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Poetry applied

How poetry and literacy relate has for years been a research interest of mine, an interest first sparked by the writings of Canadian literary theorist, Northrop Frye:

“Ideally, our literary education should begin, not with prose, but with such things as “this little pig went to market”—with verse rhythms reinforced by physical assault. The infant who gets bounced on somebody’s knee to the rhythm of “Ride a cock horse”... is beginning to develop a response to poetry in the place where it ought to start. For verse is closely related to dance and song; it is also closely related to the child’s own speech, which is full of chanting and singing, as well as primitive verse forms like the war-cry and the taunt-song. At school the study of verse is supplemented by the study of prose, and a good prose style in both speech and writing is supposed to be aimed at. But poetry, the main body of which is verse, is always the central powerhouse of a literary education” (Frye, 1963, 24-26).

Now, how can he speak with such certainty on this subject? There is, after all, relatively little research on how poetry and verse might affect literacy development. And, although Frye insists that “poetry should be at the center of all literary training, with literary prose forming the periphery” (1970, 94), we know that in the world of the classroom the opposite is true: prose, often basalized and debased, is at the center of literacy programs with poetry at the periphery, if it is in sight at all.

Even without hard evidence from formal research, however, I believed Frye was right. I knew firsthand something of the power of poetry in literacy development through my experience teaching English in a junior high school in Toronto.

For months, we immersed ourselves in Richmond Lattimore’s translation of the **Iliad**. (Lattimore, 1951). Volunteers prepared favorite bits to read aloud. We read the speeches as readers theater scripts, hearing different voices interpret the various characters. Slowly, the language became part of us. Through familiarity with the text, the students began to notice its special qualities and conventions.

One of the latter is the **Iliad’s** long similes, which delighted the students: “Hektor/would not stay back among the mass of close-armoured Trojans,/but as a flashing eagle makes his plunge upon other/flying birds as these feed in a swarm by the river,/...so Hektor steered the course of his outrush straight for a vessel/with dark prows...”(Lattimore, 327).

They reveled in the rich language of description and action: “...glorious Hektor held out his arms to his baby,/who shrank back to his fair-girdled nurse’s bosom screaming, frightened at the aspect of his own father, terrified as he saw the...crest with its horse-hair,/nodding dreadfully, ... from the peak of the helmet/...And at once glorious Hektor lifted from his head the helmet/and laid it in all its shining upon the ground. Then taking/up his dear son he tossed him about in his arms, and kissed him.” (Lattimore, 165).

The **Iliad** was for weeks the center and focus of our entire English language arts program. And we were never bored. Try in-depth study of something worthwhile; it will prove far more satisfying than dozens of brief encounters.

Earlier in the term we’d studied Greek mythology. In fact, our study of the **Iliad** grew out of the class’s interest in these ancient tales. When the students decided that it was time to try composing an original poem in the epic style,

myths were often the subject of choice. Heather Mackey chose to tell the story of Arachne. Here is an excerpt:

Hearken, ye gods, to the tale of the immortal Athene
 who decreed the fate of the boastful Arachne,

 she who evermore shall stand as a warning to mortals
 who dare defy the gods. For now,
 she weaves unceasingly
 every day and all night.
 In the land of the Achaians dwelt a maiden,
 fair Arachne of the prattling tongue.
 Always, she must tell of her skill at the loom.
 So proud was she that her fame spread
 to all the ends of the earth.
 “Even Athene is not my equal,” spoke vain Arachne.
 And so the tale spread.
 Hearing it, the gods’ messenger, Mercury,
 he of the winged feet, hastened to Athene
 and told her of Arachne’s boast.
 Pallas Athene, angered, spoke:
 “I go now unto Lydia, the land
 of the green meadows,
 to warn this proud maiden,
 Arachne of the swift fingers,
 of her fate.
 So she spoke, and sent her sacred owl
 winging in swift flight
 earthward on stealthy pinions,

 silent as soft-stepping Hecate
 covers the earth at the end of the day
 with her veil of darkness.

The great epic echoes in this poem and those written by the other children in that eighth grade class. And, although I couldn’t follow these students to find out, I feel confident that our intensive study of the *Iliad* carried over into their speaking and prose styles, bringing, if even in small measure, as Northrop Frye puts it: “the sense of wit and heightened intelligence, resulting from seeing disciplined words marching along in metrical patterns and in their inevitably right order” (1963, 25). [For, as Frye insists], “...literary education of this kind, its rhythm and leisure slowly soaking into the body and its wit and concreteness into the mind, can do something to develop a speaking and writing prose style that comes out of the depths of personality and is an expression of it” (Frye, 1963, 25-26).

To gather further evidence in support of Frye’s claims for poetry in literacy development, I turned

to my Queens College graduate students in the course, *Poetry for Children*. The students are teachers working for their Master’s degree, with a specialization in children’s literature. Sadly, most of them know little of the work of our many fine children’s poets, although Shel Silverstein is a name they readily recognize. Even sadder, many of the teachers associate poetry with fear and loathing.

Asked why they enrolled in the course, here are some of their verbatim responses: “I’m a little afraid of poetry; in high school I felt stupid when I couldn’t explain it;” “I don’t know much about poetry and haven’t a clue how to teach it to children;” “In high school I got so I hated poetry because we picked every poem to pieces, but not using poetry with my students means I’m shortchanging them, so here I am.”

For the poetry class, I require a study. Each teacher, with a simple survey, assesses her class to find out what they know of poetry and their attitude toward it. Usually, the children know very little about poetry. Unfortunately, many—especially older students—have developed a negative attitude toward it. Here are some comments from third and fifth graders: “It’s babyish stuff.” “Some of it doesn’t even rhyme.” “You have to figure out what it means.”

Based on their findings from the informal survey, the teacher designs a “treatment” especially for that group of children. The object of the treatment is to change attitudes for the better and provide knowledge to wipe out ignorance about poetry. *Delight, immersion, enjoyment, inundation* are the buzz words that guide the teachers as they plan these treatment. Over twenty years of teaching this class and assigning this exercise, my students and I have discovered that, *without exception*, a concerted effort to use poetry in the elementary classroom, without abusing it in any way, even over a short time, has significant results in increased knowledge about poets and poetry, changed attitudes toward poetry in general, and developing interest and skill in the creation of poetry. By abuse I mean, among other horrors, forced memorization, verse vivisection, trying to translate the “true” meaning of the poem into prose, learning by rote the names of poetic devices and techniques and rummaging around in poems to find and list them.

While a few weeks is not sufficient time to see marked literacy development in children, this brief time is enough to see the *potential* for development. If nothing else, a systematic poetry program, properly presented, creates keen interest in words and all the marvelous and astonishing things they

can be made to do. Without this interest in words, children have little motivation to make the considerable effort it takes to read and write them. Many of the children in my students' classes are very young; large numbers speak English as a second language. In reading and writing poetry, they often must begin with baby steps. Writing two-word poems, or terse verse, as Bruce McMillan calls it in his photo essay, **One Sun** (1990), is a major achievement for many.

In her kindergarten, Aileen Klinger used nursery rhymes, jump rope chants, and finger plays to introduce her poetry unit. When she asked her children what a poem was, no one could answer. But when she asked if they had a favorite nursery rhyme, every hand went up. "I made a list of their responses," says Aileen, "and explained that these verses are poems and that they knew what poetry was, after all. They just didn't know they knew." She adds, "I wanted to make poetry part of our regular routine rather than this 'thing' we do every now and then." This she did by building a unit on the farm around poetry, including everything from songs like "Old MacDonald" to animal poems by Mary Ann Hoberman.

First grade teacher Kalie Stern worked with her children, all of them ESL students, to find a positive descriptive word beginning with the same letter as their first name. Together they came up with Funny Frank, Smart Stanley, Artistic Adriana, Popular Paul, and Lively Levon. Then they incorporated their names in original tongue twisters following the alliterative pattern in one of their favorites: statement, statement starting with *if*, statement starting with *where*. In his creation, Levon linked himself with a lucky ladybug:

"Lively Levon liked the lucky ladybug;
If Lively Levon liked the lucky ladybug,
Where is the lucky ladybug Lively Levon liked?"

"We experimented with onomatopoeia, sharing poems containing examples," writes Kalie. After reading Taro Yoshima's **Umbrella** (1977) where the sounds the rain makes are described, the children offered their own sounds for the rain. I wrote them on a chart arranged like a poem—with short lines and lots of white space—and we read them again and again:

Pit pat pitpat pat pit pit
Click clack click clack clack

Sh sh sh sh sh
Tap tap tap taptaptap tap
P p p p p p p p p

Third grade teacher Joan Popper tells of beginning poetry-writing workshop with terse verse, the two-word rhymes that photographer Bruce McMillan delights in. First, she unveiled her own terse verses, printed on chart paper, with pictures. "They were hysterical over my drawings and sayings," she says. "I'd done things like Tall Paul, Whale Tale, and Creature Feature, with a picture you'd see in a horror movie. When it was their turn, they were absorbed in their work, trying to outdo me. Sometimes, to get a rhyme, they'd put down anything, not making any sense. When that happened, I'd say, 'How would you draw that?' and they'd get back on track." Joan flooded her classroom with collections of poetry. "The poetry books in my classroom never get a rest," she says. "Every night children borrow them to take home."

Working with sixth grade, Regina Furnari encountered negative attitudes toward poetry. Many of her students said they hated poetry as she began her study. Having read Ann Terry's classic study on children's poetry preferences (Terry, 1974), she introduced the children first to story poems and humorous verse of the Ogden Nash variety. "During the eight-week unit, my class explored poetry in many ways," she reports. "They simply read poems by well-known poets silently and aloud to each other. Even shy students began to find poems to share in class. They wrote poems of their own and learned the important lesson that writing is a process. Even the best of poets don't sit down, write some words, and publish them; they have to work over time, revising, and finding the right words. They discovered that there are lots of poems out there that they can like. At the end, fifteen out of twenty-two students said they enjoyed the unit and had learned a lot. When we started the study, eighteen out of twenty-two said they disliked poetry."

Without exception, these studies by teachers, our version of *action research*, are positive learning experiences for both children and teachers. The teachers take what they collaboratively learn about poetry in the college classes back to their children. They learn, for one thing, that poetry is not an arcane, mysterious form understandable only by English professors. As they create their own poems in workshop time, they are guided by Eve Merriam's

advice to focus on its game-like, puzzle-like qualities, its playfulness with words. “Start light,” she adds. “Give children the whole spectrum, Low taste can only be raised by experiencing poetry on all literary levels (Sloan, 1981).

Through reading and sharing, students discover how poets construct poems, often using rhyming couplets (“When you to God would honor give,/ Prove it with the life you live.”) that can expand into four-line stanzas called quatrains and from there to a series of quatrains, as in the ballad. Over the years we have found that children prefer form over free verse both in reading and writing poetry. In writing, we find, form actually frees the children; told simply to “write a poem” on their own, they are likely to sit frozen in place. A rhymed couplet, on the other hand, provides a scaffold for expression.

The teachers look hard at poems and discover how they are made—one may be a simple statement: “Arranged on a staff of high wires, birds perch in twos and fours, composing bird song”. Another may start with a question and continue with answers to the question or it might be all questions: “Does the restless sea grow weary?/Does it long to lie still and rest?/ Does it tire of the cries of sea birds?/Does it seek an end to its quest?”

They delight in finding out that there are more forms than haiku and cinquain, the most common in classrooms but not necessarily the best-served, nor the best understood. We examine poetic devices in poems, meter, and form, but only after we’ve experienced enough poems to make us curious about how they work. We look closely at free verse. What distinguishes it from prose? How is language used in it to make it “poetic?” In this exploration, we are helped by poet Mary Oliver (1994) who insists in her fine handbook on poetry that “every poem contains within itself an essential difference from ordinary language, no matter how similar to conversational language it may seem at first to be” (16).

In class, we model what we hope will happen in the elementary classroom. The teachers spend much of each class sharing aloud in small groups or with partners poems they enjoy. Because they are introduced to dozens of fine poets for children, the teachers learn that Shel Silverstein is not alone in making poems that children will love. The teachers in the college class and the children in their classrooms support each other in their writing, working in small groups, trying out the forms and techniques identified by looking hard at the poems they share. With Mary Oliver’s words in mind, they work to avoid the banal, struggling to reach past the ordinary to the best possible use of words.

Reveling in poetry with delight in mind is sure to create interest in all the wonderful things that words can be made to do. Nowhere in literature is this word magic more evident than in poetry. And unless children thrill to words, thrilled *by* words, they will show little interest in reading and writing them. Literacy begins in hearts not heads.

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