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Poetry Café The World of Langston Hughes

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Introduction

Poetry can be difficult to comprehend and even more difficult to teach. While exploring the poetry of the African American poet Langston Hughes I discovered this does not have to be so. In Hughes's poem "Life is Fine" he wrote,

I went down to the river, I set down on the bank. I tried to think but couldn't,
So I jumped in and sank.

This is not all that different than the way many of us approach a poem. If we have a hard time understanding what a poem is trying to say we might just sink. In order to see the beauty in a poem we have to commit to diving in and swimming through some tough currents. Langston Hughes is one of Americas most loved poets. He's a poet who can help us navigate these rough waters of verse.

Both children and adults dream. Hughes used the theme of Dreams as a way of seeing through the confusion of life. He explored how dreams can often be mysterious. By unlocking the mystery within our dreams we can make an attempt at understanding unrealized goals and aspirations. In "Dreamer" he states,

I take my dreams And make of them a bronze vase, And a wide fountain With a
beautiful statue in its center, And a song with a broken heart, And I ask you: Do
you understand my dreams? Sometimes you say you do And sometimes you say you don't.
Either way It doesn't matter. I continue to dream.

Much of his poetry suggests that nothing is too difficult to overcome. Nor was he bound by conventionality in his writing. Dreams are not binding, or based in reality. They can take you where you want to go and where you imagine yourself to be. Hughes believed that seemingly mundane experiences like walking down the street, attending school, or going to the store could become the stuff of art. His poetry was a simple blend of sounds and impressions. Hughes loved children and wrote many poems specifically for them. I have included several of them here in this unit as examples of the beauty and simplicity of his poetry. They are easy to grasp, yet deep enough to yield rich discussion.

Young children are spontaneous, and inquisitive in their nature. They see the world with fresh eyes, and often

have a unique way of putting this vision into words. This allows for a sense of freedom to create poetry that is not bound by conventions and can make it easier to teach than other forms of writing.

In order to capitalize on this sense of freedom a more relaxed café like setting in the classroom works well. Students are invited to move their desks aside and arrange their chairs in a circle, or small groups. The reading, discussion, and writing of poetry is better enjoyed in this special setting. Teacher and students alike use notepads, or clipboards for writing. This relaxed seating plan encourages communication that is different from other periods of the school day.

By creating a Poetry Café in our classroom we will establish a community of writers that is similar to that of the thriving community of the Harlem Renaissance. Langston Hughes was an instrumental figure during this period of the 1920's. He turned his life experiences into poetry. His work provided a lens with which to see the world. He was able to look at life with a sense of humor and in turn provide joy to those who read his poems. We will learn about what it was like to experience the crowds of new immigrants, artists, and writers that lived there as we step briefly into the world of 125th St., New York City, 1921. We will listen to the music of the Blues and see how it inspired Langston Hughes to write his revolutionary Jazz Poetry. We will learn about the influential artists and musicians. We will view original photos.

Students will learn how to listen to select poems. They will discuss these poems, and ultimately collaborate in our Café setting to create their own writing. Their writing will then be presented in a culminating activity where we invite parents and peers to an open house event of reading and recitations in our Poetry Café.

Rationale and Classroom Demographics

I am a 2nd and 3rd grade teacher at Brisbane Elementary School in Brisbane, California. Brisbane Elementary is one of three schools in the Brisbane Elementary School District. The other two schools have a unique population. San Bruno Mountain (a protected National Reserve) divides our district. Panorama School in Daly City has a very rich mix of cultures. Lipman Middle School is the feeder school for both elementary schools. Brisbane School is a K-5 school with approximately 200 students. The town itself is under 5,000 people in population. Although it is located just 10 minutes from San Francisco, many students never venture out of Brisbane.

Working in a school that is founded on the principles of Highly Effective Teaching we believe in the development of conceptual teaching, which is based on Thematic Units. In keeping with this method of teaching we will be studying not only the poetry of Langston Hughes, but also the culture of his era, which influenced him greatly, as he did it.

The town of Brisbane, ringed by the San Bruno Mountains has a unique flavor and culture largely unchanged over the past several generations. There is a spirit of independence still alive today that to some extent mirrors The Harlem Renaissance. With my students I plan to mimic this sense of community, creating our own Poetry Café.

Poetry is a form of literature that has the potential to reach everyone. It has a freedom of expression that is multisensory and moving. Hughes's poetry allows the reader to experience his life as he lived it. Reading his

poems can be like entering a Time Machine to the Harlem Renaissance. Poetry suits young children who tend to be spontaneous, and open-minded in their nature. In the words of Hughes:

- Poetry can both delight and disturb. It can interest folks. It can upset folks.
- Poetry can convey both pleasure and pain. And poetry can make people think.(1)

We will read and respond to Hughes' poems. Later we will create our own poems using these poems as models and inspirations. The students will be asked to choose a favorite Langston Hughes selection to memorize and recite along with their own work at an open house night of our Poetry Café. Transforming their feelings into words and sharing those words will be empowering for my students. Watching the reactions of friends and family as they recite poetry will provide life-long memories.

The poems of Langston Hughes provide an introduction to the world of rhythm, rhyme, and simply an appreciation of life as expressed through words. Hughes writes in the poem "Dreams,"

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly
(2)

Through the exploration of selected poems by Langston Hughes, such as "Dreams," (and the biographical story that inspired such poems) I will endeavor to provide 2nd and 3rd graders a glimpse into the world of 1920's Harlem. By transforming our classroom into a Poetry Cafe with the Jazz ballads of Bessie Smith and the Blues of Robert Johnson, and W.C. Handy, the students will begin to see how Hughes took the pathos of everyday life and turned it into Poetry. They will also start to be able to see how a person's experiences shape their identity.

In using the lens of Hughes' poetry, we will explore how the trials, tribulations, and joys of everyday life shape our views of ourselves and the world around us. Later by writing, sharing and discussing Hughes' poems, and sharing our own poetry, students will create a looking glass with which to view themselves, their classmates, and our classroom as a community.

Poetry is often thought of in terms of categories such as rhyme, rhythm, meter, and other "devices." But for young children this may not be the most engaging way to attack the subject. By reading aloud, and responding to poetry, young learners are engaging in learning in a proactive mode. Poetry can offer a new way of approaching literature. As Langdon Hammer put it in our seminar,

Poems ask us to pay attention to the sounds of words and to the look of language on a page, to the way words work through the ear and the eye. Poetry does this more explicitly and systematically than other kinds of writing.

Content Objectives

Poetry and the Common Core State Standards make a perfect pair. By using poetry as a form of literature I will be able to meet the needs of all my students, regardless of their Reading Levels. Poetry is best appreciated when read aloud; therefore it benefits both the strong and struggling readers. Students will be challenged to meet the CCSSELA-Lit.RL3.4 as they read poems to determine the meanings of words, phrases as they are

used in the text. In Langston Hughes's poem "Catch" students may be puzzled by the word choice,

Big Boy Came Carrying a Mermaid (3)

A natural discussion will ensue after reading "Catch" that might begin simply with, "Who is Big Boy? Why is he carrying a mermaid?" Students will be distinguishing between literal and non-literal language.

There is no right answer to these questions, only interpretations based on responses to specific features of the poem. Children love to tell tall tales and here is a perfect example of such a tale! No matter how much we explore the question of whether Big Boy was really carrying a mermaid we will never know the answer. Children will learn a lot from arguing these points in an opinion piece of writing (CCSELA-W.3.1). Whatever the case it's the journey, not the destination that matters.

We will be looking at poetry as if we are peeling back the layers of paint and wallpaper of an old building. Students will be pulling the words out of the page, analyzing the placement of those words, and what the writer intended them to mean. We will also focus on how each part, or stanza builds on the previous one to create the total picture (CCSELA-Lit.RL.3.7). Another activity that works well in a multi-grade classroom such as mine is to engage in Compare and Contrast exercises. We will compare our work to the poems of Langston Hughes both in structure and in subject. In our mixed level reading groups we can look at how two poems of a similar theme differ in nature, yet mirror each other. Why do some poems rhyme? Where is the rhyme? Why is there no rhyme? Why does this word come up so often? How is the placement of the word on the line (short, or long) important to the overall look and feel of the poem? These are all examples of the type of dialogue I see us having as we read Hughes' poems.

Second and third graders tend to take things for granted without really any deep thought. They are only 7-9 years old, after all. Their worlds consist of the tangible, the here and now. They need help to dig deeper, and look closer to see how a text is constructed (CCSELA-Lit.RL.3.7). This is where time spent focusing on such aspects as "beats" in a poem can point out how the mood of the poem is created.

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune, Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon (4)

Right from the start "The Weary Blues" sets the reader up to be lulled into the lazy rhythm of the poem. It has a pulse that moves it throughout almost like a lullaby would to an infant. Later there is repetition almost like a chorus in a popular tune. Something about that repetition makes you want to sing it, or chant it so that you can hear it again and again. When students focus on these aspects of the text and begin to make connections with the mechanics of the text, they start to see how the words the author used are there to emphasize a specific mood, or possibly create an image in the reader's mind of the character, or setting.

My students will have the opportunity to take a step back in time and get a snippet of what it was like in 1920's Harlem. Through their exposure to photographs, recordings of Blues and Jazz singers of that time period, and videos of the Cotton Club, I hope to recreate the atmosphere of The Harlem Renaissance. In listening to the crackly recordings of songs sung by Bessie Smith, Cab Calloway, and other jazz greats, students will begin to get the flavor of the sights, sounds, and smells Langston experienced walking down the street. We will look at how community shapes a person's worldview and begin to examine our own a little more closely through writing, drawing, and even recording.

Collaboration is a lifelong skill. In order to have any kind of discussion there needs to be a protocol. Students will help develop norms for ways to engage in comments on material read in class. They will learn to respond

to their classmate's presentations with informed thinking and appropriate questioning that will demonstrate not only their comprehension of the subject, but the success of the presenter.

Ultimately we will write poems ourselves. The act of planning, revising, editing and finally producing poems will be the icing on the cake of our Poetry Café. Students will learn that writing takes time and doesn't just come out prepackaged, and ready to go by sticking words in slots, but takes time, patience, and perseverance.

The joy of performing in our Poetry Café will be the pinnacle of our experience. I will expect students to have memorized at least one Langston Hughes poem and have one poem of their own to share. We will practice the skills involved in Public Speaking such as pace, volume, intonation, eye contact, and even posture.

Background information on Langston Hughes

The experience of reading is enriched when the reader feels a kinship with the writer. This knowledge adds texture to the experience. I am presenting an overview of the pertinent events in the life of Langston Hughes. He had a rich, and eventful life filled with sorrow and pain, especially in his formative years. What is so remarkable about this virtuoso of a human being is that with all the turbulence and rejection he experienced he was able to find beauty in his surroundings. That beauty lives on as enduring poetry that resonates with us today.

James Mercer Langston Hughes (Feb.1, 1902-May 22, 1967) was an American poet, social activist, novelist, play write, and columnist known as the poet Laureate of African Americans. He was the first and most successful writer to incorporate African American musical traditions like jazz, blues, and spirituals into literature, known as Jazz Poetry. He was one of the central artistic figures of the Harlem Renaissance and given the nickname "Shakespeare of Harlem."

He was born in Joplin, Missouri, to Carrie Mercer Langston and James Nathaniel Hughes. There was strife between the couple early in Langston's life. Hughes's father left mother and son when Langston was only 2 years old. He flew to Cuba and later Mexico in search of a more racially tolerant life. Due to the lack of consistent employment Mrs. Hughes and her son did not have an easy life. Langston was often left with babysitters, or left alone sleeping in their apartment while his mother worked at night. This situation led Mrs. Hughes and Langston to travel to Mexico in an attempt at reconciliation with her husband. The trip was not a success and the couple split. Mother and son returned to the States and due to transiency in her employment, Langston was sent to live with his maternal grandmother Mary Patterson Langston. It is 1909 and he is seven years old.

Mary Patterson was a strong influence in his life. She was a storyteller in the African American tradition and planted the seeds of racial pride in young Langston. She and her husband had been active in the Abolitionist movement, and Mrs. Patterson's husband was killed in John Brown's famous raid on Harper's Ferry.

During this next six-year period Langston ricocheted back and forth between his mother and grandmother, finally settling in Topeka, Kansas, with his grandmother until her death in 1915. It was amidst this uncertainty, and separated from his mother, that Langston developed his love of reading. He remembered:

The silence of the library, the big chairs, and long tables, and the fact that the library didn't have a mortgage on it, or any sort of insecurity about it –all that made me love it. And right then,...books began to happen for me, so that after a while , there came a time when I believed in books more than in people.(5)

He was later reunited with his mother and his stepfather in Lincoln, Illinois. It was during eighth grade that he was nominated Class Poet. He then entered Central High School in Cleveland, Illinois. He began to hone his writing skills on the school newspaper, yearbook, and started the composition of his first of his poetry and plays. He wrote his first piece of Jazz Poetry, " When Sue Wears Red,"

When Susanna Jones wears red her face is like an ancient cameo turned brown by the ages .

It is important to mention the rocky relationship that Langston had with his father. James Langston Hughes did not approve of young Langston becoming a writer, and it was only under the condition that Langston major in Engineering that he would finance his college education at Columbia University in New York. Langston managed good grades at Columbia, but left due to the prejudice he experienced in 1922. Instead he was more interested in the burgeoning culture of Harlem and its vibrant "scene." This was to be the beginning of the rest of a prolific and multifaceted life.

Hughes's Poetry, Music, and the Harlem Renaissance

The theme of Blues runs through many of Hughes's most famous poems. "The Weary Blues" as my introduction into the heart and soul of his poetry. It was in 1925 that he published this poem that garnered him first prize in the literary contest sponsored by *Opportunity*. Hughes said this about "The Weary Blues":

It was a poem about a workingman who sang the blues all night and then went bed and slept like a rock. That was all. And it included the first blues verse I'd ever heard way back in Lawrence Kansas when I was a kid.(6)

For Hughes the Blues was a pattern of lyrics, syllables, notes, and images that he was able to capture. Because of his acute sensitivity to beauty as well as a keen musical sense Hughes has the ability to put us in "the moment". His poems are sound bites heard passing by the open door of a café. This form, never before considered in the poetry world, was later termed "Jazz Poetry". Hughes lays out the poem with the first stanza, and then proceeds to tell the story in just such a tone as these first two lines imply:

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon (7)

This poem must be read aloud as it highlights both the visual and auditory senses. Students can hear the alliteration in "drowsy, and droning", and see the musician rocking back and forth playing his instrument. Just talking about "drowsy, and "droning" and what those words mean will set up the scene for the rest of the reading. Next he changes the pacing with

I heard a Negro play.

This line differs from the previous two in that there is a stopping point. The word "Negro" is important because it distinguishes this musician by his race for the reader. This musician is not just any musician, but an African American artist. Now the character is established. Next we learn

Down on Lenox Avenue the other night
By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light

Where, and what time of day the poem takes place. The rhyme has returned and the reader wants to know, "Where is Lenox Avenue? What is a gas light?" Students will have questions about the concept of gas and lights. It rhymes with flashlight, they might think. Perhaps it's that? It is this wondering that will engage students and spur them on to find answers. The next two lines match the first stanza with a chorus of

He did a lazy sway... He did a lazy sway... To the tune 'o those Weary Blues.

The poem continues with later punctuations of:

O Blues! Sweet Blues!

This reminds me of cries of "Halleluiah's" uttered during a Baptist revival meeting. It's shouted, unlike the rest of the poem, which is so slow. We imagine the musician to be almost asleep at his piano. This is a fairly lengthy poem that you might not give your students right away. It's not a children's poem, but one that children can understand, just as they would if they were walking down San Bruno Ave. in Brisbane, and passed by the "23 Club" (a local bar) and heard loud country music. In reading this poem it is important to keep focusing on where Langston places the rhyme, and where he places the refrain. Certain vocabulary words may need to be addressed, such as, *syncopated*, *croon*, *Negro*, *craggy*, *ebony*, *ivory*, and *melancholy*. Some words that can be looked up in the dictionary, and some words such as "raggy, 'gwine, ain't, ma" are all slang terms used at that time that students may or may not be familiar with. I like to imagine my students going home and telling their parents about the new words they learned in school today.

Music is crucial to the teaching of this poem. Bessie Smith, Clara and Trixie Smith, along with Ma Rainey were some of Langston's personal favorites, and although it is mentioned that he couldn't carry a tune he had a great appreciation for Blues.

In 1926 Hughes made his pilgrimage to the "Empress's" domain. Bessie Smith was appearing at the Regent Theatre in Baltimore when the author published his poem, "The Weary Blues." He made his way back to the dressing room to pay his respects. Hughes was disappointed when he asked whether she had a theory about blues as Art, and her reply was that it was a just a way to make money.

There are many versions of recordings of "Weary Blues," and it would be interesting to research both the modern and older versions of the song. Whichever adaptation of the song is used musical accompaniment to this lesson is mandatory. Students need to hear the croon of the jazz singer, and the tinkling keys of the piano. The pounding "thump" of the bass guitar provides an invitation to make noise in the classroom by slapping, clapping, and tapping out that syncopated beat.

One can't appreciate the poems of Langston Hughes without delving into the Harlem Renaissance. By definition a Renaissance is a revival of Art, Literature, and Learning. Such words come to mind as rebirth, renewal, and reawakening. For many African Americans it was a time and place that allowed for freedom of expression, and a sharing of ideas. It was a cultural destination for African Americans moving north spanning 1910-1930, with it's heyday in the 1920's. Gwendolyn Bennet, one of Langston's closest friends and

confidantes described it,

as a "fun" period, a joyous time when the emphasis was on community, on an exchange of ideas between artists, and where white folks—authors and party givers—was fodder for gab sessions among black folks. Most of us were middle-class people with middle-class backgrounds. The chief activity was interaction. We just talked incessantly and drank coffee, or just ate and talked. We'd go from one place another and we were always cooking up schemes of what we were going to do and how we were going to conquer the world.(8)

In our Café we will be the ones having the gab sessions, drinking tea, talking, and sharing ideas. One imagines the vibrancy and intimacy of a community where people are bursting to interact, create, and share ideas.

Many famous talents were unveiled at places such as the Savoy Ballroom, the site of the invention of the Lindy Hop, and The Cotton Club where Cab Calloway was known to strut his stuff, as well as Duke Ellington, and Ethel Waters. Another favorite establishment was Smalls where the literary crowd often gathered. Children may think it humorous that one of the most frequented spots was the 135th St. Branch of the New York Public Library, as well as the Harlem YMCA. Poetry readings, and literary events were hosted in both.

The spirit of the Harlem Renaissance was centered in its community of writers, and artists, each expressing his or her own vision yet bound together in a shared undertaking, and with the community of intellectuals, critics, patrons, and publishers allied to create a revolution in African American culture. (9)

This strong sense of community was also evidenced in the form of the Rent Party. Due to overcrowding and a high demand for living quarters rents, in Harlem skyrocketed and the House Rent Party was born. With the influx of the black's movement from the Midwest and the South to New York, the white population was overtaken, leaving landlords mostly African American tenants. They took advantage of this situation by charging \$15-\$20 more than the white areas of Manhattan. With the high demand and limited supply, apartments were grossly overcrowded, housing as many as three families together in virtually every room of the house. To make the rent, House Rent parties were created. These events were usually held on a Thursday, or Saturday. Thursday was a night off for domestic workers, and Saturday was payday, with Sunday being a day off.

Rent parties were a feature of Harlem nightlife. The host would provide a few folding chairs, a small musical combo, or simply a record player, or even a radio. A small dance floor was a must as dancing went on till all hours. There were the necessary refreshments: bootleg whiskey, bathtub gin, fried chicken, fish, chitterlings, pig's feet, greens, and cornbread were all standard fare. These events were advertised on small cards with catchy phrases such as "Parlor Social" a "Social Whist Party," or a "Tea Cup Party." Hughes described them in his autobiography,

Almost every Saturday night when I was in Harlem I went to a house-rent party I wrote lots of poems about house-rent parties, and ate thereat many a fried fish and pig's foot (10)

Langston shared more images of Harlem in his *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. This opus consists of one long poem and eighty-seven separate parts, or poems within the poem. One of these is the poem "Neon Signs." It is a very approachable poem for young children. It is almost a series of snapshots, or Polaroids, of signs seen in Hughes's neighborhood with all its clubs, bars, and hangouts. The poem is merely a list down the page. One

may presume that these are the signs Langston sees as he walks down the street every day. Students can do the same thing in their own town of Brisbane. We could stroll down San Bruno Avenue taking photos of signs we see as we walk to the other end of the town to the park. We could then walk back up to school taking a totally different route. Developing the photos, reviewing them and deciding which names to include and which to put aside, could make for some interesting poetry. The activity will produce a form of Found Poetry. Taking the snippets and arranging them into poems will highlight such aspects as structure, word choice, and general technique. What Hughes left out of "Neon Signs" is almost as important as what he kept in.

Another short whimsical poem, "Catch" is a poem 2nd and 3rd graders can tackle. Here is the first stanza:

Big Boy came Carrying a mermaid
On his shoulders And the mermaid
Had her tail curved Beneath his arm. (11)

This poem is fantastic as it begs so many questions after the first two lines. "Who is Big Boy? Is it a person, or a creature? Why is he carrying a mermaid? What are mermaids anyway?" The poem uses a form of figurative language that invites inferences and suppositions based on real vs. imagined entities. This is often extremely hard for young children developmentally as they tend to need to "see it to believe it." As we read along we realize that Big Boy is probably a fisherman. This is an interesting poem in its construction. The poem does not rhyme until the last line. I can picture students drawing mermaids, and burly sailors to illustrate what they think are going on in the poem. I envision them conjuring up a Disney cartoon they've watched again and again. It would be a creative exercise to challenge them to concoct their own poems with heroes and heroines involved in a dramatic rescue scene. This proves that Langston was not always "Blue," but had a silly, somewhat sarcastic side, as well.

Perhaps "Big Boy" is the oppressive culture of most of the United States. Maybe the "mermaid" is not a person, or a thing, but a feeling, need, or desire that gets "wrapped" up or conquered. We can discuss how in 1950 when Hughes wrote this poem, segregation was very much in effect. The term "boy" has a strong historical meaning for African Americans and this may also add some depth to our discussion of the poem and our exploration of real vs. imagined.

It is lovely to note that among his triumphs Langston Hughes wrote many poems specifically to be enjoyed by children. *The Dream Keeper* (1932) is a collection of fifty-nine poems, intended for young readers. Although intended for youngsters, some of the poems include more sophisticated topics such as racism and big conceptual themes such as Dreams. Some of the poems had been printed before in magazines for adults yet Hughes chose to include them here. He believed these poems to be accessible to children and adults. Poems such as "The Weary Blues," "When Sue Wears Red, Negro Dancer," and more are not exactly sugar coated fairy tales, but tales of sadness and struggle told with honesty.

"April Rain Song," is a poem that talks simply and beautifully about rain. Weather is a universal experience. We've all gotten wet either on purpose or by accident and can recall the sensation of rain drops hitting us, and the sounds they make be it a drizzle, or a downpour. This is a technique called sense memory.

Let the rain kiss you. Let the rain beat upon your head with silver liquid drops.
Let the rain sing you a lullaby.

This poem is telling us that the rain gives kisses. Of course, we know that this is a figure of speech, but what does it mean? What is a kiss? How does it feel? What kind of kiss is it, and how can we compare it to rain? When we feel raindrops how do they feel? Light, hard, soft, pounding, maybe it's not just rain, but hail that

hurts us and stings our skin. A discussion surrounding kisses and rain would be truly hilarious, as seven and eight year olds will surely get giggly talking about kissing. The line "let the rain sing you a lullaby" is evocative in that it further personifies the "rain" as a being that can both "kiss" and "sing you a lullaby." Lullabies are sweet, melodic songs that have a distinct back and forth swing rhythm to them. I would love to try to sing this poem to the tune of "Rock-a-bye Baby" and see how it turns out.

The next stanza of the poem talks about nature in the city and what happens to the water either "still" or "running." Then finally in the last stanza the rain "plays a little sleep-song" just like it did in the first stanza where it "sang the lullaby." The last line of the poem is simply a declaration:

And I love the rain.

These five simple words tell us that the speaker is saying, "Yes to rain!" And maybe even, "Yes to life!" Rain is a symbol of growth, replenishment, nurturing of new life, and maybe comfort in the splat, splat, and drip, drop we hear outside our window as we fall asleep.

Another poem that I think my students would enjoy is "Quiet Girl." Titles are as important to a piece of literature, and as personal, as our names are to us. In "Quiet Girl" the reader does not know who the subject is exactly. She is nameless. The poem was titled "Ardella," but Hughes chose to change that. At the onset we are curious to know who she is: Do we like her? Is she good, or bad? Hughes purposefully does not tell us outright, but gives us clues with his use of similes:

I would liken you To a night without stars
Were it not for your eyes. I would
likened you To a sleep without dreams
Were it not for your songs.

Is a night without stars a good thing, or a bad thing? Stars are often thought of as pretty, sparkling, and romantic. I would ask my students to maybe fold a piece of paper in half and draw both versions to see which one they like better. The use of "not" changes the direction of the poem. Her eyes seem to take the place of stars, and possibly brighten his view. Again, is a sleep without dreams a bad thing? Some people don't remember their dreams, whereas I dream constantly and wake up frazzled. We could start a Dream Journal where they record their dreams. "Were it not for your songs" starts with a question word, but Hughes does not end it with a question mark." Songs' then seems to have a positive attribute. He likes her songs, and he likes dreams as well.

Dreams are a recurring theme in Hughes' work. Dreams are often seen as symbols of hope. There are many references specific or implied to hidden dreams, lost dreams, dreams regained, or deferred. It makes sense that for African Americans of the 1920's who had suffered Jim Crow laws and restrictions that this would serve as an overarching theme. Placing the two poems "Dreamkeeper" and "Dreams" in his collection is a conscious choice. Hughes wants to

Inspire black children to revise skewed histories, to inspire black children to live up to their potential. (12)

Isn't that what we want for all children? This is why I find these poems so enduring. In the poem "Dreams" Hughes seems almost strident. "Hold fast to dreams for if dreams die..." It's a warning to children to say that if they don't hold on to their dreams there will be consequences. Just the use of the word "die" makes it severe. Grownups are always saying to children things like, "If you don't do your homework you'll get bad grades. If you don't eat your vegetables you won't grow strong." These are the kinds of threats parents employ. This

poem is only two stanzas in length, but it seems to emphasize in the purest form what Langston Hughes believed, what he had to believe to survive.

For if dreams die Life is a broken-winged bird That cannot fly.

Again he is personifying "Life" as a bird. The extremes of Live vs. Death are heavy, and abstract concepts to ponder for small children, but the basics of cause and effect are real. I don't do my homework-I sit on the bench at recess. I don't eat dinner-I don't get dessert. They can relate to the poem on these terms. Hughes is admonishing them to

Hold fast to dreams For when dreams go Life is a barren field Frozen with snow.

This is very dramatic, especially for California school children that don't experience snow each winter. The use of "barren" brings to mind childlessness and a sense of being unproductive, or stagnant. Struggle, and the attempts to overcome adversity were instilled in Langston as a young child by his grandmother. Hughes is telling the reader, to "hold fast" to this dream. This act is impossible and used as a metaphor. I would ask my students, "Can you hold a dream in your hand? Why didn't he just write, "hold", instead of "hold fast"? I would invite them to think of all the times they've needed to grip someone's hand tightly. We would generate a list of situations where, and when this might occur. We might come up with such examples as crossing the street, in a crowded mall, at a movie theater, the zoo, or an amusement park. These are all situations where dire consequences could result if you did not "hold fast". Hughes spent his early years during the period of the Jim Crow laws. He was not allowed, like other African American students the same freedoms as the white students he sat next to in class. By holding onto something, you keep it alive and close.

Strategies for Using Poetry in the Classroom

The word "strategies" is almost too scientific a word to use when speaking about the teaching of poetry. There isn't a formula or recipe for teaching. Teaching and connecting with your students can be as elusive and mercurial as poetry. Poetry is an art form that captures sounds that have been placed in the context of language, and then distilled onto the page. In poetry there are no rules! Some poems rhyme, some don't. Some poems are neat and tidy on the page, some run down and around in shapes. Therefore there are no right, or wrong answers. This may make some feel uncomfortable, or squeamish. What we don't realize is that we already have internalized the elements of poetry into our being from a very young age. According to Robert Pinsky in *The Sounds of Poetry, A Brief Guide*:

We have learned to deal with the sound patterns organically, for practical goals, from before we can remember, without reflection or instruction or conscious analysis. We all produce the sounds, and understand them, with great efficiency and subtle nuance.(13)

Children don't need to be told exactly how to find the cookie jar in the kitchen. It's possible to gesture, or make a reference to where it is without being grammatically correct. Thus in teaching poetry to young children our task should not be considered insurmountable. What I am seeking to accomplish in my approach is to let loose this subconscious awareness of sounds while inviting students to attach a conscious thought process to these sounds. I am asking them to expect the unexpected by letting the author take them to unknown and previously unexplored places in their imaginations.

I have broken these strategies, or practices up into seven overall goals to be reached. These may be attacked daily or grouped alone. You will need to gauge the stamina and interest of your class.

1. Have students read the poem aloud with an open mind. Have them read the poem many times aloud. They may read to themselves in a whisper voice or aloud with a partner.
2. Have the students learn to listen, with their whole bodies. If there is a musical quality to the poem try not to discourage swaying or tapping of feet. Clapping out beats or sounds may also be appropriate. Have them listen with their eyes open, but not focused on the page of text. Then try the same thing with their eyes closed while someone else reads, and again with their eyes open while following along with the text. Encourage them to listen the internal sound of their own voice while you read silently. This is when we get the real character, voice, or mood of the poem.
3. It is most important to have students respond to the poem. Advise them to be sensitive to the images and specific words that grab them in the poem. Make connections between themselves and Langston Hughes the writer. Record those responses in either pictures or words in specified notebooks or poetry journals.
4. Have students collaboratively discuss these responses using norms and protocols agreed upon by the group.
5. Work with your students over time to develop a vocabulary of terms that can be accessed in your discussion, just like you would do in Science, or Math.
6. The ultimate goal will be for students to have success in memorizing short poems 2-10 lines long. These will be the poems of Langston Hughes and the poems they have written in class.
7. Finally they will experience a sense of pride when they perform their poems in front of an audience at the Poetry Café.

The largest goal I have for my students is to make a personal connection to the text, which will enable them to connect their experiences and those of Langston Hughes' as portrayed in his poetry. In learning about his life, as a child growing up in the Midwest during the early 1900's, and later as an adult in Harlem they will begin to see how their own environment has shaped who we are. We will take many walks around our school (both inside and outside), and around the town. We will observe, take photographs, and write about them with a poet's eye. They will experiment with writing about Brisbane Community Park, Midtown Market, the Library, and the Recreation Department where they spend many hours after school each day. They will also start to make connections with their fellow classmates through poetry written about each other's family, pets, bedroom, or even favorite foods. By sharing these poems with each other we will refine our skills as writers and connoisseurs of poetry.

Ultimately we will create a Café- like atmosphere as a place to stimulate this process. Rearranging the classroom so that desks do not divide us, as we are throughout the regular part of the day, will promote a fun, vibrant, chatty, and alive place where dreams can be realized.

Activities

Students will engage in activities that encompass many of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts: Literacy, Writing, Speaking, and Listening. More than that the focus will be on encouraging pride, self confidence, and a sense of empowerment students will feel in the production of their own poetry,

and presenting it in the Poetry Café.

Photographs

We will look at photographs taken in Harlem, New York that can be found on the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library website. These provide a glimpse of the 1920's world outside Langston's door. We will discuss how people looked back then, the kinds of clothes they wore, did they look well dressed, or scruffy? What kinds of activities were they engaged in? Where were they going? Were they active, or inactive? We will look at the signs of the neighborhood, as a reference to *Neon Signs*. We might even list them on paper to see what kinds of poems Langston might have ended up with had he taken another path. We will also look specifically at advertisements for "Rent Parties" in notes collected and saved by Langston over time. In an article from SLATE by Harriet Staff, "Can't Pay Your Rent? Langston Hughes Can Help!" we can actually view the original notices Langston collected over time. They contained little ditties that were posted about the neighborhood,

When I first came to Harlem, as a poet I was intrigued by the little rhymes at the top of most House Rent Party Cards. (14)

These cards also provide a context with which to view his poetry. We might also view on this website photos of pages from Langston Hughes' notebook with scribbles, and cross outs.

Music

We will listen to recordings of Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong, and W.C. Handy, and Robert Johnson to get into the mood for our unit. YouTube will provide clips of famous performances. Bessie Smith's version of, "Nobody Knows When You're Down and Out", Robert Johnson, "Crossroads," and W.C. Handy's, "St. Louis Blues". These selections will provide examples of rhythm and refrain. While listening to the blues we will draw, and take notes in our journals.

Journal Making

We will construct our own hand made journals using lined paper and heavy duty construction paper, cardboard, or other hand made paper purchased at the craft store.

Steps:

1. Place cardboard on a table with a short end facing you. Roll it up, and then unroll it. The cardboard will stay bent.
2. Fold the cardboard in half. Then fold the sheets of paper in half and place them inside the cardboard cover.
3. Unfold the book. Using a nail poke three holes (an adult can help) through the fold in the book. Make the hole big enough a needle can fit through.
4. Thread the needle, and sew up the book with a big study bow using twin, yarn, or ribbon.

This pocket- sized journal will be the place where all our special words, pictures and ideas are saved.

Protocols for How to Read and Discuss Poetry

- Agree as a class on your Poetry Promise: No judgments, all comments are valuable, active participation

by all.

- Practice the "3 Read" strategy of 1) silent 2) aloud 3) respond
- Quiet atmosphere for reading and discussion

Poems with Accompanying Activities

Weary Blues

Practice the "3 Read" technique 1) Read silently to yourself. 2) Read aloud. 3) Reread/Respond. We will engage in a discussion about what they noticed as far as language. We will focus on the use of alliteration, word choice, and repetition. I will give them a brief formula for the traditional blues format of the lyric stanza. It contains three lines, line two repeats, line one, and line three rhymes with lines one and two. We can get out our markers and highlight what repeats, and where.

Following the discussion replay blues music in the background while they read the poem to each other in pairs. Each partner then tells the other what he or she visualized. After this discussion allow free time to write, draw, or paint their images of the "Weary Blues."

The next lesson would be a homework assignment and quick write of "times I feel blue."

Class collaboration of their version of the Hughes poem could be to rewrite just the refrain sections with the repetitive lines. Half the class could then read the original words and the other half could insert the classes version in a form of "call and response."

April Rain Song

This will be a look at word choice in specific. Discuss the term "onomatopoeia" and how words imitate sounds. Make a list of those words used in the poem. Make up your own rain words. Hum a lullaby as the class reads the poem. Listen to recordings of rain. Focus on the placement of the word "let", and the construction of the lines themselves. Concentrate on the ending, and how it could change if Hughes had said he hated rain instead. Write poems with the premise, "I love the rain," or "I hate the rain."

Quiet Girl (Ardella)

This poem introduces the use of simile, but with a twist. Hughes says "not" which switches up our thinking and makes us wonder. Discuss what she really looks like by analyzing the similes. This poem can be used for memorization. It is a five-line poem that does not rhyme, but should be approachable as it's told almost as a story and will provide a break from the usual poems they've encountered.

Tips for memorization:

1. Read the first line 5 times until you have it memorized.
2. Repeat the next line 5 times until you have it memorized.
3. Try both lines together.
4. Continue layering the memorization process until you have the entire poem committed to memory.
5. Speed-read through the whole poem.
6. Walk around the room while saying it.
7. Have a friend quiz you.
8. Practice in front of a mirror, or record yourself.

Catch

This short two-stanza poem offers vivid imagery. There is a sense of mystery in this poem. The main character does not have a first and last name, just "Big Boy." Explore the background history of mermaids with students to find out why Hughes chose such a character. Is she a symbol of something, if so what? Look up pictures in books, or on the Internet of mermaids and research their meaning. Memorize this poem using the tips above.

Neon Signs

This is Langston Hughes's list poem about Harlem. Use the Three Read process and ask the class, "Could you list all the names of streets, and stores you would see before we go to the park?" Brainstorm in pairs and then make a list on the board. Stroll through the neighborhood and literally take a "picture walk" with disposable cameras as your recording device. Set guidelines beforehand on what's acceptable and what's not. Develop the photos and spread them out for students to view. Create a collage in the style of Romare Bearden. Look at his collage, "The Block" which depicts the elements of Harlem in its later years. We will cut, paste, and scavenge to make a collage and a "found poem" representing Brisbane.

Dreams and Dream Keeper

The two poems should be taught in tandem and held up against each other to expose their similarities and differences. The students will be asked to choose one of the two to memorize and recite before the class. Both poems use symbolism and metaphor. Look at the enjambment Hughes uses and how it works in each. He uses run-on lines, or broken lines that do not work grammatically, but are purposeful. Rewrite the poems without any line breaks and see how, and if the meaning changes. Dreams are a heavy concept for seven and eight year olds. Introduce dreams in terms of desires, and aspirations. What is the difference between wishes and dreams? What happens when things break? How do you react? Certain phrases are very evocative like "hear melodies" and "too- rough world". Memorize this poem for presentation in the Poetry Café. Come up with lists of things that don't work when they are broken to generate a series of personal metaphors. "Life is like a broken remote control on my Wii, that cannot play." Life is like a coffee maker in the staff room that will not brew." "Life is like a teacher who is screaming for poetry in the world of Common Core." Have students make a personal connection to the text by writing their own "Dream" poem with metaphors. Then create a "Dream Keeper" bulletin board with clouds and pictures of pillows and beds designed by the students.

The choices Langston Hughes makes as a writer highlights his optimism, pessimism, or ambiguity through images and words in the form of poetry. Reading, writing, memorizing and enjoying poetry will offer skills that last a lifetime. Understanding the world through the eyes of Langston Hughes will help to pave the way.

Notes

1. Alexander, Elizabeth. The Poet as Canon-Maker, Langston Hughes, Negro Poets and American Poetry's Segregated Past
2. Hughes, Langston. "Dreams", in The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes
3. Hughes, Langston. Collected Poems

4. Hughes, Langston, *Collected Poems*
5. Haskins, James, *Always Moving On, The Life of Langston Hughes*.
6. Hughes, Langston, *The Big Sea*
7. Ampersand, Arnold, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*.
8. Ostrom, Hans, *A Langston Hughes Encyclopedia*.
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