



Poems That Work!

Curriculum Unit 79.05.03
by Richard Guidone

“Most Americans do not like poetry,” writes Gilbert Highet in *The Powers of Poetry*. “We may respect it, but we do not enjoy it.”¹

Perhaps the way we, as teachers, can improve upon the reputation of poetry is to improve upon our teaching of poetry. This paper is dedicated to that purpose. My major objective is that teachers will use this paper to give them the confidence in themselves to try poetry in the classroom of the middle school.

Poetry, for many teachers, is something that is left for someone else to worry about. Or it is one of those subjects which often gets pushed aside due to lack of time in an admittedly tight schedule. Worse yet, poetry becomes like writing book reports. Teachers tend to assign book reports without the usual dialogue that serves as an introduction to many lessons. Then the order is given to “Write A Book Report.” Is it any wonder we are disappointed by the results of such undertakings? Perhaps, what this paper might do for just one other person would be to enlighten him about the many ways in which poetry can be introduced to the student so that “*When the Teacher Says , “ Write A Poem ,”*” the end result will not be what is described here by Mauree Applegate in her book by the same name.

Do you get a sinking feeling in your middle?
Do you saw your worries out across the fiddle?
Do you sit and scratch your head?
Do you get down sick in bed?
Do you wish that you were dead?
As a kid’ll?
Do you call upon your friends to do it for you?
Do you cultivate school “Brains”-
Who often bore you?
Do you cover up with jokes?
Do you snap at all the folks who adore you?
Do you go out with the gang and cut capers
While your mother’s waiting up with lighted tapers?
Do you weep? Do you implore
That you’ll do it never more,

When Dad meets you at the door
With morning papers?
When your English teacher says
"Write a po-em,"
Do you say, "No, thank you, Ma'am;
I just can't go em!"
But now you've time to look
At the pages of this book,
If you swallow line and hook,
You can show'em!
Yes'm?
No'm?

How best to counteract this student reluctance and the equivalent teacher reluctance is another major concern of this paper. The poems that I used have been “tested” by me in my classroom on children much like yours. They are aimed at students with limited reading abilities and underdeveloped vocabularies. The poems themselves are not overbearing, or super-sophisticated, nor are they veiled in mysterious classical allusions bound to confound and confuse the casual reader. Instead they are poems aimed at today’s urban youth, straightforward, hard-hitting, and unpretentious, while delivering an urgent message.

An example of the type of poem of which I speak follows. It is written by Rachel Schofer, a sixth grade girl, and appeared in the March 1979 issue of *Language Arts Magazine* .

“Please wait,
I will come,” you said.
But you did not come.
I waited and waited.
You never came.
You broke a promise.
I will wait some more.
“Please wait,
I will come,” you said
But you did not come.

The kind of poetry that should be examined at the middle school level is the type which Alice Brand speaks about in her article in *The Middle School Journal* titled “A Poetry Process for Young Adolescents.”

“Poetry just sneaks up on you,” she says. “. . . my poetry unit eludes standard programming, its central objective is to explode the myth that students can be brought to poetry as to a shrine. Therefore . . . read lots of humorous poetry to your class, . . . light material relaxes and takes the academic edge off the unit.”²

To illustrate this technique let me relate a classroom incident. During an engaging discussion of the differing views on the origin of the universe, I found that we had, as scientists long ago had, come to a difficult point at which only conjecture or religion can assist. Not wishing to dampen their enthusiasm for knowledge, but wishing to make them see that others had grappled with this problem and came up blank, I offered this poem, titled “The Answers” by Robert Clairmont, to take the academic edge off the unit as suggested above.

“When did the world begin and how?”
I asked a lamb, a goat, a cow.
“What’s it all about and why?”
I asked a hog as he passed by.
“How will the whole thing end, and when?”
I asked a duck, a goose, a hen.
And I copied all the answers, too:
A quack, a honk, an oink, a moo!

To be able to respond to a situation like this with an appropriate poem that reflects the moment takes a special person willing to teach poetry occasionally or even incidentally but certainly not casually or indifferently.

It is therefore necessary that some things be presumed, or hoped, to be true. First, the teacher must possess a keen sixth sense, attuned to what is going on in the room and knowing when the right poem will help the situation. Secondly, he must have at hand a repertoire of poems readily available to turn to should the need arise. I encourage teachers to do as I have done over the years and embark today on collecting and sorting poems, so that when a time arrives, as it did to me when I prejudged a little girl and lumped her in with everyone else, you could get out of a sticky face-losing situation by hand-delivering a copy of this poem to the offended party.

The poem “Look At the Rain” is taken from the book *Look at the People* by Bernard Tracey Casey.

Look at the rain
One drop at a time,
Look at a tree
One leaf at a time,
Look at the grass
One blade at a time,
Look at the people,
One person at a time.

Situations such as this abound in the classroom, and many others that we can plan for will make the teaching of poetry almost effortless.

One need only to use the natural progression of the school calendar to find examples where poems can be relevant to what is happening in school. Make note of the following and use the anthologies listed in the bibliography.

- 1) Seasonal Poems
- 2) Poems of the Months
- 3) Special Holidays
- 4) Feelings in School
 - a. First Day in school
 - b. New friends
 - c. Books
 - d. Favorite Subjects
 - e. Romances
 - f. Report Cards
 - g. Sports
 1. baseball
 2. basketball
 3. football
 4. etc.
- 5) Hobbies
- 6) Pets
- 7) Trees and plants
- 8) Objects found around the home or school.

Much of my current thinking about poetry and how it should be taught comes from reading an excellent article by Stephen Dunning called "The Teaching of Poetry." In this article Dunning lists nine ways to improve upon the teaching of poetry. Much of what follows is a rephrasing of what Dunning believes to be true and how I have applied this to my teaching.

The teacher who attempts to teach poetry must genuinely love poetry and should choose those poems about which he can engender real enthusiasm. That is why it is so necessary to begin to cut out, save, copy down, clip and put together your own poetry anthology. Children today are sophisticated. They can tell when a teacher is forcing himself to teach something that he otherwise might not wish to teach. But a teacher who can communicate a sense of genuine love for poetry can transmit that feeling to his students. When that sense of mutual admiration exists, it is possible to relate a poem such as "The Haunted House" by Vic Crume and to really make the children feel-

"That beyond the door
And into the hall
This was the house
Of no one at all."

It is also important to keep in mind when teaching poetry that the poem is of central importance and should be our prime consideration. Too often we tend to get caught up in the other aspects of the author's style, life history and the cultural setting which may have influenced his poem. In so doing we lose sight of or wander away from relating to the feelings or experiences that the poet wishes to convey. Surely Robert Frost is one of our finest poets, but of what use would it be if we had our students spend countless hours at the library rewriting something already written about his life, when the statement he wishes to make in "People Keep Saying" about memorization is quite plain.

"What are you going to have to think about
When you lie awake and can't sleep at night.
Pretty things that are well said—
It's nice to have them in your head."

Quite a bit has thus far been said without much being made about the mechanics of poetry. I would prefer to teach these techniques inductively rather than to name them at the outset and then examine them. The technique I would use would be to read a group of poems that are similar, then see if students can see the similarity.

If I wanted them to understand what a lyric poem was, I might have them read the following: "Pigeons," by Richard Kell, "My People" by Bernice George, "Africa" by Langston Hughes, and "Water Pictures" by May Swenson.

Humorous poetry can be labeled as such by almost any student after reading any of these: "The Shark" by John Ciardi, "Good Sportsmanship" by Richard Armour, and "The Sniffle" by Ogden Nash.

Students seem to think that all poems rhyme. Dispel this notion by offering the following poems as proof and soon the term free verse will be theirs, not yours. Examples of poems in free verse are "The Harbor" and "Primer Lesson," both by Sandburg, and "Patrolling Barnegat" by Walt Whitman.

Other poetical devices which can be taught inductively are simile and metaphor. After reading "Pigeons" by Richard Kell and "Pretty Words" by Eleanor Wylie, students may be ready to try to write their own similes by completing these: frightened as, nervous as, tall as, dead as, happy like a, quick like a, odd as, etc. After reading "Africa" by Langston Hughes and understanding the metaphor used, suggest they write a metaphor for the following: a snowflake, a building, a wheelbarrow, a car, a train, a river, a clock, an animal.

Read these poems to illustrate the meaning of imagery and have children draw pictures from what their mind's eye sees. Poems rich in imagery are "I like to See It Lap the Miles" by Emily Dickinson, "The Buck in the Snow" by Edna St. Vincent Millay and "Dreams" by Langston Hughes. Children's art work can be hung alongside of poems to make an attractive bulletin board display.

Most teachers tend to overexplain themselves in the hope of making subject matter, including poetry, more understandable. This may be especially true of the middle school teacher, who teaches other subjects like math and science where overexplaining is very often necessary.

But in the teaching of poetry, enough room ought to be left for minds to stretch and let personal experience come to bear on the situation. A question like "What meaning does the poem have for you?" is more appropriate than "What does the poem mean?" With the first question you acknowledge that there may not be a wrong or right answer, while the second demands a right answer. Young children have not been taught as yet that many answers could be right. Their early experience in school has led them to believe that answers are either right or wrong and that to please the teacher you must provide the right answer. A goal of this paper is to make students and teachers see that poetry is personal and has different meanings for different people.

"As teachers, we must constantly remember the varied backgrounds of age, sex, knowledge, and experience which we and the students bring to the same poem. It is important that we present poetry that appeals to varied segments of the membership of the class." ³

A poem which has instant appeal to children, which is also full of imagery, is "Picnic By the Sea" by Harry Behn. In the poem Behn compares the action of adults and children at the beach. What child would deny that . . . I love sunshine

Better than shade,
And sandwiches and doing things
And boots and lemonade.

Yet a child could very easily empathize with the adult viewpoint of the purpose of the sea when Behn says:

But when you're a grownup
Lady or man,
All that seems to matter
Is the way you tan.

An often-heard lament of the adolescent is that he is not given the opportunity to choose that which affects him directly. This refrain is echoed in the words of the poem "Choosing Shoes," by Frida Wolfe:

New Shoes, new shoes,
Red, pink, and blue shoes,
Tell me, what would you choose,
If they'd let us buy?

Most course outlines simply declare what is to be read and when. Our job as teachers is to get our students to do something they might normally not do. We must seduce them into liking poetry by making it such a natural expression that they will come to expect a poem at a particular event or not be surprised by the sudden interjection of a poem. The children will not be surprised to suddenly hear "Numbers" by Alike Barnstone or "Arithmetic" by Carl Sandburg (if these are available at your fingertips) during a difficult math lesson. Children will feel comforted by the fact that you understand how they feel. When a student who doesn't hand in his assignment because he chooses to go out and play hears the following lines from "I Meant to Do My Work Today" by Richard LeGalliene, he may start to love poetry:

I meant to do my work today,
But a brown bird sang in the apple tree
And a rainbow held out its shiny hand—
So what could I do, but laugh and go?

A teacher will know he has made an impression on his students when the students suddenly become aware of

the poetry shelf in the library and eagerly bring you books to read to them. The next step, choosing individual poems to study, is not too far off.

What are some ways of effectively studying poems? Might students be better writers of poetry if their study techniques were improved? The following guidelines are offered by James Winn, Professor of English at Yale University, and seminar leader of our group. An unabridged version is available in the appendix for use with more capable groups.

How to Read A Poem

1. Read the poem out loud several times. Do the words make you hear any sounds? Which words rhyme? Do any words sound nice when you say them together? Does the poem have an unusual shape?
2. Re-read the poem as if you were reading a story. Is anyone speaking in the poem? To whom is he speaking? Are there any words you don't understand? Look them up in the dictionary.
3. Are two different things being compared using like or as? Is this a gentle, or serious, or funny poem?
4. Read the poem again. How does it make you feel?

Once children become better readers of poetry they may become better writers too. Some forms of poetry suitable for elementary school children are the following:

1. Words and phrases—write similes and metaphors as discussed earlier.
2. Free Verse—Especially suited to inexperienced writers because in free verse there is:
 - a) No rhyming to lend artificiality
 - b) No set pattern of rhythm or meter
 - c) Free variation in length of lines, form and content
 - d) Emphasis is on the thought expressed.Some examples of poems in free verse have already been mentioned.
3. Haiku—A poetic form consisting of three lines totaling 17 syllables.
Line 1: 5 syllables
Line 2: 7 syllables
Line 3: 5 syllables
4. Couplets and triplets—Teacher can supply first line, then request rhyming line. Or students make lists of rhyming words as the point from which to begin.
5. Limericks—Consists of a triplet and a couplet.
The triplet consists of lines 1, 2 and 5 whereas lines 3 and 4 form a couplet.
6. Quatrain—the most commonly used verse. Contains varied rhyme schemes and:
 - a) Quatrains contain four lines
 - b) The lines are of uniform length

- c) There is rhyme
- d) The rhyme pattern varies

Once students begin to write, what subjects will they choose? “Students must be helped to discover that poetry is written about many things. The subjects of poetry are not comprehended by nightingales, daffodils, anticipations of death, man’s yen for life at sea, and the romantic love of land-lubbers. Poetry is also about city streets, juke boxes, oil barges, and cars; hunting, prize-fighting, rockets and wars.”⁴

Students, especially boys, are at first put off by poetry because it connotes a kind of femininity. To overcome this feeling is important and necessary to the successful teaching of poetry. By providing a variety of poems you can help students come to see that poetry is more than just flowers and love, a realization which will make their enjoyment greater and will make it much easier for them to write about what they feel.

Let them understand what Sir William Watson meant when he said, “The poet gathers fruit from every tree,” by reading these poems: “The Drugstore” by Karl Shapiro, “Steam Shovel” by Charles Malam, “Foul Shot” by Edwin Hoey, “Skin” by Bobbi Katz, “Great Big Flashlight” by Mary Ann Turner, “Merry-Go-Round” by Dorothy Baruch and “Counters” by Elizabeth Coatsworth.

“In order to become really familiar with the marvelous poetry available to you and to young people whom you will teach, you should explore independently in order literally to steep yourself in poetry for children. This is not a laborious chore, for you will find that children’s poetry is not only charming, delightful, and thoroughly enjoyable, but that it also offers a pleasant variety ranging from the nursery rhyme to poems by John Ciardi or T.S. Eliot.”

A perfect example is Ciardi’s “Summer’s Song” a poem to delight both teacher and student.

By the sand between my toes,
By the waves behind my ears,
By the sunburn on my nose,
By the little salty tears
That make rainbows in the sun
When I squeeze my eyes and run,
By the way the seagulls screech,
Guess where I am? At the . . .!
By the way the children shout
Guess what happened? School is . . .!
By the way I sing this song
Guess if summer lasts too long:.
You must answer Right or . . .!

Why this great concern for bringing poetry to our students? What do we hope to achieve? Of what use is poetry in our lives? I believe we all feel that poetry will enrich the lives of our students and I believe this is my main purpose as a teacher. I concur with Mauree Applegate: "Life surely cannot consist simply in earning a living, important as that pursuit is. But living a full inner life as one earns that living is the difference between dull existence and rainbowed days."

Dare to let your children experience rainbowed days as mine did one rainy day as they asked to listen, time and again, to a recording of "April Rain Song" by Langston Hughes, especially the refrain:

Let the rain kiss you.
Let the rain beat upon your head
With silver liquid drops.
Let the rain sing you a lullaby.
And I love the rain.

ACTIVITIES

The following activities are suggested to enhance the appreciation of poetry. I have tried and used many of them. Thanks must go to Elizabeth Connellan, retired chairman of the English Department at Fair Haven Middle School, who compiled these ideas for use in a school-wide poetry happening.

1. Arrange a bulletin board with poems suitable to season, holiday or certain subjects such as animals, colors, people, food, nature, dreams, fantasies, humor, sports, science, geography, music, art, mathematics.
2. Students will arrange a bulletin board using map of world. They will find poems by poets from other countries. From copy of poem a ribbon will stretch to country of poet who wrote it.
3. Using same technique with map of United States, attempt will be made to find a poet from each state.
4. Paste clipped poems or copies of favorite poems on 5x8" oaktag for a poetry box.
5. Make an anthology of poems by one author or make a collection of poems which have to do with an area of special interest.
6. "Hang a poet" i.e. make an illuminated-type manuscript copy of a poem suitable for framing.
7. Fantasy is very imaginative and grows out of people and things of the real world. Try writing a fantasy of your own in verse after reading "The Purple Cow" (Gelett Burgess), "Steam Shovel" (Charles Malam).
8. Try writing verses for greeting cards, valentines, advertising, coming events, spelling bees, oratorical contests, games, Book Week.
9. Write a scary poem and read it to group. Suggested ideas—a light moving in darkness, howling of wind—a whining dog at night—shadows on a wall—thunder and lightning.
10. Make up a list of metaphoric names for cars, planes, bicycles, motorcycles, trains (Mustang, Cougar, Valiant, El Dorado).
11. Make poster illustrating a well-known poem. You may use pictures cut from magazines or draw your own illustrations. You may want to draw a poster for a poem you wrote yourself.
12. Write a short poem about a favorite food and illustrate it. These can be used as decor in the cafeteria.
13. Write a poem about sports. Suggested subjects are diving, baseball, football, basketball, golf, swimming, hockey, skating, boxing, tennis, fishing, rowing, hunting, track, soccer.
14. After listening to some music, write a poem. Title of selection should not be given to students, who should jot down what they imagine while listening.

The following poetical terms are intended for use by the teacher and might be items worth mentioning in a middle school setting. Review technique discussed in unit for best ways to introduce poetic terminology.

1. *Poetry*

Poetry is a patterned form of verbal or written expression of ideas in concentrated, imaginative, and rhythmical terms.

2. *Meter*

Meter is the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables established in a line of poetry.

3. *Foot*

A foot is a unit of meter.

4. *Types of Metrical Feet*

The basic types of metrical feet determined by the arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables are:

- a. iambic foot
- b. trochaic foot
- c. anapestic foot
- d. dactylic foot
- e. spondaic foot
- f. pyrrhic foot

5. *Rhymed Verse*

Rhymed verse consists of verse with end rhyme and usually with a regular meter.

6. *Blank Verse*

Blank verse consists of lines of iambic pentameter without end rhyme.

7. *Free Verse*

Free verse consists of lines that do not have a regular meter and do not contain rhyme.

8. *Rhyme*

Rhyme (also spelled “rime”) is the similarity or likeness of sound existing between two words.

9. *Position of Rhyme*

Rhyme may be end rhyme or internal rhyme.

10. *Masculine Rhyme*

Masculine rhyme occurs when one syllable of a word rhymes with another word. (bend and send, bright and light)

11. *Feminine or Double Rhyme*

Feminine rhyme occurs when the last two syllables of a word rhyme with another word. (lawful and awful, lighting and fighting, rattling and battling)

12. *Triple Rhyme*

Triple Rhyme occurs when the last three syllables of a word or line rhyme. (victorious and glorious, ascendancy and descendancy, quivering and shivering, battering and shattering)

13. *Rhyme Scheme*

Rhyme scheme is the pattern or sequence in which the rhyme occurs. The first sound is represented or designated as a, the second sound is designated as b, and so on. When the first sound is repeated, it is designated as a.

14. *Alliteration*

Alliteration is the repetition of the initial letter or sound in two or more words in a line of verse.

15. *Onomatopoeia* (on o mat o pe'a)

Onomatopoeia is the use of a word to represent or imitate natural sounds. (buzz, crunch,

tinkle, gurgle, sizzle, hiss)

16. *Personification*

Personification is the giving of human characteristics to inanimate objects, ideas, or animals.

17. *Symbol*

A symbol is a word or image that signifies something other than what is literally represented.

18. *Stanza*

A stanza is a division of a poem based on thought or form.

19. *Kinds of Stanzas*

The basic stanza forms are:

- a. couplet—two-line stanza
- b. triplet—three-line stanza
- c. quatrain—four-line stanza
- d. quintet—five-line stanza
- e. sestet—six-line stanza
- f. septet—seven-line stanza
- g. octave—eight-line stanza
- h. others are identified as nine-, tenor eleven-line stanzas.

20. *Limerick*

A limerick is a five-line nonsense poem with an anapestic meter. The rhyme scheme is usually a-a-b-b-a. The first, second, and fifth lines have three stresses; and the third and fourth have two stresses.

How to Read A Poem by James Winn

1. Read the poem out loud. Ignore problems of meaning for now; listen to the sounds of the words. Notice the rhyme scheme; identify the meter; look for alliteration, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia. What patters of recurrence does the poem display? What is its form?
2. Now ignore form and read the poem as if it were prose. Sort out the syntax. Diagram sentences if you must. Restore oddly ordered words to more normal prose order. Who is the speaker? Whom is he addressing? Can you paraphrase his meaning? What ambiguities of diction or grammar make such a paraphrase difficult? Look up any words or names whose meaning you don't know.
3. Now focus on poetic kinds of meaning. What are the most important similes and metaphors in the poem? Do they fit together? How many kinds of meaning do they have? What is tone of the poem? Is it tender, ironic, serious, sneaky? Are the meanings you are now discovering in contrast with those available from the prose paraphrase you made in step 2?
4. Now read the poem aloud again, trying to notice as many aspects of its construction as you can at once. Does the form affect the meaning? Are rhyming words important words? Do separate lines contain separate thoughts? How does the whole construct work? Does it affect you?

Notes

1. Stephen Dunning, "The Teaching of Poetry," in *Teaching Literature to Adolescents*, ed. by Stephen Dunning (Glenview, Ill., 1966) p. 1.
2. Alice Brand, "A Poetry Process for Young Adolescents," *Middle School Journal*, (May 1979) p. 6-7.
3. Iris M. Tiedt and Sidney W. Tiedt, *Contemporary English in the Elementary School* (New Jersey, 1967) p. 210.
4. Dunning, p. 33.
5. Tiedt, p. 217.

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