



Bearing Witness through Poetry

**How poetry functions as a historical archive
and means of protest (a lesson plan)**

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Learning Objectives

Note for instructor: Add to or revise objectives according to curriculum standards

Objective 1

Understand the concept of “Protest Poetry” & its historical significance



Objective 2

→ **Analyze** protest poetry from the 19th, 20th, & 21st century



Objective 3

→ **Explain** how poetry can promote social change & preserve history



Objective 4

→ **Create** their own protest poem about a past or present social issue





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01.

Introduction

**An overview of Poetry
through protest & history**

American History Told Through Poetry

- **Poetry** is a type of literature, or artistic writing, that attempts to stir a reader's imagination or emotions. The poet does this by carefully choosing and arranging language for its meaning, sound, and rhythm.
 - **Protest Poetry** is poetry that addresses or speaks out against social, political, or economic injustice.
 - Ex. Still I Rise by Maya Angelou
 - **Historical poetry** is poetry that depicts historical events or figures using the traditional elements of poetry.
 - Ex. Rosa by Rita Dove



Read and/or watch the video below of Maya Angelou reciting **Still I Rise** accompanied by powerful images



Click on image to watch video.

Read Rita Dove's poem **Rosa**, which depicts the experience of Rosa Parks, an important figure from the Civil Rights movement.



Rosa Parks Papers 1956 - 1959 (Library of Congress)

Rosa (1999)

How she sat there,
the time right inside a place
so wrong it was ready.

That trim name with
its dream of a bench
to rest on. Her sensible coat.

Doing nothing was the doing:
the clean flame of her gaze
carved by a camera flash.

How she stood up
when they bent down to retrieve
her purse. That courtesy.

Review Questions

Still I Rise ~ Maya Angelou

- *What do you believe the poem's overall theme is?*
- *How does the poem and/or video make you feel?*
- *Why do you think this is considered a protest poem?*

Rosa ~ Rita Dove

- *Who is Rosa Parks, and what is she known for?*
- *What do you think the purpose this poem is?*
- *Why do you think this is considered a historical poem?*

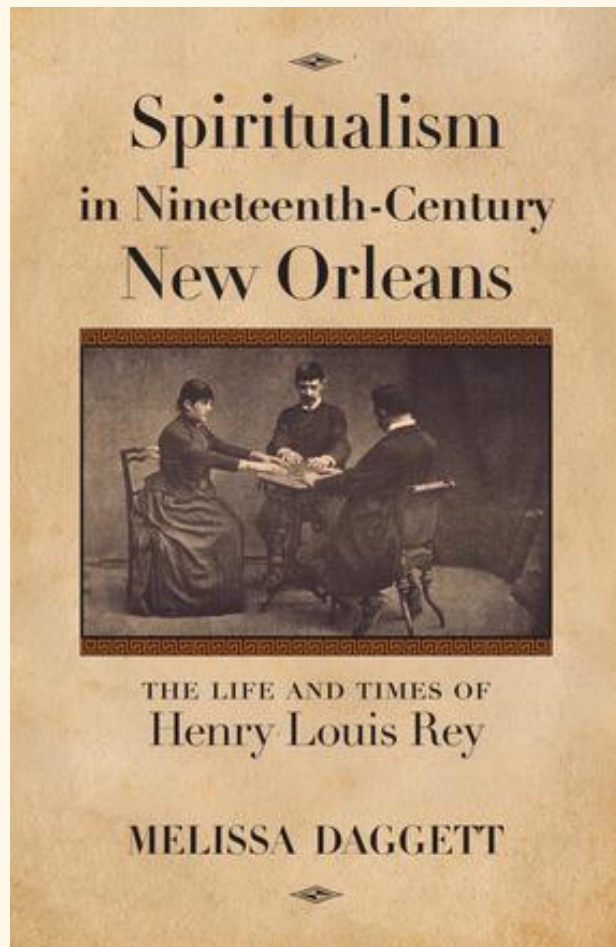




02.

Let Freedom Ring

The 19th century was a period of rapid social change in the United States. As the Civil War raged, Black poets played a key role in both documenting the era, and speaking out against injustice.



Book Cover, University Press of Mississippi

—*Henry Louis Rey ~ 1831-1894*

Henry Louis Rey, an **Afro-creole poet**, was born in 1831 to Louis Barthélemy Rey and Rose Agnès Sacriste who were both free people of color. Educated in New Orleans, Rey worked as a bookbinder and store clerk as a young man . During the civil war, he served as a captain in both the Confederate and Union Native Guards. His poem, **Ignorance** (1862), was published in L'Union, the American South's first Black newspaper. Rey was a regular contributor to L'Union, and advocated for the freedom and rights of African Americans and Afro-Creoles.



Ignorance / L'Ignorance (excerpt)


By Henry Louis Rey

**Its solemn courts will soon release
The terms of truth's decree:
Freedom, universal peace,
Happiness, and harmony!**

**What matters it that cannons roar,
That all around the tomb lies open:
For 'tis the fall of one bad world
Preparing another more beautiful one!**

De ses assises solennelles
Sort l'arrêt de la vérité :
Liberté, paix universelles,
Bonheur humain, fraternité !

Qu'importe si le canon gronde,
Si partout s'entrouvre un tombeau,
C'est la chute d'un mauvais monde
Préparant un autre plus beau !



From *AFRO-CREOLE POETRY in FRENCH from LOUISIANA'S RADICAL CIVIL WAR-ERA NEWSPAPERS*, pg. 180 - 183





Lizelia A.J. Moorner via Wikipedia

—***Lizelia Augusta Jenkins Moorner 1860s? - 1936***

Lizelia Augusta Jenkins Moorner was a poet, activist, and schoolteacher from Orangeburg, South Carolina. She is most known for her poetry collection, ***Prejudice Unveiled and Other Poems***, where she speaks out about social issues in American Society, such as lynching, discrimination, and Jim Crow. Born shortly after the **civil war**, Moorner attended **Claflin University**, South Carolina's oldest historically Black college or university that was founded to educate formerly enslaved people.



Emancipation Day (excerpt)

By Lizelia Augusta Jenkins Moorer

The first of January, see!
In eighteen hundred sixty three,
The first Emancipation Day,
When mad oppressors lost their sway,
The sun of freedom rose that day,
The night of bondage drove away,
When sainted Lincoln did decree,
That slaves forever should be free.

From *Prejudice Unveiled and Other Poems*, p. 86





A Timeline of Important Events

1861 - 1865

Civil War

The civil war was one the deadliest wars on American soil between northern & southern states. It ended in Confederate surrender in 1865.

1863-1865

Emancipation

President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863 declaring "that all persons held as slaves" in rebel states are free.

1865-1877

Reconstruction

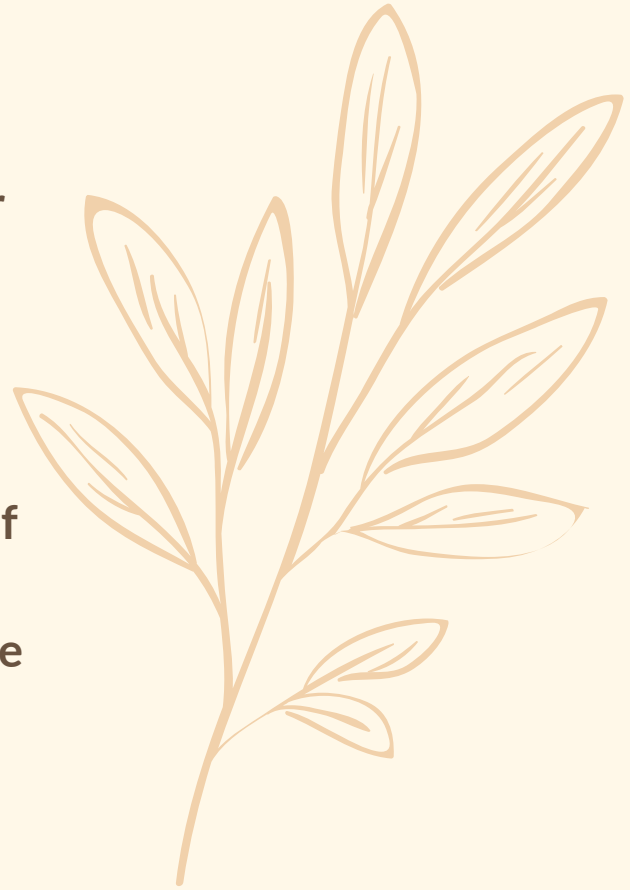
The Reconstruction Act of 1867 was intended to ensure the civil rights of formerly enslaved Black people. However, due to violent backlash those rights were eventually provoked.

Note: These events were referenced either directly or indirectly in the work of both Rey & Moorer.



Group Learning Activity

- Re-read the poetry excerpts of Rey and Moorer (or full poems if provided by instructor).
- Underline any historical references and/or “protest” language.
- Specify whether or not you’d label their poems as protest poetry, historical poetry, or a blend of both.
- Discuss with your group/partner, and then share your observations with the whole class.





03.

We Shall Overcome

During the 20th century, the Civil Rights Movement inspired generations of poets to instill a sense of pride in African

Americans, celebrate freedom fighters, and document acts of resistance to injustice.

Margaret Walker ~1915 - 1998



Margaret Walker Alexander, 1976 (MS Encyclopedia)

Margaret Walker was a poet, novelist, and educator born in Birmingham, Alabama. Her family moved to New Orleans when Walker was a young child. She began teaching in the 1940s, and eventually moved to Jackson, Mississippi to work at Jackson State University. Walker's first poetry collection, *For My People*, was published in 1942. Much of her work highlights the struggles and triumphs of Black people throughout history.



Sorrow Home ~ by Margaret Walker

My roots are deep in southern life; deeper than John Brown or Nat Turner or Robert Lee. I was sired and weaned in a tropic world. The palm tree and banana leaf, mango and coconut, breadfruit and rubber trees know me.

Warm skies and gulf blue streams are in my blood. I belong with the smell of fresh pine, with the trail of coon, and the spring growth of wild onion.

I am no hothouse bulb to be reared in steam-heated flats with the music of El and subway in my ears, walled in by steel and wood and brick far from the sky.

I want the cotton fields, tobacco and the cane. I want to walk along with sacks of seed to drop in fallow ground. Restless music is in my heart and I am eager to be gone.

O Southland, sorrow home, melody beating in my bone and blood! How long will the Klan of hate, the hounds and the chain gangs keep me from my own?



Gwendolyn Brooks ~1917 - 2000



Gwendolyn Brooks was born in Topeka, Kansas, but her family moved to Chicago when she was young. She published her first poem at 13, and by 17 she was regularly publishing poetry in the Chicago Defender. After attending junior college and working for the NAACP, she decided to focus on her poetry which highlighted the urban Black experience. Brooks is the first Black author to win the Pulitzer Prize.

Gwendolyn Brooks, U.S. Consultant in Poetry, 1985-1986.
(Library of Congress)



***WE REAL COOL* by Gwendolyn Brooks**



Click on image to watch video.

Yusef Komunyakaa ~ 1947 - present



Yusef Komunyakaa via Poetry Society of America

Yusef Komunyakaa is a poet and educator from Bogalusa, Louisiana. He served in the Vietnam War as a correspondent and was editor of the Southern Cross (a military newspaper) during the war, for which he received a Bronze Star. He is best known for her poetry collection, *Dien Cai Dau* (1988), which explores the African American experience in the Vietnam war. He has taught at University of New Orleans, Indiana University, and Princeton University. He's currently a professor in New York University's Creative Writing program.



Yusef Komunyakaa reads a poem



Facing It is about his experience in the Vietnam War.

Click on image to watch video.

Group/Individual Learning Activity

- Choose a poem from one of the three featured 20th century poets.
- What do you think the poem you chose is about?
- How does the poem make you feel?
- Is it a protest poem, historical poem, or a blend of both?
- Share your observations with the whole class.





04.

A Change is Gonna Come

In the 21st Century, poets reflect on the past, how far we've come, and how far we still have to go for a better world.

Natasha Trethewey ~ 1966 - present

Natasha Trethewey is a poet and professor from Gulfport, Mississippi. After her parents divorced, she spent time in Atlanta, Georgia, with her mother and in New Orleans, Louisiana, with her father. Trethewey often blends the personal and historical in her work, especially when it comes to the experience of growing up mixed-race in the deep south. She is the former Poet Laureate of Mississippi, and was the 19th U.S. Poet Laureate. She also won a Pulitzer Prize in 2007.



Natasha Trethewey, U.S. Poet Laureate, 2012-2014 (Library of Congress)



History Lesson by **Natasha Trethewey**

I am four in this photograph, standing
on a wide strip of Mississippi beach,
my hands on the flowered hips

of a bright bikini. My toes dig in,
curl around wet sand. The sun cuts
the rippling Gulf in flashes with each

tidal rush. Minnows dart at my feet
glinting like switchblades. I am alone
except for my grandmother, other side

of the camera, telling me how to pose.
It is 1970, two years after they opened
the rest of this beach to us,

forty years since the photograph
where she stood on a narrow plot
of sand marked colored, smiling,

her hands on the flowered hips
of a cotton meal-sack dress.



Clint Smith ~ 1988 - present

Clint Smith is a award-winning writer, scholar, and educator from New Orleans, Louisiana. A 2014 National Poetry Slam champion and a 2017 recipient of the Jerome J. Shestack Prize, Smith received his PhD in education from Harvard University. He is also the host of the YouTube series "Crash Course Black American History."



Clint Smith via Poetry Foundation

Clint Smith performs "History Reconsidered"



Click on image to watch video.

Whole Class Discussion

- **Read Trethewey's poem "History Lesson."**
 - What do you notice about the language in this poem?
 - What do you think it's about, and why?
 - Would this be a historical or protest poem?
- **Watch the video of Clint Smith's poetry performance.**
 - How do you feel after listening to his performance?
 - What historical figures did you recognize in the poem.
 - What historical references/events did he mention?
 - Is this a protest poem or historical poem?





Lesson Activity

**Students complete a poetry
assignment.**



Create your own!

- Watch Amanda Gorman read her poem, The Hill We Climb. (optional)
- Then, write either a protest poem or historical poem.
 - **Instructions for protest poem:** Think about social issue you really care about. Reflect on how it makes you feel. Write a poem expressing your feelings about the issue and why others should care about it.
 - **Instructions for historical poem:** Think about a historical event or figure that inspires you. Imagine yourself living during that time in history, then write a poem about it from your perspective.

Note for instructor: Feel free to revise or edit this activity assignment in a way that's most suitable for your students.



06.

Teacher Resources

**Links to helpful learning
materials.**

Teacher Resources (hyperlinks)

- [Historical poetry](#)
- [African American Protest Poetry](#)
- [Poems of the Civil Rights Movement](#)
- [Still I Rise - Maya Angelou \(lesson plan\)](#)
- [Rosa Parks classroom materials](#)
- [Academy of American Poets - Poetry lesson plans](#)
- [Poems of Protest, Resistance, and Empowerment](#)
- [Natasha Trethewey "History Lesson" Teacher Guide](#)
- [Crash Course Black American History w/ Clint Smith](#)
- [Using Poetry to React to Historical Events and Causes](#)
- [Three current-day poets respond to Afro-Creole protest poetry of the 1860s](#)

Additionally, there are hyperlinks within the document to other resources and references used to create this lesson plan.

