

Worksheet 3.1. Teacher’s Version: Reading Closely

Note: The observations, below, are samples meant to guide student response, which will vary.

Subjects	Poetic Device	Observations	Effects	And what, now, is the poem about for you?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The “strange, gawky house” • Shame • The artist (the “relentless” man behind the easel) • The people “who once lived there” • Desolation • The “vacant” sky • The absence of nature • The train tracks • The “stranger” • The relationship between the man and the house • The “empty white canvas” evolving into something else • Light and shadows • A “darkening” • Abandoned mansions • The painter who 	<p>Identify the diction with the most striking denotations and/or connotations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strange • Gawky • Hushed and expectant • Shame • Fantastic mansard roof • Pseudo-Gothic • Awkward • Relentless • Brutal • Horrible • Desperately empty • Utterly vacant • Devoid of meaning • Desolate • Ashamed • Unnerved • Abandoned • Utterly naked look • American and gawky 	<p>What mood is created or theme pursued as suggested by the poet’s use of denotation and connotation? Around what subjects? Do you see any interesting patterns or contrasts in the poet’s diction?</p> <p>There are a lot of words with disturbing connotations of violence, sadness, disgust, alienation, shame, and anger. The house, the sky, and the painter are all at the center of these connotations.</p> <p>There are references to America as strange and gawky with the possible connotations of immaturity.</p>	<p>To what effect? How does the device make you think more or differently about what the poet is communicating about his subjects? To what conclusions are you led?</p> <p>The connotations here contrast significantly with the connotations (or evocations) of Hopper’s form—the gentleness, the softness, etc. One sees isolation in the painting, but cannot be sure there is also desolation.</p> <p>The poet’s diction evokes violence and victimization. Something has happened and continues to happen to the house, first by an unnamed</p>	<p>Could the poem be more of an argument with Hopper’s painting than a reinforcement of its themes? The painting may be a little sad, but it is largely easy on the eyes with gentle, even soothing evocations. The poem seems now to be about a violent moment—the repercussions of industrialization—that resulted in the abandonment of rural life.</p> <p>The poem seems to be about the relationship of the painter (in general) to his or her subjects. Hirsch sets the abandoned mansion as somehow a victim of the artist’s gaze. He may be commenting on the artist’s ability to lay</p>

paints them • The repeated subject of “the utterly naked look of someone/Being stared at, someone American and gawky./Someone who is about to be left alone/Again, and can no longer stand it.”			agent (history? Industrialism?) and then by the painter.	bare the truth. The poem seems to find beauty in that (in the potential described in the previous column), though the ultimate image of something innocent (“gawky” like a deer or a child) abandoned is very disturbing and seems to incriminate not only the artist but everyone who looks on as the present and future sometimes nearly obliterates the past.
	Identify all the metaphors you see (including personification and simile) The house as a man/personification: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holding/His breath underwater, hushed and expectant” • “ashamed” • “large, awkward” • Violent: “must have done something horrible” • Punished with emptiness • Stares “frankly at the man” • “unnerved” • “someone/Being stared at, someone American and gawky./Someone who is about to be left alone/Again, and can no longer stand it” Simile: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “brutal as sunlight” 	Around what subjects does the poet employ metaphor? How do these metaphors contribute to mood or theme? Do you see any interesting patterns or contrasts in the poet’s metaphors? The first thing that is striking is the irony of the simile “brutal as sunlight,” as sunlight usually has positive connotations. Here, it is associated with the vacant sky, with defenseless exposure. The personification renders the house an emotional being who is both an agent of destruction and the victim of destruction.	To what effect? How does the device make you think more or differently about what the poet is communicating about his subjects? To what conclusions are you led? The metaphors reinforce the sense of the house, sky, and earth as victimized. It’s interesting that Hirsch doesn’t identify their victimizers except in the persona of the painter. What would the painter be guilty of? Is “staring” violent? How so? The house feels shame—about what?	

	<p>Draw out the poem’s imagery (i.e., what you are asked to perceive with your various senses).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The particular light of “the exact middle of the day” • The house as a man “being stared at...underwater: • The house itself with its “fantastic mansard rooftop/And its pseudo-Gothic porch” • The house’s “shoulders and large, awkward hands” • The “brutal” sunlight • The sky, “utterly vacant/And devoid of meaning” • The absence of “the earth” • The “single pair of tracks/straightening into the distance” • The quiet of “No trains pass” • The “white canvas” becoming populated • The man (the painter) and his “last 	<p>Which of your senses does the imagery engage? Describe what you think you are being asked to see, hear, touch....</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intense midday light and heat • The feeling of being underwater, suspended, anticipating • The house as a very elaborate structure in contrast to the formlessness of the sky, “utterly vacant/And devoid of meaning” • The house as slightly threatening, enormous, profoundly ashamed, desolate, unnerved, suspended • The man “who disappears” into “the vast, darkening 	<p>To what effect? How does the device make you think more or differently about what the poet is communicating about his subjects? To what conclusions are you led?</p> <p>One is being asked to “look” at things that are both still and solid and simultaneously fluid and vulnerable.</p> <p>The imagery contrasts light with darkness, land with water, ornate detail and vacancy, stillness and movement, even a kind of innocence (in the gawky teenager the house sometimes is) and experience (in the more violent and aggressive imagery).</p>	
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	<p>afternoon shadow moving/Across the tracks, making its way/Through the vast, darkening fields”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Abandoned mansions,/And faded cafeteria windows, and poorly lettered/Storefronts on the edges of small towns” • The “utterly naked look of someone/Being stared at, someone American and gawky./ Someone who is about to be left alone/Again, and can no longer stand it” 	<p>fields,” which are both expansive (vast) and close, even constraining (in their darkening)—I can feel the air change its temperature, textures, light, and color— movement where there’s be a lot of stillness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The final very lonely, uncomfortable, even angry house/man 		
	<p>Note any rhyme or other repetition you can discern, either in individual sounds (e.g., alliteration or assonance) or in phrases. Note any euphony and cacophony as well.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Near rhyme: expression, expectant • Euphony: hushed, ashamed 	<p>Around what subjects do these aural moments occur? Do you hear any interesting contrasts or patterns?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Around the house, the man, the desolation and shame themselves, American-ness, 	<p>To what effect? How does the device make you think more or differently about what the poet is communicating about his subjects? To what conclusions are you led?</p> <p>Many of the repetitions are used to reinforce the concepts of shame and</p>	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cacophony: strange, gawky (and later, American and gawky) • Repetition of “ashamed” • Near rhyme: gawky, awkward • Repetition of desolate • Repetition of unnerved and of image of a man holding his breath under water • Near rhyme: disappears/fields • Near rhyme: mansions/expression • Brevity of last lines of each stanza is also striking to my ear 	<p>the image of the house as a man underwater, the word “expression”</p>	<p>desolation. Clearly that is one of the poet’s primary concerns, I assume in the context of landscapes abandoned to cities. But I also see a lot of potential in these moments—I.e., the man waiting underwater for something to happen; the artist disappearing into new horizons, albeit a dark one; the awkward teenager who will group up; the expression that will communicate no matter whether any one is there to receive it.</p>
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