

THE NEW NEGRO NOVELIST AND HIS DEVELOPMENT

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
THEMES OF NEGRO FICTION. . . . .	4
STOCK CHARACTERS IN NEGRO FICTION. . . . .	7
PERIODS OF NEGRO FICTION . . . . .	9
THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NEW NEGRO NOVELIST . . . . .	11
The Slavery Period . . . . .	11
From the Civil War Period to 1900. . . . .	16
From 1900 to the Negro Renaissance. . . . .	21
The Negro Renaissance . . . . .	31
The End of the Negro Renaissance . . . . .	48
THE NEW NEGRO NOVELIST . . . . .	59
Zora Neale Hurston . . . . .	61
George Wylie Henderson . . . . .	64
Richard Wright . . . . .	65
William Attaway . . . . .	67
Frank Yerby . . . . .	71
Chester B. Himes . . . . .	73
Ann Petry . . . . .	75
Willard Motley . . . . .	78
Dorothy West . . . . .	80
Willard Savoy . . . . .	82
Minor Novels of the Period . . . . .	83
CONCLUSION . . . . .	88
ACKNOWLEDGMENT . . . . .	91
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	92

## INTRODUCTION

The study of Negro literature has generally suffered neglect. With few exceptions, colleges and critics have not realized that there is at hand a great body of American literature expressing in words the tragic experiences of the Negro race. For Negro literature is American literature, woven of the same warp and woof.

A survey of Negro novelists and their novels was the principal purpose of this study. While the writer does not believe it desirable to segregate the Negro novelist from the rest of American authors, yet it seemed that his literary history was worth recording, partly because he arrived at his present status only after a long, hard journey. Accordingly, the writer chose the subject and did extensive reading among the Negro novels, both past and present. The result stands embodied in the following study.

The market and reading public for Negro novelists have been definitely limited. Much of the work has been overlooked because it was published by small publishing houses and never promoted. Then, too, there has been a tendency in the past to consider such writing inferior simply because it was written by a Negro. The economic status of the Negro has made it difficult, if not impossible, for him to earn a living by writing alone.

Within the last few years, however, opportunities for Negro novelists have definitely widened. A number of novels

by Negro writers have made the best seller lists and a few have been made into movies. This is particularly true of those Negro novelists who have broken away from racial themes. The most striking example is Willard Motley and his Knock on Any Door, recently made into a movie starring Humphrey Bogart. The most successful financially is Frank Yerby, author of three novels including The Foxes of Harrow, filmed by Twentieth Century Fox. Yerby gave up writing about Negroes because he wanted to make money.

There have been some Negro writers whose identities were never revealed. And there have been others, like Jean Toomer, author of Cane, who were reluctant to identify themselves with the Negro literati.<sup>1</sup> (All Negro writers referred to in this thesis have been identified by the Negro Year Book or The Crisis, organ for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.)

Some Negro writers, like Zora Neale Hurston, have been more interested in telling a good story than in race problems. They know how to write a book without using the theme of racial tension which is so prevalent in novels by Negro writers. White, Negro and mixed characters may be used.

A few Negro writers have joined a "hard boiled" school of writing which has been deplored by Negro critics on the grounds that it misrepresents the race. Writers of this school, like

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<sup>1</sup>Langston Hughes, The Big Sea, p. 242.

Richard Wright, portray the bad Negro as well as the good.

Some Negro novelists have been interested in picturing Negro life for its own sake rather than for its problems. The late Claude McKay, a former Kansas State College student and an internationally known writer, wrote about a side of Negro life which had hitherto been steeped in shadow. McKay crossed over into those shunned borderlands where roustabouts, gin-drinkers, pimps and happy idlers live on the outer fringe of respectability. Because of what was considered a parading of racial defects, McKay fell out of favor with his people for as Langston Hughes remarked:

The Negro critics and many of the intellectuals were very sensitive about their race in books. (And still are.) In anything that white people are likely to read, they wanted to put their best foot forward, their politely polished and cultural foot -- and only that foot.<sup>1</sup>

On the whole, however, our Negro novelists have been growing in stature and numbers and are enjoying encouraging support in American literary circles. But the road to this accomplishment has not been easy. Few realize that this literature has been some two hundred years in the making and has been more a creature of environment than that produced by any other group. The Negro novel, at times, has fairly screamed with condemnation, complaint, abuse, pride and prejudice. Yet these novels only reflected conditions of the times and the hopes, fears

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 266 f.



and dreams of the Negro people. Once, it seemed as if Negro authors would never be able to write of phases of American life except the problems of a segregated minority. Back in 1913, Dr. W. E. Burghardt DuBois, great Negro educator, wrote:

The time has not yet come for the great development of American Negro literature. The economic stress is too great and racial persecution too bitter to allow the leisure and poise for which literature calls. On the other hand, never has the world had a richer mass of material than that which Negroes possess today and are becoming conscious of. Slowly, but surely, they are developing artists of technic who will be able to use this material. The nation does not notice this for everything touching on the Negro is banned by magazines and publishers, unless it takes the form of caricature of bitter attack or is so thoroughly innocuous as to have no literary flavor.<sup>1</sup>

Some 13 years later in 1926, an English professor, Dr. John Herbert Nelson at the University of Kansas, took a quick look into Negro literature and decided that the American Negro writer had accomplished little and that the outlook for Negro authorship was disappointing.<sup>2</sup> (It is significant that throughout his dissertation Dr. Nelson did not capitalize the "N" in Negro.)

That the Negro press had earlier deplored the lack of creative writers among Negroes is evidenced by an editorial appearing in The Crisis:

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<sup>1</sup>W. E. Burghardt DuBois, The Negro in Literature and Art, p. 237.

<sup>2</sup>John Herbert Nelson, The Negro Character in American Literature, p. 133 f.

Here is a nation whose soul is still dumb, yet big with feeling, song and story. What are we doing to develop writers to express this wealth of emotion fitly? Very little. We have among ten millions today one poet, one novelist and two or three recognized writers of articles and essays. That is all. Here is a tremendous field for improvement.....<sup>1</sup>

The Negro novelist has definitely improved since those words were written. In recent novels by Negro authors, a new body of fiction has been added to an expanding American literature. While probably few of these books have that power and distinction necessary to enter the list of permanent works of art, they have created in narrative form a new and significant phase of American life and they give a bright promise of greater things to come. In the following pages, this new fiction and its development will be discussed.

#### THEMES OF NEGRO FICTION

Inevitably, Negro writers have been concerned with the problems of their race: lynching, rioting, racial conflict, "passing," the problems of near-whites or mulattoes, miscegenation or inter-racial relations, the social structure within the Negro race itself, dramatization of sex, folk life, plantation life, the economic and social disorganization of the Negro and Jim Crowism.

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<sup>1</sup>"Writers," The Crisis, 1:20, April, 1911.

The Negroes have written at length of the economic hardships of their race, of the exploitation through peonage, share cropping and the "nigger pound," of the exclusions from the better jobs and politics, of the cruelties of white children in repulsing Negroes with hatred and the word "nigger" and all the other practices by which the Negro is "kept in his place." They have been interested in the psychology which causes white folks to take care of a "good nigger" and to break an "uppity" one.

On the theme of prejudice, a Negro literary critic, Nick Aaron Ford, has said:

There are three distinct types of prejudice mentioned in these novels: (a) prejudice manifested by one group of Negroes toward another (b) prejudice manifested by Negroes toward whites and (c) prejudice manifested by whites toward Negroes. It is maintained that such attitudes not only prove harmful to those against whom they are directed, but that they also harm those who possess them by degrading their character and destroying their better judgment. There is no foundation for prejudice; if there were, it would be an anomaly. Prejudice means pre-judgment without sufficient evidence. One gleans from these novels that such things as color, economic status, and intelligence are taken as bases for prejudice.<sup>1</sup>

Negro novelists have shown their concern over the mixture of their race with white blood. One of the most common characters in their fiction is that of a Negro child by a white father. Their novels explain the emotion of rebellion in which the Negroes regard these white men and they frequently

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<sup>1</sup>Nick Aaron Ford, The Contemporary Negro Novel, p. 24.



describe the relationship between the white man and the Negro women. The relation of a white father to his colored son, which often culminates in a lynching, has been a common motif in fiction.<sup>1</sup>

The color line and the "passing" of those who are white enough not to be challenged have been favorite themes of Negro writers. On the phenomenon of passing, Walter White, secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, explains in his book, A Man Called White:

Many Negroes are judged as whites. Every year approximately twelve thousand white-skinned Negroes disappear -- people whose absence cannot be explained by death or emigration. Nearly every one of the fourteen million discernible Negroes in the United States knows at least one member of his race who is "passing" -- the magic word which means that some Negroes can get by as whites, men and women who have decided that they will be happier and more successful if they flee from the prescription and humiliation which the American color line imposes on them. Often these emigrants achieve success in business, the professions, the arts and sciences. Many of them have married white people, lived happily with them and produced families. Sometimes they tell their husbands and wives of their Negro blood, sometimes not. Who are they? Mostly people of no great importance, but some of them prominent figures, including a few members of Congress, certain writers, and several organizers of movements to "keep the Negroes and other minorities in their places." Some of the most vehement public haters of Negroes are themselves secretly Negroes.<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes the passing theme has been treated with satire and sometimes it is tragic. Two women Negro writers,

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<sup>1</sup>Harlan Hatcher, Creating the Modern American Novel, pp. 140 ff.

<sup>2</sup>Walter White, A Man Called White, p. 3 f.

Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset, used the subject of passing in their books. They explored a world made up of beautiful women who are not suspected of having Negro blood. In Passing, Nella Larsen tells of the experiences of a woman who severs ties with colored people in order to enter the white group. In Comedy: American Style, Jessie Fauset tells the story of a near-white's determination to free herself from the handicap of color. As a result of this "white" obsession, the woman brings tragedy to herself and to her family.

#### STOCK CHARACTERS IN NEGRO FICTION

From reading novels by Negro authors, it appears that the characters used fall into certain types. This is only the writer's opinion, however, and others may challenge these classifications. Some of these characters were first stereotyped by white authors. Later, Negro writers also developed stereotypes which were similar to those of the white writers.

A popular character in fiction by both Negro and white authors has been the tragic mulatto or one of mixed blood. The mulatto is always pictured as being superior to his darker brother and as having intelligence and attractiveness because of his white ancestry. Few writers have bothered to explain that when mulattoes do surpass, they do so because of better opportunities and superior parentage and not because of their white paternity. Speaking of the pride of mulattoes

in their white blood, Langston Hughes said:

One of the things that amused me in Washington was that with all of their conventional-mindedness, a number of the families in the best colored society made proud boast of being directly descended from the leading Southern white families, "on the colored side" -- which, of course, meant the illegitimate side. One prominent Negro family tree went straight back to George Washington and his various slave mistresses.<sup>1</sup>

Another type to be found in Negro novels is the middle class Negro, who lives very much like white middle class Americans. Jessie Fauset's novels portray this Negro who "is not being pressed too hard by the furies of prejudice, ignorance and economic justice." Her novels are concerned with the psychology, motivations and the lives of colored people with intellectual interests. Negroes in her books are always clean and cultured and their moral standards are as rigid as those of the whites.

Then, there is the "bad nigger" type which this writer first noticed in the work of a white author, Thomas Dixon Jr., who wrote the inflammatory novel, The Clansman. Dixon attempted to portray his Negro as degenerate, inferior, irresponsible, bestial and the curse of the white race. The "bad nigger" appears again, although in a different light, in the novel of the Negro writer, Richard Wright. His unforgettable Bigger Thomas in Native Son is an example of the stereotyped "bad nigger."

The writer noted the servile Uncle Tom type, the "white man's Negro," who bows to the so-called dominant race. This

type was first portrayed in Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin, but is to be found in the books of Negro authors as well. The character of Min in Ann Petry's The Street is a perfect example of the Uncle Tom Negro. The term, Uncle Tom, is applied as an epithet of scorn by Negroes to those who patiently endure suffering and hardship at the hands of the whites and refuse to stand up for their rights.

The happy plantation Negro or Uncle Remus type was first personified in the writing of Joel Chandler Harris, but is to be found in the earlier writings of Negro authors as well. In writing of this type, there is always the background of the plantation tradition -- a stately mansion with lovely ladies and gallant gentlemen. The attitude of the whites toward the blacks is cordial and kingly. The loyal relationship is stressed between the master and his servant. Many of Paul Dunbar's short stories are written in the plantation tradition.

Lastly, the writer noted the militant New Negro, who refuses to bow and scrape to the white man, rebels against race prejudice and demands his place in the sun. This type is more common among writers of the "hard-boiled" school of recent years. Chester B. Himes, a young Negro from Cleveland, uses this type as the main character in his novel If He Hollers Let Him Go. The portrayal of Harriett in Langston Hughes' Not Without Laughter represents the militant New Negro who fights back against oppression.



## PERIODS OF NEGRO FICTION

Negro novels fall naturally into several chronological divisions. The first novel ever to be written by an American Negro was published in 1853 and will be discussed later. Previous to that time, there had been some Negro writers of the slavery period -- poets, historians, essayists on freedom and pamphleteers. A few of these trail-blazers will be considered in this discussion.

From the Civil War period to 1900, most of the Negro writing was counter-propaganda against that of white authors who tried to discredit the race. Novels were written in an effort to get equal social treatment for the Negro before the bar of justice. Negro characters, presented in a conventional manner, were invariably teachers, clergymen, physicians, lawyers, politicians or journalists. At least one Negro writer, Paul Dunbar, used white characters in most of his books because he did not want to write about the faults of the Negro.

The next period of Negro novels was from the beginning of the twentieth century to the 1920's. At the turn of the century, our first real Negro novelists, Charles W. Chesnutt, appeared on the scene. After that, Negro writers began to write with more realism and to paint a truer picture of the race. The spirit that quickened the Negro writing was that of a changed racialism, proud but not self-conscious, fiery but not vindictive, and tempered in bitterness. The writing changed from being mere counter-propaganda to that of writing for its

own sake. Novels of the period reflect the historical and social trends.

The period of the 1920's was called the Negro Renaissance when Negro writers came into full flower and Harlem became a national vogue. White people flocked into Harlem in droves, it became fashionable for white patrons to subsidize struggling Negro artists, and the black ghetto became the intellectual center of the colored world. Negro writers wrote to amuse the war-weary world of the Roaring Twenties. In doing so, they distorted or over-colored their material and wrote in a sensational style for their American brothers of a lighter complexion. A whole flock of Negro writers, both good and bad, came on the scene.

The stock market crash in 1929 marked the beginning of the end of the Negro Renaissance. When the depression struck, the fad of patronizing Negro art died. White patrons withdrew their support. Traditionally the last to be hired and the first to be fired, the Negroes felt the depression more acutely than any other group. Of the Negro writers of the Renaissance, only Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes held on and survived. (Incidentally, Langston Hughes is a former Kansan and grew up in Lawrence, Kansas.) With the depression years, there came the social protest or proletarian novel urging a classless society. The Harlem vogue in Negro writing passed away and the Negro turned from racial to class channels. It is significant that from 1933 until the publication of Willard

Savoy's Alien Land in April of 1949, not a single novel by a Negro writer was devoted to the subject of "passing." The Negro writers turned from the exotic and sensational and began to produce serious work and historical fiction.

Now, Negro writers in some cases are beginning to write objectively of both whites and Negroes and are becoming gradually emancipated from strictly racial subject matter. The better Negro novels, published by established publishing firms, are advertised without reference to race. Indeed the reader could not tell from reading them whether the author was Negro or white.

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NEW NEGRO NOVELIST

##### The Slavery Period

As early as the eighteenth century and even before the Revolutionary War, the first voices of Negro authors were heard in the United States. Today, there exists little written by those early Negro writers which is not now out of print. The literature produced by Negroes in the eighteenth century has been all but buried in the past, but they left "a wind of words fanning the bright flames of the spirit down the dark lanes of time."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Hughes, op. cit., p. 310.

Phillis Wheatley. The black poetess, Phillis Wheatley, was easily the pioneer of Negro writers, her first poems appearing in 1773. The first Negro to achieve distinction in American literature, she was born in Africa in Senegal in 1753 or 1754. When she was brought to America in 1761, she was bought for Mrs. Susannah Wheatley, wife of a Boston tailor. The bright mind of the child soon distinguished her from the other slaves of the household and with the assistance of Mary Wheatley, the daughter of the family, Phillis learned to read.<sup>1</sup>

Gradually, the Negro girl came to be looked upon by Mrs. Wheatley as a companion rather than a slave. Phillis had mastered some astronomy, geography, ancient history and had a thorough knowledge of the Latin classics, all rare attainments for an American woman of the period. She then turned her attention to the composition of verses using Pope's Homer as her model.

Phillis was taken abroad by a member of the Wheatley family. While abroad, she was under the special patronage of the Countess of Huntingdon, to whom a poem on the death of George Whitefield, the former chaplain of this lady, had introduced her. She made many friends abroad and the lord mayor of London presented her with a magnificent folio edition of Paradise Lost, which is now in the library of Harvard College.<sup>2</sup> While she was in England, arrangements were made for the

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<sup>1</sup>Carter Godwin Woodson, The Negro in Our History, p. 136.

<sup>2</sup>Benjamin Brawley, A Short History of the American Negro, p. 240.



publication of her volume of verses, Poems on Various Subjects.

The illness and death of Mrs. Wheatley brought Phillis back to America. With most of the Wheatley family gone, she married a ne'er-do-well by the name of John Peters, worked as a drudge in a cheap boarding house and became the mother of three children. Two children died before her. The youngest baby died with its mother December 5, 1784.

Of Phillis Wheatley's poetry, Benjamin Brawley has said:

Phillis Wheatley's collection, Poems on Various Subjects, contains thirty-nine titles. Fourteen of the thirty-eight original pieces are elegiac and not at all remarkable for poetic merit; at least six others may be classed as occasional; and two are mere paraphrases of portions of the Bible. We are thus left with sixteen poems which permit us to judge of the ability of Phillis Wheatley. Let us keep in mind the fact that all these pieces were written by a girl not yet twenty years old. The best poem is undoubtedly On Imagination, lines suffused with genuine feeling. Several other poems are of interest for different reasons. On Being Brought from Africa to America consists of eight childish but sincere lines. On Virtue is the remarkable utterance of a pious, but fatherless and motherless child. To S. M., A Young African Painter, on Seeing His Works was addressed to Scipio Moorhead, a young Negro, who had evidently some talent for painting, and one of the pictures (one infers from the poem) dealt with the story of Damon and Pythias.....The heroic couplet swings through all except two or three of the poems. The diction is pseudo-classic. The earnestness of the work, however, is one of its strong assets.....<sup>1</sup>

Although the thinkers of that day may not have been particularly impressed with Phillis Wheatley's actual contribution to literature, they had to concede that she had decidedly demonstrated that Negroes had possibilities beyond that of

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 239 ff.

being the hewers of wood and drawers of water for another race. Today, her poems are collectors' items and there are only a few rare editions of her collected verses extant.

Benjamin Banneker. A writer, inventor, political thinker, astronomer and mathematician was Benjamin Banneker, a free Negro born in Maryland on November 9, 1731. He is best remembered for his Almanacs which began to be issued in 1792.

Banneker's father had been an African prince, sold into slavery and his mother was an indentured servant. However, Banneker was born free. At that time, a Negro of this class exercised most of the privileges accorded white men and Banneker attended a local school. So thoroughly did he master the books that he was soon able to point out errors and discrepancies in them. He was interested in mathematics and astronomy and in 1770 he constructed the first clock striking the hours that was made in America. From 1792 to 1806, he published annually an almanac adapted to the requirements of Maryland and the neighboring states.

Foretelling Woodrow Wilson by some 125 years, Banneker wrote in 1793 the very principles of international peace later incorporated into the League of Nations. He pointed out that while the federal constitution adopted in 1787 made provisions for war, it suffered from the glaring defect of not doing at least as much to promote and preserve perpetual peace. He made some recommendations along this line, some of which were similar to Wilson's later Fourteen Points.

Banneker died October 9, 1806.<sup>1</sup>

Frederick Douglass. Journalist, orator, diplomat, abolitionist and one-time slave was Frederick Douglass, one of the great figures in the history of the American Negro. His reputation was national and many of his speeches are found today in the standard books on oratory. He was born in 1817 and lived for 10 years as a slave upon a Maryland plantation. Then, he was bought by a Baltimore shipbuilder. Escaping in 1838, he went disguised as a sailor to New Bedford, Mass., where he adopted the name Douglass. He lived for several years in New Bedford, being assisted by William Lloyd Garrison in his efforts for an education.

In 1841 at an anti-slavery convention in Nantucket, he exhibited such intelligence and showed himself the possessor of such a remarkable voice that he was made the agent of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. He then lectured extensively in England and the United States after friends raised the money to purchase his freedom.<sup>2</sup>

For a time, Douglass published a newspaper, The North Star, in Rochester, New York. He also established another paper, The New National Era, in Washington, D. C. In addition to articles and short stories, Douglass wrote three books: Narration of Frederick Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom, and Life and Times

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<sup>1</sup>Woodson, op. cit., pp. 138 ff.

<sup>2</sup>Brawley, op. cit., p. 108.

of Frederick Douglass. A new edition of the latter was brought out in 1941 by Pathway Press, New York.

Later in life, Douglass became recorder of deeds in the District of Columbia and then minister to Haiti. At the time of his death in 1895, he had won for himself a place of unique distinction. Shirley Graham has written in story form his biography, There Was Once a Slave (Julian Messner, New York, 1947).

Other Writers. In addition to those writers mentioned, there were various others in this period before the Civil War. There were black men like Es-Sadi, who wrote the Epic of Sudan or Tarikh Es-Soudan in Arabic, a history of the fall of the great Negro African empire, the Songhay. There was the Negro Olandan Equiano, known by his English name of Gustavus Vassa, whose autobiography of 350 pages was published in 1787. Paul Cuffe, a New England Negro who transported and established 38 Negroes on the west coast of Africa in 1815, wrote an early account of Sierra Leone. Lemuel Haynes, a Massachusetts Negro who served in the Revolutionary War and later became a minister, wrote a series of essays in 1815 on the New England theological controversy. As the Abolitionist movement gained strength, more Negro writers appeared. In 1841, the first Negro magazine was published in America by the African Methodist Episcopal Church. George Hogarth was the editor.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>DuBois, op. cit., pp. 233 ff.



From the Civil War Period to 1900

The First Novel. In 1853, the first novel by an American Negro was published in London. Written by William Wells Brown, it was called Clotel, or the President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States and was based on the allegedly true story of a mulatto daughter of Thomas Jefferson. After 11 years, an American edition of the book appeared with Jefferson's name deleted and some other revisions. A second American edition with still further changes came out three years later in 1867.<sup>1</sup>

William Wells Brown, the author of Clotel, was born in Lexington, Kentucky, in 1816. His mother was a slave and his father a slaveholder. Serving in the office of an Abolitionist newspaper in St. Louis, Brown got his start in education. He moved north where he took an active part in the work of the Underground Railroad and later lectured in New England. He visited England and France, studied medicine, busied himself in advancing the cause of freedom and contributed regularly to magazines in England and America. About 1855, Brown wrote another novel, Miralda, or The Beautiful Octoroon, but this book has not been found by modern scholars. Indeed, copies of his first novel are quite rare today.

Capitalizing upon rumors concerning Thomas Jefferson's inter-racial affairs and mulatto children, Clotel presents

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<sup>1</sup>Hugh M. Gloster, Negro Voices in American Fiction, p. 25 f.

Currer, a colored woman of Richmond, as the President's discarded mistress and the mother of his two talented children, Clotel and Althesa. The body of the story recounts the unhappy experiences of Currer and her daughters after the death of their benevolent owner. In the final scene, Clotel escapes from slavers and dramatically hurls herself into the Potomac River.

While Brown's book may not be polished writing and is frankly anti-slavery fiction, it is important in the study of American literature since it represents the first attempt of a Negro to write a full-length novel.

The Second Novel. The second novel to be written by an American Negro was a fragmentary Blake, or the Huts of America, written by Martin R. Delaney, which appeared serially in seven installments in The Anglo-African Magazine in 1859. Two years previously, there had been a novel published in London by a Frank J. Webb, but it has never been definitely established that Webb was a Negro.<sup>1</sup> Blake originally contained some 88 chapters, but the other 81 mysteriously disappeared after the first 7 installments were published.

Delaney (1812-1885) was born in Charleston, Virginia. A man of great physical strength and mental energy, he was proud of his blackness, tracing his lineage to African chieftains. His first teacher was a Yankee peddler. When his

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 260.

family slipped away to western Pennsylvania, Delaney was able to go to school. He studied medicine at Harvard and distinguished himself in a cholera epidemic in Pittsburgh in 1854. Later, he served as a medical officer in the Civil War and was commissioned a major at its close. He was an important figure in South Carolina during the Reconstruction, serving in the Freedmen's Bureau for three years and in several other offices. In 1874, he was a candidate for lieutenant governor of South Carolina.

Blake is the account of an educated West Indian slave who runs away when his wife is sold and who travels through the border states as an organizer of a general uprising to overthrow slavery. Delaney himself toured the sections of which he wrote and planned the Underground Railroad with John Brown. Several times, he was threatened with being tarred and feathered. Delaney had a plan to colonize his people in the Niger Valley in Africa and had hoped to publish Blake before he left. What happened to the book is unknown since only the seven installments were published. The fragment of the book which remains seems to voice the restiveness and resentment of the black masses of the feudal South.

The Third Novel. The honor of writing the third novel in American literary history of the Negro belongs to Mrs. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, a writer of Abolitionist verse. The novel was Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted and appeared in 1892, eight years before the turn of the century. It has been

considered a transitional novel since it was the first to treat of the Reconstruction era.

Mrs. Harper was born in Baltimore of free parents in 1825 and educated in the public schools of that city. Her first poems were published in 1864 in celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation. She died in Baltimore in 1911.

The novel, *Iola Leroy*, is a study of the color line and suggests that near-whites should cast their lot with the Negroes. The characters are well-mannered, educated Negroes, treated with sentiment and idealism rather than with objectivity and realism. Nevertheless, the book is historically significant.

Paul Laurence Dunbar. In the early nineties, there came before the public a Negro who had the gift of interpreting the lowly life of his people. He was Paul Laurence Dunbar, poet and novelist, one of the most revered and respected men of his race. His tomb in Dayton, Ohio, is today maintained as a national shrine in his memory.

Dunbar was born June 27, 1872, in Dayton, Ohio, where he was graduated from high school. He had no advanced formal training and struggled to make his way uphill as best he could. After working as an elevator boy for \$4 a week, he was given a job at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 by Frederick Douglass. Gradually, Dunbar came into notice as a reader of his own verses. William Dean Howells wrote a review of his poetry in Harper's Weekly and Dunbar was launched upon fame.

After writing magazine articles, poetry and novels while



in a vain fight to keep his health, Dunbar died at the age of 33, but he "had existed millions of years."

His work falls into three divisions: the poems in classic English, those in dialect and the stories and novels in prose. It is for his verse in Southern dialect that he is best known. Three of his four novels, the first of which came out in 1898, deal with white characters and are highly idealistic. A new edition of his short stories was published in 1938. Called The Best Stories of Paul Laurence Dunbar, it has been edited by Benjamin Brawley.

By his genius Paul Laurence Dunbar attracted the attention of the great, the wise and the good. His bookcase contained many autographed copies of the work of distinguished contemporaries. One of the most beautiful pictures in the history of American letters is that of William Dean Howells climbing on one occasion to the top of a cheap apartment house in New York to visit the poet when he was sick. The similarity of the position of Dunbar in American literature to that of Robert Burns in English has frequently been pointed out. In our own time, he most readily invites comparison with James Whitcomb Riley. The writings of both men are distinguished by infinite tenderness and pathos; and it is pleasant to know that even before Dunbar published his first book, Riley, already successful, perceived his merit and wrote him a word of cheer.<sup>1</sup>

Dunbar's four novels were The Uncalled (1898), The Love of Landry (1900), The Fanatics (1901), and The Sport of the Gods (1902). The first three deal entirely with white characters. None of these novels have much literary merit and the stories are quite ordinary. In writing of his own race, Dunbar's work has more value. His short stories, some of

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<sup>1</sup>Brawley, Ibid., p. 248.

which are written in dialect, are quite delightful reading. But when he writes of white characters, it is obvious that he is using his imagination in trying to picture how white people, like his fictional heroes and heroines, would live.

As said before, Dunbar is remembered for his poetry. A complete edition of his poems was published by Dodd, Mead and Company, New York, in 1913. This edition includes the poems from the books Lyrics of Lowly Life (1896), Lyrics of the Hearthside (1899), Lyrics of Love and Laughter (1903) and Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow (1905).

Dunbar's success as a literary man was due to his originality. There had been those before him who had undertaken to write verse in Negro dialect, but Dunbar was the first to put into it much thought and to make of it a portraiture of the feeling and work of the Negroes. His poetry showed deep pathos and sympathy. He went into the Negro life, saw it as it was and portrayed it with living characters.

From this period just prior to the Civil War and until 1900, there were minor Negro writers who would have to be considered in an exhaustive study of American literature. But the few mentioned here were the more significant ones and Dunbar had the most far-reaching influence. For with Dunbar, the Negro came up to the frontier of literary expression across which he entered into the promised land of American literature in the twentieth century.

### From 1900 to the Negro Renaissance

During the period from 1900 to the twenties or the Negro Renaissance, Negro fiction was, with some exceptions, extremely race-conscious. There were several factors which caused this to come about.

One of these was the publication of two novels by a white author, Thomas Dixon Jr. These books were The Leopard's Spots (1902), which Dixon claimed as a historical outline of the conditions from the enfranchisement of the Negro to his disfranchisement, and The Clansman (1905), purporting to be a historical romance of the Ku Klux Klan. Dixon was the nephew of Colonel Leroy McAfee, one-time Grand Titan of the Invisible Empire of the hooded order.

The Clansman was filmed by the late David W. Griffith as an early-day movie called The Birth of a Nation. This movie was considered by friends of the Negro as one of the most inflammatory boxoffice attractions in the history of the motion picture industry.

Dixon's fanaticism in this books can be exemplified by the following excerpt from The Leopard's Spots:

You are called to go down, man by man, alone, naked and unarmed in the blackness of night and fight with the powers of hell for your civilization.... The attempt is to be deliberately made to blot out Anglo-Saxon society and substitute African barbarism.<sup>1</sup>

Dixon's incendiary novels did much to arouse public opinion

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Dixon Jr., The Leopard's Spots, p. 96.

against the Negro and encouraged the popular idea of "keeping the Negro in his place." Negro writers tried to answer this propaganda with counter-propaganda in the character of their fiction.

Another factor affecting Negro fiction was a controversy stirred up by Booker T. Washington over the future of the Negro race. Washington told his people: "Cast down your buckets where you are." In other words, the Negroes must work out their own salvation in the South. Washington advocated industrial education for the Negro and believed that Negroes should not seek to compete with the white race in professional skills. Nor should they agitate for political equality. Said Washington, "In all things that are purely social, we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as on the hand in all things essential to mutual progress."<sup>1</sup>

With the exception of a small minority, the Negroes regarded this policy as a surrender to the oppressors who desired to reduce the whole race to menial service and they began militantly to attack Washington. They branded him as a traitor to his people although the South eventually reconstructed its educational system for Negroes and began to supply these schools with facilities recommended by Washington. The South thus gradually elevated to leadership many Negroes who, in standing for industrial education, largely increased the support of

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<sup>1</sup>Booker T. Washington, Selected Speeches, p. 34.



Washington among his people.<sup>1</sup>

Against this policy, however, there were some Negroes who would not yield ground. The most outspoken of these was a Negro leader, Dr. W. E. Burghardt DuBois, educated at Fisk University, Harvard and Berlin, and a professor at Atlanta University. He believed that the first efforts to secure recognition for the Negro must come through agitation for higher education and political equality. The controversy culminated in the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People which has continued to oppose the compromises of Washington. Its official organ is The Crisis, which first appeared in 1910 with Dr. DuBois as editor.

The Washington-DuBois controversy affected Negro fiction in that most writers indicated, either through implication or direct statement, a preference for the militant rather than the conciliatory school of race leadership.<sup>2</sup>

Charles W. Chesnutt. With the publication of Charles W. Chesnutt's book, The House Behind the Cedars in 1900, a Negro novelist of real stature appeared. Chesnutt was the first to use the realistic method in writing of Negroes rather than trying to gloss over their faults. He overcame the double standard by which Negro writers were appraised and used some of

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<sup>1</sup>Woodson, op. cit., pp. 440 ff.

<sup>2</sup>Gloster, op. cit., p. 99.

the themes popular today.

Chesnutt was born in Cleveland in 1856. He was a teacher in North Carolina and principal of the State Normal School at Fayetteville for several years. In 1887, he was admitted to the bar in Cleveland and practiced there. One writer has commented, "Ironically, Chesnutt was to spend his life as a lawyer, only to be remembered primarily as a writer."<sup>1</sup> He wrote three novels, the action of all of which is laid in the South, and two books of short stories.

The House Behind the Cedars presents a beautiful and sensitive heroine, Rena Walden, who, although classed as colored, is so white that her Negro identity is easily mistaken. In her struggle, she has to contend with the low ambitions of her mulatto mother and take into account the position of a brother, who is "passing" successfully as a white lawyer. She also has to fight the passions of a characterless mulatto, who wishes to marry her, and a quick-tempered southern white man, who determines to make her his mistress after he discovers she is colored. She weakens before the hopelessness of her struggle and dies, having recognized before her end that the one person who has been unselfish in his devotion is a simple-souled black man. Carl Van Vechten has called this work "perhaps the first authentic study on the subject of passing."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Henry Martha, "Pioneer With The Pen," The Negro Digest, 6:81, August, 1948.

<sup>2</sup>James Weldon Johnson, The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man, Introduction by Carl Van Vechten, p. vii.

Chesnut's The Marrow of Tradition (1901) strikes deeper into the complications created by the color line and studies the relationship existing between two sisters, one white and one mulatto, and the consequences resulting from a crime committed by a depraved young white man when he is disguised as his own colored servant. The involved action culminates in a race riot.

The Colonel's Dream (1905) is the most tragic and yet perhaps the most realistic of Chesnut's three novels. It is the story of a dreamer's attempts at reform in a southern town, which is crushed equally by a harsh economic system and by an ever-seething racial hatred. Henry French, born and reared in North Carolina and made a colonel in the Confederate Army at the age of 19, has after years of hard struggle in New York accumulated a large fortune. He has no ties in the South, but something seems to be drawing him back to the scene of his youth. Accompanied by his little motherless son, he returns to his home town for what he tells himself is to be no more than a vacation. But the sordidness of life there convinces him that he has to do something with his remaining years and with his money. He must stir the South out of its sleevishness to the traditions which are destroying it. In the fight which he makes for reform, all the odds are against him. In the end, there is nothing for him to do except admit his defeat and feel a hopelessness and despair for his native land.

Chesnutt also wrote two books of short stories: The Conjure Woman (1899), a collection of seven folk tales; and The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line (1899) which treats of color prejudice within the Negro race itself as well as inter-racial problems.

Dr. W. E. Burghardt DuBois. Dean of American Negroes and elder statesman of his race is eighty-one-year-old Dr. DuBois, who has already been mentioned in this thesis. Dr. DuBois has been an author, lecturer, editor world traveller -- in fact, a complete discussion of his accomplishments would be beyond the scope of this work. One writer has said, "The name of DuBois has become a household word in thousands of American homes during the twentieth century. It has stood for brilliance of mind, for eloquence of expression, and for noncompromise of social philosophy."<sup>1</sup>

Dr. DuBois was born in 1868 at Great Barrington, Mass., and educated at Fisk, Harvard and the University of Berlin. He holds bachelor's, master's and doctor's degrees from Harvard in addition to degrees from the other colleges. With this background, he taught in the South and the North and then took up his pen to produce numerous sociological studies, technical works, essays, sketches, short stories and two novels. His autobiography, Dusk of Dawn, was published in 1940.

His two novels were The Quest of the Silver Fleece (1911)

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<sup>1</sup>Rebecca Chalmers Barton, Witnesses for Freedom, p. 175.



and Dark Princess (1928). Only the first properly belongs in this period under discussion. The second belongs in the period called the Renaissance, but will be mentioned here.

The Quest of the Silver Fleece, probably influenced by Frank Norris' trilogy on wheat, has three main themes: the economic position of the Negro agricultural laborer, the subsidizing of certain Negro schools, and Negro life and society in the city of Washington. The tense racial relations in Toomsville, Alabama, the center of the cotton industry are portrayed. DuBois also satirizes the black and white politicians in Washington and the Southern landowning aristocracy. He discloses divergent Northern attitudes toward Negro education.

The book surpasses earlier Negro novels because of its background of scholarly investigation and because it foreshadows the social protest novels which were to come later. Plot and character are subordinated to the effect of the cotton industry on Negroes and poor whites alike in The Quest of the Silver Fleece. Poor whites and Negroes are pitted against each other in order to keep the white land barons in power and the caste system of the South is contrasted against the practicality of the Yankee.

Of the problem which was to occupy Negro writers for the next five decades, Dr. DuBois made this prophetic statement back in 1902:

I have seen a land right merry with the sun,  
where children sing, and rolling hills lie like  
passioned women wanton with harvest. And there in  
the King's Highway sat and sits a figure veiled and

bowed, by which the traveller's footsteps hasten as they go. On the tainted air broods fear. Three centuries' thought has been the raising and unveiling of that bowed human heart, and now behold a century new for the duty and the deed. The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line!<sup>1</sup>

The second novel of Dr. DuBois, Dark Princess, was published in 1928 during the period of the Negro Renaissance and concerns the possibility of international collaboration of the darker races. The main character is a beautiful princess from India, visiting in the United States. There is an international congress called "The Great Council of Darker Peoples," which debates whether black folk should be admitted to membership. First novel of its kind to make a study of the Negro among the darker races of the earth, Dark Princess takes a cosmopolitan view of the situation. It also exposes the Negro political machine in Chicago and the undercover bargains with white political organizations.

James Weldon Johnson. Born only a few years after DuBois, James Weldon Johnson resembles him in general achievement and stature. A college-trained man, professor, writer, and United States consul to Venezuela and Nicaragua, he also displayed intellectual caliber of the first rank. His first literary distinction came with The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, published in 1912. Mistakenly considered an

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<sup>1</sup>W. E. Burghardt DuBois, The Souls of Black Folk, p. 40.

considered an autobiography, the book is really a novel that leans heavily upon material that Johnson collected in his career. It is the first of the "passing" novels and the first treatment of the Black Bohemia of New York.<sup>1</sup>

Johnson was born at Jacksonville, Florida, in 1871 and was educated at Atlanta and Columbia Universities. In 1914, he joined the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People at which he worked for 14 years. Later, he was professor at New York University and at Fisk University. He was killed in an auto accident on June 26, 1938.

Associated with his brother, he produced the stirring song, "Lift every voice and sing," which has received popular adoption as a national hymn for the Negro race. He also did some studies of Negro culture and edited three anthologies on Negro poetry and spirituals.

The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man, first published anonymously, is the first novel by a Negro which does not use the South as a setting. It is also one of the first to admit the dual personalities which some Negroes assume -- one for their own people and one for the white man. This statement is made:

.....The coloured man looked at everything through the prism of his relationship to society as a coloured man, and .....most of his mental efforts ran through the narrow channel bounded by his rights and wrongs.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Sterling A. Brown, et. al., eds., The Negro Caravan, p.168.

<sup>2</sup>James Weldon Johnson, The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man, p. 73.

The hero of the book is born of a white father and a Negro mother. He attends school in the South and works at various jobs, then goes to New York where he mingles with Harlem cabaret society. After working as a musician and touring Europe, he eventually passes the color line and joins the white race with his decision prompted by a Georgia lynching. Within a few years, he attains security and marries a white woman who bears him two children before she dies.

In a reminiscence on his passing, the hero says:

My love for my children makes me glad that I am what I am, and keeps me from desiring to be otherwise; and yet, when I sometimes open a little box in which I still keep my fast yellowing manuscripts, the only tangible remnants of a vanished dream, a dead ambition, a sacrificed talent, I cannot repress the thought that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage.<sup>1</sup>

A new edition of the novel with an introduction by Carl Van Vechten was issued by Alfred A. Knopf, New York, in 1927.

Minor Novelists of the Period. Only a few novels were published by other Negro writers during the first two decades of the century. Probably the most outstanding among the minor writers was Sutton E. Griggs, who was and still is virtually unknown to white readers. Griggs was industrious enough to establish his own publishing company (The Orion Publishing Company of Nashville, Tenn.) and promote the sale of his books among the Negroes. His five novels were written mostly in answer to the propaganda of Thomas Dixon, the white author.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 207.



Beautiful heroines, "the very essence of loveliness," and noble heroes, "ebonylike Apollos," are models of decorum. Long dissertations on the race problem and melodramatic treatment of violence to the Negro make the books more like tracts than novels.

The five novels written by Griggs were The Hindered Hand (1905), Imperium in Imperio (1899), Overshadowed (1901), The Unfettered (1902) and Pointing the Way (1903).

Another minor writers of the period was Joseph S. Cotter who left school in Kentucky when in the third grade to work as a ragpicker, tobacco stemmer, brickyard hand, whiskey distiller, teamster and prize fighter. Later, the self-educated Cotter became a schoolteacher and was eventually elected by the Louisville Board of Education to serve as principal of the local school. He wrote some poetry in the Dunbar tradition and also a book called Negro Tales (1912). This last is really a series of stories with the tragic mulatto as the central figure. (Now eighty-nine-year-old Cotter is still turning out non-fiction.)

Among other novels of the period were Redder Blood (1915) by William M. Ashby and Lillian Simmons or the Conflict of Sections (1915) by Otis Shackelford. Redder Blood emphasizes the pitfalls of passing and stresses that there are no social or legal restrictions strong enough to keep lovers apart. Lillian Simmons treats of inter-racial strife caused by the Negro migration to the North. It offers the philosophy that the Negro must study to please and sympathize with the white race.

## The Negro Renaissance

The post-war period beginning in 1919 and continuing until the big stock market crash in 1929 is known as the Negro Renaissance in Negro history. During this period, the Negro affected all the arts. He made a dramatic rise in the writing of novels, a movement that has been long awaited. Writing of the period was sensational, a style that was known as the "Harlem vogue" for Harlem became the intellectual capital of the Negro world. During those "whoopee" years, the Cotton Club in Harlem became one of the most famous night clubs in the world. National attention was directed upon the black ghetto and colored authors were drawn to New York by the hundreds. The two major Negro magazines in New York featured the work of Renaissance writers and white patrons encouraged literary effort by prizes and awards.

There were several forces which brought about the Negro Renaissance and affected the writing of the period. The initial factor was World War I and the resultant migration of Negroes from the South to Northern industrial centers. The second factor was the Garvey Back-to-Africa movement and the third was a novel, Nigger Heaven, written by a white author, Carl Van Vechten. This last work is said to have affected the writing of Negro fictionists more than any other book in the history of American literature.

World War I disrupted the apparent tranquility of the Negro race. Although the National Association for the

Advancement of colored People was gaining ground, the Negro before the war had been more or less satisfied just to live. For the most part, he accepted his status in American life without too much complaint. But with the war, he caught a vision of a new order. The watchword for the nation was "Democracy." He knew democracy meant equal opportunity for all. When the Negro soldier went overseas, he thought the old order had passed.

In Not Without Laughter, Langston Hughes said:

During Sandy's second year at high school, Tempy was busy sewing for the local Red Cross and organizing Liberty Bond clubs among the colored population of Stanton. She earnestly believed that the world would really become safe for democracy, even in America when the war ended, and that colored folks would no longer be snubbed in private and discriminated against in public.<sup>1</sup>

When the war was brought to a close, white Americans attempted to thrust the black brother back into the same mould from which he had recently emerged. The effort was fruitless for he had grown so much during those years that he could not fit himself into the mould again without pain and discomfort. Consequently, there developed a bitter aftermath. Race riots flared in different sections of the country, accompanied by intense hatred of one race for the other. Negro periodicals spread the gospel of resistance, ministers encouraged their

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<sup>1</sup> Langston Hughes, Not Without Laughter, p. 274.

members to cultivate race pride and teachers taught Negro history to their children.<sup>1</sup>

Attracted by the promise of better social and economic advantages, Negroes swarmed from the South to the Northern industrial centers during the World War I period. The mass movement was accompanied by a decided increase in race tension and a rapid spread in policies of segregation. Southerners tried to hold back the tide, but it continued even though Negroes were crowded into congested sections of the Northern cities and there were race riots. In spite of the disadvantages, however, Negroes did gain by getting a better education and wider cultural opportunities.

Another factor affecting the Negro Renaissance was the "Back-to-Africa" movement in the early twenties, headed by Marcus Garvey, a Negro from Jamaica. The organ of the movement was The Negro World. Garvey's purpose was to establish a black republic in Africa, but the movement collapsed because of financial mismanagement. One historian called the scheme "insanely Utopian."<sup>2</sup> Another has termed it "the most thorough and consistent nationalistic philosophy that the Negroes ever have had."<sup>3</sup> At any rate, it appears that Garvey attracted a large personal following and exerted an influence on the

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<sup>1</sup> Ford, op. cit., pp. 17 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Woodson, op. cit., p. 554.

<sup>3</sup> Merl R. Eppse, The Negro, Too, in American History, p. 358.



Renaissance because he personified the Negro's dissatisfaction with his way of life.

As mentioned before, another influence upon the Negro Renaissance was the appearance of the white Carl Van Vechten's novel, Nigger Heaven. Never were the Negroes so outraged and never was such a furor raised as when this book came on the market. Yet much as Negroes condemned the novel, some Negro writers set out to copy its sensational style -- a style that became known as the "Van Vechten vogue."

Langston Hughes has commented on the fury aroused by

Nigger Heaven:

The strange inability on the part of many of the Negro critics to understand irony or satire..... partially explains the phenomenon of that violent outburst of rage that stirred the Negro press for months after the appearance of Carl Van Vechten's Nigger Heaven.

The use of the word nigger in the title explains the rest of it. The word nigger to colored people of high and low degree is like a red rag to a bull..... Negroes do not like it in any book or play whatsoever, be the book or play ever so sympathetic in its treatment of the basic problems of the race.....So, when the novel Nigger Heaven came out, Negroes did not read it to get mad. They got mad as soon as they heard of it.<sup>1</sup>

All across America, Negroes held meetings to denounce Nigger Heaven. At one mass meeting in the Harlem Public Library, the crowd saw a large white-haired old gentleman in the back they thought was Carl Van Vechten. They turned on him

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<sup>1</sup> Langston Hughes, The Big Sea, p. 268 f.

in such fury that the startled old gentleman arose and said,  
 "Why, I'm not Carl Van Vechten!"<sup>1</sup>

Van Vechten was surprised and distressed at the storm of disapproval his novel had aroused. He defended his subject matter on the grounds that all of this exotic material concerning Negro culture was available. Why not use it? He pointed out that if Negro authors did not make use of the material, then white authors would.<sup>2</sup>

The title of the book is an ironical one. By the title, Van Vechten referred to the term used in many cities to designate the upper gallery of a theater where Negroes may sit -- the "nigger heaven." To Van Vechten, Harlem was like that top gallery -- a place for Negroes to stage their own show and yet watch the passing parade of whites. One of the characters in the book complains:

Nigger Heaven.....that's what Harlem is. We sit in our places in the gallery of this New York theater and watch the white world sitting below in the good seats of the orchestra. Occasionally, they turn their faces up toward us, their hard cruel faces, to laugh and sneer, but they never beckon. It never seems to occur to them that Nigger Heaven is crowded, that there isn't any other seat, that something has to be done. It doesn't seem to occur to them either that we sit above them, that we can drop things on them and crush them, that we can swoop down from this Nigger Heaven and take their seats. No, they have no fear of that! Harlem! The Mecca of the New Negro!<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 270.

<sup>2</sup> Carl Van Vechten, "The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed?" The Crisis, 31:219, January, 1926.

<sup>3</sup> Carl Van Vechten, Nigger Heaven, p. 282.

The story is devoted to events in the lives of three people: a young Negro novelist, who must face the discriminations of the white editorial offices, and two young Negro women, Mary Love and Olive Hamilton, who occupy an apartment together. Neither of the girls earned very much money, but they managed to see some good plays and musical shows, usually sitting in the balcony to save expense, although "Olive was light enough and Mary's features were sufficiently Latin so that they were not rudely received when they asked at the box office for places in the orchestra."<sup>1</sup>

Mary cherished an almost fanatic faith in her race, a love for her people in themselves and a fervent belief in their possibilities. She felt at times that they were all savages and recalled something she had heard about "Negroes never premeditate murder. Their murders are committed under the reign of passion.....there had never been a Negro poisoner."

Regardless of how well Van Vechten might have known his subject matter (and he had lived and associated with the Negroes for years before writing his book), the Negroes would have no more of him. He became the goat of the Negro Renaissance. Critics proceeded to light on him and he was accused of ruining, distorting, polluting and corrupting every Negro writer from then on, who was ever known to have shaken hands with him or to have used the word "nigger" in his writings.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>2</sup>Langston Hughes, The Big Sea, p. 271.

And so the stage was set for the Negro Renaissance, a stage through which American Negro literature passed on its way to the ultimate goal. A few of the outstanding writers of the period are discussed here.

Claude McKay (1889-1948) A former student in agriculture at Kansas State College was Claude McKay, Negro poet, novelist, short story writer, world traveler and a colorful and controversial figure in the literary world.

He was born in Jamaica in the British West Indies and was taught by his free-thinking brother, the schoolmaster of his home town. When he was 17, he won a Jamaica Government trade scholarship, but after a short apprenticeship to a cabinet maker, he joined the island constabulary. In 1911, he published a book of poems, Songs of Jamaica, and then came to the United States to study. He first went to Tuskegee where he remained for several months.

In 1912, McKay came to Kansas State College and enrolled in agriculture. He remained in Manhattan two years. Then, inheriting a legacy of a few thousand dollars, McKay dropped out of college and went to New York. After his money was gone, he went to work at anything he could find to do. Most of the time, he worked as a dining car waiter on the Pennsylvania Railroad and wrote in his spare time. The late Frank Harris, editor of Pearson's Magazine, took an interest in McKay and helped him to market his work. McKay also became acquainted with Max and Crystal Eastman of The Liberator and was



associate editor of that magazine for a time.

In 1921, McKay went abroad and lived in Europe for many years. He visited with George Bernard Shaw, Sylvia Pankhurst, Isadora Duncan and many other world-known notables. In turn, he lived in Russia, Berlin, Paris, Marseilles and North Africa with brief visits back to New York. Late in 1948, he died in Chicago where he was teaching in a Catholic school.

McKay wrote three novels: Home to Harlem, which has its setting in Harlem; Banjo, a story of Marseilles; and Banana Bottom, a novel of Jamaica. He also wrote Gingertown, a collection of twelve short stories about Harlem; A Long Way from Home, his autobiography; Harlem; Negro Metropolis, a work of non-fiction; and three volumes of poems -- Songs of Jamaica, Spring in New Hampshire and Harlem Shadows.

McKay was author of a racial sonnet, If We Must Die,<sup>1</sup> which promises to go down in literary history. It has been used in various anthologies of world literature and has been adopted by the Negro people as representing the spirit of the New Negro.

The novel by McKay which the Negro critics condemned most and which made him virtually an expatriate from his own people was Home to Harlem. With this book, McKay was accused of aping Carl Van Vechten although McKay pointed out that he finished

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<sup>1</sup>Claude McKay, "If We Must Die," Harlem Shadows, p. 53.

Home to Harlem before he ever read Van Vechten's book.<sup>1</sup>

To the criticism that he wrote only of the "low-down" Negro, McKay said simply, "I created my Negro characters without sandpaper and varnish."<sup>2</sup>

Home to Harlem is a story of night life in Harlem in the days after World War I. A young Negro, Jake, found that his day dreams of going over the top in the war were to end in toting lumber in Brest, so he takes "French leave" and stokes his way back to Harlem. In a Harlem cabaret, he finds Felice, loves her and loses her the next day.

Jake then works and loafes at various jobs and the reader follows him through night clubs, pool rooms, gambling dives and prostitution houses. One sees, through Jake's eyes, the passing parade of Harlem's underworld -- streetwalkers, show girls, alcoholics, "sweet men," scabs, loafers and loan sharks. The reader meets "Gin-head Susy," who belongs to the ancient aristocracy of black cooks whose art is cream tomato soup, ragout of chicken giblets, Southern fried chicken, candied sweet potatoes and rum-flavored fruit salad waiting in the icebox. There is much dancing, singing, fighting, drinking and loving in these pages. The life thus pictured by McKay is a whole unto itself. Out of a number of detached incidents, a world arose, existing completely to give breath to his

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<sup>1</sup>Claude McKay, A Long Way from Home, p. 282 f.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 223.

characters.

Jake in Home to Harlem and Banjo, hero of the novel of that name, are elemental beings. They live simply for the joy of living, never pressed by duty or conscience or mindful of the stringencies of civilized law. The Negro "problem," as such, does not touch them. They are too busy living with gusto to bother about it. It is Ray, the trained, thinking mind, presented in both novels, who worries about it.

Could he not see what Anglo-Saxon standards were doing to some of the world's most interesting peoples?.....Educated Negroes ashamed of their race's love of color, wrapping themselves up in respectable gray, ashamed of Congo-sounding laughter, ashamed of their complexion.....ashamed of their strong appetites.<sup>1</sup>

Ray is the link between the educated Negro, who has clamped the hood of Anglo-Saxon education and conventions over his nature, and the uncultured and uninhibited Negro. Ray has resisted the pattern of the white man's domination sufficiently to realize and to be proud of his linking with the more despised members of his race:

He loved their natural gusto for living down the past and lifting their kinky heads out of the hot suffocating ashes, the shadow, the terror of real sorrow to go on gaily grinning in the present.... No Victorian-long period of featured grief and luxuriant mourning, no mechanical-pale graveside face, but a luxuriant living up from it, like the great jungles growing perennially beautiful and green in the yellow blaze of the sun over the long life-breaking tragedy of Africa.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Claude McKay, Banjo, p. 164.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 321 ff.

The world lost a brilliant mind when it lost McKay. One writer has said, "His fingerprints can never be duplicated."<sup>1</sup> But the Negro people never entirely forgave him for what was considered a betrayal of his race. When he died last year, the Negro press either ignored or gave scant space to the news of his death. Frank Marshall Davis, Negro poet, journalist and former Kansas State student now in Hawaii, wrote in January of 1949 to Professor Robert Conover of Kansas State College: "McKay was out of favor with Negro writers, both left and right, who looked upon him as an opportunist."

Walter F. White. Novelist, sociologist, educator and secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People is Walter White whose life-long work for his people has earned him high respect in this country and abroad.

It is only through White's own insistence on his Negro blood (estimated at about one-sixty-fourth) that anyone would take him for a Negro. He has fair skin, blue eyes and blond hair. The White stories of "passing white" are many and delightful. In his work as an investigator of lynchings and race riots, White found this ability to "pass" of great help in getting information. He tells many of these incidents in his autobiography, A Man Called White. Claude McKay said, "Whenever I am in Walter White's company, my eyes compose him and my emotions respond exactly as they do in the case of any friendly so-called 'white' man."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Rebecca Chalmers Barton, Witnesses for Freedom, p. 146.

<sup>2</sup>Claude McKay, A Long Way from Home, p. 111.



White was born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1893, the son of an Atlanta postman. He was educated at Atlanta University and the College of the City of New York. (All of the seven White children went through college.) His first novel was The Fire in the Flint (1924), the story of a Negro professional man. He received the Guggenheim award for his second novel Flight (1926), and then spent a year in France working on a study of lynching and lynch psychology. The results of this study were published in Rope and Fagot: A Biography of Judge Lynch (1929). He has also written A Rising Wind (1945), a report on the Negro soldier in World War II.

In The Fire in the Flint, young Kenneth Harper, a Negro physician educated abroad, returns to his home town in Georgia to practice. Kenneth's younger hot-headed brother, Bob, thinks Kenneth is a fool to return to the South, but Kenneth in his sublime ignorance believes that "any Negro can get along without trouble in the South if one only tends to his own business."

Kenneth soon finds out how wrong he can be. He arouses the Ku Klux Klan against him through his efforts to help the exploited Negro sharecroppers by consumers' cooperatives. His younger sister, Mamie, is raped, his brother is lynched and Kenneth himself is killed on his way home from a sick call.

The author, speaking through his mouthpiece, Dr. Harper, sees a new day coming when a man in the South will no longer be exploited and robbed just because he is black. He thinks

perhaps the whites in time will realize that they are hurting themselves by trying to keep the Negro down. "For all its rich natural resources, with its fertile soil and its wonderful climate, the South is farther behind in civilization than any part of the United States. Why can't the people see that they are doing more harm to themselves than they could ever do to the Negro?"

However, the slavery-conditioned minds of the dominant whites make them reluctant to change their racial concepts, according to Dr. Harper. Their weapon is the poor whites who are pitted against the Negroes in the struggle for existence.

The Fire in the Flint is a milestone in Negro writing because it exposes the precarious position of Negroes in the South. In this story of a Negro professional man, there is a great argument against prejudice and brutality.

White's second novel, Flight, is a study of "passing" in New York and of colored society in Atlanta, Georgia. The author ridicules those wealthier Negroes who place emphasis on a light skin and are outspoken in their dislike of black Negroes, Catholics and Jews.

He unfolds the story of Nimi, a New Orleans Creole, who crosses the color line to work in a dress shop on Fifth Avenue in New York. She marries a white man, but still feels drawn to Harlem and her people, thus verifying an old Negro saying that "passers always come back."

She marvelled at the spirit of the Negro race:

.....at their toughness of fibre which seemed to be a racial characteristic, which made them able to live in the midst of a highly mechanized civilization, enjoy its undoubted advantages, and yet keep free that individual and racial distinctiveness which did not permit the surrender of individuality to the machine.

In slavery, it had kept them from being crushed and exterminated as oppression had done to the Indian. In freedom, it had kept them from becoming mere cogs in an elaborately organized machine.<sup>1</sup>

Both of White's novels were written in an effort to secure better treatment of Negroes.

A white student of race relations has said of White:

Walter White has fought so valiantly all his life that he is in his own person a terrible army. But he is an army with banners -- gay, dancing pennants as well as martial flags. The first impression one gets on meeting him is of a widely traveled, well-read, busy man of the world. But his record in action shows a keen, tough warrior, probably the strongest and most successful champion of civil rights in America today.<sup>2</sup>

Jean Toomer. One of the most significant books to come out of the Negro Renaissance was Cane, written by Jean Toomer. This book is a collection of sketches, short stories and poems which startled literary America with its subject matter and unique approach. The stories in Cane are woven around three women, white or near-white, and the tragedy which comes into their lives as the result of race prejudice. The book has been described as the first to emancipate the colored world from the conventions of sex.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Walter White, Flight, p. 94.

<sup>2</sup> Edwin R. Embree, 13 Against the Odds, p. 95.

<sup>3</sup> W. E. Burghardt DuBois and Alain Locke, "The Younger Literary Movement," The Crisis, 27:161, February, 1924.

Toomer was born in 1894 in Washington, D. C., and educated there as well as at the University of Wisconsin and the College of the City of New York. In 1918, he turned to writing and his sketches, poems and reviews have appeared in various national magazines.

Langston Hughes commented on Toomer as being somewhat of a puzzle to the Negro world. After writing Cane, Toomer moved to Chicago and the next thing Harlem heard of him, he was maintaining to the newspapers that he was no more colored than white -- as certainly his complexion indicated.

When the late James Weldon Johnson wrote him for permission to use some of his poems in the Book of American Negro Poetry, Mr. Johnson reported that the poet, who, a few years before was "caroling softly souls of slavery" now refused to permit his poems to appear in an anthology of Negro verse -- which put all the critics, white and colored, in a great dilemma. How should they class the author of Cane in their lists and summaries? With DuBose Heyward and Julia Peterkin? Or with Claude McKay and Countee Cullen? Nobody knew exactly, it being a case of black blood and white blood having met and the individual deciding.....Now Mr. Toomer is married to a lady of means -- his second wife -- of New York and Santa Fe, and is never seen on Lenox Avenue any more. Harlem is sorry he stopped writing. He was a fine American writer.....<sup>1</sup>

Jessie Fauset. The chronicler of the upper class Negro is Jessie Fauset whose position among the Negro writers might be compared to that of Edith Wharton among the white novelists. Miss Fauset gives attention to a class within a race -- that of decent, well-educated Negro society.

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<sup>1</sup> Langston Hughes, The Big Sea, p. 242 f.



She was born in Philadelphia and educated at Cornell, the University of Pennsylvania and the Sorbonne in France. She has taught French in the schools of Washington, New York and Tuskegee. In addition to doing editorial work on The Crisis, she has written four novels and many magazine articles. At present, Miss Fauset lives in Montclair, New Jersey, with her husband, Herbert Harris.

Jessie Fauset states particularly that she was started on her literary career by reading a novel of T. S. Stribling (probably Birthright) in which she believed Negro life was unfairly pictured. She said:

A number of us started writing at that time. Nella Larson (sic) and Walter White, for instance, were affected just as I was. We reasoned, 'Here is an audience waiting to hear the truth about us. Let us, who are better qualified to present that truth than any white writer, try to do so'.<sup>1</sup>

Said Claude McKay:

Jessie Fauset was assistant editor of The Crisis when I met her.....She was prim, pretty and well-dressed, and talked fluently and intelligently. All the radicals liked her, although in her social viewpoint she was away over on the other side of the fence. She belonged to that closed decorous circle of Negro society, which consists of persons who live proudly like the better class of conventional whites, except that they do so on less money.....Miss Fauset has written many novels about people in her circle.... She is prim and dainty as a primrose and her novels are quite as fastidious and precious.<sup>2</sup>

Langston Hughes also has said: "Jessie Fauset's novels they (the Negroes) loved, because they were always about the

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<sup>1</sup>Marion L. Starkey, "Jessie Fauset," Southern Workman, 61:218, May, 1932.

<sup>2</sup>McKay, op. cit., p. 112.

educated Negro -- but my poems, or Claude McKay's Home to Harlem they did not like, sincere though we might be."<sup>1</sup>

Miss Fauset's novels are There Is Confusion (1924), Plum Bun (1929), The Chinaberry Tree (1931), and Comedy, American Style (1933). Of these, The Chinaberry Tree is the one usually read by white readers, possibly because it has an introduction by Zona Gale.

There Is Confusion is the first widely-recognized novel by an American Negro woman. The story revolves around the obstacles that educated Negroes must overcome and exposes both intra-racial and inter-racial color prejudices. Its thesis is stated in a speech by the dying Philip Murray to his sister. In looking back over a life which has failed to secure for him the maximum good, he says:

In those days, I was so taken up with the business of being colored! After I'd adjusted that, I thought I'd arrange my life. Ah, Joanna, that's our great mistake. We must learn to look out for life first, then color and limitations. My being colored didn't make me forget to provide myself with food and raiment.....

Learn this, Joanna, and tell the rest of our folks. Our battle is a hard one and for a long time it will seem to be a losing one, but it will never really be that as long as we keep the power of being happy.....Happiness, love and contentment in our midst make it possible for us to face those foes without.<sup>2</sup>

In Plum Bun, two things are emphasized: (1) the discriminations practiced against Negroes in public places

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<sup>1</sup> Hughes, op cit., p. 267.

<sup>2</sup> Jessie Fauset, There Is Confusion, p. 297 f.

of which numerous instances are given and (2) the advantages and disadvantages of "passing" for white. Two of the chief characters in the book are passing. They have been intimately acquainted, in fact lovers, but it is only after a long period of time that the fact of passing is revealed to each other.

The theme of The Chinaberry Tree is that the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children. The setting of the story is a small New Jersey town where colored society makes just as much a fetish of prim respectability as the white does.

Two Negro girls are the central figures in The Chinaberry Tree. The older girl, Laurentine, is the illegitimate daughter of a Negro housemaid and a white Southern colonel. All of her life, Laurentine has endured social ostracism because of her mixed blood.

The other girl, Melissa, is Laurentine's cousin. Melissa is also of illegitimate birth, but she does not know it. She enjoys popularity among colored society folk and eventually falls in love with one of the promising young men of the town. However, her world crashes when she discovers that the man she plans to marry is really her half-brother and the old secret of her birth is revealed.

Comsdy, American Style is a study of color mania in a near-white wife and mother. Olivia Cary is married to a light-skinned Negro physician and the mother of three children. Two of the children are light enough to pass, but the third and last child, Oliver, is dark to Olivia's horror. "Through one

pretext and another, Olivia contrived not to be seen on the street with him." She feels that the entire family could pass for white "if it just weren't for Oliver." Because of her Nordic obsession, Olivia ruins the lives of her children and of her husband.

Nella Larsen. A woman novelist of the Renaissance who was preoccupied with the problems of miscegenation and passing was Nella Larsen, author of two novels, Quicksand and Passing. Not too much is known of her private life other than that she was the daughter of a Danish woman and a Negro man from the Virgin Islands. Other Negro writers of the time say nothing of her background.<sup>1</sup>

Quicksand is the story of an extremely self-conscious mulatto woman, half Scandinavian and half Negro. Her yearning for something she calls "happiness" leads her to and fro in the earth. She goes from Harlem to Chicago and then to Copenhagen, Denmark. After returning to the United States, she marries an itinerant preacher and spends the rest of her life in a small Alabama town where she becomes the mother of five children. Her wanderings are a background for showing a violent struggle between her Nordic and Negro blood. When she finally yields to the stronger urge, the primitive, she is

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<sup>1</sup> A letter dated April 1, 1949, from Tuskegee Institute, Alabama, which publishes the Negro Year Book, says: "Adequate biographical data on Negro writers is often scarce, if not non-existent."



submerged by the quicksands of ignorance and emotionalism. Her character stands out as typical of the tragic mulatto so popular in fiction.

While in Quicksand, the heroine never openly severs connections with Negroes, the opposite situation exists in Passing. In this novel, a beautiful young woman passes the color line to join the white race and to marry a white man. However, in doing so, she yearns for the world she has left behind and is drawn irresistibly back to it. Her husband's discovery that she has been visiting with the Harlem Negroes leads to her tragic death.

Racial maladjustment is the problem in both of these novels. The implication is that the Negro-white hybrid can never find his place in the world.

Rudolph Fisher. Another writer of the Negro Renaissance, who caught the Harlem scene, was Rudolph Fisher. His reputation rests mainly on one novel, Walls of Jericho (not to be confused with a novel of the same name by Paul Wellman, the Kansas writer). He also wrote The Conjure-Man Dies, a detective novel, and many short stories.

Fisher trained to be a doctor and became a writer by accident. He was born in Washington, D. C., and educated in the Providence, Rhode Island, public schools, Brown University and the Howard University Medical School. In 1924, he received the degree of doctor of medicine from Howard and then practiced roentgenology in New York.

The wittiest of these New Negroes of Harlem, whose tongue was flavored with the sharpest and saltiest humor, was Rudolph Fisher....His novel, Walls of Jericho, captures but slightly the raciness of his own conversation. He was a young medical doctor and X-ray specialist, who always frightened me a little, because he could think of the most incisively clever things to say -- and I could never think of anything to answer. He and Alain Locke together were great for intellectual wise-cracking. The two would fling big and witty words about with such swift and punning innuendo that an ordinary mortal just sat and looked wary for fear of being caught in a net of witticisms beyond his cultural ken. I used to wish I could talk like Rudolph Fisher. Besides being a good writer, he was an excellent singer and had sung with Paul Robeson during their college days. But I guess Fisher was too brilliant and too talented to stay long on this earth. During the same week, in December, 1934, he and Wallace Thurman both died.<sup>1</sup>

Using the love story of a piano mover and a lady's maid as the string, The Walls of Jericho adds varied glimpses of Negro life like beads to make a Harlem necklace. One of the main characters is a colored attorney or "dickty" ("dickty" is Negro slang for the "high-toned yellow"). Another character is Miss Agatha Cramp, a white professional uplifter. Miss Cramp visits a Harlem costume ball and is surprised and shocked to see so many "white" people there -- when she is informed that they are all Negroes, after all, she naively thinks that environment and the climate of this country have lightened their complexions. She expounds: "Now if these same people here tonight had originally gone to Scandinavia -- three or four hundred years ago, you understand -- some of them

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<sup>1</sup>Langston Hughes, The Big Sea, p. 250 f.

would by now be as fair as the Scandinavians! Why they'd even have blue eyes and yellow hair!"<sup>1</sup>

The Walls of Jericho reveals the first Negro author skilled in comic realism and able to use irony and satire not only upon whites, but also upon various classes of his own people.<sup>2</sup>

### The End of the Negro Renaissance

The stock market crash in October of 1929 marked the beginning of the end for the Negro Renaissance. When the depression struck, the fad of patronizing Negro art died. White patrons withdrew their support from Negro artists. Always in job difficulties anyway, the Negroes felt the depression more keenly than any other group.

That.....was the end of the Harlem Renaissance. We were no longer in vogue, anyway, we Negroes. Sophisticated New Yorkers turned to Noel Coward. Colored actors began to go hungry, publishers politely rejected new manuscripts, and patrons found other uses for their money. The cycle that had charlestoned into being on the dancing heels of Shuffle Along now ended in Green Pastures with De Lawd.

The generous 1920's were over.....<sup>3</sup>

Of the many Negroes who started writing during the Renaissance, only a few held on and survived. Two, Langston

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<sup>1</sup> Rudolph Fisher, The Walls of Jericho, p. 103.

<sup>2</sup> Gloster, op. cit., p. 177.

<sup>3</sup> Langston Hughes, The Big Sea, p. 354 f.

Hughes and Arna Bontemps, are still writing today. Two others, who came into prominence at the end of the Renaissance, Countee Cullen and Wallace Thurman, are now dead. Another, George Schuyler, wrote two novels in 1931, but has since turned to journalism and has written no more novels.

Langston Hughes. The best-known and most versatile writer to come out of the Negro Renaissance was Langston Hughes, a former Kansan and a regular contributor to The Kansas Magazine, published at Kansas State College. His own life has been a modern odyssey for he has lived in all corners of Europe, Africa, Asia and America. He has written books, articles, short stories, poems, plays and radio scripts by the dozen. He has received Guggenheim awards, Rosenwald fellowships, literary prizes, inter-racial medals and honorary degrees. In popular opinion, he is today considered the top writer among the Negroes.

Born in Joplin, Missouri, in 1902, Hughes lived most of the time until he was 12 in Lawrence, Kansas, with his maternal grandmother. She was the widow of Lewis Sheridan Loary, one of the five Negroes killed with John Brown at Harper's Ferry. Hughes' great-uncle on his mother's side was John Mercer Langston, congressman from Virginia, U. S. minister to Haiti and first dean of the law school at Howard University.

When Hughes was 14, he went with his mother to Cleveland, Ohio, and finished high school there. After graduation, he lived for 15 months with his father in Mexico and then enrolled



at Columbia University. He remained in Columbia a year, but breaking with his father, he went on "his own." Working on freight steamers, he saw all parts of the world. While working as a bus boy in a Washington, D. C., hotel, he was "discovered" by Vachel Lindsay. From then on, Hughes was on his way up. Eventually, he finished college at Lincoln University and was awarded a doctor's degree in 1943.

One writer gives an interesting sidelight on Hughes' home life:

When I last saw him.....he was living in New York with his "adopted uncle and aunt," Emerson and Toy Harper, friends of his family since Kansas days. Mrs. Harper, who traveled for years with shows and circuses, is now a dress designer for theatrical celebrities. Her husband is a Harlow musician and composer. Their three-room apartment is a beehive: Mrs. Harper giving a fitting in the hall before a mirror, while a seamstress is busily running the sewing machine in the bedroom, the husband practicing a cadenza on his oboe in the living room, and Langston Hughes clattering away on his typewriter in the kitchen. It is a "You-Can't-Take-It-With-You" setting, with visiting Brazilian authors, relatives from Kansas, City, ladies preparing their wardrobes all walking about while doorbell and telephone go on merrily ringing and ringing.

Hughes likes to work out his articles, skits and incidental verse in such hectic settings. But he does his sustained work late at night when he is free of interruptions, starting at midnight and running on to three or four in the morning or even into the dawn.<sup>1</sup>

Hughes' life story is told in his autobiography, The Big Sea. His one novel, Not Without Laughter, a story with a Kansas setting, came out in 1930. A book of collected short

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<sup>1</sup> Edwin R. Embree, 13 Against the Odds, p. 135.

stories, The Ways of White Folks, was published in 1934. His published verse includes some six volumes. Hughes has also collaborated with Arna Bontemps on several works, including a recent anthology of Negro verse called Poetry of the Negro, 1746-1949, which was released in March, 1949, by Doubleday Doran, New York. More than a dozen of the Hughes plays have been produced by the Gilpin Players of Cleveland, oldest Negro theater group in America.

Not Without Laughter is a novel of the trials of a Negro family in Stanton, Kansas (probably Lawrence). The matriarch of the family is Aunt Hager Williams, who has raised five children and one grandson through income earned by 70 years over the wash tubs. In turn, her children leave her and only her grandson is left to carry on her dreams of uplifting the black race.

Other characters are Annjee, daughter of Hager, who has married a gay young "high yellar" guitar player named Jimboy; Sandy, young son of Annjee, whose early life is portrayed in the book; Harriett, attractive daughter of Hager, who represents the militant New Negro; and Tempy, another daughter of Hager's, who represents the snobbish upper class in Negro society.

There are descriptions of dances, carnivals, lodge activities and the various things that make up Negro life in the average Midwest town. The pool halls, red light districts and white hotels are all described for us through Sandy's eyes.

Hughes comments on his writing of the novel while a

student at Lincoln University:

All that winter, my senior year, I re-read and re-worked my novel. The following summer, after graduation, I again stayed on the campus in a big, empty theological dormitory all alone.....Aunt Hager and Annjee and Jimboy were there. And an oil light burned on my table -- as in Kansas.

That night when Harriett ran away to join the carnival was almost more than I could stand. I knew I would miss her. (I had never really had an aunt who ran away to join a carnival, but I wanted to have one. And there wasn't really any oil light in the dormitory.)<sup>1</sup>

Not Without Laughter was unique in that it was the first novel by a Negro author which brought out the position of the Negro in a small Midwestern town. Readers of Hughes wish that he might write more novels, but apparently he is a poet at heart. In all of his work, he shows the enduring tie which he feels toward his Negro background.

Arna Bontemps. Another writer who came into prominence with Hughes and who has collaborated with him is Arna Bontemps. Bontemps, who is librarian at Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee, continues writing and enjoys steady popularity. In 1948, he published a non-fictional work, Story of the Negro, a history of the Negro people from before the founding of the Songhay empire in Africa. Besides some children's books, he has written three novels: God Sends Sunday (1931), Black Thunder (1936) and Drums at Dusk (1939). The last two are historical novels of slave insurrections in Virginia and Haiti.

Bontemps was born in 1902 in Alexandria, Louisiana. At 20, he was graduated from Pacific Union College in northern

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<sup>1</sup>Langston Hughes, The Big Sea, p. 305.

California. He came to New York the following year and "saw the Negro Renaissance from a grandstand seat." Leaving New York, he taught for a while in Alabama before going to Fisk University.

God Sends Sunday, the novel which marked the end of the Negro Renaissance, is a delightful story of a Negro jockey, Li'l Augie. The book is completely free of race consciousness. Li'l Augie, born on a Red River plantation, runs away from home to become a jockey. He goes to New Orleans and finally drifts up to St. Louis in search of a new world "full of fancy yellow women." When he is at the height of his fame as a jockey and "dirty with money," he struts in fancy, ridiculous clothes and spends lavishly on women. The description of his cake walk at a St. Louis Negro ball and of the startling suit in which Li'l Augie wins the grand prize is well worth reading. Eventually, however, Li'l Augie starts on the way down. He fails at everything he tries to do and finally ends up as a penniless hobo.

The novel shows the after effects of the Harlem or Van Vechten vogue in its emphasis on the sensational.

Countee Cullen. Another writer, who brought out a novel in 1932, was Countee Cullen. This book was One Way to Heaven, his only novel although he published several books of poetry. (It seems that most of the Negro writers turn naturally to poetry as a medium to express emotion and racial oppression.)

Cullen was born in New York in 1903, the son of a Methodist minister, educated in the public schools there and



was awarded his B. A. degree from New York University and his M. A. from Harvard. His first book of poems was published in 1925 and followed by several other volumes of poetry. He died in February of 1946, only a few weeks after completing an anthology of his best verse, On These I Stand (Harper & Brothers, New York, 1947). Cullen was married to Yolande DuBois, daughter and only child of Dr. W. E. Burghardt DuBois.

One Way to Heaven is a novel of Negro religious life in Harlem with Sam Lucas, a one-armed vagrant who has made a living by dallying with phony religious conversions, as the main character. At revival meetings, Sam usually went to the mourners' bench, threw in a pack of cards and a razor and announced he was saved. The emotional congregation then showered him with coins. His conversion at the Hebron A.M.E. church won for him the heart of Mattie, an honest, hard-working, black servant girl. He married Mattie and went with her to live with her Aunt Maundy. However, he soon forgot his supposed conversion and took to drink and women. Finally, he died from pneumonia after making Mattie believe that he really did repent before death.

Another character is Constancia, the satiric mouthpiece for the Negro intelligensia, who, for a joke, arranges for a prominent Negro-hater to address a meeting of the colored folk and then says:

An irrefutable evidence of a sense of humor is the ability to laugh at oneself as well as at one's tormentors and defamers. If we Negroes haven't

learned that in these three hundred years, we have made sorry progress.<sup>1</sup>

Relative to Langston Hughes' contention that Negroes always want to put their best foot forward in anything that white people might read, a young Negro novelist in One Way to Heaven says to Constancia:

Half a dozen people here tonight have asked me what the white people will think about the race when they read my book. Good God! I wasn't writing a history about the Negro. I was trying to write a novel.<sup>2</sup>

Cullen's prose shows power, but his real reputation rests on his lyric poetry. Most of his poems are concerned with love, death and the heavy burdens of his people.

Wallace Thurman. One of the most thoughtful novels to be written by a Negro was The Blacker the Berry (1929), a study of intra-racial color prejudice, written by Wallace Thurman. In this novel, the author used the popular theory of the universal contempt for the black girl by the Negro man. Emma Lou, the heroine, was the black daughter of a light-skinned mother whose family motto was "whiter and whiter every generation." A dark skin handicaps Emma Lou at home, in adjusting herself at the university, acquiring social contacts, obtaining employment and holding the affection of the man she would like to marry. As one of the characters in the book says:

<sup>1</sup> Countee Cullen, One Way to Heaven, p. 167.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 186.

.....you can't blame light Negroes for being prejudiced against dark ones. All of you know that white is the symbol of everything pure and good, whether that everything be concrete or abstract. Ivory Soap is advertised as being ninety-nine and some fraction per cent pure and Ivory Soap is white. Moreover, virtue and virginity are always represented as being clothed in white garments. Then, too, the God we, or rather most Negroes, worship is a patriarchal white man, seated on a white throne, in a spotless white heaven, radiant with white streets and white-appareled angels eating white honey and drinking white milk.<sup>1</sup>

Thurman was ever a satirist. In a novel published in 1932, entitled Infants of the Spring, he calls the Negro literati the "niggeratti" and ridicoules the Renaissance. He was pessimistic about the attitude of the New Negro and said:

The struggle to free himself from race consciousness had been hailed before actually accomplished. The effort to formulate a new attitude toward life had become a seeking for a red badge of courage. That which might have emerged normally, if given time, had been forcibly and prematurely exposed to the light. It now seemed as if the Caesarian operation was going to prove fatal to the parent and the child.<sup>2</sup>

Educated at the University of Southern California, Thurman came to New York to serve on the editorial staff of a Negro magazine. Langston Hughes, who knew him well, said:

He was a strangely brilliant black boy, who had read everything and whose critical mind could find something wrong with everything he read..... Thurman had read so many books because he could read eleven lines at a time. He would get from the library a great pile of volumes that would have taken me a year to read. But he would go through them in less than a week and be able to

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<sup>1</sup> Wallace Thurman, The Blacker the Berry, p. 98.

<sup>2</sup> Wallace Thurman, Infants of the Spring, p. 147.

discuss each one at great length with anybody. That was why, I suppose, he was later given a job as a reader at Macaulay's -- the only Negro reader, so far as I know, to be employed by any of the larger publishing firms.<sup>1</sup>

Thurman also did ghost writing for some of the "true confessions" magazines and was said to have "ghosted" some books for prominent whites.<sup>2</sup> When only 32 years old, he died of tuberculosis in the charity ward of a New York hospital.

George Schuyler. Another satirical novelist as well as a top Negro journalist is George Schuyler, who brought out the fantastic Black No More in 1931. Born in 1895 in Rhode Island and educated in Syracuse, New York, Schuyler served as an army first lieutenant in World War I. He has long been a successful newspaperman and columnist and has been on the editorial staffs of several of the leading Negro newspapers. Although he wrote only two novels, he has continued to publish numerous short stories, articles and reviews.

The main theme of Black No More is the discovery by Dr. Crockman, a Negro scientist, of a serum which bleaches black skin white, turns thick lips thin and makes kinky hair straight. It is a caustic satire on white as well as black people. Said the scientist, who discovered the startling method of bleaching Negroes:

My sociology teacher had once said that there are but three ways for the Negro to solve his problem in America.....'To either get out, get white or get along.' Since he wouldn't and couldn't get out and

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<sup>1</sup>Langston Hughes, The Big Sea, p. 234.

<sup>2</sup>Loc. cit.



was getting along only indifferently, it seemed to me that the only thing for him was to get white.<sup>1</sup>

The irony of the whole matter was that after all the Negroes in America had gone through this bleaching process, they were so white, whiter even than many of the Nordics, that whites and blacks alike began using a light brown stain to pigment the skin. Naturally, the entire social system was upset. Cried one Southern newspaper:

Hundreds of Negroes with newly-acquired skins have already entered white society and thousands will follow them. The black race from one end of the country to the other has in two short weeks gone completely crazy over the prospect of getting white. Day by day we see the color line which we have so laboriously established being rapidly destroyed. There would not be so much cause for alarm in this, were it not for the fact that this vitiligo is not hereditary. In other words, THE OFFSPRING OF THESE WHITENED NEGROES WILL BE NEGROES! This means that your daughter, having married a supposed white man, may find herself with a black baby! Will the proud white men of the Southland so far forget their traditions as to remain idle while this devilish work is going on?<sup>2</sup>

The novel is dedicated "to all Caucasians in the great republic who can trace their ancestry back ten generations and confidently assert that there are no black leaves, twigs, limbs or branches on their family trees."

Schuyler's other novel, published the same year (1931), was Slaves Today: A Story of Liberia, a story of the persecution of Liberian natives by the ruling class. Liberia was the African colony settled by freedmen from the United States early

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<sup>1</sup> George Schuyler, Black No More, p. 13.

in the last century. The story revolves around three people: Jackson, first district commissioner, who provides natives with the connivance of the government to be shipped or sold to African planters; Pameta, a bride of a day, seized for Jackson's harem; and Pameta's husband, Zo, who is sent to a Spanish island without his consent and without hopes of escape.

Minor Post-Renaissance Novels. A few minor "first" novels were published by small publishing firms during this period. These books were unknown to white readers of the time and the authors themselves have long since faded into oblivion. Some of these books by Negro writers were as follows:

Fugitives of the Pearl (1930) by John H. Paynter, based on a historical incident occurring in 1848 when 77 Negro slaves tried to escape to Philadelphia and freedom on a small ship called the "Pearl."

Out of Wedlock (1931) by William S. Henry, the story of a Negro woman who has lived with a white man for 22 years as his common-law wife and borne five illegitimate children. After his death, she attempts retribution by dedicating herself and her children to doing away with conditions which permit white men to prey upon Negro women.

Not Only War (1932) by Victor Daley deals with miscegenation. The story concerns two men, one white and one colored, who are in love with the same girl. The two rivals meet in France during the war. The story ends with the colored man attempting to rescue his white rival during a siege, but both are killed.

Princess Malah (1933) by John H. Hill, a picture of "the relationship existing between master and slave" prior to the Revolutionary War. Malah, the principal character, is recognized as an Indian princess although she has Anglo-Saxon and Negro blood as well.

#### THE NEW NEGRO NOVELIST

From the early thirties until the present, several trends have been noticed in the novels by Negro writers. First, there is the increasing use of white characters, particularly in novels by Zora Neale Hurston, Frank Yerby, William Attaway and Willard Motley. These white characters are realistic and are portrayed by the author with a sure hand.

Also appearing in greater numbers is the social protest or proletarian novel in which the writer has turned from racial to class channels. There has definitely been a swing to the left since many Negro writers see the race problem in a different light. The depression, the war and the rise of new ideologies at home and abroad helped to promote this trend.

Three top Negro novelists -- Richard Wright, Ann Petry and Willard Motley -- have been interested in a social analysis of the effects of environment on the individual. All three of these authors have produced books using the Native Son or "how-criminals-are-made" theme. Willard Motley has been the first to show how environment affects the white slum-dweller

as well as the Negro.

Negro folk material has had continued use in the novels of this period. Zora Neale Hurston and other writers have made effective use of the folk element and have found it profitable. On the other hand, Frank Yerby has discovered a gold mine in the use of historical material.

There now appears to be three types of novels by Negro writers: the "hard-boiled" novel which makes sensational use of the racial theme and is probably intended to appeal mostly to the Negro reading public; the social protest or proletarian novel, which is aimed to reach the liberal-thinking people of all races; and the "popular" novel which does not espouse any special cause, but is written primarily to make money or to entertain.

One notices the lack of Negro war novels on World War II. With the possible exception of a novel published in April of 1949 by Willard Savoy, no Negro writer has used the war as source material. It may be that the real Negro war novel will come later when writers will be able to view the treatment of the colored service man more objectively.

One field of Negro writing that has been strengthened within recent years is that of biography. Several good ones have been produced by Negro authors. Among recent biographies are as follows: Sojourner Truth by Arthur Huff Fauset; Paul Robeson and Frederick Douglass by Shirley Graham; Dr. George Washington Carver by Shirley Graham, collaborating with



George D. Lipscomb; Joseph Charles Price (educator and race leader) by William Jacob Walls; and Sam Houston by Jeff Hamilton as told to Lenoir Hunt. Arna Bontemps has also edited an autobiography of W. C. Handy, "father of the blues"; Ben Richardson has written a series of sketches of 21 eminent American Negroes; and John E. Washington has produced a book They Knew Lincoln, consisting of stories and anecdotes about Abraham Lincoln as told by old Negroes who knew him.

Following are some of the Negro novels and novelists since the early thirties.

#### Zora Neale Hurston

A Negro writer who is more interested in telling a good story than in struggling with race problems is Zora Neale Hurston, author of three novels, some books of folk tales and her autobiography, Dust Tracks on a Road. Her most recent and best-acclaimed novel was published in 1948, Seraph on the Suwanee. Her other two novels are Jonah's Gourd Vine (1934) and Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937).

Born in 1903 at Eatonville, Florida, (first incorporated Negro town in the United States) Miss Hurston was the seventh of a family of eight children. She attended Morgan College and Howard and Columbia, studying anthropology at the latter with the famed Dr. Franz Boaz. She also worked as Fannie Hurst's secretary while attending school. Six out of the eight Hurston children hold college degrees.

Miss Hurston began writing when she was eight years old, but her first break came after college when one of her stories was published in Story magazine. Four publishers wrote her for book length work and from then on she was "made." She received a Guggenheim Fellowship to write a travel book on Jamaica and Haiti, Tell My Horse, which was published in 1938. The setting for many of her folk stories is in her native Eatonville, Florida.

Langston Hughes has commented on Miss Hurston as he knew her:

.....Only to reach a wider audience need she ever write books -- because she is a perfect book of entertainment in herself. In her youth, she was always getting scholarships and things from wealthy white people, some of whom simply paid her just to sit around and represent the Negro race for them, she did it in such a racy fashion. She was full of side-splitting anecdotes, humorous tales and tragicomic stories, remembered out of her life in the South as a daughter of a travelling minister of God. She could make you laugh one minute and cry the next. To many of her white friends, no doubt, she was a perfect "darkie" in the nice meaning they give the term -- that is a naive, childlike, sweet, humorous and highly colored Negro.

But Miss Hurston was clever too.....Almost nobody else could stop the average Harlemites on Lenox Avenue and measure his head with a strange-looking, anthropological device and not get bawled out for the attempt, except Zora, who used to stop anyone whose head looked interesting and measure it.<sup>1</sup>

The latest and, in popular opinion, the best novel by Miss Hurston is Scraph on the Suwanee, the story of a white

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<sup>1</sup> Hughes, op.cit., p. 239.

family living in the turpentine and sawmill country along the Suwanee River in Florida. The novel is completely devoid of "racial" slant and undisturbed by any race difficulties. From the turpentine country, the narrative moves on to the citrus belt and the climax takes place against the background of the shrimping fleets that work out of Florida ports.

The story opens in the first decade of this century in Sawley of West Florida on the famous Suwanee River. Arvey Henson, pretty daughter of a poor white family, is overcome with religious fervor at the "protracted meeting" held each summer and resolves to be a missionary. Her secret love for an itinerant preacher, who later married Arvey's sister, may have had something to do with this decision.

Shortly after, Arvey begins to "have fits" whenever a young man walks home from church with her. These fits continue until Jim Meserve comes to town, sees Arvey and decides to marry her.

Arvey and Jim marry and move to the citrus country where Jim makes money. Thus at middle age, Arvey has a good home, all the money she needs and two splendid children. But Arvey is unhappy since she cannot believe that her husband made a good life for her because he really loved her. She is always suspecting him of unfaithful motives and her nagging and jealousy finally drive him away. He interests himself in a shrimping fleet that works out of New Smyrna and buys himself some boats. Although he sees that Arvey is well provided for, he makes it

clear that he will never come back to her. She will have to "see the light" and come to him.

After going through some mental agony and several fast-paced events, Arvay is finally able to realize the trial and tribulation she has been to her family through her bigoted mental attitude and to understand where she belongs. She goes humbly to her husband and convinces him that she is ready to begin life anew and be the right kind of wife.

There is much dialect in the novel and a certain rough humor. The writing is reminiscent of the work of Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, particularly since the setting is in the same locality. Certainly Miss Hurston has a great grasp of character and setting.

Miss Hurston's other two novels, Jonah's Gourd Vine and Their Eyes Were Watching God, make use of the folklore of the South. She weaves these folk stories into the fictional narrative without too much racial slant. Quaint expressions and mannerisms make the characters what they are.

George Wylie Henderson

In Ollie Miss (1935) George W. Henderson became the first Negro novelist to write a novel on sharecropping. The book concerns the small Negro landowner and the sharecroppers in Alabama. In 1946, Henderson followed this book with another Alabama story, Jule.

Henderson knows his Alabama setting for he was born there.



He learned printing at Tuskegee Institute and began to write short stories for the New York Daily News while working in the Tuskegee printing plant. In his first novel of the rural Negroes, the main character is Ollie Miss, a self-reliant, brown, enigmatic young woman with great physical strength which accentuated her beauty and fascinated the men (especially when she was drinking corn likker). She is a puzzle when one encounters her and when the story ends, the puzzle still has not been solved. She bears an illegitimate child and then refuses to marry the father. Finally, she looks forward confidently to bringing up her child on some land given her by a relative.

Henderson's second novel, Jule, is definitely inferior to his first. It is the story of a Negro boy, born and bred in the backwoods of Alabama. His mother had inspired him to be "somebody" so Jule goes to New York after a fight with Boykin Key, his white rival for the affections of Negro Bertha Mac. After "improving" himself among the Negro society folk of Harlem, Jule returns South to his first sweetheart.

#### Richard Wright

Author of the powerful disturbing novel, Native Son, is Richard Wright, a realistic young Negro writer. All of Wright's life had been building toward the writing of Native Son. For the author had endured the hates and hurts of American Negro life until he had to tell about them -- tell about them

in a book so brutal that no one could "weep and feel good about it."

Native Son revolves about the character of Bigger Thomas, the stereotyped "bad nigger," and in a larger part about the entire Negro problem of this country. Bigger Thomas and his crimes were molded from his tragic background, the background of two and one-half centuries of slavery and moral degradation of Negro life. His stunted life had generated in him a wild and intense hate of white people and placed him like a wild animal at bay.

Bigger was a liar, coward, cheater, killer -- just a bad character from the start. He got a job as chauffeur to a wealthy white family and unintentionally killed the flighty daughter of the family. To escape the consequences, he then killed his Negro girl friend and was caught up in a net which inevitably leads him to the electric chair. At the trial, he is defended by Max, a Jewish lawyer. The lawyer, who is really the author's mouthpiece, makes a powerful presentation of the whole Negro problem in his plea to the jury. Max asks for a deeper justice to secure us from an explosive conflict of races. Through Max, Bigger sees at last the meaning of his own wasted life.

There are other characters, of course: Jan, the young Communist, who does not realize that his patronizing political pity is more offensive to a Negro than color prejudice; Bigger's submissive mother and sister, prototypes of all Negroes

who swallow the white man's affronts; Mrs. Dalton, blind mother of the dead white girl, whose philanthropy is as blind as her eyes; and the bloodthirsty mob itself which is always in the background.

Although Bigger is technically charged with murder when he is caught, the real thing for which the mob demands his life is "rape" of the white girl. The author points out in his introduction that it is this trumped-up charge of "rape" which has become the representative symbol of the Negro's uncertain position in America. The stereotyped incidents in the novel in which the charge of "rape" is bandied about might have been taken straight from newspaper stories.

Native Son is not a pleasant story, but it is a novel that no one can forget. No white person can read this book without gaining a greater understanding of the psychological problems of the Negroes in our society.

As said before, all of Richard Wright's life had been pointing toward the writing of Native Son. His autobiography, Black Boy, tells of his erratic youth, born here, schooled there, and holding this and that job. But in his youth also there was building an intense feeling about the tragedies of the Negro people. This finally culminated in his "hard-boiled" novel.

Wright is said to have refused \$50,000 offered by the film studios if he would let them portray the characters in Native Son as white people, and he has turned down every offer, at any price, to allow the story to be softened or

watered down for the movie public.<sup>1</sup>

Richard Wright was born September 4, 1908, on a plantation 25 miles from Natchez, Mississippi. His father was a mill worker and his mother a country school teacher. The family was continually on the move so young Wright's education was much neglected. At 15, he left home, bumming his way all over the country, working at any kind of job from ditch digging to clerking in a postoffice and always reading anything that fell into his hands. Eventually, he became head of the Harlem branch of a New York newspaper and began to write in earnest. His first book, Uncle Tom's Children, a collection of four short stories about Southern Negro life, won first prize in a national contest sponsored by Story magazine. He completed Native Son on a Guggenheim Fellowship and the novel was awarded the Spingarn Medal and Book of the Month accolade.

The year after writing Native Son, Wright published a documentary entitled 12 Million Black Voices. It tells in picture-story form the progress of the Negro people from the slave cribs of Africa up to the present day. The very excellent photographs are by Edwin Rosokam.

#### William Attaway

A Negro novelist of the realistic or "hard-boiled" school is William Attaway. He has written two books; Let Me Breathe Thunder (1939), a story in the Steinbeck tradition which deals

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<sup>1</sup>Embree, op. cit., p. 44.



with white vagabonds; and Blood on the Forge (1941), which describes the effect of a highly industrialized society on the Negro mind.

Born in Mississippi, Attaway was the son of a Negro doctor who did not want his child to grow up under the Southern caste system so the family was moved to Chicago. There Attaway was educated in the public schools and at the University of Illinois. He has worked as a seaman, salesman, labor organizer and acted in the road company of "You Can't Take It With You."

The Attaway style is characterized by short, rapid dialogue, monosyllabic words and a treatment of the more primitive aspects of human behavior. Attaway turned to using Negro characters in his second book because he did not want to break away from his people entirely in fiction.

In Let Me Breathe Thunder, two young white boys, Step and Ed, pick up a ten-year-old Mexican youngster to travel with them on the freights. On the little Mexican, Hi Boy, they lavish all the affection of their own thwarted childhood. Both Step and Ed are unsavory characters, but Step is the worst of the lot. To him, "having a woman was just about as sacred as washing his hands."

This transient trio finally arrives in the Yakima Valley of the Pacific Northwest where they accept employment from a rancher there by the name of Sampson. Step immediately seduces Sampson's young daughter, Anna, and introduces her to Mag, a colored prostitute.

In a fight at Mag's house, where Anna is waiting to keep a rendezvous with Step, Anna is shot in the arm. Step and Ed hop a freight out of town. They take Hi Boy with them although Sampson had previously asked them to leave the Mexican youngster at the ranch where he could enjoy a normal life.

While riding the freight over the Rockies, Hi Boy becomes ill from an infection resulting from an earlier injury. After almost freezing on the mountain trip, the vagrants finally reach Denver, but Hi Boy is dead. Step and Ed put the body on a freight car which is loaded for New Mexico and watch it being taken away.

Both Step and Ed are doomed from the start to a life of vagrancy and petty crime. Probably, Hi Boy would have followed in the same pattern if death had not intervened. The book gives honest, realistic treatment to the story of vagabonds with no childhood behind them and no security before them.

However, Attaway offers no solution for the problem of delinquent youth although he attributes it to the Great Depression. In Let Me Breathe Thunder, he did an excellent job on factual reporting and interpreting of that period in American life.

In Blood on the Forge, Attaway turns to a different period in American life -- the one just after World War I when a shortage of man power caused a migration of Southern agricultural labor to Northern industry. He describes the diffi-

culties of Southern agricultural labor in adjusting itself to industrial conditions and of the competition between poor whites and Negroes.

Three Negro brothers -- Big Mat, Chinatown and Melody -- leave their barren farm in Kentucky to work in the Pennsylvania steel mills along the Monongahela River. Working conditions were inhuman and many men were killed in the steel furnaces.

There a ginny falls when they pourin' -- and the preacher got to say service over a hundred tons o' steel. For no reason there's somethin' freeze in the blast furnace. Then it slip, and hot coke and metal rain down through the roof on the fellers round the bosh. Any time you foolin' round fast metal it liable to blow up. It always blow up for no reason at all, 'ceptin' it want to.....<sup>1</sup>

On some shifts, the workers have to be on duty for twenty-four hours straight for the Bessemer must never be allowed to grow cold. But the end finally comes for the three brothers: Big Mat is killed in a strike riot, Chinatown is blinded by an accident at the steel mills, and only Melody is left to carry on. He takes Chinatown to Pittsburgh. As he leaves the steel mills:

.....there was a deep pain in Melody. He was never happy. He thought about the first months in the Allegheny Valley. Then he had been fearful of the greatness around him, the endless clash of big forces playing up and down the banks of long rivers. This place had been a monster, beautiful in an ugly strength that fascinated a man so that it made him sing his fear. It was a big new world. Right now, all of Melody's world was a little dull pain.... Someday, Melody thought, he and Chinatown would go home to Kentucky. But he did not think about that

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<sup>1</sup>William Attaway, Blood on the Forge, p. 62.

very hard. He was beginning to feel the truth: they would never go home.....<sup>1</sup>

As an interpreter of the social conditions of the white and Negro working classes, Attaway has been successful in his two novels (even though the stories are not pleasant). Whether he will continue to write is doubtful as he has produced no further work within the last eight years.

#### Frank Yerby

A new Negro novelist, who is definitely in the money-making class regardless of the merits of his books, is Frank Yerby. Yerby wrote The Foxes of Harrow (1946) which sold more than a million copies the first year and was made into a movie by Twentieth Century Fox. In 1947, Yerby published The Vixens and in 1948, The Golden Hawk. All of these novels were written for popular reading without the "race tag" and all have been money makers. All are overcrowded in plot and full of action, color and sex.

Yerby (1916 - ) wrote his first book The Foxes of Harrow while working 12 hours a day in a war plant. Born in Augusta, Georgia, he was graduated from Paine College and Fisk University and later did advanced work at the University of Chicago. At 22, Yerby was an instructor at Florida A. and M. College, Tallahassee, teaching English. He spent the year after that in wandering, winding up in Detroit where he worked two years

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 275 f.



for the Ford Motor Company. Later, he worked for the Ranger Aircraft Company in Jamaica, Long Island.

He first gained attention with a short story, "Health Card," which appeared in Harper's Magazine and later won a special award in the O. Henry collection for 1944. Yerby says that the turning point in his life had come with his marriage in New Orleans on March 1, 1941, to "tiny intense Flora Helen Claire Williams, who supplied the drive hitherto lacking. Her belief in me and her attacks upon my monumental laziness finally resulted in the novel (The Foxes) whose success continues to amaze us both."<sup>1</sup>

The Foxes of Harrow, in the writer's opinion the best of Yerby's novels, is a historical novel of New Orleans using all the popular characters and situations of Southern romantic fiction: a dashing, unscrupulous, but sensitive adventurer, who has unfailing success; several beautiful women, one cold and queenly and the others warm and passionate; politics, duels, loves, lusts, quadroon mistresses, moonlight, magnolias, a pillared forty-room mansion and final devastation.

A few of the several dozen characters in The Foxes of Harrow includes Stephen Fox, master of "Harrow," the greatest manor house and plantation in Louisiana; Odalie Orceneaux, the lovely Creole belle of New Orleans, who becomes Stephen's wife; Aurore Orceneaux, sister of Odalie, who secretly and hopelessly

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<sup>1</sup> Current Biography, 1946, p. 672 f.

loved Stephen for years: Desiree Hippolyte, Stephen's quadroon mistress; Tante Galeen, his old female slave, and Inch, her grandson; and Etienne, the renegade son of Stephen Fox.

The Civil War brings destruction to Harrow and to the Fox family. The old Creole families bow to the new order and the Negroes are in the ascendancy, temporarily. However, the thinking Negro is sad for he knows that it cannot last -- that the Negroes were not yet ready for freedom and that white men will rule the South again.

In The Vixens, the story of the Reconstruction is told. The Carpetbaggers have descended on New Orleans and are hated by the people there. But the full bitterness is reserved for the Scalawags, men of Southern birth and training, who had turned against their own people.

In the story, one meets the defeated feudal lords of the South trying to turn back the o'clock of history with White Leaguers and Klansmen sweeping down to terrorize the Negroes. There are the thieving Northern Carpetbaggers, Scalawag administrators, whiskey-maddened rioters, and all the vicious crew eventually swallowed by the South.

Etienne of The Foxes appears again in The Vixens and is killed by the Negroes. The Negro, Inch, who also appeared in the first novel, meets death from the Klansmen. The main character, Laird Furnois, escapes from the debacle to begin a new life in Kansas.

In his latest novel, The Golden Hawk, Yerby has used for his setting the West Indies of the seventeenth century when Spain was making its last stand to retain its conquests in the New World.

The main character is Kit Gerado, the "Golden Hawk" and master of the ship, Seaflower. He was born without a name, illegitimate son of a French mother with the secret of his birth shrouded in mystery. He has turned to piracy as the only means of winning power and his name is known and feared throughout the length and breath of the Caribbean.

The story of The Golden Hawk revolves around Kit's lifelong search for revenge on Don Luis del Toro, the Spanish grandee who had killed his mother. It is a search that takes the reader through the buccaneer harbors of Sainte Domingue, Porto Bello and Cul-de-Sac to the fortress of Cartagena in Spanish South America. Just before the Spanish grandee's death, Kit discovers that he is Don Luis' son.

All of Yerby's novels are filled with incidents, characters and plot. Although Yerby has the gift of using colorful description, his writing strains too much for effect. This is particularly noticeable in his last novel.

### Chester B. Himes

A young Negro from Cleveland is Chester B. Himes, author of If He Hollers Let Him Go (1945), his first novel and one of the toughest of the hardboiled books. Like O. Henry, Himes (1907 - ) began to publish short stories while serving a prison term. While in the Ohio State Penitentiary, he wrote for various magazines including Esquire, for which he contributed a story on the penitentiary fire of 1930. Little information is available concerning him other than that he attended Ohio State University, worked in a war plant, and now lives in New York.

Writing with bitterness, Himes unfolds in his novel the story of racial tensions in a West Coast shipyard during the war and their effect upon Bob Jones, a young Negro from the Middle West. The book was condemned by Negro critics as misrepresenting the race. Yet this writer believes it has a message in helping to make liberal Americans more conscious of the Negro's plight.

The main character in If He Hollers Let Him Go is Bob Jones, a young Negro who has attended Ohio State University for two years and then has come out to Los Angeles to work in the Atlas Shipyard. With his war-time wages, he buys a new Buick car, good clothes and good times at the best places. He works himself up to the position of leaderman in the shipyard, a job of authority yet lacking the authority to back it up. His contacts with his fellow workers bring only bitterness



and frustration.

Hadge, a white quasi-prostitute, declines with insulting language to do a welding job which Bob has requested. However, she is willing to have him visit her secretly. When he refuses to be intimate with her because she is white, she has him beaten and arrested by charging rape. Bob escapes the law, but is brought back after a wild chase. However, all charges are later dismissed on condition that he join the Army.

Another character is Alice, sweetheart of Bob and a supervisor in the Los Angeles welfare department. She is the daughter of wealthy, upper-class Negro parents.

The novel touches on highly controversial issues. However, there is much truth in this story of a young intelligent Negro driven so far into frustration that he has lost the way out and can only strike back blindly. The bitterness which he feels over the accident of his birth is illustrated in this excerpt:

.....I could hear the sound of the baby.....and I thought if they really wanted to give him a break they'd cut his throat and bury him in the back yard before he got old enough to know he was a nigger.....<sup>1</sup>

At last reports, Himes was writing another novel entitled Lonely Crusade, to be published by Alfred Knopf of New York.

Ann Petry

With a "first" novel about a Harlem mother trapped in a

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<sup>1</sup> Chester B. Himes, If He Hollers Let Him Go, p. 5.

life of violence and frustration, Ann Petry, Negro newspaper-woman, won the 1945 Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship. In her book, she tells the story of the tragic efforts of a Negro mother to provide a decent home in Harlem for her only child, a nine-year-old "key" boy. The street whereon they live is the antagonist symbolizing all the evil inherent in bad housing, bad sanitation, violence and bestiality of segregated slum living. In one sense, the work is a New York version of Native Son, although milder.

Though her novel is distinguished for its graphic treatment of Harlem life, Ann Petry is not a native New Yorker. She was born in 1911 in Old Saybrook, Connecticut, of a New England family that had specialized in some branch of pharmacy for three generations. True to the family tradition, she studied pharmacy and received her degree as doctor of pharmacy from the University of Connecticut in 1934. Then she worked as a registered pharmacist in the drug stores owned by her family.

After her marriage in 1938, she went to New York to live and found jobs that gave her an opportunity to write -- jobs that ranged from selling advertising space and writing advertising copy for a Harlem weekly to editing the women's pages and covering general news stories for a rival paper.

After six years in Harlem, Mrs. Petry felt that she had a great deal to write about the black ghetto -- about its ancient evil housing, its tragic broken families and its high death rate. Said Mrs. Petry:

I wrote The Street in an effort to show why the Negro has a high crime rate, a high death rate and little or no chance of keeping his family unit intact in large Northern cities. There are no statistics in The Street though they are present in the background, not as columns of figures, but in terms of what life is like for people who live in over-crowded tenements. I tried to write a story that moves swiftly so that it would hold the attention of people who might ordinarily shy away from a so-called "problem novel."<sup>1</sup>

The Street was well received by reviewers. Arna Bontemps writing in the New York Herald-Tribune's book review section described Mrs. Petry as fresh new talent who deserved thoughtful attention.<sup>2</sup> In May of 1946, she was among those honored by the Women's City Club for "exceptional contributions to the life of New York City."

The protagonist in The Street is Lutie Johnson, who has a nine-year-old son, Bub. She rents an apartment on 116th Street and there begins a fight for existence made more difficult because she was pretty and colored. Trouble came when she "hired out" to work in the white folks' kitchen:

.....Here she was highly respectable, married, mother of a small boy, and, in spite of all that, knowing all that, these people took one look at her and immediately got that now-I-wonder look. Apparently, it was an automatic reaction of white people -- if a girl was colored and fairly young, why, it stood to reason that she had to be a prostitute. If not that -- at least sleeping with her would be just a simple matter, for all one had to do was make the request. In fact, white men wouldn't even have to do the asking because the girl would ask them on sight.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Current Biography, 1946, p. 476 f.

<sup>2</sup> Arna Bontemps, Book Review Section, New York Herald-Tribune, II, April 14, 1946, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Ann Petry, The Street, p. 45.

There are other characters: Mrs. Hedges, the black madam of the bawdy house, whose early partnership with the white trash-picker, Junto, brought them both riches; Boots, the fastidious Negro band leader with his fancy car, who is dependent on Junto's bounty; and Min, the aged Negro charwoman, who lives with the apartment house superintendent.

The superintendent contrives to get Lutie's son, Bub arrested on the charge of stealing from mail boxes. Lutie, in a frenzy to get money for his bond, goes to Boots' apartment. There, in an unexpected fight, she kills Boots with an iron candlestick holder and flees to Chicago.

Lutie blames the white world for her misfortunes although "she had never been able to figure out why people with white skins hated people who had dark skins. It must be hate that made them wrsp all Negroes up in a neat package labeled 'colored'.....but she really didn't know what it was."<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Petry continues to write while serving as executive secretary of Negro Women, Incorporated, a civic-minded organization which keeps a watchful eye on local and national legislation. According to last reports, Houghton Mifflin was publishing another Petry novel entitled Country Place, a story of New England town life using white characters.



### Willard Motley

A "first" novelist is Willard Motley who wrote the popular Knock on Any Door, published in 1947. The book, which uses the Native Son theme that young criminals are molded from their sordid background, has been made into a movie starring Humphrey Bogart. The book uses white characters and is non-racial in viewpoint. Motley, a young Negro who was raised in a lower middle class white neighborhood in Chicago, said he did not write about Negroes for the reason that he knows whites just as well and because he feels that the Negro writer must not lose sight of other problems -- the basic problems that concern all human beings.<sup>1</sup> The novel is simply an attempt to show how criminals, white or black, are made.

The amazing Mr. Motley has been, among other things, a migratory worker, ranch hand, short-order cook, dishwasher, Christmas card salesman, coal hiker, football coach, baker's helper, waiter, janitor, chauffeur, handy man, window washer, plasterer's helper, stock clerk, order clerk, shipping clerk, animal caretaker, laboratory technician, "artist" (painting decorative brandy bottles), photographer, radio script writer, housing authority interviewer, writer for the Office of Civilian Defense and recipient of the Book of the Month award.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Book review, New York Times, July 13, 1947, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Saturday Review of Literature, 31:8, February 14, 1948.

This is not a complete list of the author's pursuits, but it does help to explain his intimate knowledge of juke joints, pool rooms, flophouses, slum honky tonks and all the wanderers, workers and poor folk he weaves into his novel. Back of the story stands Motley's lifetime of observing and knowing the people and places he has written about.

Knock on Any Door is the story of what can happen to any boy on the Skid Row of any city. "Knock on any door down this street, in this alley."<sup>1</sup> It is the life story of Nick Romano, a boy born in Chicago's slum district.

Nick was an altar boy in the Catholic Church until he was twelve, a sensitive child who had great dreams. Then, he fell into bad company in the poolrooms of West Madison Street and was sent away to reform school. When he was finished with the beatings and cursings of the reform school, he was a hardened criminal. He vowed then that he would never go straight.

A good looking boy like Nick had a dozen ways of making money without working: "jackrolling," playing the "phoneys," or just plain panhandling. He almost went straight once when he married pretty romantic Emma Schultz, who had endured misfortune all her life. Emma married him for love and then committed suicide when she found supreme disillusionment.

After Emma's death, Nick went back to the street. He did the dirty work for one of the city's top gangsters. But he

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<sup>1</sup>Willard Motley, Knock on Any Door, p. 1.

wasn't satisfied. "Some restlessness in him send him around the street jackrolling and fighting and getting into drunken brawls. He jackrolled not because he needed the money, but recklessly, as if he wanted to get caught. And he threw the money away as fast as he got it."<sup>1</sup>

Nick finally kills his old enemy, Riley, the swaggering cop with three notches (for three dead men) in his gun belt. For this, Nick dies in the electric chair when he is only twenty-one. And so his life is ended, the life of any American boy who stumbles in the gutter.

Knock on Any Door catches the picture of a great American city and shows Motley's genius as a creative writer. The description of Nick's last hours before he goes to the electric chair is one of the most moving to be found in all fiction.

The author has been writing another novel to be called Of Night, Perchance of Death, a story of how the war catches up with five young men of varied backgrounds. He is also planning a third novel, We Fished All Night, which will deal with the slow destruction of three men back from the war. Motley has been compared by some critics to James T. Farrell and Theodore Dreiser in his writing.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid, p. 320.

<sup>2</sup> Book Review, New York Times, July 13, 1947, p. 8.

### Dorothy West

A story of Negro society in Boston is The Living Is Easy, written by a new Negro novelist, Dorothy West, and published late in 1948 by Houghton Mifflin. This chronicle of first-, second-, and third-generation dark Bostonians is somewhat reminiscent of the Renaissance novels of Jessie Fauset.

Miss West, who has been writing for newspapers and magazines in recent years, lives on Martha's Vineyard. She attended Boston's Latin School and Boston University and then departed, career-bent, to New York. There she attended Columbia's School of Journalism, spent 18 months with the Federal Writers' Project and edited a little magazine called Challenge. Later, she traveled to Russia with a group of actors and worked in a motion picture about American Negro life.

The Living Is Easy is unique in picturing the manners of a class of Negroes which is ordinarily overlooked by whites -- that of the "first families." In the earlier part of the century, Negro society in Boston was dominated by a half dozen families as self-consciously aristocratic as the Cabots, the Lodges and the Lowells.

Beautiful Cleo Judson, recently arrived from a South Carolina sharecropper's cabin, did not belong to this exclusive circle. But partly because she saw high fashion as a realistic toe-hold on opportunity, she was determined to get in and to carry her reluctant family with her. Thus she brings sorrow and misfortune to a circle of lives: her three sisters; her



daughter, Judy; her husband, Bart, the Black Banana King; the glamorous "Duchess," who wanted only to be accepted by her race; and Simeon, the Harvard idealist, who dreamed of editing a militant Negro paper in Boston.

The effects of the intermingling of blue blood and black is illustrated by an incident which occurs when Cleo goes to see the "Duchess," blonde owner of a gambling house.

.....she flung herself into that bitter, unending, secret war between white and colored women.....

"There's no more damage you can do. Get out of my race and stay out."

The Duchess said, out of her suffering, "It is my race, too."

Cleo's mouth fell open. She said in a soft, incredulous voice, "God have mercy, you're not all white!"

"My mother was colored."

Cleo sank back on her chair and wished for her fan.

"It wasn't your skin and hair that fooled me. We come every color under the sun. But the way you carry yourself, I thought you were born on Beacon Hill."

The Duchess said without expression, "My father was."<sup>1</sup>

In another family, the Binneys, there are two children: Thea, who is quite fair, and Simeon, her brother, who is dark. Once when Thea and her brother were out walking together, Simeon was attacked and mauled by some Harvard students who thought he was "dating" a white girl!

Other than this and a few minor incidents, The Living Is Easy, is non-racial in its viewpoint. The novel is mainly concerned in telling the story of a selfish woman, who is left with nothing but a forlorn hope at the end. This woman could have been white as well as Negro.

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<sup>1</sup>Dorothy West, The Living Is Easy, p. 103 f.

### Willard Savoy

The first novel in some 16 years to use the "passing" theme was released in April of 1949 by E. P. Dutton Company of New York. This novel is Alien Land, written by Willard Savoy, former Negro public relations officer in the airforce. Announcement of the book's publication was made some five months earlier and the public has been awaiting its release.

Alien Land is the story of Kern Roberts, son of a white mother and a Negro father. Kern is fair enough to pass. Living in New England at first, the family has no problems, but after his return from World War I, the father moves his household to Washington. There, he becomes a member of the Freedom League and all else, including his family, becomes secondary.

In the course of the action, Kern not only sees his mother murdered and has a fierce fight with the maid's boy friend, but goes South where he is involved in the violent deaths of three others. Coincidence is used heavily in the plot: the news of Pearl Harbor saves Kern from having to reveal his identity to Marianne, the girl he loves; the situation between him and Marianne which parallels his parents' experience; and his white classmate remembering in the last hour before graduation where he has seen Kern before.

Kern is represented as carrying a guilt complex because of his "passing" and also from his not becoming a race leader.

Whether or not the book will be successful remains to be seen. As it stands, it is a good chronicle of the life of

upper and middle class Negroes and of the conflicts in the minds of light-skinned Negroes.

#### Minor Novels of the Period

A number of minor Negro writers have written some novels since the early thirties. All of these, with the exception of George Lee, were one-book writers since they apparently produced no further work. Many of these novels are short, some less than 200 pages long. At least one writer, Katheryn Campbell Graham, makes profitable use of the folklore of the South. Some of the books, like those of Deaderick Jenkins, are slanted primarily for the Negro reading public.

Probably the most outstanding book in this group is by Chancellor Williams, The Raven, in which he writes a fictionalized biography of Edgar Allen Poe. This type of fiction is definitely a new departure for the Negro writer.

Some of these authors, notably Williams and Curtis Lucas, show much promise. Whether they produce any more books is questionable since, with the exception of the top-ranking writers mentioned earlier, Negro authors of the period have not conclusively demonstrated the capacity for sustained literary work.

Following are the lesser-known novels written by Negroes since the early thirties.

River George (1937) by George Lee of Memphis, Tennessee, tells of the life of Negro sharecroppers and shows how the black workers are fleeced. The story then moves on to Beale Street in

Memphis where the young Negro, George, has fled to escape being lynched for killing a white man, Smith. George joins the army, serves overseas and finally ends up as a roustabout on the Mississippi River. In the end, he is lynched by a mob for the murder of Smith. The chief significance of the work is its exposure of the abuses of the sharecropping system.

In 1934, Lee wrote a non-fiction work entitled Beale Street, Where the Blues Began.

Aunt Sara's Wooden God (1938) by Mercedes Gilbert is a study of the color line and miscegenation with the setting in Georgia. A Negro woman is the mother of two sons -- one by her white lover and the other by her colored husband. The near-white son is her "wooden god" and her doting on him causes trouble for the family. This is a "first" novel and the author has produced nothing further.

Under the Cottonwood (1941) by Katheryn Campbell Graham is a novel using the folklore of the South. The narrative takes the reader through four generations of the Stearns family. This family is used as a thread to string together a series of folk tales. Although the author has a wealth of material to work from, she does not handle it too well in the novel form.

Black America Abroad (1941) by Alice E. McGee is a narrative centering around Mary Ann Tillman, a Midwestern Negro girl. She had a great desire to travel in Germany and study with the German people because of their scientific achievements. History, geography and romance are interwoven in this story of Mary Ann's adventures in Nazi Germany just before Munich.



Picketing Hell (1942) by Adam Clayton Powell Sr., pastor-emeritus of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem is called a "fictitious narrative," and exposes many abuses of the church. The author wrote a non-fictional work in 1945 called Riots and Ruins in which he analyzes the causes of the race riots which swept the country in 1943. He offers some constructive suggestions toward eliminating hoodlums, giving his experience from fifty years in the ministry as a background.

It Was Not My World (1942) and Letters to My Son (1947) are books written by Deaderick P. Jenkins, who has his own publishing company in Los Angeles. The books can hardly be called novels, but a series of violent sketches attacking discrimination. In the first place, the author says he detests novels and he also hates a great many other things, judging from his work. However, he does bring some light on discrimination as practiced in the CCC camps, in the Navy, in Civil Service and in employment in Los Angeles.

From Jerusalem to Jericho (1943) by the Rev. Edward Gholson is a religious allegory retelling somewhat after the manner of The Pilgrim's Progress the story of the good Samaritan. Hardly in the "novel" class, the book contains only 122 pages.

The White Face (1943) by Charles Ruthaven Offord, a first novel, tells the story of two Negro sharecroppers, man and wife, who leave Georgia to seek freedom in Harlem. There they meet hardships and disappointments ending in a tragic encounter with pro-Nazi agents. This book is also typical of the hard-

boiled school of writing.

Flour Is Dusty (1943) by Curtis Lucas tells the story of Jim Harrell who ran away from his Georgia home when he was 12. Finally, he arrives in Atlantic City. There, he has almost saved enough money to go into business for himself when he is accused of the murder of Mrs. Banning, a wealthy Negro hotel owner. He is eventually cleared of the murder and reunited with Mrs. Banning's pretty niece, Crystal. The book gives some interesting sidelights on the work of the Tolerance League in Atlantic City.

The Raven (1944) by Chancellor Williams is the most outstanding of this group of minor novels. The book is a fictionalized story of the life of Edgar Allen Poe and is an argument for a better understanding of Poe's peculiarities. Probably, the book credits Poe with much more social consciousness than he actually had. It also tells of the plantation system and the bitterness which the "free" whites have built up against the black slaves:

.....from this situation, there developed in the hearts of the masses of poor whites a deep-rooted hatred for Negroes which was passed on down through generations. They looked upon the slaves as the chief cause of their suffering and the exact reason why they could not find enough work to make a living. And they whispered "nigger" into the ears of their children with the hot breath of hate that was to hum down through the years.<sup>1</sup>

The Policy King (1945) by Lewis A. M. Caldwell, is a fictitious narrative of Jerry Marshall, policy king from his

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<sup>1</sup>Chancellor Williams, The Raven, p. 31.

early youth except when he was sent to a federal prison for operating the policy game. This method of gambling was supposed to have been brought into the United States shortly after the Civil War.

The Robbed Heart (1945) by Clifton Cuthbert is the story of a restless young man of Manhattan whose quest for happiness led him across the color line.

High Ground (1945) by Odella Phelps Wood deals with the problem of the Negro in America revolving mainly around two characters, Jim Clayton and his wife. The story begins with World War I and ends with present day conditions.

#### CONCLUSION

In looking back over the novels by Negro writers, we see a literary trend that promises well for the future. The popularity of some of the recent books by Negro authors is an indication that Negro talent will no longer be shunted toward certain grooves and bogged down by current prejudices. Also, the Negro author is no longer to be regarded as an oddity.

Negro writers are still none too numerous in comparison with the white writers. Most of them are handicapped by having to make their living from other jobs beside writing. Publishers are hesitant about accepting books from Negro authors. Many readers are hypersensitive about reading novels by Negroes. The source material which the Negro may use in writing has been limited by his own segregated existence.

Still the Negro novel has definitely passed its apprentice stage. Now, the Negro writers are branching out and using white as well as Negro characters. However, the complaint is made that Negroes have been forced to do this because of the demands of the publishers and the reading public. The novels which sell well (Frank Yerby's, for instance) are either those which use white characters or touch very lightly on the hard facts of Negro life. It seems deplorable that the Negro must conform to the Nordic standard in literature as well as in other ways of life. After all, the Negro has his own colorful background, his own rich traditions, his own hopes, dreams, fears and prejudices -- why should he not be permitted to use this wealth of material in his writing? But if he does, he has difficulty in getting his novels published by the better publishing firms. Or, if they are published, they do not sell well.

Because of the basic human problems with which they have been dealing, these Negro authors have a vividness of style which is often lacking in the work of white writers. For these novels reflect the life and times of the Negro race more accurately than all of the books ever written by white writers. The writer believes that no one can get a true picture of the Negro people by reading books written by white authors about Negroes.

As Negro novelists get away from stereotypes used to plead a racial cause, their popularity and reading public are bound to grow. There is still much to be written. As one authority



has pointed out:

Great areas of Negro life remain unexplored, many of them even untouched. The Negro working class, the various strata of the Negro middle class; urban life in the South and North (outside Harlem) are some of these areas. Even the field covered -- the rural South and Harlem -- still call for interpreters. There are many Harlems, for instance, a long way from Carl Van Vechten's Nigger Heaven that could furnish backgrounds for good novels. There is little fiction dealing with college life, with the Negro professional class, with the Negro church, business, white-collar employment, or with Negroes in entertainment and athletics..... The story of the Negro in America has been handled largely by outsiders. This in itself should constitute a challenge to Negro authors.<sup>1</sup>

This writer believes that the ultimate end of Negro literature in this country will be complete fusion with American literature. A separate race literature is possible only with complete segregation of the races. The Negro has so long been a part of American life that his cultural life also is entangled with that of white America. Thus, when a Negro writes a good book, the fact of his race should not obscure his contribution to art, but only enrich it with his own experience.

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<sup>1</sup>Novels by Negro authors are marked with an asterisk.

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