

The Literature of the Harlem Renaissance

An Introduction

Clare Jackson

The Harlem Renaissance: a description

- The Harlem Renaissance was a flowering of Black American culture running from around the period 1919-1939 in Harlem and other Black communities.
- 'The period was the first in African American literary history in which artists and writers boldly claimed and exhibited, collectively, a self-confidence in their representation of blackness...' (*A History of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Rachel Farebrother and Miriam Thaggert. 2021)
- It was and remains globally influential.



Focus and limits

- Glancing across an immensely wide and deep area. **Introductory remarks only.**
- Focus: the literature of the Harlem Renaissance:
 - **its purpose;**
 - **some of the questions of representation that arose around it;**
 - **some of the debates which arose round it.**
- Limits of the lecturer (to name just a few...).



Terminology and vocabulary: an approach

- Terms used by key figures and publications at the time of the Harlem Renaissance would now sound offensive but were not felt to be so then e.g. 'Negro'.
- A number of terms used by modern day Black Americans to describe themselves.
- For the purposes of this lecture: 'Black people/communities' or 'Black Americans': a rationale.

Timeline: some historical and political background

- 1909: The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is set up, a civil rights organisation seeking to advance justice for Black Americans.
- 1914-1918: World War One.
- 1916: The Great Migration of Black Americans from the rural South to the urban West and North commences around this point. Harlem in New York becomes established as a new centre for Black Americans, residentially, culturally and in terms of employment.
- 1917: The NAACP and church leaders organise a Silent Protest Parade down Fifth Avenue, protesting against violence against Black Americans.
- 1919: 'Red Summer': race riots break out with hundreds of deaths, mainly those of Black Americans.
- 1920: The International Convention of the Negro Peoples of the World at Madison Square Garden is attended by 25,000 people.
- 1923: An Anti-Lynching Bill is defeated in the House of Representatives.

Authors and Publications: A Selection (1)

Journals

The Crisis (1910);
Opportunity (1923);
Fire!! Fire!! a Quarterly devoted to the Younger Negro Artists (1926);
Harlem: A Forum of Negro Life (1928)

Essays

Some Notes on Color, (Jesse Fauset, 1922), *On Being Young - A Woman – and Coloured* (Marita Bonner, 1925);
The Souls of Black Folk, *Criteria of Negro Art* (W.E.B. Du Bois, 1903 & 1926), *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain* (Langston Hughes, 1926); *The Negro-Art Hokum*, (George S. Schuyler, 1926), *Characteristics of Negro Expression* (Zora Neale Hurston, 1934), *Blueprint for Negro Writing* (Richard Wright, 1937)

Poets

Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, Countée Cullen, Alice Dunbar Nelson, Arna Bontemps, William Waring Cuney, Helene Johnson, Sterling A. Brown, Fenton Johnson, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Gwendolyn B. Bennett, Mae V. Cowdery, Jessie Fauset, Angelina Weld Grimké, Elise Johnson McDougald, Esther Popel, Anne Spencer, Melvin B. Tolson, Jean Toomer, Lucy Mae Turner, Margaret Walker, Alain Locke

Authors and Publications: A Selection (2)

Playwrights and drama

Eulalie Spence, Georgia Douglas Johnson, May Miller, Garland Anderson, Regina M. Anderson, Marita Bonner, Mary P. Burrill, Marc Connelly & Roark Bradford, DuBose and Dorothy Heyward Randolph Edmonds, Ruth Ada Gaines-Shelton, Angelina Weld Grimké, Langston Hughes, Georgia Douglas Johnson, J.D. Lipscomb, Warren A. Macdonald, Alice Dunbar Nelson, Zora Neale Hurston, Noble Sissle, Fournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles, Willis Richardson, Edward Sheldon, Noble Sissle, Myrtle Athleen Smith, Eloise Bibb Thompson, Wallace Thurman, Ridgely Torrence, Frank Wilson

Prose Fiction

Cane (Jean Toomer, 1923); *The Fire in the Flint* (Walter White, 1924); *There is Confusion* (Jessie Redmon Fauset, 1924); *Home to Harlem* (Claude McKay, 1928); *Quicksand* and *Passing* (Nella Larsen, 1928 & 1929); *The Blacker the Berry* (Wallace Thurman, 1929); *Not Without Laughter* (Langston Hughes, 1930); *Black No More* (George S. Schuyler, 1931); *The Conjureman Dies* (Rudolph Fisher, 1932) *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Zora Neale Hurston, 1937).

Angelina Weld Grimké (1880-1958)

- Teacher, including at Dunbar High School, a school for Black students with reputation for high academic excellence. AWG attended classes at Harvard.
- Prolific output includes 173 poems (31 published), essays, short stories and plays. Much of her work not published, though was in *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*. Much anthologised in HR collections and publications.
- *Rachel* one of earliest plays to protest against lynching and racist violence. Also one of first plays to be staged by a Black writer and performed by an all-Black cast.
- Challenge to grotesque and offensive misrepresentations of Black people in literature and on stage.



Text 1: Early Drama: *Rachel* (1916)

- Stage direction, beginning of Act One:

‘In the center of the left wall is a fireplace with a grate in it for coals; over this is a wooden mantel painted white. In the center is a small clock. A pair of vases, green and white in coloring, one at each end, complete the ornaments. Over the mantel is a narrow mirror; and over this, hanging on the wall, **Burne-Jones’ “Golden Stairs,”** simply framed. Against the front end of the left wall is **an upright piano with a stool in front of it. On top is music neatly piled.** Hanging over the piano is **Raphael’s “Sistine Madonna.”** In the center of the floor is a green rug, and in the center of this, a rectangular dining-room table, the long side facing front. It is covered with a green table-cloth.’

Angelina Weld Grimké

W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963)

- Academically brilliant and enormously influential figure in the Harlem Renaissance and Black American history.
- Argued vehemently that Black people should be given opportunities to achieve to the highest academic standards (cf. Booker T. Washington).
- Hugely involved for a number of years with NAACP and *The Crisis*.
- Vital figure in establishing sociological studies of the misrepresentation of Black people, and sociology as a discipline as a whole.



Du Bois on purpose of arts

- ‘Thus it is the bounden duty of black America to begin this great work of the creation of Beauty, of the preservation of Beauty, of the realization of Beauty, and we must use in this work all the methods that men have used before. And what have been the tools of the artist in times gone by? First of all, he has used the Truth -- not for the sake of truth, not as a scientist seeking truth, but as one upon whom Truth eternally thrusts itself as the highest handmaid of imagination, as the one great vehicle of universal understanding. **Again artists have used Goodness -- goodness in all its aspects of justice, honor and right -- not for sake of an ethical sanction but as the one true method of gaining sympathy and human interest.**’ (*Criteria of Negro Art*, W.E.B. Du Bois, 1926)

([http://www.webDu Bois.org/dbCriteriaNArt.html](http://www.webDuBois.org/dbCriteriaNArt.html))

Du Bois: questions of representation

- ‘Suppose the only Negro who survived some centuries hence was the Negro painted by white Americans in the novels and essays they have written. What would people in a hundred years say of black Americans? Now turn it around. Suppose you were to write a story and put in it **the kind of people you know and like and imagine**. You might get it published and you might not. And the "might not" is still far bigger than the "might". The white publishers catering to white folk would say, "It is not interesting" -- to white folk, naturally not. **They want Uncle Toms, Topsies, good "darkies" and clowns.**’ (W.E.B. Du Bois, *Criteria of Negro Art*, 1926)



Krigwa (Crisis Guild of Writers and Artists)

- Founded by Du Bois.
- Set up theatre company The Krigwa Players.
- Sponsored a competition for playwriting, starting in 1925.
- Criteria: 'The plays of a Negro theatre must be: 1. **About us**. That is, they must have plots which reveal Negro life as it is. 2. **By us**. That is, they must be written by Negro authors who understand from birth and continued association just what it means to be a Negro today. 3. **For us**. That is, the theatre must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval. 4. **Near us**. The theatre must be in a Negro neighbourhood near the mass of ordinary Negro people' (*The Crisis*, W.E.B. Du Bois, 1926)
- 'be true, be sincere, be thorough and do a beautiful job' (Du Bois)
- A number of Black women writers were winners, e.g. the Black writer, teacher and actress Eulalie Spence.

Drama: Debates

- **Purpose:** call for social action? Educate? Entertain?
- How should Black people be **represented**? Should drama present role models?
- **Exploit** the fashion for **the exotic**?
- **Integration** versus Black **autonomous identity**?

Jean Toomer (1894-1967)

- Attended both segregated Black schools and all-White schools. Attended numerous colleges and universities studying a range of disciplines, but never completed a degree course.
- 1921: became principal at an industrial and agricultural school for Black students in Georgia for short time. Formative experience witnessing the oppressions of Black people there.
- Author of Modernist and now immensely influential novel *Cane*. Recognised as a modern masterpiece, Alice Walker has said of it 'I love it passionately, could not possibly exist without it.'



Text 2: Modernism: *Cane* (1923)

‘Wind is in the cane. Come along.
Cane leaves swaying, rusty with talk,
Scratching choruses above the guinea’s squawk,
Wind is in the cane. Come along.’

CARMA, in overalls, and **strong as any man**, stands behind the old brown mule, driving the wagon home. It bumps, and groans, and shakes as it crosses the railroad track. **She, riding it easy**. I leave the men around the stove to follow her with my eyes down the red dust road. [...] Dixie Pike is what they call it. **Maybe she feels my gaze, perhaps she expects it. Anyway, she turns. The sun, which has been slanting over her shoulder, shoots primitive rockets into her mangrove-gloomed, yellow flower face.**’

Jean Toomer

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/60093/60093-h/60093-h.htm>

Cane: the purpose of the arts

- **'I realized with deep regret, that the spirituals, meeting ridicule, would be certain to die out.** With Negroes also the trend was towards the small town and then towards the city - and industry and commerce and machines. The folk-spirit was walking in to die on the modern desert. That spirit was so beautiful. Its death was so tragic. Just this seemed to sum life for me. And this was the feeling I put into *Cane*. *Cane* was a swan-song. It was a song of an end.'
- **“A visit to Georgia last fall was the starting point of almost everything of worth that I have done,”** he wrote to the editors of the socialist magazine *The Liberator*. **“I heard folk-songs come from the lips of Negro peasants. I saw the rich dusk beauty that I had heard many false accents about, and of which till then, I was somewhat skeptical. And a deep part of my nature, a part that I had repressed, sprang suddenly to life and responded to them.”**

(Parul Sehgal, The New York Times, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/25/books/review-cane-jean-toomer.html?emc=edit_bk_20181231&nl=book-review&nid=2251275320181231&te=1))

Toomer: questions of representation and debates

- ‘Toomer forbade his publisher to mention his race ... (“My racial composition and my position in the world are realities which I alone may determine.”) Nor would he allow his work to be included in black anthologies, insisting he was part of **a new, emergent race, simply called American.**’

(Parul Sehgal, *The New York Times*, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/25/books/review-cane-jean-toomer.html?emc=edit_bk_20181231&nl=book-review&nid=2251275320181231&te=1)

Langston Hughes (1901/2?-1967)

- Award-winning writer deeply engaged with the debates surrounding the function of art in relation to Black communities.
- First Black American to earn his living through writings and lecturing.
- Believed intensely in the abilities of Black artists and communities to generate a distinctively Black aesthetic.
- Immensely popular as a writer among 'ordinary' Black communities in large part because of the accessibility and outward-looking nature of his writing. (cf. Modernist movement's influence).



Text 3: Poetry: *The Weary Blues* (1925)

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uM7HSOwJw20>
- Act of self-portraiture.
- ‘He made that poor piano moan with melody.’
- ‘Sweet Blues!/ Coming from a black man’s soul... ‘
- “I’s gwine to quit ma frownin’/And put ma troubles on the shelf.”
- ‘He slept like a rock or a man that’s dead.’

(Langston Hughes)

Hughes: questions of representation and purpose of the arts

- Of the Harlem Renaissance: 'it was the period when the Negro was in vogue'.
- 'The ordinary Negroes hadn't heard of the Harlem Renaissance...And if they had, it hadn't raised their wages any.'
- '...Hughes...wanted to tell the stories of his people in ways that reflected their actual culture, including their love of music, laughter, and language itself alongside their suffering.'

(<https://poets.org/poet/langston-hughes>)

Langston Hughes: debates

- ‘Certainly there is, for the American Negro artist who can escape the restrictions the more advanced among his own group would put upon him, a great field of unused material ready for his art. **Without going outside his race, and even among the better classes with their “white” culture and conscious American manners, but still Negro enough to be different, there is sufficient matter to furnish a black artist with a lifetime of creative work.**’ (*The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*, Langston Hughes, 1926)

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69395/the-negro-artist-and-the-racial-mountain>



Adult Learning
Within Reach

George S. Schuyler (1895-1977)

- After period in army where was wrongfully imprisoned after a racist incident, began work as a journalist in New York.
- Prolific writer and journalist. Works alongside journalism included short stories, essays, novels and pamphlets.
- 1937-1944: business manager of the NAACP.
- Published in among others, *The Negro Digest*, *The Messenger* and *The Crisis*, *The Nation* and *Common Ground*, and in papers such as *The Washington Post* and *The New York Evening Post*. Chief Editorial Writer at *The Pittsburgh Courier*.



Schuyler: the purposes of art

- ‘All of this hullabaloo about the Negro Renaissance in art and literature did stimulate the writing of some literature of importance which will live. The amount, however, is very small, but such as it is, **it is meritorious because it is literature and not Negro literature. It is judged by literary and not by racial standards, which is as it should be**’ (George Schuyler, *The Courier*, 1936)

Schuyler: questions of representation

- 'Because a few writers with a paucity of themes have seized upon imbecilities of the Negro rustics and clowns and palmed them off as authentic and characteristic Aframerican behavior, the common notion that the black American is so "different" from his white neighbor has gained wide currency. **The mere mention of the word "Negro" conjures up in the average white American's mind a composite stereotype of Bert Williams, Aunt Jemima, Uncle Tom, Jack Johnson, Florian Slaphey, and the various monstrosities scrawled by the cartoonists.'**

(The Negro-Art Hokum, Nation, George S. Schuyler, 1926)

Schuyler: debates

- 'On this baseless premise, so flattering to the white mob, that the blackamoor is inferior and fundamentally different, is erected the postulate that he must needs be peculiar; and when he attempts to portray life through the medium of art, it must of necessity be a peculiar art. While such reasoning may seem conclusive to the majority of Americans, it must be rejected with a loud guffaw by intelligent people.' (*The Negro-Art Hokum, Nation*, George S. Schuyler, 1926)



Summary: purposes of art and key debates

- Proof that Black people could aspire to the highest achievements alongside White people. As a means to 'racial uplift' and positive representation of Black people.
- As a form of self-expression, created by and distinctive to Black people – and not just the educated élite.
- As a means by which a Black person could find a voice and speak for him or herself.
- As a means to enter the interior as opposed to observed experience of a Black person or people.
- As a form to be regarded on purely its own merits irrespective of race.
- To be integrated into the predominantly White world of the arts, or to stand as distinctive to it?
- As a trend to be exploited.

Summary: questions of representation?

- Absolute rejection of the degrading and grotesque portrayals of Black people in the arts up until this time. (Universally agreed).
- Who is to be represented and how?
- The dangers of seeing art from Black individuals and communities as distinctive risked that their art would be seen as separate and apart, playing to White prejudice.



Wider Reading: some starting points

A History of the Harlem Renaissance, ed. Farebrother and Thaggert, 2021

The Cambridge Companion to The Harlem Renaissance, ed. Hutchinson, 2007

Black Drama and the Harlem Renaissance, Freda L. Scott, 1985

Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays before 1950 ed. Kathy A. Perkins, 1990

<https://naacp.org/about>

<https://www.britannica.com/summary/Harlem-Renaissance-Timeline>

<https://www.historytoday.com/focus/history-harlem-renaissance>

<https://onlineexhibits.library.yale.edu/s/gatheroutofstardust/page/the-harlem-renaissance-a-chronology>



Adult Learning
Within Reach

Thank you!

