

LESSON PLAN

Persona Poetry and Mask-making: Unit for Middle School Students

By Jacy Bryla

This unit is adapted from T&W teaching artists Jane LeCroy's and Samantha Facciolo's poetry programs for sixth-grade students who were making masks as an art class project at IS 218, the Rafael Hernandez Dual Language Magnet School in the Bronx. Alongside their mask-making, the writers asked the students to write poetry that told the story of their masks. The poems were published in two anthologies: I Am a Human Mask and I See My Imagination. The teaching artists visited the art classes four different times, including field trips to the Northwest Coast Hall at the American Museum of Natural History, where many indigenous tribal masks are on display. After the program anthologies were printed, the writers returned to the school to join students in celebrating their work.

Much like tribal masks, poetry is a form of creative expression that preserves culture and history through the devices of symbolism and metaphor. Over four sessions in four weeks, students discussed the use of these devices in poems that described Native American life. Students also studied mask poems, a form of persona poetry. The teaching artists challenged students to write from the perspective of someone else, emphasizing how figurative and descriptive language demonstrates character traits.

UNIT OVERVIEW

Sessions: 3 school visits and 1 field trip

Grade: 6th

Class Length: 70 minutes

Genre: Poetry

Common Core State Standards (Refer to the [ELA Standards > Writing > Grade 6](#)):

- ELA-LITERACY.W.6.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.
- ELA-LITERACY.W.6.5: With some guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.
- ELA-LITERACY.W.6.9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.
- ELA-LITERACY.W.6.10: Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.

LESSON ONE

In this session, teaching artists introduce students the literary devices of metaphor and symbolism in poetry. In keeping with their class assignment, students will also learn about the masks of Pacific Northwest Native Americans through poetry. Students will be challenged to identify the similarities between mask-making and the figurative language present in poetry.

Preparatory Reading: [Northwest Coast Hall at American of Natural History](#)

Lesson Objectives:

Students will:

- Engage in free writing and drawing exercises that employ adjectives.
- Learn about the use of mask-making in Native American culture.
- Brainstorm how mentor poems represent Native American life.
- Reflect on the poetry samples read in class and identify metaphor and symbolism used in the poems.

Guiding Questions:

- How does metaphor and symbolism enhance the story being told in the poem: i.e. what specific details, descriptions, and phrases stand out?
- How do metaphor and symbolism help you to understand Native American culture?
- Are the details in the poems visual, lyrical, imaginative, or word-play?
- How can you incorporate these types of details in your masks and poems?

Warm-up Drawing Exercise (10 minutes):

- Instruct students to think about the art they've produced in their class. Tell them to pick one art work to observe. Then ask students to recreate this work by sketching it on a blank page.

Warm-up Writing Exercise (10 minutes):

- Ask students to free-write the story being told in the sketch. Encourage students to write anything that comes to mind, and ask them to use adjectives in their story.

Review of Exercise (5 minutes):

- Go around the room and have each student share their sketches and one or two adjectives they wrote down.

Native American Orientation (10 minutes):

- Provide a brief overview of the Native American cultures the students will observe during their field trip to the museum. A historical summary can found [here](#).
- Share with students examples of Native Americans masks and their use in Native American cultures. Descriptions of their various uses are summarized [here](#). Some [photographic examples](#) may include:
 - [Animal Masks](#)
 - [Portrait Masks](#)
 - [Abstract Masks](#)

Mentor Text & Discussion (30 minutes):

Read two poems about Native American life:

- “The Clans” by Richard Calmit Adams
- “Hiding in the Mask” by Ellen Bauer

Invite students to discuss the narrative aspects of these poems. Ask students to write down and share their answers. You may hand out these discussion questions on a worksheet too:

- Think about “Hiding in the Mask” and draw what you imagine that mask would look like. What is a specific example of a time in your life you would wear this mask?
- If you could be any animal mentioned in either poem, what would you be and why?
- Describe how the animal lives: What sounds does it make? How does it move?
- If you could be any object mentioned in either poem, what would you be and why?
- Describe the object: What does it look like? Where does it go? How is it used?

While asking students these questions, note each student answer that raises the use of metaphor and symbolism. Highlight what students find most memorable in the language when mentioning the mentor texts.

Closing (5 minutes):

Ask students to think about what they’ve learned and what they hope to see during their field trip. Remind students that the field trip is an opportunity to find inspiration for their own masks and poems. Provide students with guidelines for selecting and observing a mask at the field trip by asking:

- What color represents you? Do you think you’ll find a mask this color?
- In reading the poems, did you imagine yourself as an animal or a person? Would you pick an animal or portrait mask to look at during the field trip?
- What questions would you ask the mask you pick if it could talk to you?

Materials Needed:

- Paper and pencils
- Native American Summary
- Mask References
- *Optional - Reading exercise worksheet with questions*
- Sample poems:
 - “The Clans” by Richard Calmit Adams
 - “Hiding in the Mask” by Ellen Bauer

LESSON TWO

In this session, students visit the American Museum of Natural History to engage with the masks of the Pacific Northwest Native Americans. In doing this, students will draw from the visual craft present within the masks to brainstorm ways they will create their own masks and poems during Lessons Three and Four.

Note: In between this Lesson and Lesson Three, students will begin making their masks. These in-progress masks will be brought to Lesson Three.

Preparatory Reading: Northwestern Coast Hall at American of Natural History

Lesson Objectives:

Students will:

- Review the history of mask-making in Native American culture, and identify how the masks represent Native American life.
- Observe, recreate, and describe one of the Native American masks at the museum.
- Brainstorm through a free-write and sketch the story behind the mask they select.
- Engage in an inquiry-based exercise that will generate imaginative and visual language to use in their poetry and mask projects.
- Identify the literary devices in persona poems that complement and mirror features of the masks in the museum.

Guiding Questions:

- Now that you see the Native American masks in person, what features or details jump out at you?
- How do these features help you to understand Native American life?
- Are there features of these masks that you can include in your own mask and poem? Which features would you include? What words would you use to describe these features? Think about how language we read in the poems is similar to and different from the mask you choose to draw.
- What does it mean to take on a new persona, both through a mask and in a poem?

Native American History Recap (10 minutes):

- Review learning points from Native American Life Summary. The historical summary can found [here](#).
- Point to the different types of masks that students may come across in the gallery space:
 - [Animal Masks](#)
 - [Portrait Masks](#)
 - [Abstract Masks](#)

Drawing & Writing Exercise (35 minutes):

- Ask students to use their sketch notebooks to both sketch one mask and free-write the story they think is being told with the mask.
- Tell students to answer the following questions about the mask they observe. Instruction can be provided orally or via a worksheet:
 - What do you think the mask you drew represents?
 - What stylistic features jump out at you? For example, what colors does the mask have? How would you describe its texture? Is it smooth, rough? What is the mask's shape? Is it an animal or a human? What shapes make the mask an animal or a human?
 - What type of family do you think the mask belonged to?
 - As we learned, many of the masks are used for ceremonies or celebrations. When would you use the mask you see?

- Start thinking about the mask you'll make in class. Using adjectives and objects, describe what you think it might look like. For instance, what colors, shapes, and textures are present?
- Many of the masks are said to have supernatural powers. Will your mask have special powers? If so, which powers?
- Some of these masks were passed down through families. Who in your family would you give your mask to?
- What story do you want your mask to tell?
- Look at the mask you picked and write five words that describe it.
- Write another five words that are similar to the words you just picked. For instance, if I picked the word sunshine, I could write yellow, cheerful, hot, or happy next to it.

Mentor Text & Discussion (20 minutes):

Read the persona poem, "Becoming a Redwood," by Dana Gioia.

Invite students to discuss their initial impressions of this poem. Ask students to write down and share their answers to the following questions:

- Think about the point of view in the poem.
 - Do you think this is how a tree would feel? Why or why not?
 - What did you learn from the tree as the speaker in the poem?
 - Which words, phrases, or descriptions jump out at you?

While asking students these questions, stress key learning points in the students' answers. Highlight what students find most memorable in the poem and reference the use of imagination in the text.

Closing Questions (5 minutes):

Ask students to think about what they've learned from their masks and the poem they read. Students will continue constructing their masks and writing their poems in Lesson Three. Provide students with guidelines for brainstorming their projects by asking:

- This type of poem—one written from the perspective of someone or something else—is called a persona poem. If you were to write a poem from the perspective from someone or something else, what point of view would you write from?
- What are words you would never use, but your persona might? For example, I would never say, "I am hungry for a mouse!" However, if I were an owl I might say, "I am hungry for a mouse!"
- Think about what your mask might look like. Will you describe what your mask looks like in your poem? For example, a line from today's poem, "You are your own pale shadow in the quarter moon," could be depicted through crescent moon-shaped pupils on a mask.

Materials Needed:

- Northwest Coast Hall at American Museum of Natural History
- Paper and pencils
- Native American Learning Points and Summary
- Mask References
- *Optional: Sketching and Drawing worksheet with exercise questions*
- *Optional: Mentor text worksheet with exercise questions*
- "Becoming a Redwood" by Diana Gioia

LESSON THREE

In this session, students begin drafting their poems. In between Lessons Two and Three, students have begun constructing their masks. Students will use their brainstorming materials (their museum worksheets and mentor text exercises) and in-progress masks as inspiration for their poems.

Lesson Objectives:

Students will:

- Engage in an inquiry-based exercise that will reiterate the poetic devices of metaphor, repetition, and symbolism from mentor texts.
- Review brainstorming materials and draw inspiration for poems.
- Share brainstorm ideas with peers and instructors.
- Clarify the point of view, structure, and story behind and within each poem.
- Begin drafting poems alongside the creation of their masks.

Guiding Questions:

- Of all the poems we read in class, which will you use as a model for your poem?
- Now that you have begun making your mask, what about your mask will you include in your poem?
- What story do you hope to tell to others when they read your poem?
- After hearing your peers' ideas about your mask, what might you include in your poem draft and why?

Warm up: Free Write and Drawing Exercise (10 minutes)

- Ask students to sketch the mask they saw at the museum, without looking at notes or worksheets from the first two lessons.
- After 5 minutes of sketching, tell students to write down one word they used to describe the mask they drew during the museum visit. Once they've selected the word, ask them to write a different word that better describes the sketch they just drew.

Mentor Text & Discussion (20 minutes):

Have students retrieve their materials from Lessons One and Two. Ask a few students to share any phrases or words they remember from the poems read in those sessions. Then read one more poem, "I Am," by Joanna Hewitt.

Invite students to discuss their initial impressions of this poem, including and the use of the word "I" and repetition. Ask students to write down and share their answers to the following questions:

- Think about the structure of this poem. Why do you think each line begins with the word "I"?
- Does the "I" make you feel closer to the speaker in the poem? Why or why not?
- Which words, phrases, or descriptions jump out at you? Besides the word "I," which other phrases are repeated?

- Look at the other poems we've read. How does this repeating structure make this poem different than the others we've read in class? Which of these poems do you like the most and why?

As students answer the questions, highlight what they find most memorable in the poems and reference the use of repetition and symbolism in each text that is mentioned.

Small Group Brainstorm (20 minutes):

Put students in small groups and ask them to look over their written materials and in-progress masks. Instruct each group to do the following:

- Have each student share their in-progress mask with others in their group.
- The other students will respond to the presenter by sharing one word that describes their mask.
- The presenting student will write down their peers' descriptive words.

Draft Poem (20 minutes):

Instruct students to spend the last 20 minutes of this session drafting their poems. Students may draft their poem in the following ways:

- Write a synopsis of the story they plan to tell through their poem.
- Describe which type of poem or structure they plan to use. They may point to one of the mentor texts as an example of their selection(s).
- Make a list of words, phrases, images they plan to use in their poem. These words and phrases should represent elements and features of their in-progress masks.

Tell students them that they must bring a completed draft of their poem to Lesson Four.

Materials Needed:

- Worksheets, notes, and poems from Lessons One and Two
- Paper and pencils
- In-progress masks and other mask- making materials
- "I Am" by Joanna Hewitt

LESSON FOUR

In this final session, students share their draft poems and in-progress masks with their peers and teachers. In doing this, students engage with their work through the eyes of their readers/observers. Students also provide literary analysis and constructive feedback on their peers' projects.

Lesson Objectives:

Students will:

- Present their work to their peers and instructors.
- Provide feedback and suggestions on other students' work.
- Identify the use of poetic device in other students' work.
- Clarify and address parts of their drafts that could be edited, improved, or expanded upon.

Guiding Questions:

- What areas of your poem do you think you could improve upon?
- What inspires you about your classmates' poems? What stanzas or lines do you like and why?
- After hearing your peers' feedback, what might you change in your poem draft and why?

Warm up: Free-Write and Drawing Exercise (15 minutes):

- Without looking at their in-progress masks, ask students to sketch their masks from memory while changing one distinct feature. For instance, if my mask were a cat, I would exclude the whiskers from my drawing.
- After 7 minutes of sketching, tell students to write a stanza or line
- about the missing feature.

Draft Reading & Mask Peer Review (40 minutes):

Have students retrieve their in-progress masks and draft poems. Assign students into groups of four. While in their groups students are to do the following (these instructions may be passed out on worksheets):

- One student will present their mask and read their draft poem aloud once.
 - Other students in the group will be listening closely.
- The same student will read their poem again.
 - This time, students will write down the following while listening:
 - 1. Something they really liked about the poem.
 - Cite a word or phrase used in the poem.
 - 2. Something they really liked about the mask.
 - Cite a feature while using descriptive language.
 - 3. Something they wanted to hear or see more of in either the mask or poem.
 - Cite a line from the poem that could expanded upon or describe a feature of the mask that seems incomplete.
- Students will then go around in a circle and share their thoughts with presenter, and the presenter will take notes on their peers' feedback.

While students discuss, observe the groups, providing support, clarity and guidance when needed. Highlight and reiterate what the other students found most memorable in the presenter's draft poem. Reference and point to the students' use of literary devices in each poem.

Editing Exercise (15 minutes):

Have students look over their notes from the group exercise. Instruct students to spend the remainder of class reviewing their peers' feedback. In preparation for their homework assignment, which is to edit their poems for publication, students should consider:

1. What line, stanza or literary device did your peers really like in your poem? Where else could you add another line like the one your peers liked?
2. Was there a line or stanza in your poem that your peers wanted you to change or add to? If you were to change or add to this line or stanza, how might you do that? Try writing the revision below:
3. Pretend you were one of your classmates. Now pretend that you are reading your poem for the first time through this classmate's eyes. What might they like about the poem? What would they want to see revised?

Materials Needed:

- Completed draft of poems
- In-progress mask and other mask-making materials
- Paper & Pencil
- Optional: Editing worksheet with exercise questions