

# Ripping Good Poetry Lures Boys Who Curse With Verse

*by* Con Chapman

WHARTON, Mass. This bucolic town north of Boston is home to one of the oldest private schools in the country, the prestigious Pringy Preparatory, whose graduates include two vice presidents and a secretary of commerce, but as yet no president. "It's kind of a sore point," says assistant headmaster Lyman Norton, alluding to the glittering alumni of its nearby competitor the Groton School, which has produced a president, a governor, two U.S. senators, a secretary of state and Fred Gwynne, the actor who starred in "Car 54, Where Are You?" and "The Munsters."



*"You get in the middle of the circle and we make fun of your family tree."*

But Pringy practices an aesthetic variant of the "muscular Christianity" that is a tradition at Groton; a program of Sunday poetry classes for boys who violate the school's ban on swearing.

"There is so much that is beautiful in the English language," says Norton. "We try to teach the boys that there's no need to use vulgar

language to express themselves when they're angry or frustrated because their date won't perform a particular sex act on them."



*"Instead of 'fucking,' say 'tupping'—Shakespeare did!"*

Norton's tastes run to classical narrative poetry of manly deeds, "not the obscure, self-centered cr . . . stuff that passes for poetry these days," he says, catching himself just before committing the crime he's been charged to punish. The classes are known derisively as "Ripping Good Poetry" among students because they are "about as pleasant as a fart" according to Todd Sneed, who's already been required to get up early three times this semester for what he feels were "ticky-tacky, Mickey Mouse" violations; a "hell," a "goddamn," and a "your sister sucks donkey dicks" that he yelled at an opposing player during a squash match.

Today's inmates include Todd, his friend Harrison Leathers, III, and Oliver Westcott, bound over until 1 p.m. today with Norton while classmates play on the greensward outside.



*Trash talk, squash-style*

"I hope you came prepared," Norton snaps with the fury of a drill sergeant, "because if you didn't, I've got all afternoon since I don't give a rat's patootie about the stupid NCAA basketball tournament you miscreants waste your parents' money on."

"Yes Mr. Norton," the three violators intone with a decided lack of enthusiasm as they open their notebooks. Each boy will be required to recite two verse of masculine poetry from memory, then give a report on some facet of the poet's life or work they have dredged up from a compulsory stint in the school's library.

"You first, Leathers," Norton says. "What work emplifying the manly virtues have you chosen to inspire us with today?"

"'The Ballad of East and West,' sir," the boy replies without enthusiasm.



"Ah, Kipling—the master! Proceed."

Leathers selects lines from the poem's conclusion, including the stirring coda that launched the memorable phrase "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet" upon the world.

"Done, but just barely," Norton says, noting that the boy dropped two lines and had to be prompted with the words "Belike they will raise" when he was stopped cold at one point. "Now—tell us a little something else about Kipling."

"Did you know," Leathers begins, "that in Kipling's poem 'The Ladies' he says it's a good thing to sleep around with yellow and brown women so that you'll learn things that will 'elp you a lot with the White!'"

Norton is nonplussed for a moment, but recovers quickly. "Well, yes, indeed. That *is* one of Kipling's lesser-known works. I'll mark you down as complete. Westcott—let's hear from you. Who's your poet?"

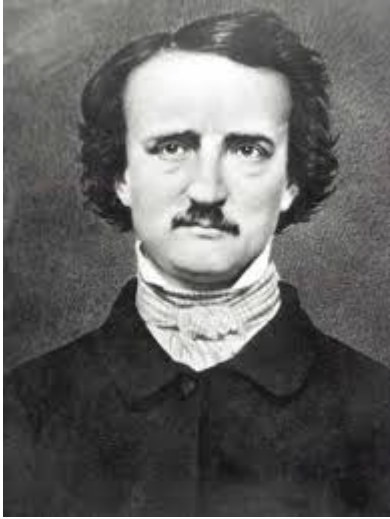


"Alfred, Lord Tennyson, sir," the boy replies.

"Good choice, let's hear it," Norton says, and the boy recites five stanzas of "The Charge of the Light Brigade," the poem about an ill-fated sortie in the Crimean War in which hundreds of British soldiers lost their lives. "Well done," Norton says when he finishes. "Now, if you will, a little something about the great poet."

"Well, I read one of his other poems, *The Lotos-Eaters*," which seems to glorify sitting around and getting high by eating some kind of naturally-occurring narcotic. It seems these natives get like totally wasted. When they talk their voices are thin, as 'from the grave; And deep-asleep they seem, yet all awake,' and . . ."

"Very good, that's enough, thank you," Norton says before the boy can delve any deeper into the poem which seems to glorify a mindless escape from reality. "Now, my best customer, Mr. Sneed," Norton says sarcastically. "What do you have for us today?"



*"What's with the smirk?"*

"Edgar Allan Poe, sir," Sneed says. "'Annabell Lee.'"

"Ah, very good. Begin," Norton says and Sneed does a passable job with the well-known poem about a beautiful maiden's tragic early death, and how the poet seems to see evidence of her continuing love in nature.

"And now if you will, please complete your assignment by telling us something we didn't know about Poe."

"Did you know that when he was 26, he married his 13-year-old cousin, and . . ."

"That will be all. Why don't you three go outside and throw a frisbee or something?"

