

Learning from Poetry of the Holocaust. Lesson Plan

Wladyslaw Szlengel

“With all my senses I feel myself being suffocated by the diminishing air in a boat that is irrevocably going down. The distinction is minimal. I’m in this boat not carried by heroic gestures but rather thrown in without volition, guilt, or higher law.



Still, I am in this boat; and if I don’t perceive myself as its captain, I am nonetheless the chronicler of the drowning. I don’t want to leave mere statistical ciphers. I want to enrich (wrong word) future history with a legacy, documents, and illustrations.

I write document-poems on the wall of my boat. To the companions of my tomb, I read elaborations of a poet, a poet *anno domini* 1943, who sought inspiration in the dismal chronicle of his day.”

– Wladyslaw Szlengel, essay quoted in *Bearing the Unbearable: Yiddish and Polish Poetry in the Ghettos and Concentration Camps*, by Frieda W. Aaron (photo of Szlengel courtesy of Jewish Historical Institute)

Essential Questions

Why did persecuted people write poetry during the Holocaust?

What can we learn about the possibilities of writing; of poetry during dark times?

Rationale

Students will understand the significant role of poetry during the Holocaust, as well as about the Holocaust and memory through poetry.

Time Required

2-3 class periods

Teacher Preparation

This lesson includes everything that you and your students should need to be successful towards answering the essential questions and much more. It includes necessary – and helpful context about the featured poet, Wladyslaw Szlengel, as well as his surrounding circumstances such as the city of Warsaw, Poland; the Warsaw Ghetto; the Oyneg Shabes resistance group; Deportations from the Warsaw Ghetto; and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, during which Szlengel and his wife were murdered.

Procedure

Step 1 Setting the table (part one): What is the value of poetry of the Holocaust?

Pass out to students the following [handout](#), including instructions, to help students answer this and other questions helpful to serve as a foundation for their poetry analysis ahead.

Step 2 Setting the table (part two): Historical Context - About Wladyslaw Szlengel, Warsaw, the Warsaw Ghetto, the Oyneg Shabes, Deportations and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising

Pass out to students the following [handout](#), including instructions, a very short contextual video which you show at the start, and an optional assignment sheet to help provide a purpose for student reading and engagement. You may assign this

sheet, one or more of the embedded questions and/or then discuss student responses.

Step 3 Reading and analyzing poetry of the Holocaust: Wladyslaw Szlengel

Included here are four diverse poems written by Szlengel. You may assign and/or analyze all four as a class, or else assign each to one or more groups, after which students can present and discuss their respective poems so as to contribute to everyone's ability to further engage meaningfully with the recommended culminating questions and work.

Each poem contains any further context necessary to contribute to student understanding. **For differentiation purposes**, "Things" is the most challenging poem for reasons of content, length and length of text-specific context. "Final Exams" is the least challenging of the four.

- [Final Exams](#)
- [Telephone](#)
- [The Monument](#)
- [Things](#)

Here are two options for you to consider which one – or both – you would like your students to use while engaging with the poems. The first option is an organizer:

Option 1: A ["TPCASTT" template](#). This contains prompts and questions that, if completed earnestly, should lead to meaningful analysis and ensuing discussion. Because the length and/or degree of difficulty of the template may be more challenging to complete for middle school students, consider assigning the specific prompts regarding "Connotation," "Attitude" and "Shifts" as a jigsaw so they can discuss them with a group, while keeping the other parts about the title and theme as individual questions.

Option 2: [Save the Last Word for Me](#). This approach, by Facing History and Ourselves, is the less restrictive option, providing a more open scaffold – asking students to identify three (or more) parts they find most compelling, explaining why, and then discussing in groups of three.

Step 4 Culminating activities

Consider one or more of the following options to empower students to demonstrate their learning by reflecting upon what they have learned from this lesson.

Option 1: This lesson endeavored to help students answer the following two essential questions:

Why did persecuted people write poetry during the Holocaust?

What can we learn about the possibilities of writing; of poetry during dark times?

Ask students to respond to one – or both of these questions in writing, using evidence to support their considered responses.

Option 2: Ask students to support their response to the following question with evidence:

What do you take away from your reading of Wladyslaw Szlengel’s poetry? What impacts you most – and why, and what do you hope to remember?

Option 3: The poem, “Final Exams,” is unfinished due to water damage to the original text preserved in the Oyneg Shabes/Ringelblum Archive. Namely, it is missing the final three lines. Ask students to write three (or more) lines to “finish” this poem, honoring the content, tone and voice of the poet. Students may then share their final lines with each other and/or with the whole class.

Option 4 (Extension activity): A fun, engaging way to interact with poetry under the umbrella of a theme is to create an “[exquisite corpse](#)” poem as a whole class. Although there are different approaches to doing this, we recommend the following procedure.

*Depending on the choices you make in step 3, see below, you could have students do this during one class period or else, have them share their student email addresses with each other and work on it over a few days.

1 Identify an overall theme. In this case, having read and analyzed poetry of the Holocaust written by Wladyslaw Szlengel, such themes could include memory, resilience, defiance, bearing witness, loss, desperation, etc.

2 Arrange all students in order (alphabetical or otherwise, but Student A, B, C, and so on). Assign one student (student A) in the class to write four lines of poetry consistent with the agreed upon theme. You should discuss as a class the recommended use of some figurative language, but style, voice, tone, etc., should be left open. Once that student (student A) writes their four lines, they then hand *only their fourth line* (not all four lines!) to the next student. That student (student B) then uses the fourth line to spark their own four lines as the following stanza. Then student B hands only their fourth line to student C, and so on.

3 Once all students have completed their lines, the collective poem – revealing every students’ lines together for the first time, should be joined together. One option is then to have all of the students read aloud their parts in order in class. Another option is to have students record their own four lines on a youtube or other video from their home or some other location, then having the students compile, join and edit all of their parts to create a class video of their “exquisite corpse” poem!

** Exquisite corpse lesson idea courtesy of Ann E. Wallace, PhD, poet laureate of Jersey City

Looking for More Holocaust Poetry? Check out these Other Voices!

If you and your students appreciated this lesson and the profound poetry and wonder about other poets of the Holocaust, here are five more incredible poems by five different poets. For each, the context is embedded. Feel free to apply one or more of the methods used in this lesson to one or more of these amazing poems:

- [“Prayer to the Living to Forgive them for Being Alive,” by Charlotte Delbo](#)
- [“So I Learn Life’s Greatest Art,” by Irena Bobowska](#)
- [“Last Days in the Ghetto,” by Chava Rosenfarb](#)
- [“My God,” by Catherine Roux](#)
- [“A Cartload of Shoes,” by Avram Sutzkever](#)

