



# Haruspicy

## Combining Science and the Art of Divination to Explore the Language of the Body

JANE LECROY

*This lesson addresses the focus standards for science in the seventh grade as determined by the Common Core State Standards: Classifying, Communicating, Comparing & Contrasting, Gathering & Organizing Data, Generalizing and Making Decisions. It also meets the Common Core writing standards 1–6.*

**A**S EVERYONE KNOWS, our bodies literally reveal our health by the way they appear and function. But have you heard that if your palms itch, you're going to get some money soon? If your ears are ringing, someone is talking about you? Are the eyes the windows to the soul?

Our bodies have a history of telling us things figuratively as well as literally. Haruspicy is the name given to the practice of divination based on “reading” the entrails of animals killed in sacrifice. One

who practices this art is called a haruspex. Ancient Romans used to “read” the entrails of the body in order to make predictions and to give explanations for occurrences they could not otherwise understand. It was a way of empowering themselves in the face of life's great uncertainties. The Roman haruspex would read the body's entrails in the same way a palm reader interprets the lines of your hand, or others “read” coffee grounds or tea leaves in the bottom of a cup, or the stars at the time of your birth: to reveal insights into your life.

The seventh-grade Common Core standards for science include a study of the human body. Although this is a visceral topic, it is imbued with poetry as well: The body is the sensor for our experience of the world, and it is through the body that we translate our feelings and knowledge. Are we not each a kind of haruspex who makes sense of the outer world by reading the inner world? We use our imaginations to transform the literal into the figurative in order to conquer our limitations. It is this art of divination, of reading the body, that inspired the following writing exercise, which gives students the opportunity to synthesize and integrate the information they have learned about the body through imaginative writing. By assembling the facts they have learned about the body in a unique and creative way, students are able

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*Jane LeCroy is a poet, performance artist, and educator. LeCroy graduated from Eugene Lang College of The New School University, after studying with poets and educators such as Sekou Sundiata, Kurtis Lamkin, Indran Amirthanagayam, Christian McEwen, Jane Lazarre, Mark Statman, Greg Tewksbury, and Nancy Barnes. Since 1997, LeCroy has been publishing student work and teaching writing, literature and performance to all ages through the artist-in-the-schools organizations T&W, DreamYard, and Global Writes. Her multimedia book *Signature Play (Three Rooms Press, 2013)* received a Pushcart Prize nomination and features her lyric poems, musical scores, visual art, and links to audio files. LeCroy fronts the avant-pop band *The Icebergs*.*

*Ever had butterflies in your stomach? I ask. Why do we associate nervousness with our stomachs?*

Students recognize that when you are nervous your stomach actually feels upset.

to demonstrate their understanding of what they've learned, as the Common Core requires. And what seventh-grader in the throes of puberty wouldn't be interested in the constructive deconstruction of the body?

I begin by giving the students a little history of the art of divining meaning. Most students are familiar with divining, even if they don't know that word. I ask students if they have heard of using the observation of seemingly random events to glean knowledge in a superstitious way. I give the example of reading Tarot cards and coffee grounds, students offer astrology, and reading palms and tea leaves. Kids who are into fantasy fiction offer runes and crystals. Then, I tell them about haruspicy and, at first, they are usually enthralled by the goriness of it; you definitely get their attention! There are haruspicy "maps" you can find on the web that can be presented to the class as well. After introducing the idea of making predictions based on the body, I ask my students how they would "read" the organs of the body.

*Ever had butterflies in your stomach? I ask. Why do we associate nervousness with our stomachs?* Students recognize that when you are nervous your stomach actually feels upset. *Why do you think the heart came to symbolize love?* Students recognize that seeing someone you have a crush on does make your heart literally race. To model this type of poetic thinking, brainstorm as a class what organs or systems might represent what emotions or life conundrums. Provide reasons why, based on attributes of that organ or system, offering reasons why it makes sense for it to metaphorically represent the emotion, idea, or personal situation.

I then ask the students to choose one or more organs, bodily systems, or body parts to "read." Once they have chosen, I tell them to think about what that organ/system does literally, and make a list of

these physical and technical traits, functions, and attributes, drawing on their study of the body in science. Once the students have their list, I

tell them to take the literal scientific explanation for some aspect of the body and use their imaginations to apply it metaphorically to something abstract, like an emotion or a desire or an idea. I ask them to make evidentiary arguments for how their literal body part/system might represent a specific abstract concept. I ask them to imagine what the functions of their chosen body part might represent figuratively or emotionally, considering what aspects the body part/organ/system/process shares with the abstract noun/concept. They can use the look, function, or process of the body part to determine the kind of insight it might offer. What would that organ/system best represent metaphorically? What does that organ/system tell them? What ailments might it suffer that would mirror an emotional state or certain fate? For example: Lungs could represent marriage because they are in a pair and must work together and are near the heart (love). If your lungs have problems, your marriage is in trouble!

To model further this type of thinking and inspire the writing activities below, you can bring in and discuss examples from literature. I have included three at the end of this piece: In Christina Rossetti's "A Birthday," a heart is compared to—among other things—a singing bird. Discuss as a class why this metaphor makes sense. For example: it might be because a bird beats its wings in a cage the way your heart beats in your rib cage. Rossetti also compares the heart to an apple tree, and the veins around the apple-like organ of the heart are tree-like in their gnarled branching appearance. In Robert Pinsky's "The Heart," he compares the heart to a pump, something that "sucks" and "clings," and the heart does suck the blood through the body and clings to the arteries and veins. Walt Whitman describes the flow of blood in "I Sing the Body Electric" as "swelling"

like an ocean tide, and blood is mostly water, like the sea flowing inside us. Talk with your students about how the poets use these bodily images to describe abstract concepts, and why they may have chosen the details they did.

The writing the students do next, based on the comparisons they've made, can take a number of forms. Students can:

- Write a poem or story about what a particular body part/organ/system/process tells them about themselves or their lives.
- Write a poem or story creating metaphors and similes pertaining to the body part/system.
- Write a persuasive mini-essay about why a certain body part/organ/system/process should symbolize an abstract concept/emotion/feeling like Love or Nervousness or Imagination or Tolerance. They can use a famous example (i.e.: heart = love, stomach = fear) or make up their own.
- Personify a body part/organ/system, turning it into a character with likes and dislikes, weaknesses and strengths, a gender, age, physical description, and attitude.
- Create an analogy for a body part/organ/system/process, comparing it to something else to highlight certain aspects of the way it functions. For instance, the brain can be considered the computer of the body, the heart could be the motor, the skin could be the memory because of the scars it shows.

Haruspicy anyone? Take a look deep inside yourself and tell me what you see. 🕵️

## Examples from literature to serve as models

### A Birthday

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

My heart is like a singing bird  
Whose nest is in a water'd shoot;

My heart is like an apple-tree  
Whose boughs are bent with thickset fruit;  
My heart is like a rainbow shell  
That paddles in a halcyon sea;  
My heart is gladder than all these  
Because my love is come to me.

Raise me a dais of silk and down;  
Hang it with vair and purple dyes;  
Carve it in doves and pomegranates,  
And peacocks with a hundred eyes;  
Work it in gold and silver grapes,  
In leaves and silver fleurs-de-lys;  
Because the birthday of my life  
Is come, my love is come to me.

Excerpt from "The Hearts" by Robert Pinsky, from *The Want Bone* (HarperCollins, 1990):

The legendary muscle that wants and grieves,  
The organ of attachment, the pump of thrills  
And troubles, clinging in stubborn colonies

Like pulpy shore-life battered on a jetty.  
Slashed by the little deaths of sleep and pleasure,  
They swell in the nurturing spasms of the waves,

Sucking to cling; and even in death itself—  
Baked, frozen—they shrink to grip the granite  
harder.

Excerpt from "I Sing the Body Electric" by Walt Whitman from *Leaves of Grass*:

Within there runs blood,  
The same old blood!  
The same red-running blood!  
There swells and jets a heart—there all passions,  
desires, reachings, aspirations,  
Do you think they are not there because they are  
not express'd in parlors and lecture-rooms?