

***The Donkey* by G. K. Chesterton**

When fishes flew and forests walked
And figs grew upon thorn,
Some moment when the moon was blood
Then surely I was born.

With monstrous head and sickening cry
And ears like errant wings,
The devil's walking parody
On all four-footed things.

The tatter'd outlaw of the earth
Of ancient crooked will
Starve, scourge, deride me, I am dumb
I keep my secret still.

Fools! For I also had my hour;
One far fierce hour and sweet:
There was a shout about my ears,
And palms before my feet.

A High School Unit Study

Maureen Wittmann

Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874 – 1936) was a prolific author, writing on a variety of topics including religion, economic theory, and philosophy. He wrote poetry, plays, novels, and the famous Father Brown detective series. Chesterton's most famous novel was [*A Man Called Thursday*](#), which is about a policeman who infiltrates a secret organization of anarchists. Although it has been nearly seventy years since Chesterton's death, he continues to be one of the most quoted authors of this century.

What I love about Chesterton is that he has a way of bringing clarity to the most muddled of subjects. Sadly, many people believe that Chesterton is too difficult to read and don't even make an attempt to tackle his writings. I do admit that I find a second, more careful, reading is sometimes necessary when I read Chesterton's heavier works, but it is usually because I am so astounded at the man's wit that I want to make sure that I understand him correctly.

A convert to the Catholic Church in 1922, Chesterton's private writings show his desire to move toward the Church as early as 1911. It is believed that his long wait was due to his desire to have his wife Francis convert alongside him. After all, it was Francis who led him from Unitarianism to Anglicanism. Chesterton's conversion was the big news of his day. The kind of news that is fervently discussed around the water cooler at the office. Chesterton wrote of his decision, "The difficulty of explaining why I am a Catholic, is that there are 10,000 reasons all amounting to one reason: that Catholicism is true."

His poem, and the subject of our unit study, *The Donkey* was published long before his conversion. It appeared in 1900 along with another favorite Chesterton poem *By the Babe Unborn* in his collection *The Wild Knight and Other Poems*. This collection can be found in Inkling Press' [G.K. Chesterton's Early Poetry](#) (available from The American Chesterton Society – contact information in sidebar). Chesterton poems can also be found, quite easily, on the Internet. Just plug “Chesterton poetry” into your favorite search engine.

In my desire to do an in depth study on *The Donkey*, I looked for help from a sixty-year-old book by Mortimer Adler, [How to Read a Book: The Art of Getting a Liberal Education](#). In this classic, Mr. Adler sets down *rules* for finding understanding from books. I think that one can apply these rules to understanding poetry as well. He tells us if we decide that a book is over our head, and we look for others to explain the book to us (through commentaries, other books, or lectures), then we are doing a disservice to the original work, and to ourselves. Chesterton's poem may, at first, appear hard to understand. Yet, if one takes on the challenge they will be rewarded in the end, and the reward is great.

In order to truly learn we need to *understand*, not just remember more information. When a writer is sharing something that is above our heads, we must rise to understand what it is that the writer is trying to communicate. One rule that Adler gives us is to pick out and interpret the important or most-repeated words in a book or, in this case, the poem. Then discover the important sentences. If the words in a sentence have more than one meaning, analyze the sentence and decide the author's intent.

Adler also tells us that reading should not be a passive activity. For example, ask the poem questions. Of course the poem is not alive and cannot answer, so you need to find the answers yourself. What does Chesterton mean by “When fishes flew?” When were “palms laid before [the donkey's] feet?”

It would be easy to search out commentaries on the poem in order to find others' opinions on *The Donkey*, but we would not learn anything of significance. We would only learn of other's opinions, rather than truly understanding the poem. Do not analyze the poem for your student. Instead encourage him to find meaning and understanding for himself, by using the steps mentioned here.

One of the greatest benefits of homeschooling is the opportunity to grow in knowledge alongside our children. Reading Chesterton is a wonderful way to discover great literature together.

Activities and Discussion

Begin by reading the poem aloud to your students and follow up with these instructions:

1. If you don't already have a poetry notebook, start one. All of the poems that you study should be copied into this notebook along with any notes. Now copy *The Donkey* by hand into your poetry notebook. Take time to reflect on the meaning of Chesterton's words and write these reflections in your notebook.
2. Look at the individual words, rather than the poem as a whole. Look up the meaning of the words in the dictionary. Words such as *monstrous*, *tattered*, and *outlaw* have strong visual meanings.

3. Read each line individually and try to imagine what Chesterton must have been thinking as he wrote them. Ask yourself, “What pictures did he have in his mind as he created this poem?”
4. As you discover understanding of the poem, ask yourself how the poem relates to you as a creature of God, as a Catholic. How does the poem reflect Chesterton’s faith?
5. Search out other poems by Chesterton. Most can be found on the Internet. One source is www.chesterton-library.net. Or check your library for *The Collected Poems of G. K. Chesterton*. Can you see any similarity between *The Donkey* and Chesterton’s other poems, either in style or content? Is there a marked or subtle difference, if at all, between his work before and after his 1922 conversion.
6. Read Chesterton’s conversion story. A simple source is <http://ic.net/~erasmus/RAZ79.HTM>. For the complete story in Chesterton’s own words, find his out of print book *The Catholic Church and Conversion*. It can be found in print as part of [*The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton, Volume 3*](#) [Ignatius Press].
7. Check out Chesterton’s books, fiction and nonfiction. Reading his works may help you find understanding in how Chesterton thinks and may help you answer any further questions about *The Donkey*.
8. Once you have followed these steps, only then look for commentaries on *The Donkey* to see how your understanding of the poem compares with the opinions of others. (Parents: One is listed in the sidebar, but don’t peek until you’ve come up with your own opinion of *The Donkey*.)
9. Read Mortimer Adler’s [*How to Read a Book: The Art of Getting a Liberal Education*](#). Though originally published in 1940, it is still available today.
10. Follow up with Nancy Carpentier Brown’s unit study on Chesterton’s poem *Lepanto* in the Spring 2004 issue of *Heart and Mind* or check the archives at www.heart-and-mind.com.
11. Nancy Brown also writes high school literature guides for various works by Chesterton. See www.hillsideeducation.com for availability of these great, yet inexpensive, guides..

From "Chesterton 101"

The American Chesterton Society, www.chesterton.org:

“The Donkey” is a microcosm of Chesterton and his philosophy. Already present in this sweet little poem are all the elements that would fill his writing for the rest of his life: paradox, humor, humility, wonder, the defense of the poor and the simple, the rebuke of the rich and worldly wise. The other recurrent theme, seen in everything from his Father Brown stories to his public debates, is the presentation of a character we would at first dismiss, but who surprises us by being in direct contact with Truth itself. Be careful before you call someone an ass. He may be carrying Christ.

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Video Series:

[EWTN](#) (Eternal Word Television Network) offers two video series on the life and works of G. K. Chesterton. Contact the [American Chesterton Society](#) or EWTN (www.ewtn.com) for more information.

Magazine:

[Gilbert!](#)

(800) 343-2425

www.gilbertmagazine.com

Nancy Carpentier Brown, contributing editor of [Heart and Mind](#), has a regular column, *Flying Star*, in *Gilbert!* Magazine.

Quotes

This is my favorite Chesterton quote. In fact, I gave it a place of prominence in [A Catholic Homeschool Treasury](#), at the beginning of the first chapter. I believe that it states in a nutshell what we as homeschoolers are doing:

“To be Queen Elizabeth within a definite area, deciding sales, banquets, labors, and holidays; to be Whitely within a certain area, providing toys, boots, cakes, and books; to be Aristotle within a certain area, teaching morals, manners, theology, and hygiene; I can understand how this might exhaust the mind, but I cannot imagine how it could narrow it. How can it be a large career to tell other people's children about the Rule of Three, and a small career to tell one's own children about the universe? How can it be broad to be the same thing to everyone and narrow to be everything to someone? No, a woman's function is laborious, but because it is gigantic, not because it is minute.”

-- From [What's Wrong with the World](#) (1910)

Some other Chesterton quotes . . .

“We do not want, as the newspapers say, a Church that will move with the world. We want a Church that will move the world . . . It is by that test that history will really judge, of any Church, whether it is the real Church or no.”

“So far as a man may be proud of a religion rooted in humility, I am very proud of my religion; I am especially proud of those parts of it that are most commonly called superstition. I am proud of being fettered by antiquated dogmas and enslaved by dead creeds (as my journalistic friends repeat with so much pertinacity), for I know very well that it is the heretical creeds that are dead, and that it is only the reasonable dogma that lives long enough to be called antiquated.”

-- From [Autobiography](#) (1936)

“The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.”

“Take away the supernatural, and what remains is the unnatural.”

“Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead.”

“Angels fly because they take themselves lightly.”

And finally, a Bible quote to reflect on as you study *The Donkey*:
Behold, your King is coming to you, humble and mounted on an ass.
Zechariah 9:9

Maureen Wittmann and her husband Rob homeschool their seven children in Michigan. Mrs. Wittmann is a contributing editor to Heart and Mind (www.heart-and-mind.com), as well as the author of For the Love of Literature: Using Living Books in the Classroom and Home [[Ecce Homo Press](#)] and The Catholic Homeschool Companion [[Sophia Institute Press](#)].