

## **alternate names for black boys**

BY DANEZ SMITH

1. smoke above the burning bush
2. archnemesiis of summer night
3. first son of soil
4. coal awaiting spark & wind
5. guilty until proven dead
6. oil heavy starlight
7. monster until proven ghost
8. gone
9. phoenix who forgets to un-ash
10. going, going, gone
11. gods of shovels & black veils
12. what once passed for kindling
13. fireworks at dawn
14. brilliant, shadow hued coral
15. (I thought to leave this blank  
but who am I to name us nothing?)
16. prayer who learned to bite & sprint
17. a mother's joy & clutched breath

### **\*\*\*SUMMER ASSIGNMENT\*\*\***

- 1. Use the 12 step approach to assessing poetry to annotate this poem.**
- 2. Record your annotations directly on the poem.**
- 3. Answer the questions on the 12 step handout.**
- 4. Locate and print or recopy another poem that explores a social justice issue. (Utilize the public library or the internet for this)**
- 5. Create your own "alternate names for..." poem with a minimum of 17 lines.**
- 6. Repeat the 12 step approach to assess your own poem.**
- 7. Record those annotations on your own poem.**
- 8. Be prepared the share this poem the first week back to school.**



## 12 steps to help deepen your understanding and appreciation of a poem

When reading a poem, use the following steps to help you annotate and explore the poem in greater depth. Many of these are interconnected and will overlap so the order is just a suggested approach and does not need to be adhered to strictly.

1. **The title:** briefly consider this before reading and note down the impressions and expectations it creates.
2. **First impressions:** note these down immediately after a first reading. Do not self-edit - jot down whatever first comes to mind, even if it is "I am confused." Give an honest, personal response.
3. **The Ws:** now make sure you are clear on the basic sense of the poem. You may need to read it again in order to answer these questions - **Who** is speaking? To **Whom**? About **What**? **Why**? **Where** and **When**? You may not find definite answers to all of these but try to establish as much clarity as possible.
4. Read again with a focus on **STRUCTURE**. Mark where you think the key turning points or stages of the poem occur.
5. **Compare the opening and closing lines** - what do they reveal about what changes/stays the same across the course of the poem?
6. Now consider **TONE**. Annotate the different parts of the poem, using precise vocabulary to pinpoint tone.
7. Read the poem **OUT LOUD** with a focus on **FORM**. Mark in:
  - the use of punctuation and how that shapes the way you read - what do you notice here? Note where sentences run over lines and/or over stanzas (enjambment) or where punctuation is used at the end of a line (end-stopped) or where it is used mid-line (caesura).
  - note down what effects you think these choices have on the way we read the poem.
8. Read the poem **OUT LOUD** again and focus on **SOUND**. Highlight moments where the sound of the poem seems particularly striking, interesting or effective. Does this lead you to add or change anything you have noted so far about tone?
9. **AMBIGUITY/COMPLEXITY:** are there moments you found tricky to read out loud? Is there more than one possible way of reading certain lines? These are likely to be ambiguous and complex parts of the poem worth exploring further - they could be key to understanding the whole poem at a deeper level. Highlight and annotate these parts - these annotations might be in the form of questions at this stage.
10. **PATTERNS:** what patterns do you notice across the whole poem? Consider: language, imagery, symbolism, rhyme and rhythm. Do these patterns span the whole poem? Do they emerge gradually? Do they stop? Are they disrupted?
11. Map the poem's **TENSIONS and CONTRASTS**. It has been said that poetry is '**moment, movement, and meaning**'; in other words, a poem establishes a moment (or an issue, an image, a dilemma, a voice etc.) and then moves from this initial state. The overall effect of this movement on the reader indicates or suggests the poem's meaning. Movement and meaning might come through tensions and contrasts between:
  - speaker and situation
  - reader's view and speaker's view
  - sides of a dilemma or problem
  - past and present

- sets of images
- levels of diction
- form and content
- tone and mood

12. **INTERPRETATION:** return to your first thoughts on the title and your first impressions. These are likely to be emotional responses, possibly focused on tone and effect. Now add to these with a more concrete and critical interpretation of the poem. To help, consider your poem in light of the following definitions of poetry:

**“You can’t write a poem out of emotion only, there must be insight.” (Philip Larkin)**

What insight(s) does the poem give us?

**“Out of the quarrel with others we make rhetoric; out of the quarrel with ourselves we make poetry.” (W.B. Yeats)**

What internal “quarrel” is the poet exploring? Is this resolved by the end of the poem?

