

The Power of Primary Source Poetry—Then They Came for Me

Inquiry Question: What can we learn of the experience of Japanese American incarceratedees from their poetry?

Compelling question: What does an American look like? Who gets to decide?

Group Work (20 minutes)

Individually read a poem or several short poems. Consider what events the writer experienced that would have led them to write the poem.

What led you to this conclusion?

How does the poet seem to feel about the event?

What key words and phrases led you to this conclusion?

Write down the line or phrase (or word) that you find most powerful.

What do you like about that line or phrase?

What question does the poem prompt you to ask? (either about the poet, life in general)

After reading the poems, share your words with your group. Then make a word drawing, using both words and drawing. Think about why this experience is significant today. Post and share your work.

That Damned Fence

They've sunk the posts deep into the ground
They've strung out wires all the way around.
With machine gun nests just over there,
And sentries and soldiers everywhere.
We're trapped like rats in a wired cage,
To fret and fume with impotent rage;
Yonder whispers the lure of the night,
But that DAMNED FENCE assails our sight.

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We seek the softness of the midnight air,
But that DAMNED FENCE in the floodlight glare

Awakens unrest in our nocturnal quest,
And mockingly laughs with vicious jest.
With nowhere to go and nothing to do,
We feed terrible, lonesome, and blue:
That DAMNED FENCE is driving us crazy,
Destroying our youth and making us lazy.

Imprisoned in here for a long, long time,
We know we're punished—though we've
committed no crime,
Our thoughts are gloomy and enthusiasm damp,
To be locked up in a concentration camp.
Loyalty we know, and patriotism we feel,
To sacrifice our utmost was our ideal,
To fight for our country, and die, perhaps;
But we're here because we happen to be Japs.

We all love life, and our country best,
Our misfortune to be here in the west,
To keep us penned behind that DAMNED
FENCE,
Is someone's notion of NATIONAL DEFENCE!
Anonymous

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poston_War_Relocation_Center

Two Poems by Toyo Suyemoto Kawakami

Barracks Home

This is our barracks, squatting on the ground,
Tar papered shacks, partitioned into rooms
By sheetrock walls, transmitting every sound
Of neighbor's gossip or the sweep of brooms
The open door welcomes the refugees,
And now at least there is no need to roam
Afar: here space enlarges memories
Beyond the bounds of camp and this new home.
The floor is carpeted with dust, wind-borne
Dry alkali, patterned with insect feet,
What peace can such a place as this impart?
We can but sense, bewildered and forlorn,
That time, disrupted by the war from neat
Routines, must now adjust within the heart.

Source: <https://www.sccs.swarthmore.edu/users/04/sorelle/poetry/wwii/poetry.html#poetry-adults-US>

Plate in hand,
I stand in line,
Losing my resolve
To hide my tears

I see my mother
In the aged woman who comes
And I yield to her
My place in line

Four moths have passed
And at last I learn
To call this horse stall
My family's home

Yukari

"Disloyal"

With papers so stamped
I am relocated to Tule lake.
But for myself,
A clear conscience.
Muin Ozaki

Gain

I sought to seed the barren earth
And make wild beauty take
Firm root, but how could I have known
The waiting long would shake

Me inwardly, until I dared
Not say what would be gain
From such untimely planting, or
What flower worth the pain?

This morning, the winding train,
Like a big black snake,
Takes us away as far as Wyoming.

The current of Buddhist thought
Always runs eastward.

This policy may support the
Tenacity of the teaching.

Who knows?
Nyogen Senzaki, Zen Master

Children's Interment Poetry

Faith

My heart is proud,
My soul is glorious and free.
You, young Nisei, are fighting for
our lives, our country, future,
and everything we stand for.
We are right behind you.
You are proving that we are loyal
in Italy and wherever you go.
You will come back victorious and free,
and we will be waiting for you
in this land of liberty.

Yokio Ota

Be Like the Cactus

Let not harsh tongues, that wag
in vain,
Discourage you. In spite of
pain,
Be like the cactus, which through
rain,
And storm, and thunder, can
remain.

Kimii Nagata

Source: <https://www.sccs.swarthmore.edu/users/04/sorelle/poetry/wwii/poetry.html#poetry-children-US>

The World

Who dares to say the world is
filled
With putrid smells of hell to
come,
The world shall hate, shall
crush, ---
We live, we die, and all is
done?

The Light of the World shall
never cease
To those with heart and
will;
The Life of Love will give us
peace
At last when all is
still.

Jessica Hoshimo