Lesson Plan for Slant Rhyme / Hip Hop as Poetry
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Objectives
Students Will:

1. Learn the definition of perfect rhyme and slant rhyme
2. Learn about the history of slant rhyme in Western Poetry and Hip-Hop Music
3. Examine how and why poets and rappers use perfect and slant rhyme
4. Write their own slant rhymes

Grade Levels
Appropriate for middle school and high school students, grades 7-12

Time Frame
One 30 minute session with optional homework assignment

Materials Needed
• Handouts
• Optional: recording of Talib Kweli’s “Memories Live,” Nas’s “NY State of Mind,” and a cd-player

Lesson
A.
Divide the class into groups of 4-6. One person in each group should be the “scribe” or “secretary.” Pass out Slant Rhyme handouts to each student.

B.
1. Read the students the definition of perfect rhyme.

   Perfect rhyme (or true rhyme):
   A rhyme in which two (or more) words begin with different consonant sounds, then have identical stressed vowel sounds. Any other following sounds are also identical. Perfect rhymes do not have to be spelled the same way.
   Examples: rink, wink / gratitude, latitude

2. Discuss: What does this definition means in practical terms?
**Question:** What rhymes perfectly with the word “wonder”?

**Answer:** The perfect rhymes are “blunder, plunder, sunder, thunder, and under.” Words like “saunter” or “daughter” or “computer” are not perfect rhymes. They don’t have matching vowel and consonant sounds after the initial “w”.

C.

1. Read students the definition of slant rhyme.

   **Slant Rhyme** (or partial rhyme, off rhyme, half rhyme, near rhyme):
   A partial or imperfect rhyme, often using assonance or consonance only. Slant rhymes do not have to be spelled in different ways.
   **Examples:** how, row / lovely, funny
   **Note:** An easy way to make a slant rhyme is to take a two-syllable word and change it so one of the syllables no longer rhymes: easy and kitty, longer and finger, baker and player.

2. Discuss what this definitions means.

   **Question:** Would there be more or fewer slant rhymes than perfect rhymes for most words? Why?
   **Answer:** There would be more slant rhymes because slant rhymes are more flexible – different people can argue over whether two words are slant rhymes. Thus there are many more possibilities for slant rhymes. Slant rhymes for “bought” for example could include every word that perfectly rhymes with “bat” plus every word that perfectly rhymes with “but” plus many others.

3. Give the class one or two words and have each group come up with some perfect rhymes and some slant rhymes for each of them. The scribe should write down what the groups come up with. Have each group share a few of their slant rhymes with the class. Choose any words in the English language or choose: brown, instant, and topic.

   Some possible (but there are many others) slant rhymes are:
   **Brown:** [perfect rhymes - clown, crown, down, drown, frown, gown, noun, town] [slant rhymes - done, brawn, bone, hummed, broad, crowed, ruin...]
   **Instant:** [perfect rhymes - there are none] [slant rhymes - fixing, old land, mixed drink, king’s men, hand stand, minced meat, Jim said...]
   **Topic:** [perfect rhymes - tropic, myopic, microscopic] [slant rhymes - knocked, real hick, mop pit, hoped, rotten, some think, etc...]
1. Discuss with your students the history of slant rhyme in English Language poetry.

**Questions:** Do you think that slant rhyme was encouraged or discouraged for early (17th-19th century) English poets? Why or why not?

**Answer:** In fact, English Language poets have long looked down on slant rhyme, considering it a flawed or sloppy alternative to “correct” or “perfect” rhymes. A few poets in the mid to late 19th Century came along and changed this paradigm, most notably: W.B. Yeats, Gerald Manley Hopkins, Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. Emily Dickinson, for example, wrote poems that included “near rhymes” (what we now call slant rhyme) and even (God help her) poems that didn’t rhyme at all! But Western Civilization was not immediately ready for this revolutionary approach. When Dickinson submitted her poems to The Atlantic, the editor, Thomas Higginson, responded: “You haven’t quite gotten it.”

But Dickinson *did* get it, in a way that Higginson couldn’t. He probably preferred the perfect rhymes of one of her “correct” poems.

2. Direct the class to look at the Emily Dickinson poem “Heart, We Will Forget Him”:

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Heart, we will forget him!
You and I, tonight!
You may forget the warmth he gave,
I will forget the light!
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**Questions:** What is the rhyme scheme? What are the perfect rhymes, if any? What are the slant rhymes, if any? What does the poem say? What effect do the perfect rhymes and slant rhymes have?

**Answer:** The rhyme scheme here is ABCB. The perfect rhymes are "tonight" and "light" (they share the same vowel *and* consonant sound at the end of the word). There is no slant rhyme. (Maybe there is slant rhyme between “forget” and “tonight”).

The effect: The perfect rhymes make the lines easy to read which corresponds to the theme of the poem: trying desperately to forget a lover. The sentiment in the poem is not transgressive or even creative in anyway (other than the dichotomy between the heart and the person) and so the perfect rhyme cements the feelings here as being normal and typical of love.

3. Look at Dickinson’s poem “The Difference Between Despair”:

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The Mind is Smooth – no Motion -
Contented as the Eye
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Upon the Forehead of a Bust -
That knows – it cannot see.

**Questions:** What is the rhyme scheme? What are the perfect rhymes if any? What are the slant rhymes if any? What does the poem say? What effect do the perfect rhymes and slant rhymes have?

**Answer:** The rhyme scheme is A-B-C-slanted B.

The Mind is Smooth – no Motion – (A)
Contented as the Eye (B)
Upon the Forehead of a Bust – (C)
That knows – it cannot see. (slanted B)

While “eye” does not perfectly rhyme with “see,” the words are similar enough in sound to constitute a slant rhyme. There is no perfect rhyme. The effect of this rhyme is haunting, off-putting. Dickinson is striking a much more somber note with these lines than she did in the preceding poem, and this too matches the content. Dickinson’s reference to the eye on the “forehead of a bust” is perhaps referencing a statue of a cyclops, which, since there are no real cyclops, knows it cannot see. To compare the mind to such a thing is a striking, creative and somewhat disconcerting metaphor. This effect is bolstered by the slant rhyme.

E.

1. **Questions:** How do you think that the hip-hop world has received slant rhyme? Would rappers be initially as closed off to slant rhymes as poets? Why or why not?

**Partial Answer:** If the world of Western Poetics resisted slant rhyme, the world of Hip-hop always embraced it. The difference, probably, is that Westen Poetry (though an Oral tradition by origin) had become a written tradition. The reader of a poem might not understand that “eye,” if pronounced a certain way, can rhyme very closely with “see.” (It also probably has something to do with a Western mindset that favors organization and perfection). Hip-hop, as an oral-tradition never had to worry about how a “reader” might pronounce a word, it is always up to the emcee.

Rap music was created on the streets and at parties where no one in the audience would ever call out: “Hey, that didn’t rhyme perfectly!” It was more important to these trail-blazing emcees to keep the flow of their rap going then to worry about specific rhymes.

2. Read the following lines by Talib Kweli from his song “Memories Live”:

Yo it kind of make me think of way back when,
I was a portrait of the artist as a young man,
All those teenage dreams of rapping,
Writing rhymes on napkins,
Was really visualization, making this here actually happen

3. **Question:** What is the rhyme scheme? What are the perfect rhymes if any? What are the slant rhymes if any? What does the rap say? What effect do the perfect rhymes and slant rhymes have?

**Answer:** The rhyme scheme is A – slanted A – B – slanted B – slanted B

Yo it kind of make me think of way back when, (A)
I was a portrait of the artist as a young man, (slanted A)
all those teenage dreams of rapping, (B)
writing rhymes on napkins, (slanted B)
was really visualization, making this here actually happen (slanted B)

There are NO examples of perfect rhyme. Notice that not only are “when” and “man” slanted rhymes, but “way back when” and “a young man” are slanted too as long as you pronounced “a” as “ay”. In this instance, the use of slanted rhyme doesn’t strike the listener much at all. It is not meant to jar the listener and create tension as it was with Dickinson’s The Mind is Smooth. Instead, the effect is very subtle. For example, Kweli’s pronunciation of “rapping” (he pronounces it “rappin’”) and “happen” are virtually identical, making this a near-perfect rhyme. What the use of slanted rhyme does allow, however, is for Kweii to work out the content he wants: painting a picture of himself as a young man. The “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man” is a reference to the James Joyce book of the same name.

**F. 2nd Example of Slant Rhyme in Rap**

[Optional - You can end the lesson here]

1. Read these lines from rapper Nas. From Nas’s song “NY State of Mind,” from his 1994 album *Illmatic.*

   I got so many rhymes I don’t think I’m too sane,
   Life is parallel to Hell but I must maintain,
   And be prosperous, though we live dangerous,
   Cops could just arrest me, blaming us, we’re held like hostages.

2. **Questions:** What is the rhyme scheme? What are the perfect rhymes if any? What are the slant rhymes if any? What does the rap say? What effect do the perfect rhymes and slant rhymes have?

**Answers:**
The rhyme scheme is: A-A-B-slanled B
The perfect rhymes are : sane – maintain
The slant rhymes are: prosperous, dangerous, blamin’ us, hostages

The rhyme scheme here (A-A-B-slanled B) is complicated by some interesting in-rhyme with “prosperous,” “dangerous,” “blamin’ us,” and “hostages.” The difference in the words further allow Nas to use his own lyrical inflection in delivery. In this rap, Nas is discussing his own feelings of living life as a black man. His life is “like Hell” in part because it’s “dangerous” and police discrimination makes Nas feel like a “hostage” to the police, or, maybe, to the system in general. The perfect rhyme at the beginning of the rap seem to mirror the idea of “maintaining” as though somehow his rhymes are both his sanity and his insanity. Things get weirder, however, and the slant rhymes at the end emphasize his incisive, from-the-heart message. The fact that “hostages” doesn’t perfectly rhyme makes this word jump out in the rap.

G. Tell the class

This quote from linguist Robert Pinsky shows how modern his ear is:

“For me such rhymes as, say, ‘swans/stones’ or ‘gibe/club’ or ‘south/both’ often sound more beautiful and interesting than such hard-rhyme combinations as ‘bones/stones,’ ‘rub/club,’ or ‘south/mouth.’”

- Linguist Robert Pinsky in his introduction to Dante’s Inferno

It is the Talib Kwelis and Nases and the Emily Dickinsons of this world that have creatively pushed the boundaries of slant rhyme in poetry.

Homework

Have each student write 2 poems / raps: one that only uses perfect rhyme, and one that uses at least four instances of slant rhyme. Share the poems / raps in class the next day. Compare the effect of perfect rhyme and slanted rhyme.

References

“Memories Live” appears on Train of Thought* by Reflection Eternal. Rawkus, 2002.
View Emily Dickinson poems online at: http://www.bartleby.com/113/
*Teacher’s Note: While the excerpts above contain no profanity, the songs themselves do.

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