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# THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

Exploring the Social and Cultural  
Perspective of African Americans

By Monica Portugal



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[Source](#)

Aaron Douglas. Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery Through Reconstruction.  
Oil on canvas, 1934.  
The New York Public Library, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Art and Artifacts  
Division.

## INTRODUCTION

The Harlem Renaissance was an early 20th century movement which lasted until the mid 1930s. At the time of this movement African American writers, artists, actors and musicians, were being recognized for their talents and contributions to the newest fads of pop culture. However, along with the newest Jazz songs and popular dances that came about during this period, African Americans used these mediums of art and literature as a way to express their experience of being black, being an artist, being an American citizen, and and being all of these things all at once.

Using music, poetry, novels, and other forms of literature and art, African Americans were able to explore questions of race and social tensions in America. Capturing the attention of white Americans, Africans Americans were able to further pursue their desires of equality, and bring to life a rebirth of their cultural identity.

**EQ: How did the Harlem Renaissance allow African Americans to express their experiences within American society?**

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# THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

## MOVIE 1.1 "Strange Fruit" performed by Billie Holiday



[Source](#)

Billie Holiday was a well known Jazz Artist during the 1930s, and performed on the stages of various Harlem clubs. Her song, "Strange Fruit" is full of emotion and imagery as she brings to attention the reality of the lynching of African Americans.



[Source](#)

**Lyrics:**

**Southern trees bear strange fruit  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root  
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze**



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## THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

Claude McKay was a well-known poet and writer during the Harlem Renaissance, who blended his love for poetry and African pride into his work. Aside from being a writer, McKay was also an activist who used his literary works to bring to discussion issues of racism and political injustices in America.



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## *If We Must Die*

**Claude McKay, 1889 - 1948**

If we must die—let it not be like hogs  
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,  
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
Making their mock at our accursed lot.  
If we must die—oh, let us nobly die,  
So that our precious blood may not be shed  
In vain; then even the monsters we defy  
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!  
Oh, Kinsmen! We must meet the common foe;  
Though far outnumbered, let us show us brave,  
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!  
What though before us lies the open grave?  
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,  
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

[Source](#)

# THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE



Zora was an anthropologist, a writer, and a civil activist. In her book *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, she discussed not only the oppression that African Americans faced on a daily basis, but also feminist ideals from an African American woman's perspective.



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## *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

### Chapter 2

"Ah ain't never seen mah papa. And Ah didn't know 'im if Ah did. Mah mama neither. She was gone from round dere long before Ah wuz big enough tuh know. Mah grandma raised me. Mah grandma and de white folks she worked wid. She had a house out in de backyard and cat's where Ah wuz born. They was quality white folks up dere in West Florida. Named Washburn. She had four gran'chillun on de place and all of us played together and cat's how come Ah never called mah Grandma nothin' but Nanny, 'cause cat's what everybody on de place called her. Nanny used to ketch us in our devilment and lick every youngun on de place and Mis' Washburn did de same. Ah reckon dey never hit us ah lick amiss 'cause dem three boys and us two girls wuz pretty aggravatin', Ah speck.

"Ah was wid dem white chillun so much till Ah didn't know Ah wuzn't white till Ah was round six years old. Wouldn't have found it out then, but a man come long takin' pictures and without askin' anybody, Shelby, dat was de oldest boy, he told him to take us. Round a week later de man brought de picture for Mis' Washburn to see and pay him which she did, then give us all a good lickin'.

Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, (University of Illinois Press, 1937), 12-13.

[Source](#)

[Source](#)

### I, Too

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.  
They send me to eat in the kitchen  
When company comes,  
But I laugh,  
And eat well,  
And grow strong.



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### Cross

My old man's a white old man  
And my old mother's black.  
If ever I cursed my white old man  
I take my curses back.  
If ever I cursed my black old mother  
And wished she were in hell,  
I'm sorry for that evil wish  
And now I wish her well  
My old man died in a fine big

[Source](#)

## LANGSTON HUGHES



Langston Hughes was a poet, a social activist, a novelist, and a columnist. Hughes' work became well known during the Harlem Renaissance and continues to be used in the modern day classroom.

[Source](#)

[Source](#)

### As I Grow Older

It was a long time ago.  
I have almost forgotten my dream.  
But it was there then,  
In front of me,  
Bright like a sun—  
My dream.  
And then the wall rose,  
Rose slowly,  
Slowly,



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### Mother To Son

Well, son, I'll tell you:  
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.  
It's had tacks in it,  
And splinters,  
And boards torn up,  
And places with no carpet on the  
floor—  
Bare.  
But all the time

[Source](#)

# *DBL Reflection*

For this assignment I chose to focus on the Harlem Renaissance and have my students explore the work of various African American musicians, artists, and writers, in order to identify the purpose of their work, and what it represented. This past semester I did a similar lesson to this DBL with my 11th grade history class for a 1920s unit. For that lesson I introduced similar sources to the ones in this assignment in order to guide my students to a deeper understanding of the Harlem Renaissance, and open a small discussion of race within America. The DBL I have created here will accomplish a similar goal.

For this lesson I wanted to introduce a more serious side of the Harlem Renaissance, and expose my students to these sources in order to guide them to understand a different perspective of America during this time period. Despite the Harlem Renaissance being a time and place full of spirit, opportunity, and pop-culture, it was also a time of opportunity to captivate audiences, black and white, and explore issues of race in America. For myself, the issues and concerns that are expressed in the documents provided by these artists, are still issues seen today. Following this DBL students can be asked to make connections to more modern day issues, compare and contrast, and reflect on American society today. As an educator I want to create a place where such discussions can be held with respect, because I do believe discussing situations and concerns such as this should be held in a classroom in order to help our students be more open minded, respectful, and well rounded to the world around them.



FROM EXPLORING  
HISTORY: VOL III

Available free at [iTunes](#)

This eBook is a collaborative project of Peter Pappas and his Fall 2015 Social Studies Methods Class [School of Education](#) ~ University of Portland, Portland Ore.

Graduate and undergraduate level pre-service teachers were assigned the task of developing an engaging research question, researching supportive documents and curating them into a DBQ suitable for middle or high school students.

For more on this class, visit the course blog [EdMethods](#)  
For more on this book project and work flow tap [here](#).

## Chapters in chronological order

1. *Finding Egyptian Needles in Western Haystacks*  
by Heidi Kershner
2. *Pompeii* by Caleb Wilson
3. *Samurai: Sources of Warrior Identity in Medieval Japan*  
by Ben Heebner
4. *The Declaration of Independence* by David Deis
5. *Reconstruction in Political Cartoons*  
by EmmaLee Kuhlmann
6. *Regulation Through the Years*  
by Chenoa Musillo Olson / Sarah Wieking
7. *Battle of the Somme* by John Hunt

8. *The Lynching of Leo Frank* by Jeff Smith
9. *The Waco Horror* by Alekz Wray
10. *The Harlem Renaissance* by Monica Portugal
11. *A Date of Infamy* by Mollie Carter
12. *Anti-Vietnam War Imagery* by Felicia Teba
13. *Examining the Ongoing Evolution of American Government* by Eric Cole

**Peter Pappas, editor**

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