

Poetry Is Dead. Does Anybody Really Care?

By Bruce Wexler, Newsweek, May 5, 2003

It is difficult to imagine a world without movies, plays, novels and music, but a world without poems doesn't have to be imagined. I find it disturbing that no one I know has cracked open a book of poetry in decades and that I, who once spent countless hours reading contemporary poets like Lowell and Berryman, can no longer even name a living poet.

Ruth Lilly made an unprecedented donation of \$100 million to Poetry Magazine in November. An article published on the Poetry International Web site said critics and poets agreed that the gift "could change the face of American poetry."

Don't these critics and poets realize that their art form is dead? Perhaps not. They probably also don't realize that people like me helped kill it.

In high school the author hated the poetry unit in English class. she was an avid reader who despised rhymed and rhythmic writing. Plowing through tangled symbol and allusion, she wondered why the damn poets couldn't just say what they meant.

At college he read "I Knew a Woman" by Theodore Roethke. Keats's odes or Eliot's "Prufrock" or that haunting line in Frost: "I have been one acquainted with the night." For the next 10 years or so, he was hooked, read poetry, wrote it and recited verse to impress dates.

And then his interest waned. It was because he had other interests that demanded his time and attention: he got married, had children, pursued his career, bought a house. He began to find more relevance in articles about interest rates than poetry.

Society, too, was changing in a way that did not favor the reading of poetry. From the Me Generation of the '70s to the get-rich-quick '80s, our culture became intensely prosaic. Ambiguity, complexity and paradox fell out of favor. Fewer politicians seemed to quote contemporary poets in speeches.

People don't possess the patience to read a poem 20 times before the sound and sense of it takes hold. They aren't willing to let the words wash over them like a wave, demanding instead for the meaning to flow clearly and quickly.

People lazy, and poetry takes work.

Poetry is designed for an era when people valued the written word and had the time and inclination to possess it in its highest form.

Poetry is the highest form of writing. Read Yeats's "The Wild Swans at Coole," Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," Thomas's "Fern Hill," and you'll experience the true power of art. They touch the heart and the head in ways that movie-makers (our current artistic high priests) can only dream of.

April was National Poetry Month, a fact I know only because it was noted in my younger daughter's school newsletter. I celebrated by finding out the name of our poet laureate (Billy Collins) and reading one of his poems. This may not seem like much, but I have television shows to watch, best sellers to read and Web sites to visit before I sleep.

Heidi Simmons

Newsweek Magazine published an article "Poetry is Dead. Does Anybody Really Care?" The author concluded that while "poetry is the highest form of writing," it takes "work" and that our culture was becoming "intensely prosaic." All true. But back then poetry was still alive.

Poetry has been dropped from the state "Common Core" writing standards for the curriculum for kindergarten through Grade 5. As a result, overburdened elementary school teachers have little incentive to give it much time.

Today the writing focus is on opinion, explanatory texts, and narratives. But if elementary school students never have the opportunity to explore their natural inclination for poetic expression, imagination, and word use, they will not fully develop their literary skills.

Just as an artisan cannot become competent in his skill without understanding his tools, writers must become comfortable with their verbal tools. Writing poetry inspires and refines a child's use of words as tools.

A fifth-grade student struggling with self-expression wrote a poem wherein he described his thoughts as a “jumbled mess of words” that were “fighting to get out by rearing, writhing, whipping, lashing, striking, and beating at his head until finally they seeped onto the paper.” The struggle of expressing an idea and the welcome relief when it is finally spread out on a page are clear in this student’s poem. Words become friends and writing becomes fun.

Poetry is a child’s natal language, a voice with which children are born. Their engagement in the poetic elements of language begins in utero with the rhythm of the first heartbeats. The infant’s poetic voice evolves into a delight of manipulating sounds. This is precursor to a child’s delight in the rhythms and intonations of nursery rhymes.

A second-grade student found rhythmic joy in her description of a thunderstorm. The “blunder slunder” of the storm blew hard through the trees and the “slunder dunder” of the storm rolled past her eyes as the trees were “flit blit” shaking and throwing their leaves.

Another gift of youth so apparent in elementary school is imagination. One of fourth-grade students imagined sneakers to be alive as they reclined in the closet after a long run, “tired with their tongues hanging out” and their “shoelaces drooping” just before their “eyelets fluttered” to sleep.

Poetic imagination helps children to bridge the familiar concrete world with the strange and abstract world of adults. Children experience their physical world with a sensual scrutiny. They can see, hear, taste, and touch what has become banal and insignificant to adults. They can use the imaginative poetic tools of comparison to communicate and understand intangible concepts.

One young student imaginatively compared it to all the five senses. Poetry felt like a “corduroy jacket,” sounded like a “whispering moon,” looked like “her chubby orange crayon, dull at the tip,” tasted like “summer honey,” and smelled like “a lavender wand.” In this way she traveled to a place where prose does not go.

These are examples of elementary school children who have had their natal gift of poetry nurtured in a K-5 literacy environment before “Common Core” standards entered the classroom.

Before students address the rugged tasks directed by “Common Core” of writing something, it would seem important to sharpen their imagination and love of words through poetic wordplay.

Students who have experienced poetry writing show greater fluency and sensitivity to language in all their writing. Poetry helps writing to be fun. Surely this is good for our children’s intellectual well-being.

Is poetry dead? Let’s hope not. Does anybody really care? We all should.

Heidi Simmons was the K-5 literacy coach at the Regional Multicultural Magnet School in New London for 15 years before retiring.