African American Literature

From 1950----present

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The overview

In broad terms, African-American literature can be defined as writings by people of African descent living in the United States. It is highly varied. African-American literature has generally focused on the role of African Americans within the larger American society and what it means to be an American. As Princeton University professor Albert J. Raboteau has said, all African-American study "speaks to the deeper meaning of the African-American presence in this nation. This presence has always been a test case of the nation's claims to freedom, democracy, equality, the inclusiveness of all." African-American literature explores the issues of freedom and equality long denied to Blacks in the United States, along with further themes such as African American culture, racism, religion, slavery, a sense of home, and more.

African-American literature has both been influenced by the great African diasporic heritage and shaped it in many countries. It has been created within the larger realm of post-colonial literature, although scholars distinguish between the two, saying that "African American literature differs from most post-colonial literature in that it is written by members of a minority community who reside within a nation of vast wealth and economic power."
Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance from 1920 to 1940 brought new attention to African American literature. While the Harlem Renaissance, based in the African American community in Harlem in New York City, existed as a larger flowering of social thought and culture—with numerous Black artists, musicians, and others producing classic works in fields from jazz to theater—the renaissance is perhaps best known for the literature that came out of it.


Another famous writer of the renaissance is novelist Zora Neale Hurston, author of the classic novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Altogether, Hurston wrote 14 books which ranged from anthropology to short stories to novel-length fiction. Because of Hurston's gender and the fact that her work was not seen as socially or politically relevant, her writings fell into obscurity for decades. Hurston's work was rediscovered in the 1970s in a famous essay by Alice Walker, who found in Hurston a role model for all female African American writers.

While Hurston and Hughes are the two most influential writers to come out of the Harlem Renaissance, a number of other writers also became well known during this period. They include Jean Toomer, who wrote *Cane*, a famous collection of stories, poems, and sketches about rural and urban Black life, and Dorothy West, author of the novel *The Living is Easy*, which examined the life of an upper-class Black family. Another popular renaissance writer is Countee Cullen, who described everyday black life in his poems (such as a trip he made to Baltimore, which was ruined by a racial insult). Cullen's books include the poetry collections
Color (1925), Copper Sun (1927), and The Ballad of the Brown Girl (1927). Frank Marshall Davis's poetry collections Black Man's Verse (1935) and I am the American Negro (1937), published by Black Cat Press, earned him critical acclaim. Author Wallace Thurman also made an impact with his novel The Blacker the Berry: A Novel of Negro Life (1929), which focused on intraracial prejudice between lighter-skinned and darker-skinned African Americans.

The Harlem Renaissance marked a turning point for African American literature. Prior to this time, books by African Americans were primarily read by other Black people. With the renaissance, though, African American literature—as well as black fine art and performance art—began to be absorbed into mainstream American culture.
Activities

Activity #1 Introduction to the Harlem Renaissance

The purpose of this activity is to provide students with a brief introduction to the Harlem Renaissance. Lecturing and brainstorming would be primary strategies for this activity and ask for student volunteers to share their thoughts with the entire class. The points to be covered are:

1. What was the state of black literature before the Renaissance?
2. What was the Great Migration?
3. What were the reasons giving rise to the Harlem Renaissance?
4. What is a literary movement and what does the term Renaissance mean?
Here it would be useful to mention other literary movements and the European Renaissance.

Activity #2—Interview

As a community outreach project, find a few local African American authors. Have the students split up into groups according to the amount of authors found. The students should conduct group interviews of the local authors to find out about background, inspirations, current works, etc.

Activity #3 Writing Poetry or Short Stories Using Themes from the Harlem Renaissance
After reading several Harlem Renaissance novels, poems etc., each student will write original poetry using the formats provided, or style of their own, that reflect the themes and writers attitudes they have identified, as well as recite their writings and give interpretation to class. Students will be graded on their reflections of the poems, their oral interpretations, and readings of their poetry.

Activity #4—Board Game
All literature has several components including introduction, conflict, climax, and resolution. Have the students get into groups of three or four and select a studied work, preferably a novel or play. The student must create a comprehensive board game according to the events in the chosen work.

Activity #5—Movie
Choose one or two movies for the students to watch such as *A Raisin in the Sun* or *Roots* or *Disappearing Acts*, just to name a few. Have the students write a review of the movie in comparison to the original written work. Obtain parental consent to watch the movies if necessary.
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