The Music of the Hemispheres
Poetics for Young Children

Second Edition

Teacher Manual

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The Music of the Hemispheres

Ask students if they think planets really make notes in space.
In the medieval ages, philosophers believed that each planet, as it zoomed around in orbit, made a sound... a note. The sound of all the planets in space was called the music of the spheres.

Today, we say the human brain has two hemispheres, and through the magic of human language, we have poetry, the music of the hemispheres.

Discuss the two hemispheres of the brain.
Language is human. Many animals make sounds, but only human beings make language.

We love language for lots of reasons, and one of the most important is that we love the beautiful sounds of language.

Words are made of sounds.

When we write words, we show the sounds with letters.
The letter *s* sounds like

\[ \textbf{SSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS} \]

Sing the letter *s* aloud together: **SSSSSSSS!**
Some sounds sound like woodwinds, or horns, or wind in the trees.
N

whuh

eee

whuh
Some sounds in words are like sounds in nature:

This little piggy cried

Wee wee wee

all the way home.

This is called

onomatopoeia

(AH no MAH toe PEE uh).

Discuss how the words on the next page sound like water.
plop

trickle

splash

drip
There are two main kinds of sounds: **vowels** and **consonants**.

**Vowels** sound like singing:  

\[ a \ e \ i \ o \ u \ y \]

and consonants sound like clicks, and taps, and bumps:

\[ b \ c \ d \ f \ g \ h \ j \ k \ l \ m \ n \ p \ q \ r \ s \ t \ v \ w \ x \ z \]

Ask students to explain all the ways vowels and consonants differ.
We can even do a **vowel-consonant split** by putting vowels and consonants on different lines.

What words are these?

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{i e} & \\
\text{cr ck t} & \\
\text{o e} & \\
\text{fl w r} & \\
\text{u e} & \\
\text{p ddl} &
\end{align*}
\]

Sing the vowel lines by themselves: iiiii, eeeeee, oooo....
Are you beginning to think that poets are aware of every sound in their poems, just as composers know each note in their compositions?

You are right. Poets know all the vowel sounds, and all the consonant sounds, and all the stresses, and they arrange these sounds at the same time that they arrange the meanings of words.

Poetry doesn’t have to be easy in order to be wonderful.
Rhyme time
Poets often put **rhymes** in poems.

A rhyme is a similar sound found in two different words, such as ** rhyme ** and ** time **, ** monarchy ** and ** malarkey **.

The sounds do not have to be spelled alike.
The team had a scheme it would seem!

Two-syllable rhyme, like rascal and Haskell, is feminine rhyme.
If the lines rhyme at their ends, that is called end rhyme.
Weary with toil, I haste me to my bed, a
The dear repose for limbs with travel tired, b
But then begins a journey in my head a
To work my mind when body’s work’s expired. b

from Sonnet 27
William Shakespeare

**Rhyme Scheme**
If we want to study the *rhyme scheme* of a poem, we assign the letter *a* to the first rhyme sound, and the letter *b* to the second rhyme sound, and so on.

So the *rhyme scheme* of this poem is *abab*.

The *a* rhymes are *bed* and *head*, and the *b* rhymes are *tired* and *expired*. 
Emily Dickinson used end rhyme in this poem about a flower, the gentian. Dickinson rhymed the even lines, 2, 4, 6, and 8, but not the odd ones.
God made a little gentian:

It tried to be a rose

And failed, and all the summer laughed.

But just before the snows

There came a purple creature

That ravished all the hill;

And summer hid her forehead,

And mockery was still.

from XLVII
Emily Dickinson

Later, students will learn that these are ballad stanzas.
Rhymes put inside the lines are called internal rhyme.

Shakespeare used internal rhyme in:

**Double, double, toil and trouble.**

William Blake used both end rhyme and internal rhyme in his poem “The Tiger.”
In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes!
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?

from “The Tiger”
William Blake

Notice that distant and deeps both begin with $d$.

Fire is an internal rhyme with aspire. Internal rhyme is more subtle.
Rhyme is not all that poets use to compose the sounds of poems. Another technique is **alliteration**, the repetition of the first, *initial*, sounds of words: “Baa, baa, black sheep.” Alliteration lets us emphasize a sound that is perfect for the meaning. Robert Burns used alliteration:
John Anderson my jo, John,
When we were first aquent:
Your locks were like the raven,
Your bony brow was brent.

from “John Anderson, My Jo”
Robert Burns

(The word brent means smooth in Scottish.)
William Shakespeare used **alliteration** on the letter *s* in Sonnet 30. Notice the interesting eye-rhyme with *past* and *waste*.

When to the **sessions** of **sweet** **silent** thought
I **summon** up remembrance of things **past**,
I **sigh** the lack of many a thing I **sought**, and with old woes new wail my dear Time’s **waste**.

Notice the alliteration of *with*, *woes*, *wail*, and *waste*. 
Alliteration often takes the form of an adjective and its noun that begin with the same letter. A.E. Housman used alliteration this way in “To an Athlete Dying Young”:

So set, before its echoes fade, the fleet foot on the sill of shade, And hold to the low lintel up The still-defended challenge cup.

adj. n. fleet foot
One poem may have end rhyme, internal rhyme, eye-rhyme and alliteration, and more.

Look at these lines from William Butler Yeats’s (pronounced Yates) poem “The Lake Isle of Innisfree.”

Innisfree is a lake in County Sligo, Ireland.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore:
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements gray,
I hear it in the deep heart’s core.

Triple stress on deep heart’s core: heartbeat.

Notice how Yeats supports the alliterated l’s with lots of other l’s inside words in this passage.
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore.

The whole poem is filled with l’s to suggest the water.
There may be no greater challenge, or joy, for the educator of elementary-age students than teaching young children to understand and love poetry. Few areas of high intellect are so inspiring—or have been the victims of such disrespectful stereotypes. Poetry is seen in preposterous terms, as unmanly, overemotional, and spontaneous. People think that poems are supposed to be pretty.

The truth is that poetry is a great intellectual discipline that also creates works of art, and these works of art represent some of humanity’s best efforts to understand the truths of the world.

_The Music of the Hemispheres_ focuses on the traditional elements and techniques of poetry: formal stanzas, rhyme schemes, traditional feet, alliteration—even though they are not always the most salient elements of modern poetry. This may seem stubbornly traditional unless you look as deeply into modern poems as we are looking into traditional poems, for it is not that modern poets do not know or employ these devices; it is that they subtly employ these devices and hide them under a thin covering of seeming irregularity. But silently, with genius, the traditional techniques are assembled, just under the surface. A perfect example comes from Sylvia Plath, whose poem “The Moon and the Yew Tree” describes the troubled interior landscape of her spirit. Plath wrote:

This is the light of the mind, cold and planetary
The trees of the mind are black. The light is blue....
Fumy, spiritous mists inhabit this place.

Ah, we think. No end rhyme. No regular meter. No alliteration. She appears just to have written the lines spontaneously, from her feelings. Well, no, look again. The first line is primarily dactylic, the second line is primarily iambic, and the incredible third line is almost perfect, evil trochees; but for one unstressed syllable added to foot two and an
unstressed syllable turned into a stressed syllable in foot five, this would be perfect trochaic pentameter:

\[
\begin{array}{cccccc}
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 \\
Fu & my & / & spi & r & it ous / mists & in / hab & it / this & place.
\end{array}
\]

Plath understood the power of meter and the way trochees cancel the reassuring normality of iambs. Having done that, she then filled the line with a hissing soundtrack to make the fumes and mists more real; we hear f’s, s’s, h’s, and th’s, and the line reeks of the ih sound of six i’s in six words:

\[
\begin{array}{cccccc}
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 \\
Fu & my & / & spi & r & it ous / mists & in / hab & it / this & place.
\end{array}
\]

What we are seeing is not a poet who has abandoned the powerful techniques of traditional poetry, but one who has learned to submerge those techniques just below a veil of protective spontaneity. Plath uses regular trochaic pentameter but switches two syllables to make it unnoticeable. She repeats vowel and consonant sounds but hidden within the words, rather than as alliteration at the beginnings of words, where it would be obvious. She avoids showy end rhyme but deftly puts mists and this in the same line as near internal rhymes. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to write real poetry; she just didn’t want us to catch her.

In order to understand all true poetry, both traditional and modern, students need to have a solid grounding in the technical details of traditional poetry. Only in this way will they develop the “art detectors” that will enable them to enjoy both Robert Burns and Sylvia Plath.

Real poetry is far more powerful and accomplished than its stereotypes imply.

In *The Music of the Hemispheres* I have tried to put a microscope on the small surfaces of words to let children really see the little things that become so large in poets’ minds. To understand poetry, we must not look at whole stanzas or lines at a time; we must look at single consonants, or even a half of a consonant. Only with this maximum inspection will we see that a line like “Fumy, spiritous mists inhabit this place” is filled
with consonants made by exhaling breath: \textit{sss, fff, hhh, ththth}. When it comes to poetry, Mies van der Rohe was right: God is in the details, and the smaller the detail, the greater the scene. Poetry lives in this paradox. This is the reason for the letter- and word-based graphics in this book; it is intellectually important that the children see a word that fills a page, or even one letter that fills a page. Let them stop, and look, and think. Let them trace the curves of a \textit{g} with their hearts. Let them distinguish \textit{fff} from \textit{sss}. Here (hear) is where they can begin to love language.

As for the stereotype that poems are pretty, or should be, we must know that poems are not, and should not be, so pitiful. Like symphonies or great paintings, poems embrace the wild spectrum of human life and of the whirling world that human beings observe. Some poems are pretty; some are sad; some are inspiring; some are funny. Poems tell the truths of the poets, and sometimes what poets feel is shock, or rejection, or love. The crux is for students to see the beauty in the art of a sad poem, such as Rupert Brooke’s gorgeous poem about his fear that he might die in France (he did). Yes, in a way, this poem is sad; it isn’t pretty like Wordsworth’s poem about the daffodils, and yet Brooke’s poem is very, very beautiful. One can love this poem. The thoughts in it are beautiful and valuable, and the poem as a piece of sound-art is beautiful, with its soft consonants: “If I should die, think only this of me....” To teach students the beauty of poetry, we can use the techniques of real poets to disclose the beautiful details and ideas and not be stopped by a poem just because it has a sadness.

Poetry, like physics, is one of those rarefied zones of intellectual possibility where our minds and spirits can do something extraordinary.