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Wallace Thurman and the Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance was cultural movement that spanned throughout the 1920’s. This cultural revolution began when African American’s began migrating up to the North in hopes of more employment option. A popular location for these African American’s to settle down was Harlem, a borough of New York City. Writers, actors, artists, and musicians glorified African American traditions, and at the same time created new ones. Wallace Thurman was an African American novelist and critic during the Harlem Renaissance and was the author of poems such as *Fire!* and *God’s Edict*.

One of the most gifted editors and critics of the Harlem Renaissance, Wallace Thurman, though an initial supporter of the flourishing African American art scene of the 1920s, became one of its most virulent critics. Thurman arrived in New York in 1925, during the second phase of the Harlem Renaissance. He helped launch two short lived periodicals dedicated to black artists and wrote three novels, several plays, and handful of poems. Thurman envisioned an African American literary movement owing itself, not to the support of elitist black intellectuals and white philanthropists, but to the individual genius whose art reflected images of everyday life of Black America ("Wallace Thurman." Contemporary).

Wallace Thurman wrote the poem, *Fire!*, which represented the authority whites had over the black people of America. This poem is ultimately about blacks being mistreated by white people. Thurman writes in the poem, “Fire… Weaving vivid, hot designs upon an ebon ("Wallace Thurman." Harlem).” Thurman is comparing the white people the fire and the blacks are the objects getting burned. The poem represents how the whites are trying to “burn” or take down the blacks in American society. Although literary critics applaud Wallace Thurman for his detailed images of black life in this time period, they say he falls short of literary excellence (Thurman, “An Introduction”).

Wallace Thurman was also the author of the poem, *God’s Edict*, which is about the authority whites have over blacks. This poem is mocking the white man’s authority in society. It also tells the reader of the foolish rules blacks had to follow because of the white people’s authority in society. Thurman writes, “Then enthrone man on the dunce's stool…And let his tale be the tale of a fool (Thurman, “God’s Edict”). These two lines are Thurman’s way of saying that just because a man is white does not mean he is entitled to be superior to another man based on his color. Thurman publically criticized the prejudices and hypocrisies of blacks as well as whites. Literary critics have said even though his literary works are frequently heavy handed and superficial in their approach, they afford a rare, behind the scenes view of Harlem in the 1920’s (Thurman, “An Introduction”).

Wallace Thurman was a very influential author and critic during the Harlem Renaissance. Thurman was well known for giving detailed images of what African Americans lives were like back then. His poems, *Fire!* and *God’s Edict*, give input on the lives of African Americans and how the whites ultimately had authority over them.

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