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to
me!

LET'S TALK EMPOWERMENT. LET'S TALK ENGLISH

First Flight

The Tale of Custard the Dragon



1. Background

The Tale of Custard the Dragon was written by Ogden Nash, and is "probably his most famous poem for kids". One of his biographers stated, "Nash always saw his role as that of a cheerful light entertainer, and maintained it to the last in his writing". Decades after his death, he continues to attract new readers and is a popular, if not the most popular, American humorous poet.

His success is due to his mastery of rhyme. "I think in terms of rhyme, and have, since I was six years old." His rhymes are often absurd. He had a fondness for creating his own words whenever rhyming words did not exist, and a knack for surprising, pun-like rhymes, sometimes with words deliberately misspelled for comic effect. In 'The Tale of Custard the Dragon', for example, he changed 'really' and 'truly' to 'realio' and 'trulio'. And, he

changed window to winda, because he wanted it to rhyme with Belinda. He also created 'mouseholed', to rhyme with 'household'!

'The Tale of Custard the Dragon' is a ballad, a poem with short stanzas, that usually, but not always, has four lines. Ballad poems use a simple rhyming structure. Usually, the second and fourth lines rhyme. The rhyming structure found in ballads makes them fun to read aloud.

2. Summary

This is a funny poem about Belinda, a little girl who lived in a little white house with her little pets – a black kitten named Ink, a grey mouse named Blink, a yellow dog called Mustard and a cowardly dragon, Custard. Belinda, Ink, Blink and Mustard were all very brave. But little Custard was a coward, and only felt safe when he was locked up in a cage. Everyone made fun of him for his cowardice.

One day, a pirate entered the house. Belinda and her animals were all very scared. Ink, Blink and Mustard disappeared immediately! The pirate shot two bullets at Custard, but they missed him. Surprisingly, cowardly Custard attacked him, and ate him up. The other animals then came out of their hiding places and hugged him for his bravery. Suddenly Custard was treated like a hero. When the other animals realized Custard was getting so much attention, they got jealous, and each one of them claimed that they could have been even braver than Custard. Custard timidly agreed that everybody was braver than him!

Do listen to this poem –

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xc4EjudVVk>

3. Explanation Stanza by Stanza

Stanza 1

*Belinda lived in a little white house,
With a little black kitten and a little grey mouse,
And a little yellow dog and a little red wagon,
And a realio, trulio, little pet dragon.*

The poem starts by introducing the characters in the poem. Belinda lived in a little white house with her little pets and a little red wagon. She had a little black kitten, a little grey mouse, a little yellow dog, and, believe it or not, she really and truly had a little pet dragon!

Stanza 2

*Now the name of the little black kitten was Ink,
And the little grey mouse, she called him Blink,
And the little yellow dog was sharp as Mustard,
But the dragon was a coward, and she called him Custard.*

The black kitten was called Ink and the gray mouse was called Blink. The poet does not tell us any more about them at this point. However, he does tell us that the little yellow dog was as sharp as mustard, which means that he was very alert. Dragons are mythical creatures. They do not exist in real life. Belinda's little dragon was a coward and was called Custard. One reason he was called Custard could be that custard is a sauce, which is yellow in colour, and yellow is a colour associated with cowardice.

Stanza 3

*Custard the dragon had big sharp teeth,
And spikes on top of him and scales underneath,
Mouth like a fireplace, chimney for a nose,
And realio, trulio daggers on his toes.*

In this stanza, the poet describes Custard's ferocious appearance. He had big sharp teeth, spikes on his back, and scales on the underside of his body. His mouth looked like a fireplace and his nose was like a chimney (for letting out smoke). Dragons are supposed to breathe and spit fire. Custard really and truly had daggers on his toes. So it is surprising that he was a coward. He could scare anybody away!

Stanza 4

*Belinda was as brave as a barrel full of bears,
And Ink and Blink chased lions down the stairs,
Mustard was as brave as a tiger in a rage,
But Custard cried for a nice safe cage.*

Everybody in the poem, except little Custard, was very brave. Belinda was as brave as many bears in a barrel. Ink and Blink chased lions down the stairs. Mustard was as strong as an angry tiger. Normally, animals are put in cages to prevent them from harming others. But here, Custard was so scared, that he cried to be placed in a cage, which would protect him from harm.

Stanza 5

*Belinda tickled him, she tickled him unmerciful,
Ink, Blink and Mustard, they rudely called him Percival,
They all sat laughing in the little red wagon
At the realio, trulio, cowardly dragon.*

Everyone was mean to little Custard. Belinda used to tickle him without showing any mercy. This means that she would continue to tickle him even though he wanted her to stop. She knew that he would not harm her. Ink, Blink and Mustard made fun of Custard by calling him Percival. Percival was a famous Knight in the Court of King Arthur. He had been brought up in a forest, and he was innocent about the ways of the world. When he was young, people made fun of him because they thought that he was not fit to become a heroic Knight. In the same way, Custard's housemates felt that he was really and truly a coward, and therefore not fit to be a dragon. They all sat in the little red wagon and laughed at him.

However, Percival had the seeds of greatness in him, and finally became one of the most famous Knights in King Arthur's Courts. In the same way Custard also had the seeds of greatness in him, and he proved himself when he was challenged. We shall hear more about this in stanza 10.

Stanza 6

*Belinda giggled till she shook the house,
And Blink said Weeek! which is giggling for a mouse,
Ink and Mustard rudely asked his age,
When Custard cried for a nice safe cage.*

Belinda laughed so long at the dragon, that she shook the house. Blink, said 'Weeek', which is the giggling sound that a mouse makes. Ink and Mustard rudely asked dragon for his age when he cried for his nice safe cage. They were making fun of him by implying that he was a baby.

Stanza 7

*Suddenly, suddenly they heard a nasty sound,
And Mustard growled, and they all looked around.
Meowch! cried Ink, and ooh! cried Belinda,
For there was a pirate, climbing in the winda.*

Suddenly, they heard a nasty sound. Mustard growled and they all looked around to try and figure out where the sound was coming from. Ink cried 'Meowch' and Belinda cried 'Ooh', because they saw a pirate climbing into the house through a window.

Stanza 8

*Pistol in his left hand, pistol in his right,
And he held in his teeth a cutlass bright,
His beard was black, one leg was wood;
It was clear that the pirate meant no good.*

The pirate had a pistol in each hand, and he held a bright sharp blade between his teeth. He had a black beard and a wooden leg to replace a leg that he must have lost in a fight. It was very clear that he was dangerous and planned to steal something from the house, even if he had to kill or injure the people who lived there.

Stanza 9

*Belinda paled, and she cried Help! Help!
But Mustard fled with a terrified yelp,
Ink trickled down to the bottom of the household,
And little mouse Blink strategically mouseholed.*

Belinda became pale with fear and cried for help. Mustard gave a scared cry and ran away quickly; Ink slowly went down to the bottom of the house, and Blink cleverly disappeared into a mouse hole, leaving Belinda with the pirate.

Stanza 10

*But up jumped Custard, snorting like an engine,
Clashed his tail like irons in a dungeon,
With a clatter and a clank and a jangling squirm,
He went at the pirate like a robin at a worm.*

However, Custard came to Belinda's rescue. He jumped up, making a snorting noise like an engine, through his nose. He waved his tail making loud metallic noises like iron chains in a dungeon where people were imprisoned in the olden days. Then he attacked the pirate in the same way as a robin attacks a worm. The poor worm has no chance of escape. The pirate too was helpless!

Stanza 11

*The pirate gaped at Belinda's dragon,
And gulped some grog from his pocket flagon,
He fired two bullets, but they didn't hit,
And Custard gobbled him, every bit.*

The pirate stared in shock when he saw Custard, because, as we know, Custard looked very scary. To give himself some courage, the pirate drank a mouthful of alcohol from a flask in his pocket. He then took out his pistol and fired two bullets at Custard. But, the bullets did not hit him. We assume that Custard got really angry, because he quickly ate up every bit of the pirate.

Stanza 12

*Belinda embraced him, Mustard licked him,
No one mourned for his pirate victim.
Ink and Blink in glee did gyrate
Around the dragon that ate the pirate.*

After this, all the animals re-appeared. There was great celebration in the little house. Belinda hugged Custard, and Mustard licked him, as dogs generally do, to express his love. Nobody felt sorry for the pirate that Custard had killed. Ink and Blink were so happy that they started dancing around the dragon. For now, Custard was a hero!

Stanza 13

*But presently up spoke little dog Mustard,
I'd have been twice as brave if I hadn't been flustered.
And up spoke Ink and up spoke Blink,
We'd have been three times as brave, we think,
And Custard said, I quite agree
That everybody is braver than me.*

Everyone has an ego. And the animals were no different. They could not bear to see Custard being treated like a hero. So Mustard said that he would have been twice as brave as Custard if he hadn't got nervous. Ink and Blink said that they could have been thrice as brave as the dragon! Little Custard went back to his timid, scared self, and completely agreed that everybody was braver than him!

4. Vocabulary

1. **Ballad** – a song or poem that tells a story
The **ballad** singers move from village to village reciting stories of bravery.
2. **Narrate** – to tell a story
When we were children, my father would **narrate** events of the Sino-Indian war to us.

3. **Heroism** – bravery
The government gave him a medal for his **heroism**.
4. **Humorous** – funny, making you laugh
This is a **humorous** book on the life of a teenager.
5. **Parody** – a piece of writing or speech that copies somebody/
something in a funny way
A classmate wrote a **parody** in which he made fun of all the teachers
and students.
6. **Rhythm** – a pattern of sounds, words or musical notes that is used in
music, poetry, and dancing
She has no sense of **rhythm** and so is a terrible dancer.
7. **Wagon** – an open section of a train used to carry goods; in the olden
days a four wheeled vehicle driven by horses or oxen
The rail **wagons** carrying coal are fully loaded.
8. **Realio** – made up word for 'really'
She **really** enjoys working with young children.
9. **Trulio** – made up word for 'truly'
I **truly** regret having lied to my mother.
10. **Dragon** – a large frightening imaginary animal, often shown with
wings, a long tail, and fire coming out of its mouth
During the Chinese New Year celebrations, the **dragon** dance is
spectacular.
11. **Blink** – closing and opening eyes quickly
She did not even **blink** once and continued to stare at the screen
steadily.
12. **Mustard** – a sharp sauce or powder made from mustard seeds ground
with vinegar and other spices
Many people put **mustard** in their sandwiches, hot dogs or
hamburgers.
13. **Coward** – scared, not brave
He was a **coward** and hid below the bed when he heard the robbers
entering the house.

14. **Custard** – a sweet sauce, usually yellow in colour, made from eggs, milk and sugar and poured over sweet dishes
Fresh fruits in **custard** is my favourite dessert.
15. **Spikes** – pieces of metal or wood with sharp ends; sharp increase
The **spikes** under the shoes of sportsmen often damage the playing field.
Since there were many robberies in our area we had put **spikes** on our boundary wall.
There have been sharp **spikes** in COVID-19 cases in many cities.
16. **Scales** – here, small flat pieces of hard skin that cover the bodies of fish and reptiles; an instrument to measure weight; relative size or proportion of something
The **scales** of fish are not very easy to remove.
My **scale** showed I had lost 2 kilograms of weight.
His business is on a very large **scale**.
17. **Underneath** – below
He hid the keys **underneath** the door mat.
18. **Fireplace** – a space in the wall of a room for a fire to burn in
There was a bright fire burning in the **fireplace** to keep the room warm.
19. **Chimney** – a hollow structure that allows the smoke from a fire inside a building to escape to the air outside
There was dark smoke coming out of the factory **chimney** and it was polluting the air.
20. **Dagger** – a sharp knife
The handle of the king's **dagger** was studded with precious stones.
21. **Brave as a barrel full of bears** – a person without fear
He charged into battle, **brave as a barrel of bears**.
22. **Chased** – ran after a person or animal
We **chased** away the children who were plucking fruit from the trees in our garden.
23. **Rage** – anger
In a **rage**, he hit the cyclist who had brushed against his new car.

24. **Tickled** – lightly touched or prodded (a person or a part of the body) in a way that caused mild discomfort or itching and often laughter
The puppy loves having his tummy **tickled**.
25. **Unmerciful** – showing no mercy; cruel or harsh
The judge was **unmerciful** towards those who broke the law.
26. **Percival** – a Knight in King Arthur's court
Sir **Percival** was one of the legendary Knights of King Arthur's Round Table.
27. **Giggled** – to laugh repeatedly in a quiet but uncontrolled way, often at something silly or rude or when you are nervous
She **giggled** when she saw how funnily the clown was dressed.
28. **Nasty** – very bad or unpleasant
She had a **nasty** habit of criticizing everyone.
29. **Growled** – when an animal makes a threatening low noise in its throat; to say something in a rough voice
The dog **growled** at any strangers who came close to the house.
30. **Pirate** – a criminal who attacks ships to steal from them; to copy films, books, or computer software without permission or payment
The **pirates** robbed the ship and carried away the treasure.
We are advised not to buy **pirated** copies of films or software.
31. **Winda** – a made up word for a window
We opened the **window** to let in some air.
32. **Pistol** – a small gun that is held in and fired from one hand
The robber held a **pistol** to Sunil's father's head.
33. **Cutlass** – a short sword with a slightly curved blade, used by sailors many years ago
The sailor always kept his **cutlass** sharpened and ready to use in case he was attacked by pirates when he was out at sea.
34. **Paled** – used to describe a person's face or skin if it had less colour than usual, especially if he or she was ill or frightened
He **paled** when he saw the policeman standing outside the door.

35. **Terrified** – very frightened
He is **terrified** of snakes.
36. **Yelp** – a sudden short cry of pain
The dog gave a frightened **yelp** when the bully hit him with a stone.
37. **Trickled** – a slow flow of liquid; to go somewhere in small numbers
Tears **trickled** down from her eyes.
After the lockdown was lifted, customers slowly **trickled** into restaurants.
38. **Household** – all the people in a family who live together in a house
The Gupta **household** is famous for its hospitality.
39. **Strategically** – relating to or marked by strategy or plan
The chair was **strategically** placed on the carpet to hide the stains on it.
40. **Mouseholed** – made up word for entering a mousehole which is a small hole dug by a mouse, a burrow of a mouse
The two cats stood guard at the **mousehole** waiting to catch the mouse when he came out.
41. **Snorting** – to make an explosive sound by forcing air quickly up or down the nose
The horse was shaking its head and **snorting**.
42. **Clashed** – to compete, fight or seriously disagree about something
Federer and Nadal have **clashed** in the tennis finals many times.
43. **Irons** – chains tied around someone to prevent them from escaping or moving
It was a common practice earlier for prisoners to be chained in **irons**.
44. **Dungeon** – an underground prison especially in a castle
The **dungeon** in the old fort has been blocked to prevent tourists from going in.
45. **Clatter** – to make or cause something to make a series of short repeated noises
There was a loud **clatter** as the pots fell out of the box.

46. **Clank** – a loud unpleasant sound like pieces of metal hitting each other
There is a rumor that the **clank** of the prisoners' chains can still be heard in the dungeons.
47. **Jangling** – the noise of metal hitting metal
He entered the room **jangling** the keys in his hands.
48. **Squirm** – move uncomfortably, wriggle and twist around
She managed to **squirm** out of the tight fitting dress.
49. **Robin** – a small, brown bird with a red front usually found in Europe and America
The **robin** hopped around in the snow eating the breadcrumbs I had thrown out of the window.
50. **Gaped** – stared open-mouthed
We all **gaped** as the little girl walked unsteadily, wearing 6 inch heels.
51. **Gulped** – swallowed
He **gulped** his drink so fast that he felt sick.
52. **Grog** – an alcoholic drink liked by sailors
The sailors spent their time on shore drinking **grog** and having fun.
53. **Flagon** – a large container, typically with a handle and spout, from which drinks are served
This **flagon** contains eight glasses of wine.
54. **Bullet** – a small metal object that is fired from a gun
The **bullet** went right through the door.
55. **Gobbled** – ate quickly and noisily
He greedily **gobbled** down a large hamburger.
56. **Embraced** – held someone tightly with both arms to express love, liking, or sympathy, or when greeting or leaving someone
The little child ran and **embraced** her mother as soon as she saw her.
57. **Mourned** – sorrow at somebody's death, or loss of something
The entire nation **mourned** the death of the soldiers at the border.

58. **Victim** – someone or something that has been hurt, damaged, or killed or has suffered, either because of the actions of someone or something else, or because of illness or chance
We collected money to help the **victims** of the devastating flood in Assam.
59. **Glee** – happiness, excitement, or pleasure
The little children opened their presents with **glee**.
60. **Gyrate** – to move in circles
The dancers were finding it difficult to **gyrate** on the small stage.
61. **Presently** – soon, shortly
She is on her way; she will join our party **presently**.
62. **Flustered** – nervous and confused
The actor became **flustered** when he forgot his lines during the performance.

5. Questions

1. **Who are the characters in this poem? List them with their pet names.**
2. **Why did Custard cry for a nice safe cage? Why is the dragon called “cowardly dragon”?**
3. **“Belinda tickled him, she tickled him unmerciful...” Why?**
4. **The poet has employed many poetic devices in the poem. For example – “Clashed his tail like iron in a dungeon” — the poetic device here is a simile. Can you, with your partner, list some more such poetic devices used in the poem?**
5. **Read stanza three again to know how the poet describes the appearance of the dragon.**
6. **Can you find out the rhyme scheme of two or three stanzas of the poem?**

7. **Writers use words to give us a picture or image without actually saying what they mean. Can you trace some images used in the poem?**
8. **Do you find The Tale of Custard the Dragon to be a serious or a light-hearted poem? Give reasons to support your answer.**
9. **This poem, in ballad form, tells a story. Have you come across any such modern song or lyric that tells a story? If you know one, tell it to the class. Collect such songs as a project.**

6. Writing

Have fun writing your ballad. Gather information (choose/decide an idea/theme), organise your materials under characters and story and then write. Revise and edit your ballad to make it entertaining. Use the following guidelines to write your ballad.

- *Purpose of writing the ballad* – to entertain and interest
- *To whom I am writing* – decide for whom you are writing
- *How should I structure features?*
 - Tell a simple narrative
 - A few major characters
 - A strong rhythm and rhyme
 - May have a refrain (single or two line(s) repeated often)
 - Divide into verses

7. Literary Devices

1. **Rhyme scheme:** The first twelve stanzas in the poem follow the aabb rhyme scheme. Each of these stanzas is composed of two pairs of rhymed couplets. In stanza 13, the rhyme scheme is aabbcc, and is composed of 3 pairs of rhymed couplets.
2. **Oxymoron:** Oxymoron is the use of two words together than have opposite meanings. The poet uses an oxymoron when he says 'pet dragon'. We know that dragons are dangerous creatures, and therefore, cannot be kept as pets.

3. **Simile:** This is a figure of speech where one thing is compared with another thing of a different kind, using words such as 'as' or 'like'.

Examples –

- (i) *The little yellow dog was sharp as Mustard.*
- (ii) *Mouth like a fireplace,*
- (iii) *Belinda was as brave as a barrel full of bears,*
- (iv) *Mustard was as brave as a tiger in a rage,*
- (v) *snorting like an engine,*
- (vi) *Clashed his tail like irons in a dungeon,*
- (vii) *He went at the pirate like a robin at the worm.*

4. **Metaphor:** This is a figure of speech that describes an object or action in a way that is not literally true, but helps explain an idea or make a comparison. The poet uses the device of metaphor when he says the dragon's mouth is like a fireplace and its nose is like a chimney in the third line of Stanza 3.
5. **Personification:** This is a device used to give human qualities to something that is not human. The poet personifies Belinda's kitten, mouse, dog and dragon. In the poem he gives them all the human ability to speak.
6. **Onomatopoeia:** This is a device where a word is used to describe a sound. The poet uses an onomatopoeia 'weeck' to describe the sound a mouse makes while giggling. Other onomatopoeia are 'clatter', 'clank', 'jangling', 'growled' and 'meowch'.
7. **Repetition:** This is a device where a word or phrase is intentionally repeated two or more times close to each other.

Examples –

- (i) Little

*Belinda lived in a **little** white house,
With a **little** black kitten and a **little** grey mouse,
And a **little** yellow dog and a **little** red wagon,
And a realio, trulio, **little** pet dragon.*

Now the name of the **little** black kitten was Ink,
And the **little** grey mouse, she called him Blink,
And the **little** yellow dog was sharp as Mustard,
But the dragon was a coward, and she called him Custard.

(ii) Realio, trulio

And a **realio, trulio**, little pet dragon

And **realio, trulio** daggers on his toes.

At the **realio, trulio**, cowardly dragon.

(iii) Tickled

Belinda **tickled** him, she **tickled** him unmerciful,

(iv) Suddenly

Suddenly, suddenly they heard a nasty sound,

(v) Pistol

Pistol in his left hand, **pistol** in his right,

(vi) Help

Belinda paled, and she cried **Help! Help!**

8. **Alliteration:** This is the occurrence of the same letter or sound at the beginning of adjacent or closely connected words.

Examples –

(i) **Belinda was as brave as a barrel full of bears** – the 'b' sound is repeated

(ii) **She shook the house** – the 'sh' sound is repeated.

(iii) **And he held in his teeth** – the 'h' sound is repeated.

- (iv) *With a **clatter** and a **clank** – the 'cl' sound is repeated.*
- (v) *The pirate **gaped** at Belinda's dragon.
And **gulped** some **grog** from his pocket **flagon** – the 'g' sound is repeated.*