
Reading Differences

Teaching sequence for *East o' the Sun and West o' the Moon*

A Norwegian fairytale illustrated by PJ Lynch and introduced by Naomi Lewis
Walker Books, 2004

About the book

In the introduction, Naomi Lewis writes that 'Wherever the landscape is wild, the winters long and bitter and the villages small and isolated, magic and mystery thrive.' This picture book is a retelling of a Norwegian fairytale that was collected in the 19th century and translated into English.

The translation contains some of the archaic phrasing of an earlier period but at the same time preserves key features of an oral storytelling tradition. PJ Lynch's illustrations show a wild, cold country, emphasising the feeling of a story from northern Europe. The pictures are an important part of the text, and deserve detailed scrutiny.

Structure of the teaching sequence

There are three main parts to this teaching sequence, each one divided into several possible sessions:

- i introducing the story and its setting
- ii how elements of northern folk tales are conveyed through pictures and language
- iii retelling and re-imagining quest stories.

These approaches are also appropriate to other folk tales in which illustrations play a prominent part. An alternative adaptation is to use several different books simultaneously, having different groups of children working on each one. The sequence would then culminate in bringing together all the book studies, making comparisons and contrasts.

Links to the national curriculum and the primary national strategy (PNS)

This work relates to the requirement in the English national curriculum programme of study for reading: *a range of literature drawn from a variety of cultures and traditions; myths, legends and traditional stories* (8e and 8f).

It also connects with specific teaching objectives in the *PNS Framework for Teaching* for years 5 and 6 to do with reading and responding to texts from different cultures.

Anticipated outcomes

In the course of reading and talking about this book, children will:

- consider the distinctive qualities of a traditional tale from the northern European tradition
- explore the contribution that illustrations make to the development of the tale's theme
- develop and extend their descriptive vocabulary
- compare different versions of the tale with one another
- make links to other similar quest and transformation stories such as *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *Sir Gawain and the Loathly Lady* and *Beauty and the Beast*.

Resources and preparation

- Laminated copies of some of the illustrations, including end papers.
- At least one other version of the story, to compare with this retelling:
 - *The Princess and the White Bear King* by Tanya Robyn Batt, Barefoot Books.
 - A retelling in Andrew Lang's 'Blue Fairy Book', Dover Publications, ISBN 0486214370 ('The Black Bull of Norway' is also in this collection).
 - An English translation of the story can be found on the University of Pittsburgh website (www.pitt.edu/~dash/norway034.html).
 - Further Norwegian stories and interpretation can be found in the *Gold Scales* website (<http://oaks.nvg.org/easu>).
- A white board or colour photocopier for presenting enlarged images from the book.

Teaching sequence

Introducing the story and its setting

Session 1: Where is east of the sun and west of the moon?

Talk about the double-page picture that forms the end paper. Ask children what kind of a map this is. Is it a modern map? Why or why not? What point of the world does it show? What do the four figures with puffed out cheeks represent? What might this suggest about the story and its setting?

Look at the illustrations towards the end of the story (the double page beginning 'Then on she rode many days, a weary time' and the double page beginning 'Early next morning, the North Wind woke her') and gather impressions of the wind characters. Read aloud the first paragraph of the introduction to conclude the initial discussion of the story's setting. Explain that there are other versions of this story, as always with stories from the oral tradition, and display any that are available.

This section of the teaching sequence contains optional group activities. Divide the class into groups and ask different groups to:

- read the rest of the introduction to highlight the importance of the bear in Norwegian folklore, and the part the winds play in this cold northern story
- find Norway on a modern map and share some basic information about the Norwegian landscape and its fjords and mountains.

Read the story aloud. Then divide the class into groups and ask each group to nominate a scribe, who will note the group's thoughts on a chart you have prepared with the following headings. Alternatively, children could write independently to record their ideas at the end of the group work.

- What did you notice about the illustrations in this story? How would you describe these illustrations?
- Do you know any other stories like this one?
- What did you notice about the language of the story? Do you remember any words or phrases?

Ask each group to share their responses with the class, and encourage comments.

Ask the children to make brief notes in their reading journals about their first impression (optional method for keeping track of impressions and interpretations).

- Did anything surprise you about what happened?
- Was there anything familiar/unfamiliar in the way it was written?
- Do you think the story has any message or meaning for the reader?

Session 2: Visualising the setting

(These activities may be combined with those in session 4 depending on the interest of the class)

Without showing the pictures again, reread the beginning of the story, where the bear comes to the cottage and asks for the youngest daughter. Ask the class to close their eyes and visualise the setting of this scene. Share some of these visualisations.

Give the class copies of the passage and ask pairs of children to mark up the text, picking out the

language that helps the reader to get a picture of this place.

Show the picture of this scene again and ask the class to compare it with their own mind-pictures. To extend this work you could ask children to paint what they saw.

Discuss with children the matter-of fact-exchange between the father and the bear. What is the effect of this everyday talk in this context?

Traditions of the north

Session 3: Notes on characters and language

Ask the class to make lists of the key characters in this story, and compile a class list from their suggestions. The list should include annotations about the characters noting what sorts of thing they say and how they are drawn. For example:

- the lassie: the youngest daughter, speaks boldly, is beautiful, generally tells the truth, drawn as a romantic beauty with flowing red hair
- the white bear/the prince: speaks the same way whether beast or man, gives orders, usually obeyed, needs help from others, shown as lonely as bear, handsome as prince
- the four winds: East, West and South winds less powerful than North, familiar with each other's ways, North wind shown as very powerful
- three hags: similar characters in appearance and what they say, appear frightening but wise and kind to the lassie
- trolls: more ugly than the hags, selfish, greedy and stupid
- other people: prisoners in castle and the lassie's family – ordinary folk caught up in the story, helped by lassie and prince.

Ask the children to identify how the storyteller helps listeners to remember what each character is like.

Discuss features of stories from the north. Use the internet through the interactive whiteboard to find out more. Two useful websites are listed in the resources section.

Children choose one set of characters to illustrate (for example trolls, hags or winds), captioning their pictures clearly to show what these characters are like and what role they play in the story.

Session 4: Looking closely at pictures: what is this place like?

Choose some key pictures from the book, for example the lassie on the bear's back looking at the mountains, the lassie alone in the forest, or the castle amid the storm. Give one laminated copy of a picture to each group. Ask the children to look at it closely and to describe the landscape and atmosphere of the picture. They should describe the style of the picture and how it makes them feel. Ask one child in each group to note down comments. As each group feeds back, briefly note key points on a flipchart or around an enlarged copy of the picture.

Now ask the children to return to the book and compare the pictures and the words of the text with the picture they have looked at. What does the story gain from being illustrated? Prompt children as necessary to comment on the frequently plain descriptions of characters and the great detail given to the landscape and weather. Note what the pictures show that the words don't, for example the jewellery worn by the hags shows their vanity and self-regard.

Session 5: Discuss the heroine: how is she portrayed?

Look at some of the images of the lassie and ask the class to discuss, in pairs, the impression of her that these pictures convey. Note responses on a flipchart.

Go on to consider how the lassie is portrayed in the writing. Ask the same pairs of children to recall and record passages from the story that make clear what she is like, for example 'There was no end to her loveliness', "'Are you afraid?' No! she wasn't', 'She must and would get there if it were possible in any way.' Share these recollected quotes and check them against the text. If necessary, prompt children to think about the contrasts between the eerie and frightening aspects of the landscape and the strong down-to-earth manner of speaking and thinking shown by the lassie. They might also comment on the rich earthy colours of her dress and complexion contrasted with the paler colours of the bear, the winds and the other characters.

Discuss with the whole class how they would sum up this character. Can they compare her with other heroes or heroines they have read about?

Ask the class to comment on the lassie in their journals, if they have them, under the following headings:

- what scenes in the story show us most about what she is like?
- how do the characters in the story react to her?
- what makes her a good heroine?

Retelling and re-imagining quest stories

Session 6: Mapping the story through images and words

Reread the story aloud. Give the children large sheets of paper, one between two, and ask them to draw a large-scale map of the landscape of the story. They should aim to show both the geography of the story (key places) and the main features of the plot (key events). Encourage them to annotate the map to explain what it shows, bearing in mind that the actual location of the castle is a mystery, known only to the four winds.

Share some of these maps, and talk about how successfully children have used them to make clear the landscape of the story and the sequence of the plot. Discuss how important landscape is in this story and the part it plays in the plot.

The language of the story is important. During a whole-class discussion, ask the children to describe the key features of the way the story is told, for example:

- repeated sayings that work like refrains
- linking words that punctuate events ('well', 'so')
- direct comments to the listener/reader ('I can't say that her packing gave her much trouble')
- frequent use of summary statements in place of direct speech ('No, she mightn't', 'yes, it was').

Discuss the effect of these features on the pace of the storytelling and engagement of the listeners. Compare with other forms of storytelling such as narrative poetry.

Session 7: Retelling the story

Using their maps, pairs of children retell the story to each other, taking it in turns (on a signal from you) to be the teller. Remind them that a teller has to make everything happen in the story, and to

make clear where the events are happening. Encourage children to use some of the storytelling techniques from the original.

Discuss the retelling as a class: which parts of the story were easy to retell, which parts were more difficult and why. Then ask some pairs of children to retell part of their story again for the class. Discuss differences between these retellings, and differences from the story in the book.

Session 8: Storytelling and role play

Referring to the story maps, decide which are the six most important scenes (the 'bones' of the story) and list them in order. Divide the class into six groups and give each group one scene, asking them to freeze-frame one important moment from it. They should be ready to bring the scene to life at an agreed signal. Each group chooses a narrator to introduce their part of the story. When groups are ready, put the class into a circle and ask the narrators to introduce the scenes in order.

The groups go on to discuss how they would brief an illustrator to illustrate their scene, being as specific as possible about details of the background, portrayal of characters, viewpoint, colour and atmosphere. They could continue this work as shared writing.

Session 9: Comparing versions of the story

Read aloud one other version of this story. Talk about how the versions are alike or different. Using prepared grids, with the titles of the two stories across the top, pairs of children talk about and record similarities and differences between the stories, in terms of their language, characters and settings. Discuss as a class the similarities and differences between the versions and decide which version the children prefer.

Session 10: Devising a quest story

East o' the Sun and West o' the Moon is a quest story in which the heroine has to traverse immense distances and overcome all kinds of obstacles in order to reach her goal. The harsh landscape is central to the story because of the challenges it presents to her; the winds are also characters playing a part in her story. Discuss with the children how to construct a quest story set in a landscape of this kind. They should consider:

- the quest: what is the object of the quest?
- the main characters: who undertakes the quest? Who else plays a part in it?
- the landscape and the journey: what kind of a landscape is this story set in and what is the journey like?
- the obstacles: what obstacles stand in the way of the main character?

Ask children to work in pairs, discussing and recording their ideas. Share ideas for stories in a plenary, referring back to the plot of *East o' the Sun and West o' the Moon*.

This work could be expanded using the web resources of similar tales and versions. It could be continued as a piece of extended writing in class or for homework.