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The Poetics of Truth and Beauty: A Practical Approach to Reading and Understanding Ekphrastic Poetry

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Introduction

As an art form that has endured through the ages, poetry's power to both attract and repel readers in part lies in its ability to transform the English language. It is one of the most powerful forms of writing, yet its syntax very often deviates from what we consider normal speech patterns and linear thought processes. Because of this, reluctant readers of poetry need specific tools and strategies, different from those used for reading prose, to understand poetry- it really is like learning a new language. These pronouncements I make about poetry are not only borne out by research and personal experience (a word about both later), they are the views shared by almost all of my high school students. Their aversion to poetry involves the notion that it is elusive, leaving them with feelings of inadequacy and intimidation, sensing that it is too dense with meaning, associations and background knowledge that they lack, thereby exacerbating their fears. In short, poetry is not accessible for them. If I am to be honest, even as an English teacher with more than a decade of teaching experience, I too had a troubled attitude toward poetry. Fortunately, or unfortunately, I was never required to teach poetry as part of the prescribed curriculum of my school district. It was only after deciding to issue a personal challenge to myself and apply to the Yale National Initiative seminar, Poems About Works of Art, that I was ready to confront my fears and attempt to unlock the secrets of poetry. To this end, I created this unit on poetry to provide a toolkit for accessing poetry, a content specific focus on ekphrastic poetry and a skills driven learning plan. The unit is roughly six weeks in length and will be book ended on the front by a persuasive writing unit and on the back by a social justice unit. It is my hope that this unit will act as a passport to poetry and give students a vantage point that will release its power to illuminate their lives and bring new light into a world they thought they knew.

Context

Washington Metropolitan Opportunity Academy (Wash Met) is one of four alternative high schools in the District of Columbia Public School System. We serve students in grades 8-12 who have not found academic, social-emotional or personal success at any of the other comprehensive high schools in the city. Wash Met

has an enrollment of approximately two hundred students**,** at least half of whom are enrolled in my English class and will experience this instructional unit. The biggest impediment to successful implementation of this unit lies in the fact that my students are almost all part of a statistically at-risk group that must contend with issues around truancy, transiency, adjudication and learning gaps. Chronic truancy plagues our students and makes it difficult for teachers to consistently provide rigorous and rich instruction. Adding to our dismal attendance rate is the rolling admissions policy that our school has instituted allowing students to bounce around from one school to the next without ever having completed any courses and thereby failing the course which they end up repeating, all of which adds a layer of stress to our enrollment and class size and does nothing to curb the growth of over aged and under credited students in our building. Further complicating the business of teaching and learning in our school is that so many of our students are adjudicated and at any given moment can transfer facilities, evade authorities, get released or locked up an indefinite time. All these points of contention make it difficult to maintain any academic and/or social-emotional continuity with our students, which only serves to widen their learning gaps and the overall achievement gap between students in America's classrooms. To mitigate these issues and foster a more educationally responsive learning environment and school community, heading into the new school year our team plans to implement a strategic truancy abatement plan, provide online resources that allow students to access classroom content and forge a consortium partnership with the other opportunity academies to moderate the transiency issues. The adjudication issues at present have no pat answers as they are largely out of our hands. We are hopeful however that the family engagement campaign that our school is launching will help to strengthen our home-school connection and refocus our students' attention from matters of the street to matters of a successful future.

Rationale

Having the awareness that overwhelmingly, my students have a great disdain for poetry, for a variety of reasons, I fully understand that in order to attract and maintain their attention and focus, I need to bring them to awareness of the importance of poetry. Sure, I could declare my authority as the teacher and command them to participate and wrestle with the unit, reminding them of the power of my pen. Or: I could take the time to explain to them the possibilities that exist in reading and studying poetry and how it is these possibilities that could change their lives for the better; a lofty ambition to be sure but well worth the effort. So, it is with hope in my heart and great expectations that I work to gently introduce my students to the magic of poetry through thoughtful responses. I think it is important to convey to my students that one must read a poem with an open heart and if they are able to do so, they will gain insight into the inner workings of a writer's mind which can very often mirror our own. They will be made to understand that to read poetry as though it were a logical proposition would be to be left with a minimal comprehension that is inflexible whereas to read it emotionally, with an open heart, is to experience the nuances and eternal hope that springs forth from it. I will lead my students to the knowledge that understanding poetry is valuable and necessary in our world that is full of sorrrow and that every poem holds something different for every reader. Finally, my students will come to understand that understanding poetry helps us to pay attention to, to honor and value, the things that makes us fully human. Certainly, while poetry is no panacea for the plague of difficulties my students face on a regular basis, it can be a meditative and reflective support that beckons them to something greater. It can be a guide and a counselor; an energizer and revitalizer. But most of all poetry can be a unifier between self, community and the world and it this unity that makes for safe spaces, personal validation

and a lifting of voices singing the praises of loss, suffering, redemption and love.

Content Objectives

Writers make deliberate choices in poems to create a meaning or give a message to an audience. Literary analysis is about dissecting a writer's choices and explaining how these choices contribute to the meaning of the text. Poems can perpetuate or challenge a dominant narrative about race, class or gender. In Socratic Seminar students will discuss how poetry can mimic real life and the ways that personal experiences affect an author's writing, motivating them to challenge or perpetuate a dominant narrative about race, class or gender. At the end of this process, through participation in a poetry slam in front of a viewing audience, students will demonstrate their ability to compose and present an original creative composition that is clear, accurate and appropriate to the occasion.

Unit Content

Often, students may find that speaking the truth is hard. But reading someone else's truth can allow them to say what is on their mind without any fear of judgment. Poetry has a way of speaking to our soul and helping us to connect on a personal level that gives us solidarity and relief. A great poem can expose students to parts of the world that they didn't know existed. It can transport them to another reality and open their eyes, reminding them that the world is a big, interesting place full of opportunities and adventures. Sometimes life can be overwhelming, and students have trouble finding the words to explain what they are feeling. They may struggle with stress, frustration, anxiety, depression, or intense love and passion, and if they cannot communicate those feelings they can torment them from within. Poetry can help students not only to release those emotions, but also make sense of them in a way that others can appreciate and relate to.

This practical approach to reading and understanding is written with the reluctant or beginning reader of poetry in mind. As outlined before, there are many reasons why people shy away from poetry. One of those reasons is likely because, after a cold read, they are left unmoved by the poem even if on a literal level they can make sense of it. It is important for students to know that reading, understanding and interpreting poetry takes practice and becomes easier only after repeated, undeterred attempts at comprehension and making meaningful connections to the poem. And even then, the reader may remain unmoved or unfulfilled by the poem. To be fair to poetry, I find it necessary to begin with the suggestion that poetry is not supposed to change your life. While it can certainly move you to more insight, truth and illumination, reading poetry is not going to change your life, not at first anyway, as that is not really its primary function. It can however get you to think about life differently and with more introspection by connecting you more deeply with yourself and more deeply with the world around you. I think it benefits readers to have this awareness of what poetry can and cannot do. Poetry can guide you to certain truths and can be instructive and suggestive but rarely is it firmly decisive (Hirsch xi). That said, it is prudent to present poetry as a kind of adventure in renewal, creativity, rebirth and wonder with the reader acting as the pilgrim and setting forth on a journey of discovery. While this way of putting it may seem flowery and melodramatic, I think it actually dispels any

myths that give it supernatural powers. In its proper place, poetry can bestow upon us the gift of intimacy, privacy and participation; it is up to the reader to decide what to do with these gifts. Speaking of the reader, it can be to their benefit to see themselves as having a role in the poem; not in the narrative or exposition of the poem but as a connective piece that can bring her or his experiences to the poem and perhaps give it more meaning or relevance. When students encounter a poem, they should be prepared to do a close reading of the poem irrespective of the length, for it is through this close reading that the world of the poem begins to take shape. As an aside, it is important that readers refrain from trying to make the poem fit exactly into their lives. They should let it be what it is and, again, let the poem's meaning gradually unfurl through a series of readings.

During the first read of the poem, it is fine for students to read the poem silently or at the very least in a hushed tone as a sort of independent pre-reading for the purpose of meeting the poem on their own terms. Next, students should read the poem aloud. This can be done in many meaningful ways that foster collaboration and engagement, such as a teacher led reading, a class wide or group choral read, or a partner read. Poems are aural compositions which were part of the oral tradition of storytelling**,** poems having been originally used as instructive memory aids. In the service of their primary function, which was to pass along information, stories, cultural beliefs and ideas, they were meant to be heard. Moreover, in order to better understand poetry, a reader needs to know what it sounds like, especially since the ear sometimes picks up more than the head allows (JSTOR, 151). It is important to note also that reading poetry aloud helps readers to practice appropriate punctuation which is crucial to making meaning. Poetry has units of meaning. These units are represented by sentences, lines, clauses, and stanzas. Even though a line stops, the meaning of that line does not stop. The line has to be read as a line, yet also read through to the next punctuation mark. Readers must learn to obey punctuation, taking care to pause at commas and stop at periods. This punctuation practice is imperative to unlocking the meaning of the poem and is best learned through oral reading. The third read of the poem should concern itself with annotations. By annotating a poem, readers break it down into individual components that makes it more digestible and easier to comprehend. Students should begin their annotations by identifying who the speaker is, observing the form of the poem (a word on poem structure later), and circling any unknown words. It is wise to read poetry with a dictionary within arm's reach for easy reference. Other needful annotations include (a comprehensive list can be found in the appendix) rhyme and meter, line breaks and figurative language. Ultimately, annotations help you to observe the tone and mood of the poem which support the message or theme and hopefully point toward an illumination or insight to one of life's truths the rationale, again for reading and understanding poetry.

Ekphrasis is a Greek word composed of the words *ek* (out) and *phrasein* (to tell or speak) which combined are understood to mean *description.* An ekphrastic poem is a vivid and imaginative description of a work of art including painting, sculpture and other things viewed aesthetically. Through musings, narrations and reflections on the action represented in a work of art, the poet aims to amplify or expand upon its meaning. Ephrastic poetry has deep artistic roots with a long history; it has been enjoying a critical and creative vogue in recent years (Cheeke 19). The unlikeness between poetry and painting is clear, yet there is always some basis for comparison. *U pictura poesis* does not fully answer the question of what poetry does better than painting and vice versa. Part of the purpose of ekphrasis is finding an answer to this question. All ekphrastic poems can be considered commentaries upon the nature of the encounter between the verbal and the visual, or as broad allegories of this relationship, with modern ekphrastic poems generally shrugging off antiquity's tendency toward elaborate description in favor of attempts at interpreting, inhabiting, confronting and speaking to their subjects. (Cheeke 13).

While it is certainly an interesting and arresting type of poetry, getting students to read and write ekphrastic

poetry, on the face of it, may present a challenge. It is important for me to secure my student readers' attention when introducing new content and I have generally found success in doing this by giving them a rationale for our course of study. In this case, ekphrasis has a back story that I think will resonate with readers. In the 19th century, there was a national debate sparked by the publication of an ekphrastic poem. Inspired by the French artist Jean Francois Millet's painting *Man With a Hoe,*the American poet Edwin Markham wrote a poem about the burdensome work of manual laborers in America which was aptly represented by the drooping man in Millet's painting. *The San Francisco Examiner* published the poem in 1889 which led to it being reprinted in thousands of periodicals across the country. The poem's publication ushered in raging debate about labor rights in the press, in social circles and in classrooms. The symbol of *The Man With the Hoe* appeared in speeches by union members and the clergy. The vivid and life-like descriptions of the man in Millet's painting were fused with pointed questions that acted as an indictment of society's role in the working conditions of agricultural laborers. Both the poem and the painting were powerful examples of the impact that literary and visual art can have on society (Getty 2015). Ekphrastic poetry's ability to implicate and call on the carpet society's injustices and misdeeds a power that, if harnessed conscientiously, can bring about awareness and eventual change. This is reason enough to study it.

The poems to be used in this curriculum unit are: *Monet's Water Lilies* by Robert Hayden, *The LittleBlack Boy* by William Blake **and from *Bellocq's Ophelia Letters from Storyville 1911.***

Robert Hayden was an American poet, essayist and educator who was the first African-American Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, a role known today as United States Poet Laureate. Hayden was born Asa Bundy Sheffey in Detroit, Michigan in August of 1913. He was taken in and fostered by a neighboring family because his own family could not afford to care for him. Growing up in a Detroit ghetto nicknamed Paradise Valley, he endured a particularly brutal childhood largely because of the contentious marriage of his foster parents. In the home, Hayden was subjected to traumatic events that included witnessing spousal abuse and suffering beatings at the hands of his foster father. His childhood experiences were fraught with chronic anger and enmity, the effects of which dogged him throughout his life. His own physical ailments**,** he was severely nearsighted added to his misery as his health prevented him from participating in sports activities and made him a target of ostracization by his peers. These childhood traumas resulted in debilitating bouts of depression which plagued his life. Despite these circumstances, he wrote extensively and is considered by many to be one of the greatest American poets. In fact, in 2012 the U.S. Postal Service issued a panel of stamps featuring great 20th century American poets and included him.

Poem Analysis

This American sonnet by Robert Hayden is both contemplative and transcendent. Using an innovative sonnet form (two quatrains with a sestet in between), Hayden seeks refuge from the horrors of current news in the beauty of Monet's painting. He laments that the news only tells of sadness and strife. In the passage, "today as the news from Selma and Saigon /poisons the air like fallout, "he references the turbulent time of the Civil Rights Movement and the famed march on Selma, Alabama. It is a time of open racial conflict and tension along with struggles for equality. Hayden, in his real life, may have covertly championed this cause, but never took a public stance against black oppression during the movement, much to the chagrin of his fellow black writers. Hayden also speaks of Saigon and the Vietnam War, also a divisive subject in America. He uses simile to refer to these current events as poisonous and pervasive, choking the life out of its citizens. For him, the only escape is into the art space where he can view the painting. The next unit reads "I come again to see/ the serene, great picture that I love." Here, Hayden reminds the reader that he visits this picture often as it offers him solace and comfort in this tumultuous world. Perhaps because in real life Hayden was

beleaguered by depressive bouts, he is signaling that he uses art as his therapy. In any case, the reader is well aware that Hayden has beaten a well-worn path to this museum's door. The poem continues with the line, "here space and time exist in light/ the eye like the eye of faith believes." This passage speaks of the suspension of space and time in light while the speaker is with his beloved painting. The painting in essence and through the skill of the painter, transcends all space and time. He compares the physical eye with the eye of faith, which I believe to be his Baha'i faith with its emphasis on a unifying vision. The next passage, "the seen, the known/ dissolve in iridescence", indicates that what we see and what we think we know are not really real, and perhaps it is our fears and insecurities that create these feelings or rather shades of these feelings.

It is there in the museum with the painting that life's travails are forgotten and melded with the unconcerned serenity of art "the illusive flesh of light/ that was not, was, forever is". Outside the confines of this art space lies human suffering, depravity, moral repugnancy but here with the painting all of those things are suspended and put on a spectrum of light that is Pandora's box before it was opened. The last quatrain continues to speak reverently about the light that emanates from the painting through the artist's adroitness and depth. Here again, "o light beheld as through refracting tears,/ here is the aura of that world/each of us has lost". This passage could be speaking to the trauma of Hayden's childhood that nevertheless glows with "aura" in memory. And although the painting gives him great comfort and joy, he remembers those tears even in the presence of the painting but he is impervious to them because he is immersed in the light of art.

William Blake is considered by many to be a seminal figure in the romantic age of literature, a major poet and an original thinker. His massive body of work went unappreciated during his time but has since been cast in the upper echelons of literature. Perhaps because of his unconventionality or his artistic flights of fancy, Blake's early critics placed more emphasis on his personal idiosyncracies than on his brilliance as a poet and artist, undervaluing his artistic accomplishments**.** At a very young age, he claimed to have seen holy visions of angels and of God. These visions formed the basis for many of his poems. Amongst his contemporaries, he was considered insane and was largely ignored. A visionary, poet and expert engraver, Blake is now widely recognized as one of the greatest contributors to English literature and art. His poem, *The Little Black Boy* is part of an illustrated collection of poems from his work titled, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience.* These poems were printed and illuminated by Blake himself. Two plates are included in *The Little Black Boy.* On one plate, an African mother and child are sitting and the child is pointing to the sun while the second plate has the poem written on it and an image of Christ seated with two children, who presumably are the little black boy and his white friend. In this collection, Blake presents the idea that childhood is a state of protected innocence but it is not immune to the fallen world and its institutions, including the realities of poverty and slavery. *The Little Black Boy* may cause great discomfiture today until it is understood.

Poem Analysis

The poem begins with the speaker, a little black child discussing his origins in "the southern wild" and explaining that although he is black his soul is white; just like that of the privileged English child. He goes on to say that the loss of whiteness is a kind of bereavement. Immediately, the reader gets the sense that the little black boy has learned at a very young age that to be black is something to be reviled and that he must seek whiteness to be accepted as decent and good. Of course, it is apparent to the reader that this self-condemnation is a learned behavior. The speaker in his innocence that he must denounce his blackness in order to be accepted, listened to and regarded as tender and equal to the white child. The mother in the poem has obviously been subjected to the same white generated rhetoric as has her son and feels the need to give him coping skills essential to moving about and knowing his place in the world. Even though we may

suppose her to have been mistreated, she has not lost her softness or patience and takes time to explain their lot in life and how to remain hopeful and steadfast in the idea that they are doing a service to humankind with their blackness.

"Look on the rising sun, there God does live,/ And gives his light, and gives his heat away". Here the sun is used as a metaphor for God, stoking the claim that darkness made by the sun is close to godliness. "And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive/ Comfort in morning joy in the noonday"; the power of the sun is omni-present and all of those who dwell in the land of the living benefit from its power and generosity. In the third stanza, " And we are put on earth a little space, /That we may learn to bear the beams of love,/ And these black bodies and this sun-burnt face/ Is but a cloud", further asserts that humans are here on earth for a short time and they must learn to accept and receive the sun's love (metaphor for God), otherwise they have no hope of mercy or redemption as the people with dark skin and burnt faces do. There is a distinct air of innocence on the part of the little black boy and his mother. They have a gentle but unreflectingly simple view of life, their position and how to mitigate their second-class citizenship. The next line speaks of a cloud that I can only liken to a state of transition. Perhaps the cloud is the grave and, as the next passage states "For when our souls have learn'd the heat to bear**,/** The cloud will vanish we shall hear his voice/Saying come out from the grove my love and care/ And round my golden tent like lamb's rejoice, **"**this signals resurrection and an opportunity to bear the heat because now the English boy is innocent too, just like the little black boy. The poem further discusses the ideal lives that both the little black boy and the English child will lead once the "cloud" has been moved. They will be on equal footing and have no need for barriers of color as they sit around the tent of God. The innocent and wise little black boy knows that the English child cannot bear the heat of the sun, but instead of rejoicing in his pain or discomfort, he will shield the English child from the harshness of the sun until he is able (having been purged) to bear the sun on his own and by that time they will both be equal. All told, it is not the little black boy who will change to become white, it is the English child who will become pure by becoming black.

Natasha Tretheway

Natasha Tretheway, the daughter of a mixed raced marriage, writes poetry that is both personal and historical. Her first collection of poems, *Domestic Work (2000),* explored the lives of black working-class men and women in the South. Her second collection, Bellocq's Ophelia (2002), focuses on the prostitutes photographed by E. J. Belocq in New Orleans in the early 20th century. In preparation for the book, Tretheway researched the lives of mixed race women in New Orleans' red-light district. This book project combined details of Tretheway's own mix-raced experience in the deep South with facts about the real womens' lives. The accompanying images in the collection are arresting in their unvarnished reality but somehow still evoke a sense of innocence, loss and naivete. It is almost as if some of the women are playing dress up and pretending to be in control of their lives and sexuality while silently yearning for rescue. Natasha Tretheway has earned a great many awards and recognitions, including having been appointed Poet Laureate of the state of Mississippi in 2012 and Poet Laureate of the United States, a position she held until 2014**.**

Poem analysis

Letters from Storyville 1911

If ever a text echoed the pain, disillusionment and colorism pathology of a mixed-race woman in early 20th century America, this one is it. The poem opens with the speaker despairing over her lot in life and lamenting the fact that she is but "a spectacle and fetish". She soon remembers that she was groomed through

childhood to live in this suspended state of existence. It was her mother who, “taught me to curtsy and be still/ so that I might please a white man, my father”. One’s initial response to the mother training her black girl child up to be on display to white men, the child’s father included, is one of scorn and disdain. While it is easy to blame the mother for not offering her girl child protection and security, her actions may be attributed to her own self-hate and an inferiority complex which reinforces a white is right pathology. The speaker may have been subjected to cruel taunts because of her own complexion or may have even been mixed-race herself and groomed by her mother in the same fashion and for the same purpose; to please men, white men in particular. For what other reason would the speaker declare that “I took arsenic-tablets I swallowed/ to keep me fair, bleached white as stone.” Arsenic was as dangerous then as it is now but its dangers were ignored because of its powers; to keep one white and fair and by extension offering entrance and acceptance to the white world, even if only as an *idee fixe* . The speaker, now devoid of emotion or self-possession after having been fetishized all her life, can easily transport her mind from her ignoble state of being, proclaiming that “It seems I can sit for hours, /suffer the distant eye he trains on me, /lose myself in reverie where I think most of you”. It is during this silent reverie that the speaker appears to look fondly upon a person from her past who coddled and molded her into a woman whose future would be free of hard work such as “laundry, flat irons and damp sheets…..or picking time, hunchbacked in the field” but limited to objectification and non-identify as she waits day in and day out “for the photograph to show me who I am”. This poem, like many of Natasha Tretheway’s other poems, highlights the identity crisis and resulting denigration suffered by many mixed-race individuals. Its tones of depersonalization, internal strife and longing to belong are as relevant today as they were in 1911.

Teaching Strategies

The forms of assessment for this curriculum unit include a critical analysis essay, an original poetic composition and an oral presentation. In addition to the course work inside of the classroom, students will participate in field experiences that include visits to local museums and art spaces. During these visits, students are expected to follow a specific protocol to ensure they are collecting information and ideas for their writing and presentation. Additionally, students will be given both a writing rubric and an oral presentation rubric to assist with their final products. To ensure that students are receiving differentiated and rigorous instruction as well as practice with the Writer’s Workshop model, the following teaching strategies will be used**:**

Close Reading

One of the ways that readers make meaning of poems and uncover their hidden truths is by participating in close reading. Close readings can be conducted over a series of lessons with the goal of breaking poems into digestible pieces that makes the content more accessible and relatable. There is no true formula for conducting a close reading, but I have found success using the following protocol:

During the first read, students number the lines of the poem and the stanzas and read the poem silently, enabling them later to reference certain lines and sections of the poem with more ease and accuracy. At the second read, the teacher reads the poem aloud, taking care to fuse proper voice inflection, observance of appropriate line endings and proper enunciation of words into their reading. It is after this reading that the teacher shares with students very specific annotations (these may vary) that will help them to make more

meaning of the poem**.** Such annotations include inviting students to consider who the speaker is, in what form the poem is written and the time period and physical setting/historical setting. Students should also write questions about unfamilia**r** words, phrases, and confusing lines or passages**,** and identify any connections they can make with the poem. To respond to and clarify some of the students' questions and concerns based on their annotations, the teacher can pair students and have them work together on breaking down the annotations and then conduct a whole group share out of their findings with the teacher guiding the share out and clarifying misconceptions, helping to make meaning and checking for understanding. The third read of the poem will ask students to write a gist statement (a 2-3 sentence summary of the poem) that considers the following: What does the poem say? What is the poem's purpose? What does the poem do? The fourth read will invite student to uncover the poem'**s** theme and select evidence from the text that supports the theme in a second round of annotations. Students can pair-share their theme annotations and responses and discuss any ideas, comments or questions they can answer among themselves before getting more guidance and direction from the teacher.

Viewing Art

To most people, there exists a notion that viewing art involves a right and a wrong approach. Much like poetry, art can leave us feeling that we are just not getting it and we begin to doubt ourselves, questioning our interpretation, which can in turn make us reluctant to share our thoughts for fear that we appear clueless about the artist's intentions. To prepare students for viewing the art integrated in this curriculum unit and for the field experiences in various art museums (digital and physical), this teaching strategy will focus on two ways that students can view and appreciate works of art; formal observation and content observation. Formal observation focuses on a work of art's physical features and characteristics. Content observation asks questions about the meaning of the work, the artist's intentions and how the art makes us feel when we view it. The formal observation approach to art will require students to spend time with the work of art as there is an investment of time required to fully appreciate it. Students will be invited to determine the basics of the work of art by identifying things such as its medium, genre, scale, format, framing, lighting, etc. These simple acts can help students build a foundation for a better understanding and more appreciation. Students will then be directed to take note of how their vision moves across the work of art. As we know, artists are masters of drawing our eyes to the points in the work where they want them to go. It is suggested that when students connect with a work of art, they do a bit of research to get more insight into the work and the artist to deepen their appreciation. Regarding content observation, students will be invited to view the work of art and comment on how the piece makes them feel. Because art is largely about the artist communicating and expressing ideas, it is helpful for viewers to recognize what they are feeling and recognize what feelings are evoked in them. A good next step is to explain to students that if there is a certain style of art that does not appeal to them, they need not fret as there is something for everyone in the world of art. Appreciating art very often requires us to move beyond our own initial subjective response and invest our time and curiosity to unlock its intentions. Next, students are encouraged to use their memory as their guide to understanding and unlocking the secrets of the work of art. It is surprising how much latent knowledge is activated when viewing a work of art. Many of our own life experiences are brought to the forefront which helps us connect to the work of art. Next, students will begin to explicitly unlock the meaning of the work of art by first determining whether the art is realistic, allegorical or free from recognizable association. Finally, students will determine if the art is thematic or abstract, an aspect of formal analysis that is partly based on knowing an artist's creative orientation.

Critical Analysis Essay Pre-Writing

In preparation for the critical analysis final product, students will respond to the following essay prompt: Choose a theme from the poem “Bellocq’s Ophelia Letters from Storyville 1911” and explain how the author develops its theme. After close reading the poem, the class will discuss the possible themes that emerge in the text (this can be done during the Paideia Seminar) and will have the option of choosing one of the themes upon which to write their essay. Using a graphic organizer, students will record information during the pre-writing portion of the writer’s workshop. Sections of the organizer include identifying the chosen theme, providing at least 2 pieces of evidence to support the theme and then analyzing the evidence.

Classroom Activities

Introduction to figurative language

Understanding and using figurative language is an integral part of reading and writing poetry. Because this unit focuses on a fundamental approach to reading and understanding poetry, it is imperative that students are introduced, or in some cases reintroduced, to the power and utility of figurative language. While there are dozens of figurative language terms that are used in discussing poetry, it is prudent to present students with small groups of the terms at first, letting them master the easier, more frequently used ones, then add to the difficulty and complexity of the terms and their usage. Irrespective of which terms are introduced and when (I do recommend beginning with simile, metaphor, personification, hyperbole, idiom, alliteration), the figurative language/vocabulary development process can be the same. To begin, set up a space for a poetry word wall in your classroom. The word wall does not have to be anything extravagant, just a place where students can have a visual reference to the terms they are working with. The word wall should contain a list of figurative language terms that are being learned. If space permits, post images of the terms to help with language acquisition. If images are not available, examples work just fine. You may even consider using some examples suggested by your students. Next, give students the terms that you want them to learn, including the definition**s** and examples. Armed with their new vocabulary, students will then create flashcards with the term and definition on the front and a student friendly example on the back. These flash cards are quick and easy references for the new vocabulary students will acquire and can be used as part of their poetry tool kit, especially when they come to learn more complex figurative language terms. Once students have had a bit of practice with explaining and giving examples of the different terms, they can continue their practice by listening to a series of popular music songs and identifying examples of figurative language present in the songs. The following songs are pretty catchy, widely known and full of examples of figurative language: *Firework* by Katy Perry, *Replay* by Sean Kingston, *Thriller* by Michael Jackson, and *Fireflies* by Owl City. Lyrics to these words are available on the website www.azlyrics.com. Students can be put in pairs to read the lyrics and highlight the different figurative language terms. After identifying the examples of figurative language, students can be invited to share their findings with the whole group and explain which examples correspond to which term. Depending upon the size of your class, you may want to assign students whole songs or stanzas. When students have shared out their examples, they can select a topic or emotion that their song addressed and use figurative language of their own to write a statement that speaks to that emotion/topic.

Composing an ekphrastic poem

The requirement that students write an ekphrastic poem as one of their performance tasks may initially seem daunting to most students but their fears can be eased by giving them a poem writing framework that makes the process easier and is especially useful for writing an ekphrastic poem. First, students should be asked to consider the speaker's voice in the poem. Is the speaker a person who is being shown the work of art? If so, what are their immediate reactions and then upon closer inspection, what has been illuminated for them? Does the work of art elicit strong, reactive feelings or is there a slow buildup of admiration, joy or resentment? Perhaps the speaker is the work of art itself or a person in the work of art. What story does this work of art or person want to tell? What is the temperament of the work of art or this person? Do you detect snark and contempt**,** or is the attitude angry, hostile, furtive or affable? Once students have established a speaker, they may then be asked to write about the scene being portrayed or the object being showcased**,** including the feelings they are experiencing while viewing the work of art. Encourage students to also relate the work of art to something that it reminds them of**.** They could even imagine what was happening while the art was being created. Invite students to imagine a story behind what they see depicted and speculate about why the artist created the work**;** and in doing this have them speak directly to the artist in their poem. Posing these questions and having students very carefully and thoughtfully consider them goes a long way toward reducing the fear and intimidation students may have about producing an original composition.

Paideia Seminar

Paideia Seminar is an iteration of the Socratic Seminar that similarly encourages students to engage in thoughtful discussions about subject matter with their classmates, promotes civil discourse and allows students to patiently speak, listen to and collaborate with their peers while focusing on a specific text. The Paideia Seminar has 3 components; a pre-seminar, seminar and post**-**seminar. During the pre-seminar, students are organized into a circle so that they are able to make eye contact with their peers. A review of the standards and objectives follows the opening of the seminar to establish a learning focus and purpose. Next, background knowledge of the text is activated or supplied along with clarification of important vocabulary words. In the case of this particular pre-seminar, students will have already completed a close reading of the text (*Monet's Waterlilies,* or *The Little Black Boy)* so supplying background knowledge may not be necessary unless students are new to the text. Included in the pre-seminar is a self-reflection where students consider the ways that they usually participate in group discussions and set an individual goal, with teacher support, that challenges them to be more engaging or participatory. Finally, the group creates norms for the seminar to encourage ownership of the activity and maintain its student driven focus. Norms can include guidance on how to respond to questions or comments, when to signal a desire to speak, time constraints, etc. The seminar portion of the Paideia is teacher facilitated but student driven. The teacher askes open-ended questions about the text and as students respond, they are required to cite specific textual evidence and details to support their responses**,** including quoting passages as evidence. The facilitator can ask questions about theme, historical relevance/perspective or specific textual details. Given that one of the final products that students will be assessed on is a critical analysis essay of a poem's theme, it would prove beneficial to explore theme in great detail during the seminar**,** including how the author develops the theme and what textual details support the theme. Also included in the seminar is a requirement for students to personalize or transfer and generalize the knowledge they are acquiring from the exercise to their own lives. The post-seminar portion is an opportunity for students to reflect on the individual goals they set in the pre-seminar as well as assess their movement toward mastery of the outlined standards and objectives. The post-seminar can be conducted in a variety of ways that provide different opportunities for students to demonstrate growth and/or mastery**,** including writing, drawing, discussion or oral presentation.

Identifying Theme

In the case of many of my students, identifying theme has proven to be an exercise in frustration and inaccuracy. While many high school students can complete this task with ease, that has not been the collective experience of my group of students**,** and because they will be required to write a critical analysis essay which focuses on how a theme emerges in a text, I thought it prudent to add a mini-lesson on identifying theme. As you well know, theme is the underlying message of a text and can sometimes be considered its "big idea". Theme is very subtle and highly subjective, unlike other literary concepts like plot and setting that are more concrete. It has helped my students to look at theme as the critical belief about life that the author is trying to convey in their writing. The teacher should remind students that theme is not the same as an explicitly stated topic and is not often directly announced. Theme is a timeless and universal statement that touches on universal human experience yet is sometimes different for everyone who may be reading the same text. To help students identify a poem's theme, I use this very simple formula: topic + author's feelings about the topic=theme. After reading and annotating a text, students will benefit from the use of a graphic organizer to collect their information on theme. A simple organizer has three columns with enough space for writing**,** with the headings**:** topic, author's feelings about topic with evidence, theme with evidence. Students can practice on well-known fairy tales before they tackle other, more complex texts. Although very simple, this organizer is student friendly and is a sound pre-write for the critical analysis writing assessment.

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Appendix

Academic standards

The District of Columbia Public Schools subscribes to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for delivery of its teaching and learning instructional framework. The standards are considered to be a clear set of collective goals and expectations representative of the knowledge and skill sets students will need in content area courses so that they will be prepared to succeed in college, career and life.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1-Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text. *This standard addresses students' ability to support their responses to a variety of question types about the poems outlined in the unit as well as their ability to incorporate textual evidence in their critical analysis essay.*

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2-Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text. *After close reading the poems, students will be required to write brief summaries of the texts and determine their themes as one of the literary tasks. Further this standard addresses the critical analysis essay students are required to complete as one of the unit's final products.*

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.4-Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on

meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone). *In this unit students learn about the power of figurative language as well as the connotative meanings of words and work to uncover the impact that these words have on the selected poems and the ways that poets masterfully use these words to create depth and dimension in their writing. Students will also incorporate a variety of figurative language terms into their own writing.*

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.1-Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking. *As part of the writing and speaking and listening product, this standards leads students to produce writings and give oral presentations that are both grammatically and mechanically correct.*

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.2-Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing. *Students will use language conventions to ensure their written responses are accurate and correct. These writings include brief constructed responses, an original poetic composition and a literary analysis essay.*

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.5-Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience. *In order to produce coherent and well- structured writing, this standard leads students into the writing process and requires them to strategize, retool and refocus at varying stages of their writing.*

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9-Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research. *One of the final products that students complete as an assessment for this unit is a critical analysis essay on the development of theme in a poem. This standard supports the writing tasks by requiring students to familiarize themselves with various forms of information to compose an essay that reflects evidentiary learning.*

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1- Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively. *This standard is addressed during the Paideia Seminars, writer's workshop (peer editing and revising) and student and teacher led conferences.*

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.A- Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas. *During the Paideia Seminars, peer review and editing and individual prep time, students will work toward mastery of this standard. In addition, the writer's workshop provides students an opportunity to prepare, research and present their findings.*
