
-The 'Human'ity of Poetry-

A Lesson on Personification and Materialism

The Graduation Years

Christopher B. Gardner

Introduction

This chapter provides a framework for English Language Arts teachers to incorporate poetry in the classroom in a meaningful way free of the stigma that often surrounds it, regarding difficulty and irrelevance. *I Used To Love H.E.R.* written by Ernest Wilson and Lonnie Rashid Lynn and *The World Is Too Much With Us* by William Wordsworth have been paired together for the purposes of this chapter, connecting students to literature by pairing one of the great English poets with a modern day 'conscious' hip-hop artist, to demonstrate a poetic concept and discuss common themes. The activities suggested in this chapter are linked thematically to accomplish Atlantic Canada ELA curricular outcomes and both literary selections use personification, that is 'treating abstractions or inanimate objects as human, or giving them human attributes, powers, or feelings' to get their point across, which students will focus on.

Teachers utilizing this chapter to plan their next lesson are expected to go beyond simply defining personification to students and then reading a poem that uses it. They are expected to facilitate student-centered learning, by allowing students to read and view an example through a thematic lens, speak and listen to others about how it made them feel, and conclude with their own writing and representations to demonstrate learning. Many "authors suggest that students learn poetry by reading, listening to, and talking about poetry, and then, finally, writing their own" (Frieze & Nixon 2009, p. 23). For teachers that use this chapter to institute a thematic lesson plan tackling personification, students will be expected to demonstrate mastery of this poetic convention through writing and representing through art, music, poetry, multimedia production and photography for purposes of summative assessment.

(2009) Voices from the Middle. Vol. 16. No. 3. March. National Council of Teachers of English.

I Used To Love H.E.R.

Verse One:

I met this girl, when I was 10 years old
And what I loved most, she had so much soul
She was old school, when I was just a shorty
Never knew throughout my life she would be there for me
on the regular, not a church girl, she was secular
Not about the money, no studs was mic checkin her
But I respected her, she hit me in the heart
A few New York *****, had did her in the park
But she was there for me, and I was there for her
Pull out a chair for her, turn on the air for her
and just cool out, cool out and listen to her
Sittin on bone, wishin that I could do her
Eventually if it was meant to be, then it would be
cuz' we related, physically and mentally
And she was fun then, I'd be geeked when she'd come around
Slim was fresh jo, when she was underground
Original, pure untampered and down sister
Boy I tell ya, I miss her

Verse Two:

Now periodically I would see
ol' girl at the clubs, and at the house parties
She didn't have a body but she started gettin' thick quick
Did a couple of videos and became afrocentric
Out goes the weave, in goes the braids beads medallions
She was on that tip about, stoppin the violence
About my people she was teachin me
But not preachin to me but speakin to me
in a method that was leisurely, so easily I approached
She dug my rap, that's how we got close
But then she broke to the West coast, and that was cool
Cause around the same time, I went away to school
And I'm a man of expandin', so why should I stand in her way?
She probably get her money in L.A.

And she did stud, she got big pub but what was foul
She said that the pro-black, was goin out of style
She said, "Afrocentricity, was of the past."
So she got into R&B hip-house bass and jazz
Now black music is black music and it's all good
I wasn't salty, she was with the boys in the hood
Cause that was good for her, she was becomin well rounded
I thought it was dope how she was on that freestyle s**t
Just havin' fun, not worried about anyone
And you could tell, by how her ***** hung

Verse Three:

I might've failed to mention that the chick was creative
But once the man got to her, he altered the native
Told her if she got an image and a gimmick
That she could make money, and she did it like a dummy
Now I see her in commercials, she's universal
She used to only swing it with the inner-city circle
Now she be in the burbs lookin' rock and dressin' hip
And on some dumb s**t, when she comes to the city

Ernest Wilson & Lonnie Rashid Lynn (1994)

[http://www.last.fm/music/Common/_/I+Used+To+Love+H.E.R.+\(Clean+Version\)](http://www.last.fm/music/Common/_/I+Used+To+Love+H.E.R.+(Clean+Version))

About the Author

I Used to Love H.E.R. is co-written and performed by Chicago-born conscious hip-hop artist Lonnie Rashid Lynn, better known by his stage-name, Common. He has taken home two Grammy awards in 2003 and 2008, is known for his social activism through music, and was invited to the White House by Michelle Obama for a poetry reading in 2011 which sparked controversy due to the lyrical content of some of his music. Common also has a flourishing acting career aside from his music, playing significant roles in *Smoking Aces*, *American Gangster*, *Date Night*, *Wanted*, *Street Kings*, and *Just Wright*.

<http://www.thinkcommon.com/> - Common's Official Website

<http://twitter.com/#!/common> - Connect with Common on Twitter

<http://itunes.apple.com/us/artist/common/id64490> - Buy Common's music on iTunes

Rationale

Incorporating poetry from 'popular culture' sources into classrooms to capture student interest, and bring attention to poetic techniques and social concepts in that work, is one of the most effective methods of overcoming the stigma often related to poetry regarding difficulty and irrelevance. The hip-hop genre of music, which has demonstrated major influence in modern times, offers useful literature for poetry teachers wishing to engage students in poetic techniques and devices.

I Used to Love H.E.R. by Ernest Wilson and Common is hailed as one of the greatest hip-hop recordings of all time. This text tackles the issue of hip-hop music moving away from its roots in soul and 'conscious' rhyming toward mainstream success verified by material possessions, and William Wordsworth's masterful commentary on how we lay waste our powers by 'getting and spending,' and not taking time to enjoy the natural beauty of the world in its pure form works well to compliment this.

What is Special

The "H.E.R." in the title refers to hip-hop culture and stands for "Hearing Every Rhyme." The entirety of this selection personifies hip-hop as a female Common used to love, but lost respect for due to gimmicks and commercialization of her character. Hip-hop is personified as a woman who went through an era of consciousness, then afro-centrism and gaining fame hanging out with gangsters in Los Angeles, which he does not look as fondly upon as her younger personality. This touches on social themes that bring the big questions that "can reframe what we already do in school and make it matter to students by generating real purpose," (Wilhelm 2007) such as 'What is Success?' to the forefront of the learning process. After reading and listening to *I Used to Love H.E.R.* students can return to the text under the lens of this question to discuss whether success is marked by material possessions, fame, delivering important, socially conscious messages, or the positive difference one might make in society. Comparisons in this text are also made between Common's perception of hip-hop history and the degradation of women. Students will discuss these concepts and whether they agree with Common's portrayal of the music form. Analysis may also move into the personified characters of other music forms as well, to differentiate among interests.

Wilhelm, Jeffrey D. (2007). Engaging Readers & Writers With Inquiry. Promoting Deep Understandings in Language Arts and the Content Areas With Guiding Questions. New York: Scholastic.

Readability

The one vocabulary word that may stand out to students in this text and cause some confusion is the use of the term 'afro centricity,' a world view that emphasizes the importance of African people. It is a definition and topic allowing for a teachable moment relating to global education ideals, that teachers must ensure is approached in a sensitive manner within their

learning environment. Other than this particular concept, the rest of the piece should be a fairly straightforward read for students, using some slang terms students are most likely already acquainted with. The only other caution is the inappropriate language, which is minimal and does not take away from the overall positive message of the song, and is edited out of the copy of the poem provided above for classroom use. However, that is the reason this chapter falls under the section of *The Graduation Years* in this compilation, because teachers should not be policing and filtering knowledge and content for students in these final years, but should be educating students on how to deal with inappropriate content in their everyday life, and that there is a time and place for certain language and actions. Also when playing the audio version of the song to the class, it is recommended to use the clean version:

http://www.last.fm/music/Common/_/I+Used+To+Love+H.E.R.+Clean+Version

Connecting

1. What is 'Success?'
2. Who is the 'H.E.R.' in the title?
3. How does Common feel about 'H.E.R.' in the first verse?
4. Can you pick out specific examples in the text where the hip-hop genre of music is being referred to as a woman or person?
5. What is Common's view of hip-hop today?
6. What is 'Afro centricity?'
7. Is material wealth or spreading a positive message more important?
8. Has artists and fans of hip-hop lost sight of its 'natural' beauty in light of the glitz and glamour the music form has gained through commercial success?

Activities

ACTIVITY #1: MATHEMATICAL LOGICAL – INTERPERSONAL – NATURALIST

After listening to the song *I Used To Love H.E.R.* performed by Common, break up into groups of four to read the poem and discuss how the poem exemplifies personification (*treating abstractions or inanimate objects as human, or giving them human attributes, powers, or feelings*). There will be assigned roles to ensure the participation of all students, so choose who will be the Reader, Collectors, and Speaker of the group. The reader will read the text aloud to the group, without music, immediately upon breaking into groups and again during the last five

minutes of this activity, before shifting into full-class discussion. The two Collectors will be responsible for recording as many examples of personification as they can find in the poem, along with statements derived from group discussion about what the literal translation of the personified lines might be. Finally, the speaker will be responsible for explaining group discoveries to the class, when called on by the teacher, and responding to or supporting comments of others by raising their hand to gain control of the floor. Before leaving class, all group members should sign the data sheets drawn up by the Collectors and hand them in.

ACTIVITY #2: VISUAL SPATIAL – BODILY-KINESTHETIC - INTRAPERSONAL

In the song *I Used To Love H.E.R.*, Common personifies hip-hop as a female undergoing a major personality change, with the introduction of commercial success to the musical culture. You will create your own image to represent hip-hop as a person. The image can reflect your interpretation of Common's portrayal of hip-hop or it can be your own interpretation of hip-hop today entirely; just make sure you state which interpretation you will be representing in your image. The image can take the form of a drawing, painting, cartoon, photograph of someone dressed in the role of Hip-hop, or a graphic design created on your computer. Underneath your image you will write a few lines explaining what we are looking at in your picture and why you have chosen to represent Hip-hop in this way.

****(If a student is uncomfortable with personifying Hip-hop due to lack of knowledge and is still trying to wrap their head around Common's portrayal of the character, the teacher may allow an image personifying another genre of music.)*

ACTIVITY #3: VERBAL LINGUISTIC – VISUAL SPATIAL – INTERPERSONAL – MUSICAL

Work individually or collaboratively with one other student to write an eight line verse personifying a genre of music, art, literature or some other preapproved topic, to demonstrate your mastery of the concept of personification. After completing your poem, choose an instrumental that compliments it from the royalty free section on <http://www.soundclick.com> or feel free to create your own instrumental to accompany the piece. Your poem will be recorded on a condenser microphone in class over your supplied instrumental, mixed and converted into an mp3 you can playback and share. You may use *I Used To Love H.E.R.* as an example of a verse which accomplishes this or visit http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wcqIINH6VcA&feature=channel_video_title to see secondary school teacher Mr. Gardner personify hip-hop in his urban rendition of *Dying In Your Arms Tonight*. You may record your 8 line poem in whatever way you see fit over the instrumental, whether you want to rap, sing, read or dramatize your piece. Also you may record your 8-line piece individually or record collaboratively with other individuals or partners to create a longer song or piece. If you plan on doing this, you may want to collaborate with

those you wish to record with in writing the pieces as well, to ensure a common theme or idea. Make sure you provide a hard copy of your poem to the teacher prior to recording.

The World Is Too Much With Us

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon,
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers,
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not.--Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.

William Wordsworth (1807)

About the Author

William Wordsworth was a major figure in English Literature that helped launch the Romantic Age alongside his colleague Samuel Taylor Coleridge, with their publication *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth was the Poet Laureate of Britain from 1843-1850, though he was rather old at this point and this was more of an honorary title, as he became known as the only Poet Laureate to write no official poetry during his term. He is a master of imagery and a lover of nature.

<http://www.gutenberg.org/browse/authors/w#a2879> – The Works of William Wordsworth

http://www.google.ca/search?q=william+wordsworth&hl=en&prmd=ivnsob&tbs=tl:1&tbo=u&ei=YnkTTvCwKM_isQKXst3UDw&sa=X&oi=timeline_result&ct=title&resnum=19&ved=0CGYQ5wlwEg&biw=1419&bih=731 – Timeline for William Wordsworth

Rationale

Introducing students to poetry of the English Canon, and the beautiful words of Romantics such as William Wordsworth still has an important place in ELA classrooms as well. Students may also very well still enjoy such poems and be capable of providing great insight into them, if the pedagogical approach most commonly used better connected with their lives and activated prior knowledge useful in tackling these poems through different lenses.

Wordsworth's *The World Is Too Much With Us* is a short read that will not intimidate students by length, but has a tremendous amount to say in beautifully crafted language. The message behind it is similar to *I Used To Love H.E.R.* in that it discusses the major focus of society today on material wealth and spending power, rather than beauty in its most natural, purest forms. Similar to Common's interpretation of the turn for the worse the genre of hip-hop music has taken, once money became involved in this art form that originated in the slums of New York, Wordsworth states that "we have given our hearts away" in pursuit of material wishes. Wordsworth's comment that now "we are out of tune" with nature seems to work rather ironically with the first poem as well.

What is Special

This poem is an imagery filled piece that tackles the notion of how the materialistic world has robbed us of the pleasure of natural beauty and appreciation for nature. Natural beauty, free of material aspirations, is personified in this poem as well, tying it into both the expectations for meaningful thematic discussion and mastery of a poetic convention introduced when analyzing *I Used To Love H.E.R.* Wordsworth capitalizes the word 'Nature,' and several other aspects of nature in his poem to demonstrate personification, as well as makes statements like "The Sea that bares her bosom to the moon." In doing so, he is speaking to one of the 'big questions' introduced by Common in this chapter regarding whether material wealth or truth and beauty is the greater treasure.

Readability

Though this poem is shorter than the first text presented in this chapter, the vocabulary is a great deal tougher, as well as references to mythological characters that may need to be addressed. Students in upper-level secondary courses should be able to tackle this poem still, especially with the prior knowledge and thematic lens to look at it with established through analysis of *I Used To Love H.E.R.* A vocabulary activity prior to reading this piece, using some of the more difficult words is highly recommended.

Connecting

1. How do we 'lay waste our powers' by 'getting and spending'?
2. What are some examples of personification in this poem?
3. What is the underlying message Wordsworth wishes to convey?
4. How does the idea presented here connect to themes presented in *I Used to Love H.E.R.*?
5. Is material wealth or truth and beauty the greater treasure?
6. In your opinion, do you take nature and the beauty of the natural world for granted?
7. What would you give up to become a multi-millionaire?

Activities

ACTIVITY #1: MUSICAL – VISUAL-SPATIAL

Read the *The World Is Too Much With Us*, and use *Windows Movie Maker* to create a slideshow that demonstrates your own interpretation of the poem, by pairing lines from the poem with music and pictures. There are no restrictions as to how vivid your interpretation of the piece might be, but you must be sure there are fifteen slides/pictures, including a title page. That is, one slide for each line of the poem, and it will be up to you whether you want to choose one song to be the background music for the entirety of your piece or whether you want to utilize several songs to musically interpret lines of the poem individually rather than collectively in your slideshow. Make sure to include the words to the poem on each of the fourteen slides following the title page, along with the picture you choose to represent that line.

ACTIVITY #2: INTRAPERSONAL – MATHEMATICAL-LOGICAL

Today's exit card will be a journal entry in which you must connect *I Used To Love H.E.R.* to *The World Is Too Much With Us* thematically. How does Wordsworth's notion of materialism versus natural beauty compare with Common's portrayal of hip-hop in the face of materialistic success? Make sure to use three quotes total, at least one from each poem to get your point across. Do you agree with Wordsworth? Do you agree with Common?

ACTIVITY #3: VISUAL-SPATIAL – BODILY-KINESTHETIC – INTRAPERSONAL – NATURALIST – VERBAL-LINGUISTIC

We will take a class field trip today around the school. Using your own camera, the camera on your cellular device, or one of the cameras provided, you will be expected to capture three natural images that are beautiful to you, but you have taken for granted or never really noticed

before, rushing by it on a daily basis to get to class or catch your bus. You will create a collage of the three images you have chosen, and a short poem or paragraph entitled 'The World Is Too Much With Me,' using the theme derived from analyzing Wordsworth's poem to discuss your own personal experience with nature in a materialistic world of 'getting and spending.' The collection of photographic works will be compiled into a PowerPoint and shared with the class.
