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Understanding and Appreciating Poetry: Afro-Americans and Their Poetry

Curriculum Unit 87.03.04
by Frances Pierce

The majority of my inner-city sixth grade class is of the Afro-American heritage. They, as all youth, need and benefit from literary experiences that develop self-awareness as individuals and awareness of being a member of a larger cultural family. I have therefore designed a unit to be used on a daily basis during Black History Month to supplement the language arts program. This unit will focus on Afro-American poetry.

I am hopeful that this unit will increase the understandings of the joys and griefs blacks, as well as those of other races, experience. Beside the differences, students may see the similarities among individuals of different races. That is, one can see a part of himself in a situation and can feel for a moment, anyway, what is meant by brotherhood. One of my goals in the development of this unit is to help my students better understand themselves and other people as well, and to improve relationships among the different races. Students will recognize the basic human needs, desires and concerns that are felt by both blacks and whites and the ways that these are manifested in the black culture. "Any Human to Another" by Countee Cullen is an example of such a poem that illustrates individuality, yet a commonalty among human beings.

One reason that I chose poetry for my unit is because historically, the most popular literary form among Afro-Americans has been poetry. Dudley Randall, black poet-publisher, feels that "it is not only because it is the fastest and least expensive to reproduce, but also because it is in the black oral tradition." ¹

Before the Civil War most black literature was oral: poems, songs and tales produced by slaves to help them cope with plantation life. In their oppressive atmosphere songslike "Go Down Moses" or "Steal Away to Jesus" might have signaled that a secret meeting was to be held in a graveyard or swamp. Often their simple sounding songs masked complex and revolutionary meanings. The black genius for the singing words goes back hundreds of years. It survives from those times in the lyrics of the spirituals in ballads like "John Henry" and the work and play songs of the slaves. Dudley Randall's *The Black Poets*, an anthology, contains a good selection of oral poetry.

The students would be interested to know that the first published poem, "Salvation of Christ with Penetential Cries" by Jupiter Harmon appeared in 1760, a date which marked not the beginning of the black literary movement in America, but rather the first incorporation of the black history tradition into the European tradition.

The students will recognize that black culture has ancient, beautiful and significant traditions. In order to

begin to understand and appreciate the black culture, the students must begin to learn about the black culture. I feel that by learning about black tradition and heritage, I can instill pride in my black students and enhance their self-image. Learning about the black heritage, through the study of poetry, can help non-black students correct misconceptions, increase the ability to relate to black people and help them better understand their own traditions. I plan to do this by introducing the students to Afro-American poetry by presenting the selected poets and their poetry chronologically in a brief biographical, historical context. The poets that I have chosen are: Paul Laurence Dunbar, Arna Bontemps, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks. The bibliography for teachers in this unit lists several sources for biographical information. Also, many anthologies include short biographical sketches. Of course the encyclopedias give brief biographical sketches of the poets. For this reason, I have not included extended personal biographical data in this unit.

Before the students actually study the Afro-American poetry, I will pursue the objective of introducing them to poetry in general. In this "introductory" phase the class will explore the concept of "what is poetry," learn the basic elements and forms of poems, explore how music is related to poetry, listen to poetry recordings and tape their readings of selected poetry. These activities are designed to develop an understanding and appreciation of poetry.

By taking my students through this introduction to poetry, I feel that they will be better prepared to study the selected poetry. In this study of Afro-American poetry, my objectives are to have my students learn new vocabulary, to identify themes, elements and forms of the selected poems, to understand the messages of the poems, and finally, to do creative writing as a response to the study of selected poetry.

There are several types of activities that I would choose to involve my students to help them to generate creativity in writing. One component of my classroom writing program is the use of yearlong journals. One reason that I like journal writing is that it is adaptable to various assignments and subjects.

One way to help the students generate ideas for journal writing is to use the idea of clustering as proposed by Gabriele Rico in the book, *Writing the Natural Way*. This technique is best described by example. The student would write one word in the center of a piece of paper, for example, "dreams." Circle the word. Now the mind is encouraged to wonder freely. Connect the center word to as many other circles emanating from the word as possible. After an allotted time, five to ten minutes, enough has been clustered to provide a basic framework for writing, whether it be a simple paragraph, a poem, or vignette. This idea helps the writer to focus attention on what is buried within the mind.

Sometimes I use what I call free writing when the student writes freely without revision. This method helps the students who can think of nothing to write. They write whatever comes to mind as it relates to the subject whether it really makes sense or not. This helps relieve the "blank page syndrome." As the students become able to generate ideas and state them on paper, I would proceed to encourage them to engage in revising and proofreading their work.

Brainstorming is another technique that I feel is worthwhile in helping students to generate ideas for writing. I would lead the brainstorming sessions and write words or ideas on the board to help stimulate responses for writing. I would introduce the clustering technique, for example, in several brainstorming sessions before I would ask them to do it individually.

Kenneth Koch in his *Wishes, Lies and Dreams* suggests that poems written on a particular subject should be read to the students at the same time they are writing poetry. This could be an incentive for generating

creativity from the students.

Reading poetry aloud, according to Kerber in his *The Teaching of Creative Poetry*, to and by the students helps them to build vocabulary and make a connection between reading, speaking and writing. So throughout the implementation of this-unit I would read poetry and use poetry recordings to increase skill development as well as to develop an appreciation.

Introduction to Poetry

Since this unit will likely serve as an introduction to the study of poetry, I would explore the concept of “what is poetry” through explanation and discussion, learn the basic elements and forms of poetry and learn how music relates to poetry.

The word “poetry” almost defies definition. Part of the beauty of poetry is its elusiveness. Poetry might be compared to the work of an artist as he creates a painting on a canvas that enables the viewer to hear, see, touch and experience the world through the artist’s impression. The poet does the same thing in carefully choosing words in his attempt to transmit that relationship with an experience, a moment or an object. So are the poet’s words carefully chosen, just as an artist carefully chooses his colors and strokes for his picture. Words of a poem are as carefully chosen and shaped into patterns of sound and form. Poetry is a elusive creation formed by using simple words!

Since I am considered a traditional teacher, one who relies heavily upon structure and continuity, I will be following a particular format in the teaching of poetry. This format will emphasize: learning new vocabulary, listening and appreciating the poetry, understanding the poet’s concept and exploring the poems for the basic elements and form (s). These elements are: line, rhythm, stanza, image, simile, metaphor, alliteration, onomatopoeia, personification, assonance and consonance. Some attention will then be given to the different forms of poetry such as: ballad, narrative, limerick and free verse. The students will learn these by reading and listening to poems illustrating these elements and forms. Through definition and example they will do related practice activities to ensure this basic learning.

I feel that a knowledge of a basic working vocabulary is necessary for the study of poetry. After the introduction of the vocabulary the students will participate in oral and written exercises to further develop that poetic vocabulary: I would ask the students to read and copy the following definitions:

- I. Repetition is the repeated use of a word or phrase.
- II. Rhyme is the repetition of a similar sound in two or more words at the end of lines.
- III. Alliteration is the occurrence of the same initial sound in two or more words within a line, stanza or a poem.
- IV. Assonance is a repeating of the same vowel sound in several nearby words.
- V. Consonance is the repeating of the same consonant sound in several nearby words.
- VI. A simile is a comparison of two people or things. The words *like* or *as* are used in making the comparison.
- VII. A metaphor is also a comparison. Unlike similes, however, metaphors do not use like or as. Instead they state that one person or thing is another.
- VIII. Personification gives quality of life or personality to things that are not alive.

As a part of the introduction to this vocabulary I would offer further explanations and illustrations, then I would proceed to involve the students so they can demonstrate an understanding of the vocabulary. The lesson plans related to specific poems will reflect further opportunities to deal with basic vocabulary development. I would try to avoid involving the students with so many poetic devices that the beauty of the mood and meaning would be lost. In *Wishes, Lies and Dreams*, Koch said, "Poetry should be talked about in as simple a way as possible and certainly without such bewildering rhetorical terms as alliteration, simile, and onomatopoeia." ² However, because of the expectations of our language arts program, I feel that it is at least necessary to introduce these terms in as simple a way as possible. I would use one or two class sessions for studying this vocabulary.

To demonstrate that music is related to poetry, I would use a class session or two to play rap music from such selections as *Run DMC King of-Road* album. The students would be directed to make associations with sound, color, feeling etc. This activity involving analogies could be verbal and/or written. Another strategy that could be used in relationship to music is to listen to teacher chosen rock music selections. The students could examine the words to the songs, provided by the teacher, for poetic devices. *Rock and Soul*, *Song Hits* and *Music Alive* are excellent sources for obtaining rock music lyrics to use with the students. (More information related to these publications can be found in the bibliography).

Using music-related activities to introduce poetry would be pertinent because music is so prominent in the lives of junior high students.

For the next part of the introduction to poetry, I would make available different kinds of commercial poetry recordings, such as *Anthology of Negro Poetry*, *Anthology of Negro Poets: 200-Years*, *The Poetry of Langston Hughes* and *Gwendolyn Brooks Reading Her Poetry*. In addition to the commercial recordings, I would select poems by Dunbar, Bontemps, Cullen, Hughes and Brooks that I would tape. I would be sure to include in my selection those that would be studied in this unit. I would use these recordings primarily for the sheer pleasure of listening and appreciating in the classroom as both large and small group activities. A listening center complete with individual headsets is needed in order to-use this as a small group or an individual activity.

In addition to these listening activities, I will provide a collection of Afro-American anthologies and poetry collections for pleasure reading and reference purposes. (Most middle and high school libraries in New Haven have extensive collections of Afro-American literature.)

I will encourage the students to check out these materials for further listening and reading at home. I will require no written responses for these introductory listening experiences.

As an extension of this appreciation activity, the students will be encouraged to tape their readings of poetry on inexpensive tapes provided by the teacher. I will encourage them to experiment with pitch, mood and tone and to analyze the effect as they read and listen to their voices on tape.

The Study of Afro-American Poetry

After introducing the students to poetry the class would proceed to study selected Afro-American poetry in depth utilizing a format such as learning brief biographical and historical information about the poet, *learning* new vocabulary words, *listening* to the selected poems being read by the teacher or on tape, *reading* the poems themselves, *discussing* the concepts, ideas, themes and elements, *answering* questions related to the understanding of the poetry, and *writing* creatively in response to the poetry selections. The class will work with selected poems from widely known Afro-American poets: Paul Laurence Dunbar, Arna Bontemps, Countee

Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Gwendolyn Brooks. These poets and their works were chosen for diversities in themes, styles, use of poetic devices, and the historical and sociological perspectives.

My basic strategies for presenting the lesson on Afro-American poetry will have structure and continuity. Before we actually study the poetry of a chosen poet, I will present some biographical background of the poet, relating as much historical and sociological data as I feel is relevant to my class. (The bibliography contains biographical reference sources.)

The lesson plans will follow this basic outline: (These activities may be oral and/or written.)

- I. I will introduce and explain the difficult vocabulary words, if there should be any.
- II. The students will either copy the poem from the board or be given a copy by the teacher.
- III. The teacher will read the poetry aloud at least twice. Student volunteers will read aloud also after having time to read the assignment silently.
- IV. I will lead a class discussion about the meaning of the poem, being careful not to overdo this. Emphasis will be placed upon student interpretation.
- V. Next, we will examine the poem for poetic devices and form such as those described earlier. It is likely that I will have to assist them with this in class, at least initially.
- VI. The final in-class activity will be a creative writing activity. In assigning this writing, I will use ideas from Koch and Elbow, in addition to my own. My lesson plans that follow in the latter part of the unit will detail specific suggestions for writing.
- VII. Since homework is a requirement at our school, I might choose from these options as an assignment: (All of these activities will be possible because I will have a set of *World Book* encyclopedias, commercial and teacher-made poetry recordings, anthologies and related biographical materials)

- Write a biographical report of the poet's life.
- Make a list of the titles of several poems written by the poet that we are studying.
- Copy your favorite poem, exactly as the poet has written it and illustrate it.
- Choose a poem and write a paragraph about what you think the poet is saying to you.
- Make a "My Favorite Poems" booklet by copying several favorite poems.
- Create a poem to share with the class.
- Write more complex paragraphs comparing and contrasting different poems/poets.
- Try changing a poem by adding another stanza or changing certain words.
- Choose a poem, other than the class selections, and practice reading it at home. Share the meaning and the poetic devices used in that poem with the class.

Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906)

Before the Civil War black and white literary tradition remained separate. The few blacks who wrote for publication lived in privileged circumstances, They, like the whites, wrote for a purpose, not for pleasure. It was not until after the Civil War that black writers had the leisure to write for entertainment or the freedom to incorporate styles and ideas from the black oral tradition. During the late 1800's Paul Laurence Dunbar was one writer who used the black oral literature form. The most widely read of the early black writers, Paul Laurence Dunbar was the first to earn a living by writing. In his short life, this prolific author completed several volumes of poetry, a number of collections of short stories and four novels.

Dunbar's works are suitable for middle and high school students because they are easy to understand and demonstrate good poetic techniques. His poems fall into two categories: dialect poems that tend to use folk humor and stereotypes and non-dialect poems that frequently have no racial overtones.

The dialect poems that I chose for my students are: "Little Brown Baby," "Scamp" and "Wadin' in de Crick." There is a nice progression from the "Little Brown Baby," who is scared of the bogey man to "Scamp," the tired toddler, to the schoolboy in "Wadin' in de Crick," *Little Brown Baby* is a good collection of these dialect poems.

These humorous dialect poems depict a warm, loving relationship with the parents especially his mother. These poems about the pleasurable events of childhood make use of imagery and rhyme. The students would enjoy reading and interpreting the dialect of these poems. After practice in reading the dialect, the students could do dramatic choral or unison reading of the selection. The students could then rewrite the poems using non-dialect English to note how the effect of the poems changed. Another writing activity that I might use is to have the student write a poem or paragraph about a pleasurable childhood experience such as a church picnic or getting new shoes.

Dunbar's short non-dialect poems make an interesting study in contrast with the humorous dialect poems. I chose "Sympathy" and "We Wear the Mask" for this unit.

These two short poems illustrate Dunbar's use of rhyme, imagery, simile, metaphor and repetition in his expression of emotions related to the oppressed black. "We Wear the Mask," relates how his people must hide the reality of being black behind smiling masks, in spite of their feelings of grief, sadness and oppression. "Sympathy" metaphorically compares the plight of the blacks to that of a caged bird that longs to be free.

As a contrast to the writing experience related to the humorous dialect poems, I would direct the students to write a poem or paragraph that conveyed sadness.

The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar is an excellent source of Dunbar's poems that includes biographical information as well.

Harlem Renaissance

The 1920's noisily brought in the Harlem Renaissance. For the first time black writers suddenly began to appear and assert the values of the black culture instead of that of middle class white American society.

By this time in history, education for blacks was not unusual, though not easy for many to attain because of circumstances. A group of black writers and thinkers had formed a group in Harlem, where they could meet to share problems and to analyze their works.

For the first time black writers turned toward self-assertion, because they had attained freedom to be themselves. However, they had experienced enough discrimination to know that assimilation was not possible.

The writings of the blacks did flourish. Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Arna Bontemps, Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes were among the poets of that period considered skillful enough to stand on their own merits in competition with other writers of the time.

For this unit, I have chosen to explore poetry selections of Arna Bontemps, Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes.

Arna Bontemps (1902-1973)

Bontemps' works span a half century from the Harlem Renaissance to the 1970's. His works include novels, children's books, poetry, biographies, short stories and anthologies.

Bontemps' poetry is included in almost all of black anthologies and is included in his collection *Personals*. *Golden Slippers* is an excellent anthology for young people. His poems are concerned with history, with the injustices suffered by black people in the past and rather pessimistic possibilities for the future.

Many of Bontemps' poems use nature imagery, a restrained tone, and somewhat traditional form. One of his most popular poems, "A Black Man Talks of Reaping," contends "small wonder that my children glean in fields/they have not sown, and feed on bitter fruit," since they have been denied the fruits of their labor. My lesson for this unit will focus on this poem and the "Daybreakers," a short poem full of imagery and rhyme.

Bontemps' poems are concerned with history, with the injustices suffered by black people in the past and the rather pessimistic possibilities of the future. "A Black Man Talks of Reaping," has the obvious external meaning of a Negro farmer who has had his products stolen by his nephew. Actually, the poem has more meaning than that. Farmers sow seeds and expect harvest if the winds or birds do not take the seeds away. This poet's metaphoric reflections on sowing and reaping lead him to other conclusions.

"Daybreakers" is a short poem of only six lines. In this poem, Bontemps uses nature imagery and a restrained tone. The short lines clearly illustrate the use of rhyme. This poem, as well as "A Black Man Talks of Reaping," uses capital letters only at the beginning of the stanzas unless a capital I is used.

For a writing assignment, I would challenge the students to write their interpretations as to what messages these poems are presenting. I would direct them to use as many words as possible that are contained in the poems in the interpretations.

Countee Cullen (1903-)

Countee Cullen was another significant poet of the Harlem Renaissance. Cullen wrote with pathos and understatement. His poetry deals with the black search for identity and the meaning of race. "Yet Do I Marvel," one of his best known poems, asks how could God have made one black and allowed him to sing. "The Shroud of Color," is a longer poem that deals with the meaning of skin color. Two poems, not as overtly racial in tone that should appeal to middle school students are "Saturday's Child," about a child born into poverty, and "Tableau," about the friendship of a black and white boy. I have chosen "Yet Do I Marvel," and "Tableau" for this unit. The poems were chosen for the mood and tone as well as the poetic devices utilized in each.

“Yet Do I Marvel” appears difficult to read because of the reversed sentence patterns and unusual way of stating ideas. In this rhymed poem, Cullen makes allusions to mythical characters Tantalus and Sisyphus. This poem, which illustrates the sonnet form, deals with the black search for identity and the meaning of race, “Yet Do I Marvel,” one of Cullen’s most famous poems, asks how God could make a poet black and bid him sing.

“Tableau” is a three-stanza poem that utilizes rhyme, imagery and metaphor. This poem would be useful to reinforce the concept that friendship has no color boundaries. The message in this poem conveys that the boys maintained their friendship, despite the criticisms of their interracial relationship.

A related writing assignment for “Yet Do I Marvel” is to construct a dialogue with God, asking him a why or how question as Cullen did in his poem.

“Tableau” might serve as a springboard for a writing exercise that would explore interracial relationships.

Langston Hughes (1902-1967)

Langston Hughes is difficult to classify as a writer. He was a leader of the Harlem Renaissance, but continued to write later than most of the others of this period. He wrote poetry, short stories, essays and edited many collections of black literature.

Hughes would likely be considered the most prolific Afro-American poet. It is unlikely that any anthology of poetry would not present poems by Hughes. His poetry presents dual perspectives, the oral folk tradition and the tradition of struggle and protest grounded on a basic affirmation of the black heritage. The oral tradition is perhaps strongest in his poems modeled on black music, the jazz and blues music. Hughes came into maturity in the 1920’s, the classic age of jazz and blues, and feeling as he did about the beauty of black life, it is not surprising that he saw black music as a paradigm of human experience.

Regardless of form, the subject of much of Hughes’ poetry is the black struggle for political power and economic well-being within the American framework of the *Constitution* and the *Declaration of Independence*. He writes of how: this dream of well-being has always been obstructed by racism. Lost dreams form a major theme of Hughes’ writing. Unfulfilled promises are pictured in a number of poems which capture the tragedy of the black experience in America. “Dream Variation” expresses the longing to express and enjoy his racial heritage. “Litany” is a haunting poem that questions if there is any love, even in Heaven, “As I Grow Older” shows how a dream flees from color. “Delinquent,” “Vagabond” and “Troubled Woman” depict people who have finally been ruined because of this hopelessness in a different perspective.

Poems about the American dream are among the favorites studied by young people. “I Too, Sing America,” “Freedom Plow” and “Let America Be America Again,” are outstanding examples related to this theme. “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” a beautiful and moving poem that was written by Hughes when he was seventeen years old, is a poetic history of the black race.

Hughes’ poems are about things that middle and high school students are concerned with, such as dreams, romance, family and jobs. His poems are written in ways that appeal to youngsters with everyday words, sometimes even slang and modern jazz rhythms. Hughes’ poetry is simple to understand, at least on the surface. These poems are excellent for illustrating some of the basic elements of poetry.

One of the hardest tasks that I faced in this unit was selecting poems by Langston Hughes. His poetry is so beautiful and encompasses so many themes and easily understood poetic elements. If my class could study

only one Afro-American poet, it would be Langston Hughes. Finally, I chose: "Color" and "My People," as good examples of rhyme with a theme of black pride. Next, I chose poetry related to dreams, a favorite theme of the poet. The poems are "Dreams," "Dream Variation" and "The Dream Keeper." My next selection "Children's Rhymes" and "I, Too, Sing America" deal with prejudice, each in a different way. My final selections are "October 16 : The Raid" (John Brown's story) and "Daybreak in Alabama," primarily because these poems serve as a springboard for studying two important aspects of black history.

Hughes' poems, "Color" and "My People" are good examples of black pride. "Color" is a short simple poem utilizing rhyme. No line has more than three words. Color wear it like ____ clearly illustrates the use of simile. This poem would lend itself well to a creative writing assignment such as *noun—verb it like ____*. (example: music sing it like ____.) "My People" uses comparison in the form of metaphor. This short six line poem illustrates the use of repetition very well. "Of My People" is used three times and "beautiful" is used four times. This poem would lend itself well to a writing assignment by asking the students to imitate this poem by making substitutions for all the words except "beautiful" and "my people."

"Dreams," "Dream Variation," and "The Dream Keeper" are excellent examples of Hughes' dream poems. These lyric poems are alike in that they illustrate Hughes' use of imagery. "The Dream Keeper" is an example of a free verse poetry. "Dreams" illustrates the use of rhyme and metaphor. "Dream Variation" illustrates the use of repetition, metaphor, rhyme and simile. These dream poem selections express a hope for unfulfilled humanity in that one must hold onto his dreams if he is to be alive. There is a consolation in the dream for when all else is lost, the dream is the one thing that can be saved, sacred, personal and inviolate.

I would use the clustering technique to generate ideas for writing a poem about dreams. In a classroom brainstorming session I would elicit responses from the students in formulating the web to generate ideas for creating the poem.

"Children's Rhymes" and "I, Too Sing America" are two of Hughes' poems that deal with prejudice. "Children's Rhymes" is an example of the poet's use of rhyme and dialect. In this lyric poem, he says there is no justice because what is true for the white folk is not true for the blacks. "I, Too, Sing America" is a free verse poem that is as stoical as it is affirmative. He accepts the brotherhood of the blacks and whites as beyond question. In this poem we can see a hope that tomorrow he will be allowed to eat at the table with his white brother. Hughes celebrates America, not the America as it is today, but the America that is to come.

"October 16: The Raid" and "Daybreak in Alabama" are examples of poems that depict historical events. "October 16: The Raid" is a narrative poem that tells the story of John Brown. This poem is an excellent illustration of how an important historical event can be told in a poem. The poem should be examined to learn how Hughes uses carefully selected words to tell a story. Before presenting this poem to the students I would tell the story or read the story of John Brown.

"Daybreak in Alabama" is a free verse poem that expresses concern about overcoming racial prejudice. The poet looks forward to the day when people of all colors will be "touching everybody with kind fingers, and touching each other as natural as dew." In this poem the students can find examples of simile, repetition and the use of nature imagery.

After reading and studying these two poems, I would conduct a brainstorming session on prejudice. As the students relate incidents, concepts and issues related to prejudice I would list them on the board. Then I would ask them to choose one idea and write a paragraph about it, stating how they feel about it and how it could or should be resolved.

Post-Depression

The Harlem Renaissance ended with the Great Depression of the 1930's. The economic problems of this period probably hit the blacks the hardest, and writers became concerned with surviving rather than expression. Now, instead of flocking to New York, the writers found their subject matter in the South and throughout the United States. They wrote more vividly about the suffering, humiliation and frustration suffered by the poor blacks as they confronted the degradation of racism as well as extreme poverty.

Three important poets began their careers during the 1940's: Margaret Walker, Robert Hayden and Gwendolyn Brooks, I have chosen selections of Gwendolyn Brooks for study.

Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-)

Gwendolyn Brooks is the only black to win the Pulitzer Prize, and a contemporary poet who has definitely won a lasting place in American literature.

Her imagery is strongly and multi-sensory. In a few lines she can recreate a life and scene complete with smells and feeling. Her earliest collection *A Street in Bronzeville* presents some memorable visions. *The Bean Eaters* contains a wider variety of suitable poems for middle school students.

Gwendolyn Brooks is to some extent a forerunner of the modern black poets. She deals openly with disillusionment and rejection of the white society, pride of the blacks and appreciation for the poor of the ghetto.

"The Tapestry Rug," "The Explorer," "My Little 'Bout Town Girl," "Gertrude," are the three I have chosen for study in this unit: "We Real Cool," "A Song in The Front Yard" and "Martin Luther King" are good choices for sixth grade students.

"We Real Cool" is a "hip" little poem that clearly illustrates repetition, rhyme, consonance and alliteration. In eight sentences utilizing the form, We-verb-noun or adjective. Gwendolyn Brooks depicts a multi-sensory image of a dropout. (example-We jazz June.) This poem would serve as an excellent model for imitation in creating personal poems. This could be done by using the "We" substituting the verbs and adding appropriate adjectives or nouns.

"A Song in the Front Yard" is a poem about a girl who yearns to go outside her front yard to learn about life in the ghetto streets. Through multi-sensory imagery and rhyme she compares her life in the front yard to the excitement of the street and the alley.

The last poem "Martin Luther King, Jr." is a complex poem chosen because it illustrates that poetry can be written without the obvious poetic devices such as rhyme, stanza forms, etc. I would use this poem in relationship to the study of Martin Luther King, Jr. and his contribution to the Civil Rights movement. A writing activity that I would consider using with this poem is to have the students do non-stop writing for ten minutes in their journals, relating all they know about Martin Luther King, Jr. and how they feel about him.

My hopes in developing and presenting this unit for my sixth grade students are many. Some of the major objectives that I want my students to achieve are as follows: to develop an awareness and appreciation of Afro-American poetry, to identify themes and messages of poetry, to understand the basic elements and forms of poetry, to relate music to poetry, to further develop an awareness and appreciation of the Afro-American culture, to increase basic language skill development, to foster creativity, and to enrich their

personal lives.

After I have completed this poetry unit I would give consideration to presenting other Afro-American literature selections. There are many good prose works, both fiction and non fiction, that would offer literary enrichment for my sixth grade students. If the students appear to be especially interested in poetry, I might extend this unit by presenting more selections by the chosen poets or introduce them to other Afro-American poets.

Notes

1. Dudley Randall, *The Black Poets* , p. 5.
2. Kenneth Koch, *Wishes, Lies and Dreams* , p. 26.

Lesson Plan “Little Brown-Baby,” “Scamp,” and “Wadin’ in de Crick”

(Dialect Poems) by William Laurence Dunbar

I. Distribute copies of “Little Brown Baby.” The students will read silently. Follow the same procedure with “Scamp,” and “Wadin in de Crick” after completing the study of “Little Brown Baby.”

II. Introduce the following vocabulary words:

“Little Brown Baby”	“Scamp”	“Wadin in de Crick”
“pappy”	“trimbly”	“crick”
“merlasses”	“trunnel bald”	“Jay-b’ud”
“straggler”	“scamp”	“tattlah”
“buggah man”		“chattah”
“pallet”		“mammy”

III. The teacher will read each poem twice. Student volunteers will read aloud also, having had time to read silently. The students might enjoy reading the poem in non dialect. The different readings of the poem will enhance understanding and enjoyment of this dialect poetry.

IV. Discussion/Questions: Explain the use of dialect. Ask students how they feel about the use of dialect. What effect does it have in Dunbar’s poetry writing? How did reading the poetry in non-dialect change it? Explain that these three poems show a progression in theme from infancy to school age. “Little Brown Baby” is scared of the bogey man, “Scamp” is a tired toddler and “Wadin in de Crick” is about a school boy who plays hooky. What is the relationship with the father in “Little Brown Baby?” Read the lines that show a warm loving relationship. What did the father joke with the child about? Do you think he should have joked with him about the bogey man? Find examples of rhyme and repetition in the poem. Next, direct the students to read “Scamp” as they did the first poem. Read the last lines of each stanza. Note these lines as examples of repetition. Find examples of the use of rhyme. Read the lines that tell why it is nice to have a mother. What were some of the things his mother did for him? Finally, direct the

students to read “Wadin in de Crick.” Find examples of the use of repetition and rhyme in this poem. Read the lines that tell how he felt about school. How did he describe the water? How did he feel about playing hooky? Read the lines that tell who would tattle on him. What lines tell how his mother felt about what he was doing. Find example of humor in the three poems.

V. Writing Activities: Rewrite a poem using non-dialect English. Try writing a short dialect poem using some of the dialect words from the selections studied in class. Write a poem or paragraph about some pleasurable childhood experience.

Lesson Plan “A Black Man Talks of Reaping,” by Arna Bontemps

I. Distribute copies of the poem. The students will read the poem silently.

II. Introduce the following vocabulary words:

reap sow stark glean

stalk orchard fowl yields

III. The teacher will read the poem at least twice. Student volunteers will read aloud also, having had time to read the poem silently. The different readings of the poem will aid the students in the interpretation of this poem.

IV. Discussion/Questions: Read stanza one again. What kind of person does the speaker seem to be? What is his fear? How does he try to protect himself from this fear? How do the first two lines in stanza two contribute to your initial impression of the black man? How do these lines make you feel? In stanza three who are “my brother’s sons?” What is the effect of the “stalk and root?” Who are “my children?” Is the black man a symbol for one person or a symbol for many people? What does he mean by sowing and reaping? Every line in the poem is leading up to the last two lines. What is happening to “my children?” Who is responsible? What is the “bitter fruit?” What is the obvious external meaning of the poem? Actually the poem means more than the farmer having his crop stolen by his nephews. What ideas and feelings are behind the words? What does the poet really mean by line one? Read lines seven and eight. What is the result of the speaker’s effort? Bontemps’ poetry uses nature imagery. Find examples of the use of rhyme. How does this poem compare to other poems we have studied? Do you like this poem? Why or why not?

V. Writing Activities: Write a paragraph interpreting the message of this poem. This poem conveys fear and injustice. Write a paragraph or poem about an injustice, or a fear that you have experienced. (I would review the clustering technique in a brainstorming session to help generate ideas if the students appeared to be having difficulty with writing.)

the use of metaphor. Find examples of the use of metaphor, repetition is used in the poem by using the word “beautiful” four times. Read the poem again and substitute different synonyms to, “beautiful.” Note how the effect of the poem changed. “Of My People” is repeated three times in this short poem. Try making substitutions for this phrase and note how the effect of the poem changed. Compare “My People” and “Color.” Note how the poet conveyed the same message of “Black pride” by using different comparisons. Name one poetic device that was used in “Color” not used at all in “My People.”

V. Writing Activities: Using the poem “Color” as an example, think of a word, such as “music,” add a verb such as “hum,” then add “it like,” now add an appropriate noun or adjective/adverb such as “a bee.” (Music hum it like a bee.) Write as many such comparisons as possible. Try to combine them into a poem. Rewrite “My People” by making substitutions for all the words except “beautiful” and “my people.” Write a paragraph on the importance of having personal pride.

Lesson Plan “We Real Cool” and “A Song in the Front Yard” by Gwendolyn Brooks

I. Distribute copies of the poetry. The students will read the poetry silently.

II. Introduce and discuss the following simple vocabulary words:

cool jazz sneers strut

lurk gin charity untended

III. The teacher will read each poem twice. Student volunteers will read aloud after reading silently. The students will be encouraged to experiment with their voices in the poetry reading, especially in the reading of “We Real Cool.”

IV. Discussion/Questions: “We Real Cool” is a “hip” little poem composed of eight sentences with only three words in each sentence. The sentences all follow the pattern of: We-verb-adjective-or noun. (example—We strike straight.) This poem contains excellent simple illustrations of several poetic elements. Find examples of repetition, rhyme, assonance, and alliteration. The multi-sensory imagery depicted in this poem about a dropout is an excellent model for imitation in creating personal poems. The poem “A Song in the Front Yard,” a longer poem with four stanzas, is about a girl who yearns to go beyond her front yard to learn about life in the street. This multi-sensory poem illustrates the use of rhyme. Read lines that illustrates rhyme. Find examples of how she uses imagery. The poem illustrates contrast in her description of the front yard and in her description of the streets. Read the lines that describe the front yard and the lines that provide a description of life in the streets. What key words do you find in each?

V. Writing Activities: Write a paragraph or poem about something that you dream of doing but is forbidden by your parents. Use the clustering technique with the word “street” and generate as many words and ideas as possible and then try to use them in composing a poem or paragraph. Try imitating “We Real Cool” by using three word sentences composed of we-verb-noun or adjective/adverb. (example—We lurk late.) in composing your poem.

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This book has writing process exercises for developmental writing.

Baldwin, Neil, *The Poetry Writing Handbook* . New York: Scholastic Book Sciences, 1981.

This is a very useful and practical book for teaching poetry writing.

Cassedy, Sylvia. *In Your Own Words: A Beginner's Guide to Writing*. New York: Doubleday, 1978.

This is a guide to writing prose and poetry.

Chapman, Abraham, Editor, *Black Voices* . New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1968.

This is a good collection of Negro literature that contains biographical information.

Davis, Arthur, Editor. *The American Negro: His History and Literature*. New York: Harper and Row, 1969.

This book contains the poetry and biographical information about Countee Cullen.

DuBois, W.E.B., *The Souls of Black Folk* . New York: New American Library, 1969.

This is a black literary classic that every teacher should read for background information. The last chapter deals with music of the blacks.

Elbow, Peter. *Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.

A valuable research and activity book which emphasizes writing principles and essential exercises to achieve powerful writing.

Gibson, Donald. Editor. *Modern Black Poets* . Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973.

This book provides a collection of critical essays about the black poets and their poetry.

Graham, Louise, Young, Miriam. *Writing Power* . New York: Globe Book Company, 1973.

This is a useful book for building writing skills for junior high students.

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This is a good book that stresses the connectedness of writing, speaking and reading.

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This is a helpful poetry writing book.

Koch, Kenneth. *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* . New York: Chelsea House, 1970.

A valuable book that describes methods for students to read and write poetry.

Kohl, Herbert R., *Teaching the "Unteachable."* New York: The New York Review, 1967.

Kohl describes his teaching experiences in East Harlem where he taught students to write out of their own experience.

Rico, Gabriele L., *Writing the Natural Way* . Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, Inc., 1983.

A valuable book designed to inspire writers to use both hemispheres of the brain to achieve "natural writing." The processes of brainstorming and clustering are described as means of effective approaches to writing.

Shaughnessy, Mina P., *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing* . New York: Oxford Press, 1979.

This book has various activities for reducing errors in vocabulary, punctuation, spelling and syntax.

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Stanford, Barbara, *Black Literature for High School Students* . Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1978.

This is a good source for ideas for teaching black literature. It contains bibliographies, reference materials and a directory of publishers.

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Bibliography

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This is an excellent anthology of modern black poetry.

Adoff, Arnold, Editor. *I Am the Darker Brother: An Anthology of Modern Poems by Negro Americans* . New York: MacMillan, 1968.

This is an excellent pictorial anthology of poetry for young people.

Brooks, Gwendolyn. *Bronzeville Boys and Girls* . New York: Harper and Row, 1956.

This is an excellent collection of Brooks' poetry for young people.

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This is an anthology of black poetry that contains biographical information about the poets.

Cullen, Countee, *On Thee I Stand*. New York: Harper and Row, 1947.

This book is a collection of the best poems by Countee Cullen.

Hopkins, Bennett Lee, *Don't Turn Your Back*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969.

This is a young people's book of poetry by Langston Hughes.

Hopkins, Bennett Lee, *On Our Way: Poems of Pride and Love* . New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974.

This is a poetry book containing poems on blackness, feelings, remembrances and love.

Hughes, Langston, *The Dreamkeeper and Other Poems* . New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1932.

This book contains selections of Hughes' dream poems and other poetry.

King, Woodie, Jr., *The Forerunners: Black Poets in America* . Washington, D.C.: Howard Press, 1975.

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McKissack, Patricia, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Man to Remember* . Chicago: Regensteiner Publications, 1984.

This is a pictorial account of the accomplishments of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Randall, Dudley, Editor. *The Black Poets*, Detroit: The Broadside Press, 1971.

This is an anthology of black poetry.

Rodgers, Bertha, Editor. *Little Brown Baby* . New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1940.

This is a collection of Dunbar's poetry that includes a biographical sketch of Dunbar.

Strickland, Dorothy, Editor. *Listen Children* . New York: Bantam Skylark, 1982.

This anthology has an excellent collection of black literature that students would enjoy. It is a good book for teachers to use for reading aloud to the students.

(Copies of the poems used in this Teaching Unit are on file in the Yale-New Haven Teacher Institute Office.)

Classroom Materials

Recordings

Africa Man and His Music. (CBS, 1972.)

This album has African music selections.

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This is a collection of poetry read by Cullen, Hughes, Brooks, and other poets.

Bontemps, Arna, Editor. *Anthology of Negro Poets in the U.S.A 200 Years* .(FL 972) New York: Folkway Records.

Arna Bontemps reads poetry of eighteen black poets including the poetry of Hughes and Dunbar.

Brooks, Gwendolyn, *Gwendolyn Brooks Reading Her Poetry* . (TC1244), New York: Caedmon Records.

The author reads selections from *A Street in Bronzeville*, *Annie Allen* , *The Bean Eaters* , among other selections.

Dee, Ruby, *The Poetry of Langston Hughes* . (TC1272) New York: Caedmon Records.

This recording has good readings of Hughes' poetry.

Run DMC *King of Rock*, (profile, 1985)

This album has African music selections.

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Rock and Soul . Derby, Ct.: Charlton Publications, Inc. (monthly)

Song Hits Magazine

Derby, Ct.: Charlton Publications, Inc. (monthly)

Soul Hits

Derby, Ct.: Charlton Publications, Inc. (quarterly)

Super Song Hits .

Derby, Ct.: Charlton Publications, Inc. (quarterly)

Music Alive .

Port Chester, N.Y.: Cherry Lane Magazines, Inc.

These publications are an invaluable source for obtaining rock music lyrics.

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