

Literacy Through Drama

“The Lady of Shalott”, a narrative poem, by Alfred, Lord Tennyson – explored through Drama

Part 1 – Outside the tower

1. Play medieval lute music to create atmosphere.
2. Tell the children that you will be exploring a poem together that is set in the time of King Arthur. It was written in Victorian times and is a story poem. Introduce or revise the term “narrative poem” and maybe talk about the poet.
3. Tell them that that the poem is in parts and the first part describes the landscape where the story is set. Ask them to close their eyes as you read Part 1 They should try to visualise a picture of the place in their minds as if they are there (*engaging with the fiction and role*). Read Part 1 aloud.
4. Ask them to describe what they saw in their mind’s eye before referring back to the text to underline with a partner, references to things that would be “seen” e.g. “long fields of barley and of rye”, “Four grey walls and four grey towers” etc. (nouns/visual image)
5. Invite them to read Part 1 with you. You may wish to explain unfamiliar vocabulary.
6. Ask them to close their eyes again and this time they are invited in turn to say aloud what they can see as if they were there and to describe it using their own words (*engaging with role*). Ritualistically each contribution begins with “I can see...” e.g. “I can see a tall grey tower. The walls are covered in moss and damp.” Children used to this strategy are better able to not interrupt each other but you can touch the children’s shoulders lightly in turn to signal their opportunity to speak. You can use medieval background music. (*The ritual adds atmosphere and demands co-operation and offers shared ownership of the emerging collective fiction*)
7. You might decide to focus on particular aspects of the setting in turn with several children adding aloud to an emerging collectively agreed description of the imagined setting spoken as if they are there. Any contributions are accepted as long as they do not directly contradict the text. This activity could be done sitting at desks or with the children positioning themselves within a drama space.
8. Ask them what the text tells them about the Lady of Shalott so far. Differentiate with them, **what they know** (reference) and **what they think they know** (inference). List their collective suggestions. You could place these around a picture outline of her (*role on the wall*)

9. Ask the children **what they want to know** (inquiry) about her at this point and gather their questions. These can be written down. How might they find out about the Lady? They can read on...but first tell them we want to find out a bit about her from the reapers.
10. Ask the children to imagine that they are the reapers referred to in Part 1 of the poem (*role-play*). The version of the poem illustrated by Charles Keeping (Oxford University Press, ISBN 0-19-272371-5) has a powerful and atmospheric picture you could use to help children engage with their roles. You could project this onto a wall. Ask them to make themselves into a still picture as reapers in the moonlight (*still image*). Read the verse aloud to them as they physically hold the image for a few seconds.
11. Ask what job related problems the reapers might have as they work? Tell them that in a moment they will re-form the image of the reapers and at a given signal (which could be medieval music if you have any) and then they will bring the scene to life in slow motion (*controlled movement*), using exaggerated slow movements. Maybe ask them to suggest possible movements first if they are not used to working in this way, thus supporting each other with ideas.
12. Repeat the activity but tell them that this time you are introducing a signal, which indicates that they can suddenly hear the lady singing. They will be focussing on a key moment. They will freeze at this signal (*freeze frame*). Your active participation adds status to the make believe. If you feel brave you could sing as the lady yourself, (*teacher in role*.)
13. Tell them that they will work as reapers one more time but this time you will join them in role as a reaper who is new to the area. (*teacher in role*) You will move around asking them questions about the lady in the tower e.g. "Who is she?" "Have you seen her?" "Does anyone live with her?" "The questions will include their own questions formulated earlier (see activity 9) and they will now, in role be guessing and providing some answers.
14. Rumours! They have one minute as gossipy reapers/villagers to invent, gather and create rumours about the Lady of Shalott (*drama game*). You can refer back to the text with them to differentiate those rumours that are text based. You can sort the rumours according to the probability of each being true.
15. Show the children the Charles Keeping picture of the tower at night. The Lady's room has a light. Ask the children to speak the reaper's thoughts as they look up at the lit window (*thought-tracking*). Ideally you could project the image onto a wall. They can imagine the picture if you do not have it.

Part 2 – Inside and outside the tower

1. Read Part 2 of the poem. This is set inside the Lady of Shalott's room. Check that they understand the storyline and the less familiar vocabulary e.g. "surly village churls" "an abbot on an ambling pad" etc.

2. Hand out strips of paper with sections of printed text, to different groups of children. Each section refers to a scene she sees reflected in her mirror e.g. “a troop of damsels glad” and “the knights come riding two by two” etc. The children could also write lines of their own, which would describe images she might have seen (*scriptwriting*). Give the children a little rehearsal time to create a short scene depicting their groups image (*improvisation / play making*) Each group should start from a *still image* and end with one, reinforcing the idea of the tapestry images. Tell the children that you will walk slowly between the groups, saying their allocated lines of text as an introduction to their *performance* (alternatively activate each group performance with the quote “I am half -sick of shadows”). The other groups will watch as audience. No comment until every group has performed.
3. Ask the children what they know, from the text, is inside the Lady’s room. Ask them to also suggest what else could be there e.g. candle, Bible, hairbrush. Ask each child to enter the drama space, which represents the Lady’s room. They are each in turn invited to enter the room as any object other than the mirror, placing themselves appropriately and stating what they are (*role play/still image*) They might also add a sentence about themselves and the Lady e.g. “I am her loom. Every day she sits near me for hours.” You could walk around the imaginary room as the lady (*teacher in role*) with the children speaking to you as the objects (*role play/improvisation*).
4. Tell the children that you will be the mirror (*teacher in role*) and will answer their questions as the mirror (*hot-seating*). They will now be out of role and may ask you one question each (*hotseating*), which you will answer, using your knowledge of the text. You may decide to impart aspects of the plot that they are not yet familiar with. Out of role you may wish to refer back to the text and together agree what the mirror revealed that was text based.

Part 3 – Sir Lancelot appears

1. Read Part 3 to the children and then with them. Divide the class into paired groups. Group 1 is a “sound group” and group2 is a “movement group”. Ask the sound groups to go through Part 3 underlining the direct or implied references to sound e.g. “And as he rode his armour rung” and “The mirror cracked.” Ask the movement group to go through and under line textual references that refer to or imply movement e.g. “She left the loom” and “Out flew the web”.
2. Ask the sound groups to create either a sound collage or a sequence of sounds as a *soundtrack* to accompany Part 3. Ask the movement group to create a *movement sequence or dance drama* linked to their underlined references.
3. Now ask the groups to pair up and perform their work for each other before working together to negotiate an integrated *performance* incorporating aspects of both groups’ work.

4. Make sure that the children recognise the key moment when the curse is activated. Do they think that the Lady of Shalott made a conscious or unconscious decision to look directly out of the window? Ask them to form two long lines facing each other. Tell them that this represents the pathway she followed from the mirror to the window. You are going to move slowly between the lines as the Lady of Shalott (*teacher in role*) the children will be the contradictory voices/thoughts that could have been in her head as she moved towards the window. As you pass by one line will try and persuade you to look out of the window and the other line will try to stop you (*conscience alley*) Nobody may touch you.
5. Move back along the lines, retracing your steps from the window (*teacher in role*). This time they can speak the thoughts (*thought tracking*) of the Lady as she returns cursed.
6. Replay the scene fast so that you do not hear or listen to the voices but rush to the window, finishing with "The curse has come upon me." Which way do the children think the scene should be played to best reflect the text? Can they justify their choice? They can direct you possibly through example as to how they think the scene should be played, (*forum theatre*)
7. The scene can be played with the children reassuming their roles as objects in her room (see Part2, activity 4). They can recreate the room and as you move towards the window they can in turn add to a commentary on the action
8. With you in role as the Lady, invite the children to question you about this moment in the story (*teacher in role/hotseating*). You could list the questions first and restrict the number she will answer. Discuss with the children which questions are open and likely to elicit a fuller response from the Lady.
9. Homework. Ask the children to draw a cracked mirror with sections. Inside each section they should write the thoughts of the Lady of Shalott at the moment the mirror cracked (*thought tracking.*)

Part 4 – The death of the Lady of Shalott

1. Read Part 4 to and then with the children. Check that they understand the sequence of the actions of the Lady of Shalott in Part 4. List her actions together.
2. Revisit the text and ask the children to consider the words Tennyson has used to describe the scene. Ask the children to suggest how he has helped us to imagine with our senses. Ask them to get into small groups. With different coloured crayons (one for each sense) ask them to underline the words and phrases that appeal to the senses e.g. floated, singing, wind, noises of the night, singing.
3. Ask them in their groups to choose one line from each part of the poem and to keep the sense of the line but to elaborate it, substituting words if they wish and adding others.

4. Show them the John William Waterhouse painting of “The Lady of Shalott”(postcard, slide or poster available from the Tate Gallery.) Ask them to consider which aspects of the painting (1888) directly link with Tennyson’s poem by direct reference to the text.
5. Ask them to form two long lines a few metres apart. The space between the lines represents the river and the lines could sway to suggest the movement of the plants in the wind and the water flowing. With you in role as the Lady (*teacher in role*) silently enact her final actions in order (*mime*). Ask the children to read aloud their newly created lines as you pass slowly up the river. This is a form of *reflection*. The same activity could be done more simply using lines they select from the poem or with them thinking aloud as The Lady of Shalott passes. Background medieval music could add atmosphere.
6. The Lady of Shalott sings her last song. In groups they could create the “mournful, holy” song that she sang. These could be performed and one selected as a background to the next activity.
7. Show them the Charles Keeping illustration of the townspeople on the wharf looking at the dead body floating past. Alternatively ask them to imagine the scene. Define where the wharf and boat are and then invite the children one at a time to enter the drama space and place themselves in the still picture entitled “Who is this? and what is here?”(*still image*) Music can accompany this.
8. Maintain the *still image* and ask them to speak their thoughts in turn as they gaze upon her (*thought tracking*).Then you enter as Sir Lancelot (*teacher in role*) and say

“She has a lovely face;
God in His mercy lend her grace,
The Lady of Shalott”
- Ask the children to suggest how the townspeople could commemorate the Lady of Shallot e.g.They could create epitaphs, write her tombstone inscription, her obituary, paint her etc.

The students have:

- investigated a longer classic narrative poem.
- worked in role, with opportunity for empathetic response (private and public)
- investigated famous artist’s and illustrator’s interpretations and portrayals of the setting and main character, with reference to the text
- created their own visual images physically (tableaux)
- offered different versions of the story
- extended parts of the story
- had opportunity to discover the differences between oral and written storytelling, both as storytellers and listeners in and out of role.
- read and performed the poem in a variety of ways (visual, verbal and kinaesthetic)

- investigated narrative viewpoint and the perspectives on the action from different characters (in and out of role).
- made notes of the story outline and presented it visually and through movement had opportunity to create, perform and respond to devised performance

Teacher Resources

<http://www.webmagick.co.uk/prcoll/poetry/lady1.htm>

This web site offers the text of “The Lady of Shalott” with paintings by famous artists e.g. Waterhouse, Hunt and Meteyard.

The Tate Gallery sells postcards, posters and a slide of the John William Waterhouse painting “The Lady of Shalott” (1888) and has an “on line” ordering service. <http://www.tate.org.uk/home/index.htm>

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November 1st 2011