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Icon of Loss: Recent Paintings by Samuel Bak Lessons for Middle & High School Students

Connie Schaffer

University of Nebraska at Omaha, cschaffer@unomaha.edu

Julie Bell

Kim Gangwish

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Icon of Loss: Recent Paintings by Samuel Bak

Lessons for Middle & High School Students

Developed by: Connie Schaffer, Julie Bell, and Kim Gangwish

The following instructional strategies reference page numbers, specific paintings, and content from the *Icon of Loss* [catalogue](#).

Lesson One: Images that Confront Us: Primary Source Analysis¹

(whole-class and small-group discussion; individual summary, analysis and writing)

Background Information

The paintings included in *Icon of Loss* represent Samuel Bak's depictions of a well-known photograph taken in the Warsaw ghetto in 1943. In their *Icon of Loss* essay, Danna Nolan Fewell and Gary A. Phillips suggest the image represents a collision of the "human and the inhuman" and that the young boy in the photograph "confronts us, interrupting the world in which we live and compelling us to acknowledge its horrors" (p. 5).

This lesson teaches students important skills related to visual literacy by incorporating primary source analysis of photographs. By analyzing photographs, students will address questions raised by the photographs and similar questions raised by Bak's paintings. Specifically, the lesson addresses the unique power images of children have in terms of eliciting questions about our world and humanity.

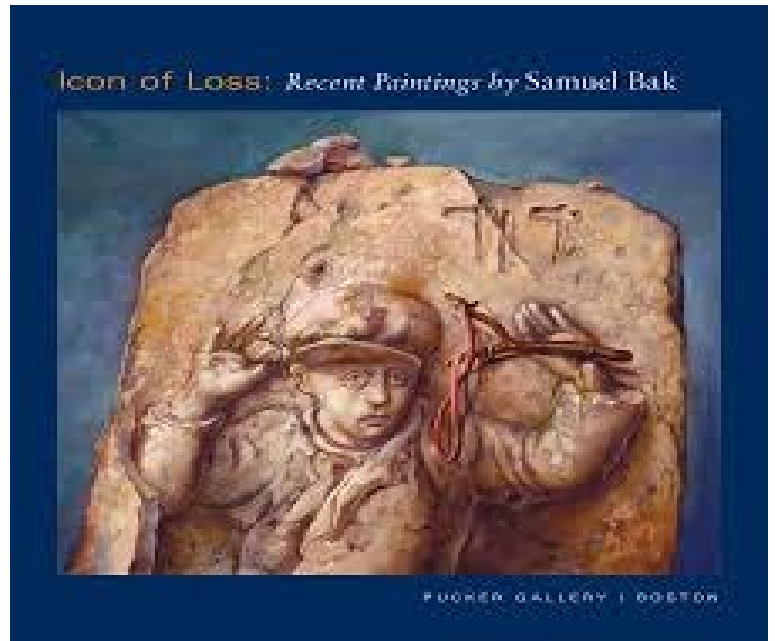
Overarching Questions for the Lesson

To what extent can images simultaneously capture elements of the universal human experience along with acts of inhumanity?

- In doing so, how does this lead us to confront the world in which we live?
- Why might images of children evoke this confrontation in a more powerful manner than images of adults?

Implementation Steps

1. Display the photograph of the boy from the Warsaw ghetto (p. 4).
2. Divide students into pairs or small groups and carefully guide their initial observation of the photograph by asking them to focus only on what they can see. Have students describe the following:
 - a. Type of photograph (black and white, unstaged, etc.)



- b. People (ages, gender, clothing, facial expressions, positions, etc.)
 - c. Objects (buildings, street, guns, handbags, etc.)
 - d. Activities (standing/walking, looking forward/back, etc.)
3. Facilitate a whole-class discussion in which students share the observations from their small groups. As a whole group, formulate questions about the image that if answered would help them interpret what is depicted in the photograph. For example:
- a. Who took the photograph and when was it taken?
 - b. Is there a caption?
 - c. Why was the photograph taken?
 - e. Who was the primary audience at the time the photograph was taken?
 - f. What did the photographer intend to document?
 - g. What other evidence might corroborate or clarify what is depicted in the photograph?
4. Complete a GIST summary for the first seven paragraphs of the essay (p. 4-6).² Read the first paragraph together as a class, and model how to write a one-sentence summary of the text. Read the second paragraph, and ask students to help create a one-sentence summary of the text. Introduce the vocabulary in the third paragraph. (See Appendix A for an explanation of relevant vocabulary.) Reconvene the student pairs or small groups, and instruct them to read the third paragraph and write a one-sentence summary. Have several pairs share their summaries. Direct student pairs to finish the reading and write one-sentence summaries for each paragraph and a 15 to 25-word summary for the entire passage.
5. Lead a whole-class discussion, and use the information from the essay to answer the questions formulated by the students in step 3. Then, introduce how the photograph represents “the human and the inhumane.”
6. Share the definitions of universal human experience and inhumanity.

Universal Human Experience – elements of life encountered by all people, shared across all cultures, geographic location, and backgrounds

Inhumanity – state of being cruel, barbarous behavior

7. Show the class *The Cup Was Full* (p. 18). Ask students to identify symbols that represent the universal human experience as well as those representing inhumanity. For example: The cup and spoon might represent food; shoes represent clothing and/or the freedom to come/go or one’s journey through life. These are common to all people. However, the boy is separated from these by a wall that represents the horrors of war, life in the ghetto, and/or the Holocaust. Additionally, the cup, once full of life or normalcy as implied in the title, is now tipped and empty.
8. Show the class *In Their Own Image* (p. 36). Again, ask students to identify symbols that represent the universal human experience as well as those representing inhumanity. For example: The symbols that represent the universal human experience include the puppets (play, although controlled), on a stage (home, although artificial), one of whom is wearing

typical clothing, and carrying what might be a school bag. These are juxtaposed with one puppet being bound and wearing a robe with wings, suggesting he has died, yet remains on stage for all to see.³ The flame might be light used to warm or illuminate the stage, but it creates smoke that represents the mass deaths in the crematoria.

- a. Discuss how Bak's paintings further represent "the human and the inhumane" found in the original photograph of the boy from the Warsaw ghetto
- b. Discuss how the children in the photograph and paintings lead us to confront the world in which we live

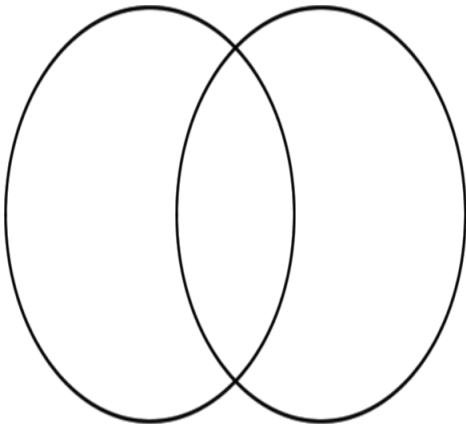
9. Have students write one or two sentences in which they describe the universal human experience and the inhumanity depicted in Bak's paintings.

10. Display the photograph, *The Terror of War* (1972), taken in Vietnam by Associated Press photographer, Nick Ut. (Note: Photograph contains a graphic image.)

11. Repeat steps 2 and 3. Provide information to answer the students' questions about [The Terror of War \(National Art Gallery\)](#).

12. Facilitate a discussion in which students compare and contrast *The Terror of War* to the photograph of the boy from the Warsaw ghetto. While discussing the photographs, have students create a Venn diagram.

***Terror of War* Warsaw ghetto**



a. Possible comparisons: Wartime context, black and white, central focus on one child, other children present, soldiers, guns, street, compelled movement, etc.

b. Possible contrasts: Absence of adults other than soldiers in *The Terror of War*, clothing, facial expressions of children, position of the hands/palms, etc.

13. Have students write one or two sentences in which they describe the universal human experience and inhumanity depicted in the photographs of the boy from the Warsaw ghetto and *The Terror of War*.

14. Building from what they have already written about Bak's paintings and the two photographs, have students write a paragraph in which they evaluate the extent to which the visual images of children lead us to confront the world in which we live.

Adaptations

- A. Incorporate or use other iconic photographs that include children such as Migrant Mother (Dorthea Lang, 1936), Emmett Till (David Jackson, 1955, Note: Photograph contains a graphic image), Elizabeth Eckford (Will Counts, 1959), Ruby Bridges (Paul

Slade, 1960) or Agim Shala (Carol Guzy, 1999), or migrant children in the United States (Sergio Flores, 2019).

B. In 1963, the *New York Times* published a photograph of a police dog jumping toward Walter Gadsden, an African-American teenager. The photograph, taken by Bill Hudson, later served as the model for Ronald McDowell's sculpture, *Foot Soldier Tribute*. Students can analyze Bak's artistic interpretations of the Strop photograph of the boy from the Warsaw ghetto in conjunction with an analysis of McDowell's artistic representation of Hudson's photograph of a teenager from Birmingham, Alabama.⁴

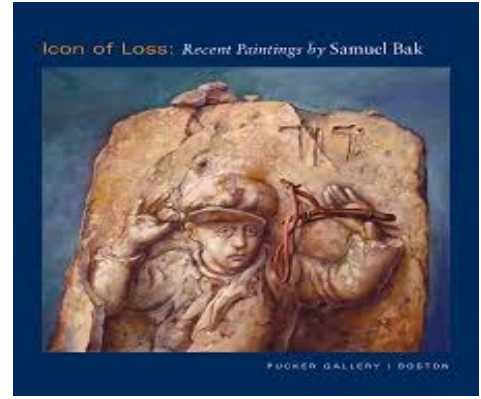
1. This strategy incorporates teacher resources developed by United States [Library of Congress](#) and [National Archives](#).
2. Cunningham, J. (1982). Generating interactions between schemata and text. In J. A. Niles & L. A. Harris (Eds.), *New inquiries in reading research and instruction* (pp. 42–47). National Reading Conference.
3. Samuel Bak's childhood friend, Samek Epstein, was murdered by the Nazis and left in the streets as a means of intimidation and an attempt to stop Jews from fleeing the ghetto.
4. Adaptation can include [The Foot Soldier of Birmingham](#), a podcast by Malcolm Gladwell.

Lesson Two: Paintings and Poetry – Building Visual and Text-based Literacy Skills

(paired and small-group discussion and categorization; individual summary and analysis)

Background Information

Within the *Icon of Loss* series, Samuel Bak uses numerous symbolic images including shoes, cups, birds, crutches, ladders, wheels, numbers, ropes, crosses, arches, and smoke, among others in his interpretations of the photograph of the boy from the Warsaw ghetto. Other artists, including poet and Holocaust survivor, Yala Korwin, have also used symbols in their artistic interpretation of the photograph. In “The Little Boy with His Hands Up”, Korwin included symbols such as white doves, brands, lost lambs, and rag-dolls.¹



This lesson teaches students important skills in interpreting symbols that appear in various mediums. By understanding symbols, students will be able to analyze the juxtaposition of good and evil in our world.

Overarching Question for the Lesson

How can hope, innocence, and life exist within times of despair, destruction, and death?

Implementation Steps

1. Introduce several of Bak’s often-used images (walls, crosses, smoky skies, trees, socks, angel wings, prayer shawls, books, ladders) using *High Winds* (p. 31) and *Figuring Out* (p. 34-35).
2. Direct students to work with a peer and identify possible meanings of these symbols and categorize them using a T-chart (see below).

<u>hope/innocence/life</u>	<u>despair/destruction/death</u>

3. As a class, share what was discussed in the pairs.
4. Distribute copies of “The Little Boy with His Hands Up” (Appendix B) to the class. Read the poem together. As a class, identify the symbols Korwin used and categorize these using the T-chart. (The poem includes symbols such as doves, broods, flock, brands, lambs, useless bundles, rag-dolls, etc.)

5. Return students to their pairs. Select several of Bak's paintings and assign different paintings to the various pairs. Instruct students to identify additional symbols, discuss their possible meanings, and categorize them using the T-chart. (Suggest using *Bluebird Land*, p. 12, *Unknown*, p. 19; *Targeted*, p. 22, *In Their Own Image*, p. 36, *Exposure*, p. 40, or *Holding a Promise*, p. 42. These include images of things such as birds, crutches, holes, targets, guns, fire, stacked stones, shoes, coats, stars, holes, boats, water, arches, rainbows, ropes, and fire.)
6. Combine two or three student pairs by partnering initial pairs who examined different paintings.
7. Within the newly-formed groups of four or six, direct students to share the findings from their pairs, add the additional symbols from the other pairs to their T-charts, and circle any symbols featured by both Bak and Korwin (Stars of David, birds/doves, blank stares, buttoned coat, bags/bundles, guns/gunman, socks, caps, etc.).
8. As a group, have students write one or two sentences to summarize the symbols on each side of the T-chart.
9. Individually, ask students to
 - a) Explain how the artists expressed hope, innocence, and life within artwork that also depicts despair, destruction, and death, and
 - b) Suggest other incidents in which they have observed hope, innocence, or life within times of despair, destruction, or death.

Adaptations

- A. Ask students why a symbol might vary between the two artists. For example: Bak uses yellow stars (*Identification*, p. 15, *Cumulative Data*, p. 33, *Exposure*, p. 40, *Walled In*, p. 41, *Signal of Identity*, p. 43), but Korwin references "a blue star on a white badge". A yellow Star of David was used in Lithuania, Bak's home. In the photograph of the boy from the Warsaw ghetto, a woman standing in the doorway, next to a soldier appears to be wearing a white armband with a star, indicative of a blue star on a white background required to be worn by Jews in the boy's homeland, Poland. Although the Jewish badges differed by region, all were tactics not simply to identify but to also dehumanize Jews.
- B. Using *Collective* (p. 32) and *Cumulative Data*, (p. 33) along with the last stanza of the poem, have students identify how both artists used a single child as a reference to all of the children killed during the Holocaust and discuss why this important.

1. Korwin, Y. H. (1987). *To tell the story: Poems of the Holocaust*, Holocaust Publications.

Appendix A

Vocabulary support for the first seven paragraphs of the *Icon of Loss* essay.

- arrested – to slow or stop
- ghetto – section of a city to which Nazis forcibly relocated Jews and confined them to live in extremely over-crowded, deplorable conditions with little access to food
- SS – unit of the Nazi regime that led the mass extermination of Jews and others considered to be undesirable
- Golden Mean – middle location, position between two extremes
- Heinrich Himmler – key leader of the Nazi regime who created and oversaw the mass extermination of Jews and other victims of the Holocaust
- Shoah – Hebrew term for the Holocaust
- syntax – rules or patterns
- Jewish Crucifixion – reference to the story of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ in the Christian religion
- iconography – representation
- Nuremberg trials – post-World War II military hearings in which Nazis and others were tried for war crimes
- martyrdom – condition of extreme suffering, death of a person who refuses to renounce a belief
- revisionists – those who re-interpret or challenge a historical account
- sanctity – sacred, holy, or hallowed
- commodification – the act of turning something into a commodity or product
- insignia – badge or distinction
- bricolages – makeshift construction, creation made from available materials

Appendix B

The Little Boy with His Hands Up

Yala H. Korwin

Your open palms raised in the air
 like two white doves
 frame your meager face,
 your face contorted with fear,
 grown old with knowledge beyond your years.
 Not yet ten. Eight? Seven?
 Not yet compelled to mark
 with a blue star on white badge
 your Jewishness.

No need to brand the very young.
 They will meekly follow their mothers.

You are standing apart
 Against the flock of women and their brood
 With blank, resigned stares.
 All the torments of this harassed crowd
 Are written on your face.
 In your dark eyes—a vision of horror.
 You have seen Death already
 On the ghetto streets, haven't you?
 Do you recognize it in the emblems
 Of the SS-man facing you with his camera?

Like a lost lamb you are standing
 Apart and forlorn beholding your own fate.

Where is your mother, little boy?
 Is she the woman glancing over her shoulder
 At the gunmen at the bunker's entrance?
 Is it she who lovingly, though in haste,
 Buttoned your coat, straightened your cap,
 Pulled up your socks?
 Is it her dreams of you, her dreams
 Of a future Einstein, a Spinoza,
 Another Heine or Halévy
 They will murder soon?
 Or are you orphaned already?
 But even if you still have a mother,
 She won't be allowed to comfort you
 In her arms.

Her tired arms loaded with useless bundles
 Must remain up in submission.

Alone you will march
 Among other lonely wretches
 Toward your martyrdom.

Your image will remain with us
 And grow and grow
 To immense proportions,
 To haunt the callous world,
 To accuse it, with ever stronger voice,
 In the name of the million youngsters
 Who lie, pitiful rag-dolls,
 Their eyes forever closed.