



James Weldon Johnson
1871–1938

NOTABLE QUOTE

“The world does not know that a people is great until that people produces great literature and art.”

My City

Poem by James Weldon Johnson

A leading light of the Harlem Renaissance, James Weldon Johnson was also a lawyer, teacher, songwriter, diplomat, and civil rights activist. He dedicated his life to fighting prejudice and inspiring African Americans to new heights of social and literary achievement.

Unstoppable Talent After graduating from Atlanta University in 1894, Johnson worked as a school principal, founded a daily newspaper, and became the first African-American lawyer since Reconstruction to be admitted to the Florida bar. In 1901, the restless Johnson

traveled to New York, where he and his younger brother became successful Broadway songwriters. One of their early songs, “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” eventually became known as the African-American national anthem.

Renaissance Man Johnson also published works in many genres of literature. Among his best-known works are his novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, his poetry collection *God’s Trombones*, and a cultural history, *Black Manhattan*. He also edited several groundbreaking collections of African-American poetry and spirituals.



Claude McKay
c. 1890–1948

NOTABLE QUOTE

“If a man is not faithful to his own individuality, he cannot be loyal to anything.”

If We Must Die

Poem by Claude McKay

Hailed by James Weldon Johnson as “the poet of rebellion,” Jamaican-born Festus Claudius McKay made his name as a fierce critic of racism in the United States. His poetry collection *Harlem Shadows*, published in 1922, is considered one of the founding works of the Harlem Renaissance.

Poet of Rebellion Already established as a poet, 23-year-old McKay arrived in the United States in 1912. In 1919, the country was torn apart by a wave of violent attacks against African Americans. Racial tensions erupted into 26 riots across the country during a period known as the Red Summer. “If We Must Die” was McKay’s anguished response, which became instantly popular among African Americans.

Enduring Message During World War II, the poem took on new meaning when British Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill quoted from it during a speech. The poem went on to become a battle cry for the Allies in their fight against the Nazis. McKay often complained that the fame of this one poem had overshadowed his other work, which included the novels *Home to Harlem* and *Banana Bottom*.

Author Online

For more on James Weldon Johnson and Claude McKay, visit the Literature Center at ClassZone.com.



LITERARY ANALYSIS: SONNET

New ideas help keep poetic traditions alive. The centuries-old **sonnet**, a 14-line lyric poem with specific patterns of rhythm and rhyme, has been reimagined by many poets. The poems in this lesson are based on two classic types of sonnets.

- The **Italian, or Petrarchan, sonnet** is divided into two parts: an **octave**, or eight-line grouping, and a **sestet**, or six-line grouping. The usual rhyme scheme for the octave is *abbaabba*. The rhyme scheme for the sestet varies but is often *cdccde* or *cdccdc*.
- The **English, or Shakespearean, sonnet** has a rhyme scheme of *abab cdcd efef gg*. This divides the poem into four distinct line groups: three **quatrains**, or four-line units, followed by a **couplet**, a pair of rhymed lines.

Sonnets are often written in **iambic pentameter**. In this meter, each line includes five pairs of syllables, the first unstressed, the second stressed. However, modern poets often break the rules when writing sonnets. As you read, note how each poet adapts this classic form to a modern message.

READING SKILL: UNDERSTAND FORM AND MEANING

Understanding a sonnet's structure can help you interpret its meaning. Keep in mind the following:

- In many sonnets, quatrains, octaves, and other line groupings are not set apart by stanza breaks. Use the rhyme scheme to determine the poem's line groupings.
- Each line grouping usually expresses one main idea.
- The first line grouping of the sonnet describes the speaker's situation or problem. The last line grouping resolves, concludes, or reacts to that situation.

As you begin to read each sonnet, identify the line groupings, listing them in a chart like the one shown. Also record in your chart the main idea expressed in each line grouping.

Title:	
Line Grouping	Main Idea
1st quatrain	

*When does old become
NEW again?*

KEY IDEA When CDs came on the market, vinyl records seemed doomed. Then, hip-hop artists made the scratching of a needle on vinyl the signature sound of a new style of music. Artists often bring back old ideas to give them new meaning. Poets James Weldon Johnson and Claude McKay did just that with their **revival** of the sonnet, breathing new life into a 700-year-old poetic form.

PRESENT Think of an artist, a musician, or a writer from the past whose work you admire. Create a plan to adapt this person's work to make a creation of your own, and present your plan to the class.



My City

James Weldon Johnson

When I come down to sleep death's endless night,
The threshold of the unknown dark to cross,
What to me then will be the keenest loss,
When this bright world blurs on my fading sight?
5 Will it be that no more I shall see the trees
Or smell the flowers or hear the singing birds
Or watch the flashing streams or patient herds?
No, I am sure it will be none of these. **A**

But, ah! Manhattan's sights and sounds, her smells,
10 Her crowds, her throbbing force, the thrill that comes
From being of her a part, her subtle spells,
Her shining towers, her avenues, her slums—
O God! the stark, unutterable pity,
To be dead, and never again behold my city! **B**

ANALYZE VISUALS

What details in this photo correspond to the poet's vision of his city?

A FORM AND MEANING

Use the **stanza break** to identify the line groupings of this poem. What is the main idea of lines 1–8?

B SONNET

Judging from its line groupings, what type of sonnet is this?

View of Broadway near Times Square in Manhattan, 1920s

If We Must Die

Claude McKay



If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious¹ spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.
5 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 constrained² to honor us though dead! **C**
O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!
10 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! **D**

C SONNET

State the rhyme scheme of lines 1–8. Considering the rhyme scheme, what type of sonnet is this?

D FORM AND MEANING

By the end of the poem, what resolution has the speaker reached?

1. **inglorious**: shameful; disgraceful.

2. **constrained**: forced.



**SUNSHINE STATE STANDARD
Literary Analysis**

Benchmark LA.1112.2.1.5 Analyze and discuss characteristics of subgenres (e.g., satire, parody, allegory) that overlap or cut across the lines of genre classifications such as poetry, novel, drama, short story, essay or editorial.

Comprehension

- Recall** In “My City,” what will the speaker most regret about death?
- Clarify** In “If We Must Die,” what type of death does the speaker argue for?
- Paraphrase** In “If We Must Die,” what is the meaning of the phrase “making their mock at our accursed lot”?

Literary Analysis

- Identify Form** McKay’s poem closely follows the conventions of a traditional sonnet. Which kind of sonnet is it? Explain your answer.
- Make Inferences About Audience** Recall the events that inspired McKay to write “If We Must Die.” What audience can you infer the speaker is addressing? Describe the speaker’s relationship to this audience.
- Classify Sonnet** Johnson’s poem includes features of both Shakespearean and Petrarchan sonnets. Using a chart like the one shown, decide whether each listed feature of the poem’s structure is characteristic of Shakespearean sonnets, Petrarchan sonnets, or both. Based on your answers, which label is the better description of Johnson’s sonnet?

	<i>Shakespearean</i>	<i>Petrarchan</i>
<i>Structure</i>		
<i>Rhyme Scheme</i>		
<i>Meter</i>		
<i>Final Couplet</i>		

- Analyze Form and Meaning** Review the chart you completed as you read. Notice Johnson’s use of a stanza break, whereas McKay uses none. In your opinion, how does this choice contribute to each poem’s meaning? Explain.
- Examine Author’s Purpose** Consider the motives that might have inspired African-American poets to express themselves in European poetic forms. What artistic and social messages are suggested by the Harlem Renaissance revival of the sonnet?
- Evaluate Style** In your opinion, which poem more successfully updates the sonnet for a modern audience? Include details in your answer.

Literary Criticism

- Critical Interpretations** Claude McKay once stated that he hoped his poems could convey universal meaning. Reread the background on “If We Must Die” included in the author biography. Does the poem’s history suggest McKay was successful in his goal? Explain your answer.



Countee Cullen
1903–1946

Any Human to Another

Poem by Countee Cullen

In 1925, while still an undergraduate at New York University, Countee Cullen (kūl'ən) published his first poetry collection, *Color*, which won immediate critical acclaim.

Cullen's greatest poetic influences were the English Romantic poets, especially John Keats. Although some of Cullen's poetry deals directly with experiences

specific to African Americans, much of his work addresses universal concerns such as love and faith. Cullen adamantly believed that poetry could break down racial barriers and disliked being pigeonholed, once stating, "If I am going to be a poet at all, I am going to be a Poet and not a Negro Poet."



Jean Toomer
1894–1967

Storm Ending

Poem by Jean Toomer

Born in Washington, D.C., Nathan Eugene Toomer grew up in a prominent, racially mixed family. Toomer could pass for white, and as a young man, often changed his racial identification from white to black and back again. As an adult, he rejected the concept of race altogether and embraced an idealistic vision of himself as a founder of a "united human race."

Toomer was drawn to Eastern philosophy and Imagist poetry—poetry that conveys meaning through the use of precise, striking images. His reputation rests mainly on his novel *Cane* (1923), an experimental work exploring the African-American experience through fragments of poetry and prose.



Arna Bontemps
1902–1973

A Black Man Talks of Reaping

Poem by Arna Bontemps

After graduating from college in 1923, Arna Bontemps (bŏn-tĕn') discovered a thriving literary scene in Harlem that he called a "foretaste of paradise." Despite his love for the bustle of the Northern cities, Bontemps was most deeply inspired by the Southern roots of African-American culture. Nearly all of his stories, novels, and plays are set in the South and provide vivid portrayals of rural life.

Bontemps, who earned his living as an educator, left Harlem in 1931 and spent most of his career in the South. His major works include the short story collection *The Old South* and the novel *God Sends Sunday*, which is often cited as the final work of the Harlem Renaissance.

AuthorOnline

For more on these poets, visit the Literature Center at ClassZone.com.

LITERARY ANALYSIS: THEME

In poetry, the speaker's descriptions of the world will often help you identify a poem's **theme**, its underlying message about life or human nature. In most works, the theme is implied, rather than directly stated. Consider these lines:

*Your grief and mine
Must intertwine*

The speaker might be talking to a loved one or making a general point about sorrow. To uncover the message of a poem, use these strategies:

- Consider the title. What information does it reveal?
- Identify the speaker. Is the speaker the voice of an individual or of a group?
- Notice key images and think about their meaning.
- Consider the mood, or feeling, the speaker conveys.

Readers notice different details and often find different themes in the same work. As you read, try to draw your own conclusions about each poet's message.

READING SKILL: DISTINGUISH FIGURATIVE FROM LITERAL MEANING

You've learned that poets use **figurative language**, such as similes, metaphors, and personification, to go beyond the literal meaning of words. Use these steps to uncover this extra level of meaning:

- Read each poem once to grasp its overall meaning.
- Reread the poem, noting important words and phrases.
- Ask questions about comparisons you notice. What is being compared, and how are these things alike?
- Uncover hidden metaphors by noting descriptive details. What do these details remind you of?

As you read each poem, record examples of figurative language in a chart like the one shown. Then, jot down some of the impressions created by the words the poet chooses.

Example	Impressions
<i>like an arrow</i>	

Explore the Key Idea

FLORIDA

How do you VIEW the world?

KEY IDEA You can see a glass as half empty or half full. You can see a pile of old newspapers as trash to be thrown away or as the makings of papier-mâché. The way you see things—your **outlook**—says a lot about who you are.

QUICKWRITE Many factors shape your outlook—your personality, your life experiences, your state of mind. Write one or two sentences describing your outlook. Then, explain the factors you think have most influenced the way you look at the world.



Any Human to Another

Countee Cullen

The ills I sorrow at
Not me alone
Like an arrow,
Pierce to the marrow,
5 Through the fat
And past the bone.

Your grief and mine
Must intertwine
Like sea and river,
10 Be fused and mingle,
Diverse yet single,
Forever and forever. **A**

Let no man be so proud
And confident,
15 To think he is allowed
A little tent
Pitched in a meadow
Of sun and shadow
All his little own.

20 Joy may be shy, unique,
Friendly to a few,
Sorrow never scorned to speak
To any who
Were false or true. **B**

25 Your every grief
Like a blade
Shining and unsheathed¹
Must strike me down.
Of bitter aloes² wreathed,
30 My sorrow must be laid
On your head like a crown.

A THEME

Reread lines 1–12.
Consider the title of the poem. Based on the title, what message about sorrow is expressed in these lines?

B FIGURATIVE MEANING

Identify two examples of **personification** in lines 20–24. What qualities are indicated by these lines?

1. **unsheathed**: removed from its protective case.
2. **bitter aloes**: spiny-leaved plants whose juice is used to make a bad-tasting medicine.

Storm Ending

Jean Toomer

Thunder blossoms gorgeously above our heads,
Great, hollow, bell-like flowers,
Rumbling in the wind,
Stretching clappers to strike our ears . . . **C**
5 Full-lipped flowers
Bitten by the sun
Bleeding rain
Dripping rain like golden honey—
And the sweet earth flying from the thunder.

C FIGURATIVE MEANING
What is thunder compared to in lines 1–4? Explain what qualities are emphasized by this comparison.



Field and Storm (2003), April Gornik. Oil on linen, 74" × 95". Courtesy of the artist and Danese Gallery, New York.

A Black Man Talks of Reaping

Arna Bontemps



Sunflowers. Charly Palmer. Mixed media collage on canvas, 48" x 24". © Charly Palmer.

I have sown beside all waters in my day.
I planted deep, within my heart the fear
That wind or fowl would take the grain away.
I planted safe against this stark, lean year. **D**

5 I scattered seed enough to plant the land
In rows from Canada to Mexico,
But for my reaping¹ only what the hand
Can hold at once is all that I can show.

Yet what I sowed and what the orchard yields
10 My brother's sons are gathering stalk and root,
Small wonder then my children glean² in fields
They have not sown, and feed on bitter fruit. **E**

ANALYZE VISUALS

What elements of this painting reflect the theme of the poem?

D FIGURATIVE MEANING

Reread lines 1–4. What idea do the words *sown*, *planted*, and *grain* have in common?

E THEME

In lines 11–12, why are the children's gleanings described as "bitter fruit"?

1. **reaping**: harvesting grain.
2. **glean**: gather grain left behind by reapers.



SUNSHINE STATE STANDARD
Literary Analysis
Benchmark LA.1112.2.1.4 Analyze the way in which the theme or meaning of a selection represents a view or comment on life, providing textual evidence for the identified theme.

Comprehension

1. **Summarize** In “Any Human to Another,” what comparisons does the speaker use to describe grief?
2. **Clarify** In “Storm Ending,” what event is described in the last line of the poem?
3. **Clarify** In “A Black Man Talks of Reaping,” how much has the speaker reaped from all the seed he has scattered?

Literary Analysis

4. **Distinguish Figurative from Literal Meaning** Review the notes you took on Bontemps’s poem. Bontemps uses an **extended metaphor**, a lengthy comparison of two things that have many points in common. Identify the extended metaphor Bontemps uses. What is this metaphor meant to suggest?
5. **Examine Imagery** “Storm Ending” includes several examples of **synesthesia**, imagery that uses one type of sensory experience to describe a different one—for example, a sound described as a smell. Identify two examples of synesthesia in the poem. Which two senses are combined in each image?
6. **Compare and Contrast Tone** Describe the tone, or attitude toward the subject, of Cullen’s and Bontemps’s poems. What **outlook** on the prospects for social equality does each poem suggest?
7. **Analyze Theme** Complete a chart like the one shown for each poem. What do you conclude is the theme of each poem?

<i>Title Reveals:</i>	<i>Speaker’s Identity:</i>
<i>Key Images:</i>	<i>Mood:</i>

Literary Criticism

8. **Biographical Context** Reread the author biographies on page 852. In each case, what connections can you make between the poet’s life story and the worldview expressed in his work? Be specific.