

Teaching Poetry

Can poetry be taught? Yes, according to current practice in many schools, although on closer examination, it is more the writing of poetry that is being promoted. Right from an early age, poetry is seen in terms of pupils learning to express themselves - one of the most popular methods

used by teachers being the compilation of lists. 'Make a list of animals and then invite the class to suggest an adjective to go with each one.' Or again, 'Get the students to write an alphabetical list of favourite words then devise a poem using as many of the words as they like.' While many of these exercises are obviously designed to be fun and encourage participation, especially at the primary level, it is questionable as to why they are described as poetry lessons as they have more of an educational feel about them. This impression is surprisingly confirmed by the Poetry Society's admission that 'Poetry is a powerful tool for raising standards of literacy and developing language skills.'

One wonders if Matthew Arnold, (a schools inspector for much of his life), would have said that 'most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry' if he had thought poetry was just a teaching resource. It's like saying that learning to play the piano improves hand and eye coordination. That may well be true, but it is not the real reason for learning to play the piano, just as learning how to express oneself is not the real reason for writing poetry. Moreover, it deflects attention from the craft skills of poetry such as rhythm and rhyme. In fact, this aspect of poetry is frequently discouraged. 'Don't worry about making the verses rhyme,' is one teacher's advice on writing a poem about a cat, 'finding good, descriptive words is more important.' In another case, instruction is given on writing haikus, a verse form that is created from syllable-based patterns. Here, the advice to pupils is that syllable counts can be difficult and that time would be better spent on the language and images, 'Just using the line as a measure can be enough' - a comment which undermines the whole point of learning to write a haiku with its strict format of three lines of five, seven and five syllables.

Even when great figures from poetry's past are featured in lessons, it is often only to provide a subject matter for pupils to express themselves. For instance, a tip endorsed by the Poetry Society for a teacher discussing the Romantic Poets and their love of nature is for students to imagine their own mountain which can be made of 'shoes, marshmallows or anything you like' and to write a piece about it. A similar attitude to the writing of poetry is very much evident in Ted Hughes' primer 'Poetry in the Making', which sets exercises after each chapter in which pupils are encouraged to take part in 'concentrated improvisation on a set theme' with 'a set length and a set time limit.' But this emphasis on helping pupils to express themselves through descriptive writing could just as well be applied to the writing of prose.

The result of all this promotion of poetry as self-expression is a torrent of versifiers, starting in schools and then contributing to the packed calendar of poetry competitions. The monthly list of events as published by the Poetry Library shows an average of four competitions every week since the beginning of the year. This dilution through quantity does poetry no favours and, anyway, figures from The Bookseller show that it is the traditional titles (anthologies, collections and reading lists) that make up the largest part of the poetry market and that the small publishers that fuel the competitions make up a comparatively small part of sales.

If poetry is to survive as an art form, this urge to turn everybody into a poet should be reined in. It would be better if students were involved more in projects like the Poetry Archive's 'Poetry by Heart' contests, in which pupils take part in a series of poetry recitation competitions, which encourage a love of poetry without trying to make everyone a poet. For it has to be said that learning how to write poetry seriously is not a subject suitable for a school curriculum. The writing of poetry is achieved by a form of osmosis, gained by long study and appreciation of past literary traditions, which enables the aspiring poet to develop an instinctive feel for the 'rightness' of a word and its balance and relationship to the word on either side of it. In a recent interview, the author Frank White, describing his reason for writing, said: 'A book has to come out of my innards. I have to feel it. I can't just decide to write about something.' This is just as true for poetry and no amount of practice in compiling lists of adjectives, phrases or images will offer the key to writing poetry.

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