

The reception of Czesław Miłosz's poetry by students of primary, lower secondary and upper secondary schools

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The works of Czesław Miłosz are usually regarded as “especially difficult” literature. It is therefore important to examine how young people analyse and interpret selected works of the poet. The article presents the results of a study evaluating the quality of reception of Miłosz's poetry by students at all levels of compulsory education prior to the Czesław Miłosz Year in 2011. The study enabled the assessment of students' knowledge of the life and work of Miłosz and the reading competencies required by a modern student to analyse and interpret his literary work.

KEYWORDS: linguistic accuracy, linguistic error, assessment, essay, Polish language, lower secondary school exam.

The year 2011 was announced as the Czesław Miłosz Year which marked the hundredth anniversary of the poet's birth. A so called “miłoszology” (the study of Miłosz's poetry) had already developed in academic circles. Both teachers and students at lower levels of education felt bored and discouraged by the writings of the Nobel Prize winner. Kryda described difficulties in the reception of his poetry in schools. In April 1981 she conducted a study evaluating teachers' and students' ability to read Miłosz's poetry in upper secondary

schools (Kryda, 1987). Twenty years later this was readdressed by Kołodziejczyk and Zięba (2002). In 2001, a competition for students of secondary schools was organised by researchers. Its main purpose was to assess the quality of the reception of the Nobel Prize winner's poetry. The conclusions were similar to those reached in the 1980s. These were that “Students still regard Miłosz as a bard, a prophet and an apocalyptic poet” (Kołodziejczyk and Zięba, 2002, pp. 170–174).

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2011 brought a revival of “miłoszology”. The Minister of Culture announced the programme *Czesław Miłosz 2011 – the Promise*, financing the celebration of the year of the poet’s centenary. As part of the Czesław Miłosz Year academic seminars, workshops, meetings with scholars specialising in his work as well as exhibitions, happenings, film screenings and poetry readings were organised. Among the events mainly for the adult reading public, an educational programme *Czesław Miłosz odNowa* (Czesław Miłosz aNew), organised by the Centre for Citizenship Education and the publisher Wydawnictwo Szkolne PWN held a special place. The aim of the programme was to acquaint students of lower and upper secondary schools with Miłosz’s works and biography to address the issue of memory and identity in Miłosz’s works. The project attracted much interest from students and the teachers of Polish. Teachers confirmed that students had become real “Miłoszomaniacs” (CCE, 2011). However, such optimistic conclusions required an assessment. This article presents the results of the research aimed to evaluate the quality of the reception of the Nobel Prize winner’s poetry by students prior to the Czesław Miłosz Year.

To create a broad picture of the reception of the selected poems by Miłosz, research was conducted in selected primary, lower secondary and upper secondary schools in the Cieszyn Silesia region. In primary schools the sixth-graders were the subject of the research (schools in: Cieszyn, Skoczów and Ustroń, in total: 142 assignments), in lower secondary schools: the third-graders (two schools from Ustroń and one from Skoczów – 115 assignments), in upper secondary schools: the third and some fourth-graders (Bielsko-Biała, Cieszyn, Żory – 74 assignments). In total 331 written assignments were collected and assessed.

On the reception of poetry – the state of the research

While comparing the bibliography on reception of Miłosz’s poetry (Kołodziejczyk and Zięba, 2002; Kryda, 1987) with the theoretical and critical works devoted to the poet (including Biedrzycki, 2008; Błoński, 1998; Fiut, 1998, 2003; Kwiatkowski, 1985; Olejniczak, 1992, 1997; Zach, 2002; Zaleski, 2005), it can be stated that of the former there is a dearth. A similar situation can be observed in the case of the bibliography on evaluation of the students’ ability to respond to contemporary poetry at school. The poetic text, how it functions in a school environment, its analysis and interpretation have been a focus for scholars since the middle of the 20th century¹.

New works were added successively to those which played a vital part in forming models to approach the text in the teaching of Polish. Dissertations by Pilch (2003), Janus-Sitarz (2009) and Myrdzik (1999) seem to be especially relevant. However, none of these scholars conducted an empirical study on the reception of poetry as part of their research. Although scholars have shown interest in the reception of literary work for a long time, the bibliography relating to this is quite limited. The first works were written in the 1970s and 80s (Dynak, 1977; Inglot, 1977; Polakowski and Uryga, 1978; Polakowski, 1980). At that time Chrzastowska (1979), Uryga (1982) and Baluch (1984) conducted research on ability to respond to contemporary poetry at a particular level of education. Students at upper secondary schools were studied by Chrzastowska and Uryga, while Baluch examined primary schools. Uryga and Chrzastowska can be singled out as pioneers of research on the reception of poetry. Until now their works have

¹ Among the authors of works were: Chrzastowska and Wyslouch (1987, 1974), Kostkiewiczowa and Sławiński (1961), Kram (1968), and: Lausz (1970), Pasterniak (1982), Słodkowski (1972), Szyszowski (1964).

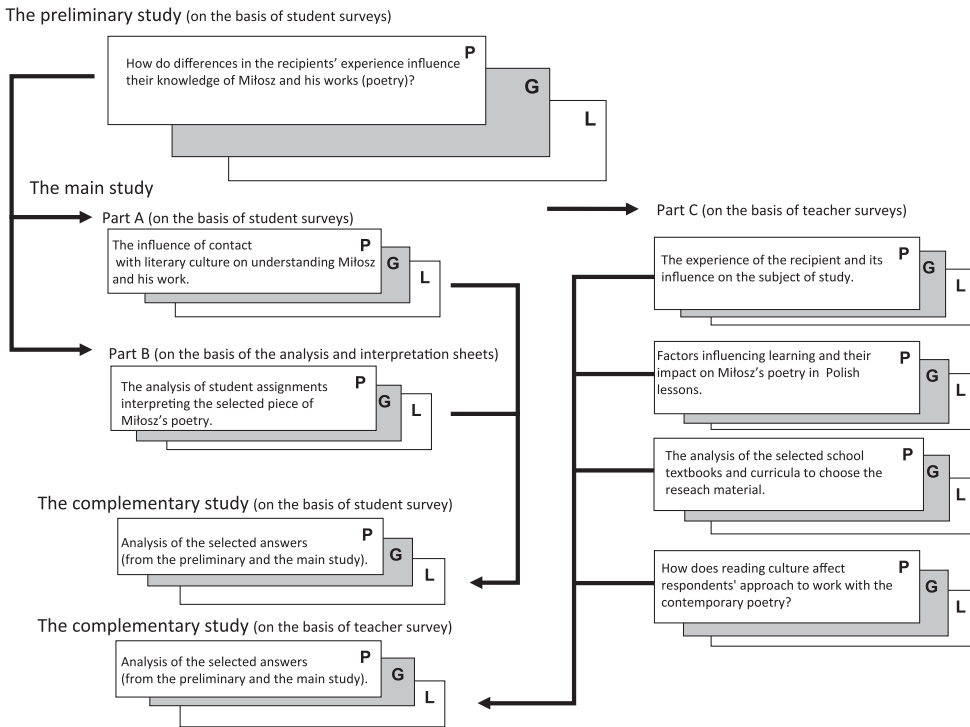


Figure 1. The concept of the research conducted among the students and teachers of Polish (P – primary schools, G – lower secondary schools – *gimnazja*, L – general upper secondary schools – *licea*).

been the main references for dissertations on analysis and interpretation of lyrical texts. Although the methodology and the statistical analysis were different, the present study was also inspired by these works.

The study

A questionnaire survey of students and teachers of primary, lower secondary and upper secondary schools was carried out to initiate the study of the poetry's reception (Figure 1 shows the results of the study). Quoting Sułkowski, Uryga emphasised that external determinants influence the effect of reception. It is essential to refer to "the field of a recipient's experience" which "covers all factors influencing the process of reception, or decoding the literary message" (Uryga, 1982, p. 14).

To capture the determinants of the reception of lyrical texts, questions were posed in the survey about factors generating the motivation to learn and involvement of young readers in cultural activities, as well as social circumstances leading to contact with a poem. Questions were therefore directed at psychological and sociological aspects of the poem's reception. The aim of the survey conducted among Polish language teachers was to provide information on their attitudes towards Miłosz as a person and his poetry and to point to factors affecting the reception of contemporary poetry during Polish classes. Further analysis covered the answers provided on the analysis and interpretation sheets.

The research material evaluating ability to respond to poetry includes records of attempts to interpret selected works of Miłosz.

The analysis was both qualitative and quantitative. The sample, means and their standard deviations were determined. It was assessed whether any original interpretations of the text appeared and whether the students demonstrated knowledge of basic literary terms and whether this knowledge was functional.

The structure of the analysis and interpretation sheet for the poems chosen

The analysis and interpretation sheets were designed to evaluate the quality of the poem's reception. They consisted of two pages. The first presented selected works, which depending on educational level comprised the following poems:

- for primary school: *The Porch*² (*Ganek*), *Love* (*Miłość*), *Fear* (*Trwoga*), *By the Peonies* (*Przy piwoniach*);
- for lower secondary school, *Report* (*Sprawozdanie*), *A Song about the End of the World* (*Piosenka o końcu świata*), *Meaning* (*Sens*), *Gift* (*Dar*), *To a Hazel Tree* (*Do leszczyny*);
- for upper secondary school: *Undressing Justine* (*Rozbieranie Justyny*), *Eyes* (*Oczy*) and a long poem *Orpheus and Eurydice* (*Orfeusz i Eurydyka*).

The second page was designed for recording the interpretation conclusions, i.e. there was the space for the analysis and interpretation.

Justification of the choice of poems

Most of the works selected for analysis and interpretation appear in the majority of school textbooks. The works of the poet which were published before 1980 prevail in school textbooks. Sometimes, at upper secondary level there are poems from volumes published in

the 1990s. Therefore, while selecting the poems for the research, it was established that there should be at least one work published after 1990. This choice was not accidental. The study was aimed at answering the following question. Which of Miłosz's works do students choose for interpretation most willingly, those that they know from school textbooks or those not in the school canon? The method used to discuss a text was also of interest. Were the tools used by the students for reception of a text read for the first time identical to those applied to a text already known, or were there any significant differences?

The rules for assessment of responses

The issue of the analysis and interpretation of lyrical texts in Polish classes, particularly in upper secondary school, continues to be addressed by many scholars such as Chrzastowska (1979), Uryga (1982), Kostkiewiczowa (Chrzastowska and Kostkiewiczowa, 1988), Bortnowski (1991), Jaskółowa and Opacka (1997). Not many scholars evaluate the reception of poetry as it causes a lot of problems. We usually first think how to measure something which theoretically cannot be measured, how not to yield to the temptation of "subjective assessment", how to maintain researcher distance and objectivity and finally, how, without exposure to criticism, to include the claim which can be heard increasingly from students: "but I understand the text exactly in this way, I have a right to my own interpretation!"

As far back as 1938 Skwarczyńska wrote about the right of students to their own interpretation. She very carefully formulated her views on the "own opinion" of young people who articulate their rash judgements which are not based on solid knowledge.

The independent thinking of young people should represent itself in the ability to analyse and interpret a work which is unfamiliar

² All titles and quotations in English are provided by Miłosz, *Czesław New and Collected Poems 1931–2001* translated by Czesław Miłosz and Robert Haas, Harper Collins Publishers, New York: 2003 [translator's footnote].

to them or in the ability to make choices, understand and interpret different literary trends and movements. [...] – How I feel it – is the main argument that hinders the need for intellectual search and thorough analysis of the text. Constructing far-reaching interpretation hypotheses based on intuitive feelings, expressed beyond the text, is a consequence of the distorted idea of “my own opinion”. The independent thinking of young people in the area of Polish literature should result from the analytical skills, the ability to associate and understand the literary trends and movements (Chrzęstowska and Wyślouch, 1974, p. 25).

This issue was also raised by Okopień-Sławińska:

The argument about the lack of “objective” interpretation (as it is sometimes called) that discourages teaching should be accepted with reservations: the indeterminacy of interpretation should not be equalled with freedom of reading and a lack of rules in this regard. [...] Any kind of teaching cannot guarantee production of excellent examples of the art of interpretation, however – by introducing the rules, the language of the text analysis and the models of certain interpretation solutions – it can and it should ensure that clear standards are established, depending on level of education (Okopień-Sławińska, 1988, pp. 112–113).

Since the ministerial document sets out the standards for analytical and interpretation skills, the works of Miłosz presented in the analysis and interpretation sheets were assessed according to the criteria based on education policy – the curriculum (MEN, 2007a) and binding standards for educational requirements (MEN, 2007b). The criteria for the assessment of interpretation and the number of corresponding points were defined by a group of experts consisting of five teachers from the primary, lower and upper secondary schools. The four teachers in each group of experts were teachers of Polish with more than five years experience and whose

classes took part in the survey and the study on the analysis and interpretation of the selected work of Miłosz. The fifth expert was a teacher of Polish and an educationalist, whose school did not participate in the research. The idea behind such selection of experts was to find a reliable and objective way of assessing the students’ work.

One of the main educational goals that should be achieved at the 4–6th grades of primary school is “stimulating the motivation to read and develop the ability to respond to literature and other texts of merit, and in this way – bringing students closer to the understanding of people and the world; introducing them to the traditions of national and European culture” (MEN, 2007a). This goal is achieved by employing different means, for example the educational programme contains such terms as: the world presented, writer, recipient, persona, metaphor, rhythm, epithet, comparison, onomatopoeia, rhyme, stanza, refrain, poetry, all of which were taken into account by the experts in choice of assessment criteria. According to the curriculum, students at this level should attempt to respond to texts, discovering their literal, metaphorical and symbolic meaning.

Assessment criteria for works at subsequent levels of education

Considering the assumptions of the curriculum, the teachers forming the expert group for primary schools specified nine assessment criteria for student assignments: the ability to recognise the subject and poetic devices with their functions, the meaning of structural elements with the ability to describe the world presented in the work, attempting to read contextually and endeavouring to discover literal and metaphorical meanings of a text.

According to Jaskółowa, to teach how to interpret is to teach how to meet another person who has something meaningful to say (Jaskółowa, 2004). A student has to learn how

Table 1

*Stages of determining the range of points for the assessment of particular criteria for the analysis and interpretation of the poem on the basis of the primary school experts' opinion**

Criteria for awarding points for interpretation of the selected poem [A student]:	The importance of the criterion as assessed by the experts (range 0–10)					The average importance of the criterion	The range of points established for the assessment of works
	Expert						
	I	II	III	IV	V		
1. Recognises the persona in the work.	5	4	6	5	4	4.8	0–5
2. Names poetic devices and indicates their functions.	10	10	10	10	9	9.8	0–10
3. Pays attention to the functions of structural elements in the work.	4	8	6	7	6	6.2	0–6
4. Lists elements of the world presented.	3	7	4	4	6	4.8	0–5
5. Shows the historical context.	4	3	5	4	5	4.2	0–4
6. Reads the work literally – describes the world presented.	3	3	5	4	5	4.0	0–4
7. Assignment contains personal reflection.	6	8	7	5	6	6.4	0–6
8. Shows attempts to interpret similes.	5	6	5	6	7	5.8	0–6
9. Originality of interpretation.	10	10	10	9	10	9.8	0–10

*Each of the experts assessed each criterion giving it from 0 to 10 points. On the basis of the proposed value of assessment by each expert (for each criterion), the average was established and it was approximated to a whole number. This number was considered the highest point that could be awarded for each criterion. Similarly, the ranges of points for lower and upper secondary schools were established.

to interact with a text, therefore personal reflection is very important in the process of interpretation, and the experts highlighted it by making it one of the assessment criteria. Being aware that there is no single final interpretation, and respecting students' right to their own individuality and freedom of speech, the originality of interpretation – openness towards a text – was considered the final and most important assessment criterion (criterion 9). The assessment criteria for assignments and number of points awarded at primary school level are shown in Table 1.

The lower secondary school experts established similar criteria to those presented above (Table 2). At this level of education students should make more complex statements than

primary school pupils. They should already know basic literary concepts and terms. In principle, students of lower secondary schools should define and actively use the following terms: the main idea, the symbolic and metaphorical meaning of the work, symbol, apostrophe, contrast, syllabic and free poem, caesura, enjambment, metaphor, poetic image, literary kind and genre. Therefore, the important elements of assessment for the teachers of Polish at this level were: skills related to recognising the persona, the intended audience and the type of poetry, making the functional analysis of poetic devices and structural elements, the ability to describe the world presented, assigning the work to the appropriate kind of literature, constructing an interpretation

Table 2

Stages of determining the range of points for the assessment of particular criteria for the analysis and interpretation of the poem on the basis of the lower secondary school experts' opinion

Criteria for awarding points for the interpretation of the selected poem [A student]	The importance of the criterion as assessed by the experts (range 0–10)					The average importance of the criterion	Range of points established for the assessment of works
	Expert						
	I	II	III	IV	V		
1. Recognises the persona in the work	3	5	4	6	3	4.2	0–4
2. Names the intended audience of the work.	4	3	5	3	4	3.8	0–4
3. Determines the kind of poetry	8	6	5	4	6	5.8	0–6
4. Presents own reading of the work and justifies it	5	6	5	6	8	6.0	0–6
5. Indicates employed means of the artistic expression and describes their functions	10	9	9	10	10	9.6	0–10
6. Assigns the work to the right kind of literature	2	3	2	3	3	2.4	0–2
7. Discusses the functions of the structural elements of the work	6	5	3	4	3	4.2	0–4
8. Ability to describe the world presented	3	5	3	4	4	3.8	0–4
9. Student's assignment shows the attempts to read contextually	9	10	10	10	9	9.6	0–10
10. Refers to other texts	6	8	9	9	7	7.8	0–8
11. Interpretation with personal reflection	6	6	8	4	5	5.8	0–6
12. Originality of interpretation	9	9	10	10	10	9.6	0–10

hypothesis for the text and an attempt to justify it. Furthermore, based on the curriculum and examination standards, experts decided to assess ability to refer to other texts, attempt at contextual reading, personal reflection and originality of assignments.

According to many educationalists, teaching the ability to interpret the text is an important task as it serves one essential purpose i.e. passing the matriculation examination (the final exam in upper secondary school). In a sense, each lesson is preparation for this examination. This is a fact not denied by teachers or students (Chrzastowska and

Wysłouch, 1974; Koziółek, 2008). The teachers who were experts for upper secondary schools, presented a similar approach to teachers in lower secondary schools (Table 3). As their work with the poem is dictated by the matriculation examination, they took the following elements in the assessment of Miłosz's works into account:

- the ability to recognise the persona of the work (who speaks?) and its recipient (to whom?);
- to determine the type of poetry, to describe the situation, construct an interpretation hypothesis;

Table 3

Stages of determining the range of points for the assessment of particular criteria for the analysis and interpretation of the poem on the basis of the upper secondary school experts' opinion

Criteria for awarding points for the interpretation of the selected poem [A student]	The importance of the criterion as assessed by the experts (range 0–10)					The average importance of the criterion	Range of points established for the assessment of works
	Expert						
	I	II	III	IV	V		
1. Recognises the persona and audience of the work	3	3	5	4	4	3.8	0–4
2. Determines basic elements of the poem (versification, style, genre)	6	4	4	2	3	3.8	0–4
3. Names the kind of poetry /describes the situation in the text	7	6	5	5	6	5.8	0–6
4. Recognises the most important themes of the work, constructs interpretation hypotheses	8	10	7	9	6	8.0	0–8
5. Indicates means employed for artistic expression and describes their functions	10	9	10	9	10	9.6	0–10
6. In the reading of the text uses important places e.g. refers to title and composition in order to understand meaning	6	10	5	9	9	7.8	0–8
7. Ability to describe the world presented	3	3	5	6	5	4.4	0–4
8. Refers to other texts	10	10	10	10	10	10	0–10
9. Shows the basic contexts of the work	9	10	10	10	10	9.8	0–10
10. Makes references to other works of the poet	7	9	7	8	10	8.2	0–8
11. Interpretation with personal reflection	8	6	5	6	4	5.8	0–6
12. Originality of interpretation	10	10	10	10	10	10	0–10

- functional analysis of the means of artistic expression and structural elements of the work, determining meaning for the text and reference to other texts and the poet's other works;
- contextual reading;
- evaluation and original presentation of opinions.

At primary school level students could gain a maximum of 56 points, at lower secondary school, 74 points and 88 at upper secondary school.

Results of the study

On the basis of 142 responses, the students of primary schools from different towns and villages have similar preferences for the choice of the poet's poems. Considering the total sample, *The Porch* was the most frequently interpreted work, with 36.6% of respondents choosing this poem. The second most popular was *By the Peonies* (27.5%), followed by *Fear* (20.4%) and *Love* (15.5%). The poem *Gift* proved to be the most popular choice for

Table 4

Selected descriptive statistics for the results of students of primary, lower and upper secondary schools achieved for the analysis and interpretation of the poem chosen

Poem	<i>n</i>	<i>E</i> [points]	<i>SD</i>	<i>q</i> ₁	<i>Me</i>	<i>q</i> ₃
Primary school						
<i>The Porch</i>	52	12.3	5.7	8	11	16.5
<i>By the Peonies</i>	39	12.5	7.3	8	10	16
<i>Fear</i>	29	10.3	6.6	5	9	13
<i>Love</i>	22	9.7	5.4	7	9	14
Lower secondary school						
<i>Gift</i>	39	9.6	5.9	6	9	12
<i>A Song about the End of the World</i>	28	12.7	7.7	6.5	12	15
<i>Report</i>	24	15.3	6.9	10.5	15	20
<i>Meaning</i>	13	13.2	3.7	11	12	16
<i>To the Hazel Tree</i>	11	15.2	9.3	6	11	23
Upper secondary school						
<i>Undressing Justine</i>	37	27.1	8.6	21	24	33
<i>Eyes</i>	23	26.0	9.2	20	25	32
<i>Orpheus and Eurydice</i>	14	33.7	17.5	21	30	44

lower secondary school third-graders in the majority of schools participating in the study (Table 4). Out of 115 respondents, the interpretation of this poem was attempted by 33.9%. The second most popular was *A Song about the End of the World* – a poem from the school textbook which was interpreted by 24.3% respondents, followed by *Report* (21%), *Meaning* (11.3%) and *To the Hazel Tree* (9.6%).

The popularity of the poem *Gift* was owing to the structure of the work, which has only 9 verses. However, the factor influencing its choice (length of the poem) does not relate to the ability required for its analysis and interpretation. Considering that the average number of points awarded for the analysis and interpretation of *Gift* was 9.6 (of 56 available points), it appears that this poem was challenging.

It is likely that the respondents assumed that the poem with only nine verses did not

require a longer statement, therefore they limited their interpretation to a minimum. At upper secondary school, the most popular poem chosen by 74 students was *Undressing Justine* (50%), while the least popular was *Eyes*, chosen by nearly 19% of respondents. *Orpheus and Eurydice* was interpreted by 31.1% respondents.

While analysing the popularity of the poem selected, it is important to look at features of the schools where the data were collected. *Undressing Justine* was popular mainly among the students from one school. In other schools it was chosen less frequently, and the most popular choice was *Orpheus and Eurydice*. Thus, it is worth examining the motivation of students choosing the particular texts. In the school where it had been the main choice, *Undressing Justine* had been the subject of a compulsory written assignment. The task set by the teacher had been: "Write

Table 5

The average sum of points awarded in the assessment of the analysis and interpretation sheets for a particular work in all three lower secondary schools, with the division of the criteria for the elements of analysis (1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8), interpretation (4, 9, 10, 11) and the criterion of originality for assignment (12)

Choice	The sum of points awarded for analysis	The sum of points awarded for interpretation	The sum of points awarded for originality
<i>Report</i>	10.4	4.2	0.6
<i>Meaning</i>	6.2	4.9	0.9
<i>A Song about the End of the World</i>	6.8	5.1	0.8
<i>Gift</i>	4.4	6.1	0.3
<i>To the Hazel Tree</i>	8.1	5.8	1.3
Total	35.9	26.1	3.9

an analysis and interpretation of the work *Undressing Justine* by Czesław Miłosz". In the two other cases the study was conducted according to plan as presented earlier, i.e. the analysis and interpretation of a work which had not been previously set. Interestingly enough, the poem chosen usually exposes students' inability in the analysis and interpretation. The average score was only 27 out of 88 available points.

As shown in Table 4, which describes the results of the students at all levels, it can be concluded that analysis and interpretation skills were at a low level³. The school where the lowest results were achieved, had a very low level of analysis and interpretation skills. In this school students mostly obtained a score of between 4 and 14 points – 50% of students. It was the least diversified group, as there were not many very capable students, with only two individuals attaining a score of between 15 and 20 points. The situation in another lower secondary school was completely different. On the basis of the results of the study, students at this school were di-

verse. The main group of respondents (50%) were students with a score of between 6 and 15.5 points. Only 7 students examined obtained a result lower than 6 points. Moreover, in this school there were students who demonstrated good analysis and interpretation skills, achieving 30, 35 and 40 points. A lower secondary school scored the highest mean value. On analysis of the scores, we note that this group was the least diversified, with 50% of results between 9 and 16 points. The lowest score for interpretation was from 0 to 5 points. There were some capable students whose interpretation was assessed at between 20 to 35 points. Although none of the students from this school achieved a score above 40 points, the average sum of the points did not change and remained the highest. The results of the study, taking into account reading competencies in the area of interpretation and analysis, also deserve attention (Table 5).

Conclusions

Primary school

On the basis of the analysis and interpretation sheets for primary schools, two models for working with a poem can be identified. The first one has the features of hermeneutic interpretation of poetic text and is based on the responses to three basic questions:

³ Due to the breadth of this issue, in this article I give the statistical analysis of the results of the students of the lower secondary schools as an example. The results of students of primary and upper secondary schools were examined in a similar way.

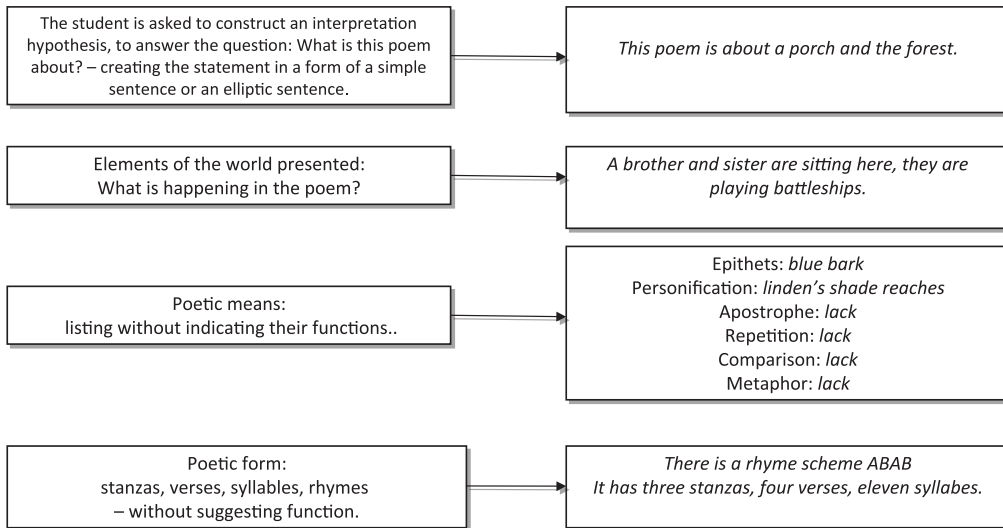


Figure 2. The model of the analysis and interpretation employed by students at primary schools.

- Why did I choose this poem? Example answer: I chose this poem because it's funny.
- What is this poem about (which elements of the world are presented)? Example answer: The poem is about blooming peonies where tiny beetles live. In the poem there are rhymes, e.g. *dzbanie – mieszkanie (bowl – home), staje – kraje (stands – lands), myśli – liśćmi (thinks – leaves)*.
- What did you like most about the poem? Example answer: I like the first stanza most.

The second model which students employ for analysis and interpretation includes the points shown in Figure 2.

The approaches shown to discuss a poetic text provided information about the organisation of the lesson. Two models of interpretation, although similar, are different in some instances. The first one focuses on the personal reflection of a student and is close to the hermeneutic model, while the second is similar to the modified structural model of analysis which does not include interpretation and determination of the functions of

the elements recognised. The approaches shown for discussing a poetic text are not complete. The perfect solution would be to combine these two models. In this case students would be required to analyse a text in detail, have a basic knowledge of poetics and be able to form their own opinions.

While analysing students' work, it was clear that young people intuitively employed terms related to poetics. The respondents list poetic devices (these lists are often unjustified as the particular poetic device is not present in the analysed text), but they do not provide any examples or their functions, e.g.: "I chose this poem because there is some fantasy in it. It is interesting because there is personification. It has three stanzas" (a comment on *By the Peonies*); "I chose the poem because it describes nature. I like the two verses in the second stanza. There are a lot of poetic devices. There are rhymes a, b, a, b" (a comment on *The Porch*). In their assignments the respondents use the terms "narrator" and "lyrical subject" interchangeably, e.g.: "I chose this poem because I like plants and this poem is about plants. The narrator

speaks in this poem, i.e. the omniscient person." (a comment on *By the Peonies*). In the majority of assignments, respondents enlist the basic structural elements of the work which consist of the number of stanzas and verses. Sometimes they identify the number of syllables, rhyme schemes, but they do not indicate their consequences on interpretation of the text⁴, e.g.: "The poem contains alternate rhymes. It is not divided into stanzas. There are some poetic means such as epithets ("dark forest"). The poem is shrouded in mystery and horror" (a comment on *Fear*).

As a result of the intuitive approach to poetry and a lack of basic skills to translate their minimal knowledge of literature into the practice of interpretation, students do not understand texts they read and cannot form their own opinions about them. There are therefore numerous summaries and copying of the content of the poem, e.g.: "This poem is quite sad. It describes children who wander around the dreadful forest and call for their father" (a comment on *Fear*). This interesting tendency which can be noted in the gathered material is that students refer to their own feelings and experiences and try to identify moralistic elements in the works e.g.: "This poem is about a father who went away and left his children. And you shouldn't do that" (a comment on *Fear*).

The primary school students enjoy reading Miłosz's poems, they say: "It's funny that the animal smells.;" they like "fear of

homeless children"; they like "horror poems" which fascinate them, and *Fear* "is a horror"; they like poems about nature – "flowers, trees, plants; from the porch there is a view in every direction" and in the poem *By the Peonies* there is some gentleness.

Although these results point out certain difficulties in the reception of Miłosz's works (at all levels of education), students are not aware of that. The respondents from primary schools claim that these poems are "great, and they could have them in a textbook". Taking into account the conclusions drawn in the process of analysis and interpretation, it turns out that *The Porch* is nothing more than a work depicting "an old porch from which you can see North, South, East and West". *By the Peonies* is a poem that "depicts the beauty of nature, mainly of flowers – peonies, in which tiny beetles have a conversation", while the poem *Fear* could change its title to *Lost*, and not very popular *Love* intimates that "we should love each other, and even if someone teases you, you should be nice to them because it will pay off".

The study showed that the selection of poems from the volume *The World (A Naïve Poem)* (*The Porch, Love, Fear, By the Peonies*) in such a form as presented in Polish classes is not the best one, as these poems require complex analysis, and it is difficult to interpret them without making references to the wider context. Chrzastowska, quoted many times in the introduction, emphasised this fact (1998).

The vast majority of the textbook and curricula authors think that at the level of primary school, students should be introduced to the topics that are more closely related to them – home, family, personal experiences, social and natural environment, and a system of values. When such goals are considered, it seems that the designers of educational tools attempt at whatever cost to assign the poems, not only of Miłosz but also of other poets of the older generation to the proposed convention of readings. In response to this method

⁴ It should be emphasised, however, that in the gathered material single interpretations can be found in which the respondents add that regular, ordered structure has an impact on the mood and rhythm of the poem: "The poem has rhythm. There are four stanzas, in each of them there are four verses. Each verse has eleven syllables. There are also alternate rhymes and epithets, e.g., in a fragrant bowl (pachnacym dzbanie) [...] (comment on *By the Peonies*); *The Porch* has an alternate rhyme scheme and it is hendecasyllable. It shows that the poem is rhythmical. It tells about the porch in front of the house. The poem is quite long (it contains three stanzas with four strophes each) [...] (comment on *The Porch*).

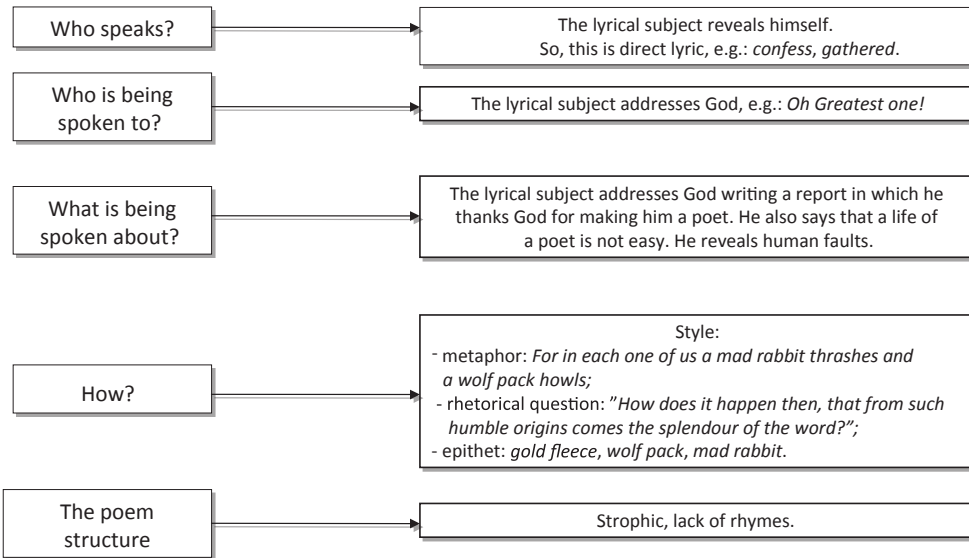


Figure 3. The model of analysis and interpretation employed by students of lower secondary schools.

of introduction to poetry, students respond to it in an instrumental and trivial way.

It should be remembered that Miłosz is not an author for children and his poetry is not directed to such an audience. Therefore, instead of looking for poems that could be included in textbooks for primary school children, maybe it would be better to refrain from using them and return to the times when Miłosz's literary output was discussed at a higher level of education, when students are more intellectually and emotionally mature⁵.

Lower secondary school

The opinions expressed by lower secondary school students on the poems of the Nobelist are "casual" and "general". *Report* is a poem "in which the poet talks about being a poet", *A Song about the End of the World* – "as the

title suggests, is about the end of the world", *Gift* speaks about "such a happy day", *Meaning* asks: "does a lining to the world exist?", while *To the Hazel Tree* "is the recollection of a tree which once must have been loved by the author". Interpretation boils down to answering the following questions shown in Figure 3.

Analytical skills are prevalent among students of lower secondary schools which is supported by the analysis of their assignments. While reading them, it can be seen that students of lower secondary schools do not recognise the difference between analysis and interpretation, and treat them separately, e.g.:

It is a strophic poem. It is targeted towards God. The addresser is the poet. The lyrical subject is a man. The poem is dominated by such poetic devices as metaphors. The poem shows the poet's gratitude to God. The desire to thank Him. The lyrical subject claims that, through poetry you can learn too much about "strange human nature". The poet admires the books which he has collected (a student's comment on *Report*).

⁵ It seems that this problem was recognised by the authors of the new curriculum which does not include Miłosz's poems in the selection of poetry at the level of primary school. However, it is hard to predict what would be the attitude of the textbook authors towards these changes.

This sample of a student assignment on the poem *Report*, shown above, reveals that information about literary theory introduced at school functions separately, as students do not see the mutual relations between the interpretation and analysis of a poetic text. This translates into all respondents' activities related to analysis and interpretation.

The students' assignments reveal lack of knowledge about basic terms related to poetics. The knowledge of poetic devices and their functions is incidental and intuitive, e.g.: "[...] The author describes how he lived. He forgets about bad things. He is not ashamed of himself. He did not feel any pain. He was happy. He dreamed. The poem contains metaphors, epithets and comparisons." (comment on *Gift*).

Students are willing to describe the structure of the poem. They frequently identify the number of stanzas, verses and syllables in the particular stanzas. With the information on verse scheme, they include information about the presence of rhymes and their scheme. However, this knowledge does not add to the functional analysis of the poem. Respondents from lower secondary schools cannot form their own opinions. Their interpretations lack any personal reflection and ideas for reading of the work. Their statements are written in a schematic way. Only in a few assignments are we acquainted with the reasons for choosing a particular poem and encounter the interpretation that is a record of a student's reflection after reading e.g.:

I'm going to discuss the poem *A Song about the End of the World* because it is the only one that aroused my interest. It shows that the end of the world will not be like everybody expects. No matter how we look at it, people are quite happy about this day. Only a few are shocked that this is a day like every day. One can imagine how the first day of the world looked. Obviously it is described in the Bible but we probably imagine it to be rather different from how it really was. In

the end we have a figure of the old man who says in a prophetic manner that there won't be such an end as we would expect. One can only wonder how this day actually ended. It is not described and so this is interesting (a comment on *A Song about the End of the World*).

Upper secondary school

One of the main tasks in Polish lessons is the interpretation of literary works. As part of this task, students at upper secondary schools should employ basic terms related to poetics, understand texts at different levels of complexity, respond to their meaning, not only at their literal level, but most importantly at the metaphorical level and read contextually (c.f. MEN, 2007a, p. 9).

All Miłosz's works for upper secondary schools were selected to allow verification of students' basic skills as set out by the curriculum. The results of the study show that the level of these skills is varied. Students at upper secondary schools recognise the persona, define the type of poem and often construct interesting interpretation hypotheses but they cannot justify these in the later part of the assignment. It is likely that school textbooks and methods of working with the text suggested by teachers are responsible for this situation. The instructions presented below, extracted from the textbook *Past is Today* (*Przeszłość to dziś*, Paczoska, 2003), indicate the following direction for the analysis and interpretation of *Undressing Justine*:

- This poem is an interpretation of *On the Neman River* (*Nad Niemnem*, a famous novel by Eliza Orzeszkowa) through the reconstruction of Justine's fate. Do you agree with this interpretation?
- According to Miłosz as a reader, there is something missing about the heroine. What is it? What elements does he add to her figure?
- Compare the "dialogue between body and soul" of Justine from the novel and the Justine in Miłosz's poem.

- Write a short essay: “The myth of the borderlands in *On the Neman River* and *Undressing Justine*”.
- How do you understand Miłosz’s formulation that Eliza Orzeszkowa is “a writer who serves good purposes”? (c.f. Paczowska, 2003, p. 105).

The assignments of students participating in the study show that the textbook model of working with a text, thinking about a text, frequently indicated the direction of the analysis and interpretation. This is supported by the following statement made by the student, who claims that the author presents two images of the Eastern borderland in his poem:

After having read three poems by Czesław Miłosz, I got interested in one of them: *Undressing Justine*. Maybe because it is about a woman and has accurate descriptions supporting our imagination, or maybe because this Justine is a heroine from *On the Neman River*, which I remember very well from Polish lessons. [...] This poem comes from the volume of poetry entitled “On the River Bank” from 1994. In this poem Miłosz meets the heroine from *On the Neman River* – Justine, in an almost intimate encounter. He looks at her differently from Eliza Orzeszkowa. He looks at her as a woman who provokes erotic associations. He admires her beauty: simple and striking. He tries to condense an erotic atmosphere, speculating about her love affair with Zygmunt Korczyński. He has no doubts that it was connected with sexual intercourse, loss of virginity and pain. But together with this incarnation (undressing) of Justine there is a reflection on her extraordinariness. [...] *They carry you, by ancient trails, to a land of shadows and murders*. The author shows here two images of the Eastern borderlands. One from the novel *On the Neman River*, nice and almost idyllic. The second one – in times of war – cruel, false, horrifying. At that time women were humiliated, raped and beaten. Miłosz’s poem is a great comment on the entire nineteenth-century as a kind of

cultural space, closed by World War One (and sometimes World War Two), just like other works by this author, since Miłosz does not belong to this space any more. He has become an exile and a wanderer, a citizen of the world. [...] (a comment on *Undressing Justine*).

The questions about the text, the so called textbook-guided analysis, were reflected in the student’s assignment. Since there are more examples of this kind, it seems that the approach to the text is mainly determined by the use of teaching tools. A common feature of upper secondary school students’ assignments was recognition of artistic means without their functional analysis. Contextual reading at the higher level is rare. Students refer mainly to things they know and which are expressed directly, e.g. *The Myth of Orpheus* and the novel *On the Neman River*. Further exploration and references to other texts appear only in a few assignments.

Summary

From the study it was concluded that the level of analysis and interpretation skills applied to Miłosz’s work is diverse and depends mainly on the stage of education and intellectual maturity of the respondent. The study of reception conducted among students at all levels of compulsory education confirms that young people more frequently chose works for analysis from those they already knew. This selection criterion does not affect the student’s attainment. As a rule, the poems most popular among the respondents appeared to be the most difficult in reception.

The model for working with a poetic text deserves attention. Since primary school answers have been sought to the questions: Who says? To whom? What about? How? This model for analysis is widespread, and, depending on the level of education, is completed by information about the author, the background of the poem and different contexts.

The majority of assignments reveal gaps in students' knowledge of basic literary terms. Knowledge of poetic devices and their functions is accidental and intuitive. This is particularly noticeable with the lower secondary students, who treat analysis and interpretation of a text as two separate activities.

The primary school students who enjoy Miłosz's poetry are not mature enough to interpret his poems. They respond in a literal, often naïve way. They approach them contextually with popular literature being their main point of reference, which can be demonstrated by the statement of one student who claimed that the title of the poem *Fear* could be exchanged for *Lost*.

It is therefore recommended that encounters with Miłosz should be limited at this level of education, possibly only to lessons about peoples' lives. At higher levels, i.e. in lower and upper secondary school, the poetry of Miłosz should make its presence known. The constructed interpretation hypotheses, often interesting but which students have difficulties in justifying, should become the subject of further consideration and analysis. In view of the above conclusions it is imperative that teaching tools be created which would enable teachers to develop students' contextual and inter-textual reading skills. These tools would also help with teaching how to construct critical essays.

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