

▶ SEEING THE WORLD

Steven Herrick

BEFORE READING

Why I Admire This Poem

I appreciate the wisdom of the dad in this poem. He sees that his young sons are bored and it's time to do something about that. He doesn't take them to the movies or to the arcade or even tell them to "run along and play." He knows they need a change of perspective, so he takes them on a perilous climb to the *very top* of the roof on their home. I also like what the dad does when he gets his sons to that perch. I should say that I like what he *doesn't* do. He doesn't try to point things out to them or ask a lot of questions about what they can see. He simply lets them observe *the world* of the title with *not a sound anywhere*. And I get the sense that they enjoy one another's company. That's the wisdom that I appreciate in the dad: he gives them the opportunity to get away from the world of *backyard games/and television* and see another world. What a wonderful gift!

Companion Poem

Just like this poem, Naomi Shihab Nye's "Every Cat Has a Story" is about seeing and imagining. The settings of the two poems are different, but take a look at how the poets look at life, how they find details all around them and make them come alive in a poem.

Special Words to Work Through

Steven Herrick is an Australian poet, and that will account for why he speaks of a *cubbyhouse* rather than a "club house," as Americans might, and why his measurement is in meters. Beyond that, take a look at some of the other words that he uses in his poem. When the trio is about to begin the climb, they *scramble onto the roof* and *hang on tight as we scale the heights*. I especially like the words *scramble* and *scale*. Uncommon words, but they convey these actions wonderfully.

FIRST READING: MEETING THE POEM

Ask your students how often they get bored. Can they name specific times when they were bored? They'll probably mention being bored during a class they don't like or when friends of their parents are around. Some will say they feel "bored"

THEMES, ISSUES, CONCEPTS

- fathers and sons
- sense of wonder
- contrast in poetry
- boredom

LITERARY TERMS

- mood
- images
- repetition
- line break
- hyperbole

ORGANIZERS

- Tone
- Sense Details

when they are by themselves. That's another area to explore: are they mostly bored when they are alone?

The other side of the equation is what your students do when they're bored. How do they manage to get through the boredom? Do they simply search out a friend? Do they have more inventive suggestions they can share with the others in the class? Don't be afraid to share your own thoughts and experiences with boredom.

CLOSE READING: GETTING TO KNOW THE POEM

One of the things I usually look for in a poem is contrast. I've noticed contrasts in a number of the poems in this book—in "Friends in the Klan," for example. In "Seeing the World" there is a contrast between the first five lines and the rest of the poem. From *bored with backyard games/and television* to *we're flying/we're flying* and *I'm sure I never want to land* is quite a contrast.

As is usually the case when contrast figures in a poem, there is a turning point—in this case, when the narrator tells us, *We sit with our backs to the chimney*. That is when he and his brother begin to notice how things are different from this unusual vantage point. The birds, the trees, the cubbyhouse, and the distant city all look different. This is a moment of growth in the narrator, when he sees things differently and is liberated from boredom. Now the things he sees—all things he can see from the ground as well—are different, and he is moved by the change in perspective. It's that liberation that lets him feel that they are flying.

Noticing Mood

How do your students feel when they read this poem? I suggested you ask your class this same question during your exploration of "Abandoned Farmhouse." Have your students use the **Tone in "Seeing the World"** organizer to help them write down their observations about how the poem makes them feel—note a couple of feelings they had while they were reading the poem and include a few specific details in the poem that made them feel that way.

My guess is they'll say the poem conveys a mood of contentment—*We sit with our backs to the chimney/and see the world*—and, later, joy—*we're flying/we're flying*. How does the poet create those feelings in the poem? He does it, of course, through the details he includes and his reaction to those details. (I have more to say about these details in the next section.)

Noticing Images

Herrick uses the senses to create images in this poem. He begins with the climb as they *scramble onto the roof*. From there, *We hang on tight as we scale the heights/to the very top*, until, *We sit with our backs to the chimney*. All of these actions rely on the sense of touch.

That changes in the next line as they *see the world* and he switches to the sense of sight. The narrator sees things *below us*: the birds flying, the trees swaying, the cubbyhouse, and the distant city.

See if your students can discover these as well as other images later in the poem. Give them the **Sense Details in “Seeing the World”** organizer and ask them to find some images in the poem and identify which sense each image appeals to. You might want to make a transparency of this organizer and add to it after your students have had the chance to fill theirs out individually.

Noticing Repetition

When a poet repeats a phrase in a poem he might be using that repetition to stitch the poem together. He may also repeat a word or phrase for emphasis. Herrick’s repetitions fall into both categories. The trio scrambles onto the roof *carefully, carefully* because they are at *the very top* of the house. This is clearly a time for caution for the young roof climbers. The repetition of *below us* emphasizes how high they are, but it also conveys something of a sense of wonder, I think, when the narrator *realizes* how high they are. The birds are *below us*. The trees are *below us*. The cubbyhouse is *below us*. And the distant city is *below us*. With the final repetition—*we’re flying/we’re flying*—the narrator registers his awe at how high they are and what he can see from that height.

Noticing Line Breaks

This poem is another example of free verse that makes good use of line breaks. One way to check is to make a transparency of the poem and highlight the final word or two in each line. If Herrick has done his work, your highlighting should include most of the important words in the poem.

He uses another kind of line break trick when he writes:

The birds flying

below us.

The trees swaying in the wind

below us.

Our cubbyhouse, meters

below us.

The distant city

below us.

Not a conventional line break, is it? Besides emphasizing the *below us* phrase by repeating it, as we’ve already seen, he also does so by putting the phrases below the things to which they refer. Your students have probably used conventional line breaks in their own writing. In fact, most of the poems in this book use conventional line breaks. But the line breaks in “Seeing the World” might give your students the

opportunity to look back over their own poems and see if there are alternative line breaks to the ones they used. Remind them that they need to have a reason for their line breaks, beyond *well, it looks cool this way*. Their reason should have something to do with the sense of their poem. Before you let your students try different line breaks, you might want to review the unit on line breaks on pages 24–25.

The line breaks in this poem are, in a sense, more important than they are in some other poems, because Herrick offers nearly no punctuation at the ends of lines to help us read the poem. But when we read the poem aloud, we can sense how to read the poem by where we pause for breath or make ever-so-slight pauses within a breath.

Noticing Hyperbole

Your students may recall that a hyperbole is an exaggeration. Sometimes the exaggeration is used for humor, but in this poem Herrick uses it, in *we're flying/we're flying*, to show the narrator's excitement and awe. Obviously, the trio on the roof of the house isn't literally flying. But it *feels* that way to them when they *lie back/look up and watch/the clouds and sky*.

AFTER READING: **KNOWING THE POEM FOREVER**

Say It Out Loud

How should you read this poem to convey the excitement the narrator feels? Because there are three people in the poem, I would work with a cast of three. The narrator of the poem would read the whole poem, assisted by the other two readers whenever the characters are doing something together. So I would have the narrator read the first four lines and then have the “Dad” character read line 5. Then have three voices read the section of the poem that begins *So we climb the ladder* until the second *we're flying*. At that point, the narrator can read the last four lines. Having him begin and end the poem solo is a nice way to bring it full circle.

Ask your students for alternative ways to present this poem. For example, this poem could be presented as a choral reading, but one that starts with a voice or two, then slowly adds voices as the excitement of the narrator builds.

Write About It

Have students explore one of these ideas in their writer's notebook:

1. Write about a time when you were so set in your ways that you never considered another way of looking at a situation or a person until something happened to change your thinking. Perhaps you judged a person by the way she dressed or the way he spoke the first time you met, until the two

of you had to work on a school project together. Make sure you give details about the original situation and why you felt the way you did, as well as the reason you changed your opinion.

2. Some people call once-in-a-lifetime experiences “peak experiences.” Can you describe a peak experience you had? Try to capture the excitement of the moment the way Herrick does in “Seeing the World.” Try to make sense impressions part of your description.
3. Consider playing with line breaks as another writing opportunity. Take a look at one of your poems and see if there is a different way to break up the lines. Does it make your poem different in any way? Is it easier to read? Play around with line breaks until you come up with something you like.

Issues/Themes/Topics

- Paying attention to the things around us
- Peak experiences
- Boredom
- Things you do with one parent but not the other
- Siblings

Related Poems

“To Look at Any Thing,” by John Moffitt

“For Poets,” by Al Young

“O I Have Dined on This Delicious Day,” by Richard Snyder

“The Blue Between,” by Kristine O’Connell George

“The Swing” by Robert L. Stevenson

Book Bridges

Here are three novels that explore the father-son relationship that Herrick writes about in his poem:

Lord of the Nutcracker Men by Iain Lawrence. A war story told by ten-year-old Johnny Briggs, whose father goes to fight in World War I. Johnny’s attitude slowly changes from his enthusiasm for the toy soldiers his father carves in the trenches to an awareness of the waste of war.

My Dad’s a Punk: 12 Stories About Boys and Their Fathers, edited by Tony Bradman. This collection of a dozen original stories explores the father-son relationship in a variety of situations. For older readers.

In Daddy's Arms I Am Tall: African Americas Celebrating Fathers, selected and illustrated by Javaka Steptoe. The collection celebrates the role of fathers in the African-American experience.

Online Resources

- Steven Herrick has a neat website: www.stevenherrick.com.au. Of course there are pictures and information about this Aussie poet, but my favorite part is the video section, where you can watch and listen to him reading five of his poems.

Name _____ Date _____ Class _____

Tone in "Seeing the World"

Feelings You Had	Details That Prompted These Feelings

Name _____ Date _____ Class _____

Sense Details in "Seeing the World"

Line	Details	Senses