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Demystifying Poetry Using Women's Ekphrasis

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Poetry is a mysterious medium for students. They respond to it on an emotional level, and that response is usually something like "Yuck!" Even when students enter an honors or an AP English course, where the students are clearly driven or they would not have chosen to sign up for the class in the first place, those same driven students still approach poetry lessons with a sense of foreboding. Ekphrastic poetry, however, provides an entry point for students into a poem. When students read an ekphrastic poem they suddenly feel that basic comprehension of a poem is actually possible—yet simple comprehension is rarely what a teacher is seeking. Ekphrasis is useful because it easily leads into a dialogue about the form and function of a poem and its components. This unit seeks to take students who dislike poetry and know little about it, and transform them into sophisticated and perceptive readers of poetry. By the end of the unit the students will have analyzed 13 poems, taught an ekphrastic poem, completed activities mimicking AP test questions, created their own ekphrastic poem, and written an explanation of how they used form and literary devices to create meaning in their poem.

(Developed for AP English Literature, grade 12; recommended for English, grades 11-12)

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