



# YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

to strengthen teaching in public schools®

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

---

## Introduction

by Paul H. Fry, William Lampson Professor Emeritus of English

The eleven curriculum units in this volume were composed during the Yale National Initiative seminar for 2010, "Poems about Works of Art, Featuring African American, Hispanic, and Women Writers," for which I was the seminar leader. Because not all the units involved ekphrasis (verbal responses to visual artifacts), and because we discovered together that there's very little ekphrastic writing in the modern Hispanic tradition (which however is very rich in visual responses to literature), it seemed best to give this collection of units a title that differs from that of the seminar. It's also the case that the units fall into interesting groups, according to which I present them rather than alphabetically.

This year's seminar featured three remarkable third-grade teachers who chose very different topics but whose units promise in common to be so surprisingly effective for very young children that I group them together. It was here in particular that working in ekphrastic literature proved quite understandably difficult, even inadvisable, yet one of these teachers actually found a way to do it. Yolanda Bezares-Chavez of Richmond, whose classroom is comprised chiefly of African American and Hispanic children between whom there are sometimes tensions, offers an historical overview of the Afro Mestizo cultures of Mexico (primarily) and Colombia, with a view to increasing mutual understanding between her two groups, and to this end she examines both the poetry and the visual art of this culture. The focus of Chicago's Renee Kreczmer is likewise historical, as she is mandated to teach the history of Chicago, so for this unit she has chosen the Great Fire as seen through the lens of the poetry and visual art that have responded to it – a strategy that can easily be adapted to regional history elsewhere and at almost any grade level. Chante Givens of Richmond, finally, is the teacher who found a place for ekphrasis in her unit introducing students to the reading and writing of poetry. The unit offers a rich archive of ekphrastic poems suitable for children, but its special focus, with much across-the-curriculum potential that she outlines, is Greg Pape's poem about Audubon's "Flamingo."

The next group of four is organized loosely and should be understood as a sequence beginning rather close to the first three units and passing through an emphasis on visual art toward the survey teaching of literature that is featured in the third and last group. Of the four units in this group, the middle two are by middle-school teachers.

Anne Marie Esposito of New Castle County, Delaware, teaches World Literature to high school seniors, for the most part using the perspective (like Bezares and Kreczmer) of cultural history, focusing on the Afghan and African narratives found in *The Kite Runner* and *Things Fall Apart*, respectively; some of the materials used to introduce both these cultures are ekphrastic, and the descriptions of making and preserving artifacts in the novels themselves are treated in this way. Sean Griffin of New Haven teaches the Harlem Renaissance in an Arts Magnet School, with much appropriate emphasis on the art of Lawrence, Bearden, and others, but

attending also to a picture book in the manner of Lawrence that accompanies a poem, as well as to the poetry of Hughes and other. Cara Goldstein of San Francisco is an art teacher who has chosen to focus on certain moments she calls "intermedial," featuring Poetry Comics, Animated Poetry, and tableau vivant (in skit form), all with the intention of expanding students' understanding of what "art" is. The interpretive problems posed by ekphrasis are therefore her constant subject. James Foltz of New Castle County regularly teaches a standard high school course in American Literature. To this syllabus his unit adds an ekphrastic focus: poetry in some cases (Longfellow's "Cross of Snow," for example), but also moments that can be approached as ekphrases in the novels he teaches, for example the letter A in *The Scarlet Letter* and "the eyes of T. J. Ekleburg" in *The Great Gatsby*.

The remaining group of four high-school teachers have in common the obligation to teach literary terms and devices to continuing students at least potentially preparing for AP exams. Like Foltz, Rochelle Baba of San Francisco concentrates much of her attention on *The Great Gatsby*, surrounding her teaching of this text with ekphrastic insights from diverse sources, as well as from poems and pictures on their own – for example a David Hockney painting of a house and swimming pool called *Splash*. Brook Blaylock of Charlotte in her unit takes an intermittently ekphrastic approach to the teaching of literature through "archetypes," as mandated by her state and school district. As she teaches the stages of the hero's journey, focused on Perseus but touching on many other figures, she introduces a rich array of ekphrastic materials to illustrate the various stages: for example responses to Raphael's *St. George and the Dragon* for an overview, and responses to paintings of Danae and the Golden Shower or the Annunciation to illustrate the stage called "miraculous birth." Karen Lichtenberg Scher of San Francisco teaches the mechanics of poetry by attending especially to sonnets and elegies, while organizing her unit thematically around "love and loss." These emphases then culminate in readings of ekphrastic poems that are themselves in many cases sonnets or elegies or both and respond to paintings about love and loss. The seminar Coordinator Kristen Kurzawski of Pittsburgh, finally, takes up the rich vein of women's ekphrastic poetry, chiefly twentieth century, both to give students a rigorous sense of the variety of ekphrastic procedure (actual, notional, and unassessable ekphrases, with the sub-categories of these) and to introduce a feminist perspective within the largely male syllabus she is mandated to work with. This is a unit in which students can be realistically expected to gain an expert knowledge of the kind of poem studied in our seminar.

What nearly all of these units have in common – apart from their appealing teachability – is the inclusion of a writing exercise. Even some of the teachers who thought it best not to shoehorn ekphrasis into their lessons nevertheless do include a culminating assignment requiring students to write a poem about a work of art, sometimes in conjunction with a visit to a museum.

Paul H. Fry

---

<https://teachers.yale.edu>

©2023 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University, All Rights Reserved. Yale National Initiative®, Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute®, On Common Ground®, and League of Teachers Institutes® are registered trademarks of Yale University.

For terms of use visit [https://teachers.yale.edu/terms\\_of\\_use](https://teachers.yale.edu/terms_of_use)