

LESSON FOR W.S. MERWIN'S "AFTER THE ALPHABETS"

Read "After the Alphabets" by W.S. Merwin at :

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?contentId=36925>

Discussion questions for "After the Alphabets":

Merwin says that he is "trying to decipher the language of insects." When you hear insects or animals such as birds communicating, what do you imagine they might be communicating about?

In trying to decipher their language, Merwin says the insects "are the tongues of the future." This is not necessarily an expected description for insects or their language, yet it suggests an idea and a feeling the reader might consider about insects. What do you think that idea or feeling might be?

Why might insects "describe buildings as food?" What kind of insects do you imagine Merwin is suggesting with this line?

How is it possible for insects (or anything or anyone) to "convey what they do not know?" In his essay "Dante (1929)," T.S. Eliot says that "Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood." Might Eliot's quote (and poetry itself) present another version of the tenuous relationship between communication and knowing?

Merwin ends the poem by declaring that insects "are never important they are everything." How can something be "never important," but also be "everything?" Are there other examples you can think of where something (or someone) lacks importance, but is essential, or vast in nature or meaning?

Literary Devices, Vocabulary, and Etymology:

☐ anaphora—a type of parallel structure in which successive phrases in a sentence or paragraph (or in lines of poetry) begin with the same word or words. The Academy of American Poets notes several ways in which anaphora can impact a poem, from it becoming like a litany (recitation or prayer in a religious service) to intensifying emotion to simply creating a rhythm. Merwin makes significant use of anaphora in "After the Alphabets." What effect do you think Merwin's anaphora has?

☐ paradox—a seemingly self-contradictory statement that, when further considered, could be found to be true. Where do you think Merwin presents a paradox in the poem?

■ decipher—the word “decipher” (which means to discover the meaning of something) contains the word “cipher,” which has several meanings, from a secret way of writing (such as a code) to the figure for the number zero (0). The word “cipher” came from the Old French word “cifre” (which meant zero), and that word originated from the Arabic word “sifr,” which meant “empty or nothing.” Combined with the prefix “de-,” one could say, in a sense that “decipher” represents the “reversal of emptiness,” especially when it comes to the idea of meaning.

Making Connections:

Entomologist Justin Schmidt created an index for the levels of pain that can result from a variety of insect stings. His descriptions are often described as poetic. Find “Schmidt’s Sting Pain Index” at the link below, and consider the poetic nature of his descriptions:

<https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/the-colorful-pain-index-of-the-stinging-ants-bees-and-wasps-around-the-world>

Writing Activities:

Write your own poem that deciphers the sounds of a specific insect or animal.

Alternately, write an ode to the insect that you most admire or that you most fear.

In either of the choices above, consider using anaphora and / or paradox.