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### The Harlem Renaissance, a Symbolic or Literal Movement

The Harlem Renaissance was a cultural awakening for the African Americans in the 1920's. Novels, poems, ideas, political movements, music, dance, and drama steeped in African traditions and more modern themes from the African Americans were produced and readily available for everyone to experience. It was a time when the oppressed voices roared from Harlem, New York and rang in everyone's ear. Lyrical pieces of poetry by Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen, genuine representations of folk literature presented by Zora Neale Hurston and radical political ideas from people like Marcus Garvey filled a cultural artistic void in America. In Voices from the Harlem Renaissance, Nathan Huggins proposes the idea that the Harlem Renaissance was more of a symbolic cultural movement, having nothing much to do with the quality of the art that came from it" (Huggins 4). Upon first reading of that quote, I was disinclined to agree with the disregard Huggins assigns to the tremendously talented artists of the Harlem Renaissance. However, after further investigation I have found concurrent attitudes towards the movement as a whole. The arguments presented by the authorities on the Harlem Renaissance put forward compelling theories which substantiate Nathan Huggins' claim.

The Harlem Renaissance did not arise from a need for African American art forms. "All renaissances are acts of cultural construction, attempting to satisfy larger

social and political needs” (Gates 9). According to Victor Kramer, the literary movement is due to an enormous number of factors. The urbanization of Harlem, the “response of blacks to the racial situation in the United States,” coupled with the expansion of the black middle class, sparked the movement (Wintz 1988, 5). Desiring equality, notoriety, respect and acknowledgement of talents and aptitudes repressed and overlooked, the Harlem Renaissance was the vehicle to alleviate some of the African American oppression. But how were a few unknown black artists able to start such a cultural whirlwind of change?

The “Synchronization of the literary and social revolt in the United States with the economic upswing that followed World War I brought about the mood necessary for the cultural Renaissance” (Hudlin 272). The roaring twenties was an era in which people were eager for knowledge, modernism and distraction from the horrors of the First World War. Many people after the war became a part of the Lost Generation, shirking traditional American values, open to the impending changes emerging in America. The demand for the “modern and new” was astounding, and the artists of the Harlem Renaissance were there to supply it. White patrons were eager and willing to support the next big thing. As Wintz says, “Harlem was the experience that bound the otherwise diverse participants to one another” (Wintz 1988, 3). Essentially, the stars aligned at exactly the right moment to create an opening for the African American to walk through and shrug off years of tyranny. From learning of the beginnings of the Harlem Renaissance, we can see that Huggins’ statement holds a great deal of credibility. If the Renaissance had been the sole result of production of quality art during the era, the origins would be more of a discovery rather than a group of people filling a cultural void.

Having paved the way for themselves, individual artists like Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Eubie Blake, Countee Cullen, Carl Van Vechten, Nella Larsen, James Weldon Johnson and Claude McKay came into the spotlight. Each artist wrote profound and influential pieces. “American literature shifted its focus away from the individual’s alienation in the modern world and stressed instead on the social conflict and class struggle of a society in crises” (Wintz 1988, 220). One of the poems of the Harlem Renaissance that portrays this emotion is Claude McKay’s *If We Must Die*.

If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
 Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,  
 While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
 Making their mock at our accursed lot.  
 If we must die, O let us nobly die,  
 So that our precious blood may not be shed  
 In vain; then even the monster we defy  
 Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!  
 O Kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!  
 Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,  
 And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!  
 What though before us lies in the open grave?  
 Like men we’ll face the murderous, cowardly pack,  
 Pressed to the wall, dying but fighting back! (McKay, 353-354)

But great individual writing about shared prejudice was not enough to unite the authors of the time.

Wintz makes some excellent points about the lack of physical unity.

There was no common bond of political or racial ideology, personal experience, background, or literary philosophy that united the various elements in the Renaissance. What they held in common was a sense of community, a feeling that they were all part of the same endeavor. ... These men and women shared little but a consciousness that they were participants in a new awakening of black culture in the United States (Wintz 1988, 2).

Cary Wintz affirms that the participants in the Harlem Renaissance were spiritually united towards a community endeavor, but heavily concentrated in individualism. If the authors felt “that they were all participating in a major literary event,” then why was the literature of the Harlem Renaissance faded out? (Wintz 1988, 231).

Were the individual goals of authors during this time the cause for forgettable literature while the movement was a historical keystone? Perhaps it was the subject matter being written. Wintz states that “the Harlem Renaissance writers were determined to express the African American experience in all of its variety and complexity as realistically as possible” (Wintz 2007, 19). Warrington Hudlin reiterates the sentiment, that assimilation to escapist literature was shirked and the nature of Harlem Renaissance literature involved authentic situations. After the great depression, audiences did not want to read about disheartening stories and abuse that is portrayed in stories like Zora Neale Hurston’s Sweat. She captured the browbeaten negro wife and abusive negro husband with incredible realism. Another reason for the disregard of the Harlem Renaissance literature could be that as the country evolved, the style of the pieces did not

suite readers. Just as Beowulf is written in a style not embraced by most of the people in the world, the literature of the Harlem Renaissance could have grown too outdated. It also could be that the politics behind the movement had forward momentum that the literature just couldn't compete with.

“The Harlem Renaissance may have been a disappointment in some ways; some careers did not develop as they promised...” (Kramer 4). No one can deny the immense inventiveness of the artists of the Harlem Renaissance. However, some artists never produced another piece of art. Lack of interest and the withdrawal of financial support from patrons ruined their careers. Proving that the individual work produced during a renaissance, or cultural construction, can only stand as long as the movement is there supporting it. The literature was not completely in vein though. Some Harlem Renaissance artists remained with their fame intact and a legacy. People like Langston Hughes and Alain Locke are still known and studied in today's society. And, the Harlem Renaissance authors paved the way for acceptance of future African American authors.

Wintz purports possibly the most crucial bit of evidence to corroborate Huggins' claim. He states that “...traditional studies of literary history, literary criticism and cultural history have virtually ignored the Harlem Renaissance...” (Wintz 1988, 227). In a later book he claims that “others would celebrate it, if only for the quantity of the books written and the quality and originality of the music. But few read Countee Cullen today, or have the songs of Ethel Waters on their iPods” (Wintz 2007, 24). This quote is extremely persuasive and influential to readers who dispute that Huggins' argument is sound. Can the vast population of the United States claim that they even know who

Countee Cullen or Ethel Waters are? Yes, jazz music has influenced modern music incredibly, but does the average citizen know who took part in the cultural revolution that was the Harlem Renaissance? Sadly, people are not aware of the immense talents of Eubie Blake or James Johnson who shaped the music that is on their iPods. The people most affected by the literature of the Harlem Renaissance were contemporary authors.

Huggins realizes that “the foundation of the Renaissance was laid in the dialectical development of social and political thought during the turn of the century” (Hudlin 269). The Harlem Renaissance was therefore “an abstract concept,” rather than a time in history propelled by great literature (Wintz 1988, 217). Although I do have an affinity for the some of the great poems, stories and plays that emerged during this turbulently inventive period of history, I agree with Huggins’ statement that the Harlem Renaissance in retrospect is a significant movement, with little attention paid to the quality or lack there of that exists in the writings of that era.

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