



## The Harlem Renaissance: Novels and Poetry from the Jazz Age

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### Lesson Transcript

Ask a Question

The Harlem Renaissance was a movement in the 1920s and 1930s during which there was an explosion of African-American art and literature. This lesson looks at the themes, causes, and important figures of the Harlem Renaissance.

## What Is the Harlem Renaissance?



*Jazz Age musicians combined African and European music styles*

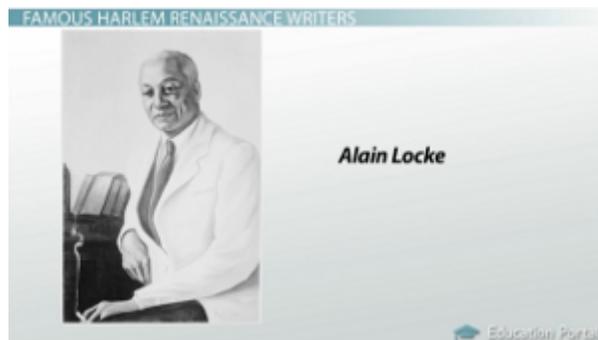
Have you ever been in a meeting or another situation where you haven't been able to talk for a long time? Often when people are forced into silence for hours at a time, they compensate afterwards by wanting to talk a lot more than usual. That's kind of what happened with African-American writers in the Harlem Renaissance.

The **Harlem Renaissance** was a movement in the 1920s and 1930s that involved an explosion of African-American art and writing. Though there had been African-American writers before the Harlem Renaissance, there had never been such a concentration of black voices all at once and all discussing what it was like to be a minority race in America at that time.

The Harlem Renaissance had a profound impact on America. Before the Harlem Renaissance, most published works were by white people, especially white men. What the African-American writers did in the '20s and '30s was to give a voice to a people who had been slaves 60 years earlier. They attacked the stereotypes of black Americans and wrote about what it felt like to be **disenfranchised**, or left out of mainstream America.

There were several things that influenced the Harlem Renaissance. Let's look at a couple of them.

# Jim Crow and the Migration North



Ask a Question

*Locke wrote the influential work *The New Negro**

Around the turn of the 20th century, many African Americans were living in the Southern United States. Before the Civil War in the 1860s, African Americans had been kept in slavery in the South. After the Civil War they were granted freedom, and most of them stayed in the rural South because that's what felt like home to them.

However, the South wasn't a fun place to be black. In the years after the Civil War, African Americans won many legal rights, including the right to vote and to run for public office. In response, white Southerners passed a series of laws called *Jim Crow laws*. The Jim Crow laws said that blacks couldn't eat at the same restaurants, drink from the same water fountains, go to the same theaters, and use the same restrooms as whites, among other things.

Jim Crow laws were only in place in the South, and as a result of them, many African Americans began to move to other parts of the U.S., particularly the Northeast, where the laws were more accepting. The large number of black Americans who moved to the North in the early 20th century turned into a **migration**, or movement by a large number of people all at once.

The migration north led to large numbers of African Americans settling in Northern cities and living close together. The largest and most famous black neighborhood in the United States became the neighborhood of Harlem in northern Manhattan.

Because they went from living far apart in the rural Southern U.S. to living in a very densely populated area in the urban North, many African Americans found that the experiences they felt weren't unusual. They found other people who felt and thought like they did, and they influenced each other. In this environment, art and writing flourished and Harlem became more than just the most famous African-American neighborhood; it became the center of the cultural revolution that would be named for it.

## The Jazz Age



*Hurston wrote about race and gender issues in her work*

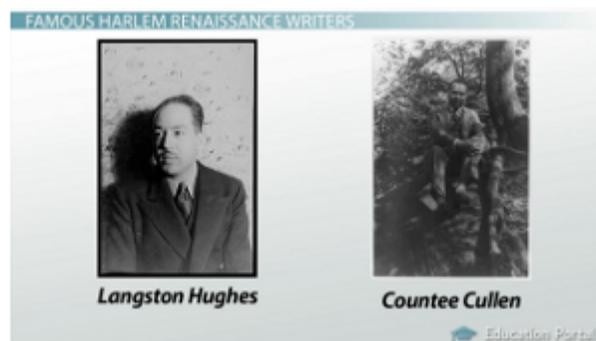
Besides the migration north, the Harlem Renaissance was largely influenced by what has become known as *The Jazz Age*.

In the early 20th century, African-American musicians married African and European music to form a new type of sound. The result was what some have called America's first great art form, jazz music. Jazz had a different feel to it than anything most people had heard. Before jazz, music was very structured in rhythm and melody. Jazz fought against the traditional structures, instead focusing on extemporaneous, or unplanned, bouts of music that created an unstructured sound.

The nation was captivated by jazz in the teens and '20s, so much so that the music became synonymous with the lifestyle of that era. Parties and fun became an important part of American life, and given the way that jazz freed music from traditional structures, the Jazz Age in America was a time when people felt that they had been freed from the traditional structures of life that had been in place before the turn of the century.

As a musical sound, jazz had an impact on the rhythm and sound of poetry in the Harlem Renaissance. But more than that, the ability of jazz to free people from limitations allowed many African Americans to search for a new way to express the plight of their people. That idea - freedom to express what it was like to be a black American - was at the heart of the Harlem Renaissance.

## Famous Harlem Renaissance Writers



*Hughes and Cullen were leading Harlem Renaissance poets*

Many influential African-American voices came out of the Harlem Renaissance.

- W.E.B. Du Bois helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, also known as the NAACP. He wrote essays and books that helped to spark the Harlem Renaissance movement, and he also served as editor of the NAACP's magazine, *The Crisis*.
- Alain Locke wrote what some people believe to be the most influential work of the Harlem Renaissance, *The New Negro*. In it, he collected essays and stories by a variety of black writers.
- Zora Neale Hurston wrote poems, plays, and novels. Her most famous work is *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a book that examines gender and race issues through the eyes of a mixed-race woman in the South.
- Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes were the most celebrated Harlem Renaissance poets. They both presented the lives of African Americans in their poetry.
- Claude McKay was a famous Jamaican-American writer and poet of the Harlem Renaissance who talked about the issues that faced black immigrants.

Ask a Question

## Lesson Summary

The Harlem Renaissance was a movement in the 1920s and 1930s that introduced the voices of African-American artists and writers into the mainstream of the United States. The Harlem Renaissance was influenced by the African-American migration north and by jazz music and the Jazz Age. There were many famous writers that came out of the Harlem Renaissance, including W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay.

## Learning Outcomes

After watching this lesson, you should be able to:

- Describe the Harlem Renaissance and the events that influenced it, such as the Jim Crow laws
- Explain the significance of the Jazz Age
- Identify some important writers from the Harlem Renaissance and their works