

## **INTRODUCTION: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE**

The Harlem Renaissance was the most important event in twentieth-century African American intellectual and cultural life. Its most obvious manifestation was in a self-conscious literary movement, but literature and the Renaissance touched every aspect of African American literary and artistic creativity from the end of World War I through the Great Depression of the 1930s. Literature, critical writing, music, theater, musical theater, and the visual arts were encompassed by this movement; it also affected politics, social development, and almost every phase of the African American experience from the mid-1920s through the mid-1930s. The Renaissance emerged from the great demographic transformation that brought hundreds of thousands of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North; it gave voice to the reinvigorated demand for equality, justice, and pride that grew out of such diverse movements and individuals as Booker T. Washington, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and W.E.B. Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey and his Universal Negro Improvement Association.

The Harlem Renaissance, then, was an African American literary and artistic movement centered in Harlem, but influencing African American communities across the country; it flourished in the late 1920s and early 1930s, but its antecedents and legacy spread many years before 1920 and after 1930. It had no universally recognized name, but was known variously as the New Negro movement, the New Negro Renaissance, and the Negro Renaissance, as well as the Harlem Renaissance. It had no clearly defined beginning or end, but emerged out of the social and intellectual upheaval in the African American community that followed World War I, blossomed in the mid to late 1920s, and then faded away in the mid 1930s. While at its core it was primarily a literary movement, it touched all of the African American creative arts. While its participants shared a commitment to representing honestly and completely the African American experience, and believed in racial pride and equality, no common political philosophy, social belief, artistic style, or aesthetic principle bound them together. This was a movement of individuals free of any overriding manifesto. While central to African American artistic and intellectual life, by no means did it enjoy the full support of the black or white intelligentsia; it generated as much hostility and criticism as it did support and praise. From the moment of its birth its legitimacy was debated. Nevertheless, by at least one measure its success was clear: the Harlem Renaissance was the first time that a considerable number of mainstream publishers and critics took African American literature seriously, and it was the first time that African American literature and the arts attracted significant attention from the nation at large.

### **Nineteenth-Century African American Literature**

The roots of the Harlem Renaissance are found in the emergence of African American literature during the nineteenth century. Writers during this period attempted to give expression to black life at a time when slavery, the Civil War, emancipation, segregation, oppression, and the struggle for freedom and equality defined the black experience. Through their literary efforts they grappled with the fundamental question of African American art: were African American writers simply darker skinned versions of

American writers, or did they produce a distinctive literature based on African and African American themes and folk traditions?

During the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century slavery dominated African American literature. The most pervasive literary product was the slave narrative, of which the best known were Frederick Douglass's The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself, published in 1845, and two years later William Well Brown's Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave. Some two dozen slave narratives were published during the 1840s and 1850s, along with pioneering works of African American fiction including William Well Brown's Clotel; or, The President's Daughter, the first novel by an African American, and Harriet E. Wilson's publication in 1859 of Our Nig; or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, the first novel by an African American woman. The slave narratives enjoyed the greatest commercial success. They provided literary material for the emerging African American religious and anti-slavery publications, as well as for white-owned abolitionist journals, and found an audience among both whites and free blacks.

Following emancipation African American literature shifted its focus significantly. Memoirs of African American life remained popular, but instead of concentrating on the horrors of slavery, they emphasized individualism, self-reliance, moral rectitude, and personal achievement—traits that brought success in the post-emancipation era. Booker T. Washington's Up From Slavery, published in 1901, is the best known but not the only example of this genre. The audience also shifted during this period. The end of slavery, the decline of the abolitionist movement, and the hardening of racial lines greatly diminished the interest of whites in African American literature. Instead, growing literacy among blacks, the proliferation of black periodicals, and the emergence of small, usually church-affiliated black publishing operations created a new but limited market for black writing within the black community. Consequently, a small African American literary subculture developed that produced writing of uneven quality that was published and distributed within the black community by black institutions, and was largely invisible to the white literary world.

As this segregated literary tradition developed, black writers frequently turned their attention to African American folk culture and history. Much of the work in uncovering the rich African American folk tradition was done in the black community, especially at the emerging black colleges and universities. The Jubilee Singers of Fisk University, organized in 1871, popularized the spirituals as an art form, while at Hampton Institute writers for the Southern Workman collected and published African American folk materials. The Fisk Jubilee Singers along with white author Joel Chandler Harris, whose Uncle Remus stories popularized traditional black trickster tales, and black writer-performers such as Bob Cole and Rosamond Johnson, who used spirituals and traditional black musical forms to create the basis for black musical theater, brought black culture and folk traditions to an audience outside the black community in the late nineteenth century.

At the century's end, literature lagged behind black music and musical theater, limited primarily by the difficulty black authors faced in getting published and having their books distributed. The black press simply did not have the resources to produce and market on a mass scale. Works that challenged popular stereotypes of blacks were particularly affected. As the twentieth century began only two African American literary

figures had managed to break through these barriers and attain, at least on a limited scale, a national reputation. Poet Paul Laurence Dunbar and novelist Charles Waddell Chesnutt were discovered and promoted by critic William Dean Howells, published by commercial presses, and marketed nationally. But even these two achieved their greatest success when they embraced black folk traditions and conformed to white stereotypes of black literature. They were far less successful when they challenged these conventions, and especially when they addressed issues of race and racial oppression.

### **Social, Political, and intellectual Background**

The emergence of the Harlem Renaissance was connected to the rapidly changing social and political environment of the early twentieth-century United States. Underlying the Renaissance was the Great Migration that brought hundreds of thousands of African Americans from the rural South to the industrial cities of the North Central to this process was the development of Harlem as the political and cultural center of African America. Equally important was the political militancy that arose in the African American community in the second decade of the twentieth century. This militancy was reflected in the emergence of WEB Du Bois and the NAACP as champions of racial equality, and the rise and fall of Marcus Garvey and his message of racial pride.

The migration of African Americans northward was part of a general movement from rural to urban America that began in the second half of the nineteenth century and continued through most of the twentieth. This movement involved both black and white Americans, and connected directly to the transformation of the country from an agricultural to an urban and industrial economy. Along with economic forces the movement of African Americans was influenced by the deteriorating racial situation, especially in the southern states, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The growth of segregation, the systematic disfranchisement of African Americans, and most importantly, the intensification of racial violence especially lynching and race riots, combined with economic factors to precipitate the migration. African American migration patterns were extremely complex, and involved movement from one area of the South to another and from rural to urban areas within the South, as well as from the South to the North. Nevertheless, the movement of African Americans out of the rural South to the urban North was significant enough to warrant comment and concern in the South and to transform radically the racial composition of northern cities.

While African Americans migrated to industrial cities across the Northeast and Great Lakes region, the impact on New York City was especially notable. In 1890 approximately 20,000 African Americans resided in Manhattan. The largest number were concentrated in the Tenderloin district on the west side of Manhattan between 27th Street and 53rd Street, and in the San Juan Hill district, on the west side above 57th Street. These areas were slums with a high population density, dilapidated housing, and high crime rates; black residents were victims of various expressions of racial hostility including a race riot that swept through the Tenderloin in 1900. By 1930 the black population of Manhattan had increased tenfold to over 224,000. Harlem, north of Central Park, from 126th Street to 159th Street, was home to almost three-quarters of this population.

More important than its physical growth was the role that Harlem assumed in the imagination of black Americans in the early twentieth century. By the 1920s Harlem had supplanted Washington, Philadelphia, and Atlanta as the focal point of black America. It was the home to most of its important institutions and people—the NAACP and the Urban League, Marcus Garvey and his UNIA; it also had become the center of African American art and culture and a magnet that attracted the creative and ambitious of the race from across the country and the world. James Weldon Johnson gave voice to this image of Harlem in his 1930 book, *Black Manhattan*, "So here we have Harlem—not merely a colony, or a community, or a settlement—not at all a 'quarter' or a slum or a fringe—but a black city located in the heart of white Manhattan, and containing more Negroes to the square mile than any other spot on earth. It strikes the uninformed observer as a phenomenon, a miracle straight out of the skies." Johnson continued in increasingly glowing terms, describing Harlem as "one of the most beautiful and healthy" neighborhoods in the city, characterized not by overcrowded tenements but by "new-law apartment houses and handsome dwellings, with streets as well paved, as well lighted, and as well kept as in any other part of the city." Johnson's optimism captured that magic that was reflected in the Harlem Renaissance, but it ignored the reality that by 1930 Harlem was well on its way to becoming a blighted, inner-city slum.

At the same time that the black migration was altering African American demographic patterns, an intense struggle was underway for leadership in the black community. Initially this struggle focused on efforts to achieve equal rights, and was embodied in the conflict between the two most prominent African American leaders, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. Actually in their goals these two men were never far apart. They both wanted full civil and political rights for African Americans; they both opposed segregation in public accommodations and the disfranchisement of African Americans based on race; they both believed that education was a key to racial progress; and they both bitterly condemned lynching and other forms of racial violence. Many of their differences were in style and strategy. Washington, based in the rural South, avoided direct confrontation with southern racism, preferring to work behind the scenes, while Du Bois, based first in Atlanta, then in Harlem, advocated a more confrontational strategy. More significant was the personal clash that developed between the two and their followers as they struggled for dominance during the period after 1903. Ultimately the deteriorating racial situation in the early 1900s undermined confidence in Washington's leadership, while Du Bois's power base in the new NAACP provided him a forum from which to effectively challenge the Tuskegeean; Washington's death in 1915 ended the contest.

After 1915 Du Bois and the NAACP also faced challenges to their leadership. The most vocal, and for a time the best-organized, came from Marcus Garvey and his United Negro Improvement Association. Garvey, a Jamaican, arrived in the United States in 1916; a year later he made Harlem the center of his political movement. Initially Garvey advocated a fairly moderate program, combining a self-help, black capitalist message, similar to that of Booker T. Washington, with Pan-Africanism, a vision of unity among all of the peoples of the African Diaspora. By 1919 he had become more radical, advocating a separatist-nationalist program that called for the creation of black institutions and businesses, the liberation of colonized Africa, and ultimately the migration of African Americans back to an African homeland. By the end of 1920

Garvey's UNIA claimed over 1,000,000 members, mostly among the black working classes; two years later his movement was in shambles and he had been indicted for mail fraud.

Against this background blacks responded to the worsening racial situation by intensifying their demands for equal rights and debating new strategies to attain these rights. This heightened racial consciousness was embodied in the concept of the "New Negro" initially defined at the beginning of the new century, then revived to capture the renewed sense of racial pride and militancy that followed World War I. Actually the term was associated with a variety of political and racial views: from a belief in racial pride, self-reliance, and assimilation; a more radical and confrontational demand for equal rights; or a Pan-African and nationalist perspective. The term "New Negro" can best be understood as the culmination of extensive social and intellectual developments within the African American community in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and as a synthesis of the divergent black political and racial strategies that had dominated African American political thought prior to and immediately following World War I. These included the more moderate approach of Booker T. Washington, the more confrontational and militant strategy of W.E.B. Du Bois and the NAACP, and the nationalistic, Pan-African ideology of Marcus Garvey. It also included the racial pride and awareness expressed in organizations such as historian Carter G. Woodson's Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, and political efforts that led to the election of the first northern blacks to congress.

In an essay he wrote for the Harlem issue of Survey Graphic in 1925, which celebrated the new literary creativity, Alain Locke connected the New Negro with the emerging Harlem Renaissance. The "younger generation is vibrant with a new psychology," he declared, that reflected its shift "from social disillusionment to race pride." These New Negro writers, Locke continued, rejected the old stereotypes of black "aunties, uncles, and mammies" and the sentimental appeal against racial injustice that had characterized the work of the previous generation of black writers. Instead they embraced the more positive attitudes of self-respect and self-reliance; they repudiated social dependence and strongly asserted their racial pride.

### **African American Literature on the Eve of the Harlem Renaissance**

In spite of its shortcomings and limitations, the nineteenth century left a rich tradition in African American literature. In the twentieth century Chesnut and Dunbar would be joined by a host of other black poets and writers, several of whom began writing prior to the First World War, and continued into the period of the Harlem Renaissance. Of these the most notable were James Weldon Johnson and W.E.B. Du Bois.

Du Bois, best known as a historian, sociologist, and civil rights leader, wrote a novel and several poems during the pre-war period. His collection of essays, The Souls of Black Folk, and his early historical and sociological works had already established his credentials as a writer before he turned to fiction. In 1911 he published his first novel, a long, complex work that examined race, class, sectional, and economic conflict against the background of cotton production, marketing, and financing. Its expose of political and economic corruption in American industry bore some

resemblance to that depicted in Frank Norris's naturalistic novels. The Octopus, which came out in 1901, and The Pit published two years later. But Du Bois combined this naturalism with a complex plot that ranged from black characters to whites and from the rural South to the centers of political and financial power in Washington and New York. Although the novel suffered from the intricacies of its plot, and the tension between its efforts at social realism and its romantic tendencies, it had two redeeming characteristics. First, Du Bois developed a set of extremely forceful women characters; secondly, the novel was significant because Du Bois, who by 1911 had become the most important African American intellectual in the country, wrote it. The novel received fairly good reviews, perhaps aided by the stature of its author, but it did not sell well. Du Bois would not attempt another novel for seventeen years.

James Weldon Johnson's only novel, The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, appeared in 1912, the year after Du Bois's effort. Johnson had a varied background as a teacher, lawyer, political activist, poet, and songwriter. He had gained significant success in black musical theater as a non-performing member of the very popular songwriting and performing team, Rosamond Johnson and Bob Cole. Not satisfied with songwriting, Johnson turned to writing serious poetry and began work on his novel. The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man was the most significant novel published by an African American prior to the Harlem Renaissance. In many ways it was a transition piece that moved beyond the work of Dunbar and Chesnutt, and anticipated many of the themes that would appear in the Harlem movement. It tells of the effort of a light-skinned African American to find racial justice in the United States. Initially he lives as a black man, but ultimately, he achieves his goals by crossing the color line and passing for white. Like Chesnutt, Johnson exposed the racial problems confronting African Americans, but he also went much further, exploring the meaning of the black experience in America, especially the psychological impact of racism. Racial prejudice was important, but to Johnson the black response to race was far more so. Johnson also expanded on another theme, first introduced by Dunbar in his novel, The Sport of the Gods. Like Dunbar, Johnson explored the local color of the emerging black ghetto, depicting vividly and realistically the lives of the black actors and musicians who lived and worked along 53rd Street in Manhattan. In spite of its quality, The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man suffered from poor marketing and distribution, and did not do well until it was re-released during the Harlem Renaissance.

Johnson had somewhat more success with his poetry. Two pieces in particular secured his early literary reputation. The first he wrote to celebrate Abraham Lincoln's birthday; his brother, Rosamond, set it to music and it was performed by a school choir in February 1900. The poem and song, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," is now celebrated as the Negro National Anthem. Johnson wrote the second poem, "Fifty Years," to mark the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. The New York Times published it, to great acclaim, on its editorial page on January 1, 1913. Four years later Johnson published his first book of poetry, Fifty Years and Other Poems. This venture was less successful. The title poem and ten others were strong, but the rest, a combination of dialect pieces, some patterned after Dunbar's work, others drawn from his writing for the theater and non-racial verses, were second rate.

By the end of World War I literary foundations laid by Chesnutt, Dunbar, Johnson, and Du Bois, together with the racial, social, cultural, and political ferment that

was brewing in Harlem, led to the movement known as the Harlem Renaissance. Several young black writers contributed to this ferment, but it involved much more than literature. World War I brought in its wake a series of devastating race riots culminating in the 1919 outbreaks in Washington and Chicago. Black politics shifted as Marcus Garvey mobilized tens of thousands of supporters and confronted the NAACP and the African American establishment with a mass movement, while A. Philip Randolph and the Messenger challenged the conventional leadership from the socialist left. Along with the thousands coming North into Harlem with the black migration, jazz and the blues followed from the South and Midwest into the city's bars and cabarets. These creative energies spread to the stage. Shuffle Along played in 1921 to standing-room-only crowds, and launched a series of black-oriented musicals and musical reviews. Claude McKay's volume of poetry, Harlem Shadows, appeared in 1922, Jean Toomer's experimental novel Cane followed the next year, and these as well as the initial published works of other young black writers contributed to Harlem's burgeoning cultural life.

Claude McKay, born and raised in Jamaica, had already published two volumes of dialect island poetry before he came to the United States in 1912 to study agriculture. By 1915 he was living in Harlem pursuing a writing career. McKay's literary connections during this period were not in Harlem, but in Greenwich Village. His first American poem appeared in Seven Arts; others followed in Pearson's and The Liberator. However, Harlem and the African American experience were the source and content of his best writing during this period, as evidenced in Harlem Shadows, his first and his finest American book of poetry. Like McKay, Jean Toomer's primary literary connections were among whites—Waldo Frank, who helped guide the publication of his book, poet Hart Crane, editor Gorham Munson, artist Georgia O'Keeffe, and photographer Alfred Stieglitz. His writing, though, was purely black in content and theme. His experimental book Cane excited African American critics who praised the book for its poetic style and for its probing of the black experience.

Other young writers also surfaced in the early 1920s. Langston Hughes published his first poem, "A Negro Speaks of Rivers" in The Crisis in 1921, when he was a nineteen-year old freshman at Columbia; by the spring of 1924 when he returned to New York after spending the better part of two years abroad, he was already something of a literary celebrity. Walter White, an officer of the NAACP, published his first novel, The Fire in the Flint, in 1924, as did Jessie Fauset, Du Bois's young editorial assistant at The Crisis. Yet up to this point there was no identifiable literary movement—only a growing amount of literary activity.

## **Origins of the Harlem Renaissance**

Against this background of increasing literary activity, three events occurred between 1924 and 1926 that launched the Harlem Renaissance. The first of these established a link between three major players in the literary Renaissance—the black literary and political intelligentsia, the white publishers and critics, and the young black writers. The occasion was the dinner that Charles S. Johnson of the Urban League hosted on March 21, 1924 to recognize the new literary talent in the black community and to present this to New York's white literary establishment. Out of this dinner came the March 1925 "Harlem issue" of the avant-garde magazine The Survey Graphic, edited by

Alain Locke and devoted to defining the aesthetic of black literature and art. The next event signaled the unprecedented white fascination with Harlem, African Americans, and their art and culture. This was the publication in early 1926 of white novelist Carl Van Vechten's Nigger Heaven, a spectacularly popular expose of Harlem life that helped create the "Negro vogue" that drew thousands of sophisticated New Yorkers to Harlem's exotic night life and stimulated the national market for African American literature and music. The final event symbolized the coalescence of a core group of young writers and artists into a movement. In the fall of 1926 a group of young black writers produced their own literary magazine, Fire!! With Fire!! poet Langston Hughes, writers Wallace Thurman and Zora Neale Hurston, artist Aaron Douglas, along with other young writers and artists declared their intent to assume ownership of the literary Renaissance.

### **The Harlem Renaissance**

Despite the efforts of Thurman and his young colleagues to launch a magazine that would define the new literary movement, Fire!! fizzled out after only one issue and the literary movement remained ill defined. No common literary style or political ideology was associated with the Harlem Renaissance. It was far more an identity than an ideology or a literary or artistic school. What united participants was their sense of taking part in a common endeavor and their commitment to giving artist expression to the African American experience. If any statement defined the philosophy of the new literary movement, it was Langston Hughes's essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," published in *The Nation* on June 16, 1926. This essay was an artistic declaration of independence— independence from the stereotypes that whites held about African Americans and the expectations that they had for black literary works. Independence also from the expectations that black leaders and critics had for black writers, and the hopes that they placed in their work. As Hughes concluded:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly, too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not their displeasure doesn't matter either. We will build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we will stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.

The determination of black writers to follow their own artistic vision and the diversity that this created were the principal characteristics of the Harlem Renaissance. This diversity ranged from Langston Hughes weaving the stylistic forms of African American music into his experimental poems of ghetto life ("The Weary Blues"); Claude McKay adopting the sonnet as the vehicle for his militant poems attacking the racial violence of 1919 ("If We Must Die"), or for presenting glimpses of Harlem life ("The Harlem Dancer"); Countee Cullen employing classical literary allusions as he explored the African roots of black life ("Heritage"); Nella Larsen presenting a powerful psychological study of an African American women's loss of identity (*Quicksand*, in 1928); or Zora Neale Hurston using the folk life of the black rural south in her brilliant exploration of race and gender (Their Eyes Were Watching God, in 1937). Diversity and experimentation were also reflected in the blues of Bessie Smith, the range of jazz from

the early rhythms of Jelly Roll Morton to the instrumentation of Louis Armstrong or the sophisticated orchestration of Duke Ellington, and in the primitivism and African images in the paintings and illustrations of Aaron Douglas. During the course of the Harlem Renaissance from the mid-1920s through the mid-1930s, sixteen black writers published over fifty volumes of poetry and fiction, while dozens of other African American artists made their mark in painting, music, and theater.

And yet, within this diversity, several themes emerge which set the character of the Harlem Renaissance. No black writer expressed all of these, but each did address one or more. The first of these themes was the effort to recapture the African American past, both its rural southern roots and its African heritage. Interest in the African past corresponded with the rise of Pan-Africanism in African American politics, which was at the center of Marcus Garvey's ideology, and also a major concern of W.E.B. Du Bois in the 1920s. Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes addressed their African heritage in their poems, while Aaron Douglas used African motifs in his paintings and drawings. A number of musicians, from the classical composer William Grant Still to jazz great Louis Armstrong, introduced African inspired rhythms and themes in their compositions. For most writers and artists the exploration of their Africanism was a positive experience, even though some white patrons attempted to channel black artistic creativity into their vision of African primitivism.

A number of black writers explored their southern heritage. Jean Toomer's Cane won wide acclaim for its use of southern black culture to understand the African American experience. Ironically, Toomer himself had little direct knowledge of the South. Zora Neale Hurston, on the other hand, was an experienced folklorist who not only published two collections of black southern folklore, Mules and Men in 1935 and Tell My Horse in 1938, but also provided an extensive study of rural southern black life in her 1937 novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God.

Another theme Harlem Renaissance writers used was the exploration of life in Harlem and other urban centers. Both Hughes and McKay drew on Harlem images for their poetry, and McKay used the ghetto as the setting for his first novel Home to Harlem, published in 1928. Some black writers, including McKay and Hughes as well as Rudolph Fisher and Wallace Thurman, were accused of overemphasizing crime, sexuality, and other less savory aspects of ghetto life in order to feed the voyeuristic desires of white readers and publishers; white novelist Carl Van Vechten was blamed for pioneering this exploitive literature in his controversial 1926 novel Nigger Heaven. Other black writers like Jessie Fauset wrote about the black middle-class urban experience.

A third major theme addressed by the literature of the Harlem Renaissance was race. Virtually every novel and play and most of the poetry explored race in America, especially the impact of race and racism on African Americans. In their simplest form these works protested racial injustice. Claude McKay's "If We Must Die" was among the best of this genre. Langston Hughes also wrote protest pieces as did almost every black writer at one time or another. The struggle against lynching in the mid-1920s stimulated anti-lynching poetry as well as Walter White's carefully researched study of the subject, Rope and Faggot, which came out in 1929; in the early 1930s the Scottsboro incident motivated considerable protest writing as well as Negro, a 1934 anthology that addressed race in an international context. Most of the literary efforts of the Harlem Renaissance

eschewed overt protest or propaganda, focusing instead on the psychological and social impact of race. Among the best of these studies were Nella Larsen's two novels, Quicksand published in 1928 and, a year later, Passing; both explore characters of mixed racial heritage who struggle to define their racial identity in a world of prejudice and racism. Langston Hughes used similar themes in his poem "Cross" and his 1931 Play, Mulatto as did Jessie Fauset in 1929 in her novel Plum Bun. That same year Wallace Thurman made color discrimination within the urban black community the central theme of his novel The Blacker the Berry.

Along with its other themes and materials, the Harlem Renaissance incorporated all aspects of African American culture in its literature, from the use of black music as an inspiration for poetry to black folklore as an inspiration for novels and short stories. Best known for this was Langston Hughes, who used the rhythms and styles of jazz and the blues in much of his early poetry. James Weldon Johnson, who published two collections of black spirituals in 1927 and 1928 and Sterling Brown, who used the blues and southern work songs in many of the poems in his 1932 book of poetry Southern Road, continued the practice that Hughes had initiated. Other writers drew from black religion as a literary source. Johnson made the black preacher and his sermons the basis of the poems in God's Trombones while Hurston and Larsen used black religion and black preachers in their novels. Hurston's first novel, Jonah's Gourd Vine (1934) described the exploits of a southern black preacher, while in the last portion of Quicksand, Larsen's heroine is ensnared by religion and a southern black preacher.

Through all of these themes Harlem Renaissance writers were determined to express the African American experience in all of its variety and complexity as realistically as possible. This commitment to realism ranged from the ghetto realism that created such controversy when writers exposed negative aspects of African American life, beautifully crafted and detailed portraits of black life in small towns such as in Hughes's 1930 novel, Not Without Laughter, or the witty and biting depiction of Harlem's black literati in Wallace Thurman's Infants of the Spring.

The Harlem Renaissance appealed to a mixed audience—the African American middle class and the white book-buying public. African American magazines such as the NAACP monthly journal, The Crisis, and Opportunity, the Urban League's monthly publication, employed Harlem Renaissance writers on their editorial staff, published their poetry and short stories, and promoted African American literature through articles, reviews, and annual literary prizes. Black writers attempted to produce their own literary venues as well. In addition to the short-lived Fire!!, Wallace Thurman spearheaded another single-issue literary magazine, Harlem, in 1927, while poet Countee Cullen edited a "Negro Poets" issue of the avant-garde poetry magazine Palms in 1926, and in 1927 brought out an anthology of African American poetry, Caroling Dusk.

As important as these literary outlets were, Harlem Renaissance literature relied heavily on white-owned publishing houses and magazines. Indeed, one of the major accomplishments of the Renaissance was to push open the door to mainstream periodicals and publishers. African American music also played to mixed audiences. Harlem's cabarets attracted both Harlem residents and white New Yorkers seeking out Harlem nightlife. The famous Cotton Club carried this to a bizarre extreme by providing black entertainment for exclusively white audiences. Ultimately, the more successful black musicians and entertainers moved their performances downtown. The relationship of the

Harlem Renaissance to white publishers and white audiences created controversy. While most African American critics strongly supported the movement, others like Benjamin Brawley and even W.E.B. Du Bois were sharply critical and accused Renaissance writers of reinforcing negative African American stereotypes. Langston Hughes's assertion that black artists intended to express themselves freely, no matter what the black or white public thought, accurately reflected the attitude of most, but not all writers of the movement.

The Harlem Renaissance declined in the mid-1930s. A number of factors contributed to this decline. The Great Depression increased the economic pressure on both writers and publishers. As a result organizations like the NAACP and the Urban League, which had actively promoted the Renaissance in the 1920s, shifted their interests to economic and social issues. Reflecting this change, both The Crisis and Opportunity suspended their literary prizes in the early 1930s. Actually, the role of The Crisis in promoting the Harlem Renaissance had diminished in the latter years of the previous decade following the departure of Jessie Fauset as literary editor in 1926 and Du Bois's growing disillusionment with the direction of black literature had taken and his inability to influence that direction. Charles S. Johnson's 1927 resignation from the Urban League redirected Opportunity back toward social and economic issues in subsequent years.

A second factor contributing to the decline of the Renaissance was the departure of many key figures in the late 1920s and the early 1930s. In addition to Charles S. Johnson, James Weldon Johnson moved from Harlem back to the South in 1931, and W.E.B. Du Bois followed in 1934; Langston Hughes left Harlem in 1931 and did not return permanently until World War II. Rudolph Fisher and Wallace Thurman died in 1934, as did James Weldon Johnson four years later. Many, who did not die or leave, stopped writing. Countee Cullen, faced with a significant decline in his literary income, took a full-time job teaching school in 1934; most of his writing after that time was children's stories. Nella Larsen suffered an emotional breakdown, and never completed her projected third novel *Claude McKay*, returning to Harlem in 1934 after an absence of about twelve years wrote that the few writers from the old days who were still around seemed to be at loose ends. His writing after his return consisted of his autobiography and a history of Harlem. In contrast Zora Neale Hurston actually enjoyed her greatest period of literary output in the 1930s, but fell silent and largely dropped out of sight after the 1940s. Sterling Brown and Ama Bontemps shifted their base of operations to black universities and their writing to literary criticism and literary history. Only Langston Hughes continued to support himself through writing after the 1930s, but he no longer considered himself part of a literary movement.

Any doubt that the era of the Harlem Renaissance had ended was put to rest by the Harlem Riot of 1935. This event shattered the illusion of Harlem as the "Mecca" of the New Negro that had figured so prominently in the folklore of the Renaissance. Harlem was a ghetto, with all of the problems associated with American urban ghettos—high rates of poverty and crime, poor and overcrowded housing, inadequate city services, job discrimination, and control of government, the police force, and employment by the dominant white power structure.

Yet the Renaissance did not disappear overnight. Almost one-third of the books published during the Renaissance appeared after 1929, and Zora Neale Hurston's

Their Eyes Were Watching God, arguably the best novel of the Renaissance, came out in 1937. In the final analysis, the Harlem Renaissance ended when most of those associated with it left Harlem or stopped writing, and the new young artists who emerged in the 1930s and 1940s chose not to associate with the movement.

### **Promoters and Critics of the Harlem Renaissance**

The Harlem Renaissance has endured a troubled history at the hands of critics and chroniclers. Even during its heyday its reputation and very existence were challenged, most frequently from within the African American intelligentsia.

Supporters and promoters of the movement included James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, and Charles S. Johnson. A poet, novelist, and literary anthologist in his own right, James Weldon Johnson both praised and promoted the literary endeavors of black artists. Tolerant of the diverse themes and topics addressed by the movement, he argued that the flowering of black literary and artistic creativity constituted the wedge that would crack open the wall of prejudice and discrimination that defined race relations in the U.S. Sociologist Charles S. Johnson concurred adding that literature, by finding meaning in the African American experience' could assist in easing the social and psychological stress that accompanied the black migration and rapid urbanization. Alain Locke was concerned more with defining the aesthetic of the Renaissance than with its social or political consequences. In his essay "Negro Youth Speaks" he praised the "lusty vigorous realism" that Hughes, Rudolph Fisher, and others brought to their literature, not because they typified a racial stereotype, but because they were unique creations. In his mind the purpose of art (including black art) was not to produce stereotypes, but to explore the variety and uniqueness of life. The literature of the Harlem Renaissance should be racial, not for the sake of propaganda, but "purely for the sake of art," and the artist should use race as an "added enriching adventure and discipline giving subtler overtones to life, making it more beautiful and interesting, even if more poignantly so."

Countering these promoters and supporters of the Renaissance was a group of African intellectuals whose assessment of the literary movement ranged from ambivalent to negative. William Stanley Braithwaite, literary critic for the Boston Evening Transcript and the most successful black literary critic during first decades of the twentieth century, was out of step with the racial consciousness of the young writers. He opposed the realistic descriptions of ghetto life that characterized the writings of Hughes, McKay, and other writers and accused these young writers of praising degradation, which, he feared, would stigmatize African Americans. In spite of these concerns Braithwaite continued to assist black writers in getting published, but encouraged them to produce more traditional works that would reflect middle class values, or at least focus on the lives of educated middle class black characters. Literary historian Benjamin Brawley agreed with much of Braithwaite's assessment of the Harlem Renaissance, especially the tendency of many of its artists to focus on "primitivism" and what he termed "the popular demand for the exotic and exciting" which led to the celebration of a mood of "hedonism and paganism" in which "introspection and self-pity ran riot." Bad literature rather than the promotion of negative racial stereotypes was Brawley's principal concern.

Most complex and enigmatic of the contemporary black critics was W.E.B. Du Bois, the preeminent black intellectual of the period as well as a poet and novelist

himself. From his position in the NAACP and as editor of The Crisis, Du Bois was strategically placed to promote the movement. And for a time he did so. In the early to mid 1920s he (or his literary editor, novelist Jessie Fauset) competed with the Urban League's Charles S. Johnson and their journal. Opportunity in promoting and publishing the African American arts. He even established a theater group to preserve authentic African American theater from the onslaught of the popular "black musical reviews" on Broadway. Later in the decade, as his personal political and economic views shifted leftward, Du Bois became increasingly intolerant of much of the Harlem Renaissance—particularly the realistic renderings of Harlem street life and the life of its lower classes and criminal element. This was most clearly reflected in his comments in The Crisis in 1926 on Carl Van Vechten's Nigger Heaven—he called that novelist's bestseller "a blow in the face" and "an affront to the hospitality of black folk,"—and in his review two years later of Claude McKay's Home to Harlem, which he wrote, "for the most part, nauseates me, and after the dirtier parts of its filth, I feel distinctly like taking a bath." The root of Du Bois's concern was his belief that the practitioners of the Harlem Renaissance subordinated the political needs of African Americans to their sense of art and the freedom of artistic expression, and, not coincidentally, to the tastes of white publishers and white readers. He most clearly expressed his disdain with these views in an address to the annual NAACP convention in June 1926 in Chicago, which he reprinted in the October 1926 issue of The Crisis:

Thus all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda.

And in 1928 he wrote his second novel, Dark Princess, in an effort to offer a literary model to wean young writers away from the Van Vechten school.

### **Harlem Renaissance RIP**

During the 1930s, as the Harlem Renaissance began to wane, criticism of the movement continued and took on a new form. Alain Locke, one of the movement's staunchest supporters in the 1920s, backed away in the early 1930s. In a 1931 essay in Opportunity he even celebrated (prematurely) its demise:

Has the afflatus of Negro self-expression died down? Are we outliving the Negro fad? Has the Negro creative artist wandered into the ambush of the professional exploiters? By some signs and symptoms. Yes. But to anticipate my conclusion, —'Let us rejoice and be exceedingly glad.' The second and truly sound phase of the cultural development of the Negro in American literature and art cannot begin without a collapse of the boom, a change to a more responsible and devoted leadership, a revision of basic values, and along with a penitential purgation of spirit, a wholesale expulsion of the moneychangers from the temple of art.

This analysis reflected much of the 1920s criticism of Du Bois and others. Locke, though, added the charge that the works created in the Harlem Renaissance failed depict accurately the nature of African Americans and the African American experience. "I

think the main fault of the movement this far," he wrote, "has been lack of any deep realization of what was truly Negro, and what was merely superficially characteristic."

A more systematic attack on the Harlem Renaissance in the 1930s came from the radical left, centered in the journal The New Masses and including two Writers, Langston Hughes and Richard Wright. The New Masses had initially embraced African American literature, especially that which gave voice to the experiences of the black masses, and avoided false exoticism and primitivism. In the 1930s, under the leadership of Michael Gold, the magazine became increasingly critical of the Harlem Renaissance, especially the influence of Carl Van Vechten, who, Gold charged, "created a brood of Negro literary bums" who wasted "their splendid talents on the gutter-life side of Harlem." From their increasingly Soviet Communist perspective. Gold and The New Masses group attacked the Van Vechten influence, bourgeois decadence, rejected jazz as another inferior musical expression linked the capitalist exploitation of blacks, and backed away from any concept of an African American culture that was distinct from proletarian culture. In the early 1930s Langston Hughes became the poster child for The New Masses' vision of black proletarian literature. Hughes became a frequent contributor to The New Masses as his politics moved leftward. The clearest expression of this leftward trend in his writing was a series of proletarian poems, many inspired by his travels in the Soviet Union during 1932 and 1933, that he sought to publish under the title A New Song. After a lengthy discussion with his publisher, Blanche Knopf, that centered on the effect of such a volume on his literary career, Hughes withdrew them, and in 1938 had them published and distributed by The International Workers Order, a radical labor press. The New Masses, aware of Hughes's shifting politics, celebrated him, proclaiming his 1930 novel, Not Without Laughter, the beginning of a break with the "vicious Harlem tradition of Negro literature sponsored by Van Vechten and illustrated by Covarrubias." In his October 1930 review of the novel Walt Cameron found Hughes's novel, while not entirely free from the Van Vechten influence, a major step forward. "[It] is a race novel. It concludes in a misty pointless fashion. There is no clear class-consciousness or revolutionary spirit, which distinguished some of Hughes's early poems. But under its black skin, there is red proletarian blood running through it. With all its faults, Not Without Laughter goes far beyond Harlem. It is *our* novel."

The young Richard Wright was another African American author who joined The New Masses circle, at least early in his career. In a 1937 essay, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," Wright echoed the charges of his mentors, that the literature of the Harlem Renaissance catered to white audiences, and that to reach this audience it either "crept in through the kitchen in the form of jokes," or became the "fruits of that foul soil which was the result of a liaison between inferiority-complexed Negro 'geniuses' and burnt-out white Bohemians with money." Though this process, he continued, it almost always ignored "the Negro himself, his needs, his sufferings, his aspirations."

### **African American Literature after the Harlem Renaissance**

The decline of the Harlem Renaissance was not a failure of African American literature. If anything black literature emerged from the Harlem Renaissance healthier than it had ever been. Certainly the quality of post-Renaissance black writing did not decline, nor did the market for black literature or the attention paid to it by white critics.

From 1940 to 1960 African American literature achieved a series of breakthroughs in several areas. First, the selection of Richard Wright's novel, Native Son, as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection represented a major market breakthrough for a black writer, guaranteeing the critically acclaimed novel best-seller status, and its author a literary income never achieved by his predecessors. The next breakthrough came in the area of critical recognition. Gwendolyn Brooks won the Pulitzer Prize in 1950 for her book of poetry, Annie Alien; in 1952 Ralph Ellison won the National Book Award for Invisible Man; and Lorraine Hansberry received the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for her 1959 play, A Raisin in the Sun. The final breakthrough came in the area of popular fiction where Chester Himes and Frank Yearby achieved considerable success. Himes became a very successful mystery writer, especially in France, while Yearby published thirty popular novels, including the 1946 best seller The Foxes of Harrow. Margaret Walker, Melvin Tolson, and Robert Hayden, in poetry, together with Ann Petry and James Baldwin in fiction added luster to African American literature in the decades following the Harlem Renaissance.

The political and social upheavals of the civil rights movement and the rise of the black power movement dominated the 1960s and early 1970s. Much of the best known black writing of these years was political—The Autobiography of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and "I Have a Dream" speech, and Eldridge Cleaver's Soul on Ice. Poet and playwright Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) was the preeminent literary figure of the period. Black literature reflected this political bent. The Black Arts movement consciously connected itself to the black community, especially the struggles for civil rights and black power. Larry Neal, co-editor with Baraka of Black Fire: An Anthology of African American Writing, a collection as influential to the Black Arts movement as Locke's New Negro was to the Harlem Renaissance, explained:

The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from the community. Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. ... The Black Arts and the Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic.

The Black Arts movement attempted to implement a literary nationalism by developing its own journals and publishing houses; however, as the marketability of works by black writers was established, mainstream presses signed up many of them. The Black Arts movement also renewed popular interest in black literature, which resulted in the reprinting of many of the Harlem Renaissance works in the 1960s and 1970s.

In the last quarter of the twentieth century African American literature flowered. The dominant trend during this period was the predominance of women writers. One characteristic of the literature of this period was the application of the findings of African American history to literature. The best known example of this is Alex Haley's immensely popular Roots, which appeared in 1976. Other examples include Ernest Gain's The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman published in 1971, in 1977 Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon and ten years later her Beloved, August Wilson's plays, which follow black history decade by decade through the twentieth century, as well as popular mystery writer Walter Mosely's examination of the history of post-war black Los Angeles in his Easy Rollins novels. The impact of women writers during this period is illustrated by

Alice Walker, whose 1974 book In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens was an effort to elevate the cultural contributions of southern black women, and who was largely responsible for refocusing critical attention on Zora Neale Hurston. It is also seen in the autobiographical writings of poet Maya Angelou, beginning with her first, / Know Why the Caged Bird Sings in 1970. Unprecedented critical acclaim and popular response came with the award of the Nobel Prize for literature to Toni Morrison in 1993, and the incredible popularity of the television production of Alex Haley's Roots. Alice Walker won the 1982 Pulitzer Prize for The Color Purple, playwright August Wilson received two Pulitzers, one for Fences and one for The Piano Lesson, and novelist Gloria Naylor achieved the American Book Award in 1982 for The Women of Brewster Place. African American writers during the last twenty-five years have achieved the popularity, critical success, and financial rewards so eagerly sought by the writers of the Harlem Renaissance.

### **The Critics and the Harlem Renaissance: The 1950s and 1960s**

Richard Wright soon freed himself from the dogma-dominated literary approach of the New Masses crowd, and along with Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and other mid-twentieth century African American writers contributed to another outburst of literary creativity in the decade before and after the Second World War. Although they distanced themselves from the Harlem Renaissance, they were not overtly hostile to it. The post-World War II period also witnessed the first significant efforts to reappraise the Harlem Renaissance; these efforts led to several retrospectives of the movement, including one in 1950 by Phylon, and one from Howard University Press in 1955 entitled The New Negro Thirty Years Afterwards. A number of the works of the Harlem Renaissance were reprinted during the 1950s and 1960s, along with the publication of several anthologies of African American literature and critical writing. Much of this occurred as the civil rights movement stimulated interest in black history and black literature, and as the first courses in these subjects began to appear in the white universities. However, the study of the Harlem Renaissance remained segregated—it might appear in "black" courses and "black" books, but it was generally ignored in literary histories, literary anthologies, and survey courses on twentieth century literature or history.

Critical interpretation of the Harlem Renaissance became increasingly negative in the late 1960s as the civil rights movement gave way to the black power movement, and as the politically-oriented Black Arts movement emerged. The scholarly studies of the Harlem Renaissance that appeared at this time reinforced the criticisms of the 1920s and 1930s and added a more nationalistic perspective that grew out of the political perspectives of the black power and Black Arts movements. Harold Cruse in his book The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual, and Nathan Huggins, who wrote the first scholarly study of the movement, pioneered this reassessment of the Renaissance.

Harold Cruse in 1967 placed his examination of the Harlem Renaissance within his larger analysis of the African American intellectual. Like a number of earlier critics, he lambasted the movement for its dependence on white patronage, which, he argued, caused the movement to become "partially smothered in the guilty, idealistic, or egotistical interventions of cultural paternalism" that was typical of NAACP "interracialism" and the efforts of James Weldon Johnson to extend its "politics of civil

rights to the politics of culture." Cruse added two elements to this criticism. First, he emphasized the failure of the African American middle class to "support the Harlem Renaissance movement morally, aesthetically, or financially," and second, he stressed the failure of African American intellectuals to provide direction for the movement, and to provide it with critical and aesthetic standards.

Four years later in his book, Harlem Renaissance, Nathan Huggins echoed many of Cruse's arguments, especially the tendency of black writers to surrender their artistic vision to white promoters and patrons. As a result of this surrender, Huggins contended that black writers strayed from more authentic expressions of the black experience and either were led into exoticism and primitivism, or allowed themselves to become enslaved to white forms and values. Even though both Cruse and Huggins had underestimated the critical and aesthetic direction that the African American intelligentsia provided, or attempted to provide to the movement, other critics of the period concurred with their arguments. They found similar weaknesses in the movement and the consensus among them was that the Harlem Renaissance had been in large part a failure, or perhaps a missed opportunity.

### **The Harlem Renaissance at the End of the Century**

A more positive and more sophisticated analysis of the Harlem Renaissance appeared in the 1980s and 1990s when the Harlem Renaissance itself enjoyed a renaissance. A new generation largely of African American scholars produced a series of excellent biographies of participants and critical studies of their works. These efforts added greatly to the knowledge of the period and provided a deeper and more critically based assessment of the Harlem Renaissance. This development coincided with the resurgence of African American literature, especially writing by African American women, which stimulated greater interest in the literary antecedents of these modern works. Related to this was the rediscovery of Zora Neale Hurston and her rise to a dominant position both African American and women's literary studies. Accompanying this was the expansion of African American studies programs and the scholarship that these programs generated. As African American studies programs matured, they stimulated the production of new anthologies and editions of Harlem Renaissance literature and African American literature. The most obvious example of this was the Norton Anthology of African American Literature, but it also included complete collections of the poetry of Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes, and new releases of novels of Wallace Thurman, Rudolph Fisher, and Claude McKay, among others. Equally important are developments such as the University of Missouri Press' publication of the complete works of Langston Hughes, and, perhaps most important, the publication of the works of several black writers, including Zora Neale Hurston, by the prestigious Library of America. If there is an American literary canon, it is defined by inclusion in the Library of America. The appearance of African American writers in this series, especially writers from the Harlem Renaissance, is the strongest sign yet that African American literature has finally moved into the mainstream, and that the significance of the Harlem Renaissance to American literature is no longer in dispute.