



# YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

*to strengthen teaching in public schools®*

Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative

2007 Volume II: Across the Curriculum with Detective Fiction for Young People and Adults

---

## **Using Walter Mosley Detective Novels (*Devil in a Blue Dress*) to Motivate Reluctant High School Readers**

Curriculum Unit 07.02.01, published September 2007

by Jessica L. Colbert

### **Overview**

---

This curriculum unit will focus on the writings of Walter Mosley. It will center on the whole class reading of *Devil in a Blue Dress*, with the possibility of exploring other Easy Rawlins stories and/or other detective fiction written by African American authors.

A description of the target student audience follows. Langley High School is one of ten Pittsburgh Public High Schools. Over sixty-percent of our students are minorities. We are a Title I school with monies allocated to our school based on the high percentage of student applications for free and reduced lunches.

This unit will be implemented in a mixed grade level (9-12) special education resource English class. Included in the class are students with learning and/or emotional disabilities as determined by a psychological report and Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Each student's educational team has determined that they will not be successful in a regular education English class with their non-disabled peers. Therefore, the students are given adapted English instruction at their functioning level instead of actual grade level. This proves beneficial in that the students' IEPs drive instruction and I have some flexibility with content. Administrators instruct me to follow the district adopted Kaplan curriculum, but it is at my discretion to supplement, modify and adapt instruction based on student needs. It is my opinion that this unit can be modified and adapted for a regular education classroom as well. Included in this unit is a section for an activity used as an extension for my population of students with learning disabilities. This activity includes examining the notion of double-consciousness in *Devil in a Blue Dress* and subsequent Easy Rawlins novels. This portion of the unit would be very appropriate for any regular or honors education class.

The aforementioned Kaplan curriculum (9th grade) includes novels such as *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers, *Tea Cup Full of Roses* by Sharon Mathis and *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson. Several of my students complained about the dreary theme of the books we read. Plots include a young African American male imprisoned for his involvement in a robbery and homicide, a young African American male struggling with his drug addicted brother and dysfunctional family and a Caucasian female recently raped, respectively. One student said quite frankly, "Why do we always have to read about bad stuff happening to black people, we know all about that!" When I asked what he would prefer to read he struggled to answer but seemed interested when I suggested mysteries. His point is valid. Walter Mosley's novels will provide students with

exposure to an African American author and a positive main male character who is African American.

## Rationale

---

African-American history is not often fully studied in K-12 schools. When it is part of the curriculum it is often a skewed depiction typically written from a white point of view. African-American history told by African-Americans rarely makes it into the textbooks. There should be more focus on African-American cultural features and history in our literature. The cultural features of African-American literature can be interpreted better by all if they are studied with attention to their time and place in history. Intellectual, historical, emotional and aesthetic themes will emerge for the reader when paired with related historical teaching (Carter-Jones, 223).

All learners are more able to make connections with texts that are culturally similar to their own. All students are better able to understand cultures different from their own when they are exposed to that literature and curriculum on a regular basis and, most importantly, in a positive light. When our curriculum includes only a few novels written by African-American authors and/or a few novels with African-American characters, we do our students a great disservice. While only approximately fourteen percent (14%) of Pittsburgh's population is African-American, nearly sixty percent (60%) of the district's students are African-American. It would only make sense that we include more culturally diverse materials in our curriculum.

The idea of inundating urban youth with models of successful African Americans is not novel. Some may criticize the perceived overemphasis on role models, but it is exceedingly important. Our youth need positive African-American role models. Leonard Pitts Jr., a syndicated columnist for *The Miami Herald*, published an article in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette's* Opinion section on June 18, 2007. The title of the article, "Why are black kids failing in disproportionate numbers? I asked some," included transcripts of interviews Pitts conducted with youth participating in the YouthBuild USA program in Philadelphia. One young lady, Dominique Williams, said, "Most of the people we see who are successful play sports or are in the music business, that's why we, as people of color, want to strive to be athletes, want to strive to be in the music business. That's where we see the most success." One of the goals of this unit will be to emphasize successful African Americans in a field (literature) other than music and sports.

The University of Pittsburgh's Center on Race and Social Problems recently (June, 2007) published "Pittsburgh's Racial Demographics: Differences and Disparities." Included in this near one-hundred page report are educational data on racial and ethnic disparities in the Pittsburgh area and the nation. Topics include K-12 enrollment, reading and math skills, high school diploma recipients, bachelor degrees conferred and education attainment. The data is frightening. At the fifth, eighth and eleventh grade level, standardized reading and math test scores (Pennsylvania State System of Assessment, PSSA) are at least thirty percent lower for African-Americans compared to white students. Within the last five years, the number of African-American males in our county who receive diplomas has been substantially lower than African-American females and white males and females. More white students than any other race or ethnic group graduate from high school every year. The nation's data is similar to that of Allegheny County. Thirty-four percent of bachelors degrees awarded go to white males. African-American men receive two percent of these degrees. African-Americans in Pittsburgh fall well below the white norms in every category. Our education system is failing our students, especially our minorities.

## Objectives

---

My goal is to instill a sense of value in reading for information as a tool for success and also as a leisure activity. Research shows a wide range of benefits of fiction reading, including personal development and empowerment, increased understanding and sympathy with different cultures, escapism and relaxation, acquisition of new knowledge about the world, stimulation of new literary creation, and as a tool for improving literacy amongst children and adults (Glenn 2004). All behaviors are teachable. Teaching the actual skill and practice of reading is the fostering of one behavior. Once students master decoding they will use it to read for knowledge, and this will support successful post-secondary outcomes, including higher education and employment. The other behavior to teach is reading for leisure. Strategies for teaching reading and behavior modification to motivate students to read for leisure will be described in this unit.

Mosley's Easy Rawlins mysteries are intended for adult audiences. *Devil in a Blue Dress* is between a fourth and fifth grade reading level, but the content is appropriate for high school students. The readability level was found using Fry's Readability graph in which an excerpt of one hundred words is selected. The number of sentences and the number of syllables within the one hundred words are counted. This is done with three different excerpts, ideally from the beginning, middle and end of the book. I took passages from chapters three, eleven and nineteen. The readability levels were fifth, second and seventh grade, respectively. An average of those three levels indicates a mean grade level of 4.6. This is probably lower than expected because there is a lot of dialogue that includes short sentences, idioms and dialect. The readability is very appropriate for my below grade level readers, and the content is still of an adult nature. This is extremely beneficial in keeping my students motivated with literature they can read and content that is still interesting. Teachers of literature and social studies at the middle and high school levels may be interested in this unit. The Easy Rawlins novels give historical insight. I recently completed a curriculum in my local seminar through the Pittsburgh Teacher's Institute. The seminar examined African-American impact on United States culture. My unit detailed youth in the civil rights movement. Mosley's novels in historical settings leading up to the civil rights movement will relate to my local seminar curriculum unit.

Walter Mosley was born and raised in Los Angeles and now resides in New York. Mosley's popular Easy Rawlins novels began in 1990. Since then Mosley has authored twenty-eight books. In 1997 Mosley published an Easy Rawlins prequel, *Gone Fishin'* through Black Classic Press. His goal was to let other writers know they can publish a book successfully out of the mainstream of New York. *What Next*, a political essay and handbook encouraging African-Americans to take action for world peace, was published in 2003. Mosley has also published some science fiction and nonfiction books. He has won numerous awards, including the Anisfield Wolf Award for his contribution of works that improve appreciation and understanding of race in America. Recently Mosley created The City College. This establishment is a new publishing degree program aimed at young urban residents. Clearly Mosley is a model African-American writer, one whom urban youth can admire (<http://www.waltermosley.com>).

## Strategies

---

The key components of the unit are a structured student notebook accompanied by a Behavior Management Plan (BMP). The student notebook will help the learner achieve all levels of Bloom's Taxonomy: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. The BMP is for getting the students to read outside of the classroom. An extension activity for regular education students is also included in this unit.

Students in the resource English class are reading below a sixth grade level. Students above a sixth grade independent reading level are included or mainstreamed in the appropriate regular education English class. Adopted reading curriculum for these students include the WORDS reading curriculum and Reading Skills for Life (RSFL) by Pearson/AGS Globe. RSFL focuses on phonemic awareness, systematic and explicit instruction in phonics, phonograms, high-frequency words, word recognition strategies, and structural analysis of words. The class is typically broken into two homogeneous reading groups. The teacher instructs each group for half of a forty-two (42) minute period or rotates the groups daily, whichever is preferable. While the teacher works with one group, the other group must have independent activities available. District instructions ask teachers to use WORDS and RSFL four of five days a week with a group reading comprehension activity the fifth day. Teachers often use the *News for You* - a product from New Readers Press, on the fifth day. *News for You* is published weekly. It includes major news stories written at about an eighth grade reading level. It includes maps, charts, and feature stories. Objectives, vocabulary lessons, discussion questions, classroom activities and a two-page student handout are included.

Students are not particularly fond of any of the above mentioned curriculums or activities. They are frustrated and embarrassed because they are well aware they are in special education or the "slow classes." Most have been in resource classes most of their school career. They are generally disenchanted with learning, especially reading. By high school they have been failing for some time. It is not uncommon to hear, "What do I have to do to get a D?" A "D" is a minimal passing grade a student can receive in order to earn credit for any particular course. A "D" is 60% mastery. Of course anyone would agree that these students need systematic reading instruction that includes decoding and constant review of sound-letter relationships. Needless to say, these are not skills the students are overjoyed about learning. They know that elementary school students are learning the same skills and they do not want to learn "baby stuff." The reading teacher in me knows it is a necessary evil. Hence, I must instruct them in reading *and* motivate them to learn. This involves convincing them they *can* and *will* learn the skills to read well.

The whole class reading of *Devil in a Blue Dress* will be used on the fifth day of instruction instead of the *News for You* reading. The activities will also be used daily when students are not working on their reading instruction with the teacher in the WORDS or RSFL curriculum. It is my hope that students will be highly motivated by the novel and work diligently to complete their daily reading instruction (WORDS and RSFL) in order to be able to work on their study sheets and other activities for *Devil in a Blue Dress*. Students will be reading and participating in the novel at different paces. Weekly goals will be set to keep students on track. Extension activities will be provided for students who are well ahead of the group. Homework will be given at least two nights per week. Homework activities will include: Reading to a family member and summary teacher-made knowledge and comprehension questions by chapter, prediction worksheet, drawing a picture or writing a three-paragraph description of a favorite character, choosing a character and describing what he/she is thinking but not saying.

I envision the student notebook to be a three ring binder with dividers for each chapter. The notebook will

include a study sheet for each chapter (see Appendix C). Each chapter study sheet will include vocabulary, dialect interpretation, character description, journal prompt, and the title of the chapter. Each of these sections will be outlined for the student for the first three chapters. In subsequent chapters students will identify their own vocabulary, vernacular phrases, characters and journal prompt (a list of teacher-made journal prompts will be provided). The vocabulary and dialect phrases may vary depending on student ability. For example, one student may have only three vocabulary or dialect phrases she is unfamiliar with, while another student may have six vocabulary or dialect phrases she is unfamiliar with. Students will be instructed to write something for each section but an exact number will not be given. The list of characters will build as new ones are introduced. Similarly, the student created descriptions of each character will expand as we proceed through the novel. Through modeling of the first three chapters, the teacher will show how to go back to already identified characters and add more information as she reads. Students will include numbers of the chapter where they found the added information for each character. The study sheets should be checked at least on a weekly basis, as much of this guide will be completed independently or in small groups while the teacher is working with the other group using the reading curriculum.

Journals are used by virtually all types of people, from sports players to astronauts. Journals are a record of events, feelings and data. They can contain just about anything. Journals, in the academic sense, give students a means to reflect upon what they have read. They give students a chance to communicate thoughts and ideas without having to worry about proper grammar, punctuation and spelling. In social studies, structured KWL (what you know, want to know and learned) journals are generally more successful than summary journal writing (Cantrell, 2000). Guided writing about major concepts and what still needed to be learned improved student comprehension in science (Feather, 1998). Journal writing is an important component of instruction across the curriculum.

Mosley's novels include great prose and dialogue amongst his characters. We will need to spend some time on the following to improve comprehension of his writing: 1) Interpretation of dialect - it will prove beneficial to spend some time previewing the written vernacular along with novel vocabulary. Interpretation of dialect is essential in appreciating the novel. 2) Graphic Organizer to be updated while reading the novel to illustrate the relation among characters and aid in the problem solving process.

High School students often decorate their notebooks, lockers, book bags etc., with sayings, lines, quotes from movies, music or famous sports or movie stars. I remember my friends and I had notebooks where we listed our favorite inspirational lines, quotes and poems. Mosley's novels have some great quotes. While not all are so encouraging, I do think they are worth examining in an effort to get students attracted to the material. The quotes from different people lend themselves to the characterization of all those involved in the mystery. Some quotes of significance include the following. In chapter 3, Easy is talking about a man who simply opened the door to Albright's place, "I often think of how so many people have walked into my life for just a few minutes and kicked up some dust, then they're gone away. My father was like that; my mother wasn't much better." In chapter 3, Albright to Easy: "Easy, walk out your door in the morning and you're mixed up in something. The only thing you can really worry about is if you get mixed up to the top or not." In chapter 13, when Easy is driving Daphne to Richard McGee's house, "We hadn't even seen a police car on the ride and that was fine with me, because the police have white slavery on the brain when it comes to colored men and white women." Chapter 15 when Easy wants to get out from under Albright: "We all owe out something, Easy. When you owe out then you're in debt and when you're in debt then you can't be your own man. That's capitalism." Chapter 17, Todd Carter explaining about the \$30,000 to Easy, "You let the bank deliver that much money to your house?" "It was only once, and what were the odds I'd be robbed that night?" "About one hundred percent, I guess." Also in chapter 17, Easy says, "I got the idea, somehow, that if I got enough money

then maybe I could buy my own life back." In chapter 18, Curtis Cross (guy with nine children) talking to Easy at Vernie's place, "Chirren [children] is the most dangerous creatures on the earth, with the exception of young girls between the ages of fifteen and forty-two."

Chapter 14 describes Easy's "voice." Easy's inner voice speaks throughout the novel, especially when Easy is in a jam. The voice is one that helps Easy overcome his fears. Examples include when Frank Green attacks Easy and when Easy and Mouse finally nab Albright. We often think of our voice as our "inner voice," the words that seem to come from nowhere but can affect our actions, mood, decisions, and feelings. I would venture to guess that we all have some sort of inner voice that talks to us throughout our day even about what may seem the simplest of things, like whether or not to go outside for a walk. Easy's voice specifically helps him overcome fear. Easy is a man who has seen a lot of death in war and now in his dealings as a novice private investigator, but he is very "un-Easy" about death. This particular portion of the unit may be beneficial to teachers of sociology and psychology, and may be used as a cross curricular activity in collaboration with the teacher of English. Our school has a sociology and psychology class, each taken for one semester. Some time should be spent discussing when Easy's voice speaks and what the goal of the voice is. Conversations with students should include relation to their own inner voice, including what and when it speaks to them.

Some novels may be read aloud by students during class time and taken home for independent reading. Others may require listening to the book in question on tape, with most activities occurring during the school day.

A second component of the unit is the Behavior Management Plan (BMP). Students will earn "Mosley Money" that will be factored into their daily grade. Repetitive reinforcement for positive behavior is essential in teaching a new skill. The skill being taught in this unit is the act of reading. This is not to be confused with teaching students *how* to read. The WORDS and RSFL curriculum implanted four of five days a week is the reading instruction. Mosley Money will focus on reinforcement of actually picking up the book and engaging in the activities of the unit.

Mosley Money is a token economy. The Mosley Money itself is not the reinforcement but it is turned in for a reward, in this case, a grade. I have found students constantly want to know what their grade is. They expect every activity, every worksheet, every time they answer a question in class to be graded. They crave this constant reinforcement and often are clueless as to why they received a particular grade, especially a failing one. They will say things like, "But I didn't fall asleep in class on Tuesday." This student did fall asleep on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, though. Mosley Money will actually be raffle tickets. A roll of 1000 can be purchased at most party supply stores. Students will be awarded Mosley Money for the following activities: being seen by me or another school staff member with the Devil in a Blue Dress novel in hand (open or closed) outside of the classroom, for example, at lunch, in detention, while waiting for the bus, while waiting to see the vice principal, in the in-house suspension room, during study hall, in the library - 1 Mosley Money for each such sighting; telling me or another school staff member *about* what they are reading at the time when they are caught reading - that is worth 3 Mosley Money; reading a chapter of the novel to a family member, young or old, at home with a signature or mark to prove it - 5 Mosley Money; reading a chapter of the novel to an adult mentor at after-school tutoring or a community program - 5 Mosley Money. Students will collect Mosley Money each day and return it to my classroom the following day or leave it in their container before the end of the school day. The container should be made of a clear plastic and labeled with each student's name. Two-liter soda pop bottles will make excellent containers. Friday's activities will include each student counting their Mosley Money, which will turn into a weekly participation grade specifically for the novel. The clear container will allow students to see their progress daily and also compare it with that of their



peers. Even my most reluctant readers are competitive. I anticipate that they will not want to be the person with the lowest amount of Mosley Money. I will issue the Mosley Money, but students will also have the opportunity to earn money when witnessed by other adults. Verification forms with a signature line can be brought to me in exchange for Mosley Money. I will briefly explain my plans for issuing Mosley Money to the staff at a faculty meeting.

Each Mosley Money will equate to four percentage points. For example, if a student earns twenty Mosley Money she will earn an eighty percent for her weekly participation grade. These points should be flexible based on student participation. The equation can be modified to boost student participation and raised if students are really buying into the plan.

The grand total of Mosley Money for each student at the conclusion of the unit can be converted into prizes to be determined by the students. Any good BMP includes a reward system determined by the students. The teacher typically has an idea of what she would like to offer and guides the students toward these entities. Possible end of the unit rewards includes bonus points, gift certificates for book stores and restaurants, and a pizza party. Local stores and businesses can be solicited for donations.

## Classroom Activities

---

The hook for this unit will be two-fold. On the first day of introduction of the novel I will hold class in the auditorium. I will arrange for a still shot of Daphne Monet, the mysterious woman in the blue dress, from the movie *Devil in a Blue Dress*, to be shown on the projection screen. Students will spend ten minutes working in pairs, one assigned as a recorder, to describe the woman in the picture. Guiding questions will be provided. They include: Describe what she looks like. How is she feeling? Who is she? What is her story? Students will then be given their own copy of the novel. Students will follow along as I read the blurb on the back of the book. I will also read any text on the inside front and back of the cover of the novel. Each student will be asked to write down what they think is the first sentence of the novel. The note cards will be collected. I will mix them up and include the real sentence in the mix. I will read each sentence once, then reread them for students to vote on which they think is the real sentence. Any student who guesses correctly will be awarded Mosley Money. The student whose sentence received the most votes will also receive Mosley Money. A discussion regarding student expectations of the book will take place.

At least three times during the novel (likely at the end of chapter ten, twenty and thirty) the students will become human graphic organizers. Students will work in groups and use their notebooks to copy character traits and descriptions (which they've already recorded in their notebooks) on large poster paper (with the sticky stuff on the back). Each group will be assigned a character(s). Each group will decorate the paper with colors, pictures, and listed ideas about the characters. Clues and insights related to each character's connection with the crimes will be listed. Murders in the novel, quite apart from other crimes, those of Coretta Jones, Howard Green, Richard McGee, and Matthew Teran. The murder of Joppy and Frank Green can also be included, the reader does not need to "figure them out." The reader is plainly told that Joppy is killed. We will spend class time presenting each character. In addition, each group will also be given one or more of the following components of a mystery: setting, initial crime, subsequent crime(s) committed, clues, the way detective traps the culprit and finally the obvious subplot of love (Fry, 2007). The class will collectively come up with transition sentences that connect the characters and components of the mystery. The teacher will

record the transitions on poster paper. Individual students will be called upon to be the "transitions." All students will stand and hold up either the character, theme or transition they were assigned. Students will have to move around to make the connections coherent. Designated speakers will read the organizer and transitions. The student made materials will be saved for the next human graphic organizer. After reading more of the novel the students will add to, delete and amend their previous ideas about the characters and participate in the graphic organizer again. The visuals and kinetics of the activity will provide multimodal learning. Students will see that their perception of characters is accurate throughout the novel.

One of the culminating activities of the unit will include a field trip to the main Carnegie Library in Pittsburgh, located in Oakland. I will arrange a book talk with one of the librarians specializing in literature for youth. A book talk is when a teacher or typically a librarian gives a brief description of a book to create curiosity about the book. She will discuss Mosley's other Easy Rawlins novels and briefly describe his other preferred genres, including science fiction, political polemic and his recently published children's book, *47*, a science fiction novel about a fourteen-year-old boy who is a slave in 1832. A strange man introduces him to magic and, consequently, freedom. The librarian will also offer a book talk on other African-American detective fiction authors. Students will have time to review all novels discussed. We will come to a consensus on what novel we will read next in the classroom. The fieldtrip will include students obtaining an application for a library card. They will need to return the form with a parent/guardian signature independently. Mosley Money will be given for students who produce a library card.

Upon completion of the novel, students will share it with one of two groups. They will decide whether to bring the novel to one of the local middle schools or the senior citizens center. Both are within walking distance of the school. Students will decide democratically which group to present the novel to. They will not be able to read the entire novel to the middle school students. A short excerpt will need to be chosen. My students will have to develop an activity to engage in with the middle school students and arrange for a plan to keep them engaged in the learning. This collaboration's benefits are twofold. First, for the middle school students, it is often a difficult transition to high school. The anxiety about the unknown is overwhelming. Meeting high school students is rewarding and will give them a connection when they arrive at Langley within the next few years. Secondly, high school students benefit from being a mentor to younger students. The idea of being a role model is immensely beneficial to my students, who often have low self-esteem because of their known disability.

If the students choose to read the novel to the members of the senior citizen center, they will need to make some decisions about time and length of stay at the center. The center will be more flexible and more able to accommodate our group on a regular basis than the middle school. Many students at the school already volunteer at the senior center. A rapport has previously been established. My students will be asked to dress up as a character from the novel to intrigue either group. Mouse, Daphne and Albright would be the likely characters, as their dress is the most distinct from all the other characters.

Finally, I'd like to touch upon my efforts to make the readings and classroom activities fun by actually taking them *outside* of the classroom. In a class of students with learning and emotional disabilities, there are many individuals who benefit from movement and change of scenery. At least once a week, I'd like to have class at a locale other than my classroom. These places will include the local library (located directly behind the school), the school library, one of the two courtyards, on the front lawn of the school, or on the playground of the local public park (within walking distance). Outside locations are of course weather permitting.



## Extension Activity

---

The following activity will function as an extension activity for my students. It may be used for a regular or honors regular education class as an integral part of this unit. W.E.B. Du Bois defined double consciousness as the unique interactions between blacks and the world around them. Double consciousness is described as the condition of having to always consider oneself from others' (whites') perspective. This view is considered a measurement of one's value in the society as a whole. African-Americans are forced to see themselves as substandard members of society because of their African heritage. After acknowledgement of this second rate citizenship, African-Americans are then permitted to see themselves as American citizens (De Bois, 1903, 96).

Soitos describes the double-consciousness trope of all detective fiction as the "masking" trope. He suggests that the black detective must wear two masks. This is both difficult and advantageous. The masking allows the black detective to maneuver his way through the black community to get information, knowledge, clues. He fits in with the culture he is enmeshed in. At the same time, the detective, in an effort to outwit the criminal, must be on his toes. The detective must "act white" in some ways. He is smart (but can't always let on to the black community that he is actually solving the mystery), he must make efforts to communicate with the - often corrupt - white police and/or black police. Easy Rawlins is thoroughly aware of his "blackness" in a white dominated society (Soitos 1996). The first line of *Devil in a Blue Dress*, "I was surprised to see a white man walk into Joppy's bar," already identifies race in the opening chapter of the novel. Rawlins must best the criminals' intellect, and in order to do so, he must understand both the white and the black mind. Easy can more easily manipulate both the black and white world to further his solution of the crime if he is able to wear both masks.

This theme of double-consciousness can be introduced in the beginning chapters of the novel. Structured student notebooks should include a section requiring students to track examples where people are not what they seem. There are examples throughout the book of Easy's precise descriptions of people, specifically how they look and the color of their skin, eyes, hair and attire. Early in chapter 3 Easy describes Albright's men: "The man who held the door was tall and slight with curly brown hair, dark skin like an India Indian, and brown eyes so light they were almost golden. His friend, who stood against a door at the far wall, was short and looked a little like he was Chinese around the eyes, but when I looked at him again I wasn't so sure of his race." Easy refers to this man as the "maybe-Chinese man." Easy even asks Albright if the little guy is Chinese. Albright says, "No one knows." The identity of others, not just Easy, is also in question. In chapter 18 Easy realizes that there will be no justice for him by way of the police, and that he has to get himself out of the mess DeWitt Albright has gotten him into. Chapter 18 ends with Easy saying, "I'd ask the bartender his name and talk about anything, but, really, behind my friendly talk, I was working to find something. Nobody knew what I was up to and that made me sort of invisible; people thought that they saw me but what they really saw was an illusion of me, something that wasn't real." Students will be asked to pinpoint other characters who wear more than one mask. Daphne Monet should be identified. She is plainly a mask-wearer in her struggle to live as a white female despite her black heritage. This activity can be accomplished in any of the Rawlins novels. Discussion questions include: Describe a mask. What is it used for? When is it beneficial to wear a mask? Are there disadvantages to wearing a mask? Who wears a mask? Why is it beneficial to wear a mask? Can people wear different masks depending on the environment/situation? What types of masks do you wear? Is there anyone who has seen all of your masks? A culminating question may include: How have you used what you have learned about double-consciousness and masking to improve your sense of self and perception in your school, community, home and society?

There are "color codes" throughout the novel (Fry, 13 July 2007). Daphne Monet is the white *and* black woman of the novel and all colors lead to her. In the middle of chapter 3, DeWitt Albright gives Easy a picture of Daphne as he begins his pursuit of her whereabouts. Easy describes Daphne's photograph, "It was a picture of the head and shoulders of a pretty young white woman. The picture had been black-and-white originally but it was touched up for color like the photos of jazz singers that they put out in front of nightclubs. She had light hair coming down over her bare shoulders and high cheekbones and eyes that might have been blue if the artist got it right." The idea of the photograph being in black and white and then color added to it is of interest. Characters surrounding Daphne include Frank Green, Howard Green, DeWitt Albright (white), and Jackson Blue - and Daphne's real name is Ruby (red). She wears a blue dress early on but eventually changes into a yellow sundress. Color and shades of people, dress, and objects are mentioned throughout the novel. It seems that Mosley has a fixation with color. Mosley's subsequent Easy Rawlins stories include: Red Death, White Butterfly, The Yellow Dog, and Black Betty.

Color codes should be discussed as a preview to the book. For my special education students I will likely review the color codes after reading the entire text. I will point out Mosley's references to color throughout the readings, but have the students reread or scan the book for color (shade) words after reading the entire book. Students will take different color markers, pens, pencils and/or highlighters to identify all the color and shade references. Regular education and honors students should be able to read for comprehension and analyze the text simultaneously. An examination of the feelings and meanings evoked by diverse colors will be explored.

Students will spend time examining Paul Laurence Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask." The poem is readily available online at many websites. Each student will receive a copy of the poem. Groups of three will be formed to discuss their thoughts and ideas about the poem. Guided questions will be provided. Groups will be asked to present their findings (no wrong answers) to the whole class. This activity will likely take only one period for my special education class. Regular education English teachers may want to spend more time analyzing the parts, punctuations, rhymes, effects, and devices. Students may produce a written essay that includes the following criteria. The essay should explain what happens in the poem, who is speaking, what is the poem about, the theme, formal and thematic structure and formal and thematic elements. Students should choose a minimum of three of the above mentioned components and include their favorite parts of the poem. A guide for the structure of the essay follows. Paragraph one should introduce the poem and present a thesis. Paragraph two includes a brief summary and analysis of the poem. Paragraph three discusses the thematic elements. Paragraph four discusses the formal elements, and whether the form helps to clarify meaning. Finally, paragraph five is a conclusion. It is assumed that this assignment would follow lessons where students have already learned about analyzing poems.

## Funding

---

Our school based funding has been drastically cut over the last two years. Mosley's novels are not part of the Kaplan curriculum and therefore are not part of the school's inventory. It may be necessary to submit a grant for funding for this unit. You may also want to use your school or local librarian for access to interlibrary loans of multiple copies of the same novel, though I do believe there is strong evidence that would suggest students are more likely to invest in a project when they can own it, literally. A student owned copy of the novels is ideal.

## Explicit Material

---

Some parts of Walter Mosley's novels are sexually explicit and there is some use of foul language. The movie, *Devil in a Blue Dress* is rated R and should be used cautiously. It is my recommendation to send a parent letter with a permission line allowing students to interact with the material. It may also be possible for the teacher to casually "skip over" explicit sections. Most notably, chapter 6, Easy and Coretta James on the couch while Dupree sleeps in the next room, parts of chapter 8, DeWitt Albright and Easy on the pier, parts of chapter 26, Easy and Daphne Monet in the little house behind Primo's place. Chapter 26 does begin to piece together the events of the novel, and it would be difficult to skip this entire chapter.

## Resources for Teachers

---

Cantrell, J.R., Dougherty, E.A., & Fusaro, J.A. (2000). "Exploring the Effectiveness of Journal Writing on Learning Social Studies: A Comparative Study." *Reading Psychology*, 21. 1-11.

Carter-Jones, Sheila. "Influence of Culture on Response to Literature: Ten Black Women Respond to Short Stories by Black Writers." (1999): 1-262.

Du Bois, W.E.B.. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Cambridge: University Press John Wilson and Son, 1903.

Dunbar, Paul Laurence. *The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar*. Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1993.

Feather, R.M., Jr. (1998). *The Use of Guided Free and Formal Journal Writing in the Development of Conceptual Change in Ninth Grade Earth Science Students as Measured using Concept Maps and Achievement Tests*. Dissertation. University of Pittsburgh.

Fry, Paul. Lecture. 12 July 2007 and 13 July 2007.

Glenn, Louise. *The Creativity of Reading Fiction: An Exploration of the Creative Processes and Responses of Fiction Readers*. University of Sheffield. September 2004.

Lock, Helen. "Invisible Detection: The Case of Walter Mosley." *MELUS* 26(2001): 77-89.

"Pittsburgh's Racial Demographics: Differences and Disparities." University of Pittsburgh: Center on Race and Social Problems. 2007.

Pitts, Leonard Jr.. "Why are black kids failing in disproportionate numbers? I asked some.." *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* June 18, 2007:

Soitos, Stephen F.. *The Blues Detective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1996.

Wesley, Marilyn C.. "Power and Knowledge in Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress*." *African American Review* 35(2001): 103-116.

Schrock, Kathleen. "Discovery Education: [DiscoverySchool.com](http://school.discovery.com/schrockguide/fry/fry2.html)." *Teacher's Helpers: Fry's Readability Graph*. 7 Jul 2007.  
<http://school.discovery.com/schrockguide/fry/fry2.html>

## Resources for Students

Mosley, Walter. Devil in a Blue Dress. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1990.

"Walter Mosley." Meet Walter. 2007. Hachette Book Group USA. 9 Jul 2007 <http://www.waltermosley.com>>.

## Appendix A- Local Standards

---

Pennsylvania Academic Standards for Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening supported by this Curriculum Unit

**Learning to Read Independently 1.1.11.C.** Use knowledge of root words and words from literary works to recognize and understand the meaning of new words during reading. Use these words accurately in speaking and writing.

**Learning to Read Independently 1.1.11.H.** Demonstrate fluency and comprehension in reading.

**Reading Critically in All Content Areas 1.2.11.C.** Produce work in at least one literary genre that follows the conventions of the genre.

**Reading, Analyzing and Interpreting Literature 1.3.11.B.** Analyze the relationships, uses and effectiveness of literary elements used by one or more authors in similar genres including characterization, setting, plot, theme, point of view, tone and style.

**Reading, Analyzing and Interpreting Literature 1.3.11.E.** Analyze how a scriptwriter's use of words creates tone and mood, and how choice of words advances the theme or purpose of the work.

**Types of Writing 1.4.11E.** Write a personal resume

**Speaking and Listening 1.6.11.A.** Listen to others.

1 Ask clarifying questions.

2 Synthesize information, ideas and opinions to determine relevancy.

3 Take notes.

**Characteristics and Functions of the English Language 1.7.77.B.** Analyze when differences in language are a source of negative or positive stereotypes among groups.

Pittsburgh Public School District - Office of Instructional Support - Communications Core Curriculum Frameworks Supported by this Curriculum Unit

**Exit Content Standard #3:** All students respond orally and in writing to information and ideas gained by reading narrative and informational texts and use the information and ideas to make decisions and solve problems.

**Exit Content Standard #4:** All students write for a variety of purposes including to narrate, inform, and persuade in all subject areas.

**Exit Content Standard #5:** All students analyze and make critical judgments about all forms of communications, separating fact from opinion, recognizing propaganda, stereotypes and statements of bias, recognizing inconsistencies and judging the validity of evidence.

**Exit Content Standard #6** All students exchange information orally, including understanding and giving spoken instructions, asking and answering questions appropriately, and promoting effective group communications.

## Appendix B

---

### Reading Response Journal Prompts

I think. . .

I wonder. . .

I know. . .

I predict. . .

I find. . .

I suspect. . .

I admire. . .

I like. . .

I don't like. . .

I feel. . .

I was surprised. . .

I was impressed by . . .

I was relieved when . . .

I noticed that . . .

It's hard to believe. . .

I was sure that . . .

I was disappointed when . . .

I was tense when . . .

If I had been there, I would have. . .

I don't understand. . .

This is similar to. . .

The part about \_\_\_\_ reminds me of \_\_\_\_

In this chapter / story, the main event (action) is. . .

In this chapter / story, the main character is. . .

My favorite part is when. . .

The most exciting part is \_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_

A part that I find confusing is. . .

I would change. . .

I am most like the character \_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_

An interesting word / sentence / idea is. . .

I thought it was funny when. . .

I can relate to this chapter / story / character because. . .

The part that makes a real picture in my mind is. . .

## Appendix C

---

Student Notebook - Chapter Study Sheet

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

Devil in a Blue Dress - by Walter Mosley

Chapter 1

Title \_\_\_\_\_



I. Vocabulary/Phrases - Use context clues, a thesaurus and/or your friends to help you write your own meaning to the word(s)

- Brawling \_\_\_\_\_
- Slithery \_\_\_\_\_
- L.A. \_\_\_\_\_
- Guffawed \_\_\_\_\_
- Matte \_\_\_\_\_
- Laid-off \_\_\_\_\_
- Distaste \_\_\_\_\_
- Drawl \_\_\_\_\_
- Regiment of men \_\_\_\_\_
- What's your pleasure? \_\_\_\_\_
- Dingy \_\_\_\_\_
- Marshall \_\_\_\_\_
- Mortgage \_\_\_\_\_
- Enameled \_\_\_\_\_
- Flourished \_\_\_\_\_

II. Dialect Interpretation - Cross out the words and write the correct spelling above.

Com'on over here, Easy, This here's somebody I want ya t'meet.

This here's a ole friend'a mines.

Mr. Albright lookin' for a man to do a lil job, Easy. I told him you otta work an'got a mortgage t'pay too.

III. Character Description - Jot down or sketch any information about the characters. You could include how he/she looks, acts, dresses, where they like to hang out, friends, enemies, strengths, weaknesses, their likes, dislikes, typical sayings, attitude, opinions, occupation, hobbies, feelings/thoughts, behavior etc. Include any specific quotes you find interesting (include page numbers).

Include the chapter in which you learned the information about each character. You will add new descriptors as you continue to read the novel.

Joppy

Easy Rawlins

DeWitt Albright

Journal Prompt - Write as many complete sentences as you can.

I predict . . .

IV. Title the Chapter - Go back to the beginning of the Chapter's worksheet and fill in a title you think would best describe this chapter

---

<https://teachers.yale.edu>

©2023 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University, All Rights Reserved. Yale National Initiative®, Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute®, On Common Ground®, and League of Teachers Institutes® are registered trademarks of Yale University.

For terms of use visit [https://teachers.yale.edu/terms\\_of\\_use](https://teachers.yale.edu/terms_of_use)