



College
of
Humanities

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA,
Arizona's First University.

Taha Muhammad Ali and Peter Cole:

A Closer Look at Poems from a Palestinian and an Israeli-American Perspective

Grade Level: 9-12

Time Frame: 1-2 class periods (50 minute periods)

Material Requirements (attached):

1. Biographical Information (*pages 2-4*)
2. Poems
 - 2.1. "Revenge" by Taha Muhammad Ali (*pages 5-6*)
 - 2.2. "Suite for Santob de Carrión" by Peter Cole (*pages 7-14*)
3. Discussion Prompts (*page 15*)
4. Writing Prompts (*page 16*)

Learning Objectives:

This lesson provides a platform for discussion of two poems, "Revenge" by Taha Muhammad Ali and "Suite for Santob de Carrión" by Peter Cole. It offers insight into contemporary Levant poetry and the shared perspectives of two poets who represent socio-political identities that are often presumed to be adversarial. The lesson includes biographical information and writing prompts, which the teacher may use to enhance the lesson.

Web Extra:

You can watch a video of Taha Muhammad Ali reciting the poem "Revenge" in Arabic and Peter Cole reading its English translation at the Famous Dodge Poetry Festival in New Jersey. This website also has a pdf of "Revenge" in its original Arabic text. The link to the reading and the original Arabic poem is: http://www.grdodge.org/2006festival_revenge.htm

Field Trip Opportunity – A Reading and Discussion with the Poets:

Taha Muhammad Ali and Peter Cole will present a matinee reading and discussion for high school students on Friday, March 28, 2008 at 10:30 a.m. If you would like to bring a group of students to the Poetry Center for this special opportunity, contact our Education Outreach office at (520)626-9625 or email poetry@u.arizona.edu. Reserve seats now; space is limited.

TAHA MUHAMMAD ALI BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Taha Muhammad Ali was born in 1931 in a village in Galilee [then Saffuriya in Mandatory Palestine, located on the site of what had once been the ancient town of Sepphoris, now Tsippori in northern Israel.] At seventeen he fled to Lebanon with his family after the village came under heavy bombardment during the Arab-Israeli war of 1948. A year later he slipped back across the border with his family and settled in Nazareth, where he has lived ever since. Audiences around the world have been powerfully moved by Muhammad Ali's poems of political complexity, bittersweet humor, and—above all—humanity. Muhammad Ali has turned over the management of his souvenir shop, near the Church of the Annunciation, to his sons and spends his days writing, traveling, and conversing with friends over Turkish coffee.

In the fifties and sixties, he sold souvenirs during the day and studied poetry (everything from classical Arabic to contemporary American free-verse) at night. Still owner of a small souvenir/antiques shop he operates with his sons, he writes vividly of his childhood in Saffuriya and of the political upheavals he has survived. The Saffuriya of his youth has served as the nexus of his poetry and fiction, which are grounded in everyday experience and driven by a storyteller's vivid imagination. He is self-taught and began his poetry career late. Taha Muhammad Ali writes in a forceful and direct style, with disarming humor and an unflinching, at times painfully honest approach; his poetry's apparent simplicity and homespun truths conceal the subtle grafting of classical Arabic onto colloquial forms of expression. In Israel, in the West Bank and Gaza, and in Europe and in America, audiences have been powerfully moved by Taha Muhammad Ali's poems of political complexity and humanity. He has published several collections of poetry and is also a short story writer. His books of poetry in Arabic include *Fourth Qasida*, *Fooling the Killers*, and *Fire in the Convent Garden*. *Never Mind*, his first collection in English, was published in 2000 by Ibis Editions, Jerusalem.

--biography written by Israeli poet Rami Saari

In his introduction to Taha Muhammad Ali's book *So What*, poet Gabriel Levin recalls stories that Taha Muhammad Ali told the audience at two of his readings in Jerusalem. In the first, the Muhammad Ali recounted that his first audience was a friend, with whom he would share a coffee every day after work. His friend pretended to be too tired, said he did not care to listen, and so Muhammad Ali would rent his ears for a moment by giving him, each day, a wooden souvenir camel from his shop. After Muhammad Ali received international praise for his work, his friend said to him, "Taha, you're a wonderful poet! I tried to burn you to a crisp! I told myself: 'If there's anything left after I've burned him, then he's a real poet. But if he's lost in the clamor of the street, and transformed entirely into ash and dust blown by the winds, then there's no need to feel sorry for him, no need to be sad about what he's written.'" And his friend gave him a box that was filled with all of the souvenir camels he had received over the years. At another reading, Muhammad Ali recounted this story from his past:

"One day, back in 1941, Ali's mother discovered a mouse in their home. She gave her son two piasters and told him to run off to the local shopkeeper in Saffuriya and buy a mousetrap. Ali returned with the mousetrap, which the shopkeeper had

mentioned was rare and made only in Hebron, and at exactly five o'clock he heard the trap door click shut. 'I then saw,' the poet exclaimed, his wrinkles creasing in his troll-like face, 'the most beautiful mouse, with green eyes and a belly white as cotton.' Fifty years later, the poet's wife spotted a mouse in her Nazareth kitchen and implored her husband, 'Taha, quick, fetch me a mousetrap.' Ali drove into Nazareth and was told that the sort of mousetrap he was looking for no longer existed, though someone had heard that they were still being made in Hebron, now part of the West Bank. A week later, it just so happened, the poet was scheduled to read his poems at the Hebron Sports Club. Ali recited his poems and was then invited to a sumptuous lunch. At the conclusion of the meal he asked his new friends, "By the way, does anyone in Hebron sell old-fashioned mousetraps?" A young man said that he knew where they could be purchased, and promptly drove the poet to one of the local stores where Ali saw the exact same mousetrap he had bought for two piasters as a child. 'Did you make these traps?' he asked the owner of the shop. 'No,' the man answered, 'they were made by my father, Ziab Al-Shantawi.' Ali paused, and then said to the Jerusalem crowd: 'This was the very same name as the shopkeeper in Saffuriya.' And so he returned home with a new-old mousetrap, and the next day, he added, at exactly five o'clock the mousetrap clicked shut, and once more he saw 'the same, beautiful mouse, with green eyes and a belly white as cotton ...'"

PETER COLE BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

adapted from the MacArthur Foundation website, www.macfound.org

Peter Cole, recipient of a 2007 MacArthur "Genius" Fellowship, is a translator, publisher, and poet who brings the often overlooked works of medieval Spain and the modern Middle East to English-speaking audiences. His highly regarded translations of the poetry of Solomon Ibn Gabirol and Shmuel HaNagid, two of the great Hebrew poets of the Andalusian "Golden Age," offer readers a lyrical illustration of the extraordinary Arab-Jewish cultural partnership that flourished in tenth- through twelfth-century Spain. A poet himself, Cole's translations infuse medieval verse with contemporary meaning while remaining faithful to the original text. His renderings of HaNagid's poems in particular, long regarded as "untranslatable," retain the subtleties, complexities, and formal elegance of the original verse. Underlying Cole's translations is an implicit message of cultural and historical cross-fertilization that is also evident in his work as a poet and a publisher. His literary press, *Ibis Editions* publishes little-known works translated from Arabic, Hebrew, German, French, and Ladino, enlightening English-speaking audiences to the thriving literary tradition of the Levant*. By fostering literary dialogue in and about the Middle East, *Ibis* provides an occasion for intellectual and cultural collaboration. In a region mired in conflict, Cole's dedication to the literature of the Levant offers a unique and inspiring vision of the cultural, religious, and linguistic interactions that were and are possible among the peoples of the Middle East.

Peter Cole began studying Hebrew in Jerusalem in 1981, and has since divided his time between Israel and the United States. He is the author of two volumes of poetry, *Rift* (1989) and *Hymns & Qualms* (1998), and has also published many volumes of translation from Hebrew and Arabic, including *Selected Poems of Shmuel HaNagid* (1996), *Selected Poems of Solomon Ibn Gabirol* (2001), Taha Muhammad Ali's *So What: New and Selected Poems, 1971-2005* (2006), and *The Dream of the Poem: Hebrew Poetry from Muslim and Christian Spain, 950-1492* (2007). He is the co-editor of *Ibis Editions*, which he co-founded in 1998, and has been a visiting writer and professor at Wesleyan University, Middlebury College, and Yale University.

*The Levant (/lə'vænt/) is a geographical term historically referring to a large area in the Middle East south of the Taurus Mountains, bounded by the Mediterranean Sea on the west, and by the northern Arabian Desert and Upper Mesopotamia to the east. The Levant does not include the Caucasus Mountains, or any part of the Arabian Peninsula. It is an imprecise term, because it refers to layers of cultural habitation, rather than to the land itself. It is a much needed term, however, given that throughout much of history the region referred to has had many different national or political names. (*from Wikipedia*)

REVENGE

by Taha Muhammad Ali

translated by Peter Cole, Yahya Hijazi, and Gabriel Levin

At times ... I wish
I could meet in a duel
the man who killed my father
and razed our home,
expelling me
into
a narrow country.
And if he killed me,
I'd rest at last,
and if I were ready—
I would take my revenge!

*

But if it came to light,
when my rival appeared,
that he had a mother
waiting for him,
or a father who'd put
his right hand over
the heart's place in his chest
whenever his son was late
even by just a quarter-hour
for a meeting they'd set—
then I would not kill him,
even if I could.

*

Likewise ... I
would not murder him
if it were soon made clear
that he had a brother or sisters
who loved him and constantly longed to see him.
Or if he had a wife to greet him
and children who
couldn't bear his absence
and whom his gifts would thrill.
Or if he had
friends or companions,
neighbors he knew
or allies from prison
or a hospital room,
or classmates from his school ...

asking about him
and sending him regards.

*

But if he turned
out to be on his own—
cut off like a branch from a tree—
without a mother or father,
with neither a brother nor sister,
wifeless, without a child,
and without kin or neighbors or friends,
colleagues or companions,
then I'd add not a thing to his pain
within that aloneness—
not the torment of death,
and not the sorrow of passing away.
Instead I'd be content
to ignore him when I passed him by
on the street—as I
convinced myself
that paying him no attention
in itself was a kind of revenge.

Nazareth
April 15, 2006

SUITE FOR SANTO DE CARRIÓN
(14th c. Castile)

The fool doesn't get it
who complains of the pain
the world inflicts.
He doesn't get it. That's how it is.

*

If it's not what I thought I'd want,
let me want what I think it is.
If at first it hurts,
I'll like it.

*

I keep myself young and lithe,
but not because I'm afraid of age.
I'm afraid of people
who'd see me and think I was wise.

*

Lacking the skill
to make a real living,
I offer in speech
a share of my learning.

*

I've feared that my speaking out
would only annoy my friends,
and strangers— or my silence
would make me seem dull.

*

It's true that people
with all their language
walk on earth for the briefest spell
then lie inside it for almost ever.

And so in time I decided
in favor of silence, not chatter—
and shut my mouth.
But nothing got better.

*

I'd like to speak
of the world and its ways,
and my doubts
about it, truthful words.

*

A single wind brought down
the magnificent tree
but the grass in the meadow softly
bowed as it passed.

*

I can't find a middle way
to my liking, or make
the least decision. I flee
from a lifetime of vows each day.

*

A man in his house on fire
suffers tremendous pain
from the wind that he praised
when he winnowed his grain.

*

And so I can neither
praise or condemn
anything altogether, or call it
ugly or fine alone.

*

I rarely complain about life,
as many do, who think
it does them an essential disservice,
since the fool thrives with the sage.

The wiser person accepts this
(beast and man should both be saved)
in all seriousness: the diligent
man in the world is made poor

while the man who's fast asleep
grows rich. God does this,
for a reason: so less than one percent of us
can claim a connection exists

between any insight and gain.

*

When I think about it
I'd be happy
enough with what I see
causes such sadness

in others daily. For if
the good were really linked
to what we want, then why

are people who have just that
so sad? There isn't any true
good in the world,
or evil, apart from the King.
So this is my secret:

It's utter folly to think
of things in the world
as equal in any way.
People should steadily change

as the world changes:
today a shield, tomorrow a spear.

*

Here's more to fear:
What's the advantage
of good over best?
All good habits have

a certain mean
and if you approach it,
the goodness remains.
But best in a way is once.

*

And yet: The length of a finger
from the limit assigned
by oneself or another is just
as far from success

as a full day's journey
in its intrinsic deficiency.

*

And there's hardly anything to get
in the world,
be it ugly or fair,
without moving through its opposite.

*

If someone's gentle,
they'll lap him up
like water; if he's bitter,
they'll spit him out like dirt.

If only to protect
ourselves from scheming
people, we should often
and suddenly alter our manner.

*

If you wait for sufficient knowledge
to set your plans in motion
your odds of success are less than
several hundred to one.

*

The wheel of the mill
has value in motion,
but earth untilled
bears nothing

*

The sluggish body
breeds struggle
in a heart
with useless worries

that kill it.

*

Ergo: Excessive good
isn't good.
Better a little suffering
than too much cure.

*

And now, I admonish you—
If you want security,
be on guard against yourself,
more than your enemy.

Guard against envy,
and guard against anger.
Above all, I warn you, don't covet
the gifts of your neighbor.

There's certainly no center there,
only an endless,
bottomless sea, with neither
port nor shore.

*

Only a man with a decent jacket
develops a craving for leather,
as the owner of several of leather
begins to consult connoisseurs.

*

Once there was a man

who walked around without shoes.
And then he got some shoes,
and soon he wanted hose.

In time he got the hose,
and then he wanted a horse,
and then he built a stable
and went to look for straw.

Good straw proved hard to find,
and so he bought some help.
Good help proved hard to keep,
and cost a lot to boot.

The story, of course, goes on
and on and on,
the gist of it being
that our man in time was ruined

by that ancient dream of shoes.

*

The finest habit
is suffering well,
and not in anger,
which doubles it.

*

Things in the end are better
when you see your suffering
as expressions
of divine displeasure.

*

A man who thinks he can settle accounts
between Pride and a lifetime's honor
is like someone who spends a career perfecting
his compound of fire and water.

When the great man falls
the vile ascends;
it's the fire just extinguished
that sends up smoke.

*

He fawns all over the lordly
and lords his faint
faux connections
over the weak he rules.

*

Son of woman, you who think
of yourself as a shining star

and complain when you fail to get
what you want, and turn on the Lord,

and live out your life in anger,
have you forgotten—you were born
from a meager thing—a filthy, putrid,
squirming drop of sperm? Son of man?

*

Or: How much will that sack
of flesh and blood
and air be worth when the spirit
that moves it flees?

Its weight, say, in mosquitoes?

*

Only to read their letters
notes and poems,
not to see them smiling ...
They distilled their wisdom

in writing, not in prizes ...
For a kind of heavenly
sense made clear, for an hour,
deep inside us:

That's why we read the wise.

*

There's nothing more generous
than a liar's tongue
which puffs people up
with promises—

then leaves them
like leather bags full of wind.

*

We were discussing pleasure
and happiness and the world's
mutability: Someone said the
sage is he who knows

that the higher one falls from,
the worse the wound;
and he who leads his life
along the plain

fears neither loss nor pain.
Someone else said, So

he knows it. That doesn't
say what he'll do.

*

People are rarely speakers
and doers; and though it's
a pleasure to give these
proverbs voice

their echoes haunt me
and often hurt.
I'm weak as the next, or weaker,
when it comes to carrying

a virtue out ...and frequently fall
into the ditch I've written.

*

Why was the human head
designed with a single tongue
but two years? ...So we should speak
no more than half of what we hear.

Not being able to speak
often causes pain
in beasts; in pain
the pain derives from speech.

*

We often disparage the world
though there isn't any
evil in things as they are; the evil's
in what we do and say;

we invent it.

*

The wheel turns
and the rich man's poor—
and the poor man's face that's glazed with mud
gazes up at the sky.

*

As for pleasure,
a little
goes quite far;
give up on almost all

of what you covet;
maybe you think you can stop it
from spilling

into evil ...

All my life I've suffered,
caught between the truth
of two ideas: what's kept
in silence can't be held

against one— so one emerges
blameless, at least;
but inner speech not cast
in writing resembles nothing

more than an arrow falling
short of its target—
an awful image extended
to the core of one's being.

Violent or soft, the unrecorded
word is like an instant's
shadow, a bay's ripple, or sea's,
leaving its fading mark on us.

**Note: Santob de Carrión is a Spanish poet, born toward the end of the thirteenth century at Carrión de los Condes, a town in Castile. Santob wrote "Consejos y Documentos del Rabbi Don Santo al Rey D. Pedro" or "Proverbios Morales," of which two manuscripts are in existence, one in the Escorial and the other in the National Library, Madrid.*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Write your responses on a separate sheet of paper.

1. In the first stanza of "Suite for Santob de Carrión," Peter Cole writes "The fool doesn't get it / who complains of the pain / the world inflicts. / He doesn't get it. That's how it is." Why do you think he repeats the phrase *doesn't get it*? What does the author mean when he says, *that's how it is*?

In "Revenge," Taha Muhammad Ali shows us a little bit of *the pain the world inflicts*. How would you describe the pain that Muhammad Ali shows us? Does the pain belong to the speaker in the poem? Or to the man who killed the speaker's father? Do you think that the speaker in "Revenge" *complains of the pain the world inflicts*? Do you think he is a fool, as described by Peter Cole in his first stanza, or do you think he *gets it*? If the latter, what does he *get*?

2. At the end of "Revenge," the speaker says that he will do nothing to the person who killed his father if that man has no family or friends. Is this revenge? Is it the opposite of revenge? Could it be both at the same time?

In "Suite for Santob de Carrión," Cole writes "and there's hardly anything to get / in the world, / be it ugly or fair, / without moving through its opposite." He mentions several opposites in the poem, for example, "the *fool* thrives with the *sage*," or "today a *shield*, tomorrow a *spear*." Can you find any other opposites in the poem? What is the effect of discussing something next to its opposite?

3. Why do you think the speaker in "Revenge" would not hurt the man who killed his father if that man has family or friends? Why would he not hurt the man if he *does not* have family or friends? Does the speaker in "Revenge" exemplify the statement in Peter Cole's poem: "And now I admonish you— / If you want security, / be on guard against yourself, / more than your enemy"? Explain.
4. Choose your favorite section in Peter Cole's poem. Why do you like this section the best? Does this section relate, in any way, to Taha Muhammad Ali's poem "Revenge"?

WRITING PROMPTS

Peter Cole's poem is written in several sections, and each section could stand alone on its own (although they are even more powerful when you put them all together). Taha Muhammad Ali's poem is written more like a story with characters, and each section builds on that story until you get to the conclusion.

Write a poem in either one of these styles. If you need a push to get started, use one of the prompts below:

*Take the story in Taha Muhammad Ali's poem and rewrite it in sections that look and sound like Peter Cole's poem. If it helps, use this to begin the first line: "No revenge may be revenge, and...."

* Take one of the section's below from Peter Cole and rewrite it in a poem that tells a story, like Taha Muhammad Ali's poem:

option 1:

There's nothing more generous
than a liar's tongue
which puffs people up
with promises—

then leaves them
like leather bags full of wind.

option 2:

If you wait for sufficient knowledge
to set your plans in motion
your odds of success are less than
several hundred to one.