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**The Cultural Impact of the Harlem Renaissance on the American Society during  
the 1920s and Beyond**

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Literature and Civilization

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## **Declaration of Originality**

I hereby declare that this research project is my own work; it incorporates no content previously published except for source materials explicitly acknowledged through proper citation.

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## **Abstract**

This study aims to stand upon the importance of the Harlem Renaissance as the first and most notable cultural movement in African American history. It also endeavours to explore the main goals that the Harlem Renaissance set for itself, and how far it succeeded in achieving and realizing them. Furthermore, this study seeks to define the African American cultural legacy that black people left behind during and after the Renaissance. It also examines the different ways and aspects in which that legacy has affected and influenced the overall American culture. Hence, this research follows both the exploratory and explanatory approaches to analyze data. The results revealed that the Harlem Renaissance indeed achieved all its set goals and more. Added to that, its defects or downfalls are only limited to its premature culmination, that, for the most part, came as a result to a set of economic and recessionary incidents at the time. Therefore, the Renaissance is perceived as a success. The results also showed that the impact of the Renaissance is clear through its effectiveness and success in both introducing new cultural and political additions to Contemporary and Modern American society, and altering the overall American perspective and stereotypes about the black race.

*Keywords:* Harlem Renaissance, black race, African American identity, American culture, the Impact of the Harlem Renaissance.

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# **General Introduction**

## General Introduction

Subsequent to centuries of atrocities and segregation, African Americans finally decided to abandon the oppressive American South in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Leaning on the virtues of Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, they left the South towards the North to establish a life for themselves. The arrival of African Americans to the urban American North coincided with the period of the "Roaring Twenties", a period of explosive cultural growth in America. Following the vogue, African Americans enthusiastically rebelled into an unprecedented cultural flowering that centered itself in Harlem, and was accordingly entitled as the "Harlem Renaissance".

This Renaissance signified the growth of the different aspects of the newly established black culture in America. It was the default life for almost two decades; literature, music and visual arts had witnessed their peak throughout that period. Indeed, not many intellectuals are actually familiar with the concept of the Harlem Renaissance, but the ones who are, have probably never thought intricately about its importance to the American culture.

The purpose of this research work is to investigate the importance of the Harlem Renaissance to the American culture through highlighting the Afro-American heritage and its underlying value in America. Moreover, this research is mainly explanatory, as it seeks to explain the direct impact of the Harlem Renaissance on the Contemporary and Modern American culture. Accordingly, this research work aims to delve into the main goals that the Harlem Renaissance set for itself, and how far it actually succeeded in realizing them. It also intends to explore the diverse ways in which the Afro-American legacy has influenced the American lifestyle, and the traces through which that impact can be clearly perceived and documented. Hence, the ensuing research questions are posed:

- 1-Did the Harlem Renaissance achieve all its main goals? And was it a success or a failure?
- 2-In what way did the Harlem Renaissance impact on the American culture? And what changes exactly did it bring to it?

The following research hypotheses are proposed for the research questions stated above:

- The Harlem Renaissance has achieved most of its highlighted goals and therefore, could be perceived as a success.
- The impact of the Harlem Renaissance on the American culture is clear through the changes and additions it brought to it. This impact has been so great that some aspects of the American culture have witnessed inevitable permanent change.



## **General Introduction**

This research work consists of three chapters to provide an intricate analysis of the legitimacy of the Harlem Renaissance, and how the legacy that African Americans left during that period affected the overall American culture. The first chapter provides an overview of the segregating life black people had in the American South, and how they managed to leave it for the North in one of the greatest migrations in black history. Moreover, it analyzes the emergence of “Harlem” as the Mecca of the New Negro, and what factors led African Americans to settle and thrive there. It also sheds light on the cultural bloom that took place during that period, and how the Afro-American culture thrived to its peak.

The second chapter is devoted to the wavering of the Harlem Renaissance, and the direct causes that led to its culmination. It also explains the way in which the Renaissance was a success, and how its short-lasting life would never diminish its importance.

Finally, the third chapter is meant to investigate the impact of the Harlem Renaissance on the American culture. It analyzes its effectiveness that is perceived through the realization of the imposing African American identity, and through introducing the concept of the African American Dream. In addition, the chapter takes a close look upon the influence of African American literature, music and art on the American culture, and the traces of the Harlem Renaissance’s cultural bloom that have lived throughout American history.

# Chapter One: Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro

## **Chapter one: Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro**

### **1.1 Introduction**

After centuries of accepting derogatory treatment and crippling segregation, it was time for formerly enslaved African Americans to free up and assert themselves among the acknowledged races. Before and during WWI, the Great Migration that African Americans led towards the urban cities of North America was the most successful deviation in black history. Settling in Harlem district in New York City, African Americans finally had the chance to reconcile themselves to the fact they were originally African, and they proudly decided to show that off, and assertively book their space in the universal cultural platform. The Harlem Renaissance was the 1920s cultural movement, through which black people in America certified their identity and accentuated the authentic high-value qualities of the New Negro.

### **1.2 The Great Migration**

#### ***1.2.1 A preview***

Ever since the Reconstruction (1865-1877), the vast majority of African American population occupied the South of the United States. In 1900, the African American population all over the U.S was estimated to be 8.8 million African Americans, 7.92 millions of them still lived in the South. The South was basically rural; its economy depended most importantly on agriculture. After the Civil War (1861-1865), the South was all wrecked down and its economy drastically declined, which had a bad impact on Southern people. During the Reconstruction, however, the Confederate Union intervened to help rebuild the South and particularly improve the overall living conditions of southern black people; roads were restructured, farms renewed, and schools re-established for poor and black children. The economy of the South started rising again. In the years between 1865 and 1870, the Congress passed three new amendments to the United States Constitution; the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment [Abolition of slavery], the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment [that granted citizenship to all people born or naturalized in the U.S, including formerly enslaved people, and guaranteed all citizens “equal protection of the laws”] and the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment [that strictly prohibited the denial of people’s right to vote based on their race or color or previous condition of servitude]. The passing of the three new constitutional amendments gave great hope to

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African Americans, they believed that they were finally having the chance to live the honorable free life they had always dreamed of. In 1877, and under the presidency of Rutherford B. Hayes, the Reconstruction officially came to an end. Federal troops were removed from the South, and the Southern State Governments took over. The rights granted to black people were snapped away, and what the South called “black codes” replaced them. The African Americans found themselves, once again, enslaved and not at all free.

### ***1.2.2 The Great Migration and Its Factors***

The Great Migration is the term given by historians to the mass movement of more than 6 million African Americans from the rural South to the urban Northern cities in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Historically, the Great Migration refers to two waves of northward migrations; the most important one was from about 1916 to 1940, and the other, from 1940 to 1970. Before and during the First World War, 1.5 million African Americans migrated out of the South to Northern, Midwestern, and Western cities such as Chicago, New York, Detroit, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Pittsburgh and Cleveland. African Americans “picked up and left the tobacco farms of Virginia, the rice plantations of South Carolina, cotton fields in east Texas and Mississippi, and the villages and backwoods of the remaining southern states—Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, North Carolina, Tennessee, and, by some measures, Oklahoma” (Wilkerson, 2010). The Great Migration is considered to be the biggest unforced migration in the history of the United States; as African Americans voluntarily chose to leave the South and never to return.

The fact that the Great Migration was unforced does not mean it had no factors leading up to it. Running away from some conditions and being tempted by others, African Americans decided for the first time to stand up for themselves and move northward to snatch the life they always wanted; a life that they only saw on magazines or heard of from their owners.

#### ***1.2.2.1 The Push Factors of the Great Migration***

The push factors refer to the degrading economic, social and political conditions that African Americans experienced in the South, which pushed them to make such a definite decision; to migrate northward and leave everything behind.

#### ***Economic Factors***

## **Chapter one: Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro**

The South of the U.S has always been the one region primarily responsible for promoting crops trade and export. Before the Civil War, the South produced many kinds of crops such as: tobacco, rice and sugar, which were equally common at that period of time. By the 1860s, however, and during the Civil War, these crops' trade faded out as their prices plunged in the agrarian market. After the invention of the cotton gin in 1793, the separation of seeds from raw cotton was no longer done by hand, thus the cotton production became easier than ever (US History, n.d.), and instead of other crops, this commodity became the rotating wheel of the southern economy. As slaves, African Americans were practically owned by white land owners; they wearily worked the lands day in and day out, without ever having the right to even complain or show discomfort. While African Americans had to experience intense suppression and deprivation of their simplest human rights, Southern white men grew content and watched their economy flourish. By the end of the civil war and the beginning of Reconstruction, slavery was technically abolished, and owning slaves was finally an illegal act. Nevertheless, Southern white men who were fully dependent on black men to work their lands, could not simply yield to those constitutional amendments and had to soon find a semi-legal alternative in order to still be able to force black men to work for them. Sharecropping and Tenant Farming were two agricultural systems that came to existence after the Civil War as a replacement to antebellum slavery. Former slaves were fresh out of slavery and had no material incomes of their own, hence they found themselves obligated to work their landlords' plantations in exchange for a share of the harvested crops; a share usually estimated about the one third. In this way, sharecroppers had to make sure they always harvested the biggest amount of crops they could every time, but that only led to debts piling up as they could hardly keep up with the enslaving exhausting work. The fact that African American sharecroppers had to constantly live in severe poor conditions because of heaped up debts, meant that they would forever be dependent on their plantation owners, which, in return, meant they had to be permanently subjected to first-degree economic exploitation. This cyclical economic exploitation system is how white men managed to have Black men always by their feet, asking for more, but only getting just enough to stay alive and work the lands. As a result, it was hard for African Americans to do anything to break out of the crushing poverty loop they were trapped into by oppressive Southern white men.

### ***Social Factors***

## **Chapter one: Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro**

The United States like many other countries, has always been a race-conscious society, and the Reconstruction South was the home of racial segregation. From Reconstruction onwards, and even though slavery was announced over on paper, it was still much present in people. African Americans, next to excruciating poverty, had to face daily hostility and segregation just for the simple fact they were black. Soon after the abolition of slavery according to the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, racist white men all over the south passed a set of segregating laws known as ‘Black Codes’, to limit black people’s activity and freedom. These laws were the implications of the deep-rooted ideology that white supremacists held as absolute; the ideology that denotes the impossibility of the coexistence of white and black men. Black people had their own houses, their own schools, their own roads and door openings; they lived their own life utterly isolated from that of whites, and any minor mistake on their part meant merciless punishment. Although Black Codes did allow some social activities like buying and owning property, marrying and making contracts, they still restricted black people’s work activity to ensure their permanent availability for cheap labour. After the end of the Civil War, white supremacist bigots were outraged by the newly enacted laws that granted freed black man social equality with white men. Powered by that, and also as a backlash to their defeat in the war, a hateful anti-immigration group known as the ‘Ku Klux Klan’, which consisted of former Confederate veterans, placed itself as the highest authority in the South. By 1866, the KKK launched its intimidating campaigns against newly freed African Americans as well as white conservatives who sympathized with them, in an effort to restore white supremacy in the South. Being most active at night, the KKK cast an unprecedented terror over peaceful black people; assassinations and lynching activities took place in almost every southern state. By the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan’s membership reached about 4 million supporters nationwide.

### ***Political Factors***

What was formerly known as the illegal black codes later expanded to a legal set of legislations officially empowered by the Southern states government. Named after a minstrel show character, the Jim Crow laws were reinforced by white legislators to restrict African Americans’ lives and separate them from the white community; to deny them their natural rights and freedom. Taking advantage of the supposedly legal doctrine “separate but equal”, white southerners cast all kinds of hostility and oppression over black people, and forced them to use separate institutional and public spaces, with the sign “coloured” hung above

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every one of them. These crippling limitations and deprivations touched all aspects of black peoples' lives, and disenfranchisement was most common then; as African Americans were forbidden from voting and utterly isolated from political life, which served as a segregating means to distort their American citizenship.

### ***1.2.2.2 The Pull Factors of the Great Migration***

While push factors mean the economic, social and political factors that pushed African Americans to leave the south, pull factors refer to the economic and social factors that glitteringly tempted African Americans to move northward and abandon the life they had ever since they were born.

#### ***Economic Factors***

With the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the flourishing of mass industrialization in the northern U.S cities, manufacturing industries and factories grew in greater need for cheap industrial labourers. General economic advancements were made in infrastructure and transportation; new railroads were manufactured and automobiles were in great demand. As a result, filling in the employment large gaps was necessary, and new job opportunities were created. In the 1910s, the restrictive anti-immigration legislations were already banning migrations to the U.S, which limited the availability of cheap labour coming from eastern and central Europe. In addition, and with the beginning of the First World War, white men were being recruited as veterans, therefore, the job positions held by them were getting emptied. Being in the other side of the country, African Americans constantly heard and looked up to these delightful news. The evacuation of the South was already in action.

#### ***Social Factors***

As American history testifies, the North of the U.S has always been ideologically opposed to the South. Throughout time, Northern white people have been less attached to the white supremacy doctrine that took over the South ever since the antebellum era, resulting in endless oppression of Southern African Americans. Most naturally, just the idea that the North was a Jim Crow- free society was enough to make black peoples' eyes sparkle with joy. Furthermore, with the lavishly abundant lifestyle that came with the roaring twenties, African Americans guaranteed the multiple possibilities of good living. In addition, the availability of better education in the urban North was the one fact African Americans

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could not ignore; as they did not have the chance to be properly educated in the segregating South.

Indeed, African Americans could do so little to change their experiences in the oppressive south, but as soon as they heard about the North, it was like the Promised Land for them. They got their railroad tickets and ascended the trains to the largest Northern cities. Northern people including lawyers, authors, politicians and ministers all welcomed the revolutionary journey of African Americans to the North, and a new culture was about to emerge.

### **1.3 The Epiphany of a Name: The Rebirth of an African Culture**

When African Americans set off from the South, they arrived in fluxes, and indeed dispersed throughout all the different urban cities of northern U.S. As a natural expansion to the industrial revolution and technological advancements in America, northern cities witnessed a bursting economic growth in the years following the end of World War I. known in history as the Roaring Twenties, the term refers to the period from 1920 to 1929 that signifies an unprecedented economic and social flowering marked most notably by the extravagant life that American people led at the time. With a population of approximately 6 million residents during the 1920s, New York was one of the biggest cities in the U.S and the most economically captivating. In parallel with the Roaring Twenties' economic and social outburst, African Americans were occupied hosting a revolutionary cultural revival in one of New York's most famous districts; Harlem. Situated in upper Manhattan, Harlem was the final destination of African Americans and the home of the New Negro. It was the neighbourhood after which the cultural revival was named; The Harlem Renaissance.

#### ***1.3.1 The New Negro Movement***

By their arrival to the North, African Americans were dumbstruck by the northern economic industrial craze, and their simple agrarian nature stood in dazzling contrast. Soon afterwards, however, they occupied good job positions and held decent educational ranks. They became artists, professors, lawyers and politicians. As a result, they developed an unprecedented intellectualism and a strong sense of racial pride; they became more self-aware in a deeply race-conscious society. Thanks to the enthusiastic nature of the Roaring



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Twenties and the ecstatic atmosphere surrounding it, African Americans smoothly contributed their share of cultural and intellectual innovation. The Harlem Renaissance refers to the black cultural explosion and intellectual revolution that took place in different boroughs in New York City, with Harlem district being its capital. Although many historians tend to define the year 1920 as the exact date at which the Harlem Renaissance started, it is hard for others to confine it to any specific date. Neither the start nor the end of the movement is definitely clear, and that could refer to the spontaneous impetuous nature of the movement's beginning and the unfortunate reluctant aura surrounding its culmination. Nevertheless, the cultural movement's lifetime is mostly known to be from 1919 to 1935. The cultural revival engulfed literature, music, theatre and visual arts. Many popular figures enriched the movement, authors and poets like Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, W.E.B Du Bois, Claude McKay and Zora Neal Hurston, musicians such as Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith and artists like Aaron Douglas, Jacob Lawrence and Augusta Savage; they were the active elite that made the movement grow. Not long before Harlem came to light, the Harlem Renaissance was known as the "New Negro Renaissance"; a name that was originally empowered by the "New Negro Movement".

The term "New Negro" stems back to 1895 when it was first used to suggest a free refined educated Negro. Subsequently, it grew very popular in the 1920s thanks to *The New Negro*, a 1925 anthology edited by Alain Locke, in which he repudiated the enslaved old Negro who submissively gave in to the segregating rules of the South, and rather promoted the idea of the New Negro who is, in contrast, determined to defend his rights and be more proud of his race. This concept of the New Negro was revolutionary in nature; it was what basically fuelled the New Negro Movement which later developed into the Harlem Renaissance. Founded by the West Indian-American political activist Hubert Harrison in 1916, the New Negro Movement was practically political. However, it did not only deal with political matters; it defended African Americans and their social and political cases, renewed a sense of racial pride and assertiveness and encouraged creativity and literary experimentation. It symbolised an energetic fresh start for African Americans. While the founding of the New Negro Movement was assertively intentional, it is undeniably true that the coming of the Harlem Renaissance was neither deliberate nor predictable. However, with the notion of the New Negro coming into light, Harlem's cultural explosion was apparently inevitable. With the beginning of the 1920s, this very notion took the African American culture by storm, and became the cultural ideology around which the American

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black world spun. After Alain Locke published his anthology *“The New Negro”*, the idea of the New Negro grew more common than ever and Locke became a prominent figure ever since.

### ***1.3.2 Alain Locke: The father of the Renaissance***

Born in Philadelphia to well-educated parents, Alain Leroy Locke was meticulously raised by his father to be a race leader. As a graduate of Harvard University, Alain Locke led a career as an author, philosopher, professor, race scholar and critic. After he wrote his anthology, Locke was so immensely engrossed with the ideology of the New Negro that he made sure the majority of African Americans were equally engulfed by it. For generations and generations, black people in America had always been disparaged, lampooned, enslaved and lynched because of the colour of their skin, for the Old Negro was too meek and compliant- when confronted by white racist cruelty, to ever rebel or try to change anything about his condemned situation. Locke, perfectly aware of this fact, grasped the sense of urgency, understood the necessity of change and held the beacon to instigate a race’s rebirth. Hence, and up to this time, Alain Locke is considered to be the pioneer of the New Negro; his efforts for innovation have been acknowledged and he was deservedly credited as “the Father of the Renaissance”. Among the many founders of the New Negro Movement, Alain Leroy Locke was the most potential of all; as “no one, not even the older Du Bois, could have been better equipped to have been the architect of the New Negro Movement and maker of history” (Holmes, 1968). As far as the Negro is concerned, Locke argued that the lack of self-understanding made the Negro as much of a social problem to himself as to others (1925). Thus, Alain Locke bore the responsibility to guide the American Negro on a quest to understand himself; to define his social and cultural needs and aspirations and to freely articulate and express them. That only, saw Alain Locke, would grant African Americans the “spiritual emancipation” he sought to realize, and therefore, lead them through a path of fervent cultural expression and productivity. In this regard, he believed that literature and art were two essential dimensions for cultural expression, and he ardently looked for the proper ways to project that on the African American situation. He particularly perceived art as an indispensable means of self-expression (Smith, 2009). Using literature and art to express the aspirations of oneself, thought Locke, would socially and culturally stabilise the American black man, offer him a sense of self-realization and self-respect and help him better understand himself. In addition, Locke promoted art expression as a prominent means for

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racial and cultural authenticity. Hence, being able to assertively confront and stand against the disparaging white stereotypes and prejudices (Locke, 1928). (See figure 1).

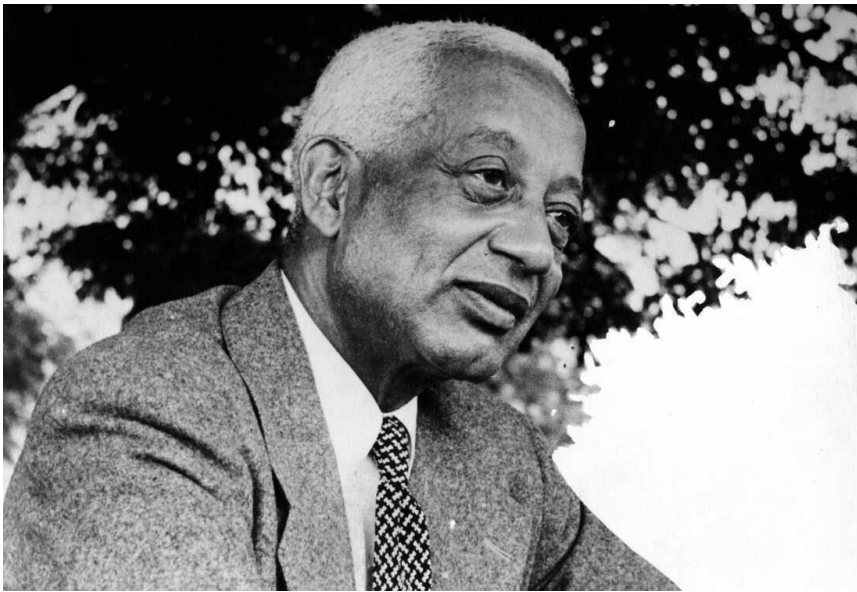


Figure 1. Picture of Alain Leroy Locke in the 1940s. Adapted from *Code Switch*, by G. Emanuel, 2014. Retrieved from

<https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2014/09/15/347132309alain-locke-whose-ashes-were-found-in-university-archives-is-buried>

Art and its function, that is to say what art serves, has been one of the most problematic universal issues of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For this matter, the intellectual argument over this issue created a commonly steep dichotomy; art or propaganda. The African American sociologist and editor of the NAACP's *Crisis* W.E.B Du Bois believed that art should be more than a tool of cultural and self-expression only. Rather, he promoted art as a means of political change and propaganda, and accentuated its invincible role in supporting people's rebellious journeys and their quests for racial recognition. For Du Bois, art's primary function was by no means aesthetic, but political and revolutionary. Being an aesthete and an African American art critic, Alain Locke as all others, exhaustively dwelt upon this very issue. In 1928, Locke wrote an article entitled "*Art or Propaganda*", in which he refuted the radical notion that art should serve as propaganda. Unlike Du Bois, Locke appreciated the human expressions of beauty and truth, and saw that as opportunity for cultural and artistic diversity. Cultural and self-expression through the arts was, for Locke, the one aesthetically pure thing that should neither be politicized, nor dedicated to serve the impure social and political realms and propagandas. Hence, he particularly perceived African American art as an

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original source of cultural expressionism and a genuine reference to black racial folk and heritage.

### 1.3.3 *The Denotation of the Name*

The word “Renaissance” is the French direct translation for “Rebirth”, and it literally denotes the act of coming into life again. According to Oxford Learner’s Dictionary, “Renaissance” lexically means “a situation when there is new interest in a particular subject, form of art, etc. after a period when it was not very popular” (2019). While the lexical meaning of “Renaissance” is related to birth, growth and revival, the contextual meaning almost always refers to the Italian cultural uprising that took place in 14<sup>th</sup> century Europe.

The reason why the Italian Renaissance has been regarded as one of the most prominent episodes in the European history will be forever acknowledged. Marking the start of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Italian Renaissance signified the intellectual and cultural revolutionary outburst that primarily took place in Florence, Italy. In 1568, the Italian writer Giorgio Vasari was technically the first in history to use the term “*Rinascita*”, the Italian word for “Renaissance” to refer to a cultural awakening. However, the term died out completely, as it had never been used again until the year 1858 by the French historian Jules Michelet. Thus, its usage became common again and Michelet had got all the credit for the coinage. When the black cultural outburst started in Harlem, Alain Locke happened to be the first to use the word “Renaissance” to refer to it (Kallen, 2009).

It is outright common among mainstream historians that the term “Rebirth” within the Italian Renaissance’s context denotes the rebirth and revival of the ancient Greek and Roman teachings, sciences and arts. They had been brought back to life by the Italian scholars and artists of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. However, when the Harlem Renaissance is alluded to, one would not eschew thinking that it is no near to be compared to the Italian Renaissance. For this reason, some historians would tend to probe the authenticity and legitimacy of the term “Renaissance” in relation to the black cultural awakening in Harlem. Naturally, there are several prime factors that may inspire or even reinforce this vision. Firstly, that in order for something to undergo a rebirth, it logically must have, in the first place, existed before. Hence, some streams would, out of misunderstanding, evoke the issue that the black community had not, in any way, experienced any cultural uprising similar to the one in Harlem; the Harlem Renaissance was, by all means, unprecedented. Therefore, it might seem

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to them that the labelling of an unprecedented event as a “Rebirth” is utterly illegitimate. Secondly, compared to the ten centuries of the Italian Renaissance, the short-lived fifteen years period of the Renaissance in Harlem stands sceptically in question. Nevertheless, as these claims are incongruously invoked and cannot be farther from the facts, they can, just as well, be adjusted to reality by being subjected to some explanations. Considering the setting and time frame within which the Italian Renaissance started, one would have to entertain the idea that the word “Renaissance” here might inspire a bigger and more acute concept. Prior to the Renaissance, Europe had been mired into the Middle Ages or the Medieval Period (500-1500), a ten centuries loop of dark critical ignorance and mental slavery. It is well-conceded that Europeans, in this period, abandoned all the sciences and achievements of their Roman and Greek predecessors, which caused those sciences to die out and get more archaic and out of use. In return, however, they brought up nothing of their own as well. There were no scientists or scholars to enlighten paths through darkness, and no artists to produce beauty and liveliness among the masses. Their minds basically froze up and they technically became unable to give away anything of value. Moreover, they were clutched into the rotten religious mire that had been imposed by the tyrannical authority of the medieval church. Thus, a state of general mental numbness and physical rigidity became the default mode all over Europe at the time. People were practically dead, for ten centuries in a row. Subsequently, the age of the Renaissance truly came to revive and recollect the Greek and Roman scholarship. But, it also, first and for most, came to summon the dead people from their virtual tombs back to life. Therefore, when Giorgio Vasari coined the term “Rinascita” or “Rebirth”, he not only intended the rebirth of the scholarship, but the rebirth of the masses. He hunted for a coinage heavy enough to both depict that awful state of death, and acknowledge the Renaissance’s glorious credit for the revivalism of the European human potentiality.

Similarly, the word “Renaissance” in the African American context does not necessarily mean the rebirth of the 1920s cultural movement. It means, more congruously, the rebirth of the black spirit. When Locke referred to the Harlem awakening as a “Renaissance”, he may have intended one of two things; either the rebirth of the African black race along with its culture, or the rebirth of the Negro, which is the closest interpretation.

### ***1.3.3.1 The Rebirth of the African Race***

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When Africans were brought to America in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, some of their original cultural property was still within them. After generations and generations, that cultural property indeed started to die out. For as long as they were slaves, White men dictated their whole lifestyle for them. Naturally, that only helped fuse the left-over African spirit more within the segregating American culture. By then, they had to cease being Africans. As a result, their offspring were brought into and raised in America, to be called, ever since, African “Americans”. In reality, African Americans never were free enough to decide their own free-standing culture in America. Therefore, the fact that they never experienced a cultural uprising in America before the Harlem Renaissance must have never been unexpected. What happened in the Harlem Renaissance though, might have been an attempt to revive that lost African spirit; the spark of originality that was constantly dimmed by the supposedly superior uproar of the American life and culture. One thing that may reinforce that is the fact that the father of the Renaissance, Alain Locke himself, saw the Harlem Renaissance as utterly “racial”. He referred to it as a “racial awakening on a national and perhaps even a world scale” (1925). In addition, he was known for his passion for African art through collecting different art pieces of sculpture, weaving and pottery. More than 365 pieces of his African art collection were transferred to Howard University Gallery of Art alone. Another thing is the Jamaican journalist and political activist Marcus Garvey’s “Back to Africa” movement that was organized in 1914. Garvey promoted through the movement the return of black people from America back to Africa, where they came from centuries ago.

### ***1.3.3.2 The Rebirth of the Negro***

The rebirth of the Negro is a notion that Alain Locke sacredly believed in; he worked hard to promote it and spent more than the half of his life defending it. He strongly believed that the Negro that lived in the South before the Great Migration must have nothing to do with the Negro that lived in the North after it. He strictly separated the two concepts as the “Old Negro” and the “New Negro”. While the Old Negro was segregated and oppressed for centuries, the New Negro came as self-dependent and assertive to replace it. Subsequent to that, came the New Negro Movement; the womb that raised the Harlem Renaissance. There are several additional points that would back up the fact that the Harlem Renaissance was all about the rebirth of the Negro. First, that the Renaissance in the beginning of the 1920s was also equally known as the “Negro Renaissance”. Second, that the last left-overs of the

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original African culture and traditions almost completely died out by the 1920s onwards. Therefore, it is not very rational to believe that the Harlem Renaissance promoted the supports of the African culture and intended to revive them, for there were no actual signs of that in reality. African Americans of the urban North had, by no means, lived by the standards of their original African culture but by the American culture's. They got all engrossed in the American culture, as their whole lifestyle was almost identical to the American lifestyle. As a result, the majority of African Americans could not identify with Marcus Garvey's movement "Back to Africa" (Hutchinson, 2021), and many of them actually saw it very refutable.

Both the rebirth of the African culture and of the Negro are two explanations that are not necessarily contradictory, but rather very complimentary. Not only they take the same path, but they also may lead to a single, most important truth. Whether it is for the African culture or African American Negro, it only matters that it is, first and for most, for the race. After being shut off and segregated ever since they set foot on America, The Harlem Renaissance came in the 1920s to be black people's most prominent cultural achievement in American history. Moreover, Alain Locke promoted the New Negro as the "race's spiritual coming of age". That only certifies that the Harlem Renaissance meant the black race's rebirth, and it was itself the greatest Black race's achievement.

### **1.4 The Cultural Bloom**

During the Roaring Twenties, cultural hype was at its peak in America. Harlem, particularly, was the capital of the Negro cultural uprising. What qualified it to be such, was the magical but cosy atmosphere in which the recently urbanized black people found their cultural refuge. And that, naturally, attracted more and more enthusiastic African Americans to it. Harlem was especially fun at night; as there were many places of interest that black people could go to for fun and entertainment. Cotton Club, for instance, was one of those places. It was one of the most famous nightclubs in New York and definitely the most famous in Harlem. It was an absolute black legacy where Jazz and Blues were dedicated and performed to white audiences only. It promoted many black musicians and performers such as Duke Ellington, and helped them attain fame. The "Tree of Hope" was also an important milestone in the Seventh Avenue in Harlem. The avenue was called the "Boulevard of Dreams" and the tree was an elm tree that was believed to have granted good luck to anyone that touched it. Many famous actors and performers are said to have touched it before

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performing; as the famous Apollo Theatre was right next to it. In 1920s Harlem, all aspects of culture flourished indeed.

### ***1.4.1 Literature***

Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, Jessie Fausset, Jean Toomer, and Nella Larson are the most famous literary figures of the Harlem Renaissance. Each one of them brought his own special touch to the African American literature that much of still stands today. Their single and most prominent interest was to depict the racial handicaps that faced black people up to that day. They also tried, through their writings to publicize the African American issue and promote African American culture and potentiality. In 1925, the poet, playwright and social activist Langston Hughes wrote "*The Weary Blues*", one of his most famous poems in which he relates the scene of a Blues singer singing off his sorrows in the middle of the night. Later in his life, Hughes also proceeded to discuss America and the possibilities of the American Dream through his poignant poems "*Let America Be America Again*" in 1936 and "*I, Too, Sing America*" in 1945. The poet and novelist James Weldon Johnson also left some iconic works that still certify his amazing writing potentials. "*The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*" was his 1912 novel that is now considered to be one of the classics of African American Literature. In 1927, it was time for Johnson to implement some original African touch and that was through "*God's Trombones*", a book that gathered a collection of religious African-inspired poems. Just like "*The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*", Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 novel "*Their Eyes Were Watching God*" is also considered an important classic and perhaps counts as her best work ever. It tells the story of a young black woman and her search for true love. African American writers and poets needed, like most black people, to get their message through, and they used literature to serve and express their literary whims.

### ***1.4.2 Music***

Short after their full settlement in the different parts of New York, African Americans started grinding their ways to happiness. Accordingly, they felt the need to bring up a certain music that would portray their heart-felt expressions and go well with the merry atmosphere. The thing that might have made the Harlem Renaissance more special at the time was the fact that African Americans searched for that type of music deep within them. They did not, by any means, try to emulate any of the common American musical styles at the time, which



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they could, indeed, do. But, they invoked original African American styles of music that were originally created by African Americans early on. “Jazz”, was the theme music that defined the Harlem Renaissance era. Back around 1912, the word “Jazz” was known as a slang word that did not refer to the music style. Thus, when it later became associated with music, it was not exactly liked by African American artists and intellectuals at the time. Rather, they preferred to call it either “Creative Music”, “New World Music”, “African American Improvised Music” or simply, “Ragtime” (Porter, 2002). It initially appeared in 1895 in one of the cheap clubs of New Orleans, South of the United States. For that reason, Jazz was never expected to be as famous and appreciated as it got in the 1920s. The “Blues” too, was a musical style that took over the period of the Harlem awakening. It was created by African Americans in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly, around 1860. Unlike Jazz, the “Blues” has not been a happy and lively music, but one that inspires sadness and melancholy. That, though, is completely expected, as it was created way before the merry times of the Renaissance. One of the most famous Jazz musicians in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was Duke Edward Kennedy Ellington, known as Duke Ellington. He led a Jazz orchestra for more than 60 years and performed in the classiest places of Harlem; “Cotton Club”. He was believed to have created ones of the most distinctive musical notes and colours in western music. His greatness granted him an unprecedented popularity and appreciation even among white audiences. Born and raised in New Orleans, Louis Daniel Armstrong was also one of the most influential figures of Jazz. By being both a trumpeter and vocalist, he climbed his journey up to fame. Through inventing Jazz and Blues, African American musicians were trying to create an authentic musical art and contribute their share of artistic musical colours to the American culture. Through Jazz and Blues, African Americans were, again, seeking a sense of recognition.

### ***1.4.3 Visual Arts***

Visual Arts in the period of the Harlem Renaissance were mainly present in the forms of paintings and sculptures. Before the creative era of the 1920s, African American artists were not very interested in the concept of original black aesthetics. Later, though, when the black cultural identity was finally in vogue, they developed a vivid passion towards African art and worked enthusiastically to bring that up to the surface. The artist that most marked that productivity and enthusiasm in the 1920s was Aaron Douglas. He mostly portrayed themes of the Negro himself and his identity matters through geometrical abstract figures

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and designs. The composition of his paintings was usually very simple and plain, but simultaneously unfolds more complexity through all the different-coloured layers. His most famous work is the 1934 mural series that consists of four pieces under the name of “*Aspects of Negro Life*”, in which he portrays the different stations of black life; the journey of African Americans from Africa to America. Among sculptors, Augusta Savage was the best. Her most famous work of the 1920s was “*Gamin*”, a 1929 bronze sculpture that sits there as the miniature figure of her young nephew. Her most distinctive work ever, though, is the 1939 “*Lift Every Voice and Sing*”, also known as the “*Harp*”. It basically depicts a group of African American figures standing straight in a line, one after another, forming a harp-like shape. This amazingly creative work is considered her strike of luck; as it was the one that granted her world-wide fame.

### **1.5 Conclusion**

Ever since their first arrival to the American grounds in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, African Americans had never had good settlement. For more than two centuries, they stayed crushed under the suppressing clutches of slavery. They lived their absolutely worst days in the American South; home of oppressive segregation. At the end of the day, however, when the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> constitutional amendments came to free them and guarantee their human rights, southern white men saw that as unacceptable. Thus, slavery, or rather, “Refined Slavery” continued, exposing all its other shapes and forms. Economical and agricultural systems such as Sharecropping and Tenant-Farming came to exploit more out of the already oppressed African Americans. Added to that, and by bringing up social and political laws like the “Black Codes” and “Jim Crow laws”, white men intended to limit the life choices of black people even more tightly. Subsequently, still, a vigilante mafia group of ex-veterans known as the “Ku-Klux-Klan” centred in the American South, gave themselves the absolute rights to commit horrible crimes against black people and poor white men who opposed their part, through awful lynching and serial executions. Since living in the South was no longer an option to African Americans by then, they made the most prominent decision in the history of black America; leaving the South and moving to the North. Over 1.5 million African Americans migrated to the urban North of the United States before and during the First World War in what got later known as the “Great Migration”. Not long after they arrived to the North, former southern black people went with the flow of the urban cities and formed themselves into promising intellectuals, artists, writers, professors, lawyers, and

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social activists. They revolted into a cultural outburst known as the Harlem Renaissance, in an attempt to prove themselves strong and assertive on the universal cultural stage. They, after centuries of segregation, decided to sculpt their own identity by reviving their original African folk and heritage, and to develop a sense of self-assertion to achieve American and world recognition as an independent, free-standing race and culture. When African Americans took over Harlem, it was a long and joyous journey that also provoked many of white Americans in the process. Later, tough, when Afro-American artists and musicians were in the process of producing quality pieces of art and music, white Americans were there as a fan audience to watch them. Through the Harlem Renaissance, African Americans certified the social, political and cultural power of a racial mass to impose identity and attaining deserved, high-value recognition.

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## **Chapter Two: The Harlem Renaissance: A Short-Lived Dream**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The Harlem Renaissance was, indeed, the most positively distinctive episode in black history. However, it only lasted from 1920 to 1929, and African Americans could not enjoy the period of triumph for much longer, as they, like all Americans, found themselves against the greatest and most severe economic recession in modern world history. As a result, it caused the Harlem Renaissance to only be seen, in retrospect, as a short dream-like period that could as well have lasted for much longer if it was not for a set of serious recessionary factors. Despite its premature, forced end, the Harlem Renaissance was, no doubt, an astounding success.

### **2.2 The Wavering of the Harlem Renaissance**

One of the most unfortunate things about the Harlem Renaissance was its soon termination. However its end came forced and does not, by any means, refer to an amateur deficiency within the movement itself. Due to unexpected economic downturns that touched the American Nation as a whole, the Harlem Renaissance forcefully came into a halt.

#### ***2.2.1 The Great Depression***

During the Roaring Twenties, America had experienced a state of unprecedented material abundance and economic boom. Distinctive advancements were made in the field of technology and mass production of goods was the dominant theme in America. As a result, the rate of employment increased more than ever, which in return, resulted in higher consumerism rates. That economic boom, however, was disrupted in 1929. Known in history as the “Great Depression”, the incident started in America, during the presidency of Herbert Hoover, as an ordinary recession in 1929. Soon after, however, it expanded into a harsh ten-year economic downturn that harmed almost every country in the world. The president believed it was a familiar recession and that the capitalist economy will undergo a self-recovery. On that basis, and in an attempt to relieve the anxious American population, he announced that the recession will end over a 60-days period. After the extravagant life of the 1920s, Americans had to learn to be extremely careful and frugal during the Great Depression. American men, particularly, were more harmed by the depression than women; as they could not find any job positions while women usually could. African Americans, however, were the most harmed casualties of all; as their jobs were usually taken from them and given to whites (The Great Depression, n.d.). Some historians would go all the way to argue that the reason why the Great Depression period chronically lasted so long is that the

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government did not really make that much effort to draw up recovery. The government along with the capitalist economy thought it was nothing but a typical recession and did not really understand the seriousness of the situation. Thus, it was automatically difficult for them to come up with effective strategies to redeem the situation and prepare to face the severe coming years of the depression.

### ***2.2.1.1 Causes of the Great Depression***

#### ***Wealth imbalance***

The significant denotation “Roaring Twenties” is a living proof of the distinctive economic growth in the 1920s. The period registered an unprecedented increase in monetary liquidity. In addition, speculation or the trend of bank investing had just come out and people could invest their money in banks, buy and sell goods in order to make much higher profits. Individual Salaries and incomes increased so highly that average individuals easily purchased houses and automobiles with their typical wages and salaries. Americans were all basically rich in the 1920s. However, and leading up to the year 1929, problems in wealth distribution rose up to the surface. The wealthiest people in America constitute one percent of the American population, while the richest constitute five percent. The income share collected by the wealthiest one percent of Americans during the late years of the 1920s increased from 12 to 19 percent. And the share collected by the richest five percent hit high from 24 to 34 percent (Why It Happened, n.d.) This led to a wealth imbalance and inequality that, in return, critically hit and destabilized the American economy. The gap between the rich American people and the working-class widened tremendously. One of the factors that directly participated in the widening of this gap was that the wages and incomes that workers were given in return to their manufacturing were not increasing hand in hand with the manufacturing rates and productivity. Wages were very low compared to the manufacturing rates; they rose at a rate one fourth as fast as manufacturing (Gusmorino, 1996). As a result, working people could not purchase highly-priced goods and had to improvise, and that decreased good demands in the market, which caused a critical deflation in prices.

#### ***Stock Market Crash***

When investors practise speculation, the ratio of them gaining profits is not always high; they also have to run the risk of losing all their money on a single hit. In the year 1929, speculation rates hit the peak, investors were recklessly selling off too many shares. By then, the stock market was already getting overwhelmed, and omens of collapse fluttered on the

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horizon. On October 24, 1929, also known as “Black Thursday”, investors sold off and traded the largest number of shares in U.S history. Billions of dollars were lost, causing the most tragic crash in the history of the American economy. By the fall of 1930, U.S banks were looped into new waves of panic. After the disastrous fail of the stock market, depositors could not trust the banks anymore and wanted their deposits back. That, especially, led to the collapse of the banks because depositors asked for their deposits to be returned in cash.

### ***2.2.1.2 Effects of the Great Depression***

There is no doubt that the Great Depression had been the worst economic downturn in the history of the American economy. Some historians would even go all the way to argue that it has been the most severe economic crisis in modern world economy. By the beginning of the 1930s, one fifth of the American industrial labourers were officially announced unemployed. After being familiar with extravagance for almost a decade, they found themselves forced into a clutch of a seemingly never-ending poverty. They had to improvise and carefully live on whatever they had, but their improvisation was, soon, not enough. The Great Depression did not only affect the American economy but the whole world economy as well. The critical crash of the American stock market of 1929, soon rippled into a world-wide Great Depression. The dependence of the economy of some countries on the American economy was finally brought to light, and urgent world cooperation was necessary.

Like all American people, African Americans suffered widely during the Great Depression. However, they suffered even much severely than whites, as racism was, again, present in America then. Since unemployment became one the most complicated economic issues of the 1930s, African Americans were the first to be dismissed from their jobs and replaced by white Americans. They even had to experience discrimination when it came to the aid of some charitable organizations (Lynch, 2020). Consequently, African Americans found themselves in a worse situation than that of whites. After the disastrous presidential term of Herbert Hoover, the American economy was in need of a new competent president. During the presidential election protocols of 1932, most African Americans voted for the mild candidate Franklin D. Roosevelt. Subsequent to that, general national economy standards may not have significantly improved, but the general situation of African Americans definitely did. During the coming years of 1933 and 1934, many national black organizations took action in favour of segregated African Americans. The National Urban League, also known as NUL, participated in the founding of the “Jobs for Negroes”

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movement, in an attempt to provide more job positions for black people. Moreover, “Buy Where You Can Work” was also an active movement that boycotted white stores and compelled their owners to cease discriminatory acts towards black people and allow them in their stores as workers just like whites. With such overwhelming harsh conditions of the Great Depression, it was impossible for African Americans to keep up their era of splendour and the dream of the Renaissance was soon over.

### ***2.2.2 The Harlem Race Riot***

It all started in 1935 when Lino Rivera, a 12-year-old boy accessed a white-owned local variety store and attempted to steal a penknife. The store keeper caught the boy red-handed and forcefully tried to pull him in to the store in order to hold him while the police came. The boy made a fuss and started yelling and screaming, and drew public attention to him in the process. Consequently, passers-by quickly gathered up inside and in front of the store calling for the white shop keepers to bring out the boy. Fearing the public rage, the shop keeper cooperated with the police and drew the boy out of the back door and let him free. Soon after that, a rumour that the boy was held down in the basement and beaten to death spread around fast, and that set the gathered outrageous black audience over the edge. The thing that naturally certified the rumour was the fact that the boy was never let out in front of the audience, and the ambulance that was called in by the crowd came and went back empty. As a result, on that day and the day after (19-20 March, 1935), the angry crowd formed public gatherings of thousands of black people, walking and running the streets of Harlem. They harvested all that met them in the way, and destroyed public white properties such as houses and stores. When the riot ended, 125 people of the black crowd had been caught and arrested, over 100 others injured and 3 announced dead.

The attempt of theft of Lino Rivera was not the direct backdrop that pushed for the riot. The Harlem Race Riot of 1935 was the inevitable consequence of the awful social and economic conditions that African Americans were forced into before and during the Great Depression. It was the result of discriminatory practises and the negligence of Harlem as a whole by the New York Urban League. Not few were the times that African Americans wrote and sent letters to the legislative government to appoint competent black delegates in the government to talk on behalf of them and address their problems. But Harlem voices were always rebuffed and met with careless negligence. The extreme hard-headedness of white senates and governors, the economic exploitation and the piled-up discriminatory



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policies and behaviours were what directly fuelled the riot. In response to all what happened, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), among other organizations, called for the founding of a biracial committee to address Harlem problems and demands from then on. Fiorello La Guardia was the first mayor to put that in action. He constructed a committee of biracial members to investigate the events of the riot along with its causes. Subsequently, La Guardia became much popular among black government members and voters, for he promoted the black racial case and could make at last make black people's voices heard.

### ***2.2.3 The Prohibition***

Starting with the beginning of the 1920s and through the 1930s, prohibition is the era during which alcoholic beverages were banned in the United States. Driven by moral inclinations, protestant dominations in the Southern part of the United States led these nation-wide act of alcohol banning. They argued that during the period of the 1920s, America got engrossed in too much immorality due to alcoholic beverages, and they believed that prohibiting the drinking of alcohol was the only solution for that soon-uncontrollable immorality. Acting on these beliefs, the alcohol industry received many legislative orders to cease the production of alcohol. As a final, definite step from the legislative government, the Eighteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution that declared the official banning of alcohol production, transportation and exportation was passed in 1920. The direct social and health impact of this banning on America was seriously followed, and medical reports showed noticeable decline in health deficiencies and diseases normally caused by excessive alcohol consumption. However, and subsequent to the official banning, alcohol gangs and mafias started constituting and crime rates rose in that period. Thus, the prohibition impact on social conflicts and violence rates has been always disputable.

During the Harlem Renaissance, night life was a constantly bright feature of the African American lifestyle in Harlem and beyond. Nightclubs and saloons were the most common places of fun for black Americans. They were the homes that fostered Jazz and Blues concerts and musicals and empowered their popularity among white audiences just as much as black. The exceptional thing that drove those places wild and accentuated the fun was alcohol. After the Prohibition, fun faded out; audience fluxes had shrunk and attendance rates to experience the fun had declined. Alcohol prohibition hindered the continuance of the African American nightclubs and saloons and snatched the life out of them. Because

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African nightclubs were the beating nerve of the Harlem Renaissance, their indirect suspension meant the indirect fading out of the Renaissance.

### **2.3 Successes and Failures of the Renaissance**

Decades after the end of the Harlem Renaissance, historians asked and would never cease asking questions that would explore its successful achievements and most unfortunate deficiencies. Indeed, the Harlem Renaissance acquainted America and the world with the different cases of the black race and highlighted its strong presence in the universal platform of arts and literature. It brought to light the black productivity and potentiality, and proved wrong all the demeaning white stereotypes. It is the flowering thanks to which many prominent black figures have been promoted and much of their precious works have been celebrated hitherto. However, these material achievements are only a small drop when it comes to the real, most important success of the Renaissance.

#### ***2.3.1 Steps towards Authenticity: The Concept of the New Negro***

Before racism is classified as a social phenomenon, it is rational to consider it as purely psychological. When the notion of racism is thought through, one might realize it is ridiculously primitive. Human brains are hard-wired to identify the similarities and differences constituting the human physical traits for safety purposes. Considering the human technological and intellectual advancement during the late few centuries, however, a minor physical difference such as skin colour should not, at all, be a problem. Nevertheless, humans have gone all the way to refute the peacefulness of the colour black. Black has been associated with all that is evil and despicable, and even more congruously, with what is mean and ugly. Based on these superstitions, black-skinned people have, forever, been dehumanized and segregated by white or light-skinned people. On this regard, different acts of oppression and discrimination have taken place in modern America, with slavery being the earliest and most oppressive. Black people in America had always been most segregated before and after the Civil War and they never had their full right to live as humans.

By the beginning of the 1920s, tough, and with the flowering of the Harlem Renaissance, the deep concept of the “New Negro” came as a slap to white men in and beyond America; it was properly introduced for the first time throughout the successful process of the movement. Through introducing the New Negro, African Americans attempted to revive the real persona of African People. A purely modern, assertive, African representation of the black race. Through the concept of the New Negro, the Harlem

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Renaissance defied the notion that marketed the colour black as mean and ugly. In addition to this glorious achievement, the New Negro was brought up to life to form and accentuate a unique version of the African American individual. Indeed African Americans followed the white American lifestyle during the Harlem Renaissance; they dressed, ate and maybe walked like white Americans. But they were, for the most part, unique and different from whites when it came to other traits. African Americans were unique in their speech and in their laughter, they celebrated their joys differently and mourned their sadness differently. African Americans were unique in spirit. That way, the New Negro came to promote the uniqueness and authenticity of the black spirit. Subsequently, when this notion was stuffed into African Americans, the touch of uniqueness and authenticity became prevalent and present in almost every Afro-American work.

Looking back to the era when black people were slaves, they created the “Spirituals”, a type of sad rhythmic singing to express their sad experiences and melancholy. They sang it all the time; at home, in the fields, and they definitely sang it for their children to go to sleep. Later with the beginning of the 1920s, spirituals were even much present in church. African Americans would perform songs of different high and low tones on the church stage rather than give a simple mono-toned speech. Celebrating this spark of uniqueness, the poet Langston Hughes intentionally used this idea of spirituals in his poems. His poems were rhythmic and lyrical, giving the impression of listening to actual musical songs. This original step from Hughes gave other dimensions to the uniqueness of Spirituals, and helped more celebrate the authenticity of the Negro. Similarly, authors of the Harlem Renaissance promoted the originality and authenticity of the New Negro through their novels and autobiographies such as James Weldon Johnson’s *“Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man”*. Moreover, African American visual arts also had their share of originality.

Contrary to all white expectations and stereotypes, African Americans celebrated their African Origins and became proud and assertive about them. Original African hair looks such as curls and braids were portrayed in many art works just as much as the colourful hair wrap that African women wrapped their hair with back in Africa. Considering that African culture consists of various colourful patterns, African visual art in America also emulated that; as African American artists generally expressed themselves through colourful patterns and geometrical designs.

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This Negro pride and uniqueness rippled into movements even outside of America. During the 1940s and the 1950s, French-speaking black community in Europe founded a racial and cultural movement known as “Negritude” or “Nègritude” in French. Asserting the notion that “Black Is Beautiful”, the movement came as an intellectual step to backfire the French who demeaned the Original African appearance and heritage. Because Black people were already powered by the concept of the New Negro in America, they were then genuinely convinced with the worth and beauty of being black. That way, the Harlem Renaissance slightly changed the stereotypes about being black, and it even positively altered the fixed negative prejudices attached to Africa in the process (Delgado-Tall, 2001).

### ***2.3.2 Renaissance Magazines: Promotion of Black Identity***

Just like poetry and prose in literature, written media played a significant role in fostering the African American concern. When African Americans first arrived to the North of the United States, they were, most naturally, intimidated by the whole sparks of that place. They arrived and that shrinking mind-set came with them. They were still affected by all the awful memories from the segregating South. Automatically, they would not write about their problems and promote their case right away. In addition, even if they had the courage to write, they would not have been able to, for they were still fresh into the North and did not have enough education and potentiality to publicize their concerns. The earliest African American or even the oldest black-oriented magazine ever written was “*The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*”, the 1910 regular publication by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The subtitle was later dismissed and it officially became known solely as “*The Crisis*”. The magazine was basically started by W.E.B Du Bois, J. Max Barber, Garrison Villard, Kelly Miller, Edward Russell, Mary Maclean and William Braithwaite. It was supervised and edited during its first 24 years by W.E.B Du Bois who attempted to highlight the seriousness and gravity of the African American situation at that time. In its first issue publication on November, 10, 1910, Du Bois announced that the aim of the magazine was to show the danger of race prejudice, particularly as manifested then toward colored people. He argued that the situation in which black people were engrossed in at that time was a critical time in the history of the advancement of men. Therefore, that was the direct idea behind the name of the magazine. Du Bois also saw that the opinions and views he and people like him had needed to be expressed openly and without fear or hesitation, and that no other organization or establishment is capable of such process. Thus, he believed that creating and founding an official free-standing magazine powered by the

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real and true opinions of its founders was the right and best thing that could properly serve the African American crisis. Ten years, approximately, after its creation, the magazine grew bigger and thicker from around 20 pages to 60 pages. In the year 1918, the magazine registered more than 100,000 readers nation-wide. During the earlier years of its start, the magazine's interests were known to be mainly political, as it was dedicated to serve the African American racial problems and civil rights issues. However, and after appointing Jessie Redmon Fauset as literary editor in 1918, the magazine became hugely influential in the fields of literature and art. Fostering the literary aspect of the African American potentials, the magazine opened many promising paths to some great authors of the Harlem Renaissance. It, later, became even an official publisher of the African American works and called itself "The Crisis Publishing Company". Thanks to that, African American writers and poets were not obliged to seek discriminatory white publishers anymore. They found their lost destination in "*The Crisis*" and could finally get their messages and concerns through. (See figure 2).

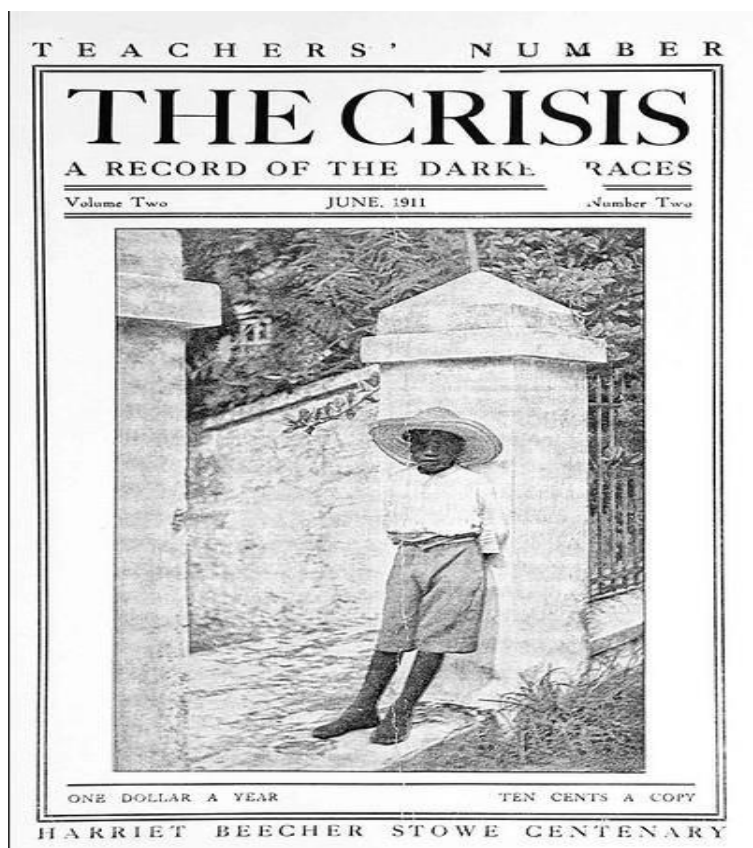


Figure 2. The "Crisis" Magazine cover from 1911. Adapted from *Flickr*, by Vieilles Annonces, 2013. Retrieved from [https://flickr.com/photos/vieilles\\_annonces/8500549309](https://flickr.com/photos/vieilles_annonces/8500549309)

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Another popular publication during the Harlem Renaissance was “*Opportunity*”. It was an academic journal and was founded in 1923 under a full name of “*Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*”. Published monthly, the journal was an official publication of the National Urban League (NUL), and had Charles S. Johnson as its editor-in –chief. Unlike “*The Crisis*”, “*Opportunity*” was not dedicated to political matters. Rather, it was more society-oriented and dealt with the social problems and concerns that African Americans faced at the time. Social deficiencies and problems of housing, education and employment were all presented and tackled by the journal. The journal’s motto “Opportunity not Alms” portrays along with its manifesto the journal’s main devotion to be solely for an interpretation of the social problems of the Negro population. It also aimed through that interpretation to realize a certain interracial co-operation in order to provide congruous solutions for those problems. Furthermore, one of the main objectives of the journal’s editor-in-chief was to inculcate an assertive racial awareness and rid black people of the mean perception they hold of themselves. Just like all the competent magazines and newspapers of the Harlem Renaissance, “*Opportunity*” realised the necessity of fostering the literary potentiality of African American writers at the time. Thus, it made indispensable efforts to publicize the message behind the literary works of the Renaissance, and open more gates for the African American issue to be known about even beyond the American nation.

Empowered by the Socialist Party, “*The Messenger*” was another early 20<sup>th</sup> century magazine. It was created in New York City and edited by the social activists Chandler Owen and A. Philip Randolph in 1917. “*The Messenger*” was a monthly publication, dealing with both political and literary realms of the Harlem Renaissance. Before the cultural flowering began, the magazine was there to support and assert African Americans during the Jim Crow era. Subsequently, and with the cultural uprising in the 1920s, literature upheld its position strong among African Americans. To provide a form of support, “*The Messenger*” promoted black American literature and encouraged black writers to shine bright in their domain by constantly publishing their works and being present as a literary corner. It also arranged many literary contexts at the time, to help African writers be more successful in their writing. However, the magazine had slight disputes with some notable figures of the Renaissance. It criticized W.E.B Du Bois and Marcus Garvey, especially as the latter promoted his idea of Black Nationalism and the reviving of the Original African values in the United States. Before the 1920s, the magazine was more concerned with uplifting black spirits and defending their civil rights. In addition, it had a fixed political view that denounced radical

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theories and orientations. It also refuted the idea of the war and worked for inculcating a sense of its dangers on African American lives. As a result, notable figures like W.E.B. Du Bois who supported the idea of war were criticized by it. On this regard, “*The Messenger*” announced that African Americans would never simply sacrifice their lives or potentiality for the exploitative United States of that time. Rather, their services to America would have to be on specific conditions. When these declarations arrived to the Justice Department, it sent its agents, right away, to arrest the editors Owen and Randolph. The magazine was common for its outspoken views and was, therefore, known as the most feared and controversial black magazine in the 1920s.

Another prominent newspaper was “*Chicago Defender*”, a 1905 online publication. It was founded by Robert S. Abbott in a period of time during which African Americans suffered the most. The newspaper was mostly devoted to black people of the American South, during the segregating era of Jim Crow and Black Codes. It was basically published to strengthen the spirits of black people at the time, and encourage them to leave the South and move to the North.

### ***2.3.3 A Short-Lasting Renaissance***

The most noticeable downfall of the Harlem Renaissance was its premature end. It is, indeed, true that its end was not its own defect but the result of the recessionary episodes listed above. However, the factors leading to the miserable termination of the Harlem Renaissance were not merely economic or material. It is mostly feared that the reasons that caused the premature end of the Harlem cultural movement are much deeper and more abstract. Looking back to the European Renaissance, the period lasted from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Unlike the unfortunate recessionary stations of the Harlem Renaissance, the Italian Renaissance underwent many wars during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Military campaigns from Spain and France exhausted Italy, the home of the Renaissance, at the time. Nevertheless, the Italian Renaissance lasted an additional century and did not actually fade out until the 17<sup>th</sup> century. As a result of such facts, one might investigate the real reason why the Italian Renaissance lasted longer despite the wars, while the Harlem Renaissance ended after few economic, recessionary difficulties.

The gravity and seriousness of the economic crises that happened during 1930s and 1940s America is not, by any means, over-looked or denied. However, there is a much deeper factor without which the Harlem Renaissance would have, probably, lasted longer. Indeed,

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the Italian Renaissance started in Rome, the capital of Italy. However, it was later fostered and raised within all Europe. It was not fostered by or inclined towards a specific group of people that holds specific characteristics or features. Therefore, the path to racism was already closed. The Harlem Renaissance, though, was a problem of race. People's separation and classification into races is what equally allows for universal racism issues. The race that started and fostered the Harlem Renaissance is the black race; the same race that had suffered in America for centuries. Therefore, when African Americans were en route to maintain their cultural awakening that also happened for the first time, economic difficulties were not the only adversary. White American resistance to the black African American values and freedom was stronger than ever, and it had always been what hindered black people to ever achieve a long-lasting cultural success in America.

Furthermore, African Americans also lacked the awareness of the seriousness of the Harlem cultural movement and lacked the awareness of what it really meant to them. As a result, they danced to the beats of Jazz and expressed themselves through music and on paper, and fumbled around with the keys of the movement in their hands. Surprisingly, even the Jazz, the newly created music, had not been cherished and appreciated enough by its own foster creators. It is very unfortunate to realize that Jazz music is, actually, more appreciated now in retrospect than it was at the time of the Renaissance. African American intellectuals, then, were too dazzled by the sparking idea of a cultural uprising that they overlooked such an important creation as Jazz, and forgot to focus just enough to realize its real prominent value as an original key to their identity (Huggins, 1971). Huggins even goes more frankly to argue that, with the exception of Langston Hughes, none of Harlem intellectuals properly valued this creative music and they failed to see it as a genuine source of inspiration (1971). That way, the spark of black cultural uprising in America started soon to dim for it was not, first and for most, based on true unshakable basis.

African Americans did not accentuate and maintain some of the real original characteristics that may sharply differentiate them from white Americans. Thus, they did not congruously cling to their original African values and let them slip and fade out into the powerful, relentless American culture. That way, the values of the African American cultural uprising would not have taken longer to fade out, even if the American economic recessions never actually happened.

### **2.4 Conclusion**



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Being fresh into the 1920s, African American intellectuals probably never thought their dream of the Renaissance would last this short. For them, America was the greatest political and economic power, and would never face difficulties that would lead to its collapse. However, and leading up to the 1930s, an unprecedented economic crisis came to challenge that conviction and threaten the American economy. Historically known as the Great Depression, the American economic crisis was a long expansion of a typical recession in 1929. Along with other subsequent historical episodes, the crisis came to put the Harlem Renaissance into a dramatic halt. The famous Stock Market Crash of 1929 and the unequal distribution of wealth following that period were the direct causes of the Great Depression. The effects of the economic downturn miserably spread nation-wide and rippled across to include most of the world countries. Social and economic phenomena such as poverty and unemployment caused by critical shortages of job positions made Americans suffer harshly during the period. Additional to that, African Americans had housing and rent issues to deal with, as living places and conditions in Harlem deteriorated and rent prices increased nevertheless. Plus, many white people snatched their previously owned houses away from Blacks and ditched them to the streets. These piled-up grudges added up to the theft incident of the 12-year-old Lino Rivera, and African Americans rose into a violent riot known as the Harlem Race Riot of 1935. Supported by the Prohibition of alcohol from 1929 to 1933, the Harlem Race Riot translates as the definite final destination of the Harlem Renaissance.

Despite its early termination, the Harlem Renaissance did have its undeniable successes. In contrast to the Old Negro, the Renaissance introduced the revolutionary concept of the New Negro. The brand-new concept accentuated all the good bright qualities that were inculcated for the African American to represent as a fresh start in urban America. The inculcation of this concept was one of the most precious achievements of the cultural movement. The magazines of the Renaissance were also a big plus to its continuance and effectiveness. They insisted upon delivering the messages of the movement and worked with urge to promote the African American identity.

The real defect of the Harlem renaissance was not its premature termination but the deep hidden factor behind it. During the flowering of the movement, African Americans created an unprecedented magical atmosphere. However, the sharp dazzle of that situation caused them to overlook the real objective behind the brightness of the Renaissance. They failed to accentuate the beauty of being black, and cling to the precious qualities that, otherwise, guaranteed the continuance of the movement. However, they, somehow,

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Succeeded at reviving their African values and generally altered the misconceptions and stereotypes white people had of the black race.

# Chapter Three: The Impact of the Harlem Renaissance on the American Culture

## **Chapter Three: The Impact of the Harlem Renaissance on the American Culture**

### **3.1 Introduction**

Before the Harlem Renaissance, black people's voices were barely heard in America. Hitherto, Americans had dehumanized blacks and oppressed their very being. That way, black people themselves grew more devoid of self-recognition and struggled to perceive and establish a sense of identity. When the black race in America underwent a renaissance, however, promising hints of mass racial recognition began flashing in the distance. Black people, for the first time, were able to stand up straight and assertive to finally announce their race's coming of age. The Harlem Renaissance has had such a strong impact that even when it ended, its permanent traces became forever stamped on both American and African American cultures.

### **3.2 The Effectiveness of the Harlem Renaissance**

Being the mixing pot of many cultures, America is constantly exposed to the alterations and updates that those cultures give away. Those alterations and updates, no matter how insignificant, can either add up or, forever, reshape the general perception of America as a whole.

Considering the relatively short period of the Harlem Renaissance, one may tend to underestimate its high effectiveness that shaped the black culture and redirected the fate of black race in America. Fortunately, the criteria by which a renaissance is considered to be successful are not only concluded to its long or short period. The success of the Harlem Renaissance must be measured by how effective it was, and how strong the alterations it caused to the American culture were.

#### ***3.2.1 The Harlem Renaissance and the African American Identity***

Before the Harlem Renaissance, black people were never considered a defined people with a defined identity. Rather, they were considered slaves owned by their masters, and they were treated as such. The identity crisis that the black race underwent in America was by no means accidental or caused by natural social development and hierarchies. White Americans intended and planned to make the black race faceless and unrecognizable by exposing it to all kinds of atrocities and segregation. Being used to this pattern, black people in America grew meeker and ever more ignorant of their true worth and right to live as a free

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people. Therefore, and at that point, it was most impossible for them to break the cycle of this mass racial, cultural erasure.

Granting black people an unshakable identity and introducing it to the world was probably the Harlem Renaissance's greatest achievement. The way the Harlem Renaissance helped black people develop and maintain an identity had to be epic and, by no means, shallow or superficial. Equally, maintaining the identity by the black race had to be ever so heartfelt and revolutionary; as the identity must grow deep within the individual and mix with their thin, obscure blood veins. Being the race leader he was, Alain Locke grew more convinced of this truth with time. He realised the seriousness of the African American situation and the gravity of the identity crisis it presented. Thus, he felt it was absolutely necessary to not only help black people develop an identity, but also provide a concept that would fuel their sense of belonging and help them maintain it over time. Locke defined and described the ideal image of a real black individual, and made sure it contrasted well to the old oppressed image. The New Negro was the best version of an African American; his existence meant a prosperous new era to the black race, and a strong denunciation of white stereotypes to the world as a whole.

Following the stipulated example of Alain Locke, African Americans, for the first time, felt an unprecedented sense of belonging and were ever so ecstatic to promote and express their identity. Some African Americans strongly believed that they originally belonged to Africa and that they were racially foreign to America. Others, though, could not accept this vision and liked to believe they were real Americans who belonged to America. Despite this second claim, however, one can never deny that black people in America belonged to Africa before they were brought from there to America as slaves. Contrary to any claim otherwise, there is one important ethnic, cultural feature that would always tie African Americans back to Africa; Folklore.

Brought from Africa, black slaves in America held some of their most prominent oral traditions along with them. Folktales and Spirituals were and still are present in most of African regions. Slaveholders in the American South limited the everyday life of black slaves; they strictly prohibited education among them to prevent emancipational tendencies. Considering this atrociously limited lifestyle, black people could not write words or document their culture and had to communicate orally, which helped African oral traditions to live throughout African American history.

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### 3.2.1.1 Folktales

Starting with the art of storytelling, African Folktales are oral stories that grew common among southern African Americans in slavery America. These tales proudly narrated the ancient victories of black ancestors and accentuated their invincible bravery and courage. Most of these Folktales were fables that explained animal behaviour and why animals do certain things like “*Why the Lizard Often Nods*” and “*Why the Owl Never Sleeps at Night*” (Cunningham, 2020). Others centred on world’s creation and heroes deeds. The reason why these folktales lived through slavery era and beyond was not only that they were a hopeful respite to enslaved black people in the South, but also for the fact that they sometimes consisted of coded information through which slaves could agree to secret meetings or other plans to execute. With the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, though, black South folktales were finally seeing the light, and began transcending into songs and films that spread across the American North as well.

One of the most popular African American folktales, hitherto, is the legend of “*John Henry*” that became famous mostly in the 1870s. The character John after whom the legend is entitled is imaginary, but the legend itself does lean on some actual scenes from real life. In 1870, the railroad company in West Virginia hired hundreds of workers to construct a railroad that would tie Tidewater Virginia to the Ohio River Valley. Many of these workers were African American; they all had to work hard in the burning sun of summer and the freezing cold of winter, and drill long deep holes into the giant hard rocks of Big Bend Mountain. The story has it that around the year 1872, the company made some updates and brought the steam drill; a boiler machine, powered by steam, that could drill holes much faster than any worker there. The legend of “John Henry” was based on this setting, and narrated the story of John Henry; the African American strong worker who got strongly outraged in reaction to the boiler machine and had to defy it to prove that man power is irreplaceable and could drill faster and deeper holes than that machine. Henry grabbed two giant heavy hammers, one in each hand, and began competing against the machine, drilling holes with as much force as his body could muster. John Henry, indeed, drilled so powerfully that he actually made deeper holes much faster and could finally beat the machine, but then, at the end, he died of exhaustion. The legend back then represented the “man against machine” struggle. However, it later became the symbol of the powerful, relentless resistance of African Americans against white oppression. This folktale grew very popular and was mainly made into songs as well as films, and, indeed, took America by storm. So

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many Americans could actually relate to the legend and showed strong compassion towards the message it held and sought to get across, that an actual statue featuring John Henry was erected in the honour of hard workers in the Great Bend Tunnel and it still sits there ever since. (See figure 3).

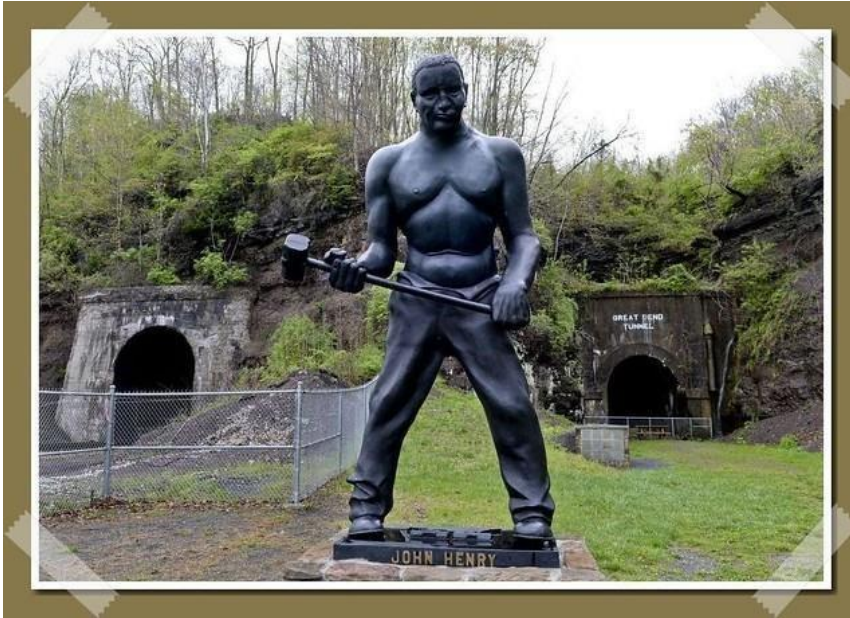


Figure 3. Statue of John Henry in the Great Band Tunnel in West Virginia. Adapted from *Encyclopedia of World Mythology and Legend* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed), by Mercatante, A, S & Dow, J, R, 2009. Retrieved from <http://occult-world.com/john-henry/>

### 3.2.1.2 Spirituals

In addition to folktales, African American folklore also consisted of Spirituals. Spirituals were original songs of pure African American creation that were common in the Antebellum South. Slaves sang rhythms of sadness and melancholy to both express their powerlessness against the cruel oppression and denigration of their white masters, and console one another and make circumstances more hopeful and bearable. In his book “*The Souls of Black Folk*”, W.E.B Du Bois calls Spirituals Sorrow Songs and beautifully describes them by stating that through all the sadness and melancholy they give away, there is always a ray of hope and faith, “The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond” (1903). The Spirituals were a form of resistance. Soon after, Spirituals deeply mixed up with the different activities Black people practiced and became the official theme of the African American everyday life. They interfered with religion and the two became inseparable. As they started being performed in

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churches, spirituals became the theme music through which African Americans learned their religion and recited its holy texts.

Today, Spirituals are strongly present in the American drama and TV shows and are included as the theme songs and soundtracks of many American famous films such as Gavin O'Connor's 2020 film "*The Way Back*", Nate Parker's 2016 "*The Birth of a Nation*" and Steve McQueen's 2013 "*12 Years a Slave*". Folktales and Spirituals are the two most prominent milestones of African American folklore; their strong presence ever since slavery to this day is, alone, a direct living proof of their strong impact on the American culture. Thanks to the genuine relentless efforts of African Americans to perfectly promote their identity, American film production itself developed a strong appreciation for black people and their dramatic potentiality throughout the last century. Many films with black actors in them have got and are getting Oscar prizes and great appeal from the American audience, that it is now undeniably impossible to overlook or marginalize the African American dramatic potentiality out of the contemporary American film production.

### ***3.2.2 The Civil Rights Movement***

After what is known as the Second Great Migration, the black population drastically increased in the American North. Due to this fact, overcrowding became a common phenomenon at all levels, especially education. Schools became overcrowded and were forced to hire inexperienced teachers to fill in the gap. As a result, teaching and learning conditions deteriorated and education quality chronically worsened. Consequently, and in the spring of 1951, a group of black students in Virginia went out into protest to denounce this inequality in education, as white schools situation was not at all to be compared to that of the blacks. The NAACP asked the students to refrain and cool down the heating protests, but the students refused. The NAACP was then forced to stand up in line with the students against this discriminatory situation of black schools and education. These incidents soon echoed nationwide and were brought up to the court. Based on that, discriminations and segregation acts intensified in public streets and institutions and circumstances became, once again, unbearable.

The Civil Rights Movement is a political organization founded by blacks against discrimination and black rights violation. It became active in the 1950s after the case of 1951. It gathered up most of black politicians and intellectuals but was mainly marked by the presence of the African American ministers and race leaders Malcom X and Martin



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Luther King, Jr. The Civil Rights Movement continued the political and cultural mission of the Harlem Renaissance and played a prominent role in weakening the intensity of white discrimination and reclaiming black civil rights. However, that was only possible through the willpower of the political leaders and intellectuals already reformed by the Harlem Renaissance during the 1920s and 1930s. That way, the effectiveness of the renaissance definitely imposed itself through the direct impact it had on almost all the important historical episodes that followed it. In this Context, Martin Luther King Jr was influenced by Langston Hughes's poems to a great extent and many historians confirmed that his great 1963 speech "I Have a Dream" was much based on other poems that he read by Hughes. King even once wrote to Hughes: "I can no longer count the number of times and places...in which I have read your poems" (Eschner, 2017).

### ***3.2.3 The Harlem Renaissance and the American Dream***

Ever since the founding of America in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, European founders sought for America to be the destined homeland for their unachieved dreams and missed opportunities. Puritans could not have religious freedom in Old England and assertively decided that they would realize it overseas in what was called New England. They believed that America would be the perfect land in which all rights would be reserved and prosperous living would be the prevailing theme. This stream of thinking got embraced by all America's settlers then, and it, soon, transcended itself into a chronic sense of exceptionalism. That America was the land of freedom and prosperity and a "beacon of hope" to the world, was a message that had to be publicized worldwide. Ever since those very times, the concept of the "American Dream" began crystalizing, but somebody had yet to refer to it as such.

In the book "Epic of America", the concept of the American Dream was, first, coined and defined by the writer and historian James Truslow Adams as the "dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" (1931). Ever since Jefferson's words in the Declaration of Independence "we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal", America has exhaustively hyped over these logos of prosperity and equality values. The American Dream was the vision of success in America; it was promoted that the harder one works, the better political, social and economic chances they would relish. However, and later on, this real general concept of the American Dream underwent a real deviation. In his famous novel "The Great Gatsby", F. Scott Fitzgerald portrays the cynical materialism of

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America and how the American Dream was distorted solely towards economic, material inclinations, as he says “a new world, material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about” (1925).

But whether the American Dream maintained its real original concept or deviated from it over time, either ways, it never included black people. African Americans had always lived the hard way and never indulged even the simplest privileges of the American Dream. With the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century though, African Americans could no longer wait for white-oriented America to grant them their legal rights; it was time for them to rebel and seek racial equality themselves. Coming up on the 1920s, America started yet to live and experience the peak of the American Dream. Opulence and abundance prevailed throughout the country; people purchased opulent items, wore vibrant shiny garments and sang their happiness off. Thus, African Americans made a decision and followed the vogue. Through the realization of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and beyond, African Americans could finally shake the distorted lies of the American Dream. Indeed, and after all what they had been through hitherto, African Americans had every excuse not to believe in the notion of the American Dream anymore. Nevertheless, many intellectuals and writers of the Renaissance worked on reviving what the American Dream really meant, and renewed its epic real echo within the weakened hearts of black people in America. The poet Langston Hughes is an example of the African American intellectuals that had quite of a negative sinister look on the traditional concept of the American Dream for the reason it would never have room for black race. As a result, he and others like Countee Cullen and Zora Neal Hurston tried another way to approach the American Dream. They recognised their ability to strive and realise the real privileges of the American Dream and finally founded their own version of it, which later became labelled as the “African American Dream”.

In his 1925 poem “I, Too, Sing America”, Hughes displayed his strong firm belief in the American Dream and that there will be one day when white Americans would know the true worth of the African American individual:

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.

They send me to eat in the kitchen

When company comes,

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But I laugh,  
And eat well,  
And grow strong.  
Tomorrow,  
I'll be at the table  
When company comes.  
Nobody'll dare  
Say to me,  
"Eat in the kitchen,"  
Then.  
Besides,  
They'll see how beautiful I am  
And be ashamed-  
I, too, am America.

Moreover, and in his 1936 poem "Let America Be America Again", he actually called for equality and wished for America to live up to its great promises again:

Let America be America again.  
Let it be the dream it used to be.  
Let it be the pioneer on the plain  
Seeking home where he himself is free.  
(America never was America to me)  
O, let my land be a land where liberty  
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,  
But opportunity is real, and life is free,  
Equality is in the air we breathe.

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(There's never been equality for me,

Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")

Added to that, and again in 1957, Hughes still believed in the African American Dream and he asserted that he, with the whole African American race, will always be there no matter what the conditions were, and that was through his poem "Still Here":

Looks like between 'em they done

Tried to make me

Stop Laughin', stop lovin', stop livin'-

But I don't care!

I'm still here!

In his 1975 poem "Hey, Black Child", the poet Useni Eugene Perkins also promoted black spirit and talked African Americans into believing in themselves and their future hopeful country:

Hey Black Child

Be what you can be

Learn what you must learn

Do what you can do

And tomorrow your nation

Will be what you want it to be

These poets are among the many writers and intellectuals of the Renaissance who planted the concept of the African America Dream in the souls of black people in America and sought for it to never die out.

During the Harlem Renaissance, African Americans, indeed, worked on altering their social and cultural status and improving their living conditions. They promoted their identity and passed their works of literature and arts through. They snatched away their rights and

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privileges with and without whites' approval, and asserted that the American Dream should, indeed, include all Americans, no matter their race or colour.

### **3.3 The Harlem Renaissance and the Contemporary American Culture**

To talk about American culture here, means to, particularly, talk about the most prominent realms of human culture: literature, music and art in the United States of America. When focusing on the general literal meaning, the term “contemporary” is mostly defined as the adjective describing scopes “belonging to the present time” (Oxford Dictionary, 2017). That is, intending contemporary American culture in general, is focusing solely on present time American culture. However, the literary meaning of the term “contemporary” when associated with literature, music and art in America is concerned with literature, music and art after WWII.

To understand how the contemporary American culture is different from the American culture of other eras, it is compulsory to know how the WWII is a turning point in American history and how it affected the American culture back then. When the U.S naval base at Pearl Harbor was attacked in December 1941, America had been officially engrossed into the Second World War. The attack was sudden and America began organizing its army to already participate in the war. Americans became most overwhelmed with the situation and started feeling deeply patriotic. As a result, literature, music and art soon adopted the case and became prominent aspects to express those intense feelings of patriotism and support. But with the years of the war going by, Americans had yet to feel more and more lost, as the general situation of the country was becoming ever more shaky and unstable. Aspects of culture like literature lost their sense of aestheticism and were devoted to solely serve and promote war and war values.

#### ***3.3.1 Afro-American Literature: The Literary Innovation***

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, African American literature was all concluded to what was known as “Slave Narratives”. These narratives are written accounts of fugitive slaves or ex-slaves, in which they narrate and document their escape journeys and struggle for freedom from slavery South to North America. The narratives also witness upon slavery cruel acts and atrocities; as they bear detailed accounts of slaves' life in which they underwent all different kinds of torture, rape, abuse and random killing. From regular accounts of slaves' life, Slave Narratives became a freestanding literary genre in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. This development was basically perceived through comparing 18<sup>th</sup> century Slave Narratives to

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those of the antebellum period; as the 18<sup>th</sup> century Slave Narratives talked less of the race and focused more on the individual and his struggles (Foster & Smith, 1994).

With the flowering of the Harlem Renaissance's literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, Slave Narratives almost disappeared altogether from the documented foreground literature of the era. Because the renaissance was a freeing life stage for African Americans, they naturally focused less on the struggle for freedom and more on asserting themselves as a rightful prominent race in America. Apart from the Slave Narratives already mentioned, the years directly before the 1920s marked a serious absence of African American literature whatsoever. However, with the coming of the Renaissance, more and more writers and poets popped up and literature flourished. Moreover, and "because so little fiction or poetry had been produced by African Americans in the years immediately prior to the Harlem Renaissance, the appearance of a dozen or more poets and novelists and essayists seemed all the more striking and improbable" (Bloom, 2004). The diversity of the literary content that came with the Renaissance made the Roaring Twenties ever more dazzling from the African American perspective. Thanks to authors and writers such as W.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Langston Hughes, Booker T. Washington and Zora Neal Hurston, the period of the Renaissance gave birth to a very notable literary content that still echoes to this day. The African American Literature of the Renaissance not only took the American community by storm back then, but it also has had a prolonged impact that touched the following decades of the 1940s and 1950s. Consequently, the literature of the 1940s, 1950s to the 1960s also influenced today's literature in return.

"Double Consciousness", a concept that has been, to this day, one of the most present and defining notions of African American literature, basically refers to the harsh black experience of looking and judging one's self through the lenses of the racist, segregationist white community. The term had been coined and produced by W. E. Du Bois in his 1902 book "*The Souls of Black Folk*". The book is a collection of essays that seriously tackle the problem of race, and in which Du Bois affirmed that "through work, culture and liberty, double consciousness could be melded into a force for positive social and cultural change in the United States" (2015). This racial concept of double consciousness has influenced other writers and other literary works, one of which is Ralph Ellison's 1952 best work "Invisible Man". This Ellison's novel has been one of the most important African American works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and it is still being taught and referred to in history and school curriculums

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nowadays. Ellison had been very affected and influenced by Du Bois' double consciousness, and it all shows up obvious in his book words:

“All my life I had been looking for something, and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me what it was. I accepted their answers too, though they were often in contradiction and even self-contradictory. I was naïve. I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer. It took me a long time and much painful boomeranging of my expectations to achieve a realization everyone else appears to have been born with: that I am nobody but myself”.

Like “*Invisible Man*”, double consciousness is present in other black as well as white American works such as Okorafor Nnedi's “*Akata Witch*”, the book of an African American background, and also “*The Giver*”, which is a novel by the white American author Lois Lowry (Diaz, 2017). Thus, double consciousness has become a very prominent racial and literary concept, and is now considered as a notable innovation in American Literature.

Just like male writers of the Renaissance, female writers such as Jessie Fauset and Zora Neale Hurston also dominated the African American literary period of the 1920s. Contrary to common belief back then, these female writers supported feminism and female role in the American society. They imposed their social and literary position in a sexist society that promoted the idea that women must not be present in any intellectual domain whatsoever. In her 1937 novel “*Their Eyes Were Watching God*”, Zora Neale Hurston tells the story of Janie Crawford, a young lively girl that believes in love and is assertive to found a marriage relationship on it. This novel is Hurston's finest work ever, and is considered a cornerstone and a classic of the Harlem Renaissance. Through reshaping the sexist American beliefs and booking a stable place for female potentiality in early 20<sup>th</sup> century literature, these female writers influenced other cotemporary female writers to come. They inspired famous writers such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Maya Angelou. Toni Morrison had always been fond of Zora Hurston and was fascinated by her feminine strength and literary potentiality. That is part of the reason why Morrison's name sparkled its way through fame; she wrote her masterpieces “*The Bluest Eye*” in 1970, “*Sula*” in 1973 and “*Beloved*” in 1987.

In addition to prose, African American poetry of the Renaissance also participated an innovative side to the contemporary American literature. Because the poet Langston Hughes was the most notable poet of the Harlem Renaissance, his poetry, indeed, had a serious

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impact on African Americans' souls. Hughes was aware of this fact, and made sure that his poetry always lived up to his race's both social and artistic expectations. Going throughout the early years of the 1920s, however, the idea of writing simple mundane poetry did not appeal to Hughes. Hence, he worked on a unique, innovative poetry to be separated from usual white poetry. He created a special kind of poetry, which followed the rhymes and musical tones of Jazz music. "Jazz Poetry" took the quarters of New York by storm and received great appeal from both colored and white people. This type of poetry had a special corner in contemporary literature; it was, later, also implemented and performed in theatre. Famous playwrights have declared that Hughes' Jazz Poetry had inspired many of their works and boosted their popularity in the process.

### ***3.3.2 Jazz: A Musical Blueprint***

When Jazz was first created and heard, it was clear that it was inspired by West African music as well as European tones and rhythms. Classical instruments used in Jazz as piano, trumpet, trombone and saxophone are undoubtedly of European origin, while other more tropical instruments such as banjo, guitar and percussion hint at colourful west African musical tradition (Schuller, 2020). From its beautiful aural effects, to the musical instruments used, to the charm and classy mood of the clubs it is played in, everything is utterly great about Jazz. But what is still even greater, is the fact that it is mostly improvisational. Iconic Jazz musicians of the 1920s were able to create original jazz pieces right there at the place that they played in for the first time. The music was inspiring to them that they could create stunning pieces easily; for them, it was like a charming, fun musical game. Next to its unique and creative musical notes, its improvisational nature is another aspect that inspired artists, and mainly poets. Authors and poets like E.E Cummings and T.S. Elliot were influenced by this sense of improvisation and, indeed, innovated in the jazz style of that time to make it sound more like today's jazz (Shutterstock, 2018). Thanks to the 1920's jazz, different genres of jazz music exist nowadays. Contemporary and Mainstream Jazz gave birth to Unconventional Jazz, Modern Jazz and Fusion. It is true that jazz is only a music style, but it actually influenced the whole lifestyle of 1920s America. Just as it influenced literature, it also influenced other cultural aspects like food and theatre. People even produced a more comfortable clothing style to easily dance to the music beats (Shutterstock, 2018). Moreover, cartoon and animation movies of the 1920s onwards were all about Jazz. Famous cartoon industries like Walt Disney's; mainly "Micky Mouse" was an iconic cartoon of the 1920s



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that had a special charm to it because of its jazz music themes and introductions. (See figure 4).

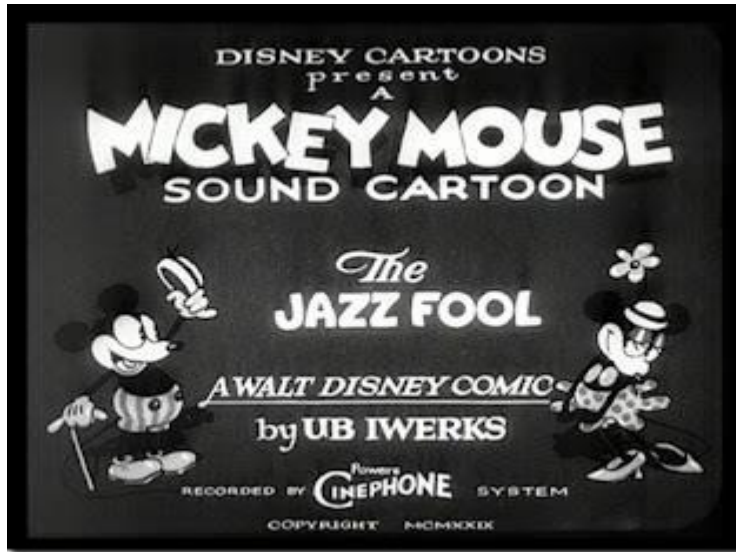


Figure 4. “The Jazz Fool”, one of 1929 Walt Disney’s shorts from the “Micky Mouse” cartoon series. Adapted from *Micky Mouse Follies: Black and White* by Jason, A, November 25, 2007. Retrieved from [mmfolliesbw.blogspot.com/2007/11/jazz-fool-october-15-1929.html](http://mmfolliesbw.blogspot.com/2007/11/jazz-fool-october-15-1929.html)

Jazz use in that very cartoon gave way and inspired other famous contemporary cartoons such as 1940 “Tom & Jerry”, 1969 “The Pink Panther” among many others. “The Pink Panther” theme jazz music was written and composed by Henry Mancini in 1963 and was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Original Score at the 37<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards. The theme music got a great appeal and fame in contemporary America, but is even much more famous now, as it is still being implemented not only in cartoonish contexts, but in other contexts as well.

### 3.3.3 African American Visual Arts and the American artistic perspective

Being a rebirth of African artistic basics, African American art in the period of the Renaissance represented Negro life aspects with genuine African impressions. Using traditional African artistic styles and patterns, African Americans created a unique artistic style to talk their struggles and victories through in the United States. With the years of the Renaissance going by, African American art was still fresh and resistant. The presence of the African race in America was more problematic than ever, hence, art stood for racial resistant matters and strove to serve the Afro-American racial case. As a result, it was almost

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impossible for African American art to be regarded as anything except propaganda. Art's aesthetic message and its expressionist intention could not show through all that fuss of the racial crisis. However, and with the end of the 1920s and the 1930s, the Renaissance effect faded out and African Americans were less impulsive and enthusiastic about their racial matter. Even though art still served black racial themes like struggle for freedom, segregation and integration, and the difficulties of everyday black life, the intention with which it did that was less of a direct resistance and more of a continuance of what the Harlem Renaissance first accentuated. Consequently, African Americans looked away from the propagandist qualities their art held with the late 1930s and focused more upon its aesthetic expressionistic value. As that was the case, white Americans' perspective of African American art shifted and redirected itself from an opponent of Afro-American art, to an artistic critic and audience. American artists and art lovers started showing a notable interest in African American art, as it savoured traditional African qualities and radiated exotic vibrations. They studied it carefully, exhibited it in art schools and museums and even made a special corner for it in the world of art and called it "Primitivism". African Americans amazingly portrayed their thoughts and feelings through complex, yet simple colourfulness. The simple, plain lines and shapes constituting Afro-American art were a grabber of American artistic attention, and many watched it with awe and amazement (See figure 5).



Figure 5. William H. Johnson's painting "Going to Church", oil on burlap, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC. Adapted from *Oxford Art Online*, 2021, Oxford

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University Press, Oxford. Retrieved from <http://oxfordartonline.com/page/african-american-art>

This Afro-American impact was not limited to America only but expanded to Europe as well. It went along with Modernism artistic trends in Europe like: Cubism, Expressionism and Fauvism, which, in return, helped it to get more known and famous there. The symmetrical geometry and the fractured, distorted figures in it inspired the most influential giants of art such as the French Paul Gauguin and Henri Matisse, the British Francis Bacon and the Spanish Pablo Picasso and Jose Vela Zanetti. Picasso's fragmented figures and cubic shapes were, to a great extent, inspired by Jacob Lawrence's painting style among many others.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

Even though the Harlem Renaissance stands as a relatively short period in American History, the impact it has had on America is very prominent and everlasting. The serious Awareness of African Americans back then was the direct factor behind the effective intention of the Renaissance. Thanks to that 1920s' cultural flowering, African Americans could finally relish a sense of identity and belonging. Growing into assertive individuals, they also learned how to point out their civil rights and stand firm for them. Notable figures like W.E.B Du Bois and Alain Locke strove to establish a strong ground for the black race's civil rights, which fuelled the efforts of the 1960s' Civil Rights Movement and other organizations. Moreover, the Renaissance came to guide and rectify the distorted concept of the American Dream. After its total decadence, African American renovated the real concept of the American Dream and affirmed the idea that all people must be equally capable of thriving in the American society.

The cultural uprising of the 1920s had had a direct strong impact on the contemporary American culture of the 1940s onwards. Literature, music and art of the era have had a ripple effect on the African American and American culture beyond the Renaissance. Authors, poets and artists lived through to influence and inspire contemporary authors, poets and artists still. The Jazz music and visual arts could indeed change and reshape the common American stereotypes of black people and their potentiality. On that matter, the originality of the African American heritage left the American audience in awe, and Americans were always eager to witness more and more of that inspiring, exotic Afro-American touch.

# **General Conclusion**

## General Conclusion

Racism has always been a common phenomenon in America, for it is the homeland for many ethnic groups that co-exist together. Being the biggest minority, black people in America had experienced the worst racist treatment throughout history. When the Harlem Renaissance came, however, some prominent things changed forever. The underlying but undeniable importance of the Harlem Renaissance is illustrated through the notable alterations that the Afro-American life witnessed in Contemporary and Modern America. Thanks to the awareness that the Civil Rights Movement and other active associations have been spreading among the masses during and after the Harlem Renaissance, black and white Americans are capable of co-existing together normally nowadays. Moreover, the Renaissance's importance is not represented through social status only, but through cultural contexts as well. The Afro-American culture that was established and promoted in the Renaissance has been present in everyday American life ever since. In addition, its influential literature, ecstatic music and sensual art are transcending to the international cultural platform and are promoted worldwide.

This study aim was to explore the main goals that the Harlem Renaissance set for itself and whether or not it succeeded in realizing them. It also aimed to define the heritage and cultural legacy that African-Americans left behind and determine its importance through exploring the way it affected and inspired the different aspects of American life. The real motivation behind choosing this topic was the strong interest in African American matters and the lifelong aspiration to explore the underlying inspirations of their rich, self-determined journeys.

The analysis that this study represents shows, first: that the labelling of this African American movement as a "Renaissance" is utterly legitimate, for its denotation implies the concept of both a birth and a rebirth. The birth and rebirth of the genuine African heritage and the Negro in America. Second, this study proves that the Harlem Renaissance achieved its main goals and more. The Renaissance introduced, for the first time, the original concept of the "New Negro" that referred to the project of the more assertive, self-determined black individual that the movement came to make and refine. The New Negro concept came as an utter contrast to the Old Negro, who is meek, undefinable and weak in the face of atrocities and segregation. Through introducing the New Negro, African Americans attempted to revive the real persona of African People. A purely modern, assertive, African representation of the black race. Through the concept of the New Negro, the Harlem Renaissance defied the notion that marketed the colour black as mean and ugly. The New Negro was brought up

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to life to form and accentuate a unique version of the African American individual. He came to promote the uniqueness and authenticity of the black spirit. Subsequently, when this notion was stuffed into African Americans, the touch of uniqueness and authenticity became prevalent and present in almost every Afro-American work. Third, African Americans succeeded during the Renaissance to promote their identity through their famous newspapers and magazines in that era. Like “The Crisis”, “Opportunity” and “The Messenger”, the Harlem Renaissance’s magazines played a significant role in in fostering the African American concern. However, the most noticeable downfall or failure of the Harlem Renaissance was its premature end. African Americans did not properly accentuate and maintain some of the real original characteristics that may sharply differentiate them from white Americans. That way, the values of the African American cultural uprising would not have taken longer to fade out, even if the American economic recessions never actually happened.

Furthermore, the analysis demonstrates that short-lived period of the Renaissance does not actually matter, as it does not by any means, diminish its importance. The effectiveness of the Renaissance does not actually represented through its short or long period, but through the successes and additions that it brought to the American life. Granting black people an unshakable identity and introducing it to the world was probably the Harlem Renaissance’s greatest achievement. White Americans had always intended to make the black race faceless and unrecognizable by exposing it to all kinds of atrocities and segregation. The Harlem Renaissance came to change that through granting African Americans a high-value sense of recognition that pushed white Americans to reconsider their racist perspective. In addition, the political leaders and intellectuals already reformed by the Harlem Renaissance during the 1920s and 1930s left a prominent political legacy. The Civil Rights Movement continued the political and cultural mission of the Harlem Renaissance and played a prominent role in weakening the intensity of white discrimination and reclaiming black civil rights. Another way the Harlem Renaissance affected the American culture was through guiding African Americans to rightfully live their version of the American Dream.

This study determines that the impact of the Harlem Renaissance also clear through the musical, literary and artistic innovations that it brought to the American culture. Thanks to authors and writers such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Langston Hughes, Booker T. Washington and Zora Neal Hurston, the period of the Renaissance gave birth to a very notable literary content that still echoes to this day. Du bois came up with the concept of

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“Double Consciousness” in his 1902 book “The Souls of Black Folk”. The concept has been, to this day, one of the most present and defining notions of African American literature, and it refers to the harsh black experience of looking and judging one’s self through the lenses of the racist, segregationist white community. This racial concept has influenced other writers and other literary works in return, one of which is Ralph Ellison’s 1952 best work “Invisible Man”.

In the field of music, “Jazz” and “Blues” music of the Renaissance inspired the Contemporary and Modern American and world music industries. Jazz is present and more famous than ever to this day, through its multiple forms like Modern Jazz, Unconventional Jazz and Fusion. Moreover, the improvisational nature of Jazz music inspired the field of literature even. The poet Langston Hughes used the concept of Jazz improvisation and its rhythms to produce a unique, unconventional poetry.

Like the other mentioned aspects of culture, visual art also contributed its share of impact to the American culture. African Americans amazingly portrayed their thoughts and feelings through complex, yet simple colourfulness. The simple, plain lines and shapes constituting Afro-American art were a grabber of American artistic attention, and many watched it with awe and amazement. American artists and art lovers started showing a notable interest in African American art, as it savoured traditional African qualities and radiated exotic vibrations. They studied it carefully, exhibited it in art schools and museums and even made a special corner for it in the world of art and called it “Primitivism”. This Afro-American impact was not limited to America only but expanded to Europe as well. It went along with Modernism artistic trends in Europe like: Cubism, Expressionism and Fauvism, which, in return, helped it to get more known and famous there.

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