

# Sparking Students' Interest in POETRY

By Judith Nembhard

**R**ecently, when a number of newspapers stopped printing poetry reviews, their editors justified the decision by saying that there was not much of a reading audience for poetry. Has the general interest in poetry reached an all-time low? Surveying the current situation, Henry Taylor, winner of the 1986 Pulitzer Prize in Poetry,

wonders whether "diminishing literacy" forecasts poetry's demise.<sup>1</sup>

Has the seeming ebb tide of poetry's influence affected the schools? Indeed it has. From within and without the profession we hear that poetry does not receive the emphasis that it deserves. One parent of elementary school children complained recently, "They don't make students memorize poetry anymore."

teacher must have a genuine love for the written word, and especially for poetry.

In a recent discussion about studying poetry, a middle-aged man with a biology degree from one of our Adventist colleges, remembering his college English professor, said with a smile, "I thought she was nuts because she liked poetry so much, but I studied it and liked it because she liked it."

Understanding poetry in all its forms and demonstrating a sensitivity to its nuances, the teacher must seek to communicate that understanding and sensitivity to students, helping them to see that studying poetry is a worthwhile activity.

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## **What methods can teachers use to get students interested in poetry?**

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Although poetry may have fallen on hard times, it is still being taught. But do students find the study of poetry pleasurable? Are they being motivated to read poetry? What methods can teachers use to get students interested in the subject?

### **Enthusiasm a Vital Ingredient**

No bag of teaching tricks will generate excitement about poetry in the classroom like an enthusiastic teacher. To begin with, the

### **Experience or Interpretation?**

In teaching poetry, we should strive to lead students to an understanding of a poem based not on what someone else says about it, but on their own experience with it. In our classes we should help students "get control over their reading and . . . make them better readers rather than . . . producers of interpretations."<sup>2</sup>

We often tend to teach on a level of abstraction that supplants experience, but students must be allowed to interact with a poem. Instead of merely analyzing, both they and we must *experience*. "No one can read a poem for us," Louise Rosenblatt has observed.<sup>3</sup> Reading poetry is an act of personal exploration.

Approaching poetry as expe-



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*Dr. Judith Nembhard is English Supervisor, Region C, District of Columbia Public Schools. She has taught every grade from first through graduate school, including nine-and-a-half years of English teaching on the secondary level, and college English teaching at Columbia Union College, Takoma Park, Maryland; and Howard University, Washington, D.C.*

rience does not negate careful analysis and critical thinking. Students should be taught about poetic elements and terminology at the appropriate level. However, analysis and exploration of meaning become fruitful only when the object is not merely to get at meaning but also to provide experience.

### How to Get Students Excited About Poetry

One teacher turned his fascination with memorizing poetry into an exciting venture for his students and himself. David Whitin saw his students come alive after he began reciting poems in class.<sup>4</sup> One day he recited Hughes Mearns' "The Little Man Who Wasn't There" and casually stated that he was sure that by the next day someone in the class could recite the poem.

He added that a copy of the poem would be taped to a window in the classroom; anyone who could recite the poem would have his or her name written beneath it. To his surprise, the next day at least a dozen students were "clamoring to recite" the poem.

And so an exciting poetic adventure began for Whitin and his students. Each poem remained on the window for about three weeks, and anyone who could recite it received credit for doing so. Teacher and students read and shared dozens of poems, with students finding poems in some unusual places—in a father's old anthology or on a religious calendar—and sharing them in class.

### Reaching Poetry-Immune Students

Once while teaching literature to a supposedly poetry-immune group of inner-city high school students, I began a study of Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by suggesting that anyone who could recite one stanza of the poem by the end of the class period would get a few extra points for the day's recitation.

We began with a warm-up

activity about Coleridge, the ballad, and the special music of the poem—its alliteration, internal rhyme, and rhyme. Toward the end of the period there was a general rush to my desk; students stood waiting their turn to recite a four-line stanza of the poem.

The young men amazed me. Ordinarily "cool" and reluctant to show any sign of excitement about learning, they now came to my desk and said their four lines with great pride. When some of them flubbed their lines, they went back to their seats, rehearsed and then returned, a pleased grin lighting up their

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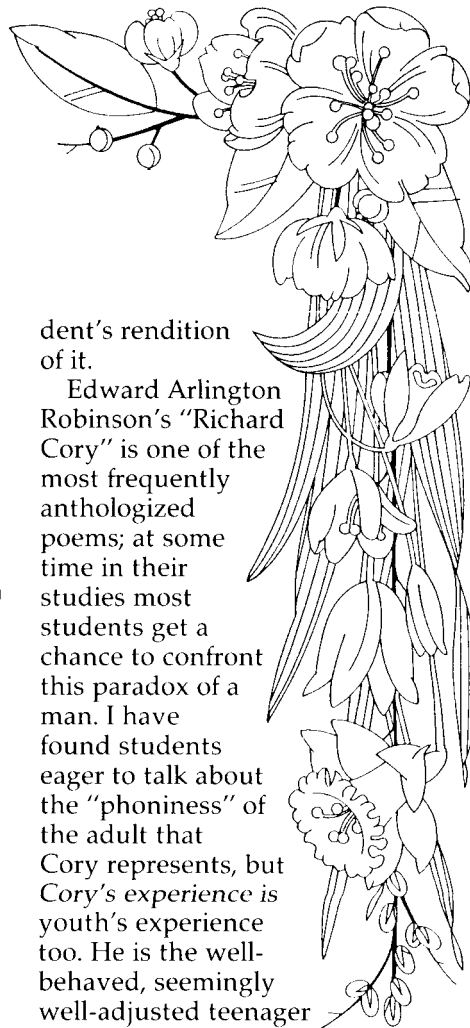
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faces when they succeeded in reciting the lines flawlessly.

That day the classroom was alive with an excitement that spilled out into the halls. One of the counselors, herself a former English teacher, told me how pleased she was to hear students walking down the halls reciting lines from "Rime of the Ancient Mariner." That introduction set the tone for an enjoyable study of the poem in detail.

### Poetry and Music

Another of my English classes became interested in poetry when I asked the students to bring to class an appropriate recording to accompany the reading of a poem of their choice from our anthology. For one period we had a demonstration of students unabashedly experiencing poetry. One young woman read Gwendolyn Brooks' "We Real Cool," the background music complementing the mood of the poem. Having heard Gwendolyn Brooks herself recite this poem, I believe she would have applauded the stu-



dent's rendition of it.

Edward Arlington Robinson's "Richard Cory" is one of the most frequently anthologized poems; at some time in their studies most students get a chance to confront this paradox of a man. I have found students eager to talk about the "phoniness" of the adult that Cory represents, but Cory's experience is youth's experience too. He is the well-behaved, seemingly well-adjusted teenager who masks his or her problems and frustrations.

One activity that works well with the poem is to have the students play the role of advice columnists. The class is divided into two groups: one to write letters seeking advice, the other to respond. Students may write as the Cory persona or provide their own questions.

The activity takes two consecutive class periods, with those giving the advice writing their responses as a homework assignment and bringing them back the next day for sharing. A poem takes on new meaning for students when it is brought into the arena of their own experience. An exercise like this offers an added benefit—getting students to write.

### Exploring the Poetic Experience

Students respond favorably to Emily Dickinson's poetry. Part of the appeal is its brevity, but they

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## QUESTIONS ABOUT AIDS

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gamous marriage relationship.

### What is my best protection against AIDS?

Knowledge. Know how people contract AIDS; learn how to prevent transmission. Because AIDS is transmitted sexually, avoid sexual activity, including heavy petting, until marriage. Choose your marriage partner carefully and remain faithful within that marriage.

Because AIDS is transmitted by intravenous drug use, avoid getting involved in drug abuse. Even "just this once" could prove fatal.

The best safeguard is to maintain the life-style Adventist schools have long advocated—keeping the body free of sexual promiscuity and chemical abuse. □

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*Joyce W. Hopp, Ph.D., M.P.H., is Dean of the School of Allied Health Professions, and Professor, School of Health, Loma Linda University, Loma Linda, California.*

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*A resource unit has been prepared for use in Seventh-day Adventist schools, grades 5-12, entitled "An AIDS Unit: Teacher Resource." It is available from North American Division union offices of education.*

#### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> J. E. Kaplan, "The Evidence Against Transmission of Human T-lymphotropic Virus/Lymphadenopathy Associated Virus in Families of Children With Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome." *Pediatric Infectious Disease* (1985), pp. 469-471.

<sup>2</sup> Phillip R. Lee, M.D., Professor of Social Medicine, University of California, San Francisco, California, in a speech entitled "AIDS: The Press, the Politics, the Price, and the Patients," at a scientific session at the American Thoracic Society convention, New Orleans, Louisiana, May 11, 1987.

<sup>3</sup> These are recommended for use with water-based lubricant and spermicidal lubricant such as Non-oxynol-9, which may give additional protection. Lubricants such as petroleum jelly or oil-based creams do not work well, as they cause rubber to deteriorate.

<sup>4</sup> *National Reports*, citing a study by Dr. Margaret Fischi of the University of Miami medical school reported in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, quoted in the *Washington Times*.

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Conference officers and division leaders as something worthy of significant support for the long-term health of the system.

The final item I would like to mention is tuition. More and more, particularly here in the United States, our people are saying that "We are pricing ourselves out of the business." This may be our greatest challenge of all.

I'm impressed with the scholarship programs a number of our NAD colleges are putting in place. I know that will help. I just hope that the systems in other divisions will not make the same mistake as the North American Division in delaying so long to activate endowment programs, or, for that matter, institutional fund raising in general.

I am especially concerned about our secondary schools (particularly boarding academies). Without strong academies to build upon the elementary experience and feed the higher education system, our whole cause is greatly weakened.

I realize that there are no easy solutions, but I suggest that an alert leadership and a determined constituency are capable of solving the problems. The education foundation idea that Gordon Madgwick presented at the recent Andrews University Trustees retreat is, I believe, a step in the right direction.

Our prayers are with you and your associates in making the second half of this quinquennium as fruitful, if not more so, than the first. Best wishes in your continued endeavors. It is a pleasure to labor with you in behalf of the church's greatest resource—our youth.

Very sincerely,  
Calvin B. Rock

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are also attracted by its intensity and Dickinson's sharp perception of the meaning of existence. Her poem "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" gave my 10th-grade class a chance to immerse themselves totally in the poetic experience.

Before we read the poem, I had the students conduct interviews among themselves. Pretending to be reporters, they paired off, note pad and pencil in hand, to find out how their partner felt about death. They took notes that would form the basis of their oral "report" to the class. Later the report was written up and submitted for a grade.

The students were frank and perceptive in their comments, but

one young woman refused to participate; she would not speak on the subject. Her reaction gave us a chance to explore the fear that is often associated with death.

So impressed were the students with the activity that some of them used the interviews to make a very attractive poster. When we studied the poem itself, we all had a clearer understanding of the subject and a greater readiness to catch the poet's vision.

### Exploring Sights and Sounds

One of the simplest yet most rewarding ways to get into poetry is through its sights and sounds. Actually, this is the level on which students initially respond to a poem. When you ask why they like it they respond, "It sounds good to me." We can teach rhyme by having students fill in blanks in stanzas of poems from which the rhyming words have been omitted. George Herbert's

"Virtue" provides a good example:

Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright,  
The bridal of the earth and sky:  
The dew shall weep thy fall \_\_\_\_\_,  
For thou must \_\_\_\_\_.

The same is done for the three remaining stanzas. Students read the poem more closely as they try to find the most suitable words to fill in the blanks. Studying the rhyme can also lead to working with other aspects of the sound pattern of the poem—for example, the repeated word *sweet* in its various denotative and connotative meanings.

Imagery is tied in with the sights and sounds of poetry. It offers another avenue for eliciting student reaction. Exploring such poems as Browning's "Meeting at Night," Dickinson's "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass," and Keats' "To Autumn" can heighten students' awareness of imagery and help them understand more clearly how their language works.

Here, too, good oral reading helps to bring the images to life. Employing my best intonation, I once read to a college class the highly imagistic description of the fog in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock":

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the  
windowpanes,  
Licked its tongue into the corners of the  
evening,  
Lingered upon the pools that stand in  
drains,  
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls  
from chimneys,  
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden  
leap,  
And seeing that it was a soft October  
night,  
Curled once about the house, and fell  
asleep.

(lines 15-22)

I wanted the students to see, feel, and react, but I was quite unprepared for the "Mmmmm!" that followed my reading, signaling their complete involvement with the scene that T. S. Eliot had created. Through the reading and animated discussion that followed, the poem became theirs.

### The Bible as Poetry

The Bible, itself a repository of some of the greatest poetry ever

written, is an inexhaustible source of poetic images expressed in figurative language. The Psalms in particular encourage the study of imagery. What a forceful picture Psalm 93:3 presents in the floods "lifting up their voice." Then there is in Psalm 102:6 the moving image of the man or woman in deep distress feeling "like a pelican in the wilderness" and "like an owl in the desert." Psalm 137 makes an excellent piece for team teaching, as the English teacher joins the Bible teacher in providing the students a rich experience in Hebrew history and poetry.

### Using Hymn Poetry

The study of imagery and metaphor can be extended to hymn poems. Some of the greatest hymns of the church make their impact through bold images.

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## Students must be allowed to interact with a poem.

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Enlisting the help of the music teacher for a lesson in hymn singing as well as hymn reading, the English teacher can provide an enriching experience for students.

At this point you may be asking, How do I begin whetting my students' appetite for poetry? Generally speaking, today's students are reluctant readers of poetry, so at the outset they may not respond to a long trek through "Hiawatha."

Instead, they may be teased into welcoming poetry through a short unit on "Little Poems." These "little poems" are pieces from four to eight lines with playful rhythms, strong images, and readily understandable meaning. They are easy to memorize and lend themselves to imitation and illustration. Among such poems are the picturesque "Dawn," by Paul Laurence Dunbar; "The Shepherd," by William Blake; and "Fog," by Carl Sandburg.

Teaching poetry presents us with an opportunity to stimulate our students' interest in the sub-

ject by making them participants in the poetry experience. We should ask the same question that John Ciardi poses in his famous book title, *How Does a Poem Mean?*

To find the answer, we must follow Ciardi's lead and involve our students fully in the experience of poetry. In so doing, not only will we give them enjoyment while they study with us, but we will also achieve the more important objective of making them lifelong lovers of poetry. □

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### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Henry Taylor, "The Strange Case of Modern Poetry," *The Washington Post* (July 26, 1987), p. B3.

<sup>2</sup> Russell A. Hunt, "Toward a Process Intervention Model of Literature Teaching," *College English*, 44:4 (April 1982), p. 348.

<sup>3</sup> Louise Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration* (New York: Noble and Noble Publishers, 1976), p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> David J. Whiting, "Making Poetry Come Alive," *Language Arts*, 60:4 (April 1983), p. 456.

## THINKING SUCCESS

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society expect girls to outperform boys in language arts and do poorly in mathematics?

How does one explain the fact that certain teachers and administrators always preside over well-behaved students? Could it be that these individuals expect good discipline? This message is conveyed to students and parents, who come to believe it, and cooperate to achieve the desired result.

Individuals *do* live up to what is expected of them.

### Belief in Self

The power to think yourself into a winner has been shown repeatedly in the field of sports. Bruce Jenner, champion of the Decathlon event in the Olympics really won the events in his head prior to the games.

The Bible offers many examples of the power of faith. Consider Paul, who had severe physical limitations as well as problems with church leaders. He was literally