

Poetry 2012: The Written World



Resources for Teachers

Country: Senegal

Poet: Leopold Sedar Senghor

Poem: *from* Song for Yacine Mbaye

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About this Resource

Activities in this resource are aimed at pupils in lower secondary school (S1–S3).

Literacy and English experiences and outcomes

Reading poems from countries around the world links to CfE Literacy & English Experiences and outcomes by offering opportunities to:

- *develop my understanding of what is special, vibrant and valuable about my own and other cultures and their languages*
- *explore the richness and diversity of language, how it can affect me, and the wide range of ways in which I and others can be creative*
- *extend and enrich my vocabulary through listening, talking, watching and reading*
- *explore and discuss word patterns and text structures*

Curriculum for Excellence Correspondences (Levels 3–4)

Individual activities outlined below can link to particular experiences and outcomes:

Reading the poem

- ENG 3-12a / ENG 4-12a
- ENG 3-17a / ENG 4-17a
- ENG 3-19a / ENG 4-19a

Discussion

- LIT 3-02a / LIT 4-02a
- LIT 3-09a / LIT 4-09a

Research Activity

- LIT 3-06a / LIT 4-06a
- LIT 3-14a / LIT 4-14a
- LIT 3-15a / LIT 4-15a

Creative Activity

- ENG 3-26a / ENG 4-26a
- ENG 3-27a / ENG 4-27a
- ENG 3-30a / ENG 4-30a
- ENG 3-31a / ENG 4-31a

from Song for Yacine Mbaye

1974, 1,500 metres champion

Mbaye you as well Mbaye, if I have chosen you Mbaye, it is for
your genuine beauty
For your skin of oiled bronze, for your skin of dark mahogany
I speak of harmony and completeness
Without excess. I have chosen you for your eastern face set with
two diamond stars
For your face tattooed with two straight lines, and, where they
join, almond eyes
Trimmed with plaits gathered high and tight, a garland of dark
light around your face
And the plaits' tail floats free, floats in the fresh breeze of the
neck's nape.
I sing your beauty and modulate the measure
I measure the curve of your curves: the bow bowed forward, the
swift and graceful
Flight of the back. If I sing, 'tis for the test is hard
It's hard to smile at the stadium's end
My sable gazelle, forward leaning, so fine in anguish and in
patience

Leopold Sedar Senghor (1906–2001)

from *Afrique/Europe: Essais et poèmes recueillis et introduits par Eugene van Itterbreek, I. Sixième Festival Européen, 1984, Cahier numéro 48* (Leuvense Schrijversaktie, 1984)

translated by Eugène Leguen de Lacroix

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Notes: The complete poem is in three parts: the extract above is the first part. (The second and third parts describe the race.) – I can find no reference to an athlete called Yacine Mbaye on the internet, and there were no major international championships held in 1974 (other than the Commonwealth Games, in which Senegal does not take part); so my guess is that Mbaye won a national competition in Senegal. – The poem is not included in *Oeuvre poétique* (Seuil, 1990), essentially Senghor's complete poems. (KC)

The Poet & His Work

Senghor was born in 1906 in Joal, a small Senegalese coastal town, of ethnically mixed parentage. Brought up as a Christian in a predominantly Christian country, he attended high school first in Dakar, and then in Paris, where one of his classmates was the future French president Georges Pompidou. He was the first African to win the difficult agrégation degree, in 1935 at the third attempt. He taught classics at a school in Tours, and joined the French army on the outbreak of war in 1939. Captured, he spent time in a Vichy prisoner-of-war camp, until he was released due to ill health in 1942.

He published his first book of poems, *Chants d'Ombre (Shadow Songs)* in 1945, followed by *Hosties Noirs (Black Hosts)* in 1948, which included many poems written as a prisoner-of-war. When French African territories were granted seats in the National Assembly, he represented Senegal (from 1946 to 1958), and helped draft the constitution of the fourth republic. When Senegal became independent in 1960, he became the country's first president, a post he held until 1980, when he relinquished power voluntarily.

Elected to the Academie Française in 1983, he continued to write in retirement; *Élégies majeures* (1991) includes poems addressed to figures as diverse as Pompidou, Martin Luther King and the Queen of Sheba. After suffering two heart attacks, he withdrew in 1990 to Normandy, the home of his second wife Colette, where he died in 2001.

Throughout his life he wrote poems as well as books and essays on culture and politics: he is best known for articulating 'négritude', a theory of black culture and identity influential in the 1940s and beyond. His poetry has been translated into English by, amongst others, William Oxley and Melvin Dixon.

Reading the Poem

The poem features two people – the poet ('I') and the runner ('you').

- Make a list of the verbs linked to the poet ('I'). How would you sum up what he is *doing* in the poem?
- The poet writes to the athlete, "I have chosen you". What reasons does he give for this choice?
- The poet compares the athlete to many types of thing.
 - What kind of *metal* is she like?
 - What kind of *wood*?
 - What kind of *precious stone*?
 - What kind of *creature*?
 - Which part of a *ship*?
- Taking these together, what kind of portrait of Yacine Mbaye does the poet create?
- If you took away the subtitle ("1974, 1,500 metres champion"), what in the poem would tell you that it is about an athlete?

Discussion

- Leopold Sedar Senghor was the president of Senegal when he wrote this poem. Can you think of any other people who have combined poetry – or writing more generally – and politics, either now or in the past?
- Do you think being a poet would make you a better or a worse politician? Why?
- And vice versa – do you think being a politician would make you a better or a worse poet? Why?

Research Activity

Thinking about both male and female 1500m runners:

- who are the current Olympic medal holders?
- who are the current world record holders?
- who are the best British 1500m runners today?
- which British athletes have won Olympic medals in the 1500m?

Find out about Senegal

- its location in Africa
- which other country is in the middle of it (and why)
- the name of the capital and other major cities
- the languages spoken there
- the names of well-known Senegalese sportsmen and sportswomen
- the names of well-known Senegalese writers and musicians

Creative Activity

Write a poem about a sportsman or sportswoman.

Choose someone who competes as an individual, rather than as part of a team – perhaps an athlete, tennis player or golfer.

Before you write the poem, find out and make notes about

- their *sporting career*, facts like where they have competed – who their rivals are or were – any records they have broken – their successes – and their failures and disappointments
- their *physical appearance* – tall or short, long- or short-haired, slim or stocky – and what they wear when competing, on their body, on their feet, on their head. Think too about colours, numbers, and so on
- what they *do* when they are competing – a list of verbs
- the *qualities* they need to be good at what they do, such as strength, speed, stamina, aggression, calm (a sprinter, whose races last only seconds, needs different qualities from a tennis player, who might be playing for several hours)
- the *difficulties or challenges* they face when competing
- any famous *quotes* – memorable statements they have made, or have been made about them

Use your notes to help you write a poem about the athlete you have chosen. You can borrow some ideas from Senghor's poem to help structure your poem.

Title: Song for [Name]

[If you have found a good quote, you could put this here as an epigraph – or leave it till the end of the poem]

[Name], if I have chosen you, [name],
it is for your [appearance]

I speak of [actions (draw from the verb list)]

I have chosen you for your [qualities]

I sing how you [give example(s) from their sporting career]

If I sing, it's because the test is hard,
it's hard to smile when [difficulties or challenges]

Further Reading & Weblinks

The poem ‘‘Song for Yacine Mbaye’’, representing Senegal, is part of The Written World – a collaboration between the Scottish Poetry Library and BBC radio to broadcast a poem from every single nation competing in London 2012.

www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/about/projects-partners/written-world

All the poems selected for The Written World – to find that for Senegal, click on Senegal on the map, or on the ‘Africa’ icon below the map

<http://ethiopiquest.refer.sn/spip.php?article526>

Senghor’s poem in the original French

www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1365925/Leopold-Senghor.html#

An obituary of Senghor

www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-14093674

Senegal country profile

www.guardian.co.uk/world/senegal

Recent news articles about Senegal

This is one of twelve resources, written by Ken Cockburn for the Scottish Poetry Library’s project The Written World, May 2012.

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