

The Harlem Renaissance

English III

Advanced Composition & Novel

Mrs. Snipes & Mrs. Lutes

“Harlem was not so much a place as a state of mind, the cultural metaphor for black America itself.”



The Harlem Renaissance, known also as the New Negro Movement and the Negro Renaissance, was an important cultural manifestation of the mid-twenties and thirties.

With Harlem as its center, the Renaissance was an upsurge of new racial attitudes and ideals on the part of Afro-Americans and an artistic and political awakening.

It was partly inspired by the iconoclastic spirit of the times.

The Harlem writers and artists were, like their Modernist white counterparts, in quest of new forms, images, and techniques.

They, too, were skeptical and disillusioned.

What chiefly differentiated them, however, was their view of artistic endeavor as an extension of the struggle against oppression.

Historical Roots & Ideologies:

The historical roots of the Harlem Renaissance are complex.

In part, they lay in the vast migration of African Americans to northern industrial centers that began early in the century and increased rapidly as World War I production needs and labor shortages boosted job opportunities.

In addition to industrial jobs in northern cities, World War I offered blacks the opportunity to serve in the military, although in segregated military units.





Yet the war also brought in its wake a series of devastating race riots culminating in the 1919 outbreaks in Washington and Chicago.

Black politics shifted as Marcus Garvey mobilized tens of thousands of supporters and confronted the newly formed NAACP and the African-American establishment with a mass political movement championing black nationalism and Pan-Africanism.

A. Philip Randolph and the *Messenger* challenged traditional black leadership from the socialist left. Increased contact between African Americans and white Americans in the workplace and on city streets forced a new awareness of the disparity between the promise of the American dream and reality.

African American soldiers who served in World War I were angered by the prejudice they often encountered back at home, compared to the acceptance they had found in Europe.

The artistic output of the Harlem Renaissance was dominated by two ideologies, both driven by racial consciousness and pride.

The first of these schools of thought was represented by W.E.B. DuBois and James Weldon Johnson.

They saw the arts as an area where talented and culturally privileged African Americans could lead their race's fight for equality.

Art functioned as propaganda: works of art inspired by the artists' racial heritage & experiences would prove the beauty of the race and its contributions to American culture.

These artistic successes could foster pride among all African-Americans and prove their educated class to be the equal of the white educated class.





The other ideology was represented by artists such as Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Aaron Douglas.

They felt the need to present the ordinary African-American person objectively as an individual simply living in the flesh-and-blood world.

This perspective argued against painting and characterizing only “cultured” and “high class” African-Americans who mirrored the standards of white society.

This school of thought advocated artists who chose to pursue their art for its own sake.

Influences on Literary Phase:

Against the background of increasingly artistic activity, three events occurred between 1924 and 1926 that launched the already developing literary phase of the Harlem Renaissance into the forefront:

1. Charles S. Johnson's Civic Club dinner, which forged the link among three major players in the literary renaissance: the black literary-political intelligentsia, white publishers and critics, and young black writers.
2. The publication in 1926 of *Nigger Heaven*, by white novelist Carl Van Vechten. This book was a spectacularly popular expose of Harlem life and helped create the "Negro Vogue" that drew thousands of sophisticated New Yorkers to Harlem's exotic nightlife.
3. The publication of the literary magazine *FIRE!!* A group of talented young black writers were spearheaded by Wallace Thurman. These artists were declaring their intent to assume ownership of the literary renaissance.

The Harlem Renaissance incorporated all aspects of African American culture in its literature and several themes emerged.



Themes in Art, Music and Literature:

Effort to Recapture the African-American Past:

- corresponded with rise of Pan-Africanism
 - Africanism in Afro-American politics
 - Marcus Garvey's ideology
 - W.E.B. DuBois
 - jazz introduced African-inspired rhythms and themes in compositions

Rural Southern Roots:

- reflected in novels by Jean Toomer and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*
- Jacob Lawrence's art: Harriet Tubman series and black migration

CARIFON AUDIO

Classic Literature

ZORA NEALE HURSTON

"Ruby Dee does an excellent job of narrating Hurston's classic 1937 novel."
—*Library Journal*



THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD

PERFORMED BY RUBY DEE



Themes Continued...

African-American Urban Experience and Racism:

- represented by Langston Hughes and Claude McKay
- some writers were accused of over-emphasizing crime, sexuality, and other less savory aspects of ghetto life to feed voyeuristic desires of white readers and publishers.

Use of Black Music & Folklore as an Inspiration for Poetry, Short Stories, and Novels:

- Langston Hughes used rhythms and styles of jazz
- black religion as a literary source: James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones*
- Sterling Brown used blues and southern work songs in his book of poetry *Southern Road*

Through all these themes Harlem Renaissance writers were determined to express the African-American experience in all its variety and complexity as realistically as possible.



The White Influence on the Harlem Renaissance:

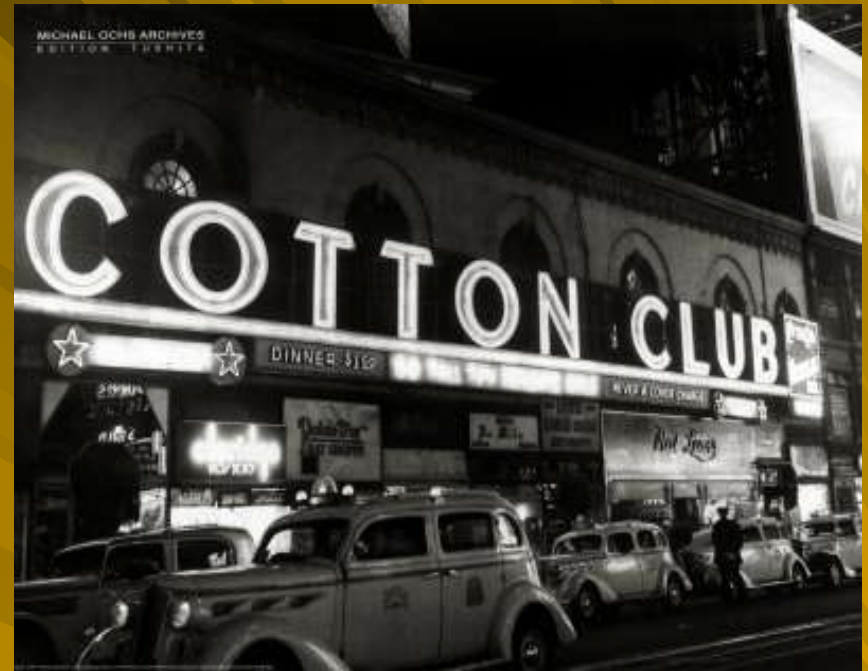
The Harlem Renaissance appealed to a mixed audience—the African American middle class and white consumers of the arts.

Urbane whites suddenly took up New York's African-American community, bestowing their patronage on young artists, opening up publishing opportunities, and pumping cash into Harlem's "exotic" nightlife in a complex relationship that scholars continue to probe.

The famous Cotton Club carried this trend to the bizarre extreme by providing black entertainment for exclusively white audiences.

The relationship of the Harlem Renaissance to white venues and white audiences created controversy.

While many African-American critics strongly supported the movement, others, like Benjamin Brawley and even W.E.B. DuBois were sharply critical and accused Renaissance writers and artists of reinforcing negative African-American stereotypes.



Decline of the Harlem Renaissance:

The Harlem Renaissance declined in the mid 1930s. Factors that contributed to this decline were as follows:

1. Harlem's emergence as a slum:
 - Within a single decade Harlem transformed from an ideal community to a neighborhood with manifold social and economic problems.
 - Housing was overpriced, congested, and dilapidated.
 - Jobs were hard to come by due to competition and discrimination.
 - As a result, most of Harlem's residents lived in poverty, a situation that contributed to the growth of crime, vice, juvenile delinquency and drug addiction.

2. The Great Depression:

- Increased economic pressure impacted both creative artists and the art industry.
- Organizations like the NAACP and the Urban League shifted interests from the arts to economic and social issues.
- Book publishers and recording companies also became more careful about their selections.

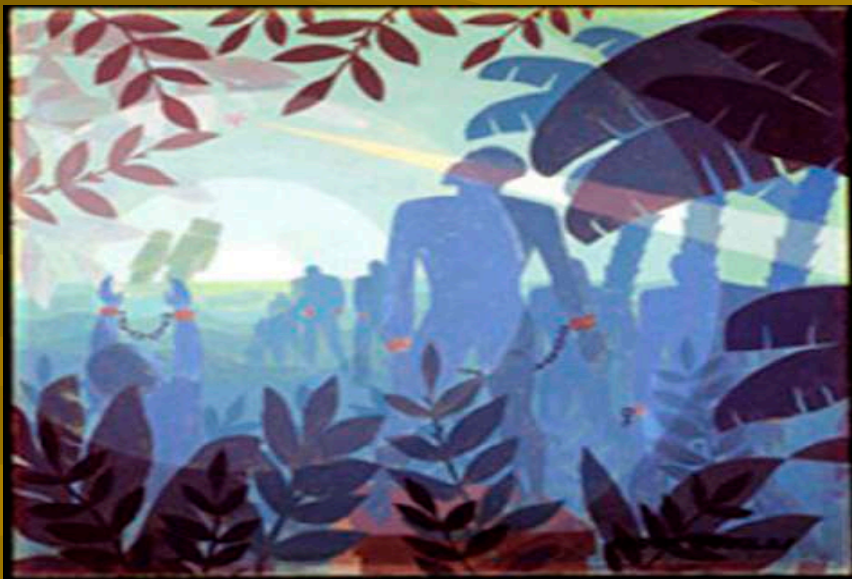
3. The Departure of Many Key Figures in the Movement:

- Charles S. Johnson and James Weldon moved back to the South in 1931; W.E.B. DuBois followed in 1934.
- Langston Hughes left and did not return permanently until after WWII
- Josephine Baker based her career in Paris in 1925.
- Death also cut short many careers. Others found inspiration and life outside of Harlem.

4. The Harlem Riot of 1935:

- This event shattered the illusion of Harlem as the “Mecca” of the New Negro that figured so prominently in folklore.
- The riot illuminated Harlem as a ghetto and was a result of high crime rates, poverty, and inadequate housing.

Powerful Images:



The spirit of the Harlem Renaissance was centered in its community of writers and artists, each expressing his or her own vision, yet bound together in a shared undertaking, and with the community of intellectuals, critics, patrons, and publishers allied to create a revolution in African American culture—all of this was unique and sadly, would not reappear again.

Though the Harlem Renaissance came to an end, it remains a reminder to all people everywhere of the hope that exists for affecting change, freedom from oppression, and expression individual and cultural identity.



Sources:

The United States in Literature & The Harlem Renaissance: A Unit of Study for Grades 9-12 by Nina Gifford

Harlem Speaks: A Living History of the Harlem Renaissance edited by Cary D. Wintz