



Chapter One: An Overview of the African American Literature

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A. Personal Information

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B. The Objectives of the Course

The objective of this course is to demonstrate the way the concept of Orality is integrated within the field of the African American Modernist literature. To be precise, this course follows four major objectives:

1. To provide an introduction to modernism, to the study of the African American literature and its relation to Ebonics and oral Black culture.
2. To combine Ebonics as a dialect with the Standard English within African American literature
3. To exhibit the importance of oral culture in the Afro American Modernist literary writings
4. To depict how the African American literature contributes to the persistence of the Black oral heritage.

C. The Prerequisites

To be able to get the most out of this course you need to know:

The American Modernism

The history of the African Americans

The various aspects of the Black Oral Culture



Introduction

The Afro-American literature has always been conceived as rich, vast and varied since it is constantly developing, adapting to modern influences and simultaneously; influencing the contemporary writing. More than that, it is a literature which evolved with the aim of giving birth to a powerful voice that has been for a long time suffocated. In this context, the literary domain has been exploited by the African American poets and novelists in order to highlight the cruel reality that was prevailing in their Black community.

First Section : American Modernism

Introduction to Modernism

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American Modernist Literature

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A. Introduction to Modernism

Modernism emerged as an artistic and cultural movement which starts at the turn of the 20th century with its core period between First World War and Second World War. Characteristically, modernism was considered as a revolution of style since many musicians, artists, and writers broke away from traditional techniques to create new and innovative art.

The features of the Modernist novel:

1. It deviates from the representational expression of reality
2. It is very much concerned with man's consciousness, the subconscious working of the human mind; the importance of stream of consciousness technique
3. It disrupts the chronological sequence and widely uses flash backs and flash forwards
4. It avoids plot
5. Its narrative structure is loose and weak. By way of compensation, it gives importance to allusion, repetition and symbolism
6. It avoids moral enlightenment and authorial intrusions (The author is like God in the universe, present everywhere but visible nowhere)
7. It employs either a single limited point of view or multiple narrators
8. It has no hero, rather an anti-hero, rootless, restless, alienated, the image of an unstable society with no confidence in itself.

B. American Modernist Literature

American modernist artists became most concerned with content and subject matter. They tried to find new ways to express their feelings and views. To illustrate, *The Great Gatsby* is considered as a huge triumph of style over content. Although the novel itself is about tragedy and loss which left a very depressed

First Section : American Modernism

feeling at the end, the reader feels quite the opposite. In other words, Fitzgerald's writing brought pleasure despite his depressing subject matter. The Great Gatsby is seen thus to represent the demoralization of American society and the end of innocence in American thought.

The American Modernism benefited from the diversity of immigrant cultures. Artists were inspired by African, Caribbean, Asian and European folk cultures and integrated these exotic styles into their works. To illustrate, there are some African American novelists who integrated aestheticism for art's sake, some added aspects of Blues and Jazz music as a medium to reveal their hidden emotions. There are some other novelists who dealt within their literary works with contemporary issues as feminism and others who added a political dimension to their literary writings.

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A. Harlem Renaissance

By the beginning of the twentieth century and mainly during the 1920s, a new form of expression had been emerged under the New Negro Movement; by the wide arrival of new groups of African American authors; bearing with them modern thoughts. Besides, these writers tried to demonstrate a close relationship between their writings and their vivid folklore by integrating aspects of their oral Black culture into their fictional prose and poetry.

The Harlem Renaissance occurred at a period between 1920s and 1940s. It witnessed a blossoming of Black culture and social thought produced by many talented and dramatic African American artists, intellectuals, writers and musicians. These figures created new and outstanding things in a private and fashionable district. It was a time of important ideas, books, cultures, arts, etc. Hence, the Harlem Renaissance revealed a Black America that has never been seen before and brought a new consideration to the American literature.

*See "Harlem Renaissance (web_video)"
Harlem Renaissance*

B. Zora Neale Hurston, a Modernist Feminist and Folklorist Novelist

During the Harlem Renaissance, all Black artists and writers took into consideration the notion of Blackness to establish their new Negro identity and culture. They had been inspired from their sorrowful past and the burden of slavery. Zora Hurston started to write and to enlighten the literary scene during this period. As a

Second Section: African American Modernist Literature

folklorist, novelist and storyteller, she had dexterously tackled different literary genres as poetry, prose and short stories to extend her feminist and folklorist views and to explore themes of oppression, discrimination and search for identity.

In her fictional world, her writings were characterized by a sense of humor and imagination. In 1937, she published her masterpiece *Their Eyes Were Watching God* which received great attention. As modernist writers, she holds an optimistic view of future for African American culture in which she demonstrates self-confidence and strives towards individual triumph as a strong African American woman. She, hence, bestowed the Black woman opportunity to express herself.

She depicted her protagonist Janie as a typical character and offered her unique characteristics different from other novelists' protagonists of her time. She characterized her heroine as a strong and courageous woman who faced different obstacles to become an independent woman. In addition to that, she was so influenced by her community and highlights a real vision of her society.

She found inspiration in an authentic Black storytelling which stems from the experiences of its ordinary people. As a folklorist, she offers her readers the opportunity to socialize with each character from the community through their virtual social life as laughing, telling stories, dancing, playing checkers and other games. She thus gave her novel a worthy image and made her story seemed more realistic and enthralling.

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