



Brighton Pierrots  
oil on canvas  
Walter Sickert (1860-1942)

### Starting questions

- Choose one word to sum up this picture.
- Where is your eye drawn?
- Describe what is happening.
- What are the main colours? What feeling do they create?
- What time of day is it?
- Who can you see in the painting? What are they doing?
- What would you see, hear, feel and smell if you were there?
- Describe the mood and atmosphere of the painting.
- What is the artist's viewpoint? What is the effect of painting the picture from this angle?
- If you were in the painting where would you choose to be and why?
- What do you think might happen next?
- What are the striped objects in front of the stage? Why has the artist included them?

## Background information

### The painting

At first sight this painting illustrates popular British seaside entertainment at the beginning of the twentieth century. Sickert has painted a pierrot show as the setting sun turns the sky dusky pink. The pierrots perform on a wooden stage on the beach with a background of houses on Brighton seafront. Two performers in red suits and straw boaters stand stiffly at the front of the stage. They face a sparse audience seated in deckchairs. Sickert wants us to focus on the pierrette in pink playing the piano at the back of the stage who stares directly back at us. Both she and the pierrot in green are wearing traditional costumes with ruffles round the neck and a conical shaped hat.

Has Sickert deliberately arranged the figures on the stage in an awkward way to undermine the perceived joviality of their performance? The stage is lit by footlights and lamps hanging above the stage. The acid colours of the scene created by the artificial stage lights add to the unsettling sense of all not being well. The blurred, unsmiling faces, many empty deckchairs at the front of the audience and isolation of the main figure with hunched shoulders add to this effect.

### The historical context

Pierrot shows had first appeared in Britain's seaside resorts during the 1890s and offered holiday family entertainment with their mixture of singing, dancing, music, acrobatics and comic sketches.

Painted in 1915 during the First World War, this visual record of British seaside entertainment highlights the tension and melancholy evoked by the war. In some towns on the south coast at the time, gunfire from the battle front could be heard. The many empty deckchairs in the audience make us think about the young men who could be sitting there enjoying themselves but in fact, have gone to fight. Some of the men in the audience appear to have bandaged heads. Could this be a reference to wounded soldiers from the war?



### The artist

Sickert was born in Munich. In 1860 as a small boy he moved to England with his family. His father was an artist but Sickert first set out to be an actor and theatrical life inspired many of his paintings.

Sickert was on holiday in Brighton during August and September 1915. He was fascinated by this show on the beach near the Palace Pier and watched it every evening for five weeks. He made many sketches, which he later used to create this painting in his London studio. There is another version of this painting at the Tate. He is well known for creating mood and atmosphere through his paintings.



# Ideas for creative writing

## Imagining a setting

- Describe the place to someone who cannot see it or to a partner who has chosen a different picture. Point out the smallest details and explain why you chose it. Try using prepositions to start each sentence.
- Annotate a copy of the picture with words to describe sounds, textures, smells, colours and atmosphere. Add questions, ideas and comments.
- Imagine something is hidden. What is it and who might find it?
- Imagine you could talk to one of the people in the picture. What would you ask them and how would they respond?



Walter Richard Sickert, 1860–1942  
Self-Portrait: The Bust of Tom Sayers 1913  
Oil paint on canvas  
610 x 503 mm

## Starting to write

Write down every idea and thought that comes to you about the setting: words, phrases, sentences, pieces of dialogue, images, a feeling, memory, smell or taste, the name of a character, a description of a person or place.

Share ideas with a partner and ask them questions about their place. Choose your favourite ideas and work with them.

Write a piece of descriptive prose as part of a story. What mood and atmosphere do you want to create? Which aspects of the place will you describe? What happens next?

Write an imaginary travel brochure for your setting to persuade people to visit.

Imagine this picture is an illustration in a book. Write the caption to accompany it.

Choose one of the people in the picture. Using the wartime context, write a diary entry or monologue to reveal their thoughts and feelings.

Write a postcard home from a tourist in Brighton at the time.

Write a playscript with stage directions to show what happens next and what the characters say and do.

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