Exploring Literary Elements with Visual Art
A 30 – 60 minute classroom activity
Grades 9 – 12, but adaptable for others
By Dawn Nelson, Forest Grove High School

Lesson Overview: Developing connections between literary artworks and visual artworks deepens students’ understanding of both and encourages both critical and creative thinking. What follows are suggested pairings and discussion prompts organized by literary elements.

Character and Narrator: Untitled: Portrait of a Couple and “My Last Duchess” by Robert Browning
https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43768/my-last-duchess

What can we infer about the couple in the portrait from the details that we pick out? Think about the way they are dressed, the way they are posed, their expressions, etc.

Consider the “narrator” or the photographer of this piece. Which details might have been designed by the photographer? What do those details contribute to the photo?

What can we infer about the character of the Duke in “My Last Duchess?” What details allow us to infer those things?

What things do we know for sure about the Duke’s late wife in the portrait? How does the Duke, as the narrator of her story, interpret those details for us?

Contrast the portrait of the couple with the poem. How does the narrator’s interference, or lack thereof, contribute to our understanding of the subjects?

Symbolism: Shiva Nataraja and “The Second Coming” by William Butler Yeats
https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43290/the-second-coming

List the details in the sculpture that may be symbolic. What might they represent?

What elements in the poem may be symbols and what might they represent?

Shiva is a Hindu god, but the poem is written with the Christian tradition in mind. Compare and contrast the symbols in the sculpture and in the poem.

Shiva is a god who is paradoxically seen as a destroyer and a benefactor. Which symbols in the sculpture show that paradox? What symbols are paradoxical in the poem?
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Setting: The Monstrous Sow of Landser by Albrecht Durer and excerpt from Dracula by Bram Stoker

List as many details as you can about the setting of the drawing. What mood do the details create? How do those details create the mood?

Highlight the details in the excerpt that give the reader a sense of setting. What mood do the details create? How do those details create the mood?

Compare and contrast the drawing and the excerpt. Both describe a similar place. Which mood is lighter? Which details contribute to one mood being lighter than the other?

Dialogue: Funerary Portrait and excerpt from The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy by Douglas Adams

We cannot hear what the people in the portrait said to each other, but based on the details of the portrait, what is a likely conversation between the two people? Why?

What can we learn about the two characters in the dialogue excerpt? What causes us to make those inferences?

Based on the dialogue excerpt, draw what you think a portrait of these two people would look like.


What details in the print do you think are meant to be satirical? What statement do you think the artist is trying to make? What is being satirized?

What details in the poem are satirical? What statement do you think the poet is trying to make? What is being satirized?

Contrast the tone of the print with the tone of the poem. What difference do you see in the tones and what do you think contributes to the difference?

Which of the pieces do you think is more effective in conveying the message to an audience? Why?
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**Tone:** *Three Kids* by William Cumming and “Our Good Day” by Sandra Cisneros

List three tone words that come to mind when you look at the painting. Under each tone word list the details that contributed to it.

List three tone words that come to mind when you read the vignette. Under each tone word list the details that contributed to it.

Compare and contrast the tone of the painting and the vignette. The subject in both is three children. Do we view the threesomes differently? Why?

**Imagery:** *Mountains* by Charles Heaney and excerpt from *The Mountains of California* by John Muir

List all of the visual details you can from the painting. What mood is created by the details?

Highlight all of the imagery that you see in the excerpt. How could you put the specific imagery that you highlighted into some larger, more general categories? What mood is created by the imagery in the excerpt?

Both the painting and the excerpt are pure visual imagery, however, unlike looking at a painting, you are left to imagine the scene from the excerpt. Do you think that the painting is more or less limited than the excerpt in its ability to convey a scene? Why?

**Figurative language:** *Procession* by Amalia Pica and “Peace Walk” by William Stafford

[https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/53897/peace-walk](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/53897/peace-walk)

This installation is meant to “suggest the ritualized action of public demonstrations.” What figurative language could you tie to this piece? Metaphor? Personification? Simile? Describe how you could use figurative language to analyze this piece.

What figurative language is present in the poem? What meaning does the figurative language provide?

What do you think is the main message of each piece? How does the figurative language contribute to that message?

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