

# Harlem Renaissance

## INTRODUCTION

In the 1920s, America was filled with economic prosperity, cultural rejuvenation, and artistic innovation. One particularly important cultural movement during this time was the Harlem Renaissance. Named after the Manhattan borough of Harlem, a predominately African American neighborhood, the Harlem Renaissance celebrated the work of African American poets, musicians, dramatists, and visual artists. Today, we remember the Harlem Renaissance in the writing of Langston Hughes, the jazz of Duke Ellington, and the performances of Josephine Baker. Another important contributor to the Harlem Renaissance was poet, novelist, and curator Arna Bontemps. In this lesson students will discover the magic of the Harlem Renaissance through Bontemps' poetry.

## GRADES 9-12 MATERIALS

- » Primary Source Document: The poem "Jazz" by Arna Bontemps.

It is important to note that while the Harlem Renaissance drew international attention to the rich cultural traditions of African Americans, the United States was still a segregated society during the 1920s. Black people did not have the right to vote. They weren't allowed to use the same bathrooms or water fountains as whites. Black children went to separate schools and black athletes had to play in separate leagues.

## STANDARDS

### NY State Standard 1: History of the United States and New York

Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of major ideas, eras, themes, developments, and turning points in the history of the United States and New York.

### Common Core: CC6-8RH/SS2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

### AASL Standards for the 21st Century Learner: 2.1.1

Continue an inquiry-based research process by applying critical thinking skills (analysis, synthesis, evaluation, organization) to information and knowledge in order to construct new understandings, draw conclusions, and create new knowledge.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Using primary sources related to the Harlem Renaissance, students will:

- » Learn about primary sources, what they are and how they can be used to help understand the past.
- » Expand their thinking and knowledge about the Harlem Renaissance, when it was, how it came about, and what significance it has in history.
- » Apply critical thinking skills to analyze a poem in order to construct new understandings about African American history and culture.
- » Write a poem or song that is personally meaningful and “publish” it alongside their classmates’ poems in order to represent the community of the class. (See Teacher’s Notes).

## ASSESSMENT

Assessment should be based on class discussion and a poem or song that demonstrates the student’s ability to:

- » Decipher primary source documents.
- » Gain an understanding of a particular historical context and cultivate compassion for differences and a variety of cultural traditions.
- » Create a poem or song that communicates a unique personal memory.

*Students should work individually using what they have learned during the lesson about the Harlem Renaissance and Bontemps’ poem to create their own poem or song that will be published alongside the poems of their classmates.*

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## GETTING STARTED

- » Explain that primary sources are original documents that tell us about the historical moments in which they were created. Ask the following questions: How can you tell that you are looking, touching, or listening to a primary source? What is a secondary source? Explain that secondary sources are interpretations of primary sources.
- » Introduce the skill of the lesson. In this lesson students will read a poem written by Arna Bontemps during the Harlem Renaissance. Explain the Harlem Renaissance to the students (See Teachers Notes). Explain that the literature, music, and art of the Harlem Renaissance can be seen as important expressions of the black community, its history and traditions, and its place in American culture.

## DIRECT INSTRUCTION

1. Read aloud the poem “Jazz” by Arna Bontemps. Ask the students to write down everything that they notice about the poem. Have the students share their observations with the class. Ask: What is this poem about? How does the title “Jazz” relate to the content of the poem? What aspects of this poem signify its relationship to the community of Harlem? What is the emotional tone of this poem?

2. If possible, play an example of jazz music for the students. Ask them to compare the poem to the music. What are the similarities and differences between these two art forms?
3. For homework, ask the students to write their own poem or song that communicates a unique personal memory. Explain that all of the students' poems will be published together in an anthology that expresses the community of the class. Have the students illustrate their poems.

### TEACHER'S NOTES

- » For more background information on the history of the Harlem Renaissance, see *The Harlem Renaissance* by Kevin Hillstrom (Detroit, MI: Omnigraphics, 2008).
- » To “publish” the anthology of student poetry, the teacher should collect all of the students' poems after they have been written and illustrated. Make sure each student's name is on his or her poem. Photocopy and staple all of the poems together with a cover created by the teacher or by the class collectively. Each student should receive a copy of the anthology.

### REFLECTION AND SHARING

- » After the class anthology has been “published” and distributed to all of the students, lead a class discussion in which the students reflect on how the anthology communicates the “community” of the class. Ask students: In what ways does the anthology characterize our class? Based on this anthology, how would you describe the community of our class?
- » Give students the opportunity to read their poems or songs aloud and explain their meaning to the class.

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JAZZ

Brown girls that my arms have known,  
Old loves and better days  
Come back again to trouble me,  
Whenever a jazzband plays.

Brown girls I had quite forgot  
With love's first pointed flames  
Are here again, when the music starts—  
I even remember names.

- Arna Bontemps

Arna Bontemps, "Jazz," n.d., Arna Bontemps Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries.