

# **Women of the Harlem Renaissance**

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## **Overview**

The purpose of this unit is to explore the women writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Students will be introduced to a variety of different genre, all written by women. They will explore the different messages that women were trying to express through their writing. Poetry, short stories, and poems will be read and analyzed during this unit. Women of the Harlem Renaissance will be taught to an eighth grade language arts class. After a brief introduction to the history of the Harlem Renaissance, the group will begin by reading essays about the “New Negro”. After students are comfortable with the idea that African American writers were experiencing a new platform for their writing, students will be introduced to female writers from the time period.

## **Rationale**

Women of the Harlem Renaissance is going to be geared toward eighth grade students at the Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander University of Pennsylvania Partnership school. Throughout the year, students will be learning about perspective. The goal of the school is to produce students that are able to look at the world from a global perspective, and see events from multiple points of view. Keeping this goal in mind, while students study the women of the Harlem Renaissance, they will continually be asking themselves the question, “What were the authors experiencing in their lives while they created these pieces of literature.” During the Harlem Renaissance, women characters often played stereotypical positions, lending themselves to an interesting unit of study. Knowing and understanding the background to the Harlem Renaissance is an essential part to this unit.

The reason for creating this particular unit is to give students a chance to see history through a different lens. Students will take a critical look at the women figures in the pieces that they study, and discuss how the character reflects the time period. They will also be looking at how women from this time compare to women in present day New York. We will be looking at music videos, plays, and short stories from authors of today to help them make the comparisons. Prior to this unit, we will have discussed many different male writers in different historical time periods. This unit will allow students to be introduced to the female perspective.

This unit will fit with the School District of Philadelphia's curriculum in a variety of ways. Students will be required to read both fiction and non-fiction texts throughout the unit. In order to show that they comprehend what they have read, students will both lead and take part in small group discussions. Students will be graded on their ability to lead peers through a discussion on a piece of literature that they have read and analyzed independently. Students will demonstrate their mastery of poetic form through written assignments. The culminating activity will be a written comparison of two women writers from the Harlem Renaissance. The analysis will focus on the perspective the author has selected for the piece.

## **Objective**

I want students to come away with an understanding of the woman's perspective during the Harlem Renaissance. Students will explore the different roles that women played during the Renaissance and compare them to roles that women play in today's society. Students will have to verbalize the stereotypes that were present during the Harlem Renaissance and the ones that still exist today. Students will leave this unit with an awakened sense of awareness to gender bias. Students will focus not only on female characters from the Harlem Renaissance, but also on female writers from the time period. In order for students to be able to discuss the roles female characters play in works written during the Harlem Renaissance, they need to be enlightened to the feminist movement that occurred long after this period of time. The feminist movement did not take place until the early 1960's, and through this cultural awakening, people began to look back in time. This allowed women to take a look at the Harlem Renaissance with a different lens than had previously been used. Taking the students through this change, will help them widen their views of the female writer and the female reader.

## **Strategies**

This unit will be taught through both small group and whole group discussions. The beginning of the unit will be taught through teacher directed instruction, so that students will get the scaffolding required to understand the readings. Students will need the basic history surrounding the Harlem Renaissance, before they can understand what they writers were encountering. There will be approximately three days of lecture on the history of the Harlem Renaissance. During this time the teachers will read selected pieces to the class, and ask the students to try and imagine what the author is describing. Students will start by keeping notes on the readings. Students will share their writings with the class to begin a whole class discussion. These discussions need to revolve around redirecting students to the history of the time.

After students are introduced to the time period as a whole, there will be a focus on gender distinctions. Every single day of their lives, students are being forced into gender roles, and they are not taking an active role in deciding their future. This unit will open the eyes of the male and female students, helping them vocalize their feelings about gender roles. These ideas will be taught through readings of essays and literature written by women during this time period.

## **Classroom Activities**

### **Day 1**

As an opening activity, students will be asked to group themselves. They will not be given any directions as to how to group themselves, other than the fact that they need to be in two groups all whom have something in common. Once students are separated into their groups, they will be asked to write down the criteria for their groups. Next, students will be asked to regroup themselves, except this time they will have to use different criteria. Again they will write down the new criteria. This will continue a minimum of six times, each time the grouping will be different. The class will come back together, and discuss all the different ways that they were able to label themselves. This will be the starting point for a discussion of gender identity in the classroom. If the students started with a division amongst boys and girls, the discussion should start there.

1. Why do we divide ourselves so easily by gender?
2. What are the different ways that you identify yourself in school? At home? On the street? Why are these so different?
3. How would you like to be identified first? Why?
4. How do stereotypes play a role in these identification?

The second half of class will begin with a setting the historical aspects of the Harlem Renaissance. To begin with, students need to be aware of the fact that the Harlem Renaissance is the time period between 1919 until about 1932. The idea that men and women were leaving their homes and lives, based on the fact that they would be able to find a “better life” in the North. Students will have a map of the country on their desk. The class will look at the map and identify New York. They will then pick out several places in the south, where African American’s were leaving. During this time, WWI was happening in Europe. This is important, because African American men were being asked to serve their country and risk their lives, while at the same time lynching was still occurring in the South. When the men came back from the war, they were being forced into work. African American’s weren’t even aloud to own a gun, despite the fact that they were forced to use guns during the war.

Day 2:

*Introduction to the Harlem Renaissance-*

This will be an introduction to the history surrounding the Harlem Renaissance. Time will be allotted each day to review some of the events in history that have helped to create an atmosphere where African American writers are beginning to feel comfortable enough to write about their lives. It must be stressed that most African American writers prior to this time were writing their poetry to please the upper class. It will take some time to work through these ideas, but it will be worth it. Students need to see the complexity of issues that African American writers during this time were facing.

Start off the conversation by presenting a general timeline of the Harlem Renaissance. It would be helpful if the timeline included pictures of famous poets and writers of the time. As the discussion progresses, music should be played, so students can get a feeling for the time. The timeline should be hung in place that the students will have easy access to throughout the unit. Students will have to have a timeline of African American history, including the lynchings, so that when they come to the point in the class that discusses why people were leaving the south, they have reasons to support this migration.

Students should be given a list of names of the people they will be studying during this unit.

Day 3:

*Continued look at the History of the Harlem Renaissance*

To begin the class, students will read an introductory essay to the Harlem Renaissance, “The Harlem Renaissance”, by Cheryl A. Walls. This essay will incorporate the ideas from the previous days lesson, at the same time bringing in the prominent names from the time period. There is a section in the essay on women of the Harlem Renaissance. Students will come away with the idea that women’s contributions to the Harlem Renaissance are only just beginning to be explored. After students have had a chance to digest the ideas from the essay, they need to discuss the fact that history is often told from the point of view of the male, ironically called “his”tory.

To help the students get a better idea of the female perspective we will begin with a look at an excerpt from “Dust Tracks on a Road”, by Zora Neal Hurston. This selection not only describes the African Americans place in society at this time, but also the woman’s place. Hurston’s grandmother is adamant about the fact that Hurston should not look at white people in the face. Students will pause here and discuss the implications of the idea. Students should discuss the feelings that the grandmother is expressing, and decide where they feel African Americans rank in society.

Day 4:

*The beginning of the Female role*

We will begin class by reading “The Heart of a Woman”, by Georgia Douglass Johnson. This poem will give the students an opportunity to hear a female poet speaking of a female perspective. We will start with Georgia Douglass Johnson, because of her importance to the Harlem Renaissance.

Students will talk about the “sheltering bars” and what they might be referring to in the poem. Then they will discuss what some of those bars might be in society today.

After discussing who the speaker is in the poem, students will write a poem that has the same tone of “The Heart of a woman”. The poem can be about the past or the present. The poem will be two stanzas, four lines each. Students will share their poems with the class. If students want they may write their poem on a piece of paper and place it next to the theme they feel it fits under.

We will compare this poem to “The Task of Negro Womanhood”, by Elise Johnson McDougald. Students will read the essay in their small group. They will pick out a sentence or two that they feel relates to “The Heart of a Woman”. Comparing these two pieces will give students the chance to see how important women are to society, yet at the same time, they don’t always feel appreciated. Students will keep a list of the lines that they pulled out of the essay to use in their writing later in the unit.

Day 5:

*A Female perspective*

Students will be reading “Sweat”, by Zora Neale Hurston. After students read the story, each student will pick a paragraph that they feel shows how women were treated during this time. We will take the time to discuss how the men in the store feel about the way Delia is being treated, verses how the woman feels she should be treated.

Students will attempt to compare this story to how a woman put in that position today might respond. Also, they will analyze how men in society might act in a similar situation. Students can use experiences from their lives, TV, movies, or music videos to support their answers. It is imperative that students start to make connections to real life at this part in the unit.

Day 6:

### *Music Video Lesson*

This lesson is planned to reignite the spark in students, by introducing them to music videos in school. Students will be watching a music video in attempt to look at it from a critical point of view. As students watch a rap video, they will be answering the following questions:

1. What are the men in the video wearing?
2. What are the women wearing?
3. What job do the males and the females appear to have?
4. Who has the most money in the video?
5. Who is in charge in the video, and man or a woman?
6. How are women being portrayed?
7. How do they feel about how the men and women are being represented?

After students have viewed the video, they will have a chance to share their views with the class. Students will then write a response to the video. Half the class will be write their response to the producer of the video while the other half will write their response to the music artist. The class will compare the two responses, analyzing the difference between the two responses. Do students take away some of the blame for misrepresenting women, when they are writing to the artist? Do they put more blame on the producer? A discussion will take place after students have written their responses, about why music videos are as racy as they are-who are the target audiences?

This lesson can be continued by the students as part of their culminating project.

Days 7 and 8:

*A look at Zora Neal Hurston*

Students will begin a full class research project on Zora Neal Hurston. The point of this project is for students to learn the research methods necessary to pull together information on an author prior to doing any readings. This will also precede the students major social studies/ language arts research project, so students will learn the skill of using a database and web search. This project will be done as a whole class, in anticipation of their individual projects on a female writer during the Harlem Renaissance.

Each student in the class will be given a specific task to complete for the project. Students will be in charge of researching Hurston's life history, students will look up information on books Hurston has published, students will do a database search for articles written about Hurston, and students will research controversy surrounding writings from the Harlem Renaissance.

Once students have completed their research, they will create a one-page summary of the information they have collected. Students will report their information back to the class. As a whole class, we will discuss the reasons behind researching an author prior to reading any piece written by the author. They will talk about the importance of knowing the mood of the time period when the author was writing.

Day 9:

*Short Stories*

Students will be reading "Sweat" by Zora Neal Hurston. This will be the students first authentic chance to discuss women's roles in society. The class will read the short story together. After reading the story, they will discuss Delia's job, and where that might place her in society. They will also discuss the community's reaction to Sykes behavior. Students will infer what Delia's job might equate to in today's world, and who the equivalent to Sykes might be. They will also write about what they would have done if they found themselves in Delia's place.

As an extension to the lesson students will write a modern day version of the story. The main character must be a female, and the antagonist must be male. There must be an

sample of what community members feel about the situation, and in the end the situation has to have a resolution. Students will get into small groups and share their stories with each other. I will read each of the papers, to get an idea as to where the students fall in their feelings about women and their place in society today. This will lead into a discussion about women's roles in society today, and how they should be treated.

Day 10:

*Short Stories continues*

To continue the class' study of short stories, they will read "Mary Elizabeth", by Jessie Redmond Fauset. Class will begin with a discussion of Fauset's career and life. An interesting connection to Fauset is the fact that she was born outside of Philadelphia. The class will discuss the obstacles that Fauset had to face throughout her life. The class will be reminded that this story was published in 1919.

Students will also be introduced to the women's suffrage movement of 1923. This was the time when African American and Caucasian women had to work together against men. This was the first time that African American and Caucasian women began to see eye to eye on many issues. One student from each group will be responsible for researching this time period and reporting back to the small group. As students read their individual stories, they will be required to incorporate this information into their analysis.

After students have read the story in their small groups, together they will decide what the message is from this story. What is the author trying to get across to the reader, and what can they infer about women during this time. Students will take a close look at the first page of the story, and analyze the meaning of the fact that Sally can't make breakfast for herself, and why May Elizabeth can come late to work. The class will take a close look at the role of the women characters, and how the male character, Roger, reacts to them.

Days 11 and 12:

*Independent Research Projects*

Today will begin the two-day independent study projects for Women of the Harlem Renaissance. Students will begin by picking a woman writer from the time period. Once

they have their approved, they will begin to research their author. They will be required to find one website and one database article on their author. They will write a half page about their author and the circumstances surrounding that person. Then they will select a piece that their author has written to analyze. Students must discuss the main character in the piece, the role women play in the piece, and the statement that the piece makes about society. Again, students will share what they have written with the whole class.

As an extra credit/extension option some students will be required to pick on male written story to analyse from the point of view of the female writer they have chosen. This part of the project will take a lot of scaffolding from the teacher. Students will have to really understand their author. Once students have done the majority of their research, they need to find a short story written by a male writer of The Harlem Renaissance they feel their author would have a problem with. It might be the author himself that the woman writer might have had an issue with, or it might be a character in the piece. Students need to be able to use evidence from their research about the female writer that they can use to directly connect to the male writer's piece.

Day 13:

### *Women Poets*

For the next few days, the class will be studying women poets of the Harlem Renaissance. Starting with "Motherhood", by Georgia Douglas Johnson. We will begin with this poem because of the powerful message that it sends about the fact that the world is not a safe place, and that the cruelty out there is so bad that she can't bare to bring a child into it.

We will also go back to Johnson's poem "The Heart of a Woman". In this context we will compare this poem to the feelings in "Motherhood". Then the students will compare the mood of both those poems to the mood of "I want to Die While You Love Me". Students will be able to see the optimism in the poem and the feeling of love. It is important that students be aware of the fact that not everything was bleak during this time period.

	Same	Different	Mood Words/Tone
The Heart of a Woman			

Motherhood			
I want to Die While You Love Me			

Students will then create their own original poem based on any of the three poems they have read. The poem must have the same tone as one of the previous poems. The students will imagine that they are living during the Harlem Renaissance and that they are female.

Days 14 and 15:

#### *Plays of the Harlem Renaissance*

Students will have an opportunity to read plays and interpret their meaning. The class will start with Georgia Douglass Johnson's "Plumes: A Folk Tragedy". They will begin with this play, because they have already read and analyzed poetry by Johnson, and they know her history during the renaissance. Also, the dialogue in the play will help the students feel as though they are in the time period. The main character is a female, struggling with raising a sick child in a time when she doesn't trust anyone.

The play will be broken up into two parts, and students will select a part to play. Students will act out the play in front of their classmates. The students that are not acting, will be required to keep notes on the dialogue that they are hearing and answer the following questions:

1. Does the main character Charity seem to be an educated woman?
2. What conclusion can you make about the relationships about the characters?
3. What events in her life, might make Charity so skeptical of doctors?
4. What would you do if you were in Charities shoes?
5. Is there anything in today's society that you could equate to how Charity feels about having a funeral?
6. Where do you think the men are in this play?
7. Is it just coincidence that the male character is a doctor?
8. What would change in the play if the doctor was a woman and the caretaker was a man?
9. What do you think happened at the end of the play?

After students complete their acting out of the play, and the class has reviewed the answers to the questions, they will break up into small groups and work the next scene in the play. This will give students an opportunity to work with dialogue, and struggle with inferring based on a characters prior actions. Students will act out there play in front of the class.

Day 16:

*Plays continued*

Students will be reading and interpreting another play written by a woman. Students will be reading "The Pot Maker", by Marita O. Bonner. Students will be reading this play to look at the dynamics between the characters, and to see how women fit into the scenario. This play has so many layers, that it will be very important to give students enough scaffolding for them to get all the different meanings. Students will begin with a discussion of what it means to be "called of God". Students will read the Setting and discuss where they think the play is taking place, and how they picture each of the characters in their heads.

Again as students read. They will pay particular attention to the way the characters are talking, and what that tells about the characters. In this play the female characters

Day 17:

*Plays continued*

Students will be reading “The Typewriter”, by Dorothy West. This story has a main character is a male, but the catalyst for change is female. Students will be able to discuss how

Days 18:

Students will be creating a mini-play. Students will select their own group mates, and they will be responsible for creating their own unique play. Students must include:

1. a main character that is female
2. be set in the Harlem Renaissance period
3. have at least three characters
4. contain a theme that has been studied in the unit

Day 19:

Prior to the class trip to Harlem, students will have their final assessment. Students will have two choices. One will be a long term project, while the second option is an in class essay.

*Long term project*

Students can create either a video or artistic piece that represents woman of the Harlem Renaissance. They must have their topic approved by the teacher prior to beginning their project. This project will be introduced at the start of the unit, so students will have ample time to complete their project.

*In class essay test*

Students will be given a copy of “The Black Dress”, by Dorothy West. Students will be required to read the story in class and they will have to analyze the two main characters. They will also write the next part of the play.

Day 20

*Trip to Harlem*

Students will have an amazing opportunity to visit Harlem considering their class trip is to New York City. Due to time constraints they will only be able to spend about an hour visiting the different places. Students will be taking a walking tour of Harlem that will be guided by a professional guide. Students will have a chance to ask questions and truly experience the feel of Harlem. Upon their return students will write a reflection on the trip and their feelings about studying the Harlem Renaissance.

Reflection on the trip:

1. What was the most interesting part of the trip?
2. Is there one thing that you wish you could have seen that you didn't?
3. Was Harlem the same or different from what you pictured and why?
4. Do you feel that it was Harlem that created the people, or the people that made Harlem what it is?

Reflection on the class:

1. What was the hardest thing about this unit?
2. If you could continue this unit, what would you like to study next?
3. Who was your favorite author that we studied? Least Favorite?
4. If you could change anything about the unit, what would it be and why?
5. Write a letter to next years eighth grade to help them prepare for the Women of the Harlem Renaissance. Tell them what they should expect, and anything that you wish you would have known before you started the unit.

## **Annotated Reading List for Students**

Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, African American Literature Voices in a Tradition. Austin, Texas: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1998.

A collection of African American writing, with a great unit on the Harlem Renaissance.

Locke, Alain. “The New Negro” Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology. Ed. Venetria K. Patton and Maureen Honey. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001.

An essay describing the movement from slavery to the “New Negro”.

Randolph, Philip A. and Chandler Owens. “The New Negro-What Is He?” Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology. Ed. Venetria K. Patton and Maureen Honey. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001.

## **Poetry: Female Writers/ Female Perspective**

Dunbar-Nelson, Alice. “I Sit and Sew” Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology. Ed. Venetria K. Patton and Maureen Honey. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001.

A poem written by a woman who feels her duties during the war are a waste of time.

Dunbar-Nelson, Alice. “Violets” Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology. Ed. Venetria K. Patton and Maureen Honey. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001.

Johnson, Georgia Douglas. “The Octoroon” Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology. Ed. Venetria K. Patton and Maureen Honey. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001.

Johnson, Georgia Douglas. “Motherhood” Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology. Ed. Venetria K. Patton and Maureen Honey. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001.

A poem about a woman who feels she can not afford to have her baby.

Johnson, Georgia Douglas. “The Heart of the Woman” Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology. Ed. Venetria K. Patton and Maureen Honey. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001.

A poem in which a woman feels trapped by her life.

Hayford, Gladys May Casely. “The Palm Wine Seller” Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology. Ed. Venetria K. Patton and Maureen Honey. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001.

An ironic poem in which a woman discusses her job of selling wine to the boatmen.

Toomer, Jean. “Portrait in Georgia” Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology. Ed. Venetria K. Patton and Maureen Honey. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001.

### **Short Story: Female Writer/ Female Perspective**

Fauset, Jessie Redmond, “Mary Elizabeth”. Double Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology. Ed. Venetria K. Patton and Maureen Honey. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001.

Hurston, Zora Neale. “Sweat” Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology. Ed. Venetria K. Patton and Maureen Honey. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001.

A short story about a married couples troubled relationship and the communities reaction.

### **Essays: Female Writer/ Female Perspective**

McDougald, Elise Johnson. “The Task of Negro Womanhood” Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology. Ed. Venetria K. Patton and Maureen Honey. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001.

Bonner, Marita O. “On Being Young- a Woman- and Colored” Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology. Ed. Venetria K. Patton and Maureen Honey. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001.

Cuthbert, Marion Vera. “Problems Facing Negro Young Woman” Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology. Ed. Venetria K. Patton and Maureen Honey. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001.

Dunbar-Nelson, Alice. “Woman’s Most Serious Problem” Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology. Ed. Venetria K. Patton and Maureen Honey. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001.

## **Annotated Reading list for Teachers**

### **General Books**

Giovanni, Nikki, Shimmy, Shimmy, Shimmy Like my Sister Kate: Looking at the Harlem Renaissance through Poems. New York: New York, 1996.

Hudson, Wade. Powerful Words: More than 200 Years of Extraordinary Writing by African Americans. USA, 2004.

Smith, Katharine Capshaw, Children's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance. Bloomington: Indiana, 2004.

## **Appendix**

- 1.1 a. Identify appropriate texts for a specific purpose before reading
- 1.1 d. Identify basic facts and main ideas in text using specific strategies (e.g. activate prior knowledge, recall genre characteristics, determine purpose, generate questions, and reread) as aids to make predictions, clarify and construct meaning.
- 1.2 a. Read and understand essential content of informational texts and documents in all academic areas.
- 1.2 c. Produce work in at least one literary genre that follows the conventions of the genre.
- 1.3 a. Read and understand works of literature.
- 1.3 c. Describe how the author uses literary devices to convey meaning.
- 1.3 d. Identify the characteristics of poetic forms ( e.g. ballad, sonnet, couplet)
- 1.4 a. Write short stories, poems, and plays.
- 1.4 c. Write persuasive pieces.
- 1.5 d. Write with an awareness of the stylistic aspects of composition.
- 1.6 a. Listen to others.
- 1.6 b. Listen to selections of literature (fiction and/or non-fiction).
- 1.7 e. Participate in small and large group discussion and presentations.