

AP English Language and Composition  
The Harlem Renaissance

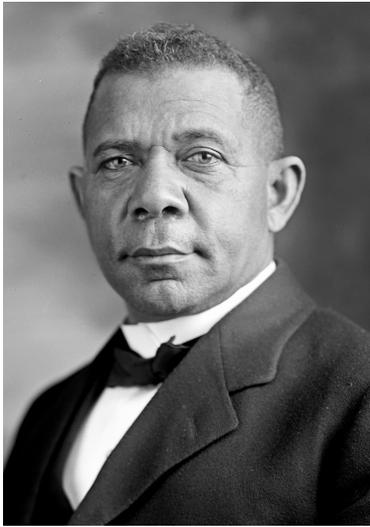


**The Harlem Renaissance** is a great movement in American arts at the beginning of the twentieth century, and we would be remiss if we talked about that period in American history without talking about it. In *Gatsby*, we catch glimpses of African American prosperity after the First World War: Nick sees as he and Gatsby drive to New York a car of African Americans driven by a white chauffeur: “‘Anything can happen now that we've slid over this bridge,' I thought; 'anything at all’” (69).

Probably our discussion should begin before that, though, with Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois and their ideas of how African Americans should attain fuller enfranchisement in mainstream American culture.

**Booker T. Washington**, below left, the principal of the Tuskegee Institute, a school for African Americans in Alabama, gained notoriety for his ideas about education and became known for his 1895 speech given to Atlanta’s Cotton States and International Exposition. This speech, derisively known as the “Atlanta Compromise” suggests offers advice to African Americans that one should “cast down your buckets where you are.” This means that African Americans should remain in the South, on the farm, accepting society as it is.

Washington is also known for his autobiography, *Up From Slavery*, which champions hard work and perseverance as the keys to success. He is the model for the leader of the school the protagonist of Ralph Ellison’s 1955 novel *Invisible Man* attends.



These ideas contrast with those of **W.E.B. DuBois**, right, whose 1903 *The Souls of Black Folk* directly criticizes Washington's view that accommodation and waiting would be the keys to success. DuBois writes, [When he] apologizes for injustice, does not rightly value the privilege and duty of voting, belittles the emasculating effects of caste distinctions, and opposes the higher training and ambition of our higher minds, we must



unceasingly and firmly oppose him.

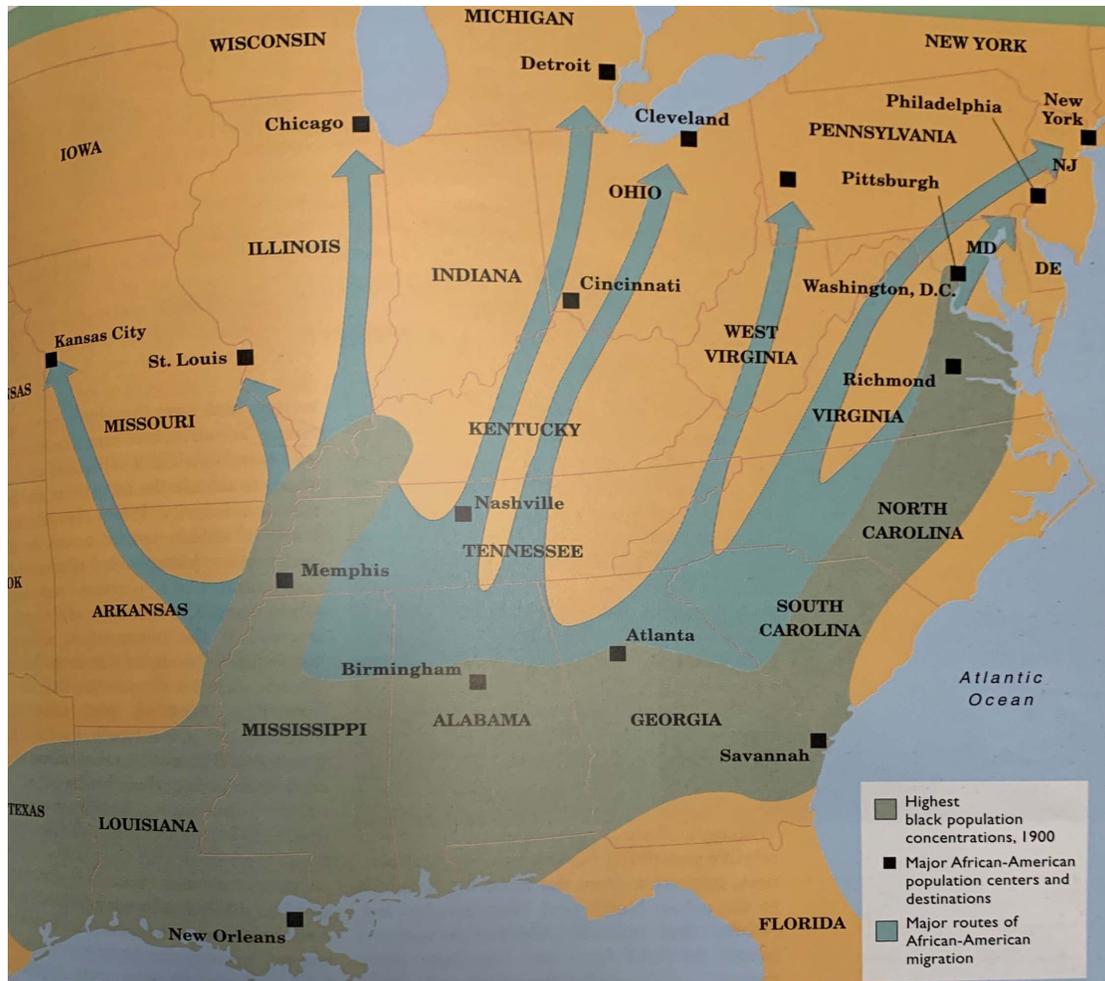
DuBois as a public intellectual gives us a number of ideas, among them his notion of The Talented Tenth, the idea that the leadership class of African Americans must be cultivated as leaders rather than trained in the trades, as Washington advocated.

DuBois also gives us the concept of the “double consciousness,” as a way of understanding the African American’s position in society. This idea, too, is important to our understanding of literary figures such as *Invisible Man* and then also other literary representations of African American life in the middle and later twentieth century:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife – this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He does not wish to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He wouldn't bleach his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face.

So, as I have mentioned, all of this happened as background; the dates I've mentioned are 1895, 1903. With the end of World War I, we see the return of African American soldiers and a desire for greater rights, for fuller enfranchisement of African Americans.

We will read DuBois' 1919 essay “Returning Soldiers,” about this very issue.



The accompanying historical event with the soldiers returning from World War I is the **Great Migration**. In 1910, roughly 90 percent of all African Americans lived in the South, and nearly 80 percent of those worked in agriculture. In the next decade, though, we begin to see African Americans move from the rural South to the industrial North in search of better jobs and better conditions in the North.

So, beginning during WWI (depressed cotton prices, the boll weevil, the need for wartime industrial labor) and then with the returning soldiers especially seeking less institutionalized racism, people began moving to the northern urban areas...and they met each other.

In music, the Harlem Renaissance meant blues from the Mississippi Delta (itself already a hybrid of West African rhythms, slave field hollers, and gospel hymns) and, relatedly, jazz from New Orleans.

To promote literature and ideas the NAACP produced *The Crisis*, a magazine edited by DuBois, *Opportunity*, which the Urban League produced, and **Alain Locke**'s anthology, *The New Negro*, with its famous introduction, of which you will read an excerpt.

The writers published here we will read in this unit: **Claude MacKay**, **Jean Toomer**, **Countee Cullen**, and **Zora Neale Hurston**. Hurston is especially interesting as an African American leader who opposed integration and who strove to preserve black folk-culture, collecting folk tales and other elements of the oral tradition. Probably the most famous poet of the Harlem Renaissance is **Langston Hughes**, whose work we will sample here.

In history class, you'll no doubt talk about the political movements and figures such as Marcus Garvey and the Back to Africa Movement, but we will fix our attention on the arts, for the most part.

Most historians end the Harlem Renaissance as a phenomenon at the start of the Great Depression, but we can see its influence throughout the rest of the twentieth century and beyond.

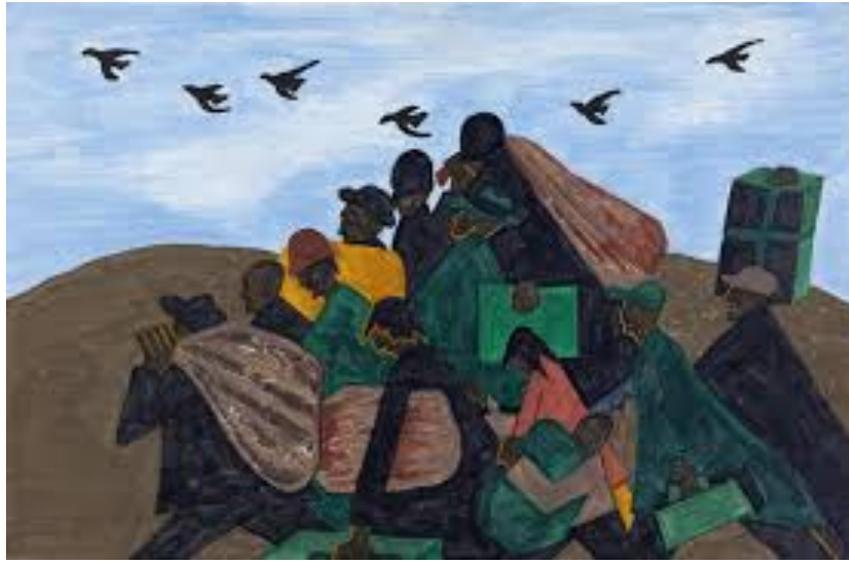
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Just as Cubism gives us a way to understand the art of William Faulkner, the art of the Harlem Renaissance gives us an approach to the writing we will treat in this unit.

Here are some selections for your enjoyment:



Aaron Douglas, *Aspects of Negro Life*, 1934.



Jacob Lawrence's *Great Migration* series (1941) is an important sequence.



Here is Lois Mailou Jones's *Dream of Nigeria* (1971).



Here is William H. Johnson's *Blind Singer* (1940).



This is the Portrait Head of John Henry, by Augusta Savage (1940).

In the midcentury, a rivalry developed between the work of writers like Ralph Ellison, author of *Invisible Man*, and writers of protest fiction such as Richard Wright. While Ellison works to prove that the African American voice can be every bit as artistic and complex as the mainstream modernists even as it is distinctive and rhetorically potent, Wright shows a more violent face in expression of anger and holding a mirror up to the psychological damage institutionalized racism can cause.

This conflict between the more conciliatory civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., carrying on the tradition of passive resistance, and the more militant, such as Malcolm X, is a persistent and developing question as African Americans work throughout the twentieth century for full enfranchisement as citizens.