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Exploring Cultural Conflict through Poetry and Art

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"I am the Great Gray Rock. Pay attention while I tell how the great country of Mali came to be" (1). This is the text taken from the very first page of Will Eisner's adaptation of the Sundiata. Now, if you are an English teacher, you may have already correctly identified this as an example of figurative language, but did you know that it is part of a long tradition of ekphrastic writing that can be traced all the way back to ancient Greece? Ekphrasis, or the written depiction of a visual representation, has always been an important part of our literary tradition and recognizing it can help students read well beyond a literal interpretation when engaging with text. Since the study of ekphrasis directs readers to both the visual representation and the text, they are forced to engage in the relationship between the two, and this will occur in both the study of prose and poetry. In fact, reading an ekphrastic poem is basically an interpretive exercise concerning both the art and poetry and it requires the reader to see beyond the superficial. It is my hope that students will realize that the known is uninformative and it is the new and different that opens the eyes and the mind. Art, like the written word, requires active reading, and active reading requires the individual to draw deeply from her own reservoir of personal experiences, regardless of the source. Art, like literary texts, once read and reread, can challenge individual perceptions and prejudices, forcing an individual to see the world and its people through a new lens. Like the Great Gray Rock, I want my students to have a voice and to exercise it as they engage with and respond to visual and written text. Fortunately, as a high school English teacher, I have the opportunity to use literature, but in this case ekphrastic poetry, and art, to challenge my students to explore known and unknown worlds and create a new way of seeing and reading.

At the time of writing I will be teaching English 12 honors in the fall. Since this is a world literature course with a portfolio-driven, skills-based curriculum, I have considerable leeway in choosing the materials to use with my class. Now, although these classes may be called "honors," most of my students, many of whom are college-bound and sometimes motivated, are not always strong, independent readers. Moreover, classes at my high school are blocked, meaning that the course is scheduled for a ninety-minute block each day for only half the school year. Furthermore, in case that hasn't complicated things enough, many of my students, as part of their vocational training, work between 20 and 30 hours a week. Therefore, whatever sequence of materials I plan to cover in class must not only include time for the actual reading and discussion of any literary text but fit together so seamlessly that little time is lost when we transition from one text/unit to the next. My plan in view of these complications is to assist my students in delving deeper into two of the major literary selections we read, *Things Fall Apart* and *The Kite Runner*, by adding some carefully selected examples of ekphrastic poetry and its related artwork and then using these materials as a springboard for the exploration and study of the art, attitudes, and prejudices these literary works challenge.

Exactly what does it mean to delve deeper into a text and why should I bother? Well, if a person is either involved in public education or concerned about what teachers do and how they do it, then she is aware of our current commitment to more standards-based instruction and the philosophy that depth is more important than breadth when developing and implementing classroom curriculum. Even though I refrain from using a lot of educational jargon, I most certainly embrace standards-based education and continue to build my classroom curriculum around certain essential questions that allow me to share important literary works with my students, address the ELA standards for twelfth grade, prepare my students for the mandated district reading and writing assessments, and more importantly assist them in their transition from high school to college or work by strengthening their reading and writing skills through the study of materials that challenge the way they look at the world and the role they play in it.

For example, if I want my students to embrace a more global perspective, I need to provide them with carefully orchestrated opportunities to examine many of the traditional attitudes and stereotypes that we have adopted about people and cultures so they may revisit, reassess and hopefully revise some of the conclusions they may have reached or beliefs they may have formed, especially those based on incomplete or inaccurate information. Of course, if I want to remain true to this model, I cannot just pass along my world vision: I have to give my students the opportunity to do more independent, possibly group-based activities where they investigate additional texts that can be directly tied to the major selections and give them a more complete understanding of the time periods, geographical locations, and cultural attitudes and stereotypes at issue. For me, delving deeper into the text means helping my students build more of the required historical, cultural, and geographical background directly and indirectly related to the major literary works we study. In this way, I will scaffold the material so that students can begin to make new connections and possibly draw fresh conclusions.

What Does This Mean?

When I started teaching I worked predominately with ninth grade students. In many ways, this is a wonderful thing. For a high school teacher, this is often the grade level where both teacher and students can most easily see and measure individual student growth as both a reader and a writer. It is at this particular grade level that students often feel the most empowered and the most rewarded. Of course, since the vocational district is not part of the normal school district feeder pattern, all of our students apply to our district from their assigned districts. From an administrative and student perspective, this application process can actually benefit most students, but it can present an interesting challenge for the ninth grade teacher who must now make sure all students meet the same standards in reading and writing.

Helping all students meet this kind of growth requires active engagement. To this end, many ELA teachers are familiar with the constructionist theory of Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky is the Russian psychologist who provided much of the foundation of what we know about child development and learning and who promoted the importance of allowing children to construct their own knowledge of what they read. By adding the study of ekphrastic poetry and prose, I will offer more and more authentic opportunities for active engagement with text, an essential component of the entire reading process. My students will begin by examining the dialogue between poet and artist, but eventually they will move on to the careful analysis and evaluation of the literary and the visual and the subsequent creation of their own dialogues, as evidenced by their original ekphrastic creations. Sounds easy, right?

What Will I Do?

Delving deeper isn't as easy as it sounds. The constraints of time, materials, skills, and motivation can seem

overwhelming. My students are often quite literal in their interpretations and rarely question why something has been included in a story or how its omission could even change a story. Their literary conversations sometimes never go beyond the most basic knowledge and obvious interpretations. Therefore, if I want them to begin moving up Bloom's level of taxonomy, then I have to have them begin analyzing, evaluating, synthesizing, and creating. Like it or not, it is my job to motivate and encourage their continued engagement with text. After having completed my research, I believe that by integrating the study of selected ekphrastic poems and prose into my current course work, I can actually strengthen individual reading skills, build geographical and cultural background, and address the twelfth grade reading and writing standards.

I don't expect anyone to believe for a minute that the study of ekphrastic poetry is an instructional miracle drug, but it does create the opportunity for the study and evaluation of short, rich pieces of literature that not only provide an immediate instructional return but lay the groundwork for the literary work and analysis to come. Ekphrasis, according to John Hollander, is a technical term used by art historians and classicists to mean "a verbal description of a work of art, of a scene rendered in a work of art, or even a fictional scene the description of which unacknowledgedly derives from descriptions of scenes" (2) Basically, however, for the purpose of this unit and my sanity, I will just say that it is a type of writing, either poetry or prose, that gives a very detailed description of a work of art, real or fictional. If the work of art is real, then it is ekphrastic: if it is fictional, then it is notional ekphrasis. Moreover, we can define a work of art to include paintings, statues, and sculptures as well as objects, artifacts, and architecture. Offering an immense variety of cases in point, this very inclusive definition requires both student and teacher to put those carefully crafted depictions under a visual and literary microscope, examining, evaluating, and challenging their significance.

Although putting literary text and pictures under a microscope does require time, using just the right materials can actually save time in the long run. In developing my unit on the study of ekphrastic poetry and art, I was able to address the following ELA standards for English 12 honors for The New Castle County Vo-tech School District:

- To view language from different perspectives
- To evaluate the literary techniques a particular author uses with respect to purpose and effect on the reader
- To evaluate a literary selection in terms of human motives, conflicts, and values
- To demonstrate an understanding of literature as a reflection of when and where it was written
- To write a work which imitates the style of another writer
- Prepare and deliver to a specific audience an oral presentation that meets a clearly state purpose

It is my plan to address these standards and better prepare my students for the district reading and writing assessments by selecting specific examples of ekphrastic poetry and prose that introduce and extend the overarching theme of cultural conflict. Using the Understanding by Design model, I revised my Enduring Understandings and Essential Questions to read as follows:

Enduring Understandings

1. Poetry and art can often influence or challenge our perceptions and prejudices, forcing us to re-examine and re-evaluate our opinions, values, and attitudes.
2. Poetry and art can help us to better understand the significance of place and time when evaluating or interpreting a literary work.
3. Poetry, like art, must be read, and reread, for both meaning and appreciation. The length of a line and the choice of a word can alter meaning just as easily as the stroke of a brush and the use of color.

Essential Questions

1. Is a work of art a representation of the subject or the artist's interpretation of what is already an individual viewpoint? (Representation of a representation)
2. How can a poetic response to work of art be a fuller representation of a subject than the work of art is?
3. How can "reading" a work of art and/or poem challenge our perceptions and prejudices about people, objects, and personal/societal beliefs or values?
4. In what ways did the European Orientalist artwork of the nineteenth century contribute to some of our current misperceptions of African and Persian culture?
5. How does the length of a line, the choice of a word, and the clustering of details or images contribute to a poem's meaning and effectiveness?

Working backwards, as outlined by the Understanding by Design model, and beginning with the end of this unit, my students will be able to demonstrate their understanding of ekphrastic poetry by building a museum of artwork from the cultures and countries we have studied and then writing an ekphrastic response to one visual image from each country we have visited during our "literary" tour. Based on all the work we have done in class, the ekphrastic poems my students write will demonstrate their understanding of the dialogue that develops between poet and artist, the technical choices a poet makes when he considers word choice and line length, and the new interpretation they will have developed as a result of doing a more careful and informed reading of all the literary and visual selections we have covered over the course of the semester. Obviously the success of this project will be greatly determined by the foundation I, as the teacher, lay at the beginning of the semester and the steps I construct as we move forward, level-by-level, rebuilding our worldview through the added viewpoints and perspectives we will come to know and understand.

Where to Begin and Why?

Although my original intent in adding the study of ekphrastic poetry to my classroom curriculum was to deepen my students' reading and understanding of two of our classroom novels, I learned very quickly that I could do more. Through an extended unit on ekphrastic poetry and prose, I will not only push my students to become active participants in the dialogue between poet and artist but create more and more situations where they will be required to question the purpose and significance of the objects and places they encounter in our literary selections and even the words the author uses to describe them. James Heffernan, in "Ekphrasis and Representation," states that "ekphrasis is the verbal representation of a graphic representation." He explains that the word takes its original meaning from ancient Greece. The 'ek' means out and 'phrasis' means to speak. Therefore, the word clearly means "speaking out." He then goes on to make a genealogical link between ekphrasis and sepulchral epigrams, or epitaphs, since the words inscribed on the stone state what is buried there. This clarifies his point that ekphrasis is both narrational and prosopopoeial: "it releases the narrative impulse that graphic art typically checks and it enables the silent figures of graphic art to speak" (3). With Heffernan's help I am going to use the study of ekphrastic poetry to help my students give voice to their own ideas about what is really going on in the poetry and prose we read for class.

Currently, I begin the semester by showing my students the short film "The Lunch Date" and engaging them in a discussion of the various viewpoints, stereotypes, assumptions, and prejudices explored through the story line. This award-winning short examines the events that precede an unexpected lunchtime encounter between an affluent white woman and an apparently homeless African American man and its subsequent effects. This is a perfect way to begin since it forces us as a class to acknowledge the assumptions people make about people and how easily they color our perceptions and perspectives, often contributing to the many cultural conflicts we see in the world today. Since we will be reading literature written by and about

people from different cultures and countries, it is important that my students adopt a more open and global perspective.

Now, with the introduction of ekphrastic poetry, I can have my students continue our discussion of cultural conflict by sharing with them some important works of art that center around this issue and have inspired a poetic response. One poem I found that I thought would really elicit a response was "War Photograph," by Kate Daniels. This poem is an ekphrastic response to a photograph taken by Associated Press photographer Nick Ut. Even though this photograph is copyrighted, it is available for public use on a number of Internet sites and can be shared responsibly with a classroom of students. It is my hope that both the photograph and the poem will invoke an immediate acknowledgement of the Viet Nam War and the cultural conflict it created within our own country. The poem vividly describes the photograph and allows the poet to share her response to what she "reads" into it. This poem also opens the door for a brief conversation about line length and the arrangement of lines. For my purposes this conversation about form is as important as the discussion of conflict, since my students will be learning how to evaluate a literary selection as well as writing their own ekphrastic responses to art. I can introduce the concept of ekphrastic poetry and its related artwork, allowing me to provide some basic instruction and review of important poetic terms and techniques and set the stage for a look at African art. As part of the initial instructional overview, I will stress the idea that ekphrastic poetry is a type of dialogue between the artist and the poet. Of course, my students will have been given a handout that will include not only a definition of ekphrastic poetry and the poem we are reading but an outline or organizer on which they record the related details from the art and the poem. They can then use their notes for similar discussions that continue among themselves.

With our modeling of a discussion on an ekphrastic poem complete, my students and I will continue exploring various cultural conflicts through a small selection of poems. That selection will include "The New Colossus" by Emma Lazarus, "Formerly a Slave" by Herman Melville, "Paul Delvaux: The Village of the Mermaids" by Lisel Mueller, "Reclining Nude" by Lyrae van Clief-Stefanon, and "Lady Freedom Among Us" by Rita Dove. Each of these poems will force an interesting discussion among my students because there is enough in both the poem and the related artwork to trigger some response from my students so they can easily identify, in each case, some type of cultural conflict and examine the technical choices made by the poet.

Armed with the poems, pictures, and a series of questions to guide their conversations, my students will work on their assigned poem in groups of four to five. For example, after reading "The New Colossus," I am sure my students will realize that those words are the very same words engraved on a plaque at the base of the Statue of Liberty. They will also remember that the Statue was a gift from the French government during the late 1800s, a time when many marginalized Europeans immigrated to the United States, and this should result in a conversation about the culture conflict that almost always accompanies immigration. Of course, this discussion will lead to an examination of the artwork and the comparison that must be made between the Statue of Liberty and the Colossus of Rhodes, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. It will be my hope that the Emma Lazarus poem and its related artwork will force my students to identify the late 1880s, and the culture conflict over the discriminatory attitudes toward race and gender. The Mueller poem may clearly state the year as 1942, but my students will need to carefully examine the Delvaux before they see how the visual invited the poetic response and a closer look at cultural conflict. The final one should prove interesting since the Dove poem is recent yet the sculpture is old, but they should not miss the conflict that arises from discussing the two. Like most teachers, I will carefully monitor these small group discussions and encourage a quick database search if I believe a group is really stumped. However, I want them to push each other through the activity, to have them draw on key words and phrases from the text and visual cues from the artwork to construct their own understanding of the issues or concerns they see examined by poet and

artist. Now, by making my students active participants in this sophisticated dialogue between poet and artist, we will cover several poems in a short period of time, and I can easily segue into my introduction to world literature and our examination of cultural conflict and change.

How Will the Poetry Align With the Literature?

Through my participation in a previous Yale seminar on maps and mapmaking, I studied European colonialism in Africa and was shown the "Imperial Federation Map." This map, along with the one of Ninth Avenue that once graced the cover of the *New Yorker*, has always comprised the cornerstone of my English 12 curriculum. I have used them both to introduce the idea that maps, like text, often have a purpose and a point of view. In fact, maps, like any other cultural artifact, can often tell us much about the values and attitudes of a particular culture and even how that culture saw or sees itself in relationship to other cultures. Now, with the introduction of ekphrasis and ekphrastic poetry and prose, I can begin adding some classical works of art and poetry that will help build the type of cultural background students need to continue making more and more sophisticated textual connections. Because I begin the semester with *Things Fall Apart*, written by Chinua Achebe, I first have my students read Doris Lessing's short story "No Witchcraft for Sale." If you are not familiar with the story, it is a rich and beautifully written piece that effectively illustrates the cultural conflict or division between European and African society as a direct result of European imperialism and colonization across the continent of Africa. In this story the conflict arises over the knowledge of a particular native plant with medicinal properties that African society wants to protect and the European society would like to exploit. In fact, in this very detailed and descriptive work it is the absence of description that is the most telling, and to be honest, it is only through my study of ekphrasis that I have grown more aware of this descriptive omission and its significance. During the so-called "search" for this plant, Lessing describes every part of the journey and the vegetation yet since Gideon, the African medicine man turned servant, never correctly identifies the coveted plant, the European colonists and doctor are never actually allowed to see it. This, of course, for the European colonists and doctor, validates their belief in their own cultural superiority. With this cultural conflict now clarified, I can introduce my students briefly to the nineteenth century school of thought and art called Orientalism.

Orientalism, defined by Edward Said, a literary critic and professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia, is "a constellation of false assumptions" that were the underlying foundation for Western attitudes toward the Middle East and much of Northern Africa. What will be most important for my students to recognize is the correlation of time periods. This Orientalist lens, prevalent throughout Europe from 1815 to 1914, coincides with the period of unparalleled European expansion, resulting in the growth of direct colonial dominion from 35% of the earth's surface to about 85% of it (4). In his book, *Orientalism*, Said provides a complete explanation and analysis of European Orientalism and how it both reflected and shaped European attitudes toward the people and cultures that were fast becoming the victims of European imperialism. According to this particular worldview, there were Westerners, and there were Orientals. The Westerners were the dominant, controlling force, and the Orientals the dominated and manipulated subject. Said carefully explains:

they (Orientals) are a subject race, dominated by a race that knows them and what is good for them better than they could possibly know themselves. Their great moments were in the past; they are useful in the modern world only because the powerful and up-to-date empires have effectively brought them out of the wretchedness of their decline and turned them into rehabilitated residents of productive colonies (5).

Basically, as the British and French Empires continued to expand into North Africa and various parts of East Asia, the Europeans who traveled there adopted a particular attitude governing their interpretation and understanding of the people within those various cultures. As you may have already guessed, it was an attitude that subjugated the people and all their cultural traditions and beliefs. As far as European society was concerned, only they could possibly define Oriental culture.

This Orientalist mindset, as evidenced in the European "scramble for Africa" as well as Europe's continued push into Asia, allowed European colonial forces and travelers to assume they knew better than the people living in the countries they invaded their own cultural worth. From such a viewpoint, their cultural worth, regardless of their own rich traditions and practices, would never be equal to that of Western culture. This obviously racist attitude was often disguised under an artistic and worldly guise of Romanticism and sophistication. In fact, I found it rather ironic that the very artistic movement that was focused on teaching people to care about each other and to promote individual liberty and bring an end to slavery in some parts of the world was often the very same vehicle used to perpetuate existing social and cultural stereotypes. The very artists, both visual and literary, who captured some of the most romantic images of these foreign lands and people on canvas and paper, had very negative and racist subtexts. In fact, Jennifer Meagher, in her article "Orientalism in Nineteenth-Century Art," explains that "some of the first nineteenth century Orientalist paintings were intended as propaganda in support of French imperialism, depicting the East as a place of backward lawlessness, or barbarism enlightened and tamed by French rule"(6). Moreover, she goes on to explain how the focus on military brutality in some of the Orientalist paintings was a reflection of "the ongoing conflicts throughout the century." This brutality contributes to negative stereotyping of Eastern cultures as does the depiction of women as slaves and concubines. In her article "When Will the Mute Swan Sing?" Liu Huiqing argues that the attitude Europe had toward the East was not respectful but merely curious. Europeans did not want to really understand any culture outside their own but to prove the superiority of their own. It was a means of marginalization. She then goes on to say that in this light colonialism "symbolizes the historical invention through which West works systematically to take for granted cultural divergence, to cancel or negate the cultural difference, ideology, and values of the 'non-West'" (7). It is at this point I will share either "Napoleon in the Plague House of Jaffa," by Antoine-Jean Gros, or "Massacre at Chios" by Eugene Delacroix. A classroom discussion of both of these pieces and the related poem by Victor Hugo will now allow me to introduce the culminating project, which will be to begin collecting works of art that are true visual representations of the various cultures and countries we will be visiting through our literary selections during the semester.

This introduction to Orientalism, which would basically be a power point presentation highlighting the artwork and its erroneous or negative implications, segues into the study of both *Things Fall Apart* and our continued work with ekphrastic poetry. Now, even though Orientalism does, in reality, only address the European attitude toward people and cultures populating Asia, specifically those groups of people living in countries above the Sahara and stretching from parts of North Africa all the way across what we often refer to as the Near, Middle, and Far East, it truly sets the stage for the cultural conflicts my students and I will encounter in the literary works we will study.

By placing my introduction to Orientalism here, I can also explain that even though Orientalism was implicit in the prejudicial attitude toward those people identified as Orientals, it did convey a grudging respect for their cultural past. However, whereas as far as any people or cultures outside this area were concerned, the European attitude was totally dismissive. The Africans were wild and primitive, desperately in need of European civilization, hence devalued even beyond Orientalist attitudes. By putting my overview of Orientalism here, I can actually help my students better appreciate Achebe's commitment to "rewriting"

history, to finally giving "the lion" its say, as is often said in many African proverbs.

As many may know, the novel *Things Fall Apart*, written by Chinua Achebe, provides an African voice for a literary discussion of European Imperialism and its impact on African culture and society. Achebe, as it has been noted into too many places to cite, may have used a "European" pen, but he tells a truly African story. Now, although I have been able to expand our study of African literature by including an excerpt from the *Sundiata*, the African film *Kieta: Heritage of the Griot*, and some assorted short stories, I did have trouble transitioning back to classical and European literature that Achebe knew well and in many ways made use of in showing the parallels between the equally rich cultures of Africa and Europe. Thankfully, ekphrastic poetry and prose has unlocked a door. It is my plan to share with my students Homer's description of the shield of Achilles, W. H. Auden's "The Shield of Achilles," and Shelley's "Ozymandias" in addition to excerpts from Will's Eisner's graphic adaptation of the *Sundiata*. As in earlier conversations about poems, my students will again have copies of the poems and related graphic organizers, and it is here that I can remind my students that the ekphrastic description of how the blacksmith god forged the shield of Achilles in the *Iliad* can be compared to the description of the incredible iron rod in the *Sundiata*. Both these selections are epic tales that recount the heroic feats of legendary men. In looking at these descriptions we can have richer discussions of the role weaponry plays in epic tales and how all cultures have their heroes. Moreover, when we view *Kieta*, which incorporates a telling of the *Sundiata*, we can discuss the cultural conflict that has arisen between traditional African beliefs and practices and the modern African practices that have evolved over almost two hundred years of French colonial rule. At this point I will share "Ozymandias" and pictures of the reconstructed statue of Ramses II. This poem, in particular, will hopefully arouse an interest in trying to understand exactly what a culture must do if it wants to survive. I hope that as my students read we will all pay closer attention to the descriptions of the search for Ezinma's *iyi-uwa*, the masks of the *egwugwu*, and the preparation for war undertaken by Okonkwo in Achebe's novel. After all, it is through this story that Achebe rewrites history, returning African history and culture to African society. Shelley, in his poem "Ozymandias," may have argued that statues constructed by man cannot last forever, but just as the statue of Ramses II has been reconstructed, Achebe, like other modern African writers, artists, and filmmakers, has taken steps to forge a truly African identity for Africa.

At this point my students and I will have constructed new knowledge as we have read *Things Fall Apart*, supplementing our study of the work not only with African proverbs and folktales but selected art and poetry too. The addition of the artwork and poetry has dovetailed perfectly with Achebe's intent to tell a story of European imperialism in Africa from a completely African perspective and it has given us a reason to examine genuine African artwork. By this point in the unit I will have given my students a list of resources they may use to pursue an independent tour of some museum websites where they can examine African artwork and begin building their own collection of favorites, and I will have offered as well as a rubric outlining how they will be assessed on both their collection and their poems. I will have reminded them that they need to begin working on their own ekphrastic poems and that they should use the poems we have studied as models for the choices they can make about the length of a line and the arrangement of imagery. The conversations we began just four to five weeks earlier continue and many may be working on making some distinctions between what they see and what they now believe to be true.

How Will I Continue Using Ekphrastic Poetry?

Continuing with this running thread on ekphrastic poetry and prose, I will transition from my unit on African literature to one on Asian/Perisan literature by sharing with my students some modern ekphrastic poems. I found some poems by Roger Sedarat, which were taken from his book entitled *Dear Regime: Letters to the*

Islamic Republic. One poem, "Post-Modern Ekphrasis Ghazal," highlights the difference between traditional Persian images and those that now command our attention on television and in newspapers. Beginning with this poem should remind us how little we truly know about the geographic location and culture we will visit through our reading of *Kite Runner*. Next I will show them the site of Persepolis, which was built by King Darius, and we will read the inscription found on the Xerxes' Gate, exclaiming "I am Xerxes." With this I hope to establish how this large area has a very long, rich, turbulent history and that Afghanistan, the country where the early and later parts of the story is set, is a virtual mosaic of ethnicities. Although I plan to include an excerpt from the *Book of Kings*, or the *Shahnama*, on Rustum and Sohrab, as well as some other examples of Persian poetry and Ottoman art, most of our focus will be on the novel. It is here that my students and I will work to overcome our limited background in Persian and Arab history, geography, art and literature.

Although the students read and enjoy the novel, I want them, like Amir, to reject the cultural stereotypes and biases that color the way we look at the people and cultures of the Near, Middle, and Far East. To do this I plan to stress the ekphrastic elements of the book, emphasizing the images of kites and kite flying/fighting that practically string the story together. In the past I have always asked my students to write about any childhood memory they have involving a kite. Most students remember either flying one or making one and we share those stories with our shoulder-partners. Using the jigsaw strategy, I then distribute an article I found online titled "Flying High." This article gives an overview on the history of kites and then discusses the art of kite fighting and its popularity in Afghanistan and other countries in East Asia. In doing this I want my students to have a better appreciation of the role of kite flying/fighting in this culture.

Reading this novel is not difficult for my students, but they do need time to read. Usually I read the first chapter aloud since it sets the stage for what is to come and it allows me to share with them a strategy for noting story details they think significant. Then I apportion the reading and give them a schedule we will adhere to for our weekly book talks. Those conversations always include the comparisons students make within the text and with other texts we have read. Also, to more fully understand the far-reaching effects of persistent and unchecked cultural conflict, I show my students the film *House of Sand and Fog*. Although the comparison between Baba and Mr. Behrani are obvious, a careful study of the police officer and the use of visual and verbal imagery make it a worthwhile viewing experience. Overall, it will be our discussion of particular objects so beautifully described in the novel and the film that will deepen our appreciation of both selections.

In my online research on Persian and Islamic art, I learned a little about illustrated texts, calligraphy, and the miniaturists. Although my research is incomplete, I did uncover a dissertation by B. O. Firat, titled *Disorienting Encounters: Rereading 17th and 18th Century Ottoman Miniature Paintings* (<http://dare.uva.nl/document/121373>). I found the introduction incredibly informative. His study includes "Fall of Adam and Eve," "Woman Bathing in the Hamam," "Surname-i," and "Portrait of Sultan Ahmed III." He cites Inge Boer, from *Disorienting Vision*, saying, "a detailed rereading of French Orientalist texts and images can dislocate stereotypes about the Orient" (8). Still in pursuit of Middle Eastern art, during an online visit to the Louvre I was able to create a personal album that includes all the slides and commentary from an exhibition titled "Calligraphy and Islamic Art." For me, these works of art where literary text becomes the vehicle for artistic expression or representation reverses the process of ekphrasis: the piece illustrates an important literary work and the literary work is the subject of the artwork. Either way, my students and I now have the perfect vehicle for reading and viewing Persian and Islamic art and literature with the clear intent of reassessing the cultural attitudes and stereotypes popularized through an Orientalist lens. It is from these resources that my students will now pull the pieces they would like to add to their personal collection.

How Will I Assess Student Learning?

Although I will have informed my students when we first viewed the prizewinning photograph by Nick Ut, and will have continued to remind them at the completion of each major literary work that they would be building an art collection from which they would draw inspiration for their own ekphrastic poems, I will now use a class period in which we can review some of the basics involved in writing an ekphrastic poem. I will review the rubric with them and have them take the rough drafts of their poems from their folders. Together we will take a second look at some of the poems we have read and they have liked so we can discuss what particular techniques or images the poet used that enhanced their appreciation or facilitated their understanding of the poem. Then, with the participation of everyone in the class, we will create a peer-editing list for our classroom use. It will be this list that my students will use to read and respond to at least one rough draft of a poem written by a classmate. At this point they will have an additional week to revise and polish their poems. Of course, in addition to submitting their poems for a grade, they will participate in a coffeehouse poetry reading. In preparation for this event I will have arranged for both space and coffee in the faculty dining room and we will meet there as a class so the students can share their selected artwork and poem in a more relaxed environment. They will evaluate the poems and vote on their favorites. Overall, I believe it will be a pleasant and rewarding experience.

A Final Comment

It will be at this point that I will challenge my students to write an original ekphrastic poem in response to any of the artwork we have examined and it will be their eyes that create a fresh, clean interpretation of the piece. It is my hope that with the study of ekphrastic poetry, they will be engaged in a dialogue with the artist and his/her art. It will be what Firat calls a face-to-face encounter, an event that "underscores the reciprocity between the seeing subject and object seen." Hopefully, by weaving the study of ekphrastic poetry into my existing units on the novels *Things Fall Apart* and *The Kite Runner*, I will have not only given my students the opportunity to exercise their own poetic voices but to enrich their understanding and appreciation of the art and literature of two emerging areas of the world, each with their own ethnically diverse and incredibly rich literary and artistic voices.

Instructional Strategies

Although most of us are enamored by the sound of our own voice, teachers learn quickly that students are more receptive to new ideas and information if there is less teacher talk and more student-centered discussion and application. This is especially true among the students who elect to attend a high school with a comprehensive vocational training program rather than a traditional one. The students who populate my classroom are good kids, but they definitely prefer a more hands-on approach to learning. From the middle of their freshman year, they spend up to two blocks, or one hundred and eighty minutes, each day actively learning and practicing their trade, hence quickly develop a participatory attitude. Therefore, I quickly adopted a more constructivist approach to learning and try to structure my class around student-centered practices and activities that put most of the responsibility for learning on their shoulders rather than mine.

To begin, most of my classes open with a question and that question is always related to whatever it is we will be working on that day. How my students are asked to respond to that question may require them to

complete a journal entry, entrance pass, or anticipatory guide, but they will almost always share their response with a shoulder partner or within a designated group. That initial "focusing" activity or anticipatory set, is followed by about fifteen to twenty minutes of direct instruction where, hopefully, I establish our instructional target for the day, provide the needed background and explanation, and model any of the structures for thinking, organizing, or writing they may require to transition comfortably into individual or group practice. Often the result of this guided practice is shared or reported-out in a variety of ways. Many of you probably use Exit Passes, Gallery Walks, or small-group presentations as part of your own instructional practices so you will realize just how easy it will be for you to adapt many of the lessons that follow for your own classroom use. All of these methods require a student to share what they have learned through a written, visual, or oral communication and all of these methods should be employed routinely. I will try to use them as part of my formative and summative assessment strategies throughout this unit.

Now, for the longer readings and ongoing projects, again I prefer to have the students construct meaning for themselves. Whenever possible, I am always more likely to select a method where the students are actively engaged with text and they are responsible for employing the active reading strategies we have all come to know and love. In my class no one ever "just" reads. Students are always asked to employ one of the many note-taking strategies that are standard practice in my classroom. For example, students may be asked to create a Three-Two-One for a short article or chapter of reading or they may be asked to complete a graphic organizer where they record Comments, Predictions, Questions, or Connections they made as they were reading. Sometimes, rather than read alone or as a class, I may Jig Saw the reading, where I divide the reading and distribute it among students who first become experts on the assigned section and then regroup them with students who have a different piece of the whole which they share with the others, or have students read Pop Corn style, permitting students to just "pop in" to read as they like. At other times, especially with novels or stories, I will employ the use of Literature Circles. The use of Literature Circles forces students to talk with each other rather than the teacher. Of course, regardless of the method, the students are accountable for the reading and thinking they do.

Consequently, all my lessons directly related to our classroom study of ekphrasis and ekphrastic poetry will employ one or more of these instructional strategies. When I introduce the entire concept of ekphrastic writing, I will precede it with a question about "visual representations," whether those representations are paintings, sculptures, or photographs. My question may be as simple as: Do you agree or disagree with the adage "one picture is worth a thousand words"? This question will open the door to sharing with my students the poem "War Photograph" and the award-winning photograph taken by Nick Ut. Of course, both the poem and the picture will be accompanied by general questions, the types of questions I want my students to consider whenever they analyze a poem and its picture, and a graphic organizer they may use for jotting down their observations. It will be my intent to model the kind of thinking and note taking I would like to see used as we continue working as a class or in our small groups. With those close at hand, I increase the likelihood that all students will participate as a whole or in groups. When we move to the longer works, I will continue to use smaller works or excerpts as a method of modeling or transitioning, as will be evident in the sample lesson in the following section.

Model Lesson Plans

As part of this unit I will outline three lesson plans that should provide a general outline for how I intend to weave the study of ekphrasis and ekphrastic poetry into my existing world literature curriculum. If you remember, my intent was always to increase the rigor and scope of my classroom program by using the study of poetry and art to not only build background and broaden our classroom use of literary text but to also engage my students in deeper and richer interaction with both written and visual text. I want them to develop and nurture a deeper, more confident approach to interpreting written and visual text. I want them to realize that knowledge and understanding increases as they move deeper and deeper into the reading of most written and visual text and that there is meaning and reasoning behind the specific choices of writers and artists. More importantly, I want them to realize that this knowledge and understanding can be directly applied when they engage in other forms of expressive, vocational or academic communications.

To make things easier, I will begin with my introductory lesson. As indicated earlier, as part of my anticipatory set, I will begin the class by having my students complete an Entrance Pass asking them to respond to the following question: Do you agree or disagree with the adage "a picture is worth a thousand words"? When students appear to be finished, I will then have them turn to their shoulder-partners and using the A-B Conversation--which only means the A's talk while B's listen and repeat with B's talk while A's listen--share their responses. Next, I will have two or three students volunteer to share their thoughts on this topic and use their responses to segue into my introduction to ekphrastic poetry. I will make this transition to direct instruction by telling my students that we will be taking a closer look at this very same issue, which has often been argued among poets and artists and openly expressed at times through ekphrastic poetry. I will then say that examining this conflict often allows us to examine other conflicts, especially cultural ones, and that the text involved in reading these images, both the visual and the written, engages us in an examination of time and place.

At this time I will distribute a graphic organizer to my students that will allow them to record their immediate observations on the photograph, "The Napalm Girl," taken by Nick Ut, and the poem, "War Photograph," written by Kate Daniels, in an organized manner. Both of these works are available on the Internet through reliable sources and can be accessed that way without violating copyright laws. The graphic organizer will only be the familiar Three-Two-One format asking students to record three specific details, two inferences, and one connection on both the photograph and the poem. After sharing their responses first with their shoulder partners and then as a class, I will present the following questions to the class and we will discuss their responses:

1. What situation or incident do you think is described in the poem? What key words or phrases led you to that inference?
2. Where do you think this situation or incident may have occurred? What key words or phrases support your reasoning?
3. When do you think this situation may have occurred? What type of connections have you made that helped you reach that conclusion?
4. Now, based on what we have discussed and read, what do you think the poem, or even the poet, may want us to know or understand?

Our discussion of the poem will then segue into a small group exercise where each student-led group will be given its own ekphrastic poem and related work of art to examine and discuss as well as the same graphic

organizer, which they will use to record their findings, and set of general questions to guide their discussion. For your convenience, I have included a list of those ekphrastic poems and artwork in the appendix of this unit. As part of my assessment strategy, each group will then share their works and conclusions with the class and allow some time for student and teacher input, clarification, or feedback. Furthermore, I will employ an Exit Pass strategy where the students record two or three things they learned as a direct result of this activity, one thing about the lesson they would share with a friend, one new insight they have about the subject, and a "newspaper heading" for the lesson.

Another lesson in our study of ekphrasis will be linked to our study of the epic hero and the understanding that all cultures have their own epic tales. It will most definitely require two class periods and a third for the showing of the film, *Kieta: The Heritage of the Griot*. As always, as part of my anticipatory set, I will begin with a question asking my students to identify one of their favorite cultural super heroes, where an individual, one with an unexpected power or resource, is destined to save a community or civilization from certain slavery or annihilation. After their responses are shared with shoulder partners, we will develop a classroom list of the characteristics of an epic hero and I will share with them a working definition for it. This will allow me to introduce the *Sundiata*, the epic tale of Mali, and I will share with my students Will Eisner's graphic adaptation of the work. As you may have guessed I will highlight the ekphrastic elements in this retelling and ask my students to comment on why Eisner may have made some of the choices he did and how his version helps us identify the important components of an epic tale. This will be followed by a student-led, small group activity where each group will study various parts of the legend that are specific to the more ekphrastic and heroic elements. I will have them record their observations, again using the familiar Three-Two-One strategy. Students will report out their findings and all will have the requisite background for a more enjoyable viewing of the film. My assessment of both their understanding of the literary work and the film will be a one page memorandum evaluating first the characteristic elements of an epic, including the literary use of ekphrasis, and then how the filmmaker's use of a "story within a story" better helped viewers understand the culture conflict within this particular African community.

To continue with my plan to thread the study of ekphrastic poetry throughout an existing unit, I plan to use Percy Shelley's poem, "Ozymandias," as part of my anticipatory set for the novel *Things Fall Apart*. When my students enter the classroom there will be a picture, displayed on the screen at the front of my classroom, of the statue of Ramses II, the statue to which Shelley refers in his poem, and the question: What really keeps a culture alive - its monuments or its stories? My students will respond to the question on paper, or an Entrance Pass, and they will share their responses with their shoulder partners using the A-B Conversation method as explained earlier. I will then distribute copies of the poem, along with the general set of questions I have used with earlier lessons, and have the students, working in small groups, analyze the poem and the argument Shelley poses. I will assess informally by having the small groups report out their ideas. This lesson, although no more than forty minutes, will excite the type of intellectual curiosity I want them to bring to the reading of *Things Fall Apart*. Although there are no monuments in this novel, Achebe is trying to rebuild African history by telling a truly African story. Therefore, this examination and discussion of Shelley's poem actually provides an interesting segue to a very thought-provoking African proverb: Until the lion has its say the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter. I am hoping that the discussion of Shelley's poem better prepares my students for the discussion of the African proverb and a thoughtful and reflective approach their reading of the novel.

End Notes

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