

AP Language and Composition
Discussions: Harlem Renaissance Poetry

You have been assigned a poem on which to lead a discussion. In working on your own, your first task is to identify speaker, occasion, and theme.

Everyone is to read and annotate all of the poems before class.

1. To begin your discussion, present a minute or less of biographical information or other context for the poem. This time is limited because the focus is to be on the poem itself; further, as we have noted, it is disrespectful to art to treat it as a function of personal biography or politics or psychology, though these factors shed some important light on the piece. Use a reputable source that you would not mind citing; edited “reference” sources are fine, but please don’t cite blogs or Wikipedia or a study-guide source.

2. Then, read the poem out loud.

3. Ask classmates questions that will help them discover the main argument of the poem and then by what literary and rhetorical means that argument is set forth in the poem.

Arguments might be ‘rhetorical,’ overt, about issues, or they might be more literary, more like what we call theme. Then, how does the poem promote its argument?

Continue to lead discussion, prompting students to refine ideas, until there is consensus about the argument of the poem and its main methods.

I’ve found it’s best for discussion leaders to keep in mind an array of correct answers rather than to rigidly impose their own idea. The exception to this is when students answering are clearly overlooking an important point or are presenting a literally correct but not productive reading of the poem.

You can always close a point by offering overtly your own interpretation: “That’s interesting [really listen, really mean this], but I see these factors pointing towards...”

Keep the discussion to 7 minutes.

4. At the end of your discussion, hand in your notes in which you have worked out what you see as the main argument and the main literary and rhetorical means at work in your poem as well as a works cited page, in MLA style.