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## HARLEM RENAISSANCE: A CULTURAL AWAKENING OF AFRO-AMERICAN LITERATURE

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### **Abstract –**

The Harlem Renaissance is generally considered to have spanned from about 1918 until the mid-1930s. The zenith of this ‘flowering of Negro literature’, as James Weldon Johnson preferred to call the Harlem Renaissance, took place between 1924 when Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life hosted a party for black writers where many white publishers were in attendance. Innovative young African American writers, painters, and musicians began gathering in a number of neighborhoods in Manhattan, including Harlem and Greenwich Village, working together and developing new ideas, and in the years after World War I they gained national attention. The Harlem Renaissance, also known as the New Negro Movement, was a period of great cultural activity and innovation among African American artists and writers, one that saw new artists and landmark works appear in the fields of literature, dance, art, and music. The Movement included the new African-American cultural expressions across the urban areas in the Northeast and Midwest United States affected by the African-American Great Migration, of which Harlem was the largest. The Harlem Renaissance came to an end during the Great Depression mostly because the African American community counted on wealthy white patrons to contribute to the success of their shows. The movement inspired new authors, musicians and black intellectuals during the civil rights movement. Furthermore, many believe that the movement has paved the way towards social equality in the arts and within the American society.

**Key words-** Harlem Renaissance, New Negro Movement, Great Migration, American society

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### **Introduction:**

The Harlem Renaissance, also known as the New Negro Movement, was a period of great cultural activity and innovation among African American artists and writers, one that saw new artists and landmark works appear in the fields of literature, dance, art, and music. The participants were all fiercely individualistic talents, and not all of them saw themselves as being part of a movement. But in time writers such as Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes; painters like Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden; and musicians and composers such as Duke Ellington and Bessie Smith became widely known as members of the Harlem Renaissance. Much of the foundation of the Harlem Renaissance was laid by earlier generations of African American educators, students, and intellectuals. In the decades

following the Civil War, many racial barriers to education were removed, and African Americans took advantage of the new educational opportunities in great numbers. Dozens of African American colleges and universities were founded, and African American professors and other intellectuals took increasingly public roles. At the same time, African Americans were moving in huge numbers from the South to northern industrial cities, like New York, where they could find work and escape some of the institutionalized discrimination and mistreatment caused by the South’s Jim Crow laws. Innovative young African American writers, painters, and musicians began gathering in a number of neighborhoods in Manhattan, including Harlem and Greenwich Village, working together and developing new ideas, and in

the years after World War I they gained national attention.

### **The Harlem Renaissance: A Cultural Awakening of Afro-American Literature**

The Harlem Renaissance is generally considered to have spanned from about 1918 until the mid-1930s. The zenith of this 'flowering of Negro literature', as James Weldon Johnson preferred to call the Harlem Renaissance, took place between 1924 when Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life hosted a party for black writers where many white publishers were in attendance and 1929 the year of the stock market crash and the beginning of the Great Depression. Harlem was a formerly white residential district that by the early 1920s was becoming virtually a black city within the borough of Manhattan. Other boroughs of New York City were also home to people now identified with the renaissance, but they often crossed paths in Harlem or went to special events at the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library. Black intellectuals from Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and other cities also met in Harlem or settled there. New York City had an extraordinarily diverse and de centered black social world in which no one group could monopolize cultural authority. As a result, it was a particularly fertile place for cultural experimentation. While the renaissance built on earlier traditions of African American culture, it was profoundly affected by trends—such as primitivism—in European and white American artistic circles. Modernist primitivism was inspired partly by Freudian psychology, but it tended to extol primitive peoples as enjoying a more direct relationship to the natural world and to elemental human desires than “over civilized” whites. The prestige of such experiments caused African American intellectuals to look on their African heritage with new eyes and in many cases with a desire to reconnect with a heritage long despised or misunderstood by both whites and black. Embracing literary, musical, theatrical, and visual arts, participants sought to reconceptualize “the Negro” apart from the white stereotypes that had influenced black peoples' relationship to their heritage and to each other. “The Harlem

Renaissance was considered to be a rebirth of African-American arts.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Activists of Harlem Renaissance Movement**

The Movement included the new African-American cultural expressions across the urban areas in the Northeast and Midwest United States affected by the African-American Great Migration, of which Harlem was the largest. “Though it was centered in the Harlem neighborhood of the borough of Manhattan in New York City, many francophone black writers from African and Caribbean colonies who lived in Paris were also influenced by the Harlem Renaissance.”<sup>2</sup> The Harlem Renaissance is unusual among literary and artistic movements for its close relationship to civil rights and reform organizations. Crucial to the movement were magazines such as *The Crisis*, published by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); *Opportunity*, published by the National Urban League; and *The Messenger*, a socialist journal eventually connected with the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, a black labor union. *Negro World*, the newspaper of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, also played a role. The Harlem Renaissance was one of primarily African-American involvement. It rested on a support system of black patrons, black-owned businesses and publications. However, it also depended on the patronage of white Americans, such as Carl Van Vechten and Charlotte Osgood Mason, who provided various forms of assistance, opening doors which otherwise might have remained closed to the publication of work outside the black American community. The new fiction attracted a great amount of attention from the nation at large. Among authors who became nationally known were Jean Toomer, Jessie Fauset, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, Omar Al Amiri, Eric D. Walrond and Langston Hughes. The Harlem Renaissance helped lay the foundation for the post-World War II protest movement of the Civil Rights Movement. Moreover, many black artists who rose to creative maturity afterward were inspired by this literary movement. The Renaissance was more than a literary or artistic movement, as it possessed a certain

sociological development—particularly through a new racial consciousness—through ethnic pride, as seen in the Back to Africa movement led by Marcus Garvey. Zora Neale Hurston *Irving says*, "Sometimes I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can anyone deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It's beyond me."3 The Harlem Renaissance was successful in that it brought the Black experience clearly within the corpus of American cultural history.

The Harlem Renaissance encouraged the new appreciation of folk roots and culture. Through sharing in these cultural experiences, a consciousness sprung forth in the form of a united racial identity. "It was within these venues that the blues music scene boomed, and since it had not yet gained recognition within popular culture, queer artists used it as a way to express themselves honestly."4 Villarosa, Linda says, "Even though there were factions within the Renaissance that were accepting of queer culture/lifestyles, one could still be arrested for engaging in homosexual acts. Many people, including author Alice Dunbar-Nelson and "The Mother of Blues" Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, had husbands but were romantically linked to other women as well."5 Ma Rainey was known to dress in traditionally male clothing and her blues lyrics often reflected her sexual proclivities for women, which was extremely radical at the time. "Ma Rainey was also the first person to introduce blues music into vaudeville."6 Rainey's protégé, Bessie Smith was another artist who used the blues as a way to express herself with such lines as "When you see two women walking hand in hand, just look em' over and try to understand: They'll go to those parties – have the lights down low – only those parties where women can go."7

Another prominent blues singer was Gladys Bentley, who was known to cross-dress. Bentley was the club owner of Clam House on 133rd Street in Harlem, which was a hub for queer patrons. "The Hamilton Lodge in Harlem hosted an annual drag ball that attracted thousands to watch as a couple hundred young men came to dance the night away in drag. Though there were safe havens within Harlem, there were prominent voices

such as that of Abyssinian Baptist Church's minister Adam Clayton who actively campaigned against homosexuality."8 The Harlem Renaissance gave birth to the idea of The New Negro. "The New Negro movement was an effort to define what it meant to be African-American by African Americans rather than let the degrading stereotypes and caricatures found in black face minstrelsy practices to do so."9 There was also The Neo-New Negro movement, which not only challenged racial definitions and stereotypes, but also sought to challenge gender roles, normative sexuality, and sexism in America in general. In this respect, the Harlem Renaissance was far ahead of the rest of America in terms of embracing feminism and queer culture. "These ideals received some push back as freedom of sexuality, particularly pertaining to women (which during the time in Harlem was known as women-loving women)."10 The black bourgeoisie saw this as hampering the cause of black people in America and giving fuel to the fire of racist sentiments around the country. Yet for all of the efforts by both sectors of white and conservative black America, queer culture and artists defined major portions of not only the Harlem Renaissance, but also defined so much of our culture today. Author of "The Black Man's Burden", Henry Louis Gates Jr. wrote on this very subject matter, the Harlem Renaissance "was surely as gay as it was black."11

#### **Conclusion-**

The Harlem Renaissance came to an end during the Great Depression mostly because the African American community counted on wealthy white patrons to contribute to the success of their shows. Nevertheless, the movement inspired new authors, musicians and black intellectuals during the civil rights movement. Furthermore, many believe that the movement has paved the way towards social equality in the arts and within the American society. The Harlem Renaissance led to more opportunities for blacks to be published by mainstream houses. Many authors began to publish novels, magazines and newspapers during this time.

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