

The Tale of Custard the Dragon

This poem is written in the style of a ballad — a song or poem that tells a story. You must be familiar with ballads that narrate tales of courage or heroism. This poem is a humorous ballad close to a parody.

Read it aloud, paying attention to the rhythm.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

Belinda still lives in her little white house,
With her little black kitten and her little grey mouse,
And her little yellow dog and her little red wagon,
And her realio, trulio little pet dragon.

Belinda is as brave as a barrel full of bears,
And Ink and Blink chase lions down the stairs,
Mustard is as brave as a tiger in a rage,
But Custard keeps crying for a nice safe cage.

OGDEN NASH

Ogden Nash wrote over four hundred pieces of comic verse. The best of his work was published in 14 volumes between 1931 and 1972. His work is perhaps best described in this poetic tribute by Anthony Burgess:

...he brought a new kind of sound to our literary diversions.
And didn't care much about breaking the poetic laws of the Medes
and the Persians.
He uses lines, sometimes of considerable length that are colloquial
and prosy.
And at the end presents you with a rhyme...
This bringing together of the informal and the formal is what his
genius chiefly loves.
I am trying to imitate him here, but he is probably quite inimitable.



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Glossary

grog: a drink typically drunk by sailors

gyrate: to move around in circles

Thinking about the Poem

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.

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