

# Poetry Foundation

## An Introduction to the Harlem Renaissance

Tracing the poetic work of this crucial cultural and artistic movement.

*We 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.*

-Langston Hughes, "[The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain](#)"

In the 1920's, creative and intellectual life flourished within African American communities in the North and Midwest regions of the United States, but nowhere more so than in Harlem. The New York City neighborhood, encompassing only three square miles, teemed with black artists, intellectuals, writers, and musicians. Black-owned businesses, from newspapers, publishing houses, and music companies to nightclubs, cabarets, and theaters, helped fuel the neighborhood's thriving scene. Some of the era's most important literary and artistic figures migrated to or passed through "the Negro capital of the world," helping to define a period in which African-American artists reclaimed their identity and racial pride in defiance of widespread prejudice and discrimination.

The origins of the Harlem Renaissance lie in the Great Migration of the early 20th century, when hundreds of thousands of black people migrated from the South into dense urban areas that offered relatively more economic opportunities and cultural capital. It was, in the words of editor, journalist, and critic Alain Locke, "a spiritual coming of age" for African American artists and thinkers, who seized upon their "first chances for group expression and self-determination." Harlem Renaissance poets such as [Langston Hughes](#), [Claude McKay](#), and [Georgia Douglas Johnson](#) explored the beauty and pain of black life and sought to define themselves and their community outside of white stereotypes.

Poetry from the Harlem Renaissance reflected a diversity of forms and subjects. Some poets, such as Claude McKay, used culturally European forms—the sonnet was one—melded with a radical message of resistance, as in "[If We Must Die.](#)" Others, including [James Weldon Johnson](#) and Langston Hughes, brought specifically black cultural creations into their work, infusing their poems with the rhythms of ragtime, jazz, and blues.

### 1914-1919

These years marked the beginning of the Great Migration, a period between 1916 to 1970 during which millions of African Americans migrated from the South to the North to flee the economic exploitation that accompanied life as a Southern sharecropper or tenant farmer, as well as violent and pervasive racism. They sought well-paying industrial jobs left vacant in the wake of World War I, which cut off cheap immigrant labor from Europe and induced white American laborers to join the armed forces. More than 175,000 African Americans settled in Harlem alone.

## 1920–1924

The literary aspect of the Harlem Renaissance is said to have begun with a dinner at the Civic Club celebrating African American writers. The likes of [Countee Cullen](#) and [W.E.B. DuBois](#) mingled with members of the white literary establishment, and doors opened: editor and critic Alain Locke was offered the chance to create an issue of the magazine *Survey Graphic* on “Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro,” which later became a book-length study. Even before the Civic Club dinner, writers associated with the Harlem Renaissance were publishing important early works. Claude McKay’s *Harlem Shadows*, James Weldon Johnson’s anthology *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, and [Jean Toomer](#)’s *Cane* were all published in these years.

## 1925-1929

These years encompassed some of the landmark achievements of the literary Harlem Renaissance, such as Alain Locke’s anthology, *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, which included works by Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, and Zora Neale Hurston and sought to define the movement. Yet the economic boom that had allowed African American culture to flourish in the 1920s was about to end. In October 1929, a stock market crash sparked what is now known as the Great Depression. Millions were thrown out of work—and African Americans, who tended to be “last hired, first fired,” were hit especially hard. African American artists saw their audiences and support dwindle as budgets and disposable incomes shrank.

## 1930-1940

By the 1930’s, unemployment and municipal neglect had transformed Harlem. Though scholars hold differing views as to when the Harlem Renaissance ended, some point to the Harlem race riot of 1935 as a bookend to the movement. When rumors circulated that police had murdered a black Puerto Rican teenager for stealing a ten-cent pocket knife from a local store, more than 10,000 people took to the streets in Harlem. The protests soon turned violent and resulted in three deaths, 125 arrests, and more than two million dollars in property damage. Other economic factors brought changes to Harlem, and many residents moved away from the area.

Poets from the Harlem Renaissance left an immeasurable impact on modern and contemporary poetry, inspiring the Black Arts movement of the 1960s and 70s, as well as international art movements of the African diaspora, known as *Negrismo* in the Caribbean and *Négritude* in the Francophone world.