

EKPHRASIS: THE MEETING OF POETRY AND ART

Ekphrasis describes the process of examining one form of art through the use of another, the most common example being when a poem is set to music and becomes a song. However, ekphrasis can refer to any such combination of art forms. If an artist is inspired by a work of literature or poetry and creates a work of art to celebrate that literary work, the result is also a form of ekphrasis. In this lesson, students will work in the opposite direction and use their skills in poetry to examine and interpret works of art.



A Coming Storm, 1863, retouched and redated in 1880
Sanford Gifford, American
Oil on canvas
28 x 42 inches (71.1 x 106.7 cm)
125th Anniversary Acquisition. Gift of the McNeil Americana
Collection, 2004
2004-115-1

Curricular Areas

English – Language Arts

Grade Level

For grades 9–12

Common Core Academic Standards

- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.4](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.5](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.7](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.4](#)

Art Images Required

Click on the titles below to view high-resolution photographs on the Philadelphia Museum of Art website. Images that are available in the ARTstor Digital Library are indicated by an ID number or search phrase. Entering that number or phrase into the ARTstor search bar will direct you to the corresponding image in that database.

- [A Coming Storm](#), 1863, by Sanford Gifford
ARTstor search: 2004-115-1
- [Sunflowers](#), 1888 or 1889, by Vincent van Gogh
ARTstor search: 1963-116-19
- [A Huntsman and Dogs](#), 1891, by Winslow Homer
ARTstor search: E1924-3-8
- [At the Moulin Rouge: The Dance](#), 1890, by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec
ARTstor search: 1986-26-32

Lesson Process

1. Display and examine *A Coming Storm* by Sanford Gifford. The writer Herman Melville (author of *Moby Dick*) saw the painting at an exhibition in New York City just after Abraham Lincoln's death in April 1865. Impressed by the work's symbolism he wrote "The Coming Storm," a poem capturing the painting's tragic sense of foreboding. View Gifford's work as you read Melville's poem:

The Coming Storm, by Herman Melville

All feeling hearts must feel for him
Who felt this picture. Presage dim—
Dim inklings from the shadowy sphere
Fixed him and fascinated here.

A demon-cloud like the mountain one
Burst on a spirit as mild
As this urned lake, the home of shades.
But Shakespeare's pensive child

Never the lines had lightly scanned,
Steeped in fable, steeped in fate;
The Hamlet in his heart was 'ware,
Such hearts can antedate.

No utter surprise can come to him
Who reaches Shakespeare's core;
That which we seek and shun is there—
Man's final lore.

2. Discuss the aspects of Gifford's painting that served as inspiration for Melville. Note that his ekphrastic poem accomplishes two things—it describes and interprets the painting. Which lines in Melville's poem are descriptive? Which are interpretive?
3. Display and examine *Sunflowers* by Vincent van Gogh. Listen to the Audio Stop and read the Teacher Resources for this painting. Have each student describe the painting to a partner, then have the partner add things that were left out of the initial description. As a result, students should have a good sense of detail in this painting.
4. Create a poem that describes van Gogh's painting. The poem can follow a specific structure or can be completely without structure. The goal is to use poetic images to create a detailed description. For poem structure ideas, review the poetry section of the Museum's teaching resource, *Looking to Write, Writing to Look*.
5. Display and examine *A Huntsman and Dogs*. Read and discuss the Teacher Resources for this painting. Describe details of this painting, as you did earlier with *A Coming Storm* and *Sunflowers*. Respond as a class to the following questions: What emotions do you feel when you look at this painting? What emotions does the young man display? What evidence of the role of man in Nature do you see here? Does this evidence seem positive or negative to you?

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6. These questions (and others that may arise during your discussion) involve your interpretation of the painting. Unlike description, interpretation includes your reaction to what you see as well as your ideas of what the artist's intent may have been. Students should now organize their interpretive ideas and use them to create a poem about *A Huntsman and Dogs*.

Assessment

1. Select one of your two poems from the assignment and revise to create a "finished product," including poetic styles and techniques you have studied in class.
2. Research to find other examples of ekphrastic poetry. Select one example and present it to the class while you display the work of art that inspired it. (You can find many examples of ekphrastic poetry on Poets.org the Academy of American Poets website.

Enrichment

1. Display *At the Moulin Rouge: The Dance* by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and read the available Teacher Resources. As you did with the other works, discuss this painting with a partner, or if you prefer, explore it on your own. Create a poem that describes the painting and also interprets its mood and its creator's purpose.