

Mini Lesson: Grit Through Poetry

Reidar Dittman



Subject Area: ELA

Grade Level: 10 – 11

Duration: 30 minutes

Standard Addressed: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.4

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Learning Aim: As a result of this activity, students will expand their understanding of elegies through listening to and reflecting on Holocaust political prisoner testimony.

Testimony:

Reidar Dittman
Political Prisoner



(1:41)

CONSIDER

- Ask students to define “elegy” (provided definition: “a poem of serious reflection, typically a lament for the dead”).
- Project or pass out Walt Whitman’s poem, “[O Captain! My Captain!](#)” Read aloud and discuss why it constitutes an elegy.
- Tell students that they will watch a selection of testimony from Reidar Dittman. Be sure to provide background on Reidar’s life and explain that you are using testimony in this lesson as a way to consider those deaths that too often go unacknowledged or unmarked.
- Ask students to think about how people memorialize those who have died. What are some examples of memorials for iconic historical figures? How do we memorialize individuals who made significant accomplishments but were not recognized?
- Tell students that they will be asked to practice their ability to listen to a text, reflect on it, and generate ideas about it.

COLLECT

- Tell students that they will watch a clip of testimony and that will be the “text” that they are reading. Explain that in this clip, Reidar discusses his experience returning to Norway after being interned as a political prisoner during World War II.
- Share Reidar Dittman’s biography by distributing the handout, projecting it on the board, or reading it aloud.
 - ◊ Viewing 1: Play Reidar’s clip all the way through as a class.
 - ◊ Viewing 2: Play the clip a second time and direct students to take notes about what they see. How does Reidar act when he relays this part of his history? How does he appear?
- As a whole group, discuss Reidar’s testimony:
 - ◊ Even after the war ends, Reidar relives his friend’s death by sharing his story with his friend’s parents. Why do you think he felt the need to give his friend’s parents specifics of his friend’s death?
 - ◊ Reidar names none of the twenty-six members of the Norwegian resistance individually. What does he communicate, through either spoken words or body language, about the loss of his compatriots?
 - ◊ Have you experienced the personal loss of a major public figure that affected you? Have you experienced the loss of someone who was more personally connected to you, either a family member or friend? How did you respond to these types of grief?

CONSTRUCT

- Tell the students that they will be working individually.
- Explain to the students that they should consider the moments in their lives when they have felt devastated by loss or by sadness and that part of the reasoning behind memorialization is to qualify or quantify that grief.
- To honor those who died who are not world leaders (such as Abraham Lincoln in Whitman’s “O Captain! My Captain!”), each student will compose a free verse elegy for either one of the nameless twenty-six individuals Reidar mentions in his testimony or someone he or she has personally lost.

COMMUNICATE

- Students will read aloud their elegies.
- As a whole group, discuss how writing and memorializing an individual honors that person’s sacrifice and legacy.
- Ask students if their understanding of elegy as a form of poetry has changed as a result of this writing practice.

Student Handout

Reidar Dittman Biography

Reidar Dittmann was born on January 15, 1922 in Tønsberg, Norway to Solveig and Gustav Dittmann, who were a housewife and government official, respectively. The Dittmanns had 4 sons and Reidar was the third child. Reidar and other schoolchildren learned English, German, French, and Latin in Norwegian's classically-based educational system. The Dittmanns were Lutherans and regular Church attendees. Reidar was active in the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), which was primarily a spiritual organization. By 1933, Reidar was aware that the political climate in Germany was changing. He remembers being eager to find out the results of the German elections that year. There were a small number of Norwegian Nazi Party members in Tønsberg at that time.

On the night of April 9, 1940, Reidar woke up to his house shaking due to of bomb detonations and artillery fire. The next day, a few hundred soldiers marched into Tønsberg. On October 27, 1940, Reidar was arrested for leading 1500 protestors in song at a time when public singing was forbidden. He hid in the forest for two days and was arrested upon his return home.

Reidar became the first political prisoner in Tønsberg's 1,100 year history. He was released on January 4, 1941 and shortly after was inducted into a resistance cell with 5 other women and men. Reidar also graduated from high school that year and began work as a shipyard clerk, and continued his covert cell activities of writing and distributing underground newspapers based on clandestine radio broadcasts. In June 1941, he was arrested in connection with a ship's sabotage, which he did not orchestrate. He was sentenced to life imprisonment and sent to Sauda, a hard labor camp in western Norway that constructed German fortifications. He was allowed regular contact with this family while incarcerated at Sauda. Reidar was released on February 1942 and shortly after enrolled at Oslo University's music conservatory, becoming a dormant cell member.

Reidar was arrested while delivering his Latin translation oral exam, along with 4,500 people. He, along with his best friend Jorg Torgerson, were sent to Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany. They remained together throughout their entire incarceration at the camp. Reidar witnessed 11,000 Hungarian Jews march to their deaths in the gas chambers. It was his first time personally witnessing the mass annihilation of a group of people. In March 1945, Reidar and his fellow Norwegian prisoners were transported to Neuengamme concentration camp until April 30, 1945. Reidar and all Scandinavian prisoners were then sent to a camp in Sweden and he was ultimately repatriated to Norway on May 28, 1945. With the help of the Norway-America Foundation, Reidar received a scholarship from St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, arriving on October 23, 1945. There he met his wife Chrisma and has been on the faculty since 1946.

This interview took place on October 3, 1999 in Northfield, Minnesota.

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“O Captain! My Captain!” by Walt Whitman

O Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is done,
The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won,
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring;
 But O heart! heart! heart!
 O the bleeding drops of red,
 Where on the deck my Captain lies,
 Fallen cold and dead.

O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;
Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle trills,
For you bouquets and ribbon'd wreaths—for you the shores a-crowding,
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;
 Here Captain! dear father!
 This arm beneath your head!
 It is some dream that on the deck,
 You've fallen cold and dead.

My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will,
The ship is anchor'd safe and sound, its voyage closed and done,
From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won;
 Exult O shores, and ring O bells!
 But I with mournful tread,
 Walk the deck my Captain lies,
 Fallen cold and dead.

Poem available from The Poetry Foundation at: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/45474>.