Making this World Beautiful with Poetry: Reading and Emulating Maggie Smith's "Good Bones"[1]

CORE TEXTS	• "Good Bones"–a poem by Maggie Smith, available here from The Poetry Foundation • *The Wall Street Journal* article "A Poet for Times of Trouble: Amid the Pandemic, Maggie Smith's 2016 Poem 'Good Bones,' About Keeping Life's Ugliness from Children, Is Having a Moment" by Alexandra Wolfe. *You may need to create a free account to read the entire article, but you should be able to access it online without paying for a subscription*
POSSIBILITIES TO TEACH FOR CHANGE	Maggie Smith's "Good Bones" is a poem that compels readers to dwell on the terrible realities of the world. As Wolfe (2020) notes, "Good Bones" had "a moment" after its 2016 publication when readers turned to the poem amid tragedies such as mass murders and the coronavirus pandemic. People felt "Good Bones" could speak to these tragedies, and Smith gained popularity when "Good Bones" became "one of the most shared poems on the Academy of American Poets' website" (Wolfe, 2020, para. 2). When reading Smith's lines like, "The world is at least / fifty percent terrible, and that's a conservative / estimate," readers today will likely make connections to recent events happening in 2026. In her article for *The Wall Street Journal*, Wolfe quotes a conversation she had with Smith over the phone. Smith said that "Good Bones" has a positive ending: "I meant it in a hopeful way." The final lines of the poem read, "This place could be beautiful, / right? You could make this place beautiful." Reading Smith's poem and Wolfe's article can show students how poets use their craft to advocate for needed change. Even though "Good Bones" highlights the terribleness of the world, it ends in hope–hope that readers can make the world beautiful.
LEARNING OBJECTIVE(S)	• Students will analyze and interpret Maggie Smith's poem "Good Bones" and determine if they agree with Smith's statement that her poem concludes in a hopeful way.

[1] Any teacher may use this lesson plan. Feel free to adjust it as needed. This is an example lesson based on the Teaching ELA for CHANGE Lesson Plan Template.

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	• Using "Good Bones" as a mentor text, students will create their own poems that address terrible aspects of the world while advocating for change and concluding with hope. **Optional:** If they would like to, students can, like Smith's "Good Bones," share their poems online using social media. This lesson would likely require 2–3 class periods as students read, interpret, and analyze Smith's poem and then craft their own.
ASSESSMENT	Students' poems should examine tragedies but end with a hopeful message as students envision a better world. They should be at least 15 lines and should emulate some of Smith's stylistic choices in "Good Bones" (e.g., repetition, enjambment, metaphor, symbolism, statements that shock the reader or grab their attention).
LEARNING ACTIVITIES & STRATEGIES	1. Begin the lesson with a five-minute quick write activity. Ask students to respond in writing to this prompt: "Can artists change the world? Explain your answer." 2. Facilitate a class discussion of their responses. 3. Using the interrupted reading activity, project one line of the poem at a time–and only one line at a time–and ask students to share what they notice after reading each line. You can prompt them to focus on Smith's style or on their interpretations. You may want to ask a few students to help you record their classmates' responses. 4. Provide each student with a copy of the poem and ask them to re-read it on their own. Prompt students to annotate the poem to record aspects of Smith's style and their interpretations of her poem. 5. Ask students to share what they noticed about Smith's style; record their responses to help them emulate Smith's style later when they write their own poem. 6. Share Wolfe's article with each student–you may want to ask students to read the whole article or just the first six paragraphs. In the article, Smith is quoted as saying that social media can be a "boon to poets" because it allows their work to be shared and that a poem can "crystallize a moment." These are helpful quotes for students to read as they prepare to write their poems. 7. Facilitate a class discussion with students by asking if they agree with Smith: Does "Good Bones" end in a hopeful way? If they do not think it ended with hope, remind students that their poems should. 8. Share with students the assessment details and support them as they craft their own poems.

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LESSON CONCLUSION	Remind students that changing the world to make it more just and equitable is an everyday commitment. The world is changed not only through momentous actions but also through everyday kindness and compassion. Ask students to share their poems with the class and encourage them–if they feel comfortable–to share their poems on social media so that other people can be inspired by their words.

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References & Resources

- Wolfe, A. (2020, May 22). A poet for times of trouble: Amid the pandemic, Maggie Smith's 2016 poem 'Good Bones,' about keeping life's ugliness from children, is having a moment. *The Wall Street Journal.* https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-poet-for-times-of-trouble-11590162963?gaa_at=eafs&gaa_n=AWEtsqc1a0wh2A4YrqsRne5HmR_Zxg2tPf_OqwEyqy23RLDaEYrsczT1vphuSQuMzF4%3D&gaa_ts=698b6623&gaa_sig=ddGkOzJtam81S9auqb3Kaf_-NaOCIbN7N6WpdgJVr4jswQ1be-85rlXcXlyCO1_woTyQWlMlrjnjDJlkMg9LLA%3D%3D

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