

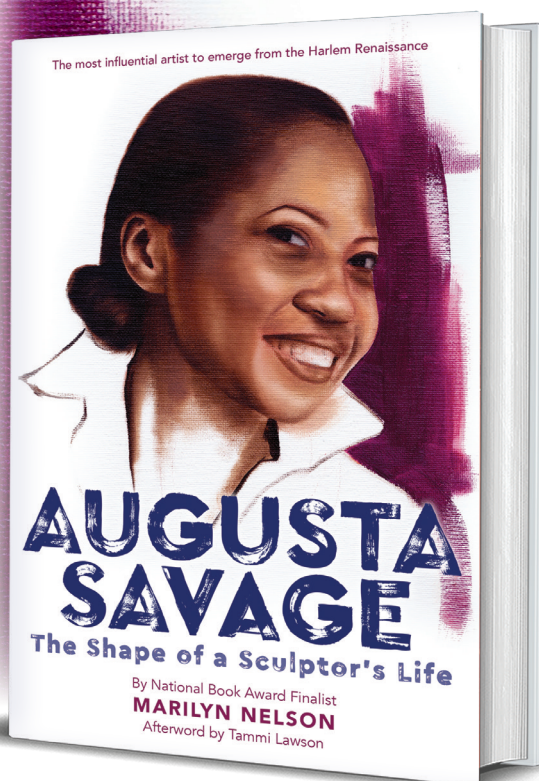
AUGUSTA SAVAGE

The Shape of a Sculptor's Life

Written by **MARILYN NELSON** Afterword by **Tammi Lawson**

TEACHING TIPS | Grade level 9–12, ages 14–18

There are several entry points for responding to this beautiful biography in poetry: through the historical context, through the art of sculpture, and through poetry writing.



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HISTORY

Many important figures of the Harlem Renaissance are referenced in the poems in this powerful biography of sculptor Augusta Savage; some may be familiar names, some may be new. Students may want to choose one of the following and do some quick online research to learn a few more details and then share findings to build a broader context for understanding the impact of Augusta Savage's contributions.

- The Harlem Renaissance
- The WPA (Works Progress Administration)
- 1939 World's Fair
- W. E. B. Du Bois
- Marcus Garvey
- James Weldon Johnson
- The Negro National Anthem
- The legend of John Henry
- Gwendolyn Brooks
- Romare Bearden
- Gwendolyn Knight
- Jake (Jacob) Lawrence
- Ernie Crichlow
- Selma Burke
- Solon Borglum
- Aleksandr Pushkin

SCULPTURE

Augusta Savage was a groundbreaking artist as a woman and as an African American creating art in the early twentieth century during a time when neither women nor Blacks received support, recognition, or equal acclaim. And yet, she persisted, creating sculptures from early childhood to the end of her life. Tammi Lawson provides archival photographs of some of Savage's sculptures that give a glimpse into the unique beauty of her work. Incredibly, her work was made of plaster and clay and rarely cast into bronze for a lasting creation.



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Gather some simple supplies and provide an opportunity for students to try sculpting something with their own hands as Augusta Savage did. Use clay, Fimo, or even Play-Doh. They can try sculpting figures like the ones Savage began making as a child and are referenced in the poems: ducklings, bunnies, mice, pigs, frogs, dogs, or even penguins.

Eventually, Savage did receive some support, including from the government-funded WPA and commissions for special pieces. She was also a teacher and mentor and created salons, studios, and galleries, as well as working as a domestic and taking in laundry to make ends meet. Lead a discussion about how artists can support their work in various ways and how a career in the arts can be shaped. Point out that Marilyn Nelson channels Augusta Savage's belief that ALL of us can "make art" and we can encourage students to try expressing themselves visually through some form of artistic work as Nelson writes in her poem "Studio" (page 43):

"Whether you're a woman, whether you're Black, no matter who you are, you can make art. Art rebuilds our hope for a shared future, it restores our courage, revives our faith."

POETRY

Marilyn Nelson uses a variety of poetic forms to shape the life story of Augusta Savage with free verse, rhyming poems, varying stanza arrangements, and points of view. Talk about these choices with students and why the poet may have made those choices in each case and what impact those choices have. Two approaches that seem particularly compelling are shape poems and ekphrastic poems. Challenge students to try writing an ekphrastic poem—a poem written in response to art or an image—inspired by one of the photographs in the book. How will they approach it? Describing the scene or sculpture? Taking an unusual point of view? Telling a story suggested by the image?

Nelson also includes a large number of concrete or shape poems arranging the text in the shape of the subject—perfect for echoing the physical shaping of sculpture. This includes: "Fingers Remember" on page 10, "Halo" on pages 16-17, "Hitting Bottom" on pages 28-29, "Bust of Aleksandr Pushkin" on page 44-45, "Boy with Rabbit" on pages 50-51, "The Harp" pages 54-55, "Salon" on page 68, and "I Don't Know" on pages 90-91. Students may want to write a shape poem to accompany the simple sculptures they have created or for some other prompt or shape of their choice.



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ISSUES

This powerful, eye-opening book also raises many questions about racism that deserve discussion. Challenge students to find poem excerpts to identify examples of racism and racist attitudes and talk about the impact of that racism.

For example, as an African American, Augusta Savage, experienced massive discrimination—in addition to the attitudes of the time toward her gender. How did that affect her life and her career?

The poems that profile important Black leaders identify many details of the racism experienced by African American men in leadership positions like Marcus Garvey or James Weldon Johnson. How did they choose to respond?

Augusta Savage creates sculptures of several important African American men and the poem, “Realization” (pages 58-59) contrasts that contribution with the many sculptures of white men throughout American history. This reflects a discussion our society is currently having about whether these statues of Civil War generals (for example) should be removed or preserved. What if some of Savage’s sculptures had been cast in bronze and displayed for the world to see all along? Would we feel differently about the presence of statues of men embodying racist ideals?

Nelson also raises the question about how society views African American boys and men in “Boy with Rabbit” (on page 50-51) and in the poem “Head of John Henry” (on page 62) where she writes:

**“John Henry stands on the brink of Negro manhood,
when a boy's beautiful life becomes endangered.”**

Students may want to consider what the poet is saying about the beauty of Blackness in men and boys and how Augusta Savage’s sculptures captured that beauty and why it is then perceived as a threat by white society.

These Teaching Tips were prepared by Dr. Sylvia Vardell.



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