

Knox College - Department of Educational Studies

Teacher: Diana Chavira      Grade Level(s): 9/10

**Lesson Title:** Questioning – Have you ever dreamt a dream like Langston Hughes?

**Subject:** English / Language Arts

**Duration:** 70 min/day for 3 days

**Instructional Objectives:** Students will:

- Identify connections between an author's work and the socio-historical context in which it was written
- Analyze a poem by Langston Hughes in its historical context
- Summarize in discussion (small groups/ classroom) the connection between one poem's meaning and the socio-historical context in which it was written
- Compose an original poem that reflects a personal view on a current social issue

**Materials:**

- Computer for Powerpoint presentation
- Chromebooks
- Dictionary/Thesaurus (Can be substituted by a Chromebook)
- Worksheets with the Langston Hughes's poem, "Dreams," "Let America Be America Again," "Theme for English B," "The Weary Blues" and "I, Too, Sing America." (The poems are available on many public domain websites.)
- *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems* by Langston Hughes

## **Academic Language:**

- Poetry (What is this? When have we studied this before and why does it matter?)
- Harlem Renaissance (When did this occur? Why does it mark an important time in history?)
- Dreams (In what context does this apply to ourselves and Langston Hughes?)
- Langston Hughes (Who was this great figure and what can we learn from him?)

**Anticipatory Set:** Ask students to think of their personal goals, ambitions, and dreams. On a scratch sheet of paper, have students to write down what their dreams are and what they would give up in order for their dreams to be realized.

## **PRIOR KNOWLEDGE**

1. Initiate a class discussion about how social context has a dramatic impact on one's goals and choices. (You might use the example of the many Americans who enlisted in the armed forces after September 11.) Ground this notion in students' lives by asking students to respond in writing to the following questions:
  - How have world events influenced your actions and the way you communicate?
  - What about the world grabs your attention and encourages you to speak out?
  - How would you define passion?
  - What are you passionate about?
  - Can you think of examples of people who are passionate about what they do?
2. Divide students into groups of two or three and ask them to share their responses. Ask volunteers to share their responses with the entire class.

3. Ask students to brainstorm examples of how the times in which a writer lives can impact his or her writing.
4. Read and display the poem "Dreams" by Langston Hughes. Ask students to volunteer their initial reactions and interpretations of this poem.
5. Read aloud the "Introduction" and "A Personal Note" from the anthology *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems* and then reread the "Dreams" poem. These brief biographical pieces illustrate how Hughes' passion for encouraging the black youth of America influenced his writing of "Dreams." Again solicit responses from students.
6. Ask students to respond to the following question: How did what you learned about Hughes' life influence your interpretation of the poem? Encourage your students to participate!

## **MODELING**

7. Inform students that they will be embarking on an adventure to show how historical events have influenced other works by Hughes.
8. Tell them that they will be learning about his life and considering how socio-historical context (social issues in history) affected his writing. To culminate this study, inform students that they will be composing their own free-verse poem on a personally relevant social topic.
9. Read aloud Langston Hughes', "The Weary Blues," together as a class. Then, tell them what you thought of the poem.  
EXAMPLE: Tell them that when you first interpreted the poem, you had a general idea of the context and historical information behind the poem, but you have not done research. Tell them that you did research on the poem, and discovered that this poem was a reflection of when he first became introduced to the Harlem Renaissance (something that you evidently did not know beforehand!). Then, explain how your interpretation of the poem was different before and after research.
10. Divide the class into three groups and assign each group one Langston Hughes poem.
  - Group One: "Harlem"
  - Group Two: "Theme for English B"
  - Group Three: "I, Too, Sing America"
11. Tell students that their goal for this part of the project is to make connections between the historical context, Langston Hughes' personal

experiences, and their own interpretation of the poem's meaning. Making connections between these areas helps students understand how the socio-historical context in which a poem is written influences its meaning and how a writer's personal experiences impact his or her writing.

12. Have students begin by reading the poem and interpreting its meaning. Explain that their initial interpretation of the poem may change as they learn more about Langston Hughes' life and times. **Mention that several of Hughes's poems were written while he was riding on trains across the country!**
13. Encourage them to explore a variety of rich and varied websites to learn about Hughes' life. Make sure that you specifically mention the relationship between Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance between the 1920s and 1930s.
  - What do you think this means? Why do you think this? What have we learned?
  - Before and after historical research: What did you learn?
14. Allow time to write in notebooks. Present the following questions:
  - What was happening in the world at the time this poem was written?
  - What did Hughes care about?
  - What may have inspired him to write this poem?

Student will keep these questions handy so that they could respond to them when the class comes together as a group to share.

15. Ask members of the group to speak about the poem assigned to them and to discuss how they felt about the poem before they conducted their research and afterwards.

## **COMPOSING POEMS**

16. Using the 1930s trunk material, you may want to read the book describing Hughes train trip during his teen years. His experience results in a published poem that resulted in critical recognition.

17. Have the class take time to begin their own original poems that revolved around the theme of "dreams."
18. Point out that the definition of the students' dreams might have changed from two days ago, when they were first asked to write down on a scratch sheet of paper. Now, their dream should be closely linked to the socio-cultural influences of today's society (if not, this is okay as long as they understand that Langston Hughes's poem, "Dreams," was written as a reflection of his time period. However, it is strongly encouraged that their poems reflect their hopes for a better community, country, or world.)

### **CLOSURE**

19. Have student present their poems or talk about the process of writing the poem. What did they take from Langston Hughes's writing? Did they successfully incorporate a modern societal problem?
20. Have students that were not able to finish their poems to finish their poems for homework and present the following day. It is important to note that the theme of "dreams" is subjective, and not everyone will or should have the same exact idea.
21. Provide an exit ticket: What did you learn with this lesson? What can we do to make it better? (These questions are designed to help students reflect on the lesson, and establish a sense of where they were in the beginning, and where they ended up.)

## **Dreams**

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

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

## THEME FOR ENGLISH B

The instructor said,  
Go home and write  
a page tonight.

And let that page come out of you---

Then, it will be true.

I wonder if it's that simple?

I am twenty-two, colored, born in Winston-Salem.

I went to school there, then Durham, then here  
to this college on the hill above Harlem.

I am the only colored student in my class.

The steps from the hill lead down into Harlem

through a park, then I cross St. Nicholas,

Eighth Avenue, Seventh, and I come to the Y,

the Harlem Branch Y, where I take the elevator

up to my room, sit down, and write this page:

It's not easy to know what is true for you or me

at twenty-two, my age. But I guess I'm what

I feel and see and hear, Harlem, I hear you:

hear you, hear me---we two---you, me, talk on this page.

(I hear New York too.) Me---who?

Well, I like to eat, sleep, drink, and be in love.

I like to work, read, learn, and understand life.

I like a pipe for a Christmas present,  
or records---Bessie, bop, or Bach.

I guess being colored doesn't make me NOT like  
the same things other folks like who are other races.

So will my page be colored that I write?

Being me, it will not be white.

But it will be

a part of you, instructor.

You are white---

yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.

That's American.

Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me.

Nor do I often want to be a part of you.

But we are, that's true!

As I learn from you,

I guess you learn from me---

although you're older---and white---

and somewhat more free.

This is my page for English B.

## **The Weary Blues**

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,  
Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,  
I heard a Negro play.

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

He did a lazy sway . . .

He did a lazy sway . . .

To the tune o' those Weary Blues.

With his ebony hands on each ivory key  
He made that poor piano moan with melody.

O Blues!

Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool  
He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.

Sweet Blues!

Coming from a black man's soul.

O Blues!

In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone  
I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan—

"Ain't got nobody in all this world,

Ain't got nobody but ma self.

I's gwine to quit ma frownin'

And put ma troubles on the shelf."

Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.

He played a few chords then he sang some more—

“I got the Weary Blues

And I can't be satisfied.

Got the Weary Blues

And can't be satisfied—

I ain't happy no mo'

And I wish that I had died.”

And far into the night he crooned that tune.

The stars went out and so did the moon.

The singer stopped playing and went to bed

While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.

He slept like a rock or a man that's dead.

## **I, Too, Sing America**

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.

They send me to eat in the kitchen

When company comes,

But I laugh,

And eat well,

And grow strong.

Tomorrow,

I'll be at the table

When company comes.

Nobody'll dare

Say to me,

"Eat in the kitchen,"

Then.

Besides,

They'll see how beautiful I am

And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

## Harlem

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore—

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over—

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

## **Model poem created by instructor – Dreams**

When I turn on the news and  
See that another Black man was  
Shot...I wonder what that means for  
His family.

When I flip open the newspaper and  
Read that another Latina was sexually  
Harassed...I wonder what that means for  
Her self-image.

When I turn on my phone to  
Read my Newsfeed and see that another  
One of my students has dropped out of  
High school...I wonder what that means for  
Her future.

And while I sit in my chair and dream of the  
Next ten to twenty years to come...I wonder  
What that means.

For my unborn children.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

## Checklist for My Dream Poem!

\_\_\_\_\_ Does my poem incorporate the theme "dreams"?

\_\_\_\_\_ Is my poem free of spelling errors? (Lack of punctuation is okay!)

\_\_\_\_\_ Does my poem incorporate a societal problem of today?

List the problem. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Does my poem use at least two poetic devices?

List them. \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Does my poem meet the length requirements of ten lines?