

The Difficulties Of Teaching Poetry

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the problems of teaching poetry in Zimbabwean secondary schools. It is based on a survey of teachers of English done in 1988. Their answers to questions asked do confirm that poetry teaching is difficult even for those who enjoy it personally.

Introduction

In 1988 I set out to investigate the problems associated with teaching poetry in Zimbabwean secondary schools. Such an investigation was necessary at that time because student teachers I had been working with from 1977 to 1988 had always mourned about the difficulty of teaching poetry. Earlier on (1984), a letter had been published in *The Herald* written by a teacher who called Literature "the most useless subject on the syllabus." The main difficulty this teacher was facing was in the teaching of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and he/she ended by questioning the whole educational value of teaching Shakespeare to Zimbabwean children who know nothing about the old English traditions described in that play.

This teacher perhaps echoed the sentiments of many, judging by the reactions that this letter drew from the other teachers. In August of the same year (1984), Artem Lozynsky published his article, "Mangoes, Drums and Messages" in which he wrote:

In Zimbabwe, it is a truth commonly accepted by teachers of English Literature that of all of the subjects written for the Cambridge "O" level certificate, literature receives the lowest grade; and of the three forms examined, fiction, drama and poetry, it is poetry which is the least successful. Neglected by teachers,

data from the thirty-two teachers who returned the questionnaire. Because the sample is so small in proportion to the number of English secondary school teachers in Zimbabwe, the observations we shall make cannot be generalised nationally. One would have to carry out extensive research involving a much bigger population in order to fully and truly represent the teachers of English in the country's schools. But I believe that the results of this survey will still stimulate our thoughts and will help us to continue the debate on the teaching of poetry in Zimbabwe at secondary school level.

We also should remember that this survey was carried out in mid-1988, so that by now things may have changed, hopefully for the better, which would mean that perhaps more teachers are feeling confident enough to tackle poetry with their students than was the case then as revealed by this survey.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Literature On The Values Of Poetry:

Over the centuries, poetry has been regarded as a great art. In western society, the value of poetry as a genre of literature was recognised as far back as the 16th Century and even before. In the 16th Century, for instance, Sir Philip Sydney wrote and published his *Apology for Poetry*. Sydney's argument rests on four major points: 1. poets as essential and original thinkers whose poetry "hath been the first light-giver to ignorance, and first nurse, whose milk by little and little enabled [the noblest of nations and languages] to feed afterwards of tougher knowledges;" 2. poets as philosophers; 3. poetry as capable of elevating the human soul to perfection and 4. poetry as an art that makes it easy for philosophy and history to complement each other. He continues:

For the philosopher, setting down with thorny argument the bare rule is so hard of utterance and so misty to be conceived, that one that hath no other guide but him shall wade in him till he be old before he shall find sufficient

Shelley in Perkins (1967:1072) also saw it fit to write *A Defence of Poetry* in which he defines poetry as "the expression of the imagination [which] is connate with the origin of man." All this information points to one important conclusion and that is that a poet is a very valuable personality in a society. For, like the novelist, "he not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time" (Shelley, p.1072).

On our own continent, the African society has always recognised poetry as a very valuable art, As Beier (1966:11) states:

Poetry has occupied a central place in the life of traditional African societies. Praise-singers, drummers, priests, hunters, masqueraders ... they all had to recite and invent poetry. The family rites connected with birth, marriage or death, the installations of chiefs or religious festivals alike were all occasions for the recitation of poetry. Equally important is perhaps the poetry of everyday life: the young girl pounding yam sings about her lover, the hunter on his way to the forest sings in praise of the animals he is going to hunt.... Traditional African societies have always had their professional poets ... [who] are not set apart from the community.... They have not lived in isolation, composing for only a handful of people.

Beier, indeed, confirms the importance of poetry in African people's lives. Just as Sydney, Coleridge, Shelley and others saw it fit to write a defence of poetry, Ulli Beier and others in Africa have also seen it fit to highlight its importance within the African context. The Swahili poet, Shabaan Robert, in Mapanje & White (1983 :1) puts the argument in clearer terms when he says:

Poetry is not something precious obtainable only in Malindi, which gave the Swahilis *Muyaka*. It is obtainable in every country. In the saying which goes, "What there

is in Pemba is in Zanzibar, as well;" take away Pemba and Zanzibar and say, "What is in Europe is in Africa as well;" take away Europe, and say, "What is in Asia is in America as well," take away Asia and say, "What is in America is in Australia as well." The created world repeats itself within the nations of human beings in order to show their common origin and their great unity.

Shabaan Robert's argument is plausible because all cultures try to recreate the cosmic rhythm in poetry. For us in Zimbabwe we can say we regard a poet as an artistic visionary, an historian, a philosopher, with an extra special gift in succinct linguistic expression. For in African and other societies, life itself is a subject for poetry as we heard from Beier above.

The implications of all this is that someone should transmit these important artistic values to the youth in order to perpetuate the beauties of poetry. Failure to do so means failure to uphold a rich heritage; a rich civilisation. Our forefathers and mothers demonstrated the ability, not only to create a rich culture through poetry, but also to keep it alive throughout the ages by means of oral recitations, song and drama. Indeed, today's poets have kept the flame ablaze. Yet we risk turning a once luscious cultural and artistic equatorial forest into a barren kalahari desert unless children are trained to enjoy and to create poetry. In our 20th Century situation, the logical person to impart the beauties of poetry to the youth is the teacher. But can all teachers teach poetry effectively in an interesting and stimulating way capable of creating lasting impressions on the minds of the children and capable of inspiring them to create more poetry?

The answer to this question will be apparent after we discuss the results of this 1988 survey carried out to determine the status of poetry teaching in selected secondary schools.

Literature Focusing On The Difficulties Of Poetry Teaching:

The problems associated with poetry teaching are not limited to Zimbabwe. Teachers, lecturers and professors elsewhere have reported similar problems. The important thing in each case is how they have devised solutions to these problems. Let us discuss a few examples of some of these reports, including one report from a teacher in a Zimbabwe secondary school.

Robert Stallman (1974: 32-39) was having difficulty teaching a university first year course entitled, Development of English Verse. He was "experiencing what is called negative feedback that would have shrivelled the bark of a sequoia." Students were finding poetry to be boring and impossible. When he asked what the problem was, one brave lady answered, "I don't know...but how can I learn about the development of poetry if I am not sure what poetry is?" Here was a problem of definition that we often assume is well taken care of by the time we meet students at College or University level. For Stallman, there was need, then, not only to teach poetry, but also to first define it for the class.

Stallman solved his problem by training his students to write parodies. He told them that "...in order to learn about what is variously called form, structure, denotation, archetypes, extension and so on in poems, we should write some poems ourselves." He and the class talked about poems as purely verbal structures. After this experience of talking about poetry, he emerged with a format of making the learning of poetry more interesting, beneficial, and worthwhile through practice. The class worked on a selection of fifteen poems, picking out some that they thought were interesting and rejecting those they thought were useless, as long as they could support their judgments to convince the rest of the students. After practical work on critiquing the poems, the stage of experience was the actual writing of poems by students themselves. Both the teacher and the students engaged in writing parodies as a way of introducing poetry writing. The experience proved to be so useful that many students reported that

they graduate, we must find ways to focus our class presentations so that our students acquire more quickly than they now do, a sense of mastery and self-respect as liberated readers. This means that we must show them how to recognise form in a poem for which, frequently, there is no previous model. It seems to me that our classes in contemporary poetry should attend to the acquisition of this skill and that our correspondence with each other in the journals should consider, in addition to textual matters, our common pedagogical needs.

Garrison is definitely right. Students need to be liberated readers of poetry and other forms of literature so that they can continue to enjoy it after school. The approach he proposes above would be useful to Zimbabwean students studying Mudereri Kadhani's "Chameleon" (1976:24) or Lazarus Dokora's "The Earth I Tread Upon" (1981:73). All in all, we can agree with Garrison on the importance of form and that students need to understand the dialectical relationship between form and content in literature and poetry. Like Swanger, Garrison does not discuss any strategies that might help students understand form and content in poetry.

One teacher of poetry, Hydes, (1985:4), has openly declared that his teaching has been a success. To demonstrate this success, Hydes describes a number of ways one can use to judge the effect of certain poems on the students:

Sometimes it is the animate manner in which the students talk about the poem during the lesson, which tells you they have responded well to it. Sometimes it is the ease with which they refer to parts of the poem in writing about it. Sometimes they make a kind of game during the year of quoting parts from a poem, or they might refer back to one poem while discussing another. It is easy to see in such case that there is a positive delight in poetry. (Hydes, 1985, 1987).

after using all the AVA's, students could recite Tennyson's poems unaided and could read with more focus." "One student later mentioned that he liked to recite "The Owl" while skipping along to the neighbouring township and another remarked that chanting it helped him shovel faster in the garden." It was in these sessions, Lozynsky reports, that they explored successfully the notion that "Prose is language walking, while poetry s language dancing" (Lozynsky, p.10).

Lozynsky's success is definitely to be attributed to the use of various audio-visual aids and sheer good imagination. When students "experienced" poetry, they understood it and they enjoyed it; a strategy that Stallman also found to be true with his students.

Having reviewed these different teaching experiences and having reminded ourselves of the values of poetry, we must now report on the results of the 1988 survey based on the responses of thirty-two teachers of English in the different schools mentioned earlier. Because the population is so small, we will not report results by school type. Rather, we will collapse all answers into percentages of those who answered positively and those who answered negatively.

Survey Results And Discussion:

Several questions were asked on the teaching of literature and poetry. We record some of the responses in percentages below in Table 1.

- Artem Lozynsky was teaching at St. Anthony's Secondary School, Masvingo, when he wrote his article.

Table 1

Question	Response In percentages		%leaving The space Blank	Total %
	yes %	no%		
1. Is Lit. taught in your school for exam purposes?	74,36	20,51	5,13	100
2. Is poetry included in the Lit. syllabus?	30,77	69,23		100
3. Do you include poems in your Lang/Lit. even if not for exam purposes?	59,38	28,13	12,49	100
4. Is poetry read even by classes not doing Lit.?	68,75	31,25		100
5. Are students exposed to Zimbabwean poetry?	71,88	28,12		100
6. Are students exposed to other African poetry?	43,75	56,25		100
7. Do you discuss oral poetry before written poetry?	25,00	75,00		100
8. Is Orature as genre part of your literary studies?	25,00	75,00		100

9. Do you think oral poetry makes good pre-requisite to written poetry?	90,63	9,37		100
10. Do you think Zimb/African poetry makes good pre-requisite to western poetry?	96,86	--	3,14	100
11. Do you use AVA's when teaching poetry?	43,75	50,00	6,25	100
12. Do you personally like poetry?	84,38	9,38	6,24	100

As we can see from the above Table, 74,36% taught literature in their schools as an examinable subject. Over 20% said they did not. Of those schools where literature was taught, over 30,77% said poetry was included in the syllabus while 69,23% said it was not. However, when we asked whether or not poetry was included in the general teaching of English Language and/Literature even when it was not for exam purposes, 59,38% said it was and 28,13% said it was not. Since Literature is often limited to the first two or three streams only in the schools, it was important for us to find out whether or not poetry was read even by those classes which did not do Literature and 68,75% said it was while 31,25% said it was not. The main sources of this poetry was cited as English Language text books, CDU poetry booklets and "magazines such as *Prize*." It is true that the authors of the English Language text books have included poetry in good quantities in their books. They have also done well to include Zimbabwean and African poetry therein. So our next question asked whether or not students were exposed to Zimbabwean Literature. Over 71% said they were while 28,13% said they were not. Similarly, 43,75% of the teachers said they included other African poetry in their lessons while 56,25% said they did not.

We wonder at these percentages. Since English Language texts have in them Zimbabwean and African poetry, does it mean that those whose students are not exposed to this poetry skip it? We have no way of knowing since we did not follow up the question.

The next three questions centred on oral poetry and Orature. We wanted to know whether oral Zimbabwean poetry was discussed before discussing written poetry. Twenty-five percent said it was and 75% said it was not. On whether Orature, as a genre, made up part of the students' literary studies, 25% said it did and 75% said it did not. For those who said they discussed oral poetry, they listed their sources as students themselves who collect it from parents/guardians and from other community elders, and the teacher. The oral poetry discussed, they said, was in the form of praise songs and poems, harvest, ploughing, wedding, funeral songs and lullabies. Those who said they did not discuss such poetry gave the reason that "they did not know much about it." However, 90,63% agreed that oral poetry would make a good pre-requisite to written poetry. Likewise, 96,86% agreed that studying Zimbabwean and African poetry would be a good pre-requisite to the studying of western poetry.

On the use of audio-visual aids when teaching poetry, 43,75% said they made use of them while 50% said they did not. It was important to find out whether or not the teachers themselves like poetry because, unless one enjoys what one teaches, very little learning can take place. As can be seen from the table, 84,38% said they do like poetry while 9,38% said they do not.

A particular trend has emerged here. The majority of teachers surveyed enjoy poetry and actually expose their students to it.

Yet, at the same time, perhaps, the same majority is reluctant to select poetry as part of an examinable section of the literature syllabus. Therefore, we sought to find out why this was so.

Some of the most frequently recurring reasons for not teaching poetry for examination purposes were as follows:

1. Pupils do not have enough English to grasp the nuances of poetry. Prose is just within their reach.
2. I feel the plot, suspense, characterisation, drama of a good story is [sic] more appealing to (and less technically demanding for) students and teachers.
3. Difficult for the teacher and the taught. Lack of adequate facilities .
4. Not yet introduced at this school.
5. It is not part of our studies, though time and again they do it as part of their English language The school cannot afford purchases of set books time and again.
6. Lack of source material. Moreover, this year the syllabus excluded poetry.
7. What the syllabus offers is not within the pupil's field of conceptualisation.
8. Difficult to teach effectively. The novels are easier both to understand and analyse for the students and also to write about well.
9. It was considered to be too difficult for the students by my predecessors and they therefore did not introduce it.
10. It is difficult to get our pupils to appreciate and get a feel for poetry as an art because of the language barrier...English is L2.
11. We have not chosen it for exam purposes since the syllabus is exam oriented.

On the other hand, those who said they included poetry in their choice of literature books still did so with caution. For example, we can summarise the answers given by the following statements: "One class

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is studying *Touched With Fire*. Most teachers are reluctant to handle poetry and lacking in confidence;" and, "poetry is taught to "A" stream only."

We then asked why the teachers like poetry, and the most frequently recurring answers were as follows:

1. Depends on the poets, e.g. Wordsworth. I like his work in that he writes on nature as he sees it and does not put any artificial language in it [what is artificial language?]
2. It is challenging since its meanings can be multiple and not always obvious.
3. I enjoy reading it to myself. I like the rhythm and musicality in poetry.
4. Most powerful literary genre. Refreshing because can be read in one sitting.
5. I get to know authors more through their poetry than their novels or plays if they have written at all. It's enjoyable to read too.
6. Interesting, succinct, sensitive form of expression.
7. I enjoy the succinct phrasing of ideas and it's a different genre to prose which I deal with chiefly...a good change.
8.for sheer beauty of language.
9. I have an in-born liking for it which I cannot explain but teaching poetry is a problem.
10. It's so good. It touches me so. It expresses my feelings, that [sic] I could not find words to...[sic].
11. It is interesting. You cover more ground in terms of literature of other worlds by reading one anthology than by reading one novel.
12. It is a source of joy and expression. It also makes me visualise situations more vividly.

13. I feel that there is no other genre where my feelings and senses are appealed to as in poetry. It also sharpens my perception. Its uniqueness just appeals to me.
14. It is an important genre of art which can be employed as a means of achieving social change and development.
15. I have tended to appreciate it from my studies at the University.

Herein lies the theme of this paper...poetry is enjoyable at a personal level but, to quote one answer, "teaching [it] is a problem." This situation is borne out by the answers to one question we asked on what the majority of students in each school almost always prefer to read. All the teachers said 100% of the students prefer the novel. However, of these students, 21,8% also read drama; 25% read the short story and only 15,63% read poetry *in addition* to reading the novel. The type of novel read ranged from Zimbabwean, African to Western. The type of poetry chosen by the students when they do read any at all, was Zimbabwean and African.

We asked also whether teachers felt that their students were given enough exposure to poetry and 84,38% thought they were not while 15,62% thought they were. In addition, we wanted to know whether or not they felt that enough emphasis was given to that poetry. As for the difficulty of the poetry, 87,5% said that students in their school found western poetry to be more difficult than Zimbabwean and African poetry. Finally, we asked what level would be most suitable to introduce students to poetry. Ninety-four percent thought form one would be the most suitable level because students are still young and learning new material is easily done at that age. Six percent thought form five or six would be the most suitable level.

Important Observations:

Several observations can be made from this survey. Firstly, the most important observation is that while the majority of teachers may love and enjoy poetry, few can actually teach it so effectively as to impart their enthusiasm for the subject to the next person. This is the same problem that was facing Lozynsky which made him resent the teaching

of the subject to the exam classes. Stallman was also facing the same problem. The feelings of those who said they did not like poetry can be summed up by this statement: "It is difficult to understand and at times the poet seems to delight in hiding the meaning." Yet this is precisely why those who like it enjoy most as some said "It is challenging since its meanings can be multiple and are not always obvious."

The second observation we make is that Zimbabwe at the moment lacks a good anthology of Zimbabwean and African poetry which is as comprehensive as *Touched With Fire, A Choice Of Poets, Rhyme and Reason, English Romantic Verse, Seven Metaphysical Poets, World War I Poetry* etc. We also lack a compilation of Zimbabwean oral poetry such as Ulli Beier's *African Poetry an Anthology of Traditional African Poems* or Jack Mapanje's and L. White's *Oral Poetry From Africa*, which teachers can easily select from and teach students. Although Zimbabwe has excellent poetry anthologies, few are comprehensive enough to be textbooks at Form One level.

One teacher actually pointed out that it would be good for "poets to shed a light on what to teach." At form four or six levels we can sight Kadhani and Zimunya, *And Now The Poets Speak* and K. Muchemwa's *Zimbabwean Poetry* in English as possibilities. However, this leads us to our next observation:

We continue to prescribe western poetry anthologies at "O" and "A" levels yet, as we have discussed above, students and teachers find it difficult. We therefore have a situation similar to Ngugi wa Thiong'o's son who, on being asked (by his father after painfully reciting Wordsworth's "I Wonder Lonely as a Cloud") what daffodils are, "looked at the illustration in the book; [and said] Oh, they are just little fishes in a lake!" Obviously this is what happens when children are required to study something they do not understand. It is this lack of understanding and the difficulty involved in conceptualising foreign concepts that prevents one from picking up a poetry anthology to read for pleasure.

Recommendations:

We would recommend the following strategies to improve the teaching of poetry in the schools: Firstly, the literature syllabus could be divided into four basic sections: Orature, Prose (i.e. novel and short story), Poetry and Drama. Texts would then be prescribed to satisfy each of these genres from form one to form six. This way, equal weight would be given to each genre and training would be given to students in each of the genres. Right now there seems to be much weight given to prose only, followed by Drama, particularly Shakespeare or western, without balancing it with something Zimbabwean. Such a syllabus should be examinable so that it can be taken seriously, as one teacher correctly pointed out, "Unless [poetry] is introduced as a compulsory subject, I do not see it standing a chance because most of the teachers were never exposed to it in their life. Like they say "charity begins at home," so the teacher should be the first to like and appreciate poetry. This will make it easy for students to appreciate and "fall in love with poetry." Once such a syllabus is worked out, scholars would always write appropriate texts for it.

The comment about "charity beginning at home" above leads us to the third recommendation: It would be helpful if the CDU and the appropriate University of Zimbabwe departments could jointly organise workshops and seminars where effective methods of teaching poetry would be discussed and tried out. We can take the methods discussed earlier in this paper as examples of how poetry can be taught interestingly with emphasis on the use of appropriate audio-visual aids to make learning less of a torture. Here we should remember Lozynsky's and Stallman's successful experiments and then think of more methods along these lines. Such workshops and seminars would also serve to disseminate information about new books, anthologies, etc. available on the market. Few teachers perhaps are aware of a J.C. poetry anthology entitled *African Poetry for Schools Books 1 and 2* by Noel Machin available in the local bookshops.

Finally, we would recommend that Zimbabwean and African poetry be given prominence in the syllabus suggested above. Fortunately, the form six Literature syllabus is still in the process of being

Zimbabweanised. We would strongly recommend the replacement of poets like Chaucer by a Zimbabwean and African poetry anthology and a collection of short stories. Students would relate more to it and would find it easier to tackle western poetry, prose and drama after that (see question 12 in Table 1 above). Besides, it is simply patriotic to study one's own art and disseminate its beauties to the Zimbabwean youth. When the young people fully appreciate their own heritage, they can easily compare and contrast it with other people's art in other far-away lands.

Let us hope that this paper will tickle our minds and start the necessary and much needed debate on the teaching of poetry in the Zimbabwean secondary schools.

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