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Prompt 3: Harlem Renaissance

Harlem Renaissance thinkers, poets, writers and artists played a significant role in defining the artistic development of unique genre and style for the African American population. This was a crucial divergence from the European styles, and creation of a peculiar taste and artistic movement particular to the black community. While the overt signs of the distinction of Harlem Renaissance or arts was directly visible through the street graffiti and art in the black neighborhoods of Harlem, New York in 1920s, the major influences of the movement were subtle and built on black ideology (Wintz). The Negro identity was forged both in the political activities, indirect actions such as publications, and changes in style of music and writing.

The Harlem Renaissance art movements were developed and reinforced through publications of Black magazines (Wintz). The black owned magazines helped to create a sense of common purpose and direction. In this way, the strive to develop a unique cultural identity was nurtured. For example, the Negro World by Marcus Garvey promoted the ideals of black sovereignty and black excellence (Thompson 250). The Messenger created a sense of socialistic approach to society and helped to inform the political thought. In a bid it furthered the economic struggles of the people including advocacy for a Black labor union. In this regard, the black people were given a sense of purpose and direction on what to think or what to share about without diverting to the European renaissance or themes. As such, the booming 20s did not divert the attention of black thinkers and the artistic community to the events of the larger

American society but focused them to their cultural heritage and intellectualism. The impact was rise of other similar magazines and newspapers including Opportunity run by the National Urban League and The Crisis by National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

The poets, thinkers and writers of the Harlem Renaissance incorporated art as an aesthetic lifestyle. Rather than working in different parts, they created a central location for the celebration of the arts, turning the major cities especially Harlem to be a melting pot of their interactions. They held festivities which centered on the black issues. Among some of the methods they adopted to promote a black culture or celebrate the Negro was through reading groups, intellectual circles and theatres (Wintz). This way, they helped to harmonize the efforts of black poets, writers and thinkers in a manner that created synchrony of the issues affecting black folk (Thompson 249). For this reason, there is little divergence in their works, as there is centrality of themes including the issues of rights, common heritage and experiences of black people.

The Harlem Renaissance artists adopted the African heritage methods of art. By turning to modernist primitivism, the African Americans established black cultural music, and artistic movement (Wintz). This is true in paintings, and jazz music which have roots in Africa. While the persons who had initiated this movement were White artists, the African American artists embraced the cultural uniqueness of blacks. As the thinkers and the artists of the time took prestige in African heritage, they grew among artists a desire to borrow from the African designs (Thompson 253). In effect, many drawings by painters and artists from the black community embraced the cubism style which at this moment was becoming universally embraced. Rather than jump to the sculpting and painting styles of the European designs or artists, many sculptors

and painters in the Harlem Renaissance adopted the modernist primitivism approach. This helped to nurture an African American culture that was proud of African civilization and stories.

The development of the African American culture was through independent thought processing—a philosophy which was developed by D.E.B. Du Bois (Maru 51). The *Souls of Black Folk* by Du Bois helped to create the foundational doctrine upon which Harlem Renaissance was developed (Maru 51). The development of the black identity was part of the cultural pluralistic of the 1920s (Wintz). The cultural pluralism was developed as a method of creating a varied cultural life. As part of preserving the African American culture, the New Negro movement tapped into the basics of their African heritage. In this manner, the African heritage became part of the African American cultural identity. This can be attributed to the influence that Du Bois and Marcus Garvey had on the cultural identity of the African Americans (Maru 54). Thus, rather than ceding their culture to the rising pluralism or blending in to the pluralism, Du Bois advocated for distinction of the African American (Thompson 247). This was further advanced by the black ideology advanced by Marcus Garvey.

Further, the African American distinctiveness in art was further developed by the contributions of the social meetings. The people would meet regularly in their homes or in the black theatres to showcase art or play music. The Harlem Renaissance embraced a cultural fit of interaction between thinkers and artists. In meeting and interacting through art meetings, African Americans would share thoughts, artistic inspiration and ways of approaching different themes (Wintz). It is this robust interaction that would lead to formation of a rich and diverse African American identity that permeated arts.

The writings and influence of thinkers played a key role in shaping African American musical taste. For example, the black music of the Harlem Renaissance period later became jazz

and blues genre (Wintz). The peculiarity of blues and jazz was developed from the Negro spirituals and the emotive expression of African American poetry (Krasner 23). One of the benefits of the adoption of a black centric music was the development of records that took pride in black identity. With the endorsement of prodigious and celebrated writers such as Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer and Sterling Brown, the blues took effect as an expressive art (Wintz). The celebration of the jazz and blues arose from the appreciation of the artistic genre of the spirituals which were deeply African American. In a way, the development and adoption of jazz and blues was an intellectual protest stemming from the Black independent identity forged by intellectuals during Harlem Renaissance (Jones 37). It was a resistance to any forms of assimilation or development of bourgeoisie distaste of African American music in preference to White music.

The black identity and experiences were merged in the musical performances of Clara Smith, Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith (Wintz). These jazz and blues musicians expressed the themes of black struggle, especially the struggle of the working-class people (Jones 41). This shows the influence of poets such as Claude McKay who created a radical movement of the rights of immigrants and highlighted racial prejudice. Claude McKay's *Home to Salem* created an excellent trail for celebration of the lower social classes in Harlem. McKay as such created an influence in setting the pace for black artists and poets to critique class divide.

Another great influence on the development of black novels or writings is Neale Houston (Farebrother and Thaggert 37). Despite coming from a black neighborhood, Houston did not pander to the victimhood that many European or Caucasian writers portrayed on African Americans. Neither did she pander to reactive writings to portray the Black people as completely innocent. She rather chose to write about the experiences of black people first as humans caught up in a web of complexity and dealing with a varied culture (Önder 119). For example, in *Their*

Eyes Were Watching God, Houston developed the thought of showing sexism in black neighborhoods and struggles of one woman through successive failed marriages (Farebrother and Thaggert 41). This did not serve to curate an African American society which is a victim but rather a society has its own story. From this, Houston influenced the genres to stick to authentic narrations of experiences in art rather than strictly pandering to political thought or activism.

Besides, Houston helped to free the African American artist or creators from strictly confining themselves to political correctness (Önder 119). Political correctness had been built on the cornerstones of the European or popular styles where themes were supposed to attend to certain ends. On the other hand, she opened the conversation to issues such as feminism in Harlem as a topic. She also created the aspect of thinking about intersectionality of gender and race. This approach was new, and helped advance the liberal approach of the Harlem Renaissance beyond the scope of culture. Undoubtedly, by showing that the African American people were more than their struggle, that they had a soul, and experiences just like any other community, helped to advance Harlem Renaissance (Önder 119). This helped create a deeper understanding of the African American people. This influence of writers such as Neale Houston would be useful in the crafting of jazz music that spoke of love and gender relations among African Americans.

Further, Neale Houston played a crucial role in the development of critical stories about African Americans working class struggle in 'Men and Mules' (Mangoff 52). This novel served a key role in showcasing the struggles of the African American people. It adopted a narrative style that personalized the stories of the people in the black neighborhoods. This aesthetic style was useful in creating a new perspective or approach to life. As the novel was written from interviews, Neale uses a first-person narration which shows her authority in reporting about the

living and working conditions of her people. In a way, this narrative style breaks tradition with the overly formal third person narrative style which is European, and absolves the author of responsibility in forming or shaping opinions. The influence of Houston's narrative style influences later day scholars of the Harlem Renaissance such as James Baldwin in forming views about the issues around them (Whalan 245).

Langstone Hughes played a key role in the advancement of literature (Atmore 286). As a poet, Hughes developed a country style of addressing some of the themes in society. He also as a poet worked on showcasing the best of the African American culture. For example, he wrote poems which praised the resilience of the African American workers (Atmore 287). Further, in writing his works, he avoided the overly sentimental approach that is common among European genres in speaking about the fate of the working class (Mangoff 47).

On the other hand, Hughes influenced the African American writers to write on the experiences they witnessed without excess sentimentalism or excesses (Atmore 288). This created a break from the sentimental writings, and ushered in a style where pragmatism and humor were ingrained in narratives and in poems. Hughes's aim was to infuse satire, sarcasm and wit to the African American tales (Eyang 51). This was advancing the literal traditions of the African American oral traditions which considered storytelling or use of poems as a way of expressing the everyday life. In a way, Hughes was protesting against the European emphasis that writing styles must have meaning or any forms of art must have a deeper meaning. In contrast, Hughes was showing that art can be free and can serve the role of helping people observe the beauty in the ordinary every day life.

Langstone Hughes's poetry was majorly aimed at celebrating the lives of the ordinary. The other writings of Hughes similarly advanced the aspect of self-identity with the ordinary

people. Often these include the working-class people. He sought to portray their lives without reacting to the popular narratives of standing up to the White themes. Hughes was criticized for his portrayal of the ordinary lives by black authors, although he was creating a more realistic literature that did not seek to advocate or change views on what life is. For example, his novel, *Fine Clothes to the Jew* was criticized for showcasing the ordinary black lowlife to consist of drunkards and prostitutes (Trotman 29). This was a significant break from the advocacy-based writing that many black writers, or pro-Negro writers even among Europeans were writing. He considered that it was not useful to create sob-stories as the people lived these lives without feeling any form of affliction or racial prejudice.

Therefore, Harlem Renaissance's art developed from the influence of other writers, thinkers and poets who sought to retain an original approach to their identity. By forging a unique cultural identity, all other forms of artwork would be assuming a distinct African American style. Thus, any artistic developments or tastes cannot be attributed to one thinker or through radical changes. Rather, it is the result of experimentation with different ideas, themes and styles as proven in the varied approaches of thinkers, writers, and poets discussed.

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