‘The Fruit of the Spirit is Love (Galatians 5:22)’
by Marvin Thompson

The aim of this lesson is to explore how in his poem, ‘The Fruit of the Spirit is Love (Galatians 5:22)’ – first-prize winner in the National Poetry Competition 2020 – Marvin Thompson questions the ways in which we define our identity, through internal and external voices. Students are encouraged to consider who the poem is addressed to, and higher ability students to discuss where one’s sense of identity comes from.

This poem was written in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd (see Thompson’s micro essay on page 3 for more context) and explores the poet’s own experience with racism and cultural identity.

Students will be able to support and justify their interpretations with evidence from the poem in line with exam criteria for their respective Key Stage.

Content warning: the poem used in this resource deals with themes of racism, and imagery of lynching.

To frame the lesson, pose a big question to students:
Why do people question their identity?

Let students reflect on how they identify themselves. Ask them to complete these sentence starters:

- I look like…
- I speak like…
- I act like…
- I feel I represent …
- I wish people understood that I am …

Students can share their answers in pairs or whole class discussion.
First, read the poem to students without giving them a copy. You could instead play the audio of Marvin Thompson reciting the poem via The Poetry Society website.

Reading around the text
In order to understand the poem fully, your students will find it helpful to be aware of a number of other texts and cultural phenomena. See which of these references your students can help each other to understand, and make sure you’re prepared to fill in any details. There’s a lot to take in here, so give them plenty of time to discuss and let their ideas percolate, or set this as a pre-reading task.

Share this interview with the poet Marvin Thompson in which he discusses some of the sources he draws on.

In his micro-essay on page 3 of this resource, Marvin Thompson discusses blackface and its roots in minstrelsy.

Students will need to know that Jason Lee was a professional footballer subjected to racism. In the 1990s Lee was regularly mocked on the British TV show Fantasy Football League by comedians David Baddiel and Frank Skinner. The programme used blackface to do impressions of Lee and compared Lee’s hairstyle to wearing ‘a pineapple on his head’. Lee has since said “Baddiel and Skinner, did they realise the impact of what they were saying, how it affected so many people? Especially a hairstyle, you’re talking about ethnicity, a lot of black people would wear dreadlocks and feel deeply offended by someone who’s getting mocked for a similar hairstyle. The implications were far wider, and it wouldn’t happen today.”

The painting ‘Christ of St John of the Cross’ by Salvador Dali

The song ‘Strange Fruit’, written by Abel Meeropol and recorded by Billie Holiday, which includes the lyrics “Southern trees bear a strange fruit / Blood on the leaves and blood at the root/ Black bodies swingin’ in the Southern breeze / Strange fruit hangin’ from the poplar trees”.

Wu-Tang Clan, the American hip hop group formed in 1992.

The Welsh word ‘cwtch’, meaning to hug or cuddle.

The American filmmaker Spike Lee.

Calypso, a style of Afro-Caribbean music.

Now move on to the second reading of the poem. Give each student a Bingo Reading card (see Resources, page 6, activity 1) beforehand and instruct students to cross out when they hear an example of each descriptor. (If you didn’t play the poet’s recitation for the first reading, play it for them this time round).

Reading across texts
Finally, give students a copy of the poem and let them annotate examples and references. Students can discuss in pairs or small groups what they believe the message of this poem to be, in consideration of the examples they were listening out for.

Task 2
Questioning

There is a wealth of questioning externally and internally in the poem. Students need to identify four rhetorical questions and complete the table as instructed (see Resources, page 6, activity 2). Students can work independently and then justify their choices in pairs or whole class discussion.

Stretch: Given the poet references his own childhood and then being a parent, what does this suggest about growing older and whether someone’s identity is ever ‘complete’? Do people ever stop questioning who they are and how they act? Should they?

Marvin Thompson
Anger and Compassion: How I Wrote an Award-winning Poem

Winning the National Poetry Competition does not mean I am a great poet or even a good writer. I am, however, an angry writer.

Anger is the singular emotion that guided the early drafts of ‘The Fruit of the Spirit is Love (Galatians 5:22)’. This fury rose after George Floyd died on May 25th, 2020 and peaked when British comedians started making social media videos apologising for playing their part in the mocking of Black people through the tradition of black face. Where were the apologies from the TV executives who greenlighted the shows?

The comedy shows in question aired in the 1990s–2020s. The minstrel show traditions they enacted stretch back to the early 1900s. At that time, theatre shows in which actors blacked up to mock African Americans were the number one form of entertainment in America. These dehumanising depictions aligned with the way British colonists depicted Africans to justify their bloody empire.

Great works of art operate on several emotional levels. With this in mind, I tried to find a way to make my poem’s narrator more relatable. This is when it hit me: I too was complicit in the black face tradition. As a teenager, I laughed when comedians blacked up as the Dual Heritage footballer, Jason Lee.

In the end, the emotional heart of my poem moved away from anger. This led me to my poem’s most tender moment: cwtching my dad ‘whilst watching Spike Lees’.

This article first appeared in Newport and Gwent Literary Club newsletter, May 2021, and is reproduced by kind permission.
Zoom in on two key structure and language features of the poem. For example, you might focus on iambic pentameter, inspired by answers Thompson gave in an interview with The Poetry Society (see page 2), or there are lots of other structural and linguistic features to choose from. These could be left on screen for students to discuss in pairs or small groups, but display one by one to frame discussion.

**Structure**

“The iambic pentameter, for me, is a poetic form that is synonymous with Shakespeare and the celebrated lineage of British literature and history. By writing my poem in iambic pentameters, I am claiming my part in that British tradition. My parents were born in Jamaica. They were born British into the British Empire. The native Arawaks of Jamaica did not ask for their land to be stolen or their people murdered. My African ancestors did not ask to be torn from their homelands. As such, my use of iambic pentameters alludes to the fact that British history and Black British history are one and the same.”

Have students identify and label where iambic pentameter is used in the poem. Ask students to discuss why Thompson felt he had to ‘claim’ British tradition/ history? What may have prevented this for him?

**Stretch 1:** Students can debate whether modern-day society lets individuals easily partake in a national or cultural identity.

**Stretch 2:** Marvin Thompson’s poem is a version of a ‘villanelle’, an intricate form with a strict structure and rhyme scheme. Ask students to research the villanelle form and discuss why Thompson used it here. Is there a relationship between repetition, rhyme, and historical legacy?

**Language**

“The song I most wanted to incorporate in my poem was ‘Strange Fruit’, as sung by Billie Holiday and Nina Simone. The song evokes the horror of lynching, a tradition linked directly to minstrelsy. In both traditions, Black people are treated as less than human, fit only for mirth or death.”

Zoom in on the line: “Should I tell mine / I filled my lungs with ’90s minstrelsy”. Minstrelsy was a form of racist ‘entertainment’ popular in the early twentieth century in America. Mostly white actors would use blackface to mock Black Americans. In his micro essay, given above, Thompson points to a direct connection between this tradition and lynching, both of which dehumanise and objectify Black people for entertainment.

If you haven’t already, listen to the song ‘Strange Fruit’ (see Task 1) as a class. Provide some context for students – ‘Strange Fruit’ is classified as a protest song against lynchings of Black Americans. Ask students to discuss why the poet would choose this song – one of three American cultural references – in the poem?

**Stretch:** Students can rank, then debate, which musical reference they consider to be most powerful in the creation of the poem’s meaning: Wu-Tang, Calypso, ‘Strange Fruit’ or ‘Blood of the Lamb’.
Plenary
Revisit the Big Question from earlier in the lesson. Ask students to write an answer in maximum ten words or fewer: Why do people question their identity?

Answers can be shared as discussion or written on post-its and stuck to a board so it looks like a gallery wall.

Wider reading/homework
From the list below, students can access another poem that also portrays a speaker questioning an identity and assumptions made. Students can choose one to research and write a 200-word reflection comparing it to Thompson’s poem.

- John Clare, ‘I Am’
- James Fenton, ‘The Ideal’
- Walt Whitman, ‘Song of Myself’
- John Agard, ‘Half-Caste’
- Amy Saunders, ‘You’re Not Black’
- Terrance Hayes, ‘I lock you in an American sonnet that is part prison’
- Tishani Doshi, ‘Girls Are Coming Out of the Woods’

Noor Wafa, the author of this resource, is a Poetry Society Teacher Trailblazer and teaches at Twickenham School, Middlesex.

Task 4
Intertextuality
For KS5 students

Ask students to identify any use of intertextuality. You may need to give them some prompts for biblical references:

_Galatians 5:22-23 RSV_
But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law.

from _The Book of Revelation 7:14_
They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb

_Students to answer:_ Thinking about identity, why do you think Thompson has referenced so many other things in this poem? How does the use of intertextuality suggest how a person’s identity is created? Answers can be discussed in pairs but should be written independently as an analytical paragraph.

_Thought prompts:_ Consider whose voices are ‘heard’ in the poem, e.g. football fans, Church hymns, etc. What does it mean to hear other voices besides the poet’s included in the poem? What was the impact of these ‘voices’ on the poet?

_Stretch:_ What is the relationship between the different source texts mentioned in the poem? Although the song ‘Strange Fruit’ is not directly mentioned, it runs like an undercurrent throughout the poem – how does this song relate to the title of the poem, and to the imagery of the ‘pineapple on his head’?
1 Bingo Reading

Cross each square when you hear an example of or reference to each descriptor during the poem’s recitation.

*Stretch: What can you ascertain about this poet’s identity given the references included?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Music</th>
<th>Famous person</th>
<th>Rhetorical question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Punishment</td>
<td>Another language</td>
<td>Religious imagery</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2 Rhetorical questions

Identify all four rhetorical questions in the poem, and decide who the poet is addressing and how he feels.

*Stretch: Is the poet consistently addressing someone? Explain why you think that is.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rhetorical Question</th>
<th>Who is the poet addressing?</th>
<th>How does the poet feel?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>Circle ONE</td>
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<td>Himsel</td>
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</table>
Marvin Thompson
‘The Fruit of the Spirit is Love (Galatians 5:22)’

Dusk reddened a Dual Heritage neck, hands
and a moustache – its ends curled with wax. Jason Lee?
I stood below his dreadlocks in woodland

and reached up to touch his feet. A whirring fan
greeted my waking eyes, the house sleepy.
I’d dreamt both Dali’s Christ and someone hanged.

“... a pineapple on his head...” sang football fans
and a comedian blacked up as Jason Lee,
mocking Rastas. Did Jason beg Jah:

“Please keep this from my kids.” Should I tell mine
I filled my lungs with ’90s minstrelsy
and sang, a teen lost in lads’ mag England?

Who taught me pro-Black talk was contraband?
The me who cwtched Dad whilst watching Spike Lees
was shoved down basement stairs, feet tied to hands.

Embarrassed, should I play my kids Wu-Tang
and other rap that set my rebel free?
One day, when they walk their kids through woodland
will they sing calypsos or ‘Blood of the Lamb’?

‘The Fruit of the Spirit is Love (Galatians 5:22)’ by Marvin Thompson was awarded first prize in the National Poetry Competition 2020.

Marvin Thompson was born in London to Jamaican parents and now lives in mountainous south Wales. His debut poetry collection, Road Trip (Peepal Tree, 2020), was a Poetry Book Society Recommendation and selected as one of its five Black Lives Matter Inspiration books. It was also one of forty recommended collections for National Poetry Day 2020. The Guardian described Road Trip as an “invigorating journey through complexities of black British family life”; it was selected by the Telegraph as one of the Poetry Books of the Year for 2020.