



African American Poetry: Songs of Protest and Pride

Curriculum Unit 01.03.03
by Jean Sutherland

I now work in an elementary school where about 90%-95% of the students are African American. My classes, including the fourth grade group I presently teach, have always reflected this percentage. Of the remaining students, most are Hispanic/Latino with few white pupils. The ages of my students vary from those who have just turned nine to those who are eleven or close to that mark. They come from a variety of social-economic backgrounds and home situations. Their academic ability and the level of their general knowledge also vary considerably. Some are members of families with multiple problems. Few of their lives are without difficulties. Most, though not all, parents or guardians are supportive of school. Most want to be helpful but often are not sure of the best way to go about it. Often the struggles of everyday life interfere with their efforts. At this point most students still enjoy school but not just for the academics. They are starting to understand that their school career will have some bearing on their lives beyond the present, though their actions often are influenced negatively by peer pressure, their lack of basic skills and general knowledge, difficulty in establishing long term goals, and the lack of a positive image, especially regarding their academic abilities. Nevertheless, they still have high aspirations regarding their futures.

Throughout the years I have realized that these African American students, and, in fact, almost all students, come with a fragmented knowledge of history, in particular African American history. They know the names of Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Cinque, and a few others, but they don't know how and where the lives of these individuals fit and interact within the flow of historical events. They know something of slavery and continuing oppression, but they tend to view these events with a combination of embarrassment and disbelief. As students interpret the past, there is almost a displaced anger that so many African Americans "tolerated" their plight. "Why didn't they fight back?" is a question they have often asked.

General Objectives

With these perceptions in mind, I have written a number of YNHTI units, during the past years, in which I tried to develop a clearer, more interrelated picture of African American history. Each attempted to emphasize the fact that, though the odds were not fair, many, many people protested in many ways, some more openly than others. Simultaneously, these units I have written attempted to develop and increase a feeling of appreciation among students for the pride and courage shown by African Americans in the past and recognition of the positives which their ancestors' actions have provided for them today, in the present. The material was usually

presented in conjunction with social studies lessons, which were ordered in historical sequence. Obviously, my objective was to give students a broader, more positive view of African American history rather than presenting isolated pictures of individuals and events. In my present unit, African American Poetry: Songs of Protest and Pride, I extend these objectives, placing an emphasis on the reading and writing of poetry reflecting the pride and protest that were a continuing element in the history of black America. Beginning with the words of Negro spirituals, through the Civil Rights Movement and the development of "black pride," up until the more strident words of today's African American poets, students will integrate poetic creations with the events of history. The "songs" they examine will include actual lyrics set to music as well as the other forms of conventional poetry. At the same time, lessons provide opportunities for students to create their own poems, bringing their personal feeling to the material being examined in class. My unit also suggests some works of prose and film, which will reinforce the objectives I aim for in my poetry related lessons.

Meeting New Haven's Literacy Standards

Throughout, students will be reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The New Haven school district's emphasis on literacy is targeted in all aspects of this unit. Material has been integrated with our social studies, art, music, and language arts lessons. The development of confident dramatic speakers is also a key goal. In everything presented, vocabulary development will be stressed through the discussion of words unfamiliar to most students. Examination of rhyming words and internal rhyme will strengthen phonic skills. The discussion of syllabication in achieving rhythm will do the same. The understanding and identification of metaphors and the importance of descriptive writing will help to illustrate their importance in the elaboration of basic ideas in both poetry and prose. The five-paragraph expository essay, an important introduction into fourth grade language arts, will be used toward the end of the unit. Teams of students will further develop literacy and related research skills when they select a poet whose work and life will be the subject of a short report and oral presentation. The library media specialist, part of our team, will assist students in this endeavor. Reports will be shared and may become a part of our culminating assembly.

The Beecher Team

This unit is part of the Beecher school team involving a first grade teacher, Geraldine Martin, our media specialist, Stephanie Zogby, who has made arrangements to work with a second grade classroom, and me. Their units are both part of this volume. Ideas on how we will enlist the expertise of other staff members and parents will be pursued. We hope that others who use this unity might choose to broaden the scope of its involvement. An after school program aimed at developing a play related to Geraldine Martin's unit will involve students from non-team classrooms. Parents will be recruited to assist with costume making, the preparation of related refreshments or meal for the culminating activity, and to help in other areas that may present themselves, such as a fund raising event to finance the culminating activity. The team has already met periodically as we each have developed our individual unit. Each unit relates to African American poetry but follows a different route: feelings and friendship, family and traditions, and songs of pride and protest. During the school year, we will continue meeting on a regular basis to arrange the specific integration of each classroom's activities. Some possibilities are mentioned in this unit. The team will also plan our culminating activity, scheduled for April, and will attempt to include other staff members, administration, and parents as the final event nears.

A Historical Approach

Though there will be some variation in the amount of time spent on each, the areas of African American history, which will be integrated with the reading and writing of specific poetry, include the period of enslavement, the Civil War years, Reconstruction and its downfall, the Migration of African Americans to the urban areas of the North, the Civil Rights Movement, and the prominent issues existing today. After we leave the Civil War and the Reconstruction years, there will be considerable overlapping of the historical periods we cover. May poems are as relevant to one period as they are to another. An example of such an all-encompassing poem is a piece by Lewis Latimer, "Unconquered and Unconquerable." With its declaration of unending pride and refusal to yield to the forces of defeat, this poem will launch students into an investigation of African American history, made more human and relevant by the poetry this unity suggests. It will be presented for discussion at the beginning and at the unit's conclusion without specific connection to any historical period. Students will eventually make those connections, hopefully realizing that it connects to all.

My soul doth still forbid me tears

Unconquered and unconquerable

(Myers, *Now Is Your Time* , p. 229)

Latimer, himself, will be examined as an individual who prevailed against considerable odds. Born in Massachusetts in 1848, he was the son of parents who had escaped from slavery in Virginia. Though most recognized for his work with Thomas Edison and his contributions to the electric light bulb, he was considered a person of culture, which included the writing of poetry. Students should be interested in the fact that Latimer had a local connection when he worked for a lighting company in Bridgeport, Connecticut. It was there that he, along with Joseph V. Nichols, successfully produced a method of attaching carbon filaments in bulbs. He later received a patent for an improved process of manufacturing filaments. In its unspectacular fashion, his life stands out as a dramatic example of pride and protest.

As we move on, there will be a compilation of other "role models" we meet along the way. Poems related to these individuals and their own words will be examined and become the subject of students' writings. More personal issues such as family, skin color, hair texture, the influence of media on what is desirable in appearance, and students' appreciation of the past, as well as their goals for the future, will be examined when relevant, no matter what the historical period. Additionally, specific time will be set aside toward the unit's conclusion for pupils to discuss and express themselves in poetry in relationship to any or all of these issues.

Getting Started

Since for fourth graders, the month of September and a few weeks in October are devoted to intensive review for and the actual administration of the Connecticut Mastery test in October, poetry examined during this period will not necessarily relate to the themes presented in this unit. About once or twice a week, students will be reading and discussing poems, which are just fun or interesting for children of their age. Hand game rhymes, often used to accompany jump roping, will be read and chanted with appropriate movements. Pieces

like "Miss Mary Mack," "I'm a Nut," "Aunt Dinah Died," "Little Sally Walker," and others, including some which students might suggest, are already known by many children having been part of most African Americans' childhood. Students are the teacher's best source. "Peas," by Henry Dumas, (Hudson, *Pass It On* , p. 17) will be their own rhymes. A younger grade, in this case, children from other "team" classrooms, will be invited to join us in performing these rhymes.

Introducing Some Elements of Poetry

Other poems not related to the historical theme will be drawn upon during this time period. Some which I will use include "Winter Poem," by Nikki Giovanni, "Hey Black Child," by Useni Eugene Perkins, "Time to Play," by Nikki Grimes, "To Catch a Fish," by Eloise Greenfield, and "Greenfield Rap," by Sharon Jordan Holley. They were selected because they are fun and easy for students to relate to and understand. These are part of a group of poems I have collected over the years, but any interesting, preferably light, poems, which the teacher may select, will serve the purpose of introducing children to poetry and some of its basic characteristics. Each will be presented, have their content discussed, and be read orally. It is at this point that students will begin to examine some of the elements that make poetry distinctive from prose. After appropriate explanation and examples, pupils should be able to identify ending rhyme, some internal rhyme, alliteration, metaphors, repetition, rhythm, and descriptive language in the above-mentioned poems and others that they read. The texts of Kenneth Koch listed in my bibliography, especially, *Making Your Own Days* , clearly present the basic elements of poetry, which the teacher will need to convey to students. I will stress only those listed above. Though I want them to look for more than rhyming lines in a poem, I don't want an overemphasis on poetic elements to discourage natural interest and spontaneity.

Students will now begin to write simple poems based upon the suggestions made by Koch in his books, especially in *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* . Approaches will include developing the following structures presented by Koch: "I wish _____," "I use to ___ But now _____," "A ___ is like ___, and it was like _____." Gradually, they will be encouraged to expand their initial creations through the inclusion of more poetic elements or further development of those, which they have already used. Students will also be encouraged to write poems similar to those being discussed in class, but actual lessons will require the same basic approach with which Koch begins.

In late October or early November, poems read and discussed will relate directly to time periods in African American History. The same general approach will be followed: introduction of the specific poem and possibly its poet, discussion of the poem, including its relationship to the historical topic or individual being covered in class, oral reading of the poem by students, group and individual, using the poem as motivation for each student to write poems to the class. Not every poem presented should require a related student poem. Each teacher must decide for the individual class how many are appropriate, but I think two for each historical period covered should be a minimum. The individual teacher must also determine which and how many poems will be presented in each period. Depending on my group, I plan to use most of the piece mentioned in the unit.

The Period of Enslavement

In many ways, an examination of this period is difficult for students to face. As mentioned, they tend to view the times with a combination of embarrassment and anger. Many adults would agree with their assessment, though for different reasons. Both the historical information presented and its related poetry will attempt to demonstrate to students the fact that within the confines of their enslavement, African Americans did more than their best to survive and even to rebel. Despite considerable odds against them, they did not sit idly by and accept their fate. They learned to read and write, developed skills in many areas, maintained a strong religious foundation, established their own marriage rites, sang their own songs of protest, and even escaped to freedom, not to mention the more subtle forms of defiance they developed. Poetry relevant they developed. Poetry relevant twill accompany the historical information presented. It will emphasize the fact that enslaved African American did indeed have pride and certainly did protest. To achieve this goal, the unit will draw upon Negro spirituals, folk poetry, and the works of some early African American poets. These pieces will help students grasp the determination and courage existing during the period of slavery. "Get on Board Little Children," "Steal Away to Jesus," "Go Down Moses," and other songs, which many students know so well, will take on additional meaning as students are able to see the role the words played in maintaining hope as well as in providing a means of communicating impending plans of escape. A song like "Oh Freedom" was sung at secret plantation meetings for years. It has survived to become one of the anthems of the Civil Rights movement.

And before I'd be a slave

I'll be buried in my grave

(Myers, *Now Is Your Time* , p. 60.)

The help of the music teacher, and perhaps a parent, if one is available, will be enlisted to assist in preparing these spirituals for an appropriate musical presentation. Naturally, some will be part of the group's final presentation.

Folk poetry from this period will be discussed both to examine its dialect and its humor, and its much more serious message. Read the words of "We Raise de Wheat."

We raise de wheat,

Dey gib us de corn....

We skim de pot,

Dey gib us de liquor,

And say dat's good enough for nigger.

(Randall, *The Black Poets* , p. 20.)

Perhaps the first known African American author of a poem, Lucy Terry will be introduced to illustrate to students that legitimate poetry was being created during this time period. This poem was transmitted only

orally for nearly 100 years before being printed in 1855. Though this poem, "Bars Fight," (Clinton, *I, Too, Sing America*, p.13.) vividly retells the story of a 1746 Indian raid on the settlers of a town in Massachusetts, it presents an extremely negative image of Native Americans. This should stimulate a worthwhile discussion. "Why might Terry have felt the way she did about the raid? Was there anything you would have agreed with? What would you tell her that might influence her feelings? What are some factors that help develop negative feelings toward a group of people?"

George Moses Horton (1797 - 1881) was born a slave. Though later self-educated, he had to memorize his first poems. Some of these poems were heard by students at the University of North Carolina who arranged to have some published. Though remaining a slave, he continued his writings in which he attacked slavery and expressed his desire for freedom. His works, such as "On Liberty and Slavery" were praised. To speak out against slavery, and to be published during this period makes Horton worthy of presentation here.

Come Liberty, thou cheerful sound,

Roll through my ravished ears...

(Clinton, *I, Too, Sing America* , p. 21.)

Although not an African American, the Quaker, John Greenleaf Whittier's poem, "Farewell of a Virginia Slave Mother" both depicts some of the agony inflicted by slavery and illustrates that a white man could feel some of its pain and was willing to speak.

Gone, gone---sold and gone

To the rice-swamps dank and lone,

From Virginia's hills and waters, ---

Woe is me, my stolen daughters!

(Hughes, *The Poetry of the Negro* , p. 641.)

Finally the defiant, though joyous words of some unnamed, former slave will conclude the period of enslavement.

No more auction block for me.

No more, no more!

No more auction block for me;

Many thousand gone.

No more driver's lash for me,

No more, no more!

No more driver's lash for me;

Many thousand gone.

(Hamilton, *Many Thousand Gone* , p. 143.)

The Civil War Period

After students have learned the basic facts surrounding this conflict which divided our country, we will read about the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, a group of African American soldiers, led by their white commander, Colonel Robert Gould Shaw. We will use *Now Is Our Time* , by Walter Dean Myers, p.154 - 180. I will read this material to them. This text contains an excellent account of these events and some of the individual soldiers involved. They are most famous for their march against the Rebel stronghold of Fort Wagner, which helped to guard Charleston, but to the class they also will be remembered for their bravery and willingness to fight for an army that did little to make them feel wanted, much less appreciated. The text also is memorable for revealing the bond that developed between the troops and their white commander, as depicted in the journal of John Appleton, another white officer serving with the group. Though the 54th was repelled and most lost their lives or were captured, they had proven themselves in battle. When Fort Wagner was finally defeated, remaining members of the 54th were among the first to enter.

The film *Glory*, which I have used with third graders, in spite of the film's occasional rough language, presents a moving portrayal of these events, very close to their written counterpart. The film dramatically illustrates the presence and bravery of African American soldiers, despite the blatant discrimination, which surrounded them during the Civil War. I will use this film both to emphasize the positive roles played by African Americans in the struggle and to motivate students to write related poetry. Dudley Randall's "Memorial Wreath," in which he pays tribute to these soldiers, will be presented as an example. The poem was written "for the more than 200,000 Negroes who served in the Union Army during the Civil War."

Love and remembrance blossom in our hearts

For you who bore the extreme sharp pang for us,

(Hughes, *The Poetry of the Negro* , p. 305.)

The Period of Reconstruction and After

The information students receive here will better help them to understand the multitude of problems that followed. As they learn the basic facts of this period, they will be motivated to write poetry related to the achievements that came about despite the crumbling of many hopes and the onslaught of legislative and personal attacks. The following is a brief summary of the material to be covered. Much of the poetry from the years that followed had their roots in the actions taken during these times. Though free at last, former slaves received mixed blessings from Reconstruction. On the positive side, blacks gained some political power. For a time, they served on state legislatures and a few even became members of the U.S. Congress. The

Freedmen's Bureau was established in 1865. It did provide general help to former slaves including food, some jobs, and the creation of hospitals, but its most significant work was in the field of education where it started day, night, industrial, and Sunday schools. In addition, it established institutions of higher learning such as Hampton, Fisk, and Atlanta universities. A large part of the Bureau's success was the result of the ambitions of striving African Americans, the work of some devoted Bureau agents, and the help of philanthropists.

It was not long before states began to enact "Black Codes," legislation, which restored many of the powers held by whites during slavery. As Northerners became more interested in restoring power to Southern businessmen, they increasingly ignored the terrorist methods of groups like the KKK, methods that allowed anti-black elements to regain control of the South. Most freedmen were never given land, a vehicle that might have led to some lasting economic and political power. The failure of Reconstruction to solve the problems and maintain its accomplishments led to the race problems that followed.

The Migration Northward

As these problems increased, many African Americans left their homes and farms in the South around the time of World War I and traveled to northern industrial cities in search of a better life. Whole families, including immediate relative, moved to Chicago, Pittsburgh, Detroit, New York, Cleveland, St. Louis, and other cities where employment might be available. It must have taken considerable courage to embark on such a journey. In his poem, "Migration," Walter Dean Myers gives us a look at what these African Americans faced.

In the waiting room, "Colored,"

Hands, callused and as black as the rich

(Lawrence, *The Great Migration* , p. 61.)

The paintings of Jacob Lawrence printed in book form, *The Great Migration* , with accompanying text give us a visual picture to sharpen our realization of what the trek was like. Students will be asked to write a poem, perhaps joined with an illustration, assuming the role of someone who migrated. They will also investigate if any members of their family made such a move during past years. If, in fact, someone in their family did travel northward, they will then be asked to write a similar poem about what they have discovered. Throughout, the point that these people were taking a chance and the conflicting emotions they must have felt will be emphasized. The struggles, which followed, will be countered with the elements of family, church, and community that held them together.

The Civil Rights Movement

There is a considerable amount of poetry related to the Civil Rights Movement, which can be understood by fourth grade students, poetry they can relate to with relative ease. Many such poems refer to the feelings and the roles played by children: "Ballad of Birmingham" by Dudley Randall and "Incident" by Countee Cullen, (Clinton, *I, Too, Sing America* , p.92.) are just two. The works of Langston Hughes are particularly appealing, but there are many others. A film and book about Ruby Bridges, the little girl who integrated the elementary

schools of New Orleans, should provide considerable motivation. A brief summary of the historical events relevant to this period follows. Though highly successful in establishing Tuskegee Institute, a major industrial training center for blacks and able to win the support of influential white people, Booker T. Washington could not stem the tide of African American setbacks: increased segregation, loss of voting rights, violence, unemployment, and anti-black riots. W.E.B. DuBois emerged as the leader of those who insisted that blacks demand their full civil rights and favored a strong liberal college education. In 1905, the Niagara Movement was founded, followed by its becoming the NAACP in 1909. African Americans returning from World War I were disillusioned with the loss of jobs and housing. Race, riots sprang up along with the beginnings of black racial pride. In the 20's a literary awakening occurred with the Harlem Renaissance. The depression of the 30's then served to worsen economic life for black Americans. World War II saw the second mass migration from the South. Housing shortages and job competition led to riots. African Americans began to galvanize themselves for moves that would give them far-reaching civil rights. In the courts, especially in *Brown v the Board of Education* (1954), strides were made. The nonviolent acts of Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, and the Montgomery boycott of Washington are just some of the landmarks in the struggle, a struggle that continues today, marked by pain and violence, leading to eventual militancy, "black pride," affirmative action, and, most importantly, the achievement of real progress. The poems students read here will relate to these times and people and will involve students in a more personal examination of the movement. Poems I mention are listed in no particular order, though I will use "I, Too, Sing America," by Langston Hughes, as my starting point. Poems referring to actual historical events and individuals will be covered as they relate to the chronological presentation of historical events. It is difficult to pinpoint when each of the others will be used. Much depends on the group of students and the amount of time the constantly shifting events of an elementary classroom allow. I suggest that the teacher become familiar with a variety of the poems I refer to and then set their own priorities, though I feel each poem has a vital message to deliver.

Three poems by Countee Cullen: "For a Lady I Know" (Hughes, *The Poetry of the Negro* , p. 231.) examines the presumptuous attitude many whites held regarding African Americans. "Saturday's Child" (Clinton, *I, Too, Sing America* , p. 92.) presents a rhythmic though poignant picture of the hardships faced by black children. In the poem "Incident," (Clinton, *I, Too, Sing America* , p. 92.) a piercing wound is delivered by a bigoted white boy to a naïve young black girl. All three are excellent for upper elementary students and should easily motivate writing.

Four poems by Langston Hughes: "I, Too, Sing America" (Clinton, *I, Too, Sing America* , p. 9.) tells us of both the mistreatment of African Americans and their determination to prevail. It will be presented orally by both girls and boys. "Merry-Go-Round" (Hughes, *The Poetry of the Negro* , p. 9.) helps us to realize the sad effects that Jim Crow Laws can have on a child's enthusiasm. "Harlem" (Hughes, *The Poetry of the Negro* , p. 199.) speculates on what could happen to "a dream deferred." "Birmingham Sunday" (Hughes, *The Poetry of the Negro* , p. 200.) vividly tells us of the horrible atrocity which occurred in Birmingham, Alabama on September 15, 1963 when four little black girls were killed as a racially motivated bomb blast ripped through their Sunday School class. It will be used together with another poem, and a newspaper article from the *New Haven Register* , Wednesday, May 2, 2001, announcing that an ex-Klansman finally had been convicted. (See lesson plans.)

I have only listed four poems here, but there are others by Hughes which students relate to easily. Some appear in Hughes' *Selected Poems* , which appears in my bibliography.

Two poems by James Weldon Johnson: "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" (Clinton, *I, Too, Sing America* , p. 38.) was set to music by his brother Rosamond and in 1920 was adopted by the NAACP as the Negro National Anthem.

The first verse has been sung by almost every African American student in our area, but the meaning of its words is fuzzy to many of them, as is the son's general significance. All verses will be presented and discussed. (See lesson plans.) "The Creation" (Pinsky, *America's Favorite Poems* , p. 142.) gives us Johnson's version of the biblical Creation. It will be used as an illustration of the strong sense of religious faith that has sustained many African Americans and, also, to prepare an oral presentation which will develop pride in the students presenting. Claude McKay: "We Must Die" (Clinton, *I, Too, Sing America* , p. 58.) was written in response to the racial injustice and violence that was occurring in the South. He presents his words as a challenge:

Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
PRESSED to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

Sterling Brown: "An Old Woman Remembers" (Gross, *Talk That Talk* , p. 143.) tells the story of the 1906 Atlanta riots. It could easily move into a discussion of the causes of race riots and the effect they may have had on African American history. Pupils will be asked to comment on the woman's concluding comments on arming themselves as a means of ending the riot.

They sat on their front stoops and in their yards,
Not talking much, but ready; their welcome ready:
Their strong oiled and loaded on their knees.

A group of poems will be presented for various heroes involved in American history, as well as poems recalling the heritage of the past and various heroes who may not have been covered previously: "For My People," by Margaret Walker (Hughes, *The Poetry of the Negro* , p. 314.); "Heritage," by Gwendolyn Brooks (Clinton, *I, Too, Sing America* , p. 100.); "Still I Rise," by Maya Angelou (Clinton, *I, Too, Sing America* , p. 107.); "Listen Children," by Lucille Clifton (Gross, *Pass It On* , p. 28.); "Martin Luther King, Jr." by Gwendolyn Brooks, (Clinton, *I, Too, Sing America* , p. 100.); "Women," by Alice Walker (Clinton, *I, Too, Sing America* , p. 122.); "Malcolm X," by Dudley Randall, "American Gothic," by Samuel Allen, (Hughes, *The Poetry of the Negro* , p. 342.); "Harriet Tubman," by Eloise Greenfield (Hudson, *Pass It On* , p. 23.); and "My People," by Langston Hughes (Hudson, *Pass It On*, p. 22.).

Finally, to conclude this unit, we will focus on the personal feelings of the students about themselves and the accomplishments of those they know, including themselves. Poems relating to personal characteristics and feelings will lead the way for student creations based upon their own feelings and experiences. "Color," by Langston Hughes, "Black Is Best," by Larry Thompson, "Black Is Beautiful," by Useni Eugeni Perkins, "Jim," by Gwendolyn Brooks, "I Can," by Mari Evans, and "WilliMae's Cornrows," by Nanette Mellage are just a few which will be used. Poems about family will now be featured: "Big Mama" and "My Daddy Is a Cool Dude," by Karama Fufuka, "A Grandfather Poem," by William J. Harris, "Mother to Son," by Langston Hughes, and "Daddy's Little Girl," by Linda Michelle Baro. Again, these poems are from a group of poems that I have accumulated over the years. Most can be found in general anthologies of African American poetry or can be replaced with other poems conveying messages of personal pride in self and/or family. Some, but not all, are in the anthologies I have listed in my bibliography. They lend themselves well to use with motivators suggested by Koch. (See bibliography.) "I wish __," "I am proud __," or "Once I __ But now I __."

There are many other poems that would be appropriate for all sections covered in this unit. Each teacher should feel free to add or subtract from those that are mentioned. The important element is to include works which make historical facts more real to students and which motivate them to write poems of their own.

Each student will compile a two-pocketed folder containing copies of the poems the class has read together, along with those poems which that particular student has written and related essays and research materials. The group will print a class publication of favorite poems created by students. On a regular basis, students will share their creations with the rest of the class. Occasionally, students will go to other classrooms to read their poetry. They especially will trade poems with members of the other two classes whose teachers are participating in a team within this poetry seminar. The unit will last until the team's culminating assembly in April, gaining intensity as the event nears.

Since the culmination of this unit will be an assembly presented to the school and parents by the three-team classrooms, pupils will have ample opportunity to develop dramatic readings of their own poetry and that which they have read as a group. It is hoped that some parents will be motivated to write poetry about the pride they feel about their children.

Lesson Plans

I have included three lesson plans. The first is considerably longer than the other two and has more specific goals. The other two are shorter but serve more as culminating projects for the entire unit, gathering together the elements of pride, protest, and poetry that have dominated the rest of the unit. Lesson One: A Close Look at Birmingham, Alabama, 1963. "Did justice prevail?" Through the use of two poems, a newspaper article, and a novel, all focused on the 1963 bombing of a Birmingham, Alabama church in which four young African American girls were killed, this series of activities attempts to develop a deeper appreciation and understanding of the event and its connections to the present, as well as, developing an appreciation of two similar, yet contrasting, poems on the subject. It examines some of the techniques used by each poet as he presents his view and provides students with an opportunity to express themselves relative to the bombing.

Subject Matter Areas:

reading, language arts, and social studies

Vocabulary:

There are many vocabulary words in these works that will need some introduction or reinforcement for my students. Older students or an advanced group might need less preparation. Specific words will be suggested here as we examine each piece.

Objectives:

Develop a clearer appreciation and understanding of the events surrounding the 1963 bombing.

Develop and appreciation and understanding of the positive and negative aspects of the recent conviction (2001) of one of the bombers.

Develop an increased understanding of vocabulary used in the poems, story, and newspaper

article.

Develop the ability to identify rhyming lines, internal rhyme, repetition, metaphors, and descriptive vocabulary in poetry.

Develop the ability to compare and contrast the two poems and to relate their content to historical events.

Provide opportunities for pupils to express their feelings relative to the bombing by creating an "I wish ___" and an "I am proud ___" poem.

Materials:

"Ballad of Birmingham," by Dudley Randall (Randall, *The Black Poets* , p. 107.)

"Birmingham Sunday," by Langston Hughes (Hughes, *The Poetry of the Negro* , p. 200.)

"Church Bomb Suspect Guilty," *New Haven Register* , 05/02/01.

The Watsons Go to Birmingham - 1963 by Christopher Paul Curtis (optional)

Procedure:

The number of days needed to achieve these objectives could vary greatly, probably from two or three days to two or three weeks, if the novel is included. I have previously written an institute unit (89.02.08) based on only "Ballad of Birmingham" which teachers might wish to refer to on the Institute's web site:

<http://www.yale.edu/ynht/>. The lesson covers the poem's content well, but an examination of the poetic elements, which help make it so effective are not examined. When the group first hears the two poems, they already will have traveled along the path of African American history leading to this period of the Civil Rights Movement. They will have knowledge of Jim Crow laws and the history of prejudice that inspire them. They will be aware that a resistance to the injustice of segregation was growing and that this resistance drew desperate, violent act of retaliation from those who would not change.

After discussing the historical fact surrounding the bombings, the two poems will be presented. Since it more clearly recounts the events, "Ballad of Birmingham" will be discussed first. Discussion of vocabulary (sacred, fierce), rhyming lines (2nd and 4th), internal rhyme ("no" and "go"), repetition ("street of Birmingham"), voice (child, mother, and poet), metaphors ("rose petal sweet"), and descriptive language ("clawed") will be given attention here. The impact of the final two stanzas, after we are being led to believe that the girls might be safe, will lead us to the more overtly vivid description in "Birmingham Sunday." For my fourth graders, there are a number of words that will require discussion: scorched, ignite, Dragon Kings, implement, missionaries

aeons, and Golden Rule. Since I believe this poem can serve its purpose without completely understanding the references to China, Red, and dynamite, they will be briefly explained but not dwelled upon. The descriptive language, presence of some repetition ("Four little girls...Four tiny girls"), and the implication of revenge and ultimate judgment mentioned in the poem's final section will receive more attention. This should lead us naturally to the newspaper article of 05/02/01.

Before that, I feel compelled to mention that some may feel that images of "spattered flesh" and "blood upon the wall" are too vivid for nine and ten year old students to read without causing harm. Certainly an unsupervised reading is not recommended, but if students are carefully led to this point, they know of the sacrifices made by African Americans from the past and are developing the pride for which this unit aims. Knowing that this event, as horrible as it was, helped to strengthen the resolve of the Movement, that it could not be ignored by the public and politicians, and that ultimately some justice was achieved through the enactment of laws and that some form of retribution for those responsible has occurred, might counteract the brutality depicted in Hughes' poem by replacing fear with pride.

Next, the newspaper article from the *New Haven Register* will tell us of the conviction of Thomas Blanton, after over 37 years, for helping other Klansmen to plant the bomb. Again, there are a number of vocabulary words that need varying amounts of discussion: galvanized, exterior, murky, segregationist, foul-mouthed, and in vain seem most necessary for fourth graders.

After reading the article together, the class will discuss various aspects of the piece: (How long ago did the bombing occur? Why did it take so long to convict Blanton? What was positive and what was negative about the fact that it took until now to achieve some justice for Blanton's acts?)

Possible questions for follow up discussion of poems

Explain which poem told the story best.

Explain which poem was the most vivid. How did you feel about reading this descriptive language?

Which poem did you like most? Explain why.

Explain how you think the four young girls would react to Blanton's conviction.

Student Poetry

Students will be asked to create an "I wish ___" and an "I am proud ___" poem expressing their feelings related to the bombing, its effect on the Civil Rights Movement, Blanton's conviction, and, perhaps how they view the present state of affairs regarding equal rights and the threat of violence. From previous experiences, they will be familiar with this approach to writing poetry. (See section on writing poetry.) More than one poem will be welcomed, but emphasis will be placed on elaboration, descriptive vocabulary, metaphors, and repetition. Poems will be shared among class members and perhaps with students in other classrooms. Copies will go in their poetry folders. Some will be read during our culminating assembly.

The Watsons Go to Birmingham - 1963 by Christopher Paul Curtis

The use of this novel is optional and probably would not work well with most classes beyond middle school. It tells the fictitious, but basically realistic, story of an African American family living in Flint, Michigan who travel to Birmingham where the children's grandmother lives. They go there to deposit the defiant, oldest son whose antics are being blamed on life in a northern urban environment. Besides his almost immediate rehabilitation, the trip narrowly avoids disaster when young sister attends Sunday School in the very church and on the very day of the bombing. In a rather mystical chain of events, the girl escapes and the attitudes of all family members are altered forever. The story is both humorous and touching. It has much that fourth graders, and even older students, can relate to easily. Most importantly, it gives us insight into some of the feelings that must have been felt by those families directly affected by the blast. It should make the historical events, the two poems, and the article even more meaningful to students. I will read the novel to the class during our daily oral reading period. It should take two or three weeks to complete. Appropriate comprehension questions easily present themselves as the teacher reads, but the main emphasis will be on appreciating the story and its characters.

Suggestions for Use with Older Students

Though designed for upper elementary grade students, with slight changes in approach and emphasis, most of these activities seem quite appropriate for middle and high school students. An additional section on the conviction and execution of Timothy McVeigh for the Oklahoma City bombing could result in some comparisons with the Birmingham, Atlanta bombing. The disregard for who was killed in order to emphasize the goals of each group involved seems to provide a valid comparison. Lesson Two: Developing Expository Writing Based Through the Use of Poetry

Poem: "Lift Every Voice and Sing" by James Weldon Johnson

Subject Matter Areas:

reading, language arts, social studies, and social development

Vocabulary:

liberty, chast'ning, treading, and stray

Summary:

This poem, which many recognize as the Negro National Anthem, talks of the pride African Americans should feel about their strength that sustained them through the difficult history of the past.

Objectives:

Develop the ability to recognize three events or individuals from African American history for which we should be proud.

Develop the ability to create a five paragraph expository essay on these events or individuals.

Procedure:

After most of the unit has been completed, the poem will be presented, read, and sung. Rhyme, repetition, metaphor, rhythm, and descriptive language will be discussed. The content stressing the recognition of pride and strength from the past will be discussed. Pupils, who will be familiar with the form of a five-paragraph essay (introduction, three supporting paragraphs, and a conclusion), will be asked to write an expository paper in which they discuss three instances in African American history for which they feel we should "lift every voice and sing." The use of detail will be emphasized. Giving examples from the lives of those they know from history or those whom they are familiar with from their own experiences will be encouraged in order to illustrate how the strength of each example has affected the future. Possibilities include the value of being nonviolent (Martin Luther King, Jr.) or the importance of pursuing your own talents despite the barriers placed by others (Baseball players Jackie Robinson and Satchel Page). References to poems we have read will also be encouraged. Essays will become part of their folders. Lesson Three: Connecting Pride in Yourself to Expository Writing and Poetry

Subject Matter Areas:

Language arts and social development Since developing a feeling of pride in the protest which has occurred throughout African American history, an implicit goal of all activities in this unit, students will now be asked to focus on things about themselves for which they are proud. They will again be asked to use the five-paragraph expository form, a focus in grades 4-6, to discuss three things about themselves for which they are proud. They easily should be able to support their choices through the use of personal examples. Essays will be read and shared with others before being placed in their folders. Finally, each student will develop a poem using the form "I am proud of myself ___" and/or "I feel proud when ___." More than one response will be encouraged, along with the use of descriptive language, repetition, and any other element of poetry that is appropriate to what they write. These poems will be shared with others and should be part of the team's culminating activity.

Bibliography

Books Related to the Teaching of Poetry All of these texts by Kenneth Koch relate to the teaching of poetry to both children and adults. They discuss the elements of poetry and give examples of simple approaches that teachers may use in motivating students to write poetry. All, also, contain examples to illustrate the points and techniques that Koch is presenting. Koch, Kenneth, *Making Your Own Day* . New York: Touchstone, 1998

Koch, Kenneth, Rose, *Where Did You Get That Red: Teaching Great Poetry to Children* . New York: Vintage Books, Random House, Inc., 1990

Koch, Kenneth, *Wishes, Lies and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry* . New York: Harper and Row, 1970

Koch, Kenneth, and Farrell, Kate. *Sleeping on the Wing* . New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1981

Sources of Unit Material Clinton, Catherine, *I, Too, Sing America* . Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Co., 1998..

An anthology of African American poems moves us from Lucy Terry's "The Bars Fight," composed in the 1700's, on to the present. Excellent information on poets along with thought provoking illustrations.

Curtis, Christopher Paul, *The Watson's Go to Birmingham* - 1963.

This chapter book follows an African American family from Flint, Michigan to Birmingham, Alabama where the lives intertwine with the 1963 bombing of a church in which four young African American girls were killed. Humorous and sensitive.

Gross, Linda and Barnes, Marian, *Talk That Talk: An Anthology of African American Storytelling* . New York: Touchstone Book, 1989.

Though its main focus is on the African American tradition of storytelling, it contains a number of poems, some of which I have used.

Hamilton, Virginia, *Many Thousand Gone: African Americans from Slavery to Freedom* . New York: Alfred a Knopf, 1993.

Hamilton brings the period of enslavement and the Civil War to life through the stories of mostly little known people who escaped slavery. Though she takes some liberties by the inclusion of conversation and in some description, the stories are essentially accurate and quite appealing to elementary students. A small amount of poetry is included.

Hudson, Wade, *Pass It On* . New York: Scholastic, Inc., 1993.

Interesting, colorful illustrations accompany this anthology of African American poems appropriate for elementary students.

Hughes, Langston, *Selected Poems* . New York: Random House, Inc., 1959.

Contains a variety of poems by Hughes. Many relate to this unit.

Hughes, Langston and Bontemps, Arna, *The Poetry of the Negro, 1746-1970* . New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1970.

This anthology includes the work of 163 poets and hundreds of poems arranged historically. Brief notes on poets and section on tributes by non-African Americans. Poems also indexed by first line and author. Excellent source of material before 1970.

Lawrence, Jacob, *The Great Migration: An American Story* . New York: The Museum of Modern Art and the Phillips Collection, Harper-Collins, 1993.

Accompanied by a brief text, the paintings of Jacob Lawrence tell the story of the northward migration of African Americans. A concluding poem "Migration," by Walter Dean Myers, captures the same spirit as Lawrence's paintings.

Lawrence, Jacob, *Harriet and the Promised Land* . Hong Kong: Aladdin Press, 1997.

Accompanied by a rhyming poem, the dramatic paintings of Lawrence tell us the story of Harriet Tubman.

Myers, Walter Dean, *Now Is Your Time: The African American Struggle for Freedom* . New York: Harper Trophy, Harper Collins, 1991.

By telling the stories of real people, Myers gives us a meaningful picture of African American history. I especially drew on his discussion of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment, focus of the movie, *Glory*. Contains authentic photographs and a few pieces of poetry.

Pinsky, Robert, *America's Favorite Poems* . New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2000.

An anthology of favorite poems selected by a wide variety of individuals. Contains a number of African American poets.

Randall, Dudley, *The Black Poets* . New York: Bantam Books, 1971.

Includes poems from folk poetry up until examples from the 60's. Presented in historical order. Some are not appropriate for

elementary students.

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