

The Ballad of Dirty Joe

By Bill Harley

Out upon the briny deep where the wild and wet winds blow,
There sailed a cruel and evil man, the pirate Dirty Joe.
He sailed upon the scummiest craft that ever left the docks
He roamed the world and seven seas in search of dirty socks.

He wore a scratchy, scraggly beard, he had but one good eye,
And with a tattered piece of sail, his oily hair he'd tie.
Hook on his arm? Aye, yes, that too - he found it very handy
For picking in between his teeth to get out sticky candy.

His one good eye surveyed the seas, searching for some ship
And when he spied a boat out there, he'd sneer and lick his lips
"All hands on deck," he'd order, "there's treasure to be had!"
He'd shake his one fist in the air and laugh like he were mad.

He'd fire his cannons cross their bow, and board the other craft
Then make the crew take off their shoes, and with a horrid laugh
He tied the sailors all up tight, and rob them of their socks
Then leave their ship a-floundering to run up on the rocks.

The socks he took from other ships, you'll be surprised to learn
He tied upon his rigging lines that reached from bow to stern
They flapped and fluttered in the breeze, a thousand little flags -
And the smell that those old socks gave off would make you cough and gag.

From China to the Ivory Coast, Australia up to Spain,
The pirate did his dirty work across the bounding Main -
You could always tell a boat Joe robbed by looking at the crew -
Fear was deep within their eyes, and all their toes were blue.

Till one day as he sailed his ship somewhere near Mandalay
His lookout spied another boat beating 'cross the bay
"Ah ha!" said Joe, "let's get that boat, we'll catch it now by thunder,
For sure as I am Dirty Joe, there's socks there we can plunder."

The pirates cheered and set their sails to catch up with their prey
They sharpened up their knives and swords, their boat danced in the spray.
But suddenly they stopped their cheers, the wind it gave a moan,
For on the other ship there flew a flag of skull and bones.

And from bow to stern, from mast to mast, flying everywhere
There flapped and snapped five hundred pairs of pilfered underwear -
Boxers big and boxers small, with stripes and polka dots
And tighty-whities hung there too, like the ones your grandpa's got.

And lined up on that other deck, armed with swords and knives
Was a sight that made the men all shake and fear for their own lives
A hundred pirate women waved their daggers and their swords
And the woman pirate captain yelled "Now, girls let's climb aboard!"

"It's Stinky Annie" someone said, "and her band of smelly varmints.
She captures every boat she can and takes their undergarments."
"Then all is lost," another said, "we don't have a chance
You can't be a pirate if you don't have underpants."

"You lily-livered lunks of lard," lashed out Dirty Joe
"What kind of pirates are you lads? That's what I want to know
We'll show them, we'll take their ship, we'll tie them up!" he roared
"We'll take their socks and sneakers, too, and throw them overboard!"

The pirates there with Dirty Joe screamed and cheered and yelled
The first mate blew the whistle, someone rang the bell.
Stinky Annie's ship drew close, all the pirates cursed and muttered
While a thousand pairs of underwear and socks all flapped and fluttered.

And as their ships came closer still, Joe's men all could see
That Stinky Annie was as scary looking as could be
Her mouth was twisted in a sneer, one arm was but a hook
And with her one good evil eye she gave a withering look.

Finally the two ships met, on the waves they rocked
"Get them now boys," Joe cried out, "Take off all their socks"
But even as the men attacked the women waiting there
Stinky Ann called to her crew "Girls - get their underwear!"

It was an awful battle, a loud and raucous fray –
At first it seemed that Dirty Joe would win and have his way
Until Joe's first mate noticed that Stinky Annie's crew
All were fighting barefoot, they had no socks and shoes.

"What's the point?" a man called out "Why make all this fuss?
If they're not wearing socks and shoes, what's in it for us?"
"No!" screamed Joe, "don't give up now!" but spoke the words too late
And Stinky Annie and her crew quickly sealed their fate.

Stinky Annie came aboard and cornered Dirty Joe
She said "I want your boxers now, in case you didn't know.
And Dirty Joe looked up and said "Before you have your fun
Your face looks quite familiar, you remind me of someone."

Stinky Anne let down her sword, they peered at one another
"Wait," she said, "I see it now, you're Joe my little brother."
"That's right" said Joe, "you're sister Ann, you bounced me on your knee.
Put down your arms, give up this fight, please don't do this to me!"

Stinky Annie gave a smile, a tear came to her eye
All her crew looked on in awe, they'd never seen her cry.
"Little Joey how are you?" she asked, "How have you been?
"I'm just fine dear sister Ann," he said and gave a grin.

"Good," said Annie, "that's great news." Her one eye shone and danced.
"Now do just what I say, you squirt. I want your underpants."
"But Annie, you're my sister," Joe blubbered and he whined
"Can it, Joey," Annie said, "I haven't got the time."

"Just because we're family, it doesn't mean I care
I'm a pirate - that's my job - I want your underwear."
So Dirty Joe surrendered and did what his sister said
And when he did, it's safe to say, more than his face was red.

Stinky Annie sailed away and still she roams the seas
With her brother's boxers tied above, flapping in the breeze
And Dirty Joe, he sailed home, close to the Bay of Fundy
He's not a pirate anymore, because he has no undies.

That's the finish of this tale, it's stupid and it's done
But there's a lesson here that I'd impart to everyone.
If you've got an older sister, then I feel bad for you
Cause as long as she's alive, she'll tell you what to do.

“The Ballad of Dirty Joe”

Below are some observations and suggestions related to my poem, “The Ballad of Dirty Joe.”

First, I have come to believe that most good stories center on a strong character. We tend to think of stories as having a good plot, but I believe that a good plot comes from strong characters. When a character has a way of behaving and it doesn't work, there is a problem. This is the essence of conflict, and central to a good story. So, if a character is strong, chances are something interesting will happen.

In keeping with the need for a strong character, the first six stanzas of the poem are taken up with a description of how terrible Dirty Joe is. Describing the character's nature and behavior is central to understanding the conflict. Likewise, when Dirty Annie comes into the picture, we understand from her description that she is very strong-willed. Without saying anything, we know there is going to be trouble.

Another important element in this poem is humor. It might be interesting to have your students name what things in the poem are funny, and why. The major method used in this poem is having characters work against type – while they are supposed to be tough and scary, they do things that cut against that – Dirty Joe collects socks, Dirty Annie collects underwear. (I will leave it for you to decide why underwear is funny – it just is.) Second, we think of pirates as being solitary, alone in the world, yet each of these pirates has family. Suddenly, we see them as little kids. Dirty Joe behaves like a little brother, whining and complaining. Playing “against type” is funny.

The last important element in this piece is the idea of reversal. Reversals are at the heart of good stories. For those of you so inclined, this goes all the way back to Aristotle's Poetics, but we'll leave that alone. In this poem, there are three major reversals. The first sets the story in motion – there is another pirate out there scarier than the first one we described. The second reversal is when we discover that the two pirates are brother and sister. The third reversal, is that Dirty Annie doesn't care if Joe is her brother or not. Once again, this goes against what is expected.

One other comment I would make about this poem is that it is mock heroic – poetry has often been used to tell heroic stories – from the Iliad and Odyssey onwards. This poem has that feel, but is silly. In fact, it is in iambic heptameter (seven beats a line), which is often used in epic poetry) Traditionally, storytellers used poetry that rhymed because it made the story easier to remember. As a storyteller who also writes songs, I'm very interested in the connection between song and story. I could just have well put this to music. I like how it works as a poem.

- 1) **Why is this poem funny? Find four things that are funny and try to explain them.**
- 2) **Is there a hero in this story? Is the central character heroic? Why are pirates interesting to us? Other pirates you might investigate are “Captain Hook” by Shel Silverstein, in Where the Sidewalk Ends, Captain Abdul's Pirate School by Colin McNaughton, and of course, Long John Silver in Treasure Island. I have a song about kid pirates “A Pirate Song” on my recording “Big Big World”.**
- 3) **Look at poems by Robert W. Service – in particular “The Cremation of Sam McGee” – which is in the same meter as “Dirty Joe.” It's funny, too.**
- 4) **Do the poem as a reader's theater, having students take the part of narrator, Dirty Joe, Stinky Annie, and pirates.**

Available on “Blah Blah Blah” and as the picture book Dirty Joe the Pirate (Harper Collins)