



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1981 Volume I: The "City" in American Literature and Culture

Yet Do I Marvel: A Comparative Study of Black American Literature

Curriculum Unit 81.01.08
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This unit is designed to provide the student with a working knowledge of black literature by using two eras of black history which produced some of the best protest literature of the black people of America. The two eras are the Harlem Renaissance or Black Renaissance of the 1920's, and the black Revolutionary period of the 1960's.

The theme for the unit comes from a poem written by one of the Renaissance poets, Countee Cullen; the title of the poem is "Yet Do I Marvel." This poem speaks to the paradox of the Black artist, to have a message and talent, but to also be confined and obligated to address himself to the plight of the black man in America.

By comparing and contrasting the two eras the student will gain an increased awareness of American history in general, and black history, in particular, the black history of these two eras. Students will also gain a historical perspective about black life, a sense of time and sequence of events in history, and the ability to compare and/or contrast events in history, finding some causal relationships. It is hoped that this course will be able to improve racial relationships by offering information and insight about black motivation and lifestyle.

This unit will be designed for a heterogenous group of high school students, who will be at different grade levels, but able to read and write with some degree of clarity. However, the unit may also be used for students who are basic skills students. If the unit is used for the student who needs to work on his reading and writing skills, the materials in the unit can be modified for these students.

The course will be eight weeks long. The classes will be held for three hours a day, five days a week. Most of the sessions will consist of a lecture, a writing section, and a group discussion or group interaction section. Students will do some role play, do specific classroom writing assignments, observe time lines, read black literature from the Harlem Renaissance and from the Protest era, read various history selections, and make a slide film presentation. The slide show will be a group project and is something that can be worked on during the third hour of class; preparation, research, and actual hands-on kinds of experiences should happen then. During this third hour, students will also work on using the poetry and themes they have read, and the historical background applicable to the time period.

A study of the historical background will begin the unit. Events which relate to American history will be examined and subsequent reactions to these events in the black community will be addressed. The causal relationships between the two Protest eras will be observed.

The movement called the Black Renaissance or Harlem Renaissance was part of a growing interest of white literary circles in the social and economic plight of the black American. This era begins after World War I, the war which according to President Wilson, would make the world "safe for democracy." Black Americans fought in the war believing that when it was over, their lives would be different, that they would become part of the mainstream of American life. Of course, this did not happen. Before and during the war, many blacks migrated to the north, where blacks found employment in northern industries. Once the war was over, blacks met with resistance to remain in the labor force by labor unions and other white workers because of high unemployment present at that time. This black migration to northern urban areas provided a foundation for the Harlem Renaissance, the era of cultural growth for black Americans. This migration created a large black population where there was some economic and political strength, and inculcated a sense of racial pride, self-reliance, racial cooperation and self-help.

The 1920's was an age of social upheaval in America. The "war to end all wars" was over and for the most part Americans wanted to forget it. Prohibition was the law, and selling or making liquor was illegal. Americans were looking for a good time, and fun and frolic was the name of the game. The twenties was a time of frenzies and crazes, dance marathons, gold fish eating contests, fast cars, the radio, people gambling on the stock market and making it rich. But not everyone did so well. The twenties was also a time of government scandal; the Teapot Dome oil scandal resulted in government officials going to jail for their participation in fraudulent oil deals. There was a fear growing in the country that the Communists might take over the government. Many people became confused and began to call anyone they did not like or with different ideas a Communist. The "Red Scare" brought out the prejudices that existed in this country against immigrants and members of minority groups.

There were many race riots during this time period; the worst was in Chicago in 1919. This riot lasted for six days and left thirty-eight people dead (fifteen whites and twenty-three blacks), and left five hundred and thirty-seven people injured. Black homes were burned down, children were ripped from the arms of their mothers and thrown into flames, and many blacks were maimed or viciously murdered. Like Chicago, there were riots in Knoxville, Tennessee, Omaha, Nebraska, Elaine, Arkansas and in Tulsa, Oklahoma. During this time, there was a resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, not only in the southern states but in the north as well. With the resurgence of the Klan there was also an increase in the number of lynchings of black people. As a result of the tenor of the times, which included the migration of blacks to the north, the race riots, the rebirth of the KKK, black unemployment, racial tensions growing in the country, a group of artists located predominantly in Harlem spoke out. The artists reflected the mood of the "New Negro," defiant, bitter and impatient. Fighting back came with the ability to articulate the feelings of the black man.

The black artist like his white contemporaries, saw the injustices happening to black people around him and used his art form to deliver the protest message to the American people. In many cases relaying this message was not intentional but rather an expression of feelings. The Renaissance artists attempted to express what the masses of the black race were feeling. Some of the poets tried to escape race in their poems, but race is always implied in their writings. The motivation of the artist comes directly from an understanding that the black artist reflects his own frame of reference which is the black experience.

The Harlem Renaissance literature begins with the poem "If We Must Die..." by Claude McKay. This poem was a direct retaliation to the plight of the black man, with particular regard to the Chicago race riots of 1919. The poem would seemingly advocate violent actions; however, it is more than just advocating violence, it is stressing that if death is inevitable, because of the situations surrounding blacks, then death must occur in a proud and honorable fashion.

Countee Cullen is a lyric poet. The two lines in sonnet form in which he speaks of the paradoxes of life expresses his faith that God can solve and answer all of the mysteries of life, shows the irony, bitterness, and pathos of a tragedy. Cullen felt that good poetry is a lofty thought expressed beautifully and romantically. However, some of the best poetry of Cullen comes from his race consciousness. Other Cullen poems which still echo the racial consciousness theme are part of his second book of poems *Copper Sun* (1927), and his poetic narrative, *The Black Christ* (1929).

Langston Hughes, one of the most popular Renaissance writers, also reflected on the outcast or paradoxical role of the black American. In his poem, "I Too Sing America," Hughes is addressing the black audience and a white audience and says that he also is beautiful and has a song to sing. He tells blacks to grow and cherish their beauty, and that eventually their beauty will be recognized. It is a Cinderella discovery, that when "company comes" blacks will be noticed and appreciated. This is the paradoxical and uncomfortable situation of not being accepted by white society.

In some of his poetry Hughes uses subjects that might be considered unpoetic and then implies race in them. An example of such a poem is "Brass Spittoons." In this poem he tells of a black porter who has the task of cleaning brass spittoons, an unlikely topic for a poem but nonetheless bringing the message of race to his audience at the very end of the poem. Hughes was able to show in this poem as well as in his other works a talent for combining wit and satire and anger in such a way as not to offend anyone, but still to make his message clear and understood.

Hughes, McKay, and Cullen were only some of the writers of this era who expressed their feelings on the moment in black history and on the American way of life. The Harlem Renaissance was an important event in black literature, and perhaps if the writers did not address themselves the way they did and on the topics that they chose, we would not have the powerful writers of the sixties with their free expression of thought.

Some of the other writers of the Harlem Renaissance who should be mentioned are Rudolph Fisher, Jean Toomer, Arna Bontemps, and James Weldon Johnson. They should, certainly, be a part of any comprehensive study of black literature of the 1920's.

Not unlike the era of the 1920's, the era of the 1960's began on a hopeful note and ended in a bitter and disillusioned way for Americans, white as well as black. There was unrest in the cities, distrust of the government and of business. The undeclared war in Vietnam which the United States became involved in spawned the Peace Movement in which young people expressed their outrage over the country's involvement in Southeast Asia. Among these young people were young black people who saw the Vietnamese war as wrong, and as a tactic of genocide for young black males. The 1960's was an age of youth. The country had a young new president early in the decade with bright new hopes and aspirations. Black Americans clearly saw themselves becoming part of the country by way of the promise of a "new generation." The sixties was a time where equal rights for all citizens was the unifying theme. This search for equal rights took place in schools, in employment, in the judicial system, the armed forces, and all public places. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 stated that public places could not be segregated, and it authorized the Attorney General to bring law suits against segregated schools, forbade employers to discriminate against anyone on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin or sex, and blocked the use of literacy tests to keep blacks and others from voting. The revolutionary period of the sixties was centered around civil rights, Supreme court decisions, school desegregation, and voting rights. There developed early in the sixties a protest movement to assure the rights of all people. Peaceful resistance was the method used which included sit-ins, pray-ins, and mass demonstrations. The aim of this resistance was to solve the "negro problem" through legislation.

Early resistance was supported by the young, including many young whites as well as blacks. The war in Vietnam, urban unrest, and other problems caused young whites to question the goals of society. Colleges became the centers for political activity.

A group who expressed much of the anger and disillusionment with America were the Black Muslims of the Nation of Islam. The Muslims produced a very influential leader, Malcolm X. Malcolm pushed the idea of black nationalism and denounced non-violence and integration into white society. His ideas and speech were so radical that liberal whites were glad to listen to integrationism and to participate as a solution to the black problem.

Malcolm appealed to many urban blacks because the poor blacks in the north could relate to the speeches and experiences of Malcolm. People were impatient for justice and for these reasons Malcolm made sense. It seemed that much of the improvements which came about in the sixties for the black American were mere token efforts and that something more immediate needed to be done.

The first riot of the 1960's occurred in Los Angeles, California in 1965 in a black neighborhood called Watts. The riot left thirty-five people dead and millions of dollars in property damage. There were more than seventy disturbances in different areas of the United States between 1965 and 1967. The climax came in Newark, New Jersey in July of 1967. Newark's riot left twenty-six blacks dead and a large part of Newark burned-out. There were reports after the riots to determine the reasons for the urban unrest. The findings of the Kerner Commission were that there were still areas of severe poverty and unemployment, which in some areas ran as high as 52%. The report stated that "Our Nation is headed towards two societies, one black and one white—separate and unequal." ¹

The protest movement was a two sided phenomena; it was ushered in non-violently with sit-ins and freedom marches and went out in a much more forceful manner. However, this era left us with some of the best protest literature. There developed out of the sixties a group of artists whose concern was the illumination, production, savoring, and support of black culture and the black experience, while also being revolutionary and political. This cultural resurgence was African, Asian, as well as American black culture. There was an exhilaration about being black, and that having a black identity was something to be proud of and protected and that this fact of blackness did not need to be explained to, explained by, or necessarily understood by whites. The very idea of blacks dealing with the black experience and giving their lives *their* perspectives was an important part of the sixties. Telling it like it is, was the way the black artist worked. This was illustrated in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* , *Soul on Ice* , and *Black Power* .

One of the artists of this era is Imamu Imiri Baraka (Leroi Jones). The literary career of Baraka has been as controversial as some of his work. Baraka feels that the job of the black artist is to be a missionary of blackness, and to bring African and Asian culture to the black American.

The defiance and arrogance of the sixties allowed a writer like Nikki Giovanni to write "Nikki Rosa," a poem about her childhood and *Gemini* , her autobiography, "My Poem," and "Knoxville, Tennessee." These writings are essentially her experiences and that is what is important: the fact that the experiences are hers, they are black experiences, they are personal and they are universal.

Organization of the Unit

I. Background

1. Topics of history of the 1920's Harlem Renaissance Era—World War I, blacks in the military, rising industrialization, black migration, social upheaval, racial tensions (race riots), the Red Scare, Teapot Dome, rise of the KKK, lynchings, the Jazz Age.

2. Topics of history of the 1960's Protest Era Vietnam, race riots, the Great Society, Civil Rights, Sit-ins, Women's Rights, Equal Rights, Black militancy, and the Peace Movement.

These background events and topics will be examined and will provide a basis for understanding the message of the various artists to be studied. The topics will also be organized in such a way to make the comparing and contrasting of events on the two eras happen in a cohesive manner. The unit continues with the focus on the artists of both eras. The organization of this material will be done as follows:

II. The Artists — The Harlem Renaissance

1. Renaissance poets and writers: Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Rudolph Fisher, Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Toomer, Arna Bontemps, and James Weldon Johnson.

2. The Messengers: Alain Locke, W.E.B. DuBois, Charles Johnson, and Marcus Garvey.

3. The Message: the complexities of being black in America, the beauty of blackness, and the rejection by blacks of repression, the involvement of whites in the movement, Pan-Africanism.

III. The Artist — The Protest Era

1. Protest poets and writers: Leroi Jones (Imamu Imiri Baraka), Don L. Lee, Richard Wright, Alice Childress, Mari Evans, Ralph Ellison, Nikki Giovanni, and Sonia Sanchez, Paule Marshall, and Gwendolyn Brooks.

2. The Messengers: Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, Elderidge Cleaver, Dick Gregory and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad.

3. The Message: the complexities of being black in America, "Black is Beautiful," non-violence as a means of peaceful coexistence, the anger, the rejection of repression and the solutions for blacks.

IV. The Comparison of the Harlem Renaissance Artists to the Protest Artists

1. How the messages are similar

2. How the messages differ

V. The Solutions of the Black Artists (social change)

VI. The Conclusions: The Future Directions of Black Literature in America

The background material for the unit will be presented in lecture form using the information which will be provided. A background information sheet will be provided to the students so that they may have their own reference sheet of pertinent information relative to the course. This sheet gives the student a handy referral sheet which will be especially useful once the literature is discussed.

Another way to provide the student with background information is by using the television movie: *Roots the Second Generation*. There is a portion of the film which deals with blacks in World War I, the ideas and philosophies of the times, and much more valuable information. Since it would be difficult to acquire a copy of the movie, a summary and discussion of the movie would be sufficient. This kind of experience will make the general background information relevant to the student because through the medium of the movie he will have experienced much more than could be told him in a classroom situation.

In order to study the artists from each era the class will discuss a sample of literature from each of the artists. By using some of the more popular pieces, representing each artist, the student will be able to develop a working knowledge of the art form.

In each piece of literature students will pay special attention to the message in each. The messages will focus on the paradox of the black artist: talent versus the conflict of being black. Explaining to students the concept of this internal conflict will be particularly difficult especially since high school students tend not to understand the concept of paradox. Once they understand some of the background information the protest literature will be easily understood. However, the conflict of being an artist might be more difficult to relay. One method of easing some of this difficulty is by inviting guest artists in to speak about what their personal motivation is.

Since this idea of conflict is difficult to relay much of the class activity must be an active participation in the learning process. This can be done through writing their own literature whether short stories or poems. Role play is also a useful means to make students aware of other person's motivations. Role play can develop a sensitivity to a situation which under normal lecture situations the student would not experience. Finally, an original class filmstrip organized, produced, and filmed by the students should help present the student with the artist's perspective. By allowing students to create their own art form they will come to understand art by doing and ultimately will come to empathize with the artists and the literature of the 1920's and the 1960's.

Student Reference Sheet

1920's Renaissance Artists

Writers:

Actors:

Plays:

Music:

Musicians:

Student Reference Sheet

Sixties Artists

Writers:

Actors:

Plays:

Music:

Musicians:

Lesson Plans

This course is designed for three hours a day for eight weeks. The normal class process will include a reading component, a writing section, and a discussion or activity section. It is always necessary to continue the format of the three elements mentioned above. Repetition of the format helps organize the time for the class, and also helps the student know what to expect when so that he can fulfill the course requirements.

The following are methods of organizing and presenting materials to the class:

Plan 1

Objectives to help students understand what the artist does and how he is motivated to produce his art and to help the students develop their own creativity.

Methods Read three representative poems from three Harlem Renaissance writers: "Yet Do I Marvel," Countee Cullen, "If We Must Die," Claude McKay, and Langston Hughes' "I Too Sing America." The first three poems should be those which are chosen by the teacher. The student will find visual aids to help explain the poem: newspapers, photographs, magazines, or art work can be used. Once the student has done this with the poetry the teacher has chosen, the student can then choose poetry he likes and following the same format find visual aids to help explain the poem. These visual aids should be displayed and presented to the class during the third hour of the class.

Plan 2

Objectives

1. Help students to understand what the artist does and how he is motivated to produce art.
2. To help students express themselves in writing.
3. To have students begin to read the autobiographies of black Americans.
4. To help students find relationships between their lives and the lives of other people.

Methods Read selections from the autobiographies of black Americans. The stories to be used are parts of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, written by Alex Haley, *Nigger* by Dick Gregory, *Gemini* and the poem “Nikki Rosa” by Nikki Giovanni.

After reading selections from the early years of these black Americans, students will write a childhood experience they have had. Before students begin to write, the idea of autobiography and childhood experience should be discussed, keeping in mind that although everyone does not have the *same* experience, there is a relationship in the kind of experiences children have. The idea of the similarities of childhood experiences can be begun by having them remember their first adventure, their first time losing somebody (death, getting lost in a strange place, losing a friend), the first time they realized that they were different from other people.

Lesson Plan 3

Objectives *Help students appreciate the black experience and culture and give the student a hands-on experience in the classroom.*

Methods

1. Show the students the *Black Book*, and explain the format of the book. Observe the components of the book with the students newspaper articles, tickets from concerts, pictures, art, crafts, poetry, recipes, folktales, etc.
2. Explain what a scrapbook is and find out if any of the students have ever made scrapbooks for themselves.
3. Students can make a scrapbook of the two eras which have been discussed; this can be a thematic scrapbook if they want or they can make a scrapbook of their times.

Additional ideas for lessons:

1. Read selected poems about growing up and have students write poetry.
2. Make a storyboard that could be used for the slide presentation and write the script which would be taped.
3. Family stories—the oral tradition is an important black experience; every family has its own family history. Have the students tell and record their family stories. These family stories should try to give the story the “flavor” that the family gives it. Later in the course the story can be storyboarded for possible filming and writing out.
4. Make a book of personalities with brief autobiographical sketches accompanied by photographs from each era.
5. Invite local artists into the class to either exhibit or to explain their art form and their own motivation and message in their art.

Notes

1. The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, New York, N.Y., Bantam Books, Inc., 1968, p.1.

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Baldwin, James. *Notes of a Native Son*. A collection of essays by Baldwin.

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Carmichael, Stokely and Hamilton, Charles V. *Black Power*. A "political framework" for blacks to organize themselves politically.

Cleaver, Eldridge. *Soul on Ice*. Autobiography of controversial sixties personality.

Duberman, Martin B. *In White America*. History of the black man's problem with discrimination in America.

DuBois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folks*. History of black Americans which includes the philosophy and opinions of DuBois.

Emanuel, James and Gross, Theodore L. *Dark Symphony*. Anthology of black literature, from early literature to the contemporary artists.

Finklestein, Milton, Sandifer, Jawn A. and Wright, Elfreda.

Minorities : USA. Explores the problems facing minority groups, looks at history and culture of different ethnic groups.

Greenlee, Sam. *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*. A fictionalized account of blacks and politics.

Johnson, James, Weldon. *Black Manhattan*. History of the negro in New York and the New York stage. Sums up the negro experience up to the depression.

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Oh, Freedom . New York Times, Inc. Arno Press. Made by Rediscovery Productions. Released by NYT, 1970.

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