"Ut Pictura Poesis": Creating Poetry Inspired by Art

PURPOSE
To analyze and compose poetry rich with imagery by deriving inspiration from works of art.

GRADE LEVELS
Middle and High School

CONTENT AREAS
Visual Arts
English Language Arts

TIME
Two class periods

STUDENT OBJECTIVES
- Students will define the term ekphrasis.
- Students will read and analyze poems inspired by art.
- Students will discuss the methods poets use to write about art.
- Students will utilize imagery to compose poetry about a work of art.

STANDARDS AND BENCHMARKS
English Language Arts State Goals 1B, 1C, 2A, 2B, 3A, 3B, 3C

LEARNING STYLES
Visual/Spatial
Interpersonal
Intrapersonal
Verbal/Linguistic

MATERIALS
Poem Analysis Activity
Homework Practice
Ekphrastic Poem Assignment
Ekphrastic Poem Rubric

VOCABULARY
Imagery
Ekphrasis
Perspective

ASSESSMENT
Ekphrastic Poem Assignment

ACTIVITIES
Anticipatory Set
- As a Bell Ringer or Do First activity, put the following on the board or overhead:
  - The Roman poet Horace once wrote in Ars Poetica: "ut pictura poesis"—"as is painting, so is poetry. Write 2-3 sentences about what you think Horace meant by this. Consider the similarities between poetry and visual arts such as painting.
- After students have had a few moments to write, ask individuals to share their responses with the class.
- Transition from this opening activity to the lesson plan by using a version of the script below:
  - Poets and painters sometimes turn to one another for inspiration. Painters and illustrators have often been inspired by literature. Between 1760 and 1900 there existed
around 2,300 paintings based on Shakespeare's plays alone. Thousands of other works of literature have inspired the work of artists past and present. But it doesn't just go one way. Writers also turn to artists for inspiration so today we are going to examine some examples of poetry and music inspired by famous works of art before we try our hand at writing our own art-inspired poetry.

Lesson:
Define (or review) the following terms:
- **Ekphrasis**: writing inspired by art
- **Imagery**: descriptive language that appeals to the senses (or visual images in art)
- **Perspective**: (in literature) the point of view from which a story is told; (in art) the technique used to represent a 3-D object on a 2-D surface (like paper) so that it appears realistic
- Distribute the Poem Analysis Activity to students and using the Gradual Release model (see resource section) guide students through interpreting the poems. For this first poem, you should lead the students through the analysis on an overhead as they follow along and mark up their papers. Move to the second phase of gradual release halfway through the poem and have students give more input into the poem's interpretation and answering the questions.
- After working through the first poem as a class, put students in pairs or small groups to analyze the second poem on their own as you move about the room to make clarifications and offer assistance.
- Debrief as a class and correct any misunderstandings before distributing the Homework Practice for students to complete independently. Read through the directions together before the end of class if time. Remind students that it is important for them to complete the homework in order to be prepared for the next phase of the activity the following class period.
- Display the final slide from the PowerPoint and read the quote aloud. Ask students to Think-Pair-Share (see Resource Section) to discuss what they think this quote means.

Day 2:
- Go over and collect the Homework Practice assignment.
- Ask students to identify some of the different approaches a poet can take when writing using art as inspiration. Write these on the board. Some ideas: writing about the scene being depicted in the artwork, writing from the perspective of a person or object shown in the artwork, speaking to or about the artist or subject of the painting, etc.
- Tell students that they will be choosing a work of art to use as inspiration writing their own ekphrastic poem.

Debrief/Assessment:
- Distribute the Ekphrastic Poem Assignment and read through the directions as a class. You should also distribute copies of the Ekphrastic Poem Grading Rubric for students to use as guide for their writing.
- You may wish to allocate class time for students to complete their poems or assign it for homework. Either way, be sure you save student entries for submitting into the Student Voices Contest!

RESOURCES:

What Is Gradual Release?
The Gradual Release of Learning Responsibility is an instruction model in which the responsibility for task completion shifts gradually from the teacher to the student, through guided practice of comprehension lessons.

A general format for gradual release:
1. teacher modeling or demonstrating for whole class
2. whole class work with student input
3. small group work with teacher moving around room to help, correct and reteach when necessary
4. independent work without assistance

Some teachers choose to explain this process to students using this simple and memorable tool:


Suggestions for Extension Activities:

1. Coordinate with an art class to create art and poetry companion pieces on the topic of gun violence and turn in all entries to the Student Voices Contest.
2. Have students perform their finished poems for the class and have the class guess which piece of art they used as inspiration.
3. Bind all of the poems into a booklet for all students to take home and share with their families.
4. Have students travel to other classrooms to share their poem and encourage other students to write poems or create art about gun violence.
Ut Pictura Poesis: Poem Analysis Activity

Directions: As you read the companion poems for each work of art, respond to the following questions in the designated space:

- **Question 1:** Is the poem simply a literal description of what the work of art looks like or does the poet make conclusions about what the painting means?
- **Question 2:** Why does the poet focus on some features of the painting and ignore other aspects of the picture?
- **Question 3:** Do you agree with the meaning the poet "reads" in the painting, or do you see the painting differently?

You will be graded on your analysis of the poems in relation to responding to the questions above and the following vocabulary terms:

- **Ekphrasis:** writing inspired by art
- **Imagery:** descriptive language that appeals to the senses (or visual images in art)
- **Perspective:** (in literature) the point of view from which a story is told; (in art) the technique used to represent a 3-D object on a 2-D surface (like paper) so that it appears realistic

As you read the poem, highlight or underline any examples of imagery you encounter. For words or phrases that reveal the perspective of the poem, use a circle. We will complete the first poem together as a class.
The Street
Stephen Dobyns

Across the street, the carpenter carries a golden board across one shoulder, much as he bears the burdens of his life. Dressed in white, his only weakness is temptation. Now he builds another wall to screen him.

The little girl pursues her bad red ball, hits it once with her blue racket, hits it once again. She must teach it the rules balls must follow and it turns her quite wild to see how it leers at her, then winks.

The oriental couple wants always to dance like this: swirling across a crowded street, while he grips her waist and she slides to one knee and music rises from cobblestones--some days Ravel, some days Bizet.

The departing postulant is singing to herself. She has seen the world's salvation asleep in a cradle, hanging in a tree. The girl's song makes the sunlight, makes the breeze that rocks the cradle.

The baker's had half a thought. Now he stands like a pillar awaiting another. He sees white flour falling like snow, covering people who first try to walk, then crawl, then become rounded shapes: so many loaves of bread.

The baby carried off by his heartless mother is very old and for years has starred in silent films. He tries to explain he was accidentally exchanged for a baby on a bus, but he can find no words as once more he is borne home to his awful bath.

First the visionary workman conjures a great hall, then he puts himself on the stage, explaining, explaining: where the sun goes at night, where flies go in winter, while attentive crowds of dogs and cats listen in quiet heaps.

Unaware of one another, these nine people circle around each other on a narrow city street. Each concentrates so intently on the few steps before him, that not one can see his neighbor turning in exactly different,

yet exactly similar circles around them: identical lives begun alone, spent alone, ending alone--as separate as points of light in a night sky, as separate as stars and all that immense black space between them.
Not my Best Side
U. A. Fanthorpe

I
Not my best side, I'm afraid.
The artist didn't give me a chance to
Pose properly, and as you can see,
Poor chap, he had this obsession with
Triangles, so he left off two of my
Feet. I didn't comment at the time
(What, after all, are two feet
To a monster?) but afterwards
I was sorry for the bad publicity.
Why, I said to myself, should my conqueror
Be so ostentatiously beardless, and ride
A horse with a deformed neck and square
Hoofs?
Why should my victim be so
Unattractive as to be inedible,
And why should she have me literally
On a string? I don't mind dying
Ritually, since I always rise again,
But I should have liked a little more blood
To show they were taking me seriously.

II
It's hard for a girl to be sure if
She wants to be rescued. I mean, I quite
Took to the dragon. It's nice to be
Liked, if you know what I mean. He was
So nicely physical, with his claws
And lovely green skin, and that sexy tail,
And the way he looked at me,
He made me feel he was all ready to
Eat me. And any girl enjoys that.
So when this boy turned up, wearing
machinery,
On a really dangerous horse, to be honest
I didn't much fancy him. I mean,
What was he like underneath the hardware?
He might have acne, blackheads or even
Bad breath for all I could tell, but the dragon--
Well, you could see all his equipment
At a glance. Still, what could I do?
The dragon got himself beaten by the boy,
And a girl's got to think of her future.

III
I have diplomas in Dragon
Management and Virgin Reclamation.
My horse is the latest model, with
Automatic transmission and built-in
Obsolescence. My spear is custom-built,
And my prototype armour
Still on the secret list. You can't
Do better than me at the moment.
I'm qualified and equipped to the
Eyebrow. So why be difficult?
Don't you want to be killed and/or rescued
In the most contemporary way? Don't
You want to carry out the roles
That sociology and myth have designed for
you? Don't you realize that, by being choosy,
You are endangering job prospects
In the spear- and horse-building industries?
What, in any case, does it matter what
You want? You're in my way.

Question 1 Response:

Question 2 Response:

Question 3 Response:

Paulo Uccello, St. George and the Dragon
Oil on canvas, National Gallery, London
UT PICTURA POESIS HOMEWORK PRACTICE

For independent practice, you will be analyzing two poems (songs) inspired by the famous Starry Night painting by Vincent Van Gogh, which appears below. Complete this assignment for homework in preparation for writing your own art-inspired poetry next class period.

Van Gogh painted Starry Night while at an Insane Asylum in Saint-Remy, France in 1889.

Remember to answer the following questions and identify examples of imagery and perspective in the texts.

- **Question 1:** Is the poem simply a literal description of what the work of art looks like or does the poet make conclusions about what the painting means?
- **Question 2:** Why does the poet focus on some features of the painting and ignore other aspects of the picture?
- **Question 3:** Do you agree with the meaning the poet "reads" in the painting, or do you see the painting differently?
Starry Night (Feat Quincy Jones, Rashida Jones & Mac Mall)
Artist: 2Pac
Album: The Rose That Grew from Concrete

[Quincy Jones—Reading Poetry written by Tupac Shakur]
Starry night.. an unknown creation
Written by, and from the archives of Tupac Shakur
Dedicated to the memory of Vincent Van Gogh

A creative heart obsessed with satisfying
this dormant and uncaring society
You have given them the stars at night
and you have given them bountiful bouquets of sunflowers
but for you there's only contempt
Though you pour yourself into that frame and present it so proudly
this world could not accept your masterpieces, from the heart
So on that starry night, you gave to us and you took away from us
the one thing we never acknowledged, your life...

[CHORUS: Rashida]
Starry night, your life
You gave to us, and took away from us
Starry night, your life
You gave to us, and took away from us

[Mac Mall]
Uhh, uhh.. watch me live my art; writing words from my soul in blood
I speak the truth on everything I love
I'll probably sacrifice my life.. to send my message through mics
It's like a war drum calling soldiers at night
It's bigger than music, I spit it straight from the heart
So it's cold and dark and deep like a universe, but no don't start
It's for your entertainment but it's my life y'all
And I can't rewind, fast forward, or press pause
But when you give your all, it's like the fans demand more
And after the tour I sit alone like before
When your name is hot it's all love, the world is yours
But when you fall off, you get ignored

CHORUS

[Mac Mall]
You on the cover of the magazine, flossing on the TV screen
Toasting with your champagne, playing life like a game
Loaded in the limousine, love to hear the fans scream
Swimming with the sharks now, ain't no love - money king
People got there hands out but ain't nobody lending hands
Can you really blame them for trying to get what they can?
Late night, bright lights, lust and lies
And anything goes under the Hollywood sign
Well you might lose your soul and who knows what you’ll find
But go ahead man we all wanna shine...
But go ahead man we all wanna shine...

CHORUS

[Mac Mall]
There you have it...
Y'know, when I was younger I prayed, to get in this game
Y'know to hold dis microphone in my hand
I asked the man upstairs, to let me rock a crowd one day
Y'know let people out there feel the way I feel through my music
Like my homeboy Tupac did fo' sho'
And he gave that to me
But he didn't he didn't he didn't let me know
about all the shady Shit that's in, in between
you and your dream, y'know?
See it's more than the music, I spit it from the heart
So sometime it's cold n it's dark, but it's raw
And that's how I'ma bring it to you every time, y'know?

CHORUS (fades out)

Question 1 Response:

Question 2 Response:

Question 3 Response:
Vincent (Starry, Starry Night)

By Don McLean

Starry, starry night.
Paint your palette blue and grey,
Look out on a summer’s day,
With eyes that know the darkness in my soul.
Shadows on the hills,
Sketch the trees and the daffodils,
Catch the breeze and the winter chills,
In colors on the snowy linen land.

Now I understand what you tried to say to me,
How you suffered for your sanity,
How you tried to set them free.
They would not listen, they did not know how.
Perhaps they’ll listen now.

Starry, starry night.
Flaming flowers that brightly blaze,
Swirling clouds in violet haze,
Reflect in Vincent’s eyes of china blue.
Colors changing hue, morning field of amber grain,
Weathered faces lined in pain,
Are soothed beneath the artist’s loving hand.

Now I understand what you tried to say to me,
How you suffered for your sanity,
How you tried to set them free.

They would not listen, they did not know how.
Perhaps they’ll listen now.

For they could not love you,
But still your love was true.
And when no hope was left in sight
On that starry, starry night,
You took your life, as lovers often do.
But I could have told you, Vincent,
This world was never meant for one
As beautiful as you.

Starry, starry night.
Portraits hung in empty halls,
Frameless head on nameless walls,
With eyes that watch the world and can’t forget.
Like the strangers that you’ve met,
The ragged men in the ragged clothes,
The silver thorn of bloody rose,
Lie crushed and broken on the virgin snow.

Now I think I know what you tried to say to me,
How you suffered for your sanity,
How you tried to set them free.
They would not listen, they’re not listening still.
Perhaps they never will...

Question 1 Response:

Question 2 Response:

Question 3 Response:
Ekphrastic Poem Assignment

"Painting is poetry that is seen rather than felt, and poetry is painting that is felt rather than seen."

~Leonardo da Vinci

Artists and poets use their work to express their opinions on the issues and problems of the world. For your ekphrastic poem, you will be focusing on one major issue of today: gun violence.

Check out the artwork below and select one as inspiration for creating your poem. These pieces were created by student artists responding to the topic of gun violence for a contest called Student Voices. The poem you create will be submitted to this year’s contest so in addition to receiving a grade for this assignment, you will also have the chance to win a brand new computer!
Ekphrastic Poem Grading Rubric

As you write your poem, refer to this grading rubric. Your poem does not have to rhyme or follow a particular form of poetry. However, the final copy you submit for grading should be neat and mistake-free.

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<td>/10</td>
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<td>Content: It is obvious which art the poem is about</td>
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<td>Perspective: The writer used a recognizable point of view or voice</td>
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