

# On Poetry and Recitation

How often should poetry be read with students each week? How often should recitations take place each year? What should be recited? These are some very common questions about how and in what way poetry and recitations should be handled.

Four big questions that I had were: Should we use anthologies for our poetry readings or is it better to study a select number of poets and study only these in one year? How should recitations be handled, especially with very young children who are early or non-readers? How is reciting a poem different from memorizing it? Are illustrated volumes of poetry better than minimally/non-illustrated volumes? The latter question I will spend more time on in another post.

These questions have been taking a great deal of time and research to answer. There are contradictory answers and, in fact, in some of these contradictions still abound. Consequently, when the information we have available to us is inconclusive and hazy in specific details, it is important to then lean heavily on the foundational principles which make up the curriculum.

## Poetry

### **How often should poetry be read with students each week?**

In this curriculum, poetry is to be read aloud once per week and the recitation selections are to be read twice per week. In Year Six, students are reading poetry twice per week and will be studying recitation work four times per week. As the curriculum grows, and each subsequent year is added, then more time allotments will be added, since the number and type of selections will also increase.

### **Distinguish between poems to be read, poems to be studied and poems to recite.**

Poetry is scheduled in every year, with the expectation that some of this poetry will be read for pure enjoyment, especially in Form I. By Form II many poems will still be read for enjoyment, but some poems will be studied in greater depth. This approach will carry on into all of the upper form levels. Poems to be recited will be divided into two sections: 1) poems chosen by the student and 2) poems selected for this

curriculum. The latter poems are poems which have been carefully selected to build upon the literary base needed for a liberal arts education.

### **Who reads the poems...the student or teacher?**

It is expected that most students in Form I will have their poems read aloud to them. Students in Form II and up can read their poems independently, as able. Be careful with Form II students, since those in the earlier years of it may still need some help with this.

Also, it is assumed that many students in the upper years still enjoy reading poetry aloud. This can be a joint effort between the teacher and the student(s). Poetry, like drama, is particularly beautiful when read aloud. This is why recitation is included: reciting poetry trains students to read aloud beautifully. This, in turn, increases their appreciation of poetry and increases their ability to find the truth, beauty and good in it. This goes all the way back to the foundational principles of this curriculum.

### **Should poetry selections be taken from anthologies or should these selections be taken from a concentration of selected poets? If the latter, how many poets should be studied?**

These particular questions have caused me some frustration over the years. It seems that this could be approached in several different ways. Ambleside Online, my first introduction to Charlotte Mason, has consistently felt that poetry should be studied by selecting one poet each term. This was to better acquaint students with one person's style, ensuring a deeper connection between author and student. This is consistent with the ideas behind studying one new composer, artist, Shakespeare play and Plutarch selection each term. I've found some direct quotes from primary resources to support this idea, something I'd been trying to find, and I'll include them below:

From Ms. Mason's *Formation of Character* (Vol. 5):

*"Collections" of poems are to be eschewed; but some one poet should have at least a year to himself, that he may have time to do what is in him towards cultivating the seeing eye, the hearing ear, the generous heart.*

And from the *Parents' Review* "Books"

After much praise for Miss M. A. Woods poetry books: *A First Poetry Book*, *A Second Poetry Book* and *A Third Poetry Book*, we are cautioned with this comment:

*May we utter one word of protest-the dissipation of flitting from chalice to chalice should only be an occasional treat; should not a single "poet" be the study of a year until he becomes a dear and intimate friend, a guide and teacher in the ways of life? But the poet we mean a child to love should not be studied with a view to any examination.*

This brings us to the follow-up question: How many poets should be studied?

It seems, from these quotes, that the Simply Charlotte Mason approach of studying only one poet each year fits better. The advantage, of course, is in how deeply students can attach to one poet. The disadvantage is in how few poets overall can be studied with this approach. It also works against the students who feel no connection with a chosen poet. To spend an entire year studying a poet that does not "speak" to them could lead to frustration.

Studying 3 poets each year allows for deep connections to specific poets, but also gives variety to students. It also allows for a fuller representative study of poets and their poetry. Time has only continued to move forward, giving us even more poets to appreciate and study than was available in Charlotte Mason's time. Even Ms. Mason acknowledged in *Formation of Character* that in her time "There is no space to glance at even the few poets each of whom should have his share in the work of cultivating the mind" (Mason 225).

### **Why are anthologies of poetry even considered part of the question?**

The search for indications in Charlotte Mason's writings and PNEU articles over whether to use anthologies or specific poet studies came about after studying many PNEU program samples. These programs indicated that children could choose their poem from anthologies or volumes of collected poems from many different poets. This was especially true in Form I. In Form II, this option to choose a poem from an anthology still held, but, often, historical ballads and poems were meant to read. These, too, were often chosen from anthologies.

After studying several programs in a row (#111-116), I found that although specific poets were not always named, there was the assumption that teachers should choose

poems which fit the time period being studied, beginning in Form II. This would reduce the number of choices for poet study. And this took place every term, so studying 3 different poets is not so far from representing the PNEU programs.

However, several poets are included multiple times in the programs, suggesting that they were considered good choices for intense study: Tennyson, Scott, Longfellow and Macaulay. These poets might be good for that “year” study that was mentioned in earlier quotes. Alternatively, you could cover these poets more than once over the course of following the 3 per term per year scope. 3 poets per term for 12 years means a study of 36 different poets-poets such as Tennyson and Longfellow could be studied twice (rather than once) in this list of 36 poets. A Mind in the Light uses Longfellow’s shorter poems in Year Three, but begins to include his longer poems in Years 5-7. Tennyson is studied twice as well with a focus on his poetry in Year Five and *Idylls of the King* in Year Nine.

In conclusion, the study of 3 poets per year roughly matches what was being studied in PNEU programs, with one exception: Form I. It seems that using an anthology would be just as effective as choosing 3 poets to study each year.

### **Should poetry readings be narrated?**

Narrating after listening to poetry read aloud or after reading poetry offers students the same benefits that narrating after prose selections give. These can be very informal; a very brief oral narration or a short discussion afterwards should suffice, especially in the younger years. You might also choose to have your students discuss or narrate only one poem, rather than all of them, since typically more than one is scheduled to be read. Occasional alternate narrations, such as dramatic and artistic interpretations of a poetry reading, are also very beneficial in building narration skills and poetry interest and appreciation. This is about allowing the students to share how they’ve connected to the poetry.

Upper year students will spend more time on narration, discussion and reflection upon poetry, including the exploration of literary terms as they apply to the specific poem of study. Literary terms will be studied in ways to expand on the appreciation of the poem and never at the expense of enjoying it.

## Recitation

### What will be recited? How many recitations per year?

In this curriculum, Form I will study 6 poems per year, except Year Three which includes “The Star Spangled Banner”. This means that each student will study 6 poems in a year or 1 poem every six weeks. This allows for students to learn each poem over the course of 11 time slots, reciting the poem on the 12<sup>th</sup>.

If your students need to have the recitation piece read more often, then please give them more days per week for this, removing a selection as needed. If your student needs less time, then please feel free to add more recitation pieces. This, like in the PNEU time tables, should take approximately 10 minutes each time.

Form II will study more poems per year, with additional selections, such as excerpts from the *Gettysburg Address* and Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech.

Forms III through VI will study 6+ poems per year; 2 excerpts from Shakespeare and 2 excerpts from speeches and documents per year.

Note: With a firmer understanding of Charlotte Mason and the PNEU approach to teaching poetry and recitation in place, I will be expanding the selections for study in each Form in this curriculum. I hope to add more specific historical poems, suggestions for patriotic and folk songs and suggestions for study in foreign languages. I will also share some additional selections specifically for those who simply need more.

In the PNEU programs, students studied hymns, verses/passages from the Bible, Psalms and a poem. Typically, students in Form I were allowed to choose a poem from some suggested anthologies. By Form II, students were sometimes allowed to choose a poem from an anthology, but often historical poems were suggested for study.

The PNEU tables show Form I working on recitations for about 10 min. -3 times per week; Form II -5 times per week and Form III -6 times per week. Students in Forms III and up also began to study poems in other languages, starting with a French poem.

### Typical Form I Recitation-Each Term

- Passages from the Bible
- Psalm
- Hymn
- sometimes a Christmas carol
- Poem from anthology

### Typical Form II Recitation-Each Term

- Passages from the Bible
- Psalm
- Hymn
- Shakespeare lines or 1-2 historical poem(s) of period
- sometimes a Christmas carol

### Examples of historical poems:

- Lay of the Last Minstrel-Scott
- Hiawatha-Longfellow
- Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington-Tennyson
- A Ballad of the Fleet-Tennyson
- Lays of Ancient Rome-Macaulay
- Saga of King Olaf by Longfellow
- The Charge of the Light Brigade-Tennyson

Note: In this curriculum, religion has not been included so as to allow all families to practice and follow their faith as best fits their family. I would not wish to presume to know what faith and practices are best for your family. Choosing these resources and creating schedules based on them closes doors to some families. There is no real way to allow this curriculum to be open to all families and make these choices.

Because I have not included religion, I have not included hymns, Bible verses/passages and readings from Psalms as part of the recitation work. Instead, students will study more poetry, including historical ballads and lyrics, patriotic and folk songs, excerpts from speeches and documents, excerpts from Shakespeare, foreign language selections and other selections.

If your family wishes to add songs and selections based on your faith, then please do so and feel free to remove whichever of the selections are included to make room for this. Also, families from other countries should substitute patriotic and folk songs which represent your country, as well as any other needed substitutions.

## **Distinguish between recite and memorize.**

On the surface they seem the same, but reciting and memorizing have differences. Building the skills needed to speak aloud, bringing the auditory beauty of a speech, song or poem to life for both the listener and the speaker is the emphasis in reciting. Having acquired the ability to know a specific sequence of words in the correct order is the emphasis in memorizing. The difference is in the purpose. You can memorize something and never have any intention of presenting it. Recitations and memorization differ in their end goals and, therefore, in their process.

The process of preparing a recitation gives students many opportunities to hear and appreciate the selected piece, allowing them to absorb its message, its ideas and, consequently-through repetition-its words. Students will often have the selection committed to memory after these many repetitions. Since the focus is not on memorizing it, the students are not stressed in the process.

Charlotte Mason addresses this emphasis in *Home Education*, she writes: “The gains of such a method of learning are, that the edge of the child’s enjoyment is not taken off by weariful verse by verse repetitions, and, also, that the habit of making mental images is unconsciously formed” (Mason 225). She goes on later and writes: “Recitation and committing to memory are not necessarily the same thing, and it is well to store a child’s memory with a good deal of poetry, learnt without labor” (Mason 226).

The end goals for reciting a selected piece are not only in teaching students how to present in front of an audience, but also in giving them beautiful works with which to connect. These selections will become a source from which they can draw from over and over again. The selections chosen for recitations are transferring their ideas-rich and living ideas-to become part of that which creates knowledge for them. Again, we must go back to the foundational principles: ideas are necessary for a true liberal education.

Arthur Burrell, author of the *Parents’ Review* article “The Children’s Art” as well as *Clear Speaking and Good Reading* was often looked to for guidelines in the art of reciting. He is referenced in the following quote from Mason’s *Home Education*:

*The child should speak beautiful thoughts so beautifully, with such delicate rendering of each nuance of meaning, that he becomes to the listener the interpreter of the author’s thought. Now, consider what*

*appreciation, sympathy, power of expression this implies, and you will grant that "The Children's Art" is, as Steele said of the society of his wife, "a liberal education in itself."*

Recitation is for bringing beautiful works to our students to incorporate as part of their knowledge base, to train students to share these works through presentations and to increase their appreciation for the beauty and power of words; these are the end goals. In the process of achieving these end goals, students will have committed a great deal to memory.

### **How Do We Handle Early or Non-Readers?**

From *Home Education*, we read "...the learning of the parable of the Prodigal Son, for example, should not be laid on the children as a burden. The whole parable should be read to them in a way to bring out its beauty and tenderness; and then, day by day, the teacher should recite a short passage, perhaps two or three verses, saying it over some three or four times until the children think they know it. Then, but not before, let them recite the passage. Next day the children will recite what they have already learned, and so on, until they are able to say the whole parable" (Mason, Vol. 1).

In summary:

- Read the selection aloud beautifully.
- Day by day, the teacher should recite a short passage from it (2-3 verses).
- This passage can be read several times until the children are ready.
- Have the children recite this passage.
- Each day they should recite what they know and then add the new section on to it.

### **Should poetry readings, even those to be recited, be prepared?**

To fulfill the purpose of gaining knowledge through recitation, it is important that the students fully understand the selected pieces they will be reciting. Preparing the recitation piece should be similar to preparing any other poem or literature selection-unknown words and places should be made clear and narrations should follow the introductory lesson of the poem or recitation piece. These narrations can be oral narrations with discussion to follow, especially for younger students. Older students may also benefit from some variations in written narrations.



Arthur Burrell gives us some advice on the importance of preparing a recitation piece in his *Clear Speaking and Good Reading*. His book focuses most often on children who can read their own selected passages; these quotes will reflect that. Here are some quotes from his book:

*Now, reciting, as it is here understood, is only the proper repetition of prose or verse without book and without conscious effort of memory. The first thing necessary, therefore, is that the prose or verse should be learnt (89).*

*Therefore NO CHILD SHOULD BE SET TO LEARN BY HEART WHAT HE DOES NOT UNDERSTAND (89).*

*Children should not usually be asked to read a passage aloud until they have had sufficient time to master its general meaning by silent study (155).*

Mr. Burrell also contributes to our understanding of recitation in his *Parents' Review* article "The Children's Art". Here is a summarizing list from that article:

- (1). *Be very careful about pronunciation.*
- (2). *Let pieces be learnt bit by bit, after a careful explanation has been given.*
- (3). *The child must stand to read. Other positive rules come in here.*
- (4). *A piece once learnt must be occasionally repeated.*

### **How should a recitation be conducted?**

It is important to allow students to recite the poem with their own nuances in articulation and emphasis and to not require them to take on your own spoken version of the piece. This is, of course, working with the assumption that the students are still expected to recite their pieces as correctly as possible; it is only the accent details and other personalization of the piece to which we are referring.

Young children, who cannot read the pieces for themselves will need to have them read aloud, but do so in an articulate and rhythmic manner, but without over dramatization or over-emphasis. This will allow young students to hear the piece read clearly and appropriately, but will still leave them room for their own interpretation of it.

In *Home Education*, Charlotte Mason writes: "...the child is led to find the just expression of thought for himself; never is the poor teacher allowed to set a pattern—

‘say this as I say it.’ The ideas are kept well within the child’s range, and the expression is his own” (223-224).

This again underscores one of the main principles of a Charlotte Mason education: allow students to connect to the knowledge in their own manner and, in turn, express it as they have connected to it. This is also a reminder of the importance of not putting selections which are not accessible to the age in which it is given. We should not expect a Year Three student to understand a piece by Milton and therefore we should not expect this student to recite one. Giving this student this piece would lead to stress, frustration and a lack of real understanding (and therefore real connection) and this would not in any way endear poetry or the act of recitation to said child.

Also, while it would be more manageable for recitations to be a group effort, it is better for students to work individually at their own level. Mr. Burrell did not encourage children to recite as a group and this was supported by Mason and the PNEU. The PNEU programs show that children were often given choices in what they wished to recite (again underscoring the desire for the selection to be one of which the child has connected). It would have made group recitations prohibitive since each child would be reciting something different. Some exceptions might include coming together, after some individual time has been spent, to sing patriotic and folk songs together. For those who include religion, there may be exceptions in this as well. Ultimately, do what works best for your family, but keep individuality in mind as well.

Note: Because this aspect of recitation is clearer to me now, I will make adjustments in the daily schedules to better reflect that recitation study is an individual rather than a group/family event. I do understand that for those who wish to combine their students as often as possible this removes something from that list. I’ll have to spend some time looking at this more to see if I can find ways to simplify the process of recitation, but still stay within the appropriate boundaries of core principles.