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# The Use of Poetry and Prose to Enrich the Teaching of Geography

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Research says that motivation is a critical factor in learning. It affects both the learning and behaviour of students. Teachers can make their lessons more interesting and stimulate students to learn by using a variety of teaching aids and creative ways of teaching. One method which has not been fully explored is the use of poetry and prose to kindle interest in learning.

To begin with poetry is described as the best words in the best order. A poetic description of a physical landscape or part of a physical landscape therefore constitutes the best way in which that landscape and the processes that help to shape it can possibly be described. Let us take for example Rachael Carson's *The Mighty Sea*.

## The Mighty Sea

"The sea lies all about us, the commerce of all land must cross it. The very winds that move over the lands have been cradled on its broad expanse seek ever to return to it. The continents themselves dissolve and pass to sea, in grain after grain of eroded land.

In its mysterious past, it encompasses all the dim origins of life and receives in the end, after it may be, many transmutations the dead husks of that same life. For all at last returns to the sea – the beginning and the end."

The poem describes vividly the origins of the earth, the processes that sculpture it and the cycle of events through which it passes. These are evident in the following lines:

"The continents themselves dissolve and pass to sea in grain after grain of eroded land . . . .

For all at last returns to the sea the beginning and the end . . . ."

Erosion is not seen merely as a dry geographical fact but as a dynamic on going process.

A poem need not only be used as stimulus. It can be also used as a basis of a geography lesson. As an introduction to the study of clouds and related weather phenomena Shelley's poem *The Cloud* would be appropriate.

### **The Cloud**

I bring fresh showers for the thirsting flowers,  
From the seas and the streams;  
I bear light shade for the leaves when laid  
In their noon-day dreams  
From my wings are shaken the dews that waken  
The sweet buds everyone,  
When rocked to rest on their mother's breast,  
As she dances about the sun.  
I wield the flail of the lashing hail,  
And whiten the green plains under,  
And then again I dissolve it in rain,  
And laugh as I pass in thunder.

The association between clouds and rain is suggested in the opening lines. Images of geographical phenomena such as evaporation, the water cycle and snow are conveyed in the last few lines of the poem. When this poem has been read, the technical aspects of rainfall and other forms of precipitation can then be dealt with.

A lesson on the sea can similarly be introduced by citing a few lines from Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach*.

### **Dover Beach**

The sea is calm tonight  
The tide is full, the moon lies fair

Upon the straits; – on the French coast the light  
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,  
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay  
Come to the window, sweet is the night air!  
Only, from the long line of spray  
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,  
Listen! you hear the grating roar  
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,  
At their return, up the high strand,  
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,  
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring  
The eternal note of sadness in. . .

The poem conveys a vivid picture of tides, the movement of waves as they approach and break upon the shore and return to the sea carrying in its wake sand and shingle. References are made to coastal features as cliffs, bay and straits.

Where textbooks may fail to arouse and hold students' attention, a few carefully selected passages of prose from novels, and other literary works can spark off interest in learning geography and give a sense of reality to the contents of the lesson. The following passage for example, provides a vivid description of a Malaysian rainforest.

“ . . . . But come down from the mountain peak and walk alone along a forest path. Though it is mid-day it is very dark and very sombre. The sun cannot pierce the dense foliage of the branches of the giant trees, and so heavily do shadows lie upon shadows, that the very green seems almost black. The sheltered air is fresh and cool and there is an almost perfect stillness. Underfoot, except where the path is trodden bare, is a matting of dead leaves and of sweet damp moss. The daily passage of the Malays keeps back the encroachment of brambles and forest creepers. To the right and left of the path the forest appears to be almost impenetrable. The trees grow so thickly together that you are closed in by a small but unbroken circle of tree trunks. Between the trees, there are tangled masses of bushes, briars and saplings. Rattans and creepers of every kind crawl along the ground and among the trees, sometimes hanging

in heavy festoons and sometimes tense with the pressure that they exert. So thick and strong is the mass of creepers that when a wood-cutter hacked through a tree-trunk, it is often kept upright by the ligaments that bind it to the surrounding trees".\*

The above passage highlights some of the salient features of the Malaysian rainforest. It helps to focus attention on the luxuriance of the forest, the profusion of species and the stillness of the air within it. The climbers and lianas that form a significant characteristic of the rainforest are clearly described in the last few lines. A discussion on the climate, composition and characteristic of the rainforest can then follow. From this, student should be able to get an impression of a rainforest even though they might have no opportunity to visit an actual rainforest. A recording of sounds can be used to create the effect of being in a forest and help to enhance interest.

Such personal accounts help to conjure up vivid images and give a sense of reality to landscapes that technical descriptions, statistics and maps can never effectively achieve as it is real phenomena and real places that are described.

In the teaching of geography it is important to develop not only the cognitive but also the affective domain. Prose passages as well as poems may also be used to foster and develop empathy and help students appreciate and understand how people in adversity feel. Towards this end the following passage from Kamala Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve* which describes human feelings during a famine in India is especially relevant.

". . . . Now that the last of the rice was gone it was in a sense a relief, no amount of scheming and paring would make it go any further: the last grain had been eaten. Thereafter we fed on whatever we could find: the soft ripe fruit of the prickly pear, a sweet potato or two, blackened and half-rotten, thrown away by some more prosperous hand; sometimes a crab that Nathan managed to catch near the river. Early and late my sons roamed the countryside, returning with a few

\* Donald Moore (edited). **Where Monsoons Meet**, George, C. Harrap, 1956, pp. 14-15.

bamboo shoots, a stick of sugar cane left in some deserted field, or a piece of coconut picked from the gutter in the town. For these they must have ranged widely, for other farmers and their families, in like plight to ourselves, were also out searching for food; and for every edible plant or root there was a struggle – a desperate competition that made enemies of friends and put an end to humanity. It was not enough. Sometimes from sheer rebellion we ate grass, although it always resulted in stomach cramps and violent retching. For hunger is a curious thing: at first it is with you all the time, waking and sleeping and in your dreams, and your belly cries out insistently and there is a gnawing and a pain as if your every vitals were being devoured, while you know and fear the sequel. Then the pain is no longer sharp but dull, and this too is with you always, so that you think of food many times a day and each time a terrible sickness assails you, and because you know this you try to avoid the thought, but you cannot, it is with you. Then that too is gone, all pain, all desire, only a great emptiness is left, like the sky, like a well in drought, and it is now that the strength drains from your limbs, and you try to rise and find you cannot, or to swallow water and your throat is powerless, and both the swallow and the effort of retaining the liquid tax you to the uttermost.

'It will not be long before the harvest,' Nathan would murmur, and I would agree with him, stifling the query whether our strength would last till then, saying, 'Ah yes, not long now; only a little time before the grain is ripe'.

It happened to me too, but I could not see myself, only what happened to others: saw their flesh melt away and their skin sag and sink between their jutting bones, saw their eyes retreat into their skulls, saw their ribs curve out from under the skin; and what withered the young bore doubly hard on the old and they were emaciated twice over.

But of us all Kuti suffered the most. He had never been a healthy child; now he was constantly ailing. At first he asked for rice water and cried because there was none, but later he gave up asking and merely cried. Even in his sleep he

whimpered, twisting and turning endlessly, permitting no one to rest. Ira was gentlest with him, and tirelessly patient, nursing him in her skinny arms and giving him most of what came to her."

Such extracts and others in similar literary works like the *The Good Earth* by Pearl S. Buck should be duplicated and copies distributed to the class and made the basis for discussion and exercise.

The poems and prose passages cited in the preceding paragraphs are but a few examples of poems and literary passages that teachers can use to stimulate interest in geography lessons. Through the years the teacher should build up an anthology of poems and extracts both for his own information and to read to the students. Being new and unusual this teaching technique would give students something to think and talk about. Once interest is aroused a great step toward learning is accomplished. This kind of learning is not easily forgotten. The use of poetry and prose can help the teacher to make his lessons more interesting and learning a pleasant and memorable experience.