

Apostrophe & “The Mother Warns the Tornado”

Poem by Catherine Pierce / motionpoem by Isaac Ravishankara

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Time: 50 minutes

According to Edward Hirsch’s *A Poet’s Glossary*, apostrophe originates in the Greek word that means “to turn away.” Hirsch writes, “the poet turns away from the audience to address a God or gods, the muse, a dead or absent person, a natural object, a thing, an imaginary quality or concept. One of the distinctive marks of poetry is that anything can be addressed.”

From Tennyson’s “Ring out, wild bells” to Catharine Pierce’s “Tornado, I want more,” apostrophe allows poets to contact the dead, conjure life from the inanimate, transport what’s absent, and communicate directly with abstract or natural phenomena. From a practical standpoint, apostrophe can help writers to see—and therefore write—from a fresh perspective, make communication more conversational (and therefore relatable for the reader). Note that apostrophe is a performance wherein, often, the speaker is creating a version of the addressed object—and often, the qualities given to the object are actually being used to describe the speaker him/herself.

OBJECTIVES

In this lesson, students will:

1. Identify the ways in which apostrophe functions in a poem for readers
2. Identify the ways in which apostrophe can function in a poem for writers
3. Identify the ways in which a film adaptation translates apostrophe into visual images
4. Write a draft of a poem that uses apostrophe

MATERIALS

- “The Mother Warns the Tornado” the poem and motionpoem: motionpoems.org/episode/mother-warns/
- Pen/paper or other writing implements
- Slips of paper with people, objects, ideas and phenomena for the writing activity below

ACTIVITIES

1. The Poem (20-25 mins): Have students read “The Mother Warns the Tornado.” Either in small groups or as a class, have students:

a. make a list of what you learn about the tornado when the speaker addresses the tornado. Now make a list of what you learn about the speaker when she addresses the tornado. Which list is longer? How are the lists similar? How are they different?

Then, as a class, rewrite the poem *without* apostrophe and have students answer, either in small groups or in class discussion, the following questions:

a. How does the poem change when you remove the apostrophe? As a reader, what do you miss when it’s gone?

b. Based on how the poem changes without apostrophe, what are some ways that apostrophe functions for readers in this poem? What does apostrophe allow Pierce to do that she couldn't do otherwise?

2. The Film (20-25 mins): Watch the film adaptation of "The Mother Warns the Tornado." Then show the students the questions below, give them a chance to read them, and have them watch the film again with the questions in mind. After they've watched the film again, have them answer the questions in small groups or in class discussion.

- a. What new images does the film give us that weren't in the poem? What is added to the story, the speaker, and the tornado by the film?
- b. We don't see the tornado until the very end of the film, but before that, the tornado is both addressed and felt. What images, sounds, and actions show you that the tornado exists? Make a list.
- c. Take that list, and now look at your list, from the poem exercise, of the speaker's qualities. In what ways is the tornado from the film like the speaker? In what ways is it different?

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

WRITING PROMPT

Without looking, choose a slip of paper from Set 1 and Set 2. The paper from Set 1 will have an absent person, inanimate object, abstract idea, or natural phenomenon. The paper from Set 2 will have a situation. Imagine that you're in that situation, and write a poem to the thing from Set 1 using what you've learned about apostrophe. Remember that you don't need to overtly describe the situation or thing—instead, imply it by referring to specific, sensory details or by stating what you will or won't do in relation to the thing you're addressing.

SET 1

The last book you read
An earthquake
An election
Your great great great grandfather
A clever crow
A geyser
Hatred
The tallest building in the world
The Arctic Ocean
Lady Gaga
The Internet
A traffic jam
Your phone
Thunder
Taco Bell
Your favorite shoes
A mountain
Time

SET 2

Trapped in an elevator
Seeing a movie that you hate
Protecting someone you love
Going on a first date
Taking a test
Going shopping
Begging for your own life
Standing up for yourself
Risking your life for someone else
Getting a dog
A job interview
Climbing the Eiffel Tower
Flying a plane
Flying a spaceship
Searching for UFOs
Falling in love
Trying to get away with a crime
Hiding from the police