

# Black people's rights in art and literature

## Lesson 1 (45'):



1. Think of cases of civil rights' violations now and in the past and work in pairs to make a list of them. Then, one of you will present them in class. (10')

2. Write down all the words related to civil rights' violations that come in your mind. Then, one of you will create on the class computer a word cloud for this activity so that we have a graphic representation of your thoughts. (10')

3. Watch the video about the Harlem Renaissance on Tube. Search it on the 'Reading Through History' channel with the title 'History Brief: The Harlem Renaissance'. While watching, answer the following questions: (5')

a. When was the Harlem Renaissance at its peak?

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b. Why was Harlem the centre of this movement?

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c. Who were they key representatives of the movement?

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d. Which was the main art form of the Harlem Renaissance?

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e. What was the most important impact of the Harlem Renaissance?

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## **Introduction to the Harlem Renaissance**

The poem is part of the intellectual and artistic movement known as the ‘Harlem Renaissance’ (1917-1930s) that helped facilitate the Civil Rights movement. Artists associated with the movement asserted pride in black life and identity, a rising consciousness of inequality and discrimination, and interest in the rapidly changing modern world—many experiencing a freedom of expression through the arts for the first time. Many African Americans of the time used their art to prove that worthwhile work had always been produced by black people, many of whom managed to succeed against all odds in very hostile environments. Langston Hughes is the one who introduced the so-called “jazz poetry”, since the rhythm of his poems has a flow and melody that remind jazz music, which was popular back then, even though it was produced by black people.

### **Visitors to the Black Belt** by Langston Hughes

You can talk about  
Across the railroad tracks--  
To me it's here  
On this side of the tracks.



You can talk about  
Up in Harlem--  
To me it's here  
In Harlem.

You can say  
Jazz on the South Side--  
To me it's hell  
On the South Side:

Kitchenettes  
With no heat  
And garbage  
In the halls.

Who're you, outsider?

Ask me who am I.



4. Read the poem and decide whether the following statements are true or false. Justify your answers by referring to specific parts of the poem. (10')

1. The poet is a member of an oppressed social group. T / F
2. Through his choice of punctuation and adverbs of space, the poet expresses the opinion that black and white people should live separately. T / F
3. Elements of rhetoric might be found in the poem. T / F
4. Harlem is represented as an area that has become affluent due to the popularity of jazz music. T / F
5. In the last two lines, the poet adopts an aggressive tone. T / F

5. The poem is based on a contrast (antithesis). Work in pairs to find the antithetical elements in the poem and analyse its meaning. Write a paragraph about it and post it on the Wall of the Padlet created for this activity to share your analysis with your classmates. Otherwise, you can all post your analyses on the class noticeboard. (10')

## Lesson 2 (45’):

1. Work in groups of four. Find online and read Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech ‘I Have a Dream’, made during the Civil Rights movement in 1963. What elements does Langston Hughes' poem share with the speech in terms of content and language? Your group representative will present your findings in class. (30’)
2. Have a look at the painting entitled ‘Postman’ (1934) by Malvin Gray Johnson. Then, read its description and answer the questions that follow. Afterwards, we will discuss them in class. (15’)



Title: Postman

Artist: Malvin Gray Johnson

Date: 1934

Medium: Oil on canvas

Dimensions: 30 x 30 in.

Location: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library

In 1912, Malvin Gray Johnson moved to New York from North Carolina. He was 16 and moved to attend NYC's National Academy of Design. He was an artist working in Harlem and was known for choosing sitters of his own class. The books in the background on the right indicate that the sitter is a member of the educated middle class. Johnson created dignified portraits. His works 'Postman' and the 'Negro Soldier' are considered some of his best works. The Cézannesque artistic device of tilting the top of the table reflects his interest in European modernism.

a. Why did the artist choose to portray educated middle class Blacks?

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b. What kind of statement did the Cézannesque artistic device make regarding the painter's artistic value?

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c. What kind of impression does this painting make on you?

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**3.** Further practice (for homework or in class): Work in groups of four. Do some online research on the 'Harlem Renaissance' movement, choose another piece of art belonging to this movement and analyse it in relation to what you have learned so far concerning black people's identity and their struggle for equality during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Then, prepare a PowerPoint presentation to make in class.

## Black people's rights in art and literature (Key)

### Lesson 1 (45'):



1. Think of cases of civil rights violations now and in the past and work in pairs to make a list of them. Then, one of you will present them in class. (10')

Students' answers

2. Write down all the words related to civil rights violations that come in your mind. Then, one of you will create on the class computer a word cloud for this activity so that we have a graphic representation of your thoughts. (10')

Students' answers

3. Watch the video about the Harlem Renaissance on Tube. Search it on the 'Reading Through History' channel with the title 'History Brief: The Harlem Renaissance'. While watching, answer the following questions: (5')

a. When was the Harlem Renaissance at its peak?

\_\_During the 1920s.\_\_\_\_

b. Why was Harlem the centre of this movement?

\_\_Because it was mainly inhabited by African Americans.\_\_\_\_

c. Who were they key representatives of the movement?

\_\_Poets, writers, artists, musicians and philosophers.\_\_\_\_

d. Which was the main art form of the Harlem Renaissance?

\_\_Jazz music.\_\_\_\_

e. What was the most important impact of the Harlem Renaissance?

\_\_It changed the stereotypical perception of African Americans as uneducated farmers on an international level.\_\_\_\_

### **Introduction to the Harlem Renaissance**

The poem is part of the intellectual and artistic movement known as the ‘Harlem Renaissance’ (1917-1930s) that helped facilitate the Civil Rights movement. Artists associated with the movement asserted pride in black life and identity, a rising consciousness of inequality and discrimination, and interest in the rapidly changing modern world—many experiencing a freedom of expression through the arts for the first time. Many African Americans of the time used their art to prove that worthwhile work had always been produced by black people, many of whom managed to succeed against all odds in very hostile environments. Langston Hughes is the one who introduced the so-called “jazz poetry”, since the rhythm of his poems has a flow and melody that remind jazz music, which was popular back then, even though it was produced by black people.

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4. Read the poem and decide whether the following statements are true or false. Justify your answers by referring to specific parts of the poem. (10')

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Answers:

1. True: The poet is an African American man, living in Harlem during the first part of the twentieth century. At that time, Harlem was fashionable as an entertainment area that was popular with white people, largely because of jazz music. Harlem's black residents, however, were still burdened with poverty and discrimination. To them, life in Harlem was often "hell". Apart from the material problems faced by the black community, Hughes highlights forms of oppression that are harder to detect, that is, benefiting from the services of black people while ignoring their identities, their hardships and the fact that the area where white people have fun is a standard and often negative living experience for the black community.

2. False: The adverbs "across" and "here" represent the white outsiders and the residents of the black community respectively, and the dashes visualize their separation. The poet, however, draws attention on this situation in order to criticize it, not to condone it. By visualizing the separate identities of the white "visitors" and the black residents of Harlem, the poet shows that simply visiting a community does not automatically make the visitor understand it and have a meaningful interaction with it.

3. True: The first three stanzas have a very similar form, with two lines referring to the titular visitors and two lines referring to the black community. This repetition, along with the oppositions (you-me, across the... tracks-here, on this side of the tracks) and the question at the end of the poem help Hughes promote his theme.



4. False: Although white people visited Harlem for entertainment purposes, the black residents still lived in poor conditions, as it is indicated by the phrases “kitchenettes with no heat” and “garbage in the halls”.

5. False: Although the tone might seem aggressive, it is possible that the poet's question and his imperative tone in the last line have a literal meaning. It can be read as a call for the white visitors to really get to know the black community and the identities of its people, rather than be mere outsiders, who consume the products of black people's intellect without any emotional investment from their part.

**5.** The poem is based on a contrast (antithesis). Work in pairs to find the antithetical elements in the poem and analyse its meaning. Write a paragraph about it and post it on the Wall of the Padlet created for this activity to share your analysis with your classmates. Otherwise, you can all post your analyses on the class noticeboard. (10')

Answer: The poem is based on the contrast (antithesis) between Harlem as a place of residence for the Black people and as a place of entertainment for the white people, who are just visitors there and do not know how life is really there. Therefore, they ignore what it means to be a Black person and their poor living conditions.

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Students’ answers

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a. Why did the artist choose to portray educated middle class Blacks?

\_\_To change the stereotype of uneducated working class Blacks and show pride for his black identity.\_\_

b. What kind of statement did the Cézannesque artistic device make regarding the painter's artistic value?

\_\_That the artist was so educated that he even knew and was influenced by international artists.\_\_

c. What kind of impression does this painting make on you?

\_\_The sitter is an educated young Black man who likes reading, but there is a kind of tiredness in his look. Maybe because he works hard to afford his living and be recognised for his contribution to the American social life. He is tired of racism and discrimination.\_\_

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Students' answers