Poetry in Three Dimensions
Reading, Writing, and Critical Thinking Through Poetry
Book One

By Carol Clark and Alison Draper

Poetry in Three Dimensions is an activity book that demystifies poetry for middle school students. This book is organized thematically so that readers can savor poems on similar topics from the perspectives of classic and contemporary poets such as e.e. cummings, Naomi Shihab Nye, Anne Sexton, Margaret Walker, Maya Angelou, Rita Dove, and others.

The three themes, or Dimensions, include

• Creatures
• Journeys
• Relationships

Comprehension and appreciation of poetry is enhanced by

• writing and discussion questions following each poem
• footnotes
• a glossary of poetic terms
• biographical information

Also available: Poetry in Three Dimensions
Reading, Writing, and Critical Thinking Through Poetry
Book Two

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BY CAROL CLARK AND ALISON DRAPER
♦ To our colleagues at Crystal Springs Uplands School and those at neighboring Bay Area schools for their constructive comments and encouragement of our work in progress.

♦ To the students at the Crystal Springs Uplands School Summer Enrichment Program for their thoughtful response to the poems in this collection and for their enthusiasm.

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♦ To Norma Fifer, our friend and mentor, for her guidance, support, and love of language that continue to inspire us.

♦ To our families for their helpful criticism, patience, sense of humor, and interest in our pursuit.
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Naomi Shihab Nye  
Always Bring a Pencil

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Imagine life as a dog tethered to a chain. Learn about the struggles and endurance of a salmon swimming upstream. View the world from a new point of view—from the top of a cathedral or from a ceiling. Experience the pain of racial prejudice and isolation; how does it feel to be called an ugly name or to be imprisoned in a Japanese internment camp? Celebrate family and accomplishment. In *Poetry in Three Dimensions* we invite you to explore all of these ideas—and more, and to enjoy the form and rhythm that poetry offers.

**WHAT YOU WILL FIND IN THIS BOOK**

You will see that the poems in this book are divided into five main sections. There are three topics or *Dimensions*: Creatures, Journeys, and Relationships. Within each of these *Dimensions*, the poems are further divided into subtopics called *Sets*. In addition, we have included two sections called *Close-Ups* and *Classic Models*. In *Close-Ups*, we offer four poems by e.e. cummings and four poems by Naomi Shihab Nye. All of the poems in the *Dimensions* and *Close-Ups* sections are by American poets writing in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries. In *Classic Models*, you will find examples of traditional “fixed form” poems that poets have written throughout the ages in Europe, Asia, and the United States. *Poetry in Three Dimensions* also includes several modern variations on these traditional forms.

**WHAT YOU WILL DO**

After each poem in the *Dimensions*, *Close-Ups*, and *Classic Models* sections, you will find two questions encouraging you to investigate the structure or language of the poem and the literary devices used by the poet. We also ask you to consider what the poem means and how this meaning relates to your personal experiences. For many of the poems, we have provided *Activities* designed to stimulate your creativity by asking you to write a poem or draw a picture, engage in some form of research, or compare and contrast different works.

*Poetry in Three Dimensions* is a collection of works mainly by Americans: African Americans, Asian Americans, European Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans. Our society has been enriched by the contributions of each of these groups. Through *Poetry in Three Dimensions* we hope you will celebrate our shared heritage and enjoy thinking about the many ways human beings are different and the same.
THE FIRST STEP—GETTING THE FEELING OF A POEM

The first characteristic of poetry that most students notice is its brevity. Poems are short! Like small treasures, they are also packed with gem-like words and phrases that appeal to your senses. When you read a poem, you will hear and see, and possibly taste, touch, or smell the images that the poet puts before you. Sometimes, reading and listening to poetry is similar to listening to music. Even when you hear a song in a foreign language, you can feel the expression that the composer is conveying to you.

Poems, even complex poems, can have a similar effect on the reader. Don’t give up if a poem doesn’t "make sense" to you after an initial reading. First, try to express what the poem makes you feel in the same way you would for a song you’ve heard for the first time. Write your feelings in your book, right next to the poem’s title. Then use the reading, writing, and thinking tools suggested below to help you find ways to understand why and how the poem makes you feel a certain way.

IDENTIFYING THE SPEAKER IN A POEM

When poets write poems, sometimes they imagine what it must be like to observe the world from the point of view of a creature or a person who is very different from themselves. This creature or person is the observer looking at the world conveyed to you through the poet’s words. In this book, we refer to this observer as the speaker, and sometimes we refer to the point of view of the speaker. In other words, the speaker and the poet are often not the same.

To understand a poem, you must know who or what is telling you a story, expressing a feeling, or describing a scene in a poem. Is the speaker a boy or girl, a man or woman, a dog, an objective observer (such as a newspaper reporter), someone looking back on the past, or someone looking ahead to the future? Even if a poet uses an "I" as a speaker, that speaker may have a very different point of view from that of the poet.

The poet is like an invisible puppeteer or someone who manipulates the strings of a marionette and makes the puppet or marionette speak and move. The poet creates the words that the speaker speaks. He or she is the master artist behind the words. When we refer to the feelings or ideas that a poem creates, we refer to the speaker’s feelings or ideas, not those of the poet.
UNDERSTANDING POETIC DEVICES

Like all artists, poets have techniques to make their art appealing and understandable to the reader. We call these tools poetic devices. In the "Glossary of Poetic Terms," you will find helpful explanations for all the poetic devices and techniques referred to in the questions.

The questions on a poem might ask you to identify and explain the effects of these devices. For example, if a question asks you to find figures of speech such as similes in a poem, you will need to look for phrases that employ the words like or as, such as "My heart is like a rose." After you find the similes and circle them in the poem, you are ready to ask, "What do they make me see or feel?"

The questions might also ask you to put brackets around the main sections of the poem. The sections of the poem, sometimes determined by stanzas, sometimes by punctuation, and sometimes only by a slight change in the types of words or images in the poem, constitute its structure. Like a well-planned house, a poem is built on a solid foundation, and it may have a simple or an intricate architecture. Locating the parts of the poem’s structure is similar to looking at a blueprint for a building. The parts enable you to see how the poet has organized the main ideas of the poem.

THE FIVE SENSES—GETTING THE PICTURE

The language of poetry often appeals to the five senses: sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste. While the last two may appear only rarely in a poem, the first three are very common. Frequently, an "Activity" assignment will ask you to draw a picture of a poem. After you read a poem, try to make a picture in your head, or a series of pictures, that reflect the words of the poem. These pictures are the imagery of poetry. Sometimes the imagery involves the process of comparison in figures of speech such as metaphor, simile, or personification. These comparisons in figures of speech help you to make sense of the pictures in your head by comparing one thing to another.

If the words use rhyme or rhythm or repeated consonant or vowel sounds to create a feeling in a poem, you are hearing as well as seeing the picture in your head. Such a poem is a like a movie with sound. If the other senses are involved, you may be stepping into the "virtual reality" of a poem. For example, if you can smell as well as picture and hear the skunk in Maxine Kumin’s "The Hermit Meets the Skunk," you have entered the scene of the poem and have let your senses stimulate your imagination.

When you first read a poem, circle or underline words that appeal to your senses. Write those senses down in the margin of the poem, and they will serve as reminders of how the poem works.
Once you have an idea of the picture or the feelings expressed in a poem, you are on your way to interpreting the poem’s meaning. Sometimes a question will ask you to explain how a specific poetic device works. For example, you might be asked about the simile in “My love is like a red, red rose,” and you would probably answer that the image uses a direct comparison between the speaker’s feeling of love and a beautiful red flower. You might also be asked about something like what a word or title implies, or why there is a contrast between two images. To respond to such questions, you must figure out how the poem works—how the poetic devices contribute to your understanding of the feelings and ideas expressed in the poem.

A second question might ask you for your interpretation, personal response, or opinion. You are ready for these questions after you have tried to figure out how each piece of the poem fits into the big picture.

A question on interpretation, personal response, or opinion asks you, the reader, to take a stand on the poem. What do you think or feel about a particular subject and why?

Poetry in Three Dimensions is easy to use.

- Beside the questions that follow each poem, you will find space for writing answers to the questions.
- The footnotes that accompany the poem will help you to understand difficult words and allusions.
- Before you do your first assignment in the book, examine the Contents to see where you can go to help yourself.
- The Glossary of Poetic Terms will help you to understand questions that ask you to identify examples of specific devices or techniques in a poem. (These devices or techniques are always indicated in bold type.)
- The Activities section, which follows the poetry sections, contains additional assignments that your teacher may ask you to complete.
- The section titled About the Poets gives you biographical information about the authors that you may find useful in helping you to understand the context of a particular poem.
- The Index will help you locate authors and titles.

We hope you will find both challenge and pleasure in reading the poems in this book.

Carol Clark and Alison Draper
THE THIRD DIMENSION: RELATIONSHIPS

TIFFANY BERES
The Real Thing
Marilou Awiakta

For Bernice

"We're the most exclusive Indian shop in New York City. We only sell the real thing."
Coyote-smooth, the man lured a covey of customers to where he held up a weaving three feet by two.
"This rug is genuine Navajo. You know it by the tiny flaw they always leave to let the evil spirit out."
"Ah . . . " sighed the covey and leaned closer.

Behind them a buckshot laugh exploded scattered thoughts turned heads toward a black-haired four-square woman. "I am Navajo," she said. "My family makes rugs."

When I was a child I herded our sheep helped mother clean the wool. Grandma spun and wove it. 25 We don’t leave a flaw 'to let the evil spirit out.'
We leave it to show what’s made by humans can’t be perfect. 30 Only the Great Spirit makes perfect things."

The covey stared blank silent then closed back to their smooth comfort— "As I was saying . . . This rug is genuine Navajo. You know it by the tiny flaw they always leave to let the evil spirit out."

1 Navajo — A Native-American tribe occupying an extensive reservation in New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah. Rug weaving is one of the traditions of Navajo culture.

2 Great Spirit — the Supreme Being of the Navajo religion.

1994
Questions for The Real Thing

1. Why are the following words especially effective in conveying the speaker’s attitude toward the man who is selling rugs in “the most exclusive/Indian shop in New York City” (lines 1–2): “Coyote-smooth” (line 4), “lured” (line 5)? In the second stanza, which words express the speaker’s attitude toward the Navajo woman? How is that attitude different from her attitude toward the man selling the rugs and why?

2. What is the specific conflict in the relationship between makers of Navajo rugs and those who sell or buy the rugs? How does the third stanza emphasize that conflict?
First Fight, Then Fiddle  
Gwendolyn Brooks (1917–2001)  

First fight. Then fiddle. Ply the slipping string.  
With feathery sorcery; muzzle the note  
With hurting love: the music that they wrote  
Bewitch, bewilder. Qualify to sing  
Threadwise. Devise no salt, no hempen thing  
For the dear instrument to bear. Devote  
The bow to silks and honey. Be remote  
A while from malice and from murdering.  
But first to arms, to armor. Carry hate  
In front of you and harmony behind.  
Be deaf to music and to beauty blind.  
Win war. Rise bloody, maybe not too late  
For having first to civilize a space  
Wherein to play your violin with grace.  

1949

1 slipping string — a reference to a loose string on a stringed instrument such as a violin or cello.  
2 threadwise — careful in the use of the thread or string.  
3 Devise no salt — a reference to the association of salt with flavor or passion, which is sometimes painful.  
4 hempen — made of hemp, a fiber used to make rope or string.  
5 silks and honey — word play on the phrase “a land flowing with milk and honey” from the Bible.
Questions for *First Fight, Then Fiddle*

1. Underline words and phrases in the first eight lines (octave) of the poem that show how the speaker wants the violin to be played. What does she mean by “Be remote/A while from malice and from murdering” (lines 7–8)?

2. Underline the speaker’s commands in the last six lines (sestet) of the poem. How do they differ from the speaker’s wishes or commands in the first eight lines? How do the poem’s rhyme scheme and structure reinforce the different ideas presented in each section?
**Fifth Grade Autobiography**

Rita Dove (1952– )

I was four in the photograph fishing with my grandparents at a lake in Michigan. My brother squats in poison ivy. His Davy Crockett cap sits squared on his head so the raccoon tail flounces down the back of his sailor suit.

My grandfather sits to the far right in a folding chair, and I know his left hand is on the tobacco in his pants pocket because I used to wrap it for him every Christmas. Grandmother’s hips bulge from the brush, she’s leaning into the ice chest, sun through the trees printing her dress with soft luminous paws.

I am staring jealously at my brother; the day before he rode his first horse, alone. I was strapped in a basket behind my grandfather. He smelled of lemons. He’s died—

but I remember his hands.

1989

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1 Davy Crockett — (1786–1836) American folk hero known for his abilities as a marksman, bear hunter, and fighter. Elected to Congress, he was known for his homespun stories and wit. Crockett was killed in the eighteenth-century mission of the Alamo in San Antonio, Texas, during a battle for the independence of Texas from Mexico.
Questions for Fifth Grade Autobiography

1. Which specific details in the remembered photograph convey the striking **images** of the four people pictured: the **speaker**, her brother, the grandfather, and the grandmother?

2. Note the space between “He’s died—” (line 21) and “but I remember his hands” (line 22). What idea or feeling does the separation emphasize? Why is the last sentence of the poem especially important in conveying the poem’s meaning?

SEE ACTIVITIES, PAGE 99.
Mother to Son
Langston Hughes (1902–1967)

Well son, I’ll tell you:
Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.
It’s had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.
But all the time
I’se been a-climbin’ on,
And reachin’ landin’s
And turnin’ corners,
And sometimes goin’ in the dark
Where there ain’t been no light.
So boy, don’t you turn back.
Don’t you set down on the steps
’Cause you finds it’s kinder hard.
Don’t you fall now—
For I’se still goin’, honey,
I’se still climbin’,
And life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.

1926
Questions for Mother to Son

1. What extended metaphor does the speaker establish in line 2? What do lines 3–7 and lines 10–13 tell you about the kind of experiences the speaker has had in her life?

2. What advice does the speaker have for her son?