FOUR BLACK AMERICAN NOVELISTS

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CHAPTER I

THE 1930'S--THE REBELLIOUS DECADE

The 1930's can indeed be described as an era of new struggle for Black Americans. The frivolity and flamboyance of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920's were brought to an abrupt halt in the early years of the new decade by the Great Depression; the multitudes of Black Americans who had flocked northward to the urban industrial center soon found themselves without the wherewithal to provide a livelihood for their families and at the mercy of President Roosevelt's New Deal. To be sure, this New Deal proved, at best, ineffective and was no answer to the real needs of Black America. In the South, Blacks also had new problems during the 1930's. Not that the Great Depression had such a great effect here, for because of the very nature of rural life, the black man had never known prosperity: economic depression was generally the rule rather than the exception. During the 1930's, however, and especially during the first few years, lynchings of black men increased in the South. These bloody and vicious acts, along with events such as the notorious Scottsboro case, tended to characterize the Black Experience in the South throughout the decade.

A literature reflects the concerns of its time and place, if not wholly in the contemporaneity of subject matter, then most certainly in attitude and approach. For instance, the

Harlem Renaissance tended to emphasize the "genteel tradition"[1] in literature, that is, the complete glorification of the Black Experience from a middle-class point of view, often at the expense of the truth. Although much of the literature produced during the Harlem Renaissance dealt with the alleged "low-life" of the Black masses, the critics whose influence dominated the literary scene during this period were its judges. These critics, notably Benjamin Brawley and W. E. B. DuBois, found the works of the younger artists of the 1920's repulsive because they exposed that side of Black life which those embedded in the genteel tradition wished to forget. Indeed, DuBois disavowed any knowledge of the folk, referring to them as the "debauched tenth."[2] He preferred characters like those found in the novels of Jessie Fauset--respectable middle-class characters in a safe and comfortable middle-class setting. Both DuBois and Brawley felt that literature should be viewed as a means to elevate race consciousness. They are called "race men,"[3] which is to say that "they tended to look at all problems and possible solution from the perspective of race."[4]

However, works by Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, and Rudolph Fisher portrayed characters who were not respectable middle-class stereotypes:

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[1]Robert A. Bone, The Negro Novel in America, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), pp. 27-28.

[2]Quoted in James O. Young, Black Writers of the Thirties (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), p. 137.

[3]Ibid., Preface, x.

[4]Ibid.

> The young creative writers . . . turned away from the romantic glorification of so-called racial traits and "respectable" race heroes to attempt realistic interpretations of the lives of black men.[5]

So anxious were they to achieve this end that what often resulted was the romantic glorification of the "low-life" and of the Harlem streets and cabarets.[6] Thus, many of them fell prey to the very things that they despised, albeit on a different level. Even at his best, a gifted writer like Langston Hughes seemed unable to move beyond such stereotyped characters. Whether in poetry, prose, or drama, these younger artists of the 1920's tended to place emphasis on primitivism and exoticism in their creative works. Nonetheless, this attempt at realism did open up a writer's possibilities in the choice of his subject: "In so doing they brought out much of the ugliness which the older race men had tenaciously kept from public eye for fear that it would reinforce the larger society's conception of Negro inferiority."[7]

Realism continued as the major thrust in Black writing during the 1930's. New Black writers dropped the exotic and primitive stereotypes of the 1920's in favor of more human characters, and "instead of exposing the black man's inferiority, the most talented of them demonstrated the ultimate universality

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[5]Ibid., xi.

[6]Addison Gayle, Jr., The Way of the New World (Garden City: Doubleday-Anchor, 1975), p. 126.

[7]Young, xi.

of all human experience, whether black or white."[8] Class, rather than race, was the most important factor that influenced their thinking. "The most dramatic impact of the economic crisis led many of them to believe that the forces, and particularly the economic forces, which affected all men were equal to, if not more important than, race in the lives of Black Americans."[9]

This formula in literature had peculiar problems. Often an artist was so anxious to depict and articulate the climate and concerns of the so-called lower side of life that many of the characters were often carried beyond the realm of credibility, and the scenes were too often marred by melodramatic events. However, the rifts with the genteel tradition of romanticism became more pronounced in the 1930's: protest in literature reached new heights, Communist influences were quite easily discernible, stark social realities were posed, and all stereotypes were eschewed, if not always in practice, then certainly in theory.

During the early part of the 1930's, the ideas and influences of the romantic and genteel critics were still dominant. For one, Alain Locke, herald of the New Negro in the 1920's, continued his quest for the romantic conception in Black art. Although of the genteel tradition himself, unlike others of the same mentality, Locke tried to keep abreast of contemporary concerns

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[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid., x.

of literature in his annual reviews.[10] Nevertheless, by the mid-1930's, the influences of these genteel critics were waning in both popularity and importance. By the end of the decade, the younger critics had all but ousted these "aged race men"[11] from the literary scene. Critics, such as Sterling Brown, Arthur Davis, and the Communist-influenced Richard Wright, now became the most popular spokesmen for the interpretation of Black literature:

> For the young realist the idea of truth with beauty was a contradiction in terms. Truth was reality; and reality for black people during the 1930's was for the most part ugly. Social realism was the vogue of the 1930's. In their use of it, the young critics attempted to broaden the black writer's conception of truth. The most important truth for them was the fact that, in addition to racial persecution, the basic social forces which oppressed black Americans were universal. Unlike the genteel critics and the Negro historians, both of whom sought a truth which would reflect favorably on the race, young critics like Sterling Brown and Richard Wright sought truths which were not limited by the demands on racial advancement.[12]

Of course, as is usually the case, not even the critics could reach the degree of perfection that they clamored for so frequently and consistently in literature.

Disappointingly enough, black fiction of the 1930's was low in quantity compared with its explosion in literary production during the 1920's.[13] Despite this decrease in volume,

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[10] Ibid., p. 145.

[11] Ibid., chapter 1.

[12] Ibid., pp. 164-165.

[13] Bone, p. 118.

some of the finest novels in Black American literature appeared during the 1930's. The several writers who had gained recognition during the Harlem Renaissance continued to write and publish, but without the degree of public success they had formerly enjoyed. Indeed, as Langston Hughes lamented, the Negro was no longer in vogue.

Among the first of the New Negro writers to publish in the 1930's was Langston Hughes himself. His first novel, Not Without Laughter, appeared in the opening year of the new decade. It is the story of the coming of age of a young boy in a small mid-Western town. Thematically, the novel posits the Harlem Renaissance credo of Joy--that Blacks have it, whites don't. The story is perhaps interfused with many of Hughes' own boyhood experiences, but it is not autobiographical in the literary sense of the word.[14] The novel, however, is shallow: the author fails to convince the reader of the import of laughter as his objective correlative. To be truly convincing, laughter would have to be discovered not only in Sandy's life, but also in the lives of Aunt Hager, Anjee, and Jimboy. Despite some very touching scenes, we leave the novel very much in the same manner that we leave the Harlem Renaissance--touched, but unmoved.

Another of the New Negro movement who continued to write and publish in the 1930's was Arna Bontemps. Actually, although he is often identified with the Harlem Renaissance, Bontemps'

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[14]Arthur P. Davis, From the Dark Tower (Washington: Howard University Press, 1974), p. 71.

temperament is not properly of it, at least not in his later fiction. His first novel, however, God Sends Sunday, published in 1931, is thematically very much a part of the Harlem Renaissance. The story of Little Augie, a jockey in the sporting world, besides being an admirable attempt at probing the psychological depths of the main character, is also important for its very thorough presentation of life in the world of horseracing. Although this is "hedonistic fiction,"[15] it does lend some light on a particular area of black life which had not been explored previously.

Bontemps' two other novels are historical ones: Black Thunder (1936) is a fictional account of Gabriel Prosser's 1800 slave revolt in Virginia; Drums at Dusk (1939) concerns such an uprising in Haiti. These novels are transitional works, for they reflect the mood of black writing in the era of the Great Depression. "By choosing slave insurrections as a basis for his plots, Bontemps stresses an aspect of slavery which was emotionally appealing to the rebellious thirties."[16] Black Thunder is by far the better of the two, for it shows not only the growth in the author's perception, but in his ability at psychological analysis of character as well. Drums at Dusk is a surface novel, and one hardly needs to say more. The characters are largely one-sided counterstereotypes to the Harlem Renaissance images of Blacks, and the plot deals

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[15]Sterling A. Brown, "A Century of Negro Portraiture in American Literature," in Black Voices, ed. Abraham Chapman (New York: Mentor, 1968), p. 581.

[16]Bone, p. 120.

with violence, which even the author finds abhorrent.[17]

Jessie Fauset continued to write and publish novels of the middle-class genteel tradition. In 1931 she published The Chinaberry Tree, and in 1933, Comedy: American Style, still keeping with the romantic strain of thought that DuBois and Brawley praised, but that made the younger critics like Brown and Wright absolutely furious. Ms. Fauset's refusal, or inability maybe, to concern herself with social implications rather than moral mandates in her novels constitutes her major downfall as a writer of proletariat literature. But this need not concern us here, for it is quite clear that such was never her intention. Nevertheless, the novels do possess a certain charm, and it is evident that Jessie Fauset was a perfectionist of form.

If the fiction of Hughes and Fauset sought to continue the New Negro mentality into the 1930's, the fiction of George S. Schuyler and Wallace Thurman bade the movement farewell. Schuyler, the iconoclastic journalist, published the only two novels of his career in 1931, Black No More and Slaves Today. Black No More is essentially a roman á clef, the key being Schuyler's assertion that the whole Renaissance notion of "black joy" was absurd. The novel is indeed one of the finest works of fiction produced during the 1930's; Schuyler's brand of wit and satire remains matched today only by that of Ishmael Reed. It does have its pitfalls, however. Schuyler is so intent on lampooning and ridiculing everything that the New

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[17]Davis, pp. 88-89.

Negro movement stood for that these attacks often become obtrusive to the plot. Then, too, the story shifts from one locale to another quite frequently, often without smooth transitions. The most important characteristic of Schuyler's fiction is, however, his clarity of thought and precision of statement, which he owes in large degree to his journalistic training. His second work, Slaves Today, is not nearly as complete as the first, neither in structure nor in content. Largely, it is a rushed journalistic report of slavery in all-Black Liberia. Perhaps, had Schuyler taken more time in writing this novel, he would have produced a work comparable to Black No More. There is one important thing about Slaves Today, though: it attempts to show that the nostalgia for Africa during the Harlem Renaissance was ill-founded; indeed, Blacks were better off in America than in Africa.

Wallace Thurman, in his Infants of the Spring, published in 1932, chronicles his personal reflections on the Harlem intelligentsia of the 1920's. The tone is bitter; Thurman's disappointment at the failure of the New Negro movement is overwhelming. Structurally, this, Thurman's second novel, is tight-knit; thematically, however, it is lacking in the extreme. The novel's importance lies in its portrayals of many of the Harlem personalities of the day. Although obviously satiric, it reveals many candid truths about the petty cares of those involved in the New Negro movement.

It is not entirely possible to categorize the novels of either Schuyler or Thurman according to the literary temperament of the 1920's or the 1930's. They are, for the most part,

personal statements on the Harlem Renaissance. Schuyler's farewell is one of relief and sheer comedy; Thurman's statement is more bitter and disappointed in its outlook. Therein the value of both works lies.

Zora Neale Hurston, already well-known since the 1920's as a competent writer of short fiction, turned to the novel in the 1930's. Jonah's Gourd Vine, her first full-length novel, was published in 1934, followed by Their Eyes Were Watching God in 1937. Both are excellently written, and are important, above all, because they delve deep into the folklore of Black Americans. There are realistic pictures of many facets of folklife interwoven into these narratives, but Ms. Hurston is often reserved as far as interpretation is concerned. Nevertheless, these often witty and funny stories are perhaps the best examples of fiction dealing with folk material produced during the 1930's, and despite some romantic coloring, they reflect the concerns with realism which so greatly characterized the literary temperament of the 1930's.

Also, during the 1930's, several new novelists appeared in Black American literature, and after meeting with some minor success, they seemed to have disappeared almost as quickly as they came. Today, they remain for the most part unheard of, and with their obscurity as a point of departure, the remainder of this study will be concerned with four of these novelists, namely, George W. Henderson, George W. Lee, Waters E. Turpin, and William Attaway.

Henderson, Lee, Turpin, and Attaway all appeared on the

literary scene during a very crucial period embraced by the years from 1935-1941. Along with the frustration of most black critics with romanticism as a dominant factor in Black literature which characterized the first years, as the decade progressed, realism became equally as frustrating at times: some realistic literature was simply not real enough. Then, too, as has been previously mentioned, the reading public, being largely white, became increasingly uninterested in Black literature after the 1920's. Parochialism had seemingly played out with them. These factors perhaps best explain the low quantity of creative literature during the period. But with the landmark publication of Richard Wright's Native Son in 1940, literary activity took on a new and more intense display of energy. Americans had found a new race spokesman; indeed, Wright soon became the "apostle of race,"[18] and his influence soon came to dominate the world of Afro-American belles lettres. Within such a frame, then, appeared such works as Henderson's Ollie Miss, Lee's River George, Turpin's These Low Grounds and O Canaan!, and Attaway's Let Me Breathe Thunder and Blood on the Forge.

The criteria for selection of these authors was largely subjective. They are often condescendingly referred to as "minor" authors of the period; hence, their artistic contributions have been ignored by most critics and scholars. Their works, however, do deserve critical attention and comparative

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[18]Carl M. Hughes, The Negro Novelist, 1940-1950 (New York: Citadel Press, 1953; 1970), p. 250.

analysis. Therefore, emphasis will be placed not only on the novels as isolated works, but also on the way they fit into the milieu of the 1930's from both a thematic and aesthetic perspective.

CHAPTER II

GEORGE HENDERSON AND GEORGE LEE: BLACK LIFE IN THE DEEP SOUTH

Among the first of the black writers of the 1930's to move away from a Northern urban setting to attempt an interpretation of the rural South was George W. Henderson. His Ollie Miss, which appeared in 1935, treats a series of "unimposing events in a simple microcosm, (and) reduces human experiences to manageable proportions."[1] A second novel, Jule, which is a sequel to Ollie Miss, was published in 1946. Besides writing novels, Henderson wrote several short stories while he worked as a printer for the New York Daily News.

George Wylie Henderson was born in 1904 in Warrior's Stand, Alabama, and was educated at Tuskeegee Institute. The Southern rural life with which Henderson was so familiar figures as the basis for the plot of Ollie Miss. The plot, according to Robert Bone,"can be divided into three parts."[2] The novel opens by presenting Ollie, the main character, who is about to embark upon a visit to her lover, Jule. Through an immediate series of lengthy flashbacks, all of the facts of Ollie's past

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[1] Bone, p. 123.

[2] Ibid., p. 124.

life, her personality traits, and especially her most startling asset, her physical strength, are revealed. Ollie has left home after a dispute with her guardian about Jule. She then becomes something of a nomad, wandering from place to place in search of happiness, security, and most of all, love. This search is prevalent throughout the first part of Ollie Miss and brings her to Uncle Alex's farm where the present action of the novel begins.

The second part of the novel begins with chapter ten. Ollie has been working at Uncle Alex's for about two months before deciding to visit Jule. She arrives at his cabin to find it empty, except for another woman's undergarment, which she promptly burns in the fireplace. Ollie then seeks out Della, one of Jule's former lovers, to see if she, perchance, knows of his whereabouts. She remains with Della for nearly a week, waiting and hoping for Jule's return. When she learns from Della that Jule has planned to attend revival services at a nearby campground, she continues her search there. When she finally finds Jule, Ollie persuades him to spend the night with her. It is at this point that Ollie's most intense desire is learned, that is, to become the mother of Jule's child. Jule has other plans, however. He does not want to be tied down to Ollie, and insists that he is in love with another woman. The next day he takes his exit, which leaves Ollie crushed and despondent. Afterwards, Ollie returns to the campground where her identity becomes known to her current rival, who in turn assails her. As a result, Ollie is badly slashed with a razor.

The third division of the novel focuses on Ollie's wounds--both her external wounds and her internal ones, and on the subsequent development of her feelings as a result of them. Ollie realizes her innermost emotions, their intensity and importance, through her bouts with bodily and mental injury. Jule, guilt laden over the razor-cutting, decides that things might again be "right" for Ollie if he were to marry her; but Ollie has grasped a higher concept of life and love:

> "Mebbe hit wa'n't dat dat made us wrong, Jule," she said simply. "Mebbe us could hab been married an' still been wrong, an' mebbe us could git married to-morrow an' be wrong right on. I guess hit was somethin' more'n dat. . . . Seem lak us was jes livin' because us wanted somethin' --jes because us craved somethin'--an' us jes went on livin' jes fer dat. Mebbe ef dere had been somethin us could want an' not hab--somethin' us could work fer an' still want--mebbe hit mought hab been dif'ent."[3]

Despite her renunciation of Jule, the novel ends on an optimistic note, for Ollie has things to look forward to: she is going to have Jule's baby, and Uncle Alex has promised to let her work ten acres of ground for herself. She knows that it will not be easy, but "that had made her feel happy in a way she had never felt before. She had something to look forward to--a farm of her own. And green things would live and grow that had been nurtured by the strength of her hands alone. Things that gave fruit in return for the sweat of her toil!" (p. 276).

Several outstanding themes prevail in Ollie Miss. One of

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[3]George Wylie Henderson, Ollie Miss (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1935), pp. 272-273. Subsequent references are to this edition.

these explores black womanhood, not only in the particular context of the Black Experience, but Henderson skillfully transcends this parochial view to explore Ollie within the more general, or universal, context of human experience. Black women, especially in Black literature, have often been portrayed either as strong, domineering, matriarchal figures, or as the "prim and decorous ambassadors"[4] to whom Richard Wright so strongly objected.

Henderson, in his creation of Ollie Miss, avoids both such stereotypes. However, her bodily vigor is a stressed trait, and attention is called to her adeptness at plowing--traditionally regarded as a man's work, "she joins three men at the task and soon only one can keep the pace she establishes."[5] Furthermore, "she becomes one of the workers, not only not asking for any special treatment, but also specifically rejecting it."[6] In so doing, Ollie carves a place for herself in this agrarian existence on her own terms: her independence is first and foremost. She demonstrates this by her refusal on several occasions to permit the men on the farm to do things for her that they, as men, expected to do for women. Such includes carrying loads which appear too heavy for Ollie, and respectfully avoiding the use of profanity in her presence. Ollie's

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[4]Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," in The Black Aesthetic, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1971; Anchor Books, 1972), p. 315.

[5]Patricia Kane and Doris Y. Wilkinson, "Survival Strategies: Black Women in Ollie Miss and Cotton Comes to Harlem," Critique Vol. 16, no. 1 (1974), p. 103.

[6]Ibid., p. 104.

response to one of the men who apologizes for another worker's profane language is indicative of her outlook:

> "Oh, dat's all right," Ollie said, looking at Willie. "Tain't no need to 'pologize. A li'l cussin' ain't nuthin' nohown, an' cussin' in front of 'omans is de same to me as cussin' in front of mens. Cussin' is jes cussin'--dat's all." (p. 47)

The men are both shocked and annoyed by this complacency; "Ollie does not rebel," as she was expected to; "she merely exists in a world she knows."[7]

Another prevalent theme in Ollie Miss concerns itself with the survival of women in a male dominated world, but again Henderson has grasped a broader concept of survival to include not only a woman like Ollie, but presents this concept as applicable to people in general. Ollie's arrival at Uncle Alex's farm not only caused a stir of interest among the male workers, but also evoked female jealousy as well, especially from the prudish gossip, Nan. However, Ollie remains oblivious to all of this. Her independence is again of paramount importance to her, and she operates only on her own terms. She comes and goes as she pleases, and does what she likes, never deferring to criticism from Nan. By stressing these characteristics, Henderson appears to suggest that women must not be limited in their pursuit of happiness by the fact that they live in a male dominated society; rather, they must learn to live their own lives according to their own needs and desires. Ollie is not a mouthpiece for Henderson, however. The strength of her character, her ability to endure in matters where men and women are concerned,

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[7] Ibid., p. 102.

and her strong compulsion to work for her wants and needs are not presented by direct comment; rather, they are revealed through cleverly devised dialogue and action.

For instance, the notion that a woman's good looks are subject to exploitation by men figures in Ollie Miss; but Ollie's beauty, though she is aware of it herself, is of little or no consequence to her:

> "Well, daughter," Mity said now, "you is a right pretty-looking gal, does you knows dat?" "Yes'm, I knows hit," Ollie said evenly. "But dat don't make no difference." "Nuh, hit don't--not to me, hit don't!" Mity said. "But hit do makes difference to de mens, honey!" And once again there was laughter. But when Ollie said, "All de same, I ain't got nuthin' no other 'oman ain't got," the laughter ceased. (pp. 57-58)

It is obvious that Henderson understands his character, but more importantly, in order that Ollie be, as credible as possible, a recreation of real life, Henderson presents her in such a way that she understands herself, inasmuch as she understands her place in the general scheme of the agrarian environment.

Another theme in Ollie Miss, according to Robert Bone, is concerned with ways of loving.[8] Through the exploration of this theme, a discrepancy in Ollie's character is revealed. This, however, is more of a tribute to the author than not, for it is eventually realized that Henderson is not only careful in his delineation of character, but also, that he has a firm understanding of the many discrepancies which exist in human nature, especially where emotions such as love come into play.

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[8]Bone, p. 125.

Ollie's early love for Jule represents one of the ways of loving presented in the novel: "Just thinking of Jule, of the fact that she wanted to see Jule, made Ollie want to live" (p. 153). Ollie exercises great self-control in all matters except those involving her feeling for Jule. In fact, this intense love for him reaches the point that it prescribes her life, especially after she finds that he is seeing another woman. This creates in Ollie yet a stronger determination to be the one woman in Jule's life, and we soon realize that she is prepared to go to great lengths to achieve this end. This is perhaps one of the more skillfully crafted portions of Ollie Miss. One would almost expect that Ollie would have no flaws in her character, being the strong person that she is in so many respects. The author knows, however, that "perfect" people--neither perfectly strong nor perfectly weak--simply do not exist, and by examining Ollie's weaknesses along with her strengths, Henderson succeeds in lifting Ollie above the stereotypal roles that had been previously assigned to Black women characters.

Another way of loving, which insists on possession, also results in negative consequences when possession is denied.[9] Such is the result of Slaughter's love for Ollie. Beginning immediately with Ollie's arrival at Uncle Alex's, her beauty exerts a drug-like influence over him--"a kind of obsession, cruel and consuming" (p. 42). Ollie, however, rejects even the slightest show of affection from Slaughter because he is in love

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[9]Ibid., p. 126.

with her, and an involvement of this sort may lead to a violation of her own affections for Jule. Ollie rejects Slaughter in favor of a casual affair with the immature Willie, another of the field hands on Uncle Alex's farm. In so doing, Ollie "provides for her physical needs . . . without violating her feelings for Jule."[10] Slaughter understands neither Ollie's reaction to him, nor his to her, and as a result he becomes emotionally anguished. This emotional crisis is also seen in Della, Jule's jilted lover, who, afterwards, provides him with a cabin to live in so that he could just be near her. Interestingly enough, Ollie herself witnesses this same emotional horror as she lies abed after the razor-cutting episode, but unlike Slaughter and Della, Ollie emerges from this crisis as the victor.

A third way of loving, then, is the higher concept of love that Ollie has grasped after her illness. Her deeper and more awe filled understanding of love, a result of her nearness to death because of love, places her in a kind of control over her emotions that corresponds to her control over other matters of her life. Although it is painful to witness Ollie's despair and torment, there is a sigh of relief when it is realized that, in the end, Ollie will make it.

Aside from being a sympathetic and understanding account of Black womanhood, Ollie Miss also establishes George Henderson as a local color writer of considerable talent. His realistic pictures of the life of Black sharecroppers on a Black-owned

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[10] Ibid., p. 124.

farm in the Deep South are quiet, but moving. Also, "the linguistic texture of the novel reflects its peasant setting: dialogue consists of short, simple sentences; figures of speech are based on nature imagery and barnyard metaphor."[11] Perhaps the novel's chief merit is that its setting presents something unusual to the canons of Black writing--the author turned South to his own roots and the roots of the vast majority of Black Americans to derive his setting. This Southern setting did not appear for the first time with Ollie Miss, however. It was also the basis for Jean Toomer's Cane and Zora Neale Hurston's Jonah's Gourd Vine. With the publication of Ollie Miss, though, the Southern Black Experience became established as a continuing source for exploration by Black writers.

Another Black writer who appeared in the 1930's, and who used the Deep South as the basis for his writing, was George W. Lee, the author of Beale Street: Where the Blues Began (1934), River George (1937), and Beale Street Sundown (1942). The son of a Baptist minister, George Wahington Lee was born near Indianola, Sunflower County, Mississippi in 1894; after attending Alcorn College, he joined the army and was commissioned as a lieutenant. Following his discharge, Lt. Lee settled in Memphis, Tennessee, where he combined a career as a Republican politician, businessman, fraternal leader of the Negro Elks, and writer.[12] The setting of Lee's writing is in Memphis and in rural Mississippi, areas that he knew quite well.

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[11] Ibid.

[12] David M. Tucker, Lieutenant Lee of Beale Street (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1971), Preface, ix.

George W. Lee's first book, Beale Street: Where the Blues Began, is a history of this famous Black district of Memphis in which many candid pictures of both its respectable upper-class and the "low-down" folk are presented in convincing detail. This book, published in 1934, was reviewed in the Book-of-the-Month Club News--the first book by a Black author to be included.[13] This first book was followed by River George in 1937, the primary focus of this discussion. A collection of short-stories was published in 1942 as Beale Street Sundown. These are scenes of Beale Street life which describe such facets as church life and the insincerity therein, and deal with themes already common to Black American literature, such as passing, and the tensions between the Black middle-class and the Black masses. In addition to these three major works, George W. Lee was also a frequent contributor to many of the leading magazines and newspapers of the day.

River George, Lee's only novel of his writing career, an expanded version of chapter three of Beale Street, is "about River George, a semimythical bad man in the community."[14] The end result is a full-length protest novel whose sentiment is definitely against the share-cropping system in the South, and which also contains many autobiographical elements on a semi-fictional level. The novel opens with a panoramic view of a share-cropping plantation in the fictitious locale of Beaver Dam, Mississippi. The owner, an old Southern gentleman, Mr. King,

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[13] Ibid., pp. 113-114.

[14] Ibid., p. 114.

sells his vast and impressive estate to a ruthless opportunist named Tyler. Immediately, the reader realizes that embedded within this obvious protest is the defense of the white aristocracy, for Mr. King is a kindly person, and quite wealthy. On the other hand, Mr. Tyler is a self-made "redneck," and once he acquires the King place, he exploits the sharecropping system and relegates the workers to conditions seemingly as deplorable as slavery. To strengthen this case in Point, Lee includes descriptions of high prices in the plantation store--the only place the sharecroppers are allowed to trade, and of the inability of the sharecroppers to pay off their debts due to the outrageous dishonesty of the bookeeper.

The major portion of the novel traces the life of its central character from the time he returns home from Alcorn College until he is lynched by a white mob. This protagonist, Aaron George, returns home from college intent on using his education to put an end to the evils of the sharecropping system, thus emancipating his fellow black brethren. He makes this vow to his dying father, but the father, wise with age, counsels his son in the following manner: "Ain't no use complainin' boy. Might as well talk to a old rattlesnake as talk to dat Mistah Tyler. Caint do anythin' with a man like dat."[15] Aaron, however, under the influence of his liberal education insists that there are laws which safeguard against the kind of oppression experienced by the sharecroppers, to which his

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[15]George W. Lee, River George (New York: Macaulay Company, 1937), p. 25. Subsequent references are to this edition.

father replies, "Laws ain't for colored," (p. 25) reflecting the helpless environment that Southern Blacks were forced to live within.

Aaron George persists, however, despite his father's conservatism; education has relieved him of such a mentality. It is soon realized, however, that Aaron's education has manifested a certain dangerous naiveté in him in that he expects sympathy when he pleads the case of the black sharecroppers before the white overseer, Sam Turner. Turner warns him that "you better get such damn fool notions out of your head, cause if you try to start anything among these niggers, it's going to be mighty unhealthy for you . . . . We ain't gonna stand for you college niggers comin' around here stirring up things. These niggers are gettin' along all right. They're happier than the niggers anywhere" (p. 42). Turner is portrayed as one kind of white character found frequently in Black literature as far back as the slave narratives--those who felt that education was dangerous to Blacks becuase it made them "uppity." It is important to note the existence of such a character in Twentieth Century fiction, not only for what it implies about the lack of change in white attitudes toward Blacks, but consequently, what it suggests about the lack of change in the living conditions for Blacks in the Deep South.

Aaron tries his hand at farming, and this venture proves a success, the result of his application of the new farming techniques he has learned at school. The yield of cotton is unprecedented on the George's land, but according to the plantation bookeeper, not enough to enable Aaron to share a profit.

Disgusted and fed up with this kind of abuse, Aaron turns to the paternalistic Mr. King for help. Through Mr. King's influence, he secures a job in Indianola at a mill, and soon finds that this is by far more profitable than sharecropping. Other workers soon begin to follow his example.

Once in town, away from the stifling peasant environment, these sharecroppers gain a new sense of direction: "Economic independence gives these men the strength to challenge the power structure on the plantation."[16] They secretly organize themselves to make a strike at Mr. Tyler's ruthless tyranny. The members swear themselves to secrecy, but an infidel, Do Pop, violates his oath and word of the plan reaches Tyler, who immediately takes action to exterminate Aaron George, who was named chief instigator. This passage is vividly reminiscent of the failure of many slave revolts because of betrayal at the last minute by a fellow slave. Aaron barely escapes death at the hands of a lynch mob after he wounds his would-be murderer, a hired mercenary named Fred Smith.

The focus of the novel then shifts to Memphis, and it is here that the chapter from Beale Street is incorporated. Aaron becomes a "half-legendary bad man of Beale Street,"[17] and the subsequent chapters explore the "low-life" among the Black people in somewhat greater detail than what had been presented three years earlier. What is evident in this section of the novel, more than anything else, is that "Mr. Lee knows his Beale Street from its respectable end to the river bottom where

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[16] Tucker, p. 116.

[17] Ibid., p. 114.

River George blustered and ruled."[18]

The novel also carries Aaron to Harlem where he comes into contact with the presumptuous urban Black intelligentsia who are convinced that they have all of the answers to the "Negro Problem"--self elevation at any expense: "Listen, big boy, we aren't much interested in Harlem in doing anything for the race. . . . Harlem has a good time." (p. 213). This is obviously a flagrant attack by Lee on the Harlem critics who had severely criticized his first book.[19] Despite this personal intrusion, nevertheless, Lee does manage to grasp more truth than even he perhaps realized at the time--that it was not possible for the Harlemites to know the real plight of the Southern Black from second-hand observation; and that was the most that some had, or cared to have.

River George carries its main character through World War I before he returns to the Mississippi plantation, where he is met by a white mob and lynched upon his arrival. After the Beale Street exposé, the novel begins to move too quickly, and often only touches on things which may have strengthened it as a whole, such as Aaron's reaction to the Harlemites. His hasty conclusion that race pride was of no interest to them is unconvincing, as is his quick death upon returning to the Deep South. Yet, there is a certain magnetism in the character of Aaron George; perhaps this is so because the book reads like a good

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[18]Alain Locke, "The Eleventh Hour with Nordicism: Retrospective Review of the Literature of the Negro for 1934," Opportunity, XIII (1935).

[19]Tucker, p. 114, 118.

biography with many easily identifiable historical events, both factual and recreated, included in the narrative.

River George, as mentioned earlier, is probably best classified as protest literature, exposing white violence and bigotry. This, coupled with the realistic presentation of Southern sharecropping, perhaps constitute the main bases for the appreciation from its critics. Other pictures of rural life are important, too. One of these is Christianity as an oppressive factor in the Black Experience, apparently a favorite topic of Lee's. At the secret meeting, Do Pop, who later betrayed the cause, tries to attribute the Black man's grief to the vengeance of God. They were suffering because God was displeased with both black and white alike, according to Do Pop: "Dat's how com' he sen's all dese floods to dis Delta lan', an' ef dis t'ing keeps up, he's gwine sen' a flood one of dese days lak he sunt in Noah's time; and dare ain't gwine be nobody lef' but de right'ous" (p. 102). To this pious view, one of the more fearless sharecroppers, aptly called Lightning, responds with vicious intent: "I looks at him and I wondah why dey bothahed to fight de civil war . . . . Now ef dis hear cheatin' ever gwiner be stopped, who' gwiner stop hit ef we don' complain? Hit's alrigh' tuh 'pend on de Lawd, but de Lawd want yuh tuh do somethin' fuh yuhself" (p. 102). Lightning is obviously expressing the author's own sentiments, but Lee manages to conveniently weave such personal views into the dialogue, thus avoiding didacticism.

Unlike Henderson, Lee depicts the South from a militant point of view. None of the peacefulness or naturalness of Henderson's tone exists in Lee's version of the sharecropping

system. Lee's heavy reliance on actual history is perhaps the controlling factor here. It must be remembered, too, that the two authors are exploring two distinctly different settings, despite their being in the same general area. Henderson's setting is an all black plantation, and all of his characters are black, for whom he displays a great understanding. Lee, on the other hand, explores the injustices dealt to black sharecroppers by a white power structure. By positing River George as a work of protest literature, Lee had no choice but to present white people as villains, and because of this, his white characters often become stereotypes. This is not a reflection of Lee's lack of understanding of the ways of whites; rather, it is more of a reflection on his inability to delineate character.

Also, whereas Henderson's protagonist is a woman, Lee's is a man. This in itself requires and demands a different approach, for Lee was not as free as Henderson to choose traits for the development of his character--the "bad-man." The least show of emotion would have defeated his purpose. This is perhaps the reason Lee chose to let Aaron George remain in the Deep South "until he put the system, and himself, to the test"[20] of endurance. Furthermore, there are vast thematic differences between these two pictures of the Deep South, but despite these differences, both Ollie Miss and River George reflect many of the concerns in the literature of the 1930's. These will be discussed in Chapter 5.

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[20] Ibid., p. 116.

CHAPTER III

WATERS TURPIN: THE TRAGEDY OF RACE

The attempts made by Black writers to obtain realism in literature during the 1930's were many and varied. Some writers, like George Wylie Henderson, followed the "slice of life" technique, exploring the particular reaction of their Black characters to an isolated incident. Others, like George W. Lee, employed a more propagandistic approach, using the oppression of their Black characters as a means for social protest. Still others, like Waters E. Turpin sought to remove the oversimplification of Black life found in much of the literature written by Blacks prior to the 1930's. This is precisely the intent of his two family chronicles, These Low Grounds (1937) and O Canaan! (1939).

Waters Edward Turpin was born in 1910 in Oxford, on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. He received the undergraduate degree from Morgan College in Baltimore, and the M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from Columbia, afterwards devoting himself to a career of college teaching, the most recent of which was spent at his alma mater where he remained until his death in 1968. In addition to the aforementioned works, Turpin wrote an historical novel of slavery in Maryland, The Rootless (1957), and a play on the life of Frederick Douglass entitled St. Michael's Dawn. Also, he was the author of numerous scholarly works, notably, Extending

Horizons, with his colleague, Nick Aaron Ford.

These Low Grounds and O Canaan! are two complex, sweeping sagas of Black families written from "the conception that the Negro social tragedy is accumulative and the fight with the envrionment, dramatic or melodramatic for the individual is heroic and epical for the race."[1] Turpin's first novel traces a family from pre-Civil War days through a succession of four generations, ending just after the Great Depression. The book opens when Martha meets and marries Joe. Through hundreds of episodes hereafter, the history of the family that begins with these slaves unfolds.

Martha is a decent, hardworking woman. While Joe is away fighting with the Union Army, she earns enough money to buy a house, with the help of her kindly mistress, Lucrece Owens, in addition to caring for her own daughter, Carrie. Joe does not return home immediately following the war; in fact, it is about eight years before he mysteriously reappears with a woman whom he introduces as his sister, but who actually bears the relation of concubine. Meanwhile, Martha has been saving money for Carrie's education. Joe persuades Martha to borrow enough money for him to open a barbershop. She consents, not knowing that the barbershop was actually a front for a gambling parlor. When this scandalous activity is brought to her attention by the local minister, Martha breaks the racket up, and as a result, Joe's business is ruined. He becomes an alcoholic, and soon dies

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[1]Alain Locke, "Jingo, Counter-Jingo and Us," Opportunity 16 (1938), p. 10.

from tuberculosis. Martha and Carrie are faced with a huge debt to repay, and they begin taking in extra laundry to meet their needs. For this reason, Carrie is not able to go off to school--one of her dearest dreams. To make matters worse, Martha has a stroke which proves fatal.

The focus of the novel now shifts to Carrie's life. Carrie is left to the care of Sue, the woman who came with Joe when he returned home, and Jake, Joe's partner in the gambling house escapade. Sue and Jake use Martha's death to satisfy their own greed by moving in and converting her hard-earned home into a house of ill repute. As Turpin puts it, "the mongrel had usurped the kennel of the throughbred."[2] Carrie is still determined to go to school, however, and seeks domestic work in the city so that she can begin to save money for her expenses. She finds work in the household of Mr. and Mrs. Hobarth. For a while, all appears to be going well; but when the Hobarth's son, Keith, returns home from college, he tries to seduce Carrie, and she is fired as a result.

Disgusted and disillusioned, Carrie returns to Sue and Jake, where she lives among the shady characters, but holds them all in contempt:

> There were times when the old urge for an education would revive in Carrie; but never to remain too long. Too much of her father's spinelessness had been engendered by her first failure. The injustice of the Hobarth incident so shadowed her thinking that it served as an immediate check whenever she considered getting another job. She fondled the notion that all

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[2]Waters E. Turpin, These Low Grounds (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937), p. 32. Subsequent references are to this edition.

> the world conspired against her. The notion became an idea and in time a fixed state of mind. (p. 48)

Thus she became, intent on nothing but preserving her physical chastity: "She attached no value to it. She simply did not choose to part with it" (p. 48).

For the next year or so, Carrie remains in this filthy, corrupt environment before she meets Jim Prince from the lowlands of Maryland's Eastern Shore. This begins a new episode in Carrie's life. Jim rescues her from an attempted rape by the drunken Jake. Afterwards, Jim persuades the apprehensive Carrie to marry him and return to his father's home in the lowlands. Here she bears three children and becomes one of the more respectable women in the town of Shrewsbury.

Carrie remains married to Jim Prince for eighteen years, but during the last four years, their marriage begins to deteriorate, thus confirming Carrie's fears that the union wouldn't last. Several events had precipitated this crisis: first, their son had died from consumption as a result of having been overworked by his father, whose determination to be economically self-sufficient had become sheer avarice; secondly, Jim had taken a mistress; thirdly, he had disowned his youngest daughter, accusing Carrie of being unfaithful; and now the most recent of this chain of events, Jim wants to send his eldest daughter to work on a farm with a reputation for abusing young women. Carrie refuses to permit this--the first time she had ever denied a wish to her husband. A fight ensues between Carrie and Jim, and as a result, Carrie takes her daughters and leaves the lowlands.

Carrie and the girls head north, where they settle in the oyster-shucking town of Herdford. Here Carrie opens a boarding house with Jake, the man who had tried to molest her years before, as her partner. Carrie becomes a changed person from the respectable woman known in Shrewsbury as Mrs. Jim Prince: she begins to dress in high fashion, she refuses to attend church, and she becomes the favorite subject of gossip in the town, especially after she converts Lew Grundy, beloved deacon of the parish, from saint to sinner.

Several years lapse before Jim Prince discovers Carrie's whereabouts and comes to Herdford to ask her to come back home. She refuses; but Blanche, the eldest daughter, returns home with her father, and he promises to send her off to school that fall. Blanche's plea to her mother to come home for a Christmas visit creates a yearning in Carrie to return home to Jim, but when she tells Lew Grundy of her plans, he shoots and kills her. Jim Prince comes to Herdford once again, this time to take Carrie home to her final resting place.

At this point, the story shifts to focus on the daughters, Blanche and Marty. After her mother's death, Blanche decides not to return to school, but to stay home and care for her father and younger sister. Blanche is quiet, sure, and industrious, possessing those qualities which remind one of the virtues of her grandmother. Marty, on the other hand, is bold, impulsive, and vivacious like her mother. Years pass; Marty grows into a young lady under Blanche's supervision, and Jim Prince's strawberry farm becomes more prosperous than he ever

imagined when Blanche persuaded him to first try it. It is while Jim has employed migrant workers to help with his crops that Marty meets Jimmy-Lew Grundy, the son of her mother's lover and murderer. They fall in love; Marty becomes pregnant; and Jimmy-Lew is killed by a train while trying to save a child's life. As a result, Marty runs away to Philadelphia to have her baby, and it is here that she begins her career as an entertainer as part of a song and dance duet, the Maryland Songbirds.

Before her rise to stardom, however, Marty works as a maid to support herself and her son, Jimmy-Lew. It is eight years before she returns to the lowlands. Meanwhile, Blanche has married the local principal of the colored school, and has two sons, Booker and Paul, who are close to Jimmy's age. When Marty returns to show-business, she leaves her son to the care of his grandfather and his aunt. He remains on the farm for six years, after which, Marty sends for him to come to New York to live with her again and attend prep school.

From this point on, Jimmy-Lew is the focal point in <u>These Low Grounds</u>. He excels in academics and athletics while at school in New York, but turns down an athletic scholarship to a big university and chooses instead to return to his beloved Maryland to attend the all-Negro Bolden College. He is intent on becoming a teacher once he finishes his prescribed course. During his first year in school, his mother dies from pneumonia. Afterwards, his education is financed by her dancing partner, Judy, and her lover, John Carlton.

When Jimmy finishes school, he becomes a teacher in the lowlands of the Eastern Shore, where his uncle, Blanche's husband, is now superintendant of the county school system for Blacks. His cousins, Booker and Paul, both of whom attended college, are finished as well. Booker remains on the farm and puts his knowledge to use in helping his grandfather, while Paul goes to New York on a business venture. The novel closes as Jimmy-Lew and Ellen, his childhood sweetheart, are making plans for their marriage and the future of their careers.

These Low Grounds is as much a philosophical novel as it is a novel of family history in that Turpin explores many attitudes toward life as held by Blacks from the pre-Civil War days down through the era of the Great Depression and notes both the changes and the consistencies. Perhaps, one of the most important of these is the attitude toward education. Martha wants Carrie to go to school because she did not have that chance herself. Although Carrie was not able to make her dream a reality, she is determined that her own children would go to school. Blanche, her eldest daughter, does go off to school, but a family crisis prevents her from completing her study. She in turn tries to instill in her younger sister the importance of continuing education on the college level. Marty does not heed her sister's counsel, but after years of life's hardships, she is determined that her son, Jimmy-Lew, will go to college at any cost. Blanche likewise places her faith in her sons, Booker and Paul. These three young men make the dreams of education a reality.

Three distinctly different philosophies of education are presented through these three college-bred cousins. Paul sees education as a means of attaining economic prosperity for the self, a rather selfish, but widely-held philosophy. Booker intends to use his education to make the farming system more profitable by applying new and more modern techniques. This is reminiscent of Booker T. Washington's philosophy, still useful, but a bit out-moded by the early 1930's when it figures as part of Turpin's chronicle. Jimmy-Lew is presented as an idealist, choosing to use his career as a teacher to prepare the way for "generations unborn." Although Jimmy's sentiments are perhaps closest to the author's own in this matter, it is with Ellen, Jimmy's prospective wife, that Turpin apparently sides in the end:

> "What is Now," she asked, "but Tomorrow's Yesterday and Yesterday's Tomorrow? It is not such a small thing. Don't think I'm trying to be bookish . . . or that I'm trying to rationalize this thing that we must meet . . . meet anywhere we go. I'm not. But I'm willing to face it, not run away from it. I don't think that just education alone will wipe it out; but I do believe that education is one of Time's powerful instruments toward a cure . . . if we let this racial thing blind us to the rest of living, we'll be lost." (pp. 343-344)

Jimmy-Lew is probably Turpin's autobiographical character in <u>These Low Grounds</u>; for in Jimmy we find several points which seemingly correspond to the author's own experiences. For instance, Jimmy wants to become a writer, intending to "tap the untouched literary material offered by that little-known section of the American scene, the Eastern Shore of Maryland" (p. 313). He wants to write a "Saga of Achievement" about his

family. In a friend's warning to Jimmy, Turpin captures much of the dilemma facing the Black writers of the 1930's:

> "You talk as if writing a book is something to be done overnight. Besides, publishers aren't interested in Negro writers. Anything they want concerning Negroes they can get from their own writers . . . . Their lives might be glorious and interesting to you . . . and you might see it all as a part of the great American Scene. But try and do it without the good old Uncle Tom stuff and see how far you get with it." (pp. 313-314)

Thus, the author expresses the fears about his own work and Black literature in general, the same fears that other Black writers had expressed after the demise of the Harlem Renaissance.

So far as the structure of the novel is concerned, it is faulty on several counts. First, the episodic nature of the narrative requires a skill that Turpin obviously did not possess at the time, although it is an admirable attempt at a first novel. The author gets hung up on the details of a particular episode too often, and the numerous flashbacks and summaries that are used to bring this particular passage back into the perspective of the story are frequently annoying. Also, there is an overuse of coincidence. Cases in point are the following: Carrie accidentally meets Jake after eighteen years, and a partnership develops between her and this man who had once attempted to rape her; Marty's brief and tragic love affair with the son of her mother's lover-murderer; and Young Jimmy's eventual marriage to Ellen Miles, a member of the family Carrie had so despised. Although the author's point is perhaps well-intended, such coincidences are too frequent to be credible.

<u>O Canaan!</u>, the second novel, continues the family chronicle

found in These Low Grounds. "Like those in [his first novel], its characters are subjected to the misfortunes of family disunity, hatred between parent and children, adultery, separation of husband and wife, and violent death."[3] This is the story of Joe Benson's migration from rural Mississippi to Chicago when the boll weevil epidemic that swept through the South in the early Twentieth Century ruined his cotton crop. "Here Negro life is presented against the metropolitan background of Chicago, instead of the rural setting in the earlier volume. However, the same ingredients--the struggle for economic security, the insincere religious activities, the love of gambling, sexual promiscuity, and the wholesome ambition of two or three of the vast throng of characters--are used in the picture."[4]

The novel opens when the Benson family, along with a number of other families from points South, migrate to Chicago in 1916. Once in Chicago, Joe Benson becomes a leader of these migrants by helping them to get settled; and in time, he becomes a leader of the Black Community proper. When he arrives in Chicago, Benson's first business endeavor is a grocery store, and it is quite a success. To boost his income, he goes into a partnership with a friend and fellow migrant, Maggie Dawson, who has derived a profitable business as a restauranteur. Also, Joe enters into the underground bootlegging business, and later, he becomes a prosperous realtor and banker. All of this occurs

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[3]Nick Aaron Ford, Black Insights (Watham, Mass.: Ginn & Company, 1971), p. 86.

[4]Ibid.

during the years between his migration to Chicago in 1916 and the Stock Market Crash in 1929 when Joe loses his fortune. Still determined to provide for his family, Joe goes to work as a Pullman porter, and though he never regains his fortune, he survives due to his brute strenth, strong determination, and above all, his strong sense of pride.

The second half of O Canaan! centers on Joe's youngest daughter, Essie. After Joe Benson's financial ruin, his wife, who has been unfaithful all along, leaves him to return to Mississippi when he can no longer afford her extravagances. Essie then takes over the management of the household, which she vows never to lose. She takes in boarders to supplement her father's meager income from portering. With her work as a waitress, and an occasional check from her older sister, Connie, Essie manages to keep the house that she loves so dearly.

Beginning with Chapter 17, the author incorporates a continuation of the plot from These Low Grounds into the story of O Canaan!. Paul, the youngest grandson of Jim Prince goes to New York near the end of the first novel. When the story resumes in O Canaan!, Paul has been in New York for four years and is preparing to leave. After spending nearly a year on his grandfather's farm, Paul comes to Chicago, where he becomes a boarder at Essie Benson's. They fall in love; Paul helps Essie to set up a hair-dressing parlor; and, eventually, they marry. Their marriage is nearly dissolved when Essie has an abortion without Paul's knowing it, but due to the wise counsel and fatherly advice from the now aged Joe Benson, they decide to

stick it out, thus ending the novel on an optimistic note.

In O Canaan!, Turpin explores the Benson family against an actual historical frame of reference, and in so doing, he presents many of the eternal verities of the Black Experience in America. Thus, the novel holds much importance as revisionist history. For instance, Joe Benson's oldest so is killed in the Chicago Riot after returning from World War I. According to most revisionist historians, these post-war race riots were caused by the white reaction to the Black soldiers returning from the war and intent on exercising the democracy for which they had fought. Turpin apparently shares this view.

Also, Turpin includes the hardships faced by the migrants once they reached the North. When they left the South, the people were jubilant that they were leaving a place where their status was that of peons. Now they were crossing over into Canaan, the promised land. As the author puts it, "some had visions" of education, of voting privileges, and of owning their own homes; "some had illusions"[5] of freedom to do as they pleased without the fear of lynch-mob rule. Most of their dreams are never realized, however, and their illusions are more harsh than any had dared to imagine. Thus, through incorporating so many of these hardships in his narrative, Turpin unfolds the tragedy of the Black Experience in America, as he had done in These Low Grounds, though not with such precision. The total impact of both novels, then, is substantially the

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[5]Waters E. Turpin, O Canaan! (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1939), p. 19. Subsequent references are to this edition.

same. Hence, the reader "concludes that life for Negroes is hedged in by similar conditions throughout all sections of America."[6]

Besides probing the incapacitating effects of history on the black man in America, Turpin also explores the effects of the Black man's own social life. One facet that the author finds particularly distasteful is the manipulation of religion by Blacks to fit their own needs, rather than converting themselves to religion. In response to whether or not she takes religion seriously, Essie replies, "Not this whoopin' and hollerin' kind . . . I get sick and tired of it! Our folks just use it for an emotional carthartic and anesthesia against the pain of reality. Monday morning it's shed like their Sunday clothes" (p. 258). Turpin obviously shares these sentiments since he does not follow with a defense for the emotional antics practiced by the Black congregation of Bathsheba Baptist Church.

Another aspect of the social life that Turpin mentions only briefly, but with a similar distaste, is pressing Black women's hair. Turpin seems not to mind that individuals make money from it, but he does object to hair-straightening because it is a manifestation of self-hate among Blacks--an extension of the "White is Right" idea. On the other hand, hair-straightening parlors create Black-owned and controlled businesses in the Black community, and he seems to be in favor of this since he has Essie--one of the members of the younger generation in whom he places the hope of the future--open such a shop. This kind of ambivalence,

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[6]Ford, Ibid.

whether it was the author's intention to appear so or not, creates in the reader yet a stronger sense of the dilemmas facing Blacks in America.

Due to its complexity, O Canaan! suffers many of the same flaws found in These Low Grounds. It is an improvement over the first novel, however, for in organization it is less episodic than its predecessor, but there is a similar overuse of coincidence."[7] This novel contains more social protest than his earlier work, but, even so, the protest is not as obvious; rather, it is more skillfully woven into the narrative and, therefore, not as obtrusive to the plot as it is in These Low Grounds. The most unusual feature in O Canaan! is, however, the mergeance of the two plots--never before had this been done in Black American literature. On the surface, this may appear to be a failure on the part of the author to control the plot and to complete a plausible ending for the second novel. However, one merely needs to recall the conceptual basis from which both stories stem in order to understand Turpin's reason for doing this--to show that the struggle of the black man against his environment was the same in America, wherever he happened to be. From this, the reader gains a deeper insight into the black man's plight in America, indeed more frightening than one cares to admit.

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[7] Ibid.

CHAPTER IV

WILLIAM ATTAWAY: THE DRAMA OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE

The provincial viewpoint held by many of the Black writers of the 1920's and the early part of the 1930's began to die out during the last years of the latter decade. Although most Black writers still placed a strong emphasis on race, class also became a rising concern in the search for a Black identity. William Attaway is one Black writer who managed to transform the drama of race into the drama of human experience among the poor laboring groups in his fiction. His two novels, Let Me Breathe Thunder (1939) and Blood on the Forge (1941), also provide a glimpse of the continuing search for a Black American tradition in literature from the 1930's into the 1940's.

William Alexander Attaway was born in 1912 in Mississippi, but later migrated with his family to Chicago, where his father became a prosperous physician. After graduating from high school in Chicago, Attaway attended the University of Illinois, but he soon left when the dean refused to accept the draft of a novel in lieu of the prescribed work. Attaway then lived for a while as a hobo, a seaman, and an actor, before returning to Urbana for his degree. He was perhaps disappointed when neither of his two novels achieved the public success that he had hoped for them. Largely because of this, Attaway turned to writing scripts

for radio and television and producing a TV special in the late 1960's on Black humor. In recent years, actually as late as 1970, William Attaway has lived in Barbados.

Attaway's experiences while hoboing serve as the basis for his first novel, Let Me Breathe Thunder. The most striking feature of the novel is that its major characters, Step and Ed, are white. However, they are quite like some Blacks, for they are "rootless men faced by hard realities yet susceptible to dreams and affection."[1] The story, told by Ed, opens just after the two wanderers have left New Mexico. While there, they picked up a Mexican waif, Hi Boy, who adopts this twosome as his road guardians. From New Mexico, they hop a train bound for Seattle but are forced to leave as quickly as they came because of a fight that Step has had with a bouncer in a Seattle bar. Here Attaway points out one of the guiding rules in the life of a hobo: "It wasn't because Step was afraid of what the bouncer's friends might do, it was simply that a transient cannot afford to get into trouble."[2] While aboard the passenger train leaving Seattle, Step and Ed meet Mr. Sampson, who offers them work on his Four Mile Farm in the Yakima Valley. They accept, and it is here that most of the action in the novel takes place.

Step has never liked the idea of having the Mexican child travel with them and, thus, is almost always harsh with the

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[1]Stanley Young, "Tough and Tender: Review of Let Me Breathe Thunder," New York Times Book Review, June 25, 1939.

[2]William Attaway, Let Me Breathe Thunder (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., Inc., 1939), p. 17. Subsequent references are to this edition.

little guy. Hi Boy, however, adores Step. To prove that he is not afraid and that he is willing to share the hardships of a hobo's lifestyle, Hi Boy commits an act that eventually proves fatal. In response to Step's accusation that he is a crybaby, Hi Boy stabs himself in the hand with a fork when no one is watching. Over a period of time the hand becomes infected, and the boy dies as a result of it. This stabbing incident, and the innocent courage shown by Hi Boy in proving his point, breaks through Step's tough veneer, and he comes to accept the boy on much better terms. "The kid becomes a kind of domestic symbol to the wanderers and a kind of outlet for their affection and all the tenderness which is missing from their abnormal lives."[3]

Once on the Sampson farm, Step and Ed fall into the routine work pattern with the sheep-herders and apple orchard attendants. On the weekends, there is the town with its movies, girls, booze--a good time. As is the custom with hoboes, they plan to work only for a while and then move on. "Their single thought is to keep alive, to push on over the next mountain, to pick hops in California, berries in Washington, backdoors in Ohio, until by some miracle they land and take root."[4] Step, however, violates this unwritten rule of hoboing by becoming involved with Sampson's daughter. Not only is this inconsistent with the casual lifestyle of transients, but also, because Sampson does not allow Anna to mix with the workers, this is a dangerous

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[3]Stanley Young, ibid.

[4]Ibid.

and potentially explosive situation. Ed tries to warn Step of this danger, but he doesn't listen. When the affair threatens to become exposed, Attaway manages to capture some of the emotional quality and force of the familiar relationship of partners on the road:

> "Boy, you sure take the cake--thinking about yourself, and that girl in more of a jam than both of us put together could stand. Maybe you think you done something to poke out your chest about?" "Cut it," he gritted. "I know what I done, and I know it's too late to start acting like I was sorry." (p. 136)

Sampson soon becomes suspicious, and to calm him, Ed informs him that they will be moving on soon. Meanwhile, the old man has become attached to Hi Boy and suggests that they consider leaving him on the farm to be raised properly. Both Step and Ed are torn between their concern for the boy's future and their own need of him, but eventually they decide that it would be best if they do leave Hi Boy with Sampson. On the night of their scheduled departure, Anna insists that Step meet her one last time at their usual meeting place, the home of Step's good friend, a black woman named Mag. While Anna is waiting for Step, Mag's husband tries to seduce Anna. When Mag out of anger and jealousy shoots at Cooper, her husband, the bullet accidentally strikes Anna. Knowing there will be trouble when Sampson gets the news, Ed and Step take Hi Boy and flee on the first train that passes through, not knowing of its bearings or destination, thus continuing their directionless search.

While on the run to catch the train, Hi Boy slips and breaks the wounds on his injured hand. Severe cold weather and heavy rain make him delirious with fever. By the time they reach

Denver, the boy is dead. The novel closes as they are placing Hi Boy's corpse on a freight headed for New Mexico with the hope that the body will not be discovered before it reaches the boy's homeland. To make the journey easier, Step tosses aboard his good luck charm: "A dog tail . . . /for/ luck and a smooth ride" (p. 267).

Let Me Breathe Thunder is an early raceless novel by a Black writer, and Attaway has a certain advantage here. He is Black, as well as a former hobo, and with this dual perspective on rootlessness, Attaway explores this aspect of the human condition with a far greater understanding than that of other writers, white or Black, who attempted the same thing. The Black characters who do appear in the novel, Mag and Cooper, are only caricatures and, seemingly, only incidentally Black. Hence, Attaway's emphasis is not on race but on the American poor. "Less ably written the book would only be melodrama and sentimentality, but the characterizations are sure, and the dialogue distilled."[5] Furthermore, the decisions that Attaway calls upon Step and Ed to make, as in matters concerning Hi Boy, seem urgent and humanly important.

Attaway also captures much of the casual relationships of hoboes on the road. Once while they were on a freight, Step and Ed meet three other hoboes. No one ever introduces himself to the others, but each goes about sharing similar experiences with the others while riding. While telling of this episode, Ed refers to the three men as "Wizened Face," "Shifty Eyes,"

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[5] Ibid.

and "the black one," obviously alluding to their most obvious physical characteristics. This impersonality in dealing with others of their own lot suggests not only the impermanent state of their lives, but also, their lack of trust in strangers. This also strengthens the importance of Step and Ed's partnership--once they become partners, their own individuality must cease to be the most important factor in their lives: in all matters, they must act as one.

Let Me Breathe Thunder is at times brutal, and at times calm, but always uncompromising. Attaway often exposes his readers to some nerve-shattering descriptions, such as the stabbing incident:

> . . . there was the fork standing straight up in his hand and the blood was oozing up around the prongs that were embedded in the flesh. . . . She pulled out the fork . . . . Ugly little puckery mouths reached for the retreating tines, then the blood began to really flow. (p. 71)

The description of this bizarre incident is powerful, and at first, seemingly melodramatic. The more one ponders this passage, however, the more one realizes the accuracy with which it is described.

In contrast to the above, there are certain poetic overtones in this novel. The following is indicative:

> Did you ever hear a lark whistle in the early morning when everything is fresh and cool? The sound comes from out in the desert. Of course, the desert here is not the sandy waste that you would think of as a desert. The purple and green of the thistle and sage, the stretches of cactus, mesquite and tumbleweed make it sort of a big back yard of your house. The lark sings from somewhere in this back yard. His whistle is just as long as the chorus to a cowboy song . . . and has more melody in it. (pp. 77-78)

Despite the romantic coloring found in this particular passage, Attaway makes it a part of a reappearing vision of those who live by hoboing--that someday, by some miracle, they will settle down. In the meantime, they must keep moving on, facing the day to day realities, harsh though they may be. By doing this, the author avoids making his novel a pastoral, like George Henderson's Ollie Miss, and also escapes the sentimentality found in the novels by Waters Turpin. Let Me Breathe Thunder is not, therefore, just another sociological novel, but a careful blend of the agonies and the ecstacies which achieves a degree of universal realism never before achieved by a Black writer.

This restlessness of the human spirit is continued in Attaway's second novel, Blood on the Forge, also, perhaps, based upon the author's own experiences as a migrant. On the surface, race seems to be the central focus here, but it so happens that Attaway makes race a part of a larger concept as the narrative unfolds. The novel is proletarian fiction, and, although there is much social protest, it is cleverly disguised. Also, the plot contains many possibilities, of which Attaway takes full advantage.

Blood on the Forge is the story of three brothers--Big Mat, Chinatown, and Melody Moss. The novel traces them from an impoverished Kentucky sharecropping farm to the Pennsylvania steel mills. The first part of the novel centers on the hardships that the brothers suffer as sharecroppers for Mr. Johnston. They live in constant debt and near starvation due not only to

the owner's trickery, but also to the dead land overworked for years. Chinatown sums up their own plight and that of numerous other black sharecroppers in the South: "We jest niggers, makin' the white man crop for him . . . /and/ end up owin' him money every season."[6] The Moss brothers flee the South after Big Mat kills Mr. Johnston's riding boss. Also, they have been recruited to go North by a white labor agent.

Part Two of the novel is a brief account of the journey from South to North and the fears experienced by those making the journey. Shaking in fear and withdrawing from all others around him, Big Mat crouched in the darkness of the freight car. In the darkness, he is lost from his brothers, and we discover that even though he possesses almost superhuman physical strength, he depends upon Melody and Chinatown for security. Chinatown also becomes obsessed with fear--mostly that someone will try to steal his gold tooth, the only thing that he really owns. This fear, we discover, symbolically foreshadows that eventually Chinatown will lose something that is precious to him. Only Melody, the youngest brother, makes the slightest adjustment; not that he is not frightened himself, but that he forgets himself in trying to calm Chinatown, who is on the verge of a mental breakdown.

Part Three of Blood on the Forge probes the reactions of

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[6]William Attaway, Blood on the Forge (New York: Doubleday, 1941; Collier Books, 1970), p. 5. Subsequent references are to the Collier edition.

the newly arrived migrants to the steel mill and the surrounding environment. They conclude the following:

> A man don't git to know what the place where he's born looks like until he goes somewhere else. Then he begins to see with his mind things that his eyes had never been able to see. To us niggers who are seeing the red-clay hills with our minds this Allegheny County is an ugly, smoking hell out of a backwoods preacher's sermon. (p. 45)

This section of the novel also describes the backbreaking work in this "ugly, smoking hell" and its destructive effects on men, regardless of their physical strength.

In Part Four, this breaking of the spirit is continued. The brothers, and especially Big Mat, become utterly helpless in face of the conditions in the mill. Big Mat is still able to do the work, but his mental well-being suffers one severe blow after another. He forsakes his Bible for the first time in his life; he takes the money that he has been saving to bring his wife from Kentucky and spends it all on a Mexican prostitute, Anna; and he finds that he is not able to relieve his frustrations through engaging in sexual activities with her. In essence, Big Mat has become totally emasculated. Chinatown also suffers a similar condition and tries to drown his sorrows in corn liquor. Even Melody threatens to destroy the family unity through his own self-pity brought on by an accident that crushed his hand, for he selfishly refuses to go to Big Mat's aid in a time of need. It is also in this part that the real tragedy begins. There is an explosion in the mill: fourteen people are killed, and Chinatown is blinded in both eyes by the explosion. Earlier, Smothers, one of the workers

who had been crippled in a previous accident, had warned them that something of this nature was inevitable, but no one had listened. Now his prophecy had come to pass. All three of the Moss brothers, then, have suffered at the hands of the steel mills: Big Mat is spiritually destroyed; Chinatown has lost his sight; Melody has crushed his guitar-playing hand and is no longer able to play the blues which had been his source of inspiration.

Part Five depicts the brothers' struggle, as individuals and as a group, to rechart their lives after these tragedies. There is another tragedy yet in store, however. The millworkers union is striking, and the owners call in deputies to break the strike, and among them is Big Mat. He is killed in a fight with the strikers while in a fit of rage and frenzy precipitated by Anna's truth exposing insult that he is still a peon; but there is still a deeper tragedy than Big Mat's death. According to Attaway, it does not stop here:

> "That's the thing 'bout nigger deputies--they're fightin' the race war 'stead of a labor strike. Always be like that, I guess, as long as they come from the South. There'll be somebody to take his place, an' that there's one reason why the union ain't gonna win. They didn't figure on the South when they started this here." (p. 234)

Thus we are told that this vicious cycle will continue.

Once they have buried Big Mat, Melody takes Chinatown and they leave to start a new life in Pittsburg. While aboard the train, they meet a blind ex-soldier. He and Chinatown begin sharing their experiences--both have fought a war for survival and are now seeking their rewards, but are

"listening for sounds that didn't exist" (p. 237). Blood on the Forge, then, ends with a note of despair:

> And so the blind lead the blind. Just as the soldier was lured away from home by the nonexistent glory of war, so Melody and his brothers have been seduced by promises of freedom and security in the North. And thus it would always be for men like Chinatown and the soldier.[7]

As mentioned previously, Blood on the Forge is basically a protest novel, exposing the discrimination and injustice that Blacks receive on the labor market, especially when they offer competition to white men.[8] To strengthen his case, Attaway shows that the other minorities who make up the community--Slovaks, Irish, Italians, and Ukrainians--have a much better chance for advancement in the mills than Blacks do simply because of the perpetuated belief in color-caste. This caste system had been seen in Kentucky as well. The white riding boss who Big Mat killed had been one of his childhood playmates. Once he achieved his position, however, his attitude toward Big Mat had changed radically: he was now the boss, and Big Mat was still a peon. In comparing the plight of the black man in the South with that in the North, Attaway, like Waters Turpin, concludes that conditions are essentially the same for Blacks wherever they go.

Even though Attaway apparently believes that the South is much too oppressive for Blacks, he posits that their

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[7]Edward Margolies, Native Sons: A Critical Study of Twentieth Century Negro American Authors (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1969), p. 61.

[8]Carl Milton Hughes, pp. 80-81.

proximity to the soil there gives them life and sustenance. When the Moss brothers reach Pennsylvania, one of the first things they notice is that there are no trees, no greenery, and that the ground is all torn up. Immediately, they begin to realize what they have lost:

> Yes, them red-clay hills was what we called stripped ground, but there was growing things everywhere and crab-apple trees bunched--stunted but beautiful in the sun. (p. 44)

Ordinarily, this would seem like a romantic yearning for a return to the Southland, as presented in Jean Toomer's Cane.[9] Attaway, however, expands this into a broader defense of the natural environment against the intervening destruction of "steel, the indestructible symbol of industry."[10] In one of the more forceful passages in Blood on the Forge, Attaway indicts industry's rape of the land:

> It's wrong to tear up the ground and melt it up in the furnace. Ground don't like it. It's the hell-and-devil kind of work. Guy ain't satisfied with usin' the stuff that was put here for him to use--stuff on top of the earth. Now he got to git busy and melt up the ground itself. Ground don't like it, I tells you . . . . It jest ain't right. (p. 53)

The explosion of the boilers in the steel mill, presumably the ground's rebellion, carries out the threat implied in the above passage. In these days of the present concerns for the environment, Attaway's prophecy in Blood on the Forge becomes all the more urgent: "possibly he saw his worst fears realized in the rapid spread of industrial wastelands and the consequent

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[9] Margolies, p. 48.

[10] Ibid., p. 53.

plight of urban Negroes."[11]

The tragedy of the human spirit is perhaps the most important concern in Blood on the Forge. This tragedy is due to restlessness; and even when human beings have happiness, they don't realize it, and the quest continues. Once they do realize that happiness actually existed in the place they have left, it is often too late to return. Big Mat leaves his wife, Hattie, in Kentucky when he and his brothers flee northward. He intends to send for her, but circumstances prevent this. Big Mat brings his Bible with him, but is unable to pray in this new land. Likewise, Melody brings his guitar, but he becomes unable to play the blues once he reaches this dehumanizing environment. In short, "their separation from their past--rootedness in the soil, the folk, religion, family--is almost as complete as that of their ancestors who traveled to a new and ugly life in the dark bellies of slave ships instead of airless boxcars."[12] Although they try to carve a new life for themselves in this "ugly, smoking hell," the Moss brothers forever remember what they have left behind:

> The sun on the red hillsides baked a man, but it was only a short walk to the bottoms and the mud oozed up between his toes like a cool drink to hot black feet, steppin' easy, mindful of the cottonmouth. (p. 46)

In the steel mill, and in general terms, the North, there was no such relief to be found.

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[11]Edward Margolies, "Introduction" to Blood on the Forge (New York: Collier, 1970), xviii.

[12]Phyllis R. Klotman, "An Examination of Whiteness in Blood on the Forge," CLA Journal Vol. XV, no. 4 (June 1972), p. 460.

In terms of structure, Blood on the Forge establishes William Attaway as a perfectionist. The narrative is simple, but not naively so, for in it are many of the complexities of human life. "Unemcumbered with sub-plots, the focus lies exclusively on the fate of the three brothers."[13] Also, by weaving protest and symbolic imagery within this simple framework, Attaway arrives at an astonishing level of sophistication.

Thematically, both Blood on the Forge and Let Me Breathe Thunder clearly represent the ever continuing search for a Black American tradition in literature. Let Me Breathe Thunder is a predecessor of the so-called "raceless novels" which came into vogue in the mid-1940's with Ann Petry, Chester Himes, and Frank Yerby.

> Let Me Breathe Thunder, for all its praise of stable family life and the virtues of farming, ultimately celebrates the free-wheeling bohemianism of hoboes--and Attaway, by manipulating his plot this way and that, manages to free his protagonists from any social and moral obligations.[14]

Most importantly, the novel proves quite definitely "that it is possible for a Negro to write about whites,"[15] and with a deep understanding.

On the other hand, Blood on the Forge is a protest novel, but by placing his black characters in a setting where the environment had degenerated through the avarice of Man,

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[13]Margolies, "Introduction," xvii.

[14]Margolies, Native Sons, p. 63.

[15]Stanley Young, ibid.

Attaway expands this racial protest into a case for the survival of the human race. In essence, Attaway wrote from the point of view that Americans were all affected by the corruption of the natural environment. Although the effects are shown as they apply to one segment of society, those hardest hit, Attaway achieves the kind of ultimate universality that he and other Black writers during the period 1935-1941 hoped would place them into the mainstreams of American literature.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The most important question for Black writers of the 1930's was "[s]hall Negro writing be for the Negro masses, moulding the lives and consciousness of those masses toward new goals, or shall it continue begging the question of the Negroes' humanity?"[1] Those writers whose temperaments were guided by the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance generally preferred the latter idea. On the other hand, those new writers of the 1930's attempted to expand social consciousness through their efforts to depict realism in the lives of Black Americans. Moving into the 1940's, Black writers adopted many of the innovations of their white contemporaries in order to achieve universality; some writers, like Richard Wright and William Attaway, even transcended these often naturalistic techniques to create innovations of their own. The years 1935-1941, then, embrace this period of ever changing emphases in Black literature. Likewise, some of the representative writers of this period--George Henderson, George Lee, Waters Turpin, and William Attaway--reflect the changing concerns of the period in their individual works; collectively, they reflect the general trend to incorporate Black writing into the

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[1]Wright, p. 318.

mainstreams of American literature.

In 1937, Richard Wright published his "Blueprint for Negro Writing." This treatise called for the application of the proletariat formula to Black writing. The formula demanded an almost exclusive exploration of themes concerning the Black masses; aesthetically, it was designed to uplift the morale of the masses and push them toward a wider social consciousness. As implied earlier, there was no such concept as the "Black Aesthetic" in literature during this period: the main thrust was to enter into the mainstreams; thus to impose such a modern concept upon Black literature of the 1930's is somewhat unfair. Nevertheless, certain points of reference can be related, if only generally.

As we have seen in the preceeding chapters, each writer took a different approach to the problems inherent in becoming a "Black writer." Interestingly enough, the only two of these novels that received much critical attention from the American public were George Lee's River George and William Attaway's Let Me Breathe Thunder: the former, perhaps, because the protest was directed toward a small white audience and, also, it was the kind of fiction that Blacks were expected to write; the latter, perhaps, because it was something of a novelty during the period--few novels by Black writers whose major characters were white had appeared since the days of Charles Waddell Chesnutt and Paul Laurence Dunbar.

In contrast, George Henderson's Ollie Miss and the two novels by Waters Turpin, These Low Grounds and O Canaan! were

almost immediately relegated to the dustbin of oblivion. Perhaps this was so because even though both writers subscribed to the uplift formula of the day, and although they managed to show some universal realism in their respective themes, the former was inproportionate to the latter. This imbalance perhaps dictated their failure.

Nor did William Attaway's later novel, Blood on the Forge, achieve the public attention that it deserved. Several factors are important to note here. First of all, it did not fit the uplift formula of the day. Secondly, the racial protest that existed in the novel was conveniently concealed within a broader protest against the destruction of the natural environment. Finally, its publication only one year after Richard Wright's Native Son presented a problem:

> . . . Attaway's book may have looked tame to an American preparing for war and whose reading reading public had found its Negro 'spokesman' in the virile Wright. To the idealogues who wanted proletarian uplift in their fiction and the aesthetes who shunned 'social content' Attaway's novel must have seemed equally distasteful.[2]

This, then, assigned Blood on the Forge to a place somewhere in no-man's land.

Nevertheless, each writer presented something unique to the canons of Black American literature: George Henderson, in his exploration of Black womanhood in the South, reveals many truths applicable to women of all races; George Lee, for all of his blatant tirades against white racism, manages to derive a realistic picture of one aspect of Black life--sharecropping

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[2]Margolies, "Introduction," xviii.

in the Deep South; Waters Turpin, through meticulously recreating Black History on a very personal level, arrives at two well drawn panoramas of the life of the average Black family in America; and William Attaway, in choosing themes uncommon to Black literature, captures the restless mood of the human spirit on a quest for a permanent home.

Despite the obvious differences in the individual concerns, when viewed as a collective group of Black writers, Henderson, Lee, Turpin, and Attaway have two things in common: they view the South as the homeland of Black Americans; and they have turned there for their subjects, whether in the more obvious manner found in Henderson, Lee, and Turpin, or in the casual allusions made by Attaway in Let Me Breathe Thunder. Furthermore, although the many wrongs and injustices forced upon the Blacks in the South are pointed out, especially in Lee's River George, there seems to be the reoccuring idea with each author that, void of such vices, the South would be the ideal home for Black people, for it is in the South that their roots are retained. This suggestion varies from the very cautious and vague statements by Lee, to the sentimental yearnings of Henderson and Turpin, on to the more obvious statements by William Attaway in Blood on the Forge.

However, the most important thing about the "rediscovery" of these novels is their contemporaneity. Women still experience difficulties in a male dominated society, as in Ollie Miss; even though the conditions for Blacks have improved remarkably since the 1930's, Blacks still suffer injustices particularly

in the South, as in River George; Black families suffer from similar internal and external crises, as in These Low Grounds and O Canaan!; a restlessness and dissatisfaction persists in American society, especially among the young, as in Let Me Breathe Thunder; and transgressions against the environment continue, as in Blood on the Forge.

These novels, then, deserve to be read, or re-read, as the case may be. Such sides of life we must know about if we are to gain an understanding. Only through such digressions into the literary past will we be able to grasp the higher and more conscious concepts of life that are necessary for determining the current status of Black writing and the directions for its future.

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