



To further my quest to take the stuffiness out of poetry and make it fun, I'll cover cinquains next. This is another throw back to good old Mrs. Schwimmer. It is a five-lined, unrhymed poem with this structure:

**Line 1:** one word (a noun -- the title or subject of the poem).

**Line 2:** two adjectives or words that describe Line 1.

**Line 3:** three verbs (or action words) associated with Line 1.

**Line 4:** four words that express a thought or feeling about the subject.

**Line 5:** one word -- a synonym (or alternate word) for Line 1.

And so, worshipping Mrs. Schwimmer as I did, I immediately sat down to write:

Animals  
Soft, beautiful,  
Running, playing, surviving,  
Some gentle, some fierce,  
Wildlife.

Sunshine  
Bright, glowing,  
Shining, lighting, heating--  
Gives life to Earth,  
Daylight.

Maths  
Hard, fun,  
Add, Subtract, Multiply--  
Useful for the future,  
Arithmetic.

After a while, I got bored of sticking to the rule book and played with the form a little, as you do...

Boys --  
Macho, necessary.  
Steals bases, tackles, flexes biceps.  
Without them what would little girls do?... Nothing! Absolutely  
nothing!  
Hunk.

These were **so** easy to write it wasn't even funny. And after all your work on sonnets and ballads and haiku, you must be shaking your head saying, "You're joking. Is that all there is to it?" Well, no. Mrs. Schwimmer's version of the cinquain was useful in making us think consciously about how we use language. But there is a lot more to the genre courtesy of a young woman by the name of Adelaide Crapsy.

Back in 1910, Adelaide (sorry, I can't call her "Crapsy") was busy reading Japanese haiku and tanka. Her readings led her to create a

new form -- highly influenced by Japanese poetry -- called the cinquain.

It was 5 lines long and had a set syllable count:

Line 1: 2 syllables

Line 2: 4 syllables

Line 3: 6 syllables

Line 4: 8 syllables

Line 5: 2 syllables

This was the traditional form of the poem and it didn't specify how many nouns, verbs and adjectives you had to use. Now, think back to my animal cinquain and compare it to this, the most famous of Adelaide's verses:

#### Triad

These be

Three silent things:

The falling snow...the hour

Before the dawn...the mouth of one

Just dead.

Wow. Quite beautiful, isn't it? It's haunting too considering that she died of tuberculosis shortly after writing it. And, in terms of merit, it stomps on my animal poem with a large and decidedly sharp pair of football cleats. This is a common problem with reading the work of others. Sure, it inspires us. Yes, it is interesting. And ok, we can learn a lot from it and enjoy it. But I do have moments when I read something that someone else has written and I know that I never could have written that myself. Maybe I'm not clever enough. Maybe my university professor is right and my poems suck. Maybe I just don't have "it" -- that poetic equivalent of the X-Factor that makes you

freakin' awesome.

Do you ever feel that way? Do you ever hear a little voice in your head, saying "don't even bother." Bear this in mind: there is not a writer out there who doesn't have to fight off that particular demon or contend with his own unique insecurities. By nature, artistic and imaginative people are among the most tortured souls on the planet. So you are not alone in feeling small in a very big and indifferent universe. And the only way to combat this is to write and keep writing.

Will you be a poet laureate and win prizes? I have no idea. I do know that you are one small, but significant voice. Use it. Record the details of this life and this time -- not only for yourself, but for those future souls that will feel just as uncertain as you do. You have something to add to mankind's perception of life. So write and add your voice to the others. No one took Adelaide's verses seriously. They weren't even published in her lifetime. Because she was such an "insignificant" little writer in the eyes of the critics, she was a bit of an academic joke for many years. But she is freakin' awesome. And you don't have to take my word for that -- I'll let the lady speak for herself:

Snow

Look up. . .

From bleakening hills

Blows down the light, first breath

Of wintry wind. . .look up, and scent

The snow!

Brilliant. I wish I'd written it and I'm jealous -- except for the dying at age 36 part. Adelaide was a poetess who never received recognition for her talents and yet she kept writing. And I'm mightily

glad she did. Not only is her work beautiful, but it is yet more evidence that lack of critical acclaim and popularity does not indicate a lack of talent. So whether life heaps laurels or anonymity on you, praise or criticism, satisfaction or frustration...keep writing. That, incidentally, is why I'm writing this.

## *Traditional Cinquain.*

Here's a brilliant traditional cinquain I found on the internet...

### Shade Tree

by Jeanne Cassler

The oak  
in my backyard  
holds twisted rope and wood  
and knows the name of every child  
that swings.

Now I'd better try a few...

### Bonfire Night

Fountains  
of blue and green  
and yellow rockets make  
me like a child -- believing in  
magic.

Old Things

Relic:

blow off the dust,  
lift with reverent fingers  
this link to the forgotten dead.

Treasure.

Field After the Harvest

Straw-man --

there in the field --  
stuffed, yet somehow hollow.

How many of us are like you,  
Scarecrow?

Venus de Milo

Venus -

Roman goddess  
of love; cast in cold stone  
with no arms for a passionate  
embrace.

Having become well acquainted with traditional cinquains, check out  
this by Jeanne Cassler:

Little Nothings:

Nothing;

motionless void;

lies like clay in God's hands,  
warms to His touch, waits to become

Something.

Nothing;  
an emptiness  
felt for too many years  
fills her heart with a simple need:  
Something.

Nothing;  
my bank account,  
the pockets of my jeans.  
“Someday,” she says, “you’ll be good for  
Something.”...

Nothing  
extracts secrets  
like a kindred spirit.  
Listen, I’m longing to tell you  
Something.

Now that is interesting. Up to this point, we have been dealing with the cinquain as a solitary unit, five lines long and then done. But here Cassler has done something different. She has grouped a series of cinquains under one title. This enables a poet to delve deeper into a topic than five lines allow. A cinquain series – not unlike a sonnet cycle – can be a collection of poems that explore different aspects of one subject or each cinquain can be used as a stanza in a longer poem that develops one idea. Take, for instance, Thomas Greer’s “Sharing”:

Eyes shut,  
biting his lip,  
a solid, dusty, whump!  
announces the summer triumph:  
first catch!

We sit  
on the front porch,  
tugging the loose laces --  
“It was my father’s mitt, then mine,  
now yours.”

Later,  
he gives the mitt  
to his little brother,  
explains the history and says,  
“I’ll share.”

Here, three cinquains are in effect three stanzas telling one story -- that of a baseball mitt used by grandfather, father and sons. And so you see, the cinquain form is evolving with every experiment by a new poet. I like the idea of grouping these poems into a series and so tried my hand at it...

Night  
Lonely  
is the night when  
other tongues are silent  
in sleep and mine can’t utter words  
to pray.

Awake--  
I lie, await  
the nip and peck of doubt,  
the lonely bird’s call of my fears.  
Awake...

my mind  
won't be silent,  
but shrieks and caws until  
night pulls a dark hood of sleep o'er  
its eyes.

Or how about this....

A weed--  
the dandelion  
was pretty in my eyes --  
tufts of sunshine that lined my walk  
to school.

And then,  
overnight,  
they'd change. The sun replaced  
by snow -- flakes sent tumbling on  
the wind

Or breath,  
each parachute  
each flake was potential --  
a beginning they derived from  
the end.

Summer,  
winter, the year's  
seasons were all there in  
in the life of one dandelion,  
one bloom.

Of course, you don't have to go down the serious route. You can, remember, opt for the more modern (and more frivolous) style of cinquain, like these...

### *Modern cinquain.*

Jack-o-Lantern--  
Orange and round,  
Carving, lighting, always frightening --  
That silently laughing mouth.  
Pumpkin.

Autumn--  
Yellow and brown  
crunching leaves, a gusting breeze shaking bare the spindly trees,  
Nature dies while golden.  
Fall.

Now you have a go using whichever style you prefer -- or better yet, try both!