

## Poetry

In her preface to *Hymns in Prose for Children* (1781), the English poet Anna Letitia Barbauld questioned whether children should be exposed to poetry:

It may well be doubted, whether poetry *ought* to be lowered to the capacities of children, or whether they should not rather be kept from reading verse, till they are able to relish good verse: for the very essence of poetry is an elevation in thought and style above the common standard; and if it wants this character, it wants all that renders it valuable. (iv)

Rather than publish hymns for children in poetry, as her predecessor Isaac Watts did, Barbauld transformed common hymns into pure prose. Parents and educators today would certainly agree with Barbauld that the "essence of poetry is an

OPPOSITE: "THE JABBERWOCK, WITH EYES OF FLAME, / CAME WHIFFLING THROUGH THE TULGEY WOOD, / AND BURBLED AS IT CAME!" FROM LEWIS CARROLL'S 1872 POEM "JABBERWOCKY," ILLUSTRATED BY JOHN TENNIEL.

elevation in thought and style above the common standard." However, it is that "elevation in thought and style"—in its infinite diversity—that they want children to experience. Children's poetry is now regarded as a powerful means for children to explore self and world and to find joy in and appreciation for language.

In his afterword to *Laughing Tomatoes and Other Spring Poems* (1997), Francisco X. Alarcón points to the variety of poetic expression: "Poems, like tomatoes, grow in many forms and shapes" (n. pag.) Some of these forms include nursery rhymes, nonsense verse, long narrative poems, lyric poems devoted to capturing a single moment or feeling, poems marking an occasion, and the skipping rhymes and playground poetry composed by children themselves. Poetry for children is created for many reasons, including

- To help children explore emotions and ideas
- To transmit values from adult to child, which could include religious instruction, civic education, and social education
- To encourage children to play with language, reveling in the sounds of words and vivid figurative language
- To enable political reflection on the part of the child
- To facilitate children's games and play.

This chapter looks at some of the features of poetry designed for children and explores the poetry that reflects children's own popular culture. One of the most striking characteristics of poetry is its union of form and content: what it says is entwined with how it says it. In this chapter, we will examine how the formal features of poetry—such as verse form and figurative language—contribute to the theme and message of a poem. We will also consider how the separate tradition of poetry for children fits into the dominant canonical tradition of adult poetry.

### NURSERY RHYMES, VERSE, AND POETRY

Before turning to the history of children's poetry, we should distinguish between three terms: **nursery rhymes**, **verse**, and **poetry**. "Nursery rhymes" can be defined as traditional songs or rhymes for children, often collected under the title "Mother Goose rhymes." John Barr defines "verse" as poetry that pursues "limited objectives: to entertain us with a joke or tall tale, to give us the inherent pleasures of meter and rhyme." A large part of the pleasure of verse is its conformity

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to the chosen meter. Poetry differs from verse, Barr explains, in that it is "written in pursuit of an open-ended goal. It seeks to use language, in its full potential, to encompass reality, both external and internal, in the fullness of its complexity." The difference between these forms is thus one of aesthetic depth: poetry offers a more full encounter with figurative language, and its meaning is less clearly defined than that of the more straightforward "verse," leading to a more rewarding and ongoing interpretative process. Although Barr makes a useful distinction between "poetry" and "verse," many people think of the two terms as synonyms that simply mean "the opposite of prose."

We could also make a distinction between oral and written poetry, as Morag Styles does when she contrasts "the disorderly, casual, robust world of the oral tradition" (such as nursery rhymes) with the written poetry "consciously composed with children in mind by writers who wish to communicate with young readers" (94). The first difference is obviously one of transmission: a spoken, sung, or chanted poem is experienced differently from one read on the page. The other difference is that of audience. Many works in the oral tradition were not originally composed for children; they first circulated in the popular culture as folk songs and ballads, street cries, and proverbs that were later adapted for a child audience. Written poetry is, for the most part, crafted by adults for a child readership. Scholars of children's poetry are interested in both oral and written traditions as well as in the overlap between oral and written poetic forms.

## A HISTORY OF POETRY FOR CHILDREN

### Bunyan and Watts

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, John Bunyan and Isaac Watts wrote poetry that was meant to have particular appeal to child readers; they believed that children needed to be taught Christian ideas and that poetry could be employed for such instruction. Bunyan drew upon the natural world to describe spiritual phenomena for his child audience. For example, he compares a mole digging obsessively in the ground to a person so interested in worldly goods that he or she neglects spiritual pursuits. In contrast to Bunyan's severe allegories, Watts relied on "engaging lyric and on metrical dexterity to reach his audience. While always upholding Puritan doctrine, his poetry gently softens the Christian message of repentance and gracefully attenuates the stress on fire and brimstone" (Demers and Moyles 61). As an example of this softening, Watts's "Love Between Brothers and Sisters" begins,

Whatever brawls disturb the street  
There should be peace at home;  
Where sisters dwell and brothers meet,  
Quarrels should never come. (lines 1-4)

Although Bunyan and Watts were didactic writers, they also sought to engage child readers with poetry featuring lively figurative language. These two figures have an important place in the history of poetry crafted both to please and to instruct child readers.

### Mother Goose

The eighteenth century saw the beginning of a tradition of written Mother Goose rhymes, which captured (at least partially) a longer oral tradition. In 1697, Charles Perrault published *Histoires ou contes du temps passé, avec des moralités: Contes de ma mère l'Oye* (commonly known as *Tales of My Mother Goose*), which contains several of the major fairy tales now familiar to us, but no poetry. There is very little relation between Perrault's *mère l'Oye* and the Mother Goose of traditional rhymes, although both figures are symbols of traditional literature transmitted orally. Some American scholars argue that Mother Goose was in fact Elizabeth Foster Goose (1665-1757) of Boston, whose last name may have been Vergoose or Vertigoose (Baring-Gould and Baring-Gould 17-18). She was known for the rhymes she produced for her grandchildren, and although it was said that the verses were published by her son-in-law, there is no trace of such a book. Mother Goose is usually deemed to be fictional. Over the years, the figure of Mother Goose has become a personification of folk wisdom, and the poems regarded as timeless lore, even though many of them were written after the eighteenth century. In the preface to *Mother Goose's Melody*, John Newbery claimed that "the custom of singing these songs and lullabies to children is of great antiquity: It is even as old as the time of the ancient *Druids*" (v).

The earliest surviving book of nursery rhymes is Mary Cooper's 1744 *Tommy Thumb's Pretty Song Book*, published in two volumes, containing an introduction from the poetic persona "Nurse Lovechild." Later, with his typical eye for a commercial opportunity, publisher John Newbery composed *Mother Goose's Melody; or, Sonnets for the Cradle* around 1765-1766 and published it in 1780. While most of these verses are familiar to today's readers, many were later modified for a younger audience. As discussed in Chapter 1, the ideology of childhood as separate from adulthood had not yet solidified when Perrault, Cooper, and Newbery

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were publishing: thus it is not surprising to find adult material in earlier editions of the poems. For example, the second volume of Cooper's *Tommy Thumb's Pretty Song Book* contains the following verse:

Little Robbin red breast  
Sitting on a pole  
Niddle, Noddle,  
Went his head,  
And Poop went his Hole. (lines 1-5)

In later editions, the final line is modified to "Wiggle waggle went his tail" (Baring-Gould and Baring-Gould 26).

The adaptation of the Mother Goose rhymes into illustrated books helped establish their role in childhood culture. Some of Randolph Caldecott's best-known illustrations were based on nursery rhymes, such as his *Sing a Song of Sixpence* (1880). As Amy Weinstein notes, "Although the verses may be appreciated entirely through sound, when accompanied by brightly colored, humorous illustrations, they gain a new sensory dimension" (43). Mother Goose and other nursery rhyme books are still common gifts for children and infants. New editions are constantly produced.

#### The Romantic Poets and Nineteenth-Century Children's Poetry

The Romantic poets of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries placed a new emphasis on children and childhood, with many writers speaking from the child's point of view. Though he did not write for children specifically, William Blake often evoked their experience. His poem "The Chimney Sweeper" is narrated in the voice of a child:

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#### PATTY CAKE



Patty cake, patty cake,  
Baker's man,  
That I will master  
As fast as I can ;  
Pricket, and Pricket,  
And mark it with a T,  
And there will be enough  
For Tommy and thee.

A RHYME FROM MARY COOPER'S *TOMMY THUMB'S PRETTY SONG BOOK* (1744).

When my mother died I was very young,  
And my father sold me while yet my tongue  
Could scarcely cry "'weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!"  
So your chimneys I sweep, and in soot I sleep. (lines 1-4)



RANDOLPH CALDECOTT'S ILLUSTRATION OF THE CLASSIC NURSERY RHYME "SING A SONG OF SIXPENCE" (1880).

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While Blake engages his readers with a tale of thwarted childhood innocence, William Wordsworth describes a divine child "trailing clouds of glory" in his "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (1802-1807). If one adheres to Wordsworth's idea of children as particularly close to the divine, not only are children capable of understanding and appreciating poetry: they are privileged readers of poetry.

One of the inheritors of the Wordsworthian tradition associating childhood and poetry was Robert Louis Stevenson. His *A Child's Garden of Verses* (1885) was written in the late Victorian period but had a Romantic emphasis on the child's point of view:

Stevenson becomes the cartographer-poet who delineates a topography that essentially excludes adults. "Grown ups" stand outside the contours of the child's space, beyond what the poems, with their geographical imagery, survey and map. Adults are outsiders who enter momentarily to put the child to bed. As voices from another "estate," they intrude and call the child home to tea. . . . None, not even the kindly aunt ("Auntie's Skirts"), is fully part of the child's subjective and self-contained space. (Colley 179)

As Jean Webb notes, Stevenson "attempts to recall the nature of childhood as he experienced it, and also to add to it the experience of the reflective adult, producing, therefore, innocence and experience combined" (361). It is, however, hard to know whether its child-centrism is the source of its appeal to children, or whether children are guided to love Stevenson's poetry by the enthusiasm adults have for it.

#### Forgotten Children's Poets of the Nineteenth Century

Much of the poetry produced for children in the nineteenth century was composed by women writers; and yet, in several cases, their authorship has been forgotten. For example, Sarah Martin, who wrote *The Comic Adventures of Old Mother Hubbard and Her Dog* (1805), is no longer well known, but her poem is still widely recited today:

Old Mother Hubbard  
Went to the cupboard  
To fetch her poor dog a bone;



But when she came there  
The cupboard was bare  
And so the poor dog had none. (lines 1-6)

The poem becomes more and more nonsensical, with the dog dying, coming back to life, standing on his head, dancing a jig, reading the news, and ultimately greeting the dame's declaration ("your servant!") with "Bow-Wow" (Baring-Gould and Baring-Gould 111-112). Styles notes, "Sarah Martin is just one of several women poets who either composed original rhymes or brought old ones to fruition, yet whose names are not widely known" (90).

Readers might think that the poem "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" is an ancient verse, passed down through history. In fact, it was written by Jane Taylor as the poem "The Star" and published for the first time in *Rhymes for the Nursery* (1806), a collection of poems by Taylor and her sister Ann. However, as early as 1864, it was credited only as a "Nursery Rhyme" in an anthology rather than being attributed to a specific author (Styles 93). Another important yet often-forgotten writer is Mary Howitt, who published "The Spider and the Fly" in 1829; it was one of the many didactic poems for children that Lewis Carroll parodied in his Alice books. "The Spider and the Fly" is a narrative poem, which means it tells a story. In Howitt's poem, the fly resists the blandishments of the wily spider until tempted by the chance to look at itself in a looking glass, which leads to its demise and this moral conclusion:

And now dear little children, who may this story read,  
To idle, silly, flattering words, I pray you ne'er give heed;  
Unto an evil counsellor close heart and ear and eye,  
And take a lesson from this tale, of the Spider and the Fly. (lines 41-44)

In addition to offering a genuine cautionary tale, this poem is an early example of the cultural anxieties caused by children's contact with strangers.

Feminist scholars have recently begun to accord nineteenth-century women poets such as Martin, Taylor, and Howitt their proper place in literary history. Christina Rossetti's poetry for adults has had a place in the canon for some time now, but she also wrote poetry for children. Her *Sing Song: A Nursery Rhyme Book* (1872; expanded edition 1893) is dedicated to the "baby who suggested them." Many of the poems in the collection are lullabies or simple poems aimed at a very young child, as in this example:

Love me,  
Love me  
Sing it high  
Sing it low

Mother's  
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Love me, — I love you,  
Love me, my baby;  
Sing it high, sing it low,  
Sing it as may be.

Mother's arms under you,  
Her eyes above you;  
Sing it high, sing it low,  
Love me, — I love you. (lines 1-8)

There are also darker aspects to *Sing Song*, such as wrenching poems about infant mortality. One such poem asks, "Why did baby die, / Making Father sigh, / Mother cry?" (lines 1-3). Lissa Paul has contextualized Rossetti's *Sing Song* within a tradition of "maternal verse" that included Ann and Jane Taylor (37). The "intimate, protected domestic space" is brought into the public sphere through maternal verse, with "handmade, home-made verses" transformed into "mass-produced purchased ones" (38-39). Although many of them are forgotten today, the women writing poetry for children in the nineteenth century successfully translated their private experiences into a commercial literary context.

### Nineteenth-Century Humorous and Nonsense Poetry

The nineteenth century saw growth in the number of humorous and nonsense poems written for children. Three writers towered over the genre during this era: Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll, and Hilaire Belloc. As we discussed in Chapter 2, though children's literature in the nineteenth century did not entirely abandon didacticism, it was increasingly oriented toward children's pleasure and entertainment. Humorous and nonsense poetry was one means to entertain children and to immerse child readers in the pleasures of playing with words. X. J. Kennedy offers a "working definition" of "nonsense in a children's book," describing it as an "account of anything that isn't likely to happen, whether or not it conceivably could" (108). Michael Heyman adds: "We may begin by classifying literary nonsense texts as those where there is a type of balance between 'sense' and 'non-sense.' Such a balance is necessary if the text is not to become either plain sense, as in a best-selling crime novel, or utter gibberish, as in a baby's babbling" (xxiv).

Nonsense poetry of the nineteenth century encouraged wordplay and experimentation with language. Edward Lear popularized the limerick form, and



"THE OWL LOOKED UP TO THE STARS ABOVE, / AND SANG TO A SMALL GUITAR." FROM EDWARD LEAR'S 1871 POEM "THE OWL AND THE PUSSYCAT," ILLUSTRATED BY WILLIAM FOSTER.

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he is also known for comical poems such as "The Owl and the Pussycat" (1871), which begins,

The Owl and the Pussy-cat went to sea  
In a beautiful pea-green boat,  
They took some honey, and plenty of money,  
Wrapped up in a five pound note. (lines 1-4)

The Owl and the Pussycat "sailed away for a year and a day / To the land where the Bong-tree grows," where they encounter a "Piggy-wig" with a "ring at the end of his nose" (lines 16-17; 18; 19). The absurd situation and made-up words add to the poem's construction of nonsense, yet they have their own internal logic, making sense purely on their own terms.

Lewis Carroll's poems in his Alice books were another major contribution in this era to the tradition of nonsense poetry for children. In *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872), Alice discovers a "Looking-glass book" where the writing is in reverse. Holding it up to a mirror, she is able to read the poem "Jabberwocky," with its famous opening stanza:

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:  
All mimsy were the borogoves;  
And the mome raths outgrabe. (lines 1-4)

Check out Humpty's translation what, you?

Humpty Dumpty later explains the meaning of the mysterious words "brillig," "mimsy," and "outgrabe," although he is obviously not a reliable interpreter. The power of Carroll's poem lies in the sounds of its words, as we see from this stanza's **alliteration** ("gyre and gimble") and the **portmanteau** word "slithy" (a word that combines "lithe" and "slimy"). Despite the nonsense words, the basic plot of the poem—the slaying of the Jabberwock—emerges clearly. In this poem, the emphasis is on whimsy and the sheer pleasure of the invented words.

Rather than invent words as Lear and Carroll did, Hilaire Belloc wrote humorous cautionary tales for children, such as *The Bad Child's Book of Beasts* (1896) and *Cautionary Tales for Children* (1907). *Cautionary Tales* includes cases such as that of Matilda ("Who told lies, and was Burned to Death") and Algernon ("Who played with a Loaded Gun, and, on missing his Sister, was reprimanded by his Father"). Franklin Hyde, who "caroused in the Dirt, and was corrected by his Uncle," shares an equally mock-sobering message:

From Franklin Hyde's adventure, learn  
To pass your Leisure Time  
In Cleanly Merriment, and turn  
From Mud and Ooze and Slime  
And every form of Nastiness — (lines 9–13)

The poem then reverses itself:

But, on the other Hand,  
Children in ordinary Dress  
May always play with Sand. (lines 14–16)

Belloc's jovial tone inverted the well-known didacticism of previous writers of cautionary tales. Franklin Hyde's problems and scrapes are recounted with a humor that Mary Howitt's earnest "The Spider and the Fly" lacks, as Belloc wrote in response to a vision of childhood and children's literature that stresses amusement rather than sober instruction.

### Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Poetry

In the twentieth century, the market for children's literature grew, as did its cultural importance. A number of poets became primarily known as children's poets, while others considered their poetry for children to be just as important as their work for adults. A. A. Milne, author of the Winnie-the-Pooh books, also wrote poetry for children, including his collections *When We Were Very Young* (1924) and *Now We Are Six* (1927). Working largely within the tradition of Robert Louis Stevenson, his work evokes a sense of childhood innocence and playfulness. In "Lines and Squares" (from *When We Were Very Young*), Milne riffs on the classic children's game of trying not to step on a crack or line while walking on the street or sidewalk. In a series of rhyming couplets, he imagines "bears / Who wait at the corners all ready to eat / The sillies who tread on the lines of the street" (lines 4–6). The confident child narrator calls back: "Bears, / Just watch me walking in all the squares!" (lines 18–19). Ann Thwaite remarks on the "pleasurable thrill of danger" (267) in Milne's poetry: "It is not a bland world. The menaces and uncertainties of real life are there all right, but perfectly adjusted to a small child's understanding. . . . The child in the poems is protected by his own egotism, is perfectly in control" (266–267).

Theodor Seuss Geisel ("Dr. Seuss"), known for his iconic picturebooks, made immense contributions to children's poetry. Philip Nel points to Geisel's skilled meters and rhymes and his exuberant delight in creating new words, illuminating



ERNEST SHEPARD  
(1924) BY A. A. MILNE

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ERNEST SHEPARD'S ILLUSTRATION OF THE WALKING GAME DESCRIBED IN "LINES AND SQUARES" (1924) BY A. A. MILNE.

"the pleasures of language, encouraging readers to be creative—an ideal suggestion for the child newly acquainted with the written word" (25). Like many nonsense poets, Geisel also created fantastical creatures. *Scrambled Eggs Super!* (1953) includes several dozen, among them the "Ruffle-Necked Sala-ma-goox," the "Mop-Noodled Finch," the "Stroodle," and the "Single-File Zummzian Zuks." Ultimately, Geisel "established verse at the center of the children's book genre" (Nel 35).

Another twentieth-century poet, John Ciardi, wrote several collections of children's poetry, including *The Reason for the Pelican* (1959) and *The Man Who Sang the Sillies* (1961). Ciardi's poems combine whimsy with realistic depictions of children's pleasures and frustrations. Many of his poems for children use simple vocabulary aimed at beginning readers. In his *You Read to Me, I'll Read to You* (1962), illustrated by Edward Gorey, poems meant to be read to a child alternate with poems that the child reads back to the adult, using what Ciardi calls "a basic first-grade vocabulary" (n. pag.).

### Chapter 3: Poetry

Eve Merriam published several collections of poetry for children, including *There Is No Rhyme for Silver* (1964) and *You Be Good & I'll Be Night: Jump-on-the-Bed Poems* (1988), illustrated by Karen Lee Schmidt. In *It Doesn't Always Have to Rhyme* (1964), Merriam draws explicit attention to poetic forms and devices in poems such as "Metaphor," "Couplet Countdown," and "Onomatopoeia" ("The rusty spigot / sputters, / utters / a splutter" [lines 1-4]). "How to Eat a Poem" includes these inviting lines:

Don't be polite.  
Bite in.  
Pick it up with your fingers and lick the juice that  
may run down your chin. (lines 1-4)

use a  
pen  
about  
your favorite  
food

In 1965, John Rowe Townsend coined the term "urchin poetry" for the kind of streetwise poetry written by authors such as Roald Dahl and Shel Silverstein, which was more likely to describe "disused railway lines, building sites, and junkheaps" than bucolic natural settings (cited in Styles 262). The "urchin" label does not encompass the full range of children's poetry today, since contemporary poetry for children also includes nature poetry and poems depicting rural life. Yet, at its best, "urchin poetry" makes an attempt to speak to children without idealizing them and without assuming that the world they live in is perfect.

Shel Silverstein is one of the seminal children's poets of the twentieth century; his *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (1974) is a modern children's classic. The collection includes both lyric poems that express emotion and narrative poems that tell a story. The poems combine the imagery of modern urban settings with very traditional forms. "Sarah Sylvia Cynthia Stout Would Not Take the Garbage Out" tells the humorous tale of a girl who refuses to attend to an ever-growing pile of trash until it takes on a life of its own, breaking through the roof, stretching to the sky, and extending across the state. She is eventually vanquished by the garbage, in a tongue-in-cheek update of Hilaire Belloc's humorous cautionary poems.

Roald Dahl is famous for novels such as *James and the Giant Peach* (1961) and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), but he also produced notable poetry collections for children, including *Revolting Rhymes* (1982) and *Dirty Beasts* (1984). *Revolting Rhymes* features verse parodies of six well-known fairy tales, all of which have surprise endings (for example, Little Red Riding Hood shoots the wolf dead). *Dirty Beasts* focuses on animals such as pigs, crocodiles, lions, and cows (and the fictional "Tummy Beast") but again features a twist, as we see

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## Contemporary Poetry as a Reflection on Self and Other

in the poem "The Pig," where a brainy pig realizes he is meant for slaughter and turns on the farmer instead:

Slowly he scratched his brainy head  
And with a little smile, he said,  
"I had a fairly powerful hunch  
"That he might have me for his lunch.  
"And so, because I feared the worst,  
"I thought I'd better eat him first." (lines 47-52)

One heir to Silverstein's and Dahl's gleeful verse is Jack Prelutsky, the first children's poet laureate of the United States. Prelutsky's *My Dog May Be a Genius* (2008), illustrated by James Stevenson, features poems devoted to animals, family, the natural world, and the pleasures of reading (even the joys of homework). The title poem refers to a dog that knows when he is getting "f-o-o-d" or his "t-r-e-a-t" because he has "learned / to s-p-e-l-l" (lines 15-16).

Other poets who wrote for children and young adults in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries include Carl Sandburg, Theodore Roethke, Maya Angelou, Dennis Lee, Nikki Giovanni, X. J. Kennedy, Eloise Greenfield, Pat Mora, Gary Soto, J. Patrick Lewis, and Myra Cohn Livingston.

### CONTEMPORARY POETRY AS A REFLECTION ON SELF AND OTHER

Contemporary poetry for children does not shy away from exploring the tensions children might feel at home or school but probes the fault lines between self and other. Jean Little's book *Hey World, Here I Am!* (1986) features poems written in the voice of her reflective protagonist, Kate. In the poem "Today," Kate grumbles:

Today I will not live up to my potential.  
Today I will not relate well to my peer group.  
Today I will not contribute in class.  
I will not volunteer one thing.  
Today I will not strive to do better.  
Today I will not achieve or adjust or grow enriched  
or get involved.  
I will not put up my hand even if the teacher is wrong  
and I can prove it.

101-102  
Have you ever grumbled  
like Kate?



### Chapter 3: Poetry

Today I might eat the eraser off my pencil.  
I'll look at clouds.  
I'll be late.  
I don't think I'll wash.

I need a rest. (lines 1-14)

The poem offers a very specific form of resistance to the ideology that children must focus on achievement and cooperation. The repetition of "Today" parodies the genre of "resolution" or self-improvement, where the speaker vows to do better in his or her daily obligations. It challenges the expectations and demands teachers have of their students. This contemporary poem also provides a sharp contrast with the didacticism of the earlier poetry for children such as the poems of Isaac Watts, in which industry and hard work are praised to the exclusion of anything else.

### AN EXPANDED CANON

During the twentieth century, the canon of children's poetry expanded to include more poets, alongside the publication of several multicultural and multilingual poetry collections. In 1932, Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes published *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems*, a selection of previously published poems selected specifically for young readers. In his poem "Children's Rhymes," Hughes writes:

By what sends  
the white kids  
I ain't sent;  
I know I can't  
be President.  
What don't bug  
them white kids  
sure bugs me:  
We know everybody  
ain't free. (lines 1-10)

In this poem written long before the election of Barack Obama, the African American child speaker reflects on the racism that has limited his destiny as an individual.

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## An Expanded Canon

Many children's poets of the late twentieth century are motivated by a similar combination of the personal and the political. Francisco X. Alarcón's *Laughing Tomatoes and Other Spring Poems / Jitomates Risueños y otros poemas de primavera* (1997), illustrated by Maya Christina Gonzalez, is a bilingual poetry picture-book. The topics of Alarcón's poems range from the natural world ("First Rain" and "Ode to Corn") to Mexican American culture, including a poem about Cinco de Mayo (a holiday that celebrates the 1862 victory of the Mexican army over an invading French army) and one about César Chavez, the Mexican American leader who founded the United Farm Workers of America. Alarcón makes powerful use of short lines with one or two words, as we see in his short poem "Chile" or "El chile":

sometimes	a veces basta
a bite is all it takes	una mordida
for a supernova	para que explote
to explode	una supernova

what's  
the bite  
complete  
it to  
explosion  
explosion

Although the length of Alarcón's poems varies from a few lines to a few pages, they all invite the same focus on every carefully chosen word — and on the natural and social world. Alarcón uses **metaphor** — the literary figure of speech where two unrelated things or ideas are compared. Here the experience of eating a hot chile is likened to the power of an exploding star. The fact that his poems appear in both English and Spanish speaks to several possible audiences: Hispanic students learning English, Anglophone students learning Spanish, and bilingual students who use both Spanish and English in their daily lives.

Caribbean-born poet Grace Nichols is another writer who expands the cultural and linguistic horizons of poetry for children, using Caribbean dialect in collections such as *Come on into My Tropical Garden: Poems for Children* (1988). The title poem begins:

Come on into my tropical garden  
Come on in and have a laugh in  
Taste my sugar cake and my pine drink  
Come on in please come on in. (lines 1-4)

By using nonstandard English and the imagery of the Caribbean, Nichols immerses her readers in her home culture.

Janet S. Wong's *A suitcase of seaweed and other poems* (1996) reflects the reality of today's multicultural American families. The book is divided into three

sections: "Korean Poems" (largely about Wong's Korean American mother), "Chinese Poems" (relating to Wong's Chinese American father), and "American Poems" (referring to her own American identity). Wong's poems are a meditation on the role of childhood memory in establishing identity and the complex ways in which identity can be experienced in a multicultural society. The "suitcase of seaweed" refers to the "seaweed / and stacks / of dried squid" that Wong's grandmother brings when she visits from Korea (lines 12-14). The final poem, "Quilt," establishes a metaphor of her family as "a quilt / of odd remnants / patched together / in a strange / pattern" but "made to keep / its warmth / even in bitter / cold" (lines 2-6; 9-12). In drawing attention to the separate norms of her Korean, Chinese, and American cultures, Wong underscores the contradictions and compromises of American identity, but also the rewards of life in her close family.

Naomi Shihab Nye's poetry is known for its focus on cross-cultural exchange; she was born in the United States but has also lived in Jerusalem. Nye is a prolific anthologist of poems by and for children, with an emphasis on international dialogue, including *This Same Sky: A Collection of Poems from Around the World* (1996). She also has an empathic understanding of the experiences of young girls, as we see in *A Maze Me: Poems for Girls* (2005). This collection includes a poem entitled "Changed," which deals with tension between peers:

They said something mean about me  
and didn't notice it was mean  
So my heart wandered  
into the rainy night without them  
and found a canopy  
to hide under. (lines 1-6)

### POETRY PICTUREBOOKS, VERSE NOVELS, AND CONCRETE POETRY

Poetry for children can be published and circulated in many ways. Many children's poets produce book-length collections of poetry, which are frequently illustrated. Sometimes poems are collected in anthologies and arranged according to theme or time period. Many children's picturebooks can themselves be read as poetry. An obvious example we have already explored is the work of Theodor Seuss Geisel ("Dr. Seuss"), whose poetry derives much of its appeal from the use of rhyme and regular meter. In *Green Eggs and Ham* (1960), the narrator rhythmically rejects the despised food of the title:

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I w  
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## Poetry Picturebooks, Verse Novels, and Concrete Poetry

I would not like them  
here or there.  
I would not like them  
anywhere. (16)

Margaret Wise Brown's classic picturebook *Goodnight Moon* (1947), illustrated by Clement Hurd, includes spare poetic language spread across separate illustrated pages:

In the great green room  
there was a telephone  
And a red balloon  
And a picture of the cow jumping over the moon (n. pag.)

One of the key features of poetry is economy of language: every word counts. Since picturebooks have little space, they also require an economy of language and are therefore quite suited to poetic expression—with or without rhyme.

In verse novels, a long narration is recounted in poetry rather than prose, straddling the boundaries between poetry and fiction. Verse novels can be particularly appealing to reluctant readers: they use a great deal of white space, are shorter than novels in prose, and explore compelling topics to which readers can relate. Jacqueline Woodson's *Locomotion* (2003) is narrated through the poems of Lonnie Collins Motion—nicknamed Locomotion—as he explores his growing power as a poet, his grief over the loss of his parents, and his ongoing separation from his sister Lili. The poems in Karen Hesse's *Out of the Dust* (1997), set in the Oklahoma Dust Bowl in 1934–1935, are narrated from the point of view of Billie Jo, a talented piano player whose hands are injured in an accident that also claims the life of her mother and her unborn brother. Marilyn Nelson's *Carver: A Life in Poems* (2001) is a biography in verse of the noted African American scientist and inventor George Washington Carver. A timeline of events and archival photographs from Carver's life help orient readers as they move through the book.

Another distinct form within children's poetry is the concrete poem. In *A Poke in the I: A Collection of Concrete Poems* (2001), anthologist Paul B. Janeczko and illustrator Christopher Raschka note that "the arrangement of letters or words on the page, the typefaces chosen, and the way space is used, add meaning to the poems beyond that contained in the actual words" (n. pag.). Concrete poems can be a single word or several words arranged into a specific shape. Janeczko and Raschka lightheartedly note that it is hard to read concrete poems out loud,

since they are so dependent on visual interpretation. Concrete poems appeal to young audiences in part due to their cleverness (which can often depend on punning or the recognition of a joke). They also highlight poetry's capacity to make meaning through visual elements such as the placement of words on a page. One example of a concrete poem is Reinhard Döhl's "Pattern Poem with an Elusive Intruder" (1965). Here, the child reader has the pleasure of finding the "Wurm" inside the "Apfel" (apple); a game of interpretive hide-and-seek.



REINHARD DÖHL'S "PATTERN POEM WITH AN ELUSIVE  
INTRUDER" IS A CONCRETE POEM.

## CHILDREN'S POPULAR CULTURE AND POETRY

In the mid 1940s, British sociologists Peter and Iona Opie collected a number of rhymes from schoolchildren. Iona Opie reflected on their purpose for doing so:

It was a recognition of the particular genus of rhymes that belongs to schoolchildren. They were clearly not rhymes that a grandmother might sing to a grandchild on her knee. They have more oomph and zoom; they pack a punch. Many are directly concerned with the exigencies of school life: the need for a stinging reply when verbally attacked; the need for comic complaints in the face of persecution or the grinding drudgery of schoolwork; the need to know some clever rhymes by heart, with which to win popularity. (11)

The Opies' emphasis is on children's own use of poetry, not on the great poems of the literary tradition, and they stress the oral transmission of children's rhymes. The Opies included material that would not necessarily be sanctioned by adult readers, as we can see from this rhyme, printed under "Insults":

Tommy  
Chop hi  
When h  
Make it

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frequently s  
deserve to b  
verses woul  
has Abraham  
"Scuse me,  
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## POETRY V

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## Poetry Written by Children

Tommy Johnson is no good,  
Chop him up for firewood;  
When he's dead, boil his head,  
Make it into gingerbread. (lines 1-4)

In his study of children's poetry, *Poetry's Playground: The Culture of Contemporary American Children's Poetry* (2007), Joseph Thomas Jr. argues that the frequently sexually explicit and violent poems composed by children themselves deserve to be studied alongside more canonical poetry for children, even if these verses would never find their way into a classroom. One rhyme, for example, has Abraham Lincoln jumping out a window with his "dick in his hand," saying "'Scuse me, ladies! / I'm superman!" (45). For Thomas, such playground poetry "dismantles nostalgic notions of the innocent, obedient, and controllable child and thus, in my experience, tends to disturb adults, as it implies sexualized, complicated child-agents who are able to control their world through linguistic play and sometimes violent, antiauthoritarian imagery" (42). Like the Opies, Thomas is interested in poetry as a means for children to exert control over their own social and imaginative lives.

### POETRY WRITTEN BY CHILDREN

Children also create written poetry, some of which is published in anthologies or in periodicals. In 1966, Richard Lewis published *Miracles: Poems by Children of the English-Speaking World*, a project funded by UNESCO. In his introductory note, Lewis explains that the poems were "intended to be read as poetry, not as a sampling of precociousness" (7). The collection lived up to its promise to showcase excellent poetry by children and to reflect an internationalist sentiment in the middle of the Cold War. In 1970, Kenneth Koch reflected on teaching poetry to children in New York's public schools in his book *Wishes, Lies and Dreams*, in which he offers a number of sample assignments, such as asking children to build a poem around "the private world of their wishes": "Once they have a subject they like, but may have temporarily forgotten about, like wishing, they find a great deal to say" (13-14). Koch's work has been accused of being too formulaic, however. One of his most bracing critics, Myra Cohn Livingston, argues in *The Child as Poet: Myth or Reality* (1984) that when Koch asked students to write about "wishes," "lies," and "dreams," he foreclosed the possibility that they might write about their everyday reality.

## THE SEPARATE TRADITION OF POETRY FOR CHILDREN

In an incisive essay called "Can Children's Poetry Matter?" (1993), Richard Flynn questions the notion "that an innocent and separate realm of children's poetry should exist at all" (40). He compares Walter de la Mare's anthology *Come Hither* (1923, 1957) with Jack Prelutsky's *The Random House Book of Poetry for Children* (1983). Of the two, he finds de la Mare's anthology infinitely stronger because it includes poetry composed solely for children as well as classics from the wider poetic tradition: "Shakespeare, Milton, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, Yeats, Hardy, and Frost alongside nursery rhymes, ballads, and doggerel" (Flynn 41). Prelutsky includes only poetry written for the child audience, which Flynn argues is an impoverishment of the range of poetry available to children (41). Several poems from the mainstream canonical tradition written in the late nineteenth century are indeed still read, such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "The Ride of Paul Revere" (1866), Ernest Thayer's "Casey at the Bat" (1888), or Alfred Noyes's "The Highwayman" (1906). To steer children away from these poems is to cut children off from the wider tradition of poetry.

Just as Flynn argues that children should be exposed to the riches of the poetry canon, Livingston advocates that they be given access to a variety of poetic forms. In 1984, she lamented that most of the poetry given to children was rhyming poetry written in couplets:

[I]t is time to rescue the child from being pulled to and fro in a struggle over ideologies and methods. It is time to respect the child's right to know, for example, not only what a couplet really is, but something about the beauty and force of a piece of free verse. Both are a piece of a poetic inheritance. (251)

Livingston's emphasis on "poetic inheritance" reminds us that young readers benefit from an exposure to all forms of poetry—free verse as much as rhyming couplets, and serious as much as comic verse.

## QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN APPROACHING A POEM FOR CHILDREN

- To what literary period does the poem belong?

The literary period of a poem often helps illuminate its themes and literary style. For example, John Bunyan's poetry reflects the religious concerns of the

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## Questions to Ask When Approaching a Poem for Children

seventeenth century as well as his own Puritan ideology. While Robert Louis Stevenson wrote in the late Victorian period, his poetry reflects a Romantic view of an unspoiled childhood, with language designed to reflect that wonder. In contrast, Shel Silverstein's more informal poems reflect the twentieth-century focus on urban and suburban experience and the complex emotions triggered by life in a family and at school.

- How was the poem published and circulated?

Is the poem published individually, as part of a collection, or as a picturebook made up of a single poem? If the poem is printed alongside other poems in a collection, the surrounding ones affect its meaning. If it is printed in a picturebook, the illustrations influence the interpretation of the poem. If the poem stands alone, it might be published in a magazine or newspaper or on a website, which also provides the poem with a context to consider.

- Is the poem anonymous or attributed to a single author? If it is anonymous, is there some way to track the author?

As we saw with Jane Taylor's "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star," some poems that seem part of popular culture originally had signed authors and only later became anonymous. If a poem is signed, it is possible to learn more about an author's life and career, which can shed light on why he or she chose to write about certain topics and themes. Research into an author's biography can also help us explore how the poem reflects (or does not reflect) his or her culture and society.

- Is the poem a lyric poem (expressing an emotion) or a narrative poem (telling a story)?

A lyric poem tends to capture a moment in time, whereas narrative poems tell stories. A poem such as Sarah Martin's "Old Mother Hubbard" is a narrative poem, since it unfolds the narrative of a dog who at first seems to have died but uncannily comes back to life to sit in a chair, ride a goat, spin cloth, and engage in many other activities. Jean Little's "Today" is a lyric poem, conveying a single mood of quiet rebellion against the constraints of school.

- Is the child directly addressed?

In children's poetry, the child is sometimes addressed directly, as we see in Shel Silverstein's poem "Listen to the Mustn'ts," which contains the lines, "Anything can happen, child / Anything can be" (lines 7-8).



• What is the diction of the poem?

“Diction” refers to word choice. Is the language formal or casual? Does the poet use deliberately old-fashioned language? Roald Dahl’s *Revolting Rhymes* uses informal — even slangy — language in order to poke fun at the fairy-tale tradition, whereas Francisco X. Alarcón uses concrete nouns and simple diction to convey a serious, solemn tone, as in his “Prayer of the Fallen Tree”:

brothers  
and sisters  
come swiftly

make me  
part of  
your nests. (lines 1–6)

• What kinds of references or allusions does the poem include?

Allusions or references might be made to myths, the Bible, folklore, popular culture, visual arts, music, or other works for children. Some of these allusions might be footnoted, but others the reader must look up in order to understand their role in the poem. For example, Marilyn Nelson’s *Carver: A Life in Poems* is filled with very specific references to the life of George Washington Carver, but the reader is assisted by footnotes explaining them.

• How does the poem use figurative language?

Figurative language is one tool that poets use to create powerful images, and to help the reader see things in a new and startling way. The critical reading of poetry involves the identification of figurative language and a consideration of how it contributes to the poem itself. See the chart (opposite) detailing some common tropes, or figures of speech.

• Is the poem a “pattern poem” with a set and defined structure?

Some poems are written in patterns, such as the sonnet, haiku, or cinquain. Reading these poems critically includes an evaluation of how they make meaning within the very defined parameters of their structure. See the chart (pg. 112) outlining some typical patterns used in poetry for children.

COMM

Figure o

Apostroph

Hyperbol

Litotes

Metaphor

Metonym

Onomatopoeia

Simile

• What

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## Questions to Ask When Approaching a Poem for Children

### COMMON FIGURES OF SPEECH

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Figure of Speech	Explanation and Definition
Apostrophe	Apostrophe is a rhetorical figure in which the speaker addresses an absent or dead person, an abstraction (like "love"), or a personified object. For example, "Oh, you beautiful sun, shine brightly over us!"
Hyperbole	Hyperbole is exaggeration made for dramatic effect. An example: "There were millions of people on the bus."
Litotes	Litotes is a form of irony that uses understatement. An example is saying "You are not unwelcome" to a guest whose visit you are excited about.
Metaphor	A metaphor applies attributes of one thing to another thing in order to suggest the shared characteristics of the two. The metaphor "Her father is a rock" indicates that he is a reliable, steady person.
Metonymy	Metonymy is a figure of speech where a thing or concept is described by one of its attributes or one of its parts. An example: "I finally got my own set of wheels."
Onomatopoeia	Onomatopoeia describes words whose sounds suggest their meaning, such as "boom," "chirp," "sizzle," or "crackle."
Simile	A simile is an explicit comparison between two things using "like" or "as." An example is "She is as tall as a giraffe."

- What is the meter of the poem?

Poetry for children can rhyme or it can be written in free verse (which means it does not have a consistent pattern in either rhyme or meter). Some poems have a regular meter (such as iambic pentameter) and others do not. The form of a poem can have an impact on its mood, tone, and subject matter. See the chart on page 113 for some typical metrical forms for poetry in English.

## TYPICAL PATTERNED POETRY FOR CHILDREN

Type of Poetry	Description
Acrostic	In an acrostic poem the first letters of the lines are capitalized and spell out a word or phrase.
Cinquain	A cinquain is made up of a five-line stanza. The modern form, invented by Adelaide Crapsey, is arranged as follows: First line: two syllables Second line: four syllables Third line: six syllables Fourth line: eight syllables Fifth line: two syllables
Couplet	Couplets are two rhyming lines — one following the other — that share the same meter.
Haiku	A haiku verse is three lines long and contains seventeen syllables, arranged as follows: First line: five syllables Second line: seven syllables Third line: five syllables
Limerick	Limericks are playful, humorous poems made up of five lines. The first, second, and fifth lines rhyme and have three stresses each, while the third and fourth lines rhyme with each other and have two stresses each.
Quatrain	A quatrain is a stanza composed of four lines. It may be rhymed or unrhymed.
Tanka	A tanka is a five-line verse with thirty-one syllables. All lines contain seven syllables except the first and third lines, which each contain five syllables.

## TYPICAL METERS

### Metrical Feet

Anapestic trimeter: three feet within a line, each containing two unstressed syllables followed by one stressed syllable.

Blank verse is unrhymed and is often in iambic pentameter.

Free verse avoids regular meter, rhyme, and meter as rhyme and meter, but may contain elements of rhyming.

Iambic pentameter: has five meters composed of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable.

Trochaic tetrameter: four feet within a line, each composed of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable, except the last foot, which is a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable.

## Questions to Ask When Approaching a Poem for Children

### TYPICAL METRICAL FORMS FOR POETRY IN ENGLISH

#### Metrical Form

#### Example

**Anapestic trimeter** has four feet within a line, with each foot containing two unstressed syllables followed by one stressed syllable.

"The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold, / And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold; / And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea, / When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee."

— Lord Byron, "The Destruction of Sennacherib," lines 1–4

**Blank verse** is unrhymed and often in iambic pentameter.

"But soft, / what light through yonder window breaks? / It is the east, and Juliet is the sun."

— William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.2–3

**Free verse** avoids patterns such as rhyme and meter. There may be a rhyme, but not a pattern of rhyming.

"I celebrate myself, and sing myself, And what I assume you shall assume / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you."

— Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," lines 1–3

**Iambic pentameter** is a line that has five meters of iambs. An iamb is an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable.

"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate; Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May, And summer's lease hath all too short a date."

— William Shakespeare, *Sonnet XVIII*, lines 1–4

**Trochaic tetrameter** contains four feet within a line. Each foot is composed of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable, except for the last foot, which contains only a stressed syllable.

"Tyger! Tyger! burning bright In the forests of the night."

— William Blake, "The Tyger," lines 1–2

## Reading Critically



### Poetry

#### Gary Soto's "Ode to the Sprinkler"

The ode is a structured lyric poem in praise of an individual or thing. While the ode form is rooted in the poetic tradition of the ancient Greeks and Romans, it is also part of the poetic tradition in English, with such famous poems as John Keats's "Ode to Autumn." In producing *Neighborhood Odes* (1992), Gary Soto pays subtle homage to the ode tradition but adapts it to reflect everyday life in a Mexican American neighborhood.

From the opening lines of the poem with their contrast of "sprinklers / On lawns" to swimming pools, we sense that the speaker does not live in an affluent neighborhood but one that has a rich tradition of communal life.

Soto's "Ode to the Sprinkler" (on pages 115–16) mixes lyric and narrative elements. It uses the present tense and lyric mode to capture the joyous mood of a child speaker running through the sprinkler: "Jumping up and / Down, pounding / The mushy grass / With my feet" (lines 24–27). The poem then switches into the past tense to tell the story of how the speaker was once stung by a bee when running through the sprinklers. The shock of the bee sting is vividly described:

I cried and  
Sat on the porch.  
The water on  
My face was not  
Water from the sprinkler,  
But water from  
Inside my body. (lines 37–43)

When the speaker is hurt, a personified Pain exclaims, "¡Hijole!" (Wow!) / "That hurts!" (lines 45–46). The device of personification underscores that the pain is so strong that it almost has a voice of its own. The voice of Pain comes from "Way down" inside the body of the speaker (line 44). After the pain and swelling are soothed by an "icy glass" of Kool-Aid pressed "Against my throbbing toe" (lines 51; 52), the speaker describes the Kool-Aid "not / As sugar on / The tongue / But as medicine" (lines 58–61).



### Ode to the Sprinkler

There is no swimming  
Pool on  
Our street,  
Only sprinklers  
On lawns, 5  
The helicopter  
Of water  
Slicing our legs.  
We run through  
The sprinkler, 10  
Water on our  
Lips, water  
Dripping  
From eyelashes,  
Water like 15  
Fat raindrops  
That fall from  
Skinny trees when  
You're not looking.  
I run *como* 20  
*Un chango*,  
In my orange  
Swimming trunks,  
Jumping up and  
Down, pounding 25  
The mushy grass  
With my feet.  
One time a bee  
Stung my toe,  
The next-to-the-biggest 30  
Toe. Then that toe  
Got bigger  
Than my real  
Big toe,

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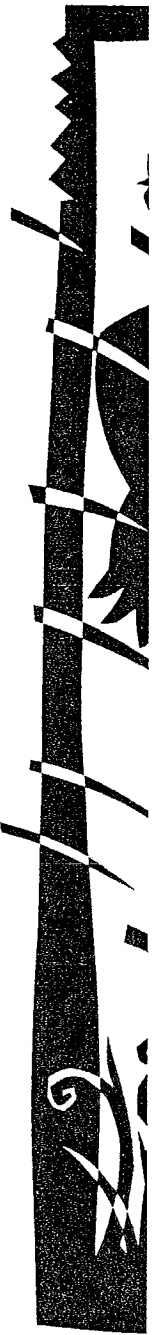
*como Un chango*: Like a monkey.

Like a balloon	35
On its way up.	
I cried and	
Sat on the porch.	
The water on	
My face was not	40
Water from the sprinkler,	
But water from	
Inside my body,	
Way down where	
Pain says, ¡Hijole!	45
That hurts!	
Mom brought me	
A glass of Kool-Aid.	
I drank some	
And then pressed	50
The icy glass	
Against my throbbing toe.	
The toe	
Shrank back	
Into place,	55
And on that day	
I began to think	
Of Kool-Aid not	
As sugar on	
The tongue	60
But as medicine.	
And as for the bees,	
You have to watch	
For them. They buzz	
The lawn for	65
Their own sugar	
And wet play.	

In "Ode to the Sprinkler," everyday life is infused with drama. By describing the sprinkler as a "helicopter / Of water / Slicing [the children's] legs," the poet draws our attention to its forceful circular motion (lines 6-8). Similes are used to strong effect,

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*¡Hijole!*: Exclamation, as in "Wow!"





DAVID DIAZ'S ILLUSTRATION FOR "ODE TO THE SPRINKLER" FROM *NEIGHBORHOOD ODES* (1992) BY GARY SOTO.



as when Soto describes the water of the sprinklers as resembling "Fat raindrops / That fall from / Skinny trees when / You're not looking" (lines 16-19). The simile evokes both the gracefulness of the sprinkler's dripping water and an organic process that eludes human perception. Another key simile is the comparison of the speaker's bee-stung toe to a "balloon / On its way up" (lines 35-36).

One of the most striking elements of the poem is the way it uses Spanish vocabulary, translated for non-Spanish speakers in a glossary at the end of the book. The speaker, for example, runs through the sprinkler "*como / Un chango*" (like a monkey) (lines 20-21). The Spanish language reflects the life and culture of the community described in the odes, and the glossary reaches out to include readers who do not know Spanish.

The poem mostly celebrates a simple summertime pleasure. Yet it ends with a note of warning about the bees in the yard, written in the second person and addressed to the reader:

And as for the bees,  
You have to watch  
For them. They buzz  
The lawn for  
Their own sugar  
And wet play. (lines 62-67)

The poem has moved from the continuous present of the running children to the memory of the bee sting. "Ode to the Sprinkler" is in some ways an atypical ode, mingling its celebration of the sprinkler with a painful memory and a subtle caution. In warning the reader to "watch for" the bees, Soto links personal experience and memory with the wider community, creating an expansive vision of the "neighborhood" he celebrates.

## EXPLC

### DISCUSS

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### SUGGESTED

1. Choos  
(a sonnet)  
this poem

## EXPLORATIONS

### DISCUSSION AND ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Recall the skipping rhymes or other playground rhymes from your childhood. How were they different from the poems you were taught in school? What do you think adults would think of these playground rhymes?
2. What poem or poems from your childhood did you particularly like? How did you discover this poem or these poems?
3. Do poems in the twenty-first century still have morals? In what ways do contemporary poems or songs for children offer serious lessons?
4. Nonsense poetry and light verse are a major part of the tradition of poetry for children. Why do you think nonsense has played such an important role in children's poetry? Why is nonsense associated with children's poetry, and what can nonsense offer to the child reader?
5. Look at a children's poem with a regular rhythm and compare it to one written in free verse. How are these poems different?
6. Research the biographies of well-known children's poets such as Shel Silverstein, Jack Prelutsky, Eve Merriam, or Dennis Lee. Did they, or do they, define themselves as poets for children? What does the self-definition of these poets tell us about the status of poetry for children in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? How is each poet's self-designation reflected in his or her poetry?
7. Much of the poetry for children is based on the world that surrounds them: the immediate experience of a child. Review contemporary anthologies sold in bookstores and note any poems that reflect global concerns (such as the environment, global injustice, or historical atrocity). Repeat this exercise for collections aimed at older readers. What differences do you see between the poems written for children and those written for adults?
8. Choose a verse novel similar to Hesse's *Out of the Dust* or Woodson's *Loxgrotto*. What do verse novels have in common with fiction? How is reading a verse novel different from reading a novel or short story?

### SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

1. Choose a poem that you are sure is inaccessible or difficult for child readers (a sonnet by William Shakespeare might be a good choice). Why do you think this poem would not resonate with child readers or listeners? Read the poem

to a young child and take notes on his or her reactions, impressions, and ideas of what the poem is about. Did the results of this exercise match your preconceptions?

2. Take a single poem that has been illustrated by multiple illustrators (possibilities include one of the Mother Goose rhymes or *A Child's Garden of Verses*). Photocopy the illustrations for this poem, using a color photocopier if necessary. Produce a collage made from all these images and prepare an analysis of it. What does the collage tell us about the illustrators' strategies? Do you see any patterns emerging?
3. Think of a danger children face in the twenty-first century. Write a humorous cautionary tale in verse, looking at Shel Silverstein and Hilaire Belloc for inspiration. Then write a serious poem about the problem. How are these poems different?
4. Imagine that a friend of yours is a caregiver for an elementary-school-aged child who claims to dislike poetry. Your friend has asked you to come up with a bibliography of good poems to read to the child to change his or her mind. Compile a bibliography of six or seven poems that you think might be effective for this purpose, and explain why you chose them.

#### SUGGESTED READINGS

Ciardi, John. *The Man Who Sang the Sillies* (1961). Illustrated by Edward Gorey. This collection includes twenty-four rhyming nonsense poems celebrating eccentric behavior, silliness, and the absurdities of family life.

Clifton, Lucille. *Some of the Days of Everett Anderson* (1970). Illustrated by Evaline Ness. This is one of Clifton's eight books featuring Everett Anderson, an energetic young African American boy. The book follows the seven days of the week for its protagonist, and many of its poems deal with city life. With its illustrations by Evaline Ness, the book is a good example of a poetry picturebook.

Hughes, Langston. *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems* (1932). This is Hughes's only collection of poems specifically for young people; it contains fifty-nine of his poems. Poems in one section of the book use the pattern of blues folk songs. Other poems reflect on the importance of dreams and explore the complexities of the African American experience.

Milne, A. A. *Now We Are Six* (1927). Illustrated by E. H. Shepard. This is Milne's follow-up collection to *When We Were Very Young* (1924). It contains thirty-two poems, including "In the Dark," "The Emperor's Rhyme," and "The Knight Whose

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Armour Didn't Squeak." Pooh and Christopher Robin make an appearance in some poems, such as "The Journey's End," "Sneezles," and "Us Two" (a poem about "Pooh and Me"). The poems engage with a child's daily experience as well as with the realm of fantasy.

Nichols, Grace. *Come on into My Tropical Garden* (1988). In this collection, Guyana-born poet Grace Nichols sets her poems in the Caribbean, sometimes using dialect. In addition to poems that invoke domestic pleasures, the collection also includes poems about history, such as "They Were My People," which describes the experience of Nichols's ancestors, who were cane cutters.

Nye, Naomi Shihab. *A Maze Me* (2005). Illustrated by Terre Maher. *A Maze Me* is aimed at preteen girls and is divided into five sections: "Big Head," "Secret Hum," "Magical Geography," "Sweet Dreams Please," and "Something True." The poems capture the excitement and anxieties caused by friendships, family relationships, and crushes. They also include observations about the natural and social world in general.

Opie, Peter, and Iona Opie. *I Saw Esau: The Schoolchild's Pocket Book* (2000). Illustrated by Maurice Sendak. Folklorists Peter and Iona Opie first published more than 170 schoolyard rhymes in this book in 1947. *I Saw Esau* includes tongue twisters, insults, and skipping rhymes.

Silverstein, Shel. *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (1974). Known for its combination of words and images, *Where the Sidewalk Ends* is now iconic in our popular culture. It contains both serious and humorous poetry, including "The Edge of the World," "Ickle Me, Pickle Me, Tickle Me Too," and "Afraid of the Dark."

Stevenson, Robert Louis. *A Child's Garden of Verses* (1885). Stevenson's verses chronicle the world of the nursery and of imaginary adventurers, harking back to his own childhood as a sickly child. The text has been illustrated several times and is a popular gift book.

Volavková, Hana, editor. . . . *I never saw another butterfly . . . Children's Drawings and Poems from Terezin Concentration Camp, 1942-1944* (1993). Expanded second edition with a foreword by Chaim Potok. The collection includes several poems by children written in the Terezin (Theresienstadt) concentration camp, nurtured by the artists who were also incarcerated there and who awaited deportation orders to concentration camps such as Auschwitz. The poems by children describe both the harsh realities of their incarceration and a happier world of creativity and natural beauty.

APPROACHES TO TEACHING  
GARY SOTO'S "ODE TO THE SPRINKLER"

[Elementary School]

Preparation for the Lesson

Students will read the poem out loud in the classroom and then once silently to themselves.

Learning Goals

- To explore the formal qualities of Soto's poem, including line breaks, meter, and figurative language
- To consider how a collection of related poems works, by positioning "Ode to the Sprinkler" within *Neighborhood Odes* as a whole
- To analyze Soto as a poet who uses both English and Spanish, and to talk about what his use of Spanish words adds to *Neighborhood Odes*.

Activity One: Formal Qualities of Poetry

Versification and line lengths: Examine Soto's short lines with the students, asking them when readers should pause when reading the poem out loud. Define FREE VERSE for the students (nonrhyming, no defined metrical structure), and ask them why they think free verse works so well in this poem.

Figurative language: Examine the following instances of figurative language in the poem:

SIMILE (a comparison that uses "like" or "as"):

Then that toe  
Got bigger  
Than my real  
Big toe,  
Like a balloon  
On its way up. (lines 31-36)

Discuss the ways in which this simile creates an image of the swollen toe in the reader's mind.

METAPHOR (a figure of speech that makes a comparison between two things that are not alike but that nonetheless have something in common):

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The helicopter  
Of water  
Slicing our legs. (lines 6–8)

Discuss how the metaphor works by asking how a sprinkler and a helicopter are alike and how they are different.

PERSONIFICATION (an object, idea, or phenomenon that is given human qualities):

Way down where  
Pain says, ¡Híjole!  
That hurts! (lines 44–46)

Discuss why Soto chooses to have “Pain” speak rather than the child in the poem, and why Soto capitalizes the word “Pain.”

### Activity Two

If any of the students are not Spanish speakers, have them look up the Spanish words in the glossary at the end of the book: “*como un chango*” (like a monkey) and “*¡Híjole!*” (Wow!). Ask the students to comment on the effect of Spanish in the poem. If any of the students are Spanish speakers, ask them whether Soto’s use of Spanish adds to their enjoyment of the poem and what they think of the combination of Spanish and English.

### Activity Three

Put the students into groups of two or three and ask each group to choose a poem from *Neighborhood Odes*. Each group will prepare an oral presentation for the class that will include

- An oral recitation of the poem itself
- An explanation of how the poem they chose compares with “Ode to the Sprinkler”
- A list of figurative language in the poem and a discussion of how the Spanish language works in the poem.

After all the presentations have been completed, students should make a list of places, people, and things in their own neighborhoods that would be good subjects for odes. Make a master list for the class on a handout; these topics could be used for a future class where students compose their own “neighborhood odes.”