

# The Negro in Art

## How Shall He Be Portrayed

### A Symposium

**W**E have asked the artists of the world these questions:

1. When the artist, black or white, portrays Negro characters is he under any obligations or limitations as to the sort of character he will portray?

2. Can any author be criticized for painting the worst or the best characters of a group?

3. Can publishers be criticized for refusing to handle novels that portray Negroes of education and accomplishment, on the ground that these characters are no different from white folk and therefore not interesting?

4. What are Negroes to do when they are continually painted at their worst and judged by the public as they are painted?

5. Does the situation of the educated Negro in America with its pathos, humiliation and tragedy call for artistic treatment at least as sincere and sympathetic as "Porgy" received?

6. Is not the continual portrayal of the sordid, foolish and criminal among Negroes convincing the world that this and this alone is really and essentially Negroid, and preventing white artists from knowing any other types and preventing black artists from daring to paint them?

7. Is there not a real danger that young colored writers will be tempted to follow the popular trend in portraying Negro character in the underworld rather than seeking to paint the truth about themselves and their own social class?

Here are some answers. More will follow:

1. Neither the black nor the white artist should be under obligations or limitations as to the sort of character he will portray. His own experience and his inmost perception of truth and beauty, in its severest interpretation, should be his only criteria.

2. An author can be criticized for painting the worst or best characters of a group if his portrayal thereby becomes artistically false; he should be free to choose his characters according to his desire and purpose.

3. Publishers assuredly may be criticized for refusing to handle novels portraying Negroes of education and accomplishment, on the ground that these characters are no different from white folk and therefore not interesting. The Negro of this type has an

artistic as well as a social right to speak for himself; and what he has to say is all too interesting, as a rule.

4. The work of such magazines as *THE CRISIS* and *Opportunity* suggests a possible way out. Through his songs, through drama, poetry and fiction, the Negro should make every effort to put before the public a true picture of the race, in totality; and white folk of sufficient intelligence and courage to recognize the issue as it stands should be enlisted as an auxiliary force to the same end.

5. The situation of the educated Negro in America surely merits all possible sincere and artistic treatment. If such enterprises seem doomed to failure in this country, they should be taken to Canada or England, or to the continental countries, and so finally reach the United States public with their prestige already established.

6. The portrayal of sordid, foolish and criminal types among Negroes is not convincing the world that such groups alone comprise the essentially Negroid, but it surely is doing a great deal to foster that opinion in the United States, where there are many anxious to believe it. The portrayal of such types by no means damns a race; look at the long line of English, French, Spanish and Russian novels and plays dealing with such characters; nor does one need to confine the list to those countries exclusively. Such portrayals have their place and deep significance artistically; but they at once become false and evil if used for propagandist purposes, or with ulterior racial motives.

7. Such a danger can scarcely be stated as a general phenomenon. The average young colored writer, if he be honest as an artist, will write the thing that is in his heart to write regardless of so-called "popular trends". Any artist who speaks the truth as he sees it and refuses to compromise with Mammon has none too easy a time; it is not a question of color, it is a question of courage. One has no reason to believe that the sincere black artist will be more easily daunted than a sincere white or brown or yellow artist. The one diffi-

culty that does seem to exist, in the light of a thoughtful reading of recent Negro novels and poems, is that many times an ingrained bitterness tinges work otherwise clearly and beautifully carried out. For that the Negro is not to blame, nor can one state the solution of the problem back of it. The only way out is up; and that seems to be the way which the younger Negro artists, singers and writers have chosen for themselves and for their people. More power to them.

VACHEL LINDSAY.

After reading your letter it suddenly occurred to me that just possibly *all* of the astounding and extraordinarily interesting Negro fiction which is now appearing may be entirely off on the wrong foot. All of you, or very nearly all, are primarily absorbed in the economic and social problems of the colored race. Complicated though these problems are in detail, yet inevitably they fall into a few general themes; so that there is the greatest danger that all of your novels will be fundamentally alike.

For example, this problem of going over and passing for white must be one which will appeal to all of you. It must needs be much the same in your book or in Walter White's.

Ordinarily I hate committees, conferences and organizations like the very devil. But I wonder if there isn't a problem here which demands a real and serious conference? Should American Negroes write as Americans or Negroes? Should they follow the pattern of the Jewish authors who are quite as likely to write about Nordics as about fellow Jews; or that of Zangwill, who is of importance only when he is writing about Jews? Should there be a Negro publishing house so that the Negro author can tell all of the ordinary publishing hous-

es to go to the devil? Should there be a club—a comfortable small hotel in Paris to which the American Negroes can go and be more than welcome?

These and a thousand like topics suggest themselves to me as they have, of course, suggested themselves to Dr. DuBois and yourself. Their very complexity makes me feel that it is impossible to give any definite answer to them. Of this alone I am sure—you cannot, all of you, go on repeating the same novel (however important, however poignant, however magnificently dramatic) about the well-bred, literate and delightful Negro intellectual finding himself or herself blocked by the groundless and infuriating manner of superiority assumed by white men frequently less white than people technically known as Negroes.

SINCLAIR LEWIS.

Naturally I think it a great mistake for Negroes to become too sensitive. If, as a race, you were the ideal people sentimentalists sometimes try to make you how uninteresting you would be.

Why not quit thinking of Negro art? If the individual creating the art happens to be a Negro and some one wants to call it Negro Art let them.

As to Negroes always being painted at their worst I think it isn't true. Suppose I were to grow indignant every time a white man or woman were badly or cheaply done in the theatre or in books. I might spend my life being indignant.

I have lived a good deal in my youth among common Negro laborers. I have found them about the sweetest people I know. I have said so sometimes in my books.

I do not believe the Negroes have much more to complain of than the whites in this matter of their treatment in the arts.

SHERWOOD ANDERSON.

## Beware of Spring

E. RALPH CHENEY

Nature employs such obvious tricks to snare men's hearts  
Beware her blatant beauty, you who freedom prize!  
Each chorister of Spring owns necromatic arts  
And many strong men drown in pairs of dancing eyes.