THE LITERARY ANATOMY
Teaching the Cinquain

The Quintet Recipe

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The quintet, popularly known as the cinquain, is a poetic form developed by the American poet Adelaide Crapsey (1878–1914). Closely related to such syllabic forms as the Japanese tanka and haiku, the cinquain consists of five lines with twenty-two syllables (distributed as 2, 4, 6, 8, 2). Crapsey's most famous cinquain, "Triad," uses ellipses and enjambment to add contours to this otherwise stark and regulated form:

http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/175526

The cinquain was one of many minimalist forms that flourished in the early Modernist milieu. Its popularity grew immensely when Carl Sandburg and Louis Untermeyer included Crapsey's work in their respective anthologies, *Cornhuskers* (1918) and *Modern American Poetry* (1919). Her short lyrics, highly personal and compressed in expression, were surprisingly modern. While Amy Lowell, H. D., and Ezra Pound were strangers to her, Crapsey shared their conviction that emotion is well expressed by compressed images—a movement away from the rhetorical excess and extravagance of Georgian poets.

Though the cinquain anticipated poems of the Imagists, it did not share the same avant-garde cache as their work. Nonetheless, the invention of a poetic form by a woman was a radical act. In turn-of-the-century literary life—and society at large—Crapsey (and the other educated women like her) had little or no voice. One of Crapsey's professors, Lucy Maynard Salmon, points out in a letter that the only way that she could publish an opinion about the conflict in Europe was if she signed it, "A Mother," and, similarly, Hilda Doolittle felt compelled to publish under the pen name H.D. (a name given to her by none other than Pound).

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As a teacher of physically and cognitively disabled students at a District 75 school in the Bronx, I find the cinquain a particularly appropriate form for my students to write in. On a pragmatic level, the cinquain has certain advantages: its minimal structure (even the rather rigorous syllabic form) offers a definable freedom. Within shorter structures, students discover obtainable goals.

To begin, I ask each student to raise his or her hand: "Pretend you are showing the sign for stop. A crossing guard uses this a lot." Once every student's hand is up, I say the word *quin-tet*, using the same inflection as *ding-dong*. I ask them to move their hands forward for the first syllable (*quin-*), then back again for the second syllable (*-tet*). We repeat this several times. "How many fingers am I holding up?" Five. "What kind of poem are we going to write today?" The quintet.

After a few weeks of working with the cinquain, some of my students begin to make this gesture independently: seeing me in the hall, they raise their hands, saying "quintet" in lieu of "hello."

For the special needs classroom, I replace the syllabic requirements with a specific word count. I also emphasize specific parts of speech. We follow this quintet recipe:

Line One: Decide on a one-word title. (noun)
Line Two: Choose two words that describe your title. (adjectives)
Line Three: Choose three words that tell something that your subject can do. (verbs)
Line Four: Choose a four-word phrase that describes a feeling about your title. (simple sentence or a fragment)
Line Five: Think of one word that refers back to your title. (synonym)

I often accompany the above exercise with the following anonymous cinquain:

Nanna
Round, soft
Humming, baking, loving
Her lap is for me
Grandma

After we have become familiar with the cinquain form as a group, the students are free to independently explore their voices, subjects, and themes.

War
is evil, it destroys,
hurts, smelly guns, fire
I hate war
It's sticky

—Emmanuel De La Rosa

Snake
poisonous, dangerous
bite, rattle, climb
Snakes can be dangerous
reptile

—Christian Sotomayer

When I first introduced the cinquain in the classroom, I did not know much about Adelaide Crapsey. As I learned more about her life and work, it became apparent that there was an elemental connection between her, the cinquain, and the students I write with in District 75 schools. In addition to being a woman writer in a world that did not have a place for her voice, Crapsey lived in Europe and later in an American sanatorium as she struggled with poor health and a debilitating illness. Many of the students I work with are being raised in settings away from their parents. In addition to being physically challenged and/or cognitively delayed, they suffer from chronic illnesses or pain. Perhaps in Crapsey's embrace of the emotional intensity of Japanese forms was the awareness of limitations and time—she died of tuberculosis at age 36—the subconscious need to say as much as possible in a minimum of words.