

## Teaching Literature-Poetry

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**Abstract:** *It is not easy to present the life and character of "The wisest, brightest, meanest of mankind." So Alexander Pope, the eighteenth century satirist, sums up the character of the great Lord Bacon. This verdict, in the main, has been upheld by Lord Macaulay and Campbell. He stands contemptible as man, but venerable as the philosopher. He contemptible as man, venerable as the philosopher, radiant with all the wisdom of his age and of all preceding ages.*

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### 1. BACON'S PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

Bacon's philosophy of life can be constructed from his striking observations on various aspects of man's personal and social life. In his essays he takes up the role of a practical moralist and presents a philosophy of his own. Referring to his attitude to life, Hugh Walker says in his book. "The English Essays and Essayists" : "Bacon was a moralist and a politician and a large proportion including many of the most interesting of the essays deal either with the ethical qualities of men, or with matters pertaining to the government to states. His purely scientific interests make but little show. The conditions were not favorable and besides, science was the subject of these serious works with which the essays were merely recreations. "As a moralist Bacon makes no pretence to system. To do so would have been to write something different from an essay as he conceived it. It would, moreover, have implied a disposition alien from that of the father of empirical philosophy. In this respect the modern mind is widely different from the ancient. Socrates advised the abandonment 'of physical investigation on the ground that they were too complicated; but on the other band he undertook to in-quire into the essential principle of justice the belief in that the investigation, though difficult, was by no means hopeless. The modern feeling is precisely the contrary, and no one did more to make it so than Bacon. By the aid of his method he hoped that the secret of nature might ere long be solved completely. He has no such hope with regard to the principles of morals. It is clear that he was certain of the existence of principles of absolute validity. The Essays seem to be work of an opportunist. Bacon admires truth, moral as well as intellectual. "Clear and round dealing is the honour of man's nature." But then "falsehood is like alloy in gold and silver, which, though it debases the metal, makes it work the better." The impression here given is immensely strengthened by the essay of "Simulation and Dissimulation." Bacon approves of secrecy: 'nakedness Is uncomely, as well in mind as body.' But to preserve secrecy, dissimulation is often necessary, and in some cases even simulation. or the pretence to be what one is not. The last, indeed is 'more culpable and less politic, except it be in great and rare matters.' But by these steps we are led to the conclusion that the best composition and temperance is : to have openness in fame and opinion, secrecy in habit ; dissimulation in reasonable use : and power to feign, if there be no remedy. It is not an elevated or an elevating ideal. A careful and candid reading of the essays will show that Bacon's morality is higher than that of average humanity, and perhaps as high as is easily practicable in a workaday world. But the framers of such maxims could never have felt that awe of the moral law within which Kant coupled with the awe of the starry heavens above : nor is there in any Baconian maxim a suggestion of the spirit of the saying ; 'Let justice be done, though the heavens should fall,' The principle to be inferred is rather, 'let right be done, and let truth be told, if it be not too costly.' As a man must be judge in his own case of what is too costly, the standard is not extravagantly high.

"On the whole Bacon gives the impression of singular aloofness from moral consideration. His maxims are prudential. He appears to be looking down with absolute dispassionateness from a height, and determining what course of conduct pays best. He condemns conning, not as a thing loathsome

and vile, but as a thing unwise. Occasionally he even lays down the rules for immoral conduct without a word of overt disapproval. In the essay *Of Suitors* he recognizes indeed the existence of right and wrong. There is in some sort a right in every suit; either a right of equity, if it be a suit of controversy; or a right of desert, if it be a suit of petitions. But he goes on, 'if affection lead a man to favors the wrong sides in win let him rather use his countenance to compound the matter times to wry it. If affection lead a man to favour the less worthy in desert, let him do it without depriving or disabling the better deserver'. Was ever moralist so impartial between right and wrong? Let the wrongdoer be moderate. But he seems to be so advised. Less in the interest of the sufferer, than because in pushing matters to an extreme there is danger to the perpetrator of the wrong.

"This impression is confirmed by the tone and substance of a remarkable group of essays which deal neither with moral principles in the individual, nor with the interests of the state, but with domestic relations and with specialties between man and man. Few readers of Bacon can have been insensitive to the extraordinary coldness of the essays, *Of Parents and Children*, *Of Marriage and Single Life* and *Of Lore*. Perhaps the defects of the essay, *Of Friendship* are less obtrusive, but a little consideration shows that they are cognate. The view is fundamentally utilitarian. Here certainly is the philosophy of fruit. Bacon values friendship highly, but mainly for the fruits to be gathered from it--comfort to emotions, light to the understanding, aid in the affairs of life. 'A friend is another himself,' and something more. But it is always what a man receives from his friend never for a moment what he gives, that is insisted on. He never hints that a man be ennobled by a deed of pure unselfishness. Apparently the blessedness of giving had no place among Bacon's beatitudes.

So it is too with the essays on the domestic relations. "Wife and children are hostages to fortune, impediments to great enterprises, either of virtue or mischief," Bacon's recognition of the moral development due to those relations is most inadequate. It is true that he sees that 'wife and children are a kind of discipline of humanity', but he seems hardly conscious of any wider influence. And apparently he thinks the balance of advantage swings to the other side; for he says that 'unmarried men are the best friends, but masters and best servants' though he adds that they are not always the best subjects'. Evidently Bacon was both deficient in and disposed to underrate the emotional element. His own marriage was a marriage of convenience; and though his condemnation of the excesses of the passion of love is fully justified, the pronouncement that it is 'the child of folly', and the advice to sever it wholly from the serious affairs and actions of life, seems to indicate coldness of blood and heart. Con-temporaries, uncharitably and perhaps unjustly, suspected to be more susceptible of the meaner than of the more generous passions saw in the essay *Of Deformity*, a covert satire on his cousin, Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury.

"An examination of Bacon's attitude towards religion leads to similar results. His belief in religion, like his belief in moral principles, was largely prudential and was destitute of fervour. It had its roots in the understanding; the religion of saints and martyrs has its roots in the heart. Bacon's declaration in the essay *Of Atheism* that he 'had rather believe all the fables in the Legend, and Talmud, and the Alcoran, than that this universal frame is without a mind, is perfectly sincere. But if circumstances had tempted him to sign a declaration to the contrary, his conscience would never have forced him, as Grammer's did, to hold his right hand in the flames. The essay *Of Unity of Religion* is the work of a political opportunist. It views religion as 'the chief hand of human society', and Bacon's main preoccupation is to determine how it may be made most useful in that capacity. Most remarkable of all perhaps is the essay *Of Death*—remarkable not so much for what it says as for what it leaves unsaid, As Dr. Abbot points out, the hopes and fears of a second life are absent; for the bare remark that "the contemplation of death as the wages of sin and passage to another world, is holy and religious", can hardly be regarded as a recognition to them. Such a conventional acknowledgement, followed by nothing, is almost more striking than complete silence. It is a fair inference that such hopes and fears counted for little in Bacon's case. Though he could upon occasion compose grand prayers, religion seems to have played very little part in his life. The division he set up between faith and reason enabled him to relegate it to a world distant from that in which he lived.

"When he can, Bacon loves to escape from the private and personal to the political aspect of the question with which he deals. This he does not only in the discussion of unity in religion, but in the treatment of marriage. Evidently he felt himself more at home in the character of statesman than in that of moralist and among the weightiest of his essays are those which treat of political questions. Nowhere does his wisdom show to better advantage. The essay *Of Plantations* is a compendium of

principles whose soundness has been gradually established by the experience of generations and centuries. Had they been accepted from Bacon the worst mistakes of England in her relations with the Colonies might have been avoided. Modern humanitarianism seems to be anticipated in the remark, 'I like a plantation in a pure soil, that is, where people are not displaced to the end to plant in others. For else it is rather an extirpation than a plantation'. And the advice to use savages justly and graciously, to fight in their defense, but not to win their favour by helping them to invade their enemies; and frequently to send some of them to the colonising country, so that they may teach a higher civilization on their return,—all this rises to the highest point attained by English opinion after an experience of three centuries. It is immeasurably superior to that which was lately exemplified in what was sardonically called the Congo Free State. Of the essence of wisdom, as well as of humanity, is the denunciation of "the base and hasty drawing of profit in the first years", and the declaration that 'it is a shameful and trampled thing to take the scum of the people, and wicked condemned men, to be the people with whom you plant'. Bacon's country-mat learnt this only when the colonies showed that they would no longer endure the treatment which he had condemned. We have to keep such facts in mind in order to do justice to the marvellous pre-science and elevation of mind shown in this essay. In his capacity of political moralist Bacon seems to shake off the fetters which cramp him as he is dealing with individual morality; or rather, perhaps, it is the fact that he is always, at heart, a political moralist that lowers his tone in the other class of cases. The accepted standard of the ethics of public life is to this day, even outside Germany, lower than that of private life. In Bacon's time the difference was still wider—how wide may be gathered from the bitter irony of More's Utopia; for there had been no great improvement in the century intervening between More and Bacon."

Delight in poetry is natural to children. If they fail to take delight in it, it is almost certainly our fault; before they reach adolescence they are living in a stage of development which makes the poetic attitude to life the right one for them. Some of them may lose this attitude as they pass through adolescence into early adult life, but most of them could preserve enough of it to be the basis of a more balanced outlook on life and a healthier all-round development if the training in poetical perception were continued throughout the educational process and even after it. All those who are able to go through life with a keen and developed appreciation of poetry could be helped to keep this approach their feeling for it as sound—fresh and continually developing if they had formed the habit of reading it aloud and declaiming it whenever possible. This would help to keep the sophisticated taste in poetry more in line with the unsophisticated taste; that is, the connoisseur and the general reader would come together in expecting to enjoy it more keenly and expose themselves to it more profitably by hearing it read aloud or recited.

On the other hand we must recognize that many people who find poetry a bore today find it so because it was presented to them at school as a fancy substitute for something other than poetry; that is, as a story, as a logical argument, as an improving fable, as a lesson, as a picturesque description, that was rendered by the teacher into prose which came to seem to be its proper condition. If the prose summary is equated to the poem, the pupil is justified in saying to himself: "This is simple; this is dull; this is the poem. The poet would have done better to have written it this way: we should have seen at a glance that it wasn't worth bothering about and would have saved ourselves time and trouble." The experience of poetry as a special way of thinking, an attitude to reality, a means of approaching the essence of human behavior, is missed.

We may make three simple rules:

1. Too much explanation is a mistake.
2. Verbal peculiarities should be passed over.
3. Good art can be allowed to make its own impact.

As art speaks directly to the emotions and the subconscious mind as well as to the conscious mind, we can let the sounds of poetry do their own work. This will lead us to adopt the general procedure outlined in the chapter on the teaching of texts, in which we take care that language and background are made familiar, before the text is approached directly, in a discussion. Or they may simply be taught by the teacher leading up to the subject of the poem, establishing the most important imagery of the poem with the help of drawing on the blackboard or readymade pictures. The aim must be to put the pupil in possession of the essential imagery and language of the poem in such a way that the first reading of the complete poem by the teacher is a significant experience for him. There is no need

for him to understand every detail or to have an equivalent experience to the experience the teacher may have when he reads it for the first time. The poem can be appreciated and understood at different levels; we must be patient and may be quite satisfied if our pupils appreciate it at their level even when we have finished with it.

They can be expected to appreciate it at our level when they have read as much as we have and lived as long and seen as much of life. It is a mistake to try and squeeze the last drop of meaning from a poem; we do best to let it make its impression gradually, over the course of several lessons, so that more of it reveals itself at each reading. In reading the poem for the first time the teacher may mark the rhythm and the line endings and rhymes rather strongly, for these are what the pupil can perceive and cling on to first, and they give form to the poem in his mind while it is still rather nebulous otherwise. Later readings will become nearer and nearer to normal poetry reading until the poem is quite familiar.

## **2. THE THREE RULES OF PRESENTATION**

It may be useful to explain in a little more detail what is implied by the rule just given that

### **1. Too much Explanation is a Mistake**

No word should be explained which reveals its own meaning in the context of the poem. No word which adds nothing important to the pupil's grasp of the essential significance of the poem as a whole should be explained in advance or have attention drawn to it during the teaching of the poem

Examples of the kind of word which need not be taught, but just an equivalent given, if necessary-- either in English or the home language—arc the words foam, in Wordsworth's Daffodils, or scullion in Yeats' The hawk.

### **2. Verbal Peculiarities may be Passed Over**

Such forms as hash, doth, yon or thou and thee, or the spelling of chant as chaunt in The Solitary Reaper can either be ignored altogether, or, if the members of the class ask about them, they can simply be said to be variants of the normal word and left at that. Everyone knows dialect or obsolete variants of words in common use in his own language which can, if necessary, be referred to .

### **3. Art can be allowed to make its own Impact**

In recognizing that most good art makes its own impact directly on the emotions and the subconscious mind, we may be content with seeing that the pupil has the key to what lies in the poem, but we do not necessarily turn it in the lock for him. He must learn to face and deal with poetry himself, so it is always better to err on the side of explaining too little than too much. For instance, a chorus such as that of the ballad Gipsy Laddie,

Rattle-turn a gipsum, gipsum

Rattle-turn a gipsum Davy,

has a most important art to play as a sort of drone or accompaniment to the poem

## **3. READING THE POEM**

When he judges that the tools will do their work effectively he turns them on to the poem itself by reading it right through once; then he reads it verse by verse, bringing out, focusing and establishing the meaning the successive sentences in the mind rather than explaining

The teacher then repeats the verse and may ask the same or simple questions, addressing other members of the class.

## **4. FURTHER READING**

When the whole poem has been presented in this way it may be read over by the teacher again two or three times; as he does so he may pause to give the pupils opportunity to fill in words and phrases, perhaps the rhyming words at the end of the lines and other key words. In time, members of the class may be able to repeat alternate lines, singly or in chorus, and finally whole verses. Now is the time for the books to be opened, or the poem to be written on the blackboard, to be read and then copied out by the class, if it is not in their textbooks. If it is in their textbooks, it is best to open them just before the end of the first lesson on it, when it has become fairly familiar to the ear. The teacher may then read it

through aloud once or twice more, according to its difficulty, and leave his pupils to read it through three or four times, silently, at home. It may then be repeated in a later lesson, perhaps after a short interval of a few days; the pupils may read it aloud several times, singly and in chorus; perhaps only five or ten minutes will be spent in subsequent lessons, until it is really very familiar indeed. Finally, it may be practiced for speaking dramatically in chorus, or it may be dramatized.

### 5. DISCUSSION AND EXPRESSION

Then the third stage, equivalent to the discussion stage of dealing with prose texts, may begin. This may well start out from discussion of parallel incidents within the knowledge or experience of members of the class. After a little discussion the teacher may ask the class to write a short composition on the lines of the poem, as shown in the chapter on Composition. When, for example, we ask them to do this for Wordsworth's poem about the daffodils, "I wandered lonely as a cloud", the degree to which their own experiences are truly parallel will tell us how far they have understood the poem. If, for instance, the word bliss cannot properly be used in connection with the pupil's experience, it can be shown not to be genuinely parallel, although perhaps in some ways similar.

### 6. CONCLUSION

To sum up the process of teaching a poem, we see three main stages, as in the teaching of prose texts

1. **Preparation**, consisting in equipping the pupil for a quick grasp of the main outline of the poem from the first reading of it, by familiarizing the most important words and expressions and ensuring that the ideas involved are not beyond his means
2. **Presentation and reading**, including a great deal of reading, and calling for intense concentration on the words of the poem, any paraphrase or summary being followed by a return to the actual words of the poem. This reading must be relatively quick, the first reading not being attempted until there is reasonable certainty that most of the class will be able to follow the essentials of the poem and establish in their minds a correct general impression of its significance and scope. Books should not be opened until the poem has been made thoroughly familiar to the ear and there is likely to be no danger of conflict between what is imagined in the ear as it is read and the printed word.
3. **The Discussion Stage**, which should be based on a thorough knowledge of the text of the poem, and be designed to lead to a deeper all-round perception of the poem and the ideas it embodies, and to expression.

After all this work has been completed, the poem may be considered as learnt, and the teacher may leave most of the rest of the work on it to the pupil. He can economize effort and time, however, by making use of the furniture which the pupil's mind has, so that the poems learnt are continually referred to and repeated, as illustrations of discussion any further reading. In this way they are really incorporated in the habit of thought of the pupil and make an important contribution to his growth; they help to give form and conciseness to his expression.

### AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY



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