

Poetry in Rap

DISCOVERING SIMILARITIES BETWEEN RAP AND POETRY

Far more familiar with the likes of Tupac than Tennyson, Shakira than simile, I designed my lessons to funnel my students' deep knowledge and appreciation of rap into an understanding of poetry's power.

"Many of your favorite artists learned writing techniques to make their rhymes stronger and raps better," I explained in the opening of our unit, "and those are actually the same strategies used by poets." The structural similarities of rhythm, simile, and metaphor, as well as thematic ones such as social commentary, allow students to conceptualize some of the clout of poetry through rap music.

1. Rhythm Without Rhyme

Although many excellent poems employ strong rhyme schemes, "no rhyme" poems offer a much-needed insight into the distinction between writing poetry and making rhymes. "No rhyme" poems were particularly important for students whose limited vocabularies affected their ability to express themselves with the creative nuance they would like. Poems such as Langston Hughes' "I, Too" are invaluable models for how poets can create rhythm without rhyming.

I am the darker brother.

They send me to eat in the kitchen

When company comes,

But I laugh,

And eat well,

And grow strong.

Hughes breaks his sentences into maneuverable, powerful chunks; the staccato flow of the first three lines gives way to the self-assured three-syllable count of the second half of the stanza.

2. Inflection and Pacing

Poetry is an art of performance, and although it may not rely on superior delivery as much as rap, a good poet grasps the rhythm of a particular poem, and allows it to flow during reading. Strong artists generate rhythm through inflection: Snoop Dogg, Tupac, Biggie Smalls, Eminem, are good examples. Similarly, a good poet has a strong sense of the pacing of their poetry, and will choose words that preserve and enhance a consistent style. Dr. Seuss' short, consistent rhyming style and penchant for made-up words characterize his books.

You'll be on your way up!

You'll be seeing great sights!

You'll join the high fliers

who soar to high heights.

In this excerpt from [Oh the Places You'll Go](#), Seuss displays his whimsical style, gripping assonance, and alliteration.

3. Metaphor and Simile

Good rap and poetry employ metaphor and simile to create imagery for different effects. Comparing the usage of metaphor and simile in poems and raps demonstrates how artists use these literary devices to breathe new life into staid words. In the lines “I come fresh like your breath after you brush/wack MCs like that orange soda get crushed,” Fatlip creatively approaches his sound with a tooth-brushing simile, while extolling the consequences of “battling” him. Such colorful images create a richer rhyme, and encourage the listener’s interest. Similarly, Christie Maurer deftly employs simile “[Glorious Things](#),” when she describes the way snow settled onto picnic benches.

Picnic tables, prepared for winter,

lean against each other.

Soft mounds of snow rest between the crevices like nests

in tree branches.

The nest simile taps into a reader’s powerful visual memory, alchemically summoning the tranquil beauty of winter. From her description, the reader is free to extrapolate on further relationships between a bird’s nest and the way the snow gathered.

Strong metaphor adds another layer of analysis to poetry, and enhances depth and power of both poetry and rap. Mos Def’s “Habitat” reads, “I’m a pirate on an island seeking treasure known as silence.” He makes a comparison between himself and a pirate; he is interested in spoils and riches, and has his own set of codes that differ from society’s. Yet he also seeks silence, and the escape it provides, the opportunity for personal reflection and rest.

Metaphor may also characterize inanimate objects. Jedd Roche’s “[Airport Flags](#)” portrays the multicolored cloths as unbiased consumers airport conversation — hanging loftily above, they have seen and heard everything. “I want to crush you here within my grasp/ and I’ll absorb your body into mine,/ like farewell conversations that, rising up,/ are swallowed by the hungry flags above.” Their presence reminds us of the idiosyncratic minutiae of our existence, as well as the overwhelming homogeny created by public space.

4. Social Commentary

While rap is sometimes characterized as the poetic vehicle of the young, poetry has long been the tool of choice for deconstruction of social issues. Social commentaries push the reader/listener to

question an aspect of personal existence, or another's life. Jadakiss' line "Why is the industry designed to keep the artist in debt?" critiques the music industry's corporatized nature, and the difficulty of gaining recognition.

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore--

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over--

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Langston Hughes' "A Dream Deferred" implicitly questions the result of postponing one's aspirations, recognizing the moral, psychological, and emotional damage that stem from the crush of racism, and the too-distant prospect of racial integration.

5. Symbolism, Personification, and More

The similarities between poetry and rap continue in symbolism, personification, narratives, and more. Their connections create an engaging and meaningful platform for the exploration of poetic devices and important themes. Students' analyses of familiar rap songs foster deeper appreciation for the poetic structures rappers employ and creates enduring understandings of these techniques, while comparison of common themes in rap and poetry lends itself to a broader understanding of social issues and other themes.

Source: <https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/lesson-plans/teaching-content/teaching-poetry-through-rap/>