“Cousins” by Kevin Young

**Theme**

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| **Seeding the Future of Black Poetry** |

**Standards**

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| **Common Core**   * Literature 1) Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain. * Production and Distribution 4) Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. * 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. * Knowledge and Ideas 5) Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.   **Standards of Learning for Virginia**   * 11.3.e) Explain the meaning of literary and classical allusions and figurative language in text. * 11.4.e) Analyze how context and language structures convey an author’s intent and viewpoint. * 11.4.h) Evaluate how specific word choices, syntax, tone, and voice support the author’s purpose. * 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** | |
| Kevin Young (b. 1970), the current Poetry Editor of the *New Yorker* and Director of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, has written multiple books of poetry and nonfiction and was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2016. He studied at Harvard University where he became a member of the Dark Room Collective, a group of young poets dedicated to forming a community of established and emerging African American writers. He attended the 1994 Conference as a member of the group and participated in Saturday’s Fisted Reading centered on the Collective. Before beginning his reading, Young publicly thanked Lucille Clifton for selecting his soon-to-be-released collection of poetry, *Most Way Home*, for the National Poetry Series. In following Rita Dove’s advice to “make yourself a little uncomfortable,” Young chose to read “Cousins,” a poem centered on his relationship with his family. | Introduce poet and discuss role of Dark Room Collective (DRC) – most of the members have gone on to become prominent figures within the community of African American poetry. Emphasize how these poets were incredibly new to the scene at the time of this conference and discuss then vs. now.  BRIEF SYNOPSIS OF DRC:  Founded in 1988 by Thomas Sayers Ellis and Sharan Strange, who were inspired after they went to James Baldwin’s funeral in 1987 as Harvard undergraduates. The mission for the group was to form a community of established and emerging African American writers.  At the 1994 Furious Flower Conference, Sharan Strange, Thomas Sayers Ellis, Natasha Trethewey, Kevin Young, John Keene, Vera Beatty, and Major Jackson performed as the Dark Room Collective, but members also included Tracy K. Smith, Janice Lowe, Artress Bethany White, Nehassaiu deGannes, and Carl Phillips. Phillips and deGannes attended the ‘94 Conference, but they did not perform with the DRC. Strange and Young began hosting readings at their Victorian house in Cambridge. In the home, large groups would gather in the living room, where they held many poetry readings, including those by Elizabeth Alexander, Cornelius Eady, Yusef Komunyakaa, and later Derek Walcott and Alice Walker. The reading series soon expanded to include musical performances, art shows, and workshops. When crowds became too large for the living room in Cambridge, the DRC moved to the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston and later the Boston Playwrights Theatre at Boston University. The DRC’s final performances were “drive-by readings,” where they traveled the country to inspire young readers and writers. The group finally disbanded in 1998, ten years after it began.  OPTIONAL – DISCUSS RITA DOVE AND LUCILLE CLIFTON’S LASTING IMPACT ON THE NEXT GENERATION. |
| **Reader Response Questions** | |
| What does “family” mean to you? | These questions are designed to help students begin to think about the concepts and issues that will be introduced and discussed in this lesson. |
| Is there anyone in your family who you feel especially close to? |
| How do you feel the events of your life have shaped you? |
| Do you feel that there are qualities and characteristics of your personality that can be attributed to your family? Which ones and how? |
| **History and Culture** | |
| Throughout the poem, Young reveals information about his cousins through dedications, indirectly revealing information about himself. How does Young use these dedications to represent the impact that his family has had on him? | Make sure students understand what the dedications are – each moment where Young has written some version of “This is for” is a dedication. |
| “Cousins” places a high value on familial relationships. What does this reveal about the values of the community Young was raised with? | Discuss how values can change from family to family and culture to culture. |
| How does Young’s poem emphasize the importance of family and community in coping with loss? |  |
| **Poet’s Craft and Structure** | |
| Allusion is a literary device designed to reference an idea or concept without explicitly stating it. What allusions can you find within the poem? Write the words down and explain the allusion. | Discuss common allusions within literature and history – ex: Bible, DaVinci’s Mona Lisa, Greek Mythology, etc. |
| Look at Young’s use of commas, em dashes (–), and periods. Go through the poem and change the punctuation. Does this change the story? How? | Ensure that students are aware of the different uses and purposes of these forms of punctuation. |
| What do you think is the significance of Young’s decision to use these forms of punctuation? What is the significance of their placement? |  |
| Repetition is a literary device that repeats the same words or phrases to help readers recognize and understand an idea or theme within the poem. Young’s use of the phrases “This is for” and “For” is an example of repetition. What do you think the is the purpose of Young’s use of repetition? | Review purpose of repetition within literary works. |
| How does the repetition of phrases throughout the poem create a sense of intimacy? |  |
| **Reading and Writing Connections** | |
| Using the repetition and structure of “Cousins,” name and describe at least five family members or friends. Write three or more stanzas with at least seven lines each. | These Reading/Writing Connections are designed to encourage student choice and act 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. |
| Write a letter to a family member or friend. Use allusions, repetition, and the different forms of punctuation discussed above to thank them for the role they play in your life. |

**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) |