

POETRY AND CULTURE



LESSON PLANS | EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES | VIDEOS | POETRY

THE FAVORITE POEM PROJECT IS DEDICATED TO CELEBRATING, DOCUMENTING AND ENCOURAGING POETRY'S ROLE IN OUR LIVES. **FOR MORE LESSON PLANS AND RESOURCES VISIT** [FAVORITEPOEM.ORG](https://www.favoritepoem.org)



Outcomes


Poetry is part of America's rich cultural inheritance — the poetic tradition in this country, like the people of this country, is rooted in many other cultures around the world. Several teachers at the first Favorite Poem Project Summer Institute suggested working poetry into middle school cultural curriculum, especially into lessons having to do with examining cultural background or those looking at the process of immigration and how it has contributed to this country.

This lesson connects students to their unique familial and/or cultural past through poetry, research, and creative multimedia while serving as an introductory project for further cultural and social studies.

Based on lessons by Mary Bourque, 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), and Margaret Voss (Marblehead Public Schools).



Ideas and Methodologies

- Ask students to interview parents, grandparents or other relatives to learn about their family backgrounds, looking into at least one parent's or relative's family history.
 - The goal should be to tell a family story — some piece of personal history that corresponds with United States and world history. Does someone in the family know when an ancestor first came to this country? Are there any students who have recently emigrated from another country — or who remember doing so as younger children?
 - If students do not know the story of their family's immigration, they should try to discover the earliest record of their family's being in this country. What did their ancestors do? Where did they live? What language did they speak? Did they share poems or songs in this language with the family on holidays or other special occasions?
 - Students may wish to focus on just one or two people in their family history, so that the emphasis is on sharing a rich, vivid story rather than on developing an elaborate, complicated family tree. Showing some of the Favorite Poem videos, or reading letters and poems from Americans' Favorite Poems (suggestions below) may guide students or pique their interest.
 - Of course, many students will discover that their immediate family descends from people of several countries and cultures. Let students know that they may discover several places where different ancestors have come from and can share the part of their family story that is of greatest interest to them, or that they can learn the most about. Students may also gather photographs, recipes, objects or artwork from their relatives that represent some part of their family background.
 - If students are unable to do research with family members, guide them in finding and researching the story of another family — either through talking to people or seeking a story in books. (For example, *Silver Days* by Sonia Levitin tells the story of the Pratt family's escape from Nazi Germany to the United States. *Letters from Rifka* by Karen Hesse shows the power of poetry in the life of a twelve-year old girl and her family as they flee from Russia to the United States in 1919.)
 - During this time of exploring, the teacher can introduce the students to poems that cross cultures and to the notion of translation. The lesson may conclude with oral presentations of family stories and/or with creative projects — creating cultural collages, writing poems.
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(Continued)

- As part of an oral presentation or what they will turn in, students should include a poem, perhaps one written in the language of their ancestors, or any poem that somehow reflects their or their families' experience. If a student chooses a poem written in another language, perhaps he or she (or a parent) will be able to read it aloud to the class in that language. If there is an English translation, they should include or read it as well. If not, perhaps the student or someone they know can try to translate the poem into English.
- If a student is not able to read a poem or its translation aloud, they can show the other students what it looks like on the page. Sharing poems and family stories is a personal place for students to begin addressing broader questions of culture, and may lead well into other cultural lessons.



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

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

Poems with letters that make 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

"Proem: to Brooklyn Bridge" 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

Lesson Resources (Continued)

Cultural Curriculum Resources Suggested by Several Teachers:

Oral History Resources (Book Links, March 1998)

Books

- Leon's Story by Leon Tillage
- I Was Dreaming to Come to America: Ellis Island Oral History Project edited by Veronica Lawler
- Lasting Echoes: An Oral History of Native American People by Joseph Bruchac
- Oh, Freedom!: Kids Talk about the Civil Rights Movement with the People Who Made It Happen by Casey King and Linda Barret Osborne
- Freedom's Children: Young Civil Rights Activists Tell Their Own Stories edited by Ellen Levine

Video

Ancestors (10-part PBS series) Companion Internet site: www.kbyu.org/ancestors

Heritage and Immigration: A Beginning Bibliography

- Aldan, Daisy. Poems from India (sel.). NY: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1969.
- Barnstone, William and Bamstone, Tony (ed.). Literatures of Asia, Africa, and African Americans. Prentice Hall, 1999.
- Bryan, Ashley. Ashley Bryan's ABC of African American Poetry. NY: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 1997.
- Delacre, L. Arroz Con Leche: Popular Songs and Rhymes from Latin America. NY: Scholastic, 1989.
- Feelings, Tom. Soul Looks Back in Wonder. NY: Dial Books, 1993.
- Fletcher, Louise. "The Land of Beginning Again."
- Hughes, Langston. The Block: Poems by Langston Hughes. NY: Metropolitan Museum of Art, Viking, 1995.
- In the Eyes of the Cat: Japanese Poetry for All Seasons.
- Lewis, Richard (ed.). Out of the Earth We Sing: Poetry and Songs of Primitive People of the World. NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1968.
- Lomax, Alan and Abdul, Raoul (ed.). 3000 Years of Black Poetry. NY: Dodd, Mead, & Co., 1970.
- Ho, M. Maples in the Mist: Children's Poems from the Tang Dynasty. NY: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, 1996.
- Myers, Walter Dean. Harlem: A Poem by Walter Dean Myers. NY: Scholastic, 1997.
- Nye, Naomi Shabib (sel.). This Same Sky: A Collection of Poems from the World. NY: Aladdin Paperbacks, 1996.
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- Philips, Neil (ed.). The New Oxford Book of Children's Verse. Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Plotz, Helen (sel.). Poems from the German. NY: Thomas Y. Crowell.
- Smith, William Jay (sel.). Poems from France. NY: Thomas Y. Crowell.
- Soto, Gary. A Fire in My Hands.
- Soto, Gary. Cool Salsa.
- Sneve, V. Dancing Teepees: Poems of American Indian Youth. NY: Holiday House, 1989.
- Sullivan, (ed.). America in Poetry.
- Talbot, Toby (coll.) Copias: Folk Poems in Spanish and English. NY: Four Winds Press, 1972.
- Wong, Janet. Good Luck Gold. NY: Margaret K. McElderry, 1994.
- Wong, Janet. A Suitcase of Seaweed. NY: Margaret K. McElderry, 1994.



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