

THE COMMON IN THE CLASSROOM

ISSUE 31 ACCOMPANIMENT

Sustained Image, Accumulating Images, and Place in Poetry and Prose

Texts Used in This Unit

“My Cousin Thinks I Gave Her Nazr” by Ezza Ahmed

“Uncontainable” by L. S. Klatt

“The Grave Fox” by Daniel Tobin

“The Strays” by Russell Brakefield

“Naow’s Boutique” by Ro Skelton

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Lesson 1: Sustained Image

This lesson is intended to introduce the idea of sustained image. Students will understand how a sustained image develops across a poem by tracking how a single image is revisited, expanded, and transformed in meaning.

Anchor Text: “My Cousin Thinks I Gave Her Nazr” by Ezza Ahmed

Key Term

Sustained image:

An image that appears multiple times in a poem and develops over the course of the piece by gaining new detail, perspective, or meaning.

Reading & Discussion

- Read the poem aloud once.
- Ask students to listen for what they can see.
- Read it a second time (teacher or student volunteer).
- Ask students the following questions:
 - What do you actually see in this poem?
 - What physical object or moment is being described?
 - What specific words or phrases help you visualize it?
- Track the image across the poem. Start by rereading the following section:

“I’m met by the bursting bulb of blood and pus which seals the fibrous innards of her nose cartilage on the outside sits the bulb pulsing expanding as if it’s breathing...”
- Have students underline/highlight the remaining lines where the image progresses.
 - Prompting Questions:
 - Where does the image first appear?
 - Where does it return?
 - What changes each time?
- Map the progression visually. This may look like:
 - Physical description (blood, pus, swelling)
 - Movement (“pulsing,” “breathing”)

- Transformation (“evil eye,” “pupil”)
- Blame (“you did this to me”)
- Belief (nazr, religious language)
- Internal meaning (“the divine in me”)
- Discuss:
 - What does the image mean at the beginning?
 - What does it mean by the end? What changes?

Application

- Turn to the photo portfolio in the issue and have students flip through the portfolio for a minute.
- Encourage students to choose one image that sticks out most to them.
- Have students write down:
 - 5 specific things they notice (leaning into texture, color, shape, position, movement)
 - Note: Prompt students to be as specific as possible (example: “a red, ridge running down the center of its face”) rather than simple, flat imagery (“feathers”).
- From their list, guide them to choose just **one** of their five details.
- Describe that single element as clearly and physically as possible, like Ahmed does in her introduction of the pimple.
- Using the progression on the board, have students follow the same progression to sustain and build the image.
- Share in groups of 2-3, if comfortable.

Reflection

- Discuss the following after sharing:
 - When does returning to an image feel generative rather than repetitive?
 - What has to change each time to keep the image alive?
- Return to the poem:
 - What specifically changes each time Ahmed comes back to the nose?
 - How does it move from physical detail to something larger?

Lesson 2: When Images Accumulate

This lesson is intended to provide an example of accumulating images and compare the techniques discussed in lesson 1. Students will recognize how multiple distinct images can work together to produce an emotional or atmospheric effect and practice using accumulation as a technique.

Anchor poem: “Uncontainable” — L. S. Klatt

Discussion

- Read the poem aloud 1-2 times. Then ask:
 - How many distinct images can you identify? Have students call them out and write them on the board.
 - Do these images feel random or connected?
 - What connects them?
 - What would be lost if you removed the GTO? The garlic? The lettuces? In other words, how is each image carrying the poem in its own way?
 - How does this poem differ from Ahmed’s?
- In Ahmed, one image is sustained and transformed. In Klatt, many images accumulate to create a feeling or state of being that no single image could produce alone. Neither approach is better. They are different tools.

Application

- List a few emotional states for students to choose from. Examples:
 - Joy
 - Grief
 - Anxiety
 - Longing
- Give students 10 minutes to generate a list of 5-10 images that belong to that emotional state for them personally.
- Have students share with a partner and then revise their images as necessary.
- Next, instruct students to arrange those images into a short poem that never names the emotional state.
- Share in pairs or small groups: can your partner identify the feeling from the images alone?

Reflection/Workshop

- Ask students to consider:
 - What is the overall effect of the accumulating images in Klatt's poem?
 - What is the overall effect of a deeply sustained image like the one we found in Ahmed's poem?
 - Can we generalize this effect to all poems with sustained or accumulated images?
 - What kinds of themes or ideas are better communicated with a single sustained image?
 - Where might a collection of images better serve an intent?

Lesson 3: Image and Place

This lesson is intended to bridge the connection between image and place in poetry. Students will explore how specific, concrete details root a poem in a particular location and practice using place as a source of image, emotion, and meaning.

Anchor Text: “The Grave Fox” by Daniel Tobin

Reading & Discussion

- Read the poem aloud twice.
- Ask students:
 - Where are we?
 - What do you know about this place just from listening?
 - What specific details tell you where this poem is set?
 - Can you picture this cemetery? What does it look like?
- As a whole group, map the place on the board together (either through a bulleted list or a simple drawing).
- Have students call out every concrete image that locates them in this specific setting:
 - Possible Responses:
 - The tended plots, obelisks and mausoleums
 - The bough-vaulted rows
 - The plastic bouquets
 - The remade curb
 - The newly seeded ground
 - The forked tree
 - The granite marker with the names
- After mapping ask:
 - What has happened to this cemetery?
 - What does it mean that the place has changed (“*the lane we missed because no longer there*”)?
 - How does being physically lost in this place mirror something the speaker might be feeling?
- Then:
 - Could this happen anywhere else?
 - What does this specific place allow the poem to do?
 - If this poem took place in a generic graveyard with no specific details, would it be the same poem? What would be lost?

Application

- Ask students to think of a specific place they know well. If students are struggling to come up with a place, provide a location on campus or nearby that might be commonplace.
- Give students 5 minutes to write down every concrete detail they can remember about that place. Encourage specificity over general observations. Prompt by asking:
 - What would only you notice?
 - What's something you pay attention to every time?
 - What part of this place has the most emotional heat?
- Try to avoid generalizations or flat imagery (e.g., “ten trees,” “blue sky,” etc.).
- From their list, ask students:
 - What is one thing about this place that could only be true of this place?
 - What detail is irreplaceable?
 - Is there anything that happened to you in this place, or anything you feel when you think of it, that connects to one of those details?
- Have students write a short poem (8–12 lines) that does one of the following two options:
 - Return to the accumulating images exercise in Lesson 2. Encourage students to string together their distinct images and see what emotion or feeling emerges in relation to that place.
 - Return to the exercise from Lesson 1. Pick one image and surge deeper, thinking about progression and what one single image can reveal about a place or a person.

Reflection/Workshop

- Share poems in groups, if comfortable.
- Ask students to respond to themselves or their peers:
 - Can you feel the place in this poem?
 - Is the setting doing work, or is it backdrop?
 - If you moved this poem somewhere else, would it change?
 - How do image and place come together (or how *could* they come together) to develop tension, emotion, or movement?

Lesson 4: Bridging Toward Other Genres

This lesson is intended to help student consider how the techniques of sustained image, accumulating images, and place might operate differently across fiction and nonfiction. Students will draw on what they practiced in poetry to form predictions about how prose writers use image and place and begin thinking across genres as writers and readers.

Review

- Review briefly the work/conversations had in the past 3 lessons. Write large ideas on the board.
- Explain that students will now begin thinking about ways of approaching image(s) and place within prose (short stories, novel, essays, memoirs, hybrid forms, etc.).

Discussion

- In groups of 3-4 have students discuss the following questions:
 - A poet has maybe 20–30 lines. Fiction/nonfiction writers usually have a lot more. Does having more space make it easier or harder to employ sustained or accumulating image(s) and other sensorial details relating to setting or place?
 - In fiction/nonfiction, is it more common to sustain images the way Ahmed does? Or do prose writers choose to accumulate images the way Klatt does? Or does something else happen entirely?
 - Does image serve a different purpose in prose than in poetry?

Written Reflection

- Ask students to write briefly in response to one or both of the following prompts:
 - Based on what we've practiced in poetry, what do you predict place and image will look like in fiction? What do you think stays the same, and what do you think changes?
 - What do you think a fiction writer or a nonfiction writer can do with place and image that a poet simply can't? What might they lose?

Lesson 5: Image in Prose

This lesson is intended to demonstrate how the techniques of sustained and accumulating image operate in prose. Students will think about how a single image transforms across a narrative and identify how accumulated details build a world and an emotional effect that direct statement cannot achieve.

Anchor Text: “Naow’s Boutique” by Ro Skelton (likely read before class)

Reading & Discussion

- To review the piece, begin by reading the opening paragraph aloud.
- Discuss general reactions to the story overall.
- Then, read the following two passages:
 - “The boutique measured six feet wide and the same deep, and sold items piecemeal: teaspoons of Nescafé, single segments of baguette, individual sachets of laundry detergent.”
 - “For the displaced, dispossessed, or plain bored, this modest boutique, with its rows of canned foods, cellophane slips of hair weave, and single cigarettes, became a place for all of us to call home.”
- Ask students:
 - We just read two descriptions of the same place. What changed?
 - What is different about how it feels in the second passage?
 - What happened in between those two passages that changed what the boutique means?
- Explain that the boutique is a sustained image in this text. It changes as the narrative develops.
- Ask students to track the boutique as a sustained image:
 - Where does it first appear?
 - Where does it return?
 - How does it transform?
 - By the end, when the boutique is gone and the garden is a parking lot, what does its absence mean?
- Accumulating images in this essay add to an overall emotional effect.
- Ask students to call out every distinct small image they remember from the essay. Write them on the board.
 - Possible responses:

- The single cigarette
- The sachets of laundry powder
- The jerrycan of water
- The three-legged plastic chairs with a fourth leg sewn on with wire
- The metal bowl of rice and fish wrapped in a colorful cloth
- The oil drum rubbish bin
- The frangipani tree
- Ask students:
 - What do these images have in common?
 - What world do they collectively build?
 - Could Skelton have just told us, “the boutique was a place of resourcefulness and belonging”? What would be lost?

If continuing from the Poetry Unit

- Ask students to consider:
 - In the poetry unit, we saw these same two techniques. What does prose allow Skelton to do with them that a poem couldn't?
 - What does having more space and more time allow an image to do?

Application

- Ask students to think of a place they return to regularly. They can use the school campus or a place they frequent outside of school.
- Give students 8-10 minutes to write a short prose paragraph (8-12 sentences) that introduces that place through its specific physical details, the way Skelton introduces the boutique.
 - Encourage them to:
 - Name concrete objects or images
 - Think about what emotions each image might conjure up
- Share in pairs.
- Ask partners:
 - What do you think this place means to the writer, based only on the details they chose?

Reflection

- Discuss as a group:
 - In poetry, every word and syllable is carefully chosen because there is so much less space. In prose, you have more room. Does having more space make it easier or harder to be specific?
 - Skelton's essay spans twenty years. How does time change what a sustained image can do?

Lesson 6: What Is the Image Doing?

This lesson is intended to demonstrate how images can provide more than just visual description in a piece. Students will practice reading for subtext and revise their own writing to ensure images carry emotional weight, reveal character, and do more than describe.

Anchor Text: “The Strays” by Russell Brakefield

Reading & Discussion

- Read aloud the following passages:
 - “Reggie killed the ignition next to the house. One coal-colored cloud floated like a top hat above his yellow lopsided rancher. Past that, the afternoon sun painted the foothills a fiery mauve. In the distance a trio of bluffs gave way to an abstract canvas, just cattle and rust-red desert smudging south to New Mexico and on into the Navajo Nation.”
 - “Two Polaroids hung above Reggie’s bench near a bucket of finishing tools. In one photo his late wife stood by the sheep shed, her head turned back toward the camera, a desert sunset streaking blush on the low hills behind her. In the other photo, his wife and daughter stood in the front flower box next to the grubby goats they loved, the two of them hovering like beautiful apparitions over the bed of swaying sunflowers and packed Shasta daisies. Reggie moved around the photographs purposefully, avoiding his wife’s and daughter’s gaze.”
- Ask students to consider:
 - What does Reggie do with the Polaroids?
 - Why doesn’t Brakefield just write: “Reggie missed his wife and felt guilty about his daughter”?
 - What does the image of the Polaroids tell us that a direct statement couldn’t?
- After discussion, work to map the images of the ranch on the board together.
 - Likely responses:
 - The old goat pasture
 - The bantams sleeping in the pinyon trees
 - The laundry slack on the line
 - The scraggly weed patch where the flower garden used to be
 - The sheep shed
 - The two Polaroids above the workbench

- For each image, ask:
 - What is this image doing beyond describing the ranch?
 - Try to guide students toward subtext within each image.
 - Is there anything on this list that is just description or is everything doing a second job?
- Introduce the key idea: In strong prose, image is rarely only description. Images often do work; they carry emotional subtext, provide information for worldbuilding, give us clues about the time period, capture information a narrator might not state, etc.
- In a notebook or on paper, have students reflect on what image is doing in “The Strays.”
 - Sentence starter: “In ‘The Strays,’ I think image is doing _____.”

Application

- Ask students to return to the place they wrote about in Lesson 5.
- This time, add in a character. It can be themselves or a made-up character—just someone with an emotional connection to the place.
- Give students 8-10 minutes to review what they previously wrote. Encourage them to think about what images have more subtext than others. How can they change their images to add subtext that convey emotion, backstory, etc.?
- Share in pairs or small groups. Have peers make observations about subtext coming through.

Reflection

- Have students discuss or write in response to the following questions:
 - What’s the difference between a detail that describes and a detail that reveals something? Can a detail do both?
 - When does telling us directly what a character feels actually weaken a scene?
 - The use of image is a powerful technique, but how might it go awry? What are some potential pitfalls of employing sustained or accumulating images in your writing?