

Representation of africa in harlem renaissance texts



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Essay Question:

1) ' *The Dixie pike has grown from a goat path in Africa*' (Jean Toomer).

Examine the representation of Africa in Harlem Renaissance texts (you may consider visual art and literature).

The Harlem Renaissance was as a cultural awakening among African Americans during the 1920s and 1930s, as through the expression of literature, music and visual art, the new generation of African Americans aimed to embrace the challenges of the contemporary era. Alain Locke coined the term ' The New Negro Movement'[1], which was critical to the cultural and political development of African Americans as the movement laid the foundations for the advancement of black culture within the United States. Joyce Turner states that, " The significance of the era is not simply that African Americans demonstrated that they could master literary and musical forms but that they were able to pierce and open up the publishing curtain."[2]Despite this, African Americans had a perplexed relationship with themselves and Africa, as many believed that blacks had lost their African identity whilst embarking on the petrifying Middle Passage across the Atlantic to the West Indies. This idea was widely accepted due to the blending of distinct African cultures and languages on the slave ships, as the majority of African Americans believed that blacks had lost all significant ties to their African heritage. This led to the creation of a distorted depiction of Africa, as Phillis Wheatly contended in her poem, *On Being Brought from Africa to America* in the late 18th century that slaves had been rescued from the disturbing foreign lands of Africa.[3]This, of course, was the result of white American mythology but represented the true disconnect between <https://assignbuster.com/representation-of-africa-in-harlem-renaissance-texts/>

African Americans and their African ancestors. However, this assertion was met with widespread antagonism in the 19th century as many black scholars began to examine Africa as the birthplace of black culture, which led to the next generation of freed African Americans to search for their origins beyond the constrictions of slavery. This new perspective, which emphasized Africa as the native motherland for African Americans, coincided with the establishment of the National Association of Colored People, which aimed to achieve equal rights for blacks within American society. The progressive nature of the organization was accompanied by the timing of the great migration, which collectively created an environment for which African Americans intended to understand and define the notion of blackness. Authors and artists alike encouraged black Americans to disregard the white narrative of African American identity and to collaborate in the spirit of Booker T. Washington and Du Bois in an attempt to discover the roots of their ancestry by invoking the history of Africa. This connotes that the Harlem Renaissance essentially placed Africa at the core of African Americanism as the leaders of the movement understood that through appreciating the origins of their past, they could truly comprehend blackness and envision a brighter future for all African Americans.

In the early years of the Harlem Renaissance, many black authors had not travelled to Africa and so their attempts to profess their African identity were based on imagination and the depiction of the continent by others. This was seen clearly within the poem *Danse Africaine* [4], which was a product of Langston Hughes' early work, as *The Congo*, which was written by the white author Vachel Lindsay, significantly inspired it.[5]According to Trudier Harris,

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the “ low beating of the tom-toms” was extremely reminiscent of the “ boom, boom, boom” sounds that were detailed within *The Congo*. Both poems focus on the tone of the African drums and draw on the vigorous tribal nature of the native Africans as the authors simultaneously attempt to display the organic innate characteristics of those who occupy the African landscape.

[6]This suggests that the authors of the Harlem Renaissance initially had no option but to rely on stereotypes and the accounts of mainly white authors, as well as their own imaginations, to detail the environment of Africa which ultimately portrayed a more symbolic, evasive and warped image of their motherland. This is particularly evident within Countee Cullen’s poem *Heritage* as he represents Africa as being a precarious and barbaric place where both man and creatures roam wildly.[7]Cullen begins the poem with an abstract and remote view of Africa as he has a particularly clichéd view of the continent, as he describes the romanticism of the scenery, “ Copper sun or scarlet sea”[8]which only accentuates both his literal and metaphoric distance away from Africa. Within the poem, Cullen depicts a struggle between the relationship of Africa and America as the speaker has difficulty understanding his identity. The speaker is reminded of his homeland throughout the poem and continually asks, “ What is Africa to me?”[9]As he has deep frustration at his inability to relate with his African roots. This illuminates the idea that the speaker is suffering from an identity crisis as he attempts to define his place within the world as he contrasts his archaic heritage to his own modern life through the form of juxtaposing the “ outlandish heathen gods” of Africa, to the Christian “ Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.”[10]This symbolizes that he is stranded between both cultures as he sacrificed the religion of his ancestors in an effort to conform to white

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culture. Yet he yearns to revive his relationship with Africa as he speaks eminently of his ancestors who he describes as “ strong bronzed men” and “ regal black women”[11]which suggests that he is proud to be a descendant of them. *Heritage* effectively illustrates what it is like being an African American in America, as Cullen evaluates this idea through Du Bois’ theory of double-consciousness, as he advocates the idea that black Americans are torn between a conflict of culture and religion. Through the use of repetitive rhyme, Cullen presents Africa as the juxtaposition to America, as the wildness of the continent is compared to the structure and regulation of western civilization, as he exposes religion as a motif for oppression and coercion. This provides the renaissance authors with a sense of freedom when writing about Africa, as it allows them to escape the boundaries of a prejudiced society. Cullen presents Africa as being the imaginative space that Harlem Renaissance writers need to flee civilization and experience a natural and liberated existence.

The allure of writing about Africa during the Harlem Renaissance unsurprisingly appealed to the majority of black authors, as Langston Hughes believed Africa was the key to acknowledging the beauty of blackness, as he felt immense pride in locating the origins of African-Americanism to Africa. Within his first poem, *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, Hughes romanticizes the history of black people, as he claims their existence to the beginnings of time. The poem traces the movement of blacks from the Euphrates and Nile rivers in Africa to the Mississippi, as he delicately suggests that he has experienced the horrors of slavery and racism as his “ soul has grown deep like rivers.”[12]This poem was the first of many by

Hughes, which confronted the experiences of black people, as Adrian Oktenburg proposes that by naming the particular rivers, the poem implicates the whole history of African and American slavery without even mentioning it.[13]A similar recognition to the history of slavery is evident within Hughes' poem *Negro*, as he outwardly claims his African American identity by stating in the opening line " I am a Negro" and repeatedly uses the word " black" to reaffirm his African genealogy, as he directly compares his skin tone to " the depths of Africa." [14]The poem then describes the circumstances, which brought about African diaspora, as Hughes reminds the reader that his ancestors were taken from their motherland without a choice, as he details the journey of the slaves " All the way from Africa to Georgia." [15]Langston Hughes was crucial for the Harlem Renaissance in establishing that African Americans did have a history beyond the plantations, and subsequently dismissed previous suggestions that blacks were without both history and culture. This was of paramount importance to Hughes as he rebuffed Phillis Wheatley's claim of a dark Africa and instead promoted an Africa of development and hope, which paid homage to the advancement and progress of black people.

Hughes desired to experience Africa for himself but unfortunately, his dreams did not couple up with reality. Upon his arrival, Hughes was perceived as a " white man" and was rejected by the African tribes who viewed him as an outsider, which is recalled within his autobiography.[16]For Hughes, his experience within Africa only distanced himself further away from the continent, as the trip exacerbated the feeling of detachment he felt within American society, as both origins of his ancestry seemingly rejected

him for being an intruder. Despite this, Hughes maintained that Africa was the birthplace of African-Americans and continued to portray the continent, as the space for which Harlem Renaissance writers could express themselves, as for Hughes, Africa was equally a place of fantasy, as well as being the home of his predecessors. Claude McKay pursued this further within his sonnet *Africa*, as it is evident that McKay longed for a reunion with his native motherland as he felt isolated and alone without an ancestral home as Steven Wilson labelled him “ perhaps the purest example of the dual identity.”[17]Within the sonnet, McKay personifies Africa by giving it a female identity, which invokes the idea of Africa being the motherland. McKay outlines what he perceives as the decay of Africa, as he begins by detailing the influence of the continent on the early world and ends with a suggestion that the world had stolen what was once Africa’s, “ They went. The darkness swallowed thee again”, as he references the tragedy and narrative of the slave trade that disrupted the harmony and tranquility of the continent.[18]Specifically, Hughes and McKay were both literary pioneers of the Harlem Renaissance and filled their poems with deep sentiment concerning the struggle of African Americans as they equally attributed the origins of blackness to Africa, and took great pride in paying tribute to their African ancestors.

The New Negro Movement also featured Jean Toomer, as Alain Locke included a variety of his work within *The New Negro*, but many critics such as James Smethurst have argued that he had more difficulty in fitting in with the movement than most.[19]The most relevant piece of work that fits with my narrative is *Carma*, which features within Toomer’s most prestigious work

titled *Cane*. The structural complexity of the text and vernacular style is more like American modernism than Harlem Renaissance literature, but its racial significance and portrayal of blackness places it comfortably alongside other Harlem Renaissance literature. *Carma* is the story of a Southern black woman in rural Georgia who is restricted by her environment. The protagonist is the epitome of what it means to be an African American female in the South as she is “ as strong as any man.”[20]However, Carma’s promiscuous sexual behavior causes friction within her own marital relationship as she seemingly is growing apart from her husband. The distance between her and her husband resembles the ever-growing distance between African Americans and their homeland. The sunset then kindles a new sensation for Carma as she can differentiate between “ the lives of African Americans as she can sound out their own voices and conversation.”[21]This then creates a song through her body, as Karen Ford identifies that the song within the narrative connects the contemporary black man with his ancestors and draws out a repressed African identity. The present moment on the “ Dixie Pike” is akin to the ancient “ goat path in Africa”[22]as Toomer uses the description of the natural landscape to compare the ancestral home of African Americans to their adopted home. The link that is formed between the South and Africa reiterates the importance of the continent to Harlem Renaissance writers, who identify Africa as an embracing but ultimately unattainable home. Within the story, Carma becomes aware of her racial consciousness, which causes her to become hysterical. She is haunted by the tragedy of the African diaspora narrative as Carole Davies suggests, “ black women’s writing should be considered within cross-cultural context” without a fixed, geographical, <https://assignbuster.com/representation-of-africa-in-harlem-renaissance-texts/>

ethnically or nationally bound category of writing.[23]For Toomer, racial awareness is critical to understanding the origins of the African American narrative, which is why the image of Africa is so prominent within Harlem Renaissance literature.

It is clear through the literary work of the Harlem Renaissance period that many African American authors attributed the roots of African American culture to Africa. This was no different to the Harlem Renaissance artists, who equally included references of Africa within their work, as their artwork reflected the African American experience of those who suffered from the consequences of African diaspora. The artists paid close attention to African material and specifically Ancient Egypt as they aimed to recreate and redefine contemporary black identity. The examination of ancient symbols within the Harlem Renaissance era intended to reclaim the history of their ancestors and prove that African Americans had a heritage that predated both slavery and America. Arguably, one of the most influential artists was Aaron Douglas who was a significant figure during the Harlem Renaissance as he depicted the history of African Americans from their origins in Africa to modern life in America. His famous four-panel series, *Aspects of Negro Life* [24]echoes this idea as it follows the journey of African Americans from freedom in Africa to the confines of slavery in America. In the first panel, Douglas explores the tribal ritual of a man and woman dancing to African drums, as he signifies the importance of rhythm and spirituality to primitive African culture. The rest of the series illustrates the historical experiences of African Americans from the realms of slavery to the integration of African Americans within modern life, as Douglas appreciates their continual

struggle to conform to American white society. Douglas utilizes elements of Egypt to present a West-African aesthetic within this piece, as Douglas features his unmistakable silhouette style and muted color, which is inspired by his interest in Egyptian civilization. Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller with *Ethiopia Awakening* pursued a similar interest in the Egyptian narrative[25], as on the surface, it appears to be comparable to an Egyptian sculpture. Fuller attempts to acknowledge the Egyptian lineage of African Americans, as Krissi Oden suggests that the sculpture represents “the emerging qualities of African Americans”[26] as the purpose of this piece was to address the misrepresentation of race and gender in American society. Another prominent artist of the Harlem Renaissance period was Lois Mailou Jones who painted *The Ascent of Ethiopia*. [27]The painting was featured alongside the book *Rhapsodies in Black*, as she displayed the richness of African culture through hopeful tones of blue and yellow, as she symbolizes the journey from the depths of slavery towards a dynamic and buoyant future, which she interprets as the Harlem Renaissance. David Bailey asserts within *Rhapsodies in Black* that Harlem Renaissance artists “have produced modernist autobiographical works that explore the issue of representing the body, migration, memory and cultural hybridity.”[28]This is certainly true of *The Ascent of Ethiopia* and both Douglas and Fuller’s work, as the Harlem Renaissance artists successfully attributed the origins of African American culture to Africa, as they significantly contributed to the representation of black culture and African heritage alongside the authors of the Harlem Renaissance movement during the 1920s.

The literature and art of the Harlem Renaissance heavily featured the representation of Africa as the new generation of African Americans aimed to determine the continent as their ancestral home. The cultural and political development of African Americans during the Harlem Renaissance was key to the advancement of black culture within the United States as through establishing a history beyond the plantations, African Americans displayed that they had both culture and history that predated the founding of America. Initially, African Americans had a troubled relationship with Africa, as many believed that blacks had lost their African identity on the journey to America. This idea was merely the result of white American mythology but did represent the detachment African Americans felt in relation to their African ancestors. The Harlem Renaissance writers sought about changing this feeling as they began to consider Africa as the being the birthplace of black culture. This inspired the Harlem Renaissance to search for their origins beyond the constrictions of slavery, which offered a new context to the ancestry of African Americans. The leading authors of the period such as Hughes, McKay and Toomer all attempted to define their African American heritage by invoking the history of Africa and representing the continent within their work. This inspired the artists of the time to explore the origins of African Americanism as they created an array of material that depicted the history of Africa and devised subsequent work that detailed the journey of their forefathers across the Atlantic, to the depths of slavery within America. This suggests that the Harlem Renaissance movement placed Africa at the center of African Americanism, as the pioneers of the movement understood that through defining and authenticating the origins of their past, they could establish a fruitful future.

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