



Landscapes

Grade Level: 5-8

Time Frame: 45 minutes

Objective: Students will explore setting through discussion on landscapes that are meaningful to them and through writing place poems.

Prior Knowledge and Skills: None

Required Materials: White board and markers, paper and pencil

Sequence of Activities:

Introduction: Give each student a copy of “Detail of the Woods” by Richard Siken. As you read “Detail of the Woods” out loud, ask students to highlight words and phrases that capture their attention. Facilitate a class conversation. What words or images caught your attention? Why did you underline them? Why do you like (or not like) those words/phrases? What do you imagine as you hear this poem read out loud? You might read it a second time and invite them to close their eyes and imagine the details mentioned in the poem, like the woods or the moon.

Detail of the Woods

Richard Siken

I looked at all the trees and didn't know what to do.

A box made out of leaves.

What else was in the woods? A heart, closing. Nevertheless.

Everyone needs a place. It shouldn't be inside of someone else.

I kept my mind on the moon. Cold moon, long nights moon.

From the landscape: a sense of scale.

From the dead: a sense of scale.

I turned my back on the story. A sense of superiority.

Everything casts a shadow.

Your body told me in a dream it's never been afraid of anything.

Discussion: Prepare a brief PowerPoint with landscape images (photography or paintings) to share with students. While viewing, facilitate a discussion guided by the following questions: What is a landscape? What happens in landscapes? In "Detail of the Woods", are there any landscapes? Sometimes landscapes give us memories. Or they make us feel an emotion. Sometimes landscapes are places where stories happened, like in history. Can you think of any examples of such places from your own life?

Generate a big list together of landscapes. Examples: woods, the moon, mountains, the playground, neighborhoods as seen from a drone. Encourage students to think beyond pastoral scenes. For example, a junkyard could be a landscape of sorts. Ask them to name local landscapes with which they are familiar, in addition to more distant landscapes.

[Optional pre-activity: If the class needs more warm-up before jumping into individual writing, the teacher can lead the class in writing a collaborative poem using one of the places on the list. This allows the teacher to highlight opportunities within the poem where words could be made more specific. To write the poem, students raise their hands as they have an idea and the teacher calls on them. The teacher writes selected contributions on the board, using questions here and there to elicit a more specific or nuanced response. Each new line can be a new detail about this place. Again, the title can be "Detail of the _____" and the first sentence can be "I looked at all the _____ and didn't know what to do."]

Writing: Ask students to pick a place from the list that they are interested in writing about. On their own sheet of paper, they should brainstorm a list of nouns and adjectives describing that place. Think of how Siken uses "cold" and "long nights" to describe the moon. What objects or creatures can be found in this landscape? How does the landscape affect your five senses? Give details about sights, smells, textures, sounds, and perhaps even tastes.

After students have had time to reflect on their chosen landscape, they can begin writing their own poem, starting with this sentence: "I looked at all the _____ and didn't know what to do." The title of their poem will be "Detail of the _____." They can call upon their lists of adjectives/nouns to describe this place. Remind them to be specific. Not just specific in description, but in nouns. For example, instead of "car," say the make and model. Instead of "dog," say the breed.

Sharing: Save five minutes at the end of class for volunteers to share their poems.

Example of Collaborative Poem:

Detail of the Junkyard

I looked at all the homeless cats and didn't know what to do

Everything so messy and broken

Will it ever be clean, Mr. Green Bean?

Old, scrappy cats looking for a hotdog

A Lamborghini with shattered glass and popped tire