



Literary and Historical Reading with Langston Hughes

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Introduction

Langston Hughes is a canonized name in the poetry curriculum across age levels and classrooms across the United States. This unit focuses on his poetry, short stories, and autobiographical excerpts, as a way to engage students fully in close reading analysis and to encourage a mindset of curiosity as they read.

In a world where our students, especially teens, are so entranced by their cellular phones, in particular social media and gaming, reading has fallen to the wayside. It is less common for me to find avid readers in my classroom, and more challenging to engage the group in class texts and novels. The challenge then is to get reluctant readers and those with little practice, not just reading, but analytically engaging with texts.

In our ELA classrooms across the country, there is an emphasis on close reading analysis. According to the Common Core, close reading analysis is, “engaging with a text of sufficient complexity directly ... encouraging students to read and reread deliberately. Directing student attention on the text itself ... to reflect on the meanings of individual words and sentences; the order in which sentences unfold; and the development of ideas throughout the text, which ultimately leads students to arrive at an understanding of the text as a whole.”(1) From this methodical rereading, students interact with the craft, structure, and syntax of literary texts, adding their meaning through logical inferences and connotations, ultimately gaining a deeper understanding of the meaning.

One flaw in the definition of close reading is the “reread deliberately” bit. For the better part of ten years, I have tried to introduce close reading to my students, hoping that like myself, they would revel in the composition of language and the tango between author and audience that make these words come to life. The moment I introduce the concept, however, it is lost in their prior understanding of “marking the text,” an annotation system taught differently by each teacher and too often relying on superficial “marks” to demonstrate what you’ve read. These marks include things like:

?- add a question mark to areas that are confusing or write your question
!- add an exclamation mark to something that surprised you
underline - important information found in the text
TT, TW, TS- write a connection you made with the text
(circle)- draw a circle around

unfamiliar words

The result is that “reading deliberately” becomes a task list where students underline and add marks superficially to the text, seldom engaging beyond mark-making, and not reaching further meaning out of their marks.

I have tried to push past this by requiring them to write their thoughts about each mark in the margin. If they added a “?” requiring them to write the question out and find an answer. If they marked a connection, explaining how the connection helps them understand the text. If they underlined, explaining the significance they found.

While we try as a campus to emphasize a growth mindset, the students' use of marking the text seems to fit with the way they engage overall with schoolwork, a more tactical checklist, and get it done approach. Yet this approach adds an extra challenge to their learning and my teaching. By working for the credit, students are more often thinking about points earned rather than critically thinking about the presented material.

In his book, *Why Learn History (When It's Already on Your Phone)* Sam Wineburg finds another flaw in the close reading definition and rejects this strategy when it comes to historical literature. While close reading may focus all students, regardless of background knowledge on the text itself, Wineburg says that “...applied to history, strictures against background knowledge do the opposite of leveling the playing field. Without context, this ‘playing field’ turns into a potholed lot that sends a shot on goal sailing in an erratic, bizarre trajectory.”(2) This is to say, that without grounding a historical text in the context of its time, its interpretation is then open to a classroom of 30 different students with varying degrees of background and an even greater variety of interpretations based on their lenses. Especially when over time the meanings of some keywords and phrases have evolved.

Instead, Wineburg implores that we think like historians, “To a historian critical thinking isn’t just collecting facts to pass judgment. It’s about determining what questions to ask to generate new knowledge.”(3) These questions, according to Wineburg, would begin with examining the source, the period, and adjacent historical context. This would push close reading away from the microscopic focus of the text into curiosity about the world and time in which the text was created.

Rationale

This unit attempts to address these two flaws of close reading by focusing on the works of Langston Hughes through a combination of a close reading framework and a historical thinking framework.

While this goal can be achieved with many different literary persons, the focus on Hughes brings about the opportunity to dissect rich literature and talk about social concerns affecting our world today.

Langston Hughes began his literary career when “books happened to” him. Hughes' work will be the cornerstone of our unit because his poetry is ripe with figurative language for close reading and his writing draws from his personal culture and for its reflection of the Harlem Renaissance for historical analysis. Furthermore, his work centers on the lived experiences of Black Americans in a way that sheds light on the

inequalities faced that are prevalent to this day.

At a time where our school community fought a year-long campaign to remove police officers from our campuses, amid a year of protesting police brutality, and with the never-ending circulation of stories paraded on social media exemplifying racism in our everyday lives, these themes are not just relatable for students, but crucial to our understanding of racism in our current time.

This will culminate in an understanding of how writers are architects of language who use the full range of their lived experiences, historical context, and identity to build their writing.

In this way, I hope to empower students to read with the curiosity to unpack and to write as architects of their own stories grounded in their historical moments.

School Demographics

The school at which I work serves 1,086 students in 6th-8th grade. 58% of our families qualify as low-income households and 33% of our students are English Language Learners. 76% of our students are “Hispanic” or LatinX, 10% are White, 5% identify as biracial, 4% Black, 5% AAPI, and the remainder unspecified. (4)

Each grade level is departmentalized and there are at least 3 ELA teachers per grade level, in some cases four. In 8th grade, students each enter with a different understanding of close reading based on their own educational experiences, past teachers, and varying reading and writing abilities. With this varying level of analysis and a habit of working for the grade, it is difficult to introduce high-level texts and reach an adequate level of engagement from students. Without this first step of deep understanding, it is difficult to then converse and finally write about, a text in a manner that aligns with college and career readiness, and most importantly with critical thinking.

This unit is designed to re-teach the fundamentals of reading critically through close reading and historical curiosity, early on in the year, as a means to recenter learning on curiosity and conversation and social justice, rather than on as a means to a grade. After all, we are striving for a collaborative, curious, and critical classroom.

Unit Overview

The unit begins by examining the learning targets and essential questions. This allows students to understand the goals and discuss the uses and benefits of diving deeper into the text. Through this examination, the teacher can correct misunderstandings about texts being read, marked, and understood to achieve a particular grade in the class.

The understanding of marking the text, for the students, shifts to a focus on diving deeper, being inquisitive and linking the historical past to the present.

Essential Questions

1. How does an author's craft, structure, and syntax, help to convey an overall theme?
2. How does the historical context of a work of literature help us understand the deeper meaning?
3. How has the lived experience of Black Americans changed over time?

The unit will begin by reteaching a close reading analysis with Langston Hughes' poetry. By focusing on some of his shorter pieces, rich with figurative language, students will work collaboratively to use the close reading marks in ways that build their connections and connotations to the specific words in the poems and to build curiosity into the historical context.

As a class we will read, and reread, Hughes' *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*. Students will work collaboratively to identify figurative language and annotate beyond simply marking the text. Since this will be their first attempt, much of this will be done in groups with constant opportunities to share and expand our annotations.

Next, students will read the text again with a focus on curiosity. The goal being to identify words and phrases we are curious about, and areas where we think we can learn more. Students will share their questions and we will begin the research process.

After the research portion, students will discuss their new understandings of the text. Why did Langston decide to include these particular landmarks?

Finally, we'll read chapter 51, *I've Known Rivers*, of Langston's autobiography where Hughes describes his creation of this poem. Having this information, students are now ready to write their final analysis of Hughes' poem, synthesizing their original close-reading interpretations, historical research, and Hughes' thoughts.

Lastly, we'll discuss their final observations, connections to today's world, other texts, or our own lives, and identify how our understanding of the poem changed with each layer of analysis. This final debrief is important as it helps us understand the benefit of each type of analysis and begins to answer our essential questions.

Additional poems examined by students, similarly, will include *Mother to Son*, and *Montage of a Dream Deferred*.

After whole group and small group practice with poetry, students will work in literature circles to independently read and analyze one of Hughes' short stories, from his collection, *The Ways of White Folks*. They will read, *Home*, *Passing*, *Berry*, *Poor Little Black Fellow*, *One Christmas Eve*, and *Mother and Child*.

In each group, students will read and annotate their stories focusing on close reading analysis. They will hold fishbowl discussions about their findings.

Next, students will reread their text for historical context. They will work together to draft research questions and then find the answers to those. In their fishbowl discussions, they will draw connections between the historical information and how it impacts their overall understanding of stories' themes.

In a final group discussion, students will draw connections between the themes and discoveries found across the different short stories. They will discuss the ways some of those themes are found in our modern times, leading to their ultimate written analysis of Langston Hughes' themes and their ability to connect the lives of Black Americans than to now.

Content Matter Discussion

The Deficiencies of our Current Curriculum

In our district, teachers are required to use the Springboard curriculum, created by College Board, a non-profit organization. The workbook and accompanying online resources include teaching strategies that differentiate and scaffold materials to facilitate student learning in ELA and Mathematics towards college readiness standards.

Langston Hughes appears in the Springboard middle school ELA curriculum in the sixth-grade workbook, in a unit designed to identify the key events of a story and how characters react.

Each reading selection has a brief introduction to the author. For the text *Thank You, M'am*, the only of Hughes short stories to be included across the middle school curriculum, his introduction is written as follows:

About the Author

Langston Hughes (1902-1967) began his writing career early. By 8th grade, he was named the class poet. He regularly wrote verses for his high school magazine. Hughes entered Columbia University in 1921 and discovered the arts scene in Harlem. He became a prominent figure in the Harlem Renaissance. His poetry, plays, and stories frequently focus on the African American experience, particularly on the struggles and feelings of people in a segregated society. His poetry was especially informed by the jazz and blues rhythms of African American music. (5)

This introduction of Hughes is meant to make him relatable to students, having started in the 8th grade himself. It emphasizes his educational experiences and notes his participation in the Harlem Renaissance. The last two sentences unjustly, and quickly, synthesize his overarching themes and inspiration.

The problem with this introduction is how much is left out. An author is not relatable to students simply because they once *were* a student. The emphasis on his educational experience leaves out the racial tensions he felt while at Columbia, which he takes a dramatic leave from, after just one year. He spends four years rejecting higher education in exchange for learning through travel and living life. His ultimate return to school, to Lincoln University, happens later than this timeline suggests, and when he is finally in a position to do so, with financial support. (6) This is much more relatable to a larger portion of my student base, who wonder how they will be to afford college, or whether they want to go at all.

The introduction also mentions the Harlem Renaissance, yet to do so without providing context is to not introduce it at all. In the 6th grade, when the social studies curriculum centers on ancient civilizations, it is unclear whether students have ever even heard of the Harlem Renaissance, let alone truly understand the impact it had on African American and American culture overall. An understanding of the Harlem Renaissance would only shed light on the themes of the short story in the curriculum and help students understand.

In *Thank You, M'am* a young black boy attempts to steal the purse of an older black woman. She catches him by the collar and takes him home with her to wash his face and feed him. Through their conversation she urges him to behave, gives him money for new shoes, and it concludes with his 'thank you,' at which point they part ways. In many ways, this story exemplifies the changing identity of the African American that is only possible after the historical Great Migration and World War 1 shifts in America, and a new identity for Black

Americans is brought to life, particularly through the art of the Harlem Renaissance. Thus the teaching of historical context would lead to a deeper understanding of the themes in this story than are simply provided in the Springboard curriculum.

Rejecting the “Old Negro” Identity

Hughes spends most of his life in Northern cities and travels abroad before his most well-known time as a writer in the Harlem Renaissance. Hughes is the product of his time and experience, a man whose identity morphs into what will be known as the “New Negro.” In 1925, Alain Locke examines this change in identities in his published essay, *Enter the New Negro*. To understand how crucial this shift is in collective and personal identity, one must concretely understand the identity of the “Old Negro” first. Locke writes, “The Old Negro... was a creature of moral debate and historical controversy... of dependence... The Negro himself has contributed his share to this through a sort of protective social mimicry forced upon him by the adverse circumstances of dependence.” (7) This quote is crucial in that it sets up two sides of the identity problem. The first being the society that has turned the Black individual into the subject of debate and controversy, often as a delinquent or subhuman. These are the societal norms, the Jim Crow Laws, and the legacy of slavery, that all worked to keep African Americans “in his[their] place.”(8) What is more relevant about this quote, however, is the contribution of African Americans to their submersion. Not only would they need to unburden themselves of societal barriers, more importantly, but they would also need to eliminate the psychological barriers formed by generationally living these norms. After all, it was safer to live abiding by the projected image than to exist as a full, self-determining, individual.

Hughes is perhaps lucky to have experienced history in such a way that promoted a new identity, what Locke refers to as the “New Negro”. Protected from the old identity, it wasn't until 1927, as an adult, that he first experienced the American South. While this event is out of chronological order, this moment helps exemplify the identity of the “Old Negro” and the self-acceptance of it that prompts psychological rejection, particularly in Hughes.

By this point in his life, Hughes was living in Harlem, back from foreign travels, and focusing on his professional writing. He was invited to both Tennessee and Texas to read his poetry and used that as an opportunity to explore the South for the first time. Familiar with stories of southern racism, Hughes seems surprised by subtleties acknowledging that “the South is not entirely as bad as it is painted...”(9)

While visiting for these lectures, Hughes takes the time to visit Baton Rouge, where a refugee camp is established due to the rising floods of the Mississippi. It is here that he encounters Southern segregation, and worse even, the “Old Negro” self held identity Locke talks about.

Visiting the refugee camp, Hughes observes that white refugees are brought to the city in covered protected decks, housed in former government barracks and tree-shaded buildings, were fed three hot meals a day, and given rations of delicacies such as tobacco, snuff, and candy. For African American refugees quite the opposite was true. They were transported to the camp exposed to the elements, housed in open fields ankle-deep in mud when it rained, received only two meals a day, and often were simply given leftover goods if any at all. (10) This treatment of African Americans, especially in a time of emergency, though deplorable, was not beyond the realm of belief. It was expected that American society would thus treat the black population as second-class citizens.

What was surprising to Hughes, was the confrontation with the “Old Negro. ” Black newspapers had reported that the flood was a “blessing in disguise” in that it saved field hands from debt servitude. These were the

people that Hughes wanted to interview. He learned that they had never had 10 dollars at once in their lives, had seldom ever left the city, and most were illiterate. (11) These could all be seen as reasons to run away from Baton Rouge and seek a better life, especially when such a flood provides a clean break from these conditions, and yet when Hughes asks, "But are you going back to the plantations?" Their responses were overwhelming, "Yes, suh, I reckon we are." (12)

More than the disparity in emergency treatment, this is the interaction that shocks Hughes. It exemplifies Locke's analysis of the old African American as one so dependent on the system that they cannot envision for themselves anything different or better. They have become reliant and accepting holding the same ideology up as a pillar of their own identity and worth. This is what is most unbelievable to Hughes. In the very next sentence he writes, "Baton Rouge depressed me so terribly; so, having the money to go away, I went." (13) It is not the outwardly discriminate conditions of the refugee camp that frighten Hughes, but the self-deprivation, and inwardly acceptance of the "Old Negro" identity, that is too much, causing Hughes to run away from it.

This visceral effect of this moment, like many of his experiences, winds up impacting his writing later in life. One example of this is in his short story, *Father and Son*. The Colonel, a white plantation owner, has fathered several mixed children with his black farmhand, Cora. Of these children, two are pivotal. Bert is the light-skinned bold academic, who has been sent and kept away, due to his resemblance to the Colonel. His independence and sense of self-worth embody the "New Negro." On the opposite end of the spectrum, the "Old Negro" is exemplified by his brother Willie. He is darker skinned, has chosen to work the plantation, and is meek and obedient to white folks. Bert's insistence on taking his rightful place as Colonel's son leads him to trouble; a mob hunting him for a lynching. In the end, as an act of final self-determination, Bert takes his own life. The mob finally recovers Bert's dead body, but robbed of satisfaction in their lynching, decide to take Willie, although innocent, to lynch as well. (14) Even in death, the "New Negro" can take his life into his own hands, to stand his ground, maintain his pride, and make his own decisions. The "Old Negro" on the other hand, has lived a life of servitude, having accepted his status and ultimately accepting a violent death, innocently, at the hands of white rage.

Migrating From the South to a New Sense of Self

The very creation of America, although not often taught as such, is inextricably linked to slavery. The legacy of which impacts the political, economic, and everyday experiences of African Americans from then until now.

We are well aware of the classical moments in American history that have led to the legal and liveable change in our country: The Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, the Reconstruction Era, the Civil Rights Movement, Affirmative Action, and most recently a summer of protest against police brutality targeting black and brown bodies.

What is often left out of this narrative, are historical events, that on their surface may seem isolated, but are an integral part of this story.

In Glenn Jordan's *Re-membering the African-American Past*, Jordan discusses ways in which two key moments in history, the Great Migration and World War 1, allow for the changing identity of African Americans, which comes through in the form of art and literature, particularly produced in the Harlem Renaissance.

Between 1910 and the 1940s African Americans moved to the North in droves. Not that the North had absolute freedom, because it did not, but it offered a higher sense of security than what many generations

had faced in the South. Thousands moved North for the economic opportunities, industrial growth, and of course as, “an act of resistance fleeing the exploitation, lynching and racial violence of the South.”(15) This, Jordan says, results in a re-imagining of their image, and since this happens on such a large scale, the African American identity as a whole becomes reinvented. From a history of slavery and suppression emerges a resistance and sense of pride in oneself.

Evidence of this shift in mindset is made clear in Hughes’ autobiography, “The Big Sea.” Born in Joplin, Missouri, Hughes moves progressively North throughout his young life, eventually ending up in Harlem. He was raised by his grandmother in Lawrence Kansas until her death when he was 12 years old. He traveled then to his Aunt and Uncle Reeds, and after that sporadically with his mother and stepfather. (16) What we see of his lineage, and in particular the attitude of his grandmother, provide an example of the transformation we see in African American ideology and the escape from an early time of tyranny over Black Americans.

Both Hughes’ great grandfathers were white on his paternal side; Silas Cushenberry being a Jewish slave trader and Sam Clay was a Scottish distiller. On his maternal side, his great grandfather was Captain Ralph Quarels who was also white. The male lineage then exemplifies the history of white supremacy in the South and the relationships that often were forced between the white slave owners and their housekeepers, slaves, etc. (17)

In the story of his grandmother, however, we see the shift to a story of resistance, beginning with her French and Indian Blood. Hughes writes, “She said there had been a French trader who came down St. Lawrence, then on foot to the Carolinas and mated with her grandmother, who was a Cherokee- so all her people were free. During slavery, she had free papers in North Carolina, and traveled about free, at will. Her name was Mary Sampson Patterson.” She marries a free man named Heridan Leary who is eventually shot and killed in John Brown's raid at Harpers Ferry. She then marries Charles Langston, Hughes’ grandfather. He also believed in freedom and followed a life of politics. (18) His grandmother’s history is one characterized by freedom since her inception. To say that “all her people were free” is a statement not afforded to many given the history of slavery. His grandmother continues this legacy by marrying an abolitionist whose life is lost in the fight for freedom, and later an academic whose work is rooted in freedom.

Of his grandmother, Hughes writes, “Our mortgage never got paid off- for my grandmother was not like the other colored women of Lawrence. She didn’t take in washing or go out to cook, for she had never worked for anyone.”(19) In this quote we can see how this free identity permeates beyond lineage into everyday life. Mary is set apart from other “colored women” due to her refusal to relinquish that freedom by performing work of servitude. While the security of a mortgage is in question here, and Hughes often talks about the poverty they faced, what would never be in question was their freedom, independence, and pride.

Returning From War a Changed Man

The freedom felt by his grandmother Mary was shared large scale when African American veterans returned from World War I. In his *Re-membering the African-American Past*, Jordan points out that, “Those who had ‘fought for freedom’ and returned to find continued oppression, asked the obvious question: We have been fighting for the freedom of others, what about our own? We have laid down our lives for this country, isn’t it about time that we got something in return? There was also a further problem: many African-American servicemen were stationed in France during the War, and they were treated like human beings.”(20) African Americans had fulfilled the ultimate patriotic call. The parallels between the freedom fought for and the lack of it at home was blatant. Many had died, and truthfully, many continued to die at home at the hands of white rage, receiving nothing for their sacrifice. These questions, which may have existed all along, were now front

and center. Furthermore, Jordan points out that they were treated, "like human beings" overseas. While this sounds basic enough, it sheds light on their subhuman treatment at home. Having experienced the basic respect and freedom of simple humanity, how could they return to anything less? What was taken for granted as societal norms back home, was now exposed to be unnecessarily constructed, and could no longer be accepted and tolerated. Since the laws had not changed, they would make their changes in one of the only ways available to them; their self-determination and identity.

While Hughes did not serve in the military, his travels through American cities and abroad gave him the full scope of experiences, leading to self-transformation.

Although Hughes lived in Northern cities for much of his life and attended integrated schools, he was nonetheless held down to second-class citizenship. As a middle schooler, he attended an almost all-white school in Lincoln, Illinois. One of two black students, he was chosen as a class poet his 8th-grade year, as is mentioned in our 6th grade Springboard Curriculum. Taken at surface value, this may appear a grand accomplishment, but his account reveals the sting of racism. Hughes writes, "In America, most white people think, of course, that *all* Negroes can sing and dance, and have a sense of rhythm. So my classmates, knowing that a poem had to have rhythm, elected me unanimously, thinking, no doubt, that I had some, being a Negro." (21) At this moment Hughes is singled out and stereotyped as a representative of his whole race in a single blow. Not having thought of himself as a poet before this moment, he is also under the pressure to perform for white folks, as a token fulfillment of this stereotype. While it is presented to students in a single sentence, a deeper look at history will allow them to understand Hughes on a human level. As someone dealing with stereotypes in ways that, unfortunately, maybe all too relatable for students.

Having now had the label of poet trust upon him, Hughes moves on to Central high school in Cleveland. Following opportunities for employment, his mother and stepfather moved their family, including Hughes and his little brother, from city to city. Work was hard to come by due to the influx of African Americans to cities during the Great Migration. The scarce number of jobs available for Black Americans now had a surplus of applicants. In addition, rent, as Hughes describes was the case in Cleveland, was often doubled and tripled for Black families. As a result, Hughes' family rented several attics and basement apartments, during his 4 high school years. (22)

Central high school exposed Hughes to a variety of ethnicities as it was integrated and catered to many foreign-born families. Instead of race being a dividing factor among the student body, the greater division was among Jewish and Gentile. Due to the diversity, Hughes was made aware of the stereotypes and discrimination that faced other ethnicities, noting the racial slurs new to his vocabulary. Yet while this discrimination against other races was present, he noticed a commonality among other minorities in that, "scorned though they might be by the pure Americans - all had it on the n----- in one thing. Summertime came and they could get jobs quickly. For even during the war, when help was badly needed, lots of employers would not hire Negroes." (23) The new revelation to Hughes, here is one that he endures in the constant city changes his family makes for work. He sees for the first time, discrimination against other people of color, and yet those other groups are at least afforded the right to work, a right that enables security and basic necessity. There is a reverberation back to veterans' demands in Jordans' quote as well. Why was it that others could readily find work and not the African American community? Why should it be so hard for African Americans to work, even in time of need? Perhaps more importantly, when would Hughes and other African Americans *earn* the right to work? The right to provide a livelihood for themselves?

The job insecurity his family and community faced, not only provides context for some of his short stories,

including *Thank You, Ma'm*, but can provide for students the opportunity to discuss and explore job and housing inequalities in their communities. This would be a discussion that, in San Jose, would resonate with students as our community currently faces growing housing insecurities due to incoming tech and commercial developments.

After high school, Hughes traveled abroad for the first time to meet his father in Mexico. His father's very existence in Mexico is a testament to the difference in treatment of African Americans in American society compared to foreign countries. Having studied law in the South, his father was unable to get a legal license, not to mention that banks, unions, and insurance companies would reject any of his future business. His father moved to Cuba and then Mexico, where he could open a law practice and work. While his relationship with his father is strained, to say the least, his father's advice is to leave America. His father tells him, "Learn something you can make a living from anywhere in the world, in Europe or South America, and don't stay in the States, where you have to live like a nigger with niggers... How can you have fun with the color line staring you in the face?" (24) More than his own internalized racism, this quote provides his father's insightful critique of American Society. It supports Locke's definition of the "Old Negro" identity. With the pressures of the "color line staring you in the face," one would be relegated, often by law, to specific geographic locations and occupations. One would have very little mobility and interaction with anyone outside their race. By being locked into this condition, one would inevitably believe the same stereotypes about themselves and their community.

To escape this second-class citizenry, Hughes decided to leave school and travel the world. *The Big Sea* begins as he sheds the weight of his books from Columbia University, into the sea, at the port of Sandy Hook. His journey as a seaman begins with his 21-year-old self-actualization, "And I felt that nothing would ever happen to me again that I didn't want to happen." (25) This is a shedding, not just of books, but of that society his father cautioned him of. He would not be a pawn of that society's regulations on him due to skin color, but go out and make his own decisions in the world. In essence, he began his own story by declaring his freedom.

His first voyage took him to Africa, "My Africa, Motherland of the Negro peoples! .The great Africa of my dreams!" (26) While this is a momentous occasion for Hughes, in some ways it forces him to deal with his American identity as his white lineage excludes him from being considered "Black," thus othering him, in what he expects to be his moment of acceptance. Hughes is left as an outsider in both American and African societies.

Hughes continued to travel for a few years as a seaman before deciding to live and work in Paris for some time. Arriving with only 7 dollars to his name, he quickly made a friend named Sonja, a Russian dancer who shared a room with him while they both looked for work. Finding work was difficult, now due to his foreign status rather than his skin tone. This was understandable to Hughes in a way that American discrimination was not. There is an amount of freedom Hughes witnessed during this time. He was more readily accepted into integrated social circles building friendships among artists, workers, and academics across race lines. He was able to find sustaining work and witnessed firsthand how black artists can rise in their careers to heights that would not be possible in America. (27)

Hughes' experiences in Paris mirrored those of the soldiers stationed in Europe during World War 1. Although they did face some adversity, it was not the norm to subjugate and humiliate African Americans. They were not restricted by location, speech, work opportunities, or familial relationships. The racial restrictions they were accustomed to, which had shaped some of their previous identities, were an American construct. Those who returned from war, and Hughes, had to come to terms with the freedom they felt in a foreign country

juxtaposed with the harsh living conditions they were cornered into at home. They were left with a taste of human freedom and dignity that they would not give up upon their return.

In what ways do our students recognize the impacts of society on their own identity? In what ways do they feel othered, accepted, or changed by exposure to other societies, groups, or norms?

Identity Into Art→ The Harlem Renaissance

The imagery of Jim Crow stereotypes and vaudeville caricatures is wearing away as Black Americans relocate and change. Not only is this group of people changing, but the world of art is changing in such a way that it allows writers and artists an avenue to capture their cultural change. James Campbell writes of *The Timeliness of Langston Hughes*, and says, “the decade of the 1920s witnessed a revolution in the realm of aesthetics, the rise of what George Hutchinson has called ‘pragmatic aesthetics,’ a new critical sensibility in which the merit of a work of art lay not in its adherence to some universal standard but rather in its capacity to express and evoke the specificities of human experiences in particular places and time...” (28) This shift from what has been traditionally considered artist, often a European standard, is now able to shift towards the everyday lives and experiences of particular localities. It creates what Campbell goes on to call a “cultural independence,” a time in which what is now considered American art, emerges. The cataloging of an “American Experience,” through music, literature, and art redefines the norms. The Harlem Renaissance, and Hughes’s own writing, thrive in capturing the experiences of what it means to be a Black American, in America, more specifically in Harlem, during this exact moment in time. His work, in particular his short stories, tells of the many interactions he’s had with African Americans across his lifetime of travel. He tells stories of the working struggles they faced and the dignity in which they faced them.

His life and the historical context are thus crucial in understanding and being able to closely read a variety of his short stories and poetry. The poverty and pride in, *Thank You M'am*, are more deeply understood when taking his childhood poverty into account, and the pride his family maintained in their free identity. The freedom experienced by servicemen abroad, and his taste of it are seen in, *Home*, the story of a musician who spends time abroad only to be hanged for exercising the same freedoms back home. *The Blues I'm Playing*, and *Slave on the Block* are about young black artists at the mercy of white patrons, which mirror one of Hughes’ last autobiographical chapters, *Patron and Friend* as well as shed light on the Negro experience in Harlem, while the Renaissance attracted wealthy white observers. Reading *Father and Son* is only enriched with an understanding of Hughes’ strained relationship with his father, and the color dynamics that play out in his genetic history. It is also the story through which the changing identities held by Black Americans are contrasted. (29) His poetry and stories are only fully understood when we can go beyond the close meaning of a word or phrase, and into the history behind the word, both from Hughes’s personal experience and from the collective experience of African Americans during that time. For students reading these texts, this provides a concrete way to understand the themes of the text and further their connection to lived experiences. This will help us draw connections between the lived experiences of today and the social movements happening around us.

Teaching Strategies

Denotation/Connotation

Over the years I have found that students understand many analytical skills, as they apply to conversations with their friends and families. Oftentimes, they lack the academic language to describe that skill. For this reason, I often use concrete examples from their everyday lives to illustrate each concept. When teaching about denotation and connotation, I begin the lesson with the check-in question “What weather are you today?” I may chart the differences and then ask students to explain what each type of weather tells us about their mood or state of being. This opens the conversation to a clear distinction between the denotation of “sunny” and “cloudy” to the connotations of “happy and energetic,” versus “tired and sad.” Next, I try to give students ways in which to help remember each word. Denotation begins with a D to remind them it’s the dictionary definition. Connotation sounds closer to connections. What I would do next is take specific lines from Hughes’ poetry. Every single line is written on one sheet of paper and given to students in groups. Their task is to find as many connotations as they can for the loaded words in each phrase. By limiting the text given, it allows students to focus on expanding their connections and by choosing a Hughes line, they are previewing an upcoming poem.

At the end of this lesson, we often debrief and talk about when and why our connotations might differ, and how we see connotations and denotations play out in our everyday conversations (like when your mom isn’t “mad” just “disappointed”).

Fishbowl Group Analysis

In a fishbowl activity, there is a group of students positioned in the center of the room. They carry out their task, in this case, a discussion on their annotations of Hughes’ short story, while the rest of the class sits around them as spectators. This is a useful strategy when teaching a new concept like close reading or historical inquiry. It allows students to practice the techniques and receive feedback on what they are doing well, provides an example for the entire class, and allows for opportunities to correct misunderstandings. I tend to use fishbowls earlier on in the year as a way to teach what academic discussion should look like so that all students are clear on the procedures and best practices.

Literature Circles

In a literature circle, a small group of students discusses a shared reading in-depth. Oftentimes each student has a particular discussion role or analysis focus. In a literature circle, students might discuss plot and characters, author’s craft and purpose, point of view, decipher vocabulary, make inferences, and draw connections to their own lives.

Literature circles give students the independent practice in annotating and analyzing a text with the safety and reassurance of working through their ideas with their peers, allowing them to also learn from one another. This strategy is also useful to differentiate texts for groups of students and group them in ways to allow you to provide targeted direct instruction.

Student Activity Samples

Autobiographical Analysis: Hughes and His Father Plan for the Future

The following activity would take place as an entrance activity several times throughout the unit. This will allow students to have daily practice at close reading and learn more historical context around Hughes' life, without reading the full autobiography. The excerpts chosen would tie into the themes and literary readings of the week.

The class will begin with a short reading exercise. Students will be given an excerpt from Hughes's autobiography. In this example, his father lays out his plan for Langston's future. He would financially support Hughes while he studied in Switzerland, learning German, Italian, and French, study engineering, and eventually move back to Mexico with his father. During this exchange, Hughes declares his intentions to be a writer, reminds his father of his poor skills in mathematics, and makes clear his disinterest in traveling to Switzerland. Instead, he suggests studying engineering at Columbia College as a compromise, which would put him close to Harlem, a city he was dying to experience; "the greatest Negro city in the world." (31)

Students will read the first time for a general understanding of the text, marking areas that stand out to them, and explaining why that caught their interest in the margin.

The second reading will be guided by more specific questions.

- What is Hughes' relationship with his father like?
- What problems do they find in each others' ideas of the future?
- What values do Hughes and his father hold? How are they different?

As students read they should pick out specific quotes that help them answer these questions. Examining a few of the quotes, students will look at particular word choices that help them arrive at their conclusions. For example, the line, "On the way back to the ranch, my father suddenly announced that he had made up his mind to have me study mining engineering." (32) In this quote students can focus on the specific word choices of "suddenly announced. . . made up his mind. . . have me study." These words and phrases point out the authority with which his father feels entitled. The suddenness of the announcement, but also the idea of him making up his mind, suggests that his father has contemplated and knows the best possible outcome for his son, and implies the plan should be taken seriously and committed to. Finally, this line goes against the very quote that begins the autobiographical journey, one we would have already analyzed as a class, "And I felt that nothing would ever happen to me again that I didn't want to happen." (33)

This analysis of the word choices, in connection with quotes and context from other moments in his life, gives students a clearer picture of Hughes, the relationship between him and his father, and even the difference in ideology between them, driven by historical factors.

This mini-lesson is also a great opportunity to draw connections between the text and our own lives. It can especially be used as a moment to push beyond a superficial connection such as, "This has happened to me" into a conversation about how our two-way analytical street: How does the text help us to understand the works of Hughes and the world around us? And, how do our connections help us better understand Hughes and this moment?

Poetry Analysis: Montage of a Dream Deferred

The following activity exemplifies the format in which we would analyze a variety of Langston Hughes' poetry. It allows us to perform a close reading, dive into the poetry with a historical curiosity, and come to a conclusion about the themes and connections after exploring both the interpretation of the literary analysis and historical context.

Class often begins with a series of questions that students can answer in their journals. These are often related to the topics of the day and are aimed at getting students to think about their own opinions and experiences. These are two questions that would be included to begin the lesson.

- What are your future dreams? What will it take for you to achieve them?
- What do you think your parents' dreams are?

Next, students will read the short first poem, *Harlem*. With this poem, we will focus on close reading analysis and figurative language. Students will write connotations in the margin of the poem in small groups focusing on literary elements such as the imagery of "fester like a sore" or the juxtaposition of "stink like rotten meat?/ Or crust and sugar over-/ like a syrupy sweet?"

Students will also focus on the structure of this small poem, particularly the isolation of the second to last stanza and final italicized line, "*Or does it explode?*" (30)

Students will discuss their findings both in small groups and as a whole class, particularly as they understand the message connected to their interpretations and answers to their entrance questions.

Next, students will be given the full set of poems, *Harlem*, *Good Morning*, and *Same in Blues*. For these texts, students will be encouraged to perform another close read, but this time to do so with the curiosity of a historian, circling words and phrases that prompt research questions.

As a class we'll gather some of these questions, which should include some of the following:

- Who is immigrating to New York? What do these places have in common?
- What is the significance of Penn Station?
- What is a party line? How does it function?
- What is life like for Black Americans during the 1940s and 50s?
- What is happening in Hughes' life right before he writes this poem?

The students will next research the unfamiliar words and historical questions created.

They will report back to their groups and the class to share their findings, adding and changing the meaning of the poem.

Questions for discussion at this point might include:

- Why do you think Hughes specifically identifies these areas of origin for New York immigrants? How does that tie to the idea of dreams?
- How does the idea of dream shift throughout the three poems?
- Typically, only *Harlem* is taught to students and is more popularly known. How does the history included in these last two sections change the idea of a dream deferred?

- Is this poem about everyone's dream?
- How does this poem connect to the events happening in society today?

To conclude this lesson, students will write their reflection on the poem that includes a close reading of the language and its historical value it.

Short Story Analysis: Thank You M'am

The following activity format works as a template for teaching Hughes' short stories in a way that includes historical context from his autobiography. The short stories lessons would take several class periods and students would work in literature groups focusing each on a different short story. The pattern for each group would be similar with questions and autobiographical pieces tailored to pair their story.

The literature circle group focusing on *Thank You M'am* would begin with the choice of answering one of the following questions:

- Describe a time when you have been starving or desperate to have something. What was it? What did that feel like? What actions would you be willing to take to get what you were after?
- Is it right or wrong to steal food to feed yourself and others?

After discussing their answers they would begin to read the story, first focusing on a general understanding and first reactions. After their reading, students discuss their first reactions, summarize and clear up any misconceptions. The first read is often an opportunity to catch any unfamiliar words and define them as well.

For the next read, I would provide more guided questions for the students. Each student should reread marking the textual evidence that will help them address the questions.

- What *inference* can you draw about the setting? When and where might this story take place?
- How does Hughes *characterize* Roger and Ms. Luella at the beginning of the story?
- How does their relationship shift throughout the story? Why do you think that is?
- How is Ms. Luella's treatment of Roger surprising? What might that reveal about her?

It is important to note that literature circles often have specific roles and focuses for students. These can change to reflect different skills or be used to differentiate instruction to particular students. In this case, I opt to focus on gathering textual evidence to support their claims and help lead their discussion.

After the second reading, students lead a discussion on the setting and characterization changes. A group graphic organizer or poster can be used to help students record and organize their ideas and help them identify the theme as well as evidence that supports the possible theme.

Once they have thoroughly examined the ideas in the text, students will be given short excerpts from Hughes' autobiography *The Big Sea* which are paired and relevant to each short story. For this particular story, an excerpt about his time with his grandmother will be included. In this piece, they will learn about his grandmother's pride, their poverty growing up, and the lessons she imparted to him. (34)

After reading about Hughes' life, students revisit their analysis and add new understandings and historical support to their themes.

Since students are working on multiple short stories around the classroom, we would conclude this lesson with

a gallery walk, short group presentations, or fishbowl discussions. This allows students the opportunity to learn about each story, different moments in Hughes' life, and draw connections between their stories.

Once each group has had a chance to present, provide feedback, or draw connections, then as a class, we come back to debrief the following questions.

- How does learning about Hughes' life help us to better understand his literary work?
- What common themes do we encounter throughout the different stories? How are these themes relevant to today's world?

Notes

1. "PARCC Model Content Frameworks: English Language Arts/ Literacy Grades 3-11," Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, October 2011, p. 8
2. Wineburg, Sam. *Why Learn History (When It's Already on Your Phone)*, (The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 100.
3. Wineburg, Sam. *Why Learn History (When It's Already on Your Phone)*, 88.
4. "Herbert Hoover Middle School," Public School Review, last modified 2018, <https://www.publicschoolreview.com/herbert-hoover-middle-school-profile/95126>
5. College Board. *Springboard Language Arts: Grade 6*, CA 2017.
6. Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea*. Autobiography. Introduction by Arnold Ramersad. Hill and Wang, 1993, New York, p.219
7. Locke, Alain. *Enter the New Negro*. Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro. Survey Graphic. Vol. VI, no.6. March 1925.
8. Ibid
9. Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea*, p.285-290
10. Ibid
11. Ibid
12. Ibid
13. Ibid
14. Hughes, Langston. *The Ways of White Folks*.
15. Jordan, Glenn. (2011) *RE-MEMBERING THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN PAST: Langston Hughes, Aaron Douglas, and the Harlem Renaissance*, Cultural Studies, 25:6, 848-891
16. Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea*, p.11-26
17. Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea*, p.11-13
18. Ibid
19. Ibid
20. Glenn Jordan (2011) *RE-MEMBERING THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN PAST: Langston Hughes, Aaron Douglas, and the Harlem Renaissance*
21. Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea*, p.24
22. Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea*, p.27-34
23. Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea*, p.32
24. Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea*, p.62
25. Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea*, p.3

26. Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea*, p.10
27. Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea*, p.144-171
28. Campbell, James T. "The Timeliness of Langston Hughes." *The Langston Hughes Review*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2019, pp. 126-135. *JSTOR*
29. Hughes, Langston. *The Ways of White Folks*.
30. Hughes, Langston. *Montage*. Henry Holt & Company. 1951, pg 71-73
31. Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea*, p.61-63
32. Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea*, p.61
33. Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea*, p.3
34. Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea*, p.13-17

Annotated Bibliography

Campbell, James T. "The Timeliness of Langston Hughes." *The Langston Hughes Review*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2019, pp. 126-135. *JSTOR*

Campbell discusses the timeliness of Hughes in two main ways. 1. Hughes is writing in a time where across America there is cultural independence, creation of what "American Art" would become. 2. Hughes' ability to write about the experiences of black Americans that would resonate with people in the future, and be able to reach them at different points in their lives.

Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea*. Autobiography. Introduction by Arnold Ramersad. Hill and Wang. 1993. New York.

In short vignettes, Hughes recounts early experiences, his educational journey, and time spent traveling as a mess boy on boats to his time spent in Paris. His book culminates with his time spent in Harlem among his contemporaries during the period known as the Harlem Renaissance.

Hughes, Langston. *The Ways of White Folks*. Random House Inc. 1993. New York.

In 14 short stories, Hughes uses the perspective of African Americans in a variety of life experiences. Each story explores different aspects of the relational, economic, and daily living tensions of blacks, in a racist and white society.

Glenn, Jordan (2011) *RE-MEMBERING THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN PAST: Langston Hughes, Aaron Douglas, and the Harlem Renaissance*, *Cultural Studies*, 25:6, 848-891

Glenn discusses white dominance and racial violence in the post-slavery period and how that begins to shift with the Great Migration and World War 1. Glenn then focuses on the portraits of Aaron Douglas, and the writing of Langston Hughes, as purposefully constructed to shed the prejudiced images of African Americans into the image of the "New Negro."

Locke, Alain. *Enter the New Negro*. Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro. Survey Graphic, Vol. VI, no.6, March 1925. <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai3/migrations/text8/lockenewnegro.pdf>

Locke examines what he calls a “spiritual Coming of Age” of the African American from an identity of the “Old Negro” on held to stereotypes and caricatures, held down in society, to the “New Negro” an identity of self-determination and independence, from the structures of racism.

Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers. *PARCC Model Content Frameworks: English Language Arts/ Literacy Grades 3-11. (pg 8)* October 2011. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED526347.pdf>

PARCC provides a teaching framework that guides educators through the alignment of state testing items with Common Core State Standards. It breaks down the specific language used by Common Core and sets benchmarks for what these college readiness standards could look like in each grade level.

Wineburg, Sam. *Why Learn History (When It’s Already on Your Phone)*. The University of Chicago Press, 2018.

Wineburg discusses the importance of moving away from a traditional model of teaching history as fact and memorization based, to one that focuses on grounding a historical text in its historic context. The methods to do so involve teaching students to be continuously curious about the sources, the dates, the people, and the language in a text. Wineburg breaks down the importance of research in an age where anything, everything, including the unaccredited, is found online.

Appendix on Implementing District Standards

Reading

The two reading standards most emphasized in this unit ask students to closely analyze elements of the text focusing on specific language and structure, and to then use that analysis to determine a theme and its development throughout the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts.

Students will be covering this standard through their application of close reading analysis of Hughes’ poetry and short stories, particularly when they examine the connotations and impact of Hughes’ syntax. Furthermore, they will be able to analyze the particular historical meaning of some of Hughes' loaded language.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.2

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development throughout the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text.

After applying standard RI.8.4, students will use their analysis of specific word choice and structure to discuss the themes presented in Hughes’ poetry and stories. Students will be able to discuss and write about these themes citing specific examples as evidence to support their claims. Students will not only be able to identify

the theme in a specific work of literature but an overarching theme across his multiple works during this unit of study.

Writing

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.1.B

Support claim(s) with logical reasoning and relevant evidence, using accurate, credible sources and demonstrating an understanding of the topic or text.

Throughout the unit, students will be identifying possible themes of Hughes' literary work, supporting those themes with relevant textual evidence and historical research. The student activity example around short stories particularly addresses this standard.

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