

VETERANS DAY OR MEMORIAL DAY
POETRY LESSON



LESSON PLANS | EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES | VIDEOS | POETRY

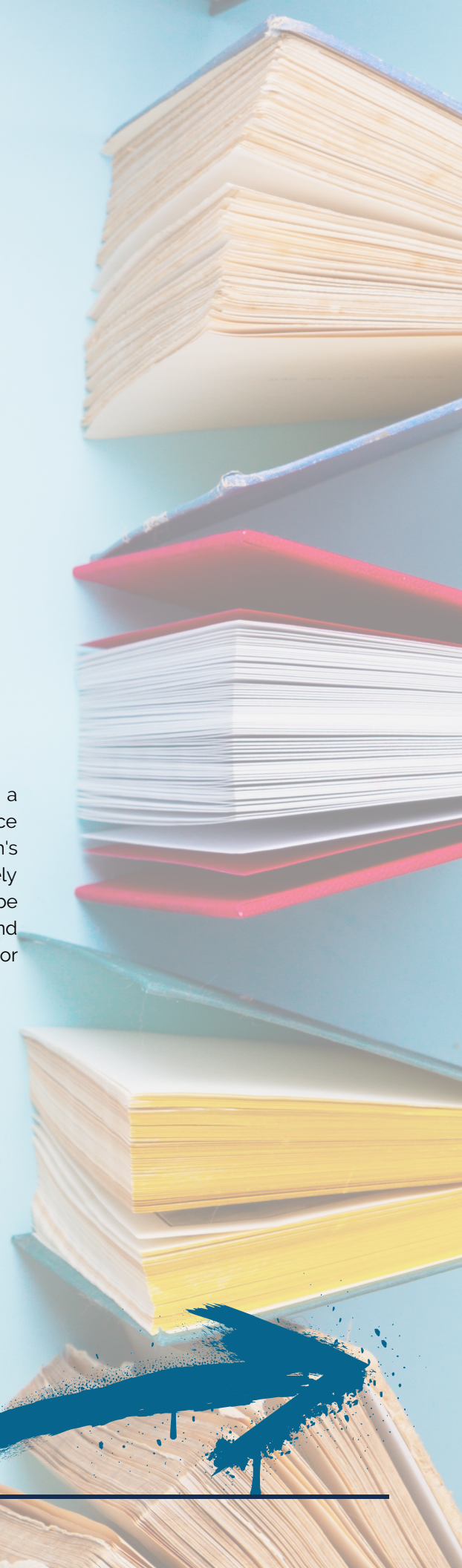
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Outcomes


Some of the following videos and poems may be useful in creating a lesson or series of lessons that helps students understand the significance of what we as a nation celebrate and whom we remember on Veteran's Day or Memorial Day. The following poems and videos are merely suggested teaching tools; all of the material presented together may be too much or too strong, so a teacher should decide which videos and poems to use, and may add other historical material, poems, songs or visual images to the mix.

This lesson was made possible by submissions from Kathleen Meyerdierks (Dudley-Charlton Middle School, Charlton, MA), Carol Nelson (Blake Middle School, Medfield, MA), and Patricia Nangle (Higgins Middle School, Peabody, MA).





Ideas and Methodologies

- Begin with a discussion that explores the students' knowledge of American involvement in various wars. Ask if some of them have relatives or family friends who have served in a war and what effect war has had on that person or on his or her family. You may ask them to go home and ask about the impact of war in their family histories.
 - Once students have shared their stories, show a Favorite Poem Project video that introduces them directly to a veteran or a veteran's story (see suggestions below).
 - Then, perhaps, have them read and discuss some poems written by or about veterans. The lesson will help students understand, through poetry, the significance of war in American and world history and in American lives.
 - You may decide to assign students to formally interview someone who has participated in a war, to write a short essay about that person's experience, and to share their essays with the class. Students may want to ask interviewees if there were any poems, songs or works of art that helped them through or remind them of that time.
 - If students do not know anyone who served in a war, you may ask them to refer to a book that offers insights on war and its effects. Two fine sources are: *Lincoln: A Photobiography* by Russell Freedman and *Abraham Lincoln: The Writer*, compiled and edited by Harold Holzer.
 - You may also ask students to write a paragraph or two about their reaction to one of the videos or poems.
 - The following pages contain a number of poems covering a multitude of major conflicts and wars. Below each poem is a brief synopsis about the piece, its author, and related Favorite Poem Project videos.
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FACING IT

by Yusef Komunyakaa (American, b. 1947)

CONNECTIONS TO THE VIETNAM WAR

My black face fades,
hiding inside the black granite.
I said I wouldn't,
dammit: No tears.
I'm stone. I'm flesh.
My clouded reflection eyes me
like a bird of prey, the profile of night
slanted against morning. I turn
this way — the stone lets me go.
I turn that way — I'm inside
the Vietnam Veterans Memorial
again, depending on the light
to make a difference.
I go down the 58,022 names,
half-expecting to find
my own in letters like smoke.
I touch the name Andrew Johnson;
I see the booby trap's white flash.
Names shimmer on a woman's blouse
but when she walks away
the names stay on the wall.
Brushstrokes flash, a red bird's
wings cutting across my stare.
The sky. A plane in the sky.
A white vet's image floats
closer to me, then his pale eyes
look through mine. I'm a window.
He's lost his right arm
inside the stone. In the black mirror
a woman's trying to erase names:
No, she's brushing a boy's hair.

Favorite Poem Video featuring "Facing It" by Yusef Komunyakaa

Read by Mike Lythgoe, Foundation Director, Washington DC

Yusef Komunyakaa is a living African-American poet, who, in addition to his literary accolades (including the Pulitzer Prize) received the Bronze Star for his service in Vietnam. "Facing It" gives a moving account of a visit to the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, DC. The reader, also a Vietnam veteran, recites the poem in front of the "sea of names" on the memorial wall. He says, "Until I found this poem, I couldn't face the wall."



THE SENTENCE

by Anna Akhmatova (Russian, 1889-1966)

CONNECTIONS TO THE VIETNAM WAR

And the stone word fell
On my still-living breast.
Never mind, I was ready.
I will manage somehow.

Today I have so much to do:
I must kill memory once and for all,
I must turn my soul to stone,
I must learn to live again —

Unless . . . Summer's ardent rustling
Is like a festival outside my window.
For a long time I've foreseen this
Brilliant day, deserted house.


Translated from the Russian by Judith Hemschemeyer

Favorite Poem Video featuring "The Sentence" by Anna Akhmatova

Read by Nancy Nersessian, Professor of Cognitive Science, Atlanta, Georgia

The reader recalls her brother's early years and describes the way his life was changed irrevocably by his tour of duty in the Vietnam War. "The Sentence" is by the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova who wrote and worked assiduously throughout her life despite political and personal upheaval. Her ex-husband was killed after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, their son imprisoned after the World War II. For 15 years, her work was banned under Stalinist rule.

NOTE: We do not recommend showing these two videos at the same time, as the material is quite strong.



LOSSES

by Randall Jarrell (American, 1914-1965)

It was not dying: everybody died.
 It was not dying: we had died before
 In the routine crashes — and our fields
 Called up the papers, wrote home to our folks,
 And the rates rose, all because of us.
 We died on the wrong page of the almanac,
 Scattered on mountains fifty miles away;
 Diving on haystacks, fighting with a friend,
 We blazed up on the lines we never saw.
 We died like aunts or pets or foreigners.
 (When we left high school nothing else had died
 For us to figure we had died like.)

In our new planes, with our new crews, we bombed
 The ranges by the desert or the shore,
 Fired at towed targets, waited for our scores —
 And turned into replacements and woke up
 One morning, over England, operational.
 It wasn't different: but if we died
 It was not an accident but a mistake
 (But an easy one for anyone to make).
 We read our mail and counted up our missions —
 In bombers named for girls, we burned
 The cities we had learned about in school —
 Till our lives wore out; our bodies lay among
 The people we had killed and never seen.
 When we lasted long enough they gave us medals;

When we died they said, "Our casualties were low."
 They said, "Here are the maps"; we burned the cities.

It was not dying — no, not ever dying;
 But the night I died I dreamed that I was dead,
 And the cities said to me: "Why are you dying?
 We are satisfied, if you are; but why did I die?"

DEATH OF THE BALL TURRET GUNNER

by Randall Jarrell

From my mother's sleep I fell into the State,
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

In 1942, during the second world war, Randall Jarrell worked as a control tower operator for the army, an experience that provided much material for his poetry. Jarrell's reputation as a poet was established in 1945, while he was still serving in the army, with the publication of his second book, *Little Friend, Little Friend*, which bitterly and dramatically documents the intense fears and moral struggles of young soldiers.



DULCE ET DECORUM EST

by **Wilfred Owen (English, 1893-1918)**

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
 Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
 Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
 And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
 Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
 But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
 Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
 Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys! — An ecstasy of fumbling,
 Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
 But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
 And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime . . .
 As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.
 In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
 He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
 Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
 And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
 His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
 If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, —
 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,
 The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
 Pro patria mori.

Favorite Poem Video featuring "Dulce et Decorum Est" by Wilfred Owen

Mary McWhorter, Accounting Manager, Stockton, California

The poet Wilfred Owen, a British soldier who fought in WWI, was killed in the war at the age of 25. In the poem, he describes a brutal gas attack. The title of the poem comes from an ode by the ancient Roman poet Horace. In the video, Mary McWhorter recalls hearing her teacher recite the poem to her 7th grade class. The horrible account, which many students laughed at, spoke to her about her father's experience as a veteran blinded in WWII.

From LYCIDAS**by John Milton (English, 1608-1674)**

Look homeward angel now, and melt with ruth:
And, O ye dolphins, waft the hapless youth.
Weep no more, woeful shepherds, weep no more,
For Lycidas your sorrow is not dead,
Sunk though he be beneath the watery floor,
So sinks the day-star in the ocean bed,
And yet anon repairs his drooping head,
And tricks his beams, and with new spangled ore,
Flames in the forehead of the morning sky:
So Lycidas sunk low, but mounted high,
Through the dear might of him that walk'd the waves,
Where, other groves and other streams along,
With nectar pure his oozy locks he laves,
And hears the unexpressive nuptial song,
In the blest kingdoms meek of joy and love.
There entertain him all the saints above,
In solemn troops and sweet societies
That sing, and singing in their glory move,
And wipe the tears forever from his eyes.
Now, Lycidas, the shepherds weep no more;
Henceforth thou art the genius of the shore,
In thy large recompense, and shalt be good
To all that wander in that perilous flood.
Thus sang the uncouth swain to th'oaks and rills,
While the still morn went out with sandals gray;
He touched the tender stops of various quills,
With eager thought warbling his Doric lay:
And now the sun had stretched out all the hills,
And now was dropped into the western bay;
At last he rose, and twitched his mantle blue:
Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new.

Favorite Poem Video featuring "Lycidas" by John Milton**Read by Joan Thuebel, Chatham, New Jersey**

Joan Thuebel reads from "Lycidas," English Renaissance poet John Milton's famous elegy for his friend Edward King who was "drowned in his passage from Chester on the Irish Seas." It had always surprised the reader that her father loved the poem until, after his death, she found a letter he'd written to his father from the battlefield of WWI that seemed to explain the connection.

THE VETERAN'S VISION

by Walt Whitman

CONNECTIONS TO THE CIVIL WAR

While my wife at my side lies slumbering, and the wars are over long,
And my head on the pillow rests at home, and the mystic midnight passes,
And through the stillness, through the dark, I hear, just hear, the breath of my infant,
There in the room, as I wake from sleep, this vision presses upon me:
The engagement opens there and then, in my busy brain unreal;
The skirmishers begin — they crawl cautiously ahead — I hear the irregular snap! snap!
I hear the sounds of the different missiles — the short t-h-t! t-h-t! of the rifle balls;
I see the shells exploding, leaving small white clouds — I hear the great shells shrieking as they pass;
The grape, like the hum and whirr of wind through the trees, (quick, tumultuous, now the contest rages!)

All the scenes at the batteries themselves rise in detail before me again;
The crashing and smoking — the pride of the men in their pieces;
The chief gunner ranges and sights his piece, and selects a fuse of the right time;
After firing, I see him lean aside, and look eagerly off to note the effect;
— Elsewhere I hear the cry of a regiment charging — (the young colonel leads himself this time, with brandish'd sword;)

I see the gaps cut by the enemy's volleys, (quickly fill'd up — no delay);
I breathe the suffocating smoke — then the flat clouds hover low, concealing all;
Now a strange lull comes for a few seconds, not a shot fired on either side;
Then resumed, the chaos louder than ever, with eager calls, and orders of officers;
While from some distant part of the field the wind wafts to my ears a shout of applause, (some special success);

And ever the sound of the cannon, far or near, (rousing, even in dreams, a devilish exultation, and all the old mad joy, in the depths of my soul);
And ever the hastening of infantry shifting positions — batteries, cavalry, moving hither and thither;
(The falling, dying, I heed not — the wounded, dripping and red, I heed not — some to the rear are hobbling);

Grime, heat, rush — aid-de-camps galloping by, or on a full run; With the patter of small arms, the warning s-s-t of the rifles, (these in my vision I hear or see,)
And bombs bursting in air, and at night the vari-color'd rockets.

O CAPTAIN! MY CAPTAIN!

by Walt Whitman

CONNECTIONS TO THE CIVIL WAR

1

O captain! my captain! our fearful trip is done;
The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won;
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring:
But O heart! heart! heart!
Leave you not the little spot,
Where on the deck my captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

2

O captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;
Rise up — for you the flag is flung — for you the bugle trills;
For you bouquets and ribbon'd wreaths—for you the shores a-crowding;
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;
O captain! dear father!
This arm I push beneath you;
It is some dream that on the deck,
You've fallen cold and dead.

3

My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still;
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will;
But the ship is anchor'd safe, its voyage closed and done;
From fearful trip, the victor ship, comes in with object won:
Exult, O shores, and ring, O bells!
But I, with silent tread,
Walk the spot my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

These poems are from Walt Whitman's book *Drum Taps*, published with its sequel in 1866. The book reflects the poet's experiences and observations during the Civil War. Whitman had spent most of his adult life working as a journalist and had published his first now-famous book *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. From 1862 to 1865, however, he worked as a volunteer hospital nurse in Washington, DC, witnessing some of the war's most brutal and devastating results. *Drum Taps* includes Whitman's two poems about Abraham Lincoln, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," considered one of the finest elegies in the English language, and the much-recited "O Captain! My Captain!"

CONCORD HYMN**by Ralph Waldo Emerson (American, 1803-1882)**

By the rude bridge that arched the flood,
Their flag to April's breeze unfurled,
Here once the embattled farmers stood
And fired the shot heard round the world.


The foe long since in silence slept;
Alike the conqueror silent sleeps;
And Time the ruined bridge has swept
Down the dark stream which seaward creeps.

On this green bank, by this soft stream,
We set today a votive stone;
That memory may their deed redeem,
When, like our sires, our sons are gone.

Spirit, that made those heroes dare
To die, and leave their children free,
Bid Time and Nature gently spare
The shaft we raise to them and thee.

Favorite Poem Video featuring "Concord Hymn" by Ralph Waldo Emerson**Read by William Clinton, Former President of the United States, Washington, DC**

The President reads Emerson's famous hymn, which was first sung on July 4, 1837, at the completion of the monument commemorating heroes of the Revolutionary War and the battles of Lexington and Concord (April 19, 1775).





Lesson Resources

Books:

Americans' Favorite Poems: The Favorite Poem Project Anthology, edited by Robert Pinsky and Maggie Dietz

Leaves of Grass by Walt Whitman,

The Complete Poems by Randall Jarrell

Favorite Poem Project Videos:

Favorite Poem Video featuring "Facing It" by Yusef Komunyakaa
Read by Mike Lythgoe, Foundation Director, Washington DC

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Read by Nancy Nersessian, Professor of Cognitive Science, Atlanta, Georgia

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