

The Great Fire of London

On 2nd September 1666, a huge fire broke out in central London. The fire burned for four days and destroyed thousands of homes. This poem was written by George Szirtes. It describes how the Great Fire of London started and how it quickly spread from one building to the next.

Thomas Farynor, Baker to the King,
Left his oven burning with the firewood nearby.
The embers muttered, the little flames took wing
And sang to the bigger flames, Come with us and fly!

- 5 So fly they did, from the Baker to The Star,
To The Star next door in Fish street, in one almighty flap,
From there on to St Margaret's which wasn't very far,
The little flames kept hopping from one gap to narrow gap.

- Here lay the tallow*, the spirits and the straw,
10 Here lay the coal and the hemp and the oil,
Given a decent breeze the fire began to draw,
And soon barrels full of water were coming to the boil.

- How happy were the flames, the gleeful little pests,
They sang and crowed and whistled in full throat,
15 Flashing now their wings and now their bright red breasts,
Like robins who had never sung a note.

- By now their bigger cousins were roosting on the bridge,
Old London Bridge was burning and the Thames was molten lead,
But the firebirds kept leaping the gap from ridge to ridge,
20 Till the city blazed from the roof to riverbed.

- Oh it was spectacular, those flames up to their tricks,
And the mess they left behind them was desolate and vague.
For days they screeched and bellowed in 1666,
And wiped away whole districts, but also purged* the Plague,
25 Or so they told each other when the squawking had died down,
And whether it was accident or fate
They certainly had changed the face of the whole town
Before they settled back into the grate.

George Szirtes

Glossary

tallow — animal fat

purged — got rid of

1 In your own words, explain how the Great Fire of London started.
.....
..... 1 mark

2 What does line 12 tell you about the temperature of the fire?
.....
..... 1 mark

3 Find and copy one simile from lines 13-16.
.....
..... 1 mark

4 "By now their bigger cousins were roosting on the bridge" (line 17). Explain what this line means.
.....
..... 1 mark

5 "the Thames was molten lead" (line 18). This is an example of (circle one):
a. a simile b. a metaphor c. personification d. alliteration 1 mark

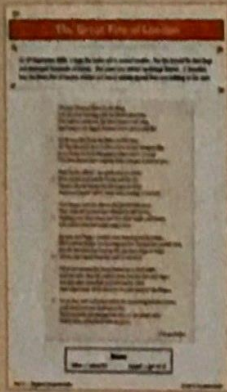
6 Using the information in the poem, write down one negative and one positive consequence of the Great Fire of London.
.....
..... 2 marks

7 What is the rhyming pattern of this poem? Circle one.
a. ABAC b. AABB c. ABAB d. ABCD 1 mark

8 Do you think the description of the fire in this poem is effective? Explain your answer.
.....
..... 2 marks

Total
out of 10

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Question Book:
Year 5, pages 10-11

Author / Source:
George Szirtes

Genre:
Poetry

Cross-curricular links:

- History (the Great Fire of London)
- Geography (using maps)

Introduction

The Great Fire of London started just after midnight on 2nd September 1666 in Thomas Farynor's bakery on Pudding Lane. Because of overcrowding and the use of flammable building materials, such as wood and straw, the fire quickly spread throughout much of the City of London. By the time it was extinguished on 5th September, the fire had destroyed thousands of buildings and made an estimated 100,000 people homeless. This poem, by the Hungarian-born poet and translator George Szirtes, uses the extended metaphor of "firebirds" to offer an original perspective on this dramatic event. As pupils read the poem, encourage them to think about the various poetic techniques Szirtes uses to create a vivid image of the fire.

Answers

1. E.g. The fire was started by the embers of Thomas Farynor's oven.
2. E.g. It tells you that the fire was very hot, because it was making whole barrels of water boil.
3. "Like robins who had never sung a note"
4. It means that the bridge was on fire.
5. b. a metaphor
6. Negative: the fire destroyed "whole districts" of the city. Positive: the fire got rid of the plague.
7. c. ABAB
8. Any appropriate answer. E.g. Yes, because it brings the fire to life and helps you to imagine how it might have looked and sounded. For example, the idea of the fire being like birds helps you to picture how the sparks flew through the air and how the flames moved from roof to roof.

Extra Activities

- Give pupils a list of techniques that are used in the poem (e.g. personification, metaphor, simile, onomatopoeia) and challenge them to identify at least one example of each. As a class, discuss the effect that these techniques have on the reader.
- Ask pupils to write their own narrative poem about a historical event that they have recently studied. Make sure they include some key facts about the event in their poem, and encourage them to use an extended metaphor, similar to Szirtes's "firebirds", to engage the reader and bring the event to life.
- Divide the class into groups and assign each group one day from 2nd to 5th September 1666. Ask each group to find out about how the Great Fire of London developed during their day and to prepare a TV news bulletin to present to the class. The news bulletins should describe the key events that occurred on each day, and could also include imagined interviews with eyewitnesses.
- Give pupils a map of the City of London and challenge them to find some of the key locations associated with the Great Fire, such as Pudding Lane, Fish Street, London Bridge, St Paul's Cathedral and the Monument to the Great Fire of London. Ask them to write down the grid reference for each location.