

Home Is...

by Eva Sierra

Education level: Middle School

Genre: Poetry

Time frame: 1 hour

Objective: Discuss, analyze, and understand the meaning of a Harlem Renaissance-era poem, and demonstrate understanding of the poem by writing a poem inspired by it.

Prior knowledge and skills: None.

Required materials: Pencil and paper, a copy of the literary model

Literary model: “The Tropics in New York” by Claude McKay

Sequence of activities:

Introduction (10 minutes):

This lesson was used at the beginning of a residency with middle school students. Claude McKay’s poem is short but full of literary devices and can offer a good perspective on poetry to those who may be new to it. This lesson was also helpful to gauge students’ understanding of literary devices and their ability to identify the theme of a poem.

Take a moment to introduce Claude McKay. His [bio on the Poetry Foundation website](#) is fabulous and I shared this excerpt with students:

Claude McKay, born Festus Claudius McKay in **Sunny Ville, Jamaica** in 1889, was a key figure in the **Harlem Renaissance**, a prominent literary movement of the 1920s. His work ranged from **vernacular verse celebrating peasant life in Jamaica** to poems that **protested racial and economic inequities**. His philosophically ambitious fiction, including tales of Black life in both Jamaica and America, addresses instinctual/intellectual duality, which McKay found central to the Black individual’s efforts to cope in a racist society.

Watch the [animated video for “The Tropics in New York”](#) by Claude McKay on the Poetry Foundation website. The video helps illustrate the poem and makes it easier to comprehend the theme. The poem is short, so it is helpful to play the video twice.

Call on students to share what feelings they experienced while watching the video.

Comprehension and Discussion (20-25 minutes):

Take a moment to define some unknown words. Remind students of Claude McKay's time period. Display the poem on the board, if possible, or provide each student with a copy of the poem and the definitions. I chose to bold the words I was defining. Words from the poem that I chose to define for this age group were:

alligator pear: avocado (derives from Nahuatl, "*ahuacatl*")

parish fair: a local annual festival held by Roman Catholic churches on a feast day of the patron saint of a given parish.

rill: a small stream

benediction: the utterance or bestowing of a blessing, especially at the end of a religious service (a prayer)

Next, ask students what literary devices they notice in the poem. Discuss as a class as each comes up. Here are some to help point out:

"Fit for the highest prize at parish fairs" (**hyperbole**)

"Dewy-dawns" (**alliteration**)

Several instances of **rhyme**.

"Fruit-trees laden by low-singing rills," (**personification**)

"In benediction over nun-like hills," (*hills so sacred they look like nuns praying*, **simile**)

"The window" (the speaker looks at the fruit through is an **extended metaphor** for separation and distance)

"And, hungry for the old, familiar ways," (*hunger* is a **double entendre**, referencing the fruit in stanza one as well as a longing for home)

Read the poem once again out loud as a class. Point out the arc of the poem:

Delicious-looking fruits → *Memories of beautiful paradise* → *Deep sadness and longing*

Call on students to answer:

- If you could describe the theme of this poem with one word, what would it be? (*The answer we are looking for is: homesickness.*)
- Why was the speaker saddened by the sight of the beautiful fruit? Discuss students' responses as a class.
- What parts of this poem do you enjoy the most, and how do they help support the theme?

Once students have demonstrated an understanding of the poem, move the conversation inward. Ask students to take a moment to think about the best parts of homes and communities, and what it might be like if they were away from these things.

To help them think, I use the examples: 1) *Imagine what it would be like if you woke up tomorrow and there was nowhere to get a carne asada burrito or a Sonoran hotdog.*

2) *A friend of mine moved to North Carolina and when she went to McDonald's they did not have Hot N' Spicy sandwiches, and instead they had the McChicken with no spice.*

Finally, ask students to imagine what they truly treasure about home, and how they would feel were they to be away from these things.

Brainstorming (10 minutes)

Begin with a “visioning” exercise. Ask students to take a moment to close their eyes or put their heads down if they feel comfortable. Students may also choose to stare into “space” if they prefer. Next, ask students to imagine their *home*. Whatever that means to them. It can be where they live now, somewhere they used to live, a relative's house, or something else. With their eyes still closed, ask them to walk through each room of their *home*. Help guide them by prompting questions about every room: *Who is usually in the living room? What color is the bathroom? Is there someone making breakfast or dinner? If so, what are they making and what does it smell like? Where do you sleep? Do you share this room?*

Countdown from three and ask students to open their eyes/raise their heads/focus their gaze and thank them for participating in the exercise.

Next, using inspiration from their visioning exercise, ask students to complete the list-writing exercise. Students will be writing lists about what they remember about their homes.

At the bottom of this lesson plan is a simple worksheet where students can make 4 lists:

- Sounds that are common
- Smells/scents that are common
- Objects I frequently saw
- Phrases/Quotes I frequently heard

Provide students with a worksheet, or simply ask them to make a list for each of the four categories. Ask students to be specific. Instead of “a green couch,” they can say: “the green couch where grandma spent her morning reading magazines.” Ask students to aim for at least 5 items in every list.

Examples for each category include:

- *The radio playing **Mexican oldies** while my brother uses the shower. (Sound)*
- ***Chorizo and eggs** made by my grandmother for breakfast. (Smell)*

- *The **white, burnt kettle** my parents used for coffee. (Object)*
*My mother who yells “**get up!**” at 6:00am. (Quote)*

Writing Exercise (10+ minutes)

Ask students to review their lists, circling or underlining the parts that stand out to them the most.

Next, remind students of the poems we read earlier. Claude McKay wrote a poem about homesickness, now we have the opportunity to write a poem about the best parts of home.

Students will create a poem using items from their list to talk about home. They are welcome to elaborate and add to each point, or leave it as is. Let students know this is a free write, and that their brainstorming sheet is a resource for inspiration.

Students may use the title and refrain: “Home Is...”

Example: *Home is a burnt, white kettle on a gas stove. / Home is a mother who screams “jya levantate!” at 6:30 every morning. / Home is a noisy pair of chihuahuas named Güero and Daisy.*

Remind students they can be serious and silly at the same time if they wish.

Set a timer for 10 minutes of writing. If almost all students are still writing near the end, silently extend the timer by 2-3 minutes.

Sharing (5 minutes)

Call upon students who volunteer to share their work.

Before sharing, ask performers to be loud and confident and ask the class to be attentive and respectful. Also, set a **class guideline of confidence** to not repeat any personal or sensitive topics after this lesson or outside of the classroom.

Describe your home by writing a list for categories in the squares. Write as many answers you can in each square. Aim for at least 5 of each.

<p><u>Sounds I Often Hear</u></p>	<p><u>Common Scents and Smells</u></p>
<p><u>Objects I Frequently See</u></p>	<p><u>Phrases/Quotes I Frequently Hear</u></p>

After you have finished writing your lists, review what you wrote and circle or underline what stands out to you the most.

“The Tropics in New York”

By Claude McKay

Bananas ripe and green, and ginger-root,
Cocoa in pods and alligator pears,
And tangerines and mangoes and grape fruit,
Fit for the highest prize at parish fairs,

Set in the window, bringing memories
Of fruit-trees laden by low-singing rills,
And dewy dawns, and mystical blue skies
In benediction over nun-like hills.

My eyes grew dim, and I could no more gaze;
A wave of longing through my body swept,
And, hungry for the old, familiar ways,
I turned aside and bowed my head and wept.