

## Harlem Renaissance Poetry

Directions: As a class, we are going to examine a series of influential poems written during the Harlem Renaissance. Your job is to analyze the poem that is on the back of this page. Try to figure out what the message of the poem is and place it within a historical context. What themes are addressed? What is the takeaway message? What aspect of what we've been learning about is represented within its lines?

1. What themes are addressed in the poem?
2. What is the takeaway message?
3. How does the poem address the themes of the Harlem Renaissance?

## Democracy (Langston Hughes)

Democracy will not come  
Today, this year  
Nor ever  
Through compromise and fear.

I have as much right  
As the other fellow has  
To stand  
On my two feet  
And own the land.

I tire so of hearing people say,  
Let things take their course.  
Tomorrow is another day.  
I do not need my freedom when I'm dead.  
I cannot live on tomorrow's bread.

Freedom  
Is a strong seed  
Planted  
In a great need.

I live here, too.  
I want freedom  
Just as you.

## **I, Too (Langston Hughes)**

I, too, sing America.

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

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

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

I, too, am America.

## **If We Must Die (Claude McKay)**

If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,  
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
Making their mock at our accursed lot.

If we must die, O let us nobly die,  
So that our precious blood may not be shed  
In vain; then even the monsters we defy  
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!

O kinsmen we must meet the common foe!  
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,  
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!  
What though before us lies the open grave?

Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,  
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

## Theme for English B (Langston Hughes)

The instructor said,  
    Go home and write  
    a page tonight.  
    And let that page come out of  
    you-- -  
    Then, it will be true.

I wonder if it's that simple?  
I am twenty-two, colored, born in  
Winston-  
Salem.  
I went to school there, then Durham,  
then here  
to this college on the hill above Harlem.  
I am the only colored student in my class.  
The steps from the hill lead down into  
Harlem  
through a park, then I cross St. Nicholas,  
Eighth Avenue, Seventh, and I come to  
the Y,  
the Harlem Branch Y, where I take the  
elevator  
up to my room, sit down, and write this  
page:

It's not easy to know what is true for you  
or me  
at twenty-two, my age. But I guess I'm  
what  
I feel and see and hear, Harlem, I hear  
you:  
hear you, hear me-- -we two-- -you, me,  
talk on

this page.  
(I hear New York too.) Me-- -who?  
Well, I like to eat, sleep, drink, and be in  
love.  
I like to work, read, learn, and understand  
life.  
I like a pipe for a Christmas present,  
or records-- -Bessie, bop, or Bach.  
I guess being colored doesn't make me  
NOT  
like the same things other folks like who  
are  
other races.  
So will my page be colored that I write?  
Being me, it will not be white.

But it will be  
a part of you, instructor.  
You are white-- -  
yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.  
'That's American.  
Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be  
a part  
of me.  
Nor do I often want to be a part of you.  
But we are, that's true!  
As I learn from you,  
I guess you learn from me-- -  
although you're older-- -and white-- -  
and somewhat more free.

This is my page for English B.

## Sonnet To A Negro In Harlem (Helene Johnson)

You are disdainful and magnificent--  
Your perfect body and your pompous gait,  
Your dark eyes flashing solemnly with hate;  
Small wonder that you are incompetent  
To imitate those whom you so despise--  
Your shoulders towering high above the throng,  
Your head thrown back in rich, barbaric song,  
Palm trees and manes stretched before your eyes.  
Let others toil and sweat for labor's sake  
And wring from grasping hands their meed of gold.  
Why urge ahead your supercilious feet?  
Scorn will efface each footprint that you make.  
I love your laughter, arrogant and bold.  
You are too splendid for this city street!

## Poem (Helene Johnson)

Little brown boy,  
Slim, dark, big-eyed,  
Crooning love songs to your banjo  
Down at the Lafayette--  
Gee, boy, I love the way you hold your head,  
High sort of and a bit to one side,  
Like a prince, a jazz prince. And I love  
Your eyes flashing, and your hands,  
And your patent-leathered feet,  
And your shoulders jerking the jig-wa.  
And I love your teeth flashing,  
And the way your hair shines in the spotlight  
Like it was the real stuff.  
Gee, brown boy, I loves you all over.  
I'm glad I'm a jig. I'm glad I can  
Understand your dancin' and your  
Singin', and feel all the happiness  
And joy and don't care in you.  
Gee, boy, when you sing, I can close my ears  
And hear tom-toms just as plain.  
Listen to me, will you, what do I know  
About tom-toms? But I like the word, sort of,  
Don't you? It belongs to us.  
Gee, boy, I love the way you hold your head,  
And the way you sing, and dance,  
And everything.  
Say, I think you're wonderful. You're  
Allright with me,  
You are.

## America (Langston Hughes)

Little dark baby,  
Little Jew baby,  
Little outcast,  
America is seeking the stars,  
America is seeking tomorrow.  
You are America.  
I am America  
America the dream,  
America the vision.  
America the star-seeking I.  
Out of yesterday  
The chains of slavery;  
Out of yesterday,  
The ghettos of Europe;  
Out of yesterday,  
The poverty and pain of the old, old  
world,  
The building and struggle of this new one,  
We come  
You and I,  
Seeking the stars.  
You and I,  
You of the blue eyes  
And the blond hair,  
I of the dark eyes  
And the crinkly hair.  
You and I  
Offering hands  
Being brothers,  
Being one,  
Being America.  
You and I.  
And I?  
Who am I?  
You know me:

I am Crispus Attucks at the Boston Tea  
Party;  
Jimmy Jones in the ranks of the last black  
troops marching  
for democracy.  
I am Sojourner Truth preaching and  
praying for the goodness  
of this wide, wide land;  
Today's black mother bearing tomorrow's  
America.  
Who am I?  
You know me,  
Dream of my dreams,  
I am America.  
I am America seeking the stars.  
America.  
Hoping, praying,  
Fighting, dreaming.  
Knowing  
There are stains  
On the beauty of my democracy,  
I want to be clean.  
I want to grovel  
No longer in the mire.  
I want to reach always  
After stars.  
Who am I?  
I am the ghetto child,  
I am the dark baby,  
I am you  
And the blond tomorrow  
And yet  
I am my one sole self,  
America seeking the stars.



**Let America be America Again**  
**(Langston Hughes)**

Let America be America again.  
Let it be the dream it used to be.  
Let it be the pioneer on the plain  
Seeking a home where he himself is free.  
(America never was America to me.)

Let America be the dream the dreamers  
dreamed--  
Let it be that great strong land of love  
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme  
That any man be crushed by one above.  
(It never was America to me.)

O, let my land be a land where Liberty  
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,  
But opportunity is real, and life is free,  
Equality is in the air we breathe.  
(There's never been equality for me,  
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")

Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?  
And who are you that draws your veil across the  
stars?

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,  
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.  
I am the red man driven from the land,  
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek--  
And finding only the same old stupid plan  
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

I am the young man, full of strength and hope,  
Tangled in that ancient endless chain  
Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!  
Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of satisfying  
need!  
Of work the men! Of take the pay!  
Of owning everything for one's own greed!

I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil.  
I am the worker sold to the machine.  
I am the Negro, servant to you all.  
I am the people, humble, hungry, mean--  
Hungry yet today despite the dream.  
Beaten yet today--O, Pioneers!

I am the man who never got ahead,  
The poorest worker bartered through the years.

Yet I'm the one who dreamt our basic dream  
In the Old World while still a serf of kings,  
Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so true,  
That even yet its mighty daring sings  
In every brick and stone, in every furrow turned  
That's made America the land it has become.  
O, I'm the man who sailed those early seas  
In search of what I meant to be my home--  
For I'm the one who left dark Ireland's shore,  
And Poland's plain, and England's grassy lea,  
And torn from Black Africa's strand I came  
To build a "homeland of the free."

The free?

Who said the free? Not me?  
Surely not me? The millions on relief today?  
The millions shot down when we strike?  
The millions who have nothing for our pay?  
For all the dreams we've dreamed  
And all the songs we've sung  
And all the hopes we've held  
And all the flags we've hung,  
The millions who have nothing for our pay--  
Except the dream that's almost dead today.

O, let America be America again--  
The land that never has been yet--  
And yet must be--the land where every man is  
free.  
The land that's mine--the poor man's, Indian's,  
Negro's, ME--  
Who made America,  
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,  
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the  
rain,  
Must bring back our mighty dream again.

Sure, call me any ugly name you choose--  
The steel of freedom does not stain.  
From those who live like leeches on the people's  
lives,  
We must take back our land again,  
America!

O, yes,  
I say it plain,  
America never was America to me,  
And yet I swear this oath--  
America will be!

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,  
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,  
We, the people, must redeem  
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.  
The mountains and the endless plain--  
All, all the stretch of these great green states--  
And make America again!