

## From Novel to Poem Handout

Poems and novels are not completely different. They are two types of creative writing, both made up of carefully selected words designed to grab the reader or listener's attention and to spark different emotions in them: happiness, sadness, fear... Particularly intense parts of a novel can provide the perfect ingredients to inspire you to create your very own poem.

Let's look at the passage from Chapter 15 of *Jane Eyre*, which describes the fire in Mr. Rochester's room. At this point in the novel, Jane has just learnt more about her mysterious employer's past life. Lying awake in bed that night, Jane considers this new information when she hears a strange laugh coming from the hallway outside her room...

### **Original text:**

Something creaked: it was a door ajar; and that door was Mr. Rochester's, and the smoke rushed in a cloud from thence. I thought no more of Mrs. Fairfax; I thought no more of Grace Poole or the laugh: in an instant, I was within the chamber. Tongues of flame darted round the bed: the curtains were on fire. In the midst of blaze and vapour, Mr. Rochester lay stretched motionless, in deep sleep.

"Wake! wake!" I cried---I shook him, but he only murmured and turned: the smoke had stupefied him. Not a moment could be lost: the very sheets were kindling. I rushed to his basin and ewer; fortunately, one was wide and the other deep, and both were filled with water. I heaved them up, deluged the bed and its occupant, flew back to my own room, brought my own water-jug, baptised the couch afresh, and by God's aid, succeeded in extinguishing the flames which were devouring it.

### **Modern version:**

Something creaked. It was a door opening – the door of Mr. Rochester's room, with smoke pouring out of it. I didn't think about Mrs Fairfax anymore, nor about Grace Poole, nor the laugh. In an instant I was in the bedroom. Tongues of flames licked the bed: the curtains were on fire. In the middle of the blaze and smoke, Mr Rochester lay stretched out in a deep sleep.

'Wake up! Wake up!' I shouted. I shook him but he murmured and turned over: the smoke had dazed him. There was not a moment to lose: the sheets were catching fire. I rushed to his basin and water jug: luckily one was wide and the other deep, and both were full of water. I lifted them, soaked the bed and the person in it, ran to my own room, came back with my own water jug, soaked the bed again and, with God's help, I put out the flames that were devouring it.

### **Where to Start**

In this scene, Charlotte Brontë is describing a dramatic moment where Jane saves the life of her employer Mr. Rochester. The passage contains many words relating to action, rather than reflection or thought. It also presents Jane in an active role whereas Mr. Rochester is passive,

which reverses the usual power dynamic between the characters based on class and gender. You might like to think about these factors when you're creating your poem.

### **Identify Your Ingredients**

Using the modern version, let's unpack the ingredients of this scene:

We have descriptions of the **surroundings**:

Mr. Rochester's room, with smoke pouring out of it.  
Tongues of flames licked the bed: the curtains were on fire.  
In the middle of the blaze and smoke, Mr Rochester lay stretched out in a deep sleep.  
the sheets were catching fire

There is some **speech** as well as a brief indication of what Jane is **thinking**:

'Wake up! Wake up!'  
There was not a moment to lose  
with God's help

We have descriptions of the **actions that Jane takes**:

I shouted.  
I shook him  
I rushed to his basin and water jug  
I lifted them, soaked the bed and the person in it  
[I] ran to my own room, came back with my own water jug, soaked the bed again  
I put out the flames that were devouring it

And we have descriptions of what **Mr. Rochester** is doing:

he murmured and turned over  
the smoke had dazed him.

### **Combine the Ingredients**

Once you've picked out the key ingredients, decide which ones you want to use and combine them together as a poem. Remember, you don't need to use all of the ingredients. Think about how you'll arrange the ingredients on each line. They don't need to appear in the same order as the original text. You might also want to rephrase some of them. For example, some of Brontë's sentences would seem quite long if placed word-for-word in a poem, so consider how they could be shortened. For example:

[I] ran to my own room, came back with my own water jug, soaked the bed again  
I soaked the bed again with my own water jug  
With my water jug, I soaked the bed again

Remember, you can change the words or whole phrases at any time. Here is an example of a two verse poem inspired by the text:

Smoke poured out Mr. Rochester's room  
Flames licked the bed  
Surrounded, he slept still  
I called him to wake  
I shook him to wake  
But he remained dazed amongst the blaze.

Not a moment to lose  
With his water jug, I soaked the bed  
The sheets were still catching  
With my water jug, I soaked the bed again  
Finally, I extinguished the flames

### **Creatively Translate Your Poem**

When we creatively translate a text, we have the freedom to make any changes we want: the perspective, the location, or the time period. We can choose to focus on one particular image or word. We can even use the original text as a starting point to write about our own experiences. Having recreated Brontë's passage as a poem, now consider how you can adapt it to create a new piece. Think about:

- What is your setting? How would you describe your surroundings?
- What are you doing? What thoughts or feelings do you have?
- What do you see or hear?
- Does a particular image or word make you think about your own experiences or life?
- Brontë was of course writing before access to indoor plumbing was widespread. Nowadays, people are unlikely to keep a water jug in their room. What might a modern version of this scene be like?

Another way to creatively translate the poem would be to change the tone. For example, dramatic moments like this scene can often seem funny, particularly to modern readers. You could write a comic poem with the same ingredients.

Whatever you do to the text – update it, make it funny, make something different happen – you are working with ingredients that Brontë has given you. You are making a creative translation.