Poetry Under Pressure

Trace how poetic choices respond to historical pressures.

ELA.11.R.1.4 "Analyze ways in which poetry reflects themes and issues of its time period."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline one detail in each paragraph that identifies a time-period issue or condition. Circle one poetic choice or feature in that paragraph, then draw a line connecting the two.

Voices from Harlem

1 In the 1920s, Harlem in New York City became a center of Black art, publishing, music, and debate. This period, often called the Harlem Renaissance, developed during the Great Migration, when many Black Americans moved from the rural South to Northern cities. Poets wrote for readers who were building new communities while facing job limits, segregated spaces, and racist violence. Their poems did not simply report events. Through voice, rhythm, setting, and image, writers explored pride, anger, fatigue, hope, and the demand to be seen as fully American.

2 Langston Hughes's 1925 poem "The Weary Blues" places a listener in a Harlem setting, where he hears a musician play late at night on Lenox Avenue. The musician's blues performance is marked by repetition, a heavy rhythm, and words about being unable to feel satisfied. These features echo blues music, an art form shaped by Black experience. The poem records exhaustion, but it also gives the musician's voice space and attention. By bringing street music into print, Hughes treats everyday Black cultural expression as worthy of serious art.

3 Claude McKay's 1919 sonnet "If We Must Die" answers a different pressure, racist mob violence directed at Black Americans after World War I. Its speaker addresses a group threatened by attackers and urges them to resist with dignity rather than submit in terror. McKay uses the formal sonnet, a structure long associated with European literary tradition, alongside urgent language of collective defense. That combination challenges ideas about whose voices belong in prestigious poetry. The poem reflects a time of danger, while its direct address turns fear into solidarity and action.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How does the first paragraph connect conditions during the Great Migration to themes Harlem Renaissance poets explored?

2. How do the musician's repeated words and heavy rhythm in “The Weary Blues” help Hughes reflect Black cultural life in Harlem?

3. Why is McKay's use of a formal sonnet significant in a poem responding to racist mob violence?

4. Compare the historical issues reflected in Hughes's and McKay's poems. How does each poem respond differently?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a four-line poem about an issue people face today. Then write two sentences explaining how one sound, image, or structural choice reflects that issue and the present moment.

ANSWER KEY

Poetry Under Pressure

GRADE 11 · ELA.11.R.1.4

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline one detail in each paragraph that identifies a time-period issue or condition. Circle one poetic choice or feature in that paragraph, then draw a line connecting the two. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How does the first paragraph connect conditions during the Great Migration to themes Harlem Renaissance poets explored?	**It explains that Black Americans were building new Northern communities while facing job limits, segregation, and racist violence, so poets explored pride, anger, fatigue, hope, and recognition.**
2	How do the musician's repeated words and heavy rhythm in “The Weary Blues” help Hughes reflect Black cultural life in Harlem?	**They echo blues music, an art form shaped by Black experience, and present the musician's exhaustion and cultural expression as worthy of serious art.**
3	Why is McKay's use of a formal sonnet significant in a poem responding to racist mob violence?	**Using a prestigious European form with urgent language of defense challenges ideas about whose voices belong in serious poetry while responding to danger.**
4	Compare the historical issues reflected in Hughes's and McKay's poems. How does each poem respond differently?	**Hughes responds to Black cultural life and exhaustion in Harlem by centering a musician's blues performance. McKay responds to racist violence by urging a threatened group to resist with dignity and solidarity.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Late buses sigh beneath the orange haze. My phone blinks flood alerts at dawn. We trade masks for water bottles at school. The forecast keeps rewriting our plans. The orange haze and flood alerts reflect climate change, a public issue shaping daily life today. Repeated images of changing forecasts show how uncertainty enters ordinary routines.

Accept answers that accurately connect a historical condition or issue to a specific poetic feature and its effect. For the open task, accept varied current issues if the poem includes four lines and the explanation clearly links a choice to the issue.