

A Circle of Friends

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This note is to point to a bit of the structure of a brilliant poem by one of Brasil's greatest poets of the twentieth century – Carlos Drummond de Andrade. (By the way, you should also know that one of Brasil's greatest poet-musicians, Milton Nascimento, has made this poem into a beautiful song. You can hear it on his record *Clube da Esquina*.)

CANÇÃO AMIGA

Eu preparo uma canção
em que minha mãe se reconheça,
todas as mães se reconheçam,
e que fale como dois olhos.

Caminho por uma rua
que passa em muitos países.
Se não me ~~vêem~~, eu ~~vejo~~
e saúdo ~~velhos~~ amigos.

Eu ~~dist~~ribuo um ~~segrêdo~~
como quem ama ou sorri.
No ~~jeito~~ mais natural
dois ~~carinhos~~ se procuram.

Minha ~~vida~~, nossas ~~vidas~~
formam um só diamante.
Aprendi ~~novas~~ ~~palavras~~
e tornei outras mais belas.

Eu preparo uma canção
que faça acordar os homens
e adormecer as crianças.

SONG-FRIEND

I am preparing a song
in which my mother will recognize herself,
all mothers recognize themselves,
and which will speak like two eyes.

I am walking along a street
which passes through many countries.
If they don't see me, I see
and greet old friends.

I am distributing a secret
like one who loves or smiles.
In the most natural way
two caresses are looking for each other.

My life, our lives,
form one lone diamond.
I learned new words
and made others more beautiful.

I am preparing a song
which will awake all men
and put to sleep all children.

Carlos Drummond de Andrade
Novas Poemas 1946-1947

There are many images of friendship that intertwine through the poem, but maybe one of the most central ones is the sentence that begins the fourth verse: we are all facets of one great shining diamond.

The subject(s) of this sentence is a repeated word – *vida(s)*, “life, lives” – a word that begins with *v*, as does the only other word that repeats within the same line: the verb *ver*, which means “see,” in line 7. This double repetition is a way of

saying, in the language of poetry, that the two concepts of vision (or perception in general) and life are central in this poem. We find corroboration for this conclusion in the highly visible repetitions in the first verse, where a verb, *reconhecer*, “to recognize,” and a noun, *mãe*, “mother,” are repeated in lines 2 and 3. To recognize, we must first perceive; to be born, to have a life, we need a mother. So when the poet chooses to return to the idea of perception in line 7 with a repeated word beginning with *v*, and to the idea of life with another repeated word in *v* in line 13, he salientizes the sound *v* itself. We then must ask: where are the other instances of *v* in the poem? Are they too articulating some kind of important linking?

The answer is that there are in fact very few *v*'s in the poem. They are found in *ver*, the word for seeing – which is one of the ways towards the truth – and *velhos amigos*, “old friends” – the epitome of friendship. The next *v*-word is the word for life itself, and finally we find *v* in the two words which concern language: *novas palavras* – the new words we must find and make more brilliant, in order to let our minds move in new ways. And just as these concepts – vision, friendship, new language – circle around the central image of human life as consisting of the numberless set of facets that form the shining surface of a great diamond, so we find that six of the poem's *v*'s form a circle that contains the seventh, the *v* of *vidas*, the word that may be the most central of all, since each life is one facet of the great jewel. So we find a circle in an unusual place – in the visual representation of a beautiful poem.

One further suggestion: if we follow the occurrences of the root *am-*, which forms the basis of the verb *amar*, “to love,” and of *amigo*, “friend,” as well as of *amiga*, “female friend,” which is salientized by being part of the title, we find that both of the occurrences of *am-* in the body of the poem are contained within the circle of *v*'s. *Amigo*, “friend,” appears in line 8, the second line that is contained in the circle of *v*'s, and *ama*, “loves,” in the fourth line, the second even line of the circle. “Officially,” there are no more occurrences of the root *am-* ... but look in line 6, the next even line of the circle, where we would expect to find love again – and we find there the touchings that connect lovers: *dois carinhos*, “two caresses.” And finally, look at the end of the fourth even line of the circle: *diamante*. The last six letters in this word spell another word that is based on *am-*: *amante*, “lover.” Can it be that the poet is letting us resee the central word *diamante* in such a way that we come to feel a kind of truth, in what Robert Frost called a deep pun? Does this circle help to let us see the ball of the great *diamante* as being formed of facets which are lovers? I leave this question for each reader to muse upon for themselves.

The poem returns to the image of music for its ending. It is at once a clarion call to wake us adults to the truth of the centrality of love for all of life, and the soft song from an adult to a beloved child in their arms, to lull the child in us to the warmth of trusting sleep. I offer you Drummond's great round jewel, in the hopes that it will ring in your hearts, as it does in mine.