

Terms to know for Harlem Renaissance Poetry Unit - 2019

HISTORY:

Harlem – **one of the five boroughs of New York City. Built by the Dutch settlers (Haarlem) and repopulated by African Americans in the 20th century as they moved north. Harlem was the center of African American cultural life in the 20th century.**

Renaissance – **a period of awakening, rebirth or rising of artistic and intellectual talent and production. The most well-known renaissance was the famous European Renaissance of the 14-17th centuries which included artists and thinkers like Leonardo Da Vinci and Michelangelo.**

The Harlem Renaissance - **was a similar explosion of artistic talent and expression in America in 1918-1940 (or so), but it was an explosion of African American talent - a talent that had never before had a national or international stage. Heroes of the Harlem Renaissance include writers Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen and many more. Writers were not the only artists part of the Harlem Renaissance, also included were thinkers like W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey; musicians like Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday; dancers like Josephine Baker; and visual artists like Aaron Douglas.**

Great Migration - **6 million African Americans moved from the rural South to the urban North (Northeast, Midwest and West) between 1910-1970. The movement was in two waves with 1.6 million people moving from 1910-1930, and, after the Great Depression, another 5 million or so moving from 1940-1970 (higher concentration moving to the west in this wave). People moved looking for manufacturing jobs and a better life than they were capable of having in the rural agrarian south, where the only option was sharecropping and living terrible lives under Jim Crow laws. The Great Migration created concentrations of people where there had not been concentrations before, and throwing together all of these people from similar and yet distinctly different backgrounds resulted in the Harlem Renaissance.**

POETRY ASSIGNMENT:

Explication: **explaining in detail what a poem means**

Initial understanding: **your understanding of a poem upon your first reading. Your first response.**

Deeper understanding: **after reading a poem several times, the meaning should deepen. Think about it like listening to a song. The first listen gives you a feeling for the song – whether it moves you emotionally or physically, whether it is catchy or not, whether it is something you want to hear again. The next several listens you may pay attention to the specifics of the lyrics, how the chorus works, how the bass line supports the rhyme, how the other instrumentation or riffs highlight meaning. Maybe you'll look up the artist to see if the song has personal implications or is tied to something that happened, or maybe you'll look up how other people have 'read' the meaning of the song.**

Context: the details and understanding of the world in which the poem is written and read

Biographical context: the poet's life and the possible bearing of the details of the poet's life on the poem. What was the poet doing, thinking about, or experiencing when they wrote and published the poem? The life of the reader of the poem also provides biographical context - how is your understanding of the poem shaped by where you are in your own life when you read the poem?

Historical context: what is going on in history at the time the poem is written, published or read. For example, Langston Hughes was writing poetry in the 1920s – 1960s as a black man in America. History of the time makes it pretty clear that racism and civil rights were an issue when he was writing, and therefore you could look for elements of those subjects – even specific historic events – in the poems. If you read a poem today that has themes or subject matter concerning Civil Rights, you also will bring a certain historical context of today's events, such as the Black Lives Matter movement.

Poetic terms:

Diction: word choice, vocabulary

Formal/informal: tone of diction – words can be formal and proper and “educated”, or informal with the use of slang or vernacular or dialect

Slang/vernacular: everyday words and usage that are not necessarily “dictionary” terms. Curse words, nicknames, slurs, cultural phrases

Denotative meaning: as close to an objective, dictionary definition of a word as it is possible to get

Connotative meaning: the many layers of meaning any word or word grouping can have based on the experiences of the writer or reader. When we make meaning of a read word, we make that meaning based on our experiences with the word itself or how that word is modified by other words around it

Syntax: word order in clauses, phrases, sentences and more. Syntax can be simple or complex, but it usually supports the meaning as well

Grammar/mechanics: the rules of language which exist to promote clarity and consistency – all of which are breakable for artistic purposes.

Free verse: a kind of poetry that does not rely on known stanza structure, rhythm or rhyme – it's free

Stanza: a block of poetic text: a grouping of lines together into a distinct unit. Think of it like a poetic paragraph.

Rhyme, end rhyme, internal rhyme, rhyme schemes: **rhyme is the deliberate attempt to use words that sound similar for a variety of effects.**

End rhyme is rhyme that comes at the end of poetic lines – this is the kind of rhyme we are most familiar with. Internal rhyme is rhyming within a line, not just at the end.

Rhyme schemes are how the rhymes work throughout a stanza or poem. For example, rhyming the last words of two lines is AA. If you rhyme the ends of the next two lines with a different sound, then you have a four line stanza (a quatrain) with a rhyme scheme of AABB. If you rhyme every other line in a four line stanza, you would have a rhyme scheme of ABAB.

Blues: an African-American song structure with roots in slave culture. Very particular structure known as the twelve bar blues includes a repetitive rhyme scheme in a three line verse.

Example:

Woke up this morning with an awful aching head

Woke up this morning with an awful aching head

My new man had left me, just a room and an empty bed

Other variations exist as well, but you get the idea

Imagery: a deliberate attempt to evoke a visual or sensory experience – a description usually used for comparative or setting purposes

Figurative language: language that compares like and unlike experiences, ideas or subjects with the purpose of clarifying or complicating an understanding

Simile: a kind of figurative language comparison that uses “like” or “as” in its construction. For example, “The basketball player is as tall as an oak tree” or, “tall like an oak tree.”

Metaphor: a kind of figurative language comparison that directly addresses a similarity. For example, “The basketball player is an oak tree, towering over the guards.”

Enjambment: a sentence in a line of poetry that does not have a punctuation stop at the end, but instead continues on to the next line or next several lines. When reading poetry, do not pause at the end of a line unless there is punctuation – keep reading like you would for any other sentence.

Alliteration: the repetition of consonant sounds, often most noticeable at the beginning of words. For example, “Fred’s friends fried Fritos for Friday’s food.”

- **Assonance: the repetition of vowel sounds. For example, I feel depressed and restless.**

Juxtaposition: **a deliberate placing of two ideas beside each other in order to highlight differences or similarities**

Point of view/poetic characterization: **the narrative position of the poem, the speaker. It's important to know that the point of view or speaker of a poem is not necessarily the poet – poets can create fictional narrators to deliver a point of view. For example, Robert Browning was a poet famous for creating dramatic monologues – a poem told from the point of view of a character created by the poet. One of his more famous poems is “My Last Duchess,” a poem “told” from the point of view of a murderous Duke, who pretty clearly killed his last duchess.**