

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

We, Too, Sing America

W.E.B. Du Bois, from “Criteria of Negro Art”

First published in *The Crisis*, October 1926.

CONTEXT: W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963) was an influential writer, professor, civil rights activist, and one of the founders of the NAACP. He argued for equal rights and viewed artworks as inherently political.

All art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda.

What is art for?

Source: *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), 60–68.

Langston Hughes, from “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”

First published in *The Nation*, 1926.

CONTEXT: Langston Hughes (1902–1967) was a prolific poet of the Harlem Renaissance. In this famous essay, Hughes is reacting to a fellow African American poet’s desire to be “a poet—not a Negro poet.” By contrast, Hughes celebrates the concerns and achievements of his community, such as jazz, blues, and spirituals, seeing in them a rich trove of inspiration for artworks.

Certainly there is, for the American Negro artist ... a great field of unused material ready for his art. Without going outside his race, ... there is sufficient matter to furnish a black artist with a lifetime of creative work. And when he chooses to touch on the relations between Negroes and whites in this country, with their innumerable overtones and undertones, surely, and especially for literature and the drama, there is an inexhaustible supply of themes at hand. To these the Negro artist can give his racial individuality, his heritage of rhythm and warmth, and his incongruous humor that so often, as in the Blues, becomes ironic laughter mixed with tears.

What is art for?

Source: *Within the Circle*, 55–59.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

We, Too, Sing America (CONTINUED)

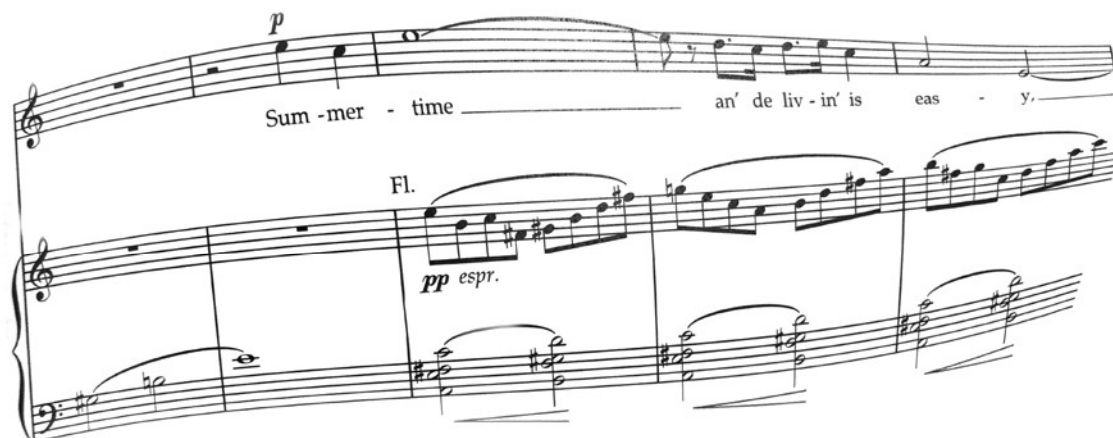
SET 1: “Summertime,” from *Porgy and Bess*

CONTEXT: This famous song opens Gershwin’s opera. Clara, a young mother, sings it as a lullaby to her baby.

Clara sits with her baby in her arms, rocking it back and forth.

CLARA: Summertime and the livin’ is easy,
Fish are jumpin’, and the cotton is high.
Oh your daddy’s rich, and your ma is good lookin’,
So hush, little baby, don’t you cry.

One of these mornings you’re goin’ to rise up singin’,
Then you’ll spread your wings and you’ll take the sky.
But till that mornin’, there’s a-nothin’ can harm you
With Daddy and Mammy standin’ by.



CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

We, Too, Sing America (CONTINUED)

SET 1: “On Summer,” by George Moses Horton

CONTEXT: George Moses Horton (1798–1883) was a slave on a tobacco plantation in North Carolina. He taught himself to read, and with the assistance of a local novelist, began publishing poetry. He was the first African American to publish a book in the South. Despite his growing fame, he was not permitted to buy his own freedom, although he eventually succeeded in purchasing his “time” from his owner so that he could devote himself to poetry full-time. After the Civil War, Horton spent his last 17 years as a free man in Philadelphia. His poetry explores love, faith, and the beauty of nature (especially that of rural North Carolina), and it also serves as a protest against slavery.

On Summer

Esteville* fire begins to burn;
 The auburn fields of harvest rise;
 The torrid flames again return,
 And thunders roll along the skies.

Perspiring Cancer** lifts his head,
 And roars terrific from on high;
 Whose voice the timid creatures dread;
 From which they strive with awe to fly.

The night-hawk ventures from his cell,
 And starts his note in evening air;
 He feels the heat his bosom swell,
 Which drives away the gloom of fear.

Thou noisy insect, start thy drum;
 Rise lamp-like bugs to light the train;
 And bid sweet Philomela come,
 And sound in front the nightly strain.

The bee begins her ceaseless hum,
 And doth with sweet exertions rise;
 And with delight she stores her comb,
 And well her rising stock supplies.

Let sportive children well beware,
 While sprightly frisking o’er the green;
 And carefully avoid the snare,
 Which lurks beneath the smiling scene.

The mistress bird assumes her nest,
 And broods in silence on the tree,
 Her note to cease, her wings at rest,
 She patient waits her young to see.

The farmer hastens from the heat;
 The weary plough-horse droops his head;
 The cattle all at noon retreat,
 And ruminates beneath the shade.

The burdened ox with dauntless rage,
 Flies heedless to the liquid flood,
 From which he quaffs, devoid of gauge,
 Regardless of his driver’s rod.

Pomacious orchards now expand
 Their laden branches o’er the lea;
 And with their bounty fill the land,
 While plenty smiles on every tree.

On fertile borders, near the stream,
 Now gaze with pleasure and delight;
 See loaded vines with melons teem—
 ‘Tis paradise to human sight.

With rapture view the smiling fields,
 Adorn the mountain and the plain,
 Each, on the eve of Autumn, yields
 A large supply of golden grain.

* Esteville is a town in North Carolina.

** Here, “Cancer” refers to the astrological sign of Cancer (the crab), which appears in the sky at the height of summer.

Source: *African-American Poetry of the Nineteenth Century: An Anthology*, ed. Joan R. Sherman (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 23–24.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

We, Too, Sing America (CONTINUED)

SET 2: “My Man’s Gone Now,” from *Porgy and Bess*

CONTEXT: Serena, the widow of the man murdered by Crown, sings this lament after her husband’s untimely death.

SERENA: My man’s gone now,
Ain’t no use a-listenin’
For his tired foot-steps
Climbin’ up the stairs. Ah!

Old Man Sorrow’s
Come to keep me company,
Whispering beside me
When I say my prayers. Ah!

Ain’t that I mind workin’
Work and me is travelers
Journeying together
To the Promised Land.

But Old Man Sorrow’s
Marchin’ all de way with me
Tellin’ me I’m old now
Since I lose my man.

ALL: Since she lose her man.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

We, Too, Sing America (CONTINUED)

SET 2: “The Weary Blues,” by Langston Hughes

CONTEXT: Langston Hughes (1902–1967) was a prolific poet of the Harlem Renaissance. His works, which also include novels, essays, and plays, portray the everyday troubles and joys of African Americans, often using the rhythms and sounds of jazz, as well as the artistic temperament of the blues.

The Weary Blues

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,
 Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,
 I heard a Negro play.
 Down on Lenox Avenue the other night
 By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light
 He did a lazy sway. . . .
 He did a lazy sway. . . .
 To the tune o’ those Weary Blues.
 With his ebony hands on each ivory key
 He made that poor piano moan with melody.
 O Blues!
 Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool
 He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.
 Sweet Blues!
 Coming from a black man’s soul.
 O Blues!
 In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone
 I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan—
 “Ain’t got nobody in all this world,
 Ain’t got nobody but ma self.
 I’s gwine to quit ma frownin’
 And put ma troubles on the shelf.”
 Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.
 He played a few chords then he sang some more—
 “I got the Weary Blues
 And I can’t be satisfied.
 Got the Weary Blues
 And can’t be satisfied—
 I ain’t happy no mo’
 And I wish that I had died.”
 And far into the night he crooned that tune.
 The stars went out and so did the moon.
 The singer stopped playing and went to bed
 While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.
 He slept like a rock or a man that’s dead.

Source: *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad, assoc. ed. David Roessel (New York: Vintage, 1994), 50.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

We, Too, Sing America (CONTINUED)

SET 3: “It Take a Long Pull to Get There,” from *Porgy and Bess*

CONTEXT: Clara’s husband, the fisherman Jake, sings this song with his fellow fishermen as they go about their work.

Jake and fishermen in center repair netting, swaying to the rhythm of the song as if actually rowing.

JAKE: Oh, I’m a-goin’ out to the Blackfish banks
no matter what the weather say,
An’ when I say I’m goin’ I means goin’,
an’ I’m leavin’ at the break o’ day.

JAKE, MEN: It take a long pull to get there, huh!
It take a long pull to get there, huh!
It take a long pull to get there,
But I’ll anchor in the Promised Land,
In the Promised Land.



CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

We, Too, Sing America (CONTINUED)

SET 3: *Aspects of Negro Life: An Idyll of the Deep South*, by Aaron Douglas

CONTEXT: Aaron Douglas (1899–1979) was a painter, muralist, and graphic artist, and one of the foremost visual artists of the Harlem Renaissance. His works incorporate African subjects and styles and were admired by prominent thinkers like W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke, who believed that artists should promote their heritage in their artworks. Douglas’s works include several large-scale murals that portray aspects of African American life. In this series, created for the New York Public Library’s Harlem branch (now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture), Douglas incorporated political and social commentary in his designs.



Aaron Douglas. *Aspects of Negro Life: An Idyll of the Deep South*. Oil on canvas, 1934. The New York Public Library, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Art and Artifacts Division.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

We, Too, Sing America (CONTINUED)

SET 4: “Oh Lawd, I’m On My Way,” from *Porgy and Bess*

CONTEXT: The opera ends with Porgy’s resolution to follow Bess to New York.

PORGY, ALL: Oh, Lawd, I’m on my way.

I’m on my way to a Heav’nly Lan’,

I’ll ride that long, long road,

If you are there to guide my hand.

Oh Lawd, I’m on my way.

I’m on my way to a Heavenly Land.

Oh Lawd, it’s a long, long way,

but you’ll be there to take my hand.

Moderato ben ritmato (quasi spiritual)
 PORGY (with religious fervor)

Po. Oh ___ Lawd, I’m on my way.

568 Fl./Cl. with PORGY (to m. 576)
 Brass/Pno. Vln.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

We, Too, Sing America (CONTINUED)

SET 4: “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” by James Weldon Johnson

CONTEXT: James Weldon Johnson (1871–1938) grew up in Jacksonville, Florida, then a relatively racially tolerant community. In addition to writing poetry and novels throughout his life, he was also the first black lawyer admitted to the Florida Bar, served as the principal of a segregated school, wrote songs on Tin Pan Alley in New York, held consular posts in Latin and South America, and served as the head of the NAACP, leading civil rights campaigns and pioneering the organization’s efforts to promote black achievement. “Lift Every Voice and Sing” was written in 1900 to celebrate Abraham Lincoln’s birthday; it was later adopted by the NAACP as the “Black National Anthem,” with a melody written by Johnson’s brother, J. Rosamond Johnson.

Lift Every Voice and Sing

Lift every voice and sing
Till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise
High as the listening skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us.
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won.

Stony the road we trod,
Bitter the chastening rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
Yet with a steady beat,
Have not our weary feet

Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?
We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,
Out from the gloomy past,
Till now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

God of our weary years,
God of our silent tears,
Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way;
Thou who hast by Thy might
Led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee,
Lest, our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee;
Shadowed beneath Thy hand,
May we forever stand,
True to our God,
True to our native land.

Source: James Weldon Johnson, *Complete Poems*, ed. Sondra Kathryn Wilson (New York: Penguin, 2000), 109–110.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

We, Too, Sing America (CONTINUED)

Quilt Panel Organizer

My chosen theme, character, or observation: _____

My caption: _____

Imagery or ideas I want to include in my panel: _____

My panel will be (circle any that apply):

VISUAL LITERARY LITERAL ABSTRACT POLITICAL NATURALISTIC RHYMING IN A FORMAL STYLE

NOTES: _____

SKETCH:

