Though high school English teachers often include a few poems by Langston Hughes in their curriculum, they may not know the impressive range of his writing, which includes poetry, novels, short stories, plays, librettos, political propaganda, and autobiography. The latest volume in the NCTE High School Literature Series contextualizes the work of this key figure of the Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro Movement.

Because Hughes’s life experiences are so closely intertwined with his work, each chapter first demonstrates how Hughes’s life and art reinforce each other, with a focus on Hughes’s blues poetry, the novel *Not without Laughter*, his autobiography, and short stories. Each chapter closes with a section called In the Classroom, which offers practical suggestions for discussion, activities, and assignments, and includes samples of student work. A detailed chronology, a glossary of terms, and a selected bibliography round out the many useful features of this resource guide.

By combining the study of literature, music, and history, *Langston Hughes in the Classroom: “Do Nothin’ till You Hear from Me”* provides the tools teachers need to make the works of Langston Hughes come alive for their students in the twenty-first-century classroom.
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Ah, the Harlem Renaissance: bathtub gin; speakeasies; beautiful, light-brown-skinned dancing girls at the Cotton Club and Small's Paradise; “Stomping at the Savoy”; benevolent gangsters; rich White patrons paying monthly stipends to support Black writers, painters, sculptors; Black people and White people partying together in Manhattan; intellectuals, artists of all genres, and the common folk holding conversations deep into the night. These are some of the popular images of the Harlem Renaissance.

This chapter focuses largely on a description of the Harlem Renaissance so that you can help your students understand the context that shaped Hughes’s writing. This wildly exciting and interesting time will undoubtedly entice you to do your own research into the era. But the social, historical, economic, and artistic impact of the Harlem Renaissance on African Americans is complex and vast. This overview provides a starting place for further research.

There were, in fact, actually two movements going on simultaneously for African Americans during this time. What I consider the “umbrella” was the New Negro Movement, which saw the migration of massive numbers of African Americans from the rural South to the North, West, Midwest, and southern urban areas. Black people were leaving agrarian lives for industrialized ones. They traded in crop income for factory paychecks and were
finding new freedoms away from the neoslavery that was enveloping them in the South through sharecropping and violence. African Americans were making great political, social, and educational strides.

Within this time of social upheaval for African Americans was an unprecedented transformation in the presentation of Black arts and letters, what Langston Hughes called the New Negro Renaissance, a term synonymous with Harlem Renaissance. No longer was the need to please a larger, White reading audience the primary catalyst and controller of the content of Black literature. In his seminal essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Hughes argued that the mountain standing in the path of progress for the new artists was the urge to imitate Whiteness in an effort to be perceived more as Americans than as African Americans. But those artists who wanted to be seen clearly as they were circumvented that racial mountain. Hughes confessed that his work was truly racial because it derived from the life he had led. Other artists who shared his artistic philosophy felt the same way: If people, White or Black, liked the art they were producing, then good. If not, it simply did not bother the artists at all. This was the attitude of the artists of the Harlem Renaissance, an attitude founded in a new freedom to express themselves as they wished.

The New Negro Renaissance has no clear beginning or end. Some scholars have dated the Harlem Renaissance from the turn of the twentieth century until the Great Depression. Others, like the renowned cultural critic Gerald Early, identify the critical shifts in African American attitudes exemplified by heavyweight boxers Jack Johnson and Joe Louis. Discuss with your students the perceptions and receptions of the two men by the larger community and how this polarization is indicative of shifting attitudes of and toward African Americans during this time. The difference be-
tween the two men can be the subject of a classroom debate—
Johnson, the symbol of an uncontrolled explosion of Blackness at
the beginning of the twentieth century, and Louis, the gentleman
boxer. In debating the issues, students can focus on whether and
how these two boxers’ positions are relevant today.

A master with his fists, Johnson beat White opponents in the
ring without being lynched. He also put himself at risk by his
disrespect of White women. In fact, his relationships with White
women—that ultimate transgression for Black men—put his life
in jeopardy. In an age when many Black men were lynched for
just looking at a White woman, Johnson managed to escape de-
spite his open violation of this and other racial taboos. He thus
became, to a large degree, an iconoclastic hero to Black America.

Joe Louis, on the other hand, represents reconciliation. He
was America’s boxer during a time when America needed heroes.
Thus his fight against Max Schmeling was not Black boxer against
White boxer, but America’s boxer against Germany’s boxer. He
served the United States in the military and represented what was
good and powerful in the nation. The wide and warm acclaim he
received because he won for the United States and because he
served his country well against her enemies made Louis a symbol
of the possibility of social cohesion between Black and White
America.

Black writers adopted that same sense of excellence and pride
in America as they assumed a place of literary prominence in the
country. Many of the writers modeled their work after European
artists, who represented “high art.” Others, like Langston Hughes
and Zora Neale Hurston, crafted their art around the lives of the
folk. Because Hughes and Hurston are such important figures in
this great literary movement, I extend the ending date of the New
Negro Renaissance to about 1940, primarily because Zora Neale
Hurston's landmark book *Their Eyes Were Watching God* wasn't published until 1937. I don't extend it any further than that because writers such as Sterling Brown, Frank Marshall Davis, Richard Wright, and others who were active in the 1940s purposely disassociated themselves from Harlem and the artists of the Harlem Renaissance.

What is important in teaching the Harlem Renaissance is not the dates or even the place (Hughes and the other artists often retreated to other places they called “home”), but that Harlem was the hub of the intellectual community that evolved; also important are the transformations that took place in African American arts and letters. That world changed forever during this movement. Hughes tells us that during this time African American artists finally threw off the restraints of writing to please the intellectual and artistic palates of Whites and wrote to please themselves. This is not to say these artists were not aware of the influence and power of White publishers and patrons. They were very much aware of how much they needed the acceptance of both groups. But the context as well as the content of their art assumed more of the artists’ life experiences and insights. In Harlem during this movement, artists in all mediums shared their ideas, their art, and their lives with one other.

Like most of the other artists of the era, Langston Hughes needed a world of Black people from which to draw artistic energy. He found that world in Harlem. He developed his artistry there. He chose, like Zora Neale Hurston, Black folk, Black lives, and Black music as the mode, model, and inspiration for his work.

Hughes began publishing his poems in *Crisis*, the literary magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Although he did not revise most of his work and adopted for the most part a “one-write” philosophy,
especially with his poetry, Hughes became successful in winning literary contests, getting published, and establishing a reputation in the literary, social, and political arenas. This can be problematic for us as teachers, when our students look to Hughes’s success as a means to justify their own resistance to revising their work. We do, however, have some ammunition to thwart this counterproductive thinking. We can point them to “The Weary Blues,” a poem that Hughes wrote and rewrote, polishing it to a fine luster before submitting it to the contest that catapulted him to success.

For the artists living the Harlem Renaissance, defining this movement was not an easy task. African American artist Aaron Douglas clearly delineates the task he and Langston faced in creating their powerful and “authentic Negro” art:

Your problem Langston, my problem, no, our problem is to conceive, develop, establish an art era. Not White art painted Black . . . No, let’s bare our arms and plunge deep through laughter, through pain, through sorrow, through hope, through disappointment, into the very depths of the souls of our people and drag forth materials crude, rough, neglected. Then let’s sing it, dance it, write it, paint it. Let’s do the impossible. Let’s create something transcendentally material, mystically objective. Earthy. Spiritually earthy. Dynamic. (Douglas qtd. in Kirschke 78, 79)

Before Hughes became part of the New Negro Renaissance, his life and habitats had none of the glamour of the life that he imagined the Negro intellectuals shared. Alain Locke, Howard University professor and self-proclaimed “midwife” to the movement, was the first to contact this fledgling poet, insisting that Hughes be included with the other younger artists. Working and living on the docks, Langston did not want the “distinguished
professor from Howard, a Ph.D. at that” (Big Sea 93), to visit him there. After all, Hughes “knew only the people [he] had grown up with, and they weren’t people whose shoes were always shined, who had been to Harvard, or who had heard Bach” (93). It was not until editor and novelist Jessie Fauset invited him to a luncheon for Crisis that Langston met the intelligentsia face to face. Although Hughes was impressed, he interrupted his work and his place in the movement by sailing for Europe and Asia.

His reentry into the Harlem Renaissance began almost as soon as he returned to the United States in 1924. Hughes went straight to Harlem and immersed himself in his life as a poet. He became acquainted with some of the most influential people of the time, such as poet Countee Cullen and entertainment critic Carl Van Vechten. He also renewed his connection with the NAACP. All these connections had a profound impact on his life and writing. Hughes’s poetry writing continued when he left Harlem and moved to Washington, D.C., to enroll at Howard University. With no tuition money and no available scholarships, he was denied admission. The harsh winter weather and the cold treatment he experienced from African Americans in Washington were good for creativity, and Hughes wrote many poems during this period.

Those poems captured the beat and rhythm of the blues and spirituals. Langston lived and listened to the blues. He loved the places where Black folk congregated and talked and sang about life: the barbershops, barrelhouses, shouting churches, nightclubs and bars. In these places, he found the stories, the rhythms, and the people he would re-create in his work. Hughes would develop his Jesse B. Semple stories (the Simple stories) from a character he had never met but had heard about in the neighborhood bar he frequented. He intended this character to be funny as well as have far-reaching social and political implications in the sto-
ries he delivered to his readers. Hughes used humor to talk about issues as important as race relations, the atomic bomb, poverty, and religious faith. Like Mark Twain, he believed that humor was a good weapon against hypocrisy.

Hughes’s career took off with a blues poem. “The Weary Blues,” published by Opportunity, the newsmagazine of the Urban League, launched his career and established his place among the literary giants of the Harlem Renaissance. More important, he met many distinguished artists and writers of the time, including Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, Jessie Fauset, and Eric Walrond, among other young artists, and reacquainted himself with James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, and W. E. B. DuBois, the old guard.

These people, these folk, and these places were the tools that allowed Hughes to breathe a remarkable life into his work. In our contemporary world, where issues of difference and diversity are vigorously debated, there is much space for lessons on life and living that we can learn by reading the works of Langston Hughes and understanding the Harlem Renaissance and New Negro Movement.

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IN THE CLASSROOM:
Live and Let Live in Return

As high school literature teachers, it is sometimes difficult to teach a literary movement. Students often want to link only one writer to the era, such as Shakespeare with the Elizabethan period, Jonathan Swift with the neoclassical, Phillis Wheatley with slave poetry, and Hughes with the Harlem Renaissance. Although these writers serve as prototypes for their respective eras, for a richer understanding and appreciation of literature, our students
need to be able to contextualize these writers’ lives with their literatures.

When we study Hughes’s autobiography, we don’t often have the time to commit our classes to reading the entire text, so I assign specific chapters of The Big Sea. I like using “When the Negro Was in Vogue” because this chapter covers the time in Hughes’s life that he identifies as most important to his artistic development. My students are then afforded an opportunity to learn about the Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro Movement. There is such a wide range of topics and genres from which to choose that students can pursue their particular interests for this research.

As I discussed earlier, I view the New Negro Movement as an umbrella movement. It covers all the political, cultural, emotional, and social changes that African Americans in the United States were making at the time. No longer did Black folk feel the need to succumb to the orders of Whites, and they were taking freedom and liberties never available to them before. At least, they were taking them to the extent that a Jim Crow—i.e., legally segregated—society would let them. African Americans were moving away from the rural South to urban centers in both the North and South. They were finding means of supporting themselves that provided regular paychecks, instead of being imprisoned in the perpetual poverty of sharecropping. They were moving their families and their destinies to places where they could take care of themselves and one another. Hughes re-creates declarations made by those folk in forms that are palatable and enjoyable to a wide reading audience.

In the Harlem Renaissance, African American artists lived out the exhortations made by Hughes in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” to express themselves however they pleased.
Some chose to emulate European artists; others found their own artistic voices.

The students take away various images from their study of the New Negro Movement and the Harlem Renaissance. The response of a Congolese student in my class illustrates how Hughes speaks across cultures to the colonial experience:

After reading “When the Negro Was in Vogue” by Langston Hughes, I could also relate to it. Mostly because my country, the Congo, was also at a point invaded by Europeans. My grandparents were not allowed to go certain places in their own country. They couldn’t either say aloud what they thought about colonization.

She then went on to talk about writers in the Congo being restricted in their work during colonization, but that they were now enjoying a few freedoms. I truly enjoyed sharing this student’s response with the rest of the class. Although the parallel is not perfect—African Americans were not literally invaded within this country—students learn that cultural and social repression is not confined to the United States.

Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, Eric Walrond, and Aaron Douglas, among many others, were essentially creating a new aesthetic. Students readily identify with this phenomenon because they feel that their generation is creating new artistic expressions, in particular with rap and spoken word poetry. In many cases, new genres are being crafted and created. But this comparison provides a teachable moment about the evolution of art, particularly through the example of rap. While young people don’t want to connect their music to old-school music, they learn that new art forms are never completely divorced from those that came before them. The desire to be different and new helps
students identify with the young revolutionaries of the Harlem Renaissance who produced their own literary magazine *Fire!* in order to publish their art their way.

I ask my students to create their own version of *Fire!* This exercise presents valuable learning experiences for both the teacher and the students. The assignment calls for students to follow their own artistic aesthetics and produce art their way. Since I have sensitive ears and we operate under certain codes as an educational institution, my students do have to refrain from profanity. In this context, we discuss issues of appropriate language, which gives students the opportunity to reflect on their word choices and on word usage. (I am still amazed at what does not constitute inappropriate language to them.) Sometimes the classroom is autocratic, and I’m in control. Other times we vote. With the exception of those moments when they want to use inappropriate language, the students are allowed to express themselves however they see fit in this magazine. They can submit articles, poems, short stories, art, and so forth. They can choose to create new art forms or they can fall back on established forms. Some have created a hybrid of several forms. One student created a rather primitive poster with cutouts from magazines but then recorded a rap song that talked about the different images on the poster. Another gave a Bratz doll voice and had her “talk” about the way young girls were being treated. A young man wrote a three-character play in which the “hard-headed” boy character only rapped, which infuriated his mother and girlfriend.

Other students, like Robert Hotchkiss, decided to respond to Hughes’s life in the Harlem Renaissance by writing poetry. Robert hooked onto the images in “When the Negro Was in Vogue” for this work. In his explanation of the poem, he quotes Hughes:
“the gay and sparkling life of the so-called Negro Renaissance of the 20s was not so gay and sparkling beneath the surface as it looked” (Big Sea 227).

The Performance

I grin, dance, and sing
With diminishing dignity.
The façade of my long smile
Will only last another short while.

The black hats and coattails
Contrast with their skin so pale.
They come from uptown
To gawk at this man so brown.

They fervently clap and laugh
For their own pleasures behalf
If the ignorant only knew
How I know them straight through.
This club was once free of colorless skeptics
And enjoyed by crowds much more ethnic.
Now my artistic song and dance
Is dictated by their deep finance.

Another long and shallow night
Until the dimming of Harlem's bright lights.
—Robert Hotchkiss

This, of course, came after our class discussion that *gay* did not mean “homosexual” in the Harlem Renaissance; it meant “happy.” The students then felt free to use the word in their responses.

Another student, Steve Doane, who is Jewish, was inspired to return to a short story he had imagined but never written. His story, which he didn’t title,
takes place in 1920s Detroit, a time when alcohol was illegal. During this time, a Jewish gang ruled most of the alcohol sales and bootlegging. I have taken what I have learned about short stories and the elements that short stories have into my own short story. I have characters, a plot, a conflict, and even my meter changes pace throughout the story. I was able to complete this because of what I learned and from the examples of a Hughes short story that I read, “The Blues I’m Playing.”

Steve’s strategy of changing African American gangsters into Jewish ones demonstrates that he was able to absorb the story and then filter it through his own experiences and his imagination.
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