

Saltaire Festival Poetry Competition 2020

Session 5 – Ballad, Blank and Free Verse

This session is aimed at poets over 18 and looks at ballad, blank and free verse poetry. The session's looking at the basics, not going into depth, so that it can be an introduction for those new to these forms. It also includes a look at the 2019 competition winners.

If you want to enter a poem into the 2020 competition, the theme is Green Aire and judges will be looking for poems that explore the theme and how they link to the Aire Valley and Saltaire. You can find full details at www.saltairefestival.co.uk. You'll also find worksheets there that recap the videos and have suggestions for writing activities.

Ballad

A ballad is a **narrative poem** – it tells a story. They were '*quickly composed to convey the scandals and important events of the day [they] were the primary source of news for the lower classes.*'¹ - known as broadside ballads. Others are border ballads, folks ballads, comic ballads, literary ballads (Ballad of Reading Gaol by Oscar Wilde for example). In fact, Rap and urban poetry styles have their roots in ballad, lambasting those in power, as do songs of protest, like those of the 1960's.

Generally a ballad will be a rhyming poem, with 4-line stanzas (or quatrains), with alternate rhyming lines, clear and repeating rhythm, and some have a chorus. In a six-line stanza the first, fourth and six line rhyme. This means they can be set to music easily, which is why many songs are written this way, hence Romantic and Rock Ballads.

There's no fixed rhythm, like a **sonnet**, but they share some common patterns, like the use of the iambic pentameter. Using the ballad, you could have seven 6-line stanzas (42 lines) or ten 4-line quatrains (40 lines).

Here's another work-in-progress of mine.

*The grass was green and litter-free
Less plastic in the Aire
Buzzing past a buff-tailed bee
A Saltaire sight so rare.*

1 P23, *Female Tars*, Suzanne J. Stark, 1996, Pimlico



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*In the street the deer came,
We saw hedgehogs snuffle by,
Wildlife lists a family game
Cubs frolicking made us sigh...*

I might go on to relate this to child education and key-stages, to how much wildlife there is in the Aire Valley, to the impact on both child/adult awareness of nature and mental health.

W H Auden, in the 'Wadsworth Anthology of Poetry', presents *Let Me Tell You a Little Story. The Anthology of the Ballad* in Chapter 5.

The ballad form may have its roots in the medieval period, but it is a relevant form for today's poets too. As shown by BBC Radio Two commissioning **Radio Ballads** in response to the 2012 Olympics in London.

Activity:

- In ten minutes, write a draft ballad on a topic relating to Green Aire
- Read aloud to explore the cadences and rhythm. Does it flow?
- If there are too many topics (and the Green Aire theme is a broad one), focus on a specific one to write about
- Remember, your ballad could be in different styles, folk, broadside, literary, comic. Try writing in these styles. Which one comes most naturally?
- Decide which draft you want to work on, and whether 4-line quatrains or 6-line stanzas

Blank Verse and Free Verse

We looked at sonnets in Session 4, which are written in blank verse, and we've just looked at ballads, so you'll be familiar with the use of the iamb metre now. Though blank verse can rhyme, it doesn't have to, but it does have a rhythm.

Free verse however, 'does what it says on the tin' - it does its own thing. It doesn't rhyme, doesn't have an ABAB pattern but follows the natural rhythm of how we speak; it may have a specific layout to conjure an image to link with the text; it is a narrative



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poem, it tells a story. Free verse is a very popular choice for contemporary poets, as it frees them up from constraints. To illustrate, I've included the poems from last year's over-18 category winners who all chose free verse as their poetry style.

2019's theme was **Textiles, Technology, Time** and how they linked with Saltaire. The poems are in reverse order, 3rd prize winner, 2nd prize winner and 1st prize winner.

Whilst reading the poems:

- Think about how their free verse is structured
- What have they chosen to explore and link to the theme?
- How have they used senses to create images?
- How have they used the layout of their poem to connect with the theme?
- To what extent do they use punctuation, eg do lines flow into the next one, how many breaths are needed to read the lines/poem.
- How many different devices have been used, eg alliteration, onomatopoeia, similes, metaphors, personification, repetition, word play, assonance? (A simple explanation of these can be found at <https://clpe.org.uk/poetryline/poetic-forms-and-devices>)

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Engagement

Emma Storr

Third Prize

I do.

Your threads hold me, pull me into
your worsted weave. I hear
your heart in the treadle-beat,
steady and true to me.

I stretch my arms across your frame's
embrace, touch my bridal dress
of wool, teased and spun on bobbins
that feed your hungry clatter.

Skeins of silk twist light within
its length. I measure your devotion
with my hands: my palms' span,
the inches of my thumbs.

Salt's Mill beside the Aire will be
our church, the weir our witness.
I'll wear your plaited ring of yarn
as proof, my loom, my love.

I do.



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Saltaire Souls

Alison Hughes

Second Prize

The mill stands proud and emphatic.
Resilient, unmoving. Stone, iron, wood.
A gutted form, an exoskeleton.
An abandoned carapace amongst silent hills.
Emptied of masters, machines,
manual manipulators of thread and fabric.

Only time separates us from the throng.
Hearts beating, air breathing.
Hands on machinery spinning warp and weft,
weaving woolly webs.
And I can hear the thrill and thrum,
the skittle skattle, dash and trap of the shuttle.
Cacophony. Clogs on cobbles.
The cough of dust laden air.

They walk amongst us.
Hands drift across art, turn books,
linger on old images. A whisper, an echo.
Can you feel them?
A thousand hearts beating, lips murmuring,
eyes watching, fingers fastening.
Time is tentored out.



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They are here. **Salts Mill 1853 Gallery**

Isobel Thrilling

Winner

SALTS MILL 1853 GALLERY

Fresh scent of lilies circles the girders,
white ghosts,
pale thermals rising
from unswung censers of cut-glass.

Here machines once wove colours
from the moors,
blue, purple and green,
the textures of
Yorkshire wools mixed with alpaca,
or fabric
from hessian made into sacks.

This hall was strung with fine strings,
yet the music was heavy-metal,
looms for harps that rang
with the song
of work, the clack of clogs

Now the sun gilds paintings
and books,
notelets, alive with arabesques,
scroll gold,
huge, oriental vases
bloom like immense flowers.

I came with my son and a friend,
we meandered alone,
yet threads of
tenderness spread between us like weft.



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As you can see, their free verse poems all link the making of textiles to personal stories. The use of sound (treadle beat, clatter; skittle, skattle; looms for harps that rang, clack of clogs) evokes the historic use of Salts Mill. Descriptions of place (weir, silent hills, moors), of time past and present, and the implicit suggestion of past lives suspended in the air of the building appeal to our emotions. What other facets of the poems do you think appealed to the judges?

Although these winning poems are in free verse, it wasn't the style that caught the judges' eyes, but the content and the link with the given themes. Some submitted poems were excellent, but didn't stick to the brief, so it's important that if you are submitting a poem, you make sure you follow the competition guidelines. These are available at www.saltiarefestival.co.uk

Activity:

- Read the poems again and note what stands out for you, what devices used appeal to you
- Try to re-write the poems in rhyming blank verse. How do the versions differ? Which feels the strongest? Does using rhyme lessen or increase the impact?
- Think about layout. Will your poem be a straight 42-lines, in stanzas, in a pattern?
- Choose how you want to link the Green Aire theme with impacts on the environment. Do free-writing (that's continuous writing with no stops, no edits, no breaks, no staring – if you 'dry up' write Green Aire Green Aire until words come back to you)
- Read what you've written. What words, phrases, feelings, sounds stand out? Start again with these and re-write.
- Do the same exercise again; slowly a piece will build.
- Work on your piece until you feel it flows.
- Read aloud; better still ask someone to read it and comment on its content and flow
- Using the comments (if you need to) rewrite and edit until you have a final draft

Summary

That's the end of the five short videos looking at styles of poetry. There are numerous websites and videos with information on styles, devices, types of poetry; its history, its development, contemporary trends, ways of writing and performing.



The one thing you should remember is that judges are looking for YOUR VOICE.

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They are looking for your individual approach to the linked themes.

Although I have covered several types and styles in the five videos, you don't have to choose any of them. It's up to you what style you choose to write your poem in, and whether you want to submit a poem to the 2020 Saltaire Festival Poetry Competition.

I hope you've gleaned something from the videos and activities, and do hope that you will submit, as Saltaire Festival Poetry Competition 2020 is looking forward to reading your creative responses to the Green Aire theme.

A final reminder that the closing date for the competition is 17 July and all details can be found at www.saltairefestival.co.uk

Happy writing! - and good luck!

Irene Lofthouse

May 2020

