

Veterans/ Memorial Day Poetry Lesson

Recommended Grade Range: Middle School



Learning Objective(s)

Students will be able to...

- ✓ Understand how poetry can be a tool for illustrating the significance of Veterans and/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.*

Lesson Agenda

Do Now

- ◆ Begin by **asking students to share (by writing independently or discussing out loud) about their knowledge of American involvement in war.** You could guide their group discussion/independent writing with any of the following questions:
 - ◆ Is there a particular war you know about already? What war(s) do you know about?
 - ◆ Do you have any relatives or family friends who have served in a war? How did it affect them or their family?

Share Out

- ◆ If students answered the Do Now by independently writing their ideas, give them a few minutes to **share out their responses.**

Mini Lesson

- ◆ After students have shared their personal connections to war, show a **Favorite Poem Project video that introduces them directly to a veteran or a veteran's story** (see the "Lesson Resources" section of this lesson plan).
 - ◆ You might ask students to take note of their reactions and feelings as they watch the video.

Share Out

- ◆ As a class or in small groups, **discuss the ways that poetry could be a useful tool in writing about war.**
 - ◆ You may wish to begin this discussion in terms of the poet: what are the benefits of them writing a poem about their experiences?
 - ◆ You could then shift to the perspective of readers: why is it important to read and learn about veterans' experiences?



Homework

- ◆ Follow-up assignments vary; see the "Suggestions for Next Steps" section of this lesson plan.

Suggestions for Next Steps

- ◆ Students could formally interview someone who has participated in a war, write a short essay about that person's experience, and 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.
- ◆ Students could also write a paragraph or short essay in response to a poem covered in class. This piece could involve outside research on the war, or students could find another poem to compare it to.

(Lesson Resources on Following Page)



Lesson Resources

The following Favorite Poem Project videos are well-suited to this lesson (note that many contain strong material):

- **“Facing it” by Yusef Komunyakaa (Vietnam War):** 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 (Vietnam War):** 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 World War II. For 15 years, her work was banned under Stalinist rule.
- **“Losses” (World War II) and/or “Death of the Ball Turret Gunner” (World War II) by Randall Jarrell:** 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 (World War I & II):** 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 (World War I):** 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” and “O Captain! My Captain!” by Walt Whitman (Civil War):** 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 (Revolutionary War):** The former 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).

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 Kathleen Meyerdierks (Dudley-Charlton Middle School, Charlton, MA), Carol Nelson (Blake Middle School, Medfield, MA), and Patricia Nangle (Higgins Middle School, Peabody, MA), and Rachel M. Dillon (NYC Public Schools).

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