

Harlem Renaissance Poets
Claude McKay, Langston
Hughes, and Countee Cullen



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I believe that poetry should be direct,
comprehensible, and the epitome of
simplicity.

— LANGSTON HUGHES

World War I marked a steady increase of blacks migrating from the rural South to major cities in the North, such as Chicago and New York, looking for work and a more open racial environment. Returning African American soldiers helped raise black hopes and expectations because they wanted not only jobs but also respect after experiencing more liberal racial attitudes in Europe. Having fought for their country, blacks began to insist that their country stand up for them by ameliorating their civil rights through employment opportunities and an acknowledgment of black culture. In the 1920s, Harlem, a neighborhood in uptown Manhattan, became the creative center of black American literature, music, dance, painting, and sculpture. The artistic production that thrived during this period and in this section of New York City is known as the "Harlem Renaissance" and it has continued to be a vital tradition and presence in American cultural life.

In 1925, Alain Locke characterized this convergence of talent as the "Mecca" of creativity; in *The New Negro*, an influential anthology showcasing writers and artists, he announced that "[t]he pulse of the Negro world has begun to beat in Harlem." Locke, a Rhodes scholar with a Ph.D. from

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Harlem: *Banjo* (1929) and *Banana Bottom* (1933); however, in *Gingertown*, a 1932 collection of short stories, some of the settings are located in Harlem. McKay's writing dropped off in the last decade of his life after he published his autobiography, *A Long Way from Home* (1937), and his *Complete Poems* were not published until 2003.

While McKay did not publish any volumes of poetry late in life, his poems remain the bedrock on which subsequent protest poetry depicting Harlem life was built.

The Harlem Dancer 1917

Applauding youths laughed with young prostitutes
 And watched her perfect, half-clothed body sway;
 Her voice was like the sound of blended flutes
 Blown by black players upon a picnic day,
 She sang and danced on gracefully and calm,
 The light gauze hanging loose about her form;
 To me she seemed a proudly-swaying palm
 Grown lovelier for passing through a storm.
 Upon her swarthy neck black shiny curls
 Luxuriant fell; and tossing coins in praise,
 The wine-flushed, bold-eyed boys, and even the girls,
 Devoured her shape with eager, passionate gaze;
 But looking at her falsely-smiling face,
 I knew her self was not in that strange place.

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CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** What does the speaker think of the dancer? Is he sympathetic? Why or why not?
2. How does the speaker's language characterize the audience?
3. What do you make of the dancer's "falsely-smiling face" (line 13)? What does it say about her relationship to herself and her work?

CONNECTION TO ANOTHER SELECTION

1. Discuss the thematic significance of the respective crowds in "The Harlem Dancer" and in "The Lynching" (p. 473).

If We Must Die 1919

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
 Flushed and penned in an inglorious spot,
 While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
 Making their mock at our accursed lot.
 If we must die, O let us nobly die,

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