

**The Man and His Pen:  
A Study of the Life of Langston Hughes and his Poetry  
Minnie Griffin**

**Introduction**

For many years my family and I lived in the Englewood community located on the south side of Chicago. Englewood was and to this day remains one of the most notorious neighborhoods in the country. Though the city of Chicago bursts with rich cultural diversity very little, if any, of that culture ever reach the streets of Englewood. In fact, many of my childhood friends did not know what lay beyond a 10 block radius let alone the cultural jewels that could be found in a city that had been blessed with their presence.

Unlike many of my friends during the time of my youth, I was blessed with parents who although were of meager means, did their best to expose my siblings and me to a world beyond the walls of our neighborhood. Our family experienced, albeit just a small nugget in a box full of many treasures, some of what our great city had to offer. These priceless cultural nuggets came in the form of weekend visits to the DuSable Museum of African American History, picnics at the Carter G Woodson Library and plays at the small but quaint ETA Theater. While my parents made sure us kids got to partake of as many wonderful experiences as they could the amazing teachers that I encountered along my educational journey picked up where they left off. These amazing connoisseurs of knowledge opened my mind to the unimaginable and my eyes to the unforeseeable. They did this through their colorful lessons and plethora of resources.

I was blessed and lucky to have those charged with the job of nurturing me culturally, spiritually and intellectually: provide me a cultural oasis in an otherwise urban desert. It is for this reason that I choose to have this unit focus on an author study of Langston Hughes and a genre study of poetry.

**Background**

Oakdale Elementary School is where I teach 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Oakdale is pleasantly situated on an oak tree lined street where you see American flags flying high, people walking their dogs and moms pushing baby strollers. Many of the old timers of the neighborhood volunteer at the school and can often be heard saying, “my how things have changed,” and I imagine they have.

While the community that Oakdale sits in the heart of, appears to be that of any small suburban neighborhood, the demographic of the school itself paints an all together different picture. Oakdale Elementary School is a “Title 1” school located in the western part of Charlotte, North Carolina. Title 1 is what some would call the mainspring of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (EASA), formerly known as No Child Left Behind. Its design is to make sure that all students have access to a high quality education

and perform well on state mandated standardized assessments. In layman terms Title 1 schools are “low performing” schools that receive federal assistance.

Oakdale is responsible for the education of a little under 650 students in grades kindergarten thru 5<sup>th</sup>. The racial and ethnic make-up of the school is 74% African American, 13% Hispanic, 4% Asian, and 8% white, non-Hispanic. From a socio-economical standpoint 88% of those 650 students receive free or reduced lunch.

My specific classroom demographics are 20% Asian, 25% Hispanic and 65% African American. My class is unique in that many of my Asian and Hispanic students are either first generation immigrants or have parents that are. 95% of the students in my class receive free or reduced lunch. Once again it is for this reason that I focus my unit on the study of Langston Hughes, a man whose meager beginnings parallel my students. And a man who carved out a place in the world by looking beyond the foreseeable and staying true to his passion.

### **Rational**

It is my hope that the Reading: African American Lives seminar will help me prepare for my unit “The Man and His Pen: A Study of the Life of Langston Hughes and his Poetry” by providing me with not only a basic biographical knowledge of some of the most notable contributors to African American literature but also providing me with a fresh new perspective when rereading some of their most monumental works. I think provided with this background knowledge I will be better equipped to explore, incorporate and even create various strategies that will assist me in nurturing my students’ curiosity and creativity in not just African American Literature but Literature in general.

My unit, “The Man and His Pen: A Study of the Life of Langston Hughes and his Poetry,” will assist me in teaching the seminar subject in multiple ways. One way I plan to use my unit to assist me in teaching the seminar subject in my classroom is by comparing/ contrasting various poems written by Langston Hughes. This will allow me to introduce my students to the concept frame of reference. Students will delve into the social and personal issues that artists faced/ face, as well as how the artists used their art forms to express themselves and their political views. Another way that I plan to utilize the seminar content is to take a look at the words that the authors used. By analyzing the authors’ choice of words I can introduce my students to the concept of inferring. Students can explore their own inferences about authors given their choice of words. Yet another way I would like to use my unit in the conveying of the seminar content is to not only look at what the authors wrote but what might they write about if they were faced with current societal woes.

My Unit “The Man and His Pen: A Study of the Life of Langston Hughes and his Poetry” will last 1-2 weeks depending on the allotted daily time. During this time students will complete various assignments that are designed to build up to culminating activity of a simulated interview.

## Objectives

### **The Purpose**

*“The Man and His Pen: A Study of the Life of Langston Hughes and his Poetry”* is designed with the hope of increasing students reading comprehension through their exposure to poetry. With the focus so much on standardized testing and the collection of data, I wanted to find ways for students to apply the traditional reading comprehensions skills and strategies to fun, friendly and non-threatening text. Students who are able to apply skills that they learn in isolation to various genres of text I have found are more apt to improve their ability to better comprehend what they read. Students can use these short, fun-filled pieces of text to begin to learn how to apply reading strategies to increase their comprehension. While this is the main goal this unit also looks to allow students the opportunity to gain a greater understanding for the Poetry Genre as well as getting to know one of the countries all time greatest poets. The Unit is intended for a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade class but can easily be modified to accommodate a 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grade class. Throughout the unit students will be asked to engage in various critical thinking activities that are designed to keep them actively engaged in the lessons. Students will also be responsible for taking part in as well as leading class discussions. So, once again this unit is designed to help students increase their reading comprehension it is my hope that the lessons will ultimately not only boost students reading comprehension skills but also create a generation of critical thinkers and passionate poetry lovers as well as poets while having fun doing it.

## Strategies

**Poet’s Workshop** – Students will study the components of a poem

Common Core –Comprehension and Collaboration

Explain how a series of stanzas fit together to form the overall structure of a poem.

**Synthesizing** – Students will learn about various types of figurative language (ex. Metaphors, similes, personification, etc.)

Common Core –Comprehension and Collaboration

Determine the meaning of phrases as they are used in text including figurative language.

**Thinking Maps** – Students will use Bubble and Double Maps to compare and contrast various songs and poems that deal with the same subject matter.

Common Core –Comprehension and Collaboration

Compare and contrast the most important points presented by two texts on the same topic.

**Making Connections** – Students will use their knowledge of current and past events to determine why a writer used certain wording in a poem or song.

Common Core –Comprehension and Collaboration

Demonstrate how a narrator’s point of view influences how events are described

**Poet’s Workshop** – Students will study the components of a poem and construct their own poems using various types of figurative language.

Common Core –Comprehension and Collaboration

Follow the conventions writing a poem

**Poet’s Workshop** – Students will publish and illustrate their Poem/songs.

Common Core –Comprehension and Collaboration

With some guidance and support use technology to produce and publish writing.

**Asking Questions** – Students will compile written interview questions for Langston Hughes based on what they have learned about him over the course of the unit.

Common Core –Comprehension and Collaboration

Adapt speech to a variety of context and tasks

## Activities

## **Classroom Activity 1 – Student Journal Setup**

Common Core Standard

W.8 Recall information from experiences.

Explanation of Activity

Teacher will explain to students that over the next couple of weeks they will be taking on the role of literary historian. It will be their job to document all aspects of information that they gather in their student notebooks. Teacher will explain that all documents or rather artifacts given to them for analyzing should be glued on the left side of their journals. Teacher will also explain that any comments or activities regarding those documents will be made on the right side of their journals. Teacher will display sample journal and answer any questions that students may have. Teacher will also explain that students will be required to write a reflection or question about the class discussion that could be shared the next day as a discussion starter. Teacher will inform students that over the next couple of weeks they will be emerged into the life of one of America's most accomplished literary figures. Teacher will give clues and have students make predictions on sticky notes and post them on the right side of their notebook for tomorrow's discussion launch. Teacher will not reveal the author's name, as a way of keeping students engaged. Teacher should instead have students go home and ask their parents to help them figure out the mystery person based on the clues or evidence presented.

Materials

Student Journals, Post-It notes, Pencils, Interactive Whiteboard,

## **Classroom Activity 2 - Introduction**

Common Core Standard

W.8 Recall information from experiences and sort into provided categories.

Explanation of Activity

Students will share predictions from previous lesson regarding mystery person. Teacher will introduce the unit by cooperatively completing KWL chart with students on Langston Hughes. Students will independently create own KWL chart in their student journals. Teacher and Students will share responses. Teacher will review thinking maps that students will be asked to use throughout the unit. Students will choose one thing from the "What" section of their KWL chart to record on their reflection for next day's discussion launch.

Materials

Student Journals, Post-It Notes, Pencils Interactive Whiteboard, Thinking Map  
Smartboard Lesson <http://tinyurl.com/c6bu7vs>

### Classroom Activity 3 - About the Author Discussion Questions Part I

#### Common Core Standard

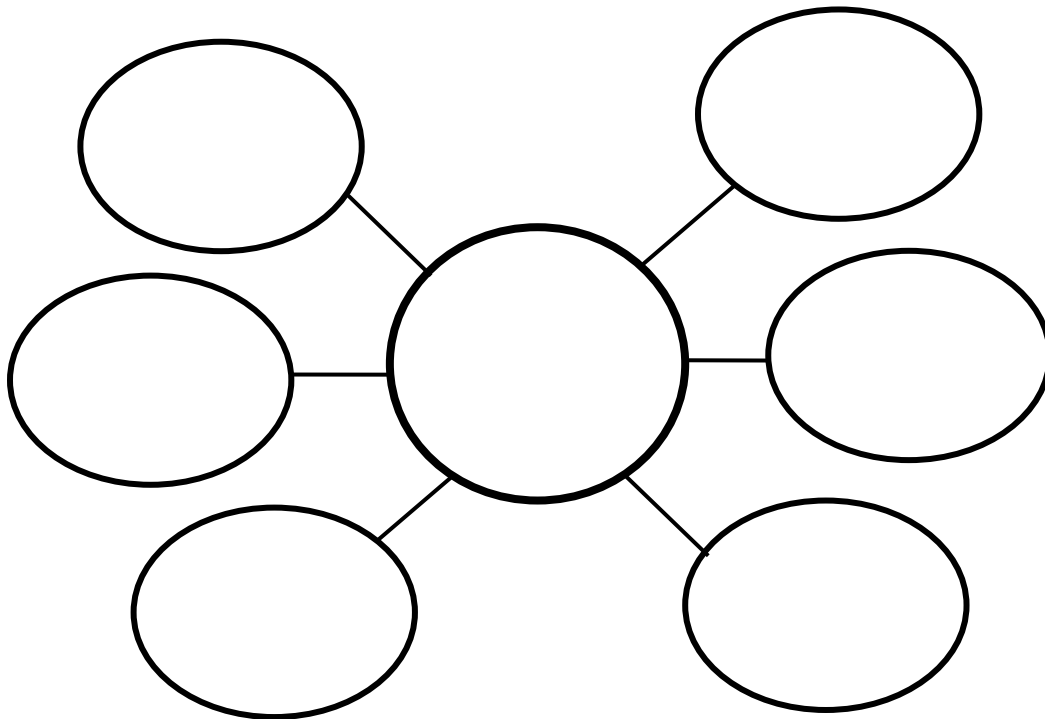
RIT.1 Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.

#### Explanation of Activity

Teacher will review the difference between explicit and implicit information with students. Teacher will have students share their reflections from the previous day to launch the day's lesson. Teacher will provide students with a copy of narrative to glue on the lefts side of their student journals. Teacher and students will read a narrative about Langston Hughes. After reading narrative about Langston Hughes students will pair share and complete a Bubble Thinking Map on the right side of their student journals by listing 3 explicit facts and 3 implicit facts about the author. Teacher will model correct explicit responses by recording responses smartboard image of bubble thinking map. Students will share their implicit responses with the class. Students will reflect on class discussion by recording comment or question on post it note and placing it on the right side of their notebooks to be used for next day's discussion launch.

#### Materials

Langston Hughes Narrative, Student Journals, Post It Notes, Pencils, Interactive Whiteboard, Bubble Thinking Map, Narrative of Langston Hughes



## **Classroom Activity 4 - About the Author Discussion Questions Part II**

### Common Core Standard

RIT.1 Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.

### Explanation of Activity

Teacher will have students share their reflections from the previous day to launch the day's lesson. Teacher will provide students with a copy of narrative to glue on the left side of their student journals. Students will read portion of a narrative about Langston Hughes with a partner. After reading narrative about Langston Hughes students will pair share and complete discussion questions by recording their answers on the right side of their Student Journals. Teacher and students will form literature circle to share student responses. Students will reflect on class discussion by recording comments or question on post it note and placing it on the right side of their notebooks to be used for next day's discussion launch.

### Materials

Student Journals, Post It Notes, Pencils, Interactive Whiteboard, Copy of Discussion Questions Part II

### Copy of Narrative

Langston Hughes was born on February 1, 1902 in Joplin, Missouri. He lived with his mother, Carrie Hughes and his grandmother, Mrs. Mary Leary Langston. His father, James Hughes, had left home for Mexico when Langston was a baby. He felt that his potential in the United States was limited because he was a Negro. When Langston was five years old he, his mother and grandmother left their home in Lawrence, Kansas to join James Hughes in Mexico. The visit did not last long. An earthquake destroyed the city and Carrie Hughes decided she and her son and mother could not live safely there. So, shortly after arriving in Mexico the three returned home. Langston did not get the chance to visit with his father and get to know him. His father did make his mother promise that Langston would return to Mexico when he was older.

### Discussion Questions

- 1) How do you think Langston felt when his family moved to Mexico? Explain.
- 2) Who do think Langston really wanted stay with his mother or father? Explain.

## **Classroom Activity 5 - About the Author Discussion Questions Part III**

### Common Core Standard

RL.5 Refer to parts of poems when writing or speaking about text.

RIT.1 Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.

### Explanation of Activity

Teacher will review the textual features of a poem (title, line, stanza). Teacher will review various types of poems students should be familiar with by displaying an example of each on the interactive whiteboard. (cinquain, limerick and free verse). Teacher will have students share their reflections from the previous day to launch the day's lesson. Teacher will provide students with a copy of narrative to glue on the left side of their student journals. Students will read portion of a narrative about Langston Hughes with a partner. After reading narrative about Langston Hughes students will pair share and complete discussion questions by recording their answers on the right side of their Student Journals. Teacher and students will form literature circle to share student responses. Students will reflect on class discussion by recording comment or question on post it note and placing it on the right side of their notebooks to be used for next day's discussion launch.

### Materials

Student Journals, Post It Notes, Pencils, Interactive Whiteboard, Copy of Discussion Questions Part II, Various Types of Poems Website,  
<http://www.kathimitchell.com/poemtypes.html>

### Copy of Narrative

Langston was very close to his mother and grandmother. He saw his college educated mother work as a maid and a waitress because of her color. Langston's grandmother was very proud of her people. She told Langston stories of his ancestors who were involved in politics and education. She also told Langston Bible stories and read passages from the Bible aloud to him. Langston grew up with this language in his head and heart. Eventually his mother did find a good job in Topeka, Kansas. She moved there with Langston. It was in this city that Langston discovered the Library and its Children's section. He spent much time in the library, often to escape teasing from classmates at his mostly white school. Langston's grandmother died when he was twelve. He remembered that she had told him never to cry, but to laugh instead. He should never feel sorry for himself even when things were difficult. So when the ticket seller at the movie-theater told him she would not sell a ticket to a "colored boy" he found the Opera House. He honored his grandmother's memory by taking her advice and not feeling sorry for himself and letting anger get the best of him. At the Opera House Langston could see the shows he had read about in the library.

### Discussion Questions

- 1) What is your opinion about the advice Langston's grandmother gave him?
- 2) Do you think people should fight discrimination or just ignore it?

### **Classroom Activity 6 - Cause and Effect**

#### Common Core Standard

RL.3 Explain how actions in a text contribute to the sequence of events.



RIT.1 Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.

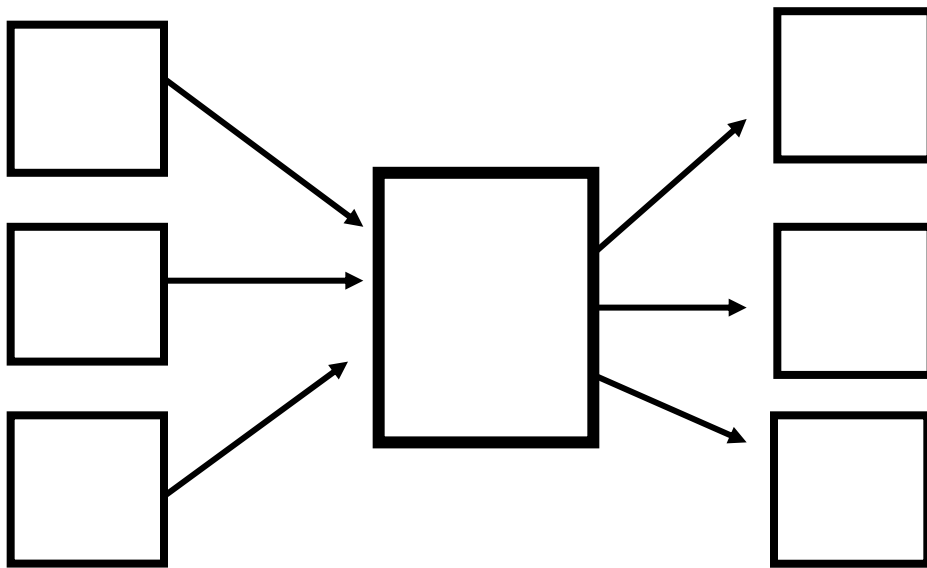
#### Explanation of Activity

Teacher will review Cause and Effect and familiarize students with multi-flow thinking map by displaying a copy on the interactive whiteboard. Teacher will have students share their reflections from the previous day to launch the day's lesson. Teacher will provide students a copy of the poem I Too by Langston Hughes to glue on the left side of their notebooks. Teacher will read aloud the poem. Students will complete multi-flow thinking map by listing 3 causes and 3 effects found in the poem. Teacher and students will form literature circle to share student responses. Students will reflect on class discussion by recording comments or question on post it note and placing it on the right side of their notebooks to be used for next day's discussion launch.

#### Materials

Student Journals, Post It Notes, Pencils, Multi-Flow Thinking Map Smartboard Document, Copy of "I Too" by Langston Hughes.

#### Multi Flow Map



#### I Too

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

### **Classroom Activity 7 - Figurative Language / Poetic Devices**

Common Core Standard

RL.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, distinguishing literal from non-literal language.

RIT.1 Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.

Explanation of Activity

Teacher will review figurative language (simile, metaphor, personification, alliteration, onomatopoeia, hyperbole, idioms) by displaying a copy of mini lesson on the interactive whiteboard. Teacher will have students share their reflections from the previous day to launch the day's lesson. Teacher will provide students a copy of the poem April Rain Song by Langston Hughes to glue on the left side of their notebooks. Teacher will read aloud the poem. Students will complete the figurative language graphic organizer by identifying any of the seven types of figurative language. (simile, metaphor, personification, alliteration, onomatopoeia, hyperbole, idioms). Teacher and students will form literature circle to share student responses. Students will reflect on class discussion by recording comments or question on post it note and placing it on the right side of their notebooks to be used for next day's discussion launch.

Materials

Student Journals, Post It Notes, Pencils, Figurative Language Smartboard Document, Copy of April Rain Song by Langston Hughes.

## Classroom Activity 8 - Compare and Contrast

### Common Core Standard

RL.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, distinguishing literal from non-literal language.

RL.9 Compare and contrast text written by the same author.

RIT.1 Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.

### Explanation of Activity

Teacher will review, compare and contrast skill by displaying a copy of mini lesson on the interactive whiteboard. Teacher will familiarize students with Double Bubble Thinking Map. Teacher will have students share their reflections from the previous day to launch the day's lesson. Teacher will provide students a copy of the poems written by Langston Hughes entitled "As I Grew" and "A Dream Deferred" to glue on the left side of their notebooks. Students will complete double bubble thinking map by making 3 comparisons and 3 contrasts of the poems "As I Grew" and "A Dream Deferred". Teacher and students will form literature circle to share student responses. Students will reflect on class discussion by recording comments or question on post it note and placing it on the right side of their notebooks to be used for next day's discussion launch.

### Materials

Student Journals, Post It Notes, Pencils, poems written by Langston Hughes entitled "As I Grew" and "A Dream Deferred" Compare and Contrast Smartboard Document.

<http://tinyurl.com/bp3226c>

### As I Grew Older by Langston Hughes

It was a long time ago.  
I have almost forgotten my dream.  
But it was there then,  
In front of me,  
Bright like a sun—  
My dream.  
And then the wall rose,  
Rose slowly,  
Slowly,  
Between me and my dream.  
Rose until it touched the sky—  
The wall.  
Shadow.  
I am black.  
I lie down in the shadow.  
No longer the light of my dream before me,

Above me.  
Only the thick wall.  
Only the shadow.  
My hands!  
My dark hands!  
Break through the wall!  
Find my dream!  
Help me to shatter this darkness,  
To smash this night,  
To break this shadow  
Into a thousand lights of sun,  
Into a thousand whirling dreams  
Of sun!

Harlem (A Dream Deferred) by Langston Hughes

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?*

### **Classroom Activity 9 - Illustration**

Common Core Standard

RL.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, distinguishing literal from non-literal language.

RL.9 Compare and contrast text written by the same author.

RIT.1 Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.

Explanation of Activity

Teacher will have students share their reflections from the previous day to launch the day's lesson. Teacher will review strategy visualizing by having students close their eyes and describe an object in the room. Teacher will have students share their reflections from the previous day to launch the day's lesson. Teacher will provide students a copy of

the poem Bouquet written by Langston Hughes to glue on the left side of their notebooks. Teacher will omit the title of the poem. Students will illustrate the poem and give the poem a title based on what they visualize as they read the poem. Teacher and students will form literature circle to share student responses. Students will reflect on class discussion by recording comments or question on post it note and placing it on the right side of their notebooks to be used for next day's discussion launch.

#### Materials

Student Journals, Post It Notes, Colored Pencils, Compare and Contrast Smartboard Document <http://tinyurl.com/bp3226c>, poem written by Langston Hughes entitled Bouquet.

#### Bouquet by Langston Hughes

Gather quickly  
Out of darkness  
All the songs you know  
And throw them at the sun  
Before they melt  
Like snow

#### **Classroom Activity 10 – Original Poem**

##### Common Core Standard

RL.5 Refer to parts of poems when writing or speaking about text.

W.5 With guidance from peers and adults develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising and editing.

W.6 With Guidance from adults use technology to publish writing. Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.

##### Explanation of Activity

Teacher will have students share their reflections from the previous day to launch the day's lesson. Teacher will review the textual features of a poem (title, line, stanza). Teacher will review various types of poems with students. Teacher will ask students to identify what types of poems Langston Hughes most often wrote. Teacher will inform students that they will be creating and publishing their own free form poems. Teacher will provide students with a copy of rubric for poem. Teacher/ students will review rubric. Students may use online rhyming dictionary as a reference tool. Students will reflect on class discussion by recording comment or question on post it note and placing it on the right side of their notebooks to be used for next day's discussion launch.

Materials

Student Journals, Post It Notes, Pencils, Various Types of Poems Smartboard Document, Copy of teacher created rubric, loose leaf notebook paper

## Free Form Poem Rubric

After reading poems by Langston Hughes and reviewing the various types of figurative language, you will be composing a poem about our life

### Directions:

1. You will relate your poem to any aspect surrounding your life.
2. You will use three different types of figurative language in your poem.
3. You will structure your poem to have at least 3 stanzas.
4. You will proofread your poem for any grammatical or spelling errors.

Paragraph

### Rubric

_____	Did I use 3 examples of figurative language in my poem?	_____ (30 pts)
_____	Does my poem relate to the topic?	_____ (25 pts)
_____	Does my poem have at least 3 stanzas to take?	_____ (10 pts)
_____	Is my spelling and grammar correct?	_____ (25 pts)
_____	Is my work neat and complete?	_____ (10 pts)
_____		

**Total**

## **Classroom Activity 11 - Interview**

### Common Core Standard

RL.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, distinguishing literal from non-literal language.

RL.9 Compare and contrast text written by the same author.

RIT.1 Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.

### Explanation of Activity

Teacher will have students share their reflections from the previous day to launch the day's lesson. Teacher will have students share their reflections from the previous day to launch the day's lesson. Teacher will provide students a copy of an interview of which Hughes was the subject. Teacher will omit some of the Hughes responses and have students answer as if they were Hughes. Students will record their answers in their student journals. Teacher and students will form literature circle to share student responses. Students reflect on class discussion by composing an interview question for Langston Hughes if he were still alive. Students will record their question on a post it note and it on the right side of their notebooks to be used for next day's discussion launch.

### Materials

Student Journals, Post It Notes, Written interview by Langston Hughes entitled Bouquet.

### **Endnotes**

Myers, Elisabeth P. Langston Hughes- Poet of His People. Illinois: Garrard, 1970.

Rampersad, Arnold, ed. The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes. New York: Vintage Classics, 1995.

### **Annotated Teacher Bibliography**

Berry, Faith. *Langston Hughes: Before and Beyond Harlem*. New Jersey: Carol Publishing Group, 1992.

This book provides information about Hughes' childhood, world travels, and relationships with other well-known intellectuals.

Elbow, Peter. *Power With Words*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.

This book gives guidelines for mastering the writing process. It also analyzes voice in writing.

National Endorsement for the Humanities. "The Poet's Voice: Langston Hughes and You." EDSITEMent.

[http://edsitement.neh.gov/printable\\_lesson\\_plan.asp?id=405](http://edsitement.neh.gov/printable_lesson_plan.asp?id=405)

This website offers lesson plans and materials in a wide range of humanities subjects.

Schmitt, Deborah. "Contemporary Literary Criticism: Langston Hughes." eNotes.

<http://www.enotes.com/contemporary-literary-criticism/hughes-langston> (accessed July 1, 2008).

This website presents an overview of Hughes' life and career.

Web English Teacher. "Langston Hughes: Lesson Plans and Teaching Ideas."

<http://www.webenglishteacher.com/hughes.html> (accessed May 1, 2008).

This website presents lesson plans, videos, biographical information, and classroom activities.

### **Annotated Student Bibliography**

Hughes, Langston. *Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. New York: Vintage, 1995.

This book is an extensive collection of Hughes's poetry.

Pinkney, Brian. *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994.

This book contains poems by Langston Hughes that deal with love life and dreams.

Roessel, David and Arnold Rampersad. *Poetry for Young People: Langston Hughes*. New York: Sterling Publishing, 2006.

This book contains illustrated collections of Hughes's poems, background information for each poem, and even quotes from Hughes himself.