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AMERICAN NEGRO POETRY:

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

NANCY E. MORRIS

ENGLISH 500

1961

SPONSORED BY DR. RICHARD K. MEEKER

SECTION I

THE POET OF THE PAST

A brief literary history and critical survey of American Negro poetry from its beginnings in 1746 to the appearance of Paul Laurence Dunbar's work in the 1890's.

American Negro poetry cannot be analyzed in the deepest sense until the reader considers its relationship to the work of white poets. Although he might hope to study it as a separate and distinct field, he soon finds his conclusions losing some of their validity. This happens because certain questions constantly force themselves upon the student: Is poetry written by Negroes different enough from "white" poetry to be placed in a special class? If so, what are the differences, and how do they relate to the artistic merit of the various works? Is American Negro poetry, then, primarily American or primarily Negro? These are questions with which this paper must concern itself. It is hoped that a short literary history of the race's poetic development, along with a more extensive critical analysis of four individual poets, will furnish revealing evidence. Only a theory can be offered as a conclusion, for literary critics of Negro poetry, some of them Negroes, differ as to the answer. Yet these are the most important questions in the study of American Negro writers. They have been present since the first poem was written by a member of the race, and they have become increasingly important through the years.

There are some who would say that this problem - this relationship of Negro culture to American culture - does not exist. They claim that the Negro's heritage is distinctly African, and that the Negro poet, therefore, draws on a wealth of materials having no connection with American society. Yet this statement can, in large part, be refuted. The Negroes brought to America by slave traders in the seventeenth century may well have brought with them memories of the unique culture

of which they had been a part. However, they were afforded no means by which to preserve this culture. It could be passed along only through oral communication, through life itself, to the younger generation. No doubt the memories soon faded, blurred by hard work, poverty, and disease; no doubt the uniqueness of whatever was being transmitted diminished as the problems of slavery took precedence in the Negro mind.

Still, some will point to the spiritual and ask if it does not preserve a distinctive form of Negro poetry. It is true that the Negro spiritual is one of America's original contributions to world culture. It is also true that it has a special quality that white writers would find difficult to imitate. In the final analysis, however, the spirituals must be classified separately from poetry. They are folk songs noted for the strength and sweetness of their melody rather than for the quality of their verse. They reveal the nature of the Negro - his sensitiveness and response to emotion, his imagination, his sorrow and longing - but they reveal it more completely through the music than through the words set to it. It is this element, a form that could have been transmitted orally, which has a peculiar "Negro" quality. The words, although somewhat altered through dialect, are English, not African. They are the subordinate part of the spiritual and cannot be considered outstanding either through literary importance or an unusual cultural heritage.

And so we find ourselves still facing the problem. The Negro writes, not in a verse form derived from African culture, but in one already established by English and American poets. We should therefore not expect his technique to differ drastically from that of his white contemporaries. Thus we will focus our attention on the subject matter, also,

to see if the difference can be defined there. We shall begin with an historical survey and attempt through it to see how the poetry of the Negro writer compares with that of the white writer, from the very beginning.

This first bit of actual poetry seems to have been written by Lucy Terry in 1746. Her "Bars Fight" is only doggerel verse describing a particularly impressive Indian massacre. It is, however, a beginning, and a noteworthy one for a woman from a social group denied the power of the written word. However, her work was never put in print, making Jupiter Hammon (d. 1800) the first American Negro to publish a poem. This Long Island slave was, in 1761, the author of "An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ with Penitential Cries" - a kind of shout-hymn. It has eighty-eight iambic lines which are even, rhymed, and repetitious; the whole thing is a most tedious affair. Hammon became a curiosity as a "literary slave," writing several other poems and even some pieces of prose. Almost all are religious exhortations which possess the sole virtue of earnestness.

Remarkably soon after these two Negroes made their weak attempts at poetry, the race produced the most gifted of all the pre-Civil War Negro poets - Phillis Wheatley. As an American woman poet, she was preceded only by Anne Bradstreet; and as an American poet, she was among the first to publish a volume. Miss Wheatley was born in Senegal, West Africa, in 1753, and was brought to America at the age of seven. She was purchased by a Boston tailor, John Wheatley, as a personal servant for his wife. Mrs. Wheatley saw the girl's quickness and began teaching her to read and write. Ten years later, Phillis published her first poem: "A Poem, by Phillis, a Negro girl in Boston, on the Death of the

Reverend George Whitefield." In 1773 a volume of her poems was brought out, and Phillis became the same sort of literary curiosity that Jupiter Hammon had been. She eventually was set free by Mrs. Wheatley, who remained her patroness; and here was the thrill of acclaim when presented to the court of George III, in London. But Miss Wheatley's career came to a bitter and ironic close. Her marriage was unhappy, her children died in infancy, and in 1784 her own life ended as a servant in a cheap boarding house.

In a remarkably few years this Negro girl bridged the huge gap between primitivism and civilization and created lines such as these:

> Imagination! who can sing thy force?
> Or who describe the swiftness of thy course?
> Soaring through air to find the bright abode,
> Th' empyreal palace of the thundering God,
> We on thy pinions can surpass the wind,
> And leave the rolling universe behind.
> From star to star the mental optics rove,
> Measure the skies, and range the realms above;
> There in one view we grasp the mighty whole,
> Or with new worlds amaze th' unbounded soul.[1]

As can be readily seen, her poetry is that of the eighteenth century, created under the influence of Alexander Pope. She writes in heroic couplets and keeps her subject matter entirely removed from her personal experience. In fact, the largest part of her work is addressed to prominent persons of the time. Miss Wheatley's work, therefore, can certainly not be considered great. She too carefully followed her models to be either racial or American. But could any American writers of her period be called great or original? When we compare Phillis Wheatley with the rest of the eighteenth century American artists, we realize the genius this girl might have been, could she have received the stimulus necessary for complete development as a poet.

It is agreed, then, that Miss Wheatley was unable to progress to the level of greatness, or even to the point of uniqueness. But when we compare her writing with that of the Negro poets of the following century, we cannot help being amazed at her great talent. This is perhaps unfortunate, for the knowledge that the race had produced a Phillis Wheatley makes it difficult for us to appreciate the efforts made by other lesser poets. James Weldon Johnson himself has said that the remaining thirty poets preceding Paul Laurence Dunbar must be considered more in the light of what they attempted than what they accomplished. Many show evidence of talent, but their lack of technique in the use of poetic materials and forms puts great limitations upon them.

The work of George Moses Horton illustrates the truth of this statement. Although he was not so gifted as Phillis Wheatley, he was evidently a true poet rather than a mere rhymer. Born a slave in North Carolina in 1797, he began composing poetry before he was able to write it down. Later he worked as a janitor at the University of North Carolina, where he received instruction from some of the professors. When the students there discovered Horton's attempts at versifying, they began paying him to write poems that could be used to impress their special girl friends. An ordinary, run-of-the-mill love poem would bring Horton 25¢; a particularly passionate one, however, might rate as much as 50¢. He carefully saved the money from the sale of many such poems and from the publication of his much more serious books in a vain attempt to purchase his freedom. Thus it is appropriate that Horton's dominant cry be that of emancipation, and that his first and primary volume, published in 1829, be titled The Hope of Liberty. The following lines are typical of the style and ability he demonstrated in the twenty-two-page booklet:

Alas! and am I born for this,
To wear this slavish chain?
Deprived of all created bliss,
Through hardship, toil, and pain?
. . . . .
Come, Liberty! thou cheerful sound,
Roll through my ravished ears;
Come, let my grief in joys be drowned,
And drive away my fears.[2]

Horton's resentment and longing are obvious; they are themes implicit in all his poems. He is at the opposite pole from Miss Whentley, who seldom expressed personal feeling of any sort, much less complaint against her enslaved state. We also see that Horton's style is simple, his speech uncomplicated. His meter shows the heavy influence of plantation melodies and gospel hymns. In fact, it is claimed that camp meeting songs first inspired him to write poetry.

His name, however, is not the most prominent during the nineteenth century. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was probably the most popular Negro poet of her time. She was born in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1825, of free parents. Until her death in 1911, her life was devoted to the cause of freedom for slaves. She became renowned as an eloquent lecturer and teacher and was among the first of a long line of Negro poets to use poetry as a means of antislavery propaganda.

The desire and complaint of Horton turns to a sense of wrong and injustice in Mrs. Harper. Her popularity was gained by lines such as the following:

Make me a grave where'er you will,
In a lowly plain or a lofty hill;
Make it among earth's humblest graves,
But not in a land where men are slaves.[3]

Her poetry shows the strength of her convictions. In addition, she had a forceful personality and read her poems well. This led to a large

demand for her work, and it is estimated that at least ten thousand of her booklets were sold. In spite of its popularity, however, much of her verse is repetitious and trite. It is simply written, often with poor rhyming. Only the vitality of its subject matter gave Frances Harper the fame she enjoyed.

There are other poets of this period who rate comment in anthologies of Negro work, but none have as much talent as Horton and Mrs. Harper or as much technical skill as Phillis Wheatley. They were only minor writers whose work is of passing notice. James Madison Bell and Albery A. Whitman are the only two that need be mentioned, their claim for recognition being based on the fact that both attempted extremely long poems. Whitman even published an epic in Spenserian stanza, "The Rape of Florida," still the longest poem ever written by a Negro in the United States. He reveals in his work imagination, skillful workmanship, and a capacity for brisk narration. But too often Whitman's ability is hidden by apparent imitation and seeming haste. Had he, too, been given the benefit of education and training, he would definitely have been a better, perhaps even an outstanding, poet. Without it, his talent as often as not lapses into mediocrity.

So passed the first one hundred fifty years of the Negro's residence in North America. It is undeniably true that the literary artists emerging from the confines of social and economic pressure produced little of abiding value during this time. Many critics would discount their early attempts altogether, saying that the poems are too faulty, too lacking in originality to be worthy of any consideration. But although the work of the first Negro poets is often trite and imitative,

one might ask if white poets of that period did not display similar weaknesses. There were several white poets who had a command of technique that the Negro writers definitely lacked. Bryant, Longfellow, Whittier, Holmes, and Lowell were all popular writers and good poets; but their settings and themes were no more American than that of the Negro, and their verse patterns no more original. Edgar Allan Poe and Walt Whitman are practically the only two that can be recognized as superior to Negro writers because of originality in form or subject matter.

It is therefore necessary for us to recognize the fact that only a small amount of great poetry was written in the first half of nineteenth-century America by writers of either race. White poets spent much of their time expressing conventional moralities in the polished European verse patterns. Negro poets expended their energy on protest writing in borrowed forms, often displaying a deficiency of technical skill. Both groups are important more for the foundations they laid and the doors they opened for later and better writers, than for outstanding poetic accomplishments with which they might be credited. But the stage for Negro poetry had been set; and soon to step out upon it was Paul Laurence Dunbar, the first "modern" poet of the race.

FOOTNOTES

[1]James Weldon Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (New York, 1931), p. 24.

[2]*Ibid.*, p. 32.

[3]Benjamin Brawley, *The Negro in Literature and Art* (New York, 1930), p. 45.

SECTION II

REPRESENTATIVES OF OUR CENTURY

A critical analysis of four outstanding poets whose work is representative of the entire range of Negro poetry in the twentieth century.

Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906)

James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938)

Claude McKay (1889-1948)

Langston Hughes (1902-)

PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR
(1872-1906)
POET OF HIS PEOPLE

The last years of the nineteenth century were difficult ones for the whole of America. The end of an era was approaching, and science and invention were changing the familiar patterns of life. There was a mixed mood of romanticism and realism, not only in literature, but also in the spirit of the times. On the sensitive person weighed a sense of change and instability. However, the public, as a whole, turned away from this and looked to the past as a refuge from the unpleasantries of the present. It is to be expected, then, that sentiment was favored in literature, that poetry was preferred to be simple, strong, and tearful. James Whitcomb Riley exemplified the popular taste; "An Old Sweetheart of Mine" and "Little Orphant Annie" were favorites. Life in the South before the war was idealized, and the idea that freedom had been disastrous for the Negro was a popular one. Thomas Nelson Page and Joel Chandler Harris began writing on this theme, and through their efforts Negro dialect writing became a vogue.

Paul Laurence Dunbar was forced to grapple with these styles and conditions of literature when he began his work. However, struggle was nothing new to Dunbar; for he had, from the beginning, faced many handicaps in the development of his literary interests and abilities. His parents were poor and without formal education; thus, it had been difficult for him to get the cultural background he needed to become a successful writer. He had also found it impossible to attend college, although this was one of his greatest desires. Much to his chagrin,

it had been necessary for him to take the job of elevator operator and write his verse as he rode up and down, day after day. Then, in 1893, when he had attempted to publish his first volume, Oak and Ivy, every publisher he approached refused him. He finally had to have the fifty-six poems privately printed and act as their salesman himself.

Dunbar's luck changed abruptly for the better, however, when he published a larger and more mature volume in 1895. Majors and Minors attracted the attention of William Dean Howells, who wrote a full-page review of it in Harper's Weekly. This review introduced Dunbar to the reading public, making him famous overnight. Some of the more important statements from this article are as follows:

> I do not remember any English-speaking Negro, at least, who has till now done in verse work of at all the same moment as Paul Laurence Dunbar...I do not think one can read his Negro pieces without feeling that they are of like impulse and inspiration with the work of Burns when he was most Burns, when he was most Scotch, when he was most peasant. When Burns was least himself he wrote literary English, and Mr. Dunbar writes literary English when he is least himself. But not to urge the mischievous parallel further, he is a real poet whether he speaks a dialect or whether he writes a language..."[1]

Quoting from "When de Co'n Pone's Hot," "When Malindy Sings," "Accountability," and "The Party," he concludes:

> I am speaking of him as a black poet, when I should be speaking of him as a poet; but the notion of what he is insists too strongly for present impartiality. I hope I have not praised him too much, because he has surprised me so very much; for his excellences are positive and not comparative. If his Minors had been written by a white man, I should have been struck by their very uncommon quality; I should have said that they were wonderful divinations. But since they are the expressions of a race-life from within the race, they seem to me infinitely more valuable and significant... God hath made of one blood all nations of men: perhaps

> the proof of this saying is to appear in the arts, and our hostilities and prejudices are to vanish in them.[1]

Howells intended this review to be a kind one, and certainly through it he gained an immediate hearing for Dunbar's poems. He emphasized the fact that Dunbar was a gifted poet, that his poetry had merit within itself. All this was beneficial, and it finally gave Dunbar the chance to prove himself worthy of notice. Yet Howell's criticism had its adverse effects, too. It described Dunbar's dialect poems as being the most praiseworthy writings, "expressions of a race-life from within the race."[1] It also gave the impression that when Dunbar wrote "literary" poems, he was being false to his Negro nature. Such opinions as these set a critical precedent that later readers of Dunbar rather closely followed. It led to a great demand for Dunbar's dialect poetry and dampened any enthusiasm that had existed for his writing in classical English. Dunbar himself was aware of this trend and regretted it. Yet he realized that Howells had, in effect, launched him in his career; and he found it necessary to temper his regret with gratitude.

Dunbar's historical importance is revealed here, for through Howell's praise, he became the first Negro poet to be at all accepted into American literature. Early in his career Dunbar had set for himself a goal: "I did once want to be a lawyer, but that ambition has long since died out before the all-absorbing desire to be a worthy singer of the songs of God and nature. To be able to interpret my own people through song and story, and to prove to the many that after all we are more human than African."[2] There is no question concerning the validity of this ideal toward which Dunbar reached; and Howells, in his criticism, recognized that it had been attained. But there can be raised a query of a different sort needing an answer just as positive as the one to

the earlier question. Was Dunbar's popularity and appeal limited to the period in which he lived, or is his work important enough to be of interest today? A conclusion can be reached only by examining his actual writings and evaluating them by the criteria of present-day literary theory. To facilitate criticism, we shall employ the three divisions commonly used in the study of Dunbar's writings: (1) prose work (2) poems in classic English (3) poems in dialect. Ignoring chronological arrangement, we shall start with the work of least value and proceed upward.

Even the very casual reader can sense the mediocrity of Dunbar's prose writings. His four novels are especially poor, relying largely on sentimentality and melodrama to hold the interest of the reader. Oddly enough, Dunbar wrote about white characters in three of his novels. A realistic portrayal of them was a difficult task for Dunbar; and this, combined with loose plot and poor form, did not contribute to his standing as a novelist. His popularity as a short-story writer was much greater, however; and a few critics have even felt that his stories attain heights equal to his poems. The present-day reader would, most likely, disagree with this viewpoint. Even though Dunbar constructed his short stories more carefully than his novels, they still exhibit weakness in organization, technique, and theme. Their chief shortcoming is in subject matter; Dunbar merely took already stereotyped stories and created variations of them. He had "good ol' days" of the South before the War praised by many stock characters. The only stories he wrote that achieved any degree of lasting success were those that broke with the plantation tradition and leaned toward realistic characterization. Unfortunately for Dunbar's reputation as a prose writer, such stories were too infrequent.

Thus it is that we turn to poetry, and primarily lyric poetry, as the form in which Dunbar was most completely at home. He by far preferred to write such poems in classic English, even though he realized that he must employ dialect to have his poems read. He expressed his regret concerning this in his poem, "The Poet":

The Poet

He sang of life, serenely sweet,
With, now and then, a deeper note,
From some high peak, nigh yet remote,
He voiced the world's absorbing beat.

He sang of love when earth was young,
And love, itself, was in his lays.
But ah, the world, it turned to praise
A jingle in a broken tongue.[3]

This is an example of Dunbar's best early work. It is relatively free of the heavy influence of the English romantic tradition that makes so many of his "literary" poems sound trite and artificial. Even in high school, Dunbar leaned heavily toward Byron, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, and their American followers. It took him many years to get away from the conventionality and sentimentality that a close following of his models caused.

And yet there were poems, even at the beginning, that revealed more of Dunbar than they did of the poets that influenced him. "The Poet," quoted above, is an example. Another is the much-quoted "Life," which appeared in the first volume that Dunbar had printed.

Life

A crust of bread and a corner to sleep in,
A minute to smile and an hour to weep in,
A pint of joy to a peck of trouble,
And never a laugh but the moans come double;
And that is life!

A crust and a corner that love makes precious,
With a smile to warm and the tears to refresh us;
And joy seems sweeter when cares come after,
And a moan is the finest of foils for laughter:
And that is life![6]

These, and others of Dunbar's better poems, have one factor in common: they, for the most part, recount the author's own experiences with life. Whenever a poem achieves poignancy or intensity or vibrant communication, it is often one closely linked to Dunbar himself. It seems that when he concentrated on expressing his feelings rather than on impressing the public, he became the true poet. Although many of his poems in classic English never rise above the commonplace, now and then one of these personal ones stands out from the others in its lyric power or its intellectual penetration.

Dunbar did not often write as race-spokesman. It is true that he was trying to raise the nation's estimation of the Negro, but he attempted to do it by demonstrating his power of creativity instead of by writing propaganda poems. When race entered into his work, it was often an almost unconscious intrusion. It was a matter vital to Dunbar only as it related to his personal experience. In such a poem as "We Wear the Mask," he expresses the frustration his race feels at being constantly misunderstood by the world with which it must deal. Dunbar himself met many slurs as he travelled throughout the country; he knew from experience that "torn and bleeding hearts" lay behind the happy-go-lucky smile that the average American automatically stamped on each Negro face.

We Wear the Mask

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask![5]

This poem, in its presentation of the very depths of Negro personality, is far superior to more formal poems by Dunbar that take the race problem as their specific subject. Although the following excerpt does not show the shallowness of the cliches that Dunbar, on occasion, employs, it will serve to demonstrate the fact that Dunbar wrote more forcefully, more meaningfully, when he wrote unconsciously and personally.

On every hand in this fair land,
Proud Ethiope's swarthy children stand
Beside their fairer neighbor;
The forests flee before their stroke,
Their hammers ring, their forges smoke,—
They stir in honest labour.[6]

This passage comes from one of Dunbar's earliest poems; thus we might conclude that his poetic style and thematic development matured through age and experience. On the whole, this is true; for he did exhibit greater mastery of technique and subject matter in his later writings. Yet Dunbar's poems in standard English were at no time in his career outstanding because of their originality. As critics have

stated, if his "literary" poems had been written by a white poet, they would have received little special notice. Most of their novelty lay in the fact that they were written by a Negro; only isolated poems demonstrated within themselves unusual artistic quality. For this reason, and for others, the public lavished greatest praise on Dunbar's dialect poems. These made use of an unusual art form; they reflected the colorful side of a segment of America's population; they were, above all, poems that a white poet probably could not have written.

This individuality was important, for the public was not ready to accept Dunbar as an American poet. It would, however, accept him and praise him as a Negro poet. Thus, verse in dialect became Dunbar's unique contribution to American literature. It opened the way for a Negro to enter the field of art, proving that the race was not culturally barren. It was, moreover, the special province of Dunbar; for although he had many imitators, none ever achieved the popularity or fame this first dialectal poet did. In our examination of Dunbar's dialect verse, we must not forget the fact that even Dunbar realized the limitations of this art form, but continued in it in order to gain a hearing from a public unwilling to read Negro verse written on a higher level.

As a writer of dialect poetry, Paul Laurence Dunbar faced problems from the very beginning. The first of major importance was dealing with the Negro stereotype created by Harris and Page. This was the picture of the docile, contented, comic Negro slave--a shallow, false picture, and one hard to live down. Dunbar undoubtedly realized that there were open to him two ways of combating this stereotype: (1) to deny it entirely, or (2) to broaden this picture and deepen it with

love and understanding. In his dialect poetry Dunbar accomplished the latter with unsurpassed skill. He pictured the Negro in his happy moments--enjoying a spelling bee, eating cornbread and molasses, courting, watching his wife prepare supper at the end of a hard day's work, playing with his children. He also showed the unhappiness and tragedy that come to the Negro as much to as to all men--death of a child, knowledge that the "old times" are gone, bitter regret after a quarrel with a friend, rejection by the world he faces daily. To many, this was a new picture of the Negro. For the first time, perhaps, some Americans began to realize that the Negro was a man, sharing in universal joys and sorrows. The Negro stereotype remained, because it had already become a distinctive part of American culture; but it had become deeper and truer through Dunbar's poetic efforts.

Another obstacle in the writing of dialectal poetry was the fact that dialect was to no extent standardized when Dunbar began using it. There had been only one previous poet who had employed Negro dialect, a white man named Irwin Russell. Dunbar began writing in Russell's style, but soon exceeded him in poetic technique, as well as in use of dialect. A dialectal writer of a different type who was also attaining great heights of popularity during this time was James Whitcomb Riley. Dunbar was a great admirer of Riley; and Riley, in turn, gave Dunbar some of his earliest praise. His influence is evident; for in Dunbar's first work, there are examples of Hoosier dialect and such poem titles as "The Old Apple-Tree," and "Chrismus Is A-Comin'!" His poem "James Whitcomb Riley" shows us just what he thought of this poet, and also gives us an insight into what he himself tried to accomplish through his use of dialect:

"Fur trim and skillful phrases,
I do not keer a jot;
'Tain't the words alone, but feelin's
That fetch the tender spot.
An' that's jest why I love him,--
Why, he's got such human feelin',
An' in ev'ry song he gives us,
You kin see it creepin', stealin',
Through the coze the tears go tricklin'.
But the edge is bright and smiley;
I never saw a poet
Like that poet Whitcomb Riley.[7]

Luckily, Dunbar did not long let his admiration for Riley limit his own effectiveness, nor did he accept Riley's use of dialect for more than a brief period. He soon left him behind, just as he had Irwin Russell. Finding that such writers had standardized no pattern for writing in Negro dialect, Dunbar then created his own. He rejected previous attempts made almost unintelligible by poor spelling, and wrote "by ear." Actually, Dunbar in his poems set the "rules" for dialect spelling that have been followed by later writers. He learned to represent on paper the speech of the Southern Negro, although he never even travelled in the South until the latter years of his life.

But by far the greatest problem, and one Dunbar never found a way of escaping, was the limited emotional expression available to writers in dialect. James Weldon Johnson has described dialect as a great organ on which can be sounded only two notes--those of humor and pathos. When a reader takes up a dialect poem, he expects to find the one or the other; and generally, he does. Any sort of exaggerated dialect is thought to be the trademark of a simple, uneducated people, who, in turn, are somehow supposed to feel only the simple, elemental extremes of emotion. One reading Negro dialect (or Hoosier dialect, for that matter) is supposed either to laugh or cry; thus, subjects evoking these responses are the

only ones available to the writer. Dunbar was not unaware of this; his realization of the limitations dialect imposed was part of the reason he preferred to write in classic English. But America could read "literary" poems by other poets. She clamored for the folksy pictures of Negro life that only Dunbar could write. So it was that she turned to Dunbar's work in dialect, for a long time almost completely ignoring any of his other work.

It is hard to write a critical analysis of this phase of Dunbar's writing, for such a study requires criteria so different from that ordinarily used. Also, the dialectal poems are long; and because they are usually narrative, the task of selecting excerpts is a difficult one. However, let us look at some of the best to see if the components of Dunbar's peculiar charm as a dialectal writer can be established.

The poem considered by many to be Dunbar's masterpiece in dialect is "When Malindy Sings." Said to be inspired by the singing of his mother, this description of Malindy's musical ability speaks tenderly of the sensitivity of Negro character.

"G'way an' quit dat noise, Miss Lucy--
  Put dat music book away;
What's de use to keep on tryin'?
  If you practice twell you're gray,
You cain't git no notes a-flyin'
  Lak de ones dat rants and rings
F'om de kitchen to de big woods
  When Malindy sings.

. . .

Ain't you nevah hyeahd Malindy?
  Blessed soul, tek up de cross!
Look hyeah, ain't you jokin', honey?
  Well, you don't know what you los'.
Y'ought to hyeah dat gal a-wa'blin',
  Robins, la'ks, an' all dem things,
Heish dey moufs an' hides dey faces
  When Malindy sings.

. . .

Oh, hit's sweetah dan de music
  Of an edicated band;
An' hit's dearah dan de battle's
  Song o' triumph in de lan'.
It seems holier dan evenin'
  When de solemn chu'ch bell rings,
Ez I sit an' ca'mly lingen
  While Malindy sings."[6]

Such a poem as this reveals Dunbar's sense of form and his innate rhythm. So distinct is the lyric power revealed here that this and other poems can be, and have been, set to music. Certainly Dunbar's verse flows freely and easily; the emotion it expresses is deep and sincere. While dialect may not, from the poet's point of view, be a very desirable instrument, Dunbar has surely made the best possible use of this form. His technique is varied enough to escape triteness; his humor and sadness, both, are mellowed enough to be touching. Although some writers might have made their portrayals ludicrous or maudlin, Dunbar maintains his role as artistic interpreter of the race.

There are many other well-known dialect poems that cannot be quoted here because of their length: "When de Co'n Pone's Hot," A Negro Love Song," "Deserted Plantation," "Little Brown Baby" have all been favorites. The latter can be used to point out a quality typical of much of Dunbar's dialectal work. Many times the reader will somehow feel that the characters in the poems or the ones narrating them are smiling through tears or are, as Langston Hughes has expressed it, "laughing to keep from crying." "Little Brown Baby" presents a Negro's enjoyment of life, his tenderness and love toward his small child; but in the last stanza this gaiety is replaced by wistfulness and a sense of sorrow.

"Come to yo' pallet now -- go to yo' res'!
Wisht you could allus know ease an' clean skies;
Wisht you could stay jes' a child on my breas'--
Little brown baby wif spa'klin' eyes!"[9]

This undercurrent is one of the techniques Dunbar uses in an attempt to keep his poems from remaining at one of the two extremes that could be so easily adopted. Happiness and humor are here; but underneath it is the knowledge that this man has suffered and that, like men everywhere, he wishes to spare his child from similar pain. Dialect marks such a poem as racial; its theme, however, is universal and therein contains its appeal for the reader.

Perhaps this is the key to Dunbar's success in reaching the American public at the particular time he did. While his poems always retained their racial flavor, never did they fail to go beyond race and speak of matters that men and women from all areas of life could understand. One of his last poems, published just a few months before his death, strikes a responsive note in almost any reader.

Compensation

Because I had loved so deeply,
Because I had loved so long,
God in his great compassion
Gave me the gift of song.

Because I have loved so vainly,
And sung with each faltering breath,
The Master in infinite mercy
Offers the boon of Death.[10]

Such a poem gives evidence of Dunbar's insight into his own life and his own experiences, at the same time revealing his ability to communicate with all men who try to live a life of harmony and love.

Certain critics, notably Benjamin Brawley, have held up Paul Laurence Dunbar to youth as an example of what genius and hard work can

accomplish for even the most downtrodden of persons. Dunbar is this, but certainly much more than this. He was the first spokesman for a race whose poetic expression had previously been limited by lack of education and opportunity. He was a poet who used the tools at hand, even though they were not the ones he would have chosen, to reach the public with his message. He was not a great poet; he himself probably realized that. But mixed in with the mediocre work, and the good, were flashes of brilliancy, lines of pure lyricism. Dunbar was the representative of a people; he had the consciousness of standing on a threshold. And although he faced an early death, he spoke for his race in holding on to a persistent optimism concerning the future. That is why he is today, after more than a half-century, loved by his own people and admired by many who discover his work.

"When all is done, say not my day is o'er,
And that thro' night I seek a dimmer shore;
Say rather that my morn has just begun--
I greet the dawn and not a setting sun,
When all is done."

FOOTNOTES

[1]Benjamin Brawley, *Paul Laurence Dunbar, Poet of His People* (Chapel Hill, 1936), pp. 49-51.

[2]*Ibid.*, p. 105.

[3]Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (New York, 1935), p. 191.

[4]*Ibid.*, p. 3.

[5]*Ibid.*, p. 71.

[6]*Ibid.*, p. 15.

[7]*Ibid.*, p. 267.

[8]*Ibid.*, pp. 82-83.

[9]*Ibid.*, p. 135.

[10]*Ibid.*, p. 105.

[11]Benjamin Brawley, *Negro Builders and Heroes* (Chapel Hill, 1937), p. 166.

BOOKS BY PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR

POEMS:

Oak and Ivy, 1893.
Majors and Minors, 1895.
Lyrics of Lowly Life, 1896.
Lyrics of the Hearthside, 1899.
Lyrics of Love and Laughter, 1903.
Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow, 1905.
The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar, 1913.

ILLUSTRATED VOLUMES OF POEMS:

Poems of Cabin and Field, 1899.
Candle-Lightin' Time, 1901.
When Malindy Sings, 1903.
Li'l' Gal, 1904.
Howdy, Honey, Howdy, 1905.
Joggin' Erlong, 1906.
Speakin' O' Christmas, 1914.

NOVELS:

The Uncalled, 1898.
The Love of Landry, 1900.
The Fanatics, 1901.
The Sport of the Gods, 1902.

STORIES AND SKETCHES:

Folks from Dixie, 1898.
The Strength of Gideon, 1900.
In Old Plantation Days, 1903.
The Heart of Happy Hollow, 1904.

JAMES WELDON JOHNSON
(1871-1938)
BRIDGE TO THE RENAISSANCE

Educator, lawyer, musician, diplomat, linguist, executive, novelist, critic, editor, poet -- all these describe the varied career of James Weldon Johnson. From the time of his youth in Jacksonville, Florida, until his sudden death in a car accident in 1938, he busied himself with those activities which were to gain him the title of America's foremost Negro citizen. In searching for the factors leading to these accomplishments, Johnson claimed that much of his success was due to the influence of his parents. His mother, a cultured New Yorker, was the first colored woman public school teacher in Florida. She was artistic, musical, very interested in books; and both her sons soon followed her in her tastes. Johnson's father never attended school, but he taught himself Spanish and became an avid theater-goer. When he was past fifty, he changed the entire course of his life and entered the ministry. Johnson described his mother as strong, determined, proud, a born reformist; his father, as quiet, unpretentious, but strong and honest. He states in his autobiography, Along the Way, that as the days passed, he found himself more and more like them.

Whatever the reasons, however, we must recognize the fact that Johnson claims America's notice completely aside from his literary endeavors. He earned his A.B. and M.A. from Atlanta University and studied for three years at Columbia University. He was awarded the honorary Doctor of Letters degree from two colleges; he received the Spingarn Medal in 1925 for distinguished service as U. S. Consul to Venezuela and

Nicaragua, and for his work as author and publicist. He became concerned with the social and economic condition of his people, and this led him to serve for several years as national secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Johnson was the intellectual leader among the Negroes of his day; his service to his race and to his country lend added weight to his work as writer and critic.

It is difficult to find a starting point for the discussion of Johnson's work, because his efforts in the field of literature were as varied as his services in public life. We shall, of course, concentrate on his poetry, but certainly we must mention and evaluate his other writings, also.

As has already been stated, their mother's interest in music had a great influence on both James Weldon Johnson and his brother, Rosamond. Rosamond Johnson eventually became a professional musician, and the brothers spent several profitable years in collaboration as songwriters. James Weldon wrote the books of eight light operas for which Rosamond composed the music. Many musical comedies and popular songs were also produced by the company these brothers headed, before James Weldon became bored with the whole idea and sought out other ways of making a living. Later in his life, though, Johnson returned for a short while to the musical field. Combining his talents as musician and linguist, he translated the libretto of the Spanish opera "Goyescas" into English for the Metropolitan Opera Company, certainly a formidable task.

But although these works were good ones and achieved a reasonable degree of popularity, Johnson will never be remembered solely for them. A much more widely-known accomplishment than these in the fields of music

and poetry is the song "Lift Ev ry Voice and Sing," now designated as the Negro National Anthem. Again, the brothers worked together, the one writing the words and the other, the music. The song was originally written for school children who were giving a program to celebrate Lincoln's birthday. However, even after the brothers had forgotten the incident, the hymn continued to be sung in Negro schools and churches throughout the country. Its popularity is probably greater today than ever before, and deservedly so; for it is a fine piece of music. It expresses an acceptance of the past and a confidence in the future; it helps to cultivate a sense of history among the Negroes. Johnson says the only comment he can make concerning the writing of this song is that "...we wrote better than we know."[1]

> God of our weary years,
> God of our silent tears,
> Thou who hast brought us thus far on our way,
> Thou who hast by Thy might
> Led us into the light,
> Keep us forever in the path, we pray;
> Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met thee,
> Lest, our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee...[2]

After such stirring lyrics as these, it is somewhat of a disappointment to examine Johnson's prose work. His essays and novels, although far above mediocrity, do not compare with his work as a poet and a critic. What is probably his best-known novel, The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man, proves to be an interesting and unusual book, but not an outstanding one. The prose form is obviously new to Johnson, and a lack of sureness in technique is evident. Johnson himself regretted, after a period of time, the fact that he first published the book anonymously; it gave the impression that the novel was a kind of publicity gimmick and added a little more to its general appearance of immaturity. Still, we can cull from the book an idea that became increasingly

important to Johnson. He has his main character regret the crossing of the color line and come to the conclusion that he has been selfish and self-seeking. The thought strikes him that had he remained with his people, he might have dedicated himself to the making of a race. Certainly Johnson, who was also very light in color, must have come to a decision about this at some time; and it is evident that he himself gladly chose the task of lifting his race to a higher level.

As a critic and editor, however, Johnson reaches a much higher level. He has to his credit three books in this field: The Book of American Negro Poetry, The Book of American Negro Spirituals, and The Second Book of American Negro Spirituals. The anthology of poetry by colored authors was probably the first in the United States, and prefacing it is a critical essay by Johnson. His comments about it are as follows:

> Before I had gone very far with the work, I realized that such a book, being the first of its kind, would be entirely devoid of a background. America as a whole knew of Dunbar, but it was practically unaware that there were such things as Negro poets and Negro poetry. So I decided to write an introduction; and the introduction developed into a forty-two page essay on "The Creative Genius of the Negro." In that essay I called attention to the American Negro as a folk artist, and pointed out his vital contributions, as such, to our national culture. In it I also made a brief survey of Negro poetry. I began with Phillis Wheatley, ... and touched on the most significant work from among the thirty-odd Negro poets between her and Dunbar.[3]

In this essay Johnson reveals the linking of folk consciousness and intellectualism that is typical of his best work. He is determined to prove that the folk songs and the folk poetry of the Negro are art, as much as are the poems written in established forms, using conventional techniques. He also furnished in this essay the best history of early

Negro poetry that can yet be found. It is, all in all, a valuable book in itself; and it was important at the time as an entryway for later anthologies of Negro poetry.

The two collections of spirituals edited by James Weldon Johnson and his brother are also important works. The first book contains sixty-one spirituals, and the second, a similar number. Rosamond Johnson, of course, made the piano arrangements; and James Weldon wrote a forty-page preface giving the history of the spirituals, theories as to their origin, and an estimate of them as music and poetry. These books can be credited with saving for America a number of unique components of her folk culture she could ill afford to lose.

Finally, let us turn to Johnson's poetry, which we must, in all honesty, label as the best part of his writing. This phase of his work is contained within three books, Fifty Years and Other Poems, God's Trombones, and Saint Peter Relates an Incident of the Resurrection Day. The latter book, or long poem, is an ironic comment on American prejudice. It combines sly mockery with a deeply moving quality, and it centers around the theme of the unknown soldier. Since this book was printed for private distribution only, it is now practically impossible to get hold of a copy. Thus it will be necessary to relate the remainder of our comments to the other volumes.

In his early writing, Johnson made some use of dialect. In his first book, he included a section entitled "Jingles and Croons." These works, following in the Dunbar tradition, were well-liked. The favorite, and one still worthy of notice today, is "Since You Went Away."

Seems lak to me de stars don't shine so bright,
Seems lak to me de sun done lose his light,
Seems lak to me dey's nothin' goin' right,
Since you went away.

* * *

Seems lak to me I jes can't he'p but sigh,
Seems lak to me ma th'oat keeps gittin' dry,
Seems lak to me a tear stays in ma eye,
Sence you went away.[4]

This little poem was Johnson's first published work; it was later set to music by his brother and became instantly popular. It is an excellent dialect poem. Johnson mutes the tone sufficiently to give it the dignity dialectal work so often lacks. Benjamin Brawley felt its dignity to be so strong, in fact, that he called this poem a threnody, or dirge. No doubt Johnson could have found a wide audience for this type of work. Yet, he knew almost instinctively the limitations and pitfalls of dialect, and he desired for Negro poetry a more unhampered future. So it was that he soon gave up the use of dialect altogether and opened the door for the Negro Renaissance.

We cannot here discuss in full this new literary movement, for it is not as yet completely upon us. But Johnson's poetry from this point on comes closer and closer to it. He departs from the protest tradition; and instead of apologizing for the race issue, leads his people to become proud of it. His poetry, as will be typical of the writers following, no longer pleads; it expresses. It revolts against sentimentality, optimism, romantic escape. The Negro and his artistic works are endowed with a new dignity, and they begin to take their rightful place in American culture. This viewpoint will not become full-blown until the days of Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, and Langston Hughes; but James Weldon Johnson, symbol of rising intellectualism among the Negroes, introduces it and propagates it.

A poem that can be identified with this rising spirit is the famous "O Black and Unknown Bards." In it Johnson pays homage to the unknown creators of the Negro spirituals. By his very selection of words

and by the tone he creates within the poem, he invests this form of folk art with new dignity and importance.

> O black and unknown bards of long ago
> How came your lips to touch the sacred fire?
> How, in your darkness, did you come to know
> The power and beauty of the minstrel's lyre?
> Who first from midst his bonds lifted his eyes?
> Who first from the still watch, lone and long,
> Feeling the ancient faith of prophets rise
> Within his dark-kept soul, burst into song?[5]

Some have even taken this as a literal explanation of the origin of the spiritual. We can hardly go so far as to say that; and yet we realize that Johnson has here recreated the mood in which the spiritual was born. He gives the act of creation almost the sacredness of Holy Scripture, a thought undoubtedly new to most Americans of both races.

Another quite thought-provoking poem from the volume Fifty Years and Other Poems is "The White Witch." In the form of a semi-legend, it lends itself to varied interpretation.

> O brothers mine, take care! Take care!
> The great white witch rides out tonight.
> O younger brothers mine, beware!
> Look not upon her beauty bright;
> For in her glance there is a snare,
> And in her smile there is a blight.[6]

The whiteness, blondeness, and youth of this witch are constantly emphasized, but we are also told that she is centuries old and twin sister to the earth. At first thought, one might wonder if the "great white witch" of the poem is the temptation to cross the color line. On the other hand, the traditional setting and form of the poem makes us search for a more universal symbol. Possibly we might maintain that she is the moon, casting her spell on mankind, as she has done through the ages. Whatever the interpretation the individual reader might decide to give,

we must agree that Johnson has created a full, if somewhat ambiguous, symbol. He also balances perfectly the evident agelessness -- antiquity on one side, modernity on the other -- of this problem.

The last poem from this book that we might notice is the social-justice poem, "Brothers." This very realistic poem deals with the horror and brutality of lynching. The main character is a symbol rather than a person; he represents all the resentment, distrust, bitterness, and hate that built up in the Negro throughout the fifteen generations of slavery. When he hurls forth his defiance, he is taken by the mob and slowly, cruelly burned at the stake. At the end, he becomes almost a Christ-symbol, for his bones and the chain that bound him are divided among those who murdered him. And in his last words, Johnson has him condemn all those who could, or would, treat a fellow human being in such a manner; "Brothers in spirit, brothers in deed are we."[7] He whose hate drives him to lynching is as beast-like as he whom discrimination and cruelty has driven to evil deeds. This piece of blank verse probably accomplished as much in the outlawing of lynching as did all the active lobbying which Johnson later led.

Had the poems we have discussed so far composed the whole of Johnson's writing, he would have our acclaim as a great American Negro writer. But there yet remains for our examination what many consider his masterpiece -- God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse. Johnson had previously spent much of his time and energy convincing the public that Negro folk music and dance was real art. There remained still the task of presenting to America the Negro folk sermon. Johnson discovered that at one time in Negro life, there were sermons that passed with only slight modification

from preacher to preacher and locality to locality. Examples of these were the "Valley of the Dry Bones" sermon, taking Ezekial 37 as the text; the "Train Sermon"; the "Heavenly March" sermon; and finally, a sermon covering the whole Bible from the Creation to the Judgment Day. It was such as these that Johnson wanted to preserve and to raise to the standard of art.

Johnson also realized that the old-time Negro preacher was looked upon by most people as a semi-comic figure, and he wanted to change this misconception. In actuality, the preacher was a vital influence among the people of his race; he was the mainspring of hope and inspiration. Generally superior in intelligence, he often committed large portions of the Bible to memory. He would balk no text: "Brothers and sisters, this morning -- I intend to explain the unexplainable -- find out the undefinable -- ponder over the imponderable -- and unscrew the inscrutable."[8] The Negro preacher was an orator and an actor. He depended on a progression of rhythmic words to move audiences to ecstasy; he could modulate his voice from a whisper to a thunderclap. When he reached the point that he had swept away both his hearers and himself, his language became much more nearly poetry than prose. This was the language and oratorical quality that Johnson wanted to represent.

Then Johnson faced the problem of Negro dialect. This would seem to be the proper medium for the sermons, but Johnson states in his Introduction two reasons why he did not use it. (1) Dialect lends itself only to limited emotional expression. Only humor and pathos can be fully represented through it. Johnson wished these sermons to give the effect of a trombone -- an instrument having the power to express all emotions encompassed by the human voice, but with greater amplitude (thus the

title, God's Trombones). (2) The old-time preachers, even though they normally used dialect, usually stepped out from its narrow confines when they preached. They combined Negro idioms and King James English to create the sonorous phrases that satisfied their sense of sound and rhythm.

In the writing of the sermons themselves, Johnson tried to indicate the tempo of the preacher by the line arrangement and a certain sort of pause. He included, also, a preliminary prayer, which was almost as important as the sermon itself, for it set the stage, so to speak, for the sermon. Johnson regretted that the atmosphere itself, the personality of the preacher, the sermon intonation, and the syncopation of speech must necessarily remain absent from the sermon-poems. Yet the reader with any degree of sensitivity must sense that here Johnson has created, or set down, something of breath-taking beauty. There are phrases and images that strike with clear notes upon the consciousness of the person who puts himself into the mood of these works. Johnson has not fallen far short of his ideal of proving that the folk sermon is truly art.

The seven sermons Johnson records in his book range from "The Creation" to "The Crucifixion," from "Let My People Go" to "Go Down, Death." All are in blank verse and show a heavy influence of the spirituals. Probably the best known is "The Creation," which presents vividly a child-like trust in the goodness and closeness of God. Yet the sermon "Go Down, Death" is equally as stirring in its simple, but beautiful interpretation of death.

And God said: Go down, Death, go down,
Go down to Savannah, Georgia,
Down in Yamacraw,
And find Sister Caroline.
She's borne the burden and heat of the day,
She's labored long in my vineyard,
And she's tired —
She's weary —
Go down, Death, and bring her to me.[9]

No one but James Weldon Johnson could have blended poetic imagery, folk superstition, and seeming truth in such a way. Death became to the Negro congregation an actual person subservient to the demands of a merciful and loving God.

The importance which repetition played in establishing the rhythm needed to sway the crowds is represented most clearly in "The Crucifixion." Johnson felt that this poem was the most difficult to write, for it required both vividness of detail and absolute dignity of presentation.

On Calvary, on Calvary,
They crucified my Jesus.
They nailed him to the cruel tree,
And the hammer!
The hammer!
The hammer!
Rang through Jerusalem's streets.
The hammer!
The hammer!
The hammer!
Rang through Jerusalem's streets.

. . .

Oh, I tremble, yes I tremble,
It causes me to tremble, tremble,
When I think how Jesus died;
Died on the steeps of Calvary,
How Jesus died for sinners,
Sinners like you and me.[10]

Not only can we see the oratorical repetition of phrases, but we notice in the last excerpt the ever-present influence of the spirituals. On such an occasion the congregation might have interruped the minister with snatches of song or with their own repetition of key thoughts.

The shortest poem in the collection, and one well representing all the techniques Johnson used in his presentation of the folk-sermon is the introductory prayer. Johnson tells us that often a woman was called on to lead this prayer whom the minister knew could stir the congregation and prepare it for the sermon which was to follow. The striking, but always appropriate, combination of everyday colloquialism and Biblical phrases in this selection make it well worth quoting in its entirety.

LISTEN, LORD -- A PRAYER

O Lord, we come this morning
Knee-bowed and body-bent
Before thy throne of grace.
O Lord -- this morning --
Bow our hearts beneath our knees,
And our knees in some lonesome valley.
We come this morning --
Like empty pitchers to a full fountain,
With no merits of our own.
O Lord -- open up a window of heaven,
And lean out far over the battlements of glory,
And listen this morning.

Lord, have mercy on proud and dying sinners --
Sinners hanging over the mouth of hell,
Who seem to love their distance well.
Lord -- ride by this morning --
Mount your milk-white horse,
And ride-a this morning --
And in your ride, ride by old hell,
Ride by the dingy gates of hell,
And stop poor sinners in their headlong plunge.

And now, O Lord, this man of God,
Who breaks the bread of life this morning --
Shadow him in the hollow of thy hand,
And keep him out of the gunshot of the devil.
Take him, Lord -- this morning --
Wash him with hyssop inside and out,
Hang him up and drain him dry of sin.
Pin his ear to the wisdom-post,
And make his words sledge hammers of truth --
Beating on the iron heart of sin.

Lord God, this morning --
Put his eye to the telescope of eternity,
And let him look upon the paper walls of time.
Lord, turpentine his imagination,
Put perpetual motion in his arms,
Fill him full of the dynamite of thy power,
Anoint him all over with the oil of thy salvation,
And set his tongue on fire.

And now, O Lord --
When I've done drunk my last cup of sorrow --
When I've been called everything but a child of God --
When I'm done travelling up the rough side of the mountain --
O -- Mary's Baby --
When I start down the steep and slippery steps of death --
When this old world begins to rock beneath my feet --
Lower me to my dusty grave in peace.
To wait for that great gittin' up morning -- Amen.11

Such writing as this causes us to realize that here is a Negro poet for whom excuses no longer need to be made, in whose hands words have taken on new forms and fresh meanings. James Weldon Johnson was a highly educated man; he was a poet capable of great subtlety and depth. No Negro poet before him had had the wide range of expression, the strength of language, the creativeness he displayed. He was an intellectual artist in his own right, a poet at once racial and American. Johnson was born into an atmosphere of traditional dialect and protest poetry. At his death, he left behind an ever-broadening field of Negro writing that was beginning to include the new notes of pride and realism. The "New Negro" was ready to speak to America; who can estimate the part James Weldon Johnson played in getting his voice heard?

ENDNOTES

[1]James Weldon Johnson, Along This Way (New York, 1933), p. 156.

[2]Ibid., p. 155.

[3]Ibid., pp. 374-375.

[4]James Weldon Johnson, The Book of American Negro Poetry, (New York, 1931), pp. 122-23.

[5]Margaret Just Butcher, The Negro in American Culture (New York, 1956), p. 100.

[6]Johnson, The Book of American Negro Poetry, p. 122.

[7]Ibid., p. 190.

[8]James Weldon Johnson, God's Trombones (New York, 1927), p. 5.

[9]Ibid., p. 28.

[10]Ibid., pp. 41-43.

[11]Ibid., pp. 12-15.

BOOKS BY JAMES WELDON JOHNSON

POETRY:

Fifty Years and Other Poems, 1917.
God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse, 1927.
Saint Peter Relates an Incident of the Resurrection Day, 1930.

PROSE:

The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man, 1912, 1927.
The Larger Success, 1923.
Black Manhattan, 1930.
Along This Way (Autobiography), 1933.
Negro Americans, What Now?, 1934.

EDITED WORKS:

The Book of American Negro Poetry, 1922.
The Book of American Negro Spirituals, 1926.
The Second Book of Negro Spirituals, 1926.

CLAUDE MCKAY
(1889-1948)
VOICE OF PASSION

Wars seem always to have had an unsettling effect on a country's literature, and the American writings of the last century can certainly claim no exemption. Before the Civil War, and for some years after it, American writers were deeply entrenched in romanticism. Moralism and optimism were the keynotes of both poetry and prose; beauty and goodness were considered to be the values inherent in good literature. The Civil War, however, brought some inkling of change. The rise of industrialization and urbanization led the way toward social realism; and such writers as Mark Twain began creating works that were more vigorous, more "true to life." By the 1890's, an open struggle had developed between the romantic and the realistic camps. The ensuing conflict was bitter, but not unduly long. Social and economic problems within America's national life, pessimism and decadence within her personal life, led inexorably to an unrest which soon penetrated her literature.

This feeling of unrest gradually altered literary outlook, making it constantly more realistic in character. By the end of the nineteenth century, writers such as Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser had helped usher in a new movement, characterized by its insistence on realism, and even on naturalism. This revolution in theme and philosophy was appropriately accompanied by experimentation in technique; thus the Twenties saw the creation of such technically unprecedented

works as Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury and Eliot's The Waste Land. This whole literary period of change finally assumed the proportions of a Renaissance. The above-mentioned thematic and technical changes persisted throughout the years of the First World War, and were never really completely lost. Without doubt, this period of Awakening in American literature affected the course of future literary work in this country.

Meanwhile, American Negro literature was experiencing a similar spiritual and literary emancipation. Its renaissance did not come until later, concentrating itself in the years 1914-1928; but when it came, it carried the earmarks of the American literary revolution as a whole. The major factors that brought it about were three in number: the First World War, the advance of the Negro in labor and education, and the Negro's extensive migration to the North. James Weldon Johnson had earlier opened the door to a change in literature by his abandonment of Negro dialect as a poetic vehicle; Alain Locke later entered it as editor of the book, The New Negro. In this book Locke stated that the younger generation of Negro writers had achieved an objective attitude toward life. Race to them was becoming an added, enriching experience, making existence more interesting, more beautiful, more poignant. From this viewpoint was afforded a deepening rather than a narrowing of social vision. The Negro Renaissance, then, was more than a new emphasis on realism or naturalism. It was a deliberate attempt by the Negro writer to stifle propagandistic and apologistic motives in his work. It was a determination to put more effort into inner mastery of mood and spirit than into outer mastery of form and technique. The young poets shook off the last shreds of the minstrel tradition and declared themselves

free in regards to the tone and technique of their self-expression. Langston Hughes phrased the independent stand of the Renaissance group thus:

> We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly, too. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on the top of the mountain, free within ourselves.[1]

The strongest voice among the "New Negroes" of this period is found to be Claude McKay's. McKay was not born in the States and probably never became a citizen; yet, in him we have our most vigorous critic of democracy and our most contemptuous viewer of America's treatment of the Negro. Can we truthfully classify McKay as an American Negro poet? Technically, we cannot. However, by virtue of such prose works as Home to Harlem and such volumes of poetry as Spring in New Hampshire, it is obvious that he has something to say to America. And because of his studies and travel here and his love for Harlem, it is likely that America has had something to say to him. We cannot afford to pass by this Negro poet, one of the most outstanding the Negro Renaissance produced.

Claude McKay was born in Jamaica, British West Indies, in a village so small that it did not possess a name. The youngest of eleven children, he was sent to his brother's home to receive an education. This brother was a schoolmaster and a freethinker, and he greatly influenced Claude during the formative years of his life. By the time the boy was fourteen, he had completely absorbed his brother's fine library, adding the ideas of such writers as Haecker, Huxley, Matthew Arnold, and Shakespeare

to his own philosophy of life. His first books, Songs of Jamaica and Constab Ballads, were published while he was working with the Jamaica constabulary. Many of the poems in these collections were written in Jamaican dialect, and it is interesting to note that already McKay's peculiar combination of rough passion and tender lyricism was appearing. These early poems became exceedingly popular in Jamaica, and McKay became known to the people as the Robert Burns of the island.

The year 1912 found McKay in America to study scientific farming, with plans for an early return to Jamaica. But after a few months at Tuskegee Institute and two years at Kansas State University, he paid a visit to New York. He arrived in Harlem just as it was beginning to take on the form of a world metropolis, and he was completely captivated by it. Shortly thereafter, he abandoned all thought of returning to Jamaica, and he began to look upon himself primarily as a poet. He published several poems in magazines in this country and, while in England, brought out Spring in New Hampshire. This was his first volume in literary English, and its preface was written by the well-known critic, I. A. Richards.

The rest of McKay's life could best be described in a travelogue. He spent time in Holland, Belgium, Russia, Germany, Morocco, England, and France, as well as in the United States. He published two other volumes of poetry, but during the last part of his life, turned almost completely to prose writing. He worked for a while in New York as an associate editor of The Liberator, a socialist magazine of art and literature. After his trips abroad, however, he turned against socialism, because he could not contend with its ruthless tyranny over man's mind

and body. McKay is remembered today primarily for his part in bringing about the Negro Renaissance, and for his most powerful volume, Harlem Shadows.

We have designated McKay as a passionate poet; this he is, throughout most of his work. But we might also call him a melodic poet, for he is as constantly conscious of sound as are Edgar Allan Poe and Vachel Lindsay, at their best. McKay, besides, has the talent of seeming unaware that his combination of words is producing such an effect. His poems sound much more natural and unaffected than do the musical experiments for which Poe is so famous. Lines from the poem "Harlem Shadows" will serve to illustrate his constant repetition of vowel sounds.

> Ah, heart of me, the weary, weary feet
> In Harlem wandering from street to street.[2]

McKay also furnishes us with many examples of alliteration: heart-Harlem, weary-weary-wandering, feet-from, street-street. However, even this does not contribute to the melodic nature of his poems as does his almost unconscious use of assonance. Most of McKay's early poems, the ones published in Jamaica, are written in a syllabic music even more delicate than this. It was not until he came to the United States that he realized that the expression of his deepest feelings required something more. Thus, McKay added to his poems the colored imagery, the deep passion that are his trademarks; but at the same time he retained his tendency to emphasize the music and the smoothness that can be cultivated in the English language.

There is another quality characteristic of McKay's poems about Jamaica and about nature that cannot escape even the ordinary reader.

Always they seem to picture the wonder of living, the vitality of the senses that belongs to childhood. John Dewey comments on this by quoting a line from McKay's own poem, "North and South": "And wonder to life's commonplaces clings."[3] Constantly McKay shows ways a sensitive adult may recreate the spontaneity and liveliness of a child; frequently he rediscovers for the reader the thrill of life itself and the freedom from artificiality possessed by the very young. McKay's emphasis on passion and intensity in theme and treatment never causes his ideas to seem immature; but it prevents them from being clouded by any commonness or dullness. His title-poem, "Spring in New Hampshire," shows the depth and fullness of the life his poems describe.

Spring in New Hampshire

Too green the springing April grass,
Too blue the silver-speckled sky,
For me to linger here, alas,
While happy winds go laughing by,
Wasting the golden hours indoors,
Washing windows and scrubbing floors.

Too wonderful the April night,
Too faintly sweet the first May flowers,
The stars too gloriously bright,
For me to spend the evening hours,
When fields are fresh and streams are leaping,
Wearied, exhausted, dully sleeping.[4]

McKay is not ashamed of emotion, and display of it never makes his poems less manly or strong. His are not weak feelings, and it does not seem unbecoming for him to express them freely. In "The Tropics in New York," he describes the fruits native to his country, the memories they bring to him, and then his emotional reaction:

My eyes grew dim, and I could no more gaze;
A wave of longing through my body swept,
And, hungry for the old, familiar ways,
I turned aside and bowed my head and wept.[5]

McKay's poems are, generally, universal in topic and tone; they are a sympathetic interpretation of the moods and experiences of humanity as often as they are a description of the hopes and sorrows of a race. Emotion being as old as human life and as deep as the heart of man, McKay could no more deny its omnipresence than he could life itself. To him, life was passion and feeling, and his poems are expressive of the naked, but beautiful, force of it.

Max Eastman, a past editor of The Liberator, claims Claude McKay to be the first lyric genius of his race. Without a doubt, McKay has a way with words superior to many of the Negro poets before or after him. And likewise, McKay's feelings are more passionate and more powerfully expressed than practically any other poet of either race. Never is this truer than when one is speaking of McKay's love poetry. An entire section of the book, Selected Poems of Claude McKay, is given the title "Amoroso," and in it are recorded McKay's reactions to passion in the deepest sense. His love is highly sensual, but it never sinks to the level of a cheap, shoddy affair. Always there is the element of awe, wonder, worship; the experience is almost a religious one.

> The perfume of your body dulls my sense.
> I want nor wine nor weed; your breath alone
> Suffices. In this moment rare and tense
> I worship at your breast...
> Oh, with our love the night is warm and deep!
> The air is sweet, my flower, and sweet the flute
> Whose music lulls our burning brain to sleep,
> While we lie loving, passionate, and mute.[6]

Surely no other lyric poet ever expressed his most intimate feelings in a form that is, simultaneously, natural and poetically perfect.

Finally, we are confronted with McKay's most extensive and most

influential body of poems. These, his poems of rebellion and protest, are strong notes in the poetic music of the Negro Renaissance. Rugged and stern, this writing never avoids the subject of race and prejudice in American life. It portrays the sensation of being a black man in a white man's world. Yet McKay is not ashamed of his color; he no longer excuses it, but extols it. There is less belligerence and more pride of race, and never is there a compromise with the white world for the way it has treated the Negro. This new-found racial pride and fresh picturing of the Negro problem is both part of the Renaissance and expressive of McKay's personal feelings and convictions.

McKay has an utter contempt for weakness; he insists that Negro men and women must grasp the responsibility of behaving as responsible members of society instead of as servants and inferiors. In "White Houses," this defiance of social injustice comes to the foreground:

> Your door is shut against my tightened face,
> And I am sharp as steel with discontent.
> But I possess the courage and the grace
> To bear my anger proudly and unbent.[7]

McKay, in fact, looks upon the hate and anger in his own heart as desirable feelings, for he feels they exercise a kind of discipline upon him, the persecuted one. Later in this same poem, he speaks of the wisdom and superhuman power he must find within himself to stay free of the poison that is produced in the lives of the white supremacists.[8] This sort of testing transforms and strengthens the soul of the Negro, making him better able to withstand discrimination and continue the battle for equal rights. His poem, "Baptism," describes this hate he must enter into and the effect it has upon him. Yet we notice, as we read it, that it is not a mean or spiteful hate, but a clean, purifying, victorious one.

Baptism

Into the furnace let me go alone;
Stay you without in terror of the heat.
I will go naked in--for thus 'tis sweet--
Into the weird depths of the hottest zone.
I will not quiver in the frailest bone,
You will not note a flicker of defeat;
My heart shall tremble not its fate to meet,
My mouth give utterance to any moan.
The yawning oven spits forth fiery spears;
Red aspish tongues shout wordlessly my name.
Desire destroys, consumes my mortal fears,
Transforming me into a shape of flame.
I will come out, back to your world of tears,
A stronger soul within a finer frame.9

There are many facets to McKay's rebellion and hate. The one we might most expect to find would be his defiance of the "white fiends" and their cruelty to the members of his race. Thus it is no surprise to us that several of his best poems deal with this problem. For example, "The Lynching" and "If We Must Die" exemplify McKay's realistic description of the situation and his violent resistance against it. Both are, somewhat incongrously, written in the sonnet form. Yet McKay has firm command of his technique, and these sonnet-tragedies are among the most effective of his work. In the first-named poem, McKay describes vividly the burning and hanging of a Negro and gives the reader the impression that this martyr is favored of God, but that the white mob remains unforgiven. The religious connotation is obvious; and just as a crowd gathered around Christ to watch his death, so the blood-thirsty, callous throng gathers here, also:

Day dawned, and soon the mixed crowds came to view
The ghastly body swaying in the sun;
The women thronged to look, but never a one
Showed sorrow in her eyes of steely blue;
And little lads, lynchers that were to be,
Danced round the dreadful thing in fiendish glee.10

"If We Must Die," on the other hand, gives us McKay's resolution concerning such cruel and pointless deaths. We hear the voice of the social rebel speaking with defiance and pride; we see the reaction of the militant and self-reliant "New Negro":

If We Must Die

If we must die--let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.
If we must die--oh, let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
Oh, Kinsmen! We must meet the common foe;
Though far outnumbered, let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back![11]

McKay often used animal imagery to refer to America and its white men. Here they are dogs; in other poems they are tigers, drinking the Negro's blood and stealing his breath. Always death is imminent, but never a hopeless death; for the Negro, in dying, likewise deals America a death-blow.

But there is more than rebellion against prejudice built into McKay's poems. In spite of McKay's love for Harlem, he could not forget the sorrow he felt at seeing the city degrade and destroy his innocent people. The first poem he published in the United States had as its theme the emptiness of the lives of those who are caught up in the sordid existence of the city. The Harlem dancer was beautiful, and her song and dance were exquisitely performed. "But," McKay says,

...looking at her falsely-smiling face,
I knew her self was not in that strange place.[12]

Her soul was not of the city, although her body, of necessity, was. The praise of the applauding boys and the young prostitutes was nothing to her; the place was foreign to her very nature. Yet the city had taken her and forced her into its mold.

The girls pictured in "Harlem Shadows" are victims of the same monster - the physical nature's insistent demands for food. The nights in Harlem are full of the footsteps of those seeking to barter bodies for bread. In each stanza the shoes become more and more worn, and the footsteps become slower and wearier. The sternness of poverty and the escape of lust have brought disgrace to the "dusky, half-clad girls," and to the poet who cares so deeply about the needs of his people.

I hear the halting footsteps of a lass
  In Negro Harlem when the night lets fall
Its veil. I see the shapes of girls who pass
  To bend and barter at desire's call.
Ah, little dark girls, who in slippered feet
  Go prowling through the night from street to street!

Ah, stern harsh world, that in the wretched way
  Of poverty, dishonor and disgrace,
Has pushed the timid little feet of clay,
  The sacred brown feet of my fallen race!
Ah, heart of me, the weary, weary feet
  In Harlem wandering from street to street.13

There are other poems, too, describing the effect of the city on the man or woman who attempts to become lost in it. Descriptions of the tired laborer who dreads the coming of the dawn and another day in the harsh, ugly city are realistically done. Often McKay contrasts the lyric beauty of daybreak with the noise and dirt revealed in the city through its approach. The dawn also points out the grotesqueness of the people whom the sins of the night have weakened and ruined. It illumines the factories to which the already exhausted worker must

return; and McKay, putting himself in the place of the laborer, says: "And I go darkly-rebel to my work."[14] The young boy who had lived a free life in the lush tropics of Jamaica could never quite forgive the city he loved for the sins it committed against an already burdened people.

How can we tie together the purposes toward which Claude McKay was aiming in his poetic endeavor? What was the ultimate end of this passion and energy that carried him through the literary Renaissance? Did he accomplish anything for himself or for his people? Let us hear the answer from McKay himself:

The Negro's Tragedy

It is the Negro's tragedy I feel
Which binds me like a heavy iron chain,
It is the Negro's wounds I want to heal
Because I know the keenness of his pain.
Only a thorn-covered Negro and no white
Can penetrate into the Negro's ken,
Or feel the thickness of the shroud of night
Which hides and buries him from other men.

So what I write is urged out of my blood.
There is no white man who could write my book,
Though many think their story should be told
Of what the Negro people ought to brook.
Our statesmen roam the world to set things right.
This Negro laughs and prays to God for light![15]

Claude McKay was afraid of no topic; he incorporated many formerly shunned ones into his work as poetic themes. His subjects ranged from rebellion against prejudice and degradation to a chafing against the color line. At the other extreme, they ranged from soft, dreamy lyrics to poems of tenderness and longing. Always his language and his thought were strong, forthright, and full of vibrant feeling. His descriptions and comparisons, even in his prose works, were invariably full, rich,

and exotic. "Flame-heart," one of the finest Negro lyrics ever written, in a subtle way combines all these aspects of McKay's life and works.

> So much have I forgotten in ten years,
> So much in ten brief years! I have forgot
> What time the purple apples come to juice,
> And what month brings the shy forget-me-not.
> I have forgot the special, startling season
> Of the pimento's flowering and fruiting,
> What time of year the ground doves brown the fields
> And fill the noonday with their curious fluting.
> I have forgotten much, but still remember
> The poinsettia's red, blood-red, in warm December.[16]

It could not be less than appropriate that our poet of passion have as his most cherished Jamaican memory the intense red of this flower that blooms freely in tropical lands. It serves as a single-image description of McKay's work; for his poems are sometimes as delicate in texture as is the poinsettia, and other times as hardy and tough in theme as they. McKay, the poet, had a heart of flame similar to the one possessed by the blood-red flower.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Margaret Just Butcher, The Negro in American Culture (New York, 1956), p. 102.

[2] James Weldon Johnson, The Book of American Negro Poetry (New York, 1931), p. 171.

[3] Claude McKay, Selected Poems of Claude McKay (New York, 1953), p. 7.

[4] Johnson, The Book of American Negro Poetry, pp. 171-172.

[5] Claude McKay, Harlem Shadows (New York, 1922), p. 8.

[6] Ibid., p. 75.

[7] Butcher, The Negro in American Culture, p. 105.

[8] Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes (editors), The Poetry of the Negro -- 1746-1949 (New York, 1949), p. 332.

[9] McKay, Harlem Shadows, p. 52.

[10] Johnson, The Book of American Negro Poetry, p. 168.

[11] Ibid., pp. 168-169.

[12] Ibid., p. 170.

[13] Ibid., pp. 170-171.

[14] McKay, Harlem Shadows, p. 43.

[15] McKay, Selected Poems of Claude McKay, p. 50.

[16] Johnson, The Book of American Negro Poetry, p. 174.

BOOKS BY CLAUDE MCKAY

POETRY

Songs of Jamaica, 1911.
Constab Ballads, 1911.
Spring in New Hampshire, 1920.
Harlem Shadows: The Poems of Claude McKay, 1922.
A Long Way from Home, 1937.
Selected Poems, 1953.

PROSE

Home to Harlem, 1928.
Banjo, a Story Without a Plot, 1929.
Gingertown, 1932.
Banana Bottom, 1933.
Harlem: Negro Metropolis, 1940.

LANGSTON HUGHES
(1902-)
NEGRO POET LAUREATE

The Negro Renaissance had levelled off, and the period of the "Negro Vogue" had passed by the time the decade of the 1930's arrived. Most of the poets representing the "New Negro" movement had done their best work and published their most noteworthy volumes before that time. But there still remained on the American scene a spokesman for the new Negro poetry, one who was destined to be lauded by Carl Van Vechten as the poet laureate of his race. The greater part of his productive period lay before him, and new ground was waiting to be broken. The poet Langston Hughes was supremely equal to the task that awaited him.

Possibly the most direct way of learning simultaneously about Hughes the man and Hughes the poet is by reading his autobiography, The Big Sea. It is a book far superior to most autobiographies, for Hughes' careful organization keeps his main ideas from being lost in the multitude of details that are so tempting to other writers in a similar position. The foreword to the book and the last three sentences give evidence of its carefully followed theme and also reveal to the reader Hughes' philosophy of life and literature:

"Life is a big sea
full of many fish.
I let down my nets
and pull."[1]

"Literature is a big sea full of many fish. I let down my nets and pulled.
"I'm still pulling."[2]

Hughes tells in this work of his parents' divorce and his consequent separation from his father. When, at the age of seventeen, he did have the opportunity of living with his father, he found himself most unhappy. The father-image he had created in his mind could not have been farther removed from the actual flesh-and-blood person he came to know. After his final break from his father a year later, Hughes continued his father-search. As we shall later see, this had some amount of influence on his poetic themes. It also revealed to him something about his own poetic nature: ". . .my best poems were all written when I felt the worst. When I was happy, I didn't write anything."[3] And again: ". . .poems are like rainbows: they escape you quickly."[4]

In this same volume, Hughes speaks of his love for Harlem. It holds a strange fascination for him, probably because of his passion for Negro culture and his intense interest in the musical forms originated and propegated by the Negroes there. And yet, Langston Hughes' poems were not at first popular among the Negro race as a whole. Many felt that Negroes had been too often maligned in literature and consequently, that any further pictures should be clean and cultured. Hughes was not a writer of this type, and for that matter, neither was Claude McKay. Both were criticized by fellow Negroes as writing in a vulgar, low-rate, malicious manner. This is surprising when we hear Hughes describing the poems that he read before a Negro audience in Nashville as "poems in which I had tried to capture some of the dreams and heartaches that all Negroes know."[5]

As was mentioned in the preceding paragraph, Hughes was greatly influenced in his writing by popular Negro music forms. He employed

the spiritual as a way of portraying the double standard by which the Negro must live.

Angel Wings

The angels wings is white as snow,
O, white as snow,
White
as
snow.
The angels wings is white as snow,
But I drug me wings
In the dirty mire
O, I drug ma wings
All through the fire.
But the angels wings is white as snow,
White
as
snow.[6]

Although Hughes proves in other poems his skill at writing in standard English, he is never hesitant about using Negro idioms and colloquialisms. He cannot be said to write in dialect, for he shares the opinion that this is a passing art form. Yet he strives always to present contemporary American Negro culture; and here, as in other less "spiritual" poems, he reproduces the speech of the Harlem Negro. Actually, the Negro speech adds to the quality of this poem. The traditional spiritual form would sound stilted otherwise expressed.

More common, however, are the poems showing the prominence of the blues and jazz form in Hughes' thought and writing. In The Big Sea, he describes vividly the effect such music has on him: "Like the waves of the sea coming one after another, always one after another, like the earth moving around the sun, night, day-night, day-night, day-forever, so is the undertow of black music with its rhythm that never betrays you, its strength like the beat of the human heart, its humor, and its rooted power."[7] This musical undertow of which Hughes speaks is revealed both in the subject matter and in the basic rhythm and flow of

many of his poems. The following poem is totally representative of its influence:

Dream Boogie

Good morning daddy!
Ain't you heard
The boogie-woogie rumble
Of a dream deferred?

Listen closely:
You'll hear their feet
Beating out and beating out a-

You think
It's a happy beat?

Listen to it closely:
Ain't you heard
something underneath
like a-

What did I say?

Sure,
I'm happy!
Take it away![8]

This poem, so Hughes informs us, describes contemporary Harlem; we shall have to take his word that this is true, for we can certainly not tell from the poem itself. The fact that the style and tone is derived directly from be-bop, however, is much clearer. Evident are the conflicting changes, sharp interjections, broken rhythms, and distortions of this modern music. It could well illustrate, as Hughes probably intends, the shifting irregularity of a community constantly on the move. It also points up the gaiety and yet the uncertainty behind this continuing transition. In this poem, as well as in the countless others of this kind, the blues and jazz poem forms are admirably suited to the character and the problems of the race that are pictured in them.

But not all of Hughes' poems show this definite jazz-tone, for he is also the author of dignified, moving lyrics. He can combine

deep feeling with cool objectivity. He can mold from free verse a poem both symmetrical and effective. He is, without question, a master of the poetic language. This, one of his best-known poems, may be used as an example:

The Negro Speaks of Rivers

I've known rivers:
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than
the flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.[9]

This poem was written when Hughes was only eighteen years of age; he jotted it down on the back of an envelope as he rode across the Mississippi River. Even as a young boy, Hughes was an appreciative recipient of the racial heritage passed down through the Negro blood line. He admired the bravery and the gaiety of the Negro; and he realized that these ancient rivers, although looking upon the Negro in primitivism and slavery, furnished a song, a lullaby, a golden hope for the race. The soul of the black man becomes in this poem one with the river in its dusky color, its ancient heritage, its depth, its everlasting hope.

An interesting aspect of Hughes' lyrical---and sometimes not-so-lyrical---work is his ability to draw clear pictures or characterize definite emotions in a very few lines. One very beautiful word-picture

describes the new moon on a cloudless, frosty night.

Winter Moon

How thin and sharp is the moon tonight!
How thin and sharp and ghostly white
Is the slim curved crook of the moon tonight:[10]

Another, depicting the cool desperation of a man driven to suicide, is a reflection of Hughes' own power of complete objectivity.

Suicide's Note

The calm,
Cool face of the river
Asked me for a kiss.[11]

And then, the more humorous, but the completely believable:

Bad Morning

Here I sit
With my shoes mismated.
Lawdy-mercy!
I's frustrated![12]

The themes around which Hughes has built his poems are almost too numerous to mention. However, the inevitable questions arise: What part does race play in Hughes' poetry? How important is it to him in the selection of topic and tone? Hughes himself would probably say that it is of only incidental consideration in the total process of his creativity. Yet we have already seen the impact of Negro rhythms and Negro speech on much of his poetry. Race also is influential in other ways, although it is, many times, an unconscious influence. Hughes, an ardent devotee of Negro culture and a dedicated student of Negro problems, can seldom completely escape this all-important matter and is, as often as not, motivated by it.

Part of this is seen in the fact that Hughes is proud of Africa and proud of the people who have come from it. A whole section of his Selected Poems bears the title of "Afro-American Fragments"; and it

includes several poems likening the depths of the dark continent to the faces of its people being persecuted around the world. Yet, compensation is not completely withheld. The darkness in these poems does not represent hopelessness and desolation nearly so much as it does tenderness, gentleness, beauty. The radiant beauty of the country and of its dark race is merely pointed up by the black exterior.

Poem

The night is beautiful,
So the faces of my people.

The stars are beautiful,
So the eyes of my people.

Beautiful, also, is the sun.
Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people.[13]

Among the beautiful souls that the poet here praises are some who deserve special mention in poems. Hughes, through poetic monologues, presents the feelings of Negroes whom he particularly admires. These individuals are strong, ironic, often pessimistic; at the same time, they are completely frank with themselves, never resorting to complaint or whining. Negro mothers, often responsible for the successes of their children and grandchildren, come in for a large share of this praise. The Minstrel Man that Hughes creates also illustrates the Negro's ability to cover up internal suffering with gay fortitude and determination.

Minstrel Man

Because my mouth
Is wide with laughter
And my throat
Is deep with song,
You do not think
I suffer after
I have held my pain so long.

Because my mouth
Is wide with laughter
You do not hear my inner cry;
Because my feet
Are gay with dancing
You do not know
I die.[14]

Of course, Hughes, along with every other American Negro poet, is finally forced to turn from praise of his race to contemplation of the racial problem in our country. One of his most obvious references to Jim Crow is found in the poem "Merry-Go-Round." While it is not one of his best poems, it treats an all too ordinary situation in an extraordinary way. The setting--a colored child at a carnival; the problem--finding the Jim Crow section on the merry-go-round; the irony--how can a back seat for a "black kid" be found in a circular arrangement of toy horses? Hughes does not answer the question; he presents it and then leaves it to the discretion of the reader.

But the most unusual racial theme appearing in Hughes' work is that of the tragic mulatto. This touchy subject, referred to only obliquely by most poets, gets its full share of attention in Hughes' poems, short stories, operas, and dramas. His two best poems on the theme are "Cross," a short, stark, ballad-like piece, and the longer, more dramatic "Mulatto." In them the unfortunate mulatto is pictured as violent, lonely, maladjusted, filled with feelings of divided loyalty and frustration. These poem-tragedies do more than portray a stereotype; they accurately represent one of the saddest problems among all races.

Cross

My old man's a white old man
And my old mother's black.
If ever I cursed my white old man
I take my curses back.

If ever I cursed my black old mother
And wished she were in hell,
I'm sorry for that evil wish
And now I wish her well.

My old man died in a fine big house.
My ma died in a shack.
I wonder where I'm gonna die,
Being neither white nor black?[15]

"Cross," as the title of this poem, gives us an insight into the problem the mixed-blood Negro faces. He is, literally, a cross, or a hybrid; he has also a cross to bear and to be crucified upon throughout his life. By suggestion and implication, we see this person's bitter resentment against his mixed background, his feeling that the failures of his life stem from that background. Now that his parents are removed from the scene, he no longer places on them any guilt for their act. Instead of the hate upon which he had previously concentrated, he feels a sense of not-belonging, desertion, rejection. His is a fruitless, hopeless search for a father and a home. This parallels the feelings of the mixed-blood Hughes, who was deeply hurt when African natives would not believe he was a Negro. It also reflects Hughes' situation as a boy, reared by his grandmother and rejected by his father. Hughes knew what it was not to fit completely into any niche of American society, and the mulatto of his imagination was thus no stranger to him.

The dramatic dialogue, "Mulatto," is a longer poem, but important enough for us to examine in its entirety.

Mulatto

I am your son, white man!

Georgia dusk
And the turpentine woods.
One of the pillars of the temple fell.

You are my son!
Like hell!

The moon over the turpentine woods.
The Southern night
Full of stars,
Great big yellow stars.
What's a body but a toy?
Juicy bodies
Of nigger wenches
Blue black
Against black fences.
O, you little bastard boy,
What's a body but a toy?
The scent of pine wood stings the soft night air.
What's the body of your mother?
Sharp pine scent in the evening air.
A nigger night,
A nigger joy,
A little yellow
Bastard boy.
Naw, you ain't my brother.
Niggers ain't my brother.
Not ever.
Niggers ain't my brother.

The Southern night is full of stars,
Great big yellow stars.
O, sweet as earth,
Dusk-dark bodies
Give sweet birth
To little yellow bastard boys.

Get on back there in the night,
You ain't white.

The bright stars scatter everywhere.
Pine wood scent in the evening air.
A nigger night,
A nigger joy.
I am your son, white man!

A little yellow
Bastard boy.[16]

This poem is permeated with an hysterical exuberance, with feelings of passion and violence. Its open theme is rejection, and all other issues are subordinated to that. The denial of kinship which was so painful to Hughes in his personal life is here. To heap irony on irony, it is a two-generation refusal, by both father and half-brother. The symbolism and color imagery in "Mulatto" is carefully worked out.

The white pillar of the temple fails to blend with a black fence rail, and the fall casts a strange shadow over the whole Southern countryside. The woods are described as "turpentine"; the sky is full of yellow bastard stars. The interracial lovemaking, however, is not the essential evil. The skies are still beautiful; the woods still possess a clean pine scent; birth from dark, earthy bodies is still sacred. The greater wrong consists in the rejection of fatherhood, the irresponsible casualness toward the sex act, the slurring references to the "nigger joy" participated in. The father makes of his son a mongrel cur and pushes him back into the night with which he covered his original selfish, careless actions. Here, as in other works, Hughes points out that the problem of mixed blood is basically a personal one. The "tragic mulatto" idea becomes a father-son conflict and a rejection that is stunting in its effect on the product of miscegenation.

It would be unfortunate for us to overemphasize this aspect of Langston Hughes' work, for there are many poems of different types that are also important. Although they are not so directly concerned with special problems as are the preceding ones, they, too, are motivated and molded by race. For instance, there is a number of poems Hughes has written in praise of Harlem. This citadel of Negro life and culture reveals to him all he wants or needs to know about the Negro. And when Hughes describes the metropolis as a "nigger place," he is not showing contempt. Rather, he is attempting to demonstrate the surprise of a lover of beauty who discovers in this cruel, but captivating, city the things he has vainly sought in more likely places.

Esthete in Harlem

Strange,
That in this nigger place
I should meet life face to face;
When, for years, I had been seeking
Life in places gentler-speaking,
Until I came to this vile street
And found life stepping on my feet![17]

One of Hughes' most successful techniques in dealing with the Negro problem is to combine a fine touch of irony with natural dignity. He can begin a poem with a subject from the lowest possible source and, using just a few words, lift it far above its original level or meaning. Such a poem is one of Hughes' own favorites, "Brass Spittoons." In it he draws a graphic picture of the lowly, filthy work to which the Negro must oftentimes stoop. It is no problem for the reader to visualize after the first few seconds the slimy pot that is being cleaned. It is somewhat of a shock, then, for this same repugnant object to become "A bright bowl of brass. . .beautiful to the Lord"[18] in the poem's last ten lines. It becomes as worthy of being placed on the altar as the cups of Solomon, for the work of his hands is the best the Negro spittoon-cleaner has to offer. This cynical, but dignified, twist inevitably leaves the reader with a strange sense of humility.

Another illustration of this same technique is a short poem criticizing America's treatment of her "darker brother." This work admits the Negro's temporary defeat, but it rejoices in the optimistic hope that this defeat will be dispelled by the strength and beauty of the Negro himself.

I, Too

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen

When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll sit at the table
When company comes.

Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed,--

I, too, am America.[19]

Here Hughes neither follows in the protest tradition nor apologizes for the problems his race causes. He merely states the fact that white men and black men are brothers, and that at the present time the darker ones are still considered children. There is no bitterness, for the Negro race knows that it is growing strong and can soon prove that its beauty and maturity exceeds that of the race attempting to dominate it. The tone of the poem is somewhat sardonic; after all, what reasoning causes one who can praise America and be an integral part of the country to be hidden from public view? At present, the white brother is ashamed of his black relative; tomorrow he will be ashamed of the way he is now treating him. Hughes is confident in this hope of his and strong in his presentation of it.

In fact, this word, strength, and another, versatility, might be used to describe Langston Hughes' most positive qualities as a writer. Since his "discovery" by Vachel Lindsay, he has expressed the strength of his convictions in practically every genre open to him. We have already seen his value as a poet; he is also competent as a short story writer, a novelist, a translator, an historian, a biographer, a musician,

a dramatist, and a writer for juveniles. He has not sought to appeal to white taste, nor has he tried to cater to a colored public. He has, therefore, been free to express his own genius and deal with his problems as a writer in his own way.

One cannot now say definitely whether or not Hughes' writings will last. His technique is smooth and his poems unusual, thus making him an interesting figure to study. Yet this very uniqueness may stand in the way of his permanent poetic success. The thought in many of his poems has been so distorted by blues and jazz forms that its obscurity sometimes makes the reader wonder whether he is reading E. E. Cummings or Langston Hughes. These unusual forms have the same drawback as do Cummings'; the reader is likely to think of them as a gimmick and refuse to accept poems using them as being serious.

Hughes' poems might also be criticized for lacking depth. Although he has achieved the freedom of technique typical of other modern poets, he has not combined it with as wide a range of thought as they. He has limited himself somewhat by his prevalent use of racial themes, and his own attitude toward race prevents his using it as a powerful force in poetry. Hughes believes that humor is the only sound approach to the racial problem, that if this is not successful, the whole matter would best be ignored. This viewpoint is obvious in the way Hughes handles his poetry. And although it may satisfy his own demands as a Negro and an artist, it may be limiting the permanent value of much of his writing.

Yet Hughes cannot be bypassed as a "fad poet" or a light writer. He can be passionate and lyrical, and he can reach objectivity and freedom in his verse. Without doubt, his is the most prominent and most influential voice among Negro poets today. He is completely original and completely Negro. For his striking presentation of contemporary Negro life, Langston Hughes well deserves the title of poet laureate of his race.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Langston Hughes, The Big Sea (New York, 1940), foreword.

[2]Ibid., p. 323.

[3]Ibid., p. 54.

[4]Ibid., p. 56.

[5]Ibid., p. 295.

[6]Langston Hughes, Selected Poems (New York, 1958), p. 25.

[7]Hughes, The Big Sea, p. 209.

[8]Langston Hughes, The Langston Hughes Reader (New York, 1958), p. 68.

[9]Countee Cullen, Caroling Dusk -- An Anthology of Negro Poetry (New York, 1927), pp. 149-150.

[10]Hughes, Selected Poems, p. 58.

[11]Cullen, Caroling Dusk, p. 151.

[12]Hughes, Selected Poems, p. 37.

[13]Cullen, Caroling Dusk, p. 150.

[14]Margaret Just Butcher, The Negro in American Culture (New York, 1956), pp. 107-108.

[15]James Weldon Johnson, The Book of American Negro Poetry (New York, 1931), pp. 226-227.

[16]Hughes, Selected Poems, pp. 160-161.

[17]Johnson, The Book of American Negro Poetry, p. 239.

[18]Ibid., p. 235.

[19]Cullen, Caroling Dusk, pp. 145-146.

BOOKS BY LANGSTON HUGHES

POETRY

The Weary Blues, 1926.
Fine Clothes to the Jew, 1927.
The Dream Keeper, 1932.
Shakespeare in Harlem, 1942.
Fields of Wonder, 1947.
Cuba Libre (by Nicolas Guillen, translated from the Spanish by Langston Hughes and Benjamin Carruthers), 1948.
One-Way Ticket, 1949.
Montage of a Dream Deferred, 1951.
Selected Poems of Gabriele Mistral (translated from the Spanish by Langston Hughes), 1957.
Selected Poems of Langston Hughes, 1958.

HUMOROUS DRAMA

Simple Speaks His Mind, 1950.
Simple Takes a Wife, 1953.
Simple Stakes a Claim, 1957.

PROSE

Not Without Laughter, 1930.
(with Arna Bontemps) Popo and Fifina, 1932.
The Ways of White Folks, 1934.
The Big Sea, 1940.
Masters of the Dew (by Jacques Roumain, translated from the French by Langston Hughes and Mercer Cook), 1947.
(with Arna Bontemps) The Poetry of the Negro, 1949.
Laughing to Keep from Crying, 1952.
The First Book of the Negroes, 1952.
The First Book of Jazz, 1954.
The First Book of Rhythms, 1954.
Famous American Negroes, 1954.
Famous Negro Music Makers, 1955.
The Sweet Flypaper of Life, 1955.
The First Book of the West Indies, 1956.
I Wonder as I Wander, 1956.
(with Milton Meltzer) A Pictorial History of the Negro in America, 1956.
Famous Negro Heroes of America, 1958.

ANTHOLOGY

The Langston Hughes Reader, 1958.

Langston Hughes has also assisted in the writing of nineteen plays, musicals, and operas.

SECTION III

THE PROBLEM OF AMERICAN NEGRO POETRY

A brief summary and consideration of the problem faced by all Negro writers -- whether to write simply as Americans or whether to continue in the role of American Negro writers.

After examining the work of these four poets -- Paul Laurence Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, and Langston Hughes, one might come to feel that the four differ too much to show any trends or directions in Negro poetry. It cannot be denied that each writer has his own technique and his particular themes; this is as it should be. Yet, each was chosen to play a definite part in the development of this paper, because each also played a definite part in the development and maturation of Negro poetry.

Paul Laurence Dunbar, as we have seen, represented the end of an era rather than the beginning of one. He was one of the last American writers to follow in the plantation tradition, although he was the first Negro writer to deserve and achieve any degree of success. It was James Weldon Johnson who helped parallel Negro writing with that in the mainstream of American literature; he was the Negro leader of his day, and his work carried the mark of a new intellectualism. Johnson's writing foreshadowed the movement which has been termed the Negro Renaissance. Part of this Renaissance was typified by a frank, but non-apologetic, criticism of democracy and its treatment of the Negro. Using traditional, but smoothly lyrical, forms to do this was Claude McKay. His was a voice typical of the many passionate ones speaking out as part of the "New Negro" movement. Finally, we moved into the study of the modern poetry of Langston Hughes. We found that his subjects sometimes lacked depth, but that they possessed a pertinency to today's culture. His comments on and descriptions of Negro

life are notable both for their accurateness and for the unusual form in which they are written.

Thus we have seen, in miniature, the total development of Negro poetry since 1890. We have surveyed the field from the earliest dialect poems to the latest modern ones. And now we are faced with the question which was raised at the beginning of this paper and which has accompanied us through each part of our study. Is American Negro poetry primarily American poetry or primarily Negro poetry? Is it different enough from poetry by white writers to deserve -- or to be allotted --- special classification? We have already referred to the fact that literary critics themselves disagree as to the answer. Let us now actually see what some of the foremost Negro writers and critical scholars have had to say about this important matter.

James Weldon Johnson, in his Preface to The Book of American Negro Poetry, reminds the reader that the Renaissance group attempted to do away with "race problem" poetry and make themselves simply poets, not Negro poets. Johnson feels, however, that they did not fundamentally succeed. Although their approach to race may be different, less direct, and usually more effective, it is still a powerful force in all their best work. Johnson discuss in the following manner the prominence of race in Negro poetry and its ability to draw a line between the work of white and of Negro writers:

> I have no intention of depreciating the poetry not stimulated by a sense of race that Afroamerican poets have written...but not in all of it do I find a single poem possessing the power and artistic finality found in the best of the poems rising out of racial conflict and contact...an artist accomplishes his best when working at his best with the material he knows best. And up to

> this time, at least, "race" is perforce the thing the American Negro poet knows best...the time should come when he will not have to know "race" so well and feel it so deeply. But even now he can escape the sense of being hampered if, standing on his racial foundation, he strives to fashion something that rises above mere race and reaches out to the universal in truth and beauty.[1]

This is a conservative position, however, when compared with that of most other critics. Countee Cullen, for instance, preferred to designate his volume, Caroling Dusk, an an anthology of verse by Negro poets rather than as an anthology of Negro verse. He feels that Negro poetry must derive from some country other than our own and some language other than our own before it can bear this separate label. Moreover, he maintains that it is not possible to consider the poems by Negro writers as having any particular factor in common, and that it is certainly not proper to use the race of the poet as the one qualification for grouping. In short, his opinion is that Negro writing has followed the poetic tendencies of the time, that the poems themselves should therefore be classified just as poems by any other American writers.[2]

Cullen's position parallels the one taken by Sterling A. Brown, Negro creative artist and literary critic. Brown agrees that writings by Negroes do not fall into a unique cultural pattern; he says that the term "Negro literature" is thus a misnomer. It has no meaning as to structural technique or a separate school of writing, for the Negro writes in forms evolved in English and American literature. For that reason, Brown considers literature by American Negroes to be a segment of American literature, and Negro writers to be American writers. Holding to a standard other than this, he maintains, would lead to a double standard of judgment, a dangerous attitude to take toward any poets or poems.

These opinions are matched time and time again by other literary spokesmen. Saunders Redding has said in the New Leader that American Negro literature is not a separate branch of writing, but part of the American literary stream.[3] Margaret Just Butcher has asserted that the objective of all colored poets is to become, basically, American poets, and only occasionally, Negro poets.[4] Alain Locke, in Four Negro Poets, states practically identical feelings: "In the chorus of American singing they [Negro poets] have registered distinctive notes whose characteristic timbre we would never lose or willingly let lapse; however, more and more they become orchestrated into our national art and culture.[5]

After hearing such a fervent outcry against labelling certain American poets as "Negro," it is difficult to summon courage to disagree on the matter. But through examination of the poems themselves, we may come to differ with or at least to offer amendments to the opinions expressed by the above-quoted critics. Certainly, as we have studied each individual poet, we have found that a large section of his poetic output, and often much of his best work, relates directly to racial themes. This is a definite distinction, although a natural one, between colored and white poets. We have seen also that the Negro Renaissance lagged behind the general swing to realism in American literature by a full decade. In fact, modern themes and techniques have never been so widely used in Negro poetry as they have in poetry by white writers. There is no Robert Frost, no Emily Dickinson, no T. S. Eliot among Negro poets. Also, the Negro writer has too often allowed the Negro problem to become so dominant in his writing that his being called a Negro poet is inevitable. Although this realm of experience is now vital and urgent to him, it stands as a

barrier, many times, to true greatness as a poet. The Negro writer must consecrate himself to the ages rather than to an hour of controversy; to humanity, rather than to a race. He himself must become more completely American in outlook before American literature can do away entirely with its Negro classification.

What lies ahead for Negro poetry? No one, not even the most competent critic, can answer such a question. The Negro writer may find ample racial material in the continuing Negro problem in America and in the native uprisings in Africa to occupy him for some time. On the other hand, he may become less specifically racial in outlook and merge his work more indissolubly with general American literature, as Alain Locke and others have predicted. One thing is certain; Negro writers must increase their output of poetry before it can have any sort of future. It has, in the past few years, dropped off in both quality and quantity. Most of the writers of the Renaissance period are no longer living; Langston Hughes, the acknowledged leader of American Negro poets, has turned primarily to prose, drama, and musical work. The little poetry that is being written today is the work of unknowns and is largely thin and inconclusive. We have seen in Johnson's work, in McKay's and in Hughes', just what heights poetry by Negroes can attain. It would be most unfortunate should this decade produce no successor to carry on the upward process of evolution.

In relation to the entire situation, James Weldon Johnson has made the following statement:

> A people may become great through many means, but there is only one measure by which its greatness is recognized and acknowledged. The final measure of the greatness of all

> peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced...No people that has produced great literature and art has ever been looked upon by the world as distinctly inferior.[6]

For this reason, if for no other, Negro poets have, in the past, needed to preserve at least the outward form of their separate classification. They have now spent more than a half-century proving that their race is not inferior. In the future, let us hope, American Negro poets will be able to cast this motive aside completely and concentrate solely on proving their individual poetic genius. This will be the ultimate step needed to produce the truly great literature for which Negro creative artists of all generations have longed.

FOOTNOTES

[1]James Weldon Johnson, The Book of American Negro Poetry (New York, 1931), p. 7.

[2]Countee Cullen, Caroling Dusk - An Anthology of Verse by Negro Poets (New York, 1927), pp. xi-xii.

[3]Saunders Redding, "Negro Literature," New Leader, (May 16, 1960), pp. 8-10.

[4]Margaret Just Butcher, The Negro in American Culture (New York, 1956) p. 114.

[5]Alain Leroy Locke, Four Negro Poets (New York, 1927) p. 6.

[6]Johnson, The Book of American Negro Poetry, p. 9.

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2. Braithwaite, William Stanley. "Alain Locke's Relationship to the Negro in American Literature," Phylon, Volume 18, 1957, pp. 166-173.

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4. Davis, Arthur P. "The Tragic Mulatto Theme in Six Works of Langston Hughes," Phylon, Volume 16, 1955, pp. 195-204.

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Box 360
Longwood College
Farmville, Virginia
January 14, 1960

Dr. Francis Simkins, Chairman
Honors Committee
Longwood College
Farmville, Virginia

Dear Dr. Simkins:

I should like to enroll in the honors program during the spring semester. I wish to pursue a topic in biology under the leadership of Mr. Merritt.

I am attaching several copies of the outline of my project for the committee's consideration.

Yours truly,

Nancy Speakman

Nancy Speakman

HONORS COURSE IN BIOLOGY

Purpose: To show that spider webs demonstrate the individuality of spiders.

Project: It is known that as long as the environment permits, all spiders of a species use the same web design. I propose to demonstrate that spiders leave evidences of individual traits or idiosyncrasies in their finished webs. To complete this project it will be necessary to study a number of webs from each of many individuals.

I plan to preserve these webs by spraying them with enamel paint and transferring them to paper. The paint will serve as both an adhesive and a coloring agent.

It is evident that many secondary problems will arise in completing a project of this type. Spiders are abundant in the late summer; therefore, a large part of the work will have to be done during the summer months. To continue the study during the winter, individual cages must be devised, and methods must be found to keep the spiders alive while in captivity. It is also quite possible that the webs will prove to be too complicated to be analyzed as closely as I propose. If this happens to be the case, or if some other non-passable obstacle presents itself, I can fall back on some other phase of spider life.

Proposed Activities:

1. Become familiar with spiders
2. Collect and classify spiders
3. Select a species with which to work
4. Design and construct a number of satisfactory cages
5. Study spiders in the actual web making process and compare with available literature.
6. Collect a number of webs from each spider
7. Compare all webs of the same individual and
8. Study the webs of drugged spiders

Statement:

I want to pursue a course of study that will not only give me knowledge in some field of zoology, but will also give me an opportunity to become more familiar with field work, biological laboratory methods, and scientific procedures. I feel that I can successfully meet those objectives by working under the Honors Program.

January 14, 1960 Nancy Spackman

AMERICAN NEGRO POETRY:

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

NANCY E. MORRIS

ENGLISH 500

1961

SPONSORED BY DR. RICHARD K. MEEKER

SECTION I

THE POET OF THE PAST

A brief literary history and critical survey of American Negro poetry from its beginnings in 1746 to the appearance of Paul Laurence Dunbar's work in the 1890's.

American Negro poetry cannot be analyzed in the deepest sense until the reader considers its relationship to the work of white poets. Although he might hope to study it as a separate and distinct field, he soon finds his conclusions losing some of their validity. This happens because certain questions constantly force themselves upon the student: Is poetry written by Negroes different enough from "white" poetry to be placed in a special class? If so, what are the differences, and how do they relate to the artistic merit of the various works? Is American Negro poetry, then, primarily American or primarily Negro? These are questions with which this paper must concern itself. It is hoped that a short literary history of the race's poetic development, along with a more extensive critical analysis of four individual poets, will furnish revealing evidence. Only a theory can be offered as a conclusion, for literary critics of Negro poetry, some of them Negroes, differ as to the answer. Yet these are the most important questions in the study of American Negro writers. They have been present since the first poem was written by a member of the race, and they have become increasingly important through the years.

There are some who would say that this problem - this relationship of Negro culture to American culture - does not exist. They claim that the Negro's heritage is distinctly African, and that the Negro poet, therefore, draws on a wealth of materials having no connection with American society. Yet this statement can, in large part, be refuted. The Negroes brought to America by slave traders in the seventeenth century may well have brought with them memories of the unique culture

of which they had been a part. However, they were afforded no means by which to preserve this culture. It could be passed along only through oral communication, through life itself, to the younger generation. No doubt the memories soon faded, blurred by hard work, poverty, and disease; no doubt the uniqueness of whatever was being transmitted diminished as the problems of slavery took precedence in the Negro mind.

Still, some will point to the spiritual and ask if it does not preserve a distinctive form of Negro poetry. It is true that the Negro spiritual is one of America's original contributions to world culture. It is also true that it has a special quality that white writers would find difficult to imitate. In the final analysis, however, the spirituals must be classified separately from poetry. They are folk songs noted for the strength and sweetness of their melody rather than for the quality of their verse. They reveal the nature of the Negro - his sensitiveness and response to emotion, his imagination, his sorrow and longing - but they reveal it more completely through the music than through the words set to it. It is this element, a form that could have been transmitted orally, which has a peculiar "Negro" quality. The words, although somewhat altered through dialect, are English, not African. They are the subordinate part of the spiritual and cannot be considered outstanding either through literary importance or an unusual cultural heritage.

And so we find ourselves still facing the problem. The Negro writes, not in a verse form derived from African culture, but in one already established by English and American poets. We should therefore not expect his technique to differ drastically from that of his white contemporaries. Thus we will focus our attention on the subject matter, also,

to see if the difference can be defined there. We shall begin with an historical survey and attempt through it to see how the poetry of the Negro writer compares with that of the white writer, from the very beginning.

This first bit of actual poetry seems to have been written by Lucy Terry in 1746. Her "Bars Fight" is only doggerel verse describing a particularly impressive Indian massacre. It is, however, a beginning, and a noteworthy one for a woman from a social group denied the power of the written word. However, her work was never put in print, making Jupiter Hammon (d. 1800) the first American Negro to publish a poem. This Long Island slave was, in 1761, the author of "An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ with Penitential Cries" - a kind of shout-hymn. It has eighty-eight iambic lines which are even, rhymed, and repetitious; the whole thing is a most tedious affair. Hammon became a curiosity as a "literary slave," writing several other poems and even some pieces of prose. Almost all are religious exhortations which possess the sole virtue of earnestness.

Remarkably soon after these two Negroes made their weak attempts at poetry, the race produced the most gifted of all the pre-Civil War Negro poets - Phillis Wheatley. As an American woman poet, she was preceded only by Anne Bradstreet; and as an American poet, she was among the first to publish a volume. Miss Wheatley was born in Senegal, West Africa, in 1753, and was brought to America at the age of seven. She was purchased by a Boston tailor, John Wheatley, as a personal servant for his wife. Mrs. Wheatley saw the girl's quickness and began teaching her to read and write. Ten years later, Phillis published her first poem: "A Poem, by Phillis, a Negro girl in Boston, on the Death of the

Reverend George Whitefield." In 1773 a volume of her poems was brought out, and Phillis became the same sort of literary curiosity that Jupiter Hammon had been. She eventually was set free by Mrs. Wheatley, who remained her patroness; and hers was the thrill of acclaim when presented to the court of George III, in London. But Miss Wheatley's career came to a bitter and ironic close. Her marriage was unhappy, her children died in infancy, and in 1784 her own life ended as a servant in a cheap boarding house.

In a remarkably few years this Negro girl bridged the huge gap between primitivism and civilization and created lines such as these:

> Imagination! who can sing thy force?
> Or who describe the swiftness of thy course?
> Soaring through air to find the bright abode,
> Th' empyreal palace of the thundering God,
> We on thy pinions can surpass the wind,
> And leave the rolling universe behind.
> From star to star the mental optics rove,
> Measure the skies, and range the realms above;
> There in one view we grasp the mighty whole,
> Or with new worlds amaze th' unbounded soul.[1]

As can be readily seen, her poetry is that of the eighteenth century, created under the influence of Alexander Pope. She writes in heroic couplets and keeps her subject matter entirely removed from her personal experience. In fact, the largest part of her work is addressed to prominent persons of the time. Miss Wheatley's work, therefore, can certainly not be considered great. She too carefully followed her models to be either racial or American. But could any American writers of her period be called great or original? When we compare Phillis Wheatley with the rest of the eighteenth century American artists, we realize the genius this girl might have been, could she have received the stimulus necessary for complete development as a poet.

It is agreed, then, that Miss Wheatley was unable to progress to the level of greatness, or even to the point of uniqueness. But when we compare her writing with that of the Negro poets of the following century, we cannot help being amazed at her great talent. This is perhaps unfortunate, for the knowledge that the race had produced a Phillis Wheatley makes it difficult for us to appreciate the efforts made by other lesser poets. James Weldon Johnson himself has said that the remaining thirty poets preceding Paul Laurence Dunbar must be considered more in the light of what they attempted than what they accomplished. Many show evidence of talent, but their lack of technique in the use of poetic materials and forms puts great limitations upon them.

The work of George Moses Horton illustrates the truth of this statement. Although he was not so gifted as Phillis Wheatley, he was evidently a true poet rather than a mere rhymer. Born a slave in North Carolina in 1797, he began composing poetry before he was able to write it down. Later he worked as a janitor at the University of North Carolina, where he received instruction from some of the professors. When the students there discovered Horton's attempts at versifying, they began paying him to write poems that could be used to impress their special girl friends. An ordinary, run-of-the-mill love poem would bring Horton 25¢; a particularly passionate one, however, might rate as much as 50¢. He carefully saved the money from the sale of many such poems and from the publication of his much more serious books in a vain attempt to purchase his freedom. Thus it is appropriate that Horton's dominant cry be that of emancipation, and that his first and primary volume, published in 1829, be titled The Hope of Liberty. The following lines are typical of the style and ability he demonstrated in the twenty-two-page booklet:

Alas! and am I born for this,
To wear this slavish chain?
Deprived of all created bliss,
Through hardship, toil, and pain?
. . . . .
Come, Liberty! thou cheerful sound,
Roll through my ravished ears;
Come, let my grief in joys be drowned,
And drive away my fears.[2]

Horton's resentment and longing are obvious; they are themes implicit in all his poems. He is at the opposite pole from Miss Wheatley, who seldom expressed personal feeling of any sort, much less complaint against her enslaved state. We also see that Horton's style is simple, his speech uncomplicated. His meter shows the heavy influence of plantation melodies and gospel hymns. In fact, it is claimed that camp meeting songs first inspired him to write poetry.

His name, however, is not the most prominent during the nineteenth century. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was probably the most popular Negro poet of her time. She was born in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1825, of free parents. Until her death in 1911, her life was devoted to the cause of freedom for slaves. She became renowned as an eloquent lecturer and teacher and was among the first of a long line of Negro poets to use poetry as a means of antislavery propaganda.

The desire and complaint of Horton turns to a sense of wrong and injustice in Mrs. Harper. Her popularity was gained by lines such as the following:

Make me a grave where'er you will,
In a lowly plain or a lofty hill;
Make it among earth's humblest graves,
But not in a land where men are slaves.[3]

Her poetry shows the strength of her convictions. In addition, she had a forceful personality and read her poems well. This led to a large

demand for her work, and it is estimated that at least ten thousand of her booklets were sold. In spite of its popularity, however, much of her verse is repetitious and trite. It is simply written, often with poor rhyming. Only the vitality of its subject matter gave Frances Harper the fame she enjoyed.

There are other poets of this period who rate comment in anthologies of Negro work, but none have as much talent as Horton and Mrs. Harper or as much technical skill as Phillis Wheatley. They were only minor writers whose work is of passing notice. James Madison Ball and Albery A. Whitman are the only two that need be mentioned, their claim for recognition being based on the fact that both attempted extremely long poems. Whitman even published an epic in Spenserian stanza, "The Rape of Florida," still the longest poem ever written by a Negro in the United States. He reveals in his work imagination, skillful workmanship, and a capacity for brisk narration. But too often Whitman's ability is hidden by apparent imitation and seeming haste. Had he, too, been given the benefit of education and training, he would definitely have been a better, perhaps even an outstanding, poet. Without it, his talent as often as not lapses into mediocrity.

So passed the first one hundred fifty years of the Negro's residence in North America. It is undeniably true that the literary artists emerging from the confines of social and economic pressure produced little of abiding value during this time. Many critics would discount their early attempts altogether, saying that the poems are too faulty, too lacking in originality to be worthy of any consideration. But although the work of the first Negro poets is often trite and imitative,

one might ask if white poets of that period did not display similar weaknesses. There were several white poets who had a command of technique that the Negro writers definitely lacked. Bryant, Longfellow, Whittier, Holmes, and Lowell were all popular writers and good poets; but their settings and themes were no more American than that of the Negro, and their verse patterns no more original. Edgar Allan Poe and Walt Whitman are practically the only two that can be recognized as superior to Negro writers because of originality in form or subject matter.

It is therefore necessary for us to recognize the fact that only a small amount of great poetry was written in the first half of nineteenth-century America by writers of either race. White poets spent much of their time expressing conventional moralities in the polished European verse patterns. Negro poets expended their energy on protest writing in borrowed forms, often displaying a deficiency of technical skill. Both groups are important more for the foundations they laid and the doors they opened for later and better writers, than for outstanding poetic accomplishments with which they might be credited. But the stage for Negro poetry had been set; and soon to step out upon it was Paul Laurence Dunbar, the first "modern" poet of the race.

FOOTNOTES

[1]James Weldon Johnson, The Book of American Negro Poetry (New York, 1931), p. 24.

[2]Ibid., p. 32.

[3]Benjamin Brawley, The Negro in Literature and Art (New York, 1929), p. 45.

SECTION II

REPRESENTATIVES OF OUR CENTURY

A critical analysis of four outstanding poets whose work is representative of the entire range of Negro poetry in the twentieth century.

Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906)

James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938)

Claude McKay (1889-1948)

Langston Hughes (1902-)

PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR
(1872-1906)
POET OF HIS PEOPLE

The last years of the nineteenth century were difficult ones for the whole of America. The end of an era was approaching, and science and invention were changing the familiar patterns of life. There was a mixed mood of romanticism and realism, not only in literature, but also in the spirit of the times. On the sensitive person weighed a sense of change and instability. However, the public, as a whole, turned away from this and looked to the past as a refuge from the unpleasantries of the present. It is to be expected, then, that sentiment was favored in literature, that poetry was preferred to be simple, strong, and tearful. James Whitcomb Riley exemplified the popular taste; "An Old Sweetheart of Mine" and "Little Orphant Annie" were favorites. Life in the South before the war was idealized, and the idea that freedom had been disastrous for the Negro was a popular one. Thomas Nelson Page and Joel Chandler Harris began writing on this theme, and through their efforts Negro dialect writing became a vogue.

Paul Laurence Dunbar was forced to grapple with these styles and conditions of literature when he began his work. However, struggle was nothing new to Dunbar; for he had, from the beginning, faced many handicaps in the development of his literary interests and abilities. His parents were poor and without formal education; thus, it had been difficult for him to get the cultural background he needed to become a successful writer. He had also found it impossible to attend college, although this was one of his greatest desires. Much to his chagrin,

it had been necessary for him to take the job of elevator operator and write his verse as he rode up and down, day after day. Then, in 1893, when he had attempted to publish his first volume, Oak and Ivy, every publisher he approached refused him. He finally had to have the fifty-six poems privately printed and act as their salesman himself.

Dunbar's luck changed abruptly for the better, however, when he published a larger and more mature volume in 1895. Majors and Minors attracted the attention of William Dean Howells, who wrote a full-page review of it in Harper's Weekly. This review introduced Dunbar to the reading public, making him famous overnight. Some of the more important statements from this article are as follows:

> I do not remember any English-speaking Negro, at least, who has till now done in verse work of at all the same moment as Paul Laurence Dunbar...I do not think one can read his Negro pieces without feeling that they are of like impulse and inspiration with the work of Burns when he was most Burns, when he was most Scotch, when he was most peasant. When Burns was least himself he wrote literary English, and Mr. Dunbar writes literary English when he is least himself. But not to urge the mischievous parallel further, he is a real poet whether he speaks a dialect or whether he writes a language...[1]

Quoting from "When de Co'n Pone's Hot," "When Malindy Sings," "Accountability," and "The Party," he concludes:

> I am speaking of him as a black poet, when I should be speaking of him as a poet; but the notion of what he is insists too strongly for present impartiality. I hope I have not praised him too much, because he has surprised me so very much; for his excellences are positive and not comparative. If his Minors had been written by a white man, I should have been struck by their very uncommon quality; I should have said that they were wonderful divinations. But since they are the expressions of a race-life from within the race, they seem to me infinitely more valuable and significant... God hath made of one blood all nations of men: perhaps

> the proof of this saying is to appear in the arts, and our hostilities and prejudices are to vanish in them.[1]

Howells intended this review to be a kind one, and certainly through it he gained an immediate hearing for Dunbar's poems. He emphasized the fact that Dunbar was a gifted poet, that his poetry had merit within itself. All this was beneficial, and it finally gave Dunbar the chance to prove himself worthy of notice. Yet Howell's criticism had its adverse effects, too. It described Dunbar's dialect poems as being the most praiseworthy writings, "expressions of a race-life from within the race."[1] It also gave the impression that when Dunbar wrote "literary" poems, he was being false to his Negro nature. Such opinions as these set a critical precedent that later readers of Dunbar rather closely followed. It led to a great demand for Dunbar's dialect poetry and dampened any enthusiasm that had existed for his writing in classical English. Dunbar himself was aware of this trend and regretted it. Yet he realized that Howells had, in effect, launched him in his career; and he found it necessary to temper his regret with gratitude.

Dunbar's historical importance is revealed here, for through Howell's praise, he became the first Negro poet to be at all accepted into American literature. Early in his career Dunbar had set for himself a goal: "I did once want to be a lawyer, but that ambition has long since died out before the all-absorbing desire to be a worthy singer of the songs of God and nature. To be able to interpret my own people through song and story, and to prove to the many that after all we are more human than African."[2] There is no question concerning the validity of this ideal toward which Dunbar reached; and Howells, in his criticism, recognized that it had been attained. But there can be raised a query of a different sort needing an answer just as positive as the one to

the earlier question. Was Dunbar's popularity and appeal limited to the period in which he lived, or is his work important enough to be of interest today? A conclusion can be reached only by examining his actual writings and evaluating them by the criteria of present-day literary theory. To facilitate criticism, we shall employ the three divisions commonly used in the study of Dunbar's writings: (1) prose work: (2) poems in classic English (3) poems in dialect. Ignoring chronological arrangement, we shall start with the work of least value and proceed upward.

Even the very casual reader can sense the mediocrity of Dunbar's prose writings. His four novels are especially poor, relying largely on sentimentality and melodrama to hold the interest of the reader. Oddly enough, Dunbar wrote about white characters in three of his novels. A realistic portrayal of them was a difficult task for Dunbar; and this, combined with loose plot and poor form, did not contribute to his standing as a novelist. His popularity as a short-story writer was much greater, however; and a few critics have even felt that his stories attain heights equal to his poems. The present-day reader would, most likely, disagree with this viewpoint. Even though Dunbar constructed his short stories more carefully than his novels, they still exhibit weakness in organization, technique, and theme. Their chief shortcoming is in subject matter; Dunbar merely took already stereotyped stories and created variations of them. He had "good ol' days" of the South before the War praised by many stock characters. The only stories he wrote that achieved any degree of lasting success were those that broke with the plantation tradition and leaned toward realistic characterization. Unfortunately for Dunbar's reputation as a prose writer, such stories were too infrequent.

Thus it is that we turn to poetry, and primarily lyric poetry, as the form in which Dunbar was most completely at home. He by far preferred to write such poems in classic English, even though he realized that he must employ dialect to have his poems read. He expressed his regret concerning this in his poem, "The Poet":

The Poet

He sang of life, serenely sweet,
With, now and then, a deeper note.
From some high peak, nigh yet remote,
He voiced the world's absorbing beat.

He sang of love when earth was young,
And love, itself, was in his lays.
But ah, the world, it turned to praise
A jingle in a broken tongue.[3]

This is an example of Dunbar's best early work. It is relatively free of the heavy influence of the English romantic tradition that makes so many of his "literary" poems sound trite and artificial. Even in high school, Dunbar leaned heavily toward Byron, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, and their American followers. It took him many years to get away from the conventionality and sentimentality that a close following of his models caused.

And yet there were poems, even at the beginning, that revealed more of Dunbar than they did of the poets that influenced him. "The Poet," quoted above, is an example. Another is the much-quoted "Life," which appeared in the first volume that Dunbar had printed.

Life

A crust of bread and a corner to sleep in,
A minute to smile and an hour to weep in,
A pint of joy to a pack of trouble,
And never a laugh but the moans come double;
And that is life!

A crust and a corner that love makes precious,
With a smile to warm and the tears to refresh us;
And joy seems sweeter when cares come after,
And a song is the finest of coils for laughter:
And that is life![4]

These, and others of Dunbar's better poems, have one factor in common: they, for the most part, recount the author's own experiences with life. Whenever a poem achieves poignancy or intensity or vibrant communication, it is often one closely linked to Dunbar himself. It seems that when he concentrated on expressing his feelings rather than on impressing the public, he became the true poet. Although many of his poems in classic English never rise above the commonplace, now and then one of these personal ones stands out from the others in its lyric power or its intellectual penetration.

Dunbar did not often write as race-spokesman. It is true that he was trying to raise the nation's estimation of the Negro, but he attempted to do it by demonstrating his power of creativity instead of by writing propaganda poems. When race entered into his work, it was often an almost unconscious intrusion. It was a matter vital to Dunbar only as it related to his personal experience. In such a poem as "We Wear the Mask," he expresses the frustration his race feels at being constantly misunderstood by the world with which it must deal. Dunbar himself met many slurs as he travelled throughout the country; he knew from experience that "torn and bleeding hearts" lay behind the happy-go-lucky smile that the average American automatically stamped on each Negro face.

We Wear the Mask

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,--
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask.[5]

This poem, in its presentation of the very depths of Negro personality, is far superior to more formal poems by Dunbar that take the race problem as their specific subject. Although the following excerpt does not show the shallowness of the cliches that Dunbar, on occasion, employs, it will serve to demonstrate the fact that Dunbar wrote more forcefully, more meaningfully, when he wrote unconsciously and personally.

On every hand in this fair land,
Proud Ethiope's swarthy children stand
Beside their fairer neighbor;
The forests flee before their stroke,
Their hammers ring, their forges smoke,--
They stir in honest labour.[6]

This passage comes from one of Dunbar's earliest poems; thus we might conclude that his poetic style and thematic development matured through age and experience. On the whole, this is true; for he did exhibit greater mastery of technique and subject matter in his later writings. Yet Dunbar's poems in standard English were at no time in his career outstanding because of their originality. As critics have

stated, if his "literary" poems had been written by a white poet, they would have received little special notice. Most of their novelty lay in the fact that they were written by a Negro; only isolated poems demonstrated within themselves unusual artistic quality. For this reason, and for others, the public lavished greatest praise on Dunbar's dialect poems. These made use of an unusual art form; they reflected the colorful side of a segment of America's population; they were, above all, poems that a white poet probably could not have written.

This individuality was important, for the public was not ready to accept Dunbar as an American poet. It would, however, accept him and praise him as a Negro poet. Thus, verse in dialect became Dunbar's unique contribution to American literature. It opened the way for a Negro to enter the field of art, proving that the race was not culturally barren. It was, moreover, the special province of Dunbar; for although he had many imitators, none ever achieved the popularity or fame this first dialectal poet did. In our examination of Dunbar's dialect verse, we must not forget the fact that even Dunbar realized the limitations of this art form, but continued in it in order to gain a hearing from a public unwilling to read Negro verse written on a higher level.

As a writer of dialect poetry, Paul Laurence Dunbar faced problems from the very beginning. The first of major importance was dealing with the Negro stereotype created by Harris and Page. This was the picture of the docile, contented, comic Negro slave--a shallow, false picture, and one hard to live down. Dunbar undoubtedly realized that there were open to him two ways of combating this stereotype: (1) to deny it entirely, or (2) to broaden this picture and deepen it with

love and understanding. In his dialect poetry Dunbar accomplished the latter with unsurpassed skill. He pictured the Negro in his happy moments--enjoying a spelling bee, eating cornbread and molasses, courting, watching his wife prepare supper at the end of a hard day's work, playing with his children. He also showed the unhappiness and tragedy that come to the Negro as much so as to all men--death of a child, knowledge that the "old times" are gone, bitter regret after a quarrel with a friend, rejection by the world he faces daily. To many, this was a new picture of the Negro. For the first time, perhaps, some Americans began to realize that the Negro was a man, sharing in universal joys and sorrows. The Negro stereotype remained, because it had already become a distinctive part of American culture; but it had become deeper and truer through Dunbar's poetic efforts.

Another obstacle in the writing of dialectal poetry was the fact that dialect was to no extent standardized when Dunbar began using it. There had been only one previous poet who had employed Negro dialect, a white man named Irwin Russell. Dunbar began writing in Russell's style, but soon exceeded him in poetic technique, as well as in use of dialect. A dialectal writer of a different type who was also attaining great heights of popularity during this time was James Whitcomb Riley. Dunbar was a great admirer of Riley; and Riley, in turn, gave Dunbar some of his earliest praise. His influence is evident; for in Dunbar's first work, there are examples of Hoosier dialect and such poem titles as "The Old Apple-Tree," and "Chrismus Is A-Comin'!" His poem "James Whitcomb Riley" shows us just what he thought of this poet, and also gives us an insight into what he himself tried to accomplish through his use of dialect:

"Fur trim and skillful phrases,
I do not keer a jot;
'Tain't the words alone, but feelin's
That tech the tender spot.
An' that's jest why I love him,—
Why, he's got sech human feelin',
An' in ev'ry song he gives us,
You kin see it creepin', stealin',
Through the core the tears go tricklin'.
But the edge is bright and smiley;
I never saw a poet
Like that poet Whitcomb Riley.[7]

Luckily, Dunbar did not long let his admiration for Riley limit his own effectiveness, nor did he accept Riley's use of dialect for more than a brief period. He soon left him behind, just as he had Irwin Russell. Finding that such writers had standardized no pattern for writing in Negro dialect, Dunbar then created his own. He rejected previous attempts made almost unintelligible by poor spelling, and wrote "by ear." Actually, Dunbar in his poems set the "rules" for dialect spelling that have been followed by later writers. He learned to represent on paper the speech of the Southern Negro, although he never even travelled in the South until the latter years of his life.

But by far the greatest problem, and one Dunbar never found a way of escaping, was the limited emotional expression available to writers in dialect. James Weldon Johnson has described dialect as a great organ on which can be sounded only two notes--those of humor and pathos. When a reader takes up a dialect poem, he expects to find the one or the other; and generally, he does. Any sort of exaggerated dialect is thought to be the trademark of a simple, uneducated people, who, in turn, are somehow supposed to feel only the simple, elemental extremes of emotion. One reading Negro dialect (or Hoosier dialect, for that matter) is supposed either to laugh or cry; thus, subjects evoking these responses are the

only ones available to the writer. Dunbar was not unaware of this; his realization of the limitations dialect imposed was part of the reason he preferred to write in classic English. But America could read "literary" poems by other poets. She clamored for the folksy pictures of Negro life that only Dunbar could write. So it was that she turned to Dunbar's work in dialect, for a long time almost completely ignoring any of his other work.

It is hard to write a critical analysis of this phase of Dunbar's writing, for such a study requires criteria so different from that ordinarily used. Also, the dialectal poems are long; and because they are usually narrative, the task of selecting excerpts is a difficult one. However, let us look at some of the best to see if the components of Dunbar's peculiar charm as a dialectal writer can be established.

The poem considered by many to be Dunbar's masterpiece in dialect is "When Malindy Sings." Said to be inspired by the singing of his mother, this description of Malindy's musical ability speaks tenderly of the sensitivity of Negro character.

"G'way an' quit dat noise, Miss Lucy--
  Put dat music book away;
What's de use to keep on tryin'?
  Ef you practice twell you're gray,
You cain't sta't no notes a-flyin'
  Lak de ones dat rants and rings
F'om de kitchen to de big woods
  When Malindy sings.

. . .

Ain't you nevah hyeahd Malindy?
  Blessed soul, tek up de cross!
Look hyeah, ain't you jokin', honey?
  Well, you don't know what you los'.
Y'ought to hyeah dat gal a-wa'blin',
  Robins, la'ks, an' all dem things,
Heish dey moufs an' hides dey faces
  When Malindy sings.

. . .

Oh, hit's sweetah dan de music
  Of an edicated band;
An' hit's dearah dan de battle's
  Song o'triumph in de lan'.
It seems holier dan evenin'
  When de solemn chu'ch bell rings,
Ez I sit an' co'mly listen
  While Malindy sings."[8]

Such a poem as this reveals Dunbar's sense of form and his innate rhythm. So distinct is the lyric power revealed here that this and other poems can be, and have been, set to music. Certainly Dunbar's verse flows freely and easily; the emotion it expresses is deep and sincere. While dialect may not, from the poet's point of view, be a very desirable instrument, Dunbar has surely made the best possible use of this form. His technique is varied enough to escape triteness; his humor and sadness, both, are mellowed enough to be touching. Although some writers might have made their portrayals ludicrous or maudlin, Dunbar maintains his role as artistic interpreter of the race.

There are many other well-known dialect poems that cannot be quoted here because of their length: "When de Co'n Pone's Hot," A Negro Love Song," "Deserted Plantation," "Little Brown Baby" have all been favorites. The latter can be used to point out a quality typical of much of Dunbar's dialectal work. Many times the reader will somehow feel that the characters in the poems or the ones narrating them are smiling through tears or are, as Langston Hughes has expressed it, "laughing to keep from crying." "Little Brown Baby" presents a Negro's enjoyment of life, his tenderness and love toward his small child; but in the last stanza this gaiety is replaced by wistfulness and a sense of sorrow.

"Come to yo' pallet now -- go to yo' res'!
Wisht you could allus know ease an' clean skies;
Wisht you could stay jes' a child on my breas'--
Little brown baby wif spa'klin' eyes!"[9]

This undercurrent is one of the techniques Dunbar uses in an attempt to keep his poems from remaining at one of the two extremes that could be so easily adopted. Happiness and humor are here; but underneath it is the knowledge that this man has suffered and that, like men everywhere, he wishes to spare his child from similar pain. Dialect marks such a poem as racial; its theme, however, is universal and therein contains its appeal for the reader.

Perhaps this is the key to Dunbar's success in reaching the American public at the particular time he did. While his poems always retained their racial flavor, never did they fail to go beyond race and speak of matters that men and women from all areas of life could understand. One of his last poems, published just a few months before his death, strikes a responsive note in almost any reader.

Compensation

Because I had loved so deeply,
Because I had loved so long,
God in his great compassion
Gave me the gift of song.

Because I have loved so vainly,
And sung with such faltering breath,
The Master in infinite mercy
Offers the boon of Death.[10]

Such a poem gives evidence of Dunbar's insight into his own life and his own experiences, at the same time revealing his ability to communicate with all men who try to live a life of harmony and love.

Certain critics, notably Benjamin Brawley, have held up Paul Laurence Dunbar to youth as an example of what genius and hard work can

accomplish for even the most downtrodden of persons. Dunbar is this, but certainly much more than this. He was the first spokesman for a race whose poetic expression had previously been limited by lack of education and opportunity. He was a poet who used the tools at hand, even though they were not the ones he would have chosen, to reach the public with his message. He was not a great poet; he himself probably realized that. But mixed in with the mediocre work, and the good, were flashes of brilliancy, lines of pure lyricism. Dunbar was the representative of a people; he had the consciousness of standing on a threshold. And although he faced an early death, he spoke for his race in holding on to a persistent optimism concerning the future. That is why he is today, after more than a half-century, loved by his own people and admired by many who discover his work.

"When all is done, say not my day is o'er,
And that thro' night I seek a dimmer shore;
Say rather that my morn has just begun--
I greet the dawn and not a setting sun,
When all is done."

FOOTNOTES

[1]Benjamin Brawley, *Paul Laurence Dunbar, Poet of His People* (Chapel Hill, 1936), pp. 49-51.

[2]*Ibid.*, p. 105.

[3]Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (New York, 1936), p. 101.

[4]*Ibid.*, p. 6.

[5]*Ibid.*, p. 71.

[6]*Ibid.*, p. 15.

[7]*Ibid.*, p. 267.

[8]*Ibid.*, pp. 82-83.

[9]*Ibid.*, p. 135.

[10]*Ibid.*, p. 105.

[11]Benjamin Brawley, *Negro Builders and Heroes* (Chapel Hill, 1937), p. 165.

BOOKS BY PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR

POEMS:

Oak and Ivy, 1893.
Majors and Minors, 1895.
Lyrics of Lowly Life, 1896.
Lyrics of the Hearthside, 1899.
Lyrics of Love and Laughter, 1903.
Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow, 1905.
The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar, 1913.

ILLUSTRATED VOLUMES OF POEMS:

Poems of Cabin and Field, 1899.
Candle-Lightin' Time, 1901.
When Malindy Sings, 1903.
Li'l' Gal, 1904.
Howdy, Honey, Howdy, 1905.
Joggin' Erlong, 1906.
Speakin' O' Christmas, 1914.

NOVELS:

The Uncalled, 1898.
The Love of Landry, 1900.
The Fanatics, 1901.
The Sport of the Gods, 1902.

STORIES AND SKETCHES:

Folks from Dixie, 1898.
The Strength of Gideon, 1900.
In Old Plantation Days, 1903.
The Heart of Happy Hollow, 1904.

JAMES WELDON JOHNSON
(1871-1938)
BRIDGE TO THE RENAISSANCE

Educator, lawyer, musician, diplomat, linguist, executive, novelist, critic, editor, poet -- all these describe the varied career of James Weldon Johnson. From the time of his youth in Jacksonville, Florida, until his sudden death in a car accident in 1938, he busied himself with those activities which were to gain him the title of America's foremost Negro citizen. In searching for the factors leading to these accomplishments, Johnson claimed that much of his success was due to the influence of his parents. His mother, a cultured New Yorker, was the first colored woman public school teacher in Florida. She was artistic, musical, very interested in books; and both her sons soon followed her in her tastes. Johnson's father never attended school, but he taught himself Spanish and became an avid theater-goer. When he was past fifty, he changed the entire course of his life and entered the ministry. Johnson described his mother as strong, determined, proud, a born reformist; his father, as quiet, unpretentious, but strong and honest. He states in his autobiography, Along the Way, that as the days passed, he found himself more and more like them.

Whatever the reasons, however, we must recognize the fact that Johnson claims America's notice completely aside from his literary endeavors. He earned his A.B. and M.A. from Atlanta University and studied for three years at Columbia University. He was awarded the honorary Doctor of Letters degree from two colleges; he received the Spingarn Medal in 1925 for distinguished service as U. S. Consul to Venezuela and

Nicaragua, and for his work as author and publicist. He became concerned with the social and economic condition of his people, and this led him to serve for several years as national secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Johnson was the intellectual leader among the Negroes of his day; his service to his race and to his country lend added weight to his work as writer and critic.

It is difficult to find a starting point for the discussion of Johnson's work, because his efforts in the field of literature were as varied as his services in public life. We shall, of course, concentrate on his poetry, but certainly we must mention and evaluate his other writings, also.

As has already been stated, their mother's interest in music had a great influence on both James Weldon Johnson and his brother, Rosamond. Rosamond Johnson eventually became a professional musician, and the brothers spent several profitable years in collaboration as songwriters. James Weldon wrote the books of eight light operas for which Rosamond composed the music. Many musical comedies and popular songs were also produced by the company these brothers headed, before James Weldon became bored with the whole idea and sought out other ways of making a living. Later in his life, though, Johnson returned for a short while to the musical field. Combining his talents as musician and linguist, he translated the libretto of the Spanish opera "Goyescas" into English for the Metropolitan Opera Company, certainly a formidable task.

But although these works were good ones and achieved a reasonable degree of popularity, Johnson will never be remembered solely for them. A much more widely-known accomplishment than these in the fields of music

and poetry is the song "Lift Ev ry Voice and Sing," now designated as the Negro National Anthem. Again, the brothers worked together, the one writing the words and the other, the music. The song was originally written for school children who were giving a program to celebrate Lincoln's birthday. However, even after the brothers had forgotten the incident, the hymn continued to be sung in Negro schools and churches throughout the country. Its popularity is probably greater today than ever before, and deservedly so; for it is a fine piece of music. It expresses an acceptance of the past and a confidence in the future; it helps to cultivate a sense of history among the Negroes. Johnson says the only comment he can make concerning the writing of this song is that "...we wrote better than we knew."[1]

> God of our weary years,
> God of our silent tears,
> Thou who hast brought us thus far on our way,
> Thou who hast by Thy might
> Led us into the light,
> Keep us forever in the path, we pray;
> Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met thee,
> Lest, our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee...[2]

After such stirring lyrics as these, it is somewhat of a disappointment to examine Johnson's prose work. His essays and novels, although far above mediocrity, do not compare with his work as a poet and a critic. What is probably his best-known novel, The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man, proves to be an interesting and unusual book, but not an outstanding one. The prose form is obviously new to Johnson, and a lack of sureness in technique is evident. Johnson himself regretted, after a period of time, the fact that he first published the book anonymously; it gave the impression that the novel was a kind of publicity gimmick and added a little more to its general appearance of immaturity. Still, we can cull from the book an idea that became increasingly

important to Johnson. He has his main character regret the crossing of the color line and come to the conclusion that he has been selfish and self-seeking. The thought strikes him that had he remained with his people, he might have dedicated himself to the making of a race. Certainly Johnson, who was also very light in color, must have come to a decision about this at some time; and it is evident that he himself gladly chose the task of lifting his race to a higher level.

As a critic and editor, however, Johnson reaches a much higher level. He has to his credit three books in this field: The Book of American Negro Poetry, The Book of American Negro Spirituals, and The Second Book of American Negro Spirituals. The anthology of poetry by colored authors was probably the first in the United States, and prefacing it is a critical essay by Johnson. His comments about it are as follows:

> Before I had gone very far with the work, I realized that such a book, being the first of its kind, would be entirely devoid of a background. America as a whole knew of Dunbar, but it was practically unaware that there were such things as Negro poets and Negro poetry. So I decided to write an introduction; and the introduction developed into a forty-two page essay on "The Creative Genius of the Negro." In that essay I called attention to the American Negro as a folk artist, and pointed out his vital contributions, as such, to our national culture. In it I also made a brief survey of Negro poetry. I began with Phillis Wheatley, ... and touched on the most significant work from among the thirty-odd Negro poets between her and Dunbar.[3]

In this essay Johnson reveals the linking of folk consciousness and intellectualism that is typical of his best work. He is determined to prove that the folk songs and the folk poetry of the Negro are art, as much as are the poems written in established forms, using conventional techniques. He also furnished in this essay the best history of early

Negro poetry that can yet be found. It is, all in all, a valuable book in itself; and it was important at the time as an entryway for later anthologies of Negro poetry.

The two collections of spirituals edited by James Weldon Johnson and his brother are also important works. The first book contains sixty-one spirituals, and the second, a similar number. Rosamond Johnson, of course, made the piano arrangements; and James Weldon wrote a forty-page preface giving the history of the spirituals, theories as to their origin, and an estimate of them as music and poetry. These books can be credited with saving for America a number of unique components of her folk culture she could ill afford to lose.

Finally, let us turn to Johnson's poetry, which we must, in all honesty, label as the best part of his writing. This phase of his work is contained within three books, Fifty Years and Other Poems, God's Trombones, and Saint Peter Relates an Incident of the Resurrection Day. The latter book, or long poem, is an ironic comment on American prejudice. It combines sly mockery with a deeply moving quality, and it centers around the theme of the unknown soldier. Since this book was printed for private distribution only, it is now practically impossible to get hold of a copy. Thus it will be necessary to relate the remainder of our comments to the other volumes.

In his early writing, Johnson made some use of dialect. In his first book, he included a section entitled "Jingles and Croons." These works, following in the Dunbar tradition, were well-liked. The favorite, and one still worthy of notice today, is "Sence You Went Away."

Seems lak to me de stars don't shine so bright,
Seems lak to me de sun done loss his light,
Seems lak to me der's nothin' goin' right,
Sence you went away.

. . .

Seems lak to me I jes can't he'p but sigh,
Seems lak to me ma th'oat keeps gittin' dry,
Seems lak to me a tear stays in ma eye,
Sence you went away.[4]

This little poem was Johnson's first published work; it was later set to music by his brother and became instantly popular. It is an excellent dialect poem. Johnson mutes the tone sufficiently to give it the dignity dialectal work so often lacks. Benjamin Brawley felt its dignity to be so strong, in fact, that he called this poem a threnody, or dirge. No doubt Johnson could have found a wide audience for this type of work. Yet, he knew almost instinctively the limitations and pitfalls of dialect, and he desired for Negro poetry a more unhampered future. So it was that he soon gave up the use of dialect altogether and opened the door for the Negro Renaissance.

We cannot here discuss in full this new literary movement, for it is not as yet completely upon us. But Johnson's poetry from this point on comes closer and closer to it. He departs from the protest tradition; and instead of apologizing for the race issue, leads his people to become proud of it. His poetry, as will be typical of the writers following, no longer pleads; it expresses. It revolts against sentimentality, optimism, romantic escape. The Negro and his artistic works are endowed with a new dignity, and they begin to take their rightful place in American culture. This viewpoint will not become full-blown until the days of Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, and Langston Hughes; but James Weldon Johnson, symbol of rising intellectualism among the Negroes, introduces it and propagates it.

A poem that can be identified with this rising spirit is the famous "O Black and Unknown Bards." In it Johnson pays homage to the unknown creators of the Negro spirituals. By his very selection of words

and by the tone he creates within the poem, he invests this form of folk art with new dignity and importance.

> O black and unknown bards of long ago
> How came your lips to touch the sacred fire?
> How, in your darkness, did you come to know
> The power and beauty of the minstrel's lyre?
> Who first from midst his bonds lifted his eyes?
> Who first from the still watch, lone and long,
> Feeling the ancient faith of prophets rise
> Within his dark-kept soul, burst into song?[5]

Some have even taken this as a literal explanation of the origin of the spiritual. We can hardly go so far as to say that; and yet we realize that Johnson has here recreated the mood in which the spiritual was born. He gives the act of creation almost the sacredness of Holy Scripture, a thought undoubtedly new to most Americans of both races.

Another quite thought-provoking poem from the volume Fifty Years and Other Poems is "The White Witch." In the form of a semi-legend, it lends itself to varied interpretation.

> O brothers mine, take care! Take care!
> The great white witch rides out tonight.
> O younger brothers mine, beware!
> Look not upon her beauty bright;
> For in her glance there is a snare,
> And in her smile there is a blight.[6]

The whiteness, blondeness, and youth of this witch are constantly emphasized, but we are also told that she is centuries old and twin sister to the earth. At first thought, one might wonder if the "great white witch" of the poem is the temptation to cross the color line. On the other hand, the traditional setting and form of the poem makes us search for a more universal symbol. Possibly we might maintain that she is the moon, casting her spell on mankind, as she has done through the ages. Whatever the interpretation the individual reader might decide to give,

we must agree that Johnson has created a full, if somewhat ambiguous, symbol. He also balances perfectly the evident agelessness -- antiquity on one side, modernity on the other -- of this problem.

The last poem from this book that we might notice is the social-justice poem, "Brothers." This very realistic poem deals with the horror and brutality of lynching. The main character is a symbol rather than a person; he represents all the resentment, distrust, bitterness, and hate that built up in the Negro throughout the fifteen generations of slavery. When he hurls forth his defiance, he is taken by the mob and slowly, cruelly burned at the stake. At the end, he becomes almost a Christ-symbol, for his bones and the chain that bound him are divided among those who murdered him. And in his last words, Johnson has him condemn all those who could, or would, treat a fellow human being in such a manner; "Brothers in spirit, brothers in deed are we."[7] He whose hate drives him to lynching is as beast-like as he whom discrimination and cruelty has driven to evil deeds. This piece of blank verse probably accomplished as much in the outlawing of lynching as did all the active lobbying which Johnson later led.

Had the poems we have discussed so far composed the whole of Johnson's writing, he would have our acclaim as a great American Negro writer. But there yet remains for our examination what many consider his masterpiece -- God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse. Johnson had previously spent much of his time and energy convincing the public that Negro folk music and dance was real art. There remained still the task of presenting to America the Negro folk sermon. Johnson discovered that at one time in Negro life, there were sermons that passed with only slight modification

from preacher to preacher and locality to locality. Examples of these were the "Valley of the Dry Bones" sermon, taking Ezekial 37 as the text; the "Train Sermon"; the "Heavenly March" sermon; and finally, a sermon covering the whole Bible from the Creation to the Judgment Day. It was such as these that Johnson wanted to preserve and to raise to the standard of art.

Johnson also realized that the old-time Negro preacher was looked upon by most people as a semi-comic figure, and he wanted to change this misconception. In actuality, the preacher was a vital influence among the people of his race; he was the mainspring of hope and inspiration. Generally superior in intelligence, he often committed large portions of the Bible to memory. He would balk no text: "Brothers and sisters, this morning -- I intend to explain the unexplainable -- find out the undefinable -- ponder over the imponderable -- and unscrew the inscrutable."[8] The Negro preacher was an orator and an actor. He depended on a progression of rhythmic words to move audiences to ecstasy; he could modulate his voice from a whisper to a thunderclap. When he reached the point that he had swept away both his hearers and himself, his language became much more nearly poetry than prose. This was the language and oratorical quality that Johnson wanted to represent.

Then Johnson faced the problem of Negro dialect. This would seem to be the proper medium for the sermons, but Johnson states in his Introduction two reasons why he did not use it. (1) Dialect lends itself only to limited emotional expression. Only humor and pathos can be fully represented through it. Johnson wished these sermons to give the effect of a trombone -- an instrument having the power to express all emotions encompassed by the human voice, but with greater amplitude (thus the

title, God's Trombones). (2) The old-time preachers, even though they normally used dialect, usually stepped out from its narrow confines when they preached. They combined Negro idioms and King James English to create the sonorous phrases that satisfied their sense of sound and rhythm.

In the writing of the sermons themselves, Johnson tried to indicate the tempo of the preacher by the line arrangement and a certain sort of pause. He included, also, a preliminary prayer, which was almost as important as the sermon itself, for it set the stage, so to speak, for the sermon. Johnson regretted that the atmosphere itself, the personality of the preacher, the sermon intonation, and the syncopation of speech must necessarily remain absent from the sermon-poems. Yet the reader with any degree of sensitivity must sense that here Johnson has created, or set down, something of breath-taking beauty. There are phrases and images that strike with clear notes upon the consciousness of the person who puts himself into the mood of these works. Johnson has not fallen far short of his ideal of proving that the folk sermon is truly art.

The seven sermons Johnson records in his book range from "The Creation" to "The Crucifixion," from "Let My People Go" to "Go Down, Death." All are in blank verse and show a heavy influence of the spirituals. Probably the best known is "The Creation," which presents vividly a child-like trust in the goodness and closeness of God. Yet the sermon "Go Down, Death" is equally as stirring in its simple, but beautiful interpretation of death.

And God said: Go down, Death, go down.
Go down to Savannah, Georgia,
Down in Yamacraw,
And find Sister Caroline.
She's borne the burden and heat of the day,
She's labored long in my vineyard,
And she's tired --
She's weary --
Go down! Death, and bring her to me.[9]

No one but James Weldon Johnson could have blended poetic imagery, folk superstition, and seeming truth in such a way. Death became to the Negro congregation an actual person subservient to the demands of a merciful and loving God.

The importance which repetition played in establishing the rhythm needed to sway the crowds is represented most clearly in "The Crucifixion." Johnson felt that this poem was the most difficult to write, for it required both vividness of detail and absolute dignity of presentation.

On Calvary, on Calvary,
They crucified my Jesus.
They nailed him to the cruel tree,
And the hammer!
The hammer!
The hammer!
Rang through Jerusalem's streets.
The hammer!
The hammer!
The hammer!
Rang through Jerusalem's streets.

. . .

Oh, I tremble, yes I tremble,
It causes me to tremble, tremble,
When I think how Jesus died;
Died on the steeps of Calvary,
How Jesus died for sinners,
Sinners like you and me.[10]

Not only can we see the oratorical repetition of phrases, but we notice in the last excerpt the ever-present influence of the spirituals. On such an occasion the congregation might have interruped the minister with snatches of song or with their own repetition of key thoughts.

The shortest poem in the collection, and one well representing all the techniques Johnson used in his presentation of the folk-sermon is the introductory prayer. Johnson tells us that often a woman was called on to lead this prayer when the minister knew could stir the congregation and prepare it for the sermon which was to follow. The striking, but always appropriate, combination of everyday colloquialism and Biblical phrases in this selection make it well worth quoting in its entirety.

LISTEN, LORD -- A PRAYER

O Lord, we come this morning
Knee-bowed and body-bent
Before thy throne of grace.
O Lord -- this morning --
Bow our hearts beneath our knees,
And our knees in some lonesome valley.
We come this morning --
Like empty pitchers to a full fountain,
With no merits of our own.
O Lord -- open up a window of heaven,
And lean out far over the battlements of glory,
And listen this morning.

Lord, have mercy on proud and dying sinners --
Sinners hanging over the mouth of hell,
Who seem to love their distance well.
Lord -- ride by this morning --
Mount your milk-white horse,
And ride--a this morning --
And in your ride, ride by old hell,
Ride by the dingy gates of hell,
And stop poor sinners in their headlong plunge.

And now, O Lord, this man of God,
Who breaks the bread of life this morning --
Shadow him in the hollow of thy hand,
And keep him out of the gunshot of the devil.
Take him, Lord -- this morning --
Wash him with hyssop inside and out,
Hang him up and drain him dry of sin.
Pin his ear to the wisdom-post,
And make his words sledge hammers of truth --
Beating on the iron heart of sin.

Lord God, this morning --
Put his eye to the telescope of eternity,
And let him look upon the paper walls of time.
Lord, turpentine his imagination,
Put perpetual motion in his arms,
Fill him full of the dynamite of thy power,
Anoint him all over with the oil of thy salvation,
And set his tongue on fire.

And now, O Lord --
When I've done drunk my last cup of sorrow --
When I've been called everything but a child of God --
When I'm done travelling up the rough side of the mountain --
O -- Mary's Baby --
When I start down the steep and slippery steps of death --
When this old world begins to rock beneath my feet --
Lower me to my dusty grave in peace.
To wait for that great gittin' up morning -- Amen.[11]

Such writing as this causes us to realize that here is a Negro poet for whom excuses no longer need to be made, in whose hands words have taken on new forms and fresh meanings. James Weldon Johnson was a highly educated man; he was a poet capable of great subtlety and depth. No Negro poet before him had had the wide range of expression, the strength of language, the creativeness he displayed. He was an intellectual artist in his own right, a poet at once racial and American. Johnson was born into an atmosphere of traditional dialect and protest poetry. At his death, he left behind an ever-broadening field of Negro writing that was beginning to include the new notes of pride and realism. The "New Negro" was ready to speak to America; who can estimate the part James Weldon Johnson played in getting his voice heard?

FOOTNOTES

[1]James Weldon Johnson, Along This Way (New York, 1933), p. 156.

[2]Ibid., p. 155.

[3]Ibid., pp. 374-375.

[4]James Weldon Johnson, The Book of American Negro Poetry, (New York, 1931), pp. 122-23.

[5]Margaret Just Butcher, The Negro in American Culture (New York, 1956), p. 100.

[6]Johnson, The Book of American Negro Poetry, p. 122.

[7]Ibid., p. 130.

[8]James Weldon Johnson, God's Trombones (New York, 1927), p. 6.

[9]Ibid., p. 28.

[10]Ibid., pp. 41-43.

[11]Ibid., pp. 13-15.

BOOKS BY JAMES WELDON JOHNSON

POETRY:

Fifty Years and Other Poems, 1917.
God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse, 1927.
Saint Peter Relates an Incident of the Resurrection Day, 1930.

PROSE:

The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man, 1912, 1927.
The Lawyer Succeeds, 1923.
Black Manhattan, 1930.
Along This Way (Autobiography), 1933.
Negro Americans, What Now?, 1934.

EDITED WORKS:

The Book of American Negro Poetry, 1922.
The Book of American Negro Spirituals, 1925.
The Second Book of Negro Spirituals, 1926.

CLAUDE MCKAY
(1889-1948)
VOICE OF PASSION

Wars seem always to have had an unsettling effect on a country's literature, and the American writings of the last century can certainly claim no exemption. Before the Civil War, and for some years after it, American writers were deeply entrenched in romanticism. Moralism and optimism were the keynotes of both poetry and prose; beauty and goodness were considered to be the values inherent in good literature. The Civil War, however, brought some inkling of change. The rise of industrialization and urbanization led the way toward social realism; and such writers as Mark Twain began creating works that were more vigorous, more "true to life." By the 1890's, an open struggle had developed between the romantic and the realistic camps. The ensuing conflict was bitter, but not unduly long. Social and economic problems within America's national life, pessimism and decadence within her personal life, led inexorably to an unrest which soon penetrated her literature.

This feeling of unrest gradually altered literary outlook, making it constantly more realistic in character. By the end of the nineteenth century, writers such as Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser had helped usher in a new movement, characterized by its insistence on realism, and even on naturalism. This revolution in theme and philosophy was appropriately accompanied by experimentation in technique; thus the Twenties saw the creation of such technically unprecedented

works as Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury and Eliot's The Waste Land. This whole literary period of change finally assumed the proportions of a Renaissance. The above-mentioned thematic and technical changes persisted throughout the years of the First World War, and were never really completely lost. Without doubt, this period of Awakening in American literature affected the course of future literary work in this country.

Meanwhile, American Negro literature was experiencing a similar spiritual and literary emancipation. Its renaissance did not come until later, concentrating itself in the years 1914-1928; but when it came, it carried the earmarks of the American literary revolution as a whole. The major factors that brought it about were three in number: the First World War, the advance of the Negro in labor and education, and the Negro's extensive migration to the North. James Weldon Johnson had earlier opened the door to a change in literature by his abandonment of Negro dialect as a poetic vehicle; Alain Locke later entered it as editor of the book, The New Negro. In this book Locke stated that the younger generation of Negro writers had achieved an objective attitude toward life. Race to them was becoming an added, enriching experience, making existence more interesting, more beautiful, more poignant. From this viewpoint was afforded a deepening rather than a narrowing of social vision. The Negro Renaissance, then, was more than a new emphasis on realism or naturalism. It was a deliberate attempt by the Negro writer to stifle propagandistic and apologistic motives in his work. It was a determination to put more effort into inner mastery of mood and spirit than into outer mastery of form and technique. The young poets shook off the last shreds of the minstrel tradition and declared themselves

free in regards to the tone and technique of their self-expression. Langston Hughes phrased the independent stand of the Renaissance group thus:

> We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly, too. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on the top of the mountain, free within ourselves.[1]

The strongest voice among the "New Negroes" of this period is found to be Claude McKay's. McKay was not born in the States and probably never became a citizen; yet, in him we have our most vigorous critic of democracy and our most contemptuous viewer of America's treatment of the Negro. Can we truthfully classify McKay as an American Negro poet? Technically, we cannot. However, by virtue of such prose works as Home to Harlem and such volumes of poetry as Spring in New Hampshire, it is obvious that he has something to say to America. And because of his studies and travel here and his love for Harlem, it is likely that America has had something to say to him. We cannot afford to pass by this Negro poet, one of the most outstanding the Negro Renaissance produced.

Claude McKay was born in Jamaica, British West Indies, in a village so small that it did not possess a name. The youngest of eleven children, he was sent to his brother's home to receive an education. This brother was a schoolmaster and a freethinker, and he greatly influenced Claude during the formative years of his life. By the time the boy was fourteen, he had completely absorbed his brother's fine library, adding the ideas of such writers as Haecker, Huxley, Matthew Arnold, and Shakespeare

to his own philosophy of life. His first books, Songs of Jamaica and Constab Ballads, were published while he was working with the Jamaica constabulary. Many of the poems in these collections were written in Jamaican dialect, and it is interesting to note that already McKay's peculiar combination of rough passion and tender lyricism was appearing. These early poems became exceedingly popular in Jamaica, and McKay became known to the people as the Robert Burns of the island.

The year 1912 found McKay in America to study scientific farming, with plans for an early return to Jamaica. But after a few months at Tuskegee Institute and two years at Kansas State University, he paid a visit to New York. He arrived in Harlem just as it was beginning to take on the form of a world metropolis, and he was completely captivated by it. Shortly thereafter, he abandoned all thought of returning to Jamaica, and he began to look upon himself primarily as a poet. He published several poems in magazines in this country and, while in England, brought out Spring in New Hampshire. This was his first volume in literary English, and its preface was written by the well-known critic, I. A. Richards.

The rest of McKay's life could best be described in a travelogue. He spent time in Holland, Belgium, Russia, Germany, Morocco, England, and France, as well as in the United States. He published two other volumes of poetry, but during the last part of his life, turned almost completely to prose writing. He worked for a while in New York as an associate editor of The Liberator, a socialist magazine of art and literature. After his trips abroad, however, he turned against socialism, because he could not contend with its ruthless tyranny over man's mind

and body. McKay is remembered today primarily for his part in bringing about the Negro Renaissance, and for his most powerful volume, Harlem Shadows.

We have designated McKay as a passionate poet; this he is, throughout most of his work. But we might also call him a melodic poet, for he is as constantly conscious of sound as are Edgar Allan Poe and Vachel Lindsay, at their best. McKay, besides, has the talent of seeming unaware that his combination of words is producing such an effect. His poems sound much more natural and unaffected than do the musical experiments for which Poe is so famous. Lines from the poem "Harlem Shadows" will serve to illustrate his constant repetition of vowel sounds.

> Ah, heart of me, the weary, weary feet
> In Harlem wandering from street to street.[2]

McKay also furnishes us with many examples of alliteration: heart-Harlem, weary-weary-wandering, feet-from, street-street. However, even this does not contribute to the melodic nature of his poems as does his almost unconscious use of assonance. Most of McKay's early poems, the ones published in Jamaica, are written in a syllabic music even more delicate than this. It was not until he came to the United States that he realized that the expression of his deepest feelings required something more. Thus, McKay added to his poems the colored imagery, the deep passion that are his trademarks; but at the same time he retained his tendency to emphasize the music and the smoothness that can be cultivated in the English language.

There is another quality characteristic of McKay's poems about Jamaica and about nature that cannot escape even the ordinary reader.

Always they seem to picture the wonder of living, the vitality of the senses that belongs to childhood. John Dewey comments on this by quoting a line from McKay's own poem, "North and South": "And wonder to life's commonplaces clings."[3] Constantly McKay shows ways a sensitive adult may recreate the spontaneity and liveliness of a child; frequently he rediscovers for the reader the thrill of life itself and the freedom from artificiality possessed by the very young. McKay's emphasis on passion and intensity in theme and treatment never causes his ideas to seem immature; but it prevents them from being clouded by any commonness or dullness. His title-poem, "Spring in New Hampshire," shows the depth and fullness of the life his poems describe.

Spring in New Hampshire

Too green the springing April grass,
Too blue the silver-speckled sky,
For me to linger here, alas,
While happy winds go laughing by,
Wasting the golden hours indoors,
Washing windows and scrubbing floors.

Too wonderful the April night,
Too faintly sweet the first May flowers,
The stars too gloriously bright,
For me to spend the evening hours,
When fields are fresh and streams are leaping,
Wearied, exhausted, dully sleeping.[4]

McKay is not ashamed of emotion, and display of it never makes his poems less manly or strong. His are not weak feelings, and it does not seem unbecoming for him to express them freely. In "The Tropics in New York," he describes the fruits native to his country, the memories they bring to him, and then his emotional reaction:

My eyes grew dim, and I could no more gaze;
A wave of longing through my body swept,
And, hungry for the old, familiar ways,
I turned aside and bowed my head and wept.[5]

McKay's poems are, generally, universal in topic and tone; they are a sympathetic interpretation of the moods and experiences of humanity as often as they are a description of the hopes and sorrows of a race. Emotion being as old as human life and as deep as the heart of man, McKay could no more deny its omnipresence than he could life itself. To him, life was passion and feeling, and his poems are expressive of the naked, but beautiful, force of it.

Max Eastman, a past editor of The Liberator, claims Claude McKay to be the first lyric genius of his race. Without a doubt, McKay has a way with words superior to many of the Negro poets before or after him. And likewise, McKay's feelings are more passionate and more powerfully expressed than practically any other poet of either race. Never is this truer than when one is speaking of McKay's love poetry. An entire section of the book, Selected Poems of Claude McKay, is given the title "Amoroso," and in it are recorded McKay's reactions to passion in the deepest sense. His love is highly sensual, but it never sinks to the level of a cheap, shoddy affair. Always there is the element of awe, wonder, worship; the experience is almost a religious one.

> The perfume of your body dulls my sense.
> I want nor wine nor weed; your breath alone
> Suffices. In this moment rare and tense
> I worship at your breast...
> Oh, with our love the night is warm and deep!
> The air is sweet, my flower, and sweet the flute
> Whose music lulls our burning brain to sleep,
> While we lie loving, passionate, and mute.

Surely no other lyric poet ever expressed his most intimate feelings in a form that is, simultaneously, natural and poetically perfect.

Finally, we are confronted with McKay's most extensive and most

influential body of poems. These, his poems of rebellion and protest, are strong notes in the poetic music of the Negro Renaissance. Rugged and stern, this writing never avoids the subject of race and prejudice in American life. It portrays the sensation of being a black man in a white man's world. Yet McKay is not ashamed of his color; he no longer excuses it, but extols it. There is less belligerence and more pride of race, and never is there a compromise with the white world for the way it has treated the Negro. This new-found racial pride and fresh picturing of the Negro problem is both part of the Renaissance and expressive of McKay's personal feelings and convictions.

McKay has an utter contempt for weakness; he insists that Negro men and women must grasp the responsibility of behaving as responsible members of society instead of as servants and inferiors. In "White Houses," this defiance of social injustice comes to the foreground:

> Your door is shut against my tightened face,
> And I am sharp as steel with discontent.
> But I possess the courage and the grace
> To bear my anger proudly and unbent.[7]

McKay, in fact, looks upon the hate and anger in his own heart as desirable feelings, for he feels they exercise a kind of discipline upon him, the persecuted one. Later in this same poem, he speaks of the wisdom and superhuman power he must find within himself to stay free of the poison that is produced in the lives of the white supremacists.[8] This sort of testing transforms and strengthens the soul of the Negro, making him better able to withstand discrimination and continue the battle for equal rights. His poem, "Baptism," describes this hate he must enter into and the effect it has upon him. Yet we notice, as we read it, that it is not a mean or spiteful hate, but a clean, purifying, victorious one.

Baptism

Into the furnace let me go alone;
Stay you without in terror of the heat.
I will go naked in--for thus 'tis sweet--
Into the weird depths of the hottest zone.
I will not quiver in the frailest bone,
You will not note a flicker of defeat;
My heart shall tremble not its fate to meet,
My mouth give utterance to any moan.
The yawning oven spits forth fiery spears;
Red aspish tongues shout wordlessly my name.
Desire destroys, consumes my mortal fears,
Transforming me into a shape of flame.
I will come out, back to your world of tears,
A stronger soul within a finer frame.[9]

There are many facets to McKay's rebellion and hate. The one we might most expect to find would be his defiance of the "white fiends" and their cruelty to the members of his race. Thus it is no surprise to us that several of his best poems deal with this problem. For example, "The Lynching" and "If We Must Die" exemplify McKay's realistic description of the situation and his violent resistance against it. Both are, somewhat incongrously, written in the sonnet form. Yet McKay has firm command of his technique, and these sonnet-tragedies are among the most effective of his work. In the first-named poem, McKay describes vividly the burning and hanging of a Negro and gives the reader the impression that this martyr is favored of God, but that the white mob remains unforgiven. The religious connotation is obvious; and just as a crowd gathered around Christ to watch his death, so the blood-thirsty, callous throng gathers here, also:

Day dawned, and soon the mixed crowds came to view
The ghastly body swaying in the sun;
The women thronged to look, but never a one
Showed sorrow in her eyes of steely blue;
And little lads, lynchers that were to be,
Danced round the dreadful thing in fiendish glee.[10]

"If We Must Die," on the other hand, gives us McKay's resolution concerning such cruel and pointless deaths. We hear the voice of the social rebel speaking with defiance and pride; we see the reaction of the militant and self-reliant "New Negro":

If We Must Die

If we must die--let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.
If we must die---oh, let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
Oh, Kinsmen! We must meet the common foe;
Though far outnumbered, let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back![11]

McKay often used animal imagery to refer to America and its white men. Here they are dogs; in other poems they are tigers, drinking the Negro's blood and stealing his breath. Always death is imminent, but never a hopeless death; for the Negro, in dying, likewise deals America a death-blow.

But there is more than rebellion against prejudice built into McKay's poems. In spite of McKay's love for Harlem, he could not forget the sorrow he felt at seeing the city degrade and destroy his innocent people. The first poem he published in the United States had as its theme the emptiness of the lives of those who are caught up in the sordid existence of the city. The Harlem dancer was beautiful, and her song and dance were exquisitely performed. "But," McKay says,

...looking at her falsely-smiling face,
I knew her self was not in that strange place.[12]

Her soul was not of the city, although her body, of necessity, was. The praise of the applauding boys and the young prostitutes was nothing to her; the place was foreign to her very nature. Yet the city had taken her and forced her into its mold.

The girls pictured in "Harlem Shadows" are victims of the same monster - the physical nature's insistent demands for food. The nights in Harlem are full of the footsteps of those seeking to barter bodies for bread. In each stanza the shoes become more and more worn, and the footsteps become slower and wearier. The sternness of poverty and the escape of lust have brought disgrace to the "dusky, half-clad girls," and to the poet who cares so deeply about the needs of his people.

I hear the halting footsteps of a lass
  In Negro Harlem when the night lets fall
Its veil. I see the shapes of girls who pass
  To bend and barter at desire's call.
Ah, little dark girls, who in slippered feet
  Go prowling through the night from street to street!

Ah, stern harsh world, that in the wretched way
  Of poverty, dishonor and disgrace,
Has pushed the timid little feet of clay,
  The sacred brown feet of my fallen race!
Ah, heart of me, the weary, weary feet
  In Harlem wandering from street to street.[13]

There are other poems, too, describing the effect of the city on the man or woman who attempts to become lost in it. Descriptions of the tired laborer who dreads the coming of the dawn and another day in the harsh, ugly city are realistically done. Often McKay contrasts the lyric beauty of daybreak with the noise and dirt revealed in the city through its approach. The dawn also points out the grotesqueness of the people whom the sins of the night have weakened and ruined. It illumines the factories to which the already exhausted worker must

return; and McKay, putting himself in the place of the laborer, says: "And I go darkly-rebel to my work."[11] The young boy who had lived a free life in the lush tropics of Jamaica could never quite forgive the city he loved for the sins it committed against an already burdened people.

How can we tie together the purposes toward which Claude McKay was aiming in his poetic endeavor? What was the ultimate end of this passion and energy that carried him through the literary Renaissance? Did he accomplish anything for himself or for his people? Let us hear the answer from McKay himself:

The Negro's Tragedy

It is the Negro's tragedy I feel
Which binds me like a heavy iron chain,
It is the Negro's wounds I want to heal
Because I know the keenness of his pain.
Only a thorn-covered Negro and no white
Can penetrate into the Negro's ken,
Or feel the thickness of the shroud of night
Which hides and buries him from other men.

So what I write is urged out of my blood.
There is no white man who could write my book,
Though many think their story should be told
Of what the Negro people ought to brook.
Our statesmen roam the world to set things right.
This Negro laughs and prays to God for Light![12]

Claude McKay was afraid of no topic; he incorporated many formerly shunned ones into his work as poetic themes. His subjects ranged from rebellion against prejudice and degradation to a chafing against the color line. At the other extreme, they ranged from soft, dreamy lyrics to poems of tenderness and longing. Always his language and his thought were strong, forthright, and full of vibrant feeling. His descriptions and comparisons, even in his prose works, were invariably full, rich,

and exotic. "Flame-heart," one of the finest Negro lyrics ever written, in a subtle way combines all these aspects of McKay's life and works.

So much have I forgotten in ten years,
So much in ten brief years! I have forgot
What time the purple apples come to juice,
And what month brings the shy forget-me-not.
I have forgot the special, startling season
Of the pimento's flowering and fruiting,
What time of year the ground doves brown the fields
And fill the noonday with their curious fluting.
I have forgotten much, but still remember
The poinsettia's red, blood-red, in warm December.[16]

It could not be less than appropriate that our poet of passion have as his most cherished Jamaican memory the intense red of this flower that blooms freely in tropical lands. It serves as a single-image description of McKay's work; for his poems are sometimes as delicate in texture as is the poinsettia, and other times as hardy and tough in theme as they. McKay, the poet, had a heart of flame similar to the one possessed by the blood-red flower.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Margaret Just Butcher, *The Negro in American Culture* (New York, 1956), p. 108.

[2] James Weldon Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (New York, 1931), p. 171.

[3] Claude McKay, *Selected Poems of Claude McKay* (New York, 1953), p. 7.

[4] Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, pp. 171-172.

[5] Claude McKay, *Harlem Shadows* (New York, 1922), p. 8.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 75.

[7] Butcher, *The Negro in American Culture*, p. 105.

[8] Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes (editors), *The Poetry of the Negro — 1746-1949* (New York, 1949), p. 332.

[9] McKay, *Harlem Shadows*, p. 52.

[10] Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, p. 163.

[11] *Ibid.*, pp. 168-169.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 170.

[13] *Ibid.*, pp. 170-171.

[14] McKay, *Harlem Shadows*, p. 43.

[15] McKay, *Selected Poems of Claude McKay*, p. 50.

[16] Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, p. 174.

BOOKS BY CLAUDE MCKAY

POETRY

Songs of Jamaica, 1911.
Constab Ballads, 1911.
Spring in New Hampshire, 1920.
Harlem Shadows: The Poems of Claude McKay, 1922.
A Long Way from Home, 1937.
Selected Poems, 1953.

PROSE

Home to Harlem, 1928.
Banjo, a Story Without a Plot, 1929.
Gingertown, 1932.
Banana Bottom, 1933.
Harlem: Negro Metropolis, 1940.

LANGSTON HUGHES
(1902-)
NEGRO POET LAUREATE

The Negro Renaissance had levelled off, and the period of the "Negro Vogue" had passed by the time the decade of the 1930's arrived. Most of the poets representing the "New Negro" movement had done their best work and published their most noteworthy volumes before that time. But there still remained on the American scene a spokesman for the new Negro poetry, one who was destined to be lauded by Carl Van Vechten as the poet laureate of his race. The greater part of his productive period lay before him, and new ground was waiting to be broken. The poet Langston Hughes was supremely equal to the task that awaited him.

Possibly the most direct way of learning simultaneously about Hughes the man and Hughes the poet is by reading his autobiography, The Big Sea. It is a book far superior to most autobiographies, for Hughes' careful organization keeps his main ideas from being lost in the multitude of details that are so tempting to other writers in a similar position. The foreword to the book and the last three sentences give evidence of its carefully followed theme and also reveal to the reader Hughes' philosophy of life and literature:

"Life is a big sea
full of many fish
I let down my nets
and pull."[1]

"Literature is a big sea full of many fish. I let down my nets and pulled.
"I'm still pulling."[2]

Hughes tells in this work of his parents' divorce and his consequent separation from his father. When, at the age of seventeen, he did have the opportunity of living with his father, he found himself most unhappy. The father-image he had created in his mind could not have been farther removed from the actual flesh-and-blood person he came to know. After his final break from his father a year later, Hughes continued his father-search. As we shall later see, this had some amount of influence on his poetic themes. It also revealed to him something about his own poetic nature: ". . .my best poems were all written when I felt the worst. When I was happy, I didn't write anything."[3] And again: ". . .poems are like rainbows: they escape you quickly."[4]

In this same volume, Hughes speaks of his love for Harlem. It holds a strange fascination for him, probably because of his passion for Negro culture and his intense interest in the musical forms originated and propagated by the Negroes there. And yet, Langston Hughes' poems were not at first popular among the Negro race as a whole. Many felt that Negroes had been too often maligned in literature and consequently, that any further pictures should be clean and cultured. Hughes was not a writer of this type, and for that matter, neither was Claude McKay. Both were criticized by fellow Negroes as writing in a vulgar, low-rate, malicious manner. This is surprising when we hear Hughes describing the poems that he read before a Negro audience in Nashville as "poems in which I had tried to capture some of the dreams and heartaches that all Negroes know."[5]

As was mentioned in the preceding paragraph, Hughes was greatly influenced in his writing by popular Negro music forms. He employed

the spiritual as a way of portraying the double standard by which the Negro must live.

Angel Wings

The angels wings is white as snow,
O, white as snow,
White
es
snow.
The angels wings is white as snow,
But I drug me wings
In the dirty mire
O, I drug me wings
All through the fire.
But the angels wings is white as snow,
White
as
snow.[6]

Although Hughes proves in other poems his skill at writing in standard English, he is never hesitant about using Negro idioms and colloquialisms. He cannot be said to write in dialect, for he shares the opinion that this is a passing art form. Yet he strives always to present contemporary American Negro culture; and here, as in other less "spiritual" poems, he reproduces the speech of the Harlem Negro. Actually, the Negro speech adds to the quality of this poem. The traditional spiritual form would sound stilted otherwise expressed.

More common, however, are the poems showing the prominence of the blues and jazz form in Hughes' thought and writing. In The Big Sea, he describes vividly the effect such music has on him: "Like the waves of the sea coming one after another, always one after another, like the earth moving around the sun, night, day-night, day-night, day-forever, so is the undertow of black music with its rhythm that never betrays you, its strength like the beat of the human heart, its humor, and its rooted power."[7] This musical undertow of which Hughes speaks is revealed both in the subject matter and in the basic rhythm and flow of

many of his poems. The following poem is totally representative of its influence:

Dream Boogie

Good morning daddy!
Ain't you heard
The boogie-woogie rumble
Of a dream deferred?

Listen closely:
You'll hear their feet
Beating out and beating out a--

You think
It's a happy beat?

Listen to it closely:
Ain't you heard
something underneath
like a--

What did I say?

Sure,
I'm happy!
Take it away![8]

This poem, so Hughes informs us, describes contemporary Harlem; we shall have to take his word that this is true, for we can certainly not tell from the poem itself. The fact that the style and tone is derived directly from be-bop, however, is much clearer. Evident are the conflicting changes, sharp interjections, broken rhythms, and distortions of this modern music. It could well illustrate, as Hughes probably intends, the shifting irregularity of a community constantly on the move. It also points up the gaiety and yet the uncertainty behind this continuing transition. In this poem, as well as in the countless others of this kind, the blues and jazz poem forms are admirably suited to the character and the problems of the race that are pictured in them.

But not all of Hughes' poems show this definite jazz-tone, for he is also the author of dignified, moving lyrics. He can combine

deep feeling with cool objectivity. He can mold from free verse a poem both symmetrical and effective. He is, without question, a master of the poetic language. This, one of his best-known poems, may be used as an example:

The Negro Speaks of Rivers

I've known rivers:
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than
the flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.[9]

This poem was written when Hughes was only eighteen years of age; he jotted it down on the back of an envelope as he rode across the Mississippi River. Even as a young boy, Hughes was an appreciative recipient of the racial heritage passed down through the Negro blood line. He admired the bravery and the gaiety of the Negro; and he realized that these ancient rivers, although looking upon the Negro in primitivism and slavery, furnished a song, a lullaby, a golden hope for the race. The soul of the black man becomes in this poem one with the river in its dusky color, its ancient heritage, its depth, its everlasting hope.

An interesting aspect of Hughes' lyrical--and sometimes not-so-lyrical--work is his ability to draw clear pictures or characterize definite emotions in a very few lines. One very beautiful word-picture

describes the new moon on a cloudless, frosty night.

Winter Moon

How thin and sharp is the moon tonight!
How thin and sharp and ghostly white
Is the slim curved crook of the moon tonight:[10]

Another, depicting the cool desperation of a man driven to suicide, is a reflection of Hughes' own power of complete objectivity.

Suicide's Note

The calm,
Cool face of the river
Asked me for a kiss.[11]

And then, the more humorous, but the completely believable:

Bad Morning

Here I sit
With my shoes mismated.
Lawdy-mercy!
I's frustrated:[12]

The themes around which Hughes has built his poems are almost too numerous to mention. However, the inevitable questions arise: What part does race play in Hughes' poetry? How important is it to him in the selection of topic and tone? Hughes himself would probably say that it is of only incidental consideration in the total process of his creativity. Yet we have already seen the impact of Negro rhythms and Negro speech on much of his poetry. Race also is influential in other ways, although it is, many times, an unconscious influence. Hughes, an ardent devotee of Negro culture and a dedicated student of Negro problems, can seldom completely escape this all-important matter and is, as often as not, motivated by it.

Part of this is seen in the fact that Hughes is proud of Africa and proud of the people who have come from it. A whole section of his Selected Poems bears the title of "Afro-American Fragments"; and it

includes several poems likening the depths of the dark continent to the faces of its people being persecuted around the world. Yet, compensation is not completely withheld. The darkness in these poems does not represent hopelessness and desolation nearly so much as it does tenderness, gentleness, beauty. The radiant beauty of the country and of its dark race is merely pointed up by the black exterior.

Poem

The night is beautiful,
So the faces of my people.

The stars are beautiful,
So the eyes of my people.

Beautiful, also, is the sun.
Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people.[13]

Among the beautiful souls that the poet here praises are some who deserve special mention in poems. Hughes, through poetic monologues, presents the feelings of Negroes whom he particularly admires. These individuals are strong, ironic, often pessimistic; at the same time, they are completely frank with themselves, never resorting to complaint or whining. Negro mothers, often responsible for the successes of their children and grandchildren, come in for a large share of this praise. The Minstrel Man that Hughes creates also illustrates the Negro's ability to cover up internal suffering with gay fortitude and determination.

Minstrel Man

Because my mouth
Is wide with laughter
And my throat
Is deep with song,
You do not think
I suffer after
I have held my pain so long.

Because my mouth
Is wide with laughter
You do not hear my inner cry;
Because my feet
Are gay with dancing
You do not know
I die.[14]

Of course, Hughes, along with every other American Negro poet, is finally forced to turn from praise of his race to contemplation of the racial problem in our country. One of his most obvious references to Jim Crow is found in the poem "Merry-Go-Round." While it is not one of his best poems, it treats an all too ordinary situation in an extraordinary way. The setting--a colored child at a carnival; the problem--finding the Jim Crow section on the merry-go-round; the irony--how can a back seat for a "black kid" be found in a circular arrangement of toy horses? Hughes does not answer the question; he presents it and then leaves it to the discretion of the reader.

But the most unusual racial theme appearing in Hughes' work is that of the tragic mulatto. This touchy subject, referred to only obliquely by most poets, gets its full share of attention in Hughes' poems, short stories, operas, and dramas. His two best poems on the theme are "Cross," a short, stark, ballad-like piece, and the longer, more dramatic "Mulatto." In them the unfortunate mulatto is pictured as violent, lonely, maladjusted, filled with feelings of divided loyalty and frustration. These poem-tragedies do more than portray a stereotype; they accurately represent one of the saddest problems among all races.

Cross

My old man's a white old man
And my old mother's black.
If ever I cursed my white old man
I take my curses back.

If ever I cursed my black old mother
And wished she were in hell,
I'm sorry for that evil wish
And now I wish her well.

My old man died in a fine big house.
My ma died in a shack.
I wonder where I'm gonna die,
Being neither white nor black?[15]

"Cross," as the title of this poem, gives us an insight into the problem the mixed-blood Negro faces. He is, literally, a cross, or a hybrid; he has also a cross to bear and to be crucified upon throughout his life. By suggestion and implication, we see this person's bitter resentment against his mixed background, his feeling that the failures of his life stem from that background. Now that his parents are removed from the scene, he no longer places on them any guilt for their act. Instead of the hate upon which he had previously concentrated, he feels a sense of not-belonging, desertion, rejection. His is a fruitless, hopeless search for a father and a home. This parallels the feelings of the mixed-blood Hughes, who was deeply hurt when African natives would not believe he was a Negro. It also reflects Hughes' situation as a boy, reared by his grandmother and rejected by his father. Hughes knew what it was not to fit completely into any niche of American society, and the mulatto of his imagination was thus no stranger to him.

The dramatic dialogue, "Mulatto," is a longer poem, but important enough for us to examine in its entirety.

Mulatto

I am your son, white man!

Georgia dusk
And the turpentine woods.
One of the pillars of the temple fell.

You are my son!
Like hell!

The moon over the turpentine woods.
The Southern night
Full of stars,
Great big yellow stars.
What's a body but a toy?
Juicy bodies
Of nigger wenches
Blue black
Against black fences.
O, you little bastard boy,
What's a body but a toy?
The scent of pine wood stings the soft night air.
What's the body of your mother?
Sharp pine scent in the evening air.
A nigger night,
A nigger joy,
A little yellow
Bastard boy.
Naw, you ain't my brother.
Niggers ain't my brother.
Not ever.
Niggers ain't my brother.

The Southern night is full of stars,
Great big yellow stars.
O, sweet as earth,
Dusk-dark bodies
Give sweet birth
To little yellow bastard boys.

Get on back there in the night,
You ain't white.

The bright stars scatter everywhere.
Pine wood scent in the evening air.
A nigger night,
A nigger joy.
I am your son, white man!

A little yellow
Bastard boy.[16]

This poem is permeated with an hysterical exuberance, with feelings of passion and violence. Its open theme is rejection, and all other issues are subordinated to that. The denial of kinship which was so painful to Hughes in his personal life is here. To heap irony on irony, it is a two-generation refusal, by both father and half-brother. The symbolism and color imagery in "Mulatto" is carefully worked out.

The white pillar of the temple falls to blend with a black fence rail, and the fall casts a strange shadow over the whole Southern countryside. The woods are described as "turpentine"; the sky is full of yellow bastard stars. The interracial lovemaking, however, is not the essential evil. The skies are still beautiful; the woods still possess a clean pine scent; birth from dark, earthy bodies is still sacred. The greater wrong consists in the rejection of fatherhood, the irresponsible casualness toward the sex act, the slurring references to the "nigger joy" participated in. The father makes of his son a mongrel cur and pushes him back into the night with which he covered his original selfish, careless actions. Here, as in other works, Hughes points out that the problem of mixed blood is basically a personal one. The "tragic mulatto" idea becomes a father-son conflict and a rejection that is stunting in its effect on the product of miscegenation.

It would be unfortunate for us to overemphasize this aspect of Langston Hughes' work, for there are many poems of different types that are also important. Although they are not so directly concerned with special problems as are the preceding ones, they, too, are motivated and molded by race. For instance, there is a number of poems Hughes has written in praise of Harlem. This citadel of Negro life and culture reveals to him all he wants or needs to know about the Negro. And when Hughes describes the metropolis as a "nigger place," he is not showing contempt. Rather, he is attempting to demonstrate the surprise of a lover of beauty who discovers in this cruel, but captivating, city the things he has vainly sought in more likely places.

Esthete in Harlem

Strange,
That in this nigger place
I should meet life face to face;
When, for years, I had been seeking
Life in places gentler-speaking,
Until I came to this vile street
And found Life stepping on my feet![17]

One of Hughes' most successful techniques in dealing with the Negro problem is to combine a fine touch of irony with natural dignity. He can begin a poem with a subject from the lowest possible source and, using just a few words, lift it far above its original level or meaning. Such a poem is one of Hughes' own favorites, "Brass Spittoons." In it he draws a graphic picture of the lowly, filthy work to which the Negro must oftentimes stoop. It is no problem for the reader to visualize after the first few seconds the slimy pot that is being cleaned. It is somewhat of a shock, then, for this same repugnant object to become "A bright bowl of brass. . .beautiful to the Lord"[18] in the poem's last ten lines. It becomes as worthy of being placed on the altar as the cups of Solomon, for the work of his hands is the best the Negro spittoon-cleaner has to offer. This cynical, but dignified, twist inevitably leaves the reader with a strange sense of humility.

Another illustration of this same technique is a short poem criticizing America's treatment of her "darker brother." This work admits the Negro's temporary defeat, but it rejoices in the optimistic hope that this defeat will be dispelled by the strength and beauty of the Negro himself.

I, Too

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen

When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll sit at the table
When company comes.

Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed,--

I, too, am America.[19]

Here Hughes neither follows in the protest tradition nor apologizes for the problems his race causes. He merely states the fact that white men and black men are brothers, and that at the present time the darker ones are still considered children. There is no bitterness, for the Negro race knows that it is growing strong and can soon prove that its beauty and maturity exceeds that of the race attempting to dominate it. The tone of the poem is somewhat sardonic; after all, what reasoning causes one who can praise America and be an integral part of the country to be hidden from public view? At present, the white brother is ashamed of his black relative; tomorrow he will be ashamed of the way he is now treating him. Hughes is confident in this hope of his and strong in his presentation of it.

In fact, this word, strength, and another, versatility, might be used to describe Langston Hughes' most positive qualities as a writer. Since his "discovery" by Vachel Lindsay, he has expressed the strength of his convictions in practically every genre open to him. We have already seen his value as a poet; he is also competent as a short story writer, a novelist, a translator, an historian, a biographer, a musician,

a dramatist, and a writer for juveniles. He has not sought to appeal to white taste, nor has he tried to cater to a colored public. He has, therefore, been free to express his own genius and deal with his problems as a writer in his own way.

One cannot now say definitely whether or not Hughes' writings will last. His technique is smooth and his poems unusual, thus making him an interesting figure to study. Yet this very uniqueness may stand in the way of his permanent poetic success. The thought in many of his poems has been so distorted by blues and jazz forms that its obscurity sometimes makes the reader wonder whether he is reading E. E. Cummings or Langston Hughes. These unusual forms have the same drawback as do Cummings'; the reader is likely to think of them as a gimmick and refuse to accept poems using them as being serious.

Hughes' poems might also be criticized for lacking depth. Although he has achieved the freedom of technique typical of other modern poets, he has not combined it with as wide a range of thought as they. He has limited himself somewhat by his prevalent use of racial themes, and his own attitude toward race prevents his using it as a powerful force in poetry. Hughes believes that humor is the only sound approach to the racial problem, that if this is not successful, the whole matter would best be ignored. This viewpoint is obvious in the way Hughes handles his poetry. And although it may satisfy his own demands as a Negro and an artist, it may be limiting the permanent value of much of his writing.

Yet Hughes cannot be bypassed as a "fad poet" or a light writer. He can be passionate and lyrical, and he can reach objectivity and freedom in his verse. Without doubt, his is the most prominent and most influential voice among Negro poets today. He is completely original and completely Negro. For his striking presentation of contemporary Negro life, Langston Hughes well deserves the title of poet laureate of his race.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Langston Hughes, The Big Sea (New York, 1940), foreword.

[2]Ibid., p. 335.

[3]Ibid., p. 54.

[4]Ibid., p. 56.

[5]Ibid., p. 235.

[6]Langston Hughes, Selected Poems (New York, 1958), p. 25.

[7]Hughes, The Big Sea, p. 209.

[8]Langston Hughes, The Langston Hughes Reader (New York, 1958), p. 88.

[9]Countee Cullen, Caroling Dusk -- An Anthology of Negro Poetry (New York, 1927), pp. 149-150.

[10]Hughes, Selected Poems, p. 58.

[11]Cullen, Caroling Dusk, p. 151.

[12]Hughes, Selected Poems, p. 37.

[13]Cullen, Caroling Dusk, p. 150.

[14]Margaret Just Butcher, The Negro in American Culture (New York, 1956), pp. 177-178.

[15]James Weldon Johnson, The Book of American Negro Poetry (New York, 1931), pp. 236-237.

[16]Hughes, Selected Poems, pp. 160-161.

[17]Johnson, The Book of American Negro Poetry, p. 280.

[18]Ibid., p. 235.

[19]Cullen, Caroling Dusk, pp. 145-146.

BOOKS BY LANGSTON HUGHES

POETRY

The Weary Blues, 1926.
Fine Clothes to the Jew, 1927.
The Dream-Keeper, 1932.
Shakespeare in Harlem, 1942.
Fields of Wonder, 1947.
Cuba Libre (by Nicolas Guillen, translated from the Spanish by Langston Hughes and Benjamin Carruthers), 1948.
One-Way Ticket, 1949.
Montage of a Dream Deferred, 1951.
Selected Poems of Gabriele Mistral (translated from the Spanish by Langston Hughes), 1957.
Selected Poems of Langston Hughes, 1958.

HUMOROUS DRAMA

Simple Speaks His Mind, 1950.
Simple Takes a Wife, 1953.
Simple Stakes a Claim, 1957.

PROSE

Not Without Laughter, 1930.
(with Arna Bontemps) Popo and Fifina, 1932.
The Ways of White Folks, 1934.
The Big Sea, 1940.
Masters of the Dew (by Jacques Roumain, translated from the French by Langston Hughes and Mercer Cook), 1947.
(with Arna Bontemps) The Poetry of the Negro, 1949.
Laughing to Keep from Crying, 1952.
The First Book of the Negroes, 1952.
The First Book of Jazz, 1954.
The First Book of Rhythms, 1954.
Famous American Negroes, 1954.
Famous Negro Music Makers, 1955.
The Sweet Flypaper of Life, 1955.
The First Book of the West Indies, 1956.
I Wonder as I Wander, 1956.
(with Milton Meltzer) A Pictorial History of the Negro in America, 1956.
Famous Negro Heroes of America, 1958.

ANTHOLOGY

The Langston Hughes Reader, 1958.

Langston Hughes has also assisted in the writing of nineteen plays, musicals, and operas.

SECTION XXI

THE PROBLEM OF AMERICAN NEGRO POETRY

A brief summary and consideration of the problem faced by all Negro writers -- whether to write simply as Americans or whether to continue in the role of American Negro writers.

After examining the work of these four poets -- Paul Laurence Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, and Langston Hughes, one might come to feel that the four differ too much to show any trends or directions in Negro poetry. It cannot be denied that each writer has his own technique and his particular themes; this is as it should be. Yet, each was chosen to play a definite part in the development of this paper, because each also played a definite part in the development and maturation of Negro poetry.

Paul Laurence Dunbar, as we have seen, represented the end of an era rather than the beginning of one. He was one of the last American writers to follow in the plantation tradition, although he was the first Negro writer to deserve and achieve any degree of success. It was James Weldon Johnson who helped parallel Negro writing with that in the mainstream of American literature; he was the Negro leader of his day, and his work carried the mark of a new intellectualism. Johnson's writing foreshadowed the movement which has been termed the Negro Renaissance. Part of this Renaissance was typified by a frank, but non-apologetic, criticism of democracy and its treatment of the Negro. Using traditional, but smoothly lyrical, forms to do this was Claude McKay. His was a voice typical of the many passionate ones speaking out as part of the "New Negro" movement. Finally, we moved into the study of the modern poetry of Langston Hughes. We found that his subjects sometimes lacked depth, but that they possessed a pertinency to today's culture. His comments on and descriptions of Negro

life are notable both for their accurateness and for the unusual form in which they are written.

Thus we have seen, in miniature, the total development of Negro poetry since 1890. We have surveyed the field from the earliest dialect poems to the latest modern ones. And now we are faced with the question which was raised at the beginning of this paper and which has accompanied us through each part of our study. Is American Negro poetry primarily American poetry or primarily Negro poetry? Is it different enough from poetry by white writers to deserve -- or to be allotted -- special classification? We have already referred to the fact that literary critics themselves disagree as to the answer. Let us now actually see what some of the foremost Negro writers and critical scholars have had to say about this important matter.

James Weldon Johnson, in his Preface to The Book of American Negro Poetry, reminds the reader that the Renaissance group attempted to do away with "race problem" poetry and make themselves simply poets, not Negro poets. Johnson feels, however, that they did not fundamentally succeed. Although their approach to race may be different, less direct, and usually more effective, it is still a powerful force in all their best work. Johnson discuss in the following manner the prominence of race in Negro poetry and its ability to draw a line between the work of white and of Negro writers:

> I have no intention of depreciating the poetry not stimulated by a sense of race that Afroamerican poets have written...but not in all of it do I find a single poem possessing the power and artistic finality found in the best of the poems rising out of racial conflict and contact...an artist accomplishes his best when working at his best with the material he knows best. And up to

> this time, at least, "race" is perforce the thing the American Negro poet knows best...the time should come when he will not have to know "race" so well and feel it so deeply. But even now he can escape the sense of being hampered if, standing on his racial foundation, he strives to fashion something that rises above mere race and reaches out to the universal in truth and beauty.[1]

This is a conservative position, however, when compared with that of most other critics. Countee Cullen, for instance, preferred to designate his volume, Caroling Dusk, an an anthology of verse by Negro poets rather than as an anthology of Negro verse. He feels that Negro poetry must derive from some country other than our own and some language other than our own before it can bear this separate label. Moreover, he maintains that it is not possible to consider the poems by Negro writers as having any particular factor in common, and that it is certainly not proper to use the race of the poet as the one qualification for grouping. In short, his opinion is that Negro writing has followed the poetic tendencies of the time, that the poems themselves should therefore be classified just as poems by any other American writers.[2]

Cullen's position parallels the one taken by Sterling A. Brown, Negro creative artist and literary critic. Brown agrees that writings by Negroes do not fall into a unique cultural pattern; he says that the term "Negro literature" is thus a misnomer. It has no meaning as to structural technique or a separate school of writing, for the Negro writes in forms evolved in English and American literature. For that reason, Brown considers literature by American Negroes to be a segment of American literature, and Negro writers to be American writers. Holding to a standard other than this, he maintains, would lead to a double standard of judgment, a dangerous attitude to take toward any poets or poems.

These opinions are matched time and time again by other literary spokesmen. Saunders Redding has said in the New Leader that American Negro literature is not a separate branch of writing, but part of the American literary stream.[3] Margaret Just Butcher has asserted that the objective of all colored poets is to become, basically, American poets, and only occasionally, Negro poets.[4] Alain Locke, in Four Negro Poets, states practically identical feelings: "In the chorus of American singing they [Negro poets] have registered distinctive notes whose characteristic timbre we would never lose or willingly let lapse; however, more and more they become orchestrated into our national art and culture.[5]

After hearing such a fervent outcry against labelling certain American poets as "Negro," it is difficult to summon courage to disagree on the matter. But through examination of the poems themselves, we may come to differ with or at least to offer amendments to the opinions expressed by the above-quoted critics. Certainly, as we have studied each individual poet, we have found that a large section of his poetic output, and often much of his best work, relates directly to racial themes. This is a definite distinction, although a natural one, between colored and white poets. We have seen also that the Negro Renaissance lagged behind the general swing to realism in American literature by a full decade. In fact, modern themes and techniques have never been so widely used in Negro poetry as they have in poetry by white writers. There is no Robert Frost, no Emily Dickinson, no T. S. Eliot among Negro poets. Also, the Negro writer has too often allowed the Negro problem to become so dominant in his writing that his being called a Negro poet is inevitable. Although this realm of experience is now vital and urgent to him, it stands as a

barrier, many times, to true greatness as a poet. The Negro writer must consecrate himself to the ages rather than to an hour of controversy; to humanity, rather than to a race. He himself must become more completely American in outlook before American literature can do away entirely with its Negro classification.

What lies ahead for Negro poetry? No one, not even the most competent critic, can answer such a question. The Negro writer may find ample racial material in the continuing Negro problem in America and in the native uprisings in Africa to occupy him for some time. On the other hand, he may become less specifically racial in outlook and merge his work more indissolubly with general American literature, as Alain Locke and others have predicted. One thing is certain; Negro writers must increase their output of poetry before it can have any sort of future. It has, in the past few years, dropped off in both quality and quantity. Most of the writers of the Renaissance period are no longer living; Langston Hughes, the acknowledged leader of American Negro poets, has turned primarily to prose, drama, and musical work. The little poetry that is being written today is the work of unknowns and is largely thin and inconclusive. We have seen in Johnson's work, in McKay's and in Hughes', just what heights poetry by Negroes can attain. It would be most unfortunate should this decade produce no successor to carry on the upward process of evolution.

In relation to the entire situation, James Weldon Johnson has made the following statement:

> A people may become great through many means, but there is only one measure by which its greatness is recognized and acknowledged. The final measure of the greatness of all

> peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced...No people that has produced great literature and art has ever been looked upon by the world as distinctly inferior.[6]

For this reason, if for no other, Negro poets have, in the past, needed to preserve at least the outward form of their separate classification. They have now spent more than a half-century proving that their race is not inferior. In the future, let us hope, American Negro poets will be able to cast this motive aside completely and concentrate solely on proving their individual poetic genius. This will be the ultimate step needed to produce the truly great literature for which Negro creative artists of all generations have longed.

FOOTNOTES

[1]James Weldon Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (New York, 1931), p. 7.

[2]Countee Cullen, *Caroling Dusk - An Anthology of Verse by Negro Poets* (New York, 1927), pp. xi-xii.

[3]Saunders Redding, "Negro Literature," *New Leader*, (May 16, 1960), pp. 8-10.

[4]Margaret Just Butcher, *The Negro in American Culture* (New York, 1956) p. 114.

[5]Alain Leroy Locke, *Four Negro Poets* (New York, 1927) p. 6.

[6]Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, p. 9.

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2. Braithwaite, William Stanley. "Alain Locke's Relationship to the Negro in American Literature," Phylon, Volume 18, 1957, pp. 166-173.

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4. Davis, Arthur P. "The Tragic Mulatto Theme in Six Works of Langston Hughes," Phylon, Volume 16, 1955, pp. 195-204.

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SUGGESTED CRITERIA FOR EXAMINATION OF HONORS CANDIDATES

I. Mastery of Subject

A. To what extent did the student master the implications of the topic assigned?

B. From the point of view of the subject, did the student do as thorough a piece of work as was possible within the curricular limitations of the Honors Course?

C. From the point of view of the student, did the student develop sufficient understanding and derive sufficient enlightenment from the work done?

II. Mastery of Research Techniques: To what extent did the student master the techniques of research necessary to develop the topic?

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