

Poetry Lesson Plans: The Language of Poetry

Grades: 12 > College Level

Objective — The student will:

- demonstrate a higher level of thinking in writing a poem that delivers a message of wisdom and is metaphorical in meaning.
- gain a better understanding of metaphors and their use in poetry as well as the meaning and use of concrete and abstract words and imagery.

Hint: Students need to understand the meaning of the word "metaphor." Students should review the definitions of "concrete," "abstract," and "general" as applicable to writing usages. Students also need to review and understand the meaning of the word "epigram."

The Language of Poetry

Write a poem which satisfies all of the following criteria:

1. Pick **one** of the phrases below and write a poem in which:
 - a) the phrase you've picked is the poem's title
 - b) the phrase you've picked occurs at least once in the body of the poem.
2. The poem should not be end-rhymed, but it should observe the basic conventions of free-verse prosody.
3. The poem should be less than 30 lines in length.
4. In addition to using the phrase you've selected, the poem should try to coin at least one truly memorable epigrammatical (clever remark / witticism) statement. A statement which is:
 - a) rich in metaphorical meaning
 - b) has the ring" of wisdom yet is fresh, not hackneyed
 - c) is borderline *abstract* (a small amount of a generalization) yet has a *concrete* "feel" to it.

A good example of such a statement would be Stevens's line:

"The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream,"

or William Stafford's:

"We live in an occupied country, misunderstood."

5. Although the poem should be in the riddling, epigrammatical language of poetry, like the Stevens poem (see Example one below), it should have an air of authority; it should make a kind of sense yet not be easily paraphrased or interpreted. In other words, it should have poetic meaning.

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Phrases (Epigrammatical --clever remarks / witty) statements)

1. The long odds in the evening
2. The heart's rust
3. Cold bacon, cold eggs, cold potatoes
4. Mr. Joy (Mr. Fear, etc.)
5. The slow kiss the spider gives the fly
6. The way the sky would like to touch the snow
7. The thief who is also the locksmith
8. At Death's picnic (funeral, party, etc.)
9. At the starling's wild parties
10. In Death's library
11. What Death has for breakfast
12. The silent storm inside my arms
13. The patient ambushes of the shadows
14. The habits of the clouds (stones, grass, etc.)
15. The left-handed daydreams of the missing ski shoes, hat, etc.)
16. What the dead birds listen for
17. What the dust seems to be saying
18. The blameless life, complete in its white package
19. The heart's hot climate
20. The franchise of the night (the moon, autumn, etc.)
21. The concealed weapon in a smile
22. The secret that wears an old suit
23. What Death (or Time or Boredom, etc.) wears
24. The erratic weather reports of the heart
25. The metaphysics of cockroaches and kings
26. The moon's white shares we (I, you, etc.) own
27. Dragging the sea for your shadow
28. Bribing the river
29. On the right side of the sun
30. Why (how) the moon divorced the earth (the sun), (the ocean divorced the land, the sky divorced the ground, etc.

EXAMPLE 1

The Emperor of Ice-Cream

Call the roller of big cigars,
The muscular one, and bid him whip
In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.
Let the wench dawdle in such dress
As they are used to wear, and let the boys
Bring flowers in last month's newspapers.
Let be be finale of seem.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Take from the dresser of deal,
Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet
On which she embroidered fantails once
And spread it so as to cover her face.
If her horny feet protrude, they come
To show how cold she is, and dumb.
Let the lamp affix its beam.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

--Wallace Stevens

EXAMPLE 2

Middle Class Poem

In dreams, the news of the world
comes back, gets mixed up
with our parents and the moon.
We can't help but thrash.
Those with whom we sleep, never equally,
Roll away from us and sigh.

When we wake
the news of the world embraces us,
pulls back. Who let go first?--
a lover's question, the lover
who's most alone.
We purchase a little forgetfulness
at the mall. We block the entrance
to our hearts.

Come evening, the news of the world
is roaming the streets
while we bathe our children,
while we eat what's plentiful
and scarce. We know what we need
to keep out, what's always there--
painful to look at, bottomless.

--Stephen Dunn

EXAMPLE 3

Thinking for Berky

In the late night listening from bed
I have joined the ambulance or the patrol
screaming toward some drama, the kind of end
that Berky must have some day, if she isn't dead.

The wildest of all, her father and mother cruel,
farming out there beyond the old stone quarry
where high school lovers parked their lurching cars,
Berky learned to love in that dark school.

Early her face was turned away from home.
toward any hardworking place; but still her soul,
with terrible things to do, was alive, looking out
for the rescue that—surely, some day—would have to come.

Windiest nights, Berky, I have thought for you,
and no matter how lucky I've been I've touched wood.
There are things not solved in our town though tomorrow came:
there are things time passing can never make come true.

We live in an occupied country, misunderstood;
justice will take us millions of intricate moves.
Sirens will hunt down Berky, you survivors in your beds
listening through the night, so far and good.

--William Stafford