

Emotional Equations

By: Taylor Johnson

Education level: High school

Genre: Poetry

Time frame: One 60 minute class period

Objective: Students will explore a model poem that uses the language of equations in poetry, then create their own 'emotional equations' as short poems.

Prior knowledge and skills: If students can be introduced to the concept of an eclogue beforehand with other poetic examples of the form, that might enrich their understanding of this poem's literary tradition and context, but it is not necessary.

Required materials: Paper, pencils or pens, [companion slideshow](#), [glossary of vocab words](#), [YouTube video of the author reading a shortened version of the poem](#)

Literary model: Based on Marcelo Hernandez Castillo's "Eclogue: A Field Guide and Cure"

Sequence of activities:

1. Opening Frame (0–5 min)

Introduce the poet and concept:

Marcelo Hernandez Castillo walks around Folsom Prison documenting plants and their healing powers. In this poem, he mixes the language of healing with the language of math—trying to make sense of pain, guilt, and love as if they were equations.

Ask: "Have you ever tried to make sense of something that didn't make sense—by turning it into numbers, patterns, or rules?"

2. Reading (10-15 min)

Play the YouTube video and/or read the poem aloud from the slides, with students taking turns reading sections. Encourage them to listen for the many examples of emotional equations in the poem. Provide the glossary to help decode unfamiliar vocabulary.

3. Unpacking (10 min)

On the board, draw an equals sign (=). Ask:

- What are some real equations you remember from school?
- What emotional equations did the poet write? (maps – borders = debt, tragedy + time = comedy...)
- What might he be trying to solve with those equations? What can't be solved that way?

4. Writing Jump-Off Prompts (15–25 min)

Option A: Write your own emotional equation. Start with:

If _____ + _____ = _____

Then expand it into a short poem that shows what the equation feels like.

Option B: Start writing your own poem with a line from the poem:

- “There is shame here but not how you imagine it.”
- “In your imagination of his crime, there must be a gold bell.”
- See if you can work in some equations to your own poem just like the poet does.

5. Closing / Share-Out (5-10 min)

Invite volunteers to share their poems / emotional equations.

Reflect together:

- What’s something in your life that doesn’t add up, yet you keep trying to understand it?
- What would your equation for healing look like?