

The Golden Shovel form

Freedom Poetry writing resources for National Poetry Day

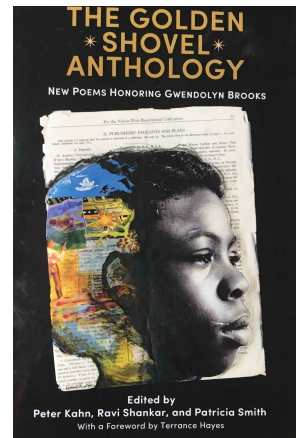
September 28th 2017

Materials are suitable for use by Year 9 – Year 13 students

Resources compiled by Sue Dymoke.

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Skills: *Drafting; developing understanding of structure; The Golden Shovel form; writing about a memory or a point of view*



Please use the ideas below as you feel is most appropriate for your students and encourage them to enter The Student International Golden Shovel poetry competition (details of which are on the last page).

The Golden Shovel is a form of poetry devised by the American poet Terrance Hayes to honour the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks who was the first black writer to win the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for literature and ‘a poetry advocate, a poetry patron and a poetry champion’ (Hayes 2017).

Hayes began experimenting with Brooks’ famous poem ***We Real Cool*** by borrowing her poem and placing it down the right margin of the page as a structure for his own new poem. Poetry educator and all-round poetry marvel Peter Kahn, began to write in this form, with Hayes’ permission. He tried out using single lines from Brooks’ work in what might be the first new twenty-first century poetic form with sophomore students. In each case the students borrowed a single line from a Gwendolyn Brooks’ poem. They quickly found that it stimulated great new writing.

The Golden Shovel Anthology (edited by Peter Kahn, Ravi Shankar and Patricia Smith) was published earlier this year by The University of Arkansas Press.

- To learn more about Gwendolyn Brooks and to read/hear her poems go to:
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/gwendolyn-brooks#about>
- To learn more about the Golden Shovel go to and Chapter 2 of this episode of BBC Radio 4 *Front Row*
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b091s805> for a discussion with poet Indigo Williams and Peter Kahn, editor of *The Golden Shovel Anthology*.

Examples of Golden Shovels:

a) Truth by Indigo Williams

(This poem borrows the line ‘and if sun comes how shall we greet Him?’

from Gwendolyn Brooks’ poem ***Truth***.) <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/54810/truth-56d2359ad24ba->

Sister, let us pretend we are ribbon haired girls again **and**
that our bodies sing to us instead of men. Come, maybe **if**
we try hard enough we will remember a song or a **sun**
before catcalls or boys that stalk with good intentions. It **comes**
back to me sometimes, the child body, smooth and free, **how**
I made angels with waving limbs. This poem’s wings **shall**
send us skirts parachuting back to the green, green grass **we**
loved on our backs. Sister, let us pretend the world is safe. **Greet**
every strange man with lemonade and pick daisies. For **Him?**



b) The way he lived now by Sue Dymoke

(This poem borrows a line 'with his great white strong cold squares of teeth' from Brooks' poem *the vacant lot*.) <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43313/the-vacant-lot>



She knew there was trouble **with**
the way he lived now when she ventured into **his**
garden again, saw the creeping speedwell, **great**
purple thistles instead of bean poles, **white**
dead-head nettles colonising borders with their **strong**
nicotine-fingered roots and the empty **cold**
frames where seedlings in serried **squares**
once waited for the next stage **of**
propagation but she could only pull weeds, grit her **teeth**.



Boys breaking glass by Cat Brogan

c) (This poem borrows the line 'I shall create! If not a note, a hole.' from the poem *Boy Breaking Glass*.)
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43322/boy-breaking-glass>



The boys' snowballs shattered the window. **I**
told my dad. My cousin mooned them. We **shall**
make the parents pay, for what they **create!**
The quiet one now runs the family gallery. **If**
I see the younger brother, though I hope **not**
to, will he produce a recompense for pinning **a**
teenage me, to my parents' bed? An apology **note**,
a reparation? I didn't tell dad that time, that **a**
boy cracked our space, crafted a silent **hole**.

- d) Which do you think are the striking lines, the ones that catch your eye or your ear, in each of these three poems? Why?
- e) How do you think the girl speaking in *Truth* wants to free herself? Why might she want to do this?
- f) What has happened to the garden in *The way he lived now*? How and why might it have changed? Is it a freer space now?
- g) What impact do you think the boys in *Boys breaking glass* have had on the other family's life?
- h) How do you think the narrators of the three poems tell you the reader about their feelings?

Breaking the rules:

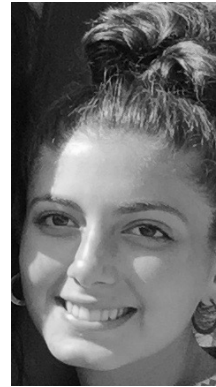
Once you know the 'rules' of the Golden Shovel form you can use them more freely, bend or even break them. Look at the following example. Poet Hannah Srajer borrows from two consecutive lines of Gwendolyn Brooks' *Still Do I Keep My Look, My Identity*:

'...In castle or in shack./ With rages or robes. Through good, nothing, or ill.'

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?volume=65&issue=2&page=18>

Third Infidelity by Hannah Srajer

Mother locks herself in
the bathroom, sterile **castle**
with no moat. No latch **or**
lock or chain can conta(in)
her sensible grief, the **shack**
she builds **with**
out us. Squatter in **rags**
in her own home, **or**
his. Marriage is a dirty **robe**,
a cover for nakedness **through**
which I was born, a **good**
girl with **nothing**
but what was built f(or)
me, the stones



- i) What do you notice about how Srajer has used punctuation and borrowed end words from the two Brooks' lines that she has chosen?

Writing your own Golden Shovel about freedom:

You can use a line from any Gwendolyn Brooks poem to inspire your writing. To read more of her poems and make your selection go to: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/gwendolyn-brooks#about>

When writing your Golden Shovel:

- think about what freedom means to you. Would you or those close to you like to be freer? How? Is there an example of someone in history or in your own family who has fought for freedom or helped others to do so? How other people's or animals' freedoms restricted? What do you feel about this? Is there a particular memory you have of feeling trapped and then being freed?
- try to choose one main event or idea to write about
- remember that any line you borrow needs to run vertically down the right margin of your poem
- use a different word from the borrowed line in each line of your poem
- the borrowed words should be the last words on each line of your poem
- **use your freedom as a writer:** you can break the rules of punctuation, use w(or)ds within words or even move a borrowed word on to the beginning of the next line
- you should always say where you have borrowed your line from: make sure you write down the title of the poem you have used and the poet's name

Poets writing about freedom

Many poets have written about different aspects of freedom. Here are some examples by other poets which you could also use as starting points for writing your own poem:

- 1) ***Still I rise* by Maya Angelou** (For a brilliant performance by Angelou go to:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qviM_GnJbOM

A striking line you might want to borrow: 'But still like dust, I'll rise.')

- 2) ***Song of the Battery Hen* by Edwin Brock** (A copy of poem and audio recording is available at: <https://www.poetryarchive.org/poem/song-battery-hen>
A striking line to borrow might be: 'Who sounds loudest in my head'.)
- 3) ***The Right Word* by Imtiaz Dharker** (A copy of poem and audio recording is available at: <https://www.poetryarchive.org/poem/right-word>
A striking line to borrow might be: 'No words can help me now'.)
- 4) ***Anne Frank Huis* by Andrew Motion** (A copy of poem and audio recording is available at: <https://www.poetryarchive.org/poem/anne-frank-huis>
A striking line to borrow might be: 'in Europe with a yellow chalk. What hope'.)
- 5) ***Everyone Sang* by Siegfried Sassoon** (A copy of poem and audio recording is available at: <https://www.poetryarchive.org/poem/everyone-sang>
A striking line to borrow might be: 'As prisoned birds must find in freedom'.)
- 6) ***Her Secret* by Patience Agbabi** is a golden shovel poem which borrows the line 'he swallows sunshine with a secret yelp' from Gwendolyn Brooks' long poem [The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith](#).

Her Secret

Make-up's a mask. She wants to be he:
to shin up trees, steal speckled eggs from swallows,
strip to the waist in undiluted sunshine.
The kind of boy you'd arm wrestle with
just to get close, a bare-knuckled *what's a
nice girl like you doing with?* Her secret
locked in a grip so firm, it makes them yelp.



Agbabi comments on the appeal of Brooks' poem and the challenges of working in the golden shovel form:

'I loved the flamboyance of ***The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith***. From the title to his wonderful, wardrobe, Brooks really brought this character to life. I was also intrigued by the prostitutes with their three layers of lipstick, their virtual homeovesticism¹. I loved the richness of the language coupled with the virtuosity with form, taking the iambic pentameter to new heights. So my poem also played with the idea of dressing up, how a character could wear make-up to hide a butch inner self. And I kept to Brook's chosen metre. As for the golden shovel form, I love writing sestinas, where you use the same six end-words throughout a poem, so this challenge used a similar part of the brain. The line 'he swallows sunshine with a secret yelp' leapt off the page and the words were particularly challenging to force my mind to work harder to come up with something coherent.'

- a) How do you think Agbabi explore ideas about identity, freedom and control in ***Her Secret***?
- b) Which lines in her poem leap off the page at you? Could you borrow one of them to write your own golden shovel?

Find more freedom poems in [The Golden Shovel Anthology](#) and at [Poetry Station](#).

¹ the arousal of a person by wearing clothing appropriate to their gender (source: Wikipedia)

About the poets:

Patience Agbabi is an award-winning poet. Her latest book is *Telling Tales* (Canongate), a fantastic 21st century remix of the Chaucer's Canterbury Tales.

Cat Brogan is a BBC Edinburgh Fringe Poetry Slam winner and one of the first poets on the Goldsmiths Spoken Word Educator programme.

Sue Dymoke writes poetry, teaches and researches at The University of Leicester, UK. Her books include: *Moon at the Park and Ride* (Shoestring press) and *Making Poetry Happen* (Bloomsbury).

Hannah Srajer is an award-winning poet who graduated from Princeton. She is currently a *Project 55* Fellow at the Association to Benefit Children, where she manages Early Childhood and Youth programming for families in East Harlem.

Indigo Williams is a British Nigerian poet, writer and Spoken Word educator from Brixton. She is one half of the art collective *I Shape Beauty*, an art collective that creates installations using poetry, costume, textile, visual art and projection mapping.

Happy National Poetry Day. Happy digging for new freedom poems.

Student International Golden Shovel Poetry competition (for students aged 12 – 22)

You might also want to enter the Student International Golden Shovel poetry competition. If you do then make sure you borrow a line for your freedom poem from one of the poems from *The Golden Shovel Anthology*. You will need to choose a 5-14 word striking line from any poem in the anthology to run vertically down the right margin of a 5-14 line poem of your own. You already have four poems to choose from on the worksheet above. Links to some other anthology poems are available here:

Gwendolyn Brooks:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43318/a-sunset-of-the-city>

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43308/kitchenette-building>

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/28110/the-bean-eaters>

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43322/boy-breaking-glass>

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43310/a-song-in-the-front-yard>

Terrance Hayes: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/55678/the-golden-shovel>

Camille Dungy: <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/because-it-looked-hotter-way>

Elise Paschen: <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/division-street>

Dexter Booth: <http://southeastreview.org/raising-our-voices-claiming-our-words/>

Kelly Reuter Raymundo: <http://sugarcanemag.com/2017/05/poetry-spotlight-after-the-eulogy-by-kelly-reuter-raymond-from-the-golden-shovel-anthology-new-poems-honoring-gwendolyn-brooks/>

Patricia Smith and Christian Campbell: <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/poetry/gwendolyn-brooks-poetry-connecting-emmett-till-violence-chicago-today/>

Timothy Yu: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/28/magazine/moon.html>

Langston Kerman, Adam Levin, Raymond Antrobus and Michael Collier: <http://lithub.com/inventing-a-new-poetic-form-to-honor-gwendolyn-brooks/>

There will be two competition categories (for 12-18 and 18-22 year olds) with prizes and publication in the next *Golden Shovel Anthology* and on the Academy of American Poets website. Look out for full details of the competition very soon.