

PHILTERS FOR THE MUSES

to convert haters into lovers of poetry

by Frances Nye

Ever wonder why those once lovely belles - Calliope, Erato and Euterpe - look so frazzled and forlorn of late? My conjecture is there is a sinister plot afoot to expunge poetry from general repute. It may well be that the seeds for the Muses' destruction were planted long ago to revenge something described in *Odysseus*.

To paraphrase Edith Wharton's description of this event: The hero, when confronted by a priest and a poet, both pleading for their lives, killed the priest without a moment's hesitation. Homer explains this by saying that Odysseus felt awe to kill a man who had been taught his divine art by the gods.

Today, such a multitude of people abhor poetry, that it might be speculated that an arcane cabal of "priests," or their modern successors, the "educators" are exacting retribution by a stealthy scheme to obliterate the Muses.

From primary grades and ever onward, pupils are subjected to the burden of memorizing long and tedious lines; the ennui of scanning interminable verse; and the agony of analyzing "magma" "lodes" of intense meaning with toothpick equipment. All are strategies designed to instill a dread of poetry; and all are meant to convey that poetry, like a mewling, malevolent creature, is best left chained in a stygian cave.

The truth is poetry is not a monster lurking in dark, esoteric depths waiting for prey to torment; rather, poetry is a combustion of tone, harmony and words that propels imagination to its outermost limits.

In spite of its "space age" allure, poetry finds itself hard pressed to induce retraction from its foes, primarily because the "cabal" has so adeptly plied its craft. On the other hand, the first, proposed remedy - "let's kill the educators," although the most efficacious tactic,

is a bit extreme. We must grant that not all educators have entered the circle of saboteurs.

Instead, I suggest expending efforts on unsullied, tiny tykes before they reach the schoolhouse steps. For, it is almost a sure fact that each wee tyrant will demand at least one-hour "reading time" every single day of its young life; and almost surely, every adult, parent or not, will be drafted to perform this function at least once in her/his life; and, almost completely sure, even the most hardened "poetry Hobe" will discover that the "chug chug" of "little black engines" will turn into torporous snores after three pages; while you can be almost absolutely sure, the "chug chug" will fuel the small urchin's howls with hyperactivity. Compelling reasons to turn to poetry! Because, poetry can be read and enjoyed at different levels. For the "neophytes" - both reader and "kid" - sound might come first, and hopefully, relaxation. Content and meaning can wait. Not only does poetry convey information, but it also emits the special vibrations of the poet. Poetry, like music, can be enjoyed even without intimate knowledge of its structure.

After the chugging engines and tootling tubas have been relegated to their proper place in the broom closet, it's hard to advise just where to start. When I was a "youngun," I remember begging for more when it came to tales like "Hiawatha," "Miles Standish," and "Little Boy Blue." As a matter of fact, I could probably cover three pages right now with titles and poets alone. That's primarily because my no-nonsense father had uncovered the trick of reading poetry to "good children". In his mind, those were ones who did not demand glasses of water and the requisite bathroom trips.

After a couple of stints with "jumping Janes and Jacks," it didn't take me long to follow in my parents' footsteps. My own daughter, or perhaps I did at the time, leaned more toward Coleridge - "Kubla Khan" and, in particular, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." To this day, she is the only person I know who can recite the entire sage as the old salt with the "long gray beard and glittering eye" to anyone unfortunate to be caught in a captive audience.

"Mariner" is rich with allegory, symbolism, metaphor, imagery, - but most important, from the very young child's point of view - sound and rhythm. The story itself is allegorical, the symbolism, rampant - particularly the albatross which represents the order of nature that must not be destroyed - the topic, one more popular than ever this day, is preservation of the environment, and the theme, one must maintain all love and reverence for all of nature's things or risk disaster. "He prayeth well, who loveth well, both an and bird and beast."

Poems can be fun. Try C. S. Lewis' "Jabberwocky" replete with making funny faces to the young audience's glee. And to elicit giggles from little girls and smiles from little boys, read "em Keats' "A song About Myself." (which proves that even the most awesome poets smile.) And, is there a child who can't be enthralled by Blake's "Tyger" - "burning bright" or comforted to sleep by "The Lamb"?

Little by little the child becomes engrossed, and probably leaps ahead of the reader in divining pith and meaning. All this brings us to the ----- of epic poetry, one of the most ancient, in the Western world, communication of myth and history combined.

No one can pretend to improve upon Aristotle's definition of epic poetry and its importance as he has outlined in "poetics"

"From what we have said it will be seen that the poet's function is to describe, not the thing that has happen, but a king of thing that might happen, i.e., what is possible as being probable or necessary. The distinction between historian and poet is not in the one writing prose and the other verse - you might put the work of Herodotus into verse, and it would still be a species of history; it consists really in this, that the one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that night be. Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars."

Young children are not frightened of epics. They relish the depth of human description, swallow the history like chocolate covered bon bons. One of my favorite's is Stephen Vincent Benet's "John Brown's Body." The epic takes us from Harper's Ferry to the Appomattox Court House. But more importantly, it pours richness, pathos, humor action, into the lives of a representative type of group, both Northerners and Southerners, who personify the tragedy and emotions of this terrible war.

Benet does not emphasize slavery, nor economics, nor rivalry, nor race, but rather, the struggles of the individuals caught in the web of their own time. Not unlike "tragedy" the epic describes how each of its characters is touched by events and how each meets the challenge of the times.

Not unlike Homer, prose and verse are mingled to describe the various emotions of the theme. This is a poem that adheres closely to historical fact, but provides a search into the human souls involved. For example, when we first encounter Sally Dupre, there is a lightness involved with this Southern belle:

"Sally Dupre, SALLY Dupre, Heart and body like sea-blown spray."

At the end, the same lightness marks the end, how she met the times.

"It was the end of the world for him and the aunts. It wasn't for her. The years had worn on her youth, much had worn, but not the crook from her smile..."

There are at least twelve separate character developments through the entire horrible four years of the civil war. This long 300-page poem is just one example of how epic, from the time of Homer, has brought understanding of human nature to multiple hundreds of generations.