



Harlem Renaissance: Pivotal Period in the Development of Afro-American Culture

Curriculum Unit 78.02.03

by Caroline Jackson

In any study of the development of Afro-American culture, the period of the 1920's known as the Harlem or Negro Renaissance is pivotal. It was a time when black and white Americans alike "discovered" the vibrancy and uniqueness of black art, music, and especially, literature. The decade was marked by exciting nightlife in Harlem's cabarets, particularly the Cotton Club; by the publishing of a great number of novels, short stories, plays, poems, and articles about and by blacks; by great musicals written by and starring blacks, most importantly the legendary *Shuffle Along* ; and by the production of artwork by talented young artists like Aaron Douglas and Richmond Barthe.

What made this period significant was the fact that the "Negro was in vogue," as Langston Hughes writes in his autobiography *The Big Sea* . For the first time in American history, large numbers of black artists could earn their livings and be critically acknowledged in their fields. It was a time of excitement for the younger generation of the Negro intelligentsia, dubbed the "New Negroes" in Alain Locke's collection of the same name, published in 1925. As Locke, often termed the "father" of the Negro Renaissance, says in his introductory essay "The New Negro," "The younger generation is vibrant with a new psychology" (p. 3). This "new psychology" was a freedom of expression hitherto unknown in such a large number of black artists as well as receptiveness to anything "black" on the part of many whites.

In all forms of art, there developed a need to identify and utilize both Afro-American folk forms (tales, spirituals, and customs) and African forms. What made this renaissance pivotal for Afro-Americans, most particularly artists and intellectuals, was the affirmation of a distinct cultural heritage and the *visibility* of that culture's manifestation.

The fact that this phenomenon occurred in the 1920's is easily understood in light of American history of the era. The Negro Renaissance was a significant tile in the overall mosaic of the post-war period, often referred to as the "Jazz Age." This label itself reflects the influence of Afro-American culture on the period. Black artists, like noted white artists of the "lost generation" that included Hemingway and Fitzgerald, were influenced by the rejection of traditional moral values which produced a mania for exotic lifestyles. In fact, this post-war lost generation often "found itself" in a trek to Harlem's entertainment spots!

Prohibition, and the speakeasies it spawned, helped create a culture of nightlife, dancing, and loose morals. Harlem's Cotton Club illustrates concretely the paradox of black-white relations in many northern capitals: the

club was instrumental in launching the careers of many brilliant black musicians like Duke Ellington, yet it was operated by whites primarily for white audiences. Writes Hughes: "White people began to come in droves. For several years they packed the expensive Cotton Club on Lenox Avenue. But I was never there, because the Cotton Club was a Jim Crow club for gangsters and monied whites." "Rent" parties (an admission charge helped hosts to pay their rents) and other clubs, including Small's Paradise, were also popular.

Although the patronage of whites was a factor in the Harlem Renaissance (not only did they "patronize" cabarets, but their patronage often extended to supporting young black artists), the period is notable above all for its black artistic and philosophical awakening. Why was Harlem the focal point of this movement? Scholars have provided numerous explanations, the most obvious being that New York, the cultural center of America, was the logical center for the genesis of formal Afro-American culture. Harlem's black population in 1920 was extremely large and continued to increase throughout the decade, reaching 200,000 by 1930 according to James Weldon Johnson's *Black Manhattan*. The Harlem black community contained not only American blacks, but many West Indians. It was the national headquarters for recently founded protest groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Urban League. Black pride in Harlem had been exemplified on July 28, 1917, by a parade of ten thousand Negroes silently protesting anti-black violence. In 1919, blacks marched again to celebrate the return of the all-black 369th Infantry from service in World War I. Further, by 1920 Harlem had gained a symbolic significance for blacks which caused it to be referred to as a "mecca" by scholars of the period. Harlem was not a ghetto; it was a black city! The books *Black Manhattan* (1930) by Johnson, and *Negro Metropolis* (1940) by Claude McKay, as well as the essay "Harlem: The Cultural Capital" by Alain Locke in *The New Negro*, offer further evidence that black intellectuals considered Harlem a black capital.

Between 1900 and 1920 the number of blacks in Harlem doubled, as did the black populations in many other northern cities. This movement, including the further growth between 1920 and 1930, is referred to as the "Great Migration." Blacks left the South in astonishing numbers for many reasons: depression in the agricultural southern economy; the World War I industrial boom in the North; growing oppression in the South; and a thoroughly American striving for a better quality of life. Charles S. Johnson, a Negro sociologist and an important figure in the Renaissance, concluded in his essay "The New Frontage on American Life": "In ten years, Negroes have been actually transplanted from one culture to another" (*The New Negro*, p. 285).

Another important aspect of Harlem's black cultural history is its role as a center for protest organizations. Although the Negro Renaissance was fundamentally a cultural movement, it can in no way be isolated from black protest of the period: protest movements formed an important psychological backdrop and many artists in fact wrote for radical magazines like *The Crisis*, *Opportunity*, and *The Messenger*. W. E. B. DuBois, already a noted scholar, author, and spokesman by 1920, was editor of the N.A.A.C.P.'s *Crisis* magazine, founded in 1910 in New York. His editorials were widely read. The Urban League's magazine *Opportunity*, edited by Charles S. Johnson, also initiated one of the most important series of events in the renaissance by promoting contests for promising young black writers. In 1924, *Opportunity* sponsored the first of several dinners honoring young black writers. C. H. Johnson termed it their "debut" and, as Arna Bontemps recalls in his essay "The Awakening: A Memoir," "Johnson was pleased to call the dinner a 'coming-out party' for an informal group designated as the 'Writer's Guild.'" (*The Harlem Renaissance Remembered*, p. 11). The socialist magazine *The Messenger*, begun by activists A. Phillip Randolph and Chandler Owen in 1917, also employed some of the renaissance writers, notably Wallace Thurman. The majority of renaissance writing was not polemical, but the subtle ties that many writers had with established protest organizations are important in understanding the pervasive feeling of black intellectuals that all accomplishments were in a sense political. There was a general belief that individual achievement by any Negro was a road to improved conditions for all

members of the race.

If one examines the academic and social backgrounds of many of the participants of the renaissance, one might reasonably conclude that the movement was primarily an elitist or middle-class phenomenon. In some senses this is true, yet this is an oversimplification. The men and women prominent in the awakening felt in many cases that they spoke for the “common” black man. Also, many writers, particularly Langston Hughes, Rudolph Fisher, Claude McKay, and Zora Neale Hurston, glorified the “average” Negro in their poetry and fiction.

The fact is that during this period black pride for many blacks (not only those involved directly in the renaissance) was a greater reality than in any previous period. Marcus Garvey’s separatist “Back to Africa” movement centered in New York was important in the fabric of the era. Although many of the Harlem intellectuals severely criticized the movement, it was vastly popular with working-class blacks. Garvey in turn criticized the “New Negroes” as being elitist “talented-tenth” traitors. However, Garvey’s racial pride theories, emphasis on Afro-American history, advocacy of a return to Africa, and stress on economic independence for Negroes attracted attention from the masses. Garvey, a Jamaican inspired by Booker T. Washington, established his United Negro Improvement Association in 1917. His movement flourished until his imprisonment for fraud in 1925. His massive parades and conventions reflected an increased sense of black pride and interest in an African heritage on the part of Negroes of all classes.

Certain events are especially significant to any cultural movement. Arna Bontemps, in his essay “The Awakening: A Memoir,” sees 1921 as the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance. Countee Cullen, soon to become a noted poet, published his poem “I Have a Rendezvous with Life” in DeWitt Clinton High School’s literary magazine, of which he was an editor, in January of that year. In June of the same year, another young poet, Langston Hughes, just graduated from high school in Cleveland and soon to enroll at Columbia, published his poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” in *Crisis*. At virtually the same time, *Shuffle Along* became a smash on Broadway. Hughes recalls coming to Columbia mostly to see the all-black musical (book by Fluornoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles and lyrics by Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle), which featured songs that became widely popular, including “I’m Just Wild About Harry.” It was a loosely plotted musical about a mayoral election in an all-black southern town. The dancing and singing were responsible for its great popularity. During the decade, each year saw the opening of new black musicals inspired by the success of *Shuffle Along*.

In 1921, a massive convention of Garvey’s U.N.I.A. occurred in New York. The international extravaganza was held in August and, according to Bontemps, “Nothing quite comparable had ever occurred in the New World experience of black people.” In addition, the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library (now the famed Schomburg Library) featured an exhibition of the works of Negro painters and sculptors.

In 1922, Claude McKay published *Harlem Shadows*, a book of poetry. McKay, a young Jamaican writer, soon became an integral part of the Renaissance. He later contributed three novels, the picaresque *Home To Harlem* (1928), *Banjo* (1929), and *Banana Bottom* (1933), as well as a book on Harlem called *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (1940), and an autobiography, *A Long Way from Home* (1937). The musicals *Strut Miss Lizzie* and *Seven-Eleven* appeared on Broadway in 1922 as well.

In 1923, Charles S. Johnson became editor of the newly born *Opportunity*, Roland Hayes gave his landmark American concert debut in Town Hall, and Jean Toomer published the most remarkable work of the period, *Cane*. *Cane* is a series of interrelated poems and stories, or sketches, almost mystically evoked and inspired by Toomer’s pilgrimage to the South. (Toomer, a very light-skinned Negro who later followed the mystic teachings of Gurdjieff, was raised in Washington, D.C.) Although the book was not widely popular at the time

of its appearance, it symbolized many qualities and motifs associated with the renaissance period, notably the desire for atavistic (African) connections and the romanticized concept of strength as located in southern black peasants, as opposed to fragmentation of northern black identities.

Opportunity's award dinner in 1924 has been previously mentioned. In this year Paul Robeson, the brilliant actor and singer, became known to the general public in Eugene O'Neill's play *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, which played in New York for several weeks. The musical *Dixie to Broadway* starring Florence Mills was a tremendous success.

In 1925 Countee Cullen published a book of poetry entitled *Color*. Langston Hughes also published a book of poetry *Weary Blues*. Most important, *The New Negro*, edited by Alain Locke, appeared. This work, perhaps more than any other, sought to mark the fact that an "awakening" or "renaissance" (both terms were actually used in the book and Locke coined the latter) was in progress. The book featured fiction by Rudolph Fisher, Jean Toomer (selections from *Cane*), Zora Neale Hurston, and Eric Walrond, all fast becoming key figures in the movement. Poetry by Cullen, McKay, James W. Johnson, Bontemps, and Hughes was presented along with a play by Willis Richardson, which is one of the few surviving works of the Krigwa Players, a black repertory group which strove to develop serious black drama by and for blacks. Essays explored the basic premises of this period: a new interest in sociology (particularly concerning the Migration), an increased interest in the Negro past, and, most especially, intense affirmation and discovery of the validity of Afro-American folk culture. The collection also featured illustrations by a brilliant young artist, Aaron Douglas, who captured in his black and white prints the themes featured in the literature. Douglas' work exhibits strong African motifs, another fundamental theme of the renaissance.

In 1926, Hughes' article "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" appeared and attempted to define the role of the Negro artist: "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame." Hughes, in collaboration with Wallace Thurman, Zora Neale Hurston, Aaron Douglas, John P. Davis, Bruce Nugent, and Gwendolyn Bennett, decided that to express their "dark-skinned" selves, they needed to begin their own magazine. The result was one fine issue of *Fire*, published in November, which featured works by all the collaborators. Unfortunately, lack of funds brought the project to a hasty conclusion. In this year, too, Carl Van Vechten, the greatest of the wealthy white enthusiasts, published *Nigger Heaven*, his controversial fictional view of contemporary Harlem. This novel enjoyed widespread popularity, but was sharply criticized by some blacks (DuBois) and defended by others (Hughes). Paul Green's Pulitzer Prizewinning play *In Abraham's Bosom* was produced in 1926.

In 1927, James Weldon Johnson's book of folk poetry, *God's Trombones*, was published. Dubose Heyward, whose *Porgy* had been very popular a few years earlier, wrote and produced a second play, *Mamba's Daughters*. The musical of the year was *Africana*, starring Ethel Waters. In addition, Langston Hughes' second volume of poetry, *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, was published.

Rudolph Fisher's novel, *Walls of Jehrico*, appeared in 1928 as did McKay's novel *Home to Harlem* and Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry*. McKay's novel was apparently the first fictional work by an Afro-American to reach the best-seller lists. Lyles and Miller tried to recapture their earlier success by producing *Keep Shuffling* and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson starred in the *Blackbirds* revue of that year. Three other novels published that year were W. E. B. DuBois' *Dark Princess*, Nella Larsen's story of the color line, *Quicksand*, and Jessie Fausett's book on a similar theme, *Plum Bun*.

Because of the crash of the stock market in 1929, many of the activities of the renaissance started to decrease; however, many of the authors who became popular during the twenties published through the

thirties and later. It is interesting that Charles Gilpin, the great black actor, achieved great fame in *The Emperor Jones* by O'Neill in 1920, the beginning of the renaissance, and died in 1930. Also in 1930, the Pulitzer Prize-winning musical play by Marc Connelly, *Green Pastures*, became the most successful venture since *Shuffle Along*, and was one of the last black musicals produced until the present period. In addition, Hughes published his first novel, *Not Without Laughter*, Larsen published her second novel, *Passing*, and McKay also published his second novel,

Banjo.

In 1931, A'lelia Walker died. The heiress to Madame Walker's hair-products fortune, A'lelia had been the great Negro party-giver of the period, using her townhouse in Harlem, her apartment, and her mansion at Irvington-on-the-Hudson to entertain black and white intellectuals. Her attempt to glorify the black artists of the period by devoting a floor in her townhouse to walls covered by art and poetry of the period was not wholly successful, but the "Dark Tower," as she called it, was unique. In 1934, two important writers died within a week of each other: Wallace Thurman and Rudolph Fisher. Zora Neale Hurston wrote two novels in the 1930's, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934) and her best work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Bontemps also published two novels: *God Sends Sunday* (1931) and *Drums at Dusk* (1939). In terms of a literary movement, the period ended with the publication of Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* in 1938, which marked a sharp difference in style and theme. Wright's naturalistic fiction was a definite departure from the romanticized works of the renaissance.

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Since this unit is intended primarily for English teachers, the emphasis of the course should be the analysis of the literature of the period, once the teacher has explored the historical significance of the Harlem Renaissance. The works of the period, as well as the artwork, exhibit certain common themes: an expression of a kind of pride and dignity bordering on defiance; atavistic yearnings for Africa; an exploration of southern black culture using folk forms in an attempt to portray the Afro-American peasant in a romanticized and glorified light: Afro-American exoticism; and finally, subtle political parody of the period itself.

Several books of fiction and poetry can illustrate these themes for the teacher, although each teacher may wish to choose individual poems and short stories for students (see Student Reading List). It is first noteworthy that poetry was the primary form of expression in the early renaissance. Poetry by nature is more centered on emotion than is fiction; therefore it is not surprising to find that Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Countee Cullen relied on the themes of pride and dignity, atavistic yearnings, and exoticism in their poetry. McKay's "If We Must Die" (1919) is classic in its expression of active resistance:

If we must die-let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.
If we must die-oh, let us nobly die...

McKay's "Harlem Dancer" contains exotic imagery which can be construed as a form of atavistic yearning:

To me she seemed a proudly-swaying palm
Grown lovelier for passing through a storm
.....
The wine-flushed, bold-eyed boys, and even the girls,
Devoured her shape with eager, passionate gaze;
But looking at her falsely smiling face,
I knew her true self was not in that strange place.

The image of the palm evokes a tropical African setting, and the audience "devouring" the dancer seems interested in the exotic vision, although the place (a Harlem theatre?) was not the dancer's rightful environment.

Cullen explores the question of African descent in his "Heritage" (1925):

What is Africa to me?
Copper sun or scarlet sea,
Jungle star or jungle track,
Strong bronzed men, or regal black
Women from whose loins I sprang
When the birds of Eden sang?
One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree
What is Africa to me?

Cullen's answer to his initial question is intricately developed in the long poem, but the idea causes him "no peace." The poem depends heavily on a romanticized concept of Africa, as does most of the writing of the period, and on a use of the exotic and sensual in Cullen's unexplained yearnings to "strip" and "dance" when "the rain begins to fall." However, students must understand that although the African references may be imprecise, it is very important that *for the first time*, Afro-Americans wanted to admit any connection whatsoever with Africa. Hughes' "Afro-American Fragment," though not published until 1959, also explores African links:

Subdued and time-lost
Are the drums—and yet
Through some vast mist of race
There comes this song
I do not understand,
This song of atavistic land,
Of bitter yearnings lost
Without a place—
So long,
So far away
Is Africa's
Dark face.

For Hughes, the connection is not overt; it is "far away" yet it exists in "those songs/ Beat back into the blood." Many poems in Hughes' *Weary Blues* exhibit an even subtler tie with African heritage. In the first section of the book, many of the poems are Hughes' famous "jazz" poems depicting Harlem's nightlife. Yet the recurring use of the terms "jungle" and "jazz" together give us a sense that this Afro-American music is born of the jungle beats. For example, in "Nude Young Dancer,"

What jungle tree have you slept under,
Midnight dancer of the jazzy hour?
What great forest has hung its perfume
Like a sweet veil about your bower?

In "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," Hughes reaches back to his African heritage again:

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young,
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids about it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.
I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

Later in the book, Hughes develops other important themes: "Songs for a Banjo Dancer" and "Blues Fantasy" are written in the style of the blues, an important folk form of Afro-Americans; the pain of race relations, an aspect of the theme of pride and dignity, are explored in the second section of the book, as in the poem, "As I Grew Older":

I lie down in the shadow.
No longer the light of my dream before me,
Above me.
Only the thick wall.
Only the shadow.
My hands!
My dark hands!
Break through the wall!

The last stanza borders on a kind of defiance against racial barriers. Hughes also speaks for the average black men and women who have continued to strive against odds in his classic “Mother to Son,” in which a mother advises her son:

Don't you fall now—
For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* is the tale of Jake, an archetypal folk hero who is successful with women, free to roam in quest of his dreams, and, of course, a “man's man.” As the novel opens, Jake has returned to Harlem from the World War. He has gone AWOL because he was not pleased with the role he and other black soldiers had been playing. Throughout the loosely structured episodic novel, the exotic nature of Harlem is viewed in the gay nightlife. Jake himself “took whatever he wanted of whatever he fancied and . . . kept going.” Jake operated purely on instinct, pursuing joy in life. His companion Ray, a would-be writer, is his opposite, and never seems at ease with life partly because he is an “intellectual.” Jake, representing the primitive and the “common” black man is the positive character. Hence, McKay sought to glorify the working-class “peasant” Negro.

Jean Toomer's *Cane*, in a much more artistic and symbolic way, also seems to extoll the virtues of the “primitive” black peasants. The strong characters in his book are primarily Southern black women who, however, remain unaware of their own power. For example, the central character in “Fern” is a woman whom men continue to go to though they are ultimately unsatisfied because she never really gives them anything. Afterward, the men feel strangely “bound to her,” but ironically, “nothing ever came to Fern.” The collection's later stories are set in the North where Toomer delineates fragmentation of the northern black personality as in “Box Seat.” In the last section, Toomer combines his two themes when the main character in “Kabnis,” a northern Negro living in the rural South, is consumed with fear and uncertainty unlike the native southerners who are able to accept their environment and in some senses thrive in it. Much of Toomer's poetry explores African connections, as does “Georgia”:

Meanwhile, the men, with vestiges of pomp,
Race memories of king and caravan,
High-priests, an ostrich, and a juju-man,
Go singing through the footpaths of the swamp.

A literary analysis of the Harlem Renaissance, the last work of Wallace Thurman, *Infants of the Spring*,

provides a kind of natural conclusion. This novel attempts to tell the story of the Renaissance itself in fictional form. The main character, Raymond Taylor, is a representation of Thurman himself. He is an aspiring author who lives in an experimental house dubbed “Niggeratti Manor” by Taylor. The Manor is a house in Harlem that a concerned black woman has rented to Negro artists. The tone of the novel is cynical and most of the characters’ stories end in psychological or physical tragedy. After a wild interracial party at the Manor, Ray remarks: “This ... is the Negro Renaissance and this is about all the whole damn thing is going to amount to.” Ray also remarks later that “at least the forward of my generation is tired of being patronized and patted on the head by philanthropists and social service workers.” Finally Ray concludes that each Negro artist must be true only to his own sensibilities, not to a movement: “I don’t owe anything to anyone except myself.” Langston Hughes’ story “Who’s Passing for Who” also takes a satirical look at fictional writers of the renaissance and the racial games they played.

Thurman’s *roman à clef* is an awfully harsh assessment of the renaissance, partly because Thurman himself became a bitter man because he felt that as a black artist he could never achieve the heights of literary fame he sought. In teaching young people about this period, we must realize that although the movement did not, in many ways, live up to the expectations of its more stringent critics like Thurman, it did mark an extraordinary new environment for black creative expression. Were it not for the “Awakening,” one wonders, would we have been priviledged to the talents of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Ishmael Reed, Toni Morrison, and the many Afro-Americans who have since contributed so much to the literary and cultural history of America?

Sequence of Lessons

(This unit was designed as part of an elective course in Afro-American Literature for high-school students, mostly juniors and seniors, with a variety of reading and writing skills. The unit can be taught autonomously at any high school level since many of the reading selections, especially the poetry, are fairly easy to understand.)

Weeks 1 and 2

The first two weeks should primarily introduce the historical backgrounds of the Renaissance Period. The points to be covered are:

1. *What was the state of black art before the renaissance ?*

Students must understand that 1920 was only 57 years after the Emancipation Proclamation. Previously, Afro-Americans as a group did not have education or access to the publishing world sufficient to make a significant literary effort. Similarly, other fields of art were shut off by the general assumption of black inferiority. Also, Afro-Americans were not thought to have a distinct cultural heritage.

2. *What is a literary movement and what does the term “ Renaissance” mean ?* Here it would be useful to mention other literary movements and the European Renaissance.

3. *What was the state of American society at this time ?* Here the teacher should cover the Jazz Age, Prohibition, postwar changes, and white-black relationships.
4. *Why did Harlem develop as the “ black mecca ”?*
5. *What was the Great Migration ?*
6. *Who was Marcus Garvey and how did he influence black thought of the period ?*

Lecturing and note-taking would be primary strategies for objectives 1 and 2. For objectives 3 and 4, readings from *The New Negro* (“The New Negro” and “Negro Youth Speaks”), an excerpt from Langston Hughes’ *The Big Sea* , and “The Awakening: A Memoir” by Arna Bontemps will be helpful. Students will read selections and answer questions.

For objective 4, it would also be useful to use “Harlem: the Culture Capital,” by James W. Johnson, from *The New Negro* .

For objectives 5 and 6, two short readings are very good: “Marcus Garvey” and “The Great Migration,” both selections from *Black History: A Reappraisal* , Melvin Drimmer, ed.

Also, in these first two weeks it would be useful to show two filmstrips which the Lee High School History Department possesses: “The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond, Part 1,” and “The Great Migration,” Parts 1 and 2.

Week 3

Now that students should have an understanding of the historical climate, an analysis of art and literature of the period should begin. This can be approached first by reviewing basic literary terms such as plot, theme, setting, characterization, tone, satire, irony, conflict, climax, imagery (metaphor-simile), and symbolism. The literature and artwork can be presented in thematic units. In Week 3, the teacher might begin by exploring poetry which exhibits racial pride and racial relations. These works would include Hughes’ “I, Too,” and “As I Grew Older”; McKay’s “If We Must Die” and “America”; and Cullen’s “Epitaphs” and “From the Dark Tower.” The poems should be read aloud in class first by the teacher and then by students. The teacher might also consider having students memorize one of the poems.

Sample Lesson

1. Read “If We Must Die” by Claude McKay.
2. Students should write out the answers to the following questions.
 - a. Who is “we” in the poem (point of view)?
 - b. How should “we” die? (Make sure students answer primarily in their own words, using an important quote.)
 - c. Who are the “monsters” and what other terms are used to refer to them? (imagery)
 - d. Explain the line, “What though before us lies the open grave!” (theme)
 - e. What is the tone of the poem?
3. Students should read “I, Too” by Langston Hughes.
4. Students should answer the following questions:
 - a. What does the kitchen symbolize?

- b. What is the theme of the poem?
 - c. What is the tone of the poem?
 - d. How do the tone and theme differ from “If We Must Die”?
5. Students should write a paragraph discussing the relationship to the poetry of Garvey’s philosophy on black pride.

Week 4

The idea of atavistic or African connections should be explored next. Useful here are poetry from *Cane* (“Georgia Dusk” and “Song of the Son”), Hughes’ “Afro-American Fragment” and “Nude Young Dancer,” McKay’s “Harlem Dancer,” Cullen’s “Heritage,” and slides of the artwork of Aaron Douglas, Sargent Johnson, and Richard Barthe. It might also be useful to show a few slides of African sculpture so students can more easily visualize African influence on art. Also, depending on the background of the students, the teacher might show a portion of tape 10 of the videotapes of Alex Haley’s *Roots* (in possession of Lee High School Annex) to demonstrate how negative American blacks’ view of Africa had been since the days of slavery. This would make the change more dramatic for the students.

Sample Lesson

After students have read and compared “Harlem Dancer” and “Nude Young Dancer,” particularly examining the subtle clues which connect each portrayal to African motifs, students should view a slide of Barthe’s “African Dancer” and first discuss similarities. The students should write one-page papers comparing all three works. Slides of Aaron Douglas’ work could also be used for comparison to any of the poems exhibiting this theme.

Week 5

The theme of exoticism can be explored next. The poems used in Week 4 can be reexamined and a selection from *Home to Harlem* (chapter one is good) can be used. Students should discuss what the term “exotic” means and why Africa as well as Afro-Americans were used as symbols of the exotic.

Week 6

The theme of glorifying the common Negro should be explored. Students should read such works as Hughes’ “Mother To Son,” and “Thank You M’am,” Bontemps’ “Summer Tragedy,” Fisher’s “Miss Cynthie,” Toomer’s “Fern,” Hurston’s “The Gilded Six-Bits,” and review *Home to Harlem* .

Sample Lesson

After the teacher has discussed characterization, students should write a paper comparing the main characters of “Miss Cynthie” and “Summer Tragedy,” particularly examining the motivation in the latter story and the ways in which all characters exhibit pride and dignity.

Week 7

Teachers should conclude the unit by assigning Thurman’s *Infants of the Spring* (a photocopied selection) and Hughes’ “Who’s Passing For Who.” Either in writing or orally, students should analyze the portrait of the Renaissance presented in these works in light of the selections from *The New Negro* from the first weeks of

the unit.

Weeks 8 and 9

Students should use the last two weeks to complete individual reports and review for a final exam. Each student should have been preparing a combination research/literary analysis paper on one author from the second week of the unit. The paper should first focus on biographical information on an author, and second on an analysis of one long work (preferably a novel) by that author. If time allows, students should present their work orally to the rest of the class in addition to passing in a written paper.

As the students prepare for an exam on the unit, it might be helpful to have the class break into groups and, using all notes, books, and reports, write study sheets on dittos for the entire class.

Student Reading List

The following articles, stories, and poems can be found in the anthologies and textbooks on the “Bibliography for Teachers.”

Arna Bontemps

“The Awakening: A Memoir”

“A Black Man Talks of Reaping”

“Summer Tragedy”

Melvin Drimmer

“Great Migration”

“Marcus Garvey”

Rudolph Fisher

“Miss Cynthie”

Langston Hughes

“Afro-American Fragment”
“As I Grew Older”
from *The Big Sea*
“I, Too”
“The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”
“The Negro Speaks of Rivers”
“Nude Young Dancer”
“Soul Food” (from the Simple stories)
“Thank You M’am”
“Theme For English B”
“Who’s Passing For Who”

Zora Neale Hurston

“The Gilded Six-Bits”

Charles S. Johnson

“The New Frontage on American Life”

James W. Johnson

“The Creation”
“Harlem: The Culture Capital”

Alain Locke

“Negro Youth Speaks”
“The New Negro”

Claude McKay

“America”
“Harlem Dancer”
Home To Harlem (Chapter 1)
“If We Must Die”
“Outcast”

Jean Toomer

from *Cane*

Slides

The following are from Nathan Huggins' *Voices From The Harlem Renaissance* and David Driskell's *Two Centuries of Black Art* .

Richmond Barthe

“Feral Benga”
“African Dancer”
“Boxer”
“Head of a Woman”

Aaron Douglas

“Building More Stately Mansions”

“Judgement Day”
(from *The New Negro* : illustrations)
(from *Fire* : illustrations)
“Aspects of Negro Life” (3 panels)

Palmer Hayden

“Midsummer Night in Harlem”

William H. Johnson

“Self-Portrait” (1921-26)
“Minnie”
“Self-Portrait” (1929)
“Mt. Calvary”

Sargent Johnson

“Forever Free”
“Mask”
“Mask (Negro Mother)”
“Negro Woman” (n.d.)
“Negro Woman, 1933”
“Head of a Negro Woman”
“White and Black”

Archibald J. Motley

“Portrait of My Grandmother”

“Brown Girl after the Bath”

“Blues”

“Mending Socks”

Hale Woodruff

“Mutiny on the Amistad”

“The Trial of the Captive Slaves from The Amistad”

“Return of the Natives from the Amistad Murals”

“Celestial Gate”

From Allon Schoener’s *Harlem On My Mind* will be slides of photographs depicting Harlem during the 1920’s and of many of the famous figures of the period.

From Jim Haskins’ *Cotton Club* will be slides of several photographs of performances at the Club as well as Harlem of the period.

Film Strips

“The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond, Part 1”

“The Great Migration, Parts 1 and 2” (Lee High School History Dept.)

If the teacher uses any of Langston Hughes’ Simple stories, the record “Simple” will be helpful. (Lee High School English Dept.)

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In Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book Library are folders on: Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Claude McKay, Wallace Thurman, and Jean Toomer.

Appropriate copies of the magazines *Crisis*, *Opportunity*, and *Fire* are also available in Yale's libraries.

*Lee High School Textbooks

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