# Ekphrasis: An Exploration of Poetry Inspired by Art

*by Caitlin Cacciatore*

## Introduction

Welcome to "Ekphrasis: An Exploration of Poetry Inspired by Art," an Open Educational Resource (OER) about ekphrastic poetry.

This OER is housed on CUNY Manifold, a platform that allows for social annotation. Teachers and students can both highlight passages to draw their fellow learners' attention to, as well as make notes for others in taking their course to see. This encourages students to delve deeper into a text and continue the conversation outside the classroom, enabling all students to benefit from a shared body of co-created knowledge and insights.

## What is Ekphrasis?

Ekphrasis is broadly defined as literature inspired by art. For more extensive definitions, please visit "Defining Ekphrasis." This art most commonly takes the form of paintings and other two-dimensional works, but historically has included three-dimensional objects as well. Arguably one of the most well-known examples

of ekphrastic poetry is Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn," published in 1819 shortly before Keats' untimely death in February of 1821.

## History of Ekphrasis

The earliest recorded example of ekphrasis is contained in Book XVIII of the Iliad, in which the poem's speaker describes the forging of the Shield of Achilles in intricate detail. The Iliad itself is not considered a work of ekphrasis, however, the nearly 150-line section describing Achilles' Shield is indeed an example of ekphrastic poetry.

Ekphrasis has a long history, although it has lain dormant as a form for most of the history of the written word. In the mid-to-late 18th century, demand arose amongst literate consumers for detailed descriptions of the many famous works of art that were making their way across Europe. Few had the means to see the works for themselves, so precise descriptions were in high demand.

## Modern Ekphrasis

From there, ekphrasis evolved into its more recognizable modern form – ekphrastic poetry that replies and responds to works of art, "exchanging the tradition of elaborate description for interpretation or interrogation."

Poet John Hollander wrote of ekphrasis as "addressing the image, making it speak, speaking of it interpretively, meditating upon the moment of viewing it, and so forth."

## Instructions for Use

This Open Educational Resource provides a toolbox that explores ekphrasis. In this toolbox, one will find a means of interpreting ekphrasis, a gentle guide on how to write an ekphrastic poem, and a case study about the Parthenon Marbles and the larger issue of the demands placed upon museums for the repatriation of culturally significant art and artifacts from the heritage communities whose ancestors produced them.

This OER is intended for use by instructors of advanced high school-level learners and college students in introductory-level courses. However, it can be adapted to reach outside that range as well. For detailed instructions on the use of this resource, please refer to "Instructions for Use - For Students" and "Instructions for Use - For Instructors."

The poems included were selected for their prestige, renown, and lasting influence in the English literary canon. For a closer analysis of why these poems were chosen, as well as a discussion of the voices that are neglected, trivialized, and silenced across the literary canon, please refer to the document "What's Missing?"

# Instructions for Use - For Instructors

## Introduction

Dear Fellow Educator,

Teaching poetry to high school and college students can be challenging. Teaching ekphrasis presents further obstacles to overcome. In creating this Open Educational Resource (OER) on ekphrastic poetry, I hope to aid you in this noble quest. Whether you decide to reuse a single document for your lesson plan, remix several resources, or revise the entire OER to suit a more expansive, robust unit or semester-length course of ekphrasis, I hope you will find this resource helpful.

Together, let us reenvision what is possible in terms of our pedagogy. You will not find questions on the theme or author's purpose. When we ask our students about the theme of a work, often one pupil answers and no one - including the student

who has just identified a singular major theme - has a chance to think deeply about the other themes, leitmotifs, and meanings of the piece, nor the sociopolitical Zeitgeist of the time during which the work was written, nor its historical context and implications, nor its legacy in the literary canon.

This resource is intended to encourage students to think more deeply than they usually would about a piece of art paired with an ekphrastic poem. It is an invitation to them, a wide-open door towards the realm of poetry, one that has the power to unlock and unleash the creative energies within them. Teaching poetry is so much more than standing in front of a room and asking, "What was the author's purpose in writing this?" Indeed, teaching poetry is a gift, if done correctly - one which has the power to launch a new generation of readers, writers, and lovers of literature.

You will find, as part of the contents of this Open Educational Resource:

## Documents

- "Ekphrasis: An Exploration Of Poetry Inspired By Art" - Contains a brief introduction to ekphrasis and offers a gentle entry into the poetic device.

- “Defining Ekphrasis” - Contains several definitions from various dictionaries.
- “How to Write an Ekphrastic Poem” - Contains instructions for how students can begin their own works of ekphrasis.
- “Understanding Ekphrasis” - Contains questions for students to aid in their understanding and analysis of the ekphrastic work in question.
- “What’s Missing” - Contains relevant information about the limitations of this resource and the lack of diversity in the historical English literary canon.
- “A Brief History of Ekphrasis” - Contains information about the history and evolution of the poetic form.
- "The Parthenon Marbles - A Case Study: A Discussion of Ethical Concerns Surrounding Ekphrasis and Ownership of the Artwork That Inspired It” - Contains information about the provenance of the Parthenon Marbles and Greece’s demands for repatriation.

## Poems

- “Ode On A Grecian Urn” by John Keats
- “Two Poems On The Elgin Marbles” by John Keats
- “The Man With The Hoe” by Edwin Markham

- "On The Medusa Of Leonardo Da Vinci In The Florentine Gallery" by Percy Bysshe Shelley
- "Elegiac Stanzas Suggested By A Picture Of Peele Castle In A Storm, Painted By Sir George Beaumont" by William Wordsworth
- "Sonnets For Spring By Sandro Botticelli" by Dante Gabriel Rossetti
- "The Shield of Achilles," a passage from Homer's *Iliad*, Book XVIII
- "Hiram Powers' *Greek Slave*" by Elizabeth Barrett Browning

### Resources

- Biographical data on selected artists and poets.
- High-fidelity images of selected artworks, including framed and unframed versions as well as the occasional sketch or study.
- A variety of existing OER PowerPoints, PDFs, documents, podcasts, and videos concerning ekphrasis, are compiled for ease of use.
- Further readings to which to direct students.

## Remarks

These resources were carefully curated by Caitlin Cacciatore for use in high school and college classrooms. The importance of teaching interdisciplinary art forms

such as ekphrasis cannot be overstated. The consideration of careful selection of an image, objet d'art, or artifact allows students to engage with arts across disciplines and understand the combined power of the written word and visual imagery. As images and text are rarely divorced in real-world contexts, this provides them with vital skills to analyze and think critically about the messages they encounter.

It is also important to teach our students the power of words, images, and other media, both for good and for ill. Our students are the next generation of leaders, scientists, politicians, engineers, innovators, creators, and artists, and are the torchbearers of our cultural legacy. One day, we will watch them pass that baton to their children and their grandchildren. As teachers, we are duty-bound to preserve the culture, history, and art of generations who have come before us.

Teaching ekphrasis, from its origins in Homer's Iliad, to the present day, equips our students with an array of tools with which to think more deeply about the connections between disciplines - not only those of art and literature but also between seemingly disparate realms such as the humanities and the sciences. Empowering our students to make these cognitive leaps allows them to gain a more holistic view of the world they are inheriting. Metaphorically speaking, ekphrasis is the art of building bridges where once there was division, connecting that which

was once separated by a chasm. As we step bravely together into an uncertain future, this is, perhaps, one of the most vital skills we can impart unto those who are growing up in a divided world.

Please feel free to reuse, remix, and repurpose any part of this OER. If you do, I humbly request that you fill out the following form to the best of your ability, so that I may improve this resource and track the number of students and classrooms I have helped: https://forms.gle/FTdQZdv8iFWL8f9y6

# Instructions for Use - For Students

## Introduction

Dear Fellow Learner,

Congratulations on taking the first steps towards a better understanding of ekphrastic poetry. The earliest written example of this poetic form dates back to Ancient Greece, namely in Homer's description of the forging of Achilles' Shield, a passage that is part of the larger epic of *The Iliad.*

In modern times, ekphrasis is a specific type of writing, usually poetry, that describes, responds to, challenges, or enters into conversation with a work of art. These artworks can be diverse and although many, if not most, ekphrastics are about paintings, the works in question can be as diverse as the subject of Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo," or Keat's "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

This Open Educational Resource on ekphrasis is intended to move beyond traditional conventions of the teaching of poetry. It is written and compiled by a poet, for future generations of youth who wish to read, write, or listen to poetry. It is my fondest hope that this OER will aid you in learning to love literature.

I invite you to explore this OER with an open mind. See what draws you in. What calls your name in dulcet tones? What speaks to you? What interests you most - what excites you? Go there first, if you have the time.

Is there something your professor didn't assign that calls your attention? Bookmark it for later.

Are you an aspiring poet? Make sure to stop by the document "How to Write an Ekphrastic Poem!"

Do you secretly hate poetry? I'm going to try to change your mind - which we agreed would be open to new experiences and new ideas. Chances are, you probably just haven't come across the right poem yet. I can help.

A suggested path through this OER follows, but feel free to explore at your own pace and if your teacher has assigned a particular part of this resource, make sure to go there as soon as possible so you can stay on top of your studies.

# Contents

Begin With: "Defining Ekphrasis." Here, you will gain a better understanding of *what* ekphrasis is.

Continue to: "Ekphrasis: An Exploration Of Poetry Inspired By Art." This gentle, brief primer will introduce you to ekphrasis.

Move on to: "A Brief History of Ekphrasis." This document explores the form from its roots in antiquity to its relevance in the modern day, making stops along the way in Ancient Greece, the 18th century, the year 1819, and the present era.

Keep going towards: "Understanding Ekphrasis." Have you ever pondered a poem? This document contains ten questions that will help you do just that.

Continue to: “What’s Missing,” a brief exploitation of sociopolitical factors influencing the literary canon, particularly older works in the public domain.

Your penultimate reading is: "The Parthenon Marbles - A Case Study A Discussion of Ethical Concerns Surrounding Ekphrasis and Ownership of the Artwork That Inspired It,” a deep-dive into the Parthenon Marbles in the British Museum, which Greece has requested to be repatriated on numerous occasions. They would have been known as the Elgin Marbles in Keats’ day, after the man who acquired them.

Finish with “How to Write an Ekphrastic Poem,” a helpful toolkit that might just inspire you to write an ekphrastic of your own.

You will also find, as part of the contents of this Open Educational Resource:

## Poems

- “Ode On A Grecian Urn” by John Keats
- “Two Poems On The Elgin Marbles” by John Keats
- “The Man With The Hoe” by Edwin Markham

- "On The Medusa Of Leonardo Da Vinci In The Florentine Gallery" by Percy Bysshe Shelley
- "Elegiac Stanzas Suggested By A Picture Of Peele Castle In A Storm, Painted By Sir George Beaumont" by William Wordsworth
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- "The Shield of Achilles," a passage from Homer's *Iliad*, Book XVIII
- "Hiram Powers' *Greek Slave*" by Elizabeth Barrett Browning

## A Variety of Resources

- Biographical data on selected artists and poets.
- High-fidelity images of selected artworks, including framed and unframed versions as well as the occasional sketch or study.
- A variety of existing OER PowerPoints, PDFs, documents, and videos concerning ekphrasis, are compiled for ease of use.
- And so much more!

# Remarks

These resources were carefully curated by Caitlin Cacciatore for use in high school and college classrooms. Please feel free to share any or all of it with your friends, classmates, colleagues, and family members. You, too, can give the gift of poetry to your circle and your community.

Please remember that this resource is an invitation, and is by no means a comprehensive encyclopedia of ekphrasis, but rather a curated sampling of poems in the public domain and other works that I found to be important, relevant, or simply riveting. It includes resources to help you understand the lives and literature of each of the writers, authors, and poets whose poems are showcased, as well as the times, trials, and triumphs of the artists whose works accompany each poem. Ultimately, this resource is an entryway into a much vaster realm, and what you see here is only a small selection of what ekphrasis is and what it has yet to become.

And if you remember nothing else from this resource, and take away no other lesson - please remember also that your generation has the power to redefine, reshape, and explore the boundaries not just of ekphrasis - but of every art form and every avenue of innovation. Words can be used as weapons. Propaganda is a

powerful tool and words and images, especially when put in conversation with one another, wield incredible power over the human mind, body, soul, spirit, and psyche. Words can inspire people to put up walls. I hope you shall use them instead to build bridges.

# Defining Ekphrasis

## Ekphrasis – from The Poetry's Foundations

## Glossary of Poetic Forms:

""Description" in Greek. An ekphrastic poem is a vivid description of a scene or, more commonly, a work of art. Through the imaginative act of narrating and reflecting on the "action" of a painting or sculpture, the poet may amplify and expand its meaning. A notable example is "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in which the poet John Keats speculates on the identity of the lovers who appear to dance and play music, simultaneously frozen in time and in perpetual motion."

# Ekphrasis – from the Oxford Classical Dictionary, as defined by Michael Squire:

“Ekphrasis refers to the literary and rhetorical trope of summoning up—through words—an impression of a visual stimulus, object, or scene. As critical trope, the word ekphrasis (ἔκφρασις) is attested from the first century CE onwards: it is discussed in the Imperial Greek Progymnasmata, where it is defined as a “descriptive speech which brings the subject shown before the eyes with visual vividness.””

# Ekphrasis – as defined by Merriam-Webster Dictionary

ekphrasis (noun) ek·phra·sis ˈek-frə-səs

variants or less commonly: ecphrasis

plural ekphrases also ecphrases ˈek-frə-ˌsēz

Defined as: a literary description of or commentary on a visual work of art.

Further Information:

“Although "ekphrasis" (also spelled "ecphrasis") is a relatively new entry in our dictionary, the practice of using words to comment on a piece of visual art is an ancient one. One of the earliest and most commonly cited forms of ekphrasis occurs in The Iliad, when Homer provides a long and discursive account of the elaborate scenes embossed on the shield of Achilles. It should be no surprise, then, that the term ekphrasis derives from Greek, where it literally means "description" and was formed by combining the prefix ex- ("out") with the verb "phrazein" ("to point out or explain"). "Ekphrasis" first appeared in English in the early 18th century.”

# Ekphrasis – as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary

**Forms:** 1600s– **ecphrasis**, 1900s– **ekphrasis**.

**Origin:** Of multiple origins. Partly a borrowing from Latin. Partly a borrowing from Greek. **Etymons:** Latin *ecphrasis*; Greek *ἔκφρασις*.

**Etymology:** < (i) post-classical Latin *ecphrasis* (15th cent.)

Defined as: Originally: an explanation or description of something, esp. as a rhetorical device. Now: specifically, a literary device in which a painting, sculpture, or other work of visual art is described in detail.

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# A Brief History of Ekphrasis

## First Recorded Example of Ekphrastic Poetry

The first written example of ekphrasis that survives to the present day takes place in Book XVIII of Homer's *Iliad*. Within the larger scope of the epic poem, the forging of Achilles' Shield is rendered in vivid detail over the course of several hundred lines. This work of mythological import is also lauded for its artistic and aesthetic beauty.

## Etymology of the Word

Merriam-Webster notes that the word 'ekphrasis' first entered the English language in 1715, alongside words whose first recorded use fell in the same year – such as 'archway,' 'glamour,' 'impersonate,' and 'physics,' among others.

Ekphrasis is “borrowed from New Latin ecphrasis, borrowed from Greek ékphrasis "description," from ekphrad-, stem of ekphrázein "to tell over, recount, describe" (from ek- + phrázein "to point out, show, tell, explain," of uncertain origin) + -sis)” (Merriam Webster) The etymology of this word and its journey from the original Greek to the New Latin to the English language is important in understanding its history, origins, and evolution. Ekphrasis originally referred to a quite different form of literature than what we would recognize as ekphrasis today.

## Evolution of the Word

The art of ekphrasis – or that of describing a work of art as vividly and in as much detail as possible – has evolved in the past few millennia. During much of history, it languished as an art form, but rose once more to prominence “in the second half of the 18th century,” in response to a demand for vivid descriptions of artworks around the world. This practice increased in popularity after the Industrial Revolution when the number of literate individuals rose because of more robust schooling offered to the working classes.

Ekphrasis helped the world become a little ‘smaller’ for a few short moments. People who were able to read and had the means to purchase newspapers, pamphlets, books, and other pieces of literature wanted to be able to see the great works of countries, cities, and entire continents they would likely never visit. It was much more expensive to reproduce a work of art on paper – especially in as faithful detail as was expected – so people relied on ekphrastic writers to paint a vivid picture in the collective mind's eye of their audience. Often, such examples of ekphrasis were reported in language that remained true to the original source material.

Ekphrasis has since expanded to include poetical works that interpret, interact with, and engage in conversation with various works of art. This form of ekphrasis is less a form of reportage and more a poetic device that is used to enter into a dialogue with an important aspect of the work of art.

In much of the world, there is no longer a need or a demand for the ekphrasis of the 18th century – gone are vivid descriptions that faithfully render an artwork on the page, replaced by metaphors that call into question some aspect of the work that is troubling, or call to attention that which is beautiful, or remark upon that which is absent. Today’s ekphrasis is an invitation to play. Now, billions of people across

the world are online and can pull up high-fidelity images of the world's great works, in full-color detail, no matter where they are located or where the work of art is in proximity to them.

## Modern Ekphrasis

What we might recognize as modern ekphrasis began in the early 19th century. John Keats wrote "Ode on a Grecian Urn" in 1819, a poem that holds a revered place in the literary canon and is perhaps amongst Keats' more famous works. Keats' work was impactful, despite or perhaps because of his tragically short life and the sheer raw talent he showed at such a tender age. Keats was only twenty-five when he succumbed to what was then known as 'consumption,' but is now referred to as tuberculosis.

Keats' legacy extends far beyond ekphrasis, but he helped to revitalize a poetic form and reinvent the definition of ekphrasis to become something far more lasting and significant than what ekphrasis had previously limited itself to. He breathed new life into a genre that might otherwise have petered out with the advent of color photography, the Internet, and rising trends toward globalization.

# Looking Towards the Future

In a way, ekphrasis has always been part of the conversation of globalization. It has endeavored to bring art to people in unique and novel ways and has succeeded in allowing art to reach more people than it otherwise would have. This synthesis of and dialogue between art and literature is essential. Indeed, the written word and language itself can be considered an artistic medium, one which we use to make meaning of the world, artifacts, art, and people around us; one that we use to reach out to one another.

Words, in this context, connect people. They form new insights about the truths that we seek. That, too, is the power of ekphrasis – to bridge the divide between the visual and language arts and to bring disparate ideas together in a cohesive whole that provokes further discussion and dialogue.

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# Understanding Ekphrasis

When reading and discussing ekphrastic poetry, you may find it useful to utilize the keen gaze of an art critic as well as the tools you have learned through analyzing literature. The simultaneous use of these seemingly disparate skill sets enables you to compare the works through a critical lens that takes geopolitical history, social norms, and societal boundaries as well as technological limitations into account. Using a holistic gaze to analyze ekphrasis is necessary to fully comprehend the nuances of the relationship between the artwork and the poem.

Ekphrasis is ultimately an ongoing conversation between the artwork and the poem. As with any literary work, it is also a continual dialogue between the reader and the poet. You have likely heard that art is in the eye of the beholder, but it is also the case that words exist and are given form by the minds of an audience. This tension between art, literature, and the intangible conversations happening between the reader and the artists is part of what distinguishes ekphrasis from other poetic forms.

# Questions to Consider:

1. **When was the artwork created in relation to the life of the poet? Was the paint still proverbially drying on the canvas, or was the work in question already part of classical antiquity or some other part of the distant past? What was the relationship between the artist and the poet? Were they contemporaries of one another? If so, were they friends, strangers, lovers, or rivals?** You may only be able to answer one or two of these questions, but considering the relationship between the creators and their temporal placement in relationship to one another can be integral in your understanding of the poem.
2. **Where would the poet have been most likely to come across the artwork in question?** You might want to imagine them at a crowded museum, gazing intently at the work, or you might picture a more intimate setting, alone with a work of art or in the company of friends. Perhaps you see them encountering the newly varnished painting at an evening soiree and being arrested by the sight of it. Remember - you don't have to be right, but your interpretation of where the poet came across the work and under what circumstances will give you a stronger notion of their experience with the work. Whether you see them in your mind's eye standing in awe in front of a

painting at a gallery or if you see them having come across the painting more organically, this will inform your understanding of both the poem and its creator.

3. **Why was the author inspired by this particular painting, sculpture, or artwork?** Even if you see nothing extraordinary or noteworthy about it, try to imagine that you do. You may wish to select one element of the artwork to praise, and another to critique. This is especially helpful if you do not understand or care for the artwork in question. This will help put you in the frame of mind of the author. Find a plausible reason why the poet was drawn to the art they chose to write about. Try to go beyond sheer aesthetic beauty. **What about the artwork was and remains unique? What sets it apart from others like it? What, if any, statement does it attempt to make?**
4. **What resonates with you about the artwork and the poem?** Make a Venn Diagram illustrating what resonances the two pieces share and which are unique to one or the other.
5. **Are there any mirrors in the poem that reflect the art? What contrasts can you find?** If the poem is bleak, yet the painting is sunny and bright, this adds layers of meaning to unravel. If the poem ends on a hopeful note despite the statue it was written after being tragic or violent in nature, consider why.

6. **Ask yourself what the poet decided to keep from the source material, what they added, and what they omitted, both intentionally and by accident.** Every element was included for a reason, and those which were left behind can tell a surprising amount about the focus of the poem, and the lens through which the poet saw it. Often, if two or more people look at the same painting, their eyes will be drawn to different places and separate focal points. This provides valuable insight into what the poet considered important, note-worthy, or beautiful enough to write about - or, conversely, what disturbed or frightened them, what they found unremarkable, and what failed to draw them in.
7. **Consider how faithfully the artwork is rendered on the page. Would you recognize it as an ekphrastic based on context clues, or is the connection between the art and the words more subtle?** This will inform your interpretation and may give you insight into the mind of the poet: what they were drawn to, what their motivation for writing the poem was, why they chose that work of art and no other, how they saw the painting and its significance, and more. Attempt to think as the poet thought; see as they saw.
8. **What limitations were the artist working under?** Consider, for example, that cobalt blue began commercial production in 1807 in France, or that viridian was discovered by a pair of Frenchmen - Pannetier and Binet - in

the late 1830s. Consider also the tools and technology available to the artist, especially if the artwork was forged in antiquity.

9. **What constraints of form may have influenced the poet? Was it popular at the time to write in a specific line or meter? What were the most popular conventions of form at the time of the writing of the piece? Were sonnets in style? Does the poem follow a certain rhythm or rhyme scheme or other constraint that does not exist in free verse?** When writing, these constraints inform the musicality of the poem as reflected by its rhythm and rhyme scheme, as well as the content and message of the piece.
10. **If the author could ask one question of the artist, what do you think that question would be?** Write down that hypothetical question, as this exercise has the potential to reveal what you found most relevant, beautiful, or striking about the piece, as well as illuminate what might still be confusing about the pieces and how they relate to one another.

# Notes on Understanding Ekphrasis

Please remember that there are very few ‘wrong’ answers. Poetry is meant to be interpreted. It is a conversation between the creator and the audience. Your interpretation of the piece is just as important - if not more so - than what the author intended. Allow yourself to move beyond questions such as theme, summary, and author’s purpose. Many writers will tell you that they write because they are compelled to do so - because it is a calling, because inspiration came to them on that day, or because they were seeking it out.

The true purpose of literature is to share emotions, scenes, visions, metaphors, and more - to reveal some great and lasting truth. At some point, the author lets the piece out into the world, at which point it becomes not a monologue, but a dialogue of which you are part.

# What's Missing?

You will find a commonality amongst these ekphrastic poems, in that they were all written by white men of European descent. One might rightly think that I am remiss not to include works written by Black women, Indigenous elders, LGBTQIA+ writers, and Asian authors: a small sampling of the people who I have left out.

The answer to why these voices are absent is simple: I chose to include only works that were in the public domain for this project, and the truth of the matter is that the literary canon, up until fairly recently, was the almost exclusive domain of the white, cisgender, heterosexual male. Other voices were excluded not by mistake but by design. Many of the groups we refer to today as marginalized were kept illiterate and uneducated, disenfranchised, and either unable to or discouraged from voting – often on pain of death.

The first wave of feminism and women's liberation, the one which enshrined the right to vote for all women, gave a voice to an entire half of the population that had been considered little more than the property of their father or their husband in the past.

Subsequent waves of feminism included intersectional feminism, which acknowledges that there is a nexus of identities with which one moves through the world. A Black woman will experience the same situation differently than a white woman, and a trans woman will have yet another set of fears and interactions that are fraught with danger in the same scenario.

These voices were silenced, and continue to be. Their books are banned. Their books are burned. Their words are turned against them, and they face threats against their lives and those of their families. Their poems cause school boards to question whether works that address Critical Race Theory should be taught, and all too often, those school boards fall on the wrong side of history.

In some nations around the world, writers can and do face persecution for speaking out against the government – from imprisonment to torture to state-sanctioned execution.

Around the world, writers and authors of marginalized identities are silenced, whether that is through the banning of their books or the ending of their lives at the hands of their government. It is our duty to acknowledge this.

I wanted to draw your attention to these works because of their prestige, and their firmly cemented place in the English literary canon. That I have chosen them is in no way meant to condone or excuse the marginalization and silencing of other groups of people, members of whom have written beautiful, moving, exquisite ekphrastics of their own.

I also wanted to draw your attention to the absence of other voices – female voices, Black voices, indigenous voices, queer voices, trans voices – because I would be remiss to present this OER without this note explaining my choices and lamenting the lack of ekphrastic poetry that has survived to the present day, as written by other groups of people who do not identify as white men, nor do they enjoy the privilege that is bestowed upon white baby boys the moment they enter this world, by mere virtue of the lightness of their skin and the sex they were assigned at birth.

# The Parthenon Marbles - A Case Study

## A Discussion of Ethical Concerns Surrounding Ekphrasis and Ownership of the Artwork That Inspired It

John Keats wrote his *Two Poems on the Elgin Marbles* after seeing the titular marbles, more commonly known outside of the UK as the Parthenon Marbles. These marbles take their original name from Lord Elgin, a British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire who oversaw their removal, which was by its very nature a destructive act.

Harvard University notes that Elgin and his men "removed a total of 17 figures from the Parthenon pediments, 15 metopes, 56 slabs of temple friezes, 1 caryatid column, 4 pieces of the Temple of Victory, 13 marble heads, other carved fragments, painted vases, sepulchral pillars, and inscribed albas from the Parthenon between the years 1801 and 1812. In 1816, an Act of Parliament acquired the

marbles from Elgin on behalf of the British Museum, where they have since remained and been displayed."

The Parthenon Marbles, should they ever be returned to Greece, are scheduled to be placed in a custom-built museum that overlooks the ruins of Parthenon itself. The Acropolis Museum, which opened to the public in 2009, was built in order to preserve and protect the plundered artifacts, upon their repatriation, which the Greek government has been requesting both formally and informally since the acquisition of the marbles.

The government of the United Kingdom holds that the actions of Lord Elgin were a legal transaction between the Ottoman and British Empires, while art historians and scholars generally believe that Lord Elgin's actions were a gross overstep of his legal authority, as well as being an act of destruction and defacement.

According to a BBC feature on the Parthenon, "In 2022, the Greek culture minister accused him of "a blatant act of serial theft.""

The British Museum, where most of the marbles are housed, has expressed concerns that if they were to return the Parthenon Marbles to Greece, that would

open the door to further requests and demands for repatriation from nations subject to imperial plunder and conquest. The ‘slippery slope’ argument exposes a fundamental flaw of Western museums. While museums do wonderful work in collecting and preserving the collective history of humankind, imperialistic motivations often drive museums to deny requests for repatriation. The assumption that other nations cannot be the steward of their own cultural heritage is ultimately a settler-colonist perspective, as seen through the lens of the all-powerful empire which believes itself to be wiser, more cultured, more advanced, and generally superior to what it believes is a weaker, more primitive culture to be dismissed as little more than ‘savages.’

Perhaps it is time to call into question considerations of the provenance of items from certain cultural communities, including but not limited to nations formerly under imperial rule; indigenous and First Nations cultures which were subject to forcible removal, theft of land and property, slavery, and genocide at the hands of empire; African peoples who were enslaved and ‘exported’ through the Middle Passage; and other civilizations from whom artifacts were stolen during times of war. Imperialism is an uncomfortable piece of our history to grapple with, but it nevertheless must be addressed in museum spaces.

Requests for repatriation abound. Easter Island's Rapa Nui community has asked the British Museum to return a Moai head named Hoa Hakananai'a. "Under Chilean law, the Moai are deemed an "integral part of the land" rather than artifacts." Additionally, a community representative named Anakena Manutomatoma states that the Rapa Nui "want the museum to understand that the Moai are our family, not just rocks." These unique cultural heritage items now enjoy protection under Chilean law, however, this was not the case when a British naval captain saw it in 1868 and had it removed in an attempt to win the favor of Queen Victoria, who donated the sculpture and another, the Moai Hava, the same officer had stolen to the British Museum, where they remain as of the time of this writing in early 2024.

Discussions between the British Museum and the Rapa Nui have been ongoing but fruitless since July 2018. The British Museum itself is careful not to call the removal 'theft' or imply any wrongdoing on behalf of Commodore Richard Powell, Queen Victoria, the British government, or any entities associated with the museum itself. Instead, it is noted that Powell's crew "discovered" Hoa Hakananai'a and that the Commodore "collected" Moai Hava. This rhetoric is unconvincing, especially in light of the members of the Rapa Nui community who are coming to "realise [sic] just how much of our heritage there is around the world

and starting to ask why our ancestors are in foreign museums," in the words of Rapa Nui sculptor, Benedicto Tuki.

When writing and reading ekphrasis, it is important to take note of the original ownership of the artwork, as well as the context within which the author encountered the art. The potential harm to heritage communities, indigenous nations, spiritual groups, or other cultures must be carefully considered and weighed. Much of the work in museums is stolen; of that – much of it is sacred, or at the very least continues to hold significance to the descendants of the community which created it.

Demands for repatriation should be taken seriously, and ekphrastics, should they be written about materials with contested or wartime provenance, should not be written lightly and should indeed be treated with the appropriate respect for their original owners and those who have a cultural, spiritual, religious, ethnic, or national claim to the art/artifact.

Indeed, all art should be seen through this critical lens of who owned it prior to its current holdings, who benefits from the display of the piece, who profited off its sale, who, if anyone, is harmed by this state of affairs, and whether or not its

acquisition was ethical. Sometimes, it can be difficult to find all the answers to these questions about every work of art. Nevertheless, they remain worthy of our consideration and the effort it takes to avoid harming another person or group of people is never effort that is spent in vain.

# How to Write an Ekphrastic Poem

Choose an artwork that speaks to you in some way. Ideally, this will be a piece that inspires you or moves you. Perhaps it is a painting you remember fondly from your youth. Maybe it's an amphora that was recently on display at a local museum. It could be any of these things or anything in between!

## Ask yourself:

1. What do you want to highlight about the piece?
2. Is there anything that stands out in the foreground, or would you rather draw the reader's attention to the background?
3. What is the subject of the artwork? What do you think was the artist trying to communicate?

4. What does the artwork imply? What values does it espouse? What cultural Zeitgeist does it capture? Does it glorify or vilify a certain group of people or place or time in history?
5. Are there figures in the painting? Try naming them, even if the names do not end up in the final draft of the poem.
6. What, if anything, would you like to reply to or critique about the piece? Now is your chance!
7. What would you like to add to the artwork? Consider this carefully, because your words will change the meaning of the piece through the interaction between poetry and more physical art forms.
8. How would you modify the artwork, if you could have asked the artist to change one detail?
9. Whose perspective is the artwork from?
10. What emotions does the work of art evoke within you? Don't worry about having a 'right answer.' What might make one person feel ecstatic joy might have another furiously stamping away, while a third person begins to cry and a fourth is utterly unmoved.

Also take note of the medium and the dimensions. Is it a large or small work of art? Does it tower above you? Or do you feel giant beside it? Why did the artist make each of the choices they did, in terms of the composition and the thematic content?

Consider that the artwork already communicates a great deal and that the purpose of ekphrasis is not necessarily to faithfully render the work of art on paper – likely, that's already been done! You are allowed to change things about the artwork in your poem. You can imagine that the painting is aged beyond recognition, or that it is so new that the paint is still drying. You can write about a shard of pottery yearning to be whole or an entire piece that had survived all these years intact.

In your poem, you can play with what the original piece communicates to the viewer. Perhaps it is a pastoral scene that you imagine has changed in the past few hundred years. Or perhaps it's a more recent abstract, and you have the creative freedom to interpret it as you will.

Strike a balance between descriptive, concrete details and more airy abstractions. In this case, the artwork does a lot of the heavy lifting in terms of the visual details, but you might want to include auditory or tactile sensations, tastes, or smells, or

juxtapose some other detail from the natural world or an object your life that does not appear in the original artwork.

Consider also what to leave in, and what to deliberately leave out. Absence says as much as presence in an ekphrastic. If a central figure is missing, it makes a certain statement.

You might also want to try creating a persona who has a slightly (or entirely) different worldview from your own who is imagined viewing the piece of art for the first time, or perhaps the thousandth. You might want to imagine a persona viewer who has seen the piece so many times it has become commonplace and faded into the fugue of the background, or even a child who is visiting a particular museum for the first time and has never seen anything quite like what you are writing your ekphrastic in response to.