Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1991 Volume III: Afro-American Autobiography

Magic, Sass, and Rage

Curriculum Unit 91.03.03
by Bill Coden

If we believe that adolescence is a time of searching for, shaping and testing identity, we can aid our students in this sometimes painful search through the study and understanding of autobiography. Autobiography points out our uniqueness as well as our connectedness with other people. A careful study of autobiography allows us to go beyond sympathy—feeling for—to the more advanced state of empathy—feeling with. Autobiography is a vehicle through which we can foster what educator Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot terms education at its best, for the genre can be both deadly serious and very playful at the same time. [1] The seriousness allows writers and readers of autobiography to learn how to ask questions and to find truths; the playfulness can lead to a fuller appreciation of the power and joy of words—and of life.

My unit is intended for use with ninth-graders, a group in the throes of identity searching and testing. The unit will be spaced out over the course of one marking period. I have chosen to concentrate on scenes and themes which occur during childhood and adolescence; by doing this, I hope the readers, my students, will more readily grasp and understand issues they may have already confronted. The issues include a sense of wonder with the world; relationships with parents and peers; death and other turning points. The works autobiographical excerpts, poems and fictions—will be by African American women writers. The structure of the unit is fairly traditional; the authors, works and thoughts may be, if not quite revolutionary, at least new and exciting. Careful reading and discussion will be linked with writing activities which will allow students to identify and experience their uniqueness and their connectedness.

In a "standard" autobiography, the writer attempts to tell his/her life story in a manner which is factually accurate and significant. He/she attempts to reveal from the inside the motivations and personality which people have known—and judged or misjudged—from the outside. The writer is a responsible adult, striving for accuracy, as he/she presents the story of a life to other responsible adults. What is of significance and importance to the writer will normally be so to the readers.

This automatic sharing of ideas, suppositions and beliefs is rare in autobiographies of childhood and early adolescence. Simple accurate narration cannot reconstruct the experience of childhood, something vastly and qualitatively different from adult experience. An inner, symbolic truth—rather than accuracy—becomes the guiding force. There is a degree of compromise between fact and fiction, for the total and immediate truth is out of reach forever. Concentrated reflection over time about a seemingly patternless past, followed by the need to shape sentences and sequences, in effect imposes patterns where seemingly none existed; these patterns suggest a meaning where before none had been apparent. Has the meaning been imposed or had it

existed, unsuspected?

“The Childhood” might be defined as an extended piece of writing, usually in prose but not excluding poetry, in which the largest portion of the material is autobiographical, the structure of which reflects step by step the development of the writer’s self. It often begins with the first light of consciousness and ends with the attainment of a precise degree of maturity: the immature self of childhood is conscious of its transformation into the mature adult who is the narrator of the earlier experiences. [2] Maturity may come with the death of a parent, as it did for Ellease Southerland; it may come when one is finally recognized as an individual, as it did for Maya Angelou.

Key elements in the childhood are an alternative dimension, magic and abundance. The alternative dimension is an angle of vision different from that of the adult recreating his/her past self. In the process of recreation, the vision becomes symbolic of a much broader experience—living in a dimension very specifically *other* than that of the adult, with its own logic, rules, sensualities and rituals; a world from which the adults are excluded forever. This sensing of the world as *different* from the world of the adult self, not weighed down in a mawkishness or nostalgia, is often best expressed in poetry.

Magic can be seen also as an attempt to express something very much more profound than mere nostalgia for a lost innocence, a carefree past. Magic is a sense of being at one with the totality, a vision of beauty so miraculous it goes beyond the surface to the essence. Magic may take various forms: a state of exaltation beyond language—but which must be expressed; curious and inexplicable occurrences. Zora Neale Hurston has strange, disturbing visions which come true. When they are fulfilled, she may begin the wandering she has wanted to do. This sense of exaltation has a great deal to do with the need to express oneself through words—or music or painting. The word “magic” often appears in scenes of childhood; evidence of magic is frequently presented in lists, usually of inanimate objects, which inspire awe and wonder.

Abundance refers to the awareness of existing and moving in a universe which is *full* . More than material abundance, the fullness which is part of the childhood has to do with being surrounded by and immersed in sounds, colors, flowers, butterflies and grasses. Christmas and the height of summer are often evoked as symbols of abundance, a time when shops and houses or fields and barns are bursting. Unhappy times are those when a sensation of emptiness and isolation holds sway. [3] “Christmas came and I had but one orange,” recalls Richard Wright in *Black Boy* . “I was hurt and would not go out and play with the neighborhood children who were blowing horns and shooting firecrackers. I nursed my orange all Christmas Day.”

Though the autobiographer’s stated concern may be with external happenings, the dominance of the mental life is demonstrated. To tell one’s story becomes an affirmation of power; to set down a personal interpretation of personal experiences declares autonomy. [4] Some of the best (and most useful for use in the classroom) examples of the power of autobiography are to be found in the autobiographical writings, poems and fictions of African American women writers. This literature is infused with knowledge communicated from generation to generation, often through the oral tradition. Education in black womanhood would include nursery rhymes, prayers, genealogy, children’s games, secret recipes, sayings and the ways and wisdom of holding a man. This basis in the oral tradition has enabled me to sense a mystical quality in much of what I’ve read, most noticeably in the works of Toni Morrison and Zora Neale Hurston. This mysticism or secret knowledge might be considered to be analogous to the magic of the Childhood, a quality which unites yet points out the uniqueness of the autobiographer and the reader; it forms the basis for Maya Angelou’s “lessons in living” and runs through Harriet Jacobs’ narrative and Hurston’s autobiography.

Most autobiographies by black Americans, Braxton states, have a dominant internal strategy of action rather than contemplation; again, however, the vibrancy and the power of the mental life is demonstrated in the telling. The autobiographer, Braxton continues, sometimes functions as the "point of consciousness" of her people, incorporating communal values into her telling and writing, demonstrating time and again the power of language to defend, explain, invoke and question. This demonstration is reason enough why our students should become more familiar with the works of African American women writers.

Two of Braxton's concepts, the use of "sass" and the "outraged mother," appear in most of the readings in the unit. The terms will be defined for students and will be noted as they appear, for they serve as a source of continuity.

"Sass," often used as a weapon of self-defense, is a word of West African derivation that is associated with the female version of the trickster. A decoction of the bark of the poisonous "sassy tree" was used in West Africa as an ordeal poison in the trial of witches. [6] Webster's Dictionary defines "sass" as talking disrespectfully or impudently to an elder or a superior, or as talking back. Sass may be the unconscious (or very deliberate) offhand remark flung by Zora Hurston to an unappreciative father; it may also be the ploy used by Harriet Jacobs to defend herself from further sexual exploitation.

The outraged mother may include sass in her repertoire for the survival of flesh and spirit. She is outraged at the abuse of her people and of her person; this is an illustration of the power of autobiography to illuminate the history of a people through the story of a person. Harriet Jacobs shows us how, in slavery, motherhood was almost unavoidable; outrage flares because of the intimacy of the oppression: sexual, maternal, physical, spiritual. The outraged mother, be it Harriet Jacobs or Momma Henderson, has an overriding concern for the literacy and freedom of her children and desires a reunion in a home of their own. [7] Rage may be expressed through sassiness and eventual flight, as it was with Jacobs, or it may seethe quietly, as it did with Henderson.

All the readings in the unit illustrate the needs of the authors—and ourselves—to live out full, expansive lives, to live out and fulfill their selves.

Harriet Jacobs, in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* , details the horrors of slavery from a woman's point of view. The chapter entitled "A Perilous Passage in the Slave Girl's Life" details how Harriet, who has been separated from the man she loves, after painful deliberation becomes pregnant in an effort to humiliate her master and to thwart his sexual advances. Being aware of her readership, Jacobs addresses them, telling how different things would have been had slavery been abolished. "The New Tie to Life" details Harriet's realization that her plan hasn't worked; her master does not sell her to the father of her child. Illness precedes the birth of her child; Harriet and her child are close to death. Harriett writes, "Alas, what mockery it is for a slave mother to try to pray back her dying child to life! Death is better than slavery!" The new tie demands, however, that life must be lived and the ties of the family must not be broken.

"The Slave Mother" by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper details, in poetic form, the fears and plight Harriet Jacobs and countless women felt. "He is not hers" is constantly repeated; the slave mother cannot prevent her child from being taken from her.

"Aunt Lindy: A Story Founded on Real Life" by Victoria Earle Matthews illustrates the author's belief in the patient, forgiving nature of her people and the futility of returning evil for evil. Aunt Lindy, known for her skill as a nurse, is asked to tend a man badly burned in a hotel fire. Upon realizing her patient is her former master, responsible for selling away her children, Lindy comes perilously close to killing him. She flees outdoors, runs to the prayer-meeting, hears about vengeance belonging to the Lord, retraces her steps, and

nurses the man back to health. Lindy and her husband are reunited with their first-born.

Zora Neale Hurston's autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* , is rich with opportunities for illustrating and discussing a sense of magic, the use of sass, the alternative dimension, and the knowledge communicated from generation to generation. Three chapters will be emphasized. "I Get Born" is hear-say, gleaned as part of the oral tradition. Zora recounts the details of her birth, the role a white man—destined to become a friend—played in her delivery, imparts a little folk wisdom, and tells how a sow encourages the reluctant Zora to walk, planting the seeds that later become a desire to wander. Zora, in "The Inside Search," tells of her ongoing pleasure with books and with reading, fostered from the time she was a child. The pleasure was tinged with the pain of wanting to be somewhere other than Eatonville, Florida. Nature offered solace. Zora first mentions her visions in this chapter, visions which let her know she will wander. "Wandering" begins with the death of Zora's mother, which she sees as the end of a phase in her life. The hour of her mother's death marked the beginning of her wanderings in geography, time, and spirit. Zora is sent away to school in Jacksonville, where she learns to accept her bereavement. The text portrays a strong bonding between Zora and her mother. Her mother sowed and protected the seeds of liberation; she was a subversive peacemaker, for the outraged mother must act through indirection. [8]

"Aunt Pauline," a chapter in Pauli Murray's *Song in a Weary Throat,* details early influences on the child who was to become a civil rights activist, lawyer, feminist, writer, priest. Aunt Pauline and Aunt Sallie vied for the love, affection, and obedience of the child, Pauline; she grew up absorbing characteristics from both. Murray writes entertainingly of her early schooling in this chapter. The combination of strong-willed family members and resolute—if not always fair—teachers contributed to the development of a remarkable person. The book's subtitle, "An American Pilgrimage," continues the concept of wandering and questing found in *Dust Tracks on a Road* .

"Southside Summers," the opening section of *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* by Lorraine Hansberry, provides further examples of writings about early memories, family—most notably her father—and the anger of the outraged mother, Lorraine herself. This section is most definitely an adult writing of childhood; the magic of the stars is tempered by fact of hatred and the realization of aloneness.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is Maya Angelou's first volume of autobiography. Braxton states that this book illustrates how the archetypal patterns and narrative concerns established by black women writers of earlier autobiographies renew themselves in contemporary works. [9] There are examples of the sense of magic found in the childhood, most notably descriptions of nature; the adult author links the descriptions to psychological and social issues. There are examples of the power of words—sassing, storytelling, preaching—and the power of silence. Knowledge passed from generation to generation is presented, sometimes as a folk-saying, sometimes as "lessons in living." Three versions of the outraged mother appear in the portraits drawn of Maya, her mother, and her grandmother. In teaching this unit, I will concentrate on the incident in which Uncle Willie must be hidden to avoid a possible lynching; Maya's "lessons in living" and the lesson in motherhood and living with which the book concludes.

Ellease Southerland's memoir, "I Got a Horn, You Got a Horn," appears in *A World Unsuspected* . She draws sharply-lined pictures of her mother, father, and grandmother. Incidents of family violence are counterbalanced by scenes of love and caring. Dreams, nightmares, a white pocketbook, and a blank notebook are sources of wonder and magic to the young Ellease. Maturity comes with the death of her mother; Ellease no longer allows herself to be kept from, quite literally, moving on. "A Feast of Fools," a short story by Southerland which appears in *Breaking Ice* , is based on her experiences as a welfare caseworker in

New York City. Confusion and condescension infect the clients and the caseworkers of a sprawling, uncaring welfare system.

Thomas and Beulah , a book of poems by Rita Dove, presents two sides of a story, a story about the poet's grandparents. "Magic" tells how things happened to Beulah as a child: magic tricks, intervention with nature, and visions.

Seriousness and playfulness are elements of the readings by African American women writers in this unit. Seriousness will help my students to learn how to ask questions and to find truths; playfulness will lead to a fuller appreciation of the power and joy of words and of life.

Notes

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1. Bill Moyers, *A World of Ideas* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), pp. 156-57.
2. Richard N. Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller: Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1984), pp. 1-9. All subsequent page references to this text are preceded by the letter "W".
3. "W" pp. 284-87.
4. Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Imagining a Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 307-09.
5. Joanne M. Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), p. 3. All subsequent page references to this text are preceded by the letter "B."
6. "B," p. 31.
7. "B," pp. 1, 10, 19-27.
8. "B," pp. 146-48.
9. "B," p. 13.

Lesson Plan: *1 Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

After reading and discussing Maya's "lessons in living," the class will formulate its own rules for survival. Students will be asked to recall pieces of family wisdom—"mother wit" as Maya terms it. The pieces will be written out—presented as adages or proverbs and explained. An extension would be to have students recall

and write about a time when they discovered the piece of wisdom to be true. Using the family wisdom as a base, we will work on devising our own pieces of wisdom—for maintaining relationships, for shoring up self-esteem, for making it in school. Family and student wisdom will be lettered on posters, displayed and referred to during the course of the school year.

Lesson Plan: “I Got a Horn, You Got a Horn”

Points to be covered in discussion have been presented in the text of the unit. A writing assignment to be done after the memoir has been read will involve the use of family photographs. Particular attention will have been paid to the photographs Southerland has chosen to include in her memoir.

Students will be asked to bring family photos to class—candid shots, rather than portraits. The photos will serve as the impetus for autobiographical writing. Students might attempt to relate what is going on in—and before and after—particular photos. Photos might also trigger random memories which might be written. I think this exercise will be especially valuable in trying to remember and recreate the sense of magic discussed in the unit; students might try to create their own lists of things which inspired awe, similar to constructions they’ll come across in the unit’s readings.

Lesson Plan: “The Slave Mother”

This poem will be read and discussed immediately after Harriet Jacobs’ “The New Tie to Life.” The poem will be presented in a “workshop” format I devised for an earlier unit.

I. Poem will be read aloud, first by student volunteers, then by teacher.
Vocabulary: despair.
II. Questions/discussion: What mood is the speaker in? How can you tell? What picture do you see? Is this picture consistent with Jacobs’ picture of the slave mother?
III. “Loss” is one of the poem’s themes. Recall a time when you felt a sense of loss—a friendship, your way, a death. Recall as much as you can; you may eliminate or add details. Begin working on a poem about a personal loss.
Remember: Concentrate on rhythm rather than rhyme.
Skip a line between stanzas.
Note Harper’s use of metaphors; attempt some of your own.

Bibliography

Braxton, Joanne M. *Black Women Writing Autobigoraphy: A Tradition Within a Tradition* . Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989.

The book offers a fascinating study of the works of black female autobiographers, from slave narratives to contemporary books. Of particular interest is Braxton's concept of the "outraged mother" which is traced and explained through a number of works.

Coe, Richard N. *When the Grass Was Taller: Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood* . New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984.

The book is a study of what is now considered to be an autonomous literary genre, the autobiography of childhood and adolescence. The author has drawn widely from world literature. Most helpful were discussions of magic and abundance, elements of the genre.

Moyers, Bill. *A World of Ideas* . New York: Doubleday, 1989.

Moyers' interview with Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot offers both autobiographical reminiscences and a strong statement of educational philosophy.

Spacks, Patricia Meyer. *Imagining a Self* . Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976.

A study of eighteenth-century fiction and autobiography. The focus is on selfhood and consistent identity, whether by illusionmaking or through collaboration with experienced actuality.

Student Readings

(discussed in the text of the unit)

Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* . New York: Bantam Books, 1985.

Dove, Rita. *Thomas and Beulah* . Pittsburgh: Carnegie-Mellon University Press, 1986.

Hansberry, Lorraine. *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* . New York: Signet, 1970.

Hurston, Zora Neal. *Dust Tracks on a Road* . New York: Harper Perennial, 1991.

Jacobs, Harriet A. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* . Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987.

Murray, Pauli. *Song in a Weary Throat: An American Pilgrimage* . New York: Harper and Row, 1987.

Shockley, Ann Allen. *Afro-American Women Writers 1746-1933: An Anthology and Critical Guide* . New York: New American Library, 1989.

Southerland, Ellease: "I Got a Horn, You Got a Horn." In *A World Unsuspected,* edited by Alex Harris. New York:

Penguin, 1990.

———. “A Feast of Fools.” In *Breaking Ice: An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Fiction* , edited by Terry McMillan. New York: Penguin, 1990.

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The node-sass-magic-importer also supports partial file name resolving so you can import files by only specifying their base name without prefix and extension (e.g. @import '~bootstrap/scss/alert'). Sadly bootstrap and most other frameworks do not load their dependencies directly in the concerned files. So you have to load all dependencies of a file manually like in the example above. I recommend you to do better and to import dependencies directly in the files that are using them. Globbing. Globbing allows pattern matching operators to be used to match multiple files at once. Required plugins: Less or Sass , File Watchers. The plugins are bundled with JetBrains Rider and enabled by default. JetBrains Rider integrates with compilers that translate Sass , Less , and SCSS code into CSS . To use a compiler in JetBrains Rider, you need to configure it as a File Watcher based on the relevant predefined template. tip.Â To compile your code automatically, you need to configure a Sass, Less, or SCSS File Watcher which will track changes to your files and run the compiler. When you open a file, JetBrains Rider checks whether an applicable File Watcher is available in the current project. If such File Watcher is configured but disabled, JetBrains Rider displays a popup that informs you about the configured File Watcher and suggests to enable it. CSS Variables and Sass mixins are each potent on their own. With some creativity, we can make them work together towards more flexible and robust solutions. On several occasions, the designer Iâ€™ve worked with had used the same colour but with varying opacity. Many of his components were using varying shades of different colours. The typical and tedious implementation involves declaring all colour variants as separate variables. We would usually end up with something similar to this: /* Color palette */. Sass Mixins. The @mixin directive lets you create CSS code that is to be reused throughout the website. The @include directive is created to let you use (include) the mixin. Defining a Mixin. A mixin is defined with the @mixin directive. Sass @mixin Syntax: @mixin name { property: value; property: value; } The following example creates a mixin named "important-text": SCSS SyntaxÂ Tip: A tip on hyphens and underscore in Sass: Hyphens and underscores are considered to be the same. This means that @mixin important-text { } and @mixin important_text { } are considered as the same mixin! Using a Mixin. The @include directive is used to include a mixin. Sass @include mixin Syntax: selector { @include mixin-name; } So, to include the important-text mixin created above