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## **A Middle School Approach to Black Literature: An Introduction to Dunbar, Johnson, Hughes, and Angelou**

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What do the American Puritans, the Scottish, the French, and the English have in common with black Americans? Famous writers, of course. Both Robert Burns and Paul Lawrence Dunbar are remembered for their use of the folklore and the language of their people. Jonathan Edwards and James Weldon Johnson “rained down hellfire” in their biblical interpretations of literature. Guy de Maupassant and Langston Hughes are masters of the short novel that captured the ambitions and hopes of their races. Charlotte Bronte and Maya Angelou managed to put excitement into otherwise commonplace autobiographies. Each of these writers stands among the giants of his times. Black America, though shackled and oppressed, has risen to the ranks of the great by producing her share of genius among the masterpieces of literature. There are many notable black writers, living and dead.

Paul Lawrence Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, and Maya Angelou are black writers who have produced some of the best black writing over the years, ranging from the serious to the light. Their thoughts, emotions, and accomplishments transcend the color line. Their works, like those of other black writers, combine entertainment, historical interest, and literary value. They share a common subject and set of feelings: the black experience. Margaret Butcher says in an article from *The Negro in American Culture* that every Negro writer has “something to say.” He cannot escape having important things to say. His mere body, for that matter, is eloquence. His quiet walk down the street is a speech to the people.

Dunbar, Johnson, Hughes, and Angelou represent the varieties of the black experience. Through their magical words and musical phrases, it is easy to comprehend their roots, joys, sorrows, dreams, and anger. The mention of their names can bring instant excitement. Two of these major writers, James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes, come out of the Harlem Renaissance. Paul Lawrence Dunbar dates back before the Renaissance period, and Maya Angelou is considered a remarkable contemporary writer of the present. The ties that bind these artists are not only color but also tradition, form, and language.

Dunbar, Johnson, Hughes, and Angelou use the spoken language of black people, often dialect or something close to it. Frequently, Paul Lawrence Dunbar captured the language of his people in a colorful and exaggerated way. He loved to write about the lives of average blacks during the post-Civil War period. Dunbar wrote about people involved in the simple pursuits of life, showing them as they sang, conversed, hunted, fished, or napped by the fireplace. He wrote most freely when he used dialect. He described and evaluated pretty girls, handsome young men, and selfish old men. What young woman wouldn’t want to be praised like

the songbird in Dunbar's poem "When Malindy Sings"?

G'way an' quit dat noise, Miss Lucy—  
Put dat music book away;  
What's de use to keep on trying?  
Ef you practise twell you're grey,  
You cain't sta't no notes a-flyin'  
Lak de ones dat rants and rings  
F'om de kitchen to de big woods  
When Malindy sings.

In 1895, W. D. Howells, for want of a closer phrase, suggested that such pieces be called "dialect pieces," but they are really not dialect so much as delightful ways of glorifying the spoken language.

Whatever the consensus may be, the language of the common black man, whether past or present, is unique and interesting in itself. Often dialect was looked upon as a weakness in black speech, but today it is considered chic. "Right On, Bro!" Whites imitate blacks in picking up and popularizing the latest in "street language." Each of the four writers shows skill in using colorful, vivid black language. Sometimes James Weldon Johnson hesitated to use dialect in his compositions because he felt that dialect had its place in fun and jest, and used it in the poem "Sence You Went Away."

Seems lak to me de stars don' shine so  
bright,  
Seems lak to me de sun done loss his  
light,  
Seems lak to me der's nothing goin'  
right,  
Sence you went away.

The language of that verse is uniquely black, as is the language of the following epitaph taken from Dunbar's "A Death Song":

Lay me down beneaf de willers in de grass,  
Where de Branch'll go a-singin' as it pass,  
An' w'en I's a-layin' low  
I kin heah it as I go,  
Sayin', sleep, Ma Honey, tek yo' res'  
at las'.

In his poem "Po Boy Blues" Langston Hughes shows his skill at a language very close to dialect:

I was a good boy  
Never done no wrong  
Yes, I was a good boy  
Never done no wrong,  
But this world is weary,  
An' de road is hard an' long.

Maya Angelou steps outside of poetry to prose in her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* as she describes a conversation with her mother that took place in Stamps, Arkansas:.

He said, "Annie, I done tole you,  
I ain't gonna mess around in no  
niggah's mouth." I said, "Some-  
body's got to do it then." And he  
said, "Take her to Texarkana to  
the colored dentist."

Langston Hughes once said, “The passing of dialect as a medium for Negro poetry will be an actual loss for in it many beautiful things can be done, and done best.” If W.D. Howells had lived during Hughes’ time, he would have agreed. Howells had written, “There is a precious difference of temperament between the races which would be a great pity to ever lose. This is best preserved and most charmingly suggested by Mr. Dunbar in those pieces of his where he studies the moods and traits of his race in its own accent.”

Margaret Larkin in *Opportunity* pointed out that Robert Burns had caught the dialect, speech cadences, and character of the Scottish people in his poems, and that Langston Hughes had done for the Negro race what Burns did for the Scotch—squeezed out the beauty and rich warmth of a noble people into enduring poetry.

Dunbar, Johnson, Hughes, and Angelou also reflect in their works a respect for the power of the folk preacher in providing an imaginative view of the world and coherence to his community. Dunbar did not advocate organized religion and dogma, but he believed in the Christian faith. At the end of *The Uncalled*, Fred says to Eliphalet: “I can do all the good I can, Uncle Liph, but I shall do it in the name of poor humanity until I come nearer to Him.” When Eliphalet suggests that he has lost his religion, Fred replied, “Lost it all? I’ve just come to know what religion is. It’s to be bigger and broader and kinder, so that people around you will be happy.”

Biblical references are found in the works of all four of the writers selected here. Vivid pictures of the Shepherd and his sheep abound. From the printed page, the roar of the black preacher delivering a rousing sermon peals. From the tradition of slavery emerged the strong respect for the Church that blacks have treasured. The ability of writers to capture the sense of deliverance from the trials and tribulations of everyday life is indeed a talent. The spirituals, an extraordinary rich example of black folk art, have taken a significant place in black folklore.

Dunbar joyfully put words to rhyme as he told of the Christmas story in his poem “Christmas Carol.”

Ring out, ye bells!  
All Nature swells  
With gladness of the wondrous story.  
The world was lorn,  
But Christ is born  
To change our sadness into glory.

Many religious messages come from sermons or sermonettes in black literature or from well-known Biblical allusions, such as this verse from “The Prodigal Son” by Johnson.

Oh-O-oh, sinner,  
When you’re mingling with the crowd in

Babylon-  
Drinking the wine of Babylon-  
Running with the women of Babylon-  
You forget about God, and you laugh  
at Death . . .

Johnson said in reference to the poems in *God's Trombones* that the power of the old-time preacher was still a vital force; in fact, it was still the greatest influence among the colored people of the United States. Not only did Johnson write sermons, he told his readers how he wanted them read. "This intoning is always a matter of crescendo and diminuendo in the intensity—arising and falling between plain speaking and chanting . . . A startling effect is gained by breaking off suddenly at the highest point of intensity and dropping into the monotone of ordinary speech." Langston Hughes allows the high-spirited Laura to preach her first sermon in the novel *Tambourines to Glory* in just this way. She stands on a street corner in Harlem:

"I were drowning once, friends, but  
now I'm saved. I were down there in  
sin's gutter lower than a snake's belly—  
now look at me. Look at me up here on  
the curbstone of life reaching out with  
my voice to you to come and be saved, too.  
Our Church is this corner, our roof is  
God's sky, and there's no doors, no place  
in our church that is not open to you  
because there are no doors. So come in  
and be one with us, one with God, and  
be Saved."

Laura drew in enough sympathizers from that one sermon to collect money to feed Essie and herself for a whole week.

Angelou, too, has pictured the mighty preacher at the altar giving out the “do’s” and the “don’ts” to the congregation in *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*.

First Corinthians tells me, “Even if I have the tongue of men and of angels and have not charity, I am as nothing. Even if I give all my clothes to the poor and have not charity, I am as nothing . . . Wooooo, Charity . . . it don’t want nothing for itself. I’m talking about Charity. Oh Lord . . . help me tonight. Charity is poor. Charity is simple.

James Weldon Johnson would have been pleased by the depth of that sermon and by sisters and brothers of the church giving out loud Amens.

Dunbar, Johnson, Hughes, and Angelou also shared the belief that beauty can be extracted from the ability of blacks to transcend bondage and oppression, that the black experience could be transformed into a literary equivalent of music. Arna Bontemps has said, “Negro experience in America has found a vastly satisfying medium of expression in music. If occasionally this has been felt as a mood of the times, in the broad sense, perhaps that is true. The lyrics . . . are certainly as valid as the music.” Just as Louis Armstrong composed beautiful notes on the horn and intimately touched the black ear, some black writers have touched the black mind. James Weldon Johnson paid tribute to the unknown composers of the spirituals in his poem “O Black and Unknown Bards”:

O black and unknown bards of long ago,  
How came your lips to touch the sacred fire?  
How, in your darkness, did you come to know  
The power and beauty of the minstrel’s lyre?

The title of Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* is a sort of parody of Paul Lawrence Dunbar’s poem, “Sympathy”:

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,  
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,  
When he beats his bars and would be free;  
It is not a carol of joy or glee,  
But a prayer that he sends from his  
heart’s deep core,  
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings-

I know why the caged bird sings.

Human bondage becomes melodious in Dunbar's poems, loudly enough to impress Maya Angelou when she wrote a novel about bondage—bondage of the mind which is the hardest to escape. Through the isolation and depression of being black rose part of the essence of the black experience—soul. Although soul is not the whole black experience, it is the most romanticized. In the poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," Langston Hughes used the word "soul" in the refrain, and was perhaps one of the first to give it the same meaning it would come to have fifty years later for all young blacks. (His reference probably goes back to *The Souls of Black Folk* by Du Bois.)

I've known rivers:  
I've known rivers ancient as the world  
and older than the flow of human blood  
in human veins.  
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

Hughes talked about another type of soul in *The Best of Simple*, one with which many Black Americans can identify:

"I have been laid off, fired and not  
rehired, jim crowed, segregated, insulted, eliminated, locked in, locked  
out, locked up, left holding the bag,  
and denied relief. I have been caught  
in the rain, caught in jails, caught  
short with my rent, and caught with the  
wrong woman, but I am still here."

Only those that have lived what Simple lived can appreciate what he was saying. Curly, who is Rita's lover in *Gather Together in My Name* by Angelou, brings soul closer to home:

He drove his 1941 Pontiac without seeming  
to think about it. I sat in the corner  
pushed against the door trying desperately  
not to watch him.  
"Where's the baby's Daddy?"  
"I don't know."  
"He wouldn't marry you, huh?" His voice  
hardened in the question.  
"I didn't want to marry him." Partly  
true.  
"Well, he's a low-down bastard in my  
book and needs his ass kicked." I began to  
love him at that moment.

Dunbar makes readers feel that "something extra" that the colored band emits as it struts proudly in "The Colored Band":

You kin hyeah a fine perfo'mance w'en de  
white ban's serenade,  
An' dey play dey high-toned music mighty sweet,  
But hit's Sousa played in ragtime, an'  
hit'a Rastus on Parade,  
W'en de colo'ed ban' comes ma'chin' down de street.



No one has yet rivaled James Weldon Johnson's soulful version of the "Creation":

And there the great God Almighty  
Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,  
Who flung the stars to the most far corner  
of the night,  
Who rounded the earth in the middle of  
His hand;  
This Great God,  
Like a mammy bending over her baby,  
Kneeled down in the dust  
Toiling over a lump of clay  
Till He shaped it in His own image;  
Then into it He blew the breath of life,  
And man became a living soul.  
Amen. Amen.

Dunbar, Johnson, Hughes, and Angelou present the phenomenon of the black folk-preacher. Collectively, they describe a belief in beauty that transcends bondage. Frequently they use a language that retains certain qualities of dialect. And they enrich the immense volume of black literature with their labors. These same qualities appear and will continue to reappear in new forms in the black writing of today and tomorrow.

## Lesson Plans

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**Grade levels: Average-to-high 7th or 8th graders**

**PURPOSE:** *This unit includes material that has been selected from four black writers: Paul Lawrence Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, and Maya Angelou. The chief*

***purpose of these selections is to present reading as interesting as possible in the forms of poetry and prose as a basis for developing an appreciation of literature in young readers. The interest value of these selections ranges from middle-school through college and beyond. The quality of the lessons is controlled by the teacher's presentation of the unit. These lessons will prove valuable to the student as a source of information and ideas and as a means for hours of stimulating reading for both pleasure and purpose.***

***STRUCTURE: Each lesson contains a biographical sketch of the author, a motivational activity, a reading selection and an evaluation.***

***PREPARATION: These two steps are recommended in helping the instructor prepare for teaching this unit.***

PREVIEW—Read as much background information as possible on the selected writers.

Familiarize yourself with some of the major works of these writers. Pay attention to pictures,

1. captions, sub-headings, topic sentences, summaries, so that you can point them out to your students as they come across them in their reading. Listen to all cassettes or tapes beforehand as well as previewing all video materials.

RELATE—as you preview materials you will recognize facts and ideas that may relate to other

2. writers or other periods. Tie in the selections of these authors with those of other American writers.

***INSTRUCTION: These three steps will help your students get as much as possible from the reading selections.***

READ—Students must have ample time to read quietly and undisturbed under your

1. supervision. Some reading can be assigned outside of the classroom, but in order to guarantee that the reading is actually done, time must be allotted by the teacher. It is imperative that the teacher provide a suitable atmosphere for silent reading in his classroom.

2. REVIEW—Have students re-read for main ideas and chief aims of selections. Have them skim over parts which they understand, and concentrate on sections that are difficult or unfamiliar.

3. RECALL—Have students collect information, facts, ideas, that will be useful to them. Have them criticize dogmatic selections, have them list facts, outline sections, etc.

***MOTIVATION: The presentation of this unit cannot be done in a passive manner. Black literature is not passive, but rigorous, exciting, and unique. In order to get and keep the attention of your students, you must make the effort to keep the lessons as interesting as possible. In order to persuade middle-school youngsters to appreciate black literature, the introduction to such must be as satisfying as the drama and trauma of its most prevalent challenger—the TV set.***

***OBJECTIVES: After teaching this unit students should be able to—***

—Appreciate some of the contributions of blacks to American Literature.

—Critically place these contributions in the spectrum of literature as a whole.

- Form opinions on the aims and goals of the four writers.
- Analyze, criticize, and evaluate literature more meaningfully.
- Become more selective in their choices of reading materials.

***EVALUATING: A pretest is valuable to the teacher in preparing for this unit. Teachers should not spend valuable time in teaching information that has already been taught by a previous teacher. In order to find out where students rank in their present knowledge of the subject matter covered by this unit, a pre-test is helpful. After all lessons have been taught, a post-test is usually administered. Often it is an interesting practice if the instructor keeps the pre-test results to compare with later post-test results. It is to be hoped that a show of growth will be recorded. Both pre-test and post-test are good tools for measurement and can be easily developed by the instructor.***

1. PRETEST—Usually composed of true-false questions of a general nature concerning authors and their works.
2. POST-TEST—detailed test consisting of essay questions, multiple-choice, and completions, centering on actual works of the authors.

## Lesson #1

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### Paul Lawrence Dunbar

- A. Paul L. Dunbar was an American novelist and poet. He was born in 1872. His father escaped from slavery in Kentucky before the Civil War. Dunbar was born in Dayton, Ohio. He was one of the first authors to picture black life with honesty and realism. For this reason, his works are historically important, though most critics do not consider him a major writer.

In much of his writing, Dunbar portrayed the lives, customs, and speech of Negro Americans. His best novel, *The Sport of the Gods* (1902), describes the hardships of Southern Blacks transplanted to a Northern city, but also their dignity and humor. Dunbar wrote many poems in the dialect of the former slaves. They include “When Malindy Sings,” and “When De Co’n Pone’s Hot.” He died in 1906.

( *World Book* 1976)

- B. Was Paul L. Dunbar a slave?  
What is meant by “dialect” of the former slaves? Give an

example.

- C. Listen to the cassette recording of several selected poems of P.L. Dunbar performed by thirteen-and fourteen-year-old students.
- D. Reading Assignment: “When Malindy Sings,” and “We Wear the Mask,” from the *Complete Poems of P.L. Dunbar* .
- E. Would “When Malindy Sings” be considered a serious or light poem? Why?  
Who was “Malindy?” Why was she so popular?  
Who is the wearer of the mask in the poem, “We Wear the Mask?”  
Do you feel Black Americans still wear the “masks”?  
Which of these poems do you prefer? Why.  
Which poem could easily convert into a song? Why?

## Lesson #2

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### James Weldon Johnson

- Early in his writing career, James W. Johnson wrote songs for vaudeville, minstrel shows, and light opera. He was born in Jacksonville, Florida, in 1871. His experience as a vaudeville writer influenced the dramatic and musical qualities of his later poetry. Johnson’s best known book is
- A. *God’s Trombones* (1927). It consists of seven sermons in verse, expressed in the manner of a black preacher speaking on a southern plantation. The poems combine biblical materials with black folklore. At least two of them—“The Creation” and “Go Down Death”—are still performed on the stage.

In addition to his writing, he had a varied public career. He was U.S. consul in Venezuela and Nicaragua and served as secretary of the NAACP. He died in 1938.

( *World Book* 1976)

- B. Which of Johnson’s poems is still performed today? What other occupations did Johnson hold besides writing?  
Ask students to write (one page or more) their own ideas of how the world was made. Ask
- C. them to draw one sketch (on poster paper provided) illustrating their ideas. Collect pictures and papers for a bulletin board titled “In the Beginning . . .”
- D. Reading Assignment: From *God’s Trombones* read the poem “The Creation.”
- E. Why do you suppose Johnson compared darkness with a hundred midnights in the poem “The Creation”?  
How did God use his arms, eyes, and hands in creating the world?

Why does Johnson compare the Great God Almighty with a “mammy” bending over a baby?  
Describe what you think God looked like as Johnson portrays him. What is the rhyming pattern in this poem? Explain.  
Would you consider performing this poem on stage? Why?

## Lesson #3

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### Langston Hughes

- Langston Hughes was born in 1902 and died in 1967. He was an American poet and short-story writer. In his first collection of poetry, *The Weary Blues* (1926), he expressed the despair
- A. of blacks over social and economic conditions under which they lived. This despair was relieved by what he then felt was the black man’s only defense— sharp humor and self-control.

Hughes’ later volumes, from *The Dream Keeper* (1932) to *The Panther and the Lash* (1967), reflect the rapidly changing times. His work told of the black man’s growing demands for social justice, and warned the white: “you’re the one/Yes, you’re the one/ Will have the blues.” In spite of his increasing anger, Hughes avoided the violence that marked the work of later black writers.

He also wrote plays and autobiographical works. Many of his humorous sketches of black life were collected in *The Best of Simple* (1961).

Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri. He attended Columbia University for a year in 1921 and then held a variety of jobs before the publication of his first book. He received the Spingarn Medal in 1960.

( *World Book* 1976)

- B. What did the poems of *The Weary Blues* protest?  
Why was Langston Hughes angry with America?  
For what and why is the Spingarn Medal given?  
What was the title of his first book?
- C. Pass around the class the 8 x 10 snapshots of storefront churches in Harlem and New Haven.
- D.
1. Reading Assignment: Read chapters 1Ð6 of *Tambourines To Glory* orally, with your class following you silently.
  2. Have students listen to cassette recording of a female Baptist minister preaching an actual sermon.
  3. Assign reading of chapters 7-12 of *Tambourines to Glory* .
  4. Discuss the plot of the book so far.
  5. Assign chapters 13-20 of *Tambourines to Glory* .

6. Discuss development of plot thus far. Take a look at character development. Ask students for descriptions (physical) of the various characters.
  7. Assign chapters 21-29 of *Tambourines to Glory*.
  8. Play recordings of Gospel music featuring female artists. Have the class decide which recording best fits the music of the "Reed Sisters' Tambourine Temple."
  9. Read chapters 30-36 of *Tambourines to Glory* orally with the class.
  10. Tie all of the reading together. Discuss highlights of the book. Review the character development. Try to get students to moralize about the way the book ends.
- E. How did Laura and Essie decide upon the name "The Reed Sisters"?
- Describe Essie's appearance and personality.
- Describe Laura's appearance and personality.
- Which character represented the "good" in people?
- Which character reflects the "bad" in people?
- Why did Laura feel threatened by Sister Birdie Lee and Marietta?
- How did Buddy treat Laura? Why?
- How many illegal games was the "Temple" involved in?
- Why was Buddy killed? Who witnessed Buddy's death?
- Why was Essie accused of Buddy's death?
- How did Essie manage to show mercy and forgiveness in spite of all that had gone on in the "Temple"?
- Who is the heroine of the book?
- What incident would be considered the climax of the story?
- How did you feel about Laura after reading the entire book?

## Lesson #4

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### Maya Angelou

- Maya Angelou, author of the best-sellers *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *Gather Together In My Name*, and an original poetry collection *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie*, has studied dance in San Francisco and has toured Europe and Africa for the State Department in *Porgy and Bess*. She taught dance in Rome and Tel Aviv. In collaboration with Godfrey Cambridge, she produced, directed, and starred in *Cabaret for Freedom*. She also starred in Genet's *The Blacks* at the St. Mark's Playhouse. At the request of the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Miss Angelou became the northern coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. From this she went to Africa, where she wrote for newspapers in Cairo and taught at the University of Ghana. She has written and produced a ten-part TV series on African tradition in American life and she wrote the musical score and original screenplay for the film *Georgia*. At this writing, Miss Angelou is working on another sequel to her autobiography.
- (Random House 1974)
- B. What makes Miss Angelou different from the other writers in this unit?

At what time was Maya Angelou involved in civil rights?

- C. Present a slide show to the class depicting scenes from the rural South that are comparable to the atmosphere of Stamps, Arkansas.

- D. Reading Assignment: Read aloud pp. 3-8 of *Gather Together in My Name* to the class. Have them read silently. Have class continue to read chps. 1-6 at this sitting.

Discuss Rita and the Baby through chapter 10. Discuss the hardship of being a single parent from Rita's standpoint.

Assign chapters 11-14 for silent reading during another class sessions.

Answer questions that students may have. Discuss character development. Read chapters 15-16 orally with class. Review chapters 1-16 to make sure students are following the plot successfully.

The remaining half of the book should be assigned now. Only one day a week should be given to silent reading; the bulk of the remaining reading should be done outside of the classroom. At this time, divide class into five or six groups. Assign each group several chapters to report on orally. The group reporting for that day should sit before the class as a panel of experts. The group should take turns giving the plot development of the assigned chapters and should be able to respond to any questions that might arise.

Tie everything together. Review character and plot development. Try to localize the changing settings. Discuss "hero" and "heroine" of book. Get students to discuss why the author wrote the book and the social significance of the book.

- E. How did Rita feel about people saying her baby could pass for white?

Describe Rita's relationship with Curly.

Why didn't Rita join the army?

Where did Rita work as a nightclub dancer?

Why did Rita return to Stamps, Arkansas?

What happens to Rita's baby?

How did Bailey help Rita? Why was Rita worried about him?

What did you think about Troub?

After leaving Guy with her mother, where did Rita go at the end of the book?

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