

Why I Force My Students to Memorize Poetry

Despite the Fact That It Won't Be on the Standardized Test

BY ANDY WADDELL

Some years ago, at a conference of English teachers, a group of colleagues and I found ourselves in a room by a fire with time to kill. I suggested that each of us recite some poem or speech we had learned in school. I realize such a suggestion is nerdy to an almost unbelievable degree, but these were English teachers after all, and I expected full well that the idea would be taken up with enthusiasm. I pictured not only exclamations as to the beauty of the words, but funny stories of nervousness overcome, childish misreading of famous lines, perhaps even negative comments, such as, "And that is why, to this day, I cannot stand Longfellow." What I did not expect from my young colleagues was their response that they had "never really memorized anything."

I shouldn't have been surprised. Even when I was in school, in the '60s and '70s, memorization was already outdated. In 1956, Benjamin Bloom had published his famous *Taxonomy*, forever relegating memorization to the lowest level of mental functioning. Gone already were the "set pieces," mostly moralistic or patriotic poems, that all schoolchildren had been forced lock-step into learning by heart. No longer would apple-cheeked youngsters recite en masse, "In fourteen hundred ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue." Why waste time on that arbitrary fact when one can merely pose the question, "Would the world have been better off if Columbus had never sailed across the Atlantic?" Then, after a brief explanation of who Columbus was, what exactly the Atlantic is, and the obligatory comment that there are "no right or wrong answers," Junior is off and running at the very highest level of Bloom's taxonomy: *evaluation*.

In English class, memorization (of Shakespeare in particular) has limped on under the justification that students were *interpreting* the work, thus elevating the exercise to level three—*application*—though just as often higher praise is heaped on those students able to *synthesize* the Bard into, say, a rap version of the prologue of *Romeo and Juliet* or even a

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discussion of the horrors of arranged marriage, thus demonstrating that students have analyzed the play and distilled the *main idea*.

The first real poem that I can remember learning in school is Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." My third-grade class recited it chorally at a school assembly, each of us clutching in our dirty hands an actual sleigh bell that we shook vigorously on every accented syllable. Every year, to demonstrate the primacy of sound over sense in poetry, I recite it for my classes, shaking now my keys in place of the long-lost bells. I mangle the poem, just as I did 40 years ago, stubbing the toe of every iambic foot to emphasize the sing-song rhythm; then I recite the same words again in a more adult manner to show that the rhythm is underneath the words. I've never found a better way to teach iambic meter, but every year I have students who have stopped listening, so caught up are they in the amazement of my first words, "I

learned this poem in third grade." More than a few have flatly refused to believe me. From their perspective, in the post-memorization era, the retention of 16 lines is simply beyond the limits of human capability.

I also use the poem to illustrate something about the meaning of poetry and about levels of interpretation. I vividly remember old Mrs. Trolinger, in a moment of pause from chanting the poem, saying, "You know class, when I read this poem, I don't just see a man stopping in the woods to think about the woods, I see a man stopping in his life to think about his life." I remember this sentence so many years later because, in third grade, it made *no sense to me whatsoever*.

Frost said, "Poetry is what gets lost in translation." It is also what is lost in interpretation. The genius of Mrs. Trolinger, a woman I still remember with unmixed love, was her faith that the meaning of the poem would come with time, would settle into our brains quietly like the snow into that dark New England

field. Besides that one offhand comment, no attempt was made to *interpret* the poem. We were saved from the reductionism of seeking the *main idea*. She had faith in the words themselves, the beauty of the image and the sound. When we were ready we would see what she meant. And one day we would roll those words, “miles to go before I sleep,” around in our heads, maybe before nodding off to sleep ourselves, and see a darker image there: a longing for the respite of death. But we could only do that if the words were in our heads, ready to be reexamined as our consciousnesses grew.

When my grandfather was dying, my mother tried to distract him, from the pain of his suffering and from the indignity of the crowded public hospital where he would spend the last few days of his life, by asking him to recite a poem he’d learned in grade school. “I don’t remember that,” he barked. For my own part, I thought my mother was crazy. Besides having been out of grade school for 75 years, Grandpa suffered from arteriosclerosis, which had made him forgetful, a neighborhood wanderer, a man who couldn’t always retrieve his grandson’s name or what state he lived in.

“Sure you do, Dad,” she said. “Half a league, half a league / Half a league onward.” And to my amazement, Grandpa joined in. “All in the valley of Death / Rode the six hundred.” Thirty, forty, fifty lines came rolling out of him. His voice deepened; the lines in his face relaxed. He was somewhere else.

The words were deep in his mind, close to the soul. As his brain shut down it had inexplicably chosen this to retain alive. Poem after poem, as well as the Gettysburg Address, the Preamble to the Constitution, the 23rd Psalm and many, many others, she coaxed out of him. These words, wedged in by rote so long before, were still active in his fading brain. Though now playing out the last scene of his strange and eventful history, this man who had lied about his age to get into the Great War, who had spent his working life pushing a mail cart, found that neither wasteful war nor sluttish time could ever dis sever his soul from the souls of those writers, those poets whose words rolled round his head, whose cadences had entered his soul, had become a part of him.

So often we see education as a series of units leading to an examination, which will in turn prepare students

for the SATs or APs they need to pass to enter university where, if they pass other examinations, they will graduate and earn large incomes. We hold those future earnings before our students like a carrot while beating them with a fear of failure. No wonder then so many dig in their heels at the sight of anything as impractical as poetry. How can we expect anything else when this attitude is validated from the very educators, school boards, and state superintendents most responsible for deciding what students should know?

Even when poetry is on the test, in the framework, it is on the most pedestrian level: a series of terms to be memorized, a puzzling jumble of lines to be decoded for the *main idea*. And if the point is to find the main idea, no wonder the students ask with frustration, “Why can’t he say what he means?”

I am against neither examinations nor practicality. It is important that our scores rise, that our students get into the “good”

colleges, that they succeed in their careers, that their taxes someday feed me in my old age. But some nod must be given to a larger idea: that we live through our consciousness, that thought is composed of words, that as English teachers we have a unique opportunity and responsibility to put words into our students’ heads—crisp, delicious words, “words opalescent, cool, and pearly,” words to entertain and sustain them. Words they may never forget. □

