

ART ACROSS THE CURRICULUM | ENGLISH

DESCRIPTIVE WRITING

INSPIRED BY JOHN BRACK'S *COLLINS ST, 5P.M., 1955*

LEVELS 7–8

OVERVIEW

In this resource students will engage in critical and creative thinking to analyse *Collins St, 5p.m.*, 1955, and develop an understanding of its historical context. Taking inspiration from the painting, they will compare and contrast how artists and writers use imagery to convey meaning. They will explore how vocabulary and literary devices, such as simile and alliteration, effect meaning and apply these techniques in their own descriptive writing project.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Analyse and interpret John Brack's *Collins St, 5p.m.*, 1955
- Discuss the relationship between visual art and poetry
- Develop strategies for expanding vocabulary
- Apply vocabulary and language features to create meaning in creative writing
- Write and present creative texts inspired by themes in John Brack's *Collins St, 5p.m.*

LINKS TO THE VIC ENGLISH CURRICULUM

YEAR 7

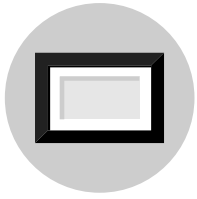
- Analyse how point of view is generated in visual texts by means of choices, including gaze, angle and social distance (VCELA370).
- Analyse and explain the ways text structures and language features shape meaning and vary according to audience and purpose (VCELY379).
- Demonstrate understanding of how the choice of language features, images and vocabulary effects meaning (extract from Achievements Standards).

YEAR 8

- Recognise that vocabulary choices contribute to the specificity, abstraction and style of texts (VCELA401).
- Apply increasing knowledge of vocabulary, text structures and language features to understand the content of texts (VCELY411).
- Explain how language features, images and vocabulary are used to represent different ideas and issues in texts (extract from Achievements Standards).

ABOUT THE WORK

1. JOHN BRACK *COLLINS ST, 5P.M., 1955*



IN THE GALLERY



IN SCHOOL



John Brack (1920–99) was one of Australia's leading modern artists. His iconic work, *Collins St, 5p.m.*, 1955, offers a social commentary on everyday life in the 1950s. In 2011, the painting was voted the National Gallery of Victoria's most popular work of art.

John Brack was interested in describing modern life and society and his subjects were everyday people. *Collins St, 5p.m.* was painted at a time when memories of the Depression and wartime austerity still lingered; however, there was also cause for celebration, as the Australian economy thrived with full employment and home building soared. To prepare for the painting, Brack stood in a doorway in Melbourne's Collins Street between 4.45 pm and 5.15 pm for many weeks and sketched streams of rush hour workers on their way home from work. He also referenced photographs of buildings in Collins Street.

During this period in Melbourne, most of the population was of Anglo-Celtic origin. Brack has depicted the people in *Collins St, 5p.m.* monochromatically to reflect the similarity between them.

The artist's depiction of these emotionally closed, robotic figures, seemingly unaware of each other and their surroundings, may be read as a loss of individuality and sense of alienation in the masses. Brack noted, 'As a matter of fact it used to strike me as most eerie, to be sketching within 3 feet of so many people, none of whom took the slightest notice'. Brack's paintings, often sombre in tone, reveal insights into the human condition.

John Brack
Collins St, 5p.m. 1955
oil on canvas
114.8 x 162.8 cm
National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne
Purchased, 1956
© National Gallery of Victoria

1.1 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1955 Melburnians felt optimistic and proud of their city in the lead-up to the 1956 Olympic Games. Buildings such as the Melbourne Olympic Pool and Olympic Park were constructed and the first skyscraper, ICI House, was approved. Modern architecture flowered and, ironically, the cast-iron verandahs of shop fronts and houses, now preserved as heritage features, were demolished. The first television licences were issued before the Olympics were broadcast. People without television sets sometimes gathered in front of department store windows to watch what became known as 'the friendly Games'.

1.2 IMMIGRATION

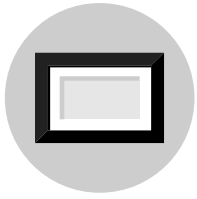
The White Australia Policy (1901–73) accounted for the lack of cultural diversity in Melbourne during the 1950s. Based on fears that there would be problems with assimilation and a threat of cheap labour, the policy restricted immigration of non-white people on racial grounds. Australia at this time was deeply linked to its colonial heritage and the aim of the policy was to uphold the British traditions and way of life. Citizens from mainland Europe and Britain, however, were encouraged to settle in Australia and this new wave of immigration transformed the country.

1.3 THE ARTIST

John Brack spent most of his life living in or near the city of Melbourne. He attended evening art classes at the National Gallery School from 1938 to 1940. He served in the army from 1940 to 1946 and, following his discharge, he returned to the National Gallery School full-time until 1949. In addition to his painting career, Brack was a respected teacher and art reviewer. He was an avid reader of literature throughout his life and in the 1930s he considered becoming a poet. Writers such as Rainer Maria Rilke, Jean-Paul Sartre, W. H. Auden, Henry James and T. S. Eliot influenced his thinking and personal philosophies about art and life.

PRE-VISIT WARM UP

2. EXPAND YOUR VOCABULARY



IN THE GALLERY



IN SCHOOL

Look closely at the work for three minutes. Let your eyes wander over every part of the painting and try to notice the colours, the shapes of the faces and their expressions, the building and the tree.

2.1 READING THE PAINTING

Reading a work is just like reading a piece of creative writing except that instead of words an artist uses colour, line, tone, shape, repetition, exaggeration, viewpoint and composition to create a meaning or mood.

- Discuss how the artist has used those elements to create mood in *Collins Street, 5p.m.*
- What might the limited colour palette or elongated faces communicate about Brack's perception of the 1950s in Melbourne?
- What do you notice about the line of office workers in the middle of the painting – what might this suggest about how the artist viewed them?
- What one word would you choose to capture the mood of the painting?

2.2 SYNONYM CHALLENGE

Make a list of all of the words that come to mind when you look at John Brack's *Collins St. 5p.m.*

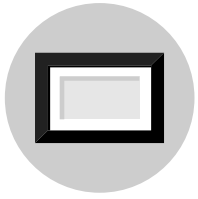
- Your list might include your personal thoughts, items that you see (nouns), or descriptive words (adjectives); for example, 'bleak', 'robotic', and 'marching'.
- Now think of as many words as you can, which are synonymous with (meaning the same thing as) the words on your list. For instance, alternative ways to express 'bleak' might be 'desolate', 'austere' and 'grim'.
- If you are working in a small group then add some competition and play a game. Each person suggests a descriptive word for something they see in the painting aloud. The others try to be the first to name three synonyms for the word.

2.3 THE WORD CHAIN GAME

Another fun way to expand your vocabulary, is to play the word chain game.

- Start with a word from your list that describes the mood of the painting.
- Use the last letter of the word to start a new word that describes aspects of the painting.
- Continue to do the same with your second and third words, and so on. For instance, if your word was grim, you might continue with miserable, eerie, then exhaustion.
- How long can you make your chain?

ACTIVITY



IN THE GALLERY



IN SCHOOL

3. USING IMAGERY AND LITERARY DEVICES TO PAINT PICTURES WITH WORDS

Writers use imagery and literary devices to add colour and interest to their descriptive writing, aiming to paint a picture in the mind of the reader. The more specific a writer is with language, such as adjectives, adverbs and simile, the more interesting that picture will be. Authors may also bring their writing alive by writing about their sensory experiences such as what they saw heard, smelled and touched.

3.1 BE SPECIFIC

Read the following poem aloud. Identify words where the poet has appealed to the senses of sight, hearing and smell to create vivid 'pictures' in the reader's mind. For instance, instead of writing that the bird 'flew' the poet writes 'he darted, circled, swooped or lifted in the blue'.

Be specific

Don't say you saw a bird: you saw a swallow,
Or a great horned owl, a hawk, or oriole.
Don't just tell me that he flew;
That's what any bird can do;
Say he darted, circled, swooped or lifted in the blue.

Don't say the sky behind the bird was pretty;
It was watermelon pink streaked through with gold;
Gold bubbled like a fountain
From a pepperminted mountain
And shone like Persian rugs when they are old.

Don't tell me that the air was sweet with fragrance;
Say it smelled of minted grass and lilac bloom;
Don't say your heart was swinging;
Name the tune that it was singing,
And how the moonlight's neon filled the room.

Don't say the evening creatures all were playing;
Mention tree toad's twanging, screeching fiddle notes,
Picture cricket's constant strumming
To the mass mosquitoes humming
While the frogs are singing bass deep in their throats.
Don't use a word that's good for all the senses
There's a word for every feeling one can feel.
If you want your lines to be terrific;
Then do make your words specific,
For words can paint a picture that's real

Mauree Applegate

3.2 GET CREATIVE WITH COLOUR

Have you ever noticed that paint manufacturers create exotic, tempting names for the colours they sell? Shades of red might be called 'capsicum', 'mulberry', 'raspberry macaroon' or 'pink clay' whereas 'olive leaf', 'equatorial forest', 'spruce', or 'rainforest glow' are inventive ways of describing shades of green.

- 1 Make a list of all the colours you can see in the painting, such as brown or yellow.
- 2 Describe the colours on your list in as many different and unusual ways as you can. For example, in *Be specific* the sky is described as 'watermelon pink streaked through with gold'.
- 3 Here are some creative descriptors for brown. Can you fill in the missing letters?

B _ O _ _ E

SA _ D _ TO _ E

S _ P _ _

TE _ S _ A I N _ D

3.3 ALLURING ALLITERATIONS AND ENTICING TITLES

Alliteration is created when a series of consecutive words begin with the same consonant; for example, 'The frightened fox fled across the field'. It can create impact, set a mood, create rhythm and inject humour. Newspaper headlines and advertising straplines often use alliteration to attract attention or memorability.

1. Imagine that *Collins Street, 5p.m.* is an image on a newspaper front page or at the top of an online article. What might the article be about?
 - a. Create a title for the article using alliteration; for example, 'A mass of Melburnians migrate miserably from the metropolis'.
 - b. If you are working with a small group, create a performance poem where each person reads out their alliterative title emphasising the first letter of each word.
2. Now imagine that *Collins Street, 5p.m.*, is on the front cover of each of the following categories: a novel; a film; a computer game; an album.
 - a. In which genre would you place each one? For example, would the work be more suited to the cover of a romance, murder mystery, spy or classical novel?
 - a. Invent an original title for each category. This time alliteration isn't essential, but the titles must still entice prospective readers, viewers, listeners and game players.

3.4 WRITING SIMILES

Similes are phrases that use comparison words such as 'like' or 'as' to compare two things with similar characteristics. By creating links between concepts that may not be immediately obvious, they help the reader to better imagine the scene being described; for example, 'the moon glowed like a shiny silver button' paints a more vivid picture than 'the moon was glowing'.

- 1 Look closely at the tree and the line of faceless office workers in *Collins Street, 5p.m.*
- 2 Describe them as if you were talking to someone who has never seen the painting before.
- 3 Write a simile that creates a vivid image of each feature; for example, 'The tree is as lifeless as a skeleton'.

3.5 SHOWING AND TELLING: IT'S ALL IN THE DETAIL

Good description involves 'showing' rather than 'telling'. Compare the two sentences in the example below. Which one provides the best visual image of the man?

	EXAMPLE	CHARACTERISTICS
Telling	The man looks sad and wears a hat.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bald sentence• Basic information• No detail
Showing	The gaunt, bowler-hatted man with sharply chiselled features and sallow skin, draped in folds over hollow cheeks, squints through stark, black-rimmed glasses in the winter gloom as he marches steadfastly home.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Intense detail• Uses adjectives and adverbs to paint a vivid picture

Choose an aspect of the painting, such as an individual person, an entire line of people, the lamppost, the buildings or even the colour palette the artist has used. Write a descriptive sentence that involves 'showing' by using as much detail as possible.

3.6 EVERYONE'S A POET

When Brack was creating *Collins St, 5p.m.*, he has indicated that he was reflecting on part of T. S. Eliot's poem *The waste land*, 1922.

The waste land

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of the winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many.
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.
T. S. Eliot

- 1 Have a debate among your group about the similarities and differences between poetry and art, considering how writers and artists employ both symbolism and imagery.

Symbolism is present when a word, phrase, item or image is used to represent a more complex idea.

Imagery involves using a group of descriptive techniques that appeal to the physical senses and emotions, creating vivid 'images' in the mind of the reader or viewer.

- 2 What evidence in *Collins St, 5p.m* suggests that John Brack was influenced by T. S. Eliot's poem? Consider the use of mood, imagery and symbolism to explain how the poem is similar to, and differs from, the painting.

POST-VISIT PROJECT

4. CREATIVE WRITING



IN SCHOOL

Create an imaginative piece of writing using one or more of the projects below. Utilise the creative words, poems and literary devices that you practised in the activities to fill your writing with colour and life.

4.1 WRITE A POEM

1. Write a poem inspired by John Brack's *Collins Street, 5p.m.* If you are nervous about writing poetry, try employing the structure in the table below.

SECTION	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE
Title	A powerful title that captures the main idea of the painting.	CLONES CLOCK OFF
Line 1	One word: capture the mood.	Monotony
Line 2	A short phrase: what is the artist communicating about the workers?	Trapped in the daily routine
Line 3	Three adjectives: describe the people.	Dull, dismal, robotic
Line 4	A short phrase: describe the line of people in the middle of the painting.	A stream of mesmerised workers
Line 5	A simile: describe what they look like.	Like an army marching in time
Line 6	A short phrase that uses a colour descriptor: where are the people?	Clockwork figures trapped in a sepia world
Line 7	Another short phrase: communicate a meaning from the painting.	The daily grind
Line 8	A question.	But it's different now – isn't it?
Line 9	Repeat line 1.	Monotony

2. A free verse poem has no defined structure or rhythm like a haiku or sonnet. It does not rhyme and allows the poet complete freedom to create their own style of poem. Create a free verse poem inspired by John Brack's *Collins Street, 5p.m.*
 - a Decide on the key ideas that you want to communicate.
 - b Write a descriptive piece about your idea using paragraphs. Utilise descriptive and sensory language to make the text feel alive and interesting.
 - c Condense your piece into a series of short lines.
 - d Revise and edit the lines until they sound strongly expressive when read aloud.
 - e If necessary, edit the lines again to polish and refine the poem.

The following student poem is an example of free verse poetry:

Dead alive
An army of people
Marching along
All heading in the same direction
As though something is calling.
But what?
The ritual,
The daily stain,
Always
Everyday Same time

Same place,
Covered in shadow,
Dark clones,
Skin folds, masking expression,
Tiredness plastered on their faces
Sleeping with eyes wide shut
Dead alive

4.2 A MEDIA PERSPECTIVE

- 1 Research what life was like in 1950s Melbourne, or in a town or city close to you. Consider aspects such as transport, architecture, fashion, cultural diversity, common jobs, values, codes of behaviour, technologies and gender roles.
 - a Create a chart or Venn diagram that illustrates the similarities and differences between city life in Australia today and in the 1950s.
 - b Write a feature article about how city life in Australia has changed since the 1950s. Include photographs from both periods and discuss whether the changes are positive or negative. Remember to create an eye-catching title.
- 2 Use Brack's *Collins Street, 5p.m.* as inspiration to write a piece for an online newspaper or blog from one of the following perspectives:
 - a An art critic writing a short review.
 - b A fashion expert describing popular clothes in Melbourne in 1955.
 - c One of the people in the painting who has now reached old age writing about how life in Melbourne has changed since 1955.

EXTENSION PROJECT

5. THE BAR IN FOCUS



IN SCHOOL



John Brack's work, *The bar*, 1954, is a companion to *Collins St, 5p.m.* Under the watchful eyes of a stern bartender, a band of near-identical workers urgently drink their fill before the six o'clock closing that was enforced in Melbourne pubs until 1966. As a pair, the two paintings offer an insight into city life during this decade in Australia's history. In this work, Brack has appropriated Édouard Manet's famous painting, *A bar at the Folies-Bergère*, 1882, and replaced the opulence of 1880s Paris with the dour austerity of 1950s Melbourne.

1. Look closely at the painting for three minutes.
 - a Make a list of the things that you notice. Do they provide clues about what might be happening in the work?
 - b What can you hear, smell, see and taste in the bar?
 - c Which particular images stand out in the painting? Why might Brack have wanted to highlight these images?
 - d Artists and writers sometimes use strong contrasts in their work to catch our attention or develop a particular idea or mood. How many opposite concepts can you find in the painting? For example, angular vs rounded, fragility vs strength.
 - e Where might the artist have used symbolism in *The bar*? Choose one item in the painting, such as the flowers and explain what they might symbolise.
 - f Compare *The Bar* with *Collins Street, 5p.m.* In what ways are they similar and different?

John Brack

The bar 1954

oil on canvas

97.0 x 130.3 cm irreg.

National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne

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2. Bartender in profile
 - a How might you describe the body language and facial expression of the bartender? What might it suggest about how she perceives her role in the bar?
 - b If the bartender were an animal, what would she be?
 - c Which adjectives could you use to describe her clothes and hairstyle?
 - d Create a simile to describe her outstretched fingers.
 - e Write a detailed description of the bartender using the technique of 'showing'.
 - a Create a six-line biography of the bartender that details her name, nationality, family, social class, education and dreams.

3. Use your description and biography for one or more of the following writing activities:
 - a Write a brief monologue outlining what the bartender in the painting is dreaming or thinking about.
 - b The bartender has a story that has been kept a secret until now and she is 'telling all' to a magazine or a TV program. Write the story she has to tell.
 - c Create a free verse poem.
 - d Imagine you are sitting in the bar in the painting. Which snippets of conversation might you overhear? Create a simple dialogue between two customers in the bar, or between a customer and the bartender.
 - e Write a text message to a friend that explains what the painting looks like, what it could mean and how it emotionally affects you. For an extra challenge, limit yourself to 140 words.

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