

I must go down to the sea – poetry comparison

Extract taken from: <i>'A Wanders song'</i> by John Masefield	Extract taken from: <i>'A Song of Joys'</i> by Walt Whitman
Oh I am tired of brick and stone, the heart of me is sick, For windy green, unquiet sea, the realm of Moby Dick; And I'll be going, going, from the roaring of the wheels, For a wind's in the heart of me, a fire's in my heels.	O to sail to sea in a ship, To leave this steady, unendurable land, To leave the tiresome sameness of the streets, the sidewalks and the houses; To leave you, O you solid motionless land, and entering a ship, To sail and sail and sail!

Comparing the two poem extracts

What do they have in common?	
What do you notice about:	
the use of rhyme?	
the length of the lines?	
the rhythm or beat of the lines?	
Words that are repeated?	
The use of lists?	
Which poem uses imagery – that is, descriptions that are not literally true? (An example from another text might be 'an icy stare' or 'he had a grip of steel'.) Give examples.	
Which poem do you prefer, and why?	

Introducing the poems

Share the following two extracts with the class which express the same feeling of longing for the sea but in very different forms.

Oh I am tired of brick and stone, the heart of me is sick,
 For windy green, unquiet sea, the realm of Moby Dick;
 And I'll be going, going, from the roaring of the wheels,
 For a wind's in the heart of me, a fire's in my heels.

From 'A Wanderer's Song' John Masefield

O to sail to sea in a ship,
 To leave this steady, unendurable land,
 To leave the tiresome sameness of the streets, the sidewalks and the houses;
 To leave you, O you solid motionless land, and entering a ship,
 To sail and sail and sail!

From 'A Song of Joys' Walt Whitman

Comparing the poems

	Masefield	Whitman
Similarities	Both find life on land tiresome, monotonous... They long for the change that the sea would bring.	
Rhyme	Uses rhyme	No rhyme
Lines	Regular lines	Lines of different lengths
Rhythm	Regular beat (14 syllables, 7 weak, 7 strong beats)	Irregular rhythm
Repetition	Repeats 'going', 'heart of me'	Repeats 'to sail', 'to leave', 'a ship'.
Lists	Lists things at sea	Lists things on land
Imagery	'a wind's in the heart of me', 'a fire's in my heels'	Does not use imagery

Writing stimulus

Discuss the poems:

- Both poets specifically mention streets. Why do you think this is?
- Would you rather be on land or at sea in a ship? (Isn't the sea generally more monotonous than land?)
- Whilst Masefield spent several years as a sailor, Whitman never went to sea. Does the knowledge that Whitman had never experienced life at sea affect how you read or appreciate the extracts?
- How is it possible to write about things you have never experienced? Writers do it all the time – think of *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings* and so on – and we are frequently asking children to use their imagination and write about all sorts of things.

Ask pupils to write from the opposite point of view, that is, the feelings of the sailor who is desperately tired of the sea and longs to be back on land. This could be prose or in poem form. The prose could be a diary, a letter or simply the thoughts in the sailor's mind.

Here, in case it is useful, is a parody of the extract from Whitman.

O to walk the lanes on the land,
To leave this unsteady, unendurable sea
To leave the tiresome sameness of the waves, the salt spray and the sky;
To leave you, O you slippery ever-moving sea, and entering a dock
To walk and walk and walk!