

BOOK EXTRACT: THE IMPORTANCE OF POETRY

*from 'The Harp and Laurel Wreath – Poetry and Dictation for the Classical Curriculum' by
Laura M. Berquist (1999, Ignatius Press, San Francisco ISBN 0-89870-716-1.*

It is a temptation for a person who is home schooling children to save fine arts appreciation for days when religion, english, mathematics, science, history, geography, literature, and penmanship are all finished. The problem, of course, is that all of these things seldom get done. Therefore the introduction of beautiful pictures, great music, and excellent poetry remains an activity to do 'some day'.

This is a mistake, because the appreciation of fine arts is formative for the soul. The old adage 'You are what you eat' could be changed truthfully to say 'You are what you see and hear'. The models in one's imagination and memory become a part of the soul and affect all the rest of life.

If the soul holds good, true, beautiful, noble and heroic images, it will be inclined to love those things. Additionally, since whatever is true is also beautiful, an appreciation of the beautiful prepares the way for an appreciation of the true. If children love the beautiful they will be disposed to love the truth, *as truth*, when they are older.

We should foster in our children a love of the beautiful and true and a corresponding distaste for what is ugly and false. Children's sense of beauty can be encouraged in various ways; those of us who are home schooling may include beautiful art, music, and literature regularly in our curricula, in ways that are appropriate to the various stages of the intellectual formation of the child.

Poetry is one of the forms of the beautiful that is relatively accessible to children. Children respond to patterns of sound and enjoy the rhythm of poetry, if they are introduced to it before someone tells them they shouldn't like it. Poetry is naturally pleasant to the ordinary child, and pleasure is a sign teachers and parents should never ignore.

Children are very good at imitation because it is the way God intends them to learn. We need to keep this in mind for all areas of our children's development, moral *and* intellectual. Children need models of right behaviour and of excellence in all the scholastic areas that are appropriate for them to pursue. The right use and richness of language is an area that is most appropriate for the formation of children. For this reason they should be exposed to the best examples of the use of language that we can give them. Beautiful word patterns and sounds, the right choice of words, and methods of producing particular responses can be imitated by children who have had good models. Language development is significantly enriched by exposure to good poetry.

Additionally, in all of the fine arts, one of the chief benefits of appreciation is seeing the world through the eyes of the artist. His gift of observation is given to the student when the work is studied. It is as though the artist said, 'Look, here is something really beautiful that I saw and want to share. Perhaps you missed it.' For this reason a painting can be better than a photograph in drawing the viewer's attention to certain aspects of a particular scene, for example, the lighting or the composition of the figures. Similarly, poetry can be a better way to draw attention to certain truths or make some fact of an experience stand out. Excellent poetry will both direct the student's attention to these aspects of reality and model the best way to share that experience.

Also, poetry appeals to the emotions, as does music, and, like music, beautiful and rightly ordered poetry can habituate or train the soul to the right kind of internal movement. Familiarity with truly good poetry will encourage children to love the good, to hope for its victory, and to feel sad at its demise. The opposite habituation is very clear to see in children

who watch or read stories in which the grotesque is taken for granted. They cease to be shocked by what is really disgusting. That is a great loss to the soul.

(This book contains an extensive selected of classic poems recommended in 'Designing Your Own Classical Curriculum' also by Berquist. It is arranged by age categories, corresponding to her view of the Classical approach to education, and includes dictation selections which are useful tools in the development of a child's writing ability.)

FRET NOT THYSELF

By Amy Carmichael

Far in the future
Lieth a fear,
Like a long, low mist of grey,
Gathering to fall in dreary rain:
Thus doth thy heart within thee complain.
And even now thou art afraid, for round thy dwelling
The flying winds are ever telling
Of the fear that lieth grey
Like a gloom of brooding mist upon the way.

*But the Lord is always kind.
Be not blind, be not blind
To the shining of His face,
To the comforts of His grace.
Hath He ever faileth thee yet?
Never, never. Wherefore fret?
O fret not thyself, nor let
Thy heart be troubled,
Neither let it be afraid.*

Near, by the footfall,
Springeth a joy,
Like a new-blown little flower
Growing for thee, to make thee glad.
Let thy countenance be no more sad,
But wake the voice of joy and health within thy dwelling,
And let thy tongue be ever telling,
Not of fear that lieth grey,
But of little laughing flowers beside the way.

*For the Lord is always kind.
Be not blind, be not blind
To the shining of His face,
To the comforts of His grace.
He hath never failed thee yet.
Never will His love forget.
O fret not thyself, nor let
Thy heart be troubled,
Neither let it be afraid.*