

“The View in Spring”

by Du Fu

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12<sup>th</sup> grade

Asian Literature

Time required: Two 58-minute periods plus homework time

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By Du Fu

A kingdom smashed, its hills and rivers still here,  
Spring in the city, plants and trees grow deep.

Moved by the moment, flowers splash with tears,  
Alarmed at parting, birds startle the heart.

War’s beacon fires have gone on three months,  
Letters from home are worth thousands in gold.

Fingers run through white hair until it thins,  
Cap-pins will almost no longer hold.

(Owen, Stephen, trans. *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1996, p. 420. )

## 1. Summary

This poem describes the experience of the loyalist Du Fu who is caught behind enemy lines when rebel forces during the An Lu-Shan rebellion have overrun the capital, Chang-an. In eight lines of poetry, Du Fu outlines the despair of those affected by war and juxtaposes the sorrows of human affairs with the enduring beauty of nature.

## 2. Historical/Literary Context

This poem describes a moment in the life of the Tang dynasty poet Du Fu (721-770) during the An Lu-Shan Rebellion (755-763), which brought to an end the rule of Emperor Xuanzong and a golden age during which China became unified, prosperous, cosmopolitan, and a center for artistic achievement.

A scholar-poet, Du Fu is considered by many to be the greatest of traditional Chinese poets, widely imitated by others. A keen observer of detail, Du Fu often chronicled in his poetry the significant political and social events he witnessed in his life (such as the An Lu-Shan rebellion), as was typical of scholar-officials in the Confucian mold. Considered by later Chinese critics to be a “poet-historian,” Du Fu “saw himself in the role of the engaged witness of a general political and social situation that reveals itself in particulars” (Owen 413).

As a scholar-official raised with the Confucian ideal of duty, Du Fu was naturally greatly disturbed by the events of the rebellion, during which An Lu-Shan overran the capital, Chang-an (modern Xian), where Du Fu lived. Since poetry was thought to be a genuine expression of one’s emotion and a good indicator of one’s character, we can see in Du Fu’s personal reaction to the rebellion the feelings of a loyal Tang official as his beloved capital and government are

threatened by rebels. “Whenever anything occurred in the Chinese polity that had wide consequences for the Chinese people at large, Du Fu himself reacted to these particular events with a great deal of passion and emotion” (Paul Rouzer, quoted in *Asia for Educators*).

This poem follows in the Confucian tradition in that it “[stirs] the listener’s sympathies” and “[reflects] social and moral history” (Owen 58).

### 3. Discussion Questions

1. The poem begins with the phrase, “A kingdom smashed.” What important effect does the placement of that phrase have on the way one reads the three successive phrases in the first two lines?  
*This phrase begins with the word “kingdom,” an idea that connotes stability and order, and then compromises this notion with the word “smashed.” The beauty and tranquility of nature is troubled by this human act.*
2. What conclusion can one draw from the juxtaposition of the phrase “A kingdom smashed” and “plants and trees grow deep”?  
*Nature is permanent and enduring even through the upheavals and changes in human affairs.*
3. What is the emotional attitude in the third and fourth line?  
*Alarm and sadness.*
4. Pick out three words that create that attitude.  
*“Tears,” “Alarm,” “Startle.”*
5. What literary device is used in the third line?  
*Personification.*
6. What important shift in focus occurs beginning in the fifth line?  
*Before this point, the perspective is of one who is surprised or alarmed by events. At this point, the narrative perspective “pulls back” to show the effects of the long war on soldiers and civilians.*
7. How has the narrative focus of the poem shifted in the final two lines from that of the first two lines?  
*The final two lines focus on the actions or reactions of a single individual, Du Fu himself.*
8. How does Du Fu place himself personally in this poem?  
*He shows his reactions to the events in the first few lines and then makes himself a character in the last two lines.*
9. Why do the “fingers run through white hair until it thins”?  
*The narrator runs his fingers through his hair because of worry, which has presumably turned his hair white.*
10. In the last two lines, the cap that is referred to is one that an official would wear. Why might Du Fu have chosen to use this detail?  
*The cap is one that an official would wear; Du Fu seems barely able to hold on to his position, just as the emperor’s government can barely hold on to the nation.*
11. How is this poem a reflection of the attitude of a Confucian scholar-official?  
*Loyal to his emperor, a scholar-official would be very distraught by the effects of a rebellion.*

12. How does this poem reflect a Confucian outlook or embody the Confucian sense of poetry's true function?

*The poem chronicles a significant political event that Du Fu witnessed.*

13. How does this poem reflect the yi-jing (I Ching), the belief in the acceptance of inevitable change?

*The poem records the effect of the events, and while the poet registers his sadness, there is no sense of protest or objection to what has occurred, nor is there hope for change.*

*Nature continues despite the transient affairs of humanity.*

14. According to Professor Gary Xu, classical Chinese poetry was non-mimetic: i.e., a work of art doesn't have to be a faithful representation of life or society; things can be out of proportion in order to represent a mindset. Explain how this poem bears out this idea.

*This poem does not attempt to represent conditions in Chang-an; instead, we see the emotional effects of the rebellion on a loyal member of the emperor's court. He projects his emotions on to nature, and he illustrates the wearying effects of war on those subjected to it, especially to himself.*

## 4. Activities

### I. Pre-reading activity: journal writing

*20 minutes*

#### **Prompt:**

“Write about a moment when you were greatly moved by a physical event that changed the appearance of a familiar, ordered environment, either positively or negatively. It could be the awe you felt after a first snowstorm of the season, the rapture you felt after an autumn storm brought down a lot of leaves and branches, the weariness you felt while surveying the mess left after a big party, or even the guilt and alarm you felt after a wrestling match with a sibling made a wreck out of your room. How did things appear to you? What did you notice? What stuck out in your mind?”

Discuss student responses. Note how one's emotions color one's point of view.

### II. Background lecture

*10 minutes*

Using the historical/literary context section above, as well as other sources (such as those cited at the end of this lesson plan), give a brief introductory lecture covering the following topics.

- A. Confucian view of poetry
- B. Political events during the time of the An Lu-Shan rebellion
- C. Du Fu's role in the government at the time

### III. Group analysis: “A kingdom smashed”

*35-40 minutes*

Put students into groups of four for this activity. Each group will do all three of the following activities.

**A. Narrative perspective: Find three types of evidence of a ‘smashed’ kingdom:**

1. From the perspective of nature
2. From the perspective of soldiers
3. From the perspective of government officials

•What do you notice about the *order* of perspectives?

**B. Literary devices (use definitions in Appendix A)**

1. Find an example of personification.
2. Find an example of projection
3. Find an example of synecdoche
4. Find an example of metonymy

**C. Storyboard**

Having analyzed narrative perspective and literary devices, students are now ready to create a storyboard, a sort of ‘comic strip’ visualization of the poem, like the sort of thing used to plan out a movie or television commercial. Each group will create a four-panel storyboard, each panel representing one two-line stanza of the poem.

The purpose of this exercise is to illustrate the effect of narrative perspective in a poem as well as to illustrate how Du Fu uses particular, focused details to represent more universal ideas.

Each group will produce a storyboard consisting of four panels indicating how the group would envision a short movie representing the poem. After some discussion among the group, each member should draw one of the panels. These should not be judged on artistic merit, but on the degree to which they represent the words of the poem and the poet’s perspective. Use templates in **Appendix B**.

**IV. Projection Poem about a Condition Changed**

*20 minutes to explain activity, which is to be done as a homework assignment.*

Write an 8-line poem in the pattern of Du Fu’s “A View in Spring” that describe change in condition and that makes use of projection and focused detail. (Use criteria in **Appendix C** to create a grading rubric for student poems.)

**A. Choose a topic:**

This poem should be about a change in condition, a breach in order that can be reflected in nature or the physical environment and that has some particular, personal effect on the narrator. Write it in the eight-line format that Du Fu uses, using roughly 10 syllables per line.

**B. Lines 1 & 2:**

Start with a noun, then follow it with a modifier or modifier phrase that indicates a radical transformation of that noun: for example, “a tree blown down” or “a village blanketed with snow”

Complete the first two lines with a description of what the scene looks like.

**C. Lines 3 & 4:**

Write two more lines that describe the environment and reflect the feelings of the narrator or viewer.

**D. Lines 5 & 6:**

Write two more lines that give a sense of the effect of the changed condition on the community or people in general.

**E. Lines 7 & 8:**

Write two final lines that focus on a small detail that reflects the effect of the change in condition, especially from the particular point of view of the narrator.

## **5. Connections to other literary works**

One can find in the poems of Emily Dickinson examples of some of the characteristics of this poem, such as the individual response to broader events as well as the projection of the narrator’s feelings onto nature. Examples abound, but one may begin with “A narrow fellow in the grass,” “I’ll tell you how the sun rose,” and “When night is almost done.”

## 6. Citations

*Asia for Educators*. Columbia University. 15 August 2008. <<http://afe.easia.columbia.edu>>

*Dictionary.com*. 20 August 2008. <<http://www.dictionary.com>>

Ebrey, Patricia Buckley. *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Lancashire, Ian, general editor. *Representative Poetry Online*. University of Toronto. 20 August 2008. <<http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/display/>>

Owen, Stephen, ed. and trans. *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1996.

## Appendix A

### **Definitions for group activity: “A kingdom smashed”**

**Metonymy:** a figure of speech in which the poet substitutes a word normally associated with something for the term usually naming that thing (for example, "big-sky country" for Wyoming). The association can be cause-and-effect, attribute-of, instrument-for, etc. (Representative Poetry Online)

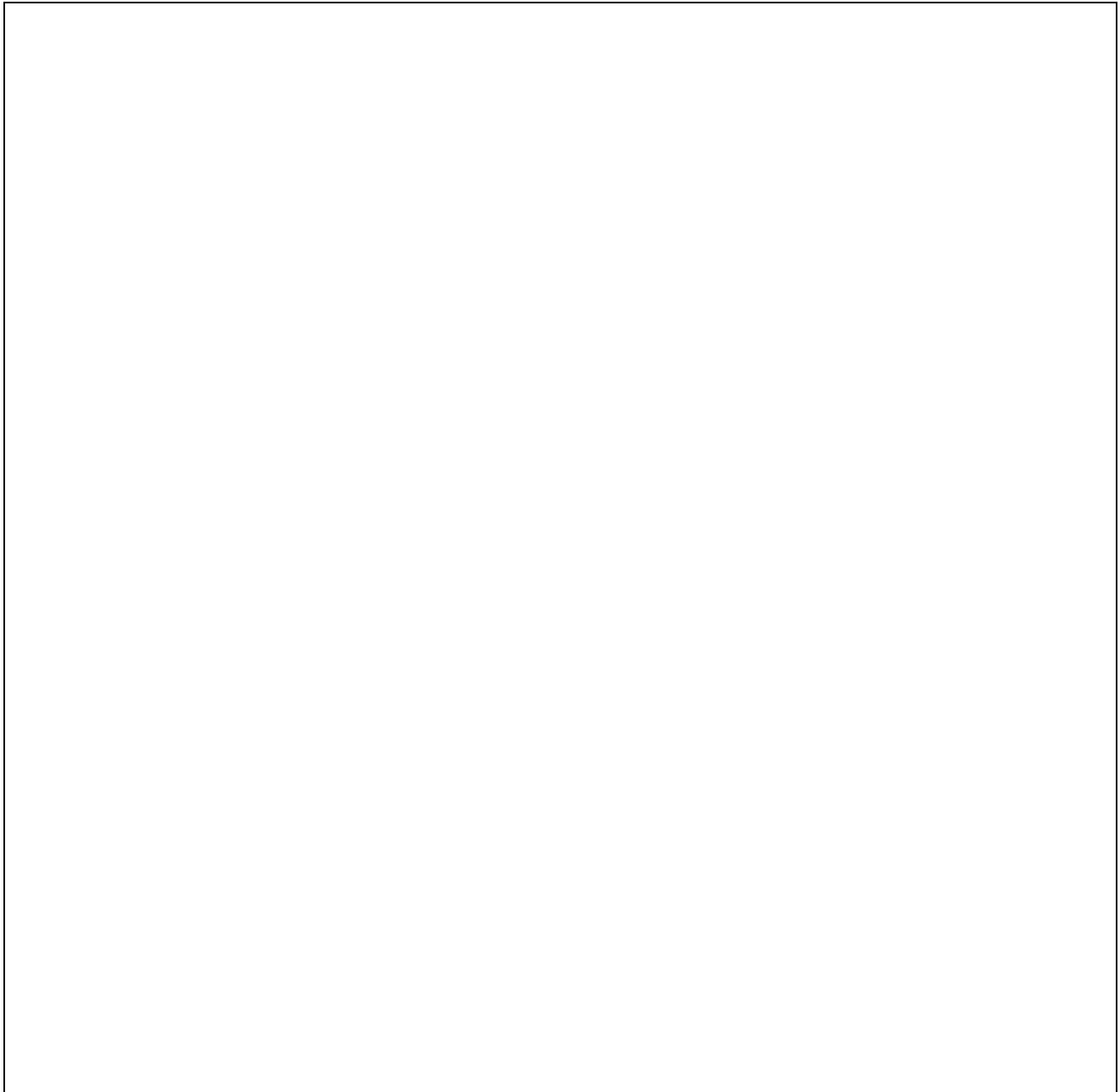
**Personification:** attributing human characteristics to a concrete object or abstract idea.

**Projection:** the tendency to ascribe to another person feelings, thoughts, or attitudes present in oneself, or to regard external reality as embodying such feelings, thoughts, etc., in some way. (Dictionary.com)

**Synecdoche:** a figure of speech where the part stands for the whole (for example, "I've got wheels" for "I have a car"). (Representative Poetry Online)

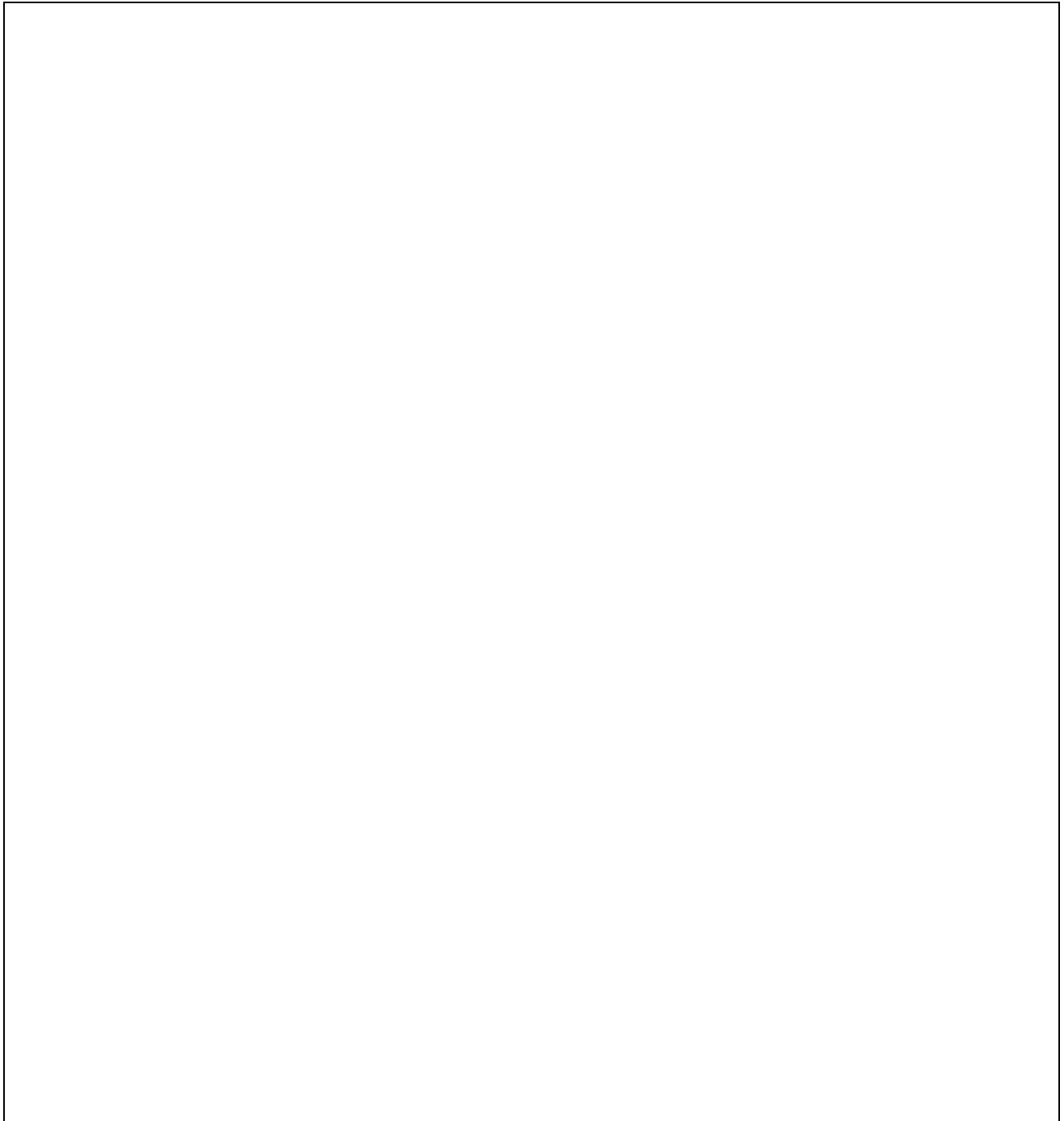
Appendix B

**Storyboard Panel 1**



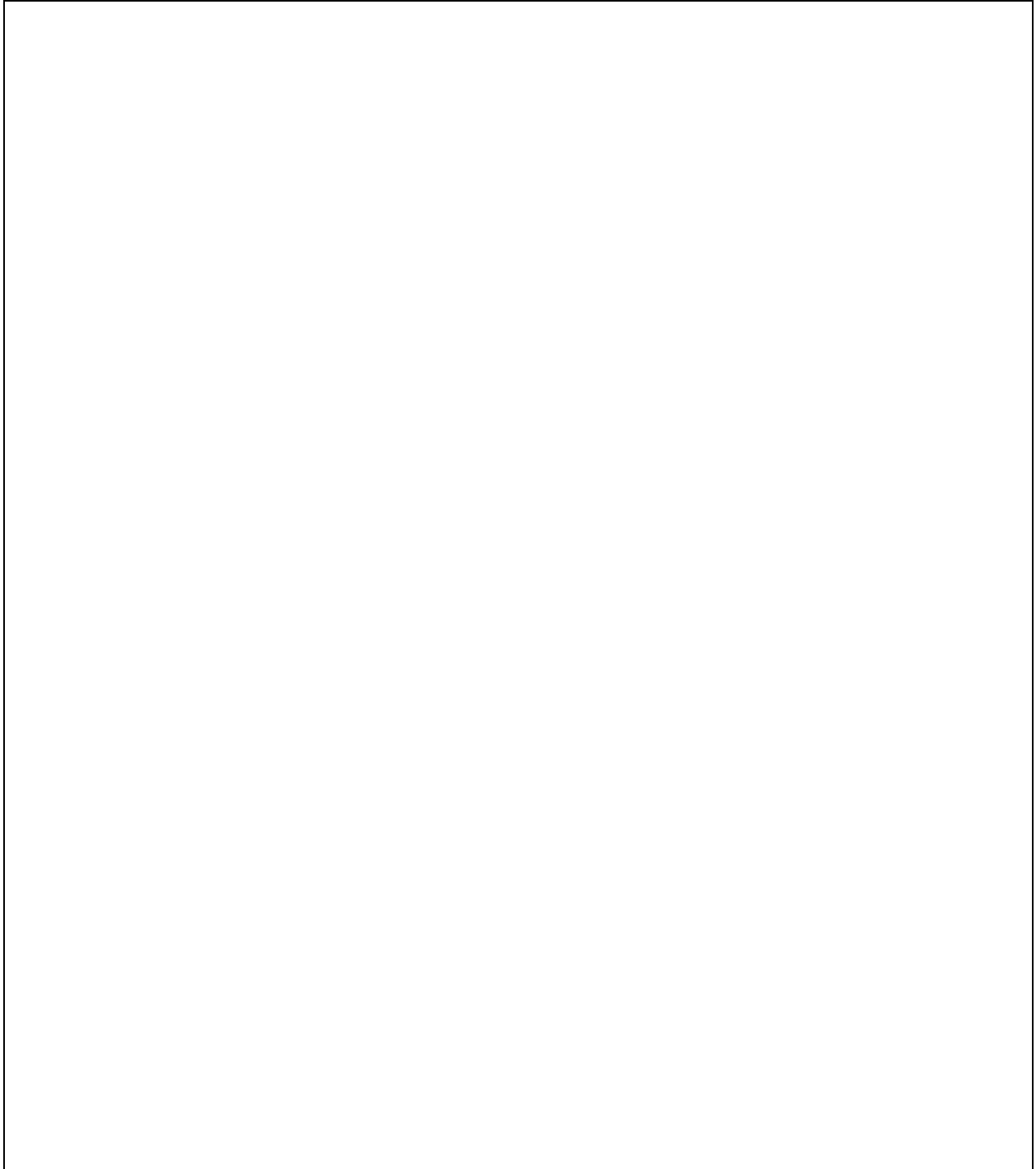
A kingdom smashed, its hills and rivers still here,  
Spring in the city, plants and trees grow deep.

**Storyboard Panel #2**



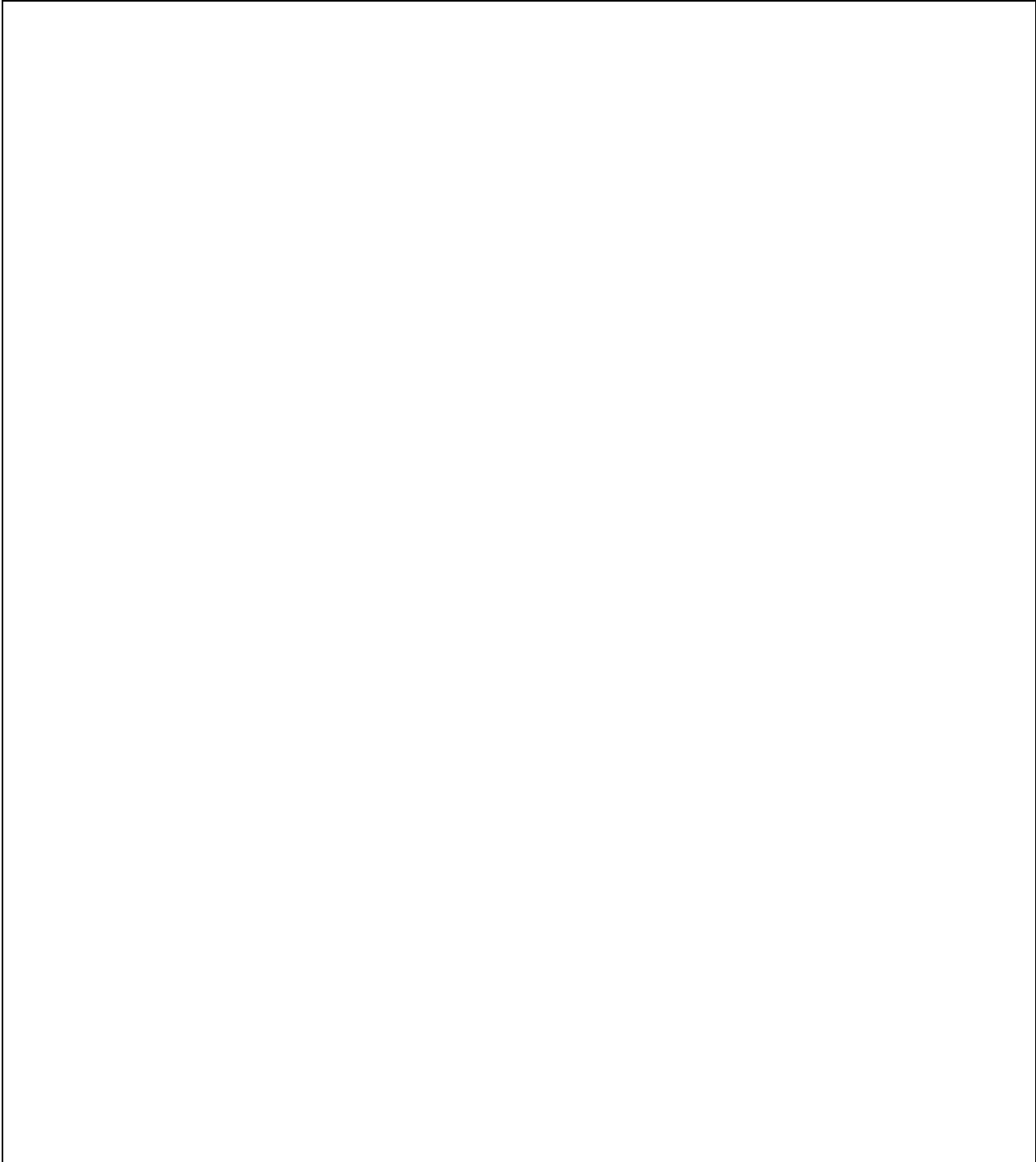
Moved by the moment, flowers splash with tears,  
Alarmed at parting, birds startle the heart.

**Storyboard Panel #3**



War's beacon fires have gone on three months,  
Letters from home are worth thousands in gold.

**Storyboard Panel #4**



Fingers run through white hair until it thins,  
Cap-pins will almost no longer hold.

**Appendix C**

**Rubric for Projection Poem**

The following are some criteria to consider in grading student poems.

- \*Eight lines, 10 syllables per line
- \*Well-chosen topic: a condition altered or changed
- \*Identifiable narrator affected by the change in condition
- \*Projection in the description of nature
- Description proceeds from general to particular
- \*Focused detail that represents general condition