Chapter 9: The Harlem Renaissance
(Also known as the "New Negro Movement")

A Brief Introduction

Harlem ... Harlem
Black, black Harlem
Souls of Black Folk
Ask Du Bois
Little grey restless feet
Ask Claude McKay

Harlem is vicious
City of Refuge
Modernism. BangClash.
Ask Rudolph Fisher
Vicious the way it's made,
Don't damn your body's itch
Can you stand such beauty.
Ask Countee Cullen
So violent and transforming.
Does the jazz band sob?
Ask Langston Hughes

- Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones)

Nigger Heaven
Ask Carl Van Vechten
Hey! ... Hey!
" ... Say it brother
Say it ..."

- Frank Horne, "Harlem"

1. Harlem Renaissance (HR) is the name given to the period from the end of World War I and through the middle of the 1930s Depression, during which a group of talented African-American writers produced a sizable body of literature in the four prominent genres of poetry, fiction, drama, and essay.

2. The notion of "twoness", a divided awareness of one's identity, was introduced by W.E.B. Du Bois, one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).and the author of the influential book The Souls of Black Folks (1903): "One ever feels his two-ness - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled stirrings: two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."

3. Common themes: alienation, marginality, the use of folk material, the use of the blues tradition, the problems of writing for an elite audience.

4. HR was more than just a literary movement: it included racial consciousness, "the back to Africa" movement led by Marcus Garvey, racial integration, the explosion of music particularly jazz, spirituals and blues, painting, dramatic revues, and others.
Personalities of the Harlem Renaissance


A Chronology of Important Events and Publications

1919

- 369th Regiment marched up Fifth Avenue to Harlem, February 17.
- Race riots in Washington, D.C., Chicago, Charleston, Knoxville, Omaha, and elsewhere, June to September.
- Race Relations Commission founded, September.
- Marcus Garvey founded the Black Star Shipping Line.
- Benjamin Brawley published The Negro in Literature and Art in the United States.

1920

- Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) Convention held at Madison Square Garden, August.
- James Weldon Johnson, first black officer (secretary) of NAACP appointed.
- Claude McKay published Spring in New Hampshire.
- Du Bois's Darkwater is published.
- O'Neill's The Emperor Jones, starring Charles Gilpin, opens at the Provincetown Playhouse.

1921

- Shuffle Along by Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, the first musical revue written and performed by African Americans (cast members include Josephine Baker and Florence Mills), opened, May 22, at Broadway's David Belasco Theater.
- Marcus Garvey founded African Orthodox Church, September.
- Second Pan African Congress.
- Colored Players Guild of New York founded.
- Benjamin Brawley published Social History of the American Negro.

1922

- First Anti-Lynching legislation approved by House of Representatives.

1923
Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life is founded by the National Urban League, with Charles S. Johnson as its editor.

National Ethiopian Art Players staged The Chip Woman's Fortune by Willis Richardson, first serious play by a black writer on Broadway, May.

Claude McKay spoke at the Fourth Congress of the Third International in Moscow, June.

The Cotton Club opened, Fall.

Marcus Garvey arrested for mail fraud and sentenced to five years in prison.

Third Pan African Congress.

Publications of Jean Toomer, Cane; Marcus Garvey, Philosophy and Opinion of Marcus Garvey. 2 vols.

Louis Armstrong in Chicago and Duke Ellington in New York began their music careers.

1924

- Civic Club Dinner, sponsored by Opportunity, bringing black writers and white publishers together, March 21. This event is considered the formal launching of of the New Negro movement.
- Paul Robeson starred in O'Neill's All God's Chillun Got Wings, May 15.
- Countee Cullen won first prize in the Witter Bynner Poetry Competition.
- Publications of Du Bois, The Gift of Black Folk; Jessie Fauset, There is Confusion; Marcus Garvey, Aims and Objects for a Solution of the Negro Problem Outlined; Walter White, The Fire in the Flint.

1925

- American Negro Labor Congress held in Chicago, October.
- Opportunity holds its first literary awards dinner; winners include Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Zora Neale Hurston.
- The first Crisis awards ceremony is held at the Renaissance Casino; Countee Cullen wins first prize.

1926

- Countee Cullen becomes Assistant Editor of Opportunity; begins to write a regular column "The Dark Tower."
- Savoy Ballroom opened in Harlem, March.
- Publications of Wallace Thurman, Fire!!; Langston Hughes, The Weary Blues; Carl Van Vechten, Nigger Heaven; Eric Walrond, Tropic Death; W. C. Handy, Blues: An Anthology; and Walter White, Flight.

1927

- In Abraham's Bosom by Paul Green, with an all-black cast, won the Pulitzer Prize, May.
- Ethel Waters first appeared on Broadway, July.
- Marcus Garvey deported.
- Harlem Globetrotters established.
- Charlotte Mason decides to become a patron of the New Negro.
- A'Lelia Walker opens a tearoom salon called "The Dark Tower."

1928

- Countee Cullen marries Nina Yolande, daughter of W.E.B. Du Bois, April 9; described as the social event of the decade.

1929

- Negro Experimental Theatre founded, February; Negro art Theatre founded, June; National Colored Players founded, September.
- Wallace Thurman's play *Harlem*, written with William Jourdan Rapp, opens at the Apollo Theater on Broadway and becomes hugely successful.
- Black Thursday, October 29, Stock Exchange crash.

1930

- *The Green Pastures* (musical), with an all-black cast, opened on Broadway, February 26.
- Universal Holy Temple of Tranquillity founded; Black Muslims opened Islam Temple in Detroit.

1931

- *Scottsboro* trial, April through July.
- A'Lelia Walker dies, August 16.

1932

- Twenty young black intellectuals travel to Russia to make a movie, *Black and White*, June.
- Mass defection of blacks from the Republican party began.
Today; Thurman, *Infants of the Spring*.

1933

- National Negro Business League ceased operations after 33 years.

1934

- Rudolph Fisher and Wallace Thurman die within four days of each other, December 22 and 26.
- W.E.B. Du Bois resigns from *The Crisis* and NAACP.
- Apollo Theatre opened.

1935

- Harlem Race Riot, March 19.
- *Porgy and Bess*, with an all-black cast, opens on Broadway, October 10.
- *Mulatto* by Langston Hughes, first full-length play by a black writer, opens on Broadway, October 25.
- 50 percent of Harlem's families unemployed.


1940 Publications of Hughes *The Big Sea*; McKay, *Harlem: Negro Metropolis*.

(Information for the above chronology is from Kellner, *Harlem Renaissance: A Historical Dictionary for the Era* and Watson, *The Harlem Renaissance*.)


1. Harlem Renaissance brought the Black experience clearly within the general American cultural history.

   a. Remarkable coincidences and luck, provided a sizable chunk of real estate in the heart of Manhattan.

   b. The Black migration, from south to north, changed their image from rural to urban, from peasant to sophisticate.

   c. Harlem became a crossroads where Blacks interacted with and expanded their contacts internationally.

   d. Harlem Renaissance profited from a spirit of self-determination which was widespread after W.W.I.
2. Harlem Renaissance could not escape its history and culture in its attempt to create a new one.

a. The "renaissance" echoed American progressivism in its faith in democratic reform, in its belief in art and literature as agents of change, and in its almost uncritical belief in itself and its future.

b. The creation of the "New Negro" failed, but it was an American failure, similar to other frustrated promotions.

c. The future of the "New Negro" was accepted without question.

d. Just as the Whites, Black intellectuals were unprepared for the rude shock of the Great Depression; the HR was shattered by it because of naive assumptions about the centrality of culture, unrelated to economic and social realities.

3. Still the Harlem Renaissance had its significance.

a. It became a symbol and a point of reference for everyone to recall.

b. The name, more than the place, became synonymous with new vitality, Black urbanity, and Black militancy.

c. It became a racial focal point for Blacks the world over; it remained for a time a race capital.

d. It stood for urban pluralism; Alain Locke wrote: "The peasant, the student, the businessman, the professional man, artist, poet, musician, adventurer and worker, preacher and criminal, exploiter and social outcast, each group has come with its own special motives ... but their greatest experience has been the finding of one another."

e. The complexity of the urban setting was important for Blacks to truly appreciate the variety of Black life. The race consciousness required that shared experience.

4. Harlem Renaissance's legacy is limited by the character of the Renaissance.

a. It encouraged the new appreciation of folk roots and culture.

b. Peasant folk materials and spirituals provided a rich source for racial imagination and it freed the Blacks from the establishment of past condition.

c. Harlem Renaissance was imprisoned by its innocence. The Harlem intellectuals, while proclaiming a new race consciousness, became mimics of Whites, wearing clothes and using manners of sophisticated Whites, earning the epithet "dicty niggers" from the very people they were supposed to be championing.

d. Harlem Renaissance could not overcome the overwhelming White presence in commerce which defined art and culture. What was needed was a rejection of White values; they had to see Whites, without awe of love or awe of hate, and themselves truly, without myth or fantasy, in order that they could be themselves in life and art.

e. Harlem Renaissance created an ethnic provincialism and its biggest gift could be a lesson from its failures. The biggest is in the strange separation of the Blacks from American culture. Except for a few Blacks, the most striking thing about them is that they are native American. The negative implications have been clear; Blacks, unlike other immigrants, had no immediate past and history and culture to celebrate. But the positive implications of American nativity have never been fully appreciated by them. It seems too simple: the Afro-American's history and culture is American, more completely so than most others in
f. At least the decade of the 1920s seems to have been too early for Blacks to have felt the
certainty about native culture that would have freed them from crippling self-doubt. ... that
is why the art of the Renaissance was so problematic, feckless, not fresh, not real. The
lesson it leaves us is that the true Black Renaissance awaits Afro-Americans' claiming their
patria, their nativity.

| Top | Novels of the Harlem Renaissance |

Fauset, Jessie Redmon: *There is Confusion*, 1924; *Plum Bun*, 1928; *The Chinaberry Tree*; 1931;
*Comedy, American Style*, 1933

1932.

Hughes, Langston: *Not Without Laughter*, 1930

Hurston, Zora Neale: *Jonah's Gourd Wine*, 1934; *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 1937

Larsen, Nella: *Quicksand*, 1928; *Passing*, 1929

McKay, Claude: *Home to Harlem*, 1927; *Banjo*, 1929; *Gingertown*, 1931; *Banana Bottom*, 1933

Schuyler, George: *Black No More*, 1930; *Slaves Today*, 1931

Thurman, Wallace: *The Blacker the Berry; a Novel of Negro Life*, 1929; *Infants of the Spring*, 1932;
*Interne*, with Abraham I. Furman, 1932

Toomer, Jean: *Cane*, 1923

Van Vechten, Carl: *Nigger Heaven*, 1926

Walrond, Eric: *Tropic Death*, 1926

White, Walter: *The Fire in the Flint*, 1924; *Flight*, 1926

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| Top |