Hearing the Voices of the Voiceless: Tracing the Evolution of African Poetry from Colonization to Spoken Word

Summative Assessment/Performance Task: As a culminating project on a unit on African poetry, students will present a product that exemplifies the evolution of the African poetic tradition from colonization to the present.

Lesson Activities:

The instructor will have students brainstorm, discuss, and write down what African writers might see and feel in their daily lives (including the significant and mundane e.g. housing, animals, landscape descriptions, empowerment opportunities, abuses, frustrations, beauty etc.)

The instructor will present a poem of Western origin and model the annotation of its descriptive content (e.g. language, geographic references, speakers, content etc).

The instructor will then annotate a poem of African origin with the same focus, but identifying the devices that that are not necessarily reflective of an African experience, but are reflective of a Eurocentric/Western experience despite being written by African poets.

To better exemplify the commonalities between the poems, the Instructor might use a Venn Diagram or other graphic organizer to compare the content of focus.

A class discussion should include the sociopolitical reasons *why* African poets might have included descriptions of items that were physically absent in their lives but were metaphorically present.

Once students have thoroughly discussed the sociopolitical nuances that influenced the African Pioneer Poets, students will create a visual product (infographic, timeline, a series of Venn diagrams, cartoon illustration, mind maps, etc.) reflecting the evolution of African poetry as the genre is categorized below.

To reduce research time, students could be given a particular set of poems written between colonization and contemporary times to establish the scope of the timeline they will present.

After studying the characteristics of African Poetry as presented by Professors Joyce Ashuntantang and Tanure Ojaide, included below, student will choose 1-3 poems from the each period. Students will then conduct their own annotated close readings of the selected poems, examining them for markers that indicate how and why they reflect their generational characteristics.

Using comment bubbles, or marginal notes, student will present their findings in as a visual product that displays the evolution of African poetry from colonization to that of contemporary spoken word.

Time Allotment: 2 weeks until presentation of finished product with required updates/check-ins throughout the project's completion (not including the required research/prior knowledge of the colonization of Africa and its impact on African citizens, education culture, etc.).

Lesson Context: This lesson will culminate a unit study of African poetry as a part of a World Literature course for 10th-12th grade high school students. It reflects the literary and socially expressive impact of colonization and upon African literature, specifically poetry, throughout contemporary time.

Essential Questions:

How is identity reflected in poetry?

How might one's descriptions of land masses, people, climate, etc. reflect one's sense of self?

How can poetry/spoken word be vehicles of protest?

Are poetry and spoken word more critical to protest literature than prose?

What is universal about poetry written throughout the world?

Lesson Objectives/Learning Intentions:

Students will identify specific contextual examples (direct/indirect quotes, summaries, and paraphrasing with MLA citations) in their visual products that reflect their poems' characteristics.

Students will practice annotating poetry

Students will identify traditional and untraditional uses of literary devices in African poetry

Students will practice close readings of poetry that reflect cultural expressions outside of their own cultural norms.

(Georgia Standards of Excellence) Content Standards:

ELAGSE9-10RL4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., word meanings) how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone.)

ELAGSE9-10RL6 Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature.

ELAGSE9-10RI1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

ELAGSE9-10RI2 Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

ELAGSE9-10W2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex

ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the

effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

b. Develop the topic with well-chosen, relevant, and sufficient facts,

extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other

information and examples appropriate to the audience's knowledge

of the topic.

Lesson Vocabulary:

Assimilate, colloquial, alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia, consonance, simile, metaphor, homophone, hyperbole, anaphora, enjambment, allusion, hyperbole, imagery, infer/inference, figurative language, personification, point of view, blank verse

Characteristics of African Poetry by Generation

Characteristics of First Generation African Poetry--*Pioneer* poetry was signified by, but was not limited to the following characteristics:

  a. Poems were written during colonial times
  b. Audience was the colonizer
  c. Seemingly thanked the colonizer for colonization
  d. Tried to ignore the labor/hardships of the people, taxes, etc.
  e. Heavy influence from the Bible
  f. Heavy Greek and Roman references
  g. Heaving showing of Western learning
  h. Imitation of Victorian literary techniques
  i. Lacked poetic craft
  j. Reflected that African culture was subpar
  k. Included physical descriptions that were not African, but were typically attributed to European/Western landscapes, climates, physical descriptors, etc.)

Characteristics of Second Generation Poetry (*The Euro-Modernist Poets*) was

Signified by, but was not limited to the following characteristics:

  a. Written during the end of colonization (late 1950s and 60s)
  b. Included a freshness of imagery
  c. Innovative language
  d. Established the African canon that is acknowledged today
  e. Most of these poets were educated in Europe and America and/or read or were taught literature by European teachers in French, British universities of Uganda, Nairobi, Lisbon, etc.
  f. Included grievances about colonization and slavery
  g. Expressed in cultural terms and racial terms
  h. Exemplified the periods of historical transformation
  i. Wrote for *all* Africans (The audience changed)
  j. Influenced by Ezra Pound, T.S. Elliot, Yates, etc.

Characteristics of the Third Generation of African Poets (Late 70s- mid 80s) included but were not limited to:

  a. Content included the background of civil war(s)
  b. Included reflections of political and economic instabilities
  c. Moved away from political focus
  d. Poets wrote with more freedom—wrote about what *they* wanted to write about

e. Poets were highly educated
f. Felt no need to prove themselves
g. Wrote with more interest in the well-being of the people
h. Included more love poems
i. Saw themselves as agents of change on society
j. Included voices of all Africa, not just West Africa
k. Movement away from race and culture

Fourth Generation of African poetry—The Alternative Generation (mid 80s- current day poetry/spoken word)

Includes but is not limited to:

a. Write with a sense of alienation, exile
b. More poems about womanhood/women's issues and experiences/voices
c. Less nostalgia reflected in the poems
d. Content is very important- even more than traditional structure and delivery
e. Simplistic language (i.e. Mandela's poem, "When I was a Child") reflecting strong content
f. Inclusion of spoken word
g. Influenced by the internet and worldwide connectivity