

# Rita Dove

## Selected Poems



### Overview

Even students who insist that they don't like poetry enjoy telling stories about their own lives. This lesson features poems by Rita Dove that will help students explore biography, autobiography, and poetry—all at the same time. The poems draw on real life situations that students can relate to, including sibling rivalry, bullies, and family traditions. Students will also consider their own family history as they read poems that Dove wrote about her grandparents in their younger years.

This lesson may change the way students think about poetry, especially if they have not previously encountered free verse. Students will learn to interpret poems and explain their ideas with examples from the text. The technique, called explication, relies heavily on close reading and critical thinking. Students will also write their own poems, as well as essays, biographical sketches, and news articles. The lesson includes instruction in social studies, history, and geography, and can be taught in its entirety or in part. Instruction for three additional Dove poems can be found on the *Ohio Reading Road Trip* website.

### Getting Started

#### Lesson Objectives

At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Write a summary of a biography about a famous person that incorporates main ideas and supporting details from the original text
- Write a poem that uses sensory words
- Write an autobiographical poem
- Write a poem or paragraph in the voice of another character
- Write an essay about a specific theme found in Dove's poetry
- Write a newspaper article
- Conduct research
- Work in a small group to explicate a poem
- Work in a small group to make a presentation to the class

## Grade Level Indicators

In meeting the above lesson objectives, students will:

- A** Use the text to demonstrate reading comprehension strategies, including the ability to compare and contrast and make inferences
- B** Use criteria to choose independent reading materials (e.g. personal interest, knowledge of authors and genres, or recommendations from others)
- C** Read books independently for a variety of purposes (e.g. for enjoyment, for literary experience, to gain information, or to perform a task)
- G** Generate writing ideas through discussions with others and from printed material, and keep a list of writing ideas
- H** Use available technology to compose text
- I** Publish writing for display or for sharing with others

## Reading Strategies

Clarifying, Using Context Clues, Inferring, Re-reading



Biographical information about Rita Dove can be found at <http://www.ohioreadingroadtrip.org/dove.html>

### Time Required: 10 class periods or more

If this lesson is taught in its entirety, 10 class periods (45 minutes each) will be needed. In the biographical poems section, allow two class periods for “Jiving,” and three periods for “The Zeppelin Factory.” The three autobiographical poems each require one class period. Opportunities for students to write poems inspired by Dove’s work are presented throughout the lesson. Since students need to work at their own pace, this writing might be started in class but completed for homework. You may want students to return to school prepared to read their poems aloud, which will require more time, or you might ask students to keep the poems in their writing portfolios. Assessment projects will require a minimum of two days of class time to complete.

Activity	Pacing	Activity	Pacing
<b>Biographical Poems</b>		<b>Autobiographical Poems</b>	
“Jiving” . . . . .	90 minutes	“Fifth Grade Autobiography” . . . . .	45 minutes
“The Zeppelin Factory” . . . . .	135 minutes	“Primer” . . . . .	45 minutes
		“Grape Sherbet” . . . . .	45 minutes
		Assessment . . . . .	90 minutes

## Reading Strategies

Comparing and Contrasting, Making Inferences, Observing Literal and Implied Meaning, Making Connections, Determining Main Ideas and Details

## Materials Needed

- Chalkboard or whiteboard
- Student copies of Rita Dove’s poems (found at the end of this lesson)

- Student copies of the Poetry Glossary (found on page 199 of this Instructor's Guide)
- Collection of age-appropriate biographies
- Maps of the United States and Ohio
- Collection of illustrated storybooks for children

### Additional Resources

- (optional) Access to computers with word processing and printing capability
- (optional) Internet access
- (optional) The *Ohio Reading Road Trip* Instructional DVD/ videocassette, television monitor, DVD player, or VCR

## Prepare to Learn

### Explication

Looking for examples in a poem to support your ideas about what the poem might mean is called *explication*. A poem can contain more than one meaning, and students should understand that each meaning can be considered valid if they can successfully explicate it. In order to identify possible meanings and find support within a poem for our ideas, we must read carefully and study how connections can be made throughout the poem.

Distribute the Explicating Poetry handout (master available in this Guide on page 201) and lead students through the six-step explication process.

## Biographical Poems

### Pre-Reading

Tell students that, in the southern United States in the early 1900s, life was changing rapidly. The need for farm workers decreased in the South while demand for factory workers increased in the North. Many Southern African-Americans, including Rita Dove's grandparents, moved to larger cities in northern states to find work.

Dove's Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Thomas and Beulah* is a collection of poems that tell the story of her grandparents' lives. This makes the book a kind of biography. Define and discuss the term "biography" with your students. Like other biographies, this book moves in chronological order, beginning with poems about Thomas and Beulah's younger years.

### "Jiving"

A poem that appears in *Thomas and Beulah* before "Jiving" tells us that Thomas is traveling by riverboat from Wartrace, Tennessee, to Akron, Ohio. To establish context, have students find the answers to the following questions:

- What is the driving distance between Wartrace and Akron?  
(Answer: 560 miles)
- What route would a riverboat have taken from Tennessee to Ohio?  
(Answer: north on the Mississippi River, then north on the Ohio River)



### Reading Poetry Aloud

This lesson uses a three-voice approach to reading poetry. First, you will read the poem aloud. Before you begin, tell students to think carefully about the words and images, and to be aware of sonic qualities (such as rhythm, alliteration, and "hard" consonant sounds) that are easy to overlook when reading silently. After reading the poem aloud, give students time to read the poem silently, but ask them to "listen" to their own internal reading voice as they do so. Finally, ask a student to volunteer to read it aloud. This three-voice procedure is suggested for all poems in this lesson.



### "Jiving"

dimpling  
dingy  
jiving  
retreat  
stud

Definitions for these words can be found in the Poetry Glossary on page 199.

- What obstacles might Thomas have encountered during such a trip?
- How would someone have passed the time on the trip?

### Homework

Have each student choose a biography to read, either online or in the library.

### Write Now!

After students have read the biography of their choice (or an excerpt, in the case of a book), ask them to summarize the story they read in a paragraph.

Review the vocabulary words, and then read “Jiving” aloud using the three-voice method.

### Discussion Questions

- What biographical information does the poem give about Dove’s grandfather?
- What kind of person does he seem to be? Find evidence in the poem to support your answer.
- How do you think Thomas feels?
- Now connect this with “since what he’d been through” (line 13). Do you think Thomas is glad to leave his past behind? Why?
- What is the significance of the italics used in “*he sure plays / that tater bug / like the devil!*” (lines 18–20)? Why does the poet use italics here? (Possible answers: *These lines are in the voice of the ladies; this gives the flavor of dialect, or how people in a certain place or as members of a certain group express themselves.*)

## “The Zeppelin Factory”

### Research Activity

Organize students into small groups, and ask them to do one or both of the following:

- Research and compare modern blimps (often seen at sporting events) with the zeppelins of yesteryear.
- Select and research an aviation tragedy.

Ask each group to present a 5–10 minute summary of their research findings to the class.

Review vocabulary words, and then read the poem “The Zeppelin Factory” using the three-voice method.

### Imagery

Explain to students that words can create vivid images in the reader’s mind. This is why poets and other writers choose their words very carefully. Most mental pictures are created by words that appeal to the senses, so that we can almost see, hear, smell, feel, and taste much of what the poet wants us to experience.



### TECHNOLOGY LINK

Rita Dove introduces and reads “Jiving” and another poem, “Maple Valley Branch Library, 1967” on the Ohio Reading Road Trip Instructional DVD/videotape. Instruction for “Maple Valley Branch Library, 1967” can be found at <http://www.ohioreadingroadtrip.org/dove.html>

Archival footage about the migration from South to North by African Americans in the early 1900s can be found on the Ohio Reading Road Trip Instructional DVD/videocassette.



### TEACHING TIP

#### Reading Poetry Aloud

For practical tips about reading poetry aloud effectively, turn to page 184.



### VOCABULARY

#### “The Zeppelin Factory”

**dub**  
**hangar**  
**intact**  
**launch**  
**tow**  
**vacant**  
**zeppelin**

Definitions for these words can be found in the Poetry Glossary on page 199.

## Write Now!

Ask students to offer examples of sensory words. On the board, create a column for each category: Color, Shape, Taste, Sound, Smell, Touch, and Size. With students, brainstorm a list of words that fit each category.

Tell students to write poems of their own that use as many of the sensory words as they can. You may want to assign a minimum of two words from each category. This poem should be completed for homework.

## Discussion Questions

Read the first stanza in the poem aloud. Tell students that Thomas found work at the zeppelin factory in Akron, Ohio.

- Why do you think the image of a whale's belly is used to describe the blimp?
- Why are sparks flying off the joints?
- Why does Thomas want to cry?

Read the second and third stanzas.

- Summarize these stanzas in your own words. (*Possible answer: A powerful wind caused the Akron to fly out of control, dragging three of the workers with it. One of the workers died. Thomas was an eyewitness to this terrible tragedy.*)

Read the last stanza.

- What does "Thomas hiding / his heart with his hat" (lines 29–30) mean, literally?

## Literal and Implied Meaning

Think about the word "hiding." Ask students to volunteer reasons that they might hide themselves or their possessions. They will likely say they hide when they want to surprise someone, when they are afraid, when they don't want to go somewhere, or when they are embarrassed. They hide their possessions when they want to protect them from being broken or stolen.

Rita Dove could have chosen the word "covering" instead of "hiding." "Hiding," however, implies or suggests additional meaning, such as the reasons for hiding that the students offered. "Covering" does not have the same impact as "hiding" because it doesn't imply the urge to protect.

Now that students have been thinking about differences between words with similar meanings, ask them to think about the word "heart." Have students locate the dictionary definitions. Focus on these definitions: a muscular organ that contracts to circulate blood in the body; one's innermost feelings. Tell students that because Thomas is upset about the blimp accident, the poet probably wants us to think about the second definition of "heart" when reading these lines.

The last lines of this poem (*Big boy I know / you're in there*) are elusive. Allow students to brainstorm ideas about what they might mean.



## TECHNOLOGY LINK

The Ohio Reading Road Trip Instructional DVD/videocassette contains a segment on the U.S.S. Akron.



## TEACHING TIP

### Additional Resources

The following children's illustrated storybooks are useful for exploring the concept of imagery.

Baylor, Byrd. "Your Own Best Secret Place." Illus. by Peter Parnell. New York: Charles Scriber's, 1979.

Examples: "... tangle of shadowy thickets; damp leaf smell; sudden swoop of piñon jays; straight shafts of sunlight through the treetops; curled up like a fox . . ."

Warnock, Natalie Kinsey, "When Spring Comes." Illus. by Stacey Schuett. New York: Dutton Children's Books, 1993.

Examples: "... pour hot syrup, making swirls on the snow and we'll eat the waxy candy with grandma's sweet milk doughnuts and sour pickles; Canada Geese will fly north honking a long sad song; music of tree toads will fill the night . . ."

## Write Now!

Ask students to write a brief newspaper article describing the 1931 Akron airship disaster, using information found during their research. Remind them to look for details in the poem, such as how people in Akron felt about the blimp before the accident. Brainstorm possible headlines of the day and have students choose a headline for their article. Allow some time for volunteers to share during the next class, if desired.

## Autobiographical Poems

Students will study three poems with first-person speakers in this section of instruction. Because the poems deal with childhood and adolescence, students will likely respond well to them. Opportunities to write poems inspired by Dove's poems are presented. Instruction for three additional poems can be found at <http://www.ohioreadingroadtrip.org/dove.html> as well.

### Pre-Reading

Tell students that an autobiography is the story someone writes about his or her own life.

1. Ask students whether they have ever written an autobiography. Ask them to think of the kinds of memories that might be included in this type of writing. Perhaps they have made picture scrapbooks that tell a story of their childhood, or maybe they have written about a specific memory, such as learning to ride a bike or the first day of preschool or kindergarten.
2. Ask students to think about some of the experiences they had as children. The memories may be happy, sad, embarrassing, etc. Students are likely to recall having to share a room with a sibling where plenty of arguments over silly things occurred, or to recall experiences related to growing up as the oldest child, middle child, youngest child, or only child.
3. Brainstorm a list of memories that might be included in an autobiography. Create a list on the board of sample memories: the first day of school, losing a tooth, family gatherings, school activities, a pet, a childhood illness, learning to read, visiting grandparents, summer vacations, a favorite toy, etc. Title the list "Childhood Memories." Save this list.

In these poems, Rita Dove seems to describe specific moments from her own childhood. Remind students that while a poem may be obviously autobiographical, the speaker in the poem should be considered separate from the poet.



If students enjoyed this section of biographical poetry or would benefit from discussion of another poem from "Thomas and Beulah," visit <http://www.ohioreadingroadtrip.org/dove.html> for instruction for "Headdress."

## “Fifth Grade Autobiography”

Read “Fifth Grade Autobiography” using the three-voice method.

Tell students that the poem reads like a simple description of a snapshot or photograph. Even though we know it was written by Rita Dove, an adult, the speaker of this poem is a fifth grader. The speaker is looking at a photograph of herself (at age four), her older brother, and her grandparents. From the title, we can infer that she’s been given the assignment of writing her “fifth grade autobiography.” She is looking at old pictures—perhaps to jog her memory or because she’s been given this task as part of the autobiography assignment.

### Discussion Questions

- What can you tell about the speaker from her description of the photograph?
- Why is the speaker jealous when she says, “I am staring jealously at my brother; / the day before he rode his first horse, alone.” Can you find examples from the poem or memories from your own life that help explain these lines?

### Write Now!

Bring out the list of childhood memories that students compiled as a class. Ask students whether anything in the poem reminds them of their own childhood experiences. Ask students to take out a sheet of paper. Write the following questions on the board and review them to ensure understanding.

- What do you remember most about your childhood?
- Why do you think this memory has stayed with you?
- What places do you remember from when you were a young child? What people?

Ask each student to brainstorm on paper ideas that answer all or some of these questions. Students may want to write in sentences, create short lists, or even write lines of poetry.

### Write Now!

Tell students that they will now write a poem inspired by a childhood memory. Encourage them to use the list they have just generated and to look at old photographs, if possible. Ask them to write a poem about one strong memory. Suggest that they imitate Dove’s style. They might even want to choose a speaker who is younger than they are now. For example, the speaker might be a third grader who is remembering something that happened in kindergarten. The title of the poem should reflect the grade level of the speaker, if it is different from the writer’s. This poem should be completed for homework.



### “Fifth Grade Autobiography”

**flounce**  
**luminous**  
**squat**

Definitions for these words can be found in the Poetry Glossary on page 199.



Throughout this lesson, students will write several poems. To create chapbooks, or small, stapled booklets that feature final versions of the poems, use the template at <http://www.ohioreadingroadtrip.org/chapbook.html>

During the next class period, if desired, ask students to share their poems with the class and talk about how it feels to use details from their own lives. Students who base their poems on photographs should be encouraged to bring them to school to show classmates. Be sure to remind them to ask permission first.

## “Primer”

### Pre-Reading

Begin by telling students that the word *primer* is produced “prim´ ər” with a short-i sound.

Read “Primer” using the three-voice method. This poem employs a bit of rhyme, a quality students generally like. While students will probably respond first to the content of the poem, at some point, they should look more closely at its form. Encourage them to find the rhymes (*heel* and *deal*; *who* and *knew*). Then help them find examples of *assonance*, the repetition of vowel sounds that also gives a poem a sense of rhythm. (For example, the short “i” in “primer,” “skinny,” “sisters,” and “hissing”; and the long “i” in “size” and “survived.”)

Students will likely make personal connections to “Primer.” Begin the discussion with a general question such as, “What do you think about the poem?” or “How does this poem make you feel?” By making connections between poems and real life, we are able to look closely at the lines and truly respond to them.

### Discussion Questions

- Why do you think the speaker says, “I knew my body was no big deal”? What do you think she is feeling when she says this?
- In lines 8–11, the speaker’s mother rescues her from bullies. Is the speaker grateful to be rescued? What lines reveal how she feels?
- Why does the speaker refuse to get into the car?
- A primer is a small book used to introduce students to a particular subject. What kind of “primer” do you think this poem is about?

### Write Now!

Ask students to tell the events in “Primer” from one of the Gatlin sisters’ point of view. Ask them to imagine who these three girls are, how they act and talk to one another before chasing someone in the schoolyard or on the way home. Students may choose to write in either poetry or prose. This assignment should be completed for homework. During the next class period, if desired, allow time for discussion and the reading of some of the poems or paragraphs.



### “Primer”

**primer**  
**retort**  
**trod**

Definitions for these words can be found in the Poetry Glossary on page 199.



Additional instruction on the concept of point of view can be found on page 187.



## “Grape Sherbet”

### Pre-Reading

Brainstorm with students their experiences at family get-togethers that occur during the spring and summer. Ask them to share memories of family barbecues, picnics, and reunions.

- Is there one main cook or do several relatives share that role?
- What are your favorite family recipes or the most popular dishes and desserts?
- Do any of your relatives make a weird concoction or a secret recipe that they bring to family events?
- Have you ever eaten sherbet? How is it like ice cream? How is it different?

Read the poem using the three-voice method. Look at lines 3–4: “Dad appears with his masterpiece— / swirled snow, gelled light.” Imagine how you would feel on a hot day when sherbet is served for dessert. Remind students that comparisons using the words “like” or “as” are called similes. A metaphor is a direct comparison between two things. Review with students that metaphors use nouns, not adjectives, when making comparisons.

### Discussion Questions

- Why do you think the speaker chooses to compare sherbet to “swirled snow, gelled light?”
- Why does the poet compare sherbet to a miracle? (*Possible answer: The speaker doesn’t know how the sherbet was made: “The recipe’s / a secret.” Miracles cannot be explained logically or scientifically, so in this way, miracles are also secrets.*)

### Implied Meaning

Tell students to look at the line containing the metaphor of the grandmother: “The diabetic grandmother / stares from the porch, / a torch / of pure refusal.” (Be sure that students are aware that diabetics must control the amount of sugar they eat because, if they don’t, they can become very ill.) Ask them to visualize the metaphor “a torch of pure refusal,” perhaps even demonstrating how she might stand in the doorway and what her expression may be as she watches everyone else eat the sherbet. Point out that the word “torch” seems to imply a specific attitude toward her. Ask students to explain the metaphor by making connections between a torch (or a flame that is meant to provide light, heat, or guidance) and the grandmother.

- Why does the speaker say *the* diabetic grandmother as opposed to *our* diabetic grandmother?



### “Grape Sherbet”

**dollop**  
**masterpiece**  
**mound**  
**recipe**  
**sherbet**

Definitions for these words can be found in the Poetry Glossary on page 199.

- Point out that the verbs in the first and third stanzas are in the present tense: appears, cheer, fights, agrees, and stares. The second and last stanzas contain verbs in the past tense: galloped, named, thought, and bothered. What effect does this have on the reader? (Possible answer: *The shift in tense helps remind the reader that the speaker is recalling this childhood memory, reflecting on this specific time.*)

### Discussion Questions

Read the last stanza of the poem aloud to the class. Lines 22–25 refer to lines 9–12: the kids had spent the morning “galloping” in a cemetery.

- What is the setting of the poem in terms of both time and place? (Possible answer: *The poem is set in a cemetery on Memorial Day, a day when many families visit the graves of departed loved ones. The “grassed over mounds” and “stones” refer to graves.*)
- What is the situation at the beginning of the poem? (Possible answer: *“We thought no one was lying / there under our feet, / we thought it / was a joke” develops the idea that the children were not behaving respectfully, simply because they didn’t know better.*)
- Why do you think the speaker remembers this particular day? (Possible answer: *The speaker, an adult looking back on her childhood, may be mourning the loss of innocence, as if to say, once you realize the significance of a cemetery, you can never again think of it as a big park.*)
- How has the way the speaker thinks about her father’s homemade sherbet changed over time? (Possible answer: *As a child, the speaker may have thought her father could have saved a lot of time and energy by simply buying the sherbet in a grocery store. As children, we sometimes do not understand why adults do the things they do. It is later that we realize what actually motivated them.*)
- What does “I’ve been trying / to remember the taste, / but it doesn’t exist” mean? (Possible answers: *It’s been so long since her father made sherbet that she wouldn’t know it if she tasted it; the father may be gone now and she knows she can never eat the sherbet again.*)

### Group Writing

Arrange students in groups of three or four. Be sure students have their copies of Dove’s autobiographical poems with them. Ask students to summarize what they learned about the speaker’s childhood, through the eyes of the speaker of each poem.

Each group should find the main idea of each poem and specify the line or lines that best fit that main idea. Remind students that since the main idea is the “message” of the poem, sometimes it cannot be found by merely quoting the poem. As an example, review the class discussion of the main idea in one of the poems. Also review the process through which the class arrived at that main idea.

- Tell students that their essays must include details that support the main idea for each poem. Tell them also to write about implied meaning, point of view, imagery, use of similes and metaphors, and the significance of line breaks and titles.

### Differentiated Learning: Additional Instruction

If students have difficulty understanding the attitude that is conveyed by “torch,” then ask them to substitute other words or phrases, such as “statue” and “teddy bear.” Write these words on the board and record responses to the following questions. Ask them to talk about what image comes to mind with “statue” (that she stands very still, has little or no expression on her face, will not budge, is barely noticed by the other people) and “teddy bear” (that she is very friendly, people are comfortable with her there). Now return to “torch.” Compare and contrast the options.



Detailed instruction for three more autobiographical Rita Dove poems, “Flash Cards,” “Buckeye,” and “Maple Valley Branch Library,” appears at <http://www.ohioreadingroadtrip.org/dove.html>

- Be sure students quote the lines to which they refer completely and accurately, and cite line numbers in parentheses after each quote: “The day? Memorial. / After the grill / Dad appears with his masterpiece—” (lines 1–3).
- You may wish to have students type their essays.

### Group Project

Each group will create a project about one or more themes, such as:

- A paper chain of important lessons learned in childhood. Students cut construction paper slips and trace the various childhood lessons of the six poems in sequential order. After an oral presentation to the class, students hang the chain around classroom windows.
- A chapbook, or small booklet held together by staples, of original poems written by the students that reflect a theme found in Dove’s writing. Students might revise and include poems written throughout this lesson as well as write new ones. For a template that will help you create a chapbook, please visit the *Ohio Reading Road Trip* website at <http://www.ohioreadingroadtrip.org/dove.html>.

## Assessment

Each student will write an essay on a theme found in the poems studied in this lesson. Be sure students know that a theme is a statement a work makes that communicates something about human nature, the world, etc. Themes found in the poems studied in this lesson include:

- “normal” childhoods that contain both happy and sad times, as recalled later in life
- the strength of family relationships
- learning as a combination of hard work, wonder, and curiosity

Students may also generate their own themes. All essays should use specific examples from the poems and demonstrate understanding of the following terms: literal and implied meaning, point of view, imagery, simile, and metaphor. The students should also demonstrate that they understand the significance of line breaks and titles.

You should determine the length of this assessment based on the needs and skill levels of your students. You may also require students to define (or use in context) the vocabulary words from this lesson.



The Ohio Graduation Test’s 6-Point rubric found on page 183 can be used for assessment of writing skills. You should also evaluate the content of essays based on demonstrated proficiency with terms taught in this lesson, clarity of ideas, and accuracy in quoting the poems.