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**Level: Third Year**

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**Introduction to African Literature**

**Definition of African literature:**

African literature is the collection of literary works of the African continent. It consists of a body of work in different languages and various genres ranging from oral literature to literature written in colonial languages (French, Portuguese and English).

As George Joseph notes in his chapter on African literature in *Understanding Contemporary Africa*, whereas European views of literature often stressed a separation of art and content, African awareness is inclusive:

"Literature" can also imply an artistic use of words for the sake of art alone. ...traditionally, Africans do not radically separate art from teaching. Rather than write or sing for beauty in itself, African writers, taking their cue from oral literature, use beauty to help communicate important truths and information to society. Indeed, an object is considered beautiful because of the truths it reveals and the communities it helps to build.

There are three main periods which distinguish the African Lit:

**Pre-colonial Lit**

**Colonial Lit:** In the colonial period, Africans who were exposed to Western languages began to write in those tongues. In [1911](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1911_in_literature), [Joseph Ephraim Casely Hayford](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J._E._Casely_Hayford) (also known as Ekra-Agiman) of the [Gold Coast](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gold_Coast_%28Africa%29) (now Ghana) published what is probably the first African novel written in English, [*Ethiopia Unbound: Studies in Race Emancipation*](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ethiopia_Unbound&action=edit&redlink=1). Although the work moves between fiction and political advocacy, its publication and positive reviews in the Western press mark a watershed moment in African literature.

During this period, African [plays](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Play_%28theatre%29) began to emerge. [Herbert Isaac Ernest Dhlomo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Isaac_Ernest_Dhlomo) of [South Africa](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Africa) published the first English-language African play, [*The Girl Who Killed to Save: Nongqawuse the Liberator*](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=The_Girl_Who_Killed_to_Save:_Nongqawuse_the_Liberator&action=edit&redlink=1) in [1935](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1935_in_literature). In [1962](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1962_in_literature), [Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ng%C5%A9g%C4%A9_wa_Thiong%27o) of [Kenya](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kenya) wrote the first East African drama, [*The Black Hermit*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Black_Hermit), a cautionary tale about "[tribalism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tribalism)" ([racism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Racism) between African tribes).

Among the first pieces of African literature to receive significant worldwide critical acclaim was [*Things Fall Apart*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Things_Fall_Apart), by [Chinua Achebe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinua_Achebe). Published in 1958, late in the colonial era, *Things Fall Apart* analyzed the effect of colonialism on traditional African society. African literature in the late colonial period (between the end of [World War I](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_I) and independence) increasingly showed themes of [liberation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberty), independence, and (among Africans in French-controlled territories) [négritude](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/N%C3%A9gritude). One of the leaders of the négritude movement, the poet and eventual President of [Senegal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Senegal), [Léopold Sédar Senghor](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L%C3%A9opold_S%C3%A9dar_Senghor), published in [1948](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1948_in_literature) the first anthology of French-language poetry written by Africans, *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* (*Anthology of the New Black and Malagasy Poetry in the French Language*), featuring a preface by the French [existentialist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Existentialist) writer [Jean-Paul Sartre](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean-Paul_Sartre).

**Postcolonial Lit:**

With liberation and increased literacy since most African nations gained their independence in the 1950s and 1960s, African literature has grown dramatically in quantity and in recognition, with numerous African works appearing in Western academic curricula and on "best of" lists compiled at the end of the 19th century. African writers in this period wrote both in Western languages (notably [English](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_language), [French](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_language), and [Portuguese](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portuguese_language)) and in traditional African languages such as [Hausa](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hausa_language). Prominent postcolonial African writers: Ama Ata Aidoo’s [*No Sweetness Here: A Collection of Short Stories*](http://www.feministpress.org/books/ama-ata-aidoo/no-sweetness-here), and [*Changes: a Love Story*](http://www.feministpress.org/books/ama-ata-aidoo/changes), Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Fragments* (1971). Nuruddin Farah’s [*From a Crooked Rib*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/From_a_Crooked_Rib) *and* [*A Naked Needle*](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=A_Naked_Needle&action=edit&redlink=1)*.* Flora Nwapa’s [*Efuru*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Efuru) *and Never Again,* [Ousmane Sembène](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ousmane_Semb%C3%A8ne)’s [*God's Bits of Wood*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God%27s_Bits_of_Wood)*.* In [1986](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1986_in_literature), [Wole Soyinka](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wole_Soyinka) became the first post-independence African writer to win the [Nobel Prize](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nobel_Prize) in literature.

**Orature- Oral Literature in African Literature**

Oral literature is described as orature, traditional literature, folkloric literature and folklore. Oral literature can simply be defined as a "literature delivered by word of mouth". There is a claim that there are certain techniques that work in oral literatue but do not work in written literature. And according to African writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o orature or oral literature passes from ear to mouth, generation to generation, it consists of songs, poems, drama, proverbs, riddles and sayings and it is the most ancient and richest in the African heritage.

**Major movements in African Lit:**

**The Harlem Renaissance**

A tremendous explosion of creativity rocked the United States in the 1920s and 1930s, and it took the name of the New York City neighborhood of Harlem.The Harlem Renaissance, also known as the New Negro Movement, was a period of great cultural activity and innovation among African American artists and writers, one that saw new artists and landmark works appear in the fields of literature, dance, art, and music. The participants were all fiercely individualistic talents, and not all of them saw themselves as being part of a movement. But in time writers such as Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes; painters like Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden; and musicians and composers such as Duke Ellington and Bessie Smith became widely known as members of the Harlem Renaissance.

Much of the foundation of the Harlem Renaissance was laid by earlier generations of African American educators, students, and intellectuals. In the decades following the Civil War, many racial barriers to education were removed, and African Americans took advantage of the new educational opportunities in great numbers. At the same time, African Americans were moving in huge numbers from the South to northern industrial cities, like New York, where they could find work and escape some of the institutionalized discrimination and mistreatment caused by the South’s Jim Crow laws. Some of the most prominent works created during the Harlem Renaissance were in the field of literature. Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, and Langston Hughes produced novels, poetry, short stories and memoirs.

**Negritude**

Negritude was both a literary and ideological movement led by French-speaking black writers and intellectuals. The movement is marked by its rejection of European colonization and its role in the African diaspora, pride in “blackness” and traditional African values and culture, mixed with an undercurrent of Marxist ideals. Its founders (or *les trois pères*), [Aimé Césaire](http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/aim%C3%A9-c%C3%A9saire), Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Léon-Gontran Damas, met while studying in Paris in 1931 and began to publish the first journal devoted to Negritude, *L’Étudiant noir* (*The Black Student*), in 1934.

The term “Negritude” was coined by Césaire in his *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (1939) and it means, in his words, “The simple recognition of the fact that one is black, the acceptance of this fact and of our destiny as blacks, of our history and culture.” Even in its beginnings Negritude was truly an international movement—drawing inspiration from the flowering of African American culture brought about by the writers and thinkers of the [Harlem Renaissance](http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/brief-guide-harlem-renaissance) while asserting its place in the canon of French literature, glorifying the traditions of the African continent, and attracting participants in the colonized countries of the Caribbean, North Africa, and Latin America. The movement would later find a major critic in Nigerian poet and playwright Wole Soyinka, who believed that a deliberate and outspoken pride in their color placed black people continually on the defensive, saying notably, “Un tigre ne proclâme pas sa tigritude, il saute sur sa proie," or “A tiger doesn’t proclaim its tigerness; it jumps on its prey.”

**Pan-Africanism:**

Pan-Africanismis based onthe idea that peoples of African descent have common interests and should be unified. Historically, Pan-Africanism has often taken the shape of a political or cultural movement. There are many varieties of Pan-Africanism. In its narrowest political manifestation, Pan-Africanists envision a unified African nation where all people of the African diaspora can live. (African diaspora refers to the long-term historical process by which people of African descent have been scattered from their ancestral homelands to other parts of the world.) In more-general terms, Pan-Africanism is the sentiment that people of African descent have a great deal in common, a fact that deserves notice and even celebration.

Pan-Africanist ideas first began to circulate in the mid-19th century in the United States, led by Africans from the Western Hemisphere. The most important early Pan-Africanists were [Martin Delany](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/156331/Martin-R-Delany) and [Alexander Crummel](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/144691/Alexander-Crummell), both [African Americans](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/67474/African-Americans), and Edward Blyden, a West Indian. Those early voices for Pan-Africanism emphasized the commonalities between Africans and black people in the [United States](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/616563/United-States). Delany, who believed that black people could not prosper alongside whites, advocated the idea that African Americans should separate from the United States and establish their own nation. Crummel and Blyden, both contemporaries of Delany, thought that [Africa](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/7924/Africa) was the best place for that new nation.