

Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance

Grade Level: 9-10

Introduction

Popular literature, art, and music of a given period can often be examined for reflections of the broader culture in which they were produced. One such period is the Harlem Renaissance—a fascinating explosion of the fine arts produced by African Americans in the early-mid twentieth century as a reaction against centuries of oppression. The poetry of this time reflects the cultural milieu of the Harlem Renaissance both through its themes and its poetic devices such as rhyme, rhythm, and figurative language.

This lesson plan, which integrates EBSCO's **Literary Reference Plus** and **Poetry & Short Story Reference Source** databases, asks students to conduct close readings of poetry and examine the interaction between poetry and its historical context.

Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1, 4, 6, 9; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.1, 9; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1, 4; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.1-5 | NCTE 2-4, 6

- R.4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
- R.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.
- L.3: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.
- NCTE 2: Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.

Essential Questions

1. How can poetry reflect the cultural values of its time?
2. How does figurative language enhance the reading of a poem?
3. How can voice empower an individual or community?

Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

1. Identify instances of figurative language in poetry.

2. Draw connections between history and literature.
3. Compare approaches of different poems to similar topics.
4. Support claims with textual evidence.

Materials

- Computer/laptop
- Access to Poetry & Short Story Reference Source
- Access to Literary Reference Plus

Procedure

1. Introduce or review the period of the Harlem Renaissance with students. Literary Reference Plus and Poetry and Short Story Reference Source include concise summaries of this period, as well as chronologies, essays, and bibliographies of popular works.

Suggested reference readings from Literary Reference Plus:

- “Harlem Renaissance” by Linda Carter. (“AN 103331INI17540170000331”)
- “Chronology of the Harlem Renaissance” by Christopher Varlack and Karl Henzy. (“AN 112613252”)
- “A Portfolio of Harlem Renaissance Photographs” by Victor A. Kramer. (“AN 43281500”)

Suggested reference readings from Poetry & Short Story Reference Source:

- “Harlem Renaissance” by Gay Zieger. (“AN 103331CSPT10550169000255”)
- “The Harlem Renaissance” by Robert Hardy. (“AN 67051522”)
- “Twentieth-Century Jazz Poetry” by T. Fleischmann. (“AN 66891842”)

2. Select 1-3 of the above readings and have students actively read with margin annotations.
3. Review reading(s) with students. Ensure that students understand where and when the Harlem Renaissance took place, as well as its major themes/concepts (e.g., reaction against oppression, explosion of music and art, sense of unified African American identity).
4. Discuss the poem “Harlem” by Langston Hughes, available on Poetry and Short Story Reference Source. This poem was not written during the Harlem Renaissance itself but is a reflection on the period by one of its most prominent writers.

Model a Think-Aloud with active annotation for students while reading through the poem. Focus on the similes, imagery, and rhyme present in the poem. Ensure that students understand the meaning of “deferred.” Some questions for the class to consider:

- Why did Hughes title his poem “Harlem”?
 - How would you describe the imagery of this poem?
 - What is the purpose of rhyme in this poem?
 - Why is the last line in italics?
 - What does Hughes mean by “explode”? Does it have a positive or negative connotation in this poem?
5. Examine some poems written during the Harlem Renaissance. You may choose to continue an “I, We, You” lesson format in which the whole class works with the same poems or create small groups differentiated by readiness that focus on different poems.

Some suggested poems from the Harlem Renaissance available on Poetry & Short Story Reference Source are (ordered from least to most challenging):

- “I Look at the World” by Langston Hughes
 - “Tableau” by Countee Cullen
 - “The Suppliant” by Georgia Douglas Johnson
 - “If We Must Die” by Claude McKay
 - “From the Dark Tower” by Countee Cullen
 - “That One Bright Chimeric Beast” by Countee Cullen
 - “To One Coming North” by Claude McKay
 - “Subway Wind” by Claude McKay
 - “My Little Dreams” by Georgia Douglas Johnson
 - “December, 1919” by Claude McKay
6. Students should annotate poems in the modeled method focusing on the following elements where applicable: rhyme, simile/metaphor, imagery, rhythm/meter, personification.
7. Depending on lesson format and poetry selection, students may synthesize information in one of the following ways:
- a. Discussion: Conduct fishbowl discussions in which the inner circle compares and contrasts a certain set of poems and the outer circle takes notes; circles switch roles and the new inner circle discusses a different grouping of poems while the outer takes notes.

- b. Presentation Workshop: Individuals or groups present their annotations and give brief summaries of their connections between the poetry and its history. Other students collaborate to add more annotations or draw additional connections if possible.
 - c. Quick Write/Journal: Students write a brief paragraph in which they describe at least three connections they made between the poems and their cultural context, citing lines from the poems for support.
8. Ask students to consider the different approaches that the different poets took in their poems. Is the poem reflective or impelling? If it calls for action, what type of action does it call for? Is the tone positive or negative? Is the poem communal (we) or personal (I)? Chart these similarities and differences with students.

Assessment

Formative Assessment

Conduct smaller evaluations that track progress towards final unit goal. Evaluate student understanding based on depth of knowledge and participation in discussion/presentation of poems or through quality of written closing activity. Collect students' annotated poems for completion check.

Summative Assessment

Conduct a measurable evaluation of student achievement in the form of quizzes, discussions, and/or written responses depending on unit plan. Suggested essay prompt: How does the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance reflect its cultural context? Cite three instances of figurative language from at least two poems and their reflection of the nonfiction reading on the Harlem Renaissance.