

WE ARE TREES

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:

English: Writing & Reading Composition
Science: Interactions & Interdependencies (KS3), Ecosystems (KS4)
Key Stages: KS3, KS4, KS5

Northern Ireland:

Language & Literacy: Writing & Reading
Science & Technology: Organisms & Health
Key Stages: KS3, KS4, KS5

Scotland:

Languages: Literacy & English – Writing & Reading
Levels: Third/Fourth Level, Senior Phase

Wales:

Languages, Literacy & Communication: Literature
Science & Technology: Being Curious, The World Around Us
Progression Steps: PS4, PS5, A levels

AGES 11–18

Topics

- trees and the ecosystem
- biodiversity
- identity
- naming
- identity and diversity
- sustainability and our future
- wellbeing and resilience

Literary features

- repetition (anaphora)
- past, present, and future tenses
- symbolism
- adjectives
- juxtaposition

This resource looks at Talulah Quinto's poem 'Maple'. It was an award-winning poem in a previous Poetry Society competition for young people aged 11-17. In the poem, Quinto takes a Maple tree as a central image to explore identity and human characteristics. 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 a Maple tree, and the way the tree's qualities prompt the poet to reflect on their own identity.



KEY INFORMATION

There are around 200 species of maple tree, which are distributed across the Northern Temperate Zone (the area of the planet from the Tropic of Cancer to the Arctic Circle). Maple trees vary hugely in size and appearance, but many are known for their vibrant red and orange colours in autumn. Some maple trees are used to produce maple syrup, while others provide wood for furniture. Across the world, the maple tree is valued for its association with strength and durability – a maple leaf even appears on the Canadian flag.



In the UK, the only native maple tree is the Field Maple, which can grow 20 metres high and live for up to 350 years. It is found in woods, hedgerows and chalk lowlands. However, other species of Maple trees are often planted in towns and cities, so you might have seen a Maple in your own neighbourhood

Field Maple trees are important for **biodiversity**, which is how we measure the range of living organisms within a single **habitat**. The Field Maple is an important home to lots of other wildlife, including aphids and ladybirds. Moths feed on its leaves, mammals eat its fruits, and bees and birds collect its nectar. For all these creatures, the Maple tree has a central role in their lives – think of it like a town centre for insects and small animals, where many interact and find food. Maples are also good at trapping air pollution, helping to clean the air we breathe. Like all trees, they take in carbon dioxide, water and light, and they create oxygen and glucose. This process is called **photosynthesis**.

DID YOU KNOW?

The scientific name for this genus of trees is 'Acer', which comes from the Latin word 'cēr', meaning sharp. Why do you think it was given this name?

There is a type of moth called 'Maple Prominent', the larvae of which eat Maple leaves. In what way do you think the names we give animals and plants reflect their characteristics? Could the same be said of humans? Think about the origins of modern surnames.



Lots of the information above came from the Woodland Trust [website](#), where you can find out more about the Field Maple and watch a [video](#) showing a year in the tree's life. .

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

Here is 'Maple', by Talulah Quinto

MAPLE

They named me after a sweet tree
As if to hide my spirit

They named me after a gentle tree
As if to hide my strength

They named me after a small tree
As if I would not grow

They named me after an old tree
As if I was not young

They named me after a living tree
And I will forever live

They named me after a sleeping tree
And I will never sleep

The name they chose is perfect
It holds me young and old
Sweet and able
Gentle and bold
That tree is Maple.



Mocha Moth, which feed on Field Maple.
Photo credit: Butterfly Conservation



DISCUSSION POINTS

- Who do you think the 'they' in the poem is? Who do you think the 'I' is?
- Choosing a name is a big responsibility. When we name something – it could be a baby, a newly discovered plant, or even the latest smartphone – how do we go about choosing a name? What kinds of qualities should we consider when naming something or someone? How do you feel about your own name?
- Read the poem and underline the verbs (the 'doing' words) that are in the **past tense**, where the action has been completed. In a different colour, underline the verbs in the **present tense**, where the action is still happening. Finally, in a third colour, underline the verbs where the action will happen in the future. Why do you think the speaker included verbs in all three tenses? What does this suggest about the way the poet sees the past, in contrast to the present and the **future**? In what way do the different tenses

contribute to the speaker's exploration of the expectations people had on them, compared to how they view themselves?

- When you first read this poem, maybe you thought the speaker was the poet himself. Does it surprise you to learn that the poem is actually about a pet goat? How does knowing that change the way you read the voice of the poem?
- The poem uses **repetition**, and more specifically **anaphora**, which is when the same word or phrase is repeated several times at the beginning of successive sentences. In this example, the phrase 'They named me after...' is repeated six times. What effect do you think this creates? How do the final five lines of the poem contrast with this?
- "The word anaphora comes from the Greek ('ana', meaning 'back' and 'pherein', meaning 'to bear'), literally translating as 'carry back'. How do you think this works in a poem like this? How can anaphora connect different parts of a poem or different ideas in a poem?"
- The phrase 'As if I...' is also repeated four times, whereas 'And I will...' appears twice. How do the lines that begin 'As if I...' compare to those that begin with 'And I will...'?
- What is the role of the tree in the poem? The speaker uses it as a way to explore their own identity. This is an example of **symbolism**, where we use an object or image to represent something else. Why did the poet choose a Maple tree? If you were to choose a tree to explore your own identity, or the identity of a pet, which tree would you choose?
- Circle as many adjectives (describing words) as you can find in the poem e.g. 'sweet', 'old'. Do they have anything in common? Are there any opposites among them?
- The poem 'Maple' uses **juxtaposition**, where two things are contrasted. Find the examples of juxtaposition. How do the examples contribute to the speaker's exploration of their identity as seen by other people and as seen by themselves?
- Do you think the speaker is telling us they are different from the Maple tree, or similar to it? Can they be both?



WRITING YOUR OWN POEM

We have learned above that Maple trees are homes for many different creatures, providing food and shelter. They also play an important role in the lives of humans: they help to clean pollution from the air, we use them to make furniture and musical instruments, and of course maple syrup!

The Maple tree demonstrates how a single tree has multiple roles within the **ecosystem** (which is a community of organisms interacting, and the environment they live in). Without the tree, lots of creatures, including humans, would suffer. Now, as we see the effects of the climate crisis, it is vital that we look after trees because protecting them means protecting all the other creatures that rely on them.

HERE ARE SOME STARTING POINTS FOR POEMS...

- Write a poem exploring our relationship with trees. You could select a particular type of tree and reflect on what it means to us as humans, or what it means to other creatures. You could even try experimenting with the voice – why not write a poem from the point of view of a tree, or of one of the creatures living on or in it?
- Trees have long been used to represent human lives – think of a family tree, for example. Lots of the language we use to talk about trees is also used in other contexts. Words like root, branch, blossom, or seed can have different meanings in different circumstances. Write a poem describing your own life, or the life of someone else, using the language of trees. Which tree will you pick? Think about how their life grows from the ground up, and how they are connected to the world around them like tree branches.
- Can you think of a metaphor from your daily life that might represent an ecosystem? Think of somewhere that's an important location in the community – perhaps a school, library, or shopping centre. Who are the different people who use this place and how do they interact? Consider how each person within the location relies on the others.
- The poem 'Maple' focussed on naming, and the expectations we create when we name something. Write a poem about names, perhaps experimenting with inventing new names for familiar things. How does renaming something change it?
- Have you ever seen a maple seed? Like several other trees, such as a sycamor they look like they have wings and you can sometimes see them spiralling through the air. In English, some names we know maple seeds by include 'whirlybirds', 'polynoses', 'helicopters', and 'maple keys'. Can you write a poem having fun with one of these names? Maybe you could think about how a maple seed looks like a door key – what is it a key to? If it's a helicopter, where is it going?



EXTENSION ACTIVITY



For a long time, poets have been interested in the relationship humans have with trees. You can find a selection of some poems about trees here, and there are many more. In 2019, as part of the Hay Festival, academic Dr Catherine Charlwood gave a lecture about poetry and trees. She said: 'Literature, and poetry in particular, show a sustained interest in trees, spanning centuries... In tying human lives to tree lives, poetry promotes a mutually sustaining model of relation and reliance. Perhaps trees need us as much as we need them, especially to advocate on their behalf. Perhaps it is only when a tree life is valued as much as a human life that nature doesn't suffer.'

Write a poem advocating for trees. You can watch Dr Charlwood's full talk on poetry and trees [here](#). It was delivered as the Sustainable Practice, Innovation and Resource Effectiveness (INSPIRE) Lecture, organised by the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD) and the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment, UK & Ireland (ASLE-UK).

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.