

# Study Guide for Barrel of Monkeys & Words@PLAY

By Cecelia Pinto, adapted for 2010 by Alexis MacLennan

Every spring, the Chicago Humanities Festival offers **Stages, Sights, and Sounds**, a mix of the best theater, music, dance, puppetry, and visual art the world has to offer. 2010 features three international companies making their Chicago debuts: Scotland's Visible Fictions, Israel's The Galilee Multicultural Theatre, and France's Vélo Théâtre. Two Chicagoans, Frank Maugeri of Redmoon Theater and beatboxer/vocal percussionist Yuri Lane, treat us to brand-new work. At the audience's request, we also welcome back Leah Mann and Ela Lamblin, the dynamic duo behind Lelavision, whose stunning physicality and musical sculptures made it the runaway hit of the 2008 festival.

We have prepared study guides for each of the 2010 performances. These materials will help teachers ready their classes for the 2010 **Stages, Sights, and Sounds** and provide activities and ideas to explore with students long after the Festival is over.

## ABOUT THE CHICAGO HUMANITIES FESTIVAL

The Chicago Humanities Festival (CHF) creates year-round opportunities for people of all ages, backgrounds, and economic circumstances to explore, enjoy, and support the arts and humanities. We accomplish this by presenting programs throughout the year, culminating in two annual Festivals of the Humanities, one in the spring specifically for children and families and one in the fall for the general public. The CHF's mission of providing broad access to the humanities – at a low ticket price – depends in part on the generosity of its most committed and enthusiastic supporters.

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## Lesson Plan:

# Words@PLAY Barrel of Monkeys

Words@PLAY is the Chicago Humanities Festival and the Chicago Park District's nationally recognized poetry program for young people. It is a community-based, after-school arts program that introduces the exploration of poetry and play to youth at neighborhood parks in Chicago. Each week, for ten weeks, recognized and high-energy spoken word artists bring a love of language and expression to park youth ages 8-13, and challenge and inspire them to engage in writing and performance. At the annual **Stages, Sights and Sounds**, a professional theater company called **Barrel of Monkeys** takes poetry written by youth in Words@PLAY and transforms it into vignettes and songs.

### BIOGRAPHY

**Barrel of Monkeys** is an arts-education theater company whose mission is to create an alternative learning environment in which children share their personal voices and celebrate the power of their imaginations. **Barrel of Monkeys** accomplishes this through creative writing workshops and in-school performances of children's stories. **Barrel of Monkeys** also engages the broader community in support of the visions of children through public performance of their work.

**STAGES**  
**SIGHTS &**  
**SOUNDS**

### CONTENTS

In this guide you'll find:

- Four lesson plans recommended for 3rd through 5th grades.
- The activities will take between one and two class sessions.
- This activity can be used in preparation for or in response to the **Barrel of Monkeys** performance with Words@PLAY.

## ACTIVITY: POETIC FOUNDATIONS

### Overview:

This lesson introduces students to the formal study of poetry. A poem looks different from other kinds of writing and it's important that students have some understanding of those differences as they begin to read and write poems.

William Carlos Williams wrote "The Great Figure," to describe something he saw. It is a simple poem but also contains many of the elements important to all poetry including visual imagery, descriptive language, sound, action and story.

**Timeframe:** This activity will take one class session.

### Students Will:

- Read "The Great Figure" by William Carlos Williams.
- Describe the language and imagery of the poem.
- Discuss the form of the poem and why the poet arranged it the way he did.
- Write descriptively about something they saw or heard.

Note: present the poem on a folded piece of paper so that students first view the poem as one long sentence and have the surprise of opening the paper to see the real poem.

### 1. Present the students with the poem written as one long sentence.

Identify and define words with which the students are unfamiliar. This is a good opportunity to try out the sounds that the poem contains, the gong clangs, siren howls and rumbling wheels.

Discuss the poem as a class. Or ask, what does the speaker in the poem see? Ask students to identify the time of day and weather in the poem. Point out the number of verbs in the sentence. Ask, why does this poet use so many verbs and what is he trying to convey to us about his experience by using all these action words?

Ask, where is the speaker? (If you're studying prepositions, here's a good one as the speaker is among the rain.)

## The Great Figure

Among the rain  
and lights  
I saw the figure 5  
in gold  
on a red  
firetruck  
moving tense  
unheeded to gong clangs  
siren howls  
and wheels rumbling  
through the dark city.

-- William Carlos Williams

**2. Present the poem as written by Williams and ask, what's different?**

Ask why the poet has chosen to position the words on various different lines? Why, for example, is firetruck on its own line? A simple answer to this is that the poet wants us to see everything both separately and altogether. And that the firetruck is perhaps the most important thing in the poem.

A more complex answer lies in the poet's interest in imagism, an early 20th century poetry movement that put great emphasis on the image as the embodiment of emotion. (An explanation of imagism is available from the Poetry Foundation at:

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/glossary-term.html?term=Imagism>

Have some conversation about night time, fire trucks, rain, things students may have heard or seen in their neighborhood.

**3. Ask students to rest for a moment and think about something they saw in their neighborhood on the way to school or last night. After a few moments reflection ask them to write about what they saw. Encourage them to use a preposition, color and sound and action words to enliven their poem.**

**EXTENSIONS:**

This poem by William Carlos Williams was inspiration for a painting created by the poet's friend, Charles Demuth, entitled, 'The Figure Five in Gold.' An exciting addition to teaching this poem would be to present Demuth's painting.

<http://www.wisdomportal.com/Christmas/Figure5InGold.html>

Ask students to create tableaux by striking poses to describe the action in the poem. This activity can be employed by individuals, groups or by several students who add to each other's physical description of the poem. For example: how can we use our bodies to show what it look like if we are among the rain and lights?

## ACTIVITY: THE 5 X 5

**Purpose:** Here's a good way to introduce students to the idea of writing poems. Students will draw five words from a hat and then create as many five-word sentences as possible. Experimenting with word orders and combinations, students will learn about using words imaginatively. Students will be able to focus on how creatively they can use the words at their disposal and less on the meaning of their sentences.

The idea of using 'word tickets' comes from Susan Goldsmith Wooldridge's book, *poemcrazy*. It has been adapted for classroom use. If you are working on parts of speech, this is a great way to reinforce your teaching. If you have students that are less facile with language or are new to English this is a good way to help them grow in confidence.

It will be necessary to create a pool of words written or typed on small pieces of paper or as Wooldridge suggests, raffle tickets. Any word that comes to mind is acceptable and the more the better. It's a good idea to have plenty of verbs and nouns as well as descriptive words. This is a bit of work but it's worth doing for the results it will produce.

**Timeframe:** One (1) class period.

### Students Will:

- Experiment as a group with making creative arrangements of randomly selected words.
- Work individually to create as many combinations of their words as possible.
- Read some of their combinations aloud to the class.

On class day, ask four students to come to the front and select a single word without looking at it. (Use a bag, a fishbowl, a top hat, to hold the word tickets)

Rewrite these words on larger pieces of paper and have the four students hold their word aloft so that the class can see the words. Say the words are 'turtle,' 'grandpa,' 'lemon,' and 'sleepy.' Tell the class that they may move one word/person at a time to create a more interesting arrangement.

It may take a few moments but someone will suggest moving 'sleepy' in front of 'grandpa' making the sentence, turtle sleepy grandpa lemon. Someone else will suggest moving 'lemon' in front of 'turtle' and then the sentence reads lemon turtle, sleepy grandpa.

Allow students to only move one word/person at a time; otherwise a single student can create a whole sentence instead of having it be a group project.

Students will take off from there with additional silly, strange, mysterious arrangements of these four words. You can have a couple of groups do this at the front of the class with different tickets.

Distribute five tickets to each student and tell them to make as many sentences with their tickets as possible.

Here are rules that will help make this exercise successful.

- They are to use only these words and cannot add other words. They may pluralize.
- Students cannot argue or complain about their words
- They cannot trade with others but must work with what they have. The exception to this is if a student has say, four nouns and no verbs, or all verbs.
- Eventually, trading is acceptable, either with you or with fellow classmates. However make sure the student has explored all the possibilities of their given words.
- Have each student read some their resulting sentences and congratulate them on the cleverness of their efforts.

### EXTENSIONS:

- Have students identify the parts of speech of each of their words.
- Ask each student to select their favorite five-word sentence and write a brief explanation of what they like about it. Is it funny? Descriptive? Unusual?
- Ask the class to brainstorm what a poem is; write their ideas on the board. Discuss as a class whether the five-word sentences are poems. Why or why not?

### ACTIVITY: EVERYDAY POEMS

**Purpose:** We encounter all sorts of lists in our daily lives, and they are a popular device in literature and poetry as well. Cataloging things from groceries to chores to wishes, lists are a form of condensed language that will be familiar to students. A list or catalog poem can be an excellent way to introduce students to writing poetry. Students will learn that, with creativity, careful word choice, and a sense for sound and rhythm, something as common and seemingly ordinary as a list can become a poem. As is the case with the example in this lesson, list poems often juxtapose contrasting things, making them fun, surprising, and interesting to write and to read.

**TIMEFRAME:** One (1) class period.

#### Students Will:

- Read and discuss the poem “Mothers with a Baby” by Guadalupe Morfin.
- Create a group poem about things a familiar character with a problem might need.
- Write their own poems in the style of “Mothers with a Baby” by Guadalupe Morfin.

### Mothers with a Baby

Mothers with a baby need  
someone to sing them to sleep  
to tell them a story  
promise them a party  
drape them in paper steamers  
give them a candy.

A mother with a baby needs  
someone to tell her how pretty she is  
smelly or not  
and when the baby gets sick  
and won't go to sleep  
the mother with a baby needs  
an elf to bring her a beer  
a fairy to give her a massage  
a prince who will dress her in pajamas  
a cup of hot soup  
a blackboard that will hold a rainbow  
and a chalk  
a big question mark  
a magic wand  
a swing, a kite  
a unicorn  
an enchanted maiden  
who has never had a baby  
and the one who must be told  
what's in store for her,  
who must be told that finally, finally  
even after everything,  
the mother with a baby would never change  
places with an enchanted maiden.

-- Guadalupe Morfin

Present the poem, "Mothers with a Baby," by Guadalupe Morfin. Everyone should have his or her own copy.

Have several students read the poem or parts of the poem aloud.

Talk about what the poem says. Ask, why does a mother with a baby need these things? Why does she need hot soup? Why does she need a magic wand? Be sure to ask about both the realistic and the magical.

Then create a group poem on the board. Select someone with a job that the students will be at least somewhat familiar with: the school janitor, the principal, a fire fighter.

Give that character a problem (take suggestions from students).

So, for example: A crossing guard with sore feet needs...

Have students throw out suggestions and put everything up on the board. Read it aloud when it's finished. Find something positive to say about all contributions.

Ask each student to select someone to write his or her own poem about.

### **ACTIVITY: DICTIONARY POETRY**

**Purpose:** Since poetry is an art form of words, poets need to build a strong vocabulary and use it in inventive ways. Researching words in a dictionary is an important skill in writing, especially in poetry, where vivid images are often achieved through very few words. Focusing their research on a specific letter encourages students to explore the dictionary independently without becoming overwhelmed by the quantity and unfamiliarity of available words. This lesson is also a fun way to learn about alliteration, parts of speech, and to practice using descriptive words.

**TIMEFRAME:** One (1) class period and take-home assignment.

#### **Students Will:**

- Practice research and self-study by looking up words in the dictionary.
- Work as a group to create a poem describing a letter of the alphabet.
- Work independently to write a poem describing an assigned letter of the alphabet.

Assign each student a letter of the alphabet to research.

Using a dictionary, students should find words beginning with their assigned letter that can be used to describe that letter. It's best not to indicate how many words as students tend to focus on rules instead of making their own way.

Model the poetry assignment first by selecting a couple of students to contribute words to a group poem about a particular letter written at the board.

Using the words they found in their research, students should write a poem about their assigned letter. The poem should include

at least a few words from the student's research, but they are free to use other words as well.

An example of a very short response is: The letter L is lovely, long and lonely, sitting by himself.

Because the only requirement is words beginning with the assigned letter, used appropriately, students are free to be creative; at the same time, the use of a research tool is a valuable one for all areas of study.

The completed letter poems can be collected to make an alphabet book with the obvious addition of illustrations if desired.

#### **EXTENSION:**

The alphabet research poem lends itself to Concrete Poetry, wherein the shape of the poem in some way represents the idea of the poem. Have students attempt a concrete poem with their assigned letters.

ex:

T  
H  
E  
L  
E  
T  
T  
E  
R  
L  
I  
S  
LONGLOVELYLONELY

#### **WORKS CITED**

Poems cited in this article came from the following sources: "The Great Figure," W. C. Williams, *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, ed. Richard Ellmann, W.W. Norton & Co, NY, 2003.

#### **RECOMMENDED READING**

*Listener in the Snow, the practice and teaching of poetry*, Mark Statman, Teachers & Writers Collaborative, NY, 2000, ISBN

*Old Faithful, 18 Writers Present Their Favorite Writing Assignments*, ed. Christopher Edgar & Ron Padgett, Teachers & Writers Collaborative, NY, 1995, ISBN 0-915924-45-5

*poemcrazy*, Susan Goldsmith Woolridge, Three Rivers Press, NY, 1997

*The Practice of Poetry*, ed. Robin Behn & Chase Twichell, Quilt/HarperResource, NY 2001, ISBN 0-06-273024-X

*The Teachers & Writers The Handbook of Poetic Forms*, ed. Ron Padgett, Teachers & Writers Collaborative, NY, 2000, ISBN 0-915924-60-9

#### **RECOMMENDED FOR YOUR CLASSROOM LIBRARY**

*The Invisible Ladder, an anthology of contemporary poems for young readers*, ed. Liz Rosenberg, Henry Holt and Co., NY, 1996, ISBN 0-8050-3836-1, ages 8 and up

*This Same Sky, a collection of poems from around the world*, ed. Naomi Shihab Nye, Aladdin Paperbacks, NY, 1996, ISBN 0-689-80630-2, ages 10 and up

*The Tree is Older than You Are, a bilingual gathering of poems and stories*, ed. Naomi Shihab Nye, Aladdin Paperbacks, NY, 1995, ISBN 0-689-82087-9, ages 8 and up