

Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative 2005 Volume I: The Uses of Poetry in the Classroom

# **Discovering Self through Poetry**

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# Introduction

Self-esteem is defined as "how much a person likes, accepts, and respects himself overall as a person"1 There are two schools of thought concerning self-esteem. The first thought advocates what is called Global selfesteem. Proponents of this view support the belief that a student must possess a sense of pride in self before he or she can achieve academically. The second school advocates what is called Earned self-esteem. According to this view, a student must first find success at home and in academics in order to develop positive self-esteem.2 Is academic success a necessary prerequisite for student self- esteem or is self-esteem a necessary prerequisite for academic success?

- This question is at the heart of an important educational controversy.
- Traditionally, schools have thought that students' satisfaction will follow on the
- heels of their academic success. In other words, children who perform well in
- class will consequently feel good about themselves. But more recent educational
- theories reversed this logic. They say that students must secure high self-esteem
- before they can hope to achieve. In other words, they must feel good about them-
- selves before they can perform well in class.3

Many of the students whom I teach come from single parent homes where the primary caretakers are single mothers, grandparents, or foster care placement providers. A few students live in assigned group homes. Parental involvement in our students' academic lives is far below expectations. A majority of our students fail to take books home for study or assignments outside of the classroom. Our school is one of the few middle schools that have not met our state's accreditation standards. These are some of the factors that contribute to our students' low self-esteem. I agree that, "there is a direct relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement. Over four decades of research has shown a clear relationship between levels of self-esteem and academic achievement." 4

- It is the key to student learning. . .Positive self esteem is the immune
- system of the spirit...the more successes we educators can build into
- a student's learning experience and a student's capacity to feel self-
- sufficient, the more opportunities we will have to increase their self-
- esteem.5

It is the premise of this unit that educators can perform the important task of increasing self-esteem with the help of poems that are concerned with this theme.

# **Unit Goals**

One of the goals of this curriculum unit is to encourage high academic achievement as students master local and global concepts and skills in Language Arts. In addition to high academic achievement, the lessons in this unit encourage the development of positive self-esteem. Students will critically analyze and reflect both orally and in writing as they study poems about their heritage, their individuality, their emotions, and achieving their goals. Poetry is so eloquent on these themes that it is an ideal means of communicating them and to the objective of increasing self-esteem. I feel that it is inseparable from good teaching.

Promoting self esteem could in many ways be defined as "good teaching."

- Good teachers learn that students who feel empowered and in control achieve
- more when a certain environment is created from purposeful classroom orchestration. Good teachers realize that they can only be considered "good
- teachers" insofar as they find ways to get students to perform and care about quality. In fact, it could be said that there is really no way to be a good teacher
- without promoting self-esteem, and if one is promoting self-esteem, it will
- lead to effective teaching practices.6

This curriculum unit, "Discovering Self Through Poetry," is a three part investigative unit for grades seven and eight. It is designed to be incorporated in the teacher's lesson plans during an entire school year. Students will investigate poetry under three thematic headings.

- Who Am I? Discovering who I am through my heritage
- Who Am I? Discovering who I am as an individual with emotions
- Who Am I? Discovering my potential to achieve.

I have elected to use poetry as the method by which the goals of this curriculum unit can best be achieved. Poetry is the best means by which I can help improve my students' self-esteem as they investigate relevant themes and develop both their critical thinking skills and improve their basic understanding of the speaker. They will also learn about themes and literary devices in poetry.

- Poetry, it is clear, is not cut off from life, but is basically
- concerned with life-that is, with the lived fullness of the world. It extends our
- own limited experience by means of imagination. By imagination, it sharpens
- our sense of the emotional, intellectual, and moral implications of human
- situations and actions. It accomplishes such tings by imaginative enactment, by
- our sense of living into the world.7

The poems in this unit were selected because of the age appropriateness of each poem's theme, which is an important element in the students' understanding. "Students are immersed in language that has personal

meaning for them."8 Secondly, these poems were selected based upon the appropriateness of each poem's theme and content as related to each of the thematic units.

# **Curriculum Unit Overview and Strategies**

Before beginning each unit study, students should be given a vocabulary study sheet. The following terms should be given for thematic unit one. (This should be done on the first day of school).

## Thematic Unit I: (September) Who Am I? My Heritage

#### Vocabulary:

The following vocabulary words for this unit should be typed and passed out to each student:

- 1. Stanza: clusters of lines in poetry
- 2. Lines: make up stanzas and other units of verse (verse paragraph, unbroken poems, etc.).
- 3. Repetition: a word or words that are repeated in a particular poem.
- 4. Rhyme scheme/rhyme pattern: the pattern of rhyme in poetry.
- 5. Theme: the main idea of a particular piece of writing.
- 6. Implied Meaning: what is expressed indirectly.
- 7. Compare: determining the similarities between two or more objects.
- 8. Contrast: determining the differences between two or more objects.
- 9. Alliteration: repetition of initial sounds in words (Example: the tall tree tumbled).
- 10. Paraphrase: writing the main idea in your own words.

## Objective(s):

- 1. Students will compare and contrast the characteristics of grandmothers then and now.
- 2. Students will identify lines and stanzas in poetry.
- 3. Students will analyze and interpret information in poetry.
- 4. Students will be able to define and identify the following: stanza, lines, repetition, rhyme scheme or pattern, and theme, and implied meaning as they relate to poetry.

#### Procedure:

Students will answer the question, Who Am I? as they discover who they are based upon their African American heritage. Students will define who they are as they investigate the history and the experiences of their ancestors. I will begin this unit by introducing students to the "I Am" poem." 9 To introduce this poetry format to the class, I will complete an "I Am" poem and read it to the class as an introduction of myself. The "I Am" poem is suggested as a good icebreaker for the beginning of the (school) year and as a good way to start students focusing on their own characteristics.10 This poem will also serve as an introduction to writing poetry as a creative exercise. In addition, it will serve as one of the instruments for the teacher to determine each student's individual perception of self. The "I Am" poem is written as a poetry frame which will assist those students who suffer from the 'I can't think of anything to write about' syndrome. For example, each line gives the student some aspect of themselves to write about. Line one begins "I am" and asks the student to complete the line by identifying two special characteristics,

Before reading the poems in this unit, students will read a brief account of each author's life. Understanding the author's life will give the students some insight into how or whether the author's life has impacted his or her work. Students will be asked to document the information about the author using the Cornell note style. The Cornell note style outline will introduce the student to formal research documentation. The notes will include the author's name and three headings for note-taking, including life experiences, contributions and a brief statement concerning how the author's life experiences have impacted his or her work. In addition, each activity will have a grammar and/or writing link to emphasize the connection between grammar, writing, and poetry.

The poem investigated during the 'Heritage" phase of this unit is, "Lineage" by Margaret Walker.

Before the teacher presents this poem, students should review the terms and definitions for 'line' and 'stanza' as they relate to poetry. These terms and definitions should be written on large index cards as the first Word Board entries. The definitions should be located on one side of the card and the word on the other side of the card. After the related vocabulary has been introduced, students will be given a copy of the poem. Read the poem aloud referring to the number of lines and stanzas in the poem. Also, show students how to find the 'rhyme scheme' or 'rhyme pattern' in the poem.

Students will work in groups of two to four to complete the following activities:

Grammar Link: Students will be directed to an introductory unit on 'Adjectives' in their grammar text or as prepared by the teacher. Students will be asked to read about adjectives as a group and write the definition of an adjective in their notebooks. After completing this activity, students will then work in groups of two to four students each to highlight the words used in the poem to describe grandmothers. Student answers should include 'strong and full of sturdiness'. After each group has presented their findings, two students will be asked to re-read a stanza of the poem illustrating each group's answers. (Students can also use the lines in this poem to study subject/verb agreement and direct objects. Higher-level students could study predicate adjectives and nominatives and infinitive phrases.)

Students will then be asked to interpret phrases in the poem by thinking of adjectives which could replace each phrase. For example, the phrase "bent to toil" could be replaced with the adjective 'hardworking'. The phrase 'touched the earth and grain grew' could be replaced with the adjective 'productive'.

Students would then randomly re-read stanzas of the poem emphasizing adjectives and substituting the adjectives they have chosen. For example, the opening lines of the poem would be read, "My grandmothers were **strong**, they followed plows and were hardworking".

I would review the term 'repetition' with the students ask each student without collaboration to find an example of repetition in the poem. After sufficient time, the students would then be allowed to discuss their answer in their group.

After completing this portion of the unit, students should be directed to stand and give their neighbor a 'high five'. This encourages positive interaction among the students. Students will complete thematic unit one by completing the writing and portfolio projects. As students work on this portion of the unit, the teacher will conduct individual and group conferences with students. Writing Project: I will then read the question posed in the last line of stanza two, "Why am I not as they?" Students would be asked to review the list of adjectives used to describe grandmothers in the poem and answer this question: Think about the adjectives used in the poem or implied in the poem to describe grandmothers. Are you like your ancestors? Explain your answer. Do you know anyone who fits at least some of the descriptions in the poem? Explain who this person is and why you think this person has the characteristics you have chosen.

Portfolio Project: Students should draw, generate computer clip art, or bring in a picture that represents the person they wrote about for the writing project.

Creative Writing Project - rewrite the "I Am" poem with reflections gained from the study of poems during this unit. For example, line one of the "I Am" poem would read, "I am. . .proud to be an African American".

Other poems suggested for study in this unit:

"We Wear The Mask" by Paul Lawrence Dunbar - Emphasize the fact that the poet wrote this poem after spending years of slavery in America. Who is the speaker? Discuss how the wearing of a mask from Reconstruction to the1950's may have saved some African Americans from humiliation and/ or death. Emphasize the use of the pronoun "We". Who are "We"? Do we wear masks today? Explain your answer. What does the mask symbolize? What is the rhyme pattern in this poem? This poem is also an excellent poem for use in Unit II during the study of emotions.

Note: All portfolio project information should be kept in the portfolio folder.

## Thematic Unit II: (October - December) Who Am I? My Individuality and Emotions

Vocabulary:

- 1. mood: the reader's response to a particular selection
- 2. tone: the feeling that the author puts into a particular selection.

## Objectives:

- 1. Students will use hands on, written, and oral experiences as they define poetry and investigate who they are based upon their individuality.
- 2. Students will recognize and appreciate the similarities and differences in themselves and others.
- 3. Students will be able to identify figures of speech in poetry and use them in their writing.
- 4. Students will identify themes in poetry.
- 5. Students will also review vocabulary words already assigned, including the terms 'compare' and 'contrast'

## Procedure:

The following poem will be studied during this unit:

"Thumbprint" by Eve Merriam. Students will answer the question, Who Am I? by examining who they are as individuals with emotions. I will use the poem, "Thumbprint" to introduce the theme of individuality. The activities used to introduce this poem provide students with group and individual learning opportunities. As an

introduction to this unit, I will ask students, "How are you similar to other people?" and "How are you different from other people?" Students' responses should include race, color, size, and height. After student responses have been listed on the board, students will be randomly placed in groups of two to four depending on the class size. Each group will then be given one ink pad and enough 3 x 5 note cards for each student in the group, the materials needed to make an imprint of their thumb on a note card. Students will help one another make an imprint of their thumb on the index card.

After completing this step, I will review the terms, 'compare' and 'contrast' with the class. Students in each group will then be given time to compare and contrast their thumb print. Each group will then be given a set of thumb prints (See materials-Unit II).

Students will help one another compare their thumb prints with the prints in the set and will be asked to find the print that is closest to each student's print in the group and write the description below the student's thumbprint on their individual cards. Each group will orally present their findings to the class. At the conclusion of this activity students will be asked to say "Great job!" to their group members as a means of conferring positive reinforcement.

The class will now read the poem, "Thumbprint" by Eve Merriam aloud. After reading, students will answer these questions orally to review previously assigned vocabulary: How many stanzas does this poem have? and What is the rhyme scheme of this poem?

Students will be involved in class discussion as they interpret the following:

What does the author say about her thumbprint in line 5? (Her thumbprint is priceless-a treasure.) They will also interpret the meaning of lines 15 – 20: "of all my atom parts I am the sum. . .Whatever I shall become." They will then be asked, What is the theme of this poem?

Students will then be introduced to 'alliteration' in the poem. After reviewing the definition, I will ask students to use their highlighter to find and highlight two examples of alliteration in this poem (whorls, whirls, wheels / impress, implant). After sufficient time, students will discuss their answers in their groups and then as a class.

The class will answer the following questions: How does the author feel about individuality? Give examples from the selection to support their answer. (Students should be able to support their answers referring to stanzas and lines in the poem).

Possible answer: She is excited because her thumbprint is unique to her. Examples to support student answers should includeline #4 – "mine alone"(6) – "My own flesh, my own feelings (10) -: "My signature" (10) and "my singularity" (12).

The study of this poem will conclude by making the following observations that every one has a different thumbprint, thumbprints last for a person's entire life, identical twins have different prints and if your thumb or fingers are injured, they heal with the same pattern.

## Poem #2. "Debt" by Paul Lawrence Dunbar

Vocabulary:

1. Students will review vocabulary from previous units and will use their knowledge of these terms to identify the figures of speech in this poem.

### Objectives:

1. Students should be able to identify the mood and tone in this selection by responding to the following questions: How did the author feel in writing this poem? and How do you feel in reading it? Students will be reminded that the mood and tone can sometimes be the same. The poem, "Debt" emphasizes individual emotions, so it is appropriate that different emotions ("moods") in response to it be discussed.

#### Procedure:

Prewriting: As a prewriting assignment, students will write a reflection about something that they did, or something that happened to them, that they regret.

Students will begin this unit by studying the life of the poet and taking Cornell notes as described in Unit I. This step is very important for students to understand the relevance of the author's life to his work. I will spend time introducing the terms 'mood' and 'tone' to the students. I will draw a diagram of a book on the board and draw two arrows; one pointing into the book and one coming out of the book. I will use this diagram to explain tone and mood and the difference between them. The arrow going into the book represents the tone that the author created and the arrow coming out of the book represents how the reader responded to the book. I will explain that the mood or the tone could be similar or different. I will give an example using a comedy routine about war. The comedian wants the listener to laugh at what has been written (tone); however, the listener thinks that the joke is not funny at all thinking that there is nothing funny about war (mood). In this example mood and tone are different. Then I will give the example of a documentary about war. The authors want to convey the seriousness of war. The viewers feel that sense of seriousness. In this instance, the mood and the tone are the same.

Following this exercise, I will ask students to make a list of the different emotions or feelings in their group (sad, happy, indifferent, puzzled, etc.). We will then read the poem, "Debt," as a group. Before reading, I will ask students to listen to the poem so that they can answer the following questions: Who is the speaker in the poem? How does the speaker feel and why? Could you be the speaker in this poem? Why or why not?

Students will be asked to highlight words in the poem that help to convey the tone.

At this point, students should be able to individually complete a poetry critique about this poem. The poetry critique outline should be written on the blackboard for students to fill in the title, the author, the number of stanzas and lines per stanza, the rhyme scheme, the mood/tone, the theme, and examples of figures of speech in the poem.

After completing the poetry critique individually, students will be given time to review their answers in groups of two to four students per group. We will then discuss the questions and the poetry critique that has been developed by all the responses taken together.

Post Writing: Students will write a reflection answering this question: What is the debt that the writer owes?

Students will conclude this unit by using lines from the "I Am" poem to write reflections gained from this study. For example, a line two begins, "I wonder". Students could complete this statement by saying, "I wonder if everyone knows what kind of thumbprint they have."

Other poems suggested for study in this unit:

"Me" by Walter de la Mare. This poem emphasizes the theme of individuality. Read the poem and allow class to paraphrase the message of the author.

"Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note" by Amiri Baraka. Emphasize the mood and tone in this poem; identify words or phrases that contribute to the mood/tone; Who is the girl speaking to as the father looks on? Examine the life of Baraka and write a reflection on who he is, referring to when he writes, "Nobody Sings Any More".

## Thematic Unit III: (January - March) Who Am I? My Ability to Achieve

Vocabulary:

- 1. Irony: the difference between an expected outcome and what actually happens.
- 2. Symbol: represents itself as well as another thing or idea.
- 3. Imagery: the picture that an author's words create in the mind of the reader.
- 4. Students will review previously learned vocabulary.

#### Objectives:

- 1. Students will write about an experience they regret.
- 2. Students will demonstrate mastery of previously learned vocabulary.

#### Procedure:

Students will answer the question, "Who Am I?" as they discover their potential to achieve. I will introduce this theme using R. Kelly's song, "I Believe I Can Fly," as a form of poetry. Student will then complete pre-reading activities for the poem, "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost.

Writing Link: Before reading the poem, students will write about something they did that they regret or something that happened to them that they regret. The writing exercise can be a formal essay or a short reflection. After the writing exercise, students will read and take notes about the author, understanding the format and rationale outlined in Unit I. I will emphasize some facts about the author's life so that students can better understand the poem. I will emphasize the fact that Frost mainly wrote about New England landscapes and country life. I will also emphasize the fact that the poem was inspired by one of Frost's friends who took him on daily walks through the countryside, pointing out rare plants and scenes in nature. After their many walks, his friend acknowledged that he (the friend) regretted some of the decisions he had made in life.

We will read the poem aloud. After introducing irony and giving examples of irony, we will discuss the poem using the poetry critique outline. Students will be asked to highlight words or phrases that create the mood or tone. We will also discuss symbolism in the poem. To begin a discussion on the use of imagery in the poem, I will give students a half sheet of paper. As I re-read the poem, students will sketch or draw the picture that comes to mind. Students will share and explain some of their pictures orally. We will then discuss the theme of the poem and examples of irony in the poem.

#### Other poems suggested for study during this unit include:

"If" by Rudyard Kipling. Students might be asked to paraphrase each stanza. Define 'impostor'. Why does the author speak of Triumph and Disaster as 'impostors'? How does the poem celebrate individuality?

"Mother to Son" by Langston Hughes. Emphasize the fact that Hughes wrote about ordinary people who struggled to survive. Discuss the Harlem Renaissance understanding this period helps explain the message of this poem. What advice does the mother give her son? How does she use herself as an example?

Writing Link: Write about someone you admire, and why.

Also use "The Dream Keeper" and "A Dream Deferred" by Langston Hughes; "Invictus" by William E. Henley.

# **Correlation to Virginia Standards**

The following Virginia State Standards are addressed in the lessons within this curriculum unit:

- 1. The student will read and analyze a variety of narrative poetic forms.
- 2. Explain the use of symbols and figurative language.
- 3. Describe main ideas or themes, using evidence from the text as support.
- 4. Compare and contrast the use of the poetic elements of word choice, dialogue, form, rhyme, rhythm, and voice.
- 5. Compare and contrast authors' styles.
- 6. Organize ideas for writing
- 7. Revise writing for word choice, sentence variety, and spelling
- 8. Use a variety of graphic organizers to compare, contrast, and explain

#### Strategies:

- 1. Whole Class instruction
- 2. Group Investigation
- 3. Independent study

#### **Evaluation:**

In addition to evaluating students during oral discussion, responses in student journals, and teacher made assessments, the success of this curriculum unit will be evaluated based upon the students' development of an ongoing and final portfolio project which will include reflections regarding the poems and themes studied, personal reflections and the student's creative writings.

- The biggest advantage to portfolio assessment is the impact on the learner. It
- allows learners to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses. It provides
- opportunities for learners to set academic and personal goals. And even learners
- considered 'at risk' seem to find a sense of responsibility and efficacy in
- evaluating their own work and selecting and attaining their own academic goals.
- Portfolio assessment offers students a way to take charge of their learning; it also
- encourages ownership, pride and high self esteem.11

# **Lesson Plans**

#### Activity One: "I Am" poem

#### Procedure:

After greeting the class, the teacher should introduce him or herself using the "I Am" poem outline. Following your introduction, introduce the "I Am" poem by telling students that you used this poetry format to introduce yourself. After sharing facts about yourself, and prepare the class for an introductory activity.

The teacher will say to the class, It is time for you to share some introductory information about yourself with the class using the "I Am" poem outline that I used. The 'I Am' poem outline will help you organize your thoughts as you prepare to introduce yourself. Pass out copies of the "I Am" poem outline to each student. Take a few moments to demonstrate how students can complete the poetry outline. After completing the poem outline, I will prepare students to share facts about themselves by introducing students to the terms 'lines' and 'stanza'. Students will now introduce themselves to the class using all of the poem or at least 8 of the lines from the poem.

#### Notes

At the conclusion of this activity, I will pass out a folder to each student. Have each student write their name on the folder and place their completed copy of the "I Am" poem in the folder. Also, I will put a copy of the "I Am" poem in at least five folders for students who may enter the class after the first session. New students will then know what activities they must complete. I suggest that after each class period, the teacher or designated students should place information in any student's folder who may be absent. Students will develop the responsibility for checking their folder when they are absent for work to be completed.

#### Activity Two: "Lineage" by Margaret Walker

#### Procedure:

Students will share in groups of three or four per group to complete this activity. Write this unit objective on the blackboard and orally review with students: Students will answer the question, "Who Am I?" based upon their African American heritage. I will review the vocabulary terms listed under 'vocabulary' with students. Pass out copies of the poem, "Lineage" by Margaret Walker to each class member. Make the following statement before formally introducing the poem: "Grandparents often have a strong sense of who they are, and what they want from life. Is it because life was harder then, and therefore more rewarding? If only we could learn the secret of their strength."

# **October - December-Thematic Unit II:Who Am I? Discovering who I am as an individual with emotions.**

## **Activity One**

## Procedure:

This activity should cover a two-week period. Students should be seated in groups with two to four students in each group. Have students write their names and date on the lined side of the index card. I will remind students that they are unique individuals. Poll the class to determine some of their differences. (Answers will include height, size, skin and hair color, hair length and more.) I will tell students that today we are going to investigate another way to determine our differences. Each group will then be given an inkpad. I will direct students in each group to help one another as they place their thumb on the inkpad and make their thumbprint on the 3 x 5 card. Have students place the information from this session in their portfolio folders.

## **Activity Two**

## Procedure:

This activity should cover a two-week period. Now, poll the class to review what students remember from session one about their individuality especially as related to their thumbprints. Use the terms 'compare' and 'contrast' to facilitate the discussion. Pass out copies of the poem, "Thumbprint" by Eve Merriam. Students' interest should be greater as a result of having completed activity one. Read the poem, "Thumbprint" aloud. Explain the definition of 'unique' in line three. Complete this unit as students rewrite the "I Am" poem with thoughts gained from the study of their individuality and emotions.

October - December:

Procedure: Use other suggested works and activities listed for Thematic Unit II in the to complete this unit.

# January - March: Thematic Unit III: Who Am I? My Ability to Achieve

## **Activity One**

## Procedure:

This unit can be used to introduce students to the February Black History month readings and activities. As a pre-study activity, I will have the song, "I Believe I Can Fly" playing as the students enter the room. I will allow students to listen to the song as they prepare for class and settle down to begin working. After students have settled, they will be instructed to listen to the poem again considering the poem's theme, mood, and tone. After the listening period, the class will orally discuss these literary devices. I will then introduce songs as a form of poetry. We will study the qualities of poetry in the song using the words from the suggested website in the narrative. Before presenting the poem by Robert Frost, students will write the formal essay outlined in the narrative section of this curriculum unit.

Students will then be given a copy of Robert Frost's poem, "The Road Not Taken". Before reading the poem aloud, I will give students an overview of the poem as described under "Debt" in the narrative section of Thematic Unit II. The class will read the poem orally. After reading, students will complete an individual poetry critique. We will discuss the completed critique orally. Use "Other poems suggested for study in Unit II" to

# **Materials**

## Thematic Unit I

Activity One: "I Am" poem

"I Am" poem-enough for each student

Folders-for students to begin compiling unit portfolio

Activity Two: "Lineage" by Margaret Walker:

Highlighters-enough for each student

Grammar book/information sheet introducing 'Adjectives'

#### Thematic Unit II

Individuality: "Thumbprint by Eve Merrimam

3 x 5 index cards-enough for each student

Ink pads-for each group of two to four students

Copies of the poem, "Thumbprint by Eve Merriam for each student

Copies of thumb patterns from the website www.wvonline.com - 1 set per group.

Emotions: "Debt" by Paul L. Dunbar

Copies of the following poems for each student: "Debt" by Paul L. Dunbar, "If" by Rudyard Kipling, "Invictus" by William E. Henley, "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost, and "A Dream Deferred" by Langston Hughes.

Thematic Unit III:

Copies of the poems: "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost, "If" by Rudyard Kipling, "Mother to Son" by Langston Hughes, "The Dream Keeper" by Langston Hughes, and "A Dream Deferred" by Langston Hughes.

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## Notes

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