



Ca' Foscari  
University  
of Venice

# European, American and Postcolonial language and literature

Literatures and Cultures, in

American Studies

"LM3-15"

Final Thesis

## Skin Deep Black Destiny

Colorism and Artistic Fate in the Works

of

Wallace Thurman

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### **Academic Year**

2015/2016

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## Introduction

When I chose to translate the book *Infants of the Spring* by Wallace Thurman, I had already become interested in the life and works of Wallace Thurman as well as in the main themes of his work: racism, colorism and the role of a black artist in America. Moreover, my previous studies had given me an insight into a past of humiliation and pain for the African American community, which finds expression in the novels and words of a black author speaking from within the 1920s African American community about the problem of race.

In the context of the Harlem Renaissance authors, the problem of race and internal racial prejudice in the black community itself drew my attention to the figure of Wallace Thurman and his works. Since any art created by the African American artist had to conform to the influential political propaganda of the time (“whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda.” (Du Bois 27)) Thurman chose the path of rebellion with *Infants of the Spring* and *The Blacker the Berry*. The novels express the underlying interracial tensions and the pressure on creativity held by political goals present at the time of their creation, which unfortunately continue to the present day.

The first chapter of the present work tries to provide an Italian version of the chapters taken from *Infants of the Spring*, a novel about the artistic destiny that unfortunately has not yet been translated into Italian. The first four chapters translated from the original work are introduced by some personal considerations on the difficulties I found in translating racial identity, in particular into a context already set. It wasn't easy to translate the original message, especially to render it into Italian without seeming racist due to the black language used by the characters. I didn't want to end up with racial stereotypes, besides trying to find meaningful equivalence to render the same wit and conversational manner of Wallace Thurman's writing.

The second chapter gives a brief insight into the man behind the work, the biography of Wallace Thurman, the factors that made up the foundation of his personality and literary legacy, as well as highlighting his role in the Harlem Renaissance, defending individuality and art against propaganda.

The next chapter of the thesis will focus on the major themes of his age and therefore affecting his work. Namely, the issue of colorism, or intra-racism, with the problem of discrimination in the black community based on the shade of black its members have which influenced their inclusion or exclusion from its hierarchy or the marriage and work market. In the first subchapter I explain the concept of race and its strictly social meaning as it is understood by contemporary scholars in order to give an historical background.

Then, I shortly present the history of racial theories as they justify the racially stratified society in the wider American context. In fact, it was the racial stratification and stereotypes connected with the biological notion of race that created impenetrable social and racial boundaries, limiting personal development of Thurman's main protagonists. Subsequently, in order to fully understand how the concept of identity-shaping processes work, I examine the notion of racial identity by analyzing the protagonist of two important books by Thurman, which are *The Blacker the Berry* and *Infants of the Spring*. In *The Blacker the Berry* I introduce Emma Lou, the main character, who is a young very dark-skinned woman. This aspect influences her life, because even in her own family she feels rejected due to her skin color. Then, I also introduce Raymond Gaylord, the protagonist of *Infants of the Spring*. He is a black artist, who himself has issues in introducing his art to white people. These two black individuals have something in common, because both struggle in finding acceptance in a world of white predominance.

*The Blacker the Berry* with its significant title illustrates the destiny of such an unfortunate member whose personal or professional development depend on the color of their skin, not only in relation to the white community but also the home ethnic group. Thurman's heroine is then compared to those of Nella Larsen's protagonists in the next subchapter, as I attempt to provide a wider

context of similar works dealing with colorism, and expressing the same relationship as Thurman does between racial identity and individuality.

The following section as an introduction to the second novel of Wallace Thurman offers an overview of the Harlem Renaissance movement, its context, leaders and mission. Subsequently, I focus on *Infants of the Spring* and the rejection of both discourses of cause and racial duty in favor of individualism as evident in the fictional life of Raymond Taylor.

Besides the issues of colorism *Infants of the Spring* also focuses on the destiny of black artists, with Ray, a young promising artist wanting to explore new forms of art and life experience, but faced with expectations and pressures in a struggle to express themselves and their unique voice while trying to make a profit by producing the art that the white community or the black community expects of them.

The characters of both novels suffer as both black and white Americans expect Ray and Emma Lou to express their race but the stereotypes contrast with their personal goals. Emma Lou is treated as a dark-skinned woman, with no future and no place in society, marginalized by both African Americans and whites for her darker shade of skin. Ray as an African American writer is expected to be a representative black voice, inspiring his race, as expected by the race leaders of Harlem Renaissance, and at the same time confirming racial stereotypes, expected by the white audience of his works.

Ray's problem, as a representative black voice, called to support the cause of the New Negro ideal and advancement, while trying to find a suitable form of expressing his individuality as an artist, receives further confirmation in Langston Hughes' essay, briefly analyzed from the racial and artistic perspective.

The fourth chapter attempts to outline the poor reception of Thurman's works when they were first published, the context of expectations and racial stereotypes which limited their success, with the recent rediscovery and reaffirmation of Thurman as a complex and subtle author of problematic "indeterminacy that makes him an outstanding author, remarkably different from the rest of his contemporaries (Ganter 98)", expressing both the racial context of the age he lived in but also announcing in his latter work the inefficiency of the

Harlem Renaissance as the basis for the effort to get the attention of the wider audiences.

Finally, my research on the subject of Harlem Renaissance, race and racial discrimination in connection to Wallace Thurman's life and work can be traced in the bibliographical reference list.



## **1. *Infants of the Spring* translation –I Fanciulli della Primavera**

### **1.1 Translating *Infants of the Spring* by Wallace Thurman**

“When languages are formed upon different principles, it is impossible that the same modes of expression should always be elegant in both. While they run together, the closest translation may be considered as the best; but when they divaricate, each must take its

natural course. Where correspondence cannot be obtained, it is necessary to be content with something equivalent." [Samuel Johnson](#) Dryden (Lives of the Poets)

The translation of any work in my opinion always starts with the translator's fascination with or attraction to the subject matter of the work about to be translated. Having previously been introduced to the problem of racial tensions in literature during the course of my studies, choosing Wallace Thurman's *Infants of the Spring*, I was starting on a voyage of discovery: what does a novel written by a black author have to say about the mission of the black artist? How does an author writing from the center of the Harlem Renaissance movement choose the words to convey his message and engage his audience?

The next question came naturally in the course of my first reading of the novel, how could a culturally and racially specific literary work be made to transcend the barriers of language and engage the Italian audience with the same force of the original? Moreover, as Tatiana Petrovich Njegosh and Anna Scacchi tried to illustrate in their work *Parlare di Razza*, the difficulty lies in finding the politically correct equivalent in the Italian language without running the risk of damaging the original work, reducing the importance of its message by using racial terminology connoting racism or stereotypically accepted realities by the Italian public. Already such efforts made in the past failed as the two authors demonstrate in their overview of the crucial issue of race and racist terminology and acceptance introduced in the translation or dubbing from English, more specifically from "Black English" to the Italian. This occurred either voluntarily, under the influence of the political regime, or involuntarily, by the inadequacy of the translation, or the fact that the cultural context was not willing to accept African American authors and characters on equal terms:

"Nel passaggio dalla lingua straniera all'italiano si opera un processo di "neutralizzazione" di cui fanno le spese soprattutto le espressioni idiomatiche, i riferimenti socioculturali, in breve tutti i tratti maggiormente distintivi del luogo di origine dell'opera tradotta (24-25). In alcuni casi si va ben oltre la semplice neutralizzazione di riferimenti culturali. L'intenzione di rendere l'opera più familiare al

pubblico di arrivo si manifesta allora in cospicue modifiche al testo originale.

L'uso dei termini razziali nell'edizione italiana de I Jefferson rivela una deplorabile mancanza di attenzione alle diverse connotazioni e sfumature, oltre che alle implicazioni ideologiche e sociali, dei corrispettivi in lingua inglese. Il messaggio implicito del testo italiano sembra essere che nel nostro paese ci si può permettere una certa disinvoltura lessicale riguardo alla razza perché “gli italiani non sono razzisti”. (Njegosh and Scacchi 234)

Multiple readings of the original work, namely Thurman's *Infants*, had to be made in order to find the neutral ground of the actual translation without repeating the errors of the past. Finding the right equivalent for realities that are closely connected to their racial and cultural context appeared more challenging as I was well aware of the fact that besides having racial tones attached to any text written by a black author, his language would not be easy to recreate in Italian. Since Wallace Thurman in his writings clearly uses a spoken language, sometimes he deliberately used grammatically incorrect sentences to define the cultural background of his characters which I chose to translate wherever possible and at times substitute with equivalent or correct Italian phrases without losing any nuance of meaning, and preserving the dignity of the original:

“Che cosa accade al discorso di razzializzazione dominante negli Stati Uniti quando viene tradotto e reimpiegato in altri contesti? Come interagisce con le diverse specificità nazionali? Dobbiamo immaginarne il transito come un processo privo di resistenze, che dà luogo a una copia dell'originale, o si può ipotizzare che avvengano significative trasformazioni? Il crescente spazio che, nell'ambito dei Translation Studies, viene dato allo studio delle dinamiche culturali, sociali e politiche implicate nei processi di traduzione, ha messo in crisi l'idea di traduzione come semplice passaggio di un testo da L1 a L2 e ne ha sottolineato piuttosto le lacune, opacità e resistenze, insieme con le asimmetrie di potere e le necessità socioculturali che dettano le politiche di traduzione. Vari studiosi hanno analizzato la

dimensione ideologica in cui si iscrivono tanto la selezione dei testi da tradurre quanto le scelte operate durante il processo di traduzione, mettendo in evidenza la storicità dei principi assunti come norma estetica in un determinato periodo (Even-Zohar; Toury); la traduzione inevitabilmente compie un'operazione di 'addomesticamento' del testo straniero, ossia iscrive in esso i valori e gli interessi del contesto in cui avviene, come appare evidente in particolare nella ritraduzione dei classici (Venuti, "Retranslations"). "(Njegosh and Scacchi 255)

Once the dilemma of the correct approach to translating the works of an African-American author into Italian had been faced, I realized that my translation effort had followed the same duality of Wallace Thurman's life, first dealing with the issue of his race, by choosing the politically correct approach to his work as a member of the African American community, then paying closer attention to his individuality as an author, his particular manner and style of writing.

A particular difficulty of the translation proved the author's use of spoonerisms,: "And this is Eustace Savoy, actor, singer, and what have you. He runs a den of iniquity in the basement, and is also noted for his spoonerisms (Infants 8)." According to the Oxford English Dictionary a **spoonerism** is a: "a mistake in which you change around the first sounds of two words by mistake when saying them, often with a humorous result, for example well-boiled icicle for well-oiled bicycle. It's named after pastor **William Archibald Spooner**(1844-1930), the head of New College, Oxford, who was said to have made many mistakes like this when he spoke." Such wordplays are not easy to understand at times by native speakers who misunderstand them for metaphors, or complex symbols. Consequently, I tried to offer a similar form in the Italian version of the text without forcing the destination language to produce a specifically English phenomenon, which illustrates the traditional problem of translating as: "the central problem of translation practice is that of finding T.L (target language) equivalents. A central task of translation theory is therefore that of defining the nature and conditions of translation equivalence.(Catford p. 21)" (Haque 101)

The problem of equivalence, as well as the debate on the freedom of the translator to become creative in finding equivalents for typically English idiomatic sayings or phrases in Italian, can be seen for instance in such expressions as “Old housemaid right down to the bricks,”(*Infants 23*). After much research, I couldn’t coin an equivalent term in Italian without sounding forced or too regional, opting for a literary translation. In many cases, while human experience is similar, there is an incompatibility of idiomatic phrases that remain connected to their age and context of production: “As far as the whole text is concerned, it is simply impossible to transfer all the message of the original text into the target text” (*Yinhua quoted in Haque109*)

Lastly, the present translation attempted to remain faithful to the original work by alternating both literal and meaningful translation into Italian, where the problem of equivalence receives more significance in a context of racial identity originally described by the language of the 1920s Harlem and the particular tone of Wallace Thurman and translated into the Italian language of the 21<sup>st</sup> century context. Consequently:

“la tensione tra concezioni essenzialiste e ibride dell’identità razziale, equivale, per certi aspetti, alla tensione che corre tra l’approccio italiano e quello americano nei confronti della razza, anche se l’abuso esiste in entrambe le società. La tensione [é]tra un punto di vista ibrido e postcoloniale da un lato, e un punto di vista afroamericano sulla razza dall’altro.” (Njegosh and Scacchi 181)

# I FANCIULLI DELLA PRIMAVERA

## 1.2 Capitolo 1

Raymond aprì la porta con enfasi, premette sull'interruttore di corrente e precedette i suoi due ospiti nella stanza poco illuminata.

“Eccoci qui, signori.”

“Che belle camerette hai qui,” disse Stephen.

“Hai veramente ragione,” Confermò Raymond. “Ne vado pazzo, però a Sam non piace il mio studio. Lui pensa sia decadente.”

“Ho solamente obiettato ad alcune decorazioni, Ray.”

“Vale a dire le tende rosse e nere, la coperta rossa e nera del letto, il rossore debole delle sedie in vimini, gli sgargianti ganci dei tappetini, e i disegni erotici di Paul. Vedi Steve, Sam pensa che sia tutto piuttosto vistoso e volgare. Lui non riesce a dimenticarsi che è un Nordico e che io sono un Negro, e secondo tutti i libri di sociologia, il mio gusto sarebbe naturalmente grossolano e volgare. Non devo andare sui colori vistosi. E' una confessione ereditaria della mia razza inferiore. Non ho ragione, Sam?”

“A me è incomprendibile in ogni caso,” mormorò Stephen. “Mi piace la stanza ... e queste fotografie sono piuttosto straordinarie. Chi le ha fatte?” “La persona più impossibile al mondo,” rispose Samuel. “Hai sbagliato di nuovo,” Raymond disse: “Paul è una delle persone più deliziose al mondo. Spero solo che passi di qui prima che tu parta, Steve. Ti divertiresti a conoscerlo.”

“Lui gestisce bene i suoi colori.”

“Ma i suoi quadri sono osceni,” protestò Samuel. “Non sono nient'altro che falli estremamente colorati.”

Raymond scosse le spalle.

“Tu discuti con lui, Steve, io sono esausto cercando di farglielo capire. Tutto ciò che Sam non capisce, lo considera come corrotto e degenerato. Come vecchio

amico, forse tu vuoi intraprendere la sua educazione da dove sono rimasto. In questo momento, mi prendo un superalcolico. Ne faccio tre?”

Raymond andò nel suo studio, e preparò tre superalcolici. Quando ritornò nella stanza, Stephen Jorsenson stava esaminando minuziosamente i vari dipinti che adornavano la parete, mentre Samuel se ne stava rigidamente davanti al finto caminetto, palesemente annoiato dall'interesse del suo amico in quello che lui considerava oscene banalità.

“Ho fatto il tuo più leggero, Sam.”

“Lo hai istruito a quello, disse Stephen. “Quando lui era all'università di Toronto, non avrebbe nemmeno bevuto un goccio di birra.”

“Sono felice di non averlo conosciuto in quel periodo. E' abbastanza impossibile adesso.” Raymond sorrise maliziosamente a Samuel poi alzò il suo bicchiere in alto. “Alla tua prima volta nell'Harlem, Stephen Jorgenson, al tuo primo giorno a New York, e alla tua prima visita agli Stati Uniti. Salute.”

Raymond e Stephen prosciugarono i loro bicchieri: Samuel sorseggiava un po' del liquido, fece una faccia ironica, poi posò il suo bicchiere sopra la sporgenza del caminetto.

“E' strano,” meditò Raymond, “come accadano le cose. Tre ore fa eravamo completi sconosciuti. Ventiquattro ore fa non eravamo nemmeno a conoscenza dell'esistenza l'uno dell'altro. E ora, Steve, mi sento come se ti avessi conosciuto tutta la mia vita. E' anche strano, perché la frequentazione è iniziata sotto auspici così malvagi. Prima di tutto Samuel ci ha fatti conoscere, e a me sempre non piacciono gli amici di Samuel. Lui conosce le persone più orrende al mondo...i servizi sociali, i ministri sociali riformati, i missionari stranieri, i radicali, le donne verseggiatrici che s'entusiasmano da tutte le parti, le segretarie del YMCA<sup>1</sup> e altri dello stesso genere. Inoltre loro sono così smielati e benevoli. Non fanno altro che parlare di assistenza e umanità, non realizzando che il migliore servizio che potrebbero prestare all'umanità sarebbe l'auto sterminio. E tu non hai idea di come simpatizzino per me, un povero Negro ignorante.

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<sup>1</sup> YMCA translated into Italian corresponds to: “palestra della comunità.”

“Di conseguenza, quando sono venuto a cena stasera, ero preparato a essere annoiato e a disagio. Sam non mi aveva detto niente, tranne che aveva un amico straniero che voleva che io conoscessi. E con mia grande sorpresa tu eri un straniero, straniero da tutto ciò che è familiare a Samuel o a me.”

“Eri uno straniero anche per me,” disse Stephen .

“Lo so,” rispose Raymond. “E puoi immaginarti il mio stupore nello scoprire che tu eri quello a disagio. Mi ha piuttosto stupito trovare qualcuno a sostituirmi a una delle cene di Samuel. Non lo sapevo- tutt’ora non so- cosa il nostro padrone di casa ti avesse raccontato di me, e certamente non avevo idea di che cosa tu pensassi o come tu considerassi i Negri . Anche se a dire il vero ho avuto l’impressione, che tu stessi anticipando una specie di attacco cannibale. Veramente. Mentre entravi nella caffetteria nell’espressione del tuo volto si leggeva chiaramente ciò che pensavi: Spero che questi Negri trovino le loro cene sufficienti, altrimenti sono capaci di avventarsi su di me.”

“Ray!” esclamò Samuel. C’era una nota di rimprovero nella sua voce, ma prima che lui potesse continuare, Stephen parlò:

“Perbacco, hai ragione. Ero spaventato. Dopotutto non avevo mai visto prima un Negro in vita mia, voglio dire, non più di due o tre, ed erano solo delle ombre passanti oscurate con una realtà non immediata. Già New York era abbastanza preoccupante di per sè, ma quando uscii dalla metropolitana alla 135esima strada, in realtà ero assalito dal panico. E’ stata l’esperienza più strana e misteriosa che io abbia mai avuto. Mi vergognavo e mi sentivo isolato, viscido ed esposto. Volevo camuffare la mia pelle bianca, e prendere un po’ di colore per sentirmi protetto. Sebbene, in realtà, penso che nessuno abbia prestato la benché minima attenzione a me, mi sentivo come se tutti mi stessero squadrandolo, guardandomi con degli occhi ostili. Era orribile. Le strane facce scure, gli occhi sospettosi, la tendenza occulta dell’antagonismo razziale che sentivo attorno a me, le squallide stradine, barricate con macabri appartamenti, e poi la deprimente sala da pranzo pubblica in cui io e Samuel eravamo le uniche persone bianche. Ero pronto a fuggire.”

“Vedi Sam,” disse Raymond, “quanto sei crudele inconsciamente tra tutti i luoghi in cui portare uno straniero innocente al momento in cui mette piede in America.

L'Harlem mi terrorizza, e sono stato qui abbastanza a lungo per essermi ambientato e dire che non ho nessuna naturale affinità con il posto.” “Penso che Steven stia esagerando.”

“Col cavolo che sto esagerando . Semmai sono colpevole di minimizzare la situazione.”

“Sicuramente, “ disse Raymond. “Forse ci sono una serqua o più cose che tu vorresti dire riguardo alle tue impressioni, ma tu desisti, per la paura di ferirmi. Per l'amore del cielo, non farlo. Io non sono minimamente a disagio per quanto riguarda la mia razza, e in qualsiasi momento preferisco una dura verità ad un distinto sotterfugio.”

Ancora una volta gli occhi azzurri ed intensi di Steve guardavano il Negro, piccolo e gracilino, il quale era seduto di fronte a lui, notava la pelle scura e liscia alla quale le lampadine di color ambrato conferivano delle sfumature rosse, e diventava particolarmente interessato nei suoi lineamenti facciali. Erano, pensò Stephen, né Nordici né Negri, ma piuttosto una felice combinazione delle due razze, mantenendo i tratti minuti dei primi, e il caloroso vigore dei secondi, così sfuggendo alla rigidità dei Nordici e alla grossolanità Africana. Altrettanto interessanti erano gli occhi. Quando a riposo sembravano coperti da una maschera fangosa, che li rendeva noiosi e privi di vita. Ma Stephen aveva notato che quando Raymond si animava, i suoi occhi si toglievano questa maschera e diventavano grandi, brillanti e focosi.

Samuel interruppe le sue fantasticherie.

“Penso che sia ora di andare verso il centro della città Steve.”

“Perché? Abbiamo qualcos'altro da fare? Questo posto è così tranquillo, non voglio spostarmi.”

“Rimani, allora,” disse Raymond. “Sam ha paura che ti contagherò se mi stai vicino troppo a lungo.”

“Non essere ridicolo, Ray.”

“Dimmi,” disse Stephen. “Voi due andate sempre così d'accordo?”

“Umhuh,” rispose Raymond. “Tuttavia, siamo davvero molto affezionati l’uno all’altro, altrimenti non avrei mai approvato il Puritanesimo di Samuel e il suo spirito elevato, e sono sicuro che a lui darebbe fastidio il mio costante assillare. Noi non andiamo d’accordo su niente, e pure ci sono momenti in cui traiamo un’enorme piacere nella compagnia l’uno del l’altro. Ho bisogno dell’influenza fissa di Sam, e lui è invigorito da quello che lui definisce il mio animalismo.”

Sorrise con affetto allo sconfitto Samuel, il quale spostò nervosamente i piedi, poi si girò verso la base del caminetto adocchiando la bevanda che aveva dimenticato, e ancora una volta prese il bicchiere tra le mani. “Stai ancora prendendo quella bevanda?” Domandò Raymond. “Sono pronto per un altro. E’ tu, Steve?”

“Non posso dire che impazzisco per il gusto del tuo gin, ma suppongo che l’effetto sia gradevole.” “Esatto. Devi abituarti al gin del Harlem. E’ pregiato, ed è una comodità onnipresente. Non riesco a farne a meno.”

Ancora una volta Raymond andò nella cantina per riempire i bicchieri vuoti, la sua mente era impegnata a contrastare i due Nordici che erano i suoi ospiti. Stephen era alto e alla moda come un Vikingo. I suoi capelli, occhi e la sua carnagione testimoniavano tutti l’ascendenza Scandinava. Samuel era minuto pallido ed anemico. I suoi capelli erano biondi e i suoi occhi azzurri, ma né i capelli biondi né gli occhi azzurri erano così chiaramente definiti o così trasparenti come quelli di Stephen. Gli avi di Samuel erano stati immersi nel crogiolo d’etnia americano, e come risultato l’ultima linea di secessione portava solo una leggera somiglianza ai suoi progenitori.

“Dimmi di più riguardo al tipo che disegnò questi,” disse Stephen nel momento in cui Raymond ritornò nella stanza e li diede un bicchiere pieno di gin e bibita gingerale.<sup>2</sup>

“Nient’affatto,” rispose Raymond. “Paul è una persona che devi vedere per apprezzare. Non crederesti a quello che potrei dirti. Sarebbe ora che lui arrivasse. Sapeva che stavo uscendo per cena stasera, è per questo che lui non è qui adesso.”

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<sup>2</sup> **Gingerale** translated into Italian is a: “bibita gassata analcolica aromatizzata allo zenzero.”

“Dimmi questo, allora,” chiese Stephen, “tutte queste orribili case dell’ Harlem hanno interni così belli?” “Neanche per sogno. La maggior parte sono peggio dentro che fuori. Dovresti vedere alcuni dei tuguri in cui dovevo vivere. Si dà il caso che la mia attuale padrona di casa è lungimirante tanto quanto una donna d’affari. Lei ha sogni, uno di questi è che lei un giorno diventerà una scrittrice di best seller. Questo spiega questa casa. Lei sapeva tutte le difficoltà vissute dagli artisti ed intellettuali dell’ Harlem nel trovare questi ambienti adatti, per questa ragione ha trasformato questa casa per i Negri impegnati nell’arte creativa. Lei avrebbe guadagnato soldi, ottenuto prestigio come mecenate, e allo stesso momento un profitto artistico dai contatti risultanti.”

“La casa è completamente riempita con questi ... ehm ... spiriti creativi?”

“Non ancora. Ma abbiamo speranze. Solo il piano di sopra rimane nelle mani dei Filistei. Una delle signore lassù sostiene di essere un’attrice, ma lo dubitiamo, e nemmeno i suoi due figli sono precoci. L’altro individuo in quel piano è un individuo misterioso come una strega, che viveva lì quando Euphoria affittava la casa, e la quale si rifiutava di andarsene. Pelham, Eustace, Paul ed io formiamo l’artistico contingente. Aspetta di conoscere gli altri. Sono tutti una rara collezione.”

Dieci minuti dopo, Paul e Eustace entrarono nella stanza.

“Oh, diavolo,” disse Paul, “un altro Nordico. Non è una bellezza, Eustace?”

“Basta con queste battute, Paul. Voglio farti conoscere Stephen Jorgenson. E’ appena arrivato dall’America oggi, e ovviamente questa è la sua prima visita all’Harlem. Non spaventarlo a morte. Questo è Paul, Steve. E’ lui il responsabile per tutti questi dipinti abominevoli. Questo è Eustace Savoy, attore, cantante, e quant’altro. Lui gestisce una casa di malaffare nella taverna, ed è conosciuto per i suoi spoonerismi<sup>3</sup>.”

“Pazzo per la broncorrea,” disse Eustace non sminuendo la sua reputazione.

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<sup>3</sup> **SPOONERISM**, in English it’s an error in speech or a deliberate play on words. For example: “The Lord is a shoving leopard” in fact is “The Lord is a loving shepherd.”It’s named after pastor William Archibald Spooner, who used to make a lot of spoonerisms while speaking. (Wikipedia)This book presents some deliberate spoonerisms.

“Sei mai stato sedotto?”chiese Paul. “Non arrossire. Sembravi così puro ed incorrotto che dovevo chiederglielo.”

Stephen guardò Raymond con fare inquisitorio.

“Non badare Paul. E’ innocuo.”

“Mi piacciono i tuoi dipinti,” disse Stephen.

“Dovresti,”rispose Paul. “Tutti dovrebbero. Sono lavori di un genio.”

“Sei disgustoso come sempre, Paul.”

“Lo so, Sam, ma è in questo che risiede il mio fascino. Comunque come hai mai fatto a conoscere un uomo così bello come questo ... lo sai,” Steve, aggiunse bruscamente, “dovresti togliere quella parte dai tuoi capelli e lasciarla soffiare dal vento. I capelli, non la parte. Impomatarli così rovina i riflessi d’orati.” “Oh, per carità ...”incominciò Stephen.

“Non c’è problema. Io non faccio mai pagare per il consiglio dell’esperto. Dov’è il gin, Ray?”

“In cantina ovviamente.”

“Ma non devi esiccare i viveri,” disse Eustace.

“Non sei per niente divertente, “ mormorò Samuel.

“Scusami, Sam. Aspetta fino a quando non avrai bevuto un paio di drink. Poi io sarò brillo.”

Lui e Paul andarono nella cantina.

Paul era molto alto. La sua faccia era del colore imbiancato della foglia di zafferano. I suoi capelli erano ispidi e impreparati. Era sua abitudine non indossare una cravatta, perché lui sapeva che il suo collo era modellato troppo bene per essere nascosto allo sguardo fisso ed intento del pubblico. Non indossava nemmeno i calzini, né la biancheria, e i pochi vestiti che si degnava di ostentare erano ammuffiti e disordinati. Eustace era un tenore, ed era anche un gentiluomo. La parola elegante lo descriveva perfettamente. Ogni suo movimento era elegante ed aggraziato. Aveva acquisito il suo portamento fisico e vezzi dagli idoli della Vittoriana mediana. Nessuno sapeva la sua età esatta, la sua

faccia era segnata e tesa. Una malattia non identificata del cuoio capelluto lo aveva reso calvo nel lato destro della sua testa. Per coprire quest'errore della natura, aveva lasciato crescere i capelli lunghi sul lato sinistro, e li pettinava di fianco oltre la cima della sua testa. L'effetto era sia utile che bizzarro. Eustace aveva anche una passione per i le cianfrusaglie, per le brumose arti dell'acquaforte, per gli antichi pezzi in argento, per il caviale e i gioielli roccocò. E il suo bene più prezioso era un anello in onice della misura di un uovo di pettirosso, che lui portava al dito indice della sua mano destra.

Francamente Stephen era sconcertato da questi due strani individui che si erano precipitati nella camera, e si s'erano imposti nei riflettori. Veramente, come aveva detto Raymond, questa casa ospitava una strana collezione di individui.

“Spero che tu non abbia prosciugato la bottiglia,” disse Raymond, nel momento in cui Paul e Eustace saltellavano allegramente dentro la stanza, maneggiando con cura i loro bicchieri pieni. “Ma pensavamo che fosse tutto per noi,” disse Paul.

“Maledetti porci”

“Da dove venivi, Steve?” domandò Paul.

“Copenhagen, Danimarca.”

“Oh, è dove producono il tabacco,”

“Tabacco?”

“Sono pronto per andarci in qualsiasi momento lo sei tu, Steve,” Samuel era inquieto ed annoiato .

“Ma non puoi portarlo via così presto. Non ho ancora avuto la possibilità di parlargli,” protestò Paul. “Devo dirgli dei miei disegni, lui sembra come se avesse abbastanza senso per apprezzarli.” “E' stanco, Paul, e una volta che tu inizi a parlare, noi non arriveremo a casa stasera.”

“Ma non voglio ancora andare a casa, Sam.”

“Vedi,” esclamò Paul trionfante, “Sapevo che aveva senso. Parlami di te, Steve.” Poi si rannicchiò sul pavimento prima della sedia di Stephen.

“Non c’è niente da dire. Sono nato in Canada. Mio padre era Norvegese, mia madre Danese. Sono stato educato all’università di Toronto dove conobbi Sam e mi identificai il più possibile nelle cose americane. La mia gente ritornò a Copenhagen. Passai l’estate con loro, ed eccomi qui a prendere un dottorato dalla Columbia.”

“Perché?”

“Perché non c’è nient’altro da fare. Se la smetto di andare a scuola, dovrò andare a lavorare, e l’unico tipo di lavoro che posso fare è professorale. Non voglio farlo, così, fino a quando il mio vecchio paga le bollette, io rimarrò a scuola.”

“Vedi,” esclamò Paul. “Lui è uno di noi.”

“Il Signore non voglia,” disse Samuel sbadigliando.

“Paul adesso dimmi dei tuoi disegni.”

“E’ facile. Sono un genio. Non ho mai avuto una lezione di disegno in vita mia, e non intendo mai farne una. Credo che Oscar Wilde sia il più grande uomo che sia mai vissuto. Huysmans’ Des Esseintes è il più grande uomo di letteratura, e Baudelaire è il più grande poeta. Mi piacciono anche Blake, Dowson, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Paul e Whitman. Oh, e naturalmente Whistler, Gauguin, Picasso e Zuloaga.”

“Ma questo non mi dice nulla riguardo ai tuoi disegni.”

“Ameno che tu non sia più stupido di quello che penso, ti ho detto tutto ciò che devi sapere.”

Ci fu un leggero bussare alla porta.

“Entra,” urlò Raymond.

Pelham entrò furtivamente nella stanza. Era piccolo, cicciotto e nero, ed indossava un grembiule verde e un berretto che era solo due gradazioni più scuro del suo viso.

“Ciao a tutti.” La sua voce era timida, di scusa. “Non sapevo che avevi ospiti.”

“Nessuno problema,” lo rassicurò Raymond. “ Signor Jorgenson, le presento Pelham Gaylord. Anche lui è un artista.”

“Piacere di conoscerla,” Stephen gli tese la mano. Pelham gli strinse la mano con cautela, poi velocemente, come un piccolo animale al largo, fece un passo indietro alla porta, e sorrise timidamente a tutti all’interno della stanza.

“Pelham è l’unica persona decente in casa,” disse Samuel.

“Intendi dire che è l’unico che tu riesci ad impressionare.” Era stato Paul a parlare. “Ma sono stanco di stare seduto qui a fare nulla. Non c’è vita in questa festa. Dobbiamo festeggiare l’arrivo di Steve. Abbiamo bisogno del liquore. Andiamo in uno spaccio di alcolici.

“Chi pagherà il conto?” domandò Raymond.

“Chi?” ripeté Paul. “Ma, Steve ovviamente. E’ la sua festa, e sicuramente avrà dei soldi.”

“Ma ...” Samuel iniziò a protestare.

“Ma diavolo ...” Paul interruppe. “Prendi il tuo cappello e cappotto, Steve. Anche voi, Ray ed Eustace. Lascia stare Sam qui con Pelham. Altrimenti lui rovinerà la festa.”

“E se io voglio andare con voi?”

“E lasciare Pelham da solo? Niente da fare, Sam. Sono sicuro che avete molto da dirvi l’uno con l’altro. E Pelham deve aver scritto alcune nuove poesie oggi. Non vedi la luce della creazione nei suoi occhi?”

Durante tutte queste battute, Paul stava aiutando prima Stephen e poi Raymond con i loro cappotti. E prima che ci potesse essere un’ulteriore protesta, accompagnò Stephen, Eustace e Raymond fuori dalla stanza, lasciando Samuel scioccamente a bocca aperta al sorridente Pelham.

## 1.3 Capitolo 2

Samuel Carter aveva migrato dal college del New England al Greenwich Village con l'intenzione di diventare un personaggio nel movimento radicale. Era stato sedotto al radicalismo da un professore di economia dalla doppia personalità alla Dottor Jekyll e Mister Hyde, il quale parlava in modo enfatico di insulsaggini, e predicava il socialismo a pochi studenti selezionati in sedute private. Di regola, questi studenti erano scelti accuratamente. Samuel era uno degli errori del professore. Il modo in cui venivano attratti l'uno all'altro in primo momento è uno di quei particolari, insolubili misteri che possono essere attribuiti alla perversità del fato. Tuttavia, rimane il fatto che Samuel divenne un membro del gruppo delle letture private del professore, ed era innocentemente arruolato al movimento radicale, nonostante la natura gli avesse stampato un'indelebile indole tradizionalista.

Durante i suoi primi giorni a New York era stato ossessionato dall'idea di diventare un martire. Il suo professore aveva acceso la sua mente anemica con storie biografiche dei radicali che avevano sacrificato la loro vita per i loro principi. Samuel avrebbe fatto altrettanto, sarebbe diventato un leader ribelle, un perseguitato spirito figlio di Eugene Debs e Emma Goldman, che era frequentemente soggetto ad una prigionia, gradualmente diventava avvezzo all'essere messo alla gogna dai sadici poliziotti che difendevano il regime capitalista.

Per preparare se stesso alla sua gloria futura si tuffò sconsideratamente nelle molte correnti intersicanti del movimento radicale. In definitiva si alleò con tutte le organizzazioni esistenti che avevano la reputazione di essere rosse o rosa, nonostante quanto fossero disparati i loro obiettivi e linee politiche. Così lui fu in grado di essere in empatia sia con gli anarchici sia con i pacifisti, socialisti e comunisti. Egli andò ad aiutare qualsiasi persona lo chiamò, ed era incapace di capire la sua diffusa impopolarità.

Ma Samuel non era destinato ad essere un martire e neppure un leader. Doveva accontentarsi trasportando gli striscioni nelle manifestazioni di protesta, o affrontando un picchetto ed essendo un uomo di generale utilità agli ufficiali e membri di tutte le varie organizzazioni a cui apparteneva. Quando c'erano

cartelloni o volantini usa e getta da essere distribuiti era Samuel che se ne occupava. Quando dovevano essere riunioni, era Samuel che organizzava per delle sedie in più, Samuel che si occupava dell'acqua per gli oratori della sera, Samuel che era chiamato per aprire le finestre, per trovare gli articoli perduti, ed era sempre lui che importunava il sovrintendente per più riscaldamento. Lui era diventato un perfetto attrezzista per il teatro nel quale desiderava recitare il ruolo di protagonista.

Samuel diventò depresso e convergente con la realizzazione che lui era, e probabilmente rimaneva un signor nessuno nel movimento radicale, inoltre lui diventò consapevole della dualità della sua natura, uno scontro tra i suoi principi professati e le sue simpatie personali. Più spesso che non lui considerava i suoi oppositori capitalistici in una luce più favorevole di quanto lui considerasse i suoi alleati radicali. Per Samuel, gli scioperanti, paralizzando l'efficacia di qualche macchina commerciale divennero ridicoli sciocchi che non sapevano quanto stavano bene. Per farla breve il suo conservatorismo naturale iniziava a farsi valere. Divenne ovvio che era uno degli eletti di Dio, e non avrebbe trovato né fama né ricchezza tra le discipline del diavolo.

Samuel diventava agitato e pieno di risentimento. Si assentò dai suoi soliti luoghi di ritrovo, iniziò a rimuginare, ed era sul punto di strisciare indietro contritamente dallo zio benestante che aveva offerto di sistemarlo negli affari, quando divenne consapevole della nuova causa in cui poté possibilmente realizzare le sue ambizioni. Entrò nelle liste in un'arena nella quale la sua mediocrità era trascurata perché aveva un viso pallido, e perché aveva assunto il ruolo di un belligerante abolizionista dei giorni nostri. Divenne la speranza di successo, battendosi per la causa del Negro Americano.

Nessun Negro aveva così tanto a cuore il benessere della sua razza come ebbe l'estraneo Samuel. Le notizie di un linciaggio lo turbarono per giorni. Animatamente attaccava bottone con tutti coloro con i quali veniva in contatto, essendo infuriato nella sua denuncia all'anarchia della folla del sud. Messo al corrente dei casi isolati di discriminazione razziale nei ristoranti o nei teatri, Samuel esplodeva in un eccesso di collera, scriveva a tutti i giornali giornalieri e agli ufficiali della città, criticando aspramente la responsabile amministrazione,

chiedendo di fare un boicottaggio generale, ed esigendo un'azione legislativa sia da parte della polizia che dalla legislatura.

Come ricompensa per il suo vigoroso spirito battagliero, Samuel si ritrovò presto acclamato dai Negri. La sua posta era tremenda. Da costa a costa Negri grati gli spedivano lettere di apprezzamento o appelli d'aiuto. La stampa dei Negri lo esaltava sia negli articoli di giornali e sia nelle loro pagine editoriali. I leader dei Negri erano orgogliosi di essere associati a lui, e di garantirgli qualsiasi assistenza di cui avrebbe avuto bisogno. E ciò che rendeva il ruolo soddisfacente era la diffamazione e abuso inflitto su di lui da alcune chiesuole dei bianchi. Alla fine Samuel era diventato un martire.

Raymond e Paul erano gli unici Negri che lui conosceva i quali ridicolizzavano apertamente sia lui e sia la sua causa. Nonostante questo, lui era attratto da loro. Dopotutto, loro erano personalità prominenti, e Samuel sentiva che era in parte suo dovere rimanere cordiale con loro. Tuttavia, Pelham Gaylord era un Negro che compiaceva Samuel. Pelham era servile, rispettoso, e abbastanza colpito dalla battaglia rumorosa quand'anche vana. E calmava un po' l'amareggiata vanità di Samuel a parlare con Pelham del suo lavoro dopo che gli altri avevano portato via Stephen senza tante cerimonie dallo spaccio clandestino d'alcolici nelle vicinanze. Monopolizzò l'intera conversazione, parlando delle seccature e tribolazioni del Negro malinteso e maltrattato, e delineando a grandi linee cosa volesse farne a proposito. Il suo monologo fu concluso solo dal chiassoso rientro dei quattro scansafatiche.

“Ah eccoti,” urlò Paul, “nel caro vecchio atelier di Pelham. Come ti sono piaciute le sue nuove poesie?”

“Non le ho ancora sentite,” disse Pelham nel momento in cui s'occupò di prendere il cappotto e cappello di Stephen.

“Scommetto che Pelham non aveva la possibilità di dire una parola. Non conopolizzasti la monversazione, Sam? Eustace sogghignò verso l'imbronciato Samuel.

“A Steve piace il nostro spaccio clandestino di alcolici, Sam,” disse Raymond.

“Ma non il nostro liquore,” aggiunse Eustace.

“Finalmente so cos’è un liquore.”

“Non pensi che dovremo andarcene adesso?” chiese Samuel.

“Sciogliti i capelli, Sam, e sii te stesso,” disse Paul. “Steve ha appena incominciato a godersela. Possiamo andare in un cabaret più tardi.”

“Ma ...”

“Stai zitto, Sam,” disse Raymond. “Abbiamo promesso a Steve un altro sussulto. Vuole vedere i quadri di Pelham e ascoltare un po’ della sua poesia. Datti una mossa, Pelham.”

Pelham era agitato ma ambizioso. Era sempre puerile e bramoso di esibire i suoi quadri o di leggere le sue poesie. Con molti movimenti superflui delle mani indicò i vari quadri sul muro.

“Quello lì,” annunciò orgoglioso, “è un ritratto di Paul Robeson. L’ho copiato dalla fotografia di un giornale.”

Stephen guardò, restò a bocca aperta e poi spostò velocemente il suo sguardo. Il suo viso diventò rosso. I suoi occhi cercarono le facce dei suoi compagni. Vedeva che, ad eccezione di Samuel, tutti avevano difficoltà a sopprimere la risata. Ancora una volta Stephen diede un’occhiata al mostruoso disegno a carboncino, e poi guardò verso il soffitto nel momento in cui Pelham mostrò allegramente il ritratto che aveva realizzato di Raymond.

## 1.4 Capitolo 3

Ormai Stephen era a New York da un mese, e la maggior parte di quel mese l'aveva trascorso in compagnia di Raymond. La loro amicizia era diventata qualcosa di prezioso, inviolabile e genuino. In quel breve periodo erano diventati così intimi come se si fossero conosciuti l'uno con l'altro sin dall'infanzia. Di fatto c'era qualcosa di deliziosamente ingenuo ed infantile riguardo il loro affetto apertamente dichiarato l'uno per l'altro. Come bambini sembravano essere totalmente inconsapevoli della loro differenza razziale. Non importava che gli avi di Stephen fossero biondi Scandinavi immersi nella tradizione delle saghe, e che gli avi di Raymond erano un insieme variegato senza legami culturali. Non faceva differenza tra loro che uno fosse nero e l'altro bianco. C'era qualcosa di più profondo del mero colore della faccia che li avvicinava, qualcosa di più vitale e duraturo che la superficiale attrazione degli opposti razziali.

La loro più grande gioia venne quando poterono essere assieme da soli e parlare ... parlare di tutto e di più. Sembravano avere così tanto da dirsi l'un l'altro, così tanto che era rimasto non detto, per tutto delle loro rispettive vite, perché non avevano mai incontrato nessun altro con il quale potessero conversare senza riservatezza. E non importava quanto spesso questi incontri di conversazione accadessero, non importava quanto a lungo durassero, sembrava sempre esserci molto di più da dire.

Stephen era assorto nell'aver notizie su Harlem e i Negri. Raymond era stuzzicato dalle virili saghe Islandesi che Stephen leggeva nella versione originale e che traduceva per suo beneficio. Entrambi erano ansiosi di diffondere i loro pensieri riguardo la letteratura ...

L' "Ulisse" era una palude dalla quale crescevano orchidee selvagge. Hemingway esemplificò lo spirito degli anni venti in America più vividamente di qualsiasi altro romanziere Americano contemporaneo. Per Raymond, Thomas Mann e Andre Gide erano gli unici giganti della letteratura ancora in vita. Andre Gide non era nella lista di Stephen, ma Sigrid Unset lo era. A nessuno dei due piaceva Shaw. Erano d'accordo sul fatto che Doistoievsky era il più grande romanziere di tutti i tempi, ma Stephen aveva solo disprezzo per Marcel Proust, al quale Raymond credeva ciecamente, ma non lo leggeva. Stendhal, Flaubert e Hardi

erano discussi amichevolmente, ma volavano scintille quando discutevano di Tolstoj o di Zola. E alla menzione di “Gente di Dublino” e “Il Ritratto dell’Artista da Giovane” di Joyce entrambi diventavano incontrollabilmente rapsodici. “E Hamsun: tu volevi dire che non hai letto “Fame,” Ray? Santo Cielo, ragazzo, questa è letteratura.”

Le loro simpatie e antipatie in letteratura erano sufficientemente simili da dar loro filosofie simili sulla vita, e sufficientemente dissimili da fornire argomento di animate discussioni. Era solo quando la loro conversazione deviava ad Harlem che loro si trovavano seduti a poli opposti.

Raymond si vantava di conoscere tutti i dettagli. Risiedeva lì da oltre tre anni, durante i quali aveva esplorato ogni angolo e fessura di quel fenomenale insediamento Negro. Durante questo periodo aveva ottenuto fama internazionale, Raymond pensava. Ma era disgustato dal modo in cui tutti cercavano di rendere romantico Harlem e i Negri dell’Harlem, e lo infastidiva parecchio quando Stephen iniziava a fare altrettanto. Insieme erano ritornati ai posti che Raymond aveva scoperto prima. Visitano tutti i cabaret, gli spacci clandestini di alcool, i club privati, i teatri, appuntamenti nelle vie secondarie. Stephen era privo di senso critico nella sua ammirazione per tutto il Negroide che egli vedeva. Tutti gli animatori, musicisti, cantanti e attori erano ... meravigliosi. Così lo erano tutti gli altri Negri che sembravano portare a termine una cosa o l’altra. Stephen, come tutti gli altri bianchi che avevano solo una conoscenza da libro dei Negri, sembrava sorpreso che un popolo che era stato schiavizzato così a lungo, e liberato così recentemente potesse fare un tal progresso. Raymond cercava di spiegare a Stephen che non c’era niente di miracoloso sulla faccenda.

“Non riesci a capire, Steve ”egli diceva“ che il Negro doveva fare tutto quel progresso che ha fatto altrimenti non sarebbe sopravvissuto? Ha soltanto cercato di mantenere il ritmo impostato dal suo ambiente. La gente va pazza per il progresso del Negro. Non è niente di così significativo, generalmente, come il progresso fatto da immigranti stranieri che vengono in questo paese anche per trovare la libertà da uno stato di schiavitù ed analfabetismo che era tanto severo quanto quello del Negro pre- e post Guerra Civile. E quanto a Harlem. Harlem è inevitabile che sia una comunità sorprendente e meravigliosa. Non è parte

integrante della più grande città al mondo? C'è qualcosa di più notevole del Ghetto, o Chinatown o il Bronx? Ha la stessa percentuale di povertà, sforzo della classe borghese, vita familiare, e mondo sotterraneo, funzionante alle stesse condizioni, che rende la vita di città un incubo per qualsiasi gruppo che è economicamente instabile. New York è un mondo in sé, ed ogni nuova parte di esso che viene scoperta dalle persone sofisticate e tiene il primato, sembra più straordinaria di quello che è stato scoperto prima.”

“Cristo, Ray, non apprezzi il luogo. Tu sei troppo una parte di esso.”

“Io una parte di Harlem? Come mai?”

“Tu sai cosa voglia dire.”

“Ma non so.”

“Beh, tu abiti qui. Hai sempre vissuto qui.”

“Tre anni non è sempre, Steve, anche se può sembrare la durata di una vita.”

“Ora stai facendo giochi di parole.”

“Non sto facendo giochi di parole. La colpa è tua. Solo perché tu hai superato la tua iniziale paura del posto e sei stato affascinato da un ambiente nuovo e bizzarro, dovresti perdere la ragione? Harlem è New York. Per favore non permettere che sia la New York Negra ad oscurare la tua visione.”

“Tu sei sia cinico che stupido.”

“D'accordo, ma se tu avessi vissuto ad Harlem tanto quanto io ho vissuto, tu comprenderesti che i Negri sono molto simili a qualsiasi altro essere umano. Hanno le stesse distinzioni sociali, fisiche ed intellettuali. Ti stai solo lasciando stuzzicare, come ho detto prima dalla novità della cosa. Dovresti vivere qui per un periodo.”

“E' proprio ciò che mi piacerebbe fare.”

“Beh ... perché no?”

“Oh cavoli, quest' è un'idea. Mi trasferirò a vivere con te.”

“Trasferirsi con me?”

“Certo. Preferisco questa camera di più di quella che ho ora, e sicuramente prediligo la tua compagnia a quella di quei balordi alla Casa Internazionale.”

“Le persone bianche non vivono ad Harlem.”

“Perché no?”

“Semplicemente non si fa, tutto qui. Cosa direbbero i tuoi amici?”

“Sei il solo amico di cui m’importa. Se mi vuoi, non vedo perché non dovrei vivere qui.”

“Non c’è nessuna ragione per la quale tu non dovresti, ma ...”

“Ma cavoli, mi trasferirò domani,ok?”

“Sarò dannatamente felice di averti Steve.”

Ventiquattro ore dopo, Stephen s’era trasferito ad Harlem.

## 1.5 Capitolo 4

C'erano quattro persone nello studio seminterrato di Eustace. Tenevano tutti dei bicchieri nelle loro mani, bicchieri contenenti gin e gingerale.

“Abbiamo un nome per la casa,” annunciò Eustace mentre Stephen e Raymond entravano.

“Qual è?” chiese Stephen.

“Niggerati Manor.”

“Di chi era questa idea?”

“Di Paul, ovviamente.”

“Niggerati Manor,” ripeté Stephen. “Proprio non lo capisco.”

“Tu non lo capiresti, Steve.”

“Nessuno di noi non è intelligente quanto te, Paul.”

“Scommetto che Ray lo capisce ... non è vero?”

“Niggerati Manor ... hmmm ... del tutto appropriato, direi. Dio solo sa che siamo sgangherati quanto basta.”

“Eccoti i tuoi drink.”

Pelham porse ad entrambi i nuovi arrivati una bevanda alcolica con gingerale.

“Ma come sta Steve dentro lì?”

“Abbastanza semplice, Eustace. Non è il compagno di stanza di Raymond?”

“Vivrai davvero ad Harlem, Steve?” Samuel chiese con incredulità.

“Certamente. Perché no?”

“Oh, niente. Naturalmente, sono sorpreso.”

“Non devi permettere che così tante cose ti sorprendano, Sam. E' un sintomo di adolescenza.”

“Come ti fu detto prima, Paul...”

“Sì, so che nessuno può essere intelligente quanto lo sono io, ma per uno che è così frequentemente tra persone intelligenti, tu sei uno stupido uomo bianco.”

Tutti risero eccetto Samuel, la cui faccia pallida e scarna si cosparsa di rosa.

“Dove sono le ragazze?”

“Chi vuole saperlo?”

“Chi diavoli chiese?”

“Tu Ray.”

“Fottiti, Paul. Non sono Sam, lo sai.”

“O.K. , Colonello.”

Ci fu un colpo alla finestra. Era il segnale usuale. Pelham si precipitò alla porta esterna. Si sentì che salutò Bull, che quasi immediatamente entrò nella stanza a grandi passi.

“Siete tutti sobri?” lui chiese.

“Dovrei sperare di dirtelo. E’ osceno per gli artisti ubriacarsi prima di mezzanotte.”

“Lascia perdere le robe intellettuali, Paul. Dammi drink, Pelham. C’è un altro quarto nella tasca del mio soprabito.”

“Urrà per Bull.” Eustace, l’oste, strinse più stretta intorno alla vita la cordicella della sua vestaglia verde appariscente, e fece un inchino. Bull fece un goffo tentativo di contraccambiare, ma il suo corpo, grosso ed impacciato non rispose aggraziatamente. Per Bull era la personificazione di ciò che le testate dei quotidiani si compiacciono di chiamare un Negro tarchiato. Era basso per il suo peso e la sua testa si stringeva tra le spalle larghe. Il suo fisico non era attraente, ma emanava forza e vitalità, e faceva sembrar essere tutti gli altri nella stanza gracili ed inferiori.

Pelham passò a un giro di drink, e mentre stava facendo questo ci fu un altro bussare alla finestra.

“Devono essere le ragazze,” congetturò Ray.

Pelham depose il vassoio e si affrettò alla porta esterna.

“Un tuttofare, Pelham.”

“Dico di sì.”

“Il diritto di una vecchia donna di servizio al muro,” Eustace dichiarò in una voce a falsetto che provocò una risata.

Pelham accompagnò le due ragazze dentro la stanza. Una era abbastanza chiara, sotto una luce smorzata poteva facilmente essere scambiata per per bianca. I suoi occhi e capelli erano di un tenue castano pastello e la sua pelle era delicatamente tinta d'avorio. La sua compagna era del colore di una castagna arrostita. I suoi capelli erano grezzi e abbondanti e neri come i suoi occhi, che erano collocati in profondità nelle sue orbite più grandi della norma. C'era qualcosa di grandioso nel suo portamento. Raymond l'aveva chiamata una noce marrone di Giunone. Il suo nome era Janet. L'altra si chiamava Aline.

“Ciao.”

“Ciao, come state?”

“Posate i vostri cappotti e prendete un drink.”

Tolsero le loro mantelle e andarono in giro nella stanza, baciando tutti con affetto. Pelham recuperò il suo vassoio e continuò a servire drink, preparandone due in più per le nuove arrivate.

Ora erano tutti sistemati comodamente. Le due ragazze condividevano il lettino con Stephen. Paul si sedette su un cuscino ai loro piedi. Samuel stava eretto sulla sedia Windsor. Bull sprofondò tra i cuscini di una Cogswell. Raymond e Eustace occupavano il sedile del pianoforte. Pelham rimase in piedi, il modo migliore per riprendere le sue attività di cameriere.

“Bene, qualche pettegolezzo?”

“Nessun pettegolezzo affatto, eccetto che Steve è diventato stabilmente un Negro.”

“Paul!”

Raymond si ricordò qualcosa che Steve aveva detto prima nella serata. “Dire Negro in presenza di una persona bianca ...” Forse Stephen aveva avuto ragione nella sua analisi di Paul. Lo osservava ora, che sedeva nella foggia di un sarto alla moda sul pavimento, il suo corpo alto sei piedi, grazioso e attraente, la sua sporca faccia gialla acceso di una qualche interna incandescenza, i suoi capelli corti e ribelli spavalidamente scomposti, il colletto aperto della sua camicia formava un contorno sporco ed inadeguato per il suo collo classicamente curvo. Stava raccontando della sua ultima avventura da vagabondo. La sua voce era melodiosa e con un tono soave. Le sue mani magre e le sue dita lunghe tracciavano curve graziose nell’aria. Come al solito quando parlava tutti rimanevano in silenzio e ascoltavano intensamente come se fossero ipnotizzati. “Ero assonnato. Sembrava che avessi camminato per miglia senza avere una tariffa del veicolo. In un modo o nell’altro non volevo neppure rincasare. Le case sono luoghi noiosi quando non ti senti un familiare. E’ più bello soltanto fare un salto in un luogo qualsiasi. Beh, vidi questo appartamento. L’atrio fiocamente illuminato. Sembrava caldo ed invitante. Andai ad esplorare e abbastanza sicuramente c’era il più bel piccolo buco di ripostiglio sotto le scale. Mi distesi e andai a dormire. Stavo sognando ... un sogno tormentato ed atrocemente bello. Ero in un giardino di fiori, coperto di querce diffuse, e profumato da freschi fiori di magnolia. Il suolo era nero e pungente. Un assortimento di fiori raramente belli in un lenzuolo multicolore. Gigli bianchi, gigli rossi, pallidi narcisi, sottili orchidee, policromatici pansé, narcisi gialli itterici, saporiferi fiori di loto. Ero nell’Eden. Gli alberi erano con fitto fogliame e solo un raggio di sole occasionalmente li attraversava. Sopra la mia testa uno stormo di tordi, dalla gola piena canticchiavano dolcemente, lusingevolmente. Mi stesi. Poi mi resi conto di una presenza, un corpo color avorio che emanava un qualche profumo esotico. La bellezza offuscava i miei occhi. La vicinanza fisica di quella presenza invisibile mi chiamò, mi richiamò più da vicino. E come io camminavo più vicino, il profumo penetrava le mie narici, infiammava i miei sensi, anestetizzava il mio cervello. La mia mano si allungò e afferrò un ciuffo di capelli di seta. Involontariamente i miei occhi si chiusero e fui consapevole di esserne assorbito fino a quando non fui una completamente introiettato. Per un breve istante sperimentai un ecstasy suprema, poi il giardino scomparve. Una voce dura stridulò nelle mie orecchie. Sentii l’urlo stridulo di una donna spaventata. Ero sveglio. Ero stato scoperto.

Potevo sentire la donna muoversi lungo il corridoio piastrellato, chiamando a voce alta un poliziotto. Feci un salto, urtai la mia testa contro il fondo ascendente della scala, mi precipitai fuori negli spazi aperti del corridoio e vidi la donna fuori sul marciapiede che gesticolava in modo agitato. Corsi su per le scale, maledicendola per aver rovinato il mio sogno. Raggiunsi il tetto, attraversai l'appartamento attiguo, scesi le scale e con nonchalance gironzolai per la strada e finalmente raggiunsi casa, ancora lamentandomi per l'interruzione del mio idillio squisito.”

I suoi occhi valutarono l'audience e furono compiaciuti da ciò che videro, ma aveva dimenticato la prosaica presenza di Samuel.

“Facesti davvero quel sogno?”

“Tu lo chiedi”

“Non è una risposta. Facesti davvero quel sogno?”

“Certamente.”

“La presenza era maschile o femminile?”

“Non lo so.”

Per un momento Samuel era incerto su quale bivio della strada seguire. Ma era determinato a mettere la sua preda con le spalle al muro. Continuò con l'accuratezza del New England continuò:

“Avesti mai una relazione con quella donna?”

“Certamente.”

“Ti lasciasti ...” abbassò la sua voce, “ti lasciasti mai andare all'omosessualità?”

“Certamente.”

Samuel arrossì. Gli altri nella stanza non tentarono più di trattenere la loro risata. Sembrava come se l'inseguito stesse per sottrarsi all'inseguitore una volta per tutte. Ma Samuel era istruito per la caccia. “Quale preferivi?” Sorrise a se stesso. Oramai lo aveva in pugno. La resa era inevitabile. I suoi occhi rilevavano precocemente la luce della vittoria. Precocemente, perché Paul trovò l'unica via d'uscita disponibile. Con una scrollata di capo, rispose velocemente:

“Veramente non lo so. Dopotutto non ci sono sessi, solo maggioranze di sesso, e la primaria funzione dell’atto sessuale è il godimento. Pertanto godetti un’esperienza tanto quanto l’altra.”

Quando la risata era cessata, Pelham passò con un altro giro di drink. Questi furono traccanati velocemente e ci furono implorazioni per averne di più. Pelham approvò sogghignando, felice, come sempre, di essere utile. Infine, dovette annunciare che tutte le bottiglie di gin erano vuote. Eustace balzò ai suoi piedi. “Mai dire nessuna. Ecco ...” Afferrò un cappello dalla cima del pianoforte. “Dallo finché fa male.” Passò il cappello ad ognuno nella stanza. Le due ragazze versarono venticinque centesimi a testa. Samuel contribuì con un biglietto spiegazzato da un dollaro. Bull e Stephen aggiunsero ognuno a questo un altro dollaro. I restanti semplicemente passarono le loro mani sulla superficie del cappello. Erano al verde.

Eustace contò il denaro e lo diede a Pelham, che immediatamente andò allo spaccio clandestino d’alcol all’angolo.

“Non so cosa faremmo senza Pelham.”

“Penso che sia un vero peccato il modo in cui voi ragazzi vi comportate con lui.”

“A lui piace molto, Bull. E’ tutto quello che è abituato a fare, servendo qualcun altro. I suoi impulsi artistici si trovano in quella direzione.”

“Non sono d’accordo con te, Ray.”

“Samuel, non sei mai d’accordo con nessuno.”

“Stavo parlando a Ray, Paul.”

“Perché non sei d’accordo? Non riesci davvero a credere che lui abbia del talento? Hai visto i suoi quadri e letto le sue poesie.” Raymond ridacchiò tra sé quando disse questo.

“Tuttavia è un essere umano e dovrebbe essere trattato come un pari. Voi gente lo rendete uno schiavo.” “Te lo garantisco. Ma se l’è voluto. Ha più piacere a servire noi che a dipingere i nostri ritratti. Noi ci sottomettiamo ad entrambi, e garantisco che lui è più felice di ognuno di noi. Non vedi, Samuel, che le tue teorie socialiste non funzioneranno? Tratta Pelham come un pari e lui sarebbe

completamente infelice. Lascialo cucinare, pulire e stirare per noi ed è felice. E' proprio un domestico nato."

"Ancora non sono d'accordo. Tu ti approfitti della sua debolezza. Come voi Negri potete aspettarvi di migliorare il vostro destino quando state sempre a soggiogare un membro della vostra propria razza?"

"Siete tutti ridicoli, Sam" Stephen parlò per la prima volta.

"Non è che la verità." Paul sogghignò al suo avversario.

"Tutti gli esseri umani sono uguali."

"Più lo ripeti, meno credo che tu ci creda."

"Oh, stai zitto, Ray, e anche tu, Sam. Non è il momento di discutere. Voglio ballare. Suona qualcosa, Eustace." Eustace acconsentì di mala voglia alla richiesta di Aline. Raramente suonava musica jazz ma aveva imparato uno o due numeri in modo da favorire i suoi amici quando nessun altro pianista era presente. Aline ballava con Stephen con il quale lei aveva stretto le mani e conversato in privato tutta la sera. Raymond ballava con Janet. Bull si mise a sedere accanto a Eustace sulla panca del pianoforte. Samuel rimase inchiodato sulla sua dritta sedia Windsor. Prima che la danza fosse finita, ci fu un colpo alla finestra. Bull andò alla portà e fece entrare Euphoria Blake. Lei entrò nella stanza agitata, un fagotto di energia colorato al caramello.

"Ciao a tutti. Santo Cielo! Un' altra festa?"

"Nient'affatto, padrona mia, solo un momento di svago."

"Qualcosa da bere?"

"Non ancora, ma sarà qui presto. Mettiti a sedere."

Si mise a sedere sul lettino.

"Bene, Paul hai trovato un lavoro?"

"Ovvio che no."

"Beh, perché non lo hai trovato?"

"Sto aspettando che tu me ne trovi uno."

“Sii nel mio ufficio alle 9 di mattina. E intendo le nove. Ti dovresti vergognare di scroccare dai tuoi amici tutto il tempo.”

“Io dovrei vergognarmi?Intendi dire che loro dovrebbero essere onorati.”

Mentre Euphoria continuava il suo rimprovero a Paul, Samuel fece cenno a Stephen di seguirlo fuori dalla stanza. Sorpreso dal gesto, Stephen si sganciò dal braccio che cingeva Aline, e girovagò fuori nel corridoio di mala voglia. Samuel stava appoggiato contro il muro, tirando nervosamente boccate di fumo da una sigaretta.

“Cosa c’è, Sam?” Stephen chiese mentre lui chiudeva la porta.

“Sono preoccupato per te.”

“Per me ... ?” Stephen rise. “ Come direbbe Paul: Come mai?”

“Beh ... il tuo trasloco tutto qui. E’ proprio il miglior passo da fare?”

“Perché no? Sono tra amici.”

“Ma sono ... beh, lo sai ... sembra strano per un uomo bianco, un uomo bianco rispettabile, essere qui ad Harlem.”

“Non lo capisco, Sam. Inoltre, tu non predichi uguaglianza sociale?”

“Certamente ... ma ...”

“Beh,” Stephen interruppe in modo deciso, “Sto solo praticando ciò che tu professi di credere. Non allarmarti. Non sono mai stato più soddisfatto nella mia vita. Questo è il paradiso comparato alla sterile bettola isterilita in cui mi tu mettesti.”

“Credo sia tutto vero, Steve ... ma ... devi stare attento.”

“Riguardo a cosa?”

“Riguardo ... beh ... le donne.”

“Oh, capisco. E’ ciò che ti sta infastidendo, huh, me ed Aline. Non preoccuparti, vecchio uomo, è solo un piccolo flirt. Fin’ora non ho intenzione di aggiungerla all’attuale mucchio di mulatte.”

“Ma è rischioso, Steve. Capisci che non conosci i Negri, non sai niente dei loro particolari problemi.”

“Ne so abbastanza da rendermi conto che la maggior parte di questi problemi particolari esistono nelle menti della gente come te.”

“Stai citando Ray adesso.”

“E non potrei citare una persona più sana. Capiscilo, Sam, non sono un ipocrita. Mi piace Ray. Mi piacciono i suoi amici. Mi piace Aline ... e nessuna delle mie preferenze è basato sul colore della pelle. Non so nulla dei maledetti pregiudizi americani, eccetto quelli che ho letto nei libri e di cui mi hanno parlato. Per me una persona è una persona, e sono ben in grado di scegliere i miei amici.”

“Non è necessario essere adirato.”

“Non sono adirato, Sam, solo un po’ seccato. Vedi, non ho molta pazienza con le persone che non hanno il coraggio delle loro convinzioni.”

“Ma ...”

Pelham dalla strada si precipitò nel corridoio, portando tre quarti di gin e alcune bottiglie di gingerale. Stephen aprì la porta allo studio di Eustace, e seguì Pelham dentro la stanza, lasciando Samuel che stava nel corridoio. Raymond aveva notato l’inspiegabile assenza e guardò in modo inquisitorio Stephen mentre egli si risiedeva accanto ad Aline. Stephen incontrò lo sguardo di Raymond e ammiccò proprio mentre anche Samuel decideva di tornare alla festa. Pelham fu accolto in modo clamoroso, e nel giro di pochissimi momenti, aveva servito un altro giro di drink. Euphoria svuotò il suo bicchiere più velocemente degli altri, poi annunciò la sua intenzione di andarsene.

“Qual è la fretta? Non ti piacciono i tuoi inquilini?” domandò Raymond.

“Preferisci prendere un altro drink.”

“No, grazie, Eustace, devo andare. E’ tardi, e devo recuperare il tempo la mattina. Non essendo ancora un’artista ... devo lavorare.”

“Perché lavorare quando puoi assumere un aiuto?” domandò Paul.

“Sto lavorando per far denaro per me stesso ... non per altri.”

“Il materialismo personificato,” mormorò Stephen.

“Dovremo scomunicarti.”

“Non potete Paul. Noi tutti le dobbiamo tutti il suo affitto,” disse Raymond.

“Perché farlo presente?” Eustace chiese tristemente. “Dammi un altro drink, Pelham. Aiutami ad affogare i miei affanni.”

“Non dimenticarmi,” pianse Aline.

“Nemmeno me.”

“O me.”

“Tutti noi, dannazione.”

Pelham si girò intorno inquietamente.

“Vieni, cammina con me verso casa, ti va, Ray? Ho un mucchio di bollette e non mi piacciono queste strade di Harlem di notte.”

“O.k., Euphoria. Ci vediamo dopo, squadra.”

Raymond e Euphoria lasciarono la stanza.



## 2. The man behind the work

Wallace Henry Thurman was born on August 16th, 1902 in Salt Lake City, Utah in United States. Born as Beulah and Oscar Thurman's son, he grew up without knowing his father as he abandoned him and his mother when Wallace was only a month old. Since Thurman's mother remarried six times, Wallace lived in Salt Lake City with his maternal grandmother Emma Jackson who managed an illegal saloon from her home, selling alcohol without a permit, and who was among the founders of Calvary Baptist Missionary Church—the first black church in Utah.

His early life was therefore spent in circumstances of loneliness, family instability, as he particularly suffered immensely from his father's abandonment. Following his moving to Bose, Idaho, with his mother, his health problems prevented him from attending school for two years, which brought him back to his grandmother's house. Thurman later satirized his early years in Utah by writing, as quoted in *Black Writers in America*, that "there has been and is certainly nothing about him [the Utah Black] to inspire anyone to do anything perhaps drink gin with gusto, and develop new technique for the contravention of virginity."

From 1910 to 1914 he lived in Chicago with his mother and had the possibility of finishing grammar school in Omaha, Nebraska, even though his sickly nature continued to prevent him from studying as he suffered from frequent heart attacks.

Looking upon his formative early years, we can see the effects of his poor health on his ability to finish school, complicated by the influenza caught in the 1918 Influenza Pandemic while in Pasadena, California and followed by a serious nervous breakdown. Enrolled in the University of Utah in Salt Lake City in 1919

he moved to the University of Southern California in Los Angeles after two years. Early on in his life Wallace had manifested a desire to study medicine, yet during his university years he found a new direction in writing and literature.

As many of the later critics would realize, it was his passion for the classical works of Plato, Aristotle, Shakespeare, Havelock, Ellis, Flaubert, Charles Baudelaire and many others, which shaped his denunciation of the Harlem writers works, his manner of articulating a theory of literature. Hughes defined Thurman as "...a strangely brilliant black boy, who had read everything and whose critical mind could find something wrong with everything he read."

While in Los Angeles he met and became friends with Arna Bontemps, a writer who introduced him to the world of journalism, as a reporter and columnist for a black-owned newspaper-The Pacific Defender.

Already showing signs of his desire to reform the works of literature of the time, Wallace started the short-lived magazine Outlet, with the intention of creating a literary movement intended to be a West Coast equivalent to the NAACP publication The Crisis, and following its failure, he moved to Harlem, New York.

In 1925, Thurman moved to Harlem, New York. Over the next decade, he worked as an elevator operator, as an editor of the journal World Tomorrow, and a writer of novels, plays and journalistic articles. In 1926, he became editor of The Messenger, a socialist journal targeting African-American readers. He was also a co-founder of the literary magazine Fire!!, which published the work of Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston and Gwendolyn Bennett. Despite its difficult start and short life, there was passion and individual commitment behind it as Langston remembers in his autobiography *The Big Sea*. "Each of us agreed to give fifty dollars to finance the first issue. Thurman was to edit it, John P. Davis to handle the business end, and Bruce Nugent to take charge of distribution. The rest of us were to serve as an editorial board to collect material, contribute our own work, and act in any useful way we could".

The magazine voiced a different view from the African-American leaders such as W.E.B. Du Bois, who argued in favor of social equality and racial integration through black propaganda. Thurman supported the freedom of the

African-American artists to express themselves on their own terms, not according to what was expected of them. Thurman believed the New Negro Movement spent too much energy in showing Americans that blacks were respectable people and not inferior. According to Singh and Scott, “Thurman’s Harlem Renaissance is, thus, staunch and revolutionary in its commitment to individuality and critical objectivity: the black writer need not pander to the aesthetic preferences of the black middle class, nor should he or she write for an easy and patronizing white approval.”

In the tradition of the Modernist literary meeting places, Thurman's apartment in Harlem served as a central meeting place for African-American authors and artists. Thurman referred to the room as "Niggerati Manor" as he and Zora Neale Hurston named their fellow African-American intellectuals and writers “Niggerati” - an ironic name for this “New Negro Movement,” in the Harlem Renaissance. According to David Levering Lewis in *When Harlem Was In Vogue*, Wallace’s gatherings were “the cradle of revolt against establishment art,” and Thurman its leading spokesman for “immoral independence.” Thurman had an odd assortment of characters, those who had little in common with the talented and respected artists of his Harlem group. As Richard Bruce Nugent stated in *Before and Beyond Harlem*, Thurman had “a fascination for people that only the devil could have—an almost diabolical power.”

In 1928, he was offered a position as editor of the magazine *Harlem: A Forum of Negro Life*, contributors included Alain Locke, George Schuyler, Alice Dunbar-Nelson and theater critic Theophilus Lewis. More ambitious than *Fire !!* the magazine contained discussions of art and politics—racial and non-racial—and sought a cross generational readership which unfortunately never lived to see a second issue. Following this experience, he became the first African American reader for a Major New York publishing company.

In the same year, on August 22, 1928, he married Louise Thompson but the marriage didn’t last long, only six months as Ms. Thompson declared Wallace Thurman to be a repressed homosexual and could no longer put up with his drinking excesses. The couple separated yet never divorced.

Concerning his career as a playwright, he wrote *Harlem: A Melodrama of Negro Life in Harlem*, (originally titled *Black Belt*), a play that was introduced on Broadway in February 1929. Having as a starting point Thurman's short story "*Cordelia the Crude*" , *Harlem* was written in collaboration with Thurman's white associate and lifelong friend, William Jourdan Rapp. The play describes the experiences of a migrant family who, coming to New York with bright hopes of a better life, discover further hardship in adjusting to city life and the problems of unemployment., James Weldon Johnson in his 1930 work *Black Manhattan* commented:

"It was a portrayal of life in a Harlem railroad flat, of rental parties, of the 'sweetback,' of the 'hot stuff man,' of the 'number king,' and the number racket. And it also portrayed a distracted migrant mother from the South caught in this whirlpool and struggling to save herself, her husband, and her children from being submerged. The play depicted a low level of life, but it had vitality and power. The cast was large, sixty in number, all Negroes except one.... It was a success."

The following collaboration with Rapp from 1930 -the three-act play *Jeremiah, the Magnificent* remained unpublished and received only one posthumous performance. Thurman's other unpublished plays remain the 1931 work *Singing the Blues*, and *Savage Rhythm*, written in 1932.

However, Thurman's best known works remain his novels, starting in 1929 with his first novel, *The Blacker the Berry*, dedicated to his grandmother Emma Jackson and one of the earliest American novels to deal with the subject of interracial prejudice, and "although talky and awkward in spots, (Thurman had hoped to write the Great African American Novel), was a breakthrough novel."(David Levering -The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader). As Lewis added, "For the first time in African American fiction, color prejudice within the race was the central theme of a novel. Emma Lou, its heroine (like the author very dark and conventional unattractive), is obsessed with respectability as well as tortured by her pigment, for Thurman makes the point on every page that Afro-America's aesthetic and spiritual center resides in the unaffected, unblended, noisome common folk and the liberated, unconventional artists."

S.P. Fullinwider in *The Mind and Mood of Black America* underlines the main character's problem:

“She was too black. She tried the various expedients—skin cream, the hair straightener, etc.—but all failed her. It finally dawned on her (as it apparently had dawned on Thurman) that her problem lay not with her color but with her psyche. The only viable solution was to accept herself for what she was.”

In 1932 he wrote and published *Infants of the Spring*, Thurman's satire of the Harlem Renaissance. The book's “Niggeratti Manor” (modeled after Thurman's former place of residence) is filled with thinly disguised portrayals of his Harlem circle: Thurman Raymond Taylor (Thurman) Sweetie Mae Carr (Zora Neale, Hurston), Dr. Parks (Alain Locke), Tony Crews (Langston Hughes), Cedric Williams (Eric Walrond). The book received mixed reviews and continues to this day to be an issue of debate. For some critics like Irvin Huggins in his *Harlem Renaissance*, it is “one of the finest bits of prose writing to come out of Harlem,” and likened Euphoria Blake's [the fictitious owner of Niggeratti Manor] story to “a good sermon.” Others like David Levering Lewis in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader* consider the book's prose “generally disappointing”. In *The Mind and Mood of Black America*, S.P. Fullinwider considered *Infants of the Spring* a polemic, which treated the Renaissance “as an exercise in self-delusion. It was not necessarily that the Negro writers were barren of talent, but that they were so busy posing at being literary that there was little time left for writing.”

Thurman's third novel, *The Interne* was published in 1932 and it was written with a white colleague Abraham L. Furman whom Thurman met while working at Macaulay's. Describing corruption in an urban hospital, *The Interne*, unlike Thurman's earlier works, dealt with white characters and did not address the subject of race. The book's commercial and critical failure made Thurman travel to California in 1934 to write screen plays of the “adults only” variety. His screenplays included two Bryan Foy Productions: the 1934 film *Tomorrow's Children* and the studio's 1935 release *High School Girl*.

As he felt screenwriting was dull and artistically unrewarding, Thurman continued his heavy drinking which, along with the effects of tuberculosis, forced

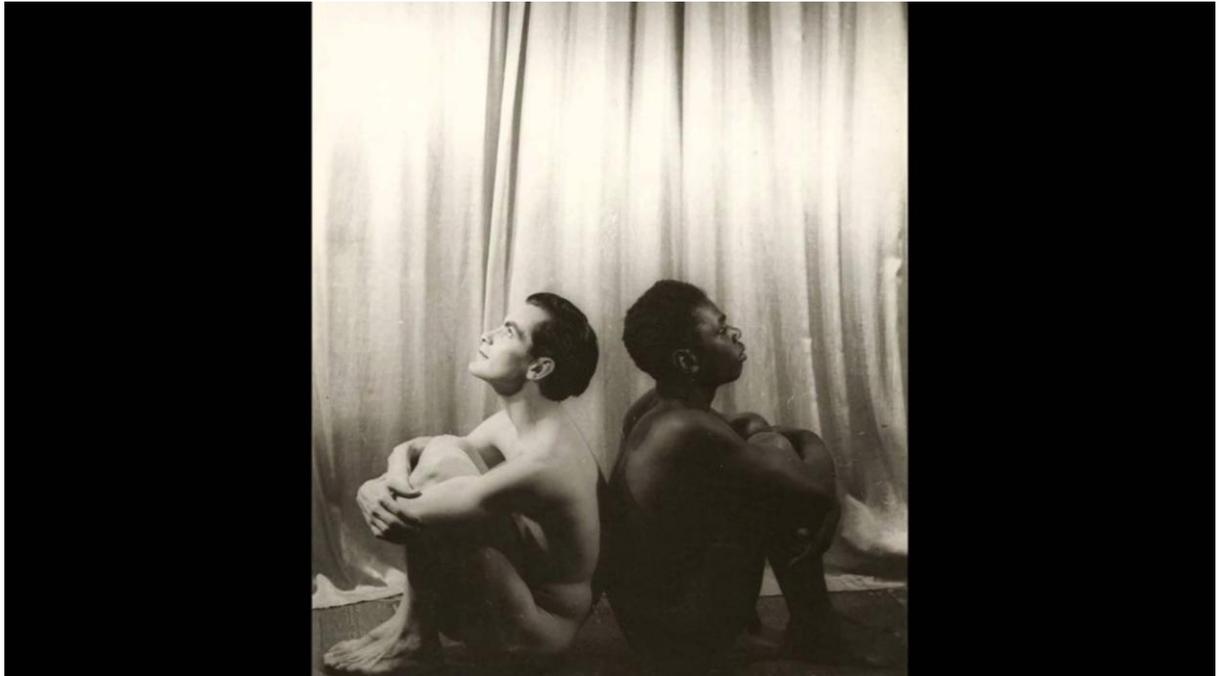
him to seek medical treatment, as he returned to New York in May of 1934, when Faith Berry wrote in *Before and Beyond Harlem*, “wasted away to skin and bones.” A month later, he collapsed and was admitted to the charity ward of City Hospital on Welfare Island. On the evening of December 21, Thurman sat up in his hospital bed, and according to Berry in *Before and After Harlem*, laughed “in tragic mockery,” during a toast to his demise, and then suddenly died.

As Arna Bontemps put it in *Harlem Renaissance Remembered*, Thurman’s life resembled “a flame which burned so intensely, it could not last long, but quickly consumed itself.”

In his short story “*Grist in the Mill*,” included in the work *Black Writers of America*, Thurman revealed an autobiographical sense of fatalism,

“This is indeed an accidental cosmos, so much so, that even the most divine mechanism takes an occasional opportunity to slip a cog and intensify the reigning chaos. And to make matters intriguing, more terrifying, there seems to be a universal accompaniment of mocking laughter, coming from the ethereal regions as well as from the more mundane spheres, to each mishap whether that mishap be experienced by a dislodged meteor, a moon-bound planet, a sun-shrunken comet, or a determined man.”

Thurman lived and died a talented and “determined man” whose mocking laughter failed to shield him from his own sense of failure and self-hatred.



### **3. Major themes of Thurman's era and works**

#### **3.1 Racism in the black community : Colorism and The Blacker the Berry**

##### **3.1.1 The problem of race**

The concepts of race and racial inequality have been central to American history from its beginnings. Despite claiming that the birth of the American nation took place driven by the quest for, religious political and economic liberty, from the very beginning American society was equally founded on domination, inequality and oppression which involved the absolute denial of freedom for slaves.

The definition of race itself does not justify its political and social application if we take a closer look. For many people, the concept of race covers important biological differences across groups of people whose ancestors came from different parts of the world. The concept of race appears even more natural to many people since racial classification is generally based on visible biological differences between individuals. However such an understanding reflects a general misconception that in the history has been manipulated to suit the interests of the dominant groups. Race is a social category, not a biological one.

While racial classifications generally use inherited biological traits as criteria for classification, nevertheless how those traits are treated and how they are translated into the categories we call “races” is defined by social conventions, not by biology, with race understood as an unstable [...] complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle (Omi and Winant 68).

According to the specialists in matters of biological and social racial discrimination as Takaki, James and more specifically Omi and Winant, the understanding of race as based on biological differences goes back to the 16th and 17th centuries when the European colonists met the first Africans and started to associate them with apes and savagery, followed by seeing in them a lack of intelligence and civility in opposition of the European ideal of beauty and sophistication.

A complex and unjust classification was born with black being defined as inferior while white European biology became a feature of superiority, resulting in a racially stratified society in the American colonies with the dominant European majority as privileged class and the inferior black class restricted to slavery. This prejudice against the black considered as inferior continued to be present in all aspects of American society being carried over in all social and political forms, as well as being passed on from generation to generation as a generalized mindset.

The major change in scientific theories however emerged in the 1920s when ethnicity-based theory defined race as a social construct, not as a fixed biological characteristic. Challenging the previous biologicistic and Darwinist theories and it became predominant well into the mid-1960s (Omi and Winant 14). Furthermore, ethnicity was understood as —the result of group formation process based on culture and descent with race simply being one of the —determinants of this process (Omi and Winant 15).

Unfortunately, despite assuming as they did in the 1920s that social differences will disappear in time due to industrial progress, the same researchers recognized at the time that the concept of race and discrimination would always be part of the American structures, and therefore impossible to remove.

In different times and places racial boundaries are drawn in very different ways. In the U.S. a person is considered “Black” if they have any African ancestry, the so-called “one-drop rule” -the standard racial classification system in the post Civil War U.S. People were therefore forcefully divided into ethnic groups according to their skin color or ancestry regardless their own preferences. And the groups defined as others than white were always discriminated in every aspect of social and economic life. Racial classification was constantly re-created throughout time, depending on political situation. (James 242).

### **3.1.2 Internalized prejudice-Colorism**

If the above section of the present paper outlined schematically the root of the racial problem in the definition and application of the concept of “race”, there is another reflection of the prejudices created by the skin color as biological difference, namely not against the white supremacy but within the black community itself. Discrimination based on the shade of skin led to hierarchies within the black community and gave birth to the term “colorism” to better define this intra-racial form of prejudice and discrimination.

According to the Oxford Dictionary, colorism is a form of “prejudice or discrimination against individuals with a dark skin tone, typically among people of the same ethnic or racial group.”

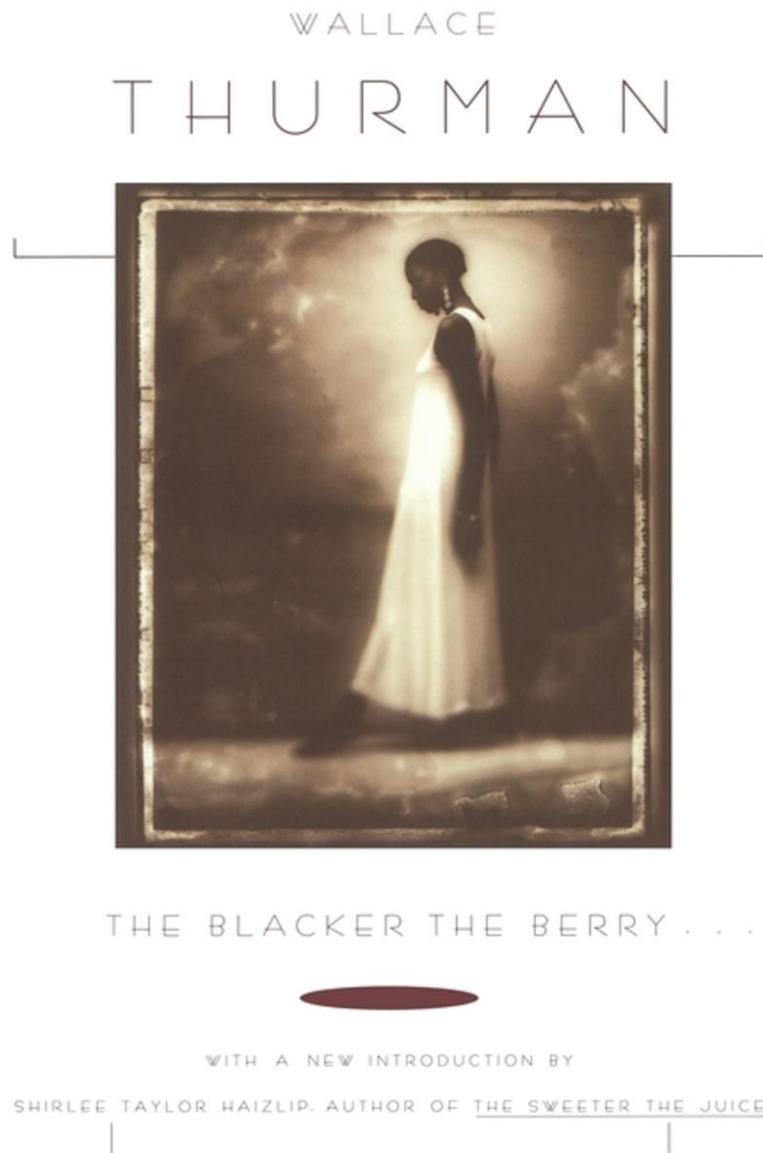
Historically, colorism can be traced back to slavery times, when some were assigned higher status among the rest of the African American community on the basis of skin color. Especially in the South where the majority of the African population resided before the Civil War, the mulattoes shared some privileges with Whites, since the authorities considered them to be a —mediating influence to help control Black slaves (Jones 1508). Evidence can be found in a letter of a slaveholder called Willie Lynch from 1712, “I have outlined a number of differences among the slaves, and I take these differences and make them bigger. I use fear, distrust and envy for control purpose. On top of my list is age, but it is only there because it starts with an A. The second is color and shade.”

Audrey Kerr in her article *The Paper Bag Principle* presents records from slave owners showing that lighter men and women were offered more skilled and more house jobs than darker slaves, who were seen as more suited for hard labor, resulting in jealousy and hatred within the slave community against lighter blacks. The origin therefore of colorism can be found in the slave owners policy of promoting intra-racial conflict: “You must use the dark skin slaves vs. the light skin slaves, and the light skin slaves vs. the dark skin slaves”. Thus by associating privilege with lighter skin shade, and inferiority with darker shades of black, the intra-racial tension became part of the black community.

In order to maintain the privileged status even in the post-bellum period, —elite mulattoes with higher education and economic security created separate communities also called blue-vein societies consisting exclusively of light-skinned African Americans; dark-skinned masses were considered inferior and were generally despised (Jones 1515).

In the context of the 1920s Harlem world, the problem of colorism emerges even more clearly in the biography of Wallace Thurman himself who was himself the subject of discrimination within his own community as contemporaries remember. Richard Bruce Nugent, a writer of the Harlem Renaissance, recalls his surprise upon first meeting his future friend and collaborator Wallace Thurman when he discovered that Thurman was black. “He was black in a way that it’s hard for us to recognize that people ever had to be black,” Nugent told historian David Levering Lewis in 1976. When Langston Hughes first introduced Nugent and Thurman, Nugent remembered: “I looked over and there was this little black boy with a sneering nose.... I couldn’t eat.” Nugent left the cafeteria, thinking to himself, “how dare he be so black,” but then returned and apologized, saying “I just never knew anybody black before.”

According to some critics, this sense of not being fully accepted by his community translated into Thurman’s lack of race-loyalty and tenuous relationship to the race (Herring 591), and ambiguity of his attitude towards race which emphasizes the ambiguity of Thurman’s personality suggested in Steve’s view of Ray as Thurman’s fictional alter ego: “You claim to have no special love for your race [but] you also claim not to despise them “(Infants 60).



### 3.1.3 The Blacker the Berry

The issues of colorism will form the main theme of Thurman's novel *The Blacker the Berry* which for a long time has been read as an autobiographical novel (Pochmara 151), with the experiences of Emma Lou symbolically mirroring the discrimination felt by Wallace Thurman in his life and in the context of the 1920s Harlem. According to the studies undertaken at the time, the majority of upper-middle-class

African Americans in Harlem in the 1920s were light-skinned. The resulting association of lighter skin, social prominence and economic prosperity, as well as the tendency of black men to marry light-skinned women for higher status will form the background for the birth of Thurman's novel and the search for identity and acceptance of its main heroine.

The story of Emma Lou Morgan, a dark-skinned young woman is set against a background of colorism evident in her family, as an elitist blue vein society set apart from the other members of the black community through the privilege of having lighter colored skin. It is her family that teaches Emma Lou

about racial discrimination and encourages her poor self-esteem, as she cannot fit into her own family. The community in Boise was an elite Negro social group founded by Emma Lou's mulatto grandparents, who believed in their own superiority since even the former slave masters had allowed them a special status. Having the white blood, which was in their eyes the symbol of everything pure and good (Berry 90), in their veins, the mulattoes in Boise feel closer to the ideal of white purity and supremacy, and thus believe they are entitled to special treatment not only by whites but also by their dark-skinned fellow citizens. Hence, the case of a family member with really dark skin becomes a social disgrace. "Negroes are, after all, human beings, and they are [...] influenced and controlled by the same forces and factors that influence and control other human beings. [...] Potentially we are all color-prejudiced as long as we remain in this environment"(Berry 92)

The color of Emma Lou's skin marks her destiny in such society and in her own community as she "would never know anything but sorrow and disappointment because of the —penalties inflicted by society on dark-skinned women" (Berry 2; 8). Marked from birth for a life of social limitations, the negative predictions of her family will soon become Emma Lou's interior voice justifying her failures on all levels in her personal and professional life.

Color consciousness is crucial to Emma Lou's character, and it would become the center of her identity and existence: "More acutely than ever before Emma Lou began to feel that [...] her marked color variation from the other people in her environment was a decided curse" (Berry 1). Since she cannot escape her skin and the constricting family environment she grew up in, she will try to escape to a larger social context L. A. where she hoped to find a more accepting community or her life purpose: "broad people who would not treat her inferior because of her skin color." (Berry 11) Nevertheless, here as well she finds herself in the same context of colorism, which makes the reader see that the problem may be more internal to the main character than external, caused by the outside community.

The problem of colorism becomes evident as a dual one,-born from a biological difference that divides the shades of black according to their parents,

then translated into a social status, but also internalized by the privileged and underprivileged members of the black community. Emma Lou is color conscious and snobbish since her family had taught her to be proud of their elite status, yet she cannot truly belong because of her darker skin. It finally translates as her inability to accept herself fully, as she is convinced that “if she removed the unwelcome black mask from her face she would be —more like her fellow men” (Berry 3)

However, her inability to belong can also be explained also by the fact that her family instilled in her an unjustified feeling of superiority which combined with her polite manners distinguishes her from other dark-skinned Blacks, especially from typical Southern “dark[ies]”(24). Hazel Mason, a dark-skinned girl from the South is described as “a barbarian who had most certainly not come from a family of best people” (Berry 17) and is rejected as a potential friend by Emma Lou. Believing that “Negroes must always be sober and serious in order to impress white people with their adaptability and non-difference”(27) Emma Lou is terrified by Hazel’s blunt behavior and feels that the right sort of people would ignore her for her association with Hazel.

Emma Lou “swings between an overwhelming sense of superiority and an equal sense of inferiority “(Jarraway 46). The sense of superiority made her believe that she cannot have a dark-skinned company. Moreover, she “idolized the one thing one would naturally expect her to hate—light-skinned African Americans” (Berry 129).

On the one hand, she refuses to be associated with Hazel who has the same dark skin as hers, and on the other hand, she wants to belong to those who are responsible for her own racial discrimination.

Returning to Boise, Emma Lou is convinced that her family’s negative prediction about her acceptance into society or her own purpose in life were reinforced by the life in L.A. However, during her summer affair with Weldon, she forgets about her skin color and her desire to belong: “What did being black, what did the antagonistic mental attitudes of the people who really mattered mean when she was in love?( Berry, 34).

With the discovery of her sexuality and her subsequent bitter disappointment when Weldon abandons her, Emma Lou will continue her quest for acceptance and identity in the Harlem of the 1920s which at the time was seen as a promised land for many African-Americans. In her desire to reject her past of pain, Thurman's heroine will attempt to leave behind her all her family ties as she tries to make a life for herself as her own individual, free to explore new possibilities along with a recently discovered sexual freedom, becoming more self-confident with "ample sophistication in the ways of sex and self-support" (Berry, 41).

Refusing the job found by her mother as an actress's maid- "Imagine her being maid for a Negro woman! It was unthinkable" (Berry, 75), Emma Lou finds work as a stenographer to a certain Mr. Brown which in her eyes represents a step forward towards her ideal self a "trim and pert woman who associates with the right sort of people" (Berry, 50). However the same intra-racial prejudice that she had thought she had left behind in the small community of Boise is at work in the world of Harlem, as she will lose her job due to her too dark complexion, apparently incompatible with a desk job, reserved for lighter-skinned black people. "African Americans are employed almost exclusively in domestic services; and that a dark skinned girl is not a type of girl that an African American businessman is likely to hire". (55) Ironically enough it is once again her own race that rejects her on the basis of her too dark skin, reinforcing her color consciousness and reserving her for menial jobs as she later takes on the job originally refused, to be Arline's maid. Thurman is presenting the reality of the false promised land of Harlem, where the same racist principles work, and self-realization is difficult due to intra-racial prejudice present everywhere, despite the propaganda of the black community leaders.

*The Blacker the Berry*, moreover, describes another phenomenon of the 1920s –the use of skin-bleaching products that in themselves appear to confirm the intra-racial prejudice at work within the black community. With the popularity of such products advertised in the magazines of the age, women within the black community believed and were told that a lighter black skin was more beautiful than a darker one, so, in order to marry well or get the job they wanted as in the case of Emma Lou they needed to liberate the whiter women trapped in

their too dark skin. As Dorman observes in his work, the practice of skin bleaching expressed the reality of the 1920s Harlem where

“lighter skin color was associated with the higher position in racial hierarchy as well as with modernity and progress” (62), and therefore the promised self-realization and better future: “bleaching was another way of achieving racial progress by creating a completely new non-black race that would be elevated from savagery” (Dorman, 72).

“The connection between economic interests, racist aesthetics, and the discourse of civilization can be seen in an advertisement for Black and White ointment reading “Bleach Your Dark Skin: Race Men and Women Protect Your Future.” The ad carries an illustration of a dark-skinned woman in profile looking to the left, backwards, and the same woman with light brown skin looking towards the right, and the future. “Be attractive!” the ad copy urges. “Throw off the chains that have held you back from the prosperity and happiness that belongs to you.”<sup>42</sup> Like Janus, the Black woman is depicted in two guises, looking in two directions, towards the dark past and the light future. The phrase, “throw off the chains that have held you back” is an explicit reference to the contemporary chains of discrimination as well as the historic chains of slavery. Through the image, dark skin is clearly associated not just with the past and slavery, but also with backward-looking people. Those who are savvy will “protect their future,” and like the woman in the image, assume a new, lighter, forward-looking gaze, towards a future unencumbered with the visual markers of slavery and blackness. Thus aesthetics, economics, racism, and destiny are hybridized in the bleaching cream advertisements, just as Goldberg explains the concepts grew together and out of one another under the “sun” of the Enlightenment in the “field” of racial discourse.” (Dorman, 60)

To better her life, Emma Lou’s color consciousness as well as her feeling of superiority based on her blue-veined origins will motivate her in choosing Alva as the ideal partner that could give her access to acceptance or the ideal

community she imagined for herself: “He was her ideal. He looked like a college person. He dressed well. His skin was such a warm and different color... (Berry 76) However, as is later revealed in the novel, Alva’s view of Emma Lou restates the colorist prejudices at work in the black community and his opportunistic nature: “[t]he only thing a black woman is good for is to make money for a brown-skin papa” (Berry 84)

In Alva, Emma Lou projects all the qualities she desires to possess, her freedom from a color-conscious existence and her wish to be loved and accepted for herself, yet in their arguments, it is clear that the color prejudice remains always an internal barrier for Emma Lou’s personal growth. Continuing to bleach her skin, she desires to be a more acceptable partner for Alva, even if he openly reproaches her for being fixated on the same discourse “color, color, color” (Berry 117) and for reinforcing the colorist prejudice by expecting to be discriminated against on the basis of her skin color.

Since Alva seemed to be “the most soothing and satisfying person with whom she had ever come into contact”(100), when she is left without him Emma Lou will once again return to her previous view of the world colored by racial prejudice and discrimination, demonstrating to the reader that her growth and identity are always dependent on the men in her life and do not appear to be justified by an internal desire for real change.

In her quest for acceptance, she attempts to pass the public school teacher’s examinations, with a new goal of respectability in mind and leaving behind her past of sexual freedom since “respectability for middle-class Harlemites women is linked [...] to the repression [...] of sexuality” (Rottenberg, 70). Changing her past freedom for attending church, getting her teaching qualifications and dating a light-skinned man seem like the right steps into getting acceptance and some economic sense of accomplishment. However, she does not seem to feel satisfied especially since the society she lives in, namely “ the next generation of Negro leaders is the same as her new boyfriend—pallid and —colorless”(Berry 130). Eventually, Emma Lou discovers for herself that the “right sort of people is actually —quite wrong”(130) for her.

Yet in tracing the destiny of his dark-skinned heroine, Thurman once again reveals that intra-racial prejudice continues to affect the lives of the victims since, even in her new context, Emma Lou continues to long for acceptance by using skin bleaching products. She isolates herself and is convinced that she is mocked by the rest of the teaching staff, due to the color of her skin “two years had wrought little change in Emma Lou, although much had happened to her” (Berry 121).

Returning to Alva therefore is a necessary step in her self-growth as she will see him for what he is and remove her illusions from actually seeing herself, and her life and realizing that it was time for her to “do something about herself and about her life “(142). Moreover, it is at this precise stage that Emma Lou will realize that she has been a victim of racial discrimination all her life, adopting principles and beliefs that were not her own, but were the product of her background or associations. Her desire to begin “life anew, always fighting [...] for acceptance of herself and by herself” (Berry 142-3) will start with her first step of accepting herself “accept her black skin as being real and unchangeable, to realize that some things were, had been, and would be...” (Berry 142).

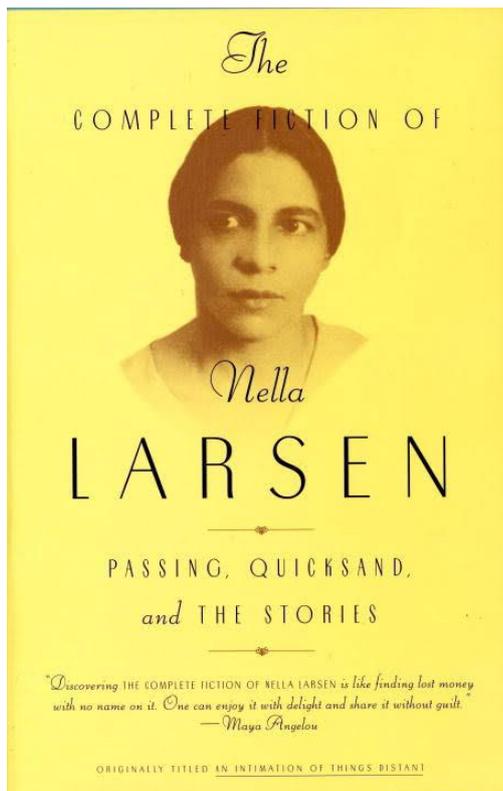
It can be said that *The Blacker The Berry* becomes a novel about self-discovery and acceptance through the experiences of the main character, yet at the same time Wallace Thurman made his novel an illustration of the intra-racial prejudices existing in the black community, made more evident by the social context of black freedom propaganda and the mirage of 1920s Harlem as a land of equal opportunity, with colorism at the heart of its hierarchy and internalized by its members.

### **3.2 Common themes with other authors of the same era – Colorism**

Wallace Thurman was not the only one to voice the problem of colorism and its influence on the lives of the members of the African American community. The superior social status of lighter skinned members of the black community appears in the memories of J. Saunders Redding, a writer and literary critic who spoke

about education in the era of segregated schools where lighter-skinned children were favored over darker-skinned students.

Redding came from an influential Black family in Wilmington, Delaware. In *No Day of Triumph*, Saunders Redding illustrates colorism discrimination during his childhood. After the World War I, Wilmington's Black population increased considerably with many black families moving from the rural South to work in factory jobs available in the growing industrial northern communities. The new arrivals were less educated, poorer, and often darker than Wilmington's



Black middle class. Saunders' mother and grandmother saw the new neighbors as a threat. Moreover in school, Redding mentions a public speaking contest where he faced a dark-skinned student. He was so nervous that he mumbled a few words before bursting into tears. In contrast, the dark-complexioned student's performance was outstanding. Redding, who was socially connected and had lighter skin, won the first prize despite his terrible performance. In this example, we can understand why Emma Lou's darker skin could function as a social barrier already in the formative years, due to colorism affecting the classrooms in Black communities.

Furthermore the Harlem Renaissance era with the talk of the New Negro evident in the propaganda of its leaders unfortunately did not change the realities already present in the black community as the new models put forth were clear example of lighter skinned members of the African American group, and their manners and forms of expression resembled more the White models than their racial roots. In this context, two authors accompany Wallace Thurman's work in exposing the prejudice of colorism within the black community. Nella Larsen and George Schuyler.

In her autobiographical novel *Quicksand*, Larsen focuses on her heroine Helga Crane, a fair-skinned woman, born into a white family as a reminder of her

mother's interracial relationship and indiscretion. Like Emma Lou from Wallace Thurman's novel, it is the family that rejects her in the first place, motivating her need to find acceptance elsewhere. With the only exception of her Uncle Peter, Helga cannot fit into her family, leaving first to teach at Negro school in Naxos where she will be isolated by the African American elite, then moving to Harlem in a different job. Her inability to fit becomes apparent as she leaves Harlem as too trivial to be with her aunt in Copenhagen. Here as well, being put on display because of her exotic looks, Helga cannot find acceptance and will return to live in the south. Her travels, just like Emma Lou's experiences illustrate their need to belong and to be accepted for their inner self and not for the color of their skin or their appearance.

Many critics have seen Helga and her struggle for acceptance as the author's biographical inner struggle to accept her racial identity. Helga's similarities to the author's real life illustrate the genuine and honest character of the art of the Harlem authors, mirroring reality. Colorism can affect both sides of the color spectrum as we have seen, with Emma Lou isolated for being too dark and with Helga as a mulatto woman. While Emma Lou's skin condemned her to the bottom of the social hierarchy, Helga's too white skin marks her as an outsider, belonging to neither community and struggling to define her own identity in relation to the outside world.

Larsen's novel *Passing* published in the same year as *The Blacker the Berry* carries on the theme of colorism by describing the experience at the opposite end of the spectrum with Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry as examples of the calculated deception of the white community by black people "passing" as white for social and economic reasons:

"this hazardous business of "passing," this breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one's chance in another environment, not entirely strange, perhaps, but certainly not entirely friendly. What, for example, one did about background, how one accounted for oneself. And how one felt when one came into contact with other Negroes. But she couldn't. She was unable to think of a

single question that in its context or its phrasing was not too frankly curious, if not actually impertinent.” (Passing 36-37)

*Passing* focuses on the strained friendship between Irene and Clare, the latter having married and deceived a white man into believing her to be white. The episode of the tea invitation, occurring two years before the events of the novel clearly illustrates the colorist prejudice when Clare, Irene and Gertrude another light skinned woman discuss the skin tones of their children:

“After taking up her own glass [Clare] informed them: “No, I have no boys and I don’t think I’ll ever have any. I’m afraid. I nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear that she might be dark. Thank goodness, she turned out all right. But I’ll never risk it again. Never! The strain was simply too-too hellish.” Gertrude nodded in complete comprehension...”Nobody wants a dark child.” Her voice was earnest and she took for granted that her audience was in entire agreement with her. Irene, whose head had gone up with a quick little jerk, now said in a voice of whose even tones she was proud: “One of my boys is dark.” Gertrude jumped up as if she had been shot at. Her eyes goggled. Her mouth flew open. She tried to speak, but could not immediately get the words out. Finally she managed to stammer: “Oh! And your husband, is he—is he—dark, too?” (Passing 59)

The entire life of Clare is a lie based on her choosing the easy way to acceptance in the white community and deleting her black roots, since her family’s elitist and snobbish discrimination against the blacks served her purposes

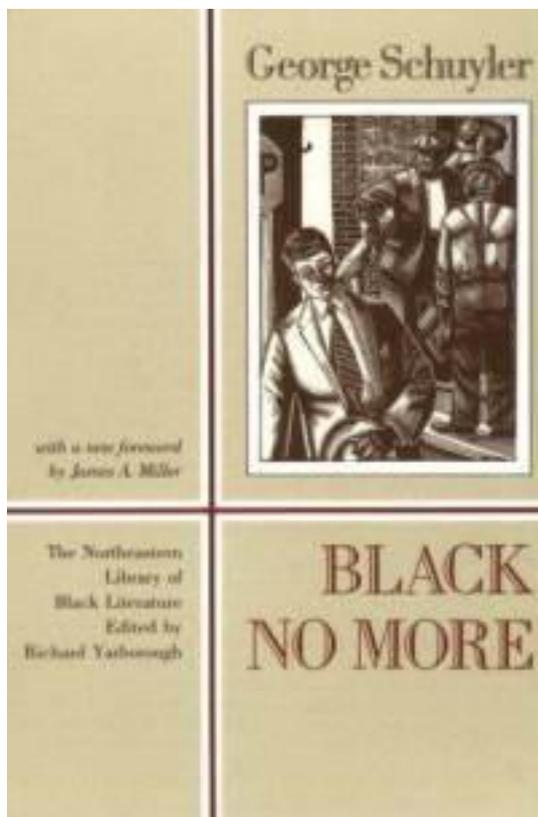
"The aunts were queer. For all their Bibles and praying and ranting about honesty, they didn't want anyone to know that their darling brother had seduced — ruined, they called It — a Negro girl. They could excuse the ruin, but they couldn't forgive the tar-brush. They forbade me to mention Negroes to the neighbours, or even to mention the south side. You may be sure that I didn't. I'll bet they were good and sorry afterwards." She laughed and the ringing bells in her laugh had a hard metallic sound. "When the chance to get away came, that omission was of great value to me. (Passing 39)

From the above excerpts, it is clear that the women choosing to pass cannot understand Irene's connection to the black community, her choosing to marry a black man rather than associate with a lighter skinned man which would ensure further acceptance and elevation in society. Moreover, when Clare returns to Irene asking for an introduction to the Harlem society, we see it as the whim of a "white" woman claiming her exotic blood legacy because it was popular:

"it wasn't, as Irene knew, that Clare cared at all about the race or what was to become of it. She didn't. Or that she had for any of its members great, or even real, affection, though she professed undying gratitude for the small kindnesses which the Westover family had shown her when she was a child. Irene doubted the genuineness of it, seeing herself only as a means to an end where Clare was concerned. Nor could it be said that she had even the slight artistic or sociological interest in the race that some members of other races displayed. She hadn't. No, Clare Kendry cared nothing for the race." (Passing 90)

Clare does not struggle for acceptance as Irene does within the African American community, yet neither of them can choose a definite side on the racial border between white and black. If Clare chose deception and passing for white as her chance to a happy life of social status, Irene is standing on the border, having married within the community and clearly disproving of Clare's choices, yet herself choosing to pass when it was convenient. Trying to integrate both

black and white in their self-definition, we see Irene who chooses to act according to the white lifestyle and white morals within her household, while Clare tries to find her way back to the black community. In both cases, a fragmented self cannot allow them to remain on the borderline. The novel therefore presents a typical dilemma for the light skinned African Americans with passing and achieving an integrated identity as central issues, the quest for acceptance



and a clearly defined racial identity which many members of the black community experienced, as Thurman's novel showed earlier, with Emma Lou's desire for acceptance.

If Nella Larsen's work dealt with her range of experiencing the intra-racial prejudice from her end of the colorist spectrum, George Schuyler and his work *Black No More* joins Thurman's concept regarding the darker end of the skin shade spectrum. Max Disher as the protagonist of the novel is again another Emma Lou, obsessed by the color of his skin, which limits their choices and opportunities in life. As the novel opens with a reference to the common colorist prejudice of preferring "yaller" women over darker ones, we see the evidence of the same context which defined beauty in terms of lighter shades of brown or as white. Moreover, Schuyler presents the context of his novel as an America fallen into a mania of the shade of color, a clear allusion to the Harlem of the 1920s and the colorism prejudice behind the popularity of skin bleaching products and supporting a lighter skinned Negro as the New Negro of the black propaganda. His dedication is not only sarcastic but also satirical of all the colorist prejudice evident in his time: "This book is dedicated to all Caucasians in the great republic who can trace their ancestry back ten generations and confidently assert that there are no Black leaves, twigs, limbs, or branches on their family trees"

The novel in itself is a satire of racial discrimination with a science fiction twist as having been rejected by white women, the protagonist will be the first to experiment with a machine that transforms him into a white person: "a formidable apparatus of sparkling nickel. It resembled a cross between a dentist chair and electric chair" (*Black No More* 13). Following his transformation, Max and his friend will travel to the South and enjoy the benefits of being for all purposes white. The satire is clearly evident in Schuyler's eliminating the racial dilemma through the magic machine, which in turn left the country in an economic chaos since the economy felt the absence of the jobs left by the previously oppressed minority.

Since the issue of race represented such a central point of Schuyler's and Thurman's times, *Black No More* presents the reader with its absence and the resulting consequences for the society. Here as well we see that race is seen more

as a social construct and not necessarily a biologically necessary division of its members. Despite its dystopian qualities, the novel does not analyze the tensions within the black community as the motivation for Max Disher's change of race was not the desire for acceptance as in the case of Larsen's *Passing* or Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry*. His only reason for changing race was to search for the woman who rejected him on the basis of his dark skin, no other social or economic motivation is to be found in the actions of the main character:

“Why not be the first Negro to try it out? Sure, it was a chance, but think of getting white in three days! No more jim crow. No more insults. As a white man he could go anywhere, be anything he wanted to be, do most anything he wanted to do, be a free man at last...and probably be able to meet the girl from Atlanta. What a vision!” (Black No More 10)

Finally, it appears that Thurman's novel *The Blacker the Berry* as well as the novels of Larsen and Schuyler attempted to give artistic expression to a tension within the black community, which seemed to rise more prominently to the surface to accompany the propaganda of the New Negro. From each side of the color spectrum these authors have expressed their own individual dramas not only as members of their race but also as the ones who had access to the underlying truth of color segregation within the black community and tried to speak for the silent majority.

As Alice Walker said: “Unless the question of Colorism is addressed in our communities and definitely in our black "sisterhoods" we cannot, as people, progress.”

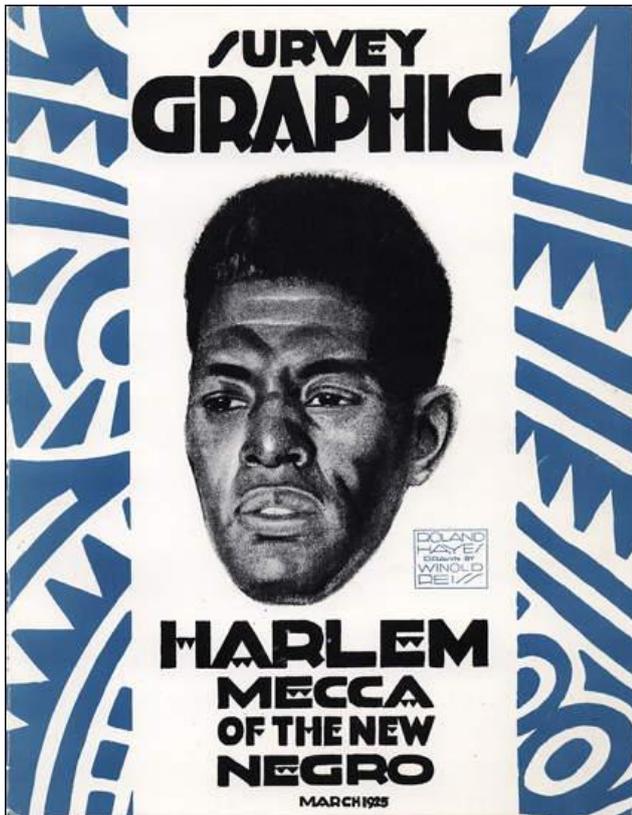
### 3.3 Harlem Renaissance and Infants of the Spring

#### 3.3.1 Harlem Renaissance



“...the life of the Negro community is bound to enter a new dynamic phase, the buoyancy from within compensating for whatever pressure there may be of conditions from without. The migrant masses, shifting from countryside to city, hurdle several generations of experience at a leap, but more important, the same thing happens spiritually in the life attitudes and self-expression of the Young Negro, in his poetry, his art, his education and his new outlook, with the additional advantage, of course, of the poise and greater certainty of knowing what it is all about. From this comes the promise and warrant of a new leadership.”(Locke 2)

As described at the time of the above article by Locke, the new social reality of the New Negro was born out of a migration from the old existential context to a new urban environment in a quest for redefinition and self-realization in the northern industrialized society. With the post World War I rapid growth of the industrial centers in the north and its shortage of labor, job opportunities motivated a large segment of the previously rural African American population to move towards the northern states where the reality of racial discrimination at



home became more apparent. In these circumstances, many African Americans decided to actively pursue the justice promised by the historical events and manifest more aggressively in both defining their identity and status within the American society.

Of all the cities of the north and the new opportunities for educational and professional growth, New York became for the African American community the promised land of change and a chance to obtain the promised justice. In the words of James Weldon Johnson: “Harlem is indeed the great

Mecca for the sight-seer, the pleasure-seeker, the curious, the adventurous, the enterprising, the ambitious and the talented of the whole Negro world; for the lure of it has reached down to every island of the Carib Sea and has penetrated even into Africa.”

In the make of-up of New York, Harlem is not merely a Negro colony or community, it is a city within a city, the greatest Negro city in the world. It is not a slum or a fringe, it is located in the heart of Manhattan and occupies one of the most beautiful and healthy sections of the city. It is not a “quarter” of dilapidated tenements, but it is made up of new-law apartments and handsome dwellings, with well-paved and well-lighted streets. It has its own churches, social and civic centers, shops, theatres and other places of amusement. And it contains more

Negroes to square mile than any other spot on earth. A stranger who rides up magnificent Seventh Avenue on a bus or in an automobile must be struck with surprise at the transformation which takes place after he crosses One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street. Beginning there, the population suddenly darkens and he rides through twenty-five solid blocks where the passers-by, the shoppers, those sitting in restaurants, coming out of theatres, standing in doorways and looking out of windows are practically all Negroes; and then he emerges where the population as suddenly becomes white again. There is nothing just like it in any other city in the country, for there is no preparation for it; no change in the character of the houses and streets; no change indeed, in the appearance of the people, except in their color.”(Johnson 2)

Furthermore within the same article, Johnson expresses the potential of the area as it appeared to him in the 1925 era of his article: “To my mind Harlem is more than a Negro community; it is a large scale laboratory experiment in the race problem. [...] I believe that the Negro’s advantages and opportunities are greater in Harlem than in any other place in the country, and that Harlem will become the intellectual, the cultural and the financial center for Negroes of the United States, and will exert a vital influence upon all Negro peoples.” (Johnson 9)

With Harlem at the heart of this new movement and need for expression, the Harlem Renaissance took form as the “New Negro” movement between 1919 and the middle of the 1930s with its peak years in the period between 1924 when *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life* hosted a party for black writers where many white publishers were in attendance in 1929. It extended to all forms of artistic expression with literary works published along with its articles and short-lived magazines, with manifestations in the visual arts, theatre, and music. The new movement tried to rediscover and affirm the African American culture through a reevaluation of its roots, celebrating primitivism and “primitive races” as more in touch with the natural world, more authentic than the civilized world.

With the premiere of *Three Plays for a Negro Theatre* in 1917 by Ridgely Torrence, the 1919 militant sonnet *If We Must Die* by Claude McKay, the African American soul finally found an artistic form of expression and set the basis for the new movement. In its support the Liberty League as the first organization and *The Voice* as its newspaper founded by Hubert Harrison in 1919 provided the political and propagandistic support needed to affirm the new Negro reality.



Moreover, Christianity, Islam and the religions brought over by the ancestors of the Harlem community also helped in defining the spiritual climate of the age. In an age of self-definition and transformation, the works of Aaron Douglas try to define the need for the African American culture to be integrated in the previous cultural background, using biblical imagery and African themes to define the new spirituality. In the same way, Langston Hughes in his poem *Merry Christmas* will try to define the opposing function of Christian religion in the life of the African

Americans- a symbol of goodness and yet a form of oppression.

In music, the years of the Harlem Renaissance were responsible for revolutionizing music with the Harlem Stride style of playing the piano and jazz using the influence of traditional African American music in creating new forms and sounds for the modern age. The work of Duke Ellington, Jelly Roll Morton and other black artists made the revival of African American rhythms and melodies the basis of a new sound that attracted and influenced the white music and audience as well.

As expression of the new social realities, the Harlem Renaissance was defined by a clear and unapologetic racial pride and affirmation, done as a

counterattack to the racist violence left behind in the south of the US by many of the new Harlem inhabitants. There was however from the beginning an underlying tension in its mix of traditional and classical forms, which mixed high and low culture and contrasted with the previously approved forms of expression preferred by the black intelligentsia as compatible with what was expected of the black performer from the white audience.

The tension between racial identity and the artistic mission of the black artist becomes more evident in the context of the white patronage of Carl Van Vechten and Charlotte Osgood Mason, who supported the black artistic community through using their own influence in getting their works published beyond the Harlem context. By providing them with access to the wider white audience, the works of new authors like Jean Toomer, Jessie Fauset, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, Omar Al Amiri, Eric D. Walrond and Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman could express the specific nature of the African American identity.

With W.E.B. Du Bois introducing the concept of the “talented tenth” as representatives and spokespeople for their community which was now defined by self-determination and different in the urban intellectual setting from the uneducated rural black folk stereotyped in the popular culture. The New Negro model put forth by the Harlem Renaissance propaganda challenged the traditional view of the gender roles, race and status. The problem of artistic mission became a problem of either adapting to the role assigned by the white audience or challenging it, yet despite the propaganda, the lighter-skinned higher-status African American artists mimicked their wider white context in manners, themes and values, much like their ancestors.

The Harlem Renaissance appealed to a mixed black middle class and white audience. Black authors published their works in magazines such as *The Crisis* and *Opportunity* funded by and speaking for the black community and yet they needed the white publishing houses and white-owned magazines to become mainstream, a fact that compromised their revolutionary purpose. However, as Langston Hughes wrote in his essay "*The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*"

(1926) black artists intended to express themselves freely, no matter what the black public or white public thought.

Since both the expectations of the wider white context or of the smaller African American one saw the black artist as a means of expressing a unified racial identity, the intra-racial tensions present in the community and the sense of fragmented identity became voiced in the works of its authors like Thurman. As he believed in the freedom of the artist and of the individual to set and achieve his own goals and means of expression, Thurman opposed the idea of group identity promoted by the propaganda of the Harlem Renaissance. By such topics as intra-racial colorism and the refusal of shared African origin and culture, Thurman challenges this group identity and race unity ideal. He sets against these the right of the individual to choose their reference group and refuse categorization, without any limit set by society or race on the individual path to self-definition and self-development, as Emma Lou and Ray discover for themselves.

Challenging the old pre-Civil War stereotypes and racial ideologies, the black leaders of the Harlem movement sought to express and glorify the New Negro, “a new African American identity that would show the respectability and capacity of black race to grow intellectually and culturally by producing a generation of —thinkers, strivers [and] doers “(Huggins 5). Consequently, the creation of artistic works that demonstrate the intellectual capacity and sophistication of black race was required of the Harlem literati as DuBois stressed in *Criteria of Negro Art* in 1926 :

“The question comes next as to the interpretation of these new stirrings, of this new spirit: Of what is the colored artist capable? We have had on the part of both colored and white people singular unanimity of judgment in the past. Colored people have said: "This work must be inferior because it comes from colored people." White people have said: "It is inferior because it is done by colored people." But today there is coming to both the realization that the work of the black man is not always inferior.”(Du Bois 17)

“We can go on the stage; we can be just as funny as white Americans wish us to be; we can play all the sordid parts that America likes to assign to Negroes; but for any thing else there is still small place for us.” (Du Bois 24) “The white publishers catering to white folk would say, "It is not interesting" -- to white folk, naturally not. They want Uncle Toms, Topsyies, good "darkies" and clowns.” (Du Bois 25)

“Thus all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propoganda. But I do care when propoganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent.” (Du Bois 27)

“In other words, the white public today demands from its artists, literary and pictorial, racial pre-judgment which deliberately distorts Truth and Justice, as far as colored races are concerned, and it will pay for no other.

On the other hand, the young and slowly growing black public still wants its prophets almost equally unfree. We are bound by all sorts of customs that have come down as second-hand soul clothes of white patrons. We are ashamed of sex and we lower our eyes when people will talk of it. Our religion holds us in superstition. Our worst side has been so shamelessly emphasized that we are denying we have or ever had a worst side. In all sorts of ways we are hemmed in and our new young artists have got to fight their way to freedom. “(Du Bois 34)

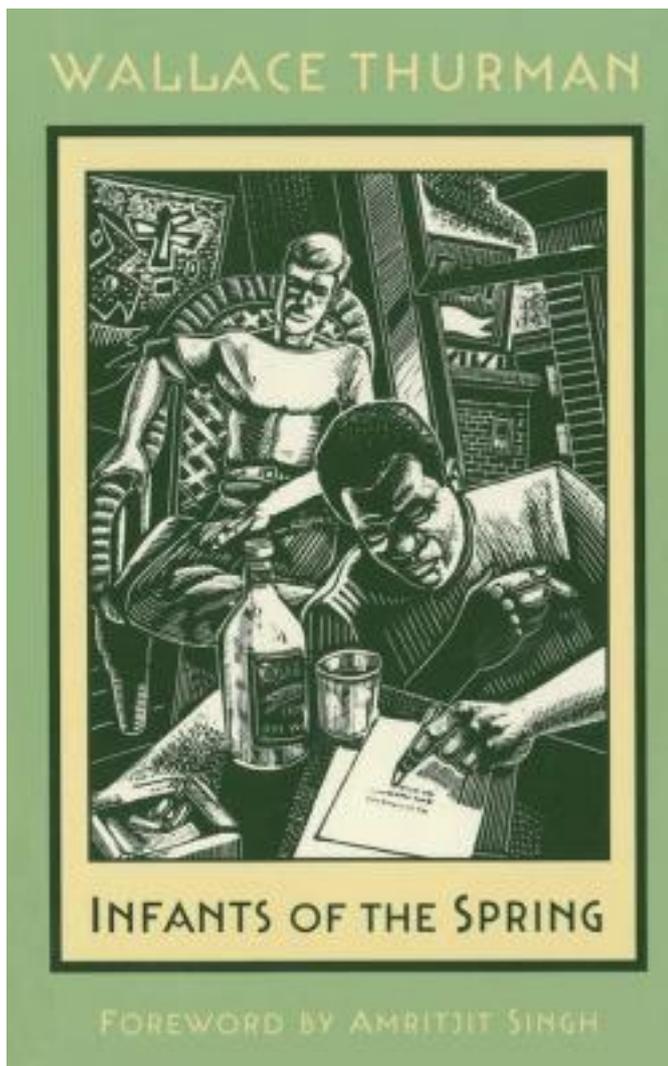
“I do not doubt that the ultimate art coming from black folk is going to be just as beautiful, and beautiful largely in the same ways, as the art that comes from white folk, or yellow, or red; but the point today is that until the art of the black folk compells [sic] recognition they will not be rated as human. And when through art they compell

[sic] recognition then let the world discover if it will that their art is as new as it is old and as old as new.” (Du Bois 38)

Since the leaders suggested that African American authors writing an art that according to Du Bois served also as propaganda for the New Negro movement, should not include negative aspects of African American life, like the “earthier sides of African Americans were tabooed, limiting thus not only the representation of African Americans but also the subjectivity and creativity of African American artists (Flamming 70).

The younger generation of African American artists therefore rejected the propaganda of the propaganda and rallied around the new controversial magazine FIRE!!, which included such topics as homosexuality, sex and murder (Flamming 70). The editor of FIRE!! and a central figure of the new generation of black rebels was Wallace Thurman: “Thurman's Harlem Renaissance is, thus, staunch and revolutionary in its commitment to individuality and critical objectivity: the black writer need not pander to the aesthetic preferences of the black middle class, nor should he or she write for an easy and patronizing white approval.” (Siggh and Scott 23)

The role of Wallace Thurman as one of the new younger product of the Harlem has only recently become appreciated. His work and purpose within the Harlem movement was to help redefine the mission of the artist in relation to the racial propaganda. As editor of FIRE!! He attempted to define a new vision of individuality for the artist and not one of serving the purposes of the New Negro propaganda. In his works as we have seen in *The Blacker The Berry* he tried to draw the attention of the community members and of the larger audiences to the fragmented racial identity present in real life and incompatible with the vision of the political leaders.



Besides emphasizing the colorist principle at work in the African American community, Wallace Thurman's vision of the artists' freedom from political commitments becomes more evident with the publishing of his novel *Infants of the Spring* in 1932.

### 3.3.2 *Infants of the Spring*

The novel published towards the end of the Harlem Renaissance movement allowed Wallace Thurman to use satire in presenting the defects of such an ambitious movement and its protagonists. Many of its characters therefore are based on Harlem Renaissance artists and leaders, like Zora Neale Hurston, Alain

Locke, Langston Hughes, and others. In choosing an alter ego in Raymond, Thurman manages to present the artificial nature of the representatives of this uplifting movement, their problematic identity adopting white manners and sophistication yet fighting for the affirmation of the African American community.

The choice of the title *Infants of the Spring* references Shakespeare's Hamlet and associates "infants of the spring", symbolic of new life and hope, with "the canker and —contagious blastments (*Infants* iii), undermining the vibrant ideal advocated by Alain Locke. The artists in the novel as fictional mirrors of the real life artists are imperfect and contaminated by various vices and defects, not the perfect models to represent the race and the political discourse of race rebirth associated with the spring.

Stephen Jorgensen, an outsider will join Raymond Taylor, the novel's central consciousness and alter ego of Wallace Thurman, in analyzing the reality of the people in charge of advocating the racial rebirth and redefinition as the New Negroes. The introduction of an outsider will facilitate the analysis of the central issues in the black community and bring a different problem to the mix, the greater racial conflict, white versus black and European versus American. As a graduate student from Copenhagen, Denmark, who has come to New York to study for a Ph.D. at Columbia University, Stephen will be introduced to the world of Harlem and the characters of the Niggeratti Manor with Ray as a guide.

In Ray's words the political leaders and their white patrons appears as lacking substance: "They talk of nothing but service to mankind, not realizing that the greatest service they could render mankind would be self extermination." (Infants 2) There is a clear criticism of Du Bois's political purposes in art as Ray describes the older generation as "warped by propagandal (Infants 221)", "a namby-pamby folk" that affirms that his race "needs outstanding people who will fight for a principle (219)".



Having become instant friends then roommates, they will discuss and analyze the events at the manor but the initial fascination of Stephen with black people, their culture, and their struggles for racial equality and artistic integrity will soon turn into disillusionment following their drunken escapades, their attacks on the missionary Samuel Carter, and their inability to get anything done. In the odd group of inhabitants of the manor, Wallace includes Paul Arbian with his bisexual nature more productive as a shock factor than as an artist, Eustace Savoy, the musician who rejects his African American roots in favor of classical music, Pelham Gaylord, the unsuccessful portrait painter who brings scandal into the manor by raping a teenage girl, Dr. Parkes as a literary equivalent of Du Bois/Alain Locke with his ideal of engaged propagandistic art.

As to the setting of the novel, Thurman creates Niggeratti Manor a fictional disguise of the author's real life residence taken shortly after the publication of *Fire!!* with Richard Bruce Nugent which became known as Niggeratti Manor, "the throbbing heart of black bohemia" (Van Notten 693). In the novel, Niggeratti Manor is run by Euphoria Blake "a Visionary as well as a business woman. She has dreams. One of them is that some day she will be a best selling author. That accounts for this house. She knew the difficulties experienced by Harlem artists and intellectuals in finding congenial living quarters, and reasoned that by turning this house over to Negroes engaged in creative work, she would make money, achieve prestige as a patron, and at the same time profit artistically from the resultant contacts." (Infants 13) Unfortunately, her experiment fails and the end of the novel brings eviction notices to all its tenants, an end to the bohemian creative lifestyle of the artists and to their dreams of making a difference through their art. The most symbolic final act is performed by Paul Arbian who commits suicide as a last resort in his efforts of making a difference. Of all artists, Ray is the only one talented and driven enough to create works that may have an impact on the community and the society, yet the end of the novel leaves him still trapped in his dilemma between racial identity and his artistic mission.

Wallace Thurman's second novel therefore continues his efforts to present the conflicts within the black community, this time focused on the problem of art and its purpose. Through his alter ego Ray, Thurman explores the same problem of

racial identity and self in the wider context of the artist's world. His satire will be focused therefore on the efforts of the political propaganda to promote a new model of racial identity for the black community, which as seen in the novel is hard to adopt and internalize since "the odds are against [...] every other man who would dare to think for himself ( *Infants* 215), the artist and member of the black community being thus pushed to embrace the group's identity and ideals and avoid self-analysis or individualism.

The events in the novel serve only as a background for Thurman's critical and harsh analysis of the Harlem Renaissance movement, its satire being mainly structured on the axes of Negro manifesto and identity and the individual destiny and mission of its main character Raymond.

A critical aspect of the novel is Ray's ridicule of the unrealistic ideals of the black leaders like Du Bois or Locke fictionally disguised as Dr. Parkes, is the imposed necessity for the artist to find his inspiration in the sources that have been pre-approved like the "pagan heritage for inspiration "(*Infants* 236). The satire is evident when Paul Arby manifests his dilemma at having mixed ancestry; he has "no conscious affinity for [African ancestors] at all since their blood is so diluted and their country and times so far away" (*Infants* 237).

To deny the multiple ancestry sources responsible for the multicultural aspects of the American identity for the exclusive return to the primitivism and African roots would signify for the black artist a limitation and an imposition justified only by political reasons in line with the New Negro movement. In Ray's opinion, black artists could use African culture as a source of inspiration only by choice, if "they actually wish to do so" (*Infants* 297). More importantly, "individuality is what we should strive for and that artists should remain true to themselves and —follow [their] individual track (239-40)". Ray's attitude reaffirms individuality and difference as the key artistic goals, illustrating Thurman's attitude towards life and art, which Pochmara defined as "radical independence and individuality" (140).

Thurman and Ray in *Infants of the Spring* will therefore voice a different attitude than the predominant one in the Harlem of his time, namely that the

group identity cannot be enforced on an individual and especially on an artist sensitivity as it eliminates all specific traits and personal needs.

“One cannot make movements nor can one plot their course. When the work of a given number of individuals during a given period is looked at in retrospect, then one can identify a movement and evaluate its distinguishing characteristics. Individuality is what we should strive for. Let each seek his own salvation. To me, a wholesale flight back to Africa or a wholesale allegiance to Communism or a wholesale adherence to an antiquated and for the most part ridiculous propagandistic program are all equally futile and unintelligent.”  
(*Infants* 119)

This insistence on the individual and not the collective racial identity and destiny can be found in Thurman’s own words describing his process of creation: “It would be his religious duty to ferret deeply into himself deeply into his race, isolating the elements of universality, probing, peering, stripping all in the interests of garnering literary material to be presented truthfully, fearlessly, uncompromisingly” (*Collected* 240).

Therefore, Ray’s considerations on the importance of individuality and subjectivity in the creative process express in fact Thurman’s contempt for the demands imposed on the artists by political propaganda. His characters in *Infants* illustrate the conflict between the artistic vision of the white and black audience, their expectations and the vision of the young black artists:

“Dr. Du Bois has shown us the way. We must be militant fighters. We must not hide away in ivory towers and prate of beauty. We must fashion cudgels and bludgeons rather than sensitive plants. We must excoriate the white man, and make him grant us justice. We must fight for complete social and political and economic equality.”  
[...] “this is a new generation and must make use of new weapons. Some of us will continue to fight in the old way, but there are other things to be considered, too. Remember, a beautiful sonnet can be as effectual, nay even more effectual, than a rigorous hymn of hate.”  
(*Infants* 119)

Thurman's choice of the odd range of artistic characters inhabiting the manor also draws attention to the imperfections of the artist's life, the bohemian freedom of experiment that applies both to life and to their art: "a rare collection which only intensifies their connection to art." (20) Ray's novel is his life in the same way Thurman chose to fictionalize the characters of the Harlem Renaissance, he is "always the author and that he dramatizes himself as well as all his life." (214)

The exploits of the characters, their extravagant lifestyle and peculiar excesses and vices only serve to reinforce the diversity underlying the artistic temperament, therefore impossible to force into a unified self, serving as model for political propaganda. As Ganter explains the "writers' imaginative queerness lay in their cosmopolitan ability to pass comfortably into another identity, be it sexual, racial, or cultural" (Ganter 85). Thurman as his literary self Ray tries to follow the bohemian tradition, to experiment forms and new modes of expression both in life and in art, but they both find that "something holds [him] back (Infants 58). As Steve defines it as "some racial complex" (60), the reader is reminded of the words of W.E.B. Du Bois who spoke about the expectations and limitations affecting Negro art "African Americans are bound by all sorts of customs that have come down [from] white patrons" (Criteria of Negro Art 294)

Even the propaganda's insistence on the role of the black artist in bridging the gap between the black and white cultures, ironically reinforces the fact that such a gap exists, as does the inferiority complex felt by many members of the black community. As Ray notes "the louder they cry against it the more they mark themselves inferiors" (Infants 140). Having "no choice but to be what their environment and nature has made them" (Infants 142) in a racially stratified country and community in itself, freedom from racial bounds cannot be achieved but through two available means: financial freedom and through art, as the landlady Euphoria states. "only with money can Negroes ever purchase complete freedom. With money and with art" (90).

Ray therefore appears to define himself as one of the few able to transcend the inferiority complex that is ridiculed in the black artist's desire to please the white audiences and their expectations; he belongs to the "remaining one hundredths

per cent of African Americans who have managed to escape racial consciousness and inferiority complex” (Infants 141).

Moreover he appears to have accepted himself and his place at the darker end of the color spectrum with ease and nonchalance, proclaiming:

“I know I am a Negro and I [cannot] effect a change” (Infants 61). His circle of friends confirms his bohemian lifestyle as further proof of his artistic temperament, defying conventions of acceptable social associations: “I cannot bear to associate with the ordinary run of people. [...] Unless buttressed by stimulating personalities, I am lost, no matter how despicable or foolish those personalities may appear in retrospect. They are the life of me” (Infants 193-4)

However, nothing escapes Thurman’s critical analysis, not even his alter ego’s confidence in being above racial conditioning or his conviction of his “openness to the unusual and transgressing the boundaries of race and art” (Ganter 85) In fact Thurman’s satire addresses Ray’s case as well, as he is another example of a poser, like all the members of the Niggeratti manor community. As the issues of race identity do not appear to affect him, nor do the requests of the political black leaders that his art express the race issues from the African American point of view. Nevertheless, he is an author who cannot write he “sit[s] around and do[es] nothing” (Infants 60). Unable to make progress in his novel, he undergoes a self analysis and admits to having made no memorable progress in his life or work, calling himself a “*self-deluded posturer*” (146).

In Thurman’s review of Infants, he writes: “Bohemianism [...] came to the present author [...] too early to be clarified by twenty-five-year-old maturity. It came in that uncertain middle period of his life [and] unbalance [d] him” (Collected 226). It appears that for Ray the “struggle to free himself from race consciousness had been hailed before actually accomplished” (147). However, Ray justifies his own hasty assimilation of the race consciousness by his strong desire to express himself, the need for artistic expression that cannot be subject to “unprincipled inundation and unprincipled expression” (Infants 146), which alludes to the expectations burdening the modes and contents of the black artist’s work.

As Ray points out his rapid assimilation and hasty development reflects on an individual scale the process of hasty assimilation that affected the entire African American community, following their freedom and limited integration into American society. Both sides of the racial conflict appeared unprepared for the new reality and therefore the corresponding mentality of the previous historical realities were carried into the present. African American self-esteem and self-reliance was praised in propaganda before actually being accomplished, just like Ray's freedom of the racial consciousness. Consequently, even if Alain Locke states that African Americans are getting into "progressive phases of [...] life and that the servile Old Negro has become a myth" (1), Ray believes that the race progress is more propaganda than reality with many African Americans as "the servile progeny of servile ancestors" (Infants 142).

Suffering from the underlying complex of inferiority visible in the contrast between the black and white society, encouraged to speak for their race and glorify their African roots, the young black artists need to free themselves from all constraints and create for art's sake and not for propaganda: "We want to lose our racial identity as such and be acclaimed for our achievements, if any" (200), without having the "Negro problem thrust at him —from every conversational nook and cranny" (215).

Escaping the burdens of the race issue and the mission of the black artist to uplift and promote the cause of the New Negro became impossible in post-war Harlem as Huggins emphasizes the role played by the white audience in creating an urgency for the affirmation of the African American art, evident in "the enormous interest of white population in African American culture and massive influx of whites to Harlem in postwar period" (85).

"Ignorant of the fact that African Americans were still having troubles defining themselves, white Americans were coming to Harlem in thousands, enjoying the careless and vibrant night life in various cabarets and bars, and trying to satisfy their new —psychological need for self-identification in postwar chaos (Huggins 89), thus taking African Americans for the mere images represented in the various shows made specifically for the enjoyment

of the white spectators. Naturally, with African American culture becoming so popular, black leaders did not hesitate to present the image of the emancipated and independent New Negro, appealing to young talented authors to support their cause.” (Kusnirova 34)

Consequently, the work of any promising African American author, including Ray’s, had to be in line with the need to uplift the race from the stereotypical image presented for entertainment. The confusion resulting from this is not only Ray’s but of his entire generation, feeling the pressure of the demands that inhibit their genius leading to self-doubts and crisis as Ray feels after losing his friends, his entourage which enabled him to freely express himself. The nervous breakdown suffered by the main character is the result of this conflict between identity, race and artistic creativity. The prognosis he makes for his future in the presence of his friend Stephen outlines the crisis at the heart of the artistic community in Harlem: “I don’t expect to be a great writer. I don’t think the Negro race can produce one now, any more than can America. [...] It will be some years before the more forward will be accepted as human beings and allowed to associate with giants” (Infants 221).

The failure of Ray as a novelist, his disillusionment with the promise of freedom afforded by his bohemian lifestyle and his circle of friends, the end of Niggeratti Manor reflect on a symbolic level the failure of Harlem Renaissance to achieve durable results, due to its internal tensions and the need to proclaim and uplift the African American identity while still uncertain about its definition or meaning: “The foundation of this building was composed of crumbling stone. At first glance it could be ascertained that the skyscraper would soon crumple and fall, leaving the dominating white lights in full possession of the sky “(Infants 284).

Moreover, the end of the novel presents Ray’s failure to free himself from “the chains which held him to a racial rack” (Infants 145). In the same way that Emma Lou felt limited in her search for identity and her place in society, Ray discovers that even for a genius writer there is no place beyond the call of race and its legacy. “It imprisons their identities in the cage of racial prejudice and thwarts their every attempt not to be seen as colored writers.” (Kusnirova 36)

### 3. 4 Common themes with other authors of the same era: Racial duty



Wallace Thurman's work systematically reflects his rejection of the limitations set to the artistic forms and modes of expression by the urgent need of the black leaders to create a new literature and art, able to counteract the stereotypical view of the African American nation. His refusal to conform to the expectations of the white patronage or to create according with the program set forth for the glorification of the New Negro by Alain Locke and W.E.B Du Bois made him an unpopular writer at the time of the *Infants of the Spring*.

Rather than creating an art that served a political purpose, the novel criticized the underlying tensions present in the Harlem community, the artist's destiny to be caught between his desire to freely create according to his sensitivity and to his individuality and the demands imposed on him as a black artist. Rather than liberating and helping to promote the new black talents, *Infants of the Spring* presents a world of limitations set before the young artist who needs to create according to the expectations of the white audience, either by

embracing primitivism and the African roots of his ancestors or by creating black art with white sophistication and forms.

Langston Hughes's essay *The Negro and The Racial Mountain* written at the height of the Harlem Renaissance expresses the same duality present in Wallace Thurman's life and work: individualism versus racial duty. However it must be said that the two writers embrace two different approaches and solutions, with Thurman unapologetically black and proud of it, fighting for the artist's right to express his individualism and Langston Hughes, lighter skinned and favored by the black leaders as the kind of New Negro able to promote the new movement. There is hypocrisy at work in Langston Hughes's essay as he in turn argues for a militant art and the need for individuality.

Moreover, he recognizes the existence of interracial differences between the "low folk" and the "high-class Negro", arguing in favor of the African heritage central to the life of the lower-class Negro whereas the middle and the higher class chose to embrace white manners and sophistication: "...this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this urge within the race toward whiteness"

Nevertheless, in praising the lower-class African American artists, Hughes assigns them the same duty imposed on himself by the black propaganda, with his words recalling the words of Du Bois: "...it is the duty of the younger Negro artist, if he accepts any duties at all from outsiders, to change through the force of his art that old whispering "I want to be white," hidden in the aspirations of his people, to "Why should I want to be white? I am a Negro—and beautiful"?" In other words he defines, as Thurman would see it, the limits of his own art and forms of expression as a militant poet, as well as readily embracing the group identity which the author of *Infants* rejected : "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame."

Further in the article the poet confirms the confines of the African American means of expression "An artist must be free to choose what he does, certainly, but he must also never be afraid to do what he must choose." Consequently, the expression of African-American heritage remains the only

approved option for emerging black artists, which contradicts his words on the importance of individual expression. At the heart of Langston's essay and work lies the same conflict Wallace Thurman described in *Infants*—an artist must express his individuality, except for the African American artist who must embrace his heritage and write militant art.

Further support can be found as the Caribbean writer, Eric Walrond in "*Writers Desert Great Field of Folk-Life for Propaganda*" (1922) writes that the reason "why the Negro has not made any sort of headway in fiction is due to the effects of color prejudice. It is difficult for a Negro to write without bringing in the race question. As soon as a writer demonstrates skill along imaginative lines he is bound to succumb to the temptations of reform or propaganda" (Parascandola 63).

As Wallace Thurman's works countered the mainstream tendency to force any emerging black artist to conformism and militant art, the debate between the black leaders favoring integration in the wider American literary context and those promoting the African heritage and the New Negro undermined the foundation of the Harlem Renaissance movement as the foundations of the Niggeratti Manor in Wallace's novel. Despite its impetuous start and development accompanying the urban development of the Harlem district, as Langston Hughes recalls it in *The Big Sea*, the movement failed to achieve its goals of social justice:

"I was there. I had a swell time while it lasted. But I thought it wouldn't last long.... For how could a large and enthusiastic number of people be crazy about Negroes forever? But some Harlemites thought the millennium had come. They thought the race problem had at last been solved through Art.... I don't know what made any Negroes think that— except that they were mostly intellectuals doing the thinking. The ordinary Negroes hadn't heard of the Negro Renaissance. And if they had, it hadn't raised their wages any." (Hughes 56)

#### 4. Critical reception of Thurman Wallace's works

One of the prominent figures of the Harlem Renaissance movement, Wallace Thurman proved to be a problematic “enfant terrible” for his contemporaries, finding no reason to agree with the mainstream ideology at work in the Harlem of the 1920s. Promoting the cause of the African American, he chose his own way of doing so by placing a mirror in front of its members and questioning the concepts of racial identity and the mission of the black artist.

In a time when the idea of racial identity was presented by the black leaders as a united front attempting to gain prominence against the white background, Thurman chose to present in *The Blacker The Berry* the problems behind this artificial concept of group identity. Emma Lou does not want to embrace her African heritage as it brings her discrimination and pain in her own community where colorist discrimination is at work and favors the light skinned African American by providing them with higher status and economic opportunities. The motivation behind writing the novel can be easily seen in the words of the author, who felt compelled to write about an evident though silenced aspect of his time:

“This intra-racial prejudice is an amazing though natural thing. Imagine a community of people, universally known as oppressed, wasting time and energy trying to oppress others of their kind, more recently transplanted from a foreign clime. It is easy to explain. All people seem subject to prejudice, even those who suffer from it the most.” (Singh and Scott 44)

The reception of the novel at the time failed to read in Emma Lou's search for identity and escaping the racial identity assigned through skin color as support of individualism and self-reliance versus community acceptance and prescribed role. As many readers from within the Harlem community, W.E.B Du Bois saw the novel as “self-despising”, damaging the racial identity and cause and complained that Thurman seemed to “deride blackness” (250). Though critics today acknowledge his promise and desire to affirm individualism and authenticity

rather than promote an artificial ideal, the early opinions continue to ensure a poor critical reception of his work.

Moreover the same cold and almost hostile reception would be reserved for his second novel *Infants of The Spring* as falling into the category of works produced by black artists at a time of major social commitment of the black community to advance the cause of the New Negro as worthy of joining the mainstream literary background. The novel's characters, the satire addressed to the major players of the political propaganda within the black community, the bohemian lifestyle that many saw as a reflection of Thurman's own excesses did nothing to advance the cause of the African American community. As such it was perceived as counterproductive, the work of a dissenter which wrought in more damage by giving voice to sexual minorities or discriminated categories within the African American community.

Modern critics analyzing the Harlem Renaissance focused on the lack of plot in *Infants* and its ending in "uninstructive nihilism" (Perry 44). Robert Bone goes so far as to claim, "it was the canker of Bohemianism, in Thurman's eyes, which threatened to nip the new Negro movement in the bud" (93). These assessments continue to account for the lack of critical appreciation for Thurman as they measure his literary achievement either in terms of classical plot development, failing to appreciate its decadent and experimental value with its satirical contribution to an age of loud propaganda. Another reason could be the fact that "assessments of the Harlem Renaissance have been often shaped by parochial—and laudable—beliefs that Oppressed races, classes, and sexual orientations should celebrate their communities as a matter of pride, the bohemian aspirations of Thurman's role in the Renaissance have been underappreciated, if not outright rejected. Although Thurman broke many social taboos during his short brilliant career, one of his most challenging characteristics was his acerbic intractability." (Ganter 84)

Finally Thurman's poor critical reception that continues to the present day could also be justified according to George Hutchinson by "the lack of an adequate American discourse about hybrid identity (6-26). Consequently, unconventional writers like Thurman, whose work challenged "the nationalist,

racial, and sexual isolationisms of his day (and regrettably,ours), have yet to receive kindly treatment for their iconoclasm.” (Ganter 84)



We are mere journeymen, planting seeds for someone else to harvest.

(Wallace Thurman)

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## Conclusions

“No other Negro writer has so unflinchingly told the truth about color snobbery within the color line, the ins and outs of ‘passing’ and other vagaries of prejudice. . . . [Its] quota of truth is just that which Negro writers, under the stress of propaganda and counterpropaganda, have generally and quite understandably omitted from their picture.”  
(Martha Gruening)

The current thesis was born out of a desire to make the work of Wallace Thurman better known as his contribution to the development of the African American literature as yet to be fully appreciated. The themes of his work—namely colorism, racial prejudice and the mission of the black artist—appeal to the reader as different and going against the common direction of his contemporaries. Having been introduced briefly in the course of my studies to the problem of race in the USA, I believe that Wallace Thurman’s work represents a significant contribution to revealing some hidden aspects.

As an active editor and writer of the Harlem Renaissance movement, Thurman’s novels describe the context of his age without hiding any darker aspects of the interracial tensions or the problem of activist art.

My thesis includes in the first chapter an Italian version of *The Infants of The Spring*, with the first four chapters of the novel translated into Italian as an illustration of the artist’s description of the characters and times of the Harlem Renaissance. The translated chapters are prefaced by considerations on the difficulty met by the translators from English to Italian, the different linguistic realities evident in trying to translate the work of Wallace Thurman.

The second chapter is dedicated to the biographical facts known about the life of the author, with a particular focus on the formative factors during his early years and his role in the Harlem Renaissance.

In the following chapter, the issues of racial identity and colorism form the focus of my analysis in their illustration by the work of Wallace Thurman. The concept of race is first defined, with the factors of biology and society as the basis for racial discrimination, followed by the problem of colorism, racial

discrimination visible within the African American community and described in the contrast of status and acceptance enjoyed by lighter skinned African Americans.

*The Blacker the Berry* is seen in relation to the previous concepts, as a novel of self-discovery and individualism, which traces the gradual evolution of its protagonist and her desire to free herself from her color-conscious world. Her struggles are compared to those of Nella Larsen's protagonists and in the next subchapter, I attempt to frame the work of Thurman in the context of similar works dealing with colorism.

An overview of the Harlem Renaissance movement, its context, leaders and mission offers more evidence about the role of Wallace Thurman in expressing the problems of his community and age. The following subchapter focuses on *Infants of the Spring* and the dilemma of Ray, a young promising artist faced with the expectations and pressures from the political leaders of the black community, rejecting both discourses of cause and racial duty in favor of individualism.

The dilemma of Ray as a representative black voice, expected to create uplifting art by the race leaders of the Harlem Renaissance is seen in connection to the artists' desire to break free from tradition or to express their individuality as Langston Hughes' essay confirms.

The fourth chapter outlines the poor critical reception of Wallace Thurman's works both when they were first published, seen as a betrayal of the activist art expectation of the black artist, and even in our days, as some scholars continue to dismiss his contribution in bringing hidden aspects of the African American experience to light. The central themes of his works appear to be still uncomfortable for the critics as colorism and activist art expressing ethnic and racial identity continue to be present in the modern age.

Finally, my research and the numerous sources found on the subject of the Harlem Renaissance, race and racial discrimination are listed, along with the fewer sources found on the subject of Wallace Thurman, in the bibliographical reference list.

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