

LITERATURE 3A

TEACHER'S NOTES

AUTHOR	Ella Wheeler Wilcox
TITLE	<i>Poems</i>
THEMES	Feelings about the future, putting things in perspective, cheering someone up, life's ups and downs
WRITING	A poem
THINK STYLE	Personification

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ella Wheeler Wilcox (1850–1919) was born in Wisconsin in the USA. She started to write when she was very young and was well known for her poetry while she was still at school. She wrote *Solitude*, her most famous poem, after meeting a crying widow (a woman whose husband had died) dressed all in black on a train. She was miserable after the journey but wrote the opening lines and continued the poem in an optimistic manner. Optimism is a common theme in most of her work. Although her poems are still popular and regularly appear in anthologies, they also appear in collections of bad poetry. It has been said that people either love or hate her work.

INTRODUCTION

Ask students if they can name any poets who write in English. Then ask students if they can recite any lines of poetry in English or even in their own language. Write any ideas on the board in note form. Ask students if they have heard of Ella Wheeler Wilcox. Use the information in the *About the author* box to provide an introduction. Depending on the class, it may be appropriate to use L1 at this stage.

START THINKING ...

- 1 Organise the class into pairs. Set a time limit of a few minutes for students to discuss the questions. Then ask students for their opinions. Encourage them to back up their answers with examples. For example, 'When other people are upset, I feel sad too. I also feel useless because I can't cheer them up.' Encourage them to give reasons to justify their answers.
- 2 Play the audio. One option is to encourage students to listen to the poems first before reading along to the audio.
- 3 When students have read and listened to the text, allow time to match the bold words in the text to the definitions. Tell them they may need to change the part of speech (form of verb, noun, etc.) to the base form to fit the glossary. Point out that making a glossary of unknown words in a text is a good way to learn vocabulary. Ask individual students for answers.

Answers

1 prophet 2 file 3 sorrow 4 yield 5 woe 6 grief
7 weep 8 creep 9 feast 10 rejoice

- 4 Students read through the questions. Check for understanding and remind them to refer closely to the text to find the answers.

Answers

1 I Told You 2 I Told You 3 Solitude 4 Solitude
5 I Told You 6 Solitude

- 5 Students read the text again. Discuss the questions and answers with the class.

Suggested answers

1 They've experienced death/someone close to them has died. 2 Laugh/Weep, Rejoice/Grieve, Feast/Fast These sets of words make the poem predictable and easier to remember. 3 Both poems are about living life optimistically and why it's important to stay positive.

- 6 Read through the sentences one at a time and check comprehension of any unknown vocabulary. Students complete the sentences with the correct form of the words in the glossary. Ask students for answers.

Answers

1 grief 2 creep 3 file 4 weeped 5 rejoiced 6 feast

- 7 Ask students to read the text again and to underline five more words that are new to them. Ask them to write the words in sentences. They then read their sentences in pairs and correct each other's mistakes.



CRITICAL THINKING

Ask the students the questions: *Which poem do you prefer? If someone wrote this poem today, would it still be popular? Are the themes still relevant?* Working individually, students write notes for each question. When students have finished, ask them to work in small groups to compare their ideas. You can then bring their ideas together on the board and discuss their ideas as a class. Then ask students if they can think of a pop song that has a similar theme. Ask them to find the lyrics and compare and contrast the poem and the song. Ask them to discuss which one they think is more effective and why.

ROLE PLAY

- 8 Organise the class into pairs. Read the instructions and check students' understanding of the task. Ask a student to read the first part of the conversation. Brainstorm ideas and phrases on the board. Set the students a time limit of 5–10 minutes to prepare their role plays. Monitor and offer support and encourage students to write their scripts. Encourage as many pairs as possible to perform their role plays. Consider asking groups to perform to each other.

The 'audience' group can monitor language use and make corrections if necessary.

LISTENING

- 9 Before listening, explain that students are going to listen to two students comparing and contrasting the two poems. Play the recording twice. The first time, encourage students to listen without taking notes. The second time, they write A, B or C.

Answers

1 A 2 B 3 C 4 A 5 C

- 10 Students read through the questions. Encourage students to answer from memory. Play the recording again for students to complete their answers and to check.

Answers

1 She says they're both about staying positive and looking on the bright side of things. 2 It cheers you up and gives you advice on how to live your life. 3 wind, snow, clouds and ice 4 That if you live your life positively, you will have a long and fulfilling life. 5 They would ask her why she had such a positive attitude, what inspired her to write these poems and who she was writing to in 'I Told You'.

AUDIO SCRIPT

CHARLES So let's talk about these two poems. Did you like them?

JANE Loved them! I think Ella Wheeler Wilcox was a brilliant poet. I love all of her poems.

CHARLES Which one did you like the most, *I Told You* or *Solitude*?

JANE It's really hard to say. They're both really inspiring. I like the message she gives in both of them.

CHARLES Which is...?

JANE Well, they're about staying positive, looking on the bright side of things. Don't you think?

CHARLES Yeah, I think so. But I think I like *I Told You* more – it's like she's trying to cheer someone up in this poem or bring them out of a dark phase, it seems like she's talking to someone who hasn't been very happy recently, or has been through a tough period.

JANE Well, I think *Solitude* cheers you up too, but it sounds more like advice on how to live your life in general. I agree that in *I Told You*, it sounds like she is talking to someone in particular. But in *Solitude*, she's telling everyone that, even if you suffer pain or go through difficult situations, you should keep a positive attitude.

CHARLES Can you see any other similarities between the poems?

JANE I think the imagery and symbols are quite similar. She talks a lot about nature – the earth, weather, flowers.

CHARLES Yeah, but I think this comes out more in *I Told You*. She uses nature as symbols of positivity and negativity – the positive ones being spring, flowers, birds, and so on. The negative ones are things like wind, snow, clouds and ice.

JANE Yeah, you're right. *Solitude* uses scenarios from everyday life and relationships more – I think the line 'Be glad, and your friends are many' means that if you are happy then people will be attracted to you and want to be your friend. But if you're not happy, then they will ignore you.

CHARLES So do you think the mood of the poems is the same?

JANE I guess so. They both seem very positive to me.

CHARLES Yeah, though to my mind, *Solitude* ends on a bit of a depressing note. Isn't she basically saying that we all die alone?

JANE Hmm, maybe, but I think the overall message is encouraging – live your life positively now, and you will have a long and fulfilling life.

CHARLES What would you say to Ella Wheeler Wilcox if she was here today?

JANE I'd ask her why she has such a positive attitude, and what inspired her to write these poems. How about you?

CHARLES I'd ask her who she's writing to in *I Told You!*

THINK STYLE

Personification

- 11 Read the *Think* box and check that students understand the meaning of *personification*. Read line 3 of the first verse of *I Told You: That he'd flee in shame when the south wind came*. Ask them who *he* is and why the poet uses *he* rather than *it* here. Point out the word *fellow* on line 5 and ask them to think of a synonym (man). They may need to use dictionaries to do this. Ask them to do the activity and then, at the end of the exercise, write their own definition of personification.

Optional extension

Students could write five short sentences using personification and then discuss their ideas with their partner.

WRITING

- 12 Read through the *Writing* skills box. Ask students for other common features of a poem. These could include the use of stressed and unstressed syllables or the use of a rhyme scheme. Ask students if they know what a *Haiku* is (a Japanese poem with three lines. Lines 1 and 3 have five syllables; line 2 has seven). Students can write their poem in class or for homework. Students then swap their poem with a partner. They read each other's work and highlight any mistakes. They assess whether the student has answered the question fully and whether they have followed the steps. They then return the poem to the original student who looks at the comments and redrafts their work. Ask some students to read their poems out loud to the class.

Additional reading or internet research topics

- The life of Ella Wheeler Wilcox
- Poetry by Ella Wheeler Wilcox
- How to write or analyse poetry