
MKU – Biskra
Faculty of Letters and Languages
English Language Division
Semester II

Level: Master 1 - Literature and Civilization
Course: American Civilization
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AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IN US HISTORY AND SOCIETY

THE NEW NEGRO MOVEMENT & THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

Objectives: Introduction to the Harlem Renaissance as part of the New Negro Movement. A political, cultural, intellectual, and artistic (literary and musical) trend that was born out of the Great Migration from the rural South to the urban North.

By the 1920s, one of the consequences of the Great Migration to the North was the outpouring and explosion of Black arts, politics, and culture in some great cities of the United States.

The "New Negro Movement" was associated with the rise of new forms of artistic production in music and literature, and a peculiar vitality in entertainment. The American artistic scene saw the rise of these new forms such as Jazz in music, and literary movements particular to the African American community.

African American literary figures such as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, or Richard Wright contributed to a new sense of African American identity, pride, and self-assertiveness.

That artistic (mainly literary and musical) development did not only appear in Harlem, New York. It also developed in great American cities of the North: Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, and Pittsburgh witnessed the same cultural and artistic growth, born out of the massive migrations of African American communities from the rural South to the urban North.

It should be noted that this development of African American identity came in a period (the 1920s) when the majority of African Americans were born free. It was the first generation who did not experience the plight of slavery (abolished in 1865).

Despite the racial segregation and injustice embodied in the Jim Crow laws, African Americans could produce and nurture a culture of their own. They could create and develop cultural and literary practices that reflected their own identity, be it in writing, music, or dance.

That artistic and cultural movement produced some side effects and it was not monolithic or homogenous. Debates regarding Black identity, what was to be an African American, what it meant to live in the United States as a Black individual, and the place of African Americans in a dominantly white America, were questions raised during those times.

Many cultural characteristics of the Harlem Renaissance also spread in the South. Jazz, Blues, and Gospel, for example, developed and became cultural markers of important Southern cities like New Orleans and Atlanta.

The development of African American music in the 1920s in Harlem led also to a vibrant nightlife. Night clubs opened and ballrooms featured jazz and dancing continuously well past midnight.

African Americans artists and musicians even attracted white people who wanted to experience Black culture without having to socialize with African Americans. *The Cotton Club* was such places that featured African American music and entertainment for white audiences.

Some African Americans derided the existence of such clubs. Others viewed it as a sign that Black culture and art were moving towards greater acceptance in a dominantly white America.