Autobiography / Biography:


This book, published in 2002, contains many of the letters written by Zora Neale Hurston to friends, colleagues, family, and supporters. These letters began to be collected in the 1960s and do not contain all of Hurston’s correspondences. Scholars know this because there are references to what researchers might have missed, gaps that leave license for guessing about answers to many important questions about the often-enigmatic anthropologist and writer. It is noted that Hurston’s biography depends upon these letters, and “this volume of her letters provides major themes for biographies of the future.”

Many questions remain unanswered about Zora Neale Hurston and her romantic relationships, for example, and there is virtually nothing in these letters about them. What is revealed about Hurston is her constant need for financial support and her itinerant lifestyle. She apparently knew from early on that she would have a difficult time economically, but she rejected “safe” economic paths offered to her. For instance, she could have accepted and settled into a teaching career but found the classroom too constricting. She could have married for money, but that would have thwarted her ambitions.

The true champions behind this volume of letters are Hurston’s correspondents who recognized her genius and kept her letters because they somehow knew that her fame “would someday rise to the necessity of such a volume.” This book is essential to any real look into the life of Zora Neale Hurston and could be used in the classroom to provide an intimate look into the character and work of this important writer and the period called The Harlem Renaissance. (Percy Joshua)


In this autobiography, Mezz Mezzrow explores how passing impacts the passer and the society the passer interacts with on a daily basis. Originally published in 1946, the book recounts the exciting jazz scene in the 1930s and early 1940s. What many will find fascinating about this book is that Mezzrow does not dish out the tale of the tragic mulatto, with which many readers will have a familiarity, but deal with a side of passing that is much less often discussed. In this book, we learn the details of the story of Mezz Mezzrow—a white man who tried his best to pass as a black man.

Mezz Mezzrow’s situation is not the only documented case of a white man passing as black. That is, this is not what makes him so unique. What makes Mezzrow unique is his reason for committing this act. Unlike other white men who have passed as black to do investigative
reporting or fight for civil rights, Mezzrow wanted to pass as black purely to delve deeper into the world of jazz. He stated, “I wanted to pass so I could play jazz the way only Negroses can.” It seems to the reader that Mezzrow is willing to go to any length, including denying his true identity, to become a master musician. It is up to the reader to determine why Mezzrow believed a black identity would make him a better musician. Even with all his efforts, we discover Mezzrow did not place enough emphasis on talent, and instead placed a higher importance on ethnicity.

Mezzrow, a Jew from Chicago, was raised in comfortable middle-class surroundings. He was sent to a reform school as a teenager and heard the black prisoners singing Blues music. Mezzrow acknowledges this as the moment he fell in love with the Blues, and was wholly consumed by a desire to master the music. Later on he also develops an affinity for jazz. Mezzrow details his obsession with black culture, and goes on to state he feels many white people look at black culture as exciting and something to be discovered. His views of white people are quite negative, and he exudes a real sense of self-hatred. After all, he was a white man, no matter how much he tries to make the reader forget. In his own words, he strived to become “a voluntary Negro.” While in the reform school, he lied to a prison guard about his lineage, claiming that although he looked white, he was actually black and feared for his safety with the white prisoners. He was moved to the black side of the prison, and made plans to live his life as a “voluntary Negro.”

As a black person, he decided he must learn to speak the “jive language that Negroes spoke.” Building his craft in jazz clubs, he interacted with black musicians who often joked about his being as black as they were. Mezzrow was proud of his mastery of jive and felt he was really fooling blacks and whites into believing his ruse. Some light is also shed on his adventures as a drug dealer, his imprisonment, and his marriage to a black woman. Again, the reader must consider if Mezzrow felt these elements would give him the true “black” experience. Mezzrow rises during the 1930s on the jazz scene and goes on to collaborate with Fats Waller and Sidney Bechet on several songs. Bechet stated, “Mezzrow failed in life because he tried too hard to be something he wasn’t.”

This book is quite mature for regular middle/high school classes although excerpts may be used in the upper high school grades. Many readers will find this book quite controversial. Since it is written from the other end of the spectrum, it will stir up many questions. The argument can be presented that Mezzrow sacrificed a comfortable life to live among a race that was treated as subhuman. How does the reader feel about someone choosing to be black for fun? In cases of blacks passing for white, we understand the passer is seeking equality and freedom. Mezzrow is passing purely for the excitement, and one could argue his action makes a mockery of black culture. Also, what does it mean to be black in the United States? Is identity really based on music, demeanor, and language? Of course not, but one needs to peel away the layers of identity to understand what many whites felt it meant to be black in a time of racial disunity. (La Donna Mays)


This book was first published in 1929 and is based on research that Walter White himself conducted. Walter White was a prominent, educated civil rights activist. White identified as being African-American, even though he had blond hair, blue eyes, and white skin. By his own account, Mr. White had mostly white ancestors, but knew of at least five black people in his family tree. White worked tirelessly for the NAACP and other organizations to advance the social standing of African-Americans. Since most people, based on his appearance, believed he was white, he was able to gain access to white society in a way that darker-skinned blacks were denied. White discusses what he learned in Rope and Faggot: A Biography of Judge Lynch.

Lynching is the centerpiece of the book, as White wanted to debunk rumors about this heinous crime, as well as let the reader know how horrific an act it was for the victim and the perpetrator. The reader is invited to critique the lie that blacks were always lynched for raping white women. White offers other motives, such as the desire many whites had to terrorize blacks and “keep them in their place,” and suggests an economic connection by acknowledging many black business owners were hanged. White’s book gives the reader the sense that the white people he spent time with were quite proud of their association with lynching, and really viewed blacks as inferior. One can only wonder how hard it must have been for him to restrain his true feeling and act like a racist. What separates White’s account from others is that he researched this book firsthand by passing for white in the American South. White risked his own life, and at one point was almost exposed in Arkansas when somehow the word leaked that a black man was posing as white and investigating lynchings.

Lynching is an extremely delicate subject, especially to teach to children. I do not believe an educator would be able to cover this book in depth in middle school, but it could be quite useful in high school. This book is ideal for classes in English, history, and journalism. A class could confront questions such as what it means to be part of a mob mentality, why more blacks didn’t choose to pass for white their entire lives, and why so few whites were brought to justice for violent crimes against black Americans. (La Donna Mays)

Articles / Essays:


Written for the occasion of Carter G. Woodson’s receiving the Spingarn Medal, this piece includes W. E. B. Du Bois’s oft-quoted statement that “All art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists,” along with his similar announcement, “I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda.” Though these highly quotable sentences make for great shorthand, the essay as a whole offers nuance and context for Du Bois’s remarks. Du Bois asserts that African-Americans have a uniquely clear-eyed perception of America, one that they should use to create works of art that bring into being a truly “beautiful world.” Black artists must struggle against the twin enemies of white prejudice and an internalized sense of inferiority. They must also be wary of whites whose enthusiasm for black art arises from a mistaken notion that a focus on art will “stop agitation of the Negro question.”

Du Bois does not call explicitly for art that “agitates,” however; instead, he frames his remarks with terms like “beauty,” “truth,” and “goodness.” He calls for art that affords its
audience an experience of aesthetic delight and also tells the truth about the lives of African-Americans. Though sometimes Du Bois may seem like a prude (as, for instance, in his comment that Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* made him want to take a bath), in this essay he criticizes African-Americans for adopting the genteel respectability of white people—sexual squeamishness and stuffy religiosity. “Our worst side has been so shamelessly emphasized that we are denying we have or ever had a worst side,” Du Bois argues. “In all sorts of ways we are hemmed in and our new young artists have got to fight their way to freedom.” Oddly enough, it would seem that sometimes the new young artists had to fight Du Bois himself.

Ultimately, Du Bois expresses a faith similar to that of James Weldon Johnson in the introduction to his *Book of American Negro Poetry*. He believes that the creation of great art will lead to whites’ acknowledgment of blacks’ humanity. Near the end of the essay, Du Bois drives home this key belief: “[T]he point today is that until the art of the black folk compels recognition, they will not be rated as human. And when through art they compel recognition, then let the world discover if it will that their art is as new as it is old and as old as it is new.”

“Criteria of Negro Art” could be placed effectively next to such other New Negro aesthetic manifestoes as Langston Hughes’s “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” George S. Schuyler’s “The Negro-Art Hokum,” and Richard Wright’s “Blueprint for Negro Writing.” Read together, these pieces could give students a revealing window into the diversity of opinion within the New Negro movement regarding the question of how the African-American literary tradition ought to develop. These pieces could provide templates and terms to use in discussing a variety of literary works. (Frank Kovarik)


Mullen, Harryette. "’When He Is Least Himself’: Dunbar and Double Consciousness in African American Poetry." *African American Review* 41, no. 2 (2007): 277-82. This article begins as a first-person reflection of the author’s experience with Paul Laurence Dunbar and moves into critical analysis of Dunbar’s use of dialect and standard English. Mullen states that her parents and grandparents were familiar with Dunbar’s poetry to indicate a comprehensive generational span. She explains that as a child, she memorized and recited Dunbar, noting the reason for this was in the tradition of “racial uplift.” She lists a who’s who of poets including Dunbar that families in the 1970s celebrated through oration. Others included Langston Hughes, Margaret Walker, Gwendolyn Brooks, and James Weldon Johnson.
Mullen also acknowledges Lewis Carroll as another writer/poet, albeit white, who had some influence with her early poetic imagination and attempts at writing.

Mullen refers to Dunbar’s life as “troubled,” though she gives little detail for this description, unless it is simply to note that his poetry reflects the “double consciousness,” which she categorizes as addressing a legacy of slavery while claiming the rights and benefits of freedom. She adds that Dunbar “wrote about slave life from the vantage point of freedom,” but did not deal with oppression; his focus was on humanity and culture, not cruelty. She also notes that Dunbar’s “poetic appreciation of black folk life was compatible with his identity as a cultured and literate African American.” Though she doesn’t specifically define the term “folk,” she aptly goes on to classify Dunbar’s importance as a “precursor of our present embrace of multicultural literacy.”

Mullen quotes William Dean Howells—who is incidentally responsible for the title—saying “Mr. Dunbar writes literary English when he is least himself,” meaning that Howells believed Dunbar’s dialect poetry to be more authentic of a black identity. Mullen then contrasts Howells’ quotation with Oscar Wilde’s: “Man is least like himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.” She then offers a brief analysis of Dunbar’s “We Wear The Mask.”

Mullen also presents the entire text of another poem, “Speakin’ at de Cou’t-house,” which is written in dialect. She notes the poem’s references to the Civil War, the Republican Party as the Party of Lincoln, and post-Reconstruction matters. She describes the poem as “commentary on current political discourse,” suggesting that Dunbar used dialect to examine problems and real life issues black people faced and not just to describe fun and good times.

This article reveals Dunbar’s complexity. It recognizes that he continued to be known and celebrated long after his death. It explains that he experimented with form—specifically vernacular—as he embraced black life and matters of concern to African-Americans. Mullen finally suggests that in using dialect, Dunbar in no way disparages black people. And in some way, unforeseen by his Renaissance contemporaries, Dunbar is an important part of racial uplift and celebration of black culture. (Vickie Adamson)


Books / Book Chapters:


A rich full representation of African-American poets is brought to the table in this dynamic publication of American Negro Poetry. It is a small volume of only 197 pages, featuring poems by 56 both well-known and obscure authors. Several women poets are part of this volume.

The publication comprises a noteworthy introduction by Arna Bontemps. Bontemps speaks to the “awakening of Negro novelists, painters, sculptors, dancers, dramatists, and scholars” during the Harlem Renaissance, giving the reader ample opportunity for dialogue and analysis of the poetry within the contexts it is presented. Bontemps harkens back to Phillis Wheatley’s poetry, and then brings the reader forward through a review of Negro poetry, its connections with music and lyrics into the 1940s. She raises two questions that require serious
consideration as we contemplate Negro poetry. First, what happened to the voice of Negro poetry after the writings of Phillis Wheatley? Why the silence? Also, was Negro poetry part of America’s mainstream or not? Extending this question, we might ask ourselves what role and responsibility, if any, does poetry have today in influencing American society? Are African-American poets seen as poets or African-American poets? These are serious questions to examine as we study the history, the nuances and the poetry itself of the “New Negro” Renaissance and beyond. This volume allows for the study of a wide variety of poets, their styles and their perspectives on the world in which they lived. Biographical notes and indexes by title are available to assist the reader in locating a particular poem.

*American Negro Poetry*’s principal audience lies with 3rd grade through 12th grade. Some of the poems are short and simple for young readers, but the majority of the poems are of a more complex nature. The promise of celebrated poetry by such writers as James Weldon Johnson, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Effie Lee Newsome, Georgia Douglass Johnson, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Richard Wright, in addition to many others, makes this publication a “must have” for everyone’s collection. (Alice Lee)

**Casement, Rose. *Black History in the Pages of Children’s Literature.* Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008.**

It feels a little odd to annotate a book of annotations, but it can be argued that *Black History in the Pages of Children’s Literature* is more than just a book of annotations. I would recommend this book as a reference to have in every school’s professional library. Casement has divided African-American history into eleven chapters beginning with “Africans in the Americas before Colonization” and going through “Telling It Like It Is: Stories of Today.” Each chapter consists of a brief historical overview of that time period, and then provides an annotated list of books for Early Elementary, Later Elementary, and Middle Grades. The annotated books are by no means an exhaustive list of the books available, but are a great foundation to start in the search for children’s literature depicting a certain era. Casement gives the genre of each book and lists any awards that a particular book may have won.

Casement’s Chapter 9, “Gaining Community, Gaining Voice: The Harlem Renaissance, the Negro Baseball League, and War,” addresses the New Negro Renaissance era. The last part of this chapter goes past the era for the New Negro Renaissance in the section Casement has designated for War, but the books that are appropriate for our time frame are easily distinguishable.

In addition to the chapters devoted to the lists of children’s books, Casement has written a chapter on “Selection and Inclusion of Children’s Literature about American History: A Critique,” which reveals her reasons for writing her book: as a college professor, she was finding students that were ignorant of African-American history, and she wanted to show education majors that this history could be incorporated into the classroom with literature. Casement gives examples of children’s books on specific topics and explains the care that teachers must use as they select historical books for their students.

The last chapter of Casement’s book is bonus material, listing outstanding authors and illustrators of children’s literature. Although the list is somewhat short, it is sufficient for teachers beginning to use children’s literature to teach Social Studies. A list of the Coretta Scott King Award winners and honor books is also included as part of this chapter. (Kim Hampton)


This book opens with a review section that shows direct evidence of controversies surrounding Hurston’s work as an African-American artist. The reviews encompass her published work and provide interpretations of her emerging work.

Following the reviews are fourteen critical essays that provide more extensive interpretations of Hurston’s writings. Topics include the “linguistic interiority” in her four novels; power and voice in an examination of female characters; the undermining of white Northern culture; the shift of identity, difference, and race representation as revealed in conflicting or overlapping structures of address; Hurston’s use of dialect; revelation of self; her comments on issues of race and racism; and the presentation of her ethnological work as a signal instance of “mythomania” or “hysteric” signifying. Some of the essayists are kind; others are brutal.

As a significant luminary of the Harlem Renaissance and a stellar representative of the new Negro and the new woman, Zora Neale Hurston has earned closer examination and too-long-dormant respect. Students should examine some of these critical perspectives and essays, comparing and contrasting their points of view. This would be a most scintillating follow-up to readings of Hurston’s work. (Percy Joshua)


In a letter dated January 20, 1931, Zora Neale Hurston communicates with Langston Hughes. She thanks him for his letter and then charges that he (Hughes) was at fault in the beginning of their conflict over a play (presumably *Mule Bone*) and she was at fault in the end. She promises to write “Godmother” (Charlotte Osgood Mason) a letter that will leave Hughes in a “white light.” Hurston then ends the main text of the letter with the hope of seeing him soon, using the closing, “Most sincerely.”

The introduction to this section of the text (letters from the 1930s) notes that Hurston wrote as many as two or three letters every day “many of them three- or four-page, single-space, laboriously typed documents” (162). Hurston’s letters communicated about her state of affairs, her constant drive to secure finances and work, and her desire to be appreciated and accepted. Rarely does she refer to the specific nature of her texts, plot, characters, or any other aspect that would reveal her exact thinking about her writing and technique. However, the postscript of the letter described above is curious and revealing:

P.S. How dare you use the word “nigger” to me. You know I don’t use such a nasty word. I’m a refined lady and such a word simply upsets my conglomeration. What do you think I was doing in Washington all that time if not getting cultured. I got my foot in society just as well as the rest. Treat me refined.

This letter predates *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, in which Hurston uses the word “nigger” effectively and deliberately. This postscript helps us to understand her intention with this word. It is Nanny who utters the word, telling Janie, “The nigger woman is de mule of de world,” and by putting this word into Nanny’s mouth, Hurston marks her as unrefined and low. With her plot,
Hurston goes on to separate Janie from Nanny, in disposition and philosophy. Though Janie speaks a dialect, she is considered classy and refined. Even when Janie leaves her middle-class position as the wife of the deceased Mayor Starks, she carries this classy air about her into the muck, where she does not seem to lose her class either. Apparently, Hurston’s protagonist could go as far south as geographically possible, with the vernacular thick on her tongue, and still maintain her class and culture. Hurston takes the financially enterprising spirit of the New Negro and assigns it to Nanny, Logan Killicks, and Joe Starks, characters she eventually casts low.

None of the aforementioned possesses the answer for becoming a satisfied self. For Hurston, it seems, life and possibility were in the South and not necessarily intertwined with material success. Her insistent phrase “Treat me refined,” at the end of the above postscript is echoed in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, though in an unexpected way. Janie gradually rejects Nanny’s classification as the world’s beast of burden and struggles towards self-definition on her own terms. (Vickie Adamson)


*The Cambridge Companion to The Harlem Renaissance* represents a serious look at the foundations of the Harlem Renaissance, the major authors and their writings. The book concludes with a review of the impact of the Renaissance on the artists themselves and our society at large. Edited by George Hutchinson, a foremost writer of this era, the book features contributors such as Emily Bernard, Jeffery Stewart, and others examining the writings of notable Renaissance authors.

This scholarly work gives a voice to the complex issues of the times. The first three chapters set the stage for the redefining of Negros in America. Initiating the discussion with the chapter entitled “The New Negro as a Citizen” is an excellent place to begin. Part II includes notable Renaissance authors. Jean Toomer, Jessie Fauset and Walter White, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Nella Larson, Rudolph Fisher, Claude McKay, W.E.B. Du Bois, Eric Walrond, George Schuyler, Wallace Thurman and Zora Neale Hurston are represented in this volume. The artists’ various ideological stances are interpreted for the reader. Biographical material is incorporated along with critiques of authors’ writings to strengthen this publication. The Cambridge publication raises some issues often not well addressed in reviews of publications of the Harlem Renaissance. Included is a chapter on transgressive sexuality and literature, and women in poetry.

It might be interesting to discuss the role of literature on Negro Life. What, if any, responsibility is placed upon the writers of this time to support and promote the “uplift” of the Negro and other social or political agendas? Is, in fact, the Negro Renaissance really over, or has it been translated into another form to include a sort of graduation or assimilation of new ideas? Defining folklore, its attributes and materials, personal relationship to folklore, in addition to raising the questions of value to society, might be an fascinating and relevant subject with students.

The reader will find here an extremely valuable and exhaustive chronology of Harlem Renaissance authors and artists with birth and death dates. Nine pages of significant events and publications during the Renaissance will have applicability for creating a sequential order of events for the instructor. Lastly, this in-depth material will best serve the teacher and possibly advanced high school students due to its complexities and the analysis that the text requires. (Alice Lee)

This text, or “critical companion,” is about Zora Neale Hurston, and in discussing Hurston, Sharon Jones provides a comprehensive overview of the historical times that informed Hurston’s work. Many influential names from the New Negro Renaissance, including Langston Hughes, Jessie Fauset, and W.E.B. Du Bois are included in this comprehensive accounting. There are numerous photos and extensive commentary on Renaissance figures such as Wallace Thurman, Richard Wright, and Nella Larson. Jones even includes a photo taken in 1927 of Hurston, Hughes, and Fauset standing in front of the Booker T. Washington statue, in which he is lifting a veil from the symbolic African American at Tuskegee. What’s important to note here is that Hurston and her contemporaries were consciously involved and invested in black history, policy, and politics.

Jones offers a thorough examination of Hurston’s works in critical context, replete with background information. For each text, Jones provides a synopsis, critical commentary, and character profiles (if applicable). The commentary on *Fire!!* for instance, does not include character descriptions but explains Hurston’s brief encounter with this short-lived periodical. For this annotation, however, it is the brief section on “dialect” that is of interest. Jones describes Hurston as a superior writer of dialect. She describes black vernacular as “a complex language in its own right, adhering to syntactical rules just as any other language.” Jones assigns the modifier “realistic” to Hurston’s character depictions because of her use of dialect and asserts that Hurston’s very use of dialect “validates” it. Her reasoning almost seems circular, but it makes sense if you allow that Hurston’s mastery of the form helps the use of vernacular gain repute.

Jones shares that Hurston’s use of dialect received mixed reviews and was celebrated and criticized at once. She notes that the use of dialect separated Hurston from her contemporaries like Jessie Fauset and Nella Larson. Jones then refers to an example in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to show how dialect is powerful and expressive, describing the moment Janie confronts Joe Starks in the store, crediting Janie’s vernacular as being “an expressive moment of honesty.” Janie’s words become the catalyst that brings Joe down and launches Janie on her true quest for self. Jones finally assets that Hurston’s lasting contribution is that she rendered African-American English as sophisticated, complex, and rich.

This small section of this larger book is useful because of its rare and specific discussion of Hurston’s technique in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, specifically. It manages to describe the result of Hurston’s experiment using dialect. In many ways, the text shows Janie in a similar light as the New Negro, but without the pretense and snobbery. She is different from her formerly enslaved, oppressive grandmother, representative of a past generation; and she is different from two older husbands who liken her to a mule. Interestingly, all three of the aforementioned, have in common with the typical New Negro the goal of capitalism. Get rich and be something. Janie rejects this stance. She reinvents and redefines herself, despite the opinions of the community surrounding her, and Janie’s pattern of stepping off of the worn path to find herself is the quintessential act of reclamation, the same desire of the New Negro. (Vickie Adamson)

---

1 I acknowledge here my belief that makers of a tributary statue would not have its subject perform a retrograde act. The statue, therefore, symbolic of enlightenment, is in the act of lifting the veil. The ambiguity is in the analysis of BTW’s policies and what they actually accomplished, not in the act performed by the figure.

Norman Mailer recounts the high times of white hipsters in the 1920s-1940s in this essay. Mailer’s work is semibiographical, although the readers get the feeling that it is more fictitious than anything else. This essay is unique in the sense that the white characters are not trying to pass using their skin color, but instead to adopt a “Negro attitude.” Mailer, like many others of his generation, thought it perfectly logical to emulate black culture for entertainment purposes.

This essay was controversial when it was first published, and has lost quite a bit of its notoriety. Some of Mailer’s views seem to indicate to the reader that living the black lifestyle is nothing more than committing acts of violence, drinking, drugging, and having sex. In a classroom setting, an educator might want to examine what made the essay controversial in the first place. High school students in English and Social Science classes may choose to investigate why Mailer would feel it was okay to espouse these views to the public and whether the essay embodies racism.

What makes Mailer’s essay interesting to many readers is his choice to explore what drives the white hipster to want to live the “Negro life.” Mailer states that a white hipster must be courageous to do so, and must be an enemy of conformity. He argues that the white hipster should learn black lingo (similar to Mezz Mezrow’s beliefs), and immerse himself in the club world. What Mailer does not offer is why the white hipster would want to do this, other than sheer curiosity. Mailer also does not delve into how blacks should feel about this, or how he personally is vested in this idea of black exploration. The reader may get a sense that Mailer is out to exploit and shock, at which he was successful. (La Donna Mays)


In her chapter “Writing in the Harlem Renaissance: The Burden of Representation and Sexual Dissidence,” Christa Schwarz delineates the social-artistic environment in which writers such as Hughes, Thurman, Cullen, McKay, and finally Nugent had to work, and the burden that fell on their creative minds and hands due to their homosexual tendencies. The literary leaders of the movement, namely Du Bois and Locke, and particularly James Weldon Johnson, viewed that contributing to the artistic and literary production of the nation, in turn will alter white America’s stereotypical perceptions of blacks. Johnson would argue in the introduction of his anthology *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, published in 1922, that the contemporary literature being produced was part of an African-American literary tradition that now is reconstructing prose to reflect a new negro consciousness that is more worldly and sophisticated. Further, not only will these works uplift the Negro race, but they will be considered part of the American narrative and not just the African-American narrative. The criteria for representing and evaluating black art and literature was vigorously debated amongst the movement’s leaders, namely, Du Bois and
Locke. Du Bois “favored the production of art that would facilitate recognition through its propagandistic power.” However, Locke espoused “a pragmatic aesthetic theory—the judging of art by its aesthetic merit, but simultaneously an aiming at appraisal and recognition by white Americans.” The two different approaches did agree upon the idea that acknowledgment from the dominant culture was imperative.

From this debate two distinctive authorial voices were realized. Countee Cullen was regarded as the Renaissance’s prodigal son since he employed traditional poetic structures, such as Shakespearean sonnets, as the literary vehicle for his work. For this, he earned critical praise from Du Bois and Locke, but also from the white American literary intelligentsia. Yet, not all the Renaissance writers were rank and file disciples of the aesthetic paradigm promoted by the movement’s elite. Richard Bruce Nugent, Langston Hughes, and William Thurman, considered the racial uplift construct second to their artistry. They argued that their creative genius, not their political and social perspective, is the primary source for their artistic production. The group, known as the Niggerati, a term coined by Zora Neale Hurston, saw themselves as different from the previous guard and set out to establish themselves on their own terms, regardless of the professional, artistic, and personal cost. Wallace Thurman, the Niggerati’s leader, published Fire!! —a literary magazine whose aim was to showcase the independent and creative thinking of the group. The subject matter included stories and poems about prostitution, Harlemite libertines, cabarets, speakeasies, and homosexual love. Surprisingly, the movement’s conservative bloc mildly approved of Fire!! However, their endorsement was the minority opinion. The white and black literary intelligentsia disapproved of the material, yet it was the burgeoning black bourgeoisie that condemned the Niggerati’s work as unworthy of print because of its salaciousness and unbridled tone. The group were firm in their position that their characters were not representations of blacks but created from their imaginations and the community in which they lived. The Niggerati’s unapologetic response did not ease the tension between the writers and black bourgeoisie. The group did not publish another issue of Fire!! But it jump-started the prolific writing careers, of Hughes, Hurston, and Thurman. (Héctor Huertas)


The chapter opens with a quotation from Julia Henderson’s A Child’s Story of Dunbar in which she describes slave language as “incorrect English,” or dialect. Capshaw then formally begins her chapter with a comment on children’s drama as a “cross written genre,” a form of writing designed to appeal to children and adults. Children’s drama of the New Negro Renaissance, in particular, contained no horrific content, instead employing encoded descriptions of slavery’s violence and even of slavery itself. Slavery was essentially unspeakable; but as pageant writers sought to use vestiges of the Southern past to galvanize the community, they recalled folk traditions and employed creative devices to write about the unsavory. Authors faced the dilemma of constructing a Southern past and present, without using slavery and without raising the umbrella of minstrelsy.

Capshaw quotes James Weldon Johnson from The Book of American Negro Poetry, saying “the passing of traditional dialect as a medium for Negro poets is complete” and then shares Myron Simons’s interpretation of Weldon Johnson. Simons says that Weldon Johnson was not calling for an end to the use of dialect poetry, but an end to the stereotypical application
of dialect poetry. Capshaw notes that nine years after Johnson said that dialect poetry was dead, Dunbar’s poetry was still popular: “Little Brown Baby” was published in 1940.

Additionally, Capshaw offers one explanation for Dunbar’s continuing popularity—that despite his use of dialect poetry, he was part of the “dominant ideology of racial uplift.” In other words, Dunbar could succeed as a poet in a white world. He provided African-Americans with a reason to celebrate, and it did not matter what manner of poetry he had written to gain his status.

Capshaw suggests that a problem surrounding Dunbar is that performers played up any minstrelsy contained in his poems as a deliberate gesture to distract from the dual nature and hidden messages in the poems. There was clownishness on one hand, but also a serious treatment of African-American issues on the other.

Capshaw states her own purpose for this chapter: It “will begin by examining Dunbar as a site of divergent ideologies (of uplift and of vernacular play), and then will expose the range of responses to the topic of southern identity during the 1930s by focusing on four southern writers who interact with the legacy of minstrelsy.” Despite the quotation from Henderson as a curious beginning for the chapter, Capshaw appears sympathetic to Dunbar, justifying Dunbar’s dialect poetry and not indicting him for misrepresenting black people. The quotation, which describes dialect as “incorrect English,” feeds into the rhetoric that fueled Dunbar’s strongest critics.

Overall, this chapter will be useful for teachers wishing to put Dunbar in a proper context. It highlights the controversy surrounding dialect poetry and explains its enduring nature as well. As a direct connection to themes explored in the Summer 2010 Seminar, this article places Dunbar as a significant contributor to The New Negro Movement. He played a distinct role in bridging the divide as African-Americans moved beyond the legacy of slavery toward an enlightened and progressive future. Dialect was not a detractor but a tool to build the bridge.

(Vickie Adamson)


Children’s Books:


This children’s book is a fictionalized account of Langston Hughes’s train ride to Mexico when he was eighteen years old. The story, told in first person, begins in Harlem as Hughes is on his way to a party to celebrate the publication of his first book of poems. The sound of his heels clicking on the pavement takes him back, back to the “clackety clack clack” of the train as he is traveling to see his father after graduating from high school. As Langston looks out of the train window, he observes the places where his people, the Negro people, live. He reminisces about his grandmother and his childhood. Leaving the Indiana cornfields around the time the sun is setting, the train slows to cross a long bridge, and something inside Langston stirs as he looks
down into the Mississippi River. He is suddenly inspired to write, grabs his stubby pencil that he always carries with him, and on an envelope scribbles... “I’ve know rivers.” By the time the river passes from his view, he has finished the poem. He saves the poem he has written, and wonders “can I sing my America, too, as other great poets have sung theirs?” At this point in the story, Langston’s mind returns to the present, where he arrives at the event being held in his honor. A friend requests that he reads some poems, and Langston turns to his river poem. The last few pages of the book are the poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” as Langston reads it to his audience.

The illustrations by Leonard Jenkins are done in mixed media collage. They are creative, colorful, and bold, yet full of contrasts. Robert Burleigh does a skillful job of weaving the past and present together in this story, but the concept of a flashback may have to be explained to less sophisticated readers as Langston is transported back to the train ride in his mind at the sound of his shoes on the pavement. A foreword and afterword by the author help explain the poem and a bit about the life of Langston Hughes. Through the weaving together of the fictionalized account of writing the poem, the actual poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” and the striking illustrations, this children’s storybook inspires and speaks to the dreamer in us all. (Kim Hampton)


*The Bat Boy & His Violin* is historical fiction set in 1948. This is a little past the time frame of the New Negro Renaissance, but the story is just too good to pass up. Reginald is a young African-American boy whose father is the manager of the worst team in the Negro National League, the Dukes. Reginald is a violin player, and wants to play in an orchestra someday, but Reginald’s father, Papa, would prefer Reginald be a baseball player “like his ol’ man.” The conflict between the interests of the father and son are further apparent within the first few pages of the story as Papa calls Reginald’s violin “your fiddle.” Papa needs a batboy for the team, so a deal is worked out that if Reginald does a good job at being the Dukes’ batboy, his upcoming recital can be held in the living room of their home instead of the church basement. Reginald becomes the Dukes’ batboy, a quite clumsy one. While Reginald is an inept batboy, he is an outstanding musician, and once he plays his violin in the dugout between his batboy duties, his music becomes an inspiration to the team. They start to win ball games, and Reginald plays at the request of the team and his father. This book also reveals the harsh realities faced by the Negro teams as they traveled from town to town to play their games. On their way to play the Kansas City Monarchs, no hotel can be found that will accept the Dukes, and they end up camping by their team bus. The night before their big game, Reginald soothes the restless team with soft music. By the end of the story, Reginald’s father has come to accept and feel pride in his son’s talents.

E.B. Lewis’s soft pastel illustrations are remarkable and capture the era and characters with beauty. (Kim Hampton)


“Uncle Romie didn’t know about cakes and baseball games and anything except his dumb old paintings. My birthday was ruined.” The narrator, James, has left his home in North Carolina to stay with his Uncle Romie and Aunt Nanette in New York City while his mother gets
ready to give birth to twins. While Aunt Nanette has made him feel welcome, showing him places of interest in New York City and especially the sights and sounds of Harlem, Uncle Romie has secluded himself in his studio preparing for an art show. When Aunt Nanette is called away unexpectedly to a family member’s funeral, James is left to celebrate his birthday with Uncle Romie. The morning of his birthday, James wanders into his uncle’s studio and finds that Uncle Romie’s art captures not only the places James has visited in Harlem, but places back home in North Carolina as well. James then discovers how much he and Uncle Romie have in common, including baseball. Uncle Romie takes James to a baseball game, and they both enjoy each other’s company. James has a wonderful birthday after all.

Jerome Lagarrigue’s illustrations are softly focused acrylic paintings done in tones and a style that are distinctly his own yet reminiscent of Bearden’s work. The story depicts the rich experiences had by James when he visits Harlem, the neighborhood that his Uncle Romie grew up in. The contrast between the city and the small town in North Carolina that Uncle Romie and James came from is well portrayed. James is a fictional character, but Hartfield has surrounded him with enough factual information about Bearden’s life that this book could be used to introduce both younger and older students to Romare Bearden and his art. (Kim Hampton)


*Harlem Stomp!* is a magnificent introduction to the New Negro Renaissance for students in grades 7 and up (recommended grade levels). The book describes “the smoldering Black consciousness” at the turn of the century and notes the difference in philosophy between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. The migration north is explained along with the race riots. Black soldiers arriving back home from the War with the attitude “We return, We return from fighting, We return fighting” are optimistic that African-Americans will be newly empowered, but violence erupts and the Ku Klux Klan is revived. The chapter on the rise of Harlem as a black metropolis is very well done, detailing the real estate wheeling and dealing that went on to establish Harlem as such a metropolis. Jean Toomer and Claude McKay were the dam breakers before the explosion of creativity described in the chapter entitled “Fire!” The social scene and the music and dance of the Renaissance are described in their own chapters, as well as the visual arts and the theater.

The numerous photographs, reproductions of magazine covers and posters, sidebars, and biographical insets make this book a visual feast. There are numerous poems and excerpts from longer works by Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Langston Hughes. Some sort of quotation or newspaper clipping is on almost every page. Along the sides of several pages are lists of words and phrases from this era, Harlem Jive. A bibliography of over 75 sources is listed, an excellent source for students. The book also has the nonfiction text features of an index and table of contents.

*Harlem Stomp!* does not try to oversimplify the Harlem Renaissance as just a time of great music and dancing. For a children’s book, it goes fairly deep into some of the issues and conflicts among the African-Americans of the era. It does not shield young readers from violence. A photograph of a lynching and references to rape make this book unsuitable for young students to read on their own, but the rest of the book could still be used with younger students with teacher direction. There are excellent examples of reproductions of primary source material, and this book would be very helpful in teaching that concept to students. Laban Carrick Hill acknowledges that “the seeds sown during the Harlem Renaissance are still bearing fruit, not just
for African-Americans, but for all Americans,” and this book does a fabulous job of making that evident. (Kim Hampton)


A relatively unknown work of Langston Hughes, *The Sweet and Sour Animal Book* is a delightful, whimsical, ABC poetry book for young children. Full of color on each page, it is hard to determine what aspect the reader enjoys the most. Is it Hughes’s engaging, humorous poetry or the beautiful three-dimensional animal illustrations by the Harlem School of the Arts children that make us fall in love with this children’s book?

In the introduction, Ben Vereen shares with us his own experiences of personalizing his relationship with Langston Hughes. Hughes’s previously undiscovered alphabet poetry was reclaimed by Oxford University Press. Vereen closes the introduction by saying, “This book gives me a powerful sense of the possibilities that await all of us.” He encourages the reader to share the promise of the future. Each letter has a short poem. For example, the letter “F” speaks of fish:

There was a fish  
With a greedy eye  
Who darted toward  
A big green fly.  
Alas that fly  
Was bait on a hook!  
So the fisherman took  
The fish home to cook.

The afterword, written by George Cunningham, acquaints the reader with Hughes’s rich life. Cunningham speaks well of Langston Hughes’s artistic expression, motivations, and even his ideological stances in his lifetime. Looking deeper, Cunningham reminds the more mature reader to look for the comparisons to black life. Hughes, juxtaposing the reality of the times with the humorous whimsical activities of the bumblebee who cannot find the real flowers, is a perfect example.

Generally geared for elementary children, this book might be useful with middle-school students as an example for writing an alphabet book regarding a particular topic or theme. Also, Hughes, even in his children’s poetry, raises question of life’s being sweet and sour. One of the issues to investigate might be the following: how does Hughes express that notion of good and bad times? How could you as a student relate and express your own highs and lows? What role does humor play in Hughes’s poetry?

Though the book was published long after Hughes’s death, one cannot help but think he would have been pleased with the collaboration of Harlem’s students in the creation of this book. The students, surrounded by Langston Hughes’s poetry, artistically expressed art that reflected their understanding of his poetry. Written especially for young children, *The Sweet and Sour Animal Book* is purely a poetry celebration! (Alice Lee)


---


“We are the ship; all else the sea.” Rube Foster, founder of the Negro National League, knew that if Negroes were going to play in a professional baseball league, they would have to organize it themselves. Nelson’s book, eight years in the making, does an excellent job conveying the story of the Negro Leagues. Nelson, in his author’s note to the book, reveals that he chose to “present the voice of the narrator as a collective voice, the voice of every player, the voice of we.” The Foreword, written by Hank Aaron, lends immediate credibility to Nelson’s work. Nelson quite creatively labeled chapters as innings, with the 1st Inning entitled “Beginnings.” We read to the 9th Inning, “Then Came Jackie Robinson,” and continue to Extra Innings, “The End of the Negro Leagues.” Nelson’s book includes a bibliography, endnotes, and an index.

This might not be a book that a teacher would read aloud entirely, but is an excellent one to choose excerpts from that would whet students’ appetites for further research on the players of the Negro Leagues. Nelson includes a liberal sprinkling of quotations from players and humorous stories throughout the book. The style of the Negro ballplayers is portrayed. Rube Foster, manager of the Giants, demanded that his players follow his directions. His players were fast, and Rube invented the “bunt-and-run,” which was built on the speed of his players. Negro baseball was fast, flashy and daring, and sometimes funny, and these stories are told as if we were sitting at the knee of the players, listening to them reminisce.

*We Are The Ship* also imparts to the reader the indignities that Negro League players had to endure as they traveled between towns, especially in the South where teams would have to travel several hundred miles without stopping because they couldn’t find a place to stop and eat along the way. Nelson’s 3rd Inning, “Life in the Negro Leagues,” describes the off-the-baseball-field lives of the Negro players.

Kadir Nelson’s story is excellent, but it is his artwork that makes this book an out-of-the-park homerun. Nelson researched uniforms and team colors, jersey numbers, and ballparks to make his illustrations as authentic as possible. The players in his paintings are all larger than life, the colors vibrant, and his research is evident as each one is uniquely characterized. Adults, as well as older children, will enjoy reading *We Are The Ship*, and younger children will enjoy just looking at Kadir Nelson’s incredible artwork. This book is truly a gem. (Kim Hampton)


“You ever hear of the jazz-playin’ man, the man with the cats who could swing with his band?” You will most certainly hear of him in this colorful story about Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington. This biography for children gives a brief account of Ellington’s life.

Ellington was born in Washington D.C. in 1899. His parents enrolled him in piano lessons, but Duke was not a very enthusiastic pupil. He would much rather be outside playing baseball than practicing the piano. Duke thought the piano pieces he played made an “umpy-
dump” sound, which was a sound ‘headed nowhere worth following.’” Duke eventually quit the piano until later.

As a young adult, Duke heard this umpy-dump which folks were calling ragtime, and he was soon back at the piano, this time by choice. With practice, he was soon playing his own melodies. Piano became Duke’s love, and by the age of nineteen he was entertaining at clubs, parties, and pool halls. Duke formed his own small band called the Washingtonians, and soon they split for New York City, where they became popular.

In 1927, the Washingtonians were asked to play at the Cotton Club, Harlem’s swankiest nightclub, and the band really took off. The band grew, and their name was changed to Duke Ellington and His Orchestra. Their music was broadcast over the radio. Duke’s musicians included Sonny Greer on the drums, Joe “Tricky Sam” Nanton on the trombone, Otto “Toby” Hardwick on the saxophone, and James “Bubber” Miley on the trumpet. Of course, Duke played the piano, and while the dancers were dancing, he “slid his honey-colored fingers over the ivory eighty-eights.” Duke Ellington’s music spread all over the country.

Duke became partners with Billy Strayhorn, and together as a team they composed unforgettable music. Most people called his music jazz, but Duke called it “the music of my people.” Duke Ellington wrote a special suite to celebrate the history of African-American people. Black, Brown and Beige was introduced at Carnegie Hall on January 23, 1943.

Andrea Davis Pinkney’s choice of words in this book complements the artwork of her husband, illustrator Brian Pinkney, or is it vice versa? The illustrations are drawings etched on scratchboard in an almost rhythmic manner and painted over in vivid hues. In this book, we can SEE the music in swirling, curling vibrant colors! Vernacular of the era gives the text sparkle and will be sure to interest young readers, you know Daddy-O? The text is also rich in metaphorical language that may have to be explained to younger readers: “compositions smoother than a hairdo sleeked with pomade, spicier than a pot of jambalaya, and curling his notes like a kite tail in the wind.” This biography gives credit to some of the other musicians in Duke’s band, and his partner in composition, Billy Strayhorn. Andrea Davis Pinkney concludes the story with a biographical page and some great source notes. In addition to being appealing to the elementary-aged students that it is intended for, this story would be a wonderful way to introduce older students to Duke Ellington. (Kim Hampton)


Readers Theater for African American History is an excellent tool that can bring history, social studies, African-American studies and even science into the classroom in a new and refreshing way. The benefits of utilizing readers theatre for classroom learning are considerable. As teachers look for ways to increase reading literacy and fluency, readers theatre can have a direct impact. The authors have created 20 three-to-five page long, interactive and creative stories to make history come alive. The stories, reminiscent of storytelling, range from Africa, before the slave trade, to the Civil Rights Movement and the March on Washington. Topics included are the American Revolution, founding fathers, abolitionists, the black press, settling the west, civil war, politics, Tuskegee Airmen, the great migration, Harlem Renaissance, Juneteenth, science and medicine, Lewis Latimer, Jackie Robinson, Phillis Wheatley, Augusta Savage, and Marian Anderson. Most pieces require about five to eleven students to perform. Each piece is independent; suggested notes on staging the script and excellent possible extensions of the readers theater are included. The authors have taken some liberties, for
example, combining historical individuals that did not actually meet to assist the conveyance of information. They suggest the instructor give some background and explanation regarding these interpretations although in no way do these detract from the usefulness of the readers theater.

One chapter on the Harlem Renaissance allows the readers to be part of a rent party with Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Paul Robeson, Duke Ellington and James Van Der Zee. Actively pulling students into the characters’ lives, perspectives, and times allows a look at the complexities of these individuals. Some questions that can be asked might include the following: Why were rent parties held? What were the times like economically during this period? How did the individuals attending contribute to the era?

Teachers will enjoy the energy, increased vocabulary, collaboration among their students and enthusiasm this publication can bring to the classroom. *Readers Theater for African American History* can best be taken advantage of by 4th through 12th grades. Additionally, the pieces can be performed for lower grades with remarkable success. (Alice Lee)


**Documentary Films:**


This Zora Neale Hurston DVD is a well-written and effectively produced documentary presenting Hurston’s life in great detail. Comments from historians and Zora’s friends, as well as reenactments and footage from her southern journeys collecting folklore help to bring this film to life. We are ready to embark on our own expedition to discover the times, complexities and life of the woman known as the “Queen of the Harlem Renaissance.”

The film can be utilized effectively with all ages, either in its entirety or through the use of excerpts. Bodacious, outrageous, independent, feisty, raunchy free spirited, lived life to the fullest, a scholar and writer—these are just some of the words and phrases used to describe Zora Neale Hurston in the film. Cameos by Alice Walker, Maya Angelou and others personalize her story. Our account begins in her childhood home of Eatonville, Florida, a black township in 1887. Zora was one of eight children, a preacher’s daughter. Though her Dad tried to channel that free spirit, her mom encouraged her to “Jump at the Sun!” She would tell Zora, “There is nothing you can’t do.”

Hurston saw the South as home and loved it. The film goes on to document her work as a novelist, an anthropologist, and a writer. Original footage from her work for the Library of Congress collecting Negro folklore and traditions throughout the South is scattered throughout the film. Her lifelong goal was to present the beauty, language, richness and everyday realism of Negro life. The contributions of Zora Neale Hurston are of great import for students studying the period of the “New Negro.” One of the questions to be examined is Hurston’s perspective on Negro life as natural and full rather than the focus many other writers had at the time of writing to “uplift” the Negro race. Hurston’s roots growing up in a black township clearly gave her a sense of racial pride and confidence in herself. The deep respect she had for her culture and an appreciation for languages and folklore were continually demonstrated in her writings.
Zora says it well in the film: “I belong to no race or time.” I believe Zora Neale Hurston was making a statement to the world that she refused to be put into a box of any sort. She truly was an intellectual rebel and a woman with her own artistic expression. The documentary fully supports this image of her and allows the viewer the unique experience of seeing Zora as an individual, woman, writer, storyteller and anthropologist. (Alice Lee)

Fiction:


Written at the end of the period under study in our Institute, this story is suggestive about the challenges that still face African-Americans despite the significant developments of the New Negro Movement. Set in a segregated “colored section” of a Northern city (likely Chicago), the story takes place in a three-room apartment where a teenaged girl named Tina lives with her mother and her eighty-year-old great aunt Susie. Tina’s father is dead, and her mother is gone at work for more than thirteen hours a day. Tina is failing in high school and hoping to escape by getting married. Her most immediate prospect, a boy named Luke Jones, is a cad interested only in his own pleasure. “It is hard to explain what has produced so many Lukes in the colored race,” the narrator of the story says, then makes an attempt to locate the cause of this alleged profusion of men who have been “slapped loose from every decent bit of manliness.” In a poignantly lyrical passage, the narrator searchingly examines African-American life and considers the conditions that have made Luke and Tina who they are:

There has to be too many young people: too few houses: too many things to long for and too little money to spend freely: too many women: too many men weak enough to make profit of the fact that they happen to be men: too few women with something in them to make them strong enough to walk over weak men: too much liquor: too many dives: too much street life: too few lovely homes …. Too many peasants lured out of cotton and corn fields and jammed down into roach-filled bed-buggy rattle-trap shim-shams of street after street after street of houses fading. (282)

Luke clearly intends to use Tina sexually, but her great-aunt, an aged, blind, yet canny representative of an earlier generation, protects her niece even though Tina, naively, doesn’t understand that she needs protecting. The looming tragedy is avoided, but the story ends somewhat ominously nonetheless. Will Tina come to understand Susie’s wisdom? Will she be crushed by the oppressive living conditions for many blacks in the North—or abused by a man who has been warped by those same conditions? Have the cultural, political, and economic achievements of the New Negro Renaissance benefited a working-class family like Tina’s? What does this rather pessimistic story from a celebrated New Negro Renaissance writer imply about the movement? (Frank Kovarik)


The Girl From Back Home by Ralf M. Coleman is a short drama about a young lady falling for a big city hustler. There is a common theme of “back home” being a reference to the South by blacks who moved up North to pursue better opportunities. As mentioned in a previous
annotation, the North takes on the persona of a bad place of temptation. This is ironic as the reason for fleeing the South was due to its limitations for blacks.

Della, the protagonist, describes herself as “good” before she met Jazz. Jazz is a hustler with his hands involved in all sorts of illegal activities (and women) in the city. He refuses to marry Della, causing her to become frustrated. Subsequently, she decides to run away with her high school sweetheart, Lee Minor, who has tracked her down in Harlem. Despite the fact that Lee is now both a farmer and doctor, it is made clear that he is financially inferior to Jazz. In response to Della’s wish to run away with Lee, Jazz questions why she would “go back home and starve to death with some hick doctor…?” This is a subtle suggestion that part of Jazz’s allure is the financial stability he’s able to offer. Coleman indirectly indicates that Della has dealt with Jazz’s behavior simply because of the financial benefits of the relationship.

The play ends with a showdown between Lee and Jazz. Lee’s love for Della causes him to stand up for her honor. This exhibition of bravery frightens Jazz, and he backs down. It is safe to say that Lee and Jazz symbolize the South and the North in this scene. The South is victorious as Lee leaves with Della. Jazz shrugs her off and picks up the phone to call another woman with whom he has been dealing. Foreshadowing comes to fruition as an early fear of Della’s ends the play. Jazz’s promiscuity has always scared Della as his women were married. Milly’s husband, Jim, is at the door as Jazz hangs up the phone after setting a date with Milly. Della’s onetime fear comes true as Jim murders Jazz in cold blood.

From a literature standpoint, The Girl From Back Home can be approached in a number of ways. Time should be spent on the title. “Back Home” clearly creates a distance between the South and the North. It will be worth researching the origin of such associations. Did all blacks refer to the South as back home? If so, why did they leave? Did leaving “back home” have a symbolic representation? If so, what? There is no direct mention of poverty, but does that mean it isn’t to be discussed? Are there any implications? Why is the North/city represented as a place of temptation? Why would so many people flock to such a place with a bad reputation?

The Girl From Back Home is worth using in class since it will encourage students to think. The effect of a poor upbringing in this play isn’t as obvious as it is in other pieces. This will go a long way in beginning the conversation in the classroom on digging beneath the surface. (Anthony McKinley)


According to Cooper’s foreword to Claude McKay’s Home to Harlem, published in 1928, McKay is perhaps the most controversial and misunderstood writer of the New Negro Renaissance. Born in 1890 in Jamaica into an impoverished family, McKay his would use his youth as the source for his first books of poetry entitled Song of Jamaica and Constab Ballads, both written in 1912. The awe-inspiring social and educational work of Booker T. Washington led this prodigious poet to the United States where he enrolled at Tuskegee Institute. Unfortunately his time there was short-lived due to the racial tensions that he had never experienced before. Later, he decided to enroll in Kansas State University, but his stay there too was brief as he decided to move to New York City. There he married and had a child, but the marriage, like his university stint, was momentary, and both mother and child moved to Jamaica. Under a pseudonym, two poems, “Invocation” and “The Harlem Dancer,” were published in 1917, receiving the attention of Max Eastman, the editor of The Liberator. On board at The Liberator, McKay not only wrote articles but would produce his most militant and fiery poems
about racial injustice and violence. In 1919, unhappy with the xenophobic response from the American-born Harlemites, the poet took to England, in hopes of finding camaraderie and acceptance. In England, he wrote a slim volume of poetry, *Spring in New Hampshire*, in 1920 and worked for a communist newspaper, *Worker's Dreadnough*. McKay quickly realized that he and his colonial kin had nothing in common, and he returned to Harlem. Back at *The Liberator*, he used this platform to criticize the New Negro Movement’s literary leaders, W.E.B. Du Bois, in particular, for his insistence on producing propagandistic literature for the purpose of racial uplift and equality. McKay became very interested in ethnic literature, in particular literature produced by marginalized people; thus he left for Russia where he found an affinity to the communist ideology. There he wrote *The Negro in America*, a collection of essays about the Negro problem. His prescription for the problem was to embrace Communism as a means for achieving genuine uplift and equality for blacks in the United States. While in Russia, McKay realized the communist ideology might infringe on how he approached particular subject matter in his work, and he decided to return home.

Due to the generous patronage of Louis Bryant Bullitt, McKay was able to focus on his prose, but it would take five years for him to produce a work that was critically received. In 1926, he wrote an anthology of short stories that his patroness forwarded to Harper and Brothers publishers, and with the supportive help of William Bradley, a literary agent, McKay was able to secure a long-term contract. Harper was interested in developing one of his short stories into a full-length novel, and this gave birth to his most successful work, *Home to Harlem*.

H.L. Menken, a naturalistic writer and essayist who insisted on using words as weapons to depict accurately the environment in which characters live, was the primary literary source for McKay’s novel. *Home to Harlem* examines issues of self-hatred, color complex, sexual struggle, corruption, and class division. Du Bois, saw the novel as perpetuating white America’s perception of black stereotypes. In a letter to a friend, McKay writes his reaction to his critics: “Leave the appreciation of what we are doing for the emancipated Negro intelligentsia.” Claude McKay did not kowtow to the black critics; rather, he continued to write honestly about the Negro problem in the United States, even at a professional and personal cost. (Héctor Huertas)


Angela Murray, the lead character in *Plum Bun*, leaves her family and roots behind in order to live as a white woman. She is a very fair-skinned African-American, and feels hopeless when she considers the prospects that being black offers. Initially, she believes “being white” will solve her problems and lead to inner peace.

Angela grows up in Philadelphia, and the reader may believe it was intentional on the author’s part to stage this novel in the North. Perhaps since most people associate racism with the South, the author wanted to show that blacks faced difficulties in all parts of the nation. Angela has a sister named Virginia, who is of a darker hue and not able to pass for white. Virginia is the opposite of Angela in the sense that Virginia actually accepts her role in the world and does not imitate white people. Angela seems to live for white people’s approval, and is repeatedly hurt when she is denied.

When their parents die, Angela moves to New York City and creates a new life—a white life. She forms friendships (based on a lie) and even falls in love. However, it is clear this relationship will never work. Her lover is of the upper crust, and Angela has no pedigree to
boast. He is interested in her for sexual purposes only. Angela can never truly be herself—she won’t even acknowledge her sister if her lover is present, fearful her secret may be exposed.

“Being white” has made Angela feel rotten, and her previous belief that it would solve her problems has been challenged. She knows that logic is incorrect, so she decides to tell her friends of her racially mixed heritage. Consequently, she loses her place in society and her friendships. She then travels to Europe where she meets a man who shares her racial background, and they have a serious relationship. Angela learns that being accepted by others is not the key to serenity. In conclusion, both characters come to terms with the realities of race, and decide to stop living a lie.

This novel is an excellent source of discussion for students. It requires some prefacing on race relations but really forces students to deal with identity and society’s perspectives. Can you simply “create” the person you want to be? Why is our main character so unhappy once she achieves her goal? In a high school setting, an educator can delve into questions of how our society is constructed. (La Donna Mays)


*Environment* by Mercedes Gilbert follows the Williamses as they struggle with their poor living environment in New York City. Their departure began as one filled with promise as the Williamses had money from the sale of a farm. But within a short time, Mr. Williams loses his job and turns to alcohol. The theme of the big city sucking the life out of people is evident in *Environment*. Before long, Mary Lou has aged “20 years” and her son Henry is running with the wrong crowd. Hope waits in Durham, where Carl (boyfriend of Edna, Mary Lou’s daughter) has a good job and a furnished home. Echoing Booker T. Washington, the idea of the South being the future for blacks is evident.

Things worsen as Mr. Williams is wrongly accused of murder and has to leave town with every penny Mary Lou possesses. Sexual advances by a crooked realtor/lawyer by the name of Mr. Jackson highlight the unfortunate situation Mary Lou is in. Against all odds, she remains relatively strong and doesn’t become a product of her environment. I say “relatively” because her situation worsens as Henry is shot and incarcerated while out with the wrong crowd. Coincidentally, Mr. Jackson is the mastermind behind the gang that has Henry’s attention. With nowhere to turn, Mary Lou trusts the only “friend” she thinks she has.

Without leaving much for speculation, Gilbert makes it crystal clear that Mary Lou will indeed fall victim to her surroundings. She agrees to a proposition that she can’t refuse, due to Henry’s predicament. The proposition calls for her to be a front as a widow for an apartment doubling as a supply house for dope, money, and alcohol. In return, Mr. Jackson will make sure Henry is exonerated.

The following and final act picks up two years later. The effect of the environment on the Williams family is clear as Edna is now a dope fiend. However, all isn’t bad as Mary Lou and Henry are back in Durham living a well-improved lifestyle. Their home is described as “large settee, comfortable chairs, and living room table, piano, and a general air of comfort, and prosperity.” This is a long way from the “poorly furnished combination dining room and kitchen” they inhabited in New York City. Predictable throughout the play, all ends well for the Williams family. Father is found a free man, Edna is clean, and all are due to unite in Durham. In addition, Henry manages to fall in love with Mr. Jackson’s daughter and all is forgiven (after a few death threats and handshakes).
While not a suggested drama to read in the classroom, the play raises a number of questions worth discussing. Why the opposing representations of city life in the North and country life in the South? Where did this contrast originate? Why is the play so formally written? What does this style suggest about black vernacular? Why the need for everything to end so happily? Do you think Gilbert set out with a preconceived agenda before writing this play? Why or why not?

Dealing with these questions will lead to further discussions on The New Negro Renaissance. The role of poverty is quite clear. This new, impoverished environment creates an attitude where acceptance is ok. Mary Lou’s situation causes her to have to deal with sexual innuendos and insults from wealthier men. Edna will not leave her family for a much better situation in Durham because she is needed to help in New York City. Henry considers quitting school to work because of their dire predicament. Last but not least, Mr. Williams becomes an alcoholic and physically abusive to Mary Lou. While the effect of this poor environment is obvious, so is the resolve of the Williams family. They weather the storm and dock safely in Durham. It is clear that they never should have left. (Anthony McKinley)


This short, often funny story dramatizes one aspect of the racial dynamics of the New Negro Renaissance—the patronizing, paternalistic, condescending racism of white dilettantes who were drawn to blacks and to Harlem nightlife as a type of fad, and as a connection to an imagined primitiveness that they projected on to African-Americans. Anne and Michael Carraway, a young white couple who live in the Village, “were people who went in for Negroes…. But not in the social-service, philanthropic sort of way, no. They saw no use in helping a race that was already too charming and naive and lovely for words.” The Carraways employ two African-Americans in their home—a woman named Mattie as a maid and cook and a boy named Luther as a putative gardener, who mainly functions as a model for Anne, a painter. “He’s so utterly Negro,” Michael says delightedly when he first sees Luther. For her part, Anne loves to stare at Luther while he’s asleep, and she eventually decides to paint him with his shirt off (as the titular slave on the block). The Carraways don’t really interact with Mattie and Luther as human beings; Mattie and Luther neither understand nor like their white employers—“They didn’t understand the vagaries of white folks, … and they didn’t want to be bothered trying.” Even though this interracial group of people live together under the same roof (albeit both black characters sleep in the basement) and the Carraways think of themselves as quite enlightened and liberal, they are in a sense just as segregated as any group of whites and blacks in America. When Michael’s mother, a more traditional racist, shows up, the story’s latent tensions come to a head.

This story would work well for a high school class. Once students understand the satirical tone, the story should be fairly clear for them. “Slave on the Block” helps illustrate a well-known aspect of the Harlem Renaissance that students might otherwise have difficulty understanding, and it includes cultural and historical references (to W. E. B. Du Bois, Countee Cullen, Paul Robeson, etc.) that offer teachers an opportunity to branch out beyond the story. (Frank Kovarik)

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* represents Hurston’s masterful telling of a woman’s journey to physical, sexual and emotional independence. Janie is defined through men, until she takes definitive action and frees herself. Janie is a hero. And her language, a distinct, black vernacular, is the language of a hero.

Janie’s voice, written in dialect throughout the novel, is compatible with and blends effectively with the omniscient narration, represented in standard English. The reader immediately recognizes the power and wisdom of Hurston’s omniscient narrator. The narrator possesses an eloquent and insightful voice, helping us to understand fundamental differences between women and men. Readers are quickly tuned in to the possibility of women’s dreams and the truth of these dreams to which women hold fast.

Janie’s narrative begins quite seamlessly, and as she talks, her persona is sometimes indistinguishable from the omniscient narrator, even though Janie speaks in vernacular. Both Janie and the narrator possess eloquent language, insight, and elevated ideas. Like Janie, the narrator seems to have a soul and speaks to the desire for justice and balance. As the narration flows, we lose our sense that there is a difference in the two styles. Both voices are insightful and sensitive, and in crafting her vernacular as she does, assigning the protagonist the same sensibility and overall characteristics of her reliable and wise narrator, Hurston transcends previously established boundaries regarding folk language.

In Chapter 16, Hurston presents a character whose very depiction offers commentary on contemporary ideology. Mrs. Turner is a misshapen woman, immediately dislikable based on her appearance, her arrogance and her disposition. In a conversation with Janie, Mrs. Turner says, “Ah hates tuh see folks lak me and you mixed up wid ‘em. Us oughta class off.” And then later, she adds, “Dey laughs too much and dey laughs too loud. Always singin’ ol’ nigger songs! Always cuttin’ de monkey for white folks. If it wuzn’t for so many black folks it wouldn’t be no race problem. De white folks would take us in wid dem. De black ones in holdin’ us back.” Within the world of the novel, Mrs. Turner is a color-struck woman who is filled with loathing for her own racial group. She is bitter and hateful, and rightfully despised by the rest of the community. She reviles their practices and them, and they return the favor.

In a broader context, Mrs. Turner’s voice echoes the idea of a black elite, a Talented Tenth that Du Bois defined in his 1903 essay of the same name. Mrs. Turner favors fair-skinned African-Americans, those who largely formed the Talented Tenth. Hurston seems to—not so indirectly—indict the black elite via Mrs. Turner for forsaking the good folk of the South. Mrs. Turner hates black people for laughing and singing and for showing all the signs that they enjoy life, the very things that Hurston spent years documenting about African-Americans. Readers easily despise Mrs. Turner due to her contemptuous nature. She is a negative force, and more than anything, she wants to pry Janie apart from Tea Cake, the one man who has finally brought some satisfaction to our protagonist/heroine.

Like all the other characters, Mrs. Turner speaks in vernacular. This detail fits with Hurston’s challenge to traditional and stereotypical uses of vernacular. Readers are forced to look beyond simple language use when analyzing character. The language neither elevates nor demeans any character. The characters are Southern, and the complexity of their lives and identity is reflected in the complexity of the vernacular they speak.

With her authentic language and her focus on Southern black folk, Hurston’s work stood apart from other examples of New Negro literature, in which protagonists moved North to achieve and develop a sense of identity. When Janie leaves the muck following Tea Cake’s death, she has a developed identity, having “been to the horizon.” And when she leaves the
muck, she does not flee to the North for life and culture. She returns to her Southern town, to Eatonville, the all-black township, a community where she immediately helps Phoebe grow ten metaphorical feet taller from the hearing—in vernacular—of Janie’s inspiring tale.

Hurston suggests that a New Negro can separate herself from an oppressive past, as Janie pulls apart from the life to which her grandmother tries to shackle her. Further, a New Negro, like Janie, can speak vernacular, and be insightful, witty, and self-possessed. Finally, a New Negro can reject material comforts and pursue other, more personally satisfying goals, those of love and emotional fulfillment. (Vickie Adamson)


Gavin Jones writes this book to “redress the neglect of poverty as a category of critical discourse in the study of American literature and culture.” While Jones’s work covers more than a century, his focus in “Part Three” on Richard Wright’s Black Boy fits well with the time period of The New Negro Renaissance.

When discussing Black Boy, Jones is looking to “realize the difference race makes in the experience of poverty by African Americans.” The chapter entitled “Race, Class, and Poor Richard” addresses the complex role of poverty as both a motivator and a depressant. My 11th grade American Literature class can approach the topic of the “American Dream” from the perspective of race and class—What is the “American Dream?” Does its definition change when race is factored in? If so, how? Does the definition continue to change based on different races? Are all races entitled to this dream? Why or why not?

Jones discusses how Wright cleverly describes his poor upbringing as a “hunger for life.” This seemingly simplistic description is deceptive. The mention of hunger results in a direct association with a hunger for knowledge—making clear the obvious fact that one must eat to live. In addition, it paints the picture of a need to be educated to live. The need to be educated is the positive motivation. Jones alludes to this during a scene in Black Boy where Wright watches his peers enjoy sardine sandwiches during lunch. When Wright says, “Someday I would end this hunger of mine,” his determination is clear. Jones also pinpoints a more negative aspect of poverty. The lack of food during his childhood resulted in Wright’s being malnourished. This malnourishment prevented him from meeting a level of performance that would’ve improved his financial situation. Jones writes, “biting hunger affects Wright psychologically…it also impacts him physically…initially preventing him from meeting the weight requirement for a permanent job in the U.S. Postal Service.” Concrete examples of the positive and negative prove the complicated and opposing effects of poverty.

From a perspective focusing specifically on the role poverty plays in African-American Literature, Jones’s book is a good initial resource. It directly references Black Boy as a source worth researching. It also presents both sides of poverty and even provides an example where it supersedes race. Wright’s horrid situation caused his isolation from other young blacks. As often happens in literature, an ambiguous conclusion allows the reader to draw on his/her personal interpretation and provide support to defend a claim, encouraging independent thought in the classroom. (Anthony McKinley)

Nella Larsen’s *Passing* was first published in 1929 and has been somewhat controversial ever since. The novel recounts the story of two adult women and their rocky friendship. The reader is informed that these characters, Irene and Clare, are being reunited after a twelve-year separation. These women have interesting love lives and social circles, but what really makes them different from mainstream society is that they are African-American women that at times pass for white. This novel reflects American society, both positive and negative, and its views on race. Although race is central to the plot of the story, it can be argued that the novel equally stresses the difficulties one faces when aspiring to move between certain social classes.

From a racial perspective, *Passing* examines skin color from all sides. Irene is quite content as a black American and identifies herself as such; however, she passes when it is convenient, and if others assume she is white, she does not correct their theory. On the contrary, Clare has been passing as a white woman for over a decade and goes out of her way to hide her black identity. She refuses to accept the position that the United States offered blacks at the time. Even though she travels in white social circles and has a white husband, she yearns to be in touch with her culture. These two characters are juxtaposed against numerous institutions (marriage, parenting, racism), and some light is shed on their differences. Irene is content to a certain extent, while Clare is constantly searching for fulfillment. Irene is jealous of Clare’s way with men (and even suspects Clare of having an affair with her husband) and is curious about Clare’s new way of life. Clare is envious of Irene’s stability and Irene’s connections to their fellow blacks. There are moments when the woman tire of each other, but what binds them is their racial identity, gender, and sense of emptiness.

Larsen’s novel is a model of ambiguity. We hear only Irene’s narration, which means we don’t know if everything we are being told is true. Several situations can be interpreted in numerous ways. For instance, if Irene is so content as a black woman, why does she sometimes pass? If Clare has gotten away with people thinking she’s white, why isn’t she happy? What is the real relationship between these women, since they straddle the line between friends and enemies? The characters mirror each other, even when they are at odds. The story is ambiguous until the very end. The last few pages focus on a scenario between the two women that leaves the reader unsure of what exactly took place. However, the reader is sure that one of the women feels a sense of relief about the ending of the novel.

*Passing* also reiterates the concept of the tragic mulatto character in the black media. From the outset, we are fully aware that race will be a problem for these characters. We know these women will feel stuck between two worlds, and true to form, because full acceptance is not found in either world, tragedy ensues. This novel allows the reader to take an in-depth look at being of mixed race in the 1920s. Larsen invites her reader along on this gloomy journey, and it is an unspoken rule that a novel of this type will not have an upbeat ending. However, the intended audience for this book would be those who want to deal with the inner workings of race, and not just a clean resolution. It is also important to note that Larsen was of mixed heritage, and was considered a tragic mulatto by some in her lifetime. Many critics believe *Passing* is more autobiographical than fiction.

This book is appropriate for high school students, particularly for English and History classes. Some background discussion will be necessary for proper usage of the novel. The book is relatively short (less than 200 pages) and an easy read. *Passing* encourages students and educators to partake in thoughtful discussions on race and class in our country. (La Donna Mays)


Published pseudonymously before either of Larsen’s novels, this story offers an interesting twist on the theme of “passing,” later taken up by the author in her 1929 novel. In fact, this story is not truly a story of racial passing at all, but it leads the reader to imagine that it is. The story takes place at a party “in one of Long Island’s most exclusive sets.” The main character, Julia Romley, wears a dress of “pale indefinite gray” that calls attention to “the flaring mop of her hair,” which is red. The room “blaze[s] with color,” for “the gorgeous things which the women were wearing had for this once managed to subdue the strident tones of the inevitable black and white of the men’s costumes.” This attention to color continues as Julia notices a familiar face among the partiers, a “tall, thin man, his lean face yellowed and hardened as if by years in the tropics.” The presence of this “tall browned man,” Ralph Tyler, described jokingly as an Indian chief, sends a chill of dread through Julia, for he knows some secret from Julia’s past, one that threatens her marriage to Jim Romley and her elite social position. The references to color in the opening paragraph of the story, as well as the ambiguity of Ralph Tyler’s race, cause us to wonder if the secret is that Julia has black ancestry that she has concealed. Eventually, Julia decides to put herself at Tyler’s mercy and ask him not to reveal her secret to her husband. That secret, we come to learn, has nothing to do with her race. Instead, it has to do with sex. Julia was Ralph Tyler’s mistress back when she was “sick and starving on the streets” and “grateful for food and shelter at any price.”

Julia Romney has been “passing,” in a sense—passing as a “virtuous” women when in fact her society would view her as “fallen.” The story causes us to consider that this notion of female honor is just as much a social construction as is race. Yet these social constructions obviously can have profound consequences for individuals’ lives. The story offers teachers a chance to discuss what Marcy Knopf calls in her introduction to this volume the “triple oppression” of women in the New Negro Renaissance, who often faced prejudice and adversities based on their race, class, and sex. (Frank Kovarik)


Nugent’s short story “Smoke, Lilies, and Jade,” published in the one and only issue of Wallace Thurman’s *Fire!!* in 1926, was to become the first gay fiction written by an African-American. Narrated mostly from the point of view of Alex, the text shares with us his innermost thoughts and emotions. Presently Alex is nineteen, but through his flashbacks, we learn that Alex arrived in New York City at the age of fourteen. His father had died when Alex was thirteen; however, he is emotionally unaffected except when his mother begins to lament. Unlike his younger sibling, who has been consistently working on the stage making $35.00 a week and owns three suits, Alex, the older son, is a disappointment to his mother since his artistic vocation has not earned him a regular salary. Even though he feels alienated by his mother, Alex does not attempt to appease her. The protagonist’s success lies with meeting his friends at night and talking about Freud, Boccaccio, and Schnitzler. His illustrious cadre includes Wallace Thurman,
Zora Neale Hurston, and Langston Hughes, just to name a few. Again in his mind, he asks himself a rhetorical question in his own defense because of his lack of meeting his mother’s expectations: Did Goya, Wilde, and Shelly ask their mothers if they should pursue their art? Becoming a bit restless, Alex goes out in hopes of meeting his friends. He stops at the neighborhood cafeteria, where he eventually converses with other people about art. Another night he goes to Monty’s apartment in the Village for a party where Zora will showcase her most recent text to Alex and others. He leaves the party at 4 a.m., and as he is walking home, the sound of his shoe’s heel against the pavement is echoed in another’s man footstep, a man who randomly comes up to Alex and in Spanish asks for a light for his cigarette. The man, Adrian, goes to Alex’s apartment and spends an amorous early morning with his new lover. When Alex wakes up, he thinks of how great it would be if Beauty (Adrian) would meet his dearest friend, Melva. Later, he attends church where he sees familiar faces, such as Hughes and Paul Robeson. This is an especially important day, since some of the singers from the church will be performing a song written by his dear friend Langston Hughes. After the service, Melva and Alex go the amusement park to enjoy a ride on the Ferris wheel. They kiss each other goodbye at the subway, and Alex returns home. There Beauty and Alex are embracing and kissing, and Alex thinks to himself, “One can Love.”

“Smoke, Lilies, and Jade” is written completely in elliptical sentences that structurally reinforce the stream of consciousness narration. Nugent’s technique emboldens Alex’s voice as he internally debates with his mother, but more importantly it psychologically and emotionally prepares him to have a relationship with another man. The elliptical construction may be read as Alex’s inability to formulate a complete and successive thought to fruition; however, it may also illustrate Alex’s ability to discern the complexities of myriad issues while maintaining a positive perspective on his life, the people surrounding him, and the community in which he lives. Further, this stylistic strategy challenges the previous paradigms of modes of narration and style, but also alerts Nugent’s Harlem contemporaries that constructing a new race literature requires a creative, affirmative, and intrepid authorial voice. Aware of the backlash that such a story would provoke, Nugent, like Alex, was unconcerned about appeasing others and only concerned about his artistry and about being comfortable in his own black gay skin. (Héctor Huertas)


The audacity of this satirical novel’s premise will probably appeal to high school students. A black scientist develops a procedure that makes black people appear white. Backed by a pair of black businessmen, he offers his services to black Americans and sets off a nationwide craze that eventually depopulates the country of virtually all visibly dark-skinned people. Alongside this larger story is the more particular story of a young man in Harlem who undergoes the procedure in hopes of snagging a white woman who has rebuffed him. He ends up traveling to the South and becoming a key advisor to a white supremacist with designs on national office. Schuyler’s Juvenalian satire is not subtle, and he leaves few if any targets standing. This lack of subtlety also makes the book widely accessible to high school students. As a book that requires little in the way of explication (indeed, it often explicates itself), Black No More could work well as a book to have students read on their own—as summer reading or for extra credit. On the other hand, it is also a novel that could spur some conversations in class about issues that are important for thinking about race in America. Does skin color mean anything beyond pigmentation? How is race a social construction? How do politicians,
businessmen, and outright scoundrels exploit race for their own benefit? How and why does our world go so crazy when it comes to race—both in the past and today? How does satire, as a genre, allow Schuyler to think about race in America in ways that other genres employed by New Negro Renaissance writers do not? What sorts of contemporary satires are thinking about race in America—and do they bear the stamp of Schuyler’s influence? (Frank Kovarik)


As depicted by David Levering Lewis and by this NEH Institute, the New Negro Renaissance begins as a story about manhood. The veterans who returned home from World War I had a new sense of themselves as men, despite the humiliations and prejudice they faced in the service. This new sense of manhood set the stage for blacks’ efforts at self-redefinition during the Renaissance. African-American men, we must remember, found themselves in a nation that largely refused to acknowledge their manhood. Whites routinely referred to black men as “boys.” Lynching of black men in America often included ritual castration. In this context, Richard Wright’s story of seventeen-year-old Dave Saunders’s quest to become a man takes on an interesting significance and raises important questions: How does a black boy become a man in America? What structures and institutions guide that process? How well does American society serve young black males as they develop into manhood?

Wright’s story, written near the end of the Renaissance, is particularly interesting because it is set in the rural South, and its character is not a member of the Talented Tenth. Dave is an uneducated, perhaps even illiterate farm laborer. His family is poor. His mother has been saving Dave’s wages in order to send him to school in the fall. But school doesn’t seem to Dave to offer much hope for manhood. Manhood for Dave is embodied in the dream of obtaining a gun. The gun carries clear phallic connotations. Indeed, at one point in the story Dave ties the gun to his thigh, suggesting a kind of prosthetic, and potent, penis. Given the history of violence toward blacks in rural areas, guns were also important for African-American men (and women) as a means of self-protection, as a defense against emasculating abuse. Dave’s mother acknowledges that Dave’s father does in fact need a gun. So perhaps Dave’s equation of the gun with manhood makes a kind of sense.

Dave buys a two-dollar pistol and accidentally kills his employer’s mule with it. When the truth comes out, he is faced with the prospect of two years of further farm labor to pay for the mule. While a conventional story about becoming a man might have Dave learn the value of responsibility by working to fix his mistake, in this instance the price seems too high—a kind of peonage, and a further postponement of Dave’s education and hopes of any other kind of life. Instead of accepting such a steep punishment, Dave flees with gun in hand, hopping a train that he hopes will take him “away to somewhere, somewhere where he could be a man.” (Frank Kovarik)

Films:


*Brother to Brother*’s young protagonist, Perry, is an aesthete who paints and writes in attempts to convey the “war within [him]” visually and textually. The causes of his emotional and psychological war derive from two incidents. The first was Perry’s rejection by his parents when his father found him kissing a boyfriend and kicked him out of the house. The other was during a class discussion of James Baldwin’s book The Fire Next Time. Perry argued that because Baldwin was openly gay, his contemporaries kept him from participating in the Civil Rights Movement, mirroring what Perry experiences when a couple of classmates censure him due to this commentary. While sitting on a stoop listening to Marcus, his straight wingman, recite his most recent poetic invention, Perry meets an unlikely man, Bruce Nugent, a Harlem Renaissance writer whose polemical short stories provoked controversy among the Negro intelligentsia because of his depiction of same sex desire. In turn, Bruce, *Brother to Brother*’s elderly protagonist, recites his own lines to the two burgeoning artists. For days thereafter, Nugent’s recitation haunts Perry; thus he dives into reading and studying not only Nugent’s works but those of other New Negro Renaissance writers. As they get to know one another, Nugent shares memories of his creative alliances with Hurston, Hughes, and Thurman, of cavorting with other gay black and white libertines, of defending the value and legitimacy of his work, of forging his identity as a black gay man living in a very hostile environment, and presently dealing with the vicissitudes of life and time, two things that Nugent has very little of left. This acquaintance between Bruce and Perry provides each of them an empathetic and compassionate listener and develops into a loving friendship. Like Perry, Bruce is also a painter and asks Perry to pose for a portrait, and they agree to meet the following day at the same time. Unfortunately, never too far from gays and lesbians, homophobia rears its ugly head when Perry’s classmate has him beaten violently by a gang of other black men. The scene ends with the classmate burning Perry’s cheek with a lit cigarette. Perry secludes himself in his 10 x 10 dormitory for a week until Bruce forces him to leave his self-imposed confinement so he can start the portrait. In a dilapidated room lit with candles all around, Perry and Bruce sit for each other’s portrait. Both sleep in the improvised art studio overnight, and the next day, when Perry attempts to wake Bruce, he realizes that his friend has passed away. *Brother to Brother* concludes with Perry scattering Bruce’s ashes along the beach.

The opening scene of *Brother to Brother* has Perry sitting in the subway train writing in his journal, and the audience is privy to his internal monologue. Trains and buses in transit suggest that our young protagonist is on a journey of self-discovery via his art, writing, and the people he meets along the way. Art and writing provide a space where Perry can map his ideas and emotions without rejection, without censure, and without criticism. His solitude and art help him mute the noise from his parents, classmates, society, and even from himself. Perry cannot live in this space perpetually; he has to move within the social environment that he inhabits, even if that environment does not acknowledge or respect him as a valued individual.

The cinematic narrative moves along nicely, due to the director’s technique of paralleling the lives of Perry and Bruce through flashbacks. Perry’s flashbacks incite anger and anxiety, since they are a response to his parents’ rejection, which has made him feel unlovable. Also they make him vulnerable to giving of himself emotionally and sexually to people, namely to his white, closeted bisexual classmate, who uses Perry to explore his own inadequacies about his unstable sexual identity and live out his fantasies of sex with black men. Bruce’s flashbacks serve important functions mostly for Perry but also for the elder protagonist himself. First they
provide the young aesthete with an American movement that has been almost forgotten in the annals of literary history. The movement is a source of inspiration for Perry as he begins to evolve artistically and to look at his artwork and writing as part of a longer tradition of black aesthetic. Bruce fondly recalls these memories since they remind him of a time when he was surrounded by people who genuinely respected his life’s work and respected him personally. The creative synergy created by Nugent’s association with the other writers, such as Hurston and Hughes, has provided a body of work that adds to America’s narrative. Together these flashbacks unite Perry and Bruce, regardless of time and space. (Héctor Huertas)


This film shows how Langston Hughes successfully fused jazz, blues, and common speech (black dialect) to celebrate the beauty of black life. A central figure of the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes is regarded by some as one of the most prominent figures of this era. His poetry is fraught with black dialect (as is the literature of his “friend” and sometimes adversary, Zora Neale Hurston) and seems to bridge a gap between the old and the new Negro. *Hughes’ Dream Harlem*, in partnership with readings of his and Zora Neale Hurston’s writings, will inspire students to discover Hughes’s work, to compare and contrast his writing with that of Zora Neale Hurston while also comparing and contrasting their ideas of the New Negro. At the same time, students will be encouraged to pursue their own writing. (Percy Joshua)


The second part of a six-part documentary that originally aired on PBS, this video focuses on the development of black art during the New Negro Renaissance. Featuring interviews with notable figures like Gerald Early, Cornel West, Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Wynton Marsalis, Cheryl Wall, August Wilson, and John Edgar Wideman, the film offers a succinct and authoritative introduction that would work well in a high school course.

The film begins by discussing the cultural significance of black female blues singers like Mamie Smith, Ma Rainey, and, especially, Bessie Smith. August Wilson memorably describes the first time he heard a recording of Bessie Smith. Having purchased an old 78 of a recording called “Nobody in Town Can Make a Sweet Jelly Roll Like Mine,” Wilson put it on his record player. “The universe stuttered,” Wilson recalls, expressing his amazement at the power of Smith’s voice and the emotional impact of the song.

As more and more African-Americans migrated to the North, a cosmopolitan black community emerged, along with an intelligentsia and a group of artists who strove to make sense of this mass experience, as Wynton Marsalis puts it. At the same time, some whites also became fascinated with this black culture. The film narrates the efforts of black magazines like *The Crisis* and *Opportunity* to cultivate a black literary movement through the establishment of literary contests. Yet these developments, of course, were not without controversy. The film explains debates within the movement about the effects of white patronage, as well as
disagreements about whether or not art should primarily seek to advance the Negro race or, instead, seek new possibilities of artistic expression in the “Jazz Age,” an era that Early defines as a “radical revision of how art is made in the Western world.” Du Bois and other black intellectuals struggled with the question of what constitutes the maximum social effectiveness of art. Cornel West notes that black art has at times been reduced to social protest, although over history it has been “so much deeper than that.” One problem, West asserts, is some black writers’ “preoccupation with the white normative gaze,” which, as West says, “you have to hold at arm’s length or you’ll never have the courage to look deep into your own past.”

The final segment of the episode uses Zora Neale Hurston as a kind of case study of these issues. Supported by white patrons, Hurston did ethnological research in the South (as a child she lived in Eatonville, Florida) but struggled to earn the trust of the rural blacks she encountered. Later, Hurston learned how to blend into the communities she researched, and her work was much more fruitful. Hurston also eventually learned to shake off the control of her patron Charlotte Osgood Mason. The publication of her 1937 novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God, put her at odds with Richard Wright, one of the “new voices of rage and resentment” in African-American literature, who felt that Hurston’s novel was, as Early puts it, the literary equivalent of a “coon show,” insufficiently engaged in political struggle. Through Cornel West, the film concludes by suggesting that Hurston, along with Langston Hughes and, in our own time, Toni Morrison, believes in the humanity of everyday folk and, taking that for granted, digs deep into that humanity through writing, unafraid of what she might find. (Frank Kovarik)


Fannie Hurst was quite involved in the Harlem Renaissance and, like many Americans, was fascinated by race relations. Her novel *Imitation of Life* (1933) took a direct look at racial taboos of the day, especially those of African-Americans who attempted to pass as white. This novel deals with the dynamics of class, race, and familial bonds in a way that examines both sides of the color line. The novel was made into a film twice, and the 1959 version (directed by Douglas Sirk) has come to be considered a classic by several critics.

The main character in the film is Lora Meredith (portrayed by Lana Turner and based on Bea in the novel). Lora is a young widow who is raising her daughter Suzie on her own while struggling to maintain a decent living. Lora meets Annie (portrayed by Juanita Moore in the film and based on Delilah in the novel) at the beginning of the film, and the two bond over their young children. However, when the audience is introduced to Annie’s daughter, named Sarah Jane, we see what the rest of society observes. Annie has the deep brown skin usually associated with African-Americans while Sara Jane is of an extremely light hue and can easily pass for white. The viewer instantly knows this will cause strife throughout the film. The viewer knows this because it was no secret that in 1933 (when the novel was written) and 1959 (when the film was released) blacks and whites operated in separate, unequal worlds. The novel/film shows the characters as they navigate through life trying to obtain better social positions in the world by several different measures.

Hurst and Sirk spend a fair amount of time in their works helping us really get to the heart of the characters. From an African-American perspective, we see grim possibilities. Even though Lora and Annie are in the same predicament as single moms, Lora’s demeanor is not as bleak. She knows her child will have options. Annie cannot say the same. Annie works as a
maid, and comes off as a “mammy” of sorts. She is constantly catering to white people’s needs. Sara Jane is terrified that this may be her fate in the world, so she decides she wants nothing to do with being black. These works radiate the eternal hopelessness of black Americans living in the early 1900s—particularly the feeling that there is nothing one can do to join mainstream society. Skin color is so significant that it takes precedence over the mother/daughter relationship. A child is even willing to cut all ties with family if it means she can join the white world. Several questions come to mind while reading/viewing these works. How important was skin color in the day-to-day lives of Americans? What were the difficulties that passing African-Americans faced? How could those who were passing cut themselves off from their families and heritage? What many readers might find surprising is that they actually come to sympathize with Sara Jane. She is not likable in the least; however, one does lament that she started out in life at a disadvantage.

From the perspective of the passing African-American, we are shown the constant fear of the truth being unleashed. Sara Jane is always looking over her shoulder and ready to run to a new town at any moment. She loses a lover when he finds out she is black, and she is constantly struggling to find employment. We get the sense of the gloominess she feels when she passes, as we know she is never completely at ease with the moral decisions she must make. One reason this book/film has found such a stronghold in American history is that it deals with the ugly side of race relations, and the way the characters are pawns in a game they never asked to play.

Excerpts of this book/film are appropriate for middle/high school students as long as the content is discussed before viewing. The content will conjure questions of identity, race, and character. Such content is pertinent to addressing United States History and relevant literature of the New Negro Renaissance period. On another note, I also think the intended audience for this book would be any educator who had difficulty understanding why some African-Americans chose to pass. The novel, in its entirety, would be long and difficult to read for some students; however the film would suffice without skipping over any crucial elements. (La Donna Mays)


Looking for Langston is a not biopic about Langston Hughes; rather it is a “meditation” on his associations with Harlem’s gay, lesbian, and bisexual subculture during the Harlem Renaissance. Issac Julien, the director of the film, in the commentary track refers to the film as a meditation on the poet, since he is interested in examining and interpreting the period that helped give voice to Hughes’s jazz and folk poetry. The film weaves together archival footage of Langston Hughes reciting poetry, of downtown Harlem, and other footage of Harlemite writers, singers, and artists. Julien introduces the speakeasy that was frequented by many of the Harlem writers. The speakeasy was more than just a spot where one could hear live music, view beautiful women and cross-dressing men singing the blues and jazz, but more importantly it was a space where queer desire, sexuality, sexual issues and relationships converged. For the time that queer artists inhabited this space, their identity was not scorned and dismissed; rather it was celebrated as gays and lesbians danced with each other without the moral majority of the black bourgeoisie intelligentsia admonishing their lifestyle. The speakeasy, the cabarets and drag balls were the source of many of Hughes’s poems. Poetry provides an emotional and personal space where the
poet may sublimate his emotions and ideas through coded words and phrases. Unlike Nugent, who blatantly discloses his sexuality through his story’s protagonist, the voice in some of Hughes’s poetry speaks of alienation and being misunderstood. *Looking for Langston* portrays Hughes as an openly gay person who enjoys the amenities that Harlem has to offer to its gay and lesbian residents. This is an art house film dedicated, according to the director, to James Baldwin, who died two years before the film premiered in 1989. Julien places Baldwin’s photograph in the speakeasy scenes as way of illustrating how Hughes shaped Baldwin’s works. Even though Julien takes creative license in portraying Hughes’s life, it is nevertheless a beautiful black and white film that pays homage to Langston Hughes and his artistic progeny, James Baldwin. (Héctor Huertas)


Students are prone to love this film. It is beautiful and visually appealing (Halle Berry and Michael Ealy are both extremely attractive); but the film chooses to highlight aspects of Hurston’s novel at the expense of other matters that teachers, in particular, consider more important. The film dwells on the love and chemistry between two beautiful people, and as it races toward their union, it distorts other plot points that are more thematically significant. Just as in Hurston’s novel, the characters in the film also speak in the vernacular. The actors are so comfortable with language that it is hardly noticeable that they are using a non-standard dialect, and this is one highlight of the movie. Students can watch, listen, and improve their comprehension of the text by developing an ear for the vernacular. They can better understand how what is written sounds when it is spoken aloud. For this reason, segments of the film are worth viewing, but the scenes to illustrate the language should be carefully chosen. It would be best to use a scene that does not distort and disagree with the novel’s intent. For example, the scene in which Nanny (Ruby Dee) informs Janie (Halle Berry) that she must marry a much older Logan Killicks is well acted, and the vernacular is delivered in exemplary fashion. However, just after this scene, in her frustration Janie runs off, jumps in a lake, and when Nanny questions her whereabouts, she responds, “I’m watching God.” In the novel, Hurston’s narrative voice delivers the title reference during a violent storm in which the characters fear for their lives. The line is profound and matches the emotional state and maturity of the characters it refers to. Yet in the scene of the film, sixteen-year-old Janie delivers the line with absolutely no context. She goes on to repeat this line at other random moments that lack the gravity Hurston constructs in the text. In instances like this, it does not matter if the characters use authentic language or not when the meaning of the story is changed so perceptibly.
Additionally, consider Janie’s return to Eatonville in the beginning of the film. She, as the novel describes, is in overalls; however, she is barefoot and empty handed. Presuming that she has just walked a great distance, this does not make our heroine appear to be very bright. In contrast to her ragged and dirty look, the film presents the townspeople in their Sunday best: women in clean, starched pastel-colored dresses and men in crisp, white shirt sleeves and ties. Some men are even on the porch of the store playing checkers. Compare this to the image painted by the written text: “These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human.” By the second scene, the filmmakers are already going in a different direction with the story. The townspeople appear to be privileged and middle-class, engaged in leisurely pursuits.

The juke-joint scene seems to capture, visually, the spirit and look of jooks. The people are having a good time, and the music is sultry. However, performer Ricky Fante sings “Simply Beautiful,” an Al Green tune. It is curious that there is not a song from the Renaissance. And while there is a kind of bluesy trumpet and sometimes a guitar refrain echoing throughout the film, this music too does not appear to be from the New Negro Renaissance. There are no credits at the end of the film to acknowledge any of the music sources, perhaps because all of the music is contemporary.

In choosing to bring Hurston’s text to visual life, the filmmakers had a particular idea. This film tells of two lovers ignited for an ephemeral moment of intense love. This is one part of the plot, and it eclipses everything else. While the film tells a good story, unfortunately it is not Hurston’s novel. If Hurston’s text were merely a love story, it would not have the enduring qualities that compel us to read it today. The film, though long anticipated and hoped for, falls short of bringing this full text to life. (Vickie Adamson)


This film constitutes Oscar Micheaux’s second film adaptation of Charles W. Chesnutt’s 1900 novel *The House Behind the Cedars*. Chesnutt’s novel might be classified as belonging to the “tragic mulatto” genre. In the novel, John Warwick, a successful South Carolina attorney, returns to his North Carolina hometown to surreptitiously visit his mother and sister. Warwick has made a new life for himself, passing for white in South Carolina. He persuades his sister, Rena, to come live with him and pass for white as well. Rena (or Rowena, as she calls herself) eventually falls in love with a white man, George Tryon, and is engaged to marry him. Through a series of accidents, her fiance discovers her black ancestry and cancels the engagement. Rena, heartbroken and angry, eventually takes a job as a schoolteacher, coincidentally at a school close to where Tryon resides. Pursued romantically by a somewhat corrupt black man and coming into unwanted contact with Tryon, Rena is emotionally distraught and ultimately meets a tragic end.

Micheaux’s film simplifies and revises the storyline drastically, in ways that seem aligned with New Negro ideals. For one thing, in the film Rena is much more resistant to her brother’s plan. She is in love with a black man—an educated New Negro named Frank Fowler. In the novel, Frank is a relatively uneducated cooper, and Rena sees him only as a loyal friend. In the film, although Rena acquiesces to John and does become engaged to Tryon, she cannot stand living a lie, and she misses her mother and Frank terribly. Ultimately, she chooses to return to her life as a colored person. The film thus embodies New Negro ideals of racial pride. Rena
has no desire to be white. Though she is light-skinned, her lover is dark-skinned. She returns eagerly to a black world that the film depicts as stable, cultured, and also fun.

Though the sound and picture quality of this film are not great, in conjunction with the novel it could be interesting to use in class or as an independent project for students. The differences between the novel and the film lend themselves readily to a class discussion about the changing attitudes prompted by the New Negro Renaissance. (Frank Kovarik)

Musical Recordings:


Poetry:


In the first stanza of Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “The Debt,” the idea of a vague debt is introduced. There is no mention of what kind of debt is owed, nor a mention of to whom. Obvious is the fact that an uninhibited decision resulted in an eternity of suffering for the debtor.

While the mention of the debt is relatively vague, the time spent repaying this debt is not. This debt is one that will be paid until death is able to free the indebted, suggesting the debt is so great that it will require more than a lifetime to be repaid. This debt also indirectly causes speculation on the debtor’s place in society. Why, after a lifetime, will he/she not have repaid this debt? Only death frees him/her. The mention of a “true” release indicates that perhaps there can be a “false” release obtained. However, this “false” release is ineffective, as death is anticipated for liberation.

While stanza two introduces the possibility that there is more taking place than a monetary loan, stanza three takes a few steps back and offers a simpler interpretation. The diction here with words such as “slight,” “bought,” and “interest” paints the picture of a poem about someone becoming overwhelmed because of a loan. Poetry is complex as it allows one to interpret with endless possibilities, unless he/she is fortunate enough to have access to the poet. In our group lecture on African-American literature in the New Negro Renaissance, a poem entitled “The Weary Blues” by Langston Hughes resulted in a 90-minute discussion. Things were settled with a comment along the lines of “the poem is about one person watching another person play the blues…that’s it.” The same can be said for “The Debt.”
Dunbar does touch upon the plight of the average person during this time period. Poor situations resulted in poor judgment. This poem can be attacked from a number of different angles. Is this poem simply about a bad judgment call? If so, what prompted this bad decision? Does a bad situation justify a bad decision? Were all African-Americans poor during this time period? How important is diction? Is this poem about Dunbar? From a literature perspective, these questions will lead to deeper discussions on poetry and hopefully the time period.

Researching and understanding The New Negro Renaissance will allow some insight into “The Debt” and other works by Dunbar. (Anthony McKinley)


Dunbar’s poem “The Party” is a masterpiece. Written in black vernacular, or dialect, the poem employs a basic subject-verb-object syntactical order and is rhythmic, like a song. Dunbar’s practice of elision (in contrast to that of authors like Joel Chandler Harris) adds music to the speaker’s voice. “The Party” is a respectable presentation of Southern folk and Southern black culture. The opening lines offer clear expression and provide a context for the entire narrative:

Dey had a gread big pahty down to Tom's de othah night;
Was I dah? You bet! I nevah in my life see sich a sight;
All de folks f'om fou' plantations was invited, an' dey come,
Dey come troopin' thick ez chillun when dey hyeahs a fife an' drum.

The pattern is similar to that of standard English, using clear—not random—paths of deviation. Dunbar typically employs final consonant deletion, dropping “g’s” and “t’s” and “d’s” from the ends of words. The internal “r” is also altered and represented with a phonetic spelling.

Understanding the rules allows “Dey had a gread big pahty down to Tom’s de othah night” to easily become “They had a great big party down to Tom’s the other night” in terms of comprehension. We recognize the persona as an alert and capable English speaker who sounds different, but is not alien. The words also look different on the page, and the voice is nuanced; but the difference is poetic, not clumsy. This speaker capably delivers his narrative and uses masterful technique to do so.

Our speaker is astute and hilarious as the poem’s narrative unfolds. His organizational structure draws the reader into this party, right through the metaphorical “do’” (door) and into the brilliant and exciting reliving of one of the best parties of the season. The speaker moves readers from a report of the finery in which everyone is dressed, and on to the latest intrigue about the dating scene: “Hahvey Jones” is no longer dating Melinda Jane (“Malindy”), and talks to Vincent Carter (Viney Ca’ ter) and watches sullenly as Malindy enjoys the party with her new beau, Isaac, whose regular employment as a house boy is probably further insult to “Hahvey.” We play, we dine, and we dance—all without pretension, in a celebration of community and culture.

It is unfortunate that African-Americans themselves interpreted Dunbar’s poetry in the same tradition as Chandler Harris and did not look beyond this unfortunate classification. In a modern audio recording of “The Party,” the speaker mimics a clown. He inserts lots of random chuckles or buffoonish cackles that are not present in the written text. The actor’s adopted persona sounds like a little plantation fool, not like someone who possesses tremendous insight into human psychology and behavior. The recording interprets Dunbar’s speaker as lowly and rejects the opportunity to read the poem in a natural, non-offensive manner. This mocking
tradition was certainly something the African-American elite abhorred and wanted to erase in its strivings toward racial uplift. Without specific linguistic scholarship, no critics explained or promoted Dunbar’s genius with the vernacular (in addition to Dunbar’s other poetry that he hoped to become better known for), and no one celebrated the nature of his dialect’s re-inventiveness in his lifetime. Additionally, though Dunbar wrote dialect and standard poetry, ironically both white and black readers unfairly “typed” his vernacular poetry. Both groups categorized it as a colorful way to represent happy and carefree black people; and while whites were satisfied with this image, black people found offense in the language. Without perspective, it becomes easy to skew Dunbar’s dialect poetry. Simply looking at a vernacular poem, dismissing it without reading it because of its nonstandard appearance, we miss experiencing the mastery and genius of the work.

Dunbar honors the folk in “The Party” by telling and giving voice to the traditions of the people. In this way, he demonstrates that there is hope for all African-Americans, and this hope was rooted in the American South. The rich, evocative, descriptive language—the dialect—is palpable; and Dunbar’s use of it speaks to the same hope of redefinition for African-Americans during the New Negro Movement. In this way, Dunbar is a precursor to the activities of the Renaissance. And it remains highly ironic that in a movement wanting to establish a rooted past, leaders rejected the roots Dunbar beautifully and faithfully established. These leaders came to view the representation of the dialect, first popularized by Chandler Harris, as too entrenched, never appreciating or acknowledging Dunbar’s successful challenge to this tradition.

Often, when I assign Dunbar’s poems (choosing from among favorites such as “The Party,” “When Malindy Sings,” “In The Mornin’,” and “Negro Love Song”), I instruct students to translate them to standard English dialect. Students do this quickly and readily, evidence that the language patterns are still recognizable and familiar. This easy identification with the language mirrors an easy identification with the speaker. The speaker and his sentiments are not foreign, even today. The students are quick to note, however, that the standard English versions they create lack the rhythm and song-like quality of the original poems. The tone changes, as does the meaning. Dunbar’s use of dialect captures the authentic spirit and energy of Southern folk, and “The Party” remains as one of the best representations of reclaimed vernacular. (Vickie Adamson)


The abovementioned website contains a brief list of thirteen poems. It makes sense to select a poem from Langston Hughes as his name is synonymous with The New Negro Renaissance.

“Advertisement For The Waldorf-Astoria” is filled with cynicism and parallels. The mere mention of the Waldorf-Astoria in a poem about poverty arouses extreme visual contrasts. Hughes juxtaposes those able to afford lodging in the luxurious Waldorf-Astoria with those left to reside in flophouses; he contrasts the “rags” of the “homeless” and “hungry” with the “background” of the Waldorf. He also sarcastically calls for “hungry ones” to read the latest literature on the Waldorf-Astoria in Vanity Fair. Most people in the lower class were illiterate during this time period. In addition, the few literate members of this class would not have had access to Vanity Fair. Interestingly, the absence of race is quite evident. Although blacks are definitely implied in this poem, there is no direct mention of Negroes. Subsequently, the
importance of class is highlighted; Hughes understands the close knit relationship between class and race.

Later in the poem, the mention of God is quite complex: “Take a room at the new Waldorf, you down-and-outers--/ sleepers in charity’s flop-houses where God pulls a/ long face, and you have to pray to get a bed.” It seems as if Hughes is questioning the faith of African-Americans. Prayer doesn’t automatically result in a bed; therefore, why pray? The idea of questioning the role of religion during the time period is a recurrent theme. Some blacks were incredulous regarding the notion of “pie in the sky when you die.” An immediate response was, “What about now?” This idea was reiterated in the readings and lecture on Father Divine. This would be an interesting segue into questions about the role of religion during the time period. Did poor blacks ultimately need something to believe in, due to their horrid living arrangements? Where did Hughes stand on issues of religion? What is to be understood by Hughes’s cynical tone? Why is there no mention of Negroes? Does class supersede race? There are a number of different directions in which this poem can be taken.

From a literature standpoint, it may seem odd to research poetry. There are often fine distinctions made between the two. However, in a recent lecture by Dr. Early we discussed the definition(s) of literature. The end result was not so clear. However, a general consensus was reached on a traditional representation/educational tool of a culture. It is safe to say that poetry fits under that broad umbrella. One can easily see the pairing of such opposites in Hughes’s poem as motivation for the poor to do better. The Waldorf is what one can strive toward. To dig deeper, perhaps Hughes is also criticizing the “haves.” Perhaps he is suggesting that the reason some are poor and less fortunate is because others have so much—hence the references to the lavish lifestyle of the affluent. The social tone of Hughes’s later poems, written after traveling abroad, would suggest that the latter statement is true. (Anthony McKinley)

Web Sites:


Columbia Granger’s World of Poetry is one of the best databases for referencing all types of poetry available. The Web site is owned and published by Columbia University Press. Accessibility is an important feature of Granger’s. With over 250,000 text poems at one’s fingertips and 450,000 citations it is easy to see the potential of this database. Conceivably, any serious study of poetry begins with researching Columbia Granger’s database. Easy to navigate, the database has over 6000 subject headings organized by themes and categories as well as hierarchically, which allows the user multiple access points. Like every good database Granger’s has advanced search capabilities, but two wonderful additions are information on poetry sources and a listening room.

Columbia Granger’s has gathered scholars from around the world to select and review poetry and write biographies and commentaries for thousands of authors. Certainly one of the best features is the ability for all the information made available to be continuously updated. An example of an entry regarding Harlem Renaissance poetry is as follows: upon entering Langston
Hughes, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” the researcher is referred to the History and Criticism section and to a nine-page review of the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance era, in addition to an extensive review of Hughes’s poem, with links to other poets and poetry along with suggestions for further reading and bibliographic citations.

Columbia Granger’s database can be accessed directly, but there is a fee. The user’s best option is to look for the database through a university, school library, or a city or county library. Granger’s can be quite advantageous in the classroom with 2nd graders and above. The user can categorize, compare and contrast poems, explore questions of style and form and poets’ perspectives, just to name a few ways the database can be utilized. Poetry lovers and novices will find this database essential for writing their own poetry, researching, creating anthologies, and will find themselves delighted as they embrace the world of poetry though the open doors of Granger’s. (Alice Lee)


This art documentary is a series of paintings commissioned by the St. Lucie Cultural Affairs in Fort Pierce, Florida, in 2006. Fort Pierce is the place where Zora Neale Hurston died and is buried and where an annual ZoraFest is held. This is the first graphic historical documentary of the life of Zora Neale Hurston. The artist responsible for this work is A.D.E. Rossman. There are eight scenic paintings:

Scene 1– Zora at the Crossroads
Scene 2– Emergence of the New Dawn (Prelude to the Harlem Renaissance)
Scene 3–Renaissance Woman (The Lady of the Renaissance)
Scene 4– The Lady, Her Pen and Her Magnificent Shawl
Scene 5– Jump at De Sun
Scene 6– One Room With a View (The One Room Studio)
Scene 7– The Eve of the Prophetess (Older Zora)
Scene 8– Daughter of the Talking Drum (Final Scene)

These eight scenes comprise a graphic interpretation of major periods in the life of Zora Neale Hurston, one of the major literary figures of the Harlem Renaissance. Because I teach literature and have a great affinity for the visual arts, I recommend these scenes for use in the classroom to enhance readings of Hurston’s work. (Percy Joshua)


The glbtq.com is the largest cyber repository for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer education and culture and houses the most comprehensive encyclopedia of glbtq culture. The encyclopedia is divided into three major categories: literature, arts, and the social sciences. It features nearly 2000 entries. Further, it provides a blogging a space for visitors to either post or respond to comments.

Written by Alden Reimonenq, a professor in the California State University system who is currently working on a critical biography of Countee Cullen, the article on the Harlem Renaissance is divided into several sections. The entry first gives a general overview of what
constituted the Harlem Renaissance, then questions whether referring to the movement as a “Renaissance” is misleading, and finally credits Queer Studies theorists for reintroducing almost forgotten female writers of the period. In the next section entitled “Homosexuality and the Writers of the Harlem Renaissance,” Reimonenq refers to Eric Garber’s groundbreaking article “A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of the Jazz Age of Harlem” that depicts the amenities that Harlem offered to its gay and lesbian inhabitants, like drag shows and speakeasies. “Functioning of the Closet” discusses how the gay and lesbian artists created a secretive niche, “the closet,” as a space where they could exchange creative ideas and freely express their sexual identity. In eight subsequent sections, Reimonenq discusses the achievements and works of the following authors: Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Angelina Weld Grimké, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Claude McKay, Wallace Thurman, and Richard Bruce Nugent. “Subverting the Mainstream Power Establishment” is in essence a Part II of the previous section, “The Closet”; Reimonenq explains that these writers had to employ coded language in their writing as a means to pass through the sensors of the publishing houses and mainstream institutions. The concluding section, “Recurring Themes, Issues, and Ideas” discusses how forbidden and unrequited love, alienation, and unrealized and displaced dreams were motifs that permeated their body of work. The article gives a cursory introduction to the gay and lesbian writers of the New Negro Movement. It provides gold nuggets of their personal lives as well as suggests how each of their voices helped construct a black consciousness. Although certain sections, such as the one about Wallace Thurman, are extremely brief, Reimonenq does supplement the article with a moderately extensive bibliography for further studies. Without a doubt, the site is a starting point for anyone interested in the New Negro Movement. (Héctor Huertas)


Uncle Remus is Joel Chandler Harris’s eponymous character that serves as a vehicle to deliver black folk tales. Uncle Remus has great stories. His stories, in fact, are actually based on African folktales. But Harris assigns Uncle Remus the language of “otherness” by producing in his vernacular random omissions of sounds and even of words. Likewise, Uncle Remus’s language is full of redundancies, as Harris inserts random words that interfere with meaning and have no rhyme or reason for being. Uncle Remus does not speak the language of an intelligent man. And in portraying Uncle Remus as lacking basic human speech, Harris robs him of his humanity.

As drawn by Joel Chandler Harris, Uncle Remus illustrates the African-American’s broken tongue and his consequent inability to master the basic rules of speaking. White readers of the Uncle Remus stories are meant to identify with the white child—who serves as the audience—and not with the speaker, Uncle Remus, the “other,” with his foreign and inferior speech. The standard-English-speaking white child exists in contrast to Uncle Remus and his strange oration, further constructing Uncle Remus’s “other” nature. The child’s sentences contain punctuation, whereas Uncle Remus’s sentences are poorly punctuated or are devoid of punctuation altogether. Uncle Remus is not particularly clever in the way he recounts his stories; he simply tells them. In fact, the white child often interrupts Uncle Remus to prompt him—as storyteller—to provide clarity, something Uncle Remus apparently lacks the intuition to do on
his own. The stories, themselves, are more interesting and clever than the narrator with his awkward expression.

Here is an example of Joel Chandler Harris inventing or altering a random word. “Turkentime” is used for “Turpentine” with no apparent reason for Uncle Remus to use the non-word other than to suggest that he is not smart enough to master the correct pronunciation. Additionally, Uncle Remus says, “dez ez sassy ez a jay-bird,” leaving readers to wonder why he can pronounce the “jay” in “jay-bird” but not in “just.” Skilled writers of dialect, not intending to mock the speaker, would probably have written “jus,” employing elision and representing the removal of the hard consonant “t” at the end of “just.” Harris’s representation of the dialect is insulting to the speaker.

Misspelled words are also typical. Harris writes “behime” for behind, “wunner” for “one of,” and “yer ner dar” for “here nor there.” The word “segashuate” remains a mystery. Chandler Harris also uses random insertions such as “dish yer” to interrupt the usual subject-verb-object pattern for no reason other than to give the speaker an unnatural, imbalanced, and awkward rhythm.

Besides telling stories, Uncle Remus lacks industry. He never seems to be doing anything, but he has plenty of time to sit around and tell stories to an inquisitive white child: "Uncle Remus," said the little boy one evening, when he had found the old man with little or nothing to do, "did the fox kill and eat the rabbit when he caught him with the Tar-Baby?" What a great life for an old man, though it seems improbable that a black laborer is sitting around waiting to perform the happy task of sharing stories with a white child. However, this is the pleasant happenstance in Joel Chandler Harris’s world.

Because of the popularity of these stories, consequently the use of dialect came to be associated with an under-functioning, work-avoiding, lazy black man. It was an unfortunate persona to become tied to black vernacular. This persona was carefully constructed, however. Harris makes deliberate choices in crafting Uncle Remus’s vernacular, and white America embraced the construct. Uncle Remus became part of an institutional view of black people as stupid and lazy, while also being sly and endearing. It is no wonder that during the New Negro Movement there was a strong reaction against the use of black vernacular. A New Negro construct would need to alter the perception fostered in the use of dialect. However, there is a difference between good depictions of vernacular, and racist uses. The inconsistency in Joel Chandler Harris’s representation of vernacular suggests that he had little interest in creating an admirable persona, and this practice demanded challenge. (Vickie Adamson)