

Secret Place For Grades Three Through Six

by Perie Longo

When my daughter Cecily was in third grade, the mother of one of her friends asked why I taught young children poetry. I found myself saying, to discover their inner life, their “secret place,” so to speak. Coincidentally, my daughter and I had just finished reading *The Secret Garden* by Frances H. Burnett. In the chapter titled “Magic,” Colin says, “everything is made out of magic; leaves and trees, flowers and birds, badgers and foxes and squirrels and people. . . . Magic is in me.” All children believe this, and especially sense it when free to explore their world. They just don’t talk about it until given the opportunity.

1. To introduce the lesson, ask who has read or seen *The Secret Garden*. Read the above quote. Ask how many of them have a secret place they like to go to when they are alone or with a special friend. Places begin to emerge: creeks, trees, forts, bedrooms, mountaintops, beaches, a cave in the woods.
2. You might also ask how many travel to places in their imagination.
3. You might read from D. H. Lawrence’s poem “Delight of Being Alone.” He writes, “It makes me realise the delicious pleasure of the moon / that she has in travelling by herself: throughout time . . .” Ask what the students like about being alone.
4. Read the sample poem “My Secret Place.” Ask students if they can guess where the place might be and what gives them a clue.
5. Ask a student to read it, then ask the class which lines or phrases they like. Do they spot any similes? Descriptions? Is there anything they don’t understand?
6. What happens in the poem that is unusual? Is there something that feels magical?
7. What do they think the poet means when she says, “Weather can’t make up its mind / in my secret place?” Discuss what the words *sunshade*, *brightrain*, and *moonbows* might be saying. You could mention that the poet e. e. cummings often ran words together and that poets like to make up words.
8. What do they think the poet is talking about when she says, “Shhhh / Sheep are being counted.” You might mention that writing a poem can feel a little like sleeping.
9. Read “Secret Place” by Cecily Longo. Ask the students what images make her place special. Do they hear any words that sound good together? Read the second poem by Jake as example of an “imaginary place” and discuss similar points. Is there anything magical or special about either of their places?
10. List on the board some questions the students can think about when writing their poem. What does their secret place look like? What do they see, hear, and feel there? Does anything unusual or magic happen there? Does a friend come along?
11. It’s always good to play soft music. Allow ten to fifteen minutes for writing time. Help those who are feeling “stuck” by pointing to the questions.
12. Give the students as much time as possible for sharing their poems.

Time and Materials: One hour for writing and sharing. You will need small, colored index cards cut in half with words printed on them: everyday nouns and verbs from poems or anywhere, really. Students can dip their hands in a paper bag and pick out a few (five or six at most). Words are like magic. One can remind us of hundreds of others, opening up a whole new thought or feeling or pricking the imagination.

Worksheet

My Secret Place

by Perie Longo, poet-teacher

My secret place is full
of cat whiskers and a snake skin
smooth as water with diamonds on its back blazing
like freshly packed snowballs
I bat to the sun
which whistles them down
as poems shouting

Let me out
Hurl me around the world
For everyone to hear

Weather can't make up its mind
in my secret place
full of sunshade

brightrain

moonbows

and child hushes piping music
through pencils Shhhhhh
Sheep are being counted

My Imaginary Football Field

by Jake Knecht, Santa Barbara County

I go when I have nothing else to do.
I ride my bike down there
and pretend there are players running
at me to give me a hug.
I spend almost the whole day there.
I can hear the crowd going wild
when I score a touchdown,
even when I'm pretending.
My favorite time to go there is when
it is raining. I get muddy as a dog
playing in the mud. I play until
it gets dark and I can't see anything
and nobody knows about it.

Secret Place

by Cecily Longo, Santa Barbara County

My secret place
is where bamboo is crisp

Wind whips the tall trees
in twists and turns

Trees grow in creeks
while leaves spin their destiny

Mud banks are cozy and warm
My secret place stays the same
in a storm



Illustration by Student
Kate Wollman of Mendocino County

Prompts

Describe what your secret place looks like.
What do you see, hear, and feel there?
Does anything unusual or magic happen there?
Does a friend come along?