

## **African-American Art & Identity in the 1920s**

### **The Basics**

#### **Time Required**

2 class periods

#### **Subject Areas**

High School US History

Emergence of Modern America, 1890-1930

#### **Common Core Standards Addressed:**

Writing Standard for Literacy in History/Social Studies 6-12

#### **Author**

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### **The Lesson**

#### **Introduction**

When the song “Black and Blue” made its debut within a “colored” musical revue called *Hot Chocolates*, it was sung by Edith Wilson, a black singer who sang it on stage draped entirely in white. Perhaps the stark contrast of the setting communicated the sentiment of the text with such impact that the audience, somewhat startled, responded initially with nervous laughter. However, they became more serious once they comprehended the song’s meaning.

The song, “Brown” was performed in the musical *Rang Tang*, identified in the Internet Broadway Database ([ibdb.com](http://ibdb.com)) as an “original, musical, revue.” The show apparently opened July 12, 1927 at the Royale Theatre and the Majestic Theatre in September, 1927. Closing dates for both are unknown. Total performances are listed as 119. It was produced by Merris Walker & Kavanaugh, book by Kaj Gynt, Lyrics by Jo Trent (female). The show was directed by Charles Davis and Miller and Lyles. The Opening Night Cast included May Barnes, George Battles, Inez Draw, Josephine Hall, Daniel Haynes, Crawford Jackson, Josephine Jackson, Zeidee Jackson, A. Lyles, Lavinia Mack, Marie Mahood, F.E. Miller, Eveyln Preer, Le’etta Revells, James Strange, Edward Thompson, and Lillian Westmoreland.

#### **Guiding Questions**

What images come to mind with the word Harlem?

Are there particular moods, feelings, or ideas associated with color?

#### **Learning Objectives**

- To analyze two images of the New Negro presented in two Harlem Renaissance songs.
- To analyze the image of the New Negro in artwork, poetry and pictures and synthesize with the image presented in the songs.
- To create a poster presenting and expressing the dual image of the New Negro of the Harlem Renaissance.

### **Preparation Instructions**

Song(s) used in lesson:

"(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue," by Fats Waller, Andy Razaf, Harry Brooks, 1929. *Voices Across Time* 6.30.

"Brown" by Jo Trent from the musical *Rang Tang*.

### **Poems:**

"Dream Variation" by Langston Hughes.

"The Lynching" by Claude McKay. [http://www.poetry-archive.com/m/the\\_lynching.html](http://www.poetry-archive.com/m/the_lynching.html)

"My Race" by Helene Johnson. <http://www.ctadams.com/helenejohnson9.html>

"The White Ones" by Langston Hughes.

"America" by Claude McKay

"From the Dark Tower" by Countee Cullern. <http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/~wilker/harlem/flamefrom.htm>

### **Artwork:**

"Into Bondage" by Aaron Douglas. <http://www.iniva.org/harlem/aaron.html>

"The Janitor who Paints" by Palmer Hayden

"Blues" by Archibald Motley, Jr. <http://www.iniva.org/harlem/motley.html>

"Café" by William H. Johnson <http://northbysouth.kenyon.edu/1998/art/pages/galjohnson2.htm>

"African Fantasy" by Winold Reiss <http://americanart.si.edu/index3.cfm>

"A Negro Speaks of Rivers" (illustration for Langston Hughes's poem) by Aaron Douglas  
<http://eev.liu.edu/eevillage/HeckscherWOE/exhibit9.htm>

## **Images:**

The Crisis

Children in the Silent Protest Parade

Florence Mills

Augusta Fells Savage

The Northeasterners

Marcus Garvey

## **Lesson Activities**

### **Procedure**

1. Ask: What images come to mind with the term “Harlem”?
2. Note student responses, create a list on the board.
3. Present brief overview of Harlem Renaissance, tying into the responses as possible. Particularly describe the explosion of African American arts and culture in the larger context of racist America.
4. Explain briefly the activity: In groups they will be analyzing two selections of music representing the African American experience, and finding examples in art, image, and poetry that connects to those musical works, and with those examples create a poster that expresses the dual perspectives on the African American experience in the 1920s.
5. Review activity in detail.
6. Have students get into groups of 3-4. Allow students to work through questions and activities, monitoring their progress.
7. When the song has been analyzed and the relevant selections made students create a poster following the specific guidelines.
8. Posters are displayed around the room and all students review all posters.
9. Follow-up discussion on why each group selected their specific works, challenges to the assignment, and understanding of the African American experience.

### **Song discussion questions and activities:**

"(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue"

- What is the mood of this song?
- What does this suggest about the status of African Americans? What is the overall theme of this song?
- How does the music contribute to this theme?
- What social and cultural conditions in the 1920s support this attitude?

"Brown"

- What is the mood of this song?
- What does the composer suggest when she says 'I know what makes life worthwhile'?
- What is the overall theme of this song?
- What type of music would you expect to accompany these lyrics?

### **Assessment**

1. Formal evaluation of poster. Informal evaluation of group work and discussion.
2. Assessable product or performance.
3. Poster Participation in discussions.
4. Assessment criteria and performance descriptors.

The poster will be evaluated on the following criteria, along with a description of expectations for each:

#### 1. Analysis & Connections

- Understanding of the dual perception of the African American experience of the 1920s is conveyed through the analytical explanation of the song lyrics
- The explanations and connections of the accompanying poem, image and art convey an understanding of several dominant elements or principles used by the creator
- The explanations and connections of the poem, image and art are related to the theme, meaning, mood or feeling of the song lyrics

#### 2. Completeness

- Has the two song lyrics along with an analytical explanation of each
- Each song lyric has a poem, image and piece of artwork
- Each poem, image and piece of artwork has three statements analyzing and making connections to the song lyric
- The poster has a creative and descriptive title

#### 3. Visual Appeal

- The two perspectives are clearly delineated on the poster
- Layout, design and neatness are all exceptional
- May have extras to enhance to appearance and understanding of the work

#### 4. Mechanics

- All written expression is clear Spelling, punctuation and grammar are correct

### **The 'New Negro' of the Harlem Renaissance**

#### **Overview:**

Together with your small group you will analyze two songs of 1927: "(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue" and "Brown." After identifying key aspects of the sense of black identity conveyed in those

works review the six poems, six pieces of art, and six images. Select one poem, one piece of art, one image to accompany each song. Arrange the songs and accompanying cultural artifacts on a poster, along with a brief explanation of connection.

Activity in Detail:

1. In your groups look at each poem in turn. Discuss the following questions and individually make note of your discussion.

"(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue"

- What is the mood of this song?
- What does this suggest about the status of African Americans?
- What is the overall theme of this song?
- How does the music contribute to this theme?
- What social and cultural conditions in the 1920s support this attitude?

"Brown"

- What is the mood of this song?
- What does the composer suggest when she writes 'I know what makes life worthwhile'?
- What is the overall theme of this song?
- What type of music would you expect to accompany these lyrics?
- What social and cultural conditions in the 1920s support this attitude?

2. Write a short statement describing the sense of African American identity conveyed in this work.

3. Review the packet of resources. Select one (1) piece of artwork, one (1) poem and one (1) picture to accompany **each** poem.

4. For each selection write out three (3) reasons why this selection is an appropriate accompaniment to the song, demonstrating an analytical understanding of the song lyrics and the selection.

5. Put it all together on a poster. The poster will be in two parts, corresponding to the two songs. Each part must include the lyrics, statement based on the lyrics, artwork & explanation, poem & explanation, picture & explanation. Follow these guidelines for creating the poster:

- The poster must have an original title.
- It must be complete.
- It must convey scholarly analysis of the selections and connections to African American identity.
- It must be neat and visually appealing.

In addition, the poster may have the following:

- Extra enhancements to further convey the identity of each section

### **Extending the Lesson**

1. Review of posters

2. Follow-up discussion.

## **Resources**

### **Lyrics**

“Black and Blue” available at

<http://lyricsplayground.com/alpha/songs/b/blackandblue.shtml>

“Brown” available at

<http://www.library.pitt.edu/voicesacrosstime/come-all-ye/ti/2004/ideas/6/documents/ArnstenBrown.pdf>

### **Reference Resources:**

- Rhapsodies in Black: Music and Words from the Harlem Renaissance CD set & accompanying booklet, produced by Shawn Amos, Rhino Entertainment Company, 2000.
- The Harlem Renaissance, National Center for History in the Schools,  
<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/nchs/>