

CHAPTER 4

POETRY

CHAPTER 4

POETRY

INTRODUCTION

We recommend that teachers devote one class to chapter one, human rights exercises, before they embark on this chapter. Each separate class or exercise has clearly outlined aims, objectives, length and NCCA key skills. We have also highlighted the material needed for each class or exercise. All handouts referenced in the classes can be found in the handout section at the end of this chapter.

POETRY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

It is often difficult for students to understand the struggle and plight of a people in another country. Poetry serves as historical documents to explore the issues and circumstances surrounding these events. Poetry can also serve as a vehicle for students to express their feelings around issues of human rights injustice and generate empathy for international struggles for human rights. Studying poetry by poets with human rights concerns encourages students to explore different perspectives and points of view. It promotes critical thinking and it encourages creative and imaginative thought among students.

From their engagement with poetry in the English course, students will have encountered distinctive voices within poems. Exploring human rights as a particular theme within poetry can therefore be an opportunity for students to build on their general appreciation of the power of a poem to express emotion succinctly.

METHODOLOGY

Poetry is an experience of word textures, sound and rhythm. To fully engage and understand the artistry and impact of a poem students should be encouraged to read it aloud. The act of articulating the poem will nurture insights and responses that a silent reading cannot elicit.

OVERALL AIM OF THE SECTION

To increase students' understanding of human rights and their familiarity with poetry as a means of expression.

Seamus Heaney On Writing *From The Republic Of Conscience* Taken From The Book *From The Republic Of Conscience Stories Inspired By The UDHR*

“*From the Republic of Conscience*’, a poem I managed to write in 1985 when I was asked to contribute something to mark the year’s United Nations Day. The request came from Mary Lawlor, the secretary of the local Sandymount branch of Amnesty International...Mary’s request was accompanied by a dossier containing the case histories of prisoners of conscience who had suffered everything from censorship and harassment to incarceration and torture, so I had a strong desire to come up with something good enough for the pamphlet Amnesty intended to publish. But I could find no way to invent a ‘verbal contraption’ that would be any way near as strong as the record of injustice and pain in those resolutely unpoetic press releases, and after a couple of weeks I wrote back and said I was unable to deliver.

But this removal of the sense of obligation shortened the creative odds: once the weight of commission lifted, conditions were less earnest, less duty bound. Anxiety about measuring up to the grim evidence disappeared, replaced by a mood that was both apt and absolved, more susceptible to the sprit of play. Almost immediately I thought of an exercise I had set my writing students in Harvard the previous semester.

I had asked them to imagine and describe a country that might stand as an allegory for some emotion or state of mind, so I now set myself the same exercise; make up a country called 'Conscience'.

I took it that Conscience would be a republic, a silent, solitary place where a person would find it hard to avoid self-awareness and self-examination; and this made me think of Orkney. I remember the silence the first time I landed there. When I got off the small propeller plane and started walking across the grass to the little arrivals hut, I heard the cry of a curlew. And as soon as that image came to me, I was up and away, able to proceed with a fiction that felt workable yet unconstrained, a made up thing that might be hung in the scale as a counterweight to the given actuality of the world"

Seamus Heaney

CLASS 1

SEAMUS HEANEY

FROM THE REPUBLIC OF CONSCIENCE

AIM

To introduce students to poetry that explores human rights.

OBJECTIVES

Students will have

- Engaged with poetry that addresses human rights;
- Become able to recognise poetry that is used to express the poet's sentiments about human rights to listeners;
- Identified with poetry as an art form which they could use to explore such issues;
- Given creative expression to their imagination.



NCCA KEY SKILLS

Information processing, communication, critical and creative thinking and being personally effective.



MATERIAL NEEDED

Reading and understanding poetry (handout section 4.1, pg 106).

Seamus Heaney's poem *From the Republic of Conscience* (handout section 4.2, pg 107).

UDHR Statement (Chapter 1, 1.1, pg 34).



LENGTH

Full Class

STEPS:

1. Hand out suggestions on reading and understanding poetry to the class, (handout section 4.1, pg 106);
2. Hand out Seamus Heaney's poem *From the Republic of Conscience* and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and ask the class to read them, (handout section 4.2, pg 107);
3. Student/teacher should read aloud *From the Republic of Conscience*;
4. Discuss with the class the following questions:
 - What is the main imagery the poem uses?
 - What feelings do the words used in this poem bring up?
 - What is the tension at the heart of the poem?

- Heaney said that he wrote the poem... “as a counterweight to the given actuality of the world” Discuss this comment after reading the poem;
 - After reading both the UDHR and the poem, does Heaney’s *Republic* reflect some of the values in the UDHR?
5. Ask the students to imagine their own Republic, what words, images, or stories come to mind? As a class brainstorm these ideas and ask the students to write these imaginative ideas down.

CLASS 2

HUMAN RIGHTS INSPIRED POETRY

AIM

To introduce and explore poetry from the perspectives of people whose human rights have been abused.

OBJECTIVES

Students will have

- Increased their ability to comprehend poetry from different voices;
- Engaged with the concepts of justice, security and human rights;
- Learned how poetry can be a voice for those who suffer human rights abuses.

NCCA KEY SKILLS

Information processing, communication, critical and creative thinking and being personally effective.

MATERIAL NEEDED

Poems from *Guantánamo* and by Martin Niemoller (handout section 4.3, pg 109; 4.5 pg 111).
Factsheet about Guantánamo Bay (handout section 4.4, pg 110).

LENGTH

Full Class

Poem 1

1. Hand out the poem, *Poem from Guantánamo*, to the class (handout section 4.3, pg 109). Ask the students to first read the poem to themselves and then ask for a volunteer to read the poem out loud to the class;
2. **Classroom activities:**
 - Hand out the fact sheet (handout section 4.4, pg 110) about Guantánamo Bay;
 - Ask the class to read the fact sheet for 5 minutes;
 - Begin a brief class discussion on the poem from the Guantánamo Detention Center;
 - Discuss the imagery used and how the poet conveys emotions in this poem;
 - What is the theme of the poem?
 - Where do you find it expressed most clearly?
 - What is the poem saying about human rights and justice (or injustice/oppression)?

Poem 2

1. Ask the students to read out the poem by Martin Niemoller (handout section 4.5, pg 111);
2. **Classroom activities:**
 - What is the theme of the poem?
 - Where do you find it expressed most clearly?
 - What is the poem saying about human rights and justice (or injustice/oppression)?
 - What images reinforce the meaning behind the poem?
 - What are the historical circumstances surrounding Martin Niemoller’s poem? (briefly summarize)

- Do you agree or disagree with the ideas expressed in this poem?
 - Compare the two poems in this lesson.
3. Get the students to brainstorm different words that identify with the concepts of human rights and justice and put together a list. Ask the students to bring the list to the next class with their ideas from the Seamus Heaney exercise from class one.



Youngs boys playing, Harare, Zimbabwe, June 17 2009. © Amnesty International.

CLASS 3

WRITE YOUR OWN HUMAN RIGHTS INSPIRED POEM

AIM

The students will engage with poems written by fellow students about human rights and use their own creative writing skills to compose a poem.

OBJECTIVES

Students will have

- Developed their critical literacy skills through poetry;
- Given an expressive shape to personal viewpoints;
- Used other texts to stimulate their imagination.



NCCA KEY SKILLS

Communication, critical and creative thinking and being personally effective.



MATERIAL NEEDED

Guidelines for writing a poem (handout section 4.5, pg 113).

Voice Our Concern poems (handout section 4.6, pg 111).

Hand out CRE case-study (pg 104)



LENGTH

Full Class

STEPS:

1. Ask students to read all the *Voice Our Concern* poems and then vote on one to read aloud (handout section 4.6, pg 111);
2. Begin a classroom discussion by asking the students the following questions;
 - Why was this poem written?
 - Comment on the imagery in this poem?
 - Does it leave a lasting impression?

Ask Students To Begin To Write Their Own Poem

STEPS:

1. Have students use their ideas from previous brainstorming activities as a starting point for their poem;
2. Ask the students to pick an article from the UDHR. It is important for each student that they pick the one that concerns them the most;
3. Before students start their own poem hand out the guidelines given, (handout section 4.5, pg 113);
4. Ask students to draw a picture to accompany their poem. Display these poems together with pictures in the classroom or, better yet, some public place in the school community.

CASE STUDY

Beara Community School has demonstrated a capacity to form the creative partnerships that can promote and enrich the work of students. The school overlooks the harbour at Castletownbere and the sea dominates the lives of the whole community. In a series of works, the students have found a way to express that domination – through music (working with a local composer), through poetry (an extended residency by writer John O’Leary, supported by both CRE and Poetry Ireland’s Writers in Schools scheme - www.poetryireland.ie) and film (assisted by professionals from the Cork Film Centre - www.corkfilmcentre.com). All this work was combined in a live presentation at the school and it continues to evolve with the support of teachers within the school, and the Principal.

You can obtain the DVD, ‘Full Fathom Five’, from the school, Contact Alan Sheehy at Beara Community School (beara2@eircom.net).



Close Guantánemo Bay, O’Connell Street Dublin, Ireland 2006/2007. © Amnesty International.



HANDOUTS

POETRY

HANDOUT 4.1

READING AND UNDERSTANDING POETRY

This handout is used in the following classes/exercises

Class 1: Seamus Heaney *From the Republic of Conscience* / pg 100

Students should consider these suggestions when reading a poem:

- Try to summarise the main images/pictures that the poem gives you.
- What do these images suggest in terms of feelings and sensations?
- Do the images make any pattern?
- Do some of the images in the poem contrast with each other?
- Does any meaning emerge from the imagery in the poem?
- Write down any questions that may have been brought up from your reading of the poem.
- After re-reading the poem have you found any answer to these questions?
- Are there tensions at the heart of the poem?

HANDOUT 4.2

FROM THE REPUBLIC OF CONSCIENCE BY SEAMUS HEANEY

This handout is used in the following classes/exercises

Class 1: Seamus Heaney's *From the Republic of Conscience* / pg 100

From The Republic Of Conscience

I

When I landed in the republic of conscience
it was so noiseless when the engines stopped
I could hear a curlew high above the runway.

At immigration, the clerk was an old man
who produced a wallet from his homespun coat
and showed me a photograph of my grandfather.

The woman in customs asked me to declare
the words of our traditional cures and charms
to heal dumbness and avert the evil eye.

No porters. No interpreter. No taxi.
You carried your own burden and very soon
your symptoms of creeping privilege disappeared.

II

Fog is a dreaded omen there but lightning
spells universal good and parents hang
swaddled infants in trees during thunderstorms.

Salt is their precious mineral. And seashells
are held to the ear during births and funerals.
The base of all inks and pigments is seawater.

Their sacred symbol is a stylized boat.
The sail is an ear, the mast a sloping pen,
the hull a mouth-shape, the keel an open eye.

At their inauguration, public leaders
must swear to uphold unwritten law and weep
to atone for their presumption to hold office –

and to affirm their faith that all life sprang
from salt in tears which the sky-god wept
after he dreamt his solitude was endless.

III

I came back from that frugal republic
with my two arms the one length, the customs woman
having insisted my allowance was myself.

The old man rose and gazed into my face
and said that was official recognition
that I was now a dual citizen.

He therefore desired me when I got home
to consider myself a representative
and to speak on their behalf in my own tongue.

Their embassies, he said, were everywhere
but operated independently
and no ambassador would ever be relieved.

HANDOUT 4.3

POEM FROM GUANTÁNAMO: THE DETAINEES SPEAK: ADNAN FARHAN ABDUL LATIF

This handout is used in the following classes/exercises

Class 2: Human Rights Inspired Poetry / pg 101

Is it True?

Is it true that the grass grows again after rain?

Is it true that the flowers will rise up in the spring?

Is it true that birds will migrate home again?

Is it true that the salmon swim back up their stream?

Is it true

This is true. These are all miracles.

But Is it true that one day we'll leave Guantánamo Bay?

Is it true that one day we will go back to our homes?

I sail in my dreams, I am dreaming of home.

To be with my children, each one part of me;

To be with my wife and the ones that I love;

To be with my parents, my world's tenderest hearts.

I dream to be home, to be free from this cage.

But do you hear me, Oh Judge, do you hear me at all?

We are innocent, here, we've committed no crime.

Set me free, set us free, if anywhere still

Justice and compassion remain in this world!

HANDOUT 4.4

COUNTER TERROR WITH JUSTICE

This handout is used in the following classes/exercises

Class 2: Human Rights Inspired Poetry / pg 101

Since the attacks in the US on 11 September 2001, the US and its allies have led a “war on terror” that has eroded fundamental human rights. The ban on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment – which is the most universally accepted ban – has been undermined. In the “war on terror”, governments have not only used torture and ill treatment but they made the case that this was justifiable and necessary. Under pressure from national and international public opinion, they now take a more subtle view and pay lip service to the prohibition on torture.

When the US invaded Afghanistan and Iraq they captured a number of men. These men were then transported to an army facility in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. Not one of these men have been convicted of any crime and yet they have been tortured, abused and denied the right to a fair trial. One of the most basic principles of the American Constitution is that everyone is innocent until proven guilty but in Guantánamo the prisoners are presumed guilty. Many of the people held there cannot speak English therefore it is extremely hard for them to prove their innocence. Furthermore, as many of the men are from developing countries the records which may prove that they are innocent (e.g. passport, employment records) are either not kept in these countries, cannot be accessed or have been destroyed.

The US administration chose Guantánamo as the location for this detention facility in an attempt to keep the detainees out of the reach of the US courts. Hundreds of people from around 35 different nationalities remain held in effect in a legal black hole, many without access to any court, legal counsel or family member. Many of these detainees allege that they have been subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.

Numerous detainees have attempted suicide. Others have in desperation embarked on hunger strikes, being kept alive, sometimes against their will, through painful force-feeding procedures. In June 2006, three detainees were found dead in their cells; they had apparently hanged themselves. Guantánamo Bay has become a symbol of injustice and abuse in the US administration’s “war on terror”.

HANDOUT 4.5

This handout is used in the following classes/exercises

Class 2: Human Rights Inspired Poetry / pg 101

Class 3: Write your own Human Rights Inspired Poem / pg 103

Poem By Martin Niemoller

First they came for the socialists,
and I did not speak out—because I was not a Socialist.
Then they came for the Trade Unionists,
and I did not speak out—because I was not a Trade Unionist-
Then they came for the Jews,
and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew-
Then they came for me—
and there was no one left to speak for me

Freedom Of Expression

By Joseph Cogavin,
Garbally College, Ballinasloe, Galway

Freedom of expression should be no problem,
But when can we draw the lines?
Is it possible we are hypocrites?
For we don't want to hear conflicting viewpoints,
But doesn't everyone have the right
To freedom of expression,
Or does Ireland not respect that?
Or is it the case
That freedom of expression has never
Or will never exist?

A Child's Prayer

By Catherine Nolan and Louise Guilfoyle
Colaiste Mhuire, Kilkenny

I go to bed at night
Praying not to wake in the light
Knowing that people will see my black eyes
When they ask what happened I'm telling them lies.

Walking to school in my raggy clothes
Looking at my shoes and seeing my toes
With a few cracked ribs and a pain in my head
All because I wet the bed.

I'm afraid to go home because I know what is in store
No food in the cupboard just scraps on the floor
What can I do for I'm only a child
Yet I am praying for help all the while

Bullying Me

By Laura Grace
Colaiste Mhuire, Kilkenny

Why do people bully me?
We were all born equal and free,
Why do people call me names?
When all I want is to join their games.

I'm not that kind of person to fight,
I can't even go outside at night,
Some people put me through hell,
When I go home I tell my mother I fell.

With cut elbows and knees,
Black eyes and bruised thighs,
I hate waking up the next day,
To face the same thing.

Why do people bully me?

Racism

By Niamh Brennan,
Presentation College, Askea, Co. Carlow

The whistle blows, the race begins,
The tension is strong to see who wins.
Complaints from the crowd as the African stops,
"He's won the race, call the cops!"
No black man can defeat us whites,
He's different, he's coloured, he has no rights!
The happy smile wipes off his face,
The black man never wins this race.

HANDOUT 4.6

This handout is used in the following classes/exercises

Class 3: Write your own Human Rights Inspired Poem / pg 103

Guidelines For Writing A Poem

- Brainstorm your ideas with your class or in a group discussion;
- Conduct some research into your topic;
- Think about the tone you want your poem to have;
- Begin your poem by producing a first draft: writing freely to get a flow of ideas underway, trying out paragraphs; viewpoints, testing different approaches, consulting with peers or teachers;
- Redraft and edit your first draft, deciding on the best arrangement of content and ensuring structure is cohesive, finalizing verses;
- Finally proofread your poem, check all punctuation, spelling and grammar.

Inspiration For Human Rights Poetry

- When writing your own poem think about what image are you trying to create?
- What feelings do you want to express?
- What tension is at the heart of your poem?
- Whose story is the poem telling?
- Your poem need not rhyme, or even “make sense” in any conventional sense;
- Poems need to be creative, unique and original;
- And finally let your imagination take hold of your pen.

Lights for Gaza, Dublin, Ireland, January 2009. © Amnesty International.

