

**Comparison is the Life-Blood of Criticism:
How to Create One Argument From Two Poems**

The aim of this session is to find classroom strategies that develop students' skills in building innovative and sophisticated arguments about the message, tone and literary techniques of poems. The aim is to help their students develop a complex argument using a series of simple questions to compare two different poems—even when the poems at first glance seem to have very little in common.

POEM 1

**Wallace Stevens
Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird**

I
Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird.

II
I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds.

III
The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.
It was a small part of the pantomime.

IV
A man and a woman
Are one.
A man and a woman and a blackbird
Are one.

V
I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.

POEM 2

**William Blake
A Poison Tree**

I was angry with my friend;
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I water'd it in fears,
Night & morning with my tears:
And I sunned it with smiles,
And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night.
Till it bore an apple bright.
And my foe beheld it shine,
And he knew that it was mine.

And into my garden stole,
When the night had veil'd the pole;
In the morning glad I see;
My foe outstretched beneath the tree.

Now to write a response/essay that compares these two poems...

1. Establish the Differences

Ask the following questions:

	<i>Poem 1</i>	<i>Poem 2</i>
<i>Date</i>	1917	1794
<i>Place</i>	<i>America</i>	<i>England</i>
<i>Cultural-Historical Context</i>	<i>Modern Era...</i>	
<i>Religious Context</i>		
<i>Author (age, gender etc.)</i>		
<i>Literary Context</i>		

Getting this information is a straight-up Wikipedia search task. Use it as an icebreaker to get the students into the poems of focus.

- a) Highlight anything you have found that is a similarity, and save this for later.
- b) Now come up with a short paragraph that picks out some (not all) of these differences, to set up the *APPARENT* lack of similarity between the two poems. The purpose of this passage is twofold: it **INTRODUCES THE POEMS** and it **SHOWS THIS IS A COMPARATIVE ESSAY**.
 - a. 1st sentence: Say they're different...*seemingly*.
 - b. 2nd sentence: Intro to the first one.
 - c. 3rd sentence: Intro to the second one.
 - d. 4th sentence (optional): Say (again) that they're different.

[1] **At first glance**, the two poems POEM 1 and POEM 2 appear to be very different. [2] The haiku-like brevity and enigmatic nature of Stevens' 1917 work "13 Ways" emerged from the cultural context of modernism, in which old poetic forms were being challenged and reshaped. [3] Blake, **on the other hand**, writes in the Christian context of late eighteenth century England, and the conventional form of his poem carries a direct message about anger and the state of sinning mankind. [4] The two poets approach **seemingly** disparate themes using very different poetic devices.

2. Finding (where possible) a Common Denominator to Connect the Poems

Ask the following questions:

	<i>Poem 1</i>	<i>Poem 2</i>
Theme?	human sensation, relationship between people and nature, relationships between people, emotions, nature, human nature...	human emotion, anger, state of humankind, forgiveness, sin, dark impulses...
Message?		
Tone?	enigmatic, simple, minimalist	direct, naïve, immediate
Imagery?		
Poetic Form?	Haiku-influenced free verse	Four stanzas, trochaic (?), four feet per line, couplets: AA, BB, CC
Poetic Devices/Diction?		

Getting this information is a guided reading task.

- a) Brainstorm information to fill all the boxes you can in as many ways as you can. Don't forget to keep your evidence in mind:
 - a. What **images** do you notice?
 - b. What line/phrase is your evidence for these **images**?

- b) Do any of the elements match up? If not, go a step more general in the analysis – try to find the common denominator by broadening your ideas more and more until there's an overlap.
 - a. Blake is interested in *anger*, Stevens perhaps in *wonder* or *personal relationships*. But if we broaden these to their widest, we might that both poets are interested in *human nature*, or *how people interact with the people and things around them*. Now we have a connection! (Remember, not everything needs a common denominator – we only really need one or two points of overlap for a good 'similarities and differences' response.)

- c) Now come up with a short conclusion to the paragraph above that picks out some (not all) of these similarities, to set up similarities between the two poems. The purpose of this passage is twofold: it SHOWS YOU HAVE A DEEPER ANALYSIS OF CONNECTIONS and it MAKES THE CLAIM OF THE ESSAY/RESPONSE.
- a. 1st sentence: Say they're actually similar in some ways.
 - b. 2nd sentence: First similarity.
 - c. 3rd sentence: Second similarity.
 - d. 4th sentence (optional): Sum up the similarities and differences with a roadmap to the essay.

[1] However, closer examination demonstrates that the poets share a number of interests. [2] Both poems focus on human nature. [3] Both also look to the world of nature to find their images and emotions, and express their ideas in deceptively simple language. [4] The two poets explore human experience through a range of poetic devices – examining them side-by-side allows the innovations of each poet to be made clear.

3. Undertaking Close Analysis with Two Poems

Choose any of the boxes in section 2, and repeat the brainstorming exercise in more detail. I'm going to look at *imagery*.

Ask the following questions:

	<i>Poem 1</i>	<i>Poem 2</i>
<i>are the IMAGES positive or negative?</i>		
<i>where are the IMAGES drawn from (e.g. nature/commerce/machines/religion..)?</i>		
<i>what emotions do the IMAGES make you feel?</i>		
<i>what is the purpose of the IMAGES in advancing the broader message of the poem?</i>		

- a) Brainstorm information to fill all the boxes you can in as many ways as you can. Don't forget to keep your evidence in mind:
 - a. What **emotions** do you notice in this image?
 - b. What phrase is your evidence for these **emotions**?
 - c. How does the phrase produce these **emotions**?

- b) It does not matter whether there are any overlaps here. Our work of *linking the poems via comparison* was done in the introduction. Any extra connections are fine and useable, but not absolutely necessary. Use the poems side-by-side to *clarify* what you think of each one, but don't feel the need to obsess over similarities and differences.

- c) Write a paragraph that deals with IMAGERY, and mentions both poems.

[1] Stevens' opening verse establishes the central image of his poem: the blackbird in nature. [2] "Among twenty snowy mountains, / The only moving thing / Was the eye of the blackbird." [3] The emotions behind this image are ambiguous: they are neither positive or negative; instead, the image is simply descriptive of a natural scene. [4] The stillness of the scene (the only verb is "was") invites the reader to calm reflection of our place in the world.¹ [5] Perhaps the most important question the poet asks is how we as humans relate to the blackbird – and to the natural world we live in. [6] Blake's third verse is enigmatic in a different way.

[7] And it grew both day and night.
 Till it bore an apple bright.
 And my foe beheld it shine,
 And he knew that it was mine.

[8] Here again, the natural world is central: anger grows like a tree and produces an "apple". [9] But the poet never makes clear what this apple is, or exactly what it means that the foe recognizes the apple as belonging to the speaker. [10] Both poets leave the reader to consider the true meaning behind the images of nature that they present; both deliberately choose images that are resistant to full explanation as they explore the complexities of human nature in the world.

¹ What would be the effect if the student had written instead: [5] "The image attempts to arouse a sensation in the reader."