

Heritage Arabic eBook

Produced by
Alexander Elinson and Stephanie Love



The Graduate Center, CUNY
365 Fifth Avenue, Room 4415
New York, New York, 10016

cilc.gc.cuny.edu

(212) 817-2084 | cilc@gc.cuny.edu

 [@CILC_CUNY](https://twitter.com/CILC_CUNY)

 facebook.com/CILCCUNY

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Title: Poetry and Music

Domain: This activity aims to develop students’ abilities to use language meaningfully in various communicative situations. It exercises the kinds of knowledge that heritage Arabic learners need in order to function in the contexts where they typically find themselves situated. Various abilities are necessary in these contexts: referring to oneself, to one’s immediate environment, to general interests or to education/work related matters are all language skills that are invoked in everyday communication.

This activity promotes critical dialect awareness—i.e. explicit knowledge about the contexts in which specific registers (formal or informal) and varieties (MSA, “dialect,” more local variants, inter-dialectical communication) are used—a skill that is necessary if heritage Arabic learners are to function at a high level of literacy.

Modes of communication: Interpretive, Presentational

Proficiency/Performance range: Intermediate to Advanced

Objectives:

- (1) Students will be able to compare the role that poetry and song play in their own lives with the role they play in the lives of their parents’ generation.
- (2) Students will be able to analyze how meaning is produced around a particular topic in an Arabic poem, and compare and contrast these strategies to those used by US poets, singers, rappers, etc. when dealing with similar topics.
- (3) Students will be able to discuss cultural histories and icons of the Arab world.
- (4) Students will be able to use background knowledge of vocabulary and word roots to understand a medieval poem.
- (5) Students will be able to identify basic components of classical Arabic poetry such as rhyme, rhythm, wordplay, etc.

Pre-Class Preparation for Instructors:

Choose one medieval poem and one contemporary Arabic singer for this activity (see below for suggestions). For this sample activity, we have selected Ibn Arabi (d. 1240) because of his importance in the Islamic tradition, but also because of the relative accessibility of his poetry and its potential to inspire rich discussion. Juxtaposing the poem with a song will help engage the students in discussion and reflection.

Suggested poem and song:

“I Believe in the Religion of Love” by Muhyi al-Din Ibn Arabi (d. 1240)

Amina Alaoui (Moroccan b. 1964) – “[Ode d'Ibn El Arabi](#)” (lyrics by Muhyi al-Din Ibn Arabi)

Other suggestions:

- (a) “[Jadak al-Ghayth](#)” (lyrics by Ibn al-Khatib d. 1374), performed by Fairouz (Lebanese b. 1935)
- (b) “[al-Atlal](#),” (lyrics by Ibrahim Nagi d. 1953) performed by Umm Kulthum (Egyptian d. 1975)

Step One: IN CLASS

1. Ask students the following (or similar) questions in Arabic, writing down on the board any vocabulary that students are unfamiliar with:
 - a) Do you like and/or read poetry? Do your parents like and/or read poetry? Do you know of any Arabic poets?
 - b) Do you listen to music? What types of music do you like? Who are some Arabic singers you know/listen to?
 - c) Have you ever heard of Ibn Arabi? What about Sufism or mysticism?
2. Depending on the students’ knowledge of Ibn Arabi, or of Sufism or mysticism, explain that you will have them research these topics at home and prepare to discuss their findings in the next class.
3. Write the following key terms on the board in Arabic, and add your own as you see fit: Sufi, poetry, ode, al-Andalus, religion, etc. Review the terms with the class and provide clarification where necessary.
4. Hand out and/or project the following lyrics:

Ibn Arabi’s Ode

لقد كنت قبل اليوم أنكر صاحبي
إذا لم يكن ديني إلى دينه داني

لقد صار قلبي قابلا كل صورة
فمرعى لغزلان ودير لرهبان

وبيت لأوثان وكعبة طائف
وألواح توراة ومصحف قرآن

أدين بدين الحب أني توجهت ركائبه
فالحب ديني وإيماني

5. As a group, listen to “[Ode d’Ibn El Arabi](#)” sung by Moroccan singer Amina Alaoui. Ask students to write the first 3 things that come to mind when listening to the song.
6. Project the lyrics of the poem on the board. Have students work in small groups to explore the general meaning of the poem and to discuss vocabulary they are unfamiliar with. Once the groups have finished reviewing the poem, review new vocabulary as a class, targeting key words and inviting students to provide translations of vocabulary words in Arabic or English.
7. Ask the class in Arabic or English about what they understood of the meaning of the poem. Some suggested questions include the following

- a) What are these lyrics about?
- b) What meanings were clear to you? What parts of the poem are still unclear? Do you think this has to do with language, with poetic structure, and/or something else?
- c) Are there any songs that you listen to that deal with similar themes? Explain.

Step Two: AT HOME

1. Prepare students to research Ibn Arabi or another figure from the Arab-Islamic cultural tradition (political figure, poet, philosopher, scholar, etc.). Possible questions for students to explore: Why did you choose this individual? What did s/he contribute to the Arab-Islamic cultural tradition? What meaning, if any, does this individual have in your and/or your family's life? What subjects and themes did this individual focus on? Why was this important at the time that s/he was writing/creating?
2. Tell students that after they finish this first research step, they will reflect on a contemporary poet or singer of their interest. Guiding questions for the comparison/contrast might include:
 - a) Where is each individual from? How do you think this influenced/influences his/her work?
 - b) What types of work did/does s/he create?
 - c) What are some of the major themes and ideas that each individual contributes to the Arab-Islamic cultural tradition?
 - d) Why was/is each individual important in his/her time?
3. Instruct students that they will prepare a short presentation (4-5 minutes) about their research and their comparison/contrast reflection to share in class. Encourage students to include pictures, videos or other media for one or both of the individuals that they have researched, which can help the class comprehend the ideas presented. Also ask students to make a short list of key vocabulary accompanying any writings that are being shared so that the class can understand the language.

Step Three: IN CLASS

1. Have students get into small groups and present their work to each other. Ask students to take notes on each other's presentations for class discussion, particularly relating to new concepts and/or vocabulary. Make sure they also document any questions that come up in their groups.