

Poetry As Social Justice

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

Materials: Ilya Kaminsky's *Dancing in Odessa*, writing materials

Time: 45 - 60 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 understand the poetics as a tool for social justice and change.

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

The Lesson

Discussion: Define the terms

As a class, discuss the following questions. Leave room for the discussion to take its natural form, allow it to take (civil) shifts into an open format if wanted.

1. What is social justice?
2. What have been some important social justice movements overtime?
3. What is the role of social justice in society?
 - a. What can social justice do for society?
 - b. Is there anything it can *Not* do... are there limitations?

Read

As a group read aloud “Author’s Prayer” (1pg.) + “Farewell to Friends” (39 pg.) and discuss the following questions as a group:

1. What can a poem do... what are poems for?
2. How can/can a poem be an act of social justice?
3. What is the role/responsibility of a poet in social justice?
 - a. What is the speaker of the poems stating their role is?

Thinking and Craft

Have students work on their own to answer the following questions. Then, come together as a group and offer students a space to share their answers as wanted.

1. What is my personal responsibility as a poet?
2. How can/does this intersect with social justice?
3. Beyond the act of writing, how else can I play a role in social justice through poetry?

Drafting

Read “Envoi” (34pg) aloud and use the following prompts/questions to have students create a poetic free response. As the students write feel free to repeat them as necessary.

If this was the last poem you wrote, what would it be about? How could it play a role in changing the world? What is this poem’s role in social justice.. to praise, to amplify, to rejoice, to remember? Are there limits to my voice in social justice?

Writing

Select a recent news event or social justice movement and create a poem using the following questions as a guide.

- What voice needs to be added into the conversation?
- How can a/my poem amplify and provide a voice to the issue?
- Why is this issue important.... Why is this issue important to me?