

Can Modern Poetry Get Past Vulgarity?  
Second Thoughts  
By J. B. Leftwich, Columnist  
28 October 1994

When I was growing up, we called it barnyard poetry. In urban regions, it was called gutter poetry.

Each of us boys knew at least one verse in forbidden language which addressed the baser sides of human existence. But you never recited this genre of verse in front of your daddy. No female I knew ever heard these rhymes.

Ah, but today an acclaimed poet recites to a sixth grade class a poem she was written about a dark side of humanity. Appearing in a Nashville elementary school, Gwendolyn Brooks described in vivid terms incestual abuse of a child by the child's uncle. Compounding the offense, a teacher defended this verbal abuse of children by a poet. And reflecting a mindset of a group of modernists, one adult wrote a letter to the editor of a newspaper defending Brooks' transgressions.

What could be worse than educated adults condoning obscenity especially in the presence of children? And why does Gwendolyn Brooks write on such sordid subjects? Doesn't she realize that her sophisticated writing style brings further acceptance to the language sickness that continues to spread in this country?

My guess is that in this Mapplethorpe type of assault on the language she too is trying to stretch the limits of decency. Hers is a deliberate push to attract attention, to become controversial, to provoke comment. She cares not about the effect the shady work of an accepted and prize-winning poet can have on young minds.

There can be no benefit to sixth graders from reading a poem featuring incest. Indeed, a class of any grade. That incest and abuse should be addressed and that children should be educated on the subject is axiomatic. But there is a time and there is a place. Gwendolyn Brooks was out of place. Too bad she wasn't out of time.

So, why are modern poets caught up in such subjects? Has sex so pervaded the thinking of modern writers that literature must dwell on the subject? Not so. John Grisham in "the Witness" has written a best-selling novel that has no romance, no sex scenes. And what about poetry. Well, read these lines from Ferrol Sams in his short story.

"Epiphany":

*The world stands out on either side  
No wider than the heart is wide  
Above the world is stretched the sky –  
No higher than the soul is high.*

These lines are written by Sam's fictional character, Dr. Mark Goddard who loves to confound the hospital's administrator with poetry when he dictates notations concerning his patients. Dr. Goddard concludes his poem and the story with *And he whose soul is flat – the sky... Will cave in on him by and by.*

And read this by Natalie Sleeth who in 1986 wrote a poem entitled, “Hymn of Promise.” She also wrote accompanying music. Her combined effort resulted in a hymn that now appears in the Methodist Hymnal. I heard it first at the funeral of a good friend.

*In the bulb there is a flower, in the seed an apple tree;  
In cocoons, a hidden promise; butterflies will soon be free!  
In the cold and snow of winter, there's a spring that waits to be,  
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.*

There are two other verses, ending with: *In our death a resurrection, at the last a victory.* Compare these thoughts with a poem featuring a vivid description of incest and child abuse.

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