

THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE
AFRICANA STUDIES UNIT/HUMANITIES DEPARTMENT
SPRING 2006

CUB 320 sec 41611 code 0734
T & THURS, 12:30 – 1:45 pm

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course is designed to explore the socio-political environment and evolution of Afro-Americans as reflected in the literature of the Harlem Renaissance (1919 – 1939) in drama, fiction, poetry and other forms of artistic expression. Students will study the relation of the various changes taking place on the social and political scenes during the first four decades of the twentieth century. The birth of the “New Negro,” the impact of Black Art and Music first in Europe and in the United States will be treated through its literature of justification/revolt or literature of racial/ethnic promotion, cultural awareness and identity. The course will compare the works of key figures of the Harlem Renaissance such as Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer and of those undertaken by the writers of “lost generation,” such as Hemingway and Fitzgerald. New themes and forms developed by the Renaissance writers and their influence on succeeding generations will be studied.

WRITING AND THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

In this course, we will study the Harlem Renaissance in the early twentieth century. As you discover how Harlem writers during that period interpreted historical events and expressed themselves artistically, you will also develop an ability to process and communicate information through the various writing assignments. The essays, written exams, and homework assignments are not meant to make your life as a student difficult; on the contrary, they are meant to enrich your learning experience. For instance, if you memorize the main issues facing Harlem Renaissance writers, you will only know a series of facts that only allows you to recite them. But if you write an essay analyzing how a particular writer chose to express an emotion or event, then you will have mastery over a body of information, and can express your views and ideas using the information you have read. Writing about what you have read, studied, and taken notes on leads you to draw connections between materials. It pushes your thinking forward, making you a more inquisitive and critical student. Once you have a deeper understanding of the material, you can then bring in your own ideas, linking the thoughts you have today to the events that have taken place in history. And when you graduate from Hostos, your ability to write will benefit you: strong writing skills are appreciated in all fields and specializations. Whether you plan on entering the job market or a four-year college, the ability to think, write and communicate clearly and effectively will make you stand out among your peers.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

This course is designated as a Writing Intensive course. Students will be given writing assignments designed to help them improve their critical thinking and writing skills. The assignments will be comprised of both informal and formal writing on writers during the Harlem Renaissance.

Informal Writing

Informal writing is non-graded, exploratory writing, where students are asked to write about a topic without focusing on style or grammar. The point is to have students develop ideas freely and focus on content, to have them “think aloud” on paper. For these assignments, students will be asked to give their thoughts and perspectives after watching videos or listening to music or visiting historic sights related to the Harlem Renaissance.

Formal Writing

Formal writing assignments are structured assignments that are graded for both content and organization. These assignments are based on class readings, and will ask students to compare and contrast literary works, summarize ideas, and conduct research. For these assignments, students are required to submit an early draft so that the professor can read and give important feedback on improving the paper. After revising the paper, students resubmit it for a grade.

GOALS OF THE COURSE

- 1) To understand and appreciate the importance of the Harlem Renaissance in American literary history through writing intensively.
- 2) To study and appreciate how African-American folk culture informed the literature of the Harlem Renaissance.
- 3) To value Africa as a source of pride in the literature of the Harlem Renaissance.
- 4) To appreciate the influence of Black Heroes and Heroic Episodes in American History on the Harlem Literary Movement.
- 5) To learn and appreciate the outpouring of formal literary and artistic expressions among African-Americans of the Harlem Renaissance.

CLASS AND GRADING POLICIES

Students must attend class regularly and participate in class discussions. Only three absences are allowed. If formal writing assignments are not submitted on time, they will be penalized one full letter grade. Therefore, students must keep up with the readings and submit assignments promptly. Below is a description of how individual grades will be calculated:

Attendance	10%
Class Participation	10%
<i>Banjo</i> Paper	15%
Poem Comparison Paper	15%
Final Paper	30%
Final Examination	20%

TEACHING METHOD

The course will be comprised mostly of lectures, with the instructor leading classroom discussions. Sometimes, a guest speaker will attend the class to address a particular issue in the course. Furthermore, films and slides will be used to supplement readings, and provide a more comprehensive view of course materials. And as mentioned earlier, the class will use weekly informal writing exercises so that students can respond to weekly readings.

REQUIRED READING

Claude McKay, *Banjo* (1929)
Wallace Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry* (1929)
Nella Larsen, *Passing* (1929)

RECOMMENDED READINGS

- “Afro-American Writers from the Harlem Renaissance,” *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Detroit: Gale, 1987.
- Basset, John Earl. *Harlem in Review: Critical Reactions to Black American Writers*. Selinsgrove: Susquehanna UP, 1992.
- Cullen, Countee. *Color*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1925.
- Huggins, Nathan, ed. *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance*. New York: Oxford UP, 1976.
- Hughes, Langston, ed. *A Pictorial History of the Negro in America*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1983.
- Hughes, Langston. *Selected Poems*. New York: Vintage Books, 1987.
- Hull, Gloria T. *Color, Sex and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance*. Bloomington; Indiana UP, 1987.
- Johnson, James Weldon. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.
- Johnson, James Weldon. *The Book of American Negro Poetry*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace and Javonovich, 1983.
- Lewis, David. *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*. New York: Viking, 1994.
- McKay, Claude. *A Long Way from Home*. New York: Arno Press, 1969.
- McKay, Claude. *Harlem Shadows*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1993
- Toomer, Jean. *Cane*. New York: Liveright, 1993.

COURSE OUTLINE

Week 1

1. Overview of the Early American Poets and the Generation of P.L. Dunbar.
2. Harlem Renaissance – terms, parameters, and historical aspects.
3. Discussion of the “New Negro.”

Week 2

1. Precursors of the Harlem Renaissance.
2. James Weldon Johnson, between the past and the present – the New Poets and their audience.
3. Discussion of Claude McKay (*If We Must Die*).
4. Discussion of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*.

Week 3

1. America and the Black Harlem Writers.
2. Discussion of *The Blacker the Berry*.

*Poems for Poem Comparison Paper Due

*Discuss Chapters I-VIII of *Banjo*

Week 4

1. Art or Propaganda?
2. A view of DuBois, McKay, and Alain Locke.
3. Literature “engagee.”
4. Discussion of Countee Cullen.

*Background information on poems due

Week 5

1. Harlem as seen by writers of the period.
2. Discussion of *Home to Harlem*.
3. *Harlem Dancers* and other poems.

*Discuss Chapters IX-XV of *Banjo*

*Outline of similarities and differences between poems due

Week 6

1. McKay’s *Militant Lyricism, Primitivism and Civilization*.
2. Discussion of *Harlem Shadows* and *Banjo*.

*Poem Comparison Paper due

Week 7

1. Africa and the Harlem Renaissance writers.
2. Images of Africa in the works of McKay, Cullen, Hughes, etc.

*Final Paper Topic is due

Week 8

1. “Back to Africa” movements.
2. Discussion of Marcus Garvey and his enterprises.

*Discuss Chapters XVI-XXV of *Banjo*

*Half-page summary of *Banjo* due

Week 9

1. Inter-racial love and “Passing.”
2. From McKay and Cullen to Jessie Faucet and Larsen.
3. Discussion of *Passing* by Nella Larsen.

Week 10

1. Christ and race in Countee Cullen’s Works.
2. Religion and God in the Harlem Literature.
3. Discussion of *Christ Recricified*, and, *Pagan Prayer*.

*Banjo Paper due

Week 11

1. Comparison and contrasting the literary movement of the Harlem writers with the “Lost Generation”: McKay, Cullen, Toomer, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald.

*First draft of Final Paper due

Week 12

1. The symbolism and mysticism of Jean Toomer.
2. The Harlem writers and the Christian Church.
3. Return to the sources in Toomer’s *Cane*.

Week 13

1. Langston Hughes: poet of the masses.
2. Discussion of *The Weary Blues*, *Night Funeral in Harlem* and *Simple*.

*Final Paper 1st draft returned

Week 14

1. From racial romanticism to jazz.
2. The theme of “Black is beautiful.”

Week 15

1. Review of other writers of the Harlem Renaissance.
2. Evaluation.

*Final Paper 2nd draft due

*Final Examination

POEM COMPARISON

Assignment

You must compare and contrast two poems that were written during the Harlem Renaissance (1910-1930). One poem will be “America,” by Claude McKay, and the other poem will be of your choice, one that you feel speaks to “America,” either agreeing or disagreeing with it. To find the second poem, students should go to the library or ask the professor for assistance. To complete this assignment, students should follow the steps below.

- Step 1: Find one poem written by a Harlem Renaissance writer.
- Step 2: Provide background information on both poems. In paragraph form, write the following:
- a. Author
 - b. Date written
 - c. Race/ethnicity of the author
 - d. Sex of the author,
 - e. Do you consider this poem to be part of the Harlem Renaissance? Why or why not?
- Step 3: Identify what you find striking about each poem. In other words, write about what grabs your attention in each work.
- Step 4: Identify similarities between the poems, and provide examples with quotes or paraphrasing.
- Step 5: Identify differences between the poems, and provide examples with quotes or paraphrasing.
- Step 6: Provide your assessment of each poem, giving your opinion on each poem.

In addition to direct quotes and summaries, you must include ideas from lecture notes, class materials, and readings from class to support your interpretation of the poems. This paper must be typed, double-spaced, and between four and six pages in length.

Due Dates:

- Week 3: Second Poem due.
Week 4: Background information due.
Week 5: Outline of similarities and differences due.
Week 6: Final draft of Poem Comparison Paper due.

THEME ANALYSIS

“Negroes are never so beautiful and magical as when they do that gorgeous sublimation of that primitive African sex feeling.”

Claude McKay in *Banjo*, 1929:105

Assignment

Using the McKay’s ideas of the instinct/primitive, and reason/civilization, explain what the above quote means. In doing so, compare and contrast McKay’s concepts of instinct/primitive with reason/civilization. In doing so, you must discuss the characteristics of a life lived according to instinct/primitive, and a life lived according to reason/civilization. Also, explain which lifestyle McKay thinks is better, and which race group he assigns under each category. In discussing these issues, you must support your answers with examples from the text, and state whether you agree or disagree with these issues.

In *Banjo* (1929), McKay also frames race and sex in terms of both instinct/primitive and reason/civilization. What are the characteristics of the instinctual approach to sex? What are the characteristics of the reason-based approach to sex? Which group does he assign under each category? Which of these approaches to sex does McKay think is better? Support your answers to these questions with examples from the text.

An issue students must also address is the negative and positive consequences of such designations. In other words, students must explain how being designated as instinctual/primitive leads to both positive and negative portrayals by the general public. Furthermore, students must describe how such portrayals affect the everyday lives of the instinctual/primitive group.

Only a small part of this paper should be directed towards summarizing the novel. Make sure that the examples you provide clearly support your answers. It is not enough to provide an example and say that it supports your answer. You must state *how* it supports your answer.

In addition to direct quotes and summaries, you must include ideas from lecture notes, class materials, readings from class to support your interpretation of the novel. Students must also include their opinion of the novel: “How did you feel about McKay’s overall argument?” While an evaluation of McKay’s conceptualization of instinct/the primitive and reason/civilization consists of describing what the author was attempting to do, your opinion of the work should be an evaluation of McKay and his ideas. This paper must be typed, double-spaced, and four to six pages in length.

Due Dates:

Week 3: Read chapters I-VIII of *Banjo*.

Week 5: Read chapters IX-XV of *Banjo*.

Week 8: Read chapters XVI-XXV of *Banjo*; a half-page summary of *Banjo* is due.

Week 10: Final draft of *Banjo* is due.

Final Paper: A Journey Through a Harlem Institution

Background

Pretend that you are a Harlem Renaissance writer and you have been transplanted from the early twentieth century to Harlem today. You take a stroll through Harlem, observing the sights, sounds, and people. Afterward, you decide to write your final essay on a Harlem institution, detailing your thoughts about that particular institution's past and present. The institution is in one of the following categories: religion; art; or the performing arts (music or dance).

Assignment

As you reflect on your observations, write about the differences and similarities between that particular Harlem institution today and its Harlem Renaissance form. When you describe the early twentieth century Harlem institution, you must cite your work, using the observations and descriptions of the writers during that period. Your description of the Harlem institution today must be based on actual field observations (you must actually visit this institution). Observe this place as though you are walking in the shoes of the Harlem Renaissance writer you have chosen, as though their hearts and minds and eyes have become one with your own.

The goal of this Harlem journey is to determine whether that particular institution's cultural role in the Harlem Renaissance remains. In other words, you must determine whether the cultural institution Harlem Renaissance writers once described still exist and function, or are characterized by new forms. To accomplish this, you can visit various places – the Cotton Club, The Apollo Theater, or a Harlem Church. You can also walk down 125th Street, 145th Street, and Convent Avenue. To make this easier, you can sign up for one of the many Harlem walking tours that are available (for more information on Harlem walking tours, you can visit http://www.harlemheritage.com/walking_tours.shtml). In the end, describe whether you are content or disappointed, whether that institution continues to fulfill the promise of the Harlem Renaissance as you, the writer, perceive it.

Field Notes

As you visit Harlem and observe its cultural and social institutions, make sure to write field notes. In other words, write your observations in a notebook and pad. After an hour or two of walking, and visiting various Harlem sites, taking field notes will ensure that you remember your observations. Although not graded, these field notes must be submitted with the assignment.

Requirements

1. Write the paper as though you are a Harlem Renaissance writer (choose one).
2. The paper must be typed, double-spaced, and between five and eight pages.
3. The paper must be cited properly and have a bibliography.
4. Submit your field notes along with the final draft.

Due Dates

Week 7: Final Paper topic due.

Week 11: Final Paper 1st draft is due.

Week 13: Final Paper 1st draft will be returned.

Week 15: Final Paper 2nd draft is due.

Informal Writing for the Harlem Renaissance

1. A visit to the “Cotton Club” in Harlem during the day or at night. Observe the environment, the décor, and entertainment activities (if any). Write down your impression and judge if what you saw agreed with the reputation of the club.
2. A walk through the center of Harlem observing the landmarks and historical buildings dating back to the Harlem Renaissance. Describe whether they each have a defining feature or quality that makes them “Harlem Renaissance” structures.
3. Listen to Langston Hughes recite his poems and then write on a particular poem that interests you. Describe how the personal rendition of the poem adds to your understanding and appreciation of the poem.
4. Write your impression of the African presence in the Harlem Renaissance. How do these writers connect or disconnect with Africa?
5. From your reading and our discussion of Marcus Garvey what does Africa mean to you? Describe the particular idea that affects your perspective.
6. In *Blacker the Berry*, Wallace Thurman discusses the problem of “Black on Black” crime. Do you feel his portrayal is accurate? Why or why not?
7. What cultural factors drive Jean Toomer’s obsession with criticizing Blacks?
8. Pretend a classmate missed the class. Write the classmate an email describing the lecture on inter-racial love and passing. Be sure to describe your agreement or disagreement with particular ideas.
9. Discuss whether you agree or disagree with Claude McKay’s portrayal of Blacks and Whites in *Banjo*? Remember to write one or two reasons to support your view.
10. Describe whether your feelings for this country match the views of Claude McKay in his poem *America*.
11. Discuss if the term “Black is beautiful” continues to have significance in today’s Harlem community. Why or why not?