

Playing With Expectations

Target Academic Level: High School & College

Lesson Overview:

After reading *Bed* by Elizabeth Metzger, students will closely at lines from the poems “Won Exit”, “Moses, New York”, and “The Impossibility of Crows” to discuss techniques for and the effect of playing with the reader’s expectations in poetry.

Before Lecture:

Have students briefly look over “Won Exit”, “Moses, New York”, and “The Impossibility of Crows”. Discuss briefly how the selected poems defy expectations and create surprise.

Lecture:

Though poetry is a condensed medium, different devices like line breaks and figurative language allow poems to deeply engage readers in a small amount of space. A poet aims to create an emotional and visceral response within the reader, or to move and stir them in some way. One way that a poet can do this is through defying expectations in their poems, as Metzger does in her collection “Bed”.

- For example, consider the poem “Won Exit”:
 - The poem begins with the line, “In one or two lives/ I opened the door with the prize/ only to find the prize was not worth the life.” The surprise here comes at the very first line: “In one or two lives.”
 - In the world of the reader, there is only one life as far as we know, so ‘or two lives’ raises many questions.
 - The surprise is amplified by the tone/delivery of the line; the abruptness and lack of elaboration, along with the way the statement is not dwelled on before moving on to the following lines all compound the effect of the defying of expectations.
 - Thus, in just the addition of an unpredictable word or two and the tone by which information is delivered, the poet can surprise the reader.
- Metzger also toys with the reader’s assumptions in the poem “Moses, New York”.
 - This can be seen in the lines, “There was a boat on the pond/ but no water.” In the first line, with the mention of a “boat on the pond,” Metzger creates a certain image in the reader’s mind. After the line break, the image created is completely shattered when the water of the pond is taken away-- the reader no longer knows what to picture.
 - This demonstrates that line breaks are another place where poets can create surprise in their poems.

- Additionally, in offering then dismantling an image, a poem can manipulate a reader's reactions.
- In the lines, "The water had sacrificed/ itself for your brutal thirst," Metzger demonstrates two more ways that poems can surprise their readers.
 - One way is through figurative language, as seen in, "The water had sacrificed/ itself." Here Metzger personifies water which, again, does not read as true or possible in the reader's known world. Through personification, the poet changes the experience of reading the poem.
 - These lines also demonstrate how word choice can be used to bring an element of surprise to a poem. In, "your brutal thirst," the addition of the word 'brutal' raises questions, as 'brutal' isn't typically attributed to thirst.
 - Thus, in "Moses, New York" Metzger demonstrates how figurative language and choices of diction can be used to generate reactions in the reader.
- In the line, "But the boat here is always/ and human," both the placement of the line break and syntax are working in tandem to defy expectation.
 - The first line ending on 'always' causes readers to expect that what comes after the line break will further expand on what the boat 'always' is or is 'always' doing. So, the next line "and human," comes as a surprise.
 - The line "and human," causes the reader to go back to the previous line and read it differently-- now it is clear that in the line, "But the boat here is always," Metzger has played with the syntax in order to surprise the reader.
- In "The Impossibility of Crows" Metzger toys with expectations by speaking about something in a way that goes against what may be considered the 'norm' for the reader.
 - This can be seen in the lines, "Your death has just begun but is not/ spoken of, it speaks/ in odd weather like a second first love."
 - Death, in the world of the reader, is typically seen as a singular finite moment, thus, stating, "Your death has just begun," requires that the reader sees death in a new, unfamiliar way for the entirety of the poem.
 - Instead of offering an explanation of what this speaker's understanding of death is, Metzger brings the reader further into this unfamiliar territory with figurative language: "it speaks/ in odd weather," personifying death as the speaker knows it.
 - "The Impossibility of Crows" also surprises the reader with the simile, "like a second first love," as, by the very nature of the term, a second first love would be impossible.
- Thus, Metzger's poetry demonstrates that a poet can manipulate a reader's expectations in order to bring surprise into the experience of reading a poem by employing techniques

like figurative language, unpredictable syntax, masterfully placed line breaks, unanswered questions, and unsettling tone.

- Surprising the reader and setting up then defying expectations is useful in amplifying physical and emotional reactions from the poem.

Post-Lecture Discussion Questions:

1. As the reader, how did the lines we've discussed surprise you? How did this change your experience of the poem?
2. Were there other poems in the collection or places in these poems that you saw Metzger toying with expectation? How was she able to surprise you in these instances?
3. In what circumstances and subject matters do you find that it might be fruitful for a poet to surprise the reader by going against what may be expected?
4. What other devices or techniques could be used by a poet to surprise their readers?

Writing Prompts:

1. In "Won Exit", the opening line, "In one or two lives," raises many questions for the reader. Write a poem that uses the same opening line.
2. As discussed, "Moses, New York" offers then shatters an image with the lines, "There was a boat on the pond/ but no water." Write a poem where you create surprise by presenting then shattering an image. You can do this as Metzger does, using a line break, or the surprise can come in the last line of your poem.
3. "Moses, New York" is also surprising in its use of figurative language, particularly personification. Write a poem in which you use personification to better communicate an emotional experience.
4. In "The Impossibility of Crows" Metzger uses the simile, "like a second first love." Write a poem in which you use, "like a second first love," as the opening or closing line.

Line Breaks and Emphasis

Target Academic Level: College

Lesson Overview:

After reading *Bed* by Elizabeth Metzger, students will look closely at lines from “Sex Dream”, “Exaggerated Honey”, and “You’ve Been on Earth So Long Already” to explore how line breaks are used to create meaning and emphasis in poetry.

Before Lecture:

Have students read over “Sex Dream”, “Exaggerated Honey”, and “You’ve Been on Earth So Long Already” paying close attention to the use of line breaks in these poems.

Lecture:

Unlike most prose forms, poets have the advantage of using the tool of line breaks in poetry. When fully taken advantage of, line breaks can be used for a variety of reasons in a poem, from emphasizing a word, changing the meaning of a line, changing the pace of reading a poem, and beyond. In *Bed*, Metzger capitalizes on making line breaks meaningful, particularly in placing/creating emphasis.

- This can be seen in the poem titled “Sex Dream”.
 - Take, for example, the lines, “What part of lying still/ left room for missing you?” Here, the line break after ‘lying still’ emphasizes what the line describes. Therefore, this line serves the purpose of creating this image in the reader’s mind.
 - The second line, “left room for missing you,” serves a different purpose; this line speaks to the inner state of the speaker.
 - Here, the line break is used to clarify/emphasize the image of the speaker lying still before changing the meaning and intensity with the line, “left room for missing you,” moving from the outer to the inner world of the speaker.
 - Similar technique can be observed in the lines: “I missed letting the shower hit my stomach/ without consequence.”
 - Like the line about the speaker lying still, the line, “I missed letting the shower hit my stomach,” is focused on the body, giving the reader an image and sensory experience.
 - With the addition of the next line, “without consequence,” the reader is moved from the body and into the mind. This line makes the statement/ tone more serious.
 - In the lines, “Never thought of the night/ your hand/ brought out the wet proof of my own life,” Metzger uses line breaks to isolate the words “your hand,”-- a decision that serves more than one purpose.

- The isolation of the words, “your hand,” also emphasize the image, demonstrating the significance of this hand for the speaker.
- The line breaks also slow the pace of reading the poem, making it so that the reader spends more time with this line/image that is important to the speaker.
- Metzger also uses line breaks similarly in the poem “Exaggerated Honey”.
 - For example, the opening lines: “Once there was nobody else to love/ a family had me.”
 - The first line implies a conclusion is coming since a question is being raised; as one reads: “Once there was nobody else to love,” the question of what comes after ‘there was nobody else to love’ arises.
 - The line break between the two lines, then, adds to the suspense in the way that it makes the reader sit with these questions a bit longer. This suspense created by the line break then leads to a feeling of resolution as it drops to the next line, “a family had me.”
 - A similar use of line break is seen in the lines: “Tell me again/ not to talk to strangers.”
 - “Tell me again,” as its own line raises the question of what the speaker is wanting to be told. The line break here, again, causes the reader to sit with the question a little longer, emphasizing the question and creating suspense/tension.
 - This tension, then, is cut by the conclusion in the next line: “not to talk to strangers.”
 - In the conclusion, “not to talk to strangers.” and, “a family had me.” the feeling of suspense and conclusion is amplified by the periods placed at the end of each line, or the use of what is called end-stopped lines.
 - In the lines, “there is no fire/ anywhere I am capable of rubbing,” the line break is used a bit differently.
 - Here, the line break comes seemingly in the middle of a thought, as it comes between ‘fire’ and ‘anywhere’.
 - Since the line break comes in the middle of a thought, we can see that the line break here is being used to emphasize the thought/image of, “there is no fire.”
 - The thought, “there is no fire,” implies a certain idea and air of safety for the reader that is then taken away in the next line, “anywhere I am capable of rubbing.” Instead of dwelling in the safety of there being no fire, the turn of the line pushes the reader into the speaker’s contemplation of their own capabilities.
 - In the turn of the line, the meaning and mood/tone changes as emphasis is created then changed.

- In the lines, “I am not mother enough to tolerate/ osecreating my own heart, not human enough/ to gather close to what’s untouchable,” the line breaks are also used to place emphasis in order to create the possibility of more than one meaning.
 - This is especially evident in the line break, “not human enough/ to gather close,” where the break emphasizes the thought, “not human enough.” This thought created by the line break offers a look into the possible emotional world of the speaker, thus adding to the intensity of the poem.
- Metzger also maximizes her use of line breaks in the poem “You’ve Been on Earth So Long Already”.
 - For example, the line break between the lines: “All my life all I’ve wanted was to be myself/ *and* someone else.”
 - “All my life all I’ve wanted,” raises the expectation/implies that this statement is conclusive, particularly in the use of the phrase, “all I wanted.”
 - The turn of the line, then, creates a surprise as it begins with ‘and’, adding to the previous statement which seemed to come to its own conclusion.
 - So, between these two lines, the line break creates and dismantles expectations/implications and makes a turn in the tone/meaning.
 - In the lines, “The other children played until they snacked/ around me,” line breaks are used to serve a different purpose.
 - These lines describe the speaker’s loneliness as a child, so the line break between the mention of the other children and themselves is representative of the distance between the speaker and others.
 - The isolation of the words, “around me,” as its own line, then, visually demonstrates the speaker’s isolation and emphasizes this line to add to its emotional intensity.

Post-Lecture Discussion Questions:

1. Did you notice any other examples of Metzger capitalizing on the use of line breaks throughout the collection that we haven’t talked about? How did these line breaks change the poem’s meaning or intensity for you?
2. How might your reading of or reaction to these poems change if the line breaks had been placed differently, or if they had been written in the prose form?
3. In your own poetry, do you have a process behind deciding where to place your line breaks?

Writing Prompts:

1. Pick a poem from *Bed* and refigure the line breaks to change the poem’s meaning. Use what you create through this exercise as a launching pad to write your own poem.

2. The poem "Sex Dream" begins with the lines, "What part of lying still/ left room for missing you?" Write a poem in which you use, "What part of lying still," as your opening line, and see where this phrase takes you.
3. "Exaggerated Honey" begins: "Once there was nobody else to love/ a family had me." Write a poem that begins with the line, "Once there was nobody else to love," or a poem that begins with, "Once," and ends with the line, "a family had me."
4. In "You've Been on Earth So Long Already" Metzger uses line breaks to visually represent the distance between the lonely speaker and the other children that they feel excluded from. Think about a time that you felt excluded or distant from someone/something. Use line breaks and white space on the page in order to visually represent the felt emotional distance.

Opening & Closing a Poem

Target Academic Level: High School & College

Lesson Overview:

After reading *Bed* by Elizabeth Metzger, students will look at the poems “With Wayward Motion”, “Mercy Later”, “Early Rising”, “Marriage”, and “Almost One” to examine different ways to open a poem, and the poems “Won Exit”, “Sex Dream”, “Exaggerated Honey”, “First Wound Kept Open”, “Mercy Later”, and “The Impossibility of Crows” to examine ways of effectively closing a poem.

Before Lecture:

Make sure students have read the collection before this class. It is not necessary to have students read these poems over again before this lecture, as this lesson will focus solely on the beginning and closing lines of these poems.

Lecture:

Being a succinct yet loaded form, poetry does not have the luxury of a slow start, and certainly does not leave room for an unmemorable or vague conclusion. In a small amount of space, the poet must both start a journey and arrive at their destination. The beginning and ending lines of a poem must entice the reader enough so that they take the poet’s hand to embark on the journey, and feel that they have been given enough by the end of the journey to be satisfied and go on their way. Opening and closing a poem effectively and skillfully, then, is something the poet must remain aware of in the creation of their work. There are different strategies and devices a poet can use to ensure their openings and closings are doing their jobs.

- In Metzger’s poems, there are many examples of effective ways to begin a poem. For example, the poem “With Wayward Motion”.
 - This poem begins: “The wind parted me./ Wind from nowhere.”
 - Here, the first line ending with a period gives it a declarative, matter-of-fact tone. The speaker seeming so sure of themselves makes the reader want to know more.
 - This tone carries to the second line, “Wind from nowhere,” which is also end-stopped.
 - Though the tone is declarative, the content of these lines raises questions that intrigue the reader, urging them to keep reading.
- The poem “Mercy Later” similarly begins with a line that is end-stopped. The opening reads: “There is a green chair to which I don’t belong.”
 - Similar to “With Wayward Motion”, the end-stopped line creates the feeling that the speaker is stating something they know a lot about, which makes the reader want to learn more from them.

- Additionally, the use of, “to which I don’t belong,” intrigues the reader, as we typically don’t see ourselves as ‘belonging’ to the items we own. The subtle oddness here also serves to raise questions within the reader that they will want to resolve by continuing reading.
- The poem “Almost One” also begins with the end-stopped line: “I have no twins left.”
 - Here, the declarative tone becomes eerie in the line’s content. The line, “I have no twins left,” seems to allude to two major losses. Thus, the detached tone becomes unsettling for the reader. In the subsequent curiosity, they will want to keep reading to learn more.
- The beginning of the poem “Marriage” is end-stopped, but with a question mark rather than a period.
 - The first line reads: “You want to know what I actually love?” The address directly to the reader as ‘you’ right away reaches and pulls the reader into the poem.
 - Because of the direct address, the fact that a question is being posed feels even more personal and luring.
 - The content of the line itself, “You want to know what I actually love?” is also interesting to the reader because the addition of the word ‘actually’ which implies a discourse or story about love in the speaker’s life that the reader doesn’t yet know about.
- The poem “Early Rising” begins with two enjambed lines: “When the earth took away my fires/ I sighed in bodies.”
 - The fact that the line is enjambed, by the nature of the poem’s downward movement to the next line, causes the reader to keep moving down the page with the poem.
 - The first line, “When the earth took away my fires,” works on many levels; to begin, it is an incomplete phrase that begs for a conclusion that the reader must keep reading to find.
 - The phrase itself, “When the earth took away my fires,” also raises questions just in its content alone: what earth is the speaker talking about that it can take things from them? And who is this speaker that has their own fires to take away? Again, the reader must keep reading to find out.
 - The second line, “I sighed in bodies,” ends in a period, thus, creating a ‘conclusive’ feeling. However, the language itself of ‘sighing in bodies’ does not make sense in the world of the reader. So, the reader is drawn into the poem by the desire to know more about the poem’s reality.
- Metzger’s poems also offer a variety of ways to close a poem. For example, take the poem “Won Exit”.
 - This poem ends with the line: “In the torture of a foyer/ doorless for entering, I am entering none.”

- This last line of, “I am entering none,” implies some kind of movement. The reader is ‘entering’ elsewhere, thus walking away from the poem. As the speaker goes elsewhere, the reader is offered a sense of their time with the speaker being over.
- Additionally, the content of the line, “I am entering none,” leaves the reader with something to think about: how can somebody enter ‘none’?
- Thus, in this ending, the poem feels complete in the way that the speaker leaves the reader, but it also leaves the reader with something to think about and consider.
- Metzger’s poem “Sex Dream” ends: “Will you ever open me/ the old way and not be wrecked./ I did not expect to ask you.”
 - This ending is two-fold-- first, a question is being asked: “Will you ever open me/ the old way and not be wrecked?” This question, for the reader, feels like the thought that the entire poem was moving towards. Thus, when the question is finally asked, there is a sense of having ‘arrived’.
 - Yet, instead of ending with the question, the speaker comments on the question: “I did not expect to ask you.” This, again, speaks to the fact that the question asked has been weighing on the speaker, making the fact that it was asked feel like even more of a release.
 - Additionally, the comment, “I did not expect to ask you,” changes the tone and puts the reader back into the mind and emotions of the speaker.
- The poem “Exaggerated Honey” similarly ends by asking and commenting on a question; the last lines are, “But what loss on earth/ would I honestly like to stay for? And life/ is no better, thank god. It also keeps us.”
 - The question raised, “But what loss on earth/ would I honestly like to stay for?” begs for an answer or conclusion for the reader. Thus, the speaker’s comments after the question become necessary in creating a satisfying ending.
 - The ending statements make use of caesura and end-stopped lines. This use of punctuation makes the line, “And life/ is no better, thank god. It also keeps us,” read even more as conclusive and complete.
- The ending of Metzger’s poem “First Wound Kept Open” works in the opposite direction, as the poem’s end works in the way that it unsettles the reader.
 - The ending reads: “my animosity toward men/ would lead toward/ safety in one who/ would wake me before/ I hit the wooden world/ and rock me there/ to say what violence/ had not yet come.”
 - The last lines in particular, “to say what violence/ had not yet come,” unsettle the reader in the sense that they create an air of violence being on its way.
 - Thus, in the creation of a looming threat, Metzger makes the end of this poem linger with the reader.

- “The Impossibility of Crows” ends in a series of shorter lines that create a visual and describe a physical movement away from the poem.
 - The ending reads: “as if my life had wound itself up/ and let go with yours/ a made metal crow/ acting born/ choosing its cracktime/ then tiptoeing off your branch of the world.”
 - The last line, “then tiptoeing off your branch of the world,” describes the object of the poem’s movement away from the speaker and off into the greater unknown. Thus, the poem is concluded by opening up into what is unknown to the speaker and, therefore, to the reader.
 - In this opening to wider possibility, Metzger creates the sense that all the speaker can tell us has been told, and we can therefore move away from this speaker as the person in the poem does.
- The poem “Mercy Later” uses the poem’s beginning to create bookends around the poem, and feel whole and complete in that way.
 - The poem begins: “There is this green chair to which I don’t belong,” and ends, “how I can’t forget where and what/ you’re driving in me/ even though you no longer belong here.”
 - Thus, the repetition of ‘belong’ and the idea of belonging becomes a thread that binds the poem together. Its appearance at the poem’s beginning then return at the poem’s end, then, creates a feeling of completion.

Post-Lecture Discussion Questions:

1. What other ways have you seen either Metzger or other poets effectively open/begin a poem? End a poem?
2. As reader’s, how do you want to feel at the end of a poem? As writers, what can you do to give readers this feeling?
3. What is your process for writing the beginning and ending of a poem? How much attention do you put into these areas in your drafting and editing?
4. In this collection and other poems you have read, what have poets done in the beginning of their poems that have affected your experience of the poem?

Writing Prompts:

1. Metzger’s poem “Almost One” opens with the line, “I have no twins left.” Write a poem in which the first line is, “I have no _____ left.” Fill in the blank with a word of your choosing, and build your poem from there.
2. The poem “Marriage” opens with the question: “You want to know what I actually love?” Write a poem where you begin by posing a question to your reader. Start with, “You want to know…” and fill in the rest of the question as you please.

3. The poem “One Exit” ends with the speaker describing their physical movement away from the poem with, “I am entering none.” Write a poem in which the speaker is speaking from a specific place. In the poem’s conclusion, have them leave this place as a signal to the reader that this poem is complete, and they have arrived at the end of the road.
4. As Metzger does in “Mercy Later”, use an image that serves as a ‘bookend’ at the opening and closing of your poem.