

## THE NEGRO IN LITERATURE AND ART

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The Negro is primarily an artist. The usual way of putting this is to speak disdainfully of his sensuous nature. This means that the only race which has held at bay the life destroying forces of the tropics, has gained therefrom in some slight compensation a sense of beauty, particularly for sound and color, which characterizes the race. The Negro blood which flowed in the veins of many of the mightiest of the Pharaohs accounts for much of Egyptian art, and indeed, Egyptian civilization owes much in its origins to the development of the large strain of Negro blood which manifested itself in every grade of Egyptian society.

Semitic civilization also had its Negroid influences, and these continually turn toward art as in the case of Nosseyeb, one of the five great poets of Damascus under the Ommiades. It was therefore not to be wondered at that in modern days one of the greatest of modern literatures, the Russian, should have been founded by Pushkin, the grandson of a full blooded Negro, and that among the painters of Spain was the mulatto slave, Gomez. Back of all this development by way of contact, comes the artistic sense of the indigeneous Negro as shown in the stone figures of Sherbro, the bronzes of Benin, the marvelous handwork in iron and other metals which has characterized the Negro race so long that archeologists today, with less and less hesitation, are ascribing the discovery of the welding of iron to the Negro race.

To America, the Negro could bring only his music, but that was quite enough. The only real American music is that of the Negro American, except the meagre contribution of the Indian. Negro music divides itself into many parts: the older African wails and chants, the distinctively Afro-American folk song set to religious words and Calvinistic symbolism, and the newer music which the slaves adapted from surrounding themes. To this may be added the American music built on Negro themes such as "Suwanee River,"

"John Brown's Body," "Old Black Joe," etc. In our day Negro artists like Johnson and Will Marian Cook have taken up this music and begun a newer and most important development, using the syn-copated measure popularly known as "rag time," but destined in the minds of musical students to a great career in the future.

The expression in words of the tragic experiences of the Negro race is to be found in various places. First, of course, there are those, like Harriet Beecher Stowe, who wrote from without the race. Then there are black men like Es-Sadi who wrote the Epic of the Sudan, in Arabic, that great history of the fall of the greatest of Negro empires, the Songhay. In America the literary expression of Negroes has had a regular development. As early as the eighteenth century, and even before the Revolutionary War the first voices of Negro authors were heard in the United States.

Phyllis Wheatley, the black poetess, was easily the pioneer, her first poems appearing in 1773, and other editions in 1774 and 1793. Her earliest poem was in memory of George Whitefield. She was followed by the Negro, Olaudah Equiano—known by his English name of Gustavus Vassa—whose autobiography of 350 pages, published in 1787, was the beginning of that long series of personal appeals of which Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* is the latest. Benjamin Banneker's almanacs represented the first scientific work of American Negroes, and began to be issued in 1792.

Coming now to the first decades of the nineteenth century we find some essays on freedom by the African Society of Boston, and an apology for the new Negro church formed in Philadelphia. Paul Cuffe, disgusted with America, wrote an early account of Sierra Leone, while the celebrated Lemuel Haynes, ignoring the race question, dipped deeply into the New England theological controversy about 1815. In 1829 came the first full-voiced, almost hysterical, protest against slavery and the color line in David Walker's *Appeal* which aroused Southern legislatures to action. This was followed by the earliest Negro conventions which issued interesting minutes, and a strong appeal against disfranchisement in Pennsylvania.

In 1840 some strong writers began to appear. Henry Highland Garnet and J. W. C. Pennington preached powerful sermons and gave some attention to Negro history in their pamphlets; R. B. Lewis made a more elaborate attempt at Negro history. Whitfield's poems appeared in 1846, and William Wells Brown began a career of writ-

ing which lasted from 1847 until after the war. In 1845 Douglass' autobiography made its first appearance, destined to run through endless editions up until the last in 1893. Moreover it was in 1841 that the first Negro magazine appeared in America, edited by George Hogarth and published by the A. M. E. Church.

In the fifties William Wells Brown published his *Three Years in Europe*; James Whitfield published further poems, and a new poet arose in the person of Frances E. W. Harper, a woman of no little ability who died lately; Martin R. Delaney and William Nell wrote further of Negro history, Nell especially making valuable contributions to the history of the Negro soldiers. Three interesting biographies were added to this decade to the growing number: Josiah Henson, Samuel G. Ward and Samuel Northrop; while Catto, leaving general history, came down to the better known history of the Negro church.

In the sixties slave narratives multiplied, like that of Linda Brent, while two studies of Africa based on actual visits were made by Robert Campbell and Dr. Alexander Crummell; William Douglass and Bishop Daniel Payne continued the history of the Negro church, while William Wells Brown carried forward his work in general Negro history. In this decade, too, Bishop Tanner began his work in Negro theology.

Most of the Negro talent in the seventies was taken up in politics; the older men like Bishop Wayman wrote of their experiences; William Wells Brown wrote the *Rising Sun*, and Sojourner Truth added her story to the slave narratives. A new poet arose in the person of A. A. Whitman, while James M. Trotter was the first to take literary note of the musical ability of his race. Indeed this section might have been begun by some reference to the music and folklore of the Negro race; the music contained much primitive poetry and the folklore was one of the great contributions to American civilization.

In the eighties there are signs of unrest and different conflicting streams of thought. On the one hand the rapid growth of the Negro church is shown by the writers on church subjects like Moore and Wayman. The historical spirit was especially strong. Still wrote of the *Underground Railroad*; Simmons issued his interesting biographical dictionary, and the greatest historian of the race appeared when George W. Williams issued his two-volume history of the

*Negro Race in America.* The political turmoil was reflected in Langston's *Freedom and Citizenship*, Fortune's *Black and White*, and Straker's *New South*, and found its bitterest arraignment in Turner's pamphlets; but with all this went other new thought; a black man published his *First Greek Lessons*, Bishop Payne issued his *Treatise on Domestic Education*, and Stewart studied Liberia.

In the nineties came histories, essays, novels and poems, together with biographies and social studies. The history was represented by Payne's *History of the A. M. E. Church*, Hood's *History of the A. M. E. Zion Church*, Anderson's sketch of *Negro Presbyterianism* and Hagood's *Colored Man in the M. E. Church*; general history of the older type by R. L. Perry's *Cushite* and the newer type in Johnson's history, while one of the secret societies found their historian in Brooks; Croghan's essays appeared and Archibald Grimke's biographies. The race question was discussed in Frank Grimke's published sermons, while social studies were made by Penn, Wright, Mossell, Crummell, Majors and others. Most notable, however, was the rise of the Negro novelist and poet with national recognition; Frances Harper was still writing and Griggs began his racial novels, but both of these spoke primarily to the Negro race; on the other hand, Chestnut's six novels and Dunbar's inimitable works spoke to the whole nation.

Since 1900 the stream of Negro writing has continued. Dunbar has found a worthy successor in the less-known but more carefully cultured Braithwaite; Booker T. Washington has given us his biography and *Story of the Negro*; Kelly Miller's trenchant essays have appeared in book form; Sinclair's *Aftermath of Slavery* has attracted attention, as have the studies made by Atlanta University. The forward movement in Negro music is represented by J. W. and F. J. Work in one direction and Rosamond Johnson, Harry Burleigh and Will Marion Cook in another.

On the whole, the literary output of the American Negro has been both large and creditable, although, of course, comparatively little known; few great names have appeared and only here and there work that could be called first class, but this is not a peculiarity of Negro literature.

The time has not yet come for the great development of American Negro literature. The economic stress is too great and the racial persecution too bitter to allow the leisure and the poise for which

literature calls. On the other hand, never in the world has a richer mass of material been accumulated by a people than that which the Negroes possess today and are becoming conscious of. Slowly but surely they are developing artists of technic who will be able to use this material. The nation does not notice this for everything touching the Negro is banned by magazines and publishers unless it takes the form of caricature or bitter attack, or is so thoroughly innocuous as to have no literary flavor.

Outside of literature the American Negro has distinguished himself in other lines of art. One need only mention Henry O. Tanner whose pictures hang in the great galleries of the world, including the Luxembourg. There are a score of other less known colored painters of ability including Bannister, Harper, Scott and Brown. To these may be added the actors headed by Ira Aldridge, who played in Covent Garden, was decorated by the King of Prussia and the Emperor of Russia, and made a member of learned societies.

There have been many colored composers of music. Popular songs like Grandfather's Clock, Listen to the Mocking Bird, Carry Me Back to Old Virginia, etc., were composed by colored men. There were a half dozen composers of ability among New Orleans freedmen and Harry Burleigh, Cook and Johnson are well known today. There have been sculptors like Edmonia Lewis, and singers like Flora Batson, whose color alone kept her from the grand opera stage.

To appraise rightly this body of art one must remember that it represents the work of those artists only whom accident set free; if the artist had a white face his Negro blood did not militate against him in the fight for recognition; if his Negro blood was visible white relatives may have helped him; in a few cases ability was united to indomitable will. But the shrinking, modest, black artist without special encouragement had little or no chance in a world determined to make him a menial. So this sum of accomplishment is but an imperfect indication of what the Negro race is capable of in America and in the world.