

## Looking at the Black Experience in America Through African American Poetry

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**Overview**

*Poetry is life distilled.*

-- Gwendolyn Brooks

Looking at events through different lenses offers varied perspectives that deepen our understanding of ourselves as well as of the experiences of others. Though textbooks have, of late, certainly become more culturally sensitive and inclusive, the participation and contributions of African Americans are still under acknowledged. This curriculum unit chronicles and expands upon the Black experience in America through the poetry of African American writers. “Reading poetry,” Dr. Beavers, poet/professor, noted, “is a way of understanding history...it is an immediate response to an event.” In an effort to capture that historical immediacy, the works chosen for study in this unit represent, whenever possible, the poems by writers living in the milieu about which they wrote. Throughout this unit students will look closely at a broad selection of poetry that will cast a different light on the major epochs of that history as well as on the everyday lives of the people who lived it. Through a close reading of the poems, accompanied by additional reading and writing activities, students will gain meaningful insights that will elaborate upon and further elucidate the historical events depicted in the traditional textbook histories they are accustomed to reading. Through a careful comparison and discussion of the two representations of history, students will see that the poetry functions as a kind of history as well. Students will come to the realization that history is more than just “great men doing great things.” Rather, it is a lot like the poetry they have been reading – it is a construct. It is formed of bits and pieces, carefully chosen to represent the author’s viewpoint and, like poetry; there are many ways to look at and to interpret an idea or event.

This unit is written for fifth grade students, but could be adapted for older grades. It is intended to supplement the School District of Philadelphia’s core curriculum for literacy and social studies. The work students do could be accomplished over the course of approximately three week to four weeks as an independent unit of study. Students would need to be provided with additional historical background material (See appendix for

suggested sources). Alternately, the activities could be inserted throughout the year as the topics arose in the curricula.

## **Rationale**

Mention Black history to most fifth graders and there will be an immediate flurry of hands, eagerly raised to demonstrate all they know on the topic. This usually amounts to a slew of facts about Dr. King, Rosa Parks, and Harriet Tubman. Students know a surprising amount of information about the iconic figures all right, but lack the deeper understanding, the awareness of the reality of everyday life for “colored people”. Without this background, the full significance of the Black experience in our history is difficult to grasp. It is the intention of this unit to provide that background through the poetry of African American literary masters.

Why poetry? Well...poetry matters. “At the most important moments, when everyone else is silent, poetry rises to speak. At funerals, graduations, at the inauguration of a president, people gather to read—what? Not stories, not articles or plays. They read poems”(Fletcher 7). Historically, poetry, with its roots in oral tradition, was the genre through which African American writers first gave voice to their thoughts and longings. It was through the mastery of its forms that they sought to prove their humanity. From Phillis Wheatley through Dunbar, Hughes, Brooks, Audre Lorde, and Elizabeth Alexander, the tradition of poetry is deep and vital.

## Background

Slavery is a feature—perhaps the defining feature—of black American identity (Rampersad xx). As such, it has shaped the course of African American literary tradition over the course of the last three centuries. It has influenced what it means to be a black writer in America, as well as its themes and forms.

Phillis Wheatley's "Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral", published in 1773 is considered by many to represent the very beginnings of African American literature. Writing for a white audience, she emulated poets in the European tradition, modeling her work on that of Dryden and Pope (Randall 25). Her poetry is devoted to religious feeling, eulogizing famous people of the day and celebrating significant events. Her work did touch on Africa and slavery as well as the dilemma of the black poet. Her works were generally well received, providing a challenge to the heart of slavery as a system—how could such great beauty be consigned to a life of slavery? Conversely, her work was met with skepticism by an intellectual community (most notably, Thomas Jefferson) that questioned the very humanity of black people (Hall 16). From its very beginnings, African American literature bore the burden of having to plead the case for the darker race (Griffin 290).

Subsequent commentary on her work focused on the problem of the "blackness" or lack thereof in her work. Literary critics were of two minds. Some felt she used her poetry as a way to assimilate into the mainstream culture. Others point out that her work criticizes white oppression through her skillful use of biblical and classical references. (Kendrick 62) The debate over Wheatley's "blackness" and her response to slavery was a precursor of a tension that persisted among African American writers for many years. To some, slavery was a fact of history that must be suppressed and forgotten lest it corrode the mind and spirit. To other African Americans, slavery must be recalled and pondered for that same basic reason: to blunt its destructive power (Rampersad xx).

How then were black writers to speak? How were they to portray themselves, their diverse experiences and the aspirations of their race? W.E.B. DuBois felt art was an important tool in the African American community and would achieve justice for the race. However, because African American literature coexisted with racist caricatures of black people in the popular culture as exemplified by the writers of the plantation tradition, it was important for black artists to counter these negative images by producing work that showcased the intellectual capacity of black people. For much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many black writers were concerned with making a "good impression", proving that "colored folks were intelligent enough to write verse". To this end, writers turned to the forms and subjects of the European, mainly British tradition. By mastering these forms, some how a black writer could prove his/her literacy and humanity. Nevertheless, within that tradition, other voices were heard, voices raised in protest of injustice. George Moses Horton's 1829 work, "The Hope of Liberty", was the first poem by a black writer to use poetry to protest against slavery. Frances E.W. Harper's "Bury Me In a Free Land" (1845) speaks powerfully of the conditions of slavery and of the longing to be free.

When Paul Laurence Dunbar published a collection of poems in 1893 entitled “Oak and Ivy”, he ushered in what some critics considered a new era in African American literary expression (Gabbin 26). Dunbar’s parents were former slaves. His mother taught him to read and his father told him stories of slave life and fighting in the Civil War. As a result, he was steeped in the oral tradition of his people and would infuse these experiences of black folk life into his art. Though much of his work was in the standard tradition of the writers he had read in school, Keats, Coleridge, Burns, Whittier, and Longfellow, he would become most famous for the poems he wrote in black dialect. Harryette Mullen considered Dunbar’s work as a “precursor of multicultural literacy.” In his vernacular poems such as “When Dey “Listed Colored Soldiers” and “A Death Song”, he represents innovative code switching—juxtaposing standard and non-standard dialect, not only for comic effect to demonstrate multicultural fluency, but to underscore social inequalities.” White audiences loved his work. To them it represented the idealized vision of slavery they would prefer to embrace.

His poetry articulated a state that W.E.B. DuBois referred to as “double consciousness” where “One ever feels this twoness, An American, a Negro, two warring souls, two thoughts, two strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body... Always looking at one’s life through the eyes of others, measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (DuBois 9). Dunbar was encouraged to continue to write his dialect poems by Charles Dennis, and editor of the Chicago News Record. “A lot of poets can write about life and love and death. You’re the only one who can tell us what that old Negro is thinking about when he plays his banjo. Don’t forget, Robert Burns wrote about a field mouse. But Burns made it into poetry” (Mullen 280) Though his dialect poems were immensely popular, Dunbar felt this as a constraint upon his creativity. “I’ve got to write dialect poetry; it’s the only way I can get them to listen to me” (Alexander xvi). Nevertheless, he continued to write in a variety of genres on topics and varied as civil rights, music, dance, and spirituality. In “We Wear the Mask” he expresses the contradictions he endured as an African American and as an artist.

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.

The beginning of the twentieth century saw a freeing up of poetic form and subject matter. Writers such as Sandburg, Lindsey, Lowell, and Frost found poetry in simple things and familiar objects, American folkways, songs and customs and gave voice to them in “language really used by men” (Frost).

Similarly, African American poets thrived in this newfound atmosphere of literary freedom. This period of heightened black artistic expression, begun around the 1920s became known as the Harlem Renaissance. It marked for many a rediscovery and celebration of their African past as well as their cultural touchstones on the new world.

Subject matter expanded and became more universal. Poets such as Sterling Brown paid close attention to the idioms, tone and cadence of black folk speech, achieving what James Weldon Johnson referred to as the ideal of original racial poetry. Langston Hughes, who came to be considered the poet laureate of the Harlem Renaissance, tore the staid forms apart, incorporating the elements of African American musical traditions – jazz, blues, and spirituals into his poetry to “sing” of Black American in its everyday language. “We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too.” (Hughes)

In the midst of the Harlem Renaissance the issue of choice of subject matter was debated as well as the contradictions of being a black poet. Countee Cullen, a young poet, and contemporary of Langston Hughes agonized over the issues. He felt he should have the right to “tell a story, to delineate a character, or to transcribe an emotion in his own way and in the light of the truth as he sees it”(Miller 19). He did not want his poetry judged on the basis of his race. “If I am going to be a poet at all, I am going to be a poet, and not a Negro poet.” Langston Hughes responded to this position in his essay, *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*. In it he attacks Cullen. “His meaning I believe is, ‘I want to write like a white poet,’ meaning subconsciously, ‘I would like to be a white poet,’ meaning behind that, ‘I would like to be white.’ And I was sorry the young man said that, no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself. And I doubted then that, with his desire to run away spiritually from his race, this boy would ever be a great poet. But this is the mountain.”

The Harlem Renaissance was a very fruitful period for African Americans on a number of levels. Although no single unifying artistic vision or statement emerged from the period, it did provide a stage for a wide variety of cultural and artistic elements. It encompassed “high culture” and “low culture”, traditional forms of music as well as blues and jazz and experimental forms of poetry. The Harlem Renaissance brought the lives and experiences of blacks to the forefront of the American cultural consciousness, and redefined how they were perceived by their countrymen.

The 1930s to the 1960s has been referred to as the protest period in African American poetry (Major 30). The poets whose work came to maturity during this time frame, Robert Hayden, Margaret Walker, and Gwendolyn Brooks among them, took poetry to the next level. They didn’t feel bound by subject matter, language or form. They seemed to have absorbed all that came before them—the techniques of the Europeans, the myths, rituals, music, and folklore of the African American tradition, synthesized them and turned them to their own unique purposes.

Robert Hayden, like Countee Cullen before him, refused to be categorized or limited by subject matter. He created works as freighted with history and cultural consciousness as “Middle Passage” and poems as lyrically beautiful and evocative as “Those Winter Sundays.” Margaret Walker in her “For My People” makes full use of the historical and cultural material of African Americans and created a poem that “Mirrors the collective soul of black folks and accomplishes a stunning psychological portrait of ‘her people.’”

(Gabbin 29) Gwendolyn Brooks' poetry of the 1950s and early 1960 reflects and responds to the growing civil rights movement. In 1955, the country witnessed the Montgomery bus boycott, the rise of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. and the senseless killing of fourteen-year-old Emmet Till (This event so moved her that she wrote two poems about it). "I want to report. I want to record. I go inside myself, bring out what I feel, put it on paper, look at it, pull out all the clichés. I will work hard that way" (Brooks). She draws attention to the injustices of the world by paying close attention to the lives of the ordinary people in her Southside Chicago neighborhood. She writes of the front and back yards, the beauty shops, vacant lots and bars (Alexander xx). Brooks moved freely among a variety of poetic forms, from the Standard English sonnets and ballads to the blues and spirituals but always made each form her own.

In the late 1960s, after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. the country experienced the alienation of many blacks from white culture. "When the poets saw the contorted faces of the mobs, saw officers of the law commit murder, and "respectable people" scheme to break the law...perhaps they asked themselves, Why should we seek to be integrated with such a society"(Randall). The Black Power Movement took hold, emphasizing black pride, self-reliance, racial confrontation and separation The cultural sector of the movement became known as the Black Arts Movement. These poets, Nikki Giovanni, Imamu Amiri Baraka, Etheridge Knight and Sonia Sanchez, among them, turned away from the values of white poetry. They drew their inspiration from the streets, jazz musicians, and the language of black people. Their poetry emphasized free verse, typographical stylization and experimentation. Dudley Randall notes, "Not ignorant of currents of contemporary poetry, they took what they could use – but wrote as black men, not as black writers trying to be white."

## **Objectives**

This unit will address the Pennsylvania Standards for literacy and social studies.

Through this unit, students will listen to, read, interpret, and appreciate a great deal of powerful verse. They will be introduced to writers whose work they have likely not yet encountered and to subjects that are generally not covered in the usual course of a poetry unit. Students will delve into the biographies of the poets and consider how this information could/should be applied when discussing author's purpose and viewpoint. Students will also write in several genres and for a variety of purposes.

Students will compare and contrast the representations of historical events as depicted through poetry as well as in the textbooks and will consider the significance inherent in the differences. Students will come to understand the essential nature of history – that it, like poetry, is a construct and can be told from any number of viewpoints and is open to interpretation in a variety of ways.

## **Strategies**

This unit incorporates several curricular areas and, as a result, will employ a variety of strategies.

Above all, poetry is intended for the ear (Kunitz). Throughout this unit, students will have many opportunities to hear poetry. They will listen to audio clips of writers reading their poetry as well as recordings of spirituals and blues songs. Choral and solo readings of poetry will also be used in the classroom.

Students will do close readings of all the poems. Since most of the students have had a wide range of experiences with poetry, both as writers and as participants in poetry café formats, they are familiar with terms and forms. Only a brief review, rather than an introductory lesson will most likely be necessary. In their analysis of the poems, they will look at form, use of figurative language, word choices, images, meaning, viewpoint, and tone. Similarly, they will examine the texts of spirituals and blues songs. They will compare and contrast the forms and determine how form and content fit/or don't fit.

Students will examine the poems within their historical framework. After students have read and discussed the account of a historical event presented in their textbook, they will follow this with a close reading of a poem that relates to the event. Students will then discuss the similarities and differences in the presentation of the content.

Working in pairs or small groups, students will identify common themes and support their findings by citing lines within the poems. Groups will present their findings and the class will discuss the themes. As a follow-up, students will use the group work and class discussion as the basis of a five-paragraph essay in which they will more closely detail their thesis on themes found in the poetry, providing evidence from the poetry.

Additional writing activities will require that students choose a poem that is of particular significance to them. They will re-write it in a different format. They may choose to write it as a journal entry, a short story, a newspaper article or essay.

As a culminating activity, students will write a poem on a contemporary event or issue. This should be something that is of importance to them and about which they have something they want to say. They will take this through the writing process to publication. Poems will then be performed for the class. Performances may be videotaped with the addition of music and graphics.

## **Classroom Activities**

### **Prologue**

Prior to beginning the unit, I would want to assess my students' knowledge on the topic of African American history. To do this, they would work in small groups on a silent mind map that would then be shared with the class. Note: This is an activity where

students take turns (without speaking!) writing on a large sheet of chart paper what they know, or think they know about a topic. During this discussion, students would be encouraged to raise questions, make comments, and to speculate about how we know this history and if it is really accurate. These responses would be recorded on chart paper and put away until the end of the unit, when they will be re-examined in light of what was learned. At the conclusion of this activity, students will be introduced to the unit – its format and objectives.

The activities in this unit can be divided into two categories: Reading and Writing

## **Reading Activities**

### **Lesson 1**

The unit will start with a recording of Gwendolyn Brooks reading her poem. “A Song in the Front Yard”. (available as a download on [www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org))

Have students just listen this first time.

Replay and listen again. On a first reading, students only hear the poem. With the second reading, they become more familiar with the language and are better able to get at the meaning.

Allow time for students to respond to the reading.

Provide students with a copy of the poem and have them read it to themselves and make notes as they go along. Encourage them to underline words and phrases that resonate for them, jot down questions, connections, and personal reactions in the margins.

Open the discussion by asking students what they think the poem is about.

Through the discussion, have students consider the author’s purpose, the use of figurative language, rhyme, rhythm, the physical aspects of the poem on the page. Share information about the poet with the students.

This lesson models for students the process they will use when looking at the poems in the unit. However, since the poetry will be read in conjunction with social studies topics, additional discussion points will need to be added. It may be necessary to make explicit for students that the objective is to realize that history is a story that can be told from differing points of view – there is no one correct interpretation, and that the poems will tell us about the history, but in a different way.

Begin the discussion by asking simply, what’s going on in the poem. What additional things do we learn about the event? How does the poem connect to the social studies topic? Is it different from the information in the text? In what way? Why do you think this is so? What is the author’s viewpoint? What does the author want us to know/think about the topic?



For example: While studying the slave trade, students would read Lucille Clifton's "Slaveship" or the first section of Robert Hayden's "Middle Passage". Explicating the poems in conjunction with the information presented in the history text leads to deeper understanding of the event and richer discussions of the poetry.

## **Lesson 2**

Spirituals are considered by many music historians to be the first uniquely American music to come out of the country. Spirituals have affected all subsequent music and became the basis of gospel, blues, jazz, and of course, rock and roll.

In this lesson, students will be introduced to the spirituals as a form of poetry as well as an artifact of their times.

To begin, students will learn about the history of spirituals, their purposes, meaning and the hidden codes within them.

Students can listen to performances of the songs and read the lyrics as they listen (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/singers/>)

As a class, we will study the lyrics using the same approach as with the poetry, paying close attention to the poetic devices and the vernacular speech, determining what it tells us about the lives and beliefs of the people

Students will work in small groups to explicate a spiritual on their own, and will share their analysis with the class

Later in the unit, students will compare/contrast a spiritual with the poetry written during the civil rights era.

## **Lesson 3**

The Blues

(Lesson adapted from PBS "The Blues")

<http://www.pbs.org/theblues/>

Not only are blues songs poetry in their own right, but they also have influenced the style of many African American poets – most notably Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown.

### **Part I**

Have students bring in song lyrics from popular music. Have students identify the poetic devices within the lyrics such as: alliteration, imagery, metaphor, personification, simile, rhyme, repetition, apostrophe, echo, allusion, hyperbole, euphemism and paradox.

Write the following blues lyrics on the board. Then as a class, identify the poetic devices used.

- "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child" (simile)

- "Sun going down, dark gonna catch me here" (personification, imagery)
- "They got me accused of forgery and I can't even write my name" (paradox)
- "You've got a good cotton crop, but it's just like shootin' dice" (simile, paradox)
- "I had religion this very day, but the whiskey and women would not let me pray" (internal rhyme, personification)
- "I can hear the Delta calling by the light of a distant star" (personification, imagery)
- "Woke up this morning with the jinx all around my bed" (metaphor)
- "Go down, old Hannah; don't you rise no more. If you rise in the morning, bring judgment sure" (personification, apostrophe)

To further discuss blues as poetry, play Robert Johnson's "Cross Road Blues". As students listen, have them write down all the poetic devices they notice. (Lyrics can be found at <http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/>)

Conclude the lesson by discussing song lyrics as poetry. How do these compare to other poetry studied in school? Are they really poetry? Why or why not?

## **Part II**

Pass out copies of "Weary Blues" by Langston Hughes (Omit his name at this point.)

Ask students to analyze the poem, specifically identifying the poetic devices. After completing the activity, tell students it was a poem by Langston Hughes. Share facts about his life that would help explain his connection to the blues.

Tell students that several elements of the blues can be found in African American literature. For example: the traditional 12 bar blues song forms; the subject matter: hard times, love, love gone wrong, oppression and alienation; it addresses the suffering of the African Americans and incorporates the rhythm and music of the African American speech. After introducing these elements, briefly discuss with the class how the poem fits the structure.

Finally, pass out copies of "To Midnight at Leroy's", or "Blues Fantasy" and have students in small groups analyze them in terms of their blues elements. Discuss findings as a class

## **Writing Activities**

### **Lesson 1**

#### **Interwoven Threads/Common Themes**

Through reading the poetry, students will become aware of several important themes that appear to run through all the works. Working in small groups, students will choose representative poems from all the selections presented, re-read them and identify common themes, and support their choices by citing lines from the poems.

Students will keep notes of their discussions.

With the insights gained through their conversations, students will then write a five-paragraph essay on the themes.

## **Lesson 2**

Looking at Haiku

Haiku? You decide.

Students are generally very familiar with the haiku format. They have been reading and writing this form of verse since the earliest grades. Etheridge Knight's poem, "Haiku" can offer a challenge to their notions of just what constitutes a haiku. After a close reading of the poem, students will determine if his poem really fits the genre or doesn't and explain their position in a persuasive paragraph.

Students will then use his work as a model and write several haiku on topics covered in the history text or on topics making history today.

## **Lesson 3**

Take Another Look

Students will choose a poem that they have read and analyzed. Using this as a source, they will then rewrite it in a different genre. They might consider such options as a diary or journal entry written by the speaker of the poem; writing as if it were a personal narrative; newspaper article or even a short story.

Students will use graphic organizers and take the piece through the entire writing process to publication

## **Culminating Activities**

Students will:

Write a poem about an event or an issue that is of importance in our time and perform it for the class. As they read, they might have any one of the spirituals or blues songs we studied playing in the background. Their reading can be videotaped with music and graphics added.

Students may want to consider videotaping photos and recording music that depict their topic and reciting their poem with the video and musical accompaniment as background.

At the conclusion of the unit students' mind maps and earliest recorded thoughts should be brought out for a review and discussion of what was learned.

## **Annotated Bibliography/Teacher Resources**

Alexander, Elizabeth. ed. *The Essential Gwendolyn Brooks*. New York: American

- Poets Project. 2006. This is a collection of some of Ms Brooks' best works from 1945-1992.
- Braxton, Joanne M. "Dunbar's Life and Career." Modern American Poetry. 4 May 2009 <<http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/dunbar/life.html>>.
- Brown, Sterling. "Negro Folk Expression: Spirituals, Seculars, Ballads and Work Songs." Modern American Poetry. 4 May 2009 <<http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/>>.
- Cunard, Nancy. Negro: An Anthology. New York: Continuum, 1994.
- Dodson, Howard. Cultural Life. Grand Rapids: Michigan State University Press, 2007. This is a collection of essays (The Shomburg Essays) on the Black experience.
- DuBois, W.E.B.. The Souls of Black Folk. New York: Barnes and Noble. 2003. A landmark book that describes, in fourteen essays, the ambitions, and struggles of African Americans as they moved into the twentieth century.
- Fletcher, Ralph. Poetry Matters. New York: Harper Trophy, 2002. A very readable and practical book for teachers of poetry
- Gabbin, Joanne V. "Furious Flower: African American Poetry, An Overview." Modern American Poetry. 2002. 4 May 2009 <<http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/blackarts/gabbin.html>>. Excellent overview of African American poetry.
- Hall, James C. "A Way With Words." *Footsteps* 7.2 (Mar. 2005): 32-35. EBSCO MegaFILE. EBSCO. [University of Pennsylvania], [Philadelphia], [PA]. 12 May 2009 <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=keh&AN=16311421&site=ehost-live>>. This is an article on modern African American poetry with a special look at Gwendolyn Brooks.
- Heard, Georgia. For the Good of the Earth and Sun. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1989. An excellent resource for teaching poetry writing.
- Hughes, Langston. "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." 1926. Modern American Poetry. 4 May 2009 <<http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g/hughes/mountains.html>>. Langston Hughes lays out his poetic manifesto, reveling in the African American culture and all its facets.
- Kendrick, Robert. "Re-memembering America: Phillis Wheatley's Intertextual Epic." *American Review* 30.1 (Spring 96 1996): 71. EBSCO MegaFILE. EBSCO. [University of Pennsylvania], [Philadelphia], [PA]. 13 March 2009 <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=keh&AN=9605022824&site=ehost-live>>. This article discusses the issue of Wheatley's "blackness" as reflected in her poetry.

- Locke, Alain. ed. The New Negro – Voices of the Harlem Renaissance. New York: Touchstone. 1925. A representative compilation of the exciting literary work of the time.
- Major, Clarence. "Crossing a Sea of Black Poetry." *American Visions* 11.4 (Aug. 1996): 30. EBSCO MegaFILE. EBSCO. [University of Pennsylvania], [Philadelphia], [PA]. 19 May 2009 <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=keh&AN=9709120007&site=ehost-live>>. This article delineates some of the major themes in Black poetry from reconstruction through the civil rights movement
- Mullen, Harryette. "When he is least himself": Dunbar and Double Consciousness in African American Poetry. *African American Review* 41.2 (Summer2007 2007): 277-282. EBSCO MegaFILE. EBSCO. [University of Pennsylvania], [Philadelphia], [PA]. 19 May 2009 <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=keh&AN=28019416&site=ehost-live>>. This article examines DuBois' concept of Blacks as having to have a double consciousness and how this is embodied in Dunbar's poetry.
- Rampersad, Arnold. Ed. The Oxford Anthology of African American Poetry. New York: Oxford, 2006. An excellent, comprehensive collection of Black poetry.
- Randall, Dudley. The Black Poets. New York: Bantam, 1977. This is an excellent resource for African American poetry from spirituals to the Black Arts movement.
- Thomas Higginson's Negro Spirituals. March 27, 2000. University of Virginia. 5 May 2009 <<http://xroads.virginia.edu>>. A very interesting site on spirituals as discovered and written about by a white union officer who led a troop of freed slaves.
- Tsujimoto, Joseph. Teaching Poetry Writing to Adolescents. Urbana, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, NCTE, 1988. This is an excellent for teaching poetry writing.
- Wall, Cheryl A. "Zora Neale Hurston's Essays: On Art and Such." S & F Online. 2005. 9 May 2009 < [www.barnard.edu/sfonline](http://www.barnard.edu/sfonline)>. An article discussing the life and influence of Zora Neale Hurston's work.

## Resources

[modernamericanpoetry.org](http://modernamericanpoetry.org)

An excellent source of poems, audios, teaching tips, biographies and literary critiques and essays

<http://www.pbs.org/theblues/>

Complete information on history of the blues – based on Scorsese documentary. Music, lyrics, lessons

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/ames/singers>

source of information and audio on spirituals

poetryfoundation.org..

Excellent source of poems, audios, essays and biographical information,

Poets.org

Another great site for poetry resources as stated above

## **Annotated References for Students**

### **Poetry for the Unit**

Note: Poems are listed in chronological order according to historical references

Slaveship	Lucille Clifton
Middle Passage	Robert Hayden
Bury Me In a Free Land	Frances E.W. Harper
Go Down Moses I Want to Go Home I Thank God I'm Free at Las'	Spirituals
Little Brown Baby	Dunbar
Incident	Countee Cullen
The Merry Go Round Ku Klux Weary Blues Midnight At Leroy's Blues Fantasy	Langston Hughes
Old Lem	Sterling Brown
Ballad of Birmingham	Dudley Randall
Strange Fruit	Blues Song
If We Must Die	Claude McKay
Street Demonstration	Margaret Walker
SOS	Amiri Baraka
Alabama Centennial	Naomi Madgett
Kitchenette building A Bronzeville mother Loiters In Mississippi	Gwendolyn Brooks
Haiku	Etheridge knight

Coal	Audre Lorde
Blues Haircut	Elizabeth Alexander
American Gothic	Samuel Allen

### **Additional Resources for Students**

Curtis, Christopher Paul. The Watsons Go to Birmingham, 1963. NY: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, 1995.

Ten year old Kenny and his family, the Watsons of Flint Michigan, are taking delinquent older brother Byron to stay with Grandma Sands in Alabama for some “straightening out”. Their visit coincides with one of the most horrific events of American history – the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in which 4 young girls died.

Hakim, Joy. A History of Us. New York: Oxford, 1994. This is a series of ten books that cover American history from the Stone Age to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. This well written and interesting set of books tells history as a fascinating story. This would be an excellent resource when doing the curriculum as an independent unit of study.

Lester, Julius. To Be A Slave. New York: Scholastic, 1968.  
What’s it like to be a slave? Ex slaves tell their moving stories.

Rochelle, Belinda. ed. Words With Wings. New York: Harper Collins, 2001.  
A varied collection of African American poetry accompanied by amazing illustrations.

### **Materials for Classroom Use**

Copies of the poems for each student  
Transparencies of the poems for the overhead (Not absolutely necessary, but it is very useful during class discussions)  
Overhead projector  
Chart paper and markers  
History texts and additional resources for the compact unit  
Computer with speakers to play the downloaded recitations and songs

### **Standards:**

#### **Literacy**

- 1.1 Learning to Read Independently
  - 1.1A Establish the purpose for reading a type of text before reading
  - 1.1B Select texts for a particular purpose
  - 1.1G Demonstrate after reading understanding and interpretation of text



1.2 Reading Critically in All Areas

1.2C Produce work in at least one literary genre that follows the conventions of the genre

1.3 Reading, Analyzing & Interpreting Literature

1.3A Read and understand works of literature

1.3C Describe how the author uses literary devices to convey meaning

1.4 Types of Writing

1.4A Write poems, plays, and multi paragraph stories including narrative and memoir

1.5 Quality of Writing

1.5A Write with sharp, distinct focus, identifying topic, task and audience

1.5B Use well developed content appropriate for the topic

1.5C Write with controlled and/or subtle organization

1.5E Revise writing to improve organization, word choice, order and precision of vocabulary

1.5F Edit writing using the conventions of language

## **Social Studies**

8.3 United States History

A.1 Primary Documents, Materials, and Historical Places

B.1 Political and Cultural Contributions of Individuals and Groups

C.2 How Continuity and Change has Influenced United States History

D.2 Conflict and Cooperation Among Social Groups and Organizations