



# The South, the North, and the Great Migration: Blues and Literature

## STANDARDS

Addresses the following  
National Curriculum Standards  
for the **English Language Arts**

Primary: 1, 2, 9

Secondary: 8, 11

## Overview

A preponderance of African American cultural expressions in the first half of the 20th century focus on the oppressive conditions of the Jim Crow South, attempts to escape this climate by migrating North, and myth versus reality of life in the North. These themes cut across African American literature, music, and art. This lesson specifically explores how the lives and work of blues musicians and African Americans intersected and complemented one another.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By completing this lesson, the student will be able to:

- Learn the correlation between blues music and African American literature.
- Understand what life was like for African Americans in the Jim Crow South and the North in the first half of the 20th century.
- Gain an appreciation of the literature produced by African Americans throughout the 20th century.

## RESOURCES NEEDED

### Music

- **The Blues Teacher's Guide** CD  
Big Bill Broonzy, "When Will I Get to Be Called a Man"

### Readings

- Langston Hughes' "The South," "One Way Ticket," "Harlem: A Dream Deferred"

### Web Sites

- <http://www.nytimes.com/books/01/04/22/specials/hughes.html>
- <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5333/>
- <http://www.pbs.org/theblues>
- [http://www.bluesrock.webz.cz/l\\_m/Broonzy/jmeno06.html](http://www.bluesrock.webz.cz/l_m/Broonzy/jmeno06.html)
- <http://www.jimcrowhistory.org/scripts/jimcrow/gallery.cgi>
- <http://www.fatherryan.org/harlemrenaissance/>

**FILM TIE-INS**

The Great Migration

*Godfathers and Sons* (segment in which Marshall Chess and Chuck D discuss the Great Migration to Chicago)

**VIEWING GUIDE**

Visit [www.pbs.org/theblues](http://www.pbs.org/theblues) for index of film segment start times and lengths.

**Introductory Exercise**

The Great Migration and its causes and effects represent a major theme in early-20th-century African American history and literature. This exercise introduces students to this theme through the work of famous Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes. Start by asking students to read Hughes' poem "The South." Discuss:

- *What does the poem reveal about life in the South?*
- *What does the poem suggest is the solution to life in the South?*
- *What does the poem reveal about life in the North?*

Follow up this poem by listening to Hughes recite his poem "One Way Ticket." After listening, discuss what this poem suggests about conditions in the South. What solution is offered for the problems that blacks must deal with in the South? What places does Hughes suggest blacks will go? [Hughes' recitation of the poem can be heard at <http://www.nytimes.com/books/01/04/22/specials/hughes.html>.]

At this point, ask students what they think blacks found once they went away from the South. In what ways do they suspect life was better? In what ways was life the same? In what ways was life worse? Introduce one last Hughes poem: "Harlem: A Dream Deferred." After reading, ask students what this poem suggests about the life blacks found in the North, and, in this case specifically, in Harlem.

Provide students with some basic information on the Great Migration. This lecture could be preceded by showing a clip from *Godfathers and Sons* in which the Great Migration to Chicago is discussed and historic footage is shown. Points to include:

- *The Great Migration occurred primarily between the two World Wars. However, between 1910 and 1970, approximately six and a half million African Americans migrated out of the South. While in 1910, 80 percent of blacks lived in the South, less than half lived there by 1970, with only 25 percent in the rural South.*
- *Chicago, New York City, and Philadelphia, as well as other Northern cities, were the initial destinations of most migrants. The West later became a major destination.*
- *Life in the South was difficult for African Americans for a variety of reasons, including problems associated with sharecropping and the accompanying natural disasters of the late 1910s and '20s; Jim Crow legislation, which resulted in segregated public facilities, transportation, and schools; and violence, symbolized by the Ku Klux Klan and most graphically displayed in public lynchings.*
- *The North was viewed as the promised land, an idea perpetuated by the need for factory workers and the fact that pay in such factories was typically as much as three times more than what blacks made working the land in the South.*
- *While segregation was not legalized in the North, as it was in the South, blacks experienced prejudice and racism in the North, commonly known as "de facto segregation."*
- *Life in the North presented its own challenges for blacks, including poor living conditions and harsh, often dangerous work environments.*

[See **Film Tie-Ins** for detailed film information.]

Conclude this exercise by discussing how the lecture information deepens student understanding of the poems. Do the poems accurately depict what life was like in the South for African Americans? Do they capture both the dream and the reality of life in the North?

## Focus Exercise

The blues represent a concrete study of the Great Migration, both in terms of blues musicians who made the move from South to North and with respect to the music these musicians created. To suggest the connection between the blues and the Great Migration, play the blues song “Times Is Gettin Harder” by Lucious Curtis. Discuss what the song suggests about blues musicians participating in the Great Migration. Next, have students read biographical information on Big Bill Broonzy, a famous bluesman who migrated from Mississippi to Chicago. As students read about Broonzy, ask them to note what his life was like in the South, what motivated them to him to leave the South, and what his life was like in the North. [Curtis’ song can be heard at <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5333/>. A biography on Big Bill Broonzy can be found at <http://www.pbs.org/theblues/>.]

Broonzy’s lyrics help illustrate what the North held for black migrants. Start by listening to his song “When Will I Get to Be Called a Man.” After listening, discuss what the lyrics of this song indicate about Broonzy’s experiences in the North versus the South. Follow this up by having students read the lyrics to a variety of Broonzy’s songs. As students read, ask them to record lines that offer information about Southern and Northern life, as well as expectations of what life in the North would hold. [A good sampling of Broonzy’s lyrics can be found at [http://www.bluesrock.webz.cz/l\\_m/Broonzy/jmeno06.html](http://www.bluesrock.webz.cz/l_m/Broonzy/jmeno06.html).]

Conclude this exercise by having students write an in-class paper in which they suggest how the life and lyrics of Big Bill Broonzy can serve as an illustration of the Great Migration and its root causes and results.

### RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

A variety of literature can be read to build on the themes of the Great Migration, the Jim Crow South, and the promised land of the North. To focus on life in the Jim Crow South, assign students to read two short stories, Arna Bontemps’ “A Summer Tragedy” and Richard Wright’s “The Man Who Was Almost a Man,” and two Sterling Brown poems, “He Was a Man” and “Master and Man.” As students read, they should record phrases and lines that suggest what life was like for African Americans in the Jim Crow South. Following the readings, students should create a visual titled “Understanding the Jim Crow South,” on which they transcribe their quotations as well as related pictures. Blues lyrics could also be added to the visuals. The lyrics of Delta bluesmen such as Robert Johnson, Skip James, Son House, and Blind Willie Johnson can be included. [The Bontemps story is available online in a variety of locations, while the last three selections are in the Norton Anthology of American Literature.]

Other literature should be considered for a focus on the Great Migration and ensuing life in the North. Two excellent works would be Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. As students read, have them record what the books have to say about migration as well as Northern life for blacks. Following the reading, students can create a project similar to the one described in the paragraph above. The poetry of such Harlem Renaissance poets as Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen and the blues lyrics of artists like Muddy Waters, J.B. Lenoir, Leadbelly, and Koko Taylor can be incorporated into the visual project as well.

#### Good starting points for research include:

- The Jim Crow Image Gallery at <http://www.jimcrowhistory.org/scripts/jimcrow/gallery.cgi>
- Harlem Renaissance at <http://www.fatherryan.org/harlemrenaissance/>

**SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT**

1. *The Chicago Defender* fueled the Great Migration by publishing articles encouraging blacks to leave the South, as well as letters from individuals who had, telling of how life in the North compared. Assign students to write an editorial for the *Chicago Defender* that argues the value of migrating. The letter should be dated between 1914 and 1945, follow editorial conventions (review these with the class, if necessary), and include references to factual information from the selected time period. To tie this assessment more closely to the blues, ask that the editorial be specifically targeted to blues musicians.

2. Jacob Lawrence's "Migration Series" includes a collection of paintings focused on the theme of the Great Migration. Ask students to select one of the paintings (many of which can be found online as well as in a variety of books) and to write a blues song that captures the painting's message. For ease of form, encourage students to use an AAB blues format, which is explained in the essay, "Understanding the 12-Bar Blues" in *The Blues Teacher's Guide*. Once these songs are written, have students show their painting and read their song to class.

**Extensions****ADDITIONAL EXERCISE**

Blueswomen in the 1920s and '30s represented a unique challenge to the predominant gender roles of their time. Spend some time studying these women with the class, emphasizing how their independence, strength, outspokenness, and relationships (as seen in their lives and music) contrasted with Victorian notions of gender. Memphis Minnie, Ma Rainey, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Bessie Smith, Ida Cox, Alberta Hunter, Mamie Smith, and Victoria Spivey would be good individuals to include. An early scene in *Warming by the Devil's Fire* highlights the music of many of these women. After studying blueswomen, discuss how they compare to black women in literature at the time. Specifically, have students consider either Janie in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* or Ma Rainey in August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. How are the women in these works of literature similar to and different from blueswomen of the same time period?

**RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS**

The concept of blues music reflecting the changes brought about by the Great Migration can be considered by comparing rural to urban blues. Assign students to research both types of blues in order to create a chart of similarities and differences between the two genres. Similarities should include lyrics focused on hardship, use of the guitar, and sliding notes. Differences should include acoustic versus electric guitar; quiet versus loud qualities; single singer versus band; irregular rhythm versus strong, steady beat; informal/unfinished versus formal/arranged; and amateur versus professional-sounding. Once students have listened to a variety of selections (many are available online) and made their charts, give them the opportunity to explain their research. These oral presentations should focus on the question, "How did the Great Migration impact blues music?"

Rural blues musicians include:

*Leadbelly*  
*Big Bill Broonzy*  
*Blind Lemon Jefferson*  
*Skip James*  
*Mississippi John Hurt*  
*John Lee Hooker*  
*Tommy Johnson*

Urban blues musicians include:

*B.B. King*  
*Louis Jordan*  
*Ray Charles*  
*Jimmy Witherspoon*  
*Big Joe Turner*

**SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCES**

## Readings

- Baker, Houston A. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.
- Cayton, Horace R. and Drake St. Clair. *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1945.
- Gottlieb, Peter. *Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks' Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916–1930*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1997.
- Green, Stephen. *Going to Chicago: A Year on the Chicago Blues Scene*. San Francisco: Woodford, 1990.
- Grossman, James. *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- Litwack, Leon. *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow*. New York: Knopf, 1998.
- Palmer, Robert. *Deep Blues*. New York: Viking Press, 1981.

## Web Sites

- *The History of Jim Crow*. Public Broadcasting Station.  
<http://www.jimcrowhistory.org/home.htm>.
- “Jim Crow” Laws. National Park Service.  
[http://www.nps.gov/malu/documents/jim\\_crow\\_laws.htm](http://www.nps.gov/malu/documents/jim_crow_laws.htm).
- *Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia*. Ferris State University.  
<http://www.ferris.edu/news/jimcrow/menu.htm>.