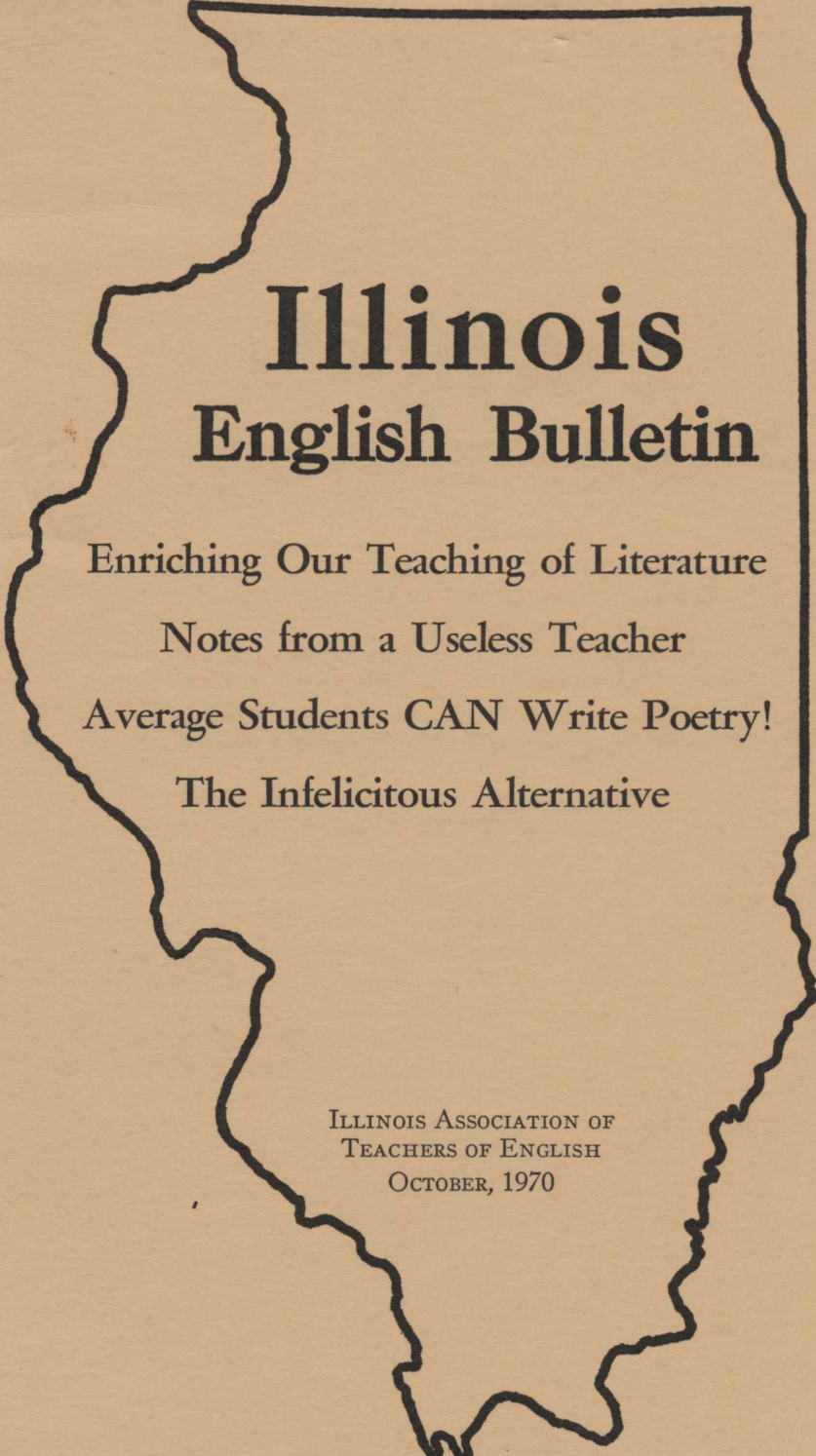




Illinois English Bulletin

Enriching Our Teaching of Literature

Notes from a Useless Teacher

Average Students CAN Write Poetry!

The Infelicitous Alternative

ILLINOIS ASSOCIATION OF
TEACHERS OF ENGLISH
OCTOBER, 1970

In this day of flurry, agitation, and involvement in which every classroom exercise must be relevant and where students are free to do their own thing; in this time of computer-based learning when we seek solutions to everything — poverty, racism, injustice, ignorance — when classes are overflowing and English teachers spend hours in meetings revamping the curriculum, often to find no money available to augment new programs, it is refreshing to look back forty years and to read suggestions for improvement of instruction given in a more relaxed atmosphere.

We offer in this Bulletin an essay, "Enriching Our Teaching of Literature," first published in the Bulletin of IATE, Volume XXIII, Number 3, on December 1, 1930. As you read this article, we request that you ask yourself if it is possible we have moved too far afield, trying to be all things to all people. Is there still a place in our courses to teach observation of beautiful things about us? Are we and our students too sophisticated for this?

Professor Harry G. Paul was one of the great English teachers at the University of Illinois. He was the guiding spirit behind IATE for many years; he edited the Bulletin from 1908 until 1933.

W. A. L.

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Enriching Our Teaching of Literature

BY HARRY G. PAUL

The wayfarer in Europe is impressed time after time with the fact that the most important building in each community is the church. Upon its construction has been lavished the labor and the money that indicate the devotion, the faith, and the aspirations of the people. The wayfarer in Illinois is impressed, even in our smaller and poorer communities, with the fact that the high school is the outstanding building, commodious, substantial, and often, for its surroundings, almost palatial. It, too, represents the devotion, the faith, and the aspirations of a people. Education, it seems, has become one of our great national obsessions.

Sometimes as we teachers realize the faith of the people in this power of education, and as we consider seriously how thorough a panacea for all human ills they regard it, we are forced to pause and to wonder—wonder how far we shall be able to live up to the confidence they have in education, wonder what we really can accomplish in making their dreams and ours come true.

No small part of this faith arises from what training has done in making two blades of grass grow where one grew before, in spanning the continent with ribbons of cement and of steel, in lifting the skyscraper, and in conquering the air with plane and radio. All of these things material have represented the advances of education, the conquest of mind over matter, and in their wake they have brought enormous opportunities for what our correspondence schools have described as “the man who knows.” Such opportunities have held an enormous fascination for the parents of the boys and girls who are now crowding our high schools and

colleges. The idea in the minds of the parents frequently finds its frank expression in words something like these: "We had to work hard for all that we gained; we had to toil and slave. We want our children to have an education, so that they will not have to work so hard. We want them to be trained so that they can get along more easily than we did."

This stress on what is commonly called a practical education offers something to commend it, something to condemn it. It is good in that it emphasizes the accumulation of that wealth, the conquest of the world material, in a fashion that makes for easier and better living conditions. Poverty, we are coming to realize, is not the queen of the virtues, for wealth can give much that is lovely and much that is to be desired. The material conquests that man has made in the last century go far toward raising us to a level of saying at least in a physical sense, "Let there be light; and there is light."

But amid all the laudation of these advances in education, many of us have been hearing a voice, at first small and still, which has grown louder with the passing of the years. This voice is questioning in ever clearer and clearer tones, What is the ultimate good of this conquest of the material world effected by twentieth century education? What is the use of a program of five hours a day for five days of the week? If we cannot put this leisure to good use, what shall it profit us? If the chief gain we make in driving home fifty miles to the hour is that we shall have more time to sit by the radio and listen to a jazz orchestra play *Hot Lips*, far better the old ox cart with its hours under the blue vault of the heavens. If learning to read and a week end free from the necessity of earning our bread is to mean simply time for befouling the mind with *True Stories*, far better the life of the Man with the Hoe.

"Make your minds nests of lovely thoughts," said that wise teacher Ruskin. Let us listen to him carefully and ponder his words, for the great curse on our students is that they have gained so little of those things which make for a fineness and richness of life that they are indeed paupers. It is a sad and discouraging sight to see these young people, supposedly the best product of our educational system, hastening at every possible opportunity to a cheap and often vulgar vaudeville, or to hear them complaining of a Sunday afternoon that, "There isn't anything to do around here."

Education for leisure, both in the case of the college bred and in that of the humblest worker who is having his free hours ex-

tended, becomes indeed a serious, a tremendous problem which the schools have been very slow in facing. Here the teacher of English bears a peculiar responsibility, for he should be a leader in bringing our young people into intimate and vital contact with those things that make for culture, those things that lead these boys and girls to a life more abundant.

In the material world the results of culture are everywhere evident and astounding. The Prussian farmer has taken a district as sandy and unprolific as the Dunes of Indiana and by culture has made it bear a harvest far beyond that produced by our rich black dirt. The magnificent broad chested Norman horse represents the last word in culture up from a shaggy little beast scarcely larger than a dog. Mark Twain once said that a cauliflower is a cabbage that has had a college education. But why multiply instances, when on every hand we see evidences of how thought and labor applied to raw and often crude materials result in a fine finished product.

We teachers of English have a special responsibility in preaching and in living the gospel of the things that are most excellent. By contact with that which is fine and lovely we must so enrich our own lives that they will be preaching their daily lessons to the boys and girls in our charge. Here lies our opportunity, for our interests and our enthusiasms are always being taught or caught in the school room. What we really are reveals itself a thousand times a day in the class room. We are constantly publishing ourselves. So it behooves us to ask whether we are the evangelists of these things that are most excellent.

Some of the easiest and simplest lessons in these matters of understanding and evaluation may come through observing and appreciating houses. Fortunately we as a people are beginning to pay more attention to architecture; we are emerging from the state when a home was an enlarged dry-goods box dropped at one corner of a treeless field. The attentive wayfarer notices the mansard roof of our own University Hall and realizes that here is a type of architecture, prevalent through Illinois, which flourished during the Administration of President Grant. He journeys to Princeton and some other towns of the neighborhood, and lo, many of the older homes show him that here is a bit of New England transferred to the prairies of Illinois. Similarly numerous southern Illinois towns tell their architectural story of the men who emigrated from Dixie, while glimpses in other communities throughout our state will recall the flush days of the river towns, or the gingerbread architecture of the nineties, or

the pseudo-Spanish carried even as far as Urbana by the Florida craze of a few years ago.

Many houses are of keenest interest to the thoughtful observer in the way they reflect the personality of their owners. Here is a ramshackle place with the seat from an old Ford decorating the front porch and proclaiming that within dwells a scion of the Doolittle family, one of whose early members was proprietor of the Union Hotel mentioned in Rip Van Winkle. Or here is the low Dutch colonial house with its garden of useful and pretty things and its window boxes rendering lovely even a very humble home. If we will but awaken our senses, we may make a walk even along a street we have trod a hundred times a glorious adventure.

To the teacher who has taught the hand to reproduce in drawings and sketches those picturesque spots captured by the receptive eye and brain, even the most commonplace Illinois town may offer literally hundreds of places of charm and beauty. Somewhat similarly an interest in photography presents fine possibilities in quickening our perceptions of the loveliness which will reward us if we will train our eyes to apprehend it. Even if we can do but little in creating beauty, we may thus learn to appreciate the difficulties of artistic expression and through these attempts may become better critics and finer teachers in spreading a knowledge of art and an enthusiasm for it. We shall be keener interpreters of the art of literature if we gain some mastery of the history and development of the art of sculpture and of painting, and if we will acquaint ourselves, lovingly acquaint ourselves, with the world's masterpieces in stone and on canvas. Here, as elsewhere, culture is a plant of slow growth; it cannot be ordered for delivery on the morrow's fast freight from Chicago or New York. The gradual accumulation of any such series as the *Masterpieces in Color*, each with its biography and appreciation and illustration in a remarkably satisfactory reproduction of some half dozen of the best pictures of a great painter, this accumulation, I repeat, with a careful and loving study and a frequent return for repeated enjoyment will not only acquaint us with much of the best of art, not only furnish us with a fine and enduring source of pleasure, but will help develop us into far more capable and successful teachers of literature.

Simply to look upon these things that are most excellent becomes an abiding source of pleasure and an inspiration. As I write there stands before me a post card reproduction (a good one) of Boughton's *Road to Camelot*, one of the treasures of the

Walker Gallery. Here is a little bower of beauty, a window that shows us the days when knighthood was in flower; the knights are riding to Arthur's court; my lady beautiful has turned to lay her finger tips on the head of the hound. And while the picture is indeed its own excuse for being, I am sure that on the morrow my teaching of Tennyson's great *Idyl* will be a little more 'attractive, a little more alluring because of this glimpse into the world of abiding beauty.

Keener and more valuable of course than this sight of the reproductions of great art is the thrill that comes from seeing these works in the original; and this is only one of the many fine fruits that come from extensive travel. "Homekeeping youths," said Shakespeare, "have ever homely wits." Travel, we recognize, just as the world has realized for centuries, is one of the finest means of education and of culture; of this it behooves every English teacher to share in large measure. It may be well to "see America first," as we are constantly exhorted to do by the slogan on the freight-cars of one of our great railways. Personally I believe that it is wiser and more profitable to see Europe first! America has much to offer, an increasing amount with the years, but Europe is so rich in art treasures, in tradition, in a life strikingly different from the increasing uniformity of our American towns each with its chain grocery, its chain drygoods store, its chain variety shop, its chain theater, its chain advertising systems, that Europe affords a relief from this as happy as it is profitable. Furthermore, we can see America when we have reached the age of being comfortable in a wheel chair. So I say, see Europe first.

I recognize, naturally, that in many minds there is interposing the objection that seeing Europe is expensive business. Yes, but not so expensive as many of us imagine, provided we are willing to rough it a little. Furthermore, and here we are at the very heart of one vital aspect of this growth in culture, most of us can have these finer things if we are willing to make them of the supreme importance that they deserve. One of the most thoroughly distinguishing differences between the educated and the uneducated man is that the former is willing and able to work toward some distant goal and is not the slave of immediate desire or impulse. A great many people, including a large part of any college student body, seem unable to set up some desirable objective and to strive toward that. You have only to go down the business street of any college town to see an immense number of catch penny, catch dime, and catch quarter shops that flank the walks. It is as if the student had his allowance in small change in the palm of his hand

and from this little pile disappeared as if between his fingers first one coin for this small, unnecessary thing, and then another for that. Of course there is nothing left for the worth while objective. Quite different is the case of a certain friend of mine, a man who has only a modest income but who manages practically every year to travel extensively. He happens to be such a good friend that he was not offended when I once asked him the impertinent question as to how he did it. His secret lay in the fact that he saved throughout the year definitely and purposefully for the particular object and did not waste money upon unnecessary trifles. Most of us will find that we can stop a great many leaks in our outgo and thus place ourselves in a position to enjoy these things that are most excellent.

Of course there are ways of travel, and ways of travel. Some European tours offer but little more than glorified trips to Coney Island, and others are very well worth while, educative to the highest degree. Please pardon the very personal illustration. It was once my privilege to see the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome under the guidance of a travel director who is a learned man and an excellent teacher. Every step in the instruction was carefully planned. For example, when we reached Florence, each morning brought its hour lecture, — the first, as I remember, on the origins of that Etruscan city. Then we visited the sites of the ancient city and mounted the hills to the old town at Fiesole. This was followed, similarly, with days given to such subjects as the Medici, Pre-Raphaelite Art, Michael Angelo, Savonarola, until wherever we walked we saw much of significance, much of beauty.

I should like to go on and elaborate some of the advantages to be gained from such travel, but, perhaps, I should be offering a come-back to a ministerial friend of mine whom I once asked if he begins his prayers with a, "When I was in Greece." I would, however, insist strongly that what I am urging is quite within the reach of practically everyone within the sound of my voice, and that such an extension of culture is as pleasurable as it is profitable. Meanwhile, during the days that we are saving for such a trip, we may do much delightful and precious travel by way of books. St. Peter's, Westminster, and the Jungfrau may thus become such familiars that when we meet them face to face, we may nod to them as old acquaintances.

Indeed the good teacher of literature is as great a traveler as was the much wandering Odysseus, a traveler in the realms of literary gold, who there, like Keats, has seen many goodly states

and kingdoms. Such a teacher is a magnificent tour conductor, leading his charges through the glorious scenes of bookland, journeying with them through the domains of space and of time. Together the guide and his party stand on the plains of Windy Troy, near the Scaean gate, close by the old men who are seated watching with fearful hearts the distant conflict. Then, out from that gate comes Helen, for whom the war is waged. The old men turn to look at Helen and say, "No wonder they are willing to fight for her; she is so beautiful." Whisked away on the magic carpet of literature, the guide and his charges may stand in Arthur's great hall and watch the knights lay their hands in his and swear "to break the heathen and uphold the Christ." Or together they may journey to Shakespearshire and hear Olivia confess her love for Viola in terms of beauty unsurpassed, or they may smile at Touchstone's confession that he is troubled less by a weary spirit than by a pair of weary legs.

Occasionally, on this grand tour, the teacher may be thankful for the services of some local guide, one of whom I wish especially to commend, namely, Austin Dobson, by Royal Appointment from Kings Knowledge and Appreciation now the Official Guide to the Days of Queen Anne, in many ways an even better and more trustworthy guide than his predecessor Thackeray. I know no better introduction to the days of Pope and Swift, of the Tatler and the Spectator, of the powerful Marlborough and his more powerful wife than these pages of the *Complete Poems* of Austin Dobson.

But there is another kind of travel which must not be neglected. Many a globe trotter has returned home without having seen a tithe of what Gilbert White observed in a tour of his garden. Some of the finest means of culture are ready at our hands if we have but the wits to use them. We need not go to Japan for the beauty of blossoms when right in our own state, easily accessible to most of us, the Anna-Cobden region brings its miles and miles of fairyland, exquisite beyond words with the beauty of the peach blow, a beauty so rare and radiant that it catches one by the throat. Similarly, an Indiana state park, a few hours travel from where you are now seated, offers a spring scene of nature in her bridal robes that for those who have looked upon it will endure as long as memory lasts. Sights such as this must be placed among the great moments of life, as precious in their way as is the first glimpse of the Liverpool clock-tower gained some morning from a porthole.

Especially valuable for teacher and pupil who are growing in

this life more abundant is the magic panorama of the procession of the seasons and the months, each with its own mystic miracle of beauty. Personally I have known hundreds of students who are grateful to Arthur Ketchum for helping them realize the charm of an early February twilight. Have you, good teacher, ever introduced your students to that bit of loveliness, his poem *Candlemas*, which you can find conveniently in the *Atlantic Prose and Poetry*? Of spring poems we have such a wealth that I need do no more than mention one of the most attractive, Bliss Carman's "Once more in misty April." Riley's *Knee-Deep in June* is fine and bright and a very true picture of the land we know and love. Autumn has a hundred poets laureate; but of all the verse of this season which I have ever used to awaken the senses of my students I believe that by far the best liked and loved has been the following familiar stanza from Carruth's *Each in His Own Tongue*:

"A haze on the far horizon,
The infinite, tender sky,
The ripe, rich tint of the cornfields,
And the wild geese sailing high, —
And all over upland and lowland
The charm of the goldenrod, —
Some of us call it Autumn,
And others call it God."

Lowell's *Indian Summer Reverie* bears in its opening stanzas music and color that are hard to match and make life finer and fuller as a vision of loveliness passes our way. Personally I have gained much of insight and of joy from Edith Wyatt's *November in the City* (*Atlantic Story, Essay, and Verse*) with its magic power of making us see the beauty of what most of us would call a disagreeable, rainy night in Chicago:

"To-night the rain blows down from misty places
Above the roof-tops where the pigeons fly."

Each season bears its accompaniment of wild life, and of these one of the most fascinating is the bird life of the winter. We watch with eager interest for the return of the robins (though some of these stay the year round), and we are delighted with the first notes we catch of that fine singer the meadow lark. Late spring and early autumn bring their hosts of lovely migrants, each with its peculiar charm and attractiveness. But the season for an intimate and personal acquaintance with birds, I believe, is the winter time when you have tempted them near your window with your bait of corn and of suet. The downy woodpecker becomes your personal friend; and the cardinal, shy and lovely,

brings his more modestly clad wife to take breakfast outside while you within are enjoying your grapefruit and toast and coffee.

Nor must we here fail to hear the voice of beauty speaking to us through flowers. In a squalid mining town of Northern Michigan, many years ago, the English teacher's desk was never without at least one exquisite flower, there telling its story of beauty — its own excuse for being. Many a little lad and many a girl, children of those who have been called the scum of the earth, hungered and thirsted for this bit of daily loveliness.

Here in Illinois few months of the year are devoid of some beauty of wild flower. More than one hardy blossom lingers long after "woods are bare and birds are flown," while other venturesome flowers come long, long before the swallows dare. It is good to number these children of the field and forest among our friends; it is better to have a little garden spot of our own. If neither of these suggestions is practical, we can at least appropriate in spirit our neighbors' flowers, which are nodding to us and telling us that they belong to whoever will appreciate and love them. Through love and understanding we may thus become veritable plutocrats of beauty.

Once we come to know the joys of a fine acquaintance with flowers, we will look forward to the recurrence of their months with much of the enthusiasm that the small boy welcomes the return of the circus season. To one teacher the reappearance of the tulips is a day to be marked with red on the calendar. Later comes the time when the spirea hedges bend under their banks of white; then a vacant lot is thronged with a bevy of Lady Hollyhocks, gowned variously and gorgeously beyond words. Soon it will be the season for the tuberose to be waving their censers in the mid-summer breeze and scattering afar their heavy perfume. Such times are among the peak moments of life, for kings and queens of the realms of beauty are passing our way.

Nor must we here forget those friends of ours, the trees, which stand sentinel in the realms of those things that are most excellent. To the understanding heart, such as Bryant's, the trees will speak their various languages and will reveal their varied personalities. Have you a wide circle of trees that you have come to know closely and affectionately? A certain magnolia tree here on the campus begins the year by donning a gorgeous maiden gown that would make seem very somber, I feel quite sure, Joseph's coat of many colors, while some of the autumn oaks blaze like the cottage windows in Wordsworth's winter sunset. The Illinois elms are a tall and sprightly family; but many of us will cast our votes

for the birch. This "most shy and ladylike of trees," as Lowell calls her, occasionally drops her demureness and grows as changeable, as vampish, and as altogether charming as any other of the loveliest members of her sex.

To the teacher who thus trains heart and brain to be receptive to these finer things and to rejoice in their presence, each day will bring its throng of the miracles of beauty. Especially lovely and wonderful are the marvelous sunsets that God paints on the skies over our own western plains, — great banks of golden and scarlet and amethyst clouds, so compelling that it seems as if the gates of the New Jerusalem must be just beyond them. Equally lovely are those sunset skies of deep purple and gray when the great fire smoulders in the west, and the greatest of all perhaps is the symphony of the stars.

The face of the earth is a great dial played upon by light and shade and awakened thereby into beauty. To the sensitive eye the shadows of a summer afternoon gradually lengthening and still lengthening and then deepening into the dark may be so beautiful that they will almost hurt. Loveliness wherever we turn! Yes, there is even beauty and charm in the lights and shadows that play along our path on an ordinary cement walk, provided only that our eyes have been opened and our hearts made receptive. Christine Rossetti, one of the most sensitive souls that ever gathered loveliness on the journey through life, expressed thus in wondrous music her regrets at leaving the world beautiful:

"I shall not see the shadows,
I shall not feel the rain;
I shall not hear the nightingale
Sing on as if in pain."

After a sympathetic reading of the pages of this exquisitely tuned spirit, all coarseness and an insensibility to fineness and beauty seem quite worthy to be classed as the eighth deadly sin.

"Wherever I go," said Emerson, "I see God manifest"; yes, manifest in Law, in Power, and also in Beauty. Into the halls of the eternal verities we may enter by many doors. For most of our pupils the teacher of literature has the supreme chance of opening the Door Beautiful, a resplendent portal of the life more abundant.

Notes from a Useless Teacher

BY ANN ARMSTRONG

Riverside-Brookfield High School

Can creative writing be taught? *No* is the answer given by many creative writers, including such diverse spirits as Somerset Maugham and Flannery O'Connor. The teacher's only function is negative or critical, wrote Miss O'Connor in a selection from her notes recently published in *The Writer* magazine. Other writers throw innuendos or broadsides, according to their own style, at the useless, or worse than useless, creative writing courses in schools.

After teaching a creative writing course with varying degrees of success last year, I am beginning to agree, if not that a creative writing course is useless, that a creative writing teacher is. At least it seems to me that a teacher of creative writing becomes most useful when he renders himself most useless.

I believe that the students can and should take over not only the positive functions of providing inspiration and of developing vocabulary and writing fluency, but also the negative functions of criticizing the work of the other students for effectiveness in communication, and of proofreading their own work. Instruction in techniques can be given by the teacher, but this also can be done inductively by showing patterns, or even better, by encouraging the students to find and bring in their own patterns.

In order to involve the students most directly in the creative writing course at Riverside-Brookfield High School, I have designated Wednesday of each week as Mystery Day. On Mystery Day something happens — we are never sure just what it will be — and the students write about their reactions to these happenings. The first Wednesday, in order to set the pattern, I instructed the students to imagine that they were seven years old, blind, and deaf, and that something strange was happening. They were to be Helen Keller just before her first meeting with Annie Sullivan. While all had their eyes closed I went from one to another, hugged each one, and put in each student's hand a piece of a brownie and spelled cookie with my finger tips. Since it took a long time to go around the entire class, most of the students, when they wrote, remarked about their increasing anxiety, confusion, and even fear. Many felt resentment at being embraced. All found it a challenge to describe the experience only in terms of the senses of touch, smell, and taste.

After this introduction the students took over the planning of the Wednesday happenings, and we had unfinished stories, a recording of strange sound effects, an exercise in the transmigration of souls, and one startling time when a student playing a recording was interrupted by a very realistic fight between two boys in the back of the room. This episode had even the teacher upset until it was revealed that it was an exercise to test accuracy of observation and ability to recall specific details.

One very provocative experience was given by a boy who showed slides of an ordinary suburban family at home and at the lake while in the background he played the score from *Romeo and Juliet*. The sounds of the wild emotions of love and hate while the bland people on the screen continued to smile serenely made one wonder what really goes on inside the quiet houses on the tree-lined streets of suburbia. I write along with the students and this exercise prompted the following poem:

Smiling, smiling,
At the blue frothed lake, smiling,
In the Krisskraft, smiling,
Standing, surfing, waving, smiling,
At the Lannon stone entrance,
smiling

Passing drinks, smiling,
In the garden, chef-hatted, smiling,
Broiling steaks, smiling,
At the wheel of the Cadillac, smiling,
Smiling, smiling.

But who can film the grief?
What eye will focus on the crushing drive and lust for
things, for status,
The cruel words behind closed doors,
The doll-like daughter, rebel son,
The shabby parents, never seen,
The pills to push your wife to happiness or stupor,
What camera is there that can catch the screaming from
your silent house
Where you stand smiling?

Monday of each week is the day we use for verbal enrichment. Each student writes on the board five interesting words of his choice and explains them. In order to encourage the useful

rather than the merely bizarre words, the students then write a coherent paragraph using as many of the words as possible.

All the writing that is done is read aloud. Poetry is also written on transparencies and shown on an overhead projector at the same time it is being read. At first the students are hesitant to criticize, but soon pick up the skill of pointing out strong points and weak points instead of just saying, "I like it."

In order to counteract the laxness of students in correcting mechanical errors of sentence structure, spelling, and punctuation, I have during the semester three assignments that are prepared to be sent out rather than to be handed in to the teacher.

The first of these is a personal opinion essay for the Voice of Youth, a regular Sunday column in the *Chicago Tribune*. The second is a letter to someone of importance, not known personally by the student. It may be a letter to a favorite author, a sports or television personality, a congressman, or even to the president of North Vietnam. The third project involves the researching of magazines, a study of *Writers' Guide*, and the submission of a manuscript to what is judged the most appropriate outlet.

On none of these do I correct mistakes, although I am available for advice and consultation when the first drafts are being written. I make sure that the students know the correct form for submission and that a stamped, self-addressed envelope is enclosed when a manuscript is sent out. I also have a magazine editor, who teaches at the school, explain how important neatness and accuracy are for the first impression. I can tell when I look at the manuscripts to be submitted outside that the students have really worked on proofreading.

The grading of this course is also in the hands of the students. We cannot use a pass-fail system here, but the grading reflects the idea of student participation. If all the work has been done, the student may give himself a C. If he has made a consistent effort to revise and improve his work, he may give himself a B. If his improvement has been the result of heroic effort, he may move up to an A. In this way he is judging himself on the basis of his own performance rather than by comparison with others.

How successful has this program been? Not very, if we judge by the number of student submissions that have been published, although we have had interesting letters back from Ray Bradbury, Mayor Richard Daley, Claude Brown, and many others. It is my hope that in trying to communicate not with a teacher, but with other students, with editors, with writers and other persons of importance, the students have learned to sharpen and improve

their own writing. I also hope they have learned that creativity cannot be measured by success, by publication, or by money earned, but that it is a process of doing, a continuation of striving in spite of failure—a reflection that well might be kept in mind by a useless teacher.

Average Students *Can* Write Poetry!

BY JUNE STARK, DIRECTOR

Charleston Service and Demonstration Center

Robert Frost said, "Poetry is a reaching out to find expression, an effort to find fulfillment." If the English teacher agrees with this definition, as I emphatically do, then it follows automatically that she will have her classes try to write poetry, regardless of the class ability level. It is perhaps true that the approach to the writing unit must be a bit more indirect; yet, each year I have been surprised to find that some of the most effective and touching poems, by Mr. Frost's definition, are written by the too frequently overlooked "average" students in my seventh grade classes.

Basically, the students have been primed by various writing experiences before we come to the poetry unit. I emphasize and reemphasize that to each creative writing experience the student brings his own background of experience which enables him to write what no other person in the class *could* write, because only *he* knows how he feels; therefore, he has something to say which only he can possibly say. This premise holds as true for the average student as for the gifted child, although the average student may need more convincing.

Still, it seems best to sneak up on writing poetry since many seventh-graders freeze, creatively speaking, at the thought of writing a poem, and the ones who do not freeze become so engrossed in getting words to rhyme that all spontaneity and emotional value in the writing is doomed.

To be specific, I have found Carl Sandburg's "Arithmetic" a good launching pad for all students beginning the poetry writing unit, but especially good for the average classes. Each student can spot some of his own reactions to numbers in Sandburg's poem. Thus primed by Sandburg's definitions, the students choose a topic, any topic, and then write a series of — to use their expression — "kookie" definitions. I read a few selections written by

the classes of the previous year, and since the students know some of those writers, they are not as dubious of their own abilities as they otherwise might be. Emphasis is on the original, the novel, the imaginative idea. They are told to ignore rhyming, and for a short time I try to ignore the ungrammatical and the misspelled. The assignment is started in class, and is collected the following day. The papers are checked to see that the assignment was completed, but no attempt is made to grade the poems. I select the better papers and type a copy, correcting grammar and spelling errors if necessary, but changing nothing else.

After being read to an invariably attentive class, these impressive examples of poetry go on the "Hey, Look What We Write!" bulletin board — a real ego booster to the authors. As examples, here are two poems written by seventh-graders, average students but at this point, very proud poets:

DOORS

Doors are things that keep secrets from children.

Doors let you in and out of the rain.

Doors of the mind open, and lots of thoughts come out.

Doors keep your food cool in the refrigerator.

Doors are in the way when you take your girlfriend out
and she has to look all night for the key.

Doors of a prison keep you locked in because you did something
that was against the law.

Doors unlock in your mind and you remember things that
happened long ago.

Doors are barriers that cannot be unlocked by anyone but you.

SPACE

Space is where there is no end.

Space is time running short before you're anywhere.

It is the unknown.

It is perilous, hateful, and unmerciful.

Space is intriguing, awe-inspiring, and demanding.

Space is filled with objects.

Some are round, some bare, some filled with living things.

Some things are bright and burning.

Others are cold and dull.

Space has secrets known to no one.

It has life, also death.

Space has always been here.
It is where we live, all we know.
Space is all there is.

The next activity begins with a variety of pictures propped on the blackboard railing to provide the impetus for the class's writing. The pictures are carefully selected from files for bulletin board material, from calendars, and from magazines. *Ideal* magazine provides a good source of quality pictures. Discussion begins with what the class sees in a particular picture, but quickly progresses to the point where each student goes beyond the obvious and becomes emotionally involved in what the picture has to say to him.

Together the class discusses one picture, with imaginations encouraged to soar, and from the discussion the students realize what I want them to do when I ask them to choose one picture and write in sentence fragments what that particular picture is really about. Each pupil then chooses a picture that appeals to him, and is free to walk up to it to inspect it more closely. Then he writes what he sees in the picture.

I am not a counselor or a psychologist, but I find it uncanny how these papers reflect the personalities and problems of the youngsters. If Robert Frost was right when he said that poetry is a reaching out to find expression, then it is not presumptuous to call these writings poetry.

The next group effort involves the first attempt to fit poetic thoughts into a poetic verse form—in this case the Japanese haiku. I mentally ask pardon each year of the Japanese classic poets and then proceed to take broad liberties with their poetic form, insisting only that the class observe the structure of the haiku by writing what they have to say in the three lines of five, seven, and five syllables.

To get past the average class reaction of, "We can never do that!" we write several haiku together, with me doing the writing, revising, and counting for them at the board. I start by having the class look out the window—always fun—and invariably the challenge of "making it come out even" will spur the class on to an enthusiastic churning out of haiku. The assignment for the following day is to write five haiku, preferably having some connection with nature but with any topic fair game. In addition, the student is to check the haiku he feels expresses most poetically a mood, thought, or emotion; in other words, the poet must choose the one which squares best with Frost's definition.

Not all the haiku, of course, are good, but many are. For example, here are three I think even the Japanese poets would appreciate:

O'er the quiet lake
The sound of a wild white loon
Is heard at sunrise.

Emerald pastures
Absorb the silver dew drops
As they drift downward.

The rose is blooming
The petals are dew-sprinkled
Earth shows its beauty.

And for fun:

All the girls gone mad
O'er John, George, Paul, and Ringo;
Well, gosh, so am I!

During the rest of the poetry unit, my seventh-graders will do other writing — perhaps limericks, free verse, or poems with conventional rhyming patterns. Some of the poems will be good; many of them will not be, at least according to the poetry experts.

However, more important than the quality of the writing is the fact that the students are creating. If I may wax philosophic a bit, it seems to me that the emphasis today in learning, entertainment, recreation and so forth, is on passivity. The teacher lectures, the student listens. The television is turned on, the student watches. The five-man basketball team rushes onto the floor, the average student sits and applauds. I believe that by having the student actively participate in the poetry unit through creating poetry himself, the teacher can pry open a bit wider the door to the appreciation of the beauty of the poetic. But even more important, a teacher here has a chance to unplug one facet of the inherent, God-given creative ability that each student has to some degree, the average as well as the gifted. And isn't this a noble enough goal for any English teacher?

The Technique of the Infelicitous Alternative

BY RON RAYBIN

Pasadena High School, Pasadena, California

With my application of the discovery method of learning, I have used a simple technique that has been effective with many students. This method involves the use of infelicitous alternatives or, the find-out-what-it-isn't-to-discover-what-it-is approach. From *The Red Badge of Courage*, for instance, I wanted my students to grasp the appropriateness of Crane's metaphors, to understand that they were both carefully created and meaningful. Of course, I didn't want to be the one to say so. In Chapter 2, Crane writes of two long, thin columns of men that march over the brow of a hill and vanish rearward as they emerge from a wood: "They were like two serpents crawling from the cavern of the night." The question I posed was, "Why not like three bunnies hopping?" The class immediately attacked the inappropriateness of the hopping bunnies image and, on the same basis of understanding, explained why two serpents crawling was an apt physical and psychological comparison. It takes only a few more of such infelicitous alternatives before a class is able to discuss and understand Crane's word pictures without the urging of a substitute. After students apprehend the nature of this technique, they can concoct the unsuitable alternatives, thus deepening their involvement.

What follows are three representative areas of English with some suggestions for applying this teaching method.

POETRY

1. If you wish a class to discover how sound supports meaning, change the sounds. When Poe writes in "The Raven," "And the silken sad uncertain rustling of each purple curtain . . ." you might have the class discuss as an alternative, "And the quiet woeful unsure movement of each purple curtain. . . ."
2. Students can be made more aware of the precision of language in a poem. To encourage some aesthetic recognition of the relationship between word choice and meaning, I have chosen some short poems and altered a few lines. The class is given

two versions of a poem with corresponding line numbers and informed as to which lines have been doctored in one or the other of the two versions. After jotting down which lines in which versions seem more apt, students justify their choices in a class discussion. After the battle, I present the original poem and allow further discussion as warranted.

Here, for example, are portions of Selma Robinson's "Country Night." (The class, of course, is given two complete versions.) Lines one and eight differ in the two versions, and students are to choose one of each as being more effective.

Version I

1. She lived alone in the country night . . .
6. The night was water, and it seemed to her
7. It rose relentlessly and unresisted,
8. Inevitable, black, and sinister.

Version II

1. She lived in terror of the country night . . .
6. The night was water, and it seemed to her
7. It rose relentlessly and unresisted,
8. Inevitable, wet, and sinister.

Selma Robinson's poem begins with line one from Version II and contains line eight from Version I.

3. If you wish a class to make discoveries about rhyme or rhythm, change those and have a two-version comparison as above.

FICTION

1. Teach character consistency by altering a character's behavior; hypothesize an unmotivated inconsistency. What does the class think, for instance, of Brutus demanding financial remuneration on the morning of the Ides of March as payment for his leadership? What about Walter Mitty, two-thirds through the story, doing something actually heroic and then dominating his wife?
2. To consider the significance of motivation, lend a character faulty motivation. Suggest that Oakhurst's suicide in "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" was motivated by boredom. To pass the time he, being a gambling man, played Russian roulette and lost.
3. Let the class consider plot manipulation by considering an extreme alteration of the plot. The cocky protagonist of Lon-

don's "To Build a Fire" gets saved at the end but his dog freezes to death. The victimized farmer in Garland's *Under the Lion's Paw* finds buried treasure at the last possible moment and pays off his self-seeking landlord.

4. What about the relevance or significance of a title? Consider "The Secret-Keeping Heart" as an alternative to "The Tell-Tale Heart" or "The Chosen Pathway" in lieu of "The Road Not Taken."
5. How does the point of view relate to the work? What would happen to *Huckleberry Finn* if the point of view were third person and not Huck's? Would *Moby Dick* be much affected if the point of view were Ahab's?
6. Why is a work structured as it is? In Chapter 1 of *The Red Badge of Courage*, what would be changed by having the youth's flashback about his enlistment occur chronologically and not as a flashback? Consider a short story being stretched to a novel or a novel being condensed to a short story.
7. An author's style can be studied by altering sentence structure. In *The Old Man and the Sea*, Hemingway writes of the old man's humility: "But he knew he had attained it and he knew it was not disgraceful and it carried no loss of true pride." Remove the "ands" and let the class consider the string of main clauses as three simple sentences instead.

COMPOSITION

1. Teach variety as an aspect of writing style by having the class discuss dittoed paragraphs which ineffectively repeat words and phrases.
2. Have the class discuss (or even write) intentionally disorganized paragraphs to discover what coherence is. The same can be done for unity.
3. Teach topic sentences or conclusions with sample compositions that you have infected with losers.
4. Teach about transitions by altering or removing them.

The infelicitous alternative can lead to a student discovery of what you want to teach as the class discusses and explains why the alternative is less effective or invalid. Frequently, the more absurd the alternative, the quicker a class is to grasp the *concept*, seeing beyond the particular example to a useful generalization.

REMINDER

This October *Bulletin* is the last you will receive until you have joined IATE for 1970-71. If you have not already done so, please send your \$3.00 immediately to IATE, Treasurer, 100 English Building, University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois 61801.

NOTICE OF MEETINGS

6-7 November 1970 — IATE Annual Meeting

Time and Place — Registration:

6 November at 1:00 p.m., University of Illinois Auditorium

7 November at 8:00 a.m., South Lounge, Illini Union

6 November 1970 — Meeting of Department Chairmen

Time and Place — Choir Room, Wesley United Methodist Church, 1203 West Green Street, Urbana, from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.

5 November 1970 — Illinois Conference on English Education

Time and Place — 113 English Building, from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

