SUMMARY
This poem compares the struggles of African Americans in a racist society to the efforts of a tenant farmer. The farmer sows, but when it's harvest time, he discovers that someone else reaps the rewards and that his children must steal to survive.

ANALYZE VISUALS
Possible answer: The farmer in the painting appears grim and determined, much like the speaker of the poem. His clothes are worn, suggesting that he has led a life of hard work, but the poverty of the buildings in the background suggests that, like the speaker, the material rewards of his labor go elsewhere.

About the Art: Painter, graphic designer, and illustrator Charly Palmer’s (born 1960) subject matter is often concerned with historical subjects, including the African-American experience, Native Americans, and the Jewish Holocaust.

READING SKILL
Possible answer: The words “sown,” “planted,” and “grain” suggest farming.

LITERARY ANALYSIS
Possible answer: The children’s gleanings are bitter because the wealth of the father’s work goes elsewhere—to the sons of the landowner.

THEME
Possible answer: The children’s gleanings are bitter because the wealth of the father’s work goes elsewhere—to the sons of the landowner.

SELECTION WRAP-UP
SYNTHESIZE Ask students what feature of the poems is most similar.

A Black Man
Talks of Reaping
Arna Bontemps

I have sown beside all waters in my day:
I planted deep, within my heart the fear
That wind or fowl would take the grain away.
I planted safe against this stark, lean year.  

1. I scattered seed enough to plant the land
In rows from Canada to Mexico,
But for my reaping only what the hand
Can hold at once is all that I can show.

Yet what I sowed and what the orchard yields
10 My brother’s sons are gathering stalk and root,
Small wonder then my children glean in fields
They have not sown, and feed on bitter fruit.

ANALYZE VISUALS
What elements of this painting reflect the theme of the poem?

FIGURATIVE MEANING
Reread lines 1–4. What idea do the words “sown,” “planted,” and “grain” have in common?

THEME
In lines 11–12, why are the children’s gleanings described as “bitter fruit”?

SYNTHESIZE Ask students what feature of the poems is most similar.

FOR LESS–PROFICIENT READERS
Concept Support: Extended Metaphor [paired option] Explain that metaphors may function on more than one level, suggesting a narrow and a broader comparison. Have pairs discuss possible meanings in the final stanza:
• orchard, “American society”
• brother’s sons, “the white majority”
• my children glean in fields, “the status of African Americans forced to accept leftovers”
• bitter fruit, “racial resentment and strife”

FOR ADVANCED LEARNERS/AP
Research and Analyze [small-group option] Have groups research sharecropping in the American South to define and explain the system. Challenge students to analyze the balance of power in the system: Who held the social, political, and economic power? Could those without power gain it? Why did sharecroppers agree to participate? Ask students to find and share connections between this system and contemporary American social institutions.