

Form and Content

Target Academic Level: High School & College

Lesson Overview:

After reading *Ashore* in its entirety, students will look closely at the following poems: “My Brother, in Eight Panels”, “Waikiki Diptych”, and “Pacific Trash Vortex”. These poems will be used to demonstrate the relationship between form and content in poetry.

Before Lecture:

Read “My Brother, in Eight Panels”, “Waikiki Diptych”, and “Pacific Trash Vortex” out loud as a class, making sure that everyone can see the form of the poem and how it looks on the page.

Lead a brief discussion asking simply what students notice about the differences in form between these three poems.

Lecture:

In poetry, poets do not have to stick to the paginal conventions of prose, or even the common left-aligned convention of poetry. The poet has the freedom to make decisions from the length of lines, to the usage of white space, to the usage of symbols or numbers, and beyond. The form of the poem on the page will often correspond with the poem’s content; for example, longer lines will often slow the pace of reading, while shorter lines will quicken the pace. Thus, shorter lines may better fit a poem about something exciting or anxiety-inducing. The usage of white space will also slow the pace of reading a poem and emphasize the words that exist amidst the white space. If a poet wants the reader to spend a bit more time with a certain word, line, or image, they might add extra white space around it. In Nakanishi’s *Ashore*, many of her poems took different forms, differing in length, line length, stanza breakage, usage of white space, and so on. In example, consider the three poems read earlier: “My Brother, in Eight Panels”, “Waikiki Diptych”, and “Pacific Trash Vortex”. Notice how each poem varies in both form and content.

- “My Brother, in Eight Panels”
 - The prose-like shape, with longer lines/horizontal thrust works with the poem’s content since the poem is mostly narrative and tells stories and memories of the speaker and the speaker’s brother.
 - The stanzas being separated by numbers allows each to stand alone as its own ‘panel’, but to still be unified as parts of the same whole, even though each differs slightly in content. In this way, each ‘panel’ becomes a part of the larger story represented in the poem.

- The last line of each stanza is echoed in the first line of the stanza that comes directly after: this emphasizes that each stanza, though slightly separated in content, is a piece of the whole image that the speaker is trying to convey of their brother.
- “Waikiki Diptych”
 - “Diptych” refers to a style of art that has two panels or parts that make up a whole image. This form serves the content of this poem, as the first part represents an idealized, marketable version of Hawaii that would not be the whole truth or ‘picture’ without the second piece, which shows the pollution and environmental harm taking place in Hawaii.
 - Each piece of the diptych uses shorter lines and a vertical thrust, and each is exactly 19 lines. Their rectangular shape mimics a canvas or tablet, which echoes the notion that they are diptych art pieces. Each being the same length and nearly the same shape reinforces the idea that they are two halves of the same whole image. This idea works with the content, as an understanding of Hawaii is not complete without each of these two views.
- “Pacific Trash Vortex”
 - This poem is about a patch of garbage that floats in the Pacific Ocean. The shape on the page is meant to mimic the shape of this vortex. The words represent pieces of garbage littered and strewn throughout the ocean, which is represented by the poem’s white space.
 - This scattering of words on the page also slows down the pace of reading the poem, requiring the reader to remain with each word a bit longer. This slowness and attention works in tandem with the serious tone and content of the poem.

Post-Lecture Discussion Questions:

1. What is the effect of varying the form and shape of poems throughout a whole collection as Nakanishi does in *Ashore*?
2. What ways have you noticed the form and shape of a poem has impacted your experience of the poem as a reader? Think about other poems in this collection, too.

Writing Prompts:

1. Think of something in your life that has two opposing views. It can be something you are torn about, something you have mixed feelings about, or something you feel that you have a unique perspective or understanding of. As Nakanishi does in “Waikiki Diptych”, write a diptych poem of the two opposing parts of the topic you choose. Try to keep the shape and length the same for each of the two parts.

2. As Nakanishi does in “My Brother, in Eight Panels”, write a poem in which the last line of each stanza is echoed in the first line of the stanza that comes directly after. Use the line, “With the distance the oceans make,” from this poem as your poem’s beginning.
3. As Nakanishi’s “Pacific Trash Vortex” does, write a poem whose shape mimics its content.