

Ledbury Poetry Festival Community Programme

Pictures and Poetry December Transcript

EXERCISE ONE: Warm up writing exercise – Creative Colour Schemes

This exercise uses colours as an inspiration for writing. It also incorporates personification.



Make a list of colours. Think about colour as a concept; the role of colour in our lives; the different meanings, connotations and symbolism of colours.

Choose a colour from your list, think about it, immerse your mind in it and write a poem/poetic description/monologue of the colour in the first person. Write as if you *are* the colour, think about what the colour is used for, meanings, symbolism, its place in art etc. What does the colour think about this? Does it like being the colour that it is? Does it wish it could be another colour or mean something different? Would it like to colour the world in a different way? Does the colour have a special way of speaking, dialect, accent, tone... etc.

Begin your piece with the words 'I am...!' and then the name of the colour that is speaking. Here are some examples:

I am Silver, serene and heavenly
I can be seen in dark skies on clear nights
I glide silently, leaving beads on every cobweb
For Gold to find in the morning

I am Red.
I am passion.
It takes two to tango
And believe me, I like to dance.
I am blood, anger, lust.

Give me wine and roses
And I'll be yours.

I am Grey,
A shade in-between,
Half-black, half-white,
I can never make up my mind,
I prefer to sit on the fence
And let my thoughts cloud over

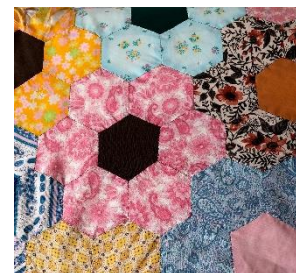
EXERCISE TWO: The theme for this writing exercise is Quilting

The idea for this theme came from a patchwork quilt that was made and given to me by my Nan, Marjorie Parker, years ago. I use it as a bedcover, and it is an exquisite work of art. The quilt contains pieces of fabric and scraps of material from old curtains, clothes and dresses worn by my family and items bought at jumble sales. The quilt tells stories; it is a chronicle; it holds memories.



SLIDE 1 (left) – NAN'S QUILT

SLIDE 2 (right) – NAN'S QUILT (CLOSE-UP)



INTRODUCTION

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quilting>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quilt>

<https://www.with-heart-and-hands.com/2016/09/quilting-poems-sayings-superstitions.html>

Quilts disclose valuable historical information about their creators, "visualizing particular segments of history in tangible, textured ways."

There are many traditions regarding the uses of quilts. Quilts may be made or given to mark important life events such as marriage, the birth of a child, a family member leaving home. Modern quilts are not always intended for use as bedding, and may be used as wall hangings, table runners, or tablecloths.

Quilting traditions are particularly prominent in the United States, where the necessity of creating warm bedding met the paucity of local fabrics in the early days of the colonies. Imported fabric was very expensive, and local homespun fabric was labour-intensive to create and tended to wear out sooner than commercial fabric. It was essential for most families to use and preserve textiles efficiently. Saving or salvaging small scraps of fabric was a part of life for all households. Small pieces of fabric were joined together to make larger pieces, in units called "blocks."

Quilting was often a communal activity, involving all the women and girls in a family or in a larger community. There are also many historical examples of men participating in these quilting traditions. A quilting bee was arranged, during which the actual quilting was completed by multiple people.

There are many traditions regarding the number of quilts a young woman (and her family) was expected to have made prior to her wedding for the establishment of her new home. Specific wedding quilts continue to be made today. Wedding ring quilts, which have a patchwork design of interlocking rings, have been made since the 1930s. It was considered bad luck to incorporate heart motifs in a wedding quilt (the couple's hearts might be broken if such a design were included), so tulip motifs were often used to symbolize love in wedding quilts.

Quilting superstitions are closely tied to the creation of quilts, as with many other activities that started centuries ago and have been passed down the generations... a mother to her daughter, a grandmother to her granddaughters, by friends in a quilting bee and so on. As they quilted, they shared stories and tales, things that had gone wrong or turned out wonderfully well based on what they believed to be the causes - and superstitions and folklore about quilting began!

Superstitions regarding making quilts are tied to religion and other deep-seated ideas about faith and faithfulness. A quilt should never be started on a Friday, as this day was "the devil's day", so any project started on a Friday was likely never to be finished. The only time one might quilt was on 'Good Friday' but only if one was making the quilt for reasons of faith.

There should be no quilting done on Sunday, as this is the day of rest for Christians. Strange penalties or punishments were then associated with this superstition. Any stitching done on this day needed to be ripped out with the sewer's teeth only.

It was said that a girl who had no bridal quilt by the time she turned twenty-one, would never marry. Furthermore, there should not be any breaks or disruptions in the patterns on a border. This would create bad luck for the marriage. So vines, flowers etc. must maintain their flow as one design all along and around the border, just as they desired in life and marriage.

SOME TECHNIQUES

Patchwork & Piecing

One of the primary techniques involved in quilt making is patchwork, sewing together geometric pieces of fabric often to form a design or "block."

Appliqué

Appliqué is where an upper layer of fabric is sewn onto a ground fabric.

Embellishment

Additional decorative elements may be added to the surface of a quilt to create a three-dimensional or whimsical effect. The most common objects sewn on are beads or buttons. Decorative trim, piping, sequins, found objects, or other items can also be secured to the surface.

Look at the attached images, clockwise from L to R on the single sheet of six pictures. I have included historical and background information where necessary, which I hope will inform your poetry.

1. UNDERGROUND RAILROAD QUILT PANELS

<https://pathways.thinkport.org/secrets/quilts1.cfm>

<https://folklife.si.edu/magazine/underground-railroad-quilt-codes>

Each panel in this image represents a separate quilt which would have been a coded message for slaves fleeing the American south for freedom in Canada. Some symbols gave directions, some meant danger or that food was available, and so on. Slaves in the main couldn't read but they did know the symbols that guided them to freedom. More background information to this below.

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

The Underground Railroad was a secret network organized by people who helped men, women, and children escape from slavery to freedom. It operated before the Civil War (1861-1865) ended slavery in the United States. The Underground Railroad provided hiding places, food, and often transportation for the fugitives who were trying to escape slavery. Along the way, people also provided directions for the safest way to get further north on the dangerous journey to freedom.

The people who helped slaves escape were called "conductors" or "engineers." The places along the escape route were called "stations." The "station master" was a person in charge of that hiding place or safe house, just as the station master was in charge of a railroad station. Sometimes escaping slaves were called "passengers." Sometimes they were called "cargo" or "goods." Conductors helped passengers get from one station to the next. Sometimes they travelled with escaping slaves all the way from the South, where they had been slaves, to the North or to Canada, where they would be free. Sometimes the conductors travelled only a short distance and then handed the escaping slaves to another helper. Harriet Tubman was a famous conductor on the Underground Railroad. Engineers helped slaves who were running away by providing them with food, shelter, and sometimes jobs. They hid the slaves from people who were trying to catch them and return them to slavery.

THE LANGUAGE OF QUILTS

When Africans were forced to come to America as slaves, they brought with them rich traditions of making banners and quilting. Many slaves did not have a chance to learn how to read and write. In some cases, they were not even allowed to talk to one another. They had to be clever, and find other ways to "talk" and tell their stories. Quilts — with their patterns and symbols — may have helped them to do this.

A safe house along the Underground Railroad was often indicated by a quilt hanging from a clothesline or windowsill. These quilts were embedded with a kind of code, so that by reading the shapes and motifs sewn into the design, an enslaved person on the run could know the area's immediate dangers or even where to head next. For example, The quilt pattern called *Bowtie* looks like an "X" on its side. This X-shaped symbol was very common in African culture. Some feel this quilt symbol was a signal to the escaping slaves to dress up and disguise themselves. Other quilt pattern codes are:

Bear Paw = Follow an animal trail through the mountains to find water and food
Log Cabin = Seek shelter now, the people here are safe to speak with
Drunkard's Path = Zig-zag as you go along in case you're being stalked by hounds
Double Wedding Ring = Now it is safe to remove your chains & shackles



Quilts had many layers of fabric. To join them all together, people used to sew a string through all the layers and tie it off with knots. Some quilts had unusual knot patterns though. To make a quilt secure, people used one or two knots. Yet researchers found some of the quilts had knots that were tied as many as five times — much more than would be needed to keep the quilt together. They realized that the knots might have been a way of telling escaping slaves a pattern of travel between safe houses or hiding places. The more knots, the greater the distance, they thought. This method of knotting also had roots in the belief systems of the Ibo people in Africa. In that culture, people tied five knots in a piece of cloth to ask for protection from the spirits around them.

Africans who were brought to America grew up with coded information all around them. They were used to seeing the symbolism in many different objects.

Some researchers question whether quilts were actually used as a form of secret communication. They say that there is little in writing or oral reports that says this is true. However, others think otherwise. After all, they say, the Underground Railroad was built on secrecy. No one would have written down information like this, or told too many others. If the secrets were well known, lives would be at stake.

Extra note: By the time early African-American quilting became a tradition in and of itself, it was already a combination of textile traditions from four civilizations of Central and West Africa. Originally, most of the textiles were made by men. When enslaved Africans were brought to America, their work was divided according to Western patriarchal standards and women took over the tradition. However, this strong tradition of weaving left a visible mark on African-American quilting. The use of strips, reminiscent of the strips of reed and fabric used in men's traditional weaving, are used in fabric quilting. A break in a pattern helped keep evil spirits away; evil is believed to travel in straight lines and a break in a pattern or line confuses the spirits and slows them down.

2. TUMBLING BLOCKS WITH SIGNATURES PATTERN BY ADELINE HARRIS, BEGUN 1856

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/15391>

In 1856, seventeen-year-old Adeline Harris, the daughter of a well-to-do Rhode Island mill owner, conceived of a unique quilt-making project. She sent small diamond-shaped pieces of white silk worldwide to people she esteemed as the most important figures of her day, asking each to sign the silk and return it to her. By the time the signatures were all returned and ready to be stitched into a "tumbling-blocks" patterned quilt, Adeline had amassed an astonishing collection of autographs. Her quilt features the signatures of eight American presidents; luminaries from the worlds of science, religion, and education; authors such as Charles Dickens and Ralph Waldo Emerson; and an array of prominent artists. Today, the autographs displayed in this beautiful and immaculately constructed quilt provide an intriguing glimpse into the way an educated young woman of the mid-19th century viewed her world.

3. HARRIET POWERS PICTORIAL QUILT, 1898

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harriet_Powers

Pictorial quilts often contain one-of-a-kind patterns and imagery. Instead of bringing together fabric in an abstract or patterned design, they use pieces of fabric to create objects on the quilt, resulting in a picture-based quilt.

Harriet Powers (October 29, 1837 – January 1, 1910) was an American folk artist and quilt maker. She was born into slavery in rural Georgia. She used traditional appliqué techniques to record local legends, Bible stories, and astronomical events on her quilts. Her quilts are considered among the finest examples of 19th-century Southern quilting.



Pictorial Quilt, 1898

This quilt has 15 panels, and it combines Biblical scenes with both African and Christian symbols, along with stories of meteorological and astronomical events. Events like Georgia's cold front of 10th February 1895, the Leonid meteor shower (November 12–14th 1833, four years before her birth), and several nights of falling stars during mid-August 1846 are all depicted in this work. Another panel illustrates the 'dark day' of 19th May 1780 (now identified as dense smoke over North America caused by Canadian Wildfires).

4. THE NAMES PROJECT AIDS MEMORIAL QUILT

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NAMES_Project_AIDS_Memorial_Quilt

<https://www.aidsmemorial.org/interactive-aids-quilt>

One of the most famous quilts in history is the AIDS Memorial Quilt, which was begun in San Francisco in 1987, and is cared for by The NAMES Project Foundation. Portions of it are periodically displayed in various arranged locations. Panels are made to memorialize a person lost to HIV, and each block is 3 feet by 6 feet, approximately the size of the average grave. Each block speaks directly to the love and loss people have experienced. Exuberant designs, with personal objects applied, are seen next to restrained and elegant designs. Each block is very personal, and they form a deeply moving sight when combined by the dozens and the hundreds. The entire quilt is now so large that it cannot be assembled in complete form in any one location. Weighing an estimated 54 tons, the AIDS Memorial Quilt was the first of its kind as a continually growing monument created piecemeal by thousands of individuals, and today it constitutes the largest piece of community folk art in the world in 2020.

The idea for the NAMES Project Memorial Quilt was conceived by AIDS activist Cleve Jones. During a candlelight march in San Francisco, Jones had people write the names of loved ones that were lost to AIDS-related causes on signs, and then they taped the signs to the old San Francisco Federal Building. All the signs taped to the building looked like an enormous patchwork quilt to Jones, and he was inspired. At that time many people who died of AIDS-related causes did not receive funerals, due to both the social stigma of AIDS felt by surviving family members and the outright refusal by many funeral homes and cemeteries to handle the deceased's remains. Lacking a memorial service or grave site, The Quilt was often the only opportunity survivors had to remember and celebrate their loved ones' lives.

Construction choices are left to the quilter. Items and materials included in the panels:

- Fabrics, e.g. lace, suede, leather, mink, taffeta, also Bubble Wrap and other kinds of plastic and even metal.
- Decorative items like pearls, quartz crystals, rhinestones, sequins, feathers, buttons.
- Clothing, e.g. jeans, T-shirts, gloves, boots, hats, uniforms, jackets, flip-flops.
- Items of a personal nature, such as human hair, cremation ashes, wedding rings, merit badges and other awards, car keys.
- Unusual items, e.g. stuffed animals, records, jockstraps, condoms, and bowling balls.

Panels are submitted to the National AIDS Memorial, along with a panel-maker identification form and a documentation letter. Occasionally, other supplemental material is donated along with the panel such as photographs of the subject. The information about the panel is recorded in a database. Panels are backed in canvas and sewn together in blocks of eight.

Those who submit panels do not have to know the person, but they do have to feel some sort of connection with the individual that they want people to recognize. For example, to memorialize Queen lead-singer Freddie Mercury, there were many panels made. Many panels were also made for the actor Rock Hudson. Other panels are made by loved ones and then attached to make one large block. Some are flamboyant and loud, whereas some are more muted and simple; either way they all carry their own set of emotions.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, supporters and custodians of The Quilt were struck by similarities between the Covid and AIDS pandemics. Protective masks have been made from Quilt fabric for first responders as a way of showing support and dealing with grief and memories of loved ones being lost during the AIDS pandemic.

5. PORTRAIT QUILT BY BISA BUTLER

<https://www.sofst.org/inspiring-quilt-artists-you-have-to-follow/>

<https://hifructose.com/2019/03/07/the-narrative-quilts-of-bisa-butler/>

Bisa Butler is a phenomenal fibre artist, specialising in quilted portraits. Her key signature is her use of vibrant colours, and subjects that span various points of history and countries. She says: "I often start my pieces with a black and white photo and allow myself to tell the story," the artist has said. "My stories are told in the fabrics that I choose, the textures I combine, and the colors that create a whole new composition. My portraits tell stories that may have been forgotten over time. When you see vintage lace and aged satin it tells you the story of delicacy and refinement of times gone by. When you see African printed cotton and mud cloth it tells the story of my ancestral homeland and the cradle of civilization. When you see multi-colored organza and netting layered you are being told a story of something or someone colorful and multifaceted."

6. QUILT BY ANN HARWELL

<http://quiltartisannharwell.com/about-ann/>

At the centre of Ann's work is a desire to create perfection. Often created from hundreds of tiny pieces of jewel-colored and patterned fabrics, her quilts include works based on outer space, astral phenomena and landscapes inspired by gardens and arboretums. She says: "My quilts are to communicate ideas, express feelings and tell stories. I especially want to unite and enhance diverse fabric designs and colors with intricate, precision piecing and exorbitant quilting. I start with an original rough drawing, draft a straight-line design, and then transfer the design to pattern material. Each piece of cotton fabric (hand-dyed, batik, commercial cottons) is selected, individually precision cut, and sewn together with my 1945 Singer Featherweight machine. My quilts are constructed like fine garments, with great attention to detail: seams are strong and straight, corners are sharp and points are precise."

EXERCISE THREE: Quilt A Poem

Look at the following poems:

Mother Pieced Quilts – Teresa Palomo Acosta

Untitled – Anon (This poem is from *Good Housekeeping*, 25th October 1890)

It's Your Quilt – Nancy Riddell

All three poems can be found here: <https://www.with-heart-and-hands.com/2016/09/quilting-poems-sayings-superstitions.html>

Now choose an image to work with and to write a poem.

- Write a sentence or two about why you chose this picture, how it makes you feel, what it makes you think about / stories / memories

- Next, write a description of details in the picture. Include words that indicate size, shape, colour, light/shade, objects, figures, positions etc.
- Finally, write a poem in response to your picture. If you need inspiration, look back at your answers above.

Remember, there are many different ways to go about this. Here are some further approaches:

- Write about the experience of looking at the image.
- Speculate about how or why this quilt has been made.
- Write from the point of view of a quilt – bring it to life and make it think and feel like a human being.
- What is the quilt’s story? What is being revealed and what concealed?
- Imagine what was happening while the artist was creating this work.
- Write about a quilt you would like to make. What materials and memories would you put in it? Describe how you would make it.

Your poem could be written in the form or style of one of the example poems (*Untitled* and *It's Your Quilt* have rhyme schemes that mirror the act of stitching, enhance the storytelling nature that is part of the quilting tradition, the sense of connection and community) / lines and meanings stitched together to tell the story of quilts, their family significance and their construction (*Mother Pieced Quilts*).

And, of course, you can write your poem in your own style!

Best wishes

Sara-Jane

©Sara Jane Arbury

