

WE ARE BIRDS

This resource has been produced for About Us as part of UNBOXED: Creativity in the UK.

This interdisciplinary resource brings together creative writing, literature and science: teachers can use it in the classroom to explore literary techniques in scientific contexts, and to explore the creativity behind scientific themes. Older students can use the resource in their own time to further their reading and generate ideas for poems of their own.

CURRICULUM LINKS

England:

Science: Living Things & Their Habitats (Y4), Interactions & Interdependencies (KS3)
English: Writing & Reading Composition
Key Stages: KS2, KS3

Northern Ireland:

Language & Literacy: Writing & Reading
The World Around Us: Interdependence, Change Over Time
Key Stages: KS2, KS3

Scotland:

Languages: Literacy & English – Writing & Reading
Sciences: Planet Earth
Levels: Second Level, Third/Fourth Level

Wales:

Languages, Literacy & Communication: Literature
Science & Technology: Being Curious, The World Around Us
Progression Steps: PS3, PS4

AGES 7–14

Topics

- birds
- the environment
- litter
- sustainability

Literary features

- imagery
- anthropomorphism

This resource looks at Aliyah Begum's poem 'Walking to the Train Station', which was a winning poem in a previous Poetry Society competition for young people on poems to solve the climate crisis. In the poem, Begum evokes different species of birds to explore the effect humans have on the environment. The resource contains discussion and writing prompts for young people to engage with the text and create their own poem in response.

GETTING STARTED

The poem you are about to read is all about litter and the responsibility we have to look after the environment. Do you think litter is a big problem? Can you think of creative ways to encourage people to stop littering?



KEY INFORMATION

Litter is a problem we live with every day – on your way to school or your friend’s house, you probably pass by multiple items of litter discarded on the ground. It might be a crisp packet, a drinks bottle or a face mask. The cost of cleaning up litter every year is estimated to be almost £1 billion in the UK alone. In 2020, the Great British Beach Clean found an average of 425 items of litter for every 100m of beach.



Plastic is one of the most common materials found in litter, and it is especially problematic because it is often not biodegradable. A plastic bag will take 10–20 years to biodegrade, while a plastic bottle may never degrade. Large-scale production of plastic began in the 1950s – since then, 8.3 billion metric tons of plastic have been produced.

A lot of the waste we create ends up in the ocean, and it is feared that by 2050, there could be more plastic than fish in the sea. Once there, it enters the food chain. For example, tiny organisms like plankton eat microplastics. These plankton are then eaten by larger animals, eventually including humans too. Once the plastic enters the food chain, it never really disappears.

Like all animals, birds can be harmed by litter. Some examples of how litter affects birds are:

- it can lead to loss of habitat, forcing them away from places where they would normally nest
- it can lead to an increased risk from predators, who are attracted by the litter
- birds can be injured by sharp objects, like broken glass bottles or tin cans
- their feathers can be harmed by oil or grease, causing problems with flight and insulation
- litter can block a bird’s digestive tract, so it can no longer eat

DID YOU KNOW?

NASA once got fined for littering! In 1979, Skylab, the first US space station, re-entered Earth’s atmosphere. Debris from Skylab was found in south-west Australia. The local authorities fined NASA \$400.

The art world is playing its part in the fight against pollution and waste, Check out these twelve beautiful art [projects](#), which shine a light on the problem of single-use plastic.

If you want to find out more about litter, here are some places you could start.

- The World’s Children’s Prize [webpage](#) about litter.
- The World Wildlife Foundation [explains](#) how plastic ends up in the sea.
- [Find out](#) about the Marine Conservation Society’s Great British Beach Clean.
- Take part in Keep Britain Tidy’s [Eco-schools](#) programme.
- The RSPB has lots of [ideas](#) for how young people, families, and schools can explore nature responsibly.

NOW LET'S THINK ABOUT THIS TOPIC IN THE FORM OF A POEM...

Here is 'Walking to the Train Station', by Aliyah Begum

WALKING TO THE TRAIN STATION

One day, you will notice the bluebird asthma pump,
Hear the birdsong vapour slice through grey fumes
And soothe the inflamed tarmac of these wheezing streets.

It hides in the tree, modest until it decides to sing.
Its plastic sapphire beak harmonises with the white noise
Of your earphones (only one side of which still works).
It dispels the grey haze that exhausts, but today
Its turbine wings clamour for your attention.

You step over the broken glass that shimmers beneath feet,
The drunk confetti outside the pub from last night.
But you miss the magpie sorting through the shards,
Clinking them into different recycling bins, unseen.

You see the mayonnaise outline of the discarded chips,
Ketchup packet exploded onto the pavement crime scene,
But not the goldfinch that wears her high-vis with pride.
She picks up the crisp packets from grass verges,
Before they reach the polluted depths of a local puddle.

You gaze across these pools of mercury,
And finally notice the world looking back.
Upside down and inside out, it pleads with you,
Asks you to take care of these streets you cross,
Your allotment in the garden of this unruly world.

But you don't listen, distracted by the
Sound of an engine fading further away.
You have missed your train too.

Aliyah Begum originally wrote this poem for a challenge on The Poetry Society's Young Poets Network, in partnership with People Need Nature, 2021.

DISCUSSION POINTS

Read the poem and spend a few moments thinking about it. Now discuss the points below with a partner or, if you're using the resource independently, jot down some notes.

- The poem is written in the **second person** ('you') form. Who is the 'you' the poem addresses?
- How many references to colours can you find in the poem? Why do you think this is such a colourful poem?
- This is also a very noisy poem. How does the soundscape of the poem build up to the phrase 'But you don't listen'?
- There is lots of **imagery** of debris in the poem – broken glass, confetti, discarded chips. How does this set the scene?
- The poet often directs the reader's gaze to the ground. Does this seem unusual to you in a poem about birds? How can you relate this to the lines 'You gaze across these pools of mercury, / And finally notice the world looking back. / Upside down and inside out'?
- **Anthropomorphism** is when something non-human like an animal or an object behaves like a human. In contrast, **zoomorphism** is when a human is given animal characteristics. Do you think this poem uses anthropomorphism or zoomorphism, or both?
- How does the poet explore the relationship between humans and animals? By making a link between humans and animals, how does the poem prompt us to think in new ways about the environment?



WRITING YOUR OWN POEM

Write a poem using anthropomorphism. Choose an animal, plant or object and give it human qualities. What is its personality? Does it have a job? How does it interact with its surroundings?

Try to use this technique to comment on human behaviour, considering how might we think about the actions of our own species differently if they were performed by an animal. How would we feel if a gorilla built a skyscraper? What if a dog had its own TV cooking show? How might frogs interact on social media?

OR

Write a poem about litter or waste and how this affects the environment. You could think about the journey of a single piece of plastic, from when it is made to where it ends up, considering how it moves through global supply chains. How many creatures interact with it on its journey? How do they each react to the encounter with plastic?



NEXT STEPS

For more poetry opportunities, check out Young Poets Network, The Poetry Society's free online platform for poets worldwide up to the age of 25. You'll find features, challenges and competitions to inspire your own writing, as well as new writing from young poets, and advice from the rising and established stars of the poetry scene. youngpoetsnetwork.org.uk

About this project

About Us is one of ten commissions for UNBOXED: Creativity in the UK. The project explores the infinite ways we are connected to the universe, the natural world and one another. A major live show toured the UK in spring 2022.

59 Productions is an award-winning design studio and production company who created the breath-taking video design for the London 2012 Olympic Opening Ceremony. Stemettes is an award-winning social enterprise working to bring young women and non-binary young people into Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) careers. The Poetry Society is an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation and is one of the UK's most dynamic arts organisations, championing poetry for all ages.