Harlem Renaissance, is a blossoming (c. 1918–37) of African American culture, particularly in the creative arts, and is the most influential movement in African American literary history. Embracing literary, musical, theatrical, and visual arts, participants sought to re-conceptualize “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 labor 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. 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, 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.

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 Okeh’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. 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 and an antidote to bourgeois black assimilation.

Poets:

Langston Hughes

Langston Hughes is one of the most well-known names of the Harlem renaissance. He was a writer, whose pieces ranged from novels, to plays. He wrote short stories, children’s books, translations, and anthologies as well. However, his most well-known pieces were his poems. Langston Hughes lived with his friends, the Reeds, after his grandmother died in 1910. He entered High School where he was very successful, and began to explore poetry. In 1921, Hughes went to Harlem and enrolled in Columbia University. He managed to be successful there, but he spent the majority of his time seeing Broadway shows. In 1922, he dropped out of Columbia and began to spend every waking moment in Harlem, supporting himself on odd jobs and writing. His writing reflected the idea that black culture should be celebrated, because it is just as valuable as white culture. He advocated many of these beliefs in his pieces. Some examples of these are “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”, “[Let America Be America Again](http://historyoftheharlemrenaissance.weebly.com/let-america-be-america-again-a-poem-by-langston-hughes.html)”, “One Way Ticket”, and many others. On may 22, 1967, Langston Hughes died of cancer. He spent the majority of his life writing great literature, which is appreciated by *all* races, to this day.

Wallace Thurman

Within 10 years of arriving in Harlem he had many employments such as ghost writer, a publisher, an editor, and a writer of novels, plays and articles. He became editor of *The Messenger,*a socialist journal aimed at blacks. He became the first to publish the adult-themed stories of Langston Hughes. Thurman left *The Messenger* to become editor of a white-owned magazine *World Tomorrow.*He collaborated in publishing literary magazine*Fire”*a devotion to the younger negro artists.” It was a collaboration with Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Bruce Nugent, Aaron Douglas and Gwendolyn B. Bennett. With only one issue ever published, Firechallenged the ideas of W.E.B Du Bois and many African American bourgeoisie who believed that black art should serve as propaganda for social equality and racial integration. Thurman and other members of the “Niggerati” (deliberately ironic name Thurman used for young African American artists and intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance) wanted to show real lives of African Americans, good and bad. He believed that black artists should be more objective in their writings and celebrate the arduous conditions of African American lives.

Zora Neale Hurston

Zora Neale Hurston was born on January 7, 1891. Hurston was always interested in writing, and during the Harlem Renaissance, she befriended some very famous writers, such as Langston Hughes. By 1935, she had published a handful of short stories, articles, as well as a novel, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*. Some of her most famous works were *The Eyes Were Watching God*, and*Tell My Horse*, which studied Caribbean Voodoo. Hurston wrote many pieces, using very distinct dialect to show African American culture (see quote below).  One of her stories, “[Spunk](http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5131/)” was selected to be a part of *The New Negro*, which focused African and African American art and literature. Her main goal was merely to celebrate African American culture. She wrote to W.E.B Du Bois, who she gave the title “The Dean of American Negro Artists” to, and suggested to make a cemetery for the “illustrious Negro Dead”, on roughly 100 acres of land, in Florida, claiming that her people must be honored.