

Task Force

John Hegley

MYTHS, PAINTINGS, POETRY & GLUESTICKS

Like so many, I have found great creative inspiration in the myths of Ancient Greece. The interesting, incredible and outrageous in the tales is an impetus to stretch one's own narrative efforts. Recently, on my way through my education-based writings, I came upon the following:

TASKS FOR PSYCHE

You've got to balance a cup
of sugar on your head
and mow the lawn.

You've got to balance a cup
of lawn on your head
and mow the sugar.

These snippets arose as a result of a workshop in London's National Gallery, perhaps a dozen years ago where I had been encouraging secondary school pupils to respond in writing, to the painting titled *The Enchanted Castle*, by Frenchman, Claude Lorrain. The image depicts a scene from the myth of Cupid and Psyche. Before continuing, I think a resumé of the part of the story around this scene might be helpful.

Psyche comes across the castle
goes inside - nobody in.



Photo by Polly Hancock

Food is brought to her by no-one,
lovely food out of thin
air. There is music with nobody playing
long before electronic sound.
Then Psyche hears the beauty, Cupid
warning, 'do not look around,
or you will be out of this castle:
I am a god and you are mortal.
You cannot look at me,
you see.'

Everything goes very nicely,
as long as she does not behold
this beauty, but, as often happens in these tales of old
someone does what they are told not to.
Psyche is banished from the castle,
she looks, and so loses the boy,
invisible music, now all vanished
with every other Castle joy.

Along comes Cupid's mother Venus,
Psyche's had her happy days:
'Stupid girl. You'll learn your lesson
and you will be amazed
at some of the lovely jobs I've got for you!'

The one task which I remember being set by the jealous Venus
is one of separating out a mountain of small foodstuffs
into individual piles:
wheat, barley, chick peas, millet, lentils and poppy seeds.
A task, interesting in its detail
and outrageous in its demand.

Working with the students,
I outlined the scary labours which Venus had set for Psyche
then asked if they would set some of their own.
The two examples I give at the outset, above

I would be wary of giving in advance of efforts by pupils.
I would rather point the way, without actually treading it.

I might instruct with:
Venus's tasks are vindictive. Yours do not have to be so.
Make yours a celebration of the imagination
rather than of a ferociously jealous nature.

I generally find it can help the writing, to bring in the random:
perhaps a few words beginning with one letter.
I tried this myself yesterday.
I used randomly selected categorised 'L' words to create a task:
Noun- lip.
Proper noun- Liverpool.
Verb - leap.
Adverb- loudly.
Adjective - long.

A resultant task: You have to *leap over Liverpool loudly, longing for lipstick.*

One would draw attention to the sympathetic ants
who came along and helped Psyche
with the task of the separating the small foodstuffs into piles.
An incredible resolution. Let us follow suit, with such of our own.
How the task is completed could incorporate quickly chosen words,
using each of the vowels:

L -and
L -evers
L -ight switch
L -opsided
L -uton

So, a go at completing the task with the help of these words...

Psyche *lands* in *Luton*, using some *lopsided levers* in a particular way
and is whisked to Birkenhead Central station from where, with one flick
of a large *light switch*, she is able to make the long Liverpool leap,
with lipstick clearly and dearly on her mind.

I sense that a different consonant might be worth trying
for the second batch of words, as the two lists have got rather muddled up!

Here is an acrostic task for Psyche:

P ut
S ome
Y oung
C heese
H andily
E verywhere.

The goal is more loosening up the lingo, than looking for masterpieces.
The cheese being 'young' is a detail which has come
from the demand of the acrostic form.

Acrostics done as a group activity are generally a delight.
VENUS and CUPID or BIRKENHEAD CENTRAL could be tried.

I have recently been working with this painting again
with younger children *
and we looked at the sad Psyche
and thought about how we might cheer her up.
In our attempt to do this,

we gave her pets, hats, and music and drew ourselves in beside her,
as sympathetic human company.

Here, the exercises were mainly drawing
I am keen to including drawing:
students have been drawing for longer than they have written.

PSYCHE COMES TO SEA MILLS PRIMARY SCHOOL
IN BRISTOL

With two classes of children, in Sea Mills
With paintings, pencils paper and some Pritt
And with some basic education skills

Malaika and I came down from the hills
And happily, our faces seemed to fit,
That Wednesday, in December, in Sea Mills.

Along with poetry - some other frills:
Songs and drawing - drawing upon wit
And Clare there, with her observation skills
(as well as doing a bit of guitar playing).

A lad who is a fan of football thrills
At Bristol City - in the mix, went it,
With Munch, Cezanne and scissors, at Sea Mills.

We opened doors to Psyche's inner ills.
Malaika played a winner - eyes were lit,
with everyone assembled - oh what skills!

It has been said that poetry distils.
It boiled down to us all doing our bit:
Our team, the gleaming children of Sea Mills
And teachers with their burning and discerning and their entertaining skills
And with Clare playing a bit of folk guitar.

I have thought I would like to try taking characters from another painting
who might try to ease Psyche's regret.
They could show that she wasn't the only one to make errors,
by sharing with her, a mistake of their own.
For instance, with the painting of Saint George and the Dragon, by Ucello
also in the National Gallery, the knight might inform Psyche
of how he could have negotiated with the dragon
instead of lunging in with his loveless lance.
Also, the dragon itself
might confide that things might not have ended up so badly
if it had given up eating young people and tried a vegetarian diet:
wheat, barley, chick peas, millet, lentils and poppy seeds
which had been very conveniently placed in separate piles.

*Teachers' notes written by Clare Elstow

<https://www.tes.com/teaching-resource/john-hegley-putting-you-in-the-picture-12307629>

John Hegley was born, 1953, North London, Anglo-French parentage. Schooled, Luton and Bristol, graduated, Bradford University in the History of Ideas. Honorary Doctorate in Literature, University of Bedfordshire. John Peel sessions with Popticians, 1983/4. BBC Online poet in residence 2000. Keats House, poet in residence, 2012. Arts Council of England grant 2019 - to run workshops with primary schoolchildren after visiting local art galleries: London, Luton, Bradford and Bristol.

Book titles include *Stanley's Stick* (Hodder) *New and Selected Potatoes* (Bloodaxe) and *Glad to Wear Glasses* (Carlton).
