

HARLEM RENAISSANCE

An African American Cultural Movement (1919-1929)



The Harlem Renaissance emerged after World War I when an extraordinary collection of writers, poets, musicians, artists, and socialites converged on Harlem. This Great Migration, caused by disenfranchisement, segregation, and an escalation of lynching and racist violence, had driven countless African Americans to flee the south in search of a new beginning. Many of the artists and performers who became identified with the Harlem Renaissance were bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender. Writers, including Countee Cullen, Angelina Weld Grimké, Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, Richard Bruce Nugent and Wallace Thurman, saw themselves for the first time as part of a broad cultural movement to shape the destiny of African Americans. Artists, singers, dancers and musicians like Bessie Smith, Gertrude Ma Rainey, Mabel Hampton, Ethel Waters, and gender-non-conforming Gladys Bentley sought not only to perfect their craft, but also to use it as a means to better race relations and American society. In the process, these talented pioneers created a multi-faceted American LGBT urban subculture. Popular entertainment ranged from the Cotton Club to “buffet flats” to enormous drag balls at Rockland Palace and the Savoy Ballroom – which accommodated 4000 people. During prohibition, numerous black speakeasies opened in Harlem, attracting gay men and lesbians into a interracial club scene made famous around the world. The Harlem Renaissance went into decline with the onset of the Great Depression, but the explosion of literature, music, and dance marked a revolution in African American life that spread across the country. It would be another half-century before scholars and the general public began to acknowledge the influence of the LGBT people who defined the Harlem Renaissance Era.



Lesson Plan

Level 1: Contributions Approach

1. Activate Prior Experience: What do you know about this cultural movement that occurred after World War I?
2. Read the biography above and explore additional resources at <https://legacyprojectchicago.org/milestone/harlem-renaissance>.
3. Group Discussion: Describe three of the multi-talented African American individuals who participated in the Harlem Renaissance.
4. Extend Knowledge: In what way did these individuals play a part in creating a culture of popular entertainment, including Drag Balls, that provided a “gender-non-conforming” setting for others.

Level 2: Additive Approach

1. Review this link: <https://seanmunger.com/2014/03/19/americas-paris-the-harlem-renaissance-of-the-1920s/>. Why does the author think Harlem in the 1920s was considered “America’s Paris”?
2. In many ways Gladys Bentley, a gender-non-conforming blues performer, was emblematic of this period. View this biography and explain whether or not you would agree and why. <https://legacyprojectchicago.org/person/gladys-bentley>.
3. Many influential writers like [Countee Cullen](#), [Angelina Weld Grimké](#), and [Alain Locke](#) worked to promote an appreciation and understanding of African American contributions. Read <https://poets.org/text/brief-guide-harlem-renaissance> and share what you have learned with your class.
4. Website Investigation: How does this period of American history relate to other [LGBTQ milestones](#)? How does the Harlem Renaissance compare? Share your findings with your class.

Level 3: Transformational Approach

1. View <https://www.britannica.com/event/Harlem-Renaissance-American-literature-and-art>. What were some of the factors that caused the Great Migration of African Americans from the South to the North during the early 20th Century?
2. In what ways did LGBTQ figures, the mixed-race music venues they starred in, the reform organizations they established, and the literary enlightenment they led during the Harlem Renaissance help lay the groundwork for the emerging Civil Rights Movement?
3. How did these performers and artists change white landscapes and artistic circles in art, music, and writing both in the U.S. and Europe?
4. How did the unique multi-racial and pansexual aesthetic of the Harlem Renaissance impact society and culture in New York? Do you think that impact still resonates today? Explain why.

Level 4: Social Action Approach

1. View <https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2018/02/harlem-renaissance-gay-black/>. Would you agree that the Harlem Renaissance was “as gay as it was black”? Explain why.
2. “A queer subculture” was an important influence during the Harlem Renaissance (<https://www.theroot.com/the-gay-harlem-renaissance-1790864926>); the same was true in the Bronzeville District in Chicago. Yet most queer subculture seems tied to white gay males. Why?
3. What happened to queer culture once the Great Depression brought the Harlem Renaissance to a crashing halt? Do you think the Harlem Renaissance opened the door for LGBTQ people to be more accepted by African Americans? Why or why not?