4 Craft Strategies to Notice in *The Leaving Morning* (And Why)

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4 Craft Strategies to Notice in The Leaving Morning (and why)
by Julie Patterson, writer-in-residence
Writing workshop teachers use exemplary texts (“touchstone texts”) in the curriculum to provide new ideas and skills. These texts over and over with students, invite students to share what they notice about the craft of these texts, point out new craft strategies that students are ready to comprehend, and invite students to use these or similar strategies in their own writing.

The best touchstone texts are sophisticated enough to work in multiple grade and subject areas. They are often the first – and still one of the most frequently taught or noticed texts that were used. The Leaving Morning by Angela Johnson. Here are just a few of the brilliant craft strategies my students and I have observed.

Repitition
It’s easy to spot repetition in The Leaving Morning, most notably the phrase “We left cold lips on the window.” But the fun part of noticing this with students is hearing their hypotheses as to why author Angela Johnson chose to repeat this phrase. “She wanted to show it wasn’t just any old cold.” “It’s a third grade.”

A fifth grade student read even deeper: “Because that’s how it feels to move. You can’t stop thinking about it. Leaving just keeps bouncing around in your head all the time.”

Readers will also often notice repeated lines and phrases. The key is to use repetition effectively in your own writing. I’ve found, however, that rarely do my students know why those words and phrases were chosen by the author. What is it you’re trying to convey in your writing? Why are they important enough to repeat? When students can form sound hypotheses about the author of the touchstone text used repetition, they can use it the next move in using repetition with intention in their own work.

Word Choice
One of my favorite conversations with middle and upper grade students often stems from our conversation about repetition. As Angela Johnson describes the leaving morning, she repeats slight variations of the phrase I left cold lips on the window. The first time this phrase appears, it is written “We pressed our faces against the hall window and left cold lips on the pane.” I ask students what a word or phrase is, and often they don’t know. Why? Why Angela Johnson chose the words she did? Why not leave out the phrase “We left cold lips on the window.”

“Because she wanted to show it wasn’t just any old cold.”

But this is just a word choice. The sentence appears in the opening lines of the story, and the word, pane, is pivotal in setting the tone and mood. As readers, we know right away that the leaving in this story is going to be painful, sad.

Onomatopoeia or Sound Effects
Students who want to show off how smart they are like to use the term onomatopoeia in this conversation, because they know that’s a vocabulary word they are supposed to know in language arts. I, on the other hand, prefer to talk about repetition or sound words, because honestly I can’t spell onomatopoeia to write it on a notice card. (And seriously, I have the highest degree attainable in onomatopoeia to write it on a noticing chart. (And on the other hand, prefer to talk about sound effects or sound effects, because honestly I can’t spell onomatopoeia to write it on a notice card. (And seriously, I have the highest degree attainable in creative writing and have never used the word onomatopoeia in any school language arts class). Like I said in the other conversation described, what is important is that students can articulate why Angela Johnson put the sound effect (shhh sound) in the beginning of the story, “Shhhhwell.” “What does that sound effect add to the story or reveal about it?”

When I asked one fourth grade class, I heard, “It’s like the whhh sound, so we know it will be a quiet story.”

“Or a sad story. It’s like the author is crying and someone is comforting her.”

“Maybe she’s going somewhere where they don’t have sound effects.”

“Or a sad story. It’s like the author is crying and someone is comforting her.”

“-Or a sad story. It’s like the author is crying and someone is comforting her.”

“I don’t know about you, but I’d sure rather hear writers use sound effects. I get to hear my students use them.”

“Because the perfect word here is pane.”

“I was speechless. I love it when the students teach me.”

My goal in all of the conversations about craft strategies is to help students see that what the author puts on the page is a choice, a decision, that their purpose is to move forward, that they want you to feel the way the story the way we want to. We led the readers where we wanted them to go.”