The Historical Forces Brought about the Harlem Renaissance and Reflection on African American Literature Teaching

Yansen Xu, Weixi Song

Foreign Language Department, Bohai University, Jinzhou, China

342272322@qq.com

Keywords: the Harlem Renaissance; Negro; immigrant community

Abstract: The Harlem Renaissance suggests the enormous change in how African Americans saw themselves and their possibilities, and it also indicates a new cohesiveness in the African American community, beginning in Harlem and reaching outward. This paper probes into the main historical forces that brought the Harlem Renaissance into being and it helps students to have a better understanding of that period of history in African American literature teaching.

1. Introduction

The Harlem Renaissance is a period of remarkable creativity in literature, music, dance, painting, and sculpture by African-Americans, from the end of the First World War in 1917 through the 1920s.(Abrams, 2004)

The dating of this literary period, like the dating of all literary periods, is imprecise. Modern scholars tend to give 1915 as the beginning, and place the close of the Renaissance somewhere in the late 30s, as the Great Depression went into its worst days and rumors of coming war were increasing. The time of the Harlem Renaissance was short, but it in fact left the legacy that greatly influenced the future of not only American literature but also of America itself.

2. The Historical Forces Brought about the Harlem Renaissance

Several historical forces brought about the Harlem Renaissance into being. The first of these factors was a massive migration.

From 1890 to 1910, the Negro population in the South increased by 2 million people, while the Negro population in the north increased by only 325,000. But from 1910 to 1930, the Negro population of the south increased by only 600,000 while that of the north increased by a million and half.

What those census figures show is a mass migration of black people out of the south and into the north, with New York getting a lion’s share. It represented one of the largest migrations of a people in history, certainly in American history. And as with all migrations, it was driven by what census takers call push and pull factors, the factors pushing people out of one place and pulling them toward another.

In this case, the pushing factors were clear, and all stemmed from the racial attitudes of the South. Following and spurred on by the hated period of Reconstruction following the Civil War, white southerners determined to re-establish slavery by another name: segregation. The economic engine of segregation was sharecropping and the legal framework was the Jim Crow laws of the south, eloquently registered by Richard Wright in his “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow.” These laws, some written and some not, were all designed to separate the races: separate drinking fountains, separate places on the bus, separate eating places, separate rest rooms, separate schools, etc. Pushed on by such oppressive social practices, blacks began to migrate out of the south beginning in the 1880s, the tide growing in each generation following, and reaching an apex in the great flood of the Mississippi River in 1927, during which it was common practice for white land owners to set Negro workers out to build and maintain the levees that were meant to hold back the flood. When the

  DOI: 10.25236/cstss.2019.048

levees failed, the workers were washed away. There is no good accounting of how many lives were lost.

The pull factors are not so clear and are part practical and part idealistic. The practical factors were made up of mostly false promises of good jobs and equal treatment in the north; the idealistic factors centered on the "spiritual geography" of the nation. On one side of Ohio River, there was freedom and equality and opportunity, and on the other side, slavery and discrimination.

Like all migrations, this was accompanied by momentous social change and raised momentous questions. After the Civil War, there had been freedmen, then in the next generation freemen, but what kind of men would the next generation bring about? The answer that rang from Negro discourse was, the next generation would see the new man, the New Negro. The old Negro was the Negro who suffered and gave into poverty and discrimination. The old Negro was the Negro who wore the mask of servility. The old Negro was the Negro of white stereotypes, ranging from the so-called contented slave to the wretched freedman. He was the darky, the shuffler, the sambo... or worse, he was the bad man, the boogieman, the rapist with designs on white women.

What would the New Negro be? Whatever the old Negro was not! If America was obsessed with money, then the New Negro would not be cramped by concern for money; if the mainstream American was beset by Puritan inhibitions, then the New Negro would freely explore sensuality and sexuality; if America was filled with Philistine ignorance, then the New Negro would be educated and cultured.

The New Negro would be the opposite of everything Negroes hated in whites and hated as well in what had become of them as Negroes.

And so along with the migration there migrated an idea, a vision of new life, new being, new horizons.

Now, of course, the mere arrival of hundreds of thousands of Negroes in the north in general and New York in particular does not by itself account for the Harlem Renaissance, any more than cultural contacts during the Crusades accounts for the Italian Renaissance. What transformed the arrival of these migrants into the phenomenon we call the Harlem Renaissance?

First, here came a people out of the American South, and what did they find? For one thing they found that they weren't the only migrants. There was still, of course, a steady stream of European migrants still coming through Ellis Island and settling in New York, Jews, Germans, Italians, Poles, Czechs, and others; and there was along with that the clash of races, the struggle for position, the shifting of territories. Harlem itself had once been largely Spanish Harlem before the Negro immigrants began to replace some of the Hispanic residents. The push and shove was so great that the era was marked by race riots.

As southern blacks encountered these immigrant groups, they found that the immigrant ethnic groups were producing their own literature and other arts. The genre we know today as stand-up comedy grew largely out of Jewish comics, many of whom came from a fairly small number of square blocks in New York, and made the transition from vaudeville to film and radio and even later TV. These were the best names in the business: names such as George Burns and Groucho Marx. And similar to the black experience, many of the works of this period were not really known until later on. One such comes to mind, perhaps one of the finest works of the period but which was only recognized later and that is Henry Roth's Call It Sleep, a majestic and panoramic modernist novel of great depth and complexity.

But, secondly, the Negro immigrants from the south found they were not the only black immigrants, because there was a rising tide of immigration out of the West Indies, blacks bringing a Caribbean culture with them, a culture that shared many of the same African roots. People of West Indian background had been looked down on in the black American South. In the earliest blues, the West Indians were called "monkey men." But in Harlem, finding themselves surrounded by and pressured by the same other forces, Southern blacks and West Indian blacks began to find common ground, the nuances of each of their cultures enriching the blend.

Some scholars take 1915 as the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance. This 1915 beginning date is taken from that being the year of the production of Angelina Weld Grimke's Rachel on a Harlem

stage in 1915. Though its craftsmanship might be considered melodramatic today, its theme involved a woman who painfully comes to consciousness of the horrors of being black, horrors so great that she no longer desires marriage and children and would slay any children she would have. It was an announcement that the new immigrants meant to no longer accept their lot but to protest.

The third factor, then, can be found in the conjunction of a death and an arrival--Booker T. Washington died in 1915 and Marcus Garvey arrived in 1916, and so those years serve as the passing of a torch not only from one generation to another but also from one set of ideas to another.

Booker T. Washington, who founded Tuskegee Institute and was the author of Up from Slavery, had been, at least in the eyes of white Americans, the representative spokesman for the Negro people. President Teddy Roosevelt had hosted him to dinner at the White House. His philosophy, in possibly an oversimplified form, can be told in two metaphors that he used frequently. One was the metaphor of the hand and its fingers: he urged white Americans to consider blacks and whites as a hand with its fingers. In all matters where they could be of mutual benefit, they would work together like the hand; in all matters of social arrangements, they would be as separate as the fingers. His other metaphor had been “let down your bucket where you are.” the image came from a story of a ship caught tideless in the waters of the ocean off South America, the sailors parching for lack of fresh water. Another ship, looking from a distance, sees that they are not in the ocean but in fact in the mouth of the Amazon River, and so signals them to “let down their buckets where they are.” Washington used this to urge Negroes to accept whatever conditions they found and work their way up from there. If you think about it, his advice made sense. White American needed labor, especially menial labor; if black people equipped themselves through agricultural and technical education to provide that labor, and proved themselves competent at doing so, then white Americans would gradually change their low opinion of blacks and blacks would be more accepted and valued.

It made a certain sense but it didn’t turn out to be so. The era of what Washington promised coincided with the era of lynching. Most lynchings were not recorded, although some were celebrated even with postcards to send friends, so our figures are always low; even at that, 1918 alone showed 75 lynchings, 14 of whose victims were burned, 11 of them alive.

The failure of Washington’s promises left the Negro community, especially those who had immigrated to New York and were poised for protest, ready for new leadership, and this the flamboyant Garvey was equally poised to provide through his Universal Negro Improvement Association, with its showy parades and its stress on collective black action; and Garvey did provide new leadership until he was deported in 1927. and this shift in styles, philosophies, and leaders sparked a new radicalism among American blacks, especially among intellectuals. Out of the ferment came journals of opinion, such as the New Masses, that regularly published Negro political thought and this free expression of unpopular ideas had the effect of igniting a new feel for the future among the immigrant community of Blacks in Harlem. The political action that came from this intellectuals work can be taken as the fourth factor that brought out the Harlem Renaissance.

An immigrant community, a diaspora, needs nothing so much as some cohesion, and this came in the move toward uniting, toward finding strength in collective numbers. Already the great railways were taking travelers across America in their ullman cars, sleepers for travelers overnight. Being a porter on one of those cars gave Negroes access to other blacks all cross America, and among the first efforts to unionize black workers were the attempts to organize the porters in a Brotherhood. The shift in leadership represented the first real opportunity for collective political action, and provided one of the factors that launched the Harlem Renaissance.

In addition to the new mix of populations, especially West Indian and Southern, and the new impetus toward collective action, the fifth factor would be the World War I, an event that helped foster the Renaissance in two ways. First, formerly excluded from the American military, over 200,000 black soldiers served in World War I. having fought in Mr. Wilson’s war to make the world safe for democracy, they felt that they deserved some of the benefits of democracy when they returned. They were to be sadly disappointed. Not only did their service in uniform for their country

not register with white America, their wearing of their uniforms after their return was added to the list of things white American considered offensive behavior. But, the sleeping tiger had been awakened and was in no mood to go hungry!

The war had its effects. A number of white Americans began questioning the political "truths" they had formerly trusted, a questioning that often led to new sympathy with ethnic minorities who had been the victims of those truths. More importantly, going to war expanded the Negro people's horizons. Discovering how differently they were treated in Europe than in America, meeting blacks from Europe and Africa, made them think that their community was larger than they had thought, that they had common bonds with blacks in Africa, with whom they might share more in common than with fellow Americans who were white. With the leadership of such figures as Aime Cesaire, Leopold Senghor, and W. E. B. Dubois, these thoughts developed in to Cesaire's "Negritude" movement and Dubois' Pan Africanism. Blacks began to see themselves as part of a world culture. The new arts springing up in Europe and the so-called primitive arts of Africa were theirs to inherit, explore, and develop, as well as the arts fed by their American experience.

At the end of the war, just as the Versailles talks were going on, 16 African Americans, 20 West Indians, and 10 Africans gathered for a Pan-African Congress. The timing made it a kind of separate peace talk, a minority report on the state of the world from the black point of view. Blacks would finally, in the words of James Weldon Johnson's song that is something of a Negro National Anthem, "lift every voice and sing."

So the war both hardened Negro resolve and expanded Negro horizons, and these two factors were vital to there being a Harlem Renaissance. As Alain Locke would later write, "the wash and rush of this human tide on the beach line of the northern city centers is to be explained primarily in terms of a new vision of opportunity, for social and economic freedom, of a spirit to seize, even in the face of an extortionate and heavy toll, a chance for the improvement of conditions." (P.49, Voices)

These were the main factors that gave birth to the Harlem Renaissance: a new meeting and understanding of other blacks, a change in leadership and thus in political resolve, and a new sense of being part of a world situation.

3. Conclusion

As readers can tell from the history, black writers (and other artists and speakers) were searching for their own voice. In the Harlem Renaissance history record, students have more chances to be exposed to the black folk tradition, and that tradition would be the source of the voice black folks were seeking. That phase of history could offer a voice to Negroes that would express where they had been, how they lived, and what their dreams were.

The historical forces that brought about the Harlem Renaissance could make African-American literature learners have a better understanding of the cultural power reflected in African-American literary works and also make them realize what was there in African American culture that had allowed African Americans to survive their early ordeals on America soil and promised things to come.

Acknowledgement

The research paper is supported by social science fund project of Liaoning province (L18BWW001)

And a Project of 2018 Federation of Social Science in Liaoning province (2018lslktyb-003)

References

[1] Locke, Alain LeRoy. (2012). The Works of Alian Locke. New York: Oxford University Press.

[2] M. H. R. Abrams. (2004). A Glossary of Literary Terms. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

[3] Schultz, M. (2005).The Rural Face of White Supremacy: Beyond Jim Crow. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.