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The Treatment of The Negro In Modern American Drama From 1900-1950.

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THE TREATMENT OF THE NEGRO IN MODERN AMERICAN DRAMA
FROM 1900—1950

being

A thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty
of Fort Hays Kansas State College in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Degree of Master of Science

by

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Approved

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

There are many important phases of American drama, and not one of the least of these is the drama of the American Negro. Only recently has much research been done in this field, so that the realization that the Negro has done a great deal to advance and develop the drama comes as a surprise. This heretofore neglected subject is, at last, coming into its proper perspective.

The purpose of this study is to discover and appraise the treatment of the Negro in modern American drama from 1900 to 1950. The relationship of the black and white races is a problem that has been the concern of Americans since the beginning of American history, and it has not and perhaps never will be solved. However, learning more about a problem should help one to understand it. An attempt will be made here to depict Negro life as it is viewed by the Negro dramatist and by the white dramatist, and to interpret and evaluate the materials and ideas presented by these dramatists. Although this study will necessarily be subjective to some degree, an effort will be made to present unbiased interpretations and carefully weighed facts.

The study of Negro drama is interesting because it is a means of presenting the Negro problem to the world. Drama is a literary form that reaches a great number of people and is necessarily a great influence upon those who read or witness it. One has only to
note the growing number of theaters and the large amount of ticket sales to leading dramatic productions to realize the far-reaching effect the drama has upon the American public. Audience reaction to Negro plays does a great deal to form lasting opinions about the race as a whole. Whether these opinions are favorable or otherwise, depend upon upon the light in which they are presented. Dramas may be instrumental in changing the present status of the Negro to a more favorable outlook for the future.

A careful analysis should reveal the feelings of the Negro and white dramatist toward the Negro and also their reasons for feeling as they do. One should be able to ascertain whether or not the dramatists are attempting to improve the Negro's condition and standards or whether they are attempting to push him even farther down the ladder of inequality. Then, there is the third possibility—the dramatists may not be at all concerned with the Negro problem; they may be showing a picture of Negro life as they see it.

The method of research includes the reading of plays by leading Negro and white dramatists, and the reading of critical comments about these plays and their authors. This will also include reading material about the historical background of the Negro in order to trace his dramatic development through the past to the present. However, only comparatively recent works will be used here. Opinions of noted critics will be considered and research work on the subject will be read.
One must realize that there are limitations to this subject. It will not be possible to read every play written about and by Negroes, but those which are typical and significant for the understanding of the problem will be studied. The emphasis will not be placed upon dramatic technique. There will be some treatment of white characters to contrast with the Negro characters. The development of characters will be important to show how Negro personalities are treated. The subject matter will furnish a background to show conditions surrounding the Negro.

The value of this study should be a better understanding of the problems of Negro life, of modern Negro dramas as works of art, and of the place the Negro holds in the present day theater. A better understanding of a problem is the first step in solving that problem. Although the Negro problem is a long way from being solved, any contribution to the knowledge of it should be a step in the right direction.
CHAPTER II

THE BEGINNINGS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE NEGRO DRAMA

To give the reader a clear idea of the growth of the Negro drama, it seems necessary to devote a chapter to the tracing of the history of the Negro drama from its beginning in America until 1900.

Negro drama has been going through a process of evolution since its birth in America, and critics agree that today it is a significant part of drama. Even as the first slave set foot on American soil, he had an inheritance in drama that arrived with him. The first noteworthy Negro character came from England and was none other than the dusky-skinned Othello. Although some Shakespearean scholars might not agree that Othello was of Negro blood, he has certainly been capably characterized by leading Negro actors.

"When Shakespeare wrote Othello," one critic has aptly stated, "he also wrote the birth certificate of the Negro actor." It might be added that the Negro actor has had to wait for over three hundred years for another role as great and as sympathetic as that of the tragic Moor.

Possibly there has never since been a greater role for the Negro actor to portray.

Critics make it quite clear that the Negro has been hampered in his dramatic achievement to the extent that certain stereotyped

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parts are all that have been allotted to him. From the earliest
days of the American theatre the Negro has been allowed to step
upon the stage only if he were portraying the role of a clown.² He was the "Mr. Bones" of the minstrel show. It is hard to answer
as to just why this is true. For some reason minority groups
always seem to be stereotyped by the majority. Besides the Negro,
the comic Irish and Jewish character parts are examples. It is
ironic that people with such a tragic history as the Negro should
be typed as the contented slave or the foolish clown.³ It has,
consequently, been almost impossible for the Negro to break these
bonds of tradition and do a creditable job of acting or of writing
serious drama. Even if he made such an attempt, he had difficulty
finding an audience. Thus the Negro has had a one-sided dramatic
development, all in the line of comedy.⁴

The drama of the American Negro, as it is found today is
comparatively new, but it has not been a sudden achievement. With
slavery as his background, the Negro has been used to reflect the
spirit of the times and the conditions of society which have sur-
rounded him. Before slavery was a disputed issue, one could find
the Negro in drama as early as 1807. He was a low comedy character
called "Zeke" in L. Beachs' Post Free. Then about 1840, the

². Loc. cit.
³. Ibid., p. 3
⁴. Ibid., p. 494.
minstrel melodrama caught the public eye. At this time, it was in disrepute by the more intellectual play-going public. The minstrels were caricatures of Negro life, and they did their share to keep a higher type of literature from developing.  

The origin of the minstrel is quite obscure, and there is so little data about it that one cannot possibly say just where and how the minstrel originated. Usually the introduction is credited to Thomas D. Rice who lived from 1806 until 1860. It would probably be more correct to say that he popularized it as its beginnings are scattered over a wide area. The tales of Rice's beginnings are fabulous, if true. According to one version he began in Cincinnati with clothes and songs borrowed from a Negro stage driver. The song went something like this:

'Turn about and wheel about and do jis so,
An every time I turn about, I jump Jim Crow.'

The audience laughed so loudly that Rice did not hear the Negro calling from back stage that the steam boat was coming and he had to have his clothes back. Finally the Negro emerged upon the stage shouting, 'Massa Rice, Massa Rice, gi me nigga's hat—nigga's coat—Higga's shoes—gi me nigga's t'ings! Massa Griffith want 'im. Steamboat's comin'!'  


This minstrel routine with its grotesque song and dance act started a vogue that has not yet disappeared. The blackface comedy with the "chicken-stealing, watermelon-eating, razor-wielding, comedian darkey" has become an American tradition.8

By 1840 minstrelsy had become the most distinctive form of Negro contribution to American amusement. A few of the notables in the field included Dan Emmett, who with four other actors, began a minstrel act. Thereafter Edwin P. Christy became a star in that sort of amusement. Charles Callender in the '60's and Lew Dockstader, P. T. Barnum, and Primrose and West are well-known names associated with the success of minstrelsy. With the exception of the Disappointed Bride, a light comedy, by J. P. Sampson in 1883, nothing of dramatic consequence bearing upon the Negro was done before the advent of Cole, Johnson, and Johnson, except for the cork-face comedy. The first successful colored company was the Georgia Minstrels, organized in 1865 by Charles Hicks, a Negro.9

One must remember, however, that the first and greatest blackface minstrels were white, not Negro. The composers, actors, and audiences were white. These profit-making enterprises attributed to the Negro were really bad imitations that the whites were doing of the colored people. It was not until after the emancipation that the Negroes could participate in a minstrel stage role.

Then a white promoter thought of the novel idea of using the real black instead of the burnt cork imitation. The idea seemed so unique that others started using it. It soon became possible to find either Negroes or whites in the minstrel. The idea has carried on through the years and the twentieth-century continuation of the theme includes the white comedians, Amos and Andy, that one can hear on the radio by a spin of the dial. There is no similar Negro team, but there are a few individual Negro comic performers such as Eddie Green, Rochester and a few teams in Negro vaudeville. The Negro in the moving pictures is the same old comic stereotyped clown that cannot seem to be shelved even today. With the whites originating what passes for Negro humor, it is easy to see how misrepresentative the minstrel might be.\(^\text{10}\)

The first dramatic effort of the American slave was in the form of songs. The songs were possibly from natural inborn ability and from the fact that, being slaves, they needed a way to express themselves. The songs served as inspirations and gave the idea that "somewhere in a glory land there would be rest for the weary and abundance for the faithful." When the slave was permitted to do nothing else he could find release from his troubles in song.\(^\text{11}\) Spirituals of folk origin arose from obscure beginnings. Besides

\(^{10}\) Brown, Davis, and Lee, \textit{loc. cit.}

\(^{11}\) Bond, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 15.
spirituals, there were ballads, blues, work songs, social songs, and songs of protest. They grew out of the hearts of the Negro to be incorporated into minstrels and later into their dramas.

The year, 1767, was the beginning of interest in the Negro as dramatic material. In that year, The Disappointment, a comic Negro opera, written by Thomas Forest was produced with an all-white cast. In 1776, The Fall of British Tyranny was written by John Leacock. It was based upon the slavery question with a white cast portraying Negro slaves who agreed that they would turn upon their masters if the British would set them free. Sixteen years later in a play called Yorker's Stratagem, a comic Yankee married a West Indian mulatto and brought the inter-marriage question to the American stage. This pitifully small collection of dramatic material never became very great, nor was it considered of utmost importance. But this was a beginning, however small, that has grown and from all indications, will continue to grow to future greatness. It took later dramatists to realize the potentialities to be found in material extracted from Negro life.

The entrance of the Negro to the American stage was surprisingly early in our history. In 1795, James Murdock's, The

Triumph of Love was presented with a certain Negro called Sambo playing an important role. However, it was not a common practice to find a Negro in a dramatic stage production. Although most of the work was done with the minstrel, finally an organized group of Negro actors presented themselves to the public as the African Company. This group, organized in 1821, under the leadership of a Negro actor, James Hewlett, ably presented Shakespearean plays and other classics at their theatre "in Mercer Street in the rear of 1 Mile Stone, Broadway." The theatre was soon closed by the civil authorities, partly because of the boisterous behavior of white patrons.14

One of the better-known actors, a contemporary of James Hewlett, was the famous Negro, Ira Aldridge. Mr. Aldridge was not favorably received in America, but in Europe he played "Othello" in many of the leading European theatres. He was an influence upon the American theatre, however, because some of his prestige came as a result of the interest in talented Negroes that the Abolition Movement sponsored.15

During the time of the Civil War, there came a lull in the popularity of the Negro minstrel which continued until the middle of the 1890's. A new-type drama became prominent and, of course, the theme of this drama was the slavery question with great emphasis upon the cruelties of the southern masters to their Negro

15. Loc cit.
slaves. Everyone became familiar with the anti-slavery plays. Even as early as 1841, the Abolitionist used the stage for propaganda purposes as he crusaded bitterly and viciously against the "evils of slavery." Even the ladies carried the banner with the Massachusetts Female Society dramatizing The Star of Emancipation to further the cause of the liberators. This play told the story of the runaway slaves in their efforts to escape. The authors did not neglect to emphasize the hardships and starvation conditions from which the runaways suffered. No one, during Civil War times, could have missed hearing of the fabulous Uncle Tom's Cabin by Harriet Beecher Stowe. The story was later dramatized to further the Negro cause. Uncle Tom's Cabin told of the trials of the noble black Uncle Tom and the death of little Eva, climaxing in the melodramatic death scene of Uncle Tom who refused to "squeal" on a fellow slave.16 Dion Boucicault's The Octoroon was written in 1859 as another of the lengthening list of anti-slavery plays. Both Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Octoroon were moralistic and sentimental, but they proved that the Negro could be something besides a song and dance man in a minstrel show. Almost all of the anti-slavery plays tried to picture a nobly-forgiving, pathetic black, who was a victim of circumstances and a woeful heroine, a beautiful octoroon.17 These productions, and there were many of them,

managed to establish these characters. They are still well established. Many Negro plays and motion pictures of the present time, have made them a tradition. Even so, it has required much time for American theatre-goers to accept plays of Negro life without prejudice, even if it were a tradition or a caricature.18

The Negro playwright has so far contributed very little to the drama of his people. William Wells Brown was the first Negro to write a play, The Escape, or A Leap for Freedom. This was written in 1851 and was a bad play even for nineteenth century times. It was probably never staged, but the author gave numerous readings from it. As its plot, it had the old triangle with a beautiful and innocent slave heroine, a lustful master, and a heroic slave lover. Another character was the abolitionist who helped the lovers to escape to Canada. The language was drawn out of old stock:19

Sir, I am your slave, you can do as you please with avails of my labor, but you shall never tempt me to swerve from the path of virtue.20

The play was styled in the same manner as a humorous minstrel.

It is almost impossible to find a good serious drama written by a Negro before 1900. Even though the Negro was anxious to act in serious drama, he made few efforts to write one. Joseph S.

20. Loc. cit.
Cotter, Sr. wrote Calib, the Degenerate which was even worse than William Wells Brown’s The Escape. It was a poetical closet play dealing with the problem of industrial versus liberal education. A Negro’s efforts shine a little brighter with Angelina Grimke’s, Rachel. In it, a sensitive young Negro woman’s life is ruined by American racial injustice. It is significant because it is the first successful drama written and interpreted by Negroes. Artistically, it is not too convincing.21

The minstrel tradition became prominent again and staged a comeback that continued until the middle nineties, when John W. Isham organized a musical show, The Octoroons, which formed the inspiration for the long line of musical comedies which have furnished vehicles for the genius of such stars as Williams and Walker, Cole and Johnson, S.H. Dudley, T. Leubie Hill, and Ernest Hogan. The best known of these earlier shows are Abyssinia, Rufus Rastus, Bandanna Land, The Red Moon, The Shoo Fly Regiment, The Sons of Ham, and Mr. Lode of Coal.22 In 1898, Bob Cole planned to write a play of his own. During the 1898-1899 season, he came out with A Trip to Coontown, the first Negro show to make a complete break from the minstrel pattern, and the first to be written with continuity and to have a cast of characters working out the story of a plot. This was, therefore, the first


Negro musical comedy and is worthy of mention because of that fact alone, if for none other.23

The history of the Negro drama leads to the conclusion that the influence of Negro writings have been negligible until the beginning of the twentieth century. None of the Negro dramas written before 1900 have lived to be remembered. The Negro actor has left his mark with his ability on the vaudeville stage and in a few serious dramas of white authorship. The Negro theatre with its slender beginning, showed possibilities for future advancement.

A vast number of white dramatists used Negro life as subject matter for their productions. From the Negro minstrels and anti-slavery plays, white audiences formed their opinions as to what Negroes were like and how they should be treated. The Civil War period saw an advancement of the cause of liberty and equality through the use of dramatic material drawn from the life of the Negro.

Related research leads one to look briefly at the short story and novel of the Negro. There are a few similarities in the development of all Negro literature. Perhaps it is significant that many of the dramas, short stories, novels, and much of the poetry were written for the same purpose—to plead the cause of freedom and equality. Short stories of Negro life were not

attempted until after the Civil War. Out of this period came the use of Negro material as a subject for literary artists.  

Langston Hughes, one of the most versatile Negro authors, tells in his "Fighting Words," of the problems faced by all writers of Negro material in selling what they write. The following selection should give some idea as to why there has not been more work done about the Negro in any literary field and why Negro writings have not been more influential.

Here are our problems: In the first place Negro books are considered by editors and publishers as exotic. Negro material is placed, like Chinese material, into a certain classification. Magazine editors will tell you, "We can use but so many Negro stories a year." (That "so many" meaning very few.) Publishers will say, "We already have one Negro novel on our list this fall."

The market for Negro writers, then, in definitely limited as long as we write about ourselves. And the more truthfully we write about ourselves, the more limited our market becomes. These novels about Negroes that sell best, by Negroes or white, those novels that make the best-seller lists and receive the leading prizes, are almost always books that touch very lightly upon the facts of Negro life, books that make our black ghettos in the big cities seem very happy places indeed, and our plantations in the deep South idyllic in their pastoral loveliness. . . When we cease to be exotic, we do not sell well.

Although the above passage applies to all Negro literature, it demonstrates a problem that the Negro dramatist faces when he finds no market or no one to produce his plays. This should show, partially at least, why Negro drama has not developed


25. Loc. cit.
more rapidly. Whether this situation can be overcome in the future remains as a speculation.
CHAPTER III
FROM 1900 UNTIL THE PRESENT

A look at the Negroes' present status in the American theatre shows that, although there are a few notable Negro dramatists who have written during the past fifty years, most audiences see Negro drama which is written by white dramatists. The coveted honor of placing a play on Broadway has not often been given a Negro. With the exception of the writers of musical comedies, Hall Johnson's *Run*, *Little Chillun* is the only play of Negro life and complete Negro authorship to have a Broadway run. Three plays of part-Negro authorship have had successful runs: *Harlem* by Wallace Thurman in collaboration with William Rapp, *Malatto* by Langston Hughes and Martin Jones, and *Native Son* by Richard Wright and Paul Green. Serious plays are considered to be box-office poison.1 Perhaps this is because the commercial theatre has very little connection with Negro life in America. Very few Negroes are among New York's theatre-goers. Even if producers wished to present a play giving a view of Negro life, it is doubtful that such a play would pay. Only very exceptional Negro plays have a chance to find their way to the Broadway stage. If it is an outstanding play, it will undoubtedly do as well as any other type production; if it

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is merely "good," it will never get a chance to fail. At best this makes the Negro playwright a "stepchild of Broadway."2

Such a totally discouraging outlook does not mean that a competent colored playwright will never see his work produced. Broadway is not the only avenue used to climb to the top of the ladder. Other theatres, particularly the Negro ones scattered over America, do their share in giving promising young Negro playwrights a chance. For those who believe that "footlights over America" are as important as "white lights of Broadway," the smaller theatres offer great possibilities, especially to the young aspiring Negro. There is always the hope that if the play does well in smaller theatres, it will gradually rise to the Broadway heights.3

Negro actors have rapidly been rising until, today, it is quite common to find them upon the Broadway stage. Although they have entered quietly as comedians, they have managed to stay long enough to gain parts in serious plays. The beginning Negro stars included the vaudeville comedian, Bert Williams, singers and dancers, Bill Robinson, Josephine Baker, Florence Mills, and Ethel Waters. It was not until the 1920's that serious roles were allotted to Negroes. Even as late as 1930, Daniel Reed's Scarlet Sister Mary was played by a white cast in blackface. Later plays such as The Green Pastures and Porgy gave the Negro a firmer grasp upon serious


3. Loc. cit.
drama. During the depression, the Federal Theatre organized Negro units which produced the Harlem Macbeth, Swing Mikado and Haiti. If this project had not died a sudden and untimely death it would probably have performed many more services for the Negro drama than it had a chance to do. As it was, its list of Negro plays included many by Negro authors, the best of which was Theodore Ward’s Big White Fog written in 1938. By the forties the Negro Playwrights Company became a Broadway producing organization. Three years later Othello was presented with Paul Robeson, a Negro, heading the cast.

Negro plays received more renown in theatres not in any way defined with the Broadway stage. Small Negro Theatres helped the black actors to get a start in their career. Between 1900 and 1915 Negro theatres were built in many Northern cities. The first of these theatres to organize a stock company was the Pekin in Chicago. In New York there were the Lafayette Players and several others that were not so well known. Their plays were past Broadway hits that were unrelated to Negro life, but they gave experience to such actors as Charles Gilpin, Rose McClendon, Abbie Mitchell, Edna Thomas, Jack Carter, and Frank Wilson. The Krigwas Players, sponsored by

W. E. B. DuBois in several northern cities, could not survive as a serious artistic movement. The Boston Players, and groups in Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Washington have appeared from time to time. One of the most effective little theatres is the Gilpin Players of Cleveland which has produced a surprising number of plays of Negro life.

Most of these amateur or semiprofessional groups are well disposed toward Negro playwrights, but most of them are very poor and very few in number. The opportunities for Negro actors and dramatists are very small indeed since the Federal Theatre Project is no longer in effect. Randolph Edmonds suggests, that the hope of a genuine Negro theatre is to be found in the "organizational" approach of the associations of Negro colleges. From the founding of the first college dramatic group, the Howard Players, by Montgomery Gregory and Alain Locke in 1921, to the present, drama has been increasingly fostered at Negro colleges. Randolph Edmonds has done a great deal to forward Negro college groups. He was instrumental in founding the Negro Intercollegiate Drama Association, which now comprises The North Carolina Agricultural and Industrial College, Hampton Institute, Howard University, Lincoln University, Morgan College, Shaw University, Virginia State College, and Virginia Union University. Edmonds, a professor of drama at Dillard University, has since organized The Southern Association of Drama and Speech Arts.

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8. Ibid., p. 504.
9. Ibid., pp. 504-505.
After looking at the possibilities of advancement for Negroes in the theatre, it might be well to note just what is being done upon the Negro stage. Stark Young defines Negro theatre as one which interprets the Negro, his life and his talents, his gifts and his burdens, his racial heritage and his personal achievements.10 Early Negro theatres certainly did not fill these qualifications. Until the past decade or so the Negro theatre was divided into two classes. One was the theatre in wholly Negro neighborhoods where it was almost unheard of for white faces to appear. In this theatre, the Negro performer usually earned little more than a starvation existence. The humor was usually ribald and lusty with satire directed at the shortcomings of the performers, audience, and the actor himself. The other Negro theatre was known to white audiences. There the whites could see three types of characters—the good-humored clown; the brutish creature fresh from the jungle, swept by passions of lust and murder that could be curbed only by the rope and faggot of white lynchers; and the kindly, faithful servant of pre-Civil war vintage who, twisted with rheumatism and tortured with lumbago, hobbles onto the stage toward the end of the third act to offer his master his life's savings to keep him out of prison so that he can marry the beautiful heroine.11


Obviously neither of these theatres gave an accurate picture of Negro life. However these types of characters have more or less disappeared since the first World War. A new realism began to gain a hearing upon the American stage. For the Negro, this was good fortune. Audiences were no longer satisfied to see white people play Negro characters. In 1917, Ridgely Torrence, a distinguished white poet, produced three one-act plays of Negro life: The Rider of Dreams, Granny Maumee, and Simon the Cyrenian. With these three plays, he vitalized the whole field of Negro drama. There was no comedy as authentic as The Rider of Dreams; no tragedy such as that in Granny Maumee. Torrence laid a healthy and sound basis for plays of Negro life. These plays had to be performed by Negroes. New Negro actors were discovered; besides those already mentioned, there were Jules Bledsoe, Lee Whipper, Georgette Harvey, Fredi Washington, Rex Ingram, Canada Lee, Richard Harrison of Green Pastures fame, and many others.12

During this same period a "Negro Renaissance" was encouraging Negroes to write, and prize contests were conducted by "The Crisis" and "Opportunity" magazines. Frank Wilson, a Negro dramatist, won the "Opportunity" prize contest for 1925 with his Sugar Cane written in 1920. His Brother Mose and Walk Together Children were produced by the Federal Theatre Project. Others who gained prominence were:

Georgia Douglass Johnson who wrote in the Torrence style in her tragedy, *Plumes*, Willis Richardson, and the most versatile of all, Langston Hughes.13

The New York theatrical season of 1933-1934 constituted an important period in the development of the Negro as an actor and of Negro life as the subject matter of drama. Steins' and Thompson's *Four Saints in Three Acts* played by an excellent and all-Negro cast struck a new development in the American theatre and a new attitude on the part of the public toward the types of plays in which Negroes might appear. Only a Negro cast could have brought the beauty of voice, the dignity and impressiveness of acting which a Negro cast gave it. *Stevedore*, a grim and melodramatic picture of race conflict in the South, induced New Yorkers to travel far down town to Le Gallienne's Repertory Theatre to see a cast made up almost entirely of Negro actors give an effective production.14

An over-all view of what is being done, shows that serious dramas about the Negro have occurred often enough only during the last ten years for white audiences to be accustomed to seeing them. There are still few excellent productions. As to number, the tally of significant Negro plays does not total a distinctive play a season. Peak successes are too isolated and disconnected. It is plain that lack of interest and support have taken their toll.15

15. Loc. cit.
CHAPTER IV

THE FUTURE OF NEGRO DRAMA

It is very difficult, indeed, to determine the future of Negro drama. One can only speculate, basing predictions upon past and present happenings. Many have made predictions that are worthy of consideration. Playwriting is at best one of the most arduous of writing skills. The Negro playwrights are blocked by many obstacles that will have a bearing upon what they may do in the future. As the Irish playwrights found a time-honored stage Irishman bossing the boards, so Negro playwrights find stereotypes endeared to the American public. These stereotypes must be erased from the minds of the public and a more realistic picture of the Negro presented. A modern example of this is shown in the life of Ethel Waters, who refused to play in *The Member of the Wedding* until they changed her part from a cook who had lost her faith to a part that had God in it. She changed the interpretation of the role so as to make a more pleasing character, thus helping to give a more realistic picture of the Negro.¹ Another complicating factor is that Broadway can accommodate only a few Negroes at best, and many white playwrights, experienced in technique, are considered the final interpreters of Negro life and character. The Negro audience is as yet unformed. Its theatrical experience is too often limited

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to song and dance, or church pageants, or fashion shows. The Negro writers' enforced separation from collaboration with acting companies, technicians, directors, and producers is bound to reflect itself in insecure, inept work. How this can be counterbalanced by whole-hearted devotion to the little theatre movement is uncertain. 2

Alain Locke states that if the expectations of Negro drama as a fruitful phase of American drama are to be fully realized, the field, even when it finds its peculiar ingredients in the problems and issues of racial conflicts and partisanship or takes its cues from particular folkways, must be a freeman's estate, with that reciprocity and universality of spirit which truly great art requires and itself helps to establish. However, the drama of Negro life is not yet fully free, although lately very grave efforts have been made to free it from its immediate handicaps. For the present the problem play upon this subject has yielded far too much of that sordid realism without purgation of terror or universality of pity which great tragedy still demands. The Negro dramatist has flooded the market with propaganda pieces containing the taint of sentimentality. The Negro playwright must abandon the "puppets of protest and propaganda and take to flesh and blood characters and situations." He will never completely monopolize the Negro subject. At the present time, the white dramatist has the advantage because of his

more natural objectivity toward the Negro problems. However, in the future, the Negro should claim his natural advantage of greater intimacy of knowledge and feeling. The essential, elemental forces of great drama in all time—epic turns of experience, tragic intensity of life, discipline and refinement of the emotions, have been accumulating like underground well-springs for generations in Negro life, and are now beginning to seek artistic vent and find free-flowing expression.  

Negro drama has developed greatly during the last ten years because American drama is changing and the awakening of Negro talent and a possible Negro Theatre is of national significance. There has been a notable attempt by the Negro playwright to advance Negro drama and to provide the talent of the Negro actor with a modern American realism for new material and a deeper, firmer grip upon the actualities of American life. Eugene O'Neill forecast that "The possibilities are limitless and to a dramatist open up new and intriguing opportunities: the gifts the Negro can and will bring to our native drama are invaluable ones." This view is confirmed by Ridgley Torrence who said, "I have sometimes imagined that the Negro, other things being equal, might produce the greatest, the most direct, the most powerful drama in the world."

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The Negro experience has been inherently dramatic: surely the substance of great drama is there. No group experience in America has plumed greater emotional depths, or passed through so many levels of life; none has found itself entangled in the elements of social conflict and complication. The material is there but the mastery is not yet achieved. If it is to come at all, it must surely arise from deep spiritual penetration into the heart and spirit of the life of the Negro.\(^5\)

Although the problem play seems to dominate the situation for the time being, the folk play seems to be the more promising path for the sound development of Negro drama. For the theatrically unsophisticated Negro audiences, Randolph Edmonds feels that the play must develop to the point of having "worthwhile themes, sharply drawn conflict, positive characters, and a melodramatic plot."\(^6\) Perhaps, if the racial problem can be over-come, the Negro dramatists of this generation can look back a little more objectively upon past history and write great problem and history plays.

The growth of the Negro Little Theatre groups in the last five years furnishes, for the first time, the opportunity to establish a drama nourished intimately by its own audience, unhampered by commercial dictation, and free of the worst features of conventionalized exhibitionism. But to this freedom must also come an

\(^5\) Loc. cit.

\(^6\) Brown, Davis, and Lee, loc. cit.
inner freedom which only the Negro dramatist and the enlightened audience of the future can bring. Just as much as the Negro's situation in the past has forced him to a counter-attitude in life and a spectator's attitude toward himself, it has cut at the roots of fine drama in him. The Negro has been forced to laugh outwardly and weep inwardly in his role of a stage clown. With greater spiritual freedom and self-control, one may confidently await the great actor, the moving interpreter, who with better emotional compensation, will have the power to smile and reflect with ironic composure. "The Negro drama will be less moved but more moving, less controversial, but more challenging, and more universal even in sounding its most racial notes."

These opinions show a hopeful outlook for the future of Negro drama. There are many obstacles to be overcome, but the general concensus seems to be that there will be a rapid development of Negro drama in the near future.

CHAPTER V

TYPES OF NEGRO DRAMA

To give one an idea of the plays to be used for a basis for judgments made in later chapters, a brief synopsis of each play will be given here with a classification as to the type of each play.

Most of the Negro plays contain tragic elements. With a background of oppression and struggle, it is only natural that the present realistic trend in writing presents the Negro in a tragic light. A struggle for a cause cannot help influencing the type of drama that is written about the Negro.

The white dramatist has created more notable plays about the Negro subject than has the black dramatist. Eugene O'Neill has used the Negro character repeatedly in a tragic situation. His play, The Dreamy Kid, tells of the Negro underworld in Harlem. The bad boy Dreamy had murdered a white man and is being hunted by the police. He risks capture to visit his dying grandmother. One realizes by the end of the final scene that Dreamy has only a few more seconds of freedom with nothing in his future but final condemnation. The blood brother of Dreamy is the Emperor in The Emperor Jones. O'Neill shows the breakdown of the brash, self-assured Emperor to a superstitious, groveling, brute-like creature that is being hunted like an animal that is bound for destruction.

All God's Chillun Got Wings deals with a more intellectual, ambitious
type of Negro entangled in a web of racial discrimination because of his marriage to a white girl who is inferior to him in every way. With the wife's insanity and the husband's unattainable ambitions to become a lawyer, one feels that even though God's chillun may have wings, they are not strong enough to raise these two out of the mire of social ostracism and racial prejudice, at least, not in this world.

Eugene O'Neill has two other plays that have minor Negro characters in their casts. They do not seem as important as those centered around Negro life, but they are worthy of consideration. The Iceman Cometh has one Negro character, Joe Mott, who aspires to be as his white fellows. He fails to overcome his inferior feelings and becomes a drunk with the rest of the barroom dreamers. The Moon of the Caribbees includes some West Indian Negresses who come on board ship bringing rum and themselves to sell.

Paul Green, a white dramatist, deals with the Negro problem in a number of one-act plays and in a few longer selections. He, as O'Neill, writes a majority of tragedies when dealing with the Negro theme. In Abraham's Bosom, Green treats of Negro life in the South, with the defeat of Abraham who wants to better the Negro's condition by starting a Negro school. He receives nothing but rebuffs and beatings for his trouble. The play leaves a feeling of hopelessness and despair, with deep pity for the unhappy Abraham. Your Fiery Furnace is the famous addition to the Abraham play.

Now, Abraham is an old man and still strives to better his conditions and the condition of his people. Many Negroes are out of
sympathy with the spirited old man who struggles against his environment. They know that it is hopeless to protest. The End of the Row has the same theme as the Abraham plays. A young Negro girl, who wishes to improve herself by getting an education, is unable to do so because of a white man who forces her to give in to his proposals. Even though he is interested in her being educated, he is more interested in her sexually. The play is very calm with only the helpless and baffling struggle of a human being. Sam Tucker carries out the theme of the Negro in relation to the white man in the same manner as In Abraham's Bosom. White Dresses tells a little incident about a Negro girl who is in love with a white man. The boy's father forces her to marry a black nigger whom she detests in order to keep his son and the girl apart. The dramatic climax hints that the white boy and the mulatto girl are children of the same father. The Hot Iron is a simple one-act play with the tragedy of a washerwoman who is poverty stricken and must support her children even though she is ill. Her worthless husband returns and is accidentally killed by the woman with her iron in their struggle when he tries to beat one of the children. The play is filled with the suffering and longings of mankind. One of Paul Green's best known plays is The No-Count Boy which is not a tragedy in the usual sense but it might be classed as a poetic tragedy. The no-count boy is a dreamy lad with either a vivid imagination or an unbalanced mind. He almost succeeds in enticing a Negro girl to break her engagement to her fiance and wander through the world with him. The world he sees
turns out to be a figment of his mind and he is captured by his mother and taken away. The boy seems rather like a caged bird and it is sad to think of his not being able to be a vagabond and play his beautiful songs on his harp.

Besides writing tragedies about the Negro, Paul Green has some plays that fall into different classifications. Roll, Sweet Chariot is called by the author, "a symphonic play of the Negro people." Perhaps the best classification for this play would be simple to call it a play of Negro life. It has elements of both the comic and tragic. It reveals the teeming, varied life of a small settlement called Potter's Field (originally the play's title) which is casually torn up because it lies in the path of a road under construction. With the incidental aid of music and song, Green records, not only the tribulations of the black race, but also its laughter and its gaiety. The community centers at the boarding-house of Quieienne Lockley and her feeble-minded husband. The collection of people there include: laborers, servants and cooks for the white folk, a barber, and an abused wife, Quieienne's son by a white man, a bogus minister who prospers on the superstitions of others, a fugitive from a chain gang who reclaims his wife, now mistress of another man. The play ends with the tremendous power in a chain-gang scene with the convicts digging on impassively at the same pace after one of their number has been shipped to death by a guard. The House of Connelly does not deal directly with Negroes but there is the Negro question in the background. The play
started as a tragedy but it ends on a note of hope. It is a study of social changes in the South. Handled freely as poetic realism, with the aid of the dance, serenade, and with two ancient sibyl-like Negresses serving symbolically as a Greek chorus, the play shows the decay of the proud and aristocratic Connelly family because of their poverty, weakness, and the sins of their fathers. The daughter of one of the Connelly tenants marries Will Connelly and gives him the strength to overcome the past. His spinster sisters are shocked, but when reminded that the Connelly family includes a great number of Negroes and mulattoes, they are silenced. The Prayer Meeting shows a view of Negro life with all its wicked merriment in the young group who holds a prayer meeting to have fun with their best girls and fellows. The righteous, horrified grandmother of the girls who organized the party, arrives home unexpectedly and breaks up the meeting. The play ends on a note of despair when the grandmother discovers that her much-loved grandson has killed a man. A play that is a farce rather than a tragedy is The Man Who Died at Twelve O'Clock. Sally and her lover want to get married, but Sally's grandfather objects. The young couple play upon the old man's superstition that he is to die at twelve o'clock, by disguising the boy as a devil and getting the old man to agree to the wedding in exchange for not carrying him to hell.

Ridgley Torrence is a well-known white artist that deals effectively with Negro life. The tragedy, Granny Maumee, is the story of a blind old lady whose obsession is the fact that her son has been burned at the stake by a white mob. Her only aim in life
is to see her great-great grandson, who is to take his place. She glories that her family are pure blacks and not mulattoes. By some magic process, Granny regains her sight and sees the baby. Her shock is almost too much to bear when she discovers that the child is white. Granny calls upon the spirits to put a curse upon the baby and its mother. Her son’s image appears to her and the curse is broken with the death of Granny. It is a pathetic play full of heartbreak at the unfairness of the whites for killing her son.

The Dance Calinda is a pantomine with folk music by the same author. This tragedy tells of a Negro who is enticed by the music of the Mardi Gras and is stabbed because he dares to dance with a Spanish girl. On the other side of the scale is his The Rider of Dreams, a comedy telling of a religious Negro lady and her lazy husband. The man lives in an impractical dream world of the wonderful things he will do in the future. He manages to lose the money his wife has been saving to pay for their home, by letting a man trick him with a worthless project that is to make him rich and give him a much-wanted guitar. A friend recovers all the money and everything ends happily. However, the husband is an incurable dreamer and he goes right on dreaming.

Haiti by William Dubois, a Negro tells of a successful Negro revolution in Haiti led by Jean Christophe and Toussaint l’Ouverture. There is little stress upon social implications. The personal interest is furnished when one finds that a Colonel’s beautiful wife is an octoroon with one of the revolutionary leaders
as her father, whom she has never seen. Finally the secret is revealed to her. Her sympathy is with the revolutionaries and when her father is killed she goes forward unafraid. This realistic forceful play is neither a comedy or a tragedy. Perhaps it can best be classified as a historical type play.

One of the most popular folk plays is the well-known *Porgy* by Dorothy and DuBose Heyward. This is another play of Negro life. The stage represents Catfish Row in Charleston, South Carolina. Porgy, a crippled peddler, has given refuge to Bess, whom he loves. She has been the mistress of a longshoreman now hiding for murder. Her efforts to go straight are ruined by the reappearance of the longshoreman. Afterward she is so discouraged that she lets a drug dealer tempt her with "happy dust" and persuade her to go to New York with him. Porgy sets out after her in his goat cart, confident that he will find her. This play can be classified as a melodrama of Negro life. *Mamba's Daughters* is a later melodrama by the same authors. Mamba is ambitious for her granddaughter Lissa. She slowly climbs up the ladder of the social scale, using her wits to get to her goal. Her daughter, Hagar, is also eager to help her daughter, but she is not so intelligent as Mamba; as a huge, rather simple-minded Negro, she gets into trouble with almost everything she does. Mamba finally accomplishes her goal through the help of Hagar who sacrifices herself for her daughter. Hagar kills a man who attacked Lissa, and she writes a confession and commits suicide so that the murder will not be blamed upon her daughter.
Anna Lucasta is a melodrama by Philip Yordan. It seems to be a mixture of vice and respectability. Anna is called back to her home from her life of sin so that she can marry a "sucker" that has money and split it with her worthless relatives. The sucker proves to be intelligent, but he immediately falls in love with Anna. She desperately wishes that she had respectability so that she could be worthy of her husband-to-be. On the day that she is to be married, her father exposes her to her fiance and his relatives so she runs away with a former lover. The man she is to marry goes after her, saying that her past life makes no difference in the way he feels about her.

The best known of all plays upon Negro subjects would, no doubt, be Marc Connelly's, Green Pastures. The play is a delightful fantasy concerning the Negro's heaven. The first scene opens realistically with a Sunday School class of Negro children asking questions about their lesson. Then the scene changes with the audience being able to look at heaven, complete with "fish fry, seegars and biled custard." After "De Lawd" creates man, he is soon irritated with man's sinfullness. After the flood and after Moses lead his people to the Land of Canaan, De Lawd is so disgusted that he renounces man completely. But during the siege of Jerusalem he cannot resist going down once more. Here he learns that God should become a God of mercy and that even God must suffer. They play is both humorous and affecting with no trace of ridicule.

The melodrama is a popular form for a Negro production. One of the early examples was Lulu Belle by Edward Sheldon and Charles
MacArthur. This told the lurid story of a Harlem tart who seduces a barber. Soon she deserts him and eventually reaches Paris, becoming the mistress of a French count. Here, both her sins and the barber catch up with her, and she is strangled to death. *The Nigger* by Sheldon is not quite so melodramatic and is more tragic. It is the story of a governor of a Southern state who, unknown to himself, is a mulatto. The secret is known to his political enemy who attempts to use it for his own aggrandizement.

*Harlem* by William Jordan Rapp and Wallace Thurman is a collaboration between the white Rapp and the black Thurman. It is another of the melodrama group. The play shows the degradation of a respectable black family after it moves to Harlem with its "rent parties", "belly-hug" dancing, and general promiscuity. The daughter spurns her fiance and runs away, first with a gangster, and after he is murdered, with a song plugger.

One of the finest plays written by a black and a white artist is *Native Son* by Richard Wright and Paul Green. It is a powerful melodramatic tragedy in which Bigger Thomas, a Negro boy, is put on trial for the murder of a white girl. He is undeniably guilty, but his lawyer pleads that he should not be executed because he is what society has made him. He is the product of poverty, injustice, and discrimination. The lawyer's plea is powerful but Bigger is executed.

*The Flight of the Natives* by Willis Richardson, a Negro dramatist, tells of the cruelty of the slave owner and the efforts of his slaves in trying to escape. The play is a tragedy dating back to
Civil War times. Another tragedy by the same man is The Broken Banjo, telling of a Negro who loves his banjo more than anything else in the world. When the banjo is broken, a quarrel ensues. The wife's relatives turn the banjo owner over to the police when it is discovered that he is a killer.

The Bird Child by Lucy White tells of a man who is white, but has an illegitimate Negro daughter who he decides to keep when her mother sends her to him, because she had eyes just like his mother's eyes and was born on the day of her death. It is another one of the many tragedies written about the Negro.

The tragedy, Sugar Cane, by Frank H. Wilson, one of the better-known Negro dramatists, tells of a Negro girl who has an illegitimate baby. A white man is the father, but a Negro is blamed for the crime. Finally the truth comes to light and the young Negro that loves the girl goes to the white man's home to get revenge. Before he gets a chance to do so, the white man is killed by an exploding stove.

Negro dramatist, John Matheus wrote the Cruiter which tells of a young Negro couple leaving the farm where they are mistreated to work in a munitions factory in the North. Granny feels that she is too old to leave her home so she stays on alone with the family dog and awaits her death. This tragic little episode is filled with the hopes and dreams of the young couple as to what they will have when they go North. It is obvious that they will never have their wishes come true.
Judge Lynch is another tragedy by a Negro dramatist. It portrays the innocent Negro who is lynched because a white man has been murdered and the Negro has had a quarrel with the murdered man. No one bothers to think about a trial for a Negro. He is killed while the guilty white man goes free.

Rackey, by Ernest Howard Culbertson tells of the reformation of a bad Negro because he has a vision. He returns to his old home to reclaim his wife, and finds that she is happily married again, so he pretends that he is still the same old wild, worthless man that he used to be and sacrifices his own happiness for his wife's security. This play would come in the general classification of a tragedy.

A play having very little plot is Balo. In this play Jean Toomer tells of the conversion of a religious boy to Christ.

Georgia Douglass Johnson's Flumes hinges upon the illness of the daughter of a poor Negro washer-woman who debates whether or not to pay fifty dollars for an operation for her child or whether to save the money for a decent burial, since she believes that the child will die anyway. Meanwhile, the child dies and this settles the problem.

The Death Dance deals with an African theme. In the mystery play, Thelma Duncan tells of the tribal customs of the African Negroes, with the proper man being punished in the final outcome.

Richard Bruce writes an African ballet called Sahji. It is a superstitious play showing the death of the tribal chieftan and the suicide of his favorite wife. It is all done with proper incantations and ritual.
The Starter is a comedy of Harlem life by Eulalie Spence. There is a play upon words in the old minstrel style for comic effect, and there is very little plot.

Randolph Edmonds wrote Bad Man and proves satisfactorily that even a bad man has a great deal of good in him. This tragedy deals with the bad Thea Dugger who has killed several men and is willing to kill more, but he willingly gives up his life for a murder that he did not commit to save his comrades and a girl who tells him that she believes that he is good.

The Seer by James W. Butcher, Jr. is a farce dealing with a superstitious old Negro who will not let his niece marry the man she loves because another man that wants to marry her has convinced him that the spirits are against their marriage. A hilarious scene develops with the young couple frightening the two who believe in spirits and finally the uncle is convinced that there is no such thing as spirits.

Another farce comedy is Thomas D. Pawley, Jr.'s Judgement Day. Zeke refuses to go to church in spite of the minister's and his wife's urgings. Then he has a dream that he is to be divided between hell and heaven and he decides to go to church—after he has had a nap.

Theodore Ward is one of the most prominent living Negro playwrights. His Big White Fog is a tragedy centering around a Negro family in Chicago in the depression years, struggling against the fog of poverty and prejudice. Our Lan'is another tragedy of the Negro's efforts after the Civil War to win and hold his own land. This climax is when Joshuah, the leader, and Delphine, the girl who
loves him, await the cannon shot which will bring inevitable death to them and destruction to the settlement Joshuah has built upon a Georgia island.

Here we have several different types of plays about Negro life—the farce, the comedy, the melodrama, and the tragedy. We have white dramatists and Negro dramatists. The greatest percent of the plays are tragedies with the melodrama occurring rather frequently.
CHAPTER VI

DRAMA AND THE STATUS OF THE NEGRO

The living conditions of the Negro is reflected in his drama. All evidence points to low living conditions with a general state of poverty. None of the plays listed in chapter five are written about rich Negroes, and most of them are very poor indeed. The whites mentioned, have more money, better homes, and more comforts. Poverty is the entire theme of Georgia Douglass Johnson's, Plumes. The scene is a poor cottage in the South. It is a story of a widowed mother with a sick child that the mother believes is going to die, and her main worry is having enough money for a "shor mufn funeral with plumes." By taking in washing, she has managed to save fifty dollars, but when the child needs money for an operation, the mother waits because she cannot bear to part with her money and not have any left for a decent burial. The child dies and the money is used for her funeral. Her death could possibly have been prevented if her mother had had even a modest sum of money to give her the needed care. This pathetic story is not the only one of its kind. Bigger Thomas in The Native Son is a product of poverty as shown by his lawyer in his plea for Bigger's life. The Hot Iron tells of a woman who does ironings for a living. She can barely get enough food from her small wages to keep her children from starving. Several of the plays tell of slave cabins with their deplorable conditions. Willis Richardson tells of these conditions in The Flight of the Natives.
In Abraham's Bosom, a descriptive scene telling of Abraham's home mentions that his two room cabin is barely furnished. Flies swarm over the bed. Abe hasn't been able to raise anything. He has no money, not even any shoes. Everything he has is mortgaged. Abe says that it—

...Makes no difference. Wuk our guts out do no good. ...de nigger is down, down. De white man up dere high, settin up wid God, up dere in his favor. He git eve'rything, nigger git the scraps, the leavings.¹

The Big White Fog has the suggestion in it that the young Negro girl is a prostitute to get enough money so that her family will not be kicked out in the street. The setting of a majority of the plays are in poor tenement houses, cabins, small farm homes, servant's quarters, and one room shacks.

The reasons for such poor living conditions may be traced to the occupations that Negroes are trained to do and the jobs the whites allow them to hold. Abraham is a field hand. From Native Son, we have Bigger Thomas, a chauffeur. Porgy is a peddler, while several of the women characters are washer-women. Many of the characters are tenant farmers or servants. There are no professional men among them because their work is that of the oppressed and the uneducated.

The education of the Negro is discussed in only one or two of the Negro plays. It is a vital issue to Abraham. In Abraham's Bosom, many of the Negroes do not seem to think education in necessary.

The regular field hands feel that Abe is queer for wanting to be educated. "Give a nigger a book and des' well shoot him," says Bud. "All de white folks tell you that." Abraham has higher ambitions. "I figger foh you, foh me, foh all de blacks in de world to lead 'em up out'n ignorance." Abe's school is started but it is forceably closed. It was formerly a Negro cabin of one bare room, now fitted up as a school house. It has a stove, table, four or five pine benches, and a small blackboard. In Anna Lucasta Negroes show their scorn for education. Stella expresses the opinion that education never gets you anywhere. All the learning in the world would not help her with her husband. Another Negro who wants an education is shown in The End of the Row. Neither Lalie nor Abraham reach their goal of improving the Negroes conditions by educating him. The educational status remains low.

Social development is not shown as such in many of the Negro plays. Most of the Negroes spend their time making a living. It is mentioned in several plays that they meet their friends in pool halls, bars, and gambling halls. Bigger Thomas meets his friends on street corners and pool halls. Joe Mott in The Iceman Cometh spends all of his time in a bar and Anna Lucasta also does so. Much of the Negroes' recreation comes through religious meetings as in Balo by Jean Toomer. All the relatives and friends gather to visit,

2. Loc. cit.
3. Ibid., p. 337.
sing songs, and listen to a sermon. In *The Prayer Meeting*, the young people get together for a good time. Picnics and dances seem to be popular. *The Dance Calendar* tells of the natural dancing ability of the Negroes and their enjoyment of it. There is a masquerade mentioned in *The Man Who Died at Twelve O'clock*. The girl makes a devil's costume for her boyfriend to wear. The Negroes like to have parties and are a fun-loving people.

The mental attitudes of the Negroes and whites toward each other are quite varied. In *All God’s Chillun Got Wings* by Eugene O'Neill, Jim Crow, a Negro, marries Ella Downey, a white girl. Intellectually, Jim is superior, but Ella cannot help feeling superior throughout the play. She shows her contempt for the Negro race by stabbing a Congo mask, which to her, symbolizes all that she hates. At times she even hates her husband because he is black. She never wants him to succeed because that will prove that he is brilliant, and she cannot seem to stand the idea of a Negro being more intelligent than she. Jim is, on the other hand, bitter and resentful. He feels that the white race is holding him back. He cannot pass his examinations and he blames the whites.

"It'd be against all natural laws, all human right and justice." He feels the pressure of society so intensely that he cannot help failing. "You with your fool talk of the black race and the white

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race! Where does the human race get a chance to come in?... You lock it up in asylums and throw away the key!"\(^5\)

Many other Negro characters have the same cry. Rackey, written by Ernest Howard Culbertson, tells of no-good Rackey's reformation. He has reformed because he has seen an angel one night from the land of the spirit, but still he is a "niggah" and he wants to be looked upon as a man. He says:

\[
\text{Jus' a niggah! Jus' a niggah—dat's all! Who—want a man who—who kin see—night an' day—de lan' ob de spirit—who want a man who kin talk bout de-vision? Whar kin I go ter meet up wid dem dat's got w'at I got! I ain' niggah—I'se—I'se a man who sees de lan' ob de spirit—}^{6}\]

Granny Maumee by Torrence, hates the whites because they burned her son at the stake. Ironically, her grand-daughter increases her ire by bringing home a white child. The mental attitudes seem to range from hate to hopelessness in the Negro. The whites have a feeling of superiority.

Many of the Negro plays bring out their attitude toward religion. Most of them are quite religious and quite superstitious. The Rider of Dreams by Ridgley Torrence shows the part that religion plays in the life of Lucy Sparrow, a washerwoman who tries to teach her son, Booker, about the Bible. As a devout believer she says that "Man got no right to enjoy hisself. He got to enjoy Gawd."

\[\text{\textsuperscript{5} Loc. cit.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{6} Ernest Howard Culbertson, "Rackey," Plays of Negro Life (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1927) p. 69.}\]
She is raising her son for the Kingdom and she declares to him that he is "a goin' in de Kingdom if pushin' 'll land you dere." 7 *Judgment Day* by Thomas D. Pawley, Jr. tells of the pious wife who tries to persuade her husband to go to church. Even with the help of the Reverend, husband Zeke declares that he will not attend church until communion Sunday. Zeke then falls asleep and dreams of judgment day. In his dream, his wife enters paradise but he is to be divided with a butcher knife and half of him will enter Hades. He awakens and decides to go to church, but instead he goes to sleep again. *The Green Pastures* by Marc Connelly tells of a Negro's idea of heaven. It shows the Negro Sunday School Class and pictures "De Lawd" in a high silk hat and smoking a cigar. The angels have a fish fry in heaven and everyone has a good time. In the play, *Racky*, a no-count niggah tells of seeing "de lan' ob de spirit." After he sees the vision he reforms and becomes a respectable citizen. *The Dreamy Kid* by Eugene O'Neill tells of the superstitious and religious old Mammy who is dying and wants Dreamy to be with her and say a prayer for her. Dreamy dares not leave his Mammy before death for fear of the curse which she says will follow him all of his life if he does. "If yo' leave me now, yo' ain't gwine git no bit er luck s'long's yo' live, I tells yo' dat!" In answer to this, Dreamy

says, "I ain't gwine again her dyin' curse. No, suh!"

This brief resume of drama and of the status of the Negro gives one an insight into the life of the Negro. However, one must remember that Negro drama is written for a purpose. Because a majority of plays dealing with the Negro shows that the Negro has poor living conditions, it does not necessarily follow that all of the Negroes in America are poverty-stricken. It means that a great number of audiences are conditioned to look upon the Negro as a poor race. These conditions may be true or they may not. Economic conditions in plays are also shown to be low with a low standard of education. All in all, plays show the Negro as rather ignorant because of lack of opportunities for education. They tell of the serious and the fun-loving Negro, the religious and the superstitious, and those that are bitter, dejected, hopeless, filled with fear or hate, and, above all, those who are always striving to better their low conditions by fighting for equality.

Possibly this picture is not entirely true. It does show the problems of a minority race. It is, no doubt, a case of underestimation to put the Negro in such sordid surroundings. Many readers agreed with James Weldon Johnson's hero in The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, that American literature has too little about "co-

lored people who live in respectable homes and amidst a fair degree of culture. Also, great areas of Negro life remain unexplored. There is little drama dealing with college life, with the Negro professional class, Negro churches, business, white-collar employment, or in athletics or entertainment. Perhaps when Negro drama expands to include these phases, the picture of Negro life will be a little less distorted.

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10. Loc. cit.
CHAPTER VII

PURPOSES FOR WRITING NEGRO PLAYS

Most Negro plays are written for propaganda purposes to bring out the conditions of the Negro and to propagate racial equality. Ever since the time when plays were written to free the slaves during the Civil War days, Negroes and whites have been trying to free the Negro. They surround him with the poorest conditions possible so as to make him a pitiable figure and arouse ire in the readers so that they will want to do something about the situation. The Negro subject has great possibilities to play upon the emotions. Almost all Negro tragedies are, in some way, connected with racial prejudice. Bringing out the factors of racial prejudice leads naturally to a propaganda play. The Negro is presented as the underdog, downtrodden by cruel, white superiors. More often than not, he is presented as right in his ideas, or if he is wrong, he is not to blame, personally. The blame is placed upon the whites or surrounding conditions. Many of these propaganda plays turn into psychological studies, coming to the conclusion that if Negroes act in an uncivilized manner, they act as they do because they are not allowed to behave in a free way and are stopped from achieving their ambitions because of outside interference.

One of the greatest propaganda plays of present times is Native Son by Paul Green and Richard Wright. Richard Wright is a Negro author and the play is based upon his novel by the same name as the play. The play is a strong preaching for treating the
Negroes as the whites. The climax of the play includes a speech by
Bigger Thomas' lawyer to save Bigger's life. No one can doubt that
Bigger is a murderer, but his lawyer feels that the boy should not
be executed and he blames society for Bigger's mistakes.

I say that this boy is the victim of a wrong that has
grown, like a cancer into the very blood and bone of our
social structure. Bigger Thomas sits here today as a
symbol of that wrong. With one part of his mind he
believes what we had taught him—that he was a free man.
With the other he found himself denied the right to accept
that truth.¹

Another propaganda play is Eugene O'Neill's, All God's Chillun
Got Wings. With the problem of a white girl marrying a Negro man,
northeither the whites nor the Negroes would accept the couple in the
United States. They had to go to France to find a place where they
could be accepted. O'Neill gains power by playing upon the idea of
racial prejudice. He symbolizes the separation between the races
by having the whites on one street and the blacks on another street.
Then there are two rows of hostile people, one of blacks, one of
whites, through which the wedded couple must pass when leaving the
church. This couple's downfall came because they cannot overcome
the prejudice. Such a tragic ending cannot help appealing to
audiences for better conditions.

The Dreamy Kid, by Eugene O'Neill, tells of a Negro boy who
has killed a man, and is being hunted by the police. Dreamy's dile-
emma and the dilemma of his close associates are symbolic of the

daily problems faced by American Negroes. J. Lovell, Jr. declares that Dreamy is a killer because he is hunted, not just hunted because he is a killer. The play is propaganda for these reasons: its symbol is clear and whole; it is presented absolutely in the spirit of the action and passion of the price; it does not demean itself by puny solutions. Brutus from The Emperor Jones, is very like Dreamy. Their early attempts to live honestly prove futile because of society's reaction to their people; they both became bad to protect themselves as hunted beings, and find themselves hunted a great deal more.

Plumes by Georgia Douglass Johnson is a propaganda play but not for racial equality. In this play there is no hint of the superiority of the whites, but there is the eternal struggle of the poor against poverty. The play tries to bring about sympathy for the characters as people in a dismal situation.

John William Rogers, Jr. tries to bring about or at least show the inequality of the Negro. In his Judge Lynch, a Negro is tortured and executed for a killing that he did not commit. There was no trial by the non-thinking lynch mob. Rogers shows the narrow-mindedness of the whites who consider the Negro as having savage tendencies. Many of the whites believe them completely uncivilized. They say that there is something in them that "when it is awake, it don't know any language except what them animals knows." The whites

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never realize their mistakes in killing the innocent Negro because they are prejudiced and have their minds made up beforehand.

The Negro author, Willis Richardson, returns to the times of the slaves in his *The Flight of the Natives*. Although the times during our history of cruel slave owners is supposedly past, this play still carried a message for present times. The theme of freedom for the oppressed, blazes throughout the play.

Almost any number of examples could be used to illustrate the propaganda purposes in plays by and about the Negro. Green's Abraham plays, Torrence's *Granny Maunee*, Lucy White's *The Bird Child*, and *Sugar Cane* by Frank Wilson are all propaganda plays.

Another purpose for writing Negro plays is amusement. It is surprising that few comedies are written about Negroes. Most of the tragic Negro plays do not include even one comic character. Most comedies about Negroes are written by white dramatists. Many plays about whites include a Negro cook, maid, butler or other servant as a minor comedy character. It is always a purely type character and everyone knows what to expect of him.

One of the few plays written by a Negro for amusement is *The Starter*, a comedy of Harlem life, by Eulalie Spence. This play employs the slapstick type of comedy present in the old time Negro minstrels. There is the usual play upon words. The hero, Kelly, is a starter "just one step better'n the man who runs the cage." Georgia, his current girl friend, is a finisher. With a great deal of play on the words "starter" and "finisher," they feel that they are meant
for each other because one can start projects and the other can finish them.

The best-known and best-loved of all plays about Negroes is Marc Connelly's, The Green Pastures. Although this play does not fit into the category of pure comedy, there are amusing scenes throughout the play. This is not the slapstick type of comedy, but the amusement of seeing Negro life in its more cheerful and fanciful aspects. Even though one enjoys the concept of the Negroes' heaven, with its fish fry and ten-cent "seegars," amusement does not seem to be the prime aim of the play. However, it can be classed as a secondary aim.

The Seer by James W. Butcher, Jr. and Judgement Day by Thomas D. Pawley, Jr. are both written primarily for amusement purposes. The former play tells how a superstitious Negro is outwitted. The scenes telling of the calling of the spirits from the other world could be made very humorous when presented upon a stage. The two men calling the spirits are incredibly frightened. They sprinkle salt around themselves to keep the spirits from getting too close. Judgement Day has some humorous scenes when Zeke dreams that two men are playing cards for his soul. The play carries on in the following manner:

Brown. Zeke Porter, come to judgment. . .Zeke Porter of all the souls that have come before us, yours is the worse. . .
Zeke. Is I—all dat bad?
Brown. You mean, were you all dat bad. 'Cause you no longer exist as you were. Do you realize that you can't enter Paradise, and Hades don't want you?
Zeke. But I gotta go somewhere. I can't just wander but 'mong de stars.
Brown. That's just the trouble.
Pluto. Well, what're we going to do with him?
Brown. I don't know. He's so lazy that he didn't even get to judgment on time!

The Man Who Died at Twelve O'Clock by Paul Green is much the same type as The Seer, even though one was written by a white man and the other by a Negro.

Those who write about the Negro are much too busy trying to promote quality to spend too much time writing for amusement. Perhaps when a more objective outlook on the Negro situation is achieved then there will be more Negro plays for amusement purposes.

Character development to give an idea of just what a character may be like or how it may change is a valid reason for writing a play, but very few plays can be said to be written for the job of character development alone. Some plays do an excellent bit of character development and still are written for propaganda purposes. Mamba's Daughters by DuBose and Dorothy Heyward has no noticeable propaganda purpose. It builds a picture of Mamba and her "daughters" as individuals and as racial types. It continually builds the idea of Mamba accomplishing what she sets out to do. She shows that she has the cunning and strength to do it. Her daughter, Hagar, is a stolid creature, who stands out as a very strong person trying in a bungling way to do her best for her child, Lissa.

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Bad Man by Randolph Edmonds, besides being a propaganda piece, shows that one can find a great deal of good in a so-called "bad-man". Thea Dugger had killed six men during his lifetime, but he confesses and burns to death for a murder that he did not commit in order to save his companions from sharing a death from a lynching party.

Character development seems to be very closely connected with an author's attempt to give an accurate picture of Negro life. Very few plays try to picture Negro life accurately. Mamba's Daughters does give several phases of Negro life. The author of the novel tells that his book is concerned only with certain social and spiritual values existing in Charleston and its environs. The phosphate mining camp stands not merely as an exposition of an isolated industry, but as a focal point for the drawing together of a number of mental attitudes and incidents typical of the industrial black belt. It shows the class distinctions which exist in Negro society just the same as in white society. Another play in this group is The Green Pastures, certainly not a realistic play, but it manages to tell fundamental truths about Negro character through imagination, suggestion, fable, and symbolism. Telling fundamental truths about the Negro does help to get an accurate picture of his life.

The plays that show the Negroes' ambition to achieve are primarily propaganda plays. Paul Green's In Abraham's Bosom is an

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outstanding example of the Negro's ambition to achieve a high place in the world through education. Abraham wishes to start a school for Negro children with himself as teacher, but he does not get to have one except for a short time. The End of the Row tells of a Negro girl who wishes to get an education. Eugene O'Neill's, All God's Chillun Got Wings, tells of Jim's struggle to become a lawyer, but he becomes paralyzed with fright every time he has to take an examination. He declares that every time he has to take a written test "There's a blank in my head—stupidity—I sit like a fool fighting to remember a little bit here, a little bit there, not enough to pass—not enough for anything—when I know it all!" Jim reached for the stars and he fails to grasp them. There is only one Negro character in Eugene O'Neill's, The Iceman Cometh, but he, Joe Mott, is a Negro who has aspired and has fallen because his aspiration was not good enough. He was a one-time proprietor of a Negro gambling house and as he liked to point out, he is essentially white, and has often been so declared by people who were in a position to know, but he is a dreamer that has been ruined by social depression, drinks and shiftlessness.

A study of Negro plays proves that by far the greatest number of Negro plays are written for propaganda purposes. Some plays have propaganda as their major purposes and other minor purposes. A few plays are written for amusement but most of these are not too well developed. Many Negro plays are directed at changing conditions.

CHAPTER VIII

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The history of the Negro drama leads to the conclusion that because Negroes were allowed to play only stereotyped parts, the influence of Negro drama has been very slight until the beginning of the twentieth century. The Negro first expressed his talent through his songs. He got his start in drama by performing in barrooms, gambling houses, and later on the vaudeville stage. There were always more Negroes who wished to be actors than there were those who wished to be dramatists. Even today, there are more white dramatists using the Negro subject than there are Negro dramatists using it. Negro actors have played upon the Broadway stage, but Negro dramatists have difficulty getting their plays staged there. With the exception of musical comedies, only one play of Negro life of complete Negro authorship, has reached Broadway. A few Little Theatre groups have furthered the cause of Negro drama, as have Negro colleges and universities. Even with existing problems, most drama critics look forward to a hopeful future for Negro drama.

By far the greatest number of plays about the Negro are tragedies written for propaganda purposes to expose the conditions under which Negroes live, and to further the cause of equality for the Negro. The status of the Negro is pictured as very low with a small amount of education, and low economic status that is kept
low because of the menial jobs that Negroes are allowed to hold. Most Negroes are shown to be superstitious with firm religious convictions. Their mental attitudes toward the whites are bitter, and rebellious or attitudes of defeatism.

The conditions presented, may not be a true picture of Negro life, but it is the picture that is used to influence audiences who see Negro plays. The study brings out Negro characteristics, and Negro problems as shown through Negro drama. It is hoped that this will be valuable to the cause of tolerance and understanding.
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