TRANSLATING POETRY

Translation is like retelling a story you’ve heard from someone else. You won’t repeat it using the exact same words. You might even change some small details or how you tell the story, depending on whether you’re talking to a friend, a younger sibling, or your teacher. In other words, we’re ‘translating’ all the time. The only difference with what we usually call ‘translation’ is that the change is happening between two languages, not within your own language.

WHAT YOU’LL NEED

- A bilingual dictionary (check the different language options on WordReference.com)
- A thesaurus and English dictionary
- A rhyming dictionary

HOW TO TRANSLATE POETRY

Step 1: Decode the poem
To translate a poem, you first need to understand it. Use a bilingual dictionary to look up each word and write down its English translation(s). Once you’ve finished, you will have a rough version of the poem in English. The words might not be in the standard order, but this word-for-word translation will help you understand what the poem is about. Think:

- What is happening in the poem?
- What is the mood of the poem?
- What types of words is the poet using?
- Does it have any interesting features?

Step 2: Listen to the poem
Poems are written to be heard, rather than read. Read the poem out loud, or copy and paste it into a text-to-speech converter (changing the language in the dropdown menu), which will read out the poem for you. Listen to the different sounds that you hear.

- Are certain sounds repeated?
- Can you hear any patterns?

Step 3: Make creative decisions
How the poem looks on the page (form) and how the poem sounds are both part of its creative effects. As a translator, you can decide whether to keep these features of the poem. You can even change these features to something different. Think:

- What effects do these features have on you?
- What do they remind you of?
- Are there any links to the poem’s theme?
- Who is the poem written for (target audience)?

Step 4: Work on your translation
Using the rough word-for-word translation you wrote out in Step 1, work on creating a polished version. At this stage, change the order of words, swap words for synonyms or completely different words, and create effects, such as rhyme (find rhymes using a rhyming dictionary). Think:

- Do you need to change the order of the words to make more sense in English?
- Do the words you’ve chosen fit with the overall tone of the poem?
- Will your target audience understand your poem?
- And finally, does your finished version reflect the creative decisions that you made in Step 3?