

The Art of the Poem in Poems of Art: Using Visuals and Close Readings to Aid Creative Writing

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Overview

The goal of this unit is to create original poetry inspired by visual art and familiar (and not so familiar) objects, at the discretion of the teacher. The essential approach to poetry (called “ekphrasis”) uses a variety of guided brainstorming exercises in both large and small group settings, followed by more and more independent practice with a variety of subject material, and culminates in an independently directed publishable art and poetry project. There is potential for short or long trips outside the classroom as well, depending upon access to museums, parks, or simply neighborhoods with objects of interest to the students.

I have taught an elective poetry class to high school students for 4 years, a poetry enrichment class for the last hour of school, and additional classes in our night school at University City High School in West Philadelphia. All of these students have been at least 14 years of age and old enough to have read a variety of levels of typical high school poetry (Robert Frost, Maya Angelou, Langston Hughes, William Shakespeare, etc.), but have written fairly little of it themselves. Many have had Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and were Special Education students; several have been English Language Learners (ELLs); still more read and wrote below their grade proficiency level; and the majority not accustomed to using their imaginations to the degree this type of exercise demands. Therefore, to teach this unit is to become thoroughly engaged with visual art and by extension the class work and writing that will come from it, as a means to increasing students’ access to poetry in order to increase their literacy levels, as well as have fun using our imaginations.

The unit will take from three 45-minute class periods at the bare minimum (1 to prewrite, 1 to write the first draft of the poem, and 1 period for rereading, revising, and rewriting--I can teach the primary activity in one 90 minute period) to an entire quarter’s worth of work (before it gets tired--you be the judge.) In this series of activities, teachers begin

with only an image--preferably a dramatic one (I choose a handgun), but it could be a football, a brush, a dollar bill, a sandwich, a hammer, a door, anything really, so long as it has some kind of symbolic value, with the more associations students will have with it the better. We once even chose an image of our school.

No matter what type of students you have, there is essentially great fun in engaging with the visual and in trying to find the words to describe the experience; writing poetry out of images can be as basic as description of what one sees to elaborating upon an extended metaphor inspired by the image and exploring one's deepest personal connections with the associations that may arise. Students should feel safe to go a little crazy, and capture that wonderful weirdness in writing. In writer and educator Kenneth Koch's words, "The trouble with a child's not being 'crazy' is that he will instead be conventional." (from "Opening the Door - How to Excite Young People About Poetry" edited by Dorothea Lasky, Dominic Luxford, and Jesse Nathan, Copyright © 2013 The Poetry Foundation). In a description by the authors of the same book, "in the 'maelstrom of creation' that was frequently Koch's classes - 'I let the children make a good deal of noise. Children do when they are excited, and writing poetry is exciting' (ibid, p.11). In my own words, I couldn't hope for anything more in my classes than excitement about reading, writing, speaking about, and listening to poetry.

Rationale

In my experience I've found that the most fun and rewarding work a teacher can do with any student is in opening her imagination. A student enjoying learning is more receptive to stretching her own boundaries with regard to what she is capable of and becomes willing to try new activities that might take her out of everyday experience into rich, new, fertile ground, territory that makes her ripe for teachable moments, great insight, and transcendent to profound realizations. These epiphanies connect the dots between the separate disciplines of all the arts, so that she re-envision herself as capable of much more than she had previously imagined, both in process and product, academically and personally.

At the beginning of the year, my class can be full of reluctant readers, fearful writers, and regrettably, students who are hesitant to think independently. Once they realize that in many of the activities we do in poetry there is essentially no wrong answer, and that participation is fun and entertaining to themselves and their classmates, they ultimately bring momentum into the more difficult aspects of academic work, like perseverance and self-discipline. If 50% of school is a social experience and the other 50% is academic "work", school can become more like "Edutainment", a happy blend of entertainment and learning, but an important step is for students to leave being spectators behind and become the performers of the work in class (sometimes without even realizing they are doing "work"). As I once heard in an education special on National Public Radio years ago, "Kids have to think that you care before they care what you think." This adage becomes a crucial philosophy in any classroom when it comes to asking students to work on poetry, which can leave them feeling vulnerable and anchorless at times, plus has not historically been allowed to be "fun" and can periodically be infiltrated by immediate

administrative needs to remediate low literacy rates and improve learners' standardized test scores as soon as possible. This is NOT to say that the fun a kid can have playing with ekphrastic poems (poems with "illuminative liveliness" <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ekphrasis>, or "a literary description of or commentary on a visual work of art" <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ekphrasis>) will not increase their literacy as much as their personal love of learning. On the contrary, I believe that all children beginning with the visual, and combined with a conversation about it, whether through criticism, poetry, or creative prose, will improve their literacy through these activities, in large part due to the way a teacher can tease their thinking into larger works with literary merit, at any age.

Background

Ekphrastic writing is nothing new, according to the Maier Museum at Randolph College, and is described as "The creation of original poetry and prose in response to works of visual art . . . a writing exercise originating in ancient Greece where schoolboys were assigned composition exercises about painting and architecture." (<http://maiermuseum.org/ekphrastic/>). In fact, in a workshop I attended with 2012-13 Montgomery County Poet Laureate Liz Chang at the Michener Museum in Doylestown, PA, we were asked first to explore the museum for art and everyday objects, about which Ms. Chang asked us to write silently for 20 minutes. Some of the workshop participants shared out their drafts voluntarily, but others saved them for multiple revisions based on the work we revisited in a second go around the exhibit, which included on that day various locally produced paintings and sculpture by Bucks County, PA, artists and a special multimedia and multi-genre exhibit titled and exploring various perspectives on *Beauty*.

Ekphrastic poems are now understood to explore more than only works of art—typically paintings, drawings, photographs, or statues. Modern ekphrastic poems have generally shrugged off antiquity's obsession with elaborate description, and instead have tried to interpret, inhabit, confront, and speak to their subjects (<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5918#sthash.bZMASMpi.dpuf>). In its varied expression, according to poetry teacher Al Filreis at the University of Pennsylvania's Kelly Writer's House, ekphrastic writing can include "poems written 'about' paintings, poems written in parallel to paintings, poems written 'after' the painterly style, poems making language out of visuals, poems 'translating' a single object in a painting, etc." (in seminar, 2013) In my experiences studying under Al Filreis, modern and contemporary American poetry in particular can be most inspiringly explored through close readings, defined as reading word for word what's actually on the page, in the poem, without the need for biographical or even historical information on the poet, the poem, or the history of the time in which it was written. Writing, however, can be an extension of poetry appreciation and that particular deepening of understanding that comes with a more focused experience of Modernist poems by Emily Dickinson to Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams to Allen Ginsberg, Ezra Pound and H.D. to Claude McKay, Gwendolyn Brooks, John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, Jack Kerouac, Robert Creeley, Amiri Baraka, and Etheridge Knight, not necessarily in that order. These are all

famous, compelling, and intriguing poets, who write dynamic and engaging poetry, but their names or work may not be at all familiar to the average high school student. In my experience, this does not matter one bit.

So long as one is not attempting to tell high school students certain poets are to be respected because they are famous, canonized, historically significant, etc., a teacher will be able to use the very same poets and poems in meaningful ways with his/her kids. At University City HS in Philadelphia, where I taught for seven years, four of which including an elective devoted exclusively to poetry, students could not have cared less if someone was famous until after they had appreciated the poem for its own inherent values. This reality corresponds well with the philosophy of close readings, whose insistence on looking to what is actually in the poem, and an absence of reliance upon the personal narrative and details of a poet's biography allows for direct and undistracted inspection of the specific words, and an interpretation of the poem's meaning regardless of some basis in the intention of an individual poet. This approach relinquishes students (and teachers!) from cumbersome research into the biography, and instead opens the door for actually reading poems together as a close-knit cadre of readers, on equal footing with the material. Additionally, the close readings allowed us as a class to explore the poems as primary sources, and left more time for our own interactions with the poems, including our own explorations of the writing process inspired by poems we felt later were worth the acclaim they had received historically and in the canon.

Objectives

According to the Common Core Writing Standards (grades 9-10/11-12) students are to:

- Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.
- Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology's capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically.
- Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.
 - Apply the understanding that usage is a matter of convention, can change over time, and is sometimes contested.
 - Resolve issues of complex or contested usage, consulting references (e.g., *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*, *Garner's Modern American Usage*) as needed.
- Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.
 - Observe hyphenation conventions.
 - Spell correctly.

- Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.
- Vary syntax for effect, consulting references (e.g., Tufte's *Artful Sentences*) for guidance as needed; apply an understanding of syntax to the study of complex texts when reading.

In alignment with these expectations, another goal that cannot be as easily quantified is that students will also be able to have *fun* with writing. Too often we are focused on the “practicality” of student activities and how they can be assessed, and too infrequently on the objective for life: enjoyment. An objective in my classroom (that is sometimes difficult for more grade-point-average-focused students) is that the essence of poetry, that may involve mental calorie burning, multiple drafts, difficult decision making, and really hard, hard, soul-searching *work*, is that I would rather they learn to assess their own work: Have they spent their time valuably, are they satisfied with the effort they put in, as well as the results from doing so? Is there still space for improvement in this particular poem? Is it possible to do that work now, or will the poem have to sit on the shelf for a while? Are there errors in wording, grammar, and flow that can be corrected? Does the poem ring true on an intuitive level, as well as when it is read by a peer or an anonymous, objective reader? Why was the poem written? If the answer begins and ends with “It was an assignment” than certainly, the objective in my class has been missed. Students should instead be striving for as much an internal gratification as that they might receive in applause or acclaim from friends, peers, teachers, publishers, and paying customers. If this seems abstract, it is. I had a painting teacher in Philadelphia named Neil Kosh who said to me that I would never get every color, every shape, every gesture perfect, and that I should lose my attachments to doing so; he said instead that a finished painting was “a lot of mistakes that looked good together”. A finished ekphrastic poem will never be the actual image it seeks to express some connection to, but maybe it can stand to give us the *experience* of that object or idea. For instance, let’s look at this poem from my student Erica Williams: (see if you can guess the object)

*Hurting and killing makes me feel good.
 I like to be held but only in one way.
 I am not a toy so children should not play with me,
 But they can't seem to keep their hands off of me
 No, I don't have a heart, in my chest there are bullets.
 I Overdose on bullets
 To see blood makes me proud, that's a pat on the back,
 Means I'm doing my job right.
 I Foam at the mouth with smoke when I go off
 And When I go off on you it's gonna make me feel so good.*

This poem is a successful example because it personifies the object, a gun, with panache and personality; it alludes to the object without blatantly coming out and naming it, therefore leaving us as readers and opportunity to engage with the poem through our own imaginations. Furthermore, Erica (the author) delivers actions the object can do, with

imaginative imagery (“I like to be held”, “play with me”, “I overdose on bullets”, blood makes me proud”, “blood...that’s a pat on the back”, “I foam at the mouth with smoke”, and “it’s gonna make me feel so good”). Phrasing filled with action can be a key to making the poem come alive. Ultimately, we feel as though the gun is speaking directly to us as readers. Even the diction (= word choice) of “gonna” gives the weapon personality and attitude.

Strategies

I began the 2012-13 school year of our Poetry elective class of twenty-seven 10th, 11th, and 12th graders with ekphrastic writing. My new students walked into the room to find all the desks focused forward to view a large unknown automotive vehicle on a ghetto street somewhere in the world (pick your own shell of a car from Google images if you want to try it yourself with your own students) projected on the wall of my classroom life-size with the help of a projector and a laptop. Students found a 3x5 inch note card on each desk and were asked to write what in my school was called a “3-2-1”: 3 details about what they saw, 2 questions they had about the picture, and 1 story about what they thought was behind the image. This strategy allowed kids to explore the image while immediately trying to formulate words with which to capture their responses to the image. I believe students in a classroom of any age group can be as intrigued with an image as mine were, but it is up to the teacher to determine which image would best spark the imaginations of his or her particular population, as well as what the teacher feels comfortable putting out there; I believe in an activity of this kind there can be no wrong answers, and beyond any original insight into the image, it builds community and camaraderie. It was simple, too, and provided a foundation of interest for the year to come. We rounded out this segment of the class period with me asking how they thought the image, and the activity, connected with analyzing poetry; the answer, we found, was in the metaphor of the stripped vehicle: the car has been taken apart to reveal its core, all its parts removed for the value of the reader until a naked shell remains. We followed with a reading of Billy Collins famous poem “Introduction to Poetry”, including the uproarious excerpted description of poetry analysis,

*...all they want to do is
tie the poem to a chair with rope,
and torture a confession out of it.
They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.*
(<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/176056>)

The poem is rich in description as well as instructive value, but most of all a not so subtle blend of irony and humor. To keep it concrete, I asked students to identify on the page I’d passed out to them three of the lines that indicate the way the author wants us to analyze a poem. I compared the poem to stripping down the car in the image we’d discussed. Alternatively, and depending upon a teacher’s assessment of the climate in the room, another activity could be a Think/Pair/Share in order to introduce a potential classroom routine into the mix. The topic I determined was based on the idea of “I Notice/I

Wonder”: What is one thing the student noticed (stood out to her/him)? What is one thing he/she is wondering about in the poem? The Think/Pair/Share allows for students to release a little of the tension from direct instruction and whole group work in place of some social reporting one-to-one. Their job is to think about the “I Notice/I Wonder” assignment, then pick partners with whom to discuss their responses, and then meet with him/her to share ideas, and report back to the class what their partners shared with them. I like to call on 1-3 pairs, but if it’s going well, I recommend the teacher roll with it and see where the “teachable moment” can go. If opening room for talk lasts too long or gets rowdy, it’s best to cut the conversations short and move to the next action (rapidly). In 2012 I returned to an image of a dramatically refurbished car, choosing to describe the action in a comparison with the MTV show “Pimp My Ride”, in which cars are enhanced to dramatic, even thrilling levels of style. After a brief review of the activities and routines of the class period (remember, it had been the first class meeting of the year), as an exit ticket I had them write what poetry was to *them*: was there a metaphor or description they could put into “25 words or fewer”? Classrooms will most likely return to writing and focus their attention on finishing the short writing assignment as quickly as possible in order to get the work in and leave for their next class. I try to add extra credit for those who write exactly 25 words, instead of fewer.

Classroom Activities/Lesson Plans

Day 1:

Objective = Students will be able to brainstorm a list of responses to a painting by Jackson Pollock in order to read fluently, appreciate the complexity, and analyze a poem by John Yau based on form and content

Standards = (CC.1.4.11–12.K) Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms of the discipline in which they are writing (CC.1.4.11-12.W) Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the strengths and limitations of each source in terms of the task, purpose, and audience; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and overreliance on any one source and following a standard format for citation.

Materials = image of a Jackson Pollack painting (just about any one), and handouts of John Yau’s “830 Fireplace Road”:
(<http://poetry.about.com/od/poemsbytitle/l/blyaupollock.htm>)

Warmup/Do Now = Project on the board a picture of a painting by Jackson Pollock (see: <http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/pollock/pollock.number-8.jpg> on Google images, for example). Distribute a 3x5 note card or piece of looseleaf paper to students and have them write down what they see. Is there a tree, vines, a person, a face, the constellations, a frog in a blender? Have students share one image from their own list and tally them on the board for students to add to their independent lists as the images are collected by the teacher on the board. As the class brainstorms ideas as a group, ask

“What is art?” to generate discussion and lead them towards a broader analysis of art in general, beyond this specific painting, and furthermore, beyond the confines of visual art back towards poetry. This will bring everyone to part 2 of the class: Direct Instruction. (One comment to expect will be “I could paint that!” Respond with inquiry such as “Why do you think *he* painted like this? Do you think it takes *any* skill? Why do children often paint this way? Do you think anyone painted like this before this painting was made in the 1950s? Why? Why not?”)

(Note: if teachers already have the cooperation of the class and have a pattern of classroom management, the class could do the warm-up in 2 stages, implementing a Think/Pair/Share activity before the whole group gets together in order to generate a conversation between pairs regarding the essential question: “Is it art? Why? Why not?”)

Direct Instruction = Project an image of Jackson Pollock painting his paintings (see: <http://www.themathhattan.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/jackson-pollock.jpg> for a photograph, or <http://static.guim.co.uk/sys-images/Observer/Columnist/Columnists/2012/2/21/1329825248467/Jackson-Pollock-007.jpg> for another photograph). Explain how “Jack the Dripper” as he was once called (http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/09/style/tmagazine/09turnpage.html?_r=0), was an artist in the 1940s-50s, and became famous for dripping paint directly on canvas laid on the floor, rather than using the more conventional strategy of painting upright with brush strokes and more representational imagery. Instead, Pollock was famous for eliminating direct images from his work, often eschewing traditional artist’s paint for old house paint and industrial cans instead of tubes, and often used sticks rather than brushes. His stated goal was to use paint as paint, or as Malcolm McCluren once said, “The medium is the message”; for Pollock, the painting medium was “itself”, not attempting to be something other than what it was (like a portrait of a tree, a person, or a landscape). Instead, it became more gestural, more emotional, and more abstract. Therefore, it was called “Abstract expressionism” by critics and art historians alike. This becomes more relevant to poetry in the next phase of the class: Guided Practice. (note: Depending upon the classroom climate, there is potential here to discuss the artist’s personal life--his alcoholism and self destructiveness, and his subsequent death by automobile accident, driving over 50 miles per hour into a wall with his mistress in the passenger seat.)

Guided Practice = Distribute to each student a copy of John Yau’s poem, and have one student read it for the class. It is somewhat of a tongue-twister, but requires little if no literacy to accomplish. I find it still works even if the reader gets through only $\frac{3}{4}$ of the entire poem; the students will get the point after that much, but ideally they will read the entire poem for the full effect, and the teacher can help to finish it off. Some questions to ask are: “Is this a poem?” Be prepared for comments similar to the essential question about Pollock’s painting: “I could have done that!” and be prepared to respond with questions including “Why do you think *he* wrote this?” and “Do you think it took any skill?” Furthermore, it is important to point out to students that he is representing the type of action painting Jackson Pollack performed, in fact he very nearly embodies the back and forth movement of the drips across the spread out canvas on the floor. Yau seems to criss cross the collection of phrases from Pollack’s written statement the way paint

crosses back and forth across the field of vision in the large, mural sized paintings Pollack created in his later years.

Independent Practice = Depending upon the class mood and the teacher's own scheduling, one could lead them into a writing exercise where students take a simple sentence/statement and rearrange it as many different ways as possible, while maintaining grammatical correctness as possible. This can be the next exercise through Independent practice, having students choose to write their own sentences about art and poetry writing (I used sentences kids had written about how and why they wrote poetry, and had them rearrange and rewrite these; alternatively, teachers of this exercise could deliver a writer's or artist's statement to students in order to facilitate a more rapid step towards the rearranging process. In any case, examples may include the following statement by Joan Mitchell, another abstract expressionist: "Abstract is not a style. I simply want to make a surface work. This is just a use of space and form: it's an ambivalence of forms and space." A sample of the rearrangement strategy might be:

"Not a style, abstract is. To make a surface, I simply want work. Of space, this is just a use, and form: it's, of forms and space, an ambivalence."

or

"Abstract is not a style, style, style. I simply want want, want to make a surface work, work, work. This is just a use of space and form and form and space and: an ambivalence of forms, space, forms, space, space, forms and space.")

Students should simply feel free and encouraged to play with the words, especially as it could lead next to a performance by Tracie Morris of Sam Cooke's song "Chain Gang", which can be another class period exercise.

ReCap/Review = Have 1-3 students share out their work from the independent exercise, highlighting the best qualities of the examples the students have written, and correcting them as necessary.

Exit Ticket = Ask students to do a 3-2-1: List 3 aspects of the class period work you enjoyed, 2 original ideas you got for your own poetry writing, 1 question you still have for the teacher to answer. You can have students write their responses to the Exit Ticket on a 3x5 note card and have students simply staple all pages together when they are done and it is time to collect their work. Teachers should study the exit tickets for homework in order to decide where to go next.

Day 2:

Objective = Students will be able to write a short poem that embodies the spirit of a person being memorialized; more than an ode or an elegy, it attempts to match form with content. Students can choose to memorialize a person living or dead, a person close to them or someone famous and history making.

Standards = (CC.1.4.11-12.K) Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms of the discipline in which they are writing.

Materials = Teachers will need a projector and access to the internet; a Smart Board is ideal. Also, students will need copies of or individual digital access to the poem by Gertrude Stein.

Do Now/Warmup = Display a painting by Picasso, preferably one from the cubist period (in the past, for this exercise I've used either "Guernica" (<http://www.caribousmom.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/guernicamural.jpg>) and "Weeping Woman with Handkerchief" (<http://livelearnloveleave.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/47.PabloPicasso-Weeping-Woman-with-Handkerchief-1937.jpg>) Note: You can take a walk through the "Guernica" painting for your own edification by watching the following YouTube video at (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nf3Q7gS_YSA) but it is important that students discover the painting's imaginative and experimental qualities through their own exploration process: What do they see? Try to tease it out of them if they are not readily seeing anything that's hidden in the painting. The purpose is to get the imagination going, more than to teach a mini-lesson in art history. (However, a skilled teacher could weave the historical/political aspects of the painting into the discussion). I tend to lead them if they are not leading themselves, but only a little at a time, so that they take the reins of the discovery more than leaving it to me to "explain" the painting to them. After all, I am always having new insight into these paintings anyway, so we are really on equal footing; I simply have seen the image before, so I do not have the freshness of seeing it for the first time. In my "reading" of the picture of the weeping woman I see 2 eyes, as if in walnut shells or boats, or a spoon. The eyes have big eyebrows, and even thicker eyelashes. The artist seems to have broken the woman's nose in half—at least there are two triangles, and there are tears (I count three from the eye at my left with at least one more on her cheek, and then one from her other eye on the right side of the painting.) She wears a hat, a red hat, with a blue flower of some type pinned to it, and her long hair is straight and a little purple with the blue and the yellow, passing by an ear ringed ear as another tear spills down her cheek. She seems to be holding a crumpled tissue to her nose or teeth, but her hand is broken into geometric shapes, like the rest of her face. Her brow seems furrowed, and her mouth is clenched tightly onto the tissue/napkin, as if she is in deep distress. I can't make out her body from the glimpse of it at the bottom of the image, but she wears black, as if in mourning at a funeral.

Direct Instruction = Students will read as a class a copy of the poem "If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso" by Gertrude Stein ([http://www.writing.upenn.edu/library/Stein-Gertrude If-I-Told-Him_1923.html](http://www.writing.upenn.edu/library/Stein-Gertrude>If-I-Told-Him_1923.html))

Guided Practice = In my class, we do a "close reading" of the poem. Close Readings, as described above, and now here, are word for word analyses of the factual meaning of each word or phrase in the poem. This may require even the best poetry teachers to burn a few extra calories, as it may take some demanding guidance to get through a poem of this

length, even while each line is relatively brief. I recommend this poem for big classes, though, because each word could be assigned to a single student, who could use a smart phone or simply memory and intuition to identify the meaning and significance of the word. Planning ahead, a teacher with English Language Learners, students with low reading levels, a young classroom age, or simply kids who need an anchor with which to be centered, ought to consider a word wall ahead of time, or at least prepare for some quick support by way of a kid given a dictionary. Even so, there really aren't too many words here to tackle (see my list, below). The challenge will be with "getting" the poem, as it is a Modernist work of art as much as paintings by Pablo Picasso. An example of a close reading of the poem could be as follows:

(1) Assign each student a line from the poem, telling each student he/she will be expected to explain the meaning and significance of that line (and that line only, unless some students are assigned more than one line)

(2) Teacher reads the entire poem all the way through from the beginning to the end (unless there is a select student who can read it fluently and sincerely) Every student should be assigned a line from the poem (some more than one); students may refer to the Merriam Webster dictionary online if they are not familiar with any word(s), and here the teacher can be quite clever, assigning more challenging lines to some gifted students and less vocabulary rich lines to those who might be less fluent

(3) Take turns progressing from one student to the next, having each explicate the meaning of the words in their assigned line, dissecting the poem line by line until there is no misunderstanding of the actual meanings to any words. Here a teacher can be the most gifted student in having prepared ahead of time: discerning any meanings in the phrases, as well as any deeper connections. For example, a terrific essay on "If I Told Him" by Gertrude Stein can be found here:

<http://www.thealsopreview.com/messages/33/593.html?1265252025>

Independent Practice = Having read the poem, and analyzed the poem as a group, students can then move forward towards writing their own poems, as if recreating the sway of ocean waves on a canvas, only through writing words which use repetition and mixed word-order to describe someone they know. The process can run more smoothly if students are able to begin with a quote from their subject, as well as aspects of him/her which can be worked into the poem as part of the "portrait". Alternatively, students can be given a portrait by another modern artist and tasked with describing the subject in slanted word descriptions (meaning that they would try to emulate the angles, or "slants" contrasting with traditional portraiture). Note a selection of portraits by Francis Bacon: (writing for this could be purposefully haunting or scary in some way)

https://www.google.com/search?q=francis+bacon+portraits+images&client=firefox-a&hs=oW9&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&tbn=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=Pf_zUbHBGs_A4APrvIC4BA&ved=0CC8QsAQ&biw=1173&bih=569

Here's one by painter Willem de Kooning: (you might have to use "sloppy" words, words sloppily, or some creative slurring)

http://24.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_lktyl5lqNw1qhxr9o1_500.jpg

Students could even explore the collage portraits by Harlem artist Romare Bearden:

<http://www.stuffthatsticks.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/romare-bearden-conjur-woman-262x300.jpg>

(or, my absolutely favorite image)

<http://www.dailyartfixx.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/romare-bearden-pittsburgh-memory-1964.jpg>

The point here is that students explore playing with language the way a painter plays with paint. Additionally, students take on a Modernist perspective on the idea of a portrait: that form is more important than content, and above all, to "Make It New" as the Modernist poet William Carlos Williams and others were famous for saying over and over again. Students should come out on the other side of this assignment having reinvented the way(s) they see another person, as well as having practiced some of the skills that allow them to articulate that new way of seeing.

ReCap/Review = In order to bring the class back together again as a group, the review of this lesson should consist of a kind of oral summative assessment: How did the form of the painting influence your writing? What steps did you take to imitate the image(s)? Why did this particular image inspire you to write?

Exit Ticket = An exit ticket here could be a gallery walk of the writing: have students put their writing up on a wall in the classroom for others to see and comment upon as they prepare to leave. Another possibility is to have students email the teacher their art and writing for publication and printing (I like to have students design posters of each piece on a Word document or GoogleDoc so that I can then print the finished products out from home; collectively, they usually make an impressive demonstration to students of the validity and communality of their work as a class).

Day 3:

Objective = Students will be able to create the equivalent of a "Ready-Made" poem, modeled after William Carlos Williams' poem known as "Red Wheelbarrow" and inspired by "Ready-Made" objects such as Marcel Duchamp's "Fountain"

Standards = (CC.1.4.11-12.U) Use technology, including the internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products in response to ongoing feedback, including new arguments and information.

Materials = Access to an Internet connection, computer and projector with screen or wall, and copies of the Red Wheelbarrow poem by William Carlos Williams

Do Now/Warmup = Have students read the red wheelbarrow poem by William Carlos Williams, found through Poets.org at <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15537>. This can be accomplished by projecting the poem for everyone to see, thus creating a paperless and more communal experience, or through paper handouts, allowing students to both read from and write on the poem simultaneously.

Direct Instruction = Teachers should read aloud the poem for the class, or alternatively play a recording of William Carlos Williams reading the poem himself (see a page of four of them here: <https://jacket2.org/commentary/four-recordings-william-carlos-williams-performing-red-wheelbarrow>). In listening to the reading, students should be asked to listen with three questions on their minds: (1) What is in the poem (2) What happens (or does not happen) in the poem, and (3) What form the poem takes. The form can be explained best by the description/definition relayed by The Poetry Foundation's biographical essay on him at <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/william-carlos-williams> where they quote an imagist moral of "swift, uncluttered, functional phrasing". Imagists, it can be taught, are concerned with what is actually there before the viewer, as opposed to our own personal feelings about the image. In other words, what are the facts as they can be discerned? This aligns closely with the Common Core expectation of seeing what is actually in the text, and how does the text represent itself, contrary to our own feelings about the subject of the text.

Guided Practice = In this phase of the class work, students should be guided in an exploratory analysis of the Ready Made sculpture by Marcel Duchamp, "Fountain". Here is a video from YouTube which allow students a 360 degree perspective on the art: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JIr-4oZTHD0&feature=youtu.be> . I like to ask "What makes it art?" to get the ball rolling, however the discussion should take off at that point. I am not really qualified as a poetry teacher to play the role of art historian, but a teacher could do much more background in Dadaism and modern art to be able to answer student questions with factual information, but the point of the exercise is to awaken students of any age to the possibilities in art, and then return to poetry as a means of communicating that experience verbally. It may be possible to let the discussion wander between class participants without much facilitation, however the kind of contributions I tend to make around this work of art include probing students to consider whether or not he made the art (in fact, he didn't even assign his own name to the "found object"). So, can Williams' poem about the Wheelbarrow be considered a "found poem", or a "Ready-Made" work of art? All he does is describe in plain terms what he sees, without embellishment and without any metaphor, simile, alliteration, hyperbole, etc., or any of the figurative language tricks of the poet's trade.

Independent Practice = Having set the stage for an investigation into Imagist Poetry, now is the time to write some: students in this activity phase can begin by selecting from sculptures which may seem simple but serve as “ready-made” works of design and which satisfy the imagist need for plainly seeing only what’s there. Other examples of sculpture by Marcel Duchamp out of the Philadelphia Museum of Art’s digital collection can be found here:

<http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/results.html?searchTxt=&bSuggest=1&searchNameID=15513&searchClassID=6&searchOrigin=&searchDeptID=&keySearch2=+Search+&accessionID=&page=1>.

Furthermore, just as William Carlos Williams was entranced by the simple and found image of chickens and a red wheelbarrow, and just as he saw that something overlooked could be looked at closely, that something of no significance could be made significant by a poet’s pen, students should also be looking for scenes of utter simplicity, the way a drawing or painting student looks for something simple to design a “still life” for a drawing or painting exercise. The only difference between this phase of work and the two earlier phases is that students are looking for their own still-lives, rather than having the teacher create one for them. The guiding principle of this writing assignment is that student writing should describe the facts of the scene as they see them, attempting to *avoid* any symbolic suggestions or even flowery details that would ordinarily play a role in a lot of poetry writing. As an extension for advanced students, teachers can direct eager seekers of further study towards Japanese Haiku, which in some ways are an early form of the Imagist poetry of William Carlos Williams, Hilda Doolittle (H.D.), T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and others. But that may be the subject of another unit, as Haiku are rich subjects in their own right. Essentially, in the words of “A Brief Guide to Modernism” by Poets.org, from the Academy of American Poets, “extreme concision and precise visualization, most purely embodied” the “doctrine of imagism” (<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5664>).

ReCap/Review = In reviewing the work of this exercise, teachers should return to the core lesson of taking a plain scene and to use the Modernist and in particular Imagist refrain to “Make It New!” For instance, if you can review 3 mottos of Modernism and think it would be beneficial to do so, require students in the Exit Ticket (next) to write the 3 most prominent messages of the movement: (1) being concise (2) recreating the imagery found in everyday objects and (3) making it new

Exit Ticket = As described just above, require students to identify three main tenets/mottos of Modernism, based on what was reviewed in the ReCap.

Annotated Bibliography/Resources

Picasso and Cubism:

- 1)<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/article/180564#article> (article mentioning Picasso and the art of the time by Jhumpa Lahiri)
- 2)<http://pablo-picasso.paintings.name/images/picasso-femme-en-pleurs.jpg> (cubist face)
- 3)http://2.bp.blogspot.com/_RbO4GcBEyuI/SwuBvvFW4zI/AAAAAAAAAG8/R45t4JwvIGY/s1600/Cubism+-+Pablo+Picasso+-+Guernica+-+1937.bmp (Guernica by Picasso)
- 4)<http://thedoctorjeckleburgreview.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/portrait-of-gertrude-stein.jpg> (Gertrude Stein portrait by Picasso)

Jackson Pollock and Abstract Expressionism:

- 1)<http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/pollock/pollock.number-8.jpg> (abstract painting close up-to be used as inspiration for discussion or writing)
- 2)<http://www.themathhattan.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/jackson-pollock.jpg> (photo of the artist-to be used as background information and insight into the artist)
- 3)<http://static.guim.co.uk/sys-images/Observer/Columnist/Columnists/2012/2/21/1329825248467/Jackson-Pollock-007.jpg> (photo of the artist-visual background information)
- 4)<http://www.artwallpapers.org/paintings/Jackson-Pollock-Arts/images/jackson%20pollock%20number%208%201949.jpg> (abstract action painting)

William Carlos Williams and Images:

<http://insearchoforder.wordpress.com/2009/08/10/w-h-auden-musee-des-beaux-arts-pieter-brueghel-the-elder-landscape-with-the-fall-of-icarus/>

Ekphrastic Poetry Resources:

- 1)<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5918>
- 2)<http://maiermuseum.org/ekphrastic/>
- 3)http://www.philamuseum.org/education/lesson_plans/27.html
- 4)<http://valerie6.myweb.uga.edu/ekphrasticpoetry.html>
- 5)<http://english.emory.edu/classes/paintings&poems/titlepage.html>
- 6)<http://eastwestpoetry.blogspot.com/2011/02/cezannes-ports-lestaque.html>