



STUDY GUIDE

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THE POETRY LOUNGE 2: The Power of Poetics

Spoken Word poetry is a contemporary form of performance that has revitalized young people's appreciation of the poetic form. Spoken Word can be distinguished from more traditional poetry the way a play can be distinguished from a novel, in that it is written specifically to be performed. Where a traditional poem is often purposefully obscure and is intended for multiple rereadings, spoken word poets have only one chance to communicate their meanings to the audience. Like plays, spoken word poetry is designed to elicit an immediate and visceral audience reaction. Because of this a lot of power must be packed into the poem.

The following guide is designed to be used interactively with the Poetry Lounge DVDs. For each poet, we have included material that can help you point out salient features of the poet's craft to student along with teaching ideas that can be used as prompts to help students in their writing and performance of spoken word poetry.

In some cases the power of the poetry comes from the artist's performance. Just like the skill of an actor can make a play powerful, how the poet performs his/her poetry often has a great deal of impact on how the audience responds. DVD #1 "The Power of Performance" is designed to help students explore how they can use aspects of performance to enhance their poetry.

In other cases the power of the poetry comes from the writer's skill in manipulating language, like in the case of a well-written play. These writers often use poetic devices to help their words have impact on the audience. DVD #2 "The Power of Poetics" is designed to help students understand how the use of poetic devices can enhance their poetry. While every poem has important poetic and performance aspects, this guide is designed to emphasize specific features of each poem so that teachers can use them as models to help students in the writing, revising, and performance of their own poetry.

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1. UNTITLED – Nikki Blak

- a. Assonance: The power of this poet's work comes from her use of assonance. Assonance is the use of words that sound like each other but don't always rhyme. There are several examples of this including: addiction/eviction, sleeves/see, and frequency/literacy. Assonance allows the audience to see comparisons (whereas dissonance or the use of words that don't sound good together is used to illustrate contrast).

- b. Imagery: This poet uses metaphors (Braille of broken bottles) and simile (worn like sleeves) as well as imagery (pigeons perch on power lines) in order to give the audience a sense of the setting of the poem.
- c. Teaching Idea: Adding Imagery: Have one half of the class write a question “What is...” with a third word following. Have the other half of the class write an answer (without knowing what the question is). Have the answer contain a thing, a place, an emotion, and a color. Collect the questions and answers and read them in random order. It often creates poems that sound like: What is love? It is an angry orange crate in the parking lot. Use these to revise into poetry.

2. MY GRANDMOTHER – Javon Johnson

- a. Allusion: This poet uses an allusion to the classic Greek story of Atlas to make the audience understand the power he sees in his grandmother.
- b. Metaphor: The metaphors in this poem (e.g., world on my shoulders, stepladder on backs) are used to reinforce the image of someone holding a heavy weight. The poet uses these devices to give us an understanding of the strength of the main character in his poem: his grandmother.
- c. Teaching Idea: Have students write hypertextual poetry. Have students write a poem that has at least two allusions in it. These allusions (words, phrases) will be activated as a link that the reader can click on to see what the student is alluding to. These links can lead to online encyclopedias, sites about Greek mythology (as with the poem above), or to poetry or lyric databases.

3. Lay Down in Green Pastures – Thea Monyee

- a. Metonymy: Metonymy is a type of metaphor where something is represented by a portion of itself (e.g., heavy boots walked away – the boots represent the whole person). This poet uses metonymy (files grow from purple to manilla) to illustrate the dehumanization of children by the foster care system and (raised by blue collars) to make a similar point about how the system views working poor parents.
- b. Unique use of Words: One feature of spoken word poetry is that the poets often use words in unique and unexpected ways. We can see an example of this when the poet uses the word artifact and then says “art, in fact.” This clever shift in the use of a word forces the audience to think carefully about the multiple meanings of words.
- c. Teaching Idea: Adding Metaphor. Use the game Exquisite Corpse (developed by surrealist poets). Pass out index cards to students and have one student in each group write a number on their card. Then the next students will write adjectives and so on with a noun, verb, adverb, verb, and prepositional phrase. Have the student with the numbered card collect all the cards and form them into a grammatically correct sentence (using all the words). The sentence is usually something like “Sixteen broken birds quickly fled into the garage.” Have the students copy the sentence down and to discuss the image it presents. Then asks students to think about what the sentence could metaphorically represent (birds

might represent fragility, garage might represent technology or masculinity). Have students create a poem where an image represents something else.

4. LOOK THIS WAY – Gina Loring

- a. Memoir: This poet illustrates one of the key lessons of creating poetry: that poems use particular (and often personal) experiences to relate larger universal themes. This poet uses her own likes and dislikes (a sort of memoir) to illustrate the larger theme of what is involved in creating a connection with another person.
- b. Structure: This poet uses a well-known structure: that of the “List” poem. In this type of poem, one lists things related to a particular topic. List poems are one of the easiest kinds of poems to write as they use a particular form (i.e., a list) to give structure to the poem.
- c. Teaching Idea: One of the easiest forms of poetry for students to write is the “List” poem. One of the most well-known forms of list poetry is the I Am From poem (see references). Lists can be generated about a particular object (shoes), a place, a person’s likes and dislikes (“These Things Have I Loved”).

5. GOD DOESN’T MAKE MISTAKES – In-Q

- a. Rhyme: This power of this poet’s performance comes from his use of rhyme. It is clear to see that the poem’s lines rhyme and this gives the audience a sense of coherence to the poem. Although this poem does not have a clear narrative or story (like the poem Monsters does) it is held together by how the words sound.
- b. Teaching Idea: This poet uses a repeated line “God doesn’t make mistakes” as the central theme or “proverb” of his poem. Share several proverbs with students (examples can be found online). These can include proverbs like: If you lie down with dogs, you get up with fleas, or A heart that has once been broken becomes a stronger vessel. Discuss what the proverbs mean and have students create a rhyming poem around the proverb that they choose. This activity will not only give students a sense of how meaning should be served by rhyme (rather than the other way around) but will also give them a deeper sense of including themes in their poetry.

UNTITLED

By Nikki Blak

There are occupations well suited to young girls who learn to get undressed too soon.
Why study for SATs, when HIV tests are so much easier to take?
Teenagers lose their virginity in the afternoon after school and learn that it's more fun
to make babies than necessary changes.
Tribal markings of tradition paint the faces of familiar strangers and are branded on the
hands of men and women.
Reality is more ridiculous than fiction.
Consider a scenario in which the ratio of mothers to fathers is so disproportionate we
figure we're fortunate we can get abortions in clinic close to home.
I live next door to addiction.
Eviction notices decorate doors.
Dollar stores have the nerve to sell [shit] that costs more than 99 cents.
Rents is as high as the ever thickening smog that hovers above the city.
Somewhat like the police helicopters we've become too accustomed to seeing.
Middle of the week street sweeping doesn't ever seem to clean these curbs sufficiently.
Liquor stores and bus stops become crime scenes.
The line between innocence and guilt is blurred by poverty.
Capitalism and institutionalize racism keep us here permanently.
Religion is a sedative, materialism a suppressant.
Girls oversexualize the promiscuous boys dangerous and aggressive,
evicted from the womb with criminal records and bad credit
only some of us are brave enough to be born.
There are occupations well suited to young boys who teach themselves
how to be men.
Why apply to college when it's so much easier to got to prison?
A child will lose a little bit of his innocence every time he exits his apartment.
Converse to pavement, face to face with the reality of a hostile environment.
Here, you either grow up real fast or never mature by age 16 now insecurities are
tattooed on both arms worn like sleeves, prominently displayed for all the watching
world to see.
TV always on same five songs on the radio programed brain waves to read these
frequencies.
Must be the reason we're so ill when it comes to literacy.
Mostly deaf, so we connect to stereotypes.
Hands carefully craft [gang] signs.
Third eyes read lips, fingertips absorb the braille of broken beer bottles and promises
leave like light imprints on surface streets.
New sneaks keeps momma knee deep in debt.
Fresh outfit ain't paid the light bill yet.

Boy still claim sex.
Bros need children sit on front steps and spit some flower seeds.
Grown folks sit on front steps talk and smoke weed.
There are too many apartments, too little parking and too few trees.
It's rare to find open space in this place so there's no
reason to wonder why we don't feel free.
We fall asleep to screaming sirens and barking dogs and wake up confined to tiny
rooms, crowded into low cost housing.
Bound to these mazes of alleys and streets tires screech on boulevard black tops.
Pigeons perched on telephone wires against the backdrop of a wounded sky full of
airplanes and kaleidoscope sunsets so picturesque it seems fictitious.
A faded shade of regret so stunningly surreal it's hard to believe it even exists.

MY GRANDMOTHER

By Javon Johnson

My grandmother speaks to me about race relations in South Central
at a time when black folk didn't have a right to vote
claiming how we have it so much better now.

Two languages that have been broken at least five times over.
And after multiple strokes she sits there in her wheelchair
strong like tree trunks, top half cut off so that poet grandchildren
could use her past stories.

Still I've never heard more powerful words than the bible.

See, my grandmother's slowly dying today.

And it's like I'm mostly upset for selfish reasons 'cause she has
this unconfidently infectious smile and she wears wrinkles on her face
like tattooed laughter.

Yet still my grandmother's slowly dying today.

See there is very little difference between desperation and strength, between waving
and drowning.

Between slow dancing to no music in empty apartments and walking around
in confused circles in big cities streets while big city railroad tracks beat into my
grandmothers back so her grandchildren could travel
places never dreamed.

It seems now that my grandmother picks a family up but Atlas never
really held the world in his shoulders.

He was just one man hanging on the edges trying his dear best not
to fall off.

And we nicknamed Desperation Strength.

We nicknamed my grandmother once her wings got clipped and she lost
her halo in the watts riots 1965.

Who else do you know that had eight kids and adopted another?

Raised grandkids as if they were her own.

Had a hand in raising me.

Ironic I'm somewhere in Iowa at 2:30 in the morning listening
to racist talk on radio thinking, I hope to God this truck don't break down.

I'm about to break now I can't handle this shit I'm not as
strong as she is, At best I can hold myself though most of the time I
can't even do that well.

I'm constantly being mistaken for standing tall when I stood on the
shoulders of those who put step ladders.

My grandmother happily accepts the fact that I'm starting a new life in Chicago while
hers is slowly coming to an end.

I'm writing suicide notes behind convenience store receipts hoping to
return a few minutes of my life so that she can stock more for hers.

I wrote her a letter the moment I got to Chicago.
I told her she can't go yet, that I'm still working out this deal with time.
I'm still working on trying to be a man and I need her there from time to time to tell me
that I'm doing all right.
I told her she don't have to be so strong all the time.
But I do need her to hang on to those edges not like a dam about to fall off and I
wouldn't nickname her Desperation Strength.
It's like my grandmother's slowly dying today and I'm mostly upset
because I don't think I'm strong enough to hold her world on my shoulders.

PURPLE FILES

By Thea Monyee

As we lay in green pastures
And rest beside still waters we fail to see the cup running over
Fail to see the water rising past ankles to knees
Or hear the desperate screams of the drowning
It is easier to assume they are hydrophobic
Society's response to their cry
Is to create systems
Be it foster, educational, or prison
Cleverly disguised as hands reaching out
To muddy water populations
Offering salvation
But refusing to get dirty
Flirting with the illusion of unity
While systematically avoiding issues plaguing low income communities
I see the disparity
Watch purple files grow from infancy to teens
Change to manila and trade lives for orange jumpsuits or army green
It seems the people have been misled to believe
These institutions are to our benefit
The general public does not question it
See most believe the youth to be voiceless
Some choose to suffer in silence
Others act out in violence
And still some will choose to use the pen
To forge their rebellion
Battalions of ballerinas and Musicians
Who live by a creed that crescendos off the walls of should be empty group homes and
bounces off of tear stained windows
We know they are a force to be reckoned with
A power to be recognized
As raw as an undisturbed diamond
And as valuable as undiscovered oil beneath the earth's surface
All three have monumental purpose when placed in the right hands
But far too often they do not
Forced on to city blocks to be educated in the school of hard knocks
But not all of our children fall victim to the system
Picasso still paints pictures through fourteen-year-old fingertips and spray cans
Using block letters and languages only some can understand
They can still feel colors in their veins
It's a shame some of us are too grown to participate

Too stoned to see the poetry in the average fifteen-year-old emcees hip hop lyrics
Too afraid to crack open his metaphors see the pain in his pores and deal with it
Mistake Jesse Owens for a hoodlum hopping ghetto fences
As though the next step is the only thing that matters
Evidence that the illusion can be shattered
Living artifacts of the art in fact they memorialize our ancestors in their passion
Turn dreams into actions with few stars to wish upon
Only the faith that some exist beyond the smog and gun smoke
Provoked often
Learning your craft in the most distracting of environments
Staying focused on hard work and your mom's early retirement
We forget to remind you of your value
Lose your compliments amidst the disdain and frustration of your peers
Yet and still you raise yourself throughout those pivotal years
God bless the child that wipes away his own tears
Who taps to soundtracks that only his ears can hear
Practices plies, leaps, and back flips without fear
Who strive for the gold even when no one comes to cheer
Here is to you:
The youth whose truth is hidden beneath media stereotypes
Manufactured by institutions and paid for by federal dollars
Raised by blue collars that you will never have to wear
I swear the youth are not lost
Our future is right here.

LOOK THIS WAY

By Gina Loring

It was a Saturday afternoon in June.

And the sun shone down on our naked skin as we passionately embraced
and met soft lips and gazed into each other's eyes as we began to make love.

It doesn't really happen that way.

The real story goes, we had this deep connection

we knew each other in another life,

powerful, magical thing going on, But between me getting tired of you

being high all the time, and you getting tired

of my mouth when you show up two hours late every time we get together

and then that little issue about you and a girl in a backroom at a house party.

Well, it just didn't work out.

But I have faith in love. I do.

And I've learned and I've grown and I know what I want.

I wanna debate political issues like, who owns Israel, and how the Chinese government
operates, and what's happened to this country since
the civil rights movement.

I wanna wrap my legs around your conscience and your innermost self,

that vulnerable side we all have where we hide away things that

never should've happened and pretend that your dad didn't leave you, leave us.

Why do so many black men abandon their children?

I wanna discuss with you about how that's not always true and that some black men
hold nothing in higher regard than their families and how when you and I have children
you'll fit that description.

I wanna whisper with Donny Hathaway and Stevie Wonder in the background and lead a
sparkling conversation and I could break out my Native American tribal music and you
would like it.

And acquire more knowledge about whatever it is that I know that you don't know and
whatever it is that you know that I don't know.

And I wanna relate to you how much Billie Holiday means to me

how she sings and cleans to me and I feel my soul is rocked lovingly and I cry sometimes.

'Cause Miles Davis hits that note so beautifully on Kind of Blue.

And I can't believe Clarence Thomas is actually allowed to decide that there should be
no punishment for a prison guard who beat a young prisoner for stepping out of line,
Momea Abdul Jamar and Lenord Paltemar but are locked up in cell blocks?

I wanna explain to you how happy I am Lenny Kravitz exists.

And how much I look up to Lonette McKee and then I'll have to remind you who she is
but that's okay 'cause most guys haven't seen Sparkle,

but they've seen the Mack which will then seigway blaxploitation and Blacula and why
that's significant to me and only me and you will listen and be intrigued.

You gotta feel for me, but not sorry, 'cause you have your own sad stories to share.

And you will and we'll look into each other's eyes, not corny like but for real 'cause you're the one that fits and I'm the one that matches and we are vibing. We're walking with grown up eyes into love.

But what is love?

I wanna talk with you about this over herbal tea or martinis or coffee or Coronas or whatever meets your fancy 'cause this is about you and this is about me. I wanna talk about Greek mythology and African history and why plastic surgery doesn't become illegal when you make yourself look like an alien and why people of color all over the world judge themselves according to a European standard of beauty and I wanna a tell you all about Saphronia and why she is not tragic, and how the story really goes and you'll care and I wanna decide with you who really made Earth and if we can remember our births and do flowers mind when you pick them for me on my birthday 'cause you would and I wouldn't mind 'cause really, all I want is somebody to admire the sky with and I think you might really like it, too. If you would just look this way.

God Doesn't Make Mistakes

By In-Q

God doesn't make mistakes
He makes trees, and leaves, and skies, and lakes
Birds, and bees, seas, and snakes

The sun moon and the stars
Ally bars
Cars passing in the dark echo like my breaking heart

You hear them in the distance
You feel it in your soul
You've gotta break yourself apart if you wanna be whole
I'm in this whole but I'm crawling towards the light by free falling into my hindsight

The thing about a lesson is you can't apply it to your past
Life isn't as simple as it seems in my photographs
Love isn't something that you feel its something that you do
Every single moment is a miracle that can redefine you
Every obstacle is an opportunity in disguise
You can tell I've gone threw it by this look in my eyes

This is not just an Idea that I read in a book
I'm opening my chest up and daring you to look
Are you scared of the mirror that you see in my face?
Switch a couple details you could be in my place
Drowning in tears of joy from the rush of a battle
I killed off my ego but regret has a shadow
And I'm proud of my progress

The process is magic
Some of us are still slaves to our old habits
Responding automatically cause that's what were used to
If there wasn't a choice your actions have used you

What if you're the puppet, and the puppeteer?
This is your life, and this is your wife, and this is your career
This is your pain, and this is your shame, and these are your tears,
And this is your brain that's had to maintain threw the years

This is reality
But you define what you see

So your reality may not seem the same to me
You think you have control?
Baby this is make believe
Your powers in your response so don't forget to breath

I have tattooed forgive on the insides of my eyelids
So when I blink I can be reminded
That

God Doesn't Make Mistakes

He makes waves that break, shores, and shapes of clouds, faceless crowds
I'm walking threw em like a hologram
Just another kace of me filling up the space in this hollow man

I've been asleep for my whole life
Now I'm wide awake and I can spot a nightmare threw the daylight

Rage is alive and well
We are inside of hell when we rely on the lies we provide ourselves

I see it in the streets everyday
Folks are unhappy with themselves in almost every way
Yet they walk around like theve got it all figured out
This is not what you're about
You just think you're supposed to take a certain rout
And I understand it cause I've been there in the past
But does everybody have to walk around with a fucking mask

I wanna see you in the light of god
You see I'm tired of making love to the same mirage
And my heart is big enough to fit the whole world in it
But I had to loose to learn my loves infinite

See God doesn't make mistakes

He makes truth
And he put it in a body and he bottled it in youth
And it's still inside of you
Whether you know it or not

You are perfect right now, you should own what you've got...

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