

Poetic interpretation

Discussions around the re-interpretation and the text of a Martin Niemöller poem

Public	: students from the age of 12.
Disciplines	: Law, Citizenship, Human sciences, English.
Implementation conditions	: before or after the visit of the exhibition Humanitarian Adventure - Defending human dignity.
Implementation duration	: 45 minutes.
Skills	: Writing, reading, understanding, reflection.
Materials	: print-outs (worksheet on following page)

Principle of activity :

Place students in groups of two to four. Give each student a print-out of the poem excerpt with blanks.

Tell students you are handing them something well known - but certain words and phrases have been left out. Ask them as a group to re-interpret the poem. Give students ten to fifteen minutes to complete.

First they came for the _____
and I did not _____ *because* _____
Then they came for the _____
and I did not _____ *because* _____
Then they come for the _____
and I did not _____ *because* _____
Then they come for me _____
and _____

Once the groups have filled in the blanks, have a spokesperson read for each group and present to the class.

After all groups have presented, read the original poem excerpt:

First they came for the Socialists,

*and I did not speak out because I was not a Socialist.
Then they came for the trade unionists,
and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they come for the Jews,
and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew.
Then they come for me,
and there was no one left to speak for me.*

Pastor Martin Niemöller

Background:

Martin Niemöller (1892-1984) was a prominent Protestant pastor who emerged as an outspoken public foe of Adolf Hitler and spent the last seven years of Nazi rule in concentration camps, despite his ardent nationalism. Niemöller is perhaps best remembered for the quotation: "First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out..." It is thought that the quotation most likely emerged in 1946, taking on the more poetic form in the early 1950s.*

In 1941, Gestapo officials transferred Niemöller to Dachau, where he shared a barrack room with Catholic dissenters and was permitted access to books.

After more than seven years of incarceration, Niemöller was liberated by US troops in Tirol, Austria, after being transported by the SS from Dachau along with other political prisoners. In 1947, he was elected as president of the Hessen-Nassau Lutheran Church and began a world tour preaching collective guilt for Nazi persecution and crimes against humanity.

By the mid-1950s, Niemöller had become a pacifist. He worked with a number of international groups, including the World Council of Churches, for international peace. Niemöller died on March 6, 1984 at the age of 92.

Proposed question to be addressed :

1. How were your interpretations different than the original?
2. What is Pastor Niemöller talking about? Did your poem keep with his same idea?
3. What do you think was going on in the world when this was written? Was it considered a peaceful time?
4. Does something like this mean anything to you today?
5. How does this relate to the idea of maintaining peace?
 - a. Must we fight to maintain others' peace in order to maintain our own?