“The Apple Trees in Sussex” by Samuel Allen

**Theme**

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| **History, Witness, and the Struggle for Freedom in African American Poetry** |

**Standards**

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| **Common Core**   * 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 5) Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact. * Literature 6) Analyze a case in which grasping point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement). * Language 5) Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings. * 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**   * 10.3.e) Explain the meaning of literary and classical allusions and figurative language in text. * 10.4. b) Analyze the similarities and differences of techniques and literary forms represented in the literature of different cultures and eras. * 10.4. h) Explain the influence of historical context on the form, style, and point of view of a literary text(s). * 11.4) The student will read, comprehend, and analyze relationships among American literature, history, and culture. * 12.4) The student will read, comprehend, and analyze the development of British literature and literature of other cultures. |

**Lesson Body and Sequence:**

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| **STUDENT WILL DO** | **TEACHER WILL DO** |
| **Background Information** | |
| Samuel W. Allen’s (1917-2015) poetic work is deeply rooted in the heritage of Black people, specifically in the oral tradition and African survival. Allen is known for merging African and African American culture in his poetry. His devotion to the fight for freedom in Black affairs, both literary and political, put his poetry at the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement. As you watch his performance and read his poem below, think about what qualifies as “civilized” or “savage.” What kind of characteristics do you assign to these words? | Introduce students to Samuel Allen.  Review the history of American Colonialism and slavery. |
| **Reader Response Questions** | |
| Write about a time in which you felt you were invisible to someone either at home or at school. You wanted to be seen, heard, and valued but you were not. How did it make you feel? | These questions are designed to help students begin to think about the concepts that will be introduced and discussed throughout the poem. |
| Do you ever feel a need to change your behavior around certain people? Who do you feel you need to change for and why? |
| **History and Culture** | |
| What historical time period does this poem describe? | Review the cultural context of slavery in the United States. |
| Through lines such as “I did not climb the apple trees in Sussex / or wait upon the queen in London town,” and “the raging lust of the big house by night and all pale / and ravenous things,” Allen juxtaposes the civility and savagery of Colonial America. What kind of connections can you make between this poem and what you have learned so far in school about Colonial American history? | Ask students to recall what they have previously learned about Colonial America and slavery in the United States. |
| Allen references London and Mississippi as the primary locations within the poem. What are the historical and cultural implications of each setting? |  |
| In the poem, the speaker cries out to African Gods, Shango God of Thunder and Damballah Sky Father and Creator of All Life. Why does the speaker feel that they have been forsaken by their gods? What religious icons replaced their gods? | Briefly discuss prominent religions in the African American Community (such as Christianity and Islam). |
| **Poet’s Craft and Structure** | |
| Irony is a literary device which contrasts the expectations for a given situation against the actual reality. Allen uses irony to expose colonial acts of savagery. Identify and explain two or more lines from the poem that disrupt the cultural perceptions of Colonial America. How does Allen expose a culture of violence and brutality? | Refresh students’ understanding of irony to eliminate common misconceptions.  Distinguish between the three different types of irony (situational, verbal, and dramatic). |
| Understatement is a figure of speech used intentionally to make a situation seem less extreme or important than it truly is. The first few lines of the poem, “I did not climb the apple trees in Sussex or wait upon the Queen in London town,” are examples of understatement. What is the significance of these actions and the implications of the speaker’s inability to do them? | Define the term “understatement.”  Discuss the various examples of understatement that are present throughout the poem. |
| Go through the poem and underline all of the action verbs. How do they express the power dynamics within the poem? | Revisit “action verbs” to prepare students for this activity.  Discuss the power in one’s ability to act and the restrictions of being limited to reactions. (Slaver and enslaved). |
| How is the perspective of the poem unique to the speaker? What kind of words does Allen use to indicate the circumstances of the speaker? | Students should recall and empathize with the circumstances of enslaved peoples. |
| In creating the structure of the poem, Allen utilized iambic pentameter and free verse. Iambic pentameter refers to a verse consisting of five metrical feet that each consist of one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable while lines of free verse are written without rhyme or regular meter. Notice how Allen uses iambic pentameter to write about London and free verse to write about Mississippi. What is the effect of alternating between iambic pentameter and free verse? Why did he choose to assign these structures to these specific locations? | Go over iambic pentameter and free verse in poetry.  Discuss the forced propriety of English culture and the struggle for freedom in African American culture to distinguish between purposes of iambic pentameter and free verse. |
| **Reading and Writing Connections** | |
| Why is “The Apple Trees in Sussex” set in Mississippi? Allen identifies Mississippi as “the worst state.” What does he mean by this? Read the timeline in the Furious Flower Archive and list events that you have studied from the Civil Rights Movement and identify those that occurred specifically in Mississippi. | 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. |
| What historical misconception do you feel passionately about? Alternating the poetic forms of iambic pentameter and free verse, write a poem that exposes the misconception through the lens of that historical perspective. |

**Materials**

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| * Printed copy of poem (optional) * Computer/tablet * Paper and pencil (optional – teachers may decide if they want students to complete all activities on their computer or tablet) |