

Cargoes

SECTION A time to cast away (page 71)

POET John Masefield (1878–1967)

This is a poem of contrasts featuring three different ships from different times and places. Their cargoes are equally diverse, from exotic riches and majestic jewels to mundane but utilitarian goods and resources.

Before the lesson

- Bring a variety of objects into the class for display, to include a peacock feather, some cinnamon, a lump of coal and soaps made from sandalwood and cedarwood.

Preparing to read this poem aloud

- Allow the exotic names to roll off your tongue, carrying the strong repetitive rhythm smoothly across each verse.
- Emphasise the long, slow vowels of the first two verses, and the repeated 's' sound in verse two.
- Pause between verses and change tone, especially between the first two verses and the last.
- Allow the short, hard consonants in verse three to sound sharply, letting the single-syllable words *salt-caked smoke stack* (line 11) jerk along, in contrast to the earlier lines. Retain this jerkiness, while also maintaining the rhythm, to the end of the poem.

Contrasts

- Read the poem aloud. Point out that 'cast away' in relation to this poem refers to the different kinds of vessel being 'cast off' and released from their moorings. Explain that the landscapes described in verses one and two are set far from Britain but that verse three is set closer to its shores.
- Discuss the value of the cargoes of the ancient quinquireme (a ship with five banks of oars) and the Spanish galleon (a large vessel with a high stern, mostly used for carrying treasure). Show the class the display items.
- Invite the pupils to imagine they are seeing and smelling the exotic objects for the very first time. How do these objects compare to the lump of coal or a cheap tin tray?
- Ask them to imagine they are living through a bitterly cold British winter. If offered a choice of diamonds or coal as the only source of heating, which might they choose? Point out that diamonds, like coal, are derived from carbon. Similarly, to make a fire, would they choose rough firewood or exotic sandalwood? Which is more useful as a commodity by which to earn a living, ironware or peacocks' feathers?
- Open a class debate on the meaning of 'value'. Elicit that what is valuable in one context may be of little or no value in another. Introduce the concept of romance, romantic places and exotic sights, smells and tastes. In what way are these valuable?
- Stress that people are a valuable cargo. For example, the soldiers stranded at Dunkirk in World War II were a valuable cargo to the little boats that rescued them.
- Invite the pupils to list the three things that they most value in their lives and to explain to a partner why they value them.
- Divide the class into three large groups and ask each group to learn and practise performing one verse. Perform the poem together, arranging the pupils as in a choir and moving from one group to the next.

EXTRA: Invite the pupils to write an extra verse, similar in rhythm and rhyme, about a vessel carrying people (for example, a pleasure boat on a river, a cruise ship or even the *Titanic*).