

# Harlem in the 1920s

Langston Hughes



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## OVERVIEW

The "Negro Renaissance," often called the "Harlem Renaissance," was a literary and artistic movement that took place in the 1920s. Centered in Harlem, an African American section of New York City, the movement celebrated African American urban culture and introduced such writers as Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Zora Neale Hurston to the general public. Langston Hughes describes what it was like to be there in these excerpts from his autobiography, *The Big Sea, An Autobiography*.

**GUIDED READING** As you read, consider the following questions:

- How did the Harlem Renaissance affect average African Americans?
  - How does Hughes define the Harlem Renaissance?
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All of us know that the gay and sparkling life of the so-called Negro Renaissance of the 20's was not so gay and sparkling beneath the surface as it looked. . . .

It was a period when every season there was at least one hit play on Broadway acted by a Negro cast. And when books by Negro authors were being published with much greater frequency and much more publicity than ever before or since in history. It was a period when white writers wrote about Negroes more successfully (commercially speaking) than Negroes did about themselves. It was the period (God help us!) when Ethel Barrymore appeared in blackface in *Scarlet Sister Mary!* It was the period when the Negro was in vogue.

I was there. I had a swell time while it lasted. But I thought it wouldn't last long. . . . For how could a large and enthusiastic number of people be crazy about Negroes forever? But some Harlemites thought the millennium had come. They thought the race problem had at last been solved. . . . They were sure the New Negro would lead a new life from then on in green pastures of tolerance created by Countee Cullen, Ethel Waters, Claude McKay, Duke Ellington, Bojangles, and Alain Locke.

I don't know what made any Negroes think that—except that they were mostly intellectuals doing the thinking. The ordinary Negroes hadn't heard of the Negro Renaissance. And if they had, it hadn't raised their wages any. As for all those white folks in the speakeasies and night clubs of Harlem—well, maybe a colored man could find *some* place to have a drink that the tourists hadn't yet discovered.

Then it was that house-rent parties began to flourish—and not always to raise the rent either. But, as often as not, to have a get-together of one's own, where you could do the black-bottom with no stranger behind you trying to do it, too. . . .

The Saturday night rent parties that I attended were often more amusing than any night club, in small apartments where God knows who lived—because the guests seldom did—but where the piano would often be augmented by a guitar, or an odd cornet, or somebody with a pair of drums walking in off the street. And where awful bootleg whiskey and good fried fish or steaming chitterling were sold at very low prices. And the dancing and singing and impromptu entertaining went on until dawn came in at the windows. . . .

Almost every Saturday night when I was in Harlem I went to a house-rent party. I wrote lots of poems about house-rent parties, and ate thereat many a fried fish and pig's foot—with liquid refreshments on the side. I met ladies' maids and truck drivers, laundry workers and shoe shine boys, seamstresses and porters. I can still hear their laughter in my ears, hear the soft slow music, and feel the floor shaking as the dancers danced.

**Source:** Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea, An Autobiography*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1963.