

Using Poetry to Teach the Holocaust:
Rationale and Strategies for the Middle Level Learner

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Research on Holocaust education indicates the value of painting a holistic picture of the Holocaust for middle level learners (Totten, Feinberg, & Fernekes, 2001). Experience from multiple perspectives on a topic can help paint that holistic picture. Poetry about the Holocaust and written by Holocaust survivors, relatives of survivors, and interested persons can broaden the range of perspectives while addressing the amalgamation of themes that surface from this episode of the world's history. As a genre, poetry belongs in a special category of expression: one that provides the reader with understanding of an untouchable experience and the writer with an opportunity for personal catharsis. The purpose of this article is twofold: to demonstrate why poetry should be integrated into Holocaust education at the middle school level, and to provide some examples of how to use teacher-directed literacy strategies to incorporate poetry into a Holocaust unit of study.

Holocaust study provides teachers with multiple opportunities to help students better understand human behavior, social issues related to historical time periods, and a myriad of ethical questions. In the 1990s, the recognition of these opportunities and the need to preserve the cultural memory of this historical tragedy inspired many states to promote Holocaust education at both the secondary and elementary levels. During this time, several middle school organizations and advocates were also calling for the reform of middle level education, including greater integration of the curriculum (National Middle School Association, 2003; Beane, 1997). In 1989, The Carnegie Foundation issued *Turning Points*, a report on the state of young adolescents in the United States. The report suggested that schooling in the middle grades should assist young adolescents in becoming more effective human beings while demonstrating the characteristics of being "an intellectually reflective person, a person en route to a lifetime of meaningful work, a good citizen, [and] a caring and ethical individual"(p. 15). These goals are clearly consistent with the objectives of Holocaust education.

Developmental Issues

Holocaust curriculum must be developmentally appropriate; for middle-level learners, the curriculum should help develop social cognition skills. Steinberg (2008) suggests that such skills include "thinking about people, thinking about social relationships, and thinking about social institutions" (p.83). Three categories of social cognition that have been studied to a large degree include: 1) impression formation (how we form judgments about others); 2) social

perspective taking (how we make assessments about the thoughts and feelings of others); and 3) morality and social conventions (how we form our conceptions of justice and social interaction). Kohlberg (1976) points out the importance of moral development during adolescence, particularly that of moral reasoning, which places special emphasis on the roles that people play, the rules that society has created, the ways in which we maintain social order, and the ways in which we judge each other.

Holocaust educators, including Totten and Feinberg (2001) and Wieser (2001), conclude that while the Holocaust is a very complex topic, there are ways to structure learning activities that are developmentally appropriate for adolescents. Their suggestions include the use of sound introductory lessons that define social justice themes; activities that give students the opportunity to think more analytically about the historical sequence of events and the roles played by various groups; lessons that help students realize that these events happened to real people, including children and teens; activities that span the middle school curriculum; and experiences that assist the students to connect the past with the present state of the human condition. Ideally, a unit on the Holocaust will help young adolescents begin to understand social justice issues such as the nature of prejudice, stereotyping, apathy, the effects of intolerance, and personal accountability. In addition, the unit can give students multiple opportunities to think more analytically about social events, roles of various groups within these events, and the roles played by specific individuals both powerful and ordinary.

Rationale for Using Poetry in Teaching the Holocaust

Teachers who take a constructivist point of view and are in tune with the integral part that emotions and reactions play in rote learning understand that "literature and the arts reach beyond the intellect to appeal to the affect" (Cai & Bishop, 1994). Reader response theory is built upon the personal interaction readers have with text; what they take from a text is highly dependent upon the teacher's instructional stance as she/he leads them through the reading. "An efferent stance shifts the reader's thinking to content and the analytical search for information to be retained. An aesthetic stance draws the reader into the text" (Ruddell, p.225). In other words, an efferent stance is usually taken when the purpose of the reading is to glean or expand knowledge; the aesthetic stance draws more heavily on a reader's personal experiences and subsequent feelings and reactions to the text. Both stances are necessary, but each is emphasized differently and sometimes at different times. Because it provides factual information as well as emotional expressions, Holocaust poetry gives teachers an opportunity to construct a broader knowledge base for students and, at the same time, provide them with the opportunity to react on a more visceral level to the inhumanities committed against several groups of people.

The enormity of the Holocaust tragedy lies at least partially in the sheer numbers of people exterminated. Many teachers undertake special projects to help their students understand the abstract concept of such high numbers and then supplement the facts with literature. First person novels, such as *Night* (1969) by Elie Wiesel and *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1952), are the most popular student choices. Poetry is another avenue that gives faces to the individuals involved and their political ramifications; poetry has the power to make the experience real to those who are, by their own positions in history, otherwise separated from the Holocaust.

Arguing for the use of literature to authenticate the understanding of historical events, Hilda Schiff (1995) contends that

literature of any period of history is not only an integral part of that period, but it also allows us to understand historical events and experiences better than the bare facts alone can do because they enable us to absorb them inwardly. In involving ourselves in the authentic literature of the Holocaust, we come as close as we can to entering psychologically into those unique events as they were actually felt by those individuals who experienced them (p.xiv).

As a source of information about the conditions people were forced to endure, Holocaust poetry poignantly expresses themes of human suffering, heroism, decency, spirit, defiance, dignity, and personal choice, topics that are of increasing importance to middle level learners. That said, the poems that are used in Holocaust units of study should be selected carefully.

Guidelines for Selecting Poems for Holocaust Study

In general, three considerations should guide teachers' selections of Holocaust poems: the students' (ability and interest), the poems themselves (language and quality), and the authors. Teachers should use their knowledge of their students as a template for matching poems with student ability and interest. If a poem is too difficult for students to comprehend, they will lose interest, possibly in the entire topic of the Holocaust. Using poems that represent a range of difficulty assures that learners of all abilities have access to the effects of the poems. One suggestion is to ask students themselves how they feel about the language use. Teachers should be able to determine an intersection between their students' profiles and the amount of scaffolding necessary for comprehending such works in class. In selecting and teaching poems, it is not only important to choose poems that are cognitively accessible, but also poems with which students can identify personally.

Teachers will want to consider their students' interests and backgrounds as they select poems for the unit. For example, students who do not know much about the Jewish culture may find poems containing several Yiddish words

difficult to understand; with the aid of the teacher, however, the language can become a point of interest. For some students, the horrific details of the Holocaust are difficult to bear, and teachers need to be ever aware in order to avoid turning students away from Holocaust study altogether. "Many of the literary works on the Holocaust include ghastly and horrifying images, scenes, incidents, and events, a teacher must use the soundest judgment possible when selecting and employing such works in class. Teachers must absolutely avoid bombarding their students with one horrific image after another" (Totten, 2001, p. 163).

Holocaust poetry provides a variety of perspectives and responses from and about a variety of people, including victims, oppressors, bystanders, and rescuers. Using poems from differing perspectives, ranging from those of children who perished to adults who survived, has the potential to broaden students' understanding through showing rather than telling about the effects of the Holocaust on the human spirit. Teachers must keep in mind, however, that not all poems are well-written or historically accurate, nor is all Holocaust poetry written by people who lived through this event. Teachers should consider the author as they select which poetry to teach. Primary sources (poems written by survivors) often prove to be most historically reliable as well as the most powerful; integrating information about the author and the life experiences of the author into the lesson will enrich the reading experience. Teachers should use caution when selecting poems from secondary sources. It is important to consider the purpose of the poem as well as the author's background. Poems written to preserve the memory of the Holocaust and Holocaust victims, for instance, can be useful and legitimate secondary sources. Lily Brett, daughter of Holocaust camp survivors, writes poignantly of her mother's experiences in "Leaving You" and of her determination to remember the depressing statistics of the Holocaust in "I Keep Forgetting." On the other hand, some poems aim to sensationalize the grim details of this horrific period. Some of these poems "draw false and simplistic analogies between the Holocaust and other human rights infractions or other injustices" (Totten, 2001, p.165). Again, investigating the author will help determine the legitimacy of the poem.

Word choice is another literary element that should guide the selection of poems for a Holocaust unit. Language that is too sophisticated may be difficult for many middle-level readers. But overall, word choice is an excellent way to help students understand both the meaning of the poem and the experiences of the Holocaust. Teachers may want to compare poetic word choice with that used in Nazi propaganda, for instance. Examining the manipulation of word choice can show rather than tell students how Jews and other marginalized populations were made to seem inferior in an attempt to justify their extinction. In their guidelines for teachers, The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (2001) stresses the importance of striving for precision of language as words used to describe human behavior quite often have multiple meanings. For example, "emigration" was the word used for expulsion; "deportation" for transportation to a

place to be killed, and “Final Solution” referred to the systematic annihilation of every single Jew (Totten, 2001).

Authors of Holocaust poetry wrote over the course of the war, as well as immediately before and long after. Teachers can use poems ranging across history to help students make connections between social issues and human expression, as well as the range of emotional reactions to differing political and social stimuli. Choosing poems written by diverse authors will also deepen students’ understanding of the Holocaust through differing standpoints. Elie Wiesel shares the following:

There are poems by those who wrote poetry in the forest, the ghettos, the concentration camps and even in the death camps; by survivors of the Holocaust who wrote in the aftermath of that tragedy, and by Jews and non-Jews who either did not live in Europe during that period and/or were not even alive. (As cited in Totten, 2001, p.165)

It is especially important to include poems written by children and adolescents, such as [“Fear”](#) by Eva Pickova (1942), since middle level learners are at a developmental point where they identify emotionally with their age peers and are developing the ability to empathize.

Using Instructional Strategies with Holocaust Poems

Teachers must make a number of instructional considerations as they prepare Holocaust poetry activities (What is the purpose of instruction? What are the students’ needs and abilities? What resources are available?). The following table and subsequent explanations should provide guidance to those who are approaching poetry and the Holocaust on unsure footing. These poems and activities are organized according to the historical divisions recommended by the United States Holocaust Museum’s teaching guidelines (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2001). The suggested instructional strategies can not only help students get to the heart of the meaning of these poems but can also develop reading and thinking competencies that will carry over into other content areas. Many of the activities suggested here could be used interchangeably with other poems; there are also many other activities that could be used with the poems identified below. These particular suggestions are meant only to provide a template for organizing strategic instruction to ensure that a unit on Holocaust poetry will address the most important facets of the Holocaust. Where available, poems are linked to a web site that contains that particular poem and supplementary information about it. Most of the suggested activities are also linked to web sites that provide further information about each particular strategy. Specific information about how to use each strategy is outlined in the paragraphs below the table. A short list of resources for Holocaust poetry follows at the end of the article.

Activities and Poems for Use in Holocaust Study

Holocaust topic	Suggested poem	Suggested activity
Background of Holocaust	"Little Polish Boy"	Ecphrastic Poetry
Anti-Semitism (includes apathy, indifference, tolerance, equality, social justice)	"I am a Jew" "Shoemaker's Wife"	Reader Response Journals
Germany between the wars; Jewish life prior to the rise of Nazi party	"Tree of Life" "Shoes" "Chanukah Lights"	Sketch to Stretch
Events leading to final solution	"Ghetto Uprising" "Departure 1940" and "The Trains"	Possible sentences Venn diagram
Final solution	"I Cannot Forget" "Daniel" "I Never Saw Another Butterfly"	Reader Response Journals Directed Listening-Thinking Activity
Role of bystanders, resisters, perpetrators, rescuers	"Where Was Man?" "The Righteous Gentiles" "First they Came for the Jews"	Style Imitation
Aftermath of Holocaust	"Creed of a Holocaust Survivor" "Never Shall I Forget" "Babi Yar"	Style Imitation Add a Stanza Jigsaw; Vocabulary Self-selection ⁰

Ecphrastic Poetry

Ecphrastic poetry refers to poetry that is written in response to a work of art. A classic example in Holocaust poetry is "Little Polish Boy," which was written by Peter L. Fischl after seeing a photograph of people, including a small boy with his hands raised in response to the Nazi's guns, being rounded up in the Warsaw ghetto. Students could write poetry in response to this same photograph prior to reading Fischl's poem, and they could write other ecphrastic poetry in response to other war photographs depicting pivotal or otherwise emotionally charged moments. More information on ecphrastic poetry, including a lesson plan (although it is high school level) using the poem "Little Polish Boy" can be found at http://www.holocaust-trc.org/Engl_Jrnl02.htm There are specific directions to use with your students in a box about three-quarters of the way down the page. There are several galleries of images available at <http://fcit.usf.edu/HOLOCAUST/resource/gallery/gallery.htm>

Reader Response

Reader response theory is built around the concept that people respond in two basic ways to what they read: the efferent and aesthetic stances. When taking the efferent stance, a student focuses more on the information and facts s/he can carry away from text; when taking the aesthetic stance, the reader responds emotionally or personally to the content of a text. Questions that ask a student to identify facts such as “What is a Jew?” or “What does ‘submit’ mean?” seek a response that can be proven right or wrong and ask the reader to interact with text from an efferent stance. Questions focusing on the aesthetic point of view ask students to build upon their personal experiences in reacting to the text. Some examples of questions about the poem “I Am a Jew” that ask readers to respond from an aesthetic stance are “Which sentence from the poem (there are six) do you find the most meaningful, and why?” or “Do you feel you could be dignified if you had been in the same situation? Why or why not?” Students typically write their answers in response journals, which the teacher reads and responds to in kind. More information about Reader Response can be found at <http://www.web.arizona.edu/~writprog/materials/3-6.htm>

Sketch to Stretch

This is a strategy that appeals to the visual learner by allowing students to produce a picture that the text creates in their heads; thus this strategy should be used with poetry that is built on strong visual images. It helps students with the expert reader competency of visualizing and helps them understand poems through concretizing a mental visualization of some component of a poem. After drawing a representation of a particular image conveyed by the poem, they are asked to explain their illustrations, perhaps adding a caption, and why they chose that particular representation. More information about Sketch to Stretch can be found at <http://www.learner.org/jnorth/tm/InstrucStrat29.html>

Possible Sentences

Preparing students for what they are about to read is a powerful way of increasing their understanding. “Possible Sentences” is a pre-reading and vocabulary-building strategy that asks students to manipulate a list of words in order to make predictions about a text they have not yet read. The teacher presents a list of words from the text that students would need to know in order to understand the text, helps students understand them, and then asks them (often in pairs or small groups) to predict what the text will be about by using pairs of the words in sentences. Some of the following words could be included in using Possible Sentences to introduce the poem “Ghetto Uprising:” miracle, invisible, abandoned, doomed, ghetto, consumed, bloodred, faithful, shamefully, blazing, stormed, survived, visions, cruelty, unimaginable, chaos, grieving, roaming, heartened, imparted, resounding, recurring, gnawing. More information about Possible Sentences can be found at http://its.gcsnc.com/act/strategies/possible_sentences.htm

Venn Diagram

A Venn diagram is a graphic organizer comprised of two circles that overlap in the middle. It is used to compare and contrast two items. Students should read two poems for example, "Departure 1940" and "The Trains" and identify what they have in common by listing short phrases in the center of the diagram, where the two circles overlap, and listing their differences in the remaining area of each circle. When choosing poems to use with this strategy, make sure that the two poems have enough in common and enough differences for the graphic organizer to really support their understanding of the poems. A sample completed Venn diagram can be found at <http://www.graphic.org/venbas.html> Students can build and print Venn diagrams online at <http://www.readwritethink.org/materials/venn/>

Directed Listening-Thinking Activity

This strategy is based on making predictions. The teacher should share a copy of the poem with students, revealing only a few lines at a time, reading the lines aloud and asking students what they think the next few lines will bring. For example, the teacher could reveal only the title of the poem and ask students how they think butterflies might be connected with what they know so far about the Holocaust. Then after reading the first two lines, the teacher could ask about the congruity of the first two lines and how students think the next part of the poem will connect with those concepts of finality and greatness. More information about DL-TA can be found at <http://www.rockingham.k12.va.us/English/shared/Directed%20Listening%20Thinking.pdf>

Style Imitation

This strategy helps students examine poetic elements by attempting to imitate the author's style. After reading "First they Came for the Jews," discuss the different groups of people described in the poem. Then ask students to identify groups of people with whom they might interact on a daily basis, and write a poem following the pattern set by Niemoeller's poem but including the groups they have identified. Before reading "Creed of a Holocaust Survivor," ask students to identify the beliefs they hold as unshakable. Have them read and discuss the poem, identifying lines that articulate negative actions, choices, and events and then write their own poem, following Niemoeller's established pattern but incorporating their own beliefs, along with what others have done (or might do) that would be in direct opposition to their beliefs. As this poem includes many references to God, teachers should point out that one's belief system does not necessarily have to address the existence of a higher being. More information about poetry style imitations can be found at <http://www.bcps.org/offices/lis/models/poets/imit.html>

Add a Stanza

As a follow-up to reading a poem that is written in relatively predictable format, ask students to write another stanza that extends from the final stanza in both content and form. For Elie Wiesel's "Night" (the poem, not the memoir), have students find textual support for each of the stanzas in the poem and then write another stanza that Wiesel might have included, accurately reflecting his experiences chronicled in the book and following the pattern he set in his writing of the poem. The information on [Style Imitations](#) might be helpful in using this strategy.

Jigsaw

Students are divided into groups and assigned both a number and a letter. For example, in the "A" group, there would be an A1, A2, A3, and A4. In the "B" group, there would also be a B1, a B2, a B3, and B4, etc. All of the 1s get together into a group and become 'experts' on a subtopic of the major topic; all of the 2s get together into a group and become 'experts' on a different subtopic, and so on. After all 'expert groups' have finished their research, they report back to the home groups (the letter name groups, in this case) and "teach" their respective subtopics to their group members. Expert groups for this poem could include "Babi Yar," "Philistines," "pogram," "Israelites," "Belostok," and the author, Yevgeny Yevtushenko. More information on Jigsaw can be found at <http://www.learner.org/jnorth/tm/InstrucStrat19.html> <http://www.oah.org/pubs/magazine/africanamerican/ciardiello.html>

Vocabulary Self-Selection

In small groups, students choose words they feel they need to learn from a selection. After selecting lists of words from the text, each group shares their list with the class, and the class collaborates to determine a final list of words. They work together to come up with information about those words on the final list, from context and previous experience, and then use outside resources, such as dictionaries, to reinforce and correct that information. More information on Vocabulary Self-Selection can be found at <http://www.bsdyt.org/District/Grants/quest/kq/vocab.htm>

Summary

Public schools students will not experience the atrocities of this era; however, many of them currently experience, often silently, the inhumanities of apathy, prejudice, and degradation. The need to educate our children about contemporary injustices and to prevent the recurrence of those in the past should inspire teachers of middle level students to capitalize on the developmental appropriateness and the variety of modalities and learning styles that can be addressed by incorporating poetry into Holocaust lessons. The lessons of the

Holocaust are made all the more powerful by students' willingness to learn the "real truth" about the past, their genuine interest in personal stories of actual people, and their ever-increasing cognitive abilities. Incorporating poetry with history provides teachers and their students with the opportunity to read and hear the real voices of the Holocaust, to make those connections with their peers of the past as well as other primary sources, and in so doing, to flesh out the facts with feelings. The universality of poetry is a logical medium for this task.

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