

Navigating and Interrogating the Pandemic and Protests Through Poetry

Frank X Walker's *Masked Man, Black: Pandemic & Protest Poems* is a new poetry collection that engages the current moment and tackles the issues challenging our country and the world. Exploring various aspects of the global pandemic and racial strife, the poems utilize a range of poetic devices as they shine a light on the problems plaguing society.

The following guide, designed for high school students but adaptable for lower grades, will help to facilitate a study of Walker's *Masked Man, Black: Pandemic & Protest Poems* and ultimately demonstrate that literature, and the arts in general, can help us make sense of our times. The guide will introduce literary terms/poetic devices, allow students to analyze poems in order to locate the poetic devices at work, and encourage students to make a personal connection to their world and experience.

Objectives

1. Students will read and analyze the poems and examine poetic devices used.
2. Students will interrogate individual poems and draw personal connections.
3. Students will discuss how poetry illustrates and magnifies real-world issues.

Learning Outcomes

1. Students will become familiar with poetry terms and concepts.
2. Students will understand the possibilities for literature and poetry moving us to a better understanding of ourselves and the world.

Instructions & Steps

1. Introduce students to the literary terms/poetic devices below.
2. Have students read poems and locate the poetic devices in use.
3. Ask for the poem to be read out loud.
4. Discuss how the poems individually or as a group illustrate these complex and serious times of crisis.
5. Have students declare which poem they identify with most.

Selected Literary Terms <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms>

1. **Metaphor:** A comparison that is made without pointing out a similarity by using words such as "like," "as," or "than."
2. **Symbol:** Something in the world of the senses, including an action, that reveals or is a sign for something else. A rose, for example, has long been considered a symbol of love and affection.
3. **Irony:** As a literary device, irony implies a distance between what is said and what is meant. Based on the context, the reader is able to see the implied meaning in spite of the contradiction.
4. **Tone:** The poet's attitude toward the poem's speaker, reader, and subject matter, as interpreted by the reader. Often described as a "mood" that pervades the experience of reading the poem, it is created by the poem's vocabulary.
5. **Persona:** A dramatic character, distinguished from the poet, who is the speaker of a poem.

Consider the following poems from Frank X Walker's *Masked Man, Black: Pandemic & Protest Poems*.

B.C.

Seems like a long time
ago, before the longest
spring break ever,
when you could be
YouTube famous
for something hilarious
or amazing or bizarre.

Today, their biggest wish
is to replicate the newest
TikTok challenge
and to get at least
a little bit of summer.

Before Corona,
young people rushed to post
and wanted just a moment
in their lives
—to go viral.

Terms: *Tone and Irony*

Additional Considerations: *Explain the significance of the choice of the words in the last line of the poem. How does the poem reflect the significant changes in the daily lives of people? What personal connection to the topic of the poem can you make?*

Notes:

Complicit, at Most

I am no more guilty
than the officers' eyes
choosing to look the other way.

Technically, I'm not even touching
his neck. All I could feel
was the hot cotton insides
of officer Chauvin's slacks
against my skin.

Almost nine minutes is a long time,
to kneel, on a neck, especially
if you are unaccustomed
to praying or begging.

But after pressing all of me down
he put this all on me
as if he was planning to propose,
but got cold feet
and was too embarrassed to get up,
and just walk away from this altar-
cation, marrying us both
to this moment, 'til death do us part.

Terms: *Tone and Persona*

Additional Considerations: *Who or what is the speaker of the poem? What sort of critique, if any, is the poem offering? Does the poem's message support or contradict the voice of the speaker? What personal connection to the topic of the poem can you make?*

Notes:

Want Ads

HELP WANTED. Nonsmoking, hygienically-conscious, COVID-negative surrogate to serve as public persona for hyper-allergic professional. Must be willing to shake hands. Some sanitizing experience preferred. Anti-vaxers need not apply.

Athletic, middle-aged man SEEKING same for occasional foursome. Must be at least six months COVID-19 free and have a single digit handicap.

FOR SALE. Home ventilator kit. Slightly used. Comes with military grade hand sanitizer. Eleven months still remaining on warranty.

Terms: Tone and Symbol

***Additional Considerations:** Consider how the poem treats the topic of the pandemic? What impact does this poem, presented in the form of a want ad, have on the subject matter? Compare and contrast the tone of each of the three stanzas. What personal connection to the topic of the poem can you make?*

Notes:

Masked Man, Black

after Paul Laurence Dunbar

Black male me walks into a store
in broad daylight black phone in hand
wearing a black mask.

You already know how this ends.
Somebody felt threatened.
Somebody got shot.
Black woman wailing makes news.

But it isn't new.
All the chalk outlines are white.
All the states are red.
The Coronavirus doesn't discriminate.
Racists still do.

Peel off mask no grins no lies.

Terms: *Tone, Symbol, and Metaphor*

Additional Considerations: *This poem pays tribute to Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem "[We Wear the Mask](#)." Compare and contrast the content and subject matter of both poems. How does this poem connect the pandemic to the topic of racial justice? What personal connection to the topic of the poem can you make?*

Notes: