

BLACK LITERATURE

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with Negro characters as stupid clowns, who had no problems that could not be solved by the moral equivalent of a stick of red peppermint candy or a pint of red whisky. Charles Chesnut (1858-1932), the first black novelist of unquestioned talent, while drawing comparisons between whites, near-whites and Negroes—generally to the disadvantage of the latter, advises whites that "Surely it were better to try some other weapon than scorn and contumely and hard words upon a people of our common race the human race . . . for we are all children of a common Father, forget it as we may, and each one of us is . . . his brother's keeper. And Paul L. Dunbar (1872-1906), probably the chief (black) architect of the minstrel tradition, who wrote most of his poetry in dialect and on subjects which permitted him to display his "finely ironic perceptions of the Negro's limitations", was moved to protest that the white audience neglected his poems in standard English, but lavished praise upon his "jingle(s) in a broken tongue."

By the turn of the century, the minstrel tra-

dition in American literature seemed indestructible. So long as they worked in it, black writers could count on the white audience's approval of their "coon songs", "nigger dialect" and the ridiculous situations set forth in "darky stories" not only as great entertainment, but as proof of Negro inferiority. And Negro inferiority explained the Negro's inferior status in the social order.

It is no wonder, then, that *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) was adversely criticized by white Southerners. A review that appeared as editorial comment in the *Nashville Banner* was typical: "This book is dangerous for the negro to read, for it will only excite discontent and fill his imagination with things that do not exist, or things that should not bear upon his mind." The things that should not bear upon the Negro's mind were, in summary, civil rights, the concept of race pride, and a belief in human equity.

The Souls of Black Folk, by William E. B. DuBois (1868-1963), helped to determine the emotional tone, anticipated the direction of thought, and suggested some of the themes that would occupy most black American writers for a half a century. The tone was—once again—protest; the ideological direction was toward interracial cooperation and integration; the themes were the defiant assertion of black humanity and human equality. And all these would find expression not only in literature, but in social and political action that started in the period of the first World War and has never stopped. But that is another story.



Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois, a foremost American scholar and dean of black persons of letters.

A few talented black writers—mostly poets—did not permit DuBois to influence their work. William S. Braithwaite, Ann Spencer, Alice Dunbar Nelson and (in his strange middle period and in mid career) James Weldon Johnson preferred to think of themselves simply as literary artists whose aim was simply to meet the standards of "universality" in subject matter, craftsmanship and form. So they composed their "raceless" poems on death and dreams and love and nature and home, and published them in such literary magazines as *the Century*, *Outlook*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *Bookman*, and the *Literary Digest*.

Nor did all the black writers for whom race consciousness was the emotional matrix, the psychological touchstone, and the final test of perception and insight have the same kind and quality of talent—though those with the brightest gifts were both novelists and poets. Jean Toomer (1894-1967) was a black writer only briefly. His book, *Cane* (1923), structures poems, stories, prose sketches and a "fabliau" into a work of superb literary art which the author called a novel. In *Bambo* (1929) and *Banana Bottom* (1933), Claude McKay failed to match *Home to Harlem*, his first novel, for honesty of treatment and character portrayal, and after *Harlem Shadows* (1922), the first volume of his poetry to be published in America, the vibrant emotional intensity of his protest poems fell away. Countee Cullen (1903-1946) was a fine lyric poet, whose black poems are often striking statements on the black alien-and-exile theme, but whose novel, *One Way to Heaven* (1932), is just barely worthy of critical attention. Of all the black writers of the period commonly designated the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes (1902-1967) was far and away the most talented, versatile, innovative and prolific. He wrote poems, short stories, novels, plays, sketches, essays, a social history and a two-volume autobiography.

Immediately following the first World War, Rollin Harte, a white journalist, reflecting on what Congressman James F. Byrnes of South Carolina defined as the Negroes' "ill-governed reaction toward race-rioting" and the "incendiary utterances of would-be Negro leaders, circulated through Negro newspapers in New York, Boston and Chicago . . ." reflecting on this and related matters, Harte wrote: "Here is the same spirit—the spirit, that is, of the new Negro. Hit, he hits back. In a succession of race riots, he has proved it. . . . That huge, leaderless exodus out of the rural South to the urban North . . . meant for the first time in his history the Negro had taken affairs into his own hands. Until then, things had been done to the Negro, with the Negro, and for the Negro. . . . At last he showed initiative and self-reliance." And this "new" Negro engaged the attention of gravely concerned whites, who turned to sociologists, psychologists and humanists for answers to the "race problem." Studies

of Negroes by whites poured from the presses in the 1920's: *The Negro in American Life*, *The Negro Faces America*, *The Negro Problem in Cities*, *The Negro Newspaper in the U.S.* Black writing of both the scholarly and imaginative kind was carefully (and critically) examined for the insights it offered into the "new" Negro mind and the clues it might yield to the Negroes' behavior. Reviews of black books regularly appeared in the book sections of metropolitan newspapers and in magazines of the caliber of the *North American Review*, *Scribner's*, *Harper's*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and the *American Mercury*.

But something was happening on another level too. In revolt against Main Street provincialism and Mrs. Grundy's phony standards, whites flocked to the Southside, to Paradise Valley, to Roxbury, to Harlem, where, it was generally believed, social and moral restraints need be exercised only minimally among a people whose current imaginative literature celebrated the primitive and instinctual and the authority of feeling over thought. And not only their literature, their music, their dances, life itself.

Negroes quickly became—in the 1920's—the subject of imaginative treatment by whites. Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* was produced in 1921. Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*, a novel of Harlem life, was the runaway best seller in 1926, and the next year Paul Green's *In Abraham's Bosom* won the Pulitzer Prize for drama. Sherwood Anderson, Waldo Frank, DuBois Heyward among others wrote novels of Negro life. Paul Whiteman made the distinctive Negro music, jazz, famous in concert halls throughout the U.S. And, employing another distinctively black musical mode, George Gershwin composed *Rhapsody in Blue* in 1930. *Green Pastures*, a Negro musical play written and composed by whites, opened on Broadway. When it closed five years later, America was in the depths of a grave economic and social crisis.

The Great Depression had a profound effect upon American life and thought. It impelled a turn to the left, promoted ruthless introspection, revolutionary honesty, and the affirmation of certain positive values as set forth, say, in the plays of Clifford Odets and S. N. Behrman; the novels of Erskine Caldwell, James T. Farrell, John Dos Passos, Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner; the criticism and social commentary of Granville Hicks, Newton Arvin, Paul Rosenfeld and Henry Mencken. In short—though misleadingly simplistic—the Great Depression generated a new consciousness; and so far as black Americans were concerned, this new consciousness was dramatized in the work of Richard Wright (1908-1960), beginning with *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), a collection of four novella dealing with black and white in a Southern setting.

Although frankly revolutionary in its tone and in its theme of collective retaliatory violence, Wright's novella did not prepare American readers for *Native Son* (1940), his first published novel. A powerful Marxist condemnation of American society, its pitiless introspective realism outraged the sensibilities even of many middle class Negro readers, who disclaimed the author's perception of the American social reality.

Black Boy (1945), the last book he wrote in the U.S., is an autobiographical account of the author's first eighteen years. It tells nothing of his life in Chicago, where he was wooed and won by the Communist Party, worked on the Federal Writer's Project, and was a friend of the sociologist Horace Cayton and the poets Margaret Walker and Arna Bontemps. In 1937, Wright moved to New York, where he also worked on the Federal Writer's Project, wrote for the communist *Daily Worker*, and came to know Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen and Ralph Ellison. He lived in New York for ten years, when, married and a father, the tensions of a segregated society were greater than he thought his wife and child should be asked to bear. Packing up his young family, Wright moved permanently to France. Over the next thirteen years, Wright wrote eight books. Among these the novels, *The Outsider* (1953), *Savage Holiday* (1945), and *The Long Dream* (1958), show a sad falling off of literary power and skill, an erosion of perception, and a relaxation of those impulses that produced his best work.

Nevertheless, those black writers—both novelists and poets—who came to wide attention in the 1950's and '60's, are indebted to Richard Wright. They owe him a debt of definition, which only James Baldwin denies. As Ralph Ellison, the genius who wrote *Invisible Man*, points out in a brilliant essay entitled "Richard Wright's Blues," Wright defines his black characters as human beings first and assumes "that the nucleus of play-

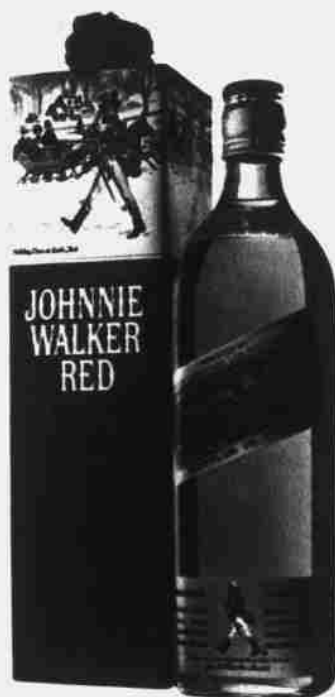
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