

Hip Hop Lesson Plan

The lesson plan is for a year 11 GCSE class, and so the choice of song and questions will reflect the higher level of analytical skills and thematic maturity expected. The lesson will be a case study of 'Memory Lane (Sittin' in da Park)' by Nas, from *illmatic* (Columbia Records, 1994), primarily through the prism of English Language and Literature. Because I believe that the song, in rendering an evocative snapshot of life in Queensbridge, NYC, addresses several topics in a skilful way, I will present several thematic questions to the class instead of just one. The aim will be for the students to be able to mix close reading of the text's literary techniques with its historical context. I will therefore start with a power-point presentation about Queensbridge, covering aspects such as enforced racial segregation in its past and its current high crime and poverty rate. Based on Marc Lamont Hill's successful decision to refer to artists as 'authors' and songs as 'texts' so as to make sure that students "focus[ed] on hip-hop texts as literature", I will do the same in my lesson.¹ Similarly, I will hand out printed-out versions of the song's lyrics to the students and will only play the song to them at the end of the class, so that they are not distracted by its musical components. Due to the highly offensive nature of the word, 'nigga' will be censored in the print-outs, although students will be made aware that the word was there so that they can engage with the slang uses of it. I will have each student pick out a phrase of their choice (no shorter than 1 line and no longer than 3 lines so that it has to be significant) and then explain to the class what they find interesting about it. Afterwards, I will split the students into groups of 2 or 3 so that all students have to contribute something. I will then hand out questions for them to work on together. They are:

- What examples of religious imagery can you find in the text? What message do you think this technique is trying to convey to the reader?
- How is police presence presented in the text? In a negative or positive way? Why do you think that is?
- Can you find any examples of a nihilistic or fatalistic philosophy within the text?
- What position does the author himself take within the text? Observer or participant? What is the effect of this?
- What are the main problems in Queensbridge that the author presents within the text?

¹ Marc Lamont Hill, *Beats, Rhymes, and Classroom Life: Hip-Hop Pedagogy and the Politics of Identity* (New York: Teachers College Press/Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 21.

- Are there any aspects of the text that you find problematic? If so, why?

I feel that this is a better alternative to singling out specific phrases and having students decipher them because it allows them to actively search the breadth of the text and identify these aspects for themselves. Afterwards, the groups will converge and present their findings to each other so that they can debate amongst themselves what their readings of the text are. I will make it clear that there is no right or wrong analysis of the text in order to encourage open conversation amongst the students.

Memory Lane (Sittin' in da Park)

[Verse 1]

I rap for listeners, bluntheads, fly ladies, and prisoners
Henessey-holders and old-school niggas
Then I be dissing a unofficial that smoke Woolie Thai
I dropped out of Cooley High
Gassed up by a cokehead cutie pie
Jungle survivor, fuck who's the live-er
My man put the battery in my back
A difference from Energizer
Sentence begins indented with formality
My duration's infinite, moneywise or physiology
Poetry, that's a part of me, retardedly bop
I drop the ancient manifested hip-hop straight off the block
I reminisce on park jams
My man was shot for his sheep coat
Chocolate incense make me see him drop in my weed smoke
It's real, grew up in trife life, did times or white lines
The hype pipes, murderous nighttimes
And knife fights and blight crimes
Chill on the block with Cognac, hold strap

With my peeps that's into drug money market into rap
No sign of the beast in the blue Chrysler
I guess that means peace
For niggas, no sheisty vice to just snipe ya
Start off the dice-rolling mats for craps to cee-lo
With side-bets, I roll a deuce, nothing below
(Peace God!) Peace God – now the shit is explained
I'm taking niggas on a trip straight through memory lane
It's like that y'all...

[Hook]

"Now let me take a trip down memory lane"
"Coming outta Queensbridge"

[Verse 2]

One for the money, two for pussy and foreign cars
Three for Alizé, niggas deceased or behind bars
I rap divine, God; check the prognosis: is it real or showbiz?
My window faces shootouts, drug overdoses
Live amongst no roses, only the drama
For real, a nickel-plate is my fate, my medicine is the ganja
Here's my basis, my razor embraces, many faces
You're telephone blown, black, stitches or fat shoelaces
Peoples are petro, dramatic automatic .44 I let blow
And back down po-po when I'm vexed so
My pen taps the paper then my brain's blank
I see dark streets, hustlin' brothers who keep the same rank
Pumpin' for somethin', some'll prosper, some fail
Judges hanging niggas, uncorrect bails for direct sales
My intellect prevails from a hanging cross with nails
I reinforce the frail, with lyrics that's real



Word to Christ, a disciple of streets, trifle on beats
I decipher prophecies through a mic and say "Peace."
I hung around the older crews
While they sling smack to dingbats
They spoke of Fat Cat; that nigga's name made bell rings, black
Some fiends scream, about Supreme Team
A Jamaica Queens thing
Uptown was Alpo, son, heard he was kingpin
Yo, fuck "rap is real", watch the herbs stand still
Never talking to snakes, 'cause the words of man kill
True in the game, as long as blood is blue in my veins
I pour my Heineken brew to my deceased crew on memory lane