“Last Affair: Bessie’s Blues Song” by Michael S. Harper

**Theme**

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| **Language, Music, and the Vernacular Tradition in African American Poetry** |

**Standards**

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| **Common Core**   * Literature 2) Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text. * Literature 3) Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed). * Literature 4) Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors). * Craft and Structure 4) Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone). * Knowledge and Ideas 4) Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. * Types and Purposes d) Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters. * Production and Distribution of Writing 4) Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.   **Standards of Learning for Virginia**   * 10.4.a) Make inferences and draw conclusions using references from the text(s) for support. * 10.4.g) Interpret how themes are connected within and across texts. * 11.4.a) Describe contributions of different cultures to the development of American literature. * 11.4.g) Interpret how the sound and imagery of poetry support the subject, mood, and theme, and appeal to the reader’s senses. * 12.4.b) Analyze how authors use key literary elements to contribute to meaning and interpret how themes are connected across texts. * 12.4.e) Interpret how the sound and imagery of poetry support the subject, mood, and theme, and appeal to the reader’s senses. |

**Lesson Body and Sequence:**

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| **STUDENT WILL DO** | **TEACHER WILL DO** |
| **Background Information** | |
| Michael S. Harper (1938-2016) was an acclaimed poet, educator, and editor. Before his death in 2016, he had published ten books of poetry. Harper was known for his use of the jazz and blues in his poems, specifically regarding rhythm and syncopation, while also incorporating famous musicians into his poems. By the time of the 1994 conference, Harper had published eight books of poetry and was serving as the poet laureate of Rhode Island. He read “Last Affair: Bessie’s Blues Song” during Thursday’s Keynote Speeches. In this poem, Harper draws on the death of Bessie Smith, a blues musician, and uses the blues tradition to embody her and tell her story. As you watch the video and read the poem, think about why Harper used the blues tradition to tell Smith’s story instead of using a different style.  Bessie Smith (1894-1937) was an influential blues musician of her era. Her music was centered around themes such as poverty, intra-racial conflict, female sexuality, and love. Between 1923-1933, Smith recorded one-hundred-and-sixty cuts, recording with artists like Louis Armstrong, Coleman Hawkins, and Fletcher Henderson. She died in Mississippi due to injuries sustained in a car accident in 1937, right on the edge of the Swing Era, where she was hoping to make her musical return. Smith was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 2006. As you watch the video and read the poem, focus on how Michael S. Harper incorporates her into the poem. | Explain who Michael S. Harper and Bessie Smith are. Briefly explain how music can have an influence on other mediums, and how it has influenced Harper in his career. |
| **Reader Response Questions** | |
| 1. How has music influenced you in your life? | These questions are designed to help students begin to think about the issues that will be discussed further in the lesson. |
| 1. Have you ever lost someone? How did it affect you? How did you get through it? |
| 1. Think about your own use of music and your moods—do you listen to music to change your moods? Or to feel deeper? Explain. |
| **History and Culture** | |
| 1. Blues music in the blues tradition is related to jazz and uses something called, “call-and-response” and rhymed narratives. Do you see these elements in “Last Affair: Bessie’s Blues Song?” If so, how is Harper using them? | Go over call-and-response and the significance of the blues tradition in African American culture. |
| 1. How does the theme of this poem relate to the recurring themes of Bessie’s music [poverty, intra-racial conflict, female sexuality]? How do you think these themes would be received in the music industry today? Do you think the reaction was different back in the 1920s? | Review themes. Discuss how Smith’s themes are used in her music. |
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| **Poet’s Craft and Structure** | |
| 1. Structure is the way that the poem is organized. Harper structures this poem in the style of a blues song, using the italicized stanzas as refrains. How does this format change the way the poem is read? How would its meaning change if the refrain were removed? | Review different types of structure and introduce students to the structure of blues songs for reference. |
| 1. Why do you think that Harper removes certain letters, as in the case of “fun’ral” in the fifth stanza? How does this affect how the poem relates to the musical elements of the poem? |  |
| 1. Imagery is the way that the poet uses language to paint a picture for the reader. Find what you think is the most striking piece of imagery and write about it. Why did this stand out to you? How does it make you feel? | Review imagery and how it can be used to heighten the experience. |
| 1. Why does Harper choose to use dark imagery in the poem? What does the poem gain from having darker imagery? What does it lose? |  |
| 1. Look at the lines “Fifty dollar record / cut the vein in her neck / fool about her money / toll her black trainwreck,” What do you think Harper is saying about Bessie? How do these lines paint a picture of her life? |  |
| **Reading and Writing Connections** | |
| 1. Choose one or two lines from one of your favorite songs and work it into a ten-line poem. | These Reading/Writing Connections are designed to encourage student choice and acts as the formative assessment for the lesson. Students should be able to utilize skills and concepts discussed in the lesson to complete either of the connections. |
| 1. Pick one of your favorite musicians and write a ten-line poem about their music and what it means to you. |
| 1. Write your story in the style of one of your favorite music genres. How does your genre depict who you are? |

**Materials**

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| * Printed copy of poem (optional) * Computer or tablet * Paper/Pencil (optional—teachers may decide to have students complete all activities on their computer or tablet) |