

Prosody and the African American Poet: A Case for Close Reading

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Rationale

Why do close readings? Why bother to ask students to slow down in this frenetic, fast-paced world? Text messages and emails are written so quickly that it is the norm for them to be filled with errors. We rush past thousands of words and images in a typical day, barely noticing what we see. We take in most information passively, and the thinking process is nearly non-existent. It is beneficial for all of us to strengthen this muscle of active engagement in all areas. One place to start is in forcing our students, even momentarily, to slow down and examine reading material more closely.

Close reading is a type of reading where the reader critically engages with the text in order to understand it, question it, evaluate it, and form an opinion about it. This is a method of reading where the reader has to slow down and think along each step of the way (Krause 1).

Not only will this enable students to glean so much more from their reading, but because the process can carry over to other aspects of life. Images bombard us, but we can see so much more if we carefully examine even a few. A student's entire life can be enriched if they learn to occasionally slow down.

This unit begs a question: should we read a poem and remain color blind, ignoring whether the poem is written by an African American or a Caucasian? In other words, do we focus on what are the universal themes, or do we take special note of the race of the author and how that influenced his writing? Our forefathers certainly did not read anything without keeping the racial difference fully in their consciousness. Thomas Jefferson, the very wordsmith of the immortal words "all men are created equal," kept the color of the author very much in mind. In his "Notes on the State of VA, Query 14," Jefferson describes all of the differences he saw between the races. Jefferson believed, according to this text, that blacks were inherently different than whites in ways far beyond the skin color. He says that blacks

"secrete less by the kidnies(sic), and more by the glands of the skin, which gives them a very strong and disagreeable odor...They seem to require less sleep. A black, after hard labour through the day, will be induced by the slightest amusement to sit up till midnight, or later, though knowing he must be out with

the first dawn of the morning...They are more ardent after their female...Their griefs are transient...are less felt, and sooner forgotten (265).

There is no thought that perhaps slaves that were working 14 hours a day might sweat, or that once they had a few hours to themselves, they might want to have some fun.

Jefferson expounds as well on the limitations of the imagination of the black poet. He states,

In imagination they are dull and tasteless...Some [blacks] have been liberally educated, and all have lived in countries where the arts and sciences are cultivated to a considerable degree...But never yet could I find that a black uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never see even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture...Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. –Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry. Love is the peculiar ;oestrum of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion has produced a Phyllis Wheatley; but it could not produce a poet (267).

One of my primary purposes as an instructor of English literature is to help my students to understand the intricate literary techniques available to any poet. I believe that through first through the ability to identify, and then to appreciate these techniques, the deeper meanings intended by poetry can be unveiled.

Objective

One goal of this curriculum unit is to prove Thomas Jefferson wrong. My African-American students should have no doubt in their ability to create works of great “imagination,” but it would be wrong to assume that. Even these hundreds of years later, messages to the contrary abound. Many still see blacks of capable of excelling only physically, musically, and express those opinions in public. This is true despite the election of the first African-American president. Indeed, it was not long after Obama’s election that a political cartoon appeared in a prestigious publication depicting our new president as an ape! Our young people would benefit from a study of the artistry and the imagination in poetry by African-American authors.

However, the primary goal of this unit is to help students appreciate the wealth of information available to the reader of poetry when one examines metrical and rhyming patterns – in other words, doing a close reading. It requires that one slow the pace of reading. Poetry is not prose. A poem is a more intense expression, utilizing a large number of techniques. The Merriam Webster Dictionary states that poetry is “writing that formulates a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience in language chosen and arranged to create a specific emotional response through meaning, sound, and rhythm” (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/poetry>). The key words are “language chosen and arranged.” The poet makes deliberate choices and a study of those choices can reveal meaning hidden in a cursory reading.

What then makes a competent reader of poetry? A generic answer would...include many of the same criteria governing conversational

meaning: an awareness of the cultural-historical distance between the reader and the poem; cultural-historical knowledge peculiar to the poem's creation and governing the poem's audience; linguistic knowledge, explicit and implicit. Poetry reading requires something further, however; a poem must be approached not only in respect of the qualities it shares with any other kind of language but also in mind of what Johnson identifies as the 'peculiar superiority' afforded the poet: 'that to all the powers which the perfection of every other composition can require, he adds the faculty of joining music with reason, and of acting at once upon the senses and the passions' (Rambler 86 [12 January 1751]). Given this 'peculiar superiority,' I should like to argue that literary criticism must turn its attention to the nuts and bolts of poetry's sound patterning, to its prosody (Hurley 5-6).

At first glance, just the way a poem appears on a page conveys meaning. An extreme example of this is the concrete poem, designed to appear on the page in a particular shape reflective of the poem's content. There have been poems in the shape of an apple, forsythia, a flower, and much more, giving the reader much information before they have read even one word. Even in the non-concrete poem, the reader sees the arrangement of stanzas, the uses of upper and lower letter case (as with e.e. cummings, or the poem ISM), the unusual placement of lines, the presence or lack of punctuation, and many other examples too numerous to list. We may quickly note a traditional configuration, such as a poem with fourteen lines that appears to be a sonnet. We may see paragraphs, as in Margaret Walker's ??? So before one reads the language of a poem, the reader is making judgments and gleanng interpretations based on one's expectations and experiences with a particular format.

Michael Hurley, in his article, "The Pragmatics of Prosody," discusses the importance of the reader's expectations of meter:

Insofar as we can feel meter's pattern...we learn to anticipate this pattern...So-called metrical tension occurs where the normative pattern is disrupted by accommodating extra or fewer syllables or where the cadence reverses from rising to falling or falling to rising. Tension of this sort may disambiguate meaning by emphasizing certain suggestions in the line (8).

As the reader expects the next beat to be in keeping with what came before, an alteration in this rhythm commands attention.

Many students resist this process of analysis, preferring to just experience the words and let that be an end to it. There are adults, including some critics, who also ascribe to this point of view. My students apply resistance to deeper investigation to other reading as well. They would prefer to decide which characters to like and not like, for instance, happy to say, "I don't know why. I just feel that way." They do not want to see the wizard behind the curtain, namely, the craftsmanship and deliberate painstaking choices of the writer that leads us to one impression or another. To ignore the mechanics, the elements that create its effect, is to lose a full appreciation of its content, and I dare say, a full enjoyment of poetry. Hurley says,

Not to register this kind of metrical cue is the equivalent of ignoring a speaker's tone of voice. No less fatal to the recovery of a poem's ...force is the failure to appreciate the expressive function of the line break or rhyme or alliteration or any number of other features of prosody that similarly serve to inflect meaning in the poem (8).

Teaching the close reading of poetry will provide an opportunity to incorporate many of the Pennsylvania State Standards for English. This process requires higher levels of thinking, and will require complex analysis and evaluation of literature. Standard 1.2.C. asks that students analyze the effectiveness of literary devices, including sound techniques, figurative language, and literary structures. All of these will be part of this curriculum unit. Specifically, students will be called upon to evaluate techniques of each poem to see how they connected to the message or theme of the poem. They will use the higher level thinking skill of synthesis as they bring together all of their knowledge of the various techniques and make possible connections to the lives of the poets. Speaking and writing skills will also be practiced as we discuss the poetry, present findings to one another, and bring together findings in short research papers and essays. Finally, the School District of Philadelphia requires multicultural curriculum elements, and this unit certainly address that concern.

Strategies

I offer the following examples of analysis as a guide to the sort of thing I hope my students will be able to do. I will begin here with two poems by Countee Cullen. This unit will be taught after the students have been trained to scan a poem and to understand the requirements of a sonnet. For a more complete explanation of how to teach students to do this, you may use another curriculum unit that I wrote entitled "Detecting Shakespeare's Sonnets," which can be found at the Yale National Initiative Web Site by clicking on Curriculum Resources for 2008.

Two by Countée Cullen

A scan of "Incident" will reveal the extreme regularity of rhythm throughout its twelve lines. It is consistently iambic tetrameter, or four iambic feet per line. The childlike simplicity of this rhythmic pattern both reflects the young age of the narrator, and simultaneously stands in ironic juxtaposition to the distress of the experience. Students will be reminded of other poems of this simplicity, such as those in nursery rhymes. The meter and rhyme reflect the innocence of the boy, even as it is lost.

As part of an examination of the poem's structure, students will note that this variation on a sonnet lacks the usual 14 lines. Likewise, each line lacks the usual five iambic feet. It has been cut short, just as has the young boy's experience that year been greatly limited, containing only his memory of the one horrible incident that became "all that [he could] remember."

"Incident" by Countée Cullen

Once riding in old Baltimore,
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,

I saw a Baltimorean
Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small,
And he was no whit bigger,
And so I smiled, but he poked out
His tongue, and called me, "Nigger."

I saw the whole of Baltimore
From May until December;
Of all the things that happened there
That's all that I remember.

The first thing I notice about "Yet Do I Marvel" is that Cullen has written a sonnet, fourteen lines long, in the Petrarchan style. This is not surprising because Cullen often preferred to write in very traditional poetic forms.

From scholar Marcellus Blount, as quoted by Braxton: "The pursuit of form in the Afro-American sonnet has measure the participation of black poets in Euro-American cultural traditions while testing the individual poet's claim to originality and authenticity. For black poets, the sonnet has served as a zone of entrapment and liberation, mediation and self-possession (Braxton 210).

The first eight lines form the octet with a rhyme scheme of abab cdcd, followed with a sestet, or six line stanza, with a different rhyme scheme. Here we find three couplets, or an ee ff gg rhyme scheme. Each line is in iambic pentameter, amazingly without many exceptions to this very regular and predictable meter. Therefore, I would want my students to pay special attention to those exceptions. The first exception I note is in the very first line in the very first three words. Stressed syllables are in **bold-faced type**. We find that three words in a row, one syllable each, are stressed. Cullen is announcing their importance, just as one would hear a flourish when royalty entered a room in days he states, "I **doubt** not **God** is **good**, well-meaning, **kind**."

"Yet Do I Marvel" by Countée Cullen

I doubt not God is good, well-meaning, kind,
And did He stoop to quibble could tell why
The little buried mole continues blind,
Why flesh that mirrors Him must some day die,
Make plain the reason tortured Tantalus
Is baited by the fickle fruit, declare
If merely brute caprice dooms Sisyphus
To struggle up a never-ending stair.

Inscrutable His ways are, and immune
To catechism by a mind too strewn

With petty cares to slightly understand
What awful brain compels His awful hand.
Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:
To make a poet black, and bid him sing!

Two by Robert Hayden

“Frederick Douglass” by Robert Hayden begins by naming abstract concepts, freedom and liberty, that are as “needful to man as air.” They are the most basic of needs, grounding us, and as “usable as earth.” One day, the poem predicts (he says “when” and not “if”), freedom and liberty will be so much a part of us that they will be “truly instinct.” Hayden compares them to bodily functions that continue without need of our will or thought. They are unconscious, like breathing, like the “diastole” or “systole” of one’s blood pressure, or like “reflex action.” It will be at this point, “when [the struggle for equality for all men] is finally won,” that Douglass “shall be remembered.” He will not be remembered as so many are, through “statues” or “legends” or “poems” or “wreaths of bronze.” These are all exterior tributes. The use of the verb “fleshing” in the last line of the poem returns us to the references to the body in lines four and five, reminding us that the tribute to Douglass will be an intrinsic part of our physical body on an instinctive level.

“Frederick Douglass” by Robert Hayden

When it is finally ours, this freedom, this liberty, this beautiful
and terrible thing, needful to man as air,
usable as earth; when it belongs at last to all,
when it is truly instinct, brain matter, diastole, systole,
reflex action; when it is finally won; when it is more
than the gaudy mumbo jumbo of politicians:
this man, this Douglass, this former slave, this Negro
beaten to his knees, exiled, visioning a world
where none is lonely, none hunted, alien,
this man, superb in love and logic, this man
shall be remembered. Oh, not with statues' rhetoric,
not with legends and poems and wreaths of bronze alone,
but with the lives grown out of his life, the lives
fleshing his dream of the beautiful, needful thing.

This second poem by Hayden begs the following question: Is it necessary to delve into Hayden’s biography to appreciate “Those Winter Sundays?” Grimes called this work “a nearly perfect poem.” Why nearly? In keeping with other proponents of the New Criticism she stated, “While looking at the biography of poets can certainly enrich the poet’s work for readers, it is a flaw if the reader feels the biography a necessity in understanding any part of the work” (Grimes 2). The primary cause of Grimes’

unhappiness is the line in stanza 2 that mentions the “chronic angers of that house.” “It is this vague line that detracts from the perfection of this sonnet. This vagueness motivates critics to peer into the poet’s life for possibilities for meaning” (Grimes 2).

It would be an interesting question to pose to my students: Does knowledge of this poet’s childhood enrich to our understanding, or is it absolutely essential? So what do we find when we “peer into the poet’s life?” Hayden was born in Detroit, Michigan, on August 4, 1913 after the marriage of his mother and father, Ruth and Asa Sheffey, had already broken. When he was just eighteen months old, the poet was delivered into the foster care of neighbors, the Haydens, where he was a victim of “regular beatings” (Guz 2). As if that were not enough,

In his childhood, Hayden was often in the middle of an emotional tug of war between his natural mother and his foster parents, and his presence in the Haydens’ home was at times a source of strain and contention, in light of the fact that he was not really their son. Many years later, he was deeply upset to discover that the Haydens had never formally adopted him. (Biography 1)

Hayden writes of father performing a thankless task of warming up the house before rousing his son. The “too” in line one tells us that this task was performed each day, and Sunday was just another in the series of days rather than the day of rest one would expect. It was so cold that it is described as “blueblack cold.” The father was a laborer who made the “banked fires blaze” with “cracked hands that ached.” The father’s actions included building a fire and polishing shoes. These are actions of a servant, and like a servant, the father’s sacrifices were unacknowledged and unappreciated.

Hayden used many poetic techniques to which I would draw the attention of my students. Like Cullen, Hayden harkens back to a traditional form of poetry in a time when many white poets are breaking new ground, leaving tradition behind. “Hayden, however, is writing the sonnet in the period when free verse is on the ascendancy” (Guz 2). The poem contains fourteen lines, as would a sonnet. Yet Hayden is not writing a traditional Shakespearean or Petrarchan sonnet. He takes more liberties. The rhythm is not reliably iambic pentameter, for instance. Guz considers this “loosely interpreted sonnet format [to be] influenced by free verse’s liberating standards” (2).

Stanza 1 contains an excellent example of consonance, where a consonant sound is repeated many times in close proximity. We find the /k/ sound in “clothes,” “blueblack cold,” “cracked,” “ached,” “weekday,” “banked,” and “thanked” for a total of nine times in this stanza alone. The first line of the next stanza contains the same consonance in “wake,” “cold,” and “breaking.” It can be said that Hayden was evoking the sound of the “splintering” and “breaking” of the fire. The harsh /k/ sound reminds us of the harshness of the cold. Once the “rooms were warm,” the consonance continues, with the repetition of a softer /s/ sound this time, in the words “slowly,” “rise,” and “dress.” This is a wonderful poem to demonstrate the importance of the well-chosen adjective as well as repetition. The repetition of “what did I know” adds poignance to the memory of a regretful adult who did not understand in childhood that an amazing amount of love can

be expressed in actions and self-sacrifice beyond what any words could express. As Grimes says, “The simple, literal line following these skillfully crafted images, delivers a blast: ‘No one ever thanked him.’ The speaker has shown us a caring man who did so much for others, yet no one appreciated it” (Grimes 1).

“Those Winter Sundays” by Robert Hayden

Sundays too my father got up early
And put his clothes on in the blueback cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

Two By Dunbar

Until this point, I have been discussing ways in which poets use the tools of language to underscore and emphasize their message. Sometimes, we will see, the language can be used with the opposite intention: to obscure the meaning. The following two poems by Paul Laurence Dunbar would be an interesting juxtaposition to discuss how a poet can use language to “mask” the strength of the message.

“We Wear the Mask” by Paul Laurence Dunbar

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.

Why should the world be overwise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
 We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries

To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
 We wear the mask!

In the third stanza," Dunbar describes a world where "we" wear masks to hide the truth. Presumably, "we" refers to African Americans. This dual identity, this speaking in codes, was rooted in Dunbar's upbringing. Dunbar was very close to his mother, Matilda Dunbar. Braxton believes that he learned to wear a mask at home. "While the unwritten rules of public engagement and negotiation outside the home dictated the use of more formal language, centuries of oral play and practice do not die in a single generation. Like many African Americans today, the Dunbars may have been culturally fluent in multiple linguistic codes" (208). The mask was worn and it "grins and lies" so that the wearer can survive in a hostile world not interested in hearing the truth from blacks. James Emanuel makes the point that "Dunbar is careful to show that the mask is grinning, not the black man"(2). The "smile" was presented, despite the "torn and bleeding hearts" or the "tortured souls." It was a form of self-protection that does not allow the "world" to be "overwise" - to see the struggles behind the mask.

It is interesting that Dunbar posed the question in the second stanza, "Why should the world be overwise, / In counting all our tears and sighs?" This suggests that keeping one's truth to oneself is a sort of victory." To "let them only see us, while/We wear the mask" implies getting an advantage in the situation, or "getting over," as they say. This is in contrast of a world where secrets are kept not out of force, or out of avoidance of terrible consequences, but as if to know what lies beneath the smile is a privilege. Dunbar says, "Nay, let them only see us, while/We wear the mask." We do not "let them" into our private world, but let them "dream otherwise." The white world saw only the surface, only the happy, contented Negro, remaining in a "dream," distant from reality. This distance was what most whites wanted, and any black man who dared put a crack in the illusion paid a heavy price. Dunbar used the metaphor of walking on "clay" to illustrate the precarious nature of living life in pretense while hurt and pain are kept hidden. To walk on clay is not steady. One can fall. Dunbar called it "vile" and "long."

Braxton states that Dunbar "speak[s] plainly and unequivocally for just a moment about the double nature of the black experience...he draws aside the veil of the seventh son to give *the reader* second sight, if only briefly, into the inner circle of the black community" (Braxton 3).

The poem is written in formal diction. All of the lines of each stanza rhyme, except for the last. We also see a consistent iambic meter with a few significant alterations. The first change is at the end of stanza one: "We mouth with myriad subtleties." This follows four lines of consistent iambic tetrameter, and then we come to a line that is a bit difficult to "mouth" in comparison, as if Dunbar is mimicking the difficulty of mouthing untruths in the very meter of the poem. The next and last alteration comes at the start of the final stanza: "We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries." In this case, our attention is drawn to the outpouring of pain and anguish, this crying out to God, to "Christ," while all the while wearing the "smile." "In the third verse, the race cries and even sings out to Christ

in pain, but ‘the world dream[s] otherwise,’ unaware of the black man’s struggle for equality in the world and peace within” (Braxton 3).

Is this formal diction in keeping with the theme of wearing a mask and hiding one’s true self? Did African Americans speak formally to the white world as part of the mask, or is this formal diction an act of defiance? Was the mask worn when Dunbar was writing in dialect? Peter Revell believes that “We Wear the Mask” is

an apologia for all that his own and succeeding generations would condemn in his work, for the grin of the minstrelsy and the lie of the plantation tradition that Dunbar felt himself bound to adopt as part of the “myriad subtleties” required to find a voice and to be heard...The poem itself is “masked,” its link to the black race, though obvious enough, not being openly stated. Yet in this one poem Dunbar left aside the falsity of dialect and the didacticism of his serious poems on black subjects and spoke from the heart. (1)

Not all would agree with Revell. David Bradley, for instance, strongly believes that Dunbar has been greatly misunderstood by many scholars and critics in their belief that Dunbar’s dialect poetry is less important than his poetry written in standard English. For instance, Dunbar’s first published book of poetry is titled *Majors and Minors*, and some critics labeled the standard English poetry as the “majors” and those written in Negro dialect as the “minors.” Bradley says,

The implication was that Dunbar was ashamed, of his black brethren and sisteren, and possibly of his own black self...Some critics – specifically, some Negro critics – believed they detected evidence of a more pathological attitude in Dunbar’s discourse, on the basis of which they argued he was, at least, twisted by a Du Boisian “Double Consciousness,” and perhaps was fatally warped by Freudian self-loathing...The primary evidence was located in the title *Majors and Minors* (360).

Braxton agrees. She explains, “For Dunbar the masked language of black dialect was part and parcel of the larger American experience. Fascinated by the representation of regional language generally, Dunbar experimented with German-American, Irish-American, and Midwestern dialects” (Braxton 3).

That brings us to an example of a Dunbar poem written in Negro dialect.

“A Death Song” by Paul Laurence Dunbar

Lay me down beneaf de willers in de grass,
Whah de branch ‘Il go a-singin’ as it pass.
An’ w’en I ’s a-layin’ low,
I kin hyeah it as it go
Singin’, “Sleep, my honey, tek yo’ res’ at las’.”

Lay me nigh to whah hit meks a little pool,
An’ de watah stan’s so quiet lak an’ cool,
Whah de little birds in spring,

Ust to come an' drink an' sing,
An' de chillen waded on dey way to school.

Let me settle w'en my shouldahs draps dey load
Nigh enough to hyeah de noises in de road;
Fu' I t'ink de las' long res'
Gwine to soothe my sperrit bes'
Ef I's layin' 'mong de t'ings I's allus knowed.

The poem is constructed in three stanzas. Each follows the same rhyme pattern: aabba. In other words, the first, second and fifth line rhyme with each other, and the third and fourth line are a couplet with a different rhyme. These sets of rhyming lines also match in length. The "a" lines each contain eleven syllables. The "b" lines have only seven. Dunbar was particularly close to his mother after she divorced his father in 1876. Once again we find evidence of her influence in this poem, who was known for her "beautiful singing of 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot'" (Braxton 260). There are several references to song throughout the poem: "Whah de branch 'll go a-singin' as it pass"; "Singin', 'Sleep, my honey, tek yo' res' at las'"; and "Ust to come an' drink an' sing." The song and the poem share subject matter – the welcome rest of death after a long life of toil. Indeed, Dunbar was considering his own death. He "lived in a world where tuberculosis was rampant. [He] lived with the knowledge that death was near" (Braxton 210).

Swing Low, Sweet Chariot

Swing low, sweet chariot,
Comin' for to carry me home.
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Comin' for to carry me home.

I looked over Jordan,
And what did I see,
Comin' for to carry me home,
A band of angels comin' after me,
Comin' for to carry me home.

If you get there before I do,
Comin' for to carry me home,
Tell all my friends I'm comin' too,
Comin' for to carry me home.

So why did Dunbar choose Negro dialect for this poem? LeBlanc says, "Dunbar grew up hearing the manner of speech from which many African Americans wanted to distance themselves. Dunbar, however, loved it. He continued to employ it in tandem with his standard English works, often hiding a second meaning in the poems" (1). It would be an interesting activity to ask students what "second meaning" Dunbar may be hiding.

Classroom Activities

Lesson Plan One

This lesson will entail modeling the process for my students. I would begin with several prereading questions to get my students thinking about the theme of “The Mask” by Paul Laurence Dunbar:

- What is a mask? What are the various ways we can define this term? What is the difference between a real mask and a figurative mask?
- Have you ever worn a figurative “mask?”
- In what circumstances in school, for instance, do you present a persona other than who you really are, or cover up your real feelings?
- What would be the consequences of always showing how you really feel?

I will then display “We Are the Mask” on an overhead projector and ask my students to read the poem. I will ask them to offer their general first-glance interpretation of the poem’s meaning.

At this point, I will ask my students to scan the poem and identify the rhythmic meter and the rhyming pattern. They will have already practiced these skills when we read sonnets by Shakespeare. Using a marker on the overhead, I will scan the first stanza of the poem, taking suggestions from the class. I hope that someone will identify the meter as iambic tetrameter. They should also take note of the unusual rhyme, with every line the same rhyme except for the last line of each stanza. The next question will be, “Where do we find meter variations?” Together, we will identify the first variation in the last line of stanza one when we read “myriad subtleties.” Is there any connection between content of this line and the way those words force us to slow down, and perhaps even stumble in our reading? Why is this also the point in which the rhyme changes for the first time? What do you think of the unusual use of the word “mouth” as a verb instead of a noun? Why does Dunbar choose “mouth” instead of a more common word such as “say” or “speak?” What is Dunbar pointing out to us so forcefully?

We will discuss the third and fourth lines in stanza 2: “Nay, let them only see us, while / We wear the mask.” The third line could be scanned as a continuation of the iambic tetrameter, but how is our reading affected by the additional punctuation? Also, how many iambic feet do we find in line four? What is Dunbar doing here? What is the effect of how one must read line three with the additional commas? I would hear responses from my students, hoping that they would suggest that we are forced to slow down, and pay special attention to this line. Similarly, the shortness of the final line with its second unrhymed ending surprises us, also drawing increased attention in that direction.

“We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries” is the opening line of the final stanza. I will ask, “Why is Dunbar forcing us to slow down in this line, this time with three commas?” What is Dunbar doing when he cries out, “O great Christ?” I will point out that this is a form of prayer, emphasizing the great despair behind the smile.

I will ask my students to briefly discuss how this examination of meter and rhyme in “We Wear the Mask” deepened their understanding of the poem. I will ask who they believe is the “we” of the poem. My students are African Americans. I would ask them to discuss where they felt a need to wear a mask and smile due to their race when they

wanted to show other feelings? Is this poem still relevant today? Do African Americans feel a need to do this as much as Dunbar may have needed to when he was alive?

It would be at this point that biographical information may be enlightening, especially to learn the time when the poem was written. I will ask my students to briefly conduct on-line research at home or in the classroom to see what they can find out about Paul Laurence Dunbar, and to report out what they learned the following day. This will lead to one last question: Is there anything you learned about the poet that added to or altered your understanding of “We Wear the Mask?”

Lesson Two

I have provided much background information about three poets in this curriculum unit for the use of the teachers. However, it is my intention that students conduct their own research and make their own between the content of the poetry and the poet’s life.

Students will be divided into three groups. Each group will be allowed to choose a poet from those discussed in this unit: Robert Hayden, Countee Cullen, or Paul Laurence Dunbar. They will be asked to research the life of their poet. Then they will find ten poems by this poet to conduct a close reading. These poems can be divided among group members, but my hope is that they will turn to one another for assistance. They will be given questions and a graphic organizer to assist them as they do the close readings. Here is a sample of the questions they will be given:

Questions for Close Readings

What is the form of the poem? Is it a sonnet, free verse, or what? Does the form of the poem reflect the meaning in any way? Is it a shortened version of another form, such as a sonnet? If so, how does the shortening of the line length or the number of total lines reflect the meaning? Could there be an ironic comment on the meaning – such as a formal structure and a poem that is about a rejection of formality?

Where do you see repetition of words or phrases? Do you see examples of anaphora or other repetition of words? Are any thoughts or ideas being emphasized by those repetitions?

Scan the meter of the poem and look for alterations in the rhythm. Can any meaning be attached to the alteration at that particular moment? Do some lines flow more smoothly in rhythm than others? What significance can be attached to those differences?

Look for examples of alliteration or assonance or consonance. How do these sound patterns reflect the meaning of the poem?

Look for examples of figurative language: extended metaphors, personification, hyperbole, simile, etc. How do these underscore the meaning of the sonnet? Do they ever seem to complicate the message?

Closely examine the diction of the poem. Select word choices that stand out to you as particularly odd or interesting. What do you make of those word choices? Do they introduce a tone that fits or contrasts with the overall message?

Now look closely at the biography of the poet. Is there anything about the meaning of the poem that would be better understood if we knew about the life of the poet?

Once each group has an opportunity to prepare these answers with the assistance of myself and group members, they will be asked to prepare presentations. Each student will be responsible for demonstrating the close reading of one poem by the author assigned to the group. I will provide an overhead projector and transparency of each poem so that the

student can demonstrate exactly what they found and where it is located in the poem. In other words, each student will teach their poem to the class.

Close Reaching Graphic Organizer

Name of Poem and Author:	In this column, quote a phrase or line that seems significant:	In this column, explain how the meaning of the poem is supported by your example:
Structure of the Poem:		
Meter: Examples of alterations in the meter that have significance.		
Alliteration: the repetition of the first consonant of a word.		
Consonance: the repetition of consonants or a consonant pattern not already listed:		
Assonance: the repetition of vowel sounds example		
Repetition of words or phrases:		
Metaphors or Similes:		
Examples of Other Forms of Figurative Language:		
Interesting word choices (Diction):		

Resources for Teachers

“Biography: Robert Hayden.” Pearson Longman.

http://wps.ablongman.com/long_kennedy_lfpd_9/22/5820/1490011.cw/-/1353652/index.html

Here is a rich resource for information related to many Harlem Renaissance poets and jazz poetry.

Bradley, David. “Factoring Out Race: The Cultural Context of Paul Laurence Dunbar.” African American Review. Summer 2007, Vol. 41 Issue 2, p357-366.

This scholarly article discusses the context of the poetry of Dunbar, and connects the content of the poetry and the life of the author.

Braxton, Joanne M. "Dunbar, the Originator." *African American Review*. Summer 2007, Vol. 41 Issue 2, p205-214.

Braxton, Joanne M., ed. *The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993. as quoted from "On 'We Wear the Mask.'" *Modern American Poetry*.
http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/dunbar/mask.htm

See below.

Emanuel, James A. "Racial Fire in the Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar." *A Singer in the Dawn: Reinterpretations of Paul Laurence Dunbar*. Ed. Jay Martin. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1975. as quoted from "On 'We Wear the Mask.'" *Modern American Poetry*. http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/dunbar/mask.htm

The Modern American Poetry web sites offer a very useful service: distillations of reviews from several scholarly critics for one poem at a time.

Grimes, Linda Sue. "Hayden's 'Those Winter Sundays: A Nearly Perfect Poem.'" *Suite 101.com*. February 7, 2007.
http://poetry.suite101.com/article.cfm/haydens_those_winter_sundays

See below.

Guz, Savannah Schroll. "Robert Hayden's 'Those Winter Sundays: Retrospective Appreciation of a Father's Stern Affection.'" *Suite101.com*.
http://poetry.suite101.com/article.cfm/robert_haydens_those_winter_sundays

At Suite101.com, you can find articles contributed by thousands of writers on as many subjects, including poetry.

Hurley, Michael D. "The Pragmatics of Prosody." *Style*. Spring 2007, Vol. 41, Issue 1.

Krause, Stephen D. "Chapter 7: The Critique Exercise." *The Process of Research Writing*. Spring 2007. <http://www.stevendkrause.com/tprw/chapter7.html>

This chapter is useful. It has many suggestions for doing close readings in preparation for research papers.

LeBlanc, Aileen. "Remembrances: Paul Laurence Dunbar's Legacy of Language." NPR. April 3, 2009. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5200796>

NPR offers many resources associated with its broadcasts, including an opportunity to listen online.

Negrospiruals.com

http://www.negrospiruals.com/news-song/swing_low_sweet_chariot_swing_lo.htm

At this site you will find the history of the spiritual, information about the composers, and the words to many of the songs.

"Poetry." *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*. 2009. Merriam-Webster Online. 2 March 2009. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/poetry>

It is great to have an online dictionary available at any moment.

"Poetry Archives" *My Poetry X*. <http://poetry.poetryx.com/poems/12023/>

This is a database of poetry by many poets as well as useful articles.

Revell, Peter. Paul Laurence Dunbar. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979. As quoted from "On 'We Wear the Mask.'" *Modern American Poetry*.
http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/dunbar/mask.htm

At Suite101.com, you can find articles contributed by thousands of writers on as many subjects, including poetry.

"Overview: 'Those Winter Sundays,' by Robert Hayden." *Poetry for Students*. Vol. 1. Gale Research. 1997.
<http://ftp.ccccd.edu/mtolleson/2328online/2328noteswintersundays.htm>

This site gives you a picture of the author, a brief biography, and a very detailed line by line explication of the poem.

Appendix D: Pennsylvania State Standards

1.1.A. Locate various texts, media and traditional resources for assigned and independent projects before reading.

1.1.D. Identify, describe, evaluate and synthesize the essential ideas in text. Assess those reading strategies that were most effective in learning from a variety of texts.

1.1.G. Demonstrate after reading understanding and interpretation of both fiction and nonfiction text, including public documents.

- Make, and support with evidence, assertions about texts.
- Assess the validity of the document based on context.
- Demonstrate fluency and comprehension in reading.
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1.1.H. Demonstrate fluency and comprehension in reading.

1.2.A. Read and understand works of literature.

- Evaluate text organization and content to determine the author's purpose and effectiveness according to the author's theses, accuracy, thoroughness, logic and reasoning.

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1.2.C. Analyze the effectiveness, in terms of literary quality, of the author's use of literary devices.

- Sound techniques (e.g., rhyme, rhythm, meter, alliteration)
- Figurative language (e.g., personification, simile, metaphor, hyperbole, irony, satire)
- Literary structures (e.g., foreshadowing, flashbacks, progressive and digressive time).

1.2.D. Analyze and evaluate in poetry the appropriateness of diction and figurative language (e.g., irony, understatement, overstatement, paradox).

1.3.A. Read and understand works of literature.

1.3. B. Analyze the use of literary elements by an author including characterization, setting, plot, theme, point of view, tone and style.

1.3.F. Read and respond to nonfiction and fiction including poetry and drama.

1.4.B. Write complex informational pieces (e.g., research papers, analyses, evaluations, essays).

1.5.C. Write with controlled and/or subtle organization.

1.5.E. Revise writing after rethinking logic of organization and rechecking central idea, content, paragraph development, level of detail, style, tone, and word choice.

1.5.F. Edit writing using the conventions of language.

1.6.D. Contribute to discussions.

1.8.A. Select and refine a topic for research.

1.8.B. Locate information using appropriate sources and strategies.

1.8.C. Organize, summarize and present the main ideas from research.