

The Poetry of African American Women

MUSEUM CONNECTION: ART and INTELLECT

Purpose: In this lesson students will analyze the work of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Georgia Johnson, and Lucille Clifton to understand how words and images contribute to the mood, author’s message, and tone.

Grade Level and Content Area: **M** Middle, Language Arts

Time Frame: 1 class period

Reading and English Language Arts VSC:

- 1.E.1.a (Grade 8) Listen to critically, read, and discuss texts representing diversity in content, culture, authorship, and perspective, including areas such as race, gender, disability, religion, and socio-economic background
- 3.A.4.d (Grade 8) Analyze other poetic elements such as setting, mood, tone, etc. that contribute to meaning

Social Studies VSC:

- 2.B.1 (Grade 8) Analyze how America continued to evolve into a society consisting of diverse cultures, customs, and traditions

Objective:

Students will analyze the poetry of three African American women to explain how the poet’s choice of words and images are used to convey mood, author’s message, and tone.

VOCABULARY AND CONCEPTS

Abolitionist – An abolitionist is a person advocating for or participating in the movement to end slavery.

Mood – The mood is the emotional feeling that a reader or listener gets from a writer’s words.

Tone – The tone is a writer’s attitude as it is portrayed in the work. It is the motivator for the mood.

MATERIALS

FOR THE STUDENT:

- Student Resource Sheet 1 – Excerpt from “An Appeal to My Country Women” by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper
- Student Resource Sheet 2 – Image, Mood, Message, and Tone: “The Heart of a Woman”
- Student Resource Sheet 3 – “Miss Rosie” by Lucille Clifton
- Student Resource Sheet 4 – Image, Mood, Message, and Tone: “Miss Rosie”
- Student Resource Sheet 5 – Image, Mood, Message, and Tone: “Eliza Harris” Excerpts

RESOURCES

PUBLICATIONS:

Appiah, Kwame, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds. *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999.

Blassingame, John, ed. *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977.

Chapelle, Suzanne, and Glenn Phillips. *African American Leaders of Maryland: A Portrait Gallery*. Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 2004.

Clifton, Lucille. *Good Times*. New York: Random House, 1970.

Foster, Frances Smith, ed. *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*. New York: The Feminist Press, 1990.

“Hear Me Roar: Women Writers Raise Their Voices.” *Footsteps*. March/April 2005.

Johnson, Georgia Douglas. *The Heart of a Woman and Other Poems*. Boston: Cornhill, 1918. Reprint, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1971.

Kelley, Robin D. G., and Earl Lewis. *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Loewenberg, Bert James, and Ruth Bogin, eds. *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life: Their Words, Their Thoughts, Their Feelings*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976.

Owens, Leslie. *This Species of Property*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976.

Stetson, Erlene. *Black Sister...Poetry by Black American Women, 1746-1980*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981.

WEB SITE:

Academy of American Poets
<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15600>

TEACHER BACKGROUND:

During the mid-19th century, protest against slavery could be found almost everywhere—in slave narratives, in newspapers, through anti-slavery societies, and in literature. William Lloyd Garrison co-organized the American Anti-Slavery Society in the 1830s and also published the newspaper, *The Liberator*. Frederick Douglass traveled the anti-slavery lecture circuit telling his story. Douglass wrote of his slave experience in his narrative, and he published his views in several newspapers, including his own, the *North Star*. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper published works in abolitionist periodicals. Harriet Beecher Stowe protested slavery through her novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Another novel of protest, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States*, was written by Martin Delany, and Samuel Cornish and John B. Russwurm published the first black newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, in 1827. David Walker's *Appeal to the Colored Race* was one of the most militant protests against slavery.

These works help in the study and understanding of the pernicious nature of slavery. Slaves, who were taught that they were inferior to whites, were viewed as property and could be deeded, awarded, bought, and sold. Owners trained slaves to exhibit certain behaviors, such as being humble, obedient, and loyal. Slave codes were designed to codify such behavior and included prohibitions against independence. In fact, slaves were prohibited from leaving the plantation without a pass signed by the owner. Punishment of slaves included whipping, mutilation, and denial of a pass.

A most fearful time for slaves was at the auction. Here families could be separated—and not just husband and wife. Children could be sold to faraway plantations or farms. At auctions, female slaves were frequently disrobed for more thorough examinations. Slaves also feared being sold to a cruel owner, who might provide less food, use the lash more frequently, and not allow much personal free time on the weekend to do gardening and other essential chores.

Slavery undermined a person's drive, motivation, and ambition since slaves could not reap the benefits from their labor. In addition, self-initiative was diminished and slavery undermined personal liberty. There were psychological effects, too, such as slaves committing suicide or undertaking self-mutilation as a result of the trauma from the institution of slavery.

Protests against slavery could also be found in poetry. The three women featured in this lesson are known for the strength of their literary voices as well as their social and political

voices. These women explore their quest for identity in society. Their literary forms and techniques are different and, for the purpose of these lessons, should be analyzed as a means of defining the tone, mood, and author's message.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825–1911)

Perhaps the most forceful yet elegant protest came from Francis Ellen Watkins Harper. Born free in Baltimore, Maryland, in September 1825 and orphaned at the age of three, she spent most of her early childhood living with her uncle, Reverend William Watkins, an educator and political figure in the civil rights movement of the period. In 1839, she published her first major works in abolitionist periodicals. In 1845, she became the first woman to teach at Union Seminary in Wilberforce, Ohio. During the early 1850s, she traveled throughout Canada and the northern United States speaking out on issues of racism, feminism, and class oppression. Many of her writings and speeches were published in the *Provincial Freeman* and other abolitionist newspapers. In the late 1850s, Harper published *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*, which sold more than 10,000 copies in the first five years of print. She contributed a portion of the proceeds from the book to abolitionist efforts.

After the Civil War, Harper formed alliances with members of the feminist movement, and in 1866 she spoke at the National Women's Rights Convention. In 1888, she addressed the International Council of Women in Washington. It is believed that some of her most comprehensive and persuasive remarks were made at the National Council of Women in February 1891. Her topic was "Duty to Dependent Races." Several years later in 1893, Harper spoke at the World's Congress of Representative Women. At this forum, she set the "agenda for middle-class women's activism for years ahead." In 1897, she was elected vice-president of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), an organization established in the 1890s that urged an end to discrimination. It also engaged in efforts to improve home life through educating women and advocating for better treatment of children. Harper continued to be an activist until her death in 1911.

Georgia Douglas Johnson (1886–1966)

Johnson was born in Atlanta, Georgia, and attended Howard University in Washington, D.C. Her Washington home was the meeting place for writers such as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Alain Locke. Johnson's poems reflect issues of identity in general for African American women and specifically of mulatto women.

Lucille Clifton (1936–)

Although Baltimore, Maryland, has been her home for many years with Baltimoreans claiming her as their own, Clifton was born in Depew, New York. Clifton's poetry celebrates the various voices of women. She has served as Poet Laureate of Maryland.

LESSON DEVELOPMENT

1. **Motivation:** Do a dramatic reading of Francis Ellen Watkins Harper’s poem on **Student Resource Sheet 1**, Excerpt from “An Appeal to My Country Women.” Tell students Harper lived from 1825–1911 and published her first major works in 1839. Discuss with students what was happening in the United States during this time frame, with emphasis on how African Americans and women were treated.
2. To activate prior knowledge, as a class create a definition of mood, author’s message, and tone. Record the definitions on the board or on a transparency.
3. Distribute **Student Resource Sheet 1**, Excerpt from “An Appeal to My Country Women.” Discuss the questions in the graphic organizer. Have students decide which questions represent mood, which represent author’s message, and which represent tone. Brainstorm a list of words that could describe mood or tone.
4. Read the stanza aloud again. Students should pay careful attention to the way you read the stanza. Refer back to the list of brainstormed words. As a class respond to the First Reading column on **Student Resource Sheet 1**.
5. Read the stanza aloud again, employing a different interpretation. Alternatively, you could choose to have a student read the stanza aloud. Students should pay careful attention to the way that tone, message, and mood are influenced by the reader. Have students complete the Second Reading column on **Student Resource Sheet 1**.
6. Read the stanza aloud a third time, employing yet another interpretation. Alternatively, you could choose to have another student read the stanza aloud. Have students complete the Third Reading column on **Student Resource Sheet 1**.
7. Have students work in pairs to answer the two questions at the bottom of **Student Resource Sheet 1**. Allow time for pairs to share and discuss their answers. Discuss with students the specific images in the poem that reflect the time period in which Harper was writing.
8. Distribute **Student Resource Sheet 2**, Image, Mood, Message and Tone: “The Heart of A Woman.” Do a dramatic reading of the poem. Tell students Johnson lived from 1886–1966. Discuss with students what was happening in the United States during this time frame, with emphasis on how African Americans and women were treated at this time. Have students read the poem silently and complete the chart. Allow time for students to share and discuss their responses. Discuss with students the specific images in the poem that reflect the events of the time period in which Johnson was writing.
9. Distribute **Student Resource Sheet 3**, “Miss Rosie.” Do a dramatic reading of the poem. Tell students Clifton was born in 1936 and is still alive. Discuss with students how the United States changed during this time frame, particularly the way in which African Americans and women are treated. Have students read the poem silently and complete **Student Resource Sheet 4**, Image, Mood, Message, and Tone: “Miss Rosie.” Allow time for students to share

and discuss their responses. Discuss with students the specific images in the poem that reflect the events of the time period in which Clifton was writing.

10. **Assessment:** Students will demonstrate their understanding of mood, author's message, and tone in selections of African American women's poetry, as well as the way that events of the time period are reflected in poetry by reading the poem on **Student Resource Sheet 5**, Image, Mood, Message, and Tone: "Eliza Harris" excerpts and completing the chart.
11. **Closure:** Ask students: What similarities in mood, tone, and message are evident in all four poems discussed today? Have students hypothesize about the reasons for similarities and differences.

THOUGHTFUL APPLICATIONS

- Have students write a poem about an issue that is important to them following the style of one of the poets studied. Have students explain the tone and the words and images they chose to create that tone. Collect the poems written by the students, and put them in booklet form so they will have a document chronicling their views and ideas in a literary form.
- Have students examine the works of other female African American writers and analyze their use of language to establish mood, author's message, and tone.
- Research Lucile Clifton and her latest works about African American family life.
- Discuss the connection between poetry and song lyrics. Have students research the lyrics of several female artists and discuss their use of imagery, mood, tone, and message.

LESSON EXTENSION

Short biographies of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and other women poets and examples of their poetry can be explored in the "Freedom Writers" exhibit of the Reginald F. Lewis Museum's "The Strength of the Mind" gallery. At other times in our history, women's voices have been raised in protest of inequality and injustice. Instruct students to select a period of protest or unrest in the nation's history and discover women's poetic or literary voices that spoke for the people, e.g., Emma Lazarus, Billie Holiday, or Maya Angelou.

Excerpt from "An Appeal to My Countrywomen"

Oh, people sin-laden and guilty,
So lusty and proud in your prime,
The sharp sickles of God's retribution
Will gather your harvest of crime.

Weep not, oh my well-sheltered sisters,
Weep not for the Negro alone,
But weep for your sons who must gather
The crops which their fathers have sown.

—FRANCES ELLEN WATKINS HARPER
From *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader* edited by Frances Smith Foster, (New York: The Feminist Press, 1990), p. 385-386.

Question	First Reading	Second Reading	Third Reading
How does this make me feel?			
What is the author saying?			
How does the author feel?			

Identify words and images in the stanza that support your responses?
How does the way that the reader interpreted the stanza affect the listener's reaction?

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Image, Mood, Message, and Tone: "The Heart of a Woman"

The heart of a woman goes forth with the dawn,
As a lone bird, soft winging, so restlessly on,
Afar o'er life's turrets and vales does it roam
In the wake of those echoes the heart calls home.

The heart of a woman falls back with the night,
And enters some alien cage in its plight,
And tries to forget it has dreamed of the stars,
While it breaks, breaks, breaks on the sheltering bars.

— *Georgia Douglas Johnson*

From *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, edited by
James Weldon Johnson (New York: Harcourt, Brace and
Company, 1922), p. 181-182

Words and Images	Mood	Author's Message	Tone

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Miss Rosie*by Lucille Clifton*

when I watch you
wrapped up like garbage
sitting, surrounded by the smell
of too old potato peels

or

when I watch you
in your old man's shoes
with the little toe cut out
sitting, waiting for your mind
like next week's grocery

I say

when I watch you
you wet brown bag of a woman
who used to be the best looking gal in Georgia
used to be called the Georgia Rose

I stand up
through your destruction

I stand up

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Image, Mood, Message, and Tone: "Miss Rosie"

Words and Images	Mood	Author's Message	Tone

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Image, Mood, Message, and Tone: "Eliza Harris" Excerpts

...How say that by lawless we may torture and chase
 A woman whose crime is the hue of her face?
 With her step on the ice, and her arm on the child,
 The danger was fearful, the pathway was wild....
 But she's free—yes, free from the land where the slave
 From the hand of oppression must rest in the grave;
 Where bondage and torture, where scourges and chains,
 Have plac'd on our banner indelible stains....

—*Frances Ellen Watkins Harper**

Words and Images	Mood	Author's Message	Tone

How do the images in this poem reflect the events in the United States during the time period in which Harper was writing?
 *From *A Brighter Day Coming: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*, edited by Frances Smith Foster (New York: The Feminist Press, 1990), p. 60-62.

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