

NATIONAL POETRY MONTH

Exercising the Imagination

Teaching May Swenson's "Cardinal Ideograms" to Elementary School Students

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"CARDINAL IDEOGRAMS" by May Swenson is a poem that works like a puzzle; experimental in form and appearance, it engages the imagination by inspiring playful connections with the familiar. Poetry is so much about the play of language leading one to see things in a new way. A successful poem, like Swenson's, creates space for new thoughts to emerge, expanding our world and our thinking. Students in a classroom setting generally focus on being correct; this impulse is often detrimental to experimentation and creativity. Here is an excellent exercise in playing with language that can encourage students to imagine and take risks as writers, and to see things in a new way.

I introduce "Cardinal Ideograms" by inviting the

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students to think of it like a game. "Who can figure out the game of this poem? I know you won't know the meaning of every word but you can figure out what the poet is playing with. Listen and look closely, follow along as I read, and see if you can figure it out." I read aloud, without clarifying any of the vocabulary so that the students have a raw experience with the text, giving them a chance to discover what is happening within it themselves. It's a great way to get them to take responsibility for interacting with the poem, and it builds confidence in kids when they discern meaning from a text without having a complete grasp of every word in it.

Cardinal Ideograms¹

MAY SWENSON

- O** A mouth. Can blow or breathe, be funnel, or Hello.
- 1** A grass blade or a cut.
- 2** A question seated. And a proud bird's neck.

¹From *Complete Poems to Solve* by May Swenson (Macmillan, 1993). Reprinted with permission of the Literary Estate of May Swenson. All rights reserved.

- 3 Shallow mitten for two-fingered hand.
- 4 Three-cornered hut
on one stilt. Sometimes built
so the roof gapes.
- 5 A policeman. Polite.
Wearing visored cap.
- 6 O unrolling,
tape of ambiguous length
on which is written the mystery
of everything curly.
- 7 A step,
detached from its stair.
- 8 The universe in diagram:
A cosmic hourglass.
(Note enigmatic shape,
absence of any valve of origin,
how end overlaps beginning.)
Unknotted like a shoelace
and whipped back and forth,
can serve as a model of time.
- 9 Lorgnette for the right eye.
In England or if you are Alice
the stem is on the left.
- 10 A grass blade or a cut
companioned by a mouth.
Open? Open. Shut? Shut.

After I read the poem aloud while the students follow on their own copies, I ask, “Who thinks they can tell what the poet is doing?” Sometimes that’s enough to make hands shoot up from students eager to explain that the Arabic numerals are being looked at as if they were pictures. Sometimes the students will feel baffled and say they don’t get it, so I’ll offer, “Here’s a clue: let me tell you what the words in the title mean.” I tell them that “cardinal” means “of prime importance”—really, a super important thing—and that the counting numbers are also referred to as cardinal numbers. Ideogram, I say, means a written symbol that represents an idea or object directly, like using a picture instead of a word, similar to how

Chinese characters are or how the bounding deer silhouette on a road sign lets you know to watch for deer crossing, or how a simplified picture of a radio with a line through it means no loud music.

I’ll also ask, “What big things stand out in this poem that we don’t usually see in poems?” Students will notice that the numbers appear larger than the text and that usually numbers aren’t in poems. “Why are the numbers there?” I ask, “What do the words next to the number have to do with the number?”

After I define the title and instigate a discussion with the above questions, most students will excitedly exclaim that they get it. I give the class up to five minutes to recognize that Swenson is seeing the numbers as if they were pictures instead of quantities; I let the students converse and try to show each other. It’s an exciting moment when the whole class comes around to seeing numbers in a new way.

If a class has a particularly hard time figuring it out, I ask them to just look at **1**. “Why might the poet say a grass blade or a cut right after **1**? Can you imagine **1** looking like a blade of grass or a little cut?” You’ll finally hear your students sigh, *ohhhhhhhhh!* Next, I encourage students to explain another line of the poem; I invite them to use the board to illustrate for the class how Swenson’s description works by drawing the number and pointing out the features that Swenson writes about.

To model this type of thinking, I then ask the class to imagine something else one of the numbers could be. Students of mine have said: **8** is a snowman, **9** is a balloon floating away, **10** is a baseball bat and ball. Then, to take it further, I choose one number and challenge the class to see how long a list of visual comparisons we can create for that number. The longer we spend on one number, the more interesting and rewarding the images that emerge. For any number a few obvious things get listed first, but when we push ourselves to be inventive, that’s when it gets exciting. **3** has been a backwards **E**, a broken pitchfork, a mermaid’s comb, a pair of lost front teeth, a plug without a cord, half an **8**, hills knocked over, a boxing fist, a broken ladder, a baby’s curl. Students love getting to experience numbers in a non-mathematical way and they feed off of each other’s ideas and the class gets into a creative frenzy. We have successfully

broken through the literal level that students bind themselves to at school!

Once excitement is built up, I announce the writing activity: Choose a letter of the alphabet and write a poem playing May Swenson's game of looking at the letter in a new way.

I ask students to choose a letter because we spend so much time in the Swenson poem modeling with numbers; letters are a fresh start and there are twenty-six of them! I also pose questions such as: *Where does your letter live? What does your letter dream? Worry? Fear? Like? Try? What does your letter want? Say? Have?* Students have lots of fun being creative and inventive, taking a break from our attachment to prescribed meaning as they play with language, creating a poem that reinvents a familiar symbol. I tell them that direct practice at being inventive with how and what you see expands our minds, taking us beyond the literal. I point out that when we feel like things are getting difficult, that's often when our most interesting thoughts arise.

Here are some fun poems that came from this exercise done with fifth-graders at ps 33 in the Bronx.

Z is the Copy of Capital N

KEVIN R.

Z we think you are the cousin of capital N
You are just a sideways capital N
You get written with a pencil and a pen

Z you and capital N are just the same one
letter

But I think you can do better

You're not like other letters

Z and capital N are the same

In a way that makes

All the other letters seem lame

Z thinks about capital N stealing his
spotlight

Z dreams of if capital N and him could fight

Z worries capital N will take his place

Z lives in the alphabet in last place

Being written at a slow pace

O

PHIL F.

O stop being thrown like a ball

Stop being like a loose tire

Rolling down a hill

You look like science

Like cells coming together

Like the planets we travel to

Like a cylinder and wider

Like the sun that we get heat from

Do you ever look for your lost brother,

ZERO!?

He's stuck in math

You see him in a word problem

He's evil in multiplication

He's easy in adding

You look like a hand lens

You look like a ball of yarn

And you are two Cs facing each other

You're like a cap for a bottle

You make too much noise

Did you kidnap two U's too?

What time is it?

You know you're a clock face tick-tock

Are you negative or positive?

F

HADDIJATOU B.

F, you're so lazy

You're not even in the word alphabet

gh and ph do all the work for you

While you're flirting with the letter E

Come on man, pump those muscles

Get back to work!

You better hurry before the word fun

Is spelled phun or ghun