

Poetry Analysis and Modeling

Museum Connection: Art and Enlightenment

Purpose: In this lesson students will examine poems by Lucille Clifton in order to achieve a greater understanding of African American poetry.

Course: High School English 9-12, American Literature

Time Frame: 1-2 class periods

Correlation to State Standards:

Standard 1: The student will comprehend and interpret a variety of print, non-print and electronic texts, and other media.

Indicator 1.1: The student will use effective strategies before, during, and after reading, viewing, and listening to self-selected and assigned materials.

Objective 1.1.3: The student will confirm understanding after reading, viewing, and/or listening to a text.

Indicator 1.2: The student will comprehend and interpret a variety of texts, including fiction, nonfiction, poetry, drama, and informational texts.

Objective 1.2.1: The student will determine the contributions of literary elements in classical and contemporary literary texts.

Indicator 2.1: The student will analyze and evaluate a variety of texts, including fiction, nonfiction, poetry, drama, and informational texts.

Objective 2.1.2: The student will analyze stylistic elements in a text or across texts that communicate an author's purpose.

Common Core State Reading Standards for Literature 6-12

- RL1(9-10) Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- RL10(11-12) By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 11-CCR text complexity band independently and proficiently.

Objective(s):

- Students will be able to examine Lucille Clifton's poetry in order to identify the effect of diction, structure, imagery, and figurative devices as well as to apply these techniques to their own "homage" poem.

- Students will be able to model their poetry after that of Lucille Clifton’s “Homage to my Hips,” in order to explore the idea that one may celebrate something about oneself that society would typically view as negative.

Vocabulary and Concepts:

(Word or Concept)	(Definition)
Alliteration	repetition of the same consonant sound beginning several words in sequence.
Anaphora	repetition of the same word or words at the beginning of successive phrases, clauses, or sentences, commonly in conjunction with climax and with parallelism.
Parallelism	recurrent syntactical similarity. Several parts of a sentence or several sentences are expressed similarly to show that the ideas in the parts or sentences are equal in importance. Parallelism also adds balance and rhythm and, most importantly, clarity to the sentence.
Assonance	recurrent vowel sounds.
Metaphor	word or phrase denoting one kind of object or idea used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them.
Diction	Is, simply put, “word choice.”
Simile	an <i>explicit</i> comparison using <i>like</i> or <i>as</i> .
Imagery	Essentially the mental pictures one gets when reading literature.

Materials:

For the Teacher:

- [http://www.pbs.org/wnet/foolooing withwords/Pclifton bio.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/foolooing%20withwords/Pclifton_bio.html)
- <http://cla.calpoly.edu/~dschwart/engl331/figurative.html>
- <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=179615>
- <http://www.howard.edu/library/reference/guides/threefaces/clifton/onlineBioBib.htm>
- <http://www.virtualsalt.com/rhetoric.htm>

For the Student:

- Student Resource Sheet 1: Drill
- Student Resource Sheet 2: “Homage to my Hips” Poem
- Student Resource Sheet 3: Rhetorical/Figurative Devices

- Student Resource Sheet 4: Lucille Clifton’s Biography
- Student Resource Sheet 5: “Homage to my _____” Blank Model Poem

Resources:

Publications:

Lucille Clifton, "homage to my hips" from *Good Woman*. Copyright © 1987 by Lucille Clifton. Reprinted with the permission of Curtis Brown, Ltd.

Source: *Good Woman* (BOA Editions, Ltd., 1987)

Web Sites:

- http://www.pbs.org/wnet/fooloining_withwords/Pclifton_bio.htm
- <http://cla.calpoly.edu/~dschwart/engl331/figurative.html>
- <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=179615>
- <http://www.howard.edu/library/reference/guides/threefaces/clifton/onlineBioBib.htm>
- <http://www.virtualsalt.com/rhetoric.htm>

Historical Background:

Lucille Clifton

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucille_Clifton

Life and Career

Lucille Clifton (born Thelma Lucille Sayles) grew up in Buffalo, New York and graduated from Fosdick-Masten Park High School in 1953. She went on to study on a scholarship at Howard University from 1953 to 1955 and after leaving over poor grades, continued her studies at the State University of New York at Fredonia.

In 1958, she married Fred James Clifton, a professor of Philosophy at the University of Buffalo and a sculptor whose carvings depicted African faces. Lucille worked as a claims clerk in the New York State Division of Employment, Buffalo (1958–1960) and as literature assistant in the Office of Education in Washington, D.C. (1960–1971). Writer Ishmael Reed introduced Mrs. Clifton to her husband Fred while he was organizing The Buffalo Community Drama Workshop.

Fred and Lucille Clifton starred in the group's version of *The Glass Menagerie* which was called "poetic and sensitive" by *The Buffalo Evening News*.

In 1966, Reed took Mrs. Clifton's poetry to Langston Hughes, who included them in his anthology *The Poetry of the Negro*. In 1967, they moved to Baltimore, Maryland. Her first poetry collection *Good Times* was published in 1969 and was listed by *The New York Times* as one of the year's 10 best books. From 1971 to 1974, Lucille Clifton was poet-in-residence at Coppin State College in Baltimore. From 1979 to 1985, she was Poet Laureate of the state of Maryland. From 1982 to 1983 she was visiting writer at Columbia University School of the Arts and at George Washington University. In 1984, her husband died of cancer.

From 1985 to 1989, Clifton was a professor of literature and creative writing at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She was Distinguished Professor of Humanities at St. Mary's College of Maryland. From 1995 to 1999, she was Visiting Professor at Columbia University. In 2006, she was a fellow at Dartmouth College.

Lucille Clifton traced her family's roots to the West African Kingdom of Dahomey, now the Republic of Benin. Growing up she was told by her mother, "Be proud, you're from Dahomey women!" She cites as one of her ancestors the first black woman to be "legally hanged" for manslaughter in the state of Kentucky during the time of slavery. Girls in her family are born with an extra finger on each hand, a genetic trait known as polydactyly. Lucille's two extra fingers were amputated surgically when she was a small child, a common practice at that time for reasons of superstition and social stigma. Her "two ghost fingers" and their activities became a theme in her poetry and other writings. Health problems in her later years included painful gout which gave her some difficulty in walking.

Her series of children's books about a young black boy began with 1970's *Some of the Days of Everett Anderson*. Everett Anderson, a recurring character in many of her books, spoke in authentic African-American dialect and dealt with real life social problems. Her work features in anthologies such as *My Black Me: A Beginning Book of Black Poetry* (Ed. Arnold Adoff), *A Poem of Her Own: Voices of American Women Yesterday and Today* (Ed. Catherine Clinton), *Black Stars: African American Women Writers* (Ed. Brenda Scott Wilkinson) and *Bedrock: Writers on the Wonders of Geology* (Ed. Lauret E. Savoy, Eldridge M. Moores, and Judith E. Moores (Trinity University Press). Studies about her life and writings include *Wild Blessings: The Poetry of Lucille Clifton* (LSU Press, 2004) by Hilary Holladay and *Lucille Clifton: Her Life and Letters* (Praeger, 2006) by Mary Jane Lupton.

Awards

She received a Creative Writing Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1970 and 1973 and a grant from the Academy of American Poets. She has received the Charity Randall Prize, the Jerome J. Shestack Prize from the American Poetry Review, and an Emmy Award. Her children's book, *Everett Anderson's Good-bye*, won the 1984 Coretta Scott King Award. In 1988, she became the first author to have two books of poetry named finalists for one year's Pulitzer Prize. She won the 1991/1992 Shelley Memorial Award, the 1996 Lannan Literary Award for Poetry, and for *Blessing the Boats: New and Collected Poems 1988–2000* the

2000 National Book Award for Poetry. From 1999 to 2005, she served on the Board of Chancellors of the Academy of American Poets. In 2007, Clifton won the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize; the \$100,000 prize honors a living U.S. poet whose "lifetime accomplishments warrant extraordinary recognition." Lucille Clifton died at the age of 73 in 2010. At the time of her death, she was living in Columbia, Maryland. Posthumously, Clifton received the Robert Frost Medal for lifetime achievement from the Poetry Society of America.

Lesson Development:

Motivation:

The following quote is taken from poet Lucille Clifton (1936-2010). Examine the quote and explain below what you believe Lucille Clifton means by this quote as well as an example of this idea that applies to you personally.

“What they call you is one thing. What you answer to is something else.”

Procedures:

1. Brainstorm some universal experiences/characteristics which cause people to call others names *i.e. a physical feature*. You can take your examples from history, literature, or personal observation or experience. **Student Resource Sheet 1: Drill**
2. Examine **Student Resource Sheet 2: “Homage to My Hips” Poem** for uses of rhetorical devices, figurative language, etc. Make predictions about Clifton’s life based on the information revealed in the poem. (See attached list of rhetorical devices and figurative language). This poem can be accessed by Internet at the following address:

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=179615> **Student Resource Sheet 3: Rhetorical & Figurative Language Devices**
3. Read about Lucille Clifton and her life by connecting to the Internet and clicking on the following link:
<http://www.howard.edu/library/reference/guides/threefaces/clifton/onlineBioBib.htm>
Student Resource Sheet 4: Lucille Clifton’s Biography
4. Skim through at least two links under the sub-title **Online Links: Biographical Resources**. In order to make connections between Clifton’s life and her poetry, list several (3-5) facts about Lucille Clifton which may have influenced her poem “Homage to My Hips.” **Student Resource Sheet 5: “Homage to my _____” Blank Model Poem.**

5. Suggest reasons why Lucille Clifton would choose her hips as the subject matter of a poem. What is it about an African American woman's hips that could be seen as positive to some and negative to others?
6. Think about yourself, someone you know, or a literary character. Consider the physical appearance of the person you have in mind. Identify one or more aspects of the person's appearance that society may see as a "fault" or unattractive characteristic.
7. Brainstorm characteristics (physical, personality, clothing) of which you or the person you are describing is proud though others may see as a fault. If using a literary character, require students to return to the text and find textual evidence to support their perceptions of the character. Passages that describe the character's physical appearance are most helpful, and these are usually found—among other places—when the character is first introduced.

Assessment:

Choose ONE person and one "negative" characteristic. Use Lucille Clifton's poem as a model for creating your own homage poem. Write in first person and be sure to emphasize how and why the narrator admires this particular characteristic or idea even though others may not. Consider what makes this characteristic connected to the narrator's past history? What makes it particular to the narrator? Be sure to embed rhetorical devices, figurative language, etc.

Closure:

Students will share their "Homage" poems with the class. Students are also encouraged to submit their poetry to their school's literary magazine, poetry contests, and other literary venues.

Thoughtful Application(s):

This lesson could be used in a Creative Writing class. It could also be used to encourage students to look at society's values and to compare these values to their own.

Teachers may wish to have students write the poem about or consider the ideas from the perspective of a character from literature. For instance, students could brainstorm information about Scout and her time period if they have recently read *To Kill a Mockingbird*. This would increase the rigor of the assignment.

- **Lesson Extension(s):** The Museum offers several school programs that connect to the curriculum lessons.

- *Journey in History Theater* provides living history and theatrical performances which highlight African Americans in the museum's gallery.
 - Take the theme tour, *Heritage* and experience the rich, cultural heritage of Maryland's African American community. Learn how African Americans established and influence Maryland's historic communities, social organizations, work traditions and artistic customs.
 - Contact group reservations for schedule updates.
- Visit the Freedom Writers section in the Strength of the Mind Gallery at the Museum. Listen to selections of spoken word from young Maryland poets. Compare the style of these poems with Lucille Clifton's.
- Identify other images of African American women presented throughout the museum. Write a poem about African American women that pays homage to them.

“Homage to my Hips” is a Lucille Clifton poem displayed in the Reginald F. Lewis Museum.

Student Resource Sheet 2

“Homage to My Hips”

Poem by Lucille Clifton

For Poem

Open Hyperlink below

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/179615>

Student Resource Sheet 3

Rhetorical & Figurative Language Rhetorical Devices

For a reliable website on extensive rhetorical devices, open the following hyperlink:

<http://www.virtualsalt.com/rhetoric.htm>.

For a quick reference, see excerpts below:

“**Alliteration** is the repetition of the same consonant sound beginning several words in sequence.”

“**Anaphora** is the repetition of the same word or words at the beginning of successive phrases, clauses, or sentences, commonly in conjunction with climax and with parallelism.”

“**Parallelism** is recurrent syntactical similarity. Several parts of a sentence or several sentences are expressed similarly to show that the ideas in the parts or sentences are equal in importance. Parallelism also adds balance and rhythm and, most importantly, clarity to the sentence.”

Personification metaphorically represents an animal or inanimate object having human attributes – attributes of form, character, feelings, behavior, and so on. Ideas and abstractions can also be personified.

Figurative Language (Rhetorical Devices and Figurative Language often dovetail together):

For a reliable website on figurative language, open the following hyperlink

go to <http://cla.calpoly.edu/~dschwart/engl331/figurative.html> on the Internet. For quick reference see examples below:

“**Assonance** is recurrent vowel sounds.”

“**Metaphor** is a word or phrase denoting one kind of object or idea used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them.”

“**Simile** is an *explicit* comparison (using *like* or *as*).”

Other Important Terms:

Diction is, simply put, “word choice.”

Imagery is essentially the mental “pictures” one gets when reading literature

Student Resource Sheet 4

Lucille Clifton's Biography

Read about Lucille Clifton and her life by connecting to the Internet and clicking on the following link. Skim through at least two links under the sub-title **Online Links: Biographical Resources**. List several (3-5) facts about Lucille Clifton which may have influenced her poem "Homage to My Hips" in order to make connections between Clifton's life and her poetry.

<http://www.howard.edu/library/reference/guides/threefaces/clifton/onlineBioBib.htm>

Suggest reasons why Lucille Clifton would choose her hips as the subject-matter of a poem. What is it about an African American woman's hips that could be seen as positive to some and negative to others?

Think about your own life, about yourself as a person, and about what society may see as your physical "faults." Try to connect these to your own history and experience.

Brainstorm in the space below things (consider physical characteristics, personality characteristics, and personal ideas) of which you are proud though others may see as a fault:

Choose ONE of the characteristics from above. Use Lucille Clifton's poem as a model for creating your own homage poem. Be sure to include reasons that you admire this particular characteristic or idea. Consider what makes this characteristic connected to your past history? What makes it particular to you? Be sure to embed rhetorical devices, figurative language, etc.

