

The night before

Michael O'Reilly has some merriment in mind for the art class



I have always thought that the classic *Night Before Christmas*, written in 1822 by Clement Clarke Moore, is one of the most appealing pieces of Christmas literature, full of the most wonderful visual images. There are many wonderful picture books available, which use the poem as the main text, which are a great way to look at and

respond to a variety of artists and art styles. I often use it as the stimulus for visual arts work at this time of the year. Here are just a few ideas

I often break the poem into sections (see box below) and give one section to a group of children to jot down/sketch their ideas. I provide each group with a large piece of art paper and allow the chil-

'Twas the night before Christmas when all through the house
Not a creature was stirring not even a mouse.
The children were nestled all snug in their beds
While visions of sugarplums danced in their heads.
The stockings were hung by the chimney with care
In hopes that Saint Nicholas soon would be there.
And Mama in her kerchief and I in my cap
Had just settled our brains for a long winter nap.
When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter
I sprang from my bed to see what was the matter.
Away to the window I flew like a flash
Tore open the shutters and threw up the sash.

This first section of the poem might be the basis for:

- ✦ making drawings using a variety of drawing tools such as chalks, pastels, crayons or markers – draw the children snuggled in bed or draw what they might be dreaming about;
- ✦ using fabrics to design and make Christmas stockings;
- ✦ knitting Christmas caps;
- ✦ using construction materials to make a diorama of the parlour with decorations, a Christmas tree and the stockings on the chimney.



**The moon on the breast of the new fallen snow
Gave the lustre of midday to objects below.**

Illustrate this section of the poem with drawings made with white chalk/pastels on black or dark papers.



**When what to my wondering eyes should appear
But a miniature sleigh and eight tiny reindeer.
With a little old driver so lively and quick
I knew in a moment it must be Saint Nick.
More rapid than eagles his coursers they came
And he whistled and shouted and called them by name.**

**"Now Dasher, now Dancer, now Prancer and Vixen,
On Comet, on Cupid, on Donner and Blitzen.
To the top of the porch, to the top of the wall
Now dash away, dash away, dash away all!"
As dry leaves that before the wild hurricane fly
When they meet with an obstacle mount to the sky
So up to the housetop the coursers they flew
With the sleigh full of toys and Saint Nicholas too.**

The image of the reindeer and the sleigh full of presents might be a stimulus for interesting work in construction.

- ✦ Use found objects to create a variety of wrapping papers, wrap old containers with these papers and scraps of ribbon, turn a desk upside down and create a sleigh to fill with the presents.
- ✦ Work with clay to create reindeer forms, add small pieces of twigs for antlers.
- ✦ Work in groups to create fabric banners illustrating the scene using techniques such as fabric collage, appliqué or embroiders.



**And then in a twinkling I heard on the roof
The prancing and pawing of each little hoof.
As I drew in my head and was turning around
Down the chimney Saint Nicholas came with a bound.
He was dressed all in fur from his head to his foot
And his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and soot.
His eyes how they twinkled, his dimples how merry
His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry.
His droll little mouth was drawn up in a bow
And the beard on his chin was as white as the snow.
The stump of a pipe he held tight in his teeth
And the smoke it encircled his head like a wreath.
A bundle of toys he had flung on his back**

And he looked like a peddler just opening his pack.

**He had a broad face and a little round belly
That shook when he laughed like a bowl full of jelly.**

**He was chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf
And I laughed when I saw him in spite of myself.**

**A wink of his eye and a twist of his head
Soon gave me to know I had nothing to dread.
He spoke not a word but went straight to his work
And filled all the stockings, then turned with a jerk.**

**And laying a finger aside of his nose
And giving a nod up the chimney he rose.
He sprang to his sleigh, to his team gave a whistle
And away they all flew like the down of a thistle.
But I heard him exclaim, ere he drove out of sight,
"Happy Christmas to all and to all a good night!"**

The central character of the poem is of course Saint Nicholas himself. He, of course can be the stimulus for work in all strands/strand units of the curriculum

- ✦ begin with looking at and responding to how different artists have portrayed this character by finding and collecting images from the internet, greeting cards, illustrated books, etc. Use these images to create collages/montages;
- ✦ use a CAD drawing programme to create new images of Santa;
- ✦ paint a picture of Santa, Mrs Claus and the family;
- ✦ draw an image of Santa on a sheet of thin polystyrene and use this as a printing block to create your own set of greeting cards;
- ✦ work with natural clay to make a Santa figure;
- ✦ make a diorama of Santa's workshop;
- ✦ make your own 'Santa Sack' by attaching fabric pieces to a shopping bag.

Christmas

dren to freely mix colour and create a group painting about that particular scene. The scenes are then displayed in sequence with the text to accompany each, an opportunity to explore interesting calligraphy styles, or indeed computer fonts.

This, of course, would be a long term project and lots of time would need to be given to the children to work on it. It certainly involves work, not only from the arts curricula, but from other subjects too.

We also need to trust that the all the children we work with can be creative, and surrender the idea that we, the teachers, have all the ideas.

Christmas carols and songs can of course be used in a similar way. Break your class into groups and assign each group one song. The task for the group is to:

- ✦ prepare a musical performance of the song;
- ✦ invent a drama or dance based on the song or on a theme suggested by the song;
- ✦ choose one strand of the visual arts curriculum and create a group art-piece for exhibition at Christmas. ❄️

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Other ideas for Christmas artwork

Check out InTouch articles on the theme of Christmas at www.into.ie

- ✦ Print Shop: December 2003
- ✦ Christmas Time: December 2004
- ✦ Festivals and Celebrations: December 2009

For Christmas music log onto and register with www.singup.org to get an endless supply of songs for all occasions, with song performances, accompanying backing tracks, lyric sheets, activity pages, etc. Check out my new blog at <http://classcreativity.blogspot.com/> for other festive creative ideas.



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was drawn up in a bow
And the beard on his chin
was as white as the snow.

