



## Poetry and Culture

Recommended Grade Range: Middle School

### Learning Objective(s)

#### Students will be able to...

- ✓ Examine and discuss the ways in which culture contributes to our country and our poetry.
- ✓ Consider their unique familial and cultural past through poetry and research.

▶ *This is a multi-day unit that relies on students conducting interviews in advance; teachers may choose to lengthen or combine a given day's lesson, below, as they see fit.*

### Lesson Agenda

#### Day One

Launch this unit by asking students to interview their parents, grandparents, or other relatives in order to learn about their family backgrounds. The goal is to look into at least one parent's or relative's family history.

- ◆ You may wish to provide time in class for students to select their interviewees and prepare their questions in advance.
  - ◆ Sample questions include: Do you know when our first ancestor came to this country? Where are your ancestors from? What language(s) do(es) your family speak? Are there any myths, poems, or songs that make up your family's history?
  - ◆ This interview could include multimedia elements in which students gather photographs, recipes, objects, and/or artwork that make up their family background.
- ◆ Students may wish to focus on just one or two people in order to gain a rich, vivid story, or they may wish to develop a family tree with some details about each family member they spoke to.
- ◆ Many students will, of course, discover that their ancestry stems from several countries and cultures. In these cases, students can share the part of their family story that is most interesting to them or that they can learn the most about.
- ◆ If students are unable to research their own family, guide them in researching the story of another family.
  - ◆ Possible texts to pull from: *Silver Days* by Sonia Levitin; *Letters from Rifka* by Karen Hesse; *Notes of a Native Son* by James Baldwin.



## Day Two

- ◆ After students have conducted their interview(s), they should spend time at home or in class **finding a poem that somehow reflects their families' experience.**
  - ◆ If a student finds a poem in another language, perhaps they can read it to the class in its original language, alongside an English translation.
  - ◆ If a student has trouble finding a poem, you could suggest one of the Favorite Poem Project's poems listed in the "Lesson Resources" section of this lesson plan.
- ◆ Students will then present their family story and accompanying poem to the class.
  - ◆ You may wish to follow each presentation with a class discussion, in which students share any connections they noticed between the interview and the poem.

## Suggestions for Next Steps

- ◆ After students interviewed their family member(s) and made connections between their history and a poem, you could guide students in writing their own poem about some element of their cultural history/identity.

(Lesson Resources on Following Page)



## Lesson Resources

### Suggested Favorite Poem Project Videos:

- "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" by Emily Dickinson. Read by Lina Yiang, Student, Decatur, Georgia.
- "Minstrel Man" by Langston Hughes. Read by Pov Chin, Student, Stockton, California.
- "Untitled Tanka" by Sone No Yoshitada. Translated from the Japanese by Kenneth Rexroth. Read by Kiyoshi Houston, Student, Santa Monica, California.
- "Politics" by William Butler Yeats. Read by Steve Conteaguero, United States Marine, Miami, Florida.
- "Ay, Ay, Ay de la Grifa Negra" by Julia de Burgos. Translated from the Spanish by Jack Agueros. Read by Glaisma Pérez-Silva, Bilingual Special Education Teacher, Hartford, Connecticut.
- From "Gitanjali" by Rabindranath Tagore. Translated from the Bengali by Rabindranath Tagore. Read by Jayashree Chatterjee, Librarian, Summit, NJ.
- "On a Quiet Night" by Li Po. Translated from the Chinese by Lewis S. Robinson. Read by Hui Xia Chin-Hong, Student, Elmhurst, NY.
- "Piececitos" by Gabriela Mistral. Translated from the Spanish by Doris Dana. Read by Sister Maria Cristina Sanchez Escobar, Millbrook, NY.
- "A Psalm of Life" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Read by Reverend Michael Haynes, Minister, Roxbury, MA.
- "The Way of the Water-Hyacinth" by Zaw Gee. Translated from the Burmese by Lyn Aye. Read by Lyn Aye, Anesthesiologist, San Jose, CA.
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### Poems that refer to family history or cultural connections in Americans' Favorite Poems:

- "Refugee Blues" by W.H. Auden
- "Eternity" by William Blake
- "The Soldier" by Rupert Brooke
- "Address to a Haggis" by Robert Burns
- "The City" by C. P. Cavafy
- from "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge
- "At Melville's Tomb" by Hart Crane
- "Immigrants" by Robert Frost
- "Birches" by Robert Frost
- "Those Winter Sundays" by Robert Hayden
- "Do You See the Town?" by Hugh von Hofmannsthal
- "Minstrel Man" by Langston Hughes
- "Mother to Son" by Langston Hughes
- "Driving Montana" by Richard Hugo
- "The New Colossus" by Emma Lazarus
- "A Psalm of Life" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
- "Our Land" by Yannis Ritsos
- "Fern Hill" by Dylan Thomas
- "A Far Cry from Africa" by Derek Walcott
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### Cultural Curriculum Resources:

- Leon's Story by Leon Tillage (1997)
- I Was Dreaming to Come to America: Memories from the Ellis Island Oral History Project, edited by Veronica Lawler (1997)
- Lasting Echoes: An Oral History of Native American People by Joseph Bruchac (1997)
- Oh, Freedom!: Kids Talk about the Civil Rights Movement with the People Who Made It Happen by Casey King and Linda Barrett Osborne (1997)
- Blood Dazzler by Patricia Smith (2008)
- When my Brother was an Aztec by Natalie Diaz (2012)
- Native Voices: Indigenous American Poetry, Craft, and Conversations by CMarie Furhman and Dean Rader (2019)
- To the Realization of Perfect Helplessness by Robin Coste Lewis (2022)
- "The Great Migration," a comprehensive online compilation of biographies about immigrants who came to New England from 1620-1640 (<https://www.americanancestors.org>)

The Favorite Poem Project is a nonprofit organization dedicated to celebrating, documenting, and encouraging poetry's role in our lives.



This lesson was made possible by submissions from Mary Bourque and Rita Delaney (Clark Avenue School, Chelsea, MA); Theresa Creaney (Smith School, Danvers, MA); Morgan May (Graduate Student, Boston University School of Education); Jennifer McConathy (Ben-Hem School, Natick, MA); Margaret Voss (Marblehead Public Schools); and Rachel M. Dillon (NYC Public Schools).

For more lesson plans, videos, and classroom resources  
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