

## Lucille Clifton's "Why Some People be Mad at Me Sometimes"

**Museum Connection:** Art and Enlightenment

**Purpose:** By reading historical accounts of civil rights events, students will be able to make personal connections to the poem, "Why Some People Be Mad at Me Sometimes." This will segue into providing an opportunity for students to read historical accounts of demonstrations for civil rights in order to create a fictitious speaker for the poem.

**Course:** American Literature/American History

**Time Frame:** 1 class period

### **Correlation to State Standards:**

Standard 1: The student will comprehend and interpret a variety of print, non-print and electronic texts, and other media.

Indicator 1.1: The student will use effective strategies before, during, and after reading, viewing, and listening to self-selected and assigned materials.

Objective 1.1.3: The student will confirm understanding after reading, viewing, and/or listening to a text.

Indicator 1.2: The student will comprehend and interpret a variety of texts, including fiction, nonfiction, poetry, drama, and informational texts.

Objective 1.2.1: The student will determine the contributions of literary elements in classical and contemporary literary texts.

Indicator 2.1: The student will analyze and evaluate a variety of texts, including fiction, nonfiction, poetry, drama, and informational texts.

Objective 2.1.2: The student will analyze stylistic elements in a text or across texts that communicate an author's purpose.

## Common Core State Reading Standards for Literature 6-12

RL6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

W3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

**Objective(s):** Students will read two news articles in order to create a fictitious speaker for the poem, “Why Some People Be Mad at Me Sometimes” by Lucille Clifton.

### Vocabulary and Concepts:

(Word or Concept)	(Definition)
Speaker	The speaker is the narrative voice in a poem that speaks of his or her situation or feelings. It is a convention in poetry that the speaker is <i>not</i> the same individual as the historical author of the poem.
Voice	The terms “voice” and “speaker” are closely related. Authors will often create a false persona for a piece of writing. In doing this, they must give the persona characters that create a voice suitable to the persona or the speaker.
Goal	This is another spelling for the word “jail.”
Negro	This name is used to refer to a person of black ancestry. It means “black” in several languages including Spanish and Portuguese. The term is now considered as being obsolete except when used by certain organizations such as the Negro League in sports and the United Negro College Fund.
Colour bar	This describes the separation of people into racial groups which led to segregation.
Anthology	An anthology is a book that consists of essays, stories, or poems by different writers.

**Materials:**

Resource Sheet 1: Poem “Why Some People be Mad at Me Sometimes

Resource Sheet 2: Poem Analysis

Resource Sheet 3: Newspaper Articles

Resource Sheet 4: Creating a Speaker with a Specific Voice

Resource Sheet 5: Visiting the Reginald F. Lewis Museum

**Resources:*****Publications:***

Newspaper article: “650 Negroes held in Alabama” from *The Guardian* May 7, 1963.

Newspaper article: “450 Negro Children Arrested” from *The Guardian* May 3, 1963.

Library of Congress Archives:

“650 Negroes held in Alabama” from *The Guardian* May 7, 1963.

“450 Negro Children Arrested” from *The Guardian* May 3, 1963.

***Web Sites:***

Poem: “Why Some People Be Mad at Me Sometimes”

<http://wordsofadunce.blogspot.com/2009/04/why-some-people-be-mad-at-me-sometimes.html>

Audio Reading of “Why Some People Be Mad at Me Sometimes”:

<http://people.bridgewater.edu/~sgallowa/386/clifton.htm>

Text of “Why Some People Be Mad at Me Sometimes”:

<http://wordsofadunce.blogspot.com/2009/04/why-some-people-be-mad-at-me-sometimes.html>

Biographical Information on Lucille Clifton:

<http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/79> and

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=1304>

Background on Martin Luther King, Jr.

[http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-bio.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-bio.html)

Martin Luther King Speeches

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkhaveadream.htm>

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>

## **Historical Background:**

### **Lucille Clifton (1936-2010)**

*MSA SC 3520-13587*

Winner of the National Book Award and former poet laureate of Maryland, Lucille Clifton ranked among the most productive poets of her time. As a poet, a writer of children's books, and a professor, Clifton strove to represent her experiences in sparse, evocative language. To create such work, Clifton spoke of poetry as a distinct entity: "Poetry is everywhere. . . I remain open to hear it. I remain available to poetry. It will come to me."

Lucille Sayles Clifton was born in 1936 in Depew, New York and began life in humble but literary surroundings. Her father, Samuel L. Sayles, was a steel mill worker who could read but could not write. In addition to raising a large family, her mother, Thelma Moore Sayles, worked as a launderer; however, she still found time to write her own poetry. Thelma's poetry even caught the eye of a magazine editor who pressed her to publish. Yet, her husband would not allow it, and, in frustration, Thelma burned all her manuscripts. Lucille Clifton vividly remembered the incident: "It is one of the reasons I keep writing. . . I wish to persist because she did not." Lucille was the first in her family to go to college; she entered Howard University in Washington, D.C. at the age of sixteen. There she met fellow writers and intellectuals including Sterling A. Brown, A. B. Spellman, and Toni Morrison. She began her studies as a drama major and appeared in the production "Amen Corner" written by a young James Baldwin.

After two years at Howard, Clifton transferred to Fredonia State Teachers College in 1955. In California, she continued to pursue her love of the theater by working some as an actor. She also kept writing poetry. In a writer's group, she met Ishmael Reed, who liked her work and passed it on to Langston Hughes. Hughes debuted her poetry in his anthology, *Poetry of the Negro*. Like so many women writers, Clifton had to balance the demands of her family and her vocation. She married Fred Clifton, a philosophy professor, in 1958, and the two had six children. When her first book, *Good Times*, was published in 1969, her children were 7, 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1. She composed much of it in her head because there was no time to sit down at a typewriter. Fortunately, her methods worked; she continued to publish prolifically while juggling her career and family. In addition to her poetry, Clifton has written almost twenty children's books, including a series centered around the young character, Everett Anderson.

Lucille Clifton continued to work and write after Fred Clifton was hired by the Job Corps center in Baltimore in 1967 and moved the family to Maryland. Thirteen years later, in 1979, Clifton was appointed to the post of Poet Laureate of Maryland by Governor Harry R. Hughes. She was the second woman and the first African American to hold the largely ceremonial post. Created by the General Assembly in 1959, the position has no official duties and offers only a \$1000 annual stipend. She succeeded Vincent Burns, a colorful man who penned poems about the state bird and tried to become president of a state poetry society in an effort to use poetry to fight communism. Originally appointed for three years, Clifton held the post until 1985. While the office of the Governor envisioned Clifton writing poems for state occasions, Clifton had different ideas. In an interview, she responded: "You don't go around asking poets to write verse on request. That's not poetry – that's greeting cards. You don't write a poem for the governor or a new mall opening on assignment . . . Poetry doesn't happen that way, it's something beyond assignment." While Clifton did not compose poems for official purposes often, she did concede for the state's 350th birthday.

No critic has classified Clifton's work as "greeting card" poetry. Instead, she is hailed for her hard, sparse vocabulary, inventive free verse and sly wit. Her early works are compared favorably with other Black Arts Movement poets like LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka). Her later volumes center on issues close to women and universal themes including family history and mortality. Critic James Miller sums up her body of work elegantly: "Lucille Clifton's world is both earthy and spiritual. In her capacity as both witness and seer, she looks through the madness and sorrow of the world, locating moments of epiphany in the mundane and ordinary. And her poetry invariably moves toward those moments of calm and

tranquility, of grace, which speak to the continuity of the human spirit.” Clifton’s ability to blend the mundane and the sublime keeps her work accessible to even casual readers and delightful to more jaded critics.

In her later years, Clifton resided in Maryland, where she taught as a Distinguished Professor of Humanities at St. Mary’s College in St. Mary’s City. Known as “an affectionate teacher,” she taught there for close to fifteen years. Along with honorary degrees from Fisk University, George Washington University, Trinity College and others, Clifton is the only writer to have had two books nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in one year (1987). She also received two grants from the National Endowment of the Arts and an Emmy for her contribution to the television show, “Free to Be . . . You and Me.” After being inducted into the Maryland Women’s Hall of Fame in 1993, Clifton’s highest honor came in 2000 when she won the National Book Award for her volume, *Blessing the Boats*. She was also committed to the arts in Maryland; Howard County honored her with an Artist of the Year Award for her contribution to the county’s public schools and her leadership at the Howard County Poetry and Literature Society. Sadly, she also faced personal tragedy. Her husband passed away in 1984, a daughter died of brain cancer in 2000, and Clifton herself had serious health problems which resulted in the removal of a kidney and a mastectomy. Through her difficulties, Clifton continued to write, bringing a new richness and depth to work. Her most recent volume, *Mercy* (2004), addressed the themes of her life’s ambitions with style and grace.

Clifton continued to gain recognition for her work. In 2007, the Poetry Foundation awarded her the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, one of the most prestigious honors for American poets. She became the first African-American woman to receive the award since its establishment in 1986. On February 28, 2008, Clifton was honored by Governor Martin O'Malley, Lt. Governor Anthony Brown, and the Legislative Black Caucus of Maryland with the Maryland Living History Award.

Lucille Clifton passed away February 13, 2010, at the age of 73.

<http://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc3500/sc3520/013500/013587/html/13587bio.html>

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## Lesson Development:

Motivation: Ask students the following questions to be answered in a journal entry or quickwrite.

- Has someone ever been angry with you?
- Describe a time when a person has been “mad” at you.
- Who is the person who was mad at you?
- Why was this person angry with you?
- Was their anger justified?
- Has there ever been a time when someone was angry with you but their anger was not justified?
- Explain why you think this person was angry even though you were not trying to anger him/her.

Developmental Steps of Lesson:

### 1. Giving Voice to the Poem

- a. Have the class read **Student Resource Sheet 1: the poem, “Why Some People Be Mad at Me Sometimes.”**

<http://wordsofadunce.blogspot.com/2009/04/why-some-people-be-mad-at-me-sometimes.html>

- i. Select two different students to read the poem in order to give the poem two different voices.

- ii. Also, play the audio recording of Lucille Clifton’s reading of the poem at

<http://people.bridgewater.edu/~sgallowa/386/clifton.htm>.

- b. Transition: What makes this a poem? Discuss lack of punctuation, lack of capitalization, line length, and word choice. Ask students to select the most powerful line, and have them explain why this line is powerful. Students may respond with “they want me to remember their memories” or “i keep on remembering mine.” Ask additional questions in **Resource Sheet 2: Poem Analysis**.

### 2. Clues to the Speaker:

- a. Instruct the students to make guesses about the speaker of the poem and support their ideas with explanations. How old is the speaker? Is the speaker male or female? Is the speaker formally educated or not? Who is the “they” mentioned in lines two and three?
- b. If the speaker is a child: Why are people mad at him/her? Who is the “they?”

- c. If the speaker is an adult: Why are people mad at him/her? Who is the “they?”
3. Applying an Historical Context to Give the Poem a Speaker a Specific Voice:
  - a. Have students read **Resource Sheet 3: Newspaper Articles**.
  - b. After reading the two articles, pass out **Resource Sheet 4: Creating a Speaker with a Specific Voice** for students to complete.

**Assessment:**

**Exit Ticket:**

All of us struggle to be treated fairly. Consider our society today. In what way do children, women, older citizens, people with disabilities, and other minority groups fight to be treated equally?

Have students complete **Resource Sheet 5: Visiting the Reginald F. Lewis Museum** which centers on Martin Luther King’s plea for peaceful protest. In preparation for the visit, acquaint students with Martin Luther King through various sources including the following:

[http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-bio.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-bio.html)

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkiveadream.htm>

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>

**Closure:**

All of us struggle to be treated fairly. Consider our society today. In what way do children, women, older citizens, people with disabilities, and other minority groups fight to be treated equally?

**Lesson Extension(s):**

- Upon visiting the Reginald F. Lewis Museum, read other poems by Clifton that are displayed. Identify common themes in her poetry.



- During the visit to the Reginald F. Lewis Museum, read poems by other poets that are on display. Compare these to Clifton's work.

### **Thoughtful Application(s):**

This lesson could be used in social studies classes that are studying Martin Luther King, the American Civil Rights Movement, or other oppressed groups of people.

- As a creative writing assignment, encourage students to write several additional stanzas for the poem which serve to explain the speaker's situation in more detail. Mimic Clifton's style in the continuation of the poem.
- Investigate the psychological and physiological effects of anger that is suppressed or demonstrated.
- Read Robert Kennedy's April 4, 1968 speech about Martin Luther King's death and instruct students to write a reply from Kennedy to Clifton telling her how to deal with her anger. Find the speech at <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/rfonmlkdeath.html>

## **Resource Sheet 1**

**Poem: “Why Some People be Mad at Me Sometimes**

For resource,

Open Hyperlink below

<http://wordsofadunce.blogspot.com/2009/04/why-some-people-be-mad-at-me-sometimes.html>

## RESOURCE SHEET 2

### Poem Analysis

*With the person next to you, discuss the questions below and write your answers on a sheet of paper.*

1. What makes this a poem? Discuss the structure of the poem (word choice, line breaks, etc.)
2. What is the most important line in the poem? What stands out and why?
3. How old is the speaker? Is the speaker a male or female? Is the speaker formally educated or not?
  - a. If the speaker is a child: Why are people mad at him/her? Who is the “they?”
  - b. If the speaker is an adult: Why are people mad at him/her? Who is the “they?”
4. Who is the “they” mentioned in lines two and three?

**RESOURCE SHEET 3**  
**Creating a Speaker with a Specific Voice**

Read the article “**650 Negroes held in Alabama**” from *The Guardian* May 7, 1963. Imagine that the speaker of the poem by Clifton is one of the African American adults referred to in the article. With the information in the article, answer these questions:

1. Who is angry with the speaker (one of the African American adults)?
2. Why are these individuals angry?
3. What do these people want the speaker to forget?
4. What is the speaker continuing to remember?

Read the article “**450 Negro Children Arrested**” from *The Guardian* May 3, 1963. Imagine that the speaker of Clifton’s poem is one of the African American children ages 6-16 who are referred to in the article. With the information in the article, answer these questions:

1. Who is angry with the speaker (African American Child)?
2. Why are these individuals angry?
3. What do these people want the speaker to forget?
4. What is the speaker continuing to remember?

## **RESOURCE SHEET 4**

### **Newspaper Articles**

#### **“650 Negroes held in Alabama” from *The Guardian* May 7, 1963.**

650 Negroes Held in Alabama: Hoses used—but not dogs

Birmingham (Alabama), May 6

Police arrested more than 650 Negroes, including children, here today during an anti-segregationist demonstration. Many were arrested as they left a church.

About two thousand Negroes, singing and chanting, marched on the Birmingham Gaol today to sing and pray for hundreds of demonstrators being held there.

The Negroes formed up at the New Pilgrim Baptist Church and a line stretched down the normally busy Sixth Avenue. Police stopped all traffic entering the street except police vehicles.

Among the first to be held was Dick Gregory, a nationally known comedian. Earlier, Negro leaders said that the marches today would be orderly and had asked the city officials not to turn on the hoses. But hoses were turned on for a short time.

A fire department official said the incident had been an error. Police dogs were not used today. More than 1,400 Negroes have been arrested during the demonstrations which began about a month ago. The campaign is aimed at ending the strict segregation which exists in Birmingham, second largest city in the Deep South.

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#### **“450 Negro Children Arrested” from *The Guardian* May 3, 1963.**

450 Negro Children Arrested

More than 450 Negro schoolchildren were arrested in Birmingham, Alabama yesterday as they paraded against the colour bar.

Firemen got hoses ready but they were not needed, as the children, aged between 6 and 16, went quietly to juvenile detention homes charged with parading without a permit. A Negro leader said the demonstrations would continue “until we run out of children.”

Earlier 79 Negroes were arrested in the town as they marched through the town singing hymns to protest against segregation. Others were arrested for parading with placards outside shops.

—Reuter

**RESOURCE SHEET 5**  
**Visiting the Reginald F. Lewis Museum**

Consider Martin Luther King’s on-going plea for peaceful protest. King believed that the only way to bring change was to do so with peaceful force. Clifton’s poem shows that sometimes people become angry if others don’t feel the same or think the same way as they do. Think about the exhibits in the museum. Give two examples in the museum of individuals or events that involved peaceful protest that led to exceptional anger in the white establishment.

**Example 1:**

Who was involved in the protest?

What occurred at the protest?

How was the protest resolved?

Compare the situation to Lucille Clifton’s poem, “Why Some People Be Mad at Me Sometimes.”

**Example 2:**

Who was involved in the protest?

What occurred at the protest?

How was the protest resolved?

Compare the situation to Lucille Clifton's poem, "Why Some People Be Mad at Me Sometimes."