



A Study Guide

The Matter is Black Life: Poetry for Engaging and Overcoming

Reading poetry involves the pleasurable activity of energetic engagement with words and ideas. This study guide is designed to facilitate your recreational and intellectual enjoyment of the curated poems for this series. Below are tips for reading poetry in general, followed by suggestions and references for each theme. We encourage you to dialogue with the poems by taking notes, annotating, and recording your impression, reactions, and responses as you read. Poems are meant to be read more than once; each subsequent reading of a poem reveals new layers of meaning, nuance, and texture that contribute to your appreciation of the poem. Enjoy!

Dennis Britton and Reginald A. Wilburn

Some Tips for Reading Poetry

Here are some paths into reading a poem.

- Think about and deconstruct the title. What thoughts and feelings does the title bring to mind? In literary studies, we call this exercise casting a “horizon of expectation.” Casting this horizon establishes initial expectations for the meaning a literary work might provide.
- On the first reading, identify the poem’s topic. In other words, what is the poem about? Additionally, what is your general response to the poem?
- Upon your second reading of the poem, seek to identify the **persona** or voice of the poem. In other words, who is speaking? In literary studies, we distinguish the persona/voice of the poem from its author since the latter is free to create a speaker other than his/her/their self.

- Who is the **addressee** of the poem? In other words, who is the persona speaking to and why?
- Identify the main organizing idea. Then, locate the sub-ideas that support the main organizing idea of the poem.
- To enhance your understanding of the poem’s meaning, examine the power of language based on the poet’s intellectual and creative use of literary devices such as metaphor, irony, and alliteration. For those trained in reading poetry, feel free to draw upon literary devices you are familiar with to establish a poem’s meaning or verbal artistry.
- Now that you have examined the literary aspects of the poem, identify the poem’s theme. What “central” message does the poem communicate to readers?

To start thinking about the African American Poetry Canon, consider these points as well.

- What cultural relevance does the poem’s central message hold for the series theme, “The Black Matter Is Life?”
- Consult the resources provided. Entertain how this information might add to your understanding of the poem’s theme and the matter of Black life.

You might also review, “[What’s African American About African American Poetry?](#)” a panel discussion among Black poets Kevin Young, Harryette Mullen, Tracie Morris and Cornelius Eady.

Wednesday, November 18 | 5:00 PM

Session #1 “Signifyin(g) on a Tradition”

Phillis Wheatley—Imagination

Lawrence Dunbar—When Malindy Sings

Langston Hughes—Harlem & Theme for English B

Sonia Sanchez—Haiku and Tanka for Harriet Tubman

This theme calls our attention to Eurocentric traditions and how Black poets have used, elaborated, transformed, improvised, and otherwise put those traditions to use in their poetry. Or not.

Toni Morrison said Black literature was not simply written about or by Black people, but it has to include the presence of the ancestor. Some interpret this to mean the historical circumstances of slavery or simply the communal history of Black people. Consider the presence or absence of ancestors in the selected poems.

W.E.B. Dubois spoke of Black Americans having a “double consciousness” – both African and American. Choose one of these poems and consider how this this double consciousness is expressed.

Phillis Wheatley chooses Eurocentric subjects, poetic forms, and cultural references. Lawrence Dunbar revels in African rhythms and speech patterns to speak about a present moment. Langston Hughes adopts the persona of a Black student to speak to a white teacher. Sonja Sanchez celebrates an ancestor through a Japanese form. How do you see the poets variously establishing, building upon, or reconfiguring African American tradition?

Some References

Henry Louis Gates – Acceptance Speech – Thomas Jefferson Prize – Thomas Jefferson and the Trials of Phillis Wheatley (about 1 hour)

<https://www.c-span.org/video/?169288-1/thomas-jefferson-trials-phillis-wheatley>

When Malindy Sings

Performed by Nina Simone: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=49g8QJ2-6f4>

Harlem (A Dreamed Deferred)

As read by Langston Hughes: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZIfdWiw3rU>

Wednesday, December 9 | 5:00 PM

Session #2 “In Protest”

James Weldon Johnson—The Creation

Audre Lorde—Litany for Survival

Danez Smith—dear white america

Elizabeth Alexander Ars Poetica #1,002: Rally

Protest and resistance are familiar literary tropes in African American writings. Famously, James Weldon Johnson prayed that God “would stir me to make a weapon of my song.” In the hands of poets, protest is a strategic endeavor, as it has always been for African American activists over the centuries.

What protest strategies can you discern in any of the poems selected for this discussion?

What clues you in to who is speaking (the persona) in Johnson’s poem, *The Creation*? What makes it a protest poem?

Are Audre Lord and Danez Smith addressing the same “addressee”? Compare their approach to protest.

What is an “*ars poetic*” and why might Elizabeth Alexander use it to voice her protest?

Some References

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/274062>

Long, Richard A. "A Weapon of My Song: The Poetry of James Weldon Johnson." *Phylon* (1960-) 32, no. 4 (1971): 374-82. (Requires academic library access.)

dear white america

As read by Danez Smith: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LSp4v294xog>

Thursday, January 21 | 5:00 PM

Session #3, Love, Love, Love

George Moses Horton—The Lover's Farewell

Gwendolyn Brooks—Lovely Love

Nikki Giovanni—Resignation

Jericho Brown—Like Father

Although African American poets negotiate an immense pressure to meet expectations about manifesting race in their work, some poems simply concern the human condition. And that is enough.

How does Horton use literary devices to create and reinforce the mood of his poem, *The Lover's Farewell*?

What is "lovely" about the love that Brooks describes?

Reflect on Giovanni's use of "because." How do the different "becausees" help us understand love?

Brown's poem engages different types of love. How do different types of love influence lovers and their loving relationships with others?

Some References

See contemporaneous comments on how this and others of Horton's poems came to be published in an attempt to finance his emancipation.

<https://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/horton1837/horton1837.html>

Like Father

As read by Jericho Brown: <https://onbeing.org/poetry/like-father/>