

LESSON PLAN TITLE: Ekphrastic Poetry

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Grade Level: 5th-12th

Model Works Used: Paintings by Edward Hopper and poem by Edward Hirsch

Literary Learning objective(s): Students will be able to understand the concept of ekphrasis and write a poem based on a work of art.

Themes: Vivid imagery, metaphor.

MDE/SEL Standards: Students learn new vocabulary, students explore sensory detail and descriptive use of language, determine a theme or central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details, produce clear writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to the task and purpose.

Materials Needed: Paper and a pen or pencil.

Opening Activity

Welcome!

I'm really glad to be here with you today. First off, wherever you are, take 30 seconds to stand up and get into a pose that makes you feel powerful. Maybe you want to hold your arms above your head, or stand with your legs wide apart, or maybe you'd like to just hold your hands together in front of your chest. Whatever makes you feel strong and powerful, hold that pose for 30 seconds!

Great job!

Pre-Discussion

Today we're going to learn about a type of poetry called ekphrasis. Ekphrasis is a kind of poetry that is inspired by pieces of art. A poet sees a particular painting or drawing or sculpture and feels moved to write about it.

In the same way that we try to convey a lot of emotion in our poetry, so too do pieces of art try to convey a lot of emotion. The tools we use as writers are different from what artists use, but the idea is the same, to express emotion!

Have you ever watched an especially beautiful sunset and noted the colors, how the sky went from a warm yellow to a glowing pink and maybe a burning red. Did it ever make you want to write down how that felt to watch?

Take one minute to remember back to a time you saw something that you thought was beautiful. Maybe it was an experience like the sunset, or maybe you saw a piece of art in a museum or hanging in someone's house.

Write down what that moment was and how it made you feel. This can be a simple free-write where you capture all your ideas and feelings.

Now we're going to look at a painting from a famous painter named, Edward Hopper. Hopper was known for his realistic paintings that showed simple, every day scenes from American life. Take a few minutes to look at and closely observe the painting, "House by the Railroad" by Hopper, seen below.



Model Poem/Art Discussion

Let's do a visual analysis of "House by the Railroad" : (Please write down your responses to these questions on a piece of paper!)

What do you see? What is happening in the artwork?

Are there any clues that tell you what the setting and time period are?

Is there a story being told? What is it?

What emotions does the artwork make you feel? What are your sensory reactions?

How would you summarize the theme or main idea of the artwork?

Hopper's paintings have inspired many ekphrastic poems. Now let's read Edward Hirsch's poem about this very painting:

Edward Hopper and the House by the Railroad (1925)

By Edward Hirsch

Out here in the exact middle of the day,
This strange, gawky house has the expression
Of someone being stared at, someone holding
His breath underwater, hushed and expectant;

This house is ashamed of itself, ashamed
Of its fantastic mansard rooftop
And its pseudo-Gothic porch, ashamed
Of its shoulders and large, awkward hands.

But the man behind the easel is relentless.
He is as brutal as sunlight, and believes
The house must have done something horrible
To the people who once lived here

Because now it is so desperately empty,
It must have done something to the sky
Because the sky, too, is utterly vacant
And devoid of meaning. There are no

Trees or shrubs anywhere—the house
Must have done something against the earth.
All that is present is a single pair of tracks
Straightening into the distance. No trains pass.

Now the stranger returns to this place daily
Until the house begins to suspect
That the man, too, is desolate, desolate
And even ashamed. Soon the house starts

To stare frankly at the man. And somehow
The empty white canvas slowly takes on
The expression of someone who is unnerved,
Someone holding his breath underwater.

And then one day the man simply disappears.
He is a last afternoon shadow moving
Across the tracks, making its way
Through the vast, darkening fields.

This man will paint other abandoned mansions,
And faded cafeteria windows, and poorly lettered
Storefronts on the edges of small towns.
Always they will have this same expression,

The utterly naked look of someone
Being stared at, someone American and gawky.
Someone who is about to be left alone
Again, and can no longer stand it.

Prewriting

After reading the poem through at least twice, write down any initial observations you have:

Words and phrases that stood out to you.

Images that stood out to you.

Take three minutes to do this!

Now let's think about how Hirsch wrote this poem:

What literary devices does Hirsch use? Can you find any examples of metaphors or similes? (Metaphors and similes compare two things to each other.) What about personification? (Personification gives human qualities and actions to objects or places)

How would you describe the mood or feeling of Hirsch's poem? How is it similar or different to the emotion conveyed in the painting?

Is there a story being told in this poem? If so, what is it?

There are a few ways to write an ekphrastic poem:

1. Describe the experience of looking at the artwork using emotion and your senses.
2. Tell the story of what's happening in the artwork trying to describe it in great detail.
3. Write from the perspective of the artist. What inspired you to create this piece of art?
4. Put yourself inside the painting and describe what you see around you and what brought you there.

Which of these do you think Hirsch did in his poem? It could be more than one!

Writing Prompt

Choose from one of these other Edward Hopper paintings and then write your own ekphrastic poem that's between 10 - 15 lines long that includes at least one metaphor.

Here's a quick refresher on metaphor: It's a figure of speech that makes a comparison between two things that are unrelated, but which share some common characteristics. An example would be, "*It's raining cats and dogs.*"

Here's an example of a metaphor from the poem:

*“And somehow
The empty white canvas slowly takes on
The expression of someone who is unnerved,*

Someone holding his breath underwater.”

Drug Store



Early Sunday Morning



Rooms by the Sea



Share / Reflect

How did you do writing 10 - 15 lines? Were you able to reach that goal? Is there someone you can read your poem aloud to? If not, try reading it aloud to yourself!

Supplemental Materials

Check/Highlight all that apply

- Text by a contemporary/diverse author
- Translated text
- Visual Thinking Strategies
- Close reading or other analysis
- A step of the writing process
- Planning & Reflection Strategy
- New device, concept or theme
- Social-Emotional Learning
 - Self-Management
 - Social Awareness
 - Relationship Skills
 - Responsible-Decision Making
 - Self-Awareness