

Poetry in Motion

Museum Connection: Art and Enlightenment

Purpose: In this lesson students will learn about the life and poetic style of Lucille Clifton, an African American poet who lived in Baltimore, Maryland. Students will use her words as inspiration to create a movement study focusing on only one body part or one group of body parts such as their heads, hair, shoulders, hips, arms, fingers, legs or feet.

Course(s): Dance III, IV, and Company

Time Frame: Two class periods (of 80 minutes each)

Correlation to State Standards: Dance Essential Learner Outcomes

Dance Outcome III: Creative Expression and Production

The student will demonstrate the ability to create dance by improvising, organizing dance ideas and performing.

Expectation A

The student will apply skills and knowledge from the language of dance to improvisation.

Indicators of Learning

1. The student will improvise dance phases using a variety of stimuli, including ideas, feelings and emotions.
2. The student will improvise variations to dance phrases by selecting and manipulating the elements of movement: time, space and energy.
3. The student will improvise movement patterns/dance phases individually and in groups.

Language Arts Indicators:

Students will:

Use during reading strategies appropriate to both the text and purpose for reading by visualizing, making connections, and using fix-up strategies such as re-reading, questioning, and summarizing (Indicator 1.1.2)

Determine how the speaker, organization, sentence structure, word choice, tone, rhythm, and imagery reveal an author's purpose (Indicator 1.2.2)

Extend or further develop meaning by explaining the implications of the text for the reader or contemporary society (indicator 1.2.5).

-Compose to express personal ideas, using poems or poetic forms (indicator 2.1.2)

Objective(s):

- Students will analyze the writing of Lucille Clifton, a famous African American poet, who spent most of her life in Baltimore.
- Students will use her descriptions, as well as their own, to create original choreography with respect to specific body parts.

Vocabulary and Concepts:

(Word or Concept)	(Definition)
Homage	a show of reverence and respect toward somebody.
Poetry	writing that formulates a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience in language chosen and arranged to create a specific emotional response through its meaning, sound, and rhythm.
Poet Laureate	a poet who is particularly honored for his or her work, or who is considered to be the most eminent poet in a particular country, state, or group.
Literal Choreography	dance arrangement that communicates a story or message to the audience.
Improvisation	improvisation is the practice of problem solving, or reacting in the moment, in response to the stimulus of one's immediate environment and

	inner feelings. This can result in the invention of new thought patterns, new practices, new structures or symbols, and/or new ways to act.
Constructive Criticism	carefully considered feedback, meant to be helpful.
Noun	a word or group of words used as the name of a class of people, places, or things.
Adjective	a word that describes or qualifies a noun or pronoun.
Verb	a word used to show that an action is taking place.
Adverb	a word that modifies a verb, an adjective, another adverb, or a sentence, e.g. "happily," "very," or "frankly"

Materials:

For the Teacher:

Teacher Resource Sheet 1: Lucille Clifton Article, *New York Times*, February 17, 2010

For the Student:

Resource Sheet 1: “Homage to My Hips,” Poem by Lucille Clifton

Resource Sheet 2: Follow- up Questions for “Homage to My Hips”

Resource Sheet 3: My Own Body Poetry (plural)

Resource Sheet 4: My Own Body Poetry (singular)

Resource Sheet 5: Body Poetry reflection & Choreographic Scoring Tool

Resources:

Publications:

Minton, Sandra Cerny. *Choreography; A Basic Approach Using Improvisation*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1997.

Holladay, Hilary. *Wild Blessings: The Poetry of Lucille Clifton*. Louisiana State University, 2004.

Web Sites:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/17/arts/17clifton.html?pagewanted=print>

Historical Background:

“Homage to My Hips” by Lucille Clifton was published in 1987.

Archives of Maryland
(Biographical Series)

Lucille Clifton (1936-2010)

MSA SC 3520-13587

Biography:

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.”¹

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.² 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.”³ 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.⁴ She began her studies as a drama major and appeared in the production “Amen Corner” written by a young James Baldwin.⁵

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*.⁶ 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.⁷ 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 1985.⁸ 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.”⁹ While Clifton did not compose poems for official purposes often, she did concede for [the state’s 350th birthday](#).¹⁰

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, such as childbirth and menstruation, 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."¹¹ Clifton's ability to blend the mundane and the sublime keeps her work accessible to even casual readers and delightful to more jaded critics. An excellent example of Clifton's ability to draw insight from prosaic materials occurs in her poem "[wishes for sons](#)": "i wish them cramps. / i wish them a strange town / and the last tampon. / i wish them no 7-11."¹² While the poem opens with her signature wit, she ends the poem by blending that wit with a more thoughtful tone: "let them think they have accepted / arrogance in the universe, / then bring them to gynecologists / not unlike themselves." Her final lines comment both on the difficulty of empathy and the complexity of gender dynamics.

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.¹³ 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 1986.¹⁴ 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.

Endnotes:

1. Qtd in Linton Weeks, "Poetry's Persistent Listener," *The Washington Post*, 18 November 2000.
[return to text](#)
2. Jocelyn K. Moody. *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997). [return to text](#)
3. Linton Weeks, "Poetry's Persistent Listener," *The Washington Post*, 18 November 2000.
[return to text](#)
4. Moody. [return to text](#)
5. Weeks. [return to text](#)
6. English Department, University of Minnesota. *Voices from the Gaps: Women Writers of Color*, September 18, 1998. <http://voices.cla.umn.edu/newsite/authors/CLIFTONlucille.htm>.
[return to text](#)
7. Ibid. [return to text](#)
8. Maryland State Archives. *Maryland Manual On-Line*, "Maryland at a Glance: Literature," March 19, 2004. <http://www.mdarchives.state.md.us/msa/mdmanual/01glance/html/poet.html>.
[return to text](#)
9. Dennis Kneale, "A New Kind of Laureate," *The Washington Post*, 9 August 1979; Timothy Phelps, "Lucille Clifton, Prominent Black Writer, Named to Curious Job of Poet Laureate," *The Baltimore Sun*, 8 August 1979. [return to text](#)
10. [Maryland State Archives. SPECIAL COLLECTIONS \(Papenfuse Topic File Collection\) Clifton, Lucille, 350th Anniversary Poem, MSA SC 1916-B29-F548.](#) [return to text](#)
11. James Miller, "Lucille Clifton," *The Heath Anthology of American Literature, Third Edition, Volume 2*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1988. [return to text](#)
12. Ibid. [return to text](#)
13. Steven Gray, "A Quiet Poet Gains the Spotlight," *The Washington Post*, 23 November 2000. [return to text](#)
14. [Mary Carole McAuley, "Wise Woman of Words," The Baltimore Sun, 7 May 2007.](#) [return to text](#)

Biography written by 2004 summer intern Amy Hobbs.

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

Lesson Development:

Motivation:

1. As students enter the room, give them a copy of **Student Resource Sheet 1: “Homage to My Hips”** and **Student Resource Sheet 2: Follow-up Questions to Poetry** in order for them to complete as a drill/warm-up. As a class, discuss the answers each student came up with and brainstorm about what this poem might look like in the form of dance.
2. Then, refer students to **Teacher Resource Sheet 1: Lucille Clifton’s Biography**. Teacher may read aloud, students may take turns reading aloud, or students may read silently. Stop for discussion at various points within the reading.
3. Guide students through improvisation while poem is being read out loud (large group improvisation).
4. Ask students to choose five words from the poem that speak to them personally. Ask students to create five movements related to the five words they have chosen (individual work).
5. Then, give each student a copy of **Student Resource Sheet 3: My Own Body Poetry (plural)** or **Student Resource Sheet 4: My Own Body Poetry (singular)**. Ask students to choose one body part, or pair of body parts, that really speaks about him or her as a person. For example, broad shoulders could carry a heavy load or soft hands could comfort someone. Have students complete **Student Resource Sheet 3: My Own Body Poetry (plural)** or **Student Resource Sheet 4: My Own Body Poetry (singular)** with this in mind and then complete questions 1-3 on **Student**

Resource Sheet 5: Body Poetry Reflection & Choreographic Scoring Tool.

6. Once students have completed their body poetry, go over the goal of the next choreography assignment. Individually, students should choreograph a piece that reflects their own body poetry. Make sure to review the criteria that will be used for grading (see **Student Resource Sheet 5: Body Poetry Reflection & Choreographic Scoring Tool**).
7. Divide students into groups (Groups may be small or large, student chosen, or teacher assigned) and give each group about 10-15 minutes to work on these studies, set to instrumental music (chosen by the teacher). During their creative time, move through the room to answer questions and make sure all groups are on task. Groups will take turns sharing their finished work with the rest of the class. Audience members are encouraged to give constructive criticism to the choreographers and performers.

Assessment: Have students evaluate themselves, using the “Self-Evaluation” column of **Student Resource Sheet 5: Body Poetry Reflection & Choreographic Scoring Tool**. Each student must complete this entire sheet (RS-4) and hand it to the teacher for evaluation before performing his or her piece.

Closure: Have students give constructive criticism about their own work, as well as that of their peers. Which body parts really worked? Were there any body parts that were challenging to illustrate through dance? Why do you think that as challenging?

Thoughtful Application(s):

- This lesson could also be used as an exercise in self-image (in Health class, or Language Arts). What is one part of your body that symbolizes a quality in which you take pride?
- This lesson could be used as an introductory lesson during the first week of school. It could be used as a vehicle for students to introduce themselves, or one another.

Lesson Extension(s):

As homework, students may choose a new type of poetry to analyze, rewrite, and to use as inspiration for choreography.

Students may use peer feedback as well as teacher feedback to revise their choreography, and present it again.

Students may link choreography together to create one large piece of “Body Poetry Choreography” to perform.

- The Museum offers several school programs that connect to the curriculum lessons.
 - *Journey in History Theater* provides living history and theatrical performances which highlight African Americans in the museum’s gallery.
 - Take the theme tour, *Heritage* and experience the rich, cultural heritage of Maryland’s African American community. Learn how African Americans established and influence Maryland’s historic communities, social organizations, work traditions and artistic customs.
 - Contact group reservations for schedule updates.
 - At the Museum chose a photo image, art work or object that inspires a dance movement connected to pride or heritage. Create a piece of choreography.
 - At the Museum, read Lucille Clifton’s poem “Blessing the Boat.” Research the meaning of this poem and interpret it with dance movements.

Teacher Resource Sheet 1

Lucille Clifton's Biography

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Student Resource Sheet 1

Homage to My Hips

these hips are big hips.
they need space to
move around in.
they don't fit into little
petty places. these hips
are free hips.
they don't like to be held back.
these hips have never been enslaved,
they go where they want to go
they do what they want to do.
these hips are mighty hips.
these hips are magic hips.
i have known them
to put a spell on a man and
spin him like a top.

--Lucille Clifton

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Student Resource Sheet 2

“Homage to My Hips” Follow-Up Questions

Follow-up: After reading “Homage to My Hips” by Lucille Clifton, answer the following questions thoroughly as instructed.

1. List the various words that Clifton uses to describe her hips.
2. Which movement qualities come to mind when reading this poem?
3. Do you think that Lucille Clifton was **ONLY** referring to her hips when she wrote this poem? If not, what else does this poem state about her?
4. When do you think this poem was written? What do you think was going on socially and historically at the time?
5. **Set it in motion!** In your groups, using the words and phrases given to us by Clifton, compose a short piece of choreography illustrating “Homage to My Hips” by Lucille Clifton (Groups may be small or large, student chosen, or teacher assigned).

Student Resource Sheet 3

My Own Body Poetry (plural)

Now it's your turn! Choose a singular or plural body part that you think best illustrates you (ex: ears are plural, nose is singular). Fill in the blanks to describe this body part(s).

Homage to My (plural) _____

These (noun) _____ are (adjective)_____ .

They need (noun) _____ to

(verb)_____.

They don't (verb) _____ .

these (noun)_____ are (adjective) _____.

They don't like to (verb) _____(adverb) _____.

These (noun)_____ have never been (adjective) _____,

They (verb or adverb)_____.

They (adjective or verb) _____.

These (noun)_____ are (adjective)_____ (noun)_____.

These (noun)_____ are (adjective)_____

(noun)_____.

I have known them

to (verb)_____ and (verb)

_____ like a (noun) _____.

Student Resource Sheet 4

My Own Body Poetry (singular)

Now it's your turn! Choose a singular or plural body part, that you think best illustrates you (ex: ears are plural, nose is singular). Fill in the blanks to describe this body part(s).

Homage to My (singular) _____

this (noun)_____ is a (adjective)_____ (noun)_____.

It needs (noun)_____ to

(verb)_____.

It doesn't (verb) _____ .

This (noun) _____ is (adjective)_____ (adjective)_____.

It doesn't like to (adverb)_____ (verb)_____.

This (noun)_____ have never been (verb) _____,

it (verb)_____.

it (verb)_____.

this (noun)_____ is a(n) (adjective) _____
(noun)_____.

this (noun)_____ is a(n) (adjective) _____
(noun)_____.

I have known it

to (verb)_____ and

(verb)_____ like a (noun)_____.

Student Resource Sheet 5

Body Poetry Reflection & Choreographic Scoring Tool

1. Which body part(s) did you choose to write about? Why?

2. Which words and phrases did you use to describe your chosen body part(s)?

3. What do you want readers to discover about you through your poetry?

4. **Set it in motion!** On your own, compose a piece of choreography inspired by your body poetry. Try your best to display the qualities and traits you describe in your poetry. These compositions will be shared with the class.

Choreographic Scoring Tool

Action	Points	Points	Points
	(8-10) Work demonstrates clear understanding of action and concepts represented from the lesson.	(4-7) Work demonstrates a basic understanding of action and concepts represented from the lesson.	(1-3) Work demonstrates little evidence of understanding of action and concepts represented from the lesson.
Individual and group work demonstrates creation of original movement.	Self assessment		
	Teacher assessment		
Student work shows a clear portrayal of message and effective performance.	Self assessment		
	Teacher assessment		

Student work shows professionalism and focus.	Self assessment		
	Teacher assessment		
Student is prepared and demonstrates excellent work ethic.	Self assessment		
	Teacher assessment		
Student is respectful and attentive throughout lesson and performances. Contributes constructive feedback.	Self assessment		
	Teacher assessment		
Total points (50 possible)	Self assessment		
	Teacher assessment		