THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NEGRO NOVELIST

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ATLANTA UNIVERSITY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR

THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY

RANDOLPH LOUIS MYERS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

ATLANTA, GEORGIA

JUNE 1961
INFORMATION TO USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleed-through, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

UMI Microform EP15717
Copyright 2007 by ProQuest Information and Learning Company. All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE</td>
<td>iii1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I    THE NOVEL AND THE NEGRO AUTHOR</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II   EARLIEST NEGRO NOVELISTS</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III  THE SECOND PERIOD</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV   THE RENAISSANCE NOVELISTS</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V    CONCLUSION</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PREFACE

The intensely controversial nature of the subject, "The Development of the Negro Novelist," seems at the outset to make the assertion that the colored author has arrived too presumptuous. The conclusion that the Negro has come of age aesthetically and is now ready to produce great literature comparable to that of Dostoievsky, Dumas, and Balsac may suggest that the study is based upon a shakable foundation. In the first place, the implication that there has been a gradual development may seem unwarranted. There is evidence showing that the earlier colored novelists in not a few respects surpassed later novelists. For instance, Chesnutt was more skillful in evolving a logical structure in the novel than McKay. From the standpoint that a novel is to be appraised through its revelation of life and truth, and not in light of its technical elements, a novelist like Nella Larsen, whose works lack sustenance, would be excelled by Frank J. Webb in his The Garlies and Their Friends (1867).

Furthermore, it may appear that, since methods of writing stories are in most instances conventional, the attempt to trace the colored author's development in light of certain criteria would be theoretically unsound. This school of thought would have the novels evaluated in terms of contemporary practices. Although the novel should meet certain fundamental needs, the fact that each generation must edit its own form gives this criticism more validity. H. G. Wells makes an excellent statement in this connection. "The literature of the past," he says, "is the expression of life under cruder and more rigid conditions than ours, lived by people who loved and hated more naively, aged sooner, and died
younger than we do.... Disregarding this theory, a critic would tend to downgrade a work of art because of its conventionality.

Nevertheless, in regards to the colored novelists, these theories become invalid. For, first, in Richard Wright's *Native Son* is the indisputable culmination of the Negro novelist's development; the author has here made an achievement not attained by any other colored novelist. Moreover, colored writers have been so concerned with conventionalities that their shortcomings, for the most part, are explainable on these grounds.

Therefore, this investigative study seeks to show the emergence of the Negro novelist out of the web of imprisoning conventional limitations and, simultaneously, to trace his progress in craftsmanship and aesthetic consciousness.

Another striking aspect of this study is that of procedure.

Considerable controversy has grown out of the emphasis placed on the social setting in literature. However, realizing the important social ramifications of the colored writer's persistent problems, one need give in this connection little consideration to this intellectual dispute. Therefore, in the conduct of this study, the procedure will be to discuss the cultural, social, political, economic, and even religious background of the periods. Three stages in this development are distinguishable. The first is the period of slavery and the Civil War, extending from 1840-1865. The specific approach in studying the novels here will be to emphasize the novels, insomuch as each of the three novelists wrote only one novel. The second period lasts only a few years, 1896-1911. Emphasis

---

here will be placed equally on novels and novelists. The third period begins in the early nineteen twenties and continues to the present time (1941). In this group attention will center upon the Negro in general as epitomised in the novels.

For obvious reasons, the study of background must of necessity be general and objective, rather than intensive and interpretative. Furthermore, limitation of the novels that could be selected is equally necessary. Study will be made of three novelists in each period, with the exception of the last period, in which three groups of novelists and Native Son will receive attention.

Although the writer's desire to become more familiar with Negro authors began to bud before the consideration of this subject, he wishes to acknowledge a debt of gratitude to his advisor, Mr. William S. Braithwaite, whose guidance, confidence, and inspiring achievements made this study more than challenging. He also expresses appreciation to the staff of the Atlanta University Library, whose efforts to secure certain indispensable books were untiring.
CHAPTER I

THE NOVEL AND THE NEGRO AUTHOR

The inclusion of an introductory chapter treating certain fundamentals of the novel and certain obvious difficulties of the Negro novelist may appear superfluous. It may be argued that the subject in itself is so comprehensive that a thesis of this nature could hardly exhaust available, pertinent data and would necessarily have to be limited. However, the diverse viewpoints in which the novel may be studied make it necessary in this investigation to set forth certain guiding basic concepts. Also, there is a need for consideration of the Negro novelist in light of a catholic standard. Therefore, this chapter attempts to give an overview of some essentials of the novel, despite the great difference of opinion, and the developing status of the Negro author in America. Subsequent chapters will treat in detail the generalities, in regard to the colored novelist, set forth in this introduction.

The novel is one of the most controversial, and yet one of the most popular, forms in literature. Far from agreeing on the origin and exact beginnings of the novel, critics have been very much at variance as to any one precise definition or description. Showing how comprehensive the novel may be in its widest sense, Charles F. Horne has described it as "the intentional separation of the expression from the fact."¹ Also calling attention to the vast realm of the novel, Walter Besant, among many others, has spoken of the art of fiction as

---

...an art in every way worthy to be called the sister and the equal of the Arts of Painting, Sculpture, Music, and Poetry; that is to say, her field is as boundless, her possibilities as vast, her excellences as worthy of admiration, as may be claimed for any of her sister Arts.\footnote{Walter Besant and Henry James, \textit{The Art of Fiction} (Boston n. d.), p. 3.}

Bliss Perry in showing the similarities and the differences between the novel and the drama included the romance and the short story within the scope of the "novel."\footnote{Bliss Perry, \textit{A Study of Prose Fiction} (New York, 1920), p. 48.} Opposing this view was Hawthorne, who did not consider his works as novels, but as romances. He described the romance as a work in which the writer is claiming a "certain latitude" as to fashion and material.\footnote{Nathaniel Hawthorne, \textit{The House of the Seven Gables}, Preface, (New York, 1907), p. 29.} In the novel the writer is not entitled to assume this scope; for, according to Hawthorne, the novel is an aim at a "very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary cause of man's experience."\footnote{Ibid.} The difficulty in distinguishing this extremely varied form is clearly revealed by E. M. Forster. He believes that the novel is such a formidable mass and so formless that it is comparable in figure to a mountain, a Parnassus, a Pisgah.\footnote{E. M. Forster, \textit{Aspects of the Novel} (London, 1923), p. 14.} "It is," he continues, "one of the moister areas of literature irrigated by a hundred rills and occasionally degenerating into a swamp."\footnote{Ibid.} He further points out that because of this, poets, although they at times find themselves becoming novelists, tend to despise the novel and that even historians...
find themselves concerned with it in their collections.¹

From another point of view, it is pointed out that the novelists themselves have been very much concerned with the problem of the novel as an artistic form. They have written about the art of fiction and have propounded the question on just what the novel is. They have shown their resentment to comments of dramatists and their adherents when they argue that the novel is so loose that it is incapable of calling forth the best within the artist and that "a novel may be often the product of unskilled labor."²

Many other conceptions and definitions of the novel could be cited to show the diverse meanings and approaches to this literary form. In fact, the lack of a precise definition is one of the chief reasons why the novel has numerous indefinite classifications. Romantic, historical, realistic, naturalistic, impressionistic, psychological are a few of the many descriptive terms used in reference to the novel. In many instances, the classification of the novel depends upon the manner in which the theme is developed. Thus, the novel may be romantic, realistic, psychological, and so on. Again, it may be distinguished by the theme itself, which may be historical, biographical, social—social in the sense that it may be a problem novel or a novel of manners. There are times when the critics' principles of fiction determine the classification. A striking example of this may be found in a grouping of novels by Charles P. Herne. On the basis of Brander Matthews's principle that fiction deals with the Impossible,

¹Ibid.
the Improbable, the Probable, and the Inevitable. Horne has grouped novels of incident, artifice, ordinary life, and the inevitable. Furthermore, novels in each of the preceding groups are separated into smaller divisions. Edwin Muir, for another example, speaks of novels of action and character and the dramatic novel.

It is thus obvious that form in the novel is very loose. But that there is form, regardless as to how varied it may be, is a statement which cannot be denied. Percy Lubbock in his The Craft of Fiction gives an answer to those of an opposing view. He reminds the adherents of formlessness that a book must have a certain form and on that point there can be no two opinions. To be sure, there is an unending argument about form, but the critic who condemns the novel as "shapeless" means that its "shape" is objectionable. In retorting, another will contend that the novel has other fine qualities and that the shape is relatively unimportant. As the controversy continues, one gets the impression that the "shape" or form is in the final analysis a matter of taste. However, there is no mistaking that, although critics may continue to disagree, "it is clear that there is agreement on this article at least—that a book is a thing to which

---

1Brander Matthews, Aspects of Fiction and Other Ventures in Criticism (New York, 1902), pp. 64-68.
5Ibid.
6Ibid.
Diverse as the conceptions and descriptions of the novel may be, there is at least one definite, indispensable aspect of any true novel: revelation of life, for a novel is a portrayal of life. In any valid definition of the novel is to be found some expression of the relationship of the novel to life. In pointing out the many ways in which novels may differ, C. F. Horne indicates that all novels are concerned with life:

...the true difference between novels lies...not in their background, not even in their artistic method, analytic or dramatic, but in their varying outlook upon life, their varying picture of the human soul and the human fate. Their essential separation lies in their attitude toward universal truth, the amount and the portion of universal law which each perceives and presents.  

Percy Lubbock also states that the novel is a picture of life and that it is the business of the novelist to create life.  

The novel, it may thus be concluded, is at least an expression of life, but as an artistic and literary creation, it must be more. An arbitrary, haphazard selection and expression of life's experiences cannot make a novel. In this expression of life there must be a meaning, some profound truth about life; there must be selection from the manifold, every-day human happenings and relationships. Furthermore, the author must be able to express these experiences in an artistic manner. In acknowledging the ever increasing field of the novelist, C. H. Grabe shows the importance of the ever-present obligations of a novelist:  

---

1 Ibid.  
3 Percy Lubbock, op. cit., p. 9.
...whatever the enlargements of the novelist's field and increase of his technical resources in the coming age, the old requirements of art remain: there must be selection among means to the achievement of some preconceived end, that end is an explanation of life or some aspect of life in the light of a personal philosophy, and...there must be indirection of approach, for unless it conveys its meaning by symbols, rather than by explicit moralising, art ceases to be art at all, but is science, philosophy, or sociology, and the aesthetic pleasure which it is its legitimate purpose to create no longer appertains to it.¹

The preceding excerpt clearly explains the necessity of a basic theme, some definite motive, in the novel. In order to select from the panoramas of life experiences which will set forth his profound truth of life, the novelist must have some guiding principle. It's this which enables him to attach a particular meaning or interpretation to the incidents as they fall into his pattern.² It may be that he proposes to call attention to a problem, to instruct, to amuse, to commercialize, or to reveal a profound truth of life. Whether it be temporary or permanent, good or bad, a motive there must be. The exhortation of Robert Louis Stevenson is fitting at this point as he urges the novelist to "choose a motive, whether of character or of passion, carefully construct... the plot so that every incident is an illustration of the motive."³

There may be any number of motives in writing a novel, but in considering it as an artistic achievement it becomes necessary to disregard the superficial purposes, such as the desire to make money or to appease some secret impulse or whim. It becomes necessary to consider the significant central idea or theme of the book and its intended effect upon the reader.

²Ibid., p. 251.
Since there is an almost unanimity of opinion that the novel should portray life, the obvious conclusion is that the motive should be concomitant with the principle of verisimilitude. It thus behooves the novelist to be true and convincing in his transcriptions of life—not necessarily in the sense of rigidly and exactly photographing every feature and incident of life, but convincing and true in the general effect and in "the underlying harmony of thought." He should not present life as it does not exist. Frank Norris has very emphatically made this contention in the following:

...the readers of fiction have a right to the Truth as they have a right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It is not right that they be exploited and deceived with false sentiment, false morality, false characters, false history, false philosophy, false emotions, false heroism, false notions of self-sacrificing, false views of religion, of duty, of conduct, and of manners.

The foregoing excerpt raises the question of the problem novel. A great novel may be of high aesthetic quality and at the same time set forth and propound some social problem. The two are not necessarily exclusive, for the novel in its broadest sense is inevitably, to a certain extent, a comment on life, or humanity. In most instances, however, there is an intrinsic weakness in the novel of purpose. Brander Matthews observes that life is full of so many teachings and meanings that purpose inevitably hampers the artist.

Any attempt to require the artist to prove anything is necessarily cramping. A true representation of life does not prove one thing

---

1 Ibid., pp. 22-23.
4 C. F. Horne, op. cit., p. 162.
only; it proves many things. Life is large, unlimited, and incessant; and the lessons of the finest art are those of life itself; they are not single but multiple.¹

A greater danger, which too frequently leads to the destruction of a novel, is the passionate devotion on the part of the author to his cause. In his zealous, unwavering steadfastness he distorts his story, bends his characters to conform to the thesis, and gives the reader not a novel, but a book on sociology, history, psychology.²

It is at this point in the discussion of the novel that attention should be given the Negro author. With few exceptions, he has found it almost impossible to free himself of peculiar forces and factors, and it is this which largely explains why he has for many years achieved very little as a creative artist in fiction. This unfortunate status of the colored writer in America embodies much evidence relative to a controversy that has prevailed in literary circles for generations. The argument that the times do not necessarily produce a great artist, that a true genius breaks through repressive conventions and reveals himself in any age, may be quite thought-provoking in this connection and, furthermore, may probably be considered in substantiating any contention that the colored race in America has produced no creative Negro novelist in the past, primarily because there was no genius to come forth. This view may appear still more valid in light of the commentary that the hostile experiences and struggles of the race in achieving full freedom have certainly provided

rich material and background for great works of art. The now established fact that Negro forms and traditions are increasingly becoming the "cornerstones of the new American art"1 adds to the convincingness of this view.

However, further discussion on the colored author in this light would lead to mere hypothetical conclusions. What cannot be denied is that the Negro novelist in developing into an artist of the highest rank has been beset from the outset by peculiar handicaps and obstacles. The persistence of racial conflicts and curious race relations has continuously commanded his attention. The earliest attempts at fiction were made by men who aimed primarily to show the tragedy of slavery and to abolish the system. Writers of the second group, to whom consideration will be given in this study, found it well nigh impossible to divorce themselves from the social and economic problems out of which came many injustices to the Negro. The latest group of novelists is still obviously racial. However, there are, in this category, a few writers who have achieved that objectivity in the use of material so necessary in transcending to effect universality. In one of the latest novels this quality is so noteworthy that it explains to a large extent the conclusion that the artist has arrived, and that the outlook for the future is now very promising.

Concomitant with the repression growing out of the author's personal and seclusive concern with problems of the race has been the pressure exerted upon him from the perpetration of unfavorable literary traditions. For years the attitude of the reading public as well as that of white authors in regards to the Negro in literature has been unsympathetic and unwholesome.

1 Alain Locke, The Negro in America (Chicago, 1933), p. 60.
The American people on a whole have retained stereotyped ideas of the Negro and have thus perpetrated artificialities and sentimentalities in the portrayal of Negro life. White writers in turn have, for the most part, catered to those ideas. During slavery he was the object of controversy and was exaggerated and distorted to fit the purpose. Colored novelists at the turn of the century wrote to a great degree in defiance of Reconstruction fiction. The unfavorable traditions have been increasingly on the wane in recent years, and the times now call for a new mind set and new attitudes. Simultaneously, the number of colored authors writing and disregarding the public and white critics is increasing.

It may readily be seen that whatever literary achievements have eventually been made by the colored novelist as an artist have come with little or no assistance from the whites. It was the evolving of a new race philosophy and psychology that enabled him finally to achieve the necessary objectivity to be a creator in American literature.


3Ibid., pp. 9ff.
CHAPTER II

EARLIEST NEGRO NOVELISTS

There is hardly a more convincing source of evidence for the conclusion that the Negro novel arose out of conditions and circumstances under which the race struggled than that of the works of the first Negro novelists in America. These men engaged in the embittered controversies on slavery in a spirit of seriousness and militancy, not unlike that of great reformers in any age. Having themselves been denied rights of full freedom and equality, they welcomed any opportunity to express bitter and indignant denunciations against slavery and racial conflicts, upon which the ignoble domination of man over his fellowman was sustained. It was only natural, then, that their works should embody, and, also, should be greatly determined by, their prolific outpouring of implacable sentiments and resentments against contemporary injustices to their race.

To understand fully the works of these authors, it is necessary that attention be given the background against which these works were projected and out of which these writers had to strive to make their individual expressions.

Introduced in the New World by Spain and Portugal, slavery was destined to reach a crucial stage in America, as it did in other parts of the world. The increased economic activity in new vast areas led to much exploitation. A new economic system began to manifest itself at the turn of the eighteenth century and had devastating effect on the Negro slave laborer. It is a

---

fact that slavery was on a decline when Eli Whitney invented the cotton 
gin, removing the difficulty of seeding the fibre, and thus greatly stimu-
lated interest in the institution. The cotton system spread, and slave-
holders increased greatly in number. Slave labor broadened into diverse 
other fields; Negroes were trained as barbers, saddlers, blacksmiths, steam-
boat pilots, wagoners.

This transition in the nature of Negroes' labor was the pivot upon 
which their outlook became shockingly different by 1850 than it ever 
previously was. As slavery deepened and spread, they were transported in 
large numbers to the lower South, where they were urgently needed. Here 
they still hoped, of course, for freedom, but faced virtually insurmountable 
obstacles. At the same time, severity accompanied the increased econo-
mic change. Relations of a more kindly and personal nature between master 
and slave gave way to harshness and cruelty.

Significantly striking in this connection is the hatred insited in 
the poor whites. The plantation system in its growth almost demolished 
the independent owner. He was either bought out or driven back to poorer 
land. As Charles S. Johnson points out:

...the perfection of the plantation system meant the ruthless 
destruction and expulsion of white farmers; for ideally it had 
little need of whites. Only a proprietor, an overseer, a

---

1Theodore Calvin Pease, _op. cit._, p. 339.

2Benjamin Brawley, _A Short History of the American Negro_ (New York, 

3Carter G. Woodson, _The Negro in Our History_ (Washington, D. C., 1924), 
pp. 105-04

4Ibid., p. 104.

physician and their families were essential and the fewer the whites, the greater the profits.  

Relations between the poor whites and the Negroes can scarcely be overemphasized here in light of their persistent menacing attitude toward the Negro. Hatred between these groups became more intense when slaves were trained as skilled workers and were hired out, thus becoming superior to poor whites in craftsmanship. 2 Paradoxically, equally injurious to the helplessly innocent Negro was his almost complete monopoly of unskilled labor in the South. The poor whites were of course a much larger group than either the planters or the Negroes, and they were the ones who policed the system of slavery. This resulted in their creating and nourishing a negative attitude toward the Negro as well as toward labor.  

To counteract every real and potential claim of the suppressed black workers, adherents of the system found it imperative to propagate defensive

---


2 Many artisans "...purchased their freedom and were above the normal labor expected... They received the same or better wages than the poor white laborer and with the influence of the master got the best jobs." Ibid., p. 11.

3 Dr. DuBois in his Black Reconstruction explains that had the poor whites not policed the system there would have been uprisings in America as there had been elsewhere. Having hatred for the planter and realizing the economic rivalry between the black and white worker in the North, the poor whites should apparently have refused disciplining the slaves. There were at least two reasons which explain their acting differently. He says that "...it [policing the slaves] gave him [the poor white] work and some authority as overseer, slave driver, and member of the patrol system. But above and beyond this, it fed his vanity because it associated him with the masters. Slavery bred in the poor white a dislike of Negro tail of all sorts. He never regarded himself as a laborer, or as part of any labor movement." Black Reconstruction in America (New York, 1935), p. 12.
doctrines. Thus, pernicious doctrines were "enunciated with a bitter finality and fury."¹ The Bible was used to show that the Creator intended men to exert superiority over one another, just as "some animals should prey upon others."² They frequently cited and twisted choice passages to prove that all men were not equal. The Negro's coming from a state of barbarism to the white man's civilization and Christianity, they taught, should have made him contented in his submissive state. They emphasized their enunciations of the Negro's childlike dependence upon slavery and paternalism," his "non-assimilability," his "imitativeness," his "inherent mental inferiority."³ Their propaganda had malicious influence that has lasted to the present day.

Opposition to the detrimental forces was virtually inevitable; for injustice and abuse to the Negro became more intense, especially after 1830. In showing that there was relatively little prejudice toward the Negro prior to 1830, Carter G. Woodson in his Free Negro Owners of Slaves points out that benevolent free Negroes had often purchased slaves to make their lot easier; and, in having identical economic interests with white slaveholders, had often enjoyed the same social standing.⁴ But racial prejudice was greatly augmented with the enthusiastic interest in slavery in the heyday of the plantation system. Free Negroes themselves encountered many difficulties.

¹ Charles S. Johnson, op. cit., p. 9.
² Ibid.
³ Alain Locke, The Negro in America, p. 25.
By 1840 the trend toward degrading the free Negro to a lower status had become evident even in the apparently benevolent slave-holding states. Just before the outbreak of the Civil War the free Negro was receiving practically no consideration in the South and very little in the North.  

Abolitionists, including many Negroes themselves, waged unrelenting warfare in propagandist literature. The realization that the institution of slavery was inconsistent with the framework upon which the American government was established and the popularity of the theory on the inalienable rights of man incited much popular resentment. Many unbiased, sincere persons admitted that the Negro had more than paid his debt for his "invitation" to the New World. It was undeniable that "the wealth of the New World came largely by the sweat of this...race." The Negro, unlike the Indians or the white laborers, had been able to withstand "the hot wet fields and the miasma of the swamps and had proved indispensable in the settlement of America." Furthermore, markets upon which the colonies prospered were kept alive by Negro labor.

Perhaps the greatest threat against the maintenance of the status quo was the rapid assimilation of the colored race. From primitive Africa, Negroes had come and had remarkably adjusted themselves amidst people who had achieved a relatively high standard of living in a materialistic culture.

1Ibid.
2Carter G. Woodson, The Negro in Our History, p. 188.
3Edwin Embree, op. cit., p. 4.
4Charles S. Johnson, op. cit., p. 5.
5Benjamin Brawley, op. cit., p. 59.
They had rapidly adapted themselves to the science, machine, communication, and other elements. Significantly illustrative of this adaptation was the widespread mixing of the races.\(^1\)

This rapid assimilation appeared very portentous to slavers who took drastic steps to check the inevitable. They enacted laws prohibiting the teaching of reading and writing to slaves, preventing interracial marriages, and placing many other restrictions on the Negro.

The novels of William Wells Brown, Martin R. Delany, and Frank J. Webb—the first colored novelists in America—were written during the turbulent times in the country's history, as previously discussed.

William Wells Brown is the author of *Clotel, or the Colored Heroine*,\(^2\) in which he tells a tale of the Southern States, revealing unparalleled atrocities of slavery. The main thread of the story is concerned with the characters Clotel, Jerome, Isabella, and Henry Linwood. The story opens in Virginia\(^3\) near the home of Thomas Jefferson, whose alleged mulatto daughter is Isabella.\(^4\) The entire slave stock of the late John Graves,

---

\(^1\) Edwin R. Embree in his discussion on the origin of a "New Race" makes the following pertinent statement: "...in addition to the fusing of diverse African strains, white and Indian blood at once began to be poured into the newly forming race. Masters freely, one might say habitually, cohabited with their slave girls." *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

\(^2\) From all available data this is the first novel written by an American Negro. Its original caption was *Clotel, or, The President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States.* Vernon Loggins, *The Negro Author* (New York, 1931), p. 165.

\(^3\) The author infers in his preface that his work was revised just before the Civil War. The subtitle was completely changed. William Wells Brown, *Clotel, or, The Colored Heroine* (Boston, 1867), Preface, p. vi.

\(^4\) Vernon Loggins, *op. cit.*, p. 165.
who seems to have been the unexpressed Jefferson himself, is on the auction block. Graves had treated his slaves with much kindness and had reared strong healthy slaves. Among the lot are several mulatto girls of "rare personal qualities." Henry Linwood, a young sympathetic slave holder, attends the auction and purchases Isabella. She is separated from her sister and her mother, Agnes—the apparent mistress of the deceased John Graves.

Isabella lives for years in a secluded grove, provided for and visited only by Henry. Here she becomes the mother of the beautiful Clotelle. Although Henry promises that he would always consider her as his wife, he feels that marriage with her would be almost an impossibility. It was forbidden under State laws, and his being related to one of the first families of Virginia made marriage with any woman of so low an origin inexpedient.

He therefore marries Gertrude Miller, a white woman of his own social standing. She and her mother learn of Isabella and Clotelle and easily overwhelm the weak-willed Henry to remove his mistress and daughter. Isabella is sold as a house servant, and, in attempting to flee from servitude, is detected. She is on the verge of being captured by slave trappers when she jumps from the "Long Bridge" at Washington and drowns herself in the Potomac. Her death so near the Nation's Capitol strongly suggests the author's having Jefferson in mind, as evidenced in the following passage:

Such was the life, and such the death, of a woman whose virtues and goodness of heart would have done honor to one in a higher station of life, and who, had she been born in any other land.

---

1 W. Wells Brown, op. cit., p. 6.
2 Some authors have confused her for Clotelle in this incident. Ibid., p. 52.
but that of slavery, would have been respected and beloved. ¹

Clotelle is enslaved in Mrs. Miller’s household and suffers misery. Because of her light skin she is made to look as much like a slave as possible; her hair is cut to the scalp, and she is forced to sit hours in the sun for a darker complexion. In the meantime, she meets Jerome, a full blooded African Negro, who is imprisoned and sentenced to hang for having had a part in a conspiracy among slaves against their masters. He abandons all hope of escaping; he is saved when Clotelle heroically and cleverly gains entrance to the prison. Unable to assist Clotelle’s escape, he flees and follows the North star on his way to Canada.

Clotelle is held in prison, flogged, and finally sold to a slave trader. It is while she is with the trader that a Frenchman, William Devanant, sees her for the first time and falls in love with her. At first refusing his offers, she finally accepts and runs away with him to France.

In the meantime, Jerome has many exciting adventures, which lead him eventually to Paris. Not many years have passed since Clotelle’s leaving America when her husband dies. In one of her frequent visits to his grave she again meets Jerome, and they later marry.

The Civil War begins while they are in Europe, and immediately they rush to America to fight for the freedom of their brethren. Jerome is killed in a heroic battle in New Orleans. Clotelle works among the Union soldiers and gains the title “Angel of Mercy.” After the war, she opens a school, thus making her contribution to the uplift of her race.

The novel is full of incidents revealing the brutalities of slavery—lamentations of slaves on the auction block; white men gambling with slaves

¹Ibid.
used as stakes; daughters of mixed parents being sold into slavery after many years of freedom upon the death of a white parent; inhumanities of slave traders and overseers.

It is readily seen from the outline of the story that the novel is largely a recording of contemporary conditions. The author himself speaks in his preface of his work being "A truthful description of scenes which occurred in the places which are given." He acknowledges having witnessed many of the incidents and having known Clotelle and Jerome as real persons.

Martin Delany's *Blacks; or, the Huts of America* is a narrative based on the plight of slaves mostly in the Mississippi Valley and gives a panoramic view of existing deplorable conditions. The story appeared serially in the *Afric-African Magazine* in 1859, but it was never completed.

The opening scenes are on the plantation of the Franks. Maggie, a comely and intelligent slave girl, had been taken from the field and given an opportunity to become refined as a housemaid. In her unselfish fidelity, so well does she please her mistress, Mrs. Franks, that she is hardly treated as a slave. Their clothes are made from the same cloth, and they confide their secrets in each other. Mrs. Ballard, a close friend of Mrs. Franks, greatly resents the consideration given Maggie and at the first opportunity becomes instrumental in sending her away. There is an implication that Maggie goes to Cuba.

Attention shifts to Henry, another slave of the Franks' plantation. He is a strong and handsome pure Negro. Having been educated in the West

---

1. Ibid., Preface, p. vi.
2. Ibid.
Indies and stolen away, he is a slave of much intelligence. He has a
wife and child, who are sold. When he learns of their absence he quarrels
with his master, and his former mild and gentle disposition changes to one
of defiance and rebellion. Franks warns him of the danger in striking a
white man and threatens to inflict severe punishment upon him. Henry
replies:

You may do you mightiest Colonel Franks. I'm not your slave,
no never was, and you know it! and but for my wife and her
people, I never would have staid with you till now. I was
descayed away when young and then became entangled in such
domestic relations as to induce me to remain with you, but now
the tie is broken! 1

Franks thereupon places Henry on the auction block, from which he makes
his escape. As a fugitive, he declares that he'll never again serve any
living white man. 2 He clandestinely visits slave huts in many Southern
States for the purpose of organizing a wide scale rebellion. His plans
are simple and clear, and he easily succeeds in getting the cooperation
of many slaves. They wait for the signal of the great insurrection to
overthrow the entire slave system. Henry is the spearhead of the move-
ment, and everyone depends on him. Although he is never sure when action
would begin or when he would return to any one plantation, Henry tells his
confreres to wait six months, two years, or probably ten years. He advises
his associates to distract possible attention of their masters from their
design by removing farm animals and thus cause suspicion to fall upon runa-
way slaves. Being a scholar, according to the author, he is very
influential.

1 Martin R. Delany, "Blacks: or, the Nuts of America," The Anglo-

2 Ibid., p. 105.
Henry carefully keeps a record of all the plantations he visits. Nevertheless, in the last chapter of the series, "The Attack, Resistance, Arrest," he and his two associates are captured in a surprise attack by slave-trappers. No subsequent chapters have been found.

Delany's novel is similar to Brown's in the personal element. Frequent notations are made in which the author states his having witnessed many of the episodes. Indeed, in light of the author's experiences, the narrative may well be considered, to a large extent, autobiographical.

Not very much is known of Frank J. Webb, the author of The Garies and Their Friends. Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote a preface to the book in which she stated that Webb was a colored young man, born and reared in Philadelphia.

His novel is obviously an outgrowth of the peculiar relations resulting from the mixing of the races. The author describes the Garies as a family of "peculiar construction." Bernard Garie outbids others at a Savannah slave auction in buying a mulatto girl, who later becomes Mrs. Garie. They have two children and decide to go North. The chief reason is that, in living in the South, he is the master as well as the father of his children; and that, so long as he remains, it is out of his power to manumit them. In event of his death, they are liable to be seized and sold by his heirs.

A colored family in Philadelphia—Mr. and Mrs. Ellis and their children, Charlie, Caddy, and Esther—make arrangements for the Garies new home, owned by Mr. Walters, a prosperous colored business man.

There lives in the neighborhood the sinister Mr. Stevens with his family. They are shocked when they learn that their new neighbor, Mr.

---

Garie, is a white man having children by a woman of color, living with her in their midst, and acknowledging her as his wife. In reality, Mrs. Garie has no lawful claim to her title. Before his emigration from Georgia, Mr. Garie had often tried to have a legal marriage; but, because of State laws, he had never succeeded. After being disappointingly refused in Philadelphia by one minister, the union of the Garies is finally legalized there.

Mr. Stevens' hatred of Negroes and his selfish, nefarious schemes to drive away and to murder certain Negroes in his community result in much destructive mob violence. He demands the service of a murderer, McCloskey, whom he has unlawfully befriended. They instigate race riots, from which Mr. Garie is killed and his wife dies. She was in childbirth in the woodhouse, where she had fled in seeking refuge from the intruding rioters. Mr. Ellis, in an heroic effort to elude the mob to warn the Garies, is captured and so seriously beaten that he eventually dies.

Mr. Walters, friend of the Ellises and Garies, discovers that Stevens is the instigator of those calamities. He learns that Stevens is the first cousin of the deceased Garie and that he had him murdered to inherit the family's wealth. Stevens is forced to give up a great deal of the money. Before dying of typhoid fever, McCloskey confesses his crimes and Stevens' part in them to a magistrate. Perceiving an officer approaching with a warrant for his arrest, Stevens commits suicide.

Garie's surviving son, Clarence, is sent away to another city where he attends a white school. He was told before leaving that the concealment of his racial identity is necessary for his welfare. Years later, when he reappears in the story, he is a man and lives only with whites. He is

\[1\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 283}\.]
engaged to Birdie Ellstowe and is about to marry her when George
Stevens, Jr. comes upon the scene and divulges the secret that Clarence
is colored. The marriage is cancelled. Birdie obeys the demands of her
father, and Clarence is banished from the house forever. Both are pining
away; she becomes so dull and silent that her father fears of her growing
hopelessly unhappy. It is not until she hears of Clarence's being near
death and calling for her that she rebels against her father and rushes
to her lover's bedside--too late, however, to see him alive. The author
comments as follows:

We, too, Clarence, cast a tear upon thy tomb—poor victim of
prejudice to thy colour! and deem thee better off resting upon
thy cold pillow of earth, than battling with that malignant
sentiment that persecuted thee, and has crushed energy, hope,
and life from many stronger hearts.¹

The novel abounds in episodes growing out of diverse racial conflicts.
There are the trials of Charlie, the brilliant "scholar," who faces one
rebuff after another because of his color; the humiliations endured by
the enviable Mr. Walker; prejudices in churches; and segregations in public
places.

General reference has already been made to the statement that these
narratives are intensely personal. It remains, now, to consider in more
detail how the intimacy of the authors with their material resulted in
serious faults in the novels.

William Wells Brown had wide and variegated experience as a slave.
In his autobiography he records how as a slave he saw his relatives sold,
slaves cruelly treated and himself suffered bitter hardships. In his
preface to this work he writes.

¹Ibid., p. 591.
It is my desire, in common with every abolitionist, to diminish their [slave holders'] influence, and this can only be effected by the promulgation of truth, and the cultivation of a correct public sentiment at home and abroad. Slavery cannot be let alone. It is aggressive and must either be succumbed to or put down.¹

In his Three Years in Europe, he is still unrelenting in his warfare. He points out that no person of his color can visit Europe without being struck with the marked difference between the Europeans and the Americans in regards to race prejudice.² The former, he concludes, were far more catholic than the latter.³

In Clotel, Brown zealously expresses his scorn and contempt of slavery; this is done in many irrelevant long passages and episodes. He writes vehemently of what he calls "the ravages of slavery,"⁴ describing how no graves were dug for Negroes—their bodies becoming food for dogs and vultures; their bones, calcined by the sun, remaining scattered about "...as if to mark the mournful fury of servitude and lust of power."⁵

Many of the incidents in the novel are almost identical with those found in his autobiography. As a slave, he himself had often witnessed the inhuman methods of selling slaves. He records how traders plucked out gray hairs of elderly slaves and made them give false ages. His intimacy in this business is seen in the following:

...they the slaves were dressed and driven out into the yard. Some were set to dancing, some to jumping, some to singing, and

²W. Wells Brown, Three Years in Europe; or, Places I Have Seen and People I Have Met (London, 1852), p. 7.
³Ibid.
⁴Clotel, p. 50.
⁵Ibid.
some to playing cards. This was done to make them appear cheerful and happy. My business was to see that they were placed in those situations before the arrival of the purchasers.1

The passage embodies much touching pathos; the author emphasizes the fact that one could hardly watch those slaves sing and dance with their cheeks wet with tears and not have sympathy, unless he were merciless.

In Clotelie, Dick Jennings replaces Walker of the autobiography.2 Jennings is a poor white who speculates on slaves. Pompey is a slave who has been with him so long and had seen so much of buying and selling of his fellow creatures that he is apathetic in preparing the slaves.3

Both works reveal many scenes of fugitives being chased by mobs with guns and bloodhounds; of merciless whippings; and of diverse other atrocities.

Brown seems most militant in discussing the indecencies resulting from the peculiar race relations. He asserts that white men in the South during his time were so promiscuous toward slave women that "every married woman in the South looked upon her husband as unfaithful and regarded every Negro woman as a rival." He illustrates this in his novel in having Isabella's complexion result in her tragic end. Her fairness is regarded with envy by the servants as well as by her mistress. "This," the author states, "is one of the hard features of slavery. Today a woman is mistress of her own cottage; tomorrow she is sold to one who aims to make her life as unbearable as possible."4

---

2________________. Clotelie, p. 11.
3Ibid.
4Ibid., p. 45
5Ibid.
The personal element is equally as strong in Delany's Blake.
Although of the North, Delany had travelled widely in the Southwest and
1 gathered impressions which appear in his novel. He was outstanding in
the fight of the race to liberate itself. He was deeply concerned with
the plan to colonize the Negroes in Central America. 2 This almost lifelong
desire for aggressive unity is a prime element in his work.

The adventures of Henry in Blake undoubtedly grow out of the author's
travels through the Southern States. Like the author, Henry has plans to
bring about unified action among the slaves. This is clearly borne out
when Henry meets an Indian, who states that the greatest fault the Indian
finds with the Negro is that he does not fight. Henry replies that
Negroes would fight if in their own country they were united as the Indians
were and were not scattered many miles apart. 3

In this connection, the author attacks those forces which tended to
prevent cooperative action. Chief among these was false religion. After
the sale of his wife and child, Henry is told by Mammy Judy to put his
trust in the Lord. He retorts:

Don't tell me about religion! What's religion to me? My
wife is sold away from me by a man who is one of the leading
members of the very church to which both she and I belong!
Put my trust in the Lord! I have done so all my life nearly
and of what use is it to me? 4

His mind made up and his course laid out, Henry refuses to consider any
longer the gospel heard most of his life from his enslavers.

1 Vermo Leggins, op. cit., p. 183.
2 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
Also denounced are those slaves who confide too much in their masters. They are treated with scorn and contempt; the author expresses through his characters the hope that "one simultaneous war cry shall burst upon the midnight air...." 1

As a native of Philadelphia, Webb—one may safely assert—is not unlike the other authors in his subjectivity. He vividly portrays the hypocrisy of the church in the North. The Reverend Dr. Blackly consents in writing to perform the marriage ceremony for Mr. Garie and Emily. But when he arrives for the occasion and discovers one white man among several colored persons, he makes it known that he cannot proceed because he doesn't believe in amalgamation and could not be induced under any circumstances "to assist in the union of a white man or woman with a person who has the slightest infusion of African blood." 2 In making preparation for the interment of Mr. and Mrs. Garie, Mr. Walters informs an assisting white stranger of the necessity of burying them, not in the lovely Ash Grove Cemetery, but in the coloured graveyard. He explains further the hypocrisy inside the churches. Speaking of a friend who had purchased a pew for himself and family in a white church, he relates how the deacons removed the floor from under it to prevent his sitting there.

The mis-adventures of Charlie Ellis clearly reveal barriers confronting Negroes. On the train with Mrs. Bird, the benevolent rich white lady, he is forced to leave the coach reserved "for whites only." At her homestead, white servants refuse to eat with him at the same table. In search of

---

1 Ibid., p. 110.
2 Frank Webb, op. cit., p. 137.
employment, he is refused position after position for which he is capably qualified.

The discussion thus far has shown that these novels are virtual transcriptions of existing conditions and realities and that they were written by men whose personal experiences and devotion to the cause of demolishing slavery resulted in their crushing art conscience. It must not be assumed, however, that these novelists made no attempts to follow in their works certain popular literary methods.

The work which had immense direct influence on these novelists is Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin. This novel was the epitome of a type of fiction merging out of slave narratives, and it dominated this type of fiction until after the Civil War.

One of the chief faults in this fiction is that it suffered from too specific a motive. "The great object of the author in writing," H. B. Stowe states in her novel, "has been to bring this subject of slavery, as a moral and religious question, before the mind of all those who profess to be followers of Christ."  

This motive immediately places her under great limitations as an artist. One of the inherent weaknesses in the novelist's being restricted to a specific and narrow aim is that the author cannot afford to make any

---

1 These narratives had popularised character types and stereotyped patterns—the good master and his faithful slave, the gratitude of a liberated slave, the good old Indian, temptation resisted and honesty rewarded, little acts of kindness. William Wood and M. S. Mott, editors, Narratives of Colored Americans (New York, 1875).

2 Harriet B. Stowe, A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin (Cleveland, 1853), p. 12.
concessions in drawing a character. If a character represents an undesirable aspect of a system, he must be portrayed as a contemptuous character; those natural traits which would tend to make the readers sympathetic cannot be revealed.

Thus, another one of the basic faults in H. B. Stowe's book is that the characters are popular types. She was aware that Uncle Tom—the pious, faithful slave—had been objected to as being improbable. She defended the character in light of certain evidence which confirmed the assertion on Uncle Tom's being the prototype of Josiah Hensen. His biography, it was declared, inspired the creation of the character. George, the son of the kind-hearted Shelbys, is the kind-hearted slave master. Typical of him is his seeking Uncle Tom to repurchase him after he has been sold in the deep South and finds him dying from brutality at the hands of Simon Legree. Mrs. Stowe comments that it was her design in delineating the Shelbys "to show a picture of the fairest side of slave life, where easy indulgence and good-natured forbearance are tempered by religious instruction." Simon Legree is the melodramatic, brutal villain who mercilessly beats and mistreats slaves. The author acknowledges Legree's being representative of a class of masters, the contrast to the Shelbys and St. Clare. Her chief purpose in drawing this character was not to vilify masters as a class but to bring to the attention of Southern men that "no Southern law requires

1 Harriet B. Stowe, A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin, p. 23.
2 Ibid., p. 25.
3 , Uncle Tom's Cabin (Great Britain m.d.), pp. 494-95.
4 , A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin, p. 8.
any test of character from the man to whom the absolute power of master is granted.\(^1\) There are many other characters in the book which are types and personifications.

It is almost superficial to assert that the creation of a natural character requires much artistic skill. A character may be representative of a type or group, but it should have a distinct personality, which makes him stand out as an individual.\(^2\)

Mrs. Stowe’s influence was very great in this respect; the type characters, epitomised in her book, may easily be identified in the novels of these first colored novelists.

In Brown’s Clotelle, John Graves and Henry Linwood are parallels of Miss Stowe’s Shelbys, and Georgiana Wilson of her Eva. Graves never appears in the story, but he is constantly in the background, and his pronouncements on freedom are expressed in long digressive passages. Henry Linwood, the father of Clotelle, is prevented from doing justice to his slave mistress and daughter by his malicious stepmother, Mrs. Miller. However, after the death of his wife, he goes in search of Clotelle, as George Shelby had sought Uncle Tom. Georgiana Wilson, who dies from the shock of hearing of Clotelle’s receiving fifty lashings, resembles little Eva.

The character Henry in Blake is a reproduction of Stowe’s George Harris. Comments of this type apply to both characters. The personal qualities and intellectual status are much overdrawn. Handsome and manly, Henry is of good literary attainments; that, however, is unknown to his master. Harris has much skill and knowledge, which enable him to make an invention. Henry

\(^1\) Harriett B. Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, p. 39.

avows that he will die before again serving another living white man. This is a slight alteration of George Harris's conversation with his former master. He says: "Because I'm a free man...I've said mas'r for the last time to any man."¹ When warned that he may be re-enslaved, he answers, "All men are free and equal in the grave, if it comes to that."²

The mulatto maid, Maggie, receives very kind attention from her intimately benevolent mistress; she represents Eliza, who had been brought up by her mistress from girlhood as a petted and indulged favorite.³

In Frank Webb's novel, there is a prefatory note⁴ by Lord Brougham in which Harriet B. Stowe states that the characters are fresh and faithfully drawn from real life.⁵ She continues as follows: "It [the novel] shows what I long have wanted to show; what the free people of colour can attain; and what they can do in spite of all social obstacles."⁶

Although not a slaver, George Stevens of the North represents the Simon Legree of the South. Both are sinister, cruel characters, having intense hatred for the Negro. They center all their affairs around making the lives of colored persons as miserable as possible.

There is prolific evidence of these writers' concern with contemporary methods in fiction. Although the novelists who had most influence were

---

¹Harriet B. Stowe, Uncle Tom's Cabin, p. 135.
²Ibid.
³Ibid., p. 13.
⁴Mrs. Stowe had written a preface which was too late for the first edition. However, Lord Brougham added a preface to the original issue in which he quoted Mrs. Stowe. Lord Brougham, "Preface," The Carics and Their Friends, p. vii.
⁵Ibid.
⁶Ibid.
great masters, they were often crude in their methods, which became very popular. For the most part the novelists were worshippers of Scott and Dickens. They had a cumbersome and diffuse style; they were tediously analytical where being dramatic was effectual; characters were evolved by means of long-winded explanation and commentary; they were tiresomely descriptive; and they so mistrusted the readers' ability to sense properly that "they were apt to rub in their appeals to them [the readers]."\(^2\)

Along with the faults growing out of the influence of great writers was the negative effect of the Puritanical element in the public. This induced novelists to moralize excessively. This tendency is found in practically all the novelists of the period.

The more or less direct influence of Scott and Dickens is seen in everplotting, changes in plot, methods of characterisation, melodrama, and sentimentality.

In the novels of the colored authors, as in those of the others, full episodes exemplify a moral. Thus Brown shows how Pompey, who prepares other slaves for auction, becomes so use to the inhuman system that he remains indifferent to the touching sadness of the victims. The author elaborately expresses the moral that vice is a monster which, when frequently seen, is "first endured, then pited, then embraced."\(^3\)

The character Daddy Joe in Blake admonishes Henry to be careful and makes reference to the biblical verse, "God moves in a mysterious way."\(^4\)

---

2. Ibid., pp. 21-22.
In narrating on the experiences of Charlie Ellis in The Garie's, the author moralizes in showing the good use the character makes of time. "Old Father Time is a stealthy walker," it is pointed out; "in youth we are scarcely able to appreciate his efforts...." He elucidates to show how people foolishly complain of time passing too rapidly. This is the theme upon which he shows how well Charlie has fared when he reappears in the story after many years interval, and how other characters are changed for better or for worse.

Although the extent to which influence of a given author in specific techniques cannot readily be determined, the popularity of certain authors resulted in the propagation of certain methods in fiction. Reference has already been made to the influence of Scott and Dickens. These authors cannot be overemphasized here for their devices. These were romantic features of their novels which explain many of their faults. William Dean Howells calls attention to this in the following:

The art of fiction, as Jane Austen knew it, declined from her through Scott and Bulwer and Dickens...because the mania of romanticism had seized all Europe, and these great writers could not escape the taint of their time....

One of the striking weaknesses in Brown's Clotelle is that of overplotting. Although the main thread of the novel is concerned with Clotelle and her lover, Jerome, much attention is given the adventures of Isabella, Henry Linwood, Dick Jennings (the slave speculator), Mr. Wilson and others.

2. Ibid.
The author thus deals with enough material from which he could have
written several novels.

The same criticism applies to The Garies. The author simultaneously
develops three stories. There is the story of the brilliant Charlie
Ellis, whose most extraordinary experience, among many, was his correcting
a mistake—much to the chagrin of a reverend white gentleman. There are
the narratives of the Garies and their unfortunate adventures in Phila-
delphia, of the Stevenses, and of Mr. Walters. The adventures of the
characters after the death of the Garies technically create another novel.

Instances of changes in plot are found in each of the novels. Blake,
however, is most striking. The character Maggie receives most attention
in the early chapters, but she is suddenly taken away and never mentioned
again. The emphasis shifts to Henry, and the end—at least that which
appears—comes very unexpectedly and abruptly.

In these novels the action frequently becomes static, as the author
describes in lengthy passages slavery and its inhumanities. Thus, there
is a great lack of design and the reader's course is made quite difficult.
Many characters are abruptly introduced and altered. A rank instance of
this is the following from The Garies:

We must now introduce our readers into the back parlor of
the house belonging to Mr. Garie's next-door neighbor, Mr.
Thomas Stevens.

We find this gentleman standing at a window... 1

In his structure Webb shows very much the influence of Scott. In
his Guy Mannering, Scott writes, "Our narration is now about to make a

---

1 William Wells Brown, Clotel, p. 124.
long stride, and omit a space of nearly seventeen years...."¹ Similarly, Webb says, "Here we leave Clarence for many years, the boy will have become a man ere we reintroduce him, and, till then, we bid him adieu."²

Greatly popularized by Dickens, sentimentalism was very much in evidence in these novels. This extreme emotionalism usually grew out of the selfish, harsh treatment of a sensitively courteous and obsequious person. A typical example of this from Dickens may be found in Dombey and Son, in which Dombey's daughter Florence, in spite of all her efforts to please him, is struck and is forced out of doors "in the wildness of her sorrow, shame and terror."³ This violent display of emotion characterizes Henry in Blake; as he learns that his wife and child have been sold to traders, "emblems of grief" gush down his cheeks.⁴ Clotelle questions Davenant on his alleged sister, whose memory resulted in his loving Clotelle on first sight. He tells her that she is dead. His emotional state is described as follows:

A paleness that overspread his countenance, the tears that trickled down his cheeks, the deep emotion that was visible in his face, and the trembling of his voice, showed at once that she had touched a tender chord. Without a single word, he buried his face in his handkerchief, and burst into tears.

Frank Webb is not so direct in pointing a moral. However, there are passages which illustrate the same tendency.

¹Walter Scott, Guy Mannering (New York, 1923), p. 81.
²Frank J. Webb, op. cit., p. 284.
⁵W. Wells Brown, Clotelle, p. 70.
Other forms of intrusion by the author on his story and characters and melodramatic episodes are noteworthy. Clotelle heroically liberates her lover from prison. After all hope had been abandoned, Jerome rushes into a burning building and saves a white child. In *Blake*, Henry, while attempting to escape detection of passing slavers, runs into dangerous waters with numerous sharks and alligators. His swimming the river and eluding the animals is dramatically adventurous. In *The Garies*, Charlie Ellis remarkably distinguishes himself in competing against white students.

So concerned are the authors in having every intended meaning understood that they employed a dull, uninteresting device by which they sympathised with one character and showed scorn to another. Thus Brown speaks of "poor little Clotelle" being kicked about by Mrs. Miller. In describing her lover, the author writes:

> Dante did not more love his Beatrice, Swift his Stella, Waller his Saccharissa, Goldsmith his Jessamy bride, or Burns his Mary, than Jerome his Clotelle.¹

The comment on the poor white slave speculator is that "a more repulsive looking man could scarcely be found in any community."² Similarly, Webb describes Stevens as having a nervous twitching which added to the sinister aspect of his face.³ "On the whole," he continues, "he was a person from whom you would instinctively shrink."⁴ Delany speaks of Henry, in *Blake*, as being bold, determined, courageous, but always mild, gently and courteous when the occasion demanded it.

¹Ibid., p. 58.
²Ibid., p. 18.
⁴Ibid., pp. 124-125.
The explanation for these interferences, of course, is that the author is primarily concerned with showing the injustices of things as they were, and not about characters as individuals.

Closely related to speaking intimately of characters and incidents as well as to the tendency to moralise is the final retribution; "good" characters are rewarded, and villains are punished. After the death of his wife, Henry Linwood becomes insane and wanders distractedly in search of his forsaken daughter. Recalling Mrs. Miller, the author comments, "this hard-hearted woman died a most miserable death, un lamented by a single person." On the other hand, "Jerome felt that to possess the woman of his love, even at that late hour, was compensation enough for the years that he had been separated from her ..." In Blake, the hero is proceeding in the direction of the Red River country when a white man assails him. "A few days after," the author records, "an inquest was held upon the body of a deceased overseer." McCloskey and Stevens are the instigators of the deaths of Mr. and Mrs. Garie and of Mr. Ellis; they both suffer from much physical as well as mental pain before their deaths.

Thus these novelists in their intensely personal reaction to their material were again heirs of the "false theories and bad manners" of the day.

In conclusion, it may be noted that since methods of telling a story in most instances are mere convention, their stories suffer from the general

---

1 W. Wells Brown, Clotelle, p. 102.
2 Ibid., p. 97.
4 William Dean Howells, op. cit., p. 52.
contemporary faults in fiction, and these writers were hardly interested in breaking away from conventions in art to exert skill in creating fiction masterpieces. Unrelaxing emphasis was placed on the theme, racial conflict; their works lack unity and have little rising and falling action; and the characters are types and personifications—being abstract virtues or vices and representatives of groups.
CHAPTER III

THE SECOND PERIOD

Charles W. Chesnutt, W. E. B. DuBois, and Paul Laurence Dunbar are the outstanding novelists of the second period in this study. To be sure, they were not the only colored authors during the first decade of the twentieth century who wrote fiction. There were a number of Negro writers who used the novel in disguising their arguments on the race problem. Sutton Griggs, F. W. Frant, Robert Waring, S. A. Rogers and Pauline Hopkins are among the minor writers. Those writers for the most part had little skill and therefore need not be given attention here.1 Although Chesnutt, DuBois, and Dunbar themselves proved ardent devotees to the cause of uplifting the race; and, like their predecessors, were unable to divorce themselves from the sociological race questions, they and their works demand attention.

Paul Laurence Dunbar was born the son of former slaves at Dayton, Ohio, 1872.2 He attended Steele High School, where he was the only colored student in his class.3 Nevertheless, he distinguished himself in becoming first a member and later president of the literary society.4

3 Ibid., p. 29.
4 Ibid.
Composing the class song, he graduated in 1891. He began writing poetry at an early age. Through influential friends his work was brought to the attention of William Dean Howells, who made a favorable review of his Major and Minor, his second volume of poetry. He was appointed to a position in the Congressional Library in 1899 but soon abandoned it. He died in 1906. Dunbar's fame as a writer rests almost entirely upon his Negro dialect poetry, and as a poet he is of real literary distinction. He was also the author of four novels—The Uncalled, The Love of Landry, The Fanatics, and The Sport of the Gods. Having been a frequent contributor of short stories to magazines, he is, furthermore, the author of several volumes of collected stories.

Chesnutt's life, more than Dunbar's, reveals how his experiences provided much material for his novels. Born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1858, he passed his early childhood and studied in North Carolina. Here he profitably studied the dialect, manners, and superstitions of colored people in that State. He was admitted to the Ohio bar, and he later secured a position on a newspaper syndicate in New York. For his literary portrayal of the life and struggle of the colored race, he was awarded the

---

1 Ibid.
2 Ibid., p. 57.
3 Ibid., p. 79.
4 Ibid., p. 131.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
Spingard Medal in 1927.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 80-81.} He is the author of a number of short stories, a biography of Frederick Douglass (1899), many sociological articles and essays,\footnote{Ibid., pp. 15 ff.} and three novels—The House Behind the Cedars (1900); The Marrow of Tradition (1901); and The Colonel’s Dream (1906).

Another author whose works are largely expressions of his life’s experiences is William Edward Burghardt DuBois, who was born February 23, 1868, at Great Barrington, Massachusetts.\footnote{Ibid., p. 25.} He received his early education in the public schools there.\footnote{Ibid., p. 45.} He later studied at Fisk University, Harvard University, and the University of Berlin.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 49 ff. 65.} He received the degree of Doctor of Philosophy from Harvard in 1895.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 49 ff. 63.} Teaching a few years at Wilberforce University, he later became professor of economics and history at Atlanta University.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 80-81.} A prolific writer, he is widely known for his prose, for which he ranks high in American literature.\footnote{James Weldon Johnson, op. cit., p. 89.} His works prove him to be the foremost leader of the race in the fight for justice. He is the author of two novels, The Quest of the Silver Fleece (1911) and Dark Princess (1928).
Writing at a time when there were serious doubts as to whether the race could assimilate the finer, cultural elements, these authors found themselves compelled to use their skill in coming to the defense of the race. There is almost an exception here, however, in the case of Dunbar. Although he did not concern himself with racial issues in his first two novels, his two last works reveal his development toward the race novel. Nevertheless, the personal tone is seldom as vehement as in the works of Chesnut and DuBois. As a matter of fact, he is at times quite objective. For example, in the following, he has one of his white characters comment on emancipation:

The North thought they were doing a great thing when they came down here and free all the slaves... But I maintain they were all wrong... in the way they did, without knowledge of what the first principle of liberty was. The natural result is that these people are irresponsible. They are unacquainted with the ways of our higher civilization, and it'll take them a long time to learn.¹

This passage is one of many which could be selected to show that not only was Dunbar often objective, but also, that he seemed to have had superficial conceptions of the problems of his day; he thus recorded what appeared on the surface.

Resulting primarily from a strategic military move,² emancipation plunged the Negro into a chaotic state. He was beset at the outset by overwhelming handicaps and obstacles. His past had not prepared him for his new status; his poverty, ignorance, and lack of responsibility caused

²W. E. B. DuBois, Black Reconstruction in America, p. 56.
the problem of his backwardness. 1

Dunbar was obviously unaware of these facts. In opposition to
the viewpoint quoted above, Chesnutt argues in The Colonel's Dream that
emancipation freed the masters as well as the slaves. Typifying many
former masters, Colonel French could never have returned to his Southern
home in prosperity had there been no emancipation, which gave him freedom
to engage in industrial affairs. The former slave, Peter, represents the
many new freedmen, who had rushed from demolished plantations to the towns.
There many of them retrogressed in becoming victims of temptations and of
vicious influences. 2 Peter had returned home poor and broken, not because
he had been free, but because, as Chesnutt indicates, he was poorly
equipped; society had not given him a fair chance. 3

These writers realized that the perpetration of ante-bellum attitudes
were very obstructive to the Negro's progress. Prejudices and hatred
mounted. Humiliated and embittered, former planters refused to accept the
new order. The idea of their former slaves enjoying freedom and equality
was repulsive to them. The character Tryon in Chesnutt's The House Behind
the Cedars expresses the attitude of the former planter; he is the young
white man, engaged to the unsuspected mulattress, Nova. He says:

The Negro is an inferior creature; God has marked him with
an intellect for a servile condition. We will not long submit
to his domination. I give you a toast sir: The Angle-Saxon
race: may it remain forever, as now, the head and front of
creation.... 4

__________________________

1Alain Locke, The Negro in America, p. 27.
2Carter G. Woodson, The Negro in Our History, p. 244.
4____________, The House Behind the Cedars (New York, 1900),
p. 136.
Chesnutt shows the fallacy in this assertion in having Tryon ironically engaged to a colored woman.

The writers concerned themselves very much with the problem of poor whites, who aggressively came forward after the war and violently insisted on their alleged superiority; they bitterly emasculated with more violence their false and pernicious race doctrines. Illustrative of this is the unscrupulous Colonel Crosswell in *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*. After a white man testified to his cheating his colored tenants, Crosswell complains to Sheriff Colton: "But, by God, sir! I'm a white man, and I place the lowest white man ever created above the highest darkey ever thought of...."

With all its faults the turmoil of Reconstruction came as a rescue to the helpless Negro, who without it would have succumbed. Although primarily motivated by its own ambitions, the North established the Freedman's bureau to protect and help the freedmen. Land, school buildings, asylums were among the tangible provisions. Persistent deprivation on the part of Southern whites led to the passage of "force bills" and the Fourteenth Amendment, which gave constitutional immunities to the newly legalized citizens. In its antagonistic attitudes the South opposed the Freedman's bureau, organized suppressive organizations like the Ku Klux Klan, and resorted to other means of intimidating the Negro. Chesnutt reveals the "stupidity" of the whites in this respect.

---

A candidate running for governor at Clarendon in *The Colonel's Dream* says:

Equality anywhere, means ultimately, equality everywhere. Equality at the polls means social equality; social equality means intermarriage and corruption of blood, and degeneration and decay. What gentleman here would want his daughter to marry a blubber-lipped, coconut-headed, kidney-footed, etc., etc., nigger?1

In *The Marrow of Tradition*, these sentiments are disproved. Major Cantoréat constantly reiterates his theme on the unfitness of the Negro to participate in government and on the impossibility of "two unassimilable races" ever living together except in the relation of superior and inferior.2 But he is compelled in the end to beg the service of the colored characters.

Underlying forces and factors show that the assistance given the Negro by the North was predicated upon a basis primarily of self-interest and ambition. The Civil War was the result of the clash between two economic systems, and not the result of a determination to abolish slavery.3 Slavery was eradicated because it was the foundation and mainstay of the Southern plantation economy.4 To suppress the opposing party as long as possible and to achieve their industrial ends, the North manipulated the Negro's voting power. Evidence of this is found in the fact that most of the local, State and Federal offices were held by men from the North, now notoriously known as "carpetbaggers."5 Becoming

4 Ibid.
very corrupt, they ruled for their own selfish interest. Negroes, as
tools and puppets, were implicated in the offenses and prefigured in the
long run very little in this respect. In this connection Cheesmatt shows
that not a few Negro office holders were very capable. The Negro-hating
Captain McBane contemptuously acknowledges the following:

A Negro justice of the peace has opened an office in Market
Street, and summoned a white man to appear before him. Negro
lawyers get most of the business in the criminal court.¹

Speaking of a spectacle of social equality and Negro domination that
made his blood boil with indignation, McBane describes how a white and a
black convict, chained together, crossed the city in charge of a Negro
officer.²

By the early 1870's the North, having achieved its ends and being
gradually rid of the politicians who had established Reconstruction,
flatly dropped the Negro.³ This has been considered by the Negroes and
their sympathizers "the most unstatesman-like act any President has
committed since the War [Civil War]."⁴ The withdrawal of troops brought
on confusion and retrogression for the Negro. Southern whites gained
almost unrestricted power, and the rights and privileges of the colored
race were almost suddenly abridged. They were lynched for trivial offenses,
imprisoned with long prison terms for ordinary misdemeanors.

The Colonel's Dream is a novel based upon these conditions. Having
won a notable victory in his business against greed and craft, Colonel

¹C. W. Cheesmatt, The Marrow of Tradition, p. 35.
²Ibid.
³Carter G. Woodson, op. cit., p. 258.
⁴Ibid., pp. 253-9.
French returns to Clarendon, a small Southern town, where he fights against the same forces in another battlefield. He meets Peter, his old slave, and Laura Treadwell, a childhood friend, whom he tries to convince that the old system of aristocracy was doomed to perish. In attempting to use his wealth to improve the town, he faces insurmountable obstacles. He soon learns that William Fellers, a poor white man, is prosperous after the war, dominates all phases of life in the town. He is the owner of a plantation where innocent Negroes labored. In condemning this system, the author writes:

Men could be tried without jury and condemned to infamous punishments, involving stripes and chains, for misdemeanors which in more enlightened States were punished with a small fine or brief detention. There were, for instance, no degrees of larceny, and the heaviest punishment might be inflicted, at the discretion of the judge for the least offense.¹

In employing Negroes and helping their schools, the Colonel offends many whites and incurs much unpopularity on his part. Peter is killed in saving the Colonel's son. When the Colonel buries his body in the white cemetery, it is dug up and thrown upon his perch. He then comes to a full realization of the futility of his work. He leaves Clarendon, but the author states that other hands would take up the fight.

He had dreamed of a regenerate South, filled with thriving industries, and thronged with a prosperous and happy people... where lay the prizes of life, which all might have an equal chance to win or lose.²

This period in American history is considered a disgrace and sore spot.³ The character Ellis in The Marrow of Tradition justifies this view.

---

¹ C. W. Chesnutt, The Colonel's Dream, p. 228.
² Ibid., p. 280.
in asserting that the petty annoyances felt by the whites at the
spectacle of a few Negroes in office did not warrant the overturning of
the city governments and the wholesale murder and other horrors on the
Negro.\(^1\)

At the same time, the Negro was outrageously cheated. He had no
capital to operate farms and factories and found it necessary to accept
the renting system.\(^2\) He was thereby exploited by signing contracts and
by other means and was reduced to a state of virtual serfdom. Cheamatt's
concern over this issue has already been shown; DuBois in *The Quest of
the Silver Fleece* studies the system more closely. The story is based
upon the tenant cotton system. Most of the setting is in the country
town of Toonsville, Alabama, with its cotton, corn, and "dirty, straggling
cabins of black folk." The heroine is the brownskin Zora, who along
with the hero, Bles Alwyn, plants cotton, but because of the exploita-
tion by the whites is thwarted in making any headway. As a child, she
sleeps out of doors to avoid becoming again the victim of the white man's
mistreatment of the colored tenants. Cotton, or the Silver Fleece, was
her source of inspiration and the source from which all her possibilities
as well as those of Bles found expression. Having failed to paint cotton
in the swamp, she receives an opportunity to go away as the maid of the
rich philanthropist, Mrs. Vanderpool. Bles Allwyn also goes away and be-
comes an outstanding politician in Washington. Here he works with and
becomes engaged to the crafty Carolines Wynn. However, like Matthew Towns

---

\(^1\) C. N. Cheamatt, *The Harrow of Tradition*, p. 291.

\(^2\) Carter G. Woodson, *op. cit.*., p. 270.
in *Dark Princess*, he realizes that as a sincere man devoted to the cause of elevating his race, that type of politics was not his preference. He suddenly abandons his political pursuits and returns to Alabama, where he again meets Zora. Together they make plans to better conditions in Toomsville. There are noteworthy white characters who, for the most part, are concerned with perpetuating the system upon which Negroes were exploited. Mary Taylor, the prototype of Mary Myrover in Chesnutt's "The Bouquet," leaves New York to teach colored children in Alabama. It is through her that her brother, John Taylor, meets Colonel Crosswell. Together they scheme to sustain the economic system on cheap labor, to corner the cotton market and to control the Black Belt. In discussing the plans with John Taylor, Crosswell says:

> Do you know the man that stands ready to gobble up every inch of cotton land in this country at a price which we trust can hope to rival.... The Black man, whose woolly head is filled with ideas of rising. We're striving by main force to prevent this, and here come your damned Northern philanthro-pists to plant schools....

A similar character is Easterly, a big capitalist, who is the force behind the scene, controlling the votes of Congressmen, deciding the outcome of bills on child labor, tariffs, cotton, and other social and economic issues. Crosswell, who is very much involved in railroading Negroes to prison and plantations meets defeat before his death when Zora battles him in court. Maxwell, a Southern white neighbor of Crosswell, in an emotional outburst against the system, suggests an encouraging outlook for the colored race:

> This system can't last always—sometimes I think it can't last long. It's wrong, through and through. It's built on

---

ignorance, theft and force, and I wish to God we had courage enough to overthrow it and take the consequences. I wish it was possible to be a Southerner and a Christian and an honest man...\(^1\)

The race would have floundered in the South at this time had there not been certain favorable forces, which provided outlets. There was much immigration to the cities, where, under increasing disadvantages of economic discrimination and segregation, the Negro fared hardly better than in the rural districts. In his *The Sport of the Gods*, Dunbar uses the demoralizing influences of the cities as the theme of the book. Berry Hamilton is falsely accused in North Carolina of stealing money from his employers, the Oakleys. He is easily sentenced to five years in prison. His wife and children go to New York. Here they regress and become demoralized. The author writes:

> When the Gods wish to destroy they first make mad. The first sign of the demoralization of the provincial who comes to New York is his pride at his insensitivity to certain impressions which used to influence him at home. First, he begins to scoff, and there is no truth in his views nor depth in his laugh. But by and by, from mere pretending, it becomes real. He grows callous. After that he goes to the devil very cheerfully.\(^3\)

The news reporter, Skaggs, goes to Beachfield and discovers that Frank Oakley had, in gambling, lost the money, that Berry had been accused of stealing. Berry gains his freedom and goes North in search of his family. He learns that his son Joe is given life in prison for murder, that his daughter is on the disreputable stage, and that his wife has remarried.

---


\(^2\) Alain Locke, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

However, her second husband is killed accidentally, and she returns South with Berry. Preaching that remaining in the Southern fields in agriculture and in devotion to God is better than suffering the disadvantages of living in the alleys of the great cities, Dunbar through his character Sadness expresses the following sentiment:

"Here is another example of the pernicious influence of the city on untrained Negroes. Oh, is there no way to keep them from the small villages and country districts of the South up to the cities, where they cannot battle with the terrible force of a strange and unusual environment...." 1

But the significance of immigration is that it heralded a new era in the South, for there was great need for Negro labor. Chevrett and DuBois clearly reveal this in their works. Out of necessity, Southerners made concessions as inducements to keep the Negroes in the South and in the fields. They gave more cooperation in establishing more schools, churches, social uplift projects, farm ownership. 2

One of the most encouraging forces near the turn of the nineteenth century was education. Northern missionaries had founded schools in various important centers and trained early post-war Negro leaders. One of the most outstanding of this group was Booker T. Washington. He advocated a program of "practical, patient self-help by gradual improvement of the black masses and the gradual wearing down of white indifference and prejudice." 3 He viewed the progress of the race in light of conditions in the South and thus emphasized industrial education for the purpose of working hand in hand with whites in fully reconstructing the South. In

1 Ibid., p. 212.
2 Carter G. Woodson, op. cit., p. 265.
3 Alain Locke, op. cit., p. 29.
this program he proposed oneness in everything, with the probable ex-
ception of social affairs. In Up From Slavery, he writes:

...in our humble way, we shall stand by you with a devotion
that no foreigner can approach...interlacing our industrial,
commercial, civil and religious life with yours in a way that
shall make the interests of both races one. In all things
that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers,
yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.  

Washington appealed many Southern as well Northern whites in this policy.

"But he was never able," as Alain Locke points out, "to refute the inter-
pretative arguments of opportunism and of biracial segregation."  
Opposition led by Dr. DuBois became bitter. In The Quest of the Silver
Fleece, Crosswell's answer to an Englishman, who asserts that people
should be given opportunities to express and develop their capacities to
the highest, shows the interpretation of the white race, as brought out
by the author:

"But...capacity differs enormously in races...." The general
trend of the conversation seemed to be that most individuals
needed to be submitted to the sharpest scrutiny before being
allowed much education, and as for the "lower races" it was
simply criminal to open such useless opportunities to them.  

This issue of education was the bone of contention until the World War,
after which a unanimity of opinion evolved.  

Another force which provided an outlet was religion. Taught many
ideas, the validity of which may or may not be doubted, many black workers
sought religion as a means of escape.  

---

1Booker T. Washington, Up From Slavery (New York, 1901), pp. 221-222.
2Alain Locke, op. cit., p. 30.
4Carter G. Woodson, op. cit., p. 263.
5Ibid., p. 269.
In spite of these influences, however, the problems of the race were still acute. Increasing attention has been called to the fact that these problems are not peculiar to the race, but concern the nation. In The Marrow of Tradition, Dr. Burns says to the colored doctor that the future of the colored race concerns the white, that one must come up or drag the other down. In the same work Chesnutt continues:

...it [the race question] will trouble the American government and the American conscience until a sustained attempt is made to settle it upon principles of justice and equity.²

In the foregoing discussion, it has been shown that the writers of this second period, not unlike those of the first, were very much involved in denouncing the injustice toward the race. However, unlike writers of the first period, they had a greater artistic conscience. Reference has already been made to Dunbar's achievement as a poet; he was also the author of high ranking short stories. Chesnutt's short stories are equally meritorious. William Dean Howells was among the first to acknowledge this; he wrote of Chesnutt's stories as follows:

They are new and fresh and strong, as life is, and fable never is; and the stories of The Conjure Woman have a wild, indigenous poetry, the creation of sincere and original imagination, which is imparted with a tender humorlessness and a very artistic reticence.³

Furthermore, Chesnutt has been considered by critics the first real and still one of the best Negro novelists.⁴ Mention has previously been made

---

¹C. W. Chesnutt, The Marrow of Tradition, p. 51.
²Ibid., p. 92.
⁴Sterling Brown, op. cit., p. 79.
to the fact that DuBois has achieved an outstanding position in American literature; in his Souls of Black Folk he has written an American classic.\(^1\) Although he is very much the sociologist in The Quest of the Silver Fleece, the work is still of sufficient literary quality to deserve the comment that "when the great epic novel of the South is written this book will prove to have been its forerunner."\(^2\)

Besides the social problems, there was another kindred force which prevented the full artistic expression of these writers. With the exception of Dunbar, they found it almost inevitable to counteract the treatment of Negro characters by white authors of the Reconstruction period. W. S. Braithwaite points out that American literature is still marked by the "indulgent sentimentalities" of these characters. He continues as follows:

The writers who dealt with him for the most part refused to see more than skin-deep,—the grim, the grimaces and the picturesque externalities.... For more than artistic reasons, indeed against them, these writers refused to see the tragedy of the Negro and capitalized his comedy.\(^3\)

The Negro thus became a stock character in fiction; he was comical, sentimental, easy-going; he showed fondness and justified the old system of the South.

Chief among the writers who developed this false literary tradition were Thomas Nelson Page, Joel Chandler Harris, Thomas Dixon, and George Washington Cable. Page in his In Ole Virginia pictures the Negro as


\(^2\)Ibid., p. 41

\(^3\)Ibid., p. 51.
hating the "Yankee," loving the old plantation, and fondly remembering his former lost master and mistress. George Cable in his Ole Creole Days idealises the old system. Joel Harris in his Uncle Remus uses fables of Brer Rabbit, which Negroes had been telling for years. He was the first true artist to realise the value in them. Uncle Remus is not an idealised and falsified character, as those of Page and Dixson. Harris was among the first to transcribe Negro dialect with much skill. But in speaking of current affairs, he weakens Uncle Remus in making him his mouthpiece. He defends the old aristocracy, admires the white folks, and ridicules Negroes desiring education. For instance, the following reveals the character as a puppet:

"Hit's de rumashun er dis country.... Put a spellin' book in a nigger's han's, en right den en dar you looses e plow-hand.... What's a nigger quinster, turn outer books?.... Wiz one bar I slave I kin fa'ily lif de vail er ignunee."  

It was these traditions that Chesmatt, DuBois, and even Dunbar, to a less degree, opposed in their works. This opposition is evidenced in diverse ways; however, defense and glorification of the race were the basic methods. In his treatment of slave characters, Chesmatt writes:

"He Negro, save in books, ever refused freedom. Many of them ran frightful risks to achieve it." In his short story "The Passing of Grandison," this view is strikingly illustrated. The clever Grandison, whose old master is convinced that he wouldn't run away, even if he were in a

1Sterling Brown, op. cit., p. 65.
2Ibid.
3Joel Chandler Harris, Uncle Remus (New York, 1925), pp. 255-256.
4C. W. Chesmatt, The House Behind the Cedars, p. 156.
Northern State, goes North with his young master and refuses to take any of the many opportunities to escape. He is left in Canada, but he travels all the way back to the plantation. To the surprise of all, a few days later, he escapes taking with him all his relatives.

Chesnutt in *The Marrow of Tradition* describes a new generation, which is not the sentimental, devoted, and obsequious type of servant. When they work for whites, they are matter-of-fact and business-like, without any attachments. Mrs. Carteret's new colored nurse refuses to take an insult and leaves. The old servant, Mammy Jane complains that the young Negroes are too self-assertive and warns that there is a limit to the white man's patience. Mammy Jane asserts: "Dat's wot I tells dese young niggers.... I's fetch my gran'son Jerry up ter be 'umble, an' keep in 'is place." The author shows his contempt of Jerry in having him meet a wretched death at the hands of the same white persons whom he had obsequiously served. In commenting on the attitude of the young nurse, the author explains:

Standing, like most young people of her race, on the border line between two irreconcilable states of life, she had neither the picturesqueness of the slave, nor the unconscious dignity of those whom freedom has been the immemorial birthright....

In *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, the heroine, Zora, is about to become the maid of a rich philanthropist who virtually begs for Zora's service:

Zora rose abruptly, and Mrs. Vanderpool feared with a lightening of heart that she had lost this strangely alluring girl.  

---

2. Ibid.
As her maid, Zora speaks to her, not as a servant, but as one woman to another. In further opposing traditional types, the authors make their characters intelligent and interested in education. Zora in The Quest of the Silver Fleece becomes educated and a race leader. She is spoken of as intelligent, proud, conquering, full-blooded woman, not meant for marrying, she is a born leader, wedded to a great cause. In her shrewdness she is able to fight Cresswell and his kind in their exploitation of Negroes. Furthermore, she makes worthy use of her leisure in good books:

She saw the drunken Goths reel upon Rome.... Paris, she knew—wonderful, haunting Paris: the Paris of Clovis and St. Louis; of Louis the Great, and Napoleon III, of Balsac....

Dr. Miller in The Marrow of Tradition, the prototype of Dr. Kenneth Harper in Walter White's The Fire in the Flint, is the most skillful doctor in town; he is told by Carteret, editor of the local paper aiming to suppress Negroes, that colored doctors do not attend white patients in the South. In spite of this hatred, he later begs Dr. Miller to operate to save his baby's life.

Another type of character which the same author convincingly delineates is the militant Negro, the antithesis of the obedient, servile character. An excellent example is Josh Green:

"Dr. Miller," cried Green, "...we're lookin' for a leader. De w'ite folks are killin' de niggers an' we ain' gwine ter stan' up an be shot down like dogs. We're gwine ter defen' ou' lives an' we ain' gwine ter run f'm no place where we've got a right ter be; an woe be ter de w'ite man w'at lays han's on us...."

Although evidence in the book shows that he has admiration for this type of character, Chesmatt voices his sentiments through Dr. Miller. He

---

1. Ibid., p. 252.
points out the necessity of being peaceful and patient, as in the following:

"My advice is not heroic, but I think it is wise. In this riot we are placed as we should be in a war. We have no territory, no base of supplies, no organization, no outside sympathy—we stand in the position of a race...without money and without friends. Our time will come,—the time when we can command respect for our rights; but it is not yet in sight."

It is obvious from these evidences that DuBois and Chesmutt had apparently dedicated themselves to tearing down the false ideas of the Negro, propagated by the school of Page and Dixon. But these writers had sufficient artistic consciousness to avoid making their characters unreasonably artificial and unnatural. It is because of this fact that they appear to accept at times the traditional types. In The Colonel’s Dream Peter is the old slave and servant of Colonel French; in displaying his fidelity, he says:

"...dese hyuh new w’te folks wa’t is come up sense de wah, ain’ got no use fer niggers, now dat day don’ b’long ter nobody no mo’.... I comes roun’ hyuh whar I knows ev’rybody and ev’rybody knows me...."

In The Marrow of Tradition Mammy Jane is the loyal, unselfish servant of the Cartarets; Sandy, who always lifts his hat before whites "with a slight exaggeration of Chesterfieldian elegance," is the personal servant of the venerable old Mr. Delamere. These characters are, the author writes, "a survival of an interesting type.”

---

1 Ibid., p. 283.
3 The Marrow of Tradition, p. 150.
These characters as well as almost all the white characters are idealized and overdrawn. However, indication of what Chesmutt could do when free of suppressive forces may be seen in his The Conjure Woman. In Uncle Julius he has created a convincing character. It is more real than its prototype Uncle Remus, as J. E. Spingarn states, "The old Negro [Uncle Julius] has seldom been given more truthfully than here."¹ Although Uncle Julius tells stories of the old South, there is an expression in each one of his personality. For example, learning that the stranger is planning to buy the vineyard, Uncle Julius says in prefacing his story "The Goophered Grapevine":

"Well, suh, you is a stranger to me, and I is a stranger to you, and we is befoe strangers ter one anudder, but 'f I 'us in ye place, I wouldn' buy dis vin ya'd."²

The humor in the excerpt is an element of Negro life which Chesmutt embodies freely in all his novels and which he does not attempt to refute when writing with white authors in mind.

The same characteristics are found in Dunbar's works to a much greater extent. Humor and pathos are expressed in abundance. His conventionality in this respect is so great that it has been suggested that he probably feared the rising poor-whites.³ In The Fanatics he states that public pressure greatly affected his writing. "Time will come," he writes, "when he who says ought of a Negro's virtues will not be cried down as an advocate drunk with prejudice."⁴

²Ibid., p. 11.
³Sterling Brown, op. cit., p. 77.
In his first novel, The Uncalled, there are no colored characters, yet the book seems quite autobiographical; for Dunbar had considered ministry, but later became disinterested. The story centers around Frederick Brent, who was adopted and reared by Hester Prime in a strict Puritanical atmosphere. He is forced against his will into ministry. The horrified commotion he aroused by his playing baseball and by other free expressions disgusts him. He seems to express in the following what Dunbar must have had in mind when he rejected the profession:

"Poor blind, conceited humanity! Interpreter of God, indeed! We reduce the Deity to vulgar fractions.... We place our own little ambition and inclinations before a shrine, and label them 'divine messages'...."  

Dissatisfied by the ordeal of pastoral visits, condolence with old ladies, prayers with poor and stricken families, useless admonishments to frivolous giggling girls, he suddenly rebels against the ministry and goes to seek his fortune in the big city. Many of the incidents in the novel suggest that they could easily have come out of his own life. The work is a noticeable example of Dunbar's aloofness on racial matters.

In The Fanatics Dunbar acknowledges that the character "Higger Ed" is, in the first part of the book at least, a buffoon, laughed and jeered at by the whites. For example, misunderstanding the word "effigy," Ed as the town crier alarms everyone in exclaiming that a mob had lynched the governor. When he learns that it was a stuffed image, he responds:

"Stuffed! I t'ought effigy meant his clothes. Lawd bless yo' soul missy, an me brekin my nail runnin' f'om a stuffed co'pse. I reckon I 'larned half de town...."  

2 ________, The Fanatics, p. 25.
It may be said that Dunbar's attempts in the field of the novel might have been far more effectual had he made more use of Negro life. Support for this statement may be gathered from his short stories. It is true that in these stories, he tends to idealize the former masters and to disregard the severities of Reconstruction. Nevertheless, there are indications of his having skill in fiction, which he does not reveal in his novels. For instance, his gift in drawing characters whom he knew may be seen in his story "The Case of Ca'line." A white lady goes into the dining room to give her colored cook a threatened going over. But Caroline proves herself queen of the kitchen. She dominates the conversation, admitting that she appears to sleep on the job when she is actually thinking, that she takes her company in the parlor when no one else is using it. Completely overwhelmed, the white lady offers to raise the wages, and Caroline answers:

"Would I stay, ef you 'crease my wages? Well, I reckon I could, but I--but I do' want no foolishness."¹

In spite of these authors' aesthetic ability and consciousness, it is doubtful that a great Negro novel could have been written at this time. This is revealed by W. S. Braithwaite in the following:

...the situation was not ripe for the great Negro novelist. The American public preferred spurious values to the genuine. Where Dunbar, the sentimentalist was welcome, Chesnutt, the realist, was barred.²

The sentimental, heroic, idealistic characteristics of fiction at that time were widely accepted by the reading public. In these conventions,

¹P. L. Dunbar, "The Case of Ca'line," The Strength of Gideon and Other Stories (New York, 1900), p. 112.
Dunbar conformed almost to the letter and thus reflected most of the contemporary faults. In this respect his novels can hardly be considered better than those works of Brown, Delany, and Webb.

In every instance the structure of Dunbar's novels is poor and weak. The Unclouded is conspicuously lacking in structural force. Many of the incidents in the early chapters are trivial and unconvincing and suggest that the author is straining and overemphasizing to narrate a serious story. After twenty years, Elphalet Hodges is still afraid to ask Hester Prime to marry him; the neighbors naively discuss who is to take the orphan, Frederick Brent; later Freddie brings home "an ominous note" from his teacher; at the school picnic Freddie heroically saves his schoolmate Elizabeth; refusing to tell Hester of his adventure, he is chastised for wearing a drenched suit; he tries to fail his examinations, but in spite of himself, he always makes the highest marks. These scenes are all unconvincingly narrated and show the influence of various authors. That of Dickens may be seen in Freddie as an orphan and his being adopted by Hester; that of Twain in Freddie's boyhood rebellion; and that of Hawthorne in the character Hester. In the final chapters Freddie goes to the big city. He is entering a cabaret when he is admonished by a tattered mendicant as follows: "Don't you go in there, young man. . . . You don't look like you was used to this life." The stranger turns out to be his long lost, disreputable father.

His second novel, The Love of Landry, is a story of Colorado and is in many respects a less successful attempt. The Sport of the Gods, however, is worthy of attention; it is considered along with The Fanatics his best novel. Nevertheless, the pattern is so loose that the author seems not to have had at the outset the slightest idea as to how the story would turn out; and in the conduct of the narrative, the story seems to get out
of hand. In the opening chapters, the point of view is focused on the Oakleys. Frank informs his brother Maurice that money for his studying art in Paris is stolen. It is discovered that their colored help Berry Hamilton had placed the same amount in a bank the same day. He is imprisoned for five years, and his family goes to New York. Here the emphasis shifts to the characters Joe, Hattie, Sadness, and Skaggs—all of whom are given equal identification, such as it is. Attention is drawn from Joe, who kills Hattie and is given life in prison, to Skaggs. He goes as a reporter and discovers the real thief. Berry Hamilton again reappears and becomes the leading character. It is obvious that the development of the narrative is very faulty.

A more convincing novel is *The Fanatics*. Here the weakness in structure is the antithesis of that in the previous works. There is a false air growing out of structural compactness. The interrelations of parts are based upon the use of unnatural circumstances and forced plotting. The narrative is based upon events occurring at the outbreak of the Civil War. Because of a fanatical temperament men in the North and in the South, did not see the real issues. Stephen Van Doren, a staunch Democrat, and Bradford Waters, an equally loyal Republican, are friends, who become bitter political enemies upon the outbreak of the war. Waters ejects his daughter Mary from their house when she refuses to avoid Robert, the Southern sympathizer, and son of Van Doren. She goes to the home of her brother's lover Hannie, who yearns in vain for Tom Water's return from the war. There is also the story of Walter Stewart, who becomes estranged to his father; but, upon hearing of his illness, goes South. After much breath-taking adventure, he arrives in time to see his father alive and to meet his future sweetheart, Dorothy Etheridge. The pairing off of the
lovers, Robert Doren and Mary Walters, Walter Stewart and Dolly Etheridge, Tom Waters and Nannie Woods, as well as the controversy and later reconciliation between Stephen Doren and Bradford Waters is very illustrative of an unnaturally compact, although logical, pattern. As a result of this, the characters become mechanical and artificial. For instance, in the following scene there is a breach between Walter Stewart and his father because of his Northern sentiments:

"Father," Walter also arose, his face was deadly pale. He did not take the proffered hand. His father gazed at him, first in amusement, then as the truth began to reach his mind, a livid flush overspread his face. His hand dropped at his side, and his fingers clenched.
"You," he half groaned, half growled between his teeth.
"Father, listen to me."
"There is but one thing I can listen to from you."
"You can never hear that. The North is my home. I was born here. I was brought up to reverence the flag...."

This scene is typical of others in which each of the four groups of characters contended over the controversial issues of the war. Both action and character are regimented and distorted in the narrow plot.

It is this weakness which primarily explains other faults of the books: the use of letters, dreams, gossipy conversation to conduct the story; intrusive comments on the story, action, and character.

Although attention must be given Chesnutt as a realist, the fact that he himself was not free of the romantic conventions should not be overlooked. Overplotting, idealized characters, creating an atmosphere of mystery and melodrama and the use of improbable accidents are glowing characteristic features in his novels. There is evidence that his personal philosophy placed limitations on his art. He himself says: "We

1P. L. Dunbar, The Fanatics, p. 34.
are all puppets in the hands of Fate, and seldom see the strings that move us. ¹ His novels in specific instances bear out this view, and there is often the impression of the author's being in the background pulling the strings, making his characters act and say what he chooses. This device was popular in contemporary fiction.

The House Behind the Cedars is a novel in which structure is based wholly on incredible chance occurrences. Rena, the colored heroine, is engaged to a young white man, Tryon. She is being warned through a letter that her fiancé is also in Patesville and that she must leave immediately to avoid revealing to him her identity. The important letter is laid on a table before it is read, and at that moment a gust of wind blows it into the street. Tryon's meeting Rena and learning that she is colored are ironically accidental. Near the end of the book, Rena is on her way home through the woods when she meets Tryon and the unscrupulous Wain. She flees fearing that if she goes to Tryon, Wain would suspect her of previous secrets; and that, if she goes to Wain, Tryon would suppose a prearranged meeting. The author states: "Not for the world would she have him Tryon think so—why she should care for his opinion she did not stop to argue."² She loses herself in the woods at the very moment in which a violent storm breaks; thus, incident subsequently results in her death.

In The Marrow of Tradition, Sandy is accused of murder because of a series of luckless coincidences. The very night he decides not to attend church, and to become a little intoxicated—acts in which he had seldom

²The House Behind the Cedars, p. 272.
indulged—Mrs. Olchitree is killed. The white character, Ellis, accidentally perceives a sinister figure resembling Sandy. Upon these and other chance occurrences, Sandy is almost led to a miserable death.

It is the element of chance which explains how Major Cartaret is forced to beg Dr. Miller to save his child. He had instigated mob violence and maltreated the doctor and his family. All the other doctors being unavailable, Cartaret's child would have died had it not been for the benevolence of the colored family.

Chesmunt seems to have been influenced very much by Thomas Hardy. In his early novels the English author expressed a pessimistic philosophy, and employed miraculous happenings and unconvincing coincidences to show the universe fatalistic.\(^1\) Similar instances of this ironic determinism are numerous in Chesmunt's works. In The House Behind the Cedars, the author seems indebted to Hardy. Rena's being sought after by three men suggests Tess' experiences; the unprincipled Wain resembles Wildeve; Rena's death in the woods is similar to that of Mrs. Yeobright's. The influence of Scott is evidenced in several scenes in the same work. The elaborate tournament and the names of the characters—Rena, Warwick, Tryon—are reminiscent of Scott.

Although it is apparent, there is not the unnatural improbability as found in the other works. However, the deaths of Peter and of the Colonel's son are forced for the purpose of burying them together. This exemplifies Chesmunt's assertion that the prejudice of the whites extends from the cradle to the grave. This incident parallels that in Webb's The Garies and

---

Their Friends.

In all of his novels there is an atmosphere of mystery and melodrama. In *The House Behind the Cedars*, Rena's secret is not revealed, and the reader is held in suspense on what constitutes the strange history of the colored family. Mrs. Miller in *The Marrow of Tradition* learns in the end that Mrs. Cartaret's property actually belongs to her. In *The Colonel's Dream*, there is the story of the deaf Vincy, who holds a secret concerning hidden money since the days of slavery; in the same work the Colonel's lawyer, Caxton, discovers on the last day a note of debt extending over a period of twenty years; this discovery saves Laura Treadwell from becoming poor at the hands of Petters.

*The Quest of the Silver Fleece* is notable for its avoidance of traditional faults, and is in a class by itself in this respect. However, there is much symbolism and fantasy, which tend to make the characters and action unconvincing. The characters Zora and Elspeth in their mysticism verge upon the supernatural. Zora, as a child, lives in a swamp, and she is spoken of as a heathen hoyden. She is always "full of great and awful visions," and "steeped body and soul in wood-lore. Her home was out of doors, the cabin of Elspeth was her port of call for talking and eating." Her strangeness becomes most unconvincing when, after rain had apparently destroyed her bolls of cotton, she sleeps in the swamp during a violent storm:

There she lay — wet, bedraggled, motionless, gray-pallid beneath her dark-drawn skin, her burning eyes searching restlessly for some lost thing, her lips a-moaning.¹

¹W. E. B. DuBois, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, p. 44.
The most mysterious character is Elspeth; her full identity is not clearly established. Her death is described as follows:

Slowly Elspeth, with quivering hands, unwound the black and snake-like object that guarded her breast.... With a low and fearful moan the old woman lurched sideways, then crashed, like a fallen pine, upon the hearth stone. She lay still—dead. ¹

On the other hand, the character Zora is much in harmony with the imaginative nature of the book. For instance, although her dialogue tends at times to become stiff and stilted, there are instances in which poetic beauty of expression and imagery transcend the effect of pure realism; as in the following, in which Bles Alwyn first meets Zora:

"What you run for?" she asked, with dancing mischief in her eyes.
"Because—" he hesitated, and his cheeks grew hot.
"I knows," she said, with impish glee, laughing low music.
"Why?" he challenged, sturdily.
"You was a-feared."
He bridled. "Well, I reckon you'd be a feared if you was caught out in the black dark all alone."²

The preceding passage embodies much beauty of thought as well as expression; but the book abounds in so much imagery that at times the style is very conscious and distracts attention from the idea. Examples of this are notable in the use of alliteration in the following: "She had chosen her mule long before—a big, black beast..."³ "The red waters of the swamp grew sinister and sullen;"⁴ "...a million wagons speeding to and fro with straining mules and laughing black men, bearing bubbling masses of piled white Fleece;"⁵ "But Zora still stood silent in the

² Ibid., p. 11.
³ Ibid., p. 92.
⁴ Ibid., p. 13.
⁵ Ibid., p. 190.
shadow of the Silver Fleece, hearing and yet not hearing...."1

The foregoing phase of this investigation has illustratively discussed the matter of the times not being ripe for a great novel from the colored race. A more convincingly specific example of this could hardly be found than in the realistic method of Chesmutt. All of his novels are realistic in the treatment of the tragic experiences growing out of the lives of colored persons who are mistaken for white. Chesmutt himself writes as follows:

As a matter of fact, substantially all of my writings, with the exception of The Conjure Woman, have dealt with the problems of people of mixed blood which, while in the main the same as those of the true Negro, are in some instances...much more complex and difficult of treatment in fiction as in life.2

In The House Behind the Cedars, he tells the tragic story of Rowena Walden, who becomes engaged to a white man. Compelled to return to her native Patesville, where everyone knows her racial identity, she is accidentally met by Tryon. He rejects her when he discovers that she is colored, in returning to implore her to reconsider him, he is too late. In The Marrow of Tradition, Dr. Miller and his wife are light complexioned Negroes, whose racial heritage brings about many trying experiences. In The Colonel's Dream Viney is the mulattress who had once been the mistress of old Dudley. This was a phase of life, as W. D. Howells stated, which was "tense with potential tragedy."3 But Chesmutt was not the first to write on this phase of Negro life; study of Frank J. Webb, who must be

---


considered Chesnutt's predecessor, has already been made in this
connection.

The Quest of the Silver Fleece and The Colonel's Dream are noteworthy
in a comparison of their realistic treatment. Both works are largely
based upon the technicalities of the business world. Chesnutt is concerned
with business methods more from a personal or individualistic point of
view. Colonel French had won a triumph against greed and craft in his big
company. In Clarendon he constructs various projects employing colored and
white and opposes the contracting and pecuniary systems. DuBois is concerned
with the business world in general. He depicts the American cotton
supremacy, revealing selfish ambition and unfair practices in Wall Street,
controllers of markets, buying and selling of land, and other abuses.

The reading public had not fully arrived at that stage in which they
would accept all out realistic fiction. They still had a preference for
the romantic world of the past. W. D. Howells clearly describes the
difficulty of the realistic novelist in this respect. Pointing out why
the stories of Chesnutt would not enjoy wide popularity, he writes as
follows:

As these stories are of our own time and country, and as
there is not a swashbuckler of the seventeenth century, or a
princess of an imaginary kingdom, in any of them they will 1
possibly not reach half a million readers in six months....

Another factor which further handicapped the Negro author was the
lack of an appreciative reading public. When Chesnutt and other authors
of his time wrote, they encountered much difficulty in finding publishers. 2
No colored novelist had gained favorable recognition, with the exception

1Ibid.

2Charles W. Chesnutt, "Post-Bellum—Pre-Harlem, op. cit., XXXVIII,
p. 195.
of Dunbar (and largely as a poet) when Chesnutt came upon the scene.\footnote{Charles W. Chesnutt, "Post-Bellum--Pre-Harlem, \textit{op. cit.}, XXXVIII, p. 195.} Even after publishers had approved a Negro author's novel, they were often reluctant in revealing his racial identity.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}} The prevailing idea was that a Negro could not write anything worthy of attention.
CHAPTER IV

THE RENAISSANCE NOVELISTS

As late as the beginning of the third decade of the twentieth century, there were hardly more than four Negro authors of prose who had attracted any wide attention from the reading public; furthermore, only one had made more than a fair start in fiction—C. W. Chesmutt as a novelist and writer of short stories; W. E. B. DuBois as an essayist; W. S. Braithwaite as a critic; B. T. Washington as an autobiographer. Although others had written notable works, they were unfamiliar to the general reading public. To be sure, there was much uneasiness among the older writers and among educated colored people; they feared and felt a great need for Negro authors who should express the life of the race.

Yet, by the end of the same decade the outlook was almost a direct contrast. The number of writers swelled fivefold. Negro artists in practically every form of literature demanded more than sectional consideration. There were over six novelists at least, whose works in many respects surpassed those of Chesmutt. As a matter of fact, books written by and on Negroes in the single year 1926 were more than all the books written by or pertaining to members of the race during the entire preceding

---

2 Ibid.
Thus, by the twenties the status of the Negro author was much more encouraging than it ever previously was. Having ceased writing after the publication of *The Colonel's Dream*, largely because the public did not favor his work, Charles W. Chesnutt himself writes of the writer's new opportunities as follows: "Negro writers no longer have any difficulty in finding publishers. Their race is no longer a detriment but a good selling point." The Negro author, furthermore, could no longer complain of not being taken seriously; indeed, there was danger of his being taken too seriously. Wishing to profit on this new popularity, editors and publishers naturally placed little stress on merit. Wallace Thurman indicates that colored newspapers reprinted practically "every item published anywhere concerning a Negro whose work had found favor with the critics, editors or publishers." Contests were conducted to spur novices, colored lecturers, preachers, and club women spoke on the "great new Negro art." Many colored writers throughout the country wrote depicting the physical and emotional racial traits with little or no apology. "To be black," Benjamin Brawley asserted, "ceased to be a matter of explanation ... instead it became something to be advertised." 

---


3 Alain Locke, "We Turn to Prose," *Opportunity*, I (February, 1922), p. 40.


5 Ibid.

This popularity exerted a favorable effect upon the white audience. Many white persons acquired a new interest in the colored race. Also, they wrote works in which they were seriously preoccupied in studying Negro life. Out of this new attitude there evolved a repudiation of traditional stereotyped conceptions of the Negro. George W. Jacob writes pertinently on this statement in the following:

Ten years [1919] ago the passion for a candid and comprehensive delineation of every phase of Negro life was such that the literate world clamored for the Negro of artistic ability as it had clamored at no previous time since the emancipation of the race.¹

These new literary expressions were indicative of a general advancement of the race. Developing a spirit of liberalism in regards to the race, even Southern writers regarded the Negro in a more impersonal light. Although there was still much to be done in attaining full justice and equality, there was a consideration of the Negro as a human being with full scope for human growth and human happiness.² Bearing out the same conclusion, V. F. Calverton asserts:

Indeed, we may say it [the new literature] illustrates a growth that in a dynamic sense has just begun. It indicates more than the rise of a literature. It marks the rise of an entire people, and in one sense may be properly described as a new emancipation, but this time spiritual.³

Although critics may not wholly agree upon the precise explanation for this literary movement⁴ there were at least two forces which undoubtedly

---

¹George W. Jacobs, "Negro Authors Must Eat," Nation, CXXVIII (June 12, 1929), p. 710.
gave it impetus, if not the very foundation itself. Many articles have dealt with the influence which immigration and the World War exerted upon this rebirth of Negro literature and of a new outlook. Through these occurrences there was engendered a new wholesome psychological mind set in the race as a whole. No longer believing themselves an inextricably inferior race with undesirable inheritances, colored people more and more developed a new spirit of race consciousness and solidarity.\(^1\) There was large scale migration of colored people, preceding and shortly after the World War. Not so completely hemmed in by seepression, by lack of opportunities, by intimidation, by disintegrating pressure, colored people increasingly wandered to sections of the nation where they were able to form visions of heretofore only dreamed-of opportunities, of social and economic freedom; of a chance to cooperate in improving their own conditions.\(^2\) Many persons shared these experiences, and the simultaneous reactions produced results in programs, projects, and organizations—all designed to elevate the race.

The World War itself, in spite of its accompanying pain, suffering and sacrifice, tended to make them forget their prison-like confinements. It was a very great and comforting thing for them to feel that they were needed and were being swept along in the on rushing current of rap'd expansion in life, in labor, and even in culture.\(^3\) In fact, not only did

\(^1\) Alain Locke, *The Negro in America*, p. 55.


they visualise a new emancipation, infinitely greater than a mere nominal freedom, but they began to feel themselves an indispensable part of what multitudes believed to be an indisputably great nation; indeed, in facing the world-wide struggles which threatened the demolition of civilization, not a few believed that in fighting for democracy they were a part of that destiny to save the world.

There is little wonder, then, that this people developed a spirit of confidence and consciousness, the wholesomeness of which was evidenced in their post-war dogged, dauntless, indomitable determination to prevent painfully unexpected threats of retrogression. The cries of battle and the enthusiasms of triumph had hardly subsided at home and across the seas before there were numerous lynchings and shocking attempts to put the Negro back where he was before the crisis. Disillusioned, but simultaneously angered and embittered, and well aware of the inevitable struggle for the very breath of life should there be a return to prewar conditions, Negroes desperately intensified their race consciousness. It is remarkable that through sponsoring a program of self-help and self-determination they became militant, but not dangerously radical. In this connection, it may further be said that this conservative militancy is in a transitional stage, the course of which will largely be determined by the powerful groups. Whether aggressive colored people will eventually adhere religiously to radical doctrines or continue to strive peacefully for an amelioration of existing repelling conditions depends largely upon those who persist in exploiting and suppressing handicapped peoples.

In summarizing, one may note, then, that in diverse phases of life

there came manifestations of a "New Negro". A new race psychology evolved out of immigration and the World War; this engendered racial respect, both from within and without, confidence, and a demand for all civil rights and opportunities of full expression. Against such a background, a new literature of much artistic value emerged.

The third and fourth decades of the century witnessed a rapid development and finally the arrival of the Negro novelist. There were in 1933 at least six novelists who equaled and even surpassed Chesnutt in many respects. In the works of Claude McKay, Jessie Fausett, Langston Hughes, Nella Larsen, Rudolph Fisher, Wallace Thurman—to select a few from a large number of authors—there is evidence of writers using material from the every-day affairs of the race to create art.

For the most part, they all were concerned in revealing truth. But although they might have tried to be faithful in portraying their findings from life, they reflect varied and even conflicting viewpoints. It is thus apparent that if their expressions are truly artistic, there must be shortcomings or weaknesses somewhere, for the novel is primarily a truthful representation of life itself. Leaving the matter of the problem novel temporarily out of the discussion, one may ask, what, briefly, constituted the difficulty which explains why these authors presented varying aspects of life as truths? The answer is quite simple. In the first place, they all worked with racial material against a varied and broad background. After the World War the problems of the race were no longer intensely sectional, but national. Furthermore, issues involving only members of the race grew in importance as well as in number. For instance, leaders of the race, although united on the matter of opposing bi-racial standards, disagreed as to whether an aggressive or passive
course of action should be pursued. These writers themselves reflect the varying, confusing sides of Negro life.

Secondly, though not profound, the novelists were realists, and the realistic method as a means of capturing truth in fiction has long been in the controversial realm. It is argued that a novelist may be accurate in his portrayal to the letter, so far as he is concerned, and yet be far from achieving that universal quality. It is pointed out that the truths and laws of life are often not to be found on the surface and that mere transcriptions of life-like scenes are no more than superficial attempts to convey deep profound meanings.¹ There is thus a necessity for the realist to have and use power to discern beyond the outer froth; this calls for catholicity and imagination, besides other techniques—such as ability to shape his material, to breath in it life.² Truth and beauty, these are cardinal terms in literary expression; and if the novelist is to attain this end, he must discover and express truth and beauty out of the contradictory, harsh, unemotional, concrete realities.

In light of these comments, it is scarcely to be wondered that these novelists presented only partial truths in their works. Even more discrediting, in spite of the fact that many of them expressed underlying assumptions on genuine aesthetic motives, they were decidedly racial. Nevertheless, there is great signification in this statement, for it reveals that these writers did have a deep artistic consciousness. It is this attitude which largely explains the arrival of the colored author in

this period.

There are in general three distinguishable groups of colored novelists in this period. First, there are those who profess portraying the Negro and his traits in naked truthfulness without apology (not without explanation however). Representative of these writers are Claude McKay and Langston Hughes. Another group seeks to show the Negro life in its neglected phases, as in the works of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen. The third group is comprised of authors concerned primarily, and in some instances almost wholly, with the problem novel, such as Walter White and W. E. B. DuBois. ¹

The authors who picture the Negro with his alleged native colorful traits and characteristics proved more artistic craftsmen than the others, but the controversy centering around them was much more widespread. The clamor for an impersonal study of the Negro, to which reference has already been made, encouraged many writers to depict the colorful aspects of the race. Among the whites, Carl Van Doren was foremost in providing incentives; he writes in the following:

What American literature decidedly needs at the moment is color, music, gusto, the free expression of gay or desperate moods. If the Negroes are not in a position to contribute these items, I do not know what Americans are.²

In response to such appeals too many aspiring writers became too enthusiastic and brought on this school of novelists many criticisms. They

¹Although illustrative references will be made to other authors, only representative authors of each group will be considered in this study. Among other authors of the so-called "Harlem" or "color realists" school are Carl Van Vechten, Rudolph Fisher, Countee Cullen, Waters Turpin, Gertrude Samborn is among the class of "Bourgeois" realists.

were charged with "plunging beneath their environment" and raising the
sewage system to the nostrils of their readers.\(^1\) In the works of these
novelists the main characters are porters, washerwomen, stevedores,
drunkards, pimps, and prostitutes. They are characters which demand skill-
ful delineation if they are intended for literary effect.

Too often, however, the effect was negative, and Negro intellectuals
and reformers complained indignantly. This school was denounced as being
mercenary; its representatives were condemned as having given vent to
suppressed desires and disregarded accepted standards "in preferring
sordid, unpleasant, or forbidden themes, and in turning away from anything
that looked like good honest work in order to loaf and to call oneself an
artist."\(^2\) In using the Harlem cabaret and night life and the primitivistic
color, which, it was believed, had its native origins in the African
jungles—in using these as sources for their literary material, these
novelists were charged with having unhealthy imaginations.

Time has already shown that, although criticisms of this nature were
not unwarranted or wholly unjustifiable, they were not profound. In
concentrating on the uselessness of many books then on top, these critics
failed to discern the art which was to have a permanent settlement after
the literary flood had subsided.

The fiction of Claude McKay has definitely been acclaimed as a high
water mark in Negro literature; he is the foremost artist of the native
color group. It was in 1922 that he gave to America his *Harlem Shadows*

\(^1\) George W. Jacobs, "Negro Authors Must Eat," *op. cit.*, CXXVIII, p. 710.

and did much in developing the Negro Renascence. Having arrived at Harlem when it was just settling and forming itself as the Negro world metropolis, McKay early struck a note in his depiction of life which goes far in explaining his art. It was his consistent concern with proletarian types that made it fitting for him to write a much wished for novel based on life in Harlem—a novel which could convey the color and spirit of that unique community. There had been reactions of disgust toward previous unsuccessful attempts on the part of authors to picture Harlem. In lesser works, it was flat and colorless; the characters were generally dull sketches—"an assemblage of buck and black faces;" and the atmosphere was usually forced and artificial.

Recognized at the outset as a notable work of art, *Home to Harlem* (1928) merited McKay the Harmon Gold Award for literature. This and subsequent books—*Banjo* (1929) and *Bamana Bottom* (1933)—prove beyond doubt that he was not a victim of local color fads. He reveals true artistic instinct in his insistence upon writing primarily to create a good story. Also, he captures in his books the rhythm and color of his Negro characters, and he communicates this in a style befitting his material. For example, the tone in the following descriptive passage is harmonious with the life the artist chooses:

Brown girls rouged and painted like dark pansies. Brown flesh draped in soft colorful clothes. Brown lips full and pouted for

---


sweet kissing. Brown breasts throbbing with love. ¹

His second work, Banjo, is notable for its continuation and enrichment in the depiction of that lowly, yet gay and even justifiable, way of living. Banana Bottom represents in several respects a crowning achievement. By not a few it is recognized as a classic for the people of Jamaica. There is masterful analysis of character here, especially in regards to the rebellious, independent heroine, Bita, and the simple, sympathetic and broadminded white squire, Gen sir. Furthermore, from a structural viewpoint, it is his best work; in developing the theme there is more compactness, more hanging-togetherness, than in his previous works.

With emphasis, therefore, on laughter, color, and other characteristics, McKay shows in Home to Harlem that New York differs from other cities in molding all peoples into its own peculiar rhythm; yet New York, "passing its strange thousands through its great metropolitan mill" cannot rob the Negro of his native, colorful traits. He illustrates the city, in all its hurly, burly on rushing, changing movements, unable to alter completely the proudly swaying bodies, the dusky half clad, giggling girls, the chattering, merry voices, the strikingly bright-colored clothes.

The story opens with the carefree, debonair Jake, the leading character, as a stoker on a freighter on his way home to Harlem from France. He realizes that he could have signed on as a deck hand had he been white like the sailors. Forced to carry lumber in Brest and to work like a laborer, instead of having a chance at the glory and sensation of fighting in the

²Ibid., p. 191.
World War as he had imagined, Jake became disillusioned and deserted the army to work as a docker in London. The war over, he is eager to get home to the brown girls waiting for the brown boys. Hating arrived, he goes to a cabaret where he meets and loves the songstress Felice. Although she returns his love, he loses her the next day. After a long interval he finds her again. In the meantime he meets his old chum Zeddy, who, also living on women, enjoys his bachelor freedom. Learning that Jake is a deserter, he warns him to be careful. Jake works as longshoreman until a strike breaks out; and, not wishing to scab, he refuses to join the union because whites give colored men the worse piers, reserving the best for Irishmen. In a bohemian fashion, he lives for a while with the cabaret entertainer, Rose, who becomes disappointed and dissatisfied because, owing to his gentle and retiring nature, he doesn't "beat her up" and take her money. Leaving her, he becomes third cook on a dining-car of the Pennsylvania railroad and meets the intelligent, understanding Ray, who, having studied in Haiti and at Howard University, is called "professor" by the other men. He lectures to Jake, teaching him race pride. He informs him of the achievements of the race and of the greatness of Toussaint L'Overture. They sleep together in the filthy quarters assigned to the crew by the richest company in the country. They resort to drugs to sleep and eventually forego the bunks in preference for the amusement basements, buffet flats and poker establishments—the strange un-American world where colored meets and mingle freely with whites.

The book abounds in dramatic human episodes. There is the story of the narrow-minded dark chef cook from Alabama, who, in despising "down-right niggers" below his acquired standing, brings on the trouble resulting in his downfall. Jake becomes ill, and he is forced to remain with his kind, sympathetic landlady, Aunt Hattie. Ray visits him, but upon his
recovery, leaves with a friend on a freighter going to Australia and Europe. Jake finds Felice, but almost fights with his old friend, Zeddy, to keep her. Angered, he reveals Jake's secret, but soon apologizes. To avoid being arrested, Jake takes Felice with him to Chicago, where the living for Negroes of that class is easy.

In these pages there is much human, gaiety, and life. McKay draws without apology mannerisms and peculiarities of many colored people.

Gin-Head Suzy is a dark fat cook who often serves fried chicken, ragout of chicken giblets, candied sweet potatoes, rum-flavored fruit salad, cream tomato soup.

He chooses as his second novel the caption "banjo," the instrument of slavery. But to McKay the sharp noisy sounds of the banjo are not indicative of the Negro's lowliness. On the contrary, it shows his "hardy existence in the biggest, the most tumultuous civilization of modern life," of his intensely happy group life—in spite of his lot.

All through his sea-faring days, Banjo has had dreams of vagabond living, as on the beach in France, where he lives on a hand to mouth basis. In the loose, lowly manner of the Ditch, he wanders about with his beach fellows, Malty, Ginger, Bugasy, and later Ray, who, having sailed to the beach, remains and befriends Banjo—whose rich Dixie accent reminds him happily of Jake (Home to Harlem).

The life depicted is similar to that in the author's previous work

---

1 Claude McKay, Banjo (New York, 1929), p. 49.

2 The term "beach" is used throughout the book in the broad nautical sense: stranded without a ship and works, forced to live from hand to mouth.
with the exception that here there is not that sparkling gaiety and moments of happiness found in Harlem. Here there is a mingling of diverse peoples—Maltese, Senegalese, Martiniquan, Madagascar, French.

The book, however, is a more profound and intense study of this adventurous living. There are striking scenes of much joking, dancing, singing, fighting, loving, and "slumming"; also, scenes of prejudice and discrimination largely on the part of British and white American people.

With much gusto and feeling, Banjo plays his instrument in a manner which reveals his instinctive propensities for bohemian living. Like magic, it dazzles and enraptures his cronies. "Sing Banjo! Play Banjo! Here I is, Big Boss. Keeping step, sure-step, night long with you in some sort a ways. He-ho Banjo! Play that thing! Shake that thing!"

McKay is aware of the interpretations that certain groups would be prone to make. But he is confident of his art and remains self-contained. In regards to whites, the attitude expressed in the words of Banjo well apply to the author:

"...I ain't a big-headed nigger, but a white man has got to respect me, for when I address myself to him the vibration of brain magic that I turn loose on him is like an electric shock on the spring of his cranium."

In his eyes there is much truth in his characters and their lives. His defense and justification for them is that the amusement side of the Negro's life in America is the most intensely happy group life in the civilized world. Although white folks have their silks, furs and shining diamonds, they are still unable to hide the misery in their lives. Further-

---

1 Claude McKay, Banjo, p. 49.
2 Ibid., p. 45.
3 Ibid., p. 194.
more, they may scorn and humor themselves on colored people; but to McKay, their attitude is the result of complexes. They have so much dirt in their hearts that they conceal it in themselves by projecting it upon weaker peoples, especially the Negro.\(^2\) His bitterness mounting, he avows that he will fight for his race whenever a fight is on.

However, when dealing with his material, he professes, in theory at least, to be a true artist. It is as an artist, not a reformer, that he speaks in the following through the character Bay:

\[\ldots\text{but if I am writing a story...I'll just identify myself with those who are really listening and tell my story.}\] \(^3\)

Replying to those who contend that his themes are forbidden, he continues:

\[\ldots\text{A good story, in spite of those who tell it and those who hear it, is like good ore that you might find in any soil}....\] \(^4\)

Again, specifically reiterating that he writes for people who can stand and appreciate a real story regardless of its origin, he further writes:

\[\ldots\text{I am not writing for... the poke-chop-abstaining Negroes, nor the Puritan Friends of Color, nor the Negrophobes nor the Negrophiles}....\] \(^5\)

But he does not succeed in wholly detaching himself; he is at times quite conscious of outside pressure. This is evidenced very much in his attitude toward the upper classes of Negroes, who, for the most part, did not sympathize with his viewpoints. The character Bay is his mouthpiece and appears in both *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*. He charges the educated Negroes with being ashamed of their racial heritage. The revolt against

---

\(^1\) Claude McKay, *Home to Harlem*, p. 86.

\(^2\) Ibid.

\(^3\) Ibid.

\(^4\) Ibid.

\(^5\) Ibid.
the race's intuitive love of color, "wrapping themselves up in respectable gray, denouncing Congo-sounding laughter."¹ He considers them as not allowing themselves a chance to appreciate their heritage; for, he believes, they use their intellect to keep ever on their guard in suppressing instinctive reaction.² Thus, this class is not setting a fine example of a high standard of living for the race. Furthermore, he denounces them for always talking class, and yet there is hardly one of them who did not have as a near relative a brother, or sister who was an ignorant chauffeur, butler, maid; or a mother who had not toiled over a wash tub to send him or her through college.³

Negroes of this group are misfits, who feel themselves, he contends, on cheap imitation; they are "anachronisms."⁴ Their education makes anyone "a sharp, smutty, rooting hog." Secondly, Negroes are given education which fails to meet their needs and interests: "...we get our education," he continues, "like our houses. When the whites move out, we move in and take possession of the old dead stuff."⁵ Thirdly, they get a white man's education which results in their despising their own people. They are taught how whites have conquered colored races, and how they are the supposedly mainspring of modern civilization. It is in a spirit of bitterness that McKay concludes as follows:

¹ Claude McKay, Banjo, p. 165.
² Ibid., p. 164.
³ Ibid., p. 116.
⁴ ________, Home to Harlem, p. 245.
⁵ Ibid., p. 24.
...However advanced, clever, and cultivated you are you will have the distinguishing adjective of 'colored' before your name. And instead of accepting it proudly and manfully, most of you are sour and bitter about it—especially you mixed-bloods.

You're a lost crowd, you educated Negroes, and you will only find yourself in the roots of your own people...

This somewhat lengthy consideration of McKay's attitude on this matter seems especially warranted in light of the fact that it is the essence of his theoretical outlook. He bases his entire third novel, Banana Bottom, upon his deep-seated preference for the lower classes. At an early age Bita Plant, the colored heroine, is raped by a demented Negro musician. However, she is helped by Mr. and Mrs. Craig, a congenial white missionary family, who sends her to an English school. She returns at the age of eighteen and lives with the family. Refusing to conform to their middle class Puritanism, and rejecting the respectable Harold Newton, whom the Craigs wanted her to marry, she bestows her affection on the disreputable Keping Dick. However, he becomes involved with Bita's friend Yoni, whom he is forced later to marry on the very day Bita chooses the peasant Jubban, her father's drayman, from all the other eligible suitors, including the Reverend Lambert. Being pregnant at the time of her father's death and her wedding, Bita represents the repudiation of middle class respectability for peasant simplicity and paganism. Squire Gensir, the best man at the wedding, is also vividly illustrative of the theme. He is a venerable white man who forsakes his own people for the lowly inhabitants of Jamaica. "The peasants," the author writes, "were his hobby. He was always among them in the fields, in their grass huts....

---

1Claude McKay, Banjo, pp. 200-201.
The peasants liked and took him simply as he took himself.\(^1\)

For Negro education, McKay would select a study of the use of lowly peoples: the Irish cultural and social movement, the Russian peasants and their struggles, Ghandi and India, Africa and its native dialects—and a rejection of European histories and novels.\(^2\)

His criticism of abashed Negroes among the lower groups, who strive to get away from these racial possessions, is equally bitter. In his short story "Brownskin Blues," he narrates the story of the black, cabaret songstress, Bess, who, in her intense desire to acquire a lighter complexion studies advertisements guaranteeing skin success magic. She expresses her attitude as follows: "Just as well to bleach out, too. I'm sure sick o' being black. Yaller gals are all in vogue....\(^3\) She does so and seriously injures her face. He contends that most persons of color who advance strive to escape what smacks of the Negroid. The chef cook in *Home to Harlem* comes from Alabama and, after achieving his respectable job, is unsympathetic toward Negroes working under him and refuses to eat such foods as chicken, "corn pom", and watermelons because he believes they brand him a typical Negro. Until he meets Ray, Jake in the same work is very American in his contempt for foreign Negroes, believing that Africa was the jungle, all Africans cannibals, and West Indians monkey-shavers. Bugsy in *Banjo* says: "You nevah know when an American black man gwine show himself a white man's nigger."\(^4\)

It is obvious that McKay is much the radical. He considers it

---

2 ________, *Banjo*, p. 201.
4 ________, *Banjo*, p. 168.
unnatural for the Negro to love a nation in which there are suppression and plundering of weaker peoples, and in which there are organized rivalries and atrocities.

It has been shown that McKay as a novelist stresses the alleged native background of the Negro and has created works of high artistic merit; it has also been shown that he professed genuine aesthetic motives, but that he did not in practice free himself from intrusive, personal race consciousness. In further appraisement, it may be observed that his first novels lack a tour de force by which sustained action is graduated to a climax. Although his desultory style enables him to give a more panoramic view of the life he pictures, it is conducive to certain weaknesses in craftsmanship. An outgrowth of past methods, a more effectual artistic practice permits the story to work itself out.\(^1\) In the older method, the author chooses scenes and episodes at will. By virtue of his selection and rejection he can readily color the truths he seeks to present for the intended effect. McKay selects incidents and episodes with apparently little consideration to rising action and mounting interest. He crowds his novels with many disconnected episodes which are in many instances for the purpose of creating a strong effect, such as the fight between two naked women in *Home to Harlem*. Another shortcoming in this method is that the point of view shifts from one character to another. In some respects the character Ray is more the hero than either Jake or Banjo. Moreover, McKay's style enables him to intrude in his story to direct the thinking of his readers; the character Ray in both

---

\(^1\)This point will be elucidated upon in the discussion on naturalism in reference to Richard Wright's *Native Son*. 
works is the mouthpiece.

In *Banana Bottom*, however, McKay demonstrates improvement in building structure; the story is far more self-contained than the preceding works. But here McKay imposes upon his story. In exalting peasant paganism over middle class respectability, he tends to distort the natural logical sequence of incidents and action. Bita's eventual acceptance of Juppan above all others is indicative of this weakness.

In a word, McKay's methods enable him to shape his stories to fit his personal views. Consequently, even if he were free of his race consciousness, he would probably still lack the comprehensiveness and catholicity, which are among the avenues to great art.

Also outstanding in this school is Langston Hughes, who in his *Not Without Laughter* depicts life among the proletarian in the Mid-West. Giving much attention to Negro characteristics, he too is racial. Depicting in touching realism the plight and hardships of poor colored workers, he too shows that Negroes can still enjoy life. Aunt Hager Williams lives a life of drudgery, not unlike that of many other Negroes. For nearly forty years since she had come from Montgomery to Kansas, she washed for white people every week. It is through her wages from washing that she buys her house, rears her children, nurses and buries her husband; it is the wash tub which finally takes her to her grave. Her younger daughter Harriett represents that group which becomes apathetic to social abuses, burying their distresses in and escaping despair through easy living. Refusing to accept religion, and leaving school to work in night clubs, she soon becomes submerged in the life of the "Bottoms," where people never realize the "utter stupidity of the word 'sin'."\(^1\)

---

Harriett along with her crony Maudel Smothers are arrested for street walking. However, she successfully arises out of this apparent degradation in becoming a popular dancer and songstress.

Among other notable characters in the book is Sandy, Aunt Hager's grandchild, who works hard in and out of school. Through him the hope of the race is expressed—that the race has a means of ameliorating conditions through proper education. Working day in and day out in the white man's kitchen, Annjee, his mother, lives a dull miserable life. It is seldom that she sees her wandering husband, Jimboy. At the first opportunity, she goes to Detroit to meet him and never returns to Kansas. Aunt Hager dies, and Sandy resides for several years with his formal, educated sister, Tempy. He later welcomes the chance to go to his mother, who, out of loneliness in Chicago, calls for him. There they meet Harriett, now a part of a large stage show, and she promises to support Sandy through school.

Seldom at home, always seeking work, Jimboy is Annjee's carefree, indifferent husband. Tempy typifies the educated class of Negroes, who go their own individual, separate ways and refuse to give any aid to their less fortunate brethren.

Hughes agrees in his social outlook in many respects with McKay. He shows that people, white and colored, on the lowest rung of the social ladder, ceasing to struggle against barriers of good and bad, or of white and black, mingle for joy and pleasure. They drink, laugh, dance, love, and thus, as Hughes points out:

They had never looked at life through the spectacles of the Sunday-School. The glasses good people wore wouldn't have fitted their eyes for they hung no curtain of words between
themselves and reality. To them things were what they were.\textsuperscript{1}

Thus, Hughes also does not accept conventional codes of ethics and morals. Harriet's retort to her mother's insistence upon her attending church is that the church has made Negroes act like Salvation Army people. She continues in the following: "Your old Jesus is white... He's white and stiff and don't like niggers\textsuperscript{2}" Aunt Hager rebukes Jimboy for playing jazz rather than hymns on Sunday. He replies, "That's what's the matter with colored folks now—work all week and then set up in church all day Sunday and don't even know what's goin' on in the... world."\textsuperscript{3}

He successfully conveys the charm and beauty in the simple, rhythmic lives of the characters. Recalling McKay's Jake and Banjo, Jimboy plays on his banjo incessantly. Harriet is ever on the go to night clubs and dances. Noteworthy is the gala affair featuring "Benbow's Famous Band."

Hughes' graphical delineation of this is seen in the following:

...the banjo cried in stop-time, and the piano sobbed aloud with a rhythmical, secret passion...."Wha! Wha! Wha! mock'd the barsmet.\textsuperscript{4}

Emotion and feeling is high:

\textbf{As, play it, Mister Benbow! It's midnight. De clock's strikin' twelve, an... As, play it, Mister Benbow!}\textsuperscript{5}

Hughes' denunciation of the better classes is equally strong.

\textsuperscript{1}Ibid., pp. 231-2.
\textsuperscript{2}Ibid., p. 45.
\textsuperscript{3}Ibid., p. 75.
\textsuperscript{4}Ibid., pp. 96-97.
\textsuperscript{5}Ibid., p. 98.
Speaking of her sister Tempy, Harriett comments: "When niggers git up in the world they act like white folks—don't pay you no mind."

Tempy and her husband are irritable characters, who believe that the quicker Negroes learn to be like whites the better. Hating the blues and spirituals, she advises Negroes to stop being lazy, singing all the time, attending revivals, to get the dollar—"because," she says, "money buys everything, even the respect of white people."

Showing how laboring colored groups are fettered by toil and poverty, Hughes attacks the prevailing system of exploitation and oppression. It is in light of this that Harriett's living in the red light district is justified when she says:

...you run to some white person's back door for every job you get, and then they pay you one dollar for five dollars' worth of work, and fire you whenever they get ready."

Jimboy is never able to get work at home largely because white foreigners are given what little there is. Ammee labors and Aunt Hager are paid frightful wages for their labor; however, they seek consolation in religion. "Don't know what they'll do in heaven," says Ammee, "'cause I'm gonna sit down up there myself."

In Not Without Laughter Hughes is obviously too concerned with social problems. The book hardly has a plot and is more a record with interesting episodes of the lives of members in a poor Negro family than a novel with mounting and unraveling action. The characters, however, are, with the exception of Tempy and her husband, well drawn and convincing. Tempy is

---

1Ibid., pp. 44-45.
2Ibid., p. 255.
3Ibid., p. 231.
too forced and overdrawn. Over-emphasis is evidenced, for instance, in her refusing to go to colored stores. "I want people to know," she says, "that Negroes have a little taste, that's why I always trade at good shops." Comfortably settled, she expends not a penny to relieve the distresses of her mother and sister. Jimboy is a fascinating character, well delineated. But the author is so devoted to giving a realistic picture of their plight that he drops this character out of the story as abruptly and as unexpectedly as he introduces him.

The book is an excellent example of a realistic novel lacking in further artistic merits largely because the author fails to shape and mold his material into literature of beauty and imagination.

Brief mention should be made of several other noteworthy authors who may be associated with this school. They demand consideration for their deep aesthetic sensibilities. Eric Walrond in his Tropic Death deals with lives of the peasants in the British West Indies, but voices little social protest. "He is sardonically aware," observes Sterling Brown, "of the way imperialism is made to work, but his chief purpose is to make the reader 'see', to give him a sense impression of a unique, interesting world." Rudolph Fisher, like McKay, depicts life in Harlem in all its realistic nakedness. He too expresses sentiments on racial unity; he was, before his untimely death, one of the best authors of short stories in the new movement. Wallace Thurman is significant here for his criticism and debunking of the light-complexioned snobbish group.

---

1 Ibid., p. 231.
2 Sterling Brown, op. cit., p. 155.
3 Ibid., p. 156.
In his *Infants of the Spring* he sets forth the criterion that colored novelists must attain before they can create truly great art. "We want to lose our racial identity, as such," his character Raymond asserts, "and be acclaimed for our achievements, if any."  

Although he is not a novelist, Jean Toomer is another author worthy of consideration in this group. More than any other contemporary colored author using the realistic method, he adheres to aesthetic objectives. *In Cane* (1923), his volume of sketches, he frees himself entirely from the restrictions of racial issues and in a true literary sense reveals the artistic value of material in the life of colored people. As Waldo Frank in his preface states, Toomer is an artist who is not interested in race in his work, but who chooses life itself as his domain; for him neither the South nor the race is a problem for him to solve.

Toomer's book appears even more remarkable in light of his themes which are the very ones upon which racial conflicts center. The beautiful, innocent Karintha helplessly becomes an innocent prostitute; the white Becky has begotten two Negro sons; the wanton Carma is the cause of her husband's being in the chain gang; Tom Burwell is lynched and burned for killing Bob Stone, the white youth, who passionately loved the colored Louisa. These he has written in a manner which proves that the theme is the author.

A previous statement implying that, owing to their method, full development of the Negro novelist could hardly have come to its senity in these realists receives further confirmation in valid criticisms made against this school of writers.

---

A penetrating critical interpretation is that these novelists in their devotion to native color failed to grasp the broader, underlying meanings. It is pointed out that they are unaware of the existence of these so-called native Negroid traits in all groups. These characteristic features are, Allison Davis writes, "the secret strength of that part of us which is one with a universal human nature."\(^1\) George W. Jacobs also shares this view, as expressed in the following:

I simply remind the reader that today, granted the same environmental conditions, the Harlem black and the Broadway white fit not dissimilarly into the mold of our mechanised American culture. This preoccupation with the primitive, therefore, belongs more properly to the fields of anthropology and archaeology than to fiction. It no more interprets Harlem than it does Broadway.\(^2\)

This view is not at all superficial. If it has any high degree of accuracy, time may reveal that these novelists are lacking in one of the fundamental requirements of all great art—universalism.

From another viewpoint, there is a strong suggestion that the importance of these works is merely temporary. That these characteristic traits are acquired and exist because of environmental influences. These artists are thus mistaking the temporary and transient for the permanent. "They mistake for color prejudice," Alain Locke argues, "the contemporary love for strong local color, and for condescension the current interest in folk life."\(^3\) Great art is determined by present and future generations.

---


\(^2\) George W. Jacobs, "Negro Authors Must Eat," op. cit., LXXVIII, p. 710.

\(^3\) Alain Locke, "Beauty Instead of Ashes," Nation, LXXVI (April 18, 1928), p. 455.
But literary history shows that works arising out of mere present conditions usually subside into oblivion in the passing panoramas.

The next group of writers, to be considered at this point, satisfied these persons who welcomed portrayals of the cultured educated Negroes. Readers and writers here also sought truth in their fiction.

Therefore, the time was interestingly appropriate for Jessie Fauset, the foremost artist of this school, and her work. She gives analytical representations of a long neglected group in America. She has proved that respectable colored Americans do provide material for great fiction. It had been doubted that this group has sufficient color and appeal. The sentiments of many were expressed by James Weldon Johnson in the following:

It would be straining the credulity of white America to the breaking point for a Negro writer to put out a novel dealing with the wealthy class of colored people.... American Negroes as heroes form no part of white America's concept of the race....

In disproving this theory, Jessie Fauset made one of the most distinct contributions toward the development of the Negro novelist. As is characteristic of great fiction, the most intense human experiences are selected for delineation. It seems a natural law that extreme examples (not transcending humanity) create the most interest, stamp the most indelible impressions. Fauset's characters and incidents embody this valuable element. In *There is Confusion* (1924), the lives of Joanna Marshall, Peter Bye, and Maggie Ellersley are tenebrous; in *love*, and *confusion*, in *Plum Bun* (1928) the dramatic incident in which Angela Murray ignores her

---

sister Virginia to preserve her friendship with a white man is one of many which calls for a skillful probing into man's inner depths; in *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931) the development of Fenton Malory and Malissa Paul's pathetic story is full of life. In her fourth book, *Comedy: American Style* (1933), the tragic circumstances are epitomized in the lives of the Cary family.

Pauset thus demonstrates that there is much drama in the life of this group. Furthermore, she draws this life with such artistic craftsmanship that she must be considered among the best colored writers of fiction. Being among the foremost in the number of books written, she has displayed "an extraordinary imaginative perception,"¹ and has embodied within her pages a spirit of happiness and beauty.²

*Comedy: American Style* is considered her most profound study; for the story, writes W. S. Braithwaite, is a tragedy throughout—is both the most inviting and, at the same time, the most powerful of her books.³

With very little thought for the feelings of the class of colored people with whom she is associating, Mrs. Olivia Cary daily cherishes within herself the idea of emerging into a world where the comforts of life may be achieved without the disadvantages of color. Unrelentingly determined to shape the destinies of her children in making them conform to her way of thinking, she brings on much unhappiness and tragedy. In her dictatorial manner she sends her daughter Teresa off to a Boston Latin school to mingle with whites. But Teresa's love for her race is great;

²Ibid., p. 27.
³Ibid., p. 28.
she befriends the only colored girl there and later agrees to elope with the dark Henry Bates. But she fails to elude her ceaselessly vigilant mother, who appears in the Boston railway station just in time to annul the engagement. As a result of her mother's rule of the thumb, Teresa eventually marries a French professor, only to settle down to a dull, unhappy life.

The story of the son Oliver is touchingly pathetic. Despised because of his dark complexion, forced from home as much as possible, and deprived of motherly love and sympathy, Oliver serves white guests as a waiter and butler for his mother. Accidentally learning of his mother's deepseated color complex, he becomes deeply hurt and kills himself. There is the other story of the scrupulous Phebe Grant and Christopher Cary. Although failing to get along with Nicholas Campbell, Phebe clings to her principles in refusing the young, rich and white, Lewellyn Nash. She marries Christopher and together they undertake to repair their damaged lives. They succeed in taking care of Phebe's mother and in restoring Dr. Cary, Sr. to health. But Olivia persists in exerting her set color preference. Forced from the house, she goes to France where after realizing Teresa's unhappiness, she winds up in an unsettled, unhappy predicament. The heroic efforts of Phebe in effecting restoration are almost fruitless; and, in temporary disparit, she almost has a rendezvous with her former lover, Campbell, who married the successful Mariee. Her indomitable spirit saves her from the assignation and she returns to her husband, to peace and happiness.

Jessie Fausset has strong convictions on race pride and glorification. As a result, there is much evidence of her imposing her ideas on her stories and characters. There are three general classifications of these
views: first, those pertaining directly to the various types of Negroes; second, reflections on the handicap of the race in general; third, defense of women.

All of her novels deal with the better, more fortunate colored people. In her introduction to *The Chinaberry Tree*, Zona Gale mentions the little attention previously given to this group, in pointing out that the educated and uneducated New Englander, the Middle Westerner, the Canadian had entered fiction.¹ Jessie Fauset herself makes an acknowledgment, which may well apply to all her works, as she speaks of the educated Negro in the following:

"Briefly he is a dark American who wears his joy and rue very much as does the white American. He may wear it with some differences but it is the same joy and the same rue. So in spite of other intentions I seem to have pointed a moral."²

Strikingly similar to McKay in her expressed purpose to achieve race pride and solidarity, she chooses directly opposite means of achieving the common end. Contending that no class of men ever remained static, she urges colored people to be the equal and even the superior of whites.³ This she believes would go far in breaking down prejudice. Thus she pictures colored people measuring up and excelling whites in whatever they undertake.

Colored Philadelphia society in her novels is "organised as definitely as, and even a little more carefully than, Philadelphia white society...."⁴ Alex in her first book, among other later characters, graduates from

---

² Jessie Redmond Fauset, "Foreword," *op. cit.*, p. x.
³ Ibid., p. 97.
⁴ There is Confusion (New York, 1924), p. 31.
Harvard with honors and the coveted Phi Beta Kappa Key. Maggie demonstrates her superiority in supervising her branch stores with good salary in three large cities. In *Plum Bun* Miss Powell wins the scholarship to study abroad, but declines the award because of prejudice. In *Comedy: American Style*, Teresa teaches several white students at the University of Pennsylvania; the Davies are caterers, serving the city's most exclusive; and Marise becomes a great actress.

Other characters are school teachers, doctors, successful business people. They all have an intense interest in all fields of education. Olivia, for instance, "read, made notes, covering a wide range of English reading, geography, psychology, biology, and especially poetry."¹

Fauset reveals in her works her belief that race pride and superiority must be achieved through a repudiation of those elements found among the lower groups—not as much a racial love, she contends, but a racial pride.² Negroes should look out for life first and then color. Again recurring to Zona Gale, she rejects the color, comedy, dialect, idiom and popular appeal of the uneducated Negro.³ Her main characters never reflect whatever suggests the typically Negroid. Joanna in *There is Confusion* had never been religious or dramatic; and believing that it was unnatural, she despises persons who made deep, emotional display. Although living among them, Maggie lives a life greatly separate from that of the uneducated


²____________, *Plum Bun*, p. 218.

³____________, *Comedy: American Style*, p. 287.

Miss Sparrow and her friend, who spent much time attending churches, strawberry festivals, lodge-meetings, funerals.

In light of these views, it is obvious that Fauset would not have the same views as McKay in regards to Africa. Through Roger Fielding in *Plum Bun* she reveals her contempt for the movement relative to making the American and the African Negroes' problems identical.

She further shows that persons in this group do not come frequently in direct contact with whites; however, they too are perturbed over the lack of opportunities as the other groups. As a young medical student, Peter in *There is Confusion* is almost discouraged by prejudice; he doesn't get a chance to study certain cases because of prejudice—"as though diseases picked out different races."  

Angela in *Plum Bun* learns at a very early age that, owing to discrimination, the good things of life are not equally distributed; that merit is not always rewarded; and that hard labor is not necessarily fruitful. Proclaiming that nothing in the world is so hard to face as the problem of being colored in America, the author in *Comedy: American Style* states the following:

"Prejudice, this silly scorn, this unwelcome patronage... combined into a crushing load under which a black man must struggle to get himself upright before he could even attempt the ordinary business of life."

Writing at a time when the general attitude of mind caused serious difficulty to the Negro woman, Fauset also uses her pen in voicing the sentiments and protests of this group. In speaking on behalf of women, Joanna in the first novel tells Peter that love for a woman often means

---

1 Jessie Fauset, *There is Confusion*, p. 155.
having many children, preparing thousand meals, picking up laundry and having no time to herself for thinking and studying. The author states that Angela in Plum Bun knew that men have more chances than women to enjoy life; "coloured men than coloured women, white men than white women."¹ Resenting certain unwarranted notions that men have of women, Pauset herself states, "one of the mysteries of the ages will be solved with the answer to the question: Why do men consider women imcalculable?"² After her irregularities with Roger and in estrangement, Angela says: "Godd, isn't there any place where man's responsibility to woman begins."³

The discussion thus far has revealed that Jessie Pauset had a deep aesthetic sense, and aimed to tell her stories wholly in that light without pointing morals. However, as has been shown, she had her own deep-seated conclusions which she injected in her stories. With the probable exception of The Chimaberry Tree, her stories are predicated upon her social convictions, to the extent that many of the weaknesses in her fiction are a result.

That she does have a thesis to prove is easily seen. Applying Tennyson's verse—"there is confusion, trouble and pain worse than death"—she depicts in There is Confusion the lives of mulattoes, who, having to contend with the race problem find the difficulty of living an ordinary life greatly augmented. Threatened with submersion, Joanna, Peter, and Maggie find their lives twisted and confused by prejudice. It is with

¹ Jessie Pauset, There is Confusion, p. 95.
² __________, Plum Bun, p. 88.
³ __________, There is Confusion, p. 168.
⁴ __________, Plum Bun, p. 235.
love and courage that they achieve a pattern enabling them to find a way out of chaos, and to prepare to face the difficulties of ordinary life.

Showing that this group is unique, she argues that its members, should not go their separate ways apart from the uneducated masses. Thus, Angela Murray passes over to the white race and becomes engaged to the rich young white man. But the marriage never takes place. Roger returns and throws himself at her feet, but she flatly refuses to marry him and later marries the colored Matthew.

As a result of her projecting her themes, she resorts to devices, which recall Chesmatt. Her frequent use of accidents, chance and forced incidents make her stories often unconvincing. In There is Confusion, she makes her characters strive to be great so that they inevitably contend violently against racial barriers. The impression of characters being forced, for instance, may be gathered from the following: "Joanna was really sick at heart to think that her beautiful dreams of success... might not be realized. She wanted to be great herself, but she did not want that greatness to overshadow Peter." There are many notable examples of this fault in Comedy: American Style. Oliver's birth, and death; Teresa's school experiences, engagement, and subsequent marriage in France; Phoebe's temporary flight and return—all are evidence of faults in craftsmanship.

Furthermore, the author crowds her novels with characters, which only in few instances come to life. They become types and puppets conveying her views. Superior, noble, successful, capable, they are seldom presented in

---

1 Jessie Fauset, There is Confusion, p. 182.
an unflattering light without apologetic explanation. These characters who fall, Olivia and Teresa, for example, are punished for what they represent. Two of her most striking characters are Oliver and Olivia. Oliver's death is very much unwarranted, but the author explains this as well as the character's unreasonable, unnatural acceptance of his mother's treatment in the following:

This little fellow, so richly endowed by the fates at birth with beauty, ability and intellect, was gifted also with two qualities which were to prove his undoing—a great need to bestow and to receive love....

On the other hand, Olivia is a type character in her unwaveringly fanatical desire to be white; this causes her to unreasonably commit pain and suffering for others. These characters are outstanding but not alive.

In applauding the achievements of the race, Fauset often dulls the effect of her books. Her references to well known persons and organizations suggest journalism and prevent the free play of imagination, on the part of the readers as well as the author.

In spite of these faults, Jessie Fauset cannot be denied a place among the foremost colored authors as well as among outstanding women novelists in America. To be sure, history reveals that many a great master of fiction reflect weaknesses in his work.

Another woman novelist preoccupied with the better classes of colored people is Nella Larsen. She also advocates race pride and pictures her characters as being happier among their own. She is equally devoted to

---

1Jessie Fauset, *Comedy; American Style*, p. 189.

illustrating how foolish and unfair prejudiced whites are. Her characters also "pass" to avoid petty annoyances and minor irritating experiences. She portrays how mulattos suffer tragic experiences because of their peculiar status.

In *Passing* (1929) she illustrates her conclusion that those who go over to the other race seldom achieve happiness. Although she disapproves of it for permanent arrangements, she condones it for temporary purposes. "It excites our contempt," the character Irene Redfield says, "and yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it."¹

After many years, Irene Redfield meets her childhood chum, Clare Kendry. Because Clare has married a white man Irene tries her best to avoid her. But Clare is persistent and succeeds in returning to her own people. Irene's eventual acceptance of Clare in her social sphere illustrates her attitude toward "passing".

In *Quicksand* (1929) she exemplifies the theme of race solidarity. Dissatisfied with teaching in a small town, Helga Crane returns to Chicago, only to be refused by her uncle's white wife. After receiving assistance from a professional woman, fighting the cause of the race, Helga goes to Denmark. Longing to return home to her own race, she refuses the rich white artist and returns home. The book ends with her rashly marrying a minister and having so many children that she almost dies.

Although Larsen's outlook is very similar to that of Faulset, she is at variance on several issues. She agrees that marriage often means having many children, but she recognizes this as a help to the race.

Bearing out this viewpoint, the character James Vayle observes:

If the race is to progress they [upper classes] are the ones who must have children; for each generation has to wrestle again with the obstacles of the preceding ones, lack of money, education, and background.¹

In comparison with Fauset, Larsen as a novelist lacks depth and imaginative use of her material. She too is faulty in developing her stories by forced incidents. A notable instance is the scene in Passing in which Clare Kendry's white husband calls her 'Nig'. He is unaware of her race and at the same time expresses a violent hatred for Negroes. The author's point here is that those who "pass" over will not be happy. In Quicksand Helga's leaving America is quite unreasonable. But the author gets her to a foreign country to illustrate her motive.

The works of these artists are still more admirable in light of the difficulty which they faced. The group with which they deal does not lend itself to objective portrayal as readily as the larger groups. The former is representative of racial achievement to a comparative few.² They are so meticulous in exhibiting high standards that on the surface at least there is an air of artificiality.³

The third distinguishable group in this period is comprised of writers who were specifically concerned with the problem novel. Their primary interest was in social issues rather than in the aesthetics of the novel. The earliest notable writer of this group was Walter White, whose The Fire in the Flint and Flight were written in the early years of the Renaissance period. Also worthy of attention is Dr. DuBois, whose versatility

¹Mella Larsen, Quicksand (New York, 1928), pp. 251-252.
³Ibid.
of scope extends him over to this period. These novels are significant because although they do not differ from those of the preceding periods in material and subjectivity, they reflect the general development of the Negro novelist in his adherence to realism.

Touching upon almost all the abuses suffered by the race in the *Fire* and the *Flint*, White tells in terse realism the story of Dr. Kenneth Harper who, after completing his training in Northern Universities, returns to his home in Central City, Georgia to practise medicine. Believing that conditions have improved, he sets about making his living in an independent way. However, he learns that strong forces of race animosity and suppression cannot be ignored. He is gradually drawn into racial conflicts and is finally killed and lynched.

The movement in the story is swift, and the action is quite melo-dramatic. There is a forced and over-conscious workmanship, which is obvious throughout the book. In showing that race unity is imperative, White has Dr. Harper believing that if every Negro "minded" his own business there would be no race problem. "Papa got along all right here in this town for more than fifty years," he says, "and I reckon I can do it too."\(^1\)

In showing that no Negro can afford to assume such an attitude, White describes a gradual change in the attitude of the character. As a result, Dr. Harper appears exceedingly dull. On the other hand, his brother Bob Harper is so impetuous and passionate that he hates every white man and ceaselessly talks, eats and sleeps on racial issues. Wallace Thurman considers the work a direct descendent of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and as having

---

a similar effect on the public. ¹

Despite this, it is a gripping story and surpasses Chesnutt's stories in its realistic representation, since it is void of those mysterious and surprising elements, which were conventions of the older writers.

DuBois in *Dark Princess* (1928) shows a deeper realistic sense than in *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911). In his later novel he studies the race question from a broader viewpoint. Analyzing national and international racial affairs, he presents a panoramic picture of the colored race in America. Of the opinion that colored people are advancing at such a rate that they are becoming more satisfied than complaining, he shows that in politics they are so much concerned with their individual interests that they fail to get church people and the young educated men of ability. The better class of colored people show little enthusiasm over the race question. He is further of the opinion that it is the mission of the darker peoples to guide mankind to health and happiness; to exterminate hate, poverty, crime, sickness, war.

It is against this background that the militant, impetuous Matthew Towns and the Princess Kautilya unfold. He quits the University of Manhattan because of prejudice and goes to France where he meets the Indian Princess. Attending the World Congress of Races there, they fall in love, only to separate. Matthew returns to America to become a Pullman porter. Through fruitless efforts to fight prejudice and to destroy a train, upon which members of the Ku Klux Klan are travelling, he is involved in a criminal offense and sentenced to five years in prison. He is saved, however, by the crafty, colored politician Sammy. Through

him Matthews meets and marries Sara Andrews. But politics disgust
Matthews and he unceremoniously forsakes and eventually divorces Sara
to marry the Princess, who reappears intermittently throughout the story.

As has been mentioned, this work is noteworthy in the group of
purpose novels of the period in that it reflects the development in
realism of these authors. To be sure, there is a mingling of fantasy,
mystery, and realism, which makes many incidents unconvincing.¹ Nevertheless, there is much evidence of a thorough young realism which cannot be
found in any of the authors prior to the new movement. This is embodied,
for instance, in picturing Matthews going to prison, in having the Princess
an expected mother before she is married to the hero.

All the novelists considered in this Renaissance period them, not
excepting DuBois, are realists; they pictured those scenes from life, which
they believed embodied truth. Nevertheless, although they sought similar,
almost identical ends, they differ greatly in their social outlook. It
has been shown that the group, of which McKay is the foremost representa-
tive, tries to picture the universal through the lowly Negro. Fauset and
Larsen study the educated colored people. And the school of White and
DuBois concern themselves, in a practically matter of fact manner, with

¹Matthew, for instance, has not seen the Princess for a long time;
he yearns for years to see or to hear from her. Yet all during that time
he unwittingly has a letter from her, which he accidentally opens at a
very opportune time. One of the most illogical of all the incidents is
the scene in which he is a pullman porter and accidentally touches a white
woman lying in a berth on the breast as a white man enters. He flees
and his friend Jimmy is mistaken for him and lynched on the train. More-
ever, the subsequent incident in which Matthews and the character
Perigua attempt to destroy the train carrying the Ku Kluxers is equally
unconvincing.
the persistent race problems. Moreover, these writers represent conflicting views and groups.

The explanation, which has previously been made, is that these writers interpreted their material in light of their personal experiences and convictions. They selected and rejected at will, revealing only that which produce the effect they intended and even in many instances distorting their data from life for the same purpose.

All of these writers lacked the method of the extreme realist, a naturalist, who seeks to achieve the whole truth. Evidence substantiating the validity of this assertion is found in the work of Richard Wright. In his *Native Son* (1940), he uses the naturalistic method and creates a work which surpasses in craftsmanship, objectivity, and revelation of truth, all novels of preceding colored authors. Indeed, against the background and works of all Negro fiction in the past, his novel may be considered the epitome, and, furthermore, it may be said that in him, the Negro novelist has truly arrived. Wright himself is aware of this fact, as evidenced in his own statement:

...my race possessed no fictional works dealing with such problems, had no background in such sharp and critical testing of experience, no novels that went with a deep and fearless will down to the dark roots of life.¹

In order to analyze adequately his novel, there is a necessity to set forth certain basic concepts upon which his method is based.

A naturalist has as his cardinal principles, objectivity, behaviorism, and determinism; and, in this, he relates himself to the scientist. He seeks to determine the conduct, behavior, or reactions of a given character,

in light of his past experiences, as he contends against certain known social forces. This theory had its greatest impetus, if not its formal genesis, in Émile Zola, who, in relating art to science states: "The Experimentalist is the examining magistrate of nature; we novelists are the examining magistrates of men and their passions."² Like a scientist, he studies hereditary and environmental forces.³

He analyzes the native equipment of his character and critically examines social surroundings. Through his findings he learns the personality of the character and the effects of the environmental pressure, favorable or unfavorable. With these conclusions he is thus able to predict or to determine the conduct of his character under any similar social influences, wherever he may be, or wherever he may go; or of other similar personalities under those same influences; he is able to foretell the interaction between society and the individual. Thus, in a word, through his objectivity, he seeks to determine behavior. Carl H. Grabo explains this as follows:

"Human conduct is the inevitable product of hereditary forces modified by environment. The experimentalist in fiction seeks ... by his selection of characters whose hereditary "values" are known and by placing these characters amid forces of environment whose strength likewise is calculated, to observe the inevitable results."⁴

These results to the artist constitute truth; they reveal human passion, motive, conduct; they explain ambition, courage, greed, fear.⁵

---

⁴ Carl H. Grabo, op. cit., p. 252.
⁵ Ibid.
Furthermore, the nature of the naturalistic method precludes any intrusively personal elements, and it is thus of great aesthetic value to the author. This novelist is hardly more responsible for the revelations of truth in his work than the people supplying him his data; he is "strictly conditioned by circumstances, and it is his duty to discover in the characters the fashions shaping causes."\(^1\)

This novelist, therefore, need not concern himself too much about plot with its increasing interest and tension. The hero, as such, is always the center of interest and life is depicted through his eyes; he determines the sequence of incidents; he makes the story in struggling against the forces in his environment. The drama is in life itself. Moreover, all things being equal, to the naturalist, there is no such thing as chance occurrences or unexpected coincidences; to him, successes and failures in life are equally distributed.\(^2\) Character, then, is not, as in the case of many past novels, clamped in a straight jacket and made subservient to situation.\(^3\)

Also, this method demands that the artist make use of imagination and emotional power in bringing the dull facts of science to life.\(^4\) And, finally, it enables the naturalist, simultaneously, yet not deliberately and intrusively, to convey corrective, recuperative measures.

Richard Wright's method in *Native Son* is evident throughout the book. Although gripping and tense the story is, in light of the foregoing

---

\(^1\) Pelham Edgar, *op. cit.*, p. 235.


\(^3\) Ibid., p. 254.

\(^4\) Ibid., p. 270.
discussion, not the prime element. The character and forces acting upon
him are the significant aspects. Bigger Thomas, an uneducated colored
youth of twenty years in age, lives with his poor, meek mother, sister
and brother in a small, time-worn house, with one bedroom, on the South
Side of Chicago. He spends much time with his friends, Jack and Gus, in
poolrooms, where they scheme their petty robberies and have their frequent
quarrels. He is taken off the W.P.A. and given a job as chauffeur and
handy man in the home of the rich realtor, Mr. Dalton.

Bigger's first assignment is to drive the daughter, Mary Dalton, to
a lecture; instead, he disobeys instructions at her request and takes her
to Jan, her Communist lover. He befriends Bigger, urging him to eat and
drink with them. Never having previously experienced such friendliness
and cordiality from a white man, Bigger is thrust into a state of con-
fusion; however, he awkwardly comments. Discharging Jan several blocks
from the house, Bigger proceeds to take the helplessly intoxicated Mary
to her bed. While in the bedroom, Mary's blind mother enters; and, to
prevent being discovered through any possible cutories from the sleeping
girl, Bigger smother and accidentally murders her. To cover up the crime,
he burns the body; and, later spurred on by other impulses, he devises a
stupid scheme of planting a kidnap note in the Dalton's home to extort
ransom money. He forces his girl friend Bessie to aid him, but later
realizes the futility of attaining the money when Mary's charred bones are
found in the furnace. With suspicions now on him, he fears taking Bessie
with him or leaving her behind and finally kills her.

A police hunt ensues, resulting in much risting; Negro homes are
searched from house to house and room to room. After an exciting flight,
Bigger is captured on a rooftopt and guarded by troops through a raging mob. The Communist lawyer, Max, defends him, pointing out that although Bigger committed the crimes, not he, but society is basically guilty. Bigger's fate, nevertheless, is death.

Richard Wright conscientiously adheres to the naturalistic formula in this book. His inspiration in choosing the character Bigger grew out of his observation and study of living persons. He came to realize that every human being is an inheritor of certain fundamental emotions, needs, and impulses; and that in life, working with, rather than against, them is imperative.\footnote{Richard Wright, \textit{How Bigger Was Born} (New York, 1940), p. xxxvii.} Thus, there was need in Bigger for a whole life, for an expression and development of the natural inalienable rights of man.

Speaking to this point, the author writes:

\ldots there was that American part of Bigger which is the heritage of us all, that part of him which we get from our seeing and hearing, from school, from the hopes and dreams of our friends, that part of him which the common people of America... take for granted.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. xxxviii.}

He continues asserting that every man and woman \textit{"should have the opportunity to realize himself, to seek his own individual fate and goal, his own peculiar and untranslatable destiny."}\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}}

Wright further understood that nature provides the organism with certain impelling, protective drives, which become evident when thwarting experiences and circumstances are confronted. \textit{"There seems to hover somewhere in that dark part of all our lives,"} he states, \textit{"...an objectless,}
timeless, spaceless element of primal fear and dread.\footnote{Ibid.} But fear is not the only preserving inborn response—love, ecstasy, submission, trust equally serve that organic function.\footnote{Ibid., p. xxxix.} It is here that the "springs" of religion and kindness or rebellion and hatred are found.\footnote{Ibid.}

From this stage, the type of personality developed depends largely upon the environment. Wright expresses this excellently in the following:

\ldots the environment supplies the instrumentalities through which the organism expresses itself, and if that environment is warped \ldots the mode and manner of behavior will be affected.\footnote{Ibid., p. xxvi.}

Thus Bigger was in his earliest years neither a beast nor a saint; he was a bundle of potentialities. And environmental forces were not conducive to a positive, wholesome development. He belongs to a poverty-stricken family living under shocking conditions; he is the member of a suppressed, exploited, and terrorized race. In the book, the rich real estate operator, Mr. Dalton, owns the dilapidated house in which the Thomases live, and is representative of a powerful group of whites who cleverly exploit Negroes. He gives much money to help Negroes; but this philanthropy is based on his own selfish motives. He rents his poorest houses to Negroes and charges them exorbitant prices, far in excess of what whites pay. At the same time, his donations to colored people serve to keep them complacent. Bigger tells Gus that he'll be glad when summer comes because they get more heat from the winter sun than from the
The physical aspects of their surroundings allure, dazzle, and excite their senses, but they find attempts to achieve happiness futile. Bigger and Gus observe planes writing in the sky, and confidently believe that they could do the same if they had a chance; they go the movies and see only white faces flashed on the screen. They are denied equal opportunities in all fields, and thus they feel themselves bottled in by a white world. keenly aware of this, Bigger tells Gus he is unable to banish such thoughts:

"They don't let us do nothing."

"Who?"

"The white folks."

"You talk like you just now finding that out," Gus said.

"Naw. But I just can't get used to it. I swear to God I can't. I know I oughtn't think about it, but I can't help it. Everytime I think about it I feel like somebody's pekin' a red-hot iron down my throat...."

Furthermore, Bigger did not have the advantages of being educated; out of school and work, he spent much of his time in petty crimes. Moreover, he lacked a force which has long served as a means of averting dejection and despair. He did not have religion and was therefore apathetic to its influences. His mother was devotedly religious, but only irked him again and again in her Christian remonstrances. An excellent illustrative scene is that in the prison where almost all the whites and colored characters are assembled; she supplicates as follows:

---

1 Richard Wright, Native Son (New York, 1940), p. 15.

2 Ibid., p. 17.
"The Lord knows I did all I could for you and your sister and brother....When I heard the news of what happened, I got on my knees and turned my eyes to God and asked Him if I had raised you wrong. I asked Him to let me bear your burden if I did wrong by you...."1

But her touching prostration is to little avail; Bigger merely retorts, "Forget me, Ma."2

Owing to this interplay of hereditary and social forces, Bigger has become maladjusted. He has become a victim of behavior complexes, and he resorts to certain escape and defense mechanisms. His behavior thus becomes characteristic: he is unable to "get along" well with people; he delights in responses which will hurt other people; he provokes minor and major disturbances to hurt his acquaintances or even his friends.3 His spirit is one of rebellion, defiance, and he feels "put upon."4

"This behavior," concludes A. H. Arlitt, "is based on a general or specific feeling of inferiority."5

It is out of fear that Bigger hates his family; he realizes that they are suffering and that he is unable to help them. He knows that if he as well as they were to feel the full shame and misery of their lives, he would be "swept out of himself with fear and despair." Against this background he assumes an attitude of iron reserve toward his family.

Thus, after calling him the biggest fool she ever saw, his mother never

1Ibid., p. 254.
2Ibid.
4Ibid.
5Ibid.
understands him; he heckles his sister incessantly; but with his
brother, there is peace; for, misconceived, he has an admiration for
Bigger’s apparent superiority. With his friends he causes continual
strife. In regards to whites, Bigger’s fear is exposed, and the mingling
of these two conflicting response patterns brings on confused and even
chaotic reactions.

An almost perfect example of this is the scene in which Bigger and
his gang plan to rob Blum, a white man. They all are afraid, and, when
Gus’s suspicions regarding Bigger’s character are apparent, Bigger’s
confused emotions burst forth like a volcano:

Mixed images of violence ran like sand through his mind,
dry and fast, vanishing. He could stab Gus with his knife;
he could slay him; he could kick him....

These forces created in Bigger a strong rebellious spirit. After
watching the plane vanish, he says:

Maybe they right in not wanting us to fly.... 'Cause if I
took a plane up I’d take a couple of bombs along and drop
'em as sure as hell....

The significance of Wright’s technique is that it enables him to
surmount racial barriers; herein lies one of the greatest aspects of the
book. It is not a race novel; it is a tragic story of youth—the youth
of all races—imposed upon by society.

During his period of experimentation, the author discovered that
there were millions of the Bigger Thomas type among all races. He interest-
ingly reveals this in the following:

...the shadings and nuances which were filling in Bigger’s
picture came, not so much from Negro life, as from the lives

\[1\] Richard Wright, Native Son, p. 25.
of whites I met and grew to know. I began to sense that they had their own kind of Bigger Thomas behavioristic pattern which grew out of a more subtle and broader frustration.\(^1\)

As evidence testing the accuracy of this conclusion he cites the waves of recurring crime, the many silly fads, the fickleness in public taste, the hysteria and fears.\(^2\)

The author has therefore transcended racial boundaries and has captured the universal. In countries the world over Bigger Thomases exist because "modern experiences were creating types of personalities whose existence ignored racial and national lines of demarcation."\(^3\)

The Communist lawyer, Max, chooses this as his theme in his defense of Bigger, as indicated in the following brief passage:

My plea is for more than one man and one people... for if we can encompass the life of this man and find out how his life and fate are linked to ours—if we can do this, perhaps we shall find the key to our future....\(^4\)

Furthermore, the novel embodies remedial, ameliorative suggestions. When a Bigger Thomas states that the race needs a leader, that colored people should organise to fight more effectively, or, to select another phrase of the scene, that the poorer classes of whites should overthrow the capitalistic system—he is speaking as many Germans, Russians, Japanese. For all Bigger Thomases, white and black, are "tense, afraid, nervous, hysterical, and restless."\(^5\)

\(^1\)Richard Wright, How Bigger Was Born, p. 336.
\(^2\)Ibid.
\(^3\)Ibid.
\(^4\)Ibid., Native Son, p. 324.
\(^5\)Ibid., How Bigger Was Born, p. 336.
Thus, there is the subtle teaching that the Bigger Thomases will not support the status quo, unless there is a change, in which the ills and abuses are eradicated. These are the ones who will eat more quickly to gaudy, hysterical leaders.

In his How Bigger Was Born, Wright well describes how meticulous as well as objective he was in dealing with his character. As a child, he had known many Bigger Thomases of his own race, the so-called "bad niggers," who terrorised their playmates; who refused to pay rent to their rich white landlords; who went to white theaters without paying; who violated all the taboos and rode in Jim Crow street cars without paying and sat wherever they pleased. Everyone of these Biggers met with a violent death.\(^1\)

Against this background, then, the tragic story of Bigger Thomas unfolds. The character himself creates the dramatic incidents and forms the plot. Realising this, Wright says, "When the time came for writing, what had made him and what he meant constituted my plot."\(^2\) To maintain a deeper sense of reality, Bigger is at the center of viewpoint as well as interest throughout the story.

Furthermore, the work is enlivened with the author's imagination which enabled him to bring his dull, concrete findings to life. He speaks of the imagination, and then the emotional element, as "a kind of self-generating cement which glued his \[ the novelist's \] facts together"\(^3\)--and

---

\(^1\)Richard Wright, How Bigger Was Born, pp. xv ff.

\(^2\)Ibid., p. xliii.

\(^3\)Ibid., p. xiii.
his emotions as a kind of dark and obscure designer of those facts.¹

This discussion has proved that Native Son is not a mere melodramatic, thrice-told tale that the superficial reader may contend. On the contrary, it is a great work of art and deserves a monumental standing in the fiction of, first, colored writers; and, secondly, America; for it is a novel which knows no racial limitations. The awards which the author has received for this artistic creation already confirm the greatness of the book.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The necessity of the colored novelist for a deep aesthetic sense is as great now as it ever was. It is true that during slavery and the years of Reconstruction and its aftermath, a colored author who gained the attention of the reading public found it extremely difficult to forego the opportunity of voicing the protests of his people for purely artistic purposes. Although certain ramifications of this problem have changed, he faces the same impediment. Having made surprisingly rapid strides in not a few respects since slavery, the race still suffers from mountainous inequalities. Not only having attained a very small share of the country's wealth, especially in light of the industrial and economic growth of the nation, the Negro still suffers from much abuse and exploitation. Unfortunate for his art, the Negro novelist finds himself almost unavoidably woven into this web.

Moreover, although the contemporary colored author does not face the problem of finding publishers and an audience, he is confronted with a public of conflicting influences. Even in trying to forget his race and to write life as he sees it, he finds himself inadvertently offending many of his own race. There are many colored persons—and this group is not confined to merely the more educated and prosperous Negroes—who clamor for writers among them to propagate the facts revealing the accomplishments

---

of the race in spite of suppression and handicaps. Also, in handling
his racial material in a spirit of catholicity and determination to
reveal truth, his revelation of disheartening facts often leads to a
destructive, rather than constructive, effect. Not to mention the masses
of readers who misunderstand and critically misinterpret novelists in
general, he finds that his white audience, still prejudiced, is prone to
misconstrue and even distort his faithful portrayals to perpetrate ideas
and notions detrimental to the advancement of the Negro race.

Here, then, is the reason, or at any rate one of the reasons, that
the colored author must have a profound aesthetic sense. He must forget
race and prejudice; he must leave the task of solving social problems to
others not primarily interested in literature. To believe that the
adherence to any one aesthetic formula will solve the difficulty of
propaganda is to misunderstand. It is a matter of fact that the naturalis-
tic method, which virtually insures objectivity, is passing.\(^1\) Although
the facts with which the naturalistic novelist works are brought to life
through his emotional and imaginative power, his photographic, literal,
naked, and even unabridged representations become tiresome.\(^2\) There is
thus a demand for other methods. It cannot be overemphasized that there
is no method which will permanently free the novelist of intrusive concern
with reforming, or transforming, society, unless he himself is imbued with
an unrelenting artistic spirit.

However, once the capable colored novelist maintains this objective
attitude, which is a requirement of art, his right to a place in American

\(^1\) "Towards a New Realism," The Saturday Review of Literature, IX

\(^2\) Ibid.
literature, indeed, in the literature of the world, is undeniable. In his transcendence of the narrow confines of race he will be, not of Negro literature, but of literature itself. Of course, he may well use the rich material which the epical and dramatic history of the race embodies; for it is significant that the very materials in Negro life which were once rejected as being artistically useless are increasingly becoming the very pillars of American art and literature. However, it should not be assumed that the colored author has a monopoly on this rich source. To be sure, he does have a natural priority in this field. Whether or not he can capture more truth in his portrayal of this life than artists of other races and, also, whether or not he should use materials growing out of life in other races are superficial questions. For, first and foremost, it is the artist himself who is the prime and determinant factor. The man as artist is of no race, save the human race; he selects his materials, not within the restricted bounds of color, but from life and the universe.

Another objection to the traditional classification of the colored author is that the great novel knows no racial restraint. So long as it does not concern itself with transient, evanescent values, this novel, in its reproduction of life and objectification of values, meets certain fundamental needs. As a result, it becomes a classic, which is handed down from one generation to another. Although their taste in fiction may vary, people anywhere at anytime can read and share the same joys and sorrows in this kind of novel as if they were their own, no matter who the author or what the origin of the work may be.


127.

In conclusion, then, the expression "Negro novelist" is now an anachronism. His development has been a gradual crystallization of his artistic ability and his aesthetic consciousness. There is undeniable evidence that had this process ripened earlier, such a novelist as Chesnutt could have marked the maturation and the arrival, by at least four decades sooner, of an artist from the colored race, who would not have known those imprisoning limitations. As to the general literary disabilities of the age, it may be stated that the appearance of a genius breaking through repelling conventions would have been just as likely among colored authors as it was among others. Recurrence may again be made to Chesnutt, whose works were striking accomplishments in breaking away from the trivial conventions in fiction.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Critical Material


128.


Fiction


The Strength of Gideon and Other Stories. New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1900.


**Historical and Biographical Material**


- *Three Years in Europe; or, Places I Have Seen and People I Have Met.* London: C. Gilpin, 1852.


Periodicals


Jacobs, C. W. "Negro Authors Must Eat," Nation, CCLVIII (June 12, 1929), pp. 710-11.


. "We Turn to Prose," Opportunity, X (February, 1932) pp. 40-44.


"To Much of the Truth." SRL, IX (April 8, 1933), pp. 521 ff.