

JASON MCCALL

Grade 9-12

Literary Arts Education Packet

Prepared by Tennessee Valley Art Association

Constructing a Self-Portrait: Expressing Identity Through Poetry

OVERVIEW

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EDUCATION STANDARDS

Grade 9

Reading Literature: 9.2, 9.4, 9.9
Writing: 9.3
Speaking and Listening: 9.3

Grade 10

Reading Literature: 10.2, 10.4, 10.9
Writing: 10.3
Speaking and Listening: 10.3

Grade 11

Reading Literature: 11.2, 11.4, 11.10
Writing: 11.3
Speaking and Listening: 11.3

Grade 12

Reading Literature: 12.2, 12.4, 12.6
Writing: 12.3
Speaking and Listening: 12

OBJECTIVES

1. Determine and analyze themes in the two texts.
2. Understand figurative and connotative meanings; analyze impact of word choices on meaning and tone.
3. Analyze source material: figures from Greek mythology, American history, and modern popular culture.
4. Determine two or more themes in the texts and analyze their development, including how they interact and build on one another.

PROJECT

Watch the Artist Spotlight video on Jason McCall.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eD02HeM9gA0>

Write a poem that expresses identity using sensory and vivid language, telling details, and references to figures from literature, history, and/or modern popular culture.

BIOGRAPHY

Background

Jason McCall holds an MFA from the University of Miami. His most recent collections are *Two-Face God*, and *It Was Written: Poetry Inspired by Hip-Hop*, which he edited with PJ Williams. His other collections include *Dear Hero*, (winner of the 2012 Marsh Hawk Press Poetry Prize), *Silver, I Can Explain*, and *Mother, Less Child* (co-winner of the 2013 Paper Nautilus Vella Chapbook Prize). He is an Alabama native, and he teaches at the University of North Alabama. Two poems are currently displayed at the Tennessee Valley Museum of Art: “I’m Glad John Henry Died

Excerpts from Jason McCall’s essay “Who Are You?”

On Identity:

If I say I started writing to find myself, then I’m only telling a half truth. Growing up, I had a clear identity. I knew who I was because of all the teachers, church members, and relatives who reminded me of who I was.

Before I even thought about writing my first poems or short stories, I saw the creative writing class as a way to find myself, as a space where I wouldn’t have to fight through all the shadows my family casts.

On Artistic Style:

When I get questions about what I write, I normally give a bloated answer about how I’m a lyric poet who focuses on narrative and tradition. I talk about how my love of origin stories drove me to writing. I get nods and raised eyebrows when I compare different versions of superheroes to different versions of gods and

heroes in the Greco-Roman world. I get a few laughs when I talk about how many dead wrestlers and Trojan War epithets I can fit into one poem.

My most common dream is a dream where I can fly, and, honestly, I think some people would give me the same look that they give when I tell them that I am a poet if I told them that I could fly. My choice to be a poet and my subject matter are usually enough to make people believe I'm somewhere between smart enough and smarter than I really am. But my answers aren't completely honest. They aren't honest at all, really.

Hidden behind the Trojan War metaphors and comic book allusions is a secret. I'm not that deep. I'm a two trick pony who's managed to ride those two tricks to awards, publications, and some level of job security.

On the Themes of Love and Hate:

I remember the first two poems I ever wrote in my 9th grade creative writing class. My first poem, naturally, was a love poem about a girl I fell in love with because she was nice to me at the bus stop. My second poem was a poem about how I hated myself because I wasn't living up to my potential in the same way that Aeneas wasn't living up to his potential when he lingered in Carthage with Dido. Maybe I didn't get the girl in 9th grade because she didn't get my Aeneas references. Or my Gundam references. Or my NWO references. Or maybe I didn't get the girl in 9th grade because she had good judgment.

Regardless, my first poem and my second poem established my poetic subject matter for the next 20 years. I only write poems about two things. I write poems about the things I love, and I write poems about hating myself.

For me, investigating my center helped me figure out why I am the poet that I am and why I write about the subjects I choose to write about. For my poems about love, I am forced to question why I love the subjects of my poems. I am forced to question why I love professional wrestling when I know professional wrestling killed Chris Benoit, Eddie Guerrero, Andre the Giant, the British Bulldog, and so many other childhood heroes. I am forced to question why I love football when football is just another extension of a white supremacist and capitalist system profiting off of the destruction of bodies that are mostly black bodies and mostly poor bodies. I am forced to question why I love the women I love and why I write

about the women I love when leaving those women out of my writing could have been the most loving thing to do. I am forced to question why I love Ancient European history and mythology when this history and mythology has been warped to demonize people who look like me. I am forced to realize that love is an act, and I am responsible for my actions. I am responsible for my writing.

For my poems about hating myself, I am forced to decide why I hate myself or parts of myself. And, of course, this excavation of myself is more important than any words I put on paper. But in reviewing my poetry, I discovered and I am still discovering that I do not hate myself in the same way that I hate the evils of the world. I don't hate myself in the same way that I hate rapists, racists, and liars. I hate myself in the same way that I hate watching bad basketball. Basketball is my favorite sport to watch. At its best, basketball is one of the best combinations of skill and strategy ever created. At its worst, it is beyond maddening. I hate watching bad basketball because I know how good basketball can be. I hate myself because I have always had a need to be better than I am at any moment.

On Identity and Transformation:

This admission is not a revelation for me. This is not the place in this essay where I realize the error of my ways and promise to transform myself into something more complex. I might dream about flying a lot, but I gave up my dreams of being a butterfly or a phoenix a long time ago. Even though I started writing out of a need to become my own person and, there's no room for a grand metamorphosis in my poetry. Like many other artists, I have had periods where I swore that I would "break out of my shell" or "think outside of the box" and develop a new voice and touch on new subjects. Those attempts always started with good intentions and always ended with bad work. And, most of the time, the work was bad and dishonest.

These misguided attempts at transformation never produced good poetry, but the attempts did produce a good lesson. They taught me that there is no need for transformation. Coming to terms with who I am does not mean that I have to change who I am...I've also come to terms with who I am as a poet. Coming to terms with who I am as a poet means that I have greater responsibility to my work. I cannot blame my inspirations on a muse or some other divine inspiration. My poetry is mine. I know who I am, and I have to accept the joy, struggle, doubt, anxiety, pride, love, and hate that comes with that knowledge.

POEMS

These poems are reproduced exactly as the poet has written them. Punctuation and spacing are as the author intended.

I'm Glad John Henry Died

Because nobody will ever love me
enough to believe my ghost will save them
from the dark mouth of the earth.
Because I never learned how to sing
at my own funeral.
Because I can't make the world
dance and shake with the beat
of a twenty pound hammer.
Because my body never helped anyone
invent the blues that invented all
the hustler anthems.
Because I can't kill myself
and get y'all to thank me for it.
But I'm mostly jealous because he made it
to the heart of something.
Even if that heart was black.
Even if that heart pumped poison
into his mouth.
Even if that heart was dead
since the earth was born.
It was a heart, and I don't have one
memory of touching a heart
or a heart touching me
or someone reaching for my heart
even if they were reaching to break
through my ribs and squeeze
my heart into puss and blood.
Zeno says nothing ever reaches
its destination, but a man reached
the moon and John Henry reached
14 feet and the drill only reached nine.
And I'm jealous of John Henry's dead body
because he might not have lived, but he did
die and I know how to love a dead body.
When I see John Henry in the tomb of Coosa
or Lewis with death in his lungs
and poetry running up his veins, I see Hades.

I know. I know. The myths
about black death never end
without mentioning a white god.
But when I see John in that mountain
black as any underworld
I see Orpheus inching toward the light
with his love one step behind
and I finally stop hating
the god of death for pulling Eurydice back
into the earth because I'm learning
that a dead body is hard
to give up. Ask me why
I scream B.I.G.'s verse on "Mo Money, Mo Problems"
every time the sun looks to pull the earth
out of its deathbed. Ask me why
this is as close as I can get to understanding
the holy spirit claiming somebody's tongue. Ask me why
every black song is a dirge.
Ask me why I'm smiling
and I will tell you the story
of all the men who died
for me but didn't stay dead.

“We Want Some Brothers up on the Wall”

A black man's job should never make him think
about Spike Lee movies, so I won't
go to the next staff meeting and joke
about there being no brothers
on the wall in any of the office posters.
Besides, there's only one other brother in the office
and a couple of sisters, and, if they missed
out on the joke, this job would be lonelier than it is.
I know I should be better
than counting the number of black faces
in every room I walk into, but I'm still a slave
to the mathematical proof of one black face
+ one black face = infinity or zero
black faces because America

doesn't know the difference between two black faces
and an armada of black faces.
America only knows a black face means it's time to fire
off a question about basketball or *Black Panther*.
If there were more brothers on the wall
and more brothers and sisters in the hall,
then maybe I wouldn't leave
my door closed so much. But maybe
I would close it more because I don't know
how to love a black face because I never wanted to
see my own face as anything more than a rental
that wasn't likely to make it
past its warranty. I'm only playing
a role. I'm Mookie. I'm Raheem. I'm the Mayor.
I'm the heat making the world
squirm and scowl and hate
God for making me.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

B.I.G.- Christopher George Latore Wallace (May 21, 1972 – March 9, 1997), better known by his stage names the Notorious B.I.G., Biggie Smalls, or simply Biggie, was an American rapper and songwriter. Rooted in the New York rap scene and gangsta rap traditions, he is considered one of the greatest rappers of all time. On March 9, 1997, while visiting Los Angeles, Wallace was murdered in a drive-by shooting. The assailant remains unidentified.

Black Panther- A 2018 American superhero film based on the Marvel Comics character of the same name.

Carthage- An ancient Phoenician city-state and civilization located in present-day Tunisia. Founded around 814 BC as a colony of Tyre, within centuries it became the center of the Carthaginian Empire, a major commercial and maritime power that dominated the western Mediterranean until the mid third century B.C.

Greco-Roman- Relating to the ancient Greeks and Romans.

Greek Mythological Characters-

- **Aeneas-** Trojan hero in Greek mythology, son of the prince Anchises and the goddess Aphrodite. He is more extensively mentioned in Roman mythology, and is seen as an ancestor of Remus and Romulus, founders of Rome.
- **Dido-** legendary foundress and first queen of the Phoenician city-state of Carthage.
- **Hades-** god of the underworld.
- **Orpheus & Eurydice-** Orpheus was a musician, poet and prophet in Greek mythology. After the death of his wife, Eurydice, he met with Hades, pleading for the release of his wife. He agreed, however, he was not to look

back until they had reached the surface. They started walking towards the surface; when Orpheus reached the opening of the cave with his wife following, he looked back, anxious to see if Eurydice was behind him. As she had not yet reached the opening though, she disappeared back into the Underworld forever.

- **Phoenix-** In ancient Greek folklore, a phoenix is a long-lived bird that cyclically regenerates or is otherwise born again. Associated with the sun, a phoenix obtains new life by arising from the ashes of its predecessor.

Gundam- Japanese military science fiction media franchise/media mix. Created by Yoshiyuki Tomino and Sunrise, the franchise features giant robots, or mecha, with the name "Gundam". The franchise began on April 7, 1979.

Identity- Who you are, the way you think about yourself, the way you are viewed by the world and the characteristics that define you.

Inspiration- The process of being mentally stimulated to do or feel something, especially to do something creative.

John Henry- An American folk hero. As an African American, he is said to have worked as a "steel-driving man"—a man tasked with hammering a steel drill into rock to make holes for explosives to blast the rock in constructing a railroad tunnel. The story of John Henry is told in a classic blues folk song, which exists in many versions, and has been the subject of numerous stories, plays, books, and novels. According to legend, John Henry's prowess as a steel-driver was measured in a race against a steam-powered rock drilling machine, a race that he won only to die in victory with hammer in hand as his heart gave out from stress. Various locations, including Big Bend Tunnel in West Virginia, Lewis Tunnel in Virginia, and Coosa Mountain Tunnel in Alabama, have been suggested as the site of the contest.

John Lewis- (February 21, 1940 – July 17, 2020) was an American politician, statesman, and civil rights activist and leader who served in the United States House of Representatives for Georgia's 5th congressional district from 1987 until his death in 2020. He was the chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) from 1963 to 1966. Lewis was one of the "Big Six" leaders of groups who organized the 1963 March on Washington. In 1965, Lewis led the first of three Selma to Montgomery marches across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. In an incident which became known as Bloody Sunday, state troopers and police attacked the marchers, including Lewis.

Lyric Poetry- A formal type of poetry which expresses personal emotions or feelings, typically spoken in the first person.

Narrative Poetry- A form of poetry that tells a story, often making the voices of a narrator and characters as well; the entire story is usually written in metered verse. Narrative poems do not need rhyme. The poems that make up this genre may be short or long, and the story it relates to may be complex. It is normally dramatic, with objectives, diverse and meter.

NWO- The New World Order (commonly abbreviated as nWo) is a professional wrestling stable that originally consisted of "Hollywood" Hulk Hogan, Scott Hall and Kevin Nash.

Transformation- A thorough or dramatic change in form or appearance.

Trojan War- In Greek mythology, the Trojan War was waged against the city of Troy by the Achaeans after Paris of Troy took Helen from her husband Menelaus, king of Sparta. The war is one of the most important events in Greek mythology and has been narrated through many works of Greek literature, most notably

Homer's Iliad. Recent research supports the claim that the war was an actual historical event, not just a mythical story.

Spike Lee- (born March 20, 1957) is an American film director, producer, screenwriter, actor, and professor. His production company, 40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks, has produced more than 35 films since 1983. References to Spike Lee film characters:

- Mookie- *Do the Right Thing*
- Raheem- *Radio Raheem*
- The Mayor- “da Mayor”, *Do the Right Thing*

Zeno- Zeno of Elea, 5th c. B.C.E. thinker, is known exclusively for propounding a number of ingenious paradoxes.

SOURCES

<https://marshhawkpress.org/jason-mccall-who-are-you/>