



NBHE

Presents

# ***Black American Literature***





Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) was a former slave who became a leading abolitionist, writer, and orator. Born into slavery in Maryland, Douglass endured severe hardships, including physical abuse, deprivation, and forced separation from his family. Despite laws forbidding slaves from learning to read, Douglass secretly taught himself literacy, recognizing it as a pathway to freedom. His 1845 autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, is a vivid and powerful account of his experiences. The book describes the inhuman conditions of slavery, such as brutal beatings, psychological torment, and the dehumanization of both slaves and their masters. Douglass recounts key moments, including his resistance against cruel overseers and his eventual escape to freedom in 1838.

#### Questions:

1. What were some of the hardships Frederick Douglass faced during his time in slavery?
2. Why was literacy significant to Douglass's journey toward freedom?
3. How does Douglass critique religion in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*?
4. What event marked a turning point in Douglass's resistance to oppression, as described in the book?
5. How did *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* impact the abolitionist movement?



Maya Angelou (1928–2014) was an acclaimed African American poet, memoirist, and civil rights activist. Born Marguerite Annie Johnson in St. Louis, Missouri, she faced many challenges growing up, including racism, trauma, and poverty. Despite these struggles, she became a versatile and influential figure in literature and the arts.

Beyond her literary achievements, Angelou worked as a singer, actress, and civil rights activist. She collaborated with prominent leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Her poetry, including the iconic “Still I Rise,” is celebrated for its themes of empowerment, perseverance, and the beauty of the human spirit. Maya Angelou’s legacy continues to inspire people worldwide as a symbol of courage, creativity, and social justice.

#### Questions:

1. What challenges did Maya Angelou face during her early life?
2. What is the central theme of Angelou’s Still I Rise?
3. How did Maya Angelou contribute to the civil rights movement?
4. What are some themes present in Angelou’s poetry, such as “Still I Rise”?
5. Why is Maya Angelou considered an influential figure in literature and activism?



Alex Haley (1921–1992) was an African American writer best known for his groundbreaking works that explored the history and culture of Black Americans. Born in Ithaca, New York, Haley began his career in the U.S. Coast Guard, where he developed his writing skills by writing letter. After retiring from the military, he became a journalist and gained fame for conducting in-depth interviews with prominent figures, including Malcolm X. Haley co-authored *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), a powerful account of Malcolm X's life, transformation, and activism, which became a classic of modern literature. His most famous work, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976), traces his ancestry back to Kunta Kinte, an African man enslaved in America. *Roots* sparked a cultural phenomenon, inspiring a television miniseries and a renewed interest in genealogy and African American history. Through his work, Haley highlighted the enduring legacy of slavery and its impact on Black identity in America, earning him widespread recognition and numerous awards, including a Pulitzer Prize.

#### Questions:

1. How did Alex Haley's career in the U.S. Coast Guard contribute to his writing?
2. What is *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* about, and why is it significant?
3. What is the central theme of Alex Haley's *Roots*?
4. How did *Roots* influence the study of genealogy and African American history?
5. Why is Alex Haley considered an important figure in American literature and culture?



Lorraine Hansberry (1930–1965) was an African American playwright and activist, best known for her groundbreaking play ‘A Raisin in the Sun (1959).’ Born in Chicago, Hansberry grew up in a racially segregated neighborhood and witnessed the challenges of racism firsthand. Her family’s fight against discriminatory housing laws profoundly influenced her work. A Raisin in the Sun was the first play written by a Black woman to be performed on Broadway. It explores themes of racial discrimination, generational conflict, and the pursuit of the American Dream through the struggles of the Younger family. The play’s title comes from Langston Hughes’s poem “Harlem,” which questions what happens to a dream deferred.

Despite her early death from cancer at age 34, her work remains a powerful voice for social justice and continues to inspire artists and activists.

#### Questions:

1. What inspired Lorraine Hansberry to write A Raisin in the Sun?
2. Why is A Raisin in the Sun considered a landmark in American theater?
3. What are some key themes explored in A Raisin in the Sun?
4. How did Hansberry’s activism influence her writing and legacy?
5. Why does the title A Raisin in the Sun reference Langston Hughes’s poem “Harlem”?



Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906) was a pioneering African American poet, novelist, and playwright. Born in Dayton, Ohio, to formerly enslaved parents, he became one of the first Black writers to gain national and international fame. His work often explored themes of love, race, identity, and resilience, employing both standard English and African American dialect to convey the depth of the Black experience. Dunbar's poem about his wife Alice reflects his mastery of romantic and lyrical poetry. The poem is a heartfelt expression of love and admiration for Alice, describing her beauty and the emotional impact she has on the speaker. Through vivid imagery and rhythmic language, Dunbar captures the intensity of affection, showcasing his ability to evoke deep emotion with simplicity and elegance. Despite his short life, Dunbar's work, including poems like *Alice*, remains a significant part of African American literary heritage, celebrated for its artistry and cultural importance.

#### Questions:

1. Who was Paul Laurence Dunbar, and why is he significant in American literary history?
2. What themes are commonly found in Dunbar's works, and how do they reflect his experiences?
3. How does the poem *Alice* showcase Dunbar's skill in expressing emotion through poetry?
4. What literary techniques does Dunbar use in *Alice* to convey the speaker's feelings?
5. Why is Paul Laurence Dunbar considered a trailblazer for African American writers?



W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963) was an influential African American sociologist, historian, writer, and activist. Born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, he became the first African American to earn a doctorate from Harvard University. A co-founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909, Du Bois dedicated his life to fighting for racial equality and justice. Du Bois is best known for his book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), a collection of essays addressing the struggles and resilience of African Americans after emancipation. He introduced the concept of “double consciousness,” describing the inner conflict experienced by African Americans who live with both their own cultural identity and the oppressive perceptions of a racist society. Throughout his life, Du Bois was a vocal critic of systemic racism, lynching, and segregation. He also debated leaders like Booker T. Washington on the best path to Black progress, advocating for political action and higher education over Washington’s emphasis on vocational training. In his later years, Du Bois embraced socialism and moved to Ghana, where he died at the age of 95.

#### Questions:

1. What notable achievement did W.E.B. Du Bois accomplish at Harvard University?
2. What is the central idea of “double consciousness” as explained by Du Bois?
3. How did Du Bois’s work with the NAACP contribute to the civil rights movement?
4. What were the key differences between Du Bois’s views and those of Booker T. Washington?
5. Why is *The Souls of Black Folk* considered a significant work in African American literature?



Ann Spencer (1882-1975) was an influential African American poet, civil rights activist, and educator from Lynchburg, Virginia. She was the first African American woman to have her poetry published in the Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry. Known for her vivid imagery and themes of racial equality, she was connected to the Harlem Renaissance and maintained friendships with prominent figures like Langston Hughes and W.E.B. Du Bois. Her home, now a historical landmark, served as a meeting place for leaders and activists in the fight for civil rights. Today, it remains preserved as a museum, offering a glimpse into her life and contributions to literature and civil rights.

#### Questions:

1. What made Ann Spencer's poetry notable in American literature?
2. How was Ann Spencer connected to the Harlem Renaissance?
3. Which prominent civil rights leaders did Ann Spencer befriend?
4. What role did Ann Spencer's home play in her community?
5. Why is Ann Spencer's home preserved as a historical landmark today?





Phillis Wheatley (c. 1753–1784) was the first African American woman to publish a book of poetry. Born in West Africa, she was enslaved and brought to Boston, Massachusetts, at around age seven or eight. Purchased by the Wheatley family, she was named Phillis after the ship that brought her. The Wheatleys recognized her intellect, taught her to read and write, and encouraged her education in literature, Latin, and theology. Phillis quickly showed a talent for writing, and by her early teens, she was composing impressive poetry. Her 1773 book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, made her a celebrated literary figure in both America and England. Wheatley's work often explored themes of freedom, spirituality, and the injustices of slavery. She gained fame and recognition, but her life was marked by challenges, including limited freedom and financial hardship.

#### Questions:

1. \*What was Phillis Wheatley known for?\*
2. \*How did Phillis Wheatley gain her education?\*
3. \*What themes did Phillis Wheatley often explore in her poetry?\*
4. \*In which year was Phillis Wheatley's book of poetry published, and what was its title?\*
5. \*What challenges did Phillis Wheatley face later in her life despite her fame?\*