Unit #4: The Changing Face of America (1890 – 1920s)

Part 3: The Harlem Renaissance
African-Americans after the Civil War

- Up until the Civil War, African Americans lived in the United States as slaves.
- After the war and the Emancipation Proclamation, African Americans had to shatter the stereotypes projected upon them by their slave ancestry.
- They were seen as individuals who were incompetent and docile, and they were viewed as an inferior race, especially intellectually.
- The nation gave African Americans this unpopular image, and unfortunately, many African Americans believed it.
Rise of the “Black Movement”

• Due to the systematic oppression that African Americans as a whole suffered from after the Civil War, many also suffered from self-hatred and low self-esteem.
• They were so devalued that they began to internalize the stigma placed upon them by the broader European society.
• It wasn't until the rise of the Black Movement, otherwise known as the Harlem Renaissance, did the African American begin to fully liberate himself from society's standards.
• It was during this period of time in the 1920s that the "New Negro" emerged and racial identity became the popular topic of many African-American authors.
Background of the Harlem Renaissance

- African American artists, writers, musicians, and performers were all part of this great cultural movement called the Harlem Renaissance.
- After World War I many African Americans migrated from the rural South to the urban North. This movement is called “The Great Migration.”
- African Americans of all ages and walks of life moved to the thriving New York City neighborhood called Harlem.
- The middle class grew quickly in Harlem because real estate finally became available to African Americans.
The Arts Flourish in Harlem

- Church groups and African American realtors were able to buy property, including the famous Apollo Theater and The Cotton Club during this time.
- As the news spread Harlem became a sanctuary for artists, craftsmen, and anyone looking to start fresh and leave the South.
- Musicians were able to cultivate their skills, and jazz and the rhythm and blues emerged.
“The Negro Was In Vogue”

• The music of the South came to the North as America discovered such African American artists such as Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, Dizzy Gillespie, W.C. Handy, John Coltrane, Marian Anderson, Scott Joplin, Duke Ellington and many more.

• Langston Hughes wrote that this “was the period when the Negro was in vogue.”
The Arts Continued...

- Black artists were thriving professionally during this time period.
- The blues were vibrantly alive, and jazz was just beginning.
- An all-black show, *Shuffle Along*, opened on Broadway in 1921, with music composed by Eubie Banks and lyrics by Noble Sissle.
- *Shuffle Along* introduced audiences to three performers soon to become famous: Josephine Baker, Paul Robeson, Florence Mills.
Literature of the Harlem Renaissance

• The Harlem Renaissance encouraged African-Americans to be proud of and celebrate their heritage.

• In autobiographies, poetry, short stories, novels, and folklore, African American writers affirmed the role of black talent in American culture.

• They focused on different aspects of black life in Harlem such as the issues of race, class, religion, and gender.
Some writers focused entirely on black characters, while others addressed relationships among people of different races.

Some writers attacked racism; others addressed issues within black communities.

A byproduct of African American writing was the affirmation that black dialects were as legitimate as standard English.
New Respect for African Americans

• Meanwhile, mainstream America was developing a new respect for African art and culture.

• Harlem drew white Americans as well. Tourists flocked to nightspots such as the Cotton Club to hear the new jazz music played by Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington.

• White writers, publishers, and patrons of the arts developed a keen interest in Harlem residents and their culture.
Alain Locke is one of the most important black intellectual leaders of this time period. He is known as the “Father of the Harlem Renaissance.” He made it his career of reshaping Black culture by bringing star writers to literary attention. Locke called for a New Negro to eradicate old stereotypes set forth by years of slavery and transform Negro Americans into a race of cultural identity and modernization. In his book, *The New Negro*, it was seen as a protest against the psychologically enslaved Negro identity that kept the African American race from being intellectually liberated.
Langston Hughes

- Langston Hughes was one of the most original and important of the African Americans writers of the Harlem Renaissance.
- He was intrigued and inspired by Harlem’s culture and activities.
- Through his writing he...
  - praised African Americans
  - embraced common people as subjects (as opposed to the wealthy people that many writers during this time were obsessed with)
  - blended elements of blues and jazz into his work.
  - portrayed nightlife and everyday experiences the people of Harlem
  - protested racial discrimination
Langston Hughes, continued...

- With his writing he supported African-American artists while they expressed their own culture.
- In 1925, he published his first poetry collection, *The Weary Blues*.
- He followed this collection with dozens of volumes of poetry, fiction, plays, and essays over the span of his career that lasted into the 1960s.
- Two of his most famous poems are “I, Too” and “The Weary Blues.”
“I, Too”

- This poem is one of Langston Hughes’ attempts to show the injustices that were occurring due to segregation and the Jim Crow Laws.
- From the 1880s into the 1960s, a majority of American states enforced segregation through "Jim Crow" laws.
- It is a protest poem that is strongly against segregation.
- It mainly shows disgust in thought that blacks are inferior to whites.
“The Weary Blues”

- This poem is influenced by the rhythm and blues music that had developed in the late 19th century by African-Americans.
- It shows sadness and has a somber mood.
- It speaks of a sense of loneliness and unhappiness and a desire of death.
Another author to emerge from the Harlem Renaissance is Zora Neale Hurston. Her stories, novels, essays, and folklore collections reflect a love of black language and manners. Hurston was one of the first writers to present African Americans as complete, multifaceted human beings.
The End of the Harlem Renaissance

- The Great Depression of the 1930s brought an end to the Harlem Renaissance.
- The depression had depleted many of the funds that had provided financial support to individual African American writers, institutions, and publications.
- This caused many of the writers who had gathered in Harlem to scatter and take other jobs to support themselves.
- However, their work planted the seeds that continued to generate important writing from the African-American experience in the years that followed..