

The Tropics in New York

Poem by Claude McKay

Theme for English B

Poem by Langston Hughes

How does **HERITAGE** shape identity?

COMMON CORE

RL 4 Analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone. **RL 6** Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of world literature.

RL 10 Read and comprehend poems. **L 4** Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words.

Your identity is certainly shaped by your personal experiences, but your heritage also has something to do with it. No matter who you are, your family and the culture in which you grew up shaped the person you are today, as well as the person you will be in the future. In the poems “The Tropics in New York” and “Theme for English B,” two African-American writers explore and celebrate the importance of their heritage.

QUICKWRITE What is your heritage, and how important has it been in shaping your identity? Jot down your thoughts, and then write a paragraph describing how your heritage has influenced who you are.



● TEXT ANALYSIS: HARLEM RENAISSANCE LITERATURE

In the early 1920s, a literary movement known as the **Harlem Renaissance** took root in the New York City neighborhood known as Harlem. African-American writers, artists, and musicians created works that expressed their own heritage, style, and voice rather than mimicking the style and voice of white culture.

Claude McKay and Langston Hughes were key writers in this movement. Both poets were concerned with the social issues facing African Americans. McKay, who grew up on the tropical island of Jamaica, wrote poetry that reflected the lush landscape and the rhythms of life on the island. Langston Hughes experimented with bringing the rhythms of blues and jazz music into his poetry. As you read these poems, note the following:

- images that are unique to the cultural background of the writer
- ideas or cultural experiences that are expressed through the speaker
- words or cultural ideas that are unique to the time period

● READING STRATEGY: READING POETRY

As you've learned, poets are careful and deliberate about their diction—the words they use in their poems. For example, rhythm and melody play an important role in most poetry, including the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance. In fact, you can find in these poems sounds and rhythms that continue to occur in contemporary African-American poetic forms. After reading each poem silently, read the poems aloud. Notice the rhythms created by the words as well as the sounds of the words in combination. Jot down examples of **sound devices**, such as alliteration, assonance, repetition, and rhyme.

<i>"The Tropics in New York"</i>	
<i>Example</i>	<i>Type of Sound Device</i>
<i>"dewy dawns"</i>	<i>alliteration</i>



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

Claude McKay

1889–1948

From Rural Jamaican to World Traveler

The 11th child of peasant farmers, Claude McKay was born and raised in Jamaica. By the time he came to the United States in 1912 to attend college, he had published two volumes of verse in Jamaican dialect. He moved to New York in 1914, and by the early 1920s he had emerged as one of the first inspirational voices of the Harlem Renaissance movement. McKay lived and traveled widely as a poet, novelist, and journalist.

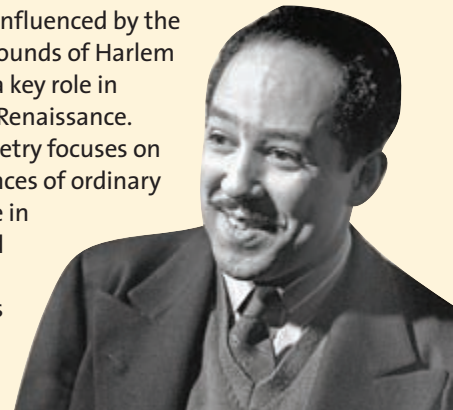


Langston Hughes

1902–1967

Spokesman for the Common People

Born in Joplin, Missouri, Langston Hughes moved often during his youth and grew up in various Midwestern cities. Like Claude McKay, Hughes became a world traveler, but he lived in New York's Harlem neighborhood at several points in his life. He was deeply influenced by the sights and sounds of Harlem and played a key role in the Harlem Renaissance. Hughes's poetry focuses on the experiences of ordinary black people in America and reflects his love of blues and jazz music.



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The Tropics in New York

CLAUDE MCKAY

Bananas ripe and green, and ginger-root,
Cocoa in pods and alligator pears,
And tangerines and mangoes and grape fruit,
Fit for the highest prize at parish fairs, **A**

5 Set in the window, bringing memories
Of fruit-trees laden by low-singing rills,
And dewy dawns, and mystical blue skies
In benediction over nun-like hills.

My eyes grow dim, and I could no more gaze;
10 A wave of longing through my body swept,
And, hungry for the old, familiar ways,
I turned aside and bowed my head and wept.

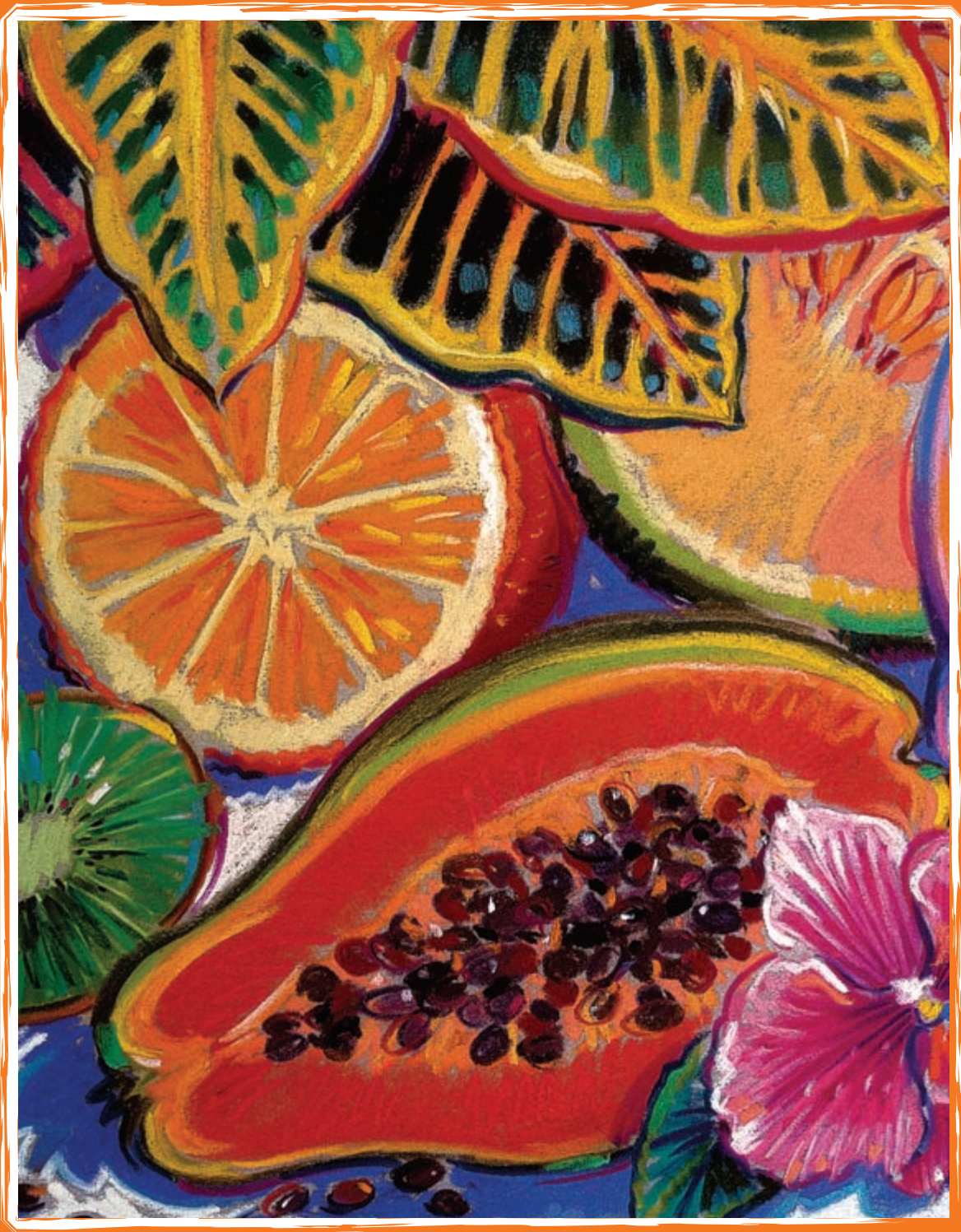
A READING POETRY

Reread lines 1–4 aloud.
What word is repeated in
a way that emphasizes
the rhythm?

COMMON CORE L4

Language Coach

Roots and Affixes The
root *bene* means “good,”
and the root *dic* means
“speak.” Reread line 8.
What do you think
benediction means?



Theme for ENGLISH B

Langston Hughes

The instructor said,

Go home and write
a page tonight.
And let that page come out of you—
5 Then, it will be true.

I wonder if it's that simple?
I am twenty-two, colored, born in Winston-Salem.
I went to school there, then Durham,¹ then here
to this college on the hill above Harlem.²
10 I am the only colored student in my class.
The steps from the hill lead down into Harlem,
through a park, then I cross St. Nicholas,
Eighth Avenue, Seventh, and I come to the Y,
the Harlem Branch Y, where I take the elevator
15 up to my room, sit down, and write this page: **B**

It's not easy to know what is true for you or me
at twenty-two, my age. But I guess I'm what
I feel and see and hear. Harlem, I hear you:
hear you, hear me—we two—you, me talk on this page.
20 (I hear New York, too.) Me—who?

COMMON CORE L4

Language Coach

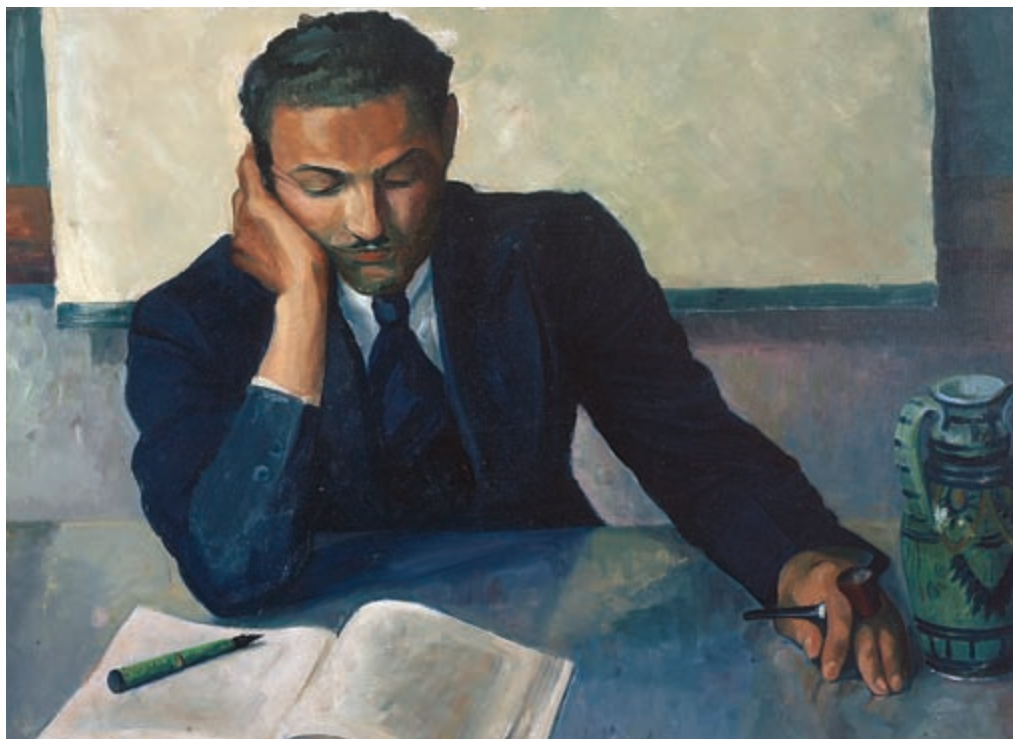
Multiple Meanings The word *colored* typically means “having color” or “influenced by.” In an old-fashioned usage of the term, it meant “African American” (the preferred term today). Which sense of the word is used in line 7?

B HARLEM RENAISSANCE

Reread lines 6–15. What do you learn about the speaker in these lines?

1. **Winston-Salem . . . Durham:** cities in North Carolina.

2. **this college on the hill above Harlem:** Columbia University in New York City.



Young Man Studying (Portrait of Langston Hughes) (1932), Hilda Wilkinson Brown. Oil on canvas. Photo by Gregory R. Staley © Lilian T. Burwell/Howard University.

Well, I like to eat, sleep, drink, and be in love.
I like to work, read, learn, and understand life.
I like a pipe for a Christmas present,
or records—Bessie, bop, or Bach.³
25 I guess being colored doesn't make me not like
the same things other folks like who are other races.
So will my page be colored that I write?
Being me, it will not be white. **C**
But it will be
30 a part of you, instructor.
You are white—
yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.
That's American.
Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me.
35 Nor do I often want to be a part of you.
But we are, that's true!
As I learn from you,
I guess you learn from me—
although you're older—and white—
40 and somewhat more free.

This is my page for English B.

C READING POETRY

Reread lines 16–28.
What sound devices
do you recognize
in these lines?

3. **Bessie, bop, or Bach:** Bessie Smith was a leading jazz and blues singer of the 1920s and early 1930s. Bop is a style of jazz that became popular in the 1940s. Johann Sebastian Bach was an 18th-century German composer.

MAGAZINE ARTICLE This article sheds further light on the Harlem Renaissance and its groundbreaking influence.

THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE:

A Cultural Explosion

From the “stompin’” jazz performances at the Savoy Ballroom to the lavish, racially-integrated literary events at the Dark Tower, 1920s Harlem in New York City hosted a vibrant cultural scene known as the Harlem Renaissance.

Scholars disagree about the exact dates of the Harlem Renaissance but generally place this cultural revolution between 1919 and the mid-1930s. The Harlem Renaissance represented a movement that was occurring throughout the country, as African Americans explored artistic, political, and social acts to raise race consciousness. Black people experiencing poverty and racial tension, particularly in the rural South, flocked to Harlem in the hopes of creating a more unified, self-determined community.

Harlem’s population quickly exploded, despite high rents there. The “city within a city” drew residents from as far as Africa and the West Indies, as its influence spread throughout the world. The result was a strong community of African-American businesses, churches, schools, and civic and entertainment centers. Although Harlemites had problems and differences, residents drew together to enjoy “strolling” (a pastime that involved dressing up to walk the neighborhood and meet neighbors), parades (which could occur a few times in one day and involve the whole crowd), and rent parties (hosted by tenants hoping to earn enough money from a cover charge to pay the month’s rent).

During the Harlem Renaissance, African Americans from all walks of life, as well as other audiences, developed greater appreciation

for both the folk and more sophisticated aspects of black culture. Musical forms such as jazz and the blues swelled in popularity. Plays by African Americans appeared on Broadway, black artists gained prominence, and black writers published more books than during any previous era.

Some of the Harlem Renaissance’s most prominent figures, such as poet Langston Hughes, drew inspiration from “the low-down folks,” a term he used to describe the masses. Hughes, who experimented with dialect and music in his writing, believed African Americans needed to be proud of their individuality and blackness. Others, such as the scholar W. E. B. DuBois, felt that African-American art should serve the political purpose of portraying its people in the best possible light, in order to show equality with whites and to defy stereotypes. Despite these differences, writers of the movement found enough in common to support one another.

The Harlem Renaissance suffered when the stock market crashed in 1929 and wealthy white patrons from New York City’s uptown neighborhoods no longer frequented Harlem’s clubs. Other factors, such as race riots, the repeal of Prohibition, and growing dissent affected the movement as well. Today the Harlem Renaissance remains a powerful influence among artists such as Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison, Pulitzer Prize winner Alice Walker, Poet Laureate Rita Dove, and many others.

Comprehension

- 1. Recall** In “The Tropics in New York,” what do the fruits in the window remind the speaker of?
- 2. Recall** What causes him to weep?
- 3. Recall** In “Theme for English B,” what instructions are given to the speaker?
- 4. Summarize** What aspect of his identity does he discuss?

COMMON CORE

RL 4 Analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone. **RL 6** Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of world literature. **RL 10** Read and comprehend poems.

Text Analysis

- 5. Examine Title** Consider the title of “The Tropics in New York.” How does it affect your understanding of the poem?
- 6. Draw Conclusions** In “Theme for English B,” the speaker says that he and the instructor are part of each other. What does he mean? Explain.
- 7. Analyze Theme** In your own words, explain the theme of the poem “Theme for English B.” What is the message the poet wants to convey? Support your answer with evidence from the text.

- 8. Identify Tone** A poet’s choice of words and details conveys a certain tone, or attitude toward the subject. Identify the tone of each poem by completing a chart like the one shown.

<i>“The Tropics in New York”</i>	
<i>Tone of Poem</i>	<i>Words/Details That Convey Tone</i>
<i>sad, nostalgic</i>	

- 9. Understand Sound in Poetry** Review the sound devices you recorded as you read the two poems. How does noticing these sound devices affect the way you perceive these poems?
- 10. Interpret Harlem Renaissance Literature** What does the article “The Harlem Renaissance: A Cultural Explosion” add to your understanding of these two poems?

Text Criticism

- 11. Biographical Context** Claude McKay grew up in a Jamaican town populated mainly by blacks. When he went to work in the city of Kingston, with a greater proportion of whites, he was shocked by the racism he encountered. He later went to the United States with great optimism about the opportunity he might find “even for a Negro,” but he was quickly disillusioned about the conditions for black Americans: “It was the first time I had ever come face to face with such manifest, implacable hate of my race.” What does this knowledge about his life add to your perception of the homesickness described in “The Tropics in New York”? Explain.

How does HERITAGE shape identity?

How important is your heritage to you? Explain.