



THE NATIONAL
WWII MUSEUM
NEW ORLEANS

Creative Voices

Interpreting African American Poetry in WWII

A Lesson from
the Education Department

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Creative Voices

Interpreting African American Poetry in WWII

During WWII African American writers and poets expressed their patriotism and willingness to serve their country as well as their frustration and bitterness about the discriminatory treatment their country often gave them. Using pens as their weapons, these creative men and women left a primary record of their innermost thoughts and feeling, often echoing the mindset of the larger African American community.

OBJECTIVE: By reading and analyzing two poems written by African American women during WWII, students will gain an understanding of the attitudes and outlooks of African Americans toward racial discrimination during the war.

GRADE LEVEL: 7-12

STANDARDS: History Thinking Standard 2—the student appreciates historical perspectives through the eyes of those who were there, as revealed through their literature. Historical Thinking Standard 5—the student identifies issues and problems in the past and analyzes the interests, values, perspectives, and points of view of those involved in the situation.

Content Era 8 (1929-1945) Standard 3C—the student evaluates how minorities organized to gain access to wartime jobs and how they confronted discrimination.

TIME REQUIREMENT: One class period.

DIRECTIONS:

1. Present a brief lesson on the African American experience during WWII. The Fact Sheet on African Americans in WWII may be helpful. Students can read the Fact Sheet aloud or it can be passed out for them to read on their own.
2. Pass out copies of the two poems. Have students read the poems to themselves and then choose a student to read them aloud to the class.
3. Pass out worksheet questions for students to complete. Tell students to include specific words or phrases from each poem to justify their answers. Remind them that some questions have no right or wrong answers—only their informed opinions.
4. Hold a class discussion about the poems using these questions and the students' answers.
5. Have each student write his or her own poem about the African American experience during WWII.

ASSESSMENT: Components for assessment include the worksheet, class discussion, and poem.

ENRICHMENT: Have each student write a poem about a current social issue that concerns him or her. This poem can be about youth violence, drug use, the environment, prejudice, local issues, etc. Students may read their poems to the class.

Creative Voices
African American Poetry in WWII

Directions: Read these two poems written by African American women and published in *The Crisis*, an African American periodical popular during World War II. Answer the questions that follow.

Civil Service

My desk sits facing yours across the floor,
Yet your fair head is stiffly held aloof
From my own darker one, though 'neath our roof
With one accord we do a job. For war
Has linked us as no pleading could before.
Yet, seemingly, you wait for further proof
That we are spun the same...the warp and woof
Of new, strong fabric, draped at Freedom's door...
For you are still reluctant to obey
The impulse that would bring you to my side;
You send your memos on a metal tray,
And coldly killed each overture I've tried.
Why hope to rid charred continents of gloom
'Till we have learned to smile across a room?

--Constance C. Nichols, *The Crisis*, April 1945.

Only in America

ONLY, IN AMERICA—
Can a child
Sit and Dream:
Golden Dreams.
Fantastic
Dreams,
Dreams
that are aggrandized;
And then awake one morning,
To find them
Realized!

ONLY, IN AMERICA—
Can a person
start from scratch;
Scummy Scratch,
Scrawny Scratch,
Barrenly imbued—
And shed Scratch like a motley'd shell;
Rebirthed...Rebreathed...Renewed!

ONLY, IN AMERICA—
Can a mother

tell her Son
Someday,
You'll be the President!
Leader of the Mass!
And before Age tints with silver tones,
This thing
has come to pass.

ONLY, IN AMERICA—
Can a Man
boldly say;
He doesn't like the government
Or the men who run the state:
Here the laws are FOR THE PEOPLE:
This does not alternate.

ONLY, IN AMERICA—
Is a whole Nation Free;
Free to vote,
To enterprise,
With impartiality;
And Opportunity lends to ALL
A Free and Equal hand...
Did I say ALL?
Well, that is ALL except the Negro Man.

--Rhoza A. Walker, *The Crisis*, February 1945.



Creative Voices
African American Poetry in WWII
Student Worksheet

Directions: After reading the two poems, answer the following questions. If you use quotes, be sure to put quotation marks around them.

1. In *Civil Service*, what does the speaker mean when she says, "With one accord we do our job"?
2. And what does she mean when she says, "For war has linked us as no pleading could before"? Who was doing the earlier pleading?
3. Describe in your own words the scene the poet writes about.
4. How does the poet feel about her workmate?
5. What lesson does the poet want the reader to think about at the end of the poem?
6. What are some of the freedoms and opportunities the speaker writes about in *Only in America*?
7. Does the poet have a positive or negative view of the United States?
8. Why does the poet wait until the very end to make her point about racial discrimination?
9. List some of the emotions you hear expressed in these two poems (ex. *frustration*).
10. As a political statement, how effective do you think these poems and other writings like them were during WWII?
11. What other types of political statements are available to people in the United States? Are some more effective than others? Why?
12. Which poem do you like better, and why?

AFRICAN AMERICANS IN WORLD WAR II

Fighting for a Double Victory



African Americans served bravely and with distinction in every theater of World War II, while simultaneously struggling for their own civil rights from “the world’s greatest democracy.” Although the United States Armed Forces were officially segregated until 1948, WWII laid the foundation for post-war integration of the military. In 1941 fewer than 4,000 African Americans were serving in the military and only twelve African Americans had become officers. By 1945, more than 1.2 million African Americans would be serving in uniform on the Home Front, in Europe, and the Pacific (including thousands of African American women in the Women’s auxiliaries).

During the war years, the segregation practices of civilian life spilled over into the military. The draft was segregated and more often than not African Americans were passed over by the all-white draft boards. Pressure from the NAACP led President Roosevelt to pledge that African Americans would be enlisted according to their percentage in the population. Although this percentage, 10.6%, was never actually attained in the services during the war, African American numbers grew dramatically in the Army, Navy, Army Air Force, Marine Corps, and the Coast Guard.

While most African Americans serving at the beginning of WWII were assigned to non-combat units and relegated to service duties, such as supply, maintenance, and transportation, their work behind front lines was equally vital to the war effort. Many drove for the famous “Red Ball Express,” which carried a half million tons of supplies to the advancing First and Third Armies through France. By 1945, however, troop losses virtually forced the military to begin placing more African American troops into positions as infantrymen, pilots, tankers, medics, and officers in increasing numbers. In all positions and ranks, they served with as much honor, distinction, and courage as any American soldier did. Still, African American MPs stationed in the South often could not enter restaurants where their German prisoners were being served a meal.

On D-Day, the First Army on Omaha and Utah Beaches included about 1,700 African American troops. This number included a section of the 327th Quartermaster Service Company and the 320th Anti-Aircraft Barrage Balloon Battalion, which protected troops on the beach from aerial attack. Soon the all-black 761st Tank Battalion was fighting its way through France with Patton’s Third Army. They spent 183 days in combat and were credited with capturing 30 major towns in France, Belgium, and Germany.

The Army Air Force also established several African American fighter and bomber groups. The famous “Tuskegee Airmen” of the 332nd Fighter Group became part of the 15th Air Force, flying ground support missions over Anzio and escorting bombers on missions over Southern Italy. The Tuskegee Airmen flew more than 15,000 sorties between May 1943 and June 1945. Bomber crews often requested to be escorted by these “Redtails,” a nicknamed acquired from the painted tails of Tuskegee fighter planes. Sixty-six Tuskegee Airmen died in combat.

Stephen Ambrose identified the lamentable American irony of WWII, writing, “*The world’s greatest democracy fought the world’s greatest racist with a segregated army*” (Ambrose, *Citizen Soldier*). During the global conflict, African American leaders and organizations established the “Double V” campaign, calling for victory against the enemy overseas and victory against racism at home. This new black consciousness and the defiant rejection of unjustifiable racism planted important seeds for the post-War civil rights movement.

The National WWII Museum honors the contributions of African Americans in World War II.