The Origin and Growth of Afro-American Literature

By John Henrik Clarke

Africans were great storytellers long before their first appearance in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619. The rich and colorful history, art and folklore of West Africa, the ancestral home of most Afro-Americans, present evidence of this, and more.

Contrary to a misconception which still prevails, the Africans were familiar with literature and art for many years before their contact with the Western world. Before the breaking up of the social structure of the West African states of Ghana, Melle (Mali), and Songhay, and the internal strife and chaos that made the slave trade possible, the forefathers of the Africans who eventually became slaves in the United States lived in a society where university life was fairly common and scholars were beheld with reverence.

There were in this ancestry rulers who expanded their kingdoms into empires, great and magnificent armies whose physical dimensions dwarfed entire nations into submission, generals who advanced the technique of military science, scholars whose vision of life showed foresight and wisdom, and priests who told of gods that were strong and kind. To understand fully any aspect of Afro-American life, one must realize that the black American is not without a cultural past, though he was many generations removed from it before his achievements in American literature and art commanded any appreciable attention.

I have been referring to the African Origin of Afro-American literature and history. This preface is essential to every meaningful discussion of the role of the Afro-American in every major aspect of American life, past and present. Before getting into the main body of this talk I want to make it clear that the Black Race did not come to the United States culturally empty-handed.

I will elaborate very briefly on my statement to the effect that "the forefathers of the Africans who eventually became slaves in the United Sates once lived in a society where university life was fairly common and scholars were beheld with reverence."

During the period in West African history—from the early part of the fourteenth century to the time of the Moorish invasion in 1591—the City of Timbuktu, with the University of Sankore in the Songhay Empire, was the intellectual center of Africa. Black scholars were enjoying a renaissance that was known and respected throughout most of Africa and in parts of Europe. At this period in African history, the University of Sankore, at Timbuktu, was the educational capital of the Western Sudan. In his book *Timbuktu the Mysterious*, Felix DuBois gives us the following description of this period:

> The scholars of Timbuktu yielded in nothing, to the saints in their sojourns in the foreign universities of Fez, Tunis and Cairo. They astounded the most learned men of Islam by their erudition. That these Negroes were on a level with the Arabian Savants is proved by the fact that they were installed as professors in Morocco and Egypt. In contrast to this, we find that the Arabs were not always equal to the requirements of Sankore.

I will speak of only one of the great black scholars referred to in the book by Felix DuBois.

Ahmed Baba was the last chancellor of the University of Sankore. He was one of the greatest African

scholars of the late sixteenth century. His life is a brilliant example of the range and depth of West African intellectual activity before the colonial era. Ahmed Baba was the author of more than 40 books: nearly every one of these books had a different theme. He was in Timbuktu when it was invaded by the Moroccans in 1592, and he was one of the first citizens to protest this occupation of his beloved home town. Ahmed Baba, along with other scholars, was imprisoned and eventually exiled to Morocco. During his expatriation from Timbuktu, his collection of 1,600 books, one of the richest libraries of his day, was lost.

Now, West Africa entered a sad period of decline. During the Moorish occupation, wreck and ruin became the order of the day. When the Europeans arrived in this part of Africa and saw these conditions, they assumed that nothing of order and value had ever existed in these countries. This mistaken impression, too often repeated, has influenced the interpretation of African and Afro-American life in history for over 400 years.

Negroes played an important part in American life, history, and culture long before 1619. Our relationship to this country is as old as the country itself.

Africans first came to the new world as explorers. They participated in the exploratory expeditions of Balboa, the discoverer of the Pacific, and Cortes, the conqueror of Mexico. An African explorer helped to open up New Mexico and Arizona and prepared the way for the settlement of the Southwest, Africans also accompanied French Jesuit missionaries on their early travels through North America.

In the United States, the art and literature of the Negro people has had an economic origin. Much that is original in black American folklore, or singular in "Negro spirituals" and blues, can be traced to the economic institution of slavery and its influence upon the Negro's soul.

After the initial poetical debut of Jupiter Hammon and Phillis Wheatley, the main literary expression of the Negro was the slave narrative. One of the earliest of these narratives came from the pen of Gustavas Vassa, an African from Nigeria. This was a time of great pamphleteering in the United States. The free Africans in the North, and those who had escaped from slavery in the South, made their mark upon this time and awakened the conscience of the nation. Their lack of formal educational attainments gave their narratives a strong and rough-hewed truth, more arresting than scholarship.

Gustavas Vassa established his reputation with an autobiography, first printed in England. Vassa, born in 1745, was kidnapped by slavers when he was 11 years old and taken to America. He was placed in service on a plantation in Virginia. Eventually, he was able to purchase his freedom. He left the United States, made his home in England and became active in the British anti-slavery movement. In 1790, he presented a petition to Parliament to abolish the slave trade. His autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Gustavas Vassa*, was an immediate success and had to be published in five editions.

At the time when slave ships were still transporting Africans to the New World, two 18th century Negroes were writing and publishing works of poetry. The first of these was Jupiter Hammon, a slave in Queens Village, Long Island. In 1760, Hammon published *An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ with Penitential Cries*. … In all probability this was the first poem published by an American Negro. His most remarkable work, "An Address to the Negroes of New York," was published in 1787. Jupiter Hammon died in 1800.

Phillis Wheatley (1753–1784), like Hammon, was influenced by the religious forces of the

Wesley-Whitefield revival. Unlike Hammon, however, she was a writer of unusual talent. Though born in Africa, she acquired in an incredibly short time both the literary culture and the religion of her New England masters. Her writings reflect little of her race and much of the age in which she lived. She was a New England poet of the third quarter of the 18th century, and her poems reflected the poetic conventions of the Boston Puritans with whom she lived. Her fame continued long after her death in 1784 and she became one of the best known poets of New England.

Another important body of literature came out of this period. It is the literature of petition, written by free black men in the North, who were free in name only. Some of the early petitioners for justice were Caribbean-Americans who saw their plight and the plight of the Afro-Americans as one and the same.

In 18th century America, two of the most outstanding fighters for liberty and justice were the West Indians—Prince Hall and John B. Russworm. When Prince Hall came to the United States, the nation was in turmoil. The colonies were ablaze with indignation. Britain, with a series of revenue acts, had stoked the fires of colonial discontent. In Virginia, Patrick Henry was speaking of liberty or death. The cry, "No Taxation Without Representation," played on the nerve strings of the nation. Prince Hall, then a delicate looking teenager, often walked through the turbulent streets of Boston, an observer unobserved.

A few months before these hectic scenes, he had arrived in the United States from his home in Barbados, where he was born about 1748, the son of an Englishman and a free African woman. He was, in theory, a free man, but he knew that neither in Boston nor in Barbados were persons of African descent free in fact. At once, he questioned the sincerity of the vocal white patriots of Boston. It never seemed to have occurred to them that the announced principles motivating their action [were] stronger argument in favor of destroying the stem of slavery. The colonists held in servitude more than a half million human beings, some of them white: yet they engaged in the contradiction of going to war to support the theory that all men were created equal.

When Prince Hall arrived in Boston, that city was the center of the American slave trade. Most of the major leaders of the revolutionary movement, in fact, were slaveholders or investors in slave-supported businesses. Hall, like many other Americans, wondered: what did these men mean by freedom?

The condition of the free black men, as Prince Hall found them, was not an enviable one. Emancipation brought neither freedom nor relief from the stigma of color. They were still included with slaves, indentured servants, and Indians in the slave codes. Discriminatory laws severely circumscribed their freedom of movement.

By 1765, Prince Hall saw little change in the condition of the blacks, and though a freeman, at least in theory, he saw his people debased as though they were slaves still in bondage. These things drove him to prepare himself for leadership among his people. So, through diligence and frugality, he became a property owner, thus establishing himself in the eyes of white people as well as the blacks.

But the ownership of property was not enough. He still had to endure sneers and insults. He went to school at night, and later became a Methodist preacher. His church became the forum for his people's grievances. The years after his arrival in Boston, he was the accepted leader of the black community.

In 1788, Hall petitioned the Massachusetts Legislature, protesting the kidnapping of free Negroes. This was a time when American patriots were engaged in a constitutional struggle for freedom. They had proclaimed the inherent rights of all mankind to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Hall dared to

remind them that the black men in the United States were human beings and as such were entitled to freedom and respect for their human personality.

Prejudice made Hall the father of African secret societies in the United States. He is the father of what is now known as Negro Masonry. Hall first sought initiation into the white Masonic Lodge in Boston, but was turned down because of his color. He then applied to the Army Lodge of an Irish Regiment. His petition was favorably received. On March 6, 1775, Hall and fourteen other black Americans were initiated in Lodge Number 441. When, on March 17, the British were forced to evacuate Boston, the Army Lodge gave Prince Hall and his colleagues a license to meet and function as a Lodge. Thus, on July 3, 1776, African Lodge No. 1 came into being. This was the first Lodge in Masonry established in America for men of African descent.

The founding of the African Lodge was one of Prince Hall's greatest achievements. It afforded the Africans in the New England area a greater sense of security, and contributed to a new spirit of unity among them. Hall's interest did not end with the Lodge. He was deeply concerned with improving the lot of his people in other ways. He sought to have schools established for the children of the free Africans in Massachusetts. Of prime importance is the fact that Prince Hall worked to secure respect for the personality of his people and also played a significant role in the downfall of the Massachusetts slave trade. He helped to prepare the groundwork for the freedom fighters of the 19th and 20th centuries, whose continuing efforts have brought the black American closer to the goal of full citizenship.

The literature of petition was continued by men like David Walker whose *Appeal*, an indictment of slavery, was published in 1829. Dynamic ministers like Samuel Ringgold Ward and Henry Highland Garnet joined the ranks of the petitioners at the time a journalist literature was being born.

Frederick Douglass, the noblest of American black men of the 19th century, was the leader of the journalist group. He established the newspaper *North Star* and, later, the magazine *Douglass Monthly*. John B. Russworm and Samuel Cornish founded the newspaper *Freedom's Journal* in 1827.

In 1829, a third poet, George Moses Horton, published his book, *The Hope of Liberty*. In his second volume, *Naked Genius* (1865), he expressed his anti-slavery convictions more clearly. George Moses Horton was the first slave poet to openly protest his status.

Throughout the early part of the 19th century, the slave narrative became a new form of American literary expression.

The best known of these slave narratives came from the pen of Frederick Douglass, the foremost Negro in the anti-slavery movement. His first book was *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845). Ten years later, an improved enlarged edition, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, was published. His third autobiography, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, was published in 1881 and enlarged in 1892. Douglass fought for civil rights and against lynching and the Ku Klux Klan. No abuse of justice escaped his attention and his wrath.

It was not until 1887 that an Afro-American writer emerged who was fully a master of the short story as a literary form. This writer was Charles W. Chesnutt. Chesnutt, an Ohioan by birth, became a teacher in North Carolina while still in his middle teens. He studied the traditions and superstitions of the people that he taught and later made this material into the ingredient of his best short stories. In August 1887, his short story, "The Goophered Grapevine," appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*. This was the beginning of a

series of stories which were later brought together in his first book, *The Conjure Woman* (1899). "The Wife of His Youth" also appeared in the *Atlantic* (July 1898) and gave the title to his second volume, *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* (1899). Three more stories appeared later: "Bacter's Procrustes" in the *Atlantic* (June 1904), and "The Doll" and "Mr. Taylor's Funeral" in *The Crisis* magazine (April 1912 and April-May 1915).

Chesnutt's novel did not measure up on the standards he had set with his short stories, though they were all competently written. In 1928, he was awarded the Spingarn Medal for his "pioneer work as a literary artist depicting the life and struggle of Americans of Negro descent."

Paul Laurence Dunbar, a contemporary of Charles W. Chesnutt, made his reputation as a poet before extending his talent to short stories. Both Dunbar and Chesnutt very often used the same subject matter in their stories. Chesnutt was by far the better writer, and his style and attitude differed radically from Dunbar's.

Dunbar's pleasant folk tales of tradition-bound plantation black folk were more acceptable to a large white reading audience with preconceived ideas of "Negro characteristics." In all fairness, it must be said that Dunbar did not cater to this audience in all of his stories. In such stories as "The Tragedy at Three Forks," "The Lynching of Jube Benson," and "The Ordeal of Mt. Hope," he showed a deep concern and understanding of the more serious and troublesome aspects of Afro-American life. Collections of his stories are: *Folks from Dixie* (1898), *The Strength of Gideon* (1900), *In Old Plantation Days* (1903), and *The Heart of Happy Hollow* (1904). Only one of his novels, *The Sport of the Gods* (1902), is mainly concerned with Afro-American characters.

Chesnutt and Dunbar, in their day, reached a larger general reading audience than any of the black writers who came before them. The period of the slave narratives had passed. Yet the black writer was still an oddity and a stepchild in the eyes of most critics. This attitude continued in a lessening degree throughout one of the richest and most productive periods in Afro-American writing in the United States—the period called "the Negro Renaissance." The community of Harlem was the center and spiritual godfather and midwife for this renaissance. The cultural emancipation of the Afro-American that began before the First World War was now in full force. The black writer discovered a new voice within himself and liked the sound of it. The white writers who had been interpreting our life with an air of authority and a preponderance of error looked at last to the black writer for their next cue. In short story collections like Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) and Lanston Hughes' *The Ways of White Folks* (1934) heretofore unreal to some readers because it was new and so contrary to the stereotypes they had grown accustomed to.

In her book *Mules and Men* (1935), Zora Neale Hurston presented a collection of folk tales and sketches that showed the close relationship between humor and tragedy in Afro-American life. In doing this, she also fulfilled the first requirement of all books—to entertain and guide the reader through an interesting experience that is worth the time and attention it takes to absorb it. In other stories like *The Gilded Six Bit*, *Drenched in Light*, and *Spunk* another side of Miss Hurston's talent was shown.

In the midst of this renaissance, two strong voices from the West Indians were heard. Claude McKay, in his books *Ginger Town* (1932) and *Banana Bottom* (1933), wrote of life in his Jamaican homeland in a manner that debunked the travelogue exoticism usually attributed to Negro life in the Caribbean area.

Before the publication of these books, Harlem and its inhabitants had already been the subject matter for a group of remarkable short stories by McKay and the inspiration for his book, *Home to Harlem*, still the most famous novel ever written about that community.

In 1926, Eric Walrond, a native of British Guiana, explored and presented another side of West Indian life in his book, *Tropic Death*, a near classic. In these 10 naturalistic stories, Eric Walrond concerns himself mostly with labor and living conditions in the Panama Canal Zone where a diversity of people and ways of life meet and clash, while each tries to survive at the expense of the other. Clear perception and strength of style enabled Mr. Walrond to balance form and content in such a manner that the message was never intruded upon the unfolding of the stories.

Rudolph Fisher, another bright star of the Harlem literary Renaissance, was first a brilliant young doctor. The new and light touch he brought to his stories of Afro-American life did not mar the serious aspect that was always present. The message in his comic realism was more profound because he was skillful enough to weave it into the design of his stories without destroying any of their entertainment value. His stories "Blades of Steel," "The City of Refuge," and "The Promised Land" were published in *The Atlantic Monthly.* "*High Yaller*" appeared in *The Crisis* magazine during the hey-day of that publication, and was later reprinted in the O'Brien anthology, *Best Short Stories of 1934*. Unfortunately, he died before all of his bright promise was fulfilled.

The Harlem literary renaissance was studded with many names. Those already mentioned are only a few of the most outstanding. During the period of this literary flowering among black writers, Harlem became the Mecca, the stimulating Holy City, drawing pilgrims from all over the country and from some places abroad. Talented authors, playwrights, painters, and sculptors came forth eagerly showing their wares.

Three men, W.E.B. DuBois, James Weldon Johnson, and Alain Locke, cast a guiding influence over this movement without becoming a part of the social climbing and pseudo-intellectual aspect of it. W.E.B. DuBois, by continuously challenging the old concepts and misinterpretations of Afro-American life, gave enlightened new directions to a whole generation. As editor of *The Crisis*, he introduced many new black writers and extended his helpful and disciplined hand when it was needed. Following the death of Booker T. Washington and the decline of the Booker T. Washington school of thought, he became the spiritual father of new black intelligentsia.

James Weldon Johnson moved from Florida to New York. His diversity of talent established his reputation long before the beginning of the "New Negro literary movement." Later, as a participant in and historian of the movement, he helped to appraise and preserve the best that came out of it. In his books, *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), *Black Manhattan* (1930), and *Along This Way*, an autobiography (1933). James Weldon Johnson showed clearly that Negro writers have made a distinct contribution to the literature of the United States. His own creative talent made him one of the most able of these contributors.

Alain Locke is the writer who devoted the most time to the interpretation of the "New Negro literary movement" and to Afro-American literature in general. In 1923, he expanded the special Harlem issue of the magazine *Survey Graphic* (which he edited) into the anthology, *The New Negro*. This book is a milestone and a guide to Afro-American thought, literature, and art in the middle twenties. The objective

of the volume "to register the transformation of the inner and outer life of the Negro in America that had so significantly taken place in the last few preceding years," was ably achieved. For many years, Mr. Locke's annual appraisal of books by and about Negroes, published in *Opportunity* magazine, was an eagerly awaited literary event.

Early in the Harlem literary renaissance period, the black ghetto became an attraction for a varied assortment of white celebrities and just plain thrill-seeking white people lost from their moorings. Some were insipid rebels, defying the mores of their upbringing by associating with Negroes on a socially equal level. Some were too rich to work, not educated enough to teach, and not holy enough to preach. Others were searching for the mythological "noble savage"—the "exotic Negro."

These professional exotics were generally college educated Negroes who had become estranged from their families and the environment of their upbringing. They talked at length about the great books within them waiting to be written. Their white sponsors continued to subsidize them while they "developed their latent talent." Of course the "great books" of these camp followers never got written and, eventually, their white sponsors realized that they were never going to write—not even a good letter. Ironically, these sophisticates made a definite contribution to the period of the "New Negro literary renaissance." In socially inclined company, they proved that a black American could behave with as much attention to the details of social protocol as the best bred and richest white person in the country. They could balance a cocktail glass with expertness. Behind their pretense of being writers they were really actors—and rather good ones. They were generally better informed than their white sponsors and could easily participate in a discussion of the writings of Marcel Proust in one minute, and the music of Ludwig van Beethoven the next. As social parasites, they conducted themselves with a smoothness approaching an artistic accomplishment. Unknown to them, their conduct had done much to eliminate one of the major prevailing stereotypes of Afro-American life and manners.

Concurrently with the unfolding of this mildly funny comedy, the greatest productive period in Afro-American literature continued. The more serious and talented black writers were actually writing their books and getting them published.

Opportunity magazine, then edited by Charles Johnson, and *The Crisis*, edited by W.E.B. DuBois, were the major outlets for the new black writers.

Opportunity's short story contests provided a proving ground for a number of competent black writers. Among the prizewinners were Cecil Blue, John F. Matheus, Eugene Gordon, and Marita Bonner.

Writers like Walter White, Jessie Fauset, Wallace Thurman, Nells Larsen, George S. Schuyler, Sterling A. Brown, and Arna Bontemps had already made their debut and were accepted into the circle of the matured.

The stock market collapse of 1929 marked the beginning of the depression and the end of the period known as "The Negro Renaissance." The "exotic Negro," professional and otherwise, became less exotic now that a hunger look was upon his face. The numerous white sponsors and well-wishers who had begun to flock to Harlem ten years before no longer had time or money to explore and marvel over Harlem life. Many Harlem residents lived and died in Harlem during this period without once hearing of the famous literary movement that had flourished and declined within their midst. It was not a mass movement. It was a fad, partly produced in Harlem and partly imposed on Harlem. Most of the writers associated with it would have written just as well at any other time.

In the intervening years between the end of "The Negro Renaissance" and the emergence of Richard Wright, black writers of genuine talent continued to produce books of good caliber. The lack of sponsorship and pampering had made them take serious stock of themselves and their intentions. *The Crisis*, organ of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and *Opportunity*, organ of the National Urban League, continued to furnish a publishing outlet for new black writers. The general magazines published stories by black writers intermittently, seemingly on a quota basis.

During this period writers like Ralph Ellison, Henry B. Jones, Marian Minus, Ted Poston, Lawrence D. Reddick, and Grace W. Thompkins published their first short stories.

In 1936 Richard Wright's first short story to receive any appreciable attention. "Big Boy Leaves Home," appeared in the anthology, *The New Caravan*. "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch" was published in *American Stuff*, anthology of the Federal Writers' Project, the next year. In 1938, when his first book, *Uncle Tom's Children*, won a $500 prize contest conducted by *Story Magazine*, his talent received national attention. With the publication of his phenomenally successful novel, *Native Son*, in 1940, a new era in Afro-American literature had begun. Here, at last, was a black writer who undeniably wrote considerably better than many of his white contemporaries. As a short story craftsman, he was the most accomplished black writer since Charles W. Chesnutt.

After the emergence of Richard Wright, the period of indulgence for Negro writers was over. Hereafter, black writers had to stand or fall by the same standards and judgments used to evaluate the work of white writers. The era of the patronized and pampered black writer had at last come to an end. The closing of this era may, in the final analysis, be the greatest contribution Richard Wright made to the status of Negro writers and to Negro literature.

When the United States entered the Second World War, the active Negro writers, like most other writers in the country, turned their talents to some activity in relation to the war.

The first short stories of Ann Petry began to appear in *The Crisis*. *The Negro Caravan*, the best anthology of Negro literature since Alain Locke edited *The New Negro* sixteen years before, had already appeared with much new material. Chester B. Himes, a dependable writer during the depression period, managed to turn out a number of remarkable short stories while working in shipyards and war industries in California. In 1944, he received a Rosenwald Fellowship to complete his first novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. In 1945, Frank Yerby won an O. Henry Memorial Award for his excellent short story, "Health Card," which had been published in *Harper's* magazine a year before.

A new crop of post-war black writers was emerging. In their stories they treated new aspects of Afro-American life or brought new insights to the old aspects. Principally, they were good storytellers, aside from any message they wanted to get across to their readers. The weepy sociological propaganda stories (so prevalent during the depression era) had had their day with the Negro writer and all others. There would still be protest stories, but the protest would now have to meet the standards of living literature.

Opportunity and *The Crisis*, once the proving ground for so many new black writers, were no longer performing that much needed service. The best of the new writers found acceptance in the general magazines. Among these are James Baldwin, Lloyd Brown, Arthur P. Davis, Owen Dodson, Lance Jeffers, John O. Killens, Robert H Lucas, Albert Murray. George E. Norford, Carl R. Offord, John H. Robinson, Jr., John Caswell Smith, Jr., and Mary E. Vroman.

With the rise of nationalism and independent states in Africa, and the rapid change of the status of the Negro in the United States, the material used by black writers and their treatment of it did, of necessity, reflect a breaking away from the old mooring.

Among black writers the period of the late 1940's was the period of Richard Wright. The period of the 1960's was the period of James Baldwin.

The now flourishing literary talent of James Baldwin had no easy birth, and he did not emerge overnight, as some of his new discoverers would have you believe. For years this talent was in incubation in the ghetto of Harlem, before he went to Europe a decade ago [1959] in an attempt to discover the United States and how he and his people relate to it. The book in which that discovery is portrayed, *The Fire Next Time*, is a continuation of his search for place and definition.

Baldwin, more than any other writer of our times, has succeeded in restoring the personal essay to its place as a form of creative literature. From his narrow vantage point of personal grievance, he has opened a "window on the world." He plays the role traditionally assigned to thinkers concerned with the improvement of human conditions—that of alarmists. He calls national attention to things in the society that need to be corrected and things that need to be celebrated.

When Richard Wright died in Paris in 1960, a new generation of black writers, partly influenced by him, was beginning to explore, as Ralph Ellison said, "the full range of American Negro humanity." In the short stories and novels of such writers as Frank London Brown, William Melvin Kelly, LeRoi Jones, Paule Marshall, Rosa Guy, and Ernest J. Gaines, both a new dimension and a new direction in writing were seen. They have questioned and challenged all previous interpretations of Afro-American life. In doing this, they have created the basis for a new American literature.

The black writer and his people are now standing at the crossroads of history. This is the black writer's special vantage point, and this is what makes the task and the mission of the black writer distinctly different from that of the white writer. The black writer, concerned with creating a work of art in a segregated society, has a double task. First: he has to explain the society to himself and create his art while opposing that society. Second: he cannot be honest with himself or his people without lending his support, at least verbally, to the making of a new society that respects the dignity of men.

The black writer must realize that his people are now entering the last phase of a transitional period between slavery and freedom: it is time for the black writer to draw upon the universal values in his people's experience, just as Sean O'Casey and Sholem Aleichem drew upon the universal values in the experiences of the Irish and the Jews. In the next phase of Afro-American writing, a literature of celebration must be created—not a celebration of oppression, but a celebration of survival in spite of it.