

Inauguration 2009
NewsDepth, January 22, 2009
Classroom Lessons



Overview:

Barack Hussein Obama was sworn in Tuesday as the 44th president of the United States, writing a new chapter in American history as the first African-American to hold the nation's highest office. Millions watched from the National Mall and around the world as he told our nation that we must choose "hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict and discord" and called on the country to "begin the work of remaking America." Obama wasn't the only one making history. Elizabeth Alexander became only the fourth poet to read at the presidential swearing ceremonies. Robert Frost read his poetry for John F. Kennedy in 1961. Bill Clinton asked Maya Angelou to read her work for his 1993 inauguration. In 1997 Clinton again asked a poet, Miller Williams, to read for the inauguration. In our activities celebrating the inauguration, students will read and respond to poetry, learn about the history of inaugural poetry, and discuss poetic devices.

Grade Level: 7-8

Subject: Language Arts

Standards:

Students will distinguish how an author establishes mood and meaning.

Students will compare and contrast important ideas, concepts and themes.

Students will write and deliver simple presentations - poems



Elizabeth Alexander

Classroom Activities:

1. Activity #1 Discussion of the History of Poetry at U.S. Presidential Inaugurations.

- Visit <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/race-for-whitehouse/obamas-inauguration-day-poem-1451351.html> This site provides a good thorough examination of the history of poetry at the inaugurations.
- A brief history: Only four times in U.S. History has poetry been read at presidential inaugurations. Robert Frost read his poetry for John F. Kennedy in 1961. Bill Clinton asked Maya Angelou to read her work for his 1993 inauguration. In 1997 Clinton again asked a poet, Miller Williams, to read for the inauguration. Barack Obama asked poet Elizabeth Alexander to read a poem for his inauguration this past week.

- What did you think of Elizabeth Alexander's poem? Let's listen to her read her poem again: <http://edwardbyrne.blogspot.com/2009/01/inaugural-poem-by-elizabeth-alexander.html>
- Distribute copies of her poem (handout)
- Discuss what they think Elizabeth was saying in her poem. What was her message? Choose various passages for the students to read aloud. Have them take turns interpreting the passage.
- The following website provides an interview with Elizabeth Alexander and Jim Lehrer of PBS's NewsHour. http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/jan-june09/inaug_poet_01-13.html Alexander reflects on her Inaugural Reading.
- This NPR interview also reflects the challenge of writing a poem for the Inauguration <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=98467631>

2. Activity #2 Comparison of Poems

- Assign students a partner or have them in small groups. Have students read about each of the previous poets who have read poems in the swearing in ceremonies. Then have them read the poems from the websites or print them out for them.

- Robert Frost

<http://www.orwelltoday.com/jfkinaugpoem.shtml>

Students will learn something unusual about Frost's poems. The poem he read, "The Gift Outright" was not the poem he intended to read. He actually wrote another poem, but the sun was too bright on his paper and he couldn't see what he had written so he recited the other one from memory.



Robert Frost

- Maya Angelou

<http://poetry.eserver.org/angelou.html>

See a video of Dr. Angelou reading her poem <http://remixamerica.org/videos/maya-angelou-1993-bill-clinton-inauguration>

- Miller Williams

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/inaug/mon/poem.htm>

An excellent interview with Miller Williams and PBS's Elizabeth Farnsworth



Maya Angelou

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/jan-june97/williams_1-16.html

Have students list what they think the similarities and differences are in each of the poems. Ask

- In what ways are the poems reflecting the time of the inauguration for which it was read?
- Can you summarize the message that each poem is trying to deliver?

- What images can you see as you read each poem?
- Did any of the poems sound more like a poem than the others?
- How does each poet make us think about the past?
- What are each of the poet's dreams for the future?
- Identify the poetic style of each poem.
- A reference for a comparison of the poems:
<http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5j10Btai2OS-qIntq33jIE9Z3VmKQD95R77TO0>

3. Activity #3 Write your own inaugural poem

- Ask students to imagine that they have been asked to write and present a poem at the inauguration. After studying the poems of the past encourage them to think of what they would write about.
- Assign students to write their own inauguration poem. Give them 2 days for this assignment. They are to go home and ask for ideas from parents, grandparents, and siblings about what message they think needs to be delivered. Have the students share their poems with the class.

Resources

Lessons

<http://www.teachervision.fen.com/poetry/lesson-plan/4414.html>

Teacher Vision's lesson on Presidential Inaugural Poetry

http://www.salon.com/books/feature/2009/01/15/inauguration_poem/

How to write a poem for the President. This site includes more history as well.

http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=333

Edsitement lesson plan on the Inauguration including links for inaugural poetry

General

<http://www.elizabethalexander.net/home.html>

Elizabeth Alexander's Website

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=99468172>

NPR invited some of the most renowned poets to write Inaugural Poems. These include audio files of the readings.

Photos

http://images.nymag.com/images/2/daily/2009/01/20090120_speech_560x375.jpg

Picture of President Obama

<http://flickr.com/photos/usatoday/3212620711/>

Picture of Elizabeth Alexander

<http://www.nytimes.com/imagepages>

Pictures of Robert Frost and Maya Angelou

Inauguration 2009 Poem by Elizabeth Alexander

Praise song for the day.

Each day we go about our business, walking past each other, catching each others' eyes or not, about to speak or speaking. All about us is noise. All about us is noise and bramble, thorn and din, each one of our ancestors on our tongues.

Someone is stitching up a hem, darning a hole in a uniform, patching a tire, repairing the things in need of repair.

Someone is trying to make music somewhere with a pair of wooden spoons on an oil drum with cello, boom box, harmonica, voice.

A woman and her son wait for the bus.

A farmer considers the changing sky;

A teacher says, "Take out your pencils. Begin."

We encounter each other in words, words spiny or smooth, whispered or declaimed; words to consider, reconsider.

We cross dirt roads and highways that mark the will of someone and then others who said, "I need to see what's on the other side; I know there's something better down the road." We need to find a place where we are safe; We walk into that which we cannot yet see. Say it plain, that many have died for this day. Sing the names of the dead who brought us here, who laid the train tracks, raised the bridges, picked the cotton and the lettuce, built brick by brick the glittering edifices they would then keep clean and work inside of.

Praise song for struggle; praise song for the day. Praise song for every hand-lettered sign; The figuring it out at kitchen tables.

Some live by "Love thy neighbor as thy self."

Others by first do no harm, or take no more than you need.

What if the mightiest word is love, love beyond marital, filial, national. Love that casts a widening pool of light. Love with no need to preempt grievance. In today's sharp sparkle, this winter air, anything can be made, any sentence begun.

On the brink, on the brim, on the cusp -- praise song for walking forward in that light.

