

Conference Paper

Art as a Vehicle for Social Change: *The Harlem Renaissance*

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Abstract

The black gatherings particularly in Harlem, constituting a community with its peculiarities, thanks to the effective contributions of intellectuals and artists through a new movement called the Harlem Renaissance urging the Blacks to struggle peacefully to gain more rights. For about thirty years, African Americans used arts in their battle to dispel common stereotypes. The origins of the movement were articulated in the philosophies of some prominent figures like W. E. Dubois and Allen Locke. The black community is a reality within the U.S.A, no one can deny its rights and this thanks to the struggles it has led, and to artistic contribution which has made the USA a nation with specificities, different from white man's country of origin. It sheds light also on the work of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* to stress the continuing heritage of the Harlem. A descriptive analytical analysis based on Cultural pluralism and Americanism concepts of Franz Boas' theories of race and culture (1930) is used in this research. The aim of the study is to show the role the elites can play to improve their communities' status and the importance of art in shaping identities and giving insights for a better future. The Harlem Renaissance established the careers of many important African American writers, artists and thinkers who were influential for decades. It brought forth a body of creative cultural work that have become classics in African American and American culture. It created an ongoing interest in African American culture that continues up to this day.

Keywords: African Americans, Harlem Renaissance, New Negro movement, art

1. Introduction

From pain blossoms innovation, this is the case of Harlem Renaissance or the New Negro cultural uprising in Harlem, New York between the 1920s and 1930s. This Negro artistic and intellectual movement, reflecting national consciousness, made its appearance after decades not to say centuries of pains, sufferings and marginalization, blacks were exposed to. Not only was life in plantations in the South unbearable, but also the racism and harsh treatment in all territories of the United States, this created inside

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the African American a feeling of misery, dissatisfaction and of challenge as well. How can I get out of these inhumane living conditions I daily undergo? A black asks, simply by being courageous enough in assuming oneself and this through leaving to broader horizons in the North, specifically to Harlem, New York where a new community which members shared nearly the same beliefs, past experiences and also same prospects, was under formation, helped in this by a group of intellectuals and artists imbibed to their bones that a shift should occur not only at the level of the living conditions of the black but also at the level of the white conception vis a vis the black cause. It has been my aim in this modest study to stress the harsh treatment blacks faced since their unwilling arrival to America till the twenties, which made of them individuals apt and able to think of their case individually, forged their bold personality and this can be noticed in the different artistic outputs, mainly literary, that were widely read by whites and met positive reaction on their part. The Harlem Renaissance polemical output was in many occasions criticized. Numerous scholars debated the importance of the works produced in it and whether it succeeded as a cultural movement to serve the race and the nation. Some just think the movement was a revolt in and of culture that was manifested in a variety of forms, with black and white culture providing an index to the black and white world view. The movement though the skeptic views about it, succeeded in many fields. It constituted foundations for many artistic fields. For blacks the movement was identity. For the nation it came to put cornerstones that would later help in solving racial problems in the United States.

2. Literature Review

After the Renaissance had run its course with the collapse of the New York stock market and the ensuing worldwide economic depression, skeptic views about the renaissance prevailed criticizing its output. The criticism on the Harlem Renaissance movement tends to focus on its impact on black literature and on the African-American community. Amritjit Singh notes, in his book *The Novels of the Harlem Renaissance* that the artists involved in the Harlem Renaissance failed to develop a black American school of literature" (qtd. in Galens, 374). Margaret Perry, in her book *The Harlem Renaissance: An Annotated Bibliography and Commentary*, generally agrees with this concept, noting that the writers of this period failed to use their blackness to fullness and with total honesty in order to create that unique genre of American literature one called black or Afro-American."(qtd. in Galens, 374). In fact, though the movement came up short in terms of staying power, one cannot deny the achievements it has made. The Renaissance set the cornerstone for Modernity in Literature. The literature

of the movement, not like any previous period in U.S. history, introduced new themes and styles of expression. White literature relied heavily on the European traditions of self-expression. Most artists of the renaissance found new and peculiar sources of ideas and inspiration mainly in Africa and the South. Even at the level of themes; away from Victorian traditions, a wide variety of themes and topics were displayed; among them racial identity where the issue of color is central to many novels, essays and poems. At the level of style, many writers relied on folk dialect to express themselves in their works. Zora Neal in her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* used it in order to reflect the folktales. African Americans of the Harlem renaissance created their own symbols which go back to their roots in Africa. Many of the poetic works also were influenced by music and they used it in their works, for example, Langston Hughes used jazz and blues beats in his poetry; in the poem *The Weary Blues*, Hughes writes of a piano player performing at a club and uses the technique of repetition, a familiar technique in many blues songs. Far beyond Harlem Renaissance, one can take the example of Toni Morrison, a prominent writer in the postmodern literary scene in the U.S. She is the first African American to be awarded the 1993 Nobel Prize in literature for her novel *The Song of Solomon*. In this work, Morrison's touches continued the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance. In a very refined style, she discussed themes of race and class. Like many of Harlem Renaissance's artists she relied on African heritage to provide her with raw material for her work. Even after about three centuries from slavery and segregation, her works still stand to speak about atrocities faced by African Americans in the South. Again, like Harlem artists, Morrison used the art to serve the needs of her community. Most of her novels speak about race problems that still face African Americans in the United States. This issue proves that the foundations of literature were at least a part of the Harlem Renaissance.

3. Research Method

The paper relied heavily on the descriptive analytical methodologies for they serve the nature of the topic. It criticizes the skeptic views held against the movement. It sheds light also on the work of Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* to stress the continuing heritage of the Harlem. It also assesses the Renaissance achievements, whether African Americans succeeded in finding a new generation of African Americans who are able to put aside the color of their skin which had been once an obstacle to their prosperity, looking ahead confidently and having one aim: being an American citizen with full rights as it is stated in the American declaration of independence by Thomas Jefferson –we hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal and

that they are endowed with certain unalienable rights - life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; furthermore, it focuses on the emergence of a common awareness building up process in the daily life of the American, black or white within the whole American nation. The paper compares the Renaissance with the European one.

3.1. Song of Solomon plot summary

Morrison used many powerful metaphors in addition to the use of details in order to establish the desired tone and mood. For example, in Chapter one, to convey the fact that Southside residents tend to rely on local gossip for their news rather than on newspapers, which often ignore events affecting the black community, the narrator tells us that "word-of-mouth news just lumbered along" (Morrison, 3). To illustrate the crushing poverty of Southside residents, we see women "getting ready to go see what tails or entrails the butcher might be giving away" (idem, 3-4). In Chapter eleven, to establish the feeling of a small, rural community, the narrator introduces us to the women of Shalimar, Virginia, who "walked as if they were going somewhere, but they carried nothing in their hands" (idem, 259). The story of *Song of Solomon* involves numerous fictional and historical events. The plot focuses on Milkman's quest for his inheritance, which he believes to be Pilate's bag of gold. The novel begins and ends with scenes of flight. It moves from the present to the past, from the North to the South, from innocence to experience, from ignorance to wisdom. *Song of Solomon* focuses on the individual's need to achieve self-knowledge, identity, and visibility as a complex, real human being. Morrison, by beginning the novel *in medias res* (in the middle of things), one feels while reading that he is challenged to reconstruct the events leading up to the opening scene by piecing together fragments of stories and conversations given by various characters. Because Milkman cannot be confined by the boundaries of the community, movement is outward rather than circular from Milkman's personal perspective to the black community, to the community at large. One can imagine Milkman's life as a ripple in a pond and his experiences as creating an ever-widening series of concentric waves that touch the lives of those around him. In this way, one can conclude that Milkman is an example of a universal view of human development through the experiences of the individual; for one can realize that by following Milkman's growth and development, he is also witnessing the growth and development of the human psyche. Milkman's life represents a microcosm of one element of black experience. His story tells what it is like to be a young black male living in a white male-dominated society. Along the way, one can learn that although society creates seemingly many obstacles (such as racism); it is up to us to overcome

those obstacles and create full, meaningful lives for ourselves, using our inherent skills and talents. One also learns that how we view ourselves and our lives is more important than how others view us, and that seeing ourselves as a part of a larger community of people and recognizing that we have the right to choose our response to situations empower us to transcend boundaries. In effect, readers, like Milkman, learn that obstacles are not ever lasting barriers but can be viewed as hurdles on the path to success.

3.2. “Neither ghetto nor plantation”

In terms of both time and place, setting plays a key role in *Song of Solomon*. Although the novel spans approximately a hundred years, documenting three generations of the Dead family’s history, it focuses on Milkman’s life from birth to age 32. The novel begins in 1931 and ends around 1963. Thus it encompasses two major movements in African-American history: the Harlem Renaissance (1917–35) and the Civil Rights movement (1955–70s). The year 1931 marks the pinnacle of the Harlem Renaissance, a literary movement heralded as a golden age of black art in the United States. It also marks the rise of the “New Negro,” an articulate, sophisticated bourgeois class of intellectual blacks immersed in cultural and aesthetic pursuits, convinced that their literary and artistic achievements would elevate their social and political status in American society by demonstrating to whites that Negroes are not inferior human beings. Similarly, 1963 also marks a milestone in black history. According to Lerone Bennett (1993), in *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America*, “It was a year of funerals and births, a year of endings and a year of beginnings, a year of hate, a year of love. It was a year of water hoses and high-powered rifles, of struggles in the streets and screams in the night, of homemade bombs and gasoline torches, of snarling dogs and widows in black. It was a year of passion, a year of despair, a year of desperate hope. It was... the 100th year of black emancipation and the first year of the Black Revolution.” In other words, it was a year of the black Civil Rights movement. *Song of Solomon’s* physical setting is the Midwest, which, as Morrison notes, “is neither ghetto nor plantation.” Geographically, it moves from an unnamed town in Michigan to the fictional town of Shalimar, Virginia. Numerous clues suggest that the mysterious, unnamed Michigan City is Detroit, “the Motor City,” birthplace of the famous “Motown Sound.” Culturally, the novel’s setting moves from the industrial North, heavily influenced by the materialistic values and traditions of white society, to the rural South, steeped in traditional values and nurtured by a strong sense of history. Along the way, it takes us — via the characters’ memories or actual wanderings — to a variety of U.S. cities and towns:

Macon, Georgia; Birmingham, Alabama; Danville, Pennsylvania; Shalimar, Virginia; and Jacksonville, Florida. As Milkman sets out to discover his inheritance, the setting shifts from the North (Michigan) to the South (the fictional town of Shalimar, Virginia). This shift from North to South presents a sharp contrast between the contemporary black northern community and the traditional black southern community. It also reverses the traditional freedom trail of enslaved Africans since Milkman finds freedom not by escaping to the North but by returning to the South. Upon his arrival in Shalimar, Milkman becomes acutely aware of his estrangement and alienation from his cultural roots. By participating in the initiation rituals thrust upon him by the men of Shalimar, by listening to the children sing Solomon's song, and by ridding himself of the mental shackles that bind him to the distorted sense of white, capitalist values espoused by his father, Milkman finally learns the meaning of love and the value of history and tradition. One can note here the importance of Harlem Renaissance. The Renaissance is a source of pride for many African American writers as they go back to it in their works and glorify its legacies. One can still find the themes of identity, racism and culture existing within these works. Again the renaissance succeeded to build a common awareness that lasted till nowadays when it put the cornerstones that later shaped the identities.

3.3. Macon Milkman

Throughout the first half of *Song of Solomon*, Milkman is the sample of an immature young man drifting aimlessly through life. Having "stretched his carefree boyhood out for thirty-one years," (Morrison, 98) he is content to go "wherever the party is." Although he functions as the novel's protagonist, he is not a heroic figure – at least not for well over half of the novel. Spiritually dead and mentally enslaved by indifference and materialism, Milkman embarks on a quest for his inheritance, which he initially believes to be Pilate's gold. Instead, through a series of hard luck and coincidences, he finds himself on a spiritual quest for his identity. Eventually, he learns the meaning of grace and mercy, and he inherits the gift of flight. Although he prides himself on being nothing like his father, Milkman shares his father's materialistic values, his arrogance, his indifference, and his sexist, chauvinistic attitudes toward women. Consequently, he has no empathy for those whom he perceives as being inferior to him socially or economically, he lacks a sense of commitment to his family and community, and he is unable to sustain a loving relationship with any woman, the exception being Sweet – *after* he discovers his spiritual inheritance – but even then only briefly. Due to his indifference and lack of direction, Milkman feels pulled in several directions by the

people around him, all of whom vie for control of his life: His mother wants him to go to medical school; his father wants Milkman to join him in the real estate business; Hagar wants him to marry her; Guitar wants him to accept the Seven Days; and Pilate wants him to assume responsibility for his life and fulfill his role as a leader, as foretold by his miraculous birth and attested to by his charmed life. (Milkman's conception and birth were assisted by Pilate's voodoo. He was born with a caul and had visions that revealed the truths hidden behind the facade of real life.) Unwilling to commit himself to any one goal, Milkman rejects all options, choosing to continue his aimless drifting and cut himself off from the people who care for him. With the help of Pilate and Guitar, Milkman eventually discovers the secret of Solomon's song once he recognizes the vital link between the past and the future. His mission to find Pilate's gold takes him back to his ancestral roots, enabling him to learn the origin of his name and to reconnect with the black community – his "tribe."

3.4. The renaissance achievements

In spite of the skepticism raised by some antagonists about the movement's achievements, in my view the movement succeeded to a large extent in changing the general landscape and this by making of America a new identity detached from Europe, be it against the will of the whites. The movement reached a number of results and outcomes that lasted long after it ended and that were felt far beyond the boundaries of Harlem and Black America. Many intellectuals criticized the movement for it stressed black exoticism and was assimilationist; so it was a failure. They argued that, the white influence through patronage directed it to the primitivism, motivated by assimilationists who aimed at minimizing cultural differences between blacks and whites, and winning acceptance according to white cultural norms. Other critics stand against this view; they consider it as a step forward in asserting African Americans' culture and identity. They took advantage of white patrons and audience to promote an independent cultural movement. (Hutchison, 16). Here one can say that the movement came to prove that there is no difference between white and black in terms of creativity. Moreover, African Americans were pragmatic enough when they used patrons to serve their cause. To be concise one can say that the movement succeeded due to its interracial character and its intra-racial diversity.

3.5. Americanism and pluralism

Dubois and Allen Locke two pioneers of Harlem renaissance in addition to Cullen a white scholar were influenced in their thoughts by the writings and teachings of Franz Bois an American anthropologist whose works encouraged critical reactions towards Anglo-Saxon supremacy and legacy, and helped in the emergence of cultural pluralism. Bois advocated the greatness of West African civilizations and hence enhanced racial pride and opposed ideas of African primitivism. Being aware of the rooted nature of American racism, he was advocating assimilationism,—encouraging cultural pride and assimilationism. Both supported the movement in literature and cultural criticism to divorce American literature from English tradition, to redefine the nature of culture in the United States by 1930 Boas' theories of race and culture, which had almost no credibility before 1910 had become institutionalized throughout the cultural and political in the U.S. in reply to racist views. As concerns the tight ties between blood, soul and the formation of racial groups, he stated: — the degraded situation of contemporary African American culture could be attributed to the loss of cultural foundations that came with removal from Africa and enslavement [3]. Herkovits one of Bois students confirmed the previous citation by stating that: —the American Negro was a new racial type distinctive among human beings (idem 74) to highlight the originality of this group productions in the field of culture. Furthering his findings, Hercovits argues that this originality distinguishes the new American culture with its peculiarities:

a related equation shows up repeatedly in the Harlem Renaissance, both racism and black American culture are closely identified with what makes American culture distinct from any other. If lynching is the national crime Black music is the national music and the spirit of American is carried most authentically in the souls of black folk. The original sin of racism peculiarly identified American culture [3].

The Negro redefined himself, began to speak for himself on a national basis, it was the first time in history of U.S. that the terms Americanism and Pluralism get discussed on a race background in terms of trying to find a solution to race problem.

3.6. Why the New Negro movement is a Renaissance?

The Harlem Renaissance got its name because it reminded observers of the European Renaissance (i.e. "re-birth") that began in the 14th and 15th centuries and permanently changed European culture and society. Beginning in the cities of Italy and spreading over the next two centuries to all of Europe, this first Renaissance represented

the end of the middle ages and the start of a new period in history. The European Renaissance - which looked to classical Greek and Roman civilization for insight and inspiration - was an upsurge of culture, learning, entertainment and rediscovery of roots that showed itself in art, writing, literature, politics, technology and many other areas (e.g. social relations and warfare). In addition, people moved to the cities and started to look at themselves in a new way and many became literate. For African Americans, the Harlem Renaissance of the New Negro period was a similar period of progressive change (in how people saw themselves, where they lived, cultural expression, literature and literacy, politics and many other ways). There were some differences however. The Harlem Renaissance looked to Africa and Black American culture for inspiration and was confined to mostly (but not totally) one country and one race. Nevertheless, both Renaissances represented a period of enlightenment after a period of barbarous destruction, rediscovery of culture and a glorious past, new thinking, literateness, urbaneness, and the creation of new expressions and consciousness. The Harlem Renaissance is really a period of enlightenment for African Americans; Immanuel Kant (2013), the German philosopher says: enlightenment is really important. It is something we need to ...emphasize to, to energize. (*What is Enlightenment*), so was the Harlem Renaissance it was the source of power to many artists. The enlightenment era in Europe depended heavily on arts, Kant comments on that: [Arts are] helping us progress. They were helping us like the world better, be more at home in the world (idem). The case for Harlem Renaissance as arts was also a means for racial uplift.

It is interesting to state at the end of this chapter to note that the Renaissance was not just a literary movement but a cultural movement. This peculiar cultural movement showed the richness of African American culture that for the first time defied the white culture and proved the importance of coexistence within the United States. Americanism and Pluralism are two key concepts were stressed during this movement. When Americanism and Pluralism were adopted by the leaders of the movement, this was key pillar that later would win African Americans their freedom. 'As diversity is the flavor of life', due to the racial differences that exist make America unique. The movement succeeded in many fields and had many achievements. Moreover, the movement represents a period of enlightenment to the African American individual.

4. Conclusion

It is interesting to state at the end of this paper to note that the Renaissance was not only a literary movement but also a cultural movement. This peculiar cultural

movement showed the richness of African American culture that for the first time defied the white culture and proved the importance of coexistence within the United States. Americanism and Pluralism are two key concepts that were stressed during this movement. When Americanism and Pluralism were adopted by the leaders of the movement, this was a key pillar that later would win African Americans their freedom. The movement succeeded in many fields and had many achievements. Moreover, the movement represents a period of enlightenment to the African American individual. African American renaissance was a cornerstone in the making of American culture. The Harlem renaissance demonstrates how culture served to broaden the appeal of African Americans for their rights as American citizens, and facilitate the acceptance of black power tenets in the United States. Scholars may argue that the use of cultural forms of avocation to advance black power ideologies contributed significantly to making the movement a lasting influence in American culture – one whose impact could be discerned long after its exclusively political agenda had disintegrated. It set forth the coming movements in the United States. No one can pretend that the Renaissance did end the race problem in U.S. still, the movement, succeeded in softening relations between whites and blacks. Many politicians later who fought in the civil rights movement were inspired by Harlem Renaissance ideas. Harlem renaissance can be taken a case study for change, from which people all over the world suffering segregation and marginalization can learn. The movement had a great impact on the American culture. Until nowadays many scholars still wonder whether the Harlem renaissance influenced other movements around the world and how it succeeded in uniting blacks all over the world.

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