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THE POWER OF THE PEN:

The Proletarian Literary Movement 1929-1941



OVERVIEW

Students will use primary resources to explore the proletarian literature movement during the Great Depression.

STUDENT GOALS

- Students will be able to describe the characteristics of a proletarian writer by analyzing an article by *New Masses* editor Michael Gold.
- Students will explore a *New Masses* cover to reveal the magazine's political views.
- Students will create their own stanzas to Langston Hughes's poem "Let America be America Again."

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

Grade 4:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.2

Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text; summarize the text.

Grades 6-8:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.6

Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose.

Grades 9-10:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D

Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

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**KEY TERMS/VOCABULARY**

- Composition
  - Gesture
  - Great Depression
  - Literature
  - Masses
  - Proletarian
  - Stanza
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**ACTIVISTS**

- Langston Hughes
- Michael Gold
- William Gropper



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**THE POWER OF THE PEN:** The Proletarian Literary Movement 1929-1941**INTRODUCING RESOURCE 1****Michael Gold, "Go Left, Young Writers!" *New Masses*, January 1929.**<https://msuweb.montclair.edu/~furr/nm/nm003.pdf>

The Great Depression of the 1930s brought economic crisis to the daily lives of New Yorkers. The capitalist system itself seemed to be collapsing, and the difficult conditions led many people to demand fundamental change. Some embraced radical political ideologies, including socialism and communism. These activists envisioned a society completely transformed, without poverty or class distinctions. A group of New York writers came to see novels and poems as a tool to advance their agenda on behalf of the "proletarian," or the working class. In 1926, the magazine *New Masses* became the leading outlet for this literature. Explore this excerpt from "Go Left, Young Writers!" by *New Masses* editor Michael Gold to discover his vision of the proletarian writer.

*"In the past eight months the New Masses has been slowly finding its path toward the goal of a proletarian literature in America. A new writer has been appearing; a wild youth of about twenty-two, the son of working-class parents, who himself works in the lumber camps, coal mines, steel mills, harvest fields and mountain camps of America. He is sensitive and impatient. He writes in jets of exasperated feeling and has not time to polish his work. He is violent and sentimental by turns. He lacks self-confidence but writes because he must – and because he has a real talent. He is a Red but has few theories. It is all instinct with him. His writing is no conscious straining after proletarian art, but the natural flower of his environment.... Do not be passive. Write. Your life in mine, mill, and farm is of deathless significance in the history of the world. Tell us about it in the same language you use in writing a letter. It may be literature – it often is. Write. Persist. Struggle."*

–Michael Gold, "Go Left, Young Writers!" *New Masses*, January 1929.

<https://msuweb.montclair.edu/~furr/nm/nm003.pdf>

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**DOCUMENT BASED QUESTIONS**

- According to Michael Gold, what are the defining qualities of a *New Masses* writer?
- What does it mean to “Go Left, Young Writers”? What does it mean to be a “Red”? Who are the “New Masses”?
- Why is a magazine like *New Masses* particularly meaningful in the context of the Great Depression?
- How can writing be a form of activism?

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**THE POWER OF THE PEN:** The Proletarian Literary Movement 1929-1941**RESOURCE 2**William Gropper, *New Masses Cover*, 1933. Marxists.org.<https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/new-masses/1933/v08n09-may-1933-New-Masses.pdf>

Founded in 1926 with loosely leftist positions, *New Masses* adopted a deeply radical stance by 1929. Its articles, editorials, and cartoons campaigned against lynching, attacked President Roosevelt's New Deal liberalism, and championed industrial unionism. The content stirred readers, and circulation increased from 6,000 in 1933 to 25,000 in 1935. Examine this *New Masses* cover to reveal its political message.

William Gropper, *New Masses Cover*, 1933. Marxists.org.<https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/new-masses/1933/v08n09-may-1933-New-Masses.pdf>



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## DOCUMENT BASED QUESTIONS

- How is artist William Gropper's portrayal of a worker similar to Michael Gold's description of a *New Masses* writer? How are they different?
- In this image, what is the relationship between workers, clergy, and politicians?
- Examine William Gropper's use of composition and gesture. How does the artist use these tools to convey different types of power?
- What might the worker's broken shackles symbolize?
- Add speech bubbles to the image. What do you think these figures might be saying?



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**THE POWER OF THE PEN:** The Proletarian Literary Movement 1929-1941**ACTIVITY**

Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes was active in the proletarian literary movement and contributed to *New Masses*. Distribute Hughes's poem "Let America be America Again" to your students. Have your students read and analyze the poem in small groups. Encourage your students to consider how this poem relates to *New Masses* and the ethos of proletarian literature. Next, ask your students to each select a line of the poem that they find particularly meaningful and present their ideas to their group. Invite your students to write their own stanzas to the poem that expand upon the line that they selected. Combine the class's stanzas together to create a modern version of Hughes's seminal poem.

Full poem can be found at <http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/let-america-be-america-again>



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## ADDITIONAL READING

### THE NEW YORK TIMES ARTICLES

“Faith in Masses Urged on Writers,” September 9, 1932, argues that literature should return to the subject of the common man in the tradition of Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=9A02E6D61231E633A2575AC0A96F9C946394D6CF>

“Three Publications Attacked by Women,” May 16, 1926, describes efforts by women’s groups and politicians to ban New Masses.

<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=9A06E1D61E3AEF3ABC4E52DFB366838D639EDE>

“Langston Hughes, Writer, 65, Dead,” May 23, 1967, is an obituary for Langston Hughes that provides insight into his journey to the pen.

<http://www.nytimes.com/books/01/04/22/specials/hughes-obit.html>

## CONTEMPORARY CONNECTIONS

“Parents Want ‘Of Mice and Men,’ ‘Kite Runner’ Removed From High Schools” by Michael Schaub, May 5, 2015, describes recent efforts of an Idaho parents committee to remove the proletarian classic *Of Mice and Men* from their school’s high school English curriculum.

<http://www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-et-jc-steinbeck-hosseini-possible-bans-20150505-story.html>

“Split by Race and Wealth, but Discovering Similarities in Steinbeck” by Winnie Hu, January 16, 2012, explores a literary experiment by which two schools in New Jersey learn John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* side by side.

[http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/17/education/studying-steinbeck-new-jersey-students-find-common-ground.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/17/education/studying-steinbeck-new-jersey-students-find-common-ground.html?_r=0)



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Hughes, Langston, "Let America Be America Again," 1938.

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Wald, Alan. *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987.