

African american history of literature assignment



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

African Americans are represented in every area of literature. They have won prizes (Pulitzer and Nobel), been poet laureate of the United States and recited their poetry at a presidential inauguration. They write about our heritage and give us heroes and characters with whom we can laugh or induce us to have a good cry. They inspire us and they encourage us.

The first African American to publish a book and achieve international recognition was Phillis Wheatley. Her first published poem appeared in 1767. Published literature by other African Americans followed.

Reading and writing were forms of power. It was illegal to teach slaves to read and write in the Southern states. There were some slave owners in the South who did not obey this law. Some allowed their slave children to learn and others were taught for practical reasons - their jobs. The Northern states were more lenient since there were more free men of color living in the region.

In the urban areas of the North, free Blacks used writing to call for the abolition of slavery. David Walker wrote an appeal that called for uprisings against slavery. Other literature pointed out the conditions of slavery and its injustice.

Literary societies were formed in the early nineteenth century by free Blacks. During this period, the first African American newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, was founded (1827-1829). The paper published original poems, appeals, editorials, and letters. These were all considered literature at the time.

Another form of literature was the slave narrative. Slaves who had found their way to the North would tell stories to white abolitionists. They, in turn, would write down the narrative and it would be published in abolitionist papers and distributed at meetings. Frederick Douglass broke this cycle. He wrote his own narrative which was published in 1845. Following his lead, William Wells Brown, Henry Bibb and James W. C. Pennington chose to write their own narratives.

Stories about slave life began to appear in the 1850s. Frederick Douglass published his first historical novel, *The Heroic Slave*, in 1853. *Clotel; or The President's Daughter*, written by William Wells Brown was published the same year. Brown published the first African American drama, *The Escape; or A Leap for Freedom*, in 1858. Following publication of works by Douglass and Brown, Martin Delaney published *Blake; or The Huts of America* in 1859, the story of a slave who leads a revolt in the South. Harriet E. Wilson is given the honor of being the first African American woman to have a novel published in the United States. Her book, *Our Nig; or Sketches From the Life of a Free Black*, was published in 1859.

The first African American literary magazine, *The Anglo-African Magazine*, began publication just before the Civil War. The literature appearing in the magazine was written by prominent African American intellectuals.

Dacey Thomas was the mother of my grandfather, Henry Rouse. My cousin, Joyce Henderson, discovered the file. Our great-grandmother was interviewed by Samuel S. Taylor as part of the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938.

“ I was born in Barbour County, Alabama. When I was born, the white folks kept the children’s age, not that of their parents. When the Yankees came through our white folks’ plantation, the white folks was hiding away things.”

“ My mother had a little baby. The old women would tend to this baby and we would sit and rock the cradle till mother would come. I know I wasn’t very old, because I didn’t do anything but sit and rock the baby. I had just gotten big enough to carry the bowls.”

“ When the Yankees came through they stole Ben See’s horse and brought him out here in Arkansas. In those days, they used to brand horses. Some woman out here in Arkansas recognized the horse by his brand and wrote to him about it. He came out and got the horse. We had gone by that time.”

“ He had a block built up high just like a meat block out in the yard. He would have the yard man bring the little niggers out and put them on this block. I don’t know nothing about their parents, who they were nor where they were. All I know he would have this child there what he’d done bought.”

“ If there would be about five or six come in, here’s this nigger sitting up here. Here’s a lot of folks waitin’ to buy him. One would say ‘ I bid so much.’ Another would say, ‘ I bid so much.’ That would go on till the biddin’ got as high as it would go. Then the little nigger would go to the highest bidder if the bid suited master.”

“ The Union Station was just like that hillside. It was just one street in the town. I don’t know what year nor nothing about it because when I came here it just like somebody didn’t have any sense.”

“ You couldn’t cook nothin’ then without somebody knowin’ it. Couldn’t cook and eat in the back while folk sit in the front without them knowin’ it. They used to steal from the old master and cook it and they would be burning sage or something to keep the white folks from smelling it. The riding boss would come round about nine o’clock to see if you had gone to bed or not. If they could steal a chicken or pig and kill and cut it up, this one would take a piece and that one would take a piece and they would burn the cotton to keep down the scent. The rider would come round in June and July too when they thought the people would be hunting the watermelons.”

“ When the soldiers come, the niggers run and hid under the beds and the soldiers come and poked their bayonets under the bed and shouted, ‘ Come on out from under there. You’re free!’”

“ Then the mother would go and get the children and bring them home. She would cook for supper and feed them. She’d have to go somewheres and get them. Maybe the children would be asleep before she would get all that done. Then she would have to wake them up and feed them.”

“ I remember one time my sister and me were laying near the fire asleep and my sister kicked the pot over and burned me from my knee to my foot. My old master didn’t have no wife, so he had me carried up to the house and treated by the old woman who kept the house for him. She was a slave. When I got so I could hobble around a little, he would sometimes let the little niggers come up to the house and I would get these big peanuts and break them up and throw them out to them so he could have fun seeing them scramble for them.”

“ After the children had been fed, the mother would cook the next day’s breakfast and she would cook the next day’s dinner and put it in the pail so that everything would be ready when the riding boss would come around. Cause when he came, it meant move.”

“ She never carried the gourds and bowls herself. She just fixed them. The yard man brought them down to the quarters and we would take them back. She wash them and scape them till they was white and thin as paper. They was always clean.”

“ She wasn’t related to me. I couldn’t call her name to save my life.”

“ When we left Ben See’s plantation and went down into Alabama, we left there on a wagon. Daddy was driving four big steers hitched to it. There was just three of us children. The little boy my mother was schooling then, it died. It died when we went betwixt New Falla and Montgomery, Alabama. I don’t know when we left Alabama nor how long we stayed there. After he was told he was free, I know he didn’t make nare another crop on Ben See’s plantation.”

“ I can’t tell you what kind of time it was right after the Civil War because I was too young to notice. All our livers I had plenty to ear. When we first came to Arkansas we stopped at old Mary Jones down in Riceville, and then we went down on the Cates Farm at Biscoe. Then we went from there to Atkins up in Pope County. No, he went up in the sand hills and bought him a home and then he went up into Atkins. Of course, I was a married woman by that time.”

“ I married the second year I came to Arkansas, about sixty-one or sixty-three years ago. I have lived in Little Rock about thirty-two or thirty-three years. When I first came here, I came right up here on Seventeenth and State streets.”

“ I have raised five children of my own.”

“ I used to work for an old white man who told me how they done. They would walk along the street with their disguises hidden under their arms. Then when they go to the meeting place, they would put their disguises on and go out and do their devilment. Then when they were through, they would take the disguise off again and go on back about their business. Old man Wolf, he used to tell me about it.”

In her research, my cousin Joyce has found that the name referenced in the document as See should be Seay.

After the Civil War, the promises of Reconstruction made to African Americans were not kept. This brought about an outpouring of African American literature that showed the beginning of ethnic awareness, which eventually triggered the Harlem Renaissance.

Autobiographies of slave life and how obstacles were overcome were popular. Literature included:

The literature portrayed the history and hopes of African Americans. The books instilled pride in African Americans while showing white readers the contributions that African Americans had made to the country.

There was an increase in literature written by African American women. Their literary endeavors included poetry, fiction and nonfiction. Writers included Frances E. W. Harper, Anna Julia Cooper, Lucy Delaney, Ida B. Wells, Victoria Earle Matthews, Gertrude Mossell and Pauline Hopkins.

W. E. B. Du Bois was the most influential African American writer of the early twentieth century. He wrote *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). The call for ethnic awareness issued by Du Bois, Alain Locke and Marcus Garvey had a profound effect on African Americans. Du Bois also challenged African American writers to write about the world around them. His challenge produced two timeless pieces of literature: *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) by James Weldon Johnson and *Invisible Man* (1952) by Ralph Ellison.

There was a sense of pride and racial unity during the Harlem Renaissance. It inspired confidence and fostered creativity. This new attitude among African Americans was the beginning of a creative period which produced a significant number of literary works by African American writers. Poets of the renaissance era included Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Georgia Douglas Johnson and Claude McKay. Fiction writers included Nella Larsen, Claude McKay, Jessie Fauset, Wallace Thurman, George Schuyler and Zora Neale Hurston.

In 1910 Edwin Harleston and a group of Blacks founded the *Pittsburgh Courier*. The paper was founded because the city's white newspapers focused on crime by African Americans and ignored the positive aspects of African American life. Robert Lee Vann, an attorney, became the editor,

treasurer and legal counsel of the newspaper. He was responsible for the growth of the newspaper.

The *Courier*'s circulation grew from 55,000 in the 1920s to about 150,000 in the 1930s. The Black migration from the South to the North helped this growth. Other factors influencing the circulation growth were the column written by journalist George Schuyler and the reporting on events that appealed to a national audience.

The Civil Rights Movement was covered by white newspapers and the circulation of the *Pittsburgh Courier* declined. The newspaper was sold in the 1960s and renamed the *New Pittsburgh Courier*. Publication ceased in the 1990s.