



Yale-New Haven
Teachers Institute®

Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1991 Volume IV: Recent American Poetry: Expanding the Canon

In Search of Afro-American Poets in Modern Times

Curriculum Unit 91.04.03
by Cynthia H. Roberts

This unit was designed to meet the needs of Special Education LD (learning disabled) and SEM (socially emotionally maladjusted) students in grades 9th-12th. Based on their skills, a great deal of time will be spent on interpretation. Both oral and written activities will be used to encourage participation.

It is my intention to show that students of poor neighborhoods, if given the chance and opportunity to write, have a tremendous amount to say and they are very anxious to speak through poetry. These students will be given the opportunity to let go and be creative.

OBJECTIVES FOR THE UNIT

1. To encourage self-analysis, especially of one's own pattern of thinking and rationalizing.
2. To develop an awareness of pride in the many contributions made by Afro-American poets.
3. To gain an appreciation for poetry.
4. To be able to express orally and in written form their feelings and emotions.
5. To increase reading comprehension and vocabulary building.
6. To enhance students' oral language and social skills through group work.
7. To help students feel a sense of pride, promote learning, social growth and to help build self-esteem.

SEQUENCE OF LESSONS AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

The majority of activities incorporated in this unit will concentrate on reading.

This unit will cover an eight to ten week period. Classes will meet twice weekly for a total of 48 minutes each class.

I. INTRODUCTION—I will introduce and discuss poetry in depth. Students will understand that poetry is age old and in its varied forms has always been the way that mankind has given expression to something more than ideas. Like music, its rhythms and cadences are universal in their emotional appeal.

II. BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES/SIGNIFICANT EVENTS

Biographical sketches of poets will be presented to students. Students will be exposed to the historical events taking place in each poet's career. These events include the Harlem Renaissance and the Post-Depression.

IV. POETRY TERMINOLOGY

I will familiarize students with terms used in the poem selections. Students will define and discuss the terms found in the unit. Students will then cite examples in selected poems by poets.

V. POETRY READING

Students will read each selected poem by a poet, memorizing whenever possible, and looking closely at the theme of the poem.

VI. POETRY CREATIONS

The final activity for this unit will deal with creative writing. Students will be asked to use any theme or style to create several poems on his/her own life. The lesson plan in the unit will detail specific suggestions.

INTRODUCTION

Poetry is, first and foremost, something to be enjoyed. It is a special way of using words in order to create the desired effect upon the reader and to light up the world for them.

Poetry universalizes experience. It has the power to make an event seem to be happening to us although it may have occurred many years ago to people we don't know. In this way, it opens up to every one an experience originally enjoyed by only a few.

The poet sees and feels a situation in away that enables him to express it for our better understanding and enjoyment.

After introducing students to poetry, the students will then proceed to studying selected Afro-American poetry in depth utilizing a format such as learning biographical and historical information about the poet (exploring the lives of each of these writers), listening to selected poems read by the teacher, using choral speaking,

learning new vocabulary words, discussion of poetry terminology, answering questions relating to the understanding of poetry, and writing creatively in response to the poetry selections. I will use selected poems from exceptional writers. These include:

PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR

CLAUDE MCKAY

GWENDOLYN BROOKS

LANGSTON HUGHES

COUNTEE CULLEN

ARNA BONTEMPS

NIKKI GIOVANNI

These writers and their works were chosen for diversities in their theme, styles, and the historical perspectives.

The poems I will use are influenced by art as by life. These authors write for an audience as well as out of experience. Students will have the opportunity to analyze the following poems for their reflection of Afro-American problems. These include: "Mother To Son", "I, Too", and "Salvation" by Langston Hughes. "Incident", "Yet Do I Marvel" and "Tableau" by Countee Cullen. "Nikki Rosa", "Mothers", and "My House", by Nikki Giovanni. "The Tropics in New York", by Claude McKay. "Golden Slippers", and "A Black Man Talks of Reaping", by Arna Bontemps. "Sympathy" and "We Wear The Mask", by Paul Laurence Dunbar. "We Real Cool", by Gwendolyn Brooks.

Students will look closely at the works of the Afro-American poets and how they perceive the world around them. Such topics as the following will be analyzed and discussed: oppression, feelings of grief, sadness, motherhood, relationships, families, and injustices.

Students will get to know these gifted individuals. Each of them proved that one person can make a difference.

These individuals make a difference by the part each played in awakening America to the many contributions they made.

The biographical sketches given only provide students with a small amount of information on the author. I plan to emphasize through discussion and group oral reports, the many contributions each poet made to America.

Students will learn in many ways these authors are individuals are just like they are. They had childhoods, families, goals, and dreams. Sometimes, they had to overcome disappointments.

These poets, help us to understand ourselves and the world around us. They make us laugh, or cry and sometimes think. Often, their works inspire social change.

Detailed treatment will be given to several poems. For this purpose, I plan to use choral speaking with

students.

Choral Speaking has many advantages:

1. It will help to develop good clear speech.
2. It develops a love for poetry.
3. It is a form of artistic expression in which all students can join.
4. It offers for greater variety than possible through solo speaking. ¹

Each poem in this section is an experience—it was for the poet who wrote it and it can be for the reader who participates in it. It has a meaning for the poet; the author combines story and idea or mood and impressions.

A poem always “means” something, but not all poems have the same kinds of “meaning”.

POEM SELECTIONS

The collection of poems I have chosen will help to inspire students to participate in the rewarding experiences which poetry provides.

LANGSTON HUGHES² *NIKKI GIOVANNI*⁴

“Mother To Son” “Nikki Rosa”

“I, Too” “Mothers”

“Salvation” “My House”

COUNTEE CULLEN³ *CLAUDE McKAY*⁵

“Incident” “The Tropics in New York”

“Yet Do I Marvel”

“Tableau”

ARNA BONTEMPS⁶ *PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR*⁷

“Golden Slippers” “Sympathy”

“A Black Man Talks of Reaping” “We Wear The Mask”

GWENDOLYN BROOKS⁸

“We Real Cool”

An appreciation of poetry is deepened and broadened by an acquaintance with it. ⁹

SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL EVENTS

In this section, I will be discussing the Harlem Renaissance and the post-depression of the 1930's.

In working with students, I've come to realize that students especially black students, have little to no knowledge about the Renaissance and how this period has anything to do with their Cultural background.

I will in some detail, cite events that have occurred in History.

The word Renaissance means rebirth and resurgence of art, music, and culture.

There was a charge that occurred between artist and intellectuals. There was a demand for equality. This was the beginning of the Renaissance.

The Harlem Renaissance began around 1918 and lasted until about 1933. Although it was short lived, it changed the face of black America forever. During this time, it features some of the biggest names in writing, literature, as well as other related fields.

During the Harlem Renaissance, for the first time black writers suddenly began to appear and assert the values of the black culture.

There was a group of black writers who formed a group in Harlem, so they could meet and share their problems and they analyzed their works together.

For the first time, blacks had attained freedom to be themselves. They had the freedom to write.

By the 1900's many blacks became professionals. There were scientist, poets, artist, and musicians. There was a desire to promote and defend the talents of blacks.

Afro-Americans did flourish in their writings. The following individuals were among the poets of that period who were considered skillful in competition with other writers.

Writers such as Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes established themselves as exceptional writers of this period.

In the Post-Depression of the 30's, the economic problems hit blacks the hardest. During this time, writers became concerned about the survival rather than expression. These writers found themselves getting their subject matter from the South and throughout the United States. Their subject matter was about suffering, frustration suffered by poor blacks, and humiliation of extreme poverty.

Gwendolyn Brooks was among the poets during this time.

The following terminology will be presented to students in this unit. The strategy for presenting this section to students will have continuity and structure. Before students begin studying actual poem selections, they will be introduced to these terms listed below:

1. MOOD—the state of feeling created by a poem, story, or play, such as sentimental or a bitter mood. Students will be given examples of each.

2. LYRIC—a poem that has the form and musical quality of a song in which the poet expresses an intense personal feeling.
3. METAPHOR—a figure of speech in which two things are identified with each other.
4. IMAGE—any word, or group of words, that appeals to the senses creates pictures in the mind.
5. ALLITERATION—the repetition of a consonant sound at the beginning of two or more words in a line of verse.
6. THEME—the central thought or idea in a poem.
7. TONE—the feeling conveyed by a writer’s attitude toward his subject and reveal through his style and choice of words.
8. REFRAIN—a line or stanza repeated at intervals in a poem.

After having been introduced to the above terminology, students will be asked to give examples of each term. Students will be provided with cite examples to help with the distinction of each term.

It is my wish that the authors and their works I have chosen, will help students to understand the world better by sharpening their senses and by making them more sensitive to life around them.

The following information will be presented to students in more detail.

Students will be presented with a biographical sketch of each poet, and events which took place during their lives.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF POETS

GWENDOLYN BROOKS (1917-), was born in Topeka, Kansas, but was reared in Chicago, where she still lives with her husband and two children. She was an early writer of poetry, contributing to Chicagos’ black newspaper, *The Defender* , when she was seventeen. Since then she has written several volumes of poetry and has receive many awards and honors for her work, she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1950. She was the first black woman to receive it.

Brooks is not just a poet, she is also a novelist. In 1953, she published *Maud Martha* , a novel about growing up. Brooks rise to fame has been marked by a series of awards and honors. Brooks’ poetry and novel are a source of human truths. 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.

In 1985, Gwendolyn Brooks was named Poetry Consultant to the library of Congress. She was the first black woman to hold this post. When considering the creative output of Gwendolyn Brooks, it is easy to forget that she wrote in the context of a full and active personal life.

The works of Gwendolyn Brooks suggest a mastery of form, language and theme. Students reading poems such as “We Real Cool” and “Children of The Poor” know that this is a person who can identify with their sounds, those of pain and laughter, broken hearts and yesterday’s garbage. There is a bond between the reader and Brooks, one with deep roots.

“We Real Cool”, is a poem that illustrates repetition, rhyme, consonance and alliteration. This poem will serve as an excellent model for imitation in creating personal poems. Students will be using the appropriate adjectives and nouns. ¹⁰

COUNTEE CULLEN (1903-1946), was born in New York, the son of a Methodist minister, published his first book of poems when he was twenty-two. He was educated at New York University and Harvard University and where he received the Master of Arts Degree. He worked as an editor, teacher, and contributor to many periodicals, including *Crisis* , the magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored people. He spent the last eleven years of his life teaching French in high school.

Countee Cullen was another significant poet of the Harlem Renaissance. His poetry deals with the black search for identity and the meaning of race.

Countee Cullen poems “Yet Do I Marvel” and “Tableau”, were chosen for the mood and tone as well as the poetic devices utilized in each. ¹¹

ARNA BONTEMPS (1902-1973), was born in Alexandria, Louisiana. When he was four years old the family moved to California where he was educated. After graduating from college, he went to New York to teach. There he formed a close friendship with Langston Hughes and came to know other negro artists of his own generation. Under a grant from the Julius Rosenwald Fund, he visited Haiti and gathered material for several books, among the *Pope and Fifina: Children of Haiti* , which he and Langston Hughes wrote for children. Arna Bontemps is the author of several novels for adults, for children, in addition to *Popp* and *Fifina* , he has written *You Can’t Pet a Possum* and *Sad-Faced Boy* .

Bontemps’ work spans a half century from the Harlem Renaissance to the 1970’s. His works included: 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 of *Personals. Golden Slippers* , and “A Black Man Talks of Reaping” will be used in this unit. *Golden Slippers* , is an excellent anthology for young people.

Bontemps’ poems are concerned with the injustices suffered by blacks in the past. ¹²

NIKKI GIOVANNI (1943-), was born in Knoxville, Tennessee in 1943. She attended Fisk University where she majored in History and graduated in 1967. She is currently teaching creative writing at Rutgers University. Black judgement collection of her poems, appeared in 1968. She also writes short stories and essays, and is an editor of *Black Dialogue* magazine.

I have chosen, “Nikki Rosa”, “Mothers”, and “My House”, to emphasize more personal themes such as physical characteristics, emotional needs, a desire to move forward, and appreciation of others, and relationships. ¹³

LANGSTON HUGHES (1902-1967), was born in Missouri. 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.

Regardless of form, the subject for most of Hughes' poetry centers around the black struggle for political power and economic well-being within the American framework of the *Constitution* and *the Declaration of Independence* .

Hughes poems are about things that high school students are concerned with, such as dreams, romance, family and jobs.

I have chosen the following poems by Langston Hughes for study, "I, Too, Sing America" "Mother To Son", and "Salvation". Hughes' poems deals with prejudice, simile, repetition, rhymes and imagery. ¹⁴

PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR (1872-1906), was born in Dayton, Ohio, in 1872. He was the first black poet who became well known throughout the United States. Dunbar started writing poems at the age of 6. He was the only black in his high school class, but his teachers saw his talent. They encouraged him to write poems. He could not afford to go to college. Newspapers would not hire him because of his race. So, Dunbar worked as an elevator operator and wrote poems in his spare time.

Dunbar paid \$125 to have a book of his poems printed. He sold copies to passengers on his elevator. Some of them helped him to bring out a second book. A famous white writer, William Dean Howells, saw the book and praised it in his magazine. Soon Dunbar's work became known throughout the country. Besides his poems, he wrote songs, novels, and short stories. He traveled the country, giving reading from his work.

Dunbar's work is easily understood by high school students because his poems demonstrate good poetic techniques.

I have chosen for study, "We Wear The Mask", and "Sympathy". These two 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", tells of the reality of being black behind smiling masks, in spite of their feelings of grief, sadness and oppression.

The poem "Sympathy", compares the plight of the blacks to that of caged bird who longs to be set free. ¹⁵

SAMPLE LESSON #1

CONCEPT TO RECALL FACTS ABOUT AFRO-AMERICAN POETS.

OBJECTIVE TO INCREASE READING COMPREHENSION AND VOCABULARY BUILDING.

PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR (1872-1906), was the first black poet who became well known throughout the United States. Born in Dayton, Ohio, in 1872, Dunbar started writing poems at age 6. He was the only black in his high school class, but his teachers saw his talent. They encouraged him to write poems. He could not afford to go to college. newspaper would not hire him because of his race. So, Dunbar worked as an elevator operator and wrote poems in his spare time.

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Dunbar's life was tragically short. He died of tuberculosis at the age of 33. Today, one of the largest high schools in Dayton, Ohio, is named after him. Here is one of Dunbar's poems.

We Wear The Mask
We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheek and shades our
eyes,—etc . . . ¹⁶

Vocabulary guile—deceit, cunning myriad—many subtleties—hidden meanings

RECALLING THE FACTS

Students will choose each correct answer and write the letter in the space provided.

- _____ 1. Dunbar began writing poems
a. at age six.
b. in high school.
c. after he worked as an elevator operator.
- _____ 2. Dunbar's first book of poems
a. brought him nationwide fame.
b. was paid for by Dunbar himself.
c. never sold any copies.
- _____ 3. Dunbar was helped by a
a. White writer.
b. Wealthy woman.
c. Black doctor.

SAMPLE LESSON #2

CONCEPT REVIEW POETRY TERMS.

OBJECTIVES TO INCREASE VOCABULARY BUILDING.

Students will choose each correct answer and write the word in the space provided.

1. rhyme 6. lyrics
2. metaphor 7. theme
3. imagery 8. alliteration
4. tone 9. refrain
5. mood

1. ____ a line or stanza repeated at intervals in a poem.
2. ____ the feeling conveyed by a writer's attitude toward his subject and reveal through his style and choice of words.
3. ____ the central thought or idea in a poem.
4. ____ the repetition of a consonant sound at the beginning of two or more words in a line of verse.
5. ____ any word, or group of words, that appeals to the senses created pictures in the mind.
6. ____ a figure of speech in which two things are identified with each other.
7. ____ a poem that has the form and musical quality of a song in which the poet expresses an intense personal feeling.
8. ____ the state of feeling created by a poem, story, or play, such as sentimental or a bitter mood.

LESSON PLAN # 3

OBJECTIVE Students will read and interpret poetry.

Group Size: Five students to a group.

Time required: 48 minutes (one class period)

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MATERIALS Copy of Poem, “I, TOO” by Langston Hughes

Question form

QUESTIONS TO BE ANSWERED AND DISCUSSED

1. What is the poem saying?
2. What emotions are the poet expressing?
3. What do you think and/or feel about what he’s saying?
4. What are three key words in the poem? (Defend your answer)

PROCEDURES

1. The teacher will read the poem out loud to the class. The students are told to discuss the questions in their group, come to agreement, and write down their answers to hand in. They will also share their answers with the rest of the class.
2. Students will be told to work together in answering the four questions and give any further instructions. They are to turn in one set of answers for the group, which reflects the group consensus. Their signature on the paper indicates that they agree with and understand the group answers and the reason for them.

DURING THE LESSON

MONITORING

The teacher monitors the groups, occasionally checking to see if a student can explain answers already agreed upon. Students will be told that one group member is to be selected as observer and will use an observation sheet to monitor the group.

I, TOO

by Langston Hughes

I, too, sing American.

(figure available in print form)

1. What is the poem saying?
2. What are the emotions expressed by the poem?
3. What do you think/feel about what the poem says?
4. What are the three key words in the poem? (Be able to defend your choice)

Notes

1. Bontemps, Arna, ed., *American Negro Poetry* . (New York: Hilland Wang, 1974) pp. 204-296.
2. Ibid. p. 208.
3. Ibid. p. 209.
4. Ibid. p. 210.
5. Ibid. p. 211.
6. Ibid. p. 212.
7. Ibid. p. 213.
8. Ibid. p. 294.
9. Marianne Borgardt, *Black Biographies* . (Englewood, New Jersey: Globe Publishing Co. 1989) pp. 17-34.
10. Ibid. p. 20.
11. Ibid. p. 22.
12. Marianne Borgardt, *Blacks in American History* .(Englewood, New Jersey: Globe Book Company 1989) pp. 2-4.
13. Ibid. p. 6.
14. Ibid. p. 7-8.
15. Ibid. p. 9.
16. Richard Corbin, *Currents in Poetry* ,(New York: MacMillian Publishing Co., 1974) pp. 76-108.

STUDENT'S BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adoff, Arnold, ed. *I am The Darker Brother* . New York: The Macmillan company, 1968.

An anthology of modern poems by negro Americans.

Adoff, Arnold, *All The Colors of the Race* . New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books, 1982.

Giovanni, Nikki, *Spin A Soft Black Song* . New York: Hill and Wang, 1971.

Hughes, Langston, *Don't You Turn Back* . New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1969.

Scholes, Robert. *Elements of Poetry* . New York: Oxford University Press, 1969.

A valuable book for discussing poetic techniques and commenting on various poems.

Wallace, Robert. *Writing Poems* . Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 2nd edition, 1987.

The book contains some stimulating techniques to help students write poetry.

TEACHER BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Angelou, Maya, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* . New York: Random House, 1969.

Autobiography of a young black girl growing up in the rural South and then California.

2. Angelou, Maya, *Now Sheba Sings* . New York: Dial Books, 1987.

Illustrated book of poetry dealing with the theme, black women, their beauty, strength, and dignity.

3. Bontemps, Arna, ed., *American Negro Poetry* . New York: Hilland Wang, 1974.

Anthology of poetry by black poets.

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

Selection of poems chosen by Hughes from his earlier volumes as well as later works, dealing with the many facets of the black experiences.

5. Jordan, June. *Soulscript* . New York: Doubleday, 1970.

Selection of poetry by black writers, which includes a section written by young students.

6. Scholes, Robert. *Elements of Poetry* . New York: Oxford University Press, 1969.

A valuable book for discussing poetic techniques and commenting on various poems.

7. Wallace, Robert. *Writing Poems* . Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 2nd edition, 1987.

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