Harlem Renaissance

a blossoming (c. 1918–37) of African American culture, particularly in the creative arts, and the most influential movement in African American literary history. 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. They also sought to break free of Victorian moral values and bourgeois shame about aspects of their lives that might, as seen by whites, reinforce racist beliefs. Never dominated by a particular school of thought but rather characterized by intense debate, the movement laid the groundwork for all later African American literature and had an enormous impact on subsequent black literature and consciousness worldwide. While the renaissance was not confined to the Harlem district of New York City, Harlem attracted a remarkable concentration of intellect and talent and served as the symbolic capital of this cultural awakening.

The background

The Harlem Renaissance was a phase of a larger New Negro movement that had emerged in the early 20th century and in some ways ushered in the civil rights movement of the late 1940s and early 1950s. The social foundations of this movement included the Great Migration of African Americans from rural to urban spaces and from South to North; dramatically rising levels of literacy; the creation of national organizations dedicated to pressing African American civil rights, “uplifting” the race, and opening socioeconomic opportunities; and developing race pride, including pan-African sensibilities and programs. Black exiles and expatriates from the Caribbean and Africa crossed paths in metropoles such as New York City and Paris after World War I and had an invigorating influence on each other that gave the broader “Negro renaissance” (as it was then known) a profoundly important international cast.

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 labour union. Negro World, the newspaper of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association, also played a role, but few of the major authors or artists identified with Garvey’s “Back to Africa” movement, even if they contributed to the paper.

The renaissance had many sources in black culture, primarily of the United States and the Caribbean, and manifested itself well beyond Harlem. As its symbolic capital, Harlem was a catalyst for artistic experimentation and a highly popular nightlife destination. Its location in the communications capital of North America helped give the “New Negroes” visibility and opportunities for publication not evident elsewhere. Located just north of Central Park, 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 (where they had their own intellectual circles, theatres, and reading groups) also met in Harlem or settled there. New York City had an extraordinarily diverse and decentered 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 “overcivilized” whites. The keys to artistic revolution and authentic expression, some intellectuals felt, would be found in the cultures of “primitive races,” and preeminent among these, in the stereotypical thinking of the day, were the cultures of sub-Saharan Africans and their descendants. Early in the 20th century, European avant-garde artists had drawn inspiration from African masks as they broke from realistic representational styles toward abstraction in painting and sculpture. 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 blacks.
This interest in black heritage coincided with efforts to define an American culture distinct from that of Europe, one that would be characterized by ethnic pluralism as well as a democratic ethos. The concept of cultural pluralism (a term coined by the philosopher Horace Kallen in 1915) inspired notions of the United States as a new kind of nation in which diverse cultures should develop side by side in harmony rather than be "melted" together or ranked on a scale of evolving "civilization." W.E.B. Du Bois had advocated something like this position in his The Souls of Black Folk (1903), a defining text of the New Negro movement because of its profound effect on an entire generation that formed the core of the Harlem Renaissance. (See primary source document: What African Americans Want.) As various forms of cultural-pluralist thought took hold, a fertile environment for the blossoming of African American arts developed. Moreover, the effort on the part of some American intellectuals to distinguish American literature and culture from European cultural forms dovetailed with African American intellectuals’ beliefs about their relationship to American national identity.

Du Bois and his NAACP colleague James Weldon Johnson asserted that the only uniquely “American” expressive traditions in the United States had been developed by African Americans. They, more than any other group, had been forced to remake themselves in the New World, Du Bois and Johnson argued, while whites continued to look to Europe or sacrificed artistic values to commercial ones. (Native American cultures, on the other hand, seemed to be “dying out,” they claimed.) African Americans’ centuries-long struggle for freedom had made them the prophets of democracy and the artistic vanguard of American culture.

This judgment began unexpectedly to spread as African American music, especially the blues and jazz, became a worldwide sensation. Black music provided the pulse of the Harlem Renaissance and of the Jazz Age more generally. The rise of the “race records” industry, beginning with OKe’s recording of Mamie Smith’s Crazy Blues in 1920, spread the blues to audiences previously unfamiliar with the form. Smith, Alberta Hunter, Clara Smith, Bessie Smith, and Ma Rainey—who had been performing for years in circuses, clubs, and tent shows—found themselves famous. Frequently ironic and often bawdy, the music expressed the longings and philosophical perspectives of the black working class. Black writers such as Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, and Jean Toomer valued the blues as an indigenous art form of the country’s most oppressed people, a secular equivalent of the spirituals, and an antidote to bourgeois black assimilationism.

Out of the blues came jazz, migrating to Northern urban centres such as Chicago and New York City during and after World War I. In the 1920s jazz orchestras grew in size and incorporated new instruments as well as methods of performance. Louis Armstrong became the first great jazz soloist when he moved from King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band in Chicago to Fletcher Henderson’s band in New York City in 1924. Henderson’s band soon had competitors in “big bands” led by the likes of Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, Chick Webb, and Jimmie Lunceford—not to mention such “white” bands as Paul Whiteman’s. Once associated with brothels and traveling circuses, jazz gained respectability as a form of high art. Moreover, dance forms associated with jazz, most famously the Charleston (also a product of the 1920s) and tap dance, became international fads as a result of hugely popular all-black musical revues.

The popularity of jazz among whites helped spark a “Negro Vogue” in cities such as New York and Paris in the mid-to late 1920s. Simultaneously, European dramatists extolled the body language of African American dance and stage humour (descended from the blackface minstrel show, the most popular and original form of American theatrical comedy). The best-known white man to bring attention to the Harlem Renaissance was undoubtedly Carl Van Vechten, whose music criticism trumpeted the significance of jazz and blues and whose provocatively titled novel Nigger Heaven (1926) helped spread the Negro Vogue. It served virtually as a tourist guide to Harlem, capitalizing on the supposed “exotic” aspects of black urban life even while focusing, primarily, on the frustrations of black urban professionals and aspiring writers. Although vilified by some, Van Vechten became a key contact for several black artists and authors because of his interracial parties and publishing connections. Nowhere was the Negro Vogue more evident than in nightclubs such as the Cotton Club and Connie’s Inn, which became especially popular with whites in the late 1920s. Both of these nightclubs excluded blacks from the audience; others, called “black and tans,” catered to “mixed” audiences, while still others excluded whites so as to avoid the police raids to which black and tans were often subjected.
The question of “Negro art”

The international appeal of jazz and its connection to common black life, accompanied by the sheer virtuosity of its musicians, encouraged black intellectuals in other fields to turn increasingly to specifically “Negro” aesthetic forms as a basis for innovation and self-expression. The tendency appeared in concert music, choral programs, and Broadway musicals as well as literature. Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle’s musical revue Shuffle Along opened on Broadway in 1921 and established a model that would shape black musicals for 60 years. Florence Mills, a spritely dancer and phenomenal singer, achieved enormous fame across racial lines in the United States and Europe before suddenly succumbing to appendicitis in 1927. Josephine Baker, who began as a chorus girl in a popular revue, became an international star when La Revue nègre opened in 1925 in Paris, where she ultimately settled as a celebrity and played a variety of “exotic” roles exploiting the glamour of the “primitive.” Popular revues and vaudeville acts drew all-black audiences throughout the United States in cities on the Theatre Owners Booking Association circuit. In the 1920s black-produced shows came to Broadway again and again, and many white-produced shows featured black casts. The success of such shows helped fuel the optimism of the Harlem Renaissance. Amid worsening socioeconomic conditions in Harlem itself and political setbacks in what was a very conservative and racist era—it was during the 1920s that the Ku Klux Klan reached its peak in membership and political influence in the South and the Midwest—some black leaders hoped that achievement in the arts would help revolutionize race relations while enhancing blacks’ understanding of themselves as a people.

Important new publishing houses opened their doors to black authors. These publishers—particularly Alfred A. Knopf, Harcourt Brace, and Boni & Liveright—were breaking away from an earlier emphasis on British literary tradition. They were publishing translated Modernist works from a variety of nationalities previously unread in the United States except by immigrants in their native languages. Interested too in the notions of American cultural pluralism—in some cases influenced by left-wing thought, in others involved in the drive for black civil rights—and aware of the vogue of primitivism, they saw a market for black-authored books on “Negro” topics. Their interest was accelerated by the efforts of African American magazine editors who organized literary prize contests and other events showcasing black literary talent. The most often cited event of this sort was a banquet at the liberal Civic Club in downtown New York organized by Charles S. Johnson, editor of Opportunity, in 1924. The event had the effect of announcing what had come to resemble a “movement”—a cohort of talented African American writers ready to be noticed. In 1925 appeared the ultimate result: The New Negro: An Interpretation, edited by Alain Locke, which sold well and garnered positive critical attention in addition to inspiring black readers and would-be authors.

Locke attempted to direct the “movement” he announced in The New Negro, stressing a turn away from social protest or propaganda toward self-expression built on what he termed “folk values”—a movement, in other words, akin to the Irish literary renaissance that had slightly preceded it. Yet the writers of the Harlem Renaissance were not unified in artistic aims or methods. Disagreement helps account for the renaissance’s importance. Locke believed that black authors and artists should develop distinct aesthetic tendencies inspired by African American folk sources and African traditions. The satirist George Schuyler lampooned the very idea of “Negro art” in America as “hokum” artificially stimulated by white decadents.

Poetry

Countee Cullen, an early protégé of Locke’s, came to resist any suggestion that his racial background should determine his notion of poetic inheritance. Devoted to the examples of John Keats and Edna St. Vincent Millay, Cullen considered the Anglo-American poetic heritage to belong as much to him as to any white American of his age. In contrast, Hughes famously announced in his manifesto The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain (1926) that black poets should create a distinctive “Negro” art, combating the “urge within the race toward whiteness.” (See primary source document: “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.”)

Hughes’s position reveals how, in addition to primitivism, the tendency to press for “authentic” American art forms—and to find them in black America—led black writers to “the folk.” Their focus on the folk also came at a time when American anthropologists influenced by Franz Boas were revolutionizing their discipline with arguments against the racist paradigms of the past. The folk—people of the rural South particularly, but also the new migrants to Northern cities—were presumed to carry the seeds of black artistic development with relative autonomy from “white”

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traditions. Thus, James Weldon Johnson, beginning with his poem The Creation (1920) and then in the book God’s Trombones (1927), set traditional African American sermons in free-verse poetic forms modeled on the techniques of black preachers.

Inspired by Southern folk songs and jazz, Toomer experimented with lyrical modifications of prose form in his dense and multigeneric book Cane (1923), which to many seemed a radical new departure in writing about black life. Cane refrained from moralizing or explicit protest while the symbols, phrases, tones, and rhythms of black folk music and jazz infused its structure. Weaving together poems, sketches, short stories, and dramatic narratives, the book seamlessly melded high Modernist literary techniques with African American style and subject matter that alternated between the rural South and the urban North. Though it exposed the brutal effects of white supremacy, it did so without seeming to preach or moralize, and it dealt with sexuality more overtly than any preceding black-authored text in American literary history. For many young black writers, Cane therefore marked the literary future. Ironically, however, even as Toomer completed Cane, he thought of himself not as a Negro but as the first member of a “new race” resulting from a uniquely American mixture of Old World peoples. Denying identification with the “Negro renaissance,” he regarded the label Negro as inappropriate and limiting for his work.

By exploring black vernacular speech and lyrical forms, Hughes, on the other hand, built his artistic project on identification with the Negro masses. Influenced by such contemporary white poets as Carl Sandburg and Vachel Lindsay but inspired also by the example of Paul Laurence Dunbar, Hughes in his first book, The Weary Blues (1926), wrote of working-class life and black popular culture as well as his own vagabond experiences in the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe. In his next book, Fine Clothes to the Jew (1927), he turned to the blues for a poetic form derived from and answering to the desires, needs, and aesthetic sensibilities of the black working class. In these poems Hughes also took on working-class personae. Sterling Brown followed Hughes in a similar spirit with ballads and other poetic forms that attempted to catch the spirit of the folk heritage without merely imitating “folk” performance.

Other black poets continued to write primarily in traditional English literary forms, at times turning these forms to new uses. Claude McKay was a Jamaican immigrant and radical socialist who had begun his poetic career with two volumes of verse primarily in Jamaican dialect. But after moving to the United States, he wrote poems exclusively in a standard English dialect and used traditional stanzaic forms, most notably the sonnet. He turned these forms to new uses, with poems of political invective being his most famous (If We Must Die), although he wrote many lyrics of nostalgia for his homeland as well as about love or exile (The Tropics in New York, Harlem Dancer). The work of McKay, who was an admirer of English Romantics such as Percy Bysshe Shelley, blends a romantic sensibility with a race-conscious and at times revolutionary one.

Cullen also adhered to traditional English poetics, but his work was less politically radical. In poems of love, praise, or racial self-questioning as well as protest, Cullen appealed to the sensibilities of the black middle class. Believing great poetry must transcend racial identity, Cullen was not averse to writing on racial subjects—as he did in his most memorable poems, such as Heritage, Incident, and From the Dark Tower—but he felt the tradition of poetry in English was a more important resource for the poet than any supposed “racial” heritage.

While the most celebrated poets of the Harlem Renaissance were men—Hughes, McKay, Cullen—black women’s poetry was far from incidental to the movement. Poems by Alice Dunbar Nelson, Helene Johnson, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Angelina Weld Grimké, Gwendolyn Bennett, and Anne Spencer appeared frequently in periodicals, although only Georgia Douglas Johnson published full volumes of poetry (including The Heart of a Woman, and Other Poems [1918] and Bronze [1922]). Women poets negotiated a number of difficulties concerning gender and tradition as they sought to extricate themselves from stereotypes of hypersexuality and primitive abandon. Attempting to claim femininity on terms denied them by the dominant society, they worked variously within and against inherited constraints concerning the treatment of love and nature as well as racial experience in poetry.

A significant proportion of poets, as well as other participants in the Harlem Renaissance, were gay or bisexual, including McKay, Cullen, Locke, Dunbar Nelson, Richard Bruce Nugent, and perhaps Hughes. References to lesbian sexuality were also well-known in blues songs by Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. The renaissance participated in what one scholar termed “the invention of homosexuality” in American culture during the early 20th century, when sexual identities came to be defined and policed in new ways. Drag balls were reported in black newspapers, sometimes disparagingly. In part because of lax policing, Harlem was known as a destination for whites seeking illicit sexual thrills, but it also allowed for discreet liaisons through which long-term same-sex relationships developed both within and between the races. According to some critics, the renaissance was as gay as it was Negro. However, with the exception of Nugent, gay sexuality among the well-known writers and artists was discreet and mostly closeted.
Fiction

Fiction of the Harlem Renaissance is notable for its concentration on contemporary life and its cultural instability—in other words, for its modernity. Anticipated by earlier novelists such as James Weldon Johnson in The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (published anonymously in 1912; republished under his name in 1927) and Du Bois in The Quest of the Silver Fleece (1911), the novelists of the renaissance explored the diversity of black experience across boundaries of class, colour, and gender while implicitly or explicitly protesting antiblack racism. In There Is Confusion (1924) Jessie Redmon Fauset considered the transformation of mainstream culture effected by the new black middle class and by the black creative arts. Using the conventions of the novel of manners, Fauset advanced themes of racial uplift, patriotism, optimism for the future, and black solidarity. Walter White’s The Fire in the Flint (1924) focused on the career and then the lynching of a black physician and veteran of World War I. Protesting racial oppression and exposing its most barbaric expressions, White’s novel also brought attention to a distinguished black professional class whose progress was being blocked by prejudice.

After the publication of Toomer’s, Fauset’s, and White’s books, which proved that black authors could place their work with prestigious publishing firms, black writers and critics debated the directions black fiction might take away from the propaganda of racial uplift and toward more nuanced and psychologically complex treatments of black experience. The question also arose as to whether new styles and literary forms might be needed to convey black experience and sensibilities in fiction. On the other hand, were there elements of black experience that, considering the continuing power of damaging white stereotypes, would be better left untouched? Du Bois worried that white editors and readers would draw black authors into an empty aestheticism or salacious modes of primitivism. The immense sales of Van Vechten’s Nigger Heaven seemed to confirm his fears, especially after some younger black authors came to that novel’s defense and, about the same time, Harlem became a popular nightlife destination for slumming whites. Interracial parties, hosted by blacks as well as whites, also developed supportive networks and patronage for the movement. The extent to which such patronage led the movement astray and ultimately destroyed it has been a point of contention ever since.

Nella Larsen and Rudolph Fisher were two significant novelists (and friends) whose work explores issues of racial psychology, class, and sexuality in the modern city. Larsen explored the psychology of urban sophisticates in her novels Quicksand (1928) and Passing (1929), analyzing the psychological intricacies of race consciousness and exposing the massive pressures to subordinate women’s sexuality to the rules of race and class. The daughter of a white immigrant from Denmark and a black West Indian cook, Larsen knew intimately the price colour-line culture exacted of those who transgressed its most fundamental rules, and her fiction remains unequaled for the originality and incisiveness with which it exposes the contradictions of identities founded on the assertion of absolute difference between “black” and “white.” Hers was a unique achievement at a time when de facto and de jure segregation were becoming ever more entrenched features of American society.

Overall, Fisher’s work presented a nuanced interpretation of the urban geography—and modernity—of Harlem. He expertly explored the ethnic and class diversity of the black metropolis as rural Southern and Caribbean migrants adjusted to and transformed it. In his short stories his use of black music as well as its contexts of performance to complement or advance narrative tensions and thematic concerns was groundbreaking. His novels The Walls of Jericho (1928) and The Conjure-Man Dies (1932)—the latter among the earliest black detective novels—also display a keen concern with black male psychology that in some respects prefigures the work of much later authors in the canon of African American fiction, particularly Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and John Edgar Wideman.

Two prolific and central figures of the renaissance produced significant, politically radical novels that envision black political identity in a global framework: Du Bois in Dark Princess (1928) and McKay in Banjo (1929). Both novels show the strong influence of Marxism and the anti-imperialist movements of the early 20th century, and both place their hopes in the revolutionary potential of transnational solidarity to end what they consider to be the corrupt and decadent rule of Western culture. However, in many respects the books could hardly be more different, both formally and thematically: Du Bois’s takes the form of the quest romance, McKay’s that of the picaresque tale. The similarities and contrasts between the novels both reveal the importance of Marxist and anti-imperialist thought to the Harlem Renaissance and suggest enduring tensions in the black radical tradition.
The decade of the 1920s was an age of satire and “debunking”—urbane, sophisticated, sometimes cynical and decadent. H.L. Mencken, a white magazine editor and satirist at the height of his career in the 1920s, was greatly admired by a number of major Harlem Renaissance authors, especially White, Schuyler, and Wallace Thurman. Schuyler’s Black No More (1931) explores the possibilities of satirical fiction more thoroughly than any other novel of the era by centring on American racial mores. Thurman’s novels The Blacker the Berry… (1929) and Infants of the Spring (1932) also direct fundamentally satirical barbs at the contradictions in American racial culture and at the “Negro renaissance” itself. Black No More and Infants of the Spring are often read as comments on the failure of the Harlem Renaissance, but they were much in tune with the spirit of the age of burlesque and debunking. Satire of the Negro Vogue was an important aspect of the renaissance.

The Harlem Renaissance also coincided with a rising interest in “folk fiction,” particularly that about the black South. White authors such as Paul Green and Julia Peterkin enjoyed tremendous success in the mid-1920s, indicating the existence of an audience for work that took a more realistic, if still limited and sentimental, approach to the black Southern “folk.” Black authors and critics felt the time had come for black writers to reveal the truth of black Southern experience as no white authors could, and no one was more successful in doing this than Zora Neale Hurston. A native of the rural South who was intimate with black folklore as well as modernist ethnography, Hurston departed from the scholarly ethnographic practice of the time as her literary ambition grew. A dialectical relationship can be noted between her ethnographic and “purely” fictional texts. The novel Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937) treats the maturation of Janie Crawford through a series of relationships and dramatic experiences while using a free indirect discourse (a mode of representing a character’s consciousness from a third-person point of view but in an informal, colloquial style seemingly identical to the character’s) that melds vernacular language and folk motifs with a more standard “literary” voice. It is widely regarded as one of the signal achievements of the Harlem Renaissance.

Drama

Drama of the Harlem Renaissance sought to overcome the decades-long hold on the popular imagination exerted by blackface minstrelsy, which had created a powerful range of damaging stereotypes that constrained theatrical presentation of black life. Critics, playwrights, and actors debated the function of drama, as well as its subject matter and the style of presentation of “Negro experience.” A number of white-authored plays about black life gained great critical and box-office success from the late 1910s through the mid-1930s, giving valuable experience to black performers and inspiring black dramatists. Most notable were Ridgely Torrence’s Plays for a Negro Theater (1917), Eugene O’Neill’s The Emperor Jones (1921), Green’s In Abraham’s Bosom (1927), and Marc Connelly’s The Green Pastures (1929). These plays also moved some black playwrights to present more authentic examples of what were called “Negro plays.” New all-black theatre groups arose in several cities.

Alain Locke, partly influenced by the Abbey Theatre of Ireland, believed that black drama should develop from the “folk play” and reveal the soul of a people rather than focusing on protest or promoting a political agenda. Du Bois, on the other hand, emphasized that “all art is propaganda.” The tension between these two positions defined much of black-authored drama between 1917 and 1937. Playwrights included Dunbar Nelson, Grimké, Hurston, Thurman, Hughes, Mary P. Burrill, Marita Bonner, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Willis Richardson, Eulalie Spence, Frank Wilson, and Randolph Edmonds. Richardson was the most prolific. Much influenced by Locke’s ideas, he focused his early plays on folk experience in the South, but over time his plays came to have more of an educational or encouraging message. The Chip Woman’s Fortune was picked up by the Ethiopian Art Theater of Chicago (a “black” company organized by white director Raymond O’Neil), and, when the troupe played a season in New York City in 1923, it became the first black-authored nonmusical drama on Broadway. Other significant plays by Richardson include Compromise: A Folk Play (1925) and Broken Banjo (1925).

A friend and admirer of Locke, Georgia Douglas Johnson also authored a number of plays in the 1920s and ’30s. Her plays tended to focus on folk experience, often centring on women, but they also protested racial oppression and especially lynching—a common theme in Harlem Renaissance drama by women. Hurston held a position similar to that of Locke about the importance of folk plays, but she went further, suggesting that such drama should grow from the styles and modes of performance found in rural Southern “jook joints” (small-town nightclubs) and storefront porches and in urban all-black cabarets. In her view, mimicry, ostentatiousness, angular movement, and playfulness characterized black folk expression, whereas Locke (more influenced by the folk theatre of Europe and Romantic aesthetic theory) emphasized simplicity, poise, and formal symmetry. Hurston’s plays drew on her vast firsthand

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knowledge of rural Southern folklore and freely used humour and exaggeration in depicting everyday black life, risking charges even today that they reinforce stereotypes. Some of her short plays made Broadway after being incorporated into the musicals Fast and Furious (first performed 1931) and The Great Day (first performed 1932).

Thurman cowrote with William Jourdan Rapp the successful and somewhat controversial play Harlem, a fast-paced slice of the “lower” end of Harlem life, notable for its vernacular and slang-ridden dialogue. It landed on Broadway for 93 performances, and, while it drew much praise in the white press, it had a mixed reception among blacks, some of whom resented its concern with only the “lowest” aspects of a population too often identified in the mainstream imagination with vice, crime, and moral lassitude.

Most successful of all the black-written plays of the Harlem Renaissance was Hughes’s Mulatto (written 1931, first performed 1935), adapted from his short story Father and Son. Set on a plantation in Georgia in contemporary times, it concerns the tragic consequences of a white man’s inability to acknowledge his only children because they are mulatto, born to the black house servant with whom he lives in a common-law marriage of sorts. The play explores the Oedipal struggle between the plantation owner and his eldest son, who is much like him and demands acknowledgment, and it ends with the patriarch’s death at the son’s hands and the subsequent lynching of both the eldest son and his younger, less rebellious brother, their mother cursing the corpse of the white man she once loved.

Overall, black drama of the Harlem Renaissance shows a steady development of dramatic form, with folk drama becoming a successful vehicle of reflection on the nature and significance of the black American experience that often included an indictment of white institutions. At the same time, black actors gained unprecedented opportunities (though still limited by racism) to perform before all-white, mixed, and all-black audiences. By the mid-1930s a Negro Actors Guild had formed, and black actors had achieved a significant foothold in American theatre.

Visual art

Visual artists of the Harlem Renaissance, like the dramatists, attempted to win control over representation of their people from white caricature and denigration while developing a new repertoire of images. Prior to World War I, black painters and sculptors had rarely concerned themselves with African American subject matter. By the end of the 1920s, however, black artists had begun developing styles related to black aesthetic traditions of Africa or to folk art. Meta Warrick Fuller anticipated this development with her sculpture Ethiopia Awakening (1914). Appearing from a distance like a piece of Egyptian funerary sculpture, it depicts a black woman wrapped like a mummy from the waist down. But her upper torso aspires upward, suggesting rebirth from a long sleep. In the 1920s, as African art became better known in Western art circles, West African cultural models gained importance for black American artists.

The signature artist of the renaissance was Aaron Douglas, who turned away from traditional landscape painting after moving to New York City from Kansas and studying under the German immigrant Winold Reiss. Influenced by Art Deco, the flat profile designs of ancient Egyptian art, and what he called the abstract qualities of spirituals, Douglas created his own style of geometrical figural representation in dealing with “Negro” subject matter. His stylized, silhouette-like rendering of recognizably black characters, imbued with qualities of spiritual yearning and racial pride, became closely identified with the Harlem Renaissance generally. In his illustrations for James Weldon Johnson’s book God’s Trombones, Douglas transformed white Christian iconography by putting black subjects in central roles and evoking the identification of black Americans with the suffering of Jesus. In the 1930s he turned more specifically to the collective historical experience of African Americans, his work subtly inflected with a new Marxist orientation, as in his well-known mural series Aspects of Negro Life (1934).

Despite Douglas’s importance, most black artists of the 1920s spent little time in Harlem. Paris was the mecca of black painters and sculptors in that decade. Yet traveling exhibits and contests in the United States encouraged black artists in the late 1920s and early ’30s. Notable figures include the painter Palmer C. Hayden, who interpreted black folklore and working-class life; Archibald J. Motley, best known for his paintings of urban black social life and his realistic portrayals of refined “New Negro” types; Augusta Savage and Richmond Barthé, both sculptors; and other visual artists such as Sargent Johnson, William H. Johnson, Hale Woodruff, Lois Mailou Jones, and James VanDerZee. Many of these artists produced their best work in the 1930s and helped cultivate the next generation. The Great Depression forced many artists to return “home” from Europe and brought them together in a critical mass previously unknown. New York City became in the 1930s a centre of art education with new galleries, schools, and museums, including the Museum of Modern Art, which had been founded in 1929. Most important for aspiring black artists were the School of
Arts and Crafts, founded by Savage, and the Harlem Community Art Center, of which Savage served as the first director after its creation in 1937 with Works Progress Administration (WPA) aid. In the middle and late 1930s, federal arts projects under the New Deal provided an unprecedented level of encouragement to the development of black artists and helped start the careers of a new generation of artists that included Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, and Norman Lewis.

**The legacy**

In the late 1930s, African American writers, influenced by the Great Depression and the strains of Marxist thought that had been a less-prominent aspect of the 1920s, attempted to differentiate their work from that of what was known then as the “Harlem movement” or the “Negro renaissance” of the previous decade. They castigated its bourgeois propensities and supposed sponsorship by white decadents, which had allegedly encouraged “weak-kneed” black writers and artists to go begging to white America for acceptance.

Yet a number of writers continued to produce texts that clearly developed from their work in the 1920s, most notably Hughes, Hurston, and Brown, as well as Arna Bontemps, who wrote for the magazines Opportunity and The Crisis in the 1920s and whose first novel, God Sends Sunday (1931), is often considered the final work of the Harlem Renaissance. Moreover, the movement of the 1920s had opened the doors of publishing houses and theatres to a significant extent. Even in the midst of the Depression, African American writing continued to appear from prestigious houses; likewise, black actors such as Ethel Waters starred on Broadway, and black visual arts blossomed. While Richard Wright castigated the writers of the 1920s for playing decorous cultural ambassadors rather than making common cause with the aspirations of the black working class, his own use of Southern black folklore and language in his early fiction owed much to the experiments of such writers of the previous generation as Hurston, McKay, and Hughes. The satirical approaches of Schuyler, Thurman, and Hughes would be revived in the 1960s and afterward by such authors as William Demby, Charles R. Johnson, and Ishmael Reed. Hurston’s use of folklore and her focus on women’s experiences and voices would inspire subsequent black women writers beginning with Alice Walker. Later yet, Larsen’s fiction inspired African American authors of interracial parentage and attracted expanding appreciation from scholars interested in the psychology of race and in black women’s sexuality.

Moreover, the Harlem Renaissance had a strong international impact. White’s The Fire in the Flint was translated into French, as was McKay’s Banjo. Nancy Cunard’s anthology Negro (1934) helped advance the reputation of black writers among the European left. Francophone black intellectuals based in Paris, including the leaders of the anticolonial and antiassimilationist movement that came to be known as Negritude (such as Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor), were inspired by the work of Harlem Renaissance authors, particularly McKay and Hughes. While the renaissance did not achieve the sociopolitical transformation for which some had hoped, today it is clear that this movement marked a turning point in black cultural history: it helped to establish the authority of black writers and artists over the representation of black culture and experience, and it created for those writers and artists a continually expanding space within Western high culture.

George Hutchinson

**Additional Reading**