What is true of art is that when suppressed it rises up and the Harlem Renaissance is a perfect example of that movement. When we think about the suppression and the beat down ways we discussed before, we will now experience writing that moves toward a rising passion in America It's a passion that grew out of the pavement of the backstreets of the USA, and it was a movement that soaked into the soul of a nation, through words and music.

Think about how this period was made possible thanks to the efforts of writers who came before them. Think about this as the achievement of these writers and how they carved a path for those to follow. Really hear these writers. Read them aloud when they share a poem. Think about shifts in tone, style, theme, and rhythm, and its exciting change.

Celebrating an Explosion of African American Literature

The Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance marked an explosion of African American arts: writing, visual art, music, theater, and critical-theoretical production. Some of the most influential artists rose up from poverty to enjoy notoriety. The movement geographical center was Chicago and Harlem, New York in the 1920s. This was a time when Broadway was booming and modernist art had great currency, both in the United States and elsewhere. The Blues and Jazz were big influences during this period and we hear this influence in the work we will read.

Zora Neale Hurston

Born to a Reverend father, Hurston lost her mother at the age of nine, attended school very little, and petitioned her way through prestigious schools until she won a scholarship to Barnard College, a division of Columbia College. The story we will read "The Gilded Six-Bits" was published in Story magazine. This publication caught the eye of an editor that urged her to write a novel, and her career was launched.

Pay attention to the repetition, rhythm, and exciting word choices Hurston uses. "It was a Negro yard around a Negro house in a Negro settlement that looked to the payroll of the G. and G. Fertilizer works for its support" is an example of repetition. "The front yard was parted in the middle by a sidewalk from gate to door-step, a sidewalk edged..." is an example of great word choice with a repetitive beat as "sidewalk" serves up a nice visual for her reader.

Consider how authentic the dialogue in this piece is as well: "Whew! dat play-fight got me all worked up," Joe exclaimed. "Got me some water in de kittle" (Bryant, 2010, p.64)? Think about why Hurston chose to do this over simply saying, "Got water in the kettle?"

Langston Hughes

Langston Hughes, a prolific and important artist of the Harlem Renaissance, shaped literary modernism. He wrote poems, plays, novels, short, stories, articles, and essays, and made a passionate effort to further the views about humanity and equality. Hughes, seen as both an acclaimed novelist and gifted poet, "believed that if poetry was to be an agent of social change it must appeal to blacks of all classes, not simply the upper reaches of the black intelligentsia. The art the movement generated should draw on black vernacular materials-jazz and folk tales and spirituals-in order to grant African Americans a sense of racial identity and shared experience that would prove a powerful political tool" (Bryant, 2010, p. 85). His poem, The Weary Blues is shared with music on YouTube.com.

Claude McKay

Claude McKay , son of a Jamaican farmer, was an invited speaker abroad and poet/writer who "contributed to literature and politics helped to change American and international conceptions of race, class, and colonialism" (Bryant, 2010, p. 92). His first novel, Home to Harlem, featured rare glimpse of African-American life, World War I realities, and a picturesque journey through the United States. Listen to Claude McKay's America set to music and images on YouTube.com.

Alice Walker

Alice Walker , best known for her novel and Steven Spielberg's film adaptation, The Color Purple, brought many issues to the forefront: "race and gender oppression, physical and emotional abuse, relationships between individuals and among families and communities" (Bryant, 2010, p. 105). After losing sight in one eye from a childhood BB gun accident, she feared losing her sight in the other eye and began "storing up images against the fading light" (p. 105). In this YouTube.com video, she talks about the freedom rides to Gaza.

Toni Morrison

Toni Morrison , Nobel laureate and Pulitzer Prize-Winning author, is known for her characterization, creative genius, thought-provoking storytelling, and rhythmic prose. She is seen here speaking about her "Society Bench by the Road Dedication" project, which dedicates benches along the road to commemorate the history of African American people. She may be best known for her novel, The Bluest Eye. Listen to an excerpt from a play based on the story on YouTube.com, which reminds us that we universally want to be loved.

Activities: Listen & Learn More

Toni Morrison, The Future of African American Literature.

Nikki Giovanni reads Langston Hughes's poem, "Let America Be America Again".

Reference

Bryant, J. (2010). The Pearson Custom Library of American Literature. Rasmussen College English Department. New York, NY: Pearson Learning Solutions