



THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA  
COLLEGE OF SOCIAL & BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES

# Center for Middle Eastern Studies

**Peace and Perspective Through Poetry**  
*The Dream of Peace in the Middle East*  
(Grades 6-8)

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This lesson is adapted from a project from Spring 2008, when I teamed up with a Seattle poet to teach my 6<sup>th</sup> graders about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. With the poet's guidance, an inspiring variety of poems from Arab and Jewish writers, and my own experiences from a 2007 fellowship to Jordan, my students learned about an area of the world they knew little to nothing about.

My students read *Habibi*, Naomi Shihab Nye's novel about a Palestinian-American girl who reconnects with her Arab heritage while also falling in love with a Jewish boy. Students can complete the following lesson without having read the book, but their experience and their work will be much richer if they have a chance to read the novel.

Through this lesson, students will learn to use their pens and their minds to wage peace. They will take on the personas of Palestinians and Israelis, and let their poems walk them through the streets of Jerusalem. They will create poetry that will let readers taste the flavors of the Middle East, feel the raw emotion and pulse of an ancient people, and discover their unflinching wisdom about war, peace, and hope.

**Resources used:**

Center for Middle Eastern Studies, University of Arizona  
[www.cmes.arizona.edu/outreach/k12.php](http://www.cmes.arizona.edu/outreach/k12.php) ("Background to the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict," "Conflict and Compromise Since 1948")

Nye, Naomi Shihab, (1997). *Habibi*. New York: Simon Pulse Press / Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division.

Nye, Naomi Shihab, (2002). *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East*. NY: Greenwillow.

“Biography of An Armenian Schoolgirl,” p.11

Rubin, Robert Alden, editor. (1993). *Poetry Out Loud*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill.  
from the section titled “Poems of Alienation,”  
“Israel,” by Karl Shapiro (p. 160) and “The Last Knocks,” by Palestinian poet Fadwa Tuqan, (translated by Issa J. Boullata), p.162

**Students will:**

- Increase their appreciation and understanding of the power of language to express awareness and concern related to struggles and conflicts from their own and other points of view;
- Experiment with creating persona pieces while learning to focus on developing an authentic voice and choosing strong, compelling words;
- Learn how art and poetry celebrate cultural and personal stories/histories;
- Learn how diverse, globally based literature and poetry can help dispel biases and build bridges of understanding across borders and conflicts;

**The Lesson:**

Use Naomi Shihab Nye’s young adult novel, *Habibi*, as a mentor text. Use the University of Arizona’s Center for Middle Eastern Studies essays, “Background to the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict” and “Conflict and Compromise Since 1948” to give students background information to understand the novel.

Once students have read the novel, pull one of the quotes that Naomi Shihab Nye places in the inset pages before *Habibi* begins. The quote is by Anndee Hochman:

*“Is a Jew a Palestinian? Is a Palestinian a Jew? Where does one begin to answer such a question? I will say this: we are cut from the same rock, breathe the scent of the same lemons and olives, anchor our troubles with the same stones, carefully placed. We are challah & hummus, eaten together to make a meal.”*

Read aloud two poems that present differing points of view, Karl Shapiro’s “Israel” and Fadwa Tuqan’s “The Last Knocks.”

Students should discuss the poems in small groups, noting how each poet presents his views on the conflict. Lead a large class discussion on the language used and points of view expressed.

Next, read two examples of persona poems. The first is Naomi Shihab Nye’s “Autobiography of an Armenian Schoolgirl,” and the second is Kim Stafford’s “19 March 2003,” from the perspective of an Iraqi child.

For the rest of the session, students are to take on the persona of someone in the Middle East. A variety of characters and viewpoints are presented in Shihab Nye’s *Habibi*. Encourage students to use the novel to spark ideas. They may write from the perspective of a young child, and elderly person, a street vendor, a soldier, a mother, a brother, a professor, a student.

Using the poems below as mentor texts, students are to craft their own drafts of a poem addressing the conflict in the Middle East. As students write, play a slideshow of images from the Middle East to help them include realistic details in their work.

*19 March 2003*

Let me be light from the morning star,  
the glimmer between worlds.

I am what you cannot see—at midnight  
or noon. I am the child in war  
putting my candle in a paper boat  
at the call to prayer. My mother says  
when I die I will be a secret.

Little boat, you are my sister  
I put light in. Go find me  
a place to be. Allah is great,  
you are small. Go tell them  
your brother is here. My mother,  
my father, we—we are a secret,  
we are a boat, we are a light.

We are the star that sees you.

What we lost will be you,  
my mother says.

-Kim Stafford

### **Biography of an Armenian Schoolgirl**

I have lived in the room of stone  
where voices become bones  
buried under us long ago.  
You could dig for years  
uncovering the same sweet dust.

My hands dream crescent-shaped cakes,  
trapped moons on a narrow veined earth.

All day I am studying my hands—giving them  
new things to hold.

Travel, I say. They become boats.  
Go—the bird squirms to detach from the arm.  
Across the courtyards, a radio rises up and explodes.

What is the history of Europe to us if we cannot  
choose our own husbands?

Yesterday my father met with the widower,  
the man with no hair.  
How will I sleep with him, I who have never slept  
away from my mother?

Once I bought bread from the vendor with the  
humped back .

I carried it home singing,  
the days had doors in them  
that would swing open in front of me.

Now I copy the alphabets of three languages,  
imagining the loops in my Arabic letters are eyes.  
What you do when you are tired of what you see,

what happens to the gray body  
when it is laid in the earth,  
these are the subjects which concern me.  
But they teach algebra.  
They pull our hair back and examine our nails.

Every afternoon predictable passage of sun  
across a wall.

I would fly out of here. Travel I say.  
I would go so far away my life would be  
a small thing behind me.

They teach physics, chemistry.

I throw my book out the window,  
watch the pages scatter like wings.

I stitch the professor's jacket  
to the back of his chair.

There is something else we were born for.

I almost remember it. While I write,  
a ghost writes on the same tablet,  
achieves a different sum.

Naomi Shihab Nye