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Lesson 2

FOCUS: Arts and Culture

A great writer's work often reflects the arts and culture of the era. The Jazz Age of the 1920s and the Harlem Renaissance marked the artistic, political, and cultural birth of the "New Negro" in literature and art. This renaissance relied upon its deep roots, including the oral traditions of storytelling and folktales. These traditions corresponded to a variety of musical styles: Negro spirituals, blues, and jazz. In Hurston's prose, the old and new converged into the dynamic, vibrant language of Janie, Pheoby, and the Eatonville townspeople.

Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read CD, Track 2 (13 minutes). After listening to the first two tracks of the CD, your students should be able to identify several revolutionary aspects of the novel. How is this evident as early as Chapter 1? What aspects of the novel derive from a tradition of oral storytelling?

Go to NEA's Jazz in the Schools Website at www.neajazzintheschools.org. Go to Lesson 2 and click on "Listen." Play clips of music from the 1930s. Ask students to take notes as they listen and to identify patterns in the music. Can your students articulate the similarities between the rhythms of the novel and the jazz styles of the 1930s?

Writing Exercise

Read the Reader's Guide essays "Harlem Renaissance: The Era" (pp. 6-7), "Harlem Renaissance: Hurston's Circle" (p. 9), and Handout 2 in the Teacher's Guide. Using these essays, write a few paragraphs about Hurston's relationship to her era.

Homework

Read Chapters 2-3 (pp. 8-25). Ask students to consider how Janie's point of view affects the way this story is told. Why does she begin her narrative with the pear tree? How is Janie's growth reflected in the way the story is told?