Responding to Poetry Through Writing is an excerpt from Writing in the Elementary Classroom: A Reconsideration edited by Janet Evans.
© 2001 by Janet Evans

All rights reserved. No part of this material from When Writers Read may be reproduced in any form or by electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review.

This book is available in North America, Australia and New Zealand. Anyone outside these territories should contact David Fulton Publishers, www.fultonpublishers.co.uk

Heinemann
361 Hanover Street
Portsmouth, NH 03801-3912
USA
Chapter 5

Responding to Poetry Through Writing
Gervase Phinn

For much of the last century, poetry has been the poor relation of fiction. It has been hardly noticed, often completely ignored, and has had little relevance in mainstream society. It has frequently received a cool welcome in schools with inspector's reports confirming that, for many children and for some teachers, poetry mattered very little. Thankfully, in this new century, poetry is rediscovering its place in society and in schools. In the English Literacy Strategy, children are expected to read poetry, aloud and silently, talk about their preferences for particular poems, and write in a range of verse forms.

This chapter aims to alleviate some of the anxiety about how to handle poetry in the classroom. It offers some suggestions and strategies for teachers to help children see that poets are people like themselves, speaking to other people about common human experience, but in words that make such experience come alive. It also offers suggestions for helping children to respond to poetry through writing and shares some wonderful examples of very sensitive poetry written by young children.

Poetry needs to be at the heart of work in English because of the quality of the language at work. If language becomes separated from the moral and emotional life—becomes merely a trail of cliches which neither communicate nor quicken the mind of the reader—then we run the risk of depriving children of the kind of vital resource of language which poetry can offer. (DES 1987)

This statement was in relation to teaching poetry in the secondary school, but the same sentiments are applicable to younger children. Reading and writing poetry is a crucial part of the language curriculum. The current educational climate in England charges teachers with introducing to all their pupils the great range of verse, encouraging them to enjoy and appreciate the rhymes and rhythms of the language and helping them achieve good standards in their own writing. Children for their
part are entitled, from the very earliest age, to a range of material which is rich and varied. They should be exposed to poems of intensity and excitement where the language is crisp, clear, and forceful; poems awash with exciting, vigorous language and saturated with reflective, thoughtful messages. Sadly, they are not always exposed to this richness nor are their responses to poetry always allowed to be as refreshing and original as they could be, as the following piece of writing indicates:

My story on Monday began:
    Mountainous seas crashed on the cliffs
    And the desolate land grew wetter . . .
The teacher wrote a little note: Remember the capital letter!

My story on Tuesday began:
    Red tongues of fire licked higher and higher
    From Etna's smoking top . . .
The teacher wrote a little note: Where is your full stop?

My story on Wednesday began:
    Through the dark, pine scented woods
    There twists a hidden path . . .
The teacher wrote a little note: Start a paragraph!

My story on Thursday began:
    The trembling child, eyes dark and wild,
    Frozen midst the fighting . . .
The teacher wrote a little note: Take care, untidy writing!

My story on Friday began:
    The boxer bruised and bloody lay,
    His eyes half closed and swollen . . .
The teacher wrote a little note: Use a semi-colon!

Next Monday my story will begin:
    Once upon a time . . .

This poem, entitled Creative Writing (Phinn 1996), parodies the kind of situation one sometimes feels is happening in elementary schools, whereby children are trying their very best to write effectively while their teachers are on different wavelengths with completely different agendas in mind.

**Raising the Poetry Profile**

Poetry must be read, talked about, appreciated, and responded to before it is analyzed. Furthermore, children model their writing on what they have previously read and talked about, hence they should be encouraged to read as much poetry as possible and take all the help they can get from what they
This is the point that Rosen (1996) makes in his work looking at why we write poetry; he states, “The history of poetry is one of plunder.” Rosen feels that we need to “create situations in which children know they can be in control of language, can mould and change it at will” (p. 14). This exact point, whereby children write words and phrases they have previously heard and talked about, can be seen in two poems written by Amy and Mark, aged 7 and 10 years, respectively (Figures 5.1 and 5.2). They had read some poems about grandmas which had spurred them on to talk about what their grandmas were like. They had then discussed their appearance, their personalities, what they smelled like, and what they said and did. Many of the ideas which emanated from their poetry readings and subsequent conversations were used in their poems, which both show a real sensitivity through the words used and the charming images.

Of course, for children to read poetry, adults, in the form of parents, teachers, and caregivers, must read poetry, too. Three very important factors in fostering children’s poetry reading and writing in the school years are teacher influence, the provision of a wide range of material, and the opportunity to “have a go.” So, teachers themselves must be readers of poetry. They need to have read the poetry anthologies they present to children, select them with care and knowledge, and be skilled in judging how and when to use them. The importance of these points was clearly seen in a conversation I had with Helen, a very enthusiastic, confident seven-year-old child whom I met when visiting a school (four- to seven-year-olds) to look at the range of writing undertaken by the children. Helen initiated the conversation:

“I’m very good at writing, you know. Would you like to see my poems?”

“I would love to,” I replied.
She smiled, “I’ll fetch my portfolio.”

---

Figure 5.1 “My Grandma”

My Grandma

I loved my Grandma.
She was very thoughtful.
Her hair was like silver
And her face like gold.
Eyes like emeralds
That glistened in the sun.
She was very precious.

Amy

Figure 5.2 “My Nan”

My Nan

I like my Nan.
She’s round and rinkly and powdery
And smells of flowers and soap.
She’s as comfy as a cushion to sit on.
When my Mom shouts at me,
I go to my Nan.
She cuddles me and says
Never mind love.
Your Mum was like that
When she was a little girl.
A real grumpy bum.

Mark
Helen was right, she was good at poetry. Her folder contained poems relating to the local environment; her holiday memories; shopping in the local supermarket; and the thoughts of a Roman soldier—part of the history theme they had just been studying. Helen was very clear about what had helped her to become a poet—as her continuing conversation showed:

"Do you write poetry?"
"Yes, I do," I replied.
"Do you get the rhythms?"
"Yes"
"And the rhymes?"
"Sometimes"
"Do you illustrate your poems?"
"No, I’m afraid I don’t."
Helen smiled. "I do," she said, "I think it makes them look nicer on the page."

When Helen was asked why she was so good at writing poetry, she verbalized the three above-mentioned factors—she stated that there were lots of poetry books in her classroom, she referred to her teacher who loved poems and read them to the class everyday, and she said there are lots of opportunities to write different kinds of poems.

Teachers might heighten children’s awareness of poetry by using a range of strategies. These could include:

1. Reading a wide selection of poems to children. For example, each schoolday might begin with a poem—not to be analyzed, just enjoyed. There does not always have to be follow-up work. Simply reading poetry to children “beds their ear” with the richest kind of language.
2. Compiling a list of poems suitable for different age groups and making a collection of poetry posters and cards to go in a poetry browsing box.
3. Inviting poets into schools to work with children and share their experiences of the process of writing: where ideas come from, the research they have to undertake, how they draft and revise, proof read, and submit for publication. Listening to popular poets reading and interpreting their own work will fascinate and inspire children.
4. Displaying a wide selection of different types of poetry and asking the children to browse and then from an anthology select just one short verse, perhaps a limerick or a haiku. Ask each child to copy out the selected poem and decorate it, commit it to memory, and then recite it to others in the class. A collection of these short poems could be put together into a poetry booklet or form part of a colorful display.
5. Mounting displays of poetry anthologies, book jackets, and posters in school corridors and classroom. Publishers will often provide material.
6. Organizing an evening for teachers, parents, school officials, and children when a speaker such as an author, adviser, or member of the local School Library Service talks about the importance of poetry. As part of the event, the children could be asked to read or perform a selection of poems (including their own) accompanied by music and mime. This could include a dramatic reading or a group choral presentation.
7. Spending a little time each week reading and discussing a longer, more demanding poem. When studying a poem, do so sensitively. Appreciation comes before analysis.

8. Enlarging short poems and hanging them from ceilings or decorating classrooms and corridors with them. A range of colorful and varied pictorial charts and poetry posters will brighten up any classroom or corridor and raise the profile of poetry in school.

9. Placing a poem screen saver on the classroom computer—change the poem daily.

10. Integrating poetry into any class topic work. Poetry text sets might be formed based on themes: Food, Animals, Places, Traditions, Light and Dark, Friends and Enemies, Magic and Mystery.

**Four- to Seven-year-olds Responding to Poetry Through Writing**

When they first arrive at school, many children will have already had some experience of poetry. They will have heard television jingles, pop songs, rhymes, and snippets of verse. Some will be familiar with the traditional rhymes and rhythms of familiar nursery rhymes:

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
All the king’s horses and all the king’s men,
Couldn’t put Humpty together again.

While other children might even know variations on original themes, making use of clever, quirky words leading to a multitude of pleasures and surprises:

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall
Eating black bananas
Where d’you think he put the skin?
Down his silk pajamas

In school, children should be introduced to and encouraged to join in with the lively rhythms, strong rhymes, choruses and repetitions of modern as well as traditional material. Teachers draw on the children’s early experiences and encourage them to perform the little rhymes they know: Humpty Dumpty, Miss Polly Had a Dolly, Georgie Porgie, Simple Simon, Jack and Jill, The Grand Old Duke of York, and Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary. They read to the children regularly, encouraging them to hear the rhymes and clap to the rhythms. They present a wide range of verse, which relates to what children see and hear around them, stimulating their imaginations, enriching their vocabulary, and building listening skills. They also introduce the children to the poetry of new and inventive poets and delight them with poems about mummies and daddies, big sisters and baby brothers, snowflakes and sunshine, sand and sea, caterpillars and cats, toy soldiers and teddy bears.

In these early stages, the teacher’s aims should be to:

- encourage the children to listen attentively to the rhythms and rhymes of poetry;
- make poems important and enjoyable for them;
- use their knowledge of alphabet letters and simple words;
- encourage them to actively participate in the reading when they feel confident to do so;
• stimulate their own spoken language, encouraging them to speak with clarity, confidence, and expression;
• teach them about some of the surface features of writing, such as spelling and punctuation, stressing high-frequency words like said, see, make, come, because, him, her, when, where, with, will, look;
• help them understand how successful poems work;
• learn the terminology of poetry: rhyme, rhythm, theme;
• foster their voluntary independent reading of poems.

Children should be introduced to nonrhyming verse at an early stage and come to appreciate that not all poetry rhymes. It was with this thought in mind that I took some stuffed animals into a class of six- and seven-year-old children. I wanted these children to write poetry related to the animals, but prior to this we began to talk about the creatures: They included a mole, badger, rabbit, hedgehog, and a dormouse. We looked at each animal in turn and talked about how they had died (many of these animals had been road accident victims, and this in itself was a talking point), the colors of their bodies, their shapes, features, and anything else the children wanted to raise. Prior to starting the collaborative part of our writing, I read some poems and short descriptive extracts from stories which featured these animals. I then began to list the parts of one animal’s body on the board; the children chose to focus on the dormouse:

   eyes   ears   nose   mouth   tail   fur

The children suggested adjectives to add some description and, with me acting as the scribe, they came up with some words which were very descriptive of the dormouse—two adjectives were added to each noun:

   black round eyes
   soft flappy ears
   wet little nose
   small whiskery mouth
   thin pink tail
   soft brown fur

From further discussion, which emerged after adding like at the end of each line, a class poem was created:

   **Dormouse**
   Black round eyes like shiny beads,
   Soft flappy ear like a crumpled purse,
   Wet little nose like sticky tar,
   Small whiskery mouth like a tiny cave,
   Thin pink tail like a lazy worm,
   Soft brown fur like a carpet.
Support had been offered, but the children had effectively composed the poem themselves. They then began to work in pairs, once again helped and supported by myself, and they produced other detailed, descriptive little poems based on this approach (Phinn 1995).

**Mole**
Fat black little body like an old kid glove,
Shiny fur as soft as silk,
Sharp little nose like an ice cream cone,
Big flat paws like pink spades,
Eyes that cannot see.

**Rabbit**
Big big eyes as round as the moon,
Soft soft fur as grey as the mist,
White whiskers like bits of cotton,
Round little tail as white as the sky.

**Badger**
Bristly fur like a doormat,
Fat round body like a dog's,
Long sharp teeth like icicles,
Glistening eyes like marbles,
Black and white in the night.

**Hedgehog**
Round, spiky body like a ball of spikes,
Crinkled pointed face like an old man,
Long long whiskers like spiky grass,
A carpet of spines, a bristly brush.

A very supportive start, making use of stimulating artefacts and giving the children the chance to talk and discuss, had moved through shared writing into guided and finally independent writing. Some very creative poems to be proud of had been the final product of this piece of work. In order to help children enjoy and respond to poetry through writing, teachers can select a particular poem and:

- read it in different ways, using different voices and intonations, varying the pace and rhythm;
- record the reading and leave a taped version for further listening;
- ask the children to talk about the theme of the poem and relate it to their own experiences;
- mount a copy next to pictures and photographs of the theme;
- explore how sounds of words reflect their meaning;
- encourage the children to mime actions described;
- encourage the children to think up new rhymes and word pairings;
- ask different kinds of questions about the poem—factual questions, speculative questions, and questions to elicit personal responses;
- discuss word patterns, unusual spellings, interesting rhymes from the poem;
- provide copies of the poem for the children to work on their own readings in pairs or groups;
- use drama activities: improvisation, tableaux, hot seating, and readers' theater to explore the theme;
- encourage the children to illustrate it (or part of it) and use this as a basis for further discussions of the verse;
- cover words or short sections of the poem and ask the children to suggest other suitable words and phrases.
These activities will all help to shape children’s oral responses to poems in readiness for their written responses.

**Seven- to Eleven-year-olds Responding to Poetry Through Writing**

Encouraging older children to read and respond to poetry is not dissimilar to working with younger children; one must hold onto certain tenets, one crucial one being not to slog tediously through a poem, explaining words and phrases, before the poem has had a chance to breathe—appreciation comes before analysis. Children should be given the opportunity of hearing the full poem read, re-read, and appreciated prior to any discussion.

With a group of eleven-year-old children we looked at a range of poetry over a six-week period. I wanted to encourage them to read, prepare, and present a selection of poems, to encourage them to share their opinions about the poems both orally and in written form, and to compare a range of poetry and recognize the key differences between prose, poetry, playscript, and nonfiction writing.

First, we looked at the poem *Night* by Richard Pasco, aged eleven (1990):

**Night**

Gently laps the sea. 
Beyond the dark rocks
The black rocks glisten wet. 
Stretching shingle to the sea,
Moonlight silvers the sand, 
Patches of blue mud
And the gulls are quiet. 
And pools of silver.

Night. Ice in the air. 
Night. Ice in the water.
Trees silhouetted, stark, straight. 
Great Neptune sleeps
Branches like ragged birds, 
And in the cold, cold deep,
So still, so black. 
All is still, all is black.

The children were asked to read the poem quietly to themselves. We then read it slowly together. A general discussion followed, using four question prompts:

1. What, in one sentence, is this poem about?
2. What parts of the poem do you particularly like? Can you say why?
3. What parts of the poem do you find difficult to understand? Can we see if we can get to the meaning?
4. Have you any other comments to make about this poem?

These general questions opened up the discussion and we focused upon some of the features of this poem: the creation of atmosphere, the four-lined stanzas, the lack of rhyme, the gentle quiet rhythm which reflects the tranquillity of the scene, the frequent use of the letter “s” (sea, silvers,
sand, silhouetted, stark, still, stretching, shingle, silver, and sleeps), the contrasting colors, the choice of certain words and phrases, the use of significant detail, the repetition, and the figures of speech. As the discussion was taking place, I tried to convince these children that when responding to poetry there is “no right answer.” I constantly challenged them to justify their points of view by referring to the text and I ensured that I valued each and every contribution as it was made by making comments such as, “That’s a good contribution,” “It’s interesting you should say that...”

After our class discussion in relation to Night, the children were grouped according to ability and asked to respond to a particular poem. The material was differentiated so, for example, the most able group was asked to consider a complex, free-verse poem, Bonfire Night (Phinn 1998), and the least able group was to read and study the more accessible poem, If You Go Down to The Woods Today (Phinn 1998).

**Bonfire Night**

I remember my first Bonfire Night.
It was cold and clear and the air smelled of smoke.
My father sat me high on his shoulders to see the dancing flames
And the red sparks spitting in the air.
My face burned with heat.
And then I saw him—
The figure sitting on the wigwam of wood.
I screamed and screamed and screamed.
“There’s a man on top,” I cried, “a man in the fire!
Oh help him, daddy, please!”
And everyone laughed.
“It’s just the guy,” my father said.
“He’s made of rags and paper.
He’s not real.”
But I was sad and scared to see
Those clinging fingers of fire
Scorch the stuffed body, crackling the arms,
Those searing tongues of flame lick round the bloated legs,
And swallow up the wide-eyed, smiling face.
Now, as I stand around the bonfire,
My own child perched high on my shoulders,
I recall my father’s words:
“He’s just a guy. He’s made of rags and paper.
He’s not real.”
Yet, still I shudder at the sight of the blazing figure
Burning in the night.
If You Go Down to The Woods Today
If you go down to the woods today,
You're sure of a big surprise.
We're chopping down the trees you see,
Before your very eyes.
The pines and ash and poplars,
They all are coming down,
To make a smart new ring road,
To circle round the town.
The cedar, cherry, chestnut,
The beech and elm and briar,
We're going to pile them all up high,
And set them all on fire.
The willow, maple, alder,
The silver birch and oak,
We're going to make a great big blaze,
And they'll all go up in smoke.
The sycamore and mountain ash,
Yes, everyone must go
To be replaced by motorway,
That's progress, don't you know.
So if you've nothing else to do,
Well, why not grab a saw,
And help us build a bonfire.
Isn't that what trees are for?

The children had to consider the poem allocated to their group, using the four prompt questions they had previously used; each child was then asked to work independently and write a paragraph about the poem s/he had studied. From the simple act of reading the poem several times, then discussing the four questions in a collaborative group fashion, the children were able to respond to the poems in writing. The fact that these children were used to talking about all types of writing (poetry, prose, and nonfiction) in terms of structure, layout, imagery, and use of particular language to create effect helped them to respond to the poems in their own personal ways.

Bonfire Night was one written response to the original poem from an able girl. This response was a third draft, written after corrections:

Bonfire Night is supposed to be an exciting time. It is full of noise and colour and interesting smells. There are bangs, crackles, whooshing rockets, whizzing fireworks, sparks, flames, reds and yellows, woodsmoke, sausages sizzling, steaming soup, chewy toffee. It's a time for families and fun. But it's not like this for one little boy who goes to his first bonfire and sees a man on the top of the pile of wood burning in the night. Everyone seems to be taking no notice. It's like a nightmare for him. The figure is only the guy (Guy Fawkes) but no one has told him that it is not real and he screams to see
the body smouldering and eaten by the flames. The memory has stayed with him all his life. Now when he is a father himself and takes his own son to the bonfire he shudders at the sight of the burning guy. The poem is about the fears of childhood and how adults sometimes do not understand.

I like the way the poem uses words to paint a picture of the bonfire with its dancing flames and the red sparks spitting in the air, those clinging fingers of fire and the description of the burning figure with the scorched, stuffed body, crackling arms, round the bloated legs and the wide-eyed, smiling face.

If You Go Down to The Woods Today was written by a boy with special educational needs and his work is once again a third draft, written after corrections and teacher intervention:

This poem is about chopping down trees to make way for a road. It reminds me of the children’s song called The Teddy Bears’ Picnic. It begins in the same way. I think the writer wants you to think this. I think he wants to make you think it is a silly little song and when he has got our attention he describes something serious. He says if you’ve nothing else to do why don’t you join everyone to chop down the trees and help burn them. What I think he really means is that we should all do something to stop the cutting down of the forest and stop people ruining the countryside by building roads.

Using the four question prompts is one way of encouraging children to respond to poetry, but they can also be helped to focus on the structure of the verse and on aspects of the language by doing activities which involved reorganizing, completing, or adding something else to a piece of text. Sometimes words are omitted (cloze procedure), paragraphs re-ordered (sequencing), or a text broken into installments to aid prediction. These techniques involve drawing on the full range of reading strategies and can also be used with narrative and nonfiction material. Searching for clues in order to complete a piece of text, re-ordering jumbled sentences, segmenting (marking off key groups of phrases or sentences), labeling, grouping (putting sections of text into different categories), and rewriting the information in the form of tables, diagrams, and flow charts, encourages careful reading and develops the children’s comprehension skills.

I wanted to try some of these techniques with a class of eleven-year-old children and decided to use a poem written by Dominic, also aged eleven. The poem was presented with certain words and phrases missing and the children, working in groups, were asked to complete the two verses.

It was __________
The sun shone down on ground that was __________
Tall trees __________ like __________
_________ a __________ sky,
And the pond in the park __________

It was __________
The __________ fell on pavements that were __________
A __________ woman splashed through __________,
Pushing a __________
Past shops which were __________ and __________
One completed poem which was typical of the children's response overall was:

It was hot.
The sun shone down on ground that was dry and dusty.
Tall trees drooped like tired runners,
Beneath a summer sky,
And the pond in the park shimmered.

It was wet.
The rain fell on pavements that were silvery.
A young woman splashed through puddles,
Pushing a pram
Past shops which were warm and dry.

Each group presented their version of the poem, the differences and similarities were discussed, and, finally, the original version was read:

It was cold.
The sun shone down on ground that was iron hard.
Tall trees stood like sharp straight pencils,
Pointing to a cloudless sky,
And the pond in the park glistened.

It was cold.
The snow fell on pavements that were steely-grey.
A cold woman splashed through slush,
Pushing a supermarket trolley
Past shops which were warm and bright.

This activity really showed the children that there is no one particular response to poetry and there is certainly no right or wrong response; the reader responds to the text in the way that is appropriate for him or her at that moment in time. As Rosen (1996) states: “Writing is a very democratic form of language because it hands so much over to the reader” (p. 14).

Another activity which encourages children to discuss and examine a poem's structure is sequencing; this is where children are given jumbled-up verses, couplets, or lines, then asked to place them in an order which is understandable and interesting. Some ten- and eleven-year-olds were given the lines to the poem, I Am (Phinn 1990). Much discussion ensued and the children eventually realized that with this particular poem the meaning was not lost, whichever way the lines were organized.
The original version:  

I Am  
I am small for my age: Hi Titch!  
Thin as a beanpole: Oi Skinny!  
I wear glasses and get spots!  
Look at spotty four eyes!  
I always come top in maths!  
Listen to the Professor!  
I am me: I can't help it!

The different, resequenced version:  

I Am  
I am me I can't help it!  
I wear glasses and get spots!  
I am small for my age: Hi Titch!  
I always come top in maths!  
Look at spotty four eyes!  
Thin as a beanpole: Oi Skinny!  
Listen to the Professor!  
I am me I can't help it!

Conclusion

There are many other ways of responding to poetry and of using poems to help to develop a positive attitude in the classroom situation; teachers committed to the teaching of poetry will know and use these ideas already. If, as teachers, we try to encourage children to turn to poetry as a source of enjoyment, we must ensure that this is matched by our own professional commitment. We must know the range of anthologies available and what kind of poems interest individual pupils, and be in a strong position to advise and help in the choice of reading material. If we provide children with a variety of stimulating poems that fascinate, excite, intrigue, and amuse; that give them fresh insights; that open their minds and imaginations; and that introduce them to the wonderful richness and range of language, then we produce avid, enthusiastic, and discriminatory readers and offer them the very best models for their own writing. James had been exposed to these kinds of models. He swam in a pool of poetry at home and at school and was just eleven years old when he presented his teacher with this remarkably moving poem about his sister:

My Sister  
My little sister died last night  
In the hospital.  
She was four days old,  
Only four days old  
And when I saw her for the first time  
I don't think that I had ever been as happy.  
She was so small and crinkled  
With big eyes and soft, soft skin,  
And a smile like a rainbow.  
Her fingers were like little sticks  
And her nails like little sea shells.  
And her hair like white feathers.
Now she's gone.
And my mum can't stop crying
And my dad stares at nothing.
I loved our baby.
And I'll never forget her.

References
Thank you for sampling this resource.

For more information or to purchase, please visit Heinemann by clicking the link below:


Use of this material is solely for individual, noncommercial use and is for informational purposes only.