



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2011 Volume II: Love and Politics in the Sonnet

Unfettered Genius: The African American Sonnet

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This unit is designed for high-school students. It provides some history about formalist poetry in African American Literature, and focuses on the African American sonnet. The technique of "signifying," in which the author conveys two different messages to two different audiences using the same words, is the primary lens used in this unit. This technique is based on the trickster tradition, which was brought from Africa to America.

Two of the sonnet cycles discussed in this unit are Natasha Trethewey's "Native Guard," found in her collection of the same title, and Marilyn Nelson's *A Wreath for Emmet Till*. These sonnets take full advantage of the sonnet's history as a political forum, and use the sonnet's "cultural capital" to garner the interest and respect of a broad audience.

The first lesson will explore early African American poets' use of double-voicing, and introduce students to Shakespeare's sonnets through Maya Angelou. The second lesson will have students research African American soldiers in the Civil War and compare "classroom history" to Trethewey's poetic interpretation. The third lesson will begin with Nelson's sonnets about the lynching of Emmet Till, and will lead students to write original sonnets based on important historical events.

(Developed for African American Literature, grade 12; recommended for African American Literature and African American History, grade 12, and American Literature and American History, grade 11)

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