



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2010 Volume I: Connecting the Visual to the Verbal in the Classroom

A Palette of Poetry

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Overview (Introduction)

The culture of today is a visual one. Between the advertisements everywhere we turn, Facebook movies, and the use of the Internet, my students are bombarded with imagery, and as a result connect best to my content when they are able to better visualize. Visualization is the most essential aspect of describing anything—but so many of my students look and do not see. Most of my students, in their daily activities, are not aware of their inner states, or how little control they have over their thoughts. They are so used to commotion; they lack the control to fully concentrate.

One way I can help my students to learn to stay more focused, as well as enhance their writing skills, is through ekphrasis—the dramatic description or representation of a visual work of art. Ekphrastic poetry is a genre of literature that requires writers to focus on a piece of art and write about it. When students are trained to look closely at works of art and reason about what they see, they are able to draw inferences about how history, culture and visual arts can influence each other.

There is strong and compelling evidence to suggest that learning to see and discover art promotes the ability to find meaning in imagery, which is the definition of visual literacy. To be visually literate means being able to analyze on many levels what you see in the world. Learning to see, interpret, and discuss works of art promotes overall critical thinking, insightfulness, and creativity—skills that can influence every part of life. ¹

I have designed this unit for eleventh grade college-bound students in my American Literature class; however it can easily be adapted to any grade level. I chose this age group because they are already familiar with the terminology we will be using in this unit; but eventually I would like to extend the visual exercises for all of my students.

As the eleventh grade curriculum focuses on American literature, I feel the perfect complement for this unit will be F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, a highly symbolic meditation on 1920s America. We will explore the major characters and themes in the novel, along with "learning to look" activities, focusing on a number of art slides that tie in with the novel. Students will have the time to really sit quietly, relax, and look at the art, observing all of the details. We will also discuss the relationship between art and writing. Students will discover how writing can be a powerful means of engaging with images. By incorporating this art experience through writing, students not only learn to be careful observers, but they learn to articulate their thoughts and

reactions to writing. Paintings and other art forms will inspire my students to create something new—poems that reflect both the painting and the student's engagement to think critically and "outside the box." This is the advantage of bringing visual art and writing together. The term for this genre is ekphrasis, a Greek word for the kind of description or representation of a work of art that has engaged writers for centuries. Students will be introduced to ekphrasis and study many examples before they create their own, based on a symbolic mask they make that represents a character and theme from the novel.

The participants in this teaching unit are students in one of the five schools in the Jefferson Union High School District in Daly City, a suburb next door to San Francisco. Our school has a student body of 1800 students, and is a community of diversity. A large number of immigrants have made Daly City their home. The Filipino population has grown more rapidly than any other group, and Filipino students comprise almost 60 percent of our population. A majority of the students come from working class and middle class families, and a lot of the students have part-time jobs. Most of the students are college-bound, but mixed in both reading and writing abilities; some are quite proficient, while others struggle. Classes are arranged heterogeneously, with Special Education and English Language learners. All staff members are CLAD (Cross Cultural, Language and Academic Learners) certified, which entitles the holder to teach non-speaking English learners. Almost all classes house 35 students, and meet for fifty-five minutes daily. Overall, they are a very responsive and friendly group of students.

Why Teach the Arts

The Arts are important for what they are. As symbol systems of culture, the arts are a language of thoughts. Just as the ability to use words can make sense of everyday experience, the images of art and the descriptions of poetry serve the same purpose. Through such artistic representations we share a common humanity. In "Every Child Needs the Arts," Charles Fowler, a spokesperson on behalf of the arts, stated:

The arts are symbol systems that permit us to give representation to our ideas, concepts and feelings in a variety of forms that can be 'read' by other people. The Arts were invented to enable us to react to the world, to analyze it, and to record our impressions so that they can be shared. ²

Artists show us new ways to see familiar things and how to interpret new situations and the subject at hand. Responding to art is about constructing and interpreting meaning. Because art is multi-layered and complex, it invites critical and creative thought, and invites multiple interpretations. Current literature supports the notion that the process of decoding, or interpreting, a work of art, can lend itself to the development of language arts skills.

The shift toward recognizing the arts as contributing to cognitive learning has been gradual. Howard Gardner's investigation into cognitive development as exhibited in learning the arts led him to his multiple intelligence theory (1973, 1983). Many other art education researchers, such as Perkins, Burton and Catterall, believe the transfer of learning from the arts to other subjects has justified the arts in education. Others believe that experiences with art can advance general education through higher order thinking skills. What is implicated in learning the visual arts – such as imagination, the ability to think critically, the ability to focus perception, and the ability to engage in divergent thinking– is thought to influence intellectual development in other disciplines (Arnheim).

Writing about art really serves a dual purpose. The arts not only provide inspiration for the writer, but also cause the viewer to slow down, analyze and respond to the work of art; actually to take the time to "see." When students are able to look beyond surface differences they are able to see the greater commonality of

human experience. And what could be more useful in helping students make use of the multilayered ways we 'see' than through art and poetry?

Background

To start this unit, students will be exposed to varied works of art representing different cultures and periods. To sharpen their observation skills, students will be asked to write down as many details and observations as they can within a given time limit. As a class, we will share our responses and will also review some 'learning to look' activities, where students see in an artwork what they can infer based on observational evidence. This will spark a classroom discussion of the artwork and its representation of the historical event or era. Through observation and discussion, students will be able to make connections with *The Great Gatsby*, and see the similarities in the themes. The selected artwork provides a quick medium for enhancing thematic understanding, while also working on such skills as finding evidence from text, predicting, and comparing and contrasting.

The following paintings will be used for observation and class discussions:

The Persistence of Memory and *The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory*, by Salvador Dali: Students will discover that both the paintings and the novel share the same theme—Time. Time is one of the most pervasive themes in *The Great Gatsby*. Fitzgerald not only manipulates time in the novel, he refers to time repeatedly to reinforce the idea that time is a driving force not only for the 1920s, a period of great change, but for America itself. Gatsby learns the hard way that you cannot repeat the past.

The Lovers, by Ren Magritte, reflects isolation. Isolation in *The Great Gatsby* is not the same as being alone. Although the characters are always in the company of others, their isolation is an internal one, stemming from their inability to truly experience intimacy with one another.

The False Mirror, by Ren Magritte, challenges the way that humans perceive the world. The universal role of the giant eye takes on a universal role equivalent to that of The Eyes of T.J. Eckleburg in *The Great Gatsby*.

A Bigger Splash, by David Hockney, has us question what lies between the visible, above the surface, and the invisible, beneath the surface. Gatsby throws lavish parties at his mansion, and yet no one shows up at his funeral. This will lead into a discussion of Pieter Bruegel's painting *The Fall of Icarus*. He too, takes a plunge, and everyone is so indifferent, they don't even notice.

Saint George and the Dragon, by Paolo Uccello, links with the superficial roles people play in *The Great Gatsby*, revealing that what one sees might not necessarily hold true. Often times, people's true identities are hidden behind masks, or stereotypes society has placed on them, and we never really know what lies beneath the surface.

I chose these paintings because no matter what time period we live in, human nature doesn't change. As much as we would like to believe we learn from our past mistakes, history keeps repeating itself over and over again. When Hockney painted *A Bigger Splash*, it was a time of turbulence and change in America, just as it was in the 1920s, and is today. All of these paintings have something to say. We still face the same problems we have always had in America. Although it is nice to believe the idealized version of the American Dream, the

truth is that dreams are not reality. Man's nature does not change, and we face the same obstacles we did when our forefathers founded this country. There will always be someone, or something, that disrupts man's good intentions, often times the "good intention" itself.

These are just some of the points we will be discussing, which will fit nicely with the themes in *The Great Gatsby*. I am sure students will disagree with many of the statements above, but that is the point. I hope to spark something inside of my students, so they can express themselves through their poetry.

In order to expand students' perceptions, we will review some suggestions from David Perkins,³ and while the students are using these guidelines, they should always be thinking in words. This should help them learn to see accurately, instead of processing information with preconceived notions or experiences. Students will begin to look at artwork critically using valid art principles as guides, rather than just personal tastes.

Next, after writing down all of the details they have observed, students will be asked to write a descriptive paragraph clearly, so that readers can visualize the subject as the writer sees it. We will review literary terms and how they can be applied to create vivid descriptions. Students must choose their language carefully and utilize the best literary devices in order to communicate their message.

On the following days, students will learn that both the literary arts and visual arts have certain basic elements in common. We will look at some of the comparative vocabulary that has been developed. Students will study mood, metaphor, symbol, pattern, and point of view in the context of both painting and poetry. We will also look at the use of color, how it affects our moods, the use of color metaphor, and color symbolism.

Students are now ready to be introduced to Ekphrasis. The meaning, the history, and the components of this form of expression will be discussed. We will use examples from sources I have found, first reading the poems as a class, then observing the art that inspired the poets. I might even have my students sketch the poem as they read it aloud. This will help develop their visualization skills, which gives them a better understanding of the poet's intent. Students will discuss their observations, inferences and interpretations, understanding the importance of carefully examining visual images to see how they were composed with intention and design. Some of the poems that might work well are Emma Lazarus' famous poem, "The New Colossus," "The Great Figure" by William Carlos Williams, and "Number 1" by Jackson Pollock.

After studying several examples as models, students will engage (interfere with, invent, challenge, embellish) an artwork of their own choice. They will then write their own ekphrastic poem. This is a way to introduce art into the classroom, and to enhance my students' writing skills. Hopefully, it will spark my students' interest, while stimulating their minds by considering why an artist chose one detail over another or one design over another. Students learn to describe, interpret, and draw conclusions from richly layered material, developing "an eye" for how art communicates, by looking at and thinking about the images over time.

Why is it Important to Teach Students to Look and See?

The process of 'looking at' goes on all the time. True seeing is rare. Real seeing means making contact without any prejudice, expectation or limitation. It means connecting free of judgment and of conditioned reflex. James Elkins argues that although most people become literate by learning to read at an early age, very few people devote as much time to reading into and through conventional surfaces.⁴ Studies show that in becoming more visually literate, one will learn how to think more effectively. Critical thinking, communication and evidential reading skills all increase with practice, which is important for all of our students.

What is Visual Literacy?

Visual literacy is the ability to understand and use images. This includes thinking, learning, and expressing oneself in terms of images. In this information age, it is important to help my students interpret the visual world around them. From books and television to billboards and animation, students are bombarded with visuals. Students need visualization skills to be able to decipher, interpret, and communicate the meaning of imagery—especially given the ease with which digitized visuals can be manipulated. Just as we learn to read text, we need to learn how to read pictures.

Visual Thinking is an inquiry-based method of teaching that can be used with original art works. It empowers viewers to trust their own observations, interpretations, and ideas about works of art. It focuses on viewer response and interest, allowing the viewer to guide the inquiry. In this sense it is not information-based, but information is woven into the discussion as it is asked for. Students need to articulate their responses and to find evidence to support opinions and reasoning. Through discussion, process writing, and other activities, students can learn to extend their visual and analytical skills to text.

With visual images, one obvious way to begin the analysis and interpretation is to describe as precisely as possible everything in the image. This forces us to look closely at the image, to examine it without missing any important detail. One way I promote visual literacy is by walking my students through a painting, yet encouraging them to come to their own conclusions. The point is to let them stretch their imaginations, and look beyond the surface, seeing with new eyes, so they can start making connections with the text. For example, in my *Gatsby* unit I will show David Hockney's painting, *A Bigger Splash*, on the overhead in my classroom. Even though it was painted in 1967, and the setting of *Gatsby* is the 1920s, there are strong parallels between the two.

To begin the discussion, I will ask my class: "What great American novel can you link this painting to? Look at it carefully, and think of some of the themes we have been discussing in class." Students should be relaxed, focusing on the details of the painting, looking for clues in the parts and whole of the picture. Students should try to "read" the painting, identifying the subject, plot and setting, searching for internal clues. What does it say? Look at it entirely first. After giving my students the time to look and make connections, the following questions will be: What do you see? What is the subject matter? It might take a few minutes to register, but I am sure they will see that this pool scene is much like the pool at *Gatsby's* mansion, where George Wilson shot him and then killed himself.

Next, I will ask my students to list all the different things that they can actually see in the work, imagining that they are describing the artwork to someone who has never seen it before. This is simply a way to get students to see as much as they can before moving on to analysis and interpretation. The following is a possible list of images my students might see in David Hockney's art work, *A Bigger Splash*:

- It is in an outside setting; a backyard with a swimming pool.
- There is a low modern dwelling with wall-sized glass panels.
- There are two towering palm trees and a patch of isolated grass.
- The picture is a perfect square.
- There is an unoccupied director's chair.
- It is almost perfectly divided—the sky above and the pool below.
- The shapes are all straight lines, mostly verticals, horizontals, parallels, and rectangles.'
- It looks like there are bars across the glass windows.
- The water is motionless, except for a big splash.

- There is a diagonally placed diving board.
- Blue is the prominent color in the painting, with bands of brown and green.

We will then analyze the painting. What is happening in the picture? Look closely. What do you see? What art elements do you see? What lines dominate the artwork? What shapes dominate the artwork? (Are they geometric, or organic?) What colors dominate the picture? Name the patterns/textures that you find.

At the analysis stage, students will try to figure out what the artist has done to achieve certain effects. For example, a student might comment that the splash disrupts the calmness of the painting. Its explosion in the water is violent, interrupting the ongoing stillness from its surroundings. From this, students can compare their first impressions of the painting and explain why. More questions will follow, such as: How did the artist use color? What effect did the artist achieve through his use of color? Does the color draw your eye to any one image or part of the painting?

As a class, we will then divide the students' observations into the three categories of art: Color, Shape, and Line. Students might comment that there are just four colors—blue, brown, a bit of pink, and green in the painting. Using so little color has the effect of simplifying the painting. The colors remain uniform and do not suggest deep perspective by fading. The splash occupies the foreground because of the light colors. Some responses to Shape and Line might be: Everything is clear, flat, and simple, reduced to a geometrical plan. The flatness of the picture plane is contrasted with the splash, made of spidery lines, strokes, twirls, and sprays of tiny dots. This splash breaks all of the order in the painting, drawing the attention of the viewer.

After looking at all of the images in the painting, students will now try to figure out what the work is about. Interpretation is the stage where students' own perspectives, associations and experiences meet with the details found in the work of art. For example: What does the color blue represent, and what is the power of the visible blue above the surface, and the blue below the surface? Possible responses could be: Blue represents royalty, sadness, or "the blues." Or: "So above, so below." We can see what is on the surface, but what is inside or below is invisible. Students might notice that both the water and the house have no reflection. One can look out, but no one can see in. It looks like there are bars over the windows. It is almost like the occupant is a prisoner in his own home. The home is also isolated on a hill. Does it look inhabited, or does it stand alone, cold and empty? What can this home tell us in relation to Gatsby? Could this represent the isolation Gatsby felt being an outsider all of his life? Remember: Gatsby was as alone in death as he had been in life.

What about the diving board? Could it be a springboard for the changing seasons—reminding us that life goes on, with or without us? Perhaps someone is taking a plunge to their death. Does it remind you of a coffin? What about the vacant director's chair? Why a director's chair? Do you remember what Owl Eyes said when he was in the library at one of Gatsby's parties? "See!" he cried triumphantly. "It's a bona-fide piece of printed matter. It fooled me. This fella's a regular Belasco. It's a triumph. What thoroughness! What realism! Knew when to stop, too--didn't cut the pages" (38). (Owl Eyes is referring to Belasco, a famous playwright and director, who spared no effort to make his settings and effects as true to life and nature as possible.) Does this sound like Gatsby? He has a library of books to impress his guests, but has he read any of them? And the books are uncut. They haven't been opened, just like the eyes of the characters in the novel. Behind the expensive parties, isn't Gatsby a lonely man? Does his greatness lie in his capacity to promote illusion? The only life in the painting is the little row of grass that doesn't even reach the end of the painting, and two towering palm trees. How do the two trees, standing together, create a contrast with the rest of the painting? And what about the splash? The splash is almost violent, breaking the calm in the rest of the painting, just like Gatsby's violent death in the swimming pool. Here is a vacant house, where the only sign of life is that someone has just sprung from the board and plunged beneath the water surface. But who ever thinks about

that diver? Who ever thought about Gatsby after he was murdered? This is where the students can see some of the similarities, and draw parallels, between the painting and *The Great Gatsby*.

We will then conclude this section, and the following day will look at another painting, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, by the famous Flemish painter, Breughel, repeating the same process used above. This time, however, the painting will be accompanied with two ekphrastic poems, W.H. Auden's "Muse des Beaux Arts" and William Carlos Williams' "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus," both describing the same painting.

Why Ekphrasis?

Carl R. V. Brown's article, "Contemporary Poetry about Painting" (1992), has argued that ekphrasis should be more widely taught in the English literature curriculum because of the many pedagogical advantages. Since its publication, several courses have been developed in colleges, and in the last decade the idea has gained momentum

Teaching ekphrastic poetry can be rewarding, because it presents numerous opportunities for the discovery of meaning. Students can get insight into the similarities and differences in the interpretation of famous works of art in popular culture. Brown suggests that teachers introduce paintings to literary works to illuminate matters of form, style, theme and historical context—to provide students with another perspective on the literature and create more opportunities for more understanding, response and inquiry. He also suggests that teachers encourage students to write their own interpretations of the paintings in poetry and prose, explaining why they agree or disagree with the poets' renderings. ⁵ .

What is Ekphrasis?

Ekphrasis, from the Greek meaning to draw out or to make clear, is the practice of creating art in response to art. Historically, ekphrasis has been primarily seen in poetic responses to visual art as seen in Homer, Keats, Wordsworth, Auden, Williams, Ashbery, and others. Ekphrasis sometimes denotes a description of a work of art that is undertaken as a rhetorical exercise (Lucie-Smith, 72). In other words, the description is done in hopes of understanding the work of art described, possibly expanding its meaning. An ekphrastic description can be anything that responds to the work of art, whether it be a painting or an object. Ekphrastic poems are attempts to describe what the

eye sees; thus enabling the viewer to understand the painting, sculpture, or architecture, more fully (Cage and Rosenfeld, 2000).

Teachers of rhetoric, in ancient Greece, taught ekphrasis as a way of heightening the experience of an object for a listener through highly descriptive writing. This practice was designed not only to provide important details about an object, but also to share the emotional experience and content with someone who had never encountered the work in question. Ekphrasis has often served the principle of '*ut pictura poesis*' (poetry as a speaking picture, and painting as mute poetry). Horace's *Arts Poetica* expressed the ekphrastic ideal of giving voice to a painting. "It has been treated as a mirror to the text, a mood of inversion, and a voice that disrupts or extends the voice of the narrative" (Elsner, Batsch). There are conventions with ekphrasis, as with other poetic modes:

- Giving Voice to the painting or making its characters speak.
- Praise, Response, with the poet or the persona praising the mastery of the work, or its stasis or permanence; or else the poet, drawn to the work, goes through a deeply moving visual experience.

- Paragone or Competitive Comparison (Leonardo da Vinci's term), where the poet competes or struggles with the painting either by pointing out its flaws or critically differentiating his art of words from that of images, or by exhibiting his own learning about the artwork itself.
- Energy or "Enargia," (from classical rhetoric) which is the natural vibrancy produced as the poet makes the artwork come to life before the reader's eyes.
- "Notional" ekphrasis, when the object itself is imagined by the poet and he proceeds to write a poem about it. ⁶ .

Objectives

Teaching American literature gives me the opportunity to practice pedagogy that is interdisciplinary, adding additional layers of meaning and contexts that my students might overlook. Knowing the historical background of a novel, and integrating art and poetry, can be drawn upon to enrich an interpretation of a literary text. Through art and poetry, learners' writing and perceptions will become more dynamic and descriptive, giving students more of a connection and an investment in their writing. Students will demonstrate comprehension by identifying evidence (diction, imagery, point of view, figurative language, symbolism, plot events and main ideas) in a variety of texts representative of different genres and using this evidence as the basis of interpretation. Students will also learn to apply techniques to different mediums, strengthening observation and writing skills. The most important objective is allowing my students the time to examine a work of art closely, becoming intimate with details, crafting words to express what one sees, and to develop an appreciation of art, recognizing how their lives are affected by its presence.

Strategies

Anticipation Guide

A strategy I use to start any new unit is an Anticipation Guide. I have had great results using this strategy. Before reading a selection, my students will respond to several statements that challenge or support their preconceived ideas about key concepts in the text. Using this strategy stimulates students' interest in a topic and sets a purpose for reading. I dim the lights, and present the guide on an overhead projector. As each statement is discussed, students must justify their opinions in an unstructured debate format, where students go to one side of the room with the word Agree if they agree with the statement, or go to the other side of the room if they disagree. Students who do not feel comfortable with a definite answer can stand in the middle. If they feel swayed by a student's response, they can move to one of the designated areas. Because student responses are based on thoughts and experiences of their own, they must "think on their feet." They should be able to explain and defend their positions in both whole group and small group discussions and give reasons for their choices. This helps all of my students anticipate the important ideas in the text, arouses student interest, sets purposes for reading, encourages higher order thinking, and provides an initial "hook" to draw them into the reading.

It is important to let the students know that the statements are designed to make them think about topics and

to make them think about what they will be learning. In this case, it would be the importance of "seeing," versus "looking," and how looking beyond the surface can enhance my students' writing skills, as well as enhance their vision of the world around them.

Think-Pair-Share

Think-Pair-Share is another cooperative discussion strategy that I use. It gets its name from the three stages of student action, with emphasis on what students are doing at each of those stages. Students learn in part by being able to talk about the content, and accountability is built in because each student must report to a partner, and then partners must report to the class. This is one way to make sure that every student participates in the discussion.

To start this strategy, we will read W.H. Auden's "Muse des Beaux Arts," aloud, switching back and forth between readers, followed by William Carlos Williams' "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus," before seeing the painting. Students will then share each other's reactions to the poems, responding to the questions: What are you hearing? What words in particular stand out, and why? What is the human position of suffering? What is the difference between innocence and indifference? These are some of the questions that can be used in a class discussion, or in a journal entry as an introductory analysis.

After discussing the poems, we will look at the art that inspired the poets, considering the following questions: Does the piece of literature visually describe the artwork? Do you find the description accurate? Does the literature draw conclusions or make interpretations of the artwork? Could you reconstruct the artwork from the literature without ever seeing it? Does the author focus on some aspects of the artwork but ignore other parts?

Process:

1. Think. I will ask the above questions to provoke my students' thoughts about the poems. Students will take a few minutes thinking about the questions, and will write down their thoughts.
2. Pair. Using designated partners, students will pair up to talk about the answers each came up with. They compare their written notes and identify the answers they think are best, or most convincing, and share their prior knowledge about the subject with their partner.
3. Share. After students talk in pairs for a designated time period, I will then call on the pairs to share their thinking with the rest of the class. I will usually call on each pair and will record their responses on the overhead or board.

Another strategy I will use is The Jigsaw activity, a useful form of cooperative learning that helps my class digest materials that are full of information and that might be challenging to the average student reader. It provides scaffolding for struggling readers and engages all students. Just as in a jigsaw puzzle, each student's part is essential for the completion and the full understanding of the task. Therefore, each student is essential, and that is precisely what makes this strategy so effective.

I will be using this strategy when students are introduced to U. A. Fanthorpe's "Not My Best Side," a humorous poem based on a painting of Saint George and the Dragon, by Uccello. The poem consists of three voices that speak in turn: the dragon, the maiden, and St. George. This poem might be challenging for my students because of the length, and content. For better understanding, the poem's three stanzas will be divided among the students into groups of five or six students. All the number one's are assigned to read the first segment of the poem, all of the number two's will be responsible for the second stanza of the poem, and the number

threes, the third stanza of the poem.

Students with the same number will get together in their groups to read, compare notes and to become experts on their section of the poem. Each group should determine what is important in their stanza of the poem, identify the main speaker, the main idea, and write a clear summary. Each member of the group is responsible to know the material well enough to go back and teach it to his/her own small group. Eventually each student will come back to her or his jigsaw group and will try to present a well-organized report to the group. The situation is specifically structured so that the only access any member has to the other five assignments is by listening closely to the report of the person reciting. Students will be asked to identify the three speakers, and answer the following questions:

- What lesson can be learned from reading Fanthorpe's reaction to the painting?
- What does this poem reveal about the way people are expected to conform to stereotypes in society?
- How can this relate to the characters in *The Great Gatsby*, and even of the people today?
- Can you judge a book by its cover?

We will then re-read the poem as a class, followed with a class discussion.

Text Rendering

Another strategy that I will be using is Text Rendering, which is almost the same format I use for a Found Poem. Both of these strategies are a way for students to break down text into its most basic elements while creating a new text (a poem) at the same time. The goal is to expand students' understanding of the text as well as to create a new piece. We will be using Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem, "We Wear the Mask," written in 1896, for this activity.

Steps:

- We will read the poem aloud, as a class, and students will have their own copies to mark with comments, or to highlight important words.
- Students will volunteer to read the poem aloud.
- As a student reads aloud, listeners will underline, highlight, or record words or phrases that move them, or that create a strong mental picture.
- When students have finished reading the poem, they will break into groups to create an oral group poem out of the words and phrases they have selected.
- One student in the group will begin by reading his/her words or phrases aloud. When there is a pause, another student will add his or her selection of words. All students in the group will share their highlighted words to add to the group poem. Students might find words and phrases that are repeated, but the group might decide to keep them, using some of the devices of poetry, such as repetition and alliteration.
- The discussion will return to the poem. Students will reread the text, noting their new understandings about the piece as a result of their work with the oral poem.
- Students reflect (in small groups and/or in writing) on how pulling out only some words or phrases has helped them to discover the essence of the piece. After the poem is completed, students will craft their own individual poem, deleting, adding, or rearranging words to create a poem, written in the first or third-person point of view, from a character's perspective in *The Great Gatsby*.

Classroom Activities

This unit will consist of nine 55-minute class periods, after we have completed reading the novel, *The Great Gatsby*, by Scott Fitzgerald. The students will already be familiar with the themes and characters in the novel that will be revisited in the paintings and poetry we discuss in class. They have already been asked to work on a mask that they can purchase, or make on their own. The mask should represent a character in *The Great Gatsby*, and should be attached to a backboard filled with symbols, themes, quotes, colors, or anything that represents the character in the novel. This will be used for the culminating activity at the end of the unit. Students will present their mask to the class, accompanied by an ekphrastic poem they have written about their own work of art.

Through our "learning to look" activities and class discussions, students will learn to respond to works of art, looking beyond the surface, and making connections to social, personal and other dimensions of life. They will learn to identify basic elements in a piece of art through writing, and in doing so, will enhance both their writing skills and skills of observation.

According to Elkins (2008), there are three steps to comprehension: describe what you see, interpret what you see, and evaluate what you see. On day one we will discuss the difference between "looking" and "seeing." The following day we will cover the first step of comprehension--description. Days three and four will focus on interpretation and evaluation.

Day One: On the first day of this unit, students will discuss the difference between looking and seeing. We will start class with a brief anticipation guide, based on Fredrick Franks' argument in his *Zen seeing/Zen Drawings* that will be discussed in an unstructured debate format. This will be presented on the overhead, with the lights off, which always seems to make my students more comfortable and willing to join in the conversation. Fredrick Franks argues that because society has become addicted to merely looking at things, we have lost our inborn gift of seeing. He believes that society has conspired against us through all of its distractions, such as television, VCRs, the internet, and advanced technology, and that because of all this we see very little. And the less we see, the more numb we become to the joys and pain of being alive, further estranging us from ourselves and others. ⁷

I will ask my students if they agree with this statement, or if they disagree, following the unstructured debate format described in my Strategy section. Students will stay seated for a few minutes, responding to the statement, writing down their thoughts. They will be asked to stand up and go to either side of the room, which has Agree written on one side, and Disagree on the other. Everyone in the class must take a stand. They should be able to explain and defend their positions, giving reasons for their choices. Those students who cannot make up their minds are allowed to stand in the middle of the two sides, and can move at any time, if a fellow student makes a convincing argument. If a student disagrees with a student who is speaking, he or she may respond once the student has finished speaking.

Surprisingly, these debates usually take care of themselves, because everyone has something to share. My students love unstructured debates, and usually handle the subject matter on their own. The only time I will interfere is when too many students are speaking at once, or if things get heated in the conversation.

After discussing the first statement, we will follow with the rest of the statements using the same format:

- It is possible to look at something and not see it.
- In an age of instant gratification, we must be trained to 'see' in order to encounter deeper meanings of things in the world.
- Looking and seeing are as different as babbling and speaking.
- It takes a long time to actually 'see' a painting.
- There is no right or wrong answer when viewing art.
- Interpreting poetry requires experience more than intelligence.
- Written or verbal miscommunication is a universal experience.
- We make meaning by comparing the unknown with what we know.

After we complete the unstructured debate, students will be asked to be seated, and to write a response to the question: "What is the difference between 'looking' and 'seeing'?" Once they have responded, they will pass their paper to a neighbor, who can add to the comments, or disagree, stating their own point of view. This process will be repeated one more time and the final respondent will paraphrase the responses, sharing them with the rest of the class. This allows students to share information and become part of the conversation without being intimidated. Some of the responses might be: to perceive; to understand; to watch; to observe ; to discover; to recognize; to visualize; to examine; or to look. We will follow their responses with different definitions I have found:

- Looking: Light passes through the lens of the eye, and the vitreous humour hits the retina, which stimulates rods (B/W) and cones (color) to send images.
- Seeing: The brain actually processes the information based upon prior knowledge, and assigns meaning to the messages received To perceive with the eyes; to visually comprehend.
- Seeing and Sight are often used to emphasize the quality which differentiates seeing from mere looking, as comprehending or understanding a sight's meaning rather than merely approaching its pattern of light.
- To visualize: To create a mental image; To see or form a mental picture of something.

We will finalize the discussion with: Descriptive language that produces visualization is called ekphrasis. I will then explain the history and meaning of ekphrasis, and announce that students will be creating their own ekphrastic poems, based on a piece of art, after they have strengthened their observational skills.

For homework, students will write a journal on the importance of "seeing" versus "looking," and how paying attention to details will not only enhance their writing skills, but also the quality of their lives.

Day Two: After our discussion on looking and seeing, it is now time for testing our observation skills. Carefully examining an art object requires students to pay close attention to details. They will learn to look (see), and think about what they are seeing. For this first exercise, I have chosen the painting, *The Persistence of Memory*, by Salvador Dali, which will be displayed on the overhead. With no background information, students will be asked to sit quietly and observe the painting. With the dimmed lights, the right climate for viewing is established. Students will be asked to focus on the details of the painting, "taking it all in," while listing everything they see before we share our observations as a class. The purpose of this exercise is to get students to see as much as they can before moving on to analysis and interpretation. Students will list the images in the painting, without focusing on their opinions or on what a particular image in the work might symbolize. At this first stage, they need to stick to the facts. The following are some observations my students might list for Salvador Dali's artwork:

There are four watches. Three appear to be molten, as if made out of cheese. One watch whose structure

doesn't appear to be malformed is orange. It is sitting on a desk-like object. Clocks appear to melt over branches and rigid surfaces. Ants appear to be feeding on the orange watch, as though it's edible. Another watch is placed on the top of the box with its face down. We cannot see the numbers or the hands of the face. We see the gold casing of the back of the watch. We can see the numbers three through nine. The hand on the watch points to the number six. In the center of the painting is a large, fleshy, animal-like creature with the fourth watch draped over it. At first glance it appears to be an animal lying on its side. The creature is grayish and seems to be lying on top of a rock. We see its profile, which faces the painting's lower edge. The head has a human-like nose and long eyelashes, a tongue, which hangs out of its mouth, and a closed eyelid. The head appears to be a distorted human profile. It shows no signs of life. Two tiny rocks are on the beach in the background. The mountains and the water are lit by sunlight. You can draw a diagonal line between the shadowed place and the lit areas of this painting. The body of water meets the horizon line. On the painting's upper-right side, there are jagged, rocky cliffs. The colors in the painting are dark brown in the foreground sand, yellow in the rocky cliffs and horizon line, and aqua blue in the sky. ⁸

After listing all of the details in the painting, students will have the opportunity to record their first reactions to the painting. As students share their first impressions, such as, "This work is strange. It looks like the artist was hallucinating," or "I love this painting. The colors are beautiful," I will record their impressions on the board. They will be asked to keep a copy of their first impressions, so they can later be used to see if they have grown through the process of viewing a work.

Students will then try to figure out what the artist has done to achieve certain effects. But before we start that discussion, students will be introduced to the Elements of Art, enabling the students to (1) describe what the artist has done, (2) analyze what is going on in this particular piece and (3) communicate their thoughts and findings using a common language.

We will discuss the basic components used by the artist when producing works of art. Those elements are color, value, line, shape, form, texture, and space. They are among the literal qualities found in any artwork. We will also discuss Primary colors {red, blue and yellow), and Secondary Colors- (orange, violet, green), created by mixing primary colors. We will also discuss the principles of design, defining proportion, contrast, emphasis, balance, harmony, movement, pattern, repetition and rhythm,

The whole point of this exercise is for students to eventually be able to create an argument about what they see. In short, they have to translate the visual into the verbal. To do this they must first understand the language of the discipline, familiarizing themselves with the terms and concepts necessary to describe a work of art. Second –and perhaps most important –they need to learn not only to describe what they see, but to craft their description so that it delivers some argument or point of view. A good paper, whether describing art, a novel or a poem, must consider what it is a student wants to say about the topic, using description to make that point.

We will end this lesson at this point, but students will be asked to look at *The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory*, another painting by Salvador Dali, repeating the same process we did today in class, later on comparing and contrasting the two pieces of art.

Day Three: We will follow up on yesterday's discussion, using the same painting, *The Persistence of Memory*. By examining the artwork, making interpretations or evaluating other's interpretations, my students will learn how to formulate and support an argument. The following questions can be asked to get students thinking and talking at this stage. What caught your attention in the painting? How did the artist use color? What about

line? Do the lines draw your eye along any particular path or emphasize any one part of the work? Are the shapes organic or geometric? What role does contrast play in this work? At this stage we are looking at what choices the artist has made and what the artist is doing, rather than moving to personal interpretation

We will follow the same format used in the Strategy section of this unit, and then move on to analysis, making connections with *The Great Gatsby*. Because the students cannot really interview the artist, they will have to rely on what they have observed through their observations and class discussions. At this point, students can come up with their own ideas about the art, and interpretations that make sense to them.

I will then follow with: What is the theme of the work? What is the work about? What does the work mean? Although Dali almost never explained his works with seriousness, students can come to some conclusions on their own by examining the feelings provoked while observing the contents of the painting. What do you think the watches symbolize? And why are the watches distorted? What do the ants and fly symbolize? What about the dead oak tree? How does Dali communicate meaning through light and shadow in the painting? What do the two steps, one brown and one blue, represent?

As a class we will discuss these questions, and how the painting is filled with interesting and meaningful images—the ants, the fly, the olive tree, the odd shape on the beach, the steps, and the watches—challenging our belief in a rational, orderly, and rule-bound world. Perhaps the distorted images that are in the shade are representing subconscious images, and the sun-lit mountain and water represent consciousness. The vision of clocks melting over a vast and lonely beach resembles the sands of time. And time reveals the presence of death. The ants and fly symbolize decay. The ants, attacking the orange clock might indicate the anxiety associated with time. Maybe it is reminding us that we are all going to die. The painting might symbolize the universal human preoccupation with time and memory. ⁹

Students will now be asked to stretch their imaginations and to expand their interpretations one step further. Why might I have chosen this particular painting for a viewing exercise? What similarities do they see in this painting to some of the themes and characters in *The Great Gatsby*? This is the fun part of the activity, because there is no limit as to where students can draw parallels. Responses might be:

- The painting is like a dream, yet the images look more like a nightmare.
- This could represent the American Dream in a corrupt period of history—the ants and fly representing the decay of morals, and the frustrations of modern society.
- Gatsby believes in his dream, even though it may never become a reality.
- Time blocks Gatsby's dream, when Daisy marries Tom Buchanan, making Gatsby a mere memory.
- He truly believes he can repeat the past, as shown when he tells Nick: "Can't repeat the past? Why of course you can!"(117).
- Gatsby is conquered by his dream, and reality vanishes.
- Tom Buchanan also tries to relive his past. "[Tom is] one of those men who reach such an acute limited excellence at twenty-one that everything afterward savors of anticlimax" (Fitzgerald 6). Tom attempts to recapture a feeling from his past that cannot equal the intensity of his youth.
- Daisy Buchanan also reaches through time to recall a feeling from her past that can never equal its original vitality. She is also probing for feelings of the past that she now lacks in her dead marriage.
- Violating time's laws, none of the characters can relive their pasts.

The world of this painting is ruled by an irrational order. It is disquieting and haunting. We return to the painting again and again to try to figure out the puzzle. But, as in a dream, no solution is offered. Everything

looks real in the painting, yet we know that it cannot be real. This deliberate confusion of real and imagined, and the attempt to represent the unconscious mind, is central to the premise of Surrealism.

The Persistence of Memory was painted by Salvador Dali in 1931. As one of his most popular paintings, it is a classic portrayal of the dream-like interpretation of quite simple objects and shapes distorted or transformed into sometimes unrecognizable forms. Dali himself once commented that the mind and time are like "cheese" that is full of holes (unreliable). In his painting, Dali seems to point out that memory can be deceiving. ¹⁰

For homework, students will compare and contrast *The Persistence of Memory* and *The Disintegration of The Persistence of Memory*, describing each painting, and writing a short essay about the painting they like best, explaining why.

Days Four and Five: The following two days we will discuss two more paintings: the first, *A Bigger Splash*, by David Hockney, painted in 1967, has already been discussed in the Strategy section of this unit, and *The Fall of Icarus*, by Brueghel, painted in the sixteenth century, accompanied by two ekphrastic poems. Through observation, and class discussions students will be able to draw parallels between both works of art, together with themes in *The Great Gatsby*.

We will start by examining two ekphrastic poems written in response to the famous Flemish painter Brueghel's *The Fall of Icarus*, using the Think-Pair-Share strategy. By asking probing questions and sharing these poems with students, I will move them to uncover a deeper level of meaning in Brueghel's painting. Moving beyond the initial reading, the students will begin to understand that the painting serves as a commentary on humankind's indifference to suffering.

A copy of both poems will be handed to the students. I will ask for volunteers to read each poem aloud, with students highlighting words and passages. We will then read about Icarus, a figure from Greek mythology who was trapped in a labyrinth with his father, Daedalus. In order to escape, his father, a talented craftsman, made two pairs of artificial wings held together with wax, so they could fly away from their place of captivity. But instead of heeding his father's warning not to fly too low or too close to the sun, Icarus got carried away, flying too close to the sun, and as a result, the wax melted and he fell, plunging to his death in the sea.

After reading the myth, students will get into pairs to discuss each poem, and will be asked to paraphrase each poem before attempting to analyze them. For example, Williams' "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" offers a brief descriptive sketch of Peter Brueghel's painting. A paraphrase of the poem might be: In Brueghel's painting the season is spring when Icarus fell into the sea. It is hot, and the wax, "sweating in the sun," has melted his wings. A farmer is working in his field, and "the whole pageantry" is "awake tingling near," meaning there was a lot of commotion going on at the sea shore, but basically, people were only concerned with themselves. No one even notices that Icarus fell into the sea, even though there was a splash, which meant that he was drowning. The event was "quite unnoticed," and "insignificant" to those who were not drowning.

In W. H. Auden's "Muse des Beaux Arts," the poem also focuses on the insignificance of the event to those not directly involved, but with much more elaboration. The speaker is pretty much absent from the poem as a whole. He is sitting before a single painting, and his mind is completely absorbed in what is before him. He is sharing his thoughts about a beautiful painting that has inspired him. Even as Auden is describing the ways that we never pay attention to the suffering around us, his poem manages to avoid describing that suffering outright. Auden makes sure that we know just how embedded suffering is in the other activities that occupy our daily lives, especially through the Old Masters, who keep reminding us through their art.

Students will discuss and answer the following questions: What can the titles tell you about the poems? What is happening in the landscape at the time of Icarus' fall? What are the poets' attitudes toward the event? What is the tone in the poems? State the themes of the poems and support with evidence from the text. How does reading the myth help you understand the poem? How is innocence and passivity handled in these poems? What is the difference between innocence and indifference? Is it acceptable for anyone, no matter what age, to be excused from being helpful or showing sympathy to others who are suffering? And finally, what lessons do the poets, W.H. Auden and William Carlos Williams, say that we can take away from the painting?

After sharing our responses, students will look at the painting, and hopefully notice the legs of a boy disappearing into the sea. By looking at what the painting says, and doesn't say, students can make connections outside of the text. Why do you think the painter has all the direction of the painting moving away from the drowning body?

Finally we will discuss how these two poems might tie in with *The Great Gatsby*. Students will brainstorm, and some of the responses might be:

- *Gatsby* can be compared to the mythic figure Icarus, associated with the sun.
- *Gatsby* correlates Daisy with the sun.
- On our first glimpse of *Gatsby*, we see him standing alone in the darkness of West Egg, reaching toward a light in East Egg.
- *Gatsby* tries to attract Daisy through a dazzling display of artificial light.
- *Gatsby's* eventual death is described as a movement from summer to autumn.
- *Gatsby* headed for the sun and got burned, just as Icarus did.

For a writing assignment, students will compare the two poems, and how two major poets have responded to the same painting. They will also respond to the painting, and how it connects to the myth of Icarus. What lessons or morals does the myth teach? How does it deal with things like pride, arrogance, empathy, or indifference?

Day Six: Today we will approach ekphrastic poetry on a more humorous level, reading Fanthorpe's "Not My Best Side," inspired by Ucello's painting, *St. George and the Dragon*. Fanthorpe takes the liberty of explaining the depicted scene through the eyes and mind of the three characters: the dragon, the maiden, and the knight. These dramatic monologues are an effective poetic device for Fanthorpe, and by speaking through these personae, she challenges old stereotypes by imagining more contemporary, irreverent attitudes.

Having been told about *St. George and the dragon*, students will be asked to describe what they think or sense about the three characters in the poem before seeing the painting, or reading the poem. They will then compare their own original thoughts about the story and its archetypes with Fanthorpe's twentieth-century rendition. Students will work in groups analyzing the poem in a Jigsaw puzzle format, already discussed in my Strategy section. They will be asked to paraphrase their stanzas before jumping into the theme of the poem, and will be responsible for answering the following questions: Look at the title of the poem. What is it telling you about the theme? Who is the speaker in your stanza? Look at the literary devices, such as imagery, symbolism, metaphor, simile, allusions, etc. What is the speaker's tone or attitude toward the subject of the poem, and toward the other characters? Why do you think Fanthorpe is speaking through personae? Now list the theme (subject) of the poem, then determine what the poet is saying about each of those subjects (theme).

Students will get back into their groups and report their findings to their other group members, followed by a

class discussion.

Day Seven: Today we will be viewing Renee Magritte's painting, *The False Mirror*. I am including Margritte in this study because his intended goal was to challenge the observer's preconditioned perceptions of reality and force the viewers to become hyper sensitive to their surroundings. Margritte never wanted to explain his paintings. He often painted objects realistically, but points out that no matter how closely we come to depicting an item accurately we never do catch the item itself.

This painting is basically a giant eye that is formed as a frame of a blue sky with clouds. The pupil of the eye rests dead center in sharp color contrast to the white and blue of the sky. But the eye is not connected to a body, just as the eyeglasses on the billboard of Dr. T.J. Ekleburg in *The Great Gatsby* do not have a nose to rest upon. Magritte challenges us to question what we see and what we think we know. Magritte's eye takes on a universal role, serving as the eye of humanity, and the representation of all humans. By looking into this eye, essentially, we are trying to understand our own existence in the world.

Students will be asked to do three things while viewing this painting on the overhead: First, they will list all of the details in the painting, second, they will write a description of the painting, and finally, they will be asked to write a story about it, before condensing it to an ekphrastic poem. We will have a brief discussion about the painting, and how it relates to *The Great Gatsby*, before students begin writing their poems. Some of the ideas that might be discussed are the themes of sight versus insight, illusion (or appearance), versus reality, and how Fitzgerald uses eyes as an important symbol throughout the novel to help clarify the different perspectives of his characters. After pondering these points, students will write an ekphrastic poem about the painting

Students should remember while writing their poems to use descriptive language, using adjectives, similies, metaphors, hyperbole, and other literary devices to create a vivid description. The poems should focus on sensory details (sight, smell, taste, touch, and sound), which are invoked by looking at the work of art. They need to ask themselves, what can be seen? What can be heard? Think of what the artist might have been saying. Speak to the artist. What do you want to ask? Give voice to the mute object. Use words that have your poem reflect the mood of the artwork. Do not forget to include the conventions of ekphrasis.

Day Eight: Today we will view another painting by Rene Magritte, *Les Amants*, or *The Lovers*, one of a series of pictures made between 1927 and 1928.

This is a beautiful, haunting painting. At first sight we can see this mysterious couple, just about to kiss, but they are covered in shrouds. The viewer is shocked by Magritte shrouding his subjects in white cloth. There can be many interpretations of the white cloth. It could indicate that "love is blind," or the mystery that veils our understanding of a lover, who is never completely known to us. The sheets can even represent the hidden, unconscious activities of the mind. Whatever the reason, the lovely point of this painting is that one can make or take out of it anything they want to.

We already know that things are not always as they seem, and that we are often fooled by the metaphorical masks people wear. This is quite evident in *The Great Gatsby*, where the appearance of many of the characters differs greatly from their actual selves. Students will respond to this painting by writing an ekphrastic poem.

Day Nine: Today we will extend our discussion of the mask motif while reading Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem, "We Wear the Mask," written in 1896. We see the author's personal frustration all throughout the poem, yet

the speaker uses a universal voice that can apply to anyone of any race who hides his or her feelings in order to survive in the world. For better understanding, we will read this poem aloud, following with the Text Rendering Strategy, already explained. Students will then write their own poem, from the point of view of a character in *The Great Gatsby*.

Day Ten: For the final activity, students will turn in their masks, which will be displayed on the walls in the classroom. Each student will then read their ekphrastic poem aloud to the class, and students will guess which mask is being described. The poet will then explain why he or she chose the quotes and symbols they did to represent their character.

End Notes

1. Hugh Davies, Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego, <http://www.signonsandiego.com> (assessed June 5, 2010)
2. Charles Fowler, "Every Child Needs the Arts," New Horizons for Learning. http://www.newhorizons.org/future/Creating_the_Future/crfut_fowler.html (accessed June 7, 2010).
3. David Perkins, "Art as Understanding" in "Art, Mind and Education." Gardner, N. University of Illinois Press. 1989.
4. James Elkins, *Visual Literacy*. 1 Ed. New York: Routledge, 2007.
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6. Calamity Jane Takes Aim," Creative Commotions, <http://calamity.wordherders.net>
7. Fredrick Franks, *Zen of Seeing: Seeing/Drawing as Meditation*. New York: Vintage, 1973.
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9. <http://www.authenticociety.com/about/ThePersistenceOfMemoryDali> (assessed July 12,
10. Ibid
11. Ibid

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Other Websites

<http://anova1215.multiply.com> This website, "Dragonfly in Amber," is based in Manila. It was created by Noelle Dela Cruz, a philosophy teacher and creative writing student, who shares a lot about her life in the Philippines, as well as beautiful art and ekphrastic poetry.

www.puddinghouse.com/ekphrastic.htm At this website Jennifer Bosveld shares some of her ekphrastic poetry, and gives tips on how to write it.

<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5918> This is a very popular site called Poet.org, from the Academy of American Poets. It offers several classic examples of ekphrastic poetry, as well as, tips for teaching poetry.

<http://www.tnellen.com/cybereng/ekphrasis.pdf> Teacher, Honor Moormon shares an extended poetry lesson in her, *Backing into Ekphrasis: Reading and Writing Poetry about Visual Art*. She includes a list of over a dozen ekphrastic poems to choose from, and a guide on how to analyze a poem.

<http://www.dwpoet.com/poetassign.html> David Wright, a professor at Wheaton College, offers this site with links to over 45 ekphrastic poems with the artwork.

<https://teachers.yale.edu>

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