Celebrating African-American Writers

By Dr. Madeline Pan

Teaching Poetic Devices in Langston Hughes' "Mother to Son"
Target Grade Level: Middle School
Time: 2-3 class periods
Key Concepts: Literary Analysis, Reading Comprehension, Poetic Devices, Writing Process

Teacher's Reflection. Langston Hughes' "Mother to Son" is a poem for all ages and a delight to teach because students "get it" very quickly. They like it at first, love it soon after, and quote it throughout the year. Better yet, they don't balk at writing a literary analysis about the poem, even writing about it very well, regardless of whether they have had experience writing a literary analysis or not.

Analyzing the Poem. The speaker of the poem, the mother, describes her life's struggle to her son through the extended metaphor of a staircase. Vivid images—"tacks," "splinters," and "boards torn up"—are sharply contrasted by the mother's repeated line, "Life for me ain't been no crystal stair." But this mother is strong; she is determined to keep on "climbin'," "turning corners," and "walking in the dark where there has been no light." And because of her perseverance in the face of adversity, this mother will not let her son be anything else; he, too, must remain steadfast and succeed.

Setting up the Prompt. When you set up the middle school prompt, "Poetic Devices in Langston Hughes' 'Mother to Son,' " in MY Access!, turn off MY Editor, Spellchecker and the scores and feedback for the last two domains/traits (Language Use, Voice and Style and Mechanics and Conventions) while students write their initial drafts. Doing so forces students to concentrate on building their body paragraphs, the introduction, and the conclusion before they work on the language, mechanics, and conventions of their essay.

Teaching the Lesson

Reading the Poem. To begin teaching the poem, read the poem out loud at least twice. Make efforts to sound like a mother who is making an irrefutable argument. Initially, you may want to ask the students what they are hearing the

mother saying while avoiding the question, “What does this poem mean?” For students who are inexperienced with poetry or who are concerned about giving you the right answer, this question can be a real turn off.

Choral Reading. The next step is to engage the students in a choral reading of the poem. I have found that through multiple choral readings, students start hearing and discussing the message on their own. For one class, I chose a very quiet 8th grade student as the soloist, cajoling her to speak as the stern mother. The drama opened up for that student and spotlighted her. She was the one who got the message first and shared it with the class. I remember how she emphasized the word “persevere” to describe the mother’s attitude, looking surprised at herself for the intensity with which she used that word. Do the choral reading 5, 6 or 9 times, depending on how well the voices coordinate and resound with meaning.

Discussing Imagery. Then tackle the metaphorical images one section at a time. Starting with the first seven lines, have students underline the nouns and suggest what they mean. From lines 8 through 13, the mother’s tone shifts; have students underline the verbs and suggest what they mean. From line 14 on, have students underline verbs and repetition of words, suggesting what they mean as well. By the end of the poem, students will see how each section will become at least one body paragraph.

Organizing Ideas. The Poetic Devices Graphic Organizer is an easy and painless way for students to SEE the organization of the essay before they begin drafting. Providing them with sentence beginners will also help students avoid the trap of starting each sentence with “I.” Students who are new to learning the skills of writing a literary analysis strain to compose topic sentences that represent the main idea of each paragraph. To assist, give them some suggestions. After reading the suggestion, some may even figure out how to write their own. Either way, you should find that students will be more likely to focus on one main idea in each paragraph, rather than drift all over the poem. Once they are liberated from figuring out how to start each paragraph, students will concentrate on explaining how the images in each section of the poem reflect the overall message.

Conferencing with Students. As students compose the body paragraphs, it is very important to circulate around the room, reading over students’ shoulders,

praising their clear and strong language and their referencing of poetic images. Suggest places in a student's essay where more analysis and/or language from the poem are needed. Have students reread each paragraph out loud so they can hear their analysis. Conferencing with students as they write provides you with excellent opportunities to teach skills within the context of students' thought processes. Anytime you require students to rethink, reread, or revise their thinking, you are strengthening their critical thinking skills. For example, if you notice that students are repeating themselves, have them highlight the repeated words, then help them determine how to substitute other words or combine sentences.

Evaluating the Essay. Once the body paragraphs are complete, have students submit their essay for scores. Explain to students what the graph represents—that it is an opportunity to continue to revise toward greater proficiency.

Composing the Conclusion. Teachers and students often struggle with what should be included in a conclusion. Consequently, students repeat their ideas from the body paragraphs and teachers find it dull to read them. For this essay, the conclusion is a student's opportunity to share his/her thoughts and opinions about Langston Hughes' theme or message. What do they believe about overcoming adversity? What does it take and what is it worth?

Composing the Introduction. Introductions can also be an elusive task for the beginning writer of literary analyses. To help facilitate a firmer grasp on this key component of an analytical response, you may need to provide further guidance. For example, you could provide a frame to allow students to see the difference between an introduction for a literary analysis and an introduction to a story. Another approach would be for students to look at the Writer's Models on the drafting page or in the portfolio. Examples of the key elements of a good introduction are evident in the models that are scored 4, 5 and 6.

Using MY Tutor and MY Editor. Once students have finished drafting and revising the content of their essay, turn on the scores for the last two domains/traits (Language Use, Voice, and Style and Grammar and Mechanics). If you haven't already taught them how to use the Spellchecker and MY Editor, this would be the time to do so. In fact, by going into the "Student Portfolios" first and looking at the MY Editor report before you have students use the tools, you

will know which errors have already been flagged. Thus, you can do one or more mini lessons on the grammar rules that you see most frequently flagged in your students' writing.

Teacher Reflection. *As teachers, we usually have students research an author before they study his/her works. Instead, do this as a culminating activity. Using iSEEK (http://education.iseek.com), provide students with background on Langston Hughes. Show them several photographs depicting Hughes during different parts of his life. Consider reading another poem with them, such as "Dream Deferred," "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," "I, Too, Sing America," or "Refugee in America." You will find that once they have written about "Mother to Son," they will develop a profound interest in the man behind the poem.*

Contributed by Dr. Madeline Pan. *Dr. Madeline Pan has made a career of teaching English to students at all levels. As a district and school administrator, her emphasis was on providing professional development on research-based writing instruction to teachers at the middle and high school level. She thanks the 8th grade students in Red Clay, Delaware and Milwaukee, Wisconsin for their enthusiasm and well-written analytical responses for "Mother to Son" by Langston Hughes.*