

A Lesson in Close Reading a Poem using Art and Choice

Choosing a Frontispiece

A frontispiece is a drawing or illustration or art work facing the title page of a book or before a section of a larger work. Its purpose is to inform the reader either of a thematic possibility in the text that follows or of some other aspect of the work that should focus the reader's attention. Let's use the idea here to launch into a type of activity where the student can demonstrate some higher level thinking and work a bit outside the medium of written text. The idea is very basic and begins with a reading of the text. I suggest beginning with shorter works, especially poetry. The learner reads through the work twice (it's preferable if one of the readings is done aloud). This is followed by giving the learner three works of art to also closely read. What the learner is looking for is a connection or multiple connections between the art and the written text. As guide it's important to note that there is not a "correct" answer to mark as right or wrong. There is, however, a justified answer which the learner must be prepared to identify and verbalize either in spoken or written format. This justification is where the guide can identify the depth and breath of the learner's thinking as well as the depth and breadth of their understanding of the text. Note, that the learner is not called upon to generate a piece of art to match the work. This can be too difficult a task for many, but choosing among three is manageable. Practiced as a regular exercise the student will begin to grow stronger in the verbal description of their thinking.

Up the level of thinking by limiting the choices the learner has to abstract art forms. This way the student is forced to search deeper into the psyche rather than relying purely on the narrative elements present in a non-abstract art form.

Picking the Art Pieces*

There is no clear method to picking the three pieces of art from which the learner will choose. Obviously, those with some background may choose pieces that are informed by that personal knowledge. Sometimes it may do to choose works by a single artist, that way the style is consistent. At other times, it may do to choose simply with a variety of subjects and approaches in mind. You want to distance yourself somewhat but not completely from the subject matter of the writing. Remember, you are not trying to set up the learner to choose one particular piece over another, but rather to let them creatively select the piece that attracts them as having some sort of specific connection which they recognize. In doing this and in encouraging them to explain the thinking behind the choice, you will be opening the door to getting learners to build confidence in their own abilities to frame arguments and trust their own thinking.

*The exercise could even be extended to using photographs.



The Poem

The Red Wheelbarrow

- - by William Carlos Williams

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

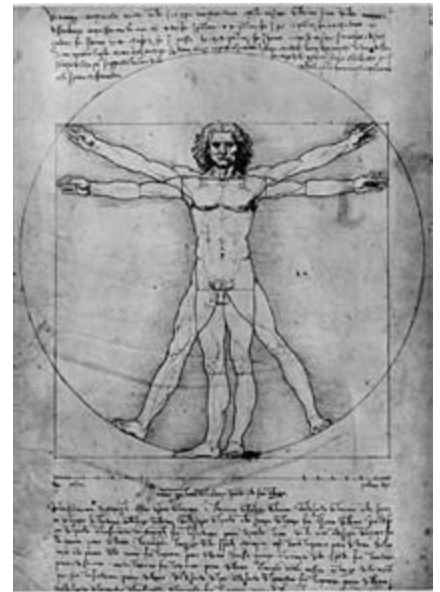
The Art Choices



*The Ancient of Days (William Blake
Vinci)*



Issac Newton (William Blake)



Vitruvian Man (Leonardo da



EXAMPLE of What this might look like:

The final learner decision could be easily presented in a two box chart using google docs.



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Justification: *The most important line to me in the poem was the first one, “so much depends”. There’s an urgency here that suggests a need to know the whys of things. Why is there a connection between and among all things that man encounters in this world. Of the three paintings, the one that has the old man, possibly a God, measuring and calculating something in the blackness beneath Him using a measuring tool, a compass seems the most appropriate. I like the notion that the god is taking the time in the heavens to make everything interconnected. There’s also a hint of a storm about him. His white hair is blowing like it’s in strong wind, and the clouds around him look like rain clouds. This to me connected well with the idea that there was a storm that hit the scene in the poem. The lines “glazed with rain / water” suggest to me that it rained before, but that all order is still present. Just like the god in the painting, rain and storms in life all are necessary to get to the purity of a peaceful moment among the chickens, again a symbol of life or procreation, and red wheelbarrow’s(industry) of life.*

