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Black Literature and the English Curriculum

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ONE of the most blatant misnomers in the regular English curriculum is in most schools “American literature,” taught in the senior high school. How much of this literature includes those black writers who have added their voices to the richness of this country’s literary heritage? According to several research studies conducted in this area, there isn’t very much. Many of the well-known and widely used anthologies from well established publishing houses are still using “tokenism” by including one or two selections by contemporary black writers. Dorothy Sterling noted in the *English Journal* (September 1969) that out of some 25,000 pages that she read, only thirty-eight books had even a selection or two about and by black authors. What have we, then, to offer black students in the way of representative “heroes” or moral values that are coupled with a sense of self-pride as we present them

with many “American literature” courses today?

For the next few minutes, therefore, I will be setting forth some reasons I think valid for including black literature in the *regular* curriculum. I shall probably raise several questions during the course of my talk. I may not be able to give answers, but I hope you will think about them because you may be the only persons who can really bring about any meaningful resolution to the problems posed here.

Whenever I’m approached by some of my colleagues regarding the possible inclusion of black literature in the curriculum, they invariably ask, “Jesse, don’t you think we should include *only* the very best of black literature?” I invariably answer, “But of course I do, for *all* literature.” However, this question is rarely asked when we talk of literature in general, only when we talk of *black* literature. There is a perpetuation of what I call “The Above Excellent Syndrome”—that is, anything related to black people, in order to be acceptable, has to

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be super-superior. There is no place for the average and certainly not for the mediocre. Thus, in our search for the "best" black literature, we omit some of the most relevant writing as it speaks to black students at this moment in history. For instance, Warren Miller's *Cool World* of several years back speaks of *r-e-a-l* not *r-e-e-l* life problems as faced by many youngsters coming of age in an urban ghetto environment. Granted, it did not win a Pulitzer Prize; it has, however, been widely read by students throughout the country. It has been said that literature, after all, is only a mirror by which man is reflected. Therefore, many black students saw themselves or people they knew in Miller's *Cool World*. Young people have lived through and with the terrible storm of our cities. Certainly one should be able to find and use those books that speak eloquently of the black experience in this country, so that not only black students but others as well might be exposed to and made aware of what is now proudly called "soul culture," or what Barbara J. Glancy calls "black barbecue."

I remember reading somewhere the statement that every man is a poet because his very existence smacks of the poetic. Poetry, by far, has been one of the black American's most popular vehicles of literary communication; however, its almost total lack of inclusion in literature anthologies is well known to the concerned observer. The spiritual is the first identifiable black American poetic expression; it was the slave who used these "sorrow songs," as DuBois calls them, as lyrics of protest:

O freedom! O freedom!
 O freedom over me!
 An befo I'd be a slave,
 I'll be buried in my grave,
 An go home to my Lord an' be free.

Or as a call to a secret meeting:

Steal away, steal away
 Steal away to Jesus-

Often the spiritual is the *only* black poetic expression found in American literature anthologies. When this is the case, it is the epitome of condescension and racism; for if only the spiritual is to stand as the apex of the black experience in this country, one will, therefore, gain a distorted view of a large ethnic group that has a distinct cultural experience.

A literature course should certainly include some early writing by such seventeenth- and eighteenth-century black poets as Jupiter Hammon and Phillis Wheatly as a beginning point in bringing black students as well as white students from the past to the present. It is important for one to know from whence one comes before one can *really* know where he must go and *who* he is.

The study of black literature is important not *only* for the black student; it is important for all other students. It is, however, more important for the black student at this point in time who has, for so long, been denied the beauty of its example, thereby causing him to grow up with a distorted self image. Which crime is more hideous—the castration of one's physical self or the castration of one's mind? I would not prefer either, but the latter, by far, is the more dehumanizing. What happens to that black child as he sits in an American literature class and discovers that his very presence is being denied by the omission of *his* literature from the curriculum?

For me to speak merely of the value of black literature in the curriculum without any reference to the struggle of the black writer in this country would present only a half-truth. In essence, to study black literature is to study the black writer as he seeks recognition on his merit. The history of black literature during the first half of the century does, in part, portray the struggle of the black

writer in this country to attain some degree of respect and achievement. For example, a late nineteenth-century black writer such as Paul Laurence Dunbar was traditional in that he tended to write what might be called typical black folk stories and poems in which he used much black dialect. He did this mainly to survive, economically, because most of his

readers were white. He gave them what they wanted, so to speak. How historical his posture! How demoralizing the result! He could, however, switch from a dialectical poem such as "When Malindy Sings" to a poem of social protest such as "We Wear the Mask" written in standard English.

We Wear the Mask

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.
Why should the world be otherwise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.
We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile:
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!¹

Paul Laurence Dunbar

As does Hughes² in "As I Grew Older."

As I Grew Older

It was a long time ago.
I have almost forgotten my dream.
But it was there then,
In front of me,
Bright like a sun—
My dream.
And then the wall rose,
Rose slowly,
Slowly,
Between me and my dream.
Rose, slowly, slowly,
Dimming,
Hiding,
The light of my dream.
Rose until it touched the sky—
The wall.

¹From *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, Inc., 1934). Reprinted by permission.

²Copyright 1926 by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. and renewed 1954 by Langston Hughes. Reprinted from *Selected Poems*, by Langston Hughes, by permission of the publisher.

Shadow.

I am black.

I lie down in the shadow.

No longer the light of my dream before me,

Above me.

Only the thick wall.

Only the shadow.

My hands!

My dark hands!

Break through the wall!

Find my dream!

Help me to shatter this darkness,

To smash this night,

To break this shadow

Into a thousand lights of sun,

Into a thousand whirling dreams

Of sun!

Langston Hughes

These are familiar poems to those of us who have some acquaintance with black writers, and they might serve as "integrators" in areas where the black student population is rather small.

Many black writers have had to solve their own publishing problems by becoming publishers themselves. Knowing this very fact of this struggle would, for the student, add another dimension to his study of black literature.

BLACK literature is, primarily, a literature of protest, exposition, and hope. What better vehicle for exposing *all* youngsters to the fact that all colors of men share in what we like to call a common "human experience." Robert Bone, Teachers College, Columbia, made the following observation in the *English Journal* (April 1969): "There has been a scandalous neglect of black writers from the curriculum. Black literature," he said, "has a revolutionary thrust. Do we wish, therefore, not to be disturbed from our innocence?"

Pearl Thomas, writing in the fall 1966 edition of *Changing Education* asks the following question, and I would also like to pose it here: "What has happened to

that large body of writing devoted to a condemnation of slavery?" She maintains, "The question is not answered by the condescending polemics of white writers but with the righteously indignant verses, stories, and plays of those miraculously schooled objects of persecution, Negro writers."

When we speak of the great value of including black literature in the curriculum, it really must be mentioned here that Africa, from whose bosom the black American was snatched, should be represented, especially by selections from its extensive and authentic oral literature that we call "folk" tales. Such stories as "The Greedy Man and the Stranger" from Senegal, "External Love" from the Ivory Coast, and the "Origin of Mankind" from Togoland should be a part of every American student's literary experience.

Let's return now to American black literature and its value for the curriculum. For those of you who have not read Barbara Dodds' book: *Negro Literature for High School Students* (NCTE, 1968), which I reviewed for the January 1969 *English Journal*, please allow me to quote extensively from the

foreword written by Frank E. Ross, Associate Professor of English at Eastern Michigan University, for he makes some very forthright statements concerning the importance of including black literature in the curriculum:

What is inside of a writer counts. . . . The literature he produces must stand on its own merits, everyone reasons. But it should be equally reasonable that that literature must have some place to stand. Literature by Negroes through the past two hundred years has found a publisher only rarely, and in the past score of years has found, once published, a person even rarer to promote it in the marketplace. This had led quite naturally to textbooks in our schools that are notable for their absence of Negro writers and Negro themes.

Ross continues:

Absence of a segment of society, in a sense, falsifies literature, for a major merit of literature is that it broadens and deepens experience. . . . A great literature is relevant to people and to society as they are, and American literature surely is not relevant if it ignores over 10 per cent of the Americans. Foundations are what English teachers build. If they teach a literature that is markedly without Negro writers, they are saying implicitly each day, boys and girls, let's open our books today and read about what white people do and think. Some teachers do not know they are implying this; some white students do not know it. Most Negro students do—a crushing concept of worthlessness, which must be true because books do not lie: Only white people have done any thinking, feeling, achieving worth setting down. Is it this tragic foundation English teachers seek to build? Perhaps more tragic than the Negro student who cannot find an acceptable self image in his school literature is the white student who is deprived of a fully rounded education in literature.

If black literature is to be studied, it should be as serious and demanding as is any other literature. It should be taught

in sequence or as part of a tradition. In other words, black literature should be placed in its true historical context when it is presented to students. If American literature is to be taught, it should reflect the thoughts and feelings of black people as well as the other visible ethnic groups that comprise this multi-cultural, multi-ethnic society. Of course, our primary concern here is with the value of black literature for the curriculum.

The literature of American blacks not only has value in itself, it can have value for the language arts curriculum as well. For the black experience in America, as reflected in literature, history, and culture, has most certainly helped to mold the American experience. If we continue to omit black literature from our English or language arts programs, we will end up teaching racism to white youngsters and self-hatred to blacks.

What better way is there to create viable and more positive human relationships than through the study of literature, for it is through literature that one gains insights into those universal verities of life: pain, love, hope, and dreams as they touch the lives of *all* men?

I have purposely refrained from mentioning many specific titles during my talk. I would, however, like to mention a few titles that are being read by young people across the country. Autobiographies and biographies offer some very illuminating insight into the lives of several black writers such as Malcolm X in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (James Weldon Johnson's *An Autobiography of an Excoloured Man*, published in 1912, should probably be read before Malcolm in order to gain some historical perspective); Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery*; Richard Wright's *Black Boy*; Dick Gregory's *Nigger*; Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land*; and an autobiography entitled *Coming of Age in Mississippi* by Anne Moody.

W. E. B. DuBois' classic, *The Souls of Black Folk*, and Frederick Douglass' *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* are some of the rich nonfictional writings about and by black authors. Jean Toomer's *Cane*, originally published in 1923, has been reprinted. Of course, there are Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Ralph Ellison's

Invisible Man, and Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*.

It is my hope that black literature will be included increasingly and at a faster pace in American literature classes across this country, not only in those predominately black schools but in every school where American literature is taught.

Standardized Testing—Reality Therapy?

Fourth period testing
wrestling/wresting
unknowns from knowns:
cubes/commas/cones
nicely neutral nouns
"sit/sat" frowns
opinion versus fact
multiply/divide/subtract.

Interest immediate
results remote
validity approximate
—no antidote?

Ernie Karsten

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