

Lecture



3 Lecture

The Harlem Renaissance and African-American Voices

The Harlem Renaissance was a flowering of African-American intellectual and artistic production in a range of fields, including literature. It occurred in the first decades of the twentieth century, particularly in the years after World War I, and was spurred in large part by mass migrations of African-Americans moving from the rural south to the urban centers of the North in search of economic prosperity, supportive communities, and an escape from the frequently violent racism and oppression of their homes.

It should be noted that the authors we're reading this week should not be seen solely in terms of their race. As you will read in their biographies, they related to their racial identities in diverse and complicated ways; Jean Toomer, for example, sometimes referred to himself as white and lived that way in society. Perhaps more importantly for our purposes, they were writing at the same time as the Modernist writers we have encountered in previous weeks, and responding to many of the same influences and social factors, to say nothing of being influenced by them (and providing influence in turn). It would not really be accurate to say that the Harlem Renaissance was part of Modernism, but there is certainly considerable overlap between the two movements, particularly in the openness to experimentation and new forms and the emphasis on personal experience and perception.

At the time these writers were working, slavery was still a matter of living memory for many in their community, and lynchings, segregation, and the denial of civil rights remained common experiences (and not only in the South; every major Northern city had neighborhoods where, it was understood, African-Americans were not welcome to live). At the same time, it was undeniably a time of promise and unprecedented prosperity for many African-Americans, and there was a general sense (perhaps most visible in the poetry of Langston Hughes) that progress toward true equality was inevitable. In many of the works you will read this week, there is, therefore, a considerable tension between the recognition of past trauma and the embrace of future hope. To what degree would African-Americans be defined by their past? To what degree would they gain the ability to write their own story?



3 Discussion

Choose THREE of the following questions and, for each, write a brief paragraph addressing the question and including specific evidence to support your ideas.

1. The texts this week are most obviously unified by the racial identities of the writers, but let's start by looking beyond that to the actual methods they employ. You have spent two weeks examining poetry and prose by authors identified with Modernism. Are the works this week Modernist? Choose one writer from this week's readings and compare their work directly to one writer of your choice from the first two weeks in terms of style.
2. In Richard Wright's story, how are the ideas of masculinity and race connected? Do all the characters agree about the nature of this connection?
3. Discuss the treatment of racial identity in the poetry of Hughes and Cullen. Do these two poets conceive of race and its concerns in the same way? How do they think about the future of this issue in America?
4. On the surface, Hurston's story seems to discount the idea of a deep racial divide in America. Is this impression accurate? Does it hold up when her work is examined closely?
5. Choose two of the writers from this week and discuss their use of dialect. You may wish to compare this to the treatment of dialogue in Faulkner's stories, particularly "Barn Burning."
6. Jean Toomer's *Cane* is a unique work in American literature, a novel-length collection of poetry and fiction which works together as a unified whole despite the lack of central characters who run through the entire piece. Based on the excerpts you read this week, what holds *Cane* together? What do these different pieces gain from being treated side-by-side?

Lecture



4 Lecture

An Overview of Postwar American Poetry

There is no simple way, in a class of this scope, to summarize in an effective way the history of American poetry over the last several decades. Prior to World War II, American poetry was dominated by Modernism, though there were increasing movements into schools of even greater experimentation, such as the Imagist poets. In the years after the war, however, this cohesion gave way to an explosion of diverse styles, schools and poetic impulses. In part, this may have been a response to the fact that poetry became increasingly esoteric and isolated. Few American poets today achieve the fame accorded to the best known novelists or playwrights; only a tiny minority of Americans read new poetry regularly or seriously. The reasons for this are multiple and overlapping. To a degree, the rise of recorded music simply displaced poetry, and some would argue that yesterday's poet is today's hip-hop artist or singer-songwriter.

It is possible to identify some movements in postwar poetry which have been coherent and influential. There is, for example, Beat poetry, exemplified this week by its most famous text, Allen Ginsberg's "Howl." Reacting against the conformity and consumer culture of the 1950s, the beats composed poems that were deliberately wild and confrontational, highlighting issues such as drug use and homosexuality which were rarely discussed openly at the time. In their rejection of mainstream American values the beats were heavily influential on the "hippie" culture of the Vietnam era, and they remain significant to any number of countercultural movements today.

Equally important was confessionalism, a poetic movement exemplified this week by the work of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. The confessionalists were influenced by the ideas of psychotherapy and saw poetry as a way to express their deepest innermost desires, fears, and traumas. Many of them were women, and their work frequently highlighted the sexism and oppression women were subjected to and the costs of that for the individual psyche. Plath's work in particular was frequently very dark, often using images drawn from Nazism and the Holocaust to explore her deeply troubled relationships with her father and husband. Plath ultimately committed suicide, but she remains one of the most popular American poets of any era, with her work continuing to speak for women who feel marginalized by a patriarchal society.

Those poets who do dedicate themselves to their work are frequently highly idiosyncratic in their writing, and it is possible today to find poets working in styles ranging from the highly traditional and regimented to the wildly experimental. Despite the relatively small audience, American poetry remains vibrant and richly rewarding for those who seek it out. This week's readings are intended to give you a quick sampling of this diversity.



4 Discussion

Choose THREE of the following questions and, for each, write a brief paragraph addressing the question and including specific evidence to support your ideas.

1. In our week one discussions, I asked you to consider the enduring popularity of Robert Frost. I now ask you to do the same for perhaps the only American poet of the last century who might be better-known: Sylvia Plath. Given the darkness of much of her work and the tragedy of her personal story, how do we account for the fact that her work is so widely known and remains so popular? What do you perceive to be its appeal?
2. Discuss the use of vulgarity and explicit imagery in "Howl." Is Ginsberg simply trying to shock here, or are these elements necessary in order for him to convey his desired ideas and impressions? What do you think this work has to say about midcentury America?
3. Plath and Sexton are often classed among the "confessionalists," a group of poets, influenced by psychology, who made their personal pain and suffering the central subject of their work. Many of the other poets this week are similarly explicit in making use of the deeply personal material of their lives. It is often said that "the personal is political." Choose three of the poets discussed this week and consider whether this is true for them. In other words, how do these poets make their deeply personal work relevant to the readers and to American life in general?
4. Discuss the image of the wreck in Rich's "Diving Into the Wreck." Is the wreck a symbol, and if so, what is it a symbol of? What clues in the work tell us that we are not reading a literal description of a diving expedition? In short, after reading this poem carefully, what is it about and how is it about that?
5. Poetry of the last several decades generally avoids rigid formalism; in other words, it rarely adheres to strict rhyme schemes or rhythms, let alone strictly regimented forms such as the sonnet. That said, this is still poetry, meaning that the sound of the language is significant. Choose one poem from any writer this week and read it out loud several times; you might also search online to see if you can find a recorded reading of the poem, perhaps even by the actual poet. How does reading/hearing the poem out loud change your impression of it? What is particularly "poetic" about this poetry? That is, how is it different than simply expressing the same ideas directly in prose?
6. Of all the poems we read this week, which did you feel the strongest emotional connection with and why?