

# WoodmereArtMuseum

TELLING THE STORY OF PHILADELPHIA'S ART AND ARTISTS

## Storytelling and Critical Thinking through the Narrative Art of Edith Neff

*NOTE to the Teacher / Parent / Homeschooler:*

*This teaching resource packet is our way of bringing the educational ideas of the many class tours and teacher workshops provided by the Woodmere Art Museum to your home or classroom.*

*Each resource highlights specific learning skills and focuses on key works from the Woodmere collection. These resources are also designed to be interdisciplinary and include links to other information sites, as well as suggestions for extensions to meet the unique interests of your students/children.*

*We hope to expand on these resources and welcome your feedback. If you use this resource please take a minute to tell us of your successes and struggles.*

*E-mail your feedback to: [education@woodmereartmuseum.org](mailto:education@woodmereartmuseum.org)*

## The Nature of Storytelling and Connections with Critical Thinking

### *The “Big Idea” of this teaching resource:*

This teaching resource is designed to connect two essential skills: **First**, the skill of storytelling. There is no activity more closely connected to the experience of being human than storytelling, both in its social implications and its historical references.

**Second**, the skill of critical thinking (actually a collection of behaviors) which allows us to examine our reactions and our perspectives and thereby to grow as individuals.

Storytelling and Critical Thinking can be accessed and nurtured through many media and in many situations, but few as immediate and engaging as the visual arts.

### **Process Part I (Storytelling):**

- 1- PowerPoint presentation, *Storytelling*. Use *Storytelling PowerPoint Notes* in the *Appendix* section of this Resource. This accompanies the PowerPoint, and allows you to guide your students through this introductory information.

Along the way, you will need to open and read two stories, as indicated in the PowerPoint notes: the *Butterfly Story* and the *Change Your Course Story* in the *Appendix*.

Be sure to highlight the following points:

- a. From the opening video (Heider and Simmel Study video link provided in *Suggested Resources* section – Why do most people see a story taking place here? Why do people take random objects moving about and attach characters and conflict to them? This is essential to the activities which follow.
- b. Allow sufficient time for response to the final slide. These responses will help you guide discussion when engaged with the works of art which follow.

2- This workshop will demonstrate how to discover stories and develop critical thinking skills with the art of Edith Neff.

Intro:

*Our Town: A Retrospective of Edith Neff* was an exhibition at Woodmere Art Museum in the fall of 2019 - January, 2020.



“I’ve always been a Philadelphia artist. These are the streets I grew up in, the people I knew, my own family. I am interested in exploring the ordinary and the familiar.”

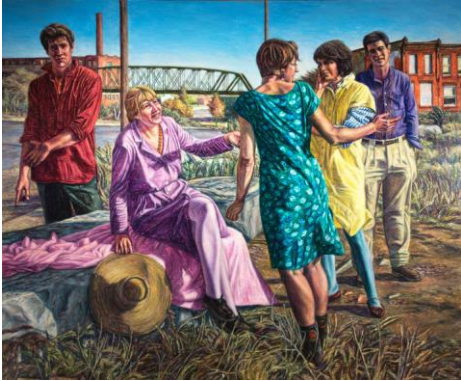
-Edith Neff

Edith Neff (1943–1995) was a leading realist painter of her time, praised for her sophisticated use of color, light and composition. Her paintings explored the drama of everyday life, presenting questions about human relationships and their links to particular places. Her work examines the social and cultural fabric of Philadelphia and raises questions of race, gender, and identity.

Neff worked from photographs she took herself. Most of the figures in her work are people she knew, her family, fellow artists and colleagues, friends, neighbors, and students. The city itself was central to her work: its public buildings, playgrounds, parks, pools, schools, and beaches were frequent settings.

3-Click to read about this [artist](#)

4-[Click Here](#) to open the image:



Take a minute to examine the image carefully. (*NOTE: If your class is not used to looking closely at an image, you can take this time to engage them in an activity such as: make a list of 10 things you see, share and then add to the list, or other "close looking" activities.*)

**A. What seems to be happening here? What stories can you imagine from this scene?**

Discuss:

**Setting** (Where does this scene take place?) Is there a mood in this scene? If so, what do you see that tells you that?)

**Character** (Who might these people be? Who is the central character? Which of the other characters seem to be part of the main story and which seem to be less involved? Why do you think so?)

**Plot** (Use your imagination to hypothesize what they might be discussing.)

**Conflict** (Your ideas about plot will help shape possible conflicts in the scene. Remember, you can't have a story without some sort of conflict. Also remember that **conflict often arises from things in a scene that are unexplained or don't seem to "fit."**)

B. The goal of the following activity is to have the students assume the persona of a character in the artwork with the idea of allowing them to see through someone else's viewpoint.

(Note: This might be a good time to discuss body language and non-verbal clues for helping to understand how another might be feeling.)

Encourage your students to “get into” their character.

Speaking and thinking through the eyes of someone else (even in a painting) is not only a way of discovering story ideas, it is also key to developing empathy toward others.

**Online class:** Part 1:

Ask students to assume the pose of a character in the artwork.

In person class:

Make sure hand positions are as accurate as possible in their poses.

What might the man in the red shirt be indicating by his hand gestures?

What about the woman in pink or purple?

Look at the other man in the scene. What is he indicating by having his hands in his pockets?

Part 2:

To initiate a conversation between characters, either **from** a student assuming a pose or **directed to** a student assuming a pose:

What might one person say to another in this story?

Why do you think so?

**In-person class:**

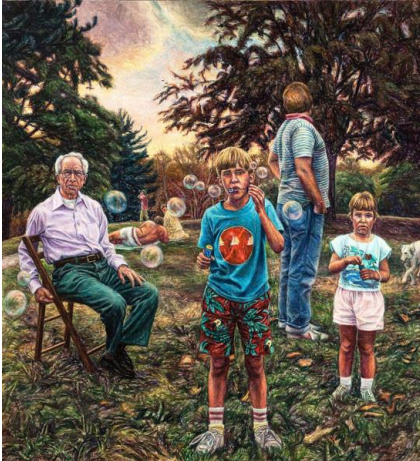
Have 5 students come to the front of the classroom and assume the poses of the people in this painting.

Initiate a conversation similar to the activity above.

**Additional Information:** Introduce the title: *Demeter Searching for the Lost Persephone*, 1986, by Edith Neff (Woodmere Art Museum: Gift of Maria Smith, 2014) How does knowing the title limit or inform on how one thinks about the story in the painting?

Older students may enjoy exploring if the artist wanted the story of Demeter and Persephone to be a metaphor or serve as a springboard for interpretation. (See link in *Suggested Resources* for story of Demeter and Persephone)

5-[Click Here](#) to open the image: *Evening Light*, 1986-87, by Edith Neff (Woodmere Art Museum: Gift of Albert Neff, 1996)



As before, take a minute to examine the painting in detail. Discuss what you see. What story elements are immediately visible in this painting? Discuss to make sure everyone understands character and setting.

Judging from the old man and two children, (the characters facing forward), who might be telling this story (**point of view**)?

*(Note: For an older class, you could discuss how this story would be told in First Person, (I), Second Person, (You), Third Person, (a narrator) or Third Person Omniscient, (narrator knows all of the thoughts and feelings of all of the characters in the story).*

**How is the audience/reader/viewer implicated in this story?**

Neff's realism provokes an intense psychological relationship between the people she depicts and their relationship with the viewer. How does the viewer play an active role in this story? This focuses on how the viewer brings their own predispositions, experiences, and lens to the story and why there are varied interpretations.

There are several possible stories, so direct students to choose a story which comes to mind, and write down the characters (notice different age groups, setting, including mood, (transitional colors in the sky), possible plot, conflict, and point of view.

Students could work individually or in pairs to write a piece of these stories. Read and discuss some of the samples.

6-Discuss: How does creating a story change how you look at the work of art?

### Assessment:

1. Assessing storytelling through art: Select an image from a magazine, Google News, or any work of art (if you are feeling daring, you can even choose something abstract). Look closely at your chosen image and write down the following: setting, character, plot, conflict, viewpoint.

Then, in a few sentences, indicate a possible story. (The idea here is that stories are a natural part of the human creative process.)

2. Choose one of the Edith Neff images and compose your story in some detail. Be sure to make the conflict clear and to have some sort of resolution of that conflict. Write the story either in first person or third person, or, assign students a role and have them tell the story from that character's viewpoint.

### Process Part II (Critical Thinking):

- 1- [Click](#) to open the image: *Swimming Pool at Hunting Park, 1975-76*, by Edith Neff (Woodmere Art Museum: Gift of Drs. Herbert and Faith Cohen, 2014)



Take a minute to look closely at the painting before responding. Of the story elements, which is the most significant here, and why do you think so? (Typical response is character, although setting is also significant. Character comes most readily to viewer's mind because the people are all involved in something, and because they show clear emotional expressions.)

- 2- As before, who are these people and what are they thinking/feeling?  
Why do you say so?
- 3- What might they be saying to each other, or thinking of each other,  
and why do you say so?
- 4- Find potential conflict. What is odd here? What do facial  
expressions and gestures reveal? The artist places a red ball in the  
foreground. What role could this ball play in the story?
- 5- Critical thinking involves a more detailed investigation of our  
responses. Your responses to questions 2, 3, and 4 are not facts –  
they are opinions. Think of opinions as hypotheses that you have  
formed.

What evidence from the painting supports your hypotheses? (Body language, gestures, Can you add to the strength of your hypotheses with any knowledge or experience of human behavior?)

After forming a hypothesis, the next step in the Critical Thinking process is to support that hypothesis with information from the work you are examining.

- 6- The final aspect of Critical Thinking involves **corroboration**. Can you support your hypothesis with information from outside the work? (Yes, knowledge of human behavior is one form of corroboration, although it typically involves additional hypotheses buried within that knowledge.) Opportunities for research in where you go for corroboration: outside sources; textual research; photographs (Edith Neff's photographs reveal her decision is composing her story: see *power point*). Brainstorm as a group for other ideas.
- 7- Finally, **after your search for corroboration, does your original hypothesis seem to hold up?** Does it need to be revised, or even discarded? Sometimes the best way to understand is to start over. (Keep in mind the old saying: "If you are on the wrong bus, every stop will be the wrong stop." Are you on the right bus?)



## Assessment

1. Go to any news source: newspaper, news magazine, news website, etc. And identify at least 4 statements that are opinions or hypotheses. Identify how the reporter/writer has supported their hypotheses, and consider how you could research to corroborate. (You may want to continue with the corroborating process, as this is how fact-checkers work in the press or on the web.)
2. Return to one of your own hypotheses from the art images above and follow through on the corroborative process. Write an explanation of your research and a summary of your findings. If you were unable to clearly corroborate your hypothesis, be sure to include that in your explanation.

## Suggested Resources:

- The animation that was used in the Heider and Simmel study: Heider, F., & Simmel, M. (1944) An experimental study in apparent behavior. *The American Journal of Psychology*, 57, 243-259. [Click Here](#)
- How Telling Stories Makes Us Human – from Time Magazine [Click Here](#)
- Ode On a Grecian Urn by John Keats – with poem guide [Click Here](#)
- The Art of Immersion – Why do We Tell Stories – from Wired Magazine [Click Here](#)
- Gods and Goddess of Ancient Greece - British Museum, [Click here](#)
- Narrative Art – with many internal links – from Wikipedia [Click Here](#)
- Why Your Brain Loves Good Storytelling – from Harvard Business Review [Click Here](#)
- (from the many Ted Talks on the subject of storytelling: Finding the Story Inside the Painting – by Tracy Chevalier [Click Here](#)
- Project Zero, Artful Thinking, Harvard Graduate School of Education [Click Here](#)
- Edith Neff: Discovering A Story in Art, Woodmere Art Museum [Click Here](#)
- Student Activities: Discovery A Story, Woodmere Art Museum [Click Here](#)

## Appendix

### Storytelling workshop - NOTES: Introductory Powerpoint

- (opening video slide): Fritz Heider and Mary-Ann Simmel 1944 study causality (how do we determine what has happened):
  - What kind of person is the big triangle?
  - What kind of person is the circle?
  - Why did the triangles fight?
  - What does the end of the animation show?
- Why are we seeing these as stories and characters? (approx. 90% do)
  - What does it say about us? (the workings of our minds)
    - Need for stories
    - Need to make sense of things
    - Tendency toward anthropomorphism
  - Other examples?
- Cave paintings – likely the first “visual arts”
  - What stories are being told?
  - Why were they painted, and why on the walls of caves?
  - What can we add to our need/reasons for storytelling?
- The Butterfly Story: purposes of stories
  - What was learned?
  - How is this different than stating the “moral” simply as a rule of behavior? Why did we insert a moral in the first place?
  - How did the story make you feel? Do we learn more from failure or success?
- Change Your Course Story: making assumptions
  - What was the purpose of this story?
  - How did you feel about the characters in the story?
- SO . . .
  - Summarize what we know about stories and about our need (as a species) to both tell them and experience them? (Create a chart paper with class)
  - Other ideas?
- What makes up a story? **What do you need to have in order to have a story?** (setting character, plot, conflict, point of view)

- However – We don't tell a story the same way to different people. (i.e. we tell a story differently to a young child than to another adult). Therefore, there is a 6<sup>th</sup> element of stories – that is the recipient. **The reader/viewer shapes the story and shapes what can be accomplished through the story, and even how the story is told.** How does this connect to the visual arts.
- Final slide and comments?

## The Story of the Butterfly

My daughter had found and put into a jar the cocoon of a butterfly. One day a small opening appeared. She sat and watched the butterfly for several hours as it struggled to squeeze its body through the tiny hole. Then it stopped, as if it couldn't go further.

So my daughter decided to help the butterfly. She took a pair of scissors and carefully snipped off the sides of the cocoon – enlarging the opening. The butterfly emerged easily but it had a swollen body and shriveled wings.

She continued to watch it, expecting that any minute the wings would enlarge and expand enough to support the body, Neither happened!  
In fact the butterfly spent the rest of its short life crawling around her room. It was never able to fly.

As it turned out, the restricting cocoon and the struggle required by the butterfly to get through the opening was a way of forcing fluid from the butterfly's body into its wings so that it would be ready to fly.

Once she understood what she, in her kindness, had done, my daughter was horrified and angry at her haste and sorry for what she had done.

But she did learn. Sometimes struggles are exactly what we need in our lives. Going through life with no obstacles could cripple us. We will not be as strong as we could have been and we would never fly.

## Change Your Course, Now! - Assumption Making

A ship had been at sea in bad weather for days. As the visibility was not good because of a heavy fog, the captain stayed on the bridge to keep an eye on all directions. Suddenly the lookout on the bridge cried, "I can see light far away."

The captain shouted to the signalman, "Signal the other ship: We are on a collision course. It is advisable that you change your course 30 degrees."

The signal that came back read: "You are advised to change your course 30 degrees!"

The captain said to the signalman, "Send to him: This is the ship's captain. Change your course 30 degrees immediately to avoid collision."

"I'm a seaman second class," came the reply. "No, I repeat, you change your course immediately to avoid collision."

The captain became furious. He said to the signalman, "Send: This is a US battleship, the second largest in the United States. I demand that you immediately change your course!" Then came the signal from the other.

"This is a lighthouse. Your call."