

# 'the reading lesson' by richard murphy essay sample

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'The Reading Lesson' by Richard Murphy is about how education is harder to understand for some people, with the theme of education and nature. I will be discussing how Murphy conveys the emotion of dissatisfaction and to what extent he is successful in deepening our understanding of it throughout the poem.

The title of the poem itself has a double meaning as 'The Reading Lesson' is about a boy who is reluctant to be taught reading and the teacher has learnt a lesson: you can't force people's interest in what they have no interest in. The poem is about a boy who is unable to be educated to the teacher's dissatisfaction. In the metaphorical sense it shows how the boy is stubbornly refusing to be taught and the teacher can't force him as it just won't make a difference, which frustrates the teacher further.

The poet conveys how the boy represents wildness and disorder through the use of animals throughout the poem, which the teacher contrasts symbolises tameness and order, very much like with the words he is trying to teach and how it represents rules and organisation. This shows how the teacher is dissatisfied by the boy's unwillingness to be educated and ordered. The structure of the poem contains four stanzas of seven lines each, the lines vary between four or five beats, and the poem therefore has a varying rhythm. This is further interrupted by different punctuations that Murphy uses to bring the teachers situation to life through the uses of full stops, questions marks, quotation marks, colons and commas.

In the first verse Murphy shows the teachers dissatisfaction through the use of metaphors. The poet sees through the eyes of the teacher and describes

how the boy at fourteen years of age finds it difficult to learn the alphabet at his age. The metaphor Murphy uses is: He finds letters harder to catch than hares

Without a greyhound. Can't I give him a dog  
To track them down, or put them in a cage?

This comparison show that the teenage traveller is obviously used to hunting hares with greyhounds. The teacher's question conveys that he is sympathetic to the boy, yet also dissatisfied by him. The teacher would love to give the boy a hound that would help him grab the letters of the alphabet or trap them somehow in his brain. The enjambment of the word Without conveys a feeling of helplessness as it isolates the phrase and emphasises the boys lack of ' tools' or help or sheer ability to perform the act of reading. He's caught in a trap, until I let him go,

Pinioned by ' Don't you want to learn to read?  
' I'll be the same man whatever I do.'

The teacher eventually realises that the classroom is like a trap to the boy, which his questions and sentences feel like traps to the disinclined boy. The word pinioned metaphorically means to cut or bind a bird's wings to prevent it flying, its literal meaning is to tie or fasten a persons arms to prevent movement. The boy feels trapped by the words as he sees no point in learning how to read, as he claims that learning to read will not change his personality or his future, which dissatisfies the teacher by his immature point.

In the second stanza the teacher's dissatisfaction is shown through the poet's use of similes. The teacher is annoyed by the boy's fear of words when he looks at a page of a book: He looks at a page as a mule balks at a gap

From which a goat may hobble out and bleat.

His eyes jinx from a sentence like flushed snipe

Escaping shot. A sharp word, and he'll mooch

Back to his piebald mare, and bantam cock.

The poet describes the almost absurd and unreasonable level of fear the boy has of reading like a frightened mule which is nervous about a shuffling goat. The boy's eyes jump away in fear from the sentence, Murphy portrays that the boy acts like a hunted snipe. This shows the teachers frustration and dissatisfaction at the irrational fear the boy has of words that can't physically harm him. The teacher knows that if he gives up on the boy that he'll wander again and not bother with reading again, the word mooch suggests that the boy is from a rural travelling family. This shows how the teacher is frustrated by the boy's shrewd disregard of being able to read that he won't even bother trying to learn. Our purpose is as tricky to retrieve

As mercury from a smashed thermometer.

Murphy conveys the teachers struggle and difficulty at trying to teach and handle the boy as its impossible trying to manage mercury or catching liquid, which brings a sense of futility at the task, as is trying to educate the boy.

There is no overall rhyming pattern, some words are repeated, like cage and read in stanza one, and read and page in the fourth stanza, but the lack of

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rhyme may reflect the sense of failure of the teacher as most poems are rhyme based.

In the third verse, when the boy declares he won't read anymore, the teacher is first uncertain if he should pursue the boy into continuing to read. This verse focuses on the juxtaposition of the placement of two statements together for effect: His hands, long-fingered as a Celtic scribe's,

Will grow callous, gathering sticks or scrap;  
Exploring pockets of the horny drunk  
Loiterers at the fairs, giving them lice.

The juxtaposition of the potential of the boy's hands (metaphorical for creativity) going to waste. A Celtic scribe was a wise ancient writer. Although the boy's fingers look elegant and long as a scribe's, they will in fact be used for hard manual labour. Labour and thievery His hands...Exploring pockets. The word callous has connotations of cruelty as well as callouses - the hard skin forming from rough work. This conveys the teacher's dissatisfaction at the lost potential that the boy could have had. But instead he's going to be a thief robbing drunks and passing on lice. A neighbour chuckles, ' You can never tame

The wild-duck. When his wings grow, he'll fly off.'

The neighbours even say that it is impossible to teach the boy. That as soon as the boy is able to he'll leave education when he is physically able to run away. This shows the teachers dissatisfaction at the boy's lack of any commitment in life that the boy will encounter.

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In the last stanza, Murphy uses extended metaphor to highlight the boy's lack of interest in education and emphasises the boy's traveller's life: If books resembled roads, he'd quickly read;  
But they're small farms to him, fenced by the page,  
Ploughed into lines, with letters drilled like oats;  
A field of tasks he'll always be outside.

The phrase if books resembled roads shows further evidence that the boy is a traveller and he'd learn to read willingly if it was what he liked, instead the books represents fenced in farms, which are off limits for the boy. This dissatisfies the teacher as the boy will just wander endlessly with no education to help him survive the world. The metaphor of letters drilled like oats in a field, reminds us how inaccessible words are to the boy, as the words are neat ordered, the boy himself is not. Written language is like a forbidden field, the boy will always be outside, unable to do the task of reading. This shows the teacher's frustration at the boy's inability to process the words or even to try and understand the meaning of words.

The poem shows that even though the boy can't read, he can understand his own ability and survive the world with the skills of being a traveller. The boy earned the teachers acknowledgement of being able to understand and read the world in his own way.