

Paul Celan's "Deathfugue"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <https://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/paul-celans-deathfugue>.

Introduction

Paul Celan is widely regarded as one of the major German-language poets of the twentieth century. He was born Paul Antschel in 1920 in Czernovitz, Romania, to German-speaking Jewish parents. In 1942, about a year after the Nazis invaded Romania, his parents were deported to a Nazi concentration camp, where both perished; meanwhile, he was imprisoned in a forced labor camp, where he remained until his liberation by the Red Army in 1944. After the war, Celan moved first to Bucharest and then, in 1947, to Paris, where he remained until his suicide in 1970.

"Deathfugue," perhaps the most well-known of Celan's poems, emerged from his experiences during the war and was first published in 1947. Like many survivors, he gave almost no factual testimony during his lifetime; his poetry therefore constitutes the bulk of his writings on his time in the camp. Distinguished by stark imagery and sonorous repetition, the poem contrasts the power of the Nazi masters with the impotence of the Jewish prisoners. Originally written in German and titled "*Todesfuge*," this poem addresses the horrors of the Holocaust, as well as the limitations of language and representation in its aftermath.

This kit provides resources to aid in a close reading of the poem, in addition to material and activities that will deepen students' understanding of the poem by exploring it through a variety of lenses, including literary allusions, music, translation, and art.

Cover image: Photograph of Celan, courtesy of ullstein bild Dtl. via Getty Images.

Subjects

Eastern Europe, Holocaust, Poetry, Translation

Reading and Background

- A [short biography](#) of Paul Celan is available online as part of the YIVO Encyclopedia.
- John Felstiner's *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* is the first critical biography of Paul Celan. In addition to recounting the poet's life, the author provides new translations of Celan's poetry, situating these texts within their personal and historical contexts. He also discusses the process of translation itself. The chapter titled "A Fugue after Auschwitz, 1944-45" serves as a useful introduction to the study of this poem.
- [This article](#) from Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Israel, suggests reasons why it's useful to include poetry in teaching about the Holocaust.
- [This article](#) from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum offers essential background on the different kinds of camps and incarceration sites established by the Nazis.

Resources

2: Text excerpt, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's "Faustus," eighteenth century, and biblical excerpt, Song of Songs 1:5.

"Deathfugue" repeatedly makes reference to two women: Margareta and Shulamith. The Margareta in Celan's poem shares a name with the heroine of *Faustus* written by the German writer Goethe. Celan's mother had exposed him to the works of the great German poets, such as Rilke and Schiller, inspiring in him a deep love for German language and literature. In using the name



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Margareta in his poem, Celan invokes the Romantic German feminine ideal, as well as German Romanticism and the Enlightenment more generally.

While Celan's mother insisted on educating him in German language and literature, his father stressed his son's Jewish education. As a boy, Celan attended a Jewish school—*Safah Ivriah*, meaning "the Hebrew language"—for at least three years and studied Hebrew with a tutor after that. Scripture pervades Celan's poetry, which strongly suggests that his use of "Shulamith" is in reference to the bride in the Song of Songs, who is described as "black" (or "dark") and "comely."

Suggested Activity: Ask students to consider why Celan uses the name Margareta. How can we see her as not just a character in the poem (the one to whom the "man in this house" writes) but as symbolic of German culture as a whole? Additionally, how does this allusion to German high culture add irony to the poem?

Ask students to discuss why Celan uses the name Shulamith. How does he use her as a contrast to the "golden haired Margareta"? How does the inclusion of this Jewish feminine ideal shape our understanding of the poem's meaning? The sounds of the name "Shulamith" also call to mind the words *shalom* and *Yerushalayim* (Hebrew for "peace" and "Jerusalem," respectively). How might these indirect allusions play into our interpretation of the poem?

Sources: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, Faust I: Scenes VII to XV," translated by A.S. Kline, Poetry in Translation, 2003, <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/German/FaustIscenesVIItoXV.php>.

The Jewish Publication Society, "Song of Songs, Chapter 1," Sefaria, 2013, https://www.sefaria.org/Song_of_Songs.1?lang=bi.

3: Video, "Music Appreciation – The Fugue Explained," featuring Johann Sebastian Bach's "Little" Fugue in G minor.

The poem's title, "Deathfugue" ("*Todesfuge*" in German), offers insight into its larger meaning. Using music and images, this video effectively illustrates what a musical fugue is and how it's structured. Though Celan's poem does not follow the structure of a musical fugue precisely, it is useful for students to understand what a fugue is, so that they can understand both why the poet alludes to this classical musical form and how the poem diverges from it.

Suggested Activity: Present students with this definition of a musical fugue from Merriam-Webster: "a musical composition in which one or two themes are repeated or imitated by successively entering voices and contrapuntally developed in a continuous interweaving of the voice parts." After reviewing and clarifying the definition in class, play the video. Then, ask students to identify the following: What words and phrases does "Deathfugue" repeat? How does the poem interweave these repetitive elements or "voices"?

Continue with a discussion of the following questions: In what ways do the phrases and rhythms of "Deathfugue" parallel the introduction and repetition of musical themes in a fugue? What kind of counterpoint does the author establish between several contrasting voices and themes—the golden haired Margareta and the ashen haired Shulamith; the power of the Nazi master and the powerlessness of the Jewish speaker; the grave in the sky and the graves being dug? In what ways does the poem's form differ from or fail to imitate a fugue?

If you have more time, ask students to write their own poems imitating Celan's style. Ask them to use repetition and to interweave multiple voices to create a rhythmic, musical piece.

Source: chriswrightmusic, "Music Appreciation – The Fugue Explained," Oct. 21 2011, video, 3:49, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=95gLT7NzHAM>.

4: Photograph, the Janowska concentration camp orchestra, before 1943.

Official camp orchestras were not uncommon in the concentration camp universe. The first publication of "*Todesfuge*" in 1947 was in Romanian, not in German, in the Bucharest magazine *Contemporanul*, and, as John Felstiner points out in his book, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*, it was accompanied by an editors' note: "The poem whose translation we are publishing is built upon the evocation of real fact" (p. 28). This assertion was intended to assure readers that the poet had not invented the forced singing and playing of condemned Jews in Nazi camps.

Such orchestras were composed of both amateur and professional musicians and were often formed under order of the camp administrators. One of the most important uses of these orchestras was to coordinate the marching of forced laborers. In addition, music accompanied public punishments and executions to demonstrate the unlimited power of the SS command. In the Janowska concentration camp, the SS commissioned a work called “*Todestango*” (“Tango of Death”) that the orchestra was required to play during “selections”—when prisoners were chosen to go to the gas chambers—and during public acts of violence and executions. Interestingly, the 1947 Romanian translation of Celan’s poem was entitled “*Tangoul Mortii*,” meaning “Death Tango.”

Suggested Activity: Show students the photograph without providing any context and have them do a close reading of it. What do they see? Then, provide them with the context of where and when the photo was taken, and what it depicts. How does this change their perception of the image? What do they notice now that they know it is a concentration camp orchestra?

Next, direct students’ attention back to “Deathfuge.” In the poem, Celan describes the commands of the “man in the house,” beginning with the last line of the first stanza: “he orders us to strike up and play for the dance.” In the next two stanzas, he continues to order the prisoners to “sing up” and “play” in varied ways. Indeed, throughout the poem, the words “orders” and “shouts” precede the words “sing” and “play.” Ask students to contemplate the irony of these juxtapositions, as music, dancing, and play are often signs of celebration, joy, or at least personal expression, rather than the outcome of orders. Ask students to notice how the musical commands shift throughout the poem, becoming darker and more menacing (from “strike up and play” to “play death more sweetly” and “scrape your strings darker”). How does this shift echo the darkening tone of the poem as a whole? Finally, direct students to pay attention to the insistent rhythm and repetition in the poem. What kind of a world does this stern, heavy rhythm evoke?

Source: “Members of the orchestra at the Janowska concentration camp perform while standing in a circle around the conductor, Yacub Mund, in the Appelplatz [roll call area],” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collections, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Apr. 4 2019, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa10008>.

5: Poem, Paul Celan’s “Todesfuge” in English translation, by Christopher Middleton, 1962, and John Felstiner, 1995.

Paul Celan’s “*Todesfuge*” has been translated into many languages, and there are more than fifteen published English translations. The act of translation requires that translators get at the truth of the text by doing their best to capture a poem’s rhythms, allusions, and complex meanings as they move from one language to the next. With “*Todesfuge*,” this work is made even more challenging by the fact that the poem, according to Celan translator Pierre Joris, is “dismantling and rewelding” German, creating, for example, new words like “*Todesfuge*.”

Here we have two translations of “*Todesfuge*.” The first, a translation by Christopher Middleton, was first published in *Modern German Poetry: 1910-1960* (ed. Hamburger and Middleton, 1962). The second translation, by John Felstiner, first appeared in his book about the poet, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (Yale University Press, 1995), and has here been reprinted from his later compilation *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* (W. W. Norton, 2000). Unlike Middleton’s translation, Felstiner’s incorporates some of the original German and offers a less literal translation of some of Celan’s words.

Suggested Activity: Read through each translation out loud as a class, and then have students write down all of the similarities and differences between the two. Then, discuss the following questions: How do these differences affect the rhythm and meaning of the poem? Focusing on one key difference, ask students how they feel about Felstiner’s incorporation of some of the original German into his translation. What does Felstiner accomplish by doing this? Which translation do you prefer and why?

Sources: Paul Celan, “Fugue of Death,” trans. Christopher Middleton, in *Modern German Poetry, 1910-1960*, ed. Michael Hamburger (New York: Grove Press, 1962).

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6: Painting, Marc Chagall’s “The Falling Angel,” 1923–1947.

"Deathfugue" conjures up dramatic images with lines such as "we shovel a grave in the air there you won't lie too cramped." Some of this imagery evokes the work created by Marc Chagall (1887-1985), a Russian-Jewish visual artist who lived in France for much of his life. His paintings were often based on emotional, poetic associations and conveyed a kind of dream-like world, reminiscent in some ways of the surreal sensibility of Celan's poem.

Suggested Activity: Examine Chagall's *The Falling Angel* as a class. Ask students to write about the specific images they see and explore possible connotations. Teachers may want to direct their students to focus on some of the following images: the fiery red angel who seems to be falling upward, the blue violin standing in contrast to the flaming red, the crucifixion, the man holding the Torah protectively, turning away from the chaos in the village, and the clock. It would be useful, too, to discuss the somber tone created by the dark color palette, and to examine the few bright spots of color—the candle, the moon, the yellow animal, and the Torah itself.

As a group, discuss these images and invite students to consider how, though seemingly disparate, they work together to form a cohesive whole, one which can be seen as the artist's response to the suffering of Europe and its Jews during World War II. Then turn back to "Deathfugue." In what ways is Chagall's approach to representing European Jewish suffering similar to Celan's approach? In what ways is it different?

Source: Marc Chagall, "The Falling Angel, 1923-47 by Marc Chagall," www.MarcChagall.net, 2011, <https://www.marcchagall.net/the-falling-angel.jsp>.