

## *Harlem Renaissance: Important Features*

**1.** Harlem Renaissance (HR) is the name given to the period from the end of World War I and through the middle of the 1930s Depression, during which a group of talented African-American writers produced a sizable body of literature in the four prominent genres of poetry, fiction, drama, and essay.

**2.** The notion of "twoness" , a divided awareness of one's identity, was introduced by W.E.B. Du Bois, one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).and the author of the influential book *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903): "One ever feels his two-ness - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled stirrings: two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."

**3.** Common themes: alienation, marginality, the use of folk material, the use of the blues tradition, the problems of writing for an elite audience.

**4.** HR was more than just a literary movement: it included racial consciousness, "the back to Africa" movement led by Marcus Garvey, racial integration, the explosion of music particularly jazz, spirituals and blues, painting, dramatic revues, and others.

## *Harlem Renaissance: An Assessment*

**1. Harlem Renaissance brought the Black experience clearly within the general American cultural history.**

a. Remarkable coincidences and luck, provided a sizable chunk of real estate in the heart of Manhattan.

b. The Black migration, from south to north, changed their image from rural to urban, from peasant to sophisticate.

c. Harlem became a crossroads where Blacks interacted with and expanded their contacts internationally.

d. Harlem Renaissance profited from a spirit of self-determination which was widespread after W.W.I.

**2. Harlem Renaissance could not escape its history and culture in its attempt to create a new one.**

a. The "renaissance" echoed American progressivism in its faith in democratic reform, in its belief in art and literature as agents of change, and in its almost uncritical belief in itself and its future.

b. The creation of the "New Negro" failed, but it was an American failure, similar to other frustrated promotions.

c. The future of the "New Negro" was accepted without question.

d. Just as the Whites, Black intellectuals were unprepared for the rude shock of the Great Depression; the HR was shattered by it because of naive assumptions about the centrality of culture, unrelated to economic and social realities.

### **3. Still the Harlem Renaissance had its significance.**

a. It became a symbol and a point of reference for everyone to recall.

b. The name, more than the place, became synonymous with new vitality, Black urbanity, and Black militancy.

c. It became a racial focal point for Blacks the world over; it remained for a time a race capital.

d. It stood for urban pluralism; Alain Locke wrote: "The peasant, the student, the businessman, the professional man, artist, poet, musician, adventurer and worker, preacher and criminal, exploiter and social outcast, each group has come with its own special motives ... but their greatest experience has been the finding of one another."

e. The complexity of the urban setting was important for Blacks to truly appreciate the variety of Black life. The race consciousness required that shared experience.

### **4. Harlem Renaissance's legacy is limited by the character of the Renaissance.**

a. It encouraged the new appreciation of folk roots and culture.

b. Peasant folk materials and spirituals provided a rich source for racial imagination and it freed the Blacks from the establishment of past condition.

c. Harlem Renaissance was imprisoned by its innocence. The Harlem intellectuals, while proclaiming a new race consciousness, became mimics of Whites, wearing clothes and using manners of sophisticated Whites, earning the epithet "dicty niggers" from the very people they were supposed to be championing.

d. Harlem Renaissance could not overcome the overwhelming White presence in commerce which defined art and culture. What was needed was a rejection of White values; they had to see Whites, without awe of love or awe of hate, and themselves truly, without myth or fantasy, in order that they could be themselves in life and art.

e. Harlem Renaissance created an ethnic provincialism and its biggest gift could be a lesson from its failures. The biggest is in the strange separation of the Blacks from American culture. Except for a few Blacks, the most striking thing about them is that they are native American. The negative implications have been clear; Blacks, unlike other immigrants, had no immediate past and history and culture to celebrate. But the positive implications of American nativity have never been fully appreciated by them. It seems too simple: the Afro-American's history and culture is American, more completely so than most others in the country.

f. At least the decade of the 1920s seems to have been too early for Blacks to have felt the certainty about native culture that would have freed them from crippling self-doubt. ... that is why the art of the Renaissance was so problematic, feckless, not fresh, not real. The lesson it leaves us is that the true Black Renaissance awaits Afro-Americans' claiming their *patria*, their nativity.