



## 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](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](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](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](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](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](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.

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

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

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

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

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

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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*