

To the Teacher

This book is not about the songs. It is about the singing. The purpose is not to learn about certain poems or poets, but to learn about what poems are, how poets think, and how poems are built. Many people can recite a poem, or read it and enjoy doing so, who still are entirely unaware of the flock of elements that have just flown softly through their brains. But poetry, like all wonderful things, can be more admired when it is fully recognized. Our intent, then, is to look at poems with a closest eye, and see why they are poems, and not merely prose sentences centered on a page.

One assumption is that a passage is not a poem just because you say it is, any more than a boat is an airplane because you say it is. Poems are compositions having qualities that nonpoems lack. Poems are built.

The title *Building Poems* is not, after all, such a metaphor. It turns out to be true, perhaps to our surprise, that like buildings, poems are constructed carefully, often to exact blueprints, out of building materials. Poets have at their disposal a host of elements to employ—everything from regular kinds of brick-like feet, to room-like stanzas, to paint-like sounds, to equation-like intentions. Poems are thought about. And the ways that poets think about language are not exclusive to poets, but are the concerns of prose writers also; we think of Flaubert, screaming his sounding prose over the French countryside, to the consternation of the local farmers. We think of Melville, secretly writing paragraphs of *Moby Dick* in iambic pentameter, with assonance, consonance, and alliteration. We think of Lincoln, the poet who became president, writing the Gettysburg Address poetically. If we do not understand poetry, we will not understand the best prose.

There are bothersome modern stereotypes that pester poetry, such as the inert idea that poems are just the free expression of your feelings. Or that poems are unmanly (tell it to Byron). But these ideas can be imagined

only by someone who has read no poems. In a culture where education often does not mean much reading, this may be prevalent.

And then, there is the idea that poems should be pretty. Emily Dickinson wouldn't have wanted to hear that, with her tough mind. Like the works of other great poets, her poems explored the full range of experience. A great poem is as likely—it almost seems more likely—to explore sadness or death as it is to describe a flower. Or a love. It is as likely to be cacophonous as it is to be euphonous. Perhaps most of the great poems are not pretty. In this book, I have not tried to emphasize pretty poems, but I have tried to feature positive ones—poems that elementary children would like and sometimes understand. I have tried to avoid the vast strata of poetry that explore profound sadness, or life's failures, or the temporality of the self. There will be plenty of time for those thoughts later. This is the time for fun and enthusiastic learning.

You will find a certain amount of silliness in this book. Fortunately. Before we think that such moments are a waste of serious classroom time, we must remember that Shakespeare provided (Bottom's awakening speech in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* comes to mind) an abundance of brilliantly silly, foolish passages in his plays, even in his tragedies. The appalling is clearer when it comes in a box of comic relief. Ergo, let's play with poetics.

Silliness is not a distraction. Pedagogically, it is vital for children to visit the borders of emotion in their content. Textbooks tend to be absurdly straight-faced. The flat tone, tedious order, and pedestrian prose of the texts that intern our students is a calamity. For serious intellectual reasons, we must push these dull limits down, and get silly. The farther we permit content to go into sadness at the one end, and silliness at the other, the deeper students will understand. Their emotional lives will illuminate, and they will begin to view the knowledge in its true and valid human context. Then they will feel its meaning. The silly, funny parts are some of the most intellectual moments of this book.

The range of poems in *Building Poems* extends from nursery rhymes

to poems (or fragments of poems) from Dickinson, Byron, Tennyson, and Shelley. At first glance, these may not seem like children's poets. Well, our notion of children's content is poisoned by the dumbed-down pessimism of the national educational culture, which assumes children can not learn much. Not long ago, children routinely read *Peter Pan* and *The Wind in the Willows*, books that have vocabularies higher than what is expected of today's high school students. Children are smarter than age-graded guidelines imply, and high ability children are simply not—intellectually—in their grade's grade. I've tried to expose children to a range extending from Peter Piper to Byron. I've included some *thees* and *thous*; no time like the present to let children be introduced to several centuries of the English language.

In the first volume of this poetry series I discussed modern poetry at some length because there is an impression that modern poets do not employ these classical devices (meter, rhyme, figures of speech) as traditional poets did. Here I will just briefly explore that misconception. Modern poets do often avoid the most regular traditions, preferring instead to disguise their poetics and to capture—through poetics, rather than by abandoning poetics—the sounds of natural speech. But be not deceived; poems are poetic. A close look at modern poems reveals the same devices we explore in *Building Poems*; we find Randall Jarrell using consonance as the sound track of ack-ack guns in “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner”: “I woke to black flack...” Or Donald Justice, in “Here in Katmandu,” playing with the *du* sound in every stanza: “There's nothing more to do,” “ruddy with dew,” “What else is there to do?” “What have these to do,” “One knew what to do.” Or crazy Ezra Pound, with the deftest touch, rhyming *mosses* and *August* in “The River-Merchant's Wife.” We find Yeats rhyming *enough* and *love* in “Brown Penny.” Just enough near-rhyme to affect the mind, but not enough to be called—dreaded word—sing-song.

Our modern dread of being sing-songy in poetry perhaps comes from Emerson, who scorned Poe's too-obvious technique, calling Poe “the jingle man.” Not wanting to be scorned, many modern poets have avoided end

rhyme and regular stanzas, but most modern poets labor over their poems, as traditional poets did, and in some ways they have retreated into an even greater sensitivity to sounds, an almost supernatural microscopic awareness of the fine edges of individual sounds. In *Leaves of Grass* Whitman described a surgeon in the Civil War, amputating limbs: “What is removed,” Whitman wrote, “drops horribly in a pail.” This seems like unpoetic prose, until you get ultra-close: notice the dropping sound of the word *drops*, and the fleshy wobble of *horribly* and *pail*, the *bl* and *pl* groupings responding to the physics of the limb landing in the pail. It is all too easy to miss such genius; to notice it, students need to be taught the same poetic traditions that Whitman knew.

There is some value in comparing modern poetry to modern painting. There are modern painters who still paint realistic landscapes, but there are also painters of genius who once painted landscapes or portraits, and who now paint impressionistic works that examine not objects but light itself, or who paint abstracts that probe the absolute limits of color theory and that can only be understood by a handful of people in the world (“I could paint that!,” someone who does not know that color theory even exists will say). Poets, too, have extended their range, and are writing nonrepresentational poems about sound itself.

Artists, including poets, allow themselves to interest themselves, and do not feel interrupted by popular limitations.

An unacquaintance with poetry sometimes results in a student asking, when shown an alliteration or a case of consonance, “Yeah, but did he really know he was doing it?” This must be, in part, a resistance to the fact that poems are intentional works of art that are made by working. It would simplify academic reality if poems were the drowsy, spontaneous expression of feelings, with *sounds-good-to-me* and *it’s-true-to-me* being the only standards. We find again that this question, “Did He Really Know He Was Doing It?” can only be asked before one has read poems, not after. No student who has examined twenty-five sonnets by twenty-five poets will think to ask if

the poets knew they were doing it. No student who has read an extended poem of eighty perfect ballad stanzas, separated by seventy-nine blank lines, will wonder if the poet knew she was constructing ballad stanzas. No student who has read lots of poems will wonder if Mark Twain knew he was shifting into wavy, rocky meter to describe the wake of a steamboat rocking the raft in *Huckleberry Finn*. Just being exposed to a lot of poems, and seeing a lot of examples of rhymes, and assonance, and consonance, and dactyls, and so on, clears the mind wondrously.

The hard work of poetry is part of its best message. It may even be the most important thing for children to understand because in these astounding poems, we can see how much someone cared. Yeats once told an audience that he was going to read his poems aloud in a very curious way. "I went to a devil of a lot of trouble," he said, to write them, and he wanted to be sure that the poetry came through. In poetry children can see a real case of exceptional individuals investing enormous time and effort to create. Poetry provides a paradigm for the life of the mind. It is precisely the almost impossible-to-believe difficulty of poetry that reveals how hard one has to work, and how much one has to care, to make such superb things, whether they be poems, or paintings, or symphonies, or novels. Poetry can introduce children to the quest of the artist, the scout who goes out, alone, to the edge, and sends us back a message of discovery. Whitman wrote:

I do not say these things for a dollar or to fill up the time
while I wait for a boat,
(It is you talking just as much as myself, I act as the tongue
of you....)

So that is the plan. By showing kids this, and this, and this, and another one, we get them to say, "Oh."

Then we get them to say, "I want to try it."

Singing Poems

The awareness of poetry involves an awakening to the personalities of vowels and consonants. Once the vowels and consonants stand out, once we are really awake to them, we begin to notice poetic brilliance that would be otherwise invisible. Making technique audible is what makes it visible. A beautiful way to awaken students' minds to the sounds of words is to split the vowels and consonants, and to let the students sing the words, with the teacher acting as conductor and pointing to the groups in turn, with symphonic flair. For example, divide the left side of the class from the right side of the class. The left will sing the consonants, and the right sing the vowels. With the line in question written on the board in a vowel/consonant split, let the students sing:

R m R m wh r f r rt th R m ?
o eo o eo e e o e a ou o eo?

First, let the consonants sing by themselves. They will sing rrrrr, mmmm, rrrrr, mmmm, whwh, rrrr, ffff, rrrr, rt, th, rrrr, mmmm. Then the vowels by themselves: oooo, eeee, oooo, oooo, eeee, oooo, eh, (silent), oooo, (silent), ah, owww, oooo, eeee, oooo. The realization should be dramatic: the consonants are so nice: rrr, mmm, and the vowels are so consistent: oo, ee. It is a beautiful line. We begin to realize why the dialogues in *Romeo and Juliet* are regarded as among the greatest poetry in English. Now, having let each side sing alone, let them sing through the sounds in correct order:

Consonants: RRRR

Vowels: OOOO

Consonants: MMMM

A variation is to sing all the vowels at once, and then all the consonants

at once, and then combine. For example, if we are examining Sylvia Plath's line, "Fumy, spiritous mists inhabit this place," here is what would happen:

F m , s p r t s m s t s n h b t t h s p l c .
u y , i i o u i i a i i a e .

Divide the consonant side of the room into smaller groups and tell them, "You three sing ffff," you four sing ssss," "You three sing th...." and then tell the vowel side of the room to all sing the lower *ih* sound of the *i*: "You sing ihhhhh." In a case like this, it is not necessary to include every single vowel or consonant, because you are calling dramatic attention to certain sounds. Then you raise both hands like a conductor, and point to the left side of the room, and together they sing:

ffff hhhhhh ssssss th.... all at the same time,

and a great hissing sound emerges in the room. You wave them off, and then turn to the right (vowel) side of the room, and they sing:

IH.....

And then you have both sides sing at once. With this, the true hidden music of Sylvia Plath's line rises in the air, a FUMY, SPIRITOUS, MISTY sound: ssfihsshhihsssihhhihththth. And students can hear how the poem was built.

The Poem of the Day

A good classroom technique for teaching students to love poetry is to begin class with the *poem of the day*. Part of what this means is simply to choose a poem each day, and read it aloud to the students. But it is the details of this practice that count. It is important to develop a collection (this takes time) of poems one loves—I used to type them out and save them in a notebook—and each day to select the one that the moment seems to call for. If it has been a hectic time, then the serenity of Yeats’s “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” might be perfect. Each day, read a poem to the students to start the day with literary feeling.

After a month or so, you can ask the students which poem they would like to hear again. I used to explain that poems are like (this is a simile) music that you play over and over; you play the music you want to hear *now*. As students begin to say, “I want to hear the Blake poem about the tiger again!” you begin to teach not just students’ intellects but their affects. They start *preferring* certain poems, and having *favorites*. Once they are doing that, and looking forward to hearing certain poems again in poem-of-the-day time, they have begun to love poetry.

The way one reads the poem of the day is important. I always tried not to read the lines in too poemy a way, but to read in a normal voice, slowly, like it was just something real. Usually, giving dramatic exaggeration to one’s voice spoils things; it seems to be better just to read the words well, and let the words do their jobs.

Notice that even though there are numerous sources, such as on the internet, for daily poems, this is really a bad idea that defeats much of the purpose. By following your own path to the poem of the day, you first inspire yourself as you search for poems and become more acquainted with poetry, and then you inspire the students with the way poems are spontaneous responses to the moment.

Poem Recipes

A technique that helps students understand poetry is to give them a recipe for a poem, to be turned in a week or more later. For example, students who have worked their way through this book could be asked to turn in a poem that contains the elements of this recipe:

a ballad stanza (or two):

 iambic tetrameter lines 1 and 3

 iambic trimeter lines 2 and 4

 end rhyme scheme abcb

assonance

internal rhyme

a simile

a spondee

Give the students a week or more, and then after the ballads come in, read through them together and post them on the wall. Talk about what they learned by actually trying to write one of these poems. After a recipe or two, let the students help decide what will be in the next recipe. Maybe the next recipe will be:

two quatrains of trochaic tetrameter

no end rhyme but eye-rhyme and at least three internal rhymes

a metaphor

personification

One of the best twists to put on the poem recipe is to give students a recipe that happens to be the actual recipe for a famous poem. Then, when they turn in their poems, you can show them the famous poem, that in form is just like theirs! This will let them feel a connection to the poet and

an understanding of the poem that is not attainable in any other way.

Even though the elements of poetry are easy to explain, and seemingly easy to understand, you may find that children struggle to hear certain things. They become frustrated trying to make a line iambic, or they may struggle for rhymes. It is not uncommon for children (or adults) to confuse stressed and unstressed syllables, or to be unable to hear the stresses. All of these things take time to be absorbed, and so when children do their best to write poems that meet the recipes, we must be patient and supportive. This is not a time when students should see their grades threatened because they have difficulty grasping or hearing. The recipe should be fun, a project where everybody gets celebrated, and where we particularly enthuse over those details that perfectly match the recipe.

One of the keys is to give elaborate explanations when you give the recipe assignment. If you write the recipe on the board, one item at a time, be sure to explain each one in detail, give examples, and check for understanding. Offer to consult with work in progress.

If we assign the first of the sample recipes above, a ballad stanza with alliteration, internal rhyme, and personification, we might get Emily Dickinson-esque poems like this:

The cricket sent his quick Morse code,
across the grassy yard.
Dash-dot, dash dot, he signaled out—
and made himself well heard!

Poems like this would be fine. They can be funny, or witty, or serious. As long as the students continue to improve, and to get a feeling for what the work of the art of poetry is like—that is the goal. With the recipes, we want children to have an insider's experience. Once they have written several recipe poems, they will no longer ask if a poet really knew he or she was alliterating a certain two or three words because they will know first-hand

that these things do not happen by accident. The goal is not to turn students into poets, but to equip them with an extraordinary first-hand exposure to poetry. Here are some other sample recipes you can assign. Give students at least a week to do each one. When you begin creating your own recipes, be sure to include four or five items in each recipe, and use different kinds of items, such as a meter, a stanza, a rhyme scheme, a figure of speech, a certain sound.

A Few Poem Recipes

1. a quatrain
abba
iambic pentameter
enjambement
a metaphor
eye-rhyme

2. two triplets
dactylic trimeter
aba bcb
end-stopped
personification
strong assonance connected with the topic

3. a quintet
trochaic tetrameter
scratchy consonants
lots of alliteration and consonance
apostrophe
internal rhyme

Things to Talk About

Sound

1. What is the difference between rhyme and consonance?
2. Which is more difficult to notice, assonance or consonance?
3. Which is more difficult to write, assonance or consonance?
4. What are the most beautiful vowel sounds?

Meter

1. In what situation might you use dactyls instead of trochees?
2. How can you tell if a syllable is stressed?
3. Is there really a difference between iambs and trochees?
4. What sounds in nature remind you of each of the four traditional types of poetic foot? What in nature sounds iambic? Trochaic? Dactylic? Anapestic?

Stanza

1. Why are sonnets so popular?
2. Why are ballad stanzas often used to write songs?
3. Which do you prefer: sonnets or rime royal? Why?
4. What is the main difference between a ballad and a limerick?

Figures of Speech

1. Which are more intellectual: similes or metaphors?
2. Is it more interesting to personify objects or animals?
3. What makes some apostrophes especially interesting?
4. Are figures of speech more interesting than direct statements?

Things for Students to Do

Sound

1. What sounds remind you of wind in the grass? On the board, make a list of words that have the right sounds to describe wind in the grass.
2. Pick two vowel sounds, then for each word make a list of words that would create assonance on that vowel sound. Which list is easier to make? Discuss why.
3. Pick a consonant. Write two short poems on the same subject; in the first, make as much alliteration with that consonant as you can. In the second poem, make as much consonance, but no alliteration, on that consonant as you can. Which technique seems to work best?

Meter

1. Find a ballad stanza by Emily Dickinson and try to rewrite it in dactyls or anapests. Discuss what you learn by trying this.
2. Write two ballad stanzas, but fill them with words that are three or four syllables. Use as few one- or two-syllable words as you possibly can. Discuss what you learn about meter by doing this.

Stanza

1. Have the students invent a new stanza, name it, and then write a poem using it.
2. Write a rime royal about a good friend.

Figures of Speech

1. Make a long list of similes beginning with "Ice cream is like...."
2. Make five metaphors for happiness, then decide which metaphor is the most creative and original.
3. Write a short poem that has an apostrophe to a personification, such as Shelley's "O wild West Wind..."

Poetry Pretest

1. The words *rough* and *cough* are an example of:
 - a. eye-rhyme
 - b. internal rhyme
 - c. rhyme
 - d. rime royal

2. The letters *abcb* are an example of:
 - a. rime royal
 - b. sonnet
 - c. rhyme scheme
 - d. limerick

3. When there are no periods or commas at the ends of the lines, that is called:
 - a. end-stopped
 - b. enjambed
 - c. rime royal
 - d. spondee

4. A two-syllable foot, with each syllable stressed, is called:
 - a. iamb
 - b. alliteration
 - c. trochee
 - d. spondee

5. The line “super happy nope ripping” is:
 - a. assonance
 - b. alliteration
 - c. consonance
 - d. rime royal

6. The ballad stanza has:
 - a. two lines
 - b. three lines
 - c. four lines
 - d. five lines

7. A sonnet has:
 - a. three quatrains and a couplet
 - b. a sestet
 - c. four couplets
 - d. two sestets and a quatrain

8. The line “His room was a landfill” contains:
 a. metaphor
 b. a personification
 c. a simile
 d. an apostrophe
9. A modern poem addressed to Thomas Jefferson would be:
 a. personification
 b. a simile
 c. an apostrophe
 d. a metaphor
10. The line “His smile was like the New York Times” contains:
 a. a simile
 b. a metaphor
 c. onomatopoeia
 d. an apostrophe
11. The words “weasles winked at woofing wagons” are an example of:
 a. consonance
 b. alliteration
 c. assonance
 d. spondee
12. The line “Suddenly down they came over the flibberty” is:
 a. iambic
 b. trochaic
 c. dactylic
 d. anapestic
13. The rhyming lines of a ballad stanza are:
 a. 1 and 3
 b. 2 and 4
 c. 1 and 2
 d. 3 and 4
14. A rime royal is:
 a. ababcdcdefefgg
 b. aabba
 c. ababbcc
 d. abcb
15. The line “Double, double, toil and trouble” is:
 a. dactylic tetrameter
 b. trochaic tetrameter
 c. iambic tetrameter
 d. anapestic tetrameter