

Language Guides

# Creative Writing

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## Introduction

In schools nowadays, great store is set upon encouraging children to engage in creative writing. But there is no general agreement about what this activity precisely involves or how to judge its products in prose and verse.

Much of the resulting confusion stems from the indiscriminate use of the term 'creative' to describe almost every human activity in the modern world, and from misunderstandings about the nature and purposes of written language. Accordingly, this language guide meets an urgent need for a clear, detailed definition of creative writing accompanied by sound suggestions for imaginative classroom practice.

It is fitting that the author is Sybil Marshall. She is a gifted writer whose classic book *An Experiment in Education* (CUP 1963) established her world-wide reputation as an expert in the realms of children's creative experience. Through her contributions to the famous Picture Box programmes, she also led the way in using television as a stimulus for creative work in schools. In short, she is one of the great pioneering teachers of our time with many years' experience in the classroom before her fairly recent transition to the rarer atmosphere of a university. Naturally, all this is reflected in what she has to say about creative writing and how she says it.

We are reminded that, once upon a time, writing in the school situation was usually confined to lessons in hand-writing, composition and spelling. Then, through the process of educational change, children were gradually allowed greater freedom to write what, how and when they wanted to write. On the way, the concept of creative writing was subject to various interpretations some of which still merit warm approval and others a good deal of censure.

Because the author remains a passionate enthusiast for creative writing in schools, she is anxious that it should no longer be associated with gimmickry and other undesirable features such as the anarchic production of quantity in preference to quality. In the interests of her cause, and at the risk of appearing reactionary, she makes a rational plea for a greater emphasis on skills training. After all, she points out, handwriting is a prerequisite of successful attempts at creative writing by children. As such, it requires daily instruction and practice from the infant stage upwards. Likewise, the meaning of written English depends on its spelling, grammar and punctuation. Hence, there is as much need today as there ever was for children to learn the linguistic rules. Indeed, the keynote of creative writing is awareness of all the possibilities of language of which these rules form a significant part.

Of course, the crucial question is how to help children develop the basic writing skills and techniques without curbing their interest and spontaneity in writing creatively. Sybil Marshall tackles this problem in a courageous, common-sense fashion all the time drawing on her wealth of classroom experience to provide practical guidance. Clearly, teachers must teach the fundamentals systematically and regularly, but not as the dreary chore some would have us believe them to be. They must also act as catalysts of the imagination giving wise counsel and carefully considered judgements when required. What is particularly important, in the author's view, is that teachers should ask for, and accept, first-rate child standards in creative writing instead of fifth-rate adult ones.

Bearing this in mind, for many teachers perhaps the last chapter will be the most valuable part of this small book so packed throughout with pearls of wisdom in eminently quotable form. There, the author presents examples of children's prose and verse, and explains in detail her criteria for judging their creative merit.

Finally, it should be mentioned that, when Sybil Marshall set her pen to paper, she was aware that other authors in the series would be dealing specifically with handwriting and other topics relevant to her own. Therefore, she has limited herself to essentials and provided a language guide which can be read at a sitting. Assuredly, however, it will be returned to again and again for its valuable information, clear exposition, excellent advice, penetrating humour and sheer delight.

September 1973 JOYCE M. MORRIS

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## Plus ça change

Once upon a time - a time recent enough, however, for many a teacher still serving to have personal memories of it - any writing children did in their early years at school fell into one of three separate categories. The first of these was *handwriting*, a time-tabled lesson during which tense little hands were clutched around thin soft-wood penholders at the end of which rusty tin ferrules held needle-pointed steel pen-nibs. The ink in the old stained pot indwells was usually made by the addition of water to vile-smelling 'ink-powder', and the resultant fluid so weak and consumptive as to be almost invisible, or thick and sticky, setting at the bottom of the crazy-veined inkwell in a filthy glutinous mass. Either way it corroded the 'steel nibs after a day or two of use, so that even if they did not become 'crossed' by pressure or accident they were nevertheless, unserviceable after a very short time in the child's possession. Pen-nibs, however, seemed to be the visible pointer that indicated the hidden overall parsimony of the supply system. The gross-box of new nibs was a treasure over which the teacher brooded dragon-like, and a child required the heroism of a Siegfried to pluck up courage to ask for a new one. So he continued to try to use his old one, while the sticky ink spirted in all directions and the page became decorated with blots, scratches and inky finger-prints until such time as the wrath descended and the whole was washed over with the pale dilution of tears.

This is not an exaggerated picture. It was truly under such conditions that children were introduced to the experience of 'writing', even for the most utilitarian purposes. They struggled in this way to achieve some kind of cursive hand, usually a bastard copperplate (a style totally unsuited to pen and paper in any case), known to children and teachers alike, for some reason, as 'double-writing'. It was surely no wonder that the thought of writing as a pleasurable activity entered the head of only a very small minority, to the rest it was a trial to be endured, or at the very least a chore to be performed for no other reason than that school demanded it. It was one of the 'three Rs' that grown-ups made a fuss about in connection with school, but for which only very few had any real use, once the blessed day of release from school dawned. Until that day, however, there were the two other categories of writing to be tackled.

The second was *composition*. The introduction to this took place in the infant school, often under the same conditions as the Victorian 'object lesson'. The teacher showed the children an object of some sort, and from the entire class, ranged in their rows of desks before her, she elicited 'facts' about the object which could then be written down, e.g. 'We have a plum. The plum is red. It has a stone. The plum grew on a tree.' The sentences, composed by the teacher from the children's hesitant observations, were then written by her on the blackboard, from where the children copied them in whatever form of script they had been taught to write. Occasionally there was a breakthrough for a few children in the infant school who managed to compose and write down their own stilted sentences, but in general this large step forward was asked of the children when they entered the junior school, that is, at the very same moment as they faced the agonising

change-over from pencil to ink and from script to double-writing. Once again the actual process of writing was made as difficult and self-defeating as it could be. It was no wonder either that many of the victims came to the conclusion that the whole purpose of writing was to record observable but uninteresting facts of very little use to anybody, let alone to themselves.

In the junior school this kind of writing lesson had the name of *composition*, because by now the children were expected to compose their own sentences on the selected topic - and no doubt there was also always a faint chance that a few would also compose their own thoughts, though any such aspiration was almost doomed to failure by the normal procedure. In the first place the teacher chose the subjects for the composition. They varied in kind according to the locality, the social conditions of the parents and the particular vagaries of the teacher. Some were hardy annuals in all schools: 'The Postman', for instance, or 'My Pet'; some were lifted from other lessons: 'The Battle of Trafalgar' or 'The Life Story of a Butterfly'; some had a distinctly vocational bias, e.g. 'What I Want to Be When I Grow Up' or 'The Duties of a Policeman'. (My favourite recollection of this sort is 'How to Wash Up' - during the course of which I learned the correct order of glass, silver, etc. No doubt my teacher truly believed that I, along with all my peers, was condemned to spend a life at the kitchen sink, even though the age of kitchen-maids had already passed.)

In fact, the subject of the composition mattered hardly at all, because the procedure never varied, and as far as the children were concerned it was a completely objective exercise anyway. When the title had been written on the board, teacher and class discussed the subject, which really meant that the teacher threw out ideas like fishing lines and pulled in towards her whatever verbal contributions from the children they happened to hook; reshaping them, as she repeated them, into sentences. Thus everybody was provided with a few communal ideas, which were grasped wholly by the brightest children, partially by the average, and extremely vaguely by the slowest. Often a 'plan' was constructed on the blackboard, which meant that not only was the substance the same in all the children's work but that it was presented in the same order.

Finally, a list of 'difficult spellings' was also usually offered, within the main two undesirable effects. The brighter children, who might have had some ideas of their own, felt obliged to use them, and constructed pedantic sentences around them. The rest either stuck them in at random and hoped philosophically for the best, or retired defeated by the hopelessness of achieving what appeared to be required of them. So 'A Walk in a Spring Wood', whether it could be recollected from actual experience by a country child or was as far from the experience of a town-dweller as a visit to the Grand Cham would have been, ended up the same. For those children who did manage half a page of writing about it, the composition recorded nothing but a catalogue of banal generalities well laced with words like 'umbrageous' and 'verdant'. The bold child who wrote: 'I went to a wood and we found violets and prim roses and wooden enemies' was likely to find himself ridiculed, or in trouble for not listening properly, or kept in to write out twenty times the correct spelling of violets, primroses and wood-anemones.

Thirdly, there was *English*, when time was spent in exercises (usually from an out-dated textbook), which were meant to ensure that such compositions as the children did produce were couched in formal, grammatical language and therefore 'acceptable' (as well as assessable in a marks system). Hours were spent in filling in gaps with to, too or two, their and there and the like, to the utter boredom of those who knew the difference anyway and the utter confusion of those who didn't. (As the books progressed up the classes, always from I to IV, the optimism of the text-book compilers rose. What ten-year-old child was likely to need the distinction between when and wen, call and caul, lee, lea and ley, discreet and discrete?)

Now, forty years later, we are concerned with something we call 'Creative Writing'. On the surface the change from one to the other seems vast, total and all to the good. We are inclined to look back on the efforts of our predecessors to teach children to write in their mother tongue with the amused tolerance and pity of those who are assured that they 'know better' now.

This is a dangerous attitude to adopt, and before allowing ourselves any false self-satisfaction, we should do well to examine critically:

- a) the stages by which one method has turned into the other
- b) the educational validity of those changes
- c) where we stand at present in relation to both past and future
- d) what we really *mean* by 'creative writing'.

### **The process of change**

There is a wave-like tendency for any educational change to build up gradually, gather momentum and force, break in a gush of enthusiasm, and quickly die away - by which time another change is already beginning to build up in the distance. At the moment of breaking, the wave is liable to sweep all before it, including common sense: to use the outworn cliché, there is always a danger of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. That is why what *used to happen* in the past is still important. There must be discrimination about what to keep and what to reject, not on the grounds of habit or expedience, but on considered educational grounds.

Everyone is aware of the reaction to over-enthusiasm summed up in the phrase 'the swing of the pendulum'. This is an unfortunate metaphor in so far as it suggests that when a forward movement loses impetus there is nowhere to go but back along the same path. Such a conclusion is foolish, to say the least of it. There may be, however, a genuine need to *reculer pour mieux sauter*, especially when the leap forward has been made hastily, with too great an abandon, and largely in the dark.

A fairly general feeling that there is a need to 'steady-up' is a healthy sign of awareness and professional responsibility, and should be regarded as 'entrenchment' rather than 'retrenchment'. The difference between the written work children achieve nowadays and that of thirty years ago is undeniable - but there can be no reason for complacent self-satisfaction because educational need is always related to the changing patterns of society. It is all too easy for each generation of teachers in turn to believe that at last the

ultimate method has been found. So it is with a lot of practices to which the word 'creative' has been attached.

In the first instance it means many different things to many different people. In the context of children's written work there have been four main variations in the interpretation put upon it. It is not my purpose at this point to comment on any of these aspects of creative writing, but merely to examine them.

#### a) Free writing

This is the most common synonym for 'creative writing' among teachers themselves. It indicates (obviously) the freedom of children to write without too much teacher-interference. Looking again at the picture of the past, we see the teacher (i) choosing the subject (ii) guiding the choice of which aspects of it shall be dealt with (iii) controlling the order in which this shall be done (iv) providing words and phrases for the children to use. The children's part was merely to transcribe what had been decided upon, and that being so, the criteria of success were neatness, cleanliness and the ability to spell. As the subjects chosen were mostly of little or no interest to children, they had no other personal motivation than the desire to please the teacher, to score well on the mark system in competition with their peers, and to keep out of trouble if possible - all somewhat negative as far as true education goes.

When the 'new art' movement began to sweep through the primary classrooms, the stilted, boring, *unnatural* compositions in English were shown up for what they truly were by comparison with the achievements of the children with paint. Freed from the restrictions of teacher-choice and teacher-direction of the old 'drawing lesson', the children's art work was providing indisputable evidence of imagination and executive ability far beyond what had previously been expected, or even considered possible. What the children were producing was in fact first-class childlike work instead of diluted fifth-rate adult art. It showed what could happen when each individual was allowed to put his own stamp on his own work (even though the work of a whole class arose from the same stimulus), and above all it demonstrated the motivating power of personal involvement in the subject and pleasure in the execution. The analogy with English was too obvious to be missed, and controls began to be eased.

In the infant schools the effect was, in general, that 'object lessons' turned into 'subject lessons', and the first sentences children were asked to write took the form of a scrap of individual personal news inscribed in a 'diary' or 'newsbook'. In the junior schools the crux of the change of direction was not so readily discerned nor so immediately acted upon. 'Creativity' was confused with 'imagination', and imagination taken to mean the same as 'fantasy'. In place of the more mundane subjects for straightforward composition the children were asked to concoct narratives about 'A Day in the Life of a Penny' for instance, or to finish a story that began 'I am now a dirty old duster, but once I was a pretty frock'. (Any flesh and blood teacher could have foretold the normal reaction of a ten-year-old boy to that, whether he came from castle or cottage, town-house or tenement!) Nevertheless, in spite of this basic lack of understanding, there was progress,



because the areas of lateral freedom laid open alternatives to the main direction. Though the title, whatever it was, might still be set by teacher or text-book, its very nature meant that teacher could not control the content of all the children's efforts, nor exactly how it was to be arranged. The 'essay plan', along with 'suggested vocabulary', 'useful phrases' and 'difficult spellings' began to disappear from the blackboard. As it dawned on the children that they were indeed out on their own, the brighter ones at any rate soon proved that their imaginative powers and technical potentiality in English were no less than they were in art. They began to write more and better stuff, even though their language was less pedantic and ponderous than before and their vocabulary and sentence structure more colloquial. The word composition went out of favour, and whatever the children happened to be writing about, it was now termed a 'story' - a far less accurate word in most circumstances.

Another major freedom came with regard to the utensils of the exercise. As the pencil (and later the ball-point pen) began to be allowed in the junior school to replace the difficult pen-nib, the children were able to write more in the time without running the risk of incurring wrath for blots and smudges, and soon the criteria for assessment of their efforts also changed. At last it was understood that what the children wrote was more important than the look of the written page.

The move towards freedom soon turned into a gallop, and in some cases resulted in children being 'free' to write what they liked about anything they liked when they liked and how they liked. Where and when that happened, the teacher's only apparent role was to be there to help when such help was requested by individual children.

But it is always difficult to generalise about 'trends', 'swings of the pendulum' and so on, without giving the impression that what is stated applies to everyone, in any situation. There has, quite definitely, been a tendency towards overdoing 'freedom' in the context of writing creatively; but while in a minority of cases this has been carried to absurdity, in the unremarked majority there is and has been steady progress. Moreover, every class is different, and the quality of the end product in creative writing is usually an indication of the quality of the teaching rather than of the efficacy of any method.

#### b) Self-expression

In this interpretation of 'creative writing' the pattern of divergence from the old practices was the same as that for free writing, though the emphasis was on a different aspect. The old method had attempted to train the child's powers of observation, and to provide him with some rudimentary skill in committing those observations to paper. His (directed) observations had relied mainly on his sense of sight. When left to observe for himself, his other senses were thought to be worth encouraging as well. Then as the diverse individuality of response began to be evident, it also began to be clear that the main difference among individuals lies in what they think and feel. The difference between objective observation and subjective awareness was at last understood, and as it was plain that children who were interested and personally involved wrote from the latter rather than the former, the idea of 'self-expression' took over. What the children wrote could

stand beside what they painted or chose to portray in spontaneous dramatic play as a means of expressing the inner self, a self of which they were made aware by the evidence of their senses. From this general idea two further developments arose. One resulted in a sort of contrived exploitation or 'flogging' of the children's sensory apparatus, in order to provoke 'imaginative' response to stimuli, and led to somewhat exaggerated experiments in supplying such stimuli - the burning of joss-sticks in a darkened room, the handling of a dead herring by blindfolded children, and so on.

The second was that far more attention was given to the children's emotions, in the belief that 'self is best expressed by acknowledging the emotional response to environment.

In this category of interpretation, work was 'creative' if it showed evidence of sensory awareness and revealed emotional response. The children were encouraged by every means to explore and state their own likes and dislikes, fears and hopes, loves and hates. To do this there had to be freedom, but there was a subtle distinction between self-expression and free writing, nevertheless.

#### c) Flowery style

Interpretation number three was the most popular one in the first place, adopted by all those who caught on to the new gimmick without giving the matter any consideration that could truthfully be termed 'thought'. It concerned itself mainly with style, and resulted in every child in any circumstance that necessitated writing being encouraged to use language more suitable for the pages of the cheapest women's magazine than for any normal purpose that he might have himself. The 'creativity' of this flowery style seemed to depend upon the number of adjectives and adverbs the writer could cram in, irrespective of their aptness or lack of it. (This has always been a pitfall to the aspiring writer, and the trap the unwary most easily fall into.) For a while this 'flowery madness' so held sway that one head teacher, discussing the chances of one of her pupils in the eleven plus hurdle race, remarked to me (with tongue in cheek): 'She's very good at maths, though her English isn't the kind that will please the selectors. But I caught her as she was about to sit down for the English test and said: "Now you just remember! Two adjectives to every noun and you ought to get through. "'

#### d) Poetry

Lastly there has been the belief that only so-called 'poetry' can be really called 'creative'; that being so, on the understanding that it was a question of creativity or nothing, children have been requested to produce poems on anything and everything from space projects to unblocking the kitchen sink. The poems thus elicited differed from prose mainly in the fact that they were broken into short units (often quite haphazardly) and set out in a form that looked, at first glance, like 'free verse'.

To this there has recently been added a further ingredient. Much has been said about the desirability of encouraging some sense of onomatopoeia, and of engendering discrimination in the choice of words that enact in the mouth some element of their own

meaning. This, being seized upon and stretched beyond its meaningful limit, has resulted in poems that are merely lists of exaggerated sounds, e.g.

The shot rang-ng-ng-ng out  
and the glass cra-a-a-sh-sh-ed,  
tinkled and shat-att-attered.

One hopes that this is a case of 'enough said'.

### **What is creativity?**

However, having broken the eggs, the omelette can perhaps be constructed. How much of the four variations given above is valid in a true, overall interpretation of 'creative writing'? Before that can be answered, it is necessary to find some kind of definition of 'creativity' and 'creative writing'. My thinking on this has been largely influenced by Susanne K. Langer (4, 5), to whom I acknowledge my debt in giving my own definition as follows:

*Creativity is the ability to create one's own symbols of experience: creative writing is the use of written language to conceptualise, explore and record experience in such a way as to create a unique symbolisation of it.*

What is meant in such a context by 'unique'? A piece of creative work comes into being because *somebody* makes a statement in *some medium* about *something*. To justify the epithet 'creative', the work should surely contain within itself, and be able to communicate, some essential quality of the experience, of the medium in which the statement is made, and of the person who has executed it. The interweaving of these three strands ensures a unique *statement*, which would, of course, mean that if this were the only criterion every piece of work carried to a state of completion would have to be classified as 'creative'. Quite obviously this is not the case. Symbolisation requires skill: skill is a concomitant of art: and art has standards - of performance, of execution, of total effect. A unique statement is not necessarily a symbol. A *symbol* is the end product of the process of a personal breaking-down, scrambling and reconstituting of experience, executed in accordance with standards that are, or can be made, acceptable. 'Creativity' lies both in conceiving the symbol and in executing it in such a way that it communicates its meaning either by measuring up well to standards already set, or by setting new standards.

In *The Hidden Order of Art* (2) the author points out how in-credibly convincing Picasso's portraits are, instancing those of his one-time secretary Sabartes. The first few of these were realistic ones; but as time progressed Picasso painted others, in one of which the sitter's spectacles are reversed, so that they sit upside down on the nose. Yet the author asserts that this portrait is probably the most convincing likeness' of all. Presumably, what Picasso was painting was his whole 'experience' of his secretary, not merely his perception of him. The last painting was more in the nature of a symbol of experience than the first, and more truly 'creative' according to my definition. But because Picasso is a genius, both measure up to the standards of art; the former to

conventional standards, the latter to standards Picasso himself helped to create. Both contain the basic 'subject matter' of the experience; both exploit the medium, paint; and both bear the unmistakable stamp of the artist's hand. The standards by which they could be judged as 'art' differ, and more people would feel able to 'judge' the former than the latter. In the later portrait Picasso set other standards. Because he understood what he was about, those standards can be accepted by others who also understand what he was about; but for a thousand other artists merely to copy Picasso's approach would not turn them overnight into Picassos. What was 'art' in the hands of Picasso in their hands would become no more than 'a gimmick'.

It is the gimmickry to which the various forms of creative writing have descended that has brought some censure of late, and threatens disrepute that could wreck the real progress that has been achieved. If a child assimilates experience, scrambles it and reconstitutes it in written language that measures up to accepted standards, while at the same time reflecting and displaying some stamp of his own individuality, his work can surely be termed 'creative' in the sense of the term when applied to primary school work. If he understands *absolutely* what the great artists in language have done with the medium and can emulate - not imitate - them, then he is probably on the way to becoming a creative artist himself, if he merely imitates or uses a popular gimmick, at his own or his teacher's instigation, his work cannot be said to be 'creative'.

### **Educational validity**

Let us consider, therefore, the four interpretations given above, and see how much in each is conducive to true creativity:

a) When the teacher initiated, organised and controlled the subject of the essay, and supplied too many props in the form of ideas, headings and spellings, *the resulting compositions symbolised no one's experience but the teacher's*. The break from this to 'free writing' was the crucial breakthrough, but in the process two valuable assets were put in jeopardy. No matter whose thoughts about experience had been committed to paper in the old way, at least there had been training in the marshalling, sifting and sorting, grouping and ordering of those thoughts, and though the children could not achieve what was being expected of them because of the dreadful tools with which they were provided, some ideas on the subject of presentation must have been inculcated. The overt 'freedom' of so-called 'free writing' has degenerated without these two safeguards to the anarchic production of quantity in place of creative quality.

b) Children encounter new experience all the time. They may 'discover' it for themselves, or meet it through the agency of the teacher, the radio, the film, the television screen, books, comics and the like. A great deal of it simply washes over them and away again; other parts of it stay with the child, building for him a unique mosaic made up of scraps of 'experience'. Each new piece that is added is not only significant in its own right - it also modifies the pattern of experience as a whole. It is only when fitted into the larger pattern of his entire experience that the new piece becomes truly significant to the child. Experience that cannot or does not fit is either rejected by the child altogether or

else becomes so much useless lumber. What this really amounts to is that no one can actually 'give' a child 'experience', and far less make him accept it as his own. What is accepted by him becomes significant as he assimilates it, breaks it down and fits it into his unique pattern. Then, and then only, can he begin to make symbols of it in any medium. If he is dealing with a common external experience, he may want to identify it, record it, describe it and involve himself further with it; if it is a more private kind of inner experience, affecting his thoughts and emotions, or if it causes him to fantasise and project his dreams, his hopes and his fears, an attempt at symbolisation may help him come to terms with any or all of them and may play a therapeutic as well as an educational part in adjusting him to them, especially if the new concepts or events are disturbing or cause distress. In either case he may well both need and desire to 'express himself; but equally well he may not, and certainly he will not *necessarily* choose to do it in writing.

Nevertheless, if, to be 'creative', what a child writes should bear the stamp of his own unique individuality, he will need to call upon his inner experience and deal with those things to which he reacts as a whole, as opposed to those he merely sees, hears and so on. The upholders of the 'self-expression' school were obviously on the right track. Two wrong turnings were taken by many teachers, though:

*i.* A child may be very *involved*, in thought and feeling, with things that to others seem trivial and unimportant, and certainly unworthy of the expense of 'emotion'. When this happens, though he may be writing about nothing more 'important' than the respective values of two different kinds of sherbet dabs, he is 'expressing himself, and may well do it quite creatively. There is no need in the cause of 'creativity' to call upon him to put himself through some emotional mangle in order to wring out of himself hopes and fears, loves and hates he does not particularly need or want to get rid of.

*ii.* Sensation and experience are not the same thing. Very few children have a basic pattern of experience into which the scent of a burning joss-stick is likely to fit with any degree of significance. Attempts to *provide* children with stimulating experiences of this kind are largely wasted. The normal classroom and the 'environment' (which today is the whole world) should be stimulating enough in their own right without the addition of such gimmicks. A good teacher is continually setting up situations in which children may gather new experience, but however good he is he cannot foretell with absolute certainty which bit of the aggregate will be significant to which child.

A group of teachers meeting at the Sheffield University Institute of Education to discuss the question of creative writing decided to try the experiment of asking all the children in their classes to write a poem under the same title. The subject chosen was 'Wishing'. The results ranged, as one might have predicted, from the wish to possess wings to the ambition to score all the goals for Sheffield Wednesday in a future cup-tie. Among them however was this offering from a ten-year-old girl:

I wish I liked onions.  
They have a penetrating smell.

On a plate they look delicious  
Small, curly, like small snails  
In the pan, crisping away  
Oh! I do hope that one day  
I get to like onions.

There is, I think, hardly a teacher in existence who could have predicted that! Yet there is no doubt about the heart-felt quality of it. It is self-expression of a far more genuine and creative nature than that of the clever-clever child who, stimulated by his teacher's oratory, makes an impassioned anti-poverty plea in the form of a 'poem', though he has no *real* conception of what poverty is. Shortly after the end of the Second World War a class of children in my own care had been considering the problem of increasing noise everywhere. Our particular local variety of this was caused by low-flying aircraft. When after the discussion I suggested a piece of writing about 'Noise', one very clever little girl got to work with all the skill supplied by her cultured background and years of my teaching. She went to town about noise of all kinds, from singing larks to bleating lambs, from church bells to air-raid sirens, and finally she got down to the aeroplanes. After giving them the works in a paragraph of highly sophisticated Marshallese, she shot her final bolt:

What a good thing it will be for this charming rural village when the aeroplane is obsolete, and guided missiles come!

This particular child was not 'clever-clever' in this way ordinarily: indeed, far from it. But I had digged a deep pit for her, as Pooh said 'somewhere where she was, only about a foot farther on', and she had fallen right into it. The discussion by itself, or the piece of written work, might have been successful as 'creative' work. The combination was not. The discussion (in my terms) had served to entice her out of the depth of her experience and understanding.

It is right that children should be stretched to the limits of their understanding and their verbal ability, because only in this way will their competence grow, but today's methods are as open to criticism as yesterday's if instead of normal growth a process of verbal forcing is put into operation. It is, as in art, a question of asking for and accepting first-rate child standards instead of fifth-rate adult ones.

The direct expression of pure emotional reaction in poetry belongs more to the adult world than that of most 'average' children, and though I am aware that exceptionally gifted children may, and indeed do, produce upon occasion a spontaneous poem on 'Hate' (for instance), this does not seem to me to set up this sort of 'self-expression' as a criterion to be aimed at by all - or even to be encouraged too often in any individual.

c) The 'flowery style' type of 'creative writing' is perhaps the most distressing to those who really care for language *per se*. The assumption behind the practice of larding (to use Lord Chesterfield's word) every little substantive with epithets and every verb with a string of adverbs is that there is only one kind of 'good' English, and that whatever the

purpose it must be used. Lewis Carroll was aware of this, a century ago. In a little-known poem called 'Poeta fit, non nascitur', a poet is explaining to an enquiring youngster the rules for writing poetry. The conversation at one point goes like this:

Then fourthly, there are adjectives  
That go with any word  
As well as Harvey's Reading Sauce  
With fish or flesh or bird:  
Of these, 'wild' lonely' 'weary' 'strange'  
Are much to be preferred.

And will it do, O will it do  
To take them in a lump,  
As 'The wild man went his weary way  
To a strange and lonely pump?'  
O no, you must not hastily  
To such conclusions jump!

Such adjectives, like pepper,  
Give zest to what you write  
And if you strew them sparsely  
They whet the appetite,  
But if you lay them on too thick  
They spoil the matter quite.

There are of course occasions when a decorative kind of language is exactly right, just as there are times when it is absolutely absurd. Much of the great poetry of our tongue depends for its impact on the poet's subtle use of this sort of language, but a study of the greatest poems will soon reveal the fact that it is used as delicately as the artist uses a camelhair brush, and is not laid on with a verbal shovel. A poet 'rapturising' on a landscape or writing a sonnet to his lady's eyes can and will use language not at all suitable for the instructions on a fire-extinguisher. The artists in words know when economy is of greater value than extravagance. Good English depends upon there being some true relationship between content and style. Language used in a new, strange fashion, language crammed with bizarre imagery, language highly decorated with adjectives and adverbs *may* be truly creative, *but not necessarily so*. Unless it fits its subject, it stands very little chance of being creative according to the definition worked out above, and only then if the usage remains firmly under the control of the writer and does not slip away into crazy convolutions generated by its own exuberance.

d) The part played by poetry in children's creative work should be considered carefully in relation to what has been said about style. It does depend so very much upon what is understood by the term 'poetry'. Used loosely in the context of creative writing, it usually means 'free verse'. Poetry, of course, includes 'free verse'; but to literature lovers the word poetry implies organisation, discipline and imagery beyond the ability of children to achieve, especially to order at a word of suggestion or command by the

teacher. Free verse itself, to be worthy of the name of poetry, must show an attempt at the same subtle choice of word and phrase, and the same disciplined organisation, as any other form of poetry.

Nevertheless, there are certain advantages in allowing the children to organise their verbal symbolisations in free verse form (see p. 46 below). These are technical advantages in the main, and speaking generally one could state fairly dogmatically that it is easier for children to achieve reasonably good creative writing in free verse than in prose; but this does not make all free verse *ipso facto* more creative than all prose. Nor does it justify the application of 'poetry' to all that children write in free verse form.

The distinction between most 'free verse' and 'poetry' should be clear to the teacher at any rate, in the hope that it will sooner or later also be understood by the children. In the meantime the sort of poetry likely to be most enjoyed by the children is that depending fairly heavily on rhyme and rhythm, akin in this respect to the playground lore they pass down to each other from generation to generation. The children who yell with gusto in the playground:

Hark the herald angels sing  
Beecham's pills are just the thing, etc.

are more likely to accept as poetry for enjoyment pieces such as de la Mare's 'Eeka, Neeka, Leeka, Lee' or Reeves' 'A Pig Tale' than, for instance, William Carlos Williams' 'Red Wheelbarrow' or the translation of a Japanese haiku. In spite of this, it is the latter kind we usually encourage them to imitate in their own writing, for bitter experience has taught most of us what dreadful things they can perpetrate when they attempt rhyme and scansion in their own work.

These subtle differences do undoubtedly create a razor's edge for the teacher to negotiate. Somehow or other he must make the children aware that prose merely broken up into short units and set out on the page to look like free verse does not automatically become either 'poetry' or 'creative'. Once he can achieve this, there will be more justification for using as a convenience the word 'poem' when attempting to differentiate between the kind of free verse children are encouraged to write and ordinary prose. In the minds of the children the meaning of both words will only be made clear by first hand daily acquaintance with as much suitable poetry as possible to set in opposition to an equivalent amount of well written prose. This instance of education by example rather than precept may of course lead to genuine attempts at rhyme and metre; it is more likely to result in the free verse truly deserving to be called 'poetry', and above all in establishing in the children's minds some machinery for discrimination in the choice between one form of language or the other as a suitable medium for what they want to symbolise, express or merely record.



**Handwriting**

Two tools are needed by any child setting out to do creative writing - language and calligraphy. It is very difficult for an adult to put himself back into the position a child is in, of not being actually in full command of either when faced with a demand to use both at once. Let us posit a person representing 'the average teacher' on holiday in France, able to get along reasonably happily and successfully on the smattering of French he acquired several years ago at school. He will chatter merrily enough, making himself understood and learning all the time from those who know the language better than he does. His many inadequacies will be 'got round' somehow and his grammatical errors will raise nothing worse in the way of censure than tolerant amusement. Then let us suppose that one night he is picked up by the police on suspicion, and is required to make a written statement - in French. His use of the language is now going to be subjected to detailed scrutiny; now the wrong tense or a silly muddling of two similar-sounding words may get him into real trouble. There will be no tolerant amusement at his inadequacies or failures - on the contrary, pressure will be exerted on him to make himself more precise. As the pressure of questioning grows, his facility with the language will probably decrease, until 'Je ne sais pas' may be the only phrase he remembers, or at least is at all sure of, and committing anything more to paper becomes impossible.

There is here a sort of analogy with 'the average child' in his use of English. It is one thing to be able to get along in it orally and quite another to be required to write it, and be precise in doing so, while aware all the time that what you write will be subjected to scrutiny and that pressure will be exerted to make you get it right next time. There may even be the threat of punishment if it is not done well enough.

Let us return, however, to our teacher making his statement in the Paris *prefecture*. Without the tool of language absolutely at his command, the relatively simple task of making a statement about his movements that day becomes incredibly difficult; but he still has one advantage over the child. He can write easily, swiftly and legibly, given a pen or pencil and paper. Let us make his situation more analogous to that of the child in school by supposing the police require him not to write, but to type out his statement, though his acquaintance with a typewriter is very slight. As a result of this, the task of actually getting anything down on paper becomes slow, laborious and prone to all kinds of accidents and mistakes in addition to those caused by his inadequate knowledge of the language.

Under such conditions, his French would hardly be likely to rank as 'creative'. What is more, he would not be likely to perform very much better if a reward instead of a punishment were being offered as inducement. If he knew how to use the typewriter

properly and had had enough practice in typing, he could at least make the most of his limited French; if his knowledge of the language were comprehensive, he could at least concentrate on saying exactly what he wanted to as economically as possible, and concentrate on the shift key and space bar, and so on. Obviously, to have anything approaching real success, he would need to know how to use both tools.

To expect 'creative writing', or indeed any sort of written work at all, from children who do not have some degree of competence with both tools, is largely a waste of time and effort. Constant failure and disappointment can only bring frustration and resentment in their wake, though the tiniest scrap of success brings a glow of achievement and renewed hopeful effort. Most children can be given a chance to achieve a modicum of success, even if the quantity of work they produce is very small indeed, provided they can set it down legibly - the caption under a picture, for instance, or a two-line request for a football at Christmas. With normal indigenous children at any rate, some knowledge of the language can be assumed; *but it cannot be assumed that the ability to use a writing instrument will be learned anywhere but in school.* For this reason if no other, more attention should be paid to the actual skill of handwriting, from infant age upwards, than is presently the case in most schools.

We are used to the idea of learning by doing, and in many cases there is no other way. There are some skills however that can be better learned properly by instruction and practice from the start, and writing is one of them. Children who are allowed to 'pick it up' as they struggle to copy what teacher has written down without any sort of systematic help tend to contract extraordinary habits of letter formation, spacing and so on, that they find it almost impossible to rectify later. A few minutes observation in a lecture room full of university students reveals the most astonishing and extraordinary modes of handling a simple instrument like a ball-point pen. The students adopt postures that one fears must inevitably result in curvature of the spine or eyes strained beyond hope of cure. The calligraphic results are a mixed bag, though many of them are so illegible as to make tutors who have to plough through essays and examination papers turn grey. The majority of students with whom I have discussed this remember learning to write' but few remember 'being taught to write', and close questioning often reveals that what they remember is the change from some sort of script to 'double-writing'.

Since so much depends upon this ordinary and largely pleasurable skill, it does seem a pity that more attention is not given directly to learning it. There are indeed a great many schools that have made a decision to teach Marion Richardson script-writing or italic throughout. In general, the writing in these schools is of a higher standard than in others that have no considered policy on this point, or that favour a loopy' kind of pseudo-copperplate, or simply a joined script. Worst of all is the laissez-faire method of letting the children pick up one letter style here and another there until the mongrel hand loses any sense of pattern or uniformity and the rhythm that makes it easy to write and comfortable to read.

I would not presume to suggest that there is any one style that is 'right' and any that are 'wrong'. The choice of style to be taught must be the decision of the head teacher and his

staff", taken as a policy decision and thereafter adhered to. If the first school and the junior school are separate institutions, this should surely be a point of contact and consultation between them. For my own part I favour the Marion Richardson style as being less full of obvious pitfalls than many others, or, best of all, the italic style which has economy of movement and a definite rhythm when written at speed, besides being the most aesthetically satisfying when done well.

Teachers of infants are always concerned about confusion caused in the child by the difference between the printed symbol and the written one, and tend to select a type of script nearest to the type-face in the basic reading scheme (if any) the children are going to use; and publishers usually take trouble to select a type face for infant books that can be reasonably easily imitated by the children when writing.

This is certainly a matter for serious consideration, and if the decision is to keep the children's writing hand in line with the printed symbol, some thought should also be given to the kind of cursive hand that will follow it in due course. If the cursive hand is going to be a development from the script, where and when does the 'joining' begin? If the junior school decides to change the style drastically, it should have a considered policy about how and when the change should take place.

In my own experience, I must say that I have never found much evidence that children are confused by the difference between printed symbols and any form of written ones. For this reason, and taking into account the enormous advantages that a child with an easy, rhythmic, legible flowing hand has, I would always start to *teach* some style of calligraphy in the infant school *as an art form* alongside any utilitarian script that might be employed for ordinary purposes. There is nothing new in this idea; 'writing patterns' in paint and crayon have been with us for at least four decades, though one sees evidence of them less and less nowadays. Indeed, I know of instances very recently in which students on teaching practice have been told very firmly by their class teachers that they must not allow children to write with anything but 'the proper thing', i.e. the pencil (presumably), because 'they must learn to form their letters properly'. As a fine-pointed pencil is difficult to use, one can only hope that at any rate 'the proper thing' is at least as fat or broad-ended as possible, and that monotony is avoided by such self-evident procedures as using coloured or tinted paper. But variety is the spice of life to small children, and to write with fine-art crayon on coloured sugar paper seems to me to be a way of ensuring practice without boredom; and why 'forming the letters' is any different with broad felt-tipped pens from doing the same with sharpened pencils, I cannot conceive.

What is often neglected is the development of the writing patterns into writing proper, and the follow-up of writing practice right into the junior school.

Most children enjoy writing for its own sake - which is a distinct asset. When they leave the first school they should, I believe, understand:

*i* that there are varying ways of making symbols for the same letter

- ii* that they will (possibly) use one for reading and another for writing
- iii* that block capitals are used for certain purposes and are a useful addition to the skill of writing
- iv* that whatever the style chosen, there is one right and several wrong ways of making each letter symbol
- v* that uniformity of size and spacing is to be aimed at because it aids legibility.

A daily practice of about ten minutes (or less) from the age of five to nine would I think work wonders in the older stages, particularly with regard to 'creative writing'. In the earliest stages, this could well be a tiny bit of group (or even class) instruction with the teacher paying particular attention to posture and holding the writing tool properly.

Once the children have grasped the idea of proper letter formation and spacing, the practice can become completely individual with the aid of cards to be copied; and if this seems like a return to the practice of Victorian 'copy-books' I am unrepentant. As far as I can see, there is nothing wrong with a piece of copying, even though it was done in the past, providing it is done with an aim in view and that this aim is recognised. In this case the aim is to ease the process of putting thoughts on paper, with the additional benefit that confidence will be gained for coping with forms, documents and the like later in life. More- over, what the copy-cards contain can and should be grist of all kinds for the insatiable mill of language learning.

There are on the market several excellent books on the technique of teaching handwriting, and there is no room for more details here. My purpose in giving it so much space already has been to bring it back to mind, and to make a plea for recognition that this is a prerequisite of any successful attempt at creative writing. It may seem to some a very negative way of beginning, merely to remove difficulty in the path. I happen to think it is wise. Perhaps I am influenced by the memory of a lady who in the distant past once taught me 'domestic science' at my grammar school. She was Belgian, and her English was not good. One morning I was set to scrub the hearth surrounding the kitchen range on which we learned cookery'. I was on my knees slopping away with a soaking floor cloth when a large flat Belgian hand landing on the side of my head knocked me into the pail. 'Ach!' said the exasperated voice. 'Do you not know that you must get without the ashes first?' 'Handwriting' is one of the categories of English in the past that I would cling to, or return to, in the name of real progress. It should be clear that the term also includes careful choice of suitable writing materials, etc.

## **Language**

The acquisition of language is a much larger and more important issue. By the time children have reached school age at all, the everlasting miracle of understanding spoken language will already have taken place, but their ability in communicating with others by means of language depends largely on their home, their social environment and their previous exposure to language experience. So much has been written on this that to do any more than to refer to it would be superfluous.

What concerns us here is the varying level of verbal ability, not its cause. In any unstreamed class there are always a few children completely at ease in a language situation, with a flow of speech and wide vocabulary, able to find words and phrases with which to 'express themselves' orally or in writing, and therefore constantly 'hogging' both teacher's attention and the main advantages to be gained from any interesting situation. The bulk of the class can talk freely enough among themselves and find adequate words to conduct their normal (slight) business with adults. As Professor Bernstein points out, the speech they use in their home environment is in the nature of a code understood by all others in the same environment, and may be compounded of gesture, grimace, etc. as well as words. It does not lend itself well to being written down, because the words alone form only a part of the whole communication. To them, language as written bears a limited resemblance to language as spoken, and is something they have to learn before they can use it. Lastly, there are those who can barely communicate in language at all, who speak only in monosyllables and have the utmost difficulty in forming a whole sentence orally, let alone in writing one.

This is the sort of picture all infant teachers are familiar with, especially in urban areas. It is not so generally recognised in the junior schools, where anxiety to get the children writing often seems to obscure the fact that they have a very poor store from which to write. This is not just a question of vocabulary but of the whole structure and purpose of language. Meaning (and therefore communication) is not contained merely in the words; it is in the choice of phrase, the lilt, the rhythm, the intonation, the speed, the dynamics, the economy or extravagance, the imagery - and so on. Complete comprehension in reading depends upon being able to respond to all these subtle elements; creative writing depends on understanding the part they play and being able to call some of them, at least, into use. What is often the case is that 75 per cent of the children in a Junior class can read and write, have command of a limited vocabulary, and can 'compose' a few lines of writing about a topic if called upon to do so or a page or two of 'free writing' of a mundane kind about their own doings. Both come into the category of 'recording' rather than 'creating'. The bank of language at their disposal has enough funds for that; but without further language assets they cannot branch out much further.

The metaphor of bricks without straw may be a cliché, but it is a useful one. If the teacher wants the children to produce creative writing, he must see that they have at their disposal the language with which to do it. The question is, how?

The answer, I believe, is a simple one. It depends upon the teacher accepting the fact that he must supply a wealth of language experience to the children, in every possible way there is. He must expose them to oral language in all its forms and variations till all the subtler uses of it are absorbed like rain on the earth; in drops or in downpours, it helps growth. Language patterns are learned through the ear more than through the eye. Every opportunity must be seized to add to the patterns and rhythms of language taken in through the ear and stored for future use.

Ideally of course this starts in pre-school years, not only in conversation with adults but by acquaintance with the nursery rhymes and jingles, lullabies and songs, finger play and

singing games that belong to the nursery years. First acquaintance with prose should come by means of stories - such as the age-old fairy tales in which repetition and economy of phrasing, rhythm, cadence and intonation are ingredients essential to the enjoyment.

Then they all went on till they met Goosey-Loosey. 'Where are you going, Goosey-Loosey?' she said. 'I am going to the woods for some food', replied Goosey-Loosey. 'Oh, Goosey-Loosey, don't go!' said Drake-Lake. 'I was going, and I met Ducky-Lucky. Ducky-Lucky met Cocky-Locky. Cocky-Locky met Henny-Penny. Henny-Penny met Chicken-Licken. Chicken-Licken was going to the woods, but the sky fell down and hit her on her poor little head. Now we are all going to tell the King.'

There is not a single word in that extract that is out of the comprehension of a toddler, yet its total impact is one of magic. The magic is contained in the play of rhyming names being repeated, and the way the string of them rises in a build-up to the announcement of the reason why anyone should not go to the woods; from that point the cadence falls again. There is a definite *shape* to the passage, which being repeated over and over again as the story progresses sets up an insistent rhythm hard to forget. The lucky children who are exposed to this sort of language experience from their cradle cannot get too much of it if they are given more, and more, in school. For those who get none at home, it is vital. Unfortunately such 'fairy tales' are often neglected once the children are in the junior school on the grounds, apparently, that they are 'babyish'. This is a misunderstanding, I think, of the nature and kind of 'fairy tales', for the content of many is more mature in every way than much literature published for junior children, while the shape and pattern of the language is often of infinitely greater value. If some of the actual words are old-fashioned and strange, they have for that very reason an added attraction.

Seven lang years I served for thee,  
The glassy hill I clamb for thee.  
The bluidy shirt I wrang for thee;  
Wilt thou no wauken and turn to me?  
from 'The Black Bull of Norroway'

The same may be said of the nursery rhyme that turns almost imperceptibly to ballad, and the jingles that lead to folk songs with such unforgettable words as:

The crow that is so black, my love  
Will surely turn to white.  
If I prove false to the girl I love  
Bright day shall turn to night.  
  
Bright day shall turn to night, my love  
And the rocks shall melt with the sun.  
And the fire will freeze and be no more  
And the raging sea will burn.  
'The True Lover's Farewell'

Myths, legends and folk tales from all civilisations and cultures can extend right through the junior school, supplemented by a selection of the books written so abundantly nowadays for children, and including such classics as *Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn*. Through an acquaintance with the poets who do not write *for* children but include children among their audience - like Walter de la Mare, John Walsh, Charles Causley and Ian Serraillier - the range of poetry can go to a very high literary quality. What binds all these together is the skill in the use of language, and it is this that children absorb without conscious effort, caught by the story, the rhyme, the tune, the rhythm - or by a teacher's enthusiasm, when subjected often enough to it. The important thing is that the children should hear this use of language, and this means teachers having a generous supply of it always to hand, for odd minutes here and there throughout the day, throughout the weeks and the years, from the nursery school to the top of the junior school. Stories, ballads, poems, traditional rhymes and folk songs - in this instance the words without the music, if the teacher truly cannot sing, are still valuable. Somehow or other, the children's store of 'creative' language usage has to be built up. The question of time will always raise its head, and it may even be necessary to steal some from 'writing' for this sort of purpose. Which, after all, is the more valuable - twenty minutes spent listening to a good story told in truly creative English, or the same amount of time used in writing 'freely' a 'story' of the kind we all know so well:

When I got up this morning my mum said you are late and I said no I'm not and she said yes you are and I said well it doesn't matter and she said yes it does you'll be late for school and then she gave me my breakfast and I had a round of toast and jam and tea and then my friend Bob came and . . .

The earlier the business of collecting language by ear begins, the better. It cannot go on too long.

Hearing, however important, is nevertheless only one form of getting acquainted with language patterns, and there are others that should not be neglected. Closely allied to hearing is repeating orally; by joining in the repetitive phrases of a story and the choruses of ballad or folk song. Accumulative poems are especially good and can be made to serve several purposes at once. 'The House that Jack Built' or 'The Twelve Days of Christmas', 'There Was an Old Woman who Swallowed a Fly' and 'A Strange visitor' are examples of poems that lie very close to the children's own lore, and for that reason can be enjoyed again and again. The teacher has only to start one going in the last few minutes of the morning session for instance, while the classroom is being hastily 'put to rights' after the morning's activity. The children will actually speed up their clearing chores in order to be able to join in, and the group will be reduced to an 'order' that no amount of patient chivying or impatient instruction could achieve in the same time. The children who do not memorise quickly are given a bit of practice, as are those whose enunciation lacks clarity; and once the children know the words so well that they repeat them without effort, all kinds of variations can be added by playing with the speed of different lines, making it loud and soft, having solo voices here and there, backing it with

tambour or other percussion rhythms, breaking into a home-made melody for a particular phrase, etc.

For the same kind of reasons, a repertoire of a few carefully chosen but well-loved stories should be readily available, to be interspersed among all the other new ones chosen for reading or telling. If such stories are well told, with the phrases and rhythms repeated accurately at each telling, the children enjoy them for a different reason, or at least an added reason, to that of hearing about the actual sequence of events again. They wait for the attractive sound of 'The Marquis of Carabas' and roll it round their tongues; wait with mouths ready to join in with 'Little dog Turpie barks so loud I cannot slumber nor sleep' and hold their breath ready to laugh yet again at Piglet's frantic exclamations of 'Heff, heff, horrible heffalump'. From such 'joining in' activities it is a small step to dramatisation of scenes that require them to read matter aloud (they obviously do not have to learn it by heart if they do not want to). Then they can sing language (in rhymes, folk songs and other school songs suitable for their age group), move to it, skip to it, make music *for* it; in fact, make the new phrases and words they hear 'their own' in every way that is possible. Not to be despised either is to *write* it as handwriting practice. At infant level the afore-mentioned cards can contain reminders of well-loved phrases:

Mirror, mirror on the wall  
Who is the fairest of us all?

At junior age, the field is limitless. Proverbs, for instance, are often gems of linguistic economy as well as wisdom, e.g. 'Let the best horse leap first over the hedge'; 'Daylight will peep through very small windows'. They simply ask to be remembered.

So do the age-old weather-saws and bits of farming lore, out-dated for their practical uses by modern knowledge and technology but still viable as pleasurable language. Very few children in these days are going to be farmers, and those that are will hardly rely on the sayings of their grandfathers for counsel, but that is no reason why any child should not benefit from acquaintance with the verbal felicity of such sayings, and to copy (and think about) a card such as this can do nothing but good:

#### Advice to a Farmer

When the hedge is white with may  
Sow your barley night and day.  
When with may the hawthorn's white  
Sow your barley day and night.

In the junior school couplets, limericks, haiku and short poems entire, as well as the words of folk songs, etc., can all be used for the same many-sided purpose.

When copying for writing practice, language patterns are also being taken in by the eyes, and this is also of paramount importance. It comes second in order to language assimilated through the ear however, because it depends upon the child being able to



read, and must therefore come at a later stage in his growth. Once he has reached the stage of translating the printed symbols into sounds, visual memory complements his aural memory in supplying him with words and phrases to use in his own compositions. The quality of what is put before him must therefore be stressed. Reading matter should be much more than practice in decoding printed symbols and in memorising vocabulary and word building. The look of the line unit on the page, the comfortable sound of a phrase, the correct use of punctuation, the shape of a sentence in both eye and ear are all scraps of 'experience' which will be called on to serve as patterns when the children come to putting their own thoughts down in writing; and it goes without saying that the better acquaintance any child has with books, the better will his written work be.

### **The rules of the game**

Having mentioned the question of punctuation, let us pause to deal with it, boldly and without flinching. Perhaps the greatest mistake of all that has been made in the changeover from the old to the new has been the belief of many that providing the children wrote in quantity and with pleasure, expressing themselves freely without inhibition and finding fresh, vigorous language in which to do it, any rules of spelling, punctuation and grammar could be dispensed with. Once again it seems to depend on a genuine understanding of *all* the aims of attempting to get a child writing creatively. Some of those aims are bound up with his health and happiness while he is still a child, all should be concerned with his educational growth, and as this will continue until he becomes a mature adult, some thought must be taken of how the pleasurable activity of creative writing will be of any use to him when he has grown out of childhood.

With a few exceptions, the children who 'paint' or 'move' when young will not need those skills as practised in school once they have grown up, though it is not to be deduced that such skills learned and enjoyed in childhood will not affect their adult behaviour in indirect and subtle ways', and though the average man of forty will obviously not need to write 'stories' or 'poems' any more than he will want to paint 'Bonfire Night' or charge about on a broomstick pretending to be Sir Galahad, the fact remains that he may very well want, as well as need, to put pen to paper to the end of his life, especially with regard to his more personal human relationships. Even if he did not, supposing a future in which normal communication between people relied entirely upon mechanical devices other than writing, one can hardly envisage a future in which he did not depend to some extent upon interpreting the printed word. In this respect reading and writing go hand in hand. What a piece of printed language *means* depends upon its syntax, grammar and punctuation. Comprehension depends upon acknowledging the existence of such rules and obeying the signals they give when searching for meaning in the printed word. If a child has to learn them in order to *read* properly, there seems to me to be no reason why he should not equally accept their existence when learning to write. To pretend that there are no rules, or that they do not matter any longer, is false and misleading. Any game that is worth playing has rules, all children know that.

They make rules for their own games, and soon complain bitterly about others who won't 'play properly'. They are never too young to comprehend that for any game rules exist,

though they may not understand the rules, may choose for their own convenience to ignore them, or 'forget' them, or may deliberately cheat by breaking them. In this respect English is analogous to any such game.

A group of boys kicking a ball about may be enjoying themselves hugely, and even say they are 'playing football'; the same boys know and accept unquestioningly the rules governing F.A. games, and are militantly vociferous if their football heroes are 'cheated' by 'wrong' decisions by a referee. If the group of boys becomes big enough for their own game to become organised, such rules as they know are immediately brought into use. They would not think the game worth playing without them. But it would be a foolish teacher who sat a group of boys down to learn the rules of Association football without ever giving them a chance to kick a ball!

This is, in effect, exactly what used to happen in the teaching of English. In the days of which we have spoken before, the rules were everything, and the game itself was never played. 'Spelling' was an end in itself, and children who had no verbal ability at all worth mentioning were constrained to master the difficulties of such unlikely words as 'ptarmigan', 'catacombs' and 'indebtedness'. Acres of paper and oceans of ink (to say nothing of eons of time) were wasted, in aggregate, on writing down lists of singulars and plurals, masculines and feminines, synonyms and antonyms (called 'similar' and 'opposites'), on fitting together oddly assorted subjects and predicates, on filling blank spaces with 'suitable adjectives (or adverbs) chosen from the list below', etc. And as for punctuation; the *pons asinorum* was of course quotation marks indicating direct speech, and few children ever crossed it successfully.

With the creative revolution, the reaction against such pointless exercises was a violent one. 'Never mind the rules,' we said. 'Let us get them writing freely. To write something badly is infinitely better than to write nothing at all. What they write is much more important than how they write it.' Speaking for myself, I still hold to all that - but it never for a moment occurred to me, twenty years ago, that anyone would ever reach a point of saying that 'punctuation did not matter' or that 'children should not be taught any grammar'. It depends on what you mean by 'teaching'. There is just as much need for children to *learn the rules* as there ever was, except that they now learn them by applying them to a game in which they are involved.

Quality still remains more important than quantity, and the 'quality' of communication in written work depends on:

- i* having a good store of general language experience on which the children can call, including what used to be called 'vocabulary'
- ii* organising the matter to be written into some order or sequence, i.e. what used to go under the name of 'paragraphing'
- iii* legibility and spelling
- iv* grammar, i.e. sentence structure and punctuation.

The intrinsic 'quality' of what a child writes is still of greater importance than whether he obeys 'the rules of English'; but the plain (if unpalatable) fact remains that he can barely

satisfy his own need to symbolise in words if he does not know the rules, and without them his efforts are largely incomprehensible to other people.

Difficult as the task of making the rules familiar to the children is, I believe it should surely still be attempted, not by teaching them in isolation but by drawing attention constantly to the *need* for them in playing the game of writing English creatively. The rules can, after all, be simplified, and awareness of them fostered in all sorts of ingenious ways. The same goes for spelling. It is the way they used to be dealt with in the past that was wrong, not the rules themselves. The attitude of the teacher towards such rules sets the attitude of the children. If a junior child wrote 'He went read with embarrassment', it would be a poor teacher who reprimanded him for his spelling, or put a heavy blue line through two words in his sentence; but it would be an equally poor teacher who didn't at some future date draw his attention to the difference in spelling between 'red' and 'read' or tell him how to spell 'embarrassment' if he continued to want to use it and to spell it wrongly. Perhaps the keynote of creative writing' is awareness of *all* the possibilities of the language, and of this 'the rules' form a significant part.

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## Pen to paper

The time has come to consider the practical issues of all that has been previously suggested to the teacher and the children in 'the classroom', which must nowadays mean any place, anywhere, in which children in the charge of a teacher are engaged in organised meaningful activity.

What is being required of the children is that they shall set down on paper, in English suitable for the purpose, some of their personal reactions to 'experience', which may be of many disparate kinds. To be 'creative' this work cannot be mere reporting, but must involve the child entire, including the ability to go beyond the realm of tact and sensory impression to the limitless area of the imagination, where thought and feeling meet, overlap, or perhaps coalesce.

What is asked of the teacher? To sum it up in a few words is impossible; to try to set it down in detail is frightening, so heavy is the load upon the teacher's shoulders. Yet the only way to clarify the position and to counter some of the false notions that all the teacher has to do is to sit back and allow the children free rein (so that out of their trailing clouds of glory they may manufacture miracles of linguistic art!) is to attempt to delineate the teacher's role.

Making this point in *Seeing to the Heart* (12) Marie Peel hits the nail squarely on the head:

One needs the catalyst of an active imagination in the teacher, to relate the facts to the child's experience, to bring the environment to life *in the child's mind*. It must be presented to him in personal terms so that he can enter into it and as the project proceeds live in it *in his own imagination*.

The teacher is 'the catalyst' in any classroom situation, and most of all where imagination and creativity are looked for. The relationship between experience and symbolisation, between the factual and the imaginative, can depend upon general factors of organisation and specific methods of teaching; for what the children produce may depend upon them being fed with further stimuli when they begin to falter or tire, and upon the teacher's alert awareness of individual needs at any given moment.

### **Organisation and methods**

Most first schools now favour informal methods that encourage individual or small-group work, but this is not quite so general in junior and middle schools. Many junior schools are still in the process of 'making haste slowly' towards informal methods, feeling that they must test each new foothold carefully before trusting to it entirely. There are also

still some firmly entrenched in traditional formal education, truly convinced that the freedom and informality of 'progressive' methods is 'a lot of nonsense' that can lead only to illiteracy and innumeracy, and finally to a collapse of educational standards. Yet even the last group pay lip service to 'creativity' and try (often with success) to inject vitality of some kind into a rigidly controlled routine of composition and correction.

Creative writing, therefore, may be undertaken by the children in any of the following situations:

- i* as a class activity, directly under a teacher's full control
- ii* as a group activity, group activated
- iii* as an individual activity, self-motivated
- iv* it may be, occasionally, an isolated activity among other types of written English work *v* a regular 'subject' or 'skill' to be practised for its own sake
- vi* an integral part of a much larger, integrated theme, project, centre of interest or topic.

The particular choice of approach among the possibilities set up by the permutation of these factors must be the teacher's own, within the framework of the school's policy.

As a general principle, I would like to advocate a mixture of all of them, according to the situation immediately to hand, i.e. in my opinion none is specifically wrong, and all may be right. The imagination of the teacher has to be brought to bear all the time, to see when the class would benefit by being held together as a unit, or when a topic is petering out and a few children need to be set off on some unrelated writing, and so on. Flexibility is a virtue that helps to save much precious time from being wasted. It seems to me that whatever other decisions are arrived at, a wise teacher will try to include in his programme at least some occasional periods when the children know that 'creative writing' will be done and *assessed as a skill*. In the course of a project or theme, many opportunities will arise for writing about a wide variety of things, probably while excitement in the factual is at fever pitch. When imagination breaks through the factual limits and begins to extend the creative horizon of the topic, the child needs to have the skill ready to use. One cannot apply a skill one does not possess, and it leads to bitter frustration and lack of confidence if one has to learn how to do it when the desire to get on with it is urgent. Certainly such a moment is not the time for teacher's instruction or 'marking'. Yet some form of assessment is as essential as some form of instruction, if progress is really to be made. There are ways in which children can be helped to learn the techniques of writing creatively, and to have occasional lessons' when everyone understands that what is written in that time will be looked at critically but constructively is helpful to teacher and taught. It saves a good deal of frustration and by-passes many of the difficulties otherwise inherent in 'free' work.

### **The experience and the symbolisation**

People are always trying to define 'imagination' and finding it very difficult to do. As I interpret it in the context of creativity in written work, it is not opposed to reality, but an

extension of it. The 'imagination' works on reality and in so doing extends it perhaps out of the realm of 'the factual' and possibly beyond the limits imposed by space and time. It is very difficult to 'imagine' anything not delineated in one's mind by reference to reality of some kind, 'God' as a pure spirit has defeated man's creative power to symbolise, and could only be 'imagined' when clothed in the attributes (as well as the shape) of a super-man or some other known creature or object. Even Elijah's concept of him as a fire, an earthquake, a rushing wind or a still small voice all related to reality. Fantasy may create giants and witches, robots and daleks; but they are nevertheless all extended images of reality.

This seems to me to be most important to remember when helping children to 'be creative'. The experience upon which their imagination is set to work is most often a factual one. If it is not, then they really are being required to make bricks without straw. From the 'experience' to the 'symbol' is the process of creativity, and the sequence is generally as follows:

- a) initial experience
- b) reinforcement of interest in selected aspects of the experience
- c) choice of medium in which to symbolise any chosen aspect
- d) application of the skill of handling that medium to the experience in mind
- e) execution of the symbol.

a) The initial experience

Most schools provide opportunities for children to encounter new experience all the time; by means of journeys and visits, films, television, radio, tapes and discs, and books; to say nothing of what the staff give 'out of themselves' in the way of experience passed on or shared. Much of this complex pattern of experience is not used specifically as material upon which any further intellectual or imaginative effort is expended; indeed, it is fairly safe to say that without 'the catalyst of the *teacher's* imagination' very little creative work of an educational nature would be attempted as a direct result of it. The role of the teacher falls clearly into two parts:

- i* as the organiser of situations in which children may acquire meaningful experience.
- ii as teacher*, giving inspiration as to what is done with the experience, and help and information about how to do it.

Let us examine a hypothetical 'experience' and its possible follow-up, taking as our example nothing more unusual than a morning's visit to the nearest railway station by a junior class. We can assume that the teacher organising such a visit will have his aims fairly clearly formed before starting on it; and what the children see and do will be to some degree mapped out by him. Much of what they learn will be factual; we will leave that aside for want of space, and consider for a moment other kinds of 'experience'. One hopes that in any such visit there is time for the children to 'stand and stare'. In this particular case, there are two sides to the experience: the factual, i.e. how a railway is run and the general functions of the station, and the imaginative, e.g. How aware are the

children of the people using the *station* - the passengers as well as the employees - as human beings? How aware are they of their own reactions to an express train thundering through, or the drama of an old lady at the barrier who has lost her ticket? Did they notice the dog that was so reluctant to enter the guard's van? Did anyone wonder what that enormous packing case contained? Where was the little boy going - the one who had tear-marks on his face and his pockets crammed with sweets and comics? What had happened to the passenger the young man was so anxiously waiting for? Did anyone wonder what the engine driver had for his dinner? and so on. Such incidents may lose their import by being pointed out to every-body, and such questions when asked may prompt silly answers, but the presence of the teacher talking to one child here, another there, joining in and elaborating any small thing mentioned sets the ball rolling. It lets the imagination out of the cage and invites it to soar away.

Back in school, the follow-up begins. What will come out of the experience in written symbolisation? It will, of course, depend upon the conditions in the classroom, and whether such work is demanded or coerced, given willingly or freely proffered by the children themselves. Where written work is demanded on the same or the next day, the chances are that 90 per cent of it will be depersonalised reportage of events and facts taken largely in the same sequence as they occurred, e.g. 'First we went to the ticket office. Then we went to Platform 3 to see the London train depart.'

Even those children well trained in seeking and finding 'good words and phrases' will only decorate this reportage, thereby turning it into the worst kind of journalism. No amount of suggestion by the teacher that they should remember what they saw, heard, smelled, tasted and felt will break the hold the 'organised' part of the experience has on them. What was pumped in will be pumped out again, though with varying degrees of interest and success in terms of 'good English'.

This, unfortunately, is still far too often the pattern, and such stimulus as a visit like this can give to real creative effort is largely wasted; *because the symbolisation is asked for before the experience has been assimilated and personalised*. Unless time is allowed for the whole experience to sink in, for the 'scrambling' process to take place and the aspects of the entire experience most important to the individual to be selected, all the children can offer is what they were all given in the first instance. This time gap between experience and any verbal symbolisation is absolutely essential if work that is really creative is to be forthcoming.

The gap can be advantageously filled by the teacher with 'reinforcement of experience' of all kinds.

#### b) Reinforcement

Reinforcement will be continually taking place in all the other follow-up activities; but the special reinforcement designed to help creative writing must be planned by the teacher, and take the form of language wherever possible.

*i* Spoken language - discussion. The children will want to talk, to each other, in small groups, or as a class with the teacher as a leader. Now is the time for those individual observations to be recalled and voiced, and those questions asked and answered. Jane can tell everybody how the old lady fussed about her ticket, and what the ticket collector said; Gary can describe the efforts of the guard to persuade the dog into the van. Guesses can be made as to what the packing case contained, or why the little boy had been crying.

*ii* Spontaneous dramatic activity suggests itself as a development, including movement and reproduction of sounds.

*iii* The printed word: books, stories, poems and songs. Non-fiction books about railways and trains in general will reinforce factual knowledge and help with terminology and spelling.

There should be enough about the classroom to allow children to browse at their leisure as well as for use in model-making, etc.

Well-written fiction touching the subject but not necessarily directly concerned with it helps the divergence. Read aloud as a shared experience, it enhances the privately selected ones ripening towards symbolisation. In the specific example we have taken, I would suggest Helen Cresswell's *The Night Watchman*; itself a highly imaginative fantasy in which a train plays an important part.

Poems of all kinds and at all levels of difficulty can fill odd minutes, the teacher simply reading them and leaving them to do their own work unless explanation is asked for, e.g.

'Victoria', Eleanor Farjeon

'I like to see it lap the miles', Emily Dickinson

'The Child in the Train', Eleanor Farjeon

'O, the wild engine', Harold Munro

'Along the windswept platform', Stephen Spender

The Ballad of John Axon', Ewan MacColl

Others could be used more specifically for a purpose, e.g. 'Night Mail' by W. H. Auden as a piece of choral work, or with percussion backing or 'Skimbleshanks the Railway Cat' by T. S. Eliot with train-rhythm backing supplied by mouth and hand sounds.

These vary in difficulty from the very simple to the difficult. This raises several points that I can only touch on very briefly in passing. The easier poems will be enjoyed and this is vital to the whole exercise; but the specific aim is to demonstrate how language has been used for effect, and this may mean stretching the children a bit farther than pure enjoyment would warrant. It is interesting to note that many of the early pioneers of creative work issued warnings against too facile an approach in the name of freedom and enjoyment, warnings that have been largely disregarded, until anything that smacks, even remotely, of 'study' is frowned upon by some; yet children can only truly progress by reaching forward to more difficult things. In this particular case, a few minutes spent studying Siegfried Sassoon's poem with children already 'railway minded' would seem to me justified and valuable. Though in the following quotation David Holbrook is



dealing mainly with the needs of students and older children, what he says holds good for any 'English' teaching situation anywhere:

The needs of adult teacher and child pupil may be stated quite simply: they meet in *the word*. The essential process of teaching English is that of concern with the whole meaning.

and again:

Unless they respond to the words they are not being taught English, for English is not in anything else.

from *The Exploring Word* by David Holbrook (3)

But there is more. The following poem by Siegfried Sassoon is a poem of *description* rather than symbolisation:

Along the wind-swept platform, pinched and white,  
The travellers stand in pools of wintry light,  
Offering themselves to morn's long, slanting arrows.  
The train's due, porters trundle laden barrows.  
The train steams in, volleying resplendent clouds  
Of sun-blown vapour. Hither and about,  
Scared people hurry, storming the doors in crowds.  
. . . a man with a hammer steals  
Stooping from coach to coach; with clang and clack,  
Touches and tests, and listens to the wheels.  
Guard sounds a warning whistle, points to the clock  
With brandished flag, and on his folded flock  
Claps the last door: the monster grunts: 'Enough!'  
Tightening his load of pant and puff.

Harold Monro is seeking expression of something more than the visual and incorporates other senses as well as some inner feeling when he writes:

. . . The station-master waves. The train  
Gathers, and grips, and takes the rails again,  
Moves to the shining open land, and soon  
Begins to tittle-tattle a tame tattooon.  
.....  
The long train moves: we move in it along.  
Like an old ballad, or an endless song,  
It drones and wimbles its unwearied croon -  
Croons, drones, and mumbles all the afternoon.

For most junior children these poems would give little real difficulty, and a great deal of helpful example. For older juniors (or more particularly, middle school pupils) I would

not hesitate to go one step further still and offer for open discussion and private assimilation (even without absolute *understanding*) the poem by Frances Cornford, written during the first world war:

How long ago Hector took off his plume  
Not wanting that his little son should cry,  
Then kissed his sad Andromache goodbye –  
And now we three in Euston waiting- room.

‘Parting in War Time’, from *Travelling Home* by Frances Cornford

The question about such a piece of verbal symbolisation is not ‘What does it say?’ but ‘What more could possibly be said?’

All reinforcement such as that suggested need only take two or three days, by which time the children will probably be ready to commit to paper some personalised thoughts on their experience.

#### c) Choosing the form

The general language experience to which they have (hopefully) been exposed will have made them aware of the different forms their creative writing can now take. These can be:

- i* story, i.e. narrative, with or without accompanying pictures
- ii* description, in prose or free verse
- iii* poem, with emphasis on the use of language to complement the meaning
- iv* ballad or song, with chorus
- v* dramatised scene for acting (i.e. ‘a play’).

How will they be able to choose? What help can be given to them? Will they be requested to write a piece if they do not offer?

This is where *having the skill ready to hand* seems to me to be so very important. After such a build-up (which takes no account of follow-up work in any medium other than words) the children are probably eager to write, and indeed may have been doing so without waiting so long, if time has been allowed for free activity. (Assimilation being an individual thing, no hard and fast rules can be made about it.)

The writing now should be *free*, from instruction though not from suggestion, from control though not from help, from interference though not from interest. The instruction and help, in choice of form, in organisation, in arrangement on the page, in attention to grammar, punctuation and spelling, can be apart from and around, before and after, the bursts of creative writing, whether isolated or as part of a theme.

#### d) Creative writing as a skill

Since the teacher is there to teach, as well as to see that the children learn, there is surely nothing against setting up a lesson now and again in which a class or a group come face to face with the problems inherent in beginning a piece of writing, recognise them for what they are, and learn a few tricks of the trade. The pattern of such a lesson falls roughly into the following parts:

- I stimulus (initial experience) or introduction to subject by the teacher
- II choice of form(s) most suitable for it, and discussion about them
- III words and phrases
- IV first draft of writing, handed in in rough.

## I STIMULUS, SUBJECT AND TITLE

So much has been written on the sort of stimuli that one can give that it would be foolish to take space to repeat it. (A short list of good books appears at the end of this guide.) There is also the wealth of suggested material supplied by modern 'text' books, and by television and radio programmes, where specific suggestions for writing topics are often given. For a teacher choosing his own, there is one piece of advice. As with a 'subject' in painting, the child is often defeated if it is in the nature of a 'panorama' rather than a limited 'scene'. To suggest 'a piece of writing about dogs' asks for trouble because the creative effort goes mainly into the selection of material. Narrowed down to 'My Dog' it becomes description or self-expression of the emotional, involved kind that may (in either case) produce good results; but there are other ways of limiting the subject without cramping the imagination; as Herbert Read says in his book *Education through Art* (7):

That common factor of all aspects of art, the quality that makes it possible for us to create from the chaotic world of our experience another world of our own, a world which is a reflection of our feelings and emotions, of that complex of instincts and thoughts which we call the personality.

It can be done very often by the medium of a well-chosen title, e.g. 'Dog in the Park', or by a suggestion of a first line:

Nose on his paws, he pretends to be sleeping.

'My Dog' could invite either poetry or prose; so could 'Dog in the Park'; but this could also suggest a story, with a sequence of events. The 'first line tide' could lead straight into prose or poetry, description or narrative, and be objective or subjective in its approach; but the field of observation, so to speak, is narrowed, and the chance of details of experience being crystallised into good words, phrases and images is greater. Safe inside some observable limits, the imagination flows more easily into free creativity.

## II FORM

If the teacher has made up his mind what constitutes poetry he may explicitly request a 'poem'; equally he may ask for a straight-forward 'prose description' or 'a story'; even 'an essay' (in the true sense of the word, i.e. thoughts on and around the subject, in prose, without a sequence of events as in a story). He may even suggest a ballad (with or

without a chorus), a song (which suggests some clear-cut rhythm) or a play. By ringing the changes on them he can help the children to discriminate clearly among them, and gradually to feel and understand the appropriateness or otherwise of any particular form to any particular experience they desire of their own accord to symbolise. There is a difference between an essay and a story. 'Our Street at Night' could be a good title of an essay asking for personal thoughts and emotions to be expressed. 'Incident in a Dark Street' invites a story, with characters, plot, shape, beginning and end, though it may be just as personal. To call both 'stories' indiscriminately, because written by a child, stores up confusion for him later. If a child tackles 'a story' the result should be worth listening to as a story, however short.

Thoughts and feelings can be in either poetry or prose; but the children should know one from the other. Poetry is organised into *units of sound*, the line break is not an haphazard chance. Even in the freest of free verse or the blindest of blank verse the organisation of the line units is (should be) part of the 'pattern' of the poem as a whole; in exactly the same way that in prose, sentences and paragraphs help to construct the meaning. Once this is thoroughly understood, children are very clever at it, because instinctively they use the speech unit as their 'line' of poetry, so organising the poem in lines that make sense. As the line of poetry is often much nearer to the speech unit than a carefully constructed prose sentence is, they find it easier and more compatible with their thoughts to write in this way, and providing the words are carefully chosen and the phrases 'sing' of their own accord, such pieces can claim to be poetry, especially where the meaning is helped out by the sound. Children like rhyme and rhythm in a poem, and *will* attempt it, however much the teacher may deplore it. This seems to me to be a case of 'If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.' Join them by *insisting* that if it rhymes and scans it must still make sense, and have all the other attributes of good poetry as well. There can even be 'exercises' in writing poems that have a certain form: couplets, limericks, clerihews, haiku and triolets. It can be explained simply that as 'couple' means 'two', a couplet is a poem in two lines, but that there are rules to be observed:

- i* the lines must have an equal number of beats or pulses
- ii* the words at the line-ends must rhyme with each other.

When the wind is in the east  
'Tis neither good for man nor beast.

Observant children will soon discover that whole poems are often made up of rhymed couplets. Older children may also appreciate the clever wit of the epigram, so very often couched in couplet form, as for instance in the famous quip by Coleridge:

Swans sing before they die - 'twere no bad thing  
Should certain persons die before they sing.

An *epigram* need not be contained in two lines, but the essence of it being that a witty thought should be stated as concisely, economically and memorably as possible, the couplet lends itself to this use.

A *clerihew*, on the other hand, contains a witty thought with the same economy of words as an epigram, but with the peculiarity that the lines, though they rhyme, are *not* of equal length, e.g.

Jonathan Swift  
Never went up in a lift  
Nor did the author of Robinson Crusoe  
Do so.

All these typically English forms are basically no more difficult to achieve than the Japanese *haiku*, for which there has recently been something of a fashion; at least, they are no more difficult to achieve than a proper haiku, which has a strictly defined form. Like the epigram or clerihew, it encapsulates a thought with the minimum of words, though the thought is likely to be of a philosophical nature rather than witty or humorous. It consists of three lines only, arranged according to a pattern of syllables; five in the first line, seven in the second and five again in the third, making seventeen altogether. Here is an example by a Sussex teacher, after playing with mirrors in a thematic course on 'Light':

Are mirrors God, then? (5)  
Face to face, Infinity (7)  
For Eternity. (5)

To compose a haiku is quite a difficult task for a child, but unless it *is* a haiku there seems to be no reason for using the term at all; better to ask simply for a 'three-line poem'. On the other hand, the awareness of words, sounds and form in general that children absorb from the attempt is valuable, and one is always surprised at what children can achieve; moreover, once a child has made a good beginning, there seems to be no valid reason why the teacher cannot help by suggesting rearrangement, substituting synonyms, and so on, until the rough work is polished into success.

As pointed out above, these suggestions are made to deal with a situation in which children insist on rhyme and metre, though there is no reason at all why they should not be tried with any top-junior or middle school children who have already had considerable experience and some success in writing poetry in other forms.

The *limerick* is a well known and popular form of organising lines of verse, probably because it is almost always of a humorous nature. It consists of five lines with a set pattern of rhythm and rhyme. The first, second and fifth lines have eight beats while the third and fourth only have six, and the rhyme scheme is *aabba*:

There was an old man of the Cape  
Who always wore trousers of crepe.  
When they said 'Do they tear?'  
He replied 'Here and there;

But they keep such a beautiful shape.'

For the devotee of limericks, the challenge is to be witty with spellings, getting rhymes at the expense of a joke against our language as it is usually pronounced:

There was a young boy in a choir  
Whose voice mounted higher and higher.  
It rose to such height  
That it went out of sight  
And they found it next day in the spire.

or, taken to the extreme:

A young fellow whose name was Colquhoun (Ca-hoon)  
Once kept as a pet a babuhoun.  
His mother said 'Cholmondeley (Chumley)  
Do you think it is colmondeley  
To feed your babuhoun with a spuhoun?'

Once the children have caught the rhythm and understood the rhyme scheme, they enjoy trying to concoct limericks on their own and use each other's names, just for the fun of it; but as an exercise in the clever arrangement of words it should not be despised simply because the results are amusing or because of the many bawdy and unrepeatable ones the teacher may happen to have heard in his student days.

A *triolet* is a poem of eight lines (each of eight beats) using only two rhymes throughout, and in which the first line is repeated as the fourth and seventh lines, and the second line as the eighth, as in this poem by Thomas Hardy:

#### Birds at Winter Nightfall

Around the house the flakes fly faster,  
And all the berries now are gone  
From holly and cotoneaster  
Around the house. The flakes fly! - faster  
Shutting indoors that crumb-outcaster  
We used to see upon the lawn  
Around the house. The flakes fly faster  
And all the berries now are gone!

A *rondel* or *rondeau* is much the same except that it has ten lines and the first line is repeated only at the end, i.e. the poem 'comes round again' to where it began. It is sometimes lengthened to thirteen lines by repeating the first line as a refrain.

The triolet and rondel are too difficult for any but the very brightest and most poetry-minded, even in the middle school age range; but it is well to remember that true poets

tend to develop very young, and that many an ode and sonnet have been composed by young people of fourteen or so. As one instinctively tempers one's demands on the slower children, one should be constantly aware of the need to stretch the most gifted.

The form and the title can be of the children's own choosing when they are writing from their own choice and 'out of themselves' entirely; but when a lesson is in control of a teacher, whether one child or a whole class is involved, the 'catalyst of the teacher's imagination' can be used to activate the process of symbolisation.

### III MAKING THE PHRASES SING - PLAYING WITH WORDS

Coleridge's definition of poetry as 'the best words in the best order' is still as good a rubric as any for children writing creatively in either prose or poetry. One of the teacher's tasks is to help children discriminate among words, to destroy any false belief that long and unusual words are necessarily better than short and simple ones as a matter of course, and to train them to listen to the difference in sound the *order of the words* makes, as well as the appropriateness of the sound of the word itself. Examples to demonstrate are obviously worth hours of explanatory talk, e.g. from Walter de la Mare:

'Chariots of gold' says Timothy  
'Silvery wings' says Elaine;  
'A bumpity ride on a wagon of hay  
For me' says Jane.  
'Bunches of Grapes' by Walter de la Mare

What this poet has done is to use great economy in the number of words, but to make the meaning unmistakable by the sound. 'Silvery wings' slips off the tongue and into the air with the movement as well as the sound of the sort of wings a romantically minded girl might conceive herself wearing. Consider the effect on this line if the poet had been content with 'silver wings' instead of 'silvery wings'. The emphasis is shifted from the 's' sounds to the 'v', which is hard and incisive, and the way the adjective slides into the noun and becomes *one thought* is lost, because the second syllable of 'sil-ver' demands a slight stress that gives a different rhythm to the words and emphasis to the adjective at the expense of the noun. He could have used 'wings of silver' said Elaine' and still retained the same number of syllables: but then the extra stress thrown upon the 'ver' would destroy the 'soaring' sound altogether. In the third line the short vowels and hard consonants create the 'bumps' he is talking about; b's and t's and d's and g all making verbal 'bumps'. Should we all remember this poem as we do if de la Mare had written:

'O, a sweet-smelling ride on a trailer of hay  
For me' said Jane.

I wonder.

These attributes do not belong solely to poetry; creative prose can be examined in the same way (occasionally), though this is much more difficult for children as young as

juniors. Nevertheless, there is no reason why they should not be asked to listen to their own prose, and to judge for themselves where short sentences would get the effect better than long (or vice versa), where an extra adjective would heighten interest, or a pause create suspense.

Some teachers feel that in a class or group situation set up specifically to 'teach' creative writing they should take the opportunity of 'playing' with words and phrases before setting the children to write. I am dubious about this; it is very little way removed from the 'vocabulary' lists of the old composition days, and has the same inherent dangers, in so far as it makes it too easy for everybody to record a composite experience in the same sort of language. It may encourage the less able children to write something, or even write more; but I would prefer two lines of truly personal work than a page of pseudo-creative stuff gleaned from everybody, because the chances are that with a little help and encouragement the two-line offering can be extended into an individual achievement of great value.

#### IV THE FIRST DRAFT

This is one reason for allowing a 'first draft'. Opinions among teachers vary widely about this, but I have never had any doubts in my own mind. For one thing, I dislike the so-called 'exercise book' intensely, even in these days of unlined pages and varying shape and size. To be confronted constantly with yesterday's work seems to me to be as destructive of creative impulse as the remains of yesterday's pudding would be of a delicate appetite; however good the pudding had been when fresh. With the best will in the world, after the first three or four pages, exercise books are made up of unfinished 'stories', teacher's red pencil and an assortment of remarks, smudges and fingermarks, mis-spellings and 'corrections'; to say nothing of the evidence of days when the child was work-shy or out-of-his-stride for some reason often completely unconnected with school. Most authors and poets admit to many more than one rough draft before submitting their work to critical attention; surely a struggling child should be allowed one?

The rough draft serves other purposes, too. Once the teacher has read it, the real teaching can begin. Ideally of course every piece should be gone through individually with its author, teacher and child discussing it constructively, testing words and phrases, offering substitutes, rearranging words in sentences for better effect, and so on. (This is a counsel of perfection offered wistfully in passing - everyone knows how impossible it is in practice in these days when time is truly the arch enemy in the classroom.)

Nevertheless, if a couple of pieces are chosen from the whole group, attention being drawn in passing to the work of others which have similar need of correction, the children can then revise their own in a similar fashion. (And if the perusal of all reveals a common mistake or two, then is the time for a ten-minute 'exercise'!)

When the children have completed the revision, a decision has to be made. Will the teacher ask that it be 'copied fair'? The answer must surely be related to the



circumstances. Obviously, not always, and not to ensure 'corrections'. To enhance achievement, and therefore motivation in future, however, presentation *does* become an important part of the exercise. If the piece is worth the effort at all, there are ways of making it less of a chore than simply 'correcting' it on the next page of the exercise book.

- i* It can be used for handwriting practice, instead of a card.
- ii* Friends can write out each other's, avoiding boredom and aiding intelligent concentration.
- iii* It can be typed out. (What a blessing an old typewriter would be in every classroom!)
- iv* The decoration can be added, in the form of marginal patterns, a colophon to fill the space at the bottom, a tiny line drawing here and there.

The finished pieces can be mounted for wall display, a class or personal book, or merely kept in a folder. The collection is an asset to the teacher, who has to assess progress individually and collectively, and to the children it is an indication that what they do is taken notice of and evaluated. We underestimate the intelligence of most youngsters if we think they are not aware when what they write goes unread, let alone unremarked upon.

The lesson' *following* the first draft has advantages as far as assessment goes.

- i* The children understand that their work is going to be examined critically and assessed, and accept it. The work is not spoiled in the process.
- ii* Whether or not any 'mark' or 'reward' is given, enough can be said to every child to assure him that his progress is of concern to somebody.
- iii* Those who have a good flow of ideas and language but a poor command of grammar can be invited to read their own work aloud. In this way they do get credit for the content of it, and the need for such things as punctuation is made startlingly clear if someone tries to read it and gets the sense wrong. When it is a case of illegible handwriting, the same thing applies - and to be allowed to type a fair copy may be all the spur needed for improvement.

If the work on the first draft is done in pencil, an eraser is a legitimate asset.

Needless to say, all criticism should be kind and constructive, and praise given freely for any spark of success. What constitutes 'success' is difficult to define. In the final chapter, a few pieces of work by children are examined in the hope of finding some sort of criteria by which the teacher can assess general progress, as distinct from any kind of standard yardstick attempting to 'measure' either English or creativity. One might as well attempt to measure the amount of colour in a beautiful soap bubble, and with the same outcome; there would be no useful result, and the bubble would burst forever.

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## The proof of the pudding

Though creativity is difficult to measure, there must be growth, or it can hardly be called an educational process. There are two difficulties; how is progress to be defined, and how assessed?

In order for them to achieve growth, the work of the children must be checked constantly and corrected, i.e. comments must be made *about it*, though not necessarily on it. They must be made in such a way that a child:

- i* understands the criticism
- ii* appreciates the need for alteration in his work
- iii* is motivated and not defeated by it.

As creative English work is always concerned with content of some kind, and because teachers' tastes vary 'one from another like the stars in glory', assessment is likely to be subjective to some degree. The teacher has to be aware of this tendency, and try to judge as objectively as possible:

- i* Has the child communicated the experience he is dealing with?
- ii* Is the form he has chosen suitable for the experience?
- iii* Is the style in keeping with the experience?
- iv* Have the rules of English been brought into use well/fairly well/hardly at all/not at all? *v* Has the work individuality and originality in thought, phrasing, imagery ?
- vi* Is it in general better or worse than other, fairly recent pieces of work?

These may add up in the mind of the teacher to a 'grade' or 'mark' characterised by a letter or a number. If so, he may wish to record it that way *for his own information*. As far as I can see, no purpose is truly served by passing this sort of 'grade' on to child or parent. What can it possibly mean to them except in competition with other children? For a child who comes from a background rich in language experience through constant reading and talking to be continually awarded A marks it may lead to smug satisfaction on his own part and despairing resignation for those children who are constantly awarded C marks. If the 'bright' child gets A, what is there for him to strive for next time? He can't get any better mark. Conversely, why should the non-verbal child from a culturally deprived background who gets D week after week make any effort at all ? He can't get any worse mark, can he? (As for what parents make of them, all one can comment is that the age when cryptic symbols were accepted as incomprehensible but potent magic is not yet past. While teachers go on using them, most parents will go on believing that there is a uniform standard to which their children do or do not measure up.)

Somehow or other the children must be motivated to go on trying, and achievement is a great element in motivation. If there is no visible 'mark' system there is all the greater

need for teacher comment, and for some sort of use to be made of worthy efforts, even though they consist only of two good sentences by the child who wrote only one sentence last week.

There are no hard and fast rules for judging creative work of any kind in any media. My purpose in the rest of this chapter is to examine the processes by which I personally would assess a few pieces of poetry and prose by children, in the hope that it may help others to find out what their own criteria are.

## Poetry

1 By a six-year-old boy

### Our Jane

Our Jane is two,  
She plays with a boy and  
she has white hair and  
she has blue eyes and  
she has a runny nose and  
she can't talk and  
she eats biscuits and  
she's fat and  
she pinched my biscuits  
and she's got a bike like an old crock and  
she plays with my train and  
she's a monkey when telly's on.  
She plays about.  
She plays up and down.  
They let her.

### Comments

Here is a very young child writing about an experience he 'knows' very well indeed. His first instinct is to list the physical attributes of his little sister, i.e. those his visual perception has made him aware of. The line units are the units of his thoughts, and arranged like that they take on a rhythm which is enhanced by the repeated 'and'. (If this were prose, that 'and' would be a mistake and corrected; as the boy has arranged his 'poem', it is acceptable and even good.)

After line eight, his thoughts diverge from the purely visual to the way his sister's existence affects him, i.e. he is now abstracting from the whole scrambled experience those bits he is in need of stressing. First there is the direct effect on him - she takes his biscuits and plays with his train. After this comes the real burst of feeling - she's a monkey when telly's on. In what he does say from that point on, one can read a wealth that remains unspoken: she spoils his viewing: he is not allowed to spoil 'theirs' - but 'they let her' spoil everybody's. The resentment at this unequal dealing is somehow

conveyed quite clearly by the last terse line, along with an unspoken question as to why it should be - partly answered, in fact, by the equally bald statement of the first line, which explains a lot, even to him.

Complex yet controlled: simple in language yet full of over- tones and undertones of meaning: natural, in speech units, and yet powerfully rhythmic. Altogether, a creative piece of work indicating a lot of potential.

2 By a seven-year-old boy

### Our Cat

Our cat does purr and sing all day  
Gets up and walks away  
Its little blue eyes look so gay.  
As it sleeps in a little ball  
    Its tiny ears do hide  
Under its pink-paddy paws.  
    It jerks as it dreams  
    Of mice and cream  
And makes little, soft, whimpering sounds.

### Comments

Close observation coupled with feeling and understanding. The strength here lies in the language control. There is the economy (only nine lines), internal rhythm within each line unit (the sort good prose might have), line breaks indicating the thought unit; but the memorable piece of this poem is the last line: And makes little, soft, whimpering sounds. which creates the verbal image of that cat as clearly as a seventeenth-century miniature painter could have done it in paint. A child with an ear for language, for the sound and cadence that add so much to meaning.

3 By a seven-year-old girl

This poem was written after examining a rose through a magnifying glass.

### The Red Rose

When you smell the roses  
They smell so lovely  
They are so pretty.  
The rose looks like a fairy dancing in the moonlight.  
Skip, hop and jump they go  
Sometimes they are red  
Sometimes they are pink.  
Their little cushion is tucked in the petals.

The petals feel so soft  
Like velvet hearts dancing round each other  
They curl up together.  
At night they go to bed in their warm green homes.  
The little yellow thing in the middle looks like a star in the setting sun.

### Comments

This is a very interesting piece; it was written voluntarily immediately after the experience, and the consequence is shown clearly in the structure of the 'poem'. There is an uncomfortable mixture of:

*i* writing anything to get a start

*ii* observation

*iii* personalised symbolism trying to break through although the process of assimilation was not yet complete

*iv* fantasy

Lines 1-3: weak and very ordinary. The experience had not really crystallised into thought or feeling strong enough to give a real lead, so she simply 'waffled' a few banalities.

Lines 4-8: probably realising the banality, she reached after an image; but again, the experience had not yet been assimilated well enough for it to supply a good one. The image that did come was taken at random from her language bank, and was not particularly apt. Challenged, she could not justify the rose 'dancing' or the moonlight. This was fantasy and decoration, rushing in where experience left a vacuum.

Lines 9-10: observation beginning to clarify - direct statement from observation in line 9, but in line 10 the first real bit of creativity; this image is appropriate and good.

Lines 11-12: experience and language coalescing; there is sensory awareness, wrapped in language chosen carefully to link with other, divergent experiences the rose is calling up. One could object to 'dancing' on a superficial reading, but reflection and imagination supply the clue; the whole image in lines 10 and 11 is really taken from a movement session the child has taken part in.

Line 12: extraneous waffle again.

Line 13: another excellent creative image taken from direct observation. The yellow stamens at the heart of an open flame-coloured rose could hardly be better described than 'a star in the setting sun'.

### Note

While one would hesitate to 'advise', 'help' or 'correct' in the case of *Our Jane* or *Our Cat*, being both conceived so completely whole, the third child could be greatly helped by a chance to revise her work after discussion. In this case I would suggest leaving lines 1-3 with a few minor changes: removing lines 4-5 altogether: leaving 6 and 7 as part of the general introduction.

I would suggest a second stanza from line 8, with emphasis on the sound. Line 8 as it stands is a prose line in spite of its excellent metaphor, ending too abruptly with the full stop. Perhaps it would sound better if we were to say

A little cushion is tucked among the petals  
That felt so soft;  
Like velvet hearts dancing round each other  
They curl up together

Line 12 can come out altogether - it is irrelevant.

The last long line with its beautiful, apt image loses power because of its uncomfortable prose rhythm. Experimenting with the sound of it could produce:

In the middle, a little yellow thing looks  
Like a star in the setting sun

thereby throwing the full stress on the image, and leaving the power of that with the reader.

Revised then, the poem becomes:

When you smell the roses  
That smell so lovely,  
They are so pretty;  
Sometimes they are red  
And sometimes pink.  
A little cushion is tucked among the petals  
That feel so soft.  
Like velvet hearts dancing round each other  
They curl up together, and  
In the middle, a little yellow thing looks  
Like a star in the setting sun.

What achievement already, in this case - and *what potential!* But she will go farther and with greater confidence if she is helped to understand what she is trying to do.

4 By an eight-year-old girl

#### In the Rain

The leaves are wet and silky  
And the rain drops are all lumpy.  
The little rain drops hang like monkeys  
On the blades of grass.

They look like glass  
So sweet and delicate.  
All of a sudden the grass seems  
    to hang its head down  
And the drops slide off  
Like children on a chute.

#### Comments

I include this one immediately after 'The Red Rose', because this child has followed much the same path in writing without making so many 'mistakes', i.e. her images are clear and concise, and she stays close to the experience. The arrangement is good, and the rhythm pleasing. The extra length of line 7 seems to me justified - the line 'hangs heavy' like the grass blades. The one word I would want to question and change if possible is lumpy' in line 2; but she knew what she meant (globular, solid, dense) and there seemed no other word suitable to replace it.

5      By an eleven-year-old boy

#### The Old Barn

The old barn stands on a hill  
Haunted with mice and memories.  
Cobwebs hang from the rotten shafts;  
The walls are going to ruin  
And woodworm steals the roof.  
The bats take refuge during day  
In this barn which has held so many a story.  
Rats walk stealthily through the ruin  
As the owls peer down from the rafters  
The owl has seen good and bad things.  
His mind is a reflection of all that's past.  
But soon there will be no more to store  
For the barn is falling to death.

#### Comments

This is a development from the sort of poems 1-4, containing all the elements found there handled confidently both with regard to content and language skill. There had been no specific initial experience or stimulus. The title alone was enough to call up relevant past experience from the accumulated, assimilated mass. Observations are interwoven with personal thoughts and feelings, and both expressed together in metaphor. There is careful organisation, and the rhythm is consistent. The poem as a whole has a *shape* related to the meaning. The middle stanza maintains a sort of plateau-level of sound, but the cadence of the last line brings the barn crashing down.

None of the children above have attempted rhyme or scansion, let alone both; but children are often allowed to fall into the belief that 'poetry' means rhyme and jog-trot rhythm, even at the expense of all sense, and without any genuine feeling for words and phrasing. This is a delicate point to deal with, because there is no denying that most of the great poetry in the English tongue has both rhyme and scansion, and to discourage children from trying seems wrong. The answer probably lies in the build-up of discrimination from the earliest years, along with careful, kind but constructive criticism of lines that don't 'come off' because of attempts to rhyme and keep the metre, e.g. a poem about a squirrel contained the lines:

It has so many great big sorrows  
Beauty today and savage tomorrow.

One feels here that the thoughts the boy (aged 9) is struggling to express are very well worth conveying, and had he been writing free verse he would probably have had success in communicating them; but confined by the rhyme and rhythm scheme he had set himself he has one line of complete ineffectual banality and one that makes no syntactical sense. (Revision with a teacher might have helped.)

On the other hand, when a child such as the boy who wrote 'The Old Barn' wants to go into rhymed verse with a regular pulse, and accepts the added difficulties, he should certainly be allowed to try. There is much evidence to demonstrate how skilful children can be at producing this sophisticated kind of poetry, when trained from an early age to think, feel and express themselves in appropriate language.

6      By David Beresford aged 12

My last example illustrates the way in which 'free writing' 'self-expression' and 'poetry' all join to become 'creative writing':

They're closing down the line  
  
They're closing down the old branch line;  
Never again shall I see the countryside  
Rolling by as the train speeds on its way;  
Never again shall I get up to all the pranks  
That boys get up to in trains;  
Never again shall I smell the smell  
Of stale tobacco, sweat and smoke;  
Never again shall I watch the engine  
Leave with all its carriages rumbling behind.  
Never again shall I talk to Mr Turner,  
The porter at the little station;  
Never again shall I put my head out of the window  
To feel the cool refreshing air rush past;  
Never again shall I see the flowers,



The farmworkers, the birds and the little village –  
Never again, never again, never again, never again. . .

### Comment

This boy had something to say, in the way he wished to say it; it affected him personally, emotionally, and this he has expressed, keeping the emotion under control by exercising control over the words and making them behave as he wants them to behave. Not only does each line and phrase tell its own tale, but the poem as a whole conjures up nostalgia for the total experience of the branch line train, as, for instance, in the way in which the slow firm statement of the first line quickens into the shorter lines of the central part of the poem (as the train gathers speed). Then, like Harold Munro's train, it settles down to 'the tittle-tattle of a tame tatton' with the last refrain of 'never again'. Indeed, in the company of all the train poems (quoted above) by recognised poets of repute, it holds its own, at child level. It demonstrates also the essentially English quality of wit; a characteristic of our literature from the Anglo-Saxon riddle to the latest Merseyside poets.

### Prose

Lest I should be accused of considering creative writing to consist only of poetry, let us now consider three pieces of junior prose.

1 By an eleven-year-old girl

#### A Wet Day

One moment it was fine and sunny and the next the rain poured down. It was the wet kind of rain, the type that sou'westers and gumboots wouldn't keep out. It seemed as if the heavens had opened. It squelched at every step and my clothes stuck to me like flies to a flypaper. After some time I came to a bus shelter. I ran for it, but inside was my old enemy Joe Harper. I stood transfixed for a second or two and then bolted out again, into the rain. As I sauntered along I came across an old friend of mine James Story. 'Nice to see you', I said (inwardly I thought differently for James was boredom in human form). We walked along for a while, James nattering on as usual. The rain frequently drowned his voice. Presently when he realised I wasn't listening the talk began to wane rapidly and then silence at long last. A dead rat floated along the gutter frequently being pushed underwater by hail-stones.

Hailstones!?! It was not until then that I had noticed it was hailing. Suddenly I broke into a run. My hair stuck up in points leaving the astonished James wondering what was the matter with me. In another shelter I sank down in a heap. A bus came along, I caught it and away we drove.

## Comments

I chose this piece deliberately as one very difficult to assess. Before examining it in fine detail, there are one or two obvious reactions to it. It contains bits of good writing, and shows a lot of interest, effort and potential talent. As it stands, it is pretty dreadful stuff language-wise. A teacher who only responds to the former may be seduced into declaring it good and giving it a high assessment rating. A language and literature lover responding only to the latter would probably flinch and put it aside quickly, rating it very low. Detailed, critical examination would reveal the strengths as well as the weaknesses, and probably result in an average rating with a rider that this child was good stuff, to be worked on with all the teacher's skill and patience. It would take too long to go through it sentence by sentence, but here are a few salient observations:

*i* This girl has an ear and an eye for language - witness the cliché of the heavens opening and 'sank down in a heap' (ear) plus the 'boredom in human form' and the 'Hailstones!?!' (eye, I think, from the worst kind of comic and juvenile fiction).

*The conclusion seems to be that both ears and eyes have been bombarded with inferior material in the past. She has no other standards, no other material on which to draw.*

*ii* She recognises an image for what it is, and uses one naturally - a reasonably good one, too. What a pity she didn't offer others instead of relying on cheap extravagance and hyperbole.

*A compliment on the one she did use would encourage her to think in those terms in future; she could get better effects with good imagery than by showers of exclamation marks.*

*iii* She has a wide vocabulary, which she uses correctly as far as basic meaning goes: 'transfixed', 'sauntered', 'frequently', 'wane', 'astonished'. The way she uses them however smacks so much of the pulp magazine sort of trash that the total effect is terrible.

Vocabulary is only a small part of language. I think there has been some over-emphasis on it in her past educational life. *This child lacks discrimination) and therefore needs help and advice.*

*iv* There is no hint of any real, personal involvement in this. It is utterly artificial, the sort of 'press-button' writing of the '11-plus exam' era. Neither is there any organisation. Thoughts and memories flooding in at random are simply stuck together with the cement of words.

The same amount of skill, brought to bear on a specific experience and properly organised, could have produced a worth while piece of writing - even on a wet day theme. She had obviously had general experience of wet days - but her thoughts were not directed towards anything she was personally concerned with or about.

*v* This child seems to me to have been the victim of training that has done more harm than good. She is too much aware of 'vocabulary' and 'interesting sentences' (witness that utterly extraneous and pointless dead rat!)

My own feeling would be that any praise given must be guarded and coupled with constructive criticism. She certainly should not be allowed to think that what she offered was 'creative writing', satisfying or even acceptable to her teacher.

*vi* There is still much hope, i.e. the chance to help her is still wide open. Proof of that lies in the evidence that her eyes and ears are so receptive to language and literature. Between the lines of her trite 'composition' one can sense the avid reader - moreover, one who has quite recently made the acquaintance of Huckleberry Finn (Joe Harper, the dead rat, and a certain unexpected colloquialism here and there show that she responded to it.) She is receptive, and can be worked on; but before much can be done with her writing, much has to be done with her reading. The lesson of such a critical look at a piece of work is for the teacher, rather than the child herself, to learn. It is diagnostic rather than remedial. Assessment here is necessary and valuable to both teacher and child. Danger could lie only in hasty assessment and the application of wrong values.

## 2 By a ten-year-old boy

This piece of work was part of follow-up to an educational broadcast (*Picture Box*: Granada Television) showing a school-made film of Noah's Ark.

### Log of the Ark

*Monday*: It is a nice day today. It is raining and the animals, birds and insects are content. I woke my sons and we fed the animals. My wife did not take to the up and down motion of the ark because it made her sea-sick. There is a light mist over the water, but it is lifting. We prayed to God to make the waters subside.

*Tuesday*: We spent a restless night because the elephants and rhinosaruses were frightened by the lions roaring. The mist has lifted and we can see the clouds.

*Wednesday*: Things look bad and the water is still rising. My sons are trying to capture the ants which escaped this morning. Rebecca had two mice in her room. I am worried about the vultures who have already eaten one of the rats.

*Thursday*: Shem was knocked over by the hippo and is in the sick room with minor cuts and bruises. He was lucky not to be crushed. We cannot steer the ark as the elephant has smashed the wheel.

*Friday*: Ham is sick in bed with the flu and I think it is spreading. Shem is up and about. We did not have enough food for the pigs, and one is dying.

*Saturday*: Today we all went on deck to pray for land so that we could land. The crocodiles are very thirsty and their scales are getting soft. Rebecca has flu now.

*Sunday*: Today the rain slowed down a little and we all had a bath for the first time since leaving land. We have sent out a dove and hope it will find land. We do not like pork but we killed the sick pig as it would be better off dead.

### Comments

*i* Work arises from initial experience, but after a space of time allowing assimilation process, and alongside many other modes of symbolisation.

*ii* Imagination fully at work, linking fantasy with reality; the imaginary doings aboard the ark are taken from the boy's knowledge of real situations: sea-sickness, sea-mist, zoo noises, the effect of mice on young women, unavoidable mishaps at sea, flu epidemics, shortage of water, etc. The fantasy, clothed in reality of this kind, is absolutely credible. *iii* Though entirely involved, the child is able to keep his distance from the fantasy he has created. He is absolutely in control, both of content and of suitable language.

*iv* There is an element of delicate wit here that never degenerates into silliness.

(This scores highly in my opinion.)

3 By an eleven-year-old girl

Unsolicited free story.

(Wendy is a black cat - the writer's alter ego.)

Wendy Finds her Sweetheart

One day Wendy went punting in the Cam on the banks of Cambridge. She could not punt very well and she was standing on the end of the boat when the punt pole got stuck at the bottom of the water in the mud. She was swung off the punt clinging to the pole.

'Help! Help!' cried Wendy as the pole began to fall in the water, hanging on with one paw and waving frantically. SPLASH! In she fell. 'Meow! Meow!' Wendy was spluttering water out of her eyes, mouth and ears.

A Professor came at hearing a watery shout. His name was Professor Mouser Tom cat. (Sounds very much professorial.) Well, our young gentleman took off his coat and trousers and dived in the water with intense dislike of the coldness of the water. But soon he reached the stranded Wendy. It was an embarrassing moment for the professor, for he now saw that it was a lady and he wanted to go back and put his trousers on. But the lady might think he was running away so he took Wendy by the leg and dropped her to the bank. The professor put on his clothes and offered to take Wendy home. Wendy shyly accepted, and was taken home.

The professor was a young man so Wendy asked her hero to come in for tea and soon they had fallen in love. Wendy looked at him but the professor turned his head away. At last the professor said 'Wendy! Wendy! I-I-I-will you - will ?'

Wendy answered by saying 'Yes! Yes! When shall it be?'

Comments

A potential author - a Helen Cresswell in the making.

*i* High degree of imagination and pure fantasy

- ii Details all from observed reality, including observation of adult human behaviour
- iii Control of all vocabulary and punctuation necessary for the effect she wants
- iv Penetrating wit, concealed in the language as well as the situation

All the children whose work has been used as examples were 'ordinary' pupils in 'ordinary' schools, some from rural villages, others from 'special priority area' schools in large towns. The common link is that they were all from primary schools (with the possible exception of the 'Branch Line' poet).

Can this work be continued into the secondary school, and beyond? Unless it can, a great many teachers in the primary and middle schools are wasting a lot of time and effort. There is available plenty of printed evidence supporting the struggle in developing and encouraging this kind of live personal writing. I have included in the bibliography a few books dealing with creative work in the secondary school. I like to think that teachers in those schools appreciate their good fortune when they take over pupils from primary schools where creative writing is well taught. Those who state that after the age of eleven (or so) children lose their ability to 'create' mislead only themselves.

The poem below is by a fifteen-year-old boy. Comment is superfluous. I only wish I could say I had written it!

### *Hiroshima*

Noon, and a hazy heat.  
A single silver shiver, and a dull drone,  
A glove finger poised - pressed.  
A moment's silence, and Oblivion.

Surely, as the age-old proverb says (in its own succinct, witty, creative way), 'the proof lies in eating the pudding, not in chewing the bag'. Creative writing in its truest sense is a written statement of the individual's 'conscious contact with environment', and that, in turn, has been given as a definition of Life.

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