Linguistic meanings through figurative language in Langston Hughes’s poetry, Faith Ringgold’s quilts/textiles and Romare Bearden’s collages

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Overview

My intentions are to have the seventh grade students reflect and discuss social themes that were prevalent during the Harlem Renaissance period, then compare and contrast them to social themes today. Students will discuss point of view as expressed in Langston Hughes poems and Romare Bearden’s collages as well as principles that contributed to the mood of Bearden’s artistic work. The curriculum seeks to make students aware of the ties between various art forms in the Harlem Renaissance—prose, poetry, visual art.

Rationale

The Harlem Renaissance was a period in American cultural history when Black artists felt a need to contribute their African heritage and pride in a positive way to the visual, performing and literary art (Carroll 75).

The Harlem Renaissance had its origins in the urban migrations of black people during and immediately following World War I. Hundreds of thousands of blacks left the rural South as economic conditions worsened and political oppression grew intolerable. In the decade before 1920, there had been, on the average, one lynching every six days. An organization that terrorized blacks throughout the South, the KKK, had been reactivated in 1915. The North promised jobs, housing and educational opportunities; the war increased demand for American products; and Northern manufacturers were badly in
need of unskilled and semi-skilled labor. The final destination was Harlem, an attractive New York City neighborhood that had recently opened its door to blacks. Harlem became the center of African American political and cultural life. Scholars have given the title Harlem Renaissance to this period (Woodward 25).

The Harlem Renaissance was a flowering of African-American social thought that was expressed through the visual arts, as well as through music, literature, theater and dance. All African-Americans were encouraged to celebrate their heritage and to become “The New Negro,” a term coined in 1925 by sociologist and critic Alain LeRoy Locke (Edwards 1994).

Students will discuss point of view, as expressed in Langston Hughes’ poems and Romare Bearden’s collages. They will compare and contrast this with the point of view of Faith Ringgold’s quilts and textiles. Students need to be aware of ties between Harlem Renaissance era writers, poets, and artists, as well as their connection with the present day.

Langston Hughes was from the Midwest. He was born in Joplin, Missouri, and grew up in Kansas and Ohio. He came to New York City to attend Columbia University a school he had chosen because it was located near Harlem (Gates 312).

Romare Bearden grew up in a middle-class African-American family from Charlotte, North Carolina. His parents Bessye and Howard were both college educated. Many southern black families migrated to the North and relocated in Harlem. Bearden’s mother was the New York editor of the Chicago Defender and became a prominent, social and political figure in Harlem. Langston Hughes frequently visited the Bearden family home. Social and intellectual gatherings would become a significant force in Bearden’s lifestyle (Greenberg 24).

This curriculum unit will make a contemporary connection through the work of textile artist Faith Ringgold, who is known for her story quilts. Story quilt is an art form that combines quilted material, cloth, paint and text to create a narrative. Among Faith Ringgold’s most famous works are The French Collection Series and Tar Beach. Faith Ringgold’s quilts concern the experience of the Black female in America. For example, Cassie, the narrator of Tar Beach, dreams of being free to go wherever she wants for the rest of her life. Cassie’s father was excluded from the labor union like countless numbers of African-Americans and Native Americans simply because they were “colored of a half-bred Indian, like they say” (Ringgold 20).

Students need to recognize and apply linguistic meanings through figurative language in African-American: story telling, poetry, collages, visual arts and quilting of the Harlem Renaissance. This curriculum will help the Shaw students to develop an
understanding of the many perspectives and voices of our past, present and future through poems and visual arts of African-Americans.

Enrollment at Shaw Middle school, where I teach, has decreased over the last several years from 750 to presently 572 students. Next year Shaw will house only seventh and eighth grade students. The Race / Ethnic composition for Shaw for the years 2005-2006 is as follows: African American 98.3%, White 0.7%, Asian 0.0%, Latino 0.9% and Other 0.2%. Because of the high concentration of African American students, I want to make the students more aware of and familiar with the great works of the Harlem Renaissance period.

Shaw’s physical plant was built in 1922 and has many murals on its exterior and interior walls. Philadelphia School District mandates that all students complete a Service Learning Project by the end of their 8th grade year, and murals have been a part of that. Murals have been painted by Shaw students both in the school and in other locations as part of the Network Arts Program. Under the direction of Network Arts coordinator Josey Stamm students have completed three mosaic murals. The first mural, which is housed on the 3rd floor of Shaw, is in the Arts and Music Academy and is entitled “Coltrane Quest.” This mural depicts the artistic contributions of musician John Coltrane. The group consisted of 5th-8th grade students who studied the life and accomplishments of Mr. Coltrane and designed the mural. The second mural is located in the Carnivore House at the Philadelphia Zoo. The students researched environmental protection strategies. The mural depicts animals from around the world. The third mural located on Shaw’s first floor, adjacent to a marble hallway, is entitled “History in the 20th Century.” It depicts cultural, technological and political aspects of recent history. The murals at Shaw show that students are eager to learn and participate in projects that enhance their school environment. They are also eager to acquire new knowledge about their own history and background. My curriculum, which connects Harlem Renaissance era arts to those of today, will help students to do this.

Objectives

1. The students will recognize and appreciate the work of Romare Bearden.

2. Using Romare Bearden’s works as examples, the students will understand collage as an art form.

3. The students will learn that Romare Bearden’s style was influenced by numerous sources, including the Western European art, African sculpture, Langston Hughes poetry and blue/jazz music.
4. The students will understand how the mood in Romare Bearden’s collages is a reflection of childhood memories, and of the Northern and Southern cities he visited with his grandfather.

5. The students will reflect on and discuss discrimination in housing, jobs and the second class treatment of individuals that was prevalent during the Harlem Renaissance.

6. The students will compare and contrast social themes of today with those of the Harlem Renaissance.

7. The students will analyze the artistic elements and principles (shape, texture, color, composition, light, and line) that contribute to the mood of an artistic work.

8. The students will appreciate Romare Bearden’s use of line, shape, color and light.

9. The students will demonstrate the process of creating a mixed-media collage that expresses a current social theme.

10. The students will create a collage inspired by Romare Bearden’s work.

11. The students will be introduced to the techniques of quilting by looking at Faith Ringgold’s story quilts.

12. The students will gain knowledge about the place of quilting/textile in American society and culture.

13. The students will identify the straight lines, curved lines and patterns of the quilts/textures.

14. The students will describe the function of a story.

15. The students will identify the setting and subject within the poems, quilts and collages.

16. The students will write a paragraph telling their point of view for the poem, quilt, and collage.

17. The students will create an individual story quilt.

18. The students will identify personification, simile, metaphor, irony, and figurative language in Langston Hughes’s poems.
19. The students will discuss ways artists express points of view in their creations.

20. The students will understand and use technology as a research tool.

21. The students will develop their skills in visual analysis and literacy.

22. The students will create in the classroom an atmosphere of learning in which community and the needs of the group are as important as those of the individual.

**Strategies**

This unit will have three different components corresponding to the three individuals discussed. Faith Ringgold’s subsection will start in October for two to three periods in the classroom. Romare Bearden’s subsection will take place in February or March and consist of one to three periods. Langston Hughes’ subsection will cover one to three weeks starting in April and students will discuss several of his poems then. The final outcome of the class is to have students make collages and quilts. We will start with the foundation strategy. The foundation strategy activates student’s prior knowledge about collages, quilts and the Harlem Renaissance.

During the unit, students will work collaboratively. The collaborative process applies the concept “two hands are better than one” to the learning environment. Cooperative learning is an extensively researched instructional method in which students are divided into small groups (2-6 members) to achieve the outcome.

Reciprocal teaching will also be used. This approach facilitates an interactive dialogue between the teacher and students about content/material with summarizing, generating questions, clarifying and predicting.

Networks will be formed to facilitate researching information. Involving students in a network is motivational, meets the needs of many students, and facilitates interdisciplinary learning.

A performance event or exhibition is an assessment based on an observation of a student’s actual performance on a given task or project. At the conclusion of this unit, students will have a chance to exhibit the collages and textiles they created.

A storyboard provides a visual means for conceptualizing and organizing information in a scenario. Students will learn storyboarding in their study of elements such as perspective, lighting, texture, composition, and line.
Story maps identify literary elements such as main characters, setting, problem, major events, problem solution, and a theme for a story. Students will use story maps in analyzing both literary and visual works of art.

Faith Ringgold’s storytelling is by way of quilts and books. Students will develop an understanding of the many perspectives and voices of our past, present and future, realizing that history is political and dynamic. The study of Faith Ringgold’s works such as *Tar Beach* and *Aunt Harriet’s Underground Railroad in the Sky* will help to foster skill in visual analysis and literacy. Students will view twelve different copies of her great work, and especially *Harlem Renaissance Party* and *Who’s Afraid of Aunt Jemina?*. Students will apply knowledge of language structure, language convention, spelling and punctuation, media techniques, and figurative language. They will critique and discuss print and non-print texts.

The Know/Want/Learned is a strategy that models the active thinking needed when reading new material or participating in a learning activity. It encourages the student to think about ideas and to ask questions while reading. The strategy is a five step process that can be used across the curriculum at all grade levels, with any size group or with a whole class. This strategy will be used as a way to introduce material by the artists being studied.

Students will look at pictures from book by Jan Greenberg on Romare Bearden’s *Collage of Memories*. Romare Bearden did not forget his upbringing, but instead used childhood memories of Southern and Northern cities and people to get the message across of the Harlem renaissance.

Students will collect material to be used in making the quilt(s). We will ask Shaw’s Arts and Music Academy get involved by having a competition to see which class can collect the largest amount of clean reusable material for the quilts. Students will also video the process of interviewing elderly individuals who knew members of a quilt bee. Students will complete Venn diagrams comparing and contrasting two books by Faith Ringgold. Students will construct Venn diagram based on a Romare Bearden collage and Langston Hughes poem that uses figurative language. Students will keep a daily journal for retelling or summarizing the events of the day. Activities can take place during regular school hours or during the extended day program.

Students will reflect on artwork by comparing the multiple purposes for creating works of art during the Harlem Renaissance era. Students will describe and analyze how personal and cultural experiences influenced the development of the Romare Bearden’s collages, Faith Ringgold’s quilting/texture and Langston Hughes’s poetry. Then students will describe, compare, and reflect on a variety of individual responses to Harlem Renaissance artworks and to Philadelphia artworks. They will compare the characteristics of works in two or more art forms that share similar subject matter, historical periods or
cultural content. They will also describe and demonstrate ways in which the principles and subject matter of other disciplines such as Reading/Writing are interrelated with the visual arts. The unit will have students collect images that demonstrate figurative language: metaphor, simile, irony and personification. These will be used in creating a collage within the cooperative groups.

Classroom Activities

Lesson Plan 1

Title of the Lesson: Langston Hughes’s Figurative Language in Mother to Son poem. Subject: Reading and Writing Grade: Seventh Length of lesson: 1-3 periods Time: 40-50 minutes

Overview of the lesson: Students will read the poem “Mother to Son” by Langston Hughes. They will reflect and discuss the social themes that were prevalent during the Harlem Renaissance period and in the poem.

Objective: Students will identify and analyze how Langston Hughes uses literary devices to convey meanings in the Mother to Son poem. They will make inferences, draw conclusions and discuss the cultural dialect used in some of his the poems. The lesson will also introduce and review background information of the Harlem Renaissance era.

Procedure
Day 1: Students are given pretest on Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance Each student will be given a copy of the “Mother to Son” poem.

Mother to Son

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 carpet on the floor-
Bare.
But all the time
I’se been a-climbin’ on,
And reachin’ landin’s
And turnin’ corners,
And sometimes goin’ 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 finds 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.

Students will determine whether the poem is written in first or third person point of view. The instructor will make sure students understand that the word “I” in the poem represents the first-person perspective. The instructor will ask students to look for clues, such as pronouns (we, he, she, it, them, us, or you), that would indicate third-person perspective. To further their understanding, students will then be asked to write the same story from two or three different perspectives. Students could pick a current issue in the school, neighborhood or on the national level and write a poem on that social theme.

Day 2: Students will be given a copy of Langston Hughes’s poem “Dream Deferred” (Harlem), and asked to perform a similar analysis regarding point of view.

*Dream Deferred (Harlem)*
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?

Day 3
Students select one of the following poems by Langston Hughes: “I, Too;” “Little Old Letter;” “The Negro Speaks of Rivers;” and “Still Here.” Students must explain why they made their selection. They will be asked to identify tone, mood, point of view, irony, simile, metaphor and any other form of figurative language used in the poem. They will then review all three poems and identify the social theme for each poem.
Materials / resources
Background Information on Harlem Renaissance
Worksheets on Langston Hughes poems: Mother to Son and Deferred Dreams (Harlem)
Vocabulary words: deferred, omniscient, point of view, tone, mood, first-person, third-person, inference character, simile, metaphor, irony and figurative language.

Assessment
Students compare and contrast two poems mentioned above by using a Venn diagram.
Post Test on Harlem Renaissance

1) What is the Harlem Renaissance?
2) Analyze at least two poems of Langston Hughes, identifying the tone, mood, irony, simile, metaphor, etc.
3) Identify at least two visual artists of the Harlem Renaissance.
4) Identify at least one musician of the Harlem Renaissance.
5) Why do you think the Harlem Renaissance individuals were so proud of their cultural heritage?

Cooperative Grouping
-In the poem “Mother to Son,” recognize the wisdom of the mother’s actions—actions that show her to be a powerful woman.

-Students rewrite well-known fairy tales, such as “Cinderella”, “Little Red Riding Hood” or “Goldilocks” and the “Three Bears,” inserting social and moral themes

Individual Class work
-Students write themselves up as a character in a story. What would they want the reader to know about them and how would they convey it in words?

-Students write their own poem expressing at least two of the following core values: compassion, courage, hope, integrity, justice, respect, responsibility and wisdom.

-Students discuss the figurative language used in the poem.

Assessment: Constructed-response
Rewrite this poem in prose form, as if it were a letter from a parent in today’s time to their son or daughter.

Lesson Plan 2

Title of the lesson: Romare Bearden Collage
Subject: Visual Arts and Writing
Grade: Seventh
Length of lesson: 1-2 periods
Time: 45 minutes

Overview of the lesson: Have students understand and appreciate Romare Bearden’s collage as an art form.

Objectives
The students will recognize and appreciate the work of Romare Bearden. They will create a collage based on a masterpiece, and critique art made by other students.

Day 1
Procedure
- Students will view pictures from book by Jan Greenberg – Romare Bearden’s Collage of Memories.
- Have students cut out different shapes and objects from numerous magazines to use for their collages.
- Students will make one group collage for every four people.
- Students will discuss ways artists like Romare Bearden express point of view and analyze the artistic elements that contributed his work.
- Explain to students that Romare Bearden stories drew attention to social realism.
- Explain to students that Bearden’s work was created by gluing fragments of paper, fabric, scraps, photographs, drawings, and images in magazines and newspapers to a flat surface.
- Working in cooperative groups, have students create different collages on themes concerning their neighborhood.

Day 2
Procedure
- Have students look at Romare Bearden’s collages and try to describe in writing his point of view and message.
- Ask the students to look at the work of art closely and make a list of everything they see. Have them share their observations in cooperative groups.

Use the following questions to direct the discussion of the collages.

What are the geometric shapes in the collage(s)?
Where do you think the scene took place?

- Students in cooperative groups decide on a theme for their group’s collage.
- Students write a short story of their rough draft of illustration / sketch of collage.
- Students are given at least two different periods to make collage.
Students make individual collages.
As a guided lesson the whole class decides on a collage for the class.

Assessment
- Cooperative Grouping rubric for team assignments to evaluate the finished product of the collage.
- Writing rubric: checklist to determine whether students meet goals for advanced, proficient, basic or below basic achievement.

Lesson Plan 3

Title of the lesson: Faith Ringgold’s quilts/textiles on social themes.
Subject: Visual Arts and Reading/Writing
Grade: Seventh
Length of lesson: 2-3 periods
Time: 45 minutes

*Overview of the lesson:* Students will learn about Faith Ringgold’s depiction of social injustices in her story quilts.

Day 1
*Procedure:* Students have worksheets on background information on quilts from different time periods.

- Hand out quilts worksheet
- To understand quilting we must go back to African American quilting traditions and textiles.
- Explain to students that originally in Africa most of the textiles were made by men. The use of strips in Ringgold’s work should remind students of the fabric used in men’s traditional weave.
- Large shapes and strong colors were used to help make the wearer visible from a distance.
- The purpose of the textiles’ asymmetry was to create a large fabric of separate weaves sown together rather than one repeating pattern.
- Improvisation is the ability to recreate and change old patterns. A break in a pattern symbolized a rebirth in the ancestral powers of the creator or weaver. Multiple patterns or changes in pattern of a specific cloth directly corresponded to the owner’s status. It symbolized prestige, power, status and wealth.
- Appliqué and record keeping is a lasting way to record family events such as birth, marriage, geographical locations and spiritual dedication.
- Religious symbols are very prominent in African textile traditions; an example is the diamond pattern. The diamond is symbolic of the cycles of life.
Guided Reading of *Tar Beach* by Faith Ringgold--summarize the story.

Assessment: Identify the tone and mood of the story, and in particular how it discusses racial discrimination.

Day 2

- Students read Aunt Harriet’s Underground Railroad in the Sky (5).
- Students explore the similarities and difference between the two texts
- Linking and comparing the homework assignment: reading their notes from the People Could Fly by Virginia Hamilton
- Cooperative Learning Groups-discuss the similarities and differences (Venn diagram) between Cassie in *Tar Beach* and Toby in *The People Could Fly*. Venn Diagrams are created on language experience chart paper.

1. Why does Cassie want to fly? What does Cassie’s flying help her to do?
2. Why does Toby want to fly?
3. What would happen if Cassie couldn’t fly?
4. In what ways are Cassie’s reasons for flying different than Toby’s reasons for flying?
5. Have you ever wanted to fly?

Assessment

Reflective Essays
Interpretive Drawings
Students write a short story using imagery, personification, infer, tone etc.

Tentative Trips: Lancaster Quilt & Textile Museum, Witmer Quilt Shop, and The Quilt Shop at Miller’s.

**Annotated Bibliography**

This book deals with the history of artists and their comments on political and social aspects of their work.

This is a great collection of poems opening with James Weldon Johnson and concluding with Marvin Wyche, Jr. Also, the glossary has biographical notes on each poet.

Langston Hughes was one of the many writers of the Harlem Renaissance through his poetry he connected to jazz and the blues.


Anthology of African American literature writings starting with spirituals, gospel, secular rhymes, ballads, work songs, songs of social change, the blues, jazz, rhythm and blues, hip hop, sermons and prayers, folktales, the literature of slavery and freedom, Harlem Renaissance, Realism, Naturalism, Modernism, and the Blacks Arts Era.


Very helpful in explaining proverbs and how they became part of the African American culture because of their vocabulary and dialect.


Langston Hughes through his writings portrayed whites in a comical view of their interaction with African Americans.


Langston Hughes recalls the social injustice of treatment towards the African American culture during the 1920s and 1930s in his writing. Majority of the story should be read by 9th – 12th graders because of some profanity in the story but the teacher can select a certain story to give meaningful information.


A superb assembly of stories depicting a great diversity of individuals who did not resemble the popular, advertising icons for the same period of time.
A superb eye opening collection on how African Americans were and still are depicted in advertisement.

Effective style of writing that will hold the reader’s interest and is broken — down into six easy chapters. Step by step process of walking the reader through checkpoints of understanding on how to be an effective writer.

Faith Ringgold brings the Underground Railroad to life for young readers through the eyes of Cassie Lightfoot and her brother BeBe.

An African-American girl growing up in Harlem in the 1930s has a dream, to be free and go wherever she wants for the rest of her life.

American poetry that focuses on popular verse from the 19th and 20th centuries writers.

Websites

www.dltk-kids.com/crafts/space/mspace.html  
Tools to help make collages of your own for home use or in the classroom.

http://teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/poetwit/guide.num  
Helps teacher to write poetry for appropriate grade level

http://sunsite.unc.edu/dykki/poetry  
Poetry archive on different poets

www.liu.edu/cwis/cups/library/aavaahmt  
African Americans in the Visual Arts: A Historical Perspective for any adult that would like to know about to use in the classroom

www.artgallery.umd.edu/exhibit/05  
Art Gallery-exhibitions- Faith Ringgold – Education
Appendix A: Standards

Reading 7.1. Apply effective reading strategies to comprehend, organize, synthesize and evaluate texts to construct meaning.

Reading 7.2. Read a variety of materials including fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary texts from a diversity of cultures, communication systems, and functional texts.

Reading 7.3. Read for a variety of purposes: to seek information, to apply knowledge, to enhance enjoyment; to engage in inquiry and research; to expand world views; to understand individuality, and the heritage of the people in our city (Philadelphia) and Harlem, New York.

Listening 7.1. Listen to, read, recognize, and response to literature as a record of human experience that provides individual perspectives.

Social Studies 7.1. Promote understanding of multiple perspectives, and reflect the importance of cultural influences.

Writing 7.1. Plan, draft, revise, and publish writing using correct grammar, sentence structure, punctuation, spelling, and effective vocabulary appropriate for the purpose, context, and audience.

Writing 7.2. Write for academic, personal, social, civic, and school-to-career purposes.

Writing 7.3. Write in a variety of forms including journals, essays, stories, letters, plays, poems, and reports using figurative language.

Writing 7.4. Students will conduct and document inquiry-based research using oral, print, and communication.

Viewing 7.1. View media, technology, art work and live performances.
Listening 7.1. Listen actively for a variety of purposes including comprehending, interpreting, analyzing, evaluating, responding effectively, and for enjoyment.

Listening 2. Recognize the diversity of oral English language use, patterns, and dialects, and understand its implications across social contexts, cultures, ethnic groups and geography.

Speaking 7.1 Speak for a variety of purposes including informing, persuading, questioning, problem solving, sharing, sharing ideas and poems, reaching consensus, and responding sensitively and respectfully using language appropriate to the context, audience, and purpose.

Speaking 7.2. Speak using effective communication skills including enunciation, inflection, volume, fluency, and non-verbal gestures.

Visual Arts 7.1. Understand and apply art media, techniques and processes.

Visual Arts 7.2. Demonstrate knowledge of elements, principles, and expressive features from diverse historical periods and cultures, especially African and African-American.

Visual Arts 7.3. Recognize, select, and evaluate a variety of subject matter, symbols, and ideas from diverse cultures and historical period especially African, European, and American cultures, in making original works of art.

Visual Arts 7.4. Observe, reflect, and value the characteristics, meanings, uses, and merits of one’s own artwork and artwork from diverse cultural groups and historical periods.

Visual Arts 7.5. Understand the visual arts and artifacts in relation to historical, social, and cultural contexts, especially African, European, and American cultures.

Visual Arts 7.6. Use the visual arts artifacts as a way of understanding ourselves and our communities through racial, cultural, and gender differences and similarities.

Visual Arts 7.7. Understand the interconnection between the visual arts and all disciplines.

Appendix B: Field Trips/Materials

Tentative Trips—locations

Lancaster Quilt & Textile Museum
31 North Market Street
Lancaster, PA 17003
Phone Number: 717. 397.2970

Witmer Quilt Shop
1070 West Main Street
New Holland, Pa 17557

The Quilt Shop at Miller’s
Route 30 – one mile east of Rt. 896

Materials needed for classroom
Chalkboard
Paper, poster board
Magazine: old editions of EBONY, ESSENCE, JET etc.
Construction paper
Crayons, makers, pens, pencils
Overhead projector
Digital camera
Scissors
Glue