

# Poetry 2012: The Written World



## Resources for Teachers

Country: Bosnia–Herzegovina

Poet: Semezdin Mehmedinović

Poem: Essay

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# About this Resource

Activities in this resource are aimed at pupils in upper primary school (P5–P7).

*Curriculum for Excellence Correspondences (Level 2)*

*Literacy and English experiences and outcomes*

Reading the poem

*To show my understanding, I can respond to literal, inferential and evaluative questions and other close reading tasks...*

**ENG 2-17a**

*I can discuss structure, characterisation and/or setting; recognise the relevance of the writer's theme and how this relates to my own and others' experiences; discuss the writer's style and other features appropriate to genre. **ENG 2-19a***

Discussion

*When listening and talking with others for different purposes, I can share information, experiences and opinions... [and] clarify points by asking questions or by asking others to say more. **LIT 2-09a***

Creative Activity

*Having explored the elements which writers use in different genres, I can use what I learn to create stories, poems and plays with an interesting and appropriate structure, interesting characters and/or settings which come to life. **ENG 2-31a***

# Essay

This evening walk deserves a poem.  
A plane gleaming over the suburbs  
Sinks into the bluish dusk.  
Wires spark over the trollies.  
A woman who lost her earring  
Comes back up the street looking for it.  
Feel sorrow for her suddenly.  
For the boy looking at himself  
In the bell of his bicycle.  
For the old man on the bridge, waving to me:  
“How is it possible that a river can dry up  
in this best of all possible worlds?”  
Finally  
For the pattern of freckles  
On my mother's face  
While she assures me as we walk  
That God is wherever I think of him.

Semezdin Mehmedinović

from *Sarajevo Blues*, translated from the Bosnian and with an introduction by Ammiel Alcalay (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1998)

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Notes:

l.4: “trollies” are trolleybuses, which draw their power from overhead electric cables.

l.12: “this best of all possible worlds” is based on a phrase by the German philosopher Leibniz (1646–1716), made famous when it was satirised by the French writer Voltaire (1694–1778) in the novel *Candide*.

## The Poet & His Work

Semezdin Mehmedinović was born in Kiseljak, Bosnia, in 1960, and was educated at the University of Sarajevo. He worked as an editor of *Lica* and *Valter* magazines, which were among the first to be openly critical of the declining communist regime. In 1991 Mehmedinović founded the cultural magazine *Fantom Slobode* (*Phantom of Liberty*), and shortly after the outbreak of war in 1992, the weekly political magazine *BH Dani*, intended to represent democratic pluralist values in a time of genocide.

*Sarajevo Blues*, a collection of poems and short prose pieces, was originally published at the end of that year, and was the first book in the Biblioteka "egzil-abc" series, published in Ljubljana, Slovenia, which provided a forum for Bosnian writers and translators under siege or living in exile.

In 1996, Mehmedinović went to the United States as a political refugee, where he continues to live today. His books in English translation include *Sarajevo Blues* (1998), *Nine Alexandrias* (2003), *Transatlantic Mail* (2009) with Miljenko Jergovic, and *Soviet Computer* (2011).

## *Reading the poem*

- What things does the poet encounter during his walk?
- Which three people does the poet encounter during his walk? How do they differ?
- Which person is the poet walking with? (We only learn this at the end of the poem.)
- Why do you think the poet asks us to feel “sorrow” for “the woman” in l.5?
- What other things does the poet ask us to feel “sorrow” for?
- What sort of image of himself do you think the boy sees “in the bell of his bicycle”?
- What is the poet thinking of while his mother is talking about God? Why do you think this is?
- The poem uses a mixture of short and long sentences. How many sentences are there in the poem? How long is each sentence, measured by the number of lines it's given? Which is the longest sentence?

# Discussion

## *Walks*

Where do you go for an “evening walk” in the summer? Perhaps a street, a park, a town square, a riverside path, a beach. Talk about what you like (and perhaps don’t like) about this place, and who you might meet there.

## *Losses*

Think of something you have lost. Where did you lose it? How did it happen? How did you feel when you realised? How did other people feel when you told them? Have you been able to replace it?

# Research Activity

Find out about Sarajevo:

- where it is
- which Empire it was part of in the 18th and early 19th centuries
- which Empire it was part of in the late 19th and early 20th centuries
- what famous incident happened there on 28 June 1914
- which country it was part of from 1919 until 1992
- what sporting event took place there in 1984
- what happened during the Bosnian War of 1992 to 1995
- what has been happening there since the war

# Creative Activity

Write a poem about a walk through a town or a city.

You could do this from memory, or you could go on an arranged walk with your class.

Before you write the poem, make some notes about the setting and characters you'll use. Think about some of the things described in 'Essay', and describe

- where you are walking
- something you see up in the sky
- something that passes you – perhaps a bus, a train, a bicycle
- the people you meet – try to think of at least three, and make them as different as possible in terms of age and gender
- something one of these people says to you
- who you are walking with
- something unusual that you notice about this person
- something this person says to you, which may be reassuring, or it may be disturbing

Now think about the *structure* of your poem. You could borrow some elements of 'Essay':

- start your poem with the line, 'This evening walk deserves a poem.'
- describe *things* first, and then the *people* you meet
- don't tell the reader who you are walking with until the end of the poem
- start the last part of the poem with the word 'Finally'.

Do you want to make it one verse, like 'Essay', or would you like to break it into different verses, perhaps one for each person you meet?

Now write your poem using the above *structure*, and using your notes to provide the *content*.

## Further Reading & Weblinks

The poem 'Essay', representing Bosnia and Herzegovina, is part of The Written World – a collaboration between the Scottish Poetry Library and BBC radio to broadcast a poem from every single nation competing in London 2012.

[www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/poems/essay](http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/poems/essay)

'Essay' on the SPL website

[www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/about/projects-partners/written-world](http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/about/projects-partners/written-world)

Other poems selected for The Written World

[www.smith.edu/poetrycenter/poets/smehmedinovic.htm](http://www.smith.edu/poetrycenter/poets/smehmedinovic.htm)

3 poems by Semezdin Mehmedinović

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/country\\_profiles/1066886.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/country_profiles/1066886.stm)

Bosnia-Herzegovina country profile

[www.guardian.co.uk/world/bosnia-and-herzegovina](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/bosnia-and-herzegovina)

Recent news articles about Bosnia-Herzegovina

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*This is one of twelve resources, written by Ken Cockburn for the Scottish Poetry Library's project The Written World, May 2012.*

[www.kencockburn.co.uk](http://www.kencockburn.co.uk)

[www.spl.org.uk](http://www.spl.org.uk)