

# Harlem Renaissance Literature

The Harlem Renaissance was the blossoming of African American intellectual life during the 1920s and 1930s. It was centered in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City. In addition to great music and art, many African-American writers found great success during this period.

## Langston Hughes

Poet, novelist, playwright, short story writer, and columnist. He was one of the earliest innovators of the new literary art form “jazz poetry” and is also best known for what he wrote about the Harlem Renaissance, “Harlem was in vogue.”

His most famous works include *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, *Not Without Laughter*, and “I, Too.”

## Zora Neale Hurston

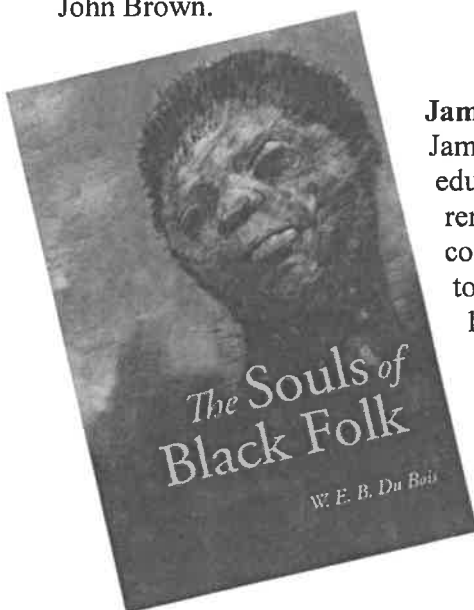
Zora Neale Hurston was an American folklorist and author during the Harlem Renaissance. Of Hurston's four novels and more than 50 published short stories, plays, and essays, she is best known for her 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

## Claude McKay

Claude McKay was a Jamaican writer and poet who wrote three novels: *Home to Harlem*, a best-seller which won the Harmon Gold Award for Literature, *Banjo*, and *Banana Bottom*. His book of poetry, *Harlem Shadows* was among the first books published during the Harlem Renaissance in 1922.

## W. E. B. Du Bois

An American civil rights activist, sociologist, historian, author, and editor. In the course of his long, turbulent career, W. E. B. Du Bois attempted virtually every possible solution to the problem of twentieth-century racism— scholarship, propaganda, integration, national self-determination, human rights, cultural and economic separatism, politics, international communism, expatriation, third world solidarity. His most famous works include *The Souls of Black Folk*, *The Philadelphia Negro*, and a biography of abolitionist John Brown.



## James Weldon Johnson

James Weldon Johnson was an American author, politician, journalist, poet, educator, lawyer, songwriter, and early civil rights activist. Johnson is remembered best for his writing, which includes novels, poems, and collections of folklore. One of the works for which he is best remembered today, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*, was published in 1927 and celebrates the tradition of the folk preacher. He was also one of the first African-American professors at New York University. Later in life he was a professor of creative literature and writing at Fisk University.



## **Dream Deferred**

by Langston Hughes

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore--

and then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over--

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load

Or does it just explode?

## **Incident**

by Countee Cullen

Once riding in old Baltimore,

Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,

I saw a Baltimorean

Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small,

And he was no whit bigger,

And so I smiled, but he poked out

His tongue, and called me, "Nigger."

I saw the whole of Baltimore

From May until December;

Of all the things that happened there

That's all that I remember.

## **If We Must Die**

By 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!

## **Crazy for This Democracy**

by Zora Neale Hurston

I have been made to believe in this democracy thing, and I am all for tasting this democracy out. The flavor must be good. If the Occident is so intent in keeping the taste out of darker mouths that it spends all those billions and expends all those billions and expends all those millions of lives, colored ones too, to keep it among themselves, then it must be something good. I crave to sample this gorgeous thing. So I cannot say anything different from repeal of all Jim Crow laws! Not in some future generation, but repeal now and forever!!

Excerpt from "Crazy for This Democracy" an essay in The Negro Digest

## **The White Witch**

by: James Weldon Johnson

BROTHERS mine, take care! Take care!  
The great white witch rides out to-night.  
Trust not your prowess nor your strength,  
Your only safety lies in flight;  
For in her glance there is a snare,  
And in her smile there is a blight.

The great white witch you have not seen?  
Then, younger brothers mine, forsooth,  
Like nursery children you have looked  
For ancient hag and snaggle-tooth;  
But no, not so; the witch appears  
In all the glowing charms of youth.

Her lips are like carnations, red,  
Her face like new-born lilies, fair,  
Her eyes like ocean waters, blue,  
She moves with subtle grace and air,  
And all about her head there floats  
The golden glory of her hair.

But though she always thus appears  
In form of youth and mood of mirth,  
Unnumbered centuries are hers,  
The infant planets saw her birth;  
The child of throbbing Life is she,  
Twin sister to the greedy earth.

And back behind those smiling lips,  
And down within those laughing eyes,  
And underneath the soft caress  
Of hand and voice and purring sighs,  
The shadow of the panther lurks,  
The spirit of the vampire lies.

## **I, Too**

By 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.