

# **Teaching African-American History Through Contemporary Modern Poetry**

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## **Overview**

## **Rationale**

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### **Overview**

This unit is aimed to concentrate on African-American culture and how its contributions to the overall culture and history of this country. This will be done with significant importance placed on poetry, especially poetry written during the Harlem Renaissance, in order to create a curriculum that provides an accurate but alternative view of history. This will give the students in The School District of Philadelphia an unorthodox view of the African-American experience in this country.

The first goal of this unit is to give students a perspective and understanding of how poetry can tell the story of a people or culture through a historical lens. We will understand the power and effect that poetry has and continues to have in the United States. Special attention will be paid to the role poetry has in bringing attention to current events of the time when a poem is published. The relationship between poetry, society and Black culture in America is what we will delve into.

My second goal for this unit is to promote, inspire, and encourage learning by creating a unit that cultivates an appreciation and understanding of poetry while incorporating literacy and knowledge of primary sources. This unit will give students an historical view from a different, fresh and new perspective. My goal is to teach familiar material from an unfamiliar viewpoint. In order for this goal to be achieved and realized, my students have to be introduced to culture in fresh and invigorating ways.

Culture and the fundamentals of society have its roots in artistic expression. Many traditions and rights of passage have been formed in relation to the arts in one way or another. Many songs and other forms of musical expression have even started out as poetry. Poetry has and is used as a communication device American society as well. This is especially true when it comes to truly significant historical events. This unit will give students an alternative view on the history of this country and the complex set of issues that a diverse country like ours deals with. This unit will include the different subgenres within poetry, the importance of poetry when recalling historical events and how poetry has shaped this country.

### **Rationale**

Poetry is one of the ways a society can define themselves. In this unit we will take into consideration how the arts, literature and specifically poetry. Literature is the record keeper of our societal practices, poetry helps solidify this. Using this knowledge, we will assess how poetry is vital to a society and how it is expressed in society. The basis of this unit will encompass some of these social practices. For instance, students will view performances of poetry. Many of my students are audio visual learners and this is an effective learning device to help my students become versed in this subject.

The use of exploration and inquiry will grant students awareness as to why poetry and the arts is important to the identity of this country. We will analyze different types of poems that were popular during different historical periods. This unit will be comprised of lessons that showcase this. This unit will feature different activities for different learning styles within each lesson

This unit will utilize various forms of technology and the internet to give students the tools and resources to be knowledgeable about the culture of poetry so they can be successful in completion of their lessons. These materials will be made accessible to the students during class time.

My school incorporates student-centered station teaching. This is the education strategy in which students are grouped into stations. In these stations students are working on the same Common-Core standards based objective, but each station is differentiated to those students learning strengths and accommodations. For example, while studying protests over American History; one group will be completing a PowerPoint comparing different

concerns of the black community during the Harlem Renaissance while another group is creating a chart detailing modern day concerns in urban areas in places like Philadelphia and New York. This teaching method has not only changed my method of teaching, but it has improved engagement amongst my students. My students are now learning in a style that not only enhances their critical thinking but their knowledge of historical content and their literacy as well as writing skills. Since I have utilized this teaching strategy and relating the material to their environment, my students and I have been on a quest to dig deeper. They want a deeper view of different historical movements that helps them understand and delve into contemporary issues. The study of African-American history and culture through modern and contemporary through this curriculum will do just that.

### **Content Objectives**

The students will use different forms of multimedia to present the cumulative assignments of this unit.

- Explore and comprehend the extent of the impact of the influence the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance had on the whole of pop culture America at the time.
- Compare and contrast modern/contemporary poetry movements with cultural movements as they related to the African-American experience during this time.
- Expand and comprehend the impact of poetry used to tell the story of the African-American oppression in the United States.
- Expand and comprehend how prominent role poetry still plays in offsetting contemptuous race relations in the United States.

### **Teaching Strategies**

This unit is written for eighth grade students but may be incorporated into the curriculum of all secondary students. The students meet in class everyday for 45 minutes each class period during the semester. Some lessons require more than one class period to be completed. This unit is meant for social studies classes with an emphasis on using poetry to teach subtopics within the subject.

The theme of this unit will have the students explore African-American culture and history through modern and contemporary poetry and poets. The objective is to lead students and engage them in understanding the poetry itself as not only artistic expression

but a valid source for studying historical events. The students will have what is needed to complete each lesson and activity available in the class.

The goals of this unit will be inclusive (but not limited to) of the following:

- The Harlem Renaissance is considered a premier showcase of black art, culture and society in 20<sup>th</sup> century America. Explain its influence on pop culture in the United States to this day and how its poets and the poetry they created tells the story of historical and current events of that time.
- Poet café. Students will pretend they are different poets during different movements and moments in African-American History. These roles will be randomly selected and differ from class to class. They will then collaborate with the rest of the class to plan this café using research of what poet's café is supposed to sound, feel and look like. Why is this poet and poem essential? Why are these societal issues focused on in this particular poem? The students will document the process and explain the different societal issues, the purpose of the café and why these issues are important to understand the African-American experience in this country.
- Analyze how the Civil Rights Movement/ Black Power Movement influence and effect poetry during this time. How did poetry not only bring societal issues to the forefront but brought poetry into mainstream culture as well?

## **Classroom Activities**

### Lesson 1: Introduction to the Harlem Renaissance through poetry

*Objectives:* The students will be able to identify and analyze the origins and impact of the Harlem Renaissance. The student will be able to explain the significant role poetry, poets authors and literature played in this movement and its impact on the African American community and the country.

*Materials/Resources:*

- Video segments of The African Americans Many Rivers to Cross: Episode four
- Video Worksheet
- Poetry
- Poetry Worksheet
- Bios of selected poets
- Poetry sound clips
- Computer

*Procedures:* The students and the teacher will engage in a discussion to assess their prior knowledge of the Harlem Renaissance and of the genre of modern/contemporary poetry. The students will receive worksheets that correspond with the teacher selected clips of the above mentioned documentary. The students will review the poetry via the close reading strategy. The introduction to background knowledge will target specific points and be general in nature due to the amount of information needed and the audience. The students will listen to poetry featured in the documentary video clips.

*Strategies/Teaching Points:* The students will engage in discussions about the Harlem Renaissance and how its poetry was integrated into American pop culture. The students will investigate modern/contemporary poetry and its place in society.

*Closing Activity:* The students will review the information gained from the documentary, close readings, sound clips and class discussions. The students will investigate what it was like to live in Harlem during this time. The students will then create a poem based on those experiences; this lesson should take two to three class periods.

## Lesson 2: Poetry from the Civil Rights' and Black Power Movement

*Objectives:* The students will analyze how the Civil Rights Movement/ Black Power Movement influenced and effected poetry during this time. How did poetry not only bring societal issues to the forefront but brought poetry into mainstream culture as well?

*Materials/Resources:*

- Video segments of various documentaries of your choosing
- Video worksheets
- Poetry
- Poetry Worksheet
- Bios of selected poets
- Poetry sound clips
- Computer

*Procedures:* The students will research about the Jim Crow era and the movements that resulted from that systemic oppression. The students will take notes on the poetry of that time period and the influence it had on not only African-Americans at this time but its relation to the counterculture undercurrent sweeping America at that time.

*Strategies:* The students will discuss their findings and compare and contrast the poetry showing the African-American experience at the time with poetry explaining the African-American experience today. What are some of these issues people faced and are facing? What has changed? What voice did poetry actually have?

*Closing Activity:* Write a poem as a person who has lived through the Black Power Movement and is now viewing the world today. What is the stark contrast between then and now? Complete a Venn diagram stressing the differences and similarities between movements then and the pavements of today.

### Final Lesson: Poets' Café

*Objectives:* Poets' café. Students will imagine they are different essential poets during certain movements and moments in African-American history. These roles will be randomly selected and differ from class to class. They will then collaborate with the rest of the class to plan this café using research of what poet's café is supposed to sound, feel and look like.

### *Materials/Resources:*

- Video segments of various documentaries of your choosing
- Video worksheets
- Poetry
- Poetry Worksheet
- Bios of selected poets
- Poetry sound clips
- Computer

*Procedures:* The students will research different poets and what a poets' café is. They will use the internet to do this research. Why is this poet and poem essential? Why are these societal issues focused on in this particular poem? The students will document the process and explain the different societal issues, the purpose of the café and why these issues are important to understand the African-American experience in this country.

*Closing Activity:* What types of poems are typically performed? Where are poets' cafés typically held? The students will document the answers to these questions and explain why this form of artistic expression was essential in getting out some of the messages of respective movements in African-American History. The students will write a five paragraph essay on their findings not inclusive of any poetry they have done in the course of this unit.

### *Adaptations to the Final Project:*

- PowerPoint Presentation
- Skit
- Journal Entry
- Rubric for Journal Entries (Sample)

## Rubric for Historical Fiction (letters, journals, poems and newspaper articles)

Criteria	Excellent 5	Good 4	Close 3	Needs Improvement 2	Poor Effort 1	NA 0
<b>Ideas and Content</b>	My paper brings the time & place my character lived alive; vividly describes her/his experiences and values; refers to relevant, historically accurate details.	My paper reveals the time and place my character lived; describes a day in her/his life; most or all details are historically accurate.	The time & place my character lived is clear, but his/her experiences are more like a list than a letter or diary entry; some details may be historically inaccurate.	I tell the reader when and where my story is set but make no attempt to include historically accurate facts or details.	The setting of my story is murky, and the characters' experiences and/or values are often historically inaccurate.	I didn't write enough to judge my own ideas and content.
<b>Organization</b>	My writing has a beginning, middle, and end that are easy to identify and follows the designated format.	I have either a strong lead, developed middle or satisfying ending but not all three. And I followed the designated format.	I have either a strong lead, developed middle or satisfying ending but not all three. But I made some mistakes with the format.	My paper failed to contain two of the following: a strong lead, developed middle, satisfying ending, or formatting was missing.	My paper failed to contain three of the following: a strong lead, developed middle, satisfying ending, or the formatting was missing.	I didn't write enough to judge.
<b>Paragraphs</b>	I indent the beginnings of all paragraphs & have one topic per paragraph. I wrote at least 5 paragraphs.	I indent the beginnings of all paragraphs, have one topic/paragraph, and I wrote 5 paragraphs.	Some of my paragraphs are too long, too short, or not indented. I wrote at least 5 paragraphs.	I have several problems with paragraphs and/or I wrote less than 5 paragraphs.	I use incorrect paragraph format and/or I wrote less than 5 paragraphs.	I didn't write enough to judge.
<b>Voice and Tone</b>	I use 1st person. My voice sounds like a real person. My paper has personality & shows how my character thinks and feels.	I sound like I care about the topic. My writing voice is engaging but may fade in and out.	My tone is OK but my paper could have been written by anyone. I need to reveal more about how I think and feel about the topic.	My writing is bland, mechanical or pretentious. It sounds like I have not found my own way to say things. I used 2nd or 3rd person.	My writing is too formal or inappropriately informal. There may be no hints of a real person in it. It may sound like I don't like the topic.	I didn't write enough to judge
<b>Word choice</b>	The words I use are striking but natural, e.g., "wondered" instead of "thought." I use powerful verbs & historically accurate words, phrases and slang from the period.	My paper has some fine word choices and generally good language. Some parts may be routine.	The words I use are acceptable but ordinary. I should try to use more expressive words.	My word choice is uninspired, colorless and dull, or sounds like I am trying too hard to impress. Some words may be used incorrectly.	The same words are repeated over and over and over. Some words may be confusing to a reader.	I had better get busy....
<b>Conventions</b>	I use the correct grammar, capitals, spelling, and punctuation.	I made some errors, perhaps by taking risks and using interesting words or sentences.	My spelling is correct on common words. Some errors in grammar and punctuation. I need to check it again.	Frequent errors are distracting but do not interfere with the meaning of my paper.	Many errors in grammar, capitalization, spelling & punctuation make my paper hard to read.	I didn't write enough to judge.

This rubric was taken from [historywithmrgreen.com](http://historywithmrgreen.com)

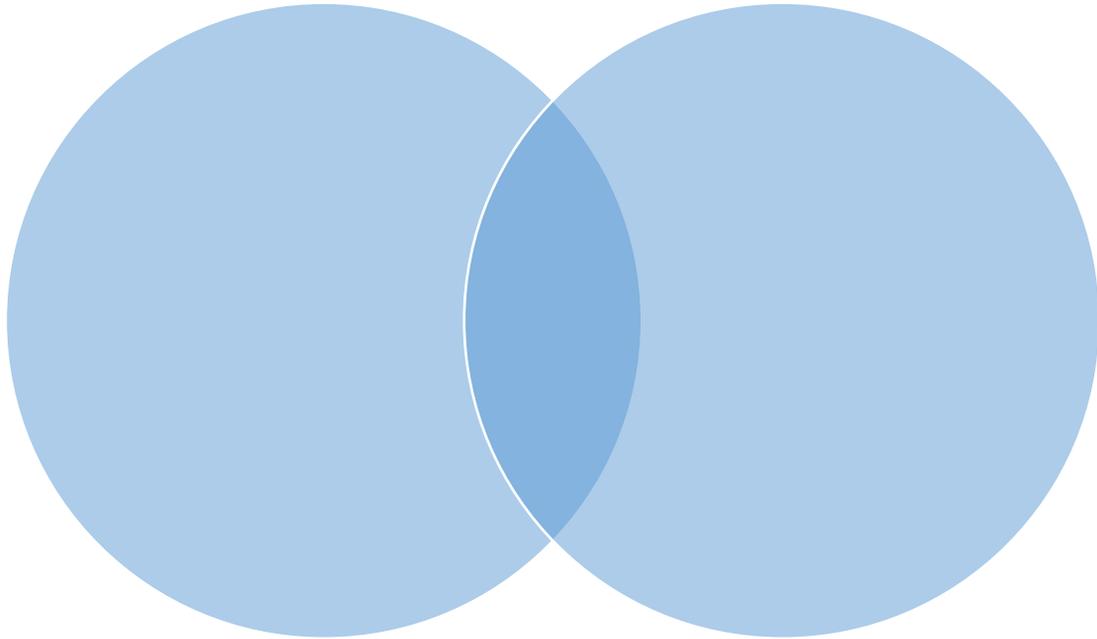


*Story Writing : Poem Writing Rubric*

CATEGORY	Exceptional	Good Work	Developing	Beginning
<b>Focus on Assigned Topic</b>	The entire poem is related to the assigned topic and allows the reader to understand much more about the topic.	Most of the poem is related to the assigned topic. The poem wanders off at one point, but the reader can still learn something about the topic.	Some of the poem is related to the assigned topic, but a reader does not learn much about the topic.	No attempt has been made to relate the poem to the assigned topic.
<b>Creativity</b>	The poem contains many creative details and/or descriptions that contribute to the reader's enjoyment. The author has really used his imagination.	The poem contains a few creative details and/or descriptions that contribute to the reader's enjoyment. The author has used his imagination.	The poem contains a few creative details and/or descriptions, but they distract from the poem. The author has tried to use his imagination.	There is little evidence of creativity in the poem. The author does not seem to have used much imagination.
<b>Spelling and Punctuation</b>	There are no spelling or punctuation errors in the final draft.	There is one spelling or punctuation error in the final draft.	There are 2-3 spelling and punctuation errors in the final draft.	The final draft has more than 3 spelling and punctuation errors.
<b>Title</b>	Title is creative, sparks interest and is related to the poem and topic.	Title is related to the poem and topic.	Title is present, but does not appear to be related to the poem and topic.	No title.
<b>Imagery</b>	Many vivid, descriptive words are used. The reader can picture the imagery in the poem.	Some vivid, descriptive words are used. The reader can somewhat picture the imagery in the poem.	The reader can figure out what to picture in the poem, but the author didn't supply much detail.	The reader has trouble figuring out what imagery the poem is using and what the author wants him/her to picture.

This rubric was taken from [rubistar.com](http://rubistar.com)

**Write a poem as a person who has lived through the Black Power Movement and is now viewing the world today. What is the stark contrast between then and now? Complete a Venn diagram stressing the differences and similarities between movements then and the pavements of today.**



**Resources**

*Bibliography*

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*Cullen, C., & Douglas, A. (1927). Caroling dusk: An anthology of verse by Negro poets. New York: Harper & Bros.*

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*Hughes, L., & Johnson, D. (2003). The collected works of Langston Hughes. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.*

*Johnson, J. W. (2015). The book of American Negro poetry. London: Forgotten Books.*

*Shakur, T. (2006). The rose that grew from concrete. London: Pocket Books*

*M. S. (2008). The Vintage Book of African American Poetry. Paw Prints.*

*Warr, M. (2016). Of Poetry and Protest: From Emmett Till to Trayvon Martin. Paw Prints.*

## Appendix

### *Standards*

This curriculum unit aligns with the Pennsylvania Academic Standards for Reading and Writing in History and Social Studies.

- *Reading in History and Social Studies Standards*
  - CC.8.5.11-12.C. Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.
  - CC.8.5.11-12.F. Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.
  - CC.8.5.11-12.F. Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.
  - CC.8.5.11-12.J. By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend history/social studies texts in the grades 11–CCR text complexity band independently and proficiently
  - CC.8.5: Reading Informational Text: Students read, understand, and respond to informational text – with emphasis on comprehension, making connections among ideas and between texts with focus on textual evidence.
  - Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.
  - Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies. Compare the point of view of two or more authors for how they treat the same or similar topics, including which details they include and emphasize in their respective accounts.
  
- *Writing in History and Social Studies Standards*
  - CC.8.6.11-12.I. Write routinely over extended time frames (time for reflection and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.
  - CC.8.6.11-12.G. Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the

strengths and limitations of each source in terms of the specific task, purpose, and audience; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and overreliance on any one source and following a standard format for citation

- CC.8.6.11-12.F. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
- CC.8.6.11-12.E. Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products in response to ongoing feedback, including new arguments or information.
- CC.8.6.11-12.B.\* Write informative/explanatory texts, including the narration of historical events, scientific procedures/