



ICON offers a baroque reflection of ourselves through our own personal histories, and how it might pertain to the global history at large. For F. Douglas Brown, who is named after Frederick Douglass, the implications of those histories connecting are abundant, wrought with vulnerability, interrogation and a call to action.

TEACHING GUIDE

ICON

by F. Douglas Brown

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Recommended Classes:

- Poetry
- Creative Writing
- Creative Nonfiction
- African-American Studies
- American/Contemporary Literature
- Narrative Studies

Keywords:

Performance / Poetry / Black Studies / Biography / History / Ekphrasis / Cultural Studies / Historical Icons / Icons / Harlem Renaissance / Black Arts / Names / Identity / Poetic Forms / Social Justice

SUGGESTED TIMELINE

6TH-8TH GRADE: FOUR-FIVE WEEKS



Week One:

Poems from *Begotten* (p. 19-44);
[Naming + Re-naming](#)

Week Two:

Poems from *The Beautiful Needful Thing* (p. 49-66);
[Harlem Renaissance & Ekphrasis](#)

Week Three:

Poems from *All Extremes and Ends and Opposites* (p. 71-101);
[ICONS: Historical/Societal/Pop Culture](#)

Week Four:

Poems from *Her, Gone* (p. 105-127);
[Self Action & Movement](#)

11TH-12TH GRADE: THREE WEEK



Week One:

Poems from *Begotten* (p. 19-44);
[Naming + Re-naming](#)

Week Two:

Poems from *The Beautiful Needful Thing* (p. 49-66) and first section of *All Extremes and Ends and Opposites* (p. 71-86);
[Harlem Renaissance & Ekphrasis](#) and [ICONS: Historical/Societal/Pop Culture](#)

Week Three:

Poems from second section of *All Extremes and Ends and Opposites* (p. 87-101) and *Her, Gone* (p. 105-127); [Self Action & Movement](#)

Writ Large Press

The Accomplices

<http://writlargepress.com>

UNIVERSITY LEVEL—INTRO TO POETRY/CREATIVE WRITING/NON-FICTION: TWO WEEKS

**Week One:**

Poems from *Begotten* (p. 19-44) and *The Beautiful Needful Thing* (p. 49-66);
[Naming + Re-naming](#) and
[Harlem Renaissance & Ekphrasis](#)

Week Two:

Poems from *All Extremes and Ends and Opposites* (p. 71-101) and *Her, Gone* (p. 105-127);
[ICONS: Historical/Societal/Pop Culture](#) and
[Self Action & Movement](#)

KEY THEMES

Naming & Re-naming/Zuihitsu

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the circumstances of your birth?
2. What are the origins of your name? What characteristics of your name's meaning do you own and dismiss? What legacy(ies) are you upholding/disavowing by having this name?
3. What is an *icon*? Define, in general terms, *icons* both historically and currently.
4. How is your personal history connected to a given era? Who in your family could be considered an *icon*?
5. How is your personal history connected to two major icons as well as two forgotten icons of a given era?

RELATED ACTIVITIES

1. Naming Activity (Using Name generators)
2. Write a list of things using the [Zuihitsu form](#).
3. Draw a map of your family or friend tree. Write a poem to represent this tree.
4. Self portraiture is the artist's rendering of their own representation through art. Re-Portrait poems ask one to actually reconsider the image that is known or already captured as a standard. It is the poet as painter or photographer changing poses or backgrounds for deeper scrutiny of the subject, which is partially, them. Considering this, revisit the Re-portrait poems in *Begotten*. Discuss with a partner how and what is being reconsidered. Create a list of key terms from that discussion and write a poem using this prompt: Select any comic superhero and reconsider their "good deeds." Write a poem questioning their powers, and their power to do no harm.

Harlem Renaissance & Ekphrasis

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some reactions to the various types of visual art? (Street & public art, museum & gallery art, notebook & personal sketches)—question connected to activities below?
2. How can the poetic form Ekphrasis help spark not only creativity writing, but also creative ways that integrate research, history, and/or biography?
3. Ekphrasis is more than just a response, it's a way for the writer to be in dialogue with other artists. Given the selected art, try to move beyond simply describing the art. Instead, write a poem from the point of view from someone, or something in the work of art. In fact, write it twice. Write one from a first person point of view, and the second from a third person point of view. How are they different? What is potentially similar about them?

RELATED ACTIVITIES

1. Visual art at a glance—respond to the first discussion question VISUALLY.
2. Research a few of the poetry/visual artist icons from the Harlem Renaissance e.g. Langston Hughes, Jacob Lawrence, Aaron Douglas, Romare Bearden.
3. Re-read the poems “Why I Read: Partial Pecha” (p. 56) and “Why I Write: Partial Kucha” (p. 82). Discuss with a partner how these poems speak to the self-realization of the Harlem Renaissance. Create a list of words that came up frequently during the discussion, and using that list, re-write one of your visual responses as a poem.
4. “Mr Covey, Shall We Dance?” (p. 58-59) is based on both the Douglass account and Jacob Lawrence’s *Frederick Douglass panel #10*. Find a visual art piece that depicts a conflict, and write a poem from the point of view of a specific person in that piece, engaging with the larger conflicts in their life, not just the situation depicted. See paintings of Frida Kahlo, Francisco Goya, Banksy, Eyre Crowe, etc.

ICONS: Historical/ Societal/Pop Culture

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the role of *icons*? Do they have a role or responsibility to help shape public opinion/views/voices?
2. What in an *icon* do you see in yourself? How does history affect you in the following ways: PERSONALLY, LOCALLY, and GLOBALLY? What historical or personal icon speaks through you in your everyday life?
3. What happens when one is thrust (sometimes violently) into the spotlight? (See: Trayvon Martin, Freddie Gray, Eric Garner, etc., etc., etc.,...) What is our role in upholding their legacy/memory as fallen icons?

RELATED ACTIVITIES

1. Write a poem in which you are in conversation with an icon from the past, present, and imagined future. Next level: write it from that icon's point of view.
2. The first three sections of the book are interested in Douglass as a thinker, and the last section, Harriet Tubman as a doer. Discuss or use zuihitsu to write how you seen this over the course of the book. Taking the keywords from the discussion and/or the zuihitsu, write a poem about two of the icons you identified earlier, or two icons currently living. When you select, pick two divergent personalities, that is, two people who are working toward the same goal, but in different ways, structures, vantage points.
3. Write a poem exposing an icon's favorite obsessions, their secret hobbies, hidden affairs or past times. How do the "things" left out of what made them an icon, either add to or subtract from their icon status? Next level: write it from that icon's point of view, and as if that icon was a failure. (ie. What if Michael Jackson, the King of Pop, was secretly obsessed with pop tarts, or pops cereal...?)

Self Action & Movement*DISCUSSION QUESTIONS*

1. How were the poems created during the Harlem Renaissance a catalyst to social change? Can you think of specific eras in which poetry/writing/art played a major role in spurring change?
2. With movements such as the [Black Arts Movement](#) in the 1960's, as well as the more recent [#BlackPoetsSpeakOut](#), which both come out of painful chapters of African-American life, how have the poems from these movements assist the community vs. commodify black bodies/pain/trauma?
3. Explain how Nina Simone's quote, "An artist's duty is to reflect the times," still holds true or not. Can poetry serve as a springboard for social movement? What role does art play in activism & empowerment?
4. Considering Audre Lorde's seminal work, [Poetry is Not a Luxury](#) how is poetry particularly placed within the black community?

RELATED ACTIVITIES

1. Write a poem that is a social critique on racism or another social justice issue of your choice. (This poem can be personal, but should also engage with larger societal issues/frameworks/structures.)
2. Consider the context in which these African-American writers produced the following quotes. Comment on them individually as a poetic response. Engage with the author of each quote creatively, starting your title with: "To Terrance Hayes' Notion of Black Writing," or: "To Audre Lorde's Powerful Vision," or something similar (hint: think of this as an Ode poem).

"It's such a futuristic idea... A world in which the descendants of slaves become poets... Elizabeth Bishop said 'poetry is a way of thinking with one's feelings.' Lucille Clifton asks, 'won't you come celebrate with me that everyday something has tried to kill me, and has failed'...Imagine 20 years of thinking with one's feelings while someone is trying to kill you."

–Terrance Hayes

"When I dare to be powerful – to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid."

–Audre Lorde

"The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference."

–Audre Lorde

"Poetry can keep life itself alive. You can endure almost anything if you can sing about it."

–James Wright

"The most humane and dignified repository for our feelings."

–Natasha Trethewey

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[ICON Workbook](#)

[COMPLETE TEACHING GUIDE & SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES ONLINE](#)