

THREE MONTHS AT THE LABORATORY SCHOOL

by
Langston Hughes

PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE

Before coming on March 1, 1949, to the University of Chicago's Laboratory School as Poet in Residence, my contacts with groups of young people over any extended period of time had been limited to a winter of the teaching of English to business academy students and preparatory school girls in Toluca, Mexico, and to a semester at Atlanta University where I gave seminars in poetry and conducted a group in Creative Writing on the college level. However, for twenty years I have been reading my poems before groups of young people from kindergarten children to adults; and often, especially in the rural South, before audiences combining the entire age range from pre-school youngsters through high school. I have talked to hundreds of grammar, high school, and college assemblies throughout the country. But never, before coming to the Lab School, had I worked with Creative Writing students below the college level.

-I-

CREATIVE WRITING

It was agreed that at the Laboratory School my Creative Writing groups would be voluntary, no compulsion, no grades, and open to all upper grade (7-10) students who might wish to come. About eighty registered and came to the first weekly group sessions. But when the Spring Quarter began, a change in schedules reduced the numbers to about sixty. Most of them came regularly, but a few in the High School did not attend every meeting, being free to come or not as they liked.

Ten groups according to grades were formed from the 6th^(added later) through the 10th grade, meeting weekly during study periods, with an after school group for those who could not fit into any other. An opportunity for individual consultations were offered and with some degree of regularity about a dozen students came for such consultations. But most of the students limited their participation to group meetings, and to writing at home.

METHODS OF GUIDANCE

My first talks and discussions with each group were designed to indicate to the young people the pleasures that lie in individual creation----not in imitating anyone else but in making one's own world in words on paper; in pointing out the difference between objective, factual, journalistic writing and individual, personal, creative writing; indicating the differences between fact and fiction, verse and poetry; and how in the wonder of creation each sea shell, each animal, each tree, and each person is different; ~~and~~^{So} if each person writes as he is, his writing is bound to be different, individual, and therefore interesting.

Picking at random from the daily paper any factual account of an accident, a murder, or some such news item, we examined its possibilities as a basis for fiction or poetry if used imaginatively, creatively. We considered our reactions had we known any of the people involved in the news story. Group discussion brought out that each person saw different possibilities, felt differently about the happening, and each if on the scene would have had a reaction different in some way from the rest of us.

Then at the end of our first talks I gave my first and only writing assignment explaining to the groups its two purposes: (1) to use facts creatively and (2) to enable me to see, since we were strange to each other, how each would use words. The assignment was to take as a subject one's home, one's neighborhood, one's street, or one's city and write about it in any form desired, poetry, verse, narrative, or fiction; in other words, to begin with something one knows well, since even fantasy must spring from known facts.

Each student was also asked to indicate the fields of writing in which he wished to work most intensively during the Spring. These were quite varied, ranging from factual and editorial writing to poetry, short stories and scientific fantasy. Since it was not possible to further sub-divide the ten groups of young writers, succeeding sessions were devoted to topics which might be helpful in various broad fields of writing, such as Humor in Writing, Methods of Working, Getting Started, Use of Dialogue, Simple Plot Construction, Writing as Communication, As Personal Expression, Advantages of Poetic Prose, Use of Visual Words, Moral Obligations in Writing, Various Ways in Which Writers Collect Ideas, Helpful Books to Read, etc.

A portion of each group meeting was devoted to the reading, discussion, and group criticism of the week's manuscripts. No student was required to read his work to the group, and those who did not wish to do so received personal comment and criticism privately from the teacher. But most of the young people liked group reading sessions and felt that each other's comments were helpful. Those manuscripts which seemed to need revision (and most of them did) were returned to be polished up and brought back the following week. A number of them

did not come back to me. One of the problems of guidance in creative writing is, I believe, to instill in the young the discipline of revision and the desire to stick with a good piece of work until it is as good as the writer can make it.

The younger children seemed to me more spontaneously creative than the older children; and had to think less hard in order to get ideas for writing. Broad suggestions on the part of the teacher as to possible subjects for writing, I discovered as the weeks went along, seemed to help many children get started who had complained that they "couldn't think of anything to write about." However, those who showed most talent in writing seldom needed suggestions as to subject matter. Almost all the children brought in their "home-neighborhood, street-city" assignment. But, left on their own for voluntary choice of subject matter, many who came regularly to the groups brought no other finished piece of work during the remaining weeks.

The 6th grade group wanted to work only on rhymes and poetry. We did practice rhymes in the group meetings, reading them aloud for criticism to detect and correct false rhymes and bad rhythms. At our last two sessions the whole group worked out a practice-verse play. It was pointed out that seldom is serious writing done in groups or in a room full of people, and that, if the spirit moved them, poems should be put down quietly at home. Some did write at home, and a few lovely little poems were brought to class as a result.

To my regret, my schedule did not permit me to visit the kindergarten with any regularity. But our few story-making half hours and moments of practice rhyming with the five-year-olds were most ^{rewarding} ~~most~~

The little ones were never at a lost for words, or story ideas, or what came next.

Due to the time lost by vacations and changes in schedules and re-organizing of groups, most of the youngsters attended only seven or, at the most, eight group meetings. But 67 completed manuscripts came in to me by May and were rexographed. Seeing their work typed gives the writers a more objective eye for its defects. And if it could be printed, that finality would show how much better each might do next time.

EVALUATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Aside from the pleasure of personal achievement and the fun of creating, writing may have, I believe, for some adolescents a ~~prere~~ psycho-therapeutic value in that, unconsciously and by indirection, they may get down on paper some of the things that trouble them--- and thus relieved, live better, freer, less confused lives. It would seem to me that words being so direct, might have a greater value in helping young people see themselves clearly than do paints or music.

Eight weeks is much too short a time to be of any real help to young people seeking to express themselves in writing. It is hardly enough time for teacher and students to become accustomed to and at ease with each other, or to develop an understanding in which so intimate a thing as a poem may be discussed sincerely and frankly. Eight weeks is just about time to begin to understand a student's trends in writing and his possibilities for development. So I suggest that the next writer in residence remain for at least a full quarter, or better still, an entire year.

It would also seem desirable perhaps after eight or ten weeks, to be able to work more intensively with students who show definite

talent, and, if possible, to permit them to have a bit more time for individual consultation and creation. A school literary publication (or a page in the school paper devoted entirely to creative work) might be desirable, also, as an outlet for student work. Creative writing as a part of the regular English classes undoubtedly has its value. But a freedom beyond that possible in a class---freedom for ungraded and entirely individual expression would certainly be rewarding to some young writers. Therefore, just as there are special people in art on the staff, it might be desirable for the Lab School to have a permanent writer in residence.

-II-

THE NEGRO THEME IN AMERICAN POETRY

Since the field of American Negro poetry is the one I know best, during the month of April I gave four seminars on the Negro theme in our poetry as expressed by both Negro and White poets from Colonial times to the present, linking this theme to the general stream of American poetry and its changes in poetic patterns and content. I tried to show how almost all the great American poets from Longfellow, Lowell, Whittier, and Walt Whitman to Lindsay, Carl Sandburg, and Karl Shapiro have written about the Negro and the racial problems in our democracy.

I tried to show how poetry does not grow out of a vacuum but out of life, and is related to its times. To that end, a brief historical background prefaced each period---the birth of a new nation two hundred years ago with its paradox of human slavery; the Reconstruction period with the Negro's struggle for education and democratic rights; the Prohibition and Depression periods between World War I and World War II with the problems of Negro life shown as segments of much

more general problems affecting everyone; and finally our contemporary post-war, post-Roosevelt period. Indicated were the folk influences on poetry---folk verses and folk songs merging into the minstrel music and that of Bland and Stephen Foster, up to the blues and jazz of today.

The poems chosen to read aloud for the students were selected not only on the basis of representing adequately their authors, the subject matter and the period, but also on their attraction for the ear. Many poems, particularly of contemporary poets, do not project well when read aloud. This factor, it seems to me should be considered when reading poetry to young people ~~who~~ who must be kept awake in order to absorb information. An attempt was made to relate almost every poem used to incidents in the poet's own life and to relate his life to the historical period in which he lived so that life, history, and poetry would emerge as one in the student's mind. Just as Walt Whitman wrote about the problems and potentialities of our democracy because he felt so deeply about them, so did Negro poets write about the problems and limitations of our democracy as it affected their lives through slavery, disfranchisement, lynchings prejudice, slums, and job discrimination. The tie-up between poetry and social studies, art and sociology, was indicated from 1746 to the present.

Specifically, as the ~~sketch~~ outline indicates, our study of the poets was divided into these four groups:

1. Colonial Period through the Civil War.
2. Civil War to World War I.
3. World War I through World War II.
4. World War II to Our Contemporaries.

The basic reference anthologies to which the students were directed are:

THE POETRY OF THE NEGRO
Hughes & Bontemps
Doubleday, 1949.

THE NEGRO CARAVAN
Brown, Davis, Lee.
Citadel Press, 1941.

GOLDEN SLIPPERS
Arna Bontemps
Harpers, 1941.

Records of Vachel Lindsay's THE CONGO and James Weldon Johnson's Negro sermons in verse from GOD'S TROMBONES were played. Pictures of some of the poets were displayed. As much poetry as possible was used by Chicago poets and about Chicago where the students live, the desire being again to relate poetry to life within the student's local understanding. This attempt was greatly aided by a visit from Gwendolyn Brooks, distinguished young Chicago poet and author of A STREET IN BRONZEVILLE, who read and explained the back-ground of her poems to a 10th grade seminar. Attendance was limited by the seating capacity of the available auditorium, so all the young people could not see and hear Miss Brooks.

The seminars were given for the 7th, 8th, 9th, and 10th grades, divided into six groups meeting each once a week (four weeks in all) for a single period. To cover two hundred years of American poetry in less than four hours, left little time for questions and discussions in the seminars, but individual teachers followed up as they wished with group discussions and further comment. It is regrettable that the Laboratory School does not have an assembly room of its own which might hold several classes at a time. This would have eliminated the necessity of repeating the same seminar six times weekly and would

questions and discussions.

-III-

POETRY ALOUD

Each Friday morning with one of Miss Rusk's 8th grade classes, we had a half hour of Poetry Aloud. Selected around a single theme every week, the young people brought poems to read. I also made a brief selection. Some of the subjects around which selections were grouped were:

Nature
Animals
People
Historical Events
Humorous Subjects
Religious Subjects
Love and Death

Reading clearly and simply was an aim---poetry as communication and enjoyment. Discussions brought out the various forms of poetry, the differences between verse and poetry, rhymed and free verse, and narrative, dramatic, philosophical, and mood poems. The young people were intrigued by Gertrude Stein. Records were played of Miss Stein and Robert Frost Reading their own poems. We also saw two antiquated film strips of Poe and Walt Whitman, of value chiefly as comedy since they were evidently made about 1910 and quaint in both conception and costuming. To these the children made up soap-opera theme-music although, when heard apart from the film strips, they had the deepest respect for the poems of Poe and Whitman.

From the reading aloud of the poems of others each week, the young people went on to the writing and reading of their own original compositions in class.

-IV-

THE BASIS OF JAZZ

With Mr. Erickson (and the use of his excellent modern America record collection, and the Library of Congress Alan Lomax Folk Song Recordings), we conducted once a week a record seminar on the basis of jazz, from the folk music of the deep South and the jug and tramp bands with their improvised instruments to the best of the modern commercial arrangements such as Benny Goodman and Artie Shaw.

Discussion and comment by the class, Mr. Erickson and myself, brought out the value of freedom and originality in folk expression and how it might be used in more disciplined and formal patterns, and of what value this folk expression---originally largely Negro---has been to American popular music, dancing, and general enjoyment.

-V-

RHYTHM PROJECT

Under the Unified Arts department, I participated in a Special 8th Grade Creative Project on Rhythm as expressed in human life, nature, and art, and its various forms of communication through athletics, the dance, the motion picture, photography, the graphic arts, music, and the spoken and written word. The students chose their own working groups and a week was devoted to exploring the various forms of rhythm. My group of four students devoted their time to Rhythm in the Spoken and Written Word, mostly as related to humor, producing limericks and nonsense verse to be read aloud. During the following week two demonstration programs were present showing the results of the various studies and activities. (See the demonstration Program and the Unified Arts Summary).

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VISITING CLASSES

On invitation I visited various classes and groups in both the lower and upper school, reading my own or the poems of others, or talking on whatever subjects the pupils requested, usually as related to my own literary activities in publishing or the theatre, how poems are written, how books are published, or else my travels to various lands, Africa, China, Russia, the Carribean. I also read my poems at an assembly for the upper school in Mandel Hall.

With each group I attempted to relate poetry to every day living, to show how the things one does become materials for creative writing, and to indicate how pleasant an adventure writing can be. In the classes there was always time for questions and discussion by the pupils.

-VII-

OUTSIDE ACTIVITIES

Through the courtesy of the Laboratory School and as time permitted, I was available for various appearances in the University community and elsewhere in the city. These appearances included a reading of my poems at the Harriett Monroe Room of the University Library, a talk relating my poems to our American sociological background for the Humanities Department of the University in Mandel Hall, a poetry evening at the Hall Branch Library, an evening with a Woodlawn district writers group, two poetry forums at Monumental Baptist Church, a talk on the writing of poetry for the Writers Workshop of Parkway Community Center, an appearance at the DuSable Community Center, a program of my poems at St. Edmund's Parochial School, and another at the armory for the Girl Scouts of District 14, ^{and} a program

on the use of poetry with children for the Education Department of Roosevelt College.

SUMMARY

My regular program at the Laboratory School when all groups were finally scheduled consisted of:

CREATIVE WRITING.....10 periods weekly
NEGRO IN POETRY.....6 periods weekly
POETRY ALOUD.....1 period weekly
BASIS OF JAZZ.....1 period weekly

During the free periods I visited classes, the Senior Kindergarten, or consulted with individual creative writers.

This schedule did not leave any time for my own creative work--- which is not serious for a short period. But I suggest that if a Writer in Residence is invited to the Laboratory School for a longer period, the schedule be a lighter one in order to allow the writer time for his own writing which is, after all, the thing that makes the writer of unique value to the students--the fact that he is a practicing writer living and working in their midst.

MY THANKS

For me personally the three months at the Laboratory School--- March, April, and May, 1949---have been full of interest, revelation, and a re-affirmation of my faith in American youth. I am deeply grateful to the Director for inviting me, and to the teachers and staff who have been most patient, kind, helpful, and encouraging to one who is only an amateur teacher. Particularly am I grateful to Mr. Henderson for his aid in the details and scheduling of the Creative Writing groups; to the English faculty and to Miss Janecek, the librarian, for invaluable help in relation to the American Poetry seminars; to Miss Merrick

and her typing class for rexographing most of our Creative Writing papers for us; to the office staff for help in many ways; and to Tom White in the Visual Aids Room at Judd for making available its resources to my classes. I have never worked anywhere with a more cooperative group of people.

The students I found delightful, attentive, and courteous in every way. A few in the Creative Writing group, less than a dozen, seemed to be there more for appreciation than for writing---but perhaps eight weeks is not enough to stimulate some to creative action. And these few, although they turned in not one written word, came regularly. In the Seminars, I have never seen more attentive students. On my visits to various classes I was intrigued by the maturity of the questions asked by many of the pupils, even little youngsters. So my impressions of the Laboratory School are good ones. And, from my limited experience with schools, I would say its students have more initiative, freedom of expression, and independence of thought than any I have known before..There is about the school a sense of fun in learning. Certainly for me, it has been most enjoyable being a Poet in Residence there.

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READING OUTLINE

COLONIAL PERIOD
through
THE CIVIL WAR:
(1746-1865)

LUCY TERRY
PHILLIS WHEATLEY
FRANCES E. W. HARPER
JAMES EDWIN CAMPBELL

WHITTIER
LOWELL
LONGFELLOW
WALT WHITMAN

CIVIL WAR
through
WORLD WAR I:
(1865-1918)

PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR
WM. STANLEY BRAITHWAITE
JAMES WELDON JOHNSON
GEORGIA DOUGLASS JOHNSON

THE MINISTREL SONGS
STEPHEN FOSTER
VAGHEL LINDSAY
WILLIAM ELLERY LEONARD

WORLD WAR I
through
WORLD WAR II:
(1918-1946)

CLAUDE McKay
FENTON JOHNSON
JEAN TOOMER
COUNTEE CULLEN

CARL SANDBURG
DU BOISE HEYWARD
WITTER BYNNER
KENNETH PORTER

WORLD WAR II
to
OUR CONTEMPORARIES:
(1946-1949)

MARGARET WALKER
GWENDOLYN BROOKS
ROBERT HAYDEN
LANGSTON HUGHES

KARL SHAPIRO
KENNETH PATCHEN
SELDEN RODMAN
ST. CLAIRE McKELWAY

BOOKS
Anthologies:

THE NEGRO CARAVAN
Brown, Davis, Lee

THE POETRY OF THE NEGRO
Hughes & Bontemps

GOLDEN SLIPPERS
Arna Bontemps

Individual Poets:

COLLECTED POEMS
Paul Laurence Dunbar

ON THESE I STAND
Countee Cullen

FOR MY PEOPLE
Margaret Walker

THE DREAM KEEPER
Langston Hughes

STREET IN BRONZEVILLE
Gwendolyn Brooks

POWERFUL LONG LADDER
Owen Dodson