

## ON MEMORIZING POETRY

POETRY is never ours until we feel it, memorize it, and thus make it a part of us; and one can never teach it who hasn't felt it, memorized it, and thus made it a part of him. Furthermore, our state course of study suggests that much poetry should be memorized in the grades, so teachers go at it by one method or another. Unfortunately, some of these methods breed in the children a distaste for poetry and leave the teacher thankful when the unit is over.

The day of the over conscientious analytically-minded teacher is passing. It is only now and then that one is seen who tears the poem to pieces, has most of the words looked up, and the sentences analyzed until it is a dead thing long before the memorizing begins. Many are still guilty of making poetry-teaching an excuse for word study, teaching the use of the book, or deep analytical thinking. This is usually because they have a confused idea of the purpose of teaching poetry. These are the ones who need to realize how fragile their material is and cultivate a lightness of touch rather than "the gambolings of a hippopotamus."

There are more of the lazy or unthinking type who, on encountering a poem such as *Ariel's Song*, will say to an over-grown slow-minded seventh grade, "Memorize this for tomorrow." The more diligent ones may struggle through this piece of seeming nonsense until the word order has become fixed in their minds long enough to tide them over that terrible tomorrow. However, the majority, being uninterested or unable to accomplish this, will probably receive a scolding and an hour after school in which to get up the assignment. The teacher has open rebellion on her hands and wonders why her pupils hate poetry so violently. Those who condemn the miscreant to memorize fifty lines after school as punishment may be loosely appended to this class.

Attitude-building is the first step in real poetry-teaching, and it's the wise teacher who goes warily here. The first poems, which being above the children's experience in poetical and spiritual value, should be very simple in form and easily within their comprehension. A short poem containing action, vivid pictures, or a decided swing is a good one on which to begin. Perhaps there's a story behind it as in *Ariel's Song*, the telling of which will flood the poem with light and meaning, or it may be introduced by reference to a similar previously-studied poem. Of course *The Chambered Nautilus* is best taught with a nautilus or some similar shell, and it goes without saying that *Snowbound* should be saved until a day with

"A chill no coat, however stout  
Of homespun stuff, could quite shut out."  
or

"No cloud above, no earth below,  
A universe of sky and snow."

The introduction must be appropriate and based on something in the child's experience that will catch his interest.

Familiarizing the class with the poem is the next problem. Perhaps they are to listen to find the answer to some question raised in the preliminary discussion, to see some picture, or to feel the swing of the poem while the teacher first reads it aloud. All such poems should be read aloud by the teacher rather than silently by the class or by pupils who will be likely to mar them. In a short discussion the main point of the poem should be brought out and lines that answer certain questions or give pictures may be read aloud by members of the class until they are somewhat familiar. Children should be encouraged to share with the group related experiences or thoughts that the poem may suggest. A second oral reading of the entire poem by the teacher or some capable student might follow after the rime scheme had been noted, if it is unusual, and any difficult words discussed which the children asked about. By this time the poem has become so familiar that



at the teacher's "Why, we almost know this now. I wonder who can learn the first stanza first." The class will usually set to work eagerly.

After they have had the satisfaction of learning a poem in this easy manner, they are ready for more. A short poem similar to the one already learned may be lettered on the board and briefly discussed. It is remarkable what results can be served if the teacher will mention about this time that she will give extra credit for all poems memorized but emphasize the fact that no one *has* to learn a single line.

This method has worked like magic in our junior high school. Two new poems were lettered on the blackboard every other day, and the children began to bring notebooks in which to copy them so they could make anthologies of their own similar to one that had happened to appear on their reading table the day before. This method gave a wide range of choice, for a poem that had little appeal to an individual child could be omitted by him. A list of good poems to memorize was posted and whenever the class felt that one which they had brought in was appropriate, it, too, was added to the list.

As there was so much extra-credit work being done, a chart was posted containing the names of the class members and a number of spaces after each name. When ten lines of poetry had been memorized and recited perfectly to some member of the class, the child could check himself in one of the spaces after his name. Each child was required to keep a list of the poems memorized, and one period a week was set aside for the recitation of them. The lists were exchanged, and the first child called upon, after reciting his chosen selection, could call on the person whose list he had for any poem on it. This was used as an additional check to prevent the child from checking himself before he had really learned the poem. In three weeks eleven-hundred lines was the greatest number mem-

orized and twenty the least. The average was between two and three hundred.

The program for our class period often took the form of:

1. Enjoying familiar poems.
2. Presenting new poem or poems.
3. Copying poems from board.
4. Studying poetry.
5. Making poetry posters.

Under the first head we sometimes recited familiar poems or played games made up around these poems. These often consisted of eight or ten questions to be answered such as: 1. What was the name of the poet who became homesick for England while in Italy and wrote a poem describing an English springtime? 2. What kind of poem was written to be sung, and contains simple language, much repetition, and four-line stanzas? 3. In what poem does a girl shoot herself to save her lover?

Making poetry posters was a development unexpected by the teacher at the beginning of this work. After interest was aroused, there came the rush for books. The college and town libraries were stripped of poetry books and the book stores were surprised with orders for *Silver Pennies*, *This Singing World*, *Magic Casements*, and other favorites. We finally arrived at the idea of lettering favorite poems on cardboard or stiff colored paper and decorating them with appropriate illustrations either drawn, painted, traced, or cut from magazines, and tinted. One lesson on spacing and color combinations and a little practice in lettering soon brought forth some beautiful posters which were placed in a border around the room,—destined to become material for future poetry classes.

As a sort of summary, we undertook in a simple way to place the poets we knew according to their nationality and period, and to catalogue our poetry roughly under the heads of lyric, ballad, free verse, negro and vagabond poetry. The culmination came when a child asked for help with rimes she wanted to use on a health chart.



This opened the way for some lessons on the writing of poetry and some very creditable first efforts spontaneously appeared.

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### INTEREST AND ENTHUSIASM IN TEACHING POETRY IN HIGH SCHOOL

IT HAS often been asked how interest and enthusiasm in teaching poetry in high school classes can be maintained, especially when boys think that poetry is effeminate, a study for girls, forced upon them. Consequently they declare their hate for anything that is poetry. Many girls have a different opinion and yet it is one that is unfavorable. Poetry to them is ethereal, unearthly, intangible.

Although no formal method can be followed, a few suggestions may be of help to the instructor. One of the chief reasons for the dislike of the study of poetry is a lack of understanding of the occasion of the poem and the special circumstances under which a poem was composed, and sometimes of the events of a poet's life that aided in the composition of a poem. Just how detailed this study should be, as well as the best way of introducing it, is left to the discretion of the instructor. It might be a lesson assigned for outside reading and a discussion in class before a poem is read. So much of the material should be taken up as will clarify an otherwise obscure poem.

Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* has always been considered an obscure poem by most students, but when one understands the circumstances under which it was written, it becomes more clear. The story that Coleridge tells is well known: In the summer of 1797 Coleridge had retired to a lonely farmhouse between Porlock and Linton. He was slightly indisposed and an anodyne was prescribed. He fell asleep and for three hours he was in a profound sleep, at least

of the external senses, during which time he had composed less than from two to three hundred lines. On awaking, he had a clear recollection of the whole and wrote it down just as we have it. He was interrupted by a man on business from Porlock, and when he came back to his room, he had forgotten all the rest.

Byron's *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* is more fully appreciated when one knows that Lord Byron wrote this poem as a direct attack upon the editor of the *Edinburgh Review* for the severe criticism of his *Hours of Idleness*, his first book of poems, all of which were written before he was nineteen years of age. Byron thought Jeffry had written the article. As was Byron's method, he attacked not only Jeffry, but every well-known literary man of his time. The criticism from the *Edinburgh Review* might be read to the class.

Of all the poets studied in the high school Browning will be found to be most obscure. With his encyclopedic knowledge of all arts of the Renaissance and his vast store of material concerning remote and often eccentric people, it is not a wonder that students are often bewildered when confronted with one of Browning's poems. *Andrea del Sarto* offers an interesting study when the proper approach is made. John Kenyon, a friend of the Brownings, asked Browning to buy him a copy of *Andrea del Sarto*, a painting by the artist of himself and wife. Since Browning could not get a copy, he wrote the poem which contains all the things the painting had meant to him, and sent it on to Kenyon. A copy of the portrait might be shown to the class. Though this fact alone does not clear up all the difficulties ordinarily encountered in a poem of Browning—especially in a monologue where the speakers are not introduced, where words and transitions are omitted, parentheses put in, and a rapid jumping style is used—it does add a certain interest that would otherwise be lost if these facts remained unknown.

Not all poems require the detailed study