

Poetry Fires the Revolution

By Justin Sybenga

“Should I give more importance to the task of finishing my very important novel, or should I accept this dangerous job that the party assigns to me, the guerrilla, the frontlines, where I could lose not just a precious two months, but all the time I thought I had left?”

— Roque Dalton, Salvadoran poet, 1969

There are such pressing unmet human needs that the artist must always wonder if creating beauty is the best use of his or her time and talent. For writers and artists coming of age in the middle of the 20th century in Central America, such questions weren't theoretical.

More than 200,000 indigenous civilians were killed in the Guatemalan civil war from 1960-1996, many of them murdered by government forces. Eight business conglomerates controlled almost all the natural resources and wealth in El Salvador under the eye of military dictators, before civil war erupted in 1980 and a dozen years of terror and bloodshed ensued. The people of Nicaragua endured the brutal Somoza dictatorship from 1936-1972, prompting the Sandinista insurrection after the Managua earthquake in 1972, which killed 10,000 and left 500,000 homeless. The repressive governments that controlled Central America in this era were backed by the United States, whose companies were generating enormous profits from coffee and fruit exports and who ostensibly wanted to save the Western hemisphere from the threat of communism.

Images of starvation, homelessness, and brutal violence were impossible to avoid. A group of poet-activists formed in the 1950s calling themselves the “[Committed Generation](#).” They dedicated themselves to fight for the rights of the poor and the oppressed, both through their writing and their political activism. Many of the greatest poets of the “Committed Generation” were jailed, exiled, or killed for denouncing the corruption and violence of the powerful and fighting on behalf of the common people.

In this series of three lessons, students will gain background knowledge on life in Central America during this volatile period in order to understand the risks these revolutionary poets took. They will read a series of poems by heroic Central American poets about the role of poetry in combatting injustice. Individually or in small groups, they will choose a poet to commemorate and will create a poster that includes biographical information about the poet and an image or metaphor about the power of poetry to change the world. These lessons can work well in English or Spanish classes. Spanish teachers could use the original Spanish poems rather than translations. There are many biographies available online in Spanish for the poets represented here, and students could create their commemorative posters in Spanish.

Essential Question

- What power, if any, does poetry have in the face of war, oppression, and injustice?

Objectives

- Students will be able to identify and analyze vivid images or metaphors about the role of poetry and social change.
- Students will be able to commemorate how a poet from Central America used poetry and action in the fight for justice

Time and Materials

- Three class periods
- Clips from documentary *Harvest of Empire* or readings about Central American countries
- Computers with internet access
- [Slideshow](#) on “Apolitical Intellectuals” by Otto Rene Castillo (provided)
- Set of poems about poetry by Central American poets with links to biographies (provided)
- Student worksheet on imagery and metaphors (provided)
- *Commemorating a Poet* assignment sheet (provided)

Lesson Activities

1. Choose a dozen or so quotes about poetry (here are a [few resources](#)) and post them on the walls, evenly spaced out, around your classroom. Feel free to find quotes from other resources that highlight other aspects of the power of poetry. Invite students to move silently about the room, reading each of the quotations. They should choose one that intrigues, pleases, or puzzles them and take a few minutes to journal about what it means before discussing as a class. Look for a natural segue into a conversation about poetry’s potential political power.
2. Tell students that they will be reading a number of poets from Central America, who stood against repressive military regimes in the mid 20th century. In order to sense the heroism of the Committed Generation, students must have an intellectual and emotional understanding of the violent conflict that raged through El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Honduras during this period. Students could watch the sections of the documentary [Harvest of Empire](#), which highlight the political turmoil and US involvement in Guatemala (13:00 - 18:37), Nicaragua (54:38-1:02:15), and El Salvador (1:10:40 - 1:16:54). Alternatively, students could be divided into four groups, and each group could read an article about this period of history in [Guatemala](#), [Nicaragua](#), [Honduras](#), and [El Salvador](#) and report out to the class.
3. Poets and intellectuals had to decide whether to keep a detached distance from the events unfolding in their countries, or if they wanted to use their creative talents to lobby for social change. This lesson uses Otto Rene Castillo’s poem “Apolitical Intellectuals” to illustrate the choice between hiding safely in the academy or paying attention and empathizing with the suffering of others and risking everything to alleviate that suffering. The whole group analysis of this poem will serve as a model for the work students will do with other poems. Students will read the poem and identify and analyze images/metaphors that evoke ideas about the

potential purposes of poetry. Then students will read a short biography to see how the poet's beliefs were lived out. Finally, the teacher will show students models of the poster commemorating the poet that students will create for one of the other poets of the Committed Generation.

- Briefly describe the emergence of the [Committed Generation](#). Invite a student to read the biography of Otto Rene Castillo on the [TeachingCentralAmerica website](#) which is provided above the poem "Apolitical Intellectuals." Discuss:
 - Why might have the government perceived Castillo as a threat?
 - Why might Castillo have been willing to sacrifice his home, safety, and his life?
- Turn to the poem "Apolitical Intellectuals" and ask students what they think the title means. Political intellectuals are those who use their art and writing for activism -- whose artistic creations wake their audience up to see unfairness or exploitation in order to inspire political action and change. The prefix "a" means "not, absence, or without." Based on Castillo's biography, ask students to make inferences about what message Castillo might have for intellectuals who avoided politics.
- Invite student volunteers to read each stanza of the poem aloud. Once they've experienced the entire poem, use the five W questions to clarify the basic storyline of the poem.
- Tell students to reread the poem individually and to identify the images or metaphors that are most memorable. Have them share out some of the lines that stood out.
- Use the [slideshow](#) to model for students how to tease out the associations and connections the poet is creating with the images and figures of speech. Students should take notes on the note-catcher, practicing for the independent work that will come later. An analysis guide is provided below to help move from the teacher modeling analysis for the first passage to drawing analysis from students through questioning. Commentary on the lines is also provided in the Google slideshow, in the notes section under the slide.

Image/Figure of Speech	New Perspective/Insight of Poet/Poetry
<p>“They will be asked what they did when their nation died out slowly, like a sweet fire, small and alone.”</p>	<p>Fire often evokes feelings of warmth and community, but because of the apathy of the apolitical intellectuals, Guatemala is fizzling out and all that will remain is cold ash blowing in the wind. Poetry can fuel the fire that brings people together and keeps them safe.</p>
<p>“Those who had no place In the books and poems of the apolitical intellectuals, but daily delivered their bread and milk, their tortillas and eggs”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What picture do you have of the people delivering food? ● What qualities does the food have? ● What is the intellectuals’ reaction to the delivery of food? Posture? Facial expression? Dialogue?
<p>“Apolitical intellectuals of my sweet country, you will not be able to answer.”</p> <p>A vulture of silence will eat your gut. Your own misery will pick at your soul. And you will be mute in your shame.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What do vultures look like and what are they known for? ● What are the vultures eating and why? ● What has happened to the guts and souls of the intellectuals and why? ● What are the two silences that Castillo references?

- After analyzing the images and figures of speech in the poem, discuss the relationships between Castillo’s biography and this poem.
 - How was Castillo’s life similar to or different from the lives of the intellectuals he describes?
 - What does he hope that his political poetry can accomplish in contrast to the apolitical intellectuals’ work?
 - Is the end result of political poetry as evidenced by Castillo’s death and apolitical intellectualism the same or different? Why?
- Click to the last three slides in the presentation and show students examples of

commemorative posters that celebrate Otto Rene Castillo's life and share a vision of what poetry could be from the poem "Apolitical Intellectuals." Discuss with students how the selected images are more than a literal representation of a vulture picking at the poet's soul. Rather, the image helps the audience sense the emptiness and shame that the intellectual feels for ignoring the suffering of his/her countrymen. Students will be creating similar posters to commemorate other poets of the Committed Generation.

4. Students will work individually or with a partner to read a poem by one of the other poets from Central America and learn a little about the poet's life. Seven poems, each which includes imagery and/or metaphors on the role of the poetry in the fight for justice, are provided along with links to biographies of the poet.
 - Teachers may invite students to browse through the poems and allow students select the poem that captures their imagination, or teachers may decide to assign each student/pair one of the poems to work with. More than one student/pair will work with each poem; when students are choosing which lines from the poem to feature in their posters, the teacher may encourage students to choose different images or metaphors.
 - Distribute the *Commemorating a Poet* assignment sheet and review the purpose, assignment expectations, process, and grading criteria with students.
 - Students should work in pairs or small groups with others who are reading the same poem to answer the reading questions, read the poet's biographies, and analyze the images and figures of speech. Students can work individually or in pairs to write their own biographies and create their posters.
 - Posters can be completed on the computer using PowerPoint, Google slides, or a more advanced publishing program like PhotoShop. Students with an artistic bent may prefer to make an original drawing or painting to use as the background for their poster.
 - Teachers can consult with art teachers at their school for support and access to supplies. Teachers could decide to share resources about effective graphic design with students. Depending on interest and technological savvy, students will invest different amounts of time and energy into their graphic design, and that is OK.
 - <http://www.delmarvaprinting.com/resources/the-ideas-collection/poster-design-tips/>
 - <http://www.designyourway.net/blog/inspiration/excellent-posters-from-the-design-world-59-examples/>
 - Students will need guidance in choosing images to accompany the lines of poetry they have selected. At first, they may be likely to look for pictures that literally depict the object of the imagery or figure of speech. Use the following questions to prod students towards a more in depth analysis and more symbolic representation.
 - What characteristics or qualities does the object/thing described in the imagery or figure of speech have? Why does the poet highlight these qualities?

- What emotions is the poet trying to evoke through the imagery or figurative language?
- What message is the poet trying to communicate through the imagery or figurative language?
- What image or images might help your audience to understand the poetic lines in a new or deeper way?
- Students should be given an opportunity to share their work once it is completed. Their posters could be displayed for a gallery walk in the classroom, displayed on a bulletin board in the school, or collected into a booklet for the classroom or school library.

Otto René Castillo was born in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. He supported the progressive social reforms of President Jacobo Arbenz during Guatemala's 10 Years of Spring and was exiled after a CIA-sponsored coup that overthrew the democratic government in 1954. He went into exile in El Salvador where he attended the University of San Salvador and helped found the University Literary Circle. He returned to Guatemala in 1957, but went into exile again in Europe. In 1966, he returned to Guatemala to join the FAR (Revolutionary Armed Forces). He was captured by government forces the following year and was interrogated and tortured before being burned alive. His poetry continues to inspire Guatemalans to fight for social justice and equality, and is found in *Tecum Oman*, *Let's Go!*, and *Tomorrow Triumphant*. [Biography](#) provided by Teaching for Change.

Apolitical Intellectuals

By Otto René Castillo

One day
the apolitical intellectuals
of my country
will be interrogated
by the simplest
of our people.

They will be asked
what they did
when their nation died out
slowly,
like a sweet fire,
small and alone.

No one will ask them
about their dress,
their long siestas
after lunch,
no one will want to know
about their sterile combats
with "the idea
of the nothing"
no one will care about
their higher financial learning.

They won't be questioned
on Greek mythology,
or regarding their self disgust
when someone within them
begins to die,
the coward's death.

They'll be asked nothing
about their absurd
justifications,
born in the shadow
of the total lie.

On that day
the simple men will come.
Those who had no place
In the books and poems
of the apolitical intellectuals,
but daily delivered
their bread and milk,
their tortillas and eggs,
those who mended their clothes,
those who drove their cars,
who cared for their dogs and gardens
and worked for them,
and they'll ask:
"What did you do when the poor
suffered, when tenderness
and life
burned out in them?"

Apolitical intellectuals
of my sweet country,
you will not be able to answer."

A vulture of silence
will eat your gut.
Your own misery
will pick at your soul.
And you will be mute
in your shame.

Translated by Margaret Randall

Unleashing the Power of Images and Figures of Speech

Images: sensory description that creates a virtual reality experience for imaginative reader

Figures of speech: language that evokes new perceptions through unexpected comparisons that literally aren't true

“Apolitical Intellectuals” by Otto Rene Castillo

Image/Figure of Speech	New Perspective/Insight of Poetry

Unleashing the Power of Images and Figures of Speech

Images: sensory description that creates a virtual reality experience for imaginative reader

Figures of speech: language that evokes new perceptions through unexpected comparisons that literally aren't true

Poem _____ Poet _____

Image/Figure of Speech	New Perspective/Insight of Poetry

Commemorating a Poet

Purposes

- To identify and analyze vivid images or figures of speech about the role of poetry and social change
- To commemorate how a poet from Central America used poetry and action in the fight for justice

Assignment Expectations

- Create a poster that includes a brief biography of the poet and a short excerpt from the poem with a vivid image or figure of speech about the role of poetry
- The poster should include image(s) that extends the viewer's understanding of the image/metaphor
- The font type, color, and size, the layout of the poster, and the selected image should all work together present an emotionally compelling statement

Process

1. Read the poem carefully and answer the following questions to help understand the basic narrative of the poem? Answer as best you can, making inferences. You will come back to these questions after reading about the poet's life story.
 - Who is the speaker in the poem? What characteristics does the speaker have? What events or situations might have prompted the poet to write this poem? Who is the likely audience of them poem?
 - What happens, if anything, in the poem?
 - What does the poet believe about the role of poetry?
2. Read the biographies of the poet, which are provided as links. You could do some additional research to find even more information about the poet's life. Return to the questions above and add more detail to your responses based on the poet's biography.
3. Analyze the most striking images and/or figures of speech about poetry using the graphic organizer called *Unleashing the Power of Images and Figures of Speech*. Use your imagination to create a detailed picture of each image or figure of speech and to think about all the new connections and associations the poet is provoking with the line.
4. Choose the lines from the poem that most potently express the poet's belief in the role of poetry in the face of oppression and injustice. Look for images online that you could use in a poster to extend your audience's understanding of the image or figure of speech. Choose an image that matches the mood of the poetry, the culture of the poet, and the message of the poem. Strive to choose an image that doesn't merely literally represent the line from the poem, but explores the poet's underlying purpose.

5. Write a short biography of your poet, synthesizing important information from several sources in your own words. Don't copy distinctive words or phrases directly from the sources, as your posters will be displayed, and you want it to reflect your original style. Your biography should be 2-4 sentences and could include:
 - Historical background reflecting important events from poet's country and time period
 - Persecution that the poet experienced or injustices that the poet addressed in his/her work
 - Dramatic or significant events from the poet's life Accomplishments achieved, awards received, or goals reached
6. Combine the selected lines from your poem, the biography, and the image(s) into a poster that commemorates the poet's life and beliefs in the power of poetry. You could make the poster on the computer or you could paint or draw the background for your poster.

Grading Criteria

Content: The biography captures significant details from the poet's life that highlight injustices the poet was addressing through poetry. The lines selected from the poem are evocative and profound and connect with the poet's biography.

Presentation: The image selected, drawn, or painted inspires fresh associations and insight into the lines featured from the poem. The font size, style, and color fit well with the mood of the poetic lines. The layout of the poster elements is appealing and allows the reader to take in the information easily.

Like You

By Roque Dalton

I, like you,
love love, life, the sweet charm of things,
the celestial landscape of January days.

Also, my blood boils
and I smile for the eyes
that have known the burst of tears.

I think that the world is beautiful,
that poetry is like bread, for everyone.

And that my veins don't end in me
but in the unanimous blood
of those who fight for life,
love,
things,
landscapes and bread,
poetry for everyone.

From *Poema Clandestinos/ Clandestine Poems* (Solidarity Publications, 1986)
Reprinted from *Rediscovering America* (Teaching for Change, 1992)

Biographies

[Academy of American Poets](#)

[Teaching for Change](#)

Ars Poetica

By Claribel Alegría

I,
poet by trade,
condemned so many times
to be a crow,
would never change places
with the Venus de Milo:
while she reigns in the Louvre
and dies of boredom
and collects dust
I discover the sun
each morning
and amid valleys
volcanoes
and debris of war
I catch sight of the promised land.

From *Fugues*. (Curbstone Press, 1993)

Translated by D.J. Flakoll.

Biographies

[American Academy of Poets](#)

[Teaching for Change](#)

Obligations of the Poet

By Gioconda Belli

Never consider yourself
a privileged intellectual, a book-filled head repeating
the same conversation,
a withered doleful thinker.

You were born to thresh stars
and discover in the trees the laughter of the crowd,
you were born brandishing the future,
seeing through eyes, hands, feet, breast, mouth,
foreteller of things to come
augur of days the sun
is unaware it will rise on,
you were conceived on moonlit nights
when wolves howled and crazed fireflies raced,
your eyes were open when your head first entered the world
and your skin was softer and thinner
than that of those born with eyes closed,
you were favored by joy and sadness,
child of sea and storm,
created to seek treasures in swamps and deserts.
Your legacy was unbounded love,
confidence, unaffected simplicity,
the shadow of chilamate trees,
the trill of black mockingbirds.

Now the depths of the earth
give forth electricity to charge your song,
poems spill from sweaty faces
and eager hands holding primers and pencils;
now you have only to sing of what surrounds you,
the soft pitch
of the fervent voices
of the multitude.

Biographies

[Bomb Magazine](#)

[The Guardian](#)

[Teaching for Change](#)

Fray

By Clementina Suárez

I am a poet,
an army of poets.
And today I want to write a poem —
a whistles poem,
a rifles poem —
to strike them in doorways
,in prison cells,
within the walls of schools.
Today I want to build and destroy,
to give hope a lift onto the scaffold.
I want to rouse the child,
archangel of swords,
to be lightning-flash and thunderclap
with a statue of a hero
to topple, to obliterate
the rotted roots of my people.

Translated by [Dave Bonta](#).

Biographies

[Colección Cisneros](#)

[Wikipedia](#)

From “Nicaraguan Canto”

By Ernesto Cardenal

This is the land of which I sing.
Hoarsely, like the guardabarranco
which at a distance sounds just like cattle lowing,
he builds his nest in holes in rocky canyon walls.
And like the cheerful güis in Nicaragua’s parks and orchards
the cierto-güis which keeps reaping CIERTO-GUIS
or like the guas in Chinandega and Chontales
which sings in the dry fields, announcing rain
thus too my song
And like the “lion bird” (or cocoroco) a lonely fellow
which sings in anguish to announce a puma.
And like the “clock bird” singing out the hours
or the Atlantic “sun bird” saying that dawn is here
thus do I sing. . . .
And I sing like the bird they call “swamp-snorter”
(because it snorts in marshes and in swamps)
but also clearly, like zanates bugling
zanatillo zanatillo
the bird of the oppressed--
or like the “creaker” (grating in damp woods)
or like the ché-ché of the northern hills (guerilla hills)
which sings CHE-CHE CHE-CHE CHE-CHE
And like the “happy bird” whose song means FEELING JOY
The poet’s voice sings FEELING-JOY
JOY JOY
And I am also like the sad cocoyo at twilight
so sadly singing SCREW-THEE-TOO
or tecolotes (owls with enormous spectacles)
which hoot among the ruins.

Biographies

[The Poetry Foundation](#)

[Britannica](#)

[Library of Congress](#)

[Teaching for Change](#)

Freehand Sketch

By Roberto Sosa

They use everything they've got to putrify a man alive,
Sketch in a flash
The ample pallor of the murdered
And lock him up in infinity.

.
And so,
Sweetly
Fatally
I have decided to construct
With all my songs
An endless bridge to dignity
So that,
One by one,
The humiliated of the Earth may pass.

Translated by [Barbara Paschke, Tony Ryan, David Volpendesta, Magaly Fernández.](#)

Biographies

[Via Negativa](#)

[Wikipedia](#)

A Flower

By Carlos Jose Guadamuz

There is a flower in my cell.
I found it alone in a corner
as if being punished
It burst the hard floor
of cement and stone.
It broke the taboo
of being born in a cell.
I saw no bird come in
to deposit the seed.
No one made a furrow
to sprout it in,
not a raindrop to make it bloom.
So it was born,
alone, in a favorable corner,
aided by no one.

With it, already the cell
isn't a cell.
It's now a garden,
a garden of one solitary rose,
my incarcerated rose:
a political prisoner.

Biographies

[Envio](#)

[Committee to Protect Journalists](#)