

Notes and Discussion Questions for “Coins” by Richard Newman

The feature article in this issue of *English Teaching Forum* provides information that will help you better understand the poem “Coins” by Richard Newman, which appears on the next page. For example, the poem mentions a *nickel*, *quarters*, a *dime*, and *pennies*. The poem also refers to the *presidential heads* of the coins. All of the coins mentioned in the poem are discussed in the “U.S. Coins” article, and photos show you what they look like. The article also explains that the heads of U.S. presidents appear on the coins.

Using information from the article about coins and the activities outlined below, you will be able to lead your students to an understanding and appreciation of the poem.

Background

In the poem “Coins,” the speaker of the poem is standing in line waiting to buy something at a convenience store. (Note: you’ll want to tell your students that when a poem is written in the first person, we refer to the “I” of the poem as the *speaker*.) While the speaker waits his turn to pay for his purchase, he is examining the coins he has in his hand. He imagines where those coins had been before he acquired them and where they will go after he spends them.

Pre-reading

Tell students that they are going to read a poem about coins by an American poet. Teach students the names of the American coins used in the poem—*penny* (one cent), *nickel* (five cents), *dime* (10 cents), *quarter* (25 cents). Using the information in the feature article, you can draw circles on the board to represent each of the coins; the circles should not all be the same size (for example, the dime is the smallest coin and the quarter is the largest).

Introduce your students to other words that might be unfamiliar to them or are familiar words used in a less familiar form—for example, *change* and *charm* are nouns in the poem, and students might be more familiar with using them as verbs; students might know the noun *cake* but not understand *caked*. To help you with vocabulary, a glossary appears on page 56.

Reading

Write the poem on the board, or make copies for students to share. Then begin by reading the poem aloud to your students. (If students have their own copies of the poem, they can follow the text as you read, marking any words they do not understand.) Depending on the level of your students, you might have to read the poem more than once. Then ask students to read the poem to themselves before you begin to discuss it.

Post-reading Discussion Questions

You can pose these questions to the whole class or have small groups of students discuss the questions and then, as a whole class, have groups compare their answers to the questions. Either use all of the questions or choose the ones you think your students will find most interesting. Write the questions on the board. Or, as a listening exercise for more advanced students, you might want to dictate some of the questions and have the students write them down to use during their discussions.

1. What specific coins does the speaker have in his hand?
2. What details does the speaker notice about each of the coins?
3. How old is the speaker? How do you know that?
4. Does the same meaning of the word *brighter* apply to the penny and to the speaker? Which meaning of the word applies to the penny and which applies to the speaker? [If students have a dictionary, they can look up *bright* and discuss the many meanings of this word.]
5. Where does the speaker imagine the coins had been before he got them?
6. What simile does the speaker use to describe how the coins circulate?
(A simile is a comparison of two unlike things, using *like* or *as*.) What does this comparison tell you about the coins?
7. How does the speaker describe the check-out girl? What other details can you imagine about her because of that description? How old do you think she is?
8. What three things does the speaker imagine will happen to his coins after he has spent them? Can you imagine other things that might happen to the coins?
9. Does your country’s money system include coins? If so, discuss your own experiences with coins.
 - What do your coins look like?
 - Do you buy things with coins? What kinds of things do you buy?
 - Do you have other uses for coins? Give examples.
 - Do you have any special coins that you don’t want to spend? Where did you get the coins? Where do you keep them? Can you imagine giving the coins to someone else some day? If yes, who? Why would you give the coins to that person?

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BY TED KOOSER, U.S. POET LAUREATE, 2004-2006

Midwestern poet Richard Newman traces the imaginary life of coins as a connection between people. The coins—seemingly of little value—become a ceremonial and communal currency.

Coins

My change: a nickel caked with finger grime;
two nicked quarters not long for this life, worth
more for keeping dead eyes shut than bus fare;
a dime, shining in sunshine like a new dime;
grubby pennies, one stamped the year of my birth,
no brighter than I from 40 years of wear.

What purses, piggy banks, and window sills
have these coins known, their presidential heads
pinched into what beggar's chalky palm—
they circulate like tarnished red blood cells,
all of us exchanging the merest film
of our lives, and the lives of those long dead.

And now my turn in the convenience store,
I hand over my fist of change, still warm,
to the bored, lip-pierced check-out girl, once more
to be spun down cigarette machines, hurled
in fountains, flipped for luck—these dirty charms
chiming in the dark pockets of the world.

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A piggy bank

Glossary

bright *adj.* — having a shiny, luminous surface; intelligent, lively, cheerful.

bus fare *n.* — the amount charged to ride a bus, often paid in coins.

cake *v.* — to cover with a thick layer of compacted matter: *Her shoes were caked with mud.*

chalky *adj.* — like chalk, covered with chalk; pale, somewhat white.

change *n.* — coins of small value regarded collectively; for example, *a handful of change.*

charm *n.* — a small ornament, such as one worn on a bracelet.

check-out girl *n.* — a girl who works at a check-out counter in a store; customers pay the check-out girl for their purchases.

chime *v.* — to produce a musical sound by striking a bell, a gong, etc.; to ring harmoniously, as a set of bells.

convenience store *n.* — a small store that sells basic items, such as packaged foods and snacks, and that opens early and stays open late for the convenience of shoppers.

grime *n.* — dirt, soot, or other filthy matter, especially when it is stuck to a surface.

grubby *adj.* — dirty, grimy.

hand over *v.* — to transfer control of (something) to someone else.

hurl *v.* — to throw forcefully, suddenly, or casually.

merest *adj. superlative* — smallest, least, slightest: *The room had the merest scent of roses.*

nick *v.* — to make a shallow cut in (something): *He nicked his finger with the knife.*

palm *n.* — the inside surface of the human hand.

piggy bank *n.* — a small bank shaped like a pig with a slot at the top to take in small coins.

red blood cell *n.* — a cell in the blood of vertebrates that carries oxygen and carbon dioxide to and from the tissues. Red blood cells contain hemoglobin, a pigment that gives blood its red color.

spin *v.* — to cause to turn around rapidly; past tense: *spun.*

tarnish *v.* — to dull the shine of a metallic surface, especially by oxidation; to diminish the purity of.

window sill *n.* — a flat, horizontal piece of wood at the bottom of a window frame. A window sill forms a small shelf on which objects can be placed.

About the Poet

Richard Newman is from the area of the United States known as the Midwest. Besides being a poet, he is a university professor in St. Louis, Missouri. To learn more about him and read other poems he has written, visit this website: <http://www.vacuumpacked.net/>