

# Cracking the carapace: a synthesis of the harlem renaissance



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“ During the early 1900s, the burgeoning African-American middle class began pushing a new political agenda that advocated racial equality. The epicenter of this movement was in New York, where three of the largest civil rights groups established their headquarters.” (Harlem Renaissance, 2011).

This cultural movement of the 1920s and 1930s, also known as the “ New Negro Movement” as referenced in Alain Locke’s 1925 collection of literary passages, was the Harlem Renaissance. During this time in the Harlem neighborhood of New York, art forms of all kinds mirrored the emergence of a new mindset that was adopted during this metamorphosis. The gradual awakening of the “ New Negro” was the result of centuries of oppression and injustice at the hands of white tyrants and in some ways, themselves, revealing a period in which black achievements in the arts were allowed to flourish.

Through reflections of the era created by black artists, it is made clear that many black Americans felt that being “ colored” was a disability, and in many artistic methods of expression – particularly songs and poems about the blues– it was said that they often wish for death. Dorothy West writes of a character in her short fiction work, *The Typewriter*, “ He hated life, but he didn’t want to die... he couldn’t imagine himself an angel,” (West, 1926).

Even the value of faith was scrutinized by some; wondering why a god almighty would bring such misfortune upon so many people. A work of poetry by Countee Cullen called *Yet Do I Marvel* voices what so many questioned desolately about the curious workings of their lord: “ 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”

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(Cullen, 1991). Words such as these were spoken all too often from many black Americans with heavy feeling about the years of oppression that plagued their race.

From the earliest accounts going back to the days of slavery, each affray that came to pass over the decades chipped at the shell that encased and smothered the black American community. What the Harlem Renaissance succeeded in doing was finally breaking through that carapace, revealing a man called the New Negro. Under the eyes of society the Old Negro was “transforming what has been a perennial problem into the progressive phases of contemporary Negro life,” says Alain Locke in his anthology, *The New Negro* (Locke, 1925). What was left behind was an idea that stretched over an entire race: “For generations in the mind of America, the Negro has been more of a formula than a human being,” (Locke). However, what was born in this renaissance was the strong will for individuality and togetherness, new psychology and old traditions, and general spirit. Common themes in visual displays of art were vibrant colors, dancing, drinking, and playing music to indicate liveliness and unification. Using the strength that had been building up for decades, the renaissance of Harlem came in the form of an advocate for racial equality and a way for achievements and arts to flourish in the black community.

However, the oppression the black community endured was not exclusively from the outside. From years of having biased ideas of their own race forced upon them by their white peers, some of the viewpoints began to sink in. “

The thinking Negro even has induced to share this same general attitude,”

Locke says. “to focus his attention on controversial issues, to see himself in <https://assignbuster.com/cracking-the-carapace-a-synthesis-of-the-harlem-renaissance/>

the distorted perspective of a social problem. His shadow, so to speak, has been more real to him than his personality.” When someone is told something enough times, they begin to believe it is true, ultimately causing the problem to attack from both the outside and the inside. The Harlem Renaissance is a triumph over this centuries-long dilemma, when black Americans truly began to explore their creative potential.

The Harlem Renaissance was not only the birth of many ideas, but it also taught Harlem and its inhabitants how to stick up for itself and halt the cycle of contagiously biased notions within its community. As shown through reflections of the era through art and music, not only some of the black American community but nearly all learned to embrace their own culture and feel pride rather than embarrassment. The New Negro was developed as a result of the appeal from the injustice of oppression from both outsiders and those within, and the Harlem Renaissance truly put to use the phrase that Zora Neale Hurston once wrote: “ Discrimination is beyond me.”