



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1991 Volume III: Afro-American Autobiography

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## **African-American Autobiography for the Middle School Student**

Curriculum Unit 91.03.07  
by Delores Marshall

African-American autobiography is intellectually thought-provoking and cultivating. These components make teaching African-American autobiography educationally productive in a positive manner. Most students lack exposure to African-American autobiography, therefore, presenting the autobiography of Langston Hughes will provide students with an exciting literary experience.

I have chosen an oral reading and written approach for this curriculum unit that offers cultural information and strategies for teaching African-American autobiography to middle school students. My objective is to incorporate reading African-American autobiographies with essential language arts that will motivate oral, silent, and written skills.

The students will read orally, selections from Langston Hughes' autobiography. As a result of reading from the selections, students will review cultural differences, vocabulary, oral reading comprehension, and inferential thinking skills. They will be required to write a fictional autobiography with characteristics of someone in their environment. We will read each fictional autobiography orally in class. During the oral reading of each creative story, we will spend some thought-provoking time discussing significant points of fictional autobiography. An oral discussion of Langston Hughes' life as an adolescent will also be included.

This curriculum unit is targeted for students in eighth grade, but could easily be adapted to seventh graders with various reading levels by using the adaptation of the autobiography, Langston Hughes', *The Big Sea*. The eighth grade students who will use this unit are in classes designated accelerated English classes. An accelerated English class contains students whose reading levels are above average. The students in this division can be motivated if the literature is made interesting by using selections that they can relate to from their own environment, or to someone they know. Discussing cultural elements and author background is also important.

At the beginning of each unit, students will be provided with pertinent information about the author—their life and the purpose for reading an African-American autobiography as it relates to various time periods in American History. During the introduction, students will be taking notes. Cultural information will be emphasized. A lesson plan will follow that includes information regarding Langston Hughes.

Weekly written tests should be given to ensure that each student understands the reading selection. It is essential to discuss orally, important aspects of the selection. An example would be that each oral reading selection always begins with students reviewing the material silently first, followed by selecting oral readers to

read the selection, group discussions with directions from the teacher, concluding with a written piece of material (worksheet) at the students' desk that they read and answer the questions in complete sentences. This should be accomplished independently within a forty-five minute period. Before the class is dismissed, papers should be collected and the teacher should briefly tell the students what is planned for the next oral reading activity.

The African-American autobiography we will read is *The Big Sea* . We will also read poetry written that may relate to the above selection. As we read each autobiography, a particular literary device will be discussed. Setting (historical time frame), theme, and characterization will be stressed. The students will read the selections together, taking turns reading aloud. Oral reading helps many students to hear correct pronunciation.

I use the directed reading to introduce African-American autobiography, and to motivate students to become interested in reading African-American autobiography, independently. The creative writing assignment that the students will be assigned at the end of the unit will bring together their knowledge and understanding of autobiographical characterization from a cultural perspective— Langston Hughes' character versus their own traits. We will also have discussed differences of other characters in the autobiography. The writing assignment will involve small groups of students brainstorming ideas for a character that will be their central character in a fictional autobiography. Each student must decide on a name, character traits, and a past life for their character. Each character must be from various geographical locations of the United States. Through the writing process of outlining, drafting, and revising, each student will have to personalize their character.

We will review six poems written by Langston Hughes. After reading the adaptation from "The Big Sea", an autobiography by Langston Hughes, we will read the selection "Class Poet" of his autobiography. That selection will give students an understanding of how Langston Hughes became a writer. When the students read "Class Poet", they will be given instructions in analyzing his character as a student, and will be asked to list character traits of Langston Hughes as a student. I will briefly discuss at the beginning of the unit, life for African-Americans during the early-to-late 1900s, and discuss the significance of African-American autobiography during this time period. A discussion of his character should give students an idea of the role African-American autobiography played in the multi-ethnic American society.

The students will write their own poems after having read "Mother to Son", and "The Negro Speaks of Rivers". In the third element, I will stress the importance of African-American autobiography as it relates to the writers' culture, for example, the passionate love that Langston Hughes felt for his people (African-Americans) and their environment during negative and positive times. The students will write their poems in regard to the cultural aspects of their lives.

At the end of this unit, we will discuss, the significance of African-American autobiography and how the above poems related to selections from *The Big Sea* . Therefore, the focus of the poetry will enable my students to understand how Langston Hughes incorporated his culture into an autobiography. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is an excellent poem to use with *The Big Sea*, particularly in regard to the many rivers he discussed and places he traveled to in *The Big Sea*.

Following are detailed plans for the above-mentioned lessons. These plans can be adapted to a variety of students with diverse reading abilities. As the introduction to this unit, the students will be provided with, and read orally, pertinent information about Langston Hughes' life and significance of reading African-American autobiography. Students will take notes about other African-American autobiographies for future reading during the school year for written book reports. Cultural information will be emphasized. The students will read

during the first week of the unit “The Early Years” of Langston Hughes. I will begin by reading orally and then other students will take turns reading orally. We stop at intervals to discuss various aspects of the selection and take notes.

After we finish reading selections from *The Big Sea*, an autobiography by Langston Hughes, we will discuss the selections as a group and the students will be given a quiz to determine their understanding of the story. When the students have completed this exercise, we discuss a few thought-provoking answers to the quiz before the final test is given. Writing answers to questions in complete sentences appears to be a skill that these students need continual practice on daily.

The next student activity will require students to write a creative fictional autobiography developing characters from someone they may or may not know. They will first work in discussion groups of three to four to brainstorm ideas for their character. They must relate the fictional autobiography to various geographical regions to build upon birth to adulthood. During the group discussion, a list will be distributed with the following criteria for their particular character: place of birth, date of birth, physical traits, emotional traits, peculiar habits, family background, and career history. Upon outlining, drafting, and proofreading, students will complete a final written draft, to be read orally in class.

The importance of teaching African-American autobiography to middle school students, is to prepare them for reading, remembering important information about the author, the historical time frame of the story, and the necessary vocabulary that will be presented in the story. These skills, however small they seem to the teacher, are educationally and culturally productive to the students’ academic success.

Another autobiography that can be used within the Langston Hughes unit is James Comer’s, *Maggie’s Dream* . This autobiography shows how a family found the courage to survive during the later years in American history. This curriculum unit could be used over the course of a marking period as a complete unit. This unit could also be utilized over the course of a year, incorporating other language arts skills. I think reading African-American autobiography is one way of exposing students, culturally and intellectually, to reading ethnic literature. When students are able to read positive literature that is thought-provoking, it eliminates boredom from the language arts literature curriculum. It also gives them an opportunity to read and think for themselves.

Students deserve to read African-American autobiographies they can some day relate to their environment or someone they may know. Any lesson, however, whether it is African-American autobiography, or Shakespeare, should provide students with an opportunity to feel good about themselves.

This information is to be used at the beginning of the Langston Hughes unit.

### ***The Early Years***

Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri in 1902. He mostly grew up in Lawrence, Kansas. His grandmother raised him until he was 12 years old. Many times, Langston was with his mother, but not often. His mother and father were separated. Langston’s mother traveled around a great deal looking for a better job.

Upon entering school, Langston was with his mother for a while in Topeka. He went to a “white” school in the downtown district. At first, Langston was not wanted at the school. They wanted to send him to the “colored” school across town. However, his mother was all ready to battle for the rights of free people. His mother went

straight to the school board. She enrolled Langston in the Harrison Street School. All the teachers were nice to him, except one. The one teacher made remarks about his skin color. Others would grab stones and tin cans and chase him home. As a result of those experiences, Langston learned early not to hate all white people. Every since that, he felt that most people were generally good. He found this to be true in every race throughout his world travels.

When Langston was in second grade, his grandmother took him to Lawrence to raise him. He was very unhappy for a long time, and very lonesome. It was then that books began to happen to him. He began to believe in nothing but books and the wonderful world of books. In books, he found, if people suffered, they suffered in beautiful language. There, almost always, the mortgage got paid off and the good knights won.

His grandmother's mortgage never got paid off. Langston's grandmother was not like other "colored" women of Lawrence. She didn't take in washing or go out to cook. She had never worked for anybody but herself. She tried to make a living by renting rooms to students from Kansas University, but they were never quite sure that the white mortgage man was not going to take the house. Sometimes Langston had very little to eat.

His grandmother was a very proud woman. She would never beg or borrow anything from anybody. She sat in her rocker and read the Bible or she would hold Langston in her lap and tell him beautiful oral tales about people who worked to make Black people free.

In his grandmother's stories, life always had a heroic end. Nobody cried in his grandmother's stories. They worked, or schemed, or fought, but no crying. When his grandmother died, he didn't cry either. He learned from his grandmother's stories that it was useless to cry about anything.

At the age of 14, Langston's mother sent for him to come to Lincoln, Illinois. She had married again. By now he had a little brother. He liked his stepfather and his new little brother. He had been very lonesome growing up. Periodically, his stepfather would leave to look for a better job. The day he graduated from grammar school, his stepfather was out looking for another job.

Reprinted by permission from *The Big Sea* : an autobiography by Langston Hughes. 1940 by Hill & Wang, a division of Farror, Straus & Giroux, Inc.

These questions are to be used with the lesson for "The Big Sea."

### **Main Idea**

- 1) The autobiography is about:
  - A. Langston Hughes' grandmother
  - B. his mother
  - C. Langston Hughes
  - D. The Big Sea

### *Remembering Details*

- 2) Where was Langston Hughes born?
  - A. Topeka, Kansas
  - B. Lawrence, Kansas
  - C. Lincoln, Illinois
  - D. Cleveland, Ohio

- 3) When Langston was in second grade, he began to:
- A. read books
  - B. write poetry
  - C. write books
  - D. read poetry
- 4) Langston's mother went to the school board to do battle:
- A. for rights of free people
  - B. to admit Langston to Harrison
  - C. to take Langston out of Harrison
  - D. for oral reading
- 5) Langston's grandmother's stories always had a:
- A. heroic ending
  - B. humorous ending
  - C. mysterious ending
  - D. sad ending
- 6) How did grandmother pay for the mortgage?
- A. took in washing
  - B. went out and cooked
  - C. rented rooms to students
  - D. read poetry
- 7) Langston was elected "Class Poet" because:
- A. he sang and danced
  - B. he had rhythm
  - C. he was the only writer
  - D. he was a good student

*Drawing Conclusions*

- 8) Langston didn't want his mother to re-marry because:
- A. he didn't like his stepfather
  - B. he didn't want to live with them
  - C. he was not told of his stepfather's unemployment
  - D. he would have to work himself
- 9) Langston was in danger when he entered Harrison Street School because:
- A. he wanted to be sent to the colored school
  - B. he thought the teachers were nice
  - C. his family wanted a quality education for him
  - D. he thought most people were generally good
- 10) When Langston's grandmother died, he didn't cry because:
- A. her stories had a heroic end
  - B. it was useless to cry about anything
  - C. he promised her he wouldn't cry
  - D. his mother didn't cry

## THINKING IT OVER

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- 1) Langston Hughes became interested in books when he was unhappy and lonely. Why?
- 2) Hughes says, "Literature is a big sea full of many fish." What does he mean? Why did he choose "The Big Sea" as a title for his autobiography?

## Teacher and Student Bibliography

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Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea* . New York: Hill & Wang, 1940.

The Early Years is adapted from "The Big Sea", an autobiography by Langston Hughes; suitable for students with average reading levels.

### *Short Stories*

Hughes, Langston. *The Ways of White Folks* . New York: Vintage Books, 1934.

A selection of some of Langston Hughes' short stories with humor, pathos, terror and satire. Good for teaching awareness of culture differences in the 1920s and 30s. Excellent for the more advanced middle school reader.

### *Family*

Comer, James P. M.D. *Maggie's American Dream* . New York: Penguin Books Limited, 1988.

Good for teaching about African-American family life and the struggle of educating her children.

David, Jay, ed. *Growing Up Black* . New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1968.

A collection of nineteen autobiographical selections. African-American tells what it was and is like to grow up in the south. A very helpful book with selections covering major African-American writers, including Richard Wright, Frederick Douglass, and Alex Haley. What gives this anthology particular significance is the fact that the narrators are African-American adults recalling an African-American childhood.

Jones, Suzanne, ed. *Growing Up in the South* . New York, Penguin Books USA Inc., 1991.

An anthology of modern southern literature by an extraordinary number of America's best storytellers, and great writers. The stories in this collection are about childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, with such writers as Alice Walker, Flannery O'Connor, Harry Crews, Mary Mebane and Ernest Gains, all of whom share those experiences of the south. Good for teaching multicultural, regional, detail, and reasoning.

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