



Lesson Plan:

## The Right Kind of Ambiguity & "The Blue Black Wet of Wood"

Poem by Carmen Gillespie / motionpoem by Malik Vitthal

Lesson plan by Eric Doise

**Time: at least 50 minutes**

### OBJECTIVES

In this lesson, students will:

1. consider the purpose and technique of ambiguity in poetry
2. analyze the ways that ambiguity is working in a poem and in a film adaptation of that poem
3. apply the lessons learned to writing a draft of a poem

### MATERIALS

- "The Blue Black Wet of Wood," the poem & the motionpoem: [motionpoems.org/episode/blue-black-wet-of-wood/](http://motionpoems.org/episode/blue-black-wet-of-wood/)
- Interview with poet Carmen Gillespie: [vimeo.com/235980907](https://vimeo.com/235980907)
- Pen/paper or other writing implements

Students are often told to embrace specificity and concrete terminology. Sometimes this results in an avoidance of ambiguous language (language which has two or more potential meanings). Certainly, too much ambiguity can result in a poem into which the reader can find no entry point. But, as demonstrated in Carmen Gillespie's "The Blue Black Wet of Wood," the economical, precise use of ambiguity can broaden, complicate, and/or universalize a poem, creating the very entry points that too much ambiguity often blocks.

### ACTIVITIES

**1. The Poem** (20-25 mins): Have students read "The Blue Black Wet of Wood" and answer, either in small groups or in class discussion, the following questions:

- a. Upon first read, what do you think this poem might be about?
- b. Find all of the words in this poem that either don't make immediate sense or make more than one kind of sense (e.g., How can rain be blue? What is the underside of an ash? Where is "obsidian away"?), and write the ambiguous word in one column. Write the nouns or verbs close to those ambiguous words in the next column. How often is an ambiguous word paired with a concrete one? What affect does this have?
- c. Now look up those ambiguous words and see how many meanings you can find. What additional meaning(s) are added to the poem as a whole when you add those definitions?

**2. The Interview** (10-15 mins): Have students watch the Motionpoems interview with Carmen Gillespie, then answer these questions:

- a. Now that you have more information from the poet, how has your interpretation of the poem changed?
- b. In light of our discussion of ambiguity, what do you think Gillespie means when she talks about writing as a way of "abstracting [her] feelings"?

## Ambiguity & "The Blue Black Wet of Wood" cont'd

3. **The Film** (20-25 mins): Watch the film adaptation of "The Blue Black Wet of Wood"
  - a. How does the added narration by Dr. Foots add new/additional meaning(s) to the poem?
  - b. Do any of your original definitions and interpretations apply to this film? If so, how?
4. Depending on class time, have students complete this exercise in class or at home:

### WRITING PROMPT

Choose a word that has at least 3-4 different meanings. (Instructors may make a handout with a list of such words if so desired.) Write down all the meanings you can think of. Consult a dictionary for help if necessary. Then, write a poem where you use each possible meaning of the word at least once. To level up, use the word so that multiple meanings can be read in just one use of the word.