

A Raisin in the Sun: Connections between Print and Non-Print Texts

Museum Connection: Art and Enlightenment

Purpose: In this lesson students will connect the themes of music, literature, and art from the Harlem Renaissance to *A Raisin in the Sun*.

Course: American Literature

Time Frame: Two 45-minute periods

Correlation to State Standards:

Standard 1: The student will comprehend and interpret a variety of print, non-print and electronic texts, and other media.

Indicator 1.2 The student will comprehend and interpret a variety of texts, including fiction, nonfiction, poetry, drama, and informational texts

Objective: 1.2.4 The student will interpret a literary work by using a critical approach (e.g. reader response, historical, cultural, biographical, structural

Standard 2: The student will analyze and evaluate a variety of print, non-print and electronic texts, and other media.

Indicator 2.1 The student will analyze and evaluate a variety of texts, including fiction, nonfiction, poetry, drama, and informational texts.

Objective: 2.1.3 The student will analyze connections between and among themes, ideas, and/or styles of two or more texts.

Common Core State Reading Standards for Literature 6-12

- Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.
- Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific

word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

Objective: Students will compose a blues song from the point of view of a character from *A Raisin in the Sun* in order to express the themes of the play in a form of expression from the Harlem Renaissance.

Vocabulary and Concepts:

Word or Concept	Definition
Blues	a song, originating with American blacks, that is marked by the frequent occurrence of blue notes, and that takes the basic form, customarily improvised upon in performance, of a 12-bar chorus consisting of a 3-line stanza with the second line repeating the first.
Blue devils	low spirits, depression.
Harlem Renaissance	renewal and flourishing of black literary and musical culture during the years after World War I in the Harlem section of New York City.

Materials:

For the Teacher:

Teacher Resource Sheet 1: Quotation from Langston Hughes

For the Student:

Student Resource Sheet 1: Writing an Original Blues Song

Resources:

Publications:

Hansberry, Lorraine. *A Raisin in the Sun: a Drama in Three Acts*. New York: Random House, 1959. Print.

Web Sites:

For examples of Harlem Renaissance art work:

<http://robinurton.com/history/Harlem.htm>, <http://www.all-art.org/history610.html> (Click on the artists: Archibald Motley, Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, William H. Johnson, Aaron Douglas, Lois Mailou Jones)

Listen to the blues by Harlem Renaissance singers:

<http://www.jcu.edu/harlem/performers/blues.htm>

For lyrics to contemporary blues (Eric Clapton's "Before You Accuse Me")

http://www.lyricsfreak.com/e/eric+clapton/before+you+accuse+me_20051376.html

How to write a blues song: http://www.ehow.com/how_2050885_write-blues-song.html

Langston Hughes' article "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" which examines the connections between poetry and music: <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/360.html>

Historical Background:

The Harlem Renaissance from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harlem_Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance was a cultural movement that spanned the 1920s and 1930s. Though it was centered in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City, many French-speaking Black writers from African and Caribbean colonies who lived in Paris were also influenced by the Harlem Renaissance.

New York City became a center of this expanding Negro middle class. In the Nineteenth Century, the district had been built as an exclusive suburb for the white-middle and upper-middle classes, with stately houses, grand avenues and amenities such as the Polo Grounds and an opera house. During the enormous influx of European immigrants in the late Nineteenth Century, the once exclusive district was abandoned by the native white-middle class. Harlem became a Negro neighborhood in the early 1900s. In 1910, a large block of homes along 135th Street and Fifth Avenue were bought by various African-American realtors and a church group. Many more African Americans arrived during World War I. Due to the war, the migration of laborers from Europe virtually ceased, while the war effort resulted in a massive demand for unskilled industrial labor. The Great Migration brought hundreds of thousands of African Americans to cities like Chicago, Philadelphia, Cleveland, and New York City.

The first stage of the Harlem Renaissance started in the late 1910s. 1917 saw the premiere of *Three Plays for a Negro Theatre*. These plays, written by white playwright Ridgely Torrence, featured Negro actors conveying complex human emotions and yearnings. They rejected the stereotypes of the blackface and minstrel show traditions. Writer and Civil Rights activist James Weldon Johnson in 1917 called the premieres of

these plays "the most important single event in the entire history of the Negro in the American Theatre." Another landmark came in 1919, when Claude McKay published his militant sonnet "If We Must Die." Although the poem never alluded to race, to Negro readers it sounded a note of defiance in the face of racism and the nationwide race riots and lynchings then taking place. By the end of World War I the fiction of James Weldon Johnson and the poetry of Claude McKay were describing the reality of contemporary Negro life in America.

The Harlem Renaissance and the 1920s embodied a great deal of jazz music. This genre blossomed during the 1920s, and became very popular with the citizens of Harlem. It later gained national and worldwide recognition. However, many of the middle and upper-class Negro families were unsure or even hostile towards jazz music because they believed that Negroes—at least affluent Negroes—should “assimilate into the White business culture” of the large cities in northeastern America such as Chicago, New York, St. Louis and Detroit. Those that did enjoy jazz would attend nightclubs where these musicians performed. Some of the more popular nightclubs included the Savoy Ballroom, the Apollo Theatre, and The Cotton Club.

In 1917 Hubert Harrison, "The Father of Harlem Radicalism," founded the Liberty League and *The Voice*, the first organization and the first newspaper of the "New Negro Movement." Harrison's organization and newspaper were political, but also emphasized the arts (his newspaper had "Poetry for the People" and book review sections). In 1927, in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, Harrison challenged the notion of the renaissance. He argued that the "Negro Literary Renaissance" notion overlooked "the stream of literary and artistic products which had flowed uninterruptedly from Negro writers from 1850 to the present," and said the so-called "renaissance" was largely a White invention.

The Harlem Renaissance grew out of the changes that had taken place in the African American community since the abolition of slavery. These accelerated as a consequence of World War I and the great social and cultural changes in early 20th century United States. Industrialization was attracting people to cities from rural areas and gave rise to a new mass culture. Contributing factors leading to the Harlem Renaissance were the Great Migration of African Americans to northern cities, which concentrated ambitious people in places where they could encourage each other, and the First World War, which had created new industrial work opportunities for tens of thousands of people. Factors leading to the decline of this era include the Great Depression.

Until the end of the Civil War, the majority of African Americans had been enslaved and lived in the South. Immediately after the end of slavery, the emancipated African Americans began to strive for civic participation, political equality and economic and cultural self-determination. By the late 1870s, conservative Whites managed to regain power in the South. From 1890 to 1908, they proceeded to pass legislation that disenfranchised most Negroes and many poor Whites, trapping them without

representation. They established white supremacist regimes of Jim Crow segregation in the South and one-party block voting behind southern Democrats. The conservative Whites denied African Americans their exercise of civil and political rights. The region's reliance on an agricultural economy continued to limit opportunities for most people. Negroes were exploited as share croppers and laborers. As life in the South became increasingly difficult, African Americans began to migrate North in great number. Most of the African-American literary movement arose from a generation that had lived through the gains and losses of Reconstruction after the American Civil War. Sometimes their parents or grandparents had been slaves. Their ancestors had sometimes benefited by paternal investment in social capital, including better-than-average education. Many in the Harlem Renaissance were part of the Great Migration out of the South into the Negro neighborhoods of the North and Midwest. African Americans sought a better standard of living and relief from the institutionalized racism in the South. Others were people of African descent from racially stratified communities in the Caribbean who came to the United States hoping for a better life. Uniting most of them was their convergence in Harlem, New York City.

Despite the increasing popularity of Negro culture, virulent racism, often by more recent ethnic immigrants, continued to impact African-American communities, even in the North. After the end of World War I, many African American soldiers—who fought in segregated units like the Harlem Hellfighters—came home to a nation whose citizens often did not respect their accomplishments. Race riots and other civil uprisings occurred throughout the US during the Red Summer of 1919, reflecting economic competition over jobs and housing in many cities, as well as tensions over social territories.

Lesson Development:

Motivation:

1. Play a piece of jazz or blues music and ask students to write their reactions to it in a quickwrite or journal entry.

Procedures:

2. Direct students to explore websites related to Harlem Renaissance artwork to look for images and artistic techniques that echo elements of the music. See the web sites listed above for links to artwork. Then, direct the students to add to their journal entries by responding to the following question: “How does the artwork echo some of the elements of the music and the African American experience?”
3. Direct students to read and paraphrase the following quotation from Langston Hughes: “Most of my own poems are racial in theme and treatment, derived from the life I know. In many of them I try to grasp and hold some of the meanings and rhythms of jazz...Jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America: the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt

against weariness in a White world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile.” Langston Hughes in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” published in *The Nation*, 23 June 1926.

4. Discuss the quotation as a class to ensure that students understand Langston Hughes’ point of view and his beliefs about the connections between jazz and the African American experience.
5. Direct students to read the poem “Harlem” which introduces and provides the title for the play, *A Raisin in the Sun*.
6. Direct students to continue their quickwrite or journal entry by responding to the question: “How does Hughes’ poem, ‘Harlem,’ embody the meanings and rhythms of jazz as expression of the African American experience?”
7. Play a blues song sung by a Harlem Renaissance singer and/or a contemporary singer such as Eric Clapton. See websites listed under “Resources” for links to songs and lyrics. Ask students to identify characteristics of the lyrics of the blues. They should recognize that blues lyrics begin with one line that is repeated. Then, the third line is longer and rhymes with the first two lines. The theme of the lyrics represents sadness or melancholy from the first person point of view.
8. Display the information about how to write a blues song which is found at the link: http://www.ehow.com/how_2050885_write-blues-song.html
9. Direct students to write a few verses of an original blues song about themselves using **Student Resource Sheet 1: Writing an Original Blues Song**. Encourage them to think about a condition or event that they have experienced that feels unfair or unjust—perhaps something that has made them feel betrayed, sad, or lonely. Share and discuss the songs.

Assessment:

Direct students to choose a character from the play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, who has a good reason to sing the blues. All characters could be used for this exercise. Then, direct students to find several quotations from this character which show the betrayal, sadness, or loneliness that would inspire a blues song. Then, select words, phrases, or sentences from the text that could be incorporated into a few verses of a blues song from the point of view of that character. Students may use the words and phrases directly from the play, and—of course—cite them correctly with quotation marks, or they may paraphrase the feelings of the characters while still remaining faithful to the text. Encourage students to consider how the various

characters might sing the blues or what instruments would be most appropriate to play this song. Some students may wish to make a recording of the songs that they compose.

Closure:

Direct students to consider the artwork, music, and poetry of the Harlem Renaissance and write three adjectives to describe the Harlem Renaissance. Then, direct them to write a paragraph explaining why these three adjectives do or do not also describe Lorraine Hansberry's play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, justifying the similarities and/or differences.

Thoughtful Applications:

- This lesson could be used in a creative writing class to inspire students to write blues lyrics.
- This lesson could be used in a music class to apply the music and lyrics of the blues to personal or literary connections.
- Students may put their blues lyrics to music by creating original musical compositions or by substituting their words into an existing blues melody.

Lesson Extensions:

- As students visit the Reginald F. Lewis Museum, they may choose a person who is featured and write a blues song to describe this person's experience. To increase the rigor of the assignment, they may write a blues song from both perspective of a conflict. For instance, upon viewing the letter from Benjamin Banneker to Thomas Jefferson and Jefferson's response, students may write a blues song from the perspective of Banneker and another from the perspective of Jefferson.
- Upon visiting the Lewis Museum, students write a response to a piece of art that represents elements of the blues and/or the Harlem Renaissance.
- The Museum offers several school programs that connect to the curriculum lessons.
 - *Journey in History Theater* provides living history and theatrical performances which highlight African Americans in the museum's gallery.
 - Take the theme tour, *Heritage* and experience the rich, cultural heritage of Maryland's African American community. Learn how African Americans established and influence Maryland's historic communities, social organizations, work traditions and artistic customs.
 - Contact group reservations for schedule updates.

**Teacher Resource Sheet 1:
Quotation from Langston Hughes**

“Most of my own poems are racial in theme and treatment, derived from the life I know. In many of them I try to grasp and hold some of the meanings and rhythms of jazz. ...jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America: the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile.”

—Langston Hughes from “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” published in *The Nation*, 23 June 1926.

Student Resource Sheet 1: Writing an Original Blues Song

Brainstorming: Choose a topic that reflects the mood of the blues. Write about this experience—something that feels unfair or unjust or, perhaps, something that has made you or someone else feel betrayed, sad, or lonely.

Writing the Blues: Now, write about this experience in the form of a blues song.

First line: State the problem. Use 12-16 syllables.

Second Line: This one is easy. Just repeat the first line.

Third Line: State the solution or consequence. This line has the same number of syllables as the first line.

Example:

“The Homework Blues”

Homework just gets me down 'cause my teacher always gives us a ton.

Homework just gets me down 'cause my teacher always gives us a ton.

And if I don't do my homework, my parents won't let me have no fun.