

Repetition Throughout Poetry Collections

Target Academic Level: High School, College, & Beyond

Lesson Overview:

After reading *The Lantern Room*, the class will discuss the use of repeated images, words, and themes throughout works of poetry using examples from Honum's collection.

Before Lecture:

Make sure students come to class having read *The Lantern Room*. Have students briefly look through the collection alone or in small groups, paying close attention to words, images, and phrases that resurface throughout the collection.

Lecture:

Though some poetry collections have a linear story structure, like a novel or movie, many do not. In order to make a collection feel linked and cohesive without a linear structure, there are some techniques poets might use, including repeating images, words, and lines throughout different poems. This repetition also serves other purposes, like emphasizing things that are significant to the collection's themes. This is a technique that Honum used in *The Lantern Room*.

- One image or idea that Honum weaved throughout the collection was the mention of rain.
 - This can be seen in the lines, "I sleep with the windows open/ and the rain climbs into my bed," and "I could roll over and wrap/ my arms around the rain," from "April in New England".
 - Another example would be, "I stand in the doorway and the rain empties its hands into my hands," from the poem "At the Dollar Save Inn in Magnolia, Arkansas."
 - Also, in the poem "Read More About Our History", Honum writes: "Look at the rain tonight/ in Auckland, how insistently it searches, in hard spirals,/ down Queen Street toward the sea."
 - The repetition of 'rain' not only helps to create a sense of unity within the collection, but also contributes to the mood of the poems, allowing a deeper look into the world of the speaker at this time of their life.
- Another image that reappeared throughout *The Lantern Room* was the image of a praying mantis.
 - In the poem "Nightfall in Spring" Honum writes: "From the tip of a twig, a praying mantis/ extended its lines, the green text of its body becoming an elegant,/ indecipherable sentence, and with round green eyes looked out/ over the grass."
 - The praying mantis also appears in the title, "Self-Portrait with Praying Mantis and Rain," and the lines of this poem that read: "Whatever the praying mantis wants,/ whatever vision she is conjuring from her place of stillness on the railing/ I want to lie down and surrender to it."

- Again, we see the praying mantis in “Self-Portrait with Praying Mantis and Endurance” with the lines: “now and then,/ a praying mantis, which strikes me as a model of dignity,/ with its big green stillness, like a mind that will not be sent scuttling/ into the past.”
 - In the reappearance of the praying mantis and the importance the speaker places on the praying mantis each time it appears, the praying mantis becomes an image the reader can grasp throughout the collection and recognize the significance of each time it appears.
- Honum also repeats the image/idea of autumn throughout the collection.
 - “On the Stairs Outside the Psychiatric Ward” reads: “All around us autumn is throwing/ gold and crimson leaves into the street.”
 - Autumn shows up again in “The Master of Dreams” in the image, “Silent/ and meticulous, he takes notes on the wind/ and the falling crimson leaves.”
 - In “Lunch Break in the Day Patient Ward,” Honum writes: “When she rolled over, my feet became birds in the golden/ leaves of her hair.”
 - Autumn is personified in “Group Therapy” in the lines, “Beyond the win-/dow, autumn toys with ideas of heaven,” and used in the simile, “All his sentences are like that,/ clean as autumn,” in the poem “Before Group Meditation.”
 - The poem “Noon with Miracle Drugs” reads: “we look longingly/ beyond the window, at the birds/ draped like strings of black pearls/ around the saffron-colored trees.”
 - The repetition of autumn allows for a sense of interconnectedness, as it becomes clear that all of these poems occur within that same period of time in the speaker’s life. The idea of autumn also allows for the implication of a time of wither and decline.
- Another image that gets repeated throughout *The Lantern Room* is the image of fluorescent lights.
 - The fluorescent lights appear in the line, “The fluorescent light is covering me like a hood of silk,” from “Lunch Break in the Day Patient Ward.”
 - They appear again in “The Ward Above” in the lines, “I don’t need to look up to know that inside some of the fluorescent/ lights there are dead flies on their backs.”
 - In “Late Afternoon with Waterfall” Honum writes, “The fluorescent light/ goes off and the shadows/ fall apart like a cardboard fort.”
 - Honum mixes figurative and concrete imagery involving the fluorescent lights in the lines, “In the common room, I drop an apple/ and the master of dreams whisks it away/ on a river of fluorescent light,” from “The Master of Dreams.”
 - “Noon with Miracle Drugs” similarly reads: “First one psychiatrist is gone, pulled away/ on a tide of fluorescent light.”

- The lights appear again in “Late Afternoon with Kiwi and Sky”: “The fluorescent light/ in the group therapy room/ is vetting me for some/ terrible migration.”
 - The returning image of fluorescent lights signals to the reader that this image is present in the speaker’s memory when they look back on this time in their life. The repetition also demonstrates a sense of monotony that the speaker perhaps was feeling during this experience.

Post-Lecture Discussion Questions:

1. Were there any other words/images that you noticed recurring throughout *The Lantern Room*? What might the significance of these different images be in this collection?
2. What effect does the use of repeated/recurring images and ideas have on your reading of a collection? What do you find it adds to the experience?
3. Outside of the reasons we’ve named for Honum using repetition in this collection, what are other reasons a poet might want to repeat an image or word in this way?
4. Can you think of any other times you encountered this technique in your reading in or outside of class? What purpose did the repetition serve in that context?

Writing Prompts:

1. Think of a time in your life when you went to the same place over and over again-- perhaps a doctor’s office, a workplace, school, or somewhere else. Think of an aspect of this place that comes to memory whenever you think of this time in your life, much like the fluorescent lights in *The Lantern Room*. Write two or more poems in which this object/idea resurfaces.
2. Throughout the collection, Honum encapsulated a time in the speaker’s life using the weather-- both rain and autumn. Think of a time in your life when something significant happened, good or bad. Write two or more poems about this time in your life where you use the weather as a backdrop.
3. The praying mantis is repeated as a symbol throughout *The Lantern Room*. Is there something in nature that holds symbolic meaning for you? Write two or more poems where you make meaning of the different times that this thing has appeared for you.

Linking the Inner and Outer World in Poetry

Target Academic Level: High School, College, & Beyond

Lesson Overview:

Poems from Honum's *The Lantern Room* will be analyzed in order to demonstrate how and why poets link the speaker's inner and outer worlds in poems.

Before Lecture:

After reading Honum's *The Lantern Room*, have students read "The Lighthouse", "Love is a Wound that Will Happen", "Motel with Storm and Map", and "Birthday at a Motel 6", paying attention to how the descriptions of space and place link to the speaker's inner state.

Lecture:

In the discussion of more abstract ideas, like emotions, it can be helpful for a reader to have concrete details that anchor and ground them in a poem. Think about times the weather, a scent, or something you see on the TV mirrored or helped you to make sense of something you were feeling. To create this experience on the page, poets can integrate sensory details and concrete imagery/description with the thoughts and emotions of the poem's speaker, as Honum does in *The Lantern Room*.

- An example of this can be found in the poem "The Lighthouse."
 - First, Honum establishes the physical space that the speaker is in through lines like, "We shake our heads and drink our water,/ coffee, or tea from little Styrofoam cups," and, "There are vision boards/ displayed along one wall."
 - The image of the vision boards triggers thought within the speaker: "Glancing at them, I think that if the/ counselor brings in magazines, scissors, and glue, I'll sit it out. Too/ cheesy, I tell myself, too juvenile," and, "I can barely look at them,/ knowing I too might choose the daisy, the word *joy* in royal blue, or/ the lighthouse, cutting shakily up the side of the tower and around/ the lantern room."
- "Love is a Wound that Will Happen" follows a similar pattern.
 - Honum begins by describing the place the speaker is in: "The motel is from another era, its horseshoe driveway a half-loop of time," and "The wind beats the hills like carpets and orange pollen/ tumbles down."
 - The idea of 'another era' leads the speaker into memory: "I wish you could show me again the black and white/ picture of your mother playing Juliet in Florence"
 - This nostalgic, longing sentiment then integrates with the speaker's sensory experience in the lines, "Shutting my eyes,/ pulling the rough white sheet to my chin, I listen to the sparrows/ closing the trees, someone laughing, and in the leaves the rain picking up/ exactly where it left off eight years ago one August morning."

- Another example would be the poem “Motel with Storm and Map”.
 - The poem begins by showing where the speaker is and what it is like there: “On the outskirts of a thundering town,/ I checked in,” and “The concrete stairs went up and up.”
 - Honum also describes the weather of this place and time: “My hair was swingy with rain,/ my umbrella blown inside out.”
 - The idea of ugliness/dirtiness is emphasized when the speaker gets to their room; Honum writes: “Seeing myself in the speckled mirror,” then finally marrying the inner and outer worlds with the lines, “As it was, my room/ was an ugly place to miss you from,/ with thin carpet and curtains/ that seemed to exhale dust.”
- In “Birthday at a Motel 6,” Honum also links the speaker’s inner and outer world.
 - The poem begins by describing the speaker’s outer world to the reader: “The summer rain takes one last sweep through the leaves,” “Sunlight shimmers on the stones below,” and, “In the parking lot,/ two girls smoke as they stroll,”
 - The description continues, using figurative language, in the lines: “Some of the doors are open to dim rectangular scenes/ as intricate as tarot cards-- Lover and Fools and High Priestesses,” before offering more concrete details, like, “the wind carries petals over dusk’s border.”
 - In the line, “Sparrows hunt for their inheritance in the grass,” Honum uses the concrete detail of the sparrows to enter into the idea of loss.
 - The idea of loss leads us, then, into the speaker’s inner world: “And my question endures another year, lit by tiny stars/ striking out across Arkansas. How will I live without her?”

Post-Lecture Discussion Questions:

1. Can you think of any other poems in *The Lantern Room* where Honum uses the speaker’s outer world to enter into their thoughts, or vice versa?
2. What might be lost for the reader if a poem exists entirely in thought and doesn’t involve the world around the speaker?
3. Think of the different senses-- sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. What might each sense offer as far as entryways into a speaker’s mind?
4. How might a writer manipulate the sensory details in a poem to better exemplify the speaker’s inner state? Do you think that the description needs to be entirely truthful? Is there room for invention, and to what purpose?

Writing Prompts:

1. In “The Lighthouse” Honum writes, “We shake our heads and drink our water,/ coffee, or tea from little Styrofoam cups.” Write a poem where you use food or drink as an entryway to thought or memory.

2. Many of Honum's poems, like "Motel with Storm and Map" and "Birthday at a Motel 6" take place while the speaker is traveling. Write about somewhere you've traveled, using the in-between spaces (hotels, airports, train stations) as a way to enter the speaker's inner world.
3. Use the line, "I wish you could show me again..." from "Love is a Wound that Will Happen" as the beginning of a poem.
4. "Birthday at a Motel 6" ends with the question, "How will I live without her?" Write a poem that also ends with a question. Arrive to this question as Honum does— using the outer world to lead the speaker into thought.

Creating Characters in Poetry Collections

Target Academic Level: High School, College, & Beyond

Lesson Overview:

Students will discuss how to effectively create characters in poetry and the impact of having characters in a poetry collection using Honum's *The Lantern Room* as reference.

Before Lecture:

Before class, have students read the entirety of Honum's collection, *The Lantern Room*. Lead a brief discussion on the characters in this collection.

Lecture:

Although poetry differs from prose, like novels and short stories, poets can still borrow storytelling techniques from these different prose forms. Although we may typically think of more lyrical writing when we think of poetry, poetry can also be written in the narrative mode. Thus, poetry can greatly benefit from techniques used in prose forms, like the inclusion of distinct characters. This approach can be observed in Honum's *The Lantern Room*, especially in poems about the speaker's psychiatric outpatient experience.

- For example, Honum has "the boy with the injured body" appear throughout the collection.
 - He first appears smoking a cigarette: "I stand with the boy with the injured body/ while the smoke from his cigarette signs a slow signature."
 - Later, in the poem "Lunch Break in the Day Patient Ward" he is smoking again: "Outside, the boy with the injured body is leaning on his cane and/ smoking a cigarette."
 - The character appearing doing the same thing each time creates a continuity and reliability in the creation of this character.
 - In "Group Therapy" Honum expands the reader's understanding of this character, writing: "The boy with the/ injured body, he's the angel."
- Another character from the psychiatric outpatient program is the Vietnam vet.
 - He appears in the poem "Stay Beside Me" where the speaker shares a bit about his story: "In the common room, the Vietnam vet tells me that his/ father, the police chief, molested his sisters."
 - In this poem we also get a bit of him speaking: "When he says, *my sis-/ters*, his slow, gravelly voice rises."
 - And some of the speaker's thoughts about him: "I think he/ is afraid to be womanly."
 - The Vietnam vet returns in the poem "The Ward Above."

- Honum brings in his voice in the lines: “In the common room, the Vietnam/ vet says, *No, you don’t want to go up there*. Everything he says, he says/ again with his eyes.”
- The speaker offers more of his history and voice in the poem “Late Afternoon with Geese.”
 - The poem reads: “*Not now*, the Vietnam vet says,/ *it’s too violent*, and he talks about the late/ Fifties, the Friday nights/ dancing at the Showboat.”
- The Vietnam vet appears again in “New England Lyric.”
 - Honum writes: “And the Vietnam vet offers/ *Take this job and shove it*,/ which he swears is one of the best/ sentences he’s ever spoken.”
- In “Note Home” we see and hear from the Vietnam Vet.
 - Honum writes: “One patient/ here is a Vietnam vet. His torso is hard like an old-fashioned suit-/case. *Kick my dog*, he said today, referring to his beloved animal over/ ten years dead, and *I’ll kick your ass*.”
 - By having the character reappear, and by including his voice, his appearance, his background, and the speaker’s thoughts on him, Honum brings the Vietnam vet to life for the reader.

Post-Lecture Discussion Questions:

1. How does building a character in poetry differ from building a character in short stories or fiction?
2. What information offered by Honum gave you the clearest understanding of the collection’s characters? (Their dialog, back stories, physical descriptions, names, etc.)
3. How might you borrow Honum’s approach in order to create characters in your own poetry?
4. What does the addition of sustained characters add to your experience of this collection? To your feelings towards/understanding of the speaker?

Writing Prompts:

1. When “the boy with the injured body” appears, he is usually smoking a cigarette. Think of somebody in your life that has a habit they are often doing that you associate with them-- for example, “Uncle Joe packs his pipe,” or “Grandma sucks a peppermint.” Use the line you come up with as a refrain in a poem.
2. Instead of giving her characters specific names, Honum calls them by identifiers: “the boy with the injured body” and “the Vietnam vet.” Think of a stranger you see often and only know by their identifiers (for example, “the boy with the Ninja Turtles backpack”) and write a series of poems in which this person appears, and is named by their identifiers.
3. Throughout the collection, Honum includes the Vietnam vet’s voice using italicized dialog. Think of something in your life that someone has said to you that has stuck with

you-- maybe it's your ex's annoying catchphrase, or something sweet your parents said when you were eavesdropping. Include this dialog in a poem using italics to mark it.

4. In "Late Afternoon with Geese," the vet's past is mentioned in the lines, "the late/ Fifties, the Friday nights/ dancing at the Showboat." Think of a grandparent, or someone that you know who has lived through decades you weren't yet alive for. Use what they've told you about these times in a poem about them.