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Philosophic Trend Of American Negro Poetry

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PHILOSOPHIC TREND OF AMERICAN NEGRO POETRY

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PREFACE

This investigation aims to study the trend away from the religious spirit in the poetry of the early American Negro toward a definite naturalistic attitude in the poetry of the contemporary American Negro. In the preparation of the following pages the writer has restricted himself to a consideration of American Negro poets whose works, beginning in 1761 and extending to the present time, appear in accepted American Negro anthologies or that have been published in the foremost periodicals of the country, and those who were fortunate enough to have their verses published in volume form.

The writer takes this opportunity to express his sincere thanks and appreciation to Sister M. Gonzaga, Professor of Education of Xavier University, Mr. Oscar A. Bouise, Instructor of English of Xavier University, Mr. George Longe, Principal of Albert Wicker Junior High School, and Mrs. Myrtle Watts Stevens for their timely suggestions, their unbiased criticisms, and their valuable assistance and splendid cooperation. Without them this investigation would have been much more difficult and the result less worthy of the ideals of Xavier University.

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTION

A retrospective view of the American Negro from the time he was transported to the shores of these United States in 1619 to the present time, shows that a complete revolution in his general condition has taken place. His status has greatly improved; he enjoys educational advantages undreamed of in the early days, and he has made some valuable contributions to America in the arts, sciences and inventions, and literature.

The "Spirituals," a creation of the American Negro, is a distinct contribution to the American field of music.¹ America can boast of such prominent Negroes as Henry O. Tanner and Meta Vaux Warrick in the field of painting and sculpture respectively, Marion Anderson and Roland Hayes in the field of vocal music, and Nathaniel Dett and Harry T. Burleigh in the field of music composition. Of the many contributions in the field of science, Dr. George Washington Carver² has made and is still making important discoveries with the peanut and other seemingly unimportant plants which are playing important roles in revolutionizing the field of scientific agriculture in this country.

1. Carter G. Woodson, The Negro in Our History (Washington: 1931), pp. 609, 611-612.

2. Alain Locke, The New Negro (New York, Boni: 1925), pp. 199-213. Locke says "The universality of the spirituals looms more and more as they stand the test of time."

2. Monroe N. Work, The Negro Year Book 1937-1938 (Tuskegee: 1938), pp. 10-11; also Who's Who in Colored America: 1935, pp. 87-88.

Probably the greatest change which the American Negro has undergone has been in the field of his literary endeavors. He came to this country not only in bondage, but ignorant of the language of his adopted home. Thus, before he could hope to attempt the crudest type of literature, it was necessary for him to develop a style of expression. These factors proved to be no serious handicap for he eventually created masterpieces in both prose and poetry, the latter a

poetry ... which expresses in material and otherwise fitting and congruous language, self, life, nature, God, and all their interactions realized or apprehended in a mood of emotional and imaginative exaltation.³

The product of the American Negro's pen today finds a place in the foremost periodicals of the country and thereby serves to satisfy the literary appetite of the American reading public. Outstanding in the literary field are the following names: W. E. B. Dubois, Countee Cullen, James Weldon Johnson,* William Stanley Braithwaite, Langston Hughes, Walter White, Jesse Fauset, Alain Locke, Sterling Brown, and Claude McKay. All of these writers have either had books published by some of the leading publishing companies or their works accepted for publication in some of the foremost periodicals of the nation.

3. Stephen J. Brown, S. J. The Realm of Poetry (New York: 1921), p. 71.

*Deceased, 1938

Since so many successes were achieved through the revolutionary changes of the various endeavors of the American Negro, it is not surprising that his views on life as reflected in both his prose and poetry should have undergone a similar change. It is my purpose to study this change toward a

naturalism ... not interested in the questions which turn upon a beyond and above as regards human thought and activity.⁴

and one

... which denies the existence of the Creator or limits His activity in such way that it amounts to the complete elimination of God from the universe in which the creature becomes the center of all reference and the source of all activity.⁵

We have chosen the field of poetry for our study, because it has been said that the Negro is a born poet and in poetry he has so far found his most natural medium of expression. "There are certain assumptions in current philosophy which are likewise current in the literature of the age ..."⁶ This statement is particularly true of Negro literature. But to find indications of naturalism in the literary productions of the Negro may or may not indicate that the Negro writer is ac-

4. The Catholic Encyclopedia, ed. Charles G. Haberman and others. (New York: 1907), Vol. X. pp. 713-714.

5. De Hovre-Jordan, Catholicism in Education (New York: 1934), p. 55.

6. Gerald B. Phelan, "Catholicism or Disillusion," The Commonwealth, XIII (April 1, 1931), p. 606.

quiring a naturalistic philosophy of life. This investigation concerns itself, however, only with the changed attitude in the American Negro poetry from its earliest stage to the present day.

What is this philosophy of naturalism and how does it manifest itself in poetry? Philosophy is the study of the principles that cause, control or explain facts and events. The problem of philosophy is mankind's attempt to answer the questions regarding ultimate reality--the first cause and last end of all existence. Man's formulated answer to the questions concerning ultimate reality is his philosophy. Too, it is that idea which, consequently, controls his ethical behavior. What may be the answers to those questions?

Among the theses which the philosophers have worked out in the way of a solution to the problem of ultimate reality ... is the one which answers in the affirmative the question as to the knowableness of the ultimate reality. This theme is called monism, because it asserts that ultimate reality has just one form, is just one in number. But what is this one or sole reality? At this point the monistic theme branches out into two schools of thought, naturalism and idealism.⁷

Naturalism contends that ultimate reality is matter or material; idealism contends that it is spiritual or immaterial. The former disclaims the freedom of the will, the latter asserts

7. Michael Demiashkevich, An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education (New York, 1935), pp. 47-48.

ibid., p. 51.

Charles D. Tenney, "The Romance of Emergence", in Studies in Philosophical Naturalism, ed. E.G. Townsend, pp. 13-25.

the freedom of the will. The ethical behavior of a natural-
ist is one based on the assumption that his actions are
neither good nor evil, since his lack of freedom of will
automatically negates any moral pattern. His conduct, con-
sequently, is that of an "egotistical hedonist or pleasure
seeker ... disbelieving in any moral law or an absolute moral
responsibility".⁸

Naturalism manifests itself in an individual through
his actions. It takes the form of either communism ...
historical socialism ... which has the state as its ulti-
mate reality, or "romanticism in which the individual desires
the release of his ego".⁹ Naturalism in literature is the
moral tone reflected in any writings whereby the author
depicts the material universe as the ultimate rule of life.
Naturalism in poetry is the moral tone reflected through
verses in which the poets feel that the material universe
is the end of all existence.

There are no works available to us which have been writ-
ten on this subject. However, some theses have been written
recently which deal with contemporary American Negro liter-
ature. Notable among them is Renascence of American Negro
Literature written by Augusta V. Jackson in 1936. In her disser-
tation, Miss Jackson seeks to prove that a definite re-
naissance in American Negro literature is in progress. She

8. Ibid., p. 51.

9. Charles D. Tenney, "The Romance of Emergence", in Studies
In Philosophical Naturalism, ed. H.G. Townsend, pp. 19-25.

CHAPTER II.

does not limit her scope of discussion to either the field of prose or poetry, but she treats the development of both within a restricted period of time. Miss Jackson mentions among others James Weldon Johnson, Jessie Fauset, William Stanley Braithwaite, Walter White, Claude McKay, and Langston Hughes as the prime instigators of the new literary movement.

Since there are no works extant having a direct bearing on the subject, we feel that this investigation concerning the moral attributes of American Negro poetry is being projected at an opportune time. Too, it will give added impetus to further investigations into the literary accomplishments of the American Negro of the past and the present.

1. Benjamin Brawley, Early American Negro Writers (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1935) pp. 23-25. An Evening Thought; Salvation by Christ, a poem of eighty-eight verses, was the first composition by a Negro printed within the present limits of the United States.

Jupiter Hammon was born between 1720 and 1730 and died soon after 1800. He was a Negro slave owned by the family of Henry Lloyd who lived in Long Island. He grew into manhood when the Wesleyan revival was making itself felt in England and America. He was strongly influenced by the evangelical hymns of Charles Wesley, John Newton, and William Cowper.

CHAPTER II.

THE EARLY PERIOD

American Negro literature may be said to have had its beginning with the publication of Jupiter Hammon's poem, An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ.¹ Since then there have been three so-called American Negro literary periods, namely: (1) The Early Period, 1761-1865; (2) The Pre-renaissance Period, 1866-1899; and (3) The Renaissance Period, 1900 to the present day.

The productions of the contemporary verse masters are culminations of the efforts of such literary pioneers as Jupiter Hammon, James M. Whitfield, Phyllis Wheatley, George Moses Horton, and Charles L. Reason. Although these early American Negro writers were well supplied with models as standards of guidance in their chosen field, their educational training was so elementary that their productions were comparatively crude. The tone of their poetry, however, was one of deep emotion. The poetry itself was natural since it was the emotional outburst of a suppressed being. That very

1. Benjamin Brawley, Early American Negro Writers (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1935) pp. 23-25. An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ, a poem of eighty-eight verses, was the first composition by a Negro printed within the present limits of the United States.

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naturalness tempered the tone to a point where it approached the sublime, for a soul under stress, as the slaves then were, unconsciously appeals to a supernatural being. The moral tone of the American Negro poetry produced during the Early Period adhered closely to the idealistic philosophy which the Negro imbibed in his contact with Christianity.

It is obvious that the early American Negro poetry reflects an undercurrent indicative of the influence of religion, for Jupiter Hammon, the father of American Negro literature, writes:

Dear Jesus unto Thee we cry,

We seek Thy true salvation.²

Here one sees a different Negro from the one associated with "fetishism" and ceremonials, suffused with a magical display and accompanied by frenzied shoutings and weird noise produced by the constant beating on the tom tom. One sees rather a meek and humble individual who prostrates himself before the throne of a Heavenly Father and in pious tone supplicates for Divine guidance.

This religious attitude on the part of the American Negro is further revealed by James M. Whitfield when he exclaims,

2. Jupiter Hammon, "An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ", vv. 17-20 in B. Brawley, Early American Negro Writers.

O great Jehovah! God of love
Thou monarch of the earth and sky!³

Through these verses one sees the Negro slave as accepting God's omnipotence when he refers to Him as "Monarch of the earth and sky." God and His abode, heaven, are to the slave a mystery, as they are to us all; but God's handiwork - the budding trees, the blooming flowers, the birds of the air, and heavenly snow-capped mountains--is his inspiration to lead a noble and spiritual life.

We find evidence, that the early American Negro was imbued with a sincere faith in the existence of a Supreme Being and of His power to grant life everlasting, in the thought reflected in the zealous lines of Charles L. Reason, to wit:

We pray to see Thee, face to face:
To feel our soul grow strong and wide.⁴

Besides the influence of religion, American Negro poetry of the Early Period reflects and undercurrent indicative of a desire for liberty and freedom. It was a freedom whose expression, in the final analysis, was closely affiliated with idealism, because the slave having despaired of ever attain-

3. James M. Whitfield, "Prayer of the Oppressed", vv. 1-2, Ibid.

James M. Whitfield was born in Boston of an unknown date. He later moved to Buffalo, New York, where he worked as a barber. He was an agitator in the decade before the Civil War. In 1865 he published a book titled America and Other Poems. He was interested in founding a colony for the Negroes.

4. Charles L. Reason, "Freedom", vv. 161-162, Ibid.

ing the seemingly impossible - a release from his earthly physical bondage - turns to his "God of Love" for sympathy. He appeals to our Divine Lord for a grant of freedom thus:

How long, O gracious God! how long,
Shall power lord it over right?⁵

The preceding verses from the pen of James M. Whitfield are devoid of any blasphemous intent. True, the slave desires an immediate release from his well-nigh intolerable plight, but he has absolute faith in God's power to deal with the situation which held him in bondage. This literary theme of liberty and freedom which inspired the early American Negro versifiers was not similar to the one which proved a source of inspiration to the fluent pen of their sister, Phyllis Wheatley, who has been called the most distinguished poet of the time of George Washington.⁶ Their idea of liberty was based on a personal desire, while Phyllis Wheatley was influenced by the colonists' national desire for liberty and freedom from the mother country, England.

The fact that Phyllis Wheatley's poetry was artistic and not doggeral may be attributed to the advantages which she possessed over the other Negro writers of that time. Her un-

5. J. M. Whitfield, "How Long", vv. 1-2, *Ibid.*

6. R. R. Moton, What the Negro Thinks, p. 205; also William Stanley Braithwaite, Negro in American Literature, p. 36. Braithwaite says, "Phyllis Wheatley was as good if not better than Ann Bradstreet to whom literary historians give the honor of being the first person of her sex to win fame in America as a poet."

usual sensitiveness to the beautiful enabled her to reflect in her poetry a touch of rare sweetness and harmony. The rudimentary education which she received from her owner and benefactress, Mrs. Susannah Wheatley, led her to use clear and concise language in her literary undertakings. Finally her study of Alexander Pope as a model gave her a mastery over form and precision.

Unshackled by the more rigid bonds of absolute slavery, she naturally had no complaints to make concerning her plight. Travelling in the suite of her socially prominent and wealthy owner, she came in direct contact with the honorable Brook Watson, Lord Mayor of London, with whom she conversed at length, and with the honorable George Washington, then Commander-in-Chief of the American Colonial Armies, by whom she was very cordially received.⁷ Thus it was that her keen intellect and sober judgement gained an insight into national problems. Her poetry, therefore, is national or patriotic in tone and concerns itself, to a great extent, with the ideals of liberty and freedom of the colonists.

The contrast in tone and quality of Phyllis Wheatley's poetry is more clearly evidenced when one compares the following stanza:

7. B. Brawley, Early American Negro Writers, pp. 31-36

10. Phyllis Wheatley, "Liberty and Peace", vv. 1-2, *ibid.*

11. Charles I. Reason, "Freedom", vv. 1-4 in Robert Thomas Berlin, Negro Poets and Their Poems (Washington, D. C.: 1936).

Celestial choir! enthroned in realm of light,
Columbia's scenes of glorious toils I write,
While freedom's cause her anxious breast alarms,
She flashed dreadful in refulgent arms.⁸

with

Alas! and am I born for this,
To wear this slavish chain
Deprived of all created bliss
Through hardship, toil, and pain?⁹

or

Lo! freedom comes. The prescient muse foretold.
All eyes th' accomplished prophecy behold.¹⁰

with

-----O! how oft
Thy loving children call on Thee
In wailings loud and breathing soft,
Beseeching, God, Thy face to see.¹¹

Phyllis Wheatley could not escape the widespread religious influence on American Negro literature common during the Early Period. Though the general moral tone of her poetry is re-

8. Phyllis Wheatley, "His Excellency General Washington," vv. 1-5 in B. Brawley, Early American Negro Writers.

Phyllis Wheatley was born in Africa about 1753. She was brought to Boston as a slave. Her works bear a close resemblance to that of Alexander Pope by whom she was influenced. Many editions of her poems appeared during her lifetime. Some of her most famous ones were placed in Poems of Various Subjects, a booklet published in 1773. Phyllis Wheatley died in Boston in 1784.

9. George Moses Horton, "The Slave's Complaint", vv. 1-4, Ibid.

George Moses Horton was born a slave in Chatam County, North Carolina in 1797. His master permitted him to hire out his time at Chapel Hill, seat of the University of North Carolina, where he was janitor for a number of years and from whose students he received a commission for writing verses. A booklet of his poems, The Hope, was published in 1829. He died in Philadelphia about 1880.

10. Phyllis Wheatley, "Liberty and Peace", vv. 1-2, Ibid.

11. Charles I. Reason, "Freedom", vv. 1-4 in Robert Thomas Kerlin, Negro Poets and Their Poems (Washington, D. C.: 1935).

latively free from idealistic leanings, a condition probably due to her association with people of wealth, she finally lent an ear to the tenets of the new faith. In her "To the University of Cambridge in New England", she writes:

What matchless mercy in the Son of God!
 When the whole human race by sin had fall'n
 He deign'd to die, that they might rise again,
 And share with Him, in the sublimest skies,
 Life without death, and glory without end.¹²

In the poem she explains in high-flown language but reverent tone the reason for our Savior Jesus Christ's sojourn on earth. Phyllis Wheatley thus displays a thorough understanding of the teachings of Holy Writ.

The religious vein reflected in American Negro poetry of the Early Period is, without doubt, due to the sublime teachings of Christianity, the greatest single factor influencing the literature of the Negro. Slave owners were at first somewhat hesitant about teaching their slaves the elements of Christianity, because they were afraid that the slave would misinterpret the term, freedom of the soul, and attempt to apply it to freedom of person. When, however, it became apparent to the owners that the Christian religion made of the Negro a better slave,¹³ more favorable opportunities for religious

12. Phyllis Wheatley, "To the University of Cambridge in New England", vv. 16-20 in *Op. Cit.*

13. G. R. Wilson, "The Religion of the American Negro Slave: His attitude toward Life and Death," in The Journal of Negro History, vol. VIII, p. 53.

CHAPTER III.

THE PRE-RENAISSANCE PERIOD

instructions were made possible. Missionaries were allowed to instruct the slave in a new faith which completely changed his philosophy of life. From one filled with a "blighting superstitious fear of a heartless universe," life to the Negro became one of "hope, salvation, and a companionship with a Heavenly Father." ¹⁴ This hope of salvation and faith in an eternal life after death is clearly expressed in :

... when this transient life shall end,
 Oh, may some kind eternal friend
 Bid me from servitude ascend,
 Without a foot of earth to tread,
 Forever!¹⁵

In acquainting the American Negro slave with Christianity, the owners instilled in him an idealism altogether different from the primitive religion which accompanied him from his native Africa. This idealism was the source of the moral tone of practically all the poetry created by the American Negro literary pioneers of the Early Period.

Poetry, always the form in which the Negro was most himself, or most skillfully imitative, flourished at that period as never before, reaching its highest point in Paul Lawrence Dunbar.¹⁶ The poetry denoted the mood of the period and was in tempo with the events affecting the race.

14. in loc. cit. Early Negro, ed. D. W. Culp (Atlanta, 1903).

15. G. M. Horton, "The Slave's Complaint", vv. 25-28 in B. Brawley, Early American Negro Writers. (New York, 1931), p. 232

William Stanley Braithwaite says: "Poetry comes nearer finality in embodying the exact meaning and intensity of human feeling than any other art ... In a nation it is a register of a people's culture."

CHAPTER III.

THE PRE-RENAISSANCE PERIOD

On January 1, 1863 President Abraham Lincoln issued his now famous Emancipation Proclamation, which granted full freedom to all the Negro slaves. Two years later, in 1865, when the Civil War finally ended, the freed man was confronted with a situation entirely different from his previous living conditions --- life under bondage --- inasmuch as

...he was forced to start out with scarcely a name -- poor, ignorant, degraded, demoralized as slavery left him. Without a home. Without a foot of land, without the true sense of real manhood, ragged and destitute... 1

Despite this sudden change, the Negro, endowed with a "cheerful sunny temperament," faced the future with a stout heart and boundless optimism. Thus did the Negro present himself at the dawn of the Pre-renaissance Period of American Negro literature.

"Poetry, always the form in which the Negro was most himself, or most skillfully imitative, flourished at that period as never before, reaching its highest point in Paul Lawrence Dunbar."² The poetry depicted the mood of the period and was in tempo with the events affecting the race.

1. Twentieth Century Negro, ed. D. W. Culp (Atlanta, 1902), p. 34.

2. Vernon Loggins, The Negro Author (New York, 1931), p. 331. In the introduction to Anthology of Magazine Verses for 1914, William Stanley Braithwaite says: "Poetry comes nearer finality in embodying the exact meaning and intensity of human feeling than any other art ... In a nation it is a register of a people's culture." Walt Whitman, Drums, Moses, A Story of the Hills, and others. The Harper used February 23, 1911. Albery A. Whitman, "Tobe's Dream", vv. 5-6, ibid.

It exhibited a gradually changing tone. From idealism, envisioning the dawn of a new day with a Heavenly father, the tone became one of materialism, the necessity of possessing a certain amount of worldly goods to keep body and soul together. In attitude American Negro poetry ranged from the frivolous type tempered with a light-heartedness immediately following the end of the Civil War to one of great dignity under Dunbar.

The frivolous attitude apparent in:

We just laughed, and danced, and shouted,
And prayed, and sang, and cried³

is a reflection of American Negro poetry at the early stage of that period. Too, there is reflected a light-heartedness and a self-satisfied attitude which is proclaimed in:

Time fer the heart ter feel lite
And de darky bids care good-nite.⁴

Verses in dialect form attained their peak in American Negro poetry under the musical pen of Paul Lawrence Dunbar, who is considered by some as the most outstanding figure in literature among the Negroes in the whole western world and the most original poet since the advent of the Negro in the

3. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, "Deliverance", vv. 1-4, *Ibid.*

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was born of free parents in Baltimore in 1825. She taught domestic science at Union Seminary in Columbus, Ohio; became lecturer for the Anti-slavery Society of Maine; and after the Civil War was representative of the W.C.T.U. Some of her published works are, Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects, Moses, A Story of the Nile, and others. Mrs. Harper died February 22, 1911.

4. Albery A. Whitman, "Tobe's Dream", vv. 5-6, *Ibid.*

American literary field.⁶ He was the first Negro poet to see "Something beneath the surface of the Negro's mere brogue. He went into Negro life, saw what it was and emerged portraying it with living characters exhibiting the elasticity, spirit, tone, and naturalness of life about him."⁶

Paul Laurence Dunbar, the poet, is a factor in American Negro history and a source of inspiration for members of his race in the field of literature. He represents a milestone in American Negro literature and stands as a dividing line between the new and the old order.

In philosophic adherence and religious attitude Dunbar's poetry at one time reflects the idealism and deep religious feeling common to the productions of the early pioneers. At other times, and especially in his later works, Dunbar parallels the most irreligious of the current American Negro contemporary poets. His poetry in some instances, it will be seen, reflects a naturalism not unlike that found in some of the contemporary American Negro verse masters. Since there is no evidence of naturalism indicated in American Negro poetry before the time of Paul Laurence Dunbar, he then can be justly referred to as the forerunner of the American Negro naturalist poets.

The religious attitude reflected in some of the earlier

5. J. W. Johnson, The Book Of Negro Poetry (New York, 1931), p. 37.

6. C. Woodson, The Negro in Our History (Washington, D. C., 1933), p.471.

poetry of Paul Lawrence Dunbar is found in:

O Lord, -----

 ---soothe me with Thy smile
 And make my life complete.⁷

There is expressed in these verses an unmistakable faith in the existence of God and of His power to guide the individual's path of life. As a further proof of Dunbar's belief he tells us:

Not they who soar, but they who plod
 Their rugged way unhelped to God

 May smile upon defeated care.⁸

At this point one sees the race making a determined effort to acquire wealth of its own by means of safe and sound investments in diverse economic fields, such as banking, insurance, and manufacturing concerns out of which came to the fore a new individual wrought with the idea that money and its values were the all-powerful representatives of a full and a happy life. This type of person naturally established as his goal the acquisition of material wealth in order to secure the much desired economic independence. While this independence is a necessary factor in race development, it, in extreme cases tends toward a subjugation of self to material things, and, in some instances, a callousness of consciousness in the struggle

7. Paul Lawrence Dunbar, "A Prayer", vv. 1, 3-4, in Complete Poems of Paul Lawrence Dunbar, (N.Y.: 1935), edited and published by Dodd Mead and Company

8. Paul Lawrence Dunbar, "Not They Who Soar", vv.1-2.8, Ibid.

for its attainment. Too great an effort on the part of the individual to obtain this economic security entails the embracing of a half-hearted dualistic religion, the worshipping of two gods, in which worship the Supreme God is sidetracked for the god of wealth. The consequent outcome is a feeling of self-sufficiency and self-importance--a feeling of less dependence upon the Creator and more upon men. This is the philosophic tone which seems to be reflected in some of the later Dunbarian poetry. This new trend in American Negro poetry is more perceptible when one compares the lines of George Moses Horton,

"Heaven! in whom can I confide?
 Can'st thou not for all provide?
 Condescend to be my guide
 Forever:"⁹

with Dunbar's

Take up your arms, come out with me
 Let heav'n alone, humanity
 Needs more and heaven less from thee---¹⁰

 Cease your wail, lugubrious saint!
 You fret High Heaven with your plaint...¹¹

The preceding verses of Paul Laurence Dunbar are characterized by a tone of indifference to heaven and, consequently,

9. G. M. Horton, "The Slave's Complaint", vv. 21-24, in B. Brawley, The Early American Negro Writers.
 10. Paul Laurence Dunbar, "Religion", vv. 11-13, in Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar.
 11. Ibid., vv. 6-7

CHAPTER IV.

THE RENAISSANCE PERIOD

the Creator. This attitude in American Negro poetry, motivated by the course of events near the turn of this century, becomes more deep-rooted and gains momentum during the literary renaissance.

With that view in mind it will be seen that the Negro experienced a renaissance in the social, economic, and the literary fields.

Booker T. Washington and Paul Laurence Dunbar supplied the motivating force which enabled the Negro to put forth a greater and more sustained effort in the aforementioned fields. Near the turn of the century, the former began to advocate a new type of industrial education to be projected among the members of his race, while the latter created a dialect verse of great musical perfection. The one became nationally renowned in the field of education, the other in the field of literature. The Negro felt that these two brothers, being nationally acclaimed, were worthy of emulation. He then became infused with a renewed energy and looked toward the future with hope and confidence.

By breaking the traditional field of employment, agricultural

To obviate all difficulty, all future references to Dunbar's poems will be made from The Complete Poems of Paul Lawrence Dunbar.

Paul Lawrence Dunbar was born at Dayton, Ohio, June 27, 1872. He was graduated from the public high school of that city in 1891. He began to write poetry during his grammar school days and continued to do so while running the elevator for passengers in a Daytona building. His first volume, Oak and Ivy, was published in 1893. A second volume, Majors and Minors, appeared in 1895. Then followed Lyrics of Lowly Life in 1896, and others. Dunbar died on February 9, 1906.

CHAPTER IV.

THE RENAISSANCE PERIOD

With regard to the American Negro, renaissance refers to the period in which he made the most rapid progress; it is the era when the American Negro's outlook on life was most suddenly transformed. With that view in mind it will be seen that the Negro experienced a renaissance in the social, economic, and the literary fields.

Booker T. Washington and Paul Laurence Dunbar supplied the motivating force which enabled the Negro to put forth a greater and more sustained effort in the aforementioned fields. Near the turn of the century, the former began to advocate a new theory of industrial education to be projected among the members of his race, while the latter created a dialect verse of great musical perfection. The one became nationally renowned in the field of education, the other in the field of literature. The Negro felt that these two brothers, being nationally acclaimed, were worthy of emulation. He then became infused with a renewed energy and looked toward the future with hope and confidence.

By forsaking the traditional field of employment, agriculture, and casting his lot in the fields of professional service, manufacturing and mechanical industries, and trade and transportation, the American Negro experienced the beginnings of economic independence. This fact is substantiated through statistics which proved that during the period from 1890 to 1930 his participation in the agricultural occupations decreased from

56.6% to 36.7%: in the domestic and personal service from 31.2% to 28.6%. On the other hand, during the same period, his participation in the mechanical and manufacturing industries increased from 5.6% to 18.6%; in trade and transportation from 4.4% to 10.6%; and in professional service from 1.1% to 2.5%.¹

The Negro became economically independent, so to speak, in the United States but realized that the fruits of his economic attainments could not be fully appreciated as long as he remained socially segregated. He then set about to find ways and means by which the situation could be remedied. To that end he employed such pacific means as competition in athletics, music, and art, which effectively brought about the desired result, so that today,

Locked arm in arm they cross the way
The black boy and the white.²

But, however much the Negro might have been satisfied with his condition, he could not experience supreme worldly satisfaction without an adequate literary background. Literature, the

1. The Negro Yearbook, 1937-38, ed. Monroe N. Work, p. 260.

2. Countee Cullen, "Tableau", vv. 1-2, in A. Locke, The New Negro. (New York, 1935).

Countee Cullen was born in New York City, 1903, and was educated in the New York public schools, Dewitt Clinton High School, and New York University from which he received his A.B. degree in 1925 with Phi Beta Kappa honors. He is the author of several books of poems, most important of which are Copper Sun, Color, and The Medes, and Other Poems. He is also editor of Caroling Dusk.

most important register of a people's culture and progress, was woefully inadequate among the American Negroes. Having attained heights previously unknown during the reign of Paul Laurence Dunbar and, at the same time, having received both national and international acclaim, Negro literature, after Dunbar, reverted to a very low level where it remained in a stagnant state for more than a decade. During that interim nothing of importance was produced. Dunbar's great literary influence on the American Negro immediately thereafter made itself felt in a group of writers whose sole aim was to perpetuate his literary ideals. J. Mord Allen, James D. Carrothers, Lucien B. Watkins, Joseph Deeman Cotter, Sr., Angelina Welde Grimke, Charles Bertram Johnson, Roy C. Dandridge, and Leslie Pinckney Hill were the outstanding ones among the group. They did not attain Dunbar's literary standards, but they did reveal a tendency toward a liberality in verse structure and a new method of treating subject-matter which served as a departure in American Negro literature and as a forerunner of a new Negro writer.

Following the World War, contemporary Negro literary standards through the sincere efforts of such talented writers as Jesse Fauset, Walter White, W.E.B. Dubois, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, William Stanley Braithwaite, and Sterling Brown, superseded those set in American Negro literature by Paul Laurence Dunbar and his followers. The contemporary writers present to

the reading public a subject-matter that is clear in thought, intelligently expressed, and has a universality of appeal. In short, they are proving to be the lever by which American Negro literature is being raised to a position of national repute.

The transformation or rebirth of the literary aspects of the American Negro leads directly to the problem of this discussion, viz., whether the idealistic tone which characterized the poetry of the early American Negro poet has remained intact through the years or whether the idealism is becoming contaminated by a naturalism resulting from the Negro's changed condition of living.

Naturalism in the poetry of the American Negro, being in evidence on the eve of the American Negro literary renaissance in some of the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar, ranges in effect from the microscopic to the glaring. In the immediate Post-Dunbarian Period indications of it are exceedingly meager and are limited to the poetry of a very few of the many active poets during that time. Joseph Seeman Cotter, Sr., presents an example of poetry which contains a naturalistic undercurrent. In his "Tragedy of Pete" he writes,

"O" Judge, my wife
 Would never go
 To a Sunday dance
 Or a movie show.

"But I went, Judge,
 Both day and night

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"O Judge, my wife
Would never go
To a Sunday dance
Or a movie show.

"But I went, Judge,
Both day and night

And came home broke
And also tight.

The contrast in moral tone found in the poetry of Cotter with the moral tone found in the poetry of the early writers, as before pointed out, is due to a changed condition of living which time and other influences brought about.

To the writers of the Early Period Sunday had its full Biblical significance and was looked upon as a sacred day to be set aside for rest, peace, and prayer. Granting the fact that there was during the Early Period such an institution as dance where the Negro slave was given entree, the most recalcitrant slave would not have the wherewithal to even attain let alone "come home broke and also tight".

Joseph Seeman Cotter, Sr., and Paul Laurence Dunbar heralded the present day "naturalist" poets who, incidentally, are the foremost lyricists among those of the Negro race here in America. Most renowned of these are Claude McKay, William Stanley Braithwaite, James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, and Countee Cullen. These men present a poetry which is unsurpassed "in its sonorous diction, vigorous workmanship, elevated imagination, and sincere emotion."⁴

3. Joseph Seeman Cotter, Sr., "Tragedy of Pete", vv. 21-28 in Countee Cullen, Caroling Dusk (New York, 1927).

4. R. T. Kerlin, Negro Poets and Their Poems, p. 91.

For classification purposes only these men may be separated into two groups relative to poetic technique, but in so far as the moral tone of their poetry is concerned they are all more or less in the same category. Langston Hughes deftly explains the moral tone reflected in some of the poetic productions of this group with the following verses:

... the brown land
for laughter
and nothing hereafter.⁵

The improvement in quality of American Negro poetry during the present time over that of the Dunbarian group is easily discernable when one compares the fluent, yet simple artistic lines of Countee Cullen:

I come to no flower but I pluck,
I raise no cup but I sip,
For a mouth is the best of sweets to suck
The oldest wine on the lip.⁶

or James Weldon Johnson's lyrical and highly imaginative lines:

The glory of the day was in her face,
The beauty of the night was in her eyes,

5. L. Hughes, "Young Sailor", vv. 20222 in The Weary Blues (New York: 1925).

Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri, in 1902. He was educated at Lawrence, Kansas and Cleveland High School in Cleveland, Ohio. He spent one year at Columbia University and has since travelled extensively in Africa and Europe. In poetry he is best known for his Fine Clothes to the Jew and The Weary Blues.

6. C. Cullen, "Youth Sings A Song of Rosebud", vv. 5-8, in J. W. Johnson, The Book of American Negro Poetry.

And over all her loveliness, the grace,⁷
Of morning blushing in the early skies.

with the unrhymed, non-metered, dry verses of Joseph Seeman Cotter, Sr. The moral motive of the preceding verses, apparently, is not consistent with their emotional depth and lyrical tone, for it is too sensuous. In tone, however, the moral undercurrent seems to parallel that found running in Cotter's "The Tragedy of Pete".

Countee Cullen skims the surface of naturalism in his "Black Magdalen", but he does so with a lower moral motive than he exhibits in "Youth Sings a Song of Rosebud", he writes:

The chaste clean ladies pass them by
And draw their skirts aside,
But Magdalens have a ready laugh;
They wrap their wounds in pride.⁸

James Weldon Johnson goes deeper than the other poets in his attempt to provide entertainment for his readers. A subject which, by all the teachings of Christianity, should be approached with deep humility and profound respect, Johnson treats with sacrilegious disregard. In

7. J. W. Johnson, "The Glory of the Day Was in Her Face", vv. 1-4, in C. Cullen, Caroling Dusk.

James Weldon Johnson was born in Jacksonville, Florida in 1872 and was educated in the public schools of Florida and Atlanta University, and Columbia University. He became engaged as teacher, then principal, of a school in Jacksonville, after which he went to N. Y. and collaborated with his brother, J. Rosamund Johnson, in libretto and song writing for the stage. Besides serving as U. S. Consul to Venezuela and Nicaragua and executive secretary of the N.A.A.C.P., he took time to write and edit Fifty Years and Other Poems, The Book of Negro Poetry, and others.

8. C. Cullen, "Black Magdalens", vv. 5-8 in The Black Christ.

With His head in His hands
 God thought and thought⁹

he presents the Supreme Being in the same light as an ordinary human being. In the effrontery which he displays in making our Lord a subject for poetic burlesque, Johnson rightfully takes his place alongside Langston Hughes. Hughes does not employ the same emotional tone as Johnson when he says

I asked the white Lord Jesus
 What was the use of prayer.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the moral tone and the irreligion of the expression approximate those of Johnson, inasmuch as the subject of their poetic butt is the same. Hughes probes the depth of naturalistic behavior in saying contemptuously:

I'm goin' to the devil an'
 I wouldn't go to heaben if I could.¹¹

In spite of the low moral tone of his poetry, Langston Hughes, the cosmopolite and rebel, is the foremost exponent of the free-verse. It is a modern form of versification and seems especially designed to effectively express Negro folk and jazz rhythms. This free-verse form is not an easy one to handle, because it does not conform to the classical tradition. However, with Hughes' pen as a controlling factor it

9. J. W. Johnson, "The Creation", vv. 73-74, in C. Cullen Caroling Dusk.

10. L. Hughes, "Song for a Dark Girl", vv. 7-8, in Fine Clothes to the Jew.

11. L. Hughes, "Bad Man", vv. 17-18, in Ibid.

becomes ideally flexible and lends itself readily to a "bluesy" keynote and an easy abandon such as are found in The Weary Blues.¹²

Unlike James Weldon Johnson whose theme is based on a variety of subjects, Langston Hughes treats mainly with a Negro of the lowly jazz type. This subject is compatible with the general tone of his creations. This is vividly illustrated in:

Soft lights on the table
 Music Gay
 Brown Skin steppers 13

 Where the jazz band plays
 From dark to dawn.¹⁴

Langston Hughes' position in American Negro literature is a unique one in that his followers are legion. Too, the literary men under his influence are daily increasing in number. He is at the crossroads where a swing from this irreligious type of literature for which he is responsible would enable him to do a great service toward racial moral uplift. His literary imitators, Lewis Alexander, Waring Cuney, Walter Everette, Frank Horne, Albert Rice, and Edward S. Silvera, poets of lesser renown, are contributing their share in dragging the American Negro down to a state of Jazz

12. R. T. Kerlin says, "The lyric monologue found in The Weary Blues is the most original contribution yet made by any Negro to verse forms.

13. L. Hughes, "Day and Night", vv 5-8, in Op. Cit.

14. L. Hughes, "Young Singer", vv. 3-4, in Ibid.

consciousness; for a jazz undercurrent permeates a greater portion of their poetic productions. Lewis Alexander in Hughes' characteristic lightness writes in his "Day and Night":

The day is a jazz band

The night is a jazz band,¹⁵

while Waring Cuney sings in fantastic tone,

O jazz band,
Play a blues for Louise tonight --
Play a moanin' sobbin' song
for a good gal.¹⁶

Music is one of the chief contributing factors to the development of the aesthetic sense, but jazz music does not inspire the search for life's higher ideals; it tends to create in an individual or group an attitude of low moral responsibility. Langston Hughes and his followers, therefore, through their poetry are not only making the Negro jazz conscious, but the very nature of their poetry is undermining the Negro's morals.

15. Lewis Alexander, "Day and Night", vv. 5, 8, in R. T. Kerlin, Reading from Negro Authors.

Lewis Alexander was born July 4, 1900 at Washington D. C. and was educated in the public schools there and at Howard University. In May, 1927, he edited the Negro Number of the Carolina Magazine. He has been writing poetry since 1917.

16. Waring Cuney, "Play a Blues for Louise", vv. 1-4, Ibid.
Waring Cuney was born in Washington, D. C. on May 6, 1906. He was educated in the public schools of Washington, at Howard University, at Lincoln University (Pa.), and at New England Conservatory of Music, Boston. He is a contributor to various magazines and is included in Braithwaite's Anthology.

Walter Everette Hawkins, another of Hughes' disciples, breaks away from his master's jazz theme when he writes:

Life is love and earth is heaven
If I may but soar and sing.¹⁷

These lines, however, parallels Hughes'

... the brown land
for laughter
and nothing hereafter¹⁸

for both express the identical thought and the lines of both embody the spirit of extreme naturalism.

Alongside of the demoralizing influence being exerted by Langston Hughes and his followers on the American Negro literary stage, Sterling Brown comes forward as a motivating factor in racial moral decadence. Sterling Brown is a prominent educator and a brilliant scholar. His Southern Road is the most original first book of verse by any Negro poet since Langston Hughes' The Weary Blues¹⁹. In it he employs the lyrical drama to great perfection. He uses Dunbar's dialect verse with consummate skill and a high degree of polish; he displays a mastery of the free-verse form, and finally, he introduces a deep undercurrent of pathos into

17. Walter Everette Hawkins, "Hero of the Road", vv. 7-8 in *Ibid.*

Walter Everette Hawkins was born in Warrenton, North Carolina, in 1886. He was educated in the public schools there and since 1913 has been employed in the city post-office of Washington, D.C. He is the author of Chords and Discords, published by Richard G. Badger, Boston, 1920.

18. L. Hughes, "Young Sailor", vv. 20-22, in The Weary Blues.

19. R. T. Kerlin, Negro Poets and Their Poems, p. 251.

21. Paul Laurence Dunbar, "Little Brown Baby", vv. 9-12.

some of his verses. These qualities are very suitable for the theme of his poetic efforts, which is, like that of Hughes, the interpretation of the lowly type of Negro life.

That Sterling Brown mastered the difficult dialect verse-form created by Paul Lawrence Dunbar is found when

An' de little brown-skinned chillen
 Wid deir skinny legs a dancin'
 Jes' a kickin' up ridic'lous
 To de heavenly band,²⁰

is juxtaposed with the following verses from Dunbar's rhythmic *Little Brown Baby*:

Little Brown baby wif spa'klin eyes,
 Who's pappy's darlin' an' who's pappy's chile?
 Who is it all the day nevah once tries
 Fu' to be cross, er once loses dat smile?²¹

For sheer skill in mastery of word form Brown, the pupil, has attained the level of the master, Dunbar. Brown, however, employs Hughes' free verse, whereas Dunbar adheres strictly to traditional form. Again like Hughes, Brown portrays a low strata of American Negro life as is so easily seen in the verses from his "When De Saints Go Ma'ching Home" previously quoted. His frankness and terseness in expression is clearly at variance with the general idea of Negro diffuseness, and

20. Sterling Brown, *When De Saints Go Ma'ching Home*, vv. 64-67, S. Brown, *The Southern Road* (New York, 1932).

Sterling Brown was born May 1, 1901, in Washington, D. C. In 1922 he was graduated from Williams College with Phi Beta Kappa honors. From thence he entered Harvard University where he secured his M.A. degree. He taught literature at Virginia Seminary, Virginia, and at Lincoln University, Kansas City Missouri. He is now Professor of Literature at Howard University Washington, D.C.

21. Paul Laurence Dunbar, "Little Brown Baby", vv. 9-12.

certain it is that he is the only one among the group under discussion with whom those two traits are associated.

The general tone of Sterling Brown's poetry is naturalistic. This is an expected condition of affairs, because his subject-matter is built primarily and almost exclusively around the tavern type of Southern American Negro. One is unconsciously led to wonder why a brilliant scholar of such national acclaim and social prominence as Sterling Brown is should select a poetic theme which seems to be entirely foreign to his ideals of life. The only explanation which presents itself is that he became associated with Langston Hughes and fell victim to his influence, for in

De red Licker's good
An' it ain't too high,²²

Brown puts himself squarely in Hughes' milieu and becomes one with him in moral tone and expressional freedom.

That a poet of Sterling Brown's literary capabilities should have fallen within the orbit of Langston Hughes' sphere of influence is catastrophic. The voluminous poetry turned out annually by these two writers has great and promising potentialities. It so happens that the tone of their poetry presents a demoralizing situation which could be easily taken care of if the works of the one could have been idealistic in

22. S. Brown, "Kentucky Blues", vv. 21-22, in Southern Road.

He makes an about face and delights with his jovial music in tone and could have been posed against the works of the other so that a neutralizing influence through poetry on the morals of the American Negro would result.

A careful study of the poetry of William Stanley Braithwaite and Claude McKay reveals a close bond of association to that of the Johnson-Cullen and Brown-Hughes groups. William Stanley Braithwaite, the sometime poet but internationally famous anthologist, is aligned with the former group, for like Cullen, he adheres strictly to traditional verse form and employs a suppressed emotional tone with a minimum degree of imagination. He, on the other hand, like Johnson, does not limit his theme but writes on a variety of subjects.

Claude McKay, the expatriate from Jamaica, is the counterpart of both Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes. His poetry of rebellion, for which he is preeminently noted, is strong and direct. The masculinity of its key is attested in

Like men we'll face the murderous cowardly pack,
PRESSED to the wall, dying, but fighting back!²³

23. Claude McKay, "If We Must Die", vv. 13-14, in J. W. Johnson, The Book of American Negro Poetry.

Claude McKay was born in Jamaica, British West Indies, in about 1891. In 1912, after receiving the highest award granted on the island for literary accomplishments, he entered Tuskegee Institute and a few months later entered Kansas State University where he stayed for two years. He left, then worked as a porter, longshoreman, barman, and dining car and hotel waiter. His publication in the United States was Harlem Shadows (1922). He now resides in France.

He makes an about face and delights with his jovial music in-
 hand, a degeneration in the moral tone of the poetry of these
 remnant. We were so happy, happy --- I remember
 Beneath the poinsettis's red in warm December.²⁴

McKay is found at his best when he treats with the Brown-Hughes theme, the American Negro, as is indicated in his "The Harlem Shadows". In it passion is brought to the front with a lyrical skill unsurpassed, it seems, by any of the current crop of American Negro lyricists. This poetic work, incidentally, puts him in the "naturalist" group because like Braithwaite with his "Sic Vita", McKay's "The Harlem Shadows" is the only one of his many poetic creations in which traces of naturalism appear.

Observing the literary accomplishments of the American Negro in perspective from the point of view of poetic growth and development from the earliest period to the present time, one is impressed with the vast improvements made in the field. It is particularly gratifying to note that American Negro literature evolved with the race, meanwhile reaching revolutionary proportions during this, the Renaissance Period. The form and content of the poetry of either Countee Cullen, James Weldon Johnson, Sterling Brown, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, or William Stanley Braithwaite are as polished stone compared with crude pig iron when placed alongside those of the poetry of the Early American Negro poets. There is perceived, on the other

24. C. McKay, "Flame Heart", vv. 29-30, in C. Cullen, Caroling Dusk: also in J. W. Johnson, The Book of American Negro Poetry.

hand, a degeneration in the moral tone of the poetry of these renaissance writers when compared with the pure idealism found permeating the poetry of the early writers. Naturalism in the poetry of the contemporary Negro poet has not yet reached alarming proportions, however, for the spiritual endowments of the American Negro do not seem at this time to be suffering any great ill effect.

moral tone prevalent in the poetic productions of the American Negro during the Early Period. Hence, idealism is the dominant theme of American Negro poetry from Jupiter Hammon's Thought: Salvation by Christ - the birth of American Negro poetry - through the greater part of Paul Laurence Dunbar's activity. This idealism was the general philosophy of the American Negro poetry for a period of approximately one hundred and twenty-five years.

Secondly, poetry evolved in direct proportion with the material progress made by the Negro race. Cataclysmic events opened the way for the Negro's entrance into many fields of endeavor which resulted in material successes. The result of these cataclysmic events, the Civil War, resulted in the freedom from bondage and opened to him fields of opportunity which enabled him to better his social, economic, and intellectual status. The second of these cataclysmic events, the World War, produced a revolutionary effect in the American Negro's

CONCLUSION

This study, and investigation into the philosophic trend of American Negro poetry, reveals the following conclusion. Firstly, American Negro poetry which had its beginning in 1761, was at the outset, crude and unpolished in form and content because its creators were not provided with a proper educational training. The introduction of the Christian religion served as a bulwark against contamination of the idealistic moral tone prevalent in the poetic productions of the American Negro during the Early Period. Hence, idealism is characteristic of American Negro poetry from Jupiter Hammon's An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ - the birth of American Negro poetry - through the greater part of Paul Laurence Dunbar's period of activity. This idealism was the general philosophic tone of the American Negro poetry for a period of approximately one hundred and twenty-five years.

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literary renaissance then in progress and added the necessary impetus which enabled him to raise the standard of his poetry to the high level which it enjoys in America today.

Thirdly and finally, due to an acquisition of material wealth on the part of the American Negro naturalism penetrated the seemingly impregnable fortress which surrounded the traditional idealism of his poetry. This condition of affairs occurred during the latter part of Paul Laurence Dunbar's period of activity and is making rapid progress under the handful of active "naturalist poets", Countee Cullen, James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, William Stanley Straighwaite, and Sterling Brown. American Negro poetry, therefore, is on the open road toward a definite naturalistic trend.

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