



Night Life in the Harlem Renaissance

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Introduction

The nightlife of the Harlem Renaissance is something that is essential to the atmosphere and the culture. People went out at night to capture the essence of the Harlem Renaissance; this is when the cabarets were open, the shows were happening, and the streets of Harlem were anything but asleep. In this catalogue we will investigate and explain the nightlife from three different perspectives. Those perspectives are the poetry representing the nightlife, the musicians and the fashion of the nightlife. While they each have their own individual contribution, they come together to portray the nightlife and what it meant for the people of the Harlem Renaissance. In all aspects of the Harlem Renaissance, the nightlife represented release and/or freedom for the individuals that were experiencing it.

One venue that the nightlife can be seen through is the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance. From Claude McKay to Langston Hughes, there is a sense of freedom and release. The poetry of the nightlife does not just stick to the obvious idea of the party scene, prostitutes and parties, but it gives a much better-rounded outlook. You can see the church scene of the nightlife, the party scene from a general point of view, the perspective directly from a dancer, and the scenes where the blues was portrayed. The poetry scene shows the

diversity in the arena of the nightlife and it depicts why people went out; to get away from their daily lives and break free, even if just for a couple of hours.

The second place that we will look at the Harlem Renaissance nightlife from is the life and music of the musicians of the Harlem Renaissance. The musicians of the Harlem Renaissance were not only celebrities you'd watch at night or listen to on the records; they were cultural leaders igniting the passion behind the movement we know today as "Harlem Renaissance." Music thrived during this time as an outlet to inspire and encourage black people to defy what standards were wrongfully implemented and enforced by the white people. "The Negro musicians of America are playing a great part in this change... They are not hampered by conventions... and with their new ideas, their constant experiment; they are causing new blood to flow in the veins of music" (Lewis 56). The people went to the Harlem clubs to release their anger and suppression in the world to create unity and embrace the love among their race. It was a new world when they'd enter and hear the vibrant rhythms or the deeply passionate voices serenade the audience. The musicians made more than music to dance to, they made driven spirits and encouraging beliefs that change is coming.

The final perspective that we will look at in regards to the nightlife is that of fashion. During the Harlem renaissance when African-Americans, especially women were limited by society, fashion served as a complex mode of freedom and self-expression. Dependent upon class and geographical location the styles of dress represented the desire to integrate with major society as well as be free of social constraints. However, even at night you saw that women were much freer in their apparel and dressed to get away from their normal life. "That brown girl's swagger gives a twitch to beauty like a queen; Lad, never dam your body's itch when loveliness is seen." (Cullen) While the idea of constraints in fashion was

there, there were so many people that broke it throughout the venues of the nightlife that it continues to show the level of freedom that the nightlife brings.

In conclusion, the nightlife in the Harlem Renaissance was one of great diversity and different experiences. One person could be going to church in a long skirt and a blazer, someone else could be going to the club in a nice dress to be listening to the sweet sounds of Duke Ellington, while another barely getting dressed at all going to be the focal point in a club. Regardless of which scene one was attending, people were going out to look for something. They were going out to step away from the struggles of the day and gain an opportunity to feel free and release the pains or struggles of the day. The nightlife was the scene and freedom and it was something that essential to the atmosphere and lifestyle of the Harlem Renaissance.

Poetic Verse of The Night life



By: Chelsea Yardborough

When one thinks of the nightlife in any setting, a club scene with dancing, scandalous girls, and a huge party scene is what automatically comes to mind. In addition, you think of men coming for a show, drinking, and interacting with the women in more than a friendly way. This is the nightlife as we know it. While this aspect of the nightlife was very dominant in the research on depictions of the nightlife through poetry in the Harlem Renaissance, there were other aspects as well. There was a nightlife scene that took place in church, where people would pray for a better tomorrow and praise for the victories that they had experienced already. There was also a club scene that wasn't as raunchy as one would think; where it was more listening to music and socializing then dancing and grinding with one another. All of these different arenas represent the nightlife of the Harlem Renaissance and they each contributed greatly to the atmosphere of the time. While each aspect was different from the other atmosphere and overall scene, there was a common theme: freedom and release. Whether they were at the club dancing their pain away or at church praising it away, the aspect of the nightlife portrayed in poetry is that of release and freedom into a different world. These portrayals can be seen in both images and poetry. The nightlife that the poets portrayed is a place where those experiencing it can get away from their day and release, feeling a sense of freedom.

"The Harlem Literary Renaissance was a sustained search throughout the literary medium to discover an image which migrant Negro Americans could accept and use and which white city Americans would accept and use. It was a search for an image on the basis of which both races could conduct their lives with some comfort and assurance."¹ I would add to this statement and say that it wasn't necessarily a place of comfort but an aspect of a release. The nightlife the authors talked about spoke of all of these levels of being able to

¹ Keller, Frances Richardson. "The Harlem Literary Renaissance ." *The North American Review* 253.3 (1968): 29-34. JSTOR. Web. 2 Dec. 2011

come out and do something, change something, or be something that you necessarily weren't. As this statement says, the literary movement in itself was something that aided in giving a voice to black Americans that they didn't have at that scale before the movement began. This was not to say there were no black artists, poets, etc. before the Harlem Renaissance, but this was the time that the movement became more spread and more widely known. This is important to touch on because these poets and artists were a part of the nightlife themselves. They were not speaking of some distance idea that they had heard of but they were speaking from a place of knowing. Therefore the sense of release and freedom found in the poetry can be confidently trusted to represent the reality of the nightlife of that time.

As stated before, there were three main venues that were discussed in the Harlem Renaissance poetry about the nightlife. The most dominant was the party scene. Without digging deeper, one could even get the impression that this was the only aspect of the nightlife that was there because of the high volume of content that can be found on it. Even within the party scene, there are different depictions. Langston Hughes gives a look into the party scene in his poem "Red Silk Stockings". In the poem he is describing a female that is dressed to impress in a short dress and red silk stockings. Red is often associated with heat and lust, and silk is a showy material; it's expensive and it is very distinct from most other materials. In the poem he says, "Put on yo' red silk stockings, Black gal. Go out an' let de white boys Look at yo' legs." This is clearly a club scene where all attention is on this girl that has on this stand out outfit. What is interesting is the idea of white people being in attendance at what would be deemed the "black" club. Later in the piece it talks about her skin color and how she was light skinned. This shows the appeal of lighter skinned people in the club, according to Hughes. Although she is clearly a show girl, there is still a release

and sense of freedom in this depiction of the girl of the nightlife. She is able to be free and dance how she wants. If she had a hard day, this is her release and whether or not we deem it as right, she is able to release her day. Some would argue this isn't freedom because she has to dance for people, but really it's the aspect of release and the internal freedom that follows the release.

Claude McKay's poem, "Harlem Dancer" allows for deeper insight into the dancer and what the release for them may be. "The wine-flushed, bold-eyed boys, and even the girls, Devoured her with their eager, passionate gaze; But, looking at her falsely-smiling face I knew her self was not in that strange place." Initially, one's instinct would be to feel bad for her, but in thinking of release and freedom, she is gaining that as well. While she is falsely smiling, she is able to leave the place that she doesn't want to be for a while. She may not want to be dancing up there, but as those watching her are forgetting about their day, she is able to take herself out of that place. This image is depicted well in James Van der Zee's "Harlem Dancer." The girl in the picture looks as if she has on a costume, allowing her to step into a different world and escape reality for a while. While it may be a different idea of freedom than the general body would like to experience, escaping from reality is still freedom nonetheless and this was an important aspect of the night life of the Harlem Renaissance. Her outfit is so elaborate, that it would almost be difficult for her to maintain a sense of self, unless this is what she wore day in and day out; which we know not to be the case. This was the wardrobe of the dancers of the night.

Another poem that talks about the party scene of the nightlife is "Jazzonia" by Langston Hughes. "In a Harlem, cabaret six long-headed jazzers play. A dancing girl whose eyes are bold lifts high a dress of silken gold." This poem gives us more of the scene of the party, while including the girl in it, while "Red Silk Stockings" focused on the girl more than

anything else. However, similar to Hughes' previous piece the girl is dancing and is a focal point of the piece. Regardless, this still gives us a larger scene of the night life because of the jazz musicians (jazzers), which gives a more visual image. The language used also portrayed this sense of freedom. By definition, whirling (as seen in the final stanza) means to revolve rapidly around a center or an axis. The poem talks about a whirling cabaret, meaning that it was rapidly moving and centered on something. I think physically it was around the people, however metaphorically the center of the cabaret was freedom and a release of the day.

The mental image that one gets while reading Hughes' piece was well captured in Archibald Motley's painting, "Sugar Shack". The painting gives us a picture of the party scene and shows a large group of people just having a good time. There are musicians playing, people dancing, and right in the center a woman with her skirt pulled up and dancing. There is also a level of chaos in this piece that shows the atmosphere of the party. There aren't organized dancers or everybody doing the same thing. It shows that everybody was doing their own thing a lot of the time and that that was great because it was an individual release, contributing to a greater environment. Also, in a lot of the movement of the dancers their arms are lifted above their head, portraying a letting go. There was freedom in movement and dance. The party scene in the Harlem Renaissance showed a sense of freedom that we don't always think of; one to be yourself or to go as something completely outside of yourself and still have a good time for the night.

Another aspect of the nightlife in the Harlem Renaissance was the blues scene. One could find the blues in the club sometimes, however there was another scene where people would come to just listen and hang out over the blues. One of the most famous female blues singers was Gertrude Pridgett, more famously known as Ma Rainey. "O Ma Rainey, Sing yo'

song; Now you's back Whah you belong, Git way inside us, Keep us strong. . . . O Ma Rainey, Li'l an' low; Sing us 'bout de hard luck Roun' our do'; Sing us 'bout de lonesome road We mus' go. . . ." This quote came from Sterling Brown's poem, "Ma Rainey", talking about the legend and how she affected people that were able to come and here her sing. There isn't talk about people dancing and jumping, but its people sitting down and listening to what Ma Rainey has to say. It is almost as if she is teaching through her music because she is able to relate so well to the people that she sings to. This was an important part of the nightlife. As previously stated, the Harlem Renaissance wasn't a time of pure bliss. It was a very difficult time to be a black person in America, so for those that were living the everyday life of a black American, it was encouraging to hear somebody singing about things that they could relate to.

According to a study done on Ma Rainey, "Rainey's talent was that she spoke for the women in her audiences in a way which enabled them to identify directly with her... but Ma Rainey also appealed to men, who have been particularly vocal about her."² Blues was a different scene, in that people came to empathize with one another and the singer's job was to draw them into a world that showed that they weren't alone in their issues. By experiencing the singer's release and talk about what was going on with them or what they have experienced in the past, it allowed for an inner release for those in the audience. This then was a precursor to a strong sense of freedom. The freedom came in understanding the trials of the time, but still being able to pick yourself up. Ma Rainey was just one aspect of the blues, but as seen in Sterling Brown's piece she affected and touched a lot of people.

The final depiction of the nightlife seen through poetry that will be discussed is the church. This is the most unique scene of the Harlem Renaissance nightlife, simply because

² Lieb, Sandra , and Paul Oliver. "Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey." *Popular Music* 3 (1983): 329-331. JSTOR. Web. 5 Dec. 2011.

it is often not talked about or thought of. Most would never think of the church as an aspect of the nightlife, however many would flood to the churches at night for prayer or worship services as a means of dealing with the hardships of life. In Countee Cullen's poem, "From the Dark Tower", it says "We shall not always plant while others reap. The golden increment of bursting fruit, not always countenance, abject and mute, that lesser men should hold their brothers cheap; not everlastingly while others sleep shall we beguile their limbs with mellow flute, not always bend to some more subtle brute; we were not made eternally to weep." While initially it is difficult to see why this would relate with the nightlife in the realm of the church, after understanding the role of the church it becomes more apparent. The church is a place of refuge that allows for people to connect with a higher being: God. By believing in God, there is a sense that God is in control of everything and that in the end everything will work out for the good of the people that are faithfully serving Him. Therefore, church is a place of freedom because it is a place to come and leave burdens. While this is not the obvious form of the nightlife, many would spend their nights in the church praying for a better tomorrow and releasing all of their problems in order to feel a sense of freedom and purpose once they left.

One cannot look at the church scene without examining the image of "Holly rollers" by Archibald Motley. He displays people waving their hands, singing and dancing. The only words on it were Jesus Saves, which gives the center of the piece being the freedom that is seen is within Jesus. With that knowledge, one should feel free and be able to go through their lives with joy because of that fact. The line in Countee Cullen's poem that says, "We were not made eternally to weep," goes directly with this sentiment of church. Instead of going home and wallowing in your pain and the trials and tribulations that the day brought, especially for black people, they went to church to praise it off. They may have wept, but

the point is to go forth with freedom and happiness. Cullen portrays that you should not be weeping, and the point is driven home in Motley's "Holly rollers." Church was the nightlife scene of spirituality and coming to create a change, as opposed to just partying for release or listening and empathizing to the blues.

In conclusion, there is no one night life of the Harlem Renaissance that was suggested through the poetry of the time. One could experience the woman with the red silk stockings of Langston Hughes or the dancer from Claude McKay's piece. That same night, someone could be in the church or listening to the sweet sounds of Ma Rainey explains the blues to those that are in the audience. However, wherever one went, there was an opportunity for a release of the day's issues and a freedom to envelope oneself in the atmosphere that was presented. This suggests that there was a need for a release. While the Harlem Renaissance is often glorified as this time of creative glory for African Americans, there were still a lot of issues going on. Racism was incredibly apparent in America and the days were hard; this period of time being early civil rights movement. The people of the Renaissance clearly needed a place to go when the days ended that would allow for them to leave their problems there and gain enough strength to go into the next day. Some were in church while others at the club; regardless, they all had an arena to let go of whatever they were holding in throughout the day and have a good time. This is exactly what the poetry portrayed; a release. Therefore, the nightlife that the poets portrayed in the Harlem Renaissance was one of freedom and release.

The Legacy of the musicians



By: Kathryn Farmer

The musicians of the Harlem Renaissance were not only celebrities you'd watch at night or listen to on the records; they were cultural leaders igniting the passion behind the movement we know today as "Harlem Renaissance." Music thrived during this time as an outlet to inspire and encourage black people to defy what standards were wrongfully implemented and enforced by the

white people. As the famous orchestra conductor, Leopold Stokowski, said, "The Negro musicians of America are playing a great part in this change... They are not hampered by conventions... and with their new ideas, their constant experiment, they are causing new blood to flow in the veins of music" (Lewis 56). The people went to the Harlem clubs to release their anger and suppression in the world to create unity and embrace the love among their race. It was a new world when they'd enter and hear the vibrant rhythms or the deeply passionate voices serenade the audience into a place they owned. The musicians made more than music to dance to, they made driven spirits and encouraging beliefs that change is coming.

Stokowski's words are emulated through the painting, "Jammin' at the Savoy" by Romare Bearden. This painting depicts a vibrant atmosphere of a band energetically jamming out to the music they're creating. The array of colors gives the viewer an assumption that this transcends a lively enthusiastic band that would encourage anyone then and now to get up and dance, to do something about that beat. The movements from each musician show that they too feel the music in their veins, perhaps letting the music take over and experiment with the moment. Cubism is a very different and unique form of art, and using that style for this painting gives depth to the meaning behind it. It goes with what Stokowski said, that the musicians brought change and a "new blood to flow in the veins of music." Their rhythm was as experimental and culturally changing as cubism was for art. There is nothing conventional in the portrait depicted in Bearden's painting. It defines the characteristics that the musicians brought to the life in Harlem Renaissance. While there are numerous influencing musicians of that time, two pioneers who strongly helped shape the civil rights movement and brought spirit to Harlem were Bessie Smith and Duke Ellington.

Born and raised in the South, Bessie Smith came a long way to become one of the most influential jazz singers in history. She was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee in 1894 into a poor family. The details of her family size and early childhood are unclear as is in most cases with black people of her time. Her father died soon after her birth and her mother passed away when Bessie was about eight years old (CSI). After the deaths of both of her parents, she along with her other

siblings was left in the care of her older sister. To provide money for the family, she and her brother, Clarence, performed in the streets; Bessie sang while Clarence played the guitar. Even back then, Bessie Smith knew how to make a crowd stop and listen.

In 1904, Clarence left home to accompany in Moses Stokes' travelling show and left Bessie at home because she was still just a young girl. Twelve years later, Clarence set up an audition for Bessie with the group. This began her long road to fame moving around to different travelling groups and shows and even her enduring relationship with Ma Rainey who influenced Smith as a mentor. Bessie Smith's real big break didn't come until 1923 when Columbia, a recording company, brought her up to New York City. It was because of Ma Rainey that Columbia created separate division for "race" records, which gave room for Bessie Smith's voice. She came at the time when Columbia was on the verge of bankruptcy, but because of her success with her first and second records, she saved the company from collapsing. "Down Hearted Blues" sold over 780,000 copies. This launched the decade where Bessie Smith earned the legacy of "Empress of the Blues."

Bessie Smith was known for her hot temper, powerful determination and strong will. All of this was shown in her lyrics and voice as she expressed the sorrows of her time for not only herself but for the black people. She became a leading figure in the Harlem Renaissance as she "defied racial barriers through the force of her indomitable personality and self-confident artistry" (NWEncyc). The tales in her blues songs expressed the painful reality of the underclass black people during that time. When Bessie Smith performed, she sang with passion, truth and confidence making any listener pause and feel the pain with her.

One of her songs that easily exemplifies Smith's personality is "Ain't Nobody's Business If I Do." Lyrics alone, this song shows the strength and fearless ambition of Smith that no one can even try to stop. The beginning says it all, "There ain't nothing I can do/Or nothing I can say/That folks don't criticize me/But I'm going to do/Just as I want to anyway." While she is speaking up for herself, she is addressing this message to the African Americans as well. While white people put down and harass all that black people do, they need to ignore the white peoples' ignorant criticism

and do as they want to succeed. Throughout all of Bessie Smith's songs, she encompasses all of the soulful power and courage that Countee Cullen portrays in his poem titled "Harlem Wine".

This poem is known still for depicting the "African American creative energies balked or discounted because of racial discrimination" (Lewis 242). The words and meaning of this poem sync perfectly with the attitude and persona Bessie Smith radiated in the Harlem Renaissance. "Harlem Wine" is about the inner strength within the black people. "Harlem Wine" represents the black man's blood. The second stanza might as well have been made specifically for Bessie Smith. It cites, "This is a wine that must flow on/Not caring how or where,/So it has ways to flow upon/Where song is in the air." In Carl Van Vechten's portrait of Bessie Smith, the words of Countee Cullen speak truth to the fire within her presence. She looks confident and strong-spirited. Nothing can get in her way so she "must flow on not caring how or where." This is the legacy Smith left to the Negroes in the Harlem Renaissance. This poem also encompasses the theme of the black people's culture and music as an outlet to inspire their individuality and pride. That is exactly what Smith did with her music; she preached the necessity for blacks to rise above and bring the change needed for equality and respect through her soulful voice and deep impacting lyrics.

Bessie Smith was among the most influential musicians of that time because she wasn't afraid to test the norms and prove them wrong. She created a new energy that lifted the Harlem Renaissance into the historically significant era, not only for the black population, but for America as a whole. Specifically Bessie Smith was known for her passion when singing. In her 1924 poem, "To Usward," Gwendolyn Bennett wrote, "But let us break the seal of years/With pungent thrusts of song/For there is joy in dried tears/For whetted passions of a throng." This is exactly what Smith did during the 1920s; she broke "the seal of years with pungent thrusts of song." She sang about the troubles and pain from within giving Negroes the courage to start speaking their opinions and to use their "dried tears" to fight for joy. Another photograph by Carl Van Vechten depicts Bessie Smith with her eyes closed and an expression on her face that shows the vigor and emotion swelling

inside her. Bessie Smith went on stage with a purpose, not of self-interest, for the integral motivation of her fellow black people.

After the Depression hit and hard economic times rose for all, especially blacks, Bessie Smith lost her grip and fell into a deep hole of alcohol and confusion. While her reign was short, her legacy lasts through all of time as the “Empress of the Blues.” Even though she despised any black person who wanted to form into the white culture and abandon his or her black race, Bessie Smith was adored as a talented performer by both blacks and whites. She not only helped pioneer the Harlem Renaissance, she helped progress the pride and sense of equality that should be instilled within every black person. Along with her, Duke Ellington emerged during that time as one of the best and most influential jazz musicians of the Harlem Renaissance.

Edward Kennedy Ellington, later nicknamed “Duke Ellington,” was born in 1899 in Washington D.C. Brought up by a Methodist and a Baptist, Duke was raised in a strict household, religiously and socially. While his mother signed him up for piano lessons, Duke’s heart was set on baseball at that age. It wasn’t until the summer of 1914, Duke’s talent and innate sense for rhythm came apparent to him. He was working at the soda jerk at a café when he wrote his first composition, “Soda Fountain Rag” which he created by ear because he had not yet learned how to read or write music. Once Duke Ellington began to hear and study more pianists, he began to realize his love and passion for music. The world of music and culture must thank him now for finally leaving baseball behind and discovering his rare and influencing talent for music.

Once Ellington began to take his love for music more seriously, he took more time to learn more and practice with different musicians. He began to perform in cafés and clubs around Washington D.C. where he grew his network and connections. His attachment to the music grew to the point that he turned down an art scholarship to Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. When Duke became a successful pianist, he started out playing in other ensembles before he created his own group called, “The Duke’s Serenaders.” His bands performed all over Washington D.C. and into Virginia for both blacks and whites, which was a rarity at that time. In the early 1920s, Duke Ellington made the

courageous move to leave behind his success story in Washington D.C. and move up to try his stardom in Harlem, New York. That move unarguably worked out unbelievably well as Duke Ellington became an iconic figure as a musician and cultural leader of the Harlem Renaissance.

Duke and his band played at clubs around Manhattan and became the house band at the Cotton Club, one of the most famous in Harlem. The Cotton Club was a place both blacks and whites occupied at night. Ellington's music was not just for the black ear, but for the American ear, as Duke even called his music, "American music." He worked for the progression of the American people as a whole which was a movement into the integrated lifestyle the Civil Rights strived for. Duke was a leader because he played for the unity of our country. His music from the lyrics to the rhythm tells the mood and emotions of his race. His vibe carries them to break the racial barrier and bring in audiences from all races and countries as Duke's famous songs circuted throughout the world pinning American music on the map.

Reading into the meaning behind Ellington's music is like studying the historical cultural lifestyle of that time in Harlem. He captured the mood of his men and peers through his music. One thing Duke made apparent was that he considered his music to American, not African American and a certain genre for a certain audience; he made it for the voice of America. He made his music for everyone as should all other aspects in America be made for. In Langston Hughes' poem, "America," he wrote, "You and I/Offering hands/Being brothers,/Being one,/Being America." This is exactly what Duke Ellington entailed during his time as a musician and composer. A photo taken in 1945 at a club in New York shows Duke playing on the piano with his band on stage and a packed house of people, black and white. This best describes the unity Duke brought to America with his music. He seems to be smiling, maybe even laughing, giving the photo a happy and warming appeal to show the positive impact he and his music had on America.

When the Great Depression came, hard times hit for everyone but they hit even harder for the black people. Even at this time, Duke Ellington led his band to never hit rock bottom. He kept his band and music afloat by adapting his sound and touring through Europe to keep the money

flowing. He stayed motivated and fought through any obstacle that came his way. It was an example for his race to show that they must never give up. Another poem of Langston Hughes, "Mother to Son," shares the ideals of Duke Ellington's personality and drive for bettering his race and country. Hughes ends his poem with "Don't you fall now-/For I'se still going', honey, I'se still climbin',/And life for me ain't been no crystal stair." Duke Ellington has been faced with his share of hardships but last through time and kept his popularity and influence through to his death. His greatest talent thriving through when times were hard was an encouraging statement to Negroes, indirectly telling them to rise through, stay strong and keep climbing. Success will come with determination and courage to not give up. The photograph of Duke Ellington at the piano in an empty space with a spotlight on him represents his dedication to his music. The black and dark essence of the space depicts a time of quarrel and distraught; a moment that assures a period of passion and sorrow. Through all of this and in such a space, he keeps with his music, music that represents his influencing leadership of the Harlem Renaissance. Duke Ellington never gave up on his passion for music and his care for his black peers.

Duke Ellington carried on his career until his death in 1974 from lung cancer. With over 3,000 compositions recorded, he brought light to the struggle for African American civil rights, ignited the growth of popular music industry, and acknowledged the emergence of the United States as a global power whose most effective cultural weapon was African American music. Duke Ellington remains respected and admired as he was when he was alive for his musical gift and cultural leadership.

The Culture of Black Beauty



By: Delia Lloyd

Fashion. A term generally defined as a prevailing custom or style of dress, etiquette, and socialization. The concept of female fashion speaks largely to how society views and depicts the female form. Thus, fashion leads to the construction of gender identity and the ever changing implications society places on femininity and beauty. In the 1920s, fashion, more commonly referred to as “beauty culture”, (encompasses all aspects of women’s appearance: clothing, hair, skin, and bodies) made a drastic transformation in the patterns, textures, and silhouettes used to create women’s clothing along with hairstyles and other

feminine products. This sweeping change forced American society to regard all women in a wholly different way. After the period of enslavement and Reconstruction, African-American women too, sought out a new identity for themselves, free of degrading stereotypes and oppressing lifestyles.

Accordingly, the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural movement which invited change and welcomed growth of the Negro, brought with it challenges as well as significant development for African American women. Black women were met with the obstacle of defining their own diverse aesthetic sense of beauty against a mainstream culture that honored “white” beauty. Throughout the twentieth century, African-American women had the complex task of deciphering the dichotomy of race and sex as it relates to the beauty standards of the Black woman. Dependent upon class and geographical location the style of dress varied, but the desire to be a part of society as well as be free of social constraints remained unchanged. This was the beginning of the African American woman’s challenge to confront the paradox of beauty.

What Is Beauty?

The plight of African American women specifically, to fit into American society proved difficult even for those in the Black middle class. Historically, the dark skin and tightly coiled hair of African-Americans had been vilified by European slaver owners and traders (Gil, 3). This unjust portrayal of African American beauty continued into the early twentieth century leading to demeaning beauty ads for black women. These advertisements focused on the two blatant markers of African Americans, skin complexion and hair texture. Skin lightening creams and hair straightening techniques were glorified.

In the Black community, women's hair was used as a two sided instrument, "one that highlighted racial inequities in the United States and revealed social tensions within black communities" (Walker, 3). Black beauty companies tried to dispel the unkind advertisements of white beauty companies by promoting that hair straightening with hot oil and a pressing comb is just another step in personal grooming, respectability and a progressive way to care for black hair. Black companies also used their ads as propaganda in the "racial uplift movement" by emphasizing the importance of personal grooming as a method to enhance the African American community as a whole and individually (Walker, 9).

White owned beauty companies endorsed a negative image of black women. Their ads constantly depicted darker skinned African American women with kinky hair as a deficiency that would never be considered sexy or glamorous (Walker, 9). In order for black women to be deemed sexually desirable they had to iron out their kinky hair and lighten their dark complexions.



Madame C. J. Walker advertisement, 1925: "Glorifying Our Womanhood" (Mad...

White companies also promoted skin bleachers that would allegedly lighten the skin "4 to 5 shades lighter" (Gil, 18).

The black community's obsession with skin color and shades and hues was illustrated in the literature of the time; either through satire, overt descriptions of a character's skin tone, or an embracement of black heritage. The satirical novel, Black No More written by George Schuyler comments on the race relations in America, the obsession with skin color, but also the detriment of thriving black community businesses due to the irrational need to be white. "...if she could do a few more nappy heads she would be in the clear; but hardly a customer had crossed her threshold in a fortnight...The Negro had

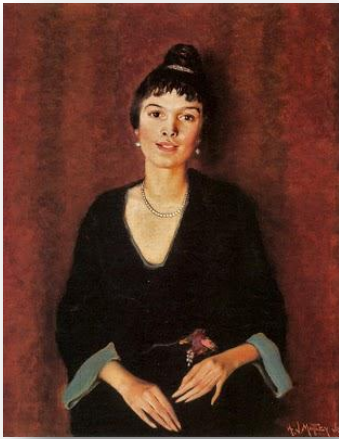
seemingly deserted her." (Schuyler, 39). Schuyler makes an important point about black businesses in Harlem, in this quote it is evident that racial and economic progress is being made within black communities but the obsession with being lighter reduces the prosperity of local black owned business and the uplift so greatly desired.

Both of the following quotes define the exact coloring of skin, down to the hues, therefore noting the importance its audience and virtually society, placed on having the appropriate amount of color. *"He was, she noted, slightly lighter than the others, almost the shade of coffee diluted with cream."* (Vechten, 25) and *"... a skin of unusual color, a delicate, creamy hue, with golden tones."* (Larsen, 60). In some literary work, dark skin was villanized as being the less desired shade of the race. In Passing by Nella Larsen, Gertrude talks about her white husband's view on having dark skinned children: *"It's awful the way it skips generations and then pops out. Why he actually said he didn't care what color it turned out, if I would only stop worrying. But, of course, nobody wants a dark child."* (168). Gertrude's conflicted point view is very similar to that of the black beauty companies and their advertising strategies for African American women. Ads created by black companies declared African American women the most beautiful in the world but still promoted the image of long straight hair and light golden brown skin (Walker, 29).

Countee Cullen's Heritage:

*So I lie, who all day long
Want no sound except the song
Sung by wild barbaric birds
Goaded massive jungle herds,
Juggernauts of flesh that pass
Trampling tall defiant grass
Where young forest lovers lie,
Plighting troth beneath the sky.*

*So I lie, who always hear,
Though I cram against my ear
Both my thumbs, and keep them there,
Great drums throbbing through the air.*

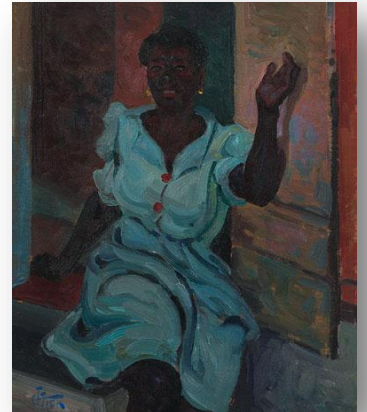


*With the dark blood damned within
Like great pulsing tides of wine
That, I fear, must burst the fine
channels of the chafing net
Where they surge and foam and fret.*

This particular excerpt of the poem narrates the speaker's paralyzed inability to move between two cultures. The imagery of the "barbaric birds" "jungle herds" and drums is representative of the speaker's African heritage, but the words also depict a sense of savagery which in turn signifies the white culture's negative and disregarded view of Africa as well as the speaker's confinement within the white culture. The rhythm of drums the speaker hears but tries to block out illustrates the consciousness and pride in the African heritage but the need to contain it due to social pressures. This need for self-containment the narrator alludes to in *Heritage* is evident in the beauty expectations placed upon African American women by both White and Black societies. By straightening coiled hair and lightening dark skin, the true identity and heritage of Africa is stripped away and replaced with a version that complies with the white perception of beauty. The depictions of light and dark skinned women differed in paintings as well. Archibald Motley's *Octoroon* published in 1922 portrays a very fair skinned African American woman dressed in velvet with straightened hair styled in bun and modest jewelry. The painting allows the woman framed, dignity and a quiet reserve about her. Compare Motley's painting with Harry Tisk's *Portrait of a Black Woman* published in 1925 a stark contrast can be made between their

sitting positions, style of dress, material used, and amount of skin shown. The portrait of the darker skinned woman does not allow for the same dignity and grace shown in Motley's painting of an octoroon. The woman seems to be more carefree and open but lacking the same formality grandeur of her fairer skinned counterpart.

The different implications between paintings serve as an allusion to the social tensions that African American women had within the black community. Not only were lighter shades of African American women becoming the idolized standard of beauty for blacks, also in art, mulattos were more frequently portrayed as dignified and of higher social standing.



Sexuality vs. Respectability

Big cities like Harlem, Chicago, and Boston received a mass influx of African Americans from the Southern states. This period of "Great Migration" increased the amount of Blacks living in northern cities "from 27 percent in 1916 to 35 percent in 1920 and 44 percent in 1930." (Walker, 15). This major influx of African Americans in big cities created a large and diverse mix of African Americans from all over the country. After the First World War, more women had jobs outside of the home. During this time women were granted the right to vote, public transportation such as trains and boats were easily accessible, and most households had radios. These advancements in technology and increased mobility, changed the way women dressed, significantly. The shift from the past decade's "Victorian" style of whale bone corsets, long skirts, long sleeves, and lace to loose clothing, shortened hemlines (above the knee for young women and below the knee for

older women), the use of exotic textiles such as; silk, wool, geometric shapes, etc. and metal closures. The textiles used to make garments were based off North African and oriental designs with the incorporation of exotic “slave” jewelry. Also fur and the use of animal prints as well as the interpretation of the African landscape originated from the Sub-Saharan (Hannel). Women also took on typical menswear, by incorporating sailor trousers into their wardrobe (Monet).

As with all time periods, the style of dress and clothing options differed depending on social standing, location, and class. In the cities, members of the Black middle class and intellectuals wore a distinguished look similar to their white counterparts. The black women in this class wore lavishly colored garments, such as; furs, silk, geometric patterns, and other textiles not commonly found in America. In Nigger Heaven Mary describes her friend Adora as being dressed in a chiffon robe with a gleaming pearl emerald on her forehead, creating an image of “African majesty” (28). This description of Adora emphasizes African American’s need for the exotic and illustrious. Also the desire for all things oriental and from faraway places is highlighted in Helga’s description of Anne Grey’s home “These historic things mingled harmoniously and comfortably with brass Chinese tea-chests, luxurious deep chairs and davenports of gay color, a lacquered jade-green settee with gleaming black satin cushions, lustrous Eastern rugs, ancient copper, Japanese prints...” (Larsen).



Harlem Belles

James Van Der Zee 1920

There was also the class of working women, the outfits and style of these African American women mimicked those of Caucasian women. Materials like silk, crepe de Chine, taffeta and satin fabrics were coveted. Soft, bright colors were worn with matching hosiery (McLeod). Dresses were predominantly calf-length, billowy and banded at the waist with rounded or a V-neck necklines. Dresses were adorned with ribbons and broad collars (McLeod).



African American women who belonged to a lower class in the urban areas and also young women had a significantly different style of dress. Their garments were similar to that of the black entertainers like Ma Rainey, Josephine Baker, and other blues singers and performers. These women were the personification of freedom through their large beaded headbands, big feathers, dresses above the knee, low cut in the front and back and the excess use of pearls, beads and rhinestones.

The colorful and eccentric dress of the north had a stark opposition in the South. In the American South, African American women were very much conservative; their attire consisted of long dresses usually long sleeved with fabric that covered the neck. In Larsen's *Quicksand*, Helga comments on the dreary, plain uniforms of the teachers and students at Naxos: "*Too they felt colors were queer; dark purples, royal blues, rich greens, deep reds...seemed odd to them. Old laces, strange embroideries, dim brocades.*" (18) The style that Helga speaks of in this passage is that of the Victorian era. In the Southern United States, African Americans built their black middle class by modeling it after the White society of the Antebellum period. In this period, women were supposed to be virtuous, chaste, and obedient.

"And thinking on Miss MacGooden's 'ladyness,' Helga grinned a little as she remembered that one's expressed reason for never having married, or intending to marry. There were, so she had been given to understand, things of matrimonial state that were of necessity entirely too repulsive for a lady of delicate and sensitive nature to submit to." (Larsen,



12). This prim and proper lifestyle constricted African American women in many social ways. In the photograph taken above of a young African American woman, it is noticed that she exhibits all the gender specified garments that women of the North shed. The whalebone corset and complete coverage of skin in white material signifies the way in which clothing can be a visual manifestation of social constraint and gender limitations.

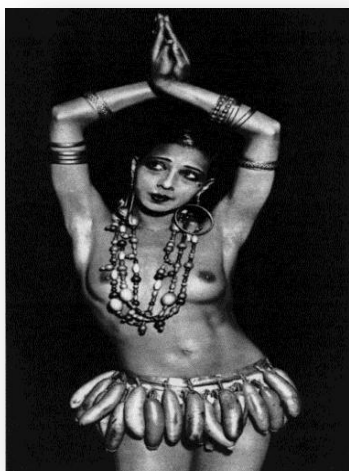
This conservative dress aligned with the southern model of the "republican motherhood," this prototype allowed black women to be educated because they in turn had to educate their children. This idealism of Victorian values in the south caused the Blacks of this region to regard the blacks of the north as devilish creatures that defiled themselves and the culture of African-Americans. Blacks of the North regarded the newly immigrated Southern blacks as inferior and incompetent. Both of these views, each different, still speak to the overall unconscious assimilation of African Americans to the white culture.

With the fundamental change in clothing and carefree behavior of women, African American women were commonly objectified. The clinging silk fabrics, colorful hosiery, and short hemline on the blackwoman's curvaceous form caused black women to be seen as sexual objects. Some artists and writers embraced the freedom of female dress as an acceptance of the black female body and the African heritage. Poets like Langston Hughes

who was considered a “lowbrow” writer of the Harlem renaissance documented the happenings of common people as well as celebrated them. Whereas intellectuals like W.E.B Du Bois condemned this behavior, he was keen to the sophisticated lady; for these were the women who would help uplift the race and improve the image of all African Americans.

This debate of sexual attractiveness versus respectability of the African American woman caused tension within the black community (Walker, 31) as well as sexual images becoming a symbol of African American beauty campaigns. Typically the concern of “respectability” was a middle class problem and being so certain cosmetic products appealed specifically to the bourgeois, “well-educated and community- minded” women (Walker). In order for cosmetic and hair products to reach all of black society, the same shunned image of sexuality was used to advertise right next to the “upstanding pillars of the community” (Walker).

This inability of the black beauty industry to send a clear message to African American women caused confusion about the public image black women should display.



Should it be an image of piousness and dignity or could be that of fun and modernity? This topic became a central theme in most literature of the time. Langston Hughes’ poem, *Red Silk Stockings* encourages the common black woman to embrace her body and celebrate it with rich colors and fabrics.

Also Gwendolyn Bennett’s *To A Dark Girl*:

*I love you for your brownness,
And the rounded darkness of your breast,
I love you for the breaking sadness in your voice
And shadows where your wayward eyelids rest.*

*Something of old forgotten queens
Lurks in the lithe abandon of your walk
And something of the shackled slave
Sobs in the rhythm of your talk.*

*Oh, little brown girl, born for sorrow's mate,
Keep all you have of queenliness,
Forgetting that you once were slave,
And let your full lips laugh at Fate!*

Spoke to the very essence of African American beauty and women. This poem sees nothing but beauty in the black woman, from her sadness to her rhythmic talk, and brown skin.

Bennett encourages black women to remember they are queens even though times may be difficult, one should always seek happiness!

Both *Red Silk Stockings* and *To A Dark Girl* aim to encourage their audience, black society, to celebrate the beauty of their race. Especially to African American women, the stanzas imply to forget the “white” image of beauty and celebrate your own, similar to the photograph of Josephine Baker in her famous banana skirt. Here Baker is topless and posed in an Egyptian stance. The openness of her body and the full display of her breasts epitomize confidence and beauty of herself as a woman and as a black woman.

The “lowbrow” celebration of femininity and beauty was not agreed upon by all members of black society. W.E.B. Du Bois considered this display of filth and prostitution over intelligence as a damnation of women. *“All womanhood is hampered today because the world on which it is emerging is a world that tries to worship both virgins and mothers and in the end despises motherhood and despoils virgins.”* (DuBois, 79). Du Bois’ belief that current society cannot both praise the clean, reverent, intelligent image of black women while simultaneously adulating the “modern woman” for her freedom of self-exposure and sex; this statement is a direct relation to the way in which beauty companies sold products.

"The present mincing of free womanhood must pass if we are ever to rid ourselves of the bestiality of free manhood." (DuBois, 79) Du Bois is arguing that the idea of free womanhood is savage and hinders the racial uplift of African Americans. This expression induces an entirely different image of Josephine Baker in the photo pictured above, with this mindset it is easy to see the objectification of the black woman's body along with the barbarian imagery of nakedness and the bananas draped around her waist. This photo is reminiscent of oriental paintings which portray harem women in a similarly wild manner.

These distinctly different schools of thought lead to an adverse paradox of the black woman's sexuality and standard of beauty. Black women struggled to find a medium between respectability and sexual attraction. There was a fine line between conformity and self-expression. The following two excerpts from Quicksand by Nella Larsen and The Heart of A Woman poem by Georgia Douglass Johnson, respectively, recognize the African American woman's longing to be free of racial and societal limitations. To enjoy all the beauty that makes that black race so wondrous and exciting. *"These people yapped loudly of race, of race consciousness, of race pride, and yet suppressed its most delightful manifestations, love of color, joy of rhythmic motion, naive, spontaneous laughter. Harmony, radiance, and simplicity, all the essentials of spiritual beauty in the race they had marked for destructions."*(Larsen)

Johnson tells of the oppression of womanhood, but in this particular stanza she describes the female soul as flying free, attempting to discover and experience something new even with the realization of gender confinement, she does find a moment of happiness. *"The heart of a woman goes forth with the dawn, as a lone bird, soft winging, so restlessly on, afar o'er life's turrets and vales does it roam*

In the wake of those echoes the heart calls home."

African American women throughout the twentieth century met the challenge of defining their own beauty standard in a mainstream culture that honored the features of white women and demonized those of blacks. The radical alteration of beauty culture in the Harlem Renaissance also launched the great debate of black female sexuality and public image along with illuminating the racial and political implications beauty culture played in literature, art, and fashion. The paradox of beauty and sex as defined by race is still an ongoing issue in black communities as well as America.

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