

Before the harlem renaissance

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Prominent Black before the Harlem Renaissance deal with what they know. This was especially true for black writers before the Harlem Renaissance. The two main themes for these writers became religion and slavery. Even black writers who had not been slaves were influenced by a parent or grandparent who had been a slave. Religion became intertwined with slavery. White owners preached that God wanted their slaves to be good Christians and serve their white masters. A great need rose in black writers not only to prove they were human, but that they could write books that equaled or surpassed their white counterparts.

Phillis Wheatley was a slave for John Wheatley. Her owner was a preacher, who treated Phillis better than the average slave. John Wheatley allowed Phillis to be educated, while most slaves were forbidden to read or write. This had a great effect on Phillis' writing. Most of her poems were about Christianity. Her first poem published by itself was An Elegiac Poem, on the Death of That Celebrated Divine, and Eminent Servant of Jesus Christ, the Reverend and Learned George Whitefield. Her poems on her plight as a slave from Africa were not published on their own, but in periodicals with other writers. Even though she was born in Africa, Phillis came to America as a child. John Wheatley raised and educated her. No wonder he had so much influence on her writing. Harry Bloom documents the above facts in his book "Black American Poets and Dramatists before the Harlem Renaissance" (119).

In another one of Harry Bloom's books he reports on another famous black writer, Fredrick Douglass ("Major Black American Writers through the Harlem Renaissance" 34-35). Fredrick Douglass, like Phillis Wheatley, was born a slave. Unlike Phillis Wheatley, Fredrick Douglass' owners treated him

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brutally. His owner shipped him from home to home working for cruel men. One of the mistresses he worked for taught him to read and write until she was ordered to stop by her husband. Fredrick wrote about what he knew about, slavery. His autobiography and speeches were published after his escape to England. His only fiction work was also about slavery. His need to document the plight of slaves and fight for the abolishment of slavery was apparent in all of his writings.

Alexandre Dumas the writer of *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *The Three Musketeers* was from France (Goetz). Even though Alexandre had been born a freeman, his grandmother was a slave. Alexandre grew up in the world of his white father. Thus his writing reflected 19th century France. The revolution in France had redefined justice. You see in *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *The Man in the Iron Mask* the new democratic views sweeping France at Alexandre Dumas' time.

Even the black writers not mentioned in this essay wrote about their plight at the time. Before the Harlem Renaissance black writers faced hardship, whether they were slaves or not. Even the best master could not help a writer they did not see as an equal. Each writer before the Harlem Renaissance faced a bias audience. In each writer's way, they helped change opinion. They might not have changed many reader's minds much in their lifetime, but they left works that inspired every black and even some white writers that followed. They enabled today's people a glimpse of what it was like to be black before the 1920's.

Works Cited

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