

Two Views of a Cadaver Room* by Sylvia Plath*Overview**

In this activity, your students will be inspired by artwork and will compose a poem that imitates Plath's format of a poem in two clearly marked sections. The first section will relate a story from the student poet's own perspective; the second part will describe a painting that is linked to that experience.

In the second section of her poem, Plath cites Brueghel's *The Triumph of Death*. Art as the stimulus for creative writing is known as *ekphrasis* and has a long tradition going back to Homer. Students may want to explore different art galleries websites at home and bring in one image to describe in detail, which then will be related back to their own personal experience.

Introduction

This poem has two clearly defined sections. In the first part, Sylvia Plath writes about her own experience of a visit to the dissecting room. The second section links the poet's experience there to Brueghel's *The Triumph of Death*, painted in 1562. Brueghel presents a gruesome, complex image of carnage, the painting is the embodiment of death and destruction. Even the trees are in ruins; they are reminiscent of the burnt-out trunks in John Nash's paintings of battlefields in the First World War.

Task

Your poem should imitate Plath's format of two clearly marked parts. The first section will relate the story from the poet's perspective (i.e. your own viewpoint); the second will describe a painting that is linked to that experience. Below is a short list of artworks; select one image to be described in detail; and then relate this back to your own personal experience.

The paintings should be discussed aloud so that ideas are verbalised. This can be done either as a class discussion or students can work in pairs.

- a) Choose a painting. Students can either do this themselves or you can supply small groups with specific paintings – which can be discussed in these groups.
- b) Make a simple inventory of what the painting contains. Note exactly what you see: character, colours, shapes, objects and composition.

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- c) Relate the painting to any social or historical facts that you know. Does it remind you of anything happening today?
- d) Now relate the painting to what you (or the subject of the picture) *feel* or *imagine*. Consider the mood and atmosphere of the painting; this tone should be reflected in your own finished poem.
- e) Are there any gestures or objects depicted in the painting that might have symbolic significance? You can use similar imagery, or create your own metaphors for your poem.

Mushrooms* by Sylvia Plath*Overview**

In this exercise students will write a polemical poem in syllabics, therefore simultaneously thinking about form and content. In particular they will begin to think about how shaping a thought using poetic techniques can lead to intensifying or complexifying their argument.

Introduction

Sylvia Plath's *Mushrooms* is famous as a feminist poem arguing for the gradual advancement of women's power, with a determined, almost militaristic progression. Plath was a very strong technician and the momentum of the poem is built on a structure of "syllabics" – counting syllables so that the same number is in every line and therefore creating unusual linebreaks.

Task

Ask the students to count the number of syllables in each line of Sylvia Plath's poem *Mushrooms*. What they will work out is that every line is made up of 5 syllables, creating some unusual line-breaks. Ask the students to think about these linebreaks and whether they work. Why has Plath chosen to use this form? Syllabics is a form frequently used by poets to achieve a sense of unease (as opposed to the reassuring regularity of other metres such as iambic pentameter).

Students should then select a pattern they wish to write. They should set this up before choosing their content, as this exercise will demonstrate the pressure that form can exert. The only stipulation is that their line lengths should be an odd number of syllables. They can copy Plath and always have the same number of syllables per line or can pattern their syllabic metre, eg. 5,7,9 – but the next stanza must replicate the pattern exactly. They should then write their pattern down the side of a lined sheet of paper eg.

5
7
9
7
5

Putting this piece of paper to one side, they should choose a topic they feel passionate about eg. the environment, justice, racism etc. They should write a prose piece, no more than one

Poetry & Performance **Teachers' Notes**

side of A4, giving an example of how the thing they disapprove of might affect someone and describing in detail a sample situation. They then should bring their pattern back and see if they can transfer their prose thought into very concentrated sentences, with line and stanza breaks determined by the pattern they have chosen. They can reduce or extend the number of stanzas but not change their pattern.

Compare the prose and poetic versions. What happened to the students' thoughts when they compressed them into a syllabic poem? Was it difficult to keep the fluidity of their sentences while counting syllables? Why did they choose that pattern of syllables and did it work?

Edge* by Sylvia Plath*Overview**

In this exercise students will think about how to make their descriptions as exact and inventive as possible by creating riddle poems which they will then read aloud to other students who have to guess what the subject is – the more accurate the description, the easier it will be to guess.

Introduction

Sylvia Plath's *Edge* is an 'ekphrastic' poem observing in fine detail a statue and famously describing the moon's "hood of bone" – an often copied phrase. It is one of the final poems she wrote before committing suicide and has a bleakness that means many critics read it biographically.

Task

Read *Edge* in class together very closely and in particular look at the way Plath describes the 'smile', the 'feet' and the way she characterises how the woman holds the children. How do the words she chooses convey emotion? Ask the students to each draw the statue as they think it's described and compare the drawings to see how similar / different they are.

Then ask the students to choose something in the classroom or school grounds and look at it as exactly as they can, first noting as many details as they can see in prose. Give them a time limit to do this. Coming back to their desks, then ask them to write a descriptive poem incorporating all the details they have noted. The poem's title will be the name of the thing they have observed.