



A Unit of Study for Grades 9-12

Nina Gifford



NATIONAL CENTER FOR
HISTORY IN THE SCHOOLS
University of California, Los Angeles

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TEACHER BACKGROUND MATERIALS

I. UNIT OVERVIEW

In *The Crisis* in 1920, W.E.B Du Bois called for “a renaissance of American Negro literature . . . [for] the strange, heart-rending race tangle is rich beyond dream and only we can tell the tale and sing the song from the heart.” [April, 298–99]. By 1925, the New York *Herald Tribune* proclaimed that a “Negro renaissance” was well underway [May 7]. Now known best as the Harlem Renaissance, it was an era of vigorous cultural growth that coalesced around a group of creative young writers, artists, musicians, and powerful social thinkers such as Du Bois and Alain Locke in Manhattan’s Harlem around 1920. Critics and historians have struggled to understand the movement and its impact over the years: What were its historical roots? How great is its art? How widespread and enduring is its legacy? Studying the Harlem Renaissance and its role in defining African American cultural identity in the rapidly changing world of the early twentieth century not only helps students grasp that era’s complexity, but also helps them develop insights into attitudes that exist in our society today.

Using a variety of documents, plus cooperative and individual instructional activities that emphasize critical thinking, students will examine the attitudes and strategies of a people battling to take their rightful place in American society. Art, literature, music, and film are also used to illustrate key points.

II. UNIT CONTEXT

The Harlem Renaissance is part of the post-World War I cultural upheaval that found all of American society trying to come to terms with the shift from a rural way of life to an urban and industrialized one. This unit can be taught after studying World War I, as a case study of the kinds of culture clashes that dominated the 1920s, or as a transition to the era of the Great Depression and the New Deal after covering the ‘20s. In preparation for teaching “The Harlem Renaissance,” background on Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the agricultural slowdown in the South, Jim Crow laws, the resurgence of the Klu Klux Klan (KKK), and the 1919 race riots would be worthwhile. See the **Annotated Bibliography** for source suggestions.

III. CORRELATION WITH THE NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR UNITED STATES HISTORY

The Harlem Renaissance provides teaching materials that address *National Standards for United States History*, Basic Edition (Los Angeles: National Center for History in the Schools, 1996) **Era 7** “The Emergence of Modern America (1890–1930).” Lessons in the unit specifically address **Standard 3C** “Examine the contributions of artists and writers of the Harlem Renaissance and assess their popularity.”

Lessons within this unit likewise address the Historical Thinking Standards by providing primary source materials which challenge students to analyze cause-and-effect relationships, to marshal evidence of antecedent circumstances, to consider multiple perspectives, and to draw upon visual data, literary, and musical sources. Students are also expected to draw evidence from historical maps.

IV. UNIT OBJECTIVES

- ◆ To identify social, economic, and political events that affected African Americans in the first decades of the twentieth century
- ◆ To describe and analyze the artistic and cultural development of African Americans during the Harlem Renaissance
- ◆ To discuss the historical impact of the Harlem Renaissance

V. LESSON PLANS

1. Evolution of Harlem (1 day)
2. Art of the Harlem Renaissance (2–3 days)
3. Historical Impact of the Harlem Renaissance (1–2 days)

VI. AN INTRODUCTION TO “THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE”

The historical roots of the Harlem Renaissance are complex. In part, they lay in the vast migration of African Americans to northern industrial centers that began early in the century and increased rapidly as World War I production needs and labor shortages boosted job opportunities. The target for the move north for African American artists and intellectuals was often New York City, where powerful voices for racial pride such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and James Weldon Johnson were concentrated. By the 1910s, Harlem had become a spirited community that provided continuity and support for a diverse population pouring in from the South and the Caribbean.

The Harlem Renaissance is also rooted in the disappointment that African Americans felt with the limited opportunities open to them as the United States struggled to transform itself from a rural to an urban society. Increased contact between African Americans and white Americans in the workplace and on city streets forced a new awareness of the disparity between the promise of U.S. democracy and its reality. African American soldiers who served in World War I were angered by the prejudice they often encountered back at home, compared to the greater acceptance they had found in Europe. A larger, better-educated urban population fully comprehended the limitations that white-dominated society had placed on them. As African Americans became increasingly disillusioned about achieving the justice that war-time rhetoric had seemed to promise, many determined to pursue their goals of equality and success more aggressively than ever before.

Organized political and economic movements also helped to motivate the Harlem Renaissance by creating a new sense of empowerment in African Americans. The NAACP boasted nearly 44,000 members by the end of 1918. In the early 1920s Marcus Garvey's message of racial pride drew hundreds of thousands of ordinary men and women to his United Negro Improvement Association and its Back-to-Africa movement. Other African Americans, including many intellectuals, turned to socialism or communism. By 1920, large numbers of African Americans of all political and economic points of view were plainly unwilling to settle for the old ways any longer. One unexpected development had an impact on the form their demand for change would take: urbane whites suddenly "took up" New York's African American community, bestowing patronage on young artists, opening up publishing opportunities, and pumping cash into Harlem's "exotic" nightlife in a complex relationship that scholars continue to probe. Fueled by all of these historical forces, an unprecedented outpouring of writing, music and visual arts began among African American artists.

The artistic output of the Harlem Renaissance was dominated by two ideologies, both driven by racial consciousness and pride. The first is represented by W. E. B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson of the NAACP, Howard University philosophy professor Alain Locke, sociologist Charles Spurgeon, and others, who extolled the arts as an area where talented and culturally privileged African Americans could lead their race's fight for equality. They believed that works of fine art inspired by the artists' racial heritage and experience would prove the beauty of their race and its crucial contribution to American culture. Artistic successes, they believed, could be counted on to foster pride among all African Americans and prove their educated class to be the equal of the white educated class. In "Criteria for Negro Art," Du Bois argued:

We have a right, in our effort to get just treatment, to insist that we produce something of the best in human character and that it is unfair to judge us by our criminals and prostitutes. This is justifiable propaganda. [The Crisis, 21 (June 1921), 55–56]

Du Bois hailed the "Talented Tenth" and Locke the "New Negro" as thinking persons whose race had survived war, migration, and prejudice, and had the strength and vision to lead the way to social justice.

Opposition to this art-as-propaganda view came from the very same elite vanguard of artists that the older generation was counting on to promote the cause: artists such as Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Aaron Douglas. They took a stand voiced in Wallace Thurman's short-lived journal, *Fire!!*, claiming the need to present the ordinary African American person objectively as an individual simply living in the flesh-and-blood world. They argued against painting and characterizing only "cultured" and "high-class" African Americans who mirrored the standards of white society. In doing so, they spoke for young artists who chose to pursue their art for its own sake. If there was not a bitter feud between these two ideological camps, it was in no small part due to the fact that the young artists still inevitably spoke from their unique experience as African American men and women.

As a discrete historical moment in American history, the Harlem Renaissance came to an end sometime in the 1930s (most authorities place it in the early thirties). The Great Depression sapped the money and energy of white patrons and party-goers as well as that of Harlemites, including the substantial support of journals such as the National Urban League's *Opportunity* and the NAACP's *The Crisis*. Harlem artists drifted to other opportunities, in Washington or Paris or Fisk University in Nashville, with a sense of leaving behind not a defined movement as much as a social phenomenon.

How, then, should we evaluate the Harlem Renaissance? From an aesthetic point of view, one of the main reproaches has been that little significant artistic criticism was written during the Renaissance. There is a sense among many critics and historians today that having art created by African Americans *taken seriously* seemed like such a momentous step forward that it seemed to suffice, and only with hindsight do we see how this may have forestalled synthesis of a Harlem Renaissance movement as such. Some critics argue that much of the work produced during the Renaissance was not of outstanding quality and that the period inevitably has been idealized, but others stress that the real point is the breakthroughs made in two areas: technical mastery and ideological content. Another criticism—that the Harlem Renaissance was an elitist intellectual movement that barely touched the masses—should be put into perspective. According to authority Nathan Huggins:

[The idea that d]espite a history that had divided them, art and culture would reform the brotherhood in a common humanity . . . was an attitude of cultural elitism. But it is wrong to assume that these black intellectuals, because of it, were not related to the black common man in Harlem. I think . . . most Negroes were apt to agree that [the artistic output] was a good thing. . . . And such an achievement, because it was elite in character, was a source of race pride and an argument against continued discrimination. [*Harlem Renaissance*, 5–6]

Other authorities point to progress in relations between African and white Americans. During the Harlem Renaissance it was acceptable for the first time for Americans of both races—as equals—to make and exploit social contact. Also, the movement articulated some priorities for the achievement of racial equality that have been played out in the modern Civil Rights Movement.

Historical evidence certainly does not show unbroken progress in African American artistic (or political or economic) development since the period of the Harlem Renaissance. But history does support the view that the Renaissance was a liberating step in the search by African Americans for artistic and cultural identity on their own terms. Victor A. Kramer, in his 1987 collection of essays on the subject, makes an important point about the need for continuing historical and social evaluation of the Harlem Renaissance: “At this stage, questions about such a complicated movement may be even more valuable than answers.” [*The Harlem Renaissance Re-Examined*, p. 2]