

MINNESOTA WRITING PROJECT
DEMONSTRATION LESSON

Title: Hearing the Poetry of Langston Hughes Through the Sounds of Jazz

Grade Appropriate: 9 – college

Approximate length of time to complete lesson: 50 minute class period

Objective(s) to be covered:

- Appreciation and understanding of Langston Hughes’s poetry, particularly his use of the jazz rhythms to capture the experience of African-American daily life Harlem in the 1920s and 30s
- Ability to read poetry closely, making meaning from how the poem sounds as well as what it says
- Use of freewriting to discover ideas, to gain a fresh perspective on music and literature, and to begin textual analysis

Specific standards addressed:

This lesson helped me fulfill English department expectations for

- teaching critical reading and writing about poetry
- including multicultural literature
- using multimedia resources

Brief summary/outline:

I taught this lesson in the second half of a 15-week semester in a first-year college literature/composition course focused on the genres of poetry and drama. At this point, the students were in the midst of writing poetry analysis papers, so I developed this lesson

- to give them a fresh perspective on poetry (emphasizing sound and rhythm to offer a new way into interpretation)
- to keep them motivated to think creatively about poetry
- to provide a change (a lively, full class discussion) from the work we had been doing in small group writing workshop

We listened to selections from each song and freewrote and/or talked aloud (in pairs and a full class) about what we heard in the music in terms of rhythm, repetition, melody, images, voice, and tone. After we shared our freewrites, we read aloud selected Hughes poems, analyzing them for echoes of what we heard in the music. By using music (something I love, but only have a layperson’s knowledge of), I can break down the “teacher as expert” role, making it safer for us to explore our ideas about both the songs and poems together.

Examples of questions and prompts we used to motivate our freewrites and discussions:

As you listen, jot down some words you would use to describe this music.

If you were describing this song to a friend, what adjectives might you use?
What instruments do you hear?
What instruments or melodies did you find yourself focusing on as you listened?
How many of those adjectives we listed apply to this poem?
What's the rhythm of this poem?
And, how does Hughes create that rhythm?

Since this was our first of two days on Hughes, my primary goal was to introduce them to the poetry and make it accessible. This lesson is intentionally ambitious (4 songs and 8 poems), and I never get through all of it. Because the students enjoy the music and talk, they tackle the remaining poems and read more in preparation for the second day, where we focus on Hughes's use of voice and his perspectives on the African-American experience.

Resources:

Duke Ellington, "Take the A Train"
Langston Hughes, "Jukebox Love Song"

Art Blakely's Jazz Messengers w/ Thelonious Monk, "In Walked Bud,"
Langston Hughes, "In Time of Silver Rain"

Julian (Cannonball) Adderly and John Coltrane, "Limehouse Blues"
Langston Hughes, "Dream Variations," "Tell Me" and "Harlem"

Billie Holiday "Body & Soul"
Langston Hughes, "The Weary Blues," "Miss Blues'es Child" and "Still Here"

Contact for additional information:

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