

Why I Teach Campbell McGrath's "Maizel at Shorty's In Kendall"

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Over nearly a dozen years in a high school classroom, I have learned that teenagers have a number of strongly held beliefs about poetry. I am not sure where they come from exactly—I don't see my colleagues passing along these messages—but year after year I hear versions of the three following adages at the beginning of the poetry unit:

- 1.) Poetry is about one's innermost feelings and can only be written when one is inspired.
- 2.) There are no rules for poetry. Anything goes. You can do whatever you want.
- 3.) Poems are keepers of secret hidden messages, which the instructor somehow knows, and which students are supposed to find.

Not only do I disagree with these assumptions, but they seem to be defense mechanisms students use to keep themselves from engaging with poetry. The first two points disqualify any discussion or constructive criticism of student writing and help discount anything new the student may encounter as far as structure or syntax, and the third leads to student frustration. In response, I have designed my poetry curriculum to undercut these beliefs—in what we read, how we discuss it, and in the kind of writing exercises I assign. For many reasons, Campbell McGrath's poem, "Maizel at Shorty's in Kendall," provides an important early step in breaking down student defenses.

Maizel at Shorty's in Kendall

All shift them sugar donuts
been singing to me,
calling to me something crazy in a voice
Dolly Parton'd be proud of—*Maizel, honey,*
eat us up! Like that.
Friendly. Nice and sweet, all
glazed up together in that box, as if they was
happy about being what they
is, surely more than this
jelly-junkie waitress hooked on
Krispy Kremes can say. Halve the moon,
leave a frosted crescent for some other girl.
Maizel, you ain't kidding
no one, honey.
Of a certainty you're going to eat that yourself,
probably soon's you get these BB-
Q
ribs to them boys at table
sixteen. Nice-looking boys, too.

These days we're getting the,
uh, Cuban mostly,
virtually all what you call Hispanic-speaking.
White folks gone moved up to Broward County, like my
ex. *Maizel, you shut*
your mouth about that man! Sweet Gee-
zus, honey, ain't this ring of sugar gold enough?

I teach this poem along with other persona poems to show kids that poems don't have to be about your own experiences. The female waitress who is the speaker of this poem is a far cry from the author himself (a male college professor), so we talk about who the speaker is, and the students can identify her as working class with a limited education. They see this in her diction—"them," in the first line and the contractions in lines 4 and 16—and syntax—"as if they was / happy about being what they / is" (lines 7-9). Through her hesitation and incorrect word choice, students also identify her attempt—and failure—to be politically correct ("These days we're getting the, / uh, Cuban mostly, / virtually all what you call Hispanic-speaking")(20-22). They are able to see and hear the humor in the doughnuts and their siren song to her, and they recognize what that says about her self-image. They see a young woman torn between desire and disappointment. Her critical self-image is evident in her definition of herself as "this / jelly-junkie waitress hooked on / Krispy Kremes" who is tempted to take only half a doughnut (9-11), but she can also admit to herself the bitter reality: "*Of a certainty you're going to eat that yourself*" (15). They also see her loneliness in the way she notices the "Nice-looking boys" at table sixteen (a shrinking commodity these days in her mind) a few lines before mentioning her ex (19). In the end, she settles for the temporary satisfaction of a "ring of sugar" rather than the more lasting and meaningful engagement or wedding ring she appears to desire (26). With both Maizel and the Krispy Kremes taking turns speaking, this is really a double persona poem, even if the doughnut voices are in her head. (I later give students an assignment where they write from the point of view of an animal or inanimate object, and while I give them specific models for that, this is another opportunity to point out such a strategy.) Identifying how these techniques develop her character helps the students see both the poet's craft and the distance between the poet and the persona he has created.

After we have talked about the content for a while, I take the opportunity to turn their attention to form. In some classes a student will comment on or ask about the one-letter line, "Q," which is also a good time to make the transition (17). I have them look down the left-hand margin. Almost without exception, none of them have noticed that this is an abecedarian poem. It makes for a moment of awe. They are impressed by what the poet has pulled off and note other things about the poem they had questions about, like the spelling "Gee-zus" (25-26). Identifying the formal structure leads students to see that poems may be a result of authorial intent as much as inspiration or happy accident, that in this case the author chose particular words because they fit the abecedarian format. This is an important discovery for students to make because it undercuts the first two presuppositions many of them bring to the study of poetry, while simultaneously offering evidence that close, careful reading of a text may help them more fully appreciate and understand a poem.

I use "Maizel at Shorty's in Kendall" as the beginning of teaching them about poetic forms. I will show them other abecedarian poems, as well as more complex forms, like sonnets, pantoums, villanelles, ghazals, and sestinas, but for now it's a chance to point out how poets use

structures to inspire them and drive their poems forward. That “uh” (21), that moment’s hesitation as she tries to find the socially acceptable term to cover for her racism seems to me something McGrath may have discovered due to the constraints of the form, and it prepares us perfectly for the stumble (“what you call Hispanic-speaking”) which the students recognize as her revealing the biases she’s trying to hide (22). It’s a great example of the poet showing us her character rather than telling us or editorializing. In fact, the students often have a great deal of sympathy for Maizel and her situation, even as they criticize her racial attitudes.

While poetry may not have strict rules like math and science do, it does have forms and techniques that writers use to shape their poems. I encourage students to look at a poem’s architecture as a way of reading closely—that the artist doesn’t hide meanings, but that looking at the structure of a poem may reveal such things. “Maizel at Shorty’s in Kendall” is a poem that is accessible to beginning poetry readers and also rewards closer reading. It’s a poem I use to defuse preconceptions about poetry while also introducing formal aspects of the composition process to students. Best of all, perhaps, it’s a poem that students like initially and like even more with additional explication and exploration. After reading and discussing it, those defense mechanisms I mentioned in the first paragraph start to fade, and I find students more open to looking at how other poems engage and affect us.

Work Cited

McGrath, Campbell. “Maizel at Shorty’s in Kendall.” *Florida Poems*. New York: Ecco Press/HarperCollins, 2002. 59. Print.