



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

Guide for Curriculum Unit 94.02.07
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This year I have developed a unit that focuses primarily on Langston Hughes' poetry; a unit that studies universal themes and historical occurrences as they journey across continents, oceans and chronological time lines. This unit explores Black history dating back to ancient civilizations and a variety of themes, including racial prejudice, miscegenation, dream fulfillment, opportunity and freedom. As an introduction to Hughes' work, we briefly studied Paul Dunbar. Dunbar's works are wonderful selections for middle-school students because they are easy to understand and they demonstrate excellent poetic techniques. Dunbar's poetry lends itself nicely as we will move into the 1920s, a time that brought the Harlem Renaissance. These writers presented the plight and struggles of Black Americans everywhere as they recounted the joys and sorrow, 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.

Hughes, as a major writer during this period, contributed largely to the oral folk tradition with its roots deeply entrenched in jazz and rhythm and blues. His poetry portrayed the constant struggle for opportunity and freedom. He often wrote on controversial, racial topics but he wrote in such a way 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 to be a forerunner of modern Black poets in that she deals openly with racist attitudes towards Caucasian society, Black pride, and she understands the urban poor. Her poetry celebrates the truth of life as she touches the sights and sounds in a poor Black community. She is rooted in the experience. One can see a common bond between the writer and her subjects, a person who can identify with their pain and laughter. 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.

(Recommended for Literature/Poetry and Black History, grades 7-12)

Key Words

Acting Drama Reading American Poetry Gwendolyn Brooks Paul Dunbar Langston Hughes

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