

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.