

The Harlem Renaissance: “Harlem,” “Yet do I Marvel,” & “Harlem Shadows”

Objectives

1. Relate the rise in African American artistic work in the 1920s & 1930s to its historical context and material conditions.
2. Distinguish between literature of the Harlem Renaissance and other contemporary American literary movements.
3. Recognize the tension between aesthetics & political activism in art.
4. Relate the Harlem Renaissance to previous African American literary movements in the nineteenth century.
5. Relate the Harlem Renaissance to subsequent African American art movements ongoing today.

Reading Assignment

Cullen, Countee. “Yet Do I Marvel.”

Hughes, Langston. “Harlem.”

McKay, Claude. “Harlem Shadows.”

Supplementary Readings

Harlem Renaissance: Music, Poets, Entertainment, Politics, and Culture. C-Span, 2001. <https://youtu.be/EgBKqbnrFF8>

Challener, Scott. “Langston Hughes ‘Harlem’.” *Poetry Foundation*, 29 September 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/yc77tute>

Commentary

The “[Harlem Renaissance](#)” refers to a loosely affiliated network of artists in the African American community centered on Harlem as a neighborhood in New York City (more recent work has also emphasized their parallel communities in Chicago). However, the network was loosely spread across African American communities in several northern cities, as well as internationally across the Caribbean and Europe with many connections to Africa, Eastern Europe, Russia, and China. At the time, it was known as the “New Negro Movement,” which reflects the “[New Woman Movement](#).” The latter was

widespread across North America and Europe. “The New Woman” emerged in the last three decades of the 19th century and is now loosely equated with **First Wave Feminism** (the struggle for women to attain rights, such as voting rights, property rights, and legal recognition as persons). From the movement for liberation, equal rights, and a more equitable revision of social expectations that was at the heart of the New Woman Movement, the New Negro Movement focused on social equity and new cultural identities for African Americans.

The term “Harlem Renaissance” was applied later to describe the extraordinary development of cultural activity and creativity that ensued as a part of that struggle for liberation, the aim of which was to value African Americans’ contributions to the cultural life of their community and achieve equality through what was later called the Civil Rights Movement. This struggle occurred in literature, drama, the visual & plastic arts, music, and fashion. We recognize this today in the development of jazz, which has continued to be popular, even if the literary and visual arts have become somewhat less familiar (though their styles have become very common in popular works today). You may wish to think about what it means for a musical form (such as jazz) that emerged from a liberation struggle to become mainstream and popular, such that it is consumed today by listeners uninterested in or completely unaware of its political context. A difficult question is if this popularization neutralizes its political ambitions... If you listen to jazz today, are you participating in the cultural of a broad movement for liberation and anti-racism, or are you just “cool”? What happens when the political weight vanishes, and is it possible for work to become mainstream while retaining its politically radical and socially transformative value?

Two major social events led to the Harlem Renaissance. After the abolition of slavery in the USA at the close of the American Civil War in 1865, many former slaves remained dissatisfied with their social conditions. Howard Zinn recounts how President Andrew Johnson, who was Vice-President under Abraham Lincoln and assumed the presidency when Lincoln was assassinated, did not fulfil the potential for liberation that the American Civil War offered.

Johnson

vetoed bills [that were meant] to help Negroes; he made it easy for Confederate [formerly slave holding] states to come back into the Union without guaranteeing equal rights to blacks. During his presidency, these returned southern states enacted “black codes,” which made the freed slaves like serfs, still working the plantations. For instance, Mississippi in 1865 made it illegal for freedmen [former slaves] to rent or lease farmland, and provided for them to work under labor contracts which they could not break under penalty of prison. It also provided that

the courts could assign black children under eighteen who had no parents, or whose parents were poor, to forced labor, called apprenticeships—with punishment for runaways. (Zinn 199)

For obvious reasons, these conditions were not acceptable to many of the freed slaves who yearned for freedom. Since one could go to prison for breaching a labour contract, and prisons sold the labour of prisoners at a very low rate, the practical changes from slave conditions were not meaningful in many situations. While the ownership of slaves had been abolished, slavery as a form of control over labour more or less continued for quite a long time. Although it is popularly imagined that slavery ended in 1863 when Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, which formally ended slavery in 1865 with the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution, this does not tell the whole story. As Zinn reminds us,

By 1900, all the southern states, in new constitutions and new statutes, had written into law the disfranchisement and segregation of Negroes, and a *New York Times* editorial said “Northern men... no longer denounce the suppression of the Negro vote... The necessity of it under the supreme law of self-preservation is candidly recognized.” (207)

This is to say, the Northern states realized that they needed to grant voting rights to African Americans lest the Southern states outvote the north in presidential elections. Lest it be forgotten, most Northern states that had abolished slavery still did not permit African Americans to vote after the end of the Civil War. The legacy of this disenfranchisement (the lack of voting rights) exists in an altered form today in the campaign tactics of voter suppression, which strategically seek to discourage or prevent parts of the population from voting, such as through restrictive identification laws or by removing voter registration offices from predominantly African American communities or geographical regions.

Due to these conditions following the end of the American Civil War in 1865, many former slaves fled the American South for greater freedom in Northern states, crossing the Ohio River much as escaped slaves had done previously, in many cases because they faced punishments, forced penal labour, or mandatory unpaid apprenticeships. In many respects, this is akin to how escaped slaves had previously faced their forced return from the North under the Escaped Slave Act. This was made worse by the series of economic depressions that accompanied the Gilded Age at the end of the nineteenth century. Economic necessity further spurred the search for freedom and drove many African Americans to the industrialized

North in search of factory jobs and employment. During the Civil War, the Southern states' capacity for heavy industry was destroyed in "total war," which is a tactic aimed at destroying an opponent's ability to wage war (by destroying crops, factories, transportation systems, industry, waterways, and so forth). After the war, the South remained heavily dependent on relatively non-industrialized cash crops, which meant that in times of economic need, the North supplied factory jobs and employment in industry.

This movement North in search of both economic opportunity and increased freedom was "The Great Migration." As African Americans were segregated into neighborhoods in Northern metropolises (New York City, Chicago, Philadelphia, Cleveland, etc.), they sought greater opportunities for political activism and artistic expression that reflected their unique cultural community and subject positions. Amidst race riots (particularly in 1919) and increasing economic uncertainty that ran from the Long Depression (1873-1879) through the economic Panic of 1893 to the Great Depression (1929 to the early 1940s), this population of African Americans agitated politically through the New Negro Movement and created cultural products in the Harlem Renaissance.

For a more detailed historical description of the Harlem Renaissance and commentary on the assigned readings, please see Howard Zinn's chapter "Or Does it Explode?" This will also extend the historical context from the New Negro Movement to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

Political Poetry

You should notice that the poetry assigned in this Unit is strikingly varied in form and style. All three poems make overt political comments on American problems of race, but they do so in varied styles. [Langston Hughes'](#) poetry is modernist in style, without a clear rhyme or rhythm, while Countee Cullen and [Claude McKay](#) rely on more traditional poetic forms. Cullen's "Yet Do I Marvel" is a modified Sonnet based on the English Sonnet form (typically an abab cdcd efef gg rhyme scheme but modified by Cullen to replace the third quatrain with two couplets: abab cdcd eeff gg). This is a poetic form deeply tied to European literature since the 13th century, which makes Cullen's poetic form deeply conservative even while his content is "radically" new. The mainstream of American and European poetry was abandoning these traditional forms at the same time. Claude McKay's "Harlem Shadows" is formally more innovative but is still deeply traditional with a clear rhyme scheme (this time three stanzas conforming to the format of the third quatrain of a sonnet with the final rhyming couplet: ababcc dedecc fgfgcc). McKay is also deeply conservative in form while expressing a radical social critique.

Both McKay and Cullen also employ the most idiosyncratic rhythm possible in the English language: iambic pentameter. This means that each line of poetry is comprised of a rhythm made up of 5 sets (*pentameter*) of paired syllables (iambic: soft STRONG). In other words, they are rhythmically the same as Shakespeare's sonnets, with 10 syllables per line with every tenth syllable rhyming. While this is a very natural rhythm for the English language and its grammatical structure, it contrasts strongly with other poetic movements of the period. Consider, apart from meaning, the rhythmic and rhyming structure of the following contemporary poems as a contrast:

I hear the halting footsteps of a **lass**
In Negro Harlem when the night lets *fall*
Its veil. I see the shapes of girls who **pass**
To bend and barter at desire's *call*.
Ah, little dark girls who in slippered **feet**
Go prowling through the night from street to **street!**
(McKay 15)

I doubt not God is good, well-meaning, **kind**,
And did He stoop to quibble could tell *why*
The little buried mole continues **blind**,
Why flesh that mirrors Him must some day *die*, (Cullen
14)

In contrast to

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain. (Eliot 23)

And then went down to the ship,
Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea, and
We set up mast and sail on that swart ship,
Bore sheep aboard her, and our bodies also
Heavy with weeping, so winds from sternward
Bore us out onward with bellying canvas,
Circe's this craft, the trim-coifed goddess. (Pound 7)

[Eliot](#)'s and [Pound](#)'s poems are from 1922, and the stylistic innovations they employ are more akin to what you will find in Langston Hughes, even though all of these poems are contemporaries.

With these contrasts, you could further notice the differences in "enjambment." To enjamb a line of poetry means to carry its grammatical meaning and syntactic unit across a line break – this also means that when you speak it aloud, you do not necessarily pause or

rest your voice at a line break and instead read directly across the break (which then exists only *visually* not *aurally*). Notice how extensively McKay uses enjambment as a somewhat “radical” poetic practice. Also notice how rare it is for Cullen, who also uses the highly traditional sonnet form:

I hear the halting footsteps of a lass
In Negro Harlem when the night lets fall
Its veil. I see the shapes of girls who pass... (McKay 15)

The underlined passage is *enjambé*. This alters, to at least some degree, the typical poetic form. This pattern does not occur as often in Cullen.

Poetry and Juxtaposition

As W. Jason Miller’s book *Langston Hughes and American Lynching Culture* argues, we as modern readers must recuperate the censored or forgotten context of some of Hughes’s major poetic works, and this extends to Cullen and McKay as well. Miller focuses on more than twenty of Hughes’s poems in relation to lynching: an illegal execution committed by a mob for a perceived wrong. In American culture, the term “lynching” is deeply bound to racial prejudice and racist violence against African Americans—many Americans associate racist murders of African Americans with the poem and song “Strange Fruit” by Abel Meeropol, first performed by Billie Holiday.



For more on “Strange Fruit,” listen to the examples in WebCampus, “Supplements & Links,” of Billie Holiday.

Miller’s recuperation of the lynching context of Hughes’ poem “Harlem,” perhaps his most written about and taught work, sets the poem in relation to Hughes’ other poem “Not for Publication.” Miller demonstrates that the poem was meant to function in relation to juxtaposed images of lynching that are explicit in Countee Cullen’s poem “Christ Recrucified” and Hughes’ own paralleling of Christ imagery with lynching in “Not for Publication” and “Death in Yorkville.” The last two poems, as Miller points out, were specifically placed in sequence with “Harlem” in their periodical and book publication forms. In other words, the two poems the Hughes originally wished to appear beside “Harlem” in its first book publication, *and* the two poems Hughes placed beside “Harlem” when it first appeared in anthologies, were all about racist lynching in the American South. By juxtaposing explicit descriptions of murders by

lynching mobs, Hughes marked the poem's intertextual construction of meaning for an audience that would enter the poem with an already heightened and subsequently revived attention to lynching as a traumatic spectre in American culture. Does this change your understanding of the poem?

Knowing that Hughes, McKay, and Cullen all wrote explicitly about lynching in their poetry, how do these "gentler" poems strike you as a reader? If you were reading these poems when they first appeared, the context of racist violence would be well-known, and you would very likely be reminded of it by the other poems besides these three. How would this contextualize or alter your interpretation and your sense of the tension between content and form?

Questions for Self-Review

1. Does the Harlem Renaissance have one unified style?
2. What relationship does the Harlem Renaissance have to the 1960s movements in Birmingham and other cities in the American South?
3. How does racist violence appear in these three poems?
4. Do form and content need to be in agreement in creative work, or can they differ from each other?

Works Cited & Supplemental Reading

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Eliot, T.S. "The Waste Land." *The Waste Land and Other Poems*. Faber & Faber, 1990, pp. 21–49.

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