

“Either Or”

& the Necessity for Image

Poem by Maxine Kumin / motionpoem by Adam Tow

Lesson plan by Athena Kildegaard

Time: at least 50 minutes

OBJECTIVES

In this lesson, students will:

1. Understand abstraction and image
2. Analyze the use of image to clarify abstraction in a poem.
3. Analyze the way abstraction and image are communicated in a film.

MATERIALS

- “Either Or” poem & motionpoem: motionpoems.org/episode/either-or/
- sticky notes and a white board or chalkboard

We know the world through our sensory experience of it: what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch. When a poem triggers a sensory experience in our imagination it is satisfying. Say the word “lemon,” and we immediately taste and smell the delightful sharpness, we see and touch the slightly rough rind. The word “lemon” conjures the concrete thing in the world. This is an image.

On the other hand, poetry also draws on abstractions—ideas, emotions, ways of being—such as truth, joy, stubbornness. We cannot see, with our mind's eye, an abstraction. We know what they are, but we cannot point to them. In poetry, writers help us to understand abstractions by comparing them to concrete things. “Happiness is a warm gun,” the Beatles sang; no, “happiness is a warm puppy,” wrote Charles Schultz, creator of The Peanuts comic strip.

Maxine Kumin's poem “Either Or” begins with an abstraction and zooms out immediately to the big picture: Earth in space. Then it zooms in just as quickly to a homey scene of a fire in a woodstove and a view out the window.

ACTIVITIES

1. Discussion (15 mins): Begin this lesson with a discussion of images and of abstractions. Make two lists on the board: one of images tied to the classroom or space where you are (desk, clock, window, pencil, etc.). Then make a list of abstractions connected with the classroom (learning, fairness, distraction, etc.). Ask: how could you use any of the words or phrases in the first list in a line or sentence that might communicate the abstractions of the second—without naming the abstraction?

2. The Poem (15 mins): Read aloud the poem “Either Or” and, in class discussion or in small groups, consider the following questions:

- a. What is the abstraction Kumin is writing about? What are some clichés about death? What would be some obvious images to compare death to? Instead, Kumin uses the words of Socrates to explain death: that it is “a migration of the soul.” What does Kumin compare this migration of the soul to?
- b. What senses are triggered in the last two stanzas of the poem?
- c. What else “migrates” in the poem?
- d. Kumin is very particular in her word choice. Look up the word *amnion*. Why does she use that word in the beginning of the poem? Why does she put the woodstove in the *backroom*? Why not some other room in the house?

"Either Or" & Image cont'd

2. The Film (15 mins): After the discussion of the poem, show the film adaptation of "Either Or." Then discuss the following questions in small groups. Have one person in each group report back to the whole class.

- a. How does the film handle the abstract idea of death?
- b. How does the film depict the images of the poem—both the images in the poem before the quote and after?
- c. What does the film leave out and what does it add to the poem? Why do you think that is? How would the film be different if it depicted all the images literally—that is, if it showed earth in space and images of the Milky Way and if it showed the ash tree and the squirrels and nuthatch?
- d. How does the film communicate the idea of death?

Writing Prompt

[In class, have students list several abstractions on the board. Give the students post-it notes on which they write a phrase or sentence describing an image to which each abstraction could be compared.]

Either in class or as homework:

Write a poem of 10-15 lines that introduces an abstraction in the title or first line and that uses an extended image to capture the idea of the abstraction. Zoom in to the very particular, as Kumin does; or, if you want, begin with the very particular and then zoom out.