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The significance of Harlem Renaissance in American literature – "New Negro"

Ziyodakhon Gulomova
PhD student of National University of Uzbekistan named after Mirzo Ulughbek
ziyodakhongulomova@gmail.com

Annotation. The article outlines the vital role of Harlem Renaissance in world literature, especially American literature and the appearance of the term New Negro during that period. It categorizes events into Old Negro and New Negro and compares similarities and differences between them. With this regard, it collects piece of writings of several scholars who saw Harlem Renaissance both as a literary and civil movement.

Key words. Harlem Renaissance, New Negro, movement, jazz age, literary tendency, "Inivisible Man"

Introduction.

There were several scholars who learnt the Harlem Renaissance period, and now we will review their research to define the Harlem Renaissance, its importance, history, and role in American literature. Professor Dr. Wintz is a specialist in the Harlem Renaissance and in African American political thought, and is an author of numerous books including *Harlem Speaks*; *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*; *African American Political Thought, 1890–1930*; *African Americans and the Presidency: The Road to the White House*; and *The Harlem Renaissance in the West*. He served as an editor of the Oxford University Press five-volume *Encyclopedia of African American History, 1896 to the Present*, and the *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance*. It is obvious that his works can be a very good resource for our dissertation paper.

So, we know the period as the New Negro Renaissance, the New Negro Movement, the Negro Renaissance, the Jazz Age, or the Harlem Renaissance. To analyze what it was, and why it happened, it is necessary to place the movement within time and space, and then to define its characteristics. This task is much more complex than it might seem.

Methods.

As Dr. Wintz states, traditionally the Harlem Renaissance was viewed as a literary movement which was centered in Harlem and continuous black migration. Actually, the black people mostly come from the southern parts of the US to Harlem district, because in the South slavery was still there, even it was abolished with the law, southern people still treated the black inferiorly and segregated them a lot. As we mentioned in Chapter I, northern part of the US was becoming industrial and gave freedom to the black people. After migrating to the North to New York, they settled in Harlem where they felt better and could express their sorrows and pains with the help of music, songs, poems and later novels.

Each tendency first appeared in the art, later it moved to literature. So we should revise the art in Harlem Renaissance to analyze the period thoroughly. According to Dr. Wintz, music and theater were mentioned briefly by most researchers, more as background and local color, as providing inspiration for poetry and local color for fiction. However, there was no analysis of the developments in these fields. Likewise, art was discussed mostly in terms of Aaron Douglas and his association with Langston Hughes and other young writers who produced the magazine *Fire!!* in 1926, but there was little or no analysis of the work of Afro-American artists. And there was even less discussion or analysis of the work of women in the fields of art, music, and theater. [3:28]

Fortunately, this narrow view has changed. The Harlem Renaissance is increasingly viewed through a broader lens that recognizes it as a national movement with connections to international developments in art and culture that places increasing emphasis on the non-literary aspects of the movement

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First, to know when the Harlem Renaissance began, we must determine its origins. Understanding the origins depends on how we understand the nature of the Renaissance. An American researcher Charles S. Johnson writes in his article "The Making of Harlem" as "For those who view the Renaissance as primarily a literary movement, the Civic Club Dinner of March 21, 1924, signaled its emergence. This event did not occur in Harlem, but was held almost one hundred blocks south in Manhattan at the Civic Club on Twelfth Street off Fifth Avenue. Charles S. Johnson, the young editor of *Opportunity*, the National Urban League's monthly magazine, conceived the event to honor writer Jessie Fauset on the occasion of the publication of her novel, *There Is Confusion*." His later description of the event makes it clear that Johnson planned a small dinner party with about twenty guests — a mix of white publishers, editors, and literary critics, black intellectuals, and young black writers. But, when he asked Alain Locke to preside over the event, Locke agreed only if the dinner honored Afro-American writers in general rather than one novelist.

So the simple celebratory dinner changed into a transformative event with over one hundred people. Afro-Americans were represented by W. E. B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, and others of the black educated people, along with Fauset and a representative group of poets and authors. White guests predominately were publishers and critics; Carl Van Doren, editor of *Century* magazine, spoke for this group calling upon the young writers in the audience to make their contribution to the "new literary age" appearing in America.

The Civic Club dinner significantly accelerated the literary phase of the Harlem Renaissance. Frederick Allen, editor of *Harper's*, approached Countee Cullen, wanted his poems for his own magazine as soon as the poet finished reading them. As the dinner ended Paul Kellogg, editor of *Survey Graphic*, hung around talking to Cullen, Fauset, and several other young writers, then offered Charles S. Johnson a unique opportunity: an entire issue of *Survey Graphic* devoted to the Harlem literary movement. Under the editorship of Alain Locke, the "Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro" number of *Survey Graphic* hit the newsstands March 1, 1925. It was an overnight sensation. Later that year Locke published a book-length version of the "Harlem" edition, expanded and re-titled *The New Negro: An Interpretation*. In the anthology Locke laid down his vision of the aesthetic and the parameters for appearing the Harlem Renaissance; he also included a collection of poetry, fiction, graphic arts, and critical essays on art, literature, and music.

For those who viewed the Harlem Renaissance in terms of musical theater and entertainment, the birth occurred three years earlier when *Shuffle Along* opened at the 63rd Street Musical Hall. *Shuffle Along* was a musical play written by a pair of veteran Vaudeville acts — comedians Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles, and composers/singers Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle. Most of its cast featured unknowns, but some, like Josephine Baker and Paul Robeson, who had only minor roles in the production, were on their way to international fame. Eubie Blake recalled the significance of the production, when he pointed out that he and Sissle and Lyles and Miller accomplished something. However, the other great Afro-American performers like Bob Cole, J. Rosamund Johnson, Bert Williams and George Walker had tried, but failed to achieve. "We did it, that's the story," Eubie Blake exclaimed, "*We* put *Negroes* back on Broadway!" [1:13]

Poet Langston Hughes also saw *Shuffle Along* as a seminal event in the emergence of the Harlem Renaissance. It introduced him to the creative world of New York, and it helped to redefine and energize music and nightlife in Harlem. In the process, it introduced white New Yorkers to black music, theater, and entertainment and helped generated the white fascination with Harlem and the Afro-American arts that was so much a part of the Harlem Renaissance. For the young Hughes, just arrived in the city, the long-range impact of *Shuffle Along* was not on his mind. In 1921, it was all about the show, and, as he wrote in his autobiography, it was "a honey of a show":

"Swift, bright, funny, rollicking, and gay, with a dozen danceable, singable tunes. Besides, look who were in it: The now famous choir director, Hall Johnson, and the composer, William Grant Still, were a part of the orchestra. Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle wrote the music and played and acted in the show. Miller and Lyles were the comics. Florence Mills skyrocketed to fame in the second act. Trixie Smith sang "He May Be Your Man But He Comes to See Me Sometimes." And Caterina Jarboro, now a European prima donna, and the internationally celebrated Josephine Baker were merely in the chorus. Everybody was in the audience—including me. People came to see it innumerable times. It was always packed. [5:74]

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Results&Discussion.

Shuffle Along also brought jazz to Broadway. It combined jazz music with very creatively choreographed jazz dance to transform musical theater into something new, exciting, and daring. And the show was a critical and financial success. It ran 474 performances on Broadway and started three touring companies. It was a hit show written, performed, and produced by blacks. Within three years, nine other Afro-American shows appeared on Broadway, and white writers and composers rushed to produce their versions of black musical comedies.

Music was also a prominent feature of Afro-American culture during the Harlem Renaissance. The term "Jazz Age" was used by many who saw Afro-American music, especially the blues and jazz, as the defining features of the Renaissance. However, both jazz and the blues were imports to Harlem. They came from the Afro-American experience around the turn of the century in southern towns and cities, like New Orleans, Memphis, and St. Louis. From these origins these musical forms spread across the country, north to Chicago before arriving in New York a few years before World War I.

Blues and black blues performers such as musician W. C. Handy and vocalist Ma Rainey were popular on the Vaudeville circuit in the late nineteenth century. The publication of W. C. Handy's "Memphis Blues" in 1912 and the first recordings a few years later brought this genre into the mainstream of American popular culture. Jazz reportedly originated among the musicians who played in the bars of the infamous Storyville district of New Orleans. Jelly Roll Morton claimed to have invented jazz there in 1902, but it is doubtful that any one person holds that honor.[2:41]

According to historian James Weldon Johnson, jazz reached New York in 1905 at Proctor's Twenty-Third Street Theater. Johnson described the band there as "a playing-singing-dancing orchestra, making dominant use of banjos, mandolins, guitars, saxophones, and drums in combination, and [it] was called the Memphis Students — a very good name, overlooking the fact that the performers were not students and were not from Memphis. There was also a violin, a couple of brass instruments, and a double-bass."[2:38] Seven years later, composer and band leader James Reese Europe, one of the "Memphis Students", took his Clef Club Orchestra to Carnegie Hall. During World War I, while serving as an officer for a machine-gun company in the famed 369th U.S. Infantry Division, James Europe, fellow officer Noble Sissel, and the regimental band introduced the sounds of ragtime, jazz, and the blues to European audiences.

Following the war, black music, especially the blues and jazz, became increasingly popular with both black and white audiences. Europe continued his career as a successful bandleader until his untimely death in 1919. Ma Rainey and other jazz artists and blues singers began to sign recording contracts, initially with Afro-American record companies like Black Swan Records, but very quickly with Paramount, Columbia, and other mainstream recording outlets. In Harlem, one club opened after another, each featuring jazz orchestras or blues singers. Noble Sissle, of course, was one of the team behind the production of *Shuffle Along*, which opened Broadway up to *Chocolate Dandies* and a series of other black musical comedies, featuring these new musical styles.

The visual arts, particularly painting, prints, and sculpture, came into existance somewhat later in Harlem than did music, musical theater, and literature. One of the most notable visual artists of the Harlem Renaissance, Aaron Douglas, arrived in Harlem from Kansas City in 1925. Later that year his first pieces appeared in *Opportunity*, and ten Douglas pieces appeared as "Ten Decorative Designs" illustrating Locke's *The New Negro*. Early the next year W. E. B. Du Bois published Douglas's first illustrations in *The Crisis*. Due to his personal association with Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, and other Afro-American writers, his collaboration with them in the publication of their literary magazine *Fire!!* and his role designing book jackets and illustrating literary works, Douglas was the most high-profile artist clearly connected to the Harlem Renaissance in the mid- to late-1920s. And while these connections to the literary part of the Renaissance were notable, they were not typical of the experience of other Afro-American artists of this period.

More significant in launching the art phase of the Harlem Renaissance were the exhibits of Afro-American art in Harlem and the funding and exhibits that the Harmon Foundation provided. The early stirrings of the Afro-American art movement in Harlem followed an exhibit which was held in 1919 on the work of Henry Ossawa Tanner at a midtown gallery in New York, and an exhibit of Afro-American artists two years later at the Harlem Branch of the New York Public Library. Even more important to the nurturing and promotion of Afro-American art were the activities of the Harmon Foundation. Beginning in 1926 the

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Foundation awarded cash prizes for outstanding achievement by Afro-Americans in eight fields, including fine arts. Additionally, from 1928 through 1933, the Harmon Foundation organized an annual exhibit of Afro-American art.

Now we will analyze the place issues of this great phenomena. Situating the Harlem Renaissance in space is almost as complex as defining its origins and time span. Certainly Harlem is central to the Harlem Renaissance, but it serves more as an anchor for the movement than as its only location. In reality, the Harlem Renaissance both drew from and spread its influence across the United States, the Caribbean, and the rest part of the world. Only a few writers, artists, musicians, and other figures of the Harlem Renaissance were native to Harlem or New York, and only a relatively small number lived in Harlem throughout the Renaissance period. However, Harlem impacted the art, music, and writing of virtually all of the participants in the Harlem Renaissance.

Harlem refers to that part of Manhattan Island north of Central Park and generally east of Eighth Avenue or St. Nicholas Avenue. Originally established in the seventeenth century as a Dutch village, it evolved over time. Following its annexation by the city in 1873, urban growth commenced.[4:139] The resulting Harlem real estate boom lasted about twenty years during which developers built most of the physical structures that defined Harlem as late as the mid-twentieth century. They designed this new, urban Harlem primarily for the wealthy and the upper middle class of Dutch people. That is why it contained broad avenues, a rail connection to the city on Eighth Avenue, and consisted of expensive homes and luxurious apartment buildings accompanied by commercial and retail structures, along with stately churches and synagogues, clubs, social organizations, and even the Harlem Philharmonic Orchestra.[4:136]

Harlem's transition, once it began, followed fairly traditional patterns. As soon as blacks started moving onto a block, property values dropped more and more as whites began to leave. This process was especially evident in the early 1920s. Both black and white realtors took advantage of declining property values in Harlem — the panic selling that resulted when blacks moved in. Addressing the demand for housing generated by the city's rapidly growing black population, they acquired, subdivided, and leased Harlem property to black tenants.

Year by year, the boundaries of black Harlem expanded, as blacks streamed into Harlem as quickly as they could find affordable housing. By 1910, they had become the majority group on the west side of Harlem north of 130th Street; by 1914, the population of black Harlem was estimated to be fifty thousand. By 1930 black Harlem had expanded north ten blocks to 155th Street and south to 115th Street; it spread from the Harlem River to Amsterdam Avenue, and housed approximately 164,000 blacks. The core of this community — bounded roughly by 126th Street on the south, 159th Street on the north, the Harlem River and Park Avenue on the east, and Eighth Avenue on the west — was more than 95 percent black [6:46].

By 1920, Harlem, by virtue of the sheer size of its black population, had emerged as the virtual capital of black America. Its name persuaded all classes of blacks from all sections of the country to go its streets. Impoverished southern farmers and plantation owners made their way northward, where they were joined in Harlem by black intellectuals such as W. E. B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson. Although the old black social elites of Washington D.C. and Philadelphia treated inferiorly and were arrogant towards Harlem's vulgar beauty, and while it housed no significant black university as did Washington, Philadelphia, Atlanta, and Nashville, Harlem still became the race's cultural center and a Mecca for its aspiring young. It housed the National Urban League, A. Philip Randolph's Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and the black leadership of the NAACP.[1:121] Marcus Garvey launched his ill-fated black nationalist movement among its masses, and Harlem became the geographical focal point of Afro-American literature, art, music, and theater. Its night clubs, music halls, and jazz joints became the center of New York nightlife in the mid-1920s. Harlem, in short, was where the action was in black America during the decade following World War I.

In spite of its physical presence, size, and its literary and arts infrastructure, the nature of Harlem and its relation to the Renaissance are very complex. The word "Harlem" evoked strong and conflicting images among Afro-Americans during the first half of the twentieth century. Was it the Negro metropolis, black Manhattan, the political, cultural, and spiritual center of Afro-America, a land of plenty, a city of refuge, or a black ghetto and emerging slum? For some scholars, the image of Harlem was more personal. King Solomon Gillis, the main character in Rudolph Fisher's "The City of Refuge", was one of these. Emerging out of the subway at 135th and Lennox Avenue, Gillis was transfixed:

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"Clean air, blue sky, bright sunlight. Gillis set down his tan-cardboard extension-case and wiped his black, shining brow. Then slowly, spreadingly, he grinned at what he saw: Negroes at every turn; up and down Lenox Avenue, up and down One Hundred and Thirty-fifth Street; big, lanky Negroes, short, squat Negroes; black ones, brown ones, yellow ones; men standing idle on the curb, women, bundle-laden, trudging reluctantly homeward, children rattle-trapping about the sidewalks; here and there a white face drifting along, but Negroes predominantly, overwhelmingly everywhere. There was assuredly no doubt of his whereabouts. This was Negro Harlem".[4:36]

After a less than happy year at Columbia, Hughes did exactly that. He dropped out of school and moved into Harlem. Hughes, though, never lost sight that poverty, overcrowded, old and poor housing, and racial prejudice were part of the daily experience of most Harlem residents.

For Hughes, too, the desire to just "live in Harlem" was as much myth as reality. After dropping out of Columbia and moving to Harlem he actually spent little time there. Until the late 1930s, he was much more of a visitor or temporary inhabitant in Harlem than a resident. While Hughes spent many weekends and vacations in Harlem during his years at Lincoln University, during the height of the Renaissance, between 1923 and 1938 he was away from the city more than he was there, more a visitor than a full-time resident.

James Weldon Johnson saw a still different Harlem. In his 1930 book, *Black Manhattan*, he described the black metropolis in near utopian terms as the race's great hope and its grand social experiment: "So here we have Harlem — not merely a colony or a community or a settlement . . . but a black city, located in the heart of white Manhattan, and containing more Negroes to the square mile than any other spot on earth. It strikes the uninformed observer as a phenomenon, a miracle straight out of the skies." When Johnson looked at Harlem he did not see an emerging slum or a ghetto, but a black neighborhood north of Central Park that was "one of the most beautiful and healthful" in the city. "It is not a fringe, it is not a slum, nor is it a 'quarter' consisting of dilapidated tenements. It is a section of new-law apartment houses and handsome dwellings, with streets as well paved, as well lighted, and as well-kept as in any other part of the city."

Conclusion.

Harlem historian Gilbert Osofsky argued, the most profound change that Harlem experienced in the 1920's was its emergence as a slum. Largely within the space of a single decade Harlem was transformed from a potentially ideal community to a neighborhood with manifold social and economic problems called 'deplorable', 'unspeakable', 'incredible'. As a result, most of Harlem's residents lived in poor housing, either in poverty or on the verge of poverty, in a neighborhood experiencing the typical results of poverty and discrimination: growing vice, crime, juvenile delinquency, and drug addiction. In short, the day-to-day realities that most Harlem residents faced differed dramatically from the image of Harlem life presented by James Weldon Johnson. Harlem was troubled by contradictions. While it reflected the self-confidence, militancy, and pride of the New Negro in his or her demand for equality, and it reflected the aspirations and creative genius of the talented young people of the Harlem Renaissance along with the economic aspirations of the black migrants seeking a better life in the north, ultimately Harlem failed to resolve its problems and to fulfill these dreams.

The 1935 Harlem Race Riot put to rest the conflicting images of Harlem. On March 19, 1935, a young Puerto Rican boy was caught stealing a ten-cent pocketknife from the counter of a 135th Street five-and-dime store. Following the arrest, rumors spread that police had beaten the youth to death. A large crowd gathered, shouting "police brutality" and "racial discrimination". A window was smashed, looting began, and the riot spread throughout the night. The violence resulted in three blacks dead, two hundred stores trashed and burned, and more than two million dollars' worth destroyed property. The Puerto Rican youth whose arrest started the riot had been released the previous evening when the merchant chose not to press charges. Shocked by the uprising, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia established an interracial committee headed by E. Franklin Frazier, a professor of sociology at Howard University, to investigate the riot. They concluded the obvious: the riot resulted from a general frustration with racial discrimination and poverty.

What the committee failed to report was that the riot shattered once and for all James Weldon Johnson's image of Harlem as the Afro-American urban utopia. In spite of the presence of artists and writers, nightclubs, music, and entertainment, Harlem was a slum, a black ghetto characterized by poverty and discrimination. However, burned-out storefronts might be fertile ground for political action, but not for art,

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literature, and culture. Harlem would see new black writers in the years to come. Musicians, poets, and artists would continue to make their home there, but it never again served as the focal point of a creative movement with the national and international impact of the Harlem Renaissance.

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