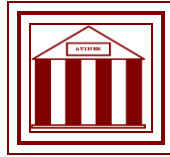


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**Poetry for Young Readers**  
**in their Responses**

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## **Poetry for Young Readers in their Responses**

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### **Abstract**

Literary education is in a particularly difficult position with poetry as many teachers and students are afraid of it due to its ambiguity, seeming incomprehensibility and possible considerable interpretative latitude. Some teachers approach the interpretation of poems in too directive a manner and expect from students the same opinion as they have. The goal of the study is to find out how students are able to interpret poetic texts without the significant help of their teacher. The subject of their interest was the poem *Puberty* focused on teenage readers. We used the semantic differential and focus group method. Through semantic differential, differences amongst 256 respondents (12 – 15 years old) were observed in terms of various categories (age, gender, educational focus, reading competence, etc.). The focus group method was used with 10 selected respondents (15 – 16 years old) to determine the extent of their insight into the poem. When comparing the results of the poem *Puberty* with other poems monitored by semantic differential we can see that it represents only the average among other poems. Respondents were not captivated by it as much as it had been expected with a text directly aimed at children. It lacks real and painful experience having a universal outreach. On the contrary, these attributes are sensitively perceived by respondents in some difficult texts for adults. Sufficiently motivated students are capable of sufficient interpretative insight without any guidance of a teacher. Poems directly aimed at young readers can be accepted as less positive than a difficult poem for adults.

### **Keywords:**

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## Introduction

Poetry is the most difficult part of teaching literature in school; this is confirmed by research carried out in this area (Benton 1999, 2000; Pike, 2000; Wiseman, 2011; Hanratty, 2012). Poetry is often rejected by students who describe it as incomprehensible and out of touch with the world of today. However, a deeper analysis of the issue reveals that the main factor causing this situation is not poetry itself, and not even the students. They merely respond to the situations provided by their teachers. Practice shows that teachers are often afraid of poetry; they do not read it and avoid teaching it. When interpreting it they act too mechanically, they reject different opinions in fear of losing authority and forget that a poem cannot have a single, correct interpretation. These concerns are transferred indirectly to their students who accept them and pass them on. (Ofsted, 2007; Vala, 2012; Lambirthetal, 2012).

In response to this situation, we began a three-year research project supported by the Grant Agency of the Czech Republic in 2011 examining poetry reception by students in primary and secondary schools and the possibility of influencing the teaching methods. The main objective of the research project is to broaden the understanding of the reception process of pubescent and adolescent readers (age category 12-19 years). We want to obtain a comprehensive view of the students and their reading of poetry as well as of the possibilities of a positive impact on the quality of this process. This paper deals with the partial issue of the students' ability to perceive and interpret poetic texts without the guidance provided by teachers. We shall focus on a poem written for adolescent readers (Jan Kašpar - Puberty).

## Research Methods

Despite the contradictory relation between school and intimacy, the conducted research tries to provide insight into the student reception of poetry with the following research methods: semantic differential (SD) and focus group. The research by semantic differential aims to determine how students aged 12-15 (256 respondents) perceive various kinds of poetry and give their interpretations. An assessment scale of SD, modified and verified by a factor analysis, enables the monitoring of the feelings of the readers – respondents – from the point of view of three factors: *comprehensibility, evaluation and impressiveness* (Vala, 2011).

An interesting insight into the ways of interpretation of the selected poems is shown by the transcript of the recording which was made among the students (aged 15-16) at a selected general secondary school by the focus group method. This method enables the obtaining of data using group interactions which emerge and develop in the discussion on the given topic (Morgan, 2007). We monitored the extent to which students were able to get close to the meanings of the poetic text during the group interactions.

## **The Poem Puberty and its Interpretations**

J. Kašpar – Puberty

*I am picking in myself  
As if was a fish with a lot of bones  
I explode in anger  
When they ask  
What's the matter with you?  
NOTHING!*

*When the night covers my eyes  
I choke with tears under the pillow*

*I am a viper, a frog, a spider and a liar,  
That's the matter with me*

The poem is based on explicit content source: me against the world. It is analytical, introspective and obviously self-tormenting as the self-examination limited to one's own world must be. One cannot get out of oneself, cannot leave the vicious circle. The only thing one can still manage is to admit one's situation, observe oneself and try to cope with a situation which cannot be changed, when one is unassisted and there is not a possibility of interference from the outside world. And that brings rebellion, anger, aggression and unbridled emotion. This is the hostile and defiant NOTHING, which at the same time means everything which one carries within oneself with such difficulties, compositionally dividing the poem into two equal and differently motivated units: accusation and confession. It is the painful and harrowing process of self-examination - but not of self-reflection - and the stifling degradation of a resigned existence in the traditionally expressive position – a viper, a frog, a spider and a liar. If this verse had been on a lower artistic level than it seems to be, it would have been a typical example of a therapeutic text. The imagery is obvious and familiar to everybody, we all say that that we are picky eaters and everybody knows what it is to pick the bones out of a fish. One may be angry when doing it which makes the picture complete. And parents tell them at dinner: What's the matter? And the answer is: NOTHING. That is when one puts one's head under the pillow, crying, suffering, and then the metamorphosis comes, one is a liar and a spider, maybe with remorse, maybe hopelessly abandoned. Instead of interpreting the text, however, one is lying on Freud's couch subjected to psychoanalytic therapy. There is no need to hide that the contemporary poetry also fulfills the latter function. But today this function is not limited to separate poems which might appall, offend and outrage society. On the contrary, entire blogs, social Internet networks and others overshadow the praised poetry. Although it has a rhythm and is easy to read, understandable and no doubt sincere.

### Discussion of the Results of the Reception of the poem

The assessment of this poem is given by the semantic differential results in the following tables. Each of them focuses on a comparison of two categories of respondents. The higher the average of the semantic differential is, the better the poem is received by the respondents in the given factor. To verify the statistical significance of differences the student t-test at a significance level of 0.05 has been used. If there is p (significant difference) in the column, a value of less than 0.05, the differences between the categories may be considered statistically significant.

**Table 1.** *Assessing the Poem Puberty vs. Students' Age*

Factor	Group1: age 14-16 Group 2: age 12-13				
	Average Group 1	Average Group 2	t	df	p
<b>Comprehensibility</b>	4,925287	4,999573	-0,38	241	0,704268
<b>Evaluation</b>	4,164751	4,634402	-1,9554	241	0,051687
<b>Impressiveness</b>	4,455939	4,182265	1,29137	241	0,197812

*t* = test statistics

*df* = number of degrees of freedom

*p* = significance of the difference between the groups of respondents at the significance level of  $\alpha = 0.05$

**Table 2.** *Assessing the Poem Puberty vs. Gender*

Factor	Group 1: Female Group 2: Male				
	Average female	Average male	t	df	p
<b>Comprehensibility</b>	5,095585	4,764815	1,711393	239	0,088306
<b>Evaluation</b>	<b>4,688521</b>	<b>4,109259</b>	<b>2,430227</b>	<b>239</b>	<b>0,015827</b>
<b>Impressiveness</b>	4,436645	4,057407	1,806093	239	0,072162

**Table 3.** *Assessing the oem Puberty vs. read / do not read Fiction*

Factor	Group 1: read Group 2: do not read				
	Average Group 1	Average Group 2	t	df	p
<b>Comprehensibility</b>	5,001411	4,771739	0,955385	233	0,340373
<b>Evaluation</b>	4,496120	4,283333	0,710151	233	0,478321
<b>Impressiveness</b>	4,346208	3,985507	1,388528	233	0,166302



**Table 4.** *Assessing the Poem Puberty vs. read / do not read Poetry*

Factor	Group 1: read poetry Group 2: do not read poetry				
	Average Group 1	Average Group 2	t	df	p
<b>Comprehensibility</b>	<b>5,287302</b>	<b>4,713934</b>	<b>2,990628</b>	<b>225</b>	<b>0,003094</b>
<b>Evaluation</b>	<b>4,697778</b>	<b>4,201093</b>	<b>2,065919</b>	<b>225</b>	<b>0,039981</b>
<b>Impressiveness</b>	4,331111	4,168033	0,771049	225	0,441487

**Table 5.** *Assessing the Poem Puberty vs. Field of Study - Natural Sciences / Humanities*

Factor	Group 1: natural sciences Group 2: humanities				
	Average Group 1	Average Group 2	t	df	p
<b>Comprehensibility</b>	4,775510	5,137190	-1,825	217	0,069243
<b>Evaluation</b>	<b>4,172109</b>	<b>4,678512</b>	<b>-2,078</b>	<b>217</b>	<b>0,038828</b>
<b>Impressiveness</b>	4,045238	4,439394	-1,836	217	0,067689

**Table 6.** *Assessing the Poem Puberty vs. Extrovert / Introvert*

Factor	Group 1: introvert Group 2: extrovert				
	Average Group 1	Average Group 2	t	df	p
<b>Comprehensibility</b>	4,935743	5,015525	-0,397	227	0,691060
<b>Evaluation</b>	4,333333	4,544292	-0,844	227	0,399303
<b>Impressiveness</b>	4,108434	4,391096	-1,306	227	0,192555

The results are surprising and partly contradict our expectations that adolescent readers will view the poem explicitly designed for them more positively than a poem written for adult readers. Although this is poetry intended primarily for pubescent readers its SD - when compared with other poems – is about average. These are some of the remarks offered by the students on the poem:

- *I would read it again, it seems to be about me. I get angry now when people ask me questions.*
- *Not interesting at all, the short strangely formed verses.*
- *The writer is sincere, I like it.*
- *Sometimes I feel like that as well, it is interesting from the very start how angry she is with herself.*
- *I don't like it, it is too pessimistic and depressing. It makes me feel bad.*
- *There is no depth, no truth, just rhyming.*

- *I like it. It is a dissection of a man who is unable to take off his mask or is not aware of it any more or does not know how to take it off.*

Statistically significant differences between the categories were established in four cases suggesting that in this group the respondents read the text in a similar way. The girls were expected to have a higher SD score in all the factors as they would feel closer to the image of a self-examining lyrical subject. The assumption has only been fulfilled at the evaluation factor. Readers of poetry perceive this poem with a greater understanding and find it more pleasant than non-readers which may be proof of their more intensive reading experience.

### **The Poem interpretation in a Focus Group**

The recording was carried out in January 2013 with a group of 10 students (4 boys and 6 girls) attending an optional literature classes. The presenter of the discussion, who was at the same time the teacher in these classes, gradually suggested several possible topics and issues and the students expressed their opinions. The discussion below is an authentic transcription of the recording.

- Michal: I can feel the process of growing up emanating from the poem, there are a lot of ideas. It's an interesting topic, I was really intrigued by how it is depicted here. I am picking in myself as if I were full of fish bones. You need to find yourself first then you can become somebody. That's the first thing, my first feeling.
- Barbora: I think it's in us, in teenagers, some of us have limited understanding of themselves, all the different feelings are mixed up and we have no idea what is actually happening to us. Each of us is different, but it's all mixed up in us.
- Alice: I see in the poem a problem that each of us has. And the others by asking us what's wrong, they give us an opportunity to share our feelings and they offer to help us. But we reject it because we think they would laugh at us or assume that our problem is not as important as we see it.
- Jindra: Or maybe she means that they would not be laughing at us, but maybe we do not even know how to express it. We are ashamed as we do not know what the problem is, what it is composed of or where to start. So the challenge to put the problem into words could be even bigger - it might sound really completely different from what we had wanted to say, it would be a different problem, we ourselves actually do not know what problem we are dealing with.
- Katka: I was intrigued: I am a viper, a frog, a spider and a liar, because at school or anywhere else when you're a teenager you

worry about different issues, or you are pushed into different groups and they encourage you to do various things, and when you do not like it and show it, you become afraid of being held in contempt, so you try to please everyone but then it may not pay off ...

- Tereza: Typical teenagers are often in a good mood, they are just fine, no problems, and then suddenly out of nowhere they are totally in a bad mood, and simply do they do not know what's up.
- Veronika: Maybe the problem is not us, but we fear that if we show it, we may lose the person somehow, or that it will change somehow and we won't meet him again.
- Ondra: I'm a frog, a spider, a liar - in fact we feel unwanted, or it means that on the one hand they want to be independent but on the other hand it is not yet possible, it's one of those transitions: they are not kids anymore, but they're not adults yet, they wouldn't be able to take care of themselves.
- Michal: I would like to respond to Ondra, adolescence is for many a period when either they become aligned with the society, with what is happening around us, or if they resist, they will be pushed out from it. It will determine how the teenager/adolescent behaves. And I think that this is somehow expressed in this poem.
- Barbora: When the night covers my eyes. I choke with tears under the pillow When we are alone the emotions just explode; we want to cry, the tears flow.
- Veronika: We often feel the pressure to behave maturely - they want us to perform in a certain way but we are not able to do it because sometimes we want to be that child.
- Eva: NOTHING. A typical teenager answer, they do not want to deal with those problems, very often these are not problems at all, just some experiences. They just say NOTHING.
- Katka: It's the first love, the search for a boy. And you like someone but you are afraid to show it. There is nobody you can discuss it with because you're afraid of what they would think.
- Michal: When I read the poem and think it over it strikes me that this is not only true for adolescents, for teenagers, but often when it is transferred to a normal life, it is the behaviour of adults. It seems to me that even adults often behave like children, I cannot relate this poem to our age group only, even adults do not come to terms with themselves, and they are moody and experience all the other things we have been talking about.
- Veronika: Back to the answer NOTHING, maybe I do not want to address those problems because I would learn something I do not want to know. And it is much worse than the problem itself.
- Ondra: Tears under the pillow. One somehow manages throughout the day when one is among people, in the evening one

realizes what one did wrong and you wrestle with your conscience.

- Michal: During the day I pretend that everything is fine, everything is under control but then in the evening I give up and these gloomy ideas appear...
- Veronika: Well, maybe we do not want it this way, we could be ... maybe not completely open, but we could filter these emotions, confide in friends not to become unhappy later.

In the focus group interview the poem has become a springboard for the students reflecting on the experiences of teenagers. The poem itself does not offer ambiguous poetic images, it does not provide too many opportunities for discussion. It is actually a challenge: Let's talk about puberty. While the students do not seem to learn anything new from the poem, they learn a lot when discussing it. The focus groups had a very friendly and intimate ambiance, individual students shared their views openly while respecting each other. Some kept on discussing their own thoughts regardless of what was being said in the debate, others were able to react to the views expressed. The verbalization of an aesthetic judgment or reading experience is a very demanding mental operation. An interpretation of a poem (or any other artwork) requires experience and openness on the part of recipients, therefore they are potentially vulnerable. Otherwise they would offer empty and formal phrases. It is admirable that the selected respondents were able to avoid it. A focus group in similar cases is a very strong tool strengthening mutuality between students, their openness to ourselves and to the others, members of the group. At the same time, we recognize that such a group dynamics may become negative – there is a certain risk involved when working with the whole class, unmotivated students, etc. In such an environment the respondents would have been afraid to express their innermost ideas for fear of becoming a subject of ridicule.

Each student dealt with the text according to their current level of personal maturity. Some showed mature thinking, detachment, they were able to generalize and avoid their own personal attitudes. Thus, for example, Michal interestingly applies the poem to adults as well who are often erratic and pretending just like teenagers. Other students do not leave the superficial level of romance focusing on their own dreams and plans. The poem surprisingly does not provoke with its topic and content although for some readers it may seem to have a slightly superior attitude – looking down on adolescents and their "childish" suffering. Some students avoid this by discussing the addressee of the poem (and the lyrical subject at the same time) in the third person: "They are teenagers," which makes the analysis safer – no identification occurs and the respondents may find a better cover behind "the teenagers".

### Comparison of the Poem *Puberty* and the Poem *The Last* (Vladimír Holan)

To compare the results of the reception of the poem *Puberty* the challenging poem *The Last* (V. Holan) has been selected. It is a demanding poem but universally valid, and students intuitively (although not intellectually) perceive it as a clear, intimate and impressive one.

Vladimír Holan – *The Last*

*The last leaf trembles on the plane-tree  
For it knows well that without shaking there is no firmness.  
I tremble, God, because I feel  
I shall soon die and should be firm.  
From every tree falls the last leaf  
For it is not without faith in the earth.  
From every man falls the last pretense  
For the mortuary slab is utterly simple.  
The leaf has no need to ask you, God, for anything –  
  
You made it grow and it has not spoilt Your hand.  
But I...*

**Table 7.** Comparison of the Poems according to the Sum of the Individual Factors

Poem	Averages			
	Comprehensibility	Evaluation	Impressiveness	Sum of the factors
<i>The Last</i>	3,84	4,51	4,47	<b>12,82</b>
<i>Puberty</i>	4,97	4,46	4,28	<b>13,71</b>

The direct comparison of the two poems confirms the expected fact that the poem *Puberty* is perceived by the respondents as significantly more understandable. However, in other factors the situation is either balanced (evaluation factor) or the poem *The Last* is dominant (impressiveness factor). It may be caused by the already mentioned fact of intuitive understanding because the theme of death and the recapitulation of one's life is universal for readers regardless of their age. If the poem (and art in general) is to act primarily on the human emotions, the poem *The Last* is artistically more impressive (regardless of its complexity).

### Conclusions

The poem *Puberty* was expected to have a higher degree of involvement as it is specifically designed for the age group of the respondents. When

compared with some other poems (e.g. The Last by Holan), it seems to lack an actual experience, a painful universally valid experience the intensity of which the respondents are able to grasp in some other challenging texts not specifically written for children. The poem by Kašpar is more of a play on words trying to create the illusion of such the experience. In its efforts, however, the author slips into a condescending tone the effect of which may have a contradictory impact on the readers. The poem itself does not offer ambiguous poetic images, neither does it provide the students with an opportunity for an analysis. It is not innovative in this respect. However, it provides the students with a background to think about themselves. The purpose of similar poems may be in breaking the stereotypes that students tend to assign to poetry in general – seeing it as unintelligible, detached from everyday life, restricted to a narrow group of readers, etc. Through such poems they can then find a way to poems that are artistically and semantically richer.

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