



Ekphrastic Poetry Lesson

Lesson Summary: Students will write a ten-line poem inspired by an artwork.

Materials needed:

- Artwork reproductions to hand out or project in the classroom
- Paper and pencils
- Optional: Observation Worksheet (attached), Selected Poetry Terms (attached), scissors

Procedure:

1. Introduce the concept of ekphrastic poetry to your students
 - Definition: a poem inspired by a work of art
 - Read example below and briefly discuss how text and image relate, what point of view the poet chose, etc.

Some classic examples of ekphrastic poetry:

<http://dwpoet.com/gins.html>, <http://dwpoet.com/sullivan.html>
<http://www.english.emory.edu/classes/paintings&poems/classicscene.html>

2. To model the process, project an artwork and observe/discuss it as a group. Record group observations for the class. Suggested questions:
 - List the first words that come to mind when you look at this artwork.
 - What is happening in this artwork? What story is being told?
 - Who or what is the subject of the painting? How would you describe them?
 - What is the mood of the artwork? What sounds, smells, feelings, tastes could you associate with it?
 - How does this artwork connect with you personally? Why did you choose it?
 - Now that you have closely observed the artwork, how would you summarize its main idea?
3. Demonstrate how the group observations could form a departure point for a poem by circling words or phrases and composing the first line of a poem. If students need more guidance on common poetic techniques, go over Selected Poetry Terms (attached).
4. Brainstorm approaches to writing an ekphrastic poem. Some examples:
 - Account of the experience of seeing the artwork
 - Story about the scene or subject of the artwork
 - Conversation between two people or elements in the artwork
5. Project second artwork and have students individually free associate for ten minutes. This free association will serve as a departure point for their poem. For a more formal experience, use the Observation Worksheet (attached).

6. Instruct students to circle words or phrases to use in composing a ten-line poem. They don't have to follow any other rules for the poem; it can simply be free verse. (Alternately, have students cut up and reassemble their words into a poem.)
7. Have students share their poems in pairs or small groups. Provide suggested discussion questions:
 - What similarities do you notice in the way that the people in your group interpreted the artwork?
 - What differences do you find?
8. Start a reflective discussion, either having individuals read an excerpt or having group leaders report on the discussion.

Suggested Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM) Artworks



The Lost Balloon, 1882
William Holbrook Beard
oil on canvas
47 3/4 x 33 3/4 in. (121.3 x 85.7 cm.)
Museum purchase
1982.41.1

http://americanart.si.edu/images/1982/1982.41.1_1a.jpg



Subway, ca. 1934
Lily Furedi
oil on canvas
39 x 48 1/4 in. (99.1 x 122.6 cm.)
Transfer from the U.S. Department of the Interior,
National Park Service
1965.18.43

http://americanart.si.edu/images/1965/1965.18.43_1a.jpg



Interception, 1996
Mark Tansey
oil on canvas
71 1/4 x 108 1/4 in. (181.0 x 275.0 cm.)
Museum purchase made possible by the American Art
Forum
1996.78

http://americanart.si.edu/images/1996/1996.78_1a.jpg



Cape Cod Morning, 1950
Edward Hopper
oil on canvas
34 1/8 x 40 1/4 in. (86.7 x 102.3 cm.)
Gift of the Sara Roby Foundation
1986.6.92

http://americanart.si.edu/images/1986/1986.6.92_1a.jpg



Café, ca. 1939-1940
William H. Johnson
oil on paperboard
36 1/2 x 28 3/8 in. (92.7 x 72.2 cm.)
Gift of the Harmon Foundation
1967.59.669

http://americanart.si.edu/images/1967/1967.59.669_1a.jpg



The Girl I Left Behind Me, 1870-1875
Eastman Johnson
oil on canvas
42 x 34 7/8 in. (106.7 x 88.7 cm.)
Museum purchase made possible in part by Mrs.
Alexander Hamilton Rice in memory of her husband and
by Ralph Cross Johnson
1986.79

http://americanart.si.edu/images/1986/1986.79_1a.jpg



Observation Worksheet

List the first words that come to mind when you look at this artwork.

PLOT: What is happening in this artwork? What story is being told?

CHARACTER: Who or what is the subject of the painting? How would you describe them?

SETTING: What is the mood of the artwork? What sounds, smells, feelings, tastes could you associate with it?

How does this artwork connect with you personally? Why did you choose it?

MAIN IDEA: Now that you have closely observed the artwork, how would you summarize its main idea?

After you have completed this worksheet, go back and circle any words or phrases you might want to incorporate into a poem about the artwork.

Selected Poetry Terms

Consider using these tools when writing your poem.

Alliteration: the repetition of a sound at the beginning of two or more neighboring words

Example: "I have **stood still** and **stopped** the sound of feet" (from "Acquainted with the Night" by Robert Frost)

Metaphor: a figure of speech in which a word or phrase meaning one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a similarity between them

Example:

"The fog comes
on little cat feet.
It sits looking
over harbor and city
on silent haunches
and then moves on."
(From "The Fog" by Carl Sandburg)

Personification: the representation of a thing or idea as a person or by the human form

Example:

"I like to see it lap the miles,
And lick the valleys up,
And stop to feed itself at tanks..."
(From "The Railway Train" by Emily Dickinson)

Repetition: the act or an instance of repeating

Example:

"**Because I do not hope** to turn again
Because I do not hope
Because I do not hope to turn..."
(From "Ash Wednesday" by T. S. Eliot)

Rhyme: close similarity in the final sounds of two or more words or lines of verse

Example:

"Sometime too hot the eye of heaven **shines**,
And often is his gold complexion **dimmed**;
And every fair from fair sometime **declines**,
By chance, or nature's changing course **untrimmed**."
(From "Shall I Compare Thee..." by William Shakespeare)

Simile: a figure of speech in which things different in kind or quality are compared by the use of the word *like* or *as*

Example:

"**O My Luve's like a red, red rose**,
That's newly sprung in June;
O My Luve's like the melodie
That's sweetly played in tune."
(From "A Red, Red Rose" by Robert Burns)

Definitions taken from Merriam Webster's Student Dictionary