



# SANKOFA

AFRICAN AMERICAN THEATRE COMPANY

## STUDY GUIDE

### LANGSTON HUGHES'

### "BLACK NATIVITY"

#### *ABOUT THE PLAY*

"Black Nativity" is an adaptation of the nativity story by Langston Hughes, performed by an entirely black cast. Hughes was the author of the book, with the lyrics and music being derived from traditional Christmas carols, sung in gospel style, with a few songs created specifically for the show. The show was first performed on Broadway on December 11, 1961, and was one of the first plays written by an African American to be staged there. The show had a successful tour of Europe in 1962, one of its appearances being at the Spoleto Festival of Two Worlds in Italy.

#### *PRODUCTIONS*

1961: Off-Broadway

The show began with the theater completely darkened. Barefoot singers clad only in white robes and carrying (electric) candles walked in, singing the classic hymn "Go Tell It on the Mountain."

The birth of Jesus was one of the most dramatic aspects of the show. The stage, previously lit with orange and blue lights, was bathed in a deep red hue. Mary's contractions were echoed through the use of African drums and percussion. The Three Wise Men were often played by prominent members of the black community in the neighboring area, and had no singing parts. The show closed with the chorus singing a reprise of "Go Tell It on the Mountain" as they walked out in darkness. A final soliloquy by a young child ended the performance.

The original name for this play was "Wasn't It a Mighty Day?" Alvin Ailey was a part of the original Off-Broadway cast, but he and Carmen de Lavallade departed from the show prior to its opening, in a

dispute over the title being changed to “Black Nativity.” They objected to the use of the word “black” in the title. The rationale at the time was that this word might be too divisive for a Broadway production aimed at keeping things harmonious with all audiences. Ultimately, black in the title did not matter. This liberating and energetic musical opened to rave reviews.

A performance of this musical also has taken place every Christmas season since 1998 in Seattle, first at the Intiman Theater and currently at the Moore Theater. The theatrical director is Jackie Moscou, the music director is Patrinell Wright, and the choreography was designed by Donald Byrd. It is a smaller production with 30 or so choir members – most of whom are also members of The Total Experience Gospel Choir, led by Pastor Patrinell Wright, and the performance also includes 10 dancers and five musicians.

## ***ADAPTATIONS***

In 2004, a documentary film was made about the world premiere performance, production, and creation of the best-selling gospel Christmas album “Black Nativity – In Concert: A Gospel Celebration,” and the original cast, under the direction of Aaron Robinson, brought it to life at the Immanuel Baptist Church in Portland, Maine.

A film version directed by Kasi Lemmons and starring Forest Whitaker and Angela Bassett was released on November 27, 2013.

## ***ABOUT THE AUTHOR***



James Mercer Langston Hughes (February 1, 1901 - May 22, 1967) was an American poet, social activist, novelist, playwright, and columnist from Joplin, Missouri. One of the earliest innovators of the literary art form called jazz poetry, Hughes is best known as a leader of the Harlem Renaissance. He famously wrote about the period that "the Negro was in vogue", which was later paraphrased as "when Harlem was in vogue."

Growing up in a series of Midwestern towns, Hughes became a prolific writer at an early age. He moved to New York City as a young man, where he made his career. He graduated from high school in Cleveland, Ohio, and soon began studies at Columbia University in New York City. Although he dropped out, he gained notice from New York publishers, first in *The Crisis* magazine and then from book publishers, and became known in the creative community in Harlem. He eventually graduated from Lincoln University. In addition to poetry, Hughes wrote plays and short stories. He also

published several nonfiction works. From 1942 to 1962, as the civil rights movement was gaining traction, he wrote an in-depth weekly column in a leading newspaper.

## ***ANCESTRY AND CHILDHOOD***



Like many African Americans, Hughes had a complex ancestry. Both of Hughes' paternal great-grandmothers were enslaved Africans, and both of his paternal great-grandfathers were white slave owners in Kentucky. According to Hughes, one of these men was Sam Clay, a Scottish-American whiskey distiller of Henry County, said to be a relative of statesman Henry Clay. The other putative paternal ancestor whom Hughes named was Silas Cushenberry, a slave trader of Clark County. Hughes wrote that Cushenberry was a Jewish slave trader, but a study of the Cushenberry family genealogy in the nineteenth century has found no Jewish affiliation. Hughes's maternal grandmother Mary Patterson was of African American, French, English and Native American descent. One of the first women to attend Oberlin College, she married Lewis Sheridan Leary, also of mixed-race descent, before her studies. In 1859, Lewis Leary joined John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry in West Virginia, where he was fatally wounded.

Ten years later, in 1869, the widow Mary Patterson Leary married again, into the elite, politically active Langston family. Her second husband was Charles Henry Langston, of African American, Euro-American and Native American ancestry. He and his younger brother John Mercer Langston worked for the abolitionist cause and helped lead the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society in 1858.

After their marriage, Charles Langston moved with his family to Kansas, where he was active as an educator and activist for voting and rights for African Americans. His and Mary's daughter Caroline (known as Carrie) became a schoolteacher and married James Nathaniel Hughes (1871–1934). They had two children; the second was Langston Hughes, by most sources born in 1901 in Joplin, Missouri, though Hughes himself claims in his autobiography to have been born in 1902.

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Langston Hughes grew up in a series of Midwestern small towns. His father left the family soon after the boy was born and later divorced Carrie. The senior Hughes traveled to Cuba and then Mexico, seeking to escape the enduring racism in the United States.

After the separation, Hughes's mother traveled, seeking employment. Langston was raised mainly in Lawrence, Kansas, by his maternal grandmother, Mary Patterson Langston. Through the black American oral tradition and drawing from the activist experiences of her generation, Mary Langston instilled in her grandson a lasting sense of racial pride. Imbued by his grandmother with a duty to help his race, Hughes identified with neglected and downtrodden black people all his life, and glorified them in his work. He lived most of his childhood in Lawrence. In his 1940 autobiography *The Big Sea*, he wrote: "I was

unhappy for a long time, and very lonesome, living with my grandmother. Then it was that books began to happen to me, and I began to believe in nothing but books and the wonderful world in books—where if people suffered, they suffered in beautiful language, not in monosyllables, as we did in Kansas."

After the death of his grandmother, Hughes went to live with family friends, James and Auntie Mary Reed, for two years. Later, Hughes lived again with his mother Carrie in Lincoln, Illinois. She had remarried when he was an adolescent. The family moved to the Fairfax neighborhood of Cleveland, Ohio, where he attended Central High School and was taught by Helen Maria Chesnutt, whom he found inspiring. His writing experiments began when he was young. While in grammar school in Lincoln, Hughes was elected class poet. He stated that in retrospect he thought it was because of the stereotype about African Americans having rhythm.

***I was a victim of a stereotype. There were only two of us Negro kids in the whole class and our English teacher was always stressing the importance of rhythm in poetry. Well, everyone knows, except us, that all Negroes have rhythm, so they elected me as class poet.***

During high school in Cleveland, Hughes wrote for the school newspaper, edited the yearbook, and began to write his first short stories, poetry, and dramatic plays. His first piece of jazz poetry, "When Sue Wears Red," was written while he was in high school.

## ***RELATIONSHIP WITH FATHER***

Hughes had a very poor relationship with his father, whom he seldom saw when a child. He lived briefly with him in Mexico in 1919. Upon graduating from high school in June, 1920, Hughes returned to Mexico to live with his father, hoping to convince him to support his plan to attend Columbia University. Hughes later said that, prior to arriving in Mexico, "I had been thinking about my father and his strange dislike of his own people. I didn't understand it, because I was a Negro, and I liked Negroes very much." His father had hoped Hughes would choose to study at a university abroad and train for a career in engineering. On these grounds, he was willing to provide financial assistance to his son but did not support his desire to be a writer. Eventually, Hughes and his father came to a compromise: Hughes would study engineering, so long as he could attend Columbia. His tuition provided, Hughes left his father after more than a year.

While at Columbia in 1921, Hughes managed to maintain a B+ grade average. He published poetry in the Columbia *Daily Spectator* under a pen name. He left in 1922 because of racial prejudice among students and teachers. He was denied a room on campus because he was black. Eventually he settled in Hartley Hall, but he still suffered from racism among his classmates, who seemed hostile to anyone who did not fit into a WASP category. He was attracted more to the African-American people and neighborhood of Harlem than to his studies, but he continued writing poetry. Harlem was a center of vibrant cultural life.

## ***ADULTHOOD***

Hughes worked at various odd jobs before serving a brief tenure as a crewman aboard the S.S. Malone in 1923, spending six months traveling to West Africa and Europe. In Europe, Hughes left the S.S. Malone for a temporary stay in Paris. There he met and had a romance with Anne Marie Coussey, a British-educated African from a well-to-do Gold Coast family; they subsequently corresponded, but she eventually married Hugh Wooding, a promising Trinidadian lawyer. Wooding later served as chancellor of the University of the West Indies.

During his time in England in the early 1920s, Hughes became part of the black expatriate community. In November 1924, he returned to the U.S. to live with his mother in Washington, D.C. After assorted odd jobs, he gained white-collar employment in 1925 as a personal assistant to historian Carter G. Woodson at the Association for the Study of African American Life and History. As the work demands limited his time for writing, Hughes quit the position to work as a busboy at the Wardman Park Hotel. Hughes' earlier work had been published in magazines and was about to be collected into his first book of poetry when he encountered poet Vachel Lindsay, with whom he shared some poems. Impressed, Lindsay publicized his discovery of a new black poet.



The following year, Hughes enrolled in Lincoln University, a historically black university in Chester County, Pennsylvania. He joined the Omega Psi Phi fraternity. After Hughes earned a B.A. degree from Lincoln University in 1929, he returned to New York. Except for travels to the Soviet Union and parts of the Caribbean, he lived in Harlem as his primary home for the remainder of his life. During the 1930s, he became a resident of Westfield, New Jersey for a time, sponsored by his patron Charlotte Osgood Mason.

## ***DEATH***

On May 22, 1967, Hughes died in the Stuyvesant Polyclinic in New York City at the age of 66 from complications after abdominal surgery related to prostate cancer. His ashes are interred beneath a floor medallion in the middle of the foyer in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem. It is the entrance to an auditorium named for him. The design on the floor is an African cosmogram entitled *Rivers*. The title is taken from his poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." Within the center of the cosmogram is the line: "My soul has grown deep like the rivers."

## ***CAREER***

from "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1920)

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.  
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.  
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.  
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln  
went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy  
bosom turn all golden in the sunset...  
—in *The Weary Blues* (1926)



First published in 1921 in *The Crisis* — official magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) — "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" became Hughes's signature poem and was collected in his first book of poetry (1926). Hughes's first and last published poems appeared in *The Crisis*; more of his poems were published in *The Crisis* than in any other journal. Hughes' life and work were enormously influential during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, alongside those of his contemporaries, Zora Neale Hurston, Wallace Thurman, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Richard Bruce Nugent, and Aaron Douglas. Except for McKay, they worked together also to create the short-lived magazine *Fire!! Devoted to Younger Negro Artists*.

Hughes and his contemporaries had different goals and aspirations than the black middle class. Hughes and his fellows tried to depict the "low-life" in their art, that is, the real lives of blacks in the lower social-economic strata. They criticized the divisions and prejudices within the black community based on skin color. Hughes wrote what would be considered their manifesto, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," published in *The Nation* in 1926:

***The younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly, too. The tom-tom cries, and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain free within ourselves.***

His poetry and fiction portrayed the lives of the working-class blacks in America, lives he portrayed as full of struggle, joy, laughter, and music. Permeating his work is pride in the African American identity and its diverse culture. "My seeking has been to explain and illuminate the Negro condition in America and obliquely that of all human kind," Hughes is quoted as saying. He confronted racial stereotypes, protested social conditions, and expanded African America's image of itself; a "people's poet" who sought to reeducate both audience and artist by lifting the theory of the black aesthetic into reality.

**The night is beautiful,  
So the faces of my people.**

**The stars are beautiful,  
So the eyes of my people**

**Beautiful, also, is the sun.  
Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people.**

—"My People" in *The Crisis* (October, 1923)

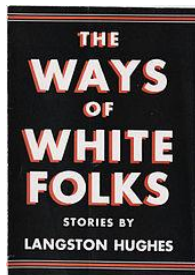
In addition to his example in social attitudes, Hughes had an important technical influence by his emphasis on folk and jazz rhythms as the basis of his poetry of racial pride.

In 1930, his first novel, *Not Without Laughter*, won the Harmon Gold Medal for literature. At a time before widespread arts grants, Hughes gained the support of private patrons and he was supported for two years prior to publishing this novel. The protagonist of the story is a boy named Sandy, whose family must deal with a variety of struggles due to their race and class, in addition to relating to one another.

In 1931, Hughes helped form the "New York Suitcase Theater" with playwright Paul Peters, artist Jacob Burck, and writer (soon-to-be underground spy) Whittaker Chambers, an acquaintance from Columbia. In 1932, he was part of a board to produce a Soviet film on "Negro Life" with Malcolm Cowley, Floyd Dell, and Chambers.

In 1931 Prentiss Taylor and Langston Hughes created the Golden Stair Press, issuing broadsides and books featuring the artwork of Prentiss Taylor and the Hughes' texts. In 1932 they issued *The Scottsboro Limited* based on the trial of the Scottsboro Boys.

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*The Ways of White Folks*, Hughes first work of stories, was published in 1934. These stories are a series of vignettes revealing the humorous and tragic interactions between whites and blacks. Overall, they are marked by a general pessimism about race relations, as well as a sardonic realism. He also became an advisory board member to the newly formed San Francisco Workers' School (later the California Labor School).

In 1935, Hughes received a Guggenheim Fellowship. The same year that Hughes established his theater troupe in Los Angeles, he realized an ambition related to films by co-writing the screenplay for *Way Down South*. Hughes believed his failure to gain more work in the lucrative movie trade was due to racial discrimination within the industry.

In Chicago, Hughes founded The Skyloft Players in 1941, which sought to nurture black playwrights and offer theater "from the black perspective." Soon thereafter, he was hired to write a column for the *Chicago Defender*, in which he presented some of his "most powerful and relevant work," giving voice to black people. The column ran for twenty years. In 1943, Hughes began publishing stories about a

character he called Jesse B. Semple, often referred to and spelled "Simple," the everyday black man in Harlem who offered musings on topical issues of the day.

He wrote novels, short stories, plays, poetry, operas, essays, and works for children. With the encouragement of his best friend and writer, Arna Bontemps, and patron and friend, Carl Van Vechten, he wrote two volumes of autobiography, *The Big Sea* and *I Wonder as I Wander*, as well as translating several works of literature into English. With Bontemps, Hughes co-edited the 1949 anthology *The Poetry of the Negro*, described by *The New York Times* as "a stimulating cross-section of the imaginative writing of the Negro" that demonstrates "talent to the point where one questions the necessity (other than for its social evidence) of the specialization of 'Negro' in the title."



From the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s, Hughes' popularity among the younger generation of black writers varied even as his reputation increased worldwide. With the gradual advance toward racial integration, many black writers considered his writings of black pride and its corresponding subject matter out of date. They considered him a racial chauvinist. He found some new writers, among them James Baldwin, lacking in such pride, over-intellectual in their work, and occasionally vulgar.

Hughes wanted young black writers to be objective about their race, but not to scorn it or flee it. He understood the main points of the Black Power movement of the 1960s, but believed that some of the younger black writers who supported it were too angry in their work. Hughes's work *Panther and the Lash*, posthumously published in 1967, was intended to show solidarity with these writers, but with more skill and devoid of the most virulent anger and racial chauvinism some showed toward whites. Hughes continued to have admirers among the larger younger generation of black writers. He often helped writers by offering advice and introducing them to other influential persons in the literature and publishing communities. This latter group, including Alice Walker, whom Hughes discovered, looked upon Hughes as a hero and an example to be emulated within their own work. One of these young black writers (Loften Mitchell) observed of Hughes:

***Langston set a tone, a standard of brotherhood and friendship and cooperation, for all of us to follow. You never got from him, 'I am the Negro writer,' but only 'I am a Negro writer.' He never stopped thinking about the rest of us.***

## ***POLITICAL VIEWS***

Hughes initially did not favor black American involvement in World War II because of the persistence of discriminatory U.S. Jim Crow laws and racial segregation and disfranchisement throughout the South. He soon came to support the war effort and black American participation after deciding that war service



would aid their struggle for civil rights at home. The scholar Anthony Pinn has noted that Hughes, together with Lorraine Hansberry and Richard Wright, was a humanist "critical of belief in God. They provided a foundation for nontheistic participation in social struggle." Pinn has found that such writers are sometimes ignored in the narrative of American history that chiefly credits the civil rights movement to the work of affiliated Christian people.

Hughes was accused of being a Communist by many on the political right, but he always denied it. When asked why he never joined the Communist Party, he wrote, "it was based on strict discipline and the acceptance of directives that I, as a writer, did not wish to accept." In 1953, he was called before the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations led by Senator Joseph McCarthy. He stated, "I never read the theoretical books of socialism or communism or the Democratic or Republican parties for that matter, and so my interest in whatever may be considered political has been non-theoretical, non-sectarian, and largely emotional and born out of my own need to find some way of thinking about this whole problem of myself." Following his testimony, Hughes distanced himself from Communism. He was rebuked by some on the Radical Left who had previously supported him. He moved away from overtly political poems and towards more lyric subjects. When selecting his poetry for his *Selected Poems* (1959) he excluded all his radical socialist verse from the 1930s. These critics on the Left were unaware of the secret interrogation that took place days before the televised hearings.

Hughes was featured reciting his poetry on the album "Weary Blues" (MGM, 1959), with music by Charles Mingus and Leonard Feather, and he also contributed lyrics to Randy Weston's "Uhuru Afrika" (Roulette, 1960).

Hughes' life has been portrayed in film and stage productions since the late 20th century. In "Looking for Langston" (1989), British filmmaker Isaac Julien claimed him as a black gay icon — Julien thought that Hughes' sexuality had historically been ignored or downplayed. Film portrayals of Hughes include Gary LeRoi Gray's role as a teenage Hughes in the short subject film "Salvation" (2003) (based on a portion of his autobiography *The Big Sea*), and Daniel Sunjata as Hughes in "Brother to Brother" (2004). Hughes' "Dream Harlem," a documentary by Jamal Joseph, examines Hughes' works and environment.

Spike Lee's 1996 film "Get on the Bus," included a black gay character, played by Isaiah Washington, who invokes the name of Hughes and punches a homophobic character, saying: "This is for James Baldwin and Langston Hughes."

Hughes' "Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz," written in 1960, was performed for the first time in March 2009 with specially composed music by Laura Karpman at Carnegie Hall, at the Honor festival curated by Jessye Norman in celebration of the African American cultural legacy.

The novel *Harlem Mosaics* (2012) by Whit Frazier depicts the friendship between Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, and tells the story of how their friendship fell apart during their collaboration on the play *Mule Bone*.

On September 22, 2016, his poem "I, Too" was printed on a full page of *The New York Times* in response to the riots of the previous day in Charlotte, North Carolina.

## ***THE MUSIC OF "BLACK NATIVITY"***

Black gospel music, often called gospel music or gospel, is a genre of African American Christian music. It is rooted in the conversion of enslaved Africans to Christianity, both during and after the trans-atlantic slave trade, starting with work songs sung in the fields and, later, with religious songs sung in various church settings, later classified as Negro Spirituals.

Black Gospel music has been traditionally concerned with the African American quest for freedom. It has provided both "spiritual and communal uplift," first in the fields, and later in the Black Church; during the 1960s era in the South, it was described as the "soundtrack of the struggle for civil rights," helping create unity and faith for the work.

Also a popular form of commercial music, Black gospel was revolutionized in the 1930s by Thomas Dorsey, the "father of gospel music," who is credited with composing more than 1,000 gospel songs, including "Take My Hand, Precious Lord" and "Peace in the Valley." Dorsey also created the first gospel choir and sold millions of copies of his recordings nationwide. The Pilgrim Baptist Church in Chicago, Dorsey's home church, is currently in development as the National Museum of Gospel Music.

The modern iteration of the genre, contemporary gospel, emerged in the late 1970s as a fusion of the traditional genre with the musical stylings of the era in secular Black music, which resulted in popularizing a whole new generation of artists and songs, expanding the larger genre's reach.

## ***THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE***

The Harlem Renaissance was an intellectual and cultural revival of African American music, dance, art, fashion, literature, theater, politics and scholarship centered in Harlem, Manhattan, New York City, spanning the 1920s and 1930s. At the time, it was known as the "New Negro Movement," named after *The New Negro*, a 1925 anthology edited by Alain Locke. The movement also included the new African American cultural expressions across the urban areas in the Northeast and Midwest United States affected by a renewed militancy in the general struggle for civil rights, combined with the Great Migration of African American workers fleeing the racist conditions of the Jim Crow Deep South, as Harlem was the final destination of the largest number of those who migrated north.

Though it was centered in the Harlem neighborhood, many francophone black writers from African and Caribbean colonies who lived in Paris were also influenced by the movement, which spanned from about 1918 until the mid-1930s. Many of its ideas lived on much longer. The zenith of this "flowering of Negro literature," as James Weldon Johnson preferred to call the Harlem Renaissance, took place between 1924—when *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life* hosted a party for black writers where many white publishers were in attendance—and 1929, the year of the stock-market crash and the beginning of the Great Depression. The Harlem Renaissance is considered to have been a rebirth of the African American arts.

Most of the future leading lights of what was to become known as the "Harlem Renaissance" movement arose from a generation that had memories of the gains and losses of Reconstruction after the Civil War. Sometimes their parents, grandparents – or they themselves – had been slaves. Their ancestors had sometimes benefited by paternal investment in cultural capital, including better-than-average education.

Many in the Harlem Renaissance were part of the early 20th century Great Migration out of the South into the African American neighborhoods of the Northeast and Midwest. African Americans sought a better standard of living and relief from the institutionalized racism in the South. Others were people of African descent from racially stratified communities in the Caribbean who came to the United States hoping for a better life. Uniting most of them was their convergence in Harlem.

## ***DEVELOPMENT***

During the early portion of the 20th century, Harlem was the destination for migrants from around the country, attracting both people from the South seeking work and an educated class who made the area a center of culture, as well as a growing "Negro" middle class. These people were looking for a fresh start in life and Harlem was a good place to go. The district had originally been developed in the 19th century as an exclusive suburb for the white middle and upper middle classes; its affluent beginnings led to the development of stately houses, grand avenues, and world-class amenities such as the Polo Grounds and the Harlem Opera House. During the enormous influx of European immigrants in the late 19th century, the once exclusive district was abandoned by the white middle class, who moved farther north.

Harlem became an African American neighborhood in the early 1900s. In 1910, a large block along 135th Street and Fifth Avenue was bought by various African American realtors and a church group. Many more African Americans arrived during the First World War. Due to the war, the migration of laborers from Europe virtually ceased, while the war effort resulted in a massive demand for unskilled industrial labor. The Great Migration brought hundreds of thousands of African Americans to cities such as Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, and New York.

Despite the increasing popularity of Negro culture, virulent white racism, often by more recent ethnic immigrants, continued to affect African American communities, even in the North. After the end of World War I, many African American soldiers—who fought in segregated units such as the Harlem

Hellfighters—came home to a nation whose citizens often did not respect their accomplishments. Race riots and other civil uprisings occurred throughout the US during the Red Summer of 1919, reflecting economic competition over jobs and housing in many cities, as well as tensions over social territories.

## ***MAINSTREAM RECOGNITION***

The first stage of the Harlem Renaissance started in the late 1910s. In 1917, the premiere of "*Granny Maumee*," "*The Rider of Dreams*," "*Simon the Cyrenian*": *Plays for a Negro Theater* took place. These plays, written by white playwright Ridgely Torrence, featured African-American actors conveying complex human emotions and yearnings. They rejected the stereotypes of the blackface and minstrel show traditions. James Weldon Johnson in 1917 called the premieres of these plays "the most important single event in the entire history of the Negro in the American Theater."

Another landmark came in 1919, when the communist poet Claude McKay published his militant sonnet "If We Must Die", which introduced a dramatically political dimension to the themes of African cultural inheritance and modern urban experience featured in his 1917 poems "Invocation" and "Harlem Dancer." Published under the pseudonym Eli Edwards, these were his first appearance in print in the United States after immigrating from Jamaica. Although "If We Must Die" never alluded to race, African American readers heard its note of defiance in the face of racism and the nationwide race riots and lynchings then taking place. By the end of the First World War, the fiction of James Weldon Johnson and the poetry of Claude McKay were describing the reality of contemporary African American life in America.

## ***LITERATURE***

With the Harlem Renaissance came a sense of acceptance for African American writers; as Langston Hughes put it, with Harlem came the courage "to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame." Alain Locke's anthology *The New Negro* was considered the cornerstone of this cultural revolution. The anthology featured several African American writers and poets, from the well-known, such as Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, to the lesser-known, like the poet Anne Spencer.

Many poets of the Harlem Renaissance were inspired to tie in threads of African American culture into their poems; as a result, jazz poetry was heavily developed during this time. "The Weary Blues" was a notable jazz poem written by Langston Hughes. Through their works of literature, black authors were able to give a voice to the African-American identity, as well as strive for a community of support and acceptance.

## *RELIGION*

Christianity played a major role in the Harlem Renaissance. Many of the writers and social critics discussed the role of Christianity in African American lives. For example, a famous poem by Langston Hughes, "Madam and the Minister," reflects the temperature and mood towards religion in the Harlem Renaissance. The cover story for *The Crisis* magazine's publication in May 1936 explains how important Christianity was regarding the proposed union of the three largest Methodist churches of 1936. This article shows the controversial question of unification for these churches. The article "The Catholic Church and the Negro Priest," also published in *The Crisis*, January 1920, demonstrates the obstacles African American priests faced in the Catholic Church. The article confronts what it saw as policies based on race that excluded African Americans from higher positions in the church.

## *CRITICISM*

Religious critique during this era was found in music, literature, art, theater, and poetry. The Harlem Renaissance encouraged analytic dialogue that included the open critique and the adjustment of current religious ideas.

One of the major contributors to the discussion of African American renaissance culture was Aaron Douglas who, with his artwork, also reflected the revisions African Americans were making to the Christian dogma. Douglas uses biblical imagery as inspiration to various pieces of art work but with the rebellious twist of an African influence.

Countee Cullen's poem "Heritage" expresses the inner struggle of an African American between his past African heritage and the new Christian culture. A more severe criticism of the Christian religion can be found in Langston Hughes' poem "Merry Christmas," where he exposes the irony of religion as a symbol for good and yet a force for oppression and injustice.

## *MUSIC*



**[OBJ]** *The multi-talented Adelaide Hall and Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson in the musical comedy "Brown Buddies" on Broadway, 1930.*

A new way of playing the piano called the Harlem Stride style was created during the Harlem Renaissance helping to blur the lines between the poor African Americans and socially elite African Americans. The traditional jazz band was composed primarily of brass instruments and was considered a symbol of the south, but the piano was considered an instrument of the wealthy. With this instrumental modification to the existing genre, the wealthy African Americans now had more access to jazz music. Its popularity soon spread throughout the country and was consequently at an all-time high.

Innovation and liveliness were important characteristics of performers in the beginnings of jazz. Jazz performers and composers at the time such as Eubie Blake, Noble Sissle, Jelly Roll Morton, Luckey Roberts, James P. Johnson, Willie "The Lion" Smith, Andy Razaf, Fats Waller, Ethel Waters, Adelaide Hall, Florence Mills and bandleaders Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong and Fletcher Henderson were extremely talented, skillful, competitive and inspirational. They are still considered as having laid great parts of the foundations for future musicians of their genre.

Duke Ellington gained popularity during the Harlem Renaissance. According to Charles Garrett, "The resulting portrait of Ellington reveals him to be not only the gifted composer, bandleader, and musician we have come to know, but also an earthly person with basic desires, weaknesses, and eccentricities." Ellington did not let his popularity get to him. He remained calm and focused on his music.

During this period, the musical style of blacks was becoming more and more attractive to whites. White novelists, dramatists and composers started to exploit the musical tendencies and themes of African Americans in their works. Composers (including William Grant Still, William L. Dawson and Florence Price) used poems written by African American poets in their songs, and would implement the rhythms, harmonies and melodies of African American music—such as blues, spirituals, and jazz—into their concert pieces. African Americans began to merge with Whites into the classical world.

## *FASHION*

During the Harlem Renaissance, the black clothing scene took a dramatic turn from the prim and proper. Many young women preferred short skirts and silk stockings to drop-waisted dresses and cloche hats. Women wore loose-fitted garments and accessorized with long strand pearl bead necklaces, feather boas, and cigarette holders. The fashion of the Harlem Renaissance was used to convey elegance and flamboyancy and needed to be created with the vibrant dance style of the 1920s in mind. Popular by the 1930s was a trendy, egret-trimmed beret.

Men wore loose suits that led to the later style known as the "Zoot", which consisted of wide-legged, high-waisted, peg-top trousers, and a long coat with padded shoulders and wide lapels. Men also wore wide-brimmed hats, colored socks, white gloves, and velvet-collared Chesterfield coats. During this period, African Americans expressed respect for their heritage through a fad for leopard-skin coats, indicating the power of the African animal.

## *CHARACTERISTICS AND THEMES*



Trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie is emblematic of the mixture of high class society, popular art, and virtuosity of jazz.

Characterizing the Harlem Renaissance was an overt racial pride that came to be represented in the idea of the New Negro, who through intellect and production of literature, art, and music could challenge the pervading racism and stereotypes to promote progressive or socialist politics, and racial and social integration. The creation of art and literature would serve to "uplift" the race.

There would be no uniting form singularly characterizing the art that emerged from the Harlem Renaissance. Rather, it encompassed a wide variety of cultural elements and styles, including a Pan-African perspective, "high-culture" and "low-culture" or "low-life", from the traditional form of music to the blues and jazz, traditional and new experimental forms in literature such as modernism and the new form of jazz poetry. This duality meant that numerous African American artists came into conflict with conservatives in the black intelligentsia, who took issue with certain depictions of black life.

Some common themes represented during the Harlem Renaissance were the influence of the experience of slavery and emerging African American folk traditions on black identity, the effects of institutional racism, the dilemmas inherent in performing and writing for elite white audiences, and the question of how to convey the experience of modern black life in the urban North.

The Harlem Renaissance was one of primarily African American involvement. It rested on a support system of black patrons, black-owned businesses and publications. However, it also depended on the patronage of white Americans, such as Carl Van Vechten and Charlotte Osgood Mason, who provided various forms of assistance, opening doors which otherwise might have remained closed to the publication of work outside the black American community. This support often took the form of patronage or publication. Carl Van Vechten was one of the most noteworthy white Americans involved with the Harlem Renaissance. He allowed for assistance to the black American community because he wanted racial sameness.

Interest in African American lives also generated experimental but lasting collaborative work, such as the all-black productions of George Gershwin's opera "Porgy and Bess," and Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein's "Four Saints in Three Acts." In both productions the choral conductor Eva Jessye was part of the creative team. Her choir was featured in "Four Saints." The music world also found white band leaders defying racist attitudes to include the best and the brightest African American stars of music and song in their productions.

The Harlem Renaissance helped lay the foundation for the post-World War II protest movement of the Civil Rights movement. Moreover, many black artists who rose to creative maturity afterward were inspired by this literary movement.

The Renaissance was more than a literary or artistic movement, as it possessed a certain sociological development—particularly through a new racial consciousness—through ethnic pride, as seen in the Back to Africa movement led by Jamaican Marcus Garvey.

## ***HONORS AND AWARDS***

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- 1926: Hughes won the Witter Bynner Undergraduate Poetry Prize.
- 1935: Hughes was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, which allowed him to travel to Spain and Russia.
- 1941: Hughes was awarded a fellowship from the [Rosenwald Fund](#).
- 1943: Lincoln University awarded Hughes an honorary Litt.D.
- 1954: Hughes won the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award.
- 1960: the NAACP awarded Hughes the Spingarn Medal for distinguished achievements by an African American.
- 1961: National Institute of Arts and Letters.
- 1963: Howard University awarded Hughes an honorary doctorate.
- 1964: Western Reserve University awarded Hughes an honorary Litt.D.
- 1973: the first Langston Hughes Medal was awarded by the City College of New York.
- 1979: Langston Hughes Middle School was created in Reston, Virginia.
- 1981: New York City Landmark status was given to the Harlem home of Langston Hughes at 20 East 127th Street by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission and 127th Street was renamed "Langston Hughes Place".
- 1982: The Langston Hughes House was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.
- 2002: The United States Postal Service added the image of Langston Hughes to its Black Heritage series of postage stamps.
- 2002: Scholar Molefi Kete Asante listed Langston Hughes on his list of *100 Greatest African Americans*.
- 2009: [Langston](#) Hughes High School was created in Fairburn, Georgia.
- 2012: Langston Hughes was inducted into the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame.
- 2015: Google Doodle commemorated his 113th birthday.