

## THE QUEEN OF HAPPINESS FLORENCE MILLS

An Apollo School Day Live Performance  
Tuesday, February 11, 2020

### Teacher's Guide

Grades 9 - 12

#### Teacher's Guide Overview

*The Queen of Happiness: Florence Mills* Teacher's Guide is designed to support educators in inspiring their students to use their voice and address meaningful issues within their community. It is created as a framework for students to better understand the racial, gender, and socioeconomic divides that ushered in the Harlem Renaissance. With this framework, students can be stimulated to consider Florence Mills in the scheme of her historic and



biographical context and the ways in which her work as a performer shattered glass ceilings as well as inspired countless individuals. The activities and assignments teachers may decide upon for this lesson can serve as a building block to motivate students to develop their voice for a variety of settings and topics.

**Florence Mills** was one of the most influential, loved, and sensational performers of all time. Born as Florence Winfrey on January 25, 1896, Mills began dazzling audiences as a singer at the age of six. Although she began her career with her two older sisters, she was tenacious in her quest to entertain and continued to hone her craft, even after they concluded their vaudeville act. Taking performing by the reins, she joined the traveling black show *Tennessee Ten*. It was on the road that she met her husband Ulysses "Slow Kid" Thompson, an acrobatic dancer. In 1921, Mills

broadened her repertoire by becoming a headliner in the widely successful Broadway musical, *Shuffle Along*, which was written by Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle.

Mills' ability to delight her audiences with her performances earned her the nickname, the "Queen of Happiness."

Mills boldly continued breaking racial barriers by performing in venues in London, Paris, and other areas of Europe. As one of the only two African Americans of her time to be photographed in a full-page of *Vanity Fair*, the entertainer also set trends in the world of fashion. Her drive



and talent eventually landed her a headliner spot at the prestigious Palace Theatre in Midtown, New York City in 1924. Two years later, the hit show *Lew Leslie's Blackbirds* ushered in her international star status. Throughout her career, Mills centered her work on advocating for racial equality. Songs such as "I'm a Little Blackbird Looking for a Bluebird" demonstrated her quest to be considered an equal to her white counterparts. This song captured her activism toward the pursuit of happiness for all people regardless of race or gender.

The trendsetter was forced to cut her performances short after she became ill in 1927. Devastatingly, Mills passed away after undergoing an operation in New York City in November of the same year. Mills' sudden death at the age of 31 left her fans shattered. Thousands visited the funeral home to pay their respects and thousands of supporters lined the streets of Harlem, New York City for her funeral procession.

Although there are no recordings of her songs, Mills' soft birdlike voice stayed in the forefront of her supporters' minds. Her enchanting performances created a lasting impression on many and inspired several works in her honor.

Among the artists who were so deeply touched by Mills is **Duke Ellington**. In 1928, Ellington created the jazz composition "Black Beauty" which was inspired by Mills' life. "Black Beauty" became one of the signature songs for the composer, pianist, and jazz orchestra leader.

Friend of Duke Ellington, **Constant Lambert**, was deeply moved by Mills' performance in *Dover Street to Dixie* at the London Pavilion in 1923. After hearing of her death, Lambert wrote the tribute piano piece "Elegiac Blues." **Thomas Wright "Fats" Waller** also celebrated Mills' life in his song "Bye Bye Florence."

The singer's reach did not stop at the creation of numerous songs and compositions created in her honor. Mills even influenced the commission of **The Florence Mills Theatre**, which opened in December 1930 and stood in South Central Los Angeles until it was demolished in 2013.

Mills' legacy continues through the contributions her work made to **the Harlem Renaissance**, also known as the "New Negro Movement." This period, from roughly the 1920s to 1930s, marked a celebration of culture, music, art, and stage performance. With a great number of African Americans beginning to call Harlem home during the **Great Migration** from the south to the North, Harlem morphed into a place for an artistic explosion. African Americans who were seeking a new start and a life outside of the racism they faced in the south found solace in Harlem. Alongside Mills, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Louis Armstrong, Paul Robeson, Josephine Baker, Aaron Douglass, and many other artists created a new narrative for Harlem. The Harlem Renaissance ushered in new fashion and a distinction of esteem for African American artists.

### **Additional Resources**

[Harlem's Little Blackbird](#), by Renee Watson. The book is written for young readers and served as an inspiration for the show, *The Queen of Happiness: Florence Mills*.

[New York Times, "Shuffle Along' and the Lost History of Black Performance in America"](#)  
[National Portrait Gallery blog: "The Forgotten Fame of Florence Mills"](#)

"Black Beauty," Duke Ellington

[Listen on Spotify](#)

[Listen on Youtube](#)

"Bye Bye Florence," Fats Waller and Bert Howell

[Listen on Spotify](#)

[Listen on Youtube](#)

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Grades 9-12

### ***Essential Questions***

How is one's voice shaped by their background, ethnicity, beliefs, customs, and other factors specific to their historical and personal context?

How can an artist's craft and legacy transcend a time period?

In what ways can one's art provide awareness to issues of racism, gender biases, or other issues?

What is the value of community and galvanizing communal efforts?

How can social media serve as a medium through which one's voice can be expressed to enact change and create community?

### ***Objectives***

Students will develop a working and evolving understanding of their voice and the capacity their voice has to initiate change.

Students will research specified time periods (Harlem Renaissance) and societal occurrences that catalyze themes unique to those periods.

Students will identify a specific artist by the characteristics of their work and societal contributions.

Students will utilize secondary sources in order to draw connections between an artist and his or her impact.

Students will develop and streamline their voice in public arenas such as class discussions, digital platforms, and social media platforms.

### ***Common Core Learning Standards***

W-6 Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing; present the relationships between information and ideas efficiently; and interact and collaborate with others.

SL-1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on *grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues*, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

SL-2 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally), evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

L-3 Use knowledge of language and its conventions when writing, speaking, reading, or listening.

R-9 Integrate information from several texts on the same topic in order to write or speak about the subject knowledgeably.

SS Participate in activities that focus on a classroom, school, community, state, or national issue.

W-8 Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the usefulness of each source in answering the research question; and integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation.

### ***Words to Know***

**Vaudeville** was a popular form of entertainment in the 1920s that featured a mixture of burlesque comedy, song, and dance.

The **Harlem Renaissance** was an explosion of intellectual, social, and artistic expression spanning from the 1920s to 1930s.

The **Great Migration** was the movement of approximately 6 million African Americans from Southeastern areas of the United States to Northeastern areas.

### ***Activities***

#### *Social Media Posts*

Students may create social media posts (videos or written messages) that express their views on issues that impact them.

#### *Digital and Social Media Shares*

Students may research and share digital media videos (i.e. YouTube) and/or social media posts that reflect their views on social justice issues.

#### *Gallery Walk*

In small groups, students may engage in conversations or contemplation influenced by another's artistic expressions (poetry, autobiographies, biographies, short stories, etc.).

#### *Stations*

Stations may serve as the space in which students can present their findings, discuss related themes, and draw connections between societal trends, themes, big ideas, etc.

### *Fishbowl Discussion*

The teacher will serve as a facilitator for this discussion and students will form two groups – one group (“the fishbowl”) will discuss questions posed to them as other students outside of that group will take note of questions they may have, understandings, etc. Students may use articles, research, and other documents to support their ideas.

### *Research Project & Paper*

Students may research more about the systems, practices, and other elements that uphold or deconstruct impactful patterns in their community. Students may consider how their research informs or shapes their personal beliefs and voice those beliefs in a formal paper.

### ***Extended Learning (Homework)***

Research & Research Paper  
Social Media Posts and Shares

### ***Assessments***

Social Media Posts  
Research Projects  
Participation in Discussions  
Participation in Group Activities

### ***Differentiation Strategies***

Color-coded and Annotated Materials  
Extended Time  
Provided Research & Provided Research Paper Outline