WRITING A CHRISTMAS TREE POEM

By Liz Lochhead

Introduction and history
Every December in Trafalgar Square in central London a huge Christmas tree – 70 feet tall (over 20 metres) – is put up, decorated and lit. Not many people know that this tree is a gift from the city of Oslo, and that a tree has been given each year for over 65 years.

A tree was first offered in 1947 as a token of gratitude for British support for Norway during the Second World War. Britain had supported the government of King Haakon VII who was exiled in London after Norway was invaded by Nazi forces in 1940. Since then a tree is given each year from the city of Oslo to the city of Westminster as a symbol of continued thanks.

In addition to Oslo’s tree in London, the city of Bergen presents a tree to Newcastle each year, while the city of Stavanger ships one to Sunderland. There are also Norwegian Christmas trees in Cardiff, Edinburgh and Kirkwall.

For the last five years the Poetry Society has collaborated with the Royal Norwegian Embassy, the Office of the Mayor of Oslo and Westminster City Council to organise an exciting and unique annual poetry programme, using the Trafalgar Square Christmas tree as a focal point.

The Society commissions a poet to write a new poem each year to be displayed around the base of the tree. The poem is inspired by many hundreds of poems written by Westminster primary school children who go to school near Trafalgar Square.

In 2014 Liz Lochhead, the Scots Makar, or National Poet of Scotland, is writing a new poem for the tree. She has provided an outline below for her Christmas tree poem which you can follow with your class to produce your very own Christmas tree poems.

The structure below is just an outline from which you can go off on tangents following the children’s (and your) interests, coming back to it whenever you wish.

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A Wee Letter about your Tree Poem from Liz Lochhead

Hello,

My name is Liz, and I am really happy that we are going to work on some poems together.

They are all about a real Christmas tree that will be in Trafalgar Square, all through the Christmas Season. This tree is a gift from the Mayor of Oslo in Norway and is to say thank you for British support during World War Two. It is an immense tree and very beautiful, and about 3 million people will see it over the Christmas period.

I am lucky enough to have the chance to write a poem which will be read out loud when the lights are switched on and which will also be printed on a banner wrapped round the base of the tree.

Today, you’re going to have a go at writing your own Christmas tree poem using the same method as me.

I have provided a sort of recipe that you can follow but like all recipes it’s only the beginning of the cooking process. Adding your own ingredients, or leaving out some things that you don’t like, is absolutely fine. I want your poem to be full of all of your favourite things. Everybody’s poem will turn out differently, even if we all follow the same instructions.

Remember, it’s your poem!

Good luck!

Liz

Love from Liz xxx

Liz Lochhead, the Scots Makar, or National Poet of Scotland
THE RECIPE

1. Beginning
I have included the DUM-DUM, or even DUM-DE-DUM-DUM, for students to fill in. There might be more or fewer beats than I’ve put in, but this is a rough structure for the start of the poem.

On the first day of not-even-Christmas-yet,
my DUM-DUM said to me:
Tell me DUM-DUM, what you’re going to hang
From your DUM-DE DUM-DUM
DUM-DE-DUM-DUM tree?

Questions to explore:
• What are the fond nicknames your mother or father or granny or grandpa might call you? Does this fit in, in line two?
  ○ In Glasgow where I live people say ‘hen’ or ‘doll’ or ‘flower’ – ‘Jimmy’ to any boy, whatever his name is.
  ○ In Bristol people say ‘my loverrr’ – even to strangers!
  ○ In other places people say ‘chuck’ or ‘hinny’.
  ○ Perhaps your auntie might say ‘sweet-cheeks’ or ‘angel’... Family nicknames are fine things.
  ○ Are there local words? Enjoy them! Put them in!

In line three, describe the tree in however many beats, as long as it sounds right to your ears.

So the poem could go:

On the first day of not-even-Christmas-yet,
my mother said to me:
Tell me, precious, what you’re going to hang
From your ever-green sweet-scented tree?

Or –

On the first day of not-even-Christmas-yet,
my brother said to me:
Tell me, stoopid, what you’re going to hang
From my bristling-with-needles ever-green tree?

Or –

On the first day of not-even-Christmas-yet,
my Poppa said to me:
Tell me, honey-child, what you’re going to hang
From our Northern, pointed Christmas tree?
2. The meat of the poem
This answers the question of what students are going to hang on their tree.

This will be a list of things, real or imagined, that children want to hang on the tree. The only rule is to use the five senses. Everything has to be something you see, hear, touch, taste or smell.

Some examples:
• For example hanging just “memories” on the tree doesn’t really work, not because it’s impossible, but because it’s hard for another person to understand what exactly you mean – but you could say you want to hang “the memory of the day I won that hundred metre race”. Why not! It’s a tree in a poem so it’s a magical tree.
• “World Peace” is too vague – but you could say “a white cardboard dove with Peace written on it with Ryan’s glitter-pen”.

It can be anything you want, from a silver star, a round red shiny bauble, to the World Cup, to a rainbow, to a peal of bells, to a new-knitted bobble-hat...

Or you might want to describe, exactly but very simply, some of the real things you always hang on your tree in your house.

Mix up the real and the imaginary.

Write far too many things then pick the best, throw away the rest!

3. The ending
This below might appear two or three times among each person’s list as a chorus, or it might be the ending only, or might not feature at all.

And from it dangles
Tinsel in tangles
Sparkles, sequins and spangles

Students can add a line here to finish it off if they want, or they might like it to end with that chorus of three lines, hanging... It’s up to you and them!