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Demystifying Poetry Using Women's Ekphrasis

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Overview

Poetry is a mysterious medium for students. They respond to it on an emotional level, and that response is usually something like "Yuck!" Even when students enter an honors or an AP English course, where the students are clearly driven or they would not have chosen to sign up for the class in the first place, those same driven students still approach poetry lessons with a sense of foreboding. Ekphrastic poetry, however, provides an entry point for students into a poem. When students read a poem that was written in response to a piece of art the effect is similar to illustrations in a children's book. Suddenly, they feel that basic comprehension of a poem is actually possible--yet simple comprehension is rarely what a teacher of poetry is seeking in her students. The wonderful thing about ekphrastic poetry is that it easily leads into a dialogue about the form and function of a poem and its components. This unit seeks to take students who dislike poetry and know little about it, and transform them into sophisticated and perceptive readers of poetry through an examination of various ekphrastic poems.

Rationale

I began teaching AP English Literature three years ago. In those three years I have worked hard to help my students acquire the skills necessary to not only score well on the AP exam, but to acquire reading and writing skills that would prepare them for whatever career path they chose after high school. One of the many skills that an AP English Literature student needs to acquire is the ability to identify literary devices within the context of a piece of writing, and examine the function of that literary device within the piece. If students are able to do this they will score well on the AP exam, but they will also become careful, analytical readers, which is a valuable skill to possess. The ability to identify literary terms and explain their function is one which a student must demonstrate with prose passages and pieces of poetry. This creates three problems for me every year. The first problem is that my students have little knowledge of literary terms beyond the most basic vocabulary. Even the things they are familiar with, like imagery and simile, they have a hard time finding within the context of a story or a poem. The second problem comes after I teach the students the terms and how to identify them in a text. Once they have acquired the vocabulary and can identify the terms, they really

struggle with considering the function of a device within a text. For some reason students think that writers just throw symbols, anaphora, metaphors, or metonymy into a piece of writing simply because they *can*. The idea that these techniques have a purpose beyond merely showing off some nifty skills on behalf of the author is a completely foreign concept to my students. Then, once I have convinced the students that writers are not simply showing off, they slowly begin to consider the question of function and have discussions about function. These discussions go far concerning stories or plays, but my third problem becomes glaringly obvious once we try to have such discussions about poetry. The students have little to no familiarity with poetry, so their ability to read and understand it is severely limited. Much of my year seems to be spent trying to teach them how to simply read and comprehend poetry, which leaves little time to get to the higher level skills necessary for the AP exam.

Some minor work with ekphrastic poetry in another course I teach gave me some ideas about how I might use the poetry in my AP course, and then the offering of a Yale National Initiative poetry seminar on ekphrasis formalized my initial thoughts. According to Leo Spitzer, ekphrasis is "the verbal representation of visual representation." ¹ The "verbal representation" of ekphrasis is what drew me toward designing a unit using ekphrastic poetry for my AP English Literature and Composition students. With ekphrastic poetry students can focus on *how* a poet verbally represents a piece of art by identifying the literary devices the poet uses, considering why those devices were chosen, and examining the effect of the devices on the reader of the poem. In my limited work with ekphrasis in the classroom, I realized that poetry becomes much more approachable when students have a visual representation in front of them. Students are intimidated by poetry, and ekphrastic poetry is accessible because they can read the poem with some confidence that they at least have a general idea what the poem is discussing.

This unit will begin with some work with poems in response to Pieter Brueghel paintings to get students familiar with the concept of ekphrasis and the various ways poets can respond to a piece of art. Several poets have written poems in response to the same Brueghel paintings, so this will serve as a good starting point for discussing the various purposes of ekphrasis. After Brueghel we will move on to women poets, mainly because my current course of study has only one text by a woman. A secondary reason is that women have a unique tradition in relation to ekphrasis, and their responses to art raise issues and questions about art and the creation of art that will benefit our work throughout the rest of the school year. So while we study the poems by looking to the text and the painting for our interpretation, I will introduce some of the feminist literary theory related to ekphrastic poetry and its female tradition. Throughout the unit students will work with ekphrastic poetry in four distinct ways. The first way is by viewing and discussing the work of art, then reading and analyzing the poem and examining the effect of the poetry on our reading of the work of art. The second way is to read the poem and consider what the artwork might look like or why it inspired the poem, then moving on to view the artwork and reexamine our ideas about the poem in reference to the piece of art. In each of these approaches we will also work closely with the text of the poem and consider how the literary devices within the text are creating a sense of the art or conditioning a certain response. After the students have worked through various poems using both approaches, they will split up into small groups to teach the rest of the class an ekphrastic poem. Finally, the students will end by creating their own ekphrastic poem and writing an explanation of the techniques they used and their function. By the end of the unit the students should have read around 15 poems and learned the basic techniques for reading and analyzing a poem.

It is important to note here that while this unit is designed for a senior AP English Literature course, it is easily adaptable to many other classes and grade levels. While some of the poems referenced in the unit may not be age appropriate for certain grades, the basic techniques and approaches are easily used within most classrooms.

Ekphrastic Poetry Defined

In order to understand the potential of ekphrastic poetry in a classroom, it is helpful to have a clear understanding of what ekphrasis actually is and what writers are attempting when they create an ekphrastic piece of writing. While the concept seems easy, "poetry or prose in response to art," there are various forms, approaches, and goals for ekphrasis. Knowing the form, the approach, and the goal of the ekphrasis will help you, as the teacher, understand what skills you will be able to teach with that ekphrasis.

Ekphrasis generally refers to any written response to art, regardless of the form of the art or the form of the writing. Up until the last twenty years or so, ekphrasis simply meant a description of a work of art and was mostly used by classicists or historians.² This sense of the word could be as simple as a caption under a picture in a book; obviously, this is not the type of ekphrasis we will examine. Additionally, many wonderful novels and prose pieces are ekphrastic in nature, like *The Scarlet Letter* or *The Girl With the Pearl Earring*, but that is not the focus of the unit. Nevertheless, many of the basic techniques in this unit could be applied to the teaching of ekphrastic prose. Although your classroom instruction may not focus much on poetry, these techniques and ideas are very adaptable and work well with prose. The ekphrases in this unit are all poems, and after the introductory lesson of the unit, it focuses solely on women's ekphrastic poetry.

There are three basic types of ekphrasis: notional ekphrasis, actual ekphrasis, and unassessable actual ekphrasis. In the simplest terms, notional ekphrasis is based on imagined art, actual ekphrasis on a piece of art that we can find and view, and unassessable actual ekphrasis is based on a piece of art that we do not have access to or that has been lost. All of these variations can serve the purpose of making poetry more accessible to students, but clearly actual ekphrasis provides a better frame of reference for students who really struggle with reading comprehension or need an entry point into a poem. Still, many of the other types of ekphrasis are good materials for an AP English Literature course. I will not be using any notional ekphrasis in this unit because it does not provide that visual entry point into poetry that my students need at the beginning of the school year.

Unassessable actual ekphrasis is a better choice than notional if your students are really struggling with understanding poetry. While there may not be an example of the actual work of art present to show your students, you can bring in related images to help them get a sense of what the poet was responding to. A fantastic unassessable ekphrastic poem is Gjertrud Schnackenberg's "Nightfishing". This poem seems designed to be taught in an English class. The sense of loss felt by the speaker is clearly conveyed in even the most superficial of readings, and the strength of the writing enables the poem to stand up well to deep reading and analysis of the various literary techniques employed within the verse. Additionally, Schnackenberg's poem is written about a planter's clock that was hanging in the kitchen of her childhood home, and a teacher could show the students various images of planter's clocks to help them understand some of her imagery and personification. When she writes that the "smiling moon as it dips down below / two hemispheres, stars numberless as days, and peas, tomatoes, and onions as the grow," students can gain clarity about the moon, hemispheres, and vegetable references easily with pictures of other planter's clocks. Once that clarity is gained they can begin to examine how she pulls the vegetable idea through the first verse paragraph in the lines "but though the sands / of time put on this vegetable disguise." Through close examination the phrase "vegetable disguise" refers to the decorative vegetables on the clock disguising the ultimate purpose of the clock, to mark the passage of time. In our world vegetables are seemingly regenerative; they may grow and be eaten, but they are quickly replaced by new vegetables. This creates the impression that vegetables never die, never end, never go away. "The sands of time," however, mark time disappearing, time ending. So while the clock is covered with cheerful vegetables and smiling moons, this is

just a disguise, hiding its true purpose. Most students will need to see the face of a typical planter's clock in order to understand this underlying meaning in the first verse paragraph. The concept of time disappearing, moments ending, things staying irrevocably in the past is a major focus in the poem. Without access to a picture of the face of the clock I could see many of my students getting hung up on the seemingly random description of the vegetables in the first verse paragraph, and that will inevitably send them into a spiral of confusion and despair over the bewildering world of poetry where clocks have vegetable gardens. It is access to images, even related images, that will provide my students with the key to the type of reading of a poem expected on the AP exam. Then once students have found this entry point, discovered the significance of the vegetable reference, the class can move on to examine the function of the personification of the clock ("The clock covers its face with its long, think hands"), the function of the metonymy ("You sit still, like a monument in a hall"), or the function of the various references to stopping or drifting throughout the poem. This is what makes ekphrasis so wonderful for the teaching of poetry: a simple photo of a clock can begin a dialogue about the basic meaning of the piece, which leads to the close analytical reading necessary for students to become perceptive readers.

Actual ekphrasis is the best type of poetry to use when looking for that entry point into poetry. It is important to note that some ekphrasis seems to stray rather far from the artwork, leaving one asking how on earth the poet could claim that the artwork inspired the poem, yet even the most oblique ekphrastic poems create discussion, invite questions, and spark interest in students. Getting my students to begin a dialogue with the poem is often the biggest hurdle I face at the beginning of the school year, and even the most bewildering ekphrastic poem will provide the students with an entry point. At the very least they can look for lines in the poem that seem to refer to the art work, and from there they can begin to puzzle out the meaning of the rest of it and the writer's purpose. Mary Leader's poem "Girl at Sewing Machine" is written in response to the painting of the same name by Edward Hopper. This is an interesting ekphrastic poem to work on with the students because of its references to things not in the picture. Hopper's painting is done in gorgeous orange, yellow, and gold tones and depicts a girl wearing a long white dress bent over a sewing machine. She is not a thin, lithe girl, but instead is rather stout. She sits at a sewing machine in front of a window in a bedroom while the sun streams in the window over her and the scene. Leader's poem tells the story of the girl while she works, and seems pretty straightforward and clear in its subject matter. So the poem is already quite accessible to students. The addition of the painting in conjunction with the poem highlights some of the more interesting diction in the poem. Leader's first few lines are "It must be warm in the room, walls the color of over-steeped / tea." In the very first line Leader's use of the word "must" is immediately interesting because it is making a guess about things the viewer of the painting could not know. Is it warm? Leader is making this assumption because of the lighting and color in the painting; however it is not clear if she is correct. Her guessing continues when she writes, "She is a busty girl, / soft, no doubt perspiring, slippery under her breasts, moisture / trapped on the back / of her neck under all that chestnut hair. She doesn't notice, / though; you can see." Leader's reference to heat continues as she guesses that the girl is sweating, but that she doesn't mind because she is intent on her work. Again, this information is not clear from the painting. Hopper's style of painting does not reveal tiny details like sweat on a subject's face to give us any indication that Leader's suppositions are true. Leader continues to focus on physical things about the girl and the setting that no viewer can know, the pudginess of the girl's feet, whether or not she wears shoes, the clothes she wears when she goes out, and why she keeps her hair long. By having the painting there in front of them the students can begin to consider why Leader spends most of the poem talking about things not apparent in the painting. They can examine the function of words and phrases like "more," "are probably," "let's go ahead and say," and "I'm sure she knows." Why is Leader making all of these suppositions? As the poem progresses Leader is no longer making simple guesses about the temperature and the size of the girl's feet; she begins to

speak for her with lines like "Yes, I know this girl" and "Let's go ahead and say it's / a dress for herself." She is no longer guessing; she is speaking as if these things are true because she "knows this girl." This ekphrastic poem provides a great opportunity for a really rich conversation about diction and its impact on meaning, purpose, and tone. Also, students could experiment with swapping out words and phrases for other words and phrases in the poem to consider the eternal English class question, "Why this word and not another?" Additionally, Leader uses onomatopoeia and imagery, two terms the students generally know when they arrive in my class. Students should be able to identify those techniques rather quickly, and then we could have a rich discussion of their function in the poem. Leader's poem also offers a good opportunity to discuss some of the unique attributes of female ekphrastic poetry that I discuss in the next section. Without the painting present, while the students may eventually notice that Leader is writing a poem about what is *not* in the painting, the use of the painting brings the concept to the discussion much more quickly. This allows us to spend more of our class time discussing literary techniques and function rather than spending most of it on basic comprehension of the poem.

In addition to using the piece of art to help the students enter into a richer discussion of poetry more quickly, the teacher can alert the students to some of the basic approaches to ekphrasis. There are some general ways that a poet can structure their response, and once the student knows these responses this knowledge can also aid them in their comprehension and analysis of the poem. John Hollander breaks it down into a few simple categories. According to Hollander, poets are "addressing the image, making it speak, speaking of it interpretively, meditating upon the moment of viewing it." ³ These four clear categories would be good to provide to most students as starting points to figure out the author's purpose with a poem. If you would like to break this concept down further for your students then Honor Moorman's essay "Backing into Ekphrasis: Reading and Writing Poetry about Visual Art" provides a helpful list of approaches to ekphrasis that are rather student friendly, no matter what level of student you teach. Some of the approaches she mentions are:

describing the scene itself, relating the image in the painting to something else, expressing an awareness of him or herself observing the painting, describing how the subject is organized or presented by the artist, trying to figure out what the painting is about, exploring the relationship between the artist and the subject of the painting, assuming the reader's familiarity with the image, discussing the history of the painting, imagining a story behind the scene depicted in the painting, imagining what was happening while the portrait sitters posed for the painting, speaking to the artist, speaking to the subject of the painting, speaking as the voice of a character from the painting, and speaking as the voice of multiple characters from the painting. ⁴

When she uses ekphrastic poetry in her class or does activities with ekphrastic poetry, Moorman will introduce the approach the poet uses to her students, but for my purposes I plan to supply my students with Hollander's shorter list during my introductory lessons of the concept of ekphrasis. Then they can use the list to figure out the approach for the other poems we discuss in class, providing yet another entry point into poetry. If I find, as the unit progresses, that they need narrower categories to consider, then I will provide them with Moorman's more detailed list.

Another rather important thing to consider with ekphrastic poetry is why writers feel compelled to write poems about art at all. On its surface it seems like a peculiar thing to do. A piece of art, whether sculpture, painting, or photography, was meant to make a statement or impact the viewer on its own. So why is there a need for another art medium, writing, to speak about the characters, the scene, the composition, etc. of the artwork? According to Hollander, a common theory about art and poetry (made popular by Plutarch) is that "painting is mute poetry and poetry is a speaking picture." ⁵ This statement seems to equalize both art forms, but I feel it

does not answer my question about why the art of poetic ekphrasis exists. Hollander goes on to elaborate and expand on Plutarch's concept, stating, "And ultimately, poetry seems to imply, it can at the very least help art to make its point by showing how, in particular cases, art is being made. In the presence of a work of art, poetry seldom makes the manifest claim that its own further removal gives it a greater authority, and its usual rhetorical stance is awed deference. But just such a claim is often latent." ⁶ Hollander believes that poetry, while seeming to state that it is just reinforcing the message of art, is really making a claim of authority over art. The poet is writing the poem perhaps because the work of art did not make the message clear enough, or perhaps even got the message wrong. While these ideas of speaking from a position of more authority over art may not be overt in the poem (and Hollander states that often they are not), they are clear enough to reveal the rivalry created through ekphrasis. In our Yale National Institute seminar on ekphrastic poetry, Yale professor Paul Fry stated that "A poem has picture envy." So while it is approaching the art from a position of authority, it is really taking that position because it is jealous of what a piece of art is capable of doing that a poem cannot because of its medium. Leonardo da Vinci, according to Hollander, believed that "poetry is condemned to proceed in time, part by part, whereas in a picture there is the power of simultaneity." ⁷ Poetry, in fact all writing, must be approached in parts, and there is a progression of ideas. One must read a line, then the next, and proceed from one stanza to another until finally all of the ideas in the poem have been taken in by the reader. None of the ideas of the poem can be taken in simultaneously, unlike a piece of art which appears to present its idea all at once, in its entirety. Poetry on the other hand can never be as immediate as art, and so seems intent on implying that art is lacking something which requires a poem to clear it up.

All this might seem a bit overstated, but even if this rivalry is not an overt message, or perhaps not even a message at all in the poem, the very nature of ekphrasis implies this idea. Why do poets need to write a poem about a work of art that was made to stand alone? The only answer is that the poet clearly thought that the art did not get the job done, to put it bluntly. The rivalry between art and poetry is inherent in the very act of ekphrasis, so students should be made aware of that and approach the poet's purpose with a little more suspicion than perhaps they would have otherwise.

Women's Ekphrastic Poetry

The rivalry between art and poetry is an important thing to consider in women's ekphrastic poetry. The disparity in the inclusion of male writers versus female writers in typical syllabi is similar to the disparity between the inclusion of male artists versus female artists in major art exhibitions or art history textbooks. In the art world "women have never been, nor are they yet, treated on par with white men." ⁸ The same could certainly be said for the world of literature. In the art community "women are also often excluded from exhibitions within which one would think they would play major roles, and women curators are rarely invited to organize the more prestigious international exhibitions." ⁹ Again, the same is clearly happening in the literary community. Simply flip through the pages of a writing anthology you use in your classroom, and the omission of female writers is apparent. Within my course syllabus for AP English Literature there is only one woman's name, Toni Morrison. In the quest for equality I have added writers like Jane Austen, Emily Bronte, Barbara Kingsolver, and Maxine Hong Kingston, but the students read these texts independently and complete assignments on them independently. Despite the additions of these women writers we still spend little class time on literature with a female voice.

Female ekphrastic poetry changes the equation a bit. There is a strong tradition of female ekphrastic poetry, and by using female ekphrastic poetry within this unit I am filling two voids. First, I am adding female voices to the writing we examine throughout the year. Secondly, while most of the art we view is by men, there are women interpreting, commenting on, and viewing this art. So female ekphrastic poets, infiltrating themselves

into the male dominated art community—even though what they say is not in the visual medium—are at least part of the discussion. Still, some critics think that women have made greater strides in the literary field than in the arts. In her well known essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" Linda Nochlin explains that "art making traditionally has demanded the learning of specific techniques and skills, in a certain sequence, in an institutional setting outside the home, as well as becoming familiar with a specific vocabulary of iconography and motifs." ¹⁰ In contrast, reading and writing is a skill that can be learned in a more isolated setting, allowing women like Jane Austen or the Bronte sisters to practice the art of writing and make an impact on the literary world. Nochlin believes it is this difference in how the art and writing are learned and the traditions behind them that have prevented great women artists from emerging in the art world for so long. However it is not clear why there are *still* very few women artists and writers being represented in exhibitions, textbooks, or anthologies. Some may argue that women have been making great strides within the art community in recent years, and there are now several well known women artists like Georgia O'Keefe, Frida Kahlo, and Cindy Sherman. Still, despite the impact these women and others have made in the art community, if I would ask my students to name important artists, they would say names like Van Gogh, Hopper, Warhol. The same would be true if I asked them to name important writers, they would list Shakespeare, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald. Within the art community women are certainly gaining their voices, but outside of that community they do not have that recognition yet.

When we consider the under-representation of women in the early art world the rationale for some key themes found within ekphrastic poetry become clear. An example of an earlier work of female ekphrasis can be seen in Griselda Pollock's work and her attempts to use paintings by Mary Cassatt to answer the question posed by Sigmund Freud: "What do women want?" ¹¹ Pollock examined paintings like Cassatt's *Woman at the Opera*, which shows a woman peering through opera glasses at something outside of the range of the painting. In the background one can see other opera goers and one man is peering through his own set of opera glasses and seems to direct his gaze at the woman in the foreground of the painting. Jane Hedley states that Pollock analyzed the painting so that "It is as if we shared this woman's box at the opera, positioned too close for a predatory, mastering gaze but invited instead to 'embrace and indulge' the gaze she directs beyond the space of the painting, toward 'a point outside the geometrical field of Western pictorial space. The force of the [works such as these] can be acknowledged today," Hedley concludes, 'because they find an echo of the current struggle of feminism to answer Freud's famous question: 'What do women want?' -'They want their own way.'" ¹² Hedley believes that "In her eagerness to 'invent ways to speak of, and from, a feminine place' that would lie 'outside current . . . ways of seeing art,' Pollack has resorted to an ekphrasis, putting into her own words the 'passion for women' she discerns in Cassatt's painting.'" ¹³ Here, Hedley touches one of the most important concepts that I want my students to consider when reading female ekphrastic poetry; women are using ekphrasis to look at art in a new way, and provide the female viewpoint that is currently missing from the art world. There are so many works of art with women as the focus, yet most of those pieces of art are created by men. As Hedley puts it, while a woman ekphrastic poet is "writing about someone else's art, she is engaged simultaneously and self-consciously in creation and interpretation, making and viewing, seeing and saying." ¹⁴ So as women look at the art, depicting women, but created by men, they are creating, making, and seeing these works in a new way through their poetry. The poem "The Venus of Willendorf" by Rita Dove examines the effect of the male gaze of the artist and the viewer created through the work of art. The work of art depicts women in a sexualized way. The Venus of Willendorf is a small limestone statue of a woman dated around 22,000 B.C. and depicts the woman with exaggerated body parts and is assumed to be a fertility symbol. In Dove's poem, the narrator (presumably Dove) begins to feel as if the world is viewing her, as a black woman, the way they view the sculpture. Dove writes, "It was impossible, of course, / to walk the one asphalted street / without enduring a gauntlet of stares. / *Have you seen her?* they asked, / comparing her to

their Venus." At this halfway point in the poem Dove begins to experience this gaze that she feels the Venus experiences. As the poem progresses she realizes that the way she is viewed and the way the Venus is viewed, is the way men look at women when she experiences a similar gaze from the scholar she is visiting. Near the end of the poem Dove proclaims that "she suddenly understands what made / the Venus beautiful / was how the carver's hand had loved her." Here Dove is commenting on art, the creation of art, and why the viewer reacts the way he/she does to the art. Throughout the poem Dove is using ekphrasis to consider the gaze of the viewer toward art, the gaze of men toward art, and how these two types of viewing are similar to how she is viewed by men. She also eventually comments on how she feels about being viewed and why art compels a certain reaction. Dove's conclusions about these ideas are ambiguous, which makes this poem an interesting choice for classroom discussion. Within this poem Dove is clearly "engaged simultaneously and self-consciously in creation and interpretation" as Hedley stated. Women's ekphrastic poetry, besides allowing for a way to infuse more female writers into a curriculum, should also help the students in their approach to poetry and their consideration of author's purpose.

Women's ekphrasis is filling a void in the art world, and it also providing a way for us to consider the portrayal of women, not only in art but in literature. It is my hope that by considering the way women are approaching ekphrasis, the questions and ideas they raise in their ekphrasis will continue to be applied to the literature we read throughout the year. This way, even though we are reading literature written by men portraying women, we can think about the way women ekphrastic poets approach the gaze of the audience upon the female subject of art. We can then apply this thought about the reader's "gaze" upon the female characters in a story, or even examine the gaze of other characters upon a female.

The following poems by women and related artwork will be used in this unit. Most of these poems can be used in all high school classrooms, regardless of grade level, but a few contain more mature ideas or subject matter. Swapping out some of the more mature poems with less challenging ones will not affect the outcome of this unit, so teachers should feel free to change and substitute to meet the needs of their students and classroom situation.

Poem

"The Venus of Willendorf" by Rita Dove

"Girl at Sewing Machine" by Mary Leader

"Renior" by Rosanna Warren

"The Village of the Mermaids" by Lisel Mueller

"Girl Powdering Her Neck" by Cathy Song

"Van Gogh's Bed" by Jane Flanders

"Mourning Picture" by Adrienne Rich

"Hiram Powers' Greek Slave" by Elizabeth Barrett Browning

"Tanner's Annunciation" by Elizabeth Alexander

Artwork

Venus of Willendorf

Girl at Sewing Machine by Edward Hopper

Boating Party by Renior

Village of the Mermaids by Paul Delvaux

Girl Powdering Her Neck Kitagawa Utamaro

Vincent's Bedroom in Arles by Vincent Van Gogh

Mourning Picture by Edwin Romanzo Elmer

The Greek Slave by Hiram Powers

Annunciation by Henry Ossawa Tanner

"Lady Freedom Among Us" by Rita Dove

Lady Freedom by Thomas Crawford

"The Self Portrait of Ivan Generalic" by Gjertrud Schnackenberg

Self Portrait by Ivan Generalic

"Reclining Nude" by Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon

Reclining Nude by Romare Bearden

Additionally I will start the unit with "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" by William Carlos Williams, "Lines on Brueghel's Icarus" by Michael Hamburger, and "Musee des Beaux Arts" by W.H. Auden. These are all based on Pieter Brueghel's painting The Fall of Icarus, though Auden's is also responding to Brueghel's Massacre of the Innocents and Census at Bethlehem.

Strategies

I have various approaches that I will use throughout the unit to discuss poetry and art, and I also have activities that require the students to work with poetry in a rather autonomous manner. I will explain some of my more unique strategies in this section.

This unit requires my students to view and discuss various works of art. In order to discuss art I wanted to use a basic discussion model for most of the pieces we work with in the unit. Another fellow in my seminar introduced me to an approach used by docents at MOMA, and it is known as the MOMA approach. It is really quite easy, and its goal is for students to be allowed a visceral, non-dictated reaction to art. The approach is full of simple questions that encourage the students to be free in their responses, and it allows all students to speak and point out their own observations without being told they are wrong. During the discussion the teacher will work as facilitator only and is not to interject his/her own opinions. So the teacher will ask the questions, listen to responses, and occasionally restate responses just to ensure that the other students have heard them and remember them. First, students are presented with the piece of artwork. The first thing they are to do is simply sit quietly, observe, and examine. They should not take notes or point out things to their classmates. After the observation period the teacher will facilitate the discussion using questions like: What is going on here? What do you see? What makes you say that? Does anyone see anything else? What is this? Once the discussion is complete I am going to ask my students to summarize their thoughts about the visual image in their notebooks. The more this approach is used the better the students will become at viewing the art. Their observations will be keener and their answers clearer. I anticipate that the first few times I run this activity the discussion will take longer, but as their familiarity with art increases this discussion will be briefer and more precise. Additionally, this activity will predominately be used when students are looking at artwork *prior* to their reading of the ekphrastic response. The reasoning is simply that on the occasions when we read the poem prior to seeing the art the students will have already formulated an idea of the artwork from the poet's response. So they will not be approaching the artwork from an unbiased viewpoint. The end point of this activity asks the students to write the ideas about the art that came out in discussion in their notebooks. The idea is that these notes will help the students remember their thoughts and the thoughts of the class clearly after reading and discussing the poem.

I do have a basic approach to teaching most of the poetry we will be reading. Early in the unit we will view the

artwork first using the MOMA approach. Then after the discussion the students will receive the poem, we will read the poem aloud, and then each student will work through the poem quietly. They are encouraged to read through the poem silently several times, and as they read I ask that the students underline words or phrases that they can trace directly back to what they are viewing in the art. Next, and this is still individually, the students will write comments in the margins of the poem comparing the poet's response to the artwork with their own response to the artwork. These are relatively simple activities to ask the students to do independently, but the rationale behind the task is to give the students some confidence working through poetry and at the same time forcing them to focus on the interpretative qualities of the text. After they have underlined and noted things in the margins we will have a discussion about their observations. I will ask questions like: What lines in the poem connect back to the work of art? How? How does the poet respond to the work of art? Where is this evident? How does the poet's response to the art work compare with our response to it (based on our earlier discussion)? Again, this conversation should really be about the students, and the teacher should just be a facilitator. Obviously, if there are serious misreadings then the teacher should correct the class, but at this point the students have not been asked to do any really deep analysis. Mostly they are observing and comparing.

After this portion of the discussion students will pair up with another student to work through the poem one more time looking for literary devices. Each pair of students should look for two or three devices. Once they find the devices they should consider the function of those devices in the poem. What is their purpose in the poem? After the partner work is complete the students will share their work with the class. Obviously many students will have found similar literary devices, so the class may have various interpretations of the function of the devices. During the discussion the teacher should act mostly as facilitator if at all possible; however, this is the point where serious misreading could occur. Also, it is important to constantly ask the students to back up their interpretations with evidence from the text. If they say that the persona speaking is being juxtaposed with the image of the character in the painting, make sure they can explain how with references to text and image. After this portion of the discussion I will point out any new literary devices we have not covered, but which appear in the poem. This way the students will be introduced to the literary terms within a text, giving them a concrete example.

The final portion of this discussion will focus on looking at the relationship between the poet and the artwork, and this is where the ekphrastic theories will come into play. What is the poet doing with this ekphrastic piece? Is the poet creating a new vision of the work of art? Is it reinforcing the work's message? Is it saying something about the artist vs. the poet or art vs. poetry? Is it commenting on the subject of the artwork or giving a voice to the subject? Is the poet evaluating the artist and/or the artwork? This is also the point in the conversation where the teacher could bring in the different theories about ekphrastic poetry and women's ekphrastic poetry. This activity, when combined with the viewing of a painting using the MOMA approach will probably take two 45 minute class periods or one block class period. I will use this questioning approach in various ways throughout the unit, and sometimes steps can be skipped or moved through quickly depending on the complexity of the poem and what I hope my students will get out of it. At one point in the unit I will also have the students complete the entire activity in small groups, and then each group will report out to the rest of the class. This final small group activity will prepare them for the teaching activity near the end of the unit.

After various discussions of ekphrastic poetry I expect my students to work in small groups and teach an ekphrastic poem to the rest of the class. When my students are teachers in the classroom they take over the role of teacher completely. They are expected to write a lesson plan, teach a lesson for an entire class period, assign homework, collect completed homework, and grade the homework. This strategy of having the students teach the class can easily be adapted to any unit or subject matter. With fiction pieces I assign

student groups a chapter of a novel or a short story to teach, and with non-fiction I will have my students teach a short speech or essay. The basic method works with virtually anything and demonstrates a student's mastery over the subject matter. When asking my students to teach for the first time I give them a sample lesson plan, a checklist of everything the "teachers" are expected to hand in, and a list of the possible texts the students will teach. We review the lesson plans and the due dates, and we discuss the expectations. For this unit I am expecting that during the lesson my students cover at least three literary devices and discuss the structure of the poem. Then I let the students split into groups and pick the piece they are going to teach. I usually aim for groups of four students, and with an AP or honors class I always allow the students to pick their own groups. The next day I hang a sign-up sheet for teaching dates on the door, and the students sign up for the day they would like to teach. I usually plan the first day for the Tuesday following the sign-up day. After they sign up I let the students work in their small groups planning lessons, using the computer to research their poems and paintings, and asking as many questions as they have. I usually only allow for one day of planning in class.

After the planning day we go back to work on other classroom activities, but one day prior to their teaching the students must hand in their lesson plan and sit down with me to review their homework and its corresponding grading rubric. When the day arrives for a group to teach they are given full control of the classroom from the minute the bell rings to when the end of class bell rings. While they are running the class I sit in the back of the classroom with a checklist making note of all of the students who participate. In order to ensure full participation and cooperation for the student teachers I give the students in the class 25 participation points on student teacher days. I have found that this keeps their behavior under control and ensures the student teachers get a class of active participants because these are the easiest points they will ever receive in my AP English class. At the end of class the group should assign the homework, and the students are expected to return it the next day. I do not permit my students to hand in late work to me, and they are not permitted to hand it in to the student teachers. The student teachers then have three school days to check and return the homework to me for my grade book. The group receives a grade based on the neatness of the paperwork they handed in, the quality of the homework assignment and the quality of the lesson they taught. I usually take extensive notes during their lessons, type up the notes, and give each member of the group a copy of the notes along with their grade. Additionally, the day after the first group teaches (they are nicknamed guinea pig group) we have an extensive debrief discussion about what worked well, what could have been improved upon, and what is expected of future groups. I make it well known that when it comes to student teaching the guinea pig group will always receive some leniency on their grade because they are going first and do not benefit from the debrief discussion.

One of my final teaching strategies for this unit is a gallery walk. Gallery walks are standard practice in my school district, and I have found that they are the best way to get the students to view other student's work. After the students have taught their lessons they will be creating their own ekphrastic poems and then writing a two page explanation of their poem. The gallery walk in this unit will have several stages because of the two components of the final product, but most gallery walks I do just have one component. After students have completed their poems I will hang the poems next to the pieces of art around the room. Next the students will be given a set of post-it notes and three reader response cards. Each student is required to read and respond to three poems, and each poem hanging up must be read three times. The students will stick a post-it note with their name on it next to the poem once it has been read. This will ensure the students know which poems have been read and which ones still need to be read. After reading a poem, the students will fill out a response card. They will write one positive comment about the poem and one comment suggesting improvement, then write down a short explanation of the poet's response to the piece of art. These directions are given to the students prior to the beginning of the gallery walk, and once the gallery walk begins the

students are not allowed to talk. They are to review and respond to the poems silently. Once they have completed all three responses they will return to their seats. This is normally the entire gallery walk, and would end with the students handing me the response cards and the class having a short discussion about what they saw. I would later give the students the response cards that were completed for their poems.

This gallery walk has two components, though, so this first part would take one 45 minute class period. The next day I would have the explanations of the poems hanging next to the poems and art. The students would have also kept the comment cards they completed. This portion of the gallery walk will ask the students to return to the three poems they read the day before, and then read the explanations for the poems. After reading the explanations the students will fill out the rest of the questions on the comment card. One question asks the student to discuss how the explanation impacted their understanding of the poem. The second question asks the student to evaluate the explanation of the poem and state whether they agree with the approach the poem takes when responding to the painting. At the end of this portion of the gallery walk I will have the final discussion, and the students will talk about what they have read and learned through the process of writing their own poetry and reading other student poems.

Standards

This unit covers many of the main goals of an AP English Literature and Composition course. It will certainly begin building the base for the deep analysis required by the AP Literature exam, and it will provide the students with many opportunities to read and write in an analytical and critical way.

AP requires that any AP literature course cover standard C1 which states that a course "include an intensive study of representative works of both British and American writers, as well as works written in several genres from the sixteenth century to contemporary times." This unit works hard to make sure that the course is representing women writers, which were under represented before. Additionally, the poems used are from British and American writers over a wide range of time periods and styles.

While reading the poems the students will write essays or short pieces in response to the poems. One of my main goals with this unit is to have the students examine the literary elements used within the poem, and I also want them to pay careful attention to the text of the poem. They will use their observations to interpret the poem verbally and in writing. The writing activities will meet the AP standard C4 which states that, "The course teaches students to write an interpretation of a piece of literature that is based on a careful observation of the works textual details, considering such elements as the use of figurative language, imagery, symbolism, and tone." These activities will also help the students meet standard C2, which requires that an AP course teach "students to write an interpretation of a piece of literature that is based on careful observation of the works textual details, considering structure, style, and themes."

When the students complete their writing they will receive various types of feedback from me. They will all receive comments on their papers, but we will also occasionally look at some of the student work and develop plans for revision. Students will be expected to revise various pieces of writing throughout the unit to show their growth as a writer. These activities will help the students meet the standard C8 which requires that "the AP teacher provide instruction and feedback on students' writing assignments, both before and after the students revise their work, which help the students develop a wide-ranging vocabulary used appropriately and

effectively." These activities also help to meet standard C10 which states, "The AP teacher provides instruction and feedback on students' writing assignments, both before and after the students revise their work, which help the students develop logical organization, enhanced by specific techniques to increase coherence, such as repetition, transitions, and emphasis."

During the course of the unit the students will do various informal types of writing like note-taking, annotation, and dialectical journal writing that will lead to their more formal pieces of writing. This work enables the students to meet standard C5 which states, "The course includes frequent opportunities for students to write and rewrite formal, extended analyses and time in-class responses. The course requires writing to understand informal, exploratory writing activities that enable students to discover what they think in the process of writing about their reading (such assignments could include annotation, freewriting, keeping a reading journal, and response/reaction papers)."

Classroom Activities

Days 1-5 Introduction to Ekphrastic Poetry

The first three days of the unit will introduce students to ekphrastic poetry through three poems written in response to work by Pieter Brueghel. These poems are all by men, but I am using them because it will allow the students to see the various ways a writer can respond to the same work of art. We will begin with "Musee des Beaux Arts" by W.H. Auden because this work is actually written in response to three different works by Brueghel. We will be using the MOMA approach to art during this introductory lesson, and we will start by viewing "Massacre of the Innocents," "Census at Bethlehem" and "The Fall of Icarus" by Brueghel. We will view each painting independently and have a discussion on each independently. Then, prior to reading the poem by Auden, we will discuss what the paintings might have in common and what a poem in response to these paintings might say. Students will record all of their responses, and then we will read the poem by Auden. After reading the poem students will identify areas in the poem that connect back to the painting. We then consider why Auden chose to focus on those elements of the paintings and what connections there may be between the elements he focuses on. While looking at Auden's choices we will refer back to the notes we took during our discussion of the paintings. We will also consider the following questions: What is the connection between the two verse paragraphs in the poem? What techniques does Auden use to convey the paintings? Does Auden's poem change the way we view the paintings or does it clarify the paintings? At the end of discussion students should write a one page response to the following question: How do references to Brueghel's paintings function within Auden's poem? What is their purpose? How do they help the reader? How do they help the poem get its message across?

Once students complete the homework questions we will step back for a moment and discuss the concept of ekphrastic poetry. Now that they have worked with one of the most famous ekphrastic poems we will briefly discuss the different types of ekphrastic poetry. Next we will take notes on the different approaches to ekphrastic poetry. I will start with the four basic approaches from John Hollander, and we will discuss those ideas in detail. Depending on the level of the students in your classroom you may also want to introduce the approaches identified by Honor Moorman. These are much more extensive and straightforward, so they may be helpful to students in their initial work with ekphrasis. After being introduced to the approaches we will refer back to the Auden poem. I will ask the students to identify which type of ekphrastic poetry it is, and

which approach Auden seemed to use. Once the students have identified the approach we will consider whether knowing the approach helps us understand Auden's poem better.

Next we will move on to the two other poems in response to Brueghel's Icarus painting. I will project the painting on the wall and split the class into two groups. One group will receive the Michael Hamburger poem "Lines on Brueghel's Icarus" and the other group will receive the William Carlos Williams poem "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus." Each group will read through their poem, identify the approach and examine how the poet utilizes the painting within the poem. They will also consider what the poet references in the painting and what they do not reference. Each group will then create a large bulleted list summarizing their responses on a large sheet of chart paper. After each group has completed the work I will pass out the other poem to each group so that they can familiarize themselves with it. Finally, we will go over each poem using the bulleted chart from each group to help us analyze the poem. The group that created the chart will run most of the discussion, but the other group should respond to and question the other group's ideas. At the end of each presentation we will have an overall discussion of the two poems and take notes on all of our ideas.

On the final day of this introductory lesson we will look back at all three poems. We will look for connections between the poems, how the different poets responded to Brueghel's work, how the poems changed our ideas about the paintings, and what techniques were used by the poets to create their response to a visual work. At this point I will also introduce the concept of the slight tension or rivalry between poetry and art. We will consider why poets feel compelled to write about art which should be able to stand on its own. For homework have the students write a response to the following question modeled after an AP open ended question: Write an essay in which you compare and contrast two of the poems, analyzing the poetic techniques the poets use to explore the situation(s) presented by the Brueghel's art. This will be the first AP open ended poetry response my students complete this year, so after this I score these essays we will do a one day writing workshop during the unit to look at some of the responses and consider their different approaches to the question. If time permits I may ask my students to rewrite the essays based on my comments and our one day writing workshop.

Days 6-13

The next set of classes will run using the same basic lesson, but that lesson will be approached in various ways. The first day will be used to teach first the Jane Flanders poem "Van Gogh's Bed" which is a pretty simple poem. During the next two days we will cover Mary Leader's poem, "Girl at Sewing Machine." We will go over the painting and the poems as discussed in detail in the strategies section of this unit. We will begin by viewing the painting using the MOMA approach, next we will read the poem aloud, and then students will work through the poem silently and look for connections between poem and painting. A discussion of their findings will follow, and next the students will pair with a partner looking for literary devices in the poem and their function. We will then discuss their findings, and end the discussion with a complete overview of the poem, its techniques, and the use of ekphrasis. These first few days will be used to get the students used to working with poetry and art, start developing their literary vocabulary, and considering function of literary devices.

The next series of class periods will use similar approaches to ekphrastic poetry, but will have slightly different formats. Sometimes the students will receive the poem the day before and come to class with things already underlined and noted like references to a work of art and literary devices. On days when they arrive to class with the poem already read and marked up we will have a whole class discussion that uses the same general questioning as describe in the strategy section as the basic approach to poetry reading. When students walk

into the room we will start the discussion of the poem by identifying where in the poem it seems to be referring to the artwork, and then I will project the work of art onto the wall. Then we will continue our discussion of the poem and its response to the work of art. We will always focus part of our discussion on what literary devices the poet is using in the poem and why. My goal is to make sure we always examine how form creates meaning. On other days students will work in small groups with the poems. I will pass out the same poem and work of art to each group. They will be asked to go through and answer the same types of questions we have been using, but this time the students will answer the questions in a small group format. After the groups have had about twenty minutes with the poems and the art work we will move to a large group discussion so they can present what they have been discussing in their groups.

For these lessons I will be using the following poems: "The Venus of Willendorf," "Self Portrait of Ivan Generalic," "The Village of the Mermaids," "Hiram Powers' Greek Slave," and "Reclining Nude." I have chosen these poems because some of them have a rather complex structure or complex ideas that may require some background information or additional help from the teacher.

Additionally, while the students work through these poems homework assignments that mimic AP questions are recommended. Students should not just write full essays in response to open ended questions. They could create a thesis and the main points that support it, they could create a thesis and then identify the lines they would refer to and write a short explanation of the lines, or they could work in groups to create multiple choice questions for the poems. While many of these assignments could be done for homework, it is also recommended that some class time be used for them as well. That is why additional days have been allotted for this series of lessons.

Days 14-22

These days in the unit are for the student teaching days. Five of the days will go directly toward the teaching of the poems, and the other two days are for the presentation of the directions and for one day of group meeting time in class. The presentation day and the group meeting day should take place at some point within the previous set of lessons. That way the groups will have enough time between being assigned their poems and their actual teaching day to prepare a good lesson.

The poems the students will teach are "Renior" by Rosanna Warren, "Girl Powdering Her Neck" by Cathy Song, "Mourning Picture" by Adrienne Rich, "Tanner's Annunciation" by Elizabeth Alexander, and "Lady Freedom Among Us" by Rita Dove. Each group will receive copies of the poem and the artwork that inspired it.

The details of the student teaching are laid out in detail in the strategies section of the unit.

Days 22-25

The final work of this unit should take three or four days, but these will not be consecutive class periods. After the student teaching days are over the students should be very comfortable with poetry, especially ekphrastic poetry. They should have learned a variety of literary terms, thought about their function, and be able to articulate how form leads to meaning in a poem. This final part of the unit asks the students to create their own ekphrastic poem. Then they will write an analysis of how they used form to create meaning in their poems.

I have a variety of art prints I normally hang in my room at the beginning of the year, but I am going to wait until this point in the unit to hang them up. You may use whatever art you wish for this assignment, but you

should offer the students a large variety of pieces to consider. On the first day I will explain the basic assignment. Students will create an ekphrastic poem in response to one of the art pieces hanging in the room. Their poem must be at least 15 lines and use a variety of techniques to create meaning in the poem. In addition to the poem they are expected to write a two page double spaced analysis of their poem. This analysis must explain the approach they took, why they chose this approach, how their poem reacts to the art, and how the form and techniques they used create meaning.

After explaining the assignment the students will have the rest of the class period to view the artwork and take notes on the various pieces. I will encourage the students to go home and do some research on the artworks and artists that captured their attention, but this is not an absolutely necessary step for the creation of their poem. Depending on the strengths of your students at this point you may choose to use the next day of class for drafting the poems. If your students seem to understand all of the concepts and terms, then this step might not be necessary for your class and this work can be done at home.

About a week after giving this assignment two days should be taken for the gallery walk activity. This activity is explained in detail in the strategies section of this unit.

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