

Langston Hughes in the Classroom

“Do Nothin’ till You Hear from Me”

The NCTE High School Literature Series



Carmaletta M. Williams

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3 I'll Build Me a World: The Harlem Renaissance



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-

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,

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-

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 through out 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.



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.

National Council of Teachers of English

1111 W. Kenyon Road

Urbana, Illinois 61801-1096

800-369-6283 or 217-328-3870

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