Love That Dog

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SHARON CREECH

Sharon Creech was born in South Euclid, Ohio, which is a suburb of Cleveland. She grew up in a large family—in fact, the character Mary Lou Finney's brothers in Creech's books *Walk Two Moons* and *Absolutely Normal Chaos* are named after and based off Creech's brothers. Throughout her childhood, her parents regularly took the family on road trips, once all the way to Idaho. It wasn't until college that Creech discovered literature and writing. She taught high school English and writing courses in England and Switzerland and eventually began writing her own novels for adults. But since writing her third book and her first book for kids, *Absolutely Normal Chaos*, Creech has written mostly for young readers. Creech and her husband have lived in England and the United States. She and her husband returned to the United States in 1998 and currently live in Maine.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Jack offers few clues as to when or where exactly he lives (and he shares nothing about what's going on in his wider world), but the way he mentions learning to type and use the computer suggest the novel takes place about the time it was written, in 2000 or 2001. Instead, *Love That Dog* serves as a primer on important 20th-century poets, with "The Tyger" by William Blake a notable exception (Blake is often grouped with Romantic poets and published "The Tyger" in his 1794 poetry collection, *Songs of Innocence and Experience*). Though Jack isn't entirely sold on the merits of William Carlos Williams's famous poem "The Red Wheelbarrow," critics of *Love That Dog* have noted that *Love That Dog* itself is written in a style very reminiscent of Williams's. Williams is most often associated with Imagist poets, whose poetry described everyday objects and happenings. Particularly early on in his career, Williams was also very concerned with using distinctly American language (rather than copying what he saw as stuffy British poetry conventions), and it's possible to see Jack's clearly childish writing style doing much the same thing. Jack's favorite poet, Walter Dean Myers, is actually better known for his young adult novels than for his poetry. But Myers, who died in 2014, advocated fiercely for more diversity in children's literature (his final published piece was an op-ed in *The New York Times* asking where all the nonwhite characters in children's literature were), and he also served as the National Ambassador for Young People's Literature in 2012 and 2013. During this time, he toured the U.S. extensively, visiting classrooms and encouraging kids to read.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Creech followed *Love That Dog* with a sequel, *Hate That Cat*, in 2008. It follows Jack through another year of school in Miss Stretchberry's class, this time as he learns to love a fat black cat. Within the novel itself, Miss Stretchberry introduces Jack and his classmates to various 20th-century poets, including William Carlos Williams ("The Red Wheelbarrow"), Robert Frost ("Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," "The Pasture"), Valerie Worth (Miss Stretchberry reads from her collection *Small Poems*), and most notably, Walter Dean Myers. Jack especially loves Myers's poem "Love That Boy," but Myers is better known for his young adult novels like *Monster* and *Scorpions*. Verse novels, particularly those intended for young readers, have exploded in popularity over the last several decades; other notable examples include *Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson, *The Crossover* by Kwame Alexander, and *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo. Jack's story also is one of many that traces a reluctant student's journey as they discover the joy of reading and writing. *The Wednesday Wars* follows a seventh-grade boy as he learns to love Shakespeare, while Norton Juster's classic novel *The Phantom Tollbooth* follows its protagonist's journey of learning to love the process of learning. Several of Sharon Creech's other books also deal with themes of grief and loss, most notably her Newbery-winning novel *Walk Two Moons*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Love That Dog
- **When Written:** 2000
- **Where Written:** Maine, United States
- **When Published:** 2001
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Children's Novel; Verse Novel
- **Setting:** Miss Stretchberry's classroom
- **Climax:** Jack reveals that the speeding blue car hit and killed Sky.
- **Antagonist:** The Blue Car
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Animal Shelters. While Jack tells readers that dogs that don't get adopted from his local animal shelter are euthanized, this has become way less common than it was when the novel was written. States still allow shelters to euthanize animals, but with many shelters shifting their focus to promoting spay-and-neuter programs (and offering these services at low or no cost

to some pet owners), the number of animals euthanized in municipal shelters has decreased dramatically.

Reading is Not Optional. As the National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, Walter Dean Myers adopted the slogan "Reading is Not Optional" to guide his work. Disturbed by the decreasing writing proficiency he noticed in fan mail from young readers, he sought to impress upon his audiences that reading isn't just a fun hobby—it's something, he believed, one must be able to do in order to be successful in the modern era.

PLOT SUMMARY

Jack is in Miss Stretchberry's class this school year, and he's indignant: he not only doesn't want to write poetry, but he can't. Also, the poems that Miss Stretchberry reads to the class, like the one about the red wheelbarrow and the one about the snowy woods, don't make any sense. But Jack agrees to try his hand at writing his own poems modeled after the ones Miss Stretchberry read. He writes poems about a speeding **blue car** with mud splatters on it, but he refuses to explain the car's significance. Grudgingly, he allows Miss Stretchberry to type up and display his poems about the blue car, but only if she doesn't put his name on them.

In November, Miss Stretchberry asks students to write poems about their pets. Jack doesn't have a pet and would like to make one up rather than write about the pet he used to have. He used to have a yellow dog, and he appreciates how Miss Valerie Worth's small poem about a dog perfectly captures how his dog used to lie down and snap at flies.

As Miss Stretchberry types up more of Jack's poems to display (but continues to not attribute them to him), Jack wonders if he's really writing poems—or if he and Mr. Robert Frost, who wrote the poems about a pasture and the snowy wood, were just "making a picture with words" and then someone typed it up and it looked like a poem. Jack's classmates think Jack's poems are real poems.

In January, Jack describes going to an animal shelter with his dad and adopting a yellow dog. The yellow dog seemed really thankful that Jack and his dad adopted him—the dogs who don't get adopted will be killed. When Miss Stretchberry asks to type up and display Jack's poem about adopting the dog, Jack says she can. But he asks her to leave off the bit about killing other dogs, since it's really sad.

After Miss Stretchberry reads the class a poem about "street music," Jack describes his quiet, suburban street. He and kids play in the street sometimes since there's not much traffic, but only if there are adults or big kids around to look out for cars. Despite signs asking cars to slow down, some cars still speed down Jack's street.

Next, Miss Stretchberry shows the class poems that look like what they describe, so a poem about a house, for instance, is shaped like a house. Jack writes a poem about his yellow dog that's shaped like his dog and lets Miss Stretchberry type it, as long as she prints it on yellow paper and copies his line spacing exactly. He also lets her put his name on it. It's a bit embarrassing when Jack's classmates compliment his poem. But Jack also asks Miss Stretchberry to pass on a message to a classmate who didn't put their name on a poem about a tree: Jack thinks it's a real poem and is also really good.

In March, Miss Stretchberry introduces students to Mr. Walter Dean Myers's poetry. Jack loves his work and even borrows one of Miss Stretchberry's books of Myers's poetry without asking. His favorite poem is "Love That Boy," since Jack's dad calls for Jack the same way the dad in the poem calls for his son. Both dads call their sons with, "*Hey there, son!*" and Jack used to call his dog, Sky, the same way. He'd say, "*Hey there, Sky!*" Jack writes a poem about playing ball with Sky in the street. He also writes one that borrows a lot of Myers's words, and since he doesn't want to make the poet mad, Jack asks Miss Stretchberry not to type that one up. However, Miss Stretchberry assures Jack that Myers wouldn't mind, especially since she put at the top of the poem that Jack was "inspired by" Walter Dean Myers.

Jack asks if Myers might visit Miss Stretchberry's classroom. After arguing for a bit, Jack agrees to write to the poet himself and ask him to visit. He's shocked, though, when Miss Stretchberry shares that it might take a long time to get a response. Jack tries to forget about his request, reasoning that Meyers will probably never write back; and he asks Miss Stretchberry to show him how to use the computer so he can start typing up his own poems.

In a poem called "MY SKY," Jack shares the story of how he and some other kids were playing outside with Sky one evening. Jack's dad got off the bus and waved, distracting Jack just as the blue car with mud splatters turned onto the other end of the street. The car hit Sky and then kept going. Jack's dad carried Sky onto the grass, where the dog died. Jack agrees that Miss Stretchberry can type up and put his poem on the bulletin board, but he's afraid he'll make his classmates really sad.

Jack gets the news that Mr. Walter Dean Myers has agreed to come to Jack's school; he has a friend in town he was planning to visit soon anyway. Jack is ecstatic. He and his classmates fill the bulletin board with their poems and display Myers's books, and Jack again asks Miss Stretchberry to hide his poem that was inspired by Myers. The visit is a success: Myers reads his own poems, reads students' poems, and even tells Jack that he'd be honored if students wrote poems that were inspired by his words. In a letter thanking Myers for his visit, Jack apologizes for his poem about Sky dying—he hopes it wasn't too sad—and says he included a poem that Myers inspired, titled "LOVE THAT DOG."

CHARACTERS

Jack – The protagonist of the novel, Jack is a student in Miss Stretchberry's class. He begins the novel disinterested in poetry and with no confidence in his own ability to write poetry, but over the course of the school year, Jack learns to love poetry and take pride in the poems he writes. Jack is inquisitive and critical. When Miss Stretchberry introduces poems that Jack doesn't like or understand, Jack picks apart why the poems are either nonsensical or are barely poems at all. It's not until Miss Stretchberry begins reading poems that speak to Jack's lived experience or that Jack finds funny that Jack's confidence begins to grow. It's also a huge moment for him when Miss Stretchberry introduces him to Walter Dean Myers's poems. Taking inspiration from the poems he reads in class, Jack writes his own poems that tell the story of adopting a dog named Sky—and Sky's tragic death when a **blue car** hits him. Though Jack worries these poems are too sad to share, sharing them with his class helps Jack process his grief. And once Jack does this, Jack is then able to focus on his excitement that he successfully wrote and asked Walter Dean Myers to visit and speak to his class. Myers's visit is extremely meaningful for Jack, and Jack ends the novel a far more confident, enthusiastic, and engaged student.

Miss Stretchberry – Miss Stretchberry is Jack's teacher. She makes a point to introduce her students to poetry, particularly famous 20th-century poets like Robert Frost and William Carlos Williams, and she also encourages her students to write their own poems. At first, Jack finds this ridiculous. But Miss Stretchberry proves to be a quietly supportive force in Jack's life. Gradually, she encourages him to try his hand at writing poems, first ones modeled after ones they've read in class and then poems that are entirely his own. She makes a point to type up students' poems and print them on colored paper, which, Jack discovers, make the poems look like "real" poems. Miss Stretchberry also types and displays Jack's poems anonymously for the first several months of school, which allows Jack to gain confidence in his work. Ultimately, she convinces him to let her put his name on the poems. In general, Miss Stretchberry is encouraging and kind: she tells Jack his poems are indeed poems, and she encourages Jack to write to Walter Dean Myers himself and invite the poet to visit their classroom. She does, however, have her faults: Jack is often annoyed when she doesn't replicate the spacing in his poems exactly.

Sky/The Yellow Dog – Sky, Jack's yellow dog, is deceased in the novel's present. But through his poems, Jack describes his strong, loving relationship with the dog, whom he and his dad adopted from an animal shelter. Sky was extremely affectionate—he'd give hugs and seemed to constantly be thanking Jack for adopting him. He was also an extremely slobbery dog, but Jack and the other kids who lived on Jack's street and played with Sky found this charming. Sky died sometime before the novel begins when a speeding **blue car** hit him, an event that Jack witnessed.

Walter Dean Myers – Walter Dean Myers (1937-2014) is a famous American author and Jack's favorite poet. Miss Stretchberry reads his poem "Love That Boy" to her class, and Jack adores the poem because the father in the poem calls to his son the exact same way that Jack's dad calls Jack: "*Hey there, son!*" Jack likes the poem so much that he writes his own poem that borrows the language and form of "Love That Boy," though when Jack discovers that Myers is still alive, he's distraught—he fears Myers might be mad at him for copying. However, with Miss Stretchberry's encouragement (and her insistence that Myers is kind), Jack eventually works up the courage to write to the poet and invite him to visit Miss Stretchberry's classroom. Myers does, and the experience is extremely meaningful for Jack. In addition to describing Myers's voice and laugh as warm, friendly, and the best he's ever heard, Jack is also thrilled when Myers reveals that he'd be honored if a student borrowed some of his words. Jack ultimately sends Myers his poem, which is titled "Love That Dog."

Robert Frost – Robert Frost (1874–1963) was a famous American poet and one that Miss Stretchberry introduces her students to. She reads her class "The Pasture" and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," neither of which Jack likes much or understands. Rather, Jack quips that if Robert Frost's poems describe cleaning out a spring or sitting in the woods watching the snow when the speaker readily admits he has other, more pressing things to do, Robert Frost must just have too much time on his hands.

Jack's Dad – Jack's dad appears in Jack's poems about life at home and about Sky. Jack and his dad appear to have a loving relationship: Jack loves Walter Dean Myers's poem "Love That Boy" so much because his dad calls to him just like the dad in the poem calls to his own son. It was Jack's dad's idea to adopt Sky, and he's there when the **blue car** hits Sky and Sky dies.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE MAGIC OF POETRY

The verse novel *Love That Dog* follows a young student, Jack, throughout his year in Miss Stretchberry's class. Miss Stretchberry makes a point to introduce her students to poetry, reading them poems by American poets like William Carlos Williams and Valerie

Worth. Jack begins the novel disinterested in poetry, particularly in writing it. However, with Miss Stretchberry's tutelage and encouragement, Jack makes several important discoveries: first, poetry doesn't have to be stuffy and boring. And second, poetry is accessible to anyone who wants to read it or write their own poems.

The novel takes the form of Jack's poetry journal, and through his weekly entries, readers follow Jack on his journey of learning to love poetry. As Jack reads classic 20th-century poems, he humorously begins to pick apart what makes a poem a poem. "The Red Wheelbarrow," a famously short poem, piques Jack's interest in part because of its form: its lines are, at most, three words, and so Jack reasons that anything can be a poem if one uses short lines. It also intrigues him because it leaves so much unsaid. Jack's willingness to ask questions about the poems—such as why the wheelbarrow matters so much, or why the speaker of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" stops to watch the snow when he has so much further to travel—is what brings the poems to life for him. Additionally, poems like Arnold Adoff's "Street Music" and Valerie Worth's collection *Small Poems* (which describe in verse common animals, like dogs and horses) show Jack that poems can be about everyday life. Jack explains in his journal, for instance, that her small poem about a dog perfectly captures how Jack's dog, Sky, used to behave. And as Jack makes these discoveries, he gradually reveals Sky's story through his own poems: how he and his dad adopted Sky, how much he loved Sky, and the heartbreaking story of a **blue car** hitting and killing Sky. Poetry, in this sense, not only gives Jack a vehicle through which to process his grief. He also comes to the conclusion that when one finds the right poet—in his case, Walter Dean Myers—poetry can bring joy to a person's life, make them feel seen and heard, and show them a new way to look at their world.

TEACHING AND MENTORSHIP

Though readers of *Love That Dog* hear only one voice (that of Jack, the child protagonist), his beloved teacher, Miss Stretchberry, nevertheless looms large over the novel. *Love That Dog* takes the form of Jack's school assignment: weekly entries in a poetry journal, in which he writes poems of his own and engages in one-sided conversations with Miss Stretchberry. (Her questions and responses to Jack are merely implied.) Over the course of Jack's time in Miss Stretchberry's class, the novel highlights the power a good, supportive teacher has: they can, as Miss Stretchberry does, instill confidence and curiosity in otherwise unengaged students. Jack begins the novel insistent that he not only doesn't *want* to write poetry, but that he *can't*. He writes at one point that "[he] tried / brain's empty." With her encouragement, though, Jack tries writing. At first, he insists what he writes aren't poems—they're just thoughts, with short lines. Gradually, though, Jack begins allowing Miss Stretchberry to type and display his poems, and eventually, he allows her to put his name on them. With Miss Stretchberry's quiet encouragement, then, Jack develops from a surly, disinterested student into one confident in his own abilities.

Additionally, Miss Stretchberry introduces Jack and his classmates to several 20th-century American poets. Many of them, like Robert Frost or William Carlos Williams, Jack doesn't like all that much. But when Miss Stretchberry introduces the class to Walter Dean Myers, Jack lights up. And with Miss Stretchberry's help and encouragement, Jack even helps arrange for the poet to visit his class. *Love That Dog* thus suggests that Miss Stretchberry's power as a teacher isn't just to show Jack what he's capable of—it's also to introduce Jack to other teachers and mentors who will continue to inspire and guide him.

ANIMALS AND GRIEF

While *Love That Dog* is primarily the story of how protagonist Jack learns to love poetry, the poems that Jack writes himself tell another story: that of Jack's relationship with his yellow dog, Sky. Through Jack and Sky's story, *Love That Dog* highlights the strength of the bond between people and animals—and the immense grief that comes when a beloved pet dies. Both, the novel insists, are worth celebrating and talking about, even if (as Jack fears) it can sometimes be immensely sad to do so. This sadness permeates nearly all of Jack's poems about Sky. His first poem explicitly about the dog, in which Jack and his dad go to an animal shelter to adopt Sky, describes dogs of various shapes and sizes in cages, leaping at the bars as though begging for someone to choose them. And in the poem's final lines, Jack bluntly notes that the dogs nobody chooses to adopt will be euthanized. Jack implies that Sky is one of the lucky ones, but that it's impossible to talk about Sky's adoption without acknowledging all the other dogs that will die rather than be adopted. Then, after describing happy times playing with a ball in the street with Sky—and after several cryptic poems describing a speeding **blue car** splattered with mud—Jack reveals that the blue car is significant because it hit and killed Sky. Sky may have been lucky to be adopted, but Jack discovers that luck isn't enough to protect a beloved pet from the dangers that lurk everywhere.

Interestingly, after writing his poem about Sky's death, Jack tells his teacher, Miss Stretchberry, that he doesn't want her to display the poem for the class—he fears it's too sad to share. This suggests that some of Jack's unwillingness to talk about losing Sky stems from a desire to protect others from uncomfortable emotions. However, Jack ultimately agrees to display his poem, and as a result, Jack's demeanor change dramatically. Suddenly, Jack is no longer cryptic, vague, or surly. Instead, he's focused entirely on his excitement about children's

author Walter Dean Myers's upcoming visit to his classroom. This shift in Jack's emotions and outlook suggests that he finds closure through sharing his and Sky's story with an audience, which highlights the value of talking and writing about sad subjects. Doing so, the novel suggests, can help a person move on and process their grief in a healthy way.

CONFIDENCE, PASSION, AND PRIDE

Throughout the year that Jack spends in Miss Stretchberry's classroom, his confidence and pride in his own work and abilities grows exponentially. This is something that *Love That Dog* attributes both to Miss Stretchberry's unwavering support and to the fact that Jack finds something (poetry, specifically the work of Walter Dean Myers) to be passionate about and work to emulate. It's not until Miss Stretchberry begins introducing poets whose poems resonate more with Jack that he starts to get excited about poetry. It's hard, he argues, to muster much enthusiasm about descriptions of a boring red wheelbarrow or a man sitting for questionable reasons in a snowy wood. It's much easier to get excited about a poem describing a recognizably noisy city, or a beloved dog, or one about an apple that is shaped like an apple. When Jack sees that poetry can describe his lived experience or entertain, rather than just portray a lifestyle that Jack knows nothing about, he grows interested in writing his own poems and believes that he's capable of doing so. Further, the novel traces Jack's growing pride in his own work: he initially refuses to let Miss Stretchberry type his poems at all, then lets her type them but without attributing them to him, and finally lets her attribute his poems to him. It's nice, Jack realizes, to have his classmates praise his work—it makes him feel like writing poetry is something he's actually good at and should keep doing. And ultimately, Jack develops enough confidence and passion for poetry to write to the poet Walter Dean Myers, inviting him to come speak to his class. Confidence and passion, this suggests, can make a person more willing to try new, scary things, like writing to a stranger and asking a favor.

Jack's growing confidence also has subtle—but nevertheless important—impacts on his classmates. At one point, he tells Miss Stretchberry that he really likes one of his classmate's poems. But he's sad that his classmate was unwilling to put their name on the poem, perhaps because they're nervous the poem isn't good. He asks Miss Stretchberry to please tell the student that he likes the poem and thinks it's really good, thereby helping another budding writer gain confidence. And this ripple effect, the novel suggests, is one of the most valuable consequences of gaining confidence in one's own abilities: it allows a person to then help others do the same.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE BLUE CAR

The blue car that Jack writes about in his poems represents his unresolved trauma. At first, the car's significance is a mystery: inspired by William Carlos Williams's poem "The Red Wheelbarrow," Jack writes that "so much depends upon" the blue car—but he refuses to say why for some time. Eventually, he reveals that sometime before the novel begins, the blue car sped down his street, hit and killed Jack's dog Sky, and then kept going. The blue car's regular appearances in Jack's poetry makes it clear that Jack is still grieving for Sky and is struggling to process watching his beloved pet die. Thus, it's significant when Jack finally switches to writing poems that *don't* include the blue car and instead are more commemorations of Sky. It suggests that finally, the blue car isn't as significant as it once was; having processed his grief, Jack can focus on remembering his time with Sky rather than fixating on Sky's tragic and unexpected death.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the HarperCollins edition of *Love That Dog* published in 2001.

Love That Dog Quotes

I don't understand
the poem about
the red wheelbarrow
and the white chickens
and why so much
depends upon
them.

If that is a poem
about the red wheelbarrow
and the white chickens
then any words
can be a poem.
You've just got to
make
short
lines.

Related Characters: Jack (speaker), Miss Stretchberry

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

Miss Stretchberry has introduced her class to "The Red Wheelbarrow" by William Carlos Williams, which is a famously short poem; Jack doesn't understand the poem's significance. However, Jack nevertheless demonstrates how to engage critically with a difficult poem: he asks questions, he admits he doesn't understand it, and he finds something to take away from the poem. In this case, Jack learns something about what makes a poem a poem in terms of form—it's line breaks and short lines that allow a person to call their writing a poem, not the poem's content. Even though Jack maintains that he doesn't understand or like "The Red Wheelbarrow" much throughout the novel, this takeaway nevertheless proves to be significant for him. Indeed, it helps Jack develop confidence as he experiments with writing his own poems, using short lines and lots of line breaks. It's also worth noting that critics of *Love That Dog* tend to mention that it's written in a style that mimics William Carlos Williams's style, so since the book itself is ostensibly Jack's poetry journal, it's possible to see that this poem influences Jack more than he realizes.

> What do you mean—
> *Why does so much depend*
> *upon*
> *a blue car?*
>
> You didn't say before
> that I had to tell *why*.
>
> The wheelbarrow guy
> didn't tell *why*.

Related Characters: Jack (speaker), Miss Stretchberry, Sky/The Yellow Dog

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

Jack has just written a poem, modeled after "The Red Wheelbarrow," that says that a lot "depends upon a blue car." Now, Miss Stretchberry has seemingly asked Jack to explain the significance of the car in his poem. Jack's indignant response suggests that ideally, he'd like to be able to be more like Williams Carlos Williams. As Jack suggests here, Williams, "The wheelbarrow guy," didn't say *why* the wheelbarrow matters so much (that ambiguity is, in fact, part of what makes the poem so compelling—there are a variety of readings).

Initially, it's possible and easy to read Jack's unwillingness to explain the car's significance as run-of-the-mill unwillingness to do something more difficult; explaining why something matters requires higher-level learning than simply saying that something matters in the first place. However, as the novel progresses, Jack's reticence begins to make more sense: he doesn't want to discuss the blue car's significance because he doesn't want to address the trauma he suffered when this blue car hit and killed Jack's beloved dog, Sky. For now, he's willing to write about the car—a sure sign he's still processing his grief—but he doesn't yet trust Miss Stretchberry with the truth, and he doesn't want to go a step further and address his grief in a way that will help him start to heal.

> I am sorry to say
> I did not really understand
> the tiger tiger burning bright poem
> but at least it sounded good
> in my ears.

Related Characters: Jack (speaker), Miss Stretchberry

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Jack is telling Miss Stretchberry what he thinks of William Blake's poem "The Tyger," which she recently read to Jack's class. As with previous poems, Jack doesn't entirely grasp what the poem is about or why it's important. But with this one, Jack appreciates its rhythm and rhyme scheme: it's fun to recite and listen to, and so he likes it a whole lot better than he does, for instance, William Carlos Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow." With this, Jack starts to discover that there are many different ways to appreciate a poem, and it doesn't necessarily need to make sense for a poem to be worth appreciating. "The Tyger," in fact, is about God and religious mysteries, but as Jack explains here, he doesn't need to fully grasp the meaning of every line to like how it sounds when Miss Stretchberry reads it aloud.

Also worth noting here is how much Jack's words mirror another poem of William Carlos Williams's, one that Jack doesn't mention explicitly: "This Is Just To Say." The title

forms the first line of the poem, which goes on to say that the speaker has eaten plums that someone left in the icebox. Once again, even if Jack hasn't enjoyed or understood Williams's poems, they nevertheless influence his writing style.

> They look nice
> typed up like that
> on blue paper
> on a yellow board.
>
> (But still don't tell anyone
> who wrote them, okay?)

Related Characters: Jack (speaker), Miss Stretchberry

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

Jack has agreed to let Miss Stretchberry type and display several of his poems about the blue car, but he asked her to not attribute them to him. This shows how Jack is gaining confidence in his own writing abilities, as well as developing trust in his teacher. He believes, on some level, that his poems about the blue car are indeed poems worth sharing; this is why he allows Miss Stretchberry to type and display them. This is because behind the scenes, Miss Stretchberry seems to be encouraging Jack to keep trying and experimenting with poetry. As she continues to presumably praise and encourage him, Jack's ability and his confidence grows. Still, though, he has a long way to go: he's not willing to put his name on the poems and allow his classmates to learn that he's the poet. He's still self-conscious about his attempts, and to her credit, Miss Stretchberry allows him to work through this discomfort on his own time. Eventually, Jack allows Miss Stretchberry to put his name on his poetry, signaling that he has at that point become confident enough to let his classmates know that he can and does write poetry.

> and especially I liked the dog
> in the dog poem
> because that's just how
> my yellow dog
> used to lie down,
> with his tongue all limp
> and his chin
> between
> his paws
> and how he'd sometimes
> chomp at a fly
> and then sleep
> in his loose skin,
> just like that poet
> Miss Valerie Worth
> says,
> in her small
> dog poem.

Related Characters: Jack (speaker), Miss Stretchberry, Sky/The Yellow Dog, Robert Frost

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

Jack is describing his favorite of poet Valerie Worth's "small poems." He's referring to her volume of poetry *Small Poems*, a children's collection that describes various animals and objects in verse. In Jack's poem, the word "small" is in a much smaller font size than the rest of the poem.

First, it's important to note that Jack likes this poem so much because it reminds him of something he knows well: his yellow dog. This suggests that one of the reasons he doesn't connect so much with the poems Miss Stretchberry read previously, such as Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and William Carlos Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow," is because the things they talk about are so far outside of Jack's lived experience. Jack has never driven a horse through a snowy wood or thought much about a wet red wheelbarrow; he's living in the late 1990s or early 2000s, when the book was written, and he explains later that he lives on a quiet suburban street. The rural, rustic, pre-car life that Williams and Frost describe simply doesn't hold Jack's interest in the same way that a poem about a dog doing normal dog stuff does.

This is also the first time that Jack mentions his yellow dog at all. This speaks both to how much he likes Worth's poem and to how much he now trusts Miss Stretchberry with what turns out to be important information about Jack's

past. Jack later reveals that Sky died when a car hit him, and that this is why Jack has thus far refused to talk about his dog, even when Miss Stretchberry asked the class to write poems about their pets. When asked out of the blue several weeks ago to talk about his pet, Jack saw no good reason to do so. Now, though, he's had a few more weeks to get to know and trust Miss Stretchberry, and with Worth's poem to guide him, Jack is ready to talk about how much his dog is like the one Worth describes in her small poem.

> I guess it does
> look like a poem
> when you see it
> typed up
> like that.
>
> But I think maybe
> it would look better
> if there was more space
> between the lines.
> Like how I wrote it
> the first time.

Related Characters: Jack (speaker), Miss Stretchberry

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

Jack lets Miss Stretchberry type up what Jack wrote describing how his yellow dog, Sky, is a lot like the one poet Valerie Worth describes in one of her small poems. Jack didn't consider what he wrote a poem, but when he sees it typed up, he realizes that at least to an outsider, it sure looks like a poem. With this, he continues to expand his understanding of what makes a poem a poem: in part, it simply has to do with whether the poem looks like what Jack thinks a poem should look like. Even if Jack doesn't necessarily think the poem's content makes a good, real poem, it looks like one—so for now, that's enough for him.

Further, Jack shows that he's gaining confidence in his writing abilities and creative intuitions. When he suggests his poem would look better with more generous line spacing, he's asking Miss Stretchberry essentially to respect his artistic choices. Doing this is one way Jack demonstrates that he cares and that he believes his ideas and opinions have value—if he didn't think his opinion mattered, he wouldn't ask Miss Stretchberry several times over the following weeks and months to please copy his line spacing exactly as he's requested. He's asserting that he's the writer and should get to make these choices.

> And you said that
> Mr. Robert Frost
> who wrote
> about the pasture
> was also the one
> who wrote about
> those snowy woods
> and the miles to go
> before he sleeps—
> well!
>
> I think Mr. Robert Frost
> has a little
> too
> much
> time
> on his
> hands.

Related Characters: Jack (speaker), Miss Stretchberry, Robert Frost

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

When Miss Stretchberry reads the class Robert Frost's "The Pasture," a poem about a man going out to clean a spring and bring in a calf, Jack is beside himself. He doesn't like or understand the poem, and he thinks that Robert Frost simply has "too much time" if he seemingly has the time to sit around and gaze at the natural world. However humorous Jack's response is, it also reflects his concerns and his priorities when it comes to poetry. Jack prefers poems that describe his lived experience. And because Jack lives in the modern world, on a suburban street, and seems to have not spent much (or any) time on farms or sitting quietly in the woods, the world Frost portrays in his poems is entirely unfamiliar to him. It's possible to argue, though, that reading this poetry is still valuable to Jack as he learns more about poetry and its conventions: indeed, Jack uses language from Frost's poems multiple times as he describes the speeding blue car. Further, it's also important that Jack learn what kind of poetry he doesn't like—this gives him the impetus to keep searching for the poems he *does* like.

And maybe
that's the same thing
that happened with
Mr. Robert Frost.
Maybe he was just
making pictures with words
about the snowy woods
and the pasture—
and his teacher
typed them up
and they *looked* like poems
so people thought
they were poems.

Like how you did
with the blue-car things
and reading-the-small-poems thing.

Related Characters: Jack (speaker), Miss Stretchberry, Robert Frost

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

Jack begins to wonder if perhaps William Carlos Williams and Robert Frost didn't set out to be poets—if instead, teachers or other mentors took the men's writing and made it look enough like poetry to convince people that's what it was. Once again, Jack remains set in his understanding of what makes a poem a poem: it has to look like one, which to him means it uses line breaks. A poem's content, on the other hand, isn't so important. This helps Jack appreciate these poets' work more, since he's not sold on the poems' content at all. In fact, he finds both poets' work almost impossible to understand or appreciate, since what they describe in their poems is so far outside of Jack's lived experience. (The poems the book uses from these two poets overwhelmingly describe a more rural life, something that Jack implies is foreign to him.)

Additionally, deciding that looking like a poem makes a piece of writing a poem helps Jack better appreciate his own work. Miss Stretchberry has now typed up several of Jack's musings or poems modeled after other poets' work. Initially, Jack doesn't consider anything he wrote to be poetry. But when Jack sees his words typed and on the bulletin board, Jack concedes that Miss Stretchberry is right: he is writing poetry. As Jack makes this connection, he gradually becomes more confident in his own abilities and becomes increasingly willing to try new things as he tries his hand at writing various types of poems.

And we did.
We chose him.

And in the car
he put his head
against my chest
and wrapped his paws
around my arm
as if he were saying
Thank you thank you thank you.

And the other dogs
in the cages
get killed dead
if nobody chooses them.

Related Characters: Jack (speaker), Sky/The Yellow Dog, Jack's Dad

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

Seemingly unprompted, Jack has written a poem about going to the animal shelter with his dad and adopting Sky, his yellow dog. This is the end of the poem. What's particularly noteworthy here is the fact that Jack hints at two very different but related ideas here: that Sky is a lucky dog to have been adopted, and that he can't acknowledge Sky's good fortune without also acknowledging all the other dogs who aren't going to be so lucky. This forms the basis of the novel's understanding of how animals, particularly pets, interact with their human families: having a pet can bring a lot of joy to one's life (and to one's pet), but having a pet is still something that can be heartbreaking for a variety of reasons. And those reasons can range from the fact that pets like cats and dogs don't live as long as people do, to the sad truth that plenty of animals don't get adopted out of shelters each year. So, even this happy poem about bringing home a dog who goes on to bring a lot of joy to Jack's life, is somewhat sad.

Yes
you can type up
what I wrote
about my yellow dog
but leave off the part
about the other dogs
getting killed dead
because that's too sad.

And don't put
my name
on it
please.

And maybe
it would look good
on yellow paper.

And maybe
the title
should be
YOU COME TOO.

Related Characters: Jack (speaker), Miss Stretchberry, Sky/The Yellow Dog

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 28-29

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Jack is giving Miss Stretchberry permission to type up his poem about adopting Sky from an animal shelter—but he has some requests and caveats if she's going to do so. First, more of Jack's personality shines through here when he asks her to leave out the part about shelter dogs being euthanized if nobody adopts them. His concern is that he doesn't want to make people sad, which highlights how much he cares about others. For now, he wants the poetry that he shares with his classmates to be happy (or ambiguous; it's arguable that all of Jack's poems about the blue car are actually really sad, since the blue car hit and killed Sky).

Then, Jack goes on to take more artistic license when he asks Miss Stretchberry to print his poem on yellow paper and give it this specific title. Prior to this, Jack mostly hasn't titled his poems, and the book never specifies if Miss Stretchberry comes up with titles for Jack's poems when she types and prints them. Asking for more control over his work is one way that Jack demonstrates his confidence. He's confident enough in what he likes and how he wants his poem to look to feel good asking Miss Stretchberry to follow his lead on these things. Still, he's not quite ready to confidently assert to his classmates that he's a poet, as evidenced by his asking Miss Stretchberry to not include his name.

At both ends
of our street
are yellow signs
that say
Caution! Children at Play!
but sometimes
the cars
pay no attention
and speed down
the road
as if
they are in a BIG hurry
with many miles to go
before they sleep.

Related Characters: Jack (speaker), Sky/The Yellow Dog

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 33-34

Explanation and Analysis

After reading a poem about "street music" by Arnold Adoff, Jack describes his own street and how he and neighborhood kids sometimes play in the street. Though Jack doesn't mention the speeding blue car outright, this is the first time that he really starts to set the scene for the car to later speed through and hit and kill Sky. Describing the cars that sometimes ignore the signs warning them that there are kids around creates a sense of foreboding: it suggests that it's just a matter of time until one of those cars hurts or kills someone. Further, Jack alludes to the blue car and how he's described it before when he mentions the "many miles" the cars have to go "before they sleep." This borrows several lines from Robert Frost's poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," a poem that Jack has regularly borrowed language from to describe the speeding blue car.

Generally speaking, the fact that this poem is a response to Adoff's poem highlights again the power of poetry. When Jack reads a poem he likes, he excitedly explains in verse

why he likes it and how it reminds him of (or how it compares to) his lived experience. So, while Adoff's street was loud and bustling (Adoff was describing the middle of a big city), Jack still responds to the recognizable descriptions of city life and takes the opportunity to describe his (usually) quiet, suburban street.

> That was so great
> those poems you showed us
> where the words
> make the shape
> of the thing
> that the poem
> is about—
> like the one about an apple
> that was shaped like an apple
> and the one about the house
> that was shaped like a house.
>
> My brain was pop-pop-popping
> when I was looking at those poems.
> I never knew a poet person
> could do that funny
> kind of thing.

Related Characters: Jack (speaker), Miss Stretchberry, Sky/The Yellow Dog

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

Miss Stretchberry recently introduced Jack's class to concrete poems, which are poems written in the shape of whatever they're about. The apple poem Jack describes here was written by S. C. Rigg, which is a pseudonym that *Love That Dog*'s author, Sharon Creech, sometimes uses. Learning about concrete poetry is a huge turning point for Jack. Prior to this, even though Jack has been able to appreciate some poems, he's generally found poetry to be pretty stuffy, or at least not humorous. Now, he sees that poetry can be funny—at least, he finds it silly and satisfying to read a poem about an apple that's in the shape of an apple. Poets, Jack learns, don't have to follow a bunch of stuffy rules in order to be able to call their work poetry: they can break those rules, say something humorous or lighthearted, and still call what they produce poetry. This inspires Jack to take a more fun approach to his own poems; indeed, he goes on to write a concrete poem about his dog Sky. The poem is decidedly charming—Sky is slobbering and wagging his tail—and it demonstrates Jack's newfound willingness to try new things and explore all that's possible when it comes to poetry.

> But I want to know
> who is the
> anonymous poet
> in our class
> who wrote that
> and why didn't
> he
> or
> she
> want to put
> his or her name
> on it?
> Was it like me
> when I didn't think
> my words
> were
> poems?
>
> Maybe you will tell
> the anonymous tree poet
> that his or her tree poem
> is really
> a poem
> really really
> and a good poem, too.

Related Characters: Jack (speaker), Miss Stretchberry

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39-41

Explanation and Analysis

When Miss Stretchberry displays students' poems on the classroom wall, Jack is immediately taken with a concrete poem about a tree. This passage reveals just how far Jack has come in the months he's been in Miss Stretchberry's class. He recognizes that he began the year unwilling to write poems, unwilling to call anything he wrote a poem, and then he spent a lot of time unwilling to put his name on any of his poems. Jack's mindset at the beginning of the year illustrates his lack of confidence: he wasn't certain he was writing good poetry (or that he was writing poetry at all), and he feared that his classmates wouldn't like or appreciate his work.

Now, though, Jack is more confident in his own abilities, and he's beginning to pay that forward. He has the maturity to understand that perhaps—hopefully—this student is going to follow the same path that he did. This student poet might be self-conscious now and worried that they're not writing real poetry—but in Jack's opinion, they're doing a fantastic job. By asking Miss Stretchberry to pass along his praise to the poem's author, Jack turns into a mentor for his own classmates, helping them make some of the same discoveries he has and develop confidence in their own abilities along the way.

> I sure liked that poem
> by Mr. Walter Dean Myers
> called
> "Love That Boy."
>
> Because of two reasons I liked it:
> One is because
> my dad calls me
> in the morning
> just like that.
> He calls
> *Hey there, son!*
>
> And also because
> when I had my
> yellow dog
> I loved that dog
> and I would call him
> like this—
> I'd say—
> *Hey there, Sky!*
>
> (His name was Sky.)

Related Characters: Jack (speaker), Sky/The Yellow Dog, Walter Dean Myers, Jack's Dad

Related Themes:

Page Number: 44-45

Explanation and Analysis

Jack is explaining to Miss Stretchberry why he likes Walter Dean Myers's poem "Love That Boy" so much. His main reason mirrors the reasons he's liked other poems in the past: "Love That Boy" portrays something that Jack himself has experienced. In this case, that experience is his dad addressing him in this very specific manner. Coming across this recognizable thing in a poem makes Jack feel seen and heard. Then, Jack reveals a second reason the poem resonates with him: he describes calling for his dog Sky in the same way his dad called for him. This begins to flesh out Sky and Jack's relationship: Jack loved the dog in much the same way, he implies, as the father in Myers's poem loves his son and as Jack's dad loves Jack. Crucially, this is also the first time that Jack shares Sky's name with Miss Stretchberry and the reader; prior to this, he's just called the dog his "yellow dog." This shows how, as Jack discovers more poetry that speaks to him, he becomes increasingly willing to divulge things that he seems to have considered private before. And as Jack shares more about Sky specifically, he begins to address and recover from the trauma of watching Sky die before his eyes.

> And when us kids
> were playing outside
> kicking the ball
> he'd chase after it
> and push it with his nose
> push push push
> and getting slobber
> all over the ball
> but no one cared
> because he was such
> a funny dog
> that dog Sky
> that straggly furry
> smiling
> dog
> Sky.

Related Characters: Jack (speaker), Sky/The Yellow Dog

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

Jack describes a happy afternoon spent outside, playing in the street with neighborhood kids and Sky, kicking a ball around. On the surface, Jack's poem is really happy: it's clear that Jack, his friends, and Sky are all having a fantastic time. Sky is making everyone laugh with his antics, and his disgusting slobber isn't even enough to put a damper on things. However, within the context of the novel, the poem is far more bittersweet. Readers know that Jack no longer

has Sky, though at this point, it's not entirely clear what happened to him. However, Jack has also written multiple poems about a speeding blue car, and he's used some of the same imagery to describe how some cars ignore signs at either end of Jack's street warning drivers to slow down. They speed down Jack's street anyway, establishing a sense of foreboding—it seems almost inevitable that these happy times playing in the street will eventually end in tragedy, if they haven't already. While these happy times happen and are certainly still possible, then, the book on the whole illustrates how tenuous and temporary this happiness can be.

❝ Yes, you can type up
what I wrote about
my dog Sky
but don't type up
that other secret one
I wrote—
the one all folded up
in the envelope
with tape on it.
That one uses too many of
Mr. Walter Dean Myers's
words
and maybe
Mr. Walter Dean Myers
would get mad
about that.

Related Characters: Jack (speaker), Miss Stretchberry, Sky/The Yellow Dog, Walter Dean Myers

Related Themes:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

Though Jack gives Miss Stretchberry permission to type and display a poem he wrote about playing with Sky, Jack is concerned that another poem he wrote might offend his new favorite poet, Walter Dean Myers. The poem in question is presumably the one that Jack reveals at the end of the novel, "LOVE THAT DOG."

Jack's admiration of Walter Dean Myers is palpable in this passage. At this point, Jack doesn't even know if Myers is alive or deceased, and yet he's intent on making sure he doesn't do anything to offend someone he admires deeply. This again highlights how caring Jack is; he wants people to be happy and fulfilled, and if he can make someone feel good, he'd like to do that. This mirrors how earlier in the novel, he asked Miss Stretchberry to leave out sad parts of a poem: he doesn't want to sadden his readers, just as he doesn't want to offend Myers.

Still, it's also clear that Jack's main focus is his love for Meyers's poetry. The secret poem he writes borrows almost word for word Meyers's poem "Love That Boy," subbing in only a couple words to make the poem about Jack's dog Sky rather than about the speaker's human son. Jack's youth and naivete shines through in this sense: whether students are borrowing from professional artists' artwork or professional poets' poems as they learn how to make their own work, this is generally considered an acceptable way to learn. His desire to not copy is noble, of course, but in his admiration of Myers, he humorously takes it a bit further than he really needs to.

❝ And thank you
for typing up
my secret poem
the one that uses
so many of
Mr. Walter Dean Myers's
words
and I like what
you put
at the top:
Inspired by Walter Dean Myers.

Related Characters: Jack (speaker), Miss Stretchberry, Sky/The Yellow Dog, Walter Dean Myers

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

Miss Stretchberry has just typed up a poem Jack wrote about Sky, in addition to a secret poem that Jack initially asked her not to type up. That secret poem is presumably "LOVE THAT DOG," a poem that borrows heavily from Myers's poem "Love That Boy" and which Jack only shares with readers at the end of the novel.

The simple fact that Jack is thankful that Miss Stretchberry typed up his poem speaks volumes about how much he trusts and appreciates his teacher. Miss Stretchberry seems to have understood that Jack's initial unwillingness to share

the poem had more to do with simply being nervous about offending Walter Dean Myers than anything else; thus, she knew that adding that Jack was "*Inspired by Walter Dean Myers*" at the top was going to fix that problem. This highlights how caring a teacher Miss Stretchberry is, as she's spent the last several months getting to know Jack, encouraging him, and showing him what he's capable of.

Then, that Jack borrowed so heavily from Myers's poem in the first place points to the idea that, thanks to Miss Stretchberry introducing him to Myers's poetry, Jack has found a new idol and mentor. Jack really likes Myers's poetry, and so he goes out of his way to study Myers's work and figure out how to replicate it. Reworking one of Myers's poems, as Jack does in his secret poem, is one way that students can learn and explore what makes those poems what they are. It thus prepares Jack to write even better poetry than he already has by teaching him more about how poetry works.

> I don't agree
> that Mr. Walter Dean Myers
> might like to hear
> from a boy
> who likes his poems.
>
> I think Mr. Walter Dean Myers
> would like to hear
> from a teacher
> who uses big words
> and knows how
> to spell
> and
> to type.

Related Characters: Jack (speaker), Miss Stretchberry, Walter Dean Myers

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

Miss Stretchberry is encouraging Jack to write to poet Walter Dean Myers and invite him to visit their classroom. Jack, however, isn't convinced that he's the right person for this job. This represents a crisis of confidence for Jack: he's more confident in his poetry and is pretty comfortable writing for Miss Stretchberry. But when it comes to writing to Myers, Jack's idol, Jack freezes up. As far as he's concerned, being a fan isn't enough to justify writing and taking up Myers's time. It's worth noting that Myers, who was alive at the time *Love That Dog* was published, was vocal about appreciating fan mail from kids like Jack. Particularly in the decade after *Love That Dog* was published, Myers made a point to visit classrooms, particularly those in underserved communities. This background information suggests that Miss Stretchberry is correct: Myers *would* like to hear from a kid like Jack, no matter Jack's supposed faults. It's up to Miss Stretchberry, then, to convince Jack that she's right, which she ultimately does.

This passage also sets Jack up to tackle the next step in his education journey: learning to use the computer and type. He identifies typing here as something that he should learn how to do if he wants people to take him seriously, and it's not long after this that he asks Miss Stretchberry to teach him how.

> Maybe you could
> show me
> how to use
> the computer
> and then
> I could type up
> my own words?

Related Characters: Jack (speaker), Miss Stretchberry

Related Themes:

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

While Jack and Miss Stretchberry wait for a response from Walter Dean Myers, Jack asks Miss Stretchberry to teach him to type. This represents a major turning point for Jack, for several reasons. First, Jack has spent much of the novel imploring Miss Stretchberry to copy his line spacing exactly when she types up his poems, something she hasn't always been able to do to Jack's satisfaction. Those requests represented Jack trying to assert creative authority over his poems. But it's not until now, when Jack asks to learn how to type his own poems, that he's able to fully bring his ideas to life exactly the way he wants to. This highlights his growing confidence. Then, Jack also previously identified being able to type as something that, in his mind, makes a person more authoritative and worth taking seriously. So, by asking to learn to type, Jack again shows how his confidence is growing. He's no longer content to sit by while

adults like Miss Stretchberry make all the choices; now, Jack is ready to make his own decisions.

> And I saw Sky
> going after the ball
> wag-wag-wagging
> his tail
> and I called him
> "Sky! Sky!"
> and he turned his
> head
> but it was too late
> because the
> *blue car blue car*
> *splattered with mud*
> hit Sky
> *thud thud thud*
> and kept on going
> in such a hurry
> so fast
> so many miles to go
> it couldn't even stop

Related Characters: Jack (speaker), Sky/The Yellow Dog

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 70-71

Explanation and Analysis

In a poem that Jack types himself, Jack finally reveals why he doesn't have Sky anymore: the blue car hit Sky, killing the dog. Writing this poem is big for Jack, as he's spent the entirety of the novel up to this point refusing to say exactly why he and his family no longer have Sky. The poem reveals that Jack has been trying to process the trauma of seeing his beloved dog die for some time. The fact that Jack has been writing poems about the blue car that hit Sky (without saying why the blue car was important) also suggests that Jack has been trying to process his grief, and that the car itself symbolizes Jack's unresolved trauma. It's not until now, when Jack puts all the pieces together to reveal exactly what happened, that Jack is able to move on. This highlights the power poetry has to help people process their grief in a healthy way.

It's also worth noting that this poem brings together many of the poems that have inspired Jack's own writing. The repetition when Jack writes "blue car blue car / splattered with mud" is a nod to when Jack wrote a poem about the blue car based on William Blake's poem "The Tyger," which employs a similar meter. And noting that the car had "so many miles to go" borrows a line from Robert Frost's poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," one that Jack says he doesn't like much but nevertheless borrows language from throughout the novel. That Jack borrows these things from famous poems helps readers trace Jack's educational journey: he's learning to bring together elements from different sources and turn them into something totally his own.

> I don't know.
> If you put it on the board
> and people read it
> it might make them
> sad.

Related Characters: Jack (speaker), Miss Stretchberry, Sky/The Yellow Dog

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

When Miss Stretchberry asks to display Jack's poem about the blue car hitting and killing Sky, Jack is hesitant: he doesn't want to upset his classmates with his poem. This first shows more of Jack's character; he's kind and compassionate, and he doesn't want to make people feel bad if it's at all possible to do so. Instead, he'd prefer to keep his grief to himself (and allow Miss Stretchberry to witness it), something that he seems to characterize as the kinder thing to do. However, the novel on the whole supports Miss Stretchberry's position, that it's perhaps better and healthier to share one's emotions with others. Indeed, this is ultimately how Jack is able to move on from his grief, as he doesn't begin to move away from writing about the blue car and Sky's death until after he does share this poem with his classmates. And on the whole, the novel takes the position that pets are wonderful—but having a pet nevertheless has the potential to be extremely heartbreaking, if only because pets don't tend to live as long as their human owners do. And talking or writing about a pet's death, the novel suggests, is one way grieving owners can process their

sadness in a healthy way.

> The bulletin board
> looks like it's
> blooming words
> with everybody's poems
> up there
> on all those
> colored sheets of paper
> yellow blue pink red green.
>
> And the bookcase
> looks like it's
> sprouting books
> all of them by
> Mr. Walter Dean Myers
> looking back at us
> [...]

Related Characters: Jack (speaker), Walter Dean Myers

Related Themes:

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

Jack describes the preparations his classmates and Miss Stretchberry have made in advance of poet Walter Dean Myers's visit to the classroom. Jack's excitement shines through in this passage: he's finally found a poet he loves and admires, and he's so excited to meet his idol. This highlights the power of identifying people like Myers; as Jack shows here, having someone like Myers to look up to not only makes life more exciting, but also can inspire kids like Jack and his classmates to try their best in an attempt to impress the poet.

Jack's language is also interesting here. He began the novel not using much figurative language; his early poems were extremely short and to the point. But here, he employs similes (the bulletin board looking like it's "blooming words" and the bookshelf looking like it's "sprouting books") to help convey just how prolific he and his classmates have been as they write their poetry. The specific language Jack uses is also important: "blooming" and "sprouting" suggest growth and change, highlighting that Jack and his classmates are growing up and maturing into poets in their own right. Jack himself has gone from something of a boring, undeveloped seed—something with potential—to a fully-formed young poet, "blooming" and putting beautiful poems into the world, just as a plant in its prime might produce flowers.

> All of my blood
> in my veins
> was bubbling
> and all of the thoughts
> in my head
> were buzzing
> and
> I wanted to keep
> Mr. Walter Dean Myers
> at our school
> forever.

Related Characters: Jack (speaker), Miss Stretchberry, Walter Dean Myers

Related Themes:

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

After poet Walter Dean Myers visits Jack's classroom, Jack describes how wonderful it was to hear Myers speak. Once again, Jack's excitement and admiration for the poet shines through in this passage, highlighting the novel's insistence that it's essential for aspiring young writers to find someone like Myers to admire. It wasn't until Jack discovered Myers's poetry that his own willingness to write truly took off. Meeting Myers, then, is the culmination of this process, one that will hopefully inspire Jack to keep writing long after the school year ends. And once again, it's possible to see how Jack's language has changed in this passage. Describing his thoughts as "buzzing" and his blood as "bubbling" shows that Jack is more comfortable using figurative language than he was early in the school year. It also points back to how Jack described feeling after Miss Stretchberry introduced concrete poems, or poems that are shaped like whatever they're about (so Jack's poem about a dog is shaped like a dog). That was a huge moment for him—it's when he realized poetry could be fun and funny—and so the similar language here suggests that Myers's visit was similarly impactful.

And it was nice of you
to read all of our poems
on the bulletin board
and I hope it didn't
make you
too sad
when you read the one
about my dog Sky
getting smooshed in the road.

Related Characters: Jack (speaker), Miss Stretchberry, Sky/The Yellow Dog, Walter Dean Myers

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 84-85

Explanation and Analysis

In a letter to Walter Dean Myers, Jack thanks Myers for his visit and specifically for reading all of the poems that Jack and his classmates wrote in preparation for Myers's visit. The fact that Jack writes this letter in the first place speaks to his growing confidence. While Miss Stretchberry had to do a lot of convincing to get Jack to invite Myers to their class to begin with, there's no indication she had to push Jack at all to write this thank-you letter. This suggests that Jack now sees himself as worthy of addressing a poet like Myers, whom he greatly admires.

Then, Jack again shows how kind and compassionate he is: he doesn't want to have made Myers sad by bringing up Sky's tragic death. Jack wants to protect people from having to feel uncomfortable emotions like grief and sadness, but he's becoming more comfortable expressing his own grief. In turn, this helps him heal. Indeed, Jack's tone here is far more matter-of-fact and straightforward than it's been so far when it comes to talking about Sky's death. When he's been willing to explicitly talk about Sky's death (or other dogs dying), Jack has been pretty straightforward. It's possible to attribute this to his youth. But the way he frames Sky's death—Sky just "[got] smooshed"—is almost laughably nonchalant, and it suggests that Jack has now moved past his trauma.

LOVE THAT DOG

(Inspired by Walter Dean Myers)

By Jack

Love that dog,
like a bird loves to fly
I said I love that dog
like a bird loves to fly
Love to call him in the morning
love to call him
"Hey there, Sky!"

Related Characters: Jack (speaker), Sky/The Yellow Dog, Walter Dean Myers

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

As the novel's final poem, Jack reveals his "secret poem" that he wrote. It borrows heavily from Myers's poem "Love That Boy," and Jack includes it in his thank-you letter to Myers, thanking Myers for visiting his classroom.

Mailing this poem to Myers represents a huge shift for Jack. Since Jack wrote this poem, he's been very concerned with keeping this poem a secret—he was afraid that Myers would be offended that Jack borrowed so many of Myers's words. However, after hearing Myers speak (and specifically, after Myers said he'd be honored if kids reworked some of his poetry), Jack's confidence has very suddenly grown. Now, he sees Myers himself as an idol and a mentor, and he's willing to trust the poet that he will genuinely be happy to see kids playing with his words and making them their own. By doing this, Jack will continue to learn and grow as a poet.

The poem itself also suggests that Jack has finally moved past the trauma he experienced when he witnessed the blue car hit and kill Sky. Over the school year, Jack has slowly introduced Sky and the blue car to readers, only revealing a few weeks ago that the blue car is responsible for Sky's death. Here, after having revealed that Sky is dead and after processing his emotions through poetry, Jack is ready to simply memorialize Sky through his poems. The poem is written in the present tense, which gives it a timeless quality—it's impossible to tell from it that Sky is dead, for instance. But with this poem, Jack can remember how he used to call for his furry friend and how much he and Sky loved each other. Even if Sky isn't around anymore, the love that Sky and Jack shared was beautiful, natural, and worth

celebrating through poems like this one.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

LOVE THAT DOG

Jack. Room 105—Miss Stretchberry. September 13. In his journal, Jack writes to Miss Stretchberry that he doesn't want to write poetry because boys don't do that. Girls write poetry.

The reader's introduction to Jack establishes exactly who he is and what his thoughts on poetry are. Poetry, he believes, isn't something he should have to care about, given that he's a boy and poetry is supposedly for girls. So, Jack begins the novel wholly uninterested in what seems to be the main thing Miss Stretchberry wants to teach him about.

September 21. Jack informs Miss Stretchberry that he tried to write poetry, but that he can't do it. His brain is empty.

Jack continues to resist Miss Stretchberry's efforts, taking a tone that's almost surly. Jack insists he can't write poetry because his brain is empty, which suggests either (or both) that he's simply unwilling to try, or that he's not confident in his abilities.

September 27. Jack doesn't get the poem about "the red wheelbarrow / and the white chickens / and why so much / depends upon / them." In fact, if the poem about the wheelbarrow and the chickens can be a poem, then it seems like any words can be poem—as long as the writer uses very short lines.

Jack is referring to "The Red Wheelbarrow," a famous poem by William Carlos Williams. It is known for its short lines (the longest line is three words) and its ambiguity—as Jack notes, Williams never says what, exactly, depends on the red wheelbarrow and the chickens. But the fact that Jack is asking questions and seemingly trying to understand the poem suggests that he's becoming somewhat more interested in poetry. Moreover, as he notes that any words can be a poem if one uses line breaks is somewhat humorous. Jack's poems throughout the novel do, in fact, mimic Williams's style. So, whether Jack fully accepts it or not, he is *writing poetry.*

October 4. Jack asks Miss Stretchberry if she promises not to read "it" aloud or put it up on the board. If she can promise those things, here's his poem—but he doesn't like it. His poem reads: "So much depends / upon / a **blue car** / splattered with mud / speeding down the road."

Jack's self-consciousness shines through here. He's willing to try his hand at writing poetry to please his teacher, but he's desperate to hide his efforts from anyone else. Then, the poem itself raises many questions similar to those "The Red Wheelbarrow" brought up. What is the significance of this car? Why does Jack decide to write about it, instead of any number of other mundane objects?

October 10. Jack is indignant: why does Miss Stretchberry wants to know why so much depends on the **blue car**? She didn't say he had to explain why. "The wheelbarrow guy" didn't have to explain why the chickens and the wheelbarrow mattered.

Jack's unwillingness to say why the blue car matters is humorous, and he makes a fair point—Williams, "the wheelbarrow guy," didn't say why anything in his poem mattered. Instead, "The Red Wheelbarrow" leaves this question up to the reader to answer, much the same way that Jack does. However, Jack also seems somewhat defensive, which suggests there might be more to the blue car than Jack's willing to let on at this point.

October 17. Jack asks what the "snowy woods" poem Miss Stretchberry read earlier was all about. Why doesn't the speaker just keep on going, if he has a long way to go before he sleeps? Also, why does Jack have to write anything more about the muddy, blue, speeding **car**? He doesn't want to write about that blue car, which had "miles to go / before it slept," and a long way to go in a hurry.

The "snowy woods" poem is "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" by Robert Frost. Jack doesn't understand this one because the speaker's behavior seems odd to him—the speaker notes that he has a long way to go before he can sleep, so stopping in the cold makes little sense. For this reason, Jack doesn't like the poem much. However, he does borrow language from the poem when he notes that the blue car had "miles to go / before it slept," and that it was in a hurry. This begins to imbue the blue car with a sense of foreboding, which is intensified when Jack refuses to give any more insight into its significance.

October 24. Jack apologizes to Miss Stretchberry. He didn't understand "the tiger tiger burning bright" poem, but it sounded really nice. He's written about the **blue car**, but with "tiger sounds": "Blue car, blue car, shining bright / in the darkness of the night: / who could see you speeding by / like a comet in the sky? / I could see you in the night, / blue car, blue car, shining bright. / I could see you speeding by / like a comet in the sky." Jack admits that he can still hear some of the "tiger sounds" in his ears. They sound like beating drums.

This poem, "The Tyger," was written by William Blake in the early 1790s. Here, Jack learns that poetry doesn't necessarily have to make sense—it can be worthwhile to read because it sounds nice, has a good rhythm, or is just fun to recite. The poem is actually about God and religion, but Jack doesn't need to know that to appreciate it. Describing the blue car with "tiger sounds" allows Jack to give a bit more context to the car: Jack saw it speed past him, so he wasn't in it, and the driver wasn't coming to see him.

October 31. Jack agrees that Miss Stretchberry can put his two poems about the **blue car** on the board, but only if she doesn't put his name on them.

Jack is becoming a bit more confident in his abilities, thanks to what seems like Miss Stretchberry praising his poems. Readers can only infer that this is what's happening, though, based on Jack's responses.

November 6. Jack has to admit that his poems look nice, all typed up on blue paper on the yellow bulletin board. Still, Miss Stretchberry can't tell anyone who wrote them. Also, Jack would like to know what "*anonymous*" means and if it's a good thing.

It's a big moment for Jack when he acknowledges that his poems look nice on the board. With this change of heart, he begins to accept that maybe he is capable of writing poetry. However, by not putting his name on the poems, Jack gets to experiment with being a poet without having to worry about fielding his classmates' opinions about the poems.

November 9. Jack doesn't have a pet, so he can't write about one. He definitely can't write a poem about a pet.

Jack's return to being surly and defensive suggests that Miss Stretchberry's request that students write poems about pets has touched a nerve.

November 15. Responding to Miss Stretchberry, Jack admits that he did used to have a pet. Still, he doesn't want to write about it. He's certain she's going to ask, "Why not?"

Jack's trust in his teacher is growing. He's not insistent on keeping this pet a total secret, even as he refuses to write about it. And when he notes that Miss Stretchberry is certainly going to ask why he doesn't want to write about it, it's a sign that Jack is getting to know his teacher better. He knows where her concerns lie: in asking students to explain things.

November 22. Miss Stretchberry seriously wants Jack to pretend he still has that pet? Can't he make up a different pet? He could have a pretend tiger, or a hamster, or a snail, or a flea.

It remains unclear why Jack is so adamant that he can't write about the pet he used to have. It's possible that Jack experienced some trauma connected to this pet—after all, he doesn't have the pet anymore. Further, the fact that Jack no longer has this pet and has been writing about a speeding blue car seems suspicious; these two things may be connected.

November 29. Jack really liked the small poems the class read today. You can read a lot of small poems really fast, and then you have all the pictures of the "small things" from the poems. He especially liked how the kitten in the poem about the cat leaped, and how he could see the horse's head in the horse poem. The dog poem, though, was his favorite, because Jack's yellow dog used to lie down just like the dog in the poem. The yellow dog would lie down with his tongue out, snap at a fly sometimes, and then sleep in his "loose skin." It was just like how Miss Valerie Worth describes the dog in her small dog poem.

Jack is referring to Valerie Worth's collection of children's poetry, Small Poems, *which describes common animals and household items in verse. Jack appreciates these poems because they describe recognizable animals—he prefers poetry that reflects his lived experience. And this paves the way for Jack to finally reveal that his former pet was a yellow dog, much like the one Worth described. In general, introducing the yellow dog in this way highlights how common of an experience it is to own a dog. Jack's tone suggests that he loved his dog and enjoyed having him around.*

December 4. Why does Miss Stretchberry want to type up what Jack wrote about reading the small poems? What he wrote isn't a poem—right? Jack supposes she can type it up and put it on the board, but she can't put Jack's name on it. Jack doesn't want his name on it because other people might not think it's a real poem.

Jack continues to expand his idea of what a poem can be. He described reading the small poems in verse; therefore, his description can indeed be considered a poem. It may be that Jack simply doesn't see the subject matter as "real" poetry; he may believe that poems need to be about more concrete things. In any case, Jack is clearly worried about impressing others, since he doesn't claim the poem as his own work because his classmates might not agree that his writing is a poem.

December 13. Jack supposes it does look like a poem all typed up, but he thinks it'd look better with more space between the lines. Then it would look more like it did when Jack wrote it to begin with. Jack also likes the picture of the yellow dog Miss Stretchberry put up next to the poem, but that's not what his yellow dog looked like.

Jack continues to become more confident in his work. This becomes especially clear when he asks Miss Stretchberry to more accurately copy his line spacing—he wants to have artistic control over his poems, even if he's not entirely convinced he's writing poetry. Then, Jack begins to share a bit more about his yellow dog. Readers don't see Miss Stretchberry's dog picture, but it's significant that Jack insists it's not a good representation of his yellow dog. This comment foreshadows that later on in the novel, Jack will probably share what his yellow dog looked like.

January 10. Jack really, really doesn't get the "pasture poem" that Miss Stretchberry read today. In the poem, someone is really going out into the pasture to clean the spring. He's going to get the "tottery calf" while he's there, and he won't be gone long, and he'd like you (whoever "you" is) to come. Seriously? Also, Miss Stretchberry told Jack earlier that Mr. Robert Frost, who wrote about the pasture, was also the one who wrote about the snowy woods and having miles to go before he sleeps. Jack is pretty sure Mr. Robert Frost has too much time on his hands.

This poem by Robert Frost is called "The Pasture." Jack's ire is palpable: cleaning a spring and fetching a calf seem to be so far outside of Jack's lived experience that he simply doesn't find the poem interesting or understandable. In fact, Jack is so confused by the lifestyles Frost portrays in his poems that he humorously suggests that the poet (whom Jack seems to equate with the poem's speaker, which isn't always the case) simply has too much time to frolic in nature. Frost's poems tend to portray rural, farming lifestyles (as did "The Red Wheelbarrow"), so this may simply reflect that Jack lives in a city or in suburbia.

January 17. Jack asks if Miss Stretchberry remembers the wheelbarrow poem from the first week of school. Maybe that poet was just "making a picture / with words" and then someone else, like a teacher, typed it up. Then maybe other people thought it was a poem because it looked like one. Maybe the same thing happened with Mr. Robert Frost. He could've just been "making pictures with words" about the snowy woods and the pasture, and then his teacher typed them, and then they looked like poems, and so people thought they were poems. That's exactly what Miss Stretchberry did with Jack's "**blue-car** things," and what he wrote about reading the small poems. They look like poems when they're typed up, and other kids think they're real poems, and they all want to know who wrote them.

Here, Jack makes a breakthrough and starts to think more critically about what makes a poem—and what makes a poem good. A poem, as Jack suggests here, can simply be a way of conveying a mood or a picture, as Frost does as he describes a winter wood or a pasture, and as Williams describes a wheelbarrow. Frost and Williams, incidentally, did set out intentionally to be poets, unlike Jack. But still, Jack recognizes that by following some standard poetry conventions (like using line breaks), he, too, can play at writing poetry. Finally, Jack's poems seem to be pretty popular among his classmates, which seemingly makes Jack begin to wonder whether he should start putting his name on them.

January 24. Jack explains that his dad was going for a drive and he invited Jack to come along. They drove to brick building with a sign that read, "Animal Protection Shelter." Inside, they walked down a cement hallway past cages filled with dogs. Some hid in the corners, but most of the dogs barked and leaped at their cages as if they were asking Jack and his dad to choose them. Then, they saw the yellow dog. He was standing against his cage, with a paw curled around the wire, his tongue hanging out, his eyes sad, and his tail wagging. Jack and his dad chose him. In the car on the way home, the yellow dog put his head on Jack's chest and wrapped his paws around Jack's arm as though he was thanking Jack. The other dogs in the cages are killed if nobody chooses them.

This is the first of Jack's poems that seems to come entirely from his own head; it's not necessarily styled after another poem, and there's no indication that Jack is responding to either an assignment from Miss Stretchberry or another poem. So, this poem represents a leap forward for Jack: he now understands that he too can "mak[e] a picture / with words" and share this experience of adopting a dog with other people. On another note, as Jack describes adopting the yellow dog, the adoption itself is a happy memory—the dog is clearly thrilled. But Jack can't separate that from the heartbreak of being at an animal shelter and seeing dogs who are going to be euthanized if nobody adopts them. This begins to suggest that experiences with animals, like Jack's experience adopting and owning his yellow dog, can be simultaneously joyful and tragic.

January 31. Jack agrees that Miss Stretchberry can type what he wrote about the yellow dog, but she has to leave out the part about the other dogs being killed. It's too sad. Also, she can't put Jack's name on it, and he thinks it would look nice on yellow paper. Maybe the title should be, "YOU COME TOO."

Here, readers get a bit more insight into who Jack is as a person: he's kind and wants to make people happy, so he doesn't want his classmates to have to think about dying dogs. He also continues to try to take more artistic control of his poems, as when he specifies what color paper Miss Stretchberry uses for this one and gives his poem a title of his own creation.

February 7. The poem does look nice on yellow paper, but Miss Stretchberry forgot—*again*—to leave bigger spaces between the lines, like Jack did when he wrote it the first time. But that's okay.

Jack is simultaneously demonstrating confidence in himself and trust in his teacher. He wants to have a say in what his poems look like, but he also likes and appreciates Miss Stretchberry enough to give her the benefit of the doubt when she doesn't copy his poems exactly.

February 15. Jack likes the poem Miss Stretchberry read today, about city "street music." Jack's street isn't in the middle of a city, so he doesn't hear loud horns, trucks, and screeches. It's on the edge of a city, so its "music" is quieter. The street is thin, with houses on both sides. Jack lives in the white house with the red door, and there's not much traffic on the street. Kids play in the street sometimes, but only if an adult or a bigger kid is around to shout "*Car!*" when a car drives down the street. There are signs at each end of the street that say "Caution! Children at Play!", but cars sometimes don't notice. They speed down the road like they're in a hurry, "with many miles to go / before they sleep."

Jack doesn't say outright why he likes Arnold Adoff's poem "Street Music." But he seems to like it because even if he doesn't live in a noisy part of town, the "street music" Adoff describes is nevertheless recognizable to Jack. And this, in turn, leads Jack to take ideas from the poem—such as that a place produces its own kind of music—and describe his own street. However, though Jack doesn't explicitly mention the blue car, he uses the same lines from "Passing by Woods on a Snowy Evening" to describe the cars that speed down his street. This creates a sense of foreboding.

February 21. Those poems that Miss Stretchberry showed the class were so great. Each poem "makes the shape / of the thing / that the poem / is about." So the one about the apple was shaped like an apple, and a poem about a house was shaped like a house. Jack's brain was "popping" as he looked at the poems. He had no idea a "poet person" could do something funny like that.

Here, Jack learns that poems don't have to be entirely serious—they can express a sense of humor and be more playful. This continues to reframe poetry as accessible and fun for readers, not an artform that has to be stuffy and formal. That these poems also make Jack's brain "pop[]" suggests that he finds them inspiring, and that he may be more willing to try his hand at writing more playful poetry.

February 26. Jack has written one of the poems that takes the shape of what it's about. It's titled "MY YELLOW DOG." The dog poem has a yellow body, a wagging yellow tail, a head, a nose that's sniffing, and a slobbering mouth.

Indeed, Jack takes the opportunity to portray his yellow dog. And just with the other poems, this one has a sense of humor: the dog is slobbery and clearly happy, if it's wagging its tail.

March 1. Miss Stretchberry can type up Jack's poem about the yellow dog that looks like a dog. This time, she has to keep the spacing exactly the same—and maybe she can print it on yellow paper. Maybe she can put Jack's name on it. But she should only do that if she wants to, and only if she thinks the poem looks good enough.

Jack's attitude in this passage marks a major turning point. Finally, he's willing to let his classmates know that he's written something. It's possible to attribute this change to Miss Stretchberry's quiet encouragement throughout the school year. She's made it clear that she's not going to push Jack and has instead let him decide on his own time to consider himself a poet.

March 7. Jack was a bit embarrassed when people complimented his poem. But he really likes the one Miss Stretchberry put up about the tree. It's shaped like a tree, but not like a fake one—it has scraggly branches. He wants to know who wrote it and why they didn't want to put their name on it. Is that student like Jack, back when he didn't think his words were poems? Maybe Miss Stretchberry can tell "the anonymous tree poet" that the tree poem is a real poem, and a good one, too.

While Jack opens by describing his embarrassment, he's much more focused on his classmate's poem about the tree. By wondering if his classmate is self-conscious too, Jack acknowledges that he and his classmates are all dealing with some of the same anxieties surrounding sharing their work. But by asking Miss Stretchberry to pass along his message to his classmate, Jack also does something important: he tries to help his classmate develop confidence in their abilities, just as he's done with Miss Stretchberry's help.

March 14. The poem that Miss Stretchberry read yesterday by Mr. Walter Dean Myers is the best poem ever. Jack apologizes for taking the book home without asking; he only got a small spot on it. The page is torn because he tried to get the spot out. Anyway, Jack copied the best poem and hung it by his bed so he can see it when he's lying down. Maybe Miss Stretchberry could copy it like Jack did, and hang it in the classroom where the kids can see it while they're at their desks. The poem Jack likes is called "Love That Boy." He likes it for two reasons. First, Jack's dad calls Jack just like the poem does, "*Hey there, son!*" Second, when Jack had his yellow dog, he loved the dog and would call him, "*Hey there, Sky!*" The dog's name was Sky.

While Jack has been getting increasingly excited about Miss Stretchberry's poetry selections over the last few months, this is the first time he's been so excited to take a poetry book home to continue reading poems he likes. And Jack would ideally like to share his enthusiasm with all his classmates, again helping them develop confidence and learn to love poetry just like he is. On another note, the reason Jack gives for liking "Love That Boy" is that it again mirrors Jack's lived experience. Seeing himself reflected in the poetry also gives Jack the confidence to finally share his yellow dog's name: Sky.

March 22. Jack's yellow dog followed him everywhere. The dog was always wagging his tail and slobbering as he smiled at Jack. The dog smiled all the time, as if to thank Jack for choosing him. He'd also jump up on Jack and give hugs. When Jack and other kids would play outside with a ball, the dog would push the ball with his nose and get slobber all over it. But nobody cared because Sky was such a funny dog who always smiled. Every morning and every evening, Jack would call him, "*Hey there, Sky!*"

Myers's poem seems to have made Jack feel more comfortable describing Sky and the good times they shared (recall that for whatever reason, Jack no longer has Sky). In Jack's description, Sky reads as a beloved neighborhood fixture—he wasn't just Jack's buddy, but he also ingratiated himself with all the other neighborhood kids.

March 27. Miss Stretchberry can type up what Jack wrote about Sky. But she can't type the other secret poem that Jack wrote (it's folded up in an envelope that's taped shut). That one uses too many of Mr. Walter Dean Myers's words, and that might make Mr. Walter Dean Myers mad.

It's a sign of how much Jack idolizes Myers that he's so afraid to anger the poet by using the poet's language. Moreover, now that Jack has discovered this role model, he's more willing to write poems beyond what Miss Stretchberry assigns—the secret poem seems to be quite personal to Jack, if he's so concerned with keeping it a secret. This reflects Jack's growing enthusiasm about reading and writing poetry.


April 4. Jack is happy to learn that Mr. Walter Dean Myers won't get mad at a boy for using his words. Also, Jack wants to thank Miss Stretchberry for typing up his secret poem, the one that uses a lot of Mr. Walter Dean Myers's words. Jack especially likes that at the top, Miss Stretchberry wrote, "*Inspired by Walter Dean Myers*." It sounds good to Jack, and now people won't just think that Jack copied because he couldn't come up with anything of his own. Now people will know that Walter Dean Myers *inspired* Jack, but Jack would appreciate it if Miss Stretchberry didn't put that poem on the board yet. Is Mr. Walter Dean Myers still alive? If he is, does Miss Stretchberry think he could come visit their class? If he does, they should hide Jack's poem just in case it'll make Mr. Walter Dean Myers mad.

Miss Stretchberry teaches Jack how to ethically borrow words from other people: he just needs to make it clear that he was inspired by another poet, rather than insisting that the resulting poem is entirely his own work. Along with this idea, Jack's enthusiasm for poetry continues to grow. Since he hasn't had many nice things to say about other poets, asking about Myers and if Myers might even be able to visit Miss Stretchberry's class indicates a significant shift in Jack's mindset. Asking about the poet himself also highlights that Jack is beginning to associate the poems he reads with the people who write them—those poets can be mentors to Jack, in addition to Miss Stretchberry.



April 9. No. Jack can't do it. Miss Stretchberry should do it, since she's a teacher.

It's unclear what, exactly, Miss Stretchberry has asked Jack to do. But in any case, Jack has reverted back to how he was at the beginning of the school year: unconfident in his own abilities.

April 12. Jack doesn't agree that Mr. Walter Dean Myers would like to hear from a young fan like Jack. Jack is certain Mr. Walter Dean Myers would rather hear from a teacher, someone who uses "big words" and can spell and type.

Jack reveals that he doesn't think he's good enough to write Myers directly. This highlights how badly he wants to impress the poet. It also shows that Jack has a long way to go as he develops his confidence as a writer, while also highlighting some specific skills Jack thinks he should learn before he considers himself worthy of addressing Myers directly. These include becoming more proficient at spelling and learning how to use the computer to type.


April 17. In a letter to Mr. Walter Dean Myers, Jack suggests that the poet probably doesn't want to hear from him. Jack is just a boy who doesn't use big words, after all, and Mr. Walter Dean Myers probably won't even read the letter. Even if he does, he probably won't answer it or do what Jack's going to ask of him. That's okay, because Miss Stretchberry says writers are really busy writing. They also have to deal with all sorts of other things, like the ringing phone, the fax machine, paying bills, and maybe getting sick (hopefully Mr. Walter Dean Myers isn't sick). Their electricity could go off, or their car could break down, or they could just have chores to do.

Jack's nervousness shines through in this letter. He doesn't think he's worthy of asking someone whom he considers a "real" poet (that is, a published writer) for a favor, so he automatically assumes that Myers is going to say no. However, he also acknowledges that poets are real people, not gods. Like everyone else, they have to contend with the grind of daily life and fit writing in among other chores and responsibilities.

Jack has no idea how Mr. Walter Dean Myers has time to write when he also has to do those other things, so maybe he should hire some help. But Jack would like to ask if Mr. Walter Dean Myers could find the time to leave his house, and if he'd like to visit a school where kids like his poems. If so, would he consider coming to Jack's school? The school is clean, the people are mostly nice, and Miss Stretchberry might even make brownies. Hopefully Jack hasn't taken too much of Mr. Walter Dean Myers's time—this letter probably takes 15 minutes to read, and in that time, Mr. Walter Dean Myers could've written a new poem. So, Jack is sorry for taking up time, and he understands if Mr. Walter Dean Myers can't come to Jack's school. Goodbye.

Finally, Jack gets to the point: he'd like to ask Myers to visit his school. That Jack gets to the point of being willing and able to ask at all speaks to Miss Stretchberry's power as a mentor. Jack only agreed to write this letter with what seems like a lot of encouragement from her. Then, Jack humorously reveals how young and naive he is when he suggests that his letter will take Meyers a long time to read. As written, the letter only takes a couple minutes to read at most, which speaks to where Jack is in his learning journey: reading is still sometimes a struggle for him.


April 20. Jack wants to know if Miss Stretchberry mailed the letter, and if Mr. Walter Dean Myers has responded yet.

Though Jack is pretty sure Myers won't get back to him, that doesn't mean he's not on edge waiting for a response. And again, Jack shows that he trusts Miss Stretchberry by not feeling like he has to mask his enthusiasm to look cool.


April 24. Jack is aghast to learn that it could take *months* for Mr. Walter Dean Myers to answer Jack's letter, if he answers at all. Until Miss Stretchberry explained it to him, Jack had no idea that the letter would go to Mr. Walter Dean Myers's publishing company, where someone sorts hundreds of letters to lots of authors and then Jack's letter will finally go to Mr. Walter Dean Myers, along with a bunch of other letters to the poet. Then, Mr. Walter Dean Myers might be on vacation, or sick, or writing, or babysitting kids or grandkids, or getting his car fixed, or maybe someone will have died. In Jack's opinion, it might take years to get a response. So, they should probably forget about it.

As Jack discovers here, writing a letter to a published author isn't as simple as just sending the letter. It can take time. But even though Jack dramatically insists they should forget they ever asked Myers to visit Miss Stretchberry's class, this is still an important part of Jack's poetry education—he's learning how to engage with the established poetry community. And in the meantime, Jack has more poetry to discover and his own poetry to write.


April 26. Sometimes, if you're trying not to think about something, you can't help thinking about it nonstop. Eventually, it makes your brain feel like "a squashed pea."

Jack is exhausted trying not to think about his letter to Myers. Nevertheless, he's becoming more comfortable with poetry as he writes this poem. Using a simile like this—comparing his brain to "a squashed pea"—suggests that he's internalizing more poetry conventions and tools, like figurative language.

May 2. Miss Stretchberry can type up what Jack wrote about trying not to think about something, but she should leave Jack's name off. It was just words that came out of his head. He wasn't paying attention to how they came out, or in what order.

As far as Jack is concerned, what he wrote isn't a poem. However, per Jack's own understanding of what makes a poem a poem, this isn't entirely true: it uses short lines, and it reflects his lived experience. He may simply be experiencing a bit of a crisis of confidence.

May 7. Could Miss Stretchberry maybe show Jack how to use the computer? Then Jack could type his own words.

Here, Jack takes control of his own education and of his own poems. If he learns to type, he won't have to pester Miss Stretchberry to make sure the spacing on his poems is just right—he can do it himself, thereby putting into the world exactly what he wants to.

May 8. Jack had no idea that spell-check existed on the computer. It's a "miracle / little brain" in there, ready to help. But Jack is really slow at typing. Didn't Miss Stretchberry say something about a program that would teach him to type? Will it help Jack type faster and let his fingers move as fast as his brain does?

Once Jack gets a taste of using the computer to type, he can't get enough. He recognizes that word processing is going to help him become a better poet, because he can create poems that look professional much more easily than he can now, when Miss Stretchberry is the one to type and print his work. Typing is also a skill that will benefit Jack more generally and make him into a better, more competent writer.

May 14. (Jack typed this poem, titled "MY SKY," by himself.) Jack was outside with some other kids and Sky, kicking a ball around before dinner. Sky was chasing the kids, wagging his tail, smiling, and slobbering. Everyone was laughing at him. Then, Jack's dad got off the bus at one end of the street, waved, and called, "*Hey there, son!*" Because of this, Jack didn't see the car coming from the other direction until one of the big kids yelled, "*Car!*" Jack turned and saw a **blue car** with mud splatters speeding down the road. Sky was chasing the ball and wagging his tail, and Jack called for him. But it was too late: the muddy blue car hit Sky and kept going. It was in such a hurry, with a long way to go, it couldn't stop.

Jack is only willing to reveal what happened to Sky now that he feels totally in-control of his poems, which suggests that poetry has become a tool for him to process his memories and emotions. The poem itself is extremely sad: Sky might have been lucky that Jack and his dad adopted him, but that luck wasn't enough to protect him from the danger that Jack has been hinting at for much of the novel. Instead, this idyllic afternoon playtime is interrupted by the speeding blue car, which hits Sky and doesn't stop. This suggests that the car itself has symbolized Jack's unresolved trauma—writing about the car and not explaining why suggests that Jack has continued to dwell on this tragic accident.

Sky laid in the road on his side, with his legs bent oddly. He was breathing heavily and looking up at Jack. Jack's dad appeared, carried Sky out of the road, and put him on the grass. Then, Sky closed his eyes and never opened them again.

The accident is made more tragic by the fact that Sky dies of his injuries. It's no small thing to witness a pet die—and Jack, it seems, has been trying to process this trauma since Sky died. His poems for Miss Stretchberry have been one way for him to do that.

May 15. Jack doesn't know if Miss Stretchberry should put his last poem on the board. If people read it, it might make them sad.

Interestingly, Jack doesn't argue that what he wrote isn't a poem, showing that he now thinks of himself as a real, capable poet. Rather, his concern is that he's going to make people sad, something he emphatically doesn't want to do.

May 17. Jack supposes Miss Stretchberry can put Jack's name on the poem. But hopefully it doesn't make people too sad. If it does, maybe Miss Stretchberry could cheer them up with some of those really tasty chocolate brownies she sometimes makes?

By putting his name on this poem, Jack takes ownership of both the poem and the event it describes. This suggests that he's finally come to terms with Sky's death—he's willing to share it with others, and he's also willing to brainstorm ideas to help make it less traumatic for others (such as Miss Stretchberry's brownies).

May 21. Jack has just gotten the best news, and he can barely believe it: Mr. Walter Dean Myers is coming to their school. He was going to be in town anyway to visit an old friend, and he said he'd be "honored" to come to Jack's school and meet the nice kids who like his poems. Jack's classmates are lucky that Mr. Walter Dean Myers has a friend in town!

Once Jack seems to move past the trauma he suffered when Sky died, he gets the opportunity to channel his energy into being really excited for Myers's visit. Poetry, in this sense, helps Jack recover, and it then gives him a reason to keep moving forward and discovering how exciting poetry can be.

May 28. The bulletin board looks like it's "blooming words." Jack's classmates' poems are up there on colored sheets of paper. The bookshelf also looks like it's "sprouting books," since it now houses all of Mr. Walter Dean Myers's books. The books sit there and look out at the students, waiting for Mr. Walter Dean Myers to come to the classroom.

Over the course of the novel, Jack's language has changed. He began writing with straightforward language, but now his language is more colorful as he describes the "blooming" bulletin board and the "sprouting" bookshelf. Additionally, using these specific words that describe growth and change reflect how Jack himself (and presumably, his classmates as well) has evolved: he now appreciates poetry and is excited to meet a real published poet, something that would not have sparked enthusiasm back in September.

May 29. Jack can't wait and definitely can't sleep. Did Miss Stretchberry do a good job of hiding his poem that was inspired by Mr. Walter Dean Myers? Jack doesn't want to upset him.

Jack still sees himself as somewhat unworthy of Myers's attention, but Jack is genuinely excited here. He's more worried about making sure Myers has a great experience in his class than he is about getting in trouble for borrowing some of Myers's words.

June 1. Today is "MR. WALTER DEAN MYERS DAY." Jack has never heard anyone who can talk like Mr. Walter Dean Myers. The way he talked made Jack's blood bubble and his thoughts buzz. Jack wanted Mr. Walter Dean Myers to stay at their school forever.

Meeting Myers is a transformative moment for Jack. It shows him that Miss Stretchberry was right—Myers isn't the sort to get angry at a kid for liking his poetry and borrowing his words—and it also makes him feel supported and inspired. This suggests that especially with this boost, Jack will continue to love and explore poetry long after Myers's visit.

June 6. In a letter to Mr. Walter Dean Myers, Jack thanks the poet for leaving his work, family, and other obligations to come visit Jack's class. He hopes Mr. Walter Dean Myers enjoyed the visit—it seemed like he did, since he smiled the whole time. When Mr. Walter Dean Myers read poems out loud, he had the best voice. It was "low and deep and friendly and warm," and it made Jack feel like it was wrapping the students in a big hug. When Mr. Walter Dean Myers laughed, it was the best laugh Jack has ever heard.

This time, there's no indication that Miss Stretchberry had to convince Jack that he should indeed write this letter. Jack has gained more confidence and is now comfortable writing and thanking his favorite poet. The way Jack describes Myers also suggests that the visit has had a major effect on Jack, if not the rest of the class. Myers, in Jack's telling, has a way of making kids feel supported and like they matter, something that helps establish Myers as a mentor and an idol for Jack and other kids like him.

Jack and his classmates hope they didn't ask Mr. Walter Dean Myers too many questions, but they appreciate that he answered every one. They're especially grateful that Mr. Walter Dean Myers said he'd be flattered if someone used a few of his words, especially if they also wrote that they were inspired by Mr. Walter Dean Myers. Also, it was nice of Mr. Walter Dean Myers to read everyone's poems. Hopefully Jack's poem about his dog Sky "getting smooshed" didn't make him too sad, and hopefully he liked the brownies. Jack thanks Mr. Walter Dean Myers again for coming to his class and explains that he also included a poem he wrote. It was inspired by Mr. Walter Dean Myers. Jack signs his letter as Mr. Walter Dean Myers's "number one fan."

Answering the students' questions is a way that Myers can show the kids he cares about them and that their thoughts matter. It seems as though Jack was actually asking if Myers would be offended by Jack's poem that borrowed Myers's words (notably, the poem itself hasn't been revealed to readers yet). But the fact that Jack decides to include the poem in this letter, thereby sharing it with Myers and the reader, shows how comfortable he now is with Myers and his own abilities. He knows now how to properly borrow someone's words. Furthermore, Jack also suggests he's going to continue to explore poetry long after the novel's close, if he now considers himself Myers's biggest fan.

The poem is titled "LOVE THAT DOG." It reads: "Love that dog, / like a bird loves to fly / I said I love that dog / like a bird loves to fly / Love to call him in the morning / love to call him / Hey there, Sky!"

"LOVE THAT DOG" borrows most of the language from "Love That Boy"; Jack simply makes it about his beloved pet and casts himself as the poem's speaker. This poem is noteworthy in that Jack positions his love for Sky as normal and natural, and this poem also isn't tainted at all by the speeding blue car and Sky's death. Rather, this poem memorializes Sky and the love that Sky and Jack shared. From this, the reader can infer that Jack's previous poem about Sky's death has helped him process his trauma and grief over the incident. Indeed, this final poem's subject matter seems to reflect an important change in Jack's mindset: he's realized that he has the choice to remember Sky joyfully rather than sorrowfully, and that poetry is an outlet for him to express that joy.

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