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2018 Volume II: Poems about Works of Art, Featuring Women and Other Marginalized Writers

The Third Space: Ekphrasis, Confessional Poetry, and Mental Health

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Introduction

My students are passionate listeners to verse; unfortunately, that kind of verse tends to be inappropriate for classroom use, and its quality is unpredictable. They live their lives by the tenets laid out in their music, though, and have little trust that other poetry has relevance, value or will be interest for them. I have not covered enough poetry over the last few years and look forward to this being unit they will be willing to engage in. One thing that should interest them is the high incidence of depression and mental illness among the poets. I don't know how familiar they are with recent celebrity suicide victims, but I do know that mental health is a common struggle among my students and their families. The other draw for my students will be the role of art images in the poems they study. My students are very responsive to image, especially some of the struggling readers. Their lives and pastimes are evidence that "visual media have assumed an unprecedented dominance in the modern world."¹ Their views on politics and culture are shaped mainly by what filters through to them via social media. We see this as a disadvantage in the classroom, but because they embrace it, use of image can be invaluable. It fills in gaps in understanding and reinforces strategies for analysis. Some see form in image more clearly than in text. The learned skills can eventually translate to textual analysis and hopefully creation. My students are often more comfortable collaborating around an image, as well. The idea that art will be their bridge to the poems we study should intrigue and comfort them. I think they'll not be able to help themselves from seeking references to the art in the poems, in the same way they'll likely seek evidence of mental health issues.

Student Audience

Phoenix Rising is a partnership between our school district and the city's juvenile bureau. Most students are fast-tracked into my small school because they are involved in the juvenile justice system; others are not "in the system," but they share characteristics that make this the best school for them. It was created because of the great need for a school or program that could accommodate a concentrated number of students with histories of severe discipline problems, chronic and temporary trauma, and the challenges of substance abuse and other dysfunctions that accompany these things. This is the last stop for most of them academically; they

have been suspended too often or were unsuccessful in the district's large traditional schools. It is a therapeutic, not punitive program. It also happens that our school family encounters mental health issues among students and their families with unusual regularity; often these issues are related to other challenges described above. We are lucky to have social work resources and partnerships to help us help our students and their families. While we are responsible for meeting state and federal mandates, often our first objectives for our students are to teach them how to be students and feel safe and successful again. With careful consideration this unit can honor the mental health struggles we experience in our classes.

The unit

Our seminar "Poems about Works of Art, Featuring Women and Other Marginalized Writers" sent us searching past the usual well-known examples of ekphrasis for our own units. We sought out poems by women, by minority writers, and by other less-explored groups that might be relevant to our student bodies. My reading and research took me organically to a set of poets, well-known already, who had not only written ekphrastic poems but also had two other attributes in common: they were exemplars of confessional poetry and had known histories of mental health struggles; in fact, two of them committed suicide as relatively young poets.

Each of our considered poets—Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Robert Lowell—has a story that will interest my students, and while their ends are often upsetting, the issues are timely and relevant, especially with my population. The central piece of the unit will be an intense poem study during which we look at specific examples of ekphrastic poems and their artworks. My students are or will be completely overwhelmed by the processes of explication and interpretation, but we can do this in smaller, less daunting pieces and sometimes collaboratively. I want them to benefit from the close reading skills that we use when we read poems and that often teach them to read prose more critically, as well. Pairing poems and images should provide engaging activities that will get students to think and apply. The central topic of depression (and suicide and other mental illness) is a sensitive one. The nature of my small classes means that we'll inevitably have some intense discussions along the way. Inevitably, students will write their own ekphrastic poems and maybe produce art to go along with existing poetry.

Objectives

By the end of this unit, my students will have improved their visual literacy skills as well as their textual literacy competence, the latter of which is a constant weakness of many of my students. The strategies and activities are intended to provide deep practice in identifying, analyzing, and applying specific poetic conventions; exploring and articulating relationships between works of art and the poems written about them; and creating original poems about works of art that demonstrate mastery in these objectives. The Oklahoma education funding crises has hit our school again; we will have no art teacher next year. In our classes we will have to make up for those experiences, partly because our state alternative education board mandates it, but more importantly because students with our challenges are more likely to thrive with them.

The shorter unit should take place over a two-week period. I have two 2.5 hour English classes each day. Because of the length of the class period, we'll be covering other course objectives at the same time. The unit is to be used in my 11th and 12th grade classes.

Ekphrasis

Simply put, ekphrasis is a genre of poems written about works of art. Variants exist both in the kind of text and the kind of image or object. For example, we'll study Robert Lowell's "Epilogue" which addresses a painting by Johannes Vermeer only in the last third of the poem. In more modern interpretations any text that describes or interacts with a work of art is considered ekphrastic. In notional ekphrasis, the subject covered is representational, like Keats's Grecian urn, inspired by his viewing of the Elgin Marbles. All English teachers should be familiar with popular examples, such as W.H. Auden's "Musee des Beaux Arts" and William Carlos Williams's "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" (which, in contrast to each other, are an excellent starting place for teachers new to ekphrasis). Mitchell says that we inevitably read and treat image as text; and in reverse, we see the verbal and treat it as image.² In our heads or as form on paper, we are programmed to interchange the skills necessary to make meaning of either.

Most know Renee Magritte's *The Treachery of Images*, his famous picture of a pipe—simply an unembellished pipe centered on a pale canvas. Beneath it is the large caption "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe.*" This is not a pipe. The relationship between the image and the words can be as simple or complicated as one likes. The image and the text seem to have equal standing spatially and visually, but they contradict each other. While the image is of a pipe, it is not a literal pipe—so what is it? "The space between words and images is kind of void into which (and from which) ideas, passions, narratives, representations emerge. It is the third space..."³

In his chapter "Ekphrasis and the Other" W.J.T. Mitchell gives three stages of realization that one who experiences an ekphrastic poem goes through: ekphrastic indifference, ekphrastic hope, and ekphrastic fear. I became interested in how this would apply to my students, who I may assume have had no previous interactions with poems about art. In a simpler manner, I see my students working through these stages as they approach reading and writing ekphrastic poems. I use Mitchell's stages as a heuristic tool rather than a literal framework for ekphrasis. The first stage, ekphrastic indifference, comes from the idea that ekphrasis is impossible. Assuming that depiction is our goal, ekphrasis falls short because it "may refer to an object, describe it, invoke it, but it can never bring its visual presence before us in the way pictures do."⁴ Does the sense of impossibility create angst on the part of the poet? It will do so with my students as their initial suspicion about ekphrasis is that the intent is singularly to describe the work of art. Thomas's next stage, however, is ekphrastic hope, wherein the reader or viewer has risen to the expectation that language may indeed have the power to engender an image in countless ways as the "estrangement of the image/text division is overcome, and a sutured, synthetic form, a verbal icon or imagetext, arises in its place."⁵ As students come to understand the endless kinds of statements that ekphrastic poems can make, I think they will feel empowered in their liberties as writers and freed as readers in finding meaning. I see this last stage, ekphrastic fear, as the realization that the relationship between image and text cannot conceivably meet up the expectations that one has of the other, or that the reader has of either. As this translates to my classroom, I don't think this means my students lose confidence in their ekphrastic abilities; I think it means that they have reached a new understanding of the complexities of ekphrastic possibility, indicating growth, not setback. As my students come to grips with these stages, I agree with Mitchell that their interaction with ekphrasis, even at a subconscious level, will engage them more than other genres might. These notions will arise again in the Strategies section of this unit.

Confessional Poetry and Mental Health

Confessional poetry is a modern poetic movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s in which the poet usually speaks directly to the reader without the voice of a separate persona. While the tone may range from the dramatic to the comic, and the personal nature of the content may seem private and often raw and psychological in nature. Poems about death, grief, trauma, and intimate relationships are typical. The three key poets in this unit, Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath, are some of the best known confessional poets. Confessional poems should feel somewhat accessible to my students; their generation is comfortable playing out their private lives online, having left behind restraint of previous generations and hesitance they may have had about going public with their relationships, traumatic events, or deepest concerns.

The three poets share other connections. Sexton and Plath studied under Lowell. Sexton and Lowell both spent time at McLean Hospital for their mental illness. The connections between confessional poets and mental illness are documented scientifically and anecdotally. The two become inseparable in my reading on the genre and poets, especially for Plath, Sexton, and Lowell, along with contemporary John Berryman. Studies done at Harvard in the 1980s affirmed what earlier studies from the 1890s and 1930s had shown: creativity and psychopathology were present through generations of well-known creators in the fields of music, art, and writing. Alongside these gifts were histories of “mania, suicide, depression, and psychosis. . .”⁶ Among these and other confessional poets with serious depression and bi-polar disorder there is even a sub-genre of poems about their experience in mental hospitals. Sexton actually began writing poetry as a suggestion from her therapist.⁷

Knowledge of the lives and tragedies of these poets is often better known than the poems themselves. Each of the three—Sexton, Lowell, and Plath—are acknowledged masters of their craft. Lowell especially was known for the many revisions of each poem. All three poets were winners of the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. It is easy to find online copies of a much-revised draft of “Epilogue,” his poem for this unit, showing such revisions.

I worried that finding poems that contain all of these elements—confessional voice, ekphrastic content, and mental health struggles—would be a stretch. Sexton’s “The Starry Night” and Plath’s “The Disquieting Muses” share all three clearly, as does Lowell’s as a reflection on his fading poetic career, to a lesser extent. In the end, all three pieces fell into place without my needing to stretch connections.

Poets and Poems

Teachers can find all of these poems and their accompanying paintings online easily. Each is reproduced in countless print art and language arts collections, as well. I will introduce the three poets as a group, emphasizing the obvious similarities among their lives and poems. As we get to the poems I will emphasize the unique styles that distinguish them. We will use a variety of close-reading and close-viewing exercises throughout the process.

Robert Lowell and “Epilogue”

Robert Lowell described his privileged childhood self as manic, energetic, and a little obsessive. In frequent

bouts of bipolar disorder he roller-coastered in cycles, affecting his relationships, his teaching, and his writing, which he “saw writing both as a way to understand his compulsions and as a compulsion in its own right, a roundabout leading out of trouble and immediately back in.” His “regular” life was driven by metaphor—his way of making sense—but in manic fits the comparisons became his reality. He might have thought himself to be a composer or a dictator. In the vacuum after his fit he could “tame” his metaphors and put them to use in his work.⁸ This cycle of adapting the manic literal to the more sane figurative use in verse might be the most direct connection between his mental health and his poetry. Robert Lowell’s “Epilogue,” fittingly published as the final poem in his last collection of poems weeks before his death, is about the fear that ruled his late life: he felt he was losing his creative abilities and his capacity for imagining, only able to resort to memory. One of the poem’s metaphors is that he can only take a snapshot, posed and artificial and static. Perhaps he is also questioning the abilities of poetry, not just his own. The painting to which Lowell likely refers is Johannes Vermeer’s *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*.

The first four lines of the 23 line poem ask directly why poetry fails him when he wants to “imagine,” not “recall.” The only two italicized lines follow: “*The painter’s vision is not a lens, / it trembles to caress the light.*” These may be the words of the poet himself; he seems to envy the painter and gives him (I say him because of Vermeer) the passionate verbs *trembles* and *caress*. When he describes the contrast of a metaphorical snapshot, that can only refresh a posed memory, he uses a harsher diction: “lurid, rapid, garish, grouped. . .paralyzed by fact.” He questions next why accuracy is not enough. (My students count on snapshots to document and validate their lives on social media. I see a probable discussion about the more accurate immortality of other ways to document our lives.)

Lowell often uses four-beat lines although most of his poems are free verse. In “Epilogue” we will look at those that have more or fewer. For example, line three is four simple one-syllable words: “I want to make,” which, isolated, shouts a statement he wants his poem to make.

The predominant images in the poem are, in fact, images-driven: vision, lens, snapshot, eye, and photograph. He finally holds Vermeer’s painting out to us near the end of the poem for comparison? Contrast? The “accuracy / Vermeer gave to the sun’s illumination” is praised, but it is also balanced with what Lowell desires, the experience of “his girl solid with yearning.” The possessive “his” of Vermeer suggests complexity in the painting, as well. The painting is more authentic than the snapshot, the kind of creation that Lowell does not want to lose. The woman in the painting is facing the window where the light illuminates her front as she reads, as if she were a saint. She is wearing blue and expecting a child, maybe suggesting Mary? Often a rich symbol a (the) map is behind her, and also lets the sun track across it through the window. In contrast to the realness of the sun, however, the map is only a web of representational signs. This “snapshot” is so heavy with affection, so un-posed—it must be what Lowell has in mind as an authentic, inspired creation, whether of art or poetry. .

The mood of the final lines leaves the reader feeling that the narrator (and in this case poet) is slipping away. Of course, the poem belies its own statement that the poet is fading in its ability; it is deeply imaginative and crafted so that we cannot tell if we should wink back at the poet or feel pity for him.

Anne Sexton and “The Starry Night”

Another New England writer of some privilege (but also probably abuse), Anne Sexton married relatively young. While her husband served in Korea she was a fashion model—an industry she shared briefly with Sylvia Plath. Still young, she suffered post-partum depression and breakdowns after having both of her children. She

attempted suicide on her 27th birthday. A psychiatrist encouraged her to write between visits, and she was quickly addicted to the process, joining writing groups in Boston and meeting Plath, Lowell, and other confessional poets and mentors early on. Her poetry was truly confessional; she dared to write about topics such as abortion, menstruation, addiction, and suicide. Criticism for her content was balanced with awards and praise for her poems. Like Lowell, her last collection of poems was about dying, but it seemed to be her poetry that kept her alive for her last two decades. Her life was fraught with drama—physical abuse of her children and between Anne and her husband, infidelity, and addiction, to start. Sexton committed suicide when she was 45. I found work discussing specific cognitive disorders connected with the likelihood of suicide. She had several of these: selective abstraction and generalization, among others. These two were the most relevant as I saw examples playing out with all three poets. Both of those just listed here are manifested in the use of metaphor which “fuse(s) sensory and thought.” Certainly all poet and writers use metaphor. These particular metaphors, that are extreme and intense, and also the use of hyperbole, serve as tools Sexton and others who habitually express the extreme depth of unhappiness, such as in “The Starry Night” when “one black-haired tree slips / up like a drowned woman in to the hot sky” or “the old unseen serpent swallows up the stars.”⁹ The intensity of despair and manic feeling in general may account for some of the very personal and controversial topics among confessional poets, especially Sexton.

Anne Sexton’s “The Starry Night” is an obvious choice for this unit. It is one of few paintings that I can be sure they’ve seen (I have a drink-and-paint version of a *Starry Night* with the Tulsa skyline in my classroom). Even before closer analysis, students will suspect easy connections to mental illness and probably suicide, for example, in the refrain “I want to die” or in “sucked up by that great dragon...” Van Gogh’s life and death were also marred by mental illness and that manic energy is present in this painting, especially. We know he was thinking about death—and religion—at the time from a letter he wrote to his brother Theo: “Looking at the stars always makes me dream . . . Just as we take the train to get to Tarascon or Rouen, we take death to reach a star.” And from Van Gogh in the poem’s epigraph: “That does not keep me from having a terrible need of—shall I say the word—religion. Then I go out at night to paint the stars,” also from a letter to Theo.

In the painting the roiling sky overpowers the calm, sleeping village below, like death waiting to call someone up. It is a dark painting save the eleven stars, maybe representing as many dead souls who have “reached a star.” Sexton says in the poem’s refrain, “This is how / I want to die.” The last four words end the first two stanzas, in prominence and repeated, confirming the interpretation that the painting is about death. The poem’s imagery, including the violent metaphors Wedding discusses, allows no room for the idea that the poem has romantic or creative interpretations.

In Sexton’s poem, the town is reduced to something that is “silent” and “does not exist / except where one black-haired tree slips / up...” She emphasizes the starry night, instead, personifying it with those terrible metaphors, and yearning for it to pull her in, to death. The last twelve words are the trickiest, less clear than her dominating use of image and metaphor. “to split / from my life with no flag, / no belly, / no cry.” She wants to go, to die, completely liberated from that which gives her immortality or meaning.

Sylvia Plath and “The Disquieting Muses”

We tend to compartmentalize Sylvia Plath’s life into several categories: her seemingly glamorous young years when she was a summer intern at *Vogue Magazine*, her tempestuous marriage to renowned poet Ted Hughes, and her struggles with mental illness and ultimate suicide at the age of thirty. It is this middle time, with Hughes in their early years, in which she finds herself often in museums, exploring and writing about art in a break from her standard poetry, but we do find the confessional voice in “The Disquieting Muses.” It is

inspired by the painting of the same name by Italian metaphysical poet Giorgio de Chirico. Sylvia Plath's ekphrastic poems are well-known but are eclipsed by the greater interest in her more personal, confessional poems, for obvious reasons. At the age of thirty, she does, like Sexton and others take her own life.

"By writing about works of art, Plath inserts herself into an ongoing dialogue, a dialogue larger than the one in her own mind."¹⁰ In this way, maybe art provides a focal point or cornerstone for the miasmic thoughts she has about her relationships, especially, and other issues, in the same way that the poems of Lowell and Sexton are probably influenced by their psychological distractions to some extent. Jeffrey Meyers points out that the subjects of the painting she writes about include "naked women in trees and jungles; coiled snakes and threatening lions; faceless, even headless figures in deserted shadowy squares; sea monsters and severed heads; blood and violence; alienated and tragically doomed lovers; departing souls and apocalyptic images."¹¹

The De Chirico painting was created in an early modern 1917, as is apparent by some cubist style and the factory in the background. In his analysis of the work James Thrall Soby says that it "illustrates the ambivalent, 'metaphysical' nature of (De Chirico's) early art. The picture attracts and repels, beguiles and frightens, conveys a warm nostalgic aura but at the same time suggests an impending catastrophe."¹² We'll see that Plath's poem captures this range, from nostalgia to catastrophe, with words. The painting is dominated by distortion, by the ambiguous green-blue sky time of day and the awkward length of the piazza between foreground and background. A female statue on the right both hovers and sits on the ground. One figure has removed her head and set it on the ground. If the painting in the landscape is the landscape within Plath's own mind, then we question who is populating the terrain and what statement she makes about both. The three female figures in the painting are the three figures, or muses, in the poem. Plath said of them in an interview, "All through the poem I have in mind the enigmatic figures in this painting - three terrible faceless dressmaker's dummies in classical gowns, seated and standing in a weird, clear light that casts the long strong shadows characteristic of de Chirico's early work."¹³ Students will want to speculate on the random artifacts, such as the boxes and striped stick or staff.

The use of I and the direct address to Mother indicate a personal narrative from the start. The three figures are a "visual representation of the evil she blames her mother for not protecting her from."¹⁴ We sense this when the figures are introduced in the first stanza as *these* women, and the statement is sustained through all seven stanzas. The meter throughout, with approximately four beats per line, gives nursery rhyme percussion, underscoring the un-childlike, somber sentiment in the poem. The muses suggest any number of witches, fates, godmothers, or good fairies, and the mix of the allusions they represent makes their presence richer in the poem, and they make the mother, who reads, bakes, praises and controls the pretty things, more vapid and distant. The idealism and safety Mother represents become less and less accessible in Plath's darkening mind, but she credits her mother for the idylls of her childhood—she "sent me to piano lessons / And praised my arabesques and trills."

The first two words are "Mother, mother," and it is the first word in the second stanza. The first two stanzas conjure up a conventional nursery with a mother who tells bedtime stories about "Mixie Blackshort the heroic bear," but Mother has introduced or allowed in her absence "these ladies. . .with leads like darning-eggs to nod / and nod and nod" at her crib. The voiceless, nodding heads are frightening to me, much less a child, and they are creepier in contrast to the witches who were always baked into the gingerbread. They are permanently settled into her head. By the 16th line they are still there—"Mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald head."

By the third stanza, when she is twelve, the muses are permanently settled into her head or life. Her mother makes bright attempts at cookies and dressing up thunderstorms; still, “those ladies broke the panes.” She keeps them at an objective arm’s length through the first half of the poem by always calling them “these ladies” or “those ladies.” For a while both worlds are present—the conventional, sunny one, and the somber, shadowed one with voiceless muses, and she crosses back and forth.

In stanza four they are present through what should be an enchanting evening with friends dancing and blinking “flashlights like fireflies.” What was probably Plath’s or our narrator’s own anxiety is blamed on the “Godmothers” and the imagery of lengthening shadows begins in the poem with “And the shadow stretched, and the lights went out.” It has been unclear whether her Mother is aware that this dark side exists. Perhaps she is, when in this stanza she “cried and cried,” as she watches Sylvia, “heavy footed” unable to engage in her performance.

Through the persistence of her conventional life of piano lessons, her mother’s apparent love is eclipsed by the presence of “muses unhired by you, dear mother.” Plath or her persona has achieved the “assiduous concealment of a more fundamental condition of blankness and hopelessness.”¹⁵ We see her tortured self emerging both in her young life and in the poem.

In the penultimate stanza her mother is floating away on a blue and floral balloon “and bluebirds that never were / Never, never found anywhere.” She seems to be taking all of the life, the beauty away with her balloon, leaving Plath in her desolate, haunting landscape where all that was good has turned dark and she turned to face “her traveling companions.”

The lengthening shadows continue in the final stanza where she repeats the address to her mother from the poem’s first line. Plath is left in the “kingdom you bore me to,” and the muses continue their vigil. There seems to be no escape—until the last two lines when she stands defiant despite the company she keeps.¹⁶

Teaching Strategies

Image Annotation

English teachers know the importance of teaching their students to annotate texts, especially those challenged with literacy or critical reading skills. More advanced readers still benefit from the process as it encourages them to do more with challenging texts or find subtleties in their usual reading practice. Whenever possible I give my students a copy they can write on and keep to refer back to. When I teach my students to annotate a text, I pull out examples from my shelves and files, where I have asked questions, illustrated something, agreed or disagreed with the author or text. I might find an exclamation point or angry face. Different colors of ink may have significance in a text I find especially challenging. There are endless possibilities for the ways in which a reader may interact with a text. To begin, I tell them to mark key words or terms; write brief definitions for words they don’t know; react emotionally; seek patterns (especially in poetry or argument) and discrepancies; ask and answer questions of the text; trace lists or processes. What they should not do is use one single highlighter to mark a text. When they have systems, such as circling and underlining for separate purposes or creating their own notations systems, they have to make critical decisions about the text using additional parts of the brain, making them far more likely not only to recall but

to make sense and meaning of what they have read.

The same processes may be used to annotate an image. Because I have small classes, I am able to print color copies of images we use. A larger class or group could also do this activity with an interactive smartboard though intimate, personal interaction with the text would be lessened.

With pencil—or whatever—in hand, students can study an image with the same intensity as a text, by asking questions, making lists, contemplating color—or lack of it, questioning facial expressions, style, or empty space. Facing an image with the intention of interacting physically with it almost forces the viewer to seek details he/she would have missed otherwise.

Visual reading

This drawing strategy will be a nice break for some students and a very effective reading strategy for my more struggling readers. Drawing key elements or figures from a poem (or other text) forces a reader to create mental images. The first benefit is that the words take on meaning. The second is that the reader now has an image to do the action in her head through the rest of the story. I have learned that many of my readers are not able yet to visualize a text mentally as it plays out on the page, so they miss the visual hooks that help them retain the words and information they read. The act of drawing forces students to visualize imagery, setting, character, and action. After drawing the images as they see them, they can turn around and describe them again, this time with their own word choices, adding layered and more individualized understanding of the scene or character. How are their word choices different from the writer's? What is the text image saying to them? I'll use this strategy to introduce a few of Plath's stanzas. While we study metaphor, we could do this activity, reducing the text only to a comparison.

Turning the Tables

To put what we've learned about ekphrasis and confessional poetry to use, we will turn the tables to look at paintings created by artists suffering from depression or other mental illness. We will speculate how and whether or not their mental health status influences their work as we speculated it did with Sexton, Lowell, and Plath. In the paintings I've chosen there is depth of emotion, genius, and often raw accessibility. They range from well-known painters like Van Gogh to the new and far less renowned like George Harding. It may be that my students will want to spend time looking for their own inspiring works of art. Turning the tables this time and starting with an image alone, we'll use activities like image annotation and brainstorming prompts (including some from units by Fellows in this seminar) to create, revise, and publish our own ekphrastic poems. I'm starting with five possible paintings, all of which can be found through google: a self-portrait by George Harding; *Bedroom at Arles* by Vincent Van Gogh; *Self-Portrait with Easel* by Otto Dix; *When Are You Getting Married* by Paul Gauguin; and finally, a seemingly untitled painting of two red figures chained in a blue room by Kim Noble.

The Scream by Edward Munch is a possibility, but it lacks the ambiguity of the others.

Classroom Activities

Parts of a Metaphor

As I kept thinking about the role of dramatic metaphor in the poems of Lowell, Sexton, and Plath, it seemed obvious that we should look more deeply into varieties of comparisons. Metaphor and others are used in a variety of fields because of their effectiveness to convey depth of emotion or clarity of image. In English classes we never fail to teach (and re-teach every year) about comparisons, but we rarely take the time to analyze them, to break them down into their parts—tenor and the vehicle. The tenor is the object, idea to which the writer wants to give attributes. The vehicle is the image brought in to lend its attributes to the tenor. In the comparison (in this case actually a simile) “except where one black-haired tree slips / up like a drowned woman into the hot sky,” the tree is the tenor, the object the poet wants to better describe, and the vehicle is the drowned woman, brought in to suggest the appearance of the tree.

Now that we’ve put a spotlight on this comparison, we can follow up with questions? Why a drowned woman? What does this do for mood or tone? What does the tree look like to you, and what does your vehicle do the tone or mood?

For one image in each poem I will give students blank paper and colored pencils and have them draw the comparison. They will have to reckon with the details as they draw. What about the tree looks like a drowned woman? Does the tree get a face? A reaching arm? For “The Starry Night” we’ll use the simile above. For “The Disquieting Muses,” we’ll use “each teacher found my touch oddly wooden; and for “Epilogue,” we will use “the sun’s illumination / stealing like the tide across a map.”

Annotation and Tone Study

English language arts teachers encourage students to annotate texts as often as we can. We teach tips and strategies to help students annotate effectively, so that they must read closely to make sense of or find meaning in the text. In addition to other visual literacy strategies, this activity will encourage students find details they would not have otherwise. They will annotate at least one painting (Vermeer’s *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*) in the same way that they annotate a text, by looking for and marking patterns, color choices, objects, unexpected things, arrangement, facial expressions, style—anything else they think is worth noting—along with making comments and asking questions. (This does mean that I have to splurge for color copies for each student, but it could be modified to be done in groups or as a whole-class activity on a Smartboard.) This thorough annotation will lead us to the next stage of the activity as we look at tone.

Tone can be a challenge to teach, but one can find a variety of tone words lists on Google. I have several that I use regularly with students depending on the needs of a particular group. I will give each student a tone word list and ask them to circle each word on the list that aligns with what they’ve found in the painting. The subtle colors or the idea that the woman might be pregnant might influence their decisions. Her facial expression is ambiguous. Students may have to justify their decisions to me or to a group or the class as they present and explain their personal lists of words.

Reductionist Reading Activity

This works best with shorter poems with more imagery. In stages students will make decisions on the importance of individual words or simple phrases and then justify them. I’ll use it with Sexton’s “The Starry

Night.” Before students do a complete reading of the poem, give them copies of the poem they can write on and black and gray markers. Have them black out the least important words, such as articles and prepositions. With their gray markers, leave them alone to make decisions on which are the next less important words. Encourage them to have taken out about half of the words. Now that they have reduced the words in the poem to at least half, they can discuss in whole-class or smaller groups what they think the poem is about. Tell them to focus on only on the words in white space. Add in the gray words. Do thoughts about the poem change? Finally, pass out clean copies of the poem to read and study and with which to compare their initial thoughts about the poem.

Diction and Dictionary Page Challenge

A common goal of these units on ekphrasis is to get our students to write original poems about works of art. We will do several exercises to sharpen skills and build confidence, including this one. Often students’ word choices are haphazard and restricted by limited vocabulary. This assignment is intended to force them to think critically about word choice and the feel the potential power they have in the process.

Give each student both a photocopy of a dictionary page (or you could cut up one of the falling-apart out-of-date dictionaries on your shelf) and the same work of art (photocopied, shared electronically, or on a smartboard). After using whatever method you choose for students to study an image, ask them to study with equal intention the words on their dictionary pages, seeking words that they feel relate to the image in any way. The next steps can vary according to your needs for the lesson. Vivid nouns and verbs can become the base for work with figurative imagery; modifying words might suggest mood or tone. Students might find words that suggest theme or narrative. I will encourage my students to pick 7-8 words to be worked in to as many lines of verse. I might ask for the inclusion of a metaphor, or ask students to play with different kinds of rhyme or sound device. Regardless of one’s specific requirements for the students’ verse practice, the students will have had to reckon with critical word choice. Rather than have them create verse, another option for using their selected words would be to explain their word choices to the class.

Bibliography

"A Brief Guide to Confessional Poetry." Poets.org. February 21, 2014.

<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/brief-guide-confessional-poetry>. Enough discussion of confessional poets and poetry for reader to have a sound understanding and bearing of how the unit's poets fit in.

Chiasson, Dan. "The Illness and Insight of Robert Lowell." *The New Yorker*, March 20, 2017. Accessed July 13, 2018.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/03/20/the-illness-and-insight-of-robert-lowell>. I'd been trying to read as much as I could of the book of which this was a review. This really covered what I needed for my unit or to brush up before one might teach it.

Doomchin, Molly. *Sylvia Plath: The Dialogue between Poetry and Painting*. PhD diss., Boston University. Boston University Arts and Sciences Writing Program. I found no publication year for this paper.

Fry, Paul H. "The Lamplit Answer? Gjertrud Schnackenberg's Antiekphrases." In *N the Frame: Women's Ekphrastic Poetry from Marianne Moore to Susan Wheeler*, edited by Jane Hedley, Nick Halpern, and Willard Spiegelman, 55-71. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2009. By our seminar leader. Along with WJT Mitchell's work, this informed how I read all three poems although I ended taking out this section of the unit.

Hedley, Jane. "Sylvia Plath's Ekphrastic Poetry." *Raritan* 20, no. 4 (2001): 37-73.

<https://literature.proquest.com/pageImage.do?ftnum=73088516&fmt=page&area=abell&journalid=02751607&articleid=R01510237&pubdate=2001&queryid=3059790352814>.

Hollander, John. *The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art*. University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Jamison, Kay R. *Robert Lowell, Setting the River on Fire: A Study of Genius, Mania, and Character*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2017. This biography of Lowell focuses on his mental health and the role it played in his writing and teaching. It had just come out, and I couldn't put it down.

McNamara, Andrew E. "Andrew McNamara, Words and Pictures in the Age of the Image: An Interview with W. J. T. Mitchell." *Eyeline Magazine* 30 (Autumn 1996): 16-21. <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/4620/1/4620.pdf>. I read this for a previous seminar, but remembered it for its analysis of image and text and the predominance of image in contemporary life.

Meyers, Jeffrey. "Sylvia Plath: The Paintings in the Poems." *Word & Image* 20, no. 2 (2004): 107-22. Accessed July 14, 2018. doi:10.1080/02666286.2004.10444009. Avoiding Wikipedia, as we tell our students to do in most situations, or seeking complimentary material, I found good content about De Chirico's painting here.

Mitchell, W. J. Thomas. *Picture Theory*. University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Wedding, Danny. "Cognitive Distortions in the Poetry of Anne Sexton." *Suicide and Life Threatening Behavior*, December 30, 2010, 140-44. Accessed July 11, 2018. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1943-278X.2000.tb01072.x>. Interesting article connecting Sexton's (and other confessional poets') psychological diagnoses with her writing style. It also coincides with what Jamison and Chiasson say about Lowell and metaphor.

Notes

1. McNamara, Andrew E. "Andrew McNamara, Words and Pictures in the Age of the Image: An Interview with W. J. T. Mitchell.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Mitchell, W. J. Thomas. *Picture Theory*, 152.
5. Ibid., 154.
6. Jamison, Kay R. *Robert Lowell, Setting the River on Fire: A Study of Genius, Mania, and Character*, 273.
7. "A Brief Guide to Confessional Poetry." Poets.org. February 21, 2014.
8. Chiasson, Dan. "The Illness and Insight of Robert Lowell." *The New Yorker*, March 20, 2017.
9. Wedding, Danny. "Cognitive Distortions in the Poetry of Anne Sexton." *Suicide and Life Threatening Behavior*, 140-143.
10. Doomchin, Molly. *Sylvia Plath: The Dialogue Between Poetry and Painting*.
11. Meyers, Jeffrey. "Sylvia Plath: The Paintings in the Poems," 107.
12. Ibid., 118.
13. Ibid., 119.
14. Doomchin, Molly. *Sylvia Plath: The Dialogue Between Poetry and Painting*.
15. Hedley, Jane. "Sylvia Plath's Ekphrastic Poetry," 52.
16. Doomchin, Molly. *Sylvia Plath: The Dialogue Between Poetry and Painting*.

Appendix

Academic Standards

Oklahoma’s English language arts standards are easy to cross-reference with other sets of academic standards. As written, they vary very little, if at all, among grades 9-12, so I have included only 11th grade.

11.1.R.3 Students will engage in collaborative discussions about appropriate topics and texts, expressing their own ideas clearly while building on the ideas of others in pairs, diverse groups, and whole class settings. *This is essential practice when older students work through literature or text of any kind.*

11.2.R.2 Students will evaluate details in literary and non-fiction/informational texts to connect how genre supports the author’s purpose. *This leads students through the essential links among confessional poetry, mental health, and ekphrastic poems.*

11.3.R.4 Students will evaluate literary devices to support interpreting of texts, including comparisons across texts: imagery, tone, symbolism, irony. *These are only a few of the literary and poetic conventions we will address in the unit.*

11.3.R.7 Students will make connections (e.g., thematic links, literary analysis) between and across multiple texts and provide textual evidence to support their inferences. *This will happen as we look at the poems by three different confessional poet, seeking the different ways each of the poets expresses that confessional voice.*

11.7.R.2 Students will analyze the impact of selected media and formats on meaning. *By juxtaposing the poems to the artworks and having to look for the painting in the poem (and the poem in the painting), students will have to analyze the impact of the visual on the textual.*

11.2.W.1 Students will apply components of a recursive writing process for multiple purposes to create a focused, organized, and coherent piece of writing. *In this unit, students will write prose and poetry, but our emphasis on revision will be in our poetry writing. We’ll study Lowell’s revisions of “Epilogue” for possibilities. The close reading and writing that is part of poem study translates to careful consideration of diction and image, maybe even more than in prose.*

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