

Improv, Jazz, and Poetry

How does the musicality of words apply to poetry?

In our curriculum throughout this project, we have explored narrative in relation to various forms or genres of expression. These have included storytelling, liner notes, spoken-word poetry, playlists, liner notes, soundtracks, and dance. In this assignment, you will think about the various ways that rhythm, musicality, and sound can be experienced similarly through music and through the written word. In this case we will focus on how performed music we listen to and written narrative we write and read – and share characteristics, speak and respond to one another.

This assignment will ask you to begin this exploration with the work of Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes. Hughes was one of the first writers to develop the concept of jazz-poetry, a genre of artistic expression that emerges from the lived experiences of African American people, though he would extend that to include Afro-Diasporic people all over the world.

Assignment #1:

Langston Hughes was a Harlem Renaissance whose love for jazz and the blues led him to theorize the location of these musical forms in relationship to African American artistic creation more broadly. In his 1926 story [*The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*](#), Hughes wrote:

But jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America; the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile.

These ideas, as well as Hughes's love for the music, found its way to the page, giving rise to the fusion genre known as **jazz poetry**. In the same vein as his beliefs about jazz, Hughes felt that jazz poetry could be a uniquely African-American literary form, distinctive among the venerable—and very white—poetic canon. When he wrote about jazz, Hughes often incorporated syncopated rhythms, jive language, or looser phrasing to mimic the improvisatory nature of jazz; in other poems, his verse reads like the lyrics of a blues song. The result was as close as you could get to spelling out jazz.

As an active proponent of racial consciousness, the poet saw jazz and the blues as art forms that resisted the idea that acceptance by white audience and embrace by white cultural should be a goal of Black artists. Instead, Hughes rejoiced in the singularity of African American history and creativity. Rather than wish away daily hardship, the blues instead elevated the troubles of the workaday African American into art.

In the video below, you will listen to and watch Langston Hughes recite his poem, *The Weary Blues*. You will also read the poem to yourselves, both quietly and out loud.

Apply techniques you use in literature classes – for example, close and/or critical reading, analysis of a poem’s structure, how the sounds of words convey feeling - to listening to jazz. At the same time, apply what you understand about the tools jazz musicians use – for example, improvisation, lyricism, rhythm, and assonance – to Hughes poem.

NOTE: Improvisation refers to creating and/or performing an artistic piece without preparation. Jazz musicians improvise by creating fresh melodies that coincide with the chord structure of a tune. They may already have an idea of how the song will go, but the specific melodies would be created on the fly (and often on stage!). Writers may improvise by writing whatever comes to mind in a “stream of consciousness” manner (a transcription of a writer’s thought process), comprised of all the strange connections the mind makes without forethought.

Langston Hughes, *The Weary Blues*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uM7HSOwJw20>

Possible Classroom Variations:

1. Students lead a “Poetry Jam Session,” a collaborative writing activity that will further illuminate the concept of improvisation. You will be playing a type of “stream of consciousness” game. Immediately after you read a line that contains a vivid image, write down the first line that comes to mind. This line should contain a vivid image that was triggered by the image contained in the previous line. (Instructors: Get the ball rolling by revealing a line you’ve already written on the board, such as “*swaying like the branches of a weeping willow*” or “*kangaroo in a party hat*” or any other image that would conjure up a specific visual in students’ minds.)

Students should immediately write their line. When finished, pass the paper to a neighbor. That student should write a line inspired by the previous student’s image, then fold the paper so that the previous line cannot be seen by the next person - only what they have just added can be seen. Tell students to pass the paper again and continue with the preceding steps until at least eight- twelve lines have been written.

Students share the collaborative poems they created. Discuss how the poems leap from image to image in imaginative yet correlative ways.

Ask: What can you infer about the people who wrote this poem? What are the possible relationships between images written by multiple people?

2. **In jazz, musicians may riff off of each other’s melody when improvising solos.** Listen to [Immanuel Wilkins Quartet](#) on Millennium Stage (six minutes). Listen to how the musicians are able to expand and complicate a melody or theme by listening to another member of a group play a solo and responding to them through their own solo. Poets write in an improvised fashion (or in a “stream of consciousness” way), illuminating the way a poet responds to different objects, events, people, or ideas and

how they find connections between them. How does listening to the Immanuel Wilkins Quartet help you think about the poem you have just created?

3. **For five minutes, play a favorite jazz selection.** Tell students to listen to the sounds they hear and “free write” whatever comes to mind based on the sounds. Tell them it’s okay to make up their own words if appropriate and that their writing doesn’t have to make “logical” sense. Just write. *Ask students: Is it possible to mimic the rhythm and sounds of jazz in poetry?* If students are challenged to think of examples, *ask: How can you translate the sound of cymbals from music to words?* It may look like this: “*tiss tiss tiss.*” If rhythm is added, the words could be “*tiss-tiss-tiss-pop tiss-tiss-tiss-pop.*”

Compare this example to the words “*his gin fizz sopped with this big mop.*” Note how the words that communicate a drink that was spilled and cleaned up have a similar rhythm as the nonsense words, “*tiss-tiss-tiss-pop.*” Set student work aside for the time being.

Concepts for this assignment are drawn from the work presented by the Kennedy Center’s Lesson Connection: Discovery Rhythm, Improv, Jazz and Poetry, and the National Endowment for the Arts, “Jazz Poetry and Langston Hughes.”