



Lesson Plan:

Allusions! &

"The Robots Are Coming"

Poem by Kyle Dargan / motionpoem by Julia Iverson

Lesson plan by Eric Doise

Time: at least 50 minutes

OBJECTIVES

In this lesson, students will:

1. learn about the purpose of allusion in a poem and its film adaptation
2. analyze the ways that those allusions are built and what effect they have in both media
3. apply the lessons learned to writing a draft of a poem

MATERIALS

- "The Robots Are Coming," the poem & the motionpoem: motionpoems.org/episode/the-robots-are-coming/
- Interviews with poet Kyle Dargan and filmmaker Julia Iverson: vimeo.com/235980636
- Pen/paper or other writing implements
- "The Robots Are Coming" handout

Allusions are a useful way of adding meaning without adding words. Allusion: In *A Poet's Glossary*, Edward Hirsch defines "allusion" as "a passing or indirect reference to something implied but not stated." These things tend to be people, characters, events, places, or works external to the work in which they appear and often rely on shared cultural knowledge. Because of this shared knowledge, allusions can be an economic means for a poet to communicate a great deal. For example, in "American Sonnet for my Past and Future Assassin," when Terrence Hayes mentions Charleston, he refers not just to the place but to the shooting of Walter Scott and the larger issue of the treatment of black men by police in America.

ACTIVITIES

1. The Poem (20-25 mins): Have students read the "The Robots Are Coming" and answer, either in small groups or in class discussion, the following questions:

- a. What allusions can you find?
- b. What meaning do those allusions add to your understanding of the poem?

Now have the students read the handout.

- c. What allusions did you miss?
- d. What meaning do those allusions add to your understanding of the poem?

2. The Film (20-25 mins): Watch the film adaptation of "The Robots Are Coming;" then watch the interview with Dargan and Iverson. Then ask students to answer the following questions:

- a. How does the film handle the allusions we looked at in the last exercise?
- b. How does the film add to or subtract from those allusions?
- c. Consider Iverson's comments about discovering extra layers of story in the poem (related to Gary, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Braddock) alongside Dargan's comments about the point of sympathy

Allusions! & “The Robots Are Coming” cont’d

at the end (right after those cities are mentioned). What does that tell you about the purpose and effect of allusion in both media?

3. Depending on class time, have students complete this exercise in class or at home:

WRITING PROMPT

Pick a place you want to know more about. It can be a city, building, or any other kind of place, but avoid anything bigger than a city. Research its past. Find a person, event, or era connected to that place that sticks out to you. Then, research that person, event, or era. Finally, write a poem telling the story of that part of the place’s history. Be sure to use allusions to people, ideas, etc. in order to tell the history, but make the references “covert, implied, or indirect.”

THE ROBOTS ARE COMING

with clear-cased woofers for heads,
no eyes. They see us as a bat sees
a mosquito—a fleshy echo,
a morsel of sound. You've heard
their intergalactic tour busses
purring at our stratosphere's curb.
They await counterintelligence
transmissions from our laptops
and our blue teeth, await word
of humanity's critical mass,
our ripening. How many times
have we dreamed it this way:

The Age of the Machines,¹
postindustrial terrors whose
tempered paws—five welded fingers
—wrench back our roofs,
siderophilic tongues seeking blood,
licking the crumbs of us from our beds.
O, great nation,² it won't be pretty.
What land will we now barter
for our lives? A treaty inked
in advance of the metal ones' footfall.
Give them **Gary**. Give them **Detroit**,
Pittsburgh, **Braddock**³—those forgotten
nurseries of girders and axels.
Tell the machines we honor their dead,
distant cousins. Tell them
we tendered those cities to repose
out of respect for welded steel's
bygone era. Tell them **Ford**
and **Carnegie**⁴ were **giant men, that war**

¹ The Machine Age ran from approximately 1880-1945 and saw rapid industrialization across many parts of the West. It was replaced by the Second Machine Age, or Digital Age, which can be identified by the increase of automation and digital technologies. Additionally, a familiar trope in science fiction is the sentience of such machines, as can be seen in such texts as *Terminator 3: The Rise of the Machines*.

² This can be read as a reference to the work of John O'Sullivan, who wrote in the 1839 essay "The Great Nation of Futurity" that the United States was destined to become the great nation because it had broken with the past. He is closely associated with Manifest Destiny.

³ Four cities whose fortunes have been tied to industrialization. Gary was founded in 1906 by US Steel, hit its economic and population peak in the 1950s, and saw a quick decline starting in the 1960s due to international competition in the steel industry. Detroit thrived and grew starting in the early 1900s with much of that growth spurred by automobile manufacturing. Beginning in the 1950s, though, the population and job opportunities began to decline due in part to overseas production and automation. Once known as The Steel City, Pittsburgh currently has no operating steelmills within its city limits. In the 1980s, the steel industry in the city collapsed, and the economy now relies heavily on sectors that include higher education, health care, and financial services. Braddock is a suburb of Pittsburgh whose economy depended largely on the steel industry for decades until after World War II.

glazed their palms with gold.⁵

Tell them we soft beings mourn
manufacture's death as our own.

⁴ Henry Ford (1863-1947) and Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919) were both prominent figures in the industrialization of America, the former connected to automobile production and mass production and the latter with railroads and the steel industry. Ford started various companies in Detroit. The Carnegie Steel Company built its first mill in Braddock and its headquarters in Pittsburgh.

⁵ The Ford Motor Company made war material for Germany and the Allies during different periods of the war even though Ford was a pacifist. Carnegie, along with many rich people of the day, paid someone to take his place in the Civil War but became known as a robber baron because he made money by providing some of the supplies the Union army needed.