



Overview

“Barney Whiterats” is a text in three parts. Students have to consider: a poem by one of New Zealand’s most respected poets, a musical setting of the poem as a lullaby, and an explanation of the poet’s inspiration that includes an old black-and-white photograph of a swagman.

The whimsical poem uses familiar poetic language features, often in cryptic ways, to “sing a person alive again”. The background information provides historical facts about the real Barney that allow readers to glimpse deeper meanings behind the playful words.

This text:

- provides opportunities to explore a time in history from the perspective of a swagman
- gives examples of how a writer can express thoughts and feelings about a topic
- requires students to make connections across the three parts of the text
- has a theme of using real people and events as the inspiration for creativity.

A PDF of the text is available at www.schooljournal.tki.org.nz

Texts related by theme “No Rhyme” SJ L3 Aug 2015 | “Drift” SJ L3 Aug 2013

Text characteristics from the year 5 reading standard

Zealand. They walked from place to place, looking for work and a meal and maybe a bed for the night. Some people would leave a pot of soup on their stoves to feed passing swagmen. But Barney was a bit different. He was also an entertainer. The audience would pay a few pennies to see him perform Punch and Judy shows, play his mechanical organ (called organ grinding), or communicate with the dead! He was most well known for showing off his two performing white mice. This is why he was called Barney Whiterats. (Obviously people weren't bothered by the fact that he owned

were written down, they were sung or spoken. Traditional Māori poetry is also chanted. It too tells stories about characters and what they get up to. I wanted to create my own version of an oral poem, so I found Barney – and I opened my mouth and gave it a go! Barney died in 1911, when he was ninety, only a few months after he gave up life on the road. This all happened a long time ago. But one thing I like about an oral poem with a tune is that you can sing a person alive again. The melody is on page 23 so that you can do this, too.

abstract ideas, in greater numbers than in texts at earlier levels, accompanied by concrete examples in the text that help support the students’ understanding

Flap. Flap. What's that?
Kākāpō beneath my hat.
Smokes. Hope. Bar of soap.
Two white rats inside my coat.

Nibble. Nibble. Sniff. Sniff.
Shuffle. Shuffle. Skip. Skip.
Stop. Go. Heavy load.
Walking on a winding road.

Clip. Clop. Clip. Clop.
Do you see me? Do you not?
Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.
Let me in if I should knock.

Bed roll. Bread roll.
Pot of soup. Pot of gold.
What to do?

some ideas and information that are conveyed indirectly and require students to infer by drawing on several related pieces of information in the text

there were a lot of swagmen in New Zealand. They walked from place to place, looking for work and a meal and maybe a bed for the night. Some people would leave a pot of soup on their stoves to feed passing swagmen. But Barney was a bit different. He was also an entertainer. The audience would pay a few pennies to see him perform Punch and Judy shows, play his mechanical organ (called organ grinding), or communicate with the dead! He was most well known for showing off his two performing white mice. This is why he was called Barney Whiterats. (Obviously people weren't bothered by the fact that he owned

oral poem. A long time before poems were written down, they were sung or spoken. Traditional Māori poetry is also chanted. It too tells stories about characters and what they get up to. I wanted to create my own version of an oral poem, so I found Barney – and I opened my mouth and gave it a go! Barney died in 1911, when he was ninety, only a few months after he gave up life on the road. This all happened a long time ago. But one thing I like about an oral poem with a tune is that you can sing a person alive again. The melody is on page 23 so that you can do this, too.

sentences that vary in length and structure (for example, sentences that begin in different ways and different kinds of complex sentences with a number of subordinate clauses)

BARNEY WHITERATS

Clip. Clop. Clip. Clop.
Can you see them? Do you not?
Stitch. Hop. Turn. Pop.
Fantails in my muttonchops.

Flap. Flap. What's that?
Kākāpō beneath my hat.
Smokes. Hope. Bar of soap.
Two white rats inside my coat.

Nibble. Nibble. Sniff. Sniff.
Shuffle. Shuffle. Skip. Skip.

figurative and/or ambiguous language that the context helps the students to understand

Possible curriculum contexts

THE ARTS: MUSIC – Sound Arts

Level 3 – Communicating and interpreting: Prepare and present brief performances of music, using performance skills and techniques.

ENGLISH (Reading)

Level 3 – Ideas: Show a developing understanding of ideas within, across, and beyond texts.

Language features: Show a developing understanding of how language features are used for effect within and across texts.

ENGLISH (Writing)

Level 3 – Ideas: Select, form, and communicate ideas on a range of topics.

Language features: Use language features appropriately, showing a developing understanding of their effects.

Possible reading purposes

- To enjoy listening to and reading a poem
- To prepare and present the poem as a song
- To learn how a poet gets his ideas
- To learn about swagmen in New Zealand
- To explore how poetry can be used to tell a story.

Possible writing purposes

- To use the poem as a model for innovation and inspiration
- To write your own poem, song, or rap about a “character”
- To try out a range of language features to convey your ideas
- To research and report on an aspect of life in New Zealand in the 1870s, for example, schools, jobs, travel, or health.



The New Zealand Curriculum

Text and language challenges

VOCABULARY

The poem:

- Possibly unfamiliar words, including “muttonchops”, “Kākāpō”, “bed roll”
- The noun “smokes” for cigarettes

The author’s note:

- Possibly unfamiliar words, including “showman”, “swagman”, “characters”, “entertainer”, “pennies”, “mechanical organ”, “organ grinding”, “melody”
- The expression, “get up to”.

Possible supporting strategies

Some of these suggestions may be more useful before reading, but they can be used at any time in response to students’ needs.

- Draw on information in the author’s note to explain unfamiliar terms, in particular, “swagman” and “mechanical organ”.
- Discuss the photo on page 25 and encourage students to guess what “muttonchops” might mean. If necessary, explain that it describes the growth of hair and beard on the cheeks.
- *The English Language Learning Progressions: Introduction*, pages 39–46, has useful information about learning vocabulary.
- See also [ESOL Online, Vocabulary](#), for examples of other strategies to support students with vocabulary.

SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE REQUIRED

- Familiarity with written, spoken, and sung or chanted poetry, including Māori chants
- Familiarity with the use of poetic language features
- Some knowledge that there have been times in New Zealand’s history of widespread poverty and unemployment
- Understanding of the special meaning of a “character” to denote an interesting or unusual person
- Knowledge of entertainers and Punch and Judy shows
- Some knowledge of Charles Dickens and his novels.

Possible supporting strategies

- You may wish to provide a brief introduction to the poem before the first reading, using information about swagmen from the author’s note.
- When reading the author’s note with the students, provide background information as needed, for example, pause to discuss unfamiliar ideas such as swagmen on the road, Punch and Judy shows, Charles Dickens, and the concept of oral poems.
- Help students from other countries to make connections to this text by having them share their knowledge of oral poems in their own cultures.

TEXT FEATURES AND STRUCTURE

- A poem in five quatrains with a final couplet
- A sentence as the last line of each verse
- Cryptic one- and two-word phrases
- Rhyming patterns, including internal rhymes
- Use of rhythm, onomatopoeia, alliteration, and repetition
- Rhetorical questions that require readers to infer meaning
- The author’s note that explains the inspiration for the poem
- Historical information about swagmen in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries
- The poetic statement, “you can sing a person alive again”
- The music for the musical arrangement.

Possible supporting strategies

- The poem should be enjoyed without analysis for at least one reading before students examine the writer’s craft.
- Have the students read the poem out loud to a partner and give each other feedback. If possible, have the students record and evaluate their own reading.
- Consider allowing the entire class to perform a choral reading of the poem. Students who are English language learners may find this helpful.
- Prompt the students to recall the features they expect to find in poetry and how they can distinguish a poem from a prose text. They could record these in a matrix.
- Use the matrix to identify poetic devices used in the poem. Add any that were not listed earlier. Discuss the devices and encourage students to refer to the list when writing poetry.
- Support students to identify the patterns in the poem – of the line breaks, verses, and punctuation. Encourage them to use these patterns to support reading it aloud.



Sounds and Words

Instructional focus – Reading

English (Level 3 – Ideas: Show a developing understanding of ideas within, across, and beyond texts; Language features: Show a developing understanding of how language features are used for effect within and across texts.)

First reading

- Provide the students with a brief explanation of the poet's inspiration for writing the poem, showing them the photograph on page 25. *What can you learn from this photo? How might it relate to the illustration on page 22? Read the poem silently, hearing the sounds of the words in your head. Now read the author's note – how does it help you understand the poem?*
- Prompt students to make connections between the photograph, the illustration, the poem, the musical arrangement, and the author's note.

If the students struggle with this text

- Reinforce the meaning that can be inferred from the illustration, the photograph, and the information in the author's note.
- Build up an understanding of Barney's life by closely examining the poem stanza by stanza.
- Read the poem aloud, using your voice to convey the sense, for example, by stressing the onomatopoeia, the rhyme, and the rhythm.
- Encourage the students to read the poem aloud to each other.
- Ask students to identify the parts they find hard to understand and support them to make inferences using information from the images and the author's note. Remind them that in poetry, not everything has a clear meaning – the poet is conveying a picture in words rather than giving an explicit description.

Subsequent readings

The teacher

Set the purpose for reading. Prompt students to make connections between the poem, the author's note, and the visual images.

- *In the second verse, talk with your partner about why you think the poet has used the words "Smokes. Hope. Bar of soap."*
- *What can you infer about the swagman's hopes? Where else in the poem are there hints about his "hopes"?*

The teacher

Prompt students to draw comparisons to help them infer meaning. Ask them to discuss the following questions in pairs:

- *What connections can you make between the life of a swagman and that of modern-day homeless people?*
- *How do people generally regard homeless people?*
- *In the fourth verse, what is implied by the two questions and the request?*
- *What information in the author's note helps you to understand the poem?*
- *What thoughts of your own about human nature help you infer the meaning of these lines?*
- *Bringing these ideas together, what can you say about the way we respond to people in need of help?*

The teacher

Invite the students to form opinions about the poem.

- *Glenn Colquhoun says "you can sing a person alive again" in an oral poem.*
- *What language features helped you form a mental image of Barney?*
- *How effective is the poem in "singing" Barney Whiterats alive? Why do you think that?*

The students:

- identify that "smokes" probably refers to cigarettes
- make connections between what they learn about his life on the road to infer that he probably doesn't have many opportunities to keep himself clean, so he "hopes" to have a bar of soap to wash himself and his clothes
- locate places in the poem that imply what Barney hopes for, for example, to let go of his heavy load, a bread roll, a pot of soup (or gold).

The students:

- compare the reality of Barney's life with what they know or understand about people who are homeless
- engage in a sensitive discussion about the treatment of homeless people in different cultures
- make connections between the questions in verse 4, what they learn from the author's note about swagmen looking for help along the road, and what they know about how people respond to homeless people
- integrate these ideas to infer that some people might choose not to "see" Barney
- with support, synthesise information to reach an opinion about the ways people (now and in the past) respond to need, for example, that some turn away, some reach out and help, and some are unaware of others' needs.

The students:

- reread to identify specific features that they used to form an image of Barney, such as the movements of the fantails and rats, which showed he had a close relationships with them, and the words that helped them form mental images of his slow, tired way of walking
- evaluate the poem and form opinions about its effectiveness
- give evidence for their opinions.

GIVE FEEDBACK

- *You reminded us of the TV item about homeless people in Auckland. That helped us to make connections between our own world and life in the nineteenth century to understand the mixed feelings people probably had to swagmen like Barney.*
- *When you played the tune and sang the poem to us, it gave us yet another way of "seeing" Barney. Music added another meaning to the words and images.*
- *The comparisons you made between this poem and the chants about tipuna that you've heard on the marae gave you a better understanding of why this poet set his poem to music.*

METACOGNITION

- How do you "read" poetry? What is different about the way you read a poem and the way you read a story?
- When you listen to music, do you pay attention to the words? Why or why not?



Reading standard: by the end of year 5



The Literacy Learning Progressions



Assessment Resource Banks

Instructional focus – Writing

English (Level 3 – Ideas: Select, form, and communicate ideas on a range of topics; Language features: Use language features appropriately, showing a developing understanding of their effects.)

Text excerpts from “Barney Whiterats”

As soon as I saw this picture of Barney Whiterats, I knew I wanted to create something about him.

Examples of text characteristics

IDEAS

Ideas can come from anywhere. Many writers keep a notebook for recording ideas, photos, newspaper clippings, descriptions, and other reminders that can trigger a creative response.

Teacher (possible deliberate acts of teaching)

You may like to put together a collection of photos that students could use to trigger their ideas for writing or composing. Prompt students to think about where they might find ideas.

- Glenn Colquhoun tells us what inspired him and why. Do some searching of your own to find an image or memory that could inspire you to create something.
- Next, think about the form this could take – Will you write a poem, a rap, a story or use some other form of creativity?
- Once you have the idea and the form, you’re ready to start playing with language features that will help express your idea.

If students struggle to find an idea, you could assign an evocative photo, piece of music, or short video to get them started.

Clip. Clop. Clip. Clop.
Can you see them? Do you not?
Stitch. Hop. Turn. Pop.
Fantails in my muttonchops.

RHYME AND RHYTHM

Writers can choose whether or not to use rhyme or where to use it.

The rhythm of a poem is usually determined by the placement of stressed syllables, the punctuation, and the line breaks.

Rhythm and rhyme work together to guide the reader as to how to make the poem sound.

Model how you identify the way Glenn Colquhoun creates mental images with words.

- As I read the poem aloud, the full stops made me speak each of the words in the first and third lines of this verse as short, sharp sounds – they made me think of a horse clip-clopping along, then a fantail flitting about.
- The punctuation and the sounds of the words, including the rhymes, made me fall into a rhythm as I spoke them – I could sense there was a beat I could follow right through the poem. Listen as I read it again.

If appropriate, refer to the matrix suggested in the supporting strategies for “Text features and structure” on page 2.

- Consider and select language features that will support your writing intentions. For example, can you use words, line breaks, and punctuation to “show” readers how you want the poem to sound?

Bed roll. Bread roll.
Pot of soup. Pot of gold.
Who’s who? What to do?
This old man lives in my shoes.

IMPLYING MEANING

Poetry often lets the reader work out meaning themselves. The poet provides hints, and it is up to the reader to interpret those hints.

Explain that we may never really know exactly what a poet (or an artist, dancer, composer) wants us to understand.

- Artists often want to communicate a feeling or an image rather than a specific meaning.
- In this extract, the contrast between a pot of soup and a pot of gold might mean that Barney’s hope of getting a pot of soup led him to thinking of a pot of gold or that maybe to him the soup was as precious as a pot of gold.
- Why does the poet add those questions?
- Who is talking? Perhaps it’s the white rats’ voices we hear.
- As you write (or compose) think about the overall feelings you want your readers or listeners to have. Do you need to make everything clear? Look for places where the rhythm and sound of the words can hint at the idea you are conveying.

GIVE FEEDBACK

- This old photograph of your koro is a great place to start. Think about how you could use the image to help bring together memories of him passed down from your family.
- I could hear you saying the lines of your poem under your breath as you tested out the rhythms and rhymes. You’ve understood that the sound of the poem can be as important as the meanings of the words.

METACOGNITION

- What was hard about writing this? What was easy? What have you learnt?
- Tell me about some of the decisions you made, before, during, and after writing.

Writing standard: by the end of year 5

The Literacy Learning Progressions