

The American Dream Redefined – How the Harlem Renaissance Questioned and Changed the Idea of the American Dream

*Laura C. Jacklin
A. Philip Randolph Career Academy High School*

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Overview:

Although the Harlem Renaissance raises many questions regarding boundaries and labels for both the place and the time that African American artists were “reborn,” it effectively could question the idea of the American Dream. While the Harlem Renaissance itself can be redefined, I believe it is beneficial for students to look at how the Harlem Renaissance redefined the American Dream. It is important for students to participate in an active dialogue in the classroom because the idea of the American Dream is still prevalent in their own lives and its attainability or applicability is still questioned today.

Described on Wikipedia as, “the faith held by many in the United States of America that through hard work, courage, and determination, one can achieve a better life for oneself, usually through financial prosperity,” the idea of what defines the American Dream has become a “question under constant discussion, and some believe that it has led to an emphasis on material wealth as a measure of success and/or happiness” (Wikipedia). The writers of the Harlem Renaissance challenge this notion by problematizing exactly what hard work, courage, and determination can actually obtain. While the Harlem Renaissance produced writers of strong work ethic as well as those willing to challenge the strictures of society, their “renaissance” was the reshaping of what it means to be a black American. Although there were obviously Harlem Renaissance writers who prospered financially, it is the collective voice of the Harlem Renaissance that reshaped the “faith” of the American Dream by creating power through language.

Because Americans still grapple with the issues of what defines the American Dream, the idea of creating a unit for African American students regarding the aspects of the American Dream is based on the goal that students will learn from the examples of voices in the past in order to shape their own futures.

As a month long curriculum unit designed to be an elective in the junior year of high school, students will take an inquiry-based approach to investigate the idea of the American Dream. This will be achieved by analyzing and interpreting literature of the

Harlem Renaissance, while specifically focusing on references to the American Dream. Students will elucidate their own histories by creating work to voice their own challenges – successes and failures – as young people in America today. Students will look at literature from two anthologies as well as handouts of poems and stories from additional texts.

Because the issues I want students to delve into posit with so many questions, the unit is framed around the practice and implementation of the Socratic Seminar. In this way, students will be able to not only open a dialogue for the discussion of the literature and their own life experiences, but also will be encouraged and tutored in the practice of refining their questioning abilities.

Rationale:

My interest in the practice of engaging students to understand and appreciate this specific literature deals with the realization that connections can be made across cultures as well as time. My interest in this came from the idea of the silenced “other” and the importance of understanding voices that are given privilege not only in literature, but in the classroom environment as well. As a first year teacher, I feel it is my duty to provide my students with the tools to explore their own voices, the voices of their peers, and the voices of those in literature. This is necessary in order to engage a dialogue between text and learner in multiple frameworks in order to allow students to be spoken to and speak to the texts themselves and to apply what may seem like archaic ideas to their lives as adolescents in the real world.

Knowing that students, especially those in an elective class, could potentially proclaim an instantly negative reaction to the mere mention of poetry, I will give them access to poems that might interrupt their opinion that poetry is “boring” or “too hard to understand.” On a larger scale, my goal is to reinforce a theme I feel is important for any student throughout their years in English class: Poetry is about illustrating worldviews, and my students’ views on the world could be every bit as “poetic” as published work.

The Harlem Renaissance is so rich and engaging and relevant to my students’ histories that I will take my opportunity to teach an elective to focus a unit that allows students to look at texts that have the ability to speak to them across the boundaries of age/sex/race. Unfortunately, texts are often seen as lifeless words on pages, but working with voices allows students to reflect on the text by grappling with their understanding in depth, as opposed to a one-dimensional way. In this way, the literature of the Harlem Renaissance and the idea of the American Dream can allow students to “get into” the text. Ideally, the different learning styles of different students are accessed and the opportunity for a student-centered classroom is set in motion.

Background to Thematic Connection

Originally, the idea of the American Dream was solely quantified by financial success. In looking at the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, it is evident that the power of

language redefined the notion of the American Dream. African Americans, not only in Harlem, as suggested by the parameters of the label, but in major cities throughout the country used language to flourish in all aspects of society. This notion of language as power still resonates in schools today, as Maryann Dicker explains when she states, “Because language is about power, students need to become conscious of the ways they might control language” (79). Students are well aware of their own code switching between classroom voices, home voices, and street voices. By introducing them to the idea that Harlem writers were both aware and vocal in their use of language to convey meaning, students can see how powerfully language has affected what creates the American Dream.

Students do not often get the opportunity to inquire into the meanings and justifications behind movements. That is to say, in a school textbook anthology, time periods and genres are specifically defined with no sense of “wiggle room.” School anthologies seem pressured by the dogma that this movement happened from this date to this date and included these specific writers. High school students often take this information as gospel because teachers do not have the opportunity to question what the textbook considers sacred and unshakeable information. While the Core Curriculum standards will be strictly followed, this unit is designed to allow an elective class to have access to a variety of texts in order to use class time to discuss and question what encompasses the Harlem Renaissance and how it relates to the specific topic of the American Dream.

Student work should not exist in a vacuum, but the “event” of the Harlem Renaissance often exists removed from outside influences in its own conceptual vacuum. The history of Harlem, from its 17th century colonization by the Dutch, through the mid 19th century Industrial Revolution where it became the summer home of those living in lower Manhattan, to the end of the 19th century when African American population moved in, has its own shifts and changes to shape and redirect what Harlem was and what it stood for. This time, forced into the perimeters of approximately 1917 to the mid 1930s was when black musicians, poets, writers and artists flourished in the United States. This “rebirth” was to signify a new, celebratory African American identity in the arts. This incorporates what really made up the redefined American Dream, as black writers questioned and criticized what it meant to be an American and have a stake in society and its culture.

It is important to understand what came before the Harlem Renaissance, because that had a profound effect on the Renaissance itself. From 1890 to 1920, there was a huge migration of African Americans from the South to the North. All told, about two million people relocated during that time. There were several reasons for this migration. First of all, life in the South after slavery ended was not necessarily much better for blacks than it was during slavery. Many people still toiled away on farms and plantations for little pay and no respect. As the country became more industrialized, the farming life was no longer as profitable, so many blacks in the South found themselves out of a job. Looking for a better life, many migrated north.

Another important event that impacted this Northern migration was World War I. Many African Americans fought and died, but those who came home found they were still treated like second-class citizens. This caused much anger, anger that fueled some to move to Northern cities where they felt they might have more opportunities – that is to say that the North seemed like the most reasonable place to fulfill their own American Dreams. Sociologist and critic Alain Locke said that this migration was like a “spiritual emancipation,” following the physical one of the mid 1800s. This emancipation provided the groundwork for the opportunities to achieve success in urban environments across the Northern states.

The Harlem Renaissance redefined the American Dream because instead of “trying to be white,” in order to “pass” and live up to the standards of the predetermined American Dream created by the white Puritans of America’s past, African Americans were encouraged to become what was known as “the new Negro” – a person who embraces his or her heritage. Of course, part of this was lashing out at the dominant culture that had literally and figuratively kept African American culture in chains for so long. But there was also a new expression of black pride, of love for the unique culture of African Americans. Embracing and celebrating this culture by using the realities and harshness of back ground in conjunction with the power of language was the new way African Americans shaped the American Dreams with their own cultural capital. Becoming the black capitol of the new world at the same time that American Modernism was changing the relationships that artists had to society, allowed for Harlem Renaissance writers to change the form of language and literature.

Perhaps the most important reasons for student voice to be given ample space in the classroom is that with new voice comes change. By relating someone else’s past with their own present and connecting to literature in multiple ways (speaking for characters, speaking to them, speaking to each other, writing questions, and reflecting on inquiry) students can connect to texts when provided with the tools for them to see the basic elements of human nature permeating through not only the histories of their home, but of the writings brought forth in the Harlem Renaissance. In order to connect to what they know and what they want, student interactions with the literature give life to the possibilities of a more informed and literate future generations. In this way, the concept of the American Dream is constantly changing, being redefined, accessed, and delved into in both realistic and idealistic formats.

Literature

The literature chosen from this unit centers mainly on the *Double-Take* anthology and the *American Negro Poetry* collection. In teaching this unit, I feel that although it is important to provide the background historical information as well as literary devices and textual explications, it is equally important for students to provide the bulk of the interpretations and inquiries. The essay “My America” was chosen as the opening piece in order for students to get an idea of how one of the most influential Harlem Renaissance authors of the time viewed what the notion of “America” meant to African Americans. This essay is included with the backbone of the lesson, Hughes’s “Harlem.” The

powerful and haunting question in the poem signifies a definite sense of unrest and collision between the American Dream for people who are promised and offered the ability to attain it and the question of the repercussions when segments of America are closed off from the ability to participate in something truly American.

Because varying images of caged birds exist in Harlem Renaissance poetry, the “Caged Dreams” section is included to interpret the metaphors of stifled dreams, as discussed in Paul Lawrence Dunbar’s “Sympathy.” The notion that the ability to have control over some other creature denotes the difference between the “haves” and the “have nots” as described in Effie Lee Newsomes, “The Bird in the Cage” offers a unique prospect for students to compare extended metaphors across the unit.

In Claude McKay’s “Harlem Shadows,” the haunting echoes of Walt Whitman portray a disquieting juxtaposition to the pride of America singing and the speaker’s observation of, “I hear the halting footsteps of a lass.../To bend and barter at desire’s call” (276). The dark realization that the dream has been lost is indicated by the speaker’s cry of, “The sacred brown feet of my fallen race!” shows how Harlem itself is the setting for the broken dreams of those living their life after failed attempts at the American Dream.

In the “Knowing too Much to Dream” section, Countee Cullen’s illusion-filled sonnet can present students with the notion that although it can be argued that the power of language is essential to the Harlem Renaissance’s redefinition of what it takes to pursue the American Dream, it is an added, imposed challenge for African Americans to struggle with the code switching of language and voice. In this area, students can respond by relating their own struggles of code-switching within the classroom as well as outside.

Langston Hughes’s “Mother to Son,” possibly familiar to students as part of past poetry anthologies, is a unique yet simple observation on the realities of people not achieving the “rags to riches” agenda of the American Dream. Due to the fact that the speaker still finds herself “climbin’./And life for me ain’t been no crystal stair,” there exists the possibility for discussion of whether or not certain marginalized groups (specifically African American women) have the opportunity and drive to keep striving for a better life, despite the obstacles the society places in front of her. Students can be encouraged to discuss what would be the “splinters...boards torn up, and places with no carpet on the floor” for women during both the Harlem Renaissance and in today’s society.

Perhaps the most subtle of the included works in relation to the American Dream, Arna Bontemps’s short story, *A Summer Tragedy*, can serve to open a dialogue regarding the poetically harsh realities of those people whose life did not go according to plan, let alone were given the opportunities to strive to achieve the American Dream.

While much of the literature deals with the negative aspects of being black in America, I have chosen to end the unit on the idea of hope. Langston Hughes’s poem, “I Dream a World” is included to bookend the unit. The unit ends this way to encourage students to become agents in their own futures and to see how learning from the voices of

the past can fuel them to create positive futures. Students at my school are all focusing on a trade, and in my first year of teaching I have seen the drive with which they harness their energy to succeed as both talented craftsmen and women, but also as young adults who realize the obstacles put in front of them long before their entrance on this earth. Hopefully, this unit will serve as a positive influence to encourage students to further themselves by not seeing the American Dream as an unattainable myth, but realizing the value of hard work, courage, determination as well as the power of language and voice that has redefined their chances for attaining success as not only Americans, but members of the human race.

Objectives:

The goal of this curriculum unit is to have students enhance and develop their metacognitive skills, through analyzing the thought processes that go along with Socratic Seminars. By becoming comfortable participating in these discussions, students should be able to become prepared for a post-secondary environment where open dialogue and thoughtful analysis of major themes and ideas are approached on a daily basis. By the end of the unit, students will be able to analyze their own critical thinking, engage in a dialogue with their peers, explicate texts based on themes and motifs, and be comfortable creating their own original work.

This unit will address the strengths and weaknesses of the following: reading, writing, speaking, and listening – all Pennsylvania State Standards. Since students will be asked to question and participate in Seminars, they will be able to practice their speaking and listening skills. The close readings of the poetry and short stories will refine their reading skills and the writing assignments will ask them to provide concise explanations behind their observations.

By asking students to present dramatic readings, music comparisons, and artistic interpretations of the literature, I want to involve the arts into the unit lesson. The Harlem Renaissance is about more than literature and I want to introduce the students to the other cultural aspects of the time period. In this way, the idea of the American Dream can be viewed through different lenses and can then be reshaped and criticized. This will also differentiate my instruction by giving my students who might not excel in the reading, writing, speaking, or listening skills as much to hone in their artistic talents or musical interests. Perhaps the most important aspect of this unit is to encourage the critical thinking skills of *all* students.

Strategies:

By junior year, I feel it is important for students to begin the shift from their comfortable classroom environment as high school students and begin preparing for the atmosphere of a college classroom. One of the ways I have found this to be best accomplished is by implementing the Socratic Seminar. In this way, students can be eased into having active voices in whole classroom discussions. Because students are often reasonably averse to jumping right into Socratic Seminar, it will be necessary to introduce them to the process,

scaffold their learning, and finally practice with them the outcomes of a successful seminar environment.

Because I want to use the Socratic Seminar as my primary mode of instruction, I want to start out by introducing an essential question and teaching my students to become active participants in discussing and creating questions. My first step will be to introduce the essential question as the theme of the unit – How did the Harlem Renaissance redefine the American Dream? It is then necessary for me to present lessons on how the Socratic Seminar works and how to create the 4 types of questions: opening questions, open-ended questions, close-ended questions, and core questions. Before delving into the Harlem Renaissance itself, I will give my students examples of these types of questions and ask them to create their own on a less overwhelming, and therefore less threatening, topic. After students have had practice creating and answering their own questions, I will move on to a fishbowl activity where the majority of the class can observe their classmates in an experimental Socratic discussion. I have found that it is difficult for students to follow the rules of Socratic Seminar because they have not been used to learning in an environment where hands are not raised and students learn from one another and not simply the teacher. I feel that this is an important lesson for even my students who do not plan on going to college to learn because it encourages respect and awareness which are obviously necessary in any path they chose to take beyond their education.

At the outset of the Socratic Seminar, I will hand out an Introduction to Socratic Seminar. The definitions, rules, and expectations are all included for the teacher's benefit to pass on to the students. It is important to make students feel like agents in their own education and by giving students the information on the *hows* and *whys* of how college classroom discussions usually function this can be done. When students can see the rationale behind the work that is required, they are able to enhance their metacognitive skills. In this way, more information leads to the more informed voice. When students feel that they have a stake in their own learning and are treated more as equals to the theories of Socrates, they will be better able to take seriously the guidelines and procedures of the seminar – the practice that leads them to express their voices. Showing students that they have these skills creates a positive learning environment because of the adult responsibilities it signifies. Also, it seems that every time students are provided upfront with the information to how they will be graded, they invariably do better than when rules and expectations and rubrics are unclear.

Because Socratic Seminars [d]o not occur magically, it is necessary to teach the four types of discussion questions. Creating these types of questions is essential to the process of the Socratic Seminar. The types of questions are as follows: Opening questions – these questions serve to allow students to express their opinions on broad topics. Closed-ended questions – There is only one answer, a “right there” question that students can find directly in the text. Open-ended questions – Some of the most interesting, these questions focus on students using proof from their texts to express their own opinions regarding the material being presented. In this way, students explicate the texts while responding to questions getting at the deeper meaning of the seminar topic. Core

questions – the most difficult and most culturally important, these questions deal with the theme, here, specifically regarding the idea of the American Dream.

By taking small, scaffolded steps, including creating a lesson on the components and examples of the four kinds of seminar questions, students will be able to move on to their own Socratic Seminar. Teachers rarely have control over the class size and often class size determines what can and cannot be accomplished in the course of a unit. Taking a potentially large class size into account, the first Socratic Seminar will take the form of a fishbowl (more conducive to initial discussion when there is a large class size) and what I have called a “freeze-frame,” where students participating in the discussion must stop mid-discussion in order for the “fish-watchers” to analyze and clarify what they have witnessed. The questions created for this freeze-frame/fishbowl activity will come from the questions designated on the syllabus and allow for all students (fish as well as “fish watchers”) to take part. As part of getting in conversation with the text, as well as including students who were not in the discussion, the “fish-watchers” will create their own double-entry journals of what they see (the mechanics of the seminar) as well as what they hear (the information their peers discuss regarding the topic of the day).

Classroom Activities:

Students will need an introduction to the Harlem Renaissance at the beginning of the unit. The first day features a mini-lecture on the Harlem Renaissance. In the classroom, there will be chart paper around the room with quotes from Langston Hughes about Harlem:

“Harlem was like a great magnet for the Negro intellectual, pulling him from everywhere. Once in New York, he had to live in Harlem.”

“It is the duty of the younger Negro artist... to change through the force of his art that old whispering, ‘I want to be white’ ... to ‘I am a Negro – and beautiful.’”

“We younger Negro artists now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame.”

These quotes help set a tone for one of the major themes of the introduction to the Harlem Renaissance and the American Dream: That this literature is not just about being “angry” or being “oppressed” – it is also a celebration of change and beauty. I think that it is selling the period short to look at it only as a “reaction” to racism, rather than a true “renaissance,” a powerful reawakening of a vibrant black culture in America.

Once the class is aware of the expectations and practices of the Socratic Seminar, I will begin the actual units of poetry and short stories. They are divided into seven subsections of the essential question, each with its own theme and questions. While we will be looking at all of the literature as a class, I will assign a group project at the beginning of the year by creating literature circles. I will divide the students into seven groups and give them each one theme on which to focus. It will then be the responsibility of the group to choose one poem from the section and prepare the following to present to

the class at the end of the unit: a short statement on the subject looked at from an historical angle, a dramatic reading of one poem from the section, an artistic interpretation of another poem from the selection (this is not about artistic skill, it is just about using another mode of expression to interpret a poem), and the students will have to choose a song from the time period that they think best reflects the issue and their rationale behind the choice. Students will be given this assignment at the beginning of the unit and presentations will be given on the last day of that week's topic. Time to work inside or outside of class is at the teacher's discretion, depending on the resources available to students within the school building.

Because I want my students to explore new ideas and relate the issues of the Harlem Renaissance to their own lives, I will inform them that they need to be reflecting on the American Dream idea in their own lives. They will be asked to keep a journal where they will make entries reflecting on the presence and/or absence of the American Dream in their day-to-day lives. Examples of journal entries could include: references to the American Dream in movies/videos/music they currently listen to as well as stories from family members or neighbors regarding the attainment and myth behind the American Dream, goals for their own futures and the steps they intend to take to see them come to fruition. This journal will later be used as their own primary source reference when they write their final reflection on the American Dream in both the Harlem Renaissance and present day.

Perhaps the most famous portrayal of the American Dream of the same time period as the Harlem Renaissance is F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Arguably, this story of the attainability and futility of one white man's racially exclusive American Dream, is one that students in their junior year will come into contact with in the regular English 3 class, as part of the Core Curriculum. Ideally, a teacher working on this unit regarding the Harlem Renaissance would be able to teach this in sync with another English teacher's unit on *The Great Gatsby* in order to demonstrate to students the articulation of the time period that the American Dream was about whites and *not* blacks and it is this discussion on the many references to dreams within Harlem Renaissance literature that turns that idea upside down to express the way Harlem Renaissance writers challenged that notion.

For the bulk of the classes, I want to take time to focus on each of the seven sections. Homework assignments will mainly consist of reading biographical information on the authors of the given section. Students should come to class prepared to be active members in the discussion of the questions and themes addressed in each piece of literature. While I will primarily lead the class through the Introduction section and most likely the Caged Dream section, I hope that for the following sections the students will be able to take control to present the information and begin the Socratic discussion. So each student will have the opportunity to practice each roll in the Socratic Seminar, I will have a sign up sheet to ensure that each student creates all types of questions at least three times throughout the seven subject seminar.

Within each section, I want the issues of the redefinition of the American Dream to arise as students are asked to give close readings of each poem and short story and explicate the literature in terms of their subsection as well as the larger essential question dealing with the redefinition of dreams. I chose the following subsections to have the Socratic dialogue and literature focus on: an Introduction connecting Langston Hughes's "Harlem" and his article on America, Caged Dreams – focusing on the opposite metaphors of birds in cages as oppression and a signal of affluence, Dreams in Harlem – a look at the labeling behind Harlem as the epicenter/Paradise for dreams to either flourish or be broken, Knowing too Much to Dream – an analysis of certain poets who describe the realities that exist beyond reaching unattainable goals in specific conditions and because of prejudices, Women in Harlem – a look at how the dreams of African American women differ from men and why and how those dreams may be less attainable due to the strictures of society, Lost Dreams – focusing on the work displaying African Americans in "lost" situations, and finally ending with Hope – literature which seems to positively view the Harlem Renaissance as a vehicle for change and improvement. I specifically chose to end with this section because I want the culmination of our unit to flow into a discussion of the hopes of my own students, years after the Harlem Renaissance. At the end, students will critique the sections in which I chose to divide the American Dream because I want them to be able to critically analyze the messages the authors chose to convey.

I indicated that I want my students to understand that their views are just important as published work. To follow up on this, I will assign their final project to be one in which they pick a theme (ideally one different from their group project) and use it, and the poems/short stories contained in it, to write a reflective essay utilizing the information contained in the journals that they have been keeping throughout the unit. The essay will be a critical analysis of the chosen issue compared with the time period of the Harlem Renaissance and their current situation as a young African American almost ready to graduate from high school.

Lesson Plans

Lesson 1 – First Day of Unit, Week One

Topic: Introduction to the Harlem Renaissance

Content: Questions – What was America to the writers of the Harlem Renaissance? What dreams were offered/promised? What dreams could end up being lost? What happens to a dream deferred? Was the dream ever offered?

Goals: Teacher will introduce the idea of an inquiry-based curriculum as well as to the overarching questions of the course. Students will read two works by Langston Hughes.

Objectives: Students will gain cursory knowledge of the issues behind the Harlem Renaissance and its background as well as the argument regarding how it is defined. Students will also absorb a lecture on the idea of the American Dream and have the

opportunity to begin responding to questions and posing their own inquiries regarding what the American Dream means to them.

Materials: Chart paper, information on the Harlem Renaissance lecture notes, Langston Hughes quotes, handouts of “My America” and “Harlem” by Langston Hughes, student journals

Procedures:

Introduction-Students will see quotes by Langston Hughes regarding the Harlem Renaissance and will respond in their freewrite journals to anything that resonates with them in the quotes. They will be encouraged to pose questions in the journals that can later be answered as the unit goes on or as students have the ability to discuss with the teacher via the freewrite journal, which is checked once a week.

Development-Teacher will give mini-lecture on the background of the Harlem Renaissance, explaining to students the issues and reasoning behind the label and the time period as well as location and prominent figures. Students will take notes.

Practice-Students will read aloud “Harlem” and will then get into groups to review metaphors and similes within the poem.

Assessment-Students will create their own metaphors for “Harlem,” in order to study more in depth the images Hughes invokes to present the idea of a “dream deferred.”

Closure-Students will read “My America” for homework and will be asked to respond in their freewrite journals to two of the questions asked in the day’s inquiry topic.

Lesson 2 – Dreams in Harlem, Week Two

Topic: Dreams in Harlem

Content: Questions – How does Harlem as a living space encourage/break down the idea of the American Dream? How do writers view Harlem as a land of dreams?

Goals: Teacher will have introduced a sonnet from the Harlem Renaissance (“Sonnet to a Negro in Harlem” by Helene Johnson) as an indicator of using language as power.

Objectives: Students will be able to discuss through a brief Socratic Seminar the questions that are at the core of this week’s topic. At this point students will have already read the poem for homework and prior to the group that has. Students will be assessed by their performance on their group project.

Materials: *Double-Take* anthology, Socratic Seminar questions, “Dreams in Harlem” Group Project, CD player, group project materials as created by the specific group presenting.

Procedures:

Introduction: Students will participate in an abbreviated Socratic Seminar discussion in order to allow time for the presenters of this section to give their group presentation.

Development: At this time, students should feel comfortable implementing the rules and procedures they have learned regarding their responses to the four types of discussion questions.

Practice: The week's group will present their short statement on the above subject from a historical angle. They will then give a dramatic reading of the poem from the selection, and present the artistic interpretation of another work from the selection, and present the song they chose from the time period. Students will teach the class their rationale behind their artistic choices. Students will have had some time in class to work together on this subject and will have had to utilize outside resources on their own time in order to prepare.

Checking for Understanding: While the teacher will be evaluating the group's work, the students in the audience will be asked to write a commentary offering constructive criticism, responses, and further questions that will be given to the group members for them to reflect on for homework by writing a written response to their feedback.

Closure: Students will be given readings for the next topic's assignment.

Lesson 3 – Lost Dreams, Week Four

Topic: Lost Dreams

Content: Questions – How are the dreams deferred depicted in Harlem Renaissance poetry and short stories? What does this say about the future? What messages does this send to African Americans as well as white readers?

Goals: Students will participate in a fishbowl Socratic Seminar Discussion on Arna Bontemps' short story, *A Summer Tragedy*.

Objectives: Students will use their four types of creative questions to facilitate their own Socratic Seminar without the aid of the teacher. In this lesson, the teacher will have the opportunity to step back and let students fully engage in the topic and its discussion as run by their own questions and subsequent discussions.

Materials: *Double-Take* anthology, fishbowl double-entry journals, student questions

Procedures:

Introduction: Students who have prepared to participate as “fish” in the Socratic Seminar (between 8-10 students) will center themselves in the middle of the classroom with their four types of discussion questions. A volunteer or assigned person will open with an opening question. The rest of the class, centered around the fishbowl, will prepare their double-entry journal for observing the proceedings.

Development: The modeling of this activity will have been done in previous lessons and students will be able to display their knowledge of the rules and procedures of the seminar by beginning without direction from the teacher.

Practice: The students (without raising hands) will participate in their discussion of the short story, while students viewing the activity will monitor what is heard and seen.

Checking for Understanding: The teacher will sit/stand in a place the least obtrusive to the discussion in the middle circle to ensure that students are directing their questions and responses not to the teacher, but to their fellow classmates. The teacher will, however, monitor the instances of the types of questions the students have been asked to pose.

Closure: At least fifteen minutes before the end of class, a facilitator from the group will wrap up the discussion with a closing question in order to bring closure to the discussion. In the last few minutes of class, students who viewed the Seminar will have the opportunity to comment on what they witnessed in their peers' discussion.

Differentiated Instruction

These lesson plans provide the framework for the general purpose of the unit. The lesson plans indicate a strong student-centered classroom. While this is not ideal for all classroom environments, it can be modified to fit a specific classroom's needs, strengths, and differentiated instruction. Small classes can forego the fishbowl entirely, while many classes that contain at least thirty students can benefit from the opportunity of rotation in and out of fishbowls. Because it is imperative that all students remain active in the discussion even if they are not a part of it, the double-entry journal allows students to use metacognitive skills that will ideally help them when they participate in their own discussions. Teachers can also use their own discretion to scaffold as much or as little as possible in the discussions by first creating the four types of questions for students to discuss and giving guided topics for the students to use while participating in the Socratic Seminar. The most important goal is for all students to gain knowledge of themselves and readers and writers, as well as important voices in their own histories.

Annotated Bibliography/Resources

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A comprehensive anthology focusing on the problematization of defining the Harlem Renaissance as a movement within a vacuum.

Rampersad, Arnold and David Roessel, eds. *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*.
New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997.

An anthology of work of that would be beneficial for students to use as a resource in their individual and group project research.

School Reform Commission. *Core Curriculum Standards Alignment Resources Educational Resources*. Philadelphia: The School District of Philadelphia, 2004.
The Academic Standards for Grade 11 Literacy as designated by state standards.

Online Resources

<http://www.mcps.k12.md.us/schools/wjhs/depts/socialst/ams/Skills/SocraticSeminar/socraticseminarIntro.html>

An amazingly applicable handout for both student and teacher to allow students a window into the pedagogy behind dialectical approach to discussion.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Dream

A brief, but beneficial description of the different aspects of the American Dream throughout different stages and criticisms.

Appendices-Standards

Student Syllabus/Reading List

The American Dream Redefined-

How the Harlem Renaissance Questioned and Changed the Idea of the American Dream

Syllabus/Reading List

- I. Introduction - Opening Questions: What was America to the writers of the Harlem Renaissance? What dreams were offered/promised? What dreams could end up being lost? What happens to a dream deferred? Was the dream ever offered?
 - My America – Langston Hughes
 - Harlem – Langston Hughes

- II. Caged Dreams – Questions: How do writers respond to the feeling of living in the American Dream but being caged off from it?

- Sympathy – Paul Lawrence Dunbar
 - The Bird in the Cage – Effie Lee Newsome
 - i. The cage metaphor as a have/have not situation
- III. Dreams in Harlem – Questions: How does Harlem as a living space encourage/break down the idea of the American Dream? How do writers view Harlem as a land of dreams?
- Sonnet to a Negro in Harlem – Helene Johnson
 - i. “Too Splendid for this city street” – Harlem as set back to dream
 - Harlem Shadows – Claude McKay
- IV. Knowing too Much to Dream – Questions: Does intelligence and awareness breed hostility or bliss? How do African American poets deal with the challenge of being Harlem writers? What happens to African Americans who know the extent of their dreams and the possibilities of failure? What can’t Harlem offer?
- Sam Smiley – Sterling A. Brown
 - Yet I Do Marvel – Countee Cullen
 - We Wear the Mask – Paul Lawrence Dunbar
 - The Tropics in New York – Claude McKay
- V. Women in Harlem – Questions: How do HR authors portray the dreams and realities of African American women in Harlem? What are their dreams? How are those dreams realized or ruined? What does this say about women’s ability for the American Dream?
- No Images – Waring Cuney
 - Mother to Son – Langston Hughes
 - Miss Cynthia – Rudolph Fisher
 - Cordelia the Crude – Wallace Thurman
- VI. Lost Dreams – Questions: How are the dreams deferred depicted in HR poetry and short stories? What does this say about the future? What message does this send to African Americans as well as white readers?
- Outcast – Claude McKay
 - A Summer Tragedy – Arna Bontemps
- VII. Hope – Questions: How is hope for the realization of dreams portrayed? What are those dreams? Why can there be hope? What makes up a positive future?
- From the Dark Tower – Countee Cullen
 - I, Too – Langston Hughes
 - Thank You, Ma’am – Langston Hughes

- Pennsylvania Station – Langston Hughes
- I Dream a World – Langston Hughes

Standards

Despite the fact that this is an elective class within the English department, it is still necessary to utilize and incorporate the 11th grade Core Curriculum in order for students to produce proficient work in accordance with the teacher’s rigorous instruction. The specific Pennsylvania State Standards for Literacy that will be implemented are the following:

1.1 Learning to Read Independently – D: Identify, describe, evaluate, and synthesize the essential ideas in text. Assess those reading strategies that were most effective in learning from a variety of texts.

1.1 Learning to Read Independently – G: Demonstrate, after reading, an understanding and interpretation of both fiction and nonfiction texts, including public documents.

1.1

Learning to Read Independently – H: Demonstrate fluency and comprehension reading.

1.3 Reading, Analyzing, and Interpreting Literature – A: Read and understand works of literature.

1.3 Reading, Analyzing, and Interpreting Literature – B: Analyze the relationships, uses and effectiveness of literary elements used by one or more authors in similar genres, including characterizations, setting, plot, theme, point of view, tone, and style.

1.3 Reading, Analyzing, and Interpreting Literature – C: Analyze the effectiveness in terms of literary quality of the author’s use of literary devices.

1.3 Reading, Analyzing, and Interpreting Literature – D: Analyze and evaluate in poetry, the appropriateness of diction and figurative language (e.g., irony, understatement, overstatement, paradox).

1.3 Reading, Analyzing, and Interpreting Literature – F: Read and respond to non-fiction and fiction including poetry and drama.

1.4 Types of Writing - B: Write complex informational pieces (e.g., research papers, analyses, evaluation, essays).

1.6 Speaking and Listening – A: Listen to others.

1.6 Speaking and Listening – D: Contribute to discussions.

1.6 Speaking and Listening – E: Participate in small and large group discussions and presentations.