

State: Oklahoma

Topic: Dust Bowl Survivors

Title of Poem: Revenge of No Man's Land

Type of Poem: American Haiku

Pre-reading Research: Students view pictures on line or watch a film on the Dust Bowl and the depression. Suggested film: The Century hosted by Peter Jennings; Internet search under Dust Bowl era. While watching the film or reading the articles, students write down 10+ words that come to mind from the images. They then write a 6-12 line poem using as many of those found words as possible.

The merciless conditions the migrants traveled extended into the panhandle of Oklahoma. Today the area is still like a moonscape with occasional windmills and oil rigs. Population growth is a caterpillar in slow motion. Winds blow hot and tillable soil is only as good as the year's precipitation in a land that never truly recovered from the 1930s dust bowl. History classes will use this lesson when covering the Great Depression and the Hoover/Roosevelt eras. English classes reading *The Grapes of Wrath* or *Dust Bowl Diary* will be able to use this lesson as a pre-reading exercise.

American Haiku, like Japanese haiku, links nature to human nature. Japanese haiku began as one line of poetry in 17 syllables. American haiku traditionally has three lines with 17 syllables broken into 5-7-5 lines of syllables. Modern haiku does not keep a strict syllable count. When writing these poems, I tried to keep the 5-7-5 format so that students would feel comfortable with the structure, a structure taught in elementary schools.

"Revenge of No Man's Land" tells a story reminiscent of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. The family is cohesive, and the tone is positive, because without hope and taking action as a unit, I do not think the families would have survived. My own experiences crossing miles of unfriendly territory included a lot of singing and family games. One of my trips also included a broken air conditioner, during which we felt the oppressiveness of the South's summer heat. Even today there are rare opportunities to stop for food in long stretches of the Southwest, and nagging children fill the air with complaints of "I'm hungry" and "Are we there yet?" even though "there" may not have a name.

Common Core Standards for Writing: W 2, W 7

Common Core Standards for Speaking and Listening: SL 1, SL 2

Common Core Standards for Literature 6-12: RL 4, RL 5

Common Core Standards for Informational Text 6-12: RI 1, RI 2, 4, RI 5, RI 6

Common Core Standards for History/Social Studies 6-12: RH 1, RH 5, RH 6

Revenge of No Man's Land

By Holly Dunlea

- 1 Native retribution:
Mexicans, Blacks, Germans, Whites
garden in Hades.
- 2 Paint a perfect blue—
Oklahoma skies in June
bring tears to our eyes.
- 3 Cantankerous clouds
punish Boise's wind-raked lands.
Butterflies escape.
- 4 Insolent brash sun—
hoppers bask in August heat,
diner's second course.
- 5 Pompous winds blow fire;
mourners cheat noon dust showers.
River Styx is dry.
- 6 Winds trumpet their base.
Cicadas hum harmony—
"Night on Bald Mountain."
- 7 Black Sunday's lesson:
Bennett's Conservation Zones.
Walk the naked earth.
- 8 Storm dunes dwarf our home.
Shovel nature's dust kittens—
a Melpomene sculpture.
- 9 Dust pneumonia
announced by coughs and fever—
tumbleweeds amass.
- 10 This humble dugout,
prairie dog's competition.
Demeter waits.

“Revenge of No Man’s Land” and Oklahoma: lessons

Literary Questions:

1. In the poem, what is the author foreshadowing in haikus 2, 5, and 9?
2. Each stanza reveals experiences of the farmer during the Dust Bowl era. Write a cohesive journal entry describing these experiences.
3. Poem 3 alludes to the River Styx. What is the mythical significance of this river, and what is its symbolic significance in the haiku? Poem 10 refers to Demeter. What is the symbolic significance of this character? Who is Melpomene (Poem 8)?
4. If the Dust Bowl era was a novel, where would you put Black Sunday on a plot line? Why?
5. What are common characteristics of the people on the plains? Write a one page description of a character who demonstrates the personality traits of an imagined Dust Bowl farmer.

Further Discussion and Activities:

1. What were some of the causes of the Dust Bowl?
2. What is Night on Bald Mountain? Listen to the music and determine why the author chose this particular music for this poem.
3. Find Boise City on an Oklahoma map. Where is No Man’s Land? Why is this area particularly significant to the Dust Bowl era? What is it like now? (See U.S. Census Bureau: State and County QuickFacts: Oklahoma for statistics.) What does this tell us about the development of this area?
4. Define “dust pneumonia.” Read Woody Guthrie's song “Dust Pneumonia Blues” on the Internet for further understanding.
5. Look up the significance of Hugh Bennett and Conservation Zones. How did Bennett handle the political environment?
6. Nature is the main antagonist in these poems. Discuss the use of grasshoppers, cicadas and Russian tumbleweeds as antagonists in the poems.
7. Bonus question: Where did the term “Dust Bowl” originate?
8. Read and annotate Franklin D. Roosevelt’s First Inaugural Speech. Examine the text for inferences, ambiguity, figurative language, and words with connotative meaning. Be sure to summarize each paragraph.

Vocabulary: cantankerous, amass, insolent, antagonist, retribution, pompous

Dust Bowl Terms: wind-raked lands, dust pneumonia, dust showers,
Conservation Zones, No Man’s Land, dugout

Literary Devices: foreshadowing, personification, irony, allusion, alliteration,
sensory images, symbolism

“Revenge of No Man’s Land” and Oklahoma: answers

Literary Questions:

1. Haiku 2: the blue skies signify that no rain will fall that day.
Haiku 5: The funeral procession may have beat the dust storm, but it will be easy to cross the River Styx due to the lack of water. Also, the panhandle is a Hell in which the residents are already living.
River Styx also equals the dried up creeks that run through the area.
Haiku 9: “tumbleweeds” is the damage in the lungs that is growing, foreshadowing future deaths.
2. Answers will vary. Students should look at history text as well as library selections.
3. The River Styx circles the realm of Hades. To cross, dead souls must pay a fee. If they have no money, they wander until they can find the pauper’s entrance. Cerberus guarded the gate at the Styx. Once entered, souls could never leave. If the River Styx has no water, it is easier to cross, and Charon’s help is not needed in order to enter hell, letting in the dust bowl dead who are all paupers. In the haiku, the River represents the Oklahoma panhandle. The people who stayed are doomed to poverty and disease. Demeter lost her daughter, Persephone, to Hades. The mention of Demeter means nothing is growing in the area. Melpomine is the muse for tragedy.
4. Answers will vary but need to have solid reasoning. Black Sunday could be at the climax of the plot line.
5. This descriptive writing should be created by the student. It should not represent a real person.

Further Discussion and Activities:

1. Causes of the dust: lack of rain, over-use of the land, method of tilling, lack of wind breaks.
2. “Night on Bald Mountain” was originally written by Modest Mussorgsky. It was partially reworked and performed by Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov. This music was chosen because it sounds powerful, dark, and foreboding, just as the winds and the future must have seemed to the residents. “Night on Bald Mountain” was featured in Fantasia with music that conjured dead, restless souls.
3. Boise City is in the panhandle of Oklahoma. There is little water in the area, even in wet years. After the 1930s, the area never came back to full production, demonstrated by the low gross income of the general population in that area.
4. “Dust pneumonia” is like black lung disease. After inhaling pounds of dust, a person starts coughing up brown or black phlegm. Recovery without clean air and antibiotics (not invented until 1939) was nearly impossible.
5. Hugh Bennett, an American hero, pushed Washington to finance the Conservation Zones that included crop rotation, fallow ground (paying farmers not to plant), trees as wind breaks, and cross-wind planting.
6. The term “Dust Bowl” originated from an article by an Associated Press reporter who was describing the desolation.