



Literary Arts 9
Jazz Poetry Workshop

Station 1

We Real Cool
Gwendolyn Brooks

THE POOL PLAYERS.
SEVEN AT THE GOLDEN SHOVEL.

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Think gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon.

Personal Letter No. 3
Sonia Sanchez

nothing will keep
us young you know
not young men or
women who spin
their youth on
cool playing sounds.
we are what we
are what we never
think we are.
no more wild geo
graphies of the
flesh. echoes. that
we move in tune
to slower smells.
it is a hard thing
to admit that
sometimes after midnight
i am tired
of it all.

Directions:

One recurring theme in jazz poetry deals with young people living recklessly. After the end of the Civil War and through the first half of the twentieth century, many Black Americans moved to northern cities where life moved quickly as a result of mechanization from inventions like the assembly line. In order to escape the numbing pressures of the workday, people partied hard—and jazz was the popular music of the time. Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000) and Sonia Sanchez (b. 1934) are two of the most well known female jazz poets. Both women’s poems shed light on different aspects of Black American life—often focusing on common people in their everyday lives.

1. Read the two poems, and determine the specific theme of each.
2. How does Brooks’s use of vernacular grammar (slang) affect the tone of “We Real Cool”? How would the poem be different if she had used “proper” written grammar?
3. What do you think Sanchez means by “no more wild geo / graphies of the / flesh”? Go beyond the obvious reference to activities reserved for those over 27 and consider other possibilities. 😊
4. Do these poems celebrate reckless living or condemn it? Give one specific example from each poem to back up your claim.
5. Finished? Check out bonus videos on our class webpage!



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Station 2

Mother to Son
Langston Hughes

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.
But all the time
I've been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So, boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps.
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now—
For I've still goin', honey,
I've still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

haiku
(for domestic workers
in the african diaspora)¹
Sonia Sanchez

i works hard but treated
bad man. i'se telling you de
truth i full of it.

¹ *The African Diaspora (pronounced die-ASS-por-uh) refers to everywhere displaced Africans moved as a result of the transatlantic slave trade. Diaspora literally means "dispersed." We also often see the word "Diaspora" referring to everywhere Jewish people moved to escape the Nazis in World War II. This parallel is not coincidental.*

Directions:

One recurring theme in jazz poetry deals with Black Americans fighting for equality—especially in the years leading up to the passing of the Civil Rights Amendment in 1965. Part of that fight meant recognizing the everyday struggles of people working in demeaning jobs that were hard on the body and spirit. Langston Hughes (1902-1967) and Sonia Sanchez (b. 1934) wrote several poems about average people doing everyday jobs.

1. Read the two poems, and determine the specific theme of each.
2. Why do both poets choose to use informal (vernacular) language in these pieces? How does it affect your opinion of the speakers in the poems?
3. What is the main difference between the speakers in both poems?
4. Sonia Sanchez writes many haiku like this one. As students, we often write humorous haiku because of the strict size limitations of the form. Consider Sanchez's motives for choosing to write haiku. Do you think this haiku is effective? Would you like to see more, or do you think the poem stands well on its own?
5. Finished? Check out bonus videos on our class webpage!



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Station 3

Playing the Invisible Saxophone *En el Combo de las Estrellas*
Harryette Mullen

One of these days I'm gonna write a real performance poem.
A poem that can grab the microphone and sing
till voice becomes music, and music dance.
A boogie poem sparkled with star presence.

The way I'll score it, poem gonna dance into melody.
(Let me tell you, this poem can move!)
And the way I'll choreograph the words,
each sound be a musical note
that flies off the page like some crazy blackbird.

Yeah, gonna have words turning into dance,
bodymoving music,
a get-down poem so kinetically energetic
it sure put disco to shame.
Make it a snazzy jazzy poem extravaganza with pizzazz.
Poem be going solo,
flying high on improbable improvisational innovation.
Poem be blowing hard!

Want to speak a wordsong that moves folks' minds
and gets em up dancing to their own heartbeats.
Poem, say some words that jump into the blood
and tapdance in the pulse like rainfall.
Gonna let the rhythm of this poem
soak through the skin like rain into earth.

Let me play musician magician,
growing out my sleeve a poem that raises cane,
Poem so sweet, be my magical musical instrument,
flashing back the spotlight's spectrum as meteoric shower.
And poem, shoot off sparks like comets with tails of fire
as I play the invisible saxophone *en el combo de las estrellas*.

Directions:

Harryette Mullen (b. 1953) is an award-winning poet and professor at UCLA.

1. Read the poem. (In case you're wondering, *estrellas* are stars.)
2. Take a deep breath.
3. Pick two stanzas (they don't necessarily have to be consecutive) and step into the hallway to create interpretive movements for them. One person will read, and the other will "dance," and then you will switch. Make sure you keep the volume to a minimum!
4. When you have two minutes left in the station, make a short video of each stanza and either email or share them with us in Google Drive! 😊



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Station 4

Get Up, Blues James A. Emanuel

Blues
Never climb a hill
Or sit on a roof
In starlight.

Blues
Just bend low
And moan in the street
And shake a borrowed cup.

Blues
Just sit around
Sipping,
Hatching yesterdays.

Get up, Blues.
Fly.
Learn what it means
To be up high.

Blues Leopold Sedar Senghor

The spring has swept the ice for all my frozen rivers
My young sap trembles at the first caresses along the tender bark.
But see how in the midst of July I am blinder than the Arctic winter!
My wings beat and break against the barriers of heaven
No ray pierces the deaf vault of my bitterness.
What sign is there to find? What key to strike?
And how can god be reached by hurling javelins?
Royal Summer of the distant South, you will come too late, in a hateful September!
In what book can I find the trill of your reverberation?
And on the pages of what book, on what impossible lips taste your delirious love?

The impatient fit leaves me. Oh! the dull beat of the rain on the leaves!
Just play me your 'Solitude', Duke, till I cry myself to sleep.

Sundown Blues Raymond R. Patterson

Sun going down,
I won't see this day again.
Sun going down,
Sure won't see this day again
When I started out,
I didn't think this day would end.

I saw a face in my mirror
And didn't know that face was mine.
A face in my mirror,
And didn't know that face was mine.
If you meet a stranger
Sometimes it pays to be kind.

Folks try to live,
They don't always live right.
Folks just trying to live,
They don't always live right.
When day is done
Ain't nothing left but night.

Sun going down,
Won't see this day again.
Sun going down,
Won't see this day again.
When I started out,
I didn't think this day would end.

Directions:

Blues music is one of the most significant influences on jazz, and the musical and thematic boundaries between the two different styles often overlap.

1. Visit our class webpage and follow the link to listen to Bessie Smith's "Lost Your Head Blues." Then read the poems on this page.
2. Based on these three poems and on the recording, write an original one-sentence definition of "the blues."
3. Now write three stanzas of your own blues based on your greatest woe.
4. Finished? Check out bonus videos on our class webpage!



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Station 5

Dream Boogie
Langston Hughes

Good morning, daddy!
Ain't you heard
The boogie-woogie rumble
Of a dream deferred?

Listen closely:
You'll hear their feet
Beating out and beating out a —

You think
It's a happy beat?

Listen to it closely:
Ain't you heard
something underneath
like a —

What did I say?

Sure,
I'm happy!
Take it away!

Hey, pop!
Re-bop!
Mop!

Y-e-a-h!

Dreams
Langston Hughes

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.

Harlem
Langston Hughes

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Directions:

You know one of these poems quite well already. As you look at these poems, remember Langston Hughes was a writer who aimed much of his work at trying to speak for justice and equality. For Black American poets during the 20th century—just like artists of every time period—their art and activism often worked together.

1. Read the poems.
2. How is the theme of “Dreams” similar to the theme of “Harlem”?
3. What is the overall tone of “Dream Boogie”? I would like to suggest that there’s some serious irony at work here. What do you think?
4. What do the last two stanzas of “Dream Boogie” mean?
5. Start a new poem about dreams using these two stanzas. Make it at least 14 lines.
6. Finished? Check out bonus video on our class webpage!



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Station 6

Plucking Out a Rhythm Lawson Fusao Inada

Start with a simple room—
a dullish color—
and draw the one shade down.
Hot plate. Bed.
Little phonograph in a corner.

Put in a single figure—
medium weight and height—
but oversize, as a child might.

The features must be Japanese.

Then stack a black pompadour on,
and let the eyes
slide behind a night of glass.

The figure is in disguise:

slim green suit
for posturing on a bandstand,
the turned-up shoes of Harlem . . .

The start the music playing—
thick jazz, strong jazz—

and notice that the figure
comes to life:

sweating, growling
over an imaginary bass—
plucking out a rhythm—
as the music rises and the room is full,
exuding with that rhythm . . .

Then have the shade flap up
and daylight catch him
frozen in that pose

as it starts to snow—
thick snow, strong snow—

blowing in the window
while the music quiets,
the room is slowly covered,

and the figure is completely
out of sight.

Directions:

Lawson Inada (b. 1938) is a Japanese-American professor and the Poet Laureate of Oregon. When we read jazz poetry, it's important to realize the impact of the music on people of almost every culture around the world. Jazz—like any art form—is an international language that can speak to many people, regardless of their differences.

1. Read the poem and pay attention to Inada's imagery.
2. Dive into the Big Can o' Crazy and do one of the following:
 - create a portrait of the man in the poem
 - draw the room
 - make a 3-panel storyboard of the action in the poem
 - draw a symbolic representation of the music in the poem
3. Finished? Check out bonus video on our class webpage!

**Because time is a factor, craftsmanship can be a little loosey-goosey, but stick-figures are out of the question. Period.*



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Station 7

Jazz Fantasia
Carl Sandburg

Drum on your drums, batter on your banjos,
sob on the long cool winding saxophones.
Go to it, O jazzmen.

Sling your knuckles on the bottoms of the happy
tin pans, let your trombones ooze, and go husha-
husha-hush with the slippery sand-paper.

Moan like an autumn wind high in the lonesome tree-
tops, moan soft like you wanted somebody terrible,
cry like a racing car slipping away from a motorcycle
cop, bang-bang! you jazzmen, bang altogether drums,
traps, banjos, horns, tin cans—make two people fight
on the top of a stairway and scratch each other's eyes
in a clinch tumbling down the stairs.

Can the rough stuff... now a Mississippi steamboat
pushes up the night river with a hoo-hoo-hoo-oo...
and the green lanterns calling to the high soft stars
...a red moon rides on the humps of the low river
hills... go to it, O jazzmen.

Directions:

Carl Sandburg (1878-1967) was one of many white writers who loved jazz music—in fact, some scholars credit him with inventing jazz poetry, though Langston Hughes is more widely regarded the “father” of jazz and blues poetry.

1. Read the poem, paying attention to the sound devices Sandburg uses to replicate the sounds of instruments.
2. List 5 examples of onomatopoeia (words that represent sounds), and write where you think those sounds come from (i.e.: if there were “moos” in the poem, I would speculate they had come from a cow or two).
3. List 3 examples of alliteration (repetition of initial consonant sounds).
4. List 2 examples of repetition.
5. Finished? Check out bonus video on our class webpage!



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Station 8

from Horizontal Cosmology

4. Saxophone

Christopher Gilbert

My bell is Charlie Parker's
hatband. So few of you who
come to touch me understand
my feeling,
only this black voice.

I am a temple and he comes
to speak through me. I am the dream
lip because

I say what you're afraid of
facing, *Living is intense.*

I am bad from note to note
like god's nostril, I connect
living to what lies ahead
by breath.

You want to know how to feel
in this world, the technology
bigger than the ear?

Listen,

I can't tell you what to hear.

I have no message waiting
for you: you must be-
hold enough to play.

Trumpet Player

Langston Hughes

The Negro
With the trumpet at his lips
Has dark moons of weariness
Beneath his eyes
where the smoldering memory
of slave ships
Blazed to the crack of whips
about thighs

The negro
with the trumpet at his lips
has a head of vibrant hair
tamed down,
patent-leathered now
until it gleams
like jet—
were jet a crown

the music
from the trumpet at his lips
is honey
mixed with liquid fire
the rhythm
from the trumpet at his lips
is ecstasy
distilled from old desire—

Desire
that is longing for the moon
where the moonlight's but a spotlight
in his eyes,
desire
that is longing for the sea
where the sea's a bar-glass
sucker size

The Negro
with the trumpet at his lips
whose jacket
Has a fine one-button roll,
does not know
upon what riff the music slips

It's hypodermic needle
to his soul
but softly
as the tune comes from his throat
trouble
mellows to a golden note

Directions:

Obviously, musicians and jazz music itself, are also important foci of jazz poetry—sometimes linking them with social commentary, and sometimes simply celebrating the fact that they were the bomb.

1. While you listen to Charlie Parker & Dizzy Gillespie playing "Donna Lee," read "Saxophone."
2. What does Gilbert think saxophonist Charlie Parker is trying to say through his music? Use at least 1 specific quote to support your idea.
3. Read "Trumpet Player."
4. What does Hughes think the anonymous trumpet player is trying to say through *his* music? Use at least 2 specific quotes to back up your claim.
5. Finished? Check out bonus video on our class webpage!



Find Your Own Voice
Jayne Cortez

Find your own voice & use it
use your own voice & find it

The sounds of drizzle
on dry leaves are not
like sounds of insults
between pedestrians

Those women laughing
in the window
do not sound like
air conditioners on the brink

The river turtle
does not breathe like
a slithering boa constrictor

The roar of a bull
is not like
the cackle of a hyena

The growl of a sea-leopard
is not like the teething cry
of a baby

The slash of a barracuda
is not like
the gulp of a leaping whale

The speech of a tiger shark
is not like
the bark of an eagle-fish

The scent of a gardenia
is not like the scent of a tangerine

Find your own voice & use it
use your own voice & find it

Directions:

Jayne Cortez (1934-2012) wrote poems and performed with jazz musicians. She uses repetition in most of her poems and often juxtaposes dissimilar images on top of one another.

1. Read the poem silently, then listen to the recording of it. Wait to watch the video (for now).
2. What is the relationship between the images in each stanza? (Write a different answer for each one.)
3. Based on your answers to the last question, how do you think Cortez expects us to find our own voices?
4. How does the music on the recording add to the poem's meaning?
5. Finished? Check out bonus video on our class webpage!



Elegance in the Extreme
Ntozake Shange

elegance in the extreme
gives style to the hours
of coaxing warmth outta
no where

elegant hoodlums
elegant intellectuals
elegant ornithologists¹
elegant botanists

but elegance in the extreme helps most
the stranger who hesitates
to give what there is for fear of unleashing madness
which is sometimes
uninvolved in contemporary mores²
archetypal realities or graciousness

in the absence of extreme elegance
madness can set right in like
a burnin gauloise³ on Japanese silk
though highly cultured
even the silk must ask
how to burn up discreetly

¹ Saxophonist Charlie Parker was called “Bird,” and references to ornithology in jazz poetry are often allusions to him.

² Mores (pronounced mor-ays) are social norms or codes of conduct.

³ Gauloises are gross cigarettes without filters. Don’t use them. Or any other tobacco products for that matter.

Directions:

The name Ntozake Shange (b. 1948)—pronounced En-toe-zok-ee Shan-gay—comes from a Zulu dialect, which means “she who comes into her own things” (Ntozake) and “she who walks like a lion” (Shange). Shange is a black feminist who wrote this poem about jazz pianist Cecil Taylor. Taylor was an avant-garde musician whose music is often dissonant and challenging to listeners.

1. This is not an easy poem, and its meaning is definitely open for your interpretation. Read it.
2. Listen to the recording of Taylor playing “Port of Call” while you answer the rest of the questions.
3. The second stanza is a great example of incremental repetition. How do the slight changes from line to line affect the poem?
4. Archetypes are symbols. What might be some of Shange’s “archetypal realities”?
5. What, to you, is the extreme elegance Shange describes? Remember—you really can’t have a wrong answer. Just give it a shot!
6. Finished? Check out bonus video on our class webpage!