Break My Heart by Joy Harjo Lesson Plan

Bailey McKarns

GRADE LEVEL: 9-10 grades

Time: Approximately 50 minutes or 1-2 day lesson plan

Standard Statement:

RL.9-10.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning, mood, and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place or an emotion; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

W.9-10.6 Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology’s capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically.

Diversity 10 DI.6-8.10 I can explain how the way groups of people are treated today, and the way they have been treated in the past, shapes their group identity and culture.


Pre-activity: (30 minutes)
Students will be asked what knowledge they have about the Native Americans currently. Students will fill out a KWL chart, and first they will fill out the “what I know” column. After they fill out the “know” column, they will fill out the “what I wonder” column. Then students will be shown this Teen Vogue “Misconceptions” video.

After the video, students will fill out the “what I learned” column. Once that is completed, students will be asked to share some of their answers with the class. Students will discuss their answers and how their thoughts about Native American people may have changed since watching the video.

Students should be asked if there are any questions or things they still wanted them to know about Native Americans.

Transition: (20 minutes) Students will get out their computers to read the poem together as a class. The teacher may read the poem to the class, or a student may read the poem. After reading
the poem together, students will be asked if they have any questions about the poem. If they
don’t have any questions about the poem, use some of the discussion questions provided.

1. *An American Sunrise* includes poems in a range of forms, distinguished by elements such
   as line length (short lines, long lines, prose), line breaks (where a line starts and ends),
   stanza shape, capitalization, and punctuation, to name just a few. Are there places where
   one or more of these choices affected how you read the poem? (NEA Big Read Book
   Discussion, question 9)

2. Joy Harjo is the first Native American poet laureate of the United States. Knowing that
   she is a Native American author, how does that affect the meaning of her poem? Does it
   change the meaning for you?

3. Harjo’s last line says, “History will find you, and wrap you/ In its thousand arms.” What
   do you think she means by this? What could she be alluding to here?

Activity: (45-50 minutes)
Students will choose their favorite line from the poem to dissect. Students should decide what the
line of the poem means to them and how it could relate to the struggles that Native Americans
have faced.

Once they decide this, students will receive a notecard with one lined side and one blank side.
Students will choose one word that they think best reflects the line they chose. They will write
the word on the blank side of the notecard, and then draw/color/decorate that side to reflect the
meaning of the line they chose. On the lined side of the notecard, students will go into detail on
what the line means, why they chose the word they did, and what their drawing shows.

After they finish their notecard, students will go to the [Traveling Stanzas website](#) to write one
short stanza based on the stems of Joy Harjo’s “Break My Heart” in the community poem
section. Students should base their own stanza off of the poem, but not copying Harjo’s work.
Students must include their email as well as their first and last name or initial when submitting
their poetry onto the Traveling Stanzas website. They will submit their stanza by emailing the
notification email they receive from the Big Read Community Poem with the poem they would
like to have graded.

Closure: (5 minutes)
Students will be allowed to share what they drew with the class if there is enough time. Student’s
work can be hung up, drawing side up, to display in the classroom.

Assessment:
Students will be assessed on the completion of the word on the front with a drawing or decoration on the front. Students will also be assessed through the description they have on the back of the notecard.

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Standards/Objectives

RL.9-10.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning, mood, and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place or an emotion; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

W.9-10.6 Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology’s capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically.

Diversity 10 DI.6-8.10 I can explain how the way groups of people are treated today, and the way they have been treated in the past, shapes their group identity and culture.


Pre-activity: (35 minutes)

Students will be asked what knowledge they have about the Native Americans currently. Students will fill out a KWL chart, and first they will fill out the “what I know” column. After they fill out the “know” column, they will fill out the “what I wonder” column. Then students will be given this article:


After reading the article, students will fill out the “what I learned” column. Once that is completed, students will be asked to share some of their answers with the class. Students will
discuss their answers and how their thoughts about Native American people may have changed since reading the article.

Students should be asked if there are any questions or things they still wanted them to know about Native Americans.

**Transition: (25-30 minutes)**

Students will get out their computers to read the poem together as a class. The teacher may read the poem to the class, or the students may popcorn read the poem. After reading the poem together, students will be asked if they have any questions about the poem. If they don’t have any questions about the poem, use some of the discussion questions provided.

1. *An American Sunrise* includes poems in a range of forms, distinguished by elements such as line length (short lines, long lines, prose), line breaks (where a line starts and ends), stanza shape, capitalization, and punctuation, to name just a few. Are there places where one or more of these choices affected how you read the poem? (NEA Big Read Book Discussion, question 9)
2. Joy Harjo is the first Native American poet laureate of the United States. Knowing that she is a Native American author, how does that affect the meaning of her poem? Does it change the meaning for you?
3. If you could ask the author any question about this poem, what would you ask and why? Would it be about the meaning? The mechanics she chose?
4. In the lines, “History will find you, and wrap you/ In its thousand arms.” and “Chaos is primordial./ All words have roots here.” What do you think she means by each one of these lines? What could she be alluding to here?
5. The U.S. News Article we just read stated this at the end, “Erik Redix, a scholar of Ojibwe history and member of the Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Ojibwe, said that ‘animals have spirits, just like us,’ and their neglect is both an affront to the spiritual imperative of treating all living beings well and a symptom of broader social distress in impoverished Native lands.” Thinking of this statement, how can you see the idea of social distress included in our poem? How does reading this article affect your view of Harjo’s poem?
6. Give one example of imagery in Joy Harjo’s “Break My Heart,” and use evidence from the poem to support your claim.
7. “Be who you are, even if it kills you.” What does this line mean to you, personally? How could being who you are possibly kill you?

**Activity: (30-40 minutes)**

Students will use the Kent State Big Read Community Poem program to complete their poetry writing activity.
Students will go to the Big Read Share Your Voice website and choose “Model B: Break My Heart.” Students will reread the poem again, and listen to the recording that Joy Harjo has at the bottom. Students will then work through the program to choose a stem for their own poem. Students should write a poem that reflects the original poem and continue the meaning of Harjo’s own poetry. The poem should be around 15-30 lines and follow the patterns that Harjo has set up in the original poem.

Students must include their email as well as their first and last name or initial when submitting their poetry onto the Traveling Stanzas website.

Once students have finished their own poem, they may read the responses of others. If they would like to write another, they are encouraged to keep trying until they are satisfied with their final product. Students should turn in the notification email they receive from the Big Read Community Poem with the poem they would like to have graded to receive credit.

**Closure: (5-10 minutes)**
Students will be welcomed to share their poems at the end of class. Students may also be directed to the other items on the Traveling Stanzas website that relates to the Big Read project with Joy Harjo.

**Assessment:**
Students will be graded on their contribution to the Community Poem. If they followed directions, they should have 15-30 lines that reflect Harjo’s poem.
“Break My Heart” from An American Sunrise.
By Joy Harjo

There are always flowers,
Love cries, or blood.

Someone is always leaving
By exile, death, or heartbreak.

The heart is a fist.
It pockets prayer or holds rage.

It’s a timekeeper.
Music maker, or backstreet truth teller.

Baby, baby, baby
You can’t say what’s been said

Before, though even words
Are creatures of habit.

You cannot force poetry
With a ruler, or jail it at a desk.

Mystery is blind, but wills you
To untie the cloth, in eternity.

Police with their guns
Cannot enter here to move us off our lands.

History will always find you, and wrap you
In its thousand arms.

…

Someone will lift from the earth
Without wings.

Another will fall from the sky
Through the knots of a tree.
Chaos is primordial.
All words have roots here.

You will never sleep again
Though you will never stop dreaming.

The end can only follow the beginning.
And it will zigzag through time, governments, and lovers.

Be who you are, even if it kills you.

It will. Over and over again.
Even as you live.

Break my heart, why don’t you?