

Says Race Leaders, Including Preachers, Flock To Harlem Cabarets

Langston Hughes Declares He Makes More Money As A Bell-Hop Than As A Poet-Writer

Young Author Calls Van Vechten Friend of Negro; Women Put Men Through Medical School, Is Claim

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 even 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

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 Small's. 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 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 collection of poems: *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, were unfavorable was not surprising to me. 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. 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 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 ap-

proval 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 records of racial life, whether choosing their material from the masses or from the best people.

2. My poems are indelicate. But so is life.

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.

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 Shakesperian 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 a rondeau. 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.

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. And as Miss Nannie Burroughs says: "to come down to the nasty now," Jean Toomer is without honor in Washington. 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 of 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 marvelous 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. To me it seems that we have much to be proud of in the work of these younger colored writers whom the lady in Washington so disapprovingly called the "bad New Negroes."