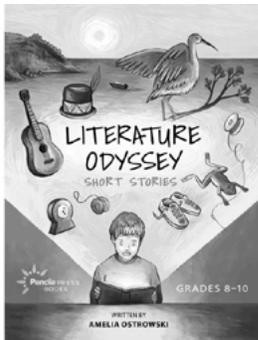


Harlem Renaissance: A Unit Study



Written by Amelia Ostrowski



This unit study is based on the new series from Pandia Press Books, *Literature Odyssey*. The new series, written for grades 9-12, is designed to strengthen your student’s abilities to read, analyze, and think critically about literature. The first book, *Literature Odyssey: Short Stories*, will be available the summer of 2026. You can read more about *Literature Odyssey* here.

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Cover image: *Song of the Towers*, a 1934 mural by artist Aaron Douglas. The mural illustrates the Great Migration of African Americans to northern cities in the early 20th century.

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Contents & Schedule

Introduction	4
○ Materials	
○ Learning Outcomes	
Day 1: The Why of Harlem	6
○ Assignment: Tracking the Great Migration	
○ Assignment: Why Harlem?	
Day 2: The Music of Harlem	10
○ Assignment: Songs of Harlem	
○ Assignment: Harlem Playlist	
Day 3: The Poetry of Harlem	13
○ Assignment: The Weight of Words	
○ Assignment: Seeds and Symbolism	
Day 4: The Art of Harlem	17
○ Assignment: Images of a Movement	
○ Assignment: Create or Curate	
Day 5: The Legacy of Harlem	21
○ Assignment: Voices for Change	
○ Assignment: A Monument in Harlem	
Appendix	24
○ The Great Migration Map	
○ Enrichment Reading	
○ Teacher Guide & Answer Key	

Introduction

This unit study on the Harlem Renaissance highlights some of the contributions by Black Americans to this important cultural movement. Some of the content included in this unit study is from *Literature Odyssey: Poetry*, a course in our upcoming literature series that will be released this year.

Here are a few notes to help you get started:

- ★ The content from *Literature Odyssey* is part of a longer lesson that focuses on in-depth literary analysis. The coursework has been simplified here, so that students are able to read and enjoy the poetry in the context of this unit study.
- ★ The *Literature Odyssey* series is designed for grades 8-12. This unit study is appropriate for middle and high school students.
- ★ The lessons that include music have links to the songs. Please keep in mind that most of the music of the Harlem Renaissance was played in clubs and bars, and drinking and smoking was the norm. If you are uncomfortable with your student viewing this atmosphere, you can search for the audio tracks of the songs.
- ★ The terms “Negro” and “colored” were widely used during the Harlem Renaissance by the Black artists and writers of the movement. The use of them in the works included in this lesson is important to the historical and cultural context of the time.

We hope you enjoy learning about this movement that had such a profound impact on American culture. There are many more individuals that contributed to the Harlem Renaissance, and we encourage you to continue your learning by checking out some of the enrichment reading included at the end of the lesson.

Materials

The supplies needed to complete the activities in this unit study:

- Printed copy of the map (attached)
- Paper
- Art supplies (student choice)
- Access to the internet

Learning Outcomes

1. Explain what the Harlem Renaissance was and the social conditions that led to its birth.
2. Explain why the Harlem Renaissance was an important cultural movement.
3. Identify key figures of the Harlem Renaissance and explore their contributions to the movement in art, music, or literature.
4. Analyze how the themes presented in the literature reflect the social and cultural values of the Harlem Renaissance.



Dizzy Gillespie's Orchestra at the Savoy Ballroom, c. 1947.

Day 1: The Why of Harlem

The Great Migration

In the early 1900s, life in the southern states was difficult for Black Americans. Even though slavery had been abolished by the 13th Amendment in 1865, segregation was still enforced in most southern cities and Jim Crow laws dictated what Black Americans could and could not do. The threat of racial violence was real, and Black Americans lived in fear of it daily. Schools remained segregated, with Black schools receiving a fraction of the funding given to white schools. Black Americans had fewer employment opportunities and received significantly lower wages than white Americans. Many worked as sharecroppers, which kept them tied to the land they worked, and in poverty.

Black Americans were still denied many of their basic human rights, including the right to vote. Although the 15th Amendment extended the right to vote to Black men in 1870, states in the south put their own barriers in place to keep them away from the ballots. Poll taxes, where a voter was required to pay a certain amount of money before they could vote, unfairly impacted Black Americans. Literacy tests that required potential voters to read sections of dense legal texts, such as the Constitution, were used to create barriers for Black Americans, many of whom were illiterate. Many southern whites were also illiterate, but there were many loopholes that allowed them to still participate in elections. Even if a Black man could pay the poll tax and pass a literacy test, there was still the risk of violence to keep him from casting a vote. All of these factors kept the number of Black Americans registered to vote low, and it was not until the efforts of activist groups in the 1950s and 1960s that these numbers started to climb.

The onset of WWI brought more opportunities for employment. As men were sent off to war, factories in northern cities needed workers, and many Black Americans saw the potential for a better life away from the stark racism of the south. Between

1914 and 1929, over one million Black Americans migrated to the north, Midwest, and west in the Great Migration. Other waves of migration happened both before and after this period, as early as the end of the Civil War and as late as the 1970s, but historians credit this particular stretch of time as the most significant in terms of change.

Several cities became popular destinations, including Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, and New York City. In New York City alone, the population of Black Americans doubled in the 1920s. But life was not easy in the northern cities. The north was not free from racism and segregation. Many neighborhoods were still unwelcoming to Black Americans, and so new neighborhoods were formed.

One of these neighborhoods was Harlem.

The Harlem Renaissance

Harlem, a section of Manhattan, became the epicenter for arts, culture, and intellect for Black Americans. The densely populated area was about three square miles, attracting over 175,000 Black Americans during the years of the Great Migration. Originally a neighborhood of white immigrants, an overabundance of both real estate and racism caused many of the white immigrants to move out as Black Americans moved in. Soon the neighborhood of Harlem was transformed into a mecca for Black culture, attracting writers, musicians, artists, and other creative individuals.

The word “renaissance” means “rebirth,” and the movement was a time for Black Americans to reclaim their identities and look towards the future. It was a cultural awakening and many of the brightest minds joined in the experience. Alain Locke, known as the “Dean of the Harlem Renaissance,” used his philosophy regarding the power of self-expression through art to push for social change without using it as propaganda. His book, *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, included literary works from many of the most well-known names of the movement and argued for the emergence of a new type of Black American that rejects the stereotypes of the past. W.E.B. Du Bois, a prominent activist, author, and co-founder of the NAACP, is often credited as the forefather of the Harlem Renaissance. His book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, introduced revolutionary ideas about Black Americans’ place and role in society.

Du Bois viewed art as a way to challenge racist stereotypes, instill cultural pride, and fight against social injustice. Through his magazine, *The Crisis*, he published and supported the work of many artists. Both men greatly contributed to the development of art during the Harlem Renaissance, but they viewed it as a tool that could be used in different ways.

In Harlem, Black Americans were able to express themselves freely in an environment that was filled with like-minded individuals. The stereotypes created by white people during slavery and the Jim Crow era had damaged identities and culture, and the Harlem Renaissance was a chance to reconnect to African roots while exploring what it meant to be Black in America. Their experience with racism, oppression, and violence heavily influenced many of the writers, musicians, and artists, but there was also hope for a better tomorrow.



Assignment: Tracking the Great Migration

Use the map found on page 24 to trace the movement of Black Americans during the Great Migration. Keep in mind that these are just some of the most common destination cities. Feel free to use any online resources to help you map the locations. The arrows that you draw can be approximate, but should show the general movement.

Origin States: Color the following states orange.

- | | |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Alabama | <input type="radio"/> Mississippi |
| <input type="radio"/> Arkansas | <input type="radio"/> North Carolina |
| <input type="radio"/> Florida | <input type="radio"/> South Carolina |
| <input type="radio"/> Georgia | <input type="radio"/> Tennessee |
| <input type="radio"/> Louisiana | <input type="radio"/> Texas |

Destination Cities: Label the following cities on the map.

- | | | |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Chicago | <input type="radio"/> Oakland | <input type="radio"/> New York City
(Harlem) |
| <input type="radio"/> Cleveland | <input type="radio"/> Philadelphia | |
| <input type="radio"/> Detroit | <input type="radio"/> Pittsburgh | |
| <input type="radio"/> Los Angeles | <input type="radio"/> Seattle | |

Common Routes: Use a different colored arrow to mark each route listed below.



Western Route

Start: Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas
End: Los Angeles, Oakland, and Seattle



Eastern Route

Start: Florida, Georgia, North Carolina,
and South Carolina
End: New York City (Harlem),
Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh



Midwestern Route

Start: Alabama, Mississippi, and
Tennessee
End: Chicago, Cleveland, and Detroit



Assignment: Why Harlem?

For this assignment, you will be creating a one-pager that demonstrates your understanding of the following:

- 1) How and why Black Americans migrated from the south;
- 2) What opportunities attracted Black Americans to other cities;
- 3) What the Harlem Renaissance was about; and
- 4) What some of the key founders of the Harlem Renaissance hoped to achieve.

Feel free to do some additional research for this assignment, especially if you would like to know more about any of the topics. If you are unfamiliar with one-pagers, do a quick search online for some examples. They range from simple to elaborate and everything in between. If you do not feel artistic, you can do a digital version using the program of your choice.

Day 2: The Music of Harlem

The streets of Harlem were alive with music—the rich, soulful tones of blues singers, the brassy blasts of trumpets, and the quick rhythms of piano keys—forming the essential soundtrack of the era. Jazz dominated the nightclubs not only in Harlem but other cities as well, creating a movement that defined the 1920s. Like many of the musicians who played it, jazz also was not born in Harlem. It is believed to have originated in New Orleans before working its way up from the south. Jazz clubs featuring Black musicians were common, some of which were frequented by whites. The Cotton Club featured Black musicians but only permitted white audience members. Some clubs, known as “black and tans,” were integrated, allowing Black and white patrons to listen together. Still others catered only to Black audiences.

While the music was enjoyable to listen to, it also carried messages of racial pride, social justice, and personal freedom. Music was a way for Black Americans to express themselves and create sounds that represented their culture and heritage. Many of these musicians have influenced countless others that came after them and continue to do so today.

There were many musicians and singers who laid the foundations for Black performers and rose to stardom during the Harlem Renaissance, and you will listen to a few of them in this lesson. As you listen to each song, think about the mood each song creates and how that mood connects to the culture of the time.



Fats Waller

Fats Waller was born in Harlem and began playing piano at the age of six. He studied and became an expert in the stride style of piano, a challenging technique that involves the left hand “striding” between octaves, creating a rhythm for the song. His

talent, combined with his entertaining personality and dramatic facial expressions, made him a key performer in the jazz clubs of the Harlem Renaissance.

As you listen to one of Fats Waller's most famous songs, write down anything that stands out to you from the lyrics, rhythms, or style of the song. Don't forget to consider the mood of the song and how you think it may represent the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance.



Fats Waller "Ain't Misbehavin'"



Bessie Smith

Bessie Smith is known as the "Empress of the Blues." Her soulful voice captured listeners even at a young age as she performed on the streets of her hometown of Chattanooga, Tennessee. After leaving home, Smith was mentored by Ma Rainey, a blues singer known as the "Mother of the Blues," which helped boost her career. Her songs often reflect her experience as a Black woman and one who came from poverty. She sang alongside famous jazz musician Louis Armstrong, another talented artist of the Harlem Renaissance.

Listen to Bessie Smith's song and write down anything that stands out to you from the lyrics, rhythms, or style of the song. Don't forget to consider the mood of the song and how you think it may represent the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance.



Bessie Smith "'Taint Nobody's Bizness If I Do"



Duke Ellington

Duke Ellington, a pianist and composer, started out with a small jazz band in Harlem and expanded it into his own orchestra. He and his ensemble were in demand at The Cotton Club, playing for white audiences.

Ellington went on to perform in clubs, hotels, theaters, and other venues where Black performers had previously been prohibited. Even when many other musicians of the jazz age of Harlem were impacted by the Great Depression, Ellington continued to be in demand and grew his career.

As you listen to Duke Ellington's song, write down anything that stands out to you from the lyrics, rhythms, or style of the song. Don't forget to consider the mood of the song and how you think it may represent the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance.

 Duke Ellington "Take the A Train"

 Assignment: Songs of Harlem

Take a look at your observations from the three musicians in this lesson and answer the following questions:

1. What similarities do you notice between the music of the three musicians?
2. What differences do you notice between the music of the three musicians?
3. How does each musician's song reflect the values and experiences of Black Americans?

 Assignment: Harlem Playlist

You will be creating a Harlem Renaissance playlist that consists of ten songs from the era. For each song that you choose, you will need to write a sentence or two that explains why you believe that song is important to include in your playlist. Consider how the song fits with the social, political, and cultural movement of the Harlem Renaissance. You can look up other musicians and also include alternative songs from the musicians in this lesson.

Day 3: The Poetry of Harlem

The rhythm of blues and jazz also influenced the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance. Poets like Langston Hughes and James Weldon Johnson used the rhythms in their poems, creating a unique structure and sound. Other poets, like Georgia Douglas Johnson and Countee Cullen, who you will be reading today, continued to use more traditional poetic forms infused with the themes of the Harlem Renaissance. Regardless of their poetic structure, the poems reflected the need to establish a new identity and pride in their race.

Black poets were supported by literary magazines like Du Bois' *The Crisis*, which gave them exposure to mainstream readers. Many poets published their collections of poems during this time, along with anthologies that featured the voices of multiple poets. While Black poets did write poems prior to the Harlem Renaissance, most did not address issues of race and injustice. It was this era that set the foundation for other Black poets to use their words to express their experiences, resist oppression, and celebrate their culture.

You will be learning about a literary device known as symbolism. This lesson, taken from *Literature Odyssey: Poetry*, will help you strengthen your literary analysis skills while applying them to the work of a poet from the Harlem Renaissance.

Symbolism

Symbolism is a literary device where symbols are used to represent something abstract, such as an idea or emotion. The symbol could be an object, a person, a place, a color, or even an event that represents a more complex meaning. Symbolism is not always easy to detect, as the meaning behind it can be subtle and it is not always clear if the author intended something to be symbolic, or if as the reader we are interpreting it that way.

There is also some wiggle room for interpretation, but it is important to remember that a symbol cannot mean just anything you want. As always, you must be able to support your interpretation of a symbol with evidence from the text.

Symbolism can get fairly complicated, with a single image having the potential to have multiple meanings. Let's consider the image of a rose. This symbol is typically associated with beauty or love. But, if the color of the rose is changed, the meaning can also change. The traditional red rose is symbolic of true love, while a yellow rose is symbolic of friendship. A rose with thorns can have a more ominous meaning, hinting at danger or trouble.

Now think about the image of water. Water can be represented in many different ways. In general, it often is symbolic of life, purification, or change, especially among many ancient cultures. For example, the image of water running over hands could be symbolic of washing away something as a way of purifying. A spring rain can be symbolic of renewal and rebirth. But like the rose, water can have a darker side. A turbulent ocean or flood can represent chaos or destruction. And what about a lake, a puddle, or a storm? All of these include water, but their symbolism differs.

Historical context can also shed some light when analyzing symbolism. If a poem was written about World War II, the meaning of any symbols within that poem could be influenced by that historical period. Ignoring or failing to acknowledge the historical context could result in missing the significance of a particular symbol. Poems written during a particular social or political movement, such as the fight for women's rights, may include symbols that have an unclear meaning without an awareness of the context.

So how do you figure out what is symbolic in a poem and what is not? Unfortunately, there is not a foolproof method for analyzing symbolism. But symbolism is ubiquitous in poetry, literature, art, and the world in general, so it is more likely that something is symbolic than isn't symbolic. If something stands out to you in a poem, take the time to consider its deeper meaning. If an image is repeated throughout the poem, it can be a hint that there is additional meaning ready to be explored. This type of analysis adds another layer to our understanding of poetry.



Assignment: The Weight of Words

For this assignment, you will be analyzing a poem from the Harlem Renaissance and paying particular attention to the poet's use of symbolism. Your knowledge of the Harlem Renaissance and the racial injustices that led many Black Americans to leave the south will help you in your analysis, so keep this in mind as you read.

- 1) Read through the poem found on the next page several times. Remember that reading the poem out loud will aid in both your understanding and help you pay attention to the language used.
- 2) Write a sentence or two to summarize the poem in your own words to help you understand what is happening in the poem or what the poet is saying.
- 3) Think about the title and write down your thoughts. What might the dark tower symbolize?
- 4) Go back through the poem and annotate. Circle any words that you think may be symbolic and remember to look for repetition of words or words that are similar.



Countee Cullen

Countee Cullen was one of the most well-known poets of the Harlem Renaissance. Unlike many of the writers who came to Harlem to be part of the cultural movement, Cullen grew up there and his poetry was influenced by this experience. His poetry often used traditional poetic structures, such as the sonnet, combined with themes that explored the Black experience and racial injustice.



From the Dark Tower

We shall not always plant while others reap
The golden increment of bursting fruit,
Not always countenance, abject and mute,
That lesser men should hold their brothers cheap;
Not everlastingly while others sleep
Shall we beguile their limbs with mellow flute,
Not always bend to some more subtle brute;
We were not made to eternally weep.

The night whose sable breast relieves the stark,
White stars is no less lovely being dark,
And there are buds that cannot bloom at all
In light, but crumple, piteous, and fall;
So in the dark we hide the heart that bleeds,
And wait, and tend our agonizing seeds.



Assignment: Seeds and Symbolism

1. What symbols can you identify in the poem, and what could they represent in the context of the poem's themes of racial injustice and hope?
2. What repetitions of symbols did you notice? Why do you think Cullen chose these images as repeating symbols in his poem?
3. Seeds can be symbolic of many different things. What do you think the seeds represent in Cullen's poem and what message do they send?
4. What might the dark tower in the title represent symbolically?
5. Why do you think this poem resonated with the Black community during the Harlem Renaissance?

Day 4: The Art of Harlem

Music and literature often overshadow the visual art of the Harlem Renaissance, but many Black artists, sculptors, and photographers used their talent to help define the movement. They combined characteristics of African art, folk art, and modern art like cubism to create a unique style. Vibrant colors, expressive faces, and scenes that depicted the bustling nightlife and urban streets created images of what it meant to be Black in America.

Art was also a way to further express the need for social and political change while reflecting on the struggles of the past. Artists could make statements about the progress that had been made, and the progress that still needed to happen. Creating art was a way to celebrate African heritage and reestablish pride in their culture, something that the restrictive atmosphere of the south had prevented.

In this lesson, you will explore the work of three different artists of the Harlem Renaissance and have the opportunity to create your own art or art collection.



Aaron Douglas

Aaron Douglas, often referred to as the “father of African-American art,” was influenced by the style of art from Africa and included elements of it in his own creations. Many of his pieces mimic Egyptian wall art and feature figures with their heads turned to the side with the bodies still facing the front. There is an almost layered effect to his paintings and the tones are muted, unlike the bold colors of many other artists of that time. The imagery in his work depicts many facets of life for Black Americans, including their history of enslavement and migration.

Click on the links for two of the four murals that Aaron Douglas painted for the New York Public Library. Take a few minutes and examine each mural. On a piece of paper, write down any observations. Remember to look not only at what is included in each mural, but also the colors and style of the art, as well as any symbolism.



Aaron Douglas *From Slavery to Reconstruction*

Aaron Douglas *Song of the Towers*



Augusta Savage

Augusta Savage, a sculptor and activist, made a name for herself in the male-dominated art scene of the Harlem Renaissance. She was also an art teacher, inspiring and instructing younger Black artists in Harlem. As a child, Savage was discouraged from pursuing art by her family, and she was once denied an art fellowship because of her race. She opened the first art gallery in the United States to feature Black artists and was the first Black woman to be elected to the National Association of Women Artists. Savage was best known for creating busts of well-known figures in Harlem, including W. E. B. Du Bois. Her sculpture *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, also known as *The Harp*, was created for the 1939 World's Fair. Sadly, it was destroyed after the Fair when Savage could not afford to move or store it.

Click on the links for two of Augusta Savage's sculptures. Take a few minutes and examine each sculpture. On a piece of paper, write down any observations. Savage was known for her portrait sculptures, so make sure to take note of facial expressions and consider why she may have selected these subjects.



Augusta Savage *Gamin*

Augusta Savage *Lift Every Voice and Sing*



James Van Der Zee

James Van Der Zee, a photographer, seemed to be in all the right places at the right time to document life in Harlem. His work provides a documentation of the everyday life of Black Americans in Harlem, whether in a nightclub, on the street, in barbershops, or for special occasions such as weddings. He also used his studio to create formal portraits with backgrounds, costumes, and props, posing his subjects carefully in the style of Victorian photography. Van Der Zee was known for his experimental style where he would often use techniques like double exposure, retouching, and superimposing images into his photographs.

Click on the links for two of Van Der Zee's photographs. Take a few minutes and examine each photograph. On a piece of paper, write down any observations. Remember to look not only at what is included in each photograph, but also any techniques that Van Der Zee may have used to create a specific look to his art.



James Van Der Zee *Couple, Harlem*

James Van Der Zee *Future Expectations (Wedding Day)*



Assignment: Images of a Movement

Take a look at your observations from the three artists in this lesson and answer the following questions:

1. What similarities do you notice between the works of the three artists?
2. What differences do you notice between the works of the three artists?
3. How does each artist's work reflect the values and experiences of Black Americans?



Assignment: Create or Curate

You have two options for this assignment, depending on your preference:

- 1) Create a piece of artwork inspired by one or more of the artists of the Harlem Renaissance. The materials you use are up to you, and you can be creative in how you choose to blend the different styles or stay true to a single artist; or
- 2) Pick one or more of the artists from the following list (or search for others) and find at least three works of art that you feel best represent the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance.

- Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller
- Archibald J. Motley, Jr.
- Laura Wheeler Waring
- Jacob Lawrence
- Aaron Douglas
- Augusta Savage
- James Van Der Zee

Once you have completed your project, create an artist's (if you created your own art) or curator's (if you created a collection of art) statement that explains the following:

- 1) An explanation of your creative choices and which artist(s) influenced them if you made your own art, or an explanation of why you chose specific pieces of art for your collection;
- 2) Any emotions, moods, or themes you feel are present in the art; and
- 3) How you feel the art is representative of the Harlem Renaissance and its spirit.

Day 5: The Legacy of Harlem

With the stock market crash in 1929 and the subsequent Great Depression, the Harlem Renaissance began to wither. Black-owned businesses were no longer thriving, and people had less money to spend on art and entertainment. Instead, what money people had went to necessities, like food, shelter, and clothing. While the movement did not completely disappear overnight, it forced some artists into difficult circumstances. The Work Progress Administration's Federal Art Project provided an opportunity for many artists, including Black and female artists, to continue to earn a living by creating art for public spaces, including schools, libraries, and hospitals. Other artists continued to thrive in new environments, while some art, music, and literature faded into obscurity until its rediscovery in later decades.

The Harlem Renaissance is considered the most influential movement for arts and culture in Black history. But its legacy is not limited to those spheres. Black Americans continued to fight for equal rights throughout the Harlem Renaissance and after its end. The power of art, music, and literature to empower and give a voice to a marginalized community, an idea that sparked during the Harlem Renaissance, was reignited during these later fights for equality.



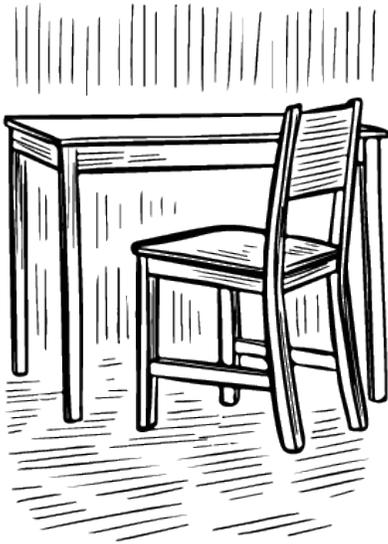
Langston Hughes

One creative mind from the movement who had an impact on the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s was the writer and poet Langston Hughes. Hughes was friends with Martin Luther King, Jr. and his words influenced many of King's speeches that demanded racial equality.



Assignment: Voices for Change

“I, Too” was written by Langston Hughes during the peak of the Harlem Renaissance. Read through his poem, considering what message he might be communicating and to whom. You can also listen to Hughes read his poem here. Then, answer the following questions.



I, Too

I, too, sing America.
 I am the darker brother.
 They send me to eat in the kitchen
 When company comes,
 But I laugh,
 And eat well,
 And grow strong.
 Tomorrow,
 I'll be at the table
 When company comes.
 Nobody'll dare
 Say to me,
 “Eat in the kitchen,”
 Then.
 Besides,
 They'll see how beautiful I am
 And be ashamed—
 I, too, am America.

1. What do you think Hughes might be communicating about how he feels regarding his current place in America?
2. How does Hughes express his hope for a better tomorrow for himself and other Black Americans?
3. In what ways do you think this poem could be connected to the larger Civil Rights Movement?



Assignment: A Monument in Harlem

Your assignment is to design a monument to stand in Harlem to honor the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance. You will need to consider how you could represent the following:

- 1) The spirit behind the movement;
- 2) Themes of art, poetry, and music;
- 3) Key figures and their contribution; and
- 4) The impact of the movement on American culture and civil rights.

Your design proposal should include:

- 1) A sketch or drawing of the monument;
- 2) A written description explaining the symbolism of the different elements; and
- 3) What you would inscribe on the plaque for the monument.

The Great Migration Map



Enrichment Reading

For Students

Making Our Way Home: The Great Migration and the Black American Dream by Blair Imani. An illustrated history of the Great Migration and the second wave of migration that continued to bring Black Americans away from the south.

Flamboyants: The Queer Harlem Renaissance I Wish I'd Known by George M. Johnson. Many of the well-known names of the Harlem Renaissance identified as queer, and this book of essays provides a history lesson on how they shaped the movement.

For Parents

The Warmth of Other Suns by Isabel Wilkerson. Wilkerson's book explores the untold stories of the Great Migration through historical research and the narratives of three migrants. Recommended for anyone who wants to learn more about the Great Migration.

For Both

The Weary Blues by Langston Hughes. Hughes' debut collection of poetry that includes many poems that are inseparable from the Harlem Renaissance.

Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston's most well-known feminist work tells the story of the strong and independent Janie Crawford as she finds herself and takes control of her destiny. Note: This book does contain some sexual content, language, and abuse.

I Too Sing America: The Harlem Renaissance at 100 by Wil Haygood. A survey of visual art from the Harlem Renaissance that also explores the culture of the era.

The Souls of Black Folk by W.E.B. Du Bois. One of the foundational texts of the Harlem Renaissance featuring a collection of essays about racism and cultural identity in America. Note: This can be a challenging read and is best for students 10th grade and up.

Poetry collections from any of the poets in this unit study.

Teacher Guide & Answer Key

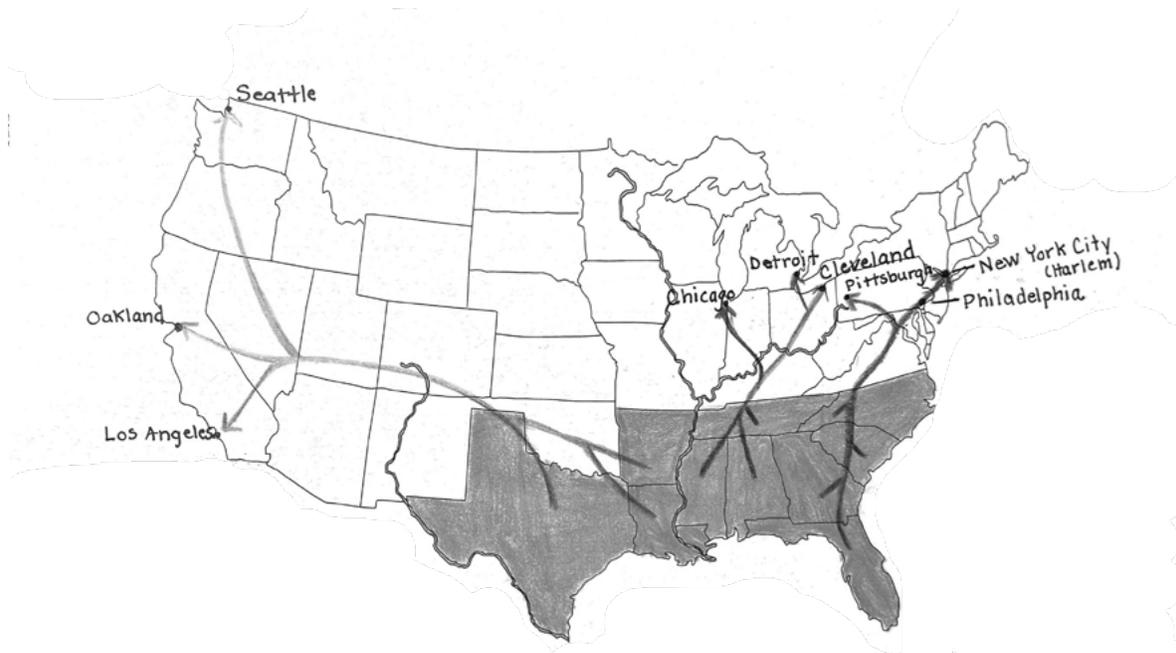
The answers in this guide are suggested answers and not all-encompassing or definitive. If your student develops a completely different interpretation than any given, encourage them to explain their reasoning. When we analyze a text, and the term “text” includes art and music, our interpretation is only limited by our ability to support our analyses with evidence.

When researching other artists, musicians, and writers, allow your student some flexibility with the dates. Historians have not placed a hard stop on the Harlem Renaissance. Most will cite the mid 1930s as when it ended, but many of the creative minds continued to produce works throughout the decade.

Day 1: The Why of Harlem

Assignment: Tracking The Great Migration

Students will use the map included in this unit study to trace the movement of Black Americans during the Great Migration. Keep in mind that these are just some of the most common destination cities. Students are free to use any online resources to help map the locations. The arrows can be approximate but should show the general movement.



Assignment: Why Harlem?

Students will create a one-pager to demonstrate their understanding of the Great Migration and origins of the Harlem Renaissance. One-pagers are an excellent way for students to show what they know and can be used as reference tools for further study. Examples of one-pagers are readily available online and students can design them however they wish. Students who do not wish to draw by hand can design their one-pager digitally using the program of their choice.

Day 2: The Music of Harlem

Assignment: Songs of Harlem

After listening to three samples of music from the Harlem Renaissance, students will compare and contrast the songs. Answers will vary for this part, but students should recognize that there are common themes and moods, such as resilience and pride. They could also note differences in tempo, instrumentation, or lyrical focus across the three pieces. Finally, students are asked to reflect on how the music reflects the values and experiences of Black Americans. Students may note how music served as a powerful form of cultural expression and resistance, and how it communicated the joys and struggles, the vibrancy of urban life, the enduring impact of racism and segregation, and the blossoming sense of cultural pride and self-determination.

Assignment: Harlem Playlist

Students will create a playlist of ten songs from the Harlem Renaissance. For each song, they will need to write a sentence or two that explains why they believe that song is important to include in their playlist. Students should consider how the song fits with the social, political, and cultural movement of the Harlem Renaissance. The musicians included in the lesson can be used, but students should look up some of their other songs and find additional musicians from the Harlem Renaissance to include. Some options include Louis Armstrong, Ethel Waters, Chick Webb, and Cab Calloway.

Day 3: The Poetry of Harlem

Assignment: The Weight of Words

Students will practice reading poetry in this assignment excerpt from our upcoming course, *Literature Odyssey: Poetry*. The poem they will read and analyze is by Countee Cullen, one of the most well-known poets from the Harlem Renaissance. Students will be looking for examples of symbolism and consider their meaning in context of what they know about the Harlem Renaissance and racial injustice. Reading poetry can be intimidating and challenging, but students should be encouraged to read, reread, and take notes to aid their understanding.

Assignment: Seeds and Symbolism

1. What symbols can you identify in the poem, and what could they represent in the context of the poem's themes of racial injustice and hope?

Answers will vary, but some of the symbols students may notice could be the golden fruit, darkness, the heart that bleeds, and seeds. The golden fruit could be symbolic of a desired reward for hard work. In the poem, the speaker is forced to labor but does not get to reap the fruit, similar to slavery and sharecropping. The heart that bleeds could be symbolic of an ongoing pain due to the oppression and racism faced by Black Americans, and the fact that this heart is hidden away could show a desire to protect it. Possible interpretations of darkness and seeds are included in the following answers.

2. What repetitions of symbols did you notice? Why do you think Cullen chose these images as repeating symbols in his poem?

Answers will vary. Students may point out that there are several symbols that relate to planting, such as seeds, bud, and fruit. The “bursting fruit” would normally be a symbol of a successful harvest, but in this case the speaker does not get to “reap” the reward of the harvest. The bud in the poem cannot bloom in light, which means it is not in the right conditions to reach its full potential. Finally, the seeds are cared for, waiting for the right time. Planting takes patience, optimism, and hard work, all of which were necessary during the fight for equality, and Cullen may have recognized that his audience would connect the meaning of a plant growing to the growth of civil rights.

There are also repeated symbols of light/white and dark in the poem. Often dark carries negative symbolism, but Cullen uses it as positive symbolism. He compares the darkness of the sky to the brightness of the stars, stating that it is “no less lovely.” Cullen could be using the darkness as a symbol of resistance, something powerful that refuses to be less than. The “light” in the poem symbolizes something negative as it cripples the buds that are trying to bloom. Cullen’s symbolic use of light and dark would have challenged the negative portrayal of Black Americans.

3. Seeds can be symbolic of many different things. What do you think the seeds represent in Cullen’s poem and what message do they send?

Answers will vary. Seeds are often symbols of hope, potential, growth, and life. In the poem, the “agonizing seeds” are kept in darkness, tended carefully and waiting for the right conditions to grow. These seeds could represent the potential and hope for a future where the Black community could thrive.

4. What might the dark tower in the title represent symbolically?

Answers will vary, but one possible interpretation may include the tower as a negative, oppressive, and dominating power looming above the speaker. Towers are also strong

structures that can often withstand harsh treatment, so perhaps the dark tower represents the strength of the Black community and their resilience to those oppressive powers.

5. Why do you think this poem resonated with the Black community during the Harlem Renaissance?

The poem expresses the frustration of being exploited through labor, something many Black Americans would have experienced. But there is also a message of hope, strength, and resilience, which were all pillars of the Black community during this time. For some, this poem could have helped validate their feelings by communicating a collective experience.

Day 4: The Art of Harlem

Assignment: Images of a Movement

Students will view six pieces of art from the Harlem Renaissance, compare and contrast them, and then analyze how the three artists' work reflects the values and experiences of Black Americans. Answers will vary, but students may notice references to the artists' African heritage and that the images tend to celebrate cultural pride and identity. The art for this assignment is in three different forms, but students may be able to point out some similarities and differences in how subjects are presented and their body language.

Assignment: Create or Curate

Students have a choice for this assignment: either create a piece of art inspired by the artists, or curate a collection of art. Any art supplies can be used, depending on what is available to the student. The curated collection can be arranged digitally, as a presentation, as a physical gallery, or any other format. A list of potential artists to research is provided, but there are many more options. Students should also complete an artist's or curator's statement that explains their creative choices or why they selected specific art.

Day 5: The Legacy of Harlem

Assignment: Voices for Change

1. What do you think Hughes might be communicating about how he feels regarding his current place in America?

Answers will vary. Students will likely recognize that Hughes feels he is a second-class citizen and not invited to the table. Instead, he is relegated to the kitchen, out of sight and unwelcome. Being separated from the company and not treated like an equal mirrors the segregation that still dominated much of society. Yet he still shows that he is surviving, even thriving by eating well, laughing, and growing strong. Hughes sees himself as powerful and resistant to the injustices surrounding him.

2. How does Hughes express his hope for a better tomorrow for himself and other Black Americans?

Answers will vary. Students will likely notice that Hughes is optimistic about the future (tomorrow) and his place in society. He also notes that they will be “ashamed” once they see how beautiful he is, which indicates that he is hopeful that there will be remorse for how Black Americans were treated.

3. In what ways do you think this poem could be connected to the larger Civil Rights Movement?

Answers will vary. The Civil Rights Movement was dedicated to achieving racial equality. Hughes emphasizes his identity as an American who deserves equal treatment, regardless of race. His metaphorical depiction of being sent to eat in the kitchen serves as a parallel for the systemic oppression experienced by Black Americans during the period.

Assignment: A Monument in Harlem

The final project for this unit is a creative and critical thinking assignment: designing a monument to honor the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance. Students must meet several specified requirements in their design. If students need some inspiration, encourage them to research existing historical monuments. A sketch of the monument design is sufficient, but students could create their monument from clay if they desire. This project should serve as a comprehensive reflection of the knowledge gained throughout the unit study.