

The Harlem Renaissance



Essential Questions

- What were some of the stereotypes whites had of African Americans in the 1920s?
- How did the Harlem Renaissance affect the views whites held about African Americans as well as those that African Americans held about themselves?
- What events sparked the Harlem Renaissance?
- What significant contributions did the artists, writers, and musicians of the Harlem Renaissance make to American culture?

The Harlem Renaissance

- 1920s movement centered in Harlem, an African American neighborhood of New York City
- Included artists, musicians, activists, intellectuals, novelists, playwrights, and poets



During the first World War, many African Americans migrated north to get jobs in war industries. In Northern states, they could escape the Jim Crow laws that made them second class citizens in the South. In New York City, neighborhoods were segregated not by law, but by custom. Harlem was known as the “Black Mecca.” In addition to the migrants from the South, Harlem became the home of many educated blacks, World War I veterans, and immigrants from islands in the Caribbean, all looking for a better life.

The New Negro



Marcus Garvey

- New black identity
- Racial pride
- Black nationalism
- Marcus Garvey's
United Negro Improvement
Association
- Urban League

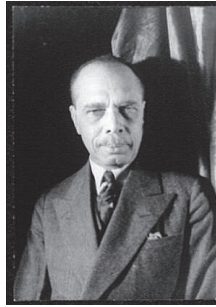
The “New Negro” was a symbolic name given to African American movements in the 1920s that emphasized racial pride and the negation of demeaning stereotypes. Marcus Garvey, an immigrant from Jamaica, formed the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and exhorted all African Americans to return to Africa as part of his Pan-African movement. He worked for political freedom and economic independence for blacks, encouraging them to open their own businesses. At its peak, the UNIA had over two million members and published its own newspaper, *Negro World*. The National Urban League was another organization that had its headquarters in Harlem. Like the UNIA, the Urban League encouraged economic empowerment. It fought against racial discrimination and for better education and job opportunities for black Americans.

The Harlem Renaissance in Literature

- Countee Cullen
- Langston Hughes
- Claude McKay
- James Weldon Johnson
- Zora Neale Hurston



Claude McKay



James Weldon Johnson



Zora Neale Hurston

The Harlem Renaissance was the name given by writer James Weldon Johnson to the flowering of African American art, literature and music that occurred in the 1920s and was based in Harlem. Langston Hughes and Claude McKay were two of many poets whose works often spoke about the African American experience. Zora Neale Hurston's novels focused primarily on the experience of African Americans in the South after slavery and Reconstruction ended. She also collected folklore from Jamaica and Haiti. The writers of the Harlem Renaissance brought the first critical attention to literature written by blacks. Their work helped disprove the stereotype of African Americans as limited intellectually and incapable of producing literature of worth.

Picture sources:

- Photos of James Weldon Johnson and Zora Neale Hurston from the Carl van Vechten collection, Library of Congress

Countee Cullen

(1903–1946)

"INCIDENT" (1926)

Once riding in old Baltimore,
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee
I saw a Baltimorean
Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small,
And he was no whit bigger,
And so I smiled, but he poked out
His tongue, and called me, "Nigger."

I saw the whole of Baltimore
From May until December;
Of all the things that happened there
That's all that I remember.



Countee Cullen was born in 1903; where is a matter of debate, but Louisville, Kentucky is generally accepted as his birthplace based on his college application and what he later related to his second wife. While still an undergraduate at New York University, he won several poetry contests, including the National Witter Bynner contest for undergraduate poetry, and published in *Poetry* magazine. He graduated in 1925, the same year he published his first volume of poetry, *Color*. He earned a Master's degree from Harvard University in literature and French, graduating from there in 1926. While Cullen maintained that he did not want to be "a negro poet," the themes of racism and oppression are evident in his work from his earliest days on. However, his poetry also dealt with the more universal themes of love, faith, and death. He strove to have his work touch people of all backgrounds and ethnicities.

Picture source:

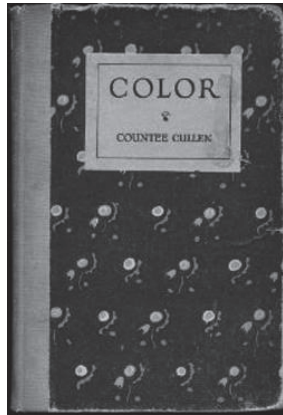
- Carl van Vechten collection, Library of Congress



1928—Cullen married Yolande Du Bois, daughter of W. E. B. Du Bois, a leading African American intellectual and civil rights activist

In 1928, Countee Cullen married Yolande Du Bois, the daughter of W. E. B. Du Bois, one of the most important African American leaders of his generation. Du Bois was the first African American to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard University. He urged blacks to fight for social and political equality, and was one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the publisher of its magazine, *The Crisis*. Du Bois saw Cullen as a rising star in the African American community. In an essay in *The Crisis* (1928), Du Bois wrote, “In a time when it is vogue to make much of the Negro’s aptitude for clownishness or to depict him objectively as a serio-comic figure, it is a fine and praiseworthy act for Mr. Cullen to show...the inner workings of the Negro soul and mind.” The wedding was the biggest social event in Harlem and the guests included most of New York’s African American literary, scholarly, and political leaders. They divorced in 1930, after Cullen told his wife that he was attracted to men.

“Yet Do I Marvel” from Color



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,
Make plain the reason tortured Tantalus
Is baited by the fickle fruit, declare
If merely brute caprice dooms Sisyphus
To struggle up a never-ending stair.
Inscrutable His ways are, and immune
To catechism by a mind too strewn
With petty cares to slightly understand
What awful brain compels His awful hand.
Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:
To make a poet black, and bid him sing!

Cullen’s most important influences as a poet were the English Romantics, particularly John Keats, as can be seen here in one of his most famous poems, a sonnet. Having been educated in high-quality racially integrated universities, the Romantic tradition that was familiar to him. He wanted to prove that African American writers could compose in classical forms and produce great literature. He came under some criticism by other black poets for writing in this style while they were experimenting with new forms, some derived from jazz. His criticism of poets who did not follow established forms extended beyond the black community. Among his contemporaries, he admired Edna St. Vincent Millay and Robert Frost, both of whom wrote in conventional rhyme schemes, but criticized more avant garde poets such as Amy Lowell.

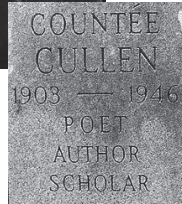
Excerpt from “Heritage”

What is Africa to me:
Copper sun or scarlet sea,
Jungle star or jungle track,
Strong bronzed men, or regal black
Women from whose loins I sprang
When the birds of Eden sang?
*One three centuries removed
From the scenes his father loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?*



While Cullen wrote extensively about the African American experience, in “Heritage” he demonstrates his sympathy with the Pan-African movement that had so much support throughout the black community. However, he also felt that poetry could bring whites and blacks together. He criticized some of his contemporaries, including Langston Hughes, for dwelling too much on the negative aspects of African American life. Cullen never lived in the South or experienced the hostility and violence blacks were subject to there, and he felt that focusing attention on these issues would lead to further division between whites and blacks. Rather, he felt that art had to be the common ground on which the two communities could meet.

Arna Bontemps



- 1934—Published *One Way to Heaven*, his first novel
- 1935—Published *The Medea and Other Poems*, the first translation of a classical work by an African American writer
- 1940, 1942—Published *The Lost Zoo* and *My Lives and How I Lost Them*, two novels for children
- 1946—Died in New York at the age of 43

In 1934, Cullen began to teach English, French, and creative writing at Frederick Douglass High School. He also turned his attention from poetry to writing novels, including two for children. *In My Lives and How I Lost Them*, he showed a more whimsical side as he pretended to share authorship with his cat. In 1946, he began working on a musical play with Arna Bontemps called *St. Louis Woman*, which was based on Bontemps's novel *God Sends Sunday*. His death from uremic poisoning and high blood pressure prevented completion of the project. He is recognized today as one of the most important and influential poets of the Harlem Renaissance.

Picture source for tombstone:

- http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Countee_Cullen_Headstone_2009.JPG