



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

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## **African-American Poets Past and Present: A Historical View**

Curriculum Unit 91.04.04  
by Joyce Patton

*African American Poets Past and Present: A historical View* will address in this unit African-American poets and the poetry they wrote throughout the course of history. They will be listed in chronological order as they appear in history. *The Eighteenth Century Beginnings* (1700-1800) brought us Phillis Wheatley and Jupiter Hammon. *The Struggle Against Slavery and Racism* (1800-1860) brought us George Moses Horton and Frances W. Harper. *The Black Man in the Civil War* (1861-1865). There were not any poets that came to us in this time frame. *Reconstruction and Reaction* (1865-1915) brought us Paul Laurence Dunbar, W.E.B. Du Bois, William S. Braithwaite, and Fenton Johnson. *Renaissance and Radicalism* (1915-1945) brought us James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Contee Cullen, Angelina Grimke, Arna Bontemps, and Sterling Brown. *The Present Generation* brought us Robert Hayden, Gwendolyn Brooks, Imamu Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Owen Dodson, Samuel Allen, Mari E. Evans, Etheridge Knight, Don L. Lee, Sonia Sanchez and Nikki Giovanni. These poets have written poems that express the feelings of African-Americans from slavery to the present. Poems were not only things written during these times. There was folk literature, prison songs, spirituals, the blues, work songs, pop chart music, and rap music the craze of today, plus sermons delivered by ministers.

The objectives of this unit are to teach children about the poets, the poems written expressing their feelings, and how to write poetry. The final goal of this unit is to help students develop an appreciation for poetry, to read and analyze poetry. This unit is being written for students in grades second through fifth. This unit can be used throughout the school year. However, this unit will be used mainly during Black History Month.

This unit will give brief biographies of each poet so students will learn something about the backgrounds of poets. Next poems written by these poets will be listed for the teacher to read to the students. Students will also be required to read poems and discuss the poets' feelings. Last, students will be taught how to write poetry with the lessons provided in this unit. They will be required to write poetry from their own experiences. Lesson plans will be the final part of this unit.

Lucy Terry a slave girl from Deerfield, Massachusetts is recognized as the first African-American poet. In 1746 she wrote *Bars Fight* a verse account of an Indian raid. Jupiter Hammon, a Long Island slave was the first poet to be published, in 1760 (an eighty-eight line religious poem printed as a broadside). In 1773 Phillis Wheatley, a Boston slave was the first African-American to publish a volume of verse (124 pages, printed in London). (Chapman 21).

Phillis Wheatley is the first poet to be addressed in our study of African-American Poets. Phillis Wheatley was

born free in Senegal on the African coast in the early 1750's. When she was five years or possibly six years old, she was kidnapped by slavers, eventually transported in a slave ship to Boston, and sold in 1761 to John Wheatley, a well-to-do-merchant tailor. Her precocity encouraged the Wheatleys to educate her, and, within sixteen months after her arrival in the Wheatley household, the young slave girl had learned to speak and to write English. She then received, through informal tutorial sessions, a New England education, with considerable stress on the Bible and on the classics. Her education also prepared her to write the kind of neoclassical poetry very much in vogue at that time. It should be also noted that her upbringing and training did not give her a deep sense of identification with her people. She wrote no poems of social or moral protest against slavery and apparently had little communication with the free Blacks of Boston until her unfortunate marriage in 1778. (Barksdale and Kinnamon 38).

Jupiter Hammon's life and career are obscure. Only a few facts are known with any certainty. First, he was born a slave sometime around 1720 and remained a slave all of his life. Second, he belonged to the influential Lloyd family of Lloyd's Neck near Queen's Village on Long Island and found in this family the kind of benevolent understanding that encouraged him to write and publish poetry. There is very little known of his marriage and family, his reconciliation of fervent Christianity with chattel slavery, or his attitudes and beliefs. His poetry reflects a strong influence of Methodism and the Wesleyan Revival that swept America in the middle of the eighteenth century. This is particularly evident in the hymnal qualities of his verse. In fact, because all of his poetizing is on religious themes, some critics have speculated that Hammon may have been a preacher first and a poet only secondarily. In the final analysis, Hammon's religion was an opiate that dulled him to the world's evil ways. Instead of giving him a revolutionary social vision, it filled him with penitential cries. And his poetry is esthetically anemic and almost stifling in its repetitive religiosity. (Barksdale and Kinnamon 46).

George Moses Horton was born a slave in Northampton County, North Carolina, and remained at least nominally a slave until freed by the union soldiers in 1865. Horton found the means and the time to become the first professional poet. He taught himself to read and write by studying the alphabet from scraps of paper and by reading Methodist hymnbooks. By the 1820's while enjoying a new kind of freedom of movement rarely accorded a slave, Horton had journeyed Northampton County to Raleigh, North Carolina, and on to the state university at Chapel Hill, where worked as a janitor and wrote poetry for lovelorn students at the price of twenty-five or fifty cents a poem. (Barksdale 219).

This tone of Horton's poetry is different from that of the other two slave poets, Phillis Wheatley and Jupiter Hammon. Except for the poems in which he bitterly pleads for his freedom from slavery, Horton's poems are generally bright with good humor, and they occasionally sparkle with fanciful bits of imagery. His poetry has little of the religiosity of Jupiter Hammon or the pious sentimentality of Phillis Wheatley. He writes of love, nature, and life's small ironies with simplicity and homely wit. Because of his early self-instruction in hymn book literature, however, the form and meter of his poems reflect a strong hymnal influence. (Barksdale 219).

Frances Watkins Harper was born free in Baltimore and became one of the best known anti-slavery poets. She received her education in Pennsylvania and Ohio, and after a brief spell of teaching in Pennsylvania, she volunteered her services to the Anti-Slavery Society in Maine as a lecturer and poetic orator. Her marriage to Fenton Harper in Cincinnati in 1860 brought a brief interlude in lecturing activities, but after her husband's early death in 1864, Mrs. Harper went back to work for the Society, traveling from Maine to Louisiana for the cause of abolition and freedom. Her poetry was for the cause of abolition and freedom. Her poetry was dedicated to slavery and its abominable practices and abuse. Many of her poems she recited at lectures.

Paul Laurence Dunbar was born in Dayton, Ohio, in 1872. From youth he was a black prodigy in a white world. He was the only black student in his high school class. After high school, Dunbar had to work at one of the few jobs open to black youngsters, an elevator operator. Dunbar, the son of an ex-slave, rose from an elevator boy composing verses to an internationally known poet. Like other black writers in the turbulent days following the Civil War, Dunbar was artistically inhibited by the distorted image of black people which was comfortable for the white book-buying public. Dunbar as lyricist of considerable ability, who proved to the literary public that a black man could be an artist. In spite of Dunbar's success, he was haunted by a feeling of failure because the dialect poems, not his standard poems, were considered the more important. He was haunted by the fear of an early death and died at the age of thirty-three, from tuberculosis in 1906. He broke the ground for poets to become in the current upsurge of poetry which reflects black life, black rhythms, black language, we can perhaps detect the spectre of Dunbar. (Barksdale 349).

W. E. B. Du Bois was born on February 23, 1868 in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, a small New England town where few black families lived. Years of study at Fisk University and Harvard University and the University of Berlin brought him in contact with some of the most brilliant teachers of two continents. In 1895 he received his doctorate from Harvard. Du Bois was not only the most brilliant and prolific black scholar of the early twentieth century, but also the most influential. He lived to be well over ninety. He spent seventy years writing, speaking, and organizing for human peace, dignity, and justice. His commitment to Black Americans broadened to encompass all people descended from Africa. (Barksdale 363). Du Bois wrote free verses to the confinement of conventional forms. His poetry was passionate and replete with vivid images. His poetry dealt with Black themes. It addressed the issues of Black Americans.

William Stanley Braithwaite was born of West Indian ancestry in Boston. He had little formal education but taught himself to read and write from wide reading and careful observation. He was a critic and talented lyric poet and he was part of the New Poetry movement in American Literature. His poems were written in a traditional nineteenth-century lyric style and sought for truth as well as beauty. His poems were carefully executed, subtle, and often cryptic, having nothing to do with the life of the black man of that time. (Barksdale 482).

Fenton Johnson is included in the archives of Black American poetry not only because of his poems themselves, but also because his works anticipated the Harlem Renaissance. He was born in Chicago. Johnson began writing at the age of nine. Later he attended the university of Chicago. He taught school for a year then became an editor and publisher.

Johnson's poetry was at first of the conventional nature. He then turned to the free form of writing in which the irregular and unrhymed lines and the rhythms were determined by the theme. In the use of free form, solid imagery and actual speech rather than romantic overtones, Johnson was related to the New Poetry Movement. His poetry deals with real-life situations and is written in simple concrete language. In halting rhythms and jagged lines he portrays the chaotic world of the black man caught up in the world of racism. He wrote the kind of poetry that was far before its time. (Barksdale 455).

James Weldon Johnson was born in Jacksonville, Florida, on June 17, 1871. Johnson's family came from Nassau off the mainland two years earlier. Johnson was educated in the schools of Jacksonville. He also attended Atlanta University in the Preparatory division. He studied drama and literature at Columbia University as a graduate student. Johnson first wrote poetry in dialect. His later poetry showed protest verse, short poems of tropical life, translations of poems from Spanish and German poetry, and poetry of his past. He relied on rhythm, idiom, imagery and was also able to express the Black religious feelings. (Long 311).

Claude McKay was born in Jamaica, British West Indies. He received his education through being taught by an elder brother, who was a schoolmaster in one of the Jamaican villages. This elder brother was a strong influence in the formative years of McKay's life; he was a freethinker and the possessor of a good library in which there were books by the great English scientists, novelists, and, above all poets. The younger brother, by the time he was fourteen, had dipped into all these books and completely absorbed many of them. When he was nineteen he joined the Jamaica constabulary and served for almost a year. (Long 375).

Most of the poems were written in the Jamaican dialect. It is important to note that these dialect poems of McKay are quite distinct in sentiment and treatment from the conventional Negro dialect poetry written by the poets in the United States; they are free from both the minstrel and plantation traditions, free from exaggerated sweetness and wholesomeness; they are veritable impressions of Negro life in Jamaica. Indeed, some of these dialect poems decidedly militant in tone. It is, of course, clear to see that McKay had the advantage of not having to deal with stereotypes. He found his medium fresh and plastic. (Johnson 165).

Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri; he spent his youth in Lawrence, Kansas. He finished high school and began to write poetry. He spent a year at Columbia University. He was unhappy so he joined the Navy. Hughes lived in Paris, Venice and Genoa. Hughes made the spirituals, blues, and jazz the basis of his poetic writings. He portrayed the humor, wit, endurance, and faith of his people with the best skills. His poems spoke of human rights in his poetry. He was the single most influential black poet. (Siler 106).

Countee Cullen was born in New York City and reared by a Methodist minister who gave him the name Cullen. Cullen was educated in the public schools of New York City. While a high school student, Cullen's poetic skills were recognized and encouraged. After completing high school he entered New York University. After earning a Phi Beta Kappa key from New York University he entered Harvard and received a master of arts degree in 1926. He was a nationally acclaimed poet by the age of twenty-one. He received the Harmon award for high achievement in literature. He wanted to be known as a poet rather than a Black poet.

Cullen was a fine lyric poet with classic line. All of his work is laid within the lines of the long-approved English patterns. His poetry contains the themes of race-consciousness. It is through his power to deepen and heighten his inner experiences that he achieves his finest work. His poetry demonstrates high lyric quality, pure artistry, rich imagination and intellectual content. (Siler 105).

Angelina Grimke was recognized as a poet prior to the Harlem Renaissance. Little is known about her birth or education. However, she was a school teacher of English in Washington, D.C. high schools. She spent the last years of her life in New York City.

Her poetry was conventional and nonracial in theme. Her poems demonstrated sensitivity and emotional sharpness. She strove to express some unique aspect of personal experience. ( Bontemps 190).

Arna W. Bontemps was born on October 13, 1902 in Alexandria, Louisiana. He attended the Pacific Union College of California which he received a B.A. degree in 1923, and earned a M.A. degree from the University of Chicago 1943. He has been a teacher at every level of education. For his poetical works he received the Crisis Magazine Prize in 1926, the Alexander Pushkin Prize for two consecutive years and many other outstanding awards for his poetry. (Barksdale 628). His poems reflected the standard forms of English free verse.

Sterling Brown was born in Washington, D.C., May 1, 1901. He received his primary and secondary education in the public schools in that city. He graduated from Williams College and was elected into Phi Beta Kappa. He received his M.A. degree from Harvard. He was a professor at Howard University.

His poetic work deals with his unique style of writing folk poetry. His poetry has the same smoothness, dramatic emphasis, and abbreviated narration. He is best known as a creator in this unique style of writing poetry. His poetry was written to express his feelings of racial injustices. He blends the affects of jazz and spirituals into his writing style. These influences can be seen in some of his more popular poems. (Barksdale 632).

Robert Hayden was born Asa Bundy Sheffey in Detroit, Michigan. After his parents were divorced he was left with neighbors William and Sue Hayden who gave him their name and raised him. He published his first book of poems when he was eighteen. He attended Wayne State University and the University of Michigan acquiring a M.A. degree. He taught at Fisk University and the University of Michigan until his death.

He received numerous awards for his poetry. His poetry's themes dealt with the tensions between the imagination and the tragic nature of life and his work contained a spiritual quality. He expressed his feelings of betterment of Black life. (Long 561).

Gwendolyn Brooks was born in Topeka, Kansas but spent most of her life in Chicago. She attended and graduated from Kennedy-King College in 1936. She received numerous awards for her poetry but the most prestigious was a Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1950.

Her work expressed her childhood and neighborhoods in her earlier writings. Her later work spoke of social problems in America. She used many forms to write poetry but free verse was one. Her poems reflect the black sermonic tradition and black music, the spirituals, blues and jazz. (Siler 105).

Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones) was born in Newark, New Jersey, on October 7, 1934. He grew up in a middle-class home, his father as a postal official and his mother a social worker. He attended Barringer High School in Newark. Baraka received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Howard University. His graduate studies were done at the New School for Social Research at Columbia University. His poetry was done in the traditional form or conventional form.

His poetry reflects the kind of changes his life took on from one phase to another. It also reflects places he visited. (Siler 693). Most of his poetry addresses the social injustices of African-Americans.

Owen Dodson was born in Brooklyn, New York. He was educated in the public schools in that borough. He attended Bates College and Yale University and received a Master of Fine Arts degree. He taught at Spelman College and Howard University. He was Poet-in-residence at the University of Arizona.

His poetry is rich in style and rich in imagery and passion, within a carefully wrought form. Dodson has been involved with poetry and poetic drama since his own school days. In 1946 a collection of his poems were published. Mr. Dodson was the Head of the Department of Drama at Howard University. (Long 547).

Samuel Allen (Paul Vesey) was born in Columbus, Ohio in 1917. He studied with James W. Johnson at Fisk University. He received a L.L. Degree from Harvard Law School. He later studied at Sorbonne in Paris. Richard Wright was helpful in getting his poetry published. His poetry has been published in numerous magazines and anthologies in this country. Allen worked with Community Relations Service of the Department of Justice. This department deals with civil rights for racial integration.

Mari E. Evans is a native of Toledo, Ohio. She is Writer-in-Residence and Assistant Professor in Black Literature at Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana. She has published two volumes of poems. Her poems are brief

and incisive with understatement and irony. The tone and idiom of the urban black folk with probes and paradoxes of black American life. Her themes are black realities and contain the tone of the sixties. (Siler 807).

Etheridge Knight was born in Mississippi and grew up in Indianapolis and was given a twenty year prison sentence in 1960. He began writing poetry and short stories while in prison. He was released on parole at the end of 1968. He is known primarily as a poet. His themes were about oppression of the Black man and prison life. (Barksdale 809).

Don L. Lee was born in Little Rock, Arkansas and was reared in Detroit, Michigan. He attended college in Chicago. Lee has been a staff member of the Du Sable Museum of African-American History in Chicago, a teacher of Afro-American literature at Roosevelt University in Chicago, and "Black" poet-in-residence at Cornell University. He is a founding member of Chicago's Organization of Black American Culture Writers Workshop (OBAC). Lee's poetry is based on black realities and is written to educate black audiences. He taught through his poetry. Lee addressed the issues facing African-Americans in this country. He was humanitarian in his writings. (Chapman 283).

Poet and playwright, Sonia Sanchez was born in Birmingham, Alabama, lived in New York City, studied at New York University and Hunter College, was associated with black arts movement in Harlem, and has taught at San Francisco State College. She was married to Etheridge Knight. Her poems have appeared in many magazines and anthologies, and three collections of her poetry have been published by Broadside Press.

In the introduction to "We A BaddDDD People," Sonia Sanchez's collection of poetry, Dudley Randall writes: "This tiny woman with the infant's face attacks the demons of this world with the fury of a sparrow defending her fledglings in the nest. She hurls obscenities at things that are obscene. She writes directly, ignoring metaphors, similes, ambiguity, and other poetic devices. But her bare passionate speech can be very effective." (Chapman 336-337).

Nikki Giovanni was born in Knoxville, Tennessee and reared in Cincinnati, Ohio. She attended Fisk University, where she was a member of a Writers workshop and was instrumental in establishing a chapter of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating committee. She left Fisk University before graduating and returned to Cincinnati, Where she plunged into the black cultural revolution. By 1967 she has arranged a Black Arts Festival, helped to develop a black theater, and was conducting a workshop in black history.

Nikki Giovanni's works have great popular appeal. Like some other poets, she has rejected the standard language and has sought to find forms and diction more reflective of black realities. Consequently, in both her prose and her poetry, she employs a current innercity vernacular and starkly realistic images. Her works are mainly tough, angry demands for action. In criticism and in poetry she attempts to find a black aesthetic distinctly different from the Euro-American aesthetic. (Collier and Long 770).

These poems have been selected to show the thoughts and feelings of the poets from the start of slavery, during slavery and to the present. These poems have been selected for reading by the teacher and the students. They will show the differences in writing styles and vocabulary by the poets. These poems can be used to introduce students to the historical aspects of this unit.

Phillis Wheatley, "On Being Brought from Africa to America"

Jupiter Hammon, "A Poem for Children"

George Moses Horton, "Slavery"  
Frances Harper, "The Slave Mother"  
Paul L. Dunbar, "We Wear the Mask"  
W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Song of the Smoke"  
William S. Braithwaite, "Rhapsody"  
Fenton Johnson, "Aunt Jane Allen"  
J. W. Johnson, "The Creation"  
Claude Mckay, "If We Must Die"  
Langston Hughes, "Mother To Son"  
Countee Cullen, "Heritage"  
Angelina Grimke, "The Black Finger"  
Arna Bontemps, "Close Your Eyes"  
Sterling Brown, "Strong Man"  
Robert Hayden, "Fredrick Douglas"  
Gwendolyn Brooks, "We Real Cool"  
Ameer Baraka, "A Poem for Black Hearts"  
Samuel Allen, "To Satch"  
Mari Evans, "When in Rome"  
Etheridge Knight, "It was a Funky Deal"  
Don L. Lee, "Assassination"  
Sonia Sanchez, "Right On: White America"  
Nikki Giovanni, "The Funeral of Martin L. King, Jr."

The poems can be found in the following books:

*American Negro Poetry* , by Arna Bontemps.

*Afro American Writings: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry* , by Richard A. Long and Eugenia W. Collier, Books 1 and 2.

*Black Out Loud* , by Arnold Adoff.

*I Am the Darker Brother* , by Arnold Adoff.

Other poems by these poets are found in books listed above.

Before teaching children about these African-American poets, they must be taught about African-American history from African to American slavery. When teaching children about the poems of Phillis Wheatley, Jupiter Hammon, George Horton, Frances Harper, and Paul L. Dunbar, you could have difficulty due to the kind of language (dialect) or vocabulary they used in their writing. However, if you discuss with students the history of African-Americans during slavery, they must come to understand. You have to discuss the education of these poets and the reasons why their writings were done in dialect.

The next group of poets: W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul L. Dunbar, William S. Braithwaite, Fenton Johnson, James W. Johnson, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, and Sterling Brown show you how the language and vocabulary of these poets improved due to their getting formal education. Therefore, the language used in these poets' works will be easier to read and understand.

As time goes on these poets: Owen Dobson, Robert Hayden, Gwendolyn Brooks, Mari Evans, Ameer Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, Don L. Lee, and Sonia Sanchez show you how language developed through their formal education and how writing styles changed.

The following poets—William S. Braithwaite, Gwendolyn Brooks, Countee Cullen, Mari E. Evans, Nikki Giovanni, Langston Hughes and Sonia Sanchez—all wrote poems for children, the language is easy to read and this poetry meets the emotional needs, interests and abilities of all students.

Teaching poetry to children can work with any grade, any age level. It can meet the emotional needs, interests and abilities of anyone, anywhere, from the gifted to the most reluctant reader; it opens up a world of feelings for children they never thought possible; it is a source of love and hope that children carry with them the rest of their lives. (Hopkins 4).

Poetry for children differs little from poetry for adults, except that its content appeal directly to children. Its language should be poetic and its subject meaningful to children. (Huck and Kuhn 387).

A poem is an experience—something that has happened to a person, something that may seem very obvious, an everyday occurrence that has been set down in a minimum number of words and lines as it has never been set down before. (Hopkins 8).

Teaching children to write poetry can be done in the following manner. First, they must be introduced to poetry. Second, they must be introduced to the poets whose poems they will be hearing and reading. Third, poems by these poets should be read to them by the teacher over a period of time. Fourth, students should be taught to read poetry aloud, and last, they should be taught to write poetry.

Poetry is much like music. In order for students to enjoy rhythm, rhyme, tunefulness, and special messages of some poetry, the poems should be read aloud to the students. Gradually, as students mature, they begin to



build an appreciation for this form of literature and are able to enjoy a poem when they read it silently. Poetry should not be first presented as a silent reading lesson. It is through the experience of listening that the child first learns to appreciate poetry as a literary form that can provide avenues for expressing feelings, thoughts, and moods that perhaps prose can never do. (Durr 58).

The guidelines below can help those who get butterflies in their stomachs when it comes to presenting poetry. The same points can be shared with children, for they, too, should be reading and sharing poetry aloud.

1. Before reading a poem aloud, read it aloud several times by yourself to get the feel of the words and rhythm. Know the poem well. Mark the words and phrases you would like to emphasize, and then you will read it exactly as you feel it.
2. Follow the rhythm of the poem, reading it naturally. The physical appearance of most poems on the printed page dictates the rhythm and the mood of the words. Some poems are meant to be read softly and slowly; others must be read at a more rapid pace.
3. Make pauses that please you—pauses that make sense. Some poems sound better when the lines are rhythmically strung together. Sometimes great effects can be obtained by pausing at the end of each line.
4. When reading a poem aloud, speak in a natural voice. Don't change to a high-pitched or bass-pitched tone. Read a poem as though you were telling the children about a new car, or a television program you saw last night. Again, you must be sincere. A poem must interest you as well as be one that you feel is right for your children.
5. After a poem is read, be quiet. Don't feel trapped into asking children questions such as "Did you like it?" Most girls and boys will answer yes—even if they didn't like it because you selected and read it. And what if they didn't like it? By the time you began finding out the reasons, the poem is destroyed and half of the class will see why they, too, shouldn't like it anymore. (Hopkins 16-17).

Once children have exposed to and enjoyed poetry over a period of time, many will compose poems of their own. Children should and can write poetry. Children's work is meant to be shared. They can read their work to one another, print it in a class or school newspaper, include it in a play or assembly program, or give it as a priceless gift to someone special. (Hopkins 141).

We should encourage children to write, play with language, use words in new and special ways, rewrite, and develop their creative potential. Writing poetry is not easy. Children should be taught to rework their creations—rework them again and again until they "feel" right.

One way to start children to start writing is by employing similes and metaphors. Using similar and metaphors is a good method of introducing children to techniques for coloring their thoughts; these figures of speech compare two dissimilar objects using like or as. (Hopkins 142). Examples of similes and metaphors are: as green as \_\_\_\_\_, as big as \_\_\_\_\_ or as tired as \_\_\_\_\_.

However the standard method of teaching children to write poetry is the use of prewriting, composing and revising. Prewriting can be to finish a comparison such as, as bright as \_\_\_\_\_. The composing comes into play as children are asked to write a poem from the idea given. Once students have completed this task then comes revising and the students will read the poems aloud to see if it gives a clear picture. If not they will make any changes until the poem is written. They can continue until they are satisfied. This is the method I will use in teaching my students to write poems.

The steps I would use in teaching children to write poetry are prewriting, composing, and revising. As an introductory lesson in teaching students to write poetry I would use Sonia Sanchez's poem titled "Haiku." I would display the poem so students will be able to see what a haiku poem looks like. I would read the poem to the students. I would then discuss in detail what a haiku poem contains. Haiku poems consist of three nonrhyming lines containing seventeen syllables, five-seven-five. This means five syllables in the first line, seven syllables in the next line and five syllables in the last line. Most haiku poems relate to nature or the seasons of the year. In Sonia Sanchez's poem "Haiku" she compares her father's smile to an African sunset. A good haiku captures a moment or single image. I would read several haiku poems that show the qualities needed. I would then present the students with an idea for them to write a haiku poem. For instance, I would place a single red rose on the table. I would ask them to concentrate on the rose for a few seconds. I would take the rose and smell it and gently place it back on the table. This will help spark ideas for prewriting because I have provided them with qualities to write a haiku. I will have provided them with an image of a single moment and nature. The results will bring students to the next step of composing a haiku. No child should be forced to write a seventeen syllable haiku. I want to motivate the students to express themselves in as few words as possible. The decision would then have to be made if the words can be used to communicate an idea. This would lead us into revising the haikus written. I feel the best way to do this is to do it as a class. The students would get to see the revisions of many haikus. The above steps can be used when students write poems using similes and metaphors, traditional verse poems, parodies, and concrete poetry.

Teachers will be able to find ideas to teach students to write poetry in Lee Bennett's book *Pass the Poetry Please!* This book contains activities to help motivate students to write poetry.

Activities for children of all ages in writing poetry are; Best Poem of the Month, poems for favorite holidays, poems about building, choral speaking, poems about the circus, poetry collage, poetry about the primary colors and poems that children create about body parts. All activities can be found in *Pass the Poetry Please!* by Lee Bennett Hopkins.

## **Lesson Plan 1**

***Objective to teach students the vocabulary related to the writing of poetry.***

***Words imagery, style, tone, metaphor, simile, themes, prose, poetry, diction, rhythm, meter, lyric, free verse and verse.***

The teacher and students will look up these words and discuss their meaning. The students will write the meanings in folders they will make for poetry writing. The students will use these words for a vocabulary lesson for the week. They will alphabetize them. They will use them in sentences. We will discuss the word meanings during the course of the week. The computer at school will also be used to locate information on words and poetry.

It is important for students to understand words related to poetry in order to give them a better understanding in studying poetry.

## Lesson Plan 2

**Objective To teach students one of the first steps in the first phase of writing poetry. To introduce similes and metaphors.**

The teacher will discuss with the students the meaning of simile and a metaphor. The teacher will give examples of similes and metaphors. The teacher will ask the students to complete a phrase using like or as.

### **Example as green as grass**

The teacher will ask students to name things that are green. We will discuss the different shades of green. A color chart will be used so students will see the other shades of green. This will encourage students to name other things that are green. Other similes that can be used are: as big as \_\_\_\_ or as tired as \_\_\_\_.

## Lesson Plan 3

**Objective To help the students to learn about the poet Gwendolyn Brooks.**

The teacher will read the biographical sketch about Gwendolyn Brooks. The teacher will ask questions to see how much they comprehended.

### **Question**

Where was Gwendolyn Brooks born?

Where did she spend most of her life?

What college did she attend?

What award did she receive for her poetry in 1950?

The teacher will read several of her poems for the students. These poems can be found in the book *Make a Joyful Sound*, by Deborah Siler, Checkerboard Press, New York, 1991.

Poems to be read are:

“Timmy and Twanda”

“Rudolph is Tired of the City”

“A Welcome Song for Laini Nzinga”

“Andre”

“To Don at Salaam”

“Tommy”

All of these poems do not have to be read all at one time. The purpose of reading the poems is to expose students to the kinds of poems Ms. Brooks wrote.

The purpose of discussing the poet is to let the students know that education is important and to give them positive role models who are writers. It will also encourage them to work hard in school and write poetry from their own experiences.

## Lesson Plan 4

Objective: To teach students how to analyze “Dreams” by Langston Hughes.

Questions:

What is the poems theme?

What kind of dreams do you have when you sleep?

What kind of dreams is the poet talking about in this poem?

The teacher will read the poem to the students aloud. The teacher will discuss with the students all difficult words in the poem students may not know. The students and the teacher will discuss the poems’ theme. The students will discuss the kinds of dreams they have when they sleep. We will then discuss the dreams the poet is speaking of in his poem. The teacher will reread the poem to the students to see if they have achieved a better understanding of the poems’ theme. We will discuss other poems written by the poet. The poems are:

“The Dream Keeper”

“Poem”

“Brothers”

“April Rain Song”

“My People”

“Color”

“Snail”

“Mother to Son”

“Lullaby”

## Student Reading List

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Adams, Russell L. *Great Negroes Past and Present* . Chicago, Illinois: Afro-Am Publishing Co., 1969.

This book is a guide to many African-Americans who made substantial contributions to African-American History from Africa to America.

Addoff, Arnold. *I Am the Darker Brother: An Anthology of Modern Poems by Negro Americans* . New York: The Macmill Co., 1968.

This book can be used by students for reading poetry and about the poets who wrote the poems.

*Black Out Loud: An Anthology of Modern Poems by Black Americans* . New York: The Macmillan Co., 1970.

This book can be used by students for reading poems and about the poets who wrote the poems.

Dawkins, John, Granowsky, Alvin, Eskin, Eden Force. *The Cornerstone Anthology* . New York: Globe Book Co., 1990.

This book can be used by students to learn about all facets of literature.

*The Students Anthology* . New York: Globe Book Co., 1990.

This book can be used by students for reference material literature.

Giovanni, Nikki. *Spin a Soft Black Song* . Boston, Massachusetts: 1971. Hill and Wang, 1971.

This book contains poems that children can read and enjoy.

Hughes, Langston. *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* . New York: Random House, 1974.

This book contains poems to be read by the students and the teacher.

Siler, Deborah. *Make a Joyful Sound* . New York:. Checkerboard Press, 1991.

This book contains poems for children by African-American poets. Biographical sketches of the poets who wrote these poems are also a part of this book.

## **Teacher's Bibliography**

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Baker, Houston A., Jr. *Afro-American Poetics: Revision of the Harlem Black Aesthetic* . Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1988.

This book discusses poets and their works during the Harlem Renaissance.

Barksdale, Richmond, and Kinnamon, Kenneth. *Black Writers of America: A Comprehensive Anthology* . New York: Macmillan Co., 1972.

A collection of literary pieces of African-Americans from the 1700's to the present day.

Bontemps, Arna. *American Negro Poetry* . New York: Hill and Wang, 1964.

This book contains poetry of many African-Americans.

Brooks, Gwendolyn. *Jump Back New Chicago Anthology* . Chicago: Broadside Press, 1972.

This book contains poetry of Chicago poets who are African-Americans.

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

All poems in this book are written by Gwendolyn Brooks on various subjects.

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

This book contains fiction, poetry, autobiography and criticism in African-American writings.

*New Black Voices* . New York: New American Library, 1972.

This is a collection of poetry, fiction, and criticism by African-Americans.

Dawkins, John, Granowksy, Alvin, Eskin, Eden Force. *Globe Literature* . Englewood Cliff, New Jersey: Globe Book Co., 1990.

This book provides information in teaching students about literature.

Exum, Pat Cruthchfield. *Keeping The Faith: Writings by Contemporary Black Women* . Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, 1974.

This book contains poetry and fiction by African-American women.

Glaysher, Fredrick. *Robert Hayden: Collected Poems* . New York: Liveright Publishing Co., 1985.

This book is a collection of Robert Hayden's poems.

Hopkins, Lee Bennett. *Pass the Poetry Please!* New York: Harper Trophy Publishers, 1987.

A complete guide for teaching children to write poetry.

Huck, Charlotte S., Kuhn, Doris Young. *Children's Literature in the Elementary School* . New York: Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston Inc., 1961.

A complete guide for the teaching of literature.

Johnson, James W. *The book of American Negro Poetry* . New York: Harcourt Brace, Javaovich Publishers, 1959.

A collection of poems by African-Americans.

Lauter, Paul. *The Heath Anthology of American Literature: Volume 2* . Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath Co., 1990.

This anthology is a useful reference guide to literature by American writers.

Long, Richard A., Collier, Eugenia W. *Afro-American Writing: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry* . Volume 1 and 2. New York: New York University Press, 1972.

These two books are a complete guide to prose and poetry by African-Americans from the 1700's to 1900's.

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