

IV. Discussion and Analysis Questions

1. What were the possible motivations for Bentley to perform in masculine dress and openly challenge gender norms?
2. How did Bentley's performances test the boundaries of artistic and personal expression protected under democratic ideals?
3. How did Bentley navigate multiple identities - as a Black person, a woman, and someone who didn't conform to traditional gender expectations?
4. Compare the "masquerade laws" of the 1840s-1880s with contemporary legislation targeting drag performances. How is gender expression being regulated today?
5. How did Bentley's visibility and success contribute to gradual institutional transformation?
6. How did changing social attitudes in the 1940s-50s force Bentley to alter her public persona?
7. In what ways did Bentley and other performers of the Harlem Renaissance create spaces where marginalized people could gather, express themselves, and build solidarity?
8. Why was Harlem in the 1920s more accepting of non-conforming gender expression than other places and times?
9. What role did speakeasies and underground venues play in creating spaces for people like Bentley?

10. How did Bentley's performances bring together diverse communities?
11. How did FBI surveillance of entertainers like Bentley reflect broader patterns of government monitoring of marginalized communities?
12. What were the possible considerations and risks that venue owners, fellow performers, and audience members took by supporting Bentley's career?
13. What can Bentley's example teach us about civic courage in challenging times? How do contemporary artists and entertainers use their platforms for social change?

VI. Case Study Question: How did Gladys Bentley use fashion and performance style to challenge social, political, and cultural norms of the 1920s-1930s?

Support your answer using your knowledge of:

- 1920s-1940s American history and the Harlem Renaissance
- Cross-dressing laws and the "three-item rule"
- FBI surveillance practices and their impact on marginalized communities
- The intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and class in early 20th-century America

Requirements:

- Incorporate your responses to the analysis questions
- Cite primary sources where available
- Connect historical patterns to contemporary issues where appropriate
- Consider both the limitations and significance of Bentley's individual actions within broader social movements
- Examine how different communities (Black, LGBTQ, working-class, artistic) might have viewed Bentley's contributions differently