

# The Historical Context of the Harlem Renaissance

## ACTIVITY 5.3

## Learning Targets

- Make inferences from texts, using guided research questions.
  - Identify the philosophy, values, and beliefs of the Harlem Renaissance, and write an explanatory text to articulate your understanding.

## LEARNING STRATEGIES:

- Graphic Organizer, Marking the Text, Discussion Groups, OPTIC

## Historical Context

Understanding the historical context of a literary work can be essential to understanding the text. For example, understanding the historical context of McCarthyism in America provides essential background knowledge for the reader to fully comprehend Arthur Miller's social commentary in *The Crucible*. When researching a literary period like the Harlem Renaissance, it is important to draw information from both primary and secondary sources to support your understanding. As you study the works included in this activity, try to answer the following guiding questions based on the information that you can glean from each text. Answers to these questions will help you begin researching for information to be delivered as you complete Embedded Assessment 1.

To understand the historical context of a literary work, it is important that you study it from several angles.

## Possible Research Questions

- What is the time period and what were the historical events that influenced this time period?
    - How does the historical context influence the writing and artwork from the period?
    - What was daily life like for the ordinary citizens?
  - What were the philosophy and beliefs of the people who influenced and were influenced by this period?
    - Do they have an optimistic or pessimistic view of life?
    - What is their view of society?
    - What is their view of education?
  - How do the dominant genres produced during this time reflect its values?
    - How did the historical period affect the arts and beliefs of the literary movement?
    - How did the creators—the artists and the politicians— influence the events of the time period?
  - Who are the significant authors and works that most represent the time period?
  - How do those works exemplify the time period?

## My Notes

# The Historical Context of the Harlem Renaissance

## My Notes

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## KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

What attitude of the Harlem Renaissance movement is reflected in these works of art?

## WORD CONNECTIONS

### Foreign Words

*Les Fétiches* is a French term meaning “an object of great charm” or “something of great adoration.” It is related to the English word *fetish*, meaning “an object regarded with awe as being the embodiment or habitation of a potent spirit or as having magical potency.”

## Conducting Research

During this part of the unit, your teacher will assign you to groups to research and analyze information about the Harlem Renaissance. You will be viewing and reading primary sources.

1. Your class will next view a documentary film together. Then your teacher will assign your discussion group one set of additional sources to investigate. Mark the text for evidence that helps you infer information, and then take notes on the graphic organizer on page 357. If you are assigned the artwork, your cooperative group should share the artwork, noting textual evidence from the art and explaining what this information tells you about the Harlem Renaissance. For the reading of the visual text, consider using the OPTIC strategy.

## PRIMARY SOURCE 1: DOCUMENTARY FILM

You will begin building understanding of the Harlem Renaissance by watching a segment of a film that your teacher will share with you. Your purpose for watching this film is to help you answer Essential Question 1: How do cultural movements such as the Harlem Renaissance affect people’s attitudes and beliefs? Take notes on this film and the rest of the research sources provided.

## PRIMARY SOURCES 2: ART

Your group’s research will focus on the art created during the Harlem Renaissance. Descriptions of primary artists follow, but you may also choose to add others to this list.

### About the Artist: Augusta Savage

Augusta Savage (1892–1962)—artist, activist, and educator—was born in Green Cove Springs, Florida. An important African-American artist, Savage began making art as a child, using the natural clay found in her community. She liked to sculpt animals and other small figures. But her father, a Methodist minister, did not approve of this activity, and did whatever he could to stop her. Savage once said that her father “almost whipped all the art out of me.”

**Art to Research:** *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, Sculpture by Augusta Savage

### About the Artist: Lois Mailou Jones

In the 1930s, the art of Lois Mailou Jones (1905–1998) reflected the influences of African traditions. She designed African-style masks and in 1938 painted *Les Fétiches*, which depicts masks in five distinct, ethnic styles. During a year in Paris, she produced landscapes and figure studies, but African influences reemerged in her art in the late 1960s and early ‘70s, particularly after two tours of Africa.

**Art to Research:** *Les Fétiches* by Lois Mailou Jones, 1938

## About the Artist: Aaron Douglas

Aaron Douglas (1899–1979) was an African-American painter and graphic artist who played a leading role in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s. His first major commission, to illustrate Alain Locke's book, *The New Negro*, prompted requests for graphics from other Harlem Renaissance writers. By 1939, Douglas started teaching at Fisk University, where he remained for the next 27 years.

**Art to Research:** *Rise, Shine for Thy Light Has Come!* by Aaron Douglas

### About the Artist: Palmer C. Hayden

Hayden (1890–1973) was born Peyton Hedgeman in Wide Water, Virginia. He took his artistic name, Palmer Hayden, from the corrupted pronunciation of Peyton Hedgeman by a commanding sergeant during World War I. Hayden was among the first African American artists to use African subjects and designs in his painting.

## **Art to Research: *Midsummer Night in Harlem* by Palmer Hayden**

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**  
Alain Leroy Locke (1885–1954) was an American writer, philosopher, educator, and patron of the arts. In *The Black 100*, Alain Locke ranks as the 36th most influential African American ever, past or present. Distinguished as the first African American Rhodes Scholar in 1907, Locke was the philosophical architect—the acknowledged “Dean”—of the Harlem Renaissance, a period of cultural efflorescence connected with the “New Negro” movement from 1919–1934.

## Informational Text

# Introduction to The New Negro

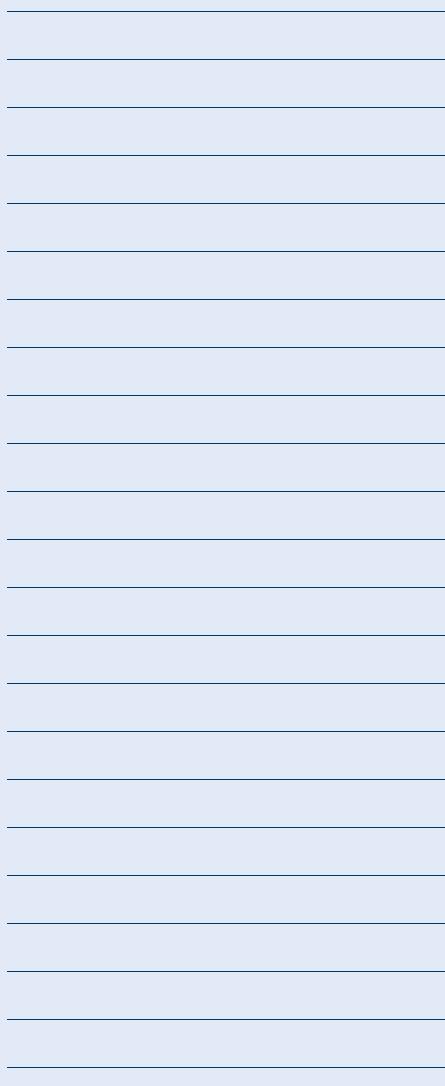
*by Alain Locke, 1925*

**1** In the last decade something beyond the watch and guard of statistics has happened in the life of the American Negro and the three *norns* who have traditionally presided over the Negro problem have a changeling in their laps. The Sociologist, the Philanthropist, the Race-leader are not unaware of the New Negro, but they are at a loss to account for him. He simply cannot be swathed in their formulae. For the younger generation is vibrant with a new psychology; the new spirit is awake in the masses, and under the very eyes of the professional observers is transforming what has been a perennial problem into the progressive phases of contemporary Negro life.

**2** Could such a metamorphosis have taken place as suddenly as it has appeared to? The answer is no; not because the New Negro is not here, but because the Old Negro had long become more of a myth than a man. The Old Negro, we must remember, was a creature of moral debate and historical controversy. . . .

**3** In the very process of being transplanted, the Negro is becoming transformed.

## My Notes



## WORD CONNECTIONS

## Allusions

In Norwegian mythology, *norns* are female beings who rule the destiny of gods and men. They are comparable to the Greek mythological Fates who watched that the fate assigned to every being by eternal laws might take its course without obstruction.

# The Historical Context of the Harlem Renaissance

## KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

How could the historical context described in the text influence the writing and artwork from the period?

## WORD CONNECTIONS

### Word Meanings

Three words in this text that may be unfamiliar to you are *extortionate*, *proscription*, and *nascent*. The word *extortionate* is an adjective that means “excessive, harsh, or unreasonable.” *Proscription* (noun) refers to a legal restraint or restriction. *Nascent* (adjective) means “beginning, emergent, or budding.”

## KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

Locke speaks of something he calls “racewelding.” How does he define this as the positive outcome of living in Harlem?

**4** The tide of Negro migration, northward and city-ward, is not to be fully explained as a blind flood started by the demands of war industry coupled with the shutting off of foreign migration, or by the pressure of poor crops coupled with increased social terrorism in certain sections of the South and Southwest. Neither labor demand, the bollweevil, nor the Ku Klux Klan is a basic factor however contributory any or all of them may have been. The wash and rush of this human tide on the beach line of the northern city centers is to be explained primarily in terms of a new vision of opportunity, of social and economic freedom, of a spirit to seize, even in the face of an extortionate and heavy toil, a chance for the improvement of conditions. With each successive wave of it, the movement of the Negro becomes more and more a mass movement toward the larger and the more democratic chance—in the Negro’s case a deliberate flight not only from countryside to city, but from medieval America to modern.

**5** Take Harlem as an instance of this. Here in Manhattan is not merely the largest Negro community in the world, but the first concentration in history of so many diverse elements of Negro life. It has attracted the African, the West Indian, the Negro American; has brought together the Negro of the North and the Negro of the South; the man from the city and the man from the town and village; the peasant, the student, the business man, the professional man, artist, poet, musician, adventurer and worker, preacher and criminal, exploiter and social outcast. Each group has come with its own separate motives and for its own special ends, but their greatest experience has been the finding of one another. Proscription and prejudice have thrown these dissimilar elements into a common area of contact and interaction. Within this area, race sympathy and unity have determined a further fusing of sentiment and experience. So what began in terms of segregation becomes more and more, as its elements mix and react, the laboratory of a great racewelding. Hitherto, it must be admitted that American Negroes have been a race more in name than in fact, or to be exact, more in sentiment than in experience. The chief bond between them has been that of a common condition rather than a common consciousness; a problem in common rather than a life in common. In Harlem, Negro life is seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self-determination. It is—or promises at least to be—a race capital. That is why our comparison is taken with those nascent centers of folk-expression and self-determination which are playing a creative part in the world to-day. Without pretense to their political significance, Harlem has the same role to play for the New Negro as Dublin has had for the New Ireland or Prague for the New Czechoslovakia.

## My Notes

**PRIMARY SOURCE 4: POETRY AND MUSIC****ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Gwendolyn B. Bennett (1902–1981) was an African-American writer who contributed to *Opportunity*, a magazine that chronicled cultural advancements in Harlem. Though often overlooked, she was an accomplished writer in poetry and prose. Her heritage is a main theme in her poetry, and her works reflect the shared themes and motifs of the Harlem Renaissance. Racial pride, rediscovery of Africa, recognition of African music, and dance are common themes in Bennett's works. Bennett read the following poem on March 21, 1924, at a gathering of writers. Some historians say that this night was the official beginning of the Harlem Renaissance.

# To Usward

by Gwendolyn B. Bennett (1924)

- Let us be still  
 As ginger jars are still  
 Upon a Chinese shelf.  
 By entities of Self. . . .
- 5 Not still with lethargy and sloth,  
 But quiet with the pushing of our growth.  
 Not self-contained with smug identity  
 But conscious of the strength in entity.  
 If any have a song to sing
- 10 That's different from the rest,  
 Oh let them sing  
 Before the urgency of Youth's behest!  
 For some of us have songs to sing  
 Of jungle heat and fires,
- 15 And some of us are solemn grown  
 With pitiful desires,  
 And there are those who feel the pull  
 Of seas beneath the skies,  
 And some there be who want to croon
- 20 Of Negro lullabies.  
 We claim no part with racial dearth;  
 We want to sing the songs of birth!  
 And so we stand like ginger jars  
 Like ginger jars bound round
- 25 With dust and age;  
 Like jars of ginger we are sealed  
 By nature's heritage.  
 But let us break the seal of years  
 With pungent thrusts of song,
- 30 For there is joy in long-dried tears  
 For whetted passions of a throng.

**My Notes**


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 **WORD CONNECTIONS****Roots and Affixes**

The word *entity* comes from the Medieval Latin *entitas*, which is from the Latin *ens*, *ent-* (meaning “being,” which is from *esse*, “be”). The suffix *-ity* means a “quality or state.” Other words using this suffix include *nonentity* and *identity*.

**KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS**

Why was Bennett's poem considered “the rallying cry for the new Negro” at the time?

**KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS**

Does this poem reflect an optimistic or pessimistic view of life?

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## My Notes

### KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

This poem has become the hymn to the beliefs and philosophy of the Harlem Renaissance. What key belief of the Harlem Renaissance do you identify in this poem?

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Weldon Johnson (June 17, 1871–June 26, 1938) was an American author, politician, diplomat, critic, journalist, poet, anthologist, educator, lawyer, songwriter, and early civil rights activist. Johnson is remembered best for his leadership within the NAACP, as well as for his writing, which includes novels, poems, and collections of folklore. He was also one of the first African-American professors at New York University. Later in life he was a professor of creative literature and writing at Fisk University.

## Lift Every Voice and Sing

by James Weldon Johnson

Lift every voice and sing  
Till earth and heaven ring,  
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;  
Let our rejoicing rise  
**5** High as the listening skies,  
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.  
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,  
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us,  
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun  
**10** Let us march on till victory is won.  
Stony the road we trod,  
Bitter the chastening rod,  
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;  
Yet with a steady beat,  
**15** Have not our weary feet  
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?  
We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,  
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,  
Out from the gloomy past,  
**20** Till now we stand at last  
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.  
God of our weary years,  
God of our silent tears,  
Thou who has brought us thus far on the way;  
**25** Thou who has by Thy might  
Led us into the light,  
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.  
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee,  
Lest our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee;  
**30** Shadowed beneath Thy hand,  
May we forever stand.  
True to our God,  
True to our native land.

## PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SOURCES 5: POETRY AND LITERARY CRITICISM

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Eugenia W. Collier (born 1928) is an African-American writer and critic best known for her 1969 short story "Marigolds." She was born in Baltimore, Maryland. The former English Chair at Morgan State University, Collier has also taught at Coppin State College (now University), the University of Maryland, and Howard University. She graduated *magna cum laude* from Howard University in 1948, and was awarded an M.A. from Columbia University two years later. In 1976, she earned a Ph.D. from the University of Maryland. Since retiring in 1996, Collier continues to live in Baltimore, and occasionally visits classes to discuss creative writing and her stories.

Literary Criticism

## Excerpt from

# “On ‘From the Dark Tower’”

by Eugenia W. Collier

College Language Association Journal 11.1 (1967)

**1** It seems to me that a poem which effectively expresses the spirit of Harlem Renaissance poetry is "From the Dark Tower," by Countee Cullen. It is a restrained, dignified, poignant work, influenced in form by Keats and Shelley rather than by the moderns.

<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, The Dark Tower was actually a place on 136th Street in Harlem, where a number of the poets used to gather. Perhaps Cullen knew he was speaking for the others, too, when he wrote:

We shall not always plant while others reap  
The golden increment of bursting fruit,  
Not always countenance, abject and mute  
That lesser men should hold their brothers cheap;  
Not everlastingly while others sleep  
Shall we beguile their limbs with mellow flute,  
Not always bend to some more subtle brute;  
We were not made eternally to weep.

The night whose sable breast relieves the stark  
White stars is no less lovely being dark,  
And there are buds that cannot bloom at all  
In light, but crumple, piteous, and fall;  
So in the dark we hide the heart that bleeds,  
And wait, and tend our agonizing seeds.

**3** Let us examine the symbolism contained in the poem. Here we have the often-used symbol of planting seeds and reaping fruit. This symbol invariably refers to the natural sequence of things—the hope eventually realized, or the “just deserts” finally obtained. The sowing-reaping symbol here effectively expresses the frustration that inevitably

## My Notes

## KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

This excerpt represents a unity of primary and secondary sources. Writing in 1967, the critic comments (the secondary source) on a poem (primary source) written during the Harlem Renaissance. How does the critic, Eugenia W. Collier, show an understanding of the historical context in her interpretation?

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falls to the individual or group of people caught in an unjust system. The image of a person planting the seeds of his labor, knowing even as he plants that “others” will pluck the fruit, is a picture of the frustration which is so often the Negro’s lot. The image necessarily (and perhaps unconsciously) implies certain questions: What must be the feelings of the one who plants? How long will he continue to plant without reward? Will he not eventually stop planting, or perhaps begin seizing the fruit which is rightfully his? In what light does he see himself? How does he regard the “others” who “reap the golden increment of bursting fruit”? What physical and emotional damage results to the laborer from this arrangement to which obviously he never consented?

4 In his basic symbol then, Cullen expresses the crux of the protest poem which so flourished in the Harlem Renaissance. In poem after poem, articulate young Negroes answered these questions or asked them again, these questions and many more. And in the asking, and in the answering, they were speaking of the old, well-worn (though never quite realized) American ideals.

5 In the octave<sup>1</sup> of the poem, Cullen answers some of these questions. The grim promise “not always” tolls ominously like an iron bell through the first eight lines. “We shall not always plant while others reap,” he promises. By degrees he probes deeper and deeper into the actual meaning of the image. In the next two lines he points out one of many strange paradoxes of social injustice: that the “abject and mute” victim must permit himself to be considered inferior by “lesser men”—that is, men who have lost a measure of their humanity because they have degraded their brothers. This image is a statement of a loss of human values—the “abject and mute” victim of an unjust social system, bereft of spirit, silently serving another who has himself suffered a different kind of loss in robbing his fellow man of his potential—that is, the fruit of his seed. Perhaps this destruction of the human spirit is the “more subtle brute” of which the poet speaks. The last line of the octave promises eventual change in the words, “We were not made eternally to weep.” Yet it implies that relief is still a long way off. It is in the sestet<sup>2</sup> that the poem itself blossoms into full-blown dark beauty. With the skill of an impressionistic painter, the poet juxtaposes black and white into a canvas of brilliant contrasts. The night is pictured as being beautiful because it is dark—a welcome relief from the stark whiteness of the stars. The image suggests the pride in Negritude which became important in the Harlem Renaissance—the pride in the physical beauty of black people, the Negro folk culture which has enriched America, the strength which the Negro has earned through suffering. Cullen describes the night as being not only a lovely thing, but also a sheltering thing. The image of the buds that cannot bloom in light suggests that the Negro’s experience has created a unique place for him in American culture: there are songs that he alone can sing.

6 The final couplet combines the beautiful and sheltering concept of darkness with the basic symbol of futile planting. The poet now splashes a shocking red onto his black and white canvas. The dark becomes not only a shelter for developing buds, but also a place to conceal gaping wounds. These two lines are quiet but extremely disturbing: “So in the dark we hide the heart that bleeds, / And wait, and tend our agonizing seeds.” And the reader cannot help wondering, what sort of planting will grow from these “agonizing seeds”?

<sup>1</sup> **octave (n.):** an eight-line stanza or section of a sonnet characterized by a specific rhyme scheme and setting out the problem of the sonnet

<sup>2</sup> **sestet (n.):** a six-line stanza or section of a sonnet with a specific rhyme scheme that usually answers the problem set out in the octave

## After Reading

2. As you examine the preceding sources, make notes about your understanding of these readings by completing the graphic organizer below or by creating your own graphic organizer in your Reader/Writer Notebook. Note each category in the graphic organizer, and write notes as to what you can infer from the text about the literary and artistic movement known as the Harlem Renaissance. Be sure to cite textual evidence to support your understanding.

	Documentary Film	Art	Informational Text	Poetry
Historical Context				
Values and Beliefs				
Genres and Style				
Significant Authors and Works				

# The Historical Context of the Harlem Renaissance

## My Notes

### Check Your Understanding

**Writing Prompt:** Select one aspect of the Harlem Renaissance (history, values and beliefs, authors and works, or genres and styles). Using the information that you have collected from primary and secondary sources, write an explanatory text that articulates your understanding of that aspect. Be sure to:

- Develop the topic thoroughly by selecting the most significant and relevant facts and details.
- Provide lead-ins to cite textual evidence, using transitions smoothly to connect ideas and create coherence.
- Integrate information to maintain the flow of ideas.
- Provide a conclusion that refers to your topic and the ideas developed in the essay.