What is Poetry?

Poetry is a collection of words that express an emotion or idea, sometimes with a specific meaning, sound, or rhythm.

Poetry

Poetry

What is poetry?

Why encourage children to recite poetry?

Children need to be surrounded by language in many forms, including poetry. Often poetry uses rich and varied language, expressing thoughts and ideas in novel and stimulating ways; poetry can make you think deeply, but it can also make you laugh. In my experience, children grow to love poetry if you read a variety of different types of poem to them often, starting with the real "show-stopper" poems that will grab their attention, like The Visitor, but then diversifying to more thought provoking pieces.

The way you read a poem is crucial to gaining children's attention and appreciation of poems. You have to enjoy poetry and enjoy reading poetry so that your enthusiasm is transmitted to the children. It is also important that you are able to read (or recite!) poems with great expression, intonation and feeling to assist the children's understanding of the poem.

Obviously poetry is an excellent way to improve oracy skills (see below for links to the current curriculum), but, more crucially, getting children to recite poetry is a marvellous way to develop their confidence and self-esteem. Even very shy children and / or children who generally will not speak up are buoyed up by the applause and acclaim reciting poetry to an audience can bring.

Range of experience:

- speak clearly, using intonation and emphasis appropriately, *e.g. recitation, oral storytelling*

Learning Objectives: Oracy – Speaking

- Y3 - speak clearly varying expression to help listeners
- Y5 - speak clearly, using formal language and projecting voice effectively to a large audience, *e.g. event for parents/carers, presentation to visitors*
- Y6 - speak clearly, using formal language, varying expression, tone and volume, to keep listeners interested

(Curriculum 2008)

What is important?

- The children need to enjoy the experience.
- The children must understand the poem and engage with the ideas.
- You introduce them to a range of different poems to broaden their experience, develop their language and thinking, and allow them to make their own decisions and judgement about poetry.

How do I do I get children to recite poetry well?

The important things is that you begin by using poems that you like and are either going to grab the children's attention from the outset, or are poems you are going to explain to the children (e.g., Falling Leaves).

The poems you choose can:

- use different imagery that you can exploit in a recitation (e.g., Falling Leaves);
- have different "roles" that the children can adopt / act out (e.g., The Visitor);
- include rhythm / repetition / choruses that can be exploited in the recitation;
- lend themselves to hand and / or body movements to support the words.

It is important that you model the way the children might recite the poem in the first instance. Then you and the class can decide how best to perform the poem:

- will different children recite different bits?
- are there roles for people to play?
- will one person recite some line alone or will lines be said in a chorus?

These are things you need to think about when choosing a poem.

Different types of poems

- Nonsense poems
- Wordplay poems
- Riddle and puzzle poems
- Punctuation and spelling poems

Poetry patterns

Acrostic Poems
Poems in which certain letters of a word in each line together form a word, which is the subject of the poem.

Cinquains
A form of syllable poem consisting of five lines adding up to 22 syllables. Line 1 has two syllables, line 2 has four syllables, line 3 has six syllables, line 4 has eight syllables and line 5 has 2 syllables.

Clerihews
A clerihew is a four-line verse about a person, which consists of two rhyming couplets. The first line of the clerihew is the name of the person. Finding words which rhyme with people's names isn't easy so clerihews are difficult to write

Epitaphs
A short piece of writing that is put on the gravestone of a person who has died.

Haiku
Haikus are traditional Japanese verse-form, consisting of three lines and a total of seventeen syllables, arranged in the pattern 5-7-5.

Kennings
A keening is a descriptive phrase, or compound word, which is used to name something instead of a noun. Anglo-Saxon poets often used kennings in their poems, for example, a river is sometimes describes as a "swan path". A kennings poem is a poem consisting of a list of kennings.

Limericks
A limerick is a humorous five-line poem with a particular pattern. It has a rhyme scheme of aabba: lines 1 and 2 are longer lines of 3 beats ending with a rhyme; lines 3 and 4 are shorter lines of two beats that end with a rhyme; line 5 is a longer line of thee beats that rhymes with lines 1 and 2.

Shape poems
A shape poem is one in which the lines of the poem are arranged to make a picture or shape. You can make a shape poem about any kind of object. In the simplest form of shape poem, the words are written so that they make a shape of the object.

Tanka
Tankas are a type of Japanese syllable poem, consisting of five lines and 31 syllables arranged in the pattern 5-7-5-7-7.

Tongue-twisters
A rhyme that is difficult to say properly because it uses similar or repeated sounds, e.g., She sells sea-shells on the seashore.
Story poems
Poems that tell a story.

Extra jargon

Couplet: a couplet is a pair of consecutive lines that rhyme.
Figurative language: the language used in metaphors and similes to create imagery in a poem.
Free verse: any poem which does not have regular pattern of rhyme or metre.
Metaphor: a way of describing something or someone as though it were something else, in order to put a picture or an idea into your reader's mind through the comparison you make, e.g. Grandma is a warm scarf.
Metre: a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in a line of poetry.
Onomatopoeia: the use of a word or words that sound like and suggest the noise or action that is being described, e.g., hiss, clatter, hum.
Personification: the giving of human characteristics to an animal or an object and referring to it as if it were a person,
Simile: a simile is when you compare one thing to another in order to crate and image in the reader's mind, using "like" or "as" to make the comparison, e.g. "the shark's teeth were like a row of daggers."

Metaphorical Poetry – thanks to Gillian Clarke

The Burglar

Silent, sneaky, slick
Deadlier
than a snake
Daring, cruel, mean
Agile
From the mysterious deep
Always on the lookout.
More frightening than a blood-
stained knife
Slyly, slithering on the shore
Greedily creeping up the sand
Rapidly stealing my treasure for
the never-ending empty ocean.

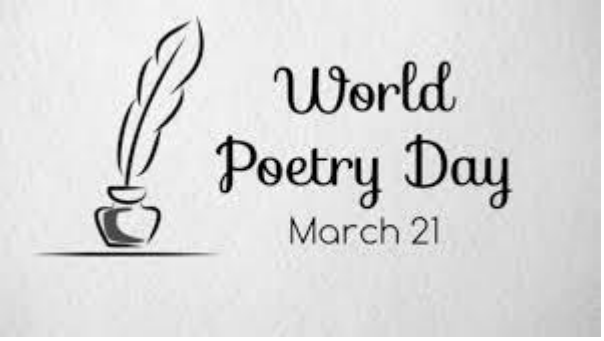
The Poets of 4M

The process

1. Make a list of words that describe the object.
2. Think of something completely different that could be described by that word.
3. Look at the second list – can you see any objects / themes / ideas that are emerging from that list? For example, in the above poem, although the children were describing the sea they began to imagine it as a burglar.
4. Once you have decided on that idea you build a poem using words you have already got, and adding some, to create that image.
5. Read and refine as many times as is needed.

Poetry days

Think about running special events in your school for these days.

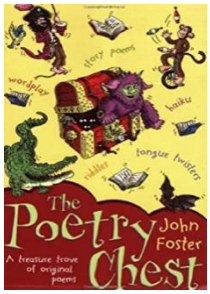


Useful websites

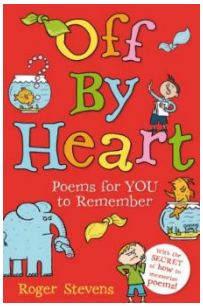
http://poetryzone.co.uk/

https://www.booktrust.org.uk/what-we-do/childrens-laureate/former-laureates/michael-rosen/poetry-resources-and-ideas-for-teachers/

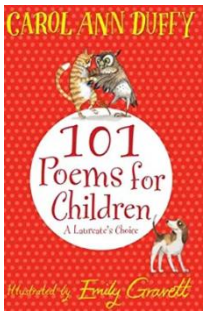
Some books that are worth looking at



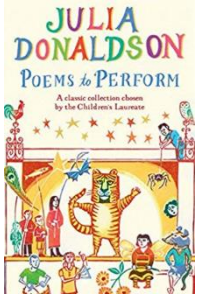
This is a very useful book for classroom teachers books it gives examples of different forms of poetry.



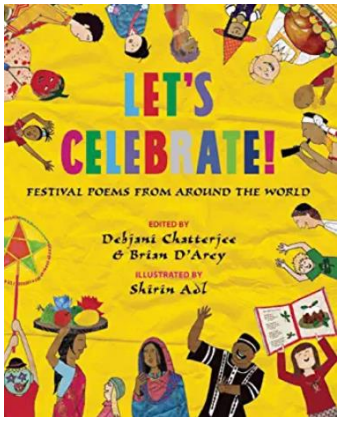
Off By Heart, as the name suggests, contains poems that are quite easy to remember and recite.



Chosen by Carol Ann Duffy, the Poet Laureate, this anthology contains some great poems and charming illustrations.

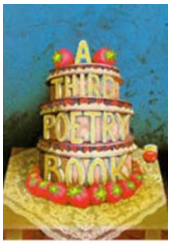


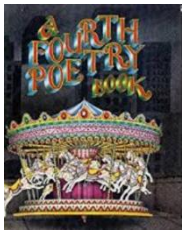
Julia Donaldson, Children's Laureate, chose these poems as they were particularly suitable for performance.

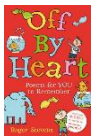


This book is a collection of festival poems from around the world.

These are my absolute favourites. Each one contains several poems I have used in the classroom time and time again to the delight of pupils.







Excerpts from: *Off By Heart* by Roger Stevens

Tips for Learning by Heart and Performing

This section is for parents, carers or teachers who would like to help their children learn poems off by heart.

Learning poems to say or perform aloud, whether to Grandma or to a whole school assembly, can be a great confidence builder for a child, not to mention fun for everyone concerned. It's important with all children, and especially with younger children, to make the experience a happy one. What is crucial is encouraging (and enjoying) youngsters learning and reading poems off by heart. Don't set the bar too high and expect perfection. Timing, expression... these things come with experience.

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Make Learning Fun

Some young children enjoy learning poems and songs by heart and do it quite naturally without any help from adults, while others can find it more difficult. Many adults, myself included, find memorising poems and the words to songs a real challenge. But there are techniques that can help.

I often meet adults who enjoy poetry and some who take pride in still being able to recite the poems that they learnt as children. But I also meet many who are bored with, have no interest in, or actively dislike poetry. Further investigation usually reveals that they had a bad time with poetry when they were at school.

So the first rule when teaching or sharing poetry must be to make it FUN. The rule of thumb is to let a child find and choose the poem he or she wants to memorise. If you don't like a poem, why would you want to remember it?

The poems and verses in this book are arranged in order of increasing length (the number of lines is given at the top of each page) and very roughly in order of difficulty. Don't forget that some shorter poems are more complex and harder to learn than long but simple ones.

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How To Learn Poems

Current research into learning suggests that the two most effective ways to learn are, firstly, to space learning over a period of time – not to try and learn a whole poem in one go – and, secondly, to test yourself as you go along.

So it makes sense, with the longer poems towards the back of the book, to break them up into chunks. Maybe learn one verse at a time. Or learn the lines in pairs. And do this over several days. Maybe learn a verse a day.

And, when learning poems, say the words out loud. Don't just read them in your head. Read a line, then cover or move the text, and say the line without looking. Here you can help the child by asking them to read aloud, without looking, as they learn.

Francis Bacon had the right idea when he said, in 1620:

> *If you read a piece of text through twenty times, you will not read it so easily as if you read it ten times while attempting to recite from time to time and consulting the text when your memory fails.*

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Tips for Memorisation

Repetition

In very simple terms, in order to remember something, our brain creates pathways between neurons. We strengthen those pathways by repeating what we want to learn. The more something is repeated, the stronger the memory becomes.

Choose a repetitive poem!

Sometimes, a poem features a single line, or a verse, that is repeated. If a poem has lots of identical lines there are fewer words to learn. In Colin McNaughton's 'The Crocodile's Brushing His Teeth' (p.23), one line sets up the next line. A poem can be quite long but quite easy to learn because it uses repetition in this way.

Spaced Repetition

Memories become stronger the more you retrieve them. So the best time to recall and repeat something that you wish to learn is just before you are about to forget it! You work to remember it, and that makes the memory stronger.

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If you want to make sure you really know the poem by heart, don't try to learn it in one go, but keep coming back to it, waiting for longer between each time. First repeat it after a few minutes, then after a few hours, then a day, then a few days. By that time it really will be stuck in your mind! This is known as spaced repetition.

Rhyme

Verses and poems that rhyme are generally easier to remember than those that don't. In the days before newspapers, when news was shared by troubadours and balladeers touring the country, factual stories would be turned into verses and made to rhyme, simply to make them easier to remember. In 'The Crocodile's Brushing His Teeth' (p.23), once a child has mastered 'The Crocodile's brushing his teeth, I'm afraid', all they have to remember are the rhyming words 'weight', 'late', 'bore' and 'class four'.

That doesn't mean that non-rhyming poems are impossible to learn. Some, in fact, can be just as easy. You just have one less tool – rhyme – to help, that's all.

Rhythm

Probably the most important element of a poem is its rhythm. A strong rhythm can help when you are trying to learn the words. For example, whether the poem is in iambic pentameter or is a limerick, the meter can help you be sure you have it right, or at least anchor the words you can remember.

Being aware of the metrical composition can really help – especially for older children. I'm always aware that over-analysing a poem can kill its enjoyment, so tread carefully here, especially with younger children. But for many, looking closely at a poem, at its construction, or what it really means, will make it much easier to memorise.

Sequence of Events

Some poems lead you naturally through a sequence of events. In Celia Warren's 'Gingerbread Man' (p.42). for example, the last line of each verse helps you start the first line of the next:

...said the Gingerbread Man,
I'd rather be made of marzipan.

Marzipan's too soft,
Said the Marzipan Man,
I'd rather be made of strawberry jam.

Strawberry jam's too runny...

Many poems tell a story. Discussing the story and what it means will help a child to remember what words come next, as in 'I Went to the Animal Fair' (p.34).

Lists

Some poems are really lists. (Indeed, this can be a great way to start young children writing poetry.) In 'The Garden Year' by Sara Coleridge (p.82), each two-line verse begins with the next month.

January brings the snow,
Makes our feet and fingers glow.

February brings the rain,
Thaws the frozen lake again.

What happens in the months, which are listed chronologically, relates directly to the season. And each verse features a rhyme. So although the poem is twenty-four lines long, children find it quite easy to remember.

Making Pictures

Pictures and images can be very helpful when memorising a poem. This only works if the poem lends itself to pictures – otherwise you end up spending all your time thinking of images rather than actually learning the poem – which is not very effective. But many poems do form pictures in our heads.

In Jane Clarke's poem 'Snow' (p.55) for example, we 'see' the snow falling in the first verse, then the settled snow and what the children do with it, and then the old, slushy snow. By being conscious of this process – making yourself aware of the poet's 'painting' – you create a mental movie that will help you remember the poem.

'What Is Pink' by Christina Rossetti (p.53) is also a list poem. But the colours – pink, red, blue, white, yellow, green, violet and orange – are not listed in any obvious order, unlike the months of 'The Garden Year'. So it's trickier to learn. But here we can use the pictures in the poem to help.

Encourage children to imagine the colours of 'What Is Pink'. Take time to build a picture of a garden path made of pink stone. Walk along the path towards an archway of red roses, look up and see the sky is blue... and so on. This technique works very well for longer or more difficult poems.

A more advanced picture technique

This is great for older children. First ask the child to think of a familiar place – such as their home. For my poem 'I Am A Princess' (p.59), for example, you could imagine the first verse beginning as you walk towards the door of your home. The door opens. There is the princess. She says she is pleased to meet you but if you come in you must obey lots of rules. Step into the hall, picture it as it is, then imagine the princess there, explaining that you have to bow and curtsey. Do those actions. Then move into the kitchen, where you are told not to argue. Move around your home, making the pictures in your head as strange as you can – this helps you remember. When recalling the poem, the familiarity of the path through the house guides you through the poem.

I once used this technique with amazing success with a class of 35 pupils, each with a different poem to learn for a performance to the school and parents. It does take time though – so use it with care. For a short poem it would be counter-effective.

Understanding

As I've said, understanding a poem can be a help to memorising it. For one thing it's hard to recite a poem with conviction, or meaning, and to 'bring it to life' (see the next section) if you don't actually know what it means. If the child doesn't understand the poem, how will his or her audience?

In 'At the Zoo' (p.21), for example, the poem is easier to picture and remember when you know that 'the grey wolf, with mutton in his maw' means that the wolf has a chunk of meat in his mouth.

And in 'The Jumblies' (p.88), knowing what Ring-Bo-Ree is – as in the line 'forty bottles of Ring-Bo-Ree' – will certainly help, both to remember and to recite the poem. It's a made-up word so why not discuss what it could be? It sounds like it might be something you are not allowed to have until you are grown up. And so it could be recited in a 'I'm not really supposed to know about this' way – almost with a wink. Similarly with the hills of the Chankly Bore. Chankly Bore sounds as if it could be quite a scary place. Especially if it's in the Torrible Zone!

Bring a poem to life with performance

Having learnt a poem off by heart, it's great to perform it, maybe for family or friends, maybe at school – for the class or in assembly. Performing a poem can be much more than simply saying it out loud. There are lots of ways to make it more fun and more interesting.

Actions

They say actions speak louder than words, but that's not always the case. When I judged the BBC's Off by Heart competition it seemed that every teacher had encouraged their charges to accompany each poem with exaggerated gestures which were meant to enhance the poem. This actually did the opposite for me: I was so entranced by some of the weird gesticulations that I missed many of the words being spoken.

Actions are good – research shows that we take in more information when someone accompanies what they are saying with hand gestures, and they can also help the reciter's memory. But less is more: don't overdo it.

Volume

If you've ever coached children for a performance you may have found yourself, as I have, continually telling them to speak louder and to make their pronunciation clearer. In school, it's always good for the teacher to stand at the back. You can cup your ears to indicate if the child isn't loud enough. If they are nervous they could imagine that they are saying the poem just to you. Ask them to look at you, and only you, as they concentrate on their task.

But sometimes a soft voice is appropriate. And sometimes the volume and tone of a voice needs to vary as the poem is recited. Make sure the child understands the meaning of the poem, and they will find it easier to understand which parts should be loud and which quiet.

In a public performance, encourage them to say the poem loudly enough – a live audience can be a bit scary – and to imagine they are saying the poem to someone at the back of the room.

And remember, a poem that a child doesn't really understand will likely be incomprehensible to the hearer.

Accents

For older children, reading a poem in a different accent can be fun. It's probably best to keep this to comic poems, especially if the child isn't that good at the accent.

Some poems are written in an accent – by Caribbean poets like Grace Nichols, or Scottish poets like Robert Burns, for example. If the child can 'do' the accent that's fine. But if he or she can't, it's probably best to recite it in his or her normal voice – or it may well sound peculiar!

Pace

Children tend to recite too fast. But don't go too far the other way and make them recite too slowly, either. You will know that listening to a long poem or story read in a dull, slow monotone quickly sends you to sleep. Or into the realm of daydream. We assimilate information better if it's delivered reasonably quickly, as long as the words are said clearly.

Varying the pace of a longer poem keeps the listener's interest, as does the use of a dramatic pause – a favourite ploy of teachers to keep children on the ball in assemblies! Reading a poem with a strong rhythm or meter is great fun. But be careful that the rhythm doesn't carry the reader away.

Similarly, a slow poem written in iambic meter (di dum di dum di dum di dum) can easily become very plodding and tiresome to listen to.

For older children, it might be worth playing them a recording of poetry so that they can hear what a poem sounds like when read by an actor or by its author. The online Poetry Archive is an excellent source for this.

Starting and Ending

Encourage children to wait until the audience is ready before they start to recite a poem. Show them how to first announce the title of the piece and the name of the author, followed by a pause. Then they can begin.

Similarly, at the end of a poem, tell them never to rush. Children often gabble the last couple of lines and even turn away as they deliver them, in their anxiety to be finished. Stress that they should actually slow down towards the end, deliver the final lines clearly and firmly, and then wait a second or two before leaving the 'stage'.

Practice!

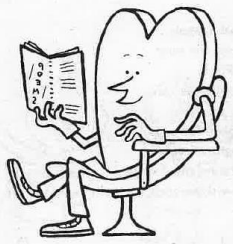
It is usually necessary to read a poem many times to learn it off by heart. Once it is learned, it becomes much easier to perform. Similarly a performance improves with practice. So if there is to be a public performance, have plenty of rehearsals. Let the child practise where the performance will be – on the stage, or at the front of the school hall. Although there's not a lot to be done if the child has stage fright, practice can guard against this: it stands to reason that, once a poem is completely memorised, and once its performance has been rehearsed enough, the child will feel more much more confident 'on the night'.

Other Ideas

If you are a teacher, you might try asking your class for ideas about how they feel they could best perform a poem. I tried this with a class I was running a workshop for and we came up with about a dozen ideas – including dressing up, using puppets, performing in twos or threes or larger groups and having musical accompaniment.

Invite a poet into your school or class. There's nothing like hearing and watching a real poet perform and read his or her poems to inspire and motivate a class.

I've given you lots of ideas and tips to help your children, whether they are family or a class at school, how to learn and to perform poems. But remember, especially with young children, don't overload them with all the things they should be doing. If they are enjoying the process they will do well, become more confident, and come back for more. So I'll end as I began, by urging you to remember – make it FUN!



Poems for festivals – these are poems that are useful for assemblies.

1. Autumn - **Falling Leaves**
2. Shrove Tuesday – **Carnival**
3. Chinese New Year – **The Chinese Dragon**
4. Eid – **Eid Mubarak! Eid Congratulations**
5. Autumn - **Moon Cakes for Trung Thu**
6. Halloween – **The Visitor**
7. Christmas **- Christmas List**

Falling Leaves

The leaves in autumn
Swing on the boughs
Pushed by the wind,
Backwards and forwards
Far above the ground.
The wind blows hard
And the leaves let go
Their hold,
Flying over the wood
Like a flock of birds
And brown as sparrows
Flying above the house.
The wind lets them fall
Helter skelter
Towards the ground
Or sets them spinning
On a roundabout;
You can watch them
And try to catch them
And try to catch them
Coming down.
They crowd together
By walls at corners
Or chase each other
Up the road.
Sometimes when you open
The kitchen door
A leaf blows in
And lies exhausted
On the floor.

Stanley Cook

The Visitor

A crumbling churchyard, the sea and the moon;
The waves had gouged out grave and bone;
A man was walking, late and alone …
He saw a skeleton on the ground;
A ring on a bony hand he found.
He ran home to his wife and gave her the ring.
"Oh, where did you get it?" He said not a thing.
"It's the loveliest ring the world," she said.
As it glowed on her finger. They skipped off to bed.
At midnight they woke. In the dark outside,
"Give me my ring!" a chill voice cried.
"What was that William? What did it say?"
"Don't worry, my dear. It'll soon go away."
"I'm coming/" A skeleton opened the door.
"Give me my ring!" It was crossing the floor.
"What was that, William? What did it say?"
"Don't worry, my dear. It'll soon go away."
"I'm reaching you now! I'm climbing the bed."
The wife puled the sheet right over her head.
It was torn from her grasp and tossed in the air;
"I'll drag you out of bed by the hair!"
"What was that, William? What did it say?"
"Throw the ring through the window! THROW IT AWAY!"
She threw it. The skeleton leapt from the sill,
Scooped up the ring and clattered downhill,
Fainter … and fainter .. then all was still.

Ian Serraillier

Chinese Dragon

I'm the dragon who dances in the street.
I'm the dragon in the festival.
I leap and twist on caterpillar feet.
I'm the dragon who dances in the street.
I snap and snort and stamp to the beat.
I shiver my scales. I can't keep still.
I'm the dragon who dances in the street.
I'm the dragon in the festival.

I'm the dragon of red and green and gold.
I'm King of the Chinese New Year.
I come from the land of stories of old.
I'm the dragon of red and green and gold.
I can breathe out fire or smoke that's cold.
If you've been good then you've nothing to fear
From the dragon of red and green and gold –
The King of the Chinese New Year.

Catherine Benson

Carnival

Carnival! Carnival! Everybody shout out – Carnival! Carnival!
Carnival! Everybody shout out – Carnival!
Ah walking up de street,
Everybody dat ah meet
Jumpin' up an' shoutin' 'bout Carnival.
Ah climb into de bus,
Everybody meck a fuss,
Jumpin' up an' shoutin' 'bout Carnival.
Carnival! Carnival! Everybody shout out – Carnival! Carnival!
Carnival! Everybody shout out – Carnival!

Ah step into de mall
Everybody start to bawl
Jumpin' up an' shoutin' 'bout Carnival.
Ah drive down to de market
In me car, nowhere to park it.
Dey jumpin' up an' shoutin' 'bout Carnival.

Carnival! Carnival! Everybody shout out – Carnival! Carnival!
Carnival! Everybody shout out – Carnival!
Banner flyin' in de air
An de pickney dem a cheer,
Jumpin' up an' shoutin' 'bout Carnival.
What a party! What a spree!
What a joyful jamboree!
Jumpin' up an' shoutin' 'bout Carnival.
Carnival! Carnival! Everybody shout out – Carnival! Carnival!
Carnival! Everybody shout out – Carnival!

Valerie Bloom

Moon Cakes for Trung Thu

In Vietnam, the moon glowing white
fills the children with great delight
For an autumn full moon, big and bright,
bring cakes and sweets. It's Trung Thu Night.
Drums and cymbals and dancing feet,
star-shaped lanterns lighting the street.
Stalls sell Moon Cakes for us to eat –
fish and flower shapes, sticky and sweet.
Wearing masks, no one knows who is who:
"Who's there?" "It's me!" "Who are you?"
A sky full of stars, full moon shining through:
Hunter's Moon, Harvest Moon, bright Trung Thu

Many Coe

Eid Mubarak! Eid Congratulations!

Eid Mubarak! Eid Congratulations!
Let each home have celebrations.
Friend or foe, stranger or dear one,
Whether near or far away,
I send you greetings on this day.
I give myself to all, with love for everyone.
In zakat charity I offer God this aching heart forever.
Whether beggar or emperor,
Let us sing of His splendour.
I bring a cup of fellow-feeling;
Come, believers, for Iftar dining.
Come together in love and let us share God's blessing.

Kazi Nazrul Islam

Twas the Night Before Christmas

Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.
The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,
In hopes that St Nicholas soon would be there.
The children were nestled all snug in their beds,
While visions of sugar-plums danced in their heads.
And mamma in her 'kerchief, and I in my cap,
Had just settled our brains for a long winter's nap.
When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter,
I sprang from the bed to see what was the matter.
Away to the window I flew like a flash,
Tore open the shutters and threw up the sash.
The moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow
Gave the lustre of mid-day to objects below.
When, what to my wondering eyes should appear,
But a miniature sleigh, and eight tiny reindeer.

Clement Clarke Moore