

Poetry As Social Justice: memory and the imagination

Age Group: high school, undergraduate, graduate, community audience

Materials: Ilya Kaminsky's *Dancing in Odessa*, writing materials, device with internet access

Time: 60 - 90 minutes

Medium: in person or virtual

Lesson Objective: Through thought, discussions and the crafting of poetry, students will have the opportunity to re-imagine the possibilities of poetry, and to see poetic language as a landscape for empathy, remembrance, and empowerment.

**Note: Although helpful, it is not required to have students read “Dancing in Odessa” prior to class.

The Lesson

Discussion and Reading

Read “Dancing in Odessa” (5pg.) and “Maestro” (7pg. - 8 pg.) and discuss the following questions:

1. How are these poems in conversation with each other, how does the information presented in “Dancing in Odessa” shape the voice of “Maestro”?
2. “Maestro” presents a scene of a school bombing. Why is this remembering important?
 - a. What can the genre of poetry do/present that other forms, such as a new article can not?
 - b. What are the limits of the genre in this retelling?
 - c. What is the role of the speaker? Is there a responsibility/expectation of truth?

Thinking

Working individually, I spend around 10 minutes searching the web for news stories. Once students have selected a story, have them “give way to the algorithm” reading up as much as possible about the story making notes on the following:

- Important facts, stats and information
- Any key quotes or interviews
- Striking moments in the language
- How different sources describe the event

Drafting

Have students begin to draft a poem inspired by their chosen news story. This version of the poem should focus around presenting information, with an eye towards facts... what needs to be said.

Reading

Read aloud “A Toast” (25pg.) and “Natalie” (29pg. - 33 pg.)

1. How are these two poems in conversation with each other?
2. What is the role of the imagination in the thesis/thinking of “A Toast” ?
3. What is the role of the imagined/subjunctive space in “Natalie”?
4. What moments are the most striking in these poems?
 - a. How would you define the tonalities of these moments?
 - b. How are they able to capture said authenticity?

Drafting

Have students return to their poem drafts. This time inserting the imagination into the conversation. Are there moments where the role of imagination can authentically amplify the situation of the poem? Are there moments that can become more vivid? Is there a place where a voice can be added? How can we manage the tension between imagination and the responsibility of truth.