

The harlem renaissance as a reaction to modernity research paper example

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



The “ New Negro Movement” came about as a result of a need to establish new identity for African-Americans after their freedom in the Civil War. There was still a great deal of racism present throughout the country, even in the comparatively enlightened cities of New York and Chicago, among others. The primary battlefield of this cultural movement was Harlem, New York, considered the “ cultural capital of black America.” A great number of blacks had moved to New York in order to become part of this burgeoning musical and art culture, as well as financial and job opportunities. This soon-to-be “ mecca for black art” came about due to this vast migration, making it the headquarters for the Renaissance many blacks knew was coming.

According to Avi-Ram, " the arts and especially poetry have played an important role" in the expression of the frustrations of the minority, whether sexual or racial, toward their own oppression - this is absolutely personified in the art of the Harlem Renaissance (1990). The poetry that was created during the Harlem Renaissance was typical of the attitudes of the times; Poets of the time vented their frustrations at the new conflicts that arose from the growing modernity of America, and the struggle to integrate with an increasingly disinterested and prejudiced culture. Black authors attempted to find their place in the modern world, and their poetry exemplified that struggle. According to Miller's article about the life of Henry David Thoreau, for example, the author's cries that " slavery and servility have produced no sweet-scented flower annually" was still not being heeded, albeit in a subtler way; blacks were merely teased at the possibility of expression and freedom, while the rest of the world looked down upon them (1854). In this essay, we will examine how several poems and addresses -

including Langston Hughes' "Harlem," Countee Cullen's "Yet Do I Marvel," and Claude McKay's "Harlem Shadows" - explore their cultural and historical contexts through their prose and form. The Harlem Renaissance allowed the artists of the time to act as advocates and spokespeople for the rage and hopelessness that was being encountered every day by blacks living in a white world, where they felt they had no place - each artist brought something new to the table, providing a unique way of expressing their feelings on life in 20th century America.

White people came to appreciate anything black as a novelty; literature was no exception. While the Harlem Renaissance had its roots in creating a new cultural movement for blacks, there was some resistance to it even within the black community. Many different groups had varying ideas on the best ways to reinvent their culture and cement themselves as a cultural and social force in America. There was a constant struggle during the Harlem Renaissance between upper class blacks who were attempting to assimilate themselves into the business culture of whites, particularly in the major cities, and the lower class blacks who were attempting to revolutionize music through the jazz movement.

Given this context, Langston Hughes' "Harlem" is indicative of the idea of race and the cultural elite, and the potential damage that can happen when one tries too hard to identify and assimilate into white culture. His opening line, "What happens to a dream deferred?" is evocative and rhetorical. He waxes philosophical about the things that black people wish they had the

privilege to do, were it not for the interference of institutionalized racism and an oppressive white culture.

Hughes, throughout the poem, has no solution for this question, only asking further questions. This relates to the helplessness black people felt in the 1920s, as they attempted to realize their dreams. However, deferment came when the attitude of the times prevented them from doing what they wanted to do. Hughes' continual questions relate to the black experience: he wants to know where his chance for equality has gone - whether it is gone forever, or whether the missed chance weighs him down; " maybe it just sags / like a heavy load" (Hughes, lines 9-10).

The final line of the poem, " Or does it explode?" is Hughes' final bit of hope; perhaps, instead of festering and withering away, the disappearing dream explodes in a brilliant blaze, perhaps making those who deferred the dream notice it. It talks about going out in a blaze of glory, perhaps telling the African-American culture that, if their dreams will be deferred, at least that abandonment will be seen and observed. In some ways, it is a call to action to attempt to take what is theirs - their hopes and dreams. On the other hand, it may be exploding in their face, reminding them of the dream they cannot achieve. Explosions imply destruction; the dream deferred may well crush and completely destroy the black culture that attempts to make up for centuries of slavery and prejudice. This, in essence, is the main idea behind Hughes' poem; he is reflecting on the lost cause that is African-American civil rights, or at least what might happen if that battle is lost.

Countee Cullen's "Yet Do I Marvel" is yet another instance of African-American despair at the hands of racism in the 1920s, but his poem implies just as much curiosity as Hughes does at the circumstances that black find themselves in. He begins the poem by reminding the audience that he does not doubt that "God is good, well meaning, kind"; there is no bitterness regarding his fate. However, he is indeed curious as to why God would make a world in which all of these terrible things happen - he references the torture of Tantalus, the death of parents and children, the Sisyphean punishment, and more. These images and situations are metaphors for the continual black struggle to do things that the white culture prevents them from doing, as they are segregated and marginalized.

Cullen, instead of getting angry, merely resigns himself to his fate, as he says that he simple cannot understand why God would do these things, though He surely has a good reason - "Inscrutable His ways are, and immune / to catechism by a mind too strewn / With petty cares to slightly understand / What awful brain compels His awful hand" (Cullen, lines 9-12). While he calls God 'awful,' he also says there is likely a good reason for his behavior. It is actually a type of passive-aggressiveness that Cullen exerts in the poem, stating that he has no idea why God would create black poets if not for them to suffer; "Yet do I marvel at this curious thing: / To make a poet black, and bid him sing!" (Cullen, lines 13-14). He is talking primarily about the continued struggle for black artists to find an audience and a voice in the Harlem Renaissance; because it is nearly impossible for a black poet to 'sing,' Cullen views it as the most awful bit of torture. Black poets like him

feel compelled to sing by some sort of unearthly passion or drive; yet, God chooses to place them in a world where they will not be allowed to express their gifts. This, to him, is the ultimate punishment (Cullen, 1926).

Claude McKay's "Harlem Shadows" is yet another instance of a black man exploring the downtrodden state of the African-American in the 1920s, centering in on Harlem nightlife. In the poem, he describes the activity of the black girls in Harlem who operate as prostitutes because they have no other way out. The dire circumstances of these girls are made clear in McKay's prose; he describes them as "little dark girls" and states that "through the long night until the silver break / Of day the little gray feet know no rest" (McKay, lines 7-8). They are forced to work all throughout the night, servicing white men in order to make ends meet. This is described as a shameful, degrading practice, but one that is necessary for them to have food on the table.

McKay's prose differs from Hughes, in that McKay demands that blacks be respected as a race, while Hughes merely laments their downfall. Hughes simply wishes to be understood, while McKay is somewhat angry with whites and white culture for marginalizing his people so much. He describes the earth as having a "white breast," indicating his opinion that the world is dominated by whites and their culture. This is identified as a primary reason why the black culture has deteriorated so much, to the point where little dark girls have to go out at night and whore themselves out for money, "trudging, thinly shod, from street to street" (McKay, line 12).

McKay rails against the world, which is “ stern” and “ harsh that in the wretched way / Of poverty, dishonor and disgrace, / Has pushed the timid little feet of clay” (lines 13-15). He hates the white culture that pervades Harlem at that time, which leads his precious girls to disgraceful acts because they have no choice. The burden of the black community is symbolized by the state of the feet of the girls in McKay’s poem - “ The sacred brown feet of my fallen race! / Ah, heart of me, the weary, weary feet / In Harlem wandering from street to street” (McKay, lines, 16-18). Just like the worn out feet of these poor black prostitutes, the black community’s continuing struggle makes them more and more exhausted.

What makes the Harlem Renaissance so unique and fascinating is the chance for these prominent black poets to express these frustrations about their current situation, much less their future. In showcasing just how dissatisfied they are with the state of the black community in Harlem and throughout America, they can unite the African-American people in solidarity and demonstrate their plight to the white community through their art. It also helped that, at this time, black artists and poets, as well as musicians, were finding increasing popularity in small white audiences; black music and poetry became ‘ cool’ for whites, and so it became more mainstream.

In conclusion, artists of the Harlem Renaissance used the medium of art, literature and music to convey the black experience in a way that was only then receiving a wider audience; this allowed them to discuss openly the disappointment and frustration that came about from societal prejudices and their institutionalized disadvantage. Langston Hughes, in his poem “

Harlem," discussed the overall view of those blacks who were not able to realize their dreams due to the system of racial prejudice that they had to operate in. Countee Cullen discussed, through the poem " Yet Do I Marvel," the idea that God was a cruel man who allowed a marginalized people to wish for things beyond their reach, torturing them through their desires for equality and expression of art. Also, Claude McKay's " Harlem Shadows" demonstrates the plight of young prostitutes in Harlem, as a metaphor for the weariness of blacks who attempt to overcome their station. These poems exemplify the frustration that African-Americans felt at the racial environment of early 20th century America, the Harlem Renaissance finally granting them the stage from which to tell these stories. Thoreau's cries of freedom and peace for both races were finally being heard, at least in this small way.

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