphors that strike you. Why do these strike you in particular?
- Now come up with some interesting metaphors of your own.
- String them together and observe the result.
- Do you think it was difficult for the poet Cathal Ó Searcaigh to come up with these metaphors?

A simile is where one thing is compared to another using the word 'like' or 'as', eg as tall as a mountain; shining like the stars etc.

- Open a favourite book at random and see how many similes and metaphors you can find in a few pages. Write out the ones that really strike you and say why this is so.

Just like the dish and the spoon in the nursery rhyme *Hey Diddle Diddle*, and like Homer's *Odyssey* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Cathal Ó Searcaigh anthropomorphises objects (gives human qualities to something to bring it to life).

- Can you anthropomorphise ordinary objects?
- Make a list of these objects and describe how they come alive.
- Compare this poem with the one on the next page *The North Pole* by Frank McGuinness pp52-53.

### **Blue Willow p141**

This poem describes a fantasy garden as observed by the poet at night.

- Where do you think the title of the poem might have come from?

This poem has a lot of rhyme and internal rhyme (rhyme within lines and within parts of words) eg

*Cool cool fiery cat, close your eyes and  
fancy that  
by the silvery zip-zapping scissory rip-  
rapping  
only pretending-to-sleep sea.*

- Read the poem aloud and see if you can find the internal rhymes.
- How does this contribute to the poem?

Like *The House that Barks*, the poem also has a lot of unusual metaphors, eg 'moongate'.

- Pick out the ones that strike you. What is it about them that you like?
- Read the poem *The Tyger* by William Blake. Do you think the poet Mary O'Malley was influenced by this poem?

Find out all you can about the famous tapestries which depict the story of *The Lady and the Unicorn* set in France.

- Do you know any stories where unicorns are mentioned? What do you know about them? Find out more about different mythical figures such as centaurs and griffins.
- Compare this poem to *Poisoned* by John Ennis p123, also set in a garden.



## SPIRITUALITY

Seamus Cashman

### **Shane the Shaman and Riverdown**

We can readily come up with a string of everyday words which invite discussion of 'spirituality': religion, pagan, God, new age, angel, prayer, meditation, reflection, grief, intimacy, dream, beauty, wonder, love, death, life, priest, druid, nature, forgiveness. The poems in this anthology offer a myriad of words and images which suggest the concept of spirituality and which depend on these words and ideas, and on images which express them.

Poems to begin with might include *Riverdown* p142 and *Shane the Shaman* p70, both discussed here, but also *The Song of Cuhtahlata: Lost Cherokee Mother* p89 (cross cultural), *The Day the Dalai Lama met the Pope* p135 (with humour and fun), *Alpine Interlude* p104 (spirituality through grief), *Amen Woman* p140 (in a social context), *Gargoyle* p74, *In the Desert* p145, *Night* p144, *Sad* p45, *Siofra Sí* p37, *Street Dancer* p60, *The Lost Shoe* p84, *The North Pole* p52 and *Hideout* p15.

### **Shane the Shaman p70**

With this poem, there is opportunity at every level for a pleasurable discussion on the use of a variety of poetic devices. The poet's use of heightened, musical language and a strong rhythmic pattern helps

to reveal the magic of words. A reader can be introduced here to the power of language that is chosen carefully, economically and precisely.

Charged with wonder, this poem is a chant or hymn or incantation. Full of sound and rhythm, *Shane the Shaman* gives the reader doorways into things of the spirit, a sort of initiation to mystery. There is a seductive timelessness in the imagery of the natural world which together with the boy's 'everyday' ordinariness makes us believe and trust in his spirit significance. This portrait of the boy Shaman has rhythms and themes reminiscent of *The Song of Hiawatha*, the great epic poem by Henry Longfellow. Shane too is a sort of prophet of peace, a believer in oneness with nature, who

... believes he knows,  
like the holy men of old  
when the animals and trees  
gave their spirits to the breeze.

(Note: *The Song of Hiawatha* [1855] does have an Irish connection! The poem is based on the legends and stories of many North American Indian tribes, but especially of the Ojibway Indians, which were collected by a Mr Schoolcraft, superintendent of Indian affairs for Michigan. Schoolcraft's wife Jane was the daughter of an early Irish fur trader, John Johnston, who had married the daughter of the Ojibway chief. Jane's tribal name was O-bah-bahm-wawa-ge-zhe-go-qua: 'The Woman of the Sound Which the Stars Make Rushing Through the Sky'.)

In the vale of Tawasentha,  
In the green and silent valley,  
By the pleasant water-courses,  
Dwelt the singer Nawadaha.  
Round about the Indian village  
Spread the meadows and the corn-fields,  
And beyond them stood the forest,  
Stood the groves of singing pine-trees,  
Green in Summer, white in Winter,  
Ever sighing, ever singing.

There he sang of Hiawatha,  
Sang the Song of Hiawatha,  
Sang his wondrous birth and being,  
How he prayed and how he fasted,  
How he lived, and toiled, and suffered,  
That the tribes of men might prosper,  
That he might advance his people!

(The metre of *The Song of Hiawatha* is trochaic tetrameter throughout the poem, and it is based entirely on stress. In using repetition, Longfellow proved to be very

skillful, often using two lines, but sometimes three as in the verse above.) And Shane the Shaman is a young boy who's met

... monsters, walked on rivers,  
jumped a chasm, led a crowd.  
But he's just as good a friend,  
plays a game and kicks a ball ...

So, he is part of our everyday life, but also someone special with deep spiritual connections with earth and its ecology. Yet, he might well be the boy next door. The spiritual world is inside him:

*Shane the Shaman takes the beating of the earth  
to be inside him and his heart begins a drumming ...*

The devices the poet uses to achieve the tone, feelings, sense of movement, power and mystery include: constant alliteration; regular rhythmic metre working on the stressed and unstressed accents (trochees and anapaests abound) to create power and movement; assonance; onomatopoeia to link the sound of words to their meaning; end rhyme and internal rhymes; metaphor; personification. And note too the changing verse lengths: a six-line refrain; then verses of 13, 8, 4, 10, 4, 8, 12 lines each, and repetition of the refrain. This 'shape' too keeps us alert to the movement of the images and ideas.

### ACTIVITIES

- Make a picture representation of the rhythms (using lines and curves for stressed and unstressed syllables, or simple wavy lines).
- Dramatise the poem for group reading by a whole class – for instance, using one voice to start each verse and then a different voice for every line.
- What images do the words create in your mind and how could these be dramatised?
- Find the few uncommon words and look up a dictionary (*scrying, stupor, doppleganger* etc).

## Riverdown p142

John F Deane's beautiful *Riverdown* is a spiritual journey expressed through childhood observations of a mountain river moving to the sea. The poem is written as a flowing sequence of five sonnets. It is a story to be read slowly a few times, and preferably aloud to appreciate the quiet rhythms and the rhymes and the echoing sounds.

### ACTIVITIES

- Describe the countryside through which the river flows.
  - What animals, fish and people are in the poem?
  - What buildings or man-made structures are in the poem?
  - What sounds are there in the poem?
  - The poem is made up of five sonnets – what is happening in each one?
  - What different feelings do you have as you read through it?
  - If you were to write a similar poem, what scenes would you describe from your experience?
  - What is the 'mystery' the poet is talking about?
  - Do you think it is a spiritual poem? What makes you think this?
  - The poem is full of wonderful imagery, eg 'eels like molten butter'; 'a washed-down tree-root'; 'mullet sluppering in the shallows'. Choose a favourite image from the poem and describe why it is so effective. You might like to make up similar images yourself.
  - During a class walk by a river or canal you could observe the similarities and differences between that scene and the scene depicted in the poem. Write your own account of this trip.
- Finally, writing poetry is an experience involving some sense of the spirit, requiring meditative and reflective moments and a willingness to engage with our senses and emotions. 'Writing poetry, we come more fully alive' someone wrote. The poet Emily Dickinson suggested we should come at a slant to find out what is in our minds and hearts – we must sometimes write about something else, something we think we know.



## SEEING THE ILLUSTRATIONS

*Kieran Griffin*

*I would love to sit  
in the yellow chair  
in the painting*

*Van Gogh's Yellow Chair* (p62)

Children are lucky. Most of their poetry books are illustrated. The books have two artists – the poet and the illustrator. In their engagement with this anthology readers can experience the work of more than two artists with each poem. They can hear the poem said by themselves or by others and they can respond to the poem as writers, artists or indeed actors. The ways in which they can 'sit in the yellow chair' are as limitless as their imagination.

The structure and composition of the

anthology will cause the reader to engage with either one relatively substantial poem or simultaneously with more than one poem. The initial impact on turning a page for most children will be visual. Their starting point will be the illustration.

- What is this picture about?
- Is there a story?
- Is it about a person? Is it about an animal or animals? A place? A feeling?
- Do you like or dislike it?
- Is it happy or sad?
- Is it abstract?
- What colours are used? Are they primary (red, yellow, blue)? Are they secondary (green, orange, purple)?
- What sounds are in the illustration?
- What smells?
- Can you tell the time of day?
- Can you tell the time of year?
- Close your eyes and see how much detail you can remember.

- Now look at the title of the poem and again at the illustration.

In addition children can be encouraged to observe the overall impact of the relationship between text and illustration. The text of the poems is, in most cases, part of the illustration and not separate. The colour of text has been influenced by the colours used in the illustration.

Differing print sizes are used for effect. In some poems, eg *Words are Such Silly Things* by Brendan Kennelly, *Word Game* by Philip Casey and *Belly Buttons* by Gabriel Fitzmaurice the typeface and direction are used to illustrate poems.

Contrasting illustrations such as *The Rabbit* by Frank Ormsby and *The Sock Gatherer* by Thomas McCarthy can be compared, for example, to the unifying illustration of *Alpine Interlude* by Chris Agee and *Script* by Moya Cannon.

Engagement with the text, which is the primary purpose of the anthology, may be more accessible and rewarding through a visual approach. This will be especially so for children whose intelligence is more influenced by visual rather than linguistic stimulation.

In response to the poems the child may choose or be encouraged to employ a wide variety of reactions. These may range from reflection to dancing in the street (see *Street Dancer* by Gabriel Rosenstock, p60), from learning by heart to writing a poem on a similar theme, from acting to reading again and internalising the poem and, of course, illustrating the poem. If their choice is to illustrate then they may choose to do so similarly or in contrast or entirely differently to the illustrations in the anthology.

Above all, the anthology is a book of poems. It is not a textbook or a workbook but a treasury of poems. Children will like some poems more than others. They may dislike some. Their reactions to the illustrations may similarly vary. They should own their personal response and be given the right to choose the medium of its expression.