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Hunter Trials

John Betjeman's wife loved horses and she would take their two children to compete in hunter trials, Gymkhanas or Pony Club rallies. The poet once accompanied them and this poem demonstrates his ability to include dialogue as an integral part of the poem, telling the story. He uses technical 'horsey' words but not necessarily in a way that makes sense, but that adds to the humour in the verse. It was first published in the magazine *Time and Tide* in 1952.

Betjeman wrote all his poems with the intention that they were to be read aloud, and 'Hunter Trials' is a fantastic poem to explore when encouraging your class to consider speech distinguishers, dramatic irony, pace, rhythm and rhyme.

Any sections in red are extension activities.

Starter

- Explain the oldest poems in the English language (Beowulf, for example) weren't written down, but were passed down orally from generation to generation. The strong rhythmicality, use of rhyme and alliteration which you find in poetry was partly a technique used by poets to ensure that they could remember the word order in the stories which they told through verse.
- Betjeman strongly championed the importance of poetry as an oral/aural art. 'Hunter Trials' is a great poem for a class to explore, focusing on the idea that, when they read any poem, they are speaking in someone else's poetic voice.
- Put the class into pairs, and get them to take turns in reading 'Hunter Trials' to each other.
- Then ask them to share with the class whether they found themselves taking on any particular voice or accent.

Lesson

- Explain to them about speech shibboleths (word or speech patterns that distinguish one group of people from another: speech shibboleths are ways in which individuals self-identify as part of a group and uphold patterns of social separation). Example from poem = 'wizard'.
- Then give them the task of circling particular words within the poem which they think sound 'posh'. Then discuss the language which identifies the speaker as a member of a particular social class. Why might a girl at a hunter trial sound 'posh'?
- They might pick up on the use of long vowel sounds: 'Do...do...too' in the second stanza; superlative neologisms: 'wizardest' in stanza 3; the use of hyperbole: 'terribly nervous' in stanza 7 or 'sick with disgust' in stanza 8 combined with the use of understatement (litotes) which concludes the poem: 'my silly old collarbone's bust'.

- Explain the way in which the speaker's speech enables Betjeman to construct a sense of dramatic irony.
- Ask your class to return to their pairs, and think about how Betjeman's use of rhythm and rhyme contributes to the pace of the poem. You want to encourage them to think about the effect of the ABAB scheme, combined with the iambic beat.
- If your pairs require the question to be scaffolded, ask them to consider where the pace of the poem is interrupted. You can ask them to consider the caesura in the line

Oh it's me now. I'm terribly nervous.

And encourage them to think why Betjeman introduces a pause at this moment.

- Encourage them also to think about the effect of the asterisk break.
- As an extension, you could ask the class to see if they can identify the feminine lines (which don't end with a paired beat), and think about the effect of those lines on the pace of the poem. As an additional prompt, ask the students to consider the effect of the feminine lines on the patterning of the stanzas: they appear in lines 1 and 3 of each verse.

Plenary

- You could explore the use of foreshadowing, with the litany of accidents which precede the speaker's broken collarbone.
- You could also examine the use of irony 'Her withers got tied in a noose', and the pun on Miss. Blewitt's name.
- Encourage the class to connect the use of speech shibboleths and the changing pace of the poem to Betjeman's construction of irony.
- To conclude, ask the class to consider how far we can expect an oral performance to convey all the things we have noticed by studying the poem on the page?