

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: THE POWER OF POETRY



HOLOCAUST  
MEMORIAL  
DAY TRUST

This resource is aimed at secondary school students, primarily Key Stages 4 and 5.

Suitable for use in History, English, RE or Citizenship lessons.

It is designed to be used on, or around, Holocaust Memorial Day, to introduce your students to the subject of genocide through poetry. This classroom activity can be a starting point for a greater scheme of work on the Holocaust and subsequent genocides or can stand alone.

The poems included here represent a variety of experiences from the Holocaust and more recent genocides.



## YOU WILL NEED:

- A worksheet for each poem you are using (see differentiation notes below. One per student or group).
- Teacher notes for each poem you are using.

Holocaust Memorial Day, 27 January, is the day for everyone to remember the millions of people killed in the Holocaust, Nazi Persecution and in subsequent genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and Darfur. 27 January marks the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the largest Nazi death camp.

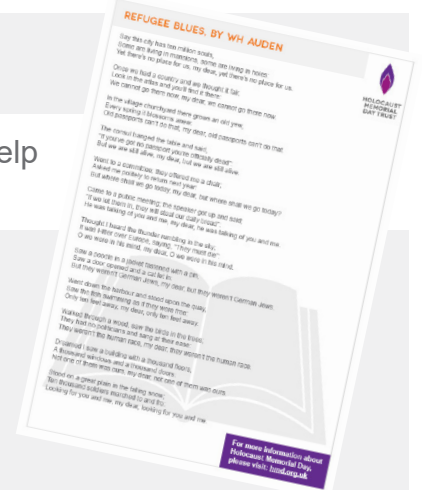
## Activity One (10 minutes)

Read *Refugee Blues* by WH Auden. (Please see teacher notes to help you analyse this poem).

### Class discussion:

Individually or in small groups ask your students to make notes on their initial thoughts and reactions to the poem. Discuss as a class what is impactful in this poem. Questions for your discussion:

- When is this poem set?
- Whose voice are we hearing?
- What is the impact of repetition?
- Which words have power within the poem?
- What are the messages of the poem?

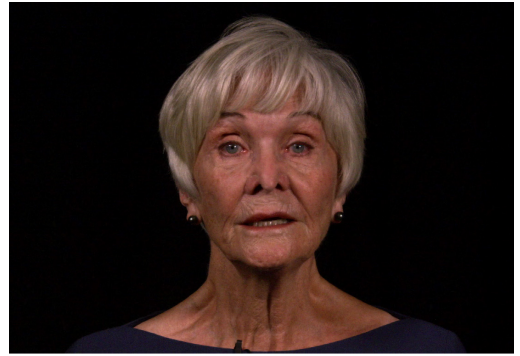


## Activity Two (5 minutes)

Visit [hmd.org.uk/thepowerofpoetry](http://hmd.org.uk/thepowerofpoetry) to watch a film of the actor Sheila Hancock reading *Refugee Blues* by WH Auden.

After playing the recording, give your students a few moments to absorb what they have heard.

**Please note that they may find the recording moving, shocking and disturbing.**



### Class discussion:

Questions for your discussion:

- How does hearing the poem performed change its impact?
- Do different parts stand out more?
- Do other meanings come through?

## Activity Three – Read and analyse the poems (15 minutes)

Distribute the other poems provided (at the end of this document) to students, individually or in small groups. Each poem has accompanying teacher notes (at the end of this document) to help you with analysing and exploring the poems with your class.

### Differentiation

We have provided five suggested poems for students to read and analyse.

**For lower ability groups** choose one poem to explore together.

**For medium ability groups** choose two or three poems and analyse them in small groups.

**For higher ability groups** use all five poems. Analyse them independently or in small groups.

Ask students to answer the same questions for these poems as we explored for *Refugee Blues* above:

- When is this poem set?
- Whose voice are we hearing?
- What is the impact of repetition?
- Which words have power within the poem?
- What are the messages of the poem?

### Extension activity:

For higher ability students or if you have more time, you can add the following questions to their discussion:

- Who wrote the poem?
- What do we know, if anything, about the person who wrote the poem?
- Can you tell from the poems which of the authors has experienced genocide?
- What difference, if any, does it make if the author did not suffer in the genocide themselves?

## Activity Four – Perform the poems (20 minutes)

Each group should now consider how they would perform the poem to an audience, firstly in front of the class, and secondly if they had other resources – for example: What sound effects might they use? What images could they include?

Each group should perform their poem to the class.

**Compare the different performances:** What was different or similar between the groups, and what impact do the performances have on the meaning of the poem?

## Plenary (10 minutes)

**What do the poems tell us about the genocides?**

- Ask your students what they know about the Holocaust or genocide *purely* from the poems.
- What questions do you still have about the Holocaust or genocides? (Background information sheets are available for teachers at [hmd.org.uk/thepowerofpoetry](http://hmd.org.uk/thepowerofpoetry) to help you answer questions).
- How can we share what we have learnt with the rest of the school to mark HMD on 27 January?

### Extension activity:

#### Write a poem

Ask your students to write their own poem to commemorate the Holocaust or a subsequent genocide, either individually or in groups. Students could explore:

- Prejudice and discrimination – both historically and today
- The power of words for good and for evil
- The life story of a survivor of the Holocaust or genocide and write a poem to or about the person they have learnt about. You can find a range of life stories at: [hmd.org.uk/lifestories](http://hmd.org.uk/lifestories)

## Performance poetry

Students could read or perform poems they have written or selected on the theme of genocide as an event to mark Holocaust Memorial Day. They could draw inspiration from Sheila Hancock about performance and reading styles to draw out the meaning of the poems they choose. Poems could be performed or read as part of a school assembly for HMD.

## TAKE THE LEARNING FURTHER:

For more poems go to: [hmd.org.uk/poetry](https://hmd.org.uk/poetry)

For more information on the Holocaust and subsequent genocides, please see our website: [hmd.org.uk](https://hmd.org.uk)

Holocaust Memorial Day Trust has a range of life stories, lesson plans, activity ideas and assemblies for you to use. You can find all of these and more at [hmd.org.uk/educators](https://hmd.org.uk/educators)

Our HMDT Interactive platform includes introductory online lessons that you can follow up with including *Introduction to genocide* and *The Holocaust and Nazi Persecution* which will help to give students background knowledge: [hmd.org.uk/interactive](https://hmd.org.uk/interactive)




Find out more...

Holocaust Memorial Day Trust: [hmd.org.uk](https://hmd.org.uk)

Order an activity pack or resources: [hmd.org.uk/activitypack](https://hmd.org.uk/activitypack)

Resources for educators: [hmd.org.uk/educators](https://hmd.org.uk/educators)

[hmd.org.uk](https://hmd.org.uk)  
[enquiries@hmd.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@hmd.org.uk)  
020 7785 7029

 [@hmd\\_uk](https://twitter.com/hmd_uk)  
 [hmd.uk](https://www.facebook.com/hmd.uk)  
 [@holocaustmemorialdaytrust](https://www.instagram.com/holocaustmemorialdaytrust)

*Learning lessons from the past to create a safer, better future*

## REFUGEE BLUES, BY WH AUDEN



HOLOCAUST  
MEMORIAL  
DAY TRUST

Say this city has ten million souls,  
Some are living in mansions, some are living in holes:  
Yet there's no place for us, my dear, yet there's no place for us.

Once we had a country and we thought it fair,  
Look in the atlas and you'll find it there:  
We cannot go there now, my dear, we cannot go there now.

In the village churchyard there grows an old yew,  
Every spring it blossoms anew:  
Old passports can't do that, my dear, old passports can't do that.

The consul banged the table and said,  
"If you've got no passport you're officially dead":  
But we are still alive, my dear, but we are still alive.

Went to a committee; they offered me a chair;  
Asked me politely to return next year:  
But where shall we go today, my dear, but where shall we go today?

Came to a public meeting; the speaker got up and said;  
"If we let them in, they will steal our daily bread":  
He was talking of you and me, my dear, he was talking of you and me.

Thought I heard the thunder rumbling in the sky;  
It was Hitler over Europe, saying, "They must die":  
O we were in his mind, my dear, O we were in his mind.

Saw a poodle in a jacket fastened with a pin,  
Saw a door opened and a cat let in:  
But they weren't German Jews, my dear, but they weren't German Jews.

Went down the harbour and stood upon the quay,  
Saw the fish swimming as if they were free:  
Only ten feet away, my dear, only ten feet away.

Walked through a wood, saw the birds in the trees;  
They had no politicians and sang at their ease:  
They weren't the human race, my dear, they weren't the human race.

Dreamed I saw a building with a thousand floors,  
A thousand windows and a thousand doors:  
Not one of them was ours, my dear, not one of them was ours.

Stood on a great plain in the falling snow;  
Ten thousand soldiers marched to and fro:  
Looking for you and me, my dear, looking for you and me.

For more information about Holocaust Memorial  
Day, please visit: [hmd.org.uk](http://hmd.org.uk)

# THE BUTTERFLY, BY PAVEL FRIEDMANN



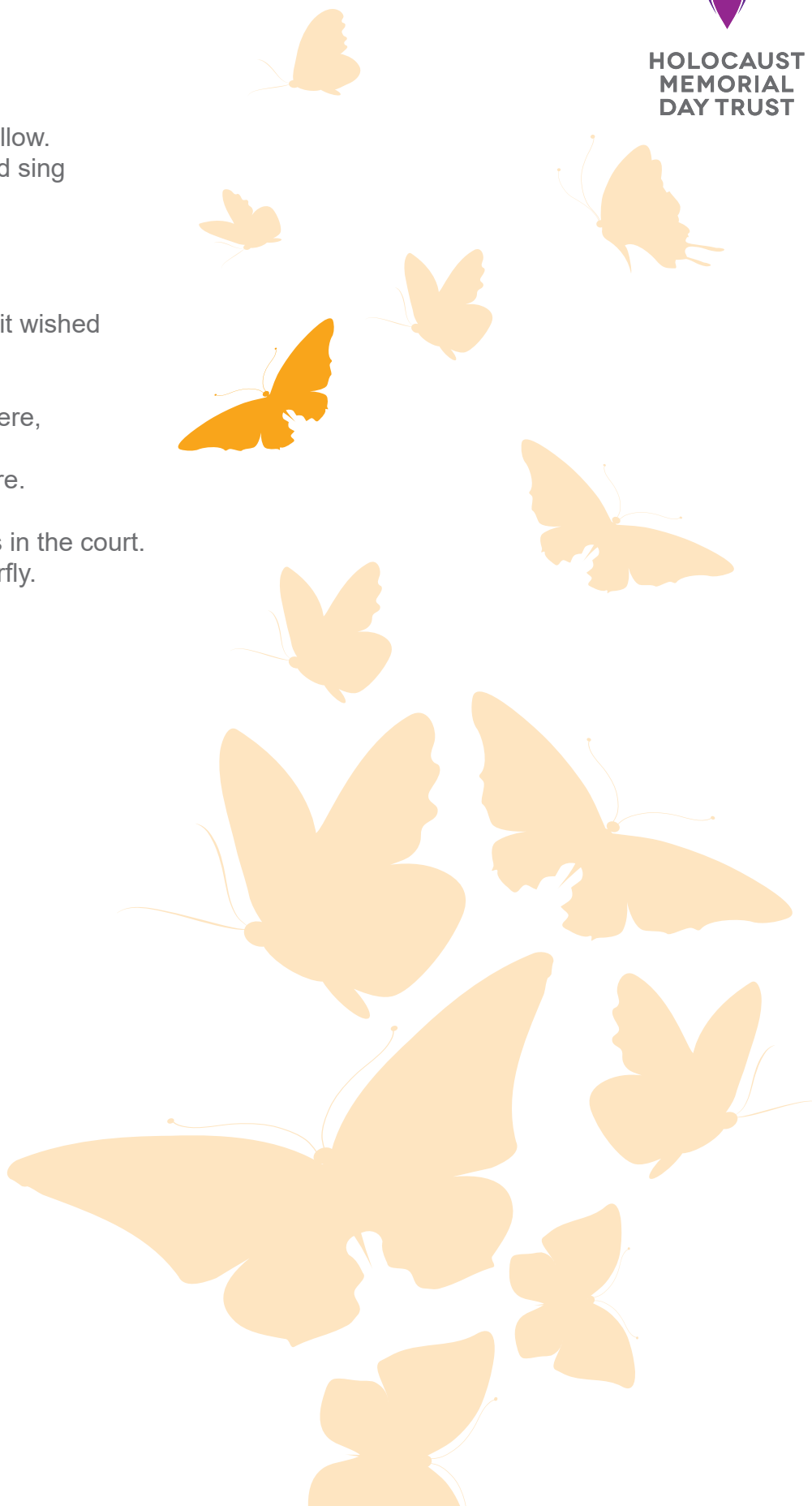
HOLOCAUST  
MEMORIAL  
DAY TRUST

The last, the very last,  
So richly, brightly, dazzlingly yellow.  
Perhaps if the sun's tears would sing  
against a white stone...

Such, such a yellow  
Is carried lightly 'way up high.  
It went away I'm sure because it wished  
to kiss the world goodbye.

For seven weeks I've lived in here,  
Pinned up inside this ghetto  
But I have found my people here.  
The dandelions call to me  
And the white chestnut candles in the court.  
Only I never saw another butterfly.

That butterfly was the last one.  
Butterflies don't live in here,  
In the ghetto.



A recording of the actor  
Samuel Barnett reading  
this poem is available at  
[hmd.org.uk/thebutterfly](http://hmd.org.uk/thebutterfly)

For more information about Holocaust Memorial  
Day, please visit: [hmd.org.uk](http://hmd.org.uk)

## IT'S GOING TO RAIN, BY VALDEMAR KALININ



HOLOCAUST  
MEMORIAL  
DAY TRUST

It's about to rain, getting darker,  
The leaves have long fallen from the trees,  
Leaving desolation where just an old man  
Roams,  
Picking handfuls of earth where Roma  
Perished.

During this war Nazis shot them dead,  
Roma seized and put in wagons, oh  
Filled with children and the Roma old,  
No mercy shown to a single soul.

Buried here auntie, grandpa, grannie,  
But God spared a small one,  
Who visits to imagine,  
The perished wait for him.

No monument stands,  
Except in the minds of the old,  
Woods and land bore witness,  
This older man declares:  
*Roma are buried here, don't disturb this land!*



For more information about Holocaust Memorial  
Day, please visit: [hmd.org.uk](http://hmd.org.uk)

# CHILDREN OF RWANDA, BY REVEREND FRANCOIS MURENZI



HOLOCAUST  
MEMORIAL  
DAY TRUST

Known and unknown are the children of Rwanda  
Victims of war and genocide,  
Though not with us now we know you're at peace,  
We who survived will remember you.  
Ten years onward our hearts still troubled  
By lack of justice for survivors,  
Help our leaders, bringing peace and hope,  
Also preventing the same tragedies.

Will you join me now, remember lives lost,  
Will you join me now, pleading to all,  
To learn the lessons, that at any cost,  
Genocide must end, forever more.



For more information about Holocaust Memorial  
Day, please visit: [hmd.org.uk](http://hmd.org.uk)



## I KEPT ON WALKING, BY MARK HAYWARD



HOLOCAUST  
MEMORIAL  
DAY TRUST

I kept on walking as she threw a stone  
For it was not thrown at me  
I kept on walking past the man who groaned  
As he was hit behind the knee

I kept on walking past the run-down homes  
I had somewhere else to be  
I kept on walking as I clutched my phone  
And pretended not to see

I kept on walking as the words were thrown  
Every insult, every plea  
The wounds they inflicted were not my own  
And nothing to do with me

I kept on walking when the rage had grown  
'Til the bodies filled the streets  
I kept on walking over skulls and bones  
Ash and blood beneath my feet

I'll keep on walking from the things I've known  
But refused to really see  
I'll keep on walking but I'm not alone  
You're keeping step with me



For more information about Holocaust Memorial  
Day, please visit: [hmd.org.uk](http://hmd.org.uk)

## TEACHER NOTES - REFUGEE BLUES, BY WH AUDEN

WH Auden finished this poem in March 1939, while he was living in New York. It is written from the point of view of a Jewish refugee who has fled Europe and arrived in America.

Between 1941 and 1945, the Nazis attempted to annihilate all of Europe's Jews. This systematic and planned attempt to murder European Jewry is known as the Holocaust. The Nazis used propaganda, persecution, and legislation to deny human and civil rights to Jews. They used centuries of antisemitism as their foundation. By the end of the Holocaust, six million Jewish men, women and children had perished in ghettos, mass-shootings, in concentration camps and extermination camps.

The poem is written in a clear rhythmic structure, almost like a song. It was published as the first in a series called *Ten Songs*.

The person speaking in the poem is addressing a loved one, as shown by the repeated use of 'my dear'. Students could decide what they think the relationship is – a married couple, a parent and child, siblings?

Each stanza expresses a challenge associated with being a refugee:

- Finding a place – both practically with accommodation, and emotionally in a new culture
- The loss of a home country
- The loss of a passport, nationality, and the rights that go with it
- Bureaucracy and systems that are confusing, slow and unhelpful
- A lack of welcome and acceptance from others
- The persecution which causes someone to flee
- Struggling to feel free despite having escaped
- Struggling to come to terms with fear and trauma

You could discuss with your students that refugees still face many similar challenges and struggles today.

## TEACHER NOTES - THE BUTTERFLY, BY PAVEL FRIEDMANN

This poem was written by Pavel Friedmann, at Theresienstadt concentration camp on 4 June 1942. On 29 September, 1944 he was deported to Auschwitz where he died.

Friedmann makes reference to ghettos in the poem. Ghettos were specially selected areas across Nazi-controlled countries where Jews were forced to live. Here, they were segregated, controlled, and dehumanised.

Nazi Germany invaded Poland on 1 September 1939 and the UK and France declared war. In spring 1940 the Nazis established ghettos in the larger towns and cities across Poland to control and segregate Jews. The largest ghetto was in Warsaw, where 400,000 Jews were crowded into 1.3 square miles of the city.

Some ghettos had walls built around them; others were marked out by barbed wire. Men, women and children were forced to leave their homes taking only the possessions they could carry and move into overcrowded houses and rooms. Leaving the ghetto was strictly prohibited. Conditions in the ghettos were appalling, where families were crowded together without adequate supplies of food or water. Many people died from starvation, disease and casual executions carried out by the Nazis.

The butterfly in the poem is a symbol of freedom, beauty and hope. There are other natural references which serve the same purpose of juxtaposition with the setting of a ghetto – the sun, dandelions, white chestnut candles.

The line 'It went away I'm sure because it wished to kiss the world goodbye' is very poignant – the poet is personifying the butterfly, and perhaps projecting his own wishes onto it.

## TEACHER NOTES - IT'S GOING TO RAIN, BY VALDEMAR KALININ

This poem is a response to the Nazis' persecution of the Roma people.

The Holocaust was the attempted annihilation of all of the Jews in Europe, by the Nazis and their collaborators. However, Jews were not the only group targeted by the Nazis. Anyone they believed threatened their ideal of a 'pure Aryan race' of Germans were targeted for persecution and discrimination across Nazi-occupied Europe.

Therefore, on Holocaust Memorial Day we also remember the Nazis other victims, who included Roma and Sinti people, disabled people, political opponents, gay men, Jehovah's Witnesses, trade unionists and many other groups.

Roma people are a nomadic ethnic group. They originated in India, but have populations in many different parts of the world. There is a recorded history of Roma people living in Europe for over 1,000 years. Roma are also known as 'travellers' or 'gypsies', although these terms can be derogatory as they have been used as a slur against the Roma. Sinti have the same heritage as Roma people, but choose a different lifestyle and are not nomadic in the same way.

Roma culture has a long tradition of storytelling, music and poetic uses of language.

This poem tells the story of the Nazis treatment of the Roma. The Nazis targeted them for total destruction – in the poem 'No mercy shown to a single soul'. The Roma word for this genocide is *Porrajmos*, which translates as 'the Devouring'.

The poem features an 'old man' – a survivor, revisiting sites where Roma people were killed, although the graves are not marked. The natural imagery in the poem reflects the old man's physical and emotional state.

The poem makes reference to the fact that the survivor wants to ensure the dead are remembered – only the 'Woods and lands' witnessed the killings, so he has to tell people what happened. This is also our responsibility on Holocaust Memorial Day – to remember, and to share the experiences of survivors of genocide, as well as those who were murdered.

The poem was written by Valdemar Kalinin, himself a member of the Roma community. He was born in Belarus and is a qualified teacher. His collection of poems was published in three languages in 2004. He now lives in London and works with Eastern European Romani and Irish Traveller children and families.

## TEACHER NOTES - CHILDREN OF RWANDA, BY REVEREND FRANCOIS MURENZI

Rwanda is a small landlocked country in east-central Africa. The two main social groupings in the country are Hutu and the Tutsi. Historically there had been tensions, inequalities and conflicts between these two groups, leading to a civil war from 1990-1993. In 1993 peace was established.

However, this peace treaty was fragile. In April 1994, the Hutu President's plane was shot down near the capital city of Kigali. It was initially unclear who was responsible for the attack, but extremist Hutu leaders immediately blamed the Tutsi for assassinating the President. Ordinary Hutus were told by radio broadcast and word of mouth that it was their duty to 'exterminate' the Tutsi population.

For 100 days, a genocide took place in which 1 million Tutsis and moderate Hutus were slaughtered, mostly by ordinary people with machetes.

In July 1994 the Tutsi rebel army regained control in Rwanda, and brought the genocide to a halt.

This poem is written by Reverend Francois Murenzi 10 years after the genocide. He grew up in Rwanda, but moved to the UK in 1993. He returned to Rwanda in the immediate aftermath of the genocide to try and find his Tutsi family members. He was reunited with his brother, who had been held prisoner by Hutus, and his sister who had survived in hiding. Sadly, their parents had been murdered in the genocide.

His poem focuses on the importance of remembrance, and the difficulties of healing after such an event. The poem calls out for humanity to learn lessons and for genocide to 'end, forever more'.

## TEACHER NOTES - I KEPT ON WALKING, BY MARK HAYWARD

This poem was submitted to Holocaust Memorial Day Trust as part of a poetry competition in 2012. It explores the theme of 'the bystander' and raises questions around our responsibilities to use the power of our words to resist, protest and take action.

We see a different kind of suffering in each stanza of the poem; physical violence, poverty, insults, killings. The poem ends with a reflection on the guilt experienced after not taking action, and our shared responsibility as a society when others suffer and we stand by.

The poem shows how unchecked hate and discrimination in society can escalate into violence, killings and genocide. You can download our poster of 'The 10 stages of genocide' at [hmd.org.uk/activitypack](http://hmd.org.uk/activitypack) which looks at the processes societies go through when genocide happens, to explore these ideas further.