

## Relevant Unit Objectives

### Module 1: African American Community and Culture

#### This lesson addresses the following Essential Questions:

- How did African-American history, including slavery and discrimination, shape African-American communal life and cultural expression?
- How was the African-American community defined?

## Objectives of the Lesson

### Aim:

What insights did the poetry of Langston Hughes offer about the African-American community in Harlem?

### At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Highlight elements in Langston Hughes' poetry that reflect the community from which he came.
- Identify areas of concern to the African-American community in the first half of the twentieth century.
- Compare and contrast the different ways Langston Hughes uses dreams to define the goals of the African-American community.
- Trace the recurring theme of dreams in African-American culture and history.

## Introduction

### The Force of Art in a Community

Teachers will have students respond to the following questions in written form or teachers can assign these questions as homework the night before the lesson and have students bring in a piece of art (or a representation of it) to share with the class at the beginning of this lesson.

- How does art reflect the community from which it comes?
- What is one piece of art (e.g., painting, sculpture, music, poetry, etc.) that you think reflects or defines your community?
- How does this piece of art reflect or define your community?

After students have been given adequate time to complete the written task, the teacher will ask students to share their responses. The goal of the teacher should be to elicit responses that represent a wide variety of arts. Students should be encouraged to expand upon their answers to demonstrate how this art is related to their community.

### Instructional Procedures

#### Step One: The Community of Langston Hughes

"Harlem: A Dream Deferred"

<http://web.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap9/hughes.html>

The teacher distributes copies of the poem "Harlem: A Dream Deferred" to students. The teacher asks students to read the poem, asking them to focus on how the poem describes the community during the period in which it was written. The teacher may have students read the poem in groups, individually, or as a class. Once the reading is complete, students can complete Handout 1.

#### Step Two: Introducing Langston Hughes

*The teacher provides background information about Langston Hughes. This may be done as a summary of the main points listed below, as a worksheet, as a PowerPoint presentation, mini-lecture, or other appropriate strategy.*

One of the leading voices of the African American artistic community of the 1920s, Langston Hughes was a member of the "Harlem Renaissance." The Harlem Renaissance was the flowering of art and intellectual life during the 1920s and 1930s in Harlem, the part of New York City in which many African Americans resided. Hughes focused his writing on the realistic plight of African Americans. He authored more than 50 literary works covering all genres: poetry, fiction, autobiography, children's books, opera, and drama.

In his early years, Hughes was greatly influenced by W. E. B. DuBois and his grandmother's stories about his grandfather, who took part in John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry in 1859 to arm the slaves.

Hughes attended Columbia University in New York City, dropping out in the early 1920s to "see the world." After returning to the United States, he won a scholarship to Lincoln University in Pennsylvania (graduating in 1929), where he was considered one of the most promising young poets of his generation.

A friend of Ernest Hemingway, Hughes continued to travel widely and made Harlem his permanent home in 1942.

Hughes, unlike many of the Harlem Renaissance writers, was able to support himself financially through his writing. His works included "Simple Speaks His Mind," featuring the witty and ironic street-smart Harlem resident who commented on the everyday life of African Americans. His well-known poems, such as "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," "The Weary Blues," and "Harlem," were meant to be read aloud; due to his use of rhythmical language, the poems were frequently set to music in order to actively engage the audience. Hughes also had success on Broadway where his 1935 play "The Mulatto" became a hit.

#### Step Three: "Dream Variations"

"Dream Variations."

<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15610>

Students will use Handout Two, "Langston Hughes: Dream Variations", to guide their reading of this poem. Students will initially read the poem alone, and then will be placed in pairs by the teacher to complete the worksheet. The teacher may also wish to have a brief class discussion to ensure student understanding of the poem. The following discussion questions may be used:

- How does this piece of art reflect or define your community?
- What factors shaped Hughes' vision for the African-American community?
- Did non-African-Americans play a role in Hughes' vision of the future? Why or why not?

**Optional Activity: A Found Poetry Exercise**

1. Students read the poetry individually and highlight/underline key words or phrases (2-3 words) that are most powerful.
2. Students meet in small groups (2-4 students) and share their powerful words.
3. Students agree on a list of powerful words/phrases.
4. Students reorganize their words/phrases in such a way that embellishes on Hughes' poem without reproducing.
5. Students read their poems orally to the class at the conclusion.

**Conclusion: Connection to Martin Luther King:**

*Students will complete the following writing prompt:*

In 1963, Martin Luther King gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC. This speech can be found at: <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihaveadream.htm>  
What dreams do you think Martin Luther King had for his community? Do you think Martin Luther King's dreams were similar or different from Langston Hughes's dreams? What dreams do you have for your community? Are your dreams similar or different from those of Langston Hughes or Martin Luther King? Why? Can dreams become reality? How? Can artists play a role in making dreams into reality?

**Optional Activity: Comparing Contemporary Poetry to Langston Hughes**

Students will read the lyrics/ listen to "Heard 'Em Say" by Kanye West (or another relevant contemporary song or poem) <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/kanyewest/heardemsay.html>

The teacher can use this song to lead a discussion about how contemporary art may offer insights into the communities from which an artist came.

- Is Kanye West's song similar to Langston Hughes' poem? If so, in what ways?
- This poem is about West's community. What impression do you get of West's community?
- Based on this song, do you think life in West's community is easy or hard? Why?
- How is the dream described by West similar or different to that described by Hughes?
- Is your community similar to the community described by Kanye West? Why or why not?
- What role did West play as an artist in drawing attention to the plight of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina struck? See this event on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zlUzLpOIkxI>
- Can you think of other African American contemporary artists whose work reminds you of Hughes' work?

## Materials

### **Basic Materials:**

Harlem: A Dream Deferred

<http://web.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap9/hughes.html>

Dream Variations

<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15610>

Handout 1: Langston Hughes: "Harlem: A Dream Deferred"

Handout 2: Langston Hughes: "Dream Variations"

### **Optional Activities:**

Heard 'Em Say by Kanye West

<http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/kanyewest/heardemsay.html>

Kanye West on YouTube

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zIUzLpO1kxI>

Handout One: Langston Hughes "Harlem: A Dream Deferred"

1. This poem is about Langston Hughes' community in Harlem. What impression do you get of Hughes' community in this poem?
2. Based on this poem, do you think life in Hughes' community is easy or hard? Why?
3. Why do you think Hughes titled this poem "Harlem: A Dream Deferred"?
4. Do you think this poem could be used to describe your community today? Why or why not?

## Handout Two: Langston Hughes "Dream Variations" (1926)

**Directions:**

*Complete the worksheet by reading the attached poem, and answer the questions below in a brief paragraph.*

1. At the end of the first stanza, Langston Hughes exclaims: "That is my dream!" In your own words describe what Langston Hughes' dream is.
2. In both poems that you have read today, Langston Hughes talks about dreams. How is his discussion of dreams in this poem different from his discussion of dreams in the first poem?
3. Based on this poem, do you think Hughes is satisfied with life in his community? Why or why not?
4. What goals do you think Langston Hughes had for his community?
5. Would you want to live in the world described by Hughes? Why or why not?