

The Sound of the River (Poetry & Writing)

Themes: Biological; Geological; Recreational; Water Quality; National Parks

Participants: High school students

NDE Standards: LA 12.2.1, 12.2.2

SDDE Standards: 9/10 L.2.1

Overview of unit: Students will prepare for the assignment by reading and discussing the poems. Following a reading of a brief history of the valley, the class will visit an area on the Niobrara River such as Smith Falls State Park or The Fort Niobrara Wildlife Refuge. During the trip the river habitat will be explored and the environment will be investigated. Students (or teacher) may then choose a project as a follow up to the field trip.

Materials needed:

- Classroom copies of Maya Angelou's poem "Inaugural Poem." These may be obtained from the Internet.
- Classroom copies of "Skulls on the Niobrara" by Neil Harrison. A copy is included that may be reproduced.
- Classroom copies of "Bison Bison" by Neil Harrison. A copy is included that may be reproduced.
- Classroom copies of "The Niobrara River Valley: A Brief History"
- Classroom copies of Personification Poem. Master copy included.
- Classroom copies of the KWL sheet. Master copy included.
- Copies as needed of the interview tips and evaluation. Master copy included.

Goals:

- Students will read and analyze three poems, "Inaugural Poem" ("The Rock Cries out To Us Today") by Maya Angelou; "Bison Bison" and "Skulls on the Niobrara" by Neil Harrison.
- Students will relate the poems to the river environment.
- Students will understand the interrelationships contained in the river system.
- Student will organize, draft and edit a compare/contrast essay, a speech or a poetry presentation.

Background:

Words to define and know: *personification, symbolism, metaphor, simile*

Read: the Inaugural poem by Maya Angelou.

Read: "Skulls on the Niobrara" by Neil Harrison. Reproducible copy included.

Read: "Bison Bison" by Neil Harrison. Reproducible copy included.

Read: The Niobrara River Valley: A Brief History. Reproducible copy included.

For more information:

The National Parks Service website: <http://www.nps.gov/niob>. This site also has a map of the scenic river which is downloadable and printable.

Before beginning the unit, students should fill out the K & W columns of a KWL worksheet about the Niobrara River and its ecosystems.

Discussion questions for the three poems:

- “Inaugural Poem”

Reread stanzas 1- 7.

1. What element(s) seem to connect the past with the future?

Suggested Responses: The rock

Reread stanzas 8-14.

1. What elements of the poem would be considered personification?

Suggested Response: Rock cries out (STZ 3); River sings (STZ 8) Clad in peace (STZ 12) Across your brow (STZ 13)

2. Which stanza addresses the inappropriate uses by humans?

Suggested Response: Stanza 10

3. What elements of the poem suggest the speaker’s wish for peaceful existence with humanity?

Suggested Response: Stanza 12

Reread stanza 15.

1. Why do humans want to respond to “singing Rivers” and “wise Rocks” (What do those two items stand for or symbolize?)

Suggested Responses: Answers may vary: it is human nature to be drawn in by the singing river and wiseness of the rock. They symbolize the flow of the river and the happiness a river can create and the knowledge a person can receive from the river and the study of the river. The flow of the river also symbolizes the journey through life.

Reread the rest of the poem.

1. What comparisons can a reader make with the passage of time and history with the flow of the river?

Suggested Responses: Both move on continually—time (history) and the river

The poem as a whole:

1. Looking at the technical aspects of the poem, do you detect a prominent rhyme pattern with this poem?

Suggested Response: none through most of the poem

2. Keeping the rhyme pattern in mind, why do you think the poet chose to have a definite rhyme pattern in stanza 16 (So say the Asian . . .)

Suggested Responses: Answers may vary

- Reread “Skulls on the Niobrara” by Neil Harrison.
1. Identify the personification in stanzas 2, 4 & 5.
Suggested Responses: Skulls crawled and whispered; skulls chanted and asked; Niobrara raised her voice
 2. Identify the simile in stanza 3.
*Suggested Response: clouds **like** a dark skin drum*
 3. Identify the metaphor in stanza 3.
Suggested Response: white horn moon
 4. What is the “Running Water” of stanza 4?
Suggested Responses: The Niobrara (“Running Water” is Niobrara translated from the Dakota language)
 5. To what does “whispering years of slaughter from severed tongues” refer?
Suggested Response: When bison were plentiful, hunters from the east would slaughter large amounts of bison and remove only their tongues which were thought to be a delicacy. The bison were once a mainstay of the Native American society; the demise of the buffalo had impact upon the history of this area.
 6. What message is the speaker trying convey by “erasing the map” and letting the “river keep her secrets”?
Suggested Responses: Answer may vary (The speaker realizes that humans may have played a part in the negative change to the area and to the river. The speaker decided not to add further to the downshift of the area.
NOTE: In 1800, an estimated 60 million bison roamed the North American continent. In 1889, by one estimate, less than 1,100 remained.¹
- Reread “Bison, Bison”
1. In stanza 1, identify the simile.
*Suggested Responses: stout backs sloped **like** pathways to heaven*
 2. In stanza 1, identify the metaphor.
Suggested Response: bull on the throne
 3. In stanza 2, what elements could be identified as an extended metaphor?
Suggested Responses: light the pipe, nostrils smoking, eyes a red blaze
 4. What elements can be identified as personification?
Suggested Response: moaning prayers to the earth

¹from *Where the Buffalo Roam*, Schult and Haugen, Badlands Natural History Association, Interior, South Dakota, 1979.

5. In stanza 4, “his stare went through and far beyond me” could be referring to ____.
Suggested Responses: Answers may vary. (The bison bull could be staring into the past to a time when his ancestors roamed the plains.)

Lesson:

- Arrange for a field trip to an area of the Niobrara River such as Smith Falls State Park or Fort Niobrara Wildlife Refuge or for an adventure, arrange for a float trip down the river (weather permitting). This trip could be combined for a cross curricular trip involving math, history and science classrooms as the area is rife with historical, ecological and geological artifacts.
- It is suggested that you arrange for a presentation about the Niobrara National Scenic River by calling the Niobrara National Scenic River headquarters at 402-376-1901.
- Read and discuss the three poems.
- Read the background historical material.
- Visit the river.
- On returning, select one of the following project assignments.
 1. Research, organize, draft and edit a compare/contrast essay that analyzes aspects of the Niobrara River valley. This essay could be written from an historical, geological, personal or economic perspective.
 2. Create an original poem that reflects the habitat, history and humanity of the river.
 3. Create a personification poem.
 4. Prepare a speech presentation using multimedia that develops an understanding of the river’s importance to the area’s culture. Include the importance of the river to agriculture, tourism, and wildlife.
 5. Conduct an interview of someone that would have knowledge of a topic related to the Niobrara River and it ecosystems. This interview may be edited using a movie-maker application. It will then be presented to the class or other audiences.

“Skulls on the Niobrara”

By Neil Harrison

Polished bronze in the shallow water,
Bleached white on the bank above,
Two skulls on the Niobrara,
Bison from another age;
I marked the crossing
on my plastic map.

All afternoon they rattled low
On the floor of my black canoe;
By night my dreams were bison,
Skulls crawled across my chest,
whispering years of slaughter
from severed tongues.

Midnight a thunder woke me,
clouds like a dark skin drum
buried a billion brilliant hooves,
rubbed out the white horn moon.

Chanting low in the canyons
a hundred thousand skulls
asked the Running Water—Why?
What god had brought them down?

When the Niobrara raised her voice
the drumming stopped,
my pulse ran black.

At dawn
I erased the map.

Let the river keep her secrets.

“Bison Bison”

By Neil Harrison

On the wildlife refuge east of Valentine
moving en masse in the morning mist, wild,
unpredictable, dangerous; stout backs
sloped like pathways to heaven, heads
bowed low, moaning prayers to the earth,
they’ve haunted my dreams for years.

The bull on the throne at the center
of the earth waits to light the pipe
full of killers of his kind; nostrils smoking,
eyes a red blaze, he counts the days
to judgment, silent, white, terrible.

A winter night at the livestock market,
I got a strange feeling and glanced
to my left, then up into the face
of an old brown bull towering over
the bars of a bed-frame stall.

His stare went through and far beyond me,
a ghost of something gone somewhere else,
back of the eyes of a stalled giant,
where misplaced gods haunt the morning mist,
wild, unpredictable, dangerous.

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The Niobrara River Valley A Brief History

At the northern edge of the Nebraska Sandhills, a vast region of rolling grass-covered dunes, the Niobrara River sculpted an extraordinary valley where sandstone bluffs tower unexpected forests. Through careful stewardship local ranchers have preserved this unique rural landscape since the 1870's. Dependable springs and seeps feed the river. Over 200 cascades and waterfalls pour directly into the river or its tributaries. The Niobrara is a premiere floating river. Each summer thousands of visitors enjoy canoeing, tubing and kayaking the Niobrara. *National Geographic Adventure Magazine* named it one of America's best 100 adventures in 2000.

Six different ecosystems--**ecosystem** [(ee-koh-sis-tuhm, ek-oh-sis-tuhm)]A collection of living things and the environment in which they live. For example, a prairie ecosystem includes coyotes, the rabbits on which they feed, and the grasses that feed the rabbits—come together along the valley. Deciduous forests of oak, ash, elm, linden, and cottonwood expand west up the river valley; forests of Ponderosa pine spread eastward from the Rockies and Black Hills. Relics from the glacial era: paper birch, ferns and club mosses still form on north-facing slopes and within shady side-canyons. Fields and patches of tallgrass prairie flourish along the river valley. The mixed grass prairie of the Sandhills dominates rolling hills south of the river, while shortgrass prairie grows on the drier table land to the north.

Wildlife abounds—deer, coyote, porcupine, beaver, and mink are mammals commonly seen by visitors. During the summer floaters are likely to spot a variety of birds like the great blue heron, belted king fisher, spotted sandpiper, turkey vulture, red-tailed hawk or bald eagle. Spiny-nosed softshell, painted and snapping turtles sun themselves along the riverbanks. Fish that are common are the channel catfish and the trout.

The river valley has five geologic formations. The south rim abuts the sand dune formations of the Sandhills. On the top, is the Ash Hollow Formation, a ledge-forming grayish sandstone. Below that is the Valentine Formation, a soft, poorly cemented sandstone that forms cliffs on both sides of the river. Next lies the Rosebud Formation which a harder pinkish-brown sandstone formation. Because the water flows over this resistant bedrock, the water is clear with frequent stretches of riffles and rapids. Beneath the bedrock of the Rosebud Formation is the Pierre Shale Formation. Many fossils from marine life such as shark and marine reptiles are found in this layer. The Ogallala Aquifer lies within the sandstone formations and it is because of the aquifer that floaters see waterfalls and seep along the reddish-brown layers.

*from the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior

Personification Poem

Personification is the figurative language that attributes human qualities to inanimate objects, natural forces, or other living creatures.

I Am the Niobrara River

(First stanza)

I am (two special characteristics the river has)
I wonder (something it might be curious about)
I hear (an imaginary sound)
I see (an imaginary sight)
I want (an actual desire)
I am (repeat the first line of the poem)

(Second stanza)

I feel (a feeling about something imaginary)
I touch (an imaginary touch)
I worry (something that might bother it)
I cry (something that makes it very sad)
I am (repeat the first line of the poem)

(Third stanza)

I understand (something that you know is true)
I say (something you believe in)
I dream (what would you dream if you were the river?)
I try (something the river keeps trying to do)
I hope (something you actually hope for)
I am (repeat the first lines of the poem)

*from Rivers Curriculum Guide, *Rivers Curriculum Project*, National Science Foundation

KWL Worksheet

Name _____

Before beginning this unit, fill out the K and W columns of this worksheet. *What do you know about the Niobrara River, What do you want to know?* When you finish the unit, fill out the L column. *What did you learn about the Niobrara River?*

K (Know)	W (Want to Know)	L (Learn)

Interview

Name _____

Tips:

Contact your interviewee well in advance: explain your project and purpose for wanting to interview this person; arrange a date and time that is convenient for the interviewee; give them the questions you will ask in advance if possible. Occasionally, alternative methods may be used to interview the person of choice. These include, phone interview, email interview or interview via distance learning technology. An in-person interview is the preferred method.

Be prepared: Know your topic and have prepared questions to get the interview started. You may want to follow up with impromptu questions.

Make arrangements for the appropriate media equipment (video recorder, audio recorder, blank tapes, notebook/pencil, etc.) Know how to use the equipment and insure the batteries are charged.

Ask for props (photos or artifacts the interviewee may possess) **if appropriate.** These visual aids can add to the overall effect of the interview and also give the interview a variety of focal points.

Be on time. Greet the interviewee warmly. If you have not met him/her, introduce yourself. Spend a few minutes getting acquainted to make the interviewee comfortable before you begin the actual interview. Be sure to have the interviewee sign a release of information and the video before you begin.

During the interview: Introduce yourself on tape, explain the purpose of the interview and introduce your interviewee. Be sure to speak loud enough to be heard on tape.

After the interview: Thank the person, later send a thank you note and, if appropriate, give the interview an edited copy of the interview. Analyze your interview and notes. Use the form below the interview plan.

Interview Plan:

Person interviewed:

Subject of interview:

Date/time/place to conduct interview:

Materials needed for interview: (For example: video recorder, audio recorder, etc.)

Questions I will ask in the interview: (List at least 10 questions)

Analysis and Conclusion:

1. Why did you choose your interviewee? Was this a good choice? Why or why not?
2. What the three most significant points your interviewee mentioned in the interview?
3. What additional questions, if any, do you wish you had asked? Why?
4. What kind of contribution do you think your interview could make to help understand the local history, environment or other relevant topic about the river?

Evaluation for Oral Presentation

Speaker's name _____

Subject/title _____

Key Point #1 _____

Key Point #2 _____

Key Point #3 _____

Use the following rating scale to evaluate the presentation's content, delivery and visuals:
5 (superior); 4 (good); 3 (average); 2 (below average); 1 (progressing)

Content

- ___ Appropriate subject choice
- ___ Introduction, including attention device; background information
- ___ Subject sentence previews all key points
- ___ Main points
- ___ Support: examples, statistics, definitions, comparison, quotations
- ___ Transitions
- ___ Conclusions, including summary and rounding out of the thoughts(circle back to intro para.)
- ___ Word choice, pronunciation, grammar

Delivery

- ___ Voice loud enough to be heard
- ___ Voice clear enough to be understood
- ___ Voice flexible enough to be interesting
- ___ Confidence and poise
- ___ Audience (eye) contact
- ___ Posture and gestures
- ___ Use of visuals in presentation
- ___ Answers questions well

Visuals

- ___ Neat and easy to read (not too busy)
- ___ Large enough to be seen by all
- ___ Colorful and bright
- ___ Enhance understanding for the audience