



LESSON PLAN: THE LIFE AND WORK OF KAHLIL GIBRAN

Introduction:

Kahlil Gibran, poet, philosopher, and author of *The Prophet* is one of the world's all-time best-selling authors. His works have been translated into more than fifty languages and *The Prophet* alone has sold millions of copies worldwide.

The goal of this lesson is to introduce students to the life and work of this “Lebanese-American” writer. The lesson will also try to encourage students to look at Gibran in his social-historical context and examine his place in the American canon of literature.

(Note: Before this lesson, students should be assigned to read the *The Prophet*. If you have time, assign all of *The Prophet*.)

Key Points about Gibran's life:

- From the village of Bsharri in Lebanon. Born in 1883. His family lived near poverty with a drunken, abusive father. Despite this, Gibran always remembered fondly his childhood spent in the Bekka valley of Lebanon.
- Immigrated to the US in 1895 with his mother, Kamileh; sisters, Mariana and Sultan; and brother, Peter. Lived in Boston. Mother and sisters worked as seamstresses and his brother ran a shop.
- 1897: Went back to Beirut to study. Returned to the US in 1901.
- Drawings first exhibited in 1904. At exhibit, Gibran met Mary Haskell who was to become a life-long friend, mentor and editor.
- Formed Ar-Rabitah Al- Qalamyah, an Arab-American cultural society in 1911.
- Moved to New York in 1912. On Mary's recommendation, began perfecting his English and writing in his adopted language. First published in English in 1915.
- Became very politically active during the war. Wanted to go to Lebanon and take part in the fighting against the Ottoman army but a shoulder injury kept him in America.
- Sat on the boards of two magazines, *The Seven Arts* and *Fatat Boston*. Contributed to other magazines such as *Al-Mouhajer* and *Al-Funna* throughout his career. Joined Golden Links Society. All these magazines and societies created a forum for Arabic writers and intellectuals in America.
- Continued exhibiting paintings and publishing novels.



- *The Prophet* was published in 1923.
- Died on April 10, 1931. Buried in Lebanon.

Significance of his work:

- Very spiritual books. Strongly attached to the Maronite Catholic tradition, though he was excommunicated by the Maronite church for *Spirits Rebellious*, a book that criticized the structure of the church and the state. Wanted to show the basic similarities and unity between Islam and Christianity. He had previously dreamed of building an edifice in Beirut with a church's dome and a mosque's minaret.
- Believed in an independent Syrian Arab state, separate from the Ottoman Empire. Encouraged Arab uprisings around the time of the First World War.
- Champion of cause of women's education in Syria, advocated modernism and liberalism. Engaged in a long correspondence with May Ziadeh, a young Palestinian writer living in Cairo, that started in 1912 and lasted until his death.
- One of young Arab émigrés who lived and wrote in the West in the 1910s and 1920s (like Ameen Rihani or Mikhail Naimy, with whom he formed Arrabitah) who encouraged Arab nationalism in their Ottoman-controlled homeland.
- As the most famous Arab émigré writer, he had a great influence over future generations of Arab-Americans such as Eugene Paul Nassar whose collection of poems, *Wind of the Land*, bears strong stylistic resemblances to Gibran's poetry (Majaj, 1996).
- Regular contributor of *Syrian World*, a publication bringing together Arab-Americans in which he promoted his political views. The magazine helped the new immigrant community adapt to the American mainstream. He is important in the context of Arab immigration to America as he represented one who has "made it" to immigrants in the 1920's. His was an Arab-American success story.
- Gibran was very popular in the US but was not very well-known in the Arab world until his death. He did not have a very strong political influence in the Ottoman province of Greater Syria.
- His books have been translated into more than 50 languages and sold over 8 million copies. His most famous work, *The Prophet*, is now in its 117th printing.
- Has influenced many public figures with his message of peace, compassion and his faith in the human race. Strong social message in his work (Kennedy's "Ask not..."



from Gibran's "Are you a politician asking what your country can do for you or a zealous one asking what you can do for your country?" in *The New Frontier*.)

Suggested Discussion Questions:

- In what ways has *The Prophet* been influenced by canonical works of Western literature? In what ways is it original? Look at the style and the content.
- Is Lebanese or Arab patriotism discernible? What is his view of America? What is the political dimension of his work?
- Can you identify with any of the characters? Does he want you to identify with them? Do you think somebody in Lebanon would feel closer or less close to them? Why?
- Is his style of writing impossibly artificial today? Is his writing too saccharine, too self-consciously florid? How would a contemporary writer in his style be received? Are his sentiments and ideals terribly outdated? Is he merely a product of his time or does he speak universal truths?
- If the latter, Why is Gibran not recognized in the canon of American literature? What is the difference between his poetry and "real" poetry?
- Why is he so popular among Americans and especially young Americans? What aspects of *The Prophet* account for its undiminished widespread popularity some 70 years after Gibran's death? What appeals to American audiences?
- What is the prophet's message? What is his vision of human relationships in society?
- Gibran said that the prophet was an "exiled island god." What do you think was his primary source of inspiration for that? The old Testament, Jesus in the Gospels, the Quran? Who might have been a model for this prophet? Jesus, Mohammad, Gibran himself?
- Can his writing be classified as immigrant literature or are there more universal themes at work here? Could it be just romantic idealism?
- Writing for a popular audience as opposed to writing for the academy. Is one more worthy than the other?

Suggested Class Exercise:

- Have students research articles in newspapers or magazines that present either the East and the West, or Islam and Christianity as inherently contradictory locked in permanent, unavoidable conflict. Assign them to write two letters to the editor refuting this claim. In one, they'll use Gibran's ideals and style to criticize the story. For the other, they'll write a clear, concise, well-argued critique that is intellectually

convincing. Ask them to compare their two pieces. How do they differ? Does one speak to the heart while the other to the head? Which do they find most persuasive?

- Ask your students what Gibran would be saying if he were alive today? What issues would he address? Are they different from the ones he addressed in the 20's? What would his Prophet be saying today? Have them address a contemporary issue, using poetic prose. They can use Gibran as inspiration but must not be merely imitative. They should give it their own style.
- Have students read current book reviews to get a grip on their style. Then make the class review *The Prophet*, keeping in mind that their reviews will determine whether people will want to read it for themselves. Make sure that they don't merely state whether or not they liked it but have them account for their reaction. Ask them to try to examine what the author was trying to do, what made him successful or what made him unsuccessful.

Selected Bibliography:

- Gibran's Works originally written in Arabic: *Spirits Rebellious* (1908); *The Broken Wings* (1912); *A Tear and a Smile* (1914); *The Procession* (1918)
- Gibran's Works originally written in English: *The Madman* (1918); *The Forerunner* (1920); *The Prophet* (1923); *Sand and Foam* (1926); *Jesus, Son of Man* (1928)
- Gibran's Posthumous publications: *Earth Gods* (1931); *The Wanderer* (1932); *The Garden of the Prophet* (1933); *Lazarus and His Beloved* (1933)

For Further Information:

- Lisa Suhair Majaj, "Two Worlds, Arab-American Writing" published in "Forkroads," Spring 1996. Looks at contemporary Arab-American writers with some references to Gibran's influence.
- Eugene Paul Nassar, *Wind of the Land*. Nassar writes in a style that Majaj connects very closely to Gibran's. She sees him as his inheritor.
- Amine Naimy, *Gibran Khalil Gibran*. A biography of Gibran by one of his contemporaries and friends.
- Kahlil and Jean Gibran, *Kahlil Gibran: His Life and Works* (1981, Interlink Publishing Group, Inc.). The author is a nephew of the poet. He and his wife record Gibran's life by looking at family history.



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- Maroun Abbad, *In Gibran's City* (1962). The author is a well-known Lebanese writer. She describes a trip to Bsharri, Gibran's birthplace.
- www.leb.net/gibran This website provides a biography, bibliography and analysis of Gibran's works as well as several links.
- *Death of the Prophet; A Video Documentary on the Life of Kahlil Gibran*. Written and directed by Eliza Haddad, this documentary includes reenactments of his life as well as interviews with well-known authors