

Royal Fireworks

Language Arts

by Michael Clay Thompson

Building POEMS

Third Edition

Compatible with Building Poems Student Book Second Edition

Instructor Manual

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Instructor Section

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 and yet still be 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 someone says it is, any more than a boat is an airplane because someone says it is. Poems are compositions having qualities that non-poems 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 as well. 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 feelings or that poems are unmanly (tell that to Byron). But these ideas can be imagined only by someone who has read no poems. In a culture in which 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 euphonious. 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-age children would like and sometimes can 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. But before we think that such moments are a waste of serious time, we must remember that Shakespeare provided an abundance of brilliantly silly, foolish passages in his plays (Bottom's awakening speech in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* comes to mind), 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. 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.

However, our notion of children's content is poisoned by the dumbed-down pessimism of the national educational culture, which assumes that children cannot 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 have tried to expose children to a range extending from Peter Piper to Byron. I have included some *thees* and *thous*; there's no time like the present to let children be introduced to several centuries of the English language.

There is an impression that modern poets do not employ classical devices such as meter, rhyme, and figures of speech as traditional poets did, but that is a misconception. Modern poets often do 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 soundtrack 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 of them labor over their poems as traditional poets did, and in some ways they have retreated into an even



We make buildings strong to resist
the wind, but why do we make
them beautiful?

There
is a pretest in
the Assessment
Materials section of this
book that can be given
to students before
beginning this study
of poetics.

Building Poems



We are the builders.
We are the makers.
Human beings make things.

Beautiful things.

We build with wood, glass, concrete, steel—
and we build with words.

The things we make—whether they are
buildings or poems—have parts, and the parts
fit, and they are arranged in a pattern for a
purpose.

Like a glass tower that reflects the sky—that
almost becomes part of the sky—a poem is
built—with poem pieces.
A poem is a kind of building.

A key
theme:
poems are
carefully built
as a form
of art

Brunelleschi's Dome

In 1418 Filippo Brunelleschi,
a grumpy architect from Florence, Italy,
was challenged to build
an enormous dome above the cathedral
of Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence.

No one knew how to do it.

Even Lorenzo Ghiberti,
who had cast the great bronze doors
of Florence's Baptistery of San Giovanni,
could not do it.

The opening that the dome would
have to cover was huge—impossible—
138 feet across, and the walls
that would support the base of the dome
were 180 feet high—a long fall.

But Brunelleschi designed a hollow dome,
two dome-shells with space in between,
made of bricks in a strong herringbone pattern.

After six centuries
his dome still stands.



Like Brunelleschi,
poets solve problems,
but poets do not make
domes of brick. They build
domes of words,
arranging sounds
to confirm the meanings of ideas.

Poets use the sounds of words
as building materials.

When Thomas Hardy wanted
to describe thorny vines on a freezing day,
he used scratchy sounds—
k, sk, st, t, and g!

The tangled bine-stems
scored the sky
Like strings of broken lyres...





Brainstorm
a long list of
words that have
scratchy
sounds.

The *k*'s and *g*'s
in English words can
sound scratchy and
rough, but if they are
present in a line full
of soft sounds, such as
l's, *m*'s, *n*'s, *f*'s, and *v*'s, they can lose
their sting. Here is a line of poetry
from William Shakespeare's
play *Romeo and Juliet*. When
Juliet's mother asks her if she
can like Count Paris, Juliet, who
really does not like Count Paris,
answers her mother:

I'll look to like,
if looking liking move.

In other words, "I'll try to like him, if trying
can move me to like him"! Even though there
are some *k*'s in Juliet's words, the line
is soft; the *k*'s absorb the softness
of the rest of the sentence. Why do *f*'s and
v's sound soft? How are those two sounds
different from one another?



like

if move

ook

Q: In what way are these sounds soft? How are they different from scratchy sounds?

liking

ooking

PATTERNS OF

alliteration

assonance

rhyme

consonance



1 OF SOUND

e

Stairways
have patterns,
like poems do.
Explore
similarities.

PATTERNS

One thing to do with sounds is to **repeat** them in patterns. There are different ways to repeat sounds.

When words end in the same sound, like *flake* and *ache*, that is **rhyme**.

When words begin with the same sound, like *moon*, *milk*, and *meanie*, that is called **alliteration**.

When words share the same vowel sound, like *croon*, *dupe*, and *newt*, that is **assonance**.

And when words share the same consonant sound, like *begin*, *aghost*, *snuggle*, and *rigging*, that is called **consonance**.





d

c

d

e

f

e

f

syrup

laugh

stirrup

half

sunny

season

sassy

sunken

cereal

serious

silly

soupy

soul

foot

lost

loop

Rhyme, words that end alike,
is one of the most important
techniques in poetry.

When poets put the rhymes
at the ends of the lines,
that is called **end rhyme**.
There are wonderful end rhymes
in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*:

“You are old, Father William,” the young man **said**,
“And your hair has become very **white**,
And yet you incessantly stand on your **head**—
Do you think, at your age, it is **right**?”

“In my youth,” Father William replied to his **son**,
“I feared it might injure the **brain**;
But, now that I'm perfectly sure I have **none**,
Why, I do it again and **again**.”

The end is an
obvious place to
put a rhyme—
clearly
noticeable.

end

es lakes said white head right son brain none again falls walls shakes



When the rhymes are inside the lines,
that is called **internal rhyme**.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson, used
internal rhyme in his poem “The Splendor Falls”:

The splendor **falls** on castle **walls**
And snowy summits old in story;
The long light **shakes** across the **lakes**,
And the wild cataract leaps in glory.

internal rhyme

Internal
rhymes
are more
hidden.

Simple Simon met a pieman...

es lakes said white head right son brain none again falls walls shakes



When the rhyme looks the same but does not sound the same, that is called **eye rhyme**.

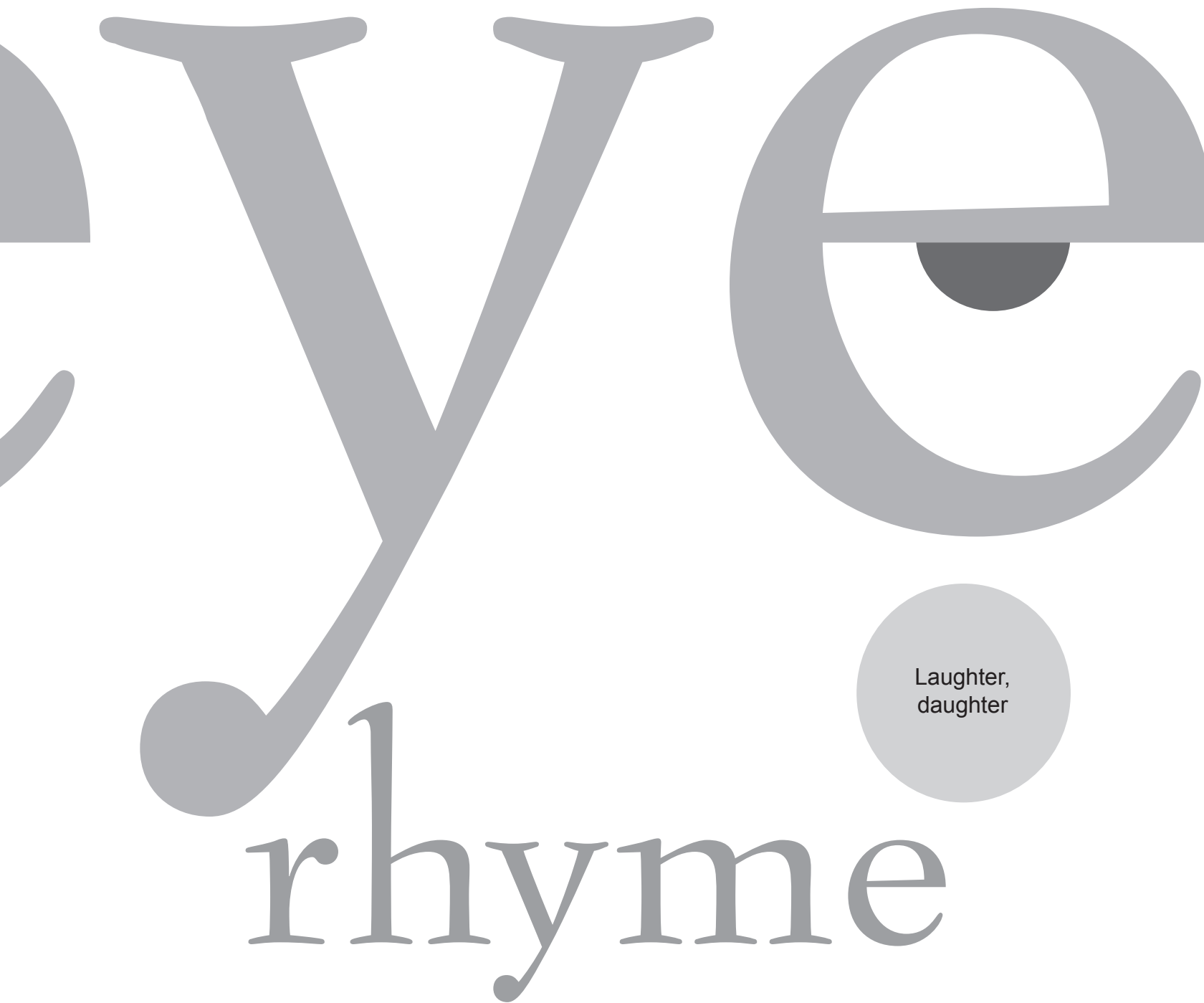
The British poet Thomas Hardy used this eye rhyme in his poem “The Darkling Thrush”:

At once a voice arose among
The bleak twigs overhead
In a fullhearted evensong
Of joy illimited.

Among and *evensong* are eye rhyme because they rhyme only to the eye! They look like rhymes, but they do not end with the same sounds.

Some eye rhymes used to be real rhymes; pronunciation has changed.





erry beak steak moss gross flower grower hour pour edge knowledge frown gro



I ne ver saw a pur p

ple
COW

meter

Words have rhythm.

When we speak, we give more emphasis to some words or parts of words than to others.

We **stress** sounds by pronouncing them with a higher volume and with more firmness.

We say CHICK**en**, not chick**EN**.

We say ba**NA**na, not bana**NA**.

By controlling the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in poems, poets can create regular rhythm, called **meter**. They do this by using small units of meter; each unit is called a **foot**.

foot

The American poet Gelett Burgess,
who was born in 1863,
is remembered for one poem.
Look at the stressed syllables, in
purple, and notice how he arranged
the patterns of stress into a regular meter:

I never saw a purple cow,
I never hope to see one;
But I can tell you, anyhow,
I'd rather see than be one.

Did you notice the way Burgess alternated between
unstressed and stressed syllables? Every other syllable is stressed.
We could say that the pattern in this poem is a two-syllable
pattern, with an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable.

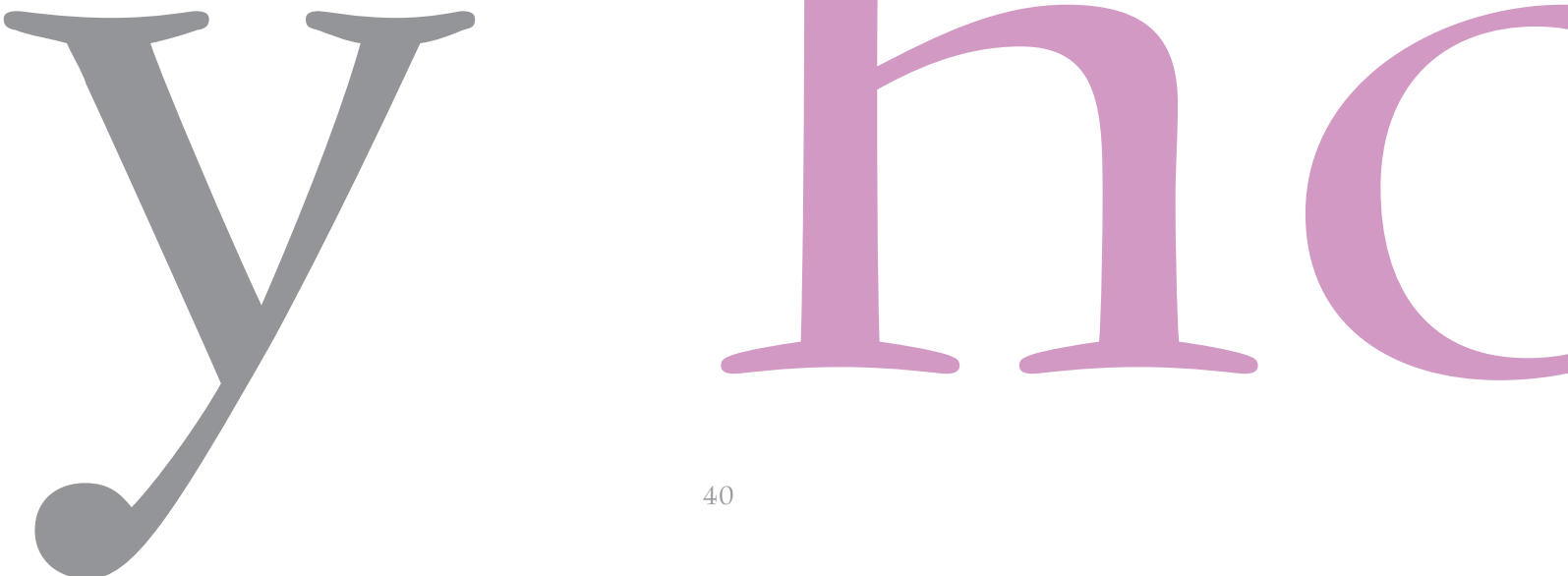
A two-syllable foot with the stress on the second syllable
is called an **iamb**.

If we broke Burgess's poem into its iambs and put slashes between the feet, it would look like this:

Syllables,
not words,
make the
foot.

I ne / ver saw / a pur / ple cow,
I ne / ver hope / to see / one;
But I / can tell / you, an / y how,
I'd ra / ther see / than be / one.

Notice that the foot is made up of syllables; "ver saw" is an iambic foot, and "a pur" is an iambic foot. When we talk about the poetic foot, we are only thinking about the pattern of stresses, not about the words. A foot can be part of a long word, or the end of one word with the beginning of the next.



Notice that Burgess's poem has four iambs in the first and third lines. Four iambs per line are called

iambic tetrameter.

Notice, too, that lines two and four have three iambs followed by a single unstressed syllable. When we add a final unstressed syllable this way, it is called a **feminine ending**.



There are four main kinds of foot in English poetry.

They are called the **iamb**, the **trochee** (pronounced TROkee), the **dactyl**, and the **anapest**.

The iamb and trochee have two syllables. In an iamb the stress is on the second syllable, and in a trochee the stress is on the first.

The dactyl and the anapest each have three syllables. In a dactyl the stress is on the first syllable, and in an anapest the stress is on the third.

The English language is naturally iambic.

iamb

There **was** a **crooked** **man**...he **went** a **crooked** **mile**.
The **Queen** of **Hearts**, she **made** some **tarts**...
I **do** not **like** thee, **Doctor** **Fell**; the **reason** **why** I **cannot** **tell**.

trochee

Barber, **barber**, **shave** a **pig**...
Mary, **Mary**, **quite** **contrary**...
Peter **Piper** **picked** a **peck** of **pickled** **peppers**.

dactyl



Jefferson
is a dactyl.
Broken
is a trochee.

Hickory, dickory...
Home again, home again, jiggety...
Ladybird, ladybird, fly away...

anapest



an old woman who lived in a shoe
an old lady upon a white horse
there I met an old man

There are many who say
that a dog has his day.
(Dylan Thomas)