

I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night

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Joe Hill front cover

Today 105 years ago, on November 19, 1905, Joe Hill was executed in Utah. Although his name is rather forgotten today, Joe Hill was arguably one of the most influential American song-writers of the 20th century. A Swedish immigrant, he was also a second language writer. So it is only fitting that [Language-on-the-Move](#) should pay tribute to this remarkable man and his inspirational writing.

[Joe Hill](#) was known as “the troubadour of the working class” and he is the poet and song writer of most of the songs in [The Little Red Songbook](#), a collection of folk songs published and sung by the [Industrial Workers Union of the World](#) during its heyday in the first half of the 20th century. He is the author of classics such as “[The Preacher and the Slave](#),” “[The tramp](#),” or “[Casey Jones, the union](#)

[scab](#).” Joe Hill’s particular talent was to write activist lyrics and set them to well-known traditional folk songs and hymns.

Joe Hill was born as Joel Hägglund in a small town in Sweden and after the death of his parents bought passage to America and arrived in 1902 as a 23-year-old with high hopes for a better future. While little is known about his early life, it seems he had learnt some English before he left Sweden by studying with the YMCA and by also having studied a dictionary ([Smith, 1984, p. 47](#)). However, overall his English must have been largely self-taught.

The migration experience that changed Joel Hägglund into Joe Hill ran deeper than the name change:

Joel Hägglund left his native Sweden for America where he believed prosperity would be his merely for the asking and where equality of opportunity was a reality. But, for Joe Hill, America turned out to be a land specializing in the oppression of foreigners and migrant workers. It could have been nothing less than an embittering experience. Certainly, it changed a young man raised in a conservative Christian home which taught him loyalty to “God, King and all authority” into a “rebel true-blue,” opposed to the existing social and

economic inequalities, to the authority of the law when it sanctioned injustice, and, apparently, to Christianity (Smith, 1984, p. 57).

Unlike many other migrants with similar experiences, Joe Hill distinguished himself through his writing and his poetry, which is rooted in his experience and is a resounding call for solidarity, equality and justice.

Joe Hill is remembered today as a martyr of the workers' movement. He is also an inspiring second language writer. Despite the fact that he himself felt that his writing was limited by his lack of education and formal training (Smith, 1984, p. 40), his poetry not only immortalized him but also remains an inspiration today.

On the eve of his execution, Joe Hill wrote his will:

My will is easy to decide,/For there is nothing to divide./My kin don't need to fuss and moan-/"Moss does not cling to a rolling stone."/My body? Ah, if I could choose,/I would to ashes it reduce,/And let the merry breezes blow/My dust to where some flower's grow./Perhaps some fading flower then/Would come to life and bloom again./This is my last and final will./Good luck to all of you, Joe Hill.

Joe Hill's wish to be cremated was honored and he was farewelled in Chicago by 30,000 mourners in one of the largest funeral processions ever. Glazer (2002, pp. 194f.) describes how his songs were sung all the way to the crematorium and as soon as a song would die out in one place it was taken up in another. Eulogies to the man whose lyrics inspired so many to organize for solidarity, equality and justice were delivered in nine languages.

Joe Hill's writings challenge us to lead a better life and to fight for solidarity, equality and justice. They also serve as a role model for aspiring second language writers. If you are a language teacher, why not introduce Joe Hill to your students? There are many good reasons for introducing Joe Hill into English language teaching: First, he makes an excellent language learning role model because the fact that English was not his "native language" did not hold him back to make his voice heard in his adopted country. Second, accounts of his life such as [this one](#), [this one](#) or [this one](#) have all the hallmarks of great language learning materials: a gripping story with lots of discussion points that lend themselves to the exploration of a wide range of issues be it migration, poverty, resistance, or the law. And, additionally, there is a gripping and unresolved murder mystery to keep everyone intrigued. Third, poetry is a great way to learn and teach a language. It certainly worked for me – "[I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night](#)" was – along with other Joan Baez songs – one of the first poems I ever learnt in the English language and with which I learn the English language.

Joe Hill never died. Let's make sure he lives on for another generation.

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