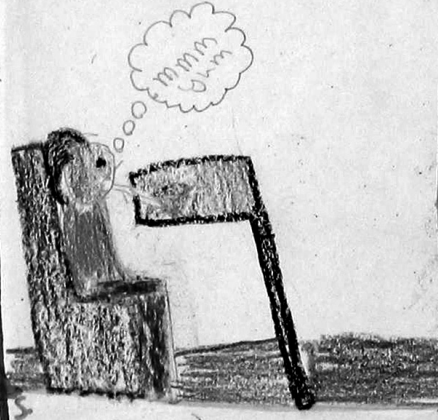Amand[a]

1. Someone brought me a dozen strawberry. | A dozen
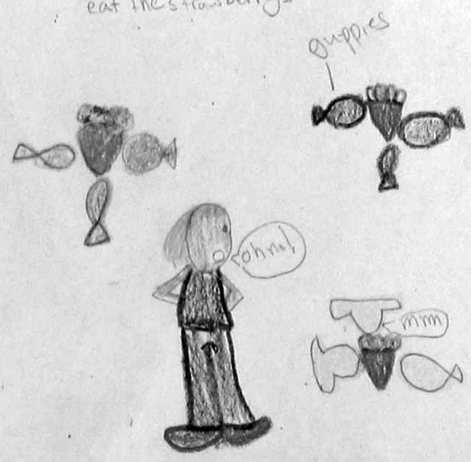
2. Strawberrys! | 2. Juicy inside and all moist.
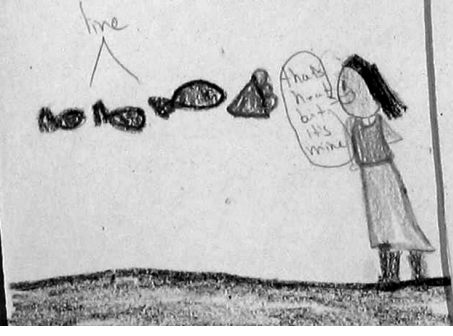
3. With just a tiny poke juice comes flowing like rivers.

Thanks

Here is

mmm yum

Help

4. Strawberry guppies are waiting to eat the strawberrys.

guppies

johns!

5. One by one.

line

that's not but it's mine

mmm

6. Someone brought me a dozen strawberrys.

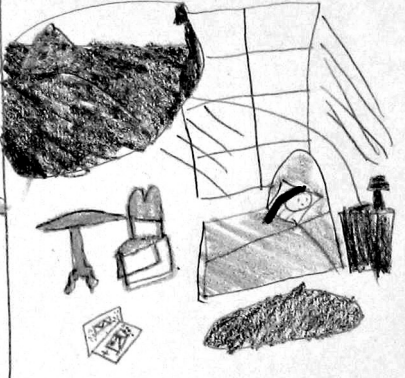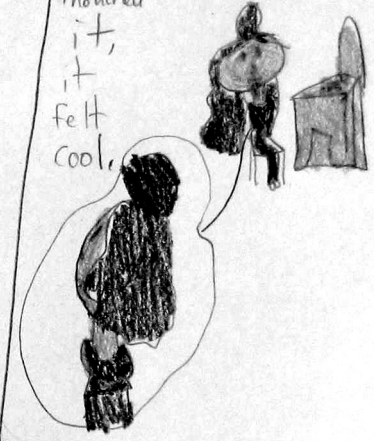
Roses

Someone gave me a rose.

It sparkeld in the daylight.

When I thouched it, it felt cool.
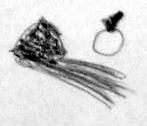
It touched my heart.

My emotions fell in love.

Someone... gave me a rose.

The End

Words and Images

Using Poetry Comics with Young Students

NANCY BARNHART

"Poetry is not always words."
— Audrey Foris

"The function of art . . . is to make people see."
— Joseph Conrad

THE YOUNG POET, a third-grader, had written a beautiful line: "Their emotions fell in love." But what does love mean, exactly, to a child this age? Love is love, she will tell you. It is, after all, an abstract concept. If you ask her to illustrate her poem, however, she can show you exactly what she means. The series of pictures this girl drew to accompany her lines showed the dance of courtship through the eyes of an eight-year-old: a young woman is given a rose; a colorful heart blooms next to her as she gazes admiringly at the rose and touches its petals. The next panel

shows a young couple, hand-in-hand, and the story ends with the symbolic rose sitting next to a ring. Fusing the lines of her poem with this sequence of visual images helped this young writer tell her story of love, and bring her words to life.

In *Poetry Comics*, Dave Morice demonstrates how to create a "hybridization" of poem and comic so that students can "see what they are saying." Playing with poetry comics is a simple yet sophisticated way to introduce young students to the sometimes elusive meanings of poetry. In a poetry comic, each comic frame blends image with text to help anchor meaning, much like illustrations in picture books. The pictures help students visualize hard to grasp lines by making the abstract concrete. And comics have the added advantage of great "kid appeal" as well.

This past June I put these ideas into practice when I taught at the Summer Creative Writing Workshop, a K–12 writing project co-sponsored by Writers in the Schools (WITS) Houston and the School Literacy and Culture Project at the Center for Education, Rice University. My co-teacher, Gloria Alvarez, and I collaborated to help our third-grade students dissect verses and match them with comic illustrations as a way to help them understand the complex poems we read together. We began with William Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," the first stanza of which reads as follows:

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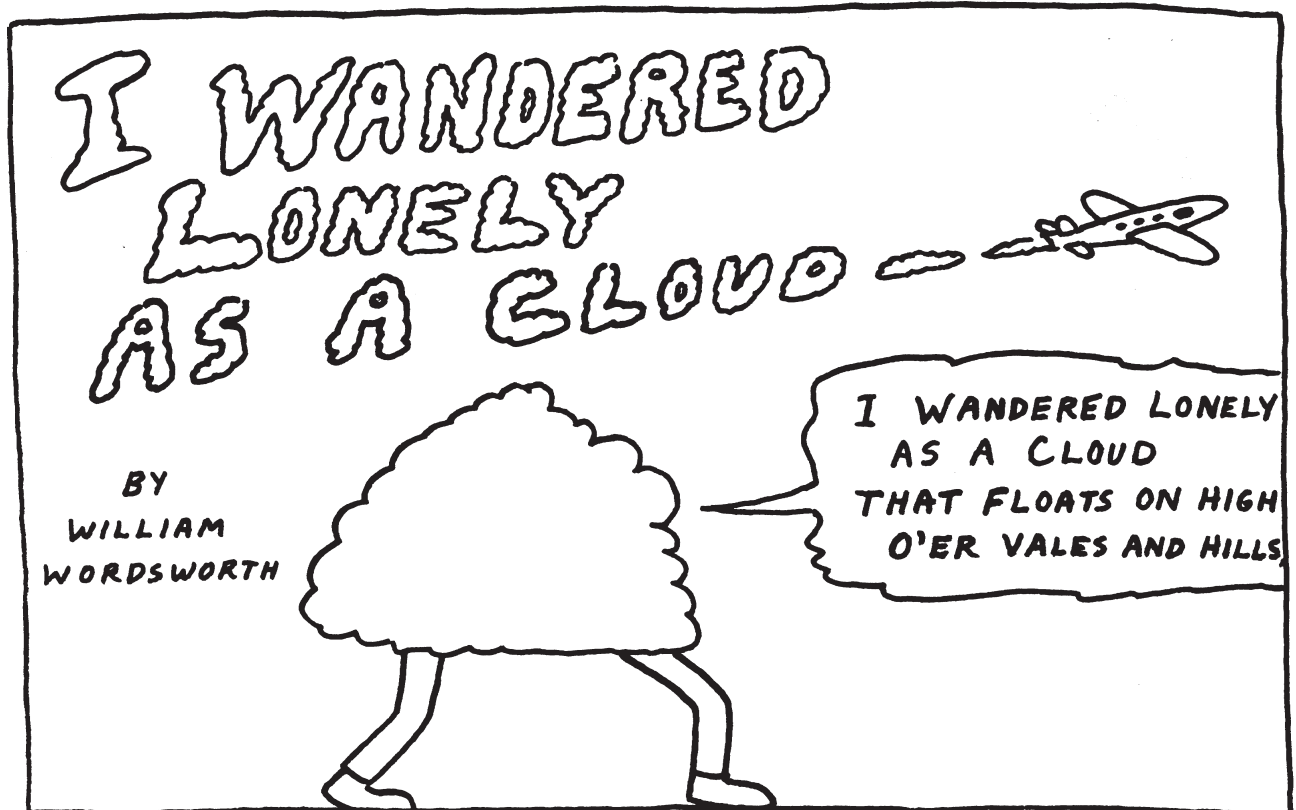
I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

After reading the poem aloud we asked the students to describe the images the poem elicited in their heads—most of which were literal translations of clouds floating o'er vales and hills, as the poem expresses. Bright-eyed Elijah beamed as he shared his understanding of personification when he said that the clouds have eyes watching from above. The students let their minds drift and soon the room filled with a sudden downpour of chatter as they considered what they might see if they could fly like clouds. They were hooked.

Building on their enthusiasm, we asked the students to think about the poem in a different way.

Imagine your eyes are like a camera lens, we said, panning out in a long shot or zooming in close up so that you can see the scene in your mind from a different perspective or point of view. Natalie Goldberg, in her book *Thunder and Lightning*, calls this process cracking open structure. To show the students what we meant by this, we handed out copies of the Wordsworth poem as depicted in Dave Morice's *Poetry Comics*. Here, the author plays with words to break open structure. He zeroes in on the word wandering and gives the cloud human legs to stroll the countryside. The class exploded in laughter at the absurdity of this image and delighted in their ability to see the poem in a different way—they made the connection between the word "wandering" and the cloud with legs. Holly marveled in astonishment, "Oh look, the cloud is wandering because he is lonely and looking for friends."

We seized the opportunity to enter into the poem in yet another way by asking the students to think of

From *Poetry Comics: An Animated Anthology*, by Dave Morice. New York: Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 2002.

comparisons using similes ("I'm as lonely as a ____") and then asked them to stretch their minds by using the prompt "I wandered lonely as a _____" to brainstorm poem possibilities. This discussion served as a review of simile and reinforced the students' understanding of the concept. We could revisit this prompt at a later time, if needed.

The students were learning how to be poet detectives, deciphering meaning line-by-line. It was time to present something a little more challenging. Langston Hughes' "Montage of a Dream Deferred" was a great way to build on similes within the context of a poem. We discussed the literal translation of "does it dry up like a raisin in the sun or maybe it just sags like a heavy load" and how those similes can be used to describe what it is like to not follow your dreams. Nikhil jokingly quipped, "I would rather work hard at something than shrivel up like a prune." His buddy Sam added, "And I don't want to be saggy!" They both chuckled and gave each other a high-five; they captured Hughes' intention.

The artful comics drawn by Morice to accompany this text also helped the students see what the author meant by the word "deferred." A dream deferred is represented through a magic act. Suril looked bemused and glanced questioningly at Drew, and they both snickered. Alina boldly exclaimed, "Oh, I get it! If you don't follow your dreams, they will disappear." Then in laser-point precision, Nelson chimed in as he mimicked a magician waving its staff, "Yeah, like *poof*! Gone, vanished in thin air!" A vocabulary lesson, unintended.

The poetic energy was palpable and we decided to ride that wave by introducing them to a poem by Federico García Lorca entitled "Seashell":

Seashell
FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA
(TRANSLATED BY **MARK STATMAN**)

FOR NATALITA JIMÉNEZ

They have brought me a seashell.

Inside sings
a map-made sea.
My heart
fills with water,
with small fish
of shadow and silver.

They have brought me a seashell.

The class read the poem together and tossed out ideas about how they might create comics to tell the "Seashell" story. They were eager to try their own hand at writing and illustrating poetry comics, so we turned them loose to write their own poems. Poetry comics proved to be not only a lesson in combining art and text to enhance meaning, but also allowed the students to practice other writing skills they had learned during the workshop, such as structure, dialogue, personification, simile, and using active language.

A Dozen Strawberries
TIFFANY

Someone brought me a dozen strawberries
Juicy inside and all moist.
With just a tiny poke,
Juice comes out flowing like rivers.
Strawberry guppies are waiting to eat the
    strawberries.
One by one.
Someone brought me a dozen strawberries.

Tiffany's proficient use of thought bubbles and dialogue bubbles in her poetry comic helped make sense of the story, as they differentiated between what the main character was thinking internally and when she was engaging in conversation with someone else. In the last frame she used an image (rather than

words) to capture a thought, blurring the line between text and art.

In her poem "Rose," Amanda used comics and words to wrestle with the complex idea of emotions.

Rose
AMANDA

Someone gave me a rose.
It sparkled in the dewlight.
When I touched it, it felt cool and wet.
It touched my heart.
My emotions fell in love.
Someone gave me a rose.

Amanda tried to make sense of her world by drawing illustrations to secure her concept of falling in love. She explored the physical touch of the rose ("it felt cool") and made a jump to the abstract by writing, "it touched my heart," and another big leap when she wrote, "my emotions fell in love."

Another variation on the theme of relationships was demonstrated by Patrick's poem on mud.

Mud
PATRICK

Someone brought me some mud,
Some glittering mud.
It glittered through the dark sky.
It made a sculpture,
A sculpture of me.
It made me feel special.
The mud sat right inside me.
It made my heart feel squishy.
Someone brought me some mud.

Yes, a poem about that thick, wet sludge became a beautiful metaphor for what this young person valued in his life. *Poetry Comics* helped this young writer take the ordinary and make it extraordinary, and gave him a vehicle to not only personify mud, but to show the intrinsic value of relationships.

Inspired by Wordsworth's use of the words *fluttering* and *dancing*, Katherine used action words, such as *howling*, *begging*, *jumping*, and *barking*, to tell her crazy dog tale in the round. She provided a series of clockwise arrows within each comic frame to direct the movement or sequence of the story.

Crazy Puppy
KATHERINE

Someone brought me a crazy puppy
Howling at night.
Begging for a treat.
Jumping and barking.
Someone brought me a crazy puppy.

Reading and creating poetry comics in our classroom proved to be a successful and enjoyable way to help our students dig deep into poetry. It also helped reinforce other writing strategies we studied during the workshop. During the remainder of the program, the students would eagerly revisit their work on our Hall of Poetry Comics. This not only gave them the opportunity to admire their work again but also to review the literary terms they had learned. Morice's "hybridization" of text and image provided a wonderful way to help students explore their words and their world in greater detail, and we enjoyed watching these young poets bloom. ☺

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The Poetry Foundation: www.poetryfoundation.org

Duke University Writing Studio: uwp.aas.duke.edu/wstudio