

OPENING  
DOORS  
to  
FAMOUS POETRY  
and  
PROSE

Ideas and resources for accessing  
literary heritage works

BOB COX



Crown House Publishing Limited  
[www.crownhouse.co.uk](http://www.crownhouse.co.uk)

First published by  
Crown House Publishing Ltd  
Crown Buildings, Bancyfelin, Carmarthen, Wales, SA33 5ND, UK  
www.crownhouse.co.uk

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First published 2014.

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data  
A catalogue entry for this book is available  
from the British Library.

Print ISBN 978-184590896-6  
Mobi ISBN 978-184590919-2  
ePub ISBN 978-184590920-8  
ePDF ISBN 978-184590921-5

Printed and bound in the UK by  
Gomer Press, Llandysul, Ceredigion

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# Introduction

In my work supporting hundreds of schools in the quest for outstanding learning there is always huge interest from teachers about using challenging literature from the past. Primary schools have never lacked enthusiasm for projects featuring Shakespeare or whole days with a Dickens focus, but I began to note some common questions in my discussions with teachers:

- ☛ Where can I find new prose extracts and poems to deepen my knowledge?
- ☛ How can I find out about creative approaches that my pupils will enjoy?
- ☛ How can these resources be used for outstanding English lessons?
- ☛ How can my pupils gain access to literary heritage works in a way that is enjoyable as well as challenging?
- ☛ How can I plan from the top to include the more able but still ensure all pupils can access fascinating ideas?

This last point led to my ‘Opening Doors’ title.

Sometimes, teachers say to me that there are books about learning theory which are fascinating, and there are textbooks with varied questions which are practical. In *Opening Doors to Famous Poetry and Prose* I have tried to combine the two by devising whole units of learning which are ready to use directly with your pupils, combined with plenty of ‘Bob says ...’ tips and advice to support methodology and first principles. The CD-ROM in the back of the book holds all of the resources so that you can use them in your classroom. In short, theory and practice coexist to inspire outstanding English using some of our greatest writers as models.

## New journeys in English: the theory

Using literary heritage texts – I am using the term very loosely to mean famous writings from the past which still influence the present – is justified on cultural grounds alone. Teachers have the huge responsibility of passing on an illustrious literary legacy. Successful authors writing in English are known around the world – visitors flock daily to the Brontë's Haworth, Hardy's Wessex and Shakespeare's Stratford-upon-Avon. I have taken coachloads of pupils across Britain and Ireland, discovering Joyce's Martello tower outside Dublin and following Sir Walter Scott's *Rob Roy* trail in Scotland.

When introduced to great writers and great writing, children start to discover something deeper, more imaginative and more enduring than that which is understood in a moment and forgotten just as quickly. Of course, I have only been able to select a limited number of texts, so the idea is that you will be inspired to find new writers at the same time as your pupils. My selections are based around texts and ideas which I have used successfully in the classroom to stimulate high level reading and writing, rather than there being any suggestion that these writers are 'better' than those I have omitted. The units include American, Irish, Scottish, French and English writers, while the wider reading includes many others, past and present, whose work originates from around the world and may have been translated into English. However, the 'Opening Doors' theme of the book means that I have chiefly focused on celebrated literature from the past to elicit creative, ambitious and high quality work in English.

The need for young people to make more progress in English is a concern for educators, for parents, for the global economy and, of course, for Ofsted inspectors. However, high standards, exciting outcomes and the sheer exuberance of writing, as it should be at Key Stage 2, will only come with challenging texts as a stimulus.

If more of our pupils are going to start secondary school at a higher level of achievement, then it is challenging texts and quality teaching that will help them to reach the stage when they are regularly:

- 🔍 Reading and understanding 'between the lines'.
- 🔍 Inferring and deducing.
- 🔍 Being engrossed in increasingly challenging and wider reading.

Bob says ...

*There are more ideas to discover, more words to explore and more styles to understand in these extracts than some of your pupils will have encountered in their education up to now. Using them should help deeper learning to become the norm in your literacy lessons and the potential for outstanding lessons is greatly increased.*

- ✿ Writing in varied styles, appropriate to the context or audience.
- ✿ Producing well-crafted and versatile writing – for example, exploring irony and parody.
- ✿ Using punctuation and grammar in accurate and varied ways to enhance meaning.

An impromptu list like mine is just a guide, but Geoff Dean's *English for Gifted and Talented Students* (2008), although about secondary English, has useful research about where very able writers should be at the start of Year 7. My list is a condensed version of the findings of this research. Setting a high benchmark for the standards that the very best might reach in Year 7 is a useful starting point for primary schools as it sets an aspirational agenda from the start.

All the writers in the bibliography have provided me with ideas and inspiration to develop a methodology to enable high level literacy to thrive. I have demonstrated this successfully in workshops with pupils and in consultancy briefs with teachers. Carol Dweck's work on mind-sets (2006), Barry Hymer's thinking on gifted and talented education (2009) and Guy Claxton's writing on 'building learning power' (2002) have all been influential. In addition, Deborah Eyre's (2011) *Room at the Top* report has given impetus to my ongoing search for excellence in the classroom with her recommendation to create 'more room at the top for more'.

Of course, the poets and novelists themselves continue to dazzle us: Hardy's glimpses of the past in 'Old Furniture'; Browning's 'Pied Piper of Hamelin' leaving the limping boy behind to dream of an enchanted land; Dickinson's 'Snake' curling around on the farmstead waiting to pounce; Wells's astronauts seeing the first vistas of a new, unknown world. Their originality is the principal influence on us all.

Bob says ...



*Our primary inspiration must come from the writing itself, our own reading of the classics and their enduring appeal. Only excellent models are likely to stimulate excellent outcomes.*

With so many subjects to teach, primary teachers always need support to use literary texts creatively, to grow their own knowledge and to find new routes into English teaching. In using these resources, I hope teachers will be encouraged to find out more about the featured writers and that this book will be the start of a journey for all concerned.

The poems and extracts I have included offer the opportunity to introduce challenging ideas and concepts which are often missing from more simple texts. When Charlotte Mew writes hauntingly about 'The Call', I find pupils in my workshops talking about eerie atmospheres, the unexpected and even spiritual feelings. When I explore 'The Land of Counterpane', there is much talk about feeling ill, being bored, finding things to do and sometimes loneliness. It is then an easy jump to discuss Stevenson's language and rhythm and for the children to write their own sharp and creative pieces.

# Sickness

# ‘The Land of Counterpane’ by Robert Louis Stevenson

Bob says ...

This poem is all about a sick boy, confined to bed and using his imagination to keep his spirits up. The counterpane is the bedspread and the boy's imagination runs wild as he seeks to keep boredom at bay.

Before letting your pupils read ‘The Land of Counterpane’, ask them how they keep themselves occupied when they are ill. Once you have a list of possibilities, use a **continuum line** to sort out the most and least effective ways of keeping our spirits up when we are ill.

Most effective ←————→ Least effective

Leave plenty of space around the **continuum line** for pupils to write in their reasons why, for example, watching a DVD might be more or less effective than reading a book.

I always advise teachers to use **writing journals** in class to capture original, quirky jottings and impulsive thoughts. Creative writing needs to be a regular activity, and short but challenging pieces can do a lot to foster an ongoing love of writing. For those who have appropriate ICT support, like tablets or notebooks, it is a perfect opportunity for pupils to build a developing profile of writing which includes all the processes (e.g. drafts, edits, additions).



There is an opportunity here for a short piece on something lively like ‘making the most of illness’. Get your pupils to write 100 words on how they have tried to cheer themselves up. Perhaps set them a bigger challenge by asking them to include how they felt about lying in bed, especially if they were missing something important. Feedback on this can focus on how well they have described their feelings and the activity they have missed out on.

## The text revealed

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### The Land of Counterpane

When I was sick and lay a-bed,  
I had two pillows at my head,  
And all my toys beside me lay  
To keep me happy all the day.

And sometimes for an hour or so  
I watched my leaden soldiers go,  
With different uniforms and drills,  
Among the bed-clothes, through the hills;

And sometimes sent my ships in fleets  
All up and down among the sheets;  
Or brought my trees and houses out,  
And planted cities all about.

I was the giant great and still  
That sits upon the pillow-hill,  
And sees before him, dale and plain,  
The pleasant land of counterpane.

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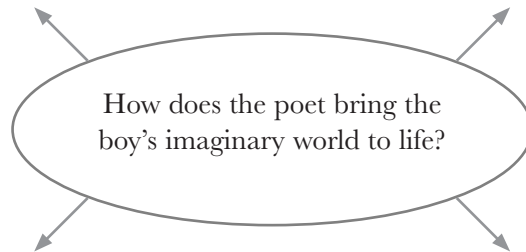
Resource 12



## Learning objectives

- 🕒 Know how first-person narratives can be used in poetry.
- 🕒 Understand how rhyme contributes to meaning.
- 🕒 Learn how to write a poem using first-person narrative and rhyming.

## Opening questions: reading skills



## Support questions

- 🕒 How many toys do you see?
- 🕒 Why is 'I was the giant' such an important line?
- 🕒 How do the rhyming couplets help us to understand the theme?
- 🕒 Which words or phrases suggest this poem may have been written quite a while ago?

### Excellent responses will:

- ☛ Demonstrate how the first-person narrative, using ‘my’ and ‘I’, shows the boy’s control over his toys and contrasts with feeling unwell.
- ☛ Always mention evidence and examples.
- ☛ Show how the curves of the bedspread cleverly provide a setting for the soldiers.
- ☛ Describe how the last stanza provides a neat finale of the ‘giant’ surveying a kingdom.
- ☛ Explore uses of the hyphen and the meaning of ‘counterpane’.

### Higher challenge

Interventions for the more able may help to support an understanding of how regular rhyming and **assonance** creates a very appropriate childlike rhythm which supports the theme very well. The regular **metre** of stressed and unstressed syllables gives the poem an even lilt, particularly as the reader visualises the toys living in a world of their own. This could be the beginning of a discussion about how poets find the right structures to suit their theme.

### Contexts for writing

There is a lot of scope for poetry writing inspired by Stevenson’s poem.

### Wings to fly

**Thinking from the top** will be enhanced by asking pupils to write in at least two different styles. For example:

1. Using rhyming couplets, stressed and unstressed beats and four-line stanzas, as in Stevenson’s poem.

2. Showing how a modern exploration of how a day feeling ill might be spent could become a very different kind of poem.

You could also ask your young writers to write a poem with the title, 'The Land of ...'

### Excellent responses will:

- ☛ Demonstrate a style and structure which suit the theme.
- ☛ Display use of the first person to help us 'see' the unique world created by the narrator.

**Support resources** could take the form of keeping to the first line of each stanza and developing ideas from there. Alternatively, give pupils the line, 'I was the giant great and still', and ask them to develop a poem around this start point.

To enhance stretch and challenge, it is a good idea to introduce comparison and evaluation across different pieces of poetry. Reading 'The Land of Counterpane' should help with this but also refer to the Stevenson poems listed on page 57 for additional opportunities to read widely.

Other writing opportunities could include:

- ☛ Inventing a new game while you are at home feeling unwell.
- ☛ Designing a bedspread for a sick child and explaining the thinking behind your ideas.
- ☛ Extending the world of the imagination beyond the counterpane. How could the whole house be used to create an inventive fantasy to cheer you up?

### Extension

Lots of the poems in this unit are about bedtime, which will generate lots of sleep-related themes for your young poets who are creating anthologies. Why not create an electronic school-wide anthology that all pupils could add to? There could be two versions: one a collection of the children's favourite poems and the other an assemblage of pupils' own drafts and final versions.

Bob says ...

Although this unit features 'The Land of Counterpane', it is vital to flood children with as many poems as possible by respected writers. Sifting and sorting through your favourites and choosing meaningful poems to read is great fun!

Try asking a group to memorise and recite their favourite poems by Stevenson and then match at least one of them with one of their own poems. By inviting pupils to answer questions from the rest of the class following their reading you can be sure that they understand the meaning of the poem. Too many recitations of the same poem will produce huge yawns, so encourage the children to select widely and try to ensure that reading and understanding go together.

The overarching aim is always to improve pupils' poetry-writing skills, not just to 'cover' a poem or spend some time answering questions. Outstanding English lessons always plan for excellence. When great teachers work with poetry collections and literary themes, their pupils begin to show huge improvements in their use of language. They become more creative thinkers and even reference other poets.

Wider reading policies should involve studying more challenging poems. Stevenson could be a useful starter at Key Stage 2, with more advanced readers building towards Ted Hughes and others by Year 6.

Stevenson is also famous for his stories, so this is a great chance to produce a Key Stage 2 book box including *Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped* and the *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. (See Unit 12 for 'The Pavilion on the Links'.)

I have seen the kinds of access strategies modelled in this book used in primary lessons with extracts and visuals from stories like *Treasure Island*. This can give pupils a real love of English literature, as well as confidence with reading famous writers and stories. This foundation can be exploited by excellent secondary teachers who can then take it further. I have seen pupils watch parts of *Macbeth*, read sections of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and appreciate 'Morte D'Arthur' without needing to understand every word, but the seeds have been sown. It's all about opening doors!

## Beyond the limit

Other poems by Robert Louis Stevenson:

📖 'The Land of Nod'

📖 'Northwest Passage'

📖 'A Good Play'

'Escape at Bedtime' from *A Child's Garden of Verses* (1885) will be particularly useful in extending the sleep theme: