

Poetry

EXAMPLE SOURCE: Nelly Sachs, *Chorus of the Saved* [Chor der Geretteten]. Translation by Catherine Sommer available at:

<https://nellysachsenglish.wordpress.com/2013/04/28/chorus-of-the-saved/> (© Catterel).

Sachs was a German Jewish refugee

Key Considerations

- ❖ Poetry that is also testimony sits on the boundary between fiction and non-fiction. It works with highly condensed imagery in order to convey something essential about the world. The images produced do not always correspond directly with reality; rather they create symbolic representations of the author's response to his or her experiences. In the case of Nelly Sachs's *Chorus of the Saved*, this is her response to surviving Nazi persecution.
- ❖ Students need to be equipped with the skills to engage with and respond to the images created by the poem – there is no “correct” answer and many (but not all) interpretations are valid. Dealing with poetry can equip students to deal with ambiguity.
- ❖ Regarding this poem in particular, one key theme is “survivor guilt”, that is, the feeling of “why did I survive when so many others did not?”. Students may find this concept difficult to understand; however, it can provide a way of getting them to think beyond a simple celebration of survival (and the idea of a “happy” ending). Sachs addresses the issue of the legacy of the Holocaust for relationships – between survivors and the dead, but also between survivors and the perpetrators (who is the “you” in the second part of the poem?). Teachers

should be careful to contextualise this theme in the broader context of the poem and the events it represents in order to avoid a focus on the guilt felt by the survivor, rather than the actions of the perpetrators.

Starting Point

Before students read the poem, it would be useful for them to have some background on the author and to begin thinking about how survivors of Nazi persecution might have felt/feel about the fact of their survival. One suggestion would be to present students with a shortened version of Sachs's biography (for example, drawn from: <https://nellysachsenglish.wordpress.com/2013/04/28/chorus-of-the-saved/>), explaining what she experienced and how she survived. Students can then be asked to imagine how she would have felt after the War – what would her response be to those around her? Be sure to avoid asking students to imagine themselves as Sachs, rather they should be encouraged to use their empathy to imagine her experiences as her own.

The concept of survivor's guilt is also encapsulated in the piece of visual art produced by Kristen Brown with the title *Survivor's Guilt*. This piece (image available online) can provide a useful

stimulus for getting students to think about and around the concept.¹

Source Engagement²

Poetry should – in the first instance – always be read aloud. Start by reading the text aloud to the group (or asking a student volunteer to do this for you) and ask the students to note down key ideas, images and words. The idea is that the “doing” helps them with the “listening”. Students can then read the text aloud to one another in small groups and select a single image or metaphor to recreate: this recreation might be done physically (as a moving tableau) or using other creative techniques, such as drawing or collaging, or even writing a poem in response to Sachs’s work (see the comments on creative work under **Video Testimonies** above).

The creative engagement with a single image – or set of single images across the class – can then form the basis for the discussion of the meanings behind those images: e.g., feelings of already being

dead, loss and guilt at surviving, continued fear in the new society. The process of making something new allows for critical engagement with the source that can be deepened through the sharing of creative outputs and class discussion.

The work with poetry can be extended to touch on different themes and topics. A complement to the work with Sachs could be engagement with other responses by survivors in the post-War period. *Echoes and Reflections: Teaching the Holocaust, Inspiring the Classroom* provides ideas in this regard, including a lesson plan “Holocaust Survivors ‘Return to Life’”, which incorporates openly accessible poetry and video testimony. See: <http://echoesandreflections.org/unit-8/?state=open#content>. You might also look at the selection of poems read aloud and available as podcasts at:

https://www.hmd.org.uk/resources/?genocide=5&resource_type=36&age=any

¹ We are very grateful to Laura Rutherford of Solihull School who drew our attention to Brown’s work when carrying out pilot testing of these resources.

² This technique for engagement with ‘difficult’ texts draws on activities developed by Professor Doris Sommer in the Pre-Texts initiative (see: <http://www.pre-texts.org/resources/supporting-ideas-resources>).