THE ART OF WORDS

by Sasha Decker, Providence Classical Christian School

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate . . .

Deep inside the tenth grader's mind, alarm bells started going off. *Oh no. Poetry! I'm not going to be able to follow this. I'm going to embarrass myself again with a stunning misunderstanding of what the poet is even talking about. Guess I won't be raising my hand today.* This dedicated, literature-loving, straight-A student was utterly baffled—and intimidated—in the presence of classic poetry.

Thankfully, I had a persistent English teacher in high school, and by graduation I had developed a deep love for poetry. Nowadays, as a fourth grade teacher in a classical Christian school, I hope to help my students avoid tenth-grade poetic panic by helping them learn to read and appreciate quality, time-honored lyric poetry while they are young. One of the things I love most about teaching is the opportunity—indeed, the honor—of guiding my students to love what is worth loving. And I believe that the art of words—the beauty and power of words in poetic form—is worth loving. So, how should we approach the teaching of classic lyric poetry to students in the later grammar years?

Most grammar school teachers already teach literature to their students. However, while lyric poetry is a genre of literature, it has several characteristics which make it uniquely suited for experiencing together in the classroom. Firstly, unlike novels, lyric poems are designed to be read more than once. They're conveniently short, and they are so packed with artistry and meaning that multiple readings are necessary to appreciate them fully. Secondly, they're meant to be read aloud. Many of poetry's most delightful elements—sound effects, heightened drama, verbal pyrotechnics—cannot be fully appreciated when reading silently. Take advantage of this! Read poems to your class—old poems, poems whose authors' names you recognize, poems that are worth savoring. Be dramatic. Good poetry is vivid, exciting, emotional. It can sustain your most dramatic rendition. Choose great poems, and read them with gusto. Give a printed copy to everyone so that visual learners can follow along. Then, once you've modeled a dramatic reading of the poem, have your students read it aloud too. Have a different student read your week's focus poem aloud each day. Remember, don't shy away from repetition!

Perhaps your students struggle to read poetry aloud. Oral reading of poetry is an art which must be taught, just as we teach oral reading of prose to

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younger students. It must also be practiced in the way we continue to practice oral reading in older grammar grades. Thankfully, the basic skills of poetry reading are easily grasped. Firstly, emphasize to your class that, just as with prose, they must read poetry in a natural style, and—this is key—they must follow the written punctuation. Is there a comma at the end of line 1? No? Then do not pause there. If you do, you may exclude an essential word from line 2, leaving you utterly mystified. Don't overemphasize the meter. Let the lines flow naturally. The meter will compel the words forward like the powerful current hidden beneath the smooth surface of a river. Model this for your students, then let them practice. Classically educated students are particularly prone to trip up here, since many of them are quite familiar with using jingles and rhymes as mnemonic devices. Those thudding iambs and galloping dactyls, while invaluable for memorization purposes, are frequently less than exemplary in artistry. Classic poetry calls for a different, subtler approach. A natural style will not only make your students' oral reading more appealing to the ear; it will also exponentially increase their understanding of the poem's meaning. Undistracted by overemphasized metrical lines and feet, your student's mind will focus on the grammar of the sentences and, thence, the actual meaning of the words.

Often in classic poems your students will encounter vocabulary words they do not recognize. Children are experts at assimilating new vocabulary through context, but sometimes in an older work the number of new words can be overwhelming. Occasionally I will have my students underline words they do not recognize as I read to them. Then we'll go back through the poem and see if we can deduce the meanings of these words from context. It's easy to pick apart a literary work too much in this fashion, so don't overdo it; but the ability to parse out the meaning of a challenging piece is a valuable skill, so practice it now and then.

Once you've trained your students to read classic poetry aloud with style while also comprehending its meaning, the fun part begins: helping them delight in the beauty of poetry for themselves. (A side note: because I am specifically discussing upper grammar school, the poetic techniques I highlight will be geared towards this level. However, secondary school teachers will find that older students are not immune to the charms of linguistic sound effects and simple imagery. If you have to make up ground in teaching older students to appreciate the art of words, start here.) The best poetry is packed with meaning. It doesn't have to be profound meaning, but each word in a quality poem is there for a reason. Helping your students appreciate what each word does will guide them on their way to appreciating the artistry of poetry.

Kids love sound effects. While upper grammar school kids may at least pretend that they've outgrown making their own sound effects, they still unapologetically love them in movies. Your students may be skeptical when you tell them that poets use sound effects like filmmakers do, but proving it is easy: read them some great poems. All quality poets choose words for maximum effect, and that includes sound effects. Just read your students these lines from the delightful poem "Opportunity" by Edward Roland Sills, in which the author briefly describes a battle scene (don't forget to pause only at punctuation):

> . . . There spread a cloud of dust upon a plain,
> And underneath the cloud, or in it, raged
> A furious battle, and men yelled, and swords
> Shocked upon swords and shields . . .

Read that to them several times; let them repeat it: "swords shocked upon swords and shields". Hear the rush of the air as the swords slice through it; hear the clash of metal on metal. The students will be impressed. (By the way, this poem is a guaranteed gateway to classic poetry for boys—not that the girls won't love it too.)

Alliteration and assonance are fun because they're easy to recognize, even for young children, but they're also fun because they, too, create sound effects when read aloud. I remember, five years ago, reading the poem "Sea Fever" by John Masefield with my students. I asked them to look for alliteration; they discovered that many of the words begin with either *s* or *w*. I asked if they had any idea why the poet chose those sounds. They didn't, but they began experimenting. Spontaneously, the entire room was filled with the sounds of half the students saying *sssssssss* while the other half said *wwwwwwwww*. We were transported: the classroom was suddenly filled with the rushing sounds of waves and wind. I referenced that moment recently to a student who was there that day, thinking she would certainly have forgotten it in five years, and her eyes immediately lit up. "That was so amazing!" she exclaimed. Quality sound effects stick in the mind.

Some sort of rhythm is almost a necessary ingredient of poetry, though its use is as varied as is classic poetry itself. Rather like sound effects, kids love rhythm. Indeed, their tendency, as I mentioned earlier, is often to overstress meter and lose track of its subtler, graceful artistry. However, you can counteract this by deemphasizing meter when necessary, while using it to advantage to enhance the meaning of certain poems. W. H. Auden's "The Night Mail" is one of my favorite poems to read to students. It's long, but you must read the entire poem—aloud—to get the whole effect. The entire journey of the train is evoked through the poem's varying rhythms—slow while the train works its way up hills, quick and steady as it chugs across meadows and grasslands, and increasingly frantic as it rushes downhill before pulling gradually into the station, where the lines become free verse without any discernable meter at all. Your class will love it when you read these lines at full speed and they hear the train chugging away:

> . . . Written on paper of every hue,
> The pink, the violet, the white and the blue,
> The chatty, the catty, the boring, the adoring,
> The cold and official and the heart's outpouring . . .

Did you catch where the train began to brake in the last line?

Sound imagery is just one of the tools at the poet's disposal. Some poems rely primarily on visual imagery, such as Emily Dickinson's "A Slash of Blue," in which she describes the sunset and sunrise. The imagery is startlingly visual—she seems almost to be painting with words.

> A slash of Blue—
> A sweep of Gray—
> Some scarlet patches on the way,
> Compose an Evening Sky—

And the sunset is painted in your mind. To help my students appreciate the way the poet paints pictures in our imaginations, we took out our watercolors and painted these scenes ourselves, both evening and morning. I am anything but a talented artist, but even my painting turned out okay. Dickinson told me exactly what to do, after all.

At first I thought that metaphors would be a bit of a stretch for fourth graders—more appropriate for fifth or sixth grade—but I've discovered that fourth graders really love them. They think it's fun to find them and enjoy their creativity. Luckily, metaphors are a poet's stock in trade, which means that you can introduce your students to plenty of quality ones. Show them how metaphors help them to understand a scene more deeply or picture it more clearly. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's simple, melancholy depiction of a traveler walking alone along the shore in "The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls" includes these graceful lines: "The little waves, with their soft, white hands, / Efface the footprints in the sands . . . " Close your eyes; picture it.

Do you see the scene more clearly than you would have if he'd skipped "with their soft, white hands"? Of course. The delicacy, the agency, the beauty and yet somehow the coldness of those gracefully destructive waves would entirely escape you without that simple metaphor.

Not all poetic art exists in small details like this, of course. The details, notable and appreciable in themselves, also add up to dramatic wholes which draw vivid pictures and narrate thrilling tales. Since children love stories, be sure to expose them to the best in poetic storytelling. Let them thrill to the rhythms and vivid, shocking images as Lord Byron's "The Destruction of Sennacherib" brings a scene of Old Testament temporal and spiritual warfare to terrifying life. Let them cheer for the prince as he "saved a great cause that heroic day" in "Opportunity." Let them feel for themselves the melancholy longing for home in Yeats' "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." Read poems for the details, and slow down to enjoy those details—but read them, too, for the overall effect, for the drama and beauty of the whole. Just remember: read them aloud. Always.

And lastly, don't forget that even young children are immensely capable. Classical Christian schools have a solid reputation for high academic standards, and our students have a well-deserved reputation for rising to these high standards while enjoying the process. The same is true in poetry appreciation. That Shakespeare sonnet I referenced at the beginning of this article? One of my proudest moments as a teacher was a few years ago when a fourth-grade student memorized and recited that poem, with a great deal of delight, at our year-end program. She was able to explain its meaning to anyone who asked her, too. Surely her appreciation for the poem will continue to grow over the years, but starting to love it at age ten certainly has given her an advantage. She has had a head start in appreciating the art of words, one which our students deserve and one which is within their reach.