

Blues, Poetry, and the Harlem Renaissance

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How does Langston Hughes' Blues-inspired poetry exemplify the ideals of the Harlem Renaissance?

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students will examine how Langston Hughes' poetry recounted the development and ideals of the Harlem Renaissance by examining historical documents, watching video clips, and reading Hugh's writing, as well as Blues lyrics.



From 1910 to 1940 over 1.5 million people in the Black Community migrated from Southern states to the North. Fleeing the terror of racism, and drawn to the employment opportunities offered in the industrialized North, Black people arrived in thousands to cities such as New York, Chicago, Detroit, and Philadelphia. This Great Migration, as it has been termed by historians, reshaped the cultural landscape of Northern cities—for with Black laborers soon came Black musicians, performers, and artists, seeking new patrons and audiences for their creative work.

The flourishing of Black culture during this time is no more famously exemplified than in Harlem. Until the early 1900s, this area in Manhattan consisted mostly of farm land, far north from the bustling New York City downtown. But in 1904, the Lenox Avenue subway was completed, allowing easy access to the area. Expecting that the train line would bring more to the area, developers built hundreds of tenement houses—but they over speculated, and many houses remained empty. Seeing an opportunity, Black real estate entrepreneur Philip A. Payton Jr. suggested that landlords open the buildings to Black tenants, and offered his services in bringing the Black community into the area. Payton's plan worked, and by the 1920s Harlem became known as the "Black Mecca." Black culture and artistic accomplishments flourished, and the "Harlem Renaissance" was born.

What fueled the Harlem Renaissance in many ways was the idea of the "New Negro," a term created by Black philosopher Alain Locke (whose use of the word "Negro" was common vernacular of the time.) As Locke wrote, this figure refuses to accept the notion historically propagated in the United States that Black people are an inferior race. Rather, the "New Negro" demands that Black cultural achievements, past and present, be considered equal to white cultural achievements.

Perhaps no figure better exemplified the ethos of the "New Negro" than poet Langston Hughes. Born in 1902 in Joplin, Missouri, Hughes moved to New York City after high school to study

at Columbia University, and soon became a principal figure of the Harlem Renaissance. True to Locke’s concept of the “New Negro”, Hughes was a tireless champion of Black arts and culture—not only the work of his colleagues, but also the vernacular and popular traditions of the Black community in general. Hughes had a fondness for Black popular music especially, regularly composing his own Blues verses and replicating the rhythms of jazz in his poetry. With an inarguable mastery of language, he nonetheless wrote his poems for the everyday people whose music and art always inspired him. As critic Donald B. Gibson wrote, Hughes “addressed his poetry to the people, specifically to black people. During the twenties when most American poets were turning inward, writing obscure and esoteric poetry to an ever decreasing audience of readers, Hughes was turning outward, using language and themes, attitudes and ideas familiar to anyone who had the ability simply to read.”

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The defining characteristics of the Harlem Renaissance
- Alain Locke’s notion of the “New Negro”
- An overview of the life and work of Langston Hughes
- Connections between Hughes’ poetry and conventions in the Blues
- Examples of Black vernacular traditions

2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE

- Students will be able to understand the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance by drawing connections between the work of Langston Hughes and Blues music.

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Pass out to each student **Handout - Langston Hughes, Blues, and the Harlem Renaissance KWL Chart**. Explain to students that there are three topics on the chart, and throughout the class they should be taking notes on what they already know, would like to know, and what they learned about each topic. Allow students time to fill out the first two columns of the chart. Then ask students to share their notes from the handout.
2. Place the images from the **Harlem Renaissance Gallery Walk** around the classroom. Tell students that they will be examining photographs taken around the 1930s in the neighborhood of Harlem, in New York City. Ask students to walk around the classroom, taking notes that summarize the subject of each image they see, and what they find interesting about it.

3. Ask students to summarize one of the images the gallery walk activity, based on their notes. Once the majority of the images have been introduced by students, ask the class:
 - Based on the photographs you saw, how might you describe life in Harlem around the 1930s? Did it seem more urban or rural? What are some of the activities people in Harlem pursued? Did it seem like they had a lot of opportunities to pursue different types of activities?
 - What kinds of artistic or creative practices were represented in the photographs?
 - What kind of forms of entertainment were featured in the photographs?
 - What other events did you notice occurring in Harlem at this time? Were there any political events? If so, what issues might have such protests and marches been related to?
 - Is your everyday life similar or different than the everyday life that seems depicted in the image? How so?
4. Inform students that the photographs they saw came from around the era of the “Harlem Renaissance.” Play the video “The Harlem Renaissance” (<https://youtu.be/9gboEyrj02g>). Then ask students:
 - What was the Harlem Renaissance, and where did it take place?
 - How did the Harlem Renaissance begin?
 - What sorts of arts flourished during the Harlem Renaissance?
 - What was “The New Negro,” and who wrote it? How did it inspire the Harlem Renaissance?
5. Ask students to return to their KWL chart and fill in anything that comes to mind from the class so far.

PROCEDURE:

1. Tell students that they will be focusing on the life of poet Langston Hughes, to see how it reflected what they have learned about the Harlem Renaissance. By using either a choice board or station activities, split students into groups to review a poem written by Langston Hughes during a certain point of his life. Ask students to read the poem, then respond to the questions on the next page of each handout.
 - **“The South”**
 - **“Theme for English B”**
 - **Letter to Carl Van Vechten, June 11, 1927**
(note to teacher: recommended for students who may need a scaffolded reading)
2. Ask students to take a moment to reflect what they learned and take notes in their

KWL handout. Then ask them to share their responses to the questions with the rest of the class.

- Inform students that they may have recognized that Hughes discusses Blues music and Blues musicians often. Explain that the class will now be comparing poetry by Langston Hughes with lyrics from Mississippi Blues musician Robert Johnson, to see how the influence of Blues might have affected Hughes' work. **Show Image 1, Langston Hughes and Robert Johnson Compared.** Explain that Robert Johnson was a legendary Blues musician from Mississippi. Read the two poems together, then ask students:

- Did you notice any similarities between these two works? What were they?
- How many lines are in each stanza of the pieces? Is that number consistent, or does it change?
- What happens in the first line of each stanza in the two works?
- What happens in the second line of each stanza?
- What happens in the third line of each stanza?
- Where do the rhyming schemes occur in each stanza?
- What scenarios are described in each of the pieces? Are they similar in any way? How might this relate to Black experience at the time? (*Encourage students to consider the theme of travel in both pieces in the context of the Great Migration.*)

- How would you describe the emotion the author is trying to convey in each of these pieces? Is it similar or different?
- Tell students that both pieces are set in an "AAB" format, with the first line identifying the situation, the second line restating the first line, and the third line resolving the initial statement. Tell students that the Blues form developed as an Black vernacular tradition. Ask students:
 - "Vernacular" is defined as "The language or dialect spoken by the ordinary people in a particular country or region." Drawing from this definition, what might "Black vernacular tradition" mean?
 - In addition to The Blues, what other genres of music might be considered part of the Black vernacular tradition? (*Answers might include spirituals, gospel, jazz, rap, hip-hop, and rock.*)
 - What are some other artistic practices outside of music that might be part of the Black vernacular tradition? (*Folktales, oral epics, sermons, and ciphers are also often considered part of the tradition.*)
 - Tell students that in addition to referring to specific artforms, Black vernacular traditions also incorporate African American Vernacular English (AAVE), a dialect of the English language that developed among Black communities. (*To better understand AAVE as a dialect, and not "broken" or "incorrect" English as it has sometimes been characterized, teachers can direct students to this youtube video that introduces the term: <http://bit.ly/tr-aave>.)* Ask students:
 - Can you find any examples of Hughes drawing upon elements of the Black Vernacular English in "Po' Boy Blues"? What about in the other works of his the class have examined?



SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Have students return to **Handout - Langston Hughes, Blues, and the Harlem Renaissance KWL Chart**. Give them time to finalize their chart. Then ask students to share their responses.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

1. Complete **Extension Activity - Literary Techniques in Langston Hugh's "Weary Blues"**
2. Bring to the class lyrics to a song you feel addresses a current social issue. Present to the class the values and themes represented in the and point out any examples of figurative language used.
3. Write a short response to the following prompt: "How can rap be considered part of the Black vernacular tradition?"
4. Research and present the work of a poet from your city or state.

**EXPLORE FURTHER:**

Teachers should feel free to supplement the class discussion with a number of different poems and Blues pieces. Suggestions below:

Poets:

Langston Hughes (especially “I Too,” “The Negro Sings Of Rivers,” “Homesick Blues,” and “Harlem”)

Sterling Plumpp (especially “Worst Than The Blues My Daddy Had” and “I Hear The Shuffle Of The People’s Feet”)

Tyehimba Jess (especially “Blind Lemon Taught Me”)

Sterling Brown

Countee Cullen

Jayne Cortez

Nikki Giovanni

Gwendolyn Brooks

Claude McKay

Blues Musicians:

Bessie Smith (especially “Downhearted Blues” and “Backwater Blues”)

Charley Patton (especially “Bo Weevil Blues”)

Shemekia Copeland (especially “In The Blood of the Blues,” “Beat Up Guitar,” and “Ghetto Child.”)

Keb’ Mo’ (especially “Henry” and “City Boy”)

Chris Thomas King (especially “Da Thrill is Gone from Da Hood.”)

Skip James (especially “Hard Time Killin’ Floor Blues”)

Gary Clark Jr. (especially “When My Train Pulls In”)

Beth Hart (especially “Leave the Light On”)

Eric Bibb (especially “Drinkin’ Gourd” and “Flood Water.”)

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading (K-12)

Reading 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

Reading 2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

Reading 3: Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

Craft and Structure 5: Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.

Craft and Structure 6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity 10: Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing (K-12)

Text Types and Purposes 1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

Text Types and Purposes 2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Production and Distribution of Writing 4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge 8: Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge 9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language (K-12)

Language 1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

Language 2: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in a word meaning.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening (K-12)

Comprehension & Collaboration 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Comprehension & Collaboration 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Comprehension & Collaboration 3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

Presentation of Knowledge 4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

NATIONAL CURRICULUM STANDARDS FOR SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 3: People, Place, and Environments

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 8: Science, Technology, and Society



NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION – NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR MUSIC EDUCATION (NAFME)

Core Music Standard: Connecting

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.



RESOURCES

HANDOUTS

- Handout - Langston Hughes, Blues, and the Harlem Renaissance KWL Chart
- “The South” by Langston Hughes
- “Theme for English B” by Langston Hughes
- Letter to Carl Van Vechten, June 11, 1927 by Langston Hughes
- Literary Techniques in Langston Hughes’ Wary Blues