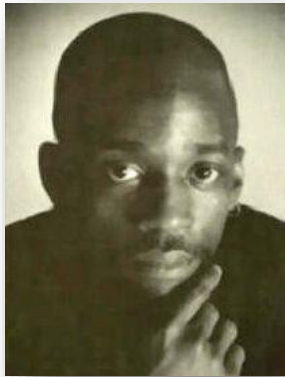


ESSEX HEMPHILL

Gay African American Poet and Activist (1957-1995)



Born in Chicago, Hemphill grew up in Washington, DC where he was at the heart of an African American gay and lesbian literary and performance renaissance during the 1980s and 90s. His poetry evoked the challenges of being black, gay and young in the midst of the AIDS epidemic – articulating the anger, despair, and commitment of his generation; his critiques of homophobia and heterosexism within the black community, of sexism among black men and of racism among gay whites served as reminders that being oppressed does not mean one is unable to oppress others. Hemphill sought to examine how sexuality is impacted upon and influenced by racism, allowing neither his sexuality nor his race to define him. He argued that “...homo sex did not constitute a whole life nor did it negate my racial identity...” and challenged himself to “...integrate all of my identities into a functioning self, instead of accepting a dysfunctional existence as the consequence of my homosexual desires.” Probably the most profound and provocative thinker of his generation – he was prominently featured in the films *Tongues Untied* (1989), *Looking for Langston* (1988) and *Black Is...Black Ain't* (1994) and the anthologies *In The Life* (1986) and *Brother to Brother* (1991) – Hemphill gave voice and metaphor to the lives of African American gay men. He died in 1995 due to AIDS-related illnesses.

Lesson Plan

Level 1: Contributions Approach

1. Activate prior experience: Have you ever read Hemphill's poetry or seen a movie, based upon his writings? Read the biography (above).
2. Now read the biographical information found in the Poetry Foundation at <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/essex-hemphill>.
3. Group Discussion: How would describe Hemphill's attributes?
4. Extend knowledge: Read the poem, “*American Wedding*” at <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/american-wedding/>. How does this poem relate to his personal life?

Level 2: Additive Approach

1. Read more of Hemphill's poetry at <http://academic.reed.edu/english/courses/english366/hemphill.html#POEM>. It is said that Hemphill's poetry brings hope and insight to mankind. What does this mean to you? Would you agree or disagree? Why?
2. Conduct an advanced search for LGBTQ poet's at <https://legacyprojectchicago.org/explore/advanced>. Select a few who interest you and compare insights about them – their motivations, inspirations, and philosophies – against what is said about Hemphill. Write an essay sharing what you have learned. Can you find a common thread between them?

Level 3: Transformational Approach

1. Examine the many conditions experienced by Hemphill through reading the following by David Bergman at <http://lodestarquarterly.com/work/233/>. Next, view this trailer for the movie “*Tongues Untied*” (which was based on Hemphill's poetry) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S2T0UdNaWlo> and read this review of the documentary at <https://www.cineaste.com/fall2007/tongues-untied-1989>. Explain how Hemphill's worldview was shaped by his experiences. How were his beliefs about black identity and homosexuality formed? Do you agree with him?
2. Chuck Tarver describes the final stages of Hemphill's life in *Taking Care of Your Blessings*. Follow this link: <http://www.qrd.org/qrd/www/culture/black/essex/blessings.html> Explain how Hemphill's philosophy on racial and sexual identity changed over time? What effect did his illness have on him? Share your insights with your class.

Level 4: Social Action Approach

1. Hemphill received the Pew Fellowship in the Arts <https://www.pewcenterarts.org/people/essex-hemphill>. Name another black artist/performer who has pushed societal boundaries? In what way is that person similar to Hemphill – or markedly different?
2. Read this essay [Is Rap Music Like Poetry](#) and this one about [Rap Music and Folk Music](#). Thinking about the themes invoked by Essex Hemphill's work, would you classify poetry as a form of Rap or Folk? Neither? Both?