

---

January 1980

## Wanted: Black Literature in Grades 7-12

Jacqueline Tilles

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj>

---

### Recommended Citation

Tilles, Jacqueline (1980) "Wanted: Black Literature in Grades 7-12," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol14/iss1/8>

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Michigan Reading Journal by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).

# WANTED: BLACK LITERATURE IN GRADES 7-12

Jacqueline Tilles

Dr. Tilles is Associate Professor at the College of Education of Wayne State University.

In the 1960's and early 1970's, the hue and cry to include Black studies in the secondary school curriculum was loud, militant and aggressive. As a result of this pressure, schools around the nation began to offer numerous Black history, Black literature and Black studies electives--and in some instances, as requirements. Even schools which were traditionally "lilly-white" in their approach to education jumped aboard the "Black bandwagon" and offered courses and units of work related to the Black experience. Sadly, however, as the hue and cry died, so did many of the Black experience courses and so did a vigorous concern for an equal and just presentation of the Black man's role in the historical, literary, and cultural life of our country.

As we begin a new decade, societal interest appears (again, because of social pressure) to have shifted to multi-cultural or bilingual concerns--once again, Blacks have been relegated, figuratively speaking, "to the back of the bus." Certainly, in the interest of justice and equality of representation, there ought to be an emphasis on the multi-cultural and the bilingual in school programs; but this emphasis ought never to be made in such a way as to forget or to ignore or to exclude purely Black concerns. There is always the danger that in attempting to deal with everybody's interests nobody's interests are really addressed.

A concern for educating students in the Black experience should be particularly strong in areas where large numbers of Blacks live and

work. Black students need this emphasis for the sake of building and maintaining a positive identity, a strong self-concept, and an approach to daily life which has been strengthened by a study of the values of others who are like oneself. Non-Black students need this emphasis in order to gain respect for Black views and values which so often differ from their own, as well as to develop the kind of humility which results from realizing that "my way is not the only way--nor is it always the best way."

## A PART OF THE SCHOOL PROGRAM

One method of keeping a concern for and an understanding of the Black experience alive and strong is to make Black literature an integral part of the school program. This can be done by requiring courses and units of work in Black literature at various points during the junior-senior high years. Such exposure can give students a more balanced picture of the American literary scene. Blacks have made prolific contributions to American literature from the 1600's to the present. Thus, no study of American literature which excludes or minimizes an examination of this contribution is an accurate, truthful examination. Moreover, Black literature can give students unique insights into the heart of both Black America and white America--insights which the study of literature written by those of other racial and ethnic backgrounds does not afford. Further, Black literature can present students with many fine

models of quality literature. Black literature contains superb examples of "the well-turned phrase," beautiful imagery, thoughtful symbolism, lifelike characterization, and provocative themes.

Consider the imagery in the following lines:

"I  
am a black woman  
tall as a cypress  
strong  
beyond all definition still  
defying place  
and time  
and circumstance  
assailed  
impervious  
indestructible  
Look  
on me and be  
renewed."

---Mari Evans 1

"That Justice is a blind goddess  
Is a thing to which we black are  
wise:  
Her bandage hides two festering  
sores  
That once perhaps were eyes."

---Langston Hughes 2

"super-cool  
ultrablack  
a tan/purple  
had a beautiful shade.

he had a double-natural  
that wd put the sisters to shame.  
his dashikis were tailor made  
& his beads were imported sea  
shells  
(from some blk/country i never  
heard of)  
he was triple-hip."

---Don L. Lee 3

These lines surely suggest the literary treat which awaits students who are required to study Black literature.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOLS

In grades 7-9, Black literature courses might include units on "Black Folklore," "The Black Hero," and "Black Family Relationships." The "Black Folklore" unit might include a study of spirituals, worksongs, and secular songs; Black magic and chance; folktales; children's games and rhymes; Black folk medicine and ghost stories. *The Book of Negro Folklore* by Langston Hughes and *Black Folktales* by Julius Lester are excellent sources for such material.

"The Black Hero" unit could deal with such folk heroes as Brer Rabbit, John Henry, Stagolee, and Joe Shine as well as with Martin Luther King, as a kind of hero of the 1960's, and Muhammad Ali as a hero of our present day. The Langston Hughes and Julius Lester references cited above would, again, serve as useful sources for selections about the folk heroes, while biographies such as *Martin Luther King: The Peaceful Warrior* by Ed Clayton and *The Greatest* by Muhammad Ali, with Richard Durham, would be appropriate for a study of contemporary heroes. Students could be encouraged to consider the kinds of qualities which Blacks have consistently admired throughout the years as well as encouraged to discuss whether these are the same qualities which white America has typically applauded.

The "Family Relationships" unit might include the scenes from Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* which appear in Alice Childress' fine collection, *Black Scenes*. Poems such as Langston Hughes' "Mother to Son" and "Cross," Paul Laurence Dunbar's "Little Brown Baby" and "In the Morning," Larry Thompson's "Black is Best," and Nikki Giovanni's "Knoxville, Tennessee" might also be included. Stories such as "Brother Carlyle," by William Melvin Kelley; "Mama's Missionary Money," by Chester Himes; "The Day the World Almost Came to an End," by Pearl Clayton;

and "Raymond's Run," by Toni Cade Bambara, would also be useful.

Units such as those described above could help to comprise an entire Black literature course for students in grades 7-9; or, if an entire course is not workable, the units might be interspersed into other literature courses.

Beyond the study of Black literature in unit fashion, Black literature courses could be rounded out by having students read some of the fine junior novels written by Black authors. *Arilla Sundown* and *Zeely*, by Virginia Hamilton; *Listen for the Fig Tree* and *Teacup Full of Roses*, by Sharon Bell Mathis; and *Soul Brothers and Sister Lou*, by Kristin Hunter, are novels which give young people special and varied insight into the Black experience. While novels written by whites about Blacks serve a useful purpose in the literary development of young people, they are in no way a substitute for books written by Black authors. Thus, the course in Black literature would either consider only novels written by Black writers; or it would give students an opportunity to compare and contrast novels written by Blacks with novels written by whites about Blacks.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR SENIOR HIGH SCHOOLS

In grades 10-12, Black literature courses might deal with units on such themes as Justice/Injustice, Alienation, Freedom, and Identity. These themes appear again and again from the writings of the earliest Black authors in this country to writings of the present day. A careful consideration of these themes would give high school students a kind of panoramic view of Black literature.

Justice/Injustice units might include such poems as Richard Wright's "Between the World and Me," Langston Hughes' "Justice" and "Ballad of the Landlord," Clarence Major's "Vietnam No. 4," Gwendolyn Brooks' "The Ballad of

Rudolph Reed," and Raymond Patterson's "Riot Rimes." Stories such as Paul Laurence Dunbar's "The Lynching of Jube Benson," Richard Wright's "Bright and Morning Star," and R. J. Meaddough III's "Death of Tommy Grimes" would add strength to such units.

Alienation units might focus on the socio-psychological concept of "twoness" which persisted in Black life until the mid-1960's and which still rears its schizophrenic head in some quarters even today. W.E.B. Dubois describes the nature of this "twoness" in *The Souls of Black Folk*:

Students could be assisted in exploring this kind of alienation by considering such poems as Claude McKay's "Outcast" and "The White House," Mari Evans' "The Emancipation of George Hector & A Colored Turtle," Samuel Allen's "A Moment Please," Langston Hughes' "Junior Addict," and Maya Angelou's "Letter to an Aspiring Junkie." Stories such as John O. Killens' "God Bless America," Chester Himes' "Marihuana and a Pistol," and Carolyn Rodgers' "Blackbird in a Cage" could also be useful.

Freedom units might consider commonalities between Black and white concepts of freedom, as well as the differences between these concepts. Such poems as Langston Hughes' "Words Like Freedom," Mari Evans' "The Young Black and Beautiful In Pursuit of Ancient Freedom Dreams," Naomi Long Madgett's "Midway," and Sonia Sanchez's "Right On Wite America." Stories such as Mike Thelwell's "Direct Action," Arna Bontemps' "A Summer Tragedy," and John Henrik Clarke's "Santa Claus is a White Man" could also be helpful.

Identity units might deal with the beauty, power and value of the Black experience as well as with the uniqueness of identity which Blacks can develop as a result of that experience. Such poems as Barbara Mahone's "What Color is Black," Margaret Walker's "For My

People," Mari Evans' "I am a Black Woman," and Waring Cuney's "No Images" could be examined; while stories such as James Baldwin's "Sonny Blues," Loyle Hairston's "The Winds of Change," Ted Poston's "The Revolt of the Evil Fairies," and C. H. Fuller Jr.'s "A Love Song for Seven Little Boys Called Sam" might also be explored.

Senior high courses in Black literature could also be enriched by a study of such full-length works as Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Alice Childress' *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich*, William Demby's *Bettlecreek*, Gordon Parks' *The Learning Tree*, William Melvin Kelley's *A Different Drummer*, June Jordan's *His Own Where*, James Baldwin's *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, and Ronald Fair's *Many Thousand Gone*.

#### SUMMARY

In the 1960's and early 1970's numerous school literature programs began to build an interest in and an appreciation for Black literature. Unless this trend continues in the 1980's, the sentiment of Jaci Earley's poem "One Thousand Nine Hundred and Sixty-Eight Winters" may well become the norm:

Got up this morning  
 Feeling good & black  
 Thinking black thoughts  
 Did black things  
 Played all my black records  
 And minded my own black  
 business  
 Put on my best black clothes  
 Walked out my black door  
 And Lord have mercy: white  
 snow!

Earley seems to suggest that no matter how "Black" one's own attitudes, activities, and sense of identity, whiteness can still blanket one's life. It is the hope of this writer that the "White snow" of unconcern and inattention not obliterate the rich literary experience awaits potential students of Black literature. WANTED: BLACK LITERATURE IN GRADES 7-12!!!!

"It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideas in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." 4

#### REFERENCES

1. Mari Evans, "I am a Black Woman", *I am a Black Woman* (New York, 1970), p. 12.
2. Langston Hughes, "Justice", *The Panther and the Lash* (New York, 1969), p. 45.
3. Don L. Lee, "But He was Cool: Or He even stopped for Green Lights" in Alma Murray and Robert Thomas (ed.) *The Scene* (New York, 1971), pp. 14-15.
4. W.E.B. Dubois, "The Souls of Black Folk," *Three Negro Classics* (New York, 1902), pp. 214-215.
5. Jaci Earley, "One Thousand Nine Hundred and Sixty Eight Winters" in June Jordan (ed.) *Soulscript* (Garden City, New York, 1970), p. 127.