

# Unlocking the Memories:

## Enjoying Poetry



**An Interdisciplinary Unit**

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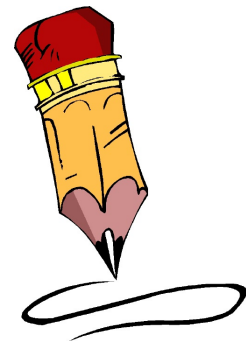
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## The Call of "The Raven"

*"Poetry lives both on the page and in the ear."  
Judith Burdan*



...But the students, listening, thinking,  
Tapping louder than before.  
"We're not very fond of poetry,  
We may suffer low test scores..."  
Quoth the teacher, "Nevermore!"

"But let us pause, engage in 'seeing'  
All that we have missed before.  
Rhyme and rhythm, alliteration,  
Simile, symbol, personification,  
While we 'taste' and hear the musings  
Of the bards for Evermore!"



## The Poetry Unit

### Unlocking the Memories: Enjoying Poetry

#### Goals:

1. Students will analyze, evaluate and appreciate poetry.
2. Students will understand the significance of the literary elements used in poetry.
3. Students will identify and explain each literary element as found in a given poem.
4. Students will use a variety of strategies to build vocabulary.
5. Students will organize and present responses to a variety of texts.
6. Students will research and report on issues discussed in the poems.
7. Students will practice writing poetry.
8. Students will write a tribute **in verse** to one of the Civil Rights leaders, living or dead.
9. Students will outline major events (key dates) in the history of slavery as they relate to the poems studied.
10. Students will listen to the vibrant sounds of Spirituals so as to fully appreciate the experience.
11. Students will learn to identify/empathize with the dreams and yearnings of the enslaved as well as with those of Civil Rights leaders.
12. Students will respect the efforts of Civil Rights leaders.



## INTRODUCTION TO UNIT

**The study of poetry can be a most pleasurable, personal experience. It lends itself easily to the interdisciplinary study, affording each student the opportunity to participate on a meaningful level.**

**However, from time to time, there arises the problem of non-involvement. Though poetry is to be found everywhere, inspiration and interest are lacking, especially when students are required to produce material for a specific class.**

**It is hoped that this unit will help to pique students' interest and enhance their poetic experience as they are re-introduced to the sounds and language of poetry.**

### **PURPOSE:**

**The writers of these selections lay bare their emotions. Students will see life portrayed as difficult and sad. But these authors also share their beliefs in the value of dreams and goals. They emphasize how dreaming and working hard toward the fulfillment of dreams may help to shape identities.**

**Hopefully, these works will encourage young people to consider and nurture their dreams at an early age, thus paving the way to achieving the larger, greater goal.**

**This unit is designed as a five-week unit for ninth graders, but may be adapted for other grade levels. The fifth week may be allocated to the completion and publication of projects. Activities have been integrated with the Social Studies and Music disciplines for authenticity. Finally, through the use of Art and figurative language, students may choose "stories" to turn into poems or create new poems from their own experiences.**



## Introduction to Projects/Activities

### The Connection:

The greater the students' understanding of history, (the Civil Rights Movement, in particular) the better they will relate to the poems in this unit. Students will

- Read and discuss the poems
- Complete assignments related to these poems
- Write poetry
- Create a personal archive
- Dramatize any poem or part thereof
- Illustrate poetry
- Listen to the sounds of poetry
- Participate in making music of their own
- Research
- Create a timeline
- Create an anthology

Through the use of the library, the internet, and/or interviews, students will broaden their knowledge of the fight for equal rights. The two "Enrichment-Have Fun" projects are long-term assignments. Students may complete the assignment of choice to be submitted at a time agreed upon by student and teacher.

### Teaching the Poems:

The poems may be used as handouts for class or individual study. The biographical notes may serve as additional background information for each work.

The activities that accompany the poems may be used on a daily basis to take advantage of extended class time (Block Scheduling) or they may be assigned as homework activities. The vocabulary exercises may be conducted as quick, five-minute checkups along the way.

Teachers may customize the Spirituals for the maximum benefit to the musical/rhythmic learners. The art activities are intended as tools to be used to heighten the level of appreciation.



LINEAGE  
Margaret Walker

My grandmothers were strong.  
They followed plows and bent to toil.  
They moved through fields sowing seed.  
They touched earth and grain grew.  
They were full of sturdiness and singing.  
My grandmothers were strong.

My grandmothers were full of memories  
Smelling of soap and onions and wet clay  
With veins rolling roughly over quick hands  
They have many clean words to say.  
My grandmothers were strong.  
Why am I not as they?





“Lineage”: Teaching the Poem/Activities

Margaret Walker’s poem is beautiful and eloquent in its simplicity. The teacher should draw students’ attention to the impact of simple, earthy words like **soap**, **onions**, and **wet clay** and their appropriateness in the poem.

Activity: Vocabulary/definitions. After reading “Lineage,” students will create a vocabulary “bank” in which the following definitions will be stored.

lineage	sturdiness
figurative language	theme
alliteration	imagery

Activity: Getting at Meaning: Students should offer clear explanations for their responses.

- What kind of ancestors does the speaker of this poem have?
- What does she remember about her ancestors?
- How does the speaker feel she compares to her ancestors?
- What does she admire about them?
- What examples of alliteration can you find in the poem?
- What does this alliteration do for the poem?



# Working Hard

Women  
Alice Walker

There were women then  
My mama's generation  
Husky of voice---Stout of  
Step  
With fists as well as 5  
Hands  
How they battered down  
Doors  
And ironed  
Starched white 10  
Shirts  
How they led  
Armies  
Head-ragged Generals  
Across mined 15  
Fields  
Booby-trapped  
Ditches  
To discover books  
Desks 20  
A place for us  
How they knew what we  
**Must** know  
Without knowing a page  
Of it 25  
Themselves.



“Women”: Teaching the Poem/Activities

Margaret Walker’s poem “Lineage” is similar to “Women” in its theme. Students should notice the similarities. The poem should be read aloud twice before proceeding to analyze and complete the activities. Have students note the alliteration and discuss how it provides unity and rhythmic cadence. Be sure to mention:

<u>st</u> out	<u>st</u> ep	<u>st</u> arched
<u>h</u> usky	<u>h</u> ands	<u>h</u> ead-ragged
<u>d</u> oors	<u>d</u> itches	<u>d</u> esks

**Activity:** Finding the Appropriate Meaning. Each of the following words has several different definitions. Study the way each word is used in the poem. Then find the word in a dictionary and/or thesaurus and give the best possible meaning.

stout	step	batter (ed)
books	doors	booby-trapped ditches
page	armies	generals

**Activity:** Understanding the Poem. Respond in complete sentences to the following:

- What are some of the activities performed by the women who are the subject of the poem?
- What did the women know that proved to be so important for the speaker’s generation?
- What mental images demonstrate the strengths of the speaker’s ancestors?
- What are the “booby-trapped ditches” to which the speaker refers in lines 17 and 18?
- Why does the speaker admire her “mama’s generation” so much?

**Activity:** Writing Poetry

- Write a poem about just ONE ancestor whose character and achievements you admire.



Pride  
U2

One man come in the name of love  
One man come and go  
One man come, he to justify  
One man to overthrow

Chorus:

In the name of love  
What more in the name of love  
In the name of love  
What more in the name of love

One man caught on a barbed wire fence  
One man he resist  
One man washed on an empty beach  
One man betrayed with a kiss

Chorus:

Early morning, April four  
Shot rings out in the Memphis sky  
Free at last  
They took your life  
They could not take your pride.

Chorus:



## “Pride”: Teaching the Poem/Activities

The lyrics of the poem/song “Pride” by U2 represent just one of many responses to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., on April 14, 1968. The song supports King’s memory by comparing the sacrifice of his life to that of other martyrs for causes throughout the ages.

Activity: Thematic Response. Students will respond at the personal level to the following:

- What emotion does this poem/song evoke? Explain.
- What message does this poem/ song convey? Support your answer from the text.
- Explain the biblical allusion in the poem/song.

Activity: Making Connections:

- Recall your ideas about Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech. How does this song’s message relate to King’s message.
- Write a tribute in verse to ONE Civil Rights’ leader, living or dead.
- Pretend you are Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Write a two-paragraph speech in which you address a gathering during a protest march in your city.



We Wear the Mask  
Paul Laurence Dunbar

We wear the mask that grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,  
This debt we pay to human guile;  
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,  
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,  
In counting all our tears and sighs?  
Nay, let them only see us, while  
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries  
To thee from tortured souls arise.  
We sing, but oh the clay is vile  
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;  
But let the world dream other-wise,  
We wear the mask!



## "We Wear the Mask": Teaching the Poem/Activities

Dunbar is writing about one of the sad realities of life. Students should note that the speaking voice of this poem is "we," not "I." Discussion may center around the positive effects of "wearing a mask," and whether or not Dunbar is speaking for the entire human race.

Activity: Developing Vocabulary: Which of the following choices is correct?

guile:	anger, deceit, confusion
myriad:	few, countless, rare
subtleties:	things not easily detected, things that are obvious
vile:	peaceful, bold, evil

Activity: Comprehension Check:

- What is your interpretation of the "mask" as described in this poem?
- Explain the meaning of the statement that the mask is a "...debt we pay to human guile."
- Write a paragraph in which you describe the issues with which the speaker is struggling.
- Write two paragraphs that describe the speaker's reasons for wearing a mask.
- Write a poem in which you identify with the speaker's struggle.
- Give your interpretation of the poem, assuming that Dunbar speaks for the entire human race.



If We Must Die  
Claude McKay

If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,  
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
Making their mock at our accursed lot.

If we must die, O let us nobly die,  
So that our precious blood may not be shed  
In vain; then even the monsters we defy  
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!  
O kinsman! We must meet the common foe!  
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,  
And for one thousand blows deal one deathblow!  
What though before us lies the open grave?  
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,  
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!





### "If We Must Die": Teaching the Poem/Activities

Claude McKay wrote the poem in response to the riots and violent deaths that occurred in 1919. When the mass migration of blacks to the industrial north during World War I caused upheaval in urban areas, McKay states "the sonnet exploded out of me."

Activity: Test Your Vocabulary: Match the Following:

- |                |       |                     |
|----------------|-------|---------------------|
| a. inglorious  | _____ | 14-line poem        |
| b. accursed    | _____ | relatives           |
| c. constrained | _____ | the emotional pulse |
| d. kinsmen     | _____ | disgraceful         |
| e. mood        | _____ | obliged             |
| f. sonnet      | _____ | unfortunate         |

Activity: Respond TRUE or FALSE as the case may be:

- \_\_\_\_\_ The poem talks about job discrimination.
- \_\_\_\_\_ The speaker claims that if his people stick together they will not die.
- \_\_\_\_\_ The poem is speaking about oppressed black people.
- \_\_\_\_\_ According to the poem, being honored after death means nothing; life is the only thing that matters.
- \_\_\_\_\_ The speaker is encouraging fellow blacks to die nobly.

Activity: Getting at Meaning: Discuss in groups of three and then respond to the following:

- What is the mood of the first eight lines of the sonnet?
- What images contribute to that mood?
- Why is the event described in the last six lines so startling?
- What does the event symbolize in the lives of the people?
- Write a concluding paragraph stating your understanding of the poem.



## Mother to Son Langston Hughes

Well, Son, I'll tell you  
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair  
It's had tacks in it,  
And splinters,  
And boards torn up,  
And places with no carpets on the floor,  
Bare.

But all the time  
I'se been climbin' on  
And reachin' landin's  
And turning corners  
And sometimes goin' on in the dark  
Where there ain't been no light.  
So, Boy, don't you turn back.  
Don't you set down on the steps  
"Cause you find it's kinder hard.  
Don't you fall now---  
For I'se still goin', Honey  
I'se still climbin'  
And life for me ain't been  
No crystal stair.



## “Mother to Son”: Teaching the Poem/Analyzing

The poem is an extended metaphor. In “Mother to Son,” the mother wants to pass on her knowledge of life to her son, emphasizing that nothing is free, but that with hard work one will be sure to experience a feeling of accomplishment.

Understanding dialect: The poem is written in a dialect, a variation of standard English that recalls the speech patterns of one group of people.

Activity: Getting at Meaning: Students will write and discuss their responses.

- Identify at least five examples of dialect in the poem and be prepared to explain how each is a variation of Standard English.
- What do you know about the speaker of the poem from her speech?
- What do you know about her life?
- How do you feel towards her? Why?
- What view of life does this poem project?
- What kind of figurative language does this poem use to project this attitude?

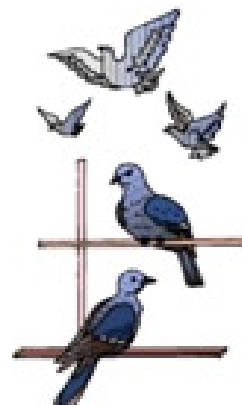


## Sympathy Paul Laurence Dunbar

I know what the caged bird feels, alas!  
When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;  
When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,  
And the river flows like a stream of glass;  
When the first bird sings and the first bud opes,  
And the faint perfume from its chalice steals---  
I know what the caged bird feels!

I know why the caged bird beats his wing  
Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;  
For he must fly back to his perch and cling  
When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;  
And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars  
And they pulse again with a keener sting---  
I know why he beats his wing!

I know why the caged sings, ah me,  
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore---  
When he beats his bars and he would be free;  
It is not a carol of joy or glee,  
But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,  
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings---  
I know why the caged bird sings!



## Caged Bird Maya Angelou

A free bird leaps  
on the back of the wind  
and floats downstream  
till the current ends  
and dips his wing  
in the orange sun rays  
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks  
down his narrow cage  
can seldom see through  
his bars of rage  
his wings are clipped and  
his feet are tied, so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still  
and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze  
And the trade winds soft through the sighing trees  
And the fat worms waiting on a dawn-bright lawn  
And he names the sky his own.



## “Sympathy” and “Caged Bird”: Teaching the Poems/ Activities

In his poem, Dunbar draws a parallel between the feelings of African Americans and the irrepressible desire of a caged bird to gain his freedom. Maya Angelou echoes Dunbar’s words as she contrasts a free bird and a caged bird. Both poems emphasize the importance of freedom and opportunity to the human spirit.

### Activity: Understanding/Analyzing

- In what ways are the two poems similar?
- In what ways are they different?
- Explain symbolism.
- What do the birds in the poems symbolize? What might the cage represent?
- Explain the attitude of the birds in the final stanzas of the two poems.

### Activity: Research and Report:

- Locate and summarize two articles related to the quest for freedom/equality within the last five years.
- What do you think are the two greatest problems that today’s black community faces? How would you propose to solve these problems?

### Activity: Illustration:

- Interpret the image of the caged bird or the free bird in an illustration, using markers, water colors or other medium. Choose colors that convey your feelings about the birds and what they symbolize.



Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing  
James Weldon Johnson

Lift ev'ry voice and sing,  
Till earth and heaven ring,  
Ring with the harmonies of liberty;  
Let our rejoicing rise  
High as the listening skies,  
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.  
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,  
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us,  
Facing the rising sun, of our new day begun  
Let us march on till victory is won.

Stony the road we trod,  
Bitter the chastening rod,  
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;  
Yet with a steady beat,  
Have not our weary feet,  
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?  
We have come, over a way that with tears has been watered,  
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,  
Out from the gloomy past,  
Till now we stand at last  
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

God of our weary years,  
God of our silent tears,  
Thou who has brought us thus far on our way;  
Thou who has by Thy might  
Led us into the light,  
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.  
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met thee,  
Lest our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget thee,  
Shadowed beneath Thy hand,  
May we forever stand,  
True to our God,  
True to our fatherland.



### "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing": Teaching the Poem/Activities

February 4, 2002: "Like a nervous father-to-be outside the delivery room, James Weldon Johnson "paced back and forth" on his front porch, "repeating the lines" of his song "over and over to myself, going through all the agony and ecstasy of creating." That's how Johnson's autobiography describes the process of writing "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," which came to be known as the black national anthem. Johnson himself referred to his song as the "Negro National Hymn." The lyrics were written in collaboration with his brother John Rosamond Johnson.

Julian Bond: NAACP chairman. "When people stand and sing it, you just feel a connectedness with the song, with all the people who've sung it on numerous occasions, happy and sad, over the 100 years before."

#### Activity: Listening and Singing:

- Have students listen to and sing a complete rendition of the poem/song.
- Dramatic Reading: Encourage students to bring the song to life with appropriate actions and posture.
- Discuss what it is like to experience the unity of a people expressing one idea.
- Research: Have students research God's Trombones and write a brief report on their findings.
- Research: Students may also benefit from researching Augusta Savage's The Harp (1939), the piece of sculpture that was influenced by Negro Spirituals and hymns, most notably, "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing."





### **Research: Time Line:**

- **Activity:** Review the following Time Line. Then expand on any given event. Be sure to explain its significance to any one poem and the overall effort in the fight for freedom.

#### Time Line: To Freedom

- May 24, 1619: Dutch slave ship arrives at Jamestown, VA carrying enslaved people from Africa.
- 1624: Two of the Africans who arrived in 1619, Isabella & Anthony, marry and have a son named William, the first child of African descent born in English America, and thus the first African-American.
- 1688: Quakers in PA sign an anti-slavery resolution, the first formal protest against slavery in the Western Hemisphere.
- 1777 – 1820: Slavery is abolished in the Northern States.
- February 12, 1793: The Fugitive Slave Act becomes a federal Law allowing the owner to seize fugitive slaves in Free States and territories.
- 1838: Frederick Douglass escapes from slavery.
- 1849: Harriet Tubman (Maryland slave) escapes to the North and begins her "freedom campaign".
- April 12, 1861: The Civil War begins.
- January 1, 1863: The Emancipation Proclamation. Abraham Lincoln declares: "all persons held as slaves are and henceforth shall be free.
- December 18, 1865: The 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment is ratified, ending slavery.



**Research: In Their Own Words:**

- Activity: Match one of the following quotations to any one of the poems studied in this unit. Explain the parallels in a one-page response.
  
- ❖ “None of us was ‘lowed to see a book or try to learn. Dey say we git smarter den dey was if we learn anything.”  
Jenny Proctor, Texas
  
- ❖ “If I had to live my life over, I would die fighting rather than be a slave again.”  
Robert Falls, former slave in interview  
conducted in the 1930s
  
- ❖ “I think we must get rid of slavery or we must get rid of freedom.”  
Ralph Waldo Emerson, poet 1856
  
- ❖ “Whenever I hear anyone arguing for slavery, I feel a strong impulse to see it tried on him personally.”  
President Abraham Lincoln, 1865
  
- ❖ “No man can put a chain around the ankle of his fellow man without at last finding the other fastened about his own neck.”  
Frederick Douglass, liberated slave  
and Civil Rights activist, 1883
  
- ❖ Bring the gifts that my ancestors gave  
I am the dream and hope of the slave  
I rise  
I rise  
I rise  
  
Maya Angelou from 1978 poem  
“Still I Rise”



### Introduction to Spirituals: Hope/Courage:

The Spiritual is also known as the work song. Yes, the slave was expected to sing as well as work. If the overseer was some distance away, this was a way of letting him know where they were and what they were doing. It was also a way of keeping in touch with the spirits, but more importantly, it was a means of making the work day go by quickly, as they communicated one with the other.

Many of the masters of plantations made their slaves convert to Christianity. The Spiritual therefore includes ideas taken from Christian hymns. It is also made up of Bible stories, prayers and sermons given by other slaves.

The vibrant sounds of these poems allow the experiences of slavery as well as freedom to be fully appreciated. Here, the enslaved dream of deliverance, the comfort of a better world, and never lose sight of their goal.

In the freedom songs, "Go Down, Moses" and "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel", the African-American slaves continue to identify with a powerful God. They remind listeners of the on-going struggles against slavery (in varying forms and degrees.) The lyrics are intense and powerful. This makes it clear why slaveholders were determined to punish severely any slave heard singing these songs.



### Go Down, Moses

When Israel was in Egypt lan'  
Let my people go  
Oppressed so hard, they could not stan'  
Let my people go.

Go down, Moses,  
Way down in Egypt lan'  
Tell ol' Pharaoh,  
"Let my people go."

"Thus saith the Lord," bold Moses said,  
"Let my people go;  
If not, I'll smite yo' first-born dead,  
Let my people go."

Go down, Moses,  
Way down in Egypt lan'  
Tell ol' Pharaoh,  
"Let my people go!"

---

### Didn't My Lord

Didn't My Lord deliver Daniel  
Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel?  
Didn't My Lord deliver Daniel  
An' why not -a-every man?



## Swing Low, Sweet Chariot

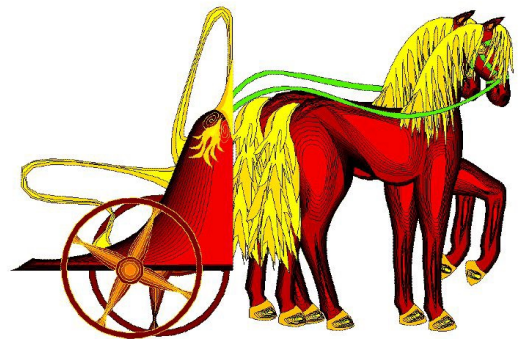
Swing low, sweet chariot,  
Coming for to carry me home,  
Swing low, sweet chariot,  
Coming for to carry me home.

I looked over Jordan and what did I see,  
Coming for to carry me home,  
A band of angels coming after me,  
Coming for to carry me home.

If you get there before I do,  
Coming for to carry me home.  
Tell all my friends I'm coming too,  
Coming for to carry me home.

I'm sometimes up and sometimes down,  
Coming for to carry me home,  
But still my soul feels heavenly bound,  
Coming for to carry me home.

Swing low, sweet chariot,  
Coming for to carry me home,  
Swing low, sweet chariot,  
Coming for to carry me home.



### Teaching the Spirituals/Activities:

The majority of the Spirituals are written in figurative language. The messages, whether sung or listened to, are most striking and powerful. The many similar themes are like precious, silken threads woven into one piece of fabric.

The songs "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "Go Down, Moses" deal with the theme of deliverance in different ways.

### Activity: Using Figurative Language:

- Students will listen to oral renditions of the songs/poems. Discussion may then center around ways in which the oral performance enhanced their experience.
- Students will write two paragraphs in which they compare and contrast the themes in "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "Go Down, Moses."
- Students will explain how the songs might have had two different meanings for the slaves.
- Students will identify the words or lines that could have double meanings.



## Enrichment Activities

# Have Fun!

Create your own archive:

- ❖ Begin to make history
- ❖ Start by collecting unique items that are of importance to you and your family.
- ❖ Create “snapshots” that would provide a glimpse into your past when it becomes your children’s future.
- ❖ Items may include, but are certainly not limited to:
  - Documents
  - Photographs
  - Recordings
  - Letters
  - Articles of clothing
  - Recipes
  - Other items, even those from a different era

Conduct your own oral history:

- ❖ Contact a grandparent or older relative willing to share their testimony
- ❖ Conduct the interview



# Have Fun!

**A Poetry Anthology:** An anthology is a collection of literary pieces. You will be creating your own anthology from various sources such as your textbooks, other books found in your libraries or in your home, or from your personal portfolio.

- ❖ You will need 12 to 15 poems for your anthology, one of which must be an original.
- ❖ You may choose ONE topic from the following list, or select a topic of your own. (Please consult with your teacher)
  - The Black Experience (Poetry by black authors)
  - Sports
  - Nature/Animals
  - Concepts/Ideas: Love, beauty, youth etc
  - Cherished possessions
  - Other
- ❖ You may prefer to create a miscellaneous anthology in which you concentrate on TWO topics.
- ❖ Remember, you must locate the appropriate poems for your chosen topic.
- ❖ Be sure to include the following:
  - A cover page
  - An introduction
  - Any graphics or pictures that tastefully explain your selections
  - One original poem

Be neat and as creative as possible!





Lineage  
Margaret Walker

**Key**

Vocabulary: Definitions

lineage	descendants of a common ancestor
sturdiness	rugged physical strength
figurative language	non-literal language
theme	central message
imagery	word pictures
alliteration	repetition of initial consonant sound

Getting at Meaning:

- The speaker sees her ancestors as role models.
- She remembers they were hard-working.
- She feels that she does not measure up to their standard.
- She is proud of them.
- She admires their strength.
- "full of sturdiness and singing"  
"veins rolling roughly"  
"smelling of soap"
- Alliteration adds musical quality to the poem.



Women  
Alice Walker

**Key**

Finding the Appropriate Meaning: Each of the following words has several different meanings. Study the way word, or word form is used in the poem. Then give the best possible meaning for each.

stout=sturdy, forceful	step=deportment	battered=overcame
books=education	doors=unjust laws	booby-trapped=dangerous
page=knowledge	armies=civil rights workers	generals=civil rights leaders

Understanding the Poem:

- The women performed everyday household chores. They commanded their households.
- They knew that difficulties could be overcome. They knew that education was important.
- The images of war emphasized the strength of the women.
- The booby-trapped ditches were the obstacles/difficulties that they overcame.
- They were making sacrifices for generations to come. They were courageous as well as unselfish.



**Key**

Pride  
U2

Thematic Response: Comprehension:

- The poem/song evokes a feeling of sadness coupled with admiration. The sacrifice, the “dying” was voluntary.
- The poem conveys the idea that one individual can be a majority and that standing alone can be honorable. This is emphasized through the repetition of the term “one man”.
- The allusion is made to Jesus who sacrificed for all mankind.
- Martin Luther King, Jr. was not afraid to stand alone.



**Key**

If We Must Die  
Claude McKay

Test your vocabulary: Match the following:

- |                |       |                     |
|----------------|-------|---------------------|
| a. inglorious  | __f__ | 14-line poem        |
| b. accursed    | __d__ | relatives           |
| c. constrained | __e__ | the emotional pulse |
| d. kinsmen     | __a__ | disgraceful         |
| e. mood        | __c__ | obliged             |
| f. sonnet      | __b__ | detestable          |

True or False:

- False
- False
- True
- False
- True

Getting at Meaning:

- The mood is sad but encouraging.
- The images are “combative” images.
- The speaker seems to be suggesting that death was inevitable.
- The event symbolized the death of Civil Rights leaders.



**Key**

We Wear the Mask  
Paul Laurence Dunbar

Developing Vocabulary:

guile	deceit
myriad	countless
subtleties	things not easily detected
vile	evil



Mother to Son  
Langston Hughes

**Key**

Getting at Meaning:

- The mother is an African American mother. She is uneducated.
- She has had a difficult life.
- One tends to sympathize with her, while feeling proud of her efforts.
- She is determined not to give up. She is unselfish. She cares more for others.
- A dismal view of life. However, there is the optimistic view of the mother who has been "reachin' landin's."
- The poem is an extended metaphor. The speech patterns are those of the uneducated slaves.



**Sympathy**  
**Paul Laurence Dunbar**

**&**  
**Caged Bird**  
**Maya Angelou**

**Key**

Understanding/Analyzing:

- The two poems tell of the experience of two birds, one caged and one free.
- The poems differ in each bird's perspective.
- Symbolism is the use of objects to represent significant events.
- The birds symbolize oppressed as well as free people.



# Biographies

## Maya Angelou: 1928 -

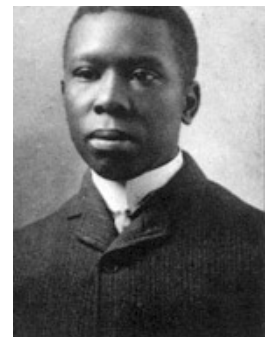
She was born Marguerite Johnson in 1928 in St. Louis, Missouri, but grew up in Stamps, Arkansas and California. Few people are as successful and multi-talented as Maya Angelou. In addition to writing poems, she has written stage plays, screen plays, short stories and autobiographical books. When time permitted, Angelou has toured the country as a lecturer and visiting professor to various colleges and universities. During the 1960's she worked with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as a coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.



Three decades after Frost's appearance at the Kennedy inauguration, President-elect Bill Clinton invited fellow Arkansan Maya Angelou to perform a poem for his inauguration ceremonies. In both her poetry and non-fiction, Angelou draws on her own experience, frequently exploring the problems of poverty, racism and sexism.

## Paul Laurence Dunbar: 1872 - 1906

He was the first African-American to gain national eminence as a poet. Born in 1872 in Dayton, Ohio, he was the son of ex-slaves, who later escaped to freedom on the Underground Railroad. Unable to afford college, Dunbar abandoned thoughts of a career in law or the ministry. Instead, he worked as an elevator operator, writing poetry only in his spare hours. His repertoire consists of more





than 500 poems. His subject matter includes the old plantation days, as well as the struggles and turmoil of emancipation. He didn't live to see his 35<sup>th</sup>. Birthday, but Paul Laurence Dunbar produced a tremendous outpouring of poetry and fiction during his brief lifetime.

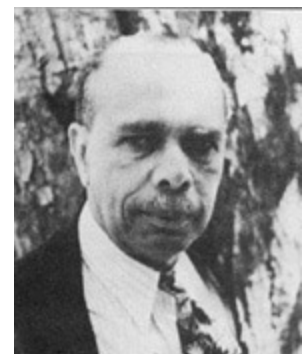
### Langston Hughes: 1902 – 1967

Born in Joplin, Missouri, Langston Hughes began writing poetry as a student at Central High School in Cleveland. He is one of the first writers to realistically portray the black experience in America, and the first Black American to earn his living solely from writing. In much of his writing he described the common people of Harlem. He used their dialect and the rhythm of their blues music and dealt with the themes of racial prejudice as well as the struggle for equality. He influenced young black writers to write about these and other relevant themes. After traveling to give public readings of his poetry, Hughes would always return to New York City, to his home in Harlem, where he helped young writers who sought his advice. He was a leading figure in the Harlem Renaissance who eventually became one of America's best-known poets.



### James Weldon Johnson: 1871 – 1938

Although he will be remembered longest as a poet and essayist, James Weldon Johnson was successful in many fields. He was born in Jacksonville, Florida. In his hometown, he was a school principal, a newspaper editor, and was admitted to the Florida Bar in 1897. When he was nearly 30, he moved to New York City. There he prospered as a writer of songs for musicals and light opera. Johnson was United States consul to Venezuela and Nicaragua from 1906 to 1913. From 1916 to 1920, he was field secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. He served as its first black executive secretary from 1920 to 1930. Johnson wrote the lyrics for the song "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" (1900), sometimes called the Negro



National Anthem. His other works include "God's Trombones" (1927), poems imitating black sermons, and **Black Manhattan** (1930), a cultural history of black life in New York City. James Weldon died in 1938 following an automobile accident in Maine.

Claude McKay: 1890 – 1948

He was born in Sunny Ville, Jamaica, West Indies. He later moved to Kingston, where he began to write poems. When he was twenty-two, he published two award-winning collections of poetry. He emigrated to the United States and attended Tuskegee Institute and Kansas State University. He soon discovered that he preferred writing and moved to New York, settled in Harlem and began publishing his poems in small literary magazines. His writing is noted for his portrayals of black life, and his demands for unity among blacks in attacking social justice.



(U2)

(Became one of the most popular rock and roll bands of the 1980's.)

Alice Walker: 1944 –

She has become one of the best-known and most highly respected writers in the United States. Walker was born on February 9 in Eatonton, Georgia, to tenant farmers Minnie Lou Grant and Willie Lou Walker. She is deeply proud of her cultural inheritances which include African American as well as Cherokee Indian. She graduated as high school valedictorian, entered Spelman College and later transferred to Sarah Lawrence College, New York where she nurtured her interest and talent in writing. In 1965 Walker returned to Georgia to



participate in the Civil Rights movement. In 1972 she accepted a teaching position at Wellesley College where she began one of the first women's studies courses in the nation, a women's literature course.

### Margaret Walker: 1915 – 1998

She was a native of Alabama and the daughter of a Methodist minister with a PhD from the University of Iowa. Besides being a writer, Walker has been a social worker, magazine editor, college English instructor and mother to four children. In 1942 she won the Yale Younger Poets Award for the first book of poetry, **For**



**My People.** In 1968 she was named director of the Institute for the Study of History, Life and Culture of Black Peoples. She was considered one of the legends of African American Literature. As an artist, she focused on the experiences and hardships of black people in America.



Indeed, poetry, with all its emotional overtones can be an enjoyable experience. It is hoped that the overall positive messages and challenges of the poems will long resonate and remain with the students.

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**The United States in Literature America Reads.** Classic Edition. Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman & Company, 1989.

### **Suggested Web Resources:**

[www.enchantedlearning.com](http://www.enchantedlearning.com)

[www.poets.com](http://www.poets.com)

[www.timeclassroom.com/unchained](http://www.timeclassroom.com/unchained)

[www.galesschools.com/enews/letters](http://www.galesschools.com/enews/letters)

[www.africanamericanspirituals.com](http://www.africanamericanspirituals.com)

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<http://www.poets.org/poets/searchresult.cfm>

