THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE 1

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The Harlem Renaissance

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New York City has always been, and still is known for the cultural influence it has on America. Many historic events have occurred within this city, but one of the most notable time periods was during the Harlem Renaissance. Between the years of 1918 and 1937, African Americans were making a mark on the city with their music, literature theater and the visual arts. (britannica.com) Many famous faces came from this specific time period, and today, are still recognized and some of the most influential people in their fields. The significance of the Harlem Renaissance as a movement, was it’s ability to help break the oppressed blacks free from stereotypes that many people would connotate with them, as their take on creative arts newly represented them to the world in a different light, and it all began right in New York City.

Prior to the Harlem Renaissance, there was a movement going on called the New Negro movement. “Historians may argue about when the New Negro movement became the Harlem Renaissance, but they all agree that by the end of World War I something new was happening uptown…” (Gill, 226). After World War I, the United States had transformed in a modern way. “New technologies, the expansion of democracy to (white) women, and a modern music- jazz- came to mark the beginning of a new era” (Ogbar, 1). When you hear Harlem Renaissance you think of African Americans, jazz and blues, culture and art but what really was it? “The Harlem Renaissance was the name given to the cultural, social, and artistic explosion that took place in Harlem between the end of World War I and the middle of the 1930s” (Wormser, PBS.org). During this period, Harlem was the haven, to which Many African Americans fled so that they can freely express themselves. The Harlem Renaissance was not just about the arts though. It was also

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a fight for the African Americans’ rights, both civil and political, and although it did not have any huge impact of taking down the social barriers of the Jim Crow laws that suppressed the African American community, it definitely made for a more relaxed and accepting environment that ultimately lead to African Americans gaining the rights they so desired. Mixing both blacks and whites as a community was an important goal but the pride of the black race was really resulted as the main outcome of the renaissance.

As a result of the Harlem Renaissance, many importance faces and pieces of art (in many different forms) were brought into mainstream culture, and still have an impact today. Music was one of the start aspects of this movement, the genre that took center stage was jazz. This form of music was brought into major popularity by the New York City night clubs, mainly in Harlem that played songs that combined African beats, the blues and ragtime music. (quia.com) Some of the most influential musicians from the era were Lance Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Billie Holiday. Poetry was also another big part of the arts that made cultural movement so strong. The poetry by greats such as Langston Hughes, who wrote in a way to “portray African Americans with dignity…” and “in a personal voice that also reflected his race.” (p.76 Watson) A theme of all the arts was that they were a reflection of the struggles and triumphs they received in their everyday lives. To the carefree music the upbeat of jazz music carried or the repression and sorrow poetry and blues music showed, the arts were all a way of reflection of an entire body of people with exploding ideas. The recognition of this art was noticed not only within the community but outside just the African Americans. Many of these jazz songs would play in only white clubs such as “Cotton Club” where blacks were not even allowed.(quia.com) They did indeed have many white supporters who enjoyed the art that came out of this era, which is why it was so widespread. In a way in harvested positive ideas of the race that had not once been their prior. Although it did not directly lead to any huge political movements it was a huge for some minor social issues to be relaxed.

Eventually the end of the Harlem Renaissance came. Around 1935 is when this era was considered finished. Many things played into its demise, one thing that although didn’t instantly effect it’s end was the infamous crash of the stock market in October 1929, thus leading to the Great Depression. “The impact of Harlem was devastating, although not immediate.” “...unemployment in Harlem was five times that of the rest of the city.” (Watson, 158) As Harlem became more and more impoverished, the prejudice against African American’s from its outsiders grew. Additionally the “New Negro Movement” was “...also torn apart by internal contradictions.” (159) A lot of people within the community mistook “art for power.” Although there was no halting end for this era, it did end very slowly, after a combination of external and internal struggles took this movement out of vogue.

The Harlem Renaissance took New York by storm with a booming force. Propelling many famous faces and genres into fame, the black community had a huge cultural impact during its long standing time. Although the era, like all do, came to an end we are still enlighted with images, sounds and stories of what these times were like. Whether it be in the music we listen to, the thoughts that we read, or the classes that teach us of its long standing legacy, we are all still reminded of the importance this time in New York City had on America, the World and future generations today.

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