

English (Secondary)

Aim: To explore the use of poetry as a response to **Untold Stories** and to create new poems based on the St. Louis case study. <http://education.hmd.org.uk/case-studies/the-ss-st-louis/read>

Starter

Write the word 'refugee' on the board and ask everyone to write down how they would define it. **Share** and **discuss** some of the definitions and display the results of the feedback on the board. After the discussion **ask** how far the media might have influenced our definitions. Is the word refugee used in a positive or negative way?

Explain that refugees come from all walks of life. Teachers, doctors, lawyers, farmers, builders, children, parents and grandparents have all faced – and still face – discrimination and persecution. Refugees become homeless and stateless persons. Each has a unique life story but many individual narratives remain hidden. They are **Untold Stories** unless other people make an effort to listen to them, read them and find new ways to pass them on to a new audience.

Tell everyone that you are going to explore some **Untold Stories** so that more people will have a chance to respond to them. In order to do this, students will be challenged to create a special poem. First of all it is important for everyone to think about human emotions. To do this we need to concentrate on how people respond to changing circumstances.

Exploring the emotions

Instruct students to work in pairs and **ask** them to talk quietly about homes and communities. **Instruct** one person to write down five things they would miss if they suddenly had to leave their current home, school or community. Next **ask** them to think about travelling to a new place and to write down five words to describe either the excitement of a new beginning or the worry of the unknown.

Tell the other person to think of five words which could be used in a poem to describe a refugee and five different words to indicate how a refugee might feel when they are forced to leave their homeland and seek asylum in another country.

After five minutes **suggest** putting both sets of words alongside each other and compare similarities and differences. Is it easier or harder to think of words connected with human emotions and difficult circumstances when we are writing about ourselves?

Tell everyone that they need to keep these words for another task later in the lesson.

Giving a context; the story of the St Louis

Use the case study <http://education.hmd.org.uk/case-studies/the-ss-st-louis/read> to help you to **tell** the story of the 937 refugees who crossed the Atlantic Ocean twice in a bid to escape persecution and to build new lives for themselves in 1939. You can read the case study notes aloud but it is better if you **retell** the story in your own words. Briefly **discuss** the events and **remind** students that the case study is only a summary of experiences because passengers had their own individual **Untold Stories**.

Suggest that students work in groups of three or four. Give each group a set of word cards (*you can find these at the end of this lesson plan*) and two or three blank cards. **Ask** them to think about the story you have shared and to select the words which they believe are vital to a retelling of the events. They may reject some of the words if they don't think they are important. Students should look up the meaning of any unfamiliar words. When they have made their choice **tell** them to place the selected words in the order they would appear in the retelling. The words can act as an aide memoir for a storyteller.

Class discussion

Ask the students whether these words make suitable storyteller notes. Are some more useful than others? Are there other words which might be better? If there are, encourage students to write these on spare cards.

Did some groups reject words? If so, which ones and why?

Group work

Give everyone a copy of the poem '*Refugee Blues*'¹ by W H Auden. You could use the whole poem or an extract starting at the 4th stanza.

¹ http://www.ppu.org.uk/learn/poetry/poetry_against1.html

Suggest that one person should read the poem whilst the rest listen. In the group discuss how the conversation in this poem could be linked with the **Untold Stories** in the St. Louis case study.

Class discussion

Explain to the class that you have chosen to focus on this poem and the St Louis story because they are both passing on an important message for Holocaust Memorial Day.

Students may have learned about the Holocaust in other lessons and they could tell you what they know from previous studies. Below in italics is a brief summary. You may omit this explanation if students have studied the period.

Between 1933 and 1945 over six million human beings of all ages were systematically murdered by the German Nazi party and their allies because they were Jewish. The aim was to annihilate Jews. Jews were targeted for persecution across most of Nazi-occupied Europe, not only in Germany but also in many surrounding countries such as Holland, Poland, Greece, France, Hungary and Lithuania. Jews were separated from their non-Jewish neighbours and their rights of citizenship were taken away. They were used as slave labour, imprisoned in concentration camps, shot in mass killings and sent to death camps where they were murdered in specially constructed gas chambers. Other people who were thought to be different from the rest of society were also rounded up. These people included the disabled, Roma or Sinti (Gypsies), Gay men, those with strong religious beliefs like Jehovah's Witnesses and people who had different political ideas and opposed the Nazis. These people were also imprisoned and many of them perished alongside the Jews of Europe.

Explain to the class that today people agree that the Holocaust both shocked and changed the world. Historians have tried to explain how it happened, though they don't all come up with the same reasons.

Survivors of the Holocaust, many of them very old today, have written and spoken about their experiences. Some visit schools to talk to young people and we often hear positive stories about the lives they rebuilt after liberation. Some of the St Louis passengers survived the Holocaust and have shared their stories with others. Some of the stories were even put into a film. However many passengers who were offered asylum on mainland Europe lost their lives when the Nazis occupied their adopted countries.

It is difficult to imagine such horrible and shocking events and many think that the experiences of survivors and the millions who died are beyond our imagination. They say that we cannot possibly understand how awful it was.

But although it is difficult to comprehend, some writers have tried to use poetry to express their own response to the stories and to try to give readers an impression of terrible times.

Ask everyone to read the poem again. This time **encourage** readers to really concentrate on the words on the page. Think together about how the writer uses words to express feelings and emotions about refugee status. **Suggest** that students underline in red the words which tell us the most about what the writer is feeling and in blue those which encourage the reader to feel empathy with the individuals in the poem. Everyone should consider the following questions.

Ask What sort of words are they? Does the writer use simple describing words or more complex ones to encourage readers to use their imagination?

Read the words aloud and discuss whether the rhythm of the poem or the repetition of a refrain helps us to understand the message?

Do you think the writer intended the poem to be read aloud as a dramatic retelling of an **Untold Story** or read silently and in private by a single person? Try to give reasons for your answer.

When do you think the words were written, during or after the events of the Holocaust?
What evidence did you find to support your answer?

If you had to choose only one verse from the whole piece, to sum up what the writer is saying, what one would it be and why?

Remind students that they have used two sets of words in the lesson, ten special ones they listed themselves and the words they chose from the cards. **Challenge** them to use each word to create their own poem to honour the refugee passengers of the St Louis. The poem should also give a reader some understanding of the plight of anyone anywhere at any time fleeing from persecution in their homeland and then facing rejection elsewhere.

Students could share their poems in a special assembly for Holocaust Memorial Day 2011 and use them to let people know how important it is to remember the millions of people who became refugees. There must be millions of **Untold Stories** about lives which were lost or changed forever. Every poem shared will help to ensure that the victims of persecution in the past and in present times are not forgotten.

Word Cards

Transatlantic	Immigration
Rejection	Exploitation
Fate	Asylum
Hope	Persecuted
Quota	Haven