

Teaching American History

Possible Subject Area(s):

American Literature, American Studies, American History

Overview: This lesson will examine the origin and legacy of the Harlem Renaissance by focusing on the contribution of Langston Hughes, first as poet and then as playwright. Students will conduct an internet search, listen and analyze poetry, understand historical context and realism in literature, and apply critical theories to create an interpretation across disciplines.

Essential Understanding:

Students will discover that a culture's literature tells its story in a distinctive way, and that the present is influenced by the past.

Essential Questions:

- *How can the literature of the Harlem Renaissance be viewed as a commentary on race relations in America?
- *Are there any winners in segregation?
- *What is the psychological impact of miscegenation?

CT. Standards:

- 1.1 Students use appropriate strategies before, during, and after reading in order to construct meaning.
- 1.2 Students interpret, analyze and evaluate text in order to extend understanding and appreciation.
- 2.2 Students explore multiple responses to literature.
- 2.4 Students recognize that readers and authors are influenced by individual, social, cultural and historical contexts.
- 3.2 Students prepare, publish and/or present work appropriate to audience, purpose and task.

Objectives:

Students will

- Research the goals of the Harlem Renaissance, biographical information about Langston Hughes, the influence of African-American history on his work.
- Examine one of three poems by Langston Hughes which is characteristic of his belief in the racial consciousness of African Americans and his hope for and his insistence on equal justice.
- Study the play "Mulatto: A Play of the Deep South" as an example of realistic drama.
- Apply critical strategies to demonstrate an understanding of other contexts.

Materials Needed:

Internet access with audio capability

Student Text: Roberts, Edgar V. and Henry E. Jacobs. *Literature: An Introduction to Reading and Writing*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc. 2004.

Suggested Activities/Procedures:

Day 1-Students will work in groups of three.

Student One will research the Harlem Renaissance.

- How did it begin?
- How did it influence African American life? African American identity?
- How did the Harlem Renaissance impact Black writers then and now?
- What impact did their writing have on the course of American history?

Possible websites on The Harlem Renaissance

<http://www.42explore2.com/harlem.htm>
<http://afroamhistory.about.com/cs/harlemrenaissance/a/harlemren.htm>
<http://www.math.buffalo.edu/~sww/circle/harlem-ren-sites.html>
<http://www.infoplease.com/spot/bhmharlem1.html>

Student Two will research biographical information of Langston Hughes.

- Find an image of Langston Hughes
- Feelings toward parental rejection in his life
- Criticism of Hughes' use of stereotypical African American dialects
- Hughes attraction to the American Communist party
- 1930s-why his focus was more on prose than poetry
- Writing and production of his play "Mulatto." Critical reception?
- Why did he garner the title, "The Poet Laureate of Harlem"?

Possible websites for Langston Hughes

http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/exploring/harlem/faces/hughes_text.html
http://afroamhistory.about.com/cs/langstonhughes/p/bio_langston_h.htm
<http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/lhughes.htm>
http://www.galegroup.com/free_resources/bhm/bio/hughes_1.htm
http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/g_1/hughes/1930s.htm

Student Three will examine the poem assigned.

- Initial reading and annotating
- Read one or two critiques
- Respond to the questions

Possible websites for poetry critiques

http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/g_l/hughes/1930s.htm

[Langston Hughes : Bibliography](http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/hughesbib.htm)

<http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/hughesbib.htm>

Bibliography of the author's work created by Internet School Library Media Center (ISLMC).

[Langston Hughes: Modern American Poetry](http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/g_l/hughes/hughes.htm)

http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/g_l/hughes/hughes.htm

Very good site with biographical information, discussion of major works, excerpts, bibliography, and links. This site is an online companion to the Anthology of Modern American Poetry (Oxford University Press, 2000) Edited by Cary Nelson.

[Langston Hughes Review](http://www.uga.edu/iaas/LHR.html)

<http://www.uga.edu/iaas/LHR.html>

Official Publication of The Langston Hughes Society

Poem One: "I, Too"

I, too, sing America.
I am the darker brother,
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,

And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed –

I, too, am America.



Questions:

1. Who is the speaker in the poem? What is the significance of the word "too" in the first line? What does it connote?
2. Who does "they" refer to in the poem? How do "they" treat the speaker of the poem? How does he respond?
3. How do you interpret the second-to-last stanza? Why will "they" be ashamed?

4. How does this poem portray race relations in America? What kind of vision of the future does it offer?
5. What do you think the narrator means when he says, "I, too, sing America"?

Poem Two: "Cross"

My old man's a white old man
And my old mother's black.
If ever I cursed my white old man
I take my curses back.
If ever I cursed my black old mother
And wished she were in hell,
I'm sorry for that evil wish
And now I wish her well
My old man died in a fine big house.
My ma died in a shack.
I wonder where I'm going to die,
Being neither white nor black?

Questions:

1. What do you think has caused the speaker to retract his/her hard feelings about his or her parents?
2. Discuss the possible meaning of the title.
3. What informs the speaker's attitude toward life?

Poem Three" "Mother to Son"

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor --
Bare.
But all the time
I've been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now --
For I've still goin', honey,
I've still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

Questions:

1. How is the central metaphor of climbing the stairs a particularly appropriate idea to convey the theme?
2. What inference can we make about the stairs being crystal rather than carpeted?
3. How does the dialect add or detract from the message of the poem?
4. What does the mother want the son to do?

In your group of Three, gather to share what you have gleaned from your research.

Assessment:

Based on your research of the period, the writer, and the poem, work together to create an original work which captures the spirit of the movement. You might create a painting which depicts the period or the poem, you might write the next stanza of the poem; you might choose or create a musical piece which captures the spirit of the work; you might role play the situation in the poem, etc... Whatever your group chooses, you should include a typed commentary explaining your choice and its appropriateness. Include the image of Langston Hughes which student two found in his/her research.

Day 1 Assignment

Read *Mulatto* in text 1608-1630. Be prepared to discuss. In light of the historical time when the play was written and produced, could there have been any other outcome?

Day Two

1. Ahead of time, Teacher should *Prepare a Transparency on Realism

Notes taken from:

<http://radar.ngcsu.edu/~tcampbell/ENG1102/Drama/modern.htm#Realism>

Realism (During and after last 1/4 of 19th century)

1. Attempts to create the appearance of life-verisimilitude-as it is actually experienced.
2. Realistic characters can be heroic but find their strength tested in events ordinary people experience, such as work, love, marriage, and death.
3. Realistic conflicts reflect real life, not just some exaggerated improbability; therefore, average, everyday people take on the focus of a play rather than serving as background or subplot characters.
4. "Problem play" was a drama that represented a social issue to awaken the audience's awareness of it. These plays reject any romantic plots

in favor of holding up a mirror that reflects not simply what audiences want to see but what the playwright sees in them.

II. Conventions

A. Picture Frame Stage

1. Typically used for realistic dramas as it reproduces the setting of a room in some detail.
2. Within the stage, scenery and props produce the illusion of reality.
3. Removing the fourth wall of a room fosters the illusion that the actions onstage are real events happening before unseen spectators. Promotes voyeurism in the audience as it gazes unseen into the lives of unsuspecting characters onstage.

B. Method acting

1. Developed by Konstantin Stanislavsky to train actors to identify with the inner emotions of the characters they played.
2. Actors were encouraged to recall from their own lives similar emotional responses to the emotions the characters experience; the goal was to present a role by first feeling and then projecting the characters' situations.
3. Actors address each other instead of the audience, acting within the setting, not merely in front of it.

C. Most modern playwrights do not deal with the strict rules/conventions of realism. Most plays offer a blend of realism and non realism. Hughes' *Mulatto* is highly realistic, yet modifies its realism through symbolism and selective emphasis.

Realistic drama is the appearance of reality, resulting from careful selection, editing, and even distortion.

2. Discuss in large group. Realism in setting and language.

How is *Mulatto* a realistic play? Why is it important that the play contains many details about the plantation and the customs of the country?

Possible responses: Absolute white control over black; conflict of “color line”; exploitation of black women; illegitimacy of children on the plantation; Robert’s actions which are neither acceptable to white nor black; his hatred for both; his inevitable violence; the Southern black vernacular (“darky talk”) of the 1930s.

Before the small groups, set the tone by listening to Hughes recitation of “Mulatto”(the poem) at <http://blip.tv/file/192319>

3. Divide the class into 3 or groups. Each group will become an expert on one of the characters.
 - a. **Colonel Norwood**-Southern Plantation owner
 - What characteristics of a plantation owner does he exhibit?
 - What does his having sent Robert and his sister away to school say about him?
 - What does Cora say about him before and after he is dead?
 - b. **Robert Lewis**-son of Colonel Norwood and Cora Lewis
 - Describe his dominant traits
 - How does he deal with the circumstances of his birth and life?
 - the incident at the Post Office
 - driving the Ford fast
 - using the front door
 - verbal sparring with his father
 - To what extent is he responsible for his own demise?
 - c. **Cora Lewis**-Housekeeper and mistress of Colonel Norwood for some thirty years
 - What has her life been like?
 - To what degree has she sacrificed her life to stay with Norwood?
 - How has she protected her children?
 - In Act 2, sc 2, what has happened to Cora? What was the nature of the “old ways” of the South? Why does Talbot slap Cora at the end?

Each character group should attempt to make some connections with the three poems from **Day One**.

4. Expert Groups report to Large group.

Day 2 Assignment: Each student will be assigned one Critical Approach from pages 1914-1927.

Written response: After reading the theory’s principles, use the questions listed under each critical approach to analyze the play *Mulatto* from the viewpoint of your theory. In your written response, use at least five instances of textual evidence to support your thinking.

Theories

-Moral/Intellectual-Concerned with content and values

Humanist/Moral Criticism

Here, the critic brings the cultural/religious assumptions of his or her own time to bear upon a literary work, judging the text according to how well it fits the critic's own ethical values system. At its best, this approach heaps praise on works of literature for their superlative expression of humankind's highest ideals & aspirations.

-Topical/Historical-stresses the relationship of literature to its historical period

Historical Criticism

Next to formalist criticism, traditionally considered the most "objective" critical approach. The historical critic may be concerned with 1) the historical context per se, and thus be concerned about the effects of the writer's historical milieu (race, place, & time [cf. Taine]) upon the literary work at hand--e.g., the effects of the Industrial Revolution on the work of a particular English Romantic poet; or 2) the cultural/philosophical--"HISTORY OF IDEAS"--background of the writer's milieu--e.g., the impact of Einstein's theory of relativity on, say, the novels of James Joyce--or 3) the effects of previous works of literature (literary history) on the writer & his/her work--e.g., the influence of Whitman's free verse and mystical worldview on American Beat poetry of the 1950's & 60's.

-Feminist/Gender-asserts that most of our literature presents a masculine-patriarchal view in which the role of women is negated or minimized

Feminist criticism (very simply put) champions the downtrodden of the "war of the sexes," critiquing *patriarchal* (or *phallogentric*) texts and championing neglected (and recent) "pro-woman" literary works. Like Marxism, feminism quite often teams up with poststructuralism in its critique of the dominant male "hegemony." One might conveniently divide feminism into two "camps": 1) those who posit an innate (and culturally repressed) "female" way of writing, reading, even thinking (essentialist); and 2) those who see sex or gender as socially conditioned and linguistically constructed (constructivist). Either way, patriarchal dominance/oppression has been--and continues to be, to a great extent the order of the day.

-Archetypal/Symbolic/Mythic-presupposes that human life is built up out of patterns, or archetypes, that are similar throughout various cultures and historical times.

Archetypal (or Jungian) (or Mythic) Criticism

Another "both fascinating and dangerous" approach that assumes that all of humankind's creative works--including literature, myths, and religious

rituals & symbols, and indeed, our very dreams--emanate from the same inner psychic source, the *collective unconscious*, as formulated by Carl Jung. Therefore one may find in many works of literature archetypal (universal-to-our-species) symbols that represent the various emotions and aspirations of humankind's ancestral psychological heritage.

The archetypal method is also commonly called MYTH or MYTHIC criticism because archetypal figures & processes--such as the shadow, the anima/animus, the wise old man, the god-image (or "Self"), the journey, the "divine marriage," and rebirth--are profusely evident in humankind's myths and rituals.

Notes on Literary Theories from <http://incolor.inebraska.com/tgannon/crit.html>

Day Three

1. Students will share their work first in small group with students who were assigned the same critical approach. This small group will prepare an oral presentation on the issues addressed in their theory.
2. The small groups will present their ideas to the large group. Each student should be a part of the presentation. Following each report, students will be asked

Questions for Large groups to answer/consider

MORAL/INTELLECTUAL

Are there struggles between characters over values? Education?

Does that struggle occur within or across color lines? Or both?

TOPICAL/HISTORICAL

When the text was produced, how does that time and setting contribute to understanding the meaning of the work?

Has the text been received differently by various groups in society?

FEMINIST/GENDER

Is the exploitation of women in the text a result of racism or sexism or both?

Does the text support or refute traditional notions of gender?

ARCHETYPAL/SYMBOLIC/MYTHIC

Does the protagonist, with his desires and aggressions have an "Oedipal Complex"?

On his journey, does the protagonist experience a cycle of transgression and redemption?

3. Following the small and large group discussions of *Mulatto* from the various theories, students will write a journal entry from a Reader-Response approach. This approach believes that reality is found in our mental perception of the external world. Actual

knowledge is our collective and personal understanding of the world and our conclusions about it. (Roberts and Jacobs 1926)

Questions to consider

What does this work mean to me, in my present intellectual and moral makeup?

How can the work improve my understanding and widen my insights?

Suggested Assessment/Evaluation

Creative presentation-day one

Small and Large group activity-day two

Written essay-Analysis of the play from a specific critical viewpoint-day two to three

Groups' Jigsaw sharing on day three

Journal reflection-individual-day three

Possible Extensions

Pick a famous mulatto from history and write a brief biography which includes how this person was received by society.

How has opinion regarding interracial relationships changed since the 1930s? How has it remained the same?

Read "Father and Son" published in 1934, which shares a similar theme. Compare to *Mulatto*.

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