

## 10: Andalusian Poetry

**Author:** Susan Douglass

### **Overview:**

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to engage with various examples of Andalusian poetry related to the history of Muslim Spain, giving them the opportunity to experience the literature of that time and place, and to engage with a rich primary source that illuminates a way of life.

**Levels:** middle grades 6-8, high school and general audiences

**Objectives:** students will:

- Identify some topics on which Andalusian poets expressed themselves.
- Identify some purposes for which poems were written, recited or sung.
- Compare and contrast different forms of poetry from al-Andalus.
- Analyze how descriptive language in Andalusian poetry reveals information about life in al-Andalus and how it illuminates people's responses to historical events.
- Cite some possible influences of Andalusian poetry on other cultures.

**Time:** One – two class periods

### **Materials:**

Student Handout 10a: Categorizing Poetry

Student Handout 10b: Andalusian Poetry

Notebook paper for reading responses

Overhead projector film & marker, or whiteboard

### **Procedure:**

1. Distribute Student Handouts 10a and 10b and allow time for students to skim all of the poems (10-20 minutes). The first engagement with the group of poems will be to categorize the poems in several ways (length, topic, style), writing the numbers of each type of poem they identify in the appropriate boxes.
2. Using the categories and corresponding poem numbers, students will work individually or in pairs, trios, or small groups to select poems to explore through the activities that follow. Each student or group will select one poem from each of the categories on the chart into which the students have sorted the poems on the graphic organizer. Knowing that students may select only the shorter poems, the selections have been sorted into Groups A, B, C, and D, so that the teacher can ask students to include one of the longer poems in responding to the questions. Discuss the results of group or individual work.

3. Finally, following the directions on the student worksheet, assign students as homework or classwork to try their own hand at a poem similar to those they have studied. Spend a class session on a Poetry Jam, in which students share their poems.

## Student Handout 10a: Categorizing and Exploring Poems

### Directions:

1. Skim through the group of poems in the Andalusian Poetry handout in 15 minutes or so. You are not reading them through, but taking a quick look at their characteristics on the chart below.
2. Write the numbers (#) of the poems that fit that category in the corresponding boxes in the chart below. Poems may fit in more than one. After you are finished, you will use these categories and your selections to explore some examples of Andalusian poetry in depth.
3. Choose one poem from each category, and answer the questions about that category in the blank forms. Be sure also to choose at least one longer poem. Be ready to share your answers and ideas with the class.
4. Poetry Jam: Try your own hand at writing a 5-line or 10-line poem (or longer if you feel like it!) on one of the topics or goals below. Try to model your poem on one of the poems you have studied. When you are finished, share with the class. If you want to recite it as a song, or with rhythmic accompaniment, that will be even better.

Characteristics	Poem Numbers	Poem Numbers	Poem Numbers	Poem Numbers	Poem Numbers
What is the topic of the poem?	daily life	historical events	religious ideas	about people	long poems
Goal: What is the poet trying to do?	describe a scene	tell a story	bring out strong feelings in the audience	give advice	short poems

### Daily life poems

1. What human activity or activities are described? Is it work or leisure?
2. What clues does the poem give to the way people lived in al-Andalus long ago?
3. What man-made objects are mentioned in the poem?
4. What inventions do they describe?

### Historical events

1. Are the events described in the poem real or fictional, or both?
2. Are the events in the poet's recent past or the distant past, or both?
3. Describe what you know about the event from clues in the language.
4. What do you think might have happened to people because of the event described?

5. What does the poet want the audience to feel about the event? How did it the poet feel about it?

### **Religious ideas**

1. What ideas about religion or spirituality does the poet express?
2. What does the poet want to express about his or her religious beliefs?
3. How does the poet use the form of the poem to express these religious ideas?

### **People**

1. Is the person in the poem an important or an ordinary person? Male or female?
2. How does the poet describe the personality of this person?
3. Is the poet trying to impress the person being described? Are they trying to impress others about the person?
4. Why do you think the poem about this person was written?

### **Describing a scene**

1. What sights, sounds and smells would you experience if you were in the scene the poet is describing?
2. What colors would you use if you were painting the scene?
3. List some words that would describe your feelings if you could step into this scene.

### **Telling a story**

1. Who are the characters in the story being told?
2. What happens in the story?
3. Why is the poet telling the story? (to entertain, teach, move to action, etc.)

### **Bringing out strong feelings in the audience**

1. What emotions does the poet try to bring out in the audience?
2. How does the poet use words and images to affect the listener's feelings?
3. What is the purpose of bringing out strong feelings?
4. What might someone want to do after hearing the poem?

### **Giving advice**

1. What is the poem about?
2. What advice is the poet giving to the audience?
3. What technique does the poet use to make the message effective?
4. Think of a sign or advertising that might have a similar message.
5. What type of person might offer the kind of advice the poet is giving?

## ***Student Handout 10b: Andalusian Poetry Examples***

### **#1**

A palm tree stands in the middle of Rusafa,  
Born in the West, far from the land of palms.

I said to it: How like me you are, far away and in exile,  
In long separation from family and friends.  
You have sprung from soil in which you are a stranger,  
And I, like you, am far from home.

Abd al-Rahman, Emir of Cordoba, d. 788 CE

## #2

A little shaikh from the land of Meknes sings in the middle of the marketplaces:  
“What have I to do with men, and what have men to do with me?”

What, O friend, have I to do with any creature  
[When] He whom I love is a Creator, a Provider?  
Unless you are sincere, my son, say not a word.  
Take down my words on paper and write them like an amulet on my authority.  
What have I to do with men, and what have men to do with me?"  
Here is a clear statement that needs no explanation:  
What has anyone to do with anyone? Grasp this allusion well,  
And observe my old age, my staff, and my begging wallet.  
Thus did I live in Fez and thus do I live here too.  
“What have I to do with men, and what have men to do with me?"

How beautiful are his words when he struts through the market-places  
And you see the shopkeepers turn their necks in his direction.  
With his begging wallet hanging from his neck, a short staff and cork sandals,  
He is a well-built little shaikh, built as God created him.  
"What have I to do with men, and what have men to do with me?"  
Were you to see this little shaikh, how elegant he is in the true sense of the word!  
He turned to me and said to me: "Do I see you follow me?  
I set down my begging bowl-and may He who has mercy on us have mercy on it."  
And he placed it among different kinds [of people] saying: "Leave me alone, leave me  
alone.  
What have I to do with men, and what have men to do with me?"

He who does good, O my son, receives only good in return;  
He will look to his faults and reprove his own deeds,  
While he who is close to my state will remain innocent and free."  
He whose soul is good will grasp the innocence of the singer;  
"What have I to do with men, and what have men to do with me?"  
And in this way he busies himself in blessing Muhammad,  
And [requesting God's] pleasure for his minister the glorious Abu Bakr,  
And for the truthful 'Umar and for the martyr of every place of martyrdom,  
And for 'Ali the grand judge over iniquities who, when he struck out, did not repeat the  
blow.

Shushtari (1212–1269 CE)

### #3

Wonder,  
A garden among the flames!  
My heart can take on any form:  
A meadow for gazelles,  
A cloister for monks,  
For the idols, sacred ground,  
Ka'ba for the circling pilgrim,  
The tables of the Torah,  
The scrolls of the Quran.  
My creed is Love;  
Wherever its caravan turns along the way,  
That is my belief,  
My faith.

*Tarjuman al-Ashwaq*, Muhyyeddin Ibn Arabi (1165-1240 CE)

### #4

Were it not for  
the excess of your talking  
and the turmoil in your hearts,  
you would see what I see  
and hear what I hear!

Muhyyeddin Ibn Arabi (1165-1240 CE)

### #5

I believe in the religion  
Of Love  
Whatever direction its caravans may take,  
For love is my religion and my faith.

Muhyyeddin Ibn Arabi (1165-1240 CE)

### #6

Oh, her beauty--the tender maid!  
Its brilliance gives light like lamps to one traveling in the dark.  
She is a pearl hidden in a shell of hair as black as jet,  
A pearl for which Thought dives and remains unceasingly in the deeps of that ocean.  
He who looks upon her deems her to be a gazelle of the sand-hills, because of her shapely  
neck and the loveliness of her gestures.

Muhyyeddin Ibn Arabi (1165-1240 CE)

### #7

My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for  
Christian monks,  
And a temple for idols, and the pilgrim's Ka'ba, and the tables of the Tora and the  
book of the Koran.  
I follow the religion of Love, whichever way his camels take. My religion and my

faith is the true religion.

We have a pattern in Bishr, the lover of Hind and her sister, and in Qays and Lubna, and in Mayya and Ghaylan.

Muhyyeddin Ibn Arabi (1165-1240 CE)

## #8

Everything declines after reaching perfection, therefore let no man be beguiled by the sweetness of a pleasant life.

As you have observed, these are the decrees that are inconstant: he whom a single moment has made happy, has been harmed by many other moments;

And this is the abode that will show pity for no man, nor will any condition remain in its state for it.

Fate irrevocably destroys every ample coat of mail when Mashrifi swords and spears glance off without effect;

...

Where are the crowned kings of Yemen and where are their jewel-studded diadems and crowns?

Where are [the buildings] Shaddad raised in Iram and where [the empire] the Sassanians ruled in Persia?

Where is the gold Qarun once possessed; where are 'Ad and Shaddad and Qab'an?

An irrevocable decree overcame them all so that they passed away and the people came to be as though they had never existed.

The kingdoms and kings that had been came to be like what a sleeper has told about [his] dream vision.

Fate turned against Darius as well as his slayer, and as for Chosroes, no vaulted palace offered him protection.

It is as if no cause had ever made the hard easy to bear, and as if Solomon had never ruled the world.

The misfortunes brought on by Fate are of many different kinds, while Time has causes of joy and of sorrow.

For the accidents [of fortune] there is a consolation that makes them easy to bear, yet there is no consolation for what has befallen Islam.

An event which cannot be endured has overtaken the peninsula; ...

The evil eye has struck [the peninsula] in its Islam so that [the land] decreased until whole regions and districts were despoiled of [the faith]

Therefore ask Valencia what is the state of Murcia; and where is Jativa, and where is Jaen?

Where is Cordoba, the home of the sciences, and many a scholar whose rank was once lofty in it?

Where is Seville and the pleasures it contains, as well as its sweet river overflowing and brimming full?

[They are] capitals which were the pillars of the land, yet when the pillars are gone, it may no longer endure!

The tap of the white ablution fount weeps in despair, like a passionate lover weeping at the departure of the beloved,

Over dwellings emptied of Islam that were first vacated and are now inhabited by  
 unbelief;  
 In which the mosques have become churches wherein only bells and crosses may be  
 found.  
 Even the mihrabs weep though they are solid; even the pulpits mourn though they are  
 wooden!  
 O you who remain heedless though you have a warning in Fate: if you are asleep, Fate is  
 always awake!  
 And you who walk forth cheerfully while your homeland diverts you [from cares], can a  
 homeland beguile any man after [the loss of] Seville?  
 This misfortune has caused those that preceded it to be forgotten, nor can it ever be  
 forgotten for the length of all time!  
 O you who ride lean, thoroughbred steeds which seem like eagles in the racecourse;  
 And you who carry slender, Indian blades which seem like fires in the darkness caused by  
 the dust cloud [of war],  
 And you who are living in luxury beyond the sea enjoying life, you who have strength  
 and power in your homelands,  
 Have you no news of the people of Andalus, for riders have carried forth what men have  
 said [about them]?  
 How often have the weak, who were being killed and captured while no man stirred,  
 asked our help?  
 What means this severing of the bonds of Islam on your behalf, when you, O worshipers  
 of God, are [our] brethren?  
 Are there no heroic souls with lofty ambitions; are there no helpers and defenders of  
 righteousness?  
 O, who will redress the humiliation of a people who were once powerful, a people whose  
 condition injustice and tyrants have changed?  
 Yesterday they were kings in their own homes, but today they are slaves in the land of the  
 infidel!  
 Thus, were you to see them perplexed, with no one to guide them, wearing the cloth of  
 shame in its different shades,  
 And were you to behold their weeping when they are sold, the matter would strike fear  
 into your heart, and sorrow would seize you.  
 Alas, many a mother and child have been parted as souls and bodies are separated!  
 And many a maiden fair as the sun when it rises, as though she were rubies and pearls,  
 Is led off to abomination by a barbarian against her will, while her eye is in tears and her  
 heart is stunned.  
 The heart melts with sorrow at such [sights], if there is any Islam or belief in that heart!

Abu al-Baqā Al-Rundi (fl. 1248 CE)

## #9

In the ocean of night, as the last of the flood-tide  
 was ebbing, an eclipse snatched away half the moon.  
 It became like a mirror heated by a blacksmith, with  
 the red of the fire fading into the black.



Ibn Hamdis (Sicily, 1055-1132 CE)

### #10

Look at the sun on the horizon; it is like a bird  
casting its wing over the surface of the bay.

Ali ibn Musa ibn Sa'id (Alcala la Real, 1213-1286 CE)

### #11

The hands of spring have built strong lily castles on their stems,  
Castles with battlements of silver where the defenders,  
grouped around the prince, hold swords of gold.

Ibn Darraj (Caceta, 958-1030 CE)

### #12

Drink from the lily pond, red with flowers, and also green,  
As if the flowers were tongues of fire coming out of the water.

Ibn Hamdis (Sicily, 1055-1132 CE)

### #13

How beautiful the rose in its colors of deep red and pure white.  
Its whiteness is like the brilliance of the stars;  
its redness not different from the red of twilight.  
And the yellow in its center is like sesame seeds clustered on a plate.

Abu al-Abbas al-Ghassani (Tunis, c. 1261 CE)

### #14

The right hand of the wind forges a coat of  
mail on the river which ripples with a thousand wrinkles.  
And whenever the wind adds a ring, the rain comes  
along to fasten it with its rivets.

Asa al-A'ma (Manish, c. 1131 CE)

### #15

The river is like a piece of parchment  
on which the breeze is tracing its lines.  
And when they see how beautiful the writing is,  
the branches bend down to read it.

Ali ibn Musa ibn Sa'id (Alcala la Real, 1213-1286 CE)

### #16

How I love those boats as they start to race, like horses chasing one another.  
The neck of the river was unadorned before, but now, in the darkness of night, it is all  
decked out.  
The brightness of the boats' candles is as the brilliance of stars; you'd think their  
reflections were lances in the water.

Many boats are moved along by their sail wings and others by their oar feet; they look like frightened rabbits fleeing from falcons.

Ibn Lubbal (Jerez, d. 1187 CE)

### **#17**

Nothing disturbed me more than a dove,  
singing on a branch between the island and the river.  
Its collar was the color of pistachio nuts,  
its breasts of lapis lazuli, its neck brightly embroidered,  
its tail and leading wing feathers of dark green.  
A ring of gold surrounded its pearl eyelids,  
pearls which rolled over rubies.  
Black was the tip of its sharp beak, as if it  
were a silver penpoint dipped in ink.  
It pillowed itself on a couch of an Ark tree  
and bowed with its wings folded over its breast.  
But when it saw my tears, it was troubled by my  
weeping and standing straight up on the green bough.  
It spread out its wings and flapped them,  
flying off with my heart to wherever it flew. Where?  
I don't know.

Ali ibn Hisa (Seville, d. 1050 CE)

### **#18**

O king, whose fathers were of lofty mien and most noble lineage!  
You have always adorned my neck with marvelous  
gifts; so may you now adorn my hand with a falcon.  
Bestow on me one with fine wings, as if its  
leading feathers had been arched by the north wind.  
Proudly I shall take him out in the morning,  
making the wind veer in my hand, and I shall capture  
the free with my chained one.

Abu Bakr Ibn al-Qabturnuh (Badajoz, c. 1126 CE)

### **#19**

Bright as a meteor, he came prancing forth in a gilded saddle cloth.  
Someone said, envying me, as he saw him trotting beneath me into battle:  
"Who has bridled the morning with the Pleiades  
and saddled the lightning with the crescent moon?"

Abu al-Sall (Denia, 1067-1134 CE)

### **#20**

If white is the color of mourning in Andalusia,  
that is only just.  
Don't you see that I have put on the white of old age

out of mourning for my youth?

al-Kafif al-Husri (Kairouan, d. 1095 CE)

## #21

When the bird of sleep thought my eye was a nest, he saw  
its lashes and, being afraid of nets, he was frightened away.

Ibn al-Hammarah (c. 1150 CE)

## #22

You have a house where the curtains are perfect for  
musical evenings, but let us understand one thing:  
The flies do the singing, the mosquitoes accompany them,  
and the fleas are the dancers.

Abu Abdallah ibn Sharaf (Kairouan, d. 1068 CE)

## #23

My soul and my family be the ransom for my patron,  
from whom I never ask for help against fate without being helped.  
They feathered my wings and then drenched them with  
the dew of generosity, so now I cannot fly away from their tribe.

Ibn al-Labbanah (Denia, d. 1113 CE)

## #24

Scatter your good deeds all around, not caring  
whether they fall on those near or far away,  
Just as the rain never cares where the clouds pour  
it out, whether on fertile ground or on rocks.

Ibn Siraj (Cordova, d. 1114 CE)

## #25

My soul said to me: "Death has come for you and here you  
are still in this sea of sins.

"And you haven't even provided for the journey."

"Be quiet," I said. "Does one take provisions to the  
Generous One?"

Abu al-Hajjaj al-Munsafi (Almuzafes, c. 1210 CE)

## #26

Be forgiving of your friend when he offends  
you, for perfection is seldom ever found.

In everything there is some flaw; even the  
lamp, despite its brilliance, smokes.

Ibn al-Haddad (Almeria, d. 1087 CE)

## #27

Look at the fire as she dances, shaking her sleeves  
with joy.  
She laughs with amazement as the essence of her ebony  
is transmuted into gold.

Ibn Abi al-Khisal (Segura, 1072-1145 CE)

## #28

Oh, the beauty of the fountain, pelting the  
horizon with shooting stars, leaping and jumping around  
playfully;  
Bubbles of water burst out of it, gushing into  
its basin like a frightened snake,  
As if it used to move back and forth beneath the  
earth, but when it had the chance, it quickly escaped,  
And settled into the basin, happy with its new  
home, and in amazement kept smiling, showing its bubbles.  
And the branches hover overhead, about to kiss  
it as it smiles, revealing the whiteness of its teeth.

Ibn al-Ra'iah (Seville, 13th century CE)

## #29

How wonderful is the water-wheel! It spins around like a  
celestial sphere, yet there are no stars on it.  
It was placed over the river by hands that decreed that  
it refresh others' spirits as it, itself, grows tired.  
It is like a free man, in chains, or like a prisoner  
marching freely.  
Water rises and falls from the wheel as if it were a  
cloud that draws water from the sea and later pours it out.  
The eyes fell in love with it, for it is a boon companion  
to the garden, a cupbearer who doesn't drink.

Ibn al-Abbar (Valencia, d. 1260 CE)

## #30

Wedding Feast on the Horizon

Pass round your cups for there's a wedding feast on the horizon—  
although it would be enough for us just to feast our eyes on your beauty.  
The lightning is a henna-dyed hand, the rain, pearls  
and like a bride, the horizon is led forth to her husband—  
and the eyes of the dawn are lined with kohl.

Ali ibn Musa ibn Sa'id (Alcala la Real, 1213-1286 CE)

## #31

O people of Andalusia, spur on your horses, for

staying here is a mistake;  
Garments begin to unravel at the seams, but now I see  
that the peninsula is unraveling at the center.

al-Assal (Toledo, d. 1094 CE)

### #32

We are moons in the darkness of the night; wherever we  
sit, there is the head of the room.  
If contemptuous fate unjustly takes away our  
greatness, it can not take away the greatness of our souls.

Ibn Adha (Granada, 1098-1145 CE)

### #33

Granada

Come, spend a night in the country with me,  
my friend (you whom the stars above would gladly call their friend),  
for winter's finally over. Listen  
to the chatter of the doves and swallows!  
We'll lounge beneath the pomegranates, palm trees, apple trees,  
under every lovely, leafy thing,  
and walk among the vines,  
enjoy the splendid faces we will see,  
in a lofty palace built of noble stones.

Resting solidly on thick foundations,  
its walls like towers fortified,  
set upon a flat place, plains all around it  
splendid to look at from within its courts.  
Chambers constructed, adorned with carvings,  
open-work and closed-work,  
paving of alabaster, paving of marble,  
gates so many that I can't even count them!  
Chamber doors paneled with ivory like palace doors,  
reddened with panels of cedar, like the Temple.  
Wide windows over them,  
and within those windows, the sun and moon and stars!

It has a dome, too, like Solomon's palanquin,  
suspended like a jewel-room,  
turning, changing,  
pearl-colored; crystal and marble  
in day-time; but in the evening seeming  
just like the night sky, all set with stars.  
It cheers the heart of the poor and the weary;  
perishing, bitter men forget their want.

I saw it once and I forgot my troubles,  
my heart took comfort from distress,  
my body seemed to fly for joy,  
as if on wings of eagles.

There was a basin brimming, like Solomon's basin,  
but not on the backs of bulls like his –  
lions stood around its edge  
with wells in their innards, and mouths gushing water;  
they made you think of whelps that roar for prey;  
for they had wells inside them, wells that emitted  
water in streams through their mouths like rivers.

Then there were canals with does planted by them,  
does that were hollow, pouring water,  
sprinkling the plants planted in the garden-beds,  
casting pure water upon them,  
watering the myrtle-garden,  
treetops fresh and sprinkling,  
and everything was fragrant as spices,  
everything as if it were perfumed with myrrh.  
Birds were singing in the boughs,  
peering through the palm-fronds,  
and there were fresh and lovely blossoms –  
rose, narcissus, saffron –  
each one boasting that he was the best,  
(though we thought every one was beautiful).  
The narcissuses said, “We are so white  
we rule the sun and moon and stars!”  
The doves complained at such talk and said,  
“No, we are the princesses here! Just see our neck-rings,  
with which we charm the hearts of men,  
dearer far than pearls.”  
The bucks rose up against the girls  
and darkened their splendor with their own,  
boasting that they were the best of all,  
because they are like young rams.  
But when the sun rose over them,  
I cried out, “Halt! Do not cross the boundaries!”

(from Ibn Gabirol, ca. 1021- 1058 CE,  
“The Palace and the Garden,”)

## Sources for the poems, by number:

#1, #33: Maria Rosa Menocal, Raymond P. Scheindlin, Michael Sells, editors. *The Literature of al-Andalus*. Cambridge University Press, 2000. p. 25; pp. 1-2 “Granada” translated by Raymond P. Scheindlin.

#2: Monroe, pp. 308-314

#3, 4, 5, 6, 7: Reynold A. Nicholson, translator *The Mystics of Islam*. New York: Penguin Books, 1914. Retrieved at

[http://www.poetseers.org/spiritual\\_and\\_devotional\\_poets/sufi/ibn\\_arabi/ip/won/](http://www.poetseers.org/spiritual_and_devotional_poets/sufi/ibn_arabi/ip/won/) and  
<http://www.poetry-chaikhana.com/IbnArabiMuhy/Ibelieveinre.htm>

#8: James Monroe. *Hispano-Arabic Poetry: A Student Anthology*. Gorgias Press, 2004. pp. 332-336

#9-32: Bellamy, James and Patricia Owen Steiner, translators. *The Banners of the Champions: An Anthology of Medieval Arabic Poetry from Andalusia and Beyond*. Madison: Hispanic Seminary of Medieval Studies, 1989. The original Arabic title is Ibn Sa’id al-Maghribi (b. 1213 CE) *Rayat al-Mubarizeen wa Ghayat al-Mumayizeen (The Banners of the Champions and Pennants of the Chosen)*.

NOTE on *Banners of the Champions*: Ibn Sa’id al-Maghribi was born near Granada in 1213 CE, to a prominent literary family. He spent his life traveling and writing, and he authored or compiled over forty works. He was familiar with many of the cities of Andalusia and North Africa, and the eastern centers like Cairo, Baghdad and Makkah. He is best known for completing a great anthology of poetry in over 15 volumes. Started by his great-grandfather, it took over 100 years to finish. The *Banners* is a short extract of about 300 poems compiled in Cairo in the summer of 1243 CE.