

# Audre Lorde

## Lesbian U.S. Poet and Activist

(1934 - 1992)

*"It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences."*

– Audre Lorde

Audre Lorde was a black lesbian of Caribbean descent who fought for social justice through her poetry, teaching, radical feminism, and civil rights activism; declaring "I am defined as other in every group I'm part of... my sexuality is part and parcel of who I am, and my poetry comes from the intersection of me and my worlds." In her groundbreaking essay, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*, she criticized Second Wave white feminists who portrayed womankind as an undifferentiated bloc, stunning them with her claim that racism, classism, sexism and homophobia were linked by a collective failure to recognize and tolerate difference. In 1977 Lorde became the poetry editor for the lesbian journal, *Chrysalis: A Magazine of Women's Culture*. She was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1978 and breathtakingly chronicled her struggles against and resistance to the disease in *The Cancer Journals* (1980). In 1979 she was a featured speaker at the first National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights. Together with fellow writer Barbara Smith, Lorde co-founded *Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press* in the late 1980s in order to promote the writings of black feminists. Concerned with global as well as local events, she co-founded Sisters in Support of Sisters in South Africa (SISA) to raise concerns about black women under apartheid. After accepting an offer to serve as a guest professor at the John F. Kennedy Institute of North American Studies at the Free University of Berlin in 1984, she remained there as a U.S. expatriate until 1992 to pursue activist work with the Afro-German population. Lorde received the Walt Whitman Citation of Merit in 1991, which recognized her as poet laureate of New York State. She took the name "Gambda Adisa" – which means "Warrior: She Who Makes Her Meaning Known" – in an African naming ceremony shortly before she passed away from liver cancer on November 17, 1992 in St. Croix. Audre Lorde, self-proclaimed "black, lesbian, mother, warrior, and poet," was 58.



## Lesson Plan

### LEVEL 1: CONTRIBUTIONS APPROACH

1. **Activate Prior Experience:** Before today what did you know about Audre Lorde, the woman who described herself as "black, lesbian, mother, warrior and poet"? Read the biographical information on the plaque (above). The learn more about Audre Lorde by viewing this link: [http://www.famouspoetsandpoems.com/poet/audre\\_lorde/biography](http://www.famouspoetsandpoems.com/poet/audre_lorde/biography)
2. **Group Discussion:** Lorde had many jobs before becoming a full time writer/poet. The group should discuss how her background, education, relationships and job opportunities helped Audre Lorde in constructing the perspective of her work.
3. **Extend Knowledge:** Use this link for a list of other poets of the period: <http://www.public.iastate.edu/~savega/afampoet.html>  
How would you rank Audre Lorde among other African American poets and authors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century?

### LEVEL 2: ADDITIVE APPROACH

1. Lorde wrote, "When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid." Listen to 5 poems by Audre Lorde then, after each write a "quick write" on your reaction: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=k360bcxwFCY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k360bcxwFCY)
2. This link will give you more information about the poet's life and accomplishments: [www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/audre-lorde](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/audre-lorde)  
Note the extensive bibliography at the end of the article—12 books of poetry, 5 books of prose, 7 poetry anthologies—that included her work as well as a book of Lorde's essays, speeches and journals. Based on the poems you have heard and this bibliography, write your own description of Audre Lorde. Compare your work with a classmate's.
3. Audre Lorde also was an essayist. Watch, listen and then write a reaction to what has been called "one of the most important essays of the 20<sup>th</sup> century". Lorde reads her "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power": [www.youtube.com/watch?v=xFHWg6aNKyQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xFHWg6aNKyQ)

### LEVEL 3: TRANSFORMATIONAL APPROACH

1. After reading quotes attributed to Audre Lorde, choose one for each self-identified characteristic of the poet: "Black" "Lesbian" "Mother" "Warrior" and "Poet". For a list of quotes go to: [http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/18486.Audre\\_Lorde](http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/18486.Audre_Lorde)
2. Lorde's first book was written when she was married to a man with two children. Shortly after its publication she divorced her husband and began a lesbian relationship. From your reading and listening to her work, do you think she was honest with her readers? Was she born "that way" or did she choose to further her career by becoming a lesbian African American?
3. Audre's career spanned four decades, from the late 1960's through the early 1990's. Based on what you have learned from her writing thus far, make a list of the themes she may have written about if she had she lived through the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### LEVEL 4: SOCIAL ACTION APPROACH

1. Do you think that Audre Lorde would be criticized for living her openly gay life today? Would her marriage and children be a plus for her career or not matter? Discuss the pros and cons of the situation.
2. Look back at your list of themes from above. What would Lorde be writing about today? Would she still be writing about Apartheid, sex discrimination and gay rights? Support your answer with poems or essays discovered in this study.
3. Using the site below read a little about Maya Angelou: <http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/maya-angelou>.  
Make a list of the characteristics that Maya Angelou and Audre Lorde shared. Discuss your list with the class and focus on the power and influence these women had on America.