

## **Shedding False Images Through Art and Poetry**

*John J. Grob*

### **Index**

Overview  
Rationale  
Objectives  
Strategies  
Classroom Activities  
Annotated Bibliography/Resources  
Appendix Standards

*It is an arduous task, this journey of shedding, slowly and deliberately, one layer at a time.*

### **Overview**

The intention of this unit is to encourage students to understand the roles they play in daily life and to critically review the imposed identities that have been given by others, or ones that they have assumed over time from conditioning and cultural influences. This curriculum unit can be adapted for all age groups and is only limited by the constraints of time, available resources, and teacher/student interests. The ideas and concepts can be broken down into single class units (min-lessons) that can easily be interjected into core curriculum materials and literary selections without interfering with time lines and benchmark materials. This unit will give students ample opportunity to research and analyze literature and art that incorporates examples of role-playing, masks, stereotypes and identity fragmentation. If time permits the students would conclude with a project that would include visual and verbal presentations.

### **Rationale**

This unit grew from my own inability to understand and process the behavior of my students that I was experiencing in my classes. I was baffled and confused and was not able to effectively process what I was witnessing on a daily basis. I teach in an urban school in center city Philadelphia and I was confronted with behavior that I had only seen on the movie screen. I became frustrated and managed to get through my first two years of teaching. However, I wanted to see beyond the acquired facades of my students and had experiences where students were able to code switch verbally and behaviorally. They quite successfully flipped back and forth in order to survive the streets and at the same time, my classroom.

I decided to create lessons that would focus on masks, bravado and stereotypes. Every one wears different faces for a variety of reasons and situations. I wanted to have the students, in a controlled environment, indulge in activities that would expose them to experiences that would push them beyond their accepted sense of self. Ideally they would *consciously* choose the part they presented to the outside world. I personally needed to get in touch with that part of my students which existed beyond the false bravado that was running uncontrollably in the halls, cafeteria, and classrooms.

We often get thrown into situations not of our choosing and rely on our abilities to present an outer image to protect us when we feel powerless. I feel that many of my students had totally accepted the covering as their true identity and got lost in the illusion, becoming the victim of the mask that was supposed to protect them. I did not want to turn my class into mini-group therapy sessions and had to constantly be on the alert not to alienate the students by overtly destroying defense mechanisms which protected them from peer ridicule and harassment. It was a gargantuan task which often got complicated by my own survival mechanisms which become activated when I get exposed to hostile environments.

### **Objectives**

The objective of this unit is to expose the student to visual and verbal stimuli which, when analyzed and synthesized, would ultimately help the student to understand the process of masking as a survival tool in an often hostile environment. With this knowledge they can then choose the appropriate behavior in order to find their way through an often apathetic or hostile environment. This will be accomplished by student research on the art of collage and African masks and verbally through the analysis and creation of poetry.

The age old question, “Who am I?” is more relevant than ever as the young person searches for his identity and place in society. This search is being complicated by mass media and the illusionary world of advertising. Children are being exposed and programmed seven days a week, twenty four hours a day through radio, computer, television and I-pods. Students are constantly “plugged in” and receive a steady flow of “hyped” imagery of who they are and what they need to be. They have been reduced to commodities to be exploited and struggle to style themselves according to the dictates of the street, peers, family values, marketing media, and the latest fashions and fads. Students become confused, isolated and fragmented individuals who change according to the dictates of their environmental influences in order to cope with the realities of their existence. Through endless repetition the authentic self is reduced to a shallow sense of style (Mayors 71).

It is the intention of this unit to help the student dispel the stereotypical illusions that the students hold as their position in life and to encourage them to take an analytical view of themselves in order to discover their deeper interiors.

Students will explore the art of collage through the work of Romare Bearden where they will become acquainted with the themes of fragmentation and isolation.

Students will analyze and interpret poetry by T.S Eliot, Langston Hughes, Emily Dickenson, and Edgar Lee Masters. From these selections the student should acquire the expertise to understand themes, characterization and man's search for meaning and identity. By the end of the unit students should be able to understand the rationale of masking, and acquire sufficient background in the subject of identity to intelligently create original poetry and projects on the subject contained in the unit.

### **Strategies**

The subject matter at hand is so diverse that lessons can be conducted over long periods of time or as mini units created as you "find" relative information to fit into your Planning and Scheduling Timeline.

Throughout the process students will keep an on going journal to record all the assignments and writing exercises assigned by the teacher of the unit.

Students will not be spoon-fed but will be given topics and assignments to be done in the computer lab. This will prepare the college bound student for independent research in preparation for info gathering and background information.

Students will begin with a mini assignment which includes a list of words that is designed to create an overall working vocabulary. The student will also be responsible for compiling a list of antonyms and synonyms in the back of the journal which will increase their comprehension of themes designed into the unit.

Students will meet the guidelines of the School District of Philadelphia's Planning and Scheduling Timeline - Literacy by setting this unit within the scheduled timeline of the current school year.

Students will be required to master the skills addressed in the Pennsylvania literacy standard: reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Students will experience a video presentation on hip hop culture and will participate in a collaborative effort with the Multicultural Youth Exchange on “Male and Female Gender Stereotypes in our Contemporary Media”.

In conclusion the students will synthesize their research into a visual and verbal project producing their own personal collage on stereotypes and an original poem on the “real me”.

### **Lesson I – Collage and Fragmentation**

- Students will research the art form of collage in the computer lab and record 5 characteristics in their unit journal.
- Students will define collage in terms of the work of Romare Bearden. Five facts about Bearden’s career as a collage artist should be put into the unit’s journal.
- An essay should be written in the journal ( all class work and assignments from this point on should be dated and included in the journal.) that is inspired by the following quotations on identity:

I think of myself first as an American, and being an American means four things: One, being in the tradition of Emerson, Emily Dickinson, Melville, Walt Whitman. Second, you have to have the spirit of the whole Negro tradition. The third tradition is the frontiersman, like Mark Twain and Bret Harte, and the fourth is the Indian.” Romare Bearden (Alexander 1)

One ever feels his two-ness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, Two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, Whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. W.E.B. Du Bois (Alexander 1)

I contend that if the African-American intellectual consciousness is split It is split multiply rather than doubly, and that that so-called fragmentation, arisen from the fundamental fragmentation of the Middle Passage, has become a source of our creative power. The complex co-existence of a spectrum of black identities in a single space represents a particular strength and coherence of African-American cultural production. (Alexander 1)

- The students should be able to compare the fragmentation of identity with the overall fragmentation of a collage which when taken as a whole creates a single unit.

- Students should then go to the computer and study the collage works of Bearden
- Students should be reminded that bits and pieces make up the identity of a collage. This information will come in handy when they get to the lesson on masks and role playing. This should generate an interesting discussion.
- Discuss with the students the concepts of parts that make up the whole. See how many ideas that they can generate on this subject.

Some examples are: stained glass windows, mosaics, puzzles. Have them list the possibilities in their journals. This provide information for future reference.

## **Lesson 2 – Masks**

- The teacher should initiate a class discussion on masks. Let the students tell you in a random fashion what they know about masks.
- Upon completion of the above mini discussion, take the students to the computer lab to come up with 10 facts about masks. Have the students start their research by getting a full definition of the word mask. Ask the students to find 4 antonyms and 4 synonyms for the word mask. Later on when the research is completed have the students share their findings. It is a low risk sharing and all the students are eager to share what they have found. In this part of the lesson we are building a working vocabulary.
- Below is an example of a **Fodder For Thought** sheet that I compiled from the student's synonym search for the word, mask:

### **Fodder For Thought**

#### Bravado

1. .Defiant or swaggering behavior: *strove to prevent our courage from turning into bravado*
2. A pretense of courage; a false show of bravery.
3. A disposition toward showy defiance of false expressions of courage.

#### Habit

1. A recurrent, often unconscious pattern of behavior that is acquired through frequent repetition.
2. An established disposition of the mind or character.

3. Customary manner or practice: a person of ascetic habits.
4. An addiction, especially to a narcotic drug.
5. Physical constitution.
6. A distinctive dress or costume, especially of a religious order.
7. A riding habit.

### Illusion

1. An erroneous perception of reality
2. An erroneous concept or belief.
3. The condition of being deceived by a false perception or belief
4. Something, such as a fantastic plan or desire, that causes an erroneous belief or perception
5. Illusionism in art
6. A fine transparent cloth, used for dresses or trimmings.

### Façade

1. The face of a building, especially the principal face.
2. An artificial or deceptive front: ideological slogans that were a façade for geopolitical power struggles

*I always save the definitions for the work in question for last*

### Mask

1. A covering worn on the face to conceal one's identity.
2. A covering, as of cloth, that has openings for the eyes, entirely or partly conceals the face, and is worn especially at a masquerade ball.
3. A grotesque or comical representation of a face, worn especially to frighten or amuse, as at Halloween
4. A facial covering worn for ritual.
5. A figure of a head worn by actors in Greek and Roman drama to identify a character or trait and to amplify the voice.
6. A protective covering for the face or head.
7. A gas mask.
8. A usually rubber frame forming a watertight seal around the eyes and nose and containing a transparent covering for use in seeing underwater.
9. A covering for the nose and mouth that is used for inhaling oxygen or an anesthetic.

10. A covering worn over the nose and mouth, as by a surgeon or dentist, to prevent infection.
11. A mold of a person's face, often made after death.
12. An often grotesque representation of a head and face, used for ornamentation.
13. The face or facial markings of certain animals, such as foxes or dogs.
14. A face having a blank, fixed, or enigmatic expression.
15. Something, often a trait, that disguises or conceals: "If ever I saw misery under a mask, it was on her face".
16. A natural or artificial feature of terrain that conceals and protects military forces or installations.
17. An opaque border or pattern placed between a source of light and a photosensitive surface to prevent exposure of specified portions of the surface.
18. The translucent border framing a television picture tube and screen.
19. Computer Science. A pattern of characters, bits, or bytes used to control the elimination or retention of another pattern of character, bits, or bytes.
20. A cosmetic preparation that is applied to the face and allowed to dry before being removed, used especially for cleansing and tightening the skin.
21. A person wearing a mask.

Further info:

**Fodder** –Raw material, as for artistic creation; Feed for livestock, especially coarsely chopped hay or straw; A consumable, often inferior item or resource that is in demand and usually abundant supply.

-Have the students check out the poem, [The Masks We Wear](http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Creek/2177Masks.html) :  
[http: www.geocities.com/Heartland/Creek/2177Masks.html](http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Creek/2177Masks.html)

- Further research can be done on different culture who have a tradition of masks such as Chinese, Indian (American and India), African, Indonesian. The resources are endless.

**Interesting fact: Masks were thought to give the person wearing them special spiritual powers.**

-Ask why the kids wear designer clothing, glasses, sweats, the list is endless

- Once you start on the research, class time quickly passes. Watch the clock!

- I heard somewhere that, "Halloween masks cover the other masks we wear".

### Lesson 3 Gender Stereotyping

- Students will brain storm to see how many stereotypes they can come up with in a 10 minute brain storm.

-Examples range from pretty boy to gangster and valley girl to gold digger

-Have a student list them on news print for future reference.

-Divide students into groups and let them choose one of the stereotypes as a part of the group project.

-Distribute large 5 to 6 foot sheets of paper (Brown or white), one to each group.

-Students are to draw an outline of a body on the full sheet of paper.

-Using markers, crayons etc. the students will make a rendering of their chosen stereotypes. This drawing would include jewelry, hair and any other outstanding characteristic that is typical of the image they wish to create. Remind the students that they need not have any artistic ability. Limit their time or they will take forever.

-This exercise fits in with lesson's one and two. Have a class discussion on the relationship between masks and stereotypes

- If possible get a copy of a video called Hip Hop: Beyond Beats & Rhymes (Hurt). It is a stunning production depicting gender violence.

-Synopsis of video:

An official selection of the 2006 Sundance Film Festival, Hip Hop: Beyond Beats & Rhymes provides a riveting examination of representations of manhood in hip-hop culture. Director Byron Hurt, former college quarterback, gender violence prevention educator and longtime hip-hop fan, pays tribute to hip-hop while challenging the rap music industry to take responsibility for too often perpetuating destructive, deeply conservative styles of manhood that glamorize sexism, violence and homophobia. Taking his camera from the street to the recording studio to the corridors of industry power, Hurt elicits fascinating insights into hip-hop masculinity from ordinary kids, aspiring rapper, music mogul, rap stars and prominent cultural critics. The film is at once gripping and educational in its fearless, unflinching engagement with issues of race, gender violence and the corporate exploitation of youth culture. (Hurt)

- Students will have the opportunity to see through the protective layers of anger and bravado.



- Some of the language of the video is a bit racy. This is definitely to be confined in its usage to senior level classes.

#### **Lesson 4 – Identity Poetry**

- Students will read and analyze Langston Hughes’ poem “Motto”

-Focus in on the first line, “I play it cool.” Bring into the discussion the ideas of masks and role playing.

- Assign the students the task of writing an “imitation poem”. This is where the students read a poem by a famous person and imitate it.

-Students will read and peer edit so that each author can correct spelling errors etc.

-If you have the time, type and distribute a collection of “Imitation Poems”.

#### **Lesson 5 – Identity Poetry**

-Students will read and analyze Gwendolyn Brooks’s poem “We Real Cool”

- The poem paints an image which comes to an eye opening ending.

-Students will write a critical essay expressing their opinions on the seven school dropouts.

-Also check out Ms. Brooks’s poem “Sadie and Maud”.

#### **Lesson 6 – Identity Poetry**

- Students will read and analyze Paul L. Dunbar’s “We Wear the Mask”.

-Students should remember that the masks people wear are often a method for survival in a hostile environment.

-Students will discuss contemporary society’s methods for survival and compare it to the choices in the poem.

- At the end of the discussion have the students do a 15 minute journal entry as a closing piece.

## **Lesson 7 – Final Project**

**- Students will create a collage on masks and an original poem on the theme of identity.**

### *Part One: Collage*

Supplies needed:

One 8.5 x 11 heavy weight piece of paper or water color paper

Glue sticks

Magic markers

Water color paints (If available)

Magazines (lots of magazines)

An envelope to store images and words

-Students must bring in a large assortment of magazines and newspapers. The more diverse the subject matter the better the selection for the students to choose. It is important to note that you request the students to bring in magazines from a variety of sources. Recommend that they bring Ebony, Spanish News, Asian Update etc. I have given extra credit to students who have collected 10 or more magazines for the project.

-In the first meeting of the class students review the characteristics of a collage and the idea of fragmentation.

-Instruct the student to go to the magazines and tear pieces of paper from the backgrounds of the advertisements to paste onto their paper to create a collage

background of their own. I recommend that they do not use scissors. You get a more pleasing overall effect when the pieces are hand torn. This causes problems for students who feel the need to cut everything in nice little squares. Tell these students to trust your artistic abilities and move on. Suggest that the students create a monochromatic background, using different shades and values. Print may be included in the background but should be placed randomly and not attract attention. It is best at this time that they do not include pictures of people. Only allow the students to touch up the background with magic markers. The majority of the paper should be covered with torn pieces of color from magazines.

-Students will now search for faces, cartoons, masks, etc. that depict roles that people play. They can be faces depicting emotions such as anger, hate, love, or sadness. The list is endless.

-Students should also be aware of words and letters that they will need during this process. Have them look for words that relate to this unit that can be randomly placed throughout their collage. The part that the students really don't like is the tearing out of single letters to make words and the tearing out of the whole words. I insist that they do so as part of the process. You be the judge on this one.

- When the collage is completed I give to the students a typed "I" message that I have prepared before hand. On a piece of typing paper with a font size of 20 or more create "I" messages such as:

|            |             |              |            |
|------------|-------------|--------------|------------|
| I am peace | I am honest | I am whole   | I am trust |
| I am love  | I am fair   | I am diverse | I am life  |

(Add to the list and create your own messages –keep them abstract qualities)

-I cut them into long strips and place them into a box. I tell them that they will pick a strip from the box, a message for them from the universe. They can cut them into letters or leave them in strip. They now should incorporate this message into their collage.

-The collages are displayed in the room and I have my other classes review and discuss them.

### *Part 2 – Identity Poem*

-Students will create an original poem on their own personal masks and identity.

- Let this process flow freely with little instruction or guidance.
- Students can ask questions for clarification as needed.
- Students must type their finished poems. Remind them to use spell check.
- The finished poems should be taped to the back of the collage or cut into strips to be glued to the face of the collage. I prefer taping them to the back.

### **Annotated Bibliography / Resources**

#### Teacher's Reading List and Resources

Alexander, Elizabeth. *The Genius of Romare Bearden*. 29 May 05  
[HTTP://elizabethalexander.net/the%20genius%20of%20rb.pdf](http://elizabethalexander.net/the%20genius%20of%20rb.pdf)

This is a great article for all beginners who want an introduction to the work of Bearden.

Author Anonymous. African Masks History and Meaning.

[http://www.rebirth.co.za/African\\_mask\\_history\\_and\\_meaning.htm](http://www.rebirth.co.za/African_mask_history_and_meaning.htm)

Baldwin, James. *Notes of a Native Son*. Boston , MA: Beacon Press, 1957. This book clearly articulates to white American what it means to be American and a black American at the same time.

Freire, Paulo. *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare Teach*.

Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 2005. Freire's words challenge all who teach to reflect critically on the meaning of the act of teaching as well as the meaning of learning. He shows why a teacher's success depends on a permanent commitment to learning and training as part of an ongoing appraisal of classroom practice. By opening themselves to recognition of the different roads students take in order to learn, teachers will become involved in a continual reconstruction of their own paths of curiosity, opening the door to habits of learning that will benefit everyone in the classroom.

Gergen, Kenneth J. "The Decline and Fall of Personality" Psychology Today Aug. 2004  
<http://psychologytoday.com/articles/index.php?term=pto-19921191-000023&page=5>

Gilmore, Rev. Forrest. *The Masks That We Wear*. Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Princeton Home page. 09 Oct. 2005

[http://www.uuprinceton.org/worship/sermons/sermon\\_2005-10-09.html](http://www.uuprinceton.org/worship/sermons/sermon_2005-10-09.html) This is a personal reflection by The Reverend Forrest Gilmore.

Hall, Horace R. *Mentoring Young Men of Color: Meeting the Needs of African American and Latino Students*. Lanham, MD; Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2006.

This book examines the subject of youth mentoring through a cultural lens. The work not only investigates the value of school-based mentoring in the lives of these children, but also offers alternative and constructive ways in which our society can experience and embrace this social group. Positioning mentoring as a cultural practice, this book informs schools and communities of their ethical role and responsibility in fighting the public assault on American's youth by helping young males of color develop a deeper sense of self-awareness and the power they possess.

Hurt Byron. *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats & Rhymes* ( A Sundance Film Festival 2006 Official Selection). Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 2006. Hurt elicits fascinating insights into hip-hop masculinity from ordinary kids, aspiring rappers, music moguls, rap stars, and prominent cultural critics. This film is a fearless, unflinching engagement with issues of race, gender violence and the corporate exploitation of youth culture

Kunjufu, Jawanza. *Black Students. Middle Class Teachers*. Chicago, Il: African American Images, 2002. One of the major catalysts for the author to write this book came from a principal's comment. She told the author that in her school the problem was not a shortage of African American teachers but their class and value conflict with the students. She described her frustration of observing middle-class African American teachers being condescending toward low-income students.

Ladson-Billings, Gloria. *The Dreamkeepers*. New York, NY: PJossey-Bass, 1994. Ms. Billings takes a look at the deteriorating American public school system and how some teachers have decided to return quality, value and integrity to the classroom.

Majors, Richard, Mancini Billson, Janet. *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster,1993. Traditionally, men define their sense of self-esteem through their roles in the community as protector, provider, and breadwinner. But many black men who are left without the means to fulfill these traditional roles have become angry and alienated. In order to establish some strategy to cope in these volatile times, they have developed a "Cool pose" or tough-guy image to obscure their anger and disappointment. This book traces the history of black posturing back to Africa and the slave era, and shows how even then blacks were forced to mask their true emotions in order to survive. Sadly, this is still true today, and although adopting a cool pose helps some black men, many become distanced from their relationships and their own feelings in the process

Patterson, Lindsay. Langston Hughes -- *The Most Abused Poet in America?* 04/Jan/22

<http://www.nytimes.com/books/01/04/22/specials/hughes-abused.html>. ‘Critically, the most abused poet in America was the late Langston Hughes. Serious white critics ignored him, less serious ones compared his poetry tot.....’

Talbot, Jonathan. *Collage: A New Approach*. New York, NY; Talbot, 2001.

This book describes a new technique, developed by the author, which makes it possible to adhere collage elements without liquid adhesives. This technique eliminates wrinkling and drying time form collage-making, offering new opportunities for creative spontaneity.

Tatum, Dr. Beverly Daniel. *Can We Talk about Race?: And Other Conversations in an Era of School Resegregation*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press ,2007.

This book encourages discussion about many of the difficult issues still surrounding race in America – in and out of the classroom. It will be very valuable reading not just for educators and parents but for everyone concerned about the unfinished business remaining after Brown v. Board of Education.

Tatum, Dr. Beverly Daniel. *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* New York, NY: Basic Books, 2003. Walk into any racially mixed high school and you will see Black youth seated together in the cafeteria-and the White, Latino, Asian Pacific, and American Indian youth clustered in their own groups, too. Is this self-segregation a problem we should try to fix, or a coping strategy we should support? Dr. Tatum addresses these issues.

## **Appendix**

Pennsylvania’s Department of Education Academic Standards

Standard # 1.1 Learning to Read Independently (Purposes for Reading. Word Recognition Skills. Comprehension and Interpretation. Fluency.)

Standard # 1.2 Reading Critically in All Content Areas (Detail. Inferences. Fact from Opinion. Comparison. Analysis and Evaluation)

Standard # 1.3 Reading, Analyzing and Interpreting Literature (Literature Elements. Literary Devices. Poetry. Drama)

Standard #1.4 Types of Writing (Narrative. Informational. Persuasive)

Standard # 1.5 Quality of Writing (Focus. Organization. Content. Style. Conventions)

Standard # 1.6 Speaking and Listening (Listening Skills. Speaking Skills. Discussion. Presentation)

Standard #1.7 Characteristics and Function of the English Language (Word Origins. Variation. Application)

**Assessment Anchors R11.A.2 Understand nonfiction appropriate to grade level.**

R11.A.2.2 Identify and apply word recognition skills

R11.A.2.2.1 Identify and apply how the meaning of a word is changed when an affix is added; identify the meaning of a word form the text with an affix.

R11.A.2.4 Identify and explain main ideas and relevant details

R11.A.2.4.1 Identify and/or explain stated or implied main ideas and relevant supporting details from text.

R11.A.2.3 Make inferences, draw conclusion, and make generalizations based on text.

R11.A.2.3.1 Make inferences and/or draw conclusions based on information from text.

R11.A.2.3.2 Cite evidence from text to support generalization.

R11.A.2.5 Summarize a nonfictional text as a whole.

R11.A.2.5.1 Summarize the major points, processes, and/or events of a nonfictional text as a whole

R11.A.2.6 Identify, describe and analyze genre of text. R11.A.2.6.1 Identify and/or describe intended purpose of text.

R11.B.1.1 Interpret, compare, describe, analyze, and/or evaluate the relationship between characters and other components of text.

R11.B.1.1 Interpret, compare, describe, analyze, and evaluate components of fiction and literary nonfiction. Interpret, compare, describe, analyze, and/or evaluate the relationships among the following within fiction and literary nonfiction. Character may also be called narrator, speaker, and subject of a biography.

