The Poetic Classroom
Teaching Poetry in English Language Courses in Swedish Upper Secondary Schools

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Abstract

This study aims at shedding some light on teachers’ attitudes and views on poetry as a part of English language studies. More specifically, it intends to explore whether there is support for the generally preconceived idea that poetry’s role in today’s language studies has diminished. This essay presents previous research regarding the development of poetry teaching in classrooms and the importance of reading poetry. Thereafter it includes a smaller qualititative survey, which was sent out to teachers in Swedish upper secondary schools, on their views concerning poetry and its incorporation in their courses, as well as reasons behind their choices. Although the study did not receive enough answers to warrant general conclusions on how teachers in Halland view poetry, the results do show tendencies toward a view of poetry as being strenuous to work with due to students’ resistance and negative attitudes. Moreover, that poetry is one area of English language studies that the majority of teachers view as less important. Furthermore, the results reveal that a teacher’s personal interest in poetry, or lack of interest, affects the amount of time and focus placed on poetry in the classrooms.

Key words: Poetry, Students, English, Teacher, Attitudes
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Introduction

This study aims at giving a picture of the relation English teachers in Sweden have to poetry and especially how they view teaching poetry. The essay contains a qualitative survey pertaining to both teachers’ personal attitudes toward poetry and their professional views on poetry as part of the curriculum in English courses. Of interest to me is how, and to what extent, English teachers use and teach poetry in their classes. I am also interested in why teachers make certain choices regarding teaching poetry to their students.

I chose to focus on poetry due to both a growing personal interest in the usage of language by poets and the fact that poetry seems to disappear more and more in language education. I am basing this assumption on my own education and the views of teachers, tutors, and fellow teacher training students I have talked to. However, my claim that poetry has a diminishing role in language studies is supported by previous research from the US, Canada, and the United Kingdom, which shows similar results in other parts of the western world. I thereby find it important to explore what teachers say about teaching poetry and what reasons have led to poetry’s arguably weakened place on the curricula in the English language classroom.

Background

I have always found it strange how, when my fellow language students and I discuss what we studied during our own schooling, we can name a large number of writers of traditional prose, but very few poets. Poetry seems to have been a very small part of all the literature one has read in school. Researchers like David I. Hanauer and Bill Overton seem to agree on the diminishing role of poetry in language studies over the last 20 years, based on their studies in Canada and the United Kingdom respectively.

As a teacher candidate, I have spent several weeks practising at different schools and observed that when the classes are to work with literature, focus is to a great extent placed on
reading either extracts or only a few longer works of prose. This is interesting to note, for several reasons. Among other, that poetry with its often shorter texts would be more suitable and less time consuming to study, especially since the teacher has quite a vast assortment of areas to cover during the English courses.

Notably, there is no explicit reference in the guidelines released by Skolverket ¹ about what type of literature the pupils should have read when the course is finished, which leaves space for personal interpretations. The overarching goals for English at Swedish upper-secondary schools mention that the pupils should “improve their ability to read and understand well English literature and reflect on texts from different perspectives, refine their ability to express themselves in writing in different contexts and develop their awareness of language and creativity” (skolverket 1). Even though it is not specified which sort of literature the pupils should read, one of the goals in the English B course syllabus has been phrased as follows: “the student should […] be able to read, summarise and comment on the content of longer fictional texts” (skolverket 2). And to receive a top grade “the student [should be] able to understand, comment on and compare some contemporary novels in English as well as [be] able to read extracts from literary works from different eras and put them into context” (skolverket 2). Although then Skolverket does not explicitly state that the students do not need to study any poetry, there is reason to believe that emphasis is to be put on traditional novels, since they are explicitly mentioned. The given formulation does however open up for a personal interpretation of what kinds of texts may be included in the study material.

¹ Skolverket is the central administrative agency for the public school system in Sweden
What Is Poetry?

There is a great variety of definitions of poetry and the researchers cited here all have their own views concerning what can be defined as poetry. Hanauer defines a poem as “a literary text that presents the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of the writer through a self-referential use of language that creates for the reader and writer a new understanding of the experience, thought or feeling expressed in the text” (10). Although he mentions that this definition can be applied to other types of texts, he also states that what is so special when studying poetry is that “the learning process relates directly to the way language is used in poems. The language of the poem directs and mediates the process of understanding. In poetry, language is not a transparent medium that merely transfers the author’s message; the language of the poem is the author’s message” (10). Dodsworth defines poetry as different from the novel or drama due to it usually not containing a plot. He recounts historical changes, mentioning that “‘Poetry’ was once the opposite of ‘Prose’: then it became the opposite of ‘Science’. Now it is more natural for us to think of it as opposed to ‘the novel’ and ‘drama’. But this division is principally mere convenience” (85). He also notes that “poetry is art: it does not imitate life as a novel does” (85). Furthermore, he compares poetry with philosophy and concludes that poetry is neither thought nor philosophy, and though people might associate poetry with wisdom, the wisdom to be found in poetry is mainly associated with the form of the words (85). Lastly, Overton approaches poetry as texts where prosody, metre, different enunciation of words, as well as different kinds of rhyming are important, both for meaning and for how the language is perceived, which makes poetry different from other types of texts (“People have forgotten how to hear the music” 266).

To me poetry is a text that creates its meaning through the poet’s use and placement of words within the text. I would agree with Hanauer and Dodsworth in that poetry often is a very personal form of text that usually has no explicit plot and thus demands more of the
reader. Worth noting though is that there are poems that may or may not fit into this definition, poetic texts including the presence of sounds more than proper words for example. One can also find poems written in a way which makes the words create an actual image from which meaning can be derived, both on its own and together with the words used in the poem.

**Poetry and the Student**

Hanauer’s research shows that it is not unusual for teachers to be met with negative responses when they announce that their class is to work with poetry. He states that the students perceive poetry to be “difficult, irrelevant, boring and out of date” (7). He gives a more detailed explanation on why students might find it hard to understand poetry and offers an insight into how a student unfamiliar with it might have trouble grasping it:

In many cases, mature readers expect the meaning of a text to be constructed automatically and as directly as possible. In some ways, constructing meaning from poetry runs counter to this expectation. To find the meaning of a poem requires effort and analysis. Rather than constructing meaning automatically, the reader of a poem may experience the frustration that comes with the lack of understanding. This explains to a certain extent why some mature readers dislike reading poetry. (41)

Hanauer suggests that when first introducing poetry, it is important to choose and utilize material that is more closely connected to the students’ own life and experiences in order to create a personal interest for poetry. He also points to the connection between poetry and today’s popular music and notes that the use of popular music could be a good entry point for getting students interested in poetry, since song lyrics are similar to older poetry in their rhyme and structure. “The world of popular music is a testament to the expressive potential of
poetry in today’s society. Popular music is influential because it communicates experiences and emotional states that are meaningful to its listeners” (Hanauer 8). He claims that the traditional clash between students and poetry has been caused by the use of older poems with an unfamiliar language, which have made it harder for the students to create an understanding and a connection to the experience or thought expressed in the poem. Hanauer concludes that literacy activities in the classroom should be a meaningful to the students and should be linked to their worlds. (9)

Hanauer presents three conditions for poetry teaching for successful and meaningful understanding of the poems studied. First and foremost the reader (or writer) of a poem needs a personal relationship with that which is put forth in the poem, i.e. the student has to create a personal bond with the poem’s expressed experience, thought, or feeling, a bond that no one else is able to define for them. He claims that without this personal understanding, a poetic experience will fail to occur (15-17). His second condition requires the reader to have acquired enough knowledge, on a personal level, about the poem’s theme. He means that a reader with sufficient knowledge will be able to fill in the gaps in the poem and create a personal understanding of it. Another aspect of this is that writers of poetry can more easily choose what to express in their poems. To him a student cannot create a meaningful understanding nor write a meaningful poem without this pre-acquired knowledge (17). The third and last condition that needs to be met is for the reader to have the right expectations and the necessary language skills in order to both read and write a poem. Hanauer notes that the language used in poems cannot be too far from the readers’ linguistic competence, otherwise that will hinder their understanding them. According to him, it is the lack of awareness of one or more of these conditions that is the source of the resistance to poetry encountered in classes (17).
Turning now to Overton, he conducted a survey on the teaching of versification and poetry at a number of British higher education institutes. In his survey he posed a number of questions to a larger group of English lecturers and university teachers about the degree to which their institution taught versification and poetry to students. His results show that even in higher education, the teaching of poetry and verse is diminishing in importance. Overton reasons that this occurrence can explain how it has come to be so that students in secondary schools are less and less familiar with reading poetry and understanding the technical terminology that is connected to the study of poems (267).

Elsewhere, Overton maps the growing resilience towards poetry that has come to surface. He states “a graduate who has acquired dismissive attitudes is likely to pass on the same attitudes as a teacher. The result is increasing ignorance and, among those who go on to higher education, increased resistance to the subject whether optional or compulsory” (Overton “Teaching Poetry” 137) He argues that the poor interest in poetry is widely acknowledged, along with poems being little or poorly taught in schools and notes that Poetry generally comes third in importance after fiction in print and drama through visual media. Overton claims that this attitude results in students becoming functionally illiterate as poetry readers (138).

Moreover, Overton mentions what he believes is one reason why students might be reluctant to study poetry when their teacher introduces it to them. He suggests that by promoting a visual culture, the technological development has led to the students no longer knowing how to read verse properly. He claims that when students are reading out loud or silently to themselves, they often emphasize line endings and syllables incorrectly as well as read too fast. He notes that he has experienced how students have entered their higher education without sufficient knowledge of prosody, the theory and practice of versification. (266-267).
Dodsworth gives another reason for what he believes can explain why some students are reluctant to poetry and have problems understanding it. He stresses that the study of poetry is difficult for the students as it requires them to talk about poetry as well as reflect on their feelings. He argues that the ability to reflect on one’s feelings is essential, if the student is in turn to be able to express their feelings and relate to the poem. Dodsworth brings to light the fact that as society loses its more pronounced way of self-examination, which used to be part of a less secular or more traditional religious ethic, it becomes harder for people to express their emotions in more elaborate ways. Because of the growing loss of this way of self-examination, the descriptive vocabulary to express one’s feelings is lost to the modern-day student (85). Lastly, Dodsworth points out that one of the reasons why students may be reluctant to study poetry is the simple fact that they do not know what it is. He proposes that students have to learn what a poem is simply by learning to look at it as poetry (85).

While research has shown that students are becoming less familiar with poetry and find it hard to understand, Hanauer gives an insight on how the reading process works and also why poetry might have come to be considered more difficult to teach than other forms of literature, as well as why it should be incorporated in English studies:

In the reading process, long-term memory contributes to understanding by helping readers make connections between existing knowledge and the information that is being read. Long–term memory also enables readers to fill in gaps in texts by supplying knowledge drawn from their long-term memory. […] Poetry often presents a challenge to readers because it provides only minimal or indirect information through which to produce understanding. (12)

His reason for why it is important to incorporate poetry in English studies has a historical aspect that shows the importance of poetry through time: “of all the kinds of texts, poetry - whether oral or written - has historically been the form used most often to express personally significant statements in writing, singing or public speaking” (Hanauer 7). In turn, the reason
for why introducing poetry to the students is so important is because it enables them to both
construct personal statements about their own lives and understand others’ expressed through
a poetic language. Hanauer means that having the students work with poetry helps them
widen their knowledge of other people’s lives, different cultures, and times. By writing their
own poems they are also able to use poetry as a means of expressing their life experiences (8).
Hanauer also points out that utilizing poetry in language classes makes the student develop
their language skills. When one is reading and writing poetry one learns to use language in a
special way and can thus create meaning with completely new methods. This leads to the
students not only broadening their experience of life, but their ability to understand and use
their language as well. Poems also incorporate a mix of different linguistic structures, such as
different sound patterns, graphic forms, and semantic associations. These characteristics of
poetry can be adapted to different levels of difficulty and utilized in the classroom based on
the students’ ability and knowledge:

Poetry is the perfect tool for helping children in the early and emergent stages of
literacy become physically and emotionally involved with written language as it
is read aloud to them. It helps them focus on the sounds of language and become
used to constructing meaning from various viewpoints” (Hanauer 9).

Thesis

The focus of this essay has been placed on teachers’ attitudes towards poetry and on how
they work with poetry with their students. As poets and their poetry seem to get less and less
room on the curriculum in language arts education and previous research shows a general
understanding that students are becoming less and less familiar with poetry study, I find it of
interest to explore further how teachers view poetry.

Accordingly, the areas of interest in my study can be divided into three different parts.
First is to examine whether there is any basis for the assumption that poetry is not being
taught widely in Swedish upper secondary schools anymore and in that case what explanations there might be for this trend. The second part is to inquire about the teachers’ views on the study of poetry, and whether their views can help create an understanding and influence how to work with poetry. Lastly, I place focus on how the teachers view their students’ attitudes and thoughts towards poetry.

**Method**

I have chosen to do a qualitative survey among English language teachers teaching on upper secondary level in Swedish schools. The survey includes six different questions concerning the teachers’ views and their teaching of poetry in English courses. My choice of focusing on the educator is due to from the fact that teachers hold the key to creating an interest toward poetry among the pupils and their actions will affect the coming generations’ views and attitudes towards poetry.

The survey’s is formed so that even if the teacher never works with poetry, they are still able to answer the questions and give their reasons and thoughts concerning their choices.

**Selection Process**

Regarding the informant selection process, I started out by contacting teachers I was already familiar with, who would be most likely to contribute to my survey. I reached the remaining participants using email addresses on school homepages.

Out of the contacted 62 teachers at 10 different schools I only received 10 answers to my survey, while two answered that they were not willing to participate. Of the ten participants seven were female and three male.

**Presentation and Discussion of Results**
The answers received are presented thematically, divided under different headings according to each question. All answers have been anonymous, indicating only gender and years of experience.

**Presentation of the Teachers Participating in the Survey**

When quoting their different answers, I will refer to the different teachers as M1-3 and F1-7, (M for Male and F for Female). The male teachers’ working experience ranged between 5 and 35 years, currently in theoretical programmes but also including previous vocational programme experience. The female teachers’ experience ranged between 7 and 20 years. Similar to the male participants, they have experience from both vocational and theoretical programmes.

**Time Spent on Poetry**

The teachers’ answers show that generally very little time is spent on working with poetry. Two teachers distinguished themselves, as they seem to actively give poetry more room in their English classes. Their reasons for this were that poetry is an important part for them and, as one put it, it leads to “reading comprehension, vocabulary, language development and an appreciation for literature and the written word” (F1). Their answers are in line with Overton’s claim that a person who has taken on a negative, or positive, attitude towards something as a student, in this case poetry, is likely to hold on to that same attitude as a teacher.

Among the teachers who spend little to no time on poetry, a common reason for not teaching it seems to originate from the type of students they have. These express a feeling that other things are more important to focus on, for different reasons. Several of them point to the different kinds of students they teach. Some state that pupils on vocational programs show no interest in poetry whatsoever, thus making it difficult to incorporate poetry in a meaningful
way. Others plan their courses together with their pupils, which affects how much time is spent on studying poetry in class: “It is very much up to the constitution of the class: what are their interests, would they be susceptible?” (F6).

As the teachers keep returning to their pupils, it seems to me as if they expect that they cannot affect the pupils’ attitudes once they have started at upper secondary school, though they are only about 15 years old and, I can only presume, are not very likely to have great previous experience of poetry. As mentioned above, experience of and familiarity with poetry is something Hanauer states is important in order to create a meaningful and successful poetic experience. Another aspect to take into account is that the poem in some way is to be connected to the readers’ feelings or experiences: one could argue that most 15-year olds might not be ready, or have not experienced enough of life, to work with poetry in a way that is meaningful to them. In fact I would consider it suitable to introduce poetry more extensively to them once entering upper-secondary education. Yet, if the teachers give in to the preconceived ideas that some students do not like poetry without challenging them properly, they might miss that students may not really know what poetry is or have never moved beyond the idea that it is, in the words of Hanauer, “difficult, irrelevant, boring and out of date” (7). Furthermore, their attitude might stem from an inability to connect to the poem. It seems to me that if the students show too much resistance, the teachers choose to yield, and end up avoiding actually introducing poetry to the pupils in a way that might be constructive and could change how they view it. Instead, they seem to consider the more practical inclined students’ attitudes as unlikely to change despite any efforts. They thus leave it to their pupils to decide whether focus should be placed on poetry or not.

One of the teachers (F2) surprised me as her argument for spending little time on poetry with her classes was that she primarily choose to focus on areas that would enable her students to pass the national tests. While it is important to aid the students to pass their tests, I
find that the scope of English studies should be more long-term. The main reason for educating people should be to give them the tools to excel in society, whatever path they choose to take. Both Dodsworth’s and Hanauer’s studies have shown how poetry can provide people with the tools to express themselves with greater variation as well as deepen their understanding of others, a skill much needed in society in my opinion.

Something that the answers from a few of the female teachers indicate is that poetry has lost its importance in some classrooms, as they either have not worked with poetry for several years, or put focus on other kinds of texts. Based on the teachers’ different answers, one could suspect that poetry divides them into two groups; those who try to actively give it more room and those who consider it inferior to other areas that need to be studied in English.

The answers from some of the teachers show, similarly to the results found by Overton and Hanauer in Canada and The United Kingdom, that there seems to be a trend of allowing poetry to be reduced to a minor complement when studying literature or other areas in English. One could contest that including poetry in the curriculum is important, but as mentioned by Dodsworth, the successful study of poetry, though requiring a large effort from the pupils, will enable them to express themselves in a better way, and help them reflect on their existence and feelings. This is not only important for creating a stronger sense of one’s being; it might also lead to a more understanding and tolerant society in the long run. Of course this depends on the focus and approach chosen, once the teacher works with poetry. Overton shows that poetry studies need not be concentrated solely on the students’ emotional development and maturity, but can also be centred around more technical aspects. With a more technical approach on terminology and knowledge of different kinds of poetry, the students are given the ability to become more competent writers and readers.

**Approaches to Poetry**
The second question to be answered inquired about how the teachers usually approached poetry, if they worked with it to any extent. The answers that showed the most positive attitude towards poetry indicate that if the teachers have a genuine interest in poetry, they find ways to introduce it to their pupils.

The teachers had a few different approaches that reflect their views on poetry. Some of them use a thematic approach with among other love or war poems. The introduction of poetry according to the different seasons was also mentioned, using Christmas as a theme during winter, or poems relating to the fall or spring. Poetry was also mentioned in relation to different English holidays, or special occasions such as Guy Fawkes’s Day. Having some sort of theme was mentioned by the teachers with a more positive attitude toward poetry. A different approach that could be identified from the answers of some of the other teachers was that they tend to work with poetry along with another area of study: adding poetry as a minor complement when they work with other types of texts or different writers, with Shakespeare and Marlow as examples. One teacher mentioned that she uses poems to introduce a subject or end a session, while some mentioned how they sometimes use poetry as a tool for different kinds of assignments, like drawing inspiration from songs with more epic lyrics to write a short story or newspaper articles. Moreover, they use poetry to teach reading between the lines and interpreting metaphors, identifying allusions or drawing conclusions from the texts. Lastly, one mentioned the alternative of asking the students to enact a scene found in a poem.

Most teachers choose to identify song lyrics as a kind of poetry and mentioned how they use different songs along with more traditional poetry, letting students present a song of their choice with lyrics they find interesting. Some mentioned that they let their students rap some sort of text, or recite a poem in class. The use of lyrics Hanauer claims to be a very suitable way of introducing poetry to students, since lyrics are very familiar to them and often something they are genuinely interested in. As most teachers mentioned how they use lyrics in
relation to poetry studies, they seem to constitute a great potential tool for introducing poetry to the students. Overton points to the students’ inability to read verse properly, something that could be improved by studying the tone and rhythm of lyrics for example.

**Reasons for Working or Not Working with Poetry**

When asked about their reasons for working, or not working with poetry, the teachers gave quite varied answers. Some of them who showed to be most positive toward poetry, elaborated on choosing to include poetry in their English classes, one claiming that “[p]oetry is the highest form of literary expression” (M1), while others saw poetry as excellent starting point for interesting discussions, having near limitless possibilities that enable you to “break every rule in the book” (M3).

While the male teachers regarded poetry as having huge potential and several ways of working with it, the female teachers’ standpoints were more negative, with one exception; only F1 pointed to poetry as a tool to increase and develop one’s vocabulary and expressions. Most of the female teachers argued that there are far more important issues to address. They focused on more everyday texts, such as newspaper articles, in order to give more useful knowledge to their students, while also evoking their students’ lack of interest in poetry as reasons why they do not include poetry in their English classes.

A few of the female teachers noted that they work more with newspapers and articles since those are more connected to their students’ reality. While this is true it might not be as meaningful to a student as these teachers believe. Poetry can probably fulfil the same goal of yielding knowledge about what happens in the world, yet on a more personal level, and perhaps in a way that the student realizes how a war or a natural disaster for example are perceived by the ones that have survived such events. At the same time poetry can provide different images and perspectives on historical events, depending on what type of poems are chosen. Of course one cannot replace newspapers with poetry, as they can be useful for
different reasons, like studying different textual structures and evaluating source reliability. However the majority of the teachers seem to consider poetry less important, more complementary to other study areas and a means to improve grammar and vocabulary.

**Gains of Studying Poetry**

When asked about what the students might learn by studying poetry, the teachers’ answers were quite similar. Some answers pointed to poetry as a tool to enrich the students’ language, giving them new ways of expressing themselves. They thus focused more on personal development as well as on the positive effects poetry might have in English learning. Some answers also pointed to the sound aspect of poetry, offering linguistic material, which novels might not do so well.

A few teachers noted poetry’s potential of increasing the students reading comprehension skills, as a very close reading is required to understand what a poem means. They also expressed what they saw as an obvious benefit in increasing one’s vocabulary. They seemed to be hopeful toward their students finding poetry as a source of inspiration and knowing how people think. These teachers seemed to believe that the students can create an appreciation of English language poetry or at least become acquainted with it. One of them saw poetry as making life more enjoyable, as it might give students “a glimpse into an enchanted world” (M1). However, they pointed to the more demanding aspects of poetry as well, requiring a lot from the students in order to understand different meanings and contexts.

All male teachers mentioned that poetry might enhance their students’ knowledge of the usage of words. This is something that some of the female teachers noted as well, mentioning how poetry can enrich and broaden the student’s English. The teachers mentioned that the students might learn the value of words, how one can use different words in different contexts. A greater knowledge of metaphors and figures of speech was something they expressed as possible gains too. They also saw poetry as enriching one’s language and
making it more colourful. Others only stated that potential gains depend upon the students’
skills and motivation and that poetry can be thought provoking. One of the female teachers
saw several different gains depending on what the teacher is after: “it is good to work with
rhymes to explain homophones and some pronunciations rules” (F6). This teacher also
pointed to poetry as useful when working with different literary movements, giving the
Romantics as an example, as well as different English cultural traditions.

Just as Hanauer refers to the difficult and quite demanding parts of poetry study, as the
lack of direct information, the openness of meaning along with the many ways of analyzing
and understanding a poem’s words, the teachers who answered the survey seem to
acknowledge that poetry requires more work on the students’ part to reach meaningful results.
Obvious in their answers is also that poetry offers a lot of different possibilities, giving
students a more sophisticated language as well as providing them with material to learn about
different sounds and versification: the potential of teaching sound patterns and phonemes for
example seems to be valued as very important.

Material and Media Used in Poetry Teaching

The teachers who participated in the survey seem to be quite untraditional in how they
work with poetry besides the fact that they use lyrics. Most of them seem to have really
embraced media as a tool, both visual and auditory. While Overton claims that visual media
have to some extent negative effects on reading aloud or listening to readings of poems, the
teachers in my survey have found ways to utilize visual media, which benefit the teaching of
poetry. They give examples of using films and searching Youtube for readings of poems; they
thus try to incorporate aspects of poetry that might be part of the students’ every day life,
something that would most likely bridge the gap between the students’ lives and the world of
poets. They also claim to be open to their students’ interests and try to link poetry to their
lives. Some of the teachers try to use contemporary films (Dead Poets’ Society, Four
Weddings and a Funeral), along with lyrics (Bob Dylan songs) to create an interest in poetry among their students. Several also mentioned that they encourage the students to write their own poems and recite them in class. Lastly, some mentioned the use of different excerpts from anthologies and books (On Wings of Verse by Anna Maria).

Almost all of the teachers that include poetry in the curriculum have found different means of working with poetry that can link it to the students’ lives. Of course one has to consider the kind of poems being taught as more contemporary ones are probably less problematic to encounter than, older poetry written in a language presumably less familiar to the students.

There are obviously means of utilizing a visual media as a steppingstone to create an interest in and an understanding of poetry among the students. Arguably films like The Edge of Love (on Dylan Thomas), Sylvia (on Sylvia Plath), or Bright Star (on John Keats), while not giving a completely accurate picture of the poets’ lives, can be used in ways that show how different contexts can alter one’s understanding of a poem and the meaning of the words. These films may also show how the tone of a poem can change depending on how it is being read, using a serious, or loving, voice for example. As according to Overton, it is important to connect poetry to the students’ reality, and since many of today’s students are quite familiar with different visual media, films can be instrumental in creating a successful and meaningful poetic experience.

Views on the Importance of Studying Poetry/Positive and Negative Aspects

The survey’s last question asked the teachers whether or not they viewed it as important to read poetry and if they could identify any positive/negative aspects when trying to work with poetry. Although the teachers do not work a lot with poetry due to students showing resistance, working with texts they feel more necessary to cover, or simply not having enough
English hours, a majority of them view poetry as an important part of English that students need to come in contact with.

Several of the teachers return to the students’ negative attitudes towards poetry. Some seem to rely on their previous experience, that the students view poetry as tedious, and that being a difficult threshold to try and get over. Some mention that since there are so many different areas to cover, one tends to focus on the areas that students prefer to work with, or areas that might be of more immediate use. As a result, the teachers spend a lot of time on basic grammar and vocabulary, to help the majority of the students pass the English courses. Only a few feel that it is important to introduce poetry to students, claiming poetry is something that is hard to find your own way into. They thus see it as their duty to introduce poetry, recognising it as often being a forgotten written language form. One teacher sees poetry as very important as it offers a large potential for the students to grow as humans:

As I would in Swedish studies, I try to get them to understand the common human denominators, that life is pretty much the same wherever, whoever /…/ you are. I hope to expand their imagination and ability to visualize and conceptualize non-concrete images and to expand their vocabulary (F6).

Several of the teachers seem to see different positive aspects in how incorporating poetry in their teaching is beneficial for the improvement of their students’ language skills. Most view poetry as providing insights into other people’s lives and emotions. However they return to their conclusion that it is often too cumbersome and time consuming to make the students interested enough and taking hours from what they consider to be more important study areas.

**Conclusions**

Though the number of participants in my survey was very low, the results do allow for some conclusions to be made. One can see that there is a common understanding that there are aspects of poetry that would be beneficial for the students to become familiar with. A
number of the teachers seem to view poetry as a tool used to broaden the students’ knowledge of language and ways of expressing themselves and become more proficient readers.

A few teachers expressed a more traditional viewpoint toward literature and the way they focus on different novels and extracts from books that need to be read in order to cover the cultural heritage aspect in the course plan for English. Of course this is only a minor part of what is required to cover and perhaps likely to change over time, as indicated in the previous research and to some extent also by the teachers’ answers.

Several of the participating teachers mention the broad usage area that poetry can present, both when it comes to discussions and learning sound patterns. Although some mention that there are far more important areas to study, more relevant to the students’ lives, one should perhaps not remove poetry entirely from the curriculum as a few of the teachers have done. Still the choices they have made seem to confirm Overton’s observations of a replicated attitude from student to teacher. One could view the above as a reason why poetry teaching might be sensitive to the teachers’ personal attitude to poetry, when also regarding that as a student one might have found it difficult or dull. Poetry requires working with language on a deeper level than other text types. Simply reading poetry without reflection does not fill any real purpose, comparable to prose that is usually more straightforward. This could be one of the reasons why the teachers mention that the students find poetry cumbersome. Why poetry has come to have a diminished role in the classrooms might be due to the students rarely getting the chance to encounter poetry or their being first introduced to it in a way that is not suitable for their age.

As the teachers note the above negative attitude among their students, one wonders what it is that has created it in the first place. Dodsworth mentions that the modern day student and society at large might have lost their means of self-examination. They can therefore not express their feelings in more elaborate ways, or relate to poetic expressions. Another aspect
of the difficulty of working with poetry according to him, is that poetry requires the students to reflect on their character and to share their feelings, which might make them feel vulnerable.

Overall, the teachers view poetry in a positive light and as something that holds substantial benefits, pointing to how it can provide deeper knowledge about language. The teachers seem to be progressive and try to incorporate different types of media in line with the students’ interests in order to bridge the gap between poetry and the adolescents, when they choose to work with poetry that is. Whether or not they are aware of the three conditions that Hanauer has set as necessary in order to create a meaningful poetic experience, it seems apparent that they too consider it important that the students have a personal relation to the content of a poem.

I find that poetry, while not being given much room in the classroom, is considered rather important by the teachers, but that at the same time working with it is clearly linked to their personal interest in verse. Poems often end up being secondary to works of prose, probably both out of convenience and due to the guidelines set in English course plans by Skolverket. It may seem as poetry has lost its place in the classroom, but as lyrics are more and more incorporated in the teaching, along with films about poets or poetry, these materials may lead to a development that makes the teachers include different kinds of poetry in the classrooms, enhancing thus alternative ways of using the English language.

**Future Studies**

One has to question how the future English classroom will look like and whether poetry will have a place alongside the different study areas, or if it will be positioned behind them as a minor complement or time filler. Previous research has shown that there are reasons to worry about poetry not being given any room in language arts education.
A further step to study poetry’s role in classrooms, could be to inquire how language teachers work with poetry. One could look at how teachers actually introduce poetry in the classroom, whether they use a more personal entry point or focus on more technical aspects, different sound patterns, rhymes and versification, and what effects this could have on the students’ attitudes and relation to poetry in a wider sense.

A different route to take could be to focus on the students, and explore what they think about poetry. Perhaps one could study whether poetry has any acknowledged place in their lives. Using this approach may lead to a better understanding of what the students find interesting or troublesome regarding poetry, which in turn could help teachers to improve their teaching.
Works Cited

Primary sources:
Survey answers from English teachers teaching at upper secondary schools

Secondary sources:

Books and articles:


Skolverket. Ämne - Engelska, skolverket.se. n.d. Web. 8 April 2010

Appendix 1: Survey:

Working With Poetry in English Language Courses

My name is Kim Haraldsson and I am doing my fourth year in the teachers’ training programme at Halmstad University. I am currently studying my last term of English, which includes writing a C-essay.

My survey will ask you a series of questions regarding your views and experiences of teaching poetry to English language students. I am interested in learning about your various approaches, and if they differ depending on what type of class you have. I am also interested in knowing your reasons behind the choices you might have made regarding working or not working with poetry in the classroom.

There are a total of 6 questions and in the end I ask you to give some personal information about yourself, which subjects you teach, the types of classes and the number of years you have worked as a teacher.

All the questions are given below.

Question 1. In relation to the other areas in English how much time do you place on reading and working with poetry with your pupils? What can you say about the choice you have made regarding this, what type of things play into it?

2. Presuming that you work with poetry of some kind, how do you usually approach poetry? Do you incorporate it into another study area, in a thematic study or another subject and so on?

3. What would you say are your reasons why you either work or do not work with poetry in your classes?

4. What do you feel your students learn by studying poetry? What would you say is the focus when working with poetry in English?

5. What type of material and media do you utilize in your poetry teaching? Do you in any way take into account what the students might listen to or read outside of school when trying to get them to connect with poetry. How do you do this if that is the case?
6. Do you feel it is of importance to actually study and help students become familiar with poetry? What positive and/or negative aspects can you see to teaching poetry to students?

Personal information about yourself:

The subjects I teach are:_____________________________________________________

The types of classes I teach are:________________________________________________

I have worked as a teacher for:________________________________________________

I am:  [  ] Male  Female  [  ]

I thank you kindly for participating in my survey, Kim Haraldsson.

My contact information:

Kim Haraldsson  Kungsgatan 29, 302 27 HALMSTAD
Phone number. 0738-521 331

Answers to the questions:

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