

Agriculture in Poetry

Grades 6-12

English Language Arts



Objectives

Students will read and discuss a variety of poems with agricultural themes and write their own poems based on food and agriculture.

Vocabulary

acequia— a community-operated watercourse used in Spain and former Spanish colonies in the Americas for irrigation

agriculture— the science or occupation of cultivating the soil, producing crops, and raising livestock

compost—a decayed mixture of plants (such as leaves and grass) that is used to improve the soil in a garden

crop rotation— the practice of growing first one and then another crop on the same land especially to preserve the ability of the soil to produce crops

imagery— language that suggests how someone or something looks, sounds, feels, smells, or tastes

irrigation—the process of supplying with water by artificial means

rural— of or relating to the country, country people or life, or agriculture

Background

Over the years food, agriculture, and **rural** life have been a rich source of inspiration for poetry.

Understanding **agriculture** helps us in several ways. It helps us grasp the ag-related **imagery** used in poetry, and reading poetry with agriculture-related imagery gives us a peek into a way of life unfamiliar to many of us. It helps us from a historical perspective when we read poetry that examines a way of life that is in the past, and reading poetry set in cultures different from our own helps give us a multicultural perspective.

The poems included with this lesson provide some good examples. If you know that **crop rotation** involves planting different crops in the same field with each season, you can better understand the progression described in Gordon Bottomley's poem, "The Ploughman." It also helps to know that the word "corn" in the past was the word used for any grain, not just what we know as corn, which was called "maize."

Walt Whitman's poem, "This Compost," probably makes little sense if the reader doesn't understand the process of **composting**—that dead matter is transformed to provide nutrients for new life planted in the soil.

Peggy Pond Church is a poet from New Mexico, where farming is dependent upon

acequias—**irrigation** ditches that move water into the fields from a nearby river. Knowing about the acequias help the reader understand what she is describing.

Agriculture in Poetry (continued)

Some Poems With Food and Agriculture-Related Themes

- “Ode to Tomatoes,” Pablo Neruda
- “Blackberry-Picking,” Seamus Heaney
- “The Cow in Apple Time,” Robert Frost
- “Fiesta Melons,” Sylvia Plath
- “Peach Trees,” Peggy Pond Church
- “My Strawberry,” Helen Hunt Jackson
- “Plowing Through Ashes,” Walter McDonald
- “This Compost,” Walt Whitman
- “This is Just to Say,” William Carlos Williams
- “Perhaps the World Ends Here,” Joy Harjo

For more poems with food and agriculture-related themes, go to the “Ag in Poetry” section on the AITC website: https://agclassroom.org/ok/resources_food/songs.php

Additional Reading

Heaney, Seamus, and Ted Hughes (editors), *The Rattle Bag*, Faber and Faber, 2005.

MacGowan, Christopher, *William Carlos Williams (Poetry for Young People)*, Sterling, 2003.

Paschen, Elise, and Dominique Racciah, *Poetry Speaks Who I am: Poems of Discovery, Inspiration, Independence, and Everything Else (A Poetry Speaks Experience)*, Sourcebooks Jabberwocky, 2010.

Schmidt, Gary D., *Robert Frost (Poetry for Young People)*, Sterling, 1994.

Agriculture in Poetry

Activity 1: How to Read a Poem, (ELA) 3 50 minute class periods

Students will compare and contrast poetry written about agriculture.

Oklahoma Academic Standards

Activity 1: How to Read a Poem (ELA)

6.2.R.2	Students will analyze details in literary and nonfiction/informational texts to distinguish genres.
7.2.R.2	
8.2.R.2	
9.2.R.2	
10.2.R.2	
11.2.R.2	
12.2.R.2	
7.3.R.7	Students will make connections (e.g., thematic links, literary analysis) between and across multiple texts and provide textual evidence to support their inferences.
9.3.R.7	
10.3.R.7	
6.4.R.3	Students will use context clues to determine or clarify the meaning of words or distinguish among multiple-meaning words.
7.4.R.3	
8.4.R.3	
9.4.R.3	
10.4.R.3	
11.4.R.3	
12.4.R.3	
6.4.W.2	Students will select appropriate language to create a specific effect according to purpose in writing.
7.4.W.2	
8.4.W.2	
9.4.W.2	
10.4.W.2	
11.4.W.2	
12.4.W.2	

Materials:

- Activity 1 Worksheet 1 “How to Read a Poem”
- Poem 1 “**This Compost,**” by Walt Whitman
- Poem 2 “**The Ploughman,**” by Gordon Bottomley
- Poem 3 “**Peach Trees,**” by Peggy Pond Church
- Computer
- Pecans, leather, cotton, wheat, fruit, vegetables, baseball, socks, other agriculture related items
- Paper
- Paper bags

Agriculture in Poetry

Procedures:

1. Read and discuss background and vocabulary.
—As a class, read one or more of the poems provided with this lesson: Poem 1 “**This Compost,**” by **Walt Whitman**; Poem 2 “**The Ploughman,**” by **Gordon Bottomley**; Poem 3 “**Peach Trees,**” by **Peggy Pond Church**.
—Discuss unfamiliar vocabulary.

Vocabulary for “**This Compost,**” by **Walt Whitman**

axis— a straight line about which a body or a geometric figure rotates or may be supposed to rotate

compost—a decayed mixture of plants (such as leaves and grass) that is used to improve the soil in a garden

corruption— physical decay or rotting

fetor— a strong, foul smell

infectious—capable of contaminating with a disease-producing substance or germ

mite—a very small creature that often lives on plants, animals, and foods

mould— British spelling for mold, light rich crumbly earth that contains decaying matter (as leaves)

visage— the outward appearance of a person, animal, or thing

Vocabulary for “**The Ploughman,**” by **Gordon Bottomley**

pallid— lacking healthy color

reaper—a worker who cuts (as grain) or clears (as a field) with a sickle, scythe, or machine

ridge— a raised or elevated part or area

Vocabulary for “**Peach Trees,**” by **Peggy Pond Church**

orchard— a place where fruit or nut trees are grown

plough—British spelling for plow, a piece of farm equipment that is used to dig into and turn over soil especially to prepare the soil for planting

2. Provide copies of Activity 1 Worksheet 1 “**How to Read a Poem.**” Discuss.
—Students will each select one of the poems listed in the background information. Students will find their selected poems online in the “Ag in Poetry” section on the AITC website: https://agclassroom.org/ok/resources_food/songs.php or in the library.
—Students will research the poet who wrote the selected poem and be prepared to make a short presentation about him/her.
—Students will prepare the poems to read aloud to the class and be prepared to discuss imagery, meaning, their relation to agriculture, etc.

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Extension:

1. Collect a sampling of agriculture-related items (pecans, leather, cotton, wheat, fruit, vegetables, baseball, socks, etc.)
 - Place items at stations around the classroom. Place a piece of paper next to the item.
 - Students will visit each station around the room and use their imaginations and creativity to write down an adjective to record their impressions of each agricultural product (color, shape, smell texture, etc.) on the paper. Each student should write a single word or short phrase describing the item on the paper.
 - Divide students into small groups. Give each group one of the items and the paper that was beside it.
 - Students will work in groups to use the words and phrases on the paper to create poetry about each item. Students may use any style of poetry they choose. They can use words not on the paper, as well, but need to use as many words on the paper as they can.
 - Students will avoid naming the item in their poems so the class can guess what the item is from the description in the poem.

(Activity adapted from Oregon Ag in the Classroom Foundation.)
2. Some of our best-known poets have written well-loved poems focused on one particular food:
 - Pablo Neruda’s “Ode to Tomatoes,”
 - William Carlos Williams’ “This is Just to Say,”
 - Jack Prelutsky’s “A Pizza the Size of the Sun.”
 - Read one or more poems focused on a particular food as a class. (See “Ag in Poetry” on AITC website.) Discuss.
 - Students will select a favorite food and write a poem focused on that food. Instruct students to start by just describing the food (color, shape, texture, etc.) and then organize their thoughts into poetry form.

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Activity 1 Worksheet 1: How to Read a Poem



Name: _____ Date: _____

Procedures

1. Look at the poem's title. What might this poem be about?
2. Read the poem aloud without trying to understand it.
3. Read it again for understanding. Start with what you know. Underline the parts you do not understand. Look up unfamiliar words in a dictionary.
4. Now read the poem as if it were prose. Rearrange words to more normal prose order.
5. Write a short first impression of the poem. Include: What do you notice about the poem so far? What do you think the poem is about?
6. Look for patterns. Watch for repeated, interesting or unfamiliar use of language, imagery, sound, color or arrangement. What might the poet be trying to do with these patterns?

7. Look for changes within the poem—in tone, focus, narrator, structure, voice, patterns. What has changed and what does the change mean?

8. Who is speaking in the poem? What does the poem tell you about him or her?

9. Re-read the poem aloud from start to finish. Circle those portions you still do not understand.

10. Explain to someone else what you think the poem means.

11. Find the crucial moments in the poem. Look for words like “but” or “yet.” Such words often act like hinges to swing the poem in a different direction. Pay attention to breaks between stanzas or between lines.

12. Did the poet use a specific form, such as a sonnet or an ode?

13. Did the poet use specific poetic devices such as assonance, alliteration, symbols, metaphors or allusions?

14. How does the poet use capitalization and punctuation?

15. Read the poem aloud again. Return to the title and ask yourself what the poem is about and how it relates to the title.

THIS COMPOST, by Walt Whitman (1819-1892)

Behold this compost! behold it well!
Perhaps every mite was once form'd part of a sick person—yet behold!

The grass of spring covers the prairies,
The bean bursts noiselessly through the mould in the garden,
The delicate spear of the onion pierces upward,
The apple-buds cluster together on the apple-branches,
The resurrection of the wheat appears with pale visage out of its graves.
What chemistry!

That the winds are really infectious,
That all is clean forever and forever,
That the cool drink from the well tastes so good,
That blackberries are so flavorful and juicy,
That the fruits of the apple-orchard and the orange-orchard, that
melons, grapes, peaches, plums, will none of them poison me,

That when I recline on the grass I do not catch any disease
Now I am terrified at the Earth, it is that calm and patient,
It grows such sweet things out of such corruptions,
It turns harmless and stainless on its axis, with such endless succession
of diseased corpses,

It distils such exquisite winds out of such infused fetor,
It gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such leavings from
them at last

THE PLOUGHMAN, by Gordon Bottomley (1874-1948)

Under the long fell's stony eaves
the ploughman, going up and down,

Ridge after ridge man's tide-mark leaves,
And turns the hard grey soil to brown.

Striding, he measures out the earth
In lines of life, to rain and sun;

And every year that comes to birth
Sees him still striding on and on.

The seasons change, and then return;
Yet still, in blind, unsparing ways,

However I may shrink or yearn,
the ploughman measures out my days.

His acre brought forth roots last year;
This year it bears the gleamy grain;

Next spring shall seedling grass appear:
Then roots and corn and grass again.

Five times the young corn's pallid green
I have seen spread and change and thrill;

Five times the reapers I have seen
Go creeping up the far-off hill:

And, as the unknowing ploughman climbs
Slowly and inveterately,

I wonder long how many times
The corn will spring again for me.

PEACH TREES, by Peggy Pond Church (1903-1986)

Do not hurry past this orchard too quickly
Saying: Yes, surely that is a beautiful thing.
As though the moment of flaming were the purpose of this orchard
Accomplished now that your all-claiming eyes have seen it.

Remember that before these trees were ever planted,
A thin, small, unprotesting beast of burden
Dragged a curved plough through the reluctant earth,
With a man stooping behind in the hot sun to guide it.

Remember a wide ditch had to be dug here to coax the river
Up the dry, stubborn flanks of these hills, a long time barren,

And that a woman, ageless as the brown hills are ageless,
Hoed the difficult earth about the young roots planted,
And dreamed, before ever the slender branches had budded,
Of yellow fruit spread to the sun in her dooryard in autumn.