



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1994 Volume II: Poetry in the Classroom: Incentive and Dramatization

We. Too. Sing America

Curriculum Unit 94.02.07
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I. Introduction Over the past five years, while participating in the Yale -New Haven Teachers Institute, I have written extensive units detailing the lives and achievements of Edward Hopper, Jacob Lawrence, B. Traven, the Wright Brothers and Langston Hughes. During each project I have read extensively about these creative geniuses. During the Langston Hughes project, I developed a historical narrative that touched lightly on specific areas of his monumental portfolio. His literary accomplishments were well represented by his novels and short stories, his plays, and his poetry. Hughes' poems often conveyed serious messages that were seldom pleasant but he wrote these poems with compassion and hope.

This year I have decided to develop a unit that focuses primarily on Langston Hughes' poetry against the backdrop of earlier and later poetry (Paul Dunbar and Gwendolyn Brooks, respectively); that is to say, a unit that studies universal themes and historical occurrences as they follow a progressive journey across continents, oceans and chronological time lines. This unit will explore black history dating back to ancient civilizations; and as we move to the present day, we will examine a variety of themes , including but not limited to racial prejudice, miscegenation, dream fulfillment, opportunity and freedom.

As an introduction to Hughes' work, we will briefly study Paul Dunbar, a prolific black writer who completed a large collection of short stories, four novels, and volumes of poetry. He wrote in the late 1800's and he was one of the first black writers to earn a living from his writing. Dunbar's works are wonderful selections for middle school students because they are easy to understand and they demonstrate excellent poetic techniques. His poems fall into two categories: humorous dialect poems that often depict warm, loving relationships, especially with his mother, and short, non-dialect poems that shed some light on the reality of being an oppressed people.

Dunbar's poetry will lend itself nicely to our advance into the 1920's, a time that brought the Harlem Renaissance. For the first time, blacks began the process of introducing America to itself — that is, to all members of its extended family. For so long before then Black Americans had been denied access to the cultural and economic mainstreams of America. The first writers of this movement developed literature that was rich in detail and sought to describe the dramas of everyday living. These writers presented the plight and struggles of Black Americans everywhere; they recounted the joys and sorrows , the fears and hatreds, the opportunities and the prejudices. Many of these writers sought to challenge the conscience of White America to consider equal opportunities for all.

During this time period, black writers became very self-assertive. Writers such as McKay, Toomer, Bontemps, Cullen and Hughes became widely accepted as peers of universally-accepted poets of the time. Hughes, as a major writer during this Renaissance period, contributed largely to the recovery of the oral folk tradition, with its roots in jazz and rhythm and blues. His poetry, while reflecting his black heritage, portrays the constant struggle for opportunity and freedom. As we study Hughes, we will seek to analyze the historical events or consequences that prompted Hughes to create such masterpieces as “The Negro Mother”, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”, “The Weary Blues”, “Dream Variations” and “I, Too, Sing America”. These poems and many others served as a platform from which Langston sought to bring about social change. As he created his poems, he sought to portray his people with a strong sense of realism. He often wrote on controversial racial topics but he wrote in such a way as to please large elements of both his white and black audiences.

To conclude my unit, we will briefly study Gwendolyn Brooks, the first Afro-American to win the Pulitzer Prize. Her imagery is strong and visceral. To some extent she could be considered a forerunner of contemporary black poets in that she deals openly with the disillusionment widely experienced with the Caucasian society, emphasizes black pride, and understands the urban poor. Her poetry celebrates the truth of life, touching the sights and sounds in a poor black community. She is rooted in this experience. One can see a common bond between the writer and her subjects; she can identify with their pain and laughter, their shattered egos and dreams. She is most famous for “The Bean Eaters” and “Children of the Poor”. These selections will be ideal for my students because they share similar circumstances.

II. Goals, Objectives and Strategies My unit objectives are to present an overview of Afro-American poetry, beginning with an analysis of Paul Dunbar’s dialect poetry, moving through the Harlem Renaissance period with a major focus on Langston Hughes’s offerings and culminating with an interesting perspective of the urban poor by Gwendolyn Brooks. Because the majority of my classes at Roberto Clemente Middle School are Afro-American students, I would want them to develop an awareness of and appreciation for poetry created by fellow African-Americans preceding them who have contributed to a narrative history of the Afro-American experience. Additionally, students will be expected to identify themes and underlying messages, especially as we move from “veiled” situations to the oral blues tradition. Having the opportunity to study three famous poets across a period of almost seventy years, students will be able to compare and contrast styles of writing, treatments of themes and literary techniques. Finally, they will become better readers of poetry, improving their comprehension abilities and their critical and analytical reading skills. Hopefully, my students will be motivated to excel and to enjoy themselves as well.

III. Paul Dunbar’s Poetry Paul Laurence Dunbar achieved recognition as America’s first black American to earn a living as a professional writer. He authored six volumes of poetry as well as novels, songs and essays. He was well known nationally and his writings were widely accepted by both white and black audiences. As a black man who was the son of former slaves, Dunbar wrote from a knowledgeable perspective of slavery conditions and oppression to the human spirit. He was able to interpret his people through his representation of black folk language, and his work helped to shape mainstream American cultural and intellectual thought more generally through his popular versions of the African-American experience.

Dunbar was born in Dayton, Ohio in 1872. His father had escaped from slavery via the Underground Railroad and had fought in the Civil War for the Union army. Dunbar learned to read well from his mother and later he dedicated his first volume of poetry, *Oak and Ivy*, to her, thanking her for all her sacrifices, her love and her guidance. Dunbar would also honor his father in poems that took pride in heroic wartime achievements such as “Our Martyred Soldiers” and “The Colored Soldiers.”

As a young man in high school, Dunbar possessed an inquisitive mind, keen powers of observation, an

excellent vocabulary and an aptitude for written expression. However, his search for employment following graduation was tainted by his encounters with racism. He discovered that physical labor and domestic service were the only job opportunities available to him. For the next two years, Dunbar operated an elevator in downtown Dayton at four dollars a week despite his desire to attend Harvard to study law.

In 1893, Dunbar traveled to the World's Columbian Exposition to sell copies of his book of poems, *Oak and Ivy*. It was here that he met Frederick Douglass, who befriended him and assumed a fatherly role towards the young poet. In 1895, Dunbar met Alice Ruth Moore, an aspiring black writer, and three years later he married her. Although Alice and Paul loved each other, this stormy relationship ended in divorce four years later. By this time Dunbar was addicted to alcohol (which had been prescribed for his tuberculosis) and the mood of his poetry had changed dramatically. He spent his last few days living with his mother, dying on February 6, 1906.

Although Dunbar enjoyed mild success with his *Oak and Ivy*, especially considering Douglass's support, it was his second poetry collection, *Majors and Minors* that brought him into the national spotlight. On June 27, 1896, Harper's Weekly carried a critical review written by William Dean Howells that suggested that the *Minors* was well done but that there was nothing very special in the book "except for the Negro face of the author. In his treatment of it", Howells wrote, "he has been able to bring us nearer to the heart of primitive human nature in his race than anyone else has yet done." ¹ These comments, biased they were, did help to create a larger audience for Dunbar's poetry, but Dunbar grew to resent Howells and his remarks. It was comments like these that were to impose constraints on the Harlem Renaissance artists of the 1920's, as the white readership insisted on stereotyped representations of the "Ole Negro" of the southern plantation.

Dunbar's dialect poetry was usually written in a comic or sentimental way, and it was popular with whites as well as blacks. Langston Hughes would later use black dialect deliberately as he struggled with stereotypes in creating his original literature. Dunbar was highly successful in his dialect poetry, presenting it as the spoken language of the people." ² But some critics believed that in these poems Dunbar did not enhance his stature as a poet because he failed to create "the geography, the psychology and the imagery that must accompany a fundamental artistic decision of the kind." ³

Dunbar's poetry focused on numerous fundamental themes that poets to follow would develop as well. His poems included family situations, narrative histories influenced by slavery conditions, tragedy and death, miscegenation, anger and protest, black heroic themes that exhibited strong racial pride and vivid dreams of hope, opportunity and freedom. Poems such as "Sympathy" helped to design a "self veiling" mask that would gradually be removed as his poetry and that of others would become involved in the oral blues tradition.

By the time that Dunbar would write his second poem entitled "Sympathy", he would still be a young poet of twenty-seven, but his career and his life would soon be over. By this time Dunbar could identify easily with the caged bird and his song:

I know why the caged bird beats his wing
Till its blood is red on the cruel bars
For he must fly back to his perch and cling
When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;

And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars

And they pulse again with a keener sting -

I know why he beats his wing!

Dunbar often used humor as a mask to conceal his angriest messages. "We Wear The Mask" was one of his most famous poems.

We wear the mask that grins and lies

It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes, -

This debt we pay to human guile;

With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,

And mouth with myriad subtleties.

This poem provides an opportunity to view the inner circle of the black community as the poet lifts his mask momentarily. In daily life, the mask covers the face and eyes, the torn and bleeding hearts, and the "myriad subtleties". The speaker of this poem cries out to Christ in pain but the world is oblivious to the black man's struggle for equality.

Black heroic themes are developed nicely in pieces such as "The Colored Soldiers". As I have previously noted, Dunbar's father had served with the Union army in the Civil War. This poem celebrates the heroism of black men like his father who fought bravely against the South, often volunteering for the most dangerous assignments.

Yes, the Blacks enjoy their freedom

And they won it dearly, too;

For the lifeblood of their thousands

Did the southern fields bedew

In the darkness of their bondage,

In the depths of slavery's night,

Their muskets flashed the dawning

And they fought their way to light.

"The Haunted Oak", a ballad, evinced strong racial pride and a spirit of protest. When Dunbar first sent the poem to be published, there were many who were amazed that it was accepted and printed, considering the topic and the time. I have read this poem several times and each time the poem is as visceral as the first. I especially like the portrayal of the speaker as the "oak" himself as the "guiltless man" is hanged.

I feel the rope against my bark,

And the weight of him in my grain,
I feel in the throe of his final woe
The touch of my own last pain.
And never more shall leaves come forth
On a bough that bares the ban;
I am burned with dread, I am dried and dead,
From the curse of a guiltless man.

Dunbar's dialect poetry is rich with irony, understatement, hyperbole and caricature. In "When Malindy Sings", Dunbar's use of caricature renders whites more comical than blacks. He has his white audience assuming that they are more intelligent and biologically superior because they can read and write. But with all these assets, Miss Lucy can't sing and no amount of practice will make Ode soun come right".

G'way an' quit dat noise, Miss Lucy —
Put dat music book away;
What's de use to keep on trying
Ef you practise twell you're gray
You cain't sta't no notes a-flyin
Lak de ones dat rants and rings
F'om de kitchen to de big woods
When Malindy sings.

Throughout the Harlem Renaissance, Dunbar remained a model for writers such as Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes. As Arna Bontemps notes, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Dubois were strongly drawn to Dunbar's work. Dunbar's pride in his "blackness," his appreciation of his racial and cultural heritage, his loving depiction of black men and women, and his musical renditions of black folk language, strongly influenced subsequent generations of Black poets.

IV. The Blues Tradition Langston Hughes owed much to Dunbar, but he also drew upon jazz and blues as primary resources for most of his poetry, making excellent usage of blues structure, themes and visceral imagery. There are many different types of blues styles attributed to geographical locations and historical time periods. Researchers have determined that decided differences in environments have resulted in variances in style and mood. Blues researcher Sam Charters has pointed out that in rural, less populous Black areas like Texas allowed traditional elements like slave and work songs to be incorporated in songs sung by local blues performers. In this manner, all blues styles were based on the time, location, environment and the interaction of elements in that environment. As we examine the influence of the blues tradition on Hughes's work, we will consider the types of blues that Hughes encountered in the various environments in which he

lived, keeping in mind that his styles were often in transitional phases.

Hughes's earliest musical influences were likely to have occurred in his Lawrence, Kansas childhood days between 1902 and 1915. The songs in this area were strongly influenced by slave and field hollering songs. His next blues influence probably occurred in Harlem between 1922 and 1923 while he was attending Columbia University. Hughes was strongly drawn towards the vaudeville blues singers, especially female blues singers such as Mamie Smith, Ethyl Waters, and Bessie Smith. Hughes also named other sources for his knowledge of the blues in his first autobiography *The Big Sea*. He also credited famous blues performers like Leadbelly and The Delta Singers, both in person and on records.

Zora Neale Hurston was probably Hughes's closest friend, a fellow writer who possessed a broad knowledge of black folklore. Hughes felt that Hurston was the most amusing of all Harlem Renaissance artists, due probably in no small part to her folk-knowledge and mother-wit. The close contact with these people and the knowledge of the work of the Lomaxes and John Work provided additional blues material for Hughes." ⁴

As a result of these sources and prevailing attitudes, Hughes created his own blues poetry, drawing heavily on oral tradition for his structure, themes and imagery. Hughes carefully imitated various existing blues forms in his poems to render them in such a way as to identify with rhythms of typical blues songs of that period. Structurally, the traditional blues format was in stanza form with the same thought repeated three times, or - the more common pattern - with the first thought repeated twice, with the last word of the previous lines rhyming with the last word of the last line. The chord structure characteristically lasted twelve bars, performed in the key of C, and used three chords. These chords were C, F and G. Hughes attempted to capture the beat and rhythm of blues songs in his poetry.

"The Weary Blues" was a Langston Hughes poem that appeared to be influenced by vaudeville lyrics. In the poem, Hughes narrated the story of a Harlem pianist. Structurally, the poem had twelve-bar stanzas; the theme was based on a blues tradition, and rhymed couplets separated by refrains appeared throughout the poem. However, it was not the singer who described why he or she was blue, but it was the poet who was hearing the singer and trying to understand what the "Weary Blues" were and what they meant. In his poem, Hughes was not rooted in the experience, but rather he is an outside analytic voice striving to identify with the "Sweet Blues coming back from a black man's soul!" One night in March, 1923, after a visit to a Harlem cabaret, Hughes wrote himself into the poem as follows:

Droning a drowsy, syncopated tune,

Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,

I heard a Negro play.

Down on Lenox Avenue the other night

By the pale dull parlor of an old gas light

He did a lazy sway . . .

He did a lazy sway . . .

To the tune o' those Weary Blues.

In this beautiful poem, Hughes delineates a distance between the narrator of a poem and the bluesman playing as if to make known to the world the distance between the poet and “his people”. Not having been born in the South or having relations who were slaves, Hughes often considered himself an outsider when writing about slave experiences. He was a poet who was not exactly Rooted in the experience”.

Poems like “The Weary Bluest are most successful because they transcend the absence of actual music by capturing the spirit of the blues song in its cadence of lines, and extend the limits of oral tradition by changing or modifying the existing structures or themes of the blues. The range of Langston Hughes’s knowledge of the blues tradition and his attempts to utilize aspects of the oral blues tradition in his work demonstrate his creative genius in recognizing the blues as a truly great folk art itself.

V. Langston Hughes and the Needs of Black Peoples Langston Hughes has been accepted by people all over the world as one of the most eloquent spokesmen for the American Negro. He wrote several volumes of poetry, six novels, nine books for young people, two autobiographies, many short stories, plays, photo essays, translations, lyrics for musicals and operas, radio and television scripts, recordings and numerous articles on a variety of topics. He created a Negro literature which embodied the Harlem Renaissance Movement. Because of the general interest in all facets of Negro life in the 1920’s and 30’s, he was able to please large elements of the white and the black audience as well.

My objectives for this segment of my curriculum unit are to present an overview of Langston Hughes’s poetry, to read and appreciate the candid, honest and powerful creative masterpieces of this black genius, and to discuss their numerous universal themes and their subtle, underlying meanings, highlighting the tensions, the inequalities, and the hope for greater opportunity. Other objectives are to dramatically improve the reading and writing skills of our students, to improve their critical thinking and inferential skills, and to challenge them with oral speaking and communication opportunities. Hopefully, my students will be motivated to excel, to develop a greater appreciation for Langston Hughes and his literary achievements, and to enjoy themselves as well.

My strategies for teaching this unit will reflect a diversified literary approach. Students will be challenged with comprehensive silent and oral readings: summarizing; finding the main idea; context skills; analytical and inferential skills; and writing and communication skills. The poetry selections will lend themselves nicely to oral presentations and classroom efforts at interpretation. Throughout these writings, we will highlight the dialect of Langston’s characters -conveying their rich and candid humor - and we will analyze the mechanics of his writing and his writing style. Listening to Langston himself on his records will be quite an experience. I’m sure that the children of the city of New Haven will have *ample opportunity* to open their ears and to listen to the sweet music of Langston Hughes.

Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri in 1902, spending most of his early years with his grandmother in Lawrence, Kansas due to the estranged relationship between his parents. In 1915, Langston moved to Lincoln, Illinois to live with his mother Carrie, and it was here at Lincoln’s Central School that Langston first began to write poetry. Later that year, he was elected eighth grade class poet. During the next four years, Langston would attend Central High School, reading Sandburg extensively and creating poetry similar in style and structure to that of Dunbar.

Following his graduation from Central High School, Langston would visit his father in Mexico to solicit funds to attend college. It was on this train excursion that Langston created one of his most famous poems, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”. That summer Langston wrote many poems because he was constantly unhappy. He readily admitted that he usually created his best work when he was depressed or miserable.

Hughes attended Columbia University between 1921 and 1922; however, at the end of his first year he quit, broke off relations with his father, and went off on his own. He worked as a truck farmer on Staten Island, a delivery man for an expensive florist, and a messboy on a vessel anchored at Jones Point, New York. Isolated on this ship, Langston began to write in earnest. That winter he wrote a poem entitled “The Weary Blues” about a piano player he heard in Harlem, and, more incisively, about himself and his relationship with his fellow Afro-Americans. When spring came, he signed onto a boat sailing for Africa —the Africa of his dreams. Fluent in French and Spanish, Hughes lived for various periods in Mexico, France, Italy, Spain, and the Soviet Union. “Among the new Negro writers of the Harlem Renaissance , Hughes had no peer as an internationalist, a citizen of the world. And yet his cosmopolitanism, rare for any American in his time, never displaced his passionate engagement with and commitment to African-American vernacular culture.” ⁶

Langston Hughes’s life was filled with a wide variety of rich experiences. In 1925, Opportunity Magazine awarded Langston first prize for “The Weary Blues”, and it was at this banquet that he met Carl Van Vechten, who would introduce his poetry to Alfred Knopf. Shortly thereafter, all sorts of good things began to happen. In 1926, his first book, *The Weary Blues* , was published. At Christmas, in 1925, Langston received a scholarship to attend Lincoln University from a rich, female sponsor in New York — a woman who “liked his poetry”.

During the next four years, Langston would attend college, publish his first short stories, and enjoy the gay and sparkling life of the so-called Harlem Negro Renaissance, especially the Saturday night house rent parties and those affairs given by A’lelia Walker — “the greatest Harlem party giver ever.” In the summer of 1926, Langston wrote a poem entitled “Mulatto” that he worked harder on than on any he had ever written. In 1927, *Fine Clothes to the Jew* was published and although it was well received by the literary magazines, the Negro critics attacked the book as a disgrace to the race. Ten years later, however, many of the poems contained in this book were being read in Negro schools and colleges. Langston continued writing throughout his career until he was hospitalized in March, 1967. On May 22, 1967, Langston Hughes died, but his work and his spirit will live on forever.

As prolific as Hughes strove to be in a variety of genres, he saw himself primarily as a poet. The sources of his poetry were to be found largely among the unheard masses of black folks and their rhythms, dialect, and their lifestyles. The basic themes focusing on the American Dream and the possibilities of hope and advancement were constantly present in his poetry. “The tension between the unrealized dream and the realities of the black experience in America provided the dynamic. This tension between material and theme laid the groundwork for the irony which characterized Hughes’s work at its best.”

Of his many volumes of poetry, nine books should be considered as major collections. These selections include *The Weary Blues* (1926), *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942), *Fields of Wonder* (1947), *One-Way Ticket* (1949), *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951), *Ask Your Mama* (1961), and *The Panther and the Lash* (1967).

Within the context of my curriculum unit, I have chosen six of Hughes’s poems to develop universal themes of Black history, Black pride, anger and protest, and Black dignity. In “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”, a poem dedicated to W.E.B. Dubois, the narrator traces civilization back to the source in East Africa. Then the speaker reaffirms the spirit distilled from human history, ranging from 3,000 B.C., through the mid-nineteenth century to the author himself at the brink of the Harlem Renaissance.” ⁸

Hughes also emphasizes the dignity and the sensitivity of the Negro as he recounts the Negro life in ancient African civilizations and in America.

A man-child is born, soft-spoken, almost casual,

yet noble and proud and Black as Africa.

The muddy river is his race, the primal source out of which he is born anew;

on that 'muddy bosom' of the race as black mother or grandmother, he rests securely forever.

This poem celebrates Black America. It exudes profound strength and heritage. The rivers represent immortality, an immortality that is deep, continuous and mysterious. The black man has become one with the rivers as he has bathed in them, built his homes near them, worked above them, and drunk from them. The transformation of the Mississippi River from mud to gold is mirrored by the transformation of slaves into free men by the Emancipation Proclamation. The black man has seen civilizations rise and fall throughout time, and his soul has deepened with time, securing his survival.

Langston extols the black woman as the hope of the race in "The Negro Mother". She was the one whom they stole three hundred years ago from Africa's land. She was the one who worked in the fields, the one they beat and mistreated, and whose children they sold as well. But she is nourishing " a dream that nothing could smother, deep in my [her] breast — the Negro mother." And it's through her children that the Negro mother can finally realize her dream. This poem is a historical narrative that uses the metaphor of life as a journey, similar to the notion of climbing the stairs of life in "Mother to Son".

It is these stairs of life, worked through the usage of black dialect, that embody the black race's courage, endurance and sense of duty. For rich people the stairs are crystal, smooth and easy to climb, but for poor people the stairs are splintered, torn up and dark, not unlike ghetto or tenement walkups. To stop or to despair is to give up or to die. Therefore one must persevere, bear and nourish new generations - and keep climbing. These men and women, especially during slavery periods, kept on climbing in order to prepare the way for " the coming Free".

Perhaps the closest that Hughes ever came to sharing his inner emotions and anxieties was in his poem, "As I Grew Older" that was published in 1925 when Hughes was twenty-three. The poem begins with the poet recalling his dream that was once "bright like a sun" but now is only a memory. A wall which separates the poet from his dream suddenly appears and continues to loom larger and larger, blocking out the sunshine, creating a sense of blackness or darkness, and removing all hope of dream fulfillment. As the poet begins to realize that his blackness is the cause of his frustrations, he realizes that he needs to focus his energies as positive Black light. His dreams can be realized as he shatters this darkness, smashes this night, breaks this shadow

Into a thousand lights of sun,

Into a thousand whirling dreams

Of sun."

Poetry then becomes an outlet as well as a salvation. "Only occasionally, as in the poem As I Grow Older, does Hughes provide a window upon his inner anxieties, and even in this poem the real root of his anxieties is hidden, and the poem becomes an allegory of the black man's alienation in white America."10

It is fitting that I culminate my Langston Hughes portion of this curriculum unit with "I, Too, Sing America"

because the title of this unit originated with the idea that a study of several Afro-American poets would come to represent the “We” in “We, Too, Sing America”. But, as I began to develop this project, I came to realize that the “We” represents all of us — the poets, our Yale professors, ourselves and - perhaps most importantly, our students.

Langston Hughes, being American, tells all of us in his poetry that freedom must belong to all of us before it can be freedom for anyone. In his poem, “I, Too, Sing America”, the “darker brother” is waiting for his opportunity to share the table of freedom with all Americans. He “laugh(s), eat(s) well, And grow(s) strong.” For, indeed, the black man’s roots are deep in America, even deeper than those of most white Americans. Therefore, Hughes celebrates America as well, but not an America that is but an America that *is to come* . Hughes’s democratic vistas are still on the distant horizon yet to arrive.

The black child in America has had a very difficult road to success growing up in poverty with racist social policies and attitudes, and massive disparities in terms of educational opportunities. He continues to cry out for fairness and Hughes has heard him, and it’s through the knowledgeable voice of Hughes that we can all hear and perhaps better understand just how difficult it has been to grow up black in America.

VI. Gwendolyn Brooks and The Urban Poor Gwendolyn Brooks is a major figure in American literature whose work is immersed in the feelings and the racial issues of Black people in this country today. She has received more than fifty honorary doctorates from American colleges and universities. She was the first Black woman elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. She won the Pulitzer Prize in poetry in 1950 for *Annie Allen*. And in 1980, she was invited to read her work at the White House in the company of twenty other distinguished poets, including Robert Hayden. Schools and cultural centers have been named for her, and in 1985 she was named Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress.

Gwendolyn was born into a loving and caring family on June 7, 1917. Her father, a janitor, often sang to her and related stories about other families less fortunate than theirs. Her mother, a Sunday school teacher, played the piano and encouraged her daughter to write prolifically, assuring her that one day she would receive the excellence and renown of a “lady Paul Laurence Dunbar”. Whenever poets would come to Chicago, Mrs. Brooks would take her children to listen to them, especially to James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes. Both Johnson and Hughes would influence Brooks’s writing and Hughes was to become her inspiration as well as her friend: he later dedicated “Something in Common” (1963) to Gwendolyn.

From the beginning, humanistic qualities and heroic figures became important topics for Brooks. Her early works — *A Street in Bronzeville*, *Annie Allen* , and *Maud Wartha* — are primarily concerned with the pressures of daily existence and the lives of the ghetto poor. Her poetry invokes the need for leadership and “race heroes” in the Black community. Gwendolyn Brooks shares with Langston Hughes the achievement of being responsive to turbulent changes in the black community’s vision of itself and to the changing forms of its ambiance during decades of rapid change. ¹¹

One of Gwendolyn’s “race heroes” was her close friend Langston Hughes. She was greatly impressed by *The Weary Blues* . She paid the highest tribute to Hughes as “the noble poet, the efficient essayist, the adventurous dramatist who strongly influenced her life and her art.” ¹² Many parallels may be drawn between Brooks and Hughes in their ways of expressing the “Black experience”; these would involve their African heritage and the absorption of blues, jazz and street language into their poetry. Brooks also admired the way in which Hughes befriended younger poets (like herself) and helped to pave the road for their literary successes.

Brooks would later pay special tribute to her close friend in a poem entitled “Langston Hughes”. This poem pleased Hughes very much. The poet describes Hughes as a luminous guide, one who is determined that the American dream should apply to all peoples. He “Has a long reach”, like a hand, and he “grips his right of twisting free”, twisting away from the bonds of slavery, racism and discrimination. He is “helmsman, hatchet, headlight”, heroizing his efforts in leading others to freedom.

Brooks wrote poems for children as well as adults. “Pete at the Zoo”, a ballad, mirrors her sensitivity towards children and their need for security, imagination and freedom. “Naomi” shows the impatience of a young adolescent with the unimaginative adults who nag Annie Allen’s childhood. My own favorite is “We Real Cool”, which has received strong praise for its technique and is probably the most widely known of Brooke’s works. The characters in this poem do not have much of anything going for them except for their stylish behavior as a peer group. The coolness of the players is the center of their personalities and the key to their lives. But beyond the poem, we are left feeling sorrow for these alienated, hopeless kids who have dropped out of society drinking, sinning and dying. It is this waste of human life that the author is mourning. The poem will be especially moving for my classes because some of my students bear striking resemblance’s to these “cool” dudes.

“A Song in the Front Yard” is a poem about a young girl who “wants a peek at the back” to learn about life in the ghetto streets. These streets and alleys are located in “Bronzeville”, a south side area of Chicago of about forty blocks. This young girl apparently lives on the border of segregated black life in Chicago and no matter how often her mother tries to discourage her with “sneers”, reminding her of the dubious futures of Johnie Mae, who will probably become a “bad woman”, and George, who will “be taken to jail sooner or later”, the young girl seems destined to fall prey to the excitements of the street and alleys — streets and alleys not unlike the areas that surround Clemente School. The real beauty of these poems becomes evident, though, as Brooks takes a humanistic and compassionate view of the black life she portrays so un sentimentally.

I have chosen to conclude this portion of my unit with “The Ballad of Rudolph Reed” and “The Ballad of Pearl May Lee”, stories with strong moral or social themes. Rudolph Reed was a man of strength and endurance, both physical and moral. “Rudolph Reed was oaken.” The paradox between Rudolph Reed and “oaken” is obvious. Reed’s wife and children support his desire to purchase a house; but few people but he would have cared to move to “a street of bitter white”. However, move is what they do and the first two nights rocks as big as fists crash through their windows. On the third night his daughter Mabel is cut by flying glass. Reed, no longer restrained in the style of a noble hero, sees the blood running down her forehead, presses the hand of his wife (as if to say good bye) and goes out into the night “with a thirty-four And a beastly butcher knife.” He hurts four white men before he is shot to death. The poem ends with Reed’s daughter Mabel blaming herself for what has happened while her mother changes her “bloody gauze.” Rudolph Reed became a victim of despair.

“The Ballad of Pearl May Lee”, a favorite of Langston Hughes, describes an “intimacy” that has taken place in the back seat of a Buick. Sammy, Pearl’s black lover, has committed the “old, old crime” of being intimate with a Caucasian woman who has seduced him. Having been wrongly accused of raping the white woman, Sammy is hauled off to jail and, subsequently, hung “around a cottonwood tree.” Pearl, her name a symbol of purity, notes bitterly that Sammy grew up thinking “Black” was “for the famished to eat” although he had “me in your black folks bed.” She often wished that he was dead. This poem is filled with intense feelings of rage and grief. As Brooks matured, her poetry reflected the distinctive lifestyle of her people. Her poetry became revolutionary, extolling her Blackness, her rage and her grief.

VII. Lesson Plans My first lesson involves one of my favorite Langston Hughes poems. “Mother to Son” is especially meaningful to me because it provides a positive basis for motivating many of my alternative program students. The poem wonderfully compares the difficulties and the hardships of life to the climbing of a stairway, perhaps in a tenement, with “tacks in it,/ And splinters, And boards torn up,/ And places with no carpet on the floor — Bare.” This poem highlights the relationship of mother to child in a way that my students can easily understand. Throughout the poem, the mother seeks to encourage hope in her son, to motivate him to continue on with his life’s struggle — to persevere and, by his actions, to nourish new generations.

Initially students should have ample opportunity to read the poem to themselves, after which a volunteer will read orally to the class. These activities will help to stimulate group discussions of comprehensive issues concerning the poem, such as:

1. What does the mother compare life to?
2. Describe the obstacles on the stairs.
3. What kind of advice is the mother giving to her son?
4. How old do you think the mother and son are? Do you think age plays an important part in this poem?
5. Have your parents or relatives ever given you advice? What was it and did it help you to make better decisions?

Reading poetry aloud in classroom environments allows students to develop communication skills such as enunciation and intonation. Because poetry can be a form of storytelling, students will have the opportunity to explore the content of a poem: that is, the characters, the theme, the time and place, and the conflict and its resolutions. Their listening skills can also improve as well.

My *second* lesson focuses on Paul Dunbar and his masterful poem/ballad “The Haunted Oak”. This piece evinces strong racial pride and a spirit of protest. The poem is a story of a guiltless man who was accused of “the old, old crime,” spirited away from jail by a lynching mob, and hung on a “haunted bough” in the middle of the night. The oak says: “I feel the rope against my bark,/ And the weight of him in my grain,/ I feel in the throe of his final woe/ The touch of my own last pain.”

Students need to have a thorough understanding of the treatment of blacks in America. They should know the historical facts about slavery, lynching, racism, and discrimination. Because of the strong emotions of anger and rage that are generated by these topics, teachers need to prepare their students to vent their anger in a healthy manner, especially in multicultural classrooms. It is important that all students recognize the racism that has been inflicted upon black Americans because blacks still suffer today from many injustices incurred by their ancestors.

All students need to carefully analyze alternative ways of reacting to injustice. Teachers may choose to lead group discussions that focus on current injustices to minority peoples. Student ideas may be listed on the blackboard with individual topics to be discussed within smaller groupings as a follow-up lesson. Students may

also seek to analyze the widespread occurrence of these injustices as they relate to time and to geographical locations.

It is important that all students recognize the reactions that black and white peoples have had to racism and they should understand which reactions have led to positive change. One of the most valuable functions of literature is that it helps us to analyze alternatives and their consequences without facing the consequences ourselves. We can learn from the mistakes of others as well as from their successes.

My *third* lesson highlights the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks. Her imagery is visceral and multi-sensory, and she writes about racism, black pride, and her loving appreciation for the urban ghetto poor.

At first, I wanted to do a lesson on 'The Ballad of Rudolph Reed' because we had so much success this year with Lorraine Hansberry's "Raisin in the Sun". Then I thought about doing "The Ballad of Pearl May Lee", which was Langston Hughes's favorite. I finally decided on Brooks's "We Real Cool" and "A Song in the Front Yard" because the themes of both these works reflect the approximate ages of my students and their sociological and cultural backgrounds.

"we Real Cool" is a small poem consisting of only eight lines with three words on each line that depicts young dropouts from school and the alternative activities that they seek to engage in. This multi-sensory poem contains excellent examples of repetition, rhyme, and alliteration. Within the context of this poem, teachers will be able to point out instances of these poetic techniques. At Clemente School, dropping out is a real coming event for many students. Perhaps this poem will give them an opportunity to rethink their situation before it is too late.

"A Song in the Front Yard" is a longer poem with four stanzas, which depicts a young girl who is curious to go beyond her front yard to learn about the back alleys and the "charity children" and to "strut down the streets with paint on my [her] face". This poem illustrates the use of rhyme and imagery and also allows for a comparison/contrast between life in her front yard and the "wonderful things" to be found in the back.

After each student has read these poems silently and orally, the teacher should lead the class discussion with ideas that relate to the skills which I have mentioned in each of these poems. Follow-up activities may include writing a story or a poem about someone that your parents forbid you to see.

Additional Suggested Activities

- * Oral Speaking

After having read a wide selection of Dunbar, Hughes, and Brooks, students will have the opportunity to select an individual piece to memorize and subsequently to present to the class.

- * Recordings

As a culminating activity to Hughes's poetry, students will have the opportunity to listen to the "sweet music" of Langston Hughes. An MGM L.P. record entitled "The Weary Blues and Other Poems" was created in 1958 with jazz background provided by Charles Mingus and other talented musicians.

- * Write a biographical report of the poet's life.

- * Copy your favorite poem and illustrate it.

- * List some dreams that you have for your future. What can be done to help them to happen?

- * Make a "My Favorite Poems" booklet by copying several of your favorite poems.

* Create a poem to share with your class.

Footnotes

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Appendix (Poetry Packets) Dunbar1. "Sympathy"2. "Sympathy"3. "We Wear The Mask"4. "The Colored Soldiers"5. "The Haunted Oak"6. "When Malindy Sings"

Hushes1. "The Weary Blues"2. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"3. "Mulatto"4. "The Negro Mother"5. "Mother To Son"6. "As I Grew Older"7. "I, Too, Sing America"

Brooks1. "Langston Hughes"2. "We Real Cool"3. "A Song in the Front Yard"4. "The Ballad of Pearl May Lee"5. "The Ballad of Rudolph Reed"

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