Honor Moorman

# Backing into Ekphrasis: Reading and Writing Poetry about Visual Art

Teacher Honor Moorman explains an extended poetry lesson that connects art and poetry. Students perform published poems written in response or reaction to paintings as preparation for their visit to an art museum, where they emulate the professional poets in writing original poems about art. Sample poems show the effectiveness of this idea.

There is no picture and no poem unless you yourself enter it and fill it out.

—*Jacob Bronowski*

What do John Keats, W. H. Auden, Anne Sexton, and my ninth-grade students have in common? They have all written ekphrastic poetry. *Ekphrastic poetry,* or poetry inspired by visual art, has a well-established history dating back to Homer's description of the Shield of Achilles in *The Iliad.* Its popularity in the Romantic period was marked by Keats's quintessential "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Twentieth-century examples include Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" inspired by Pieter Breughel the Elder's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* and Sexton's "The Starry Night" inspired by Vincent Van Gogh's painting of the same name (DiYanni 587, 584; "Ecphrasis").

**The more I immersed myself in art and poetry, the more I valued their role in my life and the more important I felt it was to give students opportunities for personally meaningful experiences with poetic language and aesthetic images.**

However, I wasn't thinking of this literary tradition when I introduced the idea of writing poetry about art to my students. I didn't even discover the term *ekphrasis* until a few years later. My inspiration for this lesson simply came from my passion for art and poetry and my interest in how various art forms inspire one another. The assignment's popularity and the poems that students write have encouraged me to reuse and refine it.

## Poetry Inspired by Art

I can trace the idea for this lesson to a pivotal experience at the age of sixteen. I was lost in the Louvre when I turned a corner and found myself standing in front of the *Venus de Milo.* I was familiar with this famous statue by reputation, but when I saw her armless form with my own eyes, I suddenly felt overwhelmed by a sense of interconnectedness, a notion that I now shared something intimate with every person before and after me who had or would gaze upon this beautiful marble figure. Although I didn't realize it at the time, that feeling was the inspiration for an ekphrastic poem yet to be written.

When I introduced the idea of writing poetry about art to students twelve years later, I had just moved into a neighborhood within walking distance of a local art museum, and I had begun taking poetry-writing classes at a community literary arts center. The more I immersed myself in art and poetry, the more I valued their role in my life and the more important I felt it was to give students opportunities for personally meaningful experiences with poetic language and aesthetic images.

I had also become increasingly aware of the similarities between the visual and the verbal arts. William Blake said that poetry and art are "ways to converse with paradise" (Farrell 6). In the *Phaedrus,* Plato observes that when paintings and poems are

put together, they "seem to talk to you as if they were intelligent" (qtd. in Foster and Prevallet xv). Indeed, both poetry and art speak to our imaginations through the power of images. Georgia Heard calls language "the poet's paint" (65), and many other writers and artists have commented on the parallels between these two modes of expression.

I decided to take students on a field trip to the museum where I hoped they would find inspiration for a poetry-writing activity. But I didn't want them to interpret this assignment too literally or feel as if they were simply being asked to give a concrete description of a work of art. I realized that they would be more likely to think divergently about the assignment if they could read poems about art that represented the wide range of approaches that were possible. In *Wordplaygrounds: Reading, Writing, and Performing Poetry in the English Classroom,* John S. O'Connor recommends providing a variety of poetic formats for students to consider because "[o]ffering diverse models suggests a greater number of possibilities to students . . . and eliminates the notion that there is somehow a 'right answer,' a model to be followed exactly" (5).

I was delighted to discover several excellent resources. The first was a Web site entitled "The Poet Speaks of Art." This site, created by Harry Rusche for his Introduction to Poetry class at Emory University, includes forty-five examples of ekphrastic poetry along with their corresponding paintings. Another resource was *Heart to Heart: New Poems Inspired by Twentieth-Century American Art* edited by Jan Greenberg, a collection of forty-four poems and the works of art that inspired them. In addition, Robert DiYanni's *Literature: Reading Fiction, Poetry, Drama, and the Essay* and *Literature for Composition: Essays, Fiction, Poetry, and Drama* edited by Sylvan Barnet et al. each contain twelve poems inspired by paintings.

With so many poems about art to choose from, I selected those that were most accessible and appropriate for ninth graders. Since I was planning to have students work in pairs and my largest class had twenty-eight students, I chose fourteen poems and located images of the various paintings that had inspired them (see fig. 1). I typed and printed the poems (two copies of each poem per class period) and created a slideshow of the images. Then I wrote questions designed to guide the students in analyzing their poems.

## Ekphrastic Examples

I decided that the most efficient way to expose students to a wide variety of ekphrastic poetry would be to have pairs focus on one poem and then share their poems in a collective performance. I also wanted to help them develop confidence reading poetry aloud as a step toward sharing their poetry with their peers later. And I agree with Fredric Lown and Judith W. Steinbergh, who write, "Poetry is the music of our language and can be appreciated more fully when it is both heard and read" (xi).

On the day of the lesson, I asked students to pair up with a partner of their choice. This provided a level of comfort that helped students feel more secure to engage in the risk-taking I would be asking them to do in the activity. I explained that at the end of the ninety-minute class period they would be creating a poetry performance by reading aloud poems that were inspired by works of art, but first each pair of students would become "experts" on a given poem. I would show them the paintings that inspired their poems, and for the performance they would read the poems aloud using the paintings as visual aids.

Next, I handed out the poetry-analysis guidelines (see fig. 2). The ten steps on the "Analyzing a Poem Written about a Work of Art" handout helped guide the students through a close reading of their poems. While the students worked together in pairs, I was able to monitor and support their work individually or in small groups. I also encouraged them to discuss ideas with their partners as they read through the poem several times, looked up unfamiliar words, annotated, summarized, and sketched what they imagined the artwork would look like.

When I projected the paintings, the students were proud that they could immediately identify their paintings. Studying the images gave the students more insight into their poems. Timothy Cage and Lawrence Rosenfield note similar results in their analysis of students' reactions to ekphrastic poetry: "When the relationships between the poems and paintings are acknowledged, students' emotional and intellectual engagement with the texts is extended to new dimensions; the poem encompasses

**FIGURE 1.** Poems Inspired by Paintings

| Poem | Painting | Approach |
|---|---|---|
| "The Street," Stephen Dobyns | *The Street,* Balthus | Describing the scene itself |
| "The Poppy of Georgia O'Keeffe," Janine Pommy Vega | *Poppy,* Georgia O'Keeffe | Relating the image in the painting to something else |
| "The Great Figure," William Carlos Williams | *Figure Five in Gold,* Charles Henry Demuth | Expressing an awareness of him- or herself observing the painting |
| "The Corn Harvest," William Carlos Williams | *The Harvesters,* Pieter Brueghel | Describing how the subject is organized or presented by the artist |
| "Paul Delvaux: The Village of the Mermaids," Lisel Mueller | *The Village of the Mermaids,* Paul Delvaux | Trying to figure out what the painting is about |
| "Edward Hopper and the House by the Railroad," Edward Hirsch | *House by the Railroad,* Edward Hopper | Exploring the relationship between the artist and the subject of the painting |
| "Van Gogh's Bed," Jane Flanders | *Vincent's Bed in Arles,* Vincent van Gogh | Assuming the reader's familiarity with the image |
| "Before the Mirror," John Updike | *Girl Before a Mirror,* Pablo Picasso | Discussing the history of the painting |
| "Girls on the Bridge," Derek Mahon | *Girls on the Jetty,* Edvard Munch | Imagining a story behind the scene depicted in the painting |
| "American Gothic," John Stone | *American Gothic,* Grant Wood | Imagining what was happening while the portrait sitters posed for the painting |
| "Red Hills and Bones," Laura Kasischke | *Red Hills and Bones,* Georgia O'Keeffe | Speaking to the artist |
| "Peasant Wedding," William Carlos Williams | *The Wedding Banquet,* Pieter Brueghel | Speaking to the subject of the painting |
| "Mourning Picture," Adrienne Rich | *Mourning Picture,* Edwin Romanzo Elmer | Speaking as the voice of a character from the painting |
| "It's Me!" David Harrison | *Marilyn Diptych,* Andy Warhol | Speaking as the voice of multiple characters from the painting |

The pairings of poems and paintings are taken from Barnet et al.; Greenberg; and Rusche's Web site, "The Poet Speaks of Art." The approach column is my original work.

more and there is more to respond to simply because another art form is integrated into the literary text" (qtd. in Milner and Milner 162–63).

When the students presented their poems, I wanted to emphasize that each poet had taken a different approach to the idea of writing about a painting. My point was to help students realize that they would have a variety of approaches to choose from when they wrote a poem about a work of art at the museum. I acted as an emcee, giving a brief introduction to each poem and drawing attention to the approach each poet had taken in writing about a work of art (see fig. 1). Note: In a ninety-minute class period, we were able to prepare and perform on the same day. With a shorter class period, students might need to practice one day and present the next.

## The Museum as Muse

After reading and sharing examples of ekphrastic poetry, the students were ready to write their own. Our field trip to the local art museum began with a docent-led tour to give the students an overview of the works on display. Then, students chose one work of art to focus on for their creative writing

**FIGURE 2.** Analyzing a Poem Written about a Work of Art

1. Read your poem slowly and carefully all the way through without stopping. Write some words or phrases below to capture what you think this poem might be about. What questions do you have about this poem?
2. Read the poem again—aloud this time. What did you notice or discover on the second reading?
3. Now read the poem with your pen or pencil in hand. Annotate as you read: underline, highlight, make notes in the margins, use symbols, and so forth.
4. Identify at least two words in the poem that you need to check for meaning or pronunciation. Look them up in the dictionary. List the words and their definitions below.
5. On the right-hand side of your poem handout, paraphrase the poem, stanza by stanza.
6. Imagine what the painting described in the poem might look like. Sketch your ideas on the back of this sheet.
7. Write a one-sentence summary of the essence of your poem.
8. Prepare to read your poem to the class. Pay attention to sentence structure and punctuation, as well as line breaks, stanza breaks, and the layout of the words on the page. Decide how you will share the reading with your partner. Practice reading aloud with clarity and expression.
9. When you are ready to perform, watch the slideshow of art images and identify the painting that inspired your poem.
10. Perform your poem for the class. Have fun and remember to be a good audience member!

assignment (see fig. 3). Like the models we studied in class, the students' response poems represented a variety of approaches to ekphrasis. For example, Abby and Pamela were both inspired by Claude Monet's *Nympheas (Water Lilies).* Abby's poem speaks to the artist in a spectator's voice:

**Nympheas**

Mr. Monet,
I wish to fall lightly
into the world of serene bliss
you created.

The lilies sing to me a brilliant tune
as their luminous colors burst
from the murky water.

Deep under the surface of your lilac
lily flowers, a mystery of aqua blue secrets
awaits you. I long to drift in
and disappear.

I wish to be a lily flower
who rests there night and day.
To bask in the sun and
sleep in the dark, and
just float there to stay.

Forever and always with the Nympheas.

Pamela's poem adopts the voice of the water lilies themselves:

**Water Lilies**

Hey you,
The one with the beret.
Are we as you expect?
Are we delicate?
Do we dance and sway to your taste?
Are we your next masterpiece?
Do our murky waters reflect anything?
Do our colors entrance you?
Do we make you happy?
Will we fulfill your dream?
Can we, simple water lilies, inspire such
a great man like you?
Do we leave an impression?

Ryan captured his encounter with a sculpture in the courtyard, Barbara Hepworth's *Cantate Domino:*

**Cantate Domino by Barbara Hepworth**

A rush of peace and serenity . . .
turning my tired legs
I see beauty galore
staring me down.

As I sit, it challenges me.
Minutes draw by as I face
its growing weeds.

The cold turns me away
as I know I must.
My time ends, but
the steel lives on.

After the field trip, students could revise their poems before sharing them with their peers. Most students were eager to share, and they enjoyed listening to each other's poems and guessing which work of art had inspired them. As an extension of our experiences, I asked the students to participate in a small-group discussion about the similarities between the visual and verbal arts. The lists they brainstormed looked like the chart from Karen Eichler's lesson, "Creative Communication Frames: Discovering Similarities between Writing and Art" (see fig. 4).

**Class discussion about the correspondence between art and poetry gave us an enriched vocabulary for discussing reading and writing for the rest of the year.**

Ryan studying Barbara Hepworth's sculpture. Photograph by Honor Moorman. Sculpture © Bowness, Hepworth Estate.

Class discussion about the correspondence between art and poetry gave us an enriched vocabulary for discussing reading and writing for the rest of the year. Like Mary Bellucci Buckelew, who tried a similar lesson with her students, I found that "[o]ur foray into the world of art provided us with a clear language with which to talk about our reading and writing, allowing students to make important and deep connections regarding the different mediums, demonstrating their ability to 'read' efferently and aesthetically" (51).

## The Power of Ekphrastic Poetry

This lesson appealed to the students' multiple intelligences and diverse learning styles and gave them opportunities to engage in higher-order thinking through analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. In the pre–field trip lesson, they practiced comprehension strategies such as questioning, rereading, annotation, word study, visualizing, summarizing, and reading with fluency. At the museum, they engaged in close reading, analysis, interpretation, and descriptive as well as imaginative writing.

Writing and the visual arts are ways of engaging with the world, ways of knowing. In the words of Mary Ehrenworth, "When we ask children to write through their engagement with the visual arts, we ask them both to make sense of what they see and to make meaning on the page" (7). Calling students' attention to the work of an artist seemed to put them in tune with the intentionality of the creative process.

I also found that introducing ekphrastic poetry to students helped them become more observant in their reading and writing and in their study of visual images. In *Bring Life into Learning: Create a Lasting Legacy,* Donald H. Graves reflects on the nature of "artful thinking," the fact that "painters, composers, writers, and scientists have much in common. They feast on details" (58). Recognizing that students need to "see what they are reading" to "incorporate visual details in their own writing" (Holbrook 39, 40), I often encourage students to sketch the images evoked by a literary text or draw their ideas before they begin writing. Studying the specific links between visual and verbal expression found in ekphrastic poetry gave students an even deeper understanding of the power of details to create an image in the mind.

**FIGURE 3.** Museum Field Trip: Poetry-Writing Assignment

Now that you have toured the museum, please choose ONE work of art that you would like to write about and spend the next 30–40 minutes focusing on that work of art.

1. Record the following information about the work of art you have chosen:

   Title _____ Date _____

   Artist _____ Medium _____

2. Write a sentence or two about why you chose this work of art, how it makes you feel, and/or what it makes you think about.

3. Next, write a *detailed* description of the work of art. Be *specific* enough so that someone else could clearly imagine the work of art in his or her mind after reading your description. Be sure to include words that indicate size, shape, color, light/shade, objects, figures, positions, and so on.

4. Finally, write a poem in response to your work of art. If you need inspiration, look back at your answers above. Also, remember there are many different ways to go about this.

   Here are some of the approaches that were used in the poems from our class activity:

   > Write about the scene or subject being depicted in the artwork.
   > Relate the work of art to something else it makes you think of.
   > Write about the experience of looking at the art.
   > Describe how the artwork is organized or presented.
   > Speculate about how or why the artist created this work.
   > Imagine a story behind what you see presented in the work of art.
   > Imagine what was happening while the artist was creating this work.
   > Speak to the artist or the subject(s) of the painting, using your own voice.
   > Write in the voice of the artist.
   > Write in the voice of a person or object depicted in the artwork.

The ekphrastic poetry lesson has become a staple of my teaching repertoire, and I have since discovered that other teachers and students are engaged in similar lessons. In "Art in the Literature Class," Elizabeth B. Cussler describes taking her American literature students to the museum where they wrote poems, letters, interior monologues, or short narratives in response to specific works of their choice (28). Traci Gardner's "A Picture's Worth a Thousand Words: From Image to Detailed Narrative" guides students through the writing of a detailed narrative in response to a visual image that tells a story. Joseph I. Tsujimoto suggests having students write a "visual response poem" in which they respond to paintings and photographs displayed around the classroom (62–63). Brenda Loreman's "Responding to Paintings with Poetry" also recommends setting up an art gallery in the classroom. Once students have selected the piece that inspires them, Loreman offers thought-provoking questions for students to answer before drafting their poems.

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**FIGURE 4.** Similarities between Visual and Verbal Arts (Eichler, instruction 5)

| | |
|---|---|
| Author's Word Choice | Artist's Brushstrokes, Color, and Medium |
| Author's Point of View | Artist's Perspective |
| Author's Purpose | Artist's Purpose |
| Author's Main Idea | Artist's Subject |
| Author's Setting—Time, Place | Artist's Period, Time, Place |

Gerrit W. Bleeker and Barbara Bleeker and Marilyn J. Hollman describe using art reproductions in books to introduce ekphrastic poetry to students. Bleeker and Bleeker share Jan Greenberg's *Heart to Heart: New Poems Inspired by Twentieth-Century*

*American Art* and Belinda Rochelle's *Words with Wings: A Treasury of African-American Poetry and Art* with middle school students and then have them create their own works of art. Each student writes an accompanying poem from one of the four response categories identified by Greenberg: "stories," "voices," "impressions," or "expressions" (45–46). Hollman and Albert B. Somers recommend introducing ekphrastic poetry by first showing students the artwork—asking them to describe, analyze, interpret, and evaluate it—and then inviting them to compare their responses to the poet's response (25–26; 172). This might be especially interesting when looking at more than one poem written about the same work of art. For example, there are at least six poems inspired by Pieter Brueghel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus:*

> Dannie Abse, "Brueghel in Naples"
>
> W. H. Auden, "Musée des Beaux Arts"
>
> Edward Field, "Icarus"
>
> Michael Hamburger, "Lines on Brueghel's *Icarus*"
>
> Joseph Langland, "Fall of Icarus: Brueghel"
>
> William Carlos Williams, "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" (Milner and Milner 162)

Whether you take students to the museum, create an art gallery in your classroom, or invite students to visit one of the many virtual museums available on the Internet, an essential component of this experience is giving students a choice about which work of art they will respond to and which approach they will take. Hollman explains:

> The art itself accounts for a lot. First, the writer's choices are generally powerful "stuff," and *they* choose it . . . . In these paintings, sculptures, or photographs, they encounter a piece of the world already shaped. Order has been imposed, details chosen; the undifferentiated landscapes of the world in which we see and feel have been particularized, composed, if you will. This frees the writer to confront the feeling, to enter the landscape, to concentrate on language to respond to or describe that world. The art . . . seem[s] to model a way of seeing, or organizing, experience so it can break out again in the poems. (27; italics in original)

When students are free to choose the work of art that speaks to them, they will more easily find the words to express that resonance. In the words of Gabriele Lusser Rico, "In making connections, students begin to re-*cognize*—to know again—that their own active imaginations enrich their learning, give breadth to their writing and thinking, and let them experience that *they* are the creators of context" (22; italics in original).

A few months after I introduced students to this lesson idea, I went to an exhibition of works from the Museum of Modern Art. Edging through the crowd to get a look at *The Starry Night,* I flashed back to the epiphany I had experienced when I first encountered the *Venus de Milo.* That night I, like countless others—including Anne Sexton, Robert Fagles, and Don McLean (DiYanni 584–85; Somers 171)—wrote a poem inspired by my experience with Van Gogh's famous painting:

**Staring at the Night**

Perhaps
he too
once stood
just here
head tilted
eyes licking
the orangey
crescent moon
exploding stars
flaming cypress
swirling silver sky

his imagination
suspended
in the silent city
beneath quaking
black mountains
secret recesses
of a tender
growing night

Van Gogh
whispering
to his soul
with furious
brushstrokes
as I cannot
with this
trickle

of words
he will
never
read

—*Honor Moorman*

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