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"Reigniting The Spark" Teaching the Harlem Renaissance To A New Generation

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“REIGNITING THE SPARK”
TEACHING THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE TO A NEW GENERATION

M.A. Thesis In Literature
By Ayeley Sowah
May 7, 2012

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Literature of the City University of New York.
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REIGNITING THE SPARK!

TEACHING THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE TO A NEW GENERATION

Does Harlem Renaissance literature have a place in American literary history? I have long thought of this question because of my experience as a student, scholar and now educator in learning and teaching the authors of this time period. Often missed in English classrooms on secondary and post-secondary levels or dropped from the curriculum, these authors, artists and musicians made an indelible mark on American history and the works go unrecognized in classrooms around the nation. We must not allow the voices of these artists to disappear.

“What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?”

Langston Hughes
INTRODUCTION

“Reigniting the Spark” is an attempt to rekindle the spark in teacher and student interest in an era that seems to be fading from society. While the Harlem Renaissance era is certainly taught in many classrooms, it is certainly not addressed in every class. As the era is introduced less in the classrooms, scholars who become teachers are less likely to introduce the era to their students, nearly eroding an exciting time in literary history. Teachers are more likely to omit a topic rather than teach one in which they lack full knowledge. The title also pays homage to the period alluding to the title from Renaissance author Wallace Thurman, who produced the magazine “Fire”.

Is it important for twenty-first century students attending school in Harlem to learn about the Harlem Renaissance? As a lifetime Harlem resident I often heard the names associated with the Renaissance like Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen and Marcus Garvey through landmarks such as the library and park. I witnessed various neighborhood transformations of art that spoke to the past, but it was an undergraduate professor that ignited my spark, sending me on a journey to the Schomburg Center for Black Culture and Research in Harlem to complete an assignment on Harlem Renaissance writers. It was the first time I officially heard the term “Harlem Renaissance” used, despite having attended school in Harlem
for 11 years. Once I became more familiar with the authors I was enthused by my findings and continued this research as a graduate student. The focus of this research is to provide an opportunity to instructors to view lesson ideas and examine the criticisms of the era using multiple theories and to incorporate artists into the literary classrooms in their own right.

Many artists arrived in Harlem as a result of the Great Black Migration between 1910 and 1930. This was an upward movement in many ways; African-Americans left the South in search of the American Dream: Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. Employment was the main motivator for the great exodus from the South, followed by overt racism exhibited through Jim Crow Laws, dilapidated living conditions and inferior schools. These hardships were the foundations for which many writers and artists used to create authentic work; their struggles, successes and accomplishments became our stories forever engraved on our consciousness in appreciation for the new exploratory period called the Harlem Renaissance.

This research will examine the multitude of authors from various literary theories including Feminist theory, which deals with political, social, economic and psychological oppression of women in literature; a mirror image of society at large that transcended race. New Historicism and Cultural Theory examines literature (including art forms) from a specific era taking into account the author, the time
period of the writing, and character development that directly addresses the cultural constructs of the individual and collective people and their expressions.

**New Historicism and Cultural Theory**

New Historicism and Cultural Theory examines recent (late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} century) history from a literary perspective. To clarify, the following questions may be addressed: Why could a particular text only be written during this time? What is unique and time bound in the plot or theme? Are the social issues depicted in the text relevant in today’s society? “What some people believe today about “frontier” life in North America ... they know primarily from fictional sources ...that reflect a certain set of beliefs and viewpoints.” (Hall 304) For example, Nella Larsen’s texts *Passing and Quicksand* deal with gender, class and race issues: all relevant with today’s society, making the works timeless. However, more specifically, the texts deal with the issue of very fair-skinned Black women “passing” for White and society’s response to this action. In the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, this issue is not relevant due to integration and the progress of society, but it was very relevant during the time the novels were written, making her novels great examples to study New Historicism and Cultural Theory. To study this theory allows the investigator to explore and understand more fully where people’s beliefs and actions may derive from and how they were reinforced.
Literary and other cultural texts are connected in complex ways to the time period in which they were created. Systems of social power are both reflected in and reinforced by such texts. (Hall 299)

“The New Negro”, as Alain Locke suggested, was embarrassed by the Old Negro because he was subservient, and simply and quietly accepted the societal norms of segregated institutions: slavery and Jim Crow Laws. Today the Old Negro and the heritage that is unique to the African-American culture throughout history is embraced rather than dismissed. In fact, the Old Negro is a stereotype because behind the antics of the Old Negro was an abolitionist and a rebel who organized meetings and planned escaped routes (Harriet Tubman) and taught themselves to read and write (Frederick Douglas) despite the laws. If the Old Negro did not act the way he did, these legendary, heroic acts of the past would not have been possible. New Historicism explores the systems of power that were in place at the time and reinforced in the text through issues addressing gender, class, ethnicity, and sometimes religion. It helps the reader to understand the positions and actions of characters. Culture speaks through literature and informs the reader of historical, societal norms.

The Harlem Renaissance must be explored through New Historicism and Cultural Theory to grasp its magnificent impact on American history. This research will serve as a gateway to introduce lesson ideas for instructors to have students
embody reading from various perspectives to broaden their knowledge of the era and the authors. Teaching various authors in isolation is not as effective as teaching various authors under different critical theories; allowing students to gain a wider range of the sense of the people, of the movement and of the time. In particular, the authors set forth for discovery on this journey will include Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Jean Toomer, James Weldon Johnson and Jessie Fauset.

It is impossible to discuss teaching the Harlem Renaissance without addressing the artists from the period and their direct connection to the writers; Aaron Douglas, Palmer Hayden, William H. Johnson, Archibald Motely and James Van Der Zee. There were many women artists as well; Selma Burke, Meta Warrick Fuller and Augusta Savage, these women held their place in American society during a time when the possibility of voting for women was an uphill battle. This is the paradigm of teaching the Harlem Renaissance as a unit of study and not selecting isolated authors and artists.

**Feminist Theory**

“The Feminist Theory focuses intensely on gender (the social roles performed by the sexes) and explores the complex ways in which women have been denied social power and the right to various forms of self-expression.” (Hall 199) Social power structures historically represent a patriarchal perspective. In
Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*, Helga Crane is a refined character who speaks proper, standard English. She is a woman of culture but marries a southern preacher and follows him to uplift his congregation. By the novel’s end, this vibrant, charismatic and independent woman is physically and emotionally tired from having too many children. She wants to escape, like Janie, but cannot bear the idea of leaving her children behind. Helga resorts to an ill-stricken sleep to cope with the hate and disgust she feels for her husband and the death of her fourth child soon after birth. Unfortunately for her, as soon as she is recovered from her illness, they become pregnant again with the fifth child. Despite hating her husband and dreaming of a life that could have been without children, she allows herself to become pregnant again, falling victim to male domination. Students can use Nella Larsen’s depiction of Helga Crane as a benchmark to measure other feminist protest from male subjugation during the Harlem Renaissance.

A key element of feminist theory is that women resisted the patriarchal domination imposed upon them via social institutions. Janie Crawford from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, refused to become a “mule” and left her first husband, despite his vast wealth, during a time that women did not act in this manner. After her second husband’s death, Janie immediately ran off with a much younger man to enjoy life untethered by patriarchal institutions of gender oppression. This behavior was also unusual for women and Zora Neale Hurston was a trailblazer for
women writers and their development of female characters, using the pen as a form of protest.

It is imperative for students to understand that the Harlem Renaissance was a male dominated time period, similar to other great literary time periods in American history. Teachers should encourage students to question the women writers’ choices to end the works as they did; is it deliberate? Langston Hughes said, “The less exotic we are the less we sell.” While that may have been true of the Harlem Renaissance writer and artist, were women authors held to a different standard? Would these literary works be too “exotic” if the heroines chose different paths and maintained their independence, free from societal strongholds implemented by the male majority? This includes sexual oppression as part of the female identity. Do these women writers simply represent the dichotomy of being a Black, woman author during this time in American History? What about the identity and sexuality of these heroines, must they remain oppressed to fit societal standards?

In the early twentieth century, Nella Larsen attended Fisk University; they had strict laws against courtship, but they only applied to women. This may have prompted Larsen’s early departure because this is where she met her husband and no doubt provided the author with the fuel to protest these gender specific rules. Women were not allowed to attend the school if they were engaged or
married. Any woman who became pregnant was immediately expelled from the school. Men and women could not walk on the same side of the street. These rules only affected women. Teachers can have students explore Feminist Theory through the eyes of one of the female writers of the Harlem Renaissance and from a current perspective.

**THE WRITERS AND THEIR PENS**

As our world grows and changes, so must our teaching practices in the classroom. Teachers have witnessed the end of an era: teaching in isolation. New educational and societal priorities ushered in new practices, which have called for an interdisciplinary approach to teaching. Classroom teachers must create their lessons and performance tasks to fit this new model of integrating other subjects into theirs; as an English teacher of high school students I must use topics that deal with History, Science, Math, Art, Health and Physical Education. This research will exhibit effective ways to incorporate other subjects into an English classroom where students are exposed to literature with a focus on Feminist and New Historicism and Cultural Theories. This interdisciplinary teaching approach reinforces what a student is learning to increase retention and understanding of the concepts while improving reading and writing skills. For example, students in an Economics class would study the financial surplus experienced by many
Americans during The Roaring Twenties and how this surplus inadvertently increased the middle class Black community in Harlem through philanthropic donations to the arts, funding the Harlem Renaissance writers by paying for their living and publishing expenses. Those same students would be exposed to the literature of the time period in an English class and would critically examine the texts to explore the dichotomy of “being Negro and being American” (DuBois). Students in a History class would explore the Great Depression and the effects it produced on American society, with a specific look at the toll it had on Harlem and the Harlem Renaissance artists.

The New Negro Movement was a time period beginning 1918 that demanded a new breed of “Black Folk” who encompassed sophistication and education but maintained at their conscious forefront the fight for equality. Such a group was labeled “The Talented Tenth” a phrase coined by W.E.B. DuBois. His message was clear; not everyone is capable of being a leader and “Black Folk” needed to have their best leadership in the foreground to represent the masses as well as lead them out of oppressive conditions and save them from themselves. “The Talented Tenth of the Negro race must be made leaders of thought...among their people... The Negro race, like all other races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men.” (DuBois) The New Negro Movement shed the ideals of the
former Negro, submissive, jovial and dedicated worker, for a more favorable, dignified style of protest: the pen.

As former sharecroppers and farmers made a life for their children in the South the best way they knew with very limited resources, the next generation desired more. The Great Migration (1915) was underway, former sharecroppers and farmers fled the old dogmas of the South in search of a new life, a better life; one without the Jim Crow Laws, the downtrodden existence to live out the vicious cycle of existing, not living and not being recognized by society or the government. Caravans of “Black Folk” descended onto what would later be called “Nigger Heaven”: Harlem. The Great Migration led to an explosion of Black populations in other major Northern and Midwestern cities, but none would leave its mark on literary history like that of New York City.

Harlem, The Mecca for Black life, witnessed an artistic boom producing writers, artists and musicians. In part, this artistic boom was to serve as the catalyst for voting rights, jobs and housing; however, the enthusiasm placed on the social aspect of the “Talented Tenth” bourgeois lifestyle somehow took precedent. The lifestyle was afforded by the philanthropic donations of wealthy white patrons of the arts, many thinking it would last much longer than its actuality. The New Negro Movement lasted through the great economic boom in America known as The Roaring Twenties and its demise coincided with the Great
Depression of the early 1930’s, which was a direct result of the Stock Market Crash of 1929. Philanthropic funds disintegrated for Black arts and many of the Black bourgeois who enjoyed parties at “The Dark Tower” (home of A’Lelia Walker) began to seek employment in their respective fields of work prior to their artistic success. Zora Neale Hurston returned to substitute teaching after her success and Nella Larsen returned to nursing after her success as a writer. Are these details important to the study of the writing?

A pathway to teaching New Historicism and Cultural Theory that would prove to be effective is to allow students to complete an investigative report on the author and examine their works. Students would connect the research by answering the following questions: How does the author deal with the issues in their life through their writings? How does the writing reflect the cultural behaviors of society? What were the political, social and economic ladders in society and how did they function? What are the various perspectives presented by the author in their writing? These questions serve as a springboard to embark on an analysis of New Historicism and Cultural Theory. Students will be able to view first-hand how the author dealt with societal issues and will be able to potentially argue which side of the issues the author supported.
Nella Larsen

Nella Larsen was born to a Caucasian mother and a very fair-skinned black father. Although it cannot be proven, it is believed that her father may have passed for white, which is a taboo in both the white and black communities. Larsen was very fair-skinned as well, but was too dark to pass for white.¹ She attended Fisk University, but dropped out after one year and traveled to New York City with her husband Dr. Elmer Samuel Imes. There she attended nursing school and became a member of the “black bourgeoisie”.² This group differentiated itself from the poor Black class of New York City, historically through White ancestry and Caucasian features, which was later enhanced to include occupation and income. Larsen enjoyed this membership because she wanted to gain access to the middle-class Black society and she longed for solid familial relationships because of the strained relationship with her parents.

In Passing, Nella Larsen reveals to her readers much about her own life. The novel chronicles the friendship of two mulatto women; Clare Kendry, who “passes” for White and longs for a familial relationship that she never experiences and the other, Irene Redfield, who can pass for White, but opts to embrace her African heritage and marries a Black doctor. Both Clare and Irene have children, but for Clare it was anything but a joyous occasion. Although not available in the early 20th century, DNA dictates genetic codes and Clare was fearful that her
secret would explode if her darling, precious baby were to be born darker than her two supposed White parents. “No, I have no boys and I don’t think I’ll ever have any. I’m afraid. I nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear that she might be dark”. (Larsen 168) When Clare’s daughter is of age she is shipped off to boarding school, for fear that her features may begin to change.

“Hello Nig” (Larsen 170) was the greeting John Bellew gave to his wife Clare as he met her at a restaurant with her friends, whom were all “passing” that day because the restaurant did not serve Blacks. Irene was flooded with disdain at the idea that Clare’s husband would greet her in such a manner and especially in front of guest. She was even further disturbed that Clare allowed “an outsider” (a true testament to how Nella Larsen felt in her life) to “ridicule her race”. John later explains his greeting, “When we were first married, she was as white as ... a lilly. But I declare she’s getting’ darker and darker. I tell her if she don’t look out, she’ll wake up one of these days and find she’s turned into a nigger.” (Larsen 171) Embarrassed, but with no alternative to offer any other emotion, Clare began a resounding laughter and the other two ladies joined in. She attempted to save the moment and restore order and asked her husband,

“My goodness, Jack! What difference would it make if, after all these years, you were to find out that I was one or two percent coloured?” “Oh no,
Nig” he declared, nothing like that with me. I know you’re no nigger, so it’s
all right. You can get as black as you please as far as I’m concerned, since I
know you’re no nigger. I draw the line at that. No niggers in my family.

Never have been and never will be.” (Larsen 171)

Now this is a passage that will grab at the emotional strings of any reader. What
were the true reactions of the three ladies lunching to Bellew’s crass statements
since they are all niggers? The literary theme of irony is important (and often
difficult) to teach in an English class, especially in high school when the students
must take a qualifying exit exam that incorporates literary themes. This scene is an
opportunity to allow students to independently explore irony after reading the
scene. Without blending the study of literature with the study of history, students
may be left wondering about an author’s choice; why did John greet his wife this
way, was this common thought of society at large during this time?

Larsen dealt with the issue of Black acceptance of White beauty and the
concept of the benefits of whiteness throughout her life. When her mother
remarries a white man after her father’s death she was not truly accepted or
embraced by her stepfather; she was forced to stay with distant relatives in
Copenhagen, Denmark.³ This family rejection is believed to be one reason for her
dropping out of Fisk University, where she also met her husband. While working
on the novel Passing, Larsen discovered that her prominent African-American
husband and physicist, Dr. Elmer Samuel Imes, was conducting an affair with a white woman. Once again Larsen received a subliminal message that her unique and exotic beauty was rejected and family ties were broken. Larsen took the advice of a well known philanthropist, Carl Van Vechten (and Godfather to the Harlem Renaissance because he funded many projects) to not confront her husband and to continue her work on the novel as if nothing happened.\textsuperscript{4} This idea only worked on the surface because, like many authors, Larsen drew from her real experiences to complete her work. Larsen felt displaced by the White beauty that plagued her life from its inception. It was not just the white beauty, but the acceptance of the “White is Right” attitude in society, closing many doors to African-Americans. Nella Larsen, like many biracial people at the time, felt that she didn’t belong to any group, not Black or White, hence her disappointment as she continued to lose her husband, her identity and her career.

\emph{Passing} is a great novel for deeper exploration on character development. On the surface it seems that Clare was masking her true identity, but indeed it was Irene who wore the mask; she despised African-Americans, reminiscent of DuBois, especially those of low life. Irene and her husband maintained their posh brownstone in an elite area of Harlem. However, she also hated Blacks who decided to take the “passing” road, but she employed her passing strategies when
it was convenient for her. Irene’s character evokes a sense of emptiness, loneliness and not belonging: all reflective of the author’s life.

**Langston Hughes**

Langston Hughes was a traveler who migrated from the Midwest to various places around the world and ultimately landed in Harlem, where he poured his soul into his writing. Hughes recognized through his poetry the many people who continued to migrate North in search of the better life. Hughes wrote about the average man and his exhausting efforts for equality, a different approach than Larsen, she wrote about the upper and middle class Black people and their issues with class and race distinction. Teachers should make their students aware that the Harlem Renaissance was born from necessity because black authors were not in high demand. In other words, while Black authors did exist prior to the Harlem Renaissance, they were infrequently published. The novels that were published addressed anti-slavery protests, but essays and poetry were very scarce. To expose many Black writers to the public at large would not support the societal norm of these writers being uneducated and primitive beings. As a result, Black writers needed to promote their own work.

Langston remarked in *Fighting Words*,

...Negro materials ... are placed into certain classifications. Magazine editors tell you, ‘we can use but so many Negro stories a year.’ (That ‘so
many’ meaning very few). Publishers will say, ‘We already have one Negro novel on our list this fall.’ When we cease to be exotic, we do not sell well.

(Kramer 239)

As a result of the multitude of rejection, Black authors found their voice through magazines published specifically for them, such as *The Crisis, Opportunity and Fire*. This was part of the social and economic climate of the Renaissance and some writers brought into the idea of being the other or exotic because it afforded them financial gain in accordance with elite notoriety.

Langston Hughes, along with his colleague Zora Neale Hurston, “believed that the authenticity of their own voices depended upon the deliberate use of the ... ‘non-literary’ language and idiom of the blacks.” (Blooms 119) Both Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston depended on financial assistance of a rich, white woman, Mrs. Osgood Mason. She supported their writing but requested editorial rights over their work. This situation outlines the double bind that Harlem writers faced; the political pressures from Black leaders to represent the race in the light of the “New Negro” and maintaining the white patronage by representing the race as “exotic”. How is this relevant in the classroom? This information will exhibit how the writers had a political and moral obligation to their race and a creative and financial obligation to their patrons; it also represents the wealthy White patron who benefited from the prosperity of The Roaring Twenties. Teachers will
also find it useful to expose students to the fact that Harlem Renaissance writers criticized each other. Hughes wrote of Hurston:

“In her youth she was always getting scholarships and things from the wealthy White people, some of whom simply paid her just to sit around and represent the Negro race for them... To many of her White friends, no doubt, she was a perfect ‘darkie’, in the nice meaning...- naïve, childlike, sweet, humorous and highly colored Negro.” 5

Langston Hughes made his people and his patrons proud because he wrote about the plight of the average black woman, how they were marginalized in society and their positions as domestic workers. He also extrapolated elements of his real life to connect to his female characters. He was raised under the guidance of his mother and grandmother, who are represented in the women he writes about. Hughes more famous works include, “I, Too, Sing America”, “Mother To Son”, “Dream Deferred”, “Cora Unashamed” and “The Gun”. In many of these poems he exposes the reader to the life of the Midwest characters who were miserable in their existence and simply muddled along, often dreaming of a better life for themselves and future generations. He made a connection to his characters examining their world through a feminist lens. For example, in “Cora Unashamed” Hughes writes about a woman having an illegal abortion, a topic not
addressed by many male authors, including those from the Harlem Renaissance era.

**Zora Neale Hurston**

A prominent figure of the Harlem Renaissance, Zora Neale Hurston landed in Harlem through the same caravan of the Great Black Migration, like so many that came before her. She was raised in Eatonville, Fl, the first Black town to become incorporated: owned and operated by Blacks. It is not a surprise that she drew from her experiences in Eatonville to create the dynamic heroine, Janie Crawford, from her most acclaimed novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God.* Although the text is written slightly after the height of the Renaissance era, 1937, Hurston was still a major part of the Harlem Renaissance team, also known as the Black Literati. In this text, Hurston draws on the rich texture of culture from the Southern roots of Black tradition: the townspeople participated in a major funeral procession, burial and last words from the highest ranking member of the town for a mule. The mule was overworked and at the end of his time in life; as the men of the town teased the mule, Janie became annoyed and defended the mule. The reader should recall Nanny’s comparison and its significance to this scene and Janie’s reaction: “Women is da mules of the world.” (Hurston 67) The town of Eatonville becomes a character within itself; growing from a small simple town with almost nothing worth stopping by for, to one with a bank, post office, a
general store and excess land to sell to new settlers. The characters are fictional but the town is a real place. Students should research the town and its historical and economic significance in America.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* provides a number of opportunities in which symbolism can be addressed by teachers in the classroom. The mule symbolizes the constraints of women. Further, mules are almost always barren because it does not have the correct (or even) number of chromosomes; thus, the mule in this story is symbolic of Janie and her barrenness. Although she has three husbands, Janie never had any children. This is an important aspect of the novel because women were often defined by their children; it is their sole reason for existence to reproduce, like Helga Crane from *Quicksand* by Nella Larsen.

Zora Neale Hurston maintains the authenticity of her characters by using Black vernacular incorporated with their rich culture. She was criticized by some of her colleagues because the Harlem Renaissance was the time for the “Talented Tenth” to rise to the top and the Black vernacular Hurston employed did not fit the characteristic of the “New Negro”. In fact, it more represented the “Old Negro”, which white patrons like Mrs. Mason loved because it captured the primitiveness of the Negro that she believed to be authentic. Mrs. Mason continued to patronize writers and artist as long as they remained in their primitive cages, breaking free of that style was the automatic financial divorce of
both parties. Hurston’s problem, like many artists that received financial support from White patrons, was the criticism from her own. Richard Wright, author of “Black Boy”, disliked Zora’s portrayal of Blacks as "common folks working bean fields" and that the characters were too simple. He considered writing a political tool to describe the horrors of racism, which he believed this work did not employ, but many would differ from Wright’s criticism.

There were future generations that would take a different perspective of Hurston’s work. Zora Neale Hurston’s career did not last beyond the 1950’s, she was rejected by many publishers; she died penniless in January 1960. Her works were out of print for the next decade until Alice Walker wrote an essay “In Search of Zora Neale Hurston” and ignited the spark of literary interest in Hurston’s work. Walker states of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, “There is no book more important to me than this one.” Walker acknowledges Hurston’s intellectual and literary craft when she was inspired to create the heroine, Celie, for her novel, *The Color Purple*. Alice Walker uses the same Black vernacular and rich cultural history of Southern Blacks to chronicle the life and progress of Celie, Nettie, Sophia, and Sug Avery. Like her mentor and predecessor, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker employed writing as a political tool to bring attention to the plight of women (particularly in the south), education and racism. Walker was not a member of the Harlem Renaissance writers but she was deeply inspired by one of the prominent
figures from that era. The impact of the Harlem Renaissance writers reached far beyond their lifetimes. Alice Walker’s poem “Janie Crawford” speaks to this inspiration:

**Janie Crawford**

*Alice Walker*

i love the way Janie Crawford

left her husbands the one who wanted
to change her into a mule
and the other who tried to interest her
in being a queen
a woman unless she submits is neither a mule
nor a queen
though like a mule she may suffer
and like a queen pace
the floor

Teaching the Harlem Renaissance as a unit allows the student an in depth view of the connections between writers from different generations and their cultural influences. Frank Horne, a Harlem Renaissance poet, was an eye doctor and opened a practice in Harlem. He was an activist who used his financial gain to speak out against segregation in public places. He loved the lifestyle in Harlem and respected the writers that came before him and acknowledged them in his poem: Harlem.
Harlem.

"Harlem ... Harlem

Black, black Harlem

Souls of Black Folk

Ask Du Bois

Little grey restless feet

Ask Claude McKay

City of Refuge

Ask Rudolph Fisher

Don't damn your body's itch

Ask Countee Cullen

Does the jazz band sob?

Ask Langston Hughes

Nigger Heaven

Ask Carl Van Vechten

Hey! ... Hey!

'... Say it brother, Say it...' "

Frank Horne
James Weldon Johnson

Known as the Renaissance Man of his time, James Weldon Johnson was a novelist, poet, editor, journalist, activist, scholar, attorney and songwriter. He was considered a Renaissance man for good reason, he explored and employed various talents and interests. These are the values that teachers hope to inspire within their students: we want them to explore all of their talents and interests and employ them toward advocacy and/or protest. The song to win him much acclaim became known as the Black National Anthem: “Lift Every Voice And Sing” places a serious emphasis on Black people in America.

Lift every voice and sing
Till earth and heaven ring
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
let our rejoicing rise,
high as the list’ning skies, let it resound loud as the rolling sea
sing a song full of faith that the dark past has taught us,
sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
let us march on till victory is won.
Blacks were brought to America under bondage and millenniums later remain under serious duress from economic, political and racial discrimination: “sing a song full of faith that the dark past has taught us, ... has brought us”. African-Americans remained steadfast in their faith in God and His ability to deliver them victory from oppression: “facing the rising sun of a new day begun, let us march on till victory is won.” The rising sun is symbolic of a new day without the lasting effects of slavery and often the “victory” is delivered in the form of death.

James Weldon Johnson depicts Harlem favorably in Black Manhattan:

The masses of Harlem get... lots of enjoyment out of strolling... Strolling in Harlem does not mean merely walking along Lenox or up Seventh Avenue or One Hundred and Thirty-fifth Street; it means that these places are for socializing. One puts on one’s best clothes... to pass the time pleasantly with friends and acquaintances... One saunters along, he hails this one, exchanges a word or two with that one, stops for a short chat with the other one. He comes up to a laughing, chattering group, in which he may have only one friend or acquaintance, but that gives him the privilege of joining in. He does join in and takes part in the joking, the small talk and gossip, and makes new acquaintances... This is not simply going out for a walk; it is going out for an adventure.” 8
This passage is an example of what we miss when we do not explore the entire era as a unit. There is a pulse of Harlem the reader gets, a sense of understanding the dynamics of the stroller and his “adventure” during the Renaissance. This passage truly depicts life in the Harlem Renaissance. It is important for students (especially in a Harlem school) to get a sense of a typical day out for a stroll. It was imperative that people wore their best clothes, why? How does that nuance portray the people of this time period? Do we still adhere to these social norms in Harlem today?

In Black Manhattan, Johnson asked a pertinent question that lends itself to twenty-first century life:

“Will the Negroes of Harlem be able to hold it?” He continues, “Residents of Harlem, regardless of race, have been driven out when they lay in the path of business and greatly increased land values. Harlem lies in the direction that path must take; so there is little probability that Negroes will always hold it as a residential section.” ⁹

Gentrification is happening throughout the city, but the first neighborhood affected but the shift in residential and political power was Harlem. The generations of Harlem residents were no longer safe from corporate take-over (greed) and development. In the early 1990’s two major residents moved into Harlem: President Bill Clinton and the Riverbank State Park. While the “old”
residents welcomed the two new tenants with open arms, they did not realize what was in store for them. James Weldon Johnson was a true visionary; he predicted the future of the Harlem resident 65 years prior to the occurrence. Many Harlem residents were displace and forced to move further north into the Bronx and beyond as abandoned lots were developed and priced at a premium in a New York State market; this drove the prices of other residential buildings into an abyss and residents were forced to move. This information provided to high school students helps them to understand the shift in the Harlem resident from the Sunday stroller to the simple survivor, both described by Johnson.

Prohibition, Integration and Miscegenation

The Prohibition Era lasted from 1919-1933 and was ratified by the 18th Amendment, which prohibited the manufacturing, selling, transporting, exporting and importing of alcohol. Alcohol was associated with poverty and crime. The goal was to rid society of the alcohol and the other problems of crime and poverty would disappear. This federal mandate was an attempt to regulate morality by deterring crime, instead it gave rise to organized crime and paved the way for performers who would otherwise have no venue to act, sing or dance because Blacks were not permitted to perform in the white clubs. The speakeasy club is born; smoking, drinking and entertainment entered the arena. The very element
Prohibition was to trying prevent was alive and well in the speakeasy club, where race and sexual preference had no restrictions.

Gladys Bentley, who migrated to Harlem in the early 1920’s, was a butch lesbian woman who performed at the Clam House on 133rd Street wearing a full tuxedo, including a top hat. She was known for her raunchy lyrics and flirting with women attending her performances, but she attracted a wide array of audience members. She enjoyed a fruitful career as a performer, leaving Harlem to live on Park Avenue with servants and her new wife. Gladys was very open about her sexuality because she was not only comfortable in her own skin, she was comfortable in Harlem because gays were generally accepted in Harlem during the Renaissance era.

During the early years of the Great Depression, Harlem’s artistic market was spared; however, as the country moved further into despair President Roosevelt envisioned alcohol as a means to generate revenue through taxes. Unfortunately, the repeal of Prohibition in the 1930’s began the demise of the speakeasy clubs and the Great Depression finally hit the Harlem market and dried up all available funds and philanthropic gain. Gladys’ career was nearing its end and she made a bold attempt to save her career. She is quoted as saying, “I was just born different I guess.” Gladys also wrote that she was cured of her lesbianism. Gladys went on to perform well past the climax of the Harlem
Renaissance, but over the years she began to tone down her act by using less racy lyrics and wearing a dress, attempting to conform to stricter societal standards outside of Harlem. At the time of her death in 1960, she was participating in the ministry to become an ordained minister.

Speakeasies were clubs that invited all races, genders and sexual preferences. This was an early form of integration and everyone was present for a common goal: entertainment and night life. In these relaxed environments, the “exotic” reference to Blacks continued and many people from the races found themselves in relationships. Miscegenation was illegal in many states, but widely practiced. Greenwich Village, an area south of Harlem in New York City, was far more accepting than many other places and as a result had a rise in their population. This forward progression toward total integration paved the way for the Civil Rights Movement in America.

ART

W.E.B. DuBois, literary critic and editor of the Harlem Renaissance, reminded his readers of the impressive Black heritage revealed in the fine arts of Ethiopia and Egypt. “The Negro artist must have freedom to wander where he will, portray what he will, interpret whatever he may see according to the great canons of beauty...” 10
Aaron Douglas

Aaron Douglas was the foremost sought after artist of the Harlem Renaissance, he painted murals, designed book jackets, magazine covers and was commissioned to paint libraries. His distinct style included using cubism, an art form that deconstructs the traditional use of paint forms. Douglas was an innovative artist using the translucent circle, or bull’s eye like effect, to draw the audience’s attention to certain aspects of the art and follow the pattern away from the center to another aspect of the painting. See Figure 1

This is one segment of the mural entitled “Aspects of Negro Life”. Immediately the eye is drawn to the star on the left high in the sky. It is reminiscent of the North Star, often referenced to as the “light” that illuminated the direction to lead runaway slaves to the North, to freedom, to victory. The first tree to the right of the star is bearing “Strange
Figure 1

Fruit”, the body of a lynched person, represented by the dangling feet and the rope resting parallel to the tree.

The North Star travels across the page in a horizontal dance screeching right through the center of the page to bring the audience’s attention to the four ring translucent circle to highlight the progress of Blacks from slavery through Reconstruction. See Figure 2
Archibald Motley

Archibald Motley, a Harlem Renaissance artist himself, uses a different approach than Douglas to capture the authenticity of life in Harlem. Unlike Douglas, Motley draws facial features, dresses his characters and positions them in such a way that makes them come to life. Motley’s use of rich vivid colors is also a stark contrast to the Douglas motif. See Figure 3. While Douglas used muted colors and the characters are generally outdoors in a rural environment, Motley focuses on the night life and clubs associated with the Harlem Renaissance. Each painter tells the story of progress in their own way: Motley’s focus is fun and good
times, smiling faces and socializing. Douglas’ artwork has a more serious tone; his work depicts Egyptian style features on the abstract faces of African-Americans traveling through history: slavery, picking cotton, Great Migration, and the Industrial Era. It is impossible to teach the Harlem Renaissance without dissecting both styles.

The Benefits of an Interdisciplinary Approach

A major part of my teaching philosophy is to achieve the ultimate goal of helping my students to become the best critical readers and writers they can possibly be at this time in their lives. To accomplish this goal I push students to read more complex text and painstakingly go through the complete writing process several times throughout the semester to enhance students’ metacognitive skills through workshops, reflections and revisions.

Students will compose a play using three Harlem Renaissance personalities; an activist, Marcus Garvey, an artist, Aaron Douglas, and an author, W.E.B. Dubois. The names provided are simply suggestions, students may choose their own. The play will include a real place in Harlem for the meeting, Liberty Hall purchased by Garvey in 1919. The play must also address a real historical issue. One possible issue: Marcus Garvey, Founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) with a massive Back to Africa Movement message, is seeking
funding to support his purchase of ships to transport Black people back to Africa.

He is attempting to reach a wider audience and solicits the help of an artist to create an advertisement for more Harlem citizens to become involved with his movement and an author to connect him with a White Patron and write literary reviews of his speeches, which would encourage more participation in his movement. The dialogue and actions of the characters would come from the research students will conduct of these historical figures. This research will allow students to make real decisions based on the personality of the person. The rationale for this assignment is to allow students to independently discover the inner workings of how the Harlem Renaissance genres overlapped. In other words, everyone, no matter the medium they chose, an activist, artists, or authors was all trying to send the same message. However, this did not mean that all Harlem Renaissance participants supported each other’s work. Based on the research, students will be able to determine if W.E.B. DuBois supported the UNIA Movement or if he considered Garvey beneath the “Talented Tenth”. Based on that information, students will be able to answer these questions: Would DuBois provide Garvey with any assistance or support Garvey through his work? Would the artists support Garvey and his movement through their work? How were Garvey supporters received in Harlem? Did the people of Harlem think Garvey’s intentions and actions were authentic? How many Black people disagreed with
Garvey’s message because they knew their place was in America as a result of the years of toil and sacrifice in this country?

This type of research encourages students to critically analyze historical issues from a New Historicism and Cultural Theory approach. This critical analysis of the research and development of the play will foster the skills necessary for collaboration and problem solving. The Depths of Knowledge Level 3 “Strategic Thinking” requires reasoning, steps to approach the problem, making a decision and a justification for that decision. This lesson falls in line with the Depths of Knowledge Level 3 example, “identify research questions and design investigations for a scientific problem” or “develop a scientific model for a complex situation.” Interdisciplinary teaching promotes greater interaction and innovative thinking within student groups. It also encourages collaboration amongst teachers and offers students multiple approaches to review, analyze and process information, all skills that are required to pass qualifying state exams. This assignment will involve all major subject teachers: Art teachers may provide guidance for set and costume design, as well as posters and advertisements. The History and English teachers should collaborate to provide assistance with research and authentic dialogue and actions of the characters. English teachers will also provide assistance with the comprehension of the texts and literary elements addressed and the reflective essay incorporating their written responses
to the questions. The Economics and History teachers will provide guidance for analysis of the financial issues that arose for Garvey and how the economy and the government played a role in his downfall. The analytical skills and critical writing skills will serve as a bridge from basic composition writing to higher order thinking, reading and writing skills. The Common Core Learning Standards Integration of Knowledge and Ideas section outlines the outcomes for interdisciplinary teaching. Specifically number 9, “Demonstrate knowledge of twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.”

When teachers teach the authors in isolation our students miss valuable connections and information. One missing element would be the arts; the way the stories are told within arts, the political and social messages addressed in the arts and their direct connection to the literary work. Students miss out on lesser known writers and artists and their significant contributions to the era; Alain Locke, editor of The Crisis; Charles S. Johnson, editor of Opportunity; W.E.B. DuBois, author, editor; Arna Bontempts and Jessie Fauset. Teaching the Harlem Renaissance as a collective unit would expose students to the literary work and the other Harlem Renaissance writers who criticized fellow writers from the same time period. This would include W. E. B. DuBois’ criticism on Claude McKay’s portrayal of low life Negroes and Richard Wright’s criticism on Zora Neale
Hurston’s “simple Black folk”. Finally, teachers can breathe life into teaching the Harlem Renaissance by taking an interdisciplinary approach addressing Economics, Math, History, Literature and Art.

Teacher Resources

The following chart is a measuring tool that teachers use to monitor and assess the various levels of knowledge a student makes throughout the year. Students may start the year between levels 1 and 2, but by the end if the year the student should perform between levels 3 and 4.

Norman Webb’s Depth of Knowledge Levels:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DEPTH OF KNOWLEDGE (DOK) LEVEL</th>
<th>DOK DEFINITION</th>
<th>DOK EXAMPLES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DOK-1 – Recall &amp; Reproduction</td>
<td>Recall of a fact, term, principle, concept, or perform a routine procedure.</td>
<td>Recall elements and details of story; structure, such as sequence of events, character, plot and setting; Conduct basic mathematical calculations; Label locations on a map; Represent in words or diagrams a scientific concept or relationship. Perform routine procedures like measuring length or using punctuation marks correctly; Describe the features of a place or people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOK-2 - Basic Application of Skills/Concepts</td>
<td>Use of information, conceptual knowledge, select appropriate procedures for a task, two or more steps with decision points along the way, routine problems, organize/display data, interpret/use simple graphs.</td>
<td>Identify and summarize the major events in a narrative; Use context cues to identify the meaning of unfamiliar words; Solve routine multiple-step problems; Describe the cause/effect of a particular event; Identify patterns in events or behavior; Formulate a routine problem given data and conditions; Organize, represent and interpret data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOK-3 - Strategic Thinking</td>
<td>Requires reasoning, developing a plan or sequence of steps to approach problem; requires some decision making and justification; abstract, complex, or non-routine; often more than one possible answer.</td>
<td>Support ideas with details and examples; Use voice appropriate to the purpose and audience; Identify research questions and design investigations for a scientific problem; Develop a scientific model for a complex situation; Determine the author’s purpose and describe how it affects the interpretation of a reading selection; Apply a concept in other contexts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOK-4 - Extended Thinking</td>
<td>An investigation or application to real world; requires time to research, problem solve, and process multiple conditions of the problem or task; non-routine manipulations, across disciplines/content</td>
<td>Conduct a project that requires specifying a problem, designing and conducting an experiment, analyzing its data, and reporting results/solutions; Apply mathematical model to illuminate a problem or situation; Analyze and synthesize information from</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
areas/multiple sources. multiple sources; Describe and illustrate how common themes are found across texts from different cultures; Design a mathematical model to inform and solve a practical or abstract situation.

THE COMMON CORE LEARNING STANDARDS

The following chart is the Common Core Learning Standards for English with a focus on Reading and Writing. Teachers use this chart as a tool to plan instruction and curriculum and establish data to continue to drive that instruction.

Reading Standards

Grades 11–12 students:

**Key Ideas and Details**

1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

2. Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

3. Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

**Craft and Structure**

1. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include
Grades 11–12 students:

Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

2. Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

3. Analyze a case in which grasping point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

7. Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text. (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist.)
   a. Analyze multiple interpretations of full-length works by authors who represent diverse world cultures.

8. (Not applicable to literature)

9. Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

10. By the end of grade 11, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 11–CCR text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.
    By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems,
    at the high end of the grades 11–CCR text complexity band independently and proficiently.

   Responding to Literature

11. Interpret, analyze, and evaluate narratives, poetry, and drama, aesthetically and philosophically by making connections to: other texts, ideas, cultural perspectives, eras, personal events, and situations.
    a. Self-select text to respond and develop innovative perspectives.
    b. Establish and use criteria to classify, select, and evaluate texts to make informed judgments about the quality of the pieces.
Grades 11–12 students:

Writing Standards

Text Types and Purposes

1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence. Explore and inquire into areas of interest to formulate an argument.
   a. Introduce precise, knowledgeable claim(s), establish the significance of the claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that logically sequences claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.
   b. Develop claim(s) and counterclaims fairly and thoroughly, supplying the most relevant evidence for each while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both in a manner that anticipates the audience’s knowledge level, concerns, values, and possible biases.
   c. Use words, phrases, and clauses as well as varied syntax to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships between claim(s) and reasons, between reasons and evidence, and between claim(s) and counterclaims.
   d. Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing.
   e. Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the argument presented.
Lessons

Rhetorical modes of writing: Comparative, Argumentative, Informative, Persuasive and Process Analysis essays

Critical Lens – interpret a quote, express the validity of the quote and use two authors from the Harlem Renaissance era to support your claim.
“To gain that which is worth having, it may be necessary to lose everything else.”

Bernadette Devlin

Create a dialogue between two unlikely characters or authors
Nella Larsen and Gladys Bentley are two people unlikely to share the same space; an author and a lesbian speakeasy performer. Create a dialogue in which they discuss the elements of their work and the feelings of being outcasts in their lives.

Play Writing - Have students create a play using three personalities from the Harlem Renaissance; an activist, Marcus Garvey, an artist, Aaron Douglas, and an author, W.E.B. Dubois. (previously described) The names provided are simply suggestions, students may choose their own. The play will include a real place in Harlem for the meeting, Liberty Hall purchased by Garvey in 1919. The play must also address a real historical issue. One possible issue: Marcus Garvey, Founder of UNIA with a massive Back to Africa Movement message, is seeking funding to support his purchase of ships to transport Black people back to Africa. He is attempting to reach a wider audience and solicits the help an artist to create an advertisement for his more Harlem citizens to become involved with his movement and an author to connect him with a White Patron and write literary review of his speeches, which would encourage more participation. The dialogue and actions of the characters would come from the research students will conduct of these historical figures.

Heroism and independence: students can write a comparative essay explaining how Helga Crane from *Quicksand* and Janie Crawford from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* are similar in their pathways to independence. (Initially, students may not see how Helga is independent, so it may take further discussions and analysis of the text)
Write a critical analysis of Zora Neale Hurston’s use of literary devices and figurative language in Their Eyes Were Watching God. Be sure students provide their definitions for all literary devices.

Authenticity of character was important to Zora Neale Hurston, but she was widely criticized for her simplicity of the character. Rewrite one chapter of Their Eyes Were Watching God having Janie and all other characters involved in the scene use standard English. Also omit any references to simple country life such as harvesting the bean fields. Upon completion, students will present their “new” chapters to the class and write a reflection on how these change the dynamic of authenticity Hurston employed.

Twenty-first Century Moves: in our current society it is acceptable for men to be the stay-at-home parent. While this is a choice, women in previous centuries did not have a choice in the positions they played. Rewrite an oppressive scene between Janie and her second husband, making Janie the powerful figure and her husband the oppressive victim that must bend to the will of his wife. From a historical approach, have students research when the shift occurred in society for men to be the stay-at-home parent.

Have students choose a collection of Langton Hughes poetry and write a review for the school newspaper aligned to the editorial reviews of the Harlem Renaissance literary magazines: The Crisis or Opportunity. What poems would they recommend to other students? Why does his poetry excite activism in teenagers?

Have students write an interpretation of James Weldon Johnson’s “Lift Every Voice and Sing”. Within this interpretation have students analyze Augusta Savage’s “The Harp” and explain how the two pieces of art work simultaneously to deliver the same message.

Using Geometry skills, have students examine the use of parallel and linear lines and the cubism effect in the art work of Archibald Motley and Aaron Douglas.
Augusta Savage

THE HARP
Notes:

1. Lisa Beringer McKissack, Minneapolis, Minnesota 2007 Compass Point Books (home)

2. E. Franklin Frazier, Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class (New York, 1957), 198 (Nella librabry)

3. Davis, Thadious M. Nella Larsen, Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance A Woman’s Life Unveiled

4. ibid

5. Lewis, David, The Harlem Renaissance Reader

6. Jago, Carol, Alice Walker In The Classroom

7. ibid

8. Johnson, James Weldon, Black Manhattan (new York, 1930), 162-163 (note Nela didn’t like it anymore and grew weary of the socializing and wanted to move) the very life she wanted, she didn’t anymore.


10. The Crisis 34 (April 1927) 70
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Jargo, Carol Alice Walker in the Classroom. Illinois: NCTE, 2000

