

# Brief summary of the harlem renaissance essay sample

[Art & Culture](#), [Renaissance](#)



Variously known as the New Negro movement, the New Negro Renaissance, and the Negro Renaissance, the movement emerged toward the end of World War I in 1918, blossomed in the mid- to late 1920s, and then faded in the mid-1930s. The Harlem Renaissance marked the first time that mainstream publishers and critics took African American literature seriously and that African American literature and arts attracted significant attention from the nation at large. Although it was primarily a literary movement, it was closely related to developments in African American music, theater, art, and politics.

## BEGINNINGS

The Harlem Renaissance emerged amid social and intellectual upheaval in the African American community in the early 20th century. Several factors laid the groundwork for the movement. A small black middle class had developed by the turn of the century, fostered by increased education and employment opportunities following the American Civil War (1861-1865). During a phenomenon known as the Great Migration, hundreds of thousands of black Americans moved from an economically depressed rural South to industrial cities of the North to take advantage of the employment opportunities created by World War I. As more and more educated and socially conscious blacks settled in New York's neighborhood of Harlem, it developed into the political and cultural center of black America.

Equally important, during the 1910s a new political agenda advocating racial equality arose in the African American community, particularly in its growing middle class. Championing the agenda were black historian and sociologist

W. E. B. Du Bois and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which was founded in 1909 to advance the rights of blacks. This agenda was also reflected in the efforts of Jamaican-born black nationalist Marcus Garvey, whose Back to Africa movement inspired racial pride among working-class blacks in the United States in the 1920s.

African American literature and arts had begun a steady development just before the turn of the century. In the performing arts, black musical theater featured such accomplished artists as songwriter Bob Cole and composer J. Rosamond Johnson, brother of writer James Weldon Johnson. Jazz and blues music moved with black populations from the South and Midwest into the bars and cabarets of Harlem. In literature, the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar and the fiction of Charles W. Chesnutt in the late 1890s were among the earliest works of African Americans to receive national recognition. By the end of World War I the fiction of James Weldon Johnson and the poetry of Claude McKay anticipated the literature that would follow in the 1920s by describing the reality of black life in America and the struggle for racial identity.

In the early 1920s three works signaled the new creative energy in African American literature. McKay's volume of poetry, *Harlem Shadows* (1922), became one of the first works by a black writer to be published by a mainstream, national publisher (Harcourt, Brace and Company). *Cane* (1923), by Jean Toomer, was an experimental novel that combined poetry and prose in documenting the life of American blacks in the rural South and urban North. Finally, *There Is Confusion* (1924), the first novel by writer and

editor Jessie Fauset, depicted middle-class life among black Americans from a woman's perspective.

With these early works as the foundation, three events between 1924 and 1926 launched the Harlem Renaissance. First, on March 21, 1924, Charles S. Johnson of the National Urban League hosted a dinner to recognize the new literary talent in the black community and to introduce the young writers to New York's white literary establishment. (The National Urban League was founded in 1910 to help black Americans address the economic and social problems they encountered as they resettled in the urban North.) As a result of this dinner, the *Survey Graphic*, a magazine of social analysis and criticism that was interested in cultural pluralism, produced a Harlem issue in March 1925. Devoted to defining the aesthetic of black literature and art, the Harlem issue featured work by black writers and was edited by black philosopher and literary scholar Alain Leroy Locke.

Later that year Locke expanded the special issue into a book, *The New Negro*, which became the landmark anthology of the age. The second event was the publication of *Nigger Heaven* (1926) by white novelist Carl Van Vechten. The book was a spectacularly popular exposé of Harlem life. Although the book offended some members of the black community, its coverage of both the elite and the baser sides of Harlem helped create a "Negro vogue" that drew thousands of sophisticated New Yorkers, black and white, to Harlem's exotic and exciting nightlife and stimulated a national market for African American literature and music. Finally, in the autumn of 1926 a group of young black writers produced their own literary magazine,

Fire!! With Fire!! a new generation of young writers and artists, including Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, and Zora Neale Hurston, emerged as an alternative group within the Renaissance.

## CHARACTERISTICS

No common literary style or political ideology defined the Harlem Renaissance. What united participants was their sense of taking part in a common endeavor and their commitment to giving artistic expression to the African American experience. Some common themes existed, such as an interest in the roots of the 20th-century African American experience in Africa and the American South, and a strong sense of racial pride and desire for social and political equality. But the most characteristic aspect of the Harlem Renaissance was the diversity of its expression. From the mid-1920s through the mid-1930s, some 16 black writers published more than 50 volumes of poetry and fiction, while dozens of other African American artists made their mark in painting, music, and theater.

The diverse literary expression of the Harlem Renaissance ranged from Langston Hughes's weaving of the rhythms of African American music into his poems of ghetto life, as in *The Weary Blues* (1926), to Claude McKay's use of the sonnet form as the vehicle for his impassioned poems attacking racial violence, as in "If We Must Die" (1919). McKay also presented glimpses of the glamour and the grit of Harlem life in *Harlem Shadows*. Countee Cullen used both African and European images to explore the African roots of black American life. In the poem "Heritage" (1925), for

example, Cullen discusses being both a Christian and an African, yet not belonging fully to either tradition. *Quicksand* (1928), by novelist Nella Larsen, offered a powerful psychological study of an African American woman's loss of identity.

Diversity and experimentation also flourished in the performing arts and were reflected in the blues singing of Bessie Smith and in jazz music. Jazz ranged from the marriage of blues and ragtime by pianist Jelly Roll Morton to the instrumentation of bandleader Louis Armstrong and the orchestration of composer Duke Ellington. In the visual arts, Aaron Douglas adopted a deliberately "primitive" style and incorporated African images in his paintings and illustrations.

The Harlem Renaissance appealed to a mixed audience. The literature appealed to the African American middle class and to the white book-buying public. Such magazines as *The Crisis*, a monthly journal of the NAACP, and *Opportunity*, an official publication of the Urban League, employed Harlem Renaissance writers on their editorial staffs; published poetry and short stories by black writers; and promoted African American literature through articles, reviews, and annual literary prizes. As important as these literary outlets were, however, the Renaissance relied heavily on white publishing houses and white-owned magazines. In fact, a major accomplishment of the Renaissance was to push open the door to mainstream white periodicals and publishing houses, although the relationship between the Renaissance writers and white publishers and audiences created some controversy. Du Bois did not oppose the relationship between black writers and white

publishers, but he was critical of works such as McKay's bestselling novel *Home to Harlem* (1928) for appealing to the "prurient demand[s]" of white readers and publishers for portrayals of black "licentiousness." Langston Hughes spoke for most of the writers and artists when he wrote in his essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926) that black artists intended to express themselves freely, no matter what the black public or white public thought.

African American musicians and other performers also played to mixed audiences. Harlem's cabarets attracted both Harlem residents and white New Yorkers seeking out Harlem nightlife. Harlem's famous Cotton Club carried this to an extreme, by providing black entertainment for exclusively white audiences. Ultimately, the more successful black musicians and entertainers who appealed to a mainstream audience moved their performances downtown.

## ENDING AND INFLUENCE

A number of factors contributed to the decline of the Harlem Renaissance by the mid-1930s. The Great Depression of the 1930s increased the economic pressure on all sectors of life. Organizations such as the NAACP and the Urban League, which had actively promoted the Renaissance in the 1920s, shifted their interests to economic and social issues in the 1930s. Many influential black writers and literary promoters, including Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, Charles S. Johnson, and Du Bois, left New York City in the early 1930s. Finally, the Harlem Riot of 1935—set off in part by the growing

economic hardship of the Depression and mounting tension between the black community and the white shop-owners in Harlem who profited from that community-shattered the notion of Harlem as the “ Mecca” of the New Negro. In spite of these problems the Renaissance did not disappear overnight. Almost one-third of the books published during the Renaissance appeared after 1929. In the last analysis, the Harlem Renaissance ended when most of those associated with it left Harlem or stopped writing. Among the new young artists who appeared in the 1930s and 1940s, social realism replaced modernism and primitivism as the dominant mode of expression.

The Harlem Renaissance changed forever the dynamics of African American arts and literature in the United States. The writers that followed in the 1930s and 1940s found that publishers and the public were more open to African American literature than they had been at the beginning of the century. Furthermore, the existence of the body of African American literature from the Renaissance inspired writers such as Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright to pursue literary careers in the late 1930s and the 1940s, even if they defined themselves against the ideology and literary practices of the Renaissance. The outpouring of African American literature of the 1980s and 1990s by such writers as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison also had its roots in the writing of the Harlem Renaissance.

The influence of the Harlem Renaissance was not confined to the United States. Writers McKay, Hughes, and Cullen, actor and musician Paul Robeson, dancer Josephine Baker, and others traveled to Europe and attained a popularity abroad that rivaled or surpassed what they achieved in



the United States. The founders of the Négritude movement in the French Caribbean traced their ideas directly to the influence of Hughes and McKay. South African writer Peter Abrahams cited his youthful discovery of *The New Negro* as the event that turned him toward a career as a writer. For thousands of blacks around the world, the Harlem Renaissance was proof that the white race did not hold a monopoly on literature and culture.