

Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute 1981 Volume I: The "City" in American Literature and Culture

American History Through Literature: Adolescent Identity in the 20th Century

Curriculum Unit 81.01.09 by Karen Wolff

Introduction

All too often in high school, the emotional development and the academic development of students are pitted against one another. The implicit emotional dimension of the many subjects is dealt with indirectly if at all. I feel that adolescents are most interested in themselves and their feelings as they adjust to the demands of puberty and their imminent integration into adult lives and responsibilities. These emotional issues can be integrated into a curriculum which helps students articulate their immediate concerns as they learn interesting and useful information.

Erik Erikson identifies adolescence as the stage in human development which involves the emotional crises of "Identity and Role Confusion." Physically, the body is going through profound changes. The process of genital maturation results in the ability to reproduce. Mentally, the brain develops the ability to deal with more complex problems in greater depth. Socially, the individuals prepare to leave home. New possibilities and new freedoms await them as do new responsibilities and new fears. Emotional crises arise from the pressure and confusion of the many changes. This confusion is expected and normal. Adolescents must experience the extremes of these emotional crises as they learn to understand both the positive and negative components of the crises. In this way they learn what they feel, how to deal with their feelings and how to make decisions based on this knowledge. Schools need to help in this process of self-realization.

The options for adolescents have broadened radically over the last eighty years. This process will probably continue. I think that it would be helpful for students to read how adolescents in other times and places experienced changes and dealt with the emotional demands of their adolescence. In small towns people had relatively few options. Roles were stable and rigid. While kids could dream, they had a whole community maintaining expectations. The move to the city and away from traditions opened a whole new range of life styles. There is a wealth of short stories and novels which deal with these themes. By giving students an historical understanding of the changing opportunities for adolescents in America, I hope to give them new insights into their emotional themes and show them that literature and history are rich resources for understanding their lives and struggles.

This unit has been organized for students with a high school reading level and the ability to express themselves in writing. It will be used in an inner city alternative high school, the High School in the

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Community. The class is interdisciplinary, English and American History, and it meets daily for three hours. The course lasts eight weeks. The unit will be used as half of the daily period. I have focused on the historical and psychological issues which students have raised with me most frequently over the last ten years. Although I do have a particular student body in mind as I organize this curriculum, I do feel that the approach and much of the content would be useful in many different settings.

Objectives

I have four objectives for this unit. The first is to give the skills to read literature as a resource for understanding historical change and gathering information about how other people experience emotional issues similar to those the students are experiencing.

The second objective is to give students a broad outline of the major changes in American life in the last eighty years. In addition to learning the significant dates and events, I want them to understand how these events changed people's views of life.

The third objective is to teach students to identify the emotional issues of adolescence. Reading about the lives and experiences of other people can often help students understand and deal with their own.

The fourth objective is to teach certain academic skills in reading and writing. These will be described in the strategies section of the unit.

Strategies

Literature is a resource for understanding historical change and its impact on people's lives. There are many ways to teach history. I have chosen to focus on reading literature because I want to put the lives of ordinary people at the center of the study. I want students to see that people make history and that their lives and life choices shape history. I want students to see that people have written stories about their real experiences and feelings. These stories are both interesting and informative. They make history come alive and destroy many stereotypes about people and their historical realities.

The stories I have chosen are about how people experience their lives and deal with their personal issues. These experiences will be discussed and analysed from an historical and psychological perspective. From this work I want students to learn that their life experiences can also be understood from different perspectives and that developing an understanding for these perspectives can help them make their life choices. There is real power in being able to describe and understand one's own experiences and feelings.

The stories I chose for this unit meet two requirements: 1) they give a feeling for an historical period; 2) they speak to a significant issue in adolescent behavior. They are organized in chronological order. Each week we will work with a different story, studying it in depth through understanding the historical and psychological contexts.

By historical context I mean the major historical developments which shaped the issues raised by the story being studied. The historical issues of the 20th century are vast. I feel that the most significant issues for my students are industrialization; urbanization and class differentiation; wars; the depression and the creation of the welfare state; the Civil Rights Movement; the changing roles for men and women; and the growth of a critical spirit. These changes grew with the development of American capitalism and have influenced the students' lives directly.

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I will give weekly lectures on these topics, Students will be expected to take notes. Reading assignments from an American history text book will also be required. I will use *These United States* by James P. Shenton, Judith R. Benson and Robert E. Jakoubek (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1978). There will be weekly quizzes on the historical information.

The *psychological context* is the identity development of adolescents. These too are vast. For urban youth, however, there seem to be certain overshadowing concerns: the cost of survival and upward mobility; family relations; sexual and racial identity; the control of intense feelings; and the drive for social change.

These issues are raised in the stories I have chosen. In class discussions students will be asked to talk about their reactions to the stories. From these discussions the class will identify specific psychological issues that are meaningful for them. They will then be given a writing assignment based on these ideas. These assignments will be structured to allow for creative writing. The following day the assignments will be read out loud in class. This sharing of thoughts and feelings will allow for further identification of the common issues for adolescents.

The *skill development* in this unit will involve reading, writing, and discussion. There will be vocabulary development based on words from the stories and the use of historical and psychological concepts in class discussions. Students will have weekly writing assignments from which they will learn to write summaries, essays, and creative stories. They will be expected to take notes on the lectures and pass quizzes on the information from the lectures and the textbook. Students will also be expected to read each story twice, once at the begining of the week and again at the end. This will encourage them to see that studying a piece of writing carefully from different perspectives adds to the understanding and appreciation of the story.

The week will look like this:

In class Homework

Monday: Vocabulary Work Write sentences for vocabulary

Introduce story Read story

Tuesday: Class discussion: Writing assignment:

Draw out students reaction Answer questions on content

Psychological context Write summary of story

Wednesday: Lecture: Creative writing on a theme

Historical Context

Thursday: Read creative writing in Reread Story

class

Friday: Quiz: Rewrite, correct and organize

Vocabulary week's unit to be handed in History on Monday for final review.

Short Essay

Course Content

1. Micheal Gold, Jews Without Money (New York, 1930), pp. 25-37.

Summary: This segment of Jews Without Money contains a series of descriptions of characters living on the Lower East Side of New York City at the turn of the century when the author was living there. He describes Kid

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Louis, the local tough who specializes in seducing young virgins; Harry, the Pimp, the assimilated Jew who takes care of "his girls" during the day and returns home to his respectable family at night. He is a Tammany Hall supporter. Suzie, the suffering prostitute; Ida, the "Madame"; Mr. Zunzer, the Jewish slum landlord. I included a section that describes the author's reaction to school as a threat to his ethnic identity. The street gang leader, Nigger, acts out these feelings for his friends.

Historical Content: Ghetto life and ghetto ways of survival are significant aspects of modern American life. Minorities, other migrants and immigrants have all lived through slight variations of these themes. The process of industrialization shaped the urbanization and the life styles at the turn of the century. As big business flourished, the large influx of immigrants and other cheap labor enabled immense capital accumulation and great class divisions. It is important to understand who came to the ghettos and why.

Psychological Context: Life in the ghetto has two distinct and contradictory functions. It was both protective and destructive. People were thrown together in poverty and desperation. They learned to survive together. However, survival often forced people to be brutal. Desperation often determined values. Most emotional issues and life choices were determined by the immediacy of survival. The only way out, assimilation into the mainstream, required rejection of both the good and the bad aspects. Assimilation was costly and often created hard, cold people.

2. Kate Chopin, Desirée's Baby

Summary: Armand Aubigny marries Desirée after falling in love with her when he sees her sleeping in the sun. They have a child, a son. As the child grows, it is clear that he has black blood. She had been an orphan, deserted as an infant. The husband accuses Desirée of being part black. She accepts her fate and disappears with the child. But the story ends with a twist—Armand too has a hidden past.

Historical Context: Racial issues are a crucial part of American life. Racial mixing has not been overtly accepted though it has occurred frequently. Though this is a particularly stark story, it does present a view of the more victorian views of women. Women were possessions of their husbands. Once rejected in her society, she had no place to go. Money could not compensate for social values and standing.

Psychological Context: Passion can drive people to take chances in life. Passion is often played off against the search for stability. Security appears more constant; passion more erratic. But often this is more apparent than real. Armand and Desirée are passionate people. They act with extreme feelings in love and in rejection. Racial identity is a confusing issue. Is it determined by internal values or external skin color? Marriage and intimacy involve learning about and accepting others. Race has a particular power in our culture but there are many other hidden secrets which become known only after people have been together for a while. What can be known between individuals? How does this knowledge develop? What is the cost of intimacy?

3. Toni Morrison, Sula

Summary: Shadrack, as a young man of 20, went off to war in France. During the war he saw much violence and death. He was shot in the foot, went into shock, and returned to his hometown in Ohio. He was a deeply changed person. At 22 he was a person who no longer knew who he was. Once home he established a new identity for himself. He instituted National Suicide Day and it became his reason for living. Every January 3, he would walk through town with a cowbell and a hangman's rope telling the people that this was their only chance to kill themselves or each other. There is a poignant description of his sense of powerlessness and fear of loss of control.

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Historical Context: Wars are not just dates but have real profound effects on individuals. Soldiers leave home and fight for their country. Then they return having survived their experiences essentially alone because the other people around them have had such different lives. This is a universal issue whether after the two World Wars, the Vietnam War and the Korean War. For that matter, when individuals have experiences that are different from those of the people around them, they often lose a sense of cohesion and belonging.

Psychological Context: Shadrack left for the war a young man and returned consumed by the fear of death and the loss of control. He dealt with this fear by making a place for these feelings in his scheme of life. Could he have done otherwise—run from these fears or deny them? National Suicide Day was a way for him to take control of his fear by focusing on one day a year.

4. Tillie Olsen, I Stand Here Ironing

Summary: In this short story the author reminisces about her life as she struggled to raise her eldest daughter, Emily. She describes the desperation after being deserted by her husband and being left with four small children. She went to work. Emily is left with relatives, then in a day care center, and then finally in a home for children. When her mother could afford to take her back, she is a stiff lonely child. The mother and Emily try to reestablish a relationship, but it is very difficult. Emily has trouble in school until she finds recognition in acting. There is a constant sense of helplessness as the mother remembers lost moments, unspoken feelings, and the growth of their separation.

Historical Context: Family Life has been seen as the backbone of American life. But often it is disturbed or altered by desertion death or changing economic circumstances. The depression of the 30's saw 1/3 of the American population unemployed. Women who had traditionally stayed home to raise children were forced to work. There was no social welfare or other forms of state assistance. The subsequent development of the welfare state was important. The welfare state maintains a reserve work force which can be called in for emergencies and helps keeps the cost of labor down. This is an important concept for the students to understand. Another issue touched upon is the new consciousness of the effects of the Atomic Bomb. The vision of Hiroshima and Nagasaki introduced the sense that maybe people should live for the moment since mankind could now totally destroy itself with but a few bombs. Survival from want was replaced with a sense of living for the moment.

Psychological Context: What is the relationship between a mother and a daughter but a series of experiences seen differently by the two participants? Each is captive of their circumstance, both physically and mentally. The mother can look back on her mistakes. Nevertheless the child has developed into a person in its own right. How and when does a child bloom? Who determines her success or failure? How much of her is determined by her age and social environment? As Olsen suggests, maybe all one can do for children is to give them a sense of themselves so that they can believe in themselves. Separation from parents and friends is a crucial aspect of adolescent growth.

5. Arthur Miller, Death of a Salesman

Summar y: In this segment of Miller's play Biff and Happy, Willie's two sons, are discussing and comparing their lives. Both are over thirty and feel lost and discontent, though for different reasons and in different ways. Biff is 34. He has wandered around the USA and has tried many different kinds of jobs but feels restless whenever he tries to settle down. He is now coming home to try and settle down. He doesn't know what he wants but he continues to dream the dreams of his adolescence. Happy has succeeded in business. He has a stable, respectable job, earns good money and has many fancy women. He still feels that something is

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missing. He always goes after what other people have but only feels successful in competition rather than because he knows what he wants. He feels lonely and empty. As they compare their choices they dream together of getting away and/or settling down. They live for the future.

Historical Context: The Second World War had established America as the most powerful country in the world. The expansive economic development due to the Cold War and the defense industry had brought a general sense of prosperity and purpose. We had saved the world from Fascism and Communism. Now we were ready to show the world a real solid middle class capitalistic society.

Psychological Context: Neither Biff nor Happy can find "happiness and meaning" in their lives. They represent the conflicts that arise when external need for survival no longer determines choices in life. How then does one decide what will make them happy or satisfied? Happy strives to have what his colleagues have but is not satisfied with his success. Biff rejects the accepted norms but feels detached. Both toy with the idea that marriage will force them to settle down—again an external motivation. But is that who they are and what they want? What is success—an internal or external goal?

6. Ernest Gaines, Bloodline

Summary: This is an incredibly powerful story about a mulatto man who returns to the plantation he was born on. Cooper is the son of a Black field worker and the white plantation owner, Frank Laurent, a mean dominating person. Both parents are dead and Cooper has returned to claim his birthright. His mother died a few years after she was forced off the plantation with her son and husband. Since the age of 14 Cooper had wandered the United States and experienced and witnessed incredible suffering. He now returned to the plantation as a conquering general (lacking an army). The confrontation is between Cooper and his uncle, who explains that he will abide by the rules of the racist society though he doesn't necessarily feel in agreement with them. The plot centers around the fact that the uncle wants to meet Cooper but Cooper refuses to enter the plantation house through the back door. The uncle sends larger and larger groups of Black plantation residents to get Cooper but each group gets severely beaten. Finally the uncle, old, sick and weak, goes to where Cooper is staying in the Black guarters. The story includes wonderful character descriptions.

Historical Context: Even after the slaves were freed, plantation life and customs survived. This story takes place in the 1930s in Louisiana. The values and the ways of behvior of the Old South are maintained since neither Blacks nor whites know any other way. Oppression is both violent and subtle. People developed many different ways to cope though these ways were different for Blacks and whites. The old ways were dying with the older people; the young were moving North. New ways were not being developed. They were still in the form of fantasies and theories. The North had different rules but it is just as brutal and racist. These dynamics were brillantly represented in this story.

Psychological Context: The question of birthright focuses the issues in this story. Is a mulatto half Black or half white? Is Cooper his father's son or his mother's son? Having been forced from his home and family, is he freed from his slave heritage or is he a slave to it? Can one fight back and change the rules of society? At what cost? Is there real choice in life?

7. Alice Walker, Everyday Use

Summaay: Dee has received a scholarship to a school in the big city. She returns home to her mother and sister, Maggie, for a visit. This story is told by her mother who is comparing Dee, the successful daughter to Maggie, the daughter who stayed home. Dee returns filled with the new African nationalistic ideas. She has

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changed her name, no longer eats her mother's cooking because it contains pork, and views her family's life and possessions as quaint. Finally the mother realizes that Maggie is more of her even though she is withdrawn and ugly. Maggie can still respect and feel her roots with self-respect and does not need to romanticize them.

Historical Context: Racial identity has been a constant issue in America. At various times, different movements have grown up. There have been two major tendencies: integration and separation. Though they share a common background and a common anger, they have different interpretations of the cause of American racism. Was the oppression caused by economics of the innate hatred between the races? It is important to understand these issues and know the names of the major movements and their proponants: Garvey and the Back to Africa Movement, The Black Muslims, Malcolm X and Pan-Africanism, W.E.B. DuBois, Dr. M.L. King, SNCC and the NAACP.

Psychological Contex t: The roots of most Black Americans are in the rural South. This heritage was often hard and brutal and ugly. It has also created beautiful and warm traditions. How does one deal with these issues as one works at developing self-respect and pride in an alien (white) culture? Does one romanticize the traditions? Can one move up in America without rejecting one's past? What is the cost of upward mobility, assimilation and success?

Sample Lesson Plans

Week 1

I. Vocabulary Worksheet: Fill in the appropriate words for the following definitions.
v. To laugh in a controlled way.
n. A house often divided into apartments which barely meets standards of safety and comfort.
n. The desire to fight.
v. To walk with a swing (often to boast or brag).
adj. Unrestrained joy.
adj. Being like a beast.
v. To thrive, grow, develop.
adj. With good will, the desire to be helpful.
n. One who believes in traditional views.
n. Slippery substance.
n. Ditches.

adj. Of strong feelings.
adj. Uncontrollable fear or emotion.
v. Squirming.
n. A point of honor.
n. Small petitioned spaces.
n. A plan for doing something.
n. A shop or factory where workers work long hours at low wages.
n. A slang word for Jews.

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adj. Having been affected by Tuberculosis.			d by Tuberculosis.		
	n. A break or tearing apart.				
	n. A series of	_ n. A series of raids and executions in Tzarist Russia against the Jews.			
	n. A private c	n. A private club for members of the Democratic Party in New York City around 1900. They			
	ruled the city.				
	tubercular	pugnacity	slime		
	snicker	scheme	Tammany Hall		
	rupture	kike	conservative		
	tenement	sweatshop	brutal		
	scruples	trenches	flourish		
	cubicles	writhing	philanthropic		
	Russian Pogrom	swagger	hysterical		
	passionate	exuberant			

Choose one assignment:

a. Write a sentence for each word. Use the word correctly and in such a way that its meaning is

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clear.

- b. Write a story using 20 of these words correctly.
- II. Writing Assignment: Writing a summary: Answer the following questions.

Use full sentences.

- 1. Who is Nigger?
- 2. Who is susie?
- 3. Describe Kid Louie.
- 4. What information do you have about Harry, the Pimp?
- 5. Who is telling the story?
- 6. Describe Ida.
- 7. Who is Mr. Zunzer?
- 8. Why did Mr. Zunzer keep the whores in his house?
- 9. What did the author think of school as a child?
- 10. What role did gangs play for the young Jews in the ghettos?

Now write a brief *summary* of the story.

III. Writing Assignment: Writing on a Theme.

These are sample questions. The real ones should be developed from the class discussion about the story. A minimum of one page of writing.

- a. We all live in neighborhoods. Describe your neighborhood. Include the major characters that influenced you as you grew up in that neighborhood.
- b. One of the major themes in this excerpt is the cost of survival in a brutal environment. Write a story about someone who was forced to act in someway because of serious need of money.
- c. Gangs give their members a sense of belonging and a feeling of security. Write a diary of a member of a gang.
- d. What ways could a ghetto resident leave the ghetto? Write the story of a person who leaves the ghetto for a "better" neighborhood. Remember there are usually both benefits and costs.
- e. After viewing a series of slides of ghetto life, pick one slide and write a story about it.

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Teacher's Bibliography

Baxandall, Lee, ed., Radical Perspectives in the Arts. Middlesex, England: Pelican Books, 1972.

Collection of essays from a Marxist perspective. They discuss art and literature from social and historical viewpoints as well as literary ones.

Berger, John, Ways of Seeing. London: Penguin Books, 19771.

Wonderful photoessays on the relationship between seeing and words.

Erikson, Erik, Childhood and Society. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1963.

Presentation of Erikson's theory of the eight stages of human development and how culture and life experiences influence development.

Erikson, Erik, Identity: Youth and Crisis . New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1968.

Erikson analyses his view of the growth of identity and role differentiation. Thoughtful way to present and discuss psychological issues of adolescents.

Vygotsky, Lev S., Thought and Language . Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1962.

Interesting presentation of two different views of human development: Vygotsky's interaction approach and Piaget's stages approach.

Williams, Raymond, Marxism and Literature. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Williams analyses different aspects of modern culture from and extremely interesting Marxist perspective. Many new ideas to work with.

Zinn, Howard, A People's History of the United States. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1980.

American History seen from the perspective of the minorities and the oppressed. An interesting approach to seeing history from "the other side."

Student's Bibliography

Anderson, Sherwood, Short Stories. New York: Hill and Wang, 1962.

Short stories which deal with individuals in small towns in America and their dreams. Great stuff for the kids.

Anderson, Sherwood, Winnesberg, Ohio . New York: The Viking Press, 1919.

Stories about life in a small American town of the early 20th century. The author is very sensitive to how people feel and how they tend to show their feelings.

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Angelou, Maya, I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings . New York: Bantam

Books, 1971.

The first of a three part autobiography. In this segment she talks about her childhood and adolescence in the rural south and then in California.

Arnow, Harriet, The Dollmaker. New York: Avon Books, 1972.

The story of a woman and her family when they are forced to move from the southern mountains to Chicago during the Second World War. Wonderful feeling for life in the housing projects and the struggle for survival among these southern whites.

Baldwin, James, Go Tell It On The Mountain . New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1953.

A powerful story of the dynamics and feelings in a black family that moves to New York from the rural south. The focus is the development of Black consciousness in an adolescent boys as his family holds on to the traditional religion of southern Blacks.

Childress, Alice, A Short Walk. New York: Avon Book, 1979.

An interesting story of a Black woman's life in a rural southern town and then in New York. She gives a vivd description of life in Harlem in the forties, fifties and sixties.

Chopin, Kate, The Awakening and Other Stories. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1970.

Short, emotionally intense stories about life on the plantations of southern Louisiana around the turn of the century. She is particularly interested in racial and sexual issues.

Fitzgerald F. Scott, The Short Stories of Fitzgerald. New York: Charles Scribner, Sons, 1957.

Assorted stories about life among the rich and those aspiring to become rich in the 20s and 30s. Difficult reading for some students though many are about adolescents.

Gaines, Ernest, *Bloodline*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1968.

Collection of Short stories which are powerful descriptions of the changing nature of rural southern life. He is particularly interested in the psychological impact of America's racial heritage.

Gold, Micheal, Jews Without Money . New York: Horace Livewright, 1930.

Wonderful description of life in the Jewish ghetto in the Lower East Side of New York at the turn of the century.

Hemminway, Ernest, The Short Stories of Ernest Hemmingway. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927.

Exciting and interesting stories but tend to be too sophisticated or on distant subjects for my students.

Hughes, Langston, The Langston Hughes Reader. New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1958.

A collection of poems, short stories, plays and excerpts from larger pieces which deal with many facits of American life. He is particularly interested in how Blacks and whites see each other.

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Hurston, Zora Neal, Rust Tracks on the Road. New York: Phillip Lippincott, 1971.

An autobiography of a young Black woman growing up in rural Mississippi in the 20s.

Malcolm X, The Autobiography of Malcolm X. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1966.

Life story of an important leader. Great description of his growth as a thinker.

Miller, Arthur, Collected Plays . New York: Viking Press, 1961.

Contains both "Death of a Salesman" and "A View from The Bridge." Both raise important issues for adolescents.

Morrison, Toni, Sula. New York: A Bantam Book, 1973.

Life in a small town in Ohio as seen through the eyes of a few generations of one family made up mostly of strong, powerful Black women.

Morrison, Toni, Song of Soloman . New York: Signet, 1977.

Story of a young man's journey from a northern city to rural southern town to find his roots. Wonderful descriptions and feeling for people.

Olsen, Tillie, Tell Me A Riddle . New York: A Delta Book, 1960.

Contains "I Stand Here Ironing." Collection of stories about women coming to terms with their lives.

Poole, Ernest, The Harbor. New York: MacMillan Company, 1925.

Young boy grows up on the docks of New York. Warm sensitive description of his learning to leave home and search for new adventure near and on the sea. Life in the 20s.

Thomas, Piri, Down These Mean Streets. New York: Knopf, 1977.

The story of a Puerto Rican Boy growing up in New York in the 60s.

Toomer, Jean, Cane. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1923.

A collection of stories, poems and vignettes about people, places and scenes from the south of the 20s.

Twian, Mark, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, New York: Bantam Books, 1965.

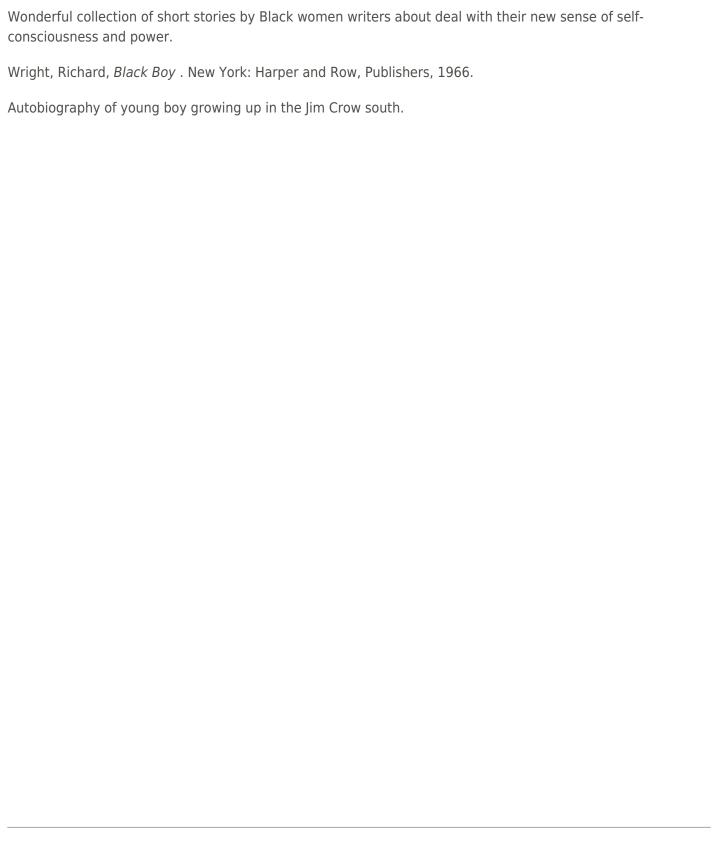
Huck leaves home with Jim, the runaway slave, and finds adventure along the Mississippi River.

Walker, Alice, In Love and Trouble. New York: Harcourt Brace Javenovich, 1967.

A collection of short stroies about Black women as they deal with changes in their lives as they become more conscious of themselves as women and Blacks.

Washington, Mary Helen, Midnight Birds . Garden City, New York:. Anchor Books, 1980.

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