

# HARLEM POETRY

## LESSON PLAN

### LEARNING GOALS

#### Students will be able to...

- Define the "Harlem Renaissance"
- Find Harlem Renaissance Art in NM
- Write a Harlem Renaissance style poem

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### MATERIALS

#### Students will be using...

- Writing Utensil + Journal
- Word processor
- The Worldwide Web/Internet

### SUBJECTS

#### Students will engage...

- Black History/American History
- English Literature/Literary Arts
- Poetry/Composition

### LESSON DESCRIPTION

In this lesson, students will become familiar with two prominent artists from the Harlem Renaissance period in America. Students will begin with an overview of the historical significance of the Renaissance period in Europe and its influence on the Black experience in America. African American students will learn that their literary arts and creative legacy precedes the European Renaissance and has roots in the African artistic tradition and was only later labeled as a Renaissance by academia.

### VOCABULARY (5 MIN)

1. Define Renaissance
2. Define Harlem Renaissance
3. Define metaphor

## GUIDING QUESTIONS (5 MIN)

1. How far apart was the Renaissance from the Harlem Renaissance (in miles and years)?  
• How are the Renaissance and the Harlem Renaissance similar?  
What are the differences between the two Renaissances?
2. Who was Jean Toomer? Where was he from? How did he end up in New Mexico?  
• Who was Anita Scott Coleman? Where was she from? How did she end up in New Mexico?
3. What are the similarities between Jean Toomer's poem "Face" and Langston Hughes' poem "Harlem"? What are the differences between Jean Toomer's poem "Face" and Langston Hughes' poem "Harlem"?
4. What is the dominant metaphor in Anita Scott Coleman's poem "Black Baby"?  
What is the relationship between the blackness of the baby and the blackness of the coal?  
What is the relationship between the baby and the diamond?
5. What does the poem say about the worth/value of Black life?

## INSPIRATION (5 MIN)

1. Jean Toomer's most famous novel, *Cane*, was published in 1923 and was hailed by critics for its literary experimentation and portrayal of African-American characters and culture.
2. I discovered Anita Scott Coleman while doing research for a website documenting important yet under-celebrated Black New Mexicans. The goal was to produce a lyrical script that delivers information on historical figures, like Hamilton. <https://www.dignewmexico.com/>
3. A year ago, I commissioned a poem on Langston Hughes based on the 4th Chapter of his autobiography "Sea," accompanied by Dr. Ron McCurdy and the Langston Hughes Project at UNM's Popejoy Hall. <https://hakimbe.tumblr.com/post/611244276211400704/salvation-by-langston-hughes-i-was-saved-from>

## ACTIVITY (25 MIN)

1. Write a poem inspired by a face. (Use Jean Toomer's poem "Face" or Hakim Bellamy's poem "Aphrodite" as an example.)
2. Write a poem that uses a metaphor to illustrate the relationship between beauty and black youth. (Use Anita Smith Coleman's "Black Baby" or Hakim Bellamy's poem "Black Things" as an example.)
3. Extra Credit: Visit <https://www.dignewmexico.com/> and read/view/listen to the Anita Scott Coleman Persona (Biographical) Poem ... write your own poem in the voice of a historical figure you admire that gives us a window into their life.gives us a window into their life
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.

## DEBRIEF (5 MIN)

1. What does Toomer's, Coleman's and Bellamy's poems tell you about the authors experiences/lives?
2. What do your poems tell the reader about YOU?

## FURTHER RESOURCES

<https://www.ducksters.com/history/renaissance.php>

<https://kids.britannica.com/kids/article/Harlem-Renaissance/353232>

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/jean-toomer>

<https://www.unmpress.com/books/drama-southwest/9780826356383>

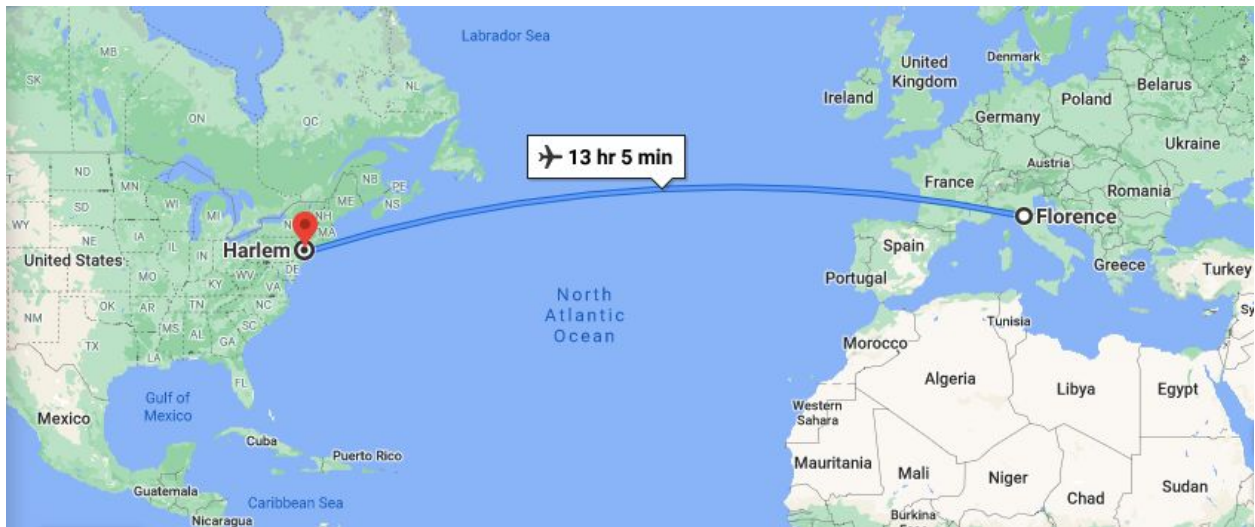
<https://poets.org/poem/face>



<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46548/harlem>

<https://www.nmhistoricwomen.org/location/anita-scott-coleman/>

<https://www.bese.com/anita-scott-coleman-afro-latinx-writer-of-the-harlem-renaissance/>

Where in the world is Harlem/Florence?



Two Renaissances ... 4,153 Miles Apart.  

Florence, Italy

Harlem, USA

391 Years Apart.

The Renaissance Ended in 1527 (Fall of the Roman Empire)  
The Harlem Renaissance Began in 1918 (Start of the Great Migration)

## What is a Renaissance?

A renaissance is literally a “rebirth.” The Renaissance was a time of “coming out of the dark”. It was a rebirth of education, science, art, literature, music, and a better life for people in general. The Harlem Renaissance was a period of intense creativity in Black literature, music, the visual arts, the performing arts and a better life for African Americans in America.

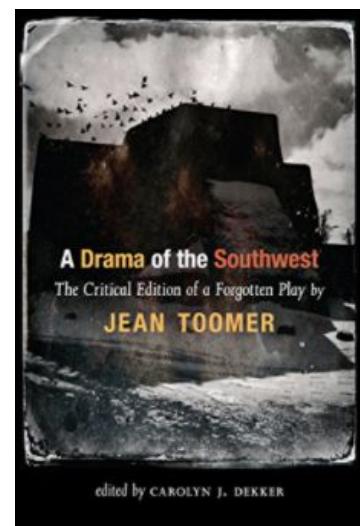
## Who was Jean Toomer?

An important figure in African-American literature and the Harlem Renaissance, Jean Toomer (1894–1967) was born in Washington, DC, the grandson of the first governor of African-American descent in the United States. A poet, playwright, and novelist, Toomer's most famous work, *Cane*, was published in 1923 and was hailed by critics for its literary experimentation and portrayal of African-American characters and culture.



In the 1930s Jean Toomer spent time in Taos, New Mexico as part of his friend Mabel Dodge Luhan's artist community. During his time in Taos he finished a manuscript titled *A Drama of the Southwest*. Originally unpublished, the University of New Mexico Press published the manuscript in 2016.

“Taos is an end product. It is the end of a slope. It is the end product of the Indians, and end product of the Spaniards, an end product of the Yankees and puritans. It must be plowed under. Out of the fertility which death makes in the soil, a new people with a new form may grow. I dedicate myself to the swift death of the old, to the whole birth of the new. In whatever place I



start work, I will call that place Taos.” (taken from *Drama of the Southwest*)\*

\*The folder of Toomer’s notes contains three copies of this paragraph: a handwritten version and a typed copy and its carbon. Though each copy carries the assertion that the paragraph is “taken from *Drama of the Southwest*,” no surviving portion of the manuscript contains it.<sup>1</sup>

### **Exercise:**

Compare Jean Toomer’s *Face* and Langston Hughes *Harlem*.

1. What makes these poems similar?
2. What makes these poems different?
3. Write a poem inspired by a face.

## *Face*

By Jean Toomer

Hair—

silver-gray,

like streams of stars,

Brows—

recurved canoes

quivered by the ripples blown by pain,

Her eyes—

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<sup>1</sup> A Drama of the Southwest, The Critical Edition of a Forgotten Play By Jean Toomer Edited by Carolyn J. Dekker. UNM Press 2016

mist of tears  
condensing on the flesh below  
And her channeled muscles  
are cluster grapes of sorrow  
purple in the evening sun  
nearly ripe for worms.

## *Harlem*

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.

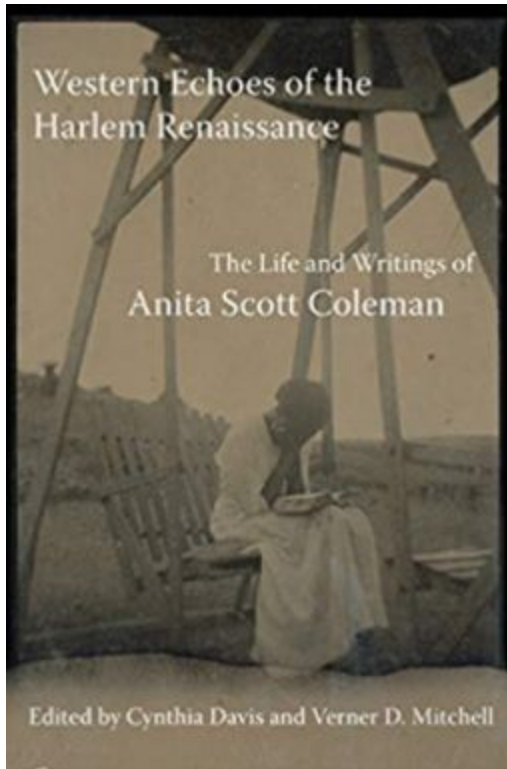
*Or does it explode?*

### **Who was Anita Scott Coleman?**

Anita Scott Coleman (1890-1960) was an African-American woman and Harlem Renaissance era writer who spent much of her childhood and young adult years in Silver City, New Mexico. Coleman was born in Guaymas, Sonora, Mexico, in 1890. She moved with her family to New Mexico when she was still a child, settling on a ranch near Silver City. After high school, Coleman enrolled at New



Mexico Teacher's College (now Western New Mexico University), received a teaching certificate, and earned her living as a teacher. Coleman published her first story in 1919 and went on to publish nine others before leaving New Mexico in 1926 to join her husband in Los Angeles.



Coleman's writing broadened the narrative within the concept of black art that was often centered around the experiences of the black society on the East Coast: Harlem, New York City. 'The landscape—cactus, prairie-dog holes, and mountains, rolled into something compact and smooth as a khaki-colored canvas, and flashed past us like sheets of lightning,' wrote Coleman in her story *El Tisico* in the journal *The Crisis* (The official magazine of the NAACP). It's one of her short stories which reflect her Afro-Latinx

heritage and has combined cultural, racial and historical significance—see also her essay *Arizona and New Mexico—The Land of Esperanza* which highlights her observations of the formative years of the Southwest and the contribution of the Buffalo Soldiers.

### **Exercise:**

Read and Analyze Anita Scott Coleman's poem *Black Baby*.

1. **What is the dominant metaphor?**
2. **What is the relationship between the blackness of the baby and the blackness of the coal?**
3. **What is the relationship between the baby and the diamond?**
4. **What does the poem say about the worth/value of Black life?**
5. **Write a poem that uses a metaphor to illustrate the relationship between beauty and black youth.**

### Black Baby

The baby I hold in my arms is a black baby.  
Today I set him in the sun and Sunbeams danced on his head.  
The baby I hold in my arms is a black baby.  
I toil, and I cannot always cuddle him.  
I place him on the ground at my feet.  
He presses the warm earth with his hands,  
He lifts the sand and laughs to see  
It flow through his chubby fingers.  
I watch to discern which are his hands,  
Which is the sand. . . .  
Lo . . . the rich loam is black like his hands.  
The baby I hold in my arms is a black baby.  
Today the coal-man brought me coal.  
sixteen dollars a ton is the price I pay for coal.--  
Costly fuel . . . though they say:  
-- If it is buried deep enough and lies hidden long enough

'Twill be no longer coal but diamonds. . . .  
My black baby looks at me.  
His eyes are like coals,  
They shine like diamonds.

**Extra Credit:**

Visit <https://www.dignewmexico.com/> and read/view/listen to the Anita Scott Coleman Persona (Biographical) Poem ... write your own poem in the voice of a historical figure you admire that gives us a window into their life.

**Resources**

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Just beyond the shoreline  
of cheek lies a body  
of water.

Your eyes, dark, different

Your oceans, deep  
like the person pooling inside you. Black  
as a body at the bottom  
of the Atlantic.

And when you lie on your back  
balancing my nose atop yours,  
our lips pointing at each other  
like a reflection,

I can make out ancestors  
desperately trying to stay afloat  
in the abyss of your gaze.

They are still  
as beautiful as the mutiny  
that landed them overboard.

As beautiful as  
the pair of wings you ingested  
and blossomed into gills.

The flood in your voice.  
The ocean spray still on your breath  
The salt beds just beneath the shoreline  
of your cheek.

Your beauty does not evaporate,  
it never drowns.

So much so,  
those jealous of your beauty  
try to bottle it.

So Precious  
they will sell you by the ounce.

Your beauty has become that  
of myth and make-up.

Their firehose fetish tried  
and failed to segregate beauty  
from your Brownstone face.

Different  
is what makes beautiful,  
beautiful.

At least noteworthy.  
Unlike anything else  
and you

are different.

In my garden, I grow Black things. Things always subject to ripen too soon. Short-lived so they seed young, young. But still bud big and strong. Grow so damn fast, people mistake them for weeds.

In my garden, this forest, I grow Black things like candied yams and okra, watermelon and thick skin. Things so sweet, they attract flies and mosquitos ... as they get older police officers and white women too!

He laughs, when I tell him "It's a Black thing." In my garden, I grow laughter by the esophagus. By the thermometer. I grow Afros by the pound. In my garden, we grow Black things, like time. We harvest it, like medicine.

One memory at a time.

In my garden, I grow Black things...like the Roots. Because we been scared off of raising our own. Ever since a little boy name Billie holla'd at a lil' boy named Emmet, pointed at Pop'lar and started asking innocence some honest questions like...

"Do negroes grow on trees?"

I tell him that a Black garden, is so much more than a plantation. We grow things besides suffering. We grow things besides nations.

In my garden, I grow Black Gods. It's no Eden, nor jungle either.