

WHITE, WALTER FRANCIS, 1893-1955 . CHAPTER: THE NEGRO IN THE FIELD OF FICTION . Girard, KS :

Haldeman-Julius Publications , 1928 .

Chapter: The Negro In The Field of FictionThe Negro in the Field of Fiction

In the field of the short story and the novel the number of writers which the Negro has produced is not so great as the number of poets, but there have already appeared a few who have done distinctive, if not notable, work. William Stanley Braithwaite, himself a distinguished poet, though better known through his annual editorship of the best verse of the year and for his critical work in the Boston *Transcript*, thus writes *The New Negro* of the Negro in American fiction. "Ante-bellum literature imposed the distortions of moralistic controversy and made the Negro a wax-figure of the market place: post-bellum literature retaliated with the condescending reactions of sentiment and caricature, and made the Negro a *genre* stereotype. Sustained, serious or deep study of Negro life and character has thus been entirely below the horizons of our national art. Only gradually through the dull purgatory of the Age of Discussion, has Negro life eventually issued forth to an Age of Expression."

Not that the Negro was not in American literature, Mr Braithwaite hastens to add, long--49--before he began to *make* literature.. In the often-noble phrases to be found in the spirituals, in the humor and shrewdness and aptness of language of folk-lore the Negro played an important role, entirely separate from use of Negro characters and life by white writers as vehicles for naivete, humor or picturization of Negroes as criminals or lackeys.

With a few notable exceptions Negro writers have not until very recent years attacked the task of novel-writing. Paul Lawrence Dunbar wrote several volumes of short stories and novels, but they were overshadowed by that which gave him his greatest fame and was his severest handicap -- his dialect poems. Charles W Chestnutt in the early years of the 20th Century produced three novels and two volumes of short stories, many of the latter first appearing in *The Atlantic Monthly*. In 1912 there came James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an ex-Colored Man*, an extraordinarily objective, true and simply written picture of Negro life. Long out of print, this novel was fortunately reprinted in Alfred A Knopf's Blue Jade Library in 1927 with an excellent introduction by Carl Van Vechten. About the same time of the first publication of that novel -- in 1911, I believe -- *The Quest of the Silver--50--Fleece* by the distinguished Negro scholar, Dr W E DuBois, made its bow. In it cotton -- "the silver fleece" -- was the combination hero and villain, the boon and nemesis of white and black alike in the South.

With the awakening to artistic productiveness in other fields there came inevitably a stirring in the field of fiction. The future historian of this movement cannot in fairness fail to note the very material impetus given by the novel of a Southern white man, T S Stribling of Tennessee whose *Birthright*, published serially in *The Century Magazine* when Carl Van Doren was literary editor, broke sharply with the Thomas Dixon-Irvin Cobb-Octavus Roy Cohen-Thomas Nelson Page type of story about Negroes. Mr Stribling was not entirely successful in his attempt at evocation of the life of Negroes of education and refinement -- but he smashed a tradition of long standing when he dared to make the central character of his novel a Negro of such standards.

Shortly after *Birthright* came a novel by a colored woman, *There Is Confusion*, by Jessie Fauset. Miss Fauset's story, to quote Mr Braithwaite again, laid out new territory in that "its distinction is to have created an entirely new milieu in the treatment of the race--51--in fiction. She has taken a class within the race of established social standing, tradition and culture, and given in the rather complex family story of the Marshalls a social document of unique and refreshing value."

Miss Fauset's novel was followed by *The Fire in the Flint*, its scene laid in Georgia, depicting the struggle of a Negro physician of ideals against that environment; in it he meets death but not before a

latent spark, covered over by a disinclination to do anything other than follow his profession, is struck into flame of revolt. This novel was followed later by *Flight*, an attempt to delineate the spiritual struggles of a colored girl against hypocrisy of her own race and whites.

Just over the horizon as this is being written hover a number of novels by various Negro writers which hold great promise. One of these is by Dr. DuBois and its scene is that teeming center of Negro cultural life, Harlem, in New York City. Another is by a young Negro scientist who has done notable work in the writing of short stories, Dr. Rudolph Fisher, and bears the title, *The Walls of Jericho*. A third is by a young woman, Nella Larsen, and its title is *Quicksand*. A fourth is by the poet, Claude McKay, and is called *Home to--52--Harlem*. In the four there is exciting promises of material achievement in that three of the four are already known for excellent literary achievement.

In the field of the short story three names spring instantly to mind for work of a very high order -- Rudolph Fisher, Jean Toomer, and Eric Walrond. The last named, born like Claude McKay in the West Indies, has, also like McKay, used to great advantage the tropics and their people. Mr. Walrond's *Tropic Death*, a collection of his stories, received high critical praise when published in 1927 and was the cause of the award to its writer of second prize in the Harmon Awards for Negro Literature, first place going to *God's Trombones*.

Of Rudolph Fisher's short stories one, unfamiliar with the Caribbean, can form a more accurate judgment of their versimilitude. There can be no question that his stories are of an exceedingly high calibre. They have been published by *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Crisis*, and other magazines, and one looks forward eagerly to their publication in book form by an astute publisher. Until that time comes those who missed these stories when published in magazines may find two of them -- *The City of Refuge* and *Vestiges* -- in *The New Negro*.

--53--Jean Toomer, too, writes of American scenes, doing so with a lyric beauty, an objectiveness, and sometimes a haunting mysticism which places him very close to the position of being the most gifted writer of the race. His volume of short stories and sketches, *Cane*, when published in 1923, received extravagant critical praise, but was allowed soon to go out of print. That has recently been remedied by the republication of the book.

John Matheus of West Virginia, Zora Neale Hurston, and a considerable number of as yet less well-known writers of short stories, combined with Fisher, Toomer and Waldron, give not only a most creditable array of talent in this field, but hold brilliant promise for the future.