

TEACHING MODERN POETRY IN THE HIGH SCHOOL

TRAVELING at dusk the noisy city street,
 I listened to the newsboys' strident cries
 Of 'Extra,' as with flying feet
 They strove to gain this man or that—their prize.
 But one there was with neither shout nor stride,
 And, having bought from him, I stood near by,
 Pondering the cruel crutches at his side,
 Blaming the crowd's neglect, and wondering why—
 When suddenly I heard a gruff voice greet
 The cripple with 'On time tonight?'
 Then, as he handed out the sheet,
 The youngster's answer—'You're all right.
 My other reg'lars are a little late.
 They'll find I'm short one paper when they come;
 You see, a strange guy bought one in the wait;
 I thought 'twould cheer him up—he looked so glum!
 So, sheepishly I laughed, and went my way,
 For I had found a city's heart that day."

This little poem, called "Echoes," by Ruth Lambert Jones, was read to an eighth grade class in a junior high school. Suggested questions found in *The Gleam*, a magazine of verse for young people published in Canton, Massachusetts, were then asked in order to make clear the meaning of the poem. After some minutes of discussion the members of the class were asked to tell in a few lines of poetry any experience they had had similar to this one, or to write a short verse on any thought which the title, the poem, or any word in the poem suggested to them. Since they had had little experience of this kind, the children at first were somewhat dubious as to their ability to "write poetry," but, after a few words of encouragement from the teacher, they agreed to try it. Heads were bent busily over scraps of paper; now and then came the sound of a sheet being crumpled after a vain attempt to compose a "poem."

But soon the boys and girls began com-

ing eagerly to the teacher asking "Now what do you think of this?" "Is this the best word I could use here?" Suggestions were made by the teacher and slight changes were made here and there. Before all the children had finished, came the request "Let's hurry up and read 'em!" There was everywhere a complete willingness to accord to the class's request that any child read his poem. Various ideas were expressed in the compositions read. The worst and best were greeted spontaneously with sympathetic laughter and exclamations of approval. Below are quoted two of the poems written:

"One day at dusk, along a country road,
 I saw a squirrel. He carried in his mouth a load
 Of acorns; for the winter months were close
 behind his flying feet.
 'Poor squirrel,' thought I, 'I pity you when
 comes the snow and sleet.'
 While in the squirrel's mind a thought:
 'I'm sorry for him ; for while I sleep
 He'll have to go to school with wet, cold feet.
 Gee, but I'm lucky! I wouldn't be a boy
 for any treat.'"

Another with a somewhat different thought:

"One day as down the street I went,
 A cripple, weary and forspent, I met.
 The hastening traffic bustled by,
 Blocking his passage way, and I
 Hurried to help his faltering way.
 When, safely across, I left him to stay,
 He said: 'Tho' I have but a lame man's
 thought to defray
 My thanks to you for this act today.'
 And I was content, for this was true pay."

Here, it would seem, is one way in which the chief problem of the teacher of poetry—that of making the poem a real imaginative and emotional experience for the child—can be met. For, however crude this first attempt at writing poetry may seem, the children have been given the opportunity to express in their own language any thoughts or feelings which the poem may have aroused in them. A poem, whether written by the most experienced or inexperienced of us, is

merely the attempt to express the emotions which stir our hearts. This attempt to tell others, with the best language and with the nicest likenesses and distinctions which we can command, of the worthwhile things we find about us, develops in us a fineness of feeling and a sensitiveness to the good and beautiful in life which few other things can give.

The child at the high school age is at the most important character-forming stage of his life. Here a real interest in life is awakened and the child's conceptions of life are formed. Here he begins to proclaim his preferences, assert his individuality, shape his life plans. Because of this susceptibility of the child of high school age, poetry, as well as all other good influences, can here play its most important part in the making of a happy man. Poetry, bringing, as it does, food for the mind and spirit, can here open up new vistas for the child and bring him into a realization of his mental and spiritual powers—in truth, help him to find his real self. If we can so teach poetry that the love of the child for it will grow as he develops, and that it will form such an integral part of the life of the child and man that it will find expression in noble thoughts, words, and deeds, then, and then only, have we achieved the truest success in the teaching of poetry.

There are many ways, besides the writing of it, in which poetry may be made a real experience for the child. The teacher is perhaps the best judge of the method to be employed in her classroom, for she can see whether or not, and when, the children respond with true emotion to a poem filled with a meaning which should strike a responsive chord in their beings. But the wide-awake teacher of poetry will make plans and devise means whereby the best lessons of poetry read may find an outlet in the everyday situations in the schoolroom. The value of such experience for the child can clearly be seen. From the glimpses which he gets of the genuine and worthwhile, he will turn inevitably to a consideration and evaluation of the things with which he comes into immediate contact. Poetry then will help the child interpret his own life and make him appreciative of his own experiences. New enjoyment of poetry will come because the child sees in it life, and new enjoyment of life will come

because he sees in it poetry. Any reasonable means which brings about this thorough appreciation would certainly seem justifiable. But in some way, if it is to be effectively taught, poetry must be made a part of the life of the child—it can not be considered a thing apart. However far it may take him into the past or future, if it does not ultimately return him to the present and furnish some comfort or inspiration for the realities of his daily life, then it can not have done its full work.

The teaching of literature in the high school has been severely criticised as not developing in the child an abiding love for the best literature. We do not like to acknowledge this as a fact, but when we face it frankly, how many boys and girls who go out from high school to their life-work devote much of their leisure time to the reading of good literature? Certainly, we should have to admit, a very small percentage. Could it be that the cause for this is that, with the change in the character of the high school student, we have made little or no change in subject matter or method of teaching? When we compare the student of the old Latin school or academy, coming from a home of culture where much reading and study was the rule, with the high school student of today, coming from the masses of an industrial population, do we not see a great need for some change? Is it quite fair, when so many of our boys and girls have their only opportunity to become acquainted with poetry in the short years spent in high school (for such a small percentage go further), that we should give them a chance for the study of only the older "cultural" literature, and nothing which makes them see the beauty and the poetry of the lives which they are now living and are to live? "The best thing," one writer claims, "that we can do for the high school student is to leave with him a vital interest in poetic things." Then, whether he goes to college or to work elsewhere, he will have always that love of the good and beautiful which will open his heart and mind to the "skyey" influences and keep him above the sordidness of life.

In order that this end of making poetry a vital thing for the child may be achieved, these two things must always be borne in mind: first, it must portray the beauties of the child's own life, and, second, it must be

in a language which he can understand. The high school teacher then must remember that it is the modern child that he is teaching and that what is nearest to him is modern life told in the language of our day.

All poets have one object in common: to make us see the beauties which they find in life. Our poets of today are no exception to the rule. They have taken our life, commercial as it is and as lacking in romance as it may seem, and brought to us, not in archaic phrases, but in the language that we know best, all that is worthwhile and good in it. They have obtained, as all poets do, their inspiration from the great and the small in life, and there is hardly any part of our complicated existence of which our poets have not shown us the beauty. Pessimistic critics stand by and say there is no art in our modern poetry. But he who is observant has long since realized that "meter and rhyme are but the accompaniments of poetry" and that the real poetry—the real art—is the expression of the deep-felt emotions which stir the heart of man. Amy Lowell says that "Art, true art, is the desire of a man to express himself, to record the reactions of his personality to the world he lives in. Great emotion always tends to become rhythmic, and out of that tendency the forms of art have evolved. Art becomes artificial only when the form takes precedence over the emotion." Our modern poets are seeking to bring home to us the poetry of our everyday existence by producing spontaneous and sincere verses not so far removed from the language we are accustomed to hearing. They are trying to bridge the ever-widening chasm between poetry and life by the establishment of a fresh relation between the two.

So great has been the revival in interest in poetry with the coming of the present age that it has been said that we are passing through a renaissance of poetry. Certainly we know that there is more poetry being written by more people on more different subjects than there has been for many years. Perhaps we think we see a great change in poetry, but, after all, is it so essentially different? Is there not behind it all the same feeling which has always prompted the gifted man to sing? Does it not still portray the best in life? Should the fact that it is given to us

in new form be cause for alarm? It may be necessary that generations place their seal of approval upon the work of a master before he be acknowledged as such, but most assuredly there is much being written now that will bring out the noble things that lie within us.

So we make the plea for a "whole-hearted bringing" of poetry to young people.

In Canton, Massachusetts, there is published five times yearly, under the auspices of the American School and Poetry Association, the little magazine of verse for young people already mentioned, *The Gleam*. This magazine was established, as its editor says, because of the belief that poetry and young people should be brought together into as close a comradeship as possible. That poetry is published which makes a real appeal to young people, and the best efforts in poetry and poetry essays of high school students all over the United States are accepted for publication. Surely no more inspiring thing could be done for our young people than to give them this splendid medium of expression. High school teachers and students have shown their great appreciation of this magazine by making large orders for copies of it and by the many letters of commendation which the editor has received. "The best evidence of merit," he says, "is the cordial recognition it has received." Surely no teacher of poetry in the high school should be without *The Gleam*. Adults can obtain the magazine by membership in the School and Poetry Association, dues one dollar a year; and it is available for young people at ten cents a copy, application being made to the editor through some member of the association.

There are in book form many excellent collections of modern poetry. One that has been especially prepared for high school study is the little book, *Modern Verse*, by Anita P. Forbes, (Henry Holt and Company, New York). This is a collection of some of the choicest works of present day authors, arranged with notes and questions on the poems and short sketches of the lives of the authors. No attempt is made to furnish details of the authors' lives or complete lists of their works, the editor believing that, with a love of poetry developed, the interest of the child will carry him on into further study and reading.

Louis Untermeyer's collection, *Modern*

American and British Poetry (Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York) could be used in the two upper years of high school work, if not in the lower.

There are perhaps other collections of modern poetry prepared for high school study; certainly there are many volumes of the best poems with sketches of the lives of the authors which the teacher could use in his work. And in many of our leading magazines there are special departments devoted to the publication of the best poems of the day. Both *The Literary Digest* and *The Bookman* offer this, and good use may be made of these magazines in the classroom.

This is not a plea for the teaching of modern poetry instead of the works of older poets, which, together with the "classics," have given inspiration, comfort, courage, knowledge to millions, but only a plea that our modern youth have the beauty in their own lives brought to them in the best language of their day.

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HEALTH TEACHING IN THE HIGH SCHOOL

"Health education as conducted in the various high schools of the country is as yet in an unorganized state," says Dorothy Hutchinson in *Health Education Bulletin*, No. 15, just distributed by the U. S. Bureau of Education. The bulletin therefore presents a great many suggestions which have been collected and organized, and outlines methods which have proved successful and helpful in the presentation of the subject.

But one of the numerous stimulating features of the bulletin is the following section dealing with equipment and devices, particularly because it includes a bibliography which high school teachers will find most useful.

I. EQUIPMENT AND DEVICES

It is as necessary for the teacher of hygiene to have an adequate supply of tools with which to work as it is for the physics teacher to have an adequately equipped laboratory. Therefore models, illustrations, diagrams, charts, and specimens are all part of the equipment. The best part of this laboratory equipment is that it can be made to a large extent by the pupils themselves.

List of Tools

SIGHT	HEARING	DOING
Charts	Lectures	Health clubs
Films	Special topics	Health newspaper
Posters	Debates	School boards of health

Demonstration hour, informal discussions.

Besides the devices listed, catchy rhymes, the keeping of chore cards have been used successfully in many schools. The use of chore cards with foreign-born students has proved most effective in many cases.

Special Drives

In many schools the setting aside of a particular week in the year for emphasis on the subject of health has proved most interesting and helpful.

Films

As far as possible, visual instruction, which is far more important than oral instruction, should be made use of in the health project. Various health films could be shown to great advantage during the demonstration hours or during morning exercises.