These Bad New Negroes: A Critique on Critics

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Tired of living penniless on bread and figs in Genoa, I found myself a job on a ship bound for New York in the fall, 1924. [25](https://search-alexanderstreet-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C4389614#fn_25) When, after many days of scrubbing decks on my part, the boat reached Manhattan there was a letter waiting for me from my mother saying, "We're living in Washington now. Come home." And I went.

I'd never been in Washington before but I found it a city as beautiful as Paris and full of nice colored people, many of them nice looking and living in nice houses. For my mother and me, the city was a sort of ancestral shrine of which I had heard much. The great John M. Langston, senator, educator, and grand-uncle of mine had once lived there. [26](https://search-alexanderstreet-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C4389614#fn_26) Indeed, I was to stop with descendants of his and, of course, I would meet the best people. And I did.

But since this is to be an article on literature and art, I must get on into the subject. For two years, working at sea and travelling, I had been away from books. Many of my own I had thrown into the ocean because I found life more attractive than the printed word. [27](https://search-alexanderstreet-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C4389614#fn_27) But now I wanted to read again and talk about literature so I set out to borrow, in good Negro fashion, a copy of Jean Toomer's *Cane*. "What!" said the wellbred Washington folk. " *Cane?*" they repeated, not many having heard of it. Then I was soon given to understand by the female heads of several

nice families that *Cane* was a vulgar book and that no one read it. "Why do you young folks write that way?" they asked. I offered no protest for I had not heard the question before and I am not much at answering questions quickly. But, amazed, I thought how a prophet is without honor in his own country, since Jean Toomer was born and had lived in Washington. *Cane* had received critical recognition all over America, and even in Europe, as a beautiful book, yet in the society of the author's own home-town it was almost unknown. And those who knew it thought it something low and indecent. Whenever *Cane* was mentioned the best Washingtonians posed this question: "Why doesn't Jean Toomer write about nice people?" And I began to think they wanted to add, "Like ourselves."

When Rudolph Fisher's *City of Refuge* appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* (Washington is Fisher's home-town, too) the best persons again asked the same thing: "Why can't you young folks write about nice people? Rudolph Fisher knows decent folks." And then I knew the "nicer people" meant themselves. [28](https://search-alexanderstreet-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C4389614#fn_28)

Then Alain Locke's *New Negro* appeared on the scene with stories by Toomer, Fisher, Eric Walrond, Zora Hurston, Matheus, and none of them were nice stories in the Washington sense of the word. "Too bad," they said. But the storm broke on the Reiss drawings. They were terrible! And anyone defending them had to answer questions like these: "Why does he make his subjects so colored?" (As though they weren't colored.) And of the two school teachers pictured in the book: "Couldn't he find any better looking school teachers to paint than these two women?" (As though all teachers should resemble the high-yellow ladies dominating the Washington school system.) And always: "Does he call this art?" I said it was art and that the dark-skinned school teachers were beautiful. But one day a nice old grandmother, with whom I disliked to disagree, summed up everybody's aversion to Fisher, Toomer, Walrond, and the Reiss drawings in one indefinite but pregnant remark, "Lord help these bad New Negroes!" [29](https://search-alexanderstreet-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C4389614#fn_29)

Now that there has appeared in the colored press a definite but rather uncritical aversion to much of the work of the younger Negro writers and particularly myself; and because the Negro press reflects to a certain extent the minds of its readers, it is time to attempt to uncover the reasons for this dislike toward the "New Negro." I present these as possible solutions:

* 1. The best Negroes, including the newspaper critics, still think white people are better than colored people. It follows, in their minds, that

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since the drawings of Negroes do not look like the drawings of white people they are bad art.

 2. The best Negroes believe that what white people think about Negroes is more important than what Negroes think about themselves. Then it follows that because a story by Zora Hurston does not tend to make white people think all Negroes good, then said story by Zora Hurston is a bad story.

 3. Many of the so-called best Negroes are in a sort of *nouveau riche* class, so from the snobbishness of their positions they hold the false belief that if the stories of Fisher were only about better-class people they would be better stories.

 4. Again, many of the best Negroes, including the newspaper critics, are not really cultured Negroes after all and, therefore, have little appreciation of any art and no background from which to view either their own or the white man's books or pictures.

Perhaps none of these reasons are true reasons but I offer them for consideration. Now I shall proceed to the defense.

Art is a reflection of life or an individual's comment on life. No one has labeled the work of the better known younger Negro writers as untrue to life. It may be largely about humble people, but three-fourths of the Negroes are humble people. Yet I understand these "best" colored folks when they say that little has been written about them. I am sorry and I wish some one would put them into a nice story or a nice novel. But I fear for them if ever a really powerful work is done about their lives. Such a story would show not only their excellencies but their pseudo-culture as well, their slavish devotion to Nordic standards, their snobbishness, their detachment from the Negro masses, and their vast sense of importance to themselves. A book like that from a Negro writer, even though true and beautiful, would be more thoroughly disliked than the stories of low-class Negroes now being written. And it would be more wrathfully damned than *Nigger Heaven*, at present vibrating throughout the land in its eleventh edition.

It seems to me too bad that the discussions of Mr. Van Vechten's novel in the colored press finally became hysterical and absurd. No book could possibly be as bad as *Nigger Heaven* has been painted. And no book has ever been better advertised by those who wished to damn it. Because it was declared obscene everybody wanted to read it and I'll venture to say that more Negroes bought it than ever purchased a book by a Negro author. Which is all very fine because *Nigger Heaven* is not a bad book. It will do nice people good to read it and maybe it will broaden

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their minds a bit. Certainly the book is true to the life it pictures. There are cabarets in Harlem and both white and colored people who are nationally known and respected can be found almost any night at Smalls'. [30](https://search-alexanderstreet-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C4389614#fn_30) I've seen ministers there, -nobody considers cabaret-going indecent any longer. And college boys, as you know, do have affairs with loose women. Some are even given allowances and put through medical school by such generous females. But nowhere in the novel does the author represent his college boy as a typical Negro college boy. And nowhere does he say he is writing about the whole Negro race. I admit I am still at a loss to understand the yelps of the colored critics and the reason for their ill-mannered onslaught against Mr. Van Vechten. The sincere, friendly, and helpful interest in things Negro of this sophisticated author, as shown in his published reviews and magazine articles, should at least have commanded serious, rather than vulgar, reviews of his book.

That many of the Negro write-ups of my own new collection of poems, *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, were unfavorable was not surprising to me. [31](https://search-alexanderstreet-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C4389614#fn_31) And to be charged with painting the whole Negro race in my poems did not amaze me either. Colored critics are given to accusing all works of art touching on the Negro of portraying and representing *all* Negro life. *Porgy*, about a beggar in Charleston, is said by them to picture all Negroes as beggars, yet nowhere does DuBose Heyward imply such a thing. [32](https://search-alexanderstreet-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C4389614#fn_32) Newspaper critics, of course, came to the same amazing conclusion about *Nigger Heaven* picturing all Negroes as cabaret goers. And now *Fine Clothes to the Jew* "low-rates" everybody of color, in their opinion.

In analyzing their reviews of my book their main objections against my work seem to be based on the reasons I am listing below with my own comments following:

* 1. White people will gain a bad impression of Negroes from my poems. This then implies that a Negro artist should create largely for the benefit of and for the approval of white people. In answering this I ask these questions: Does George Bernard Shaw write his plays to show Englishmen how good the Irish are? Do any of the great Russian writers write novels for the purpose of showing the perfections of the Russians? Does any true artist anywhere work for the sake of what a limited group of people will think rather than for the sake of what he himself loves and wishes to interpret? It seems to me that there are plenty of propagandists for the Negro, but too few artists, too few poets, too few interpreters and recorders of racial life, whether of the masses or of the best people.
* 2. My poems are indelicate. But so is life.

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3. I write about "harlots and gin-bibers." But they are human. Solomon, Homer, Shakespeare, and Walt Whitman were not afraid or ashamed to include them.

 4. "Red Silk Stockings." An ironical poem deploring the fact that in certain southern rural communities there is little work for a beautiful colored girl to do other than the selling of her body, -a fact for one to weep over rather than disdain to recognize. [33](https://search-alexanderstreet-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C4389614#fn_33)

 5. I do not write in the conventional forms of Keats, Poe, Dunbar, or McKay. But I do not write chiefly because I'm interested in forms, -in making a sonnet or a rondeau. I write because I want to say what I have to say. And I choose the form which seems to me best to express my thoughts. I fail to see why I should be expected to copy someone else's modes of expression when it amuses me to attempt to create forms of my own. Certainly the Shakespearean sonnet would be no mould in which to express the life of Beale Street or Lenox Avenue. Nor could the emotions of State Street be captured in rondeau. [34](https://search-alexanderstreet-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C4389614#fn_34) I am not interested in doing tricks with rhymes. I am interested in reproducing the human soul, if I can.

 6. I am prostituting my talent. But even the income from a very successful book of poems is not worth the prostitution of one's talent. I make much more money as a bell-hop than as a poet.

 7. I deal with low life. But I ask this: Is life among the better classes any cleaner or any more worthy of a poet's consideration?

 8. Blues are not poetry. Those who have made a more thorough study of Negro folk verse than I, and who are authorities in this field, say that many Blues are excellent poetry. I refer to James Weldon Johnson, Dorothy Scarborough, Carl Van Vechten and H. O. Osgood in their published writings. [35](https://search-alexanderstreet-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C4389614#fn_35)

 9. I am "supposed to be representative of Negro progress in the literary arts." To which I can only answer that I do not pretend, or ask anyone to suppose, that I officially represent anybody or anything other than myself. My poems are my own personal comments on life and represent me alone. I claim nothing more for them.

If the colored newspaper critics (excepting Dewey Jones and Alice Dunbar Nelson) choose to read only the words I write and not their meaning, if they choose to see only what they call the ugliness of my verse and not the protest against ugliness which my poems contain, what can I do? Such obtuse critics existed in the days of Wordsworth, Shelley, Burns, and Dunbar, -great poets with whose work I dare not compare my own. Burns was maligned because he did not write of Scottish nobles.

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And as Miss Nannie Burroughs says, "to come down to the nasty now," Jean Toomer is without honor in Washington. [36](https://search-alexanderstreet-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C4389614#fn_36) But certainly my life has been enlivened by the gentle critics who called me a "gutter-rat" and "sewer-dweller" right out in print! Variety, even in the weekly press, is the spice of criticism.

Since I am said to be the "baddest" of the bad New Negroes, I may as well express my own humble opinion on my young contemporaries, although I may vary with the race newspapers and the best Negroes. To me the stories of Rudolph Fisher are beautiful although he deals with common folks. To me it seems absurd to say that they are not elevating to the race. The stories of Sherwood Anderson deal largely with people of the same classes but white America calls him one of the greatest of the moderns. If Rudolph Fisher can write beautifully about a poor Negro migrant from the South, more power to him. A well-written story, no matter what its subject, is a contribution to the art of the Negro and I am amazed at the educated prudes who say it isn't. Jean Toomer is an artist to be proud of. Wallace Thurman, Countee Cullen with his marvellous command of technique and his poems of passion and free love, Zora Hurston with her fine handling of Negro dialect, Edward Silvera and the newer poets, all are contributing something worthwhile to the literature of the race. [37](https://search-alexanderstreet-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C4389614#fn_37) To me it seems that we have much to be proud of in the work of these younger colored writers whom the old lady in Washington so disapprovingly called the "bad New Negroes."

Notes

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25 Hughes wrote this essay at the request of the *Pittsburgh Courier* while he was a student at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. The manuscript is inscribed to Carl Van Vechten (1880-1964), writer, photographer, patron of African American art, and a personal friend of Hughes's.

26 John Mercer Langston (1829-1897) was the son of a black woman and a white Virginia plantation owner. Active in the antislavery movement, he went on to become a Howard University law professor, the U. S. minister to Haiti, and a legislator in the House of Representatives.

27 Hughes describes this incident in *The Big Sea*.

28 In Fisher's story "The City of Refuge," published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1925, a black protagonist fleeing the South after killing a white man seeks refuge in Harlem.

29 Alain Locke (1886-1954), an African American professor of philosophy at Howard University, was commissioned in 1924 to design and edit a special Harlem issue of the popular *Survey Graphic* magazine. From this issue, published in March 1925, Locke created *The New Negro*, an anthology featuring artwork, essays, fiction, and poetry by some of the most exciting artists and intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance. Winold Reiss's sketches of "Harlem Types" in this issue were introduced as "a graphic interpretation of Negro life, freshly conceived after its own patterns. Concretely in his portrait sketches, abstractly in his symbolic designs, he has aimed to portray the soul and spirit of a people." Eric Walrond (1898-1966) was born in British Guiana and became a noted short fiction writer, journalist, and editor during the Harlem Renaissance; Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) was a master of the short story, but the work that fully reflected her adeptness at blending African American folk vernacular with poetic lyricism was her 1937 masterpiece, *Their Eyes Were Watching God;* John F. Matheus (1887-1983), African American educator, short story writer, and playwright.

30 Smalls' Paradise, a popular Harlem nightclub where an integrated clientele was served by waiters on roller skates. See David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (1981; New York: Penguin, 1997), 106.

31 Hughes's second book of poems, *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), was referred to by J. A. Rogers as "about as fine a collection of piffling trash as is to be found under the covers of any book." See "Langston Hughes' Book of Poems ‘Trash’: Noted Race Critic Attacks Pandering to White Man's Twisted Notion of What Race Authors Would Write," *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 12, 1927, sec. 2, p. 4.

32 *Porgy*, the basis for George Gershwin's opera *Porgy and Bess*, is the best known work of DuBose Heyward (1885-1940), a white writer who attempted a realistic portrait of an African American community in South Carolina.

33 "Red Silk Stockings" was included in *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927).

34 Memphis's Beale Street, Harlem's Lenox Avenue, and Chicago's State Street are streets rich in African American culture.

35 James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938), African American songwriter, poet, novelist, journalist, and autobiographer; Dorothy Scarborough (1878-1935), American novelist, short story writer, folk song anthologist; H. O. Osgood (1879-1927), American jazz writer.

36 Alice Dunbar Nelson (1875-1935), African American poet, fiction writer, and journalist; Nannie Burroughs (1883-1961), American educator and journalist.

37 Wallace Thurman (1902-1934), African American novelist, editor, poet, playwright, and literary critic; Edward Silvera, African American poet.