

The Story of Self: Memory and Metaphor, Identity and Imagery

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Overview: “What is it?”

The main premise of this unit is to examine Romare Bearden’s artistic expression of autobiography within the context of student analysis of autobiographical poetry and other written expressions of identity. This unit will focus specifically on, but is not limited to, Bearden’s art reflecting his childhood experiences in the South and Pittsburgh, “places that intrigued Bearden and inspired his art- Northern city streets, Southern farm life, homey interiors in both settings,”¹ as well as the use of a few original poems by Bearden eliciting autobiographical or identity related themes. While examining these Bearden texts, students will simultaneously engage in the creation of original “identity collages” and autobiographical poems as the unit culminates with an extension of this identity analysis in the examination of the Harlem Renaissance and jazz and blues music so identifiable in Bearden’s own artistic autobiography. Ideally, these simultaneous explorations will generate a deep understanding of the role symbolism, imagery, and metaphor play in autobiographical expression. “Through accomplished acts of recollection and commemoration, Bearden forged rich narratives convey[ing] universal statements.”¹ Bearden’s art, a “rich compilation of collage layering [that] parallels the complexity of human experience to project meaning beyond any ostensible subject,”¹ possesses “universal statements” in easily identifiable recurring motifs and symbols (the image of the train, incorporation of music and the idea of the blues, iconic African-American character portrayals) and as students recognize these on canvas they will compare and contrast the way in which an artist employs symbolism and imagery versus the way in which an author integrates these as figurative language in a poetic text.

As an artist, Romare Bearden is best known for his masterful collage paintings and this unit is, ultimately, a collage of sorts. Students will be piecing together the art and writings of Romare Bearden, the poetry of Harlem Renaissance and other minority figures, the lyrics of jazz and blues musicians, and their own individual art work and poetry to develop an understanding of autobiography and figurative language. A study of Romare Bearden is a perfect foundation for this unit as the visual imagery invoked in Bearden’s art (his pictorial significations) transports viewers to scenes from Bearden’s life (autobiography) that take onlookers into a journey of memory. Bearden’s art continually evokes autobiographical images of his summers in Charlotte with grandparents, his youth and adult life in Pittsburgh and Harlem, and his later explorations of the Caribbean. Within each cut-out and color section are hidden symbols that tell the story of not only Bearden’s life, but that of the Great Migration, the Harlem Renaissance,

and the African-American experience: “a celebration of the lives of African-Americans within the universe of human experience as the artist understood it.”¹ It is these stories I want students to identify and analyze as they juxtapose a study of Bearden’s art, Harlem Renaissance poetry and jazz, and their own autobiographical expression through art, poetry, and music in an interdisciplinary unit that is, simply and profoundly, an exploration of “the story of self-” Bearden’s self, the African-American self, and the individual self, as students examine the ways in which these texts all are autobiographical on a number of levels. This unit will be designed for eighth grade language arts students and will be introduced at the beginning of the school year. Both the study of biography, autobiography, and memoir, the exploration of Harlem Renaissance poets, and poetic devices in general are all critical parts of the eighth grade standard course of study. With Bearden’s paintings as the foundation, students can examine these concepts in creative and cross-curricular manners.

This unit centers on strategies and curriculum designed for eighth grade language arts students in a high performing middle school in Charlotte, NC. The school is an honors school of excellence, meeting both high growth and 27 out of 27 AYP standards. The school population consists of 1,054 students in sixth through eighth grade with a racial and socioeconomic diversification resulting in 72.2 percent Caucasian, 13.8 percent African-American, 7.6 percent Asian, 4.1 percent Hispanic, 2.1 percent multiracial, .3 percent Native American and 12.6 percent of students participating in the free and reduced lunch program. 7.3 percent of students have disabilities and 5.4 percent have limited English proficiency (LEP). The majority of the school population enjoys wealth, involved and well educated parents, and average to high intellectual abilities.

Driven by “rigor and relevance,” the goal of the administration and teachers remains to create an academic environment designed to challenge the most gifted students while simultaneously stretching and growing all students to reach new academic heights. A strategy employed to accomplish this goal is the heterogeneous grouping of all Language Arts classes. This grouping creates a classroom of multiple ability levels and challenges the instructor to differentiate education in order to facilitate the needs of lower-level students without introducing frustration, while simultaneously driving high level students to greater academic and intellectual engagement. The instruction exists within the premise of teaching all whole group lessons to the highest level of student and then addressing the needs of lower level students through small groups and on an individual basis as need arises. Intellectually stimulating, challenging, and rigorous instruction aligned to the NC standard course of study, and designed to teach students curriculum as well as application, guides the instructional focus of this school. This curriculum unit’s design applies these principles to create a unit of study both challenging and accessible as students engage with an interdisciplinary exploration of identity, memory, symbolism, metaphor, and the art of autobiography.

The Art of Autobiography: “I’m trying really to remember”

The Russian poet, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, summarized the relationship between autobiography and text with his quote, "A poet's autobiography is his poetry. Anything else is just a footnote."¹ This reflection epitomizes the paradigm through which this unit intends students to analyze text: the text itself is the autobiography. While engaging with the art of Bearden and the identity poetry in this unit, the ultimate aim is to alter students' perceptions of autobiographical expression from the traditional non-fiction analysis of one's life from birth to old age, and instead, see autobiography in its most subtle forms, hidden inside the images, metaphors, and figurative language in multiple fiction and non-fiction texts.

What is it?
I'm trying really to remember
The clock has stopped
Now I can never know
Where the edge of my world can be
If I could only enter that old calendar
That opens to an old, old July
And learn what unknowing things know¹

This untitled poem by Romare Bearden, first published in 1984 by Myron Schwartzman in “Romare Bearden Sees in A Memory,” will be the first poem students engage in this study. As a unit introduction, students will be given a copy of this poem and asked to analyze it in several different ways. First of all, they will do a cold reading and generate a first response to the poem. I will instruct them to read the poem and write down all their reactions. They will not be given any specific questions to answer or any background on the poem's author or thematic intent. Following this reading, students will share their interpretations in small groups and discuss whether or not similar themes or ideas stood out following their initial interpretation. Next, students will reread the poem and engage with guided questions about the text. Students will be asked to identify the following: what is the poem's main idea; what is the author's purpose in writing this poem; who do you think the author is and what about the text makes you draw this conclusion; what is the main conflict the poem's protagonist is experiencing; is this conflict resolved and why or why not; what types of sensory images does the author use in this text and are they effective; are there any symbols in this text and what do they symbolize; if you had to sum up this poem's theme in one word what word would you use and why? Students will again share their responses in small groups upon completion of this second analysis. After small group discussions, students will then compare their responses and discuss the poem's theme in a teacher led whole class analysis.

Following discussion of the above mentioned questions, students will be shown Bearden's collage *Childhood Memories* and instructed to compare and contrast this piece

of art with the poem they just analyzed. At this point, students will have identified memory as a key theme of Bearden's poem, and will focus on this painting's depiction of memory. Students will be informed that while this painting was created between 1965 and 1966 the artist was born in 1911 and experienced childhood during the early 20th century. Students will again pay particular attention to the images, particularly the eye with the clock hands, and their symbolic impact on the theme of the work. Students will follow the same procedure of analysis on this text as they used on the poem; they will journal their initial responses and share, answer the same set of questions they engaged with the poem and share, and then interact in a teacher led whole class analysis. At the conclusion of the class discussion, the teacher will introduce the students to the author and artist, Romare Bearden, and set the stage for the analysis of autobiographical text throughout this unit.

Identity Collage: "The clock has stopped"

As an homage to Bearden's adeptness in synthesizing multi-faceted memory and experience into collage paintings richly narrating his "autobiography" in a lexicon of magazine clippings, fabric, tin foil, paint, newspaper photographs, and other found objects, student engagement conjoins a study of Bearden's art and thematically representative poetry within the context of differentiated group analysis ultimately resulting in the formation of a class "collage" of shared knowledge. As each group analysis centers on different poems and paintings (identified specifically in the sections that follow), student reflection will move from a specific thematic or motif based analysis within a small group setting to "jigsawed" (more information available in the strategies section) whole class presentations of their specific study of Bearden resulting in an overall picture of Bearden's identity and autobiography as expressed through his recurrent symbols and motifs, specifically, his emphasis on memory, music, and metaphor. Each small student group will become the magazine clippings, scraps of fabric, and brushstrokes of paint that form a whole class collage painting a story of autobiography with the "images" of Bearden, Harlem Renaissance poetry, and jazz, all richly colored with a new understanding of the metaphors employed by these texts.

Introduction: " can [I] ...ever know/Where the edge of my world can be"

In order to introduce students to a wide variety of Bearden's work, students, following an initial, teacher led model, will engage in small group analysis of a Bearden painting as well as a Harlem renaissance poem. Students will be divided into differentiated small groups and presented with a poem and a Bearden collage representative of the overall focus of study (see subsequent sections). While in these groups, students will analyze both works and then be responsible for presenting an overview of their works and analysis to the entire class using the jigsaw method (see strategies section). Students will

answer a series of questions about both the poems and the collages and then compare and contrast the two, ultimately writing about how and why both are excellent representations of the African-American experience at this time period and how they both uniquely employ symbolism and metaphor to convey the author's purpose. At the end of the study students will present their poetry analysis and Bearden pieces to the class ultimately creating a wall of the classroom dedicated to posting poetry and art side by side in a "Harlem Renaissance identity collage."

The painting and poetry studied in each group will be thematically or symbolically related and part of the student analysis will be to identify the commonalities between these pieces. Students will be introduced to the analysis process and expectations during a whole class lesson modeling a comparison of Langston Hugh's poem, *Mother to Son*, and Bearden's painting, *Captivity and Resistance*, 1976. "A powerful, highly political object, *Captivity and Resistance* makes clear that the concerns Bearden had addressed in the Baltimore Afro-American forty years earlier were still very much on his mind."¹ These concerns are a perfect example of the "tacks, splinters," and "boards torn up" Hughes symbolizes in *Mother to Son*. Both Hughes' text as well as Bearden's paintings and Afro-American publications represent a picture of African-American history that reflects a story of struggle as well as perseverance. Hughes does this through the words of his poems' narrator which urge "So boy, don't you turn back."¹ Comparatively, *Captivity and Resistance*, sends viewers a similar message by juxtaposing images of inequality and entrapment beside those indicative of escape from subjugation, in particular the drawings of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman.

Included as well are images of the continent of Africa; a wood sculpture; a writhing figure in chains; slave ships with voyagers below deck and at battle on deck [again juxtaposing subjugation and defiance]; and Prince Cinque, the hero of the battle and a handsome and gentle figure at the mural's center, who holds a staff against a landscape with the sun/moon rising/setting. At the far right is an ominous apparatus for a lynching, presumably that of John Brown whose bearded spirit shadow in gray hangs over two figures that reference Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman, a rifle on end between them. Also depicted is a regiment of African-American Civil War soldiers in the gray uniform of the Confederate side, although accompanying them on horseback is what may be a blue-jacketed Union officer.¹

Each of the aforementioned images will be analyzed as symbols and compared and contrasted to the symbols used by Hughes.

During group work, which will occur over a three to four day period, mini-lessons on symbolism, metaphor, and author's purpose will be given as warm up activities prior to

students dividing into groups. During group work, students will “TP-CASTT” (for more information see the strategies section) both the poem and the artwork. Students first look at the title of the poem without having read the poem. At that time they analyze the title and make predictions about the poem and work of art based solely on the title. Next students paraphrase each stanza of the poem, rephrasing the poet’s words into everyday language they can easily understand. In order to paraphrase the painting, students will “narrate” the story, telling in words the story the picture visually portrays. The poetic connotation will consist of identifying the similes and metaphors used by the poet verbally while the artistic connotation will entail identification of the visual symbols and pictorial metaphors employed by Bearden. Attitude analysis will involve determining the mood and tone of the poem as well as the mood and tone of the painting being viewed. Shifts will be analyzed visually by examining abrupt differences in color, line, or artistic patterns, verbally by analysis of a change in the theme or author’s style. Next, both the poem and art title will be revisited and students will determine whether or not they think the title is effective based on their new understanding of the work. Finally, students will determine the theme of both the poem and painting. Also during this analysis, students will answer guided questions designed to prompt discussion on the “hidden messages” within the text and the interconnectedness of the author’s personal identity and created work.

Memory: “enter[ing] that old calendar/ open[ing] to an old, old July”

Romare Bearden, as quoted in *Romare Bearden: Six Panels on a Southern Theme*, reflected that “From far off some people that I have seen and remembered have come into the landscape [of my paintings]...Sometimes the mind relives things very clearly for us. Often you have no choice in dealing with this kind of sensation, things are just there.... There are roads out of the secret places within us along which we all must move as we go to touch others.”¹ These very “roads out of the secret places within us” are exactly the paths I hope my students will travel down both personally, as they muse over their own autobiography of memory, as well as vicariously, as they visit the “secret places” hidden in Bearden’s collage. Memory is an essential component of any autobiography and a fitting place for students to begin their study. However, personal reflection and analysis of Bearden’s memories are only the beginning of this section of study, for Bearden did not reflect exclusively on isolated personal memories. His collage paintings are best described, and analyzed, as an “accumulation of memories,” and it is the accumulated autobiography, the layers of stories hidden in Bearden’s texts, that students will be discovering. “What better medium than collage to express the accumulation of memories? And isn’t collage the emblematic medium of the century? Collagists... take bits of chaos to...investigate, organize, and present evidence of the activity of a culture...Bearden’s work acknowledges the vitality of the American crafts tradition of quilting, rug-making, and decoration that was a lively art before the appropriation of

the Cubists...[and probably very vivid in Bearden's memories of childhood] his autobiographical underpinning echoes the structure of so much contemporary art."¹

In light of the multi-faceted documentation of memory Bearden has achieved in his art, students will look at three specific types of memory and autobiographical representation in this section of study: personal memory, those experiences and sentiments isolated to individual experience; American memory, reflections best understood within the historical context of our nation's interaction with African-American culture and life; and collective memory, memories that transcend personal or national ties and forge universal connections.

Student study of "memory" will begin with a brief whole class discussion of what memory is and how and why memory is both personal and collective. The class will review the above quote and discuss how we are seeing, through Bearden's collages, both an individual memory, his personal childhood experiences and reflections on canvass, as well as the memory of a culture, the African-American experience Bearden represents visually. This idea of individual and collective representation of memory will be reinforced by the analysis of both a verbal representation of this collective memory of a culture, compared to the visual, as compared to the individual memories personal to each texts' creator.

Personal Memory

You know, in Eliot's poem, *The Four Quartets*, he talks about time, and you're going back to where you started from, but maybe you're bringing another insight, another experience to it. And things that may be nonessential have been stripped away, and you can see that the things that still stick in your mind must be of some importance to you. Like the people I remember, the pepper jelly lady, a little girl [who] kind of played with me, Liza. All these things that now come back to me.¹

Bearden's above statement emphasizes his interplay with time and memory, evoking a haunting idea of yet uninterpreted symbolism seemingly meaningless until expressed and analyzed artistically through the paradigm of visual and chronological reflection. Bearden's personal memories and symbols diffuse themselves throughout his collage paintings forming and reforming into autobiography. Bearden observed "time [as] a pattern," stating "you can come back to where you started from with added experience and hope for more understanding."¹ This idea of advanced understanding through chronologically varied perspectives forms a basis of comparison between Bearden's art and the poems paired below. Student examination will involve the identification of similar themes and responses to the idea of time and its effect on memory and experience. Students will study the poem *Southern Mansion* by Arna Bontemps in conjunction with

an untitled poem by Bearden, beginning with the line “Sometimes I remember” and his painting, *Profile/Part I, The Twenties: Mecklenburg County, Sunset Limited*, 1978. Students in this group will TP-CASTT and compare and contrast all three texts, and then focus on the three texts’ similarities. Interestingly, students should find that all three not only reflect on remembered experiences, but identify a haunting absence accompanying these memories. It is this absence that I want students to particularly notice in *Profile/Part I, The Twenties: Mecklenburg County, Sunset Limited*- specifically, why did Bearden include no structures in this painting? Just as Arna Bontemps can never enter the southern mansion she describes and Bearden can never truly revisit his grandparent’s house, I hope to suggest that this painting could not contain the structures of the particular past Bearden wishes to represent in this collage. The sun has “set” on the scenes both poets have described, their verbal images merely memories haunting the lines of their poems in the same way Bearden’s painting has hauntingly eliminated structures. The viewer does not see or know where the individuals in Bearden’s sunset scene have come from, or where they will go after the sky (memory?) darkens. We witness them trapped in a particular linear moment, just as Bontemp’s mansion and Bearden’s grandparents’ house are trapped, the only hint of time the train moving forward- but to where? Through a series of guided questions, students will be led to identify the similar themes of “lack” both the poems and paintings convey. They will then be asked to reflect on the effect of time (the train?) on memory, recognizing that while in some ways time refines memory, in other ways it alters or erases it. Students will finalize their analysis by selecting the text they feel best reflects the idea of memory and writing an explanation of why with specific textual references to support their ideas.

The second study of this nature will examine personal memories associated with death, loss and grief. Bearden experienced this personally through the very significant loss of his boyhood friend, Eugene Bailey, “a sickly and handicapped Pittsburgh lad who lived near the Banks’ [Bearden’s grandparents] boarding house.”¹ Bailey is sometimes credited as the catalyst for Bearden’s interest in art as Bailey’s stories of life in his mother’s brothel prompted Bearden to put pen to paper and illustrate his friend’s tales. Ultimately, Bearden’s grandmother, Carrie Banks, discovered the reality of Bailey’s life and adopted him into their home. Tragically Eugene died shortly after this and his death, like Bearden’s great-grandparents’ Charlotte home, became another one of Bearden’s haunting memories. “Bearden commemorated their youthful friendship more than five decades later... in *Profile/Part I, The Twenties: Pittsburgh Memories, Farewell Eugene*.” Bearden also reflected upon this loss in verse, penning a poem about Eugene Bailey’s death. Students will examine the following excerpted lines from this poem:

Nothing like this was necessary
Eugene
I stand here among these tombs,
holding this flower
which will fall endlessly into this

open earth
that rejects nothing.¹

in conjunction with their examination of Bearden's *Farewell Eugene* collage painting, TPCASTTing and answering guided questions about both pieces. Students will also compare and contrast the effectiveness of Bearden's above poem, versus Bearden's painting, in conveying his memory and feelings of grief in regard to Eugene. Particular attention will be paid to how Bearden establishes a mood and tone verbally in his poem versus visually in his art.

Following this comparison and contrast of Bearden's personal experience with loss, students will be divided into groups and will compare Bearden's expressions of grief to those articulated by poets Langston Hughes in *Sylvester's Dying Bed*, James Weldon Johnson in *Go Down Death (A Funeral Sermon)*, and Claude McKay in *If We Must Die*. Student placement in these groups will be based on ability and reflect the difficulty level of the poem, Hughes' *Sylvester's Dying Bed* representing the poem with the greatest ease of readability and McKay's *If We Must Die* being the most difficult text to interpret. Students will not only TP-CASTT these poems, but answer sets of differentiated questions designed to engage students not only with the theme of loss, but encourage analysis of how each of these texts reflects a cultural expression of loss and details significant experiences unique to African-American tradition. After students have looked at both the Bearden works and the poetry they were assigned in a small group setting, students will reflect on how and why all of these texts reveal important information about not only the authors of each text on an autobiographical level, but a culture as a whole. This final discussion and writing assignment will be designed to introduce the next section of study, American memory, where students will examine Bearden's art and Harlem Renaissance poems through the lens of its commentary on American society during the time of its creation.

American Memory

“Ralph Ellison... [once] described...his and Bearden's shared concern [as being] ‘with the relationship between our racial identity, our identity as Americans, and our mission as writer and artist.’”¹ It is this “shared concern” student analysis is designed to identify in this section of study. Through examination of Bearden's broader themes, specifically those reflecting the daily life of both Southern and Northern African-Americans, along with the study of poetry illustrating the nexus of racial and American identity and the concomitant struggle this produced, students should identify an “autobiography” of African-American life in the era of segregation. “[Bearden's] collages are considered to be some of the first works to ‘pointedly engage black popular cultural practices in contemporary visual production [contributing to his position as] the main interpreter of a

complex view of black subjectivity in his time”¹ and are therefore a fitting springboard for this analysis. “Bearden’s art provides a rich archive of the African American experience, a lesson in modernism, and a lyrical legacy of Southern history.”¹ It is the “history” of Bearden’s art, and the individual and American messages it conveys, around which student study revolves. Of particular importance will be Bearden’s pictorial representations of the Northern cities to which a number of African-Americans immigrated during the Great Migration.

Student study centers on the way African-Americans transitioned from the South to the North, their motivation for escaping the South, and the question of whether or not this Great Migration solved the racial dilemmas from which these former Southerners hoped to escape. Bearden’s own family reportedly left Charlotte after his father was accosted by a gang of white men accusing him of kidnapping the lighter skinned Romare: “White men surrounded them, and asserted that the “black” father had kidnapped the “white” child. Three-year-old Romare would have heard the cacophony, seen the struggles, and felt fear. Father and son escaped, but Bearden’s parents quickly left the South for Harlem. He could never quite go home again.”¹

Bearden’s experience with racial prejudice did not end in Harlem, nor did the memory of the South ever escape his psyche. Similarly, a number of Harlem Renaissance poets either experienced both Southern and Northern life as an African-American and compared and contrasted the two, or combined their overall racial struggles into a frustration with America as a whole and racism in general. It is the response to this racism, and the quest to find a sense of “home” and a place in which one can fully belong and assimilate, that is the focus of this section of study. Bearden mixes both Southern and Northern images, and racial struggles and stereotypes within his collages. His very form of creation, the fractured nature of montage, reflects the division and disharmony both he, and a number of African-Americans, experienced during this time period. “Collage methodology, fracturing space and form, was a brilliant choice for an artist wishing to convey his responses to a society increasingly aware of the possibilities of nuclear war, of the growing controversy that preceded and accompanied the United States’ engagement in Southeast Asia, and on a daily basis for African-Americans, of the ongoing bestiality imposed by the Jim Crow laws, which both limited opportunities in every aspect of life and maintained the splintered existence of an illegal de facto segregation.”¹ Through comparing and contrasting the positive and negative depictions of the African-American experience in Bearden’s art with the positive and negative descriptions of this experience in the poems *America*, *The City’s Love*, and *The White City* by Claude McKay and *Theme for English B*, and *I, Too* by Langston Hughes students will engage with the “American memories” recorded in these texts.

Collective Memory

One of the most interesting aspects of Bearden's oeuvre is the universality and cross-cultural nature of a number of his symbols and means of expression. While at first glance, Bearden may appear to be a documentarian exclusively capturing the life and culture of African-Americans during the era of segregation, closer examination of his collected works reveals a much broader connection to life and society. Yes, Bearden is primarily creating a type of fractured social-realism in his collage paintings, however, he is creating his story through the use of much more universal symbols. His use of African masks, Chinese and Japanese elements, and his fascination with, and reference to literary mythology within his body of work combine to produce yet another layer of interpretation of Bearden's paintings, that of a latent expression of the collective memory of not only his race, but of humanity. Bearden himself commented that "all of painting is a kind of talking about life or society, but it doesn't need to be overtly so."¹ Bearden has indeed achieved a deep seated complexity within the layers of his collage paintings that begs viewers to examine the intersection of myth and memory, autobiography and biography in a fascinating visual narrative of humanity.

One of Bearden's best examples of visually emblemizing "collective memory" arises in his *Black Odyssey* series. "...In Bearden's Odysseus narrative, the lush environment is inhabited by dark-skinned figures rooted in both classical myth and African-American culture. When queried about this, Bearden explained that the series 'involves Poseidon who always has to come up from Africa, where he wants to be with his friends there. And it is universal. So if a child in Benin or Louisiana... sees my paintings of Odysseus he can understand the myth better.'¹ Students will begin their study of Bearden's mythological themes by dividing into groups, each one of which responsible for analyzing one of Bearden's *Black Odyssey* paintings alongside a copy of that section of Homer's *Odyssey* and a traditional Greek illustration of the corresponding scene. Students will compare and contrast the universal themes in all three texts and then identify how and why Bearden has appropriated the originally "Greek" themes in order to comment on the African-American experience, or "odyssey," he knows personally. Students will identify what Bearden's decision to recreate these images reflects about his autobiography as well as how it is a biography of his race, ironically represented in a tale classically and symbolically connected to another culture and time. Students will focus on the symbols and visual images that produce the universal messages Bearden has capitalized upon in his art. Finally, student groups will present their findings to the class as a whole who will take notes on each section as Bearden's entire *Black Odyssey* series, as well as an abridged version of Homer's *Odyssey*, is reviewed and discussed.

After the completion of the *Black Odyssey* activity, students will then examine the way Countee Cullen embraced mythological symbols as a means to express his frustration and struggle as both an African-American and a poet in *Yet Do I Marvel*. Student groups will investigate one of Cullen's two literary allusions, either Tantalus or

Sisyphus, and identify how and why they are appropriate symbols of Cullen's personal, autobiographical struggles as detailed in this text. Students will then share their findings with the class as a whole and turn their attention on the last two lines of the poem, "Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:/ To make a poet black, and bid him sing!"¹ Students will examine how and why these two lines are similar to the plights of Tantalus and Sisyphus and overall, what Cullen was attempting to represent about his African-American experience by appropriating these symbols. Students will then compare Cullen's use of universal mythological symbols to express culturally specific experiences in *Yet Do I Marvel* with Bearden's in *Black Odyssey*. Finally, students will discuss the identity of Cullen as a Black poet, as expressed in the last two lines of *Yet Do I Marvel*, and Bearden as a Black artist. Students will examine the idea of "song" in terms of Cullen's poems and Bearden's paintings and be asked to identify the types of images both "sing" about and why.

Music: "the edge of my world"

Not only is the idea of memory a recurring motif in Bearden's oeuvre, "music culture was [also] a critical aspect of Bearden's... [body of work]. Ellison recounted shared experiences with the artist in the 1930s: 'the days of swinging big bands... when we danced the Lindy at the Savoy Ballroom, and nights when new stars were initiated on the stage of the Apollo Theatre.'"¹ Clearly the experiences recounted by Ellison impacted Bearden, as their memory emerged to form the basis of an entire collection of paintings: "[Bearden's] 1975 exhibition... entitled *Of the Blues*, joined New York club scenes with images rooted in Mecklenburg blues memories.... As a group these collages offer a glimpse into Bearden's densely layered interaction with music's visual realm.... Hot sounds and movements generated by musicians, vocalists, and dancers who frequented [these clubs] can almost be heard and felt while looking at Bearden's evocations of these places."¹ This series of paintings captures a type of musical memory Bearden paradoxically transposes into fabric, paper clippings, and paint. These "notes" play a visually narrated song mysteriously transcending sensory boundaries and becoming a simultaneous feast of sight and sound. This phenomenon will be the foundation of student study of sensory imagery and figurative language. These verbal tools, and their capacity to transcend experiential boundaries, will be explored by comparing and contrasting their use in the poems *Song* by Gwendolyn Bennett, *O Black and Unknown Bards* by James Weldon Johnson, and Langston Hughes' *The Weary Blues*.

Metaphor: "learn[ing] what unknowing things know"

Throughout this course of study, students will be introduced to not only a number of Bearden's collage paintings, but a number of significant Harlem Renaissance poems and

poets. In order to assist student understanding and as a form of guided notes during jigsawed presentations, students will be keeping a detailed note sheet comparing and contrasting the verbal and visual images discussed in multiple texts. Whether during a teacher led whole class discussion, or during student guided presentations of various differentiated studies, students will track and analyze the symbols and metaphors used by these poets to convey meaning. Following each new discussion of paired texts, students will spend time completing the sections on their guided notes sheets. This is best accomplished following the whole class or student led discussion, and when guided by the instructor. I have provided a sample of the first initial comparisons students will be making. The idea behind this study is to focus on and compare and contrast the way in which Bearden employs artistic symbolism and figurative language to convey meaning to the verbal methods found in the poems studied. Teacher led instruction should guide students to particular images within Bearden's paintings that parallel similar verbally generated images. For example, following the course of study detailed under the heading "The Art of Autobiography," students will culminate the lesson by comparing and contrasting the verbal and visual images analyzed during the lesson, and entering their observations on the guided notes chart. The guided notes chart will be divided into sections as follows. Headings at the top of the chart will be: Bearden's Work/ Poem or line (beneath this heading students will enter the name of Bearden's painting and the title of the poem being compared and contrasted), Visual/ Symbol One (beneath this heading students will enter a significant visual image from the Bearden painting they listed in the first column and a critical line of poetry or symbol from the poem they listed in the first column), Represents (beneath this heading students will note what the visual image symbolizes and what the poetry line represents figuratively), Effectiveness (students will explain how and why this visual image is effective within the context of the overall painting and how and why the poetic figurative language functions in the context of the poem's overall meaning), Visual/Symbol Two (students will note another visual from Bearden's painting and another line from poetry), Represents (beneath this heading students will note what the visual image symbolizes and what the poetry line represents figuratively), Effectiveness (students will explain how and why this visual image is effective within the context of the overall painting and how and why the poetic figurative language functions in the context of the poem's overall meaning), Visual/Symbol Three (students will note another visual from Bearden's painting and another line from poetry), Represents (beneath this heading students will note what the visual image symbolizes and what the poetry line represents figuratively), Effectiveness (students will explain how and why this visual image is effective within the context of the overall painting and how and why the poetic figurative language functions in the context of the poem's overall meaning), Commonalities between Visuals and Symbols (this heading will allow students to identify the similarities between the visual and verbal images analyzed and prepare for the comparison and contrast paragraph they will write about the text analyzed). Following the completion of the chart, students will use this information to generate a comparison and contrast paragraph discussing in detail the ways in which the painting

used visual symbols as a form of figurative language to convey an overall theme and the ways in which a poet conveyed a similar theme through verbal metaphors and symbols.

This activity will continue throughout the entire unit and will form the foundation for students' final writing assignment. In this assignment, they will review the notes they have taken and select a poem and Bearden painting to compare and contrast in a five paragraph essay. This essay will compare and contrast the verbal and visual usage of symbols to convey an overall theme and achieve a particular author's purpose and will be a test grade.

Guided Notes Chart

| Bearden's Work/Poem Line | Visual/Symbol One | Represents | Effectiveness | Visual/Symbol Two | Represents | Effectiveness | Visual/Symbol Three | Represents | Effectiveness | Commonalities between Visual/Symbols |
|---------------------------|----------------------|------------|---------------|--|------------|---------------|--|------------|---------------|--------------------------------------|
| <i>Childhood Memories</i> | Eye with clock hands | | | Woman holding cotton boll and man playing guitar in the middle of the intersection | | | clock on top of the black and white building in the left hand corner | | | |

| Beard en's Work/ Poem Line | Visua l/ Sym bol One | Repres ents | Effecti venes s | Visual/ Symb ol Two | Repre sents | Effecti venes s | Visual /Symb ol Three | Repre sents | Effecti venes s | Comm onaliti es betwe en Visual s/Sym bols |
|-----------------------------|---|-------------|-----------------|------------------------------|-------------|-----------------|--|-------------|-----------------|--|
| Capti vity and Resi stanc e | slav e ship s with voya gers belo w deck and at battl e on deck | | | a writhin g figure in chains | | | figure at mural 's cente r, holdi ng a staff again st a lands cape with sun/ moon rising /setti ng | | | |

| Beard en's Work/Poem Line | Visua l/ Sym bol One | Repre sents | Effecti venes s | Visual/ Symb ol Two | Repre sents | Effecti venes s | Visual /Symb ol Three | Repre sents | Effecti venes s | Comm onaliti es betwe en Visual s/Sym bols |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------|-------------|-----------------|---------------------|-------------|-----------------|-----------------------|-------------|-----------------|--|
| Southe rn Mansio n by Arna Bonte mps | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | | | | |

Possible Strategies for Teaching this Unit:

Flexible Grouping

Differentiation, in the form of flexible grouping, is employed in a number of my lessons for this unit. In each section including the study of multiple texts, I have identified the difficulty levels of the poetry and fiction studied to facilitate the creation of differentiated groups as a part of this unit of study. "Differentiated instruction, also called differentiation, is a process through which teachers enhance learning by matching student characteristics to instruction and assessment. Differentiated instruction allows all students to access the same classroom curriculum by providing different entry points, learning tasks, and outcomes that are tailored to students' needs."¹ As a teacher in a heterogeneously grouped classroom, it is almost impossible to meet the needs of the multiple ability levels within a single classroom setting without differentiating content, process, or product. Students need individualized activities and content specific to their learning styles and level. As a teacher of heterogeneous classes in an eighty to ninety minute block period, I have found that breaking my class into "chunks" of teaching time, and transitioning between direct, whole class instruction and flexible grouping, has produced the most positive results. I introduce concepts in a whole class setting. Following direct instruction, flexibility grouping allows me to individualize assignments and content, remediating, reinforcing, and challenging as appropriate. As "teachers can differentiate content, process, and/or product for students,"¹ it is important to note that the groups used to cover curriculum in this unit are based around differentiated content

and product. However, the process remains uniform for all students. The wonderful part about this differentiation as it relates to this unit in particular, is that it allows students a much broader exposure to content (more examples of Bearden's art and the brief introduction to a greater number of poems) as student groups share the content knowledge learned in these small settings with the rest of their peers.

Literature Circles, Expert Group Presentations, and Guided Notes

Information will be shared among students through the use of literature circles, or "expert groups." Once divided into groups, students within each group are given different texts to respond to and interpret. Each student in the group is assigned a role and will perform a specific task. The roles I traditionally assign are Discussion Leader, Textmaster, Creative Director and Connector. I do not place students in groups larger than four students and I have found that groups of three, whenever possible, create environments of better interaction and discussion between peers. In these literature circles, students interact with a piece of art, poetry or prose, or both resources simultaneously in order to gain an understanding of autobiography or figurative language. After completing interpretive activities, the students in each literary circle become "experts" on their text or texts and create a five to ten minute mini lesson on their completed analysis, presenting this information to the whole class. Students whose groups are not presenting information will be taking guided notes on the information each group shares. These notes are the same for each student and are designed to explore the ideas of autobiography inherent in this unit. They contain a section of information and questions for students to answer as each group presents. (I have provided a sample of these guided notes in the section titled "Metaphor").

Jigsaw

The jigsaw strategy is designed to present students with a multitude of texts, or one very large text, without making it necessary for students to read an entire work, or every resource material provided by a teacher, while still being exposed to relevant information and material in an engaging and instructional manner. During a jigsaw, students are presented with different texts, or different passages of texts, and read these works individually or in a small group in order to form an "expert" opinion on the text and report findings. As students take on the role of an "expert" they analyze their section of text in detail and then share their new knowledge within a small group or whole class setting. Students are responsible for an assigned text in such a degree that they can summarize and present this information to classmates in a manner that facilitates the understanding of the basic themes and concepts inherent within the text.¹

TP-CASTT

This strategy is a method of poetry analysis created to encourage students to “use an analytical process to understand the author’s craft.”¹ Students will employ this method of analysis while in their “identity collage” groups. This strategy has students break a poem apart and look at different elements of the poem as well as the poem as a whole. TP-CASTT is an acronym that stands for “title,” “paraphrase,” “connotation,” “attitude,” “shifts,” “title,” and “theme.”

Appendix of District Standards

<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/curriculum/languagearts/scos/2004/25grade8>

This hyperlink shows the NC Standard Course of study for my curriculum. During my unit I will focus extensively on goals 5.01 and 5.02

Competency Goal 5: The learner will respond to various literary genres using interpretive and evaluative processes.

5.01 Increase fluency, comprehension, and insight through a meaningful and comprehensive literacy program by:

- using effective reading strategies to match type of text.
- reading self-selected literature and other materials of interest to the individual.
- reading literature and other materials selected by the teacher.
- assuming a leadership role in student-teacher reading conferences.
- leading small group discussions.
- taking an active role in whole class seminars.
- analyzing the effects of elements such as plot, theme, characterization, style, mood, and tone.
- discussing the effects of such literary devices as figurative language, dialogue, flashback, allusion, irony, and symbolism.
- analyzing and evaluating themes and central ideas in literature and other texts in relation to personal and societal issues.
- extending understanding by creating products for different purposes, different audiences, and within various contexts.
- analyzing and evaluating the relationships between and among characters, ideas, concepts, and/or experiences.

5.02 Study the characteristics of literary genres (fiction, nonfiction, drama, and poetry) through:

- reading a variety of literature and other text (e.g., young adult novels, short stories, biographies, plays, free verse, narrative poems).
- evaluating what impact genre-specific characteristics have on the meaning of the text.
- evaluating how the author's choice and use of a genre shapes the meaning of the literary work.
- evaluating what impact literary elements have on the meaning of the text.

End Notes

1. *Romare Bearden: Southern Recollections*. Charlotte: Mint Museum, 2011, 15.
2. Ibid., 21.
3. Ibid., 16.
4. Ibid.
5. "Yevgeny Yevtushenko quotes." ThinkExist.com Quotations.
http://thinkexist.com/quotes/yevgeny_yevtushenko/
6. Hicks, Kyra E. "The Anyone Can Fly Foundation, Inc."
http://www.anyonecanflyfoundation.org/library/Collins_on_Bearden_essay.html
7. Bearden, Romare, Ruth Fine, and Mary Lee Corlett, *The Art of Romare Bearden*. Washington: National Gallery Of Art, 2003, 83.
8. "Mother to Son by Langston Hughes." PoemHunter.Com - Thousands of poems and poets. Poetry Search Engine. <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/mother-to-son/>
9. Bearden, Fine, and Corlett. *The Art of Romare Bearden*, 83.
10. Ibid., 44.
11. Ibid., 109.
12. *Romare Bearden: Southern Recollections*. Charlotte: Mint Museum, 2011, 39.
13. Ibid.
14. Bearden, Fine, and Corlett. *The Art of Romare Bearden*, 8.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 43.
17. Ibid., 39.
18. *Romare Bearden: Southern Recollections*. Charlotte: Mint Museum, 2011, 40.
19. Ibid., 44.
20. Bearden, Fine, and Corlett. *The Art of Romare Bearden*, 41.
21. Ibid., 26.
22. Ibid., 89.
23. "Countee Cullen." www.kirjasto.sci.fi . <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/ccullen.htm>
24. Bearden, Fine, and Corlett. *The Art of Romare Bearden*, 75.
25. Ibid., 75-76.

26. Hall, T., N. Strangman, and A. Meyer, Differentiated Instruction and Implications for UDL Implementation, http://www.k8accesscenter.org/training_resources/udl/diffinstruction.asp.
27. Tomlinson, Carol Ann, How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed Ability Classrooms (Columbus, Ohio: Assn For Supervision & Curric Development (Ascd), 2004).
28. Collegeboard Springboard English Textual Power, 389.
29. Ibid., 384.

Annotated Bibliography

"Additional Poems by Gwendolyn Bennett." Welcome to English & Department of English, College of LAS, University of Illinois.

<http://www.english.illinois.edu/Maps/poets/af/bennett/poems.htm> (accessed September 24, 2011).

This website provides access to Bennett's poems and is an easy way for teachers to find, print, and research the Bennett poems used in conjunction with the Bearden paintings.

Bearden, Romare, Ruth Fine, and Mary Lee Corlett. *The Art of Romare Bearden*. Washington: National Gallery Of Art, 2003.

This book is an expansive teacher resource providing both biographical information as well as artistic analysis and criticism of Bearden's works. This source also contains a number of excellent color representations of Bearden's art.

Board, College. Collegeboard Springboard English Textual Power Level III. New York: CollegeBoard, 2005.

This textbook provides detailed information to assist teachers who wish to use the jigsaw or TP-CASTT strategies discussed in this unit.

Boaz, Franz. "Mules and Men Index." American Studies @ The University of Virginia. <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA01/Grand-Jean/Hurston/Chapters/index.html>

(accessed September 24, 2011).

This is a website dedicated to the works of Zora Neale Hurston and provides excellent short stories and novel excerpts teachers could easily integrate into study.

Bontemps, Arna. "Southern Mansion By Arna Bontemps." Chickenbones.

<http://www.nathanielturner.com/southernmansion.htm> (accessed September 24, 2011).

This website provides easy access to poems by Bontemps.

Ellmann, Richard, and Robert Clair. *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*. 2nd ed.

New York: Norton, 1988.

Excellent teacher resource for research and analytical information regarding the Harlem Renaissance and the poets and poems discussed in this study.

Hicks, Kyra E.. "The Anyone Can Fly Foundation, Inc.." The Anyone Can Fly

Foundation, Inc..

http://www.anyonecanflyfoundation.org/library/Collins_on_Bearden_essay.html

(accessed June 15, 2011).

Website providing an excellent collection of essays and critical interpretations of Bearden's works.

"James Weldon Johnson: Poems." Poetry Archive | Poems. <http://www.poetry->

[archive.com/j/johnson_james_weldon.html](http://www.poetry-archive.com/j/johnson_james_weldon.html) (accessed September 24, 2011).

Johnson, James Weldon. "O Black and Unknown Bards, by James Weldon Johnson."

Poetry Archive | Poems. <http://www.poetry->

[archive.com/j/o_black_and_unknown_bards.html](http://www.poetry-archive.com/j/o_black_and_unknown_bards.html) (accessed September 24,

2011).

Both of the above websites provide easy access to poems by James Weldon Johnson.

Kreymborg, Alfred. *American Poetry*. New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1941.

Excellent teacher resource for research and analytical information regarding the Harlem Renaissance and the poets and poems discussed in this study.

Meally, Robert G., and Romare Bearden. *Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey*. New York:

DC Moore Gallery, 2007.

An extensive critical analysis of Bearden's *Black Odyssey* series of paintings. Provides

teachers with critical research for understanding and teaching this series in addition to including striking color representations of this series.

Miller, R. Baxter. *The Art and Imagination of Langston Hughes*. Lexington, KY:

University Press of Kentucky, 1989.

A detailed and thorough source for teachers to access in preparation for analyzing Hughes' poetry in this unit.

"Mother to Son by Langston Hughes." PoemHunter.Com - Thousands of poems and

poets.. Poetry Search Engine. <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/mother-to-son/>

(accessed October 30, 2011).

Website providing teachers and students easy access to Hughes' poetry.

Romare Bearden: Southern Recollections. Charlotte: Mint Museum, 2011.

Anthology dedicated to the pieces in Bearden's oeuvre depicting the South. Provides teachers with critical essays and color reproductions of Bearden's works.

"Yevgeny Yevtushenko quotes." Find the famous quotes you need, ThinkExist.com

Quotations.. http://thinkexist.com/quotes/yevgeny_yevtushenko/ (accessed

October 30, 2011).

Website providing teachers easy access to the Yevtushenko quote referenced in this unit of study.

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