

Understanding The Unexpected Destination

A Lesson on Poetic Narrative Conclusion

Designed by John Darr

It is difficult to conceive how truly horrific events like the Russian Pogroms could be perpetrated by millions of human beings and sustained through the complicity of millions more. The tangled sociopolitical factors leading to the event provide some explanation, yet there is still a fundamental barrier of understanding between most readers and the mindset of a concentration camp officer in Nazi Germany or the emotional state of the prisoner under their control. The conditions strike us as distinctly inhuman and yet they are deeply human; no other species preys upon itself on such a scale. When we reflect upon the Holocaust and similar tragedies, it is essential to acknowledge and explore the complexities of the events. It is just as essential to avoid dismissing them as extraordinary in nature or perpetrated by unilaterally evil beings.

One of the most basic impulses of a poet is to write poetry that offers similar judgment. Yet the most effective literature does not offer simple answers; otherwise, political literature would amount to the statistics offered on a Wikipedia page – perhaps not even that. Works like Lee Sharkey's *Walking Backwards* succeed because they dive into complex emotional and narrative spaces of human cruelty and suffering. Sharkey's records of Jewish narrative and experience invite the reader to empathize. In such a way, meaning is assigned organically through the reader's own experience of the text. What students should understand is not that they, in reading and writing poetry, abandon meaning. Rather, students must learn to craft and search for meaning actively in poetry without relying on the narrative closure offered by most popular texts.

This lesson fulfills the following objectives:

1. Students will be able to identify the function of conclusion in forming the overall meaning of a text.
2. Students will be able to identify evaluate the conclusion of a narrative.
3. Students will be able to identify and outline narrative in a poem.
4. Students will be able to interpret the ending of a poem in the context of its previous narrative.
5. Students will be able to identify and differentiate explicit and implicit meanings in a narrative.

Homework assigned to prepare for this class:

N/A

Lesson Structure:

1. **Opening Journal:** Think of a movie, book, or television show where you hated the ending. What events lead to the ending? What does the ending mean in the context of the rest of the story? (~10 minutes)
2. **Creative Writing Warm-Up:** Re-write a short version of story that you just wrote about and write it an improved ending. (~5 minutes) How is the meaning of your story different than the original? (~5 minutes)
3. **Writing Reflection:** Think of a movie, book, or television show where you loved the ending. What events lead to the ending? What does the ending mean in the context of the rest of the story? What makes the ending better than the ending of the previous story? (~10 minutes)

RUNNING TIME UP TO THIS POINT: 30 MINUTES

4. **Ending Discussion:** What should the ending of a story do? Students share examples they wrote and argue about the function of endings. (~5 minutes)
5. **Introduction to *Walking Backwards*:** Have students find and read description of *Walking Backwards*' cover painting, then the dedication for the poem. What context do we get for this collection? (~5 minutes)
6. **Reading *Walking Backwards*:** Students read through *Cautionaries* independently. (~10 minutes). They then choose three poems to reverse outline in terms of plot (outlines should be three or more points). (~5 minutes)
7. **Group Discussion:** How are the endings in *Cautionaries* functioning? What do they tell us about the meaning of each poem? How are the endings to the poems different than the endings of most stories? (~5 minutes in groups, open up to class for ~5 minutes) How do we discern meaning from a poem differently than from a clearer narrative? *Direct students to look for hints for meaning in each chosen poem – students share their outlines, offer their interpretation of events, and point to one particular line that highlights their interpretation.* Close reading involves the investigation of specific pieces of evidence to prove meaning when meaning is unclear. (~5 minutes).
8. **Assign Homework: Close Reading Re-Evaluation.** Choose a book, movie or television show you have access to and conduct a short close reading (1 page) of an ending scene. Cite at least two key details that complicate the meaning of the ending. In other words, you should provide a basic interpretation of the ending – for example, good triumphs over evil – but then show how that basic interpretation is not quite rich enough to capture the full intent of the author's work.

Critical Essay: *Walking Backwards* (Recommended essay length: 4 – 6 pages)

One of the most intriguing aspects of *Walking Backwards* is its form. The book is constructed as a set of nested series: poems are divided among subsets, and those subsets contain further subsets of poems sequenced through the use of numbers (see “Intentions”) or divided through the use of symbols (see “Something We Might Give”). For this essay, you will choose one of these series in the book and write a critical analysis of narrative that series conveys. To guide yourself through this process, follow the steps below:

1. **Read through the series and write down your overall impressions of the ‘plot’ of the series.** Use the following questions to form a working hypothesis: What seems to happen? Are there identifiable characters or emotions within the series? What are your own feelings towards the series, and what lines or stanzas bring out those feelings?
2. **Perform a close reading of the first and last poems / stanzas in the series.** Identify form, mood, topic, and narrative. Are there similarities between the poems that hint at a continuity over the series the poems bookend? Are there differences between the poems that suggest an evolution or transformation instead? List as many attributes of the poems as you can, identifying similarities and differences, so you’ll be able to identify trends running through the work as a whole.
3. **Read back through the series and look for evidence to flesh out the possible trends you identified in step 2.** Look for recurring objects, characters, lessons, or feelings within the series. How does the treatment of these elements differ from poem to poem? Are there any clear patterns? Is there a general direction or path that you can trace between poems (for example: poems becoming more intense and conflicted as the series goes on, poems becoming more or less abstract as the series goes on, poems paying more or less attention to nature as the series goes on) for which you can provide specific textual examples?
4. **Structure and outline your essay.** Your goal is to guide the reader through the development of a single theme or topic over the course of the series. In this case, you’ll want to provide an introduction that reviews the topic you’ll be talking about and ends with a strong thesis (Thesis example: *Over the course of section X in Walking Backwards, Lee Sharkey highlights the importance of object Y to theme Z by developing theme Z most dramatically in poems where Y is present.*) In this case, you’ll be identifying a theme or meaning, then identifying what the author is using to make that meaning present throughout the work. Your essay will walk the reader through examples to show why the pattern you’ve identified is valid and important to the work.
5. **Fill out the outline with textual evidence.** For each point you have in your outline, provide a quote that demonstrates the validity of that point. Remember, no single piece of evidence will provide an airtight argument for the presence of the theme you’ve

identified. You're aiming to collect enough evidence to provide backup for your thesis; you don't need to prove why all other interpretations are wrong (or even inferior) in order to defend your own. Just aim to provide at least one piece of evidence for every point you make over the course of your essay.

6. **Write the essay.** Using your outline as a roadmap, draft the essay. Give yourself the flexibility to go back and look for more evidence when you come up with new ideas, but try to stick with your outline to make your draft as clear and focused as possible. Try not to worry too much about phrasing and editing while writing; that's what the next step is for.
7. **Revise the essay.** In addition to using a spell check and reading back through the essay for errors, use read-aloud and peer editing to get a more thorough, distanced perspective on your work.
8. **Turn in the essay and pat yourself on the back.** Good luck!

Assignment Rubric:

Presence of a strong, clear thesis:	_____ / 15
Provision of relevant evidence:	_____ / 25
Analysis & defense of evidence:	_____ / 35
Structure:	_____ / 15
Grammar & Mechanics:	_____ / 10
Total:	_____ / 100

Creative Project: *Walking Backwards*

Walking Backwards bears a unique approach to structure that utilizes nested series and subseries of poems. When we write collections of our own, it is important to recognize the collection's form as a site for creative opportunity. For this creative process, you'll craft three twelve-poem collections from one group of material by grouping and sequencing your poems in different ways. You'll then write a reflection that summarizes your experience creating each version and weighs their relative quality, ranking each version and providing an argument for each version's place in the ladder. To guide yourself through this process, follow the steps below:

1. **Select an overall topic for the collection.** This can be as broad or as narrow as you'd like, but beware! Going too broad could make it difficult to create a focused collection, while going too narrow could make it difficult to generate enough varied content and ideas to fill your project. For example: *food* might be a bit too broad, and *bananas* might be a bit too narrow, but fruit might offer the flexibility to explore different but connected foods over the course of the project. Of course, going narrow into something specific on which there is a lot of available information (either in your head, your memories, or on the internet) is completely viable!
2. **Brainstorm some subtopics.** If you can't think of possible subtopics within your topic, it's probably too narrow. Subtopics will help you organize your poems into groups; for example, if you chose fruit, you might have some poems about the cultural uses of fruit and some poems about your own personal memories and feelings towards fruit. As you write, your poems may begin to 'blend' and your subtopics may overlap – but this is a good thing! If your poems are distinct from one another while diving between many different approaches to the same topic, you've got a great collection on your hands.
3. **Generate your poems!** Just start writing. Don't worry about whether or not individual poems are good or even grammatically correct. Write as much as you can, whenever you feel the energy or inspiration to do so. The more poems you write, the easier the rest of the project will be. You'll not only be spoiled for choice when it comes to making several versions of your project, but you'll also feel less panicked when you realize a poem you thought you'd use is actually weaker than everything else in your project. Remember, you can keep writing new poems at any time in the project after this; don't feel as if everything has to be perfect before you move on to the next step. You may just find that another step of the process inspires you to write your best poem yet!
4. **Organize and Re-Organize your poems to form your three different collections. One will have no groups, only a title; another will divide the poems into two distinct sections, and the third will divide the poems into three to five sections.** If you're feeling particularly bold, you can even go for subsections. Each section should have something unique that ties it together – some similar topic or narrative that runs through the section and makes it feel like it could almost stand on its own. You can do this organization in several ways – on a digital document or spreadsheet, for

example – but my favorite is to print out all my poems, lay them out on the floor, and move them around so I can easily see what I’m doing from a macro and micro perspective. Also, I get to feel a bit like a mad scientist without risking the actual explosions.

5. **Print out and staple your three collections, each with a table of contents and page numbers.** Make sure everything’s in the right order and double check for spelling before turning anything in.
6. **Write a two-page reflection.** In the reflection, make sure to:
 - a. Explain why you chose your topic and subtopics. Why is the topic interesting or important to you? What do you think is most important to communicate about the topic and how did your poems attempt to do that? (~ ½ page)
 - b. Explain why you ordered each collection like you did, and how each process felt to you. (~ 1 page)
 - c. Rank the collections from best to worst, explaining what you like and / or dislike about each version. (~ ½ page)
7. **Revise the reflection and the collection.** In addition to using a spell check and reading back through the essay for errors, use read-aloud and peer editing to get a more thorough, distanced perspective on your work.
8. **Turn in the essay and pat yourself on the back.** Good luck!

Assignment Rubric:

Collection Content:	_____ / 55
Meets Length and Form Requirements:	_____ / 20
Poetry Effort & Polish:	_____ / 35
Reflection Content:	_____ / 40
Reflection on Topic & Subtopics	_____ / 10
Explanation of Ordering & Process	_____ / 15
Ranking & Explanation:	_____ / 5
Overall Grammar & Mechanics:	_____ / 5
Total:	_____ / 100