



“Ode to Pablo’s Tennis Shoes”

Gary Soto

Some of your students might be surprised that a poet could write a poem about a pair of dirty tennis shoes. They might ask, “What’s so important about a pair of tennis shoes?” In “Ode to Pablo’s Tennis Shoes,” Gary Soto shows us that these shoes are, indeed, quite important to Pablo. And, by focusing on details and making some telling comparisons, Soto elevates these tennis shoes in a way that will have many readers understanding that they are not just another pair of sneakers.

OPENERS

Before reading the poem, have students:

1. List a few everyday, common things for which they are grateful.
2. Pick one of their “common things” and explain why it’s important to them.

- Distribute the poem and have students read it silently and then in pairs or small groups. Pick at least two volunteers to read the poem to the entire class.
- Distribute the Response Sheet 1 on page 37. Ask students to answer the questions and review the poetic terms.
- Explore the poem with your class by focusing on:

FORM

The ode is a poem that celebrates a subject. It has a venerable history, going back to Pindar and Horace in ancient Greece. Pindar’s odes were meant to be sung and danced in a theater. Horace’s, on the other hand, were more meditative and contemplative. Odes were quite popular with the English Romantic poets. Among the more famous odes from the period are: “Ode to a Nightingale” and “Ode to a Grecian Urn” by John Keats, “Dejection: An Ode” by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and “Ode to the West Wind” and “To a Skylark” by Percy Bysshe Shelley.

Originally, the ode was dignified and written in exalted language. Over time, however, poets have relinquished such formality. One of the more prolific writers of odes is Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, who wrote three books of odes, the best of which are collected in the bilingual edition of *Selected Odes of Pablo Neruda* (University of California Press, 1990). With its informality and exuberance, Gary Soto’s “Ode to Pablo’s Tennis Shoes” is a good example of a contemporary ode.



MOOD

One of the things that any good writer does is establish a mood in a piece of writing. How does the piece make you feel? Scared or sad or angry, perhaps? After your students have read the poem to themselves or have heard a classmate or two read it aloud, you might ask them: How did you feel when you read “Ode to Pablo’s Tennis Shoes”? How do you think Pablo feels?

Soto creates a feeling of relaxation after an active day of “leaping for a football.” Pablo is resting, while his tennis shoes “wait under Pablo’s bed.” The boy is “listening/To his mother laughing” as she watches the Mexican soap operas on television. His tennis shoes, “that snuggle his toes,/Are under his bed.” He’s not bathed, which suggests he has just tumbled into bed. He wants to be “A little worn,” like the shoes that “He loves.” Pablo “is tired/Sinking into the mattress.” The boy is ready for the eight hours of sleep that he needs.

IMPLICATIONS

HAND OUT
REPRODUCIBLE

1

According to the title, this poem is about Pablo’s tennis shoes. And it delivers. We get to see these tennis shoes quite well. However, the poem does not give us much direct information about Pablo. But, like so many good poems, it implies a number of things about him. Give your students Reproducible 1 and ask them to read the poem to themselves and jot down things that they learn about Pablo and give the evidence that led them to their conclusions. For example, even though the poet doesn’t tell us that Pablo is active, the first stanza does show us an active kid.

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

If your students are unfamiliar with some of the basic forms of figurative language—non-literal expressions to get across certain images or ideas more vividly—this ode gives them a chance to explore them. Ask students to circle any places in the poem where Soto compares one thing to another. See if they can notice a difference in the way he compares things. Your students may notice, for example, that the poet refers to Pablo’s shoes as his “twin pets” in line 17. They are likely to notice how Soto uses a different kind of comparison in lines 36 to 38 to describe the shoes: “Cloth like a sail,/Rubber like/A lifeboat on rough sea.”

When your students can see these two comparisons, you can explain how the first comparison, in which the poet makes a direct comparison, is a metaphor. The second example is a simile because the poet uses *like* (or *as*) in his comparison. Metaphors and similes are the backbone of



EXPLORATION 1

poetry because they help the reader see more clearly similarities between the ideas and images being compared.

ORIGINALITY

Originality helps a good poem stand apart from greeting card verse. A good poem says what it needs to say in a fresh way. The language is original. The images are original. In the case of “Ode to Pablo’s Tennis Shoes,” Soto skillfully shows that a couple of the qualities that Pablo admires in the tennis shoes are the same qualities that he possesses.

To help students see the comparison between the boy and his tennis shoes, have them read the poem carefully for connections. In lines 25 and 26, for example, Soto says that Pablo:

...wants to be
Like his shoes,
A little dirty
From the road,
A little worn
From racing to the drinking fountain

But Soto also points out, “Pablo is tired” and so are his shoes, as they rest under his bed, “The tongues hanging/Out, exhausted.” The boy “needs eight hours/Of sleep/To cool his shoes,” but he also needs that time to cool himself for a new day of running around with his fabulous tennis shoes.

RELATED POEMS

“Ode to a Stamp Album,” Pablo Neruda

“Ode to My Socks,” Pablo Neruda

“String,” Valerie Worth

Focus on the Poet

This ode is part of Gary Soto’s *Neighborhood Odes* (Harcourt, 1992). Two other Soto collections for young readers are *Canto Familiar* (Harcourt, 1995) and *A Fire in My Hands* (Scholastic, 1990), which include Soto’s comments on the poems. If you are interested in reading Soto’s poems for adults, look for his *New and Selected Poems* (Chronicle Books, 1995).

You and your students can visit <www.garysoto.com> to find out more about him. You can also find an autobiographical sketch of Soto, as well as other information about him, by clicking on “Online Activities Center” at <<http://teacher.scholastic.com/>>, then click on “Authors & Books.”