

## Learning Targets

- Carefully examine and mark the text to identify possible research topics.
- Develop research questions about the Harlem Renaissance.

## Before Reading

1. With a partner, discuss and write at least three pieces of information that you know about the Harlem **Renaissance**. Use the My Notes space.

## During Reading

2. As you read this introductory informational text, mark the text by circling names and places and underlining labels and titles for possible topics to investigate further about the philosophy/beliefs, historical context, arts, and daily life during the Harlem Renaissance. Be prepared to share your topics.

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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## Informational Text

# “The Harlem Renaissance”

adapted from *The 1920s* by Kathleen Drowne and Patrick Huber

## Historical Context

### Chunk 1

**1** Between 1915 and 1918, approximately half a million African Americans left the South for northern urban-industrial centers like Harlem, Chicago, St. Louis, and Detroit as part of the Great Migration. . . . Most of these migrants moved north to find higher-paying jobs and to carve out better lives for themselves and their families. They also sought to escape segregation, sharecropping, and racial violence common in the South. The flood of African-American newcomers heightened competition with white workers for jobs, housing, and public facilities, and set off an unprecedented surge of race riots in northern and Midwestern cities.

**2** For the most part, southern black migrants were disappointed by what they found in the North. Not only were well-paying jobs scarce for black workers in northern and Midwestern cities, but racist practices also forced these new arrivals to suffer the indignities of segregated schools, theaters, housing, and other facilities. Although the 1920s saw a tremendous flowering of African-American arts, particularly in Harlem and other northern cities, the decade overall was one of tense, turbulent, and sometimes violent relations between black and white Americans. (9–10)

**3** Although the phrase “New Negro” dates to the late nineteenth century, it was not until the 1920s that this label gained currency as a description for middle-class African Americans who advocated a new sense of militancy and racial pride. Indeed, Alain Locke, an African-American philosopher, critic, and editor, titles his Harlem

**LEARNING STRATEGIES:**  
Close Reading, Marking the Text, Discussion Groups, Questioning the Text

### ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

A **renaissance** is a rebirth or revival. The word is derived from the French *re*, meaning “again” and *naitre*, meaning “to be born.” When spelled with a capital “R,” the word refers to a revival in art, literature, and learning of a historical period.

### My Notes

### KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

Why do you think the Great Migration was instrumental to the beginnings of the Harlem Renaissance?

# Developing Research Questions

## My Notes

### KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

What were the results of black people from the South, the West Indies, and African coming together in Harlem during the 1920s?

### KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

What are the ironies in naming Harlem's most popular nightclub the "Cotton Club"?

Renaissance literary anthology *The New Negro* (1925) in order to signal these powerful currents of black artistic consciousness, renewed civil rights advocacy, and racial solidarity. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and other organizations waged court battles in an attempt to secure African Americans' civil and political rights. Black writers, musicians, and artists, especially those who resided in Harlem, the so called "Mecca of the New Negro," used their work to celebrate African-American culture and challenge damaging racist stereotypes. Above all, "New Negroes" attempted to assert their own agency and participate fully in American culture, while resisting white America's attempts to cast them as a "problem" that somehow needed to be solved. Many critics, in hindsight, see the New Negro movement as overly optimistic and even naïve, but at the time this impulse toward self-expression, self-assertiveness, and self-determination was a driving force among some middle-class African Americans. (12–13)

## Literature

### Chunk 2

**4** The Harlem Renaissance, sometimes called the Negro Renaissance or the New Negro Movement, describes the period roughly between the end of World War I and the onset of the Great Depression, during which African Americans produced a vast number of literary, musical, and artistic works. The artists associated with the Harlem Renaissance attempted to promote racial consciousness and black pride by creating new images of African Americans and by celebrating their blues and folklore traditions, in order ultimately to destroy old racist stereotypes. The works they created were, for the most part, confident, positive, and optimistic about the future of black America.

**5** . . . Thousands of black families crowded into Harlem, a large neighborhood in upper Manhattan loosely defined in the 1920s as the area between 110th and 155th Streets. This dramatic population shift transformed Harlem into the capital of African-American culture during the 1920s. . . Black people from the American South, the West Indies, and even Africa crowded into the neighborhood, competing for jobs and living space. Harlem became an important cultural crossroads, and talented writers such as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Jessie Fauset, and Zora Neale Hurston were only a few of the hundreds of young African Americans who flocked to Harlem to join the growing colony of black intellectuals fueling the Harlem Renaissance. (186–187)

## Music

### Chunk 3

**6** Although initially considered little more than a passing musical fad when it was first recorded in 1917, jazz became the most influential form of American popular music in the 1920s. Jazz combined elements of a wide range of music, including ragtime compositions, brass-band marches, minstrel numbers, and to a lesser degree, blues songs. . .

**7** The enormous popularity of jazz provided new opportunities for African-American musicians to make records, occasionally perform on radio, and find work playing for live audiences. . .

**8** With the advent of National Prohibition, Harlem nightclubs and cabarets, located above 125th Street in Manhattan, began to attract wealthy white partygoers and tourists who wanted to drink, dance, and hear "exotic" African-American music. In 1929, *Variety* listed 11 major nightclubs in Harlem that catered to predominately white crowds, including Small's Paradise, Connie's Inn, and the Cotton Club. These swanky nightclubs and cabarets employed hundreds of African-American jazz musicians during the late 1920s, including bandleader Edward "Duke" Ellington. . . (199–200)

**9** By far the greatest jazz musician of the 1920s was Louis Armstrong, a New Orleans-born cornetist and trumpeter whose inventive solos and technical brilliance marked the pinnacle of hot jazz. . . . (200)

**10** Another influential form of African-American music that rose to prominence during the 1920s was the blues. Although it remains difficult to pinpoint an exact origin the blues emerged sometime around the turn of the twentieth century and evolved from a variety of traditional black musical forms, including field hollers, work songs, ballads, and rags. . . . Early folk blues reflected a variety of experiences of African-American life during segregation and often spoke of work, gambling, crime, gambling, alcohol, imprisonment, disasters, and hard times. Above all, the blues commented on the universal themes of troubled love relationships and sexual desires. . . (205)

**11** One of the most influential vaudeville blues singers of the 1920s was Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, a flamboyant dresser who flaunted expensive beaded gowns, a necklace made of \$20 gold pieces, and ostentatious diamond earrings and rings. . . Billed as “the Mother of the Blues,” she recorded more than 100 songs over five years. . . Rainey’s young protégé, Bessie Smith, emerged as an even greater vaudeville star. Smith’s first record, “Gulf Coast Blues,” coupled with “Downhearted Blues,” made in 1923 for Columbia, sold 780,000 copies in its first six months. . . With her expressive, soulful phrasing, she remained the biggest blues star of the 1920s, and today she is unquestionably considered by music historians to be the greatest vaudeville blues singer of all times. (205–206)

### Art

#### Chunk 4

**12** One serious problem that plagued African-American artists during the 1920s was a lack of opportunity to study art and to show their work. Some museums refused to exhibit the work of black artists, and some art schools declined to consider black applicants for scholarships. In 1923, sculptor Augusta Savage brought this discrimination against black artists to the attention of the American public when, after being rejected for a summer school in France because of her race, she appealed to the press. After her story appeared in newspapers, many editorials and letters followed, and while she never did receive the scholarship, she did other black artists a great service by focusing public scrutiny on the problem. . . .

**13** Perhaps the best-known African-American painter of the Harlem Renaissance was Aaron Douglas. Douglas was a student of the German artist Winold Reiss, who painted African Americans neither as crude stereotypes nor as white people with dark complexions, but rather as dignified, unique individuals. Reiss encouraged Douglas to incorporate African imagery into his paintings, which he did with great success. His May 1927 cover for the Urban League’s magazine *Opportunity*, for example, depicts the proud profile of a long-neck Magbetu woman with an elaborate African hairstyle. . . . In 1928, Douglas became the first president of the Harlem Artists Guild, an organization that helped black artists secure federal funding from the Works Progress Administration during the Great Depression. (274)



#### WORD CONNECTIONS

##### Colloquialisms

“The blues” is a colloquial phrase meaning a feeling of deep sadness. In music, this sadness is expressed by minor harmonies, slow rhythms, and melancholy words.

#### My Notes

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#### KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

What obstacles did black musicians and artists face during the Harlem Renaissance?

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# Developing Research Questions

## My Notes

### After Reading

3. Meet with discussion groups to share annotations and possible research topics. Take notes in your Reader/Writer Notebook.

### Review Levels of Questions

Questioning the text is a reading strategy that helps you make meaning from text by asking questions. The three types of questions are:

- Level 1—Literal: *Who is Aaron Douglas* (answers can be found in text or with further research)
- Level 2—Interpretive: *What comparisons can you make between a writer's and an artist's use of imagery?* (requires inference and further research to answer)
- Level 3—Universal: *How do works of art reflect the artist's beliefs?* (answers go beyond what is included in the text and may require additional research)

The questions in the Key Ideas and Details boxes are examples of questioning the text. Most of these questions are interpretive questions.

When applied to research, the same strategy helps you create effective research questions about the information/texts you are researching.

### Check Your Understanding

Quality research questions are Level 2 and Level 3 because they require analysis and synthesis of information to make universal statements of understanding. With your classmates, develop three quality open-ended research questions based on your reading of "The Harlem Renaissance." Include your questions here and in the notes you have already taken. These questions might provide a possible topic for a multimedia research presentation.