

Word Windows into History

I like to see it lap the miles, And lick the valleys up,
And stop to feed itself at tanks; And then, prodigious,
To fit its sides, and crawl between,
Complaining all the while In horrid,
hooting stanza; Then chase itself
down hill... Emily Dickinson, "XLIII"

Poems and Songs Selected for the Themes and Eras Illuminated through American Art

**Prepared by the DePaul University Center for Urban Education
for the Terra Teacher Lab
Terra Foundation for American Art**

These are examples of songs and poems that illustrate times in US history. You can use them to help students understand that a poem or song is a word picture and can be interpreted just as a painting can be—and that in context it makes more sense as well as providing a window into that context.

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Creation of an American Identity in the New Nation, 1670–1850

Resources

The following poems are not in the public domain. They can be accessed via the following URLs.

I am the People, the Mob

Carl Sandburg

<http://www.bartleby.com/165/137.html>

I, Too, Sing America

Langston Hughes

http://www.poetryconnection.net/poets/Langston_Hughes/2383

Let America Be America Again

Langston Hughes

<http://www.americanpoems.com/poets/Langston-Hughes/2385>

Bury Me in a Free Land

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

Make me a grave where'er you will,
In a lowly plain, or a lofty hill;
Make it among earth's humblest graves,
But not in a land where men are slaves.

I could not rest if around my grave
I heard the steps of a trembling slave;
His shadow above my silent tomb
Would make it a place of fearful gloom.

I could not rest if I heard the tread
Of a coffle gang to the shambles led,
And the mother's shriek of wild despair
Rise like a curse on the trembling air.

I could not sleep if I saw the lash
Drinking her blood at each fearful gash,
And I saw her babes torn from her breast,
Like trembling doves from their parent nest.

I'd shudder and start if I heard the bay
Of bloodhounds seizing their human prey,
And I heard the captive plead in vain
As they bound afresh his galling chain.

If I saw young girls from their mother's arms
Bartered and sold for their youthful charms,
My eye would flash with a mournful flame,
My death-paled cheek grow red with shame.

I would sleep, dear friends, where bloated might
Can rob no man of his dearest right;
My rest shall be calm in any grave
Where none can call his brother a slave.

I ask no monument, proud and high,
To arrest the gaze of the passers-by;
All that my yearning spirit craves,
Is bury me not in a land of slaves.

I Hear America Singing

Walt Whitman

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deckhand
singing on the steamboat deck,
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing as he stands,
The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way in the morning, or
at noon intermission or at sundown,
The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of
the girl sewing or washing,
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
The day what belongs to the day--at night the party of young fellows,
robust, friendly,
Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

Paul Revere's Ride (excerpt)
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Listen, my children, and you shall hear
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere,
On the eighteenth of April, in Seventy-Five:
Hardly a man is now alive
Who remembers that famous day and year.

He said to his friend, "If the British march
By land or sea from the town to-night,
Hang a lantern aloft in the belfry-arch
Of the North-Church-tower, as a signal-light,--
One if by land, and two if by sea;
And I on the opposite shore will be,
Ready to ride and spread the alarm
Through every Middlesex village and farm,
For the country-folk to be up and to arm."

...

You know the rest. In the books you have read,
How the British Regulars fired and fled,--
How the farmers gave them ball for ball,
From behind each fence and farmyard-wall,
Chasing the red-coats down the lane,
Then crossing the fields to emerge again
Under the trees at the turn of the road,
And only pausing to fire and load.

So through the night rode Paul Revere;
And so through the night went his cry of alarm
To every Middlesex village and farm,--
A cry of defiance, and not of fear,
A voice in the darkness, a knock at the door,
And a word that shall echo forevermore!
For, borne on the night-wind of the Past,
Through all our history, to the last,
In the hour of darkness and peril and need,
The people will waken and listen to hear
The hurrying hoof-beats of that steed,
And the midnight message of Paul Revere.

To view the full text of this poem, go to:
<http://poetry.eserver.org/paul-revere.html>

In San Francisco

Joaquin Miller

Lo! here we sit mid the sun-down seas
And the white Sierras. The swift sweet, breeze
Is about us here; and the sky so fair
Is bending above its azaline hue,
That you gaze and you gaze in delight, and you
See God and the portals of heaven there.

Yea, here sit we where the white ships ride
In the morn made glad and forgetful of night,
The white and the brown men side by side
In search of the truth, and betrothed to the right;
For these are the idols, and only these,
Of men that abide by the sun-down seas.

The brown brave hand of the harvester,
The delicate hand of the prince untried,
The rough hard hand of the carpenter,
They are all upheld with an equal pride;
And the prize it is his to be crown'd or blest,
Prince or peon, who bears him best.

Yea, here sit we by the golden gate,
Not demanding much, but inviting you all,
Nor publishing loud, but daring to wait,
And great in much that the days deem small;
And the gate it is God's, to Cathay, Japan,--
And who shall shut it in the face of man?

Road to Oregon

Elizabeth Markham

We left our friends in foreign lands-
Our native country dear;
In sorrow, took the parting hand
And shed the falling tear.

For Oregon, three cheers they gave,
From us to disengage-
Fearing that we might find our graves
Amidst the sand and sage;

Or meet by cruel savage bands,
And slaughtered on the way-
Their spectred visions, hand in hand,
Would round our pathway play.

To the Pacific's temperate clime
Our journey soon began-
Traversing through the desert sands
Towards the setting sun.

On Platte the roucks like battlements,
Were towering tall and high;
The frightened elk and antelope
Before our trains would fly.

And herds of buffalo appear-
On either side they stand;
Far as our telescope could reach,
One thick and clustering band.

O'er sinking sands and barren plains,
Our frantic teams would bound-
While some were wounded, others slain,
Mid wild terrific sound.

And in these lone and silent dells
The winds were whispering low;
And moaning to the Pilgrims, tell
Their by-gone tails of woe.

Deserted on those mountains wild,
No ear to hear his cry-
Near by a spring, on a rude bluff,
They laid poor Scott to die.

Unaided grief and blighted hope,
Midst savage beasts of prey-
The fate of poor deserted Scott
Is wrapped in mystery!

Our toils are done, our perils o'er-
The weary pilgrims' band
Have reached Columbia's fertile shore-
That far-famed happy land.

O'er mountains high and burning plains,
Three thousand miles or more-
We are here; but who can e'er explain
Or count the trials o'er?

Such clouds of mist hang round the
scene,
O'er which we have no control;
It's like a half-remembered dream,
Or tale that's long been told.

The Pony Express

Bret Harte

In times of adventure, of battle and song,
When the heralds of victory galloped along,
They spurred their faint steeds, lest the tidings too late
Might change a day's fortune, a throne, or a state.
Though theirs was all honor and glory -- no less
Is his, the bold Knight of the Pony Express.
No corselet, no vizor, nor helmet he wears,
No war-stirring trumpet or banner he bears,
But pressing the sinewy flanks of his steed,
Behold the fond missives that bid him "God-speed."
Some ride for ambition, for glory, or less,
"Five dollars an ounce" asks the Pony Express.

Trip lightly, trip lightly, just out of the town,
Then canter and canter, o'er upland and down,
Then trot, pony, trot, over upland and hill,
Then gallop, boy, gallop, and galloping still,
Till the ring of each horse-hoof, as forward ye press,
Is lost in the track of the Pony Express.

By marshes and meadow, by river and lake,
By upland and lowland, by forest and brake,
By dell and by cañon, by bog and by fen,
By dingle and hollow, by cliff and by glen,
By prairie and desert, and vast wilderness,
At morn, noon, and evening, God speed the Express.

XLIII

Emily Dickinson

I like to see it lap the miles,
And lick the valleys up,
And stop to feed itself at tanks;
And then, prodigious, step

Around a pile of mountains,
And, supercilious, peer
In shanties by the sides of roads;
And then a quarry pare

To fit its sides, and crawl between,
Complaining all the while
In horrid, hooting stanza;
Then chase itself down hill

And neigh like Boanerges;
Then, punctual as a star,
Stop—docile and omnipotent—
At its own stable door.

Westward Expansion/The Empire of Liberty, 1840–1900 Resources

The following poems are not in the public domain. They can be accessed via the following URLs.

Chicago
Carl Sandburg
<http://www.bartleby.com/165/1.html>

Halsted Street Car
Carl Sandburg
<http://www.bartleby.com/165/8.html>

They Will Say
Carl Sandburg
<http://www.bartleby.com/165/6.html>

We Real Cool
Gwendolyn Brooks
<http://www.americanpoems.com/poets/Gwendolyn-Brooks/7795>

Mannahatta

Walt Whitman

I was asking for something specific and perfect for my city,
Whereupon lo! upsprang the aboriginal name.

Now I see what there is in a name, a word, liquid, sane,
unruly, musical, self-sufficient,
I see that the word of my city is that word from of old,
Because I see that word nested in nests of water-bays,
superb,
Rich, hemm'd thick all around with sailships and
steamships, an island sixteen miles long, solid-founded,
Numberless crowded streets, high growths of iron, slender,
strong, light, splendidly uprising toward clear skies,
Tides swift and ample, well-loved by me, toward sundown,
The flowing sea-currents, the little islands, larger adjoining
islands, the heights, the villas,
The countless masts, the white shore-steamers, the lighters,
the ferry-boats, the black sea-steamers well-model'd,
The down-town streets, the jobbers' houses of business, the
houses of business of the ship-merchants and money-
brokers, the river-streets,
Immigrants arriving, fifteen or twenty thousand in a week,
The carts hauling goods, the manly race of drivers of horses,
the brown-faced sailors,
The summer air, the bright sun shining, and the sailing
clouds aloft,
The winter snows, the sleigh-bells, the broken ice in the
river, passing along up or down with the flood-tide or
ebb-tide,
The mechanics of the city, the masters, well-form'd,
beautiful-faced, looking you straight in the eyes,
Trottoirs throng'd, vehicles, Broadway, the women, the
shops and shows,
A million people--manners free and superb--open voices--
hospitality--the most courageous and friendly young
men,
City of hurried and sparkling waters! city of spires and masts!
City nested in bays! my city!

Art Effecting Social Change, 1945–1980

Resources

The following poems and songs are not in the public domain. They can be accessed via the following URLs.

A Dream Deferred

Langston Hughes

<http://www.cswnet.com/~menamc/langston.htm>

American History

Michael S. Harper

<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15872>

I Ain't Got No Home

Woody Guthrie

<http://www.fortunecity.com/tinpan/parton/2/iaint.html>

Ludlow Massacre

Woody Guthrie

http://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/Ludlow_Massacre.htm

Strange Fruit

Lyrics by Lewis Allen; Sung by Billie Holiday

<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/strangefruit/film.html>

Those Three Are on My Mind

Frances Taylor and Pete Seeger

<http://www.peteseeger.net/thosethree.htm>

Yet Do I Marvel

Countee Cullen

<http://www.english.upenn.edu/~hbeavers/281/cullen-marvel.html>