

Using Rap Lyrics as a Resource in the Secondary English Classroom

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Overview

Under social conditions in which sustained frontal attacks on powerful groups are strategically unwise or successfully contained, oppressed people use language, dance, and music to mock those in power, express rage, and produce fantasies of subversion. (Rose 99)

The popularity of rap music upon American culture (and upon global culture) has increased exponentially in the past decade or so, defying the expectations of critics who had “predicted a quick demise”. (Kubrin 360) With rap’s popularity and influence has come much critical scrutiny. Rap music seems a natural subject for a high school classroom, given that it is both part of current teen culture and exceedingly controversial. At the intersection of popular culture and controversy are situated many lively verbal and written discussions. Working with rap lyrics also allows teachers to cover a great number of literary techniques and devices in an interesting manner. Placing rap in a tradition of black protest allows students to draw connections among poets and eras, to act as literary critics and to consider what responsibilities rap artists and producers might have toward the society in which their messages are heard.

My unit will ask students to reflect upon the themes, source and function of current rap lyrics. They will discover rap's common messages, theorize about their source, and ultimately decide what influence rap lyrics can have upon the listener. Furthermore, they will find commonalities in theme between rap lyrics and black protest poetry of the Harlem Renaissance and of the 1960's, thus placing rap lyrics on a continuum of protest by artists in the African-American community. Finally, they will learn or relearn a variety of rhetorical strategies and locate them, both in poetry from the two periods listed above and in rap lyrics.

Rationale

The School District of Philadelphia has moved toward a mandated English curriculum over the past six years. Much of it relies on standard anthologized works, familiar to me

from my own schooling thirty-five years ago. We are, however, allowed to substitute similar materials, as long as we cover the skills relevant to the unit. Some of my students are poor readers and high-interest materials help hold their attention. I hope that this unit will enrich the three weeks the District has allotted for poetry study and still give the students the English skills and knowledge they need. Although none of the poems or lyrics I've used is difficult reading, the specific selections of my unit would probably be appropriate for older teens, perhaps those in English 3 and 4, as they contain profanity. The unit itself could be adapted, of course, with milder songs and poems. The skills covered are those we teach repeatedly throughout high school: identifying theme, author's purpose and tone, recognizing irony, metaphor, paradox and other literary strategies.

From its inception, rap has been identified as an art form of the dispossessed. Rap songs are often about tough lives. Practitioners take extra care to prove their bona fides, as only rappers authentically from the 'hood are seen as "keeping it real," i.e., representing the true culture. Ironically, perhaps, many of the originators of hip hop were more likely to come from stable working-class families than from the ranks of the desperately deprived. (Hager 26) Although early songs like "The Message" protested the conditions in poor neighborhoods, and old school MCs boasted of their skills, looks and way with women, it wasn't until the rise of NWA and other so-called "gangsta' rappers" that a criminal response to these conditions was rationalized, glorified and actually codified as a boastful creed similar to those of American gangster/hero archetypes such as Jesse James and the Mafia. (Chuck D 248)

Therefore, rappers earn legitimacy by claiming experience with poverty, drug dealing, and encounters with violence and the law. Even after these artists soar to prominence and wealth, they are either unwilling or unable to leave what's called "the game" behind; witness the list of dead or injured rappers, from Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls to Cam'ron and Beanie Sigal. Some observers even claim shootings are intentional, because this "obsession with a particular story about violence, drugs, and life in the hood, or belief that there is something essentially authentic in the description of brutal lifestyles," sells. (Pennycook 103) Why is this so frequently the depiction of black life in America? Who is sponsoring these ideas and who is consuming them?

Clearly, to be a rapper is, in some sense, to be the voice of some part of the African American community, and that bears upon the inquiry; what are common themes of rap songs, and why does rap repeatedly address those themes? To answer that question, it will be fruitful to look back to where rap started, in the South Bronx, New York City.

The Beginning

Histories of the early days of hip hop place its generation squarely amidst the chaos in New York's Bronx, generated by first, Robert Moses' community-killing Cross-Bronx Expressway project, and, later, by the economic downturns of the 1970's. (Rose 22) Moses, a New York City planner, used his extraordinary influence to remake huge chunks of the city, for better or worse. Creating the Cross-Bronx Expressway required

the city to co-opt miles of healthy commercial and residential blocks, driving business people and long-term residents out. The mess and inconvenience of years of construction damaged the area further, and, into the void thus established, the city's Welfare department moved impoverished families. (Rose 31) Soon another Moses project, the Bronx Co-op City, siphoned away remaining middle-class residents.

Cities were politically unpopular at the time; notoriously, when New York asked Washington for financial help during a crisis, President Ford's answer was interpreted as "Drop Dead, New York." (Van Riper) Ironically, Moses himself later said the slums he himself had helped create were "beyond rebuilding, tinkering and restoring. They must be leveled to the ground." (Chang 18) Unemployment among young people was said to be close to 80%. (Chang 13) Traditional support networks had been decimated by the breakup of the neighborhoods. These conditions were the crucible that created hip hop, the three-pronged youth culture of graffiti, break dancing, or "b-boying," and rapping.

How did such oppressive conditions inspire innovation? The new art forms were partly about neighborhood stardom. To young people with few opportunities to assert themselves in the larger society, community recognition was extra important. "To an invisible generation, fame itself was wealth." (Chang 118) The explosion of graffiti in the 1970's began with simple "tagging" - putting your graffiti name everywhere possible. Subway cars were desirable tagging spots because they carried names out of the neighborhood to citywide fame. Even after graffiti artists moved on to full-car, multi-color designs, or "masterpieces," the artist's name was still a focal point. Another identity-building strategy in graffiti was the creation of writers' clubs or associations, which gathered at high school cafeteria tables or on corners to compare style books and share methods for "getting up" (putting your name on a wall or train car) while avoiding police. (Hager 20) Similarly, break dancers formed crews, wore matching outfits and created identity with signature moves and styles. Who you were was important, but equally important was the group with whom you associated.

The lyrics of rap mirror this search for identity and importance. As in graffiti, artists use assumed names, which sometimes change, a la "P Diddy." Early MCs, seen in the movie *Wild Style*, identify themselves by name and spin funny and boastful tales of their prowess. Something as simple as the almost universal calling out of the artist's name at beginning or end of song reinforces the rapper's demand to be recognized. Rappers are similar to graffiti artists and b-boys also in that they collaborate on songs in ever-shifting alliances and also form more permanent groups, such as the Wu-Tang Clan.

Like poets and novelists, rappers often use the first person to tell stories both personal and general. "Rappers craft stories that represent the creative fantasies, perspectives and experiences of racial marginality." (Rose 3) Rappers bear witness to America's injustice. However, listeners should be careful to distinguish between the story teller and the story. For example, like any writer may, Tupac Shakur assumes an identity when he tells the story of "16 on Death Row." He speaks from the perspective of a young man caught in the justice system. Writers are responsible for the content of their stories but it is unfair to assume they have lived the tale. We should consider whether some of

the rhetoric may be the "fantasy of subversion" Rose postulates. (Rose 99)

Today rap is scrutinized critically by an uneasy group of bedfellows, an alliance of the right and left, for its misogynistic and crime- and drug-glorifying lyrics. Observers fear that young people take rap's messages literally and use them as instructions. However, other commentators think that focusing on the negative aspects of the rap industry is absurd. Imani Perry argues that historically, black American music has always been at the same time both squeaky clean, like the products of Motown, and down and dirty, like those of Stax Records. Therefore, there's nothing new about music that can shock. (Perry 4) The "respectable" forms of music attempted to show white America the injustice of racism against such well-mannered citizens, and perhaps catered to a wider range of listeners. Today, young people are unwilling to accept that division; hip hop allows all manner of discourse, and subsequent argument about what's been said. (Perry 6) Indeed, such argument is often played out openly in songs. Nor do today's artists need to stay clean to appeal to a large number of music fans.

Moreover, the offenses laid at rap's door are found in other forms of music; for instance, rock and roll objectifies women, uses rude language, and sees its artists frequently in the news for negative reasons. Perhaps most new forms aimed mostly at teens go through a period of criticism before gaining acceptance as their advocates age, or perhaps the firestorm of criticism aimed at rap comes from a slightly different place.

If Rose is correct and these "cultural responses to oppression" enable a community's ability to resist, then perhaps attacks on rap are manifestations of fear; perhaps the establishment worries that full revelation of what's going on in our communities will empower rebellion. Perry observes that the subject of hip hop songs is much less often about romantic love than are songs from other musical traditions, and more frequently about rage, crime, unhappiness and problems between individuals. (Perry 8) Rap songs tell real stories of how life is lived in inner-city ghettos by people experiencing racism and oppression. (Rose 1) Chuck D calls rap "angry Black voices yelling and speaking out and being heard, and sometimes followed by Black and white kids around the world. Censorship and the attacks on Rap are an attempt to nip that in the bud." (Chuck D 250)

Messages

Although students are quite aware of the controversy over rap, the media discussion tends to exclude the consumer as it swirls among pundits, intellectuals, rappers and production executives. To introduce the unit, I will ask students to examine a number of songs which seem, to me, to address common themes. After seeing these examples, students will be ready to draw parallels of their own across songs, and then in poems. If input is needed, I might suggest that they think about investigating gender, family and community, loyalty and betrayal, drug and alcohol use, outlawry, police brutality, or sex and love. The following two themes appear in the lyrics of old and new rap songs.

Economic deprivation

From the beginning, rappers spit songs of protest against unequal opportunity; I will discuss three examples here. In 1982's "The Message," Grandmaster Flash protests the "bum education, double-digit inflation," which leave kids with few choices.

You'll grow in the ghetto livin' second-rate
And your eyes will sing a song called deep hate
The places you play and where you stay
Looks like one great big alleyway
You'll admire all the number-book takers
Thugs, pimps and pushers and the big money-makers
Drivin' big cars, spendin' twenties and tens
And you'll wanna grow up to be just like them, huh

In the underground economy, hustlers rule, and as glamorous and conspicuous local role models, children may seek to emulate them. Grandmaster Flash deplors the conditions that limit kids' aspirations. Today's rappers, seemingly, were these children, worked for these pushers, and sometimes claim to still be involved in the drug trade. For example, Lil Wayne frequently assumes a gangsta pose, but explains it's a matter of economic necessity:

Yeah, money on the mind, murder in the plans
Disturbin' if you may, but it's dinner for the fam

He understands that society objects, but in his mind, he's doing what he must to support his family. At the same time, not all rappers are modern-day Robin Hoods, and today's rappers want more than just a fair share; they want a big piece of the American Dream. When Kanye West raps about conspicuous consumption, he admits that, although he wasn't deprived, he wants more:

You don't see just how wild the crowd is?
You don't see just how fly my style is?
I don't see why I need a stylist
When I shop so much I can speak Italian.

I don't know I just wanted better for my kids
And I ain't sayin' we was from the Projects
But every time I wanted layaway or a deposit
My dad'll say, "When you see clothes, close your eyelids."

Students will discuss several questions when investigating rap songs about economics:

- What conditions are rappers explaining or protesting, then and now?
- What action do they take in answer to these conditions?

- Does everyone deserve or need the things rappers say they have? Why or why not?
- Are there other answers to the social conditions described? What?
- Are the rappers assuming identities or are they speaking literally?
- What results from the actions of the rappers/characters in the songs?
- Do the ends justify the means? Identity

Another very common theme of rap songs is the assertion of identity, which, in turn, raises questions about the assumption of identities. Listeners must inquire, how much of the rap is literally true, and how much is part of myth-making? Early on, rappers in the small arena of clubs, parks and neighborhood competition rapped about their own skills, in showdowns reminiscent of earlier African-based traditions. (Perry 16) Some potent combination of machismo, youth, the insecurity of racism, economic deprivation, and this earlier tradition of toasting led to rap's lyrics of boasting and one-upmanship. However, beyond claims of personal importance, rappers also locate themselves within the important signifiers of group, family and neighborhood. Students will explore identity as it relates to: a) personal exploration and proving self-hood; b) showing masculinity; and c) being part of the family, peer group, and community.

Boasting focuses on the rapper's ability to emasculate rivals. The rapper will best others by writing better rhymes, selling more records, getting more women, or using violence if they must. Boastful raps enumerate status symbols like cars, watches, guns or properties.

I snatch your girl cause your arm ain't strong enough
 Plus ya don't stay in the studio long enough
 I make hits while y'all stay hatin and take bricks
 Had it locked til I came in the club, Take 6
 Got your chick cause you swore she was innocent
 (Jay-Z, "The City Is Mine")

I'm the motherfuckin big shot, I get down
 wit a 17, 16, 10 and a six shot
 fuck with Kiss get your wig rocked
 and if you're smart you'll bounce when my motherfuckin shit drop.
 (Jadakiss, "I'm A Gangsta")

Beyond the appeal of glamor, power and violence, many of these songs offer striking imagery, clever rhymes and humor. But for what seem to be more realistic depictions of identity, students should look at messages in a different vein, by the same artists (and not infrequently, within the same song.) Rappers often share homey and poignant details of growing up. Searching just the title "Where I'm From" on <http://www.hotlyrics.net/> finds the following and eleven others:

I'm from where the beef is inevitable, summertime's unforgettable
 Boosters in abundance, buy a half-price sweater new

Your world was everything, so everything you said you'd do
You did it, couldn't talk about it if you ain't lived it
(Jay-Z, "Where I'm From")

Jadakiss, stepping away from posturing, offers a brief autobiography:

All I want you to do is feel me...
Why take time out, to give you the real me...
Ayo I grew up very athletic, hard headed
thought I knew everything, wanted to do everything
I was spoiled, stubborn, the only child
so the only thing I could do was hold it down
Now this is something that I could tell you that's no bullshit
I always been wicked with the flow since a lil kid
my first addiction, GI Joes and icies
after that it was light skinned girls and Nikes
breeze through junior high school, then high school
couple of semesters of college and then night school
Moms start riffin, talkin 'bout how she can't support a grown man
so the god start flippin (Jadakiss, "Feel Me")

The contrast between the extravagant boasts about Glock-9s and Lamborghinis, on the one hand, and the intimate accounts of happy childhood summers and struggling to get through college are striking and present a great opportunity for discussion. Students might enjoy creating a character sketch of one artist by combing his or her works for clues to personality and motivation, just as we do for major characters in novels. This is also a good opportunity to discuss the concept of the reliable vs. unreliable narrator.

The Properties of Black Protest Poetry

The ideas in this section of my paper are largely indebted to Margaret Ann Reid's book *Black Protest Poetry: Polemics from the Harlem Renaissance and the Sixties*. Reid's book analyses rhetorical strategies of black protest poems from the two titular periods. I want students to investigate how contemporary rappers use these same strategies, to learn to recognize them, to analyze what new or different language styles rappers use, and how and why they work for each genre.

According to Reid, the language of black Americans is unique for a number of reasons. Enslaved Africans of various language communities met on American soil and needed to negotiate communication strategies, which included disguising meaning and information from white slave owners. What's now called slang, street talk or Ebonics, Reid argues, rose from this need for two languages. Having come from an oral tradition, Africans also brought a love of word play and story-telling to the new world. Rhetorical strategies seen in what Rose calls Afrodiasporic works include irony, paradox and ambiguity, hyperbole, repetition, narrative sequencing (storytelling), and using "the idiom

of the people" (Reid 9) rather than traditionally formal poetic language.

Irony, paradox and ambiguity all functioned as shields for early black poets, who needed to hide anger and protest behind a socially palatable facade. Just as contemporary commentators on rap note its bitter anger, so Reid finds anger and despair in black poems of the last century. To be published during the nineteen twenties, however, poets needed to use rhetorical strategies to disguise their message; otherwise, Reid argues, the message would be too radical for white readers to stomach.

Irony can be a difficult concept to get across. Before looking at poems, I would prepare students with a mini-lesson on the three types of irony. Dramatic irony is easiest and can be illustrated with a short clip from a familiar film. The end of *Romeo and Juliet* works well to show that dramatic irony means the reader knows something the characters do not; in this case, that Juliet is not actually dead, as Romeo prepared to kill himself for her loss. For example, the Langston Hughes poem on lynching, "Silhouette," says:

Southern gentle lady
Do not swoon
They've just hung a black man
In the dark of the moon.

The poem later makes clear that the lynching is in retaliation for some offense against "white womanhood;" the irony here could be either that many of the sex acts punished in this way were consensual, or that in accusing black men, Southern women would know perfectly well the consequence, and therefore be complicit in their deaths. Thus, in referring to the delicacy of these women, Hughes uses verbal irony to suggest the opposite.

Although black poets of the Sixties no longer needed to rely on white publishers to disseminate their work, irony as a weary, sardonic and bittersweet poetic device continued. Hughes was still publishing, and one of his later poems, "Junior Addict," is from a very different world for black people, but one replete with irony—in this case, situational irony, where the writer points out situations that totally refute government rhetoric. The poem reflects:

It's easier to get dope
than it is to get a job.
Yes, easier to get dope
than to get a job--
daytime or nighttime job,
teen-age, pre-draft,
pre-lifetime job.

Beyond the irony of the ready availability of an illegal substance, the irony here relates to the powerlessness of young black men, often accused of being purposeless and dangerous, wanting a legitimate job but unable to find a way in. When the system both

encourages you to join it and excoriates you for your supposed laziness, but makes participation next to impossible, what remains but illegal activity? (This poem also would relate to the lesson on the common rap theme of economic deprivation.)

Is irony evident in today's rap lyrics? Lupe Fiasco uses irony to compare drug dealers to the police whose nominal duty is to stop crime:

He's sittin in the front of the police car position
His mission is bending, pinning charges on niggas even if they didn't
He's sittin in court lying, testifying against defendants LIKE THAT
And he love to choke niggas
He don't trip wit the rich he just love the broke niggas
Probably did more dirt in the street than most niggas
Even the old people don't like em, cuz of the way he approach niggas
"Nigga you ain't no better than me"
Just a hustla wit a badge confiscate the dope money
Put it wit your retirement boat money
You ain't building no playgrounds in the poor for some cash
That ain't a pension that's a shoe box stash
Wit a glock to protect it we both undercover check it
Thinking that the good we do, gonna out weigh the sinning that we do to
collect it
Sayin its for the community, they don't value us
Only around because the property value up
And they gotta clean the street before they put the houses up
Knock the Section 8's down...put them 200,000's up
Feel he don't get paid enough
To kick in doors to raid and cuff
So he use what niggas get on the street to supplement the wages cut
So he gotta keep just enough niggas out there hustlin to keep his paper up
...Maybe he should be in the handcuffs

What's ironic here? Instead of verbal irony, in which the writer masks his opinions by saying the opposite of what he believes, Fiasco is pointing out situational ironies about life in the 'hood. For example, we expect police to be deployed in any dangerous situation, to protect citizens equally. However, in this instance, the policeman knows that he's only been sent to the neighborhood because it is about to be gentrified; otherwise, the crime would continue undeterred. The police officer is just a pawn of the wealthy. Like the young black men he arrests, he feels unappreciated by the community, and he is underpaid, so like the drug dealers, he turns to crime. Therefore, simply, it is ironic that the person we pay to enforce the laws is himself a criminal. In the end, Fiasco claims, the police officer loses all interest in stopping the drug trafficking, because it is lucrative to him personally. He wants the criminal activity to continue so that he can "keep his paper up:" that is, continue to add money to his shoebox retirement stash.

Therefore, students will see that irony, used in black protest poems of the nineteen-

twenties and nineteen-sixties, is also a rhetorical device for current rappers.

Objectives

In many ways, this unit is business as usual. English classes cover the same skills every year, asking students to continually improve their reading, writing and speaking. During this unit, students will be required to do a lot of close reading, restatement and analysis of text. They will write in response to text and formulate opinions on issues involving language use, thematic content and writer's purpose.

Students should be able to recognize authors' strategies and evaluate their use. For example, students should understand that writing in the first person does not necessarily mean the story is autobiographical, and they should be able to explain why else the author might write that way. Students should recognize figures of speech and experiment with creating them. Students need to know tropes such as metaphor, metonymy and allusion.

Students will also cover two specific poetic eras, which is part of our focus on American Literature in English 3. They'll learn the basic history of, and read selections from, both the Harlem Renaissance and the 1960s and learn to trace methods and themes across eras. The unit covers a number of specific-to-poetry forms as well, like rhyme.

The unit is different in that it asks students to examine popular culture, as well as reading the older texts contained in the curriculum. Students are exposed to lots of media but rarely are asked to examine its messages in school, which makes the unit valuable. Perhaps the most important thing students could do with this unit is to investigate the messages of the most popular rap songs, and then ask why these songs prevail over other music.

Students will also work on research skills. Our students are victims of the digital divide, often lacking access to the Internet at home and at school. Because lyrics will be found online, this unit provides students an opportunity to do interesting and legitimate research. Unlike other kinds of research projects, students can't just borrow information from websites; they need to find and evaluate their own texts.

Strategies

Ground rules

It's important to first turn students' focus away from the illicit thrill of hearing profanities in class and onto the messages the songs, and their word choices, send. It might help to examine words from songs in my lessons with a worksheet in a technical way. Ask students what the words mean, why they're offensive, and why artists might choose them. Speaking words openly and subjecting them to critical analysis will, I hope, defuse awkwardness.

The exception to this, and the most inflammatory word, is likely to be "nigga." A discussion of the word might include parts of Low's article and the film *The N Word*. Students should have the option to substitute or skip any word rather than speaking it.

Another necessary strategy is to explain that while songs might use these words casually, students may not use them unless reading or quoting lyrics or discussing them. That is, potentially offensive words may not be lightly bandied, and offenses against this rule carry consequences. It is often necessary to explicate words like "Chink" or "dyke" and to convince students that these words are offensive to many listeners.

What might sound like a lot of fuss is actually hard won learning from years of trying to talk about tough issues in class. Setting ground rules is absolutely essential and I've found the majority of high schoolers will support them. Of course, it is also necessary to cede much of the enforcement to the group, rather than policing it yourself.

Group work

Cooperative learning lets students teach each other and allows the students to hear and express a variety of viewpoints in a safer setting than whole-class discussion. Small group discussion also allows students to get more airtime than they can in a class discussion among thirty. Each group member has a task; each lesson requires students to adhere to a format and present work results.

Double-entry Journal

Each student will keep a double-entry journal as a research record. Journals may be used in several ways; one side may list quotes, the other, interpretation; one side a literary device's definition, the other side, examples. We may also use the journals to co-edit their papers, text on one side, questions or comments on the other.

Research

The unit requires students to explore lyrics and topics on the Internet. Student facility with research varies dramatically. This unit provides an opportunity to teach research skills and especially to ask students to evaluate various websites.

Assessment

Since most students know more about rap than their teachers do, this is a good time for students to teach. Final presentations could trace a theme or device across writers, or focus on one artist's work. Or, the district's final paper for the poetry unit asks students to choose one poet who advocated for social change and write about her goals; this would be an easily adapted assignment.

Classroom Activities

Lesson Plan 1: *Filthy Words*

2-3 class periods

Materials:

Article: "Before We Spoke, We Swore," by Natalie Angier

Article: "Filthy Words," by George Carlin

Students will begin by responding to the prompt below in their journals.

Have you noticed, in your lifetime, that some words are openly used, on TV or on the radio, that wouldn't have been acceptable before? Can you list some words that were not okay to say before, but are okay to say now, on TV, radio, or in public? How do you explain this? Further, how do you feel about this? Do you prefer the standards for community discourse rigid, or loose, and why?

When students have had sufficient time to write, the teacher should ask for volunteers to read their own entries. Be prepared for students' laughing. If few students volunteer to read their work, consider collecting journals and reading aloud to students; I usually hide the covers to keep authors anonymous. Discuss answers.

Next, students will read the Angier article.

This lesson will concentrate on several sections of article, excerpted below.

"...the United States Senate is poised to consider a bill that would... increase the penalty for obscenity on the air. By raising the fines... the Senate seeks to return to... the gentler tenor of yesteryear, when seldom were heard any scurrilous words, and famous guys were not foul mouthed all day.

Yet researchers who study the evolution of language and the psychology of swearing say that they have no idea what mystic model of linguistic gentility the critics might have in mind. Cursing, they say, is a human universal. Every language, dialect or patois ever studied, living or dead, spoken by millions or by a small tribe, turns out to have its share of forbidden speech, some variant on comedian George Carlin's famous list of the seven dirty words that are not supposed to be uttered on radio or television.

Young children will memorize the illicit inventory long before they can grasp its sense, said John McWhorter, a scholar of linguistics... and literary giants have always constructed their art on its spine.

"Ben Jonson peppered his plays with fackings and "peremptorie Asses," and Shakespeare could hardly quill a stanza without... profanities...like "zounds" or "sblood" - offensive contractions of "God's wounds" and "God's blood" - or some ...sexual pun.

Even the quintessential Good Book abounds in naughty passages like the men in II Kings 18:27 who, as the comparatively tame King James translation puts it, "eat their own dung, and drink their own piss."

Yet as much as bad language can deliver a jolt, it can help wash away stress and anger. In some settings, the free flow of foul language may signal not hostility or social pathology, but harmony and tranquility.

"Studies show that if you're with a group of close friends, the more relaxed you are, the more you swear," Dr. Burrige said. "It's a way of saying: 'I'm so comfortable here I can let off steam. I can say whatever I like.' "

Evidence also suggests that cursing can be an effective means of venting aggression and thereby forestalling physical violence.

After reading, class should discuss the following questions, in groups. Within each group, each student will assume responsibility for one aspect of report, functioning as either the facilitator, recorder, reporter, or go-between to teacher/other groups. Each group should record their findings on chart paper, to be hung in room as a unit resource.

Describe the most recent uproar about inappropriate language.

How is this controversy related to what you wrote about earlier, the increasing freedom of the airwaves?

How do rap songs fit into this controversy?

What is the government's proposed solution?

Briefly describe the history of profanity, according to linguists quoted.

Why can cursing be positive, according to article?

Why and when can cursing be negative, in your opinion?

Depending on the age and maturity of students, the class could also read/listen to George Carlin's monologue "Filthy Words" and compare its use of objectionable words to that of a rap song or of a current comedy routine, the purpose being, of course, to set the stage for a balanced evaluation of rap songs and the language they use. In a final research assessment or paper, teachers could require reference to language choices and expect students to summarize arguments and take a position.

Lesson Plan 2: *Literary Elements*

1-2 class periods

Materials:

Game Pieces (Laminated excerpts from poetry and rap lyrics)

Posters listing elements with their definitions

Velcro or tape, for attaching pieces to posters

At the start of a unit, we review the literary elements students need to discuss the works in an informed way. These include figures of speech like metaphor and irony, sound devices like onomatopoeia and rhyme, and poetic forms like ode and sonnet. Depending on the class, I either do this all at once (for older students, as all terms are being reviewed, not introduced), or a couple at a time, as needed for specific works (for lower grades). For this unit, aimed at juniors and seniors, I'll use two days to cover the great majority of relevant terms.

Students form groups. Each group delegates roles, or teacher may assign: facilitator, recorder, reporter, timekeeper, etc. Each group gets laminated game pieces. On each can be found at least one literary element; many quotes contain more than one. For example,

I could use the following Kanye West stanza on one game piece:

We shine 'cause they hate us, floss 'cause they degrade us.
We tryin' to buy back our 40 acres. (Kanye West, "All Fall Down")

Students might find a metaphor in "shine," or historical allusion in "40 acres." In groups, students find literary elements on each game piece, prepare an explanation, then attach their pieces to correct posters and explain their thinking. Student performance lets the teacher know the level of remediation necessary.

Lesson 3: *Writing Colloquially*

1-2 class periods

Materials:

"Slim Greer in Hell," by Sterling Brown
"When Malindy Sings," by Paul Laurence Dunbar
"right on: white America," by Sonia Sanchez
"I'll Still Kill" by 50 Cent, featuring Akon

Prewriting in dialect: In double-entry journal, students will rewrite lines written in dialect on board; they will write them in Standard English. Then students will write a sentence of their own, first in Standard English, then in dialect, spelling the words as closely as they can come to how they actually speak. The instructor should ask students to record their dialect sentences on the board or on chart paper around the room. Share and discuss.

Class Activities: After playing with writing in their own dialect, students will read and discuss the selections listed above, then agree or disagree with a series of statements:

Dialect is used

- to make poems, dialogue and raps more interesting.
- because writers don't know how to spell.
- to add to the character's development.
- to mock people with heavy accents.
- to identify the region of the speaker in text.
- for authenticity.

One problem with dialect

- is that it is difficult to read.
- is that it makes the speaker in text seem dumb.
- is that it is not realistic.

Dialect is a positive technique because

- it represents the variety of accents in the USA.

- it values the way people really speak.
- it adds to our understanding of character.

Further discussion questions:

- How does dialect change, add to or take away from a poem?
- Why did the authors choose dialect?
- How are the accents of the dialect poem like ours or not like ours?

A culminating activity might ask students to join one side of a debate on dialect, or to write a position paper, either supporting or criticizing use of dialect, with reference to specific works.

Annotated Resources

Abrahams, Roger D. "Getting Around Old Master (Most of the Time)." *African American Folktales: Stories from Black Traditions in the New World*. Ed. Roger D. Abrahams. New York: Pantheon Fairy Tale & Folklore Library, 1985. 265-305. Some ideas about African traditions and how they influence today's culture.

Angier, Natalie. "Almost Before We Spoke, We Swore." New York Times, September 20, 2005. Accessed online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/20/science/20curs.html?pagewanted=all> 5/5/08 Use this to remind yourself and students that rappers didn't invent vulgar words. Also presents rationale for use of 'foul language'.

Carlin, George. "Filthy Words." <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/conlaw/filthywords.html> 5/5/08 A comedy routine with lessons about censorship, language, and how both change.

Chang, Jeff. *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*. New York: Picador, 2005. Detailed narrative of the history of hip-hop uses interviews with those who created and witnessed the movement. Excellent 55-page list of resources.

Chuck D, and Yusuf Jah. *Fight the Power: Rap, Race and Reality*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1997. Outspoken and colloquial, Chuck D traces the roots and history of hip hop; a good selection for inspiring classroom discussion.

Jamison, DeReef F. "The Relationship between African Self-Consciousness, Cultural Misorientation, Hypermasculinity, and Rap Music Preference." Journal of African American Studies, Spring 2006, Vol. 9, No. 4, pp. 45-60. This article is a good resource for any discussion of masculinity in America; summarizes findings by other researchers; relates ideas of masculinity to themes of rap music.

Kubrin, Charles E. "Gangstas, Thugs, and Hustlas: Identity and the Code of the Street in Rap Music." Social Problems, Vol. 52, Issue 3, pp. 360-378. Read this to add to discussion of manly poses.

Low, Bronwen E. "Hip-Hop, Language, and Difference: The N-Word as a Pedagogical Limit-Case." Journal of Language, Identity, and Education, 6(2), 147-160, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc. 2007. This article discusses how young people of today view and use the "n-word," describes the outcome of a high school class working with word.

Lyrics: Recommended Internet Sites

<<http://www.lyricsbook.net/>>. Font easy to read, searchable, fewer spelling mistakes than other sites.

<<http://www.lyrics-art.com/>>. Biographies and photos of artists, searchable, nice-looking site, lists albums, extensive rap lyrics.

<<http://www.hotlyrics.net/>>. Impressive number of lyrics, searchable, large number of ads can be intrusive.

Oliver, William. "'The Streets': An Alternative Black Male Socialization Institution." Journal of Black Studies 2006; 36; 918-937. This article explains how the streets function as a source of income, identity and family for some men.

Pennycock, Alastair. "Language, Localization, and the Real: Hip-Hop and the Global Spread of Authenticity." Journal of Language, Identity, and Education, 6(2), 101-115, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc. 2007. Discusses the kind of authenticity required when hip hop crosses borders, and the messages other cultures take, and reframe, from American rap songs.

Perry, Imani. *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004. Beautifully written, deeply philosophical – interesting discussion of how mainstream culture sees rap and why.

Reid, Margaret Ann. *Black Protest Poetry: Polemics from the Harlem Renaissance and the Sixties*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2001. Scholarly text on two different eras of poetry; in-depth analysis of rhetoric.

Rose, Tricia. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994. Detailed background of hip hop and rap, chapters on musicality and on women in rap.

Rosier Smith, Jeanne. *Writing Tricksters: Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Literature*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. The Regents of the University of California. Some scholars trace rap back to traditions like the 'trickster', who is explained well here.

Van Riper. Frank. "Ford to New York: Drop Dead," New York Daily News 29 Oct 1975.
15 Jun 2008 <<http://www.nydailynews.com/features/bronxisburning/battle-for-the-city/Ford-to-New-York-Drop-Dead.html>>. Official attitude toward New York's financial troubles.

Appendix

State Literacy Standards for Grade 11

1.1 Learning to Read Independently

- D. Identify, describe, evaluate and synthesize the essential ideas in text.
- G. Demonstrate understanding and interpretation of text. Make, and support with evidence, assertions about texts. Compare and contrast texts using themes. Make extensions to related ideas, topics or information

1.3 Reading, Analyzing, and Interpreting Literature

- B. Analyze literary elements including theme, point of view, tone, and style.
- C. Analyze author's use of literary devices.
- D. Analyze and evaluate poetry.

1.6 Speaking and Listening

- A. Listen to others.
- B. Listen to selections of literature. Identify and define new words and concepts. Analyze and synthesize the selections relating them to other selections heard or read.

1.7 Characteristics and Functions of Language

- B. Analyze the role and place of standard American English in speech, writing and literature. Analyze when differences in language are a source of negative or positive stereotypes among groups.

1.8 Research

- B. Locate information using appropriate sources and strategies