

Discovering Angel Island: The Story Behind the Poems

Lesson Unit 1

GRADES

4th, 5th & 6th

OVERVIEW

Students will read and interpret a poem from Angel Island and express their understanding of the poem in oral class discussion and in writing. The lesson focuses on a poem written by a Chinese immigrant imprisoned on Angel Island. It provides discussion and writing activities directed at student understanding of the poem and expressing their interpretation of immigrant experience in writing.

The students will view a short video about immigrants coming to the United States during 1910-1940. The video will show that many people from Asian countries were prevented from entering the United States, and they were kept at a prison on Angel Island. During their stay at Angel Island, many immigrants carved poems into the walls to express their feelings about being imprisoned. After the video, the class will read and discuss one of the poems, and the students will write their own interpretation of the poem.

OBJECTIVES

- Students will experience and work with **primary source material**
- Students will have experience **reading and interpreting figurative language**
- Students will **organize and outline** their **ideas** before **expressing** them **in writing**.
- Students will **paraphrase** a poem.

TIME

One 50-minute class period plus homework or two class periods

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MATERIALS

- Access to <http://www.kqed.org> to stream video *Discovering Angel Island: The Story Behind the Poems*, or a VHS or DVD copy of the Video
- Multiple copies of Poem #32 or #8 for introduction (attached)
- Poem #7 for teacher modeling and class discussion, and final writing assignment (attached)
- Copies of Pre-writing Organizer (attached)
- Paper and pencil for each student
- For Lesson Four (extension lesson), copies of Poem #10

STANDARDS

California State Academic Standards

Fourth Grade

Language Arts: Reading 2.2, 3.1, 3.3, 3.5; Writing 1.1, 1.2, 1.10, 2.1-2.4; Language Conventions 1.1-1.7; Listening & Speaking 1.1, 1.2, 1.6-1.8, 2.4

History/Social Studies: 4.3, 4.4

Fifth Grade

Language Arts: Reading 1.5, 2.3, 2.4, 3.1-3.3, 3.5; Writing 1.1, 1.2, 2.2, 2.4; Language Conventions 1.1-1.5; Listening & Speaking 1.1, 1.7, 1.8

Sixth Grade

Language Arts: Reading 1.2, 1.5, 2.3, 2.4; Writing 1.1-1.3, 1.6, 2.2, 2.4; Language Conventions 1.1-1.5

LESSON ONE: View the Video

1. As an introduction, read Poem #32 or #8 aloud to the class while the students follow along, and then show the video.
2. After the students have seen the video, remind them that we have learned a lot about the Angel Island immigrant experience from the poems the immigrants left behind. We can come to know the people better through reading their thoughts, feelings, experiences and hopes.

LESSON TWO: Close-Text Reading of a Poem

1. Ask the students to read Poem #7. Call on various students to read a line or a few lines each aloud while the class follows along. After the students have heard and read the entire poem, go through the poem altogether line by line. It may be helpful to project a copy of the poem on an overhead projector.
2. Ask the students what the writer of the poem has said in a general sense. Record student comments on the board or chart paper. Students may make notes on their copy. A copy of the poem on an overhead

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projector may be helpful here. Depending on student understanding and experience reading poetry, point out and discuss the following lines and words in detail:

- a. **Lines 1-3:** Be sure the students understand the first two lines. What do we know about the writer? Together refer to the footnote to determine what is the “day the Weaver Maiden met the Cowherd”.
 - b. **Line 4:** What does the writer mean when he says he “took passage” on the *President Lincoln*?
 - c. **Line 5:** Ask the students to visualize “ate wind and tasted waves”. What does this mean? Discuss why a poet would use this type of language.
 - d. **Line 6:** What clues do the words “fortunately” and “safely” give you?
 - e. **Lines 7-8:** What is the wooden building? Ask the children to describe how the writer is a prisoner. Give some examples of the ways in which you imagine the writer could be suffering physically and emotionally.
 - f. **Line 9:** Check the footnote and discuss why the Chinese would call the Americans in charge “barbarians”.
 - g. **Line 10:** What do you think the writer means by his family's circumstances? What does he mean by a “double” stream of tears? Point out that he is crying for his own suffering and for his family for all the sacrifices they made to help send him to America.
 - h. **Lines 11-12:** How do you think the writer feels at the end of the poem?
3. Ask the students what questions they have, and see if other students can offer answers.
 4. Bring students attention back to the overall meaning of the poem. Review the comments written on the board.

LESSON THREE: Individual student written response to the poem

1. They will be able to refer to the notes on the overhead or the board. It is important that the students include their personal reflection at the end.
2. Students can organize their ideas on the Pre-writing Organizer. This will help them as they prepare to write.
3. After they have completed the pre-writing organizer, they can do their actual writing for homework or during a second class period.

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4. Options/Extension: Students could edit one another's papers. On another day, the teacher might ask some students to read their papers to the class.

LESSON FOUR: Extension Activities

1. Poem #10 provides another opportunity for students to read about the experience of immigrants held at Angel Island. Depending upon how the students wrote about poem #7, the teacher can decide how much direction to give the students on the next poem.
2. The students may be able to read the poem with a partner or small group and work on interpreting the poem with their peers. Each student can write an individual response, and each small group can present their interpretation to the class. An alternative would be to have the students read the poem on their own and respond to it without any class discussion.

REFERENCES

Lai, Him Mark, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung, *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940*, University of Washington Press (Seattle), 1991.

Link to University of Washington Press for purchase info:
<http://www.washington.edu/uwpress/search/books/LAIISL.html>

Or Amazon.com:
http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0295971096/qid=1095881923/sr=1-5/ref=sr_1_5/103-2947762-8562243?v=glance&s=books

This lesson unit was developed by Lorraine Bader, 4th grade teacher at the French-American International School in San Francisco, CA.

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Discovering Angel Island: The Story Behind the Poems

Lesson Unit 1

Poems from *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940*¹

Poem #32

Imprisoned in the wooden building day after day,
My freedom withheld; how can I bear to talk about it?
I look to see who is happy but they only sit quietly.
I am anxious and depressed and cannot fall asleep.
The days are long and bottle constantly empty; my sad
mood, even so, is not dispelled.
Nights are long and the pillow cold; who can pity my
loneliness?
After experiencing such loneliness and sorrow,
Why not just return home and learn to plow the fields?

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Lesson Unit 1

Poems from *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940*²

Poem #8

Instead of remaining a citizen of China, I willingly became an

ox.

I intended to come to America to earn a living.

The Western styled buildings are lofty; but I have not the

luck to live in them.

How was anyone to know that my dwelling place would be a

prison?

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Lesson Unit 1

Poems from *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940*³

Poem #7

Originally, I had intended to come to America last year.
Lack of money delayed me until early autumn.
It was on the day that the Weaver Maiden met the Cowherd⁴
That I took passage on the *President Lincoln*.
I ate wind and tasted waves for more than twenty days.
Fortunately, I arrived safely on the American continent.
I thought I could land in a few days.
How was I to know I would become a prisoner suffering in the wooden
 building?
The barbarians'⁵ abuse is really difficult to take.
When my family's circumstances stir my emotions, a double stream of
 tears flow.
I only wish I can land in San Francisco soon.
Thus sparing me the additional sorrow here.

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⁴ Better known as the "Festival of the Seventh Day of the Seventh Moon," the Qiqiao Festival is widely celebrated among the Cantonese. As the legend of the Cowherd (Niulang) and the Weaver Maiden (Zhinu) is told, the Weaver Maiden in heaven one day fell in love with a mortal Cowherd. After their marriage, her loom, which once wove garments for the gods, fell silent. Angered by her dereliction of duty, the gods ordered her back to work. She was separated from the Cowherd by the Silver Stream or Milky Way, with the Cowherd in the Constellation Aquila and she across the Heavenly River in the Constellation Lyra. The couple was allowed to meet only once a year on the seventh day of the seventh moon, when the Silver Stream is spanned by a bridge of magpies. On this day, maidens display toys, figurines, artificial fruits and flowers, embroidery and other examples of their handiwork, so that men can judge their skills. It is also customary for girls to worship and make offerings of the fruits to the gods.

⁵ A Cantonese term for Westerner.

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Lesson Unit 1

Poems from *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940*⁶

Poem #10

Poem by One Named Xu From Xiangshan

Encouraging the Traveler

Just talk about going to the land of the Flowery Flag⁷ and my
countenance fills with happiness.

Not without hard work were 1,000 pieces of gold dug up and gathered
together.

There were words of farewell to the parents, but the throat choked up
first.

There were many feelings, many tears flowing face to face, when parting
with the wife.

Waves big as mountains often astonished this traveler.

With laws harsh as tigers,⁸ I had a taste of all the barbiturates.

Do not forget this day when you land ashore.

Push yourself ahead and do not be lazy or idle.

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⁷ A Cantonese colloquialism for the United States.

⁸ From "Tangong," a chapter in the 'Book of Rites'. Confucius was passing Mt. Taj and saw a woman weeping and wailing at a grave. Confucius asked one of his disciples to ask why she was wailing so sadly. She said, "My father-in-law and my husband were killed by tigers. Now my son is also killed by a tiger." Confucius asked why she didn't leave this dangerous place. She replied that it was because there is no oppressive rule here. Confucius remarked, "Oppressive rule is surely fiercer than any tiger."

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Lesson Unit 1 Pre-Writing Organizer

Who wrote the poem?

When was the poem written?

Explain where the writer was when he wrote the poem.

Explain what is happening in the poem.

Why do you think the person wrote the poem?

How does this poem make you feel?