



Teaching the Holocaust Through Poetry

Lesson Plan

Ages: **Students in Grades 10 – 12**

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Introduction

The Holocaust occurred 65 years ago and reams have been written about it. Different disciplinary have applied their approaches to try and understand the transgressive nature of this period in human history. We have written a lesson-plan focusing on a poem written by W.H. Auden, one of England's leading poets at the time of World War II. The poem was written about half a year before the outbreak of the war and as such, it deals more with the problems of refugees than with ghettos and concentration camps. With great in prescience, Auden raises the specter of the German-Jewish refugees that had become a factor on the international agenda since the mid-1930's, and whose fate he addresses even before the war erupts. The poem can be found in many compilations of world poetry.

Rationale

The students will confront the question of man's inhumanity to man through the insights of the artist who works with words, the poet. Toward the end of the lesson-plan, we will also ask the pupil to consider other art forms such as painting and photography in an attempt to expose the students to the possibilities offered by these various disciplines in conveying the inside human experience of difficult historical periods. Can the art forms add to our historical knowledge? Do they deepen the impact?

We hope that the student who experiences this lesson plan in his/her class and is exposed to class discussion on the subject will also increase his/her awareness not only of the plight of refugees during the war but also of the relevance of the subject in today's world.

Lesson Procedure

The focus of the lesson will be the reading of Auden's poem "Refugee Blues"^[1] and answering discussion questions. The poem may be handed out a day before the lesson to several students who will prepare to read it aloud in class. Alternatively, the teacher might prefer to read it to the class him/herself. In either case, the musical rhythm inherent in the poem's special form should be noted and given expression in the reading.



Some of the questions may be given as homework and this is specifically recommended for question No.10. In addition, the teacher might want to broaden the general knowledge of the students on the central subject of Auden's poem, the Jewish refugees at the time of World War II. For example, he can direct them to links we will supply in the body of the lesson.

Questions 7, 8 and 9 could be used as a trigger to examine the problem of refugees in different locations in the world today.

Historical Note to the Teacher

The following is intended to help the teacher with some general information about the fate of Jewish refugees from Germany and Austria from 1933 to the outbreak of World War II in 1939.

In the first years of the Nazi regime, most German Jews who emigrated went to neighboring European countries and to British mandatory Palestine. However, the picture changed considerably after 1936, and especially in 1938. During this period, as immigration of refugees to Palestine and most of the countries of Europe became increasingly difficult, and the circumstances of Jews in Germany deteriorated, Jews became more willing to consider more remote places, especially South America. However, as the plight of Austrian Jewry became more desperate after the Nazi annexation of March 1938, and the *Kristallnacht* pogrom in November which struck the Jews of the entire Reich, the question of the Jewish refugees remained largely unresolved. The countries of the world had virtually shut their gates and besides a small numbers of Jews offered a haven here and there, the vast majority were stranded in a sea of hostility. Chaim Weizmann, twelve years before he would become the first president of the newly created State of Israel, made the following remark, in December 1936; "There are now two sorts of countries in the world, those that want to expel the Jews and those that don't want to admit them", (Testimony given at the Peel Commission, Jerusalem, 1936).

In their frantic efforts to break out of the Nazi trap, the Jewish refugees from Germany and Austria attempted to emigrate wherever they could. Some traveled as far as Shanghai, China, one of the few places that accepted immigrants freely. Others tried to reach Palestine stealthily in order to circumvent British restrictions on Jewish immigration.

It is estimated that about half the Jews emigrated from Greater Germany in 1933-1939. Their destinations were primarily the United States, Palestine, Latin America and various West European countries.

The dry statistics, however, contribute nothing to our understanding of the tremendous personal anguish suffered by this population. Auden wrote his poem at the end of this period and it was their plight that inspired "Refugee Blues". His inspired work is in our opinion an excellent example of the poet honing in



and with his poetic sensitivity, helping the reader burrow beneath the historical narrative into the harrowing experience of these refugees.

Questions on the Poem

1. As you read in the Introduction, the poem was written half a year before the outbreak of World War II. However the reader can pinpoint the three major protagonists whose paths will cross tragically in the course of the war. Complete the following sentences:
 - The victims are the...
 - The perpetrators are the ...
 - The bystanders are the...
2. What particular factors led an individual to be defined as belonging to this or that group?
3. Of the three groups, which was the largest? Is there any connection between your answer and the term 'The Silent Majority'?
4. What possible relationships could have developed between the victims and the bystanders?
5. Auden presents different situations in which prohibitions against the victims multiply and effectively turn them into refugees. Identify and list some of these prohibitions. What does it mean to have these things taken away from you?
6. State bureaucracies are crucial in the lives of ordinary citizens, not to mention threatened population groups like the homeless or people evicted from their homes. Identify the different functionaries or objects that represent bureaucracies for Auden.
7. In your opinion, who is a refugee?
Can one become a refugee in one's own home?
8. How can state bureaucracies help refugees or hinder efforts to help?
9. In your opinion, should governments today have the responsibility to take care of refugees in their country?
Alternatively, what is the role of society in absorbing refugees? Think of schools, sports clubs, the scout movement and other organizations in your country.

Note to the Teacher

Questions 7, 8 and 9 deal with more universal applications on the subject of refugees and in our opinion are invaluable in developing a deeper understanding of this timeless and persistent problem. They are included here in the body of the students' questions before the lesson-plan returns to the text of the poem.

10. Below is a list of key words taken from the poem. Use at least half of them in a 60 word paragraph that reflects some of Auden's main ideas:

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atlas, passports, consul, politely, daily bread, German Jews, politicians, human race, a thousand floors, soldiers, Hitler, thunder rumbling

11. What literary device does Auden employ in every stanza to convey the reality of the world of refugees? How does it affect you?
12. Auden moves from the world of humans to the realm of nature in various stanzas, thereby creating distinct comparisons on the fate of man versus the state of other creatures on earth. Comment on his juxtaposition of looming imprisonment and freedom.
13. The poet uses some startling images in the poem. Look at the following examples and comment on their effectiveness:
 - a. blossoming passports
 - b. officially dead
 - c. fish swimming as if they were free
 - d. a building with a thousand floors

An Additional Strategy

The concluding task of this lesson-plan incorporates two additional art-forms: photography and painting. Below, you can examine a historical photograph of Jews standing in lines outside of a travel agency in Berlin a short time after the pogrom of *Kristallnacht* in November 1938. More than 300,000 Jews had already fled Germany which swelled the ranks of Jewish refugees who are the subject of Auden's poem. Does this photograph add to your appreciation of the subject? Can you link it to the poem you have just studied?





Now look at this painting of Felix Nussbaum. You can find more information on this artist in "Related Items" at the beginning of the lesson plan.



This painting was titled "The Refugee".

- a. What elements in the painting connect you with the poem?
- b. Does the painting affect you differently from the poem?
- c. In general, do you feel that your understanding of and feeling for the subject of the Jewish Refugees in World War II is enhanced by your contact with the poem , the photograph and the painting presented to you in this lesson?

Answer Page for Teacher

1. The victims are German Jews. The perpetrators are German soldiers under Hitler's leadership. The bystanders are the German people referred to in the poem in several verses.
2. In the case of the Jews, mention should be made of the Nuremberg Laws, 1935 that gave legal definition to who was a Jew by Nazi standards. The difference between a perpetrator and a bystander could open up thought-provoking discussion in the class.
3. The biggest group was comprised of the bystanders, most of whom would qualify as part of the silent majority.
4. The whole spectrum of human behavior from antagonism to silence to heroic efforts of helping Jews.



5. Possible answers:
 - a. prohibitions to live in the city
 - b. prohibitions to live in the country
 - c. prohibitions to renew passports
 - d. difficulties of getting into new places
 - e. without homes, they are easy prey for the soldiers.
6. the consul, a committee, politicians, old passports.
7. Answers to this question could be based on dictionary definitions that the students might look up as homework. Alternatively, the students could work in groups or pairs to make up the best definition in class. The second part of the question requires discussion of citizens deprived of basic rights even before their eviction.
8. The discussion generated here will be guided by the current situation in your country.
9. In distinction to the previous question, this question is more universal and involves moral and ethical considerations.
10. As stated above, this question could be given for homework as a form of summary.
11. This question deals with poetry and literary devices. The tight structure of Auden's poem is evident in the repeating form of the stanzas and in the constant repetition in the third line of each stanza. This repetition enforces the sensation of impending doom, of an inexorable progression toward death. The contrast of the impersonal forces of evil with the twelve-time repeated phrase, 'my dear' highlights the plight of the people in their intimate relationships with the all-powerful wheels of history.
12. Auden uses the world of nature, in different verses, to contrast the free life of dogs and cats, birds, fish and even an old yew plant in the churchyard in comparison to that of restrictions placed on Jews.
13. This question focuses on poetic use of language.
14. The additional strategy is discussed in the rationale near the beginning of the lesson-plan.

Concluding Note to the Teacher

We hope that this lesson plan has been of value to you. You are invited to share any thoughts or ideas stemming from this lesson plan with us. To send us your comments, [click here](#).

^[1] available in "Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957", published by Faber and Faber.

