



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative  
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## **Reading Art through Poetry**

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In his book *The Gazers Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art*, John Hollander asserts that the term, Ecphrasis, has been until very recently a "technical term used by classicists and historians of art to mean a description of a work of art.. <sup>1</sup>" This bit of information was reassuring for me, having taught middle school for over twelve years and having never used the term or the named theory at all. Although my students and I had no knowledge of the theory attached to the verbal description of artwork, that does not mean that we as a class had not been practicing writing ecphrastically. In fact we have been writing ecphrastically for the past several years. This past year my class participated in a journal writing exercise on the Hopper painting "Nighthawks." Many students not only enjoyed the exercise, but noted it as one of the most rewarding writing experiences when looking back on the school year in June. The painting proved a source of inspiration for many of the students, leading them to the creation of their own short stories and poetry. In the past we have also written about art museum pieces, posters chosen from the We the People posters that are given to schools as part of an NIH grant, and we regularly use laminated photos and artwork to get us started writing in our journals. In this unit my hopes are that the artists of the Harlem Renaissance will provide equally worthy inspiration for my students to write their own ecphrastic poetry.

Leading students through "Reading Art Through Poetry" will help them to not only explore and experiment with ecphrastic poetry, but to discover much more the poetry and artwork of an extremely important era in our country's history--the Harlem Renaissance. Beginning with the exploration of Harlem itself, the unit will give students background with examples of what was happening in Harlem in the early twentieth Century in the arts, literature and music. Students will find inspiration to write their own ecphrastic pieces by studying the works of poets Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks as well as great artists such as Jacob Lawrence, William H. Johnson and Romare Bearden. Finally the inspiration gathered through the study of art and poetry of the Harlem Renaissance will lead to the students' creation of books of ecphrastic poetry

Artwork has always been a source of inspiration for poets and students alike. From Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" or Browning's fictional examination of art in "My Last Duchess," to Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Prosperpine" and Allen Ginsberg's "The Corn Harvester," art has often served as an inspiration for the written word and a vehicle often leading to the creation of great poetry born of artistic inspiration.

Working in an arts magnet school, my students are surrounded by an abundance of material to look to for poetic inspiration. Our school, like most schools, is decorated throughout with artwork, both professionally and student created. What is different about our middle school as opposed to others is the degree to which our students are exposed to art. In our arts magnet school students are inundated with and introduced to art in all

of their subjects; dancers dance to music, to visual arts, and to poetry; photographers not only photograph the arts throughout the building, but they create it as well; and English and other academic classes regularly attempt to bridge the gap between the written word and art. The value and importance of art is highly respected in our school and every unit which I create for my students attempts to wed the arts and the written word.

Students are fortunate to become a part of the arts community through an arts magnet school. Every year my school presents a large art show called "As Far as the Eye Can See," in which incredible sculpture, visual arts, video, photography and other art forms are highlighted in a forum that includes an exclusive opening in which our strings orchestra greets local dignitaries who choose to attend. Our school regularly sets up exhibits in public areas throughout the city, including the town hall, the board of education building, local museums, the train station and even the New Haven Green. Field trips to area museums and galleries are a regular occurrence with students visiting the Yale Art Gallery, The Yale Center for British Art, smaller local galleries as well as larger facilities outside of our city including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Museum of Modern Art in New York. Students at our school are taught early that arts are and should be a part of their lives both in and outside the classroom setting.

Not unlike the function of an arts magnet school, this study of ecphrastic poetry will attempt to wed, or merge the more standard academic pursuits (the study of poetry, the writing process) with the arts. Students will learn how to view art, to write poetry, and to merge the two. The focus or the tools that I will use to get us there will be the art and poetry of the Harlem Renaissance. This pivotal period of American culture is rich with materials that will allow me to lead students through a process that begins with the understanding of how to view art, how to appreciate poetry and, finally, how to merge their new appreciation of art and poetry in their own ecphrastic books--including not only poems about the art of the Harlem Renaissance, but about the art and paintings that surround them in their own environment every day.

## Purpose

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This unit is designed in a multiple tiered fashion meant to help students find their way from the observation of art to the creation of their own art in response to the art which they have been observing. At the beginning of the unit students learn how to be better observers of art. A teacher bringing a class of students into an art museum without preparing them for the experience is destined to see that modern students need a lesson or two in the art of observing art, the technique needed to be successful in their attempts to become better readers of art. During this part of the unit I will introduce the reader to a method of observation introduced to teachers at my school several years ago by instructors from the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

The second section of my unit focuses on the study of poetry. Here I will introduce several key approaches to the writing of poetry that will help students to become better writers and to improve on the poetry that they currently write. The importance of incorporating sensory images in the writing of poetry will be explored as will the concept of "voice" in poetry and the importance of determining the ending of lines and punctuation in the writing of free verse.

Focusing on the paintings and poetry of the Harlem Renaissance will give my students a glimpse into an incredible period of the development of African American culture. Many students come to the eighth grade

with little or no knowledge of what the Harlem Renaissance was, and the impact of the movement on the development of the arts in the twentieth century is inarguably an important one that they should not miss. I believe that eighth grade students should not leave middle school without some knowledge of what went on in this country in Harlem in the beginning of the Twentieth Century.

The merging of art and poetry is really what an arts magnet school is all about and what educators of middle school students should be pursuing. Visual arts, in fact all arts, are always a key to academic success on the middle school level. Any teacher can tell you that there is a huge difference in any lesson when a visual or object of some sort is introduced to the lesson. The fourth section of my unit unites the poetry and artwork in examples that students will utilize in the writing of their own poetry based on artwork, seeking to capitalize on the lessons they have learned in the previous sections, giving them a chance to read art through poetry. In this section students will write their own poetry and refine their poetry writing through the writer workshop method of multiple draft writing.

I want my students to become better creative writers and I want them to become creative artists. This is why I include the final section of the unit. As mentioned earlier, I am a firm believer that the arts are a vital part of the education of all students and I strive to include art in most of the units that I create. The culminating activity of this unit, the creation of poetry books, not only serves as a means of alternate assessment, but is an open-ended, creative project in which students will be able to display their own artistic abilities based on their own choices.

## **A Note on the Curriculum**

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This past year (2009–2010 school year) the city of New Haven introduced a new, performance based assessment English Language Arts curriculum which was the result of a two year effort of approximately two dozen area teachers, supervisors and advisors. This massive document was designed to provide the district with a flexible and practical reading and writing based curriculum. While the focus on poetry in the curriculum is set for the third quarter, the epiphastic approach to writing poetry and the creation of books of poetry leads to exactly the type of performance based assessment opportunities that are offered in the curriculum.

The time, effort, dedication and training that has gone into developing the teaching of language arts in New Haven is important to this unit, for many aspects of the new curriculum will appear in the unit. While the city is focusing on aspects such as reader workshop, journal writing and performance based assessment, the writer workshop introduced in the section below is probably the most relevant to this unit.

### **The Writer Workshop**

The writer workshop is an essential part of the new, New Haven, 6–8 curriculum. Writer workshop is a way of teaching writing that emphasizes revision based on mini lessons, and revision. The format used in this unit has its roots in the New Haven teaching community and a partnership with the Connecticut Writing Project, an affiliate of the National Writing Project. In order to run the writer workshop in the classroom, teachers need to be flexible in their instruction as well as trustful of their students. The tight grip we often associate with classroom management must be loosened a bit when implementing writer workshop in the classroom. The reason for this is the same reason that the writer workshop really works for children; it allows and encourages

students to work at their own pace and to progress at a rate that is comfortable for them. Not all students will be on the second draft at the same time because not all of the students will finish their first draft and move on at the same time. The writer workshop can be a very intimidating teaching tool for this very reason. A classroom of twenty five middle school students all working on some different aspect or phase of their writing can look like a class out of control. Some students may be on the computer typing, some may be involved in conversation around peer editing, some may be getting up to gather supplies for another draft and some may be working in their journal, or conferencing with the teacher. Sounds like chaos, but it doesn't have to be if students are taught early in the year how the writer workshop works.

At the beginning of every writer workshop session I review the basic steps that students will be going through in order to complete a writing task: brainstorming topics is usually first, followed by first draft, peer conference, second draft, teacher conference and finally a third or final draft. Students need to be taught how to make their way through these six steps in order for the workshop to run smoothly. And key to a teacher keeping his or her sanity during the writer workshop is turning much of the responsibility of the progression back to the students. Students must understand that they are responsible for keeping track of the writing process that is going on in their workshop. If a teacher is able as early as possible to emphasize students being responsible for keeping track of their place in the process, everything will work smoothly during this process.

Having students keep track of their own progress is key to the success of a writer workshop. Last year I implemented a bulletin board on which students could keep track of their own progress as they went through the process. Each student was assigned a Popsicle stick to write their name on. The stick had a Velcro backing so that the students could move their names across a felt board which is labeled with their class period and the several steps of the writing process. We all begin on brainstorming or seeds, but like a pack of runners in a marathon, the field quickly thins as each writer finds his or her own pace and goes through the steps. Other teachers have used paint stirrers for name labels and cans for the writing steps. Students simply move their paint stirrer along as they make their way through the writing process. Others have used magnets, pencils and numerous other objects with varied labeled containers or bulletin boards. The important thing to do here is set up a system where students are responsible for monitoring their own progress.

Another key element in writer workshop is the mini lesson. When working on writer workshop, teachers need to prepare short lessons to introduce to students as they make their way through the writing process. Teachers decide what a specific class is weak in and create a mini-lesson for students to focus on. For example if a class is weak in punctuating quotations, a teacher will spend ten to twenty minutes on a lesson on the use of quotations and commas in dialogue. Once students go through the mini lesson, they return to writer workshop. The material from the mini lessons becomes the focus of peer group editing. This is really a departure from past practice when peer editing meant a student looked at another student's work and corrected everything from punctuation to spelling to format to dialogue and leads. This practice is unrealistic. Students cannot be expected to be experts on every aspect of editing a paper, so instead the two or three mini lesson topics introduced during the workshop now become the focus. Students understand the topic; they have practiced it and should be expected to be on target with that topic in this writing workshop. I keep the mini lessons, post them near the felt board and of course change them for each new writer workshop piece. Students do not get overwhelmed with the material and actually know how to help each other during the peer editing section of their writing.

The writer workshop takes a lot of up front preparation and organization, but when it becomes routine to teacher and students, the process is extremely rewarding and can make a huge difference in the progress

that students make in their writing. Since I have started using writer workshop in my classroom, students have started to really understand that one draft of writing is rarely enough. Using writer workshop with poetry is a good way to start the school year. The smaller pieces help students focus better and allow them to get through the entire process several times before moving onto more extensive pieces later in the year.

## **Journal Writing**

Journal writing has also been recently introduced to the students in New Haven. All of my students are required to have writing journals which we keep in the classroom. It is divided into four sections: "Seeds" for brainstorming, "Nurturing" for the expansion of ideas, "Craft" for rules and reminders on writing, and "Response to Literature" where students respond to what is being read in class. I also keep a journal of my own and when students are writing I try to join them. Periodically I will write comments in their journal as I keep track of the progress they are making on their writing.

## **Learning to View Art**

Students in New Haven are fortunate to have several excellent museums and galleries to choose from right in the city. One museum we regularly visit is the Yale Center for British Art. This museum holds the largest collection of British art outside of Great Britain. Artists from the 16th Century on are represented in the museum, which includes fine examples of a variety of work from a large spectrum of British artists. Both permanent and changing exhibitions combined with lectures, gallery talks, tours, films and concerts make the museum one of the focal points of education in the New Haven area.

The museum works closely with area schools and for several years has welcomed Betsy Ross Arts Magnet School students to the center. Students are led through the museums by teachers and docents and are encouraged to examine and interpret the art. While the Yale Center for British Art is the starting point of my unit, any museum or gallery will do just fine for the start of the unit. Students need to go somewhere to learn to view art correctly

One of my main objectives when we visit an art museum is to get the students to understand what is expected of them in the museum (behaviorally). Some of my students have never been to a museum, so part of the learning here concerns the museum atmosphere. Students need to know to keep their voices down. They need to know that the artwork and the walls are not to be touched. They are given a brief overview of the museum, what is on which floor, who is in charge, who the security guards are and why they are there. They need to know that gum chewing and eating or drinking are absolutely out of the question. Sometimes they are introduced to the director or curator of the museum and they are welcomed. Students are only gradually learning to be a good audience and all of these ideas and concepts need to be introduced to them before they even begin to look at artwork. Once they understand the rules and what is expected of them, students sit in front of the work, observe quietly for a minute and then are asked to share their feelings on the work. I ask probing questions to get the students to share their thoughts: what do you see? What makes you say that? Does anyone see anything else? What else do you see? What is this? What do you think this is? Why? Does anyone else see that? Does anyone else see anything different? All the students' comments are welcomed and encouraged. No answer is wrong and no answer or interpretation is any better or worse than any other. Students are learning, not only to observe and notice things about the artwork, but to also respect each other's opinions and listen to other ideas. Every time students are introduced to artwork in this unit as a class, their first encounter with the artwork looks much like what was described above. If I am unable to make trips to the museum, I use the lesson above on posters and slides in the classroom. The same rules apply and the same respect for each other's thoughts and ideas should continue.

## Background

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### The Harlem Renaissance

After I am comfortable with the students' level of understanding regarding the viewing of artwork, I introduce them to the Harlem Renaissance, the time period which will be the focus of much of the unit. This movement, which lasted from the twenties into the early forties, was one of the most significant groundswells culturally that any group of people have achieved in this country. *In Beloved Harlem; a Literary Tribute to Black America's Most Famous Neighborhood*, William Banks characterizes the beginning of the movement as "a stellar, singular roll of time in which the generations of blacks born in the wake of the Civil War descended on an unpopular plot of real estate in upper New York City and commenced to making a bit of heaven for themselves. <sup>2</sup> " And it was a bit of heaven, for as African Americans flocked to New York in search of a dream and an identity, figures such as Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Romare Bearden and Langston Hughes led an incredible cultural revolution that would shape not only the future of African American culture, but the future of American writing, music and art as well.

There are several ways to introduce the Harlem Renaissance to students, but one way that I have found rewarding is to allow the students to make their own discoveries. After a brief discussion about what the word "Renaissance" means, I allow my students to go onto the internet to explore the period themselves. In a sort of internet treasure hunt, students find out about the period, the dates, the figures in music, in art, in literature. They gather the background knowledge needed to go ahead with the unit. (See the appendix for the "Harlem Renaissance Treasure Hunt Worksheet.") This is actually a good strategy to use when introducing any new information to students. Whenever possible, teachers should allow students to find information on their own, on the internet or in the library. Students feel a sense of accomplishment and are more likely to retain the information which they have gained on their own

#### *Visual Artists of the Harlem Renaissance*

The three artists of the Harlem Renaissance that I will focus on in this unit are Jacob Lawrence, William H. Johnson, and Romare Bearden. Of course there are plenty of other artists that teachers can focus on, including Aaron Douglas, Palmer Hayden, James Van Der Zee, and others, but I chose these artists specifically for several reasons.

Jacob Lawrence's painting, like the poetry of Langston Hughes, is extremely accessible to students in Middle school. Using bright colors and sharp angles, Lawrence's paintings are reminiscent of comic books, or the graphic novel. The historical panels that he is famous for are visual lectures on figures who make up a sort of "who's who" of middle school history books: *The Life of Frederick Douglas* (41 panels); *The Life of Harriet Tubman* (40 panels); *The Migration of the Negro Northwards* (60 panels); or the life of Toussaint L' Overture (41 panels). <sup>3</sup> Lawrence becomes a visual historian or a teacher through these incredible works of art. Students will also see their own lives in the simple subject matter chosen by Lawrence in his other work. Works such as "Brownstones," "Barbershop," "Parade," "Home Chores" and "Library" examine African American life through simple, everyday images that students will be able to relate to on many levels.

While much of William H. Johnson's work seems simplistic, even "primitive" as he himself once called it, this artist's work was significant. His earlier works focused on depictions of African Americans in religious scenes. It is not unusual to see a black Jesus or Mary in these pieces. Later in his career, much as in Lawrence's



historical series, Johnson focused on heroic or historical figures such as Frederick Douglass in his paintings. But it is his mid career, when Johnson focused on the simple depiction of the plight of the African American, that will be utilized in this unit. David Driskell in *The Flowering of the Harlem Renaissance: The Art of Aaron Douglas, Meta Warrick Fuller, Palmer Hayden, and William H. Johnson* comments on the importance of Johnson's work, asserting that Johnson rejected common elitist views of art and worked to "develop an awareness of the social plight of Black people in America," setting out to enlighten the "Black Community about their own history and heritage." <sup>4</sup> Students will find Johnson's use of bright colors and two dimensional, flat artwork perhaps too simple at first, reminding them of their own work or that of their classmates, but partly for this very reason his paintings are exactly the type of artwork that students will find easy to relate to and write about.

The same, in regard to middle school students' accessibility, can be said of Romare Bearden. Famous for his collages, Bearden will inspire students and provide a new medium to focus on when writing ecphrastically. A host of Bearden images appear on the National Gallery of Arts homepage at the time of this writing. Among the images I intend to use in the unit are "Black Manhattan," "Card Players," "Childhood," and "Madeline Jones' Wonderful garden, 1977." These images will increase the students' understanding of the way art depicts everyday life and the different mediums used by artists.

### *Langston Hughes*

Langston Hughes was the voice of the Harlem Renaissance. More than any other writer of the time, Langston Hughes came to represent the period. Many of my students have heard of Hughes, who really "helped to define the spirit of the age." <sup>5</sup> He is a favorite among the writers of the period for many reasons, and is especially helpful in this unit, much like the painters mentioned above, owing to his accessibility.

Hughes's career took off after one year at Columbia University with the 1921 publication of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" in the *Crisis*, a publication born of the Harlem Renaissance. James Smethworth comments in *Lyric Stars: Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes* that Hughes's free verse poems, including "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," are "vehicles for Hughes' deepest musings on the nature of African American identity and its historical, cultural and spiritual connections to Africa." <sup>6</sup> Much as Lawrence and Johnson were using their paintings to raise awareness as to the plight of the African American, so too did Hughes begin to sing the sad song of a "dream deferred." In 1926 the poet published his first collection of poems, *The Weary Blues*, the first to use the blues form in poetry. <sup>7</sup> Hughes experimented with voice and vernacular in many of the blues pieces including "Homesick Blues" (Da railroad bridge's/A sad song in de air ll1-2), the "Po' Boy Blues" (I's so weary/I wish I'd never been born. ll 22-23) as well as "Mother to Son" (Well, son, I'll tell you;/Life for me ain't been no crystal stair. ll1-2) Hughes is identifying the African American experience through the use of speech. As with the stroke of a brush Hughes is painting the African American voice as part of a cultural identity. Smethurst comments, "Hughes' vernacular pieces make plain their identity as speech, generally either a folk monologue or song." <sup>8</sup>

Much as students will look to Walter Dean Myers' Harlem for examples of imagery in their poetry, they will look to Langston Hughes for lessons on persona or voice and line breaks in free verse.

While there are numerous other writers that could be utilized for an examination of the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance, the lack of ecphrastic poetry from the period is surprising. Examples of Harlem Renaissance poets writing about the visual arts are almost non-existent. There are examples, which I will use in the unit, of modern poets writing about the art of the period, but not contemporaries. On the other hand, poets and

writers writing about music and the emergence of jazz during this time period is not lacking and would make a complete teaching unit of its own. The ecphrastic section of this unit mostly focuses on my students' attempt to bridge this gap. Langston Hughes steps in to remind us of the technique of writing poetry and provides examples for mini lessons, but the focus of the unit is really on the art of the period and my students writing of ecphrastic poetry based on that art.

## The Unit

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The unit I am creating is intended to be used with my eighth grade students in my language arts class. Social Studies and art teachers may also find the unit helpful as it can be utilized for a multi-disciplinary platform for the teaching not only of ecphrastic poetry, but also for a survey of the art and literature of the Harlem Renaissance. As mentioned in my rationale, it is designed to lead students from the observation of art and poetry, both separately and ecphrastically, to the creation of students' own volumes of ecphrastic poetry. As with most teacher produced materials, minor changes to the unit will make it accessible to either higher or lower grade levels.

### Section one: Introduction to Harlem

I begin this section of the unit with an exploration of Walter Dean Myers's *Harlem*, a book of art next to poetry. Walter Dean Meyers is an extremely popular writer who grew up in Harlem and writes urban fiction that involves the coming of age plights of today's youth. An award winning poem, illustrated by the author's son, Christopher Myers, *Harlem* is a resource I like to use with students every year. Before reading the poem, show the students the Lawrence painting from the *Great Migration of the Negro* series (panel 1). Ask the students how the painting relates to what they know about Harlem already. Read the book out loud or in a "popcorn" reading session. Christopher Myers' incredible artwork, paired with that of Jacob Lawrence, begins to make the connection between poetry and artwork which is vital to this unit. I remind students that images are a big part of what makes some poetry work and point out some images in the Myers poem. As we read the poem a second time I ask students to list the sensory images in the poem. Images such as "Hide-and-seek knights" or "Cracked reed/soprano sax laughter" spring up in the discussion as do references to figures students discover in their research. We try to define the meanings in relation to their newly obtained background knowledge of both the poetry and the artwork. Honor Moorman in her article "Backing into Ecphrasis: Reading and Writing Poetry about Visual Arts," points out that "both poetry and art speak to our imaginations through the power of images" <sup>9</sup> Once we have discussed and shared our imagery from the poetry, I introduce students to a second painting: Jacob Lawrence's magnificent depiction of a Harlem neighborhood; *Brownstones*.

Utilizing the art viewing method mentioned above, students are asked to look closely at the painting before sharing their observations. Once we have observed the painting we begin to list images that we see in the painting, which are much like the images we listed when looking at the poem *Harlem*. Once again students share and compare images and figurative language, as we did with the poetry. Finally I ask students to write about the painting utilizing the images they pointed out. Students can write either prose or poetry in their writing journals and then share with each other in groups or as a class. The students have just taken part in their first practice of ecphrastic writing. For homework students are to bring in a visual representation of their own neighborhood along with a poem written about it with several sensory images or examples of figurative language included. (Note to readers: At the time of the writing of this publication the Whitney Museum has an



interactive Webquest set up for *Brownstones* in which students can highlight parts of the painting and answer questions based on the work. The site provides teachers with another means of introducing the painting to the class)

The first original ecphrastic poem students come in with (about a piece of artwork about their neighborhood) should run through writers' workshop. I review the importance of sensory images and figurative language in a ten minute mini lesson utilizing the images we came up with the day before. It may take a day or two for students to get through the steps of a writer workshop, but when they are done (including a typed draft with all previous drafts included), I have students keep both the artwork and the poetry together in a folder.

## **Section II- Exploring voice through ecphrastic poetry**

The focus of the second section of the unit begins with an examination of voice. Langston Hughes' "Mother to Son" is a perfect sample for examining an author's use of voice in poetry. Have several students read the poem. Each will put his or her own personality into the poem, doing dramatic readings. This helps to emphasize the importance of voice or persona in poetry. Have a discussion. Who is speaking in the poem? Who is it asserting that "Life for me ain't been no crystal staircase?" In a method parallel to the art viewing section of the unit, ask students what they hear in the poem. If they say, "The speaker can't speak correct English," for example, I ask them what makes them say that. Where is the evidence, and what does that tell us about the speaker? What kind of assumptions or predictions can students make about the speaker of the poem and what leads them to that conclusion? Is it true as Regennia N. Williams and Carmeletta M. Williams conclude in their essay "Mother to Son: The letters from Carrie Hughes Clark to Langston Hughes, 1928-1938," that the "message or voice in 'Mother to Son' represents the relationship between Hughes and his grandmother, Mary Leary Langston.?"<sup>10</sup> We discuss the terms "persona" and "voice" before looking at the next image from Jacob Lawrence, *The Seamstress*.

I ask students to spend some time looking at the painting through the method earlier mentioned in the unit and review what students see. After a brief discussion on the painting, I ask students to write a line of dialogue using the person in the painting's persona. Students can share in small groups and then share out loud. Ask students to pay close attention to the voice which they have given *The Seamstress*. What problems does the figure face? What might she be thinking or saying and why do students come to this conclusion? Do students think *The Seamstress* speaks like someone they know? Why or why not? Students continue writing the monologue they have started and to try and make the voice consistent throughout. Once students have finished their monologues, we have another look at "Thank you Ma'm." Why does Hughes end the lines where he does? Point out that poets, not the punctuation, make the decision on how and where to end the line in a line of free verse. Point out that as John Hollander says in *Rhyme's Reason*, "since a line may be determined in almost any way, and since lines may be determined in almost any way, and since lines may be grouped on the page in any fashion, it is the mode of variation itself which is significant."<sup>11</sup> In other words in free verse, because there is so much freedom the decision involved in ending and beginning lines actually becomes extremely important. Why did the poet decide to end the line here and not there? Why does the word "Bare" get its own line in the Hughes poem? What sort of visual effect do the line breaks in "Mother to Son" create? Does the poem look like a staircase? After considering free verse and line breaks in poems, have students go back to their monologues and make some changes in line breaks. Finally students work in small groups to review each other's poems in the writer workshop, focusing on persona and line breaks.

This is also a good place to allow students to practice writing ecphrastic poetry utilizing some of the images mentioned above. I run a mini lesson on free verse, going over examples and trying to show students that not

all poetry fits an exact, technical form. I like to get students away from rhyming and rapping everything they write in middle school and the introduction of free verse should help with that. With this additional lesson students should be able to look at some paintings and write their own poems without too much guidance. I break the students into four groups and assign each group one of four Lawrence images mentioned earlier in the unit. "Barbershop," "Parade," "Home Chores" and "Library" are four excellent examples of Lawrence's work that focus on the African American experience and will be easy for students to relate to. I allow students time to view the images and then have each group member create their own poem based on the artwork. After students have had a chance to write, I assign a group leader to lead a discussion and a group writer workshop where everyone is examining each other's work and group feedback leads to a piece to revise. Finally I will have students share their poems with the images as a backdrop.

## **The Blues**

No discussion of the Harlem Renaissance is complete without a discussion of the music. The movement was as much about music, the embracing of the blues and the invention of jazz, as it was about anything else. Langston Hughes was the first African American poet to experiment with the blues form in his poetry as he led his contemporaries on a quest for identity. I begin talking about music of this era with students by asking them about their music. Students are always eager to share their musical favorites and quick to scoff at others, but when they are reminded that all the modern music that they are familiar with--jazz, rock, hip hop, soul and rap--are descendants of the blues, the conversation takes a different turn. I bring in music for them to hear and ask them to bring in some music of their own to compare. Using t-charts or Venn diagrams, I ask students to compare the music, looking especially for similarities between the pieces. Then we turn back to Langston Hughes.

One of Hughes' most successful poems, "The Weary Blues," is a wonderful example for students to read, as the poem examines the African American condition at the turn of the century. Smethhurst asserts that free verse poems such as "The Weary Blues" "are often vehicles for Hughes' deepest musings of the nature of African American Identity and its historical, cultural, and spiritual connections to Africa."<sup>12</sup> The poem also embraces the focus of our mini lessons in this unit: persona, voice and free verse. Both "Po' Boy Blues" and "Homesick Blues" are poems that can be read aloud and also sung to a blues beat. I allow students to play around with the poems, banging out the blues beat on their desks, or if a more musical student wants to bring in a guitar or harmonica, they can play the beat while someone else sings the poem. After going over the similarities between the blues pieces, I ask students to try writing their own blues. We brainstorm titles out loud (*Lunchroom Blues*, *Spaghetti Blues*, *Summertime Blues*, etc.), jot down ideas in our journals and then write the blues. Students enjoy writing these short pieces, and we share out loud.

Finally I tell students that I want them to write ecphrastic blues based on the artwork of another figure from the Harlem Renaissance, William H. Johnson. Choice is always important so I put up three Johnson images for students to work with. In *Moon over Harlem* Johnson depicts the aftermath of a street fight; in *Chain Gang*, Johnson depicts several prisoners in stripes chained together; and finally *Lil Sis* is a simple, yet touching full length portrait of an African American girl. After examining the pieces, I ask students to write some blues. In this case, I allow students to combine paintings in their lyrics or use the images individually. Some students will naturally combine the images, creating a story while others will want to write separate poems for each. I tell students that at least one of their writings needs to be a blues piece, but not all.

## **Romare Bearden and collage**

Introducing Romare Bearden at this point allows students to examine another medium in their ecphrastic writing. Famous for his work with collage, Bearden is an artist not always closely related to the Harlem Renaissance, but his work clearly focuses on African American life in New York during the mid Twentieth Century. Students enjoy his art because it is different and it is an art form that they are familiar with. I have students go back to the computers and look for Bearden images that we can work with. I ask students to look for collages which inspire them. Some works they might come across are *Black Manhattan*, *Card Players*, *Childhood* and a host of others.

Once students have found their inspirational Bearden image, they are to write their own ecphrastic poem, find a partner to run the poem through writer workshop with and finally prepare to share their work with the class. It will take a day or so for students to do a sort of "show and tell" with their images and poetry.

After working with Bearden I encourage students to look elsewhere in the building, outside, or in their books for artwork that inspires them to write one more ecphrastic poem. I give them a period to organize their poems and prepare to put them into their own books.

### **Section III- Ecphrastic Books**

At this point it is time for students to organize their poetry and create a book of their own verse. How far a teacher wants to go with this section of the unit is really up to the individual. You could easily spend up to a month on this section of the unit alone. At minimum students will need their typed poems, the ability to print or photocopy images which they worked with, papers, scissors and glue. I have had students make books before in my classroom with no other supplies than what we had available to us (paper, cardboard, glue sticks, scissors, computers) and students were able to create a variety of books (accordion, flip books, pocket books, etc.) within about a week. There are web sites and books in which book making is explored to a wide degree, but again it is up to the teacher how much time, effort, and resources teachers and students want to spend on this project. See lesson plan three and Appendix A for more guidance on the project.

## **Sample Lesson Plans**

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### **Lesson Plan One: Images: Harlem and Brownstones**

#### *Objectives*

This lesson is meant to help students get used to understand how images in art and poetry complement each other. Students will listen to or read Walter Dean Myers' poem *Harlem* while examining the art in the book. They will begin to identify images from the poem and then identify images in Lawrence's *Brownstones*. After brainstorming images from the poem and painting, students will create a web in which they will utilize images from their own neighborhood and prepare to write a piece on an image from their own neighborhood.

#### *Materials*

Students will need their journals, a copy of the poem *Harlem*, a tape recorder if you are using the recorded version of the poem, and the Lawrence painting, *Brownstones*. Students will also need to come up with a picture or drawing of their own neighborhood which they will write about.

### *Initiation*

Ask students what an image is. Take a few minutes to talk about how important images are to poets. I often tell students poets paint pictures in our minds through words and images. Ask students to give you examples of images from literature or poetry that they are familiar with. Sometimes I will have students draw an image and then describe it in words on the back of the drawing.

### *Procedure*

After talking about images, ask students to listen closely as Sean "Puff Daddy" Combs reads "Harlem" to them from cassette. The Scholastic Book recording and illustrated version of this poem is wonderful for this part of the unit. Students listen very closely and you can have a student show the class the illustrations in the book as it is read. Before beginning ask students to jot down the images that really strike them. There are many images in the poem that the students love. Ask the class to share the images that they enjoyed. Reiterate how images really put a picture in our minds through some of the examples.

After going through the poem with students, allow them to look at *Brownstones* by Jacob Lawrence. Once again, brainstorm images that they see in the painting. Ask them how a poet would describe those images.

Now give students a web organizer. Ask them to write "my neighborhood" in the center and to think of some images that remind them of their neighborhood.

### *Closure*

Share some of the images students come up with. Students should go home and prepare an image from their neighborhood. It could be a photo, a drawing, even a painting. Have students bring in the image so that on the following day they can write about their neighborhood, much as Myers has written about his own.

## **Lesson Plan Two- Voice or Persona in Poetry**

### *Objectives*

This lesson is meant to help students understand how poets use persona in poetry. It will be important for students as they begin writing their own ecphrastic poetry to understand how they can use voice in their writing.

### *Materials*

Students will need their journals, a copy of the poem "Mother to Son" by Langston Hughes and the poem "We Real Cool" by Gwendolyn Brooks.

### *Initiation*

Start out by reading the poem "Mother to Son" out loud. I purposely read it rather deadpan so that I have lots of students ready to "correct" my reading with a more accurate rendition of vernacular used in the poem. Several students read the poem out loud so we get a little different rendition and a variety of student interpretations of the lines.

### *Procedure*

After reading through the poem, have a discussion with students as to why Langston Hughes, one of our greatest poets, would decide to write a poem using the type of slangy language which we see in "Mother to Son." Students will come to realize that Hughes has created a voice or persona in his poem. The author is not the speaker, instead the "mother," who students will quickly point out sounds more like a grandmother, is speaking in the poem. Hughes has decided to create a character in his poem. Point out that students should feel free to do the same when they are writing about paintings.

### *Closure*

Ask students to think of someone they know and write a few lines of verse using that person's voice. Share the writing out loud. What do students notice about creating a persona in their writing? Students are now primed to write poems about some of the paintings mentioned above, or paintings that you decide to use in your classroom.

## **Lesson Plan Three--Preparing For Publishing**

### *Objectives*

This lesson is meant to help students explore the possibilities as to how to finalize their collection of epiphastic poetry.

### *Materials*

Students will need their journals, a folder with their finalized (workshopped) poems, and images for their poetry books. You will have prepared samples of student produced books and any material/instruction on book making that you have gathered.

### *Initiation*

Start out by asking students to list ways to make a book in the seed section of their journal. You will be surprised at how many varieties of book making students will come up with.

### *Procedure*

After discussing the methods for creating a book which students have come up with, have some samples prepared to share with students. I am fortunate to have an elaborate art department in my building which I can turn to for samples of simple, yet incredible binding techniques. Last year I was given samples of accordion books, mini flip books, and simple cardboard covers wrapped in fabric and woven together with string. There are also web sites on book binding which you can show students to help them decide how they will produce their poetry books.

### *Closure*

Now that students have a better idea of how to create their volumes of poetry, ask them to write a proposal for their book creation to you. Set up the proposal like a query letter. Tell students you (the teacher) are the publisher and they should submit a detailed proposal as to not only what kind of book they plan to produce, but what will be in it, in what order, etc. This proposal should be written as a formal letter. Not only are you helping students organize their ideas, you are also helping them practice persuasion, not to mention giving you a heads up as to what degree of help individuals will need in putting their books together. Once you have

gotten the letters from students, set up conferencing time to touch base with them and make sure they are on the right track for book production.

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## Appendix A: The Ecphrastic Poetry Book Score Sheet

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Use the following score sheet to score your project before handing it in:

	Student	Teacher
1. Images and poetry are combined in book (30)	_____	_____
2. Neighborhood poem is included (10)	_____	_____
3. Poem inspired by work of Jacob Lawrence (10)	_____	_____
4. Poem inspired by work of William Johnson (10)	_____	_____
5. Poem inspired by work of Romare Bearden (10)	_____	_____
6. Poem inspired by artwork in school (10)	_____	_____
7. Poem inspired by artwork outside of school (10)	_____	_____
8. Student introduces project in share day (10)	_____	_____
9. Extra ecphrastic poems (extra credit)	_____	_____
TOTAL	_____	_____

## Appendix B: Implementing District Standards

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### Connecticut's Common Core of Learning Program Goals

Having completed this unit, students will have achieved the following Connecticut's Common Core of Learning Program Goals for Language Arts:

- Create works using the language arts in visual, oral and written texts;
- Read, write, speak, listen and view to construct meaning of written, visual and oral texts;
- Choose and apply strategies that enhance the fluent and proficient use of the language arts; (brainstorming, use of graphic organizers)
- Read with understanding and respond thoughtfully to a variety of texts

When done with this unit, students will have achieved the following Connecticut's Common Core of Learning Program Goals for the arts;

- Create (imagine, experiment, plan, make, evaluate, refine and present/exhibit) art works that express concepts, ideas and feelings in each art form
- Respond (select, experience, describe, analyze, interpret and evaluate) with understanding to diverse art works and performances in each art form
- Understand the connections among the arts, other disciplines and daily life.

## New Haven Public Schools Academic Performance Standards

Students will also achieve the following goals from the New Haven Public Schools Academic Performance standards for eighth grade Language Arts;

- Students will demonstrate strategic reading skills before, during and after reading
- Students will demonstrate strategic writing behaviors
- Students will participate in a wide variety of writing experiences

## Endnotes

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