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Of Virtual Poems and Sun-Shadow Mandalas: How Art can Improve Reading and Writing

FRAN CLAGGETT

In the late 1970s, the Bay Area Writing Project at the University of California, Berkeley, published a small monograph titled *Brain Research and the Teaching of Writing*; it contained an essay on clustering by Gabrielle Lussor Rico and a number of classroom-tested activities I had designed for my high school students. The Sun-Shadow Mandala was there, in its embryonic stage; the Lifeline to Literature was there, as was the Universe of Language. Brain research was in its infancy in those days, but some of us could see, in addition to the writing on the wall, the art on the wall.

From that decade on, the walls in my classroom, and soon in classrooms all over the country, were brilliant with color, design, quotations as students learned to incorporate multiple ways of thinking into their projects and papers. Art was no longer a course reserved for the talented few who had room for an extra class in their schedules. Art was no longer divorced from reading and writing. Nor was it a solitary activity as we learned in those days how critical the sharing of ideas could be to generating both art and writing.

I tend to think of that period in my own teaching as the golden days, when we were free to innovate, to offer many courses called English. At one point, when the administration did a survey, they found that 183% of students were enrolled in English classes. It was not unusual for students to take two or even three courses each semester. And teachers could teach their first loves, whether it was Shakespeare or poetry or mythology or, yes, grammar! But the golden days gave way to what we see now—testing, multiple choice, non-fiction book choices only, the five-paragraph essay. Walls are not bare, but too often they contain only the posters of books, not student-generated graphics. Yes, there are still amazingly creative teachers utilizing what is now called “brain-based learning,” but too many have given up the challenges and now use the predictable lesson plans and tests that prepare students for the tests that govern their lives.

While some of you may recognize and use the particular art-based activity I have chosen to feature, many of you will find it new. And for those of you who know it well, I have included what you may not have seen before—the rationale for all aspects of the activity as it relates to our basic commitment—improving both the reading and writing of our students.

The Virtual Poem

The virtual poem exists at the point of intersection among the words on a page, the author’s intent, and the reader’s construct. Like a hologram, the poem appears fully formed but mutable, depending on where one stands. There are givens: the words I read are identical to the words you read. The poet who wrote the words does not change. Standing before this hologram, however, I will not see exactly the same poem that you see. My poem is constructed of the words we both read, but its meaning takes shape from the conjunction of memory and stimulus, from the myriad neural connections that carry all of the components of my being up to this moment and combine them with the stimulus of the new words.

There is more. The poem I see, while not the poem you see, is still comprehensible to us both. We can talk about it as if it were the same poem. In fact, it will change for me as you talk, because your words become part of my own thinking as I read the poem. But there is still more that enables us both to resonate to these words written in this way. Suzanne Langer writes of the symbolic nature of language, an idea widely unacknowledged in a world cluttered with factoids. There are words that transcend our usual way of thinking about language. Water. Rock. Fire. These words are as central to our understanding as the metaphors that enable us to expand our knowledge. They are as deep as myth. They are the archetypes that create of this ungainly world one interpretive community. And so the concept of virtual poem takes on new meaning: it is not just the words, the author,

the reader; it is all these plus the symbolic archetypes that enable both of us to create at least parallel, if not identical, virtual poems.

Wallace Stevens, in “The Rock,” writes, “The rock is the habitation of the whole . . . /The starting point of the human and the end . . .” The poem that I create from Wallace Stevens’s “The Rock” will not be the poem he wrote or the poem that you read. Yet we will be able to talk about it as if it were the same poem because of the archetypal power of rock.

In other poems, a less obvious connection may exist, but it will exist because of the symbolic nature of language. We may be unaware of the role of symbol in our work as we write, but living the conscious life allows us to discover new conjunctions of meaning as we read our own as well as others’ work. I remember Robert Frost, one summer at Bread Loaf, after weeks of feuding with John Ciardi about Ciardi’s belabored interpretation of “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” relenting with a casual growl, “I don’t care if he gets more out of a poem than I put into it; I do that myself.”

How can we learn to give shape and substance to the ephemeral images that flit through our minds as we read and write? Like a dream, the symbolic thinking inherent in the reading/writing process often vanishes as we emerge from being engrossed in a text. Working with color, shape, and symbol, we can tap the creative energy that flows between hand and eye, making the connection between brain and mind.

We have all designed many strategies for helping students develop ways of enhancing their reading and writing. Here, however, I want to detail one strategy—constructing a Sun-Shadow Mandala—which has proven to be enormously powerful as a way of enabling students to access these archetypal images that form the wellspring of both reading and writing.

The Sun-Shadow Mandala

The Sun-Shadow Mandala, a symbolic portrait of an individual, is drawn from images based on seven archetypal categories—animal, plant, color, number, shape, stone, and element (air, earth, fire, or water). Through working with these images in the structure of the mandala, we create metaphors for the dualities inherent in any person—self, other, historical figure, or fictional character. The sun images describe the way the artist sees the subject of the mandala in relation to others, to their environment, to their culture. The shadow

images arise from inner qualities that are frequently hidden, sometimes denied.

Imagine you are the “you” now as you follow the directions for constructing a Sun-Shadow Mandala. Begin with questions: What animal are you most like? What plant? What color? What number? What geometrical shape are you most like? What stone, mineral, or gem? Which of the four elements—air, earth, fire, water—are you most like? (Or what aspect of one of these elements: for water, are you most like—the ocean, a lake, an icicle, rain?) The seven words you generate from these questions are your sun images. Before going further, write an explanation for each of the seven symbols, such as, “I am like a wolf because I live at the edges of civilization.” You may write a single sentence or elaborate on it, using the symbol as a stimulus for an unconstructed flow of ideas.

Turning to the shadow symbols requires thinking in dualities. Begin with your sun animal, say wolf. Choose one quality of the wolf that explains your choice: remote, perhaps. Then search for an opposite concept; in this case, gregarious would do. To find your shadow animal, ask: What animal is most aptly characterized by the descriptor gregarious? I might choose crow. Expanding my thoughts about this shadow animal, I now write, “I am also like a crow; no landscape is foreign to me. Wherever I go, there are those just like me.” You may find that your shadow writing will begin with a disclaimer (“I am not like the because”) or a realization that this symbol characterizes an inner, hidden part of you (“Inside, I am like the ... because”). You might also begin with a qualification: (“Sometimes I am like the ..., especially when I”)

Once you have completed generating all seven sun and seven shadow images and some elaboration for each, you are ready to draw your mandala. The directions for actually drawing the mandala are very simple: within the framework of a circle, using color and shape, but no words, draw or symbolize all of your sun images and all of your shadow images.

Draw. For some, this is a liberating word: draw! For others, it may be intimidating. If so, erase all preconceptions about drawing. Focus on the symbols. You may want to consider how you place things in relation to each other or you

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may want to consider only the way the colors and shapes look together. Gather up marking pens, crayons, watercolors, whatever you like the texture of, the feel of. Get a big piece of paper. Begin.

As you work on your mandala, let your mind follow its bent as you play with how the wolf may interact with the crow, how you can use your sun color, topaz, as the eyes of the wolf, how the amethyst cave provides a den. Or you may find your focus in shape: the meaning of the design will emerge.

When you finish the mandala, create a frame of two sentences. Write a sun-sentence—one sentence using all of your sun images; then write a shadow-sentence. Pay attention to syntax but not too much to meaning. Write the two sentences as a frame around the mandala.

There are any number of writing assignments that spin off from the mandala exercise. The most immediate poetry spinoff is haiku. The personal mandala leads to memoir; the fictional character mandala leads to sophisticated character studies. The idea mandala leads to many kinds of writing, from poetry to interpretation to reflection. But the mandalas themselves create magnificent art pieces that make a room come alive.

The Graphic Design: The Hand, Mind, Eye Connection

There are important aspects to the physical act of graphic designing which I call fixative and reflective. Creating a symbolic graphic such as the sun-shadow mandala fixes the elements of archetypes in the conscious mind; once present in color and design, the reader/writer can reflect on their meaning. The act of drawing enables us to catch hold of the evanescent quality of archetypal imagery that constantly hovers just below our conscious awareness allowing us to become mindful readers and writers. The importance of the hand, mind, eye connection is explored here in another way:

To perceive is to conceive; to conceive is to perceive.

We see what we know; we know what we see.

To write is to extend the circle of knowledge
by extending the ability to perceive.

We begin by drawing.

Think of the mandala as the circle of knowledge.

Making mandalas transforms the circle.

The making of mandalas is the making of metaphor.

Making metaphors is thinking.

(“How do I know what I know?” the child asks:

“What in your circle of knowledge is it like?” we say.

“What is it unlike?”)

We draw the new in terms of the old.

Filled with the imagery of the mandala, we write.

The Sun-Shadow Mandala involves writers in working with dualities found within themselves, other people, or fictional characters as they move from making metaphors, to choosing specific attributes for each metaphor, to integrating them into a circular design.

The use of the terms sun and shadow is consistent with an archetypal approach to metaphor. As writers select their sun images by thinking analytically, considering alternatives, they are using the rational “sun side” or Apollonian aspect of their minds. They arrive at their shadow images by moving through a process of selecting oppositional word choices; in this activity, they are using the Dionysian “shadow side” of their minds associated with the mythology of the moon.

The animal, usually the central image in the sun-shadow mandala, occurs often in literature as poets write from the point of view of an animal that represents the narrator at the archetypal level. Galway Kinnell’s “The Heavy Bear,” Loren Eiseley’s “The Changelings,” Adrienne Rich’s “The Panther” all reveal some sense of self through the animal’s consciousness. Rilke writes of struggling to attain the point of view of a dog. Ted Hughes shows powerful insights into the person who identifies with “Hawk.”

Writers can use the mandala to discover the symbols that hold power for them—a totem animal, perhaps, a stone, or a particular color. Each symbol seems to operate at a different level of awareness, tapping different aspects of character or personality. The shadow images ask the writer to move into more hidden realms, and to delineate the relationship of sun and shadow, first in the mandala, then in the writing that springs from it.

The concept of sun-shadow images arises from considering the place of dualities in literature and in our lives. Although it may seem superficial to think in terms of dualities, our history is filled with philosophies that are built on concepts of opposites. Charles Hampden-Turner’s *Maps of the Mind*, for example, is a graphically depicted history of the philosophies of dualities throughout history. Of course we acknowledge that things are never as simple as good and evil, war and peace, inner and outer, the haves and the have-nots. Being aware of dualities, however, provides insight into the more subtle complexities of personalities and motivations for human behavior.

The making of mandalas, reinforcing as it does the symbolic foundations of reading and writing, asks us to think both visually and symbolically. It reinforces our awareness of the importance of symbol and metaphor, the power of abstractions made concrete, and opposition. It leads us in a natural progression from visualization to drawing to writing—the eye, hand, brain connection.

The act of drawing the mandala requires the writer to show the relationships among the sun and shadow symbols by considerations of size, color, placement, and interaction. As writers visually integrate these seemingly disparate metaphors of character, the developing “whole” of their mandalas, like Buckminster Fuller’s geodesic dome, becomes greater than the sum of its parts. Paradoxically, it also becomes simpler: Willard Gibbs, the scientist, is quoted by Muriel Rukeyser as saying that truth is an accord that actually makes the whole “simpler than its parts.” Multiple layers and dimensions of character emerge. This new understanding, whether conscious or subliminal, sets up a pattern of thinking that is reflected in the depth and richness of writing that flows naturally from the mandala work. The opposition of sun and shadow is a natural stimulus for many kinds of poetry and reflective pieces; it leads easily into sun-shadow sets of haiku, those sharply contrapuntal poems that embrace dualities, leaving the conjunctions to the readers.

In addition to acting as a catalyst for developing visual and metaphorical thinking, the process of comparing aspects of an individual to archetypal symbols, drawing the symbols, then positing reasons for their choices leads readers to a deeper understanding of characters in literature as well as self. As reflective readers begin to uncover both sun and shadow traits of characters in literature and to validate these traits by returning to the text, they become aware of nuances in both character and style. They begin to see the power of the shadow in what an author chooses not to say, and to understand how the unsaid as well as the said can be used to generate meaning. Awareness of subtle personality traits leads readers quite naturally to compare themselves with the literary or historical characters they are exploring, and, as they make these connections, gain insight into the qualities that connect us all as members of the human community.

The Sun-Shadow Mandala is clearly focused to elicit contact with the kinds of archetypal images and symbols that influence us all the time, whether we are mindful of them or not. The process is important as a generative, powerful experience in its own right, but, beyond that, it serves to remind us that language is, at its most basic level, symbolic. I am not

suggesting that we plan our own writing by consciously “putting in” archetypal imagery. What I am suggesting is that we become conscious, aware readers of our own writing as well as of the writing of others.

At this level, when we become cognizant of flickers of meaning that we had not consciously intended, we can begin the real work of writers: re-vision. The first step is easy—the inspired flow. But the next part is where the conscious awareness becomes involved. For years I thought that I was purely a right-brain writer. I never revised my poems or papers. Then, working with a very fine poet, one totally attuned to her inner life and to the immense power of symbol in language, I began to see how I could move from sometimes inspired but also sometimes glib, unexamined poems to more considered pieces. I discovered the act of re-visioning my own work. I came to see that writing is an act of interpretation, no less than reading is an act of composing or creating, and that we must be both composers and interpreters of our own work. Writing from such mandala journeys as I have chronicled here can help us learn to fix the elements of archetypes in our mind, reflect on how they can inform our work, and re-vision our poems. “The poem makes meanings of the rock,” Wallace Stevens writes. Even though our words may sound, to us, like Stevens’ “scrawny cry,” they, too, can carry us, and sometimes our readers, to “a new knowledge of reality.” Both reading and writing, then, will be lifted to new heights, or drawn to deeper depths, as we give shape to the virtual poem.

A Final Note

Of course we cannot recreate that golden era of creativity in the classroom, but we can become conversant with the latest thinking of how brain research can enhance our teaching. Some of you may have watched the current series of brain research television programs that Charlie Rose has produced with the Nobel scientist Eric Kandel. Each program includes specialists in some aspect of brain research and offers tantalizing information that we can use as we continually refine our thinking about the best ways to incorporate all of the modes of learning into our classrooms.

While I no longer teach high school, I have not given up teaching, only now I teach writing in the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at our local university. Teaching is teaching, and it is also learning. I invite you all to join me in resurrecting the art in the English Language Arts.

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Fran Claggett is a teacher, writer, and consultant. She has received many awards, including that of James Lynch Fellow at the University of California Berkeley. Her book *A Measure of Success: From Assignment to Assessment in English Language Arts* received the James Britton Award from NCTE. Fran was awarded the first Lifelong Achievement Award from CATE. She is currently involved with the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Sonoma State University both as a teacher and student. Her latest book is *Crow Crossings: Poems and Prose*, published by RiskPress Foundation with all proceeds going to the Ceres Project.