

Soul to Spirit to Speak to Writers: Poetry and Song

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Contents of Curriculum Unit

- Rationale
- Introduction
- Objectives
- Strategies
- Black Poets - Historical data
- Harlem Renaissance Poets
- Black Power Poets - The 60's
- To Be Black and a Poet?
- Poet Rappers - Present Day
- Poetry Form & Technique
- Lesson Plan (1)
- Lesson Plan (2)
- Lesson Plan (3)
- Student Reading List
- Annotated Bibliography/Resources
- Appendix/Standards

Rationale

This curriculum unit has been prepared for use in the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) English Language Arts classroom. The unit can be used in a high school setting, regular and advanced classes. It also reflects strategies that can be used to adapt for teaching in a learning support classroom. The unit satisfies the need to expand the limitations of classroom texts to meet new SDP African-American curricular requirement additions in the English Language Arts frameworks.

Introduction

The unit represents the past, present and future essence of the African-American writer, more specifically the poet, and the ways they are represented in society today. Poets simply do their work, which is a way to have their voice heard and recognized but critics, readers, and publishers are perhaps more central in constructing a representation for poets. The unit's focus begins its undertaking with the introduction of Phillis Wheatley and Paul Lawrence Dunbar; more closely at the presumed origins of African-American poets amidst the emergence of Black writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance era. In

remembering the historical context during and between the works of Wheatley and Dunbar, students will become familiar with and reminded of the historical ramifications concerning Blacks and nonexistent race relations in America during the lives of these poets. In view of the fact that this unit will draw from the past in order to bring students' interests into the present and future, we will turn to the vastly read and publicized poetry of the Renaissance era alongside works from the Black poets of the 60's.

African-American poets at different points in time have undertaken to "map" what it means to be Black. Additionally, the enterprise of what encompasses being black meant different things at different times. The historical background information will be followed by lessons on poetic technique allowing students to become empowered critically and analytically while delving into the bulk study of poets and their works. Students will be able to craft their personal and individual words into original, technically savvy works of poetry that communicate to society.

This unit will speak to the spirit and soul of African-American students, as the history and messages of poetry are interpreted into societal existence of our youth today. While looking at the handiwork of African and African-American poets and their published literature, students will also delve into learning poetic structure. With this intent, students will master use of literary devices and other poetic techniques through the introduction of the strategies utilized, as well as from the in-depth study of the poet. Students will also become familiar with how these poetic works influence their lives and the lives of others. This will lead students to investigate their place in the world, as we know it, giving them a secure footing in being able to express themselves without denigration to their humanness, but to celebrate what they in fact have to offer the world in a more positive and socially acceptable manner. By examining literary works in the course of the unit, students will be able to further explore implications of value, and self-worth.

This unit proposes to utilize the study to expose students to the celebration of self, through the self-affirmations of poetics and poets. Students will be prompted to further their knowledge and/or span the uses of language, diction and syntax through Renaissance era legacies using poetry as a way to link literary practice to the performative practices that are found in Hip Hop and spoken word. In addition, this unit will give students a knowledge base that shall speak to their spirit and psyches through historical accounts, biographical information, schools of Black thought and historical conceptualizations both real and unreal.

Objectives

The following listed objectives can be used to satisfy local district curricular needs, in other words, all the objectives can be approached in a timeframe that will meet standardized testing criteria toward proficiency in reaching Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and student mastery for goals and standards as set by the national No Child Left Behind (NCLB) guidelines.

1. Students will examine how poetry reflects contemporary issues.
2. Students will demonstrate the ability to understand and interpret poetic presentations both past and present day.
3. Students will understand literary devices and elements as they apply and work within a poem.
4. Students will identify the many differences between the dramatic rap genre and other poetry literary forms.
5. Students will demonstrate an understanding of the poetry conventions such as diction, rhyme scheme, rhythm, scansion, and iambic pentameter.
6. Students will be introduced to historical accounts and Black schools of thought to compare and discuss their responses to certain works.
7. Students will read poetry aloud.
8. Students will engage in small and large group discussions on characterization, literary devices, themes, aesthetic values, and cultural implications.
9. Students will develop a variety of written responses, which may include journal entries, character biographies, reaction papers, and critical reviews.
10. Students will demonstrate the ability to understand and interpret poetry.
11. Students will appreciate the importance of word choice to a poet's style and message, using word recognition skills to expand vocabulary and its use.
12. Students will identify main ideas, relevant details, and author's style and purpose when reading various poems.
13. Students will examine the use of tone and analyze the impact it has on the effectiveness of the author's style and purpose.
14. Students will read and analyze the various types of poems including political, satirical, humorous, cultural, and philosophical.
15. Students will respond to the poem and poet (performance) visits through class discussion, debate, presentations, and various writings assignments such as response writing and critical analysis writing.
16. Students will produce personal poetry for performance and/or discussion.

Strategies

This unit is to be assigned over a nine-week report card period. However, the unit can be chunked into weekly fragmented segments that can be designed to coordinate with content performance descriptors to prepare students for scheduled benchmark assessments. In the high school setting, most often classes are rostered to daily meetings over the course of each week consisting of 55-minute periods everyday, which are scheduled to meet over the entire school year. By using the unit in a chunking approach, teachers will be able to meet the guidelines as set forth by the School District of Philadelphia's *Planning and Scheduling Timeline- Literacy*, in the secondary educational classroom environment at any time they chose to use it without having to delay student work until the School District of Philadelphia's prescribed poetry study segment within the school year.

Students will be expected to participate fully in all activities as set forth by the

teacher. Students will develop a variety of literary skills by closely following all instruction throughout the unit; furthermore, they will gain a clearer understanding of African-American history as it applies to American English literature. Also, students will gain an understanding of African-American's being historically marginalized in regard to their place in using the English language. Students will also gain knowledge of the uses of the "word and words" in literature in response to the plight of their community's satisfaction and regret through critical examination of the assigned poetic works. Teachers can present curricular activities that can be used alone, depending on the grade/ability level, as well as how much time made available to address in-depth inquiry as to the historical content of the unit. Additionally, a multimedia approach such as poetry in film, poetry readings, music videos, and slam poetry will be included to enable the students to gain knowledge in a variety of ways in order to be stimulated to do further exploration and study.

Black Poets – Historical Data

The politics of critically examining Black poets becomes more a responsibility of the writer to carry the life message of the people while leaving no recourse for simple self-expression and sometimes just the ability of the craft of poetry. Throughout this unit, we will see this phenomenon again and again. Thomas Jefferson's description of Wheatley's poems in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), where he says Wheatley's poems "...are beneath the dignity of criticism."

Most reverently, when looking into the history of the emergence of the Black poet we are likely to find Phillis Wheatley and Paul Lawrence Dunbar at the beginning of the timeline, respectively. Wheatley having been brought to America in 1761 into slavery had by 1765 written her first piece, having the intelligence to learn the language of her master. Surprisingly not receiving harsh treatment thereof by the master for having learned to read and write with such astuteness. Of course, the first lessons she received were biblical in nature this still did not stray her from learning. Then to see the poetic images of the book and in full with unusual ease, was seen as a rarity for an African at the age of only seventeen.

Most critics frequently stated that she was too highly objective in her writing, adhering too closely to the tenets of her training and background that because of this she failed in telling her story, in expressing her feelings, and explaining her thoughts. However, her poems were a showing of record of Black survival in a white culture, not having been a Black nationalist but referring to her circumstance in the theme of escape in her poetry. She wrote an iambic line with grace and perfection while using the language of the King (England).

Conversely, Paul Lawrence Dunbar's writings were published later in his career and often in the Negro dialect, still his poetry offered readers his writing perfection of blank verse and iambic lines. As some have critically examined his works of poetry, they have

tended to explain his writing as being heavily influenced by Poe and Tennyson, and that his imagery clearly reflected their descriptions through similes and metaphors that were used for a long time prior to his own published writing and therefore was lacking originality. On the other hand, his writings using dialect, also written in perfect iambic lines, were seen to be of the highest form of poetry for a Black man by those examining his work in his day and even now.

Despite the sentiments of mainstream America at the time and today, the works of Wheatley and Dunbar still hold their place in the English literature canon yet while most young Black Americans have no recognition of either writer/poet. This unit will begin to diminish the notion that the contributions of both were unworthy of being noted or read in the public academic realm. Strategies used to reach this end will be teaching students the historical content by having visiting scholars in the class, both literary and historians. Also, students will be asked to survey the Internet of its containment of the two above-mentioned poets. Students will generate questions using the Think-Pair-Share strategy in order to have an even greater depth of reasoning for understanding of Black people politically and in literature during this point in time.

Renaissance Poets

The central focus of the unit is the study of the Renaissance poets, some being highly revered, while others hardly mentioned. This segment of the study shall be divided into two parts, male and female poets of the day. Students must be made aware at this point of the reservations in teaching this unit with regard to the Harlem Renaissance's prescribed timeline (dictated by those who do not look like those of the era), did Blacks cease writing in 1940, or was it that their work wasn't published as frequently because of the effects of the Great Depression in the United States? Students will first be introduced to the unit with discussion and survey of the issues concerning when the Renaissance Era begins, when it ends, and what sustained/eroded its movement. We will use an I-search method to pre-determine a timeline for use in the overall unit. From the initial agreed upon timeline, students will then be directed to verify the dates; a class debate forum will be developed to settle discrepancies prior to opening with any of the poetic readings. Students will come to know what or who may have been the driving force of determining publicized dates and why they may not in fact be true.

Next, students will be lead to open in the reading of the Negro National Anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing" giving them credence in wanting to further their study of poetry of the era; how it relates to song and in relation to an understanding of the politics during this time. To launch this segment with this poetic piece, students will get underway with practical strategies that will become the undertow of what will come from the completion of the unit. Through this we will investigate all of the fundamental formalities of Black thought good, bad and/or indifferent approaches taken in presenting the message of the people to the public at large. Additionally, students will be encouraged to utilize Holmes Afrocentric paradigm Model as literary indicators to explore other aspects of the poetic lyrics.

The Harlem Renaissance is known as the flowering of African-American social thought and culture based in the African-American community forming in Harlem in New York City (USA). This period, beginning with 1920 and extending roughly to 1940; while others would argue the period from 1911 to 1929, and still others would consider the Era to be in full swing from 1919 (end of WWI) and 1945. Art during the Era was expressed through every cultural medium—visual art, dance, music, theatre, literature, poetry, history and politics. Instead of using direct political means, African-American artists, writers, and musicians employed culture to work for goals of civil rights and equality. For the first time, African-American paintings, writings, and music became absorbed into mainstream culture and crossed racial lines, creating a lasting legacy.

In this study students will be introduced to the highly publicized reasoning behind the widely recognized timeline and why this may not be necessarily true. Historically, at the time the Era ended, according to most documented information, the US stock market suffered a severe crash, which caused most literary philanthropic funding to cease, the financial vehicle in which the culturally artistic flowering of the Era became public and possible. Students must also look at the Renaissance being geographically noted as only in Harlem (Manhattan), New York. Writers from the era came from varied geographical settings throughout the United States and the Caribbean. Besides the geographic issue to be remarked and studied, the schools of thought within the Black community itself and the division of how Blacks should be portrayed to the masses, more specifically Whites then, more microscopic the division of poets through the subject of gender.

Langston Hughes, a primary voice of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920's, was known as "The Poet Laureate of Harlem" in this period of poetry extravaganza there were his contemporaries, Countee Cullen, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Nugent and Claude McKay. These poets used the social, political, and religious aspects of the African American experience as stepping-stones for poetic expression. Widely divergent styles and subject matters existed within the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance. Many of the poets students will study will be found to be vastly diverse in theme and purpose of style.

As students do a few of the lesson activities that follow in this unit, have them consider the following questions: Why is Langston Hughes considered a great American poet? What was the influence of Africa and African-American history on his work? What is imagery and how is it used as a political/social vehicle for poets? Who exactly is exposed to or reading the works? These questions can be applied to other poets studied in the unit as well.

Male Poets

During the Harlem Renaissance era most of the association of its works goes to Black men. It is most thought to be a masculine movement and in researching the era as a whole, one will find that works published by the women of the era are few. It leaves us to question, were men providing for other men the commission of grants, scholarships, and

stipends for published their work? Additionally, how does writing—which was often thought to be unmanly—come to be considered so important to Black male survival? Why does the period give Black men such reverence and high esteem when to be a male poet is most times seen as an unmanly characteristic? How does poetry come to be viewed as survival for Black men? Through reading the poems of the time, students will search for answers to these questions. They will begin to discuss logical ramifications in regard to the division of male and female poets of the day.

Masculinity for Black men is a broad topic, when looking at the migration patterns of Blacks moving to the North students will understand the rationale instigating Black relocation. There is a strong connection between masculinity and employment. Also the issue of lynching a popular Southern White American pastime began causing an upsurge in urban population growth of Black communities across the northern regions of the US.

Students will learn in brief that lynching proceeds from the impulse of a) economic competition between black and white males in the agricultural industry b) a method of social control, at a time when blacks are being disenfranchised in the electoral process, and c) the ways that white male anxieties about black men and white women lead them to target scapegoat black men as "sexual beasts" even as white men continued to rape and sexually harass black women.

As a response to the population upswing writers like W.E.B. DuBois, James Weldon Johnson, Sterling A. Brown, and Alain Locke began to set the tone through their essay writing of what Black men should represent when in the public setting. Poets became committed to one or another's school of Black thought. As stated by DuBois, "... the real solution of the color problem. The recognition accorded Cullen, Hughes, Fauset, White and others shows there is no real color line. Keep quiet! Don't complain! Work! All will be well!"¹ Yet Locke responded to the creative upsurge in saying, "The great social gain in this is the releasing of our talented group from the arid fields of controversy and debate to the productive fields of creative expression. The especially cultural recognition they win should in turn prove the key to that revaluation of the Negro which must precede or accompany any considerable further betterment of race relationships."²

There are symbols and metaphors in the poetry of Black men that are specific to them, and can be seen and felt through many of the assigned student readings. During the Renaissance, again thought to be a masculine movement. The migration to the cities from the South showed us a relationship between masculinity and employment. As Arna Bontemps expresses in "*A Black Man Talks of Reaping*," he poetically discusses unemployment of the Black man. Then again seen in Claude McKay's, "*If We Must Die*" discussing the cultural aesthetics' of the lynching of Black men and the notion of dying with dignity no matter what. Students will be lead to note McKay's use of the hog as a symbol of unmanliness, cowardice, and disempowerment. Students will then read Jean Toomer, who boldly expresses in "*Portrait in Georgia*" the disgust of lynching and the shame that went along with the event for Blacks. Toomer uses the image of the burning faggot, the lyncher's rope as he compares these to physical attributes to be found on a woman's body. Langston Hughes, differed in his presentation of Black men, he always

set himself as a poet and writer on the outside of the frame of his worded imagery. He writes about the loneliness of being a Black man in a society that defies their existence but celebrates and lauds the talents of those who “make it”. In his poem, “*The Weary Blues*,” Hughes presents the plight of the Black man as an artist who creatively lives through the beauty of his music, yet shares in the sadness and gloom of being Black.

Ironically when men wrote poetry about Black women, they seemed to place most women in two categories – worker (legal or ill-repute) and the rich and refined woman (fair-skinned and educated). When reading “*The Harlem Dancer*” by Claude McKay combined with Hughes’ “*Jazzonia*” and “*Song to A Negro Wash Woman*”, students will be made more aware of the diverse stance the men took when writing about women. This will introduce students to a base with discussion about issues of sexuality within this section of the unit. Students will increase their understanding of the driving forces behind the poetic images of women as expressed by the men of the era. Sexuality issues having been written as had been defined by the earlier literary Victorian period, then sexuality coming into an era that viewed sexuality in not such a suppressive state.

Female Poets

Black women writers of the era seemingly were looking through the kaleidoscope of White women fighting for the right to vote during the 1920’s while also noticing the divide amongst themselves. Black women had very separate classes the working woman, the middle class woman and then the women of stature and refinement, confined to be – normally a woman of very light skin and keen features. Students will explore these questions: Was Black women’s class and caste systems simply frustrations borne out the struggle for the vote that motivated Black women’s writing in the Renaissance? Or is their writing reflective of the kind of complexity that a phallogentric view of the Renaissance would lead us to ignore?

Varied sentiments are felt and experienced when students are exposed to the writings of Harlem Renaissance women. Most often women write about experiences they have incurred during their lifetimes; their biographical information is usually closely linked to the themes found in their poetry and other writings. Women of the day not only tackled the issue of being Black, but also being a minority within the race – woman. They tended to expose some of the sexual pleasures and displeasures and cut across the lines of men in their more dominant writings about women of the night or ill-repute.

Expressed vividly in the poetry of the period, there was definitely a class conflict within the circles of women and even among women poets. Students will find in their reading that women wrote about where they came from resounds in the metaphors and symbols of their verse. In the society of Black women there was a working class and a middle class. This phenomenon may have been set by the stage of the caste system as had been experienced in the days of slavery, the house woman and the field woman; light and dark-skinned respectively. Still other women were more than likely silenced since having been married with children, such as Alice Dunbar-Nelson (wife of Paul Lawrence

Dunbar), and Helene Johnson both of whom began their writing careers after the death of her husband or divorce. This fact is seen more than once or twice when researching the biographical data of female poets.

Students will compare and contrast the writings and biographical backgrounds of women poets as they are introduced. Students will be encouraged to graphically organize the traits which will guide their reading more thoroughly and give them a greater outlook on the pressures women felt during the years of the Renaissance. Students will be asked to draw assumptions about the creative writings of these women. Students will be asked to begin questioning: how and why do women migrate from the South, having to adjust to urban life? What is the response when a lighter-skinned, middle class woman snubs a dark-skinned Black woman because she does not speak correct English? Students will investigate these conflicts because they suggest all the ways that the “transformative energy” of the Renaissance often got translated into efforts to define what blackness was and who could articulate it.

Students will be introduced and read poems of the following: Angelina Weld Grimké, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston, Gwendolyn B. Bennett, Jessie Fauset, Bessie Smith and Helene Johnson. Students will give their own personal and detailed poetic performance pieces to tribute the lives and works of these women. They will be given the choice of one woman poet and asked to write at least an 18 line poem which will be labeled with a title using a parenthesized subtitle for the celebrated woman poets own name.

Black Power Poets

During the 1960's the time of the Love Child and those in the Black community walking tall came a revolution of poets demanding respect from the establishment that had long kept Black writers in the background of American literature canon prior to them singing the words of James Brown, “*Say It Loud, I'm Black an I'm Proud!*” Many of the learned writers of the Renaissance had taken employment at universities and colleges that served young Black students, now known as a historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). These literary scholars were chief proponents of spawning the thinking and nurturing the talents of the aspiring outspoken Black men and women writers and poets of this period. The main position and concept of the Black Power movement was the necessity for Black people to define the world in their own terms, in this view we can link the Black Arts Movement.

To provide students with a sense of how this moment in Black poetic history is both different and similar to the Renaissance, students should note that Amiri Baraka was a poet who supported the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist system, Black or White. As an opponent of the middle-classes, Baraka has been criticized, among others, to be too 'hip' and too controversial. This view is drastically differing from what the artist of the Renaissance wanted society to perceive as a Black peoples view. While on the other hand, poets of the 60's were in the vein of the Renaissance poets in that making art was based on the speech and music of Black people, drawn from the everyday lives of our

people and returned to them in an inspiring and potent form. Students will begin to understand and appreciate that the vernacular was the basis for the development of the art; that text was not the singular consideration but rather one of a number of considerations, then students can appreciate the Shakespeares of Harlem, so forth and so on.

Although the Black Arts Movement fundamentally changed American attitudes both toward the function and meaning of literature as well as the place of ethnic literature in English departments, African-American scholars have deemed it the "shortest and least successful" movement in African-American cultural history. Students will discover, the Black Arts Movement; the way it openly attacked a number of long-standing beliefs of literary critics and historians; in particular, the role of the text, the timelessness of art, the responsibility of artists to their communities, and the significance of oral forms in cultural struggles, as they will have learned in their study of the Renaissance. In contrast, students will delve into what sorts of relationship inheres between political agitation and inclusiveness, canon formation and political rhetoric?

Critical in orientation, the writers of the period produced literature of great power and integrity. This fact may have led to the decline of the Black Arts movement in 1974. Students can be encouraged to further their investigation by researching: Why 1974? What was it about that moment that led to the demise of the Movement? Was it the Patty Hearst trial? Was it Watergate or the winding down of the Vietnam War? Black Studies activist leadership was gutted and replaced by academicians and trained administrators who were unreceptive, if not outright opposed, to the Movement's political orientation. We will explore the poetry by investigating some of the major artists of the time, and not ignore the historical and political connections to what came after this period.

Students will become familiar with poetic works of Nikki Giovanni, Amiri Baraka, Haki Mahubuti, Sonia Sanchez, Rita Dove, Askia Toure, Kalamu ya Salaam, Mari Evans, more through viewing film documentaries, reading poetry anthologies of the period and through programmed visits (Art Sanctuary³) with writers who have already expressed an interest of touring throughout the Philadelphia public schools. In addition, the lessons constructed to include this portion of the unit will undoubtedly be intertwined with the political stance that was taken by writers of the era and their fearless attempts at dismantling the powerful political heads in this country in an effort to unmask racism and unite the people of all races.

To Be Black and A Poet?

Black poets seemingly were subliminally charged with moving Black people into a finer recognition of who they are through the inception and conception of their works some spiritual, others radical. Poetic works by black poets have readers look at themselves and when poems are performed, the creativity of the artist becomes an upwelling of feeling like the lifting of a fog, and a swelling of emotion. Throughout this portion of the unit, students will be required to view several poetry workshop films; as well trips will be

scheduled to The Painted Bride – “Rock The Pen”⁴ venue to experience the effects of the poet on a live audience.

Countee Cullen and Paul Lawrence Dunbar attempted to skirt, in their writing through form, word choice and diction, they were in fact Black men critics of their times were critiqued their work by looking at these men - color first, talent next, exceptionality of skill third. Cullen was criticized for being conventional, for using the British romantic poets as his models, and for insisting that poetry in general should be free of racial and political matters. Dunbar, who at home was esteemed for the things he had done rather than because as the son of Negro slaves he had done them.⁵ In his poetry he chose to use two distinct voices, the standard English of the classical poet and the evocative dialect of the turn-of-the-century Black person in America.

However, poets of Renaissance era were noted in writing beyond the poetry. These poets gave space between what the artist rendered and the apprehension of perception by the consumer/reader/viewer. Their talent was based upon the reciprocal relationship – artist to the one who appreciates and/or gets the perception, leaving space for interaction between the two and their words. In the days of Wheatley and Dunbar, where the practice of holds barred was the norm, during the Renaissance we experienced Black poets attempting to speak truth, as they knew it. However, when discovering the words of W.E.B. DuBois, one might think that his reference to the Black man or woman might not be them – dark and working class. Black and a poet crossed both White and Black society. This fact led to the rebellious and straightforward themes of poets in the 60’s. Black Power poets were quick to eradicate the words of their predecessors, yet were humble enough to give them reverence and respect for having given credence to the Black artist themselves.

During the 60’s, to be Black and a poet was a balm for the community; finally Black artist gave life to the words of the souls who had been silenced by others. Their poetry didn’t make apologies to anyone for anything and their words engaged the real world. (Are we seeing this again – rap lyrical poets?) Also through this period were “street” poets and “academic” poets; as stated before, the academic poets were the poets of the Renaissance era teaching the students enrolled in HBCU’s. This fact gave poets the beauty of the English language through use of tone, diction and gave rise to the rhetorical reasoning for having become writers or poets. The difference between the poets of these two periods is that the 60’s poet had no worries of having to answer to the masses of the people. They spoke to the situations of the time not having to use as much figurative language as had been utilized prior.

Poet Rappers

Students recite to perfection many of the rap lyrics heard on radio and television videos, the market for rap music and all that is attached to the industry is much in demand. Some questions are raised for students through the study of poetry and the messages that have been drawn from their exposure to and the repetition of the lyrical mastery over the years. Speech, rather Black English in music, and performance were major elements of Black

literature throughout the evolution of the art. Black literature aesthetics emphasized the oral tradition, specifically that of the 60's, which includes the ritual use of call and response both within the body of the work itself as well as between artist and audience. This same tradition of spoken orientation is apparent in rap music of the 90's and then again in performance poetry, e.g. - poetry slams. Have rap lyrics evolved from the poets' messages of the past? Does rap poetics deserve a place in the study of poetry? Has the rap music lyrics lent itself to the demise of Black youth it serves? Have the poetics given a position for society to look at Black life in a certain way? Have rap industry artist given the public a clear view of the culture it speaks about?

In contrast to these traditions and in response to beginning to find answers to the posed questions, students will again be prodded to understand the songs, rhythm and rote memory verse of the unwritten railroad songs. This will connect for them the methods in which Zora Neale Hurston was able to document while studying the gangs of men and their songs sung while working days and nights. Have Black people always spoken about what was in their days and in an answer to their feelings in the society? Students will begin to look more at how messages are chosen for the masses versus merely hearing what is forced for society to consume. Given this glimpse of the entire picture through the historical patterns of Black poetic aesthetics and the responses to the times both political and academic, students will be able to better critique poetic verse through peer evaluation some of what may have been believable before introduction to this unit.

Poetry Form & Technique

Scansion, meter, rhyme form and technique must be taken into account when teaching a unit lesson of this type. Therefore, students will be instructed on the rules of stressed and unstressed syllables within lines of verse. They will also be taught poetry literary terms to be able to define in literary term meanings of poetic work beyond the written word to envelope figurative language which the works have embedded, also to expose students to the uses of imagery as it relates socially, politically, and romantically. Students will be briefly introduced to nursery rhymes for easy understanding of meter and rhythm, and then they will continue their study looking at poems within the context of this unit to determine patterns of meter both in blank verse and free verse.

Most children's verse creates its major sound effects out of a pattern of syllabic accents, sometimes in conjunction with the total number of syllables in a line; sometimes not. Accent, or stress, is not difficult to determine: it usually follows the "natural" stress of the words. Most English words have one strong stress; multi-syllable words may also have secondary and tertiary stresses. Students will be able to discover these syllables in words by looking in a dictionary or doing online searches to see how they are marked. Furthermore, students can simply say the word out loud to determine stress syllables. Once students determine where the word stresses fall, they will read a line of verse out loud. Students will find their voice naturally accentuates certain syllables and be given instruction of how to mark stresses like this: (/ marks a stress; - marks a weak or unstressed syllable). Once students determine where the stresses fall, they may also find the pattern(s) of stressed and unstressed syllables. In the English language the most

common metrical forms combine the number of syllables with the number of stresses in a regular pattern. This pattern is even found in most of the poetry of African-American writers.

The boundaries between meters have nothing to do with the syntax or the word boundaries in the line. Rather, they describe (somewhat abstractly) a rhythmic sequence, or pattern, of relatively strong and relatively weak stresses. The number of feet in a line will determine the name of the verse form: iambic pentameter, has five feet organized in iambic rhythm (used most often). Tetrameter has four feet per line; trimeter three feet; and so on. Accentual verse, which relies on a regular number of stresses per line, is an older verse form in English it is often associated with oral or folk verse forms. Ballads and other narrative poems often rely on this older style of verse.

Sample scansion to show students using a simple nursery rhyme:

To scan the following nursery verse, you would first mark the stressed syllables as follows:

/ - - / - - /

Hickory, dickory, dock,

- / - / - /

The mice ran up the clock.

- / - /

The clock struck one,

- / - /

The mice ran down.

/ - - / - - /

Hickory, dickory, dock.

As these markings will tell you, the verse alternates trimeter lines with dimeter: 2 trimeter, 2 dimeter, then one trimeter again. You might also note that the middle three lines are quite strictly iambic.

Rhyme is also an important element of scansion, and of poetry in general. To determine a rhyme scheme, mark the last stressed syllable in each line and the unstressed syllables that follow it, if any. The first sound is marked as "A," the second as "B," and so on. Students will be instructed to look at a poem first for its number of lines, then its form, then to determine its rhyme scheme and finally to analyze metrical patterns. The pattern, then, for the verse above, would be: AABBA. Note that the rhyme pattern follows the metrical pattern: the trimeter lines rhyme on the A word; the dimeter lines on the B word.

Students tend to cling to the rhythmic syncopation of tunes and beats, teaching stressed and unstressed syllables will almost seem natural to them. In doing so, students will become critical analyzers of rhythmic patterns found in most poetry, especially the works of the many of the listed poets. In this way, poets were and are able to write in such a way that appeals to the masses of people both in the Black community and in society at-large.

Generally speaking, in poetry we look for places where meter breaks down, where an expectation is subverted. In nursery rhymes and nonsense verse often the pleasure derives precisely from the predictability of the verse: without even knowing the meaning of the words, we can often predict what sound will come next. Metrical predictability aids in memorization, a key element of rap lyric poetry and popular verse as well. Form and content, need to be considered together in order to determine the effect of meter and rhyme: meter by itself means nothing. Therefore, students will be able throughout the unit to make relevant observations of the poetry, which will enable them to read en route for holding peer and scholarly discussions.

Students will be issued notes that will serve as a poetry analysis guide giving them the foundation of literary terms that identify all that will be necessary to understand the above-mentioned information and to work independently as well as in groups for the following lesson plans.

Lesson Plan 1 – Speaking Poetically via Poetic Devices

Goal: Students will respond to various literary genres using interpretive and evaluative processes.

Objectives: 1.1.B-G; 1.3.B &C; 1.4.A; 1.5.A; 1.6.A-C; 1.7.B (PA Literacy State Standards)

Required Materials: Lyrics of rap songs and an ELA textbook or poetry analysis note guide.

Introduce lesson: Generate discussion by pointing out that most songs use the poetic device of rhyme.

Procedures: 1. The teacher must decide what poetic devices are to be introduced in the lesson. 2. Find rap lyrics of songs with these devices in them. (e.g. - Tupac Shakur, Jadakiss, etc.) 3. The device is reviewed in class. 4. Instead of illustrating the device by poems used in the textbook, the teacher will illustrate the device through a song. 5. Some poetic devices are not easily found in songs, such as concrete poems. The teacher may chose to introduce the device and have students reform the song so that it fits the criteria for the device. *Note: I used the lyrics of the Tupac Shakur’s “Liberty Needs Glasses,” and “A River Flows Forever.” The lesson went extremely well. Especially, with those students who were not much into poetry in the first place. I even convinced my thug and thugette students to participate. My favorite line, “You all like poetry, because rap music is just poetry in motion.” My students all always smile when I say this.

Independent Practice: Have students write their own rap lyrics with the poetic devices in them. It will be less complex if students utilize the device they found most prevalent in their research.

Closure: Review various poetic devices using rhyme as the first concept.

Assessment: Have students analyze a rap(s) for various poetic devices.

Adaptations for students with learning disabilities: Use lyrics of nursery rhymes and repetitious rap songs. You can include collage work with the assignment so that students can further display the concepts they found in images.

Extensions for gifted students: Have the lesson based on lyrics that they find and correlate themes with political trends of the period then compare them to today's perspectives. Have students prepare a PowerPoint presentation using their own rap and the imagery they attached to the entire project. Have students use the L.I.S.T. Paradigm.

Time: Can be used over a two-week period or less depending what variations of the lesson you choose.

Lesson Plan 2 – Right Writers of Poetry and Song

Purpose: Students will be assigned particular poems from the reading list. Next, students will begin to make a definition of poetry (class/group defined) that is useful for them in their own writing. Then, students will share a favorite poem with the class. Students will share the recognized poetic elements. Students will achieve socially charged poetic performances for literary visitor(s).

Objectives: 1.1.B, D, F; 1.2.B; 1.3.B & C; 1.4.A & B; 1.5.A & F; 1.6.A-C, E & F; 1.7.A & B.

Procedure: This lesson requires two or three class periods per week. Over a period of three weeks, students will read and write socially motivated and charged poetry. Although they may wish to work with rhyme, this lesson does not require it. Suggested assignments call for free verse with specific structures and shapes. This lesson is useful in emphasizing the power of economy, contrast, repetition, and figures of speech in any writing whether it is poetry or prose. Students should not be encouraged to use rhyme until they have practiced other poetic skills. Rhyme sidetracks them from using other important elements and tempts them to say that which they don't intend.

1. Using The Black Poets: A New Anthology in class, or arrange for the class to read and work in the library or on the web via projection. Give students at least one class period to read and search through as many poems as possible.
2. Ask students to read widely and find at least one poem they each honestly like. Don't let them rely on an old favorite, but expect them to read to discover something new.
3. Explain that they will be expected to share a poem with the class in the large circle on the following day. They should be prepared to explain in detail why they admire the poem they have chosen.
4. Arrange the class in one large circle or three smaller circles and ask the students to take turns reading and discussing the poems they have chosen. (Begin the session by sharing several poems you have found. Model an explanation of why they appeal to you.)

Encourage the students to explain why they were attracted to their poems. Ask questions, if necessary, to illicit more thoughtful answers.

5. Most students are likely to choose a poem because the subject matter appeals to them. They are unlikely to be aware of any poetic devices the poet may be using. If so, this is a good time to reinforce the idea that the subject matter of poetry is ordinary human experience. It is important for students to realize that their own experience is subject matter for poetry. Occasionally, point out poetic elements in particular poems as you hear them read.

6. After the poems have been read and each student has discussed a poem, ask the whole class to brainstorm a list on the board of some elements of poetry. The list may be similar to the following:

- a. subject matter - feelings (serious, humorous, political, emotional, and spiritual)
- b. economy (grammar and usage rules are sometimes ignored)
- c. shape or pattern
- d. white space
- e. line breaks, spelling
- f. repetition of words or phrases
- g. rhythm & rhyme
- h. voice of a speaker
- i. images (pictures brought to the mind)
- j. appeals to all the senses (students must use literary terms for the senses)
- k. word sounds (alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia)
- l. figures of speech (simile, metaphor, personification, onomatopoeia, hyperbole, oxymoron)
- m. surprises

Assessment: Student will be scored according to a preset rubric that will have been determined by each student group. The sections to be considered are: poem choice, poem explanation (written and oral), poetry devices and terms, participation, performance, if necessary.

Lesson Plan 3 – Iambic Speaks to my Spirit

Audience: This lesson can be utilized in the Honors, advanced or AP ELA classes. It can be adapted to a learning support environment by significantly decreasing the amount of lines of verse to scan.

Objectives: 1.1.G; 1.4.A & B; 1.5.E; 1.6.A.

Purpose: Blank verse is poetry written in unrhymed iambic pentameter. The meter is usually iambic (a pattern of unstressed syllables followed by stressed), and pentameter (a line consisting of five feet). Here is an example of blank verse: ("Da" is unstressed and the "Dum" is stressed. Each "Da Dum" equals one metric foot.) Da Dum Da Dum Da Dum Da Dum Da Dum

It has been determined that this form closely approximates ordinary English. In other words, we often talk in iambs. Since blank verse usually sounds natural, it appears to be an easy form to use; however, it requires talent to write well in blank verse. This form also lends itself to the expression of grand passions; Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Dunbar, Cullen, Dunbar-Nelson, and Sanchez, as well as many other Black poets, wrote in blank verse.

Procedure: Choose ten lines of poetry that appear to be written in blank verse. Copy the lines and scan them to see if students were correct. At the bottom of student pages note any variations in meter. Students can also use the stressed and unstressed marks as mentioned in the poetic technique section of this unit.

Student Reading List

Poetry most times requires short readings enabling students to be able to benefit from the variety, complexity and sometimes simplicity of a long reading list before the unit's end.

The following readings are taken from African American Literature. Austin: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1998.

They are: *Beehive & Song of the Son*, Jean Toomer; *The Tropics In New York, America, Baptism, & If We Must Die*, Claude McKay; *John Henry*, Anonymous; *SOS*, Amiri Baraka; *Yet Do I Marvel*, Countee Cullen; *Heritage*, Countee Cullen; *The Weary Blues*, Langston Hughes; *Critique of the Weary Blues*, Jessie Fauset; and *A Summer Tragedy*, Arna Bontemps; *We Wear the Mask, The Debt, Life's Tragedy, & When Malindy Sings*, Paul; Lawrence Dunbar; *On Being Brought to America*, Phillis Wheatley; *The Song of the Smoke*, W.E.B. DuBois; *The Creation, & Lift Every Voice And Sing*, James Weldon Johnson; *Harlem, I, Too, & Dreams*, Langston Hughes; *Backwater Blues*, Bessie Smith; *Southern Mansion*, Arna Bontemps

In addition, students will be required to read: *Somebody Blew Up America*, Amiri Baraka; *America, The Terrorist*, The Last Poets; *What's Going On*, M. Gaye; *Across 110th Street*, C. Mayfield; *The Bottle*, G. Scott-Heron; *A River Flows Forever*, T. Shakur; *Liberty Needs Glasses*, T. Shakur; *Fight the Power*, Public Enemy; *Why*, Jadakiss; *Me, Myself, & I*, De La Soul; *The Message*, Grandmaster Flash; *Law and Order: The Immigrant*, Samuel Allen; *Celebration*, Mari Evans; *Phillis*, Naomi Long Madgett; *I Am*, Amiri Baraka; *Love Child – a black aesthetic*, Kalamu ya Salaam; Sonia Sanchez; *Black is a Noun* (an essay with poetic elements), Nikki Giovanni; *Parsley: The Cane Fields*, Rita Dove; *The Black Back Up*, Sherley Anne Williams; Dolores Kendrick; *Jeopardy* and *Where it Came From*, Gerald Barrax; *In Small town USA* and *Omar*, E. Ethelbert Miller; *Every Shut Eye Ain't Asleep*, Michael S. Harper.

Finally, students will be assigned various reading assignments and instruction while using The Black Poets: A New Anthology, edited by Dudley Randall. Through utilizing

this very inclusive and diverse magnitude of materials, teachers and students have the option of choosing to work with poetic works that they like rather than being led by the teacher on specific poem readings. However, there will be times when an assignment will confine both students and teacher to one or two specified poems for an assignment.

Added-on to the canon for this unit, students will utilize and be encouraged to take-home poetry readings from various selections from the text, The Black Poets: A New Anthology edited by Dudley Randall, students will find this text intriguing and most expressive of the diversity the ear offers in poetic literacy. Exposure to works in this text will allow them to read beyond preferred assignments and delve into the more intricate splendor of the politically vocal Black poet and their wide-ranging messages. In addition, they will come to actualize the information from previous study of the Renaissance era, in that the poet of that time and space was not as well respected as one would think – Black writers, etc. The Renaissance poets and writers were thought to be a failure for their complacent approach in expressing the sentiment of the people, according to much discussion from the writers of the 60's.

Further in this portion of the unit students will read from Nikki Giovanni's – Ego-Tripping, as well as from the 1992 Children's book of Distinction Award book, Make a Joyful Sound: Poems for Children by African-American Poets. Supplementing this portion with poetry that may interest Caribbean-born students, we will read and introduce the poetry of Linton Kwesi Johnson. Johnson is the first Caribbean speaking poet to be published by Penguin Books. Johnson's poetry offers to students the flavor of imagery and message of his thoughts and living through the eyes of a European Black man writing in his native dialect.

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