

## Pragmatic Approaches to the Selection and Teaching of Poetry in Schools

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*(Received 9 May 2002; Revision accepted 30 July, 2003)*

### ABSTRACT

How many people really like poetry enough to read some regularly through adulthood?

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The unsatisfactory teaching of poetry in schools may be the main cause why poetry is not read and enjoyed by many more adults than it is at present (1995).

C.W. Valentine (465-66). Valentine's (465-66) observations concerning the attitudes of British people towards poetry are even more true of Nigerians. According to Valentine, (466) statistical evidence from public libraries and public opinion surveys in Britain shows that not more than 3 percent of the reading public read poetry at all. If poetry is so unpopular in Britain despite its high rate of literacy, it is even more so in Nigeria with its high rate of illiteracy. But the unpopularity of poetry does seem to arise not so much from the fact that Nigerians are largely illiterate as from the fact that Nigerian students at various levels of education are not sufficiently motivated and exposed to poetry at school to develop an enduring taste for it. This paper analyses the problems that alienate students and teachers from poetry, and puts forward suggestions aimed at arresting further deterioration of students' interest in poetry, a situation that has so marginalized poetry in school and society that it (poetry) has come to be regarded, and actually referred to, as a 'minority interest subject'. To that end, this paper emphasizes the relevance of poetry in the school curriculum and in society at large. It also examines the social and pedagogical problems that marginalize poetry in the school system and offers what is considered pragmatic approaches to the selection of materials for and teaching of poetry in Nigerian schools, particularly secondary schools. The approaches suggested here are aimed at stimulating teachers and students' interest in poetry sufficiently for them to regard poetry not as a tedious subject to be avoided, but a pleasant and an enriching experience to be relished within and without the school system.

**KEY WORDS:** Approaches, Selection, Teaching, Poetry, Schools.

### THE CHALLENGE OF POETRY IN SCHOOLS.

Part of the cause of alienation of teachers and students from poetry arises from the inability of many teachers of English to justify, even to themselves, the relevance of poetry in the school curriculum. The relevance of poetry cannot be over-emphasized, however, for poetry occupies a central place in the literary arts. For one thing, language is handled at its most creative level in poetry. As Thompson and Tunnicliffe put it:

..language is at its fullest and most flexible when creative imaginations are drawing on it for drama, fiction, poetry and song. forms of language (that) are infinitely rich and varied, covering the whole range of human experience. (15-16)

Poetry particularly makes greater use of the possibilities of language than any other literary genre. Through its limitless forms, poetry facilitates the

expression of experiences that defy communication in prose, drama or song. As Alexander Pope points out, poetry gives form to 'that which is oft thought of/ but never so well expressed'

The ability to use language is peculiar to man. It is no exaggeration to assert that what put man at the apex of creation is his ability to use language for introspection, and to understand, structure and control his environment. Without language, cultural and scientific development would have been impossible to man as it is to the lower animals.

If the ability to use language is crucial to human development, the ability to use that language creatively, as it is done in poetry, should be given priority attention and pursued vigorously within and outside the school system. Through the instrumentality of poetry, new words are created, and overused, threadbare words regain linguistic currency. This is why poetry is said to be an instrument of linguistic renewal.

In the technological culture which Nigeria is straining

after, the tendency is to pursue science and technology at the expense of the art. This lopsidedness, according to Thompson and Tunnicliffe, (16) is sustained at a high price- 'the neglect of the language appropriate to our humanity'. As Thompson and Tunnicliffe put it:

If we haven't got much in the use of language for expressing and conveying what we feel, we are so much more inarticulate, 'dumb' as we may say- rather less human. (16).

Apart from its centrality to linguistic renewal, poetry is a vehicle of self-understanding and expression of the emotions that people, irrespective of race or culture, share in common. This is why mankind will always need poets and poetry. People of all races and cultures are known to recourse to poetry to find expression for powerful feelings awakened by the momentous events of life. On such occasions, poetry helps us, not just to clarify and understand our emotions but to come to terms with them. In moments of heightened emotions, be that of joy or sorrow, we come to terms more with such feelings when we express them in poetry or apply the balming words of poets who have gone through similar experiences to our own circumstances. By so doing, our suffering is tempered, as the South African poet, Dennis Brutus puts it, 'by the knowledge of those/who endure much more/and endure..(54)

These qualities ensure for poetry a special place in the realm of arts and in the school curriculum, and the sustenance of a viable culture in a developing nation.

#### KEY FACTORS IN THE TEACHING OF POETRY

For a purposeful teaching of poetry in school, the following factors should be taken into serious consideration;

- i. the nature of students to be taught;
- ii. the objectives of the course;
- iii. the types of materials to be used; and
- iv. the methods of teaching to be adopted.

Some educational psychologists believe that poetry is highly selective of its audience, and maintain that many readers are not immediately capable of the emotional and intellectual response that the appreciation of poetry demands. For example, Valentine holds that

the enjoyment of poetry involves something more than general intelligence: (it requires) some specific abilities, or specific sensitivities. to word, sounds, rhythm, or to the blending of the music of words with the ideas expressed (and regrets that) we may expect to find some intelligent people whom Nature has endowed but poorly with these specific abilities and sensitivities. (467)

Valentine may be right in his assertion that nature does not endow everyone equally with the specific abilities and sensitivities for the enjoyment of poetry. But to blame everything on nature would amount to evading the task of getting to the root of alienation from poetry which many people, especially students, experience.

Many factors are responsible for students' dislike for poetry. Part of the problem lies in the lack of understanding of the nature and structure of poetry as a linguistic event. Written poetry involves a careful selection and deployment of words that catch the essence of the poet's sensibility.

The poet, in an effort to create new meanings, or achieve some semantic effect, may make a creative dislocation of the syntax of the language. One is convinced that the inability of most students to appreciate poetry arises, not so much from lack of specific sensitivity to sounds and rhythms, as Valentine asserts, as from the inability to understand the syntactic dislocations that are involved in the creation of a certain category of poems.

Wolf-Dieter Stampel points out that the category of syntactic dislocation most problematic to the understanding of poetry includes:

forms of contraction through which certain parts of the statement- generally of a functional nature-are left out, and the reader himself has to supply the missing links in order to complete the implied message (36)

Nwoga's analysis of the problem with poetry is quite revealing. In his essay entitled 'Obscurity and Commitment in Modern African Poetry', he states:

I think it needs to be pointed out that there are degrees and variations of obscurity in modern African poetry. As we have seen, there is a large body of poetry which is direct and simple in the expression of idea or feeling. Other poems have the semblance of obscurity because of their *complicated syntax* and, the reader needs only to restore the words to their normal order or supply the missing links to come to a position to appreciate the poems. Some other poems are difficult because they are involved in the exploration of ideas which, in the first place, are difficult of comprehension to many, or describing a situation with which the reader may be unfamiliar. (36), my emphasis.

#### THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

The teacher has a crucial role to play in enabling students to overcome these three stumbling blocks-complicated syntax, difficult ideas, and unfamiliar situations-to their

enjoyment of poetry. The problem of complicated syntax can be solved, as Stempel and Nwoga have pointed out, by restoring the words of the sentence to their normal order. The ability to do this depends on the students' mastery of the structure of English which, unfortunately, many schools do not take seriously these days.

The tragedy of the whole situation is that a large proportion of the teachers of English in our secondary schools (including graduate teachers) do not have sufficient knowledge of the grammar of English to be of much help to students in this regard. It is a fact that the curriculum of English studies in some Nigerian Universities is so lopsided in favour of literature courses that little attention is paid to the language courses. Graduates from such Universities dread teaching English language, or poetry, especially when the teaching task requires a close examination of the linguistic features of the poem.

A mastery of grammar is mandatory for a successful analysis of poetry. Poems come in all kinds of forms. Sometimes, a stanza can be one long periodic sentence. Many secondary school students may have difficulties in recognizing this sentence type. This implies that the teacher has to take into consideration the students' entering behaviour before selecting his materials for every poetry lesson. This and similar problems emphasise the need for collegial co-operation and solidarity among teachers, as the content of a history or English, or science class may form the indispensable template on which a successful poetry lesson must be based.

The purpose of restoring a poem with complicated syntax to its original order is not to render poetry into prose. Its purpose is to enable students to understand what the poem is all about in the first place. The teacher has to draw the attention of the students to the structure of the poem as it is, and guide them with probing questions, suggestions and cues to perceive and appreciate the new meaning created by the way the poet has deployed the words of his expression.

Another problem that puts students off poetry is the nature of the words in the poem. Poems that contain too many words outside the vocabulary range of children tend to discourage them from reading poetry. The teacher must bear this in mind when selecting materials for a poetry lesson, especially in the primary and junior secondary schools. Poems for primary and junior secondary classes should be arranged in such a way that the poems will neither be too difficult nor too easy for the class at any point in the programme.

If the poem is too difficult, it discourages students. If it is too easy, it will fail to engage the interest of children who naturally enjoy challenging (but not frustrating) tasks. A

good teacher must maintain this delicate balance between easiness and difficulty in his materials if he hopes to retain the interest of his students in poetry.

This does not, however, mean that difficult or unfamiliar words should be eliminated from the text of children's poetry. One way of coming to terms with difficult and unfamiliar words is through the use of reference materials, especially a good dictionary. Sometimes a poet uses a word in a very unusual sense. This unusual sense can be discovered through a careful study of the various meanings of the word in a standard dictionary. Students should therefore be encouraged to look up the meanings of difficult words in the dictionary or other reference materials such as encyclopedia.

Another problem that students experience in poetry is the obscurity created by unfamiliar situations or by concepts that are difficult to understand. Typical of these obscurities are distant and exotic allusions whose origins can only be dug out from extinct civilizations or foreign cultures. It is such factors that make the reading of Christopher Okigbo's *Labyrinths* (1971) a frustrating task for many students.

One is not advocating that only poems that yield their meaning at the first reading should be selected for schools. Far from it. To take that kind of position as Chinweizu et al have done in *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* (1980) is to cultivate intellectual laxity. Poetry for Nigerian secondary schools should include poems reflecting varied experiences within the interest range of teenagers and young adults. They should also include some poems with foreign background. But the teacher should, in bringing in these varieties, never lose sight of the very sound principle of moving from the known to the unknown.

#### STRATEGIES FOR READING POETRY

One effective way of tackling a word used in an unusual way is by arming the students with word-attack skills. One effective word-track skill is brainstorming. Brainstorming entails getting students to mention or list as many meanings and implications as possible a given word has in the context in which it is used in the poem. Brainstorming can be given as a short quiz that can be done in class or can take the form of a take-home assignment. Some words that need cultural explication may not be found in standard reference materials. Where such words cause problems in understanding a poem, students should be encouraged to ask their parents or knowledgeable elders in the society.

Through this kind of orientation, the teacher would be gradually introducing his pupils into the rudiments of research procedure. The teacher should refrain from giving students information they can discover for themselves. A teacher who takes the easy way out by telling students what they should find out for themselves is unwittingly killing children's natural impulse to explore and discover and denying them the joy in finding solutions to problems. Nothing blunts the edge of

inquiry like intellectual spoon-feeding.

Other causes of alienation from poetry can be traced to individual differences, in this respect, to the differential responses that individuals make to the mythic. Some people are idiom-closed. Such people simply find it difficult to abandon themselves to the mythos created by the poet.

In extreme cases, idiom-closed individuals cannot enjoy a joke, and find music irritating. They are emotionally resistant to the phenomenistic construal that poetry demands, and are incapable of the poetic faith which enables the reader to take the poet by his word. Such readers do not appreciate the analogical nature of most poetic expressions. Metaphor is lost on them.

Samuel R. Levin in *Syntax of Metaphor* emphasizes the importance of poetic faith:

To be in sympathy with the poet, to read in the condition of poetic faith, We should have to take the poet at his word. This means that instead of construing the (poet's) expressions, we must construe the world for, that is what he has done (131).

Those who cannot distinguish fact from fiction cannot enter the possible world created by the poet. Happily for poetry and for poets, such people bereft of the power of imagination are few and far between, and children are the least among them, being naturally, highly imaginative. That is why children make greater response to poetry than adults, barring errors of teaching.

Many people, including students, have wrong notions about poetry. For many, poetry is synonymous with obfuscating language. It need not be. For, poetry is simply, verbal art. Anyone who can understand prose speech can, with the right orientation, understand the creative use to which ordinary language is put in poetry, for, poetry and prose draw from the linguistic resources of everyday speech.

Poetry, as a way of using language, abounds in conversational speech. Poetry as an art form devoted to that way of using language differs from prose only in terms of the concentration of poetic forms which it shares with prose. If children are introduced to the art of poetry via the poetry of conversational speech with which they are familiar, the apprehension that poetry causes in the hearts of many will disappear. It will when children begin to recognize that figures of speech such as simile, repetition, metaphor, personification, etc. Which they are familiar with in conversational speech are also used in poetry. The difference is only in terms of concentration and complexity. As Geoffrey Leech points out:

...there is no fundamental difference between poetic language and prose language, except that the features

typifying literary composition tends to be more pervasive and pronounced in poetry than in prose (17).

It is therefore clear that poetry is not an unknown territory, as many students believe. There is no doubt that most of the problems that readers encounter in poetry arise from the fact that such readers did not receive the correct orientation to poetry at school, and not necessarily because of lack of some extraordinary aptitude for appreciating and enjoying poetry.

Some figures of poetry are actually common figures of everyday speech, and are easy to recognize even by children. For instance, if a mother tells a hyperactive child who has broken so many kitchen ware: 'come and take your meal, son, but don't fail to break the glasses and the dishes after you've eaten', the child will surely recognize the irony in his mother's statement. It will not be difficult for such a child to recognize forms of irony in poetry, especially if the teacher draws attention to them. The same thing applies to poetic devices such as metaphor, simile, proverbs, repetitions, etc. The teacher should start the teaching of poetry from those linguistic devices that poetry shares with prose, as the spring board from which children can take off into the mainstream of poetry.

Another cause of the unpopularity of poetry among school children is the failure to harmonise the poetry syllabus with the age and development of children. Modern education is child-centred. The state of the child's intellectual development should determine the type of poem that can engage his interest. One quality of poetry which never fails to engage the interest of children is rhythm. This is perhaps as a result of the numerous rhythms of life that impinge on human consciousness. The rhythm of day and night and of the seasons; the rhythm of life and death; the rhythm of the tides and of the angry waves in their endless battle with the shore; the rhythm of our emotions, or sadness and joy, and of human physiological cycles, are but as few of the numerous rhythms that surround human existence and consciousness. The rhythm of speech is just one of them, and is put to creative and entertaining use especially in poetry, song and dance.

Because of man's sensitivity to it, rhythm has been, and must be given special consideration in the selection of poetry texts for pre-primary and primary schools.

As Valentine points out;

..feeling for rhythm is evidently fundamental. Little children love rhythmic sounds. They often enjoy even poetry which is largely beyond their understanding if it is read with a marked rhythm. (457).

#### SELECTION OF MATERIALS: PSYCHOLOGICAL

In selecting poems for primary and pre-primary

syllabuses, therefore special attention should be paid to poems that are prominent in rhythm, poems that children enjoy. Rhyme and rhythm make for memorability and recitation of poems which children enjoy gives them useful speech training.

Another important factor in the selection of poetry for primary schools is the question of content. Syllabus committees should be sensitive to the ideas that are likely to engage the interest of children in various age cohorts. The Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget, identified four stages of intellectual development:

- the sensori-motor stage;
- the preoperational stage
- the concrete operational stage; and
- the formal operational state (12-24).

Each stage is marked by change in the child's way of perceiving reality, with the sensori-motor stage marking the most rudimentary, and the formal stage the most advanced stage of the child's mental development. This hierachial structure of the child's mental development should be reflected in the poetry syllabus and, in fact, the syllabuses of all school subjects.

Unfortunately, this is often not the case. Children are often saddled with poetry whose content and form are either beyond or below the interest range of the children concerned. Whichever is the case, many children end up disliking poetry.

The guiding principle in the selection of a poem for educational purpose should be: set for the child a task that is neither too easy nor too difficult to solve, so that all the time he is climbing an evenly rung ladder of cognition and experience.

Another very important technique in the teaching of poetry is consolidation. Consolidation enables the skills and concepts taught over a period of time to take a more meaningful and recognizable shape in the child's mind. Consolidation can take the form of summaries, short quizzes, tests, recitations, actual poetic compositions and probing questions that test the power of inference rather than of mere recall and comprehension, etc. These are excellent ways of helping students to increase their mastery of what they have learnt. Unfortunately, these techniques of recapitulation and consolidation are among the most neglected. And they are most neglected when teachers are running for time, to beat the syllabus. In such cases, many poems are simply rushed through to the bewilderment of the confused pupils. When such teachers boast of having 'finished' the syllabus, they fail to realize that the syllabus is made for the child, not the child for the

syllabus.

If interest in poetry is to be sustained through adult life, learnt poetic experiences should be consolidated enough to pass permanently into the realm of the mind that Atkinson and Shriften refer to as long-term memory (238).

#### PRAGMATIC APPROACHES TO POETRY

One approach that has proved to be useful in the teaching of poetry is the integrated approach. This approach is based on Piagets' theories of accommodation and assimilation, (Dececco and Crawford,) (81). The degree to which an experience is learned or made familiar depends, to a large extent, on the number of sensory organs brought to bear on that experience.

This natural way of learning is of crucial importance in the teaching of poetry in primary and secondary schools. Children should be given the opportunity not just to hear poems read but to read and listen to the poems themselves. They should be encouraged to capture the characters, events and themes of favorite poems in painting and sculpture. If a poem is prominently lyrical and hymnodic, children can be encouraged to turn the poem into a song.

Another way of awakening children's interest in poetry is by involving them in the making of poems. Poetry is art; it is a skill that is learnt and improved on by instruction and practice. In the junior primary school, little children are taught the rudiments of colours, sketching, painting and sculpture. These practices reveal quite early children who hold promise of scholarship in the visual arts.

In the study of poetry, surprisingly, no such creative experiences are provided for school children. This embarrassing silence of the syllabuses over poetic composition is perhaps based on the assumption that primary and secondary school children have not yet acquired sufficient linguistic skills for creative writing. This is not necessarily true. Poetry is verbal art. It is a form of art in which the artist uses words to sketch, paint, or sculpture his creative imagination. There is every reason to believe that children who have sufficient psycho-motor skills to manipulate drawing and painting instruments and produce appreciable art work also possess sufficient verbal skills to produce good poetry. As a matter of fact, even primary school children can create good poetry if they are sufficiently guided and motivated.

When children are exposed to poetry through the integration of the various approaches suggested above—reading, listening, sketching, painting and sculpturing the themes, turning the poems into songs, writing poems, etc—they will have experienced the poems they have learnt through various senses. These experiences widen their threshold of understanding and approaching poetry.

### MOTIVATIONAL REINFORCEMENT TO POETRY IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS.

Children who are engaged in these creative activities need encouragement and motivation to mobilize them towards greater effort. The teacher should motivate his pupils by rewarding good effort. Reward here does not necessarily mean material ones, although they are not excluded. A nod here, a smile there, even a drop of praise from a devoted teacher whom students usually hold in high esteem are precious to school children.

Intrinsic rewards such as praise and a feeling of doing well have far-reaching positive psychological effects. First, they increase the ego strength of children and enable them to tackle other problems of human endeavour with greater confidence. Second, being praised before his peers satisfies, if only for a moment, the child's basic human need for self-esteem. These positive effects of reward can motivate even weak students to develop more interest in poetry. Unfortunately, positive reinforcement in the form of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards is one of the most neglected teaching strategies. In the junior primary school especially, the major form of motivation should be reward by the teacher.

### POETRY FOR ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG ADULTS

At the senior secondary levels, poems should be carefully chosen to satisfy the needs of the various personality types the students are growing into. Adolescence is a period of emotional turbulence. It is often marked by crises of identity, as the youths contend with the physical and the psychological problems involved in the transition from childhood to adulthood. It is also a very impressionable stage of intellectual and emotional growth. The impressions the teacher makes on the student about poetry at this stage are bound to be carried into adult life.

While the poetry teacher of penultimate and final year classes of secondary school should keep as close as possible to the final examination requirements, he should also make allowance for poems that address the various personality types in his class. Philosopher and psychologist, Edward Spranger, identifies spheres of values that occupy the principal place in people's emotions, sentiments and choices, and identifies six personality types and their dominant value choices.

These are,

- i. the economic value type who place priority to economic utility, profit and success;
- ii. the aesthetic value type whose predominant yearning is towards the beautiful and harmonious and noble enjoyment;
- iii. the political value type strongly attracted towards heroism and power;

- iv. the theoretical value type who are dedicated to science research and reflection; and the search for truth and objectivity;
- v. the social value type dedicated to the good of the society; and
- vi. the religious value type who give the first place to God and the search for Union with God and the good of the whole man, (Haring 177-78).

None of these types occurs in isolation in any person. However, one is usually dominant in each person. The fulfillment of the demands of the personality type contributes to the gradual self-actualisation of the individual. An individual performs best and is most pleased when his creative energies are directed towards a career he likes best and has the best aptitude for.

In selecting his teaching materials, the poetry teacher should include poems that cater for the emotional needs of the various personality types in his class. The theoretical value of persons will find a lot to reflect upon in Chinweizu's poem entitled 'Dr. Wizard'. The religious value type will find T.C. Nwosu's *Six Dazzling Days* (1992), and Ebele Eko's *Wings of the Morning* (1978) enthralling. In these two collections, the religious sensibility is deeply sustained throughout. The exultant faith of the *Dazzling Days* and the enduring love of the *Wings* cannot fail to delight and transport someone inclined towards the exploration of transcendental realities. The social value type and the political value type will find poems in Odia Ofeimun's *The Poet Lied* (1980) and Niyi Osundare's *Songs of the Market Place* (1983) quite engaging. As for the aesthetic value type, there is an abundant number of poems that embody various aspects of aesthetic beauty that can satisfy such tastes.

Poems that whet students' appetites for poetry after they have finished formal education are usually not the poems set in the syllabus for the purpose of the examination. Such poems are usually crammed for examinations and forgotten as soon as the tension of the examination is over. Poems that are long remembered are those that give form to things often thought of but never so well expressed, poems that touch something deep and personal in an individual; poems that plumb the mythic level of the mind. Such poems continue to echo in the mind years after they have been read. In some cases, such poems need little or no effort to get them fixed in the mind. The beauty of their form and the power of their mythos etch them indelibly on the mind from where they rise in moments of reflection to admonish, rebuke, or comfort the individual.

When students come to this level of appreciation wherein they can see a relation between a well-expressed thought and their own personal concerns, then they are well on their way to using vicarious experiences to achieve well integrated

personalities. This is what we are aiming at in postulating a pragmatic approach to towards the teaching of poetry in schools.

### Conclusion

The above discussions show that the pragmatic approach to the teaching of poetry in schools does not just aim at enabling students to pass examinations. The approach aims at fitting them to live well adjusted lives in which the continued reading of poetry after school has a crucial role to play. There is no doubt that poetry has a significant contribution to make in the education of the whole man. Training to pass examination is only a factor of this goal.

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