

Talking with Tennyson

Interpreting The Lady of Shallot in the Internet Age

by David Gibbons

On the lawn outside Lincoln Cathedral stands Alfred, Lord Tennyson. He stares at his hand, stony faced and mute. You can try to get a word out of him if you want, but he isn't going to give. For many children he is unknown and for many adults his work represents a rote-learned verse, gathering dust in the box of memories marked 'School – nostalgic but useless'. Yet his work can be still accessible and vibrant for today's pupils in a world of new and exciting forms of literacy.

Our project began with a somewhat rash promise; the small collection of Tennyson artefacts that is on public display in Lincoln was due to be moved and, following a discussion about some input from primary school children into the rededication ceremony, the words 'We can do something, no problem, we'll make a film!' tripped a little too easily off the tongue. Little did we expect that just five weeks later our children would be totally enthralled by 'The Lady of Shalott'.

The project that emerged developed a range of speaking and listening skills, engaging closely with the text. We were delighted with the way

that drama, ICT, visual literacy, a critical approach to literature, art, music, history and photography were all incorporated successfully into the final piece. It was a challenge indeed to produce something that was of sufficiently high quality to be exhibited in public in such a short time; however what was striking was how the process that emerged delivered high quality speaking and listening at every stage.

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Equally striking was the impact the project had on our own professional development – three staff and two governors each took responsibility for an area of personal interest/ professional competence in order to lead the children. As the project came together we all learned from and challenged each other.

The pupils began working on the project by looking at a very plain version of the text of The Lady of Shallot, just the words, no illustrations. The intention was very simple: to identify visual images from the poem that could be captured somewhere in the local environment. This proved to be quite a stretching introduction for the children but immediately signalled to them the importance of quality and reasoned discussion. The following day the pupils set off around the local environment with digital cameras (and a photographer to guide them) to capture images that mirrored and illustrated the text. We and they were amazed at what they found – from the leaf floating on the local beck that became 'The shallop flitteth silken-sail'd', to the out-of-focus hassock that 'overlooks the space of flowers'. Once again the quality of debate about what to photograph and why, constantly referencing the text, was very high.

This photography work was followed by a drama session, focussing again closely on visual imagery in The Lady of Shallot. The children devised pieces of physical theatre which represented the key symbolic elements of the

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poem; the towers of Camelot and the mirror cracking being the most striking. Secondly, the pupils undertook 'Conscience Alley' activities around the theme of 'should she or shouldn't she look'. This generated a rich and lively debate around the major dilemma in the poem and both activities produced further material for the final film-based product.

Next step was to explore the wealth of visual imagery that has been inspired by The Lady of Shalott over the past 160 years, which involved the pupils looking closely at the work of painters such as William Holman Hunt, Gabriel Dante Rossetti and John William Waterhouse, as well as influential early photographers like Julia Margaret Cameron and Henry Peach Robinson. Again quite a challenge for 10- and 11-year-olds, but one they enjoyed greatly. Oracy was their way to negotiate this process and the arguments about the quality and appropriateness of each image were a joy to hear. Here the internet also came into its own. We were amazed at how much Lady of Shalott imagery is out there, from 'classics' to the 'could be deemed interesting/ frankly bizarre' end of the Arthurian-inspired pockets of cyberspace. ▶



Only at this point were the children introduced to the software – Photo Story 3 – that they were going to use to produce their interpretation of The Lady of Shallot. This free software, available from Microsoft, has been discussed in a previous edition of Classroom and if you haven't used it yet, do! The pupils began work on ordering, manipulating and resizing the images that they had collected and created, overlaying them with lines from the original text. Gradually, over one or two sessions the pieces began to take shape and at this time we decided to take a quite different approach to the production of the final film. The pupils worked collaboratively to produce just one film, with each small group contribution being time limited and the next group taking up where the previous group had left off. Imagine the arguments that this generated! But the pupils again rose to the challenge – if they were going to change something that had been created before them, there had to be a good reason.

As the film took shape we were able to visit the Tennyson archive at Lincoln Central Library*. The pupils were able to handle a range of original material from Tennyson's own library, such as proof copies of folios and original illustrations. They were somewhat amazed to be handed original letters from Queen Victoria (with the thickest black border you have ever seen) and Edward Lear (with none too complimentary doodles). By this point Tennyson was truly alive for the pupils and they talked with growing confidence about his life, work and influence on others.

Back at the main editing laptop, things were getting tense as our deadline day approached. The pupils were able to access Audio Network's vast music library in order to select the right pieces that provided a fitting soundtrack to each element of their film. Again more in-depth discussion! Again the poem was brought to life

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by a different art form and a different sensory route. The children used Audacity (more excellent free software) to record their 'Conscience Alley' devised piece to provide a further sonic overlay the end of the film.

We knew the film was nearing its completion when a Year 6 child responded to a suggestion from the school's head teacher with 'You're just getting picky now!' The whole group came back together and used the interactive whiteboard to view and make final collective changes to the piece, ready for the big screening.

It was quite something for our pupils to meet with doctors, professors and a real 'Lady' as they presented their interpretation of The Lady of Shallot to the members of the Tennyson Society and their guests. They talked with pride and knowledge of the poem and the process. The audience response was one of amazement that children so young could have produced something so professional. The fact of the matter is that children use ICT intuitively to communicate – in the production of the film they led every step of the way – and, whilst not wishing to undermine their wonderful technical achievements, this project was successful for a far more important reason: young people debated, mediated and communicated their feelings and thoughts on Tennyson's poetry and Tennyson, in a very real sense, spoke back to them.



The final film can be viewed at www.nettleham-junior.lincs.sch.uk selecting the Lady of Shallot from the home page. ■

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To download Photostory 3 and Audacity, visit:
www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/using/digitalphotography/photostory/default.mspx
and <http://audacity.sourceforge.net>

To visit the Tennyson archive at Lincoln Central Library, email grace.timmins@lincolnshire.gov.uk

For more information on
Audio Network visit: www.audiolicense.net
The Tennyson Society visit:
www.tennysonociety.org.uk/tennyson