

Racial Consciousness Takes New Turn, Says Journalist

By EUGENE GORDON

[Editor's Note—This article, entitled "The Negro Grows Up," appeared in the July issue of the Plain Talk magazine. The writer, Eugene Gordon, a native of Florida, a graduate of Howard university, at present is a member of the editorial staff of the Boston Post, a white publication. Mr. Gordon states in his article that we have become less critical of ourselves, we trust our preachers, take less to white paternalism, study more of the history of our race, and are less distrustful of the whites. The article will be carried in two succeeding issues of the Defender, the first part of which is printed below.]

Whereas the American Negro used to whimper when hurt, he now sets his jaws. In those circumstances in which he once was pathetically childish he is now sophisticated and cynical. He used to smart under the mildest criticism, but now he critically dissects himself. In short, the American Negro has come of age.

There are involved at least six factors that tend to prove the truth of my assertion. The first is that the American Negro has become critical of himself and thereby tolerant of outside criticism. Second, he is less credulous of and also somewhat cynical toward what his preachers tell him about heaven and hell. Third, he has fewer inhibitions than formerly. Fourth, he is beginning to chafe under the patronage of paternalistic whites and to show evidence of desiring to propel his own craft. Fifth, he has begun a serious but enthusiastic study of Negro history. And, sixth, he is less distrustful of and bears less prejudice toward whites than was once the case.

WRITINGS OF JEAN TOOMER START NEW ERA

The Negro's unblased and unflattering criticism of himself had its genesis in Jean Toomer. When this brilliant young Negro wrote "Cane" he shocked a great many staid and respectable Colored folk. So impersonally objective yet so intimately understanding was it that scores of readers at first suspected its author of being a southern cracker. Never before had any American Negro dared to tell so much about his folk.

His readers were uncomfortably sensitive. Here was a Negro writer exposing his race's most shameful weaknesses to the supercilious stare of the whites. He talked of black prostitutes and white men, and of white prostitutes and black men. While everybody admitted that what he said was true, they insisted that since nobody had discussed it before there seemed no reason for discussing it now. The subject was absolutely taboo.

The great mass of Colored folk could not appreciate Toomer. The great mass still cannot appreciate him. As a matter of fact, the great mass of Colored folk cannot now bear to be criticized, despite the continuous stream of criticism that is released upon them by their more intelligent leaders. Perhaps I should add here that it is not to the masses I refer in the discussion of this subject. It is, indeed, to the increasing number of educated Colored folk, especially the intellectuals. The masses had been taught for years that pride of race consisted primarily in maintaining silence regarding their human weaknesses. For some unexplainable reason they looked upon human frailty as Negro frailty, and the black man who exposed these frailties was considered a traitor. Thus, they came to suffer with chronic nice-nastiness and were perpetually miserable.

Rudolph Fisher followed Toomer. Among other things he exposed the Harlem "rent party." I have seen many a nice Boston Colored girl blush with humiliation at the thought that whites would learn the dreadful truth that some Colored folk gave "rent parties." One in particular, I recall, lost her appetite when, reading "The Promised Land" while she ate, she came across the detailed description of such a party. At the same time other young Negro writers were bandying such racial phrases as "high yaller," "high brown," "chocolate brown" and "stovepipe black."

FRANK NOVELS SHOCKED RESPECTABLE PEOPLE

Once the white man learned of these intimate pet designations, we were told, he would possess a most vital weapon of ridicule. But that was not all. These same writers told shamelessly how black boys and girls, under the natural urge of protective coloration in order to prevent their extinction, bleached their skin and straightened their hair. "What will the white people think?" wailed the staid and respectable. "Why give them all our most precious secrets? Aren't we supposed to keep any of our weaknesses to ourselves?"

They did not remember of course while protesting that whites in increasing numbers already knew more about these secrets than many Colored folk knew. Many of the Negroes did not know even that it was the whites who manufactured, and advertised for sale, devices and decoctions for untangling kinky hair, bleaching dark skin, thinning thick lips and elevating flat noses, and that, therefore, black folk were not actually giving white folk "race" secrets. So the staid and respectable Colored folk were self-conscious and terribly mortified.

Later writers, among them Wallace Thurman and Langston Hughes, turned other tricks out of the black bag. Thurman discussed the Harlemite's home life, his social life and his church. Hughes in an article in the Nation ridiculed the "nice" people of Washington because they professed disgust of Toomer. In other places Hughes told of the American Negro's preferences in food, music and entertainment, and dilated in his "blues" upon the dark brother's merits as a lover. Harlem was taken up, turned inside out and shaken vigorously. The denizens thereof were studied like strange microscopic cultures. Nothing was omitted in the reports resulting from this study. Thus, a mysterious unknown black group came to be best known

of all the folk groups among us. Harlem, after all, was an excellent specimen.

SELF-CRITICISM STARTS LITERARY MOVEMENT

Presently there came Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life, and The Crisis: Record of the Darker Races, offering prizes for poems, short stories, plays, essays and sketches about Colored folk. There followed, naturally, more delving, scalpel wielding and probing; so that finally all who read at all knew the American Negro precisely for what he was. He no longer harbored dark secrets, from either the Caucasian or himself. At last the literate whites knew almost as much about the blacks as the literate and illiterate blacks knew about the whites—which was a great deal. For it is significant that Negro readers of the daily press have been for years infinitely better informed of the Caucasians' secrets than the Caucasians have been about the Negroes'. All the whites needed to do, even before Colored folk began to expose themselves, was to peruse the Negro press.

This literary movement, I say, was the beginning of the Colored man's criticism of himself. When the first shock of the expose diminished, Negro newspapers became bolder in the same direction. They criticized black folk for errors that previously had been condoned or overlooked. The Negro press had existed until now solely to propagandize the whites in the blacks' favor. Its news generally reflected to the discredit of the whites and to the credit of the Colored folk. The black man was represented as a godly, long suffering martyr. He had no fault, no blemish, no weakness—at least none that the white man was supposed to know about. Only the whites were vile.

This biased attitude was defended as necessary to combat the white man's cruelty and prejudice. It was said to foster race pride in Colored folk. This it did, too, to an extent, but it also fostered silly prejudices.

Such was the old Negro press.

NEWSPAPERS AND YOUTHS QUESTION CHURCHES

The Colored writers already referred to, with some not yet mentioned, caused the change. It was not long, following the appearance of these writers, until editorials in the Negro press catechized black folk on their sins. Negro "leaders" were stood up in the glare of the press spotlight and scrutinized until they squirmed. Colored feature, editorial and special writers, men like J. A. Rogers, George S. Schuyler, A. Philip Randolph, Chandler Owen and Theophilus Lewis of the Messenger; William Kelley and Edward M. Grey of the Amsterdam News, and W. P. Dabney, editor of the Cincinnati Union, were characteristic of the newer order. Cold, passionless, objective in their point of view, impartial in their criticism of American life, these excellent writers discussed black men and white men alike. Very soon all who read at all were accustomed to the method. They no longer sweated in embarrassment when white writers mentioned unpleasant facts, for black writers had already mentioned them. And now we approach a situation in which facts cease altogether to be unpleasant.

But the Negro's self-criticism has not ended with his person. It has included Christianity, the Negro church and the Negro preacher. It is only recently that the American Negro church and its minister have been held less than sacrosanct. Hitherto both have been hedged about by a picket fence of taboos. The Colored minister, like a few Colored editors, has exercised unlimited license to attack whom he would, but he himself has been inviolate. Well, that day has passed. There is now seldom a gathering of intelligent Colored folk in which soon or later there is not wholesome and exhaustive discussion of religion, church and ministry. The newspapers themselves are often scornful in their attitude toward brothers of the cloth and are generous with space in publishing their falls from grace. They criticize the parson's illiteracy, his ignorance of human impulses, his inefficiency as a leader, his ineptitude as a business man and his monkeyshines in the pulpit. On the other hand, those preachers who deserve credit are not overlooked.

But if the newspapers are generous with criticism, the youth of the race are prodigal. Especially is this true of college youth, who go beyond questioning the church and its ministry. They let it be known that they accept nothing without first subjecting it to close and careful scrutiny. It must meet their standard, which is to say the standard of modern civilization.

(Continued Next Week)