Layers on the Line

Read images for literal and deeper meanings.

ELA.10.R.1.4 "Analyze how authors create multiple layers of meaning and/or ambiguity in a poem."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline words or images that could mean more than one thing. Circle details that support a second possible meaning for the station, train, or travelers.

Last Platform

1 At dusk, the station clock holds its breath above the empty platform. I stand beneath it with a paper ticket soft from rain, though no train is named on its blue line. Across the tracks, a porter folds a red flag into a square of evening. The rails shine like two questions leading west. When the loudspeaker clears its throat, even the pigeons lift their gray letters from the roof. I check my watch, but its hands point only toward the place my brother used to wait for me after school.

2 An old woman arrives carrying a suitcase that seems lighter than the shadow beside her. She asks, "Is this the line for leaving?" I want to say every line is, but I point to the bench where a child has carved a map of rivers, roads, and one small house. The woman sits. Her suitcase clicks open. Inside are apples, a photograph faced down, and a key wrapped in a handkerchief. She offers me an apple. It tastes of metal, wind, and something almost remembered.

3 At last, a train enters without a sound. Its windows hold dark water instead of faces, and each door opens onto the same unlit room. The old woman rises, yet she leaves the suitcase on the bench. "Keep it," she says, perhaps to me, perhaps to the station. I do not board. I place my ticket under the clock, where the rain can read it. Then the train moves west, carrying no one I can see, while the rails keep shining after it has gone, as if they have not decided what to ask.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. In paragraph 1, how does the clock work as both a real object and a deeper image for the speaker? Use two details from the paragraph.

2. What are two possible meanings of the rails being "two questions leading west" in paragraph 1?

3. How do the faced-down photograph and wrapped key add a second layer of meaning to the old woman's trip?

4. Why does the speaker say the train is carrying "no one I can see" instead of simply calling it empty?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a four-to-six-line poem about an ordinary object that can suggest two different ideas. After your poem, write exactly two sentences explaining the object's literal meaning and its possible deeper meaning.

ANSWER KEY

Layers on the Line

GRADE 10 · ELA.10.R.1.4

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline words or images that could mean more than one thing. Circle details that support a second possible meaning for the station, train, or travelers. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	In paragraph 1, how does the clock work as both a real object and a deeper image for the speaker? Use two details from the paragraph.	**Literally, it is a station clock that marks time. Figuratively, its "holds its breath" image creates suspense, and its hands seem to point the speaker toward a memory of the brother.**
2	What are two possible meanings of the rails being "two questions leading west" in paragraph 1?	**The rails are actual tracks leading west. They can also represent unanswered questions or difficult choices about leaving, time, and the brother.**
3	How do the faced-down photograph and wrapped key add a second layer of meaning to the old woman's trip?	**They are possible belongings for travel, but they also suggest a home, a hidden memory, or a painful departure that the woman may be leaving behind.**
4	Why does the speaker say the train is carrying "no one I can see" instead of simply calling it empty?	**The wording leaves open the possibility that the train carries unseen people, memories, or the dead. This makes the departure mysterious rather than plainly ordinary.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

The porch light blinked above the empty steps. I left my coat beneath its yellow eye. By morning, the bulb had burned itself out. The house still knew the shape of goodbye. The light is a real porch light, but it can also represent someone waiting or hoping. Its darkness and the coat suggest a departure that may be temporary or permanent.

Accept different interpretations when students support them with specific words or images from the poem. In Part 3, accept any ordinary object that clearly has a literal role and a supported deeper meaning.