



Prose and poetry techniques: Free verse

Form

Free verse is verse in lines of irregular length, rhyming (if at all) very irregularly.

Note: nowadays some poets and critics reject the term 'free verse' and prefer to speak of 'open form' poetry or 'mixed form' poetry.

Characteristics

Free verse is not prose set out in lines. Like other sorts of poetry, it is language organised for its musical effects of rhythm and sound. However, these effects are used irregularly, not according to any completely fixed pattern.

Among the poetic devices that are often found in free verse are

- repetition (often with variation)
- patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables
- alliteration
- occasional internal rhyme (rhyme occurring inside a line)
- occasional rhyme at the ends of lines (often imperfect rhymes such as half-rhymes and pararhymes)
- patterns of assonance (syllables in which the vowel sounds are the same)
- imagery

Illustration

These devices are easier to illustrate than to describe. Here is a complete short poem in free verse by D H Lawrence:

Things Men Have Made -

Things men have made with wakened hands, and put soft life into
are awake through years with transferred touch, and go on glowing
for long years.

And for this reason, some old things are lovely
warm still with the life of forgotten men who made them.

The lines are of different lengths. They don't rhyme with each other. Nor are they arranged in a fixed pattern of stressed (emphasised) and unstressed syllables. Nevertheless, this is a highly organised piece of writing.

The most obvious device here is the repetition, with variation: 'men have made', 'men who made'. These phrases occur at the beginning and end of the poem, with a single syllable before the first occurrence and after the second. They balance each other, emphasising a balance between the first two lines and the last two, between the first sentence or proposition of Lawrence's statement and the second, which echoes it and develops it further. The whole poem pivots around the very short line in the middle, 'for long years'.

There are other repetitions: 'life', in the first and fifth lines, 'wakened' and 'awake' in the first and second lines.

Although there is no set number of stresses in the lines, there is a clear pattern of stresses at the beginnings of the lines. The first line and the last both begin with two stressed syllables: 'Things men', 'warm still'. The second and the fourth line both begin with two unstressed syllables, followed by one that is stressed: 'are awake', 'And for this'. Again, this emphasises a balance between the first two lines and the last two.

Some phrases are emphasised and linked together by alliteration (words beginning with the same sound): 'men ... made', 'transferred touch', 'go on glowing'.

The third phrase cited, 'go on glowing', is also an example of internal rhyme, rhyme occurring inside a line (in 'go' and 'glow'). Though perhaps this was just an effect that came luckily to hand, rather than something Lawrence was deliberately aiming for. 'Wakened' and 'awake', in lines one and two, are also linked by internal rhyme, as well as by the fact that they both have the same linguistic root (wake).

Some words are linked by assonance: the use of like vowel sounds, particularly in stressed syllables. Thus, in the first line, the long 'a' sound connects 'made' with 'wakened'; in the fourth line, the vowel sound (a short 'u') links 'some' with 'lovely'. All these syllables are naturally stressed.

The poem has a strong central image: the metaphor of objects taking on and preserving some of the life of their makers. There is also a secondary, closely related metaphor, of warmth: 'glowing', 'warm'.

Advice

Note that the poem by Lawrence is being used as a handy example, not as a model. There is no set way to write free verse.

To write it well requires great sensitivity to sound and rhythm in language.

The process of writing free verse is often one of knowing when to keep and build on the sound effects that come to hand, and when deliberately to discard them.