

**LEDBURY POETRY FESTIVAL COMMUNITY PROGRAMME**  
**SEGMENTS POETRY WORKSHOP**  
**JANUARY 2021. THEME: SCHOOL**

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**EXERCISE ONE: Warm-up writing exercise – If Walls Had Ears**

Choose a place from the list below and bring it to life. Speak in its voice. Imagine this place has feelings and thoughts as people do. Think about: What is the story of the place? What life does it have? What would it say if given a voice? What are its innermost thoughts or secrets? Ambitions or dreams? What memories does it have? What opinions? Feelings? Ideas? Think about the five senses – what does it see, hear, smell, taste, touch? Give the place a personality. Remember the little details.

- A lift in a skyscraper
- A derelict house
- A mansion that's now a tourist attraction
- A funfair before opening time
- A zoo at closing time
- A public park at 5am
- A swimming pool
- A courtroom
- A cinema after the film is over
- A theatre before the play begins
- A supermarket at the busiest time of the day
- A call centre
- A dentist's surgery
- An operating theatre
- A cheap hotel room
- A prison cell
- A cathedral
- A place of your own

**EXERCISE TWO: The theme for this exercise is SCHOOL**

As the concept of online homeschooling is now well underway during the Covid-19 pandemic, this workshop will explore the history of schools, focussing in particular on Classical Greek and Roman schooling and the Ragged Schools of 19th century Britain as inspiration for writing poetry.

Guide To The Slides clockwise from top left:

- Slide 1 - Plato's Academy, mosaic in Pompeii
- Slide 2 - Relief of Roman school found in Neumagen, a teacher with three discipuli (180-185 AD)
- Slide 3 - Roman fresco of a blond maiden reading a text (60-79 AD), Pompeii
- Slide 4 - Roman portraiture fresco of a young man with a papyrus scroll, from Herculaneum, 1st century AD
- Slide 5 - Bronze statuette of a girl reading (1st century)

see picture next page



Guide To The Slides clockwise from top left:

- Slide 6 - Ragged School and Working Girls Home doorway, Dantzic Street, Manchester
- Slide 7 - Lambeth Ragged School (Boys)
- Slide 8 - Charles Dickens
- Slide 9 - Dr Thomas Barnardo
- Slide 10 - Lambeth Ragged School (Girls)
- Slide 11 - The Ragged School Museum in Tower Hamlets



- <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/School>
- <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Academy>
- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education\\_in\\_ancient\\_Rome](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education_in_ancient_Rome)

A school is an educational institution designed to provide learning spaces and learning environments for the teaching of students (or "pupils") under the direction of teachers. Most countries have systems of formal education, which is sometimes compulsory. In these systems, students progress through a series of schools. The names for these schools vary by country but generally include primary school for young children and secondary school for teenagers who have completed primary education. An institution where higher education is taught, is commonly called a university college or university.

**Classical Greek and Roman Schools**

The word school derives from Greek σχολή (scholē), originally meaning "leisure" and also "that in which leisure is employed", but later "a group to whom lectures were given".

The concept of grouping students together in a centralized location for learning has existed since Classical antiquity. Formal schools have existed at least since ancient Greece, such as Plato's Academy, a word that derives from an Athenian hero, Akademos. Outside the city walls of Athens, a sacred space that had once been an olive grove and was dedicated to the goddess of wisdom, Athena, was made famous by Plato as a centre of learning. Hence the expression "the groves of Academe". In these gardens, Plato conversed with followers and developed his sessions into a method of teaching philosophy.

Whereas Greek boys primarily received their education from the community, a Roman child's first and most important educators were almost always his or her parents. In Roman society, the father acted as head of the household, and had, according to law, absolute right of control over his children. It was the father's duty to educate his children (girls and boys) and should he be unable to fulfil this duty, the task was assumed by other family members. Wealthy families employed private tutors, many were Greek slaves or freedmen. Parents taught their children the skills necessary for living in the early republic, which included agricultural, domestic and military skills as well as the moral and civil responsibilities that would be expected from them as citizens. Men like Cato the Elder adhered to this Roman tradition and took their roles as teachers very seriously. Cato the Elder not only made his children hardworking, good citizens and responsible Romans, but "he was his (son's) reading teacher, his law professor, his athletic coach. He taught his son not only to hurl a javelin, to fight in armour, and to ride a horse, but also to box, to endure both heat and cold, and to swim well". Perhaps the most important role of the parents in their children's education was to instil in them a respect for tradition and a firm comprehension of devotion to duty. For a boy, this meant devotion to the state, and for a girl, devotion to her husband and family.

At the height of the Roman Empire, formal schools were established, which served paying students; very little that could be described as free public education existed. Both boys and girls were educated, though not necessarily together. The Roman education system that developed arranged schools in tiers. A Roman student would progress through schools just as a student today might go from primary school to secondary school and then to college.

While the Romans now adopted many aspects of Greek education such as the great works of Homer, two subjects in particular were viewed as trifling: music and athletics. Music to the Greeks was fundamental to their educational system. The ability to play an instrument was the mark of a civilized, educated man and through an education in all areas of music it was thought that the soul could become more moderate and cultivated. The Romans did not share this view and considered the study of music as a path to moral corruption.

Athletics, to the Greeks, was the means to obtaining a healthy and beautiful body which was an end in and of itself and further promoted their love of competition. The Romans did not share this stance either, believing that athletics was only the means to maintaining good soldiers.

An instructor in a Roman primary school (*ludus litterarius*) was often known as a *litterator*. There were never any established locations for a *ludus litterarius*. They could be found in a variety of places, anywhere from a private residence to the street. Roman students were expected to work on their own. There was little sense of a class as a cohesive unit, exemplified by students coming and going at different times throughout the day. Young Roman students faced no formal examinations or tests. Their performance was measured through exercises that were either corrected or applauded based on performance.

At between nine and twelve years of age, boys from affluent families would take up study with a grammaticus, who honed his students' writing and speaking skills, versed them in the art of poetic analysis and taught them Greek if they did not yet know it. By this point, lower-class boys would already be working as apprentices, and girls—rich or poor—would be focused on making themselves attractive brides and, subsequently, capable mothers.

Daily activities included lectures by the grammaticus, expressive reading of poetry and the analysis of poetry. Students were expected to read and speak in Greek as well as in Latin. Children continued their studies with the grammaticus until the age of fourteen or fifteen, at which point only the wealthiest and most promising students matriculated with a rhetor.

The rhetor was the final stage in Roman education. Very few boys went on to study rhetoric. The orator, or student of rhetoric, was important in Roman society because of the constant political strife that occurred throughout Roman history. Young men who studied under a rhetor would focus on public speaking and declamation and also learned other subjects such as geography, music, philosophy, literature, mythology and geometry. These well-rounded studies gave Roman orators a more diverse education and helped prepare them for future debates.

### **Ragged Schools**

Ragged schools were charitable organisations dedicated to the free education of destitute children in 19th century Britain. Such children, it was argued, were often excluded from Sunday School education because of their unkempt appearance and often challenging behaviour. The schools were developed in the poorest districts. Teachers (who were often local working people) initially utilized stables, lofts, and railway arches for their classes. The majority of teachers were voluntary, although a small number were employed. There was an emphasis on reading, writing, arithmetic, and study of the Bible. It is estimated that about 300,000 children went through the London ragged schools between 1844 and 1881.

For many of the destitute children of London, going to school each day was not an option. From the 18th century onwards, schools for poor children were few and far between. They had been started in areas where someone had been concerned enough to want to help disadvantaged children towards a better life.

John Pounds, a Portsmouth shoemaker, provided important inspiration for the movement of ragged schools. Known as the "crippled cobbler," Pounds began teaching poor children without charging fees in his Portsmouth shop in 1818. He actively recruited children and young people to his school, spending time on the streets and quays of Portsmouth making contact and even bribing them to come with the offer of baked potatoes. His reputation as a teacher grew and he soon had more than 40 students attending his lessons. Pounds quickly became a figurehead for the schools; his ethos was used as an inspiration for the later movement.

In 1841 Sheriff Watson established a school in Aberdeen, Scotland. He was frustrated by the number of children who committed a petty crime and faced him in his courtroom. Rather than sending them to prison for vagrancy, Watson established a school for boys. The Industrial Feeding School provided reading, writing and arithmetic. Watson believed that gaining these skills would help the boys rise above the lowest level of society. Three meals a day were provided and the boys were also taught useful trades such as shoemaking and printing. A school for girls followed in 1843. In 1845, the schools were integrated. From here, the movement spread to Dundee and other parts of Scotland.

The same year that Watson established his school in Aberdeen, the Field Lane Ragged School began in Clerkenwell, London. It was S. R. Starey, the secretary of this school, who first applied the term

'ragged' to the institutions in an advert he submitted to *The Times* seeking public support. The London City Mission reported in their Annual Report that their schools had been formed exclusively for children "raggedly clothed". The children only had very ragged clothes to wear and they rarely had shoes. In other words, they did not own clothing suitable to attend any other kind of school.

In 1843, Charles Dickens began his association with the schools and visited the Field Lane Ragged School. He was appalled by the conditions. The experience inspired him to write *A Christmas Carol*. While he initially intended to write a pamphlet on the plight of poor children, he realised that a dramatic story would have more impact. Dickens continued to support the schools, donating funds on various occasions. In 1837, he used the street called Field Lane as a setting for Fagin's den in his classic novel, *Oliver Twist*.

In 1844, Anthony Ashley-Cooper, 7th Earl of Shaftesbury, became the president of the newly-established London Ragged School Union. He used his knowledge of the schools and refuges and his understanding of the living conditions among low-income families to pursue changes in legislation. He served as president for 39 years and maintained his commitment to the Ragged Schools and educational reform until his death in 1885.

There was a massive growth in the numbers of schools, teachers and students. By 1851, the number of educators would grow to include around 1,600 persons. By 1867, some 226 Sunday Ragged Schools, 204-day schools and 207 evening schools provided a free education for about 26,000 students. However, the schools were heavily reliant on volunteers and continually faced problems in finding and keeping staff. Women played an important role as volunteer teachers. A newspaper report on the progress of the schools announced that 'the most valuable teachers in ragged schools are those of the female sex'.

By the time the 1870 Education Act was passed, there were 350 ragged schools in existence. The success of the ragged schools definitively demonstrated that there was a demand for education among the poor. In response, England and Wales established school boards to administer elementary schools. As the school boards were built and funded, the demand for ragged schools declined.

The Ragged School Museum, founded in 1990, occupies a group of three canalside buildings on Copperfield Road in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets that once housed the largest ragged school in London; the buildings had previously been used by Dr Thomas Barnardo.

Barnardo arrived in London in 1866 and was confronted by a city where disease was rife, poverty and overcrowding endemic and educational opportunities for the poor nonexistent. He watched helplessly as a cholera epidemic swept through the East End, leaving more than 3,000 Londoners dead and many destitute. He gave up his medical training to pursue his local missionary works and in 1867, opened his first ragged school, where children could gain a free basic education. Ten years later, Barnardo's Copperfield Road School opened its doors to children, and for the next thirty-one years it educated tens of thousands of children. It closed in 1908, by which time enough government schools had opened in the area to serve the needs of local families.

The Ragged School Museum provides an idea of the working of a ragged school, but it is important to note that Thomas Barnardo's institution differed considerably in practice and philosophy from those schools accountable to the London Ragged School Union. An authentic Victorian classroom has been set up within the original buildings, in which 14,000 children each year experience a school lesson as it would have been taught more than 100 years ago - like The Heritage Centre in Ledbury!

Now look at the following poems (and prose extract!):

*Hard Times* by Charles Dickens, Chapter 1

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/786/786-h/786-h.htm>

*Underneath The Apple Tree* – Anon (scroll down to P.36)

[https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=ZV7JITpXeAQC&pg=PP7&source=gbs\\_selected\\_pages&cad=3#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=ZV7JITpXeAQC&pg=PP7&source=gbs_selected_pages&cad=3#v=onepage&q&f=false)

*The Geography Teacher* – Brian Patten

<https://lizbrownlepoet.com/2018/04/12/p-is-for-childrens-poets-trevor-parsons-and-brian-patten-atozchallenge-ztoa/>

*In Mrs Tilscher's Class* – Carol Ann Duffy

<http://tylerpoems.blogspot.com/2009/06/in-mrs-tilschers-class.html>

### **EXERCISE THREE: Poetry About School**

Write a poem inspired by the history we've explored, items you may have (old school books; pieces of school uniform), your experience of school or homeschooling, or any other aspects of the theme. Here are some suggestions for ways in to the writing:

Write a personification poem from the point of view of an object/place. Write your poem imagining the object/place is 'alive' and has the same attributes as a human being. What would it say? Think about the function of the object, where it is situated, what it sees, smells, hears, touches etc. Memories? What does it think about/dream about? Maybe use the 'If Walls Had Ears' exercise to write about a school classroom, school toilets, playground, bike sheds...

Write a poem inspired by the theme that evokes a personal memory for you, maybe involving another person or a personal story. Perhaps a teacher or lesson you remember from your own schooldays (eg: *The Geography Teacher* poem); a school incident or the prospect of growing up (eg: *In Mrs Tilscher's Class*)

Write a poem in praise of an object, school or teacher; a thank-you poem.

As schools invariably operate with rules, have a go at writing a Cinquain poem or a poem made up of a series of Cinquains. A Cinquain is a 5 line verse structure in which the lines comprise 2, 4, 6, 8, 2 syllables. The form was invented by an American writer, Adelaide Crapsey, and is illustrated in her poem *November Night*:

Listen...

With faint dry sound,

Like steps of passing ghosts,

The leaves, frost-crisp'd, break from the trees

And fall.

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

And, of course, you may write a poem about the items and/or theme in your own way and in your own style!

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