Black Insights

Significant Literature by Black Americans—1760 to the Present

MORGAN STATE COLLEGE **Nick Aaron Ford**

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To
My wife, Ola, who has helped me
in more ways than I can enumerate

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Preface

The editor of this anthology, whose dissertation for the Ph.D degree in 1945 was concerned with imaginative literature by American Negro Writers, has continually taught college courses in the subject since 1936. When the current demand for resource books for such courses became insistent two years ago, suggestions came in from publishers indicating a ready market for "instant" anthologies by specialists in the field, even by "instant" specialists only mildly interested in the subject, who were willing to accept the challenge. But this editor refused to be rushed believing that even specialists require sufficient time to thoughtfully assess the needs and to determine the most effective ways of responding, including the preparation of study aids for students and instructional guides for teachers unfamiliar with the most troublesome problems associated with the "newly discovered" subject. Now after two years of carefully and critically selecting and reexamining pertinent subject matter and preparing commentaries, study aids, and guidelines for instructors, the editor believes *Black Insights: Significant Literature by Black Americans* is capable of becoming one of the most authoritative, complete, and satisfying textbooks in the field.

The key word in the title of this anthology is *significant*. Every selection was chosen on the basis of its *significance* in two or more of the following respects: *literary, historical, racial, sociological, stylistic, cultural.* The major constant concern throughout is literary significance, although not always according to the traditional norms to which most American critics subscribe. Some contemporary black writers and critics believe that there is a *black esthetic* entirely different from that generally recognized by college and university professors, and that any anthology which ignores this consideration cannot adequately represent the significant literary contributions of all Americans. This editor does not wholly accept that doctrine, but he does recognize some validity in the idea. Consequently, there is an uneven literary quality (judged by traditional standards) in the selections, but this compromise is compensated for by a greater degree of significant relevance in other important respects than is usually afforded in literary anthologies.

This collection includes eighty-one poems, fourteen short stories, two complete dramas and a long excerpt (a quarter of the whole) from a third, independent units from three novels and three autobiographies, twelve essays, one interview, and three public addresses. Inclusion of the public addresses can be justified on the bases of content and literary style. In addition to the basic qualitative requirements stated earlier for the individual selections to be included, each author represented must have at least one published work to his credit or one drama produced in a recognized theater. Unfortunately, a few important novelists with more than one published book have been omitted because no independently meaningful excerpt could be extracted from the desired work. However, such novelists are discussed in sectional introductions, and references are made to their novels, which, in most cases, are available in inexpensive reprints. Likewise, talented poets who are not represented by individual selections are given some recognition in introductory discussions.

The writers are grouped under four major divisions: (1) The Pathfinders, (2) The Torchbearers, (3) The Alienated,

and (4) The Revolutionists. In addition to the general Introduction, each division is preceded by an Introduction describing the common attributes of the group of authors included in the unit. Also each author is introduced by a brief biographical sketch including some critical comments. Study aids consisting of commentary and suggestive questions are placed at the end of each part and a highly selective bibliography follows the works of each author. A general selective bibliography is appended at the end of the volume. A separate *Instructor's Manual* containing suggestions and guidelines for using this anthology most effectively has been prepared to assist teachers whose backgrounds in and experiences with the subject are limited.

Nick Aaron Ford

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3 The Alienated

4 The Revolutionists

■ Charles W. Chestnutt (1858–1932)

Charles Waddell Chestnutt was born in Cleveland, Ohio, on June 20, 1858. At the age of eight he moved with his family to North Carolina, where he remained until his departure for New York City in 1883. During his seventeen years in the South he embarked on an ambitious program of self-education that led to his employment as a teacher in the public schools of the state, including the principalship of the State Normal School at Fayetteville. In 1887, after his return to his native city of Cleveland, he was admitted to the Ohio bar, although he never entered the active practice of law, choosing to work rather as a court reporter and commercial stenographer.

He first broke into print with the publication of a Negro folk tale, "The Gophered Grapevine," in the *Atlantic Monthly* the same year he was admitted to the practice of law. It was the first time this magazine had published a story by a Negro writer. Twelve years later *The Conjure Woman* (1899), a collection of seven Negro folk tales including "The Gophered Grapevine," and *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories* (1899) were published by Houghton Mifflin and Company, and *Frederick Douglass* (1899), by Small, Maynard and Company. Within the next five years he published three novels: *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), and *The Colonel's Dream* (1905).

Hugh Gloster in his *Negro Voices in American Fiction* (1948) gives a succinct and fair appraisal of Chestnutt's literary achievements:

> . . . Chestnutt was an important trail-blazer in American Negro fiction. In his early stories of plantation life he not only made the folk tale a more faithful transcript of actual conditions but also became the first colored writer of fiction whose work was generally criticized without consideration of race. In *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* he experimented with racial subject matter which he subsequently handled at greater length in *The House Behind the Cedars*, *The Marrow of Tradition*, and *The Colonel's Dream*. All four of these books are favorably disposed toward the mulatto, who ostensibly represented for Chestnutt the most accomplished character in the Negro group. In treating the complexities of caste and color during the Reconstruction period, Chestnutt sometimes seems to accept the racial myths of his time; but he had a keen eye for social injustice and, before laying down his pen, he had either used or suggested many of the themes of the fiction of Negro life as we know it today.

If Gloster is correct in his assumption that Chestnutt "became the first colored writer of fiction whose work was generally criticized without consideration of race," it is true only of the criticisms that were written before the critics and the public knew that the author was a Negro. It is a fact that for some time after publication of his first two books, the publishers refused to divulge the race of the author in the belief that such a revelation might be harmful to the possible success of the books. Chestnutt reacted to the failure to divulge his race with the following explanation: "It never occurred to me to claim any merit because of it [race], and I have always resented the denial of anything on account of it."

Although Chestnutt wrote nothing significant after 1905, he received the NAACP's Spingarn Award in 1928 for his "pioneer work as a literary artist depicting the life and struggle of Americans of African descent." The selection presented here was chosen as a good example of one of the major characteristic concerns of his fiction: the tragic situation of the mulatto.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

Chestnutt, Charles W. *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1899); Reprint (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1968).

Chestnutt, Helen M. *Charles Waddell Chestnutt: Pioneer of the Color Line* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1950).

Gloster, Hugh, "Pioneer in the Fiction of Negro Life," *Phylon*, II (First Quarter, 1941), pp. 57–66.

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The Wife of His Youth

I

Mr. Ryder was going to give a ball. There were several reasons why this was an opportune time for such an event.

Mr. Ryder might aptly be called the dean of the Blue Veins. The original Blue Veins were a little society of colored persons organized in a certain Northern city shortly after the war. Its purpose was to establish and maintain correct social standards among a people whose social condition presented almost unlimited room for improvement. By accident, combined perhaps with some natural affinity, the society consisted of individuals who were, generally speaking, more white than black. Some envious outsider made the suggestion that no one was eligible for membership who was not white enough to show blue veins. The suggestion was readily adopted by those who were not of the favored few, and since that time the society, though possessing a longer and more pretentious name, had been known far and wide as the "Blue Vein Society," and its members as the "Blue Veins."

The Blue Veins did not allow that any such requirement existed for admission to their circle, but, on the contrary, declared that character and culture were the only things considered; and that if most of their members were light-colored, it was because such persons, as a rule, had had better opportunities to qualify themselves for membership. Opinions differed, too, as to the usefulness of the society. There were those who had been known to assail it violently as a glaring example of the very prejudice from which the colored race had suffered most; and later, when such critics had succeeded in getting on the inside, they had been heard to maintain with zeal and earnestness that the society was a lifeboat, an anchor, a bulwark and a shield,—a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night, to guide their people through the social wilderness. Another alleged prerequisite for Blue Vein membership was that of free birth; and while there was really no such requirement, it is doubtless true that very few of the members would have been unable to meet it if there had been. If there were one or two of the older members who had come up from the South and from slavery, their history presented enough romantic circumstances to rob their servile origin of its grosser aspects.

While there were no such tests of eligibility, it is true that the Blue Veins had their notions on these subjects, and that not all of them were equally liberal in regard to the things they collectively disclaimed. Mr. Ryder was one of the most conservative. Though he had not been among the founders of the society, but had come in some years later, his genius for social leadership was such that he had speedily become its recognized adviser and head, the custodian of its standards, and the preserver of its traditions. He shaped its social policy, was active in providing for its entertainment, and when the interest fell off, as it sometimes did, he fanned the embers until they burst again into a cheerful flame.

There were still other reasons for his popularity. While he was not as white as some of the Blue Veins, his appearance was such as to confer distinction upon them. His features were of a refined type, his hair was almost straight; he was always neatly dressed; his manners were irreproachable, and his morals above suspicion. He had come to Groveland a young man, and obtaining employment in the office of a railroad company as messenger had in time worked himself up to the position of stationery clerk, having charge of the distribution of the office supplies for the whole company. Although the lack of early training had hindered the orderly development of a naturally fine mind, it had not prevented him from doing a great deal of reading or from forming decidedly literary tastes. Poetry was his passion. He could repeat whole pages of the great English poets; and if his pronunciation was sometimes faulty, his eye, his voice, his gestures, would respond to the changing sentiment with a precision that revealed a poetic soul and disarmed criticism. He was economical, and had saved money; he owned and occupied a very comfortable house on a respectable street. His residence was handsomely furnished, containing among other things a good library, especially rich in poetry, a piano, and some choice engravings. He generally shared his house with some young couple, who looked after his wants and were company for him; for Mr. Ryder was a single man. In the early days of his connection with the Blue Veins he had been regarded as quite a catch, and young ladies and their mothers had manœuvred with much ingenuity to capture him. Not, however, until Mrs. Molly Dixon visited Groveland had any woman ever made him wish to change his condition to that of a married man.

Mrs. Dixon had come to Groveland from Washington in the spring, and before the summer was over she had won Mr. Ryder's heart. She possessed many attractive qualities. She was much younger than he; in fact, he was old enough to have been her father, though no one knew exactly how old he was. She was whiter than he, and better educated. She had moved in the best colored society of the country, at Washington, and had taught in the schools of that city. Such a superior person had been eagerly welcomed to the Blue Vein Society, and had taken a leading part in its activities. Mr. Ryder had at first been attracted by her charms of person, for she was very good looking and not over twenty-five; then by her refined manners and the vivacity of her wit. Her husband had been a government clerk, and at his death had left a considerable life insurance. She was visiting friends in Groveland, and, finding the town and the people to her liking, had prolonged her stay indefinitely. She had not seemed displeased at Mr. Ryder's attentions, but on the contrary had given him every proper encouragement; indeed, a younger and less cautious man would long since have spoken. But he had made up his mind, and had only to determine the time when he would ask her to be his wife. He decided to give a ball in her honor, and at some time during the evening of the ball to offer her his heart and hand. He had no special fears about