

**The Fate of Poetry in a Common Core-Based Curriculum**  
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Once upon a time, poetry was a substantial part of the English curriculum. Several large-scale studies in the past century suggest its contours. The profile of the poetry curriculum has been historically shaped by the purposes English teachers or literary scholar saw for it in the school curriculum. Today its profile is being shaped by anti-literary forces.

**Post World War II Studies**

Possibly the most exhaustive examination of what was available in high school literature anthologies, the textbooks used for over a century in most secondary English classrooms, was reported in a 1963 book titled *High School English Textbooks*. James Lynch and Bertrand Evans, both professors of English at the University of California, Berkeley, scrutinized the contents of the 72 most frequently used anthologies for grades 9 to 12 in the 1950s, detailing by genre what they found.

Lynch and Evans viewed literature anthologies as “repositories of the very best ever thought and written in the spirit of the humanistic tradition and the Anglo-American heritage.”<sup>1</sup> Because they considered poetry as the “literary heart” of an anthology, they calculated by grade level the number of different poems available across anthologies and listed the poets represented by these numbers.

Among their conclusions, Lynch and Evans suggested it is at least questionable “whether a high school student inadequately read in the poetry of his own culture is prepared to undertake the study of another.” They also questioned whether “world literature” should be included, given the “neglect by several anthologies of numerous major authors in the Anglo-American tradition.” We shall note the continuing relevance of their concern.

While Lynch and Evans saw “literary importance” as the criterion for selection, for a subject they believed students should see as a “serious and important body of matter for study,”<sup>2</sup> George Norvell had a different view of the purpose for a school’s English curriculum. He published in 1973 a major study of secondary students’ interests in the texts they read in English class or independently.<sup>3</sup> By telling us what secondary students enjoyed reading in class or on their own, his report at the same time tells us what literary and non-literary texts they were assigned. Norvell’s purpose was to

be able to recommend to English teachers titles that students would enjoy reading, with the hope that if teachers assigned them students would develop a life-long love of reading, which he believed to be a major, if not the major, purpose, of the school's English curriculum.

Norvell's information came from thousands of students across New York State. Not surprisingly, we learn from his study that students did not enjoy many of the selections they were assigned in English. The factor that most correlated with enjoyment was gender, not literary artistry or reading ability. (With their teachers' assistance, students in his study were classified as superior, average, or weak readers.) In fact, he found that "the reading materials commonly used in literature classes are better liked by girls than boys in a ratio of more than two to one."

Although poetry and plays were boys' least favorite genres, nevertheless, boys did have some favorites among the poems studied in their English classes. Those with the highest ratings by boys in grades 10, 11, and 12 were: "Ballad of Billy the Kid" (Knibbs); "Casey at the Bat" (Thayer); "Dorlan's Home Walk" (Guiterman); "Cremation of Sam McGee" (Service); "Da Greata Stronga Man" (Daly); "Deacon's Masterpiece" (Holmes); "George Washington" (Kirk); and "Old Ironsides" (Holmes).<sup>4</sup> Poems with the highest ratings by girls in grades 10, 11, and 12 (in that same table) included: "Between Two Loves" (Daly); "Da Younga 'Merican" (Daly); "Dorlan's Home Walk" (Guiterman); "House with Nobody in It" (Kilmer); "How the Great Guest Came" (Markham); "O Captain! My Captain!" (Whitman); "Twins" (Leigh); and "George Washington" (Kirk). In general, girls liked the poems rated highly by boys more than the converse.

### **Core Knowledge Sequence**

In the late 1980s, the Core Knowledge Foundation, established by literary scholar E.D. Hirsch, issued the Core Knowledge Sequence, a set of content guidelines for grades K-8. Many of the highly rated poems or authors assigned in grades 10, 11, and 12 in George Norvell's study are in the Core Knowledge Sequence. Required in grade 7 are poems by Edgar Allan Poe, Emily Dickinson, Alfred Lord Tennyson, William Blake, Robert Service, Wilfred Owen, Robert Frost, Countee Cullen, T.S. Eliot, Langston Hughes, and William Carlos Williams. Required in grade 8 are poems by e.e. cummings, Carl Sandburg, Dylan Thomas, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Robert Browning, Emily Dickinson, William Wordsworth, Robert Frost, Edwin Arlington Robinson, William Shakespeare, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Gerald Manley Hopkins, Allen Ginsberg, Langston Hughes, and Gwendolyn Brooks.

The author lists in the Core Knowledge Sequence stimulate several observations. First, what the Core Knowledge Sequence requires in grades 7 and 8 seems to be at a higher level of conceptual and/or reading difficulty than what students in the upper high school grades in the 1950s and 1960s mentioned as enjoyable reading. The difference in reading level may reflect lower academic standards in secondary English classes in American public schools after World War II and/or a deliberate increase in the relative difficulty of the literary works selected for the elementary and middle school grades in the Core Knowledge Sequence.

This observation raises an unanswerable question. To what extent are secondary teachers responding to lower student reading skills today in selecting the genres and poems for all secondary students to read?

Second, the corpus of poems in the Core Knowledge Sequence has both a more British and a more African-American flavor than do Norvell's lists. The authors of the Core Knowledge Sequence acknowledge that they sought to include what they considered multicultural texts, and E.D. Hirsch's own literary scholarship centered on British poets.

Third, required titles in the Sequence say much less about a poem's or poet's popularity than about the purpose for schooling. Norvell was interested in recommending what students seemed to enjoy reading so long as the poems were of high quality, or as he put it, where "the lines of student popularity and critical approval converge."<sup>5</sup> He was thus indirectly hinting at the need to cater to the school population that secondary English teachers were teaching in mid-century America. On the other hand, the Core Knowledge Sequence was and remains centered on "cultural" literacy, on what students should be familiar with (literary work or author or both) to be considered educated---or as the Sequence itself states: to provide a "foundation for later learning" and "the common ground for communication in a diverse society."

### **National Survey of High School English Teachers' Poetry Assignments**

My survey in 2010 of the major titles English teachers assign in grades 9, 10, and 11 in honors or standards classes (i.e., not in the highest or lowest English classes in a school) found little overall difference in the profile of poets and/or poems between their assignments and those in the Sequence. Interviewers spoke with over 400 English teachers to obtain descriptions of what they assigned in over 800 courses at these grade levels (two courses per teacher in a nationally representative sample of teachers at these grade levels).<sup>6</sup> Table 1 below is taken from this survey. It excludes the

book-length plays or poems (such as *Julius Caesar* or *The Iliad*) also mentioned by teachers.

While the overall profile of poets mentioned in the 2010 survey is not very different from those required in the Core Knowledge Sequence (and the list of required poems in the Sequence may have influenced the contents of the large American and British/world literature anthologies used in recent years by most high school English teachers), what is different are the frequencies at which they are mentioned at each of these three grade levels. Beyond the first half dozen names, the numbers are miniscule, indicating that few students nationally are reading these poets. Not only are the vast middle third of our students reading few poems by 2010, they are reading few poems or poets in common.

### **Common Core’s English Language Arts Standards**

How do Common Core’s English language arts standards, released in June 2010, fit in with what seems to be a disappearing poetry curriculum in this country?

**1. Content- and Culture-Free Skills.** To begin with, readers need to understand that most of Common Core’s ELA standards are actually content- and culture-free skills. Here is a grade 9/10 literature standard as an example. “Determine a theme or central idea of a text, and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.” This is a content- and culture-free skill, not an academic standard for grade 9/10, because it can be applied as easily to “The Three Little Pigs” as to *Moby-Dick*. There is nothing in the “standard” to suggest level of reading difficulty, cultural relevance, or complexity.

Common Core did recognize that the same skill set could in theory be the curricular objective at every single grade level and that the content of a K-12 reading curriculum needs to increase in difficulty through the grades. So it provided an appendix that is supposed to help teachers understand what level of reading difficulty should characterize the texts chosen to address its ELA standards at each grade level. But when we look at the poems listed for each span of grades in Appendix B, which lists exemplars of “complexity” and “quality” (not recommended or required texts) for each successive grade span, we find an incoherent group of poems representing a wide range of intellectual levels, literary movements, and literary traditions at every grade span. What an English teacher or school may infer as

guidelines to complexity or quality from any one group of poems is totally unclear.

The following poems serve as exemplars of complexity and quality for grades 6 to 8:

Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth. "Paul Revere's Ride"

Whitman, Walt. "O Captain! My Captain!"

Carroll, Lewis. "Jabberwocky."

Navajo tradition. "Twelfth Song of Thunder."

Dickinson, Emily. "The Railway Train."

Yeats, William Butler. "The Song of Wandering Aengus."

Frost, Robert. "The Road Not Taken."

Sandburg, Carl. "Chicago."

Hughes, Langston. "I, Too, Sing America."

Neruda, Pablo. "The Book of Questions."

Soto, Gary. "Oranges."

Giovanni, Nikki. "A Poem for My Librarian, Mrs. Long."

Some of the poems on this list may at first seem impressive for grades 6 to 8. But let's take a closer look at Pablo Neruda's "Book of Questions," for example. For what purpose would a middle school English or reading teacher teach Neruda's poems?

Tell me, is the rose naked  
or is that her only dress?

Why do trees conceal  
the splendor of their roots?

Who hears the regrets  
of the thieving automobile?

Is there anything in the world sadder  
than a train standing in the rain?

If I have died and don't know it of whom do I ask the time?

Why do leaves commit suicide when they feel yellow?

Is it true that in an anthill dreams are a duty?

Love, love, his and hers, if they've gone, where did they go?

How many weeks are in a day and how many years in a month?

Let's try another one—William Butler Yeats' "The Song of the Wandering Aengus." It is described in an overview of a college lecture in the following way: "Yeats' commitment to a poetry of symbol is explored in "The Song of the Wandering Aengus," a fable of poetic vocation."<sup>7</sup> One more. Emily Dickinson's "The Railway Train"

What at first seemed impressive may now seem pretentious. Such exemplars raise a number of questions: Who was the real audience for Appendix B in Common Core's ELA document? Why were Neruda's "Book of Questions" and Yeats' and Dickinson's poems listed as exemplars of complexity and quality for grades 6 to 8? Why were they listed at all in Common Core's Appendix B? Are they more appropriate for an Advanced Placement course in literature or for a college course? And why offer such a randomly selected group of poems to illustrate complexity or quality? Does such a scattered list of poems suggest disdain for coherence of any kind in a curriculum?

**2. Poetry Skills Taught in Common Core.** Now let's look at some of the middle school literature standards themselves to get a sense of what skills English teachers are to develop in their middle school students in order to read poetry. Here are the few that seem most applicable to poetry in grades 6 to 8.

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone.

[At a later grade] Analyze the impact of rhymes and other repetitions of sounds (e.g., alliteration) on a specific verse or stanza of a poem or section of a story or drama

Analyze how a particular sentence, chapter, scene, or stanza fits into the overall structure of a text and contributes to the development of the theme, setting, or plot.

Earlier, in grade 4, students have been expected to:

Explain major differences between poems, drama, and prose, and refer to the structural elements of poems (e.g., verse, rhythm, meter)..."

Given the paucity of standards mentioning poetry at all, never mind the elements of poetry, it is not clear that poetry as a genre can be well addressed by English teachers in a Common Core-oriented classroom. Nor can they easily choose to do so in the reduced amount of time that English teachers are to spend on literary texts during an academic year.

**3. Reduction of reading instructional time for literary study.** The reduction of literary-historical content in the standards is an inevitable consequence of Common Core's emphasis on informational reading.<sup>8</sup> The nine literature standards and ten informational standards at every grade level in Common Core's reading standards promote a 50/50 split between literature and informational reading. At the same time, Common Core indicates that English classes must teach more informational reading or literary nonfiction than ever before. Common Core also states that the common tests in English language arts now being developed at the high school level must match the 30/70 percentages on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) grade 12 reading test (30 percent literary passages and 70 percent informational passages). Strangely, Common Core has yoked the English curriculum to a test with arbitrary percentages for types of reading that have no basis in research or in informed professional consent. They also make no sense arithmetically. How can 30 percent of the reading in the entire curriculum be literary when at least half of what they read in English class must be informational?

Nor has Coleman or his co-writer Susan Pimentel made clear attempts to set the record straight about the misinterpretation of these percentages in Common Core's ELA document. They claim that the English class is to continue its focus on literature all the while insisting on the teaching of more "informational" or nonfiction texts in the English class, and they have never offered a set of new percentages in place of the implicit 50/50 mandate. The study of poetry for its own sake may almost disappear in language arts classrooms.

David Coleman, now president of the College Board, believes: "Because the overwhelming majority of college and workplace reading is non-fiction, students need to hone their ability to acquire knowledge from informational texts...[and] ...demonstrate facility with the features of texts particular to a variety of disciplines, such as history, science, and mathematics." English teachers are not prepared to teach students how to

read technical or discipline-based material in other areas. An attempt to turn the high school English curriculum into little more than a service unit for other subject areas should require public discussion and approval by every local school board and community in this country.

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<sup>1</sup> James J. Lynch and Bertrand Evans, *High School English Textbooks: A Critical Examination* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Lynch and Evans, p. 129.

<sup>3</sup> George Norvell. *The Reading Interests of Young People* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1973).

<sup>4</sup> Norvell. *Reading Interests*. From Table 22-1, pp. 125-127.

<sup>5</sup> Norvell, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> *FORUM 4: Literary Study in Grades 9, 10, and 11: A National Survey*. (Boston: Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers, 2010). [http://www.alscw.org/publications/forum/forum\\_4.pdf](http://www.alscw.org/publications/forum/forum_4.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> English 310, Modern Poetry, Yale University. <http://oyc.yale.edu/english/engl-310/lecture-4>.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Bauerlein and Sandra Stotsky. *How Common Core's ELA Standards Place College Readiness at Risk*. White Paper No. 89. Boston: Pioneer Institute, September 2012.

<http://pioneerinstitute.org/download/how-common-cores-ela-standards-place-college-readiness-at-risk/>



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**Table 1: Major Poets Mentioned 15 or More Times by Grade Level**

Major Poets Assigned	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Total
Robert Frost	87	80	96	263
Emily Dickinson	49	66	113	228
Edgar Allan Poe	74	42	53	169
Langston Hughes	59	45	57	161
Walt Whitman	19	23	105	147
William Shakespeare	67	55	18	140
Maya Angelou	31	13	19	63
e.e. cummings	16	28	17	61
Carl Sandburg	19	13	22	54
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow	4	8	31	43
Anne Bradstreet	2	6	27	35
T.S. Eliot	2	7	22	31
William Wordsworth	7	7	11	25
Edgar Lee Masters	4	7	14	25
William Cullen Bryant	0	3	19	22
Nicki Giovanni	7	9	5	21
Sylvia Plath	3	6	12	21
Ralph Waldo Emerson	0	2	19	21
William Carlos Williams	1	4	16	21
Gwendolyn Brooks	2	11	6	19
Paul Dunbar	7	2	10	19
Pablo Neruda	2	14	2	18
Theodore Roethke	3	12	2	17
Ezra Pound	2	5	10	17
Edwin Arlington Robinson	0	1	15	16
Homer	10	4	1	15
Robert Browning	2	5	8	15
John Keats	2	6	7	15
Pat Mora	4	11	0	15
Other Poets	183	325	307	815