

Twentieth-Century American Literature

Led by Peter Conn

Preface

The reading list offered a sequence of important texts in twentieth-century American literature, which aspired to represent something of the diversity and range of writing over that period. The books included fiction and non-fiction, poetry and drama, written by women and men from different ethnic and geographical backgrounds.

Beginning with W. E. B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folks* (1903), the readings continued with Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro* (1925), F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), Robert Hayden, selected poems, Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* (1976), Lorene Cary, *The Price of a Child* (1995) and *Free!* (2005), and August Wilson, *Fences* (1987). In each case, the seminar discussion centered on the work, in the context of American social and political history. In addition, one class was devoted to an illustrated survey of major developments in twentieth-century American painting and photography. Finally, the seminar was privileged to have noted author Lorene Cary join the group for the discussion of her books.

The teacher participants were themselves a diverse group of women and men, representing every grade level and several disciplines. Some of the curriculum units they produced incorporated texts and/or authors from the seminar reading list; others applied ideas or themes from the seminar to a different body of materials.

Susan King will use children's books to teach her elementary school students about the history and achievements of African-Americans. Kemo Donita Logan will have her eighth-grade students read and study the work of the Harlem Renaissance poets, then write their own poems using the classic texts as inspiration and models. Catherine Thornton Brownlee intends to explore African-American folklore with her eighth-grade Reading and Language Arts class. Barbara McDowell Dowdall, will have her high school juniors read memoir and fiction, by Bebe Moore Campbell and Lorene Cary, to explore the theme of "Philly girls growing up."

Joyce Aronsky's fifth-grade students will take part in an interdisciplinary project, "The Story of Us," in which they do the work of historians, gathering information about their families and community. Laura Jacklin has developed a unit for a twelfth-grade literature course, in which the students will use Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness" to explore a diverse group of literary experiences. William S. Lewis plans to use a single work, August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*, to illuminate the history and culture of African-Americans during the 1930s. Alison McCartney will also focus on a

single work, Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as a way of exploring contemporary political debates. Christine Lokey will guide her elementary school students in exploring the connections between literature and social activism.

--*Peter Conn, Professor of English*