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Black Birds Of Promise Who Defy The Odds Of Gods And Sing Their Songs

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Contemporary Black poets such as James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Maya Angelou, Nikki Giovanni, and Alice Walker have all made very significant contributions to the world of poetry. These poets were chosen not only because their works are well known, but because each wrote at a time when significant cultural and social changes took place in our country. Each of these poets contributed pieces which reflect the attitudes and values that existed during their era.

After reading Maya Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, I was struck by the beauty of her dedication. The awareness of being Black is the most powerful inspiration for Black writers in America. Although being Black was once considered a liability both socially and culturally, the poets I chose truly "defied the odds". The songs they sang echoed not only the struggle, but the beauty, hope and the determination of the Black experience.

Langston Hughes, one of the Harlem Renaissance writers, produced his works at a period of time when Black Americans were filled with little hope. His poems such as "Ennui", "Mother to Son", and "Island" speak of struggle, lost hope, and despair. Thirty years later Nikki Giovanni's writings represent not struggle but hope, courage, and determination that things were improving and getting better everyday.

The students that I work with in New Haven are handicapped not only educationally, but socially and culturally as well. These students have been exposed to very little in terms of Black contributions in literature. Beginning in February, Black History Month, my students will begin this unit dealing with Black poetry. This unit will begin by exploring the lives of each of these poets. The students will be presented with a biographical sketch of each poet, followed by a discussion of significant historical events which took place during the high point of their careers. Students will then be introduced to selected poems by each author. We will examine each poem in detail to interpret the meaning and became familiar with each author's individual writing styles.

This unit is being designed primarily for students in a middle school with learning disabilities and some social emotional problems. Based on my knowledge of their skills, a great deal of time will be spent on interpretation. Both oral and written activities will be used to encourage participation from even the most reluctant student. These activities will include art projects, creative writing, and interpretative role-playing. Visual aids will be used as needed.

Once the students have become familiar with the poetry and writing styles of the poets, we will then examine

the historical time frame in which their writing took place and how this may have influenced the content of the material produced. Students will be free to examine the relevancy of the material at the time it was written in a social and cultural context and determine the relevancy for us today.

Lastly, students will be asked to create their own poetry based on a general theme. It is my hope that this unit will enable my students to feel comfortable with their own unique writing styles as well as motivate them to create their own poetry.

Sequence of Lesson and Teaching Strategies

This unit will be taught three times weekly beginning in February. The entire unit should be completed in six to eight weeks. My unit will be divided into five parts.

I. Introduction—Biographical sketches of the six poets will be presented to students. They will be given a brief history of each poet's life.

II. Significant Historical Events—Students will be exposed to historical events which took place during the highpoint of each poet's career.

III. Terms Used In Understanding Imagery in Lyric Poetry—Students will learn terms and definitions useful in understanding lyric poetry.

IV. Poetry Reading—Students will begin reading selected works by each poet. We will examine the writing styles of each poet and interpret each poem.

V. Creating Poetry—At this point in my unit students will be encouraged to create their own poems based on a general theme.

The poets I have chosen will be presented to students in the following sequence:

James Weldon Johnson

Langston Hughes

Gwendolyn Brooks

Maya Angelou

Nikki Giovanni

Alice Walker

The following background information is being presented for teacher information. Students may be presented with a little or as much of this information as each teacher feels necessary.

Background

James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes both created works during the first cultural movement involving Blacks in America. The Negro Renaissance or as it is sometimes called the Harlem Renaissance accepted that an American Negro could explore his blackness, dramatize it, describe its roots and still remain safely within the general frame of an American civilization.

James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938)

Into James Weldon Johnson's life has been crowded a great variety of experiences. He was born in Jacksonville, Florida and educated in the schools of that city. He attended Atlanta University and Columbia University. Mr. Johnson served as principal of a grammar school, studied law and was admitted to the bar in 1897. From 1906 to 1913 he served as United States Consul, first in Venezuela and then in Nicaragua. Diversified as his life has been, his writings have been just as versatile. Besides *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), he is the author of *Fifty Years and Other Poems* (1917), *God's Trombones* (1927), *Black Manhattan* (1930), and *Saint Peter Relates an Incident of the Resurrection Day* (1930). It is as a poet, however, that Johnson has achieved his finest effects. James Weldon Johnson wrote with understanding, sincerity, imagination, poise and a great sympathy for subject matter. Johnson chose to use old Negro diction rather than traditional dialect for many of his poems. Such works as, "Go Down Death", and "Listen Lord" are among the most moving poems of American Literature. His poems evoked the racial and creative spirit of the Harlem Renaissance. ¹

Langston Hughes (1902-1967)

Langston Hughes is undoubtedly America's most famous Black poet. He was born in Missouri in 1902, but grew up all over the country. Hughes, called by many the "Poet Laureate" of Black America, wrote his first short story while in Cleveland's Central High School. By the age of twenty-one Hughes had experienced varied and harsh phases of life, out of which he wrote a number of poems. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers", "Cross", and "I, too", are poems which reflect Hughes' despair over conditions of the Black man in America. Langston Hughes was known as a cosmopolite and a rebel and both of these attributes are reflected in his poetry. As a rebel, he was not bound by poetic form and tradition. As a cosmopolite, he took his subject matter from any level of life that interested him. A great deal of Hughes' poetry is written in the Negro folk and jazz rhythms. "Minstrel Man" and "Bound No'th Blues" are examples of two poems in which Hughes uses jazz rhythms in his poetry. Langston Hughes was constantly a promoter of the Black race and his efforts to blend folklore and jazz can be measured by his recognized universality as a lyric poet. ²

Gwendolyn Brooks, Maya Angelou, Nikki Giovanni, and Alice Walker are four Black Women poets whose works reflect the experiences of Black women in America. Their poems not only reflect the struggle of Black women, but also speak of love, lost love, motherhood, friendships, and relationships.

Gwendolyn Brooks

Gwendolyn Brooks was born in Topeka, Kansas and raised in Chicago. She has been writing poems since she was a little girl. Her first critical recognition came in 1940 at the Northwestern University Writers' Conference. Her first volume, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1943) was well received in the literary world. This was followed by *Annie Allen* (1949) a novel, *Bronzeville Boys and Girls* (1956), *The Bean Eaters* (1960), *Selected Poems* (1963) and *In the Mecca* (1968). Among her many awards was a Pulitzer Prize in 1950. As a poet she has used traditional forms in unconventional ways. Some of her most popular poems are, "The Ballad of Rudolph Reed", "The Children of the Poor" and "The Bean Eater". Her incisive but individual poems have made her both an admired poet and a spokesman for her race. ³

Maya Angelou

Maya Angelou, author of the bestsellers, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, *Gather Together In My Name*, *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*, *The Heart of a Woman* and more recently *Now Sheba Sings The Songs*, has also written four collections of poetry, *Just Give Me A Cool Drink Of Water 'fore I Die*, *Oh Pray, Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well*, *And Still I Rise*, and *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?* She received the Golden Eagle Award for her documentary, *Afro-American in the Arts*, for PBS in 1977. In 1983, she received the Matrix Award in the field of books from Women in Communications, Inc. Maya Angelou poetry reflects the powerful spirit of Black women the world over. It is a complex spirit comprised of remorse, pain, ecstasy, triumph and above all strength. ±4

Nikki Giovanni

Nikki Giovanni, my favorite poet, is extremely outspoken. She was born in Knoxville, Tennessee in 1943. She attended Fisk University where she majored in history and graduated in 1967. Currently Ms. Giovanni teaches creative writing at Rutgers University. When asked why she decided to be a writer, Giovanni responds that she couldn't see anywhere to go intellectually and thought that she'd take a chance on feelings. Her individual poems have appeared in numerous journals including *Negro Digest*, *Black Dialogue*, and the *Journal of Black Poetry*. Her work appears in a number of anthologies including *New Black Poetry*, *Black Poetry*, *Black Art*, and *City In All Directions*. "Nikki-Rosa", "A Robin's Poem", and "Knoxville Tennessee" are among Giovanni's poems that helps one to reflect on growing up, happiness and sometimes sorrow. ⁵

Alice Walker

Alice Walker's first book, *Once: Poems*, was published in 1968. Since then she has continued to turn to poetry for some of her most personal deeply felt statements. She has said that her poems, even the happy ones, emerge from an accumulation of sadness when she stands again in sunlight. Walker won a Pulitzer Prize for her novel, *The Color Purple*. Her other published works include two collections of short stories, *In Love and Trouble* and *You Can't Keep A Good Woman Down*; three volumes, *Once*, *Revolutionary Petunias*, *Good Night Willie Lee, I'll See You In The Morning*; two novels, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *Meridian*; a volume of essays, *In Search of Our Mothers' Garden: Womanist Prose* and *A Biography of Langston Hughes*. Born in Eatonton, Georgia, she now resides in San Francisco. ⁶

I. *Introduction*— It is important for my students to learn about each poets' life and the time period in which their works were produced. To motivate my students' interest in these poets I will start by creating a bulletin board entitled "Famous Black Poets". The six poets I have chosen will be the focus of this board. Pictures of each poet and a few important facts about each will be included in the construction. To help maintain an interest throughout my unit, it is important that this beginning portion of the unit be presented with a great deal of enthusiasm. I will spend a total of two days discussing the poets with students. Two poems by each of the six poets will be read to students after discussing the poets. I will read "Listen Lord A Prayer" and "The Prodigal Son", by James Weldon Johnson; "As I Grew older" and "My People" by Langston Hughes; and "Sadie and Maud" and "We Real Cool" by Gwendolyn Brooks. By Maya Angelou, student will hear the poems "Family Affairs" and "Starvation". Choosing two poems by Nikki Giovanni was difficult because I have so many personal favorites. I finally decided on "Alone" and "Knoxville Tennessee". Alice Walkers' poems, "To Die Before One Wakes Must Be Glad" and "Ballad of the Brown Girl" will be read last. Once students have been read poems by the six poets, they will be encouraged to create a booklet containing some important facts about each of the six poets. They may include one poem by each poet in their booklet. As a follow up activity I

will develop short stories about each poet. Students must supply the missing facts in each story. An example of this activity maybe found in the lessons included in this unit.

II. *Significant Historical Events*— My students have a great deal of difficulty dealing with events from a time period they are not familiar with. They are often unaware of events happening in the world today. I have spent a great deal of time making them aware of what is going on in other parts of the world. Visual aids such as magazines, newspaper articles, and filmstrips are very helpful when I teach history and current events in my class.

This portion of my unit will be presented to students using lectures, magazine articles from 1930-1965, stories and filmstrips. We will begin by discussing the period of time known as the Harlem Renaissance. My class will outline important historical events which took place during this era. I will then discuss the depression which killed the Renaissance as it put an end to the Jazz Age.

Black America in the 1930's was represented by sickness, unemployment and general misery. Filmstrips and magazine articles will be used to help my students understand the difficulties Black Americans faced in the 1930's. We will then move to discussion of the 1960's. Again visual aids will be used to show students such things as the rise of the Black Panther Party, The March on Washington, and the Assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

III. *Terms Used In Understanding Imagery In Lyric Poetry*—In order for my students to be able to interpret the meaning of the poems we will read, they must first understand the way in which poets use figures of speech to express their feelings. I have chosen the following terms for my students to become familiar with:

1. A Lyric poem—is a descriptive poem that expresses the poet's feelings.
2. A figure of speech—is a device, or aid, by which the poet makes his/her feelings clear. Through them the poet presents images, or pictures, to help the reader see as the poet does.
3. A simile—is a comparison of two unlike things. The words *like* or *as* are used in the comparison.
4. A metaphor—is a comparison that does not use the words like or as.
5. An assonance—is the repetition if the same vowel sound in several words.
6. A consonance—is the repetition of the same consonant sound in several nearby words.

One strategy to help students understand these terms will be the use of poems. Carl Sandburg's poem "Fog" which may be found in *Chicago Poems* is an excellent poem to use. Students will be presented the poem then they will be asked the following questions.

1. What is Sandburg describing?
2. What two things is Sandburg describing?

3. Does Sandburg use a simile or a metaphor to make the comparison? How can you tell?

It is not my intent to have students memorize these definitions. I do, however, want them to have the necessary skills which enable them to interpret the meanings of the poems which will be presented to them.

Songs are often poetry with music. Music is a very important part of many students daily lives. The use of the now popular “Rap” songs may be used in teaching the students the use of figures of speech.

IV. *Reading Poetry*— Reading poetry is not a new task in my classroom. My students, who are two to three levels below in reading, usually approach any type of reading with very little enthusiasm and a lot of anxiety.

I would like to make this major portion of my unit enjoyable for my students. To begin, a portion of my class will be designated as poetry corner. Students will be encouraged to sit on comfortable pillows and relax. James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes, my first two poets, may not be easy for students to read or interpret without a great deal of guidance from me. We will start each new poet by reviewing what we have learned about the poet’s life and the time period in which they lived. Our first three poems by James Weldon Johnson will be “The Creation”, “The Prodigal Son”, and “Go Down Death”. All poems will be read by me initially. “The Creation” which is not difficult to interpret, will be discussed in detail. Students will be encouraged to share their ideas and feelings about the poem. We will discuss the religious aspect and the use of old Negro Sermons in relation to Johnson’s poetry. Art activities will be used as a means for interpretation. Students will be asked to illustrate one of the three poems. Poems chosen by our next poet, Langston Hughes, are “Motto”, “Dream Variations”, “Minstrel Man”, “Genius Child” and “Mother to Son”. We will begin by reviewing the Harlem Renaissance period and Langston Hughes life. Langston Hughes was a poet who wrote prose and poetry. The use of the now popular “rap” songs will be used during our discussion of Hughes’ poetry. One teaching strategy will be to have groups of students use one of Hughes’ poems as a “rap” song. This will be fairly easy to do with “Motto”, “Minstrel Man” or “Dream Variations”, which are poems which use rhythms of Harlem. We will discuss the meanings of each of Langston Hughes’ poems and what may have inspired him to write these poems.

Poems by Gwendolyn Brooks, “The Bean Eaters” and “The Ballad of Rudolph Reed” will be fairly easy for students to read and interpret. Role playing will be used to help students interpret each poem. I will let students work in groups and ask them to create a skit. The two poems by Maya Angelou “Caged Bird” and “My Life Has Turned to Blue” will be used to show students the use of figures of speech in poetry. Students will illustrate both of these poems as a means of interpretation.

Nikki Giovanni’s poems “Nikki-Rosa”, “My House”, and “Mothers” are all poems which tell a story. These poems will be fairly easy for students to read and interpret. This will leave us free to discuss what may have inspired Giovanni to write these poems and the message and or feelings she’s trying to inspire in her readers. We will use the themes from each of these poems when students are asked to create their own poems.

Alice Walker’s poems “Hymn” and “Medicine” will be difficult for students to understand. Walker’s poetry is not easy to interpret and the reading level of many of her poems may be difficult for my class. Using Alice Walker’s poems I will encourage students to share what each poem means to them.

V. Creating Poetry—This will be the final portion of my unit. At this point students will be asked to create their own poem based on a specific theme. Before asking them to create poems, I will share with them a collection of poems written by other children between the ages of twelve and eighteen. These poems maybe found in the book *Soulscript Afro-American Poetry* , edited by June Jordan. We will use these poems as a source of enjoyment only.

Before we begin creations I will give my students these suggestions:

1. Do not be concerned about the format of your poem. It does not have to rhyme. It does not have to sound poetic.
2. As you write, make every word count.
3. Try to make your feelings clear. Did the topic make you feel happy, sad, uneasy, thrilled, angry, or glad.
4. If you wish, add rhyming words to your poem. But do not force it. Some poems sound better unrhymed.
5. Re-read your poem. When you are satisfied with it, give your poem a title.

One of the problems I usually have with my class is fear of trying anything new. When they are asked to create something, (a story or drawing), they often ask me what should they do before beginning. For this reason I have decided to take away a little of the anxiety by giving them specific themes to base their poems on. We will start by listening to Nikki Giovanni’s poem “My House”. We will talk about some of the feelings this poem evokes in the listener. Students will then be asked to write a poem based on the same theme. I will give students a few days to work on this until they are satisfied with what they have written. I will also write a poem based on this theme to share with my students. It is very important that these poems are never corrected or criticized in any way. My objective is for students to become comfortable with what they write. We will write poems based on three other themes: families, mothers, and my smile.

Listed below are the selected poems which will be used in this unit:

James Weldon Johnson

“The Creation”

“The Prodigal Son”

“Go Down Death”

Langston Hughes

“Dream Variations”

“Motto”

“Minstrel Man”

“Genius Child”

“Mother to Son”

Alice Walker

“Hymn”

“Medicine”

Gwendolyn Brooks

“The Bean Eaters”

“The Ballad of Rudolph Reed”

Maya Angelou

“Caged Bird”

“My Life has Turned Blue”

Nikki Giovanni

“Nikki Rosa”

“My House”

“Mothers”

Notes

Maya Angelou. *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*— quoted from dedication.

1. *The Book of American Negro Poetry* , ed. James Weldon Johnson (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1931), p. 114.
2. *The Book Of American Negro Poetry* , ed. James Weldon Johnson (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1931) pgs. 232-234.
3. *On Being Black: Writings By Afro-Americans* , ed. Charles T. Davis and Daniel Walded (Greenwich, Conn: Fawcett Publications, Inc. 1970) p. 379.
4. *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?* (New York: Random House, 1983).
5. *Gemini, An Extended Autobiographical Statement On My First Twenty-five Years Of Being A Black Poet* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971).
6. *Once: Poems* , (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1968).

Bibliography for Teachers

Angelou, Maya. *S haker, Why Don't You Sing?* New York: Random House, 1983.

A collection of twenty-three wonderful poems by Maya Angelou. This collection will lead to an appreciation of Angelou's poetry. Her best collection to date.

Bontemps, Arna. *American Negro Poetry* . New York: Hill and Wang, 1974.

An anthology of poems from the Harlem Renaissance period to present.

Davis, Arthur P. and Peblow, Michael W. editors. *The New Negro Renaissance , An Anthology* . New York: Holt, Rhineholt, and Winston, 1975.

An excellent collection of Black American literature that represents the diversity of the New Negro Renaissance (1910-1940).

Davis, Charles T. and Walden, Daniel, editors. *On Being Black Writings By Afro Americans* . Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, Inc. 1970.

A good source for obtaining biographical information on Afro American writers from Fredrick Douglas to present, as well as excerpts from their greatest works.

Giovanni, Nikki. *Gemini* . New York: Penguin Books, 1971.

Giovanni's extended autobiographical statement. Excellent source for those wanting to know more about the poet. For those who are already fans, you appreciate her more after reading *Gemini* .

Hopkins, Lee Bennett, editor. *You Don't Turn Back Poems By Langston Hughes* . New York: Alfred A. Knoff, Inc. 1967.

These collection of poems by Hughes' are great to introduce students to the poet. A very diverse collection.

Johnson, James Weldon. *God's Trombones, Seven Negro Sermons In Verse* . New York: The Viking Press, 1927.

A collection of Johnson's poems which use the old Negro Sermons rather than traditional dialect.

Johnson, James Weldon, editor. *The Book of American Negro Poetry* . New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1931.

An anthology of American Negro Poetry Johnson selected forty poets starting with Paul Laurence Dunbar. Sketches of each poets are included which are critical as well as biographical.

June Jordan, editor. *Soulscrip Afro-American Poetry* . New York: Zenith Books, Doubleday and Company Inc., 1970.

Soulscrip opens with poetry by Black children ranging in age from twelve to eighteen, then moves to poems by accomplished Afro American poets.

Koch, Kenneth. *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* . New York: Perennial Library, 1980.

A must for teachers introducing poetry in the classroom. Koch includes poetry written by students and gives teaching suggestions and strategies.

Walker, Alice. *Once: Poems* . New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1968.

The first volume of Alice Walker's poetry. A fantastic collection of witty and graceful poems.

Bibliography for Students

Poems used in this unit have been placed on file at the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute Office.

Angelou, Maya. *Now Sheba Sings The Songs* . New York: E.P. Dutton/ Dial Books, 1987.

Brooks, Gwendolyn. *Selected Poems* . New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1963.

Giovanni, Nikki. *My House* . New York: Quill Publications, 1983.

Hughes, Langston. *Selected Poems*. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1981.

Johnson, James Weldon. *God's Trombones, Seven Negro Sermons In Verse* . New York: The Viking Press, 1927.

Jordan, June, editor. *Soulscript Afro American Poetry* . New York: Zenith Books, Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1970.

Lesson I

Concept To review fact about Afro-American poets.

Objective The students will select appropriate words, from a provided list, to complete the story about Langston Hughes.

Langston Hughes was born in _____. He was known as the _____ of Black America. He wrote his first short story while in _____. A great deal of Langston Hughes poetry is written in the _____ and _____. He is known as the most famous _____ in America.

This type of lesson can be used to review facts about each poet.

Lesson II

Concept To review terms used in understanding imagery in lyric poetry.

Objective Students will be able to recognize a simile, metaphor, assonance, and consonance in a poem.

Directions Read the poem “Velvet Shoes” to students. This poem may be found in *Collected Poems by Elinor Wylie*. Students are to copy and complete the following sentences.

1. One example of a simile in the poem is _____.
2. An example of a metaphor in the poem is _____.
3. An example of assonance is _____.
4. An example of consonance is _____.

Lesson III

Concept Time and events have sequential order.

Objective Students will read a story, then put the events in sequential order.

Directions Read the story then put the list that follows in order. Number the events in the order which they occurred. Write 1 beside what would come first, 2 beside what would come next, and so on.

James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes were two poets who wrote during the period called the Harlem Renaissance. James Weldon Johnson was born in 1871 in Florida. He wrote *The Autobiography Of An Ex-Colored Man* in 1912. Langston Hughes was born in 1902 in Missouri. He wrote *Simple Speaks His Mind* in 1950. James Weldon Johnson died in 1938 and Langston Hughes in 1967.

1. James Weldon Johnson died in 1938. _____
2. Langston Hughes died in 1967. _____
3. Langston Hughes wrote *Simple Speaks His Mind* in 1950. _____
4. James Weldon Johnson wrote the *Autobiography of An ExColoured Man* in 1912. _____
5. James Weldon Johnson was born in 1871. _____
6. Langston Hughes was born in 1902. _____

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