Visualizing Voice: En-visioning Poetry through Comic Books
Developed by John S. O'Connor*
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CCSS.ELA-Literacy RL.9-10.1, 9-10.4, 9-10.10, 11-12.1, 11-12.4, 11-12.7, 11-12.10

NCTE Standards: 1-6; 11-12

(Two Periods)

Overview

In this lesson, students will practice close reading by deciding points of emphasis within a poem. What narrative episodes or scenes occur in the poem? And what types of "moves" does the author make? (In other words, where does the language announce itself as different?) Since poets also make moves with language, which language is most surprising, most self-conscious (calls most attention to itself)? What are the conspicuous sonic patterns? Students will identify the most interesting, the most image-rich language and render their choices visually, creating a comic book of the poem, using graphic conventions such as frames, font, bold, and italics. Best of all, no special drawing skill is required! The key goal here is for students to make poetic inferences in an unthreatening way, since every representation is an interpretation.

Featured Resource

There are two options for drawing resources: students can, of course, hand draw their own frames and figures, but I've also found it useful to offer one of the many simple graphic tools available on line such as Script Generator: http://stripgenerator.com/strip/create/. On that website, check out a crude model based on the poem "Richard Cory" (http://stripgenerator.com/strip/817146/richard-cory/).

From Theory to Practice

This exercise invites students to perform like sophisticated literary analysts in a fun, concrete, and comfortable way. In so doing, students come to see reading as a performance. According to Jeff Wilhelm, in *You Gotta Be the Book* "pictures paired with words [help] less engaged readers

* John S. O'Connor teaches at New Trier High School and in the School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University. He is the author of Wordplaygrounds: Reading, Writing and Performing Poems in the English Classroom, and This Time It's Personal: Teaching Academic Writing through Creative Nonfiction. O'Connor's poems have appeared in places such as The Cortland Review, Rhino, and Poetry East.

to visualize the action of a story and to understand how words suggest various characters, settings, and activities" (160). In fact, Wilhelm argues that the most important reading skill is visualizing words, since "reading is seeing" (185).

Materials

Edwin Arlington Robinson's poem, "Richard Cory" – though *any* poem can be approached in this manner

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Identify language patterns within a poem.
- Use their voices as interpretive instruments, constructing and revealing meaning through the choices they make in performance.

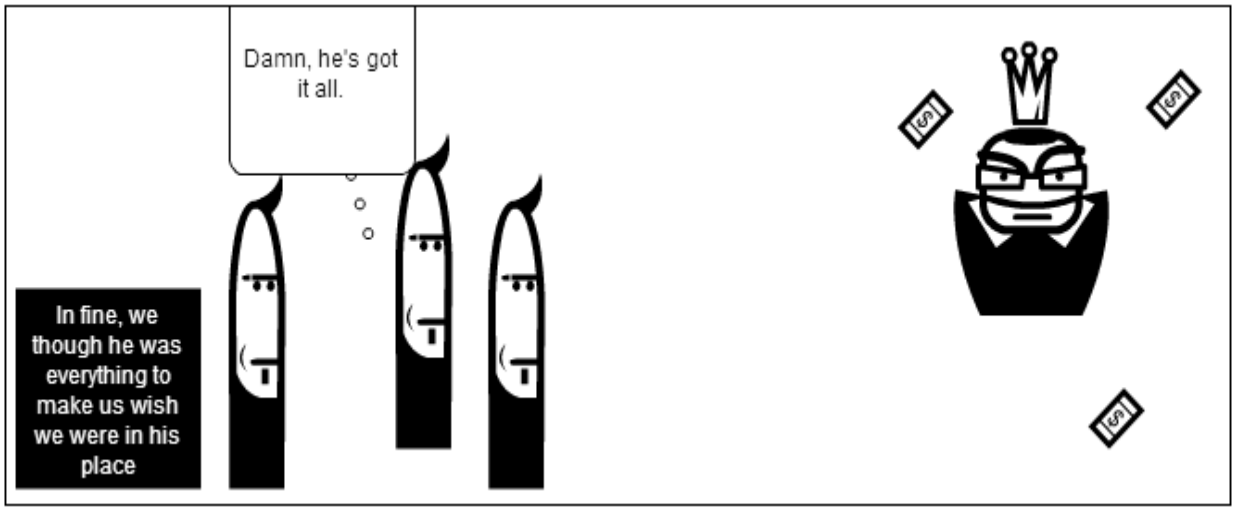
Session One

1. Pass out copies of Edwin Arlington Robinson's "Richard Cory," or any other poem you are studying.
2. Ask students to read the poem once silently. Then ask for a student volunteer to read the poem aloud.
3. Ask the class for questions about language or "plot."
4. Ask for a student to relate the "story" of the poem. In other words, what happens in it?
5. Divide the class into groups by sections of the poem. There are four stanzas and 16 lines, four per stanza. With a large class, you might, for example, have students work on a single line in pairs. With a small class, you might assign one or two lines per student, or have the class work in small groups with each group working on a separate stanza.
6. Within the class arrangement you have chosen, ask students to identify the key moments in the poem: the most interesting language, the most striking language, or any other way the poem "turns."

7. Assign homework (though this might be done in class): Pass out the "Poem Cartoon Instructions" sheet. Create an original cartoon based on the line or the stanza you have been assigned.

8. Have the class examine the model cartoon Richard Cory at the Script Generator website. Remind students that their cartoons may be hand drawn; they do *not* have to use web tools.

Richard Corey



Session Two

1. Ask students to share their cartoons with the class. If the cartoons were created online, you might project them from a computer for the whole class to see. If the cartoons were drawn by hand, you might ask students to take a picture with a cell phone and email the image to you so that you can broadcast the images to the class. Examine cartoons in the order in which the language appears in the poem.

2. Tell students that **every representation is an interpretation**. (This will be true of their spoken performances as well.)

3. As each group presents, ask the class to identify the choices in each cartoon. Ask group members to explain why they made these choices. (It is possible that some choices were made unintentionally or inadvertently.)

4. When the last group has finished, ask for a volunteer to read the entire poem aloud again, informed by the visual depictions of the cartoons.

As an **extra challenge** for an individual or the same small group, you might assign a new poem (I usually prefer poems that are one page maximum for this exercise), and ask those students to create a small book (a zine, perhaps) of that poem, telling the story of the poem—and the story of the language of that poem—in a maximum of five frames.

Poem Cartoon Instructions

Create an original cartoon based on the line or the stanza you have been assigned. Feel free to use a web tool such as Script Generator – or draw your own cartoon using stick figures. There is no expectation you will draw with skill (though if you are working with a partner, your group might take advantage of skilled artists within the group). You will not be judged on artistic merit!

Decide what to depict. This could be an entire action, an interesting phrase, or even a single image you find interesting. Choose the size and shape of the frame, and how your subject will appear in the frame. Will your subject fill the frame? What else might you draw in your frame to show scale and size? Will your subject be centered or moved off to one side?

Importantly, <u>you must include the phrase or the line from the poem within the frame. Also include a thought bubble somewhere in the frame that comments on the cartoon you have drawn.</u>

Further Reading

Wilhelm, Jeffrey, *You Gotta Be the Book* (2008). Teachers College, Columbia University Press.

Common Core State Standards

ELA-Literacy RL.9-10.1, 11-12.1: Cite Strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

ELA-Literacy RL.9-10.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

ELA-Literacy RL.9-10.10: By the end of grade 9, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 9-10 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

By the end of grade 10, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 9-10 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

By the end of grade 10, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 9-10 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

ELA-Literacy 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.

ELA-Literacy RL.11-12.7: Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text.

ELA-Literacy RL.11-12.10: By the end of grade 11, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 11-CCR text complexity band

proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 11-CCR text complexity band independently and proficiently.

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NCTE Standards

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.

5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.

11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).