

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Task: read this document and complete "Reading Review" questions. And complete directions for "Suffrage, Now What?"

## 211 A Black Writer on the Harlem Renaissance

During the 1920's, there was a cultural renaissance, or rebirth, in black culture that came to be known as the "Harlem Renaissance." An extremely talented group of writers and poets began to speak out against injustices in America and to write of the joys, sorrows, and hopes of black Americans.

Black pride was aroused by these writers and by America's growing interest in black music, art, and entertainment, especially in the Harlem area of Manhattan in New York City. Jazz music became the rage, and many black entertainers became extremely popular and famous, as did many nightclubs in Harlem. In this selection, Langston Hughes, one of the leading black writers of that time, wrote about the Harlem Renaissance.

### READING FOCUS

1. What effect did white audiences have on black entertainers?
2. According to Hughes, what was the "Harlem Renaissance" really like?
3. What effect did the Harlem Renaissance have on the "ordinary" Negro?

The 1920's were the years of Manhattan's black Renaissance. It began with the musical revue *Shuffle Along*. It reached its peak just before the crash of 1929, the crash that sent Negroes, white folks, and all rolling down the hill.

*Shuffle Along* was a honey of a show. Swift, bright, funny, carefree, and gay, with a dozen danceable, singable tunes. Everybody was in the audience—including me. People came back to see it many times. It was always packed.

To see *Shuffle Along* was the main reason I wanted to go to Columbia. When I saw it, I was thrilled and delighted. From then on I was in the gallery of the Cort Theatre every time I got a chance. *Shuffle Along* gave just the proper push—a pre-Charleston kick—to that Negro vogue of the 1920's that spread to books,

African sculpture, music, and dancing.

The 1920's brought the rise of Roland Hayes, who packed Carnegie Hall; the rise of Paul Robeson in New York and London; the booming voice of Bessie Smith on thousands of records; and the rise of that grand comedienne of song, Ethel Waters. The 1920's brought Louis Armstrong and Josephine Baker.

White people began to come to Harlem in large numbers. For several years they packed the expensive Cotton Club on Lenox Avenue. But I was never there, because the Cotton Club was a Jim Crow club for gangsters and rich whites. They did not want Negro customers, unless you were someone famous like Bojangles [a dancer]. So Harlem Negroes did not like the Cotton Club and never appreciated its Jim Crow policy in the very heart of their dark community. Nor did ordinary Negroes like the growing numbers of whites in Harlem after sundown, filling the little cabarets and bars. Formerly only colored people laughed and sang there. Now strangers were given the best ring-side tables to sit and stare at the Negro customers—like amusing animals in a zoo.

The Negroes said: "We can't go downtown and sit and stare at you in your clubs. You won't even let us in your clubs." But they didn't say it out loud—for Negroes are practically never rude to white people. So thousands of whites came to Harlem night after night, thinking the Negroes loved to have them there. They firmly believed that all the people who lived in Harlem left their houses at sundown to sing and dance in nightclubs, because most of the whites saw nothing but the nightclubs, not the houses.

Some of the small clubs had people like Gladys Bentley, who was something worth discovering in those days, before she got famous. For two or three amazing years, Miss Bentley sat and played a big piano all night long, without stopping. She slid from one song to another, with a powerful and continuous underbeat of jungle rhythm. Miss Bentley was an amazing exhibition of musical energy—a large, dark, masculine woman, whose feet pounded the floor while her fingers pounded the keyboard—a perfect piece of African sculpture, made alive by her own rhythm.

But when the place where she played became too well known, she began to sing with an accompanist, became a star, moved to a larger place, then downtown, then to Holly-

wood. The old magic of the woman and the piano and the night and the rhythm are gone. But everything goes, one way or another. The 1920's are gone and lots of fine things in Harlem night life have disappeared like snow in the sun—since it became completely commercial, planned for the downtown tourist trade, and therefore dull.

The dancers at the Savoy even began to practice acrobatic routines. They did absurd things for the entertainment of whites that probably never would have entered their heads to attempt just for their own amusement.

Some critics say that that is what happened to certain Negro writers, too. They stopped writing to amuse themselves and began to write to amuse and entertain white people. In so doing they distorted their material and left out their American brothers of a lighter complexion. Maybe it's true, since Negroes have writer-racketeers like any other race. But I have known almost all of them, and most of the good ones have tried to write honestly and express their world as they saw it.

All of us know that the happy, sparkling life of the so-called Negro Renaissance of the 1920's was not so happy and sparkling beneath the surface. But it was a period when, at almost every Harlem uppercrust dance or party, one would be introduced to various distinguished white celebrities who were there as guests. It was a period when preachers opened up shouting churches as sideshows for white tourists. 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 given much more publicity than ever before or since. It was a period when white writers wrote about Negroes more successfully (commercially speaking) than Negroes did about themselves. It was the period 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 people in Harlem 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,



Langston Hughes

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 tourists hadn't yet discovered.

complete.

#### READING REVIEW

1. (a) What effect, if any, did white audiences have on the work of the black writers and entertainers? (b) What evidence did Hughes present to support his conclusion?
2. (a) What was Hughes' attitude toward black intellectuals? (b) toward the ordinary people of Harlem?
3. (a) Why did some people feel the race problem had been solved? (b) Did Hughes agree with this assumption? Why or why not?

### **Suffrage Achieved...Now What?**

Directions: From the reading, summarize 5 reasons WHY Eleanor Roosevelt describes suffrage as an empty right. How does she argue that suffrage did not achieve the goals that women hoped it would.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

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in their labor its own reward. When it comes to giving the offices or dealing out favors, men are always given precedence.

They will ask women to run for office now and then, sometimes because they think it politic and wise to show women how generous they are, but more often because they realize in advance their ticket cannot win in the district selected. Therefore they will put up a woman, knowing it will injure the party less to have a woman defeated, and then they can always say it was her sex that defeated her. Where victory is certain, very rarely can you get a woman nominated on the party ticket.

Of course there are women all over the United States who have been elected to high and important offices. There are three women in Congress; there have been two woman governors; and women sit in various State legislatures and hold State offices. In New York City one could cite several who have not only been elected but who have conducted themselves in office with ability and distinction. But does that indicate any equal recognition of share in political power? Infinitely more examples come to mind of women who were either denied a nomination or who were offered it only when inevitable defeat stared the party leaders in the face.

When, some years ago, it came to putting women on the Democratic State Committee in New York, only two outstanding men openly approved of the move. A number were willing, but a great many more were indifferent. Governor Smith wanted women on the committee, believing they had something to contribute, and that they should have recognition for what they could do. Quite unlike Governor Smith, many other men come to mind who hold important positions of power in New York State. They deal with the women in a spirit of most deferential courtesy; but as many of us know, they heartily dislike the idea of women mixing in politics, are antagonistic to those who are active, and can be depended upon to do all in their power to render the women's influence negative.

How many excuses haven't I heard for not giving nominations to women! "Oh, she wouldn't like the kind of work she'd have to do!" Or, "You know she wouldn't like the people she'd have to associate with—that's not a job for a nice, refined woman." Or more usually: "You see, there is so little patronage nowadays. We must give every appointment the most careful consideration. We've got to consider the good of the party." "The good of the party" eliminates women!

To many women who fought so long and so valiantly for suffrage, what has happened has been most discouraging. For one reason or another, most of the leaders who carried the early fight to success have dropped out of politics. This has been in many ways unfortunate. Among them were women with gifts of real leadership. They were exceptional and high types of women, idealists concerned in carrying a cause to victory, with no idea of personal advancement or gain. In fact, attaining the vote was only part of a program for equal rights—an external gesture toward economic independence, and social and spiritual equality with men.

When the franchise was finally achieved, their interest was not held by any ambition for political preferment or honors. To learn the intricate machinery of politics and play the men's game left them cold. The routine of political office held no appeal. One of the most prominent of those early crusaders today gives her energies to campaigning for world peace. By nature a propagandist, it would be impossible to interest her in either of the major parties. Another woman, who donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to the cause, frankly admits she has never even cast a vote. She considers the situation, with women coping with men in the leading parties, utterly hopeless. Like many others, she regards suffrage as an empty victory, equal rights a travesty, and the vote a gesture without power.

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"Women Must Learn to Play the Game as Men Do"

Eleanor Roosevelt

Originally published in The Red Book Magazine 50, no.6 (April 1928): 78-79, 141-142.

Women have been voting for ten years. But have they achieved actual political equality with men? No.

They go through the gesture of going to the polls; their votes are solicited by politicians; and they possess the external aspect of equal rights. But it is mostly a gesture without real power. With some outstanding exceptions, women who have gone into politics are refused serious consideration by the men leaders. Generally they are treated most courteously, to be sure, but what they want, what they have to say, is regarded as of little weight. In fact, they have no actual influence or say at all in the consequential councils of their parties.

In small things they are listened to; but when it comes to asking for important things they generally find they are up against a blank wall. This is true of local committees, State committees, and the national organizations of both major political parties.

From all over the United States, women of both camps have come to me and their experiences are practically the same. When meetings are to be held at which momentous matters are to be decided, the women members often are not asked. When they are notified of formal meetings where important matters are to be ratified, they generally find all these things have been planned and prepared, without consultation with them, in secret confabs of the men beforehand. If they have objections to proposed policies or candidates, they are adroitly overruled. They are not allowed to run for office to any appreciable extent and if they propose candidates of their own sex, reasons are usually found for their elimination which, while diplomatic and polite, are just pretexts nevertheless.

In those circles which decide the affairs of national politics, women have no voice or power whatever. On the national committee of each party there is a woman representative from every State, and a woman appears as vice-chairman. Before national elections they will be told to organize the women throughout the United States, and asked to help in minor ways in raising funds. But when it comes to those grave councils at which possible candidates are discussed, as well as party policies, they are rarely invited in. At the national conventions no woman has ever been asked to serve on the platform committee.

Politically, as a sex, women are generally "frozen out" from any intrinsic share of influence in their parties.

The machinery of party politics has always been in the hands of men, and still is. Our statesmen and legislators are still keeping in form as the successors of the early warriors gathering around the campfire plotting the next day's attack. Yes, they have made feints indicating they are willing to take women into the high councils of the parties. But, in fact, the women who have gone into the political game will tell you they are excluded from any actual kind of important participation. They are called upon to produce votes, but they are kept in ignorance of noteworthy plans and affairs. Their requests are seldom refused outright, but they are put off with a technique that is an art in itself. The fact is that generally women are not taken seriously. With certain exceptions, men still as a class dismiss their consequence and value in politics, cherishing the old-fashioned concept that their place is in the home. While women's votes are a factor to be counted upon, and figure largely in any impending campaign, the individual women who figure in party councils are regarded by their male confrères as having no real power back of them. And they haven't.

Men who work hard in party politics are always recognized, or taken care of in one way or another.

Women, most of whom are voluntary workers and not at all self-seeking, are generally expected to find