

English Literature in our Schools.

A paper read by Aaron Perry, M. A., at the Carleton County Teachers' Institute.

The subject of English literature in our schools is a broad and important one. It is not my purpose in these few minutes to outline any well-defined method by which a lesson in English literature should be taught, but simply to throw out a few general hints and suggestions about our literature and its place in the schools; and also to outline in a general way a course in literature, which should be taken up by our teachers.

My paper will be simple, practical and I hope helpful. It shall be my aim, to say something to help those teachers, who have the problem of school teaching to solve in the large ungraded country schools.

The importance of English literature in our schools is admitted by all educationists. It is given an important place in the public school course. It is one of the important subjects on all college and university curriculums, and what is more noteworthy is the increased attention, which it is receiving every year, by the large universities and centres of learning in the great nearby Republic. At such centres as Yale and Harvard the number of students who are specializing in English literature is increasing every year. It is one of the few compulsory subjects on the High School course in the United States.

Thus the importance of English and the necessity for its having a very large place on our curriculum is established. We can see its importance, and every one of our boys and girls ought to be well-armed, as they go forth from our schools. Their vocabulary of English should be large.

The most important thing in our education, is to make our pupils think, and then to express these thoughts in the best English. We get our best English from the great authors who have lived, and who are living, who have bequeathed and are bequeathing to their posterity this rich heritage. And yet it is a sad fact, that so few of our young people have an appreciative value of the really best literature. We are a reading people, and our boys and girls are going to continue to read, when they leave the schools. I wonder what per cent. of them have been so trained, that they can go to the nearest stationer, and make the proper selection of poetry and fiction.

A vast quantity of literature is being projected upon the reading public today, some of it doubtless must be good, much of it certainly is objectionable, of little or no educational value whatever.

Go into any book store with me and look over the list of cheap and popular fiction. You will find such writers as Chas. Garvice, Bertha M. Clay, The Duchess, and scores of others. Would it be fair to say that the title is highly suggestive of the character of the book? If so glance over the titles.

The question naturally arises, are these books of any value as an educational force? Do they educate, do they elevate? If not a reform surely is necessary. It is plainly our duty as teachers and especially as teachers of English literature, to do all in our power to cultivate the best that is in the boy, so that he shall love the good and beautiful, the upright and pure in our English. If so, his reading will not become distorted, as he goes from us, but he will seek and select the best and brightest gems in our literature.

Perhaps I am making our responsibilities as teachers of English literature too great. But does not the future reading of the boy depend largely on the taste he gets for literature in the schools? We can do much; but results would be much greater, if it were not for the limited time, and the already overcrowded curriculum. In many of the larger country schools, the literature is a subordinate, and is taught in conjunction with the reading lesson. Doubtless all the subjects on the curriculum are important, the science as well as the literature, the mathematics as well as the science.

I would like to quote a criticism of one of the American professors in English literature. Take it for what it is worth. He claims that their educational system insists upon the careful training in mathematics or physical sciences, subjects comparatively easy and remote from life, yet leaves literature, most difficult and vital of all subjects to take care of itself.

You will all agree with me, that we ought to spend much time in our schools in teaching our literature as literature.

To the great majority of you, the English literature used, comes directly from our Royal Readers; and it is especially of these, Nos. 3, 4 and 5 that I wish now to speak. Most of my studying and teaching in the public schools has been in connection with the old readers. For them I still have a profound admiration, and love to return again and again to their worn pages. I will remember when the new readers appeared how great a consternation they created among the teaching fraternity, more than once have I sat in institutes and listened to criticisms harsh and severe.

Since taking up the work of teaching again, and coming into direct contact with the read-

ers and having recently examined them most carefully from a literary standpoint, you will certainly permit me to make my criticism. The province is to be congratulated on having placed in its schools such a select list of literary productions. Our readers from the English point of view are superior to the old readers.

In the first place we find that the best in the old readers is placed here for us, so we have lost nothing there.

2nd. They are modernized. By that I mean that many of the 19th century poets are found here.

3rd. They are Americanized and Canadianized if you will. We find selections from some of our modern American writers, such as Lowell, Bryant, Whittier, Irving, Holmes and Riley, and also as we would expect from Longfellow. Then we have selections from our own writers, Roberts, Chas. Sangster, D'Arcy McGee and others. In reader V. are found selections from some of our Canadian statesmen, as Joseph Howe, McDonald, Tipper and Laurier. Surely this is a need in our schools. I would that many of our Canadian writers were represented; as we have no mean class of writers in this country. One of the Yale professors in English literature in an article to one of the American encyclopaedias of recent date has spoken most favorably of the Canadian literature. He is certainly a competent judge.

4th. Then again we have selections from many of England's recent writers, as Robert Louis Stevenson, Kipling, Leigh Hunt, Tennyson as the great 19th century master is given a prominent place. We here find some of his brightest and best poems, while there are a few of his select poems which perhaps might have appeared, yet on the whole the pupil ought to be able to catch the Tennysonian spirit.

The great contemporary of Tennyson in the last century as you well know was Robert Browning. During the first part of the century and as a young writer, his lamp shone but dimly, it flickered more than once, and the severe critics tried hard to extinguish it, but Browning lived, and is today standing with Shakespeare, Tennyson and Milton, as one of the great literary geniuses of the centuries. The Browning societies in England and in this country are every day ennobling his poetry by their devotion. And yet many of our children are growing up, with but a vague idea of this poet. If they have heard of him at all, it is only that he is an inexplicable, incomprehensible being, who wrote only for the sage and scholar.

In looking over the readers I find that only four of his works appear viz:—"An Incident at Ratisbin," "The Pied Piper of Hamelin," "How they brought the good news from Ghent to Aix," and "An Italian in Italy." In reading these four poems the pupil gets no true conception of this man as a writer. Although there is much in Browning that is hard to understand, yet his lyrics, his romances and idylls, his shorter poems, are quite easily understood.

Browning is the great student of human nature. His subjects are men and women, taken from the high and the low, the rich and the poor, from the cultured and the unlearned. We see man in every phase of life. His men and women are in truth more real to us than those of Shakespeare, his heroes are all manly men, his optimism is of the truest type, and thus we should have more of his writings for our young minds to read and admire. Why not such poems as

MEETING AT NIGHT.

The gray sea and the long black land;
And the yellow half-moon large and low;
And the startled little waves that leap
In fiery ringlets from their sleep,
As I gain the cove with pushing prow,
And quench its speed i' the slushy sand.
Then a mile of warm sea-scented beach;
Then fields to roses till a farm appears;
A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch
And blue spurt of a lighted match,
And a voice less loud, thro' its joys and fears,
Than the two hearts beating each to each.

Here we have the whole philosophy of life, couched in beautiful poetry, full of pictures, highly imaginative, easily understood by our boys and girls.

Then again why not selections from his greatest optimistic poem, Rabbi Ben Ezra. Listen to the first stanza.

Grow old along with me,
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made;
Our times are in his hand
Who saith "A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God; see all nor be afraid."

Such stanzas as these characterize the real Browning—the Browning that we should know.

The literature in the first nine or ten grades comes as I have said almost entirely from these readers. Your material is before you. How shall it be presented to the youthful minds so as to produce the effect desired. Let me say right here, don't destroy the literature lesson by loading the pupils' minds with the externals of the language. These are proper and must have their place. "Words," says Dr. Holmes, lead to things."

They become your tools, your fortune or your friends as you need them. Grammar and rhetoric, and later logic must also claim your attention. There is a great danger however in our crowded curriculum of spending much time in the literature lesson on these externals.

Perhaps these subjects belong rather to language and hence do not come under my domain, and so ought not to be mentioned here. I speak of them because they are kindred subjects, and are taught in direct connection with the literature lesson, oftentimes taking its place. Listen to the words of Prof. Brander of Columbia University. "He claims that literature is not a matter of rhetoric; that it is not external and detachable, but internal and essential. It has to do with motive and character, with form and philosophy; it is a criticism of life itself or else it is mere vanity and vexation. The essays of Stevenson will survive not because of their style alone, but because the man who wrote them, artist as he was in words, had something to say, something which was his own, the result of his own observation of life, from his own angle of vision. Style is the great antiseptic no doubt; but style cannot bestow life on the still born."

Another critic has gone even further, and has defined "literature as the revelation of a hidden life."

I think then our aim is to inspire the pupil in every way possible, to help him appreciate the beauty and grandeur in our literature, to make him in some slight degree, think the thoughts and feel the emotions, that came from the mind and the heart of the writer. Unless this is done literature will be a cold dull monotony. On the other hand will come life and strength, the pupil will become interested in all the externals, such as grammar, rhetoric and the mere mechanism of the language. The mechanics of literature will become a pleasing subject, if but the pupil can understand the motive force and power which projected it.

Get the pupils interested intensely in the author before beginning to read a poem. For instance in order to get them interested in Tennyson, tell them a few pleasing and yet important incidents in his life, such as these: that his father was a church of England Rector, in a small village of 62 people, the father of 12 children, that he began to write poetry when a mere boy, that he published his first volume at the age of 15 to get pocket money, that he was betrothed for 13 long years, unable to marry because of poverty; how he rose from insignificance to one of the greatest forces of the 19th century. With such easily remembered points as these, Tennyson becomes to your pupils a living being, not a relic of a by gone day. He is real. When you take up a poem, they will feel that they are conversing with a kindred spirit. He will inspire them. He soon becomes to them an old friend. Also show them his portrait. Get the pupil to study the features and looks of the poet, so that he will always have Tennyson before him. Our readers will greatly assist us right here, as we find portraits of a great number of the noted writers. There again every teacher ought to have a good literary map of England.

In studying a certain poem such as "In Memoriam," throw all the light you can on the poem before you begin to read. Make Arthur Henry Hallam as real to them as Tennyson. Tell them that these men were college chums at Cambridge, that Hallam spent his vacation's at Tennyson's home in Somersby, because engaged to Tennyson's sister and was his most intimate friend. On the sudden death of Hallam in 1833, the poet was so grieved, that he at once began to write this elogy; that after 17 years he published this his great religious work. Tell them that this short selection is only a few verses from the larger poem of almost 3000 lines (2880). Thus knowing the motive of the writer, and the subject of the poem, an interest certainly will be aroused.

I find pupils become interested in having literature note books. Have them write from dictation the important events in the author's life, the poems written and when published.

In reading a poem, the pupil should be taught to think carefully and express concisely in a few words the meaning of a certain selection, when this is done, the poem becomes his own in a true sense. Avoid however trying to understand everything. Explanations in detail will destroy the desired effect. There is a possibility of not seeing all that a writer meant, but there is as great a possibility of over stepping the thoughts of the writer and seeing more than he intended. Never take time in attempting to explain an occasional difficult passage.

There are many selections of poetry, that give the pupil a grand opportunity for imaginative work. Get them to draw mental pictures and then express them. Gray's Elogy although so full of philosophy and thought is a good poem for this. No pupil can read the first stanza, without feeling that he is there in very person standing by the poet in the country church yard, can feel the night approaching, the grandeur and the awe on every side. There peasants, although unknown become real personages. I find even young pupils can become intensely interested in the poem, although it is full of meaning.

Then again here is a good opportunity for making our boys and girls express their own opinions. Ask such questions. Do you like this poem? Why? Which stanza is your favorite and why? What particular words and phrases attract you most strongly?

Which poem of Tennyson's is your favorite? Who is your favorite author and why? Ask these questions and always insist that they give an answer to the why? part. You will receive many and various reasons. A few days ago upon finishing Gray's Elogy with my Grade VII, I asked the class, how many really liked this poem? There was unanimity. I asked the brightest boy in the class why he liked it. He hesitated for a minute and then very intelligently answered: I don't know! It was a striking and forcible answer as you will note. He however, gave me several good reasons why he liked the work, from further questioning.

What about memorizing some one asks? English poetry above all is worth memorizing. Have the pupil memorize only the best selections. This will be a great incentive to love the work and create a desire to get more. By thus doing a greater familiarity will be created with many striking passages, and even though the pupil has not been asked to memorize them, he will at once readily know a passage when he hears it, from what taken and by whom written. And when he hears a lecturer or speaker quote a certain stanza, he will at once recognize an old friend. A good exercise and one I find very interesting, is to take a number of poems, that have been read, pick out certain passages, and have the pupils tell instantly the the poem and writer.

concluded next week.

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And further, take notice that all creditors are required to file their claims duly proven, with the undersigned assignee, within three months from the date hereof, unless further time be allowed by a Judge of the Supreme or County Court; and that all claims not filed within the time limited, or such further time if any, as may be allowed by any such Judge, shall be wholly barred from any right to share in the proceeds of the Estate; and that the said Assignee shall be at liberty to distribute the proceeds of the estate as if any claim not filed as aforesaid did not exist, but without prejudice to the liability of the debtor therefor.

Dated at Woodstock, in the County of Carleton, this thirtieth day of December, A. D. 1903.
WM. A. HAYWARD, Sheriff.
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9.05 A. MIXED—Week days—for Aroostook, Mead, and intermediate points.

11.28 A. EXPRESS—Week days—for Presque North, River du Loup and Quebec.

12.30 P. MIXED—Week Days—for Fredericton, Mead, etc., via Gibson Branch.

2.20 P. MIXED—Week days—for Perth Jct., Mead, and intermediate points.

5.59 P. EXPRESS—Week days—for Houlton, Fredericton, Saint John and East; Vancouver, Sherbrooke, Montreal, and all points West, Northwest, and on Pacific Coast; Bangor, Portland, Boston, etc. Palace Sleeper Mead to Montreal. Pullman Sleeper Mead to Boston.

ARRIVALS.

11.12 P. M.—MIXED—Week days, Fredericton, etc., via Gibson Branch.

11.28 A. M.—EXPRESS—Week days, from Saint John and East; Fredericton, St. Stephen, Houlton, Montreal, etc.

1.15 P. M.—MIXED—Week days, from Plaster Rock and intermediate points.

3.30 P. M.—EXPRESS—Week days, from Presque Isle, Caribou, Edmundston, etc.

7.20 P. M.—MIXED—Week days, from Aroostook Jct.

10.10 P. M.—MIXED—Week days, from Houlton, Fredericton, St. John and East; St. Stephen, St. Andrew, Bangor, Portland, Boston, etc.

C. B. FOSTER, D. P. A., St. John.