

NORTHROP FRYE APPLIED IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM

By

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To be invited home to Canada, my first country, to speak about a Canadian hero, is indeed the highlight of my academic career. How did this come about? Perhaps it was because the organizers of the Festival discovered that my doctoral dissertation was an attempt to apply certain of Northrop Frye's ideas to the literacy development of young children. Or maybe it was because they heard that I was a certified Small Frye, the name Peter Yan, himself a devoted Small Frye, uses to describe fans and followers of Frye. Certainly I qualify as a Frye fan. In fact, when I defended my doctoral dissertation at Columbia University's Teachers College, a committee member actually accused me of hero worship. I was astonished at this scholar's ignorance, for *heroic*, even *Herculean*, are surely words that would come readily to minds familiar with Professor Frye's accomplishments.

More recently, my dentist chatted to distract me from the pain he was inflicting. He asked if I had anything exciting going on in my life. When he let up long enough for me to speak, I explained that I was participating in the annual Northrop Frye Festival in Canada in April. He recognized the famous name but was uncertain why it was famous. "A writer?" he ventured. Yes, you could say that, especially if you added that Frye published more than 30 important books. But even calling Northrop Frye a writer would be a gross understatement unless you added that he wrote memorable, accessible prose that often soars toward poetry. Alvin Lee (1994, xxv) puts it well when he says "There is

a pervasive sense that the writings of this man are at once so wide in their reach and implications, and contain so many brilliant insights and nuggets of wisdom aphoristically expressed, that they will need to be returned to over and over again.” Yes. Amen. But just how does one adequately describe this remarkably erudite humanist and the published legacy he left us?

“Don’t try to compare Frye with other critics,” warned my musician husband who is a Small Frye in his own right. “He is a group of One.”

Harold Bloom (1987, 62), himself with a carefully cultivated reputation as a literary critic, calls Frye “the major literary critic in the English language.” But even *literary critic* has too narrow a connotation. A.C. Hamilton (1984, 4) draws attention to the many aspects of Frye’s critical thought, calling him “a social-cultural-religious critic.” Eminent Frye scholar, Robert Denham (2004, vii), describes Frye as “one of the most expansive and visionary critical minds of the last century.”

Frye wrote extensively and with a shaping effect on the development of Canadian culture, particularly the country’s literary culture. But he also wrote about education. He explained how fine imaginative prose and poetry not only educate the imagination but must become the child’s first and foremost teacher of reading, writing, and articulate speaking. And he gave instructions as to how the study of literature, he called it criticism, should proceed from the earliest years.

The depth and breadth of Frye’s scholarship was evident last spring at the University of Ottawa’s symposium on Frye to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the publication of *Anatomy of Criticism*. We heard learned discourse on the key terminology used in his works, on his critical principles, on film studies and Frye, Bakhtin and Frye,

Frye and history, Frye's religious thought, and ruminations declaring that Frye changed his mind over his lifetime concerning some of his critical principles. Even the most learned scholar, though, cannot convince me that Professor Frye changed his mind about very much. Or needed to. Last and not least, his views on education were examined, but briefly, a disappointment to me, since I believe that what he said about early education is rare wisdom with present and future relevance.

It is Professor Frye's ideas about education and how literature ought to be studied in the elementary and high school that concern me most and what I will speak about today along with selected accounts of their application.

In my experience, literary theory is slow to trickle down to have much effect on practice in early education. As an approach to literary studies, where they occur at all, reader response has been for some time the vogue in elementary school. Educators have embraced what seem to me to be the easy, simplistic and obvious tenets of reader response such as: "Individuals bring their own life and literary experiences to the understanding of a literary work" or "There is no single valid interpretation of a literary work." From my observation in elementary classrooms, what passes for reader response seldom goes beyond chatting as readers share personal reaction to a text.

Professor Frye makes it clear that criticism, the study of literature, begins after the personal lived-through experience of a literary work is complete. And this study ought not to be limited to the close reading of a text, the method of study that prevails still in high schools and in elementary schools, too, where poems and stories are considered from a literary stance and not as mere vehicles for teaching the so-called "reading skills."

Frye advocates that teachers provide a deductive framework to guide the students as they discover, through carefully chosen examples, the conventions that make literary and sub-literary imaginative structures work (Frye was no literary snob). And for Frye, a major part of this framework involves not shredding each work through endless questions about content but a stepping back from this poem or that novel to see how each relates to other works in the order of words that is literature as a whole..

The truth is: whether the vogue is to approach texts from either a New Critical or a reader response stance, from the perspective of feminism, Marxism or whatever, there is in none of these approaches to literary studies a sense of how the imaginative use of words connects in story, poetry, even popular songs and advertisements. Frye's approach to literature study is unlike any other. But what is important to emphasize is this:

Northrop Frye's theory of literature does not supplant other approaches; it provides an umbrella for them. Peter Yan (2002,3) a high school teacher who successfully applies Frye's ideas in the classroom, puts it this way: "Frye's writing is the operating system adaptable to any platform, the ultimate shareware, the great code which builds on old programs and allows you to write new ones."

Northrop Frye's revolutionary and unique vision of a synoptic theory of literature is described fully in his groundbreaking *Anatomy of Criticism*. The ideas in this benchmark book, among them the assertion that we could talk about literature on its own terms, centering its study on principles to be found in literature itself, rather than on philosophy, psychology, or history and cultural concerns, has been met by some—mostly literary critics yearning for fame- with skepticism in post-structuralist, postmodern times.

But detractors often criticize Frye out of ignorance, from a partial reading or misreading of his work. As Robert Denham (1974, 2) comments, “Frye has often been oversimplified, distorted and attacked. Much of this has resulted, I think, from a simple failure to understand. Much has resulted too from the prejudice of opponents whose biases have precluded objectivity.”

Professor Frye never wasted his time and energy arguing with other academics. He simply wrote on, insisting upon and demonstrating the validity of his ideas. “The order of words is there, and it is no good trying to write it off as a hallucination of my own,” he declared. “The fact that literature is based on unifying principles as schematic as those of music,” he went on, “is concealed by many things, most of them psychological blocks, but the unity exists and can be shown and taught to others, including children” (1976,118). From experience, I know this to be true.

Frye in fact put forth this schematic, systematic overview as, in his words, “A scaffolding to be knocked away when the building [literary criticism, he meant] is in better shape” (1993, 14). But will it ever be anything but a great hodge-podge of conflicting ideas and the clashing of enlarged egos? Probably not. But my sense is that over time, far into the future, Frye’s ideas are destined to prevail.

Certainly, literary criticism has never lacked for theory but it *has* lacked an encompassing theory and Frye was the first critic since Aristotle to attempt one in a field as he himself put it “where there is much endeavor and little attempt at perspective” (1957, 3). All critics may not be ready, however, to embrace his comprehensive take on literature. Ideas about the nature of language and concerns about how literature represents cultural issues such as feminism are currently the fashionable subjects of criticism.

Out of current fashion or not, his ideas fully embraced or not, since the 1940s, when Frye first published, his work has never been ignored. At no time has there been a lack of dissection and discussion by scholars and interested lay people at home and abroad.

Interviewed by Imre Solusinszky for his book , *Criticism in Society*, critic J. Hillis Miller complained that he found annoying the emphasis on Frye in articles he received while editing a literary journal over many years. After discussing Frye and his ideas at length in his *own* interview in Solusinszky's book, Miller complained that the emphasis on Frye by other critics interviewed in the same book was excessive and probably unwarranted. Solusinszky wryly counters at the conclusion of the interview: "Well, [he tells Miller] I'm glad that a series of interviews in which Frye has been overemphasized has ended with a long discussion of Frye" (Solusinszky, 1987, 240).

If Frye did lose a favored place on the literary stock exchange in the 1980s, he couldn't have cared less. He simply wrote on. Nor did thinkers who admired his mind care if he'd fallen off the slippery pedestal of literary studies. In an email communication in March 2002, Frye scholar Robert Denham informed me that Frye's work is currently available in more than 21 languages. More than half of these translations took place between 1992 and 2002. During this period there were held a dozen or so international conferences and two dozen new books devoted wholly to Frye's work.

Nor has this interest waned since 2002; indeed, it is interest in cultural criticism that has begun to wane. Translations of Frye works and conferences on Frye continue internationally. Kernels of wit and enduring wisdom from Frye's voluminous notebooks have been selected and published by Robert Denham, He calls the volume, *Northrop*

Frye Unbuttoned because here we have a hitherto unrevealed human dimension of Frye as well as further examples of his “wit and brilliance revealed in notes on literary matters, musings on religious beliefs, and aphoristic speculations on a broad range of topics” (Denham, 2004, dust cover copy).

Shortly after Frye’s death in 1991, plans were begun for a collected edition of Frye’s writing and speeches. Generous funding by those who recognized the worth of the project made possible the extensive work that has led to its near completion. In May 2007, twenty-two volumes of a thirty-volume collection were in print, five more were in press, two manuscripts were about to be submitted for reviewing and the final volume, a cumulative index, was building steadily. One volume, a collection of interviews with Frye, came off the press this month.

At 51, *Anatomy of Criticism* shows no signs of old age. Nor do any of Frye’s other key works. Young scholars with minds of their own pore over their pages. Students I have introduced to *The Educated Imagination* as a Frye primer are stunned by its eloquence and insights. Meetings such as this one and the Northrop Frye Symposium in Ottawa last May draw small Fryes and Frydolators, learned academics and less learned lay people like myself to discuss words of power by a man for all seasons.

As Salusinszky and Boyd wrote in 1999: “In an academy more sensitive to the whims of [the literary stock] exchange than it likes to pretend, genuinely distinctive voices are rarer and more valuable than mere superstars and founders of schools. Frye’s cheerful indifference to the demands of fashion, his willingness to embrace heterodoxy and slaughter a sacred cow or two, is one of the things that makes his voice so distinctive- and so indispensable” (Salusinszky and Boyd. Eds. 1999 xxii, xxiii).

That is what I believe and teach. I take what I consider to be indispensable about Frye's ideas and apply them in the college classroom with teachers in elementary and middle school. In turn, they take and apply them as they guide the children's literacy development.

Northrop Frye gave me, a junior high school English teacher turned doctoral candidate, a revolutionary way to think about literature. It was the late 1960s at Columbia University's Teachers College and I needed a focus for my doctoral dissertation in English education. My chosen area of study was early literacy development through children's literature.

At that time, in elementary and middle schools, a misguided distinction was made between literature and reading. Full attention then was paid to *how* children read, not *what* they read. Drills on so-called "reading skills" were administered through specious basal readers containing mediocre material written in "controlled vocabulary" and thick workbooks crammed with often inane or dull reading-related exercises, all apparently designed to kill a child's desire to read.

Outstanding works of children's poetry and prose were relegated to the outer edges of this curriculum as a decorative frill, shared occasionally as read-alouds when time permitted but excluded from any systematic study or even regular inclusion in programs to develop literacy. The potential of fine literary works to motivate children to read and indeed to *teach* them to read and write through the art of their own words was largely ignored. There was then, and still is, relatively little empirical research on which prose facilitates the development of readers and writers. There are *no* such studies of consequence on how poetry relates to early literacy development.

The education community, especially administrators in charge of curriculum, insist upon evidence from studies, preferably empirical, as a basis for practice. Never mind that these studies are often flawed. Many suffer from mistaken notions about what is the most suitable material to teach beginning reading. Genuine literature, poetry in particular, continues to struggle for a place in the literacy curriculum.

Of course there are data to support the hypothesis that the best literature and the love of words it engenders does foster reading and writing. Read the biography of any successful writer and you will find ample evidence. Poet and playwright, Eve Merriam, growing up in Philadelphia, reports attending there every D'Oyly Carte production of Gilbert and Sullivan. The polysyllabic playfulness of the rhymes and rhythms in these operettas echo in Eve's poetry together with the tumbling word clusters of Gerard Manley Hopkins, a poet she read and reread. Those familiar with the sonorous cadences of Dylan Thomas's poetry are not surprised to hear that his father, a schoolmaster, from the time Dylan was a toddler regularly read aloud to him from Shakespeare. Versatile children's writer, Jane Yolen, visited Andrew Lang's gravesite in Scotland to thank him for providing the books of fairy tales that she says, made her a writer.

Good teachers seem in my experience to have an intuitive grasp of this truth. They know that literature must partner with them in motivating children to read and teaching them how to write. They have discovered through experience, common sense and knowledge of children that the expensive canned schemes and programs created by the reading industry are often based on false or misleading premises. These ideas include the notion that fragmenting reading experience through inane drills of so-called sequential skills is the way to develop literacy. The reading pundits insist that suitable early reading

material must be dumbed down, or, in their unfortunate parlance, *leveled*, that is written in vocabulary deemed appropriate for a learner's age. As though children can't meet a challenge! Good teachers know they can. I preach the gospel according to Frye to counter the false teachings of the reading industry. Professor Frye's blistering critique in the 1960s of Harcourt's *Adventure* series of basal readers gives me the authority to rail against mediocre reading schemes.

In an interview with me February 23, 1970, Professor Frye said: "As you read and write from the basis of literature, eventually you realize that there is a difference between learning to read and write at the minimum standards of literacy and being able to write with some power of articulateness and to read with some sense of direction. **So the teaching of literature is the teaching of reading and writing.** And what you're aiming for here is the transfer of imaginative energy from literature to the reader."

This transfer certainly can never come from a textbook or workbook filled with mediocre text but it does come when the emotions and imagination are engaged with wonder and delight at what words can be made to do, as in the prose and poetry of *Alice in Wonderland*, say, or the verse of A.A.Milne and, to use more modern examples, tales of Harry Potter and verse by Shel Silverstein. Without an early goosebump experience caused by the written word, children are unlikely to be keen to read. Literacy after all must begin in hearts not heads.

Frye's belief in the inherent power of story to teach is borne out by limited but significant research by noted educators such as Margaret Meek in Britain, Frank Smith in Canada and Kenneth Goodman in the United States. Listening to quantities of stories has been found to be the best preparation for reading them independently. Immersion in stories

is essential to the growth of a child's sense of what stories are and how they are made: their recurrent conventions, patterns, and even their use of language and imagery, as distinct from language in other forms of discourse. As the child's sense of story develops, so does the ability to predict and comprehend. Further, research shows the influence of well-wrought stories is manifest in the increased stylistic richness of a child's own writing

Professor Frye makes this point in his own well-chosen words:

The young child can be introduced to the myths, fairy-tales, legends, Bible stories, which are central to our imaginative heritage because all he needs to do to comprehend them is to listen to the story. This is not a passive response, but a kind of imaginative basic training....As he grows older and his literary experience increases, he begins to realize that there are a limited number of possible ways of telling a story, and that he is already in possession of all of them. Hence he has, not only a sense of the structure of storytelling implanted in his mind, but a potential critical standard as well...
(Frye, 1988, p.54).

For my doctoral study, I wanted to show that one who appreciated and understood the wonders of great writing and its appeal to the imagination and the emotions could at the same time learn to discuss poems and stories objectively. In those days talk about literature was sentimental. I called the typical reverential discussion of it, "the hand on the heart approach." I wanted to make the point that, after a child has learned to decode words, his teachers of reading and writing must be qualified literary works, not the methods and materials of the latest fad created by the reading industry. I needed someone

to corroborate my conviction, formed through years of personal and professional experience, that reading, hearing and responding to the best of imaginative literature rather than laboring over workbook exercises *about* reading, is the only route toward true literacy: a state of becoming where individuals read fluently, independently and because they want, even *need*, to do so. Well aware that I needed quantities of help before I could articulate or even confirm any of my ideas, I read literary criticism in bulk. No one talked about literacy development through literature.

Then, by fortunate chance, I stumbled on the February and March 1969 issues of *Monday Morning*, a magazine from Canada for teachers, containing interviews of Northrop Frye by Bruce Mickleburgh, a Canadian educator. Frye was talking directly to my interests and concerns. He said that literature, an art form, could not be directly taught like a skill such as driving a car. He said we study literature through response to it after we have first experienced the work as an entity. He said response could and should be varied: we could write, dramatize, paint, draw, create comics, make home movies. But we should respond to art with art. He had much more to say and it all made sense. I searched out his books and articles and read every word. His idea that the principles governing literature were to be found within literature itself, his sense of literature as an order of words, could make possible an objective look at how literature works and how literary works interrelate. I was fascinated. And excited.

But, I fretted. Should a former elementary and junior high English teacher have the audacity to make this distinguished scholar a collaborator for my doctoral paper? Probably not, but it was at least worth a try. I drafted a proposal for a dissertation on the place of literature in a child's literacy development in which best practice would be based

upon Frye's literary and educational theories. I wrote asking Professor Frye for an interview as brief as he needed it to be. He graciously granted me three interviews and set no time limits.

My doctoral committee recognized in the end that I was applying a hero's ideas to education and they passed my paper. Later it was published as *The Child as Critic* by Teachers College Press and is now in its fourth edition.

In 1972-73, because of my connections with Dr. Frye's work, I had the good fortune to work with others on a series of anthologies and handbooks from Harcourt titled *Literature: Uses of the Imagination*. Dr. Frye was the general editor and the series was a brilliant application of his theories of literature. They are structured to allow students to discover the principles of literature as Frye delineated them. They were in print for many years and I'm told by Robert Denham that full sets of the books are owned and still used by discriminating teachers today. True classics do not die. I certainly have used my set as I have attempted, for 30 years, helped by my students—all teachers-- to put Northrop Frye into elementary and junior high classrooms.

In graduate classes in literature and literacy development in the Division of Education at Queens College of the City University of New York, I share with teachers aspects of Frye's revolutionary way of looking at literature. Using these ideas, I encourage the teachers to build for themselves a deductive framework to guide the children's inductive learning about how literature works. We also take seriously what he says about the primacy of poetry in literacy development and develop strategies for best classroom practice based upon his ideas.

Frye once declared that “the only guarantee that a subject is theoretically coherent is its ability to have its elementary principles taught to children” (1963b, 33) Both children and teachers, once a deductive framework is in place to guide the teacher, can easily induce from their reading and listening to stories that likenesses unite literature. This intertextual study I call Reading for Connections. The notion of intertextuality fits well with Frye’s belief that in order to ultimately understand what literature as a whole is about, the reader/critic must “interpret every work of literature in the light of all the literature he knows” (1963a 44).

We learn all things by making connections, by constructing new knowledge from what we already know. All imaginative verbal constructs, whether literary or subliterary such as comics, advertisements or pop songs interrelate. Educator Robert Scholes echoes Frye when he says: “We need to help [our students] to see that every poem, play and story is a text related to others, both verbal pre-texts, and all manner of post-texts...” (1985, 20). Awareness of relationships among works of literature gives children a broader notion of imaginative literature and a greater sense of its significance than they would otherwise have, as they typically, when they consider literature at all, examine only the content of stories and poems through desultory classroom discussions.

Literary works are unified through their likenesses, similarities discoverable in recurrent character types, plot patterns, themes and imagery. The more we read, the more obvious it becomes that literature is not merely a collection of unrelated poems and stories. Although created centuries apart, Hercules and Superman are recognizable as the same character type, the hero with magical powers. The helpful talisman in the form of an invincible weapon or invisibility cloak aids the ancient heroes of classical Greek

myths and modern heroes like Harry Potter. Imagery like wastelands and gardens occurs in the Old Testament and in folksingers' ballads. That love is more powerful than evil or even death is a theme in stories as different as the old tale of "Beauty and the Beast" and E.B. White's contemporary story, of *Charlotte's Web*. In television advertisements a brave and virtuous Mr. Clean defeats his evil adversary, Dirt. The character of wise teacher or mentor recurs with regularity down the centuries, in a past time as Merlin and in our time as Yoda of *Star Wars*.

"All stories in literature are developments of fundamental fictional shapes which can be studied most clearly in myths and fairy tales," Frye wrote. (1963b, 45). In discovering the truth of this statement, graduate students, and ultimately their grade school pupils are asked to recall and consider all the fairy tales and myths they have encountered through reading, viewing, listening and discussion. Then they are asked to respond to this statement: Folk and fairy tales contain blueprints for all stories that come after them. Older students usually realize on their own that it makes sense to first identify the conventional elements or motifs common to folk and fairy tales; younger students may need a suggestion from the teacher.

Students brainstorm to identify patterns that they have noticed recur in this traditional literature. Through shared inquiry they establish a list of recurrent patterns such as the following, which is gleaned from the work of students from grade one to graduate school.

Story plots frequently feature journeys or quests. The quester often endures trials and testing. . Typical protagonists are well-intentioned and considerate; often they are underdogs. The quester may have helpers, sidekicks

who might even be animals, and who exist only to assist the protagonist. Other characters are for the quest or against it; often there is an evil or powerful adversary who thwarts questers as they struggle toward their goals.

In any given cast of characters, there might also be wise men or women, tricksters, buffoons or simpletons. In reaching their goals, questers use their own resources but on occasion they may make use of a talisman or amulet. A wise man or woman or a supernatural being may offer help or advice to the quester.

Tricksters usually are on the side of good.

There may be transformations, literal or psychological. The old stories feature loss and recovery, rescue from evil, righting of wrongs, rewards for good or courageous behavior. When forces of good and evil clash, good typically triumphs. Plots usually a happy or satisfying ending. In folk and fairy tales wishes are plentiful and they can come true.

Recurrent settings are identified and they may include forests, highways, oceans, islands, towers, castles, wastelands, and gardens. The numbers 3 and 7 recur in the old tales. Three brothers will undertake a series of three tasks, for instance. Weather and the seasons play a part in setting and plot. Quests, for example, often begin in spring, in “the merry month of May.” Great trials may take place in winter or in rain. The success of a venture frequently occurs in spring, the time of rebirth, or in high summer.

Once these lists are determined, young students draw upon their reading, listening and viewing and discuss the recurrence of literary elements found both in myths, folk and

fairy tales, in modern fantasy, and—more of a challenge—in realistic contemporary stories, films and television shows. Playing this intertextual game not only has obvious intellectual value but it also helps the students to see how literature works. Here a few examples from a study in reading for connections conducted with fifth graders in PS219 Queens, New York City.

The following was based on William Steig's picture book, *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* (1969) In the story, a magic pebble he found in the fall causes a young donkey, Sylvester, after an ill-conceived wish, to transform into a rock. In the following spring, his parents happen to picnic at this very rock.

Sara said: This story tells of loss and recovery. Sylvester is lost when he turns into a rock, but his family gets him back to himself at the end. Jason said: This book is a good example of transformation. Sylvester turns into a rock and back again into a donkey. Jared adds: And the transformation is because of a talisman, the magic pebble. Rachel adds: And a wish, don't forget. Sylvester's mother wishes he was with them and he turns from a rock into a donkey. Jason puts in: Sylvester gets rescued in the spring when the leaves come out and flowers are just starting to bloom.

A reading of Maurice Sendak's *Higglety Pigglety Pop!* (1967) elicited these comments.

Jared says: The little dog, Jennie, leaves home on a quest because she's discontented. She says there's more to life than having everything. Alex says: This whole story is like a dream. It doesn't make much sense. Dori tells him: Well, it's like that in fairy tales. Lots of the stuff in them couldn't really happen. Things keep changing their shapes, just like they do here. In "Cinderella" the pumpkin turns into a coach and mice into horses. Here Baby turns into Mother Goose. Sara adds: There's a shapechanger in the old TV show, Deepspace Nine. Jared chimes in: And in one of the ads on TV motor oil turns into a tiger. Alex has an insight: Jennie has her worst time when she's lost in the forest. That's a folktale thing. Remember Little Red Riding Hood? Sara comments: There's no villain in the story. Lisa says: Well, the lion seems like a villain to Jennie. Dori asks: Would you say that Jennie's black bag is a talisman? After some thought the children agree.

It is more difficult to make connections between the old tales of fantasy and a modern realistic story. But the children managed with Katherine Paterson's *The Great Gilly Hopkins* (1978). Abandoned by her mother, Gilly has lived unhappily in a series of foster homes, always cherishing the vain hope that her mother will come to claim her.

Jared starts: Gilly doesn't go on a journey, but she has a quest. She wants to find her mother and live permanently with her instead of in foster homes. Sara puts in: In a way, her foster mother, Trotter, is like the wise

woman in fairy tales, don't you think? She's on Gilly's side and gives her good advice. Jason says: I think there's a transformation in this story. Gilly doesn't change into something else, she stays a girl. But she changes inside. In the beginning she fought against how things were in her life. But in the end she accepts what she can't change. Once she wouldn't have done that. Jared adds: Gilly doesn't get tested so much. But she makes things happen. You know, she takes chances . Dori asks: Is Gilly a trickster character or just a brat? Jared says: Same thing

For decades I have introduced the teachers in my graduate classes to Frye's comprehensive theory of literature, with particular emphasis on the insight that all stories are displacements from myth and fairy tale to modern realism. I caution that these ideas are not meant to be directly taught to children. Knowledge of them provides the teachers with a deductive framework from which they can help the children to discover for themselves the major characteristics and conventions of stories. The reading for connections program is a concept easily grasped by young scholars. Examining literary and sub-literary works in relation to each other, noting their similarities and relationships provides a sense of the broad scope and significance of the art of literature, of its unity and coherence as a whole and, as insight into what literature is and how it works develops , there comes an understanding of how art in words extends far into the popular language of the world.

Professor Frye had much to say about poetry and literacy development. Some of these wise words are found in the *The Well-Tempered Critic*. "Ideally," he writes, "our

literary education should begin not with prose but with such things as “This little pig went to market”—with verse rhythms reinforced by physical assault. The infant who gets bounced on somebody’s knee to the rhythm of “Ride a cock horse” does not need a footnote telling him that Banbury Cross is twenty miles northeast of Oxford...all he needs is to get bounced. If he is, he is beginning to develop a response to poetry in the place where it ought to start. For verse is closely related to dance and song; it is also closely related to the child’s own speech” (1963c, 25).

He goes on: “Poetry, the main body of which is verse, is always the central powerhouse of a literary education. It contributes, first, the sense of rhythmical energy...It contributes too, as the obverse of this, the sense of leisure, of expert timing of the swing and fall of cadences. Then there is the sense of wit and heightened intelligence, resulting from seeing disciplined words marching along in metrical patterns and in their inevitable right order. And there is the sense of concreteness that we can get only from the poet’s use of metaphor and visualized imagery. Literary education of this kind...can do something to develop a speaking and prose style that comes out of the depths of personality and is a genuine expression of it” (Ibid.,27).

In the essay, “Elementary Teaching and Elemental Scholarship” Frye wonders why the rhymes, jingles and songs children already know are not their first reading material and therefore their first models for writing rather than basalized prose basal readers. He wonders why educators, in teaching children both to read *and* to write, fail to capitalize on the young child’s propensity for and delight in riddles, conundrums, tongue twisters, rhymes and puns (1970, 95-97).

Frye insists: “In teaching youngsters to write, you throw a dead language at them and ask them to decipher it. And I think the obvious way to teach a person to write is to listen to the way they talk and try to give some shape and direction to that talk as it goes on. [In the foreword to my book, *The Child as Critic*, Frye talks about a young child’s natural fascination with words.] “There’s a great current of verbal energy that comes out of any child,” he says, “and the thing to do is direct that, not to lead him into a sort of rat’s maze of subjects and predicates and objects before his time. . .” (1990,13).

For Frye to declare that “Poetry is always the central powerhouse of a literary education” is always news to the majority of elementary educators. In elementary and middle school poetry and verse are typically relegated to the periphery of the curriculum and treated as an unnecessary frill. Because poetry is not taken seriously in either the classroom or the culture at large, few studies have been undertaken on its motivational potential for making children take an interest in reading and writing words or on its role in developing facility in language. Without the quantitative data from experimental studies so revered by educators, administrators in particular, poetry and verse are given no major role in the reading business.

Since the early 1980s I have taught to elementary and middle school teachers pursuing a master’s degree a course I developed under Professor Frye’s influence. I call it “Literacy Through Poetry, Verse and Wordplay.” Not a great believer in the validity of controlled experimental studies in schools—far too many variables--- I require my students to conduct our own brand of action or ethnographic research in their classrooms. Many children dislike poetry, often because they know little or nothing about it. The teachers administer a survey to their pupils to determine attitudes and knowledge about

poetry. Then they design a treatment accordingly, one that will further knowledge and change attitudes about poetry by presenting it in ways designed to preserve delight and destroy drudgery.

Over many years, my students and I have discovered that planned, intensive effort to use and not abuse poetry in the classroom, even over the short span of a few weeks, has marked results in increased knowledge, changed attitudes and, to some extent improvement of language skills, although significant improvement in reading and writing of course requires more time than just a few weeks. But, at the very least, one of the main goals of the course is *always* achieved: every teacher reports that their students show an increased interest in written language and new enthusiasm for reading and writing.

At the end of the treatment, the survey is again administered to the children. A child who at first wrote, "Poetry is too hard to read" now says "Poetry is words leaping off the page." Another who said initially that she liked nothing about poetry; after the learning sequence on poetry, writes: "What do I like best about poetry? It lets your thoughts explode in words."

At the beginning of the project, few children report checking out books of poetry and verse from the library; after their classroom experience, most report that they have favorite poets and search library shelves for their work. Evaluating her project, undertaken with second graders, one teacher wrote: "I see that what they and I have done together has caused a new spark in us, a new interest in reading and writing words." Full reports of teachers' work with poetry and children from kindergarten through ninth grade may be found in my book, *Give Them Poetry!*

I like to think that Professor Frye would be pleased with the work I and my students undertake. He complained that abuse of poetry in elementary and secondary classrooms arose from teachers' failure to show children or actually to *agree* with children that poetry is a direct, forceful, natural even primitive form of utterance and not something perversely obscure and difficult.

Frye and others, the poet Kenneth Koch among them, hear young children's spontaneous alliterative chants and taunts, observe their love of puns and riddles and their penchant for metaphor and describe them as natural poets. The Russian poet, Kornei Chukofsky (1968, 64) supplies fine examples of the young child's intuitive grasp of metaphor. "It was a pleasure to find out from kids," he writes, "that a bald man has a barefoot head, that a mint candy made a draft in the mouth, that the husband of a grasshopper was a daddyhopper."

Although he claimed no firsthand experience in teaching children to read and write Frye , without doubt, had an uncanny intuitive knowledge of how the task must proceed. His keen interest coupled with his general erudition makes what he had to say on the subject both inspirational and immensely practical.

Helping children toward literacy becomes an increasingly challenging enterprise in a world where many children prefer, over books, other intriguing handheld devices that play games and deliver DVDs. One respected study of fourth graders in 1985 revealed that reading occupied less than 1% of children's free time (Andersen, 1985, 77). In 2008, this finding would surely be confirmed. And as to writing, children may excel over adults at texting but there is cause for concern: Will they ever be able to write a school paper in standard English? Writing cannot develop without reading.

The psycholinguist, Frank Smith, another wise Canadian scholar, has famously and accurately declared in his writings and speeches: “We learn to read by reading.” Workbooks full of remedial reading-related exercises are not the kind of reading he meant. What he had in mind are fine works of fiction, memorable poetry and engaging books of information, read with relish inside and outside of school. Taking a keen interest in the printed word is always the first step in learning to read, a cumulative process that develops over a lifetime.

Professor Frye had no patience with educational fads and fancies. In developing literacy, he knew and demonstrated the only viable way toward literacy—through immersion in genuine literature. He honored me immeasurably by writing the Foreword to the 1975 edition of my book, *The Child as Critic* and I close with a quotation from it:

“The author makes clear from the beginning her opposition to what she calls the “skills and drills” approach [to literacy development] which frustrates and stunts all genuine imaginative growth. Emphasis on skills tries to be efficient: It regards learning to read as a largely mechanical operation, to be taught with the least waste of time by repetition of familiar words, adding new words as facility is gained. The argument for such teaching seems extremely plausible, and has only the flaw that the human mind, which always begins as a child’s mind, is simply not built that way. Consequently such an approach is not merely immoral and anti-intellectual, it is also miserably inefficient.”

(xiii) Amen.

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