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The Harlem Renaissance

The fight for African American equality in the United States has been a slow and arduous process. One of the key steps in the progression towards equality was the Harlem Renaissance, a time of great social and creative activity among African Americans during the 1920's and 1930's. Many patrons supported the extraordinary talents of black authors, musicians, and painters, many of whom lived in Harlem, New York. As more African Americans became politicians, new political groups also developed alongside them. All of these artists, academics, and politicians used their talents to further the struggle for African American identity.

Harlem Demographics

The district of Harlem, in New York City, was once predominantly populated by white people. Believing that there would be a population boom in Harlem, developers at the turn of the century began building more housing in the area, but interest in these developments among the white community was severely lacking.

Philip A Payton Jr. of Afro-American Realty Company encouraged African Americans to consider living in Harlem. Black Americans from all walks of life were attracted to the area's desirable housing. Some, like the real estate tycoon Casper Holstein, were wealthy. Most, however, were middle class families who were looking for a better life. Over several years, Harlem became the largest African American community in the United States. However, it would later become one of the worst ghetto areas in the country due to the

surrounding white neighborhoods' refusal to accommodate the growing numbers of African Americans who relocated to New York.

In 1917, three years after the start of World War I, the US declared war on Germany and began sending both white and black soldiers to the European front. Munitions factories were built in the northern states to produce needed weapons for the war effort. A large percentage of the African American population, who primarily lived in the south at the time, began moving north to work in these factories. This demographic shift became known as the "Great Migration." It brought many African Americans to places like Harlem.

The reaction of northerners to the Great Migration was mixed. Some white Americans in the north began to join militant groups such as the Klu Klux Klan in an effort to keep African Americans out of their communities. Other white northerners were much more receptive and were curious about African American culture. They were open to the views of the new residents.

The Arts in Harlem

At the turn of the century, an increasing number of African Americans were pursuing higher education. Approximately one tenth of black Americans had gained master degrees and Ph.Ds. They became known as the "Talented Tenth." Armed with trained intellects, some of them began to lead the demand for change in the overall treatment of blacks in the US.

By the 1920's, the stage was set for the Harlem Renaissance. People of African descent from all over the United States and even as far as the Caribbean were drawn to Harlem. Many were artists, and they thrived on Harlem's nightclubs, theatres and other artistic venues.

These artists, like many black Americans, had an acute sense of their race. They began to call themselves the "New Negroes." They no longer felt restrained by the bigotry of the white population, but were seeking a new social standing for African Americans.

Literature was at the forefront of the Harlem Renaissance. Authors composed poetry, essays, short stories, plays, novels and even scholarly works in the name of self-determination and black pride. W.E.B. Du Bois, a sociologist and historian with a Ph.D. from Harvard, was one such Harlem Renaissance writer who edited *The Crisis*, a journal put out by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Du Bois also formulated his own sociological theories regarding the relevance of African Americans in US society. These writings are still considered an authoritative reflection of the African American psyche.

Langston Hughes was a Harlem Renaissance poet. His first book, a compilation of his poetry entitled "The Weary Blues," was published in 1926 when he was 24 years old. Hughes was unlike many of his fellow Renaissance writers in that he preferred to keep his personal experiences out of his descriptions and comment on the experience of African Americans as a group.

African American author Jean Toomer wrote "Cane" in 1923. This was an experimental work written in poetic prose. Through his writings, Toomer expressed his wish to transcend racial boundaries. Women also participated in the Harlem Renaissance. One of the most prominent among them was the writer Dorothy West, who at age 17 left her native Boston for Harlem. She published short stories, such as "The Typewriter," which

described what Southerners experienced when moving to urban areas in the North. West continued to write even after the Harlem Renaissance was over.

There were other artists who participated in the Harlem Renaissance. A number of musicians, such as Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Fats Waller played in Harlem's Cotton Club and Smalls' Paradise. These musicians explored a new type of music called jazz, which quickly became popular throughout the world and is recognized as the first distinctly American musical form. Painting was also part of the Harlem Renaissance art. Some of the most famous painters of this movement were Aaron Douglass and Archibald J. Motley, Jr.

Art and the Depression

The glory of the Harlem Renaissance was undermined in the mid-1930's by the economic problems of the Depression. The financial crisis forced patrons to withdraw their support for many African American endeavors. White readers of African American literature stopped purchasing it. They had lost interest in the plight of the African American in light of their own anxieties. The artists who continued to create after the end of the Harlem Renaissance had great difficulty finding support for their work. It seemed that with the coming of the Depression, the Harlem Renaissance had suffered and declined.

Some historians believe that the Harlem Renaissance did very little for the African American cause because it did not produce any immediate changes. Wages for African Americans were not raised and new laws to end segregation and job discrimination were not instituted.

However, other historians are of the opinion that the Harlem Renaissance benefited future African Americans by helping to establish black pride. Renaissance writers such as W.E.B Du Bois influenced future artists like author James Baldwin and activists like Martin Luther King, Jr. These individuals and others like them would help initiate broader social change in the 1950's and 60's.

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By Keira Stevenson

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