“Some Kind of Crazy” by Major Jackson

**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.
* Literature 9) Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.
* Craft and Structure 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.
* 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
* Language 5) Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

**Standards of Learning for Virginia** * 11.3.e) Explain the meaning of literary and classical allusions and figurative language in text.
* 11.4.d) Interpret the social or cultural function of American literature.
* 11.4.h) Evaluate how specific word choices, syntax, tone, and voice support the author’s purpose.
* 12.3.d) Explain the meaning of common idioms, and literary and classical allusions in text.
* 12.4.e) Interpret how the sound and imagery of poetry support the subject, mood, and theme, and appeal to the reader’s senses
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**Lesson Body and Sequence:**

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| **STUDENT WILL DO** | **TEACHER WILL DO** |
| **Background Information** |
| Major Jackson (b. 1968) graduated from Temple University with a degree in accounting. Instead of utilizing his degree, he decided to pursue poetry and is now a renowned poet, editor, and professor. Jackson attended the 1994 Conference as 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 went on to publish his first book of poems, *Leaving Saturn*, in 2002. By participating in the Conference’s Fisted Reading centered on the Dark Room Collective, Jackson was one of the poets who represented “the bright promise” of the future of African American poetry. In introducing “Some Kind of Crazy,” Jackson talks about the Theatre of the Absurd, a label used to describe dramatic works of European and American dramatists based off of an assertion made by Albert Camus that “the human situation is essentially absurd, devoid of purpose.” Works within the Theatre of the Absurd are written from a distanced perspective, as if looking down on human’s actions. Keep this concept in mind while watching the video below and listen closely to how Jackson introduces the poem before he begins reading. | 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.Introduce students to concept of the Theatre of the Absurd, make sure that they understand the description provided within the background information and expand upon it if necessary.  |
| **Reader Response Questions** |
| What is something you want so much you can practically see it? Describe it.  | These questions are designed to help students begin to think about the concepts and issues that will be introduced and discussed in this lesson. |
| Who or what is your ideal “community of believers?”  |
| How do you feel you represent the future?  |
| **History and Culture** |
| In Jackson’s introduction, he says, “in college you learn about the Theatre of the Absurd peering down on those guys and, um, I grew up in North Philly and there was this guy named Steve who used to walk around for years like he was driving a car.” Does Jackson’s portrayal of Steve agree or disagree with the assertion of the Theatre of the Absurd? Why or why not?  | OPTIONAL – Walk students through how Jackson’s description of Steve can relate to the Theatre of the Absurd’s vision of looking down on the actions of humans.  |
| Jackson goes on to say, “you come to understand that yeah, your neighborhood is kind of absurd, but people like Steve are family, y’know.” What does this statement tell you about the value of community in African American culture? | Discuss how values can change from family to family and culture to culture. Remind students how communities can be built from this concept. |
| **Poet’s Craft and Structure** |
| Poets often utilize specific words or phrases to convey their meaning. This is referred to as word choice. Pick what you believe to be the most important word from each stanza and explain the importance of each word.  | Review word choice and its impact within literary works. |
| Rewatch the video and pay attention to the differences between Jackson’s reading and the published version of the poem. Do you think there is a significance in Jackson’s change in word choice or omission of stanzas? Why? | For this question, it might be helpful to provide students with a transcribed version of the poem Jackson reads at the 1994 Conference as well as the published version.  |
| Sometimes, we associate certain words with specific images. Poets often utilize these descriptive words, or imagery, to create a picture. How does Jackson utilize imagery to describe Steve’s car? Use examples from the poem to support your explanation.  | Review imagery and uses within literature. |
| In “Some Kind of Crazy,” Jackson uses imagery to paint a picture of his community. As a representative of the “bright future” of African American poetry, how is Jackson’s use of imagery paying homage to his roots?  |  |
| **Reading and Writing Connections** |
| Write a nine-line poem using the words you chose earlier. Only use one of your chosen words per line and keep the words in the same order as they appear in Jackson’s poem.  | 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. |
| Think about your community, the good, the bad, and the absurd of it. Using imagery, write a paragraph (at least five sentences) about your community.  |

**Materials**

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| * Printed copy of published poem (optional)
* Printed copy of transcription of poem from 1994 Conference reading (optional)
* Computer or tablet
* Paper/Pencil (optional – teachers may decide to have students complete all activities on their computer or tablet)
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