

The Fish as Dream Bedroom

Grade Level: 6-7

Time Frame: 50-60 minutes

Objective: Students will begin by reading a poem that utilizes a great deal of description, and will then write about an object or place with as much description as they possibly can.

Prior Knowledge and Skill: None.

Materials: “The Fish” by Elizabeth Bishop, A list of 10-15 generic objects (See Attached)

Sequence of Events:

Introduction of Poem/Activity (7-10 minutes)

Begin by having the students talk about description/detail: What is an adjective? How do you describe something to someone who cannot see it/hear it? Possibly, as a group, try to describe something in the room with extreme detail i.e. the clock in the room/the whiteboard/posters etc.

Then pass out and introduce the poem “The Fish” by Elizabeth Bishop. Give a little background on the author and her work. Then, read the poem aloud slowly, emphasizing the description. For this particular lesson it is really crucial to have the poem in front of each student. It is long, and often students will tune out. Having it in front of them allows them to follow along and focus.

Discussion of Poem (10-15 minutes)

Once they have read the poem, discuss what they noticed. What is this poem about? What happens? Is there a beginning/middle/end? What is the point?

Then have one student voluntarily read aloud only the first and last line of the poem (“I caught a tremendous fish / and then I let the fish go”). Ask the students: Why did Bishop not make the whole poem just these two lines? Why did she make the choices she made? The whole point is for them to recognize that this poem is spending so much time in pure description, and nothing else really happens the whole time. This should help them understand that there is never “nothing left to say” about an object or idea: There is always more that you can describe, and that is the key.

Group Poem (10-15 minutes)

Try a group poem describing a random object like “Dog” or “Cat”. Have each student provide a line or at least a word of description. Take the time to make sure you include as many elements or description as possible: What does it look like? What is it

doing? Where did it come from? What does it like/not like? The point is to get as much information as possible.

Individual Writing (20-25 Minutes)

After the group poem, transition into individual writing time. Give the students a choice between two prompts: (1) you can either provide a generic word or object (one of the words you pre-prepared on the list) and have them describe it in as much detail as possible, OR have them write a poem describing or designing their dream bedroom/any kind of room. This will generate a great deal of excitement, as many students do not have a say in their room situation, and often come up with grand ideas perfect for the purpose of description. Give them time to write, while circling around helping students who get stuck. Just keep asking the questions: What does it look like? What is it doing? Where did it come from? What does it like/not like? Remind them about *The Fish*, and how much description Bishop was able to put on the page. The goal is not for the students to have perfectly formed poems, but rather as much detail as possible.

After the students seem to be wrapping up, spend the rest of class sharing their work, and coming up with more detail together (either by asking questions unanswered by their description or offering your own ideas)

Literary Model:

The Fish

Elizabeth Bishop

I caught a tremendous fish
and held him beside the boat
half out of water, with my hook
fast in a corner of his mouth.
He didn't fight.
He hadn't fought at all.
He hung a grunting weight,
battered and venerable
and homely. Here and there
his brown skin hung in strips
like ancient wallpaper,
and its pattern of darker brown
was like wallpaper:

shapes like full-blown roses
stained and lost through age.
He was speckled with barnacles,
fine rosettes of lime,
and infested with tiny white sea-lice,
and underneath two or three
rags of green weed hung down.
While his gills were breathing in
the terrible oxygen —the frightening gills,
fresh and crisp with blood,
that can cut so badly—
I thought of the coarse white flesh
packed in like feathers,
the big bones and the little bones,
the dramatic reds and blacks
of his shiny entrails,
and the pink swim-bladder
like a big peony.
I looked into his eyes
which were far larger than mine
but shallower, and yellowed,
the irises backed and packed
with tarnished tinfoil
seen through the lenses
of old scratched isinglass.
They shifted a little, but not
to return my stare.
—It was more like the tipping
of an object toward the light.
I admired his sullen face,
the mechanism of his jaw,

and then I saw
that from his lower lip
—if you could call it a lip—
grim, wet, and weaponlike,
hung five old pieces of fish-line,
or four and a wire leader
with the swivel still attached,
with all their five big hooks
grown firmly in his mouth.
A green line, frayed at the end
where he broke it, two heavier lines,
and a fine black thread
still crimped from the strain and snap
when it broke and he got away.
Like medals with their ribbons
frayed and wavering,
a five-haired beard of wisdom
trailing from his aching jaw.
I stared and stared
and victory filled up
the little rented boat,
from the pool of bilge
where oil had spread a rainbow
around the rusted engine
to the bailer rusted orange,
the sun-cracked thwarts,
the oarlocks on their strings,
the gunnels—until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go.

LIST OF GENERIC WORDS FOR DESCRIPTION ACTIVITY:

- Dog
- Cat
- Door
- Box
- Room
- Hat
- Planet
- Country
- Person
- Table
- Lamp
- Shoes

Student Examples:

Jessabella (6th Grade)

My Dream Bedroom

My dream room would have stickers all over it. Stickers with my favorite things and that will have memories in them. My dream room would have lights inside it and my lights will be on all the time, even at night. My dream room would have my own bathroom, a game and TV room, a workroom and a walk in closet. I would also have a big bed with some curtains. My wall would be a fish tank or a LED light wall, and I would have a pet fox, or a wolf. THAT is what my dream bedroom would be like.

Kuauhtemoc (6th Grade)

My Dream Crib

I want to have an indoor skate park and a game room,
a room where we have fun,
a big pool were we also have fun,
and a room full of clothes and skateboards and shoes
and an underground skate park.
With a 7-11 in the skate park,
for the munchies,
and a movie theater
and a Gucci toilet.