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Understanding Poetry

Triggering Subjects vs. Actual Subjects

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Abstract:

This classroom discussion-oriented lesson, which takes between sixty to seventy minutes, involves close-reading of texts, use of evidence to convey an interpretation, and discussion of authorial purposes and techniques. Students use poet Richard Hugo's theory of poetry having both a "triggering subject" and an "actual subject" to analyze and respond to example poems selected by the teacher. The end goal is to engage in a discussion of how poets use observation and experience to take sometimes everyday moments and convert them into thoughtful, surprising, and moving commentaries. This lesson is well-suited to preparing students to read poetry more effectively and thoughtfully for the Laureate Project assessment (also available on the Digital Commons). It has also been used in creative writing classrooms for teaching poetry composition. This lesson is suitable for grades 9-12.

Standards:

RL.9-10.1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

RL.11-12.2. Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

RL.11-12.4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

RL.11-12.6. Analyze a case in which grasping a point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

SL.11-12.3. Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis, and tone used.

Procedure:

The class prior to this, assign your students the first chapter of Richard Hugo's book, *The Triggering Town: Lectures and Essays on Poetry and Writing* to read (.pdf copy of the first three chapters of the book is included with this lesson plan). The chapter, "Writing Off the Subject," introduces the idea of triggering and actual subjects in poetry, which can be more or less described as follows: just because a poem describes a flower doesn't mean that the poem is actually about that flower, or even about flowers generally. Poets often see and experience things that "trigger" the urge to create a poem, and lead to the revelation of an idea, image, a feeling that is different from that initial trigger. This revealed thing is the actual subject of the poem. Hugo describes this concept in much greater and more effective detail in this short chapter.

Prior to this class, the students should also have read a small collection of poems that embody this shift from a triggering to an actual subject. One such a list is included with this lesson plan. All the poems are selected from the anthology *Poetry 180*, edited by Billy Collins. You could also easily select your own array of poems, if you prefer.

After discussing and clarifying the principle of trigger vs. actual subject from the Hugo reading, show the students the Maxine Kumin poem, "The Excrement Poem" (included). Have them discuss the contrast between the medium (poetry, which is typically assumed to be exclusive to "beautiful" things) and its content (mucking out horse stables and a building a manure pile). See if they can identify where Kumin shifts the poem away from the triggering act of stable-mucking and into a consideration of the resilience and hopefulness of life. What novelty does this unconventional subject matter lend to what might otherwise feel like a typical subject? This whole process might take thirty minutes. If Kumin's poem does not appeal to you, Billy Collins' "Weighing the Dog" is an excellent and very explicit example of a poem moving from a triggering subject to an actual subject, too.

Once this is done, ask students to review the poem packet they were assigned to read and organize themselves into small groups (no more than four apiece) based on what they believe their "favorite" poem in the packet was. In these groups, ask the students to do the following:

- 1.) Identify what the triggering subject in the poem is.
- 2.) Identify what the "actual" subject is, whether it is a material thing or an abstract thing.
- 3.) Identify where the poet begins to shift the poem from the one to the other.
- 4.) Identify figurative language, imagery, and sound elements that contribute to the shift – and make notes explaining how.
- 5.) Finally, in the spirit of Helen Vendler and her theory that all poetry should provide pleasure, what's the pleasure of this poem, and how is that pleasure related to the movement from a triggering subject to an actual subject?

After about ten minutes of discussion, invite or call upon groups to share their analysis of the triggering/actual phenomenon and its importance to their chosen poem. Most of the poems in the packet will probably be represented by some group; those that are not may be discussed later or used for another purpose.

Modification for Creative Writing classes:

A follow-up lesson to this discussion that has proven useful in creative writing classrooms: if you have the freedom to have students move around the halls for a short period during class time, ask them to make a list of as many things as they can find that they think it would be “impossible” to write a poem about. Alternatively, you could bring an array of interesting or entirely mundane objects to class for your students to peruse. Once they have a list of objects or some in front of them, challenge them to think in terms of the object being only a trigger. What perhaps less than obvious concept could one “actually” write about, if one were to start with, say, a list of items currently waiting for their owners in the lost and found, or a well-chewed pencil, or a fire extinguisher behind a glass case? The key to this follow-up activity and discussion is to emphasize to your students that the most crucial skill a talented poet has is not some magical genius with language itself necessarily, but rather a willingness to really look at their world and think about it in surprising, associative ways.

Materials:

Students who have read the following: Chapter One, “Writing Off the Subject,” Richard Hugo’s *The Triggering Town*; selected poems from *Poetry 180*.

Copies of Maxine Kumin’s “The Excrement Poem,” or Billy Collins’ “Weighing the Dog.”