

Name: _____ Class: _____

The Harlem Renaissance

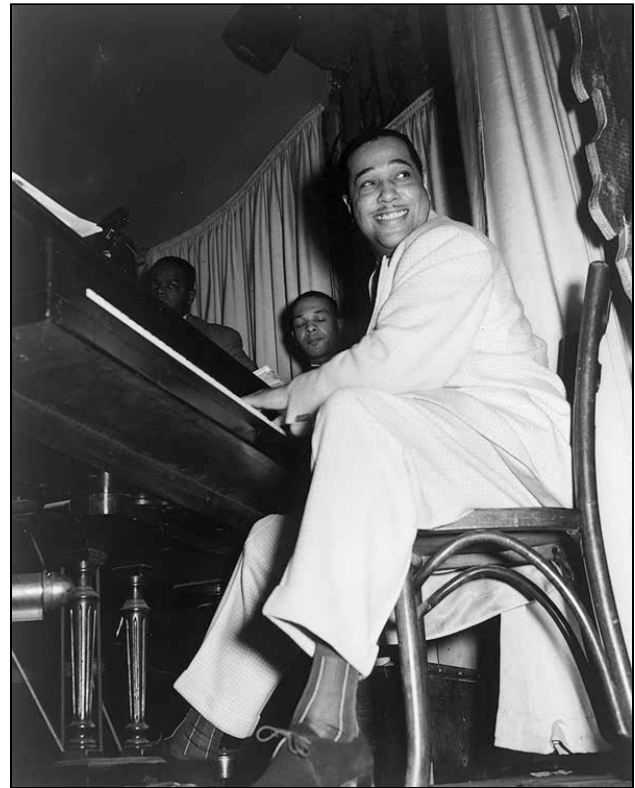
By Jessica McBirney
2017

The Harlem Renaissance was a cultural, social, and artistic movement that took place in Harlem, New York during the 1920s. This informational text further discusses how the movement developed, as well as its impact on culture in America. As you read, take notes on what events led up to the Harlem Renaissance and how they contributed to it.

- [1] The Harlem Renaissance was an artistic and cultural explosion among African Americans living in Harlem, New York in the 1920s. It produced some of the greatest American artists, musicians, and writers of all time, and expanded the identity and culture of a group that had been marginalized¹ for hundreds of years.

Why Harlem?

After the Civil War ended and slavery was abolished² in 1865, many African Americans remained in southern states where their families had once been slaves on plantations. Most found jobs as farm laborers – doing essentially the same work they had done as slaves, but now for a meager wage. Over the next few decades, even though the federal government made some attempts to give African Americans a decent life, segregation, as well as racist attitudes and racial violence, kept freed slaves and their families from improving their own circumstances. The governments of southern states often ignored the hardships faced by African Americans.



"Duke Ellington at the Hurricane Club 1943" by Gordon Parks is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

In the early 1900s African Americans began moving north where they could find better paid jobs working in city factories instead of on farms. This movement was known as The Great Migration. Neighborhoods that were mostly black popped up in cities all over the North, including Harlem, a neighborhood in New York City. It was originally built for a white, upper middle class population, but in 1910 a group of African American realtors purchased several blocks in the area, and opened the neighborhood to the new black migrants from the south. Not only did African Americans settle there, but dark-skinned immigrants from the Caribbean also came to seek a better life. These immigrants, often former slaves as well, also faced discrimination and oppression³ in their home countries.

1. **Marginalize (verb):** to assign someone to a powerless or unimportant position within a society or group
2. **Abolish (verb):** to get rid of or outlaw
3. **Oppression (noun):** the cruel or unfair treatment of a group of people

Art Confronting Racism

Even though the north did not have as much overt and institutionalized racism⁴ as the south, African Americans still faced some level of discrimination and encountered stereotypes⁵ about their people and culture. One of the most common stereotypes was that they were primitive, wild people still closely connected to the “jungle roots” of their origins in Africa.

- [5] The first major cultural event of the Harlem Renaissance, a 1917 theater production called “Three Plays for a Negro Theater,” tore down these stereotypes for its viewers. It was written by the white playwright Ridgely Torrence and cast African Americans to portray complex human events and emotions. Two years later poet Claude McKay published the sonnet “If We Must Die.” Although the poem never addressed race directly, African-American readers found its message of defiance⁶ inspiring as they continued to hear about racially motivated violence around the country. Literature in the Harlem Renaissance portrayed African Americans as complex human beings with intelligence and emotions, just like any other person. It provided insight into the everyday life of African Americans. These ideas were revolutionary for many white spectators⁷ because they countered the typical, stereotypical depictions of African Americans in popular culture.

The Harlem Renaissance did not promote a specific political viewpoint or artistic style. Rather, it was a chance for a variety of African American artists to use their own form of art to express racial pride and identity. Artists held the belief that through intellect, literature, art, and music, their work could challenge racism and enable African Americans to better integrate⁸ into American society as a whole.

Literature and Music

Literature dominated the Harlem Renaissance and was one of the most powerful tools African Americans used to develop their own culture. The most famous writer to emerge from the period was Langston Hughes, a poet who decided to ignore many of the conventional rules for poetry in favor of a more rhythmic approach, drawn from traditional and new African American music like spirituals and the blues. He wrote about the many struggles African Americans faced, but a theme of hope and overcoming hardship ran through many of his books.

Writers at the time popularized the concept of the “New Negro.” This was an identity they hoped all African Americans would embrace, one of assertiveness and a refusal to submit to the old racial prejudice and segregation that had plagued⁹ them for so long.

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4. “Overt racism” refers to racial discrimination that is openly expressed, and “institutionalized racism” refers to racism specifically in social and political institutions, like the government and organizations.
 5. **Stereotype (noun):** a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a person
 6. **Defiance (noun):** boldness, rebellion
 7. **Spectator (noun):** someone who looks on or watches (a performance or other public event)
 8. **Integrate (verb):** to make part of a larger unit or group
 9. **Plague (verb):** to cause continual trouble or distress

Music became another central component in Harlem. As jazz continued to grow in popularity everywhere during the 1920s, musicians in Harlem put their own spin on the music: the Harlem Stride Style. They added piano to the brass instruments of jazz. Many famous jazz musicians rose to stardom during this period, including Duke Ellington. Music in Harlem also included elements from old black spiritual songs and the blues. White artists began to take notice of black musicians, and they incorporated some of this new culture into their own music.

A Deep and Lasting Impact

- [10] Not only did the Harlem Renaissance produce new and exciting art and music, it also helped to define a new part of the African American identity. Since African Americans had been enslaved and oppressed for so long, it was important to create a cultural heritage of which they could be proud. It also made the larger American culture take African Americans more seriously, and it laid important groundwork for the Civil Rights movement that would come several decades later.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following identifies the central idea of the text, regarding the Harlem Renaissance?
 - A. It encouraged African Americans to leave the South to pursue work in Harlem, where African Americans were considered equals.
 - B. It worked to change white citizens' perceptions of African Americans as primarily laborers
 - C. It provided African Americans an opportunity to create a new identity by using art to express their feelings and experiences.
 - D. It reminded white citizens that African Americans continued to suffer unjust treatment because of their race.
2. PART B: Which section from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "In the early 1900s African Americans began moving north where they could find better paid jobs working in city factories instead of on farms." (Paragraph 3)
 - B. "One of the most common stereotypes was that they were primitive, wild people still closely connected to the 'jungle roots' of their origins in Africa." (Paragraph 4)
 - C. "Although the poem never addressed race directly, African-American readers found its message of defiance inspiring as they continued to hear about racially motivated violence around the country." (Paragraph 5)
 - D. "Artists held the belief that through intellect, literature, art, and music, their work could challenge racism and enable African Americans to better integrate into American society as a whole." (Paragraph 6)
3. PART A: How does the text describe the connection between racial inequality in the South and the development of the Harlem Renaissance?
 - A. African Americans were forced to leave the South and go to Harlem because of the violence they experienced in the South.
 - B. African Americans were tired of unfair treatment in the South and wanted to forge a new path for themselves in Harlem.
 - C. African Americans were too afraid to establish an identity in the South because of the history of slavery there.
 - D. African Americans were not permitted to work as anything but laborers in the South and heard of the artistic opportunities in the North.
4. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "Most found jobs as farm laborers – doing essentially the same work they had done as slaves, but now for a meager wage." (Paragraph 2)
 - B. "The governments of southern states ignored the hardships of the African American community and continued to care mainly about white citizens." (Paragraph 2)
 - C. "in the early 1900s African Americans began moving north where they could find better paid jobs working in city factories instead of on farms." (Paragraph 3)
 - D. "These immigrants, often former slaves as well, also faced discrimination and oppression in their home countries." (Paragraph 3)

5. How does the inclusion of details about specific artists from the Harlem Renaissance contribute to the development of ideas in the text?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. How can art be a form of protest? Why was art a successful means for African Americans to challenge discrimination and offensive stereotypes during this time?
2. In the context of the text, how has America changed over time? How does the text explore ways in which America has changed since the abolition of slavery? How did the accomplishments of the Harlem Renaissance allow future change to take place?
3. In the context of the text, how are communities formed? How did the Harlem Renaissance contribute to the establishment of an African American culture and identity in America? How do you think this community benefited the Civil Rights Movement decades later?