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THE ‘COLOUR’ OF IMMIGRANT LITERATURE IN THE SELECTED FICTION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN AND WHITE AMERICAN WRITERS

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ABSTRACT

Paris is a metropolitan city with its urban characteristics that have been shaped by its artistic monuments and history. There was a wave of immigration by white Americans to Paris at the beginning of the twentieth century. This wave of immigrants included several artists, journalists, and writers, who were disillusioned by the promises of the New World, America. These were as Gertrude Stein’s described created a ‘lost generation’ in Europe. At the second half of the twentieth century, there appeared another wave of immigration to Europe, this time mainly by African-Americans. Their experiences and conditions differed from that of white pioneers. They were more liberal and stood for freedom rather than getting lost in Paris. Their previous situation in America was one of restlessness; they had to run away from hatred levelled against their skin colour or sexuality. They pointed to social problems back in America and pronounced the freedom of speech they earned Paris. This article aims to explore the extent to which the African-American literary experience of Paris after World War II differed from that of white American writers earlier in the century. The paper critically compares the selected fiction by accomplished authors such as Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), F. Scott Fitzgerald’s ‘Babylon Revisited’ (1931), Richard Wright’s *The Outsider* (1953) and James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* (1956). This article concludes that the two literary experience that were shaped in Paris vigorously differed in their motives and motivations in reflecting the expectations of exile, the experience of sexuality and the treatment of women.

Keywords: Paris, World War II, Immigrant Literature, Sexuality, Exile

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INTRODUCTION

The African-American experience of Paris differs from that of white Americans, because they are motivated by different factors and expectations of exile. The experience of white Americans in Paris in the earlier period of the 20th century was conveyed by a remark made by Gertrude Stein, “you are all a lost generation”, which Hemingway uses as an epigraph to *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). Stein’s analysis reflected on the experiences of white expatriates. They choose to live in European countries, especially in Paris, as the city is believed to provide better opportunities for writers, cheap living conditions and is beatified by artistic monuments. Paris has become synonymous with seduction and inspiration among white Americans. In a similar way, Hemingway characterises the white experience in Paris in bohemian terms, referencing lifestyles dedicated to drinking, talking and searching for inspiration when producing works of art. He speaks to those living in this way as follows in *The Sun Also Rises*:

You know what’s the trouble with you. Nobody that ever left their own country wrote anything worth printing. [...] You’re an expatriate. You’ve lost touch with the soil. You get precious. Fake European standards ruined you. You drink yourself to death. You become obsessed by sex. You spend all your time talking, not working. You’re an expatriate, see? You hang around cafes. (Hemingway 2011, 84)

It is understood from the excerpt that at the time the text was written, white expatriates were coming to Paris to seek out better conditions and greater inspiration. They were besotted by their perceptions of European standards and sought to enjoy their lives rather than following American standards of hard work. They were seduced by Paris, and sought inspiration for great works of art. Michael Soto considers that Hemingway criticises the effects of the “Lost Generation” on his fellow citizens. Nevertheless, Soto underlines the fact that this search for bohemian life “redefined United States culture at home and abroad, liberating American literary expression from its stubbornly pragmatic roots and its Victorian pieties” (Soto 2001, 16). This argument suggests that white Americans obtained as much from the bohemian lifestyle as they lost. It allowed them to disengage from the morality and piety that restrains the imagination.

Similarly, Fitzgerald notes that Paris had the power to seduce him into drinking and “hanging out”, although he resisted this to win his daughter, Honoria back. In “Babylon Revisited”, Charlie gets lost in Paris, and becomes addicted to alcohol. He misbehaves concerning his marriage, and induces his wife’s death indirectly, as implied by his sister-in-law. His second visit to Paris is to win back his lost daughter, Honoria. Upon his return to Paris to seek out his estranged family, his former habits and actions haunt him. Lorraine and Duncan, friends from a time in his life when he stressed entertainment, interfere in his life unexpectedly stopping him from reuniting with his daughter. Like Hemingway, Fitzgerald accuses his generation of having become lost in European traits. Charlie expresses his desire to “jump back a whole generation and trust in character as the eternally valuable element” (Fitzgerald 1986, 208). It is evident that the members of the ‘lost generation’ also lost their customs, and identities by loitering in Paris. The appeal of the city went beyond to get them degenerated.

The experience of sexuality in white American writers’ texts also differs from that in African-American writings. Although the “lost generation” was “obsessed with sex”, sexuality is absent in the texts and presents grounds for a real loss. In *The Sun Also Rises*, Lady Brett Ashley represents desire for sexuality, attracting most of the men around her. Brett conducts a relationship with Jake. Multiple times in the novel, it is highlighted that Jake was wounded in World War I, and as a result he is no longer capable of sexual intercourse. Brett is aware that he will not be able to participate fully in a relationship, offering her sexual satisfaction, so she distances herself from Jake and does not let him touch her. David Tomkins states:

“The novel toys with Jake’s material indeterminacy by utilizing a commodity discourse that works toward assigning value to the material void of Jake’s sexual organ. [...] Hemingway, in placing Jake at the narrative helm of *The Sun Also Rises*, ironically reifies Stein’s highly abstracted assessment of his lost generation by specifically associating loss with a bodily instrument [...] whose function had been [...] to generate.” (Tomkins 2008, 755-6)

Here it is explained that Hemingway uses Jake’s sexuality to represent the “lost generation”. He combines the idea of sexuality with being lost in Paris. Therefore, Jake differs from his companions, who are only lost in alcohol, as he is unable to reproduce and continue his family line. The absence of sexuality makes Jake vulnerable

within society as his masculinity is put into question. He becomes the person of interest due to his invisible but crucial indeterminacy. His inability to reproduce also symbolises the lost generation as incapable of generating new ideas. Thereby suggesting that the lost generation also suffered from a physical disability in addition to its loss of piety and morality.

Fitzgerald disregards the experience of sexuality in “Babylon Revisited”. Although Charlie used to be a man absorbed by alcohol and womanising, he has been reformed of his addictions and sicknesses in a sanatorium. Nonetheless, Charlie struggles to keep away from the distractions of the past. Again, in the absence of Charlie’s sexuality, Fitzgerald works to prove a physical and psychological loss among the lost generation. With her sexual charm, Lorraine keeps reminding Charlie of his past and she leaves a note to remind him of his attempts to impress her. Charlie considers his time with Lorraine as a nightmare later when he connects his “[stealing] a tricycle and pedal[ing] Lorraine all over the Etoile between the small hours and dawn” with locking his wife out (Fitzgerald 1986, 209). He later considers his acts as demonstrating his “condition of utter irresponsibility” (Fitzgerald 1986, 219). Fitzgerald draws a link between Charlie’s irresponsibility at home and his sexual desires. The absence of sexuality gives him a space to desire a proper home with his daughter. Fitzgerald ensures that Charlie undergoes a physical deprivation, manifest as the denial of sexuality to claim Honoria back. Therefore, the condition of being lost prompts bigger losses such as the death of his wife and losing custody of his daughter.

1. IMMIGRATION WAVES AND MOTIVATIONS

The African-American’s immigration to Paris was mostly motivated by political pursuits compared to white Americans. African-Americans escaped from America because they were undergoing harsh conditions due to being labelled as other over their skin colour and sexuality. Black people were already fighting against oppression in America. When in Europe, they were still considered outsiders, distinct from the white Americans. James Baldwin makes all the characters white, also highlighting the white race in *Giovanni’s Room* despite his otherwise racial literary inclinations. Baldwin envisions Paris as an escape, an opportunity to pursue a career as a writer, even though he was not accepted in America due to his sexual preference.

The main character, David is disciplined by his father, who expects him to “grow up to be a man”, meaning that he should have a heterosexual relationship with a woman (Baldwin 2007, 14). Regardless of his father’s guidance, he pursues a sexual affair with Joey, his adolescent friend, upon whom he bestows an accidental kiss. Mae Henderson argues that:

For Baldwin, the symbol for the expatriate is the homosexual who cannot reconcile himself with his body and desire. [...] The expatriate, who is more conventionally constructed as a stranger in a strange land, becomes, in Baldwin’s vision, one who is a stranger unto himself, one in exile from the body and desire. (Henderson 2000, 322)

David’s exile is situated in his own body, as he tries to run away from his own bodily desires. While David sought to escape from American morals and obligations, he also observed socially acceptable morals, causing him to be exiled in his own conscious. Much like Baldwin himself, David sees Paris as an opportunity to escape. David wanted to flee from his hidden desires and possible homosexuality. David develops a strong self-denial and self-hatred, due to his feelings for another boy, believing himself unclean. David also flees from his home country’s preoccupation with same sex desire. David tells his lover, Giovanni that “people have dirty words – for the situation. It is a crime – in my country, and, after all I didn’t grow up here, I grew up there” (Baldwin 2007, 72). Although David tries to escape from American morality, he is stuck in a homosexual relationship with Giovanni, quite hypocritically. Excluding the aspect of colour line in *Giovanni’s Room*, Baldwin demonstrates that even a white person can be marginalised in white society when their sexuality is scrutinised. In that case, it is understood that Baldwin criticises the politics of sexuality. Baldwin links homophobia with American identity. Paris provides David the freedom to admit his own sexual identity for David, as it does not punish the lifestyles of homosexuals. Thus, Baldwin’s text presents an experience of Paris that is politically unique from that of other white pioneers.

Richard Wright underlines the reality of being outsider in *The Outsider*. In the novel, Wright introduces a group of black people, who entertain themselves and support those from their own community. Wright is strict about the adjectives used to define characters such as black, short, big and fat. In doing so, Wright also aims to highlight the social problem of racial segregation. Writing about the black experience means

more than sharing travel experiences in Paris. He is after protesting the inner feelings of African-Americans. Cross, the main character of *The Outsider* also wants to share his experiences with the world. He shows his rage thus “[he was] seething with hate against himself and the world. [...] He yearned to talk to someone; [b]ut to whom could he talk? To his mother? No; she would only assure him that he was reaping the wages of sin and his sense of dread would deepen” (Wright 1993, 15-17). Recording his experience of Paris, Wright also publicised his ‘sense of dread’ at the name of the group. His mother heightened the representation of the morality, which chained the writers by traditional segregation. Storytelling gave Wright the freedom to speak for himself, an opportunity lacking in America but available in Paris. Adam Gopnik (2004, 24) proposes that writers like Baldwin and Wright wanted the freedom of Paris to accomplish their works without the fear of being branded as members of a socially humiliated group. Thus, Wright felt more freedom in Paris to protest the black experience and the dread of segregation.

1.1. The Treatment of Women: The Visible or the Invisible

The treatment of women in the white Americans’ writings functions differently from that of African Americans since woman stands at the very centre of the stories, objectifying the strong women. Brett in *The Sun Also Rises* is a strong female character occupying the centre of the narrative although she is not the narrator. She holds power over most of the men around her because of her charming traits. She can seduce men to suit her own desires. However, she also becomes the object of men’s desires. Brett retains the power to destroy the life of her lover, Romero, who tries to characterise Brett into more “womanly” style. Tomkins writes that “the numerous sexual exchanges that occur between Brett and her many able-bodied lovers primarily involve their use of her body [...] to ‘spend’ their physical desires so that Brett’s own pleasure [...] remains undercover” (Tomkins 2008, 753). Initially, Brett was a strong woman in control of her own relationships. Nonetheless, Brett’s sexual adventures with several men position her as an object of their desire; thus, her “pleasure” is not taken into consideration and she is consumed by other’s desires. Hemingway, eventually, proposes an ideal union for Brett with Jake, who is sexually disabled. Linda Wagner proposes power and obligation through marriage although Hem-

ingway does not necessarily support sexual relationships, rather he emphasises relationships compromising sacrifice and caring without expectation, they provoke sympathy as with Brett's commitment to Jake. Brett's relationship with Jake frees her from the chains of other men's desires, whilst he can offer her love without any expectation.

"Babylon Revisited" centres around two women, Honoria, and Lorraine, who are in a position either to destroy or release Charlie from his misery. In the story, Charlie is dedicated to reclaiming Honoria from her legal guardian. Honoria is a strong figure in the story, despite her young age, since she is the subject of dispute. Honoria is the only person who can save her father from his miserable life. Charlie's restoration depends on his possession of Honoria. Therefore, it is clearly understood that Charlie craves possession of Honoria as he might a commodity. Terrell Tebbetts agrees:

He thinks of his daughter as if she were a possession. He regrets not that Honoria was removed from his presence, from the easy reach of his love, but that she was "taken from his control", as if she were an investment portfolio lodged in a blind trust. [...] He sounds like a capitalist concerned with acquiring ownership and building his labor forces. (Tebbetts 2008, 153)

Although Honoria matters to Charlie, he wishes to obtain his daughter like he would a lost possession. Charlie aims to regain his paternal pride through her possession. Thus, Honoria constitutes a space for Charlie to dominate, as well as playing a crucial role in his winning control. In contrast, Lorraine holds control sway over Charlie. She not only tries to seduce Charlie, but also deliberately aims to leave his passions of Honoria unrequited. Upon Lorraine's arrival at Honoria's guardian's house, Charlie's guise is shattered, and they wish to keep Honoria. Thus, Lorraine changes Charlie's fate. However, Lorraine does not hold value for Charlie, in fact he objectifies her as a mistress.

The treatment of women in African-American writings differed from that in white American's texts, as the female figures in African-American texts were traditional in morality and generally ignored by the other characters. The major female character in *Giovanni's Room*, Hella goes to Spain to think out what she feels for David. Meanwhile, David starts a relationship with Giovanni and leaves him promptly when Hella returns to Paris. David does not consider his proposal to Hella seriously, and cheats on her with both a man and a woman in her absence. David expresses his concerns

over Hella finding out his homosexual relationship (Baldwin 2007, 72). However, what is more important for David is the exposure of his homosexuality, not his infidelity. Therefore, women are not positioned as powerful in *Giovanni's Room*. Hella is less influential in the novel than Giovanni. David humiliates Hella by way of delaying her awareness of the situation. Hella feels “ashamed” and finds the situation “unjust” since she blames him making her forget her womanhood (Baldwin 2007, 145).

The female characters in the novel also resemble one other in that they are very traditional and follow moral codes. Hella abandons immediately when she discovers reality. She blames David's friends for corrupting him. Hella does not want to admit that David's inner self was inclined to dissident desires, rather that he was altered by his friends. She comments that “that sordid little gangster [Giovanni] has wrecked your life. [she] think[s] he's wrecked [hers], too. Americans should never come to Europe [...] it means they never can be happy again” (Baldwin 2007, 146). Holding onto her American morals, Hella is disgusted by David and rejects further relations with him. Another female character in *Giovanni's Room* is David's landlady, who also acts traditionally. She insists on David's finding a woman to live with erasing the option of his living with a man. She offers to have David over to dinner to satisfy her maternal instincts, and takes interest in David's moves, questioning his later life choices. She insists that David should pray for guidance, as she lives her life religiously and traditionally (Baldwin 2007, 61).

In *The Outsider*, Wright also demonstrates that women are deliberately ignored by Cross. In a phone conversation between Cross and Dot, it is obvious that Dot cares about Cross and how he spends his time. However, Cross does not allow her to become involved in his daily life and habits. Dot obviously threatens Cross that she will commit suicide. Cross does not pay attention and tries to silence her. Cross is not united with his present wife, and nor does he visit his mother, either. Thus, women do not interfere in his life actively, even when they attempt to reach him, he rejects a contact with them. Dot's possible revelation of their unborn child to his wife does not concern Cross. It is understood from Cross's speech that all he cares about is his desire, and he only wants women for their bodies; a woman is a piece of meat to be interfered with (Wright 1993, 31).

Cross's mother is represented as a traditional and moral character in the novel. She is a religious woman who advises Cross to lead a decent life with his wife and children, she resents his deception and seduction of Dot. She insists that Cross will be punished by God if he continues to misbehave. Just as Hella resents David's homosexuality, she also rejects her son's extramarital affair with Dot and that he has impregnated her. She does not believe in pleasure as her son does, and warns him that he is acting against God. Sarah Relyea notes that Wright tries to establish political and intellectual liberation for himself while he is "dismiss[ing] many [...] especially women, as followers of superstitious and outmoded faiths" (Relyea 2006, 197). Similarly, Cross blames his mother criticising here for believing in "an illusion" rather than a reality (Wright 1993, 27). Thus, he dismisses any kinds of belief and ignores her warnings of punishment. Wright does not observe or maintain American ethical standards.

1.2. The Experience of Sexuality: Freedom or Repression

The experience of sexuality is represented in African-American writers' texts in the chain of events influencing the fates of characters. While white Americans displayed sexuality as something to be avoided not to be lost, African-American writers position sexuality in the search for freedom. Sexuality led the writers into new directions in pursuit of self-identity. Lloyd Kramer writes about Baldwin's experiences of Paris, noting that "the expatriate experience thus brought new freedoms to Baldwin, but it also gave him new questions about his own identity and provoked the kind of personal redefinition that occurs so often among displaced persons" (2001, 31). Baldwin's expatriation in Paris also earned him the chance to redefine himself in new terms. In *Giovanni's Room*, there is contradiction between traditional straight sexuality and homosexuality that differs from the white tradition; sexuality seems to free the characters from their restrictions. Aside from others' implications and utterances regarding of desire for sex, David's sexuality is also in question. He undergoes a duality of sexuality to match his desires. Feeling the chains of morality in America, David flees to Paris, and he finds a girl, Hella, proposing marriage to prove his heterosexual identity. When Hella leaves for Spain to consider the proposal, David falls into the trap of questioning, whether he is attracted at Giovanni. His relationship with

Giovanni thus reveals his homosexual identity, of which he is ashamed in respect of traditional morality.

Baldwin depicts sexuality as a locus of exploitation for powerful characters such as Guillaume, Jacques, and including David. Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman writes that David's sexual ambiguity is also a consequence of and underlined by his whiteness. According to Abdur-Rahman, "sexual repression and sexual exploitation is tied in *Giovanni's Room* both to national identity and class privilege. Sexual exploitation proliferates when men fail to own or are not held responsible for their own sexual proclivities and practices" (2007, 483). Thus, David is positioned as nationally and substantially superior to Giovanni. He does not hesitate to consume Giovanni's materials, his room, money, and his body. Aligned with his white ancestry and his money, David leaves Giovanni without warning. Thus, according to Henderson, David is the person who corrupts Giovanni with his American morals. Similarly, in Wright's novel, sexuality is the search of identity and exploitation. Wright draws attention to Cross's troublesome marriage and his secret affair with Dot. Cross exploits Dot and impregnates her even though he is married. He is motivated by sexual desires rather than ethics. Even though he learns that his mistress is pregnant with his child, he does not consider her or the child indispensable. He just thinks that "his desire for her had already gone" (Wright 1993, 32). Aside from his present affairs, he tries to influence a girl he saw on the street and pokes her. It is obvious from Cross's actions that he behaves sexuality and is pleasure oriented.

CONCLUSION

Paris holds an important place in the history of American immigration. This article has argued that immigration of African-Americans differed from that of white Americans in multiple ways. The accomplished writers from both immigrations reflected their experiences in their writings. African-Americans sought freedom in Paris whereas the white Americans lived there in a haze of loss. The white Americans searched for opportunities to reclaim their lives. African-Americans express their situations in a contradistinction of Paris with other places. While the white Americans reflected sexuality as problematic and something to be avoided, African-Americans benefited from the freedom of sexuality with images of infidelity or homosexuality. The white Americans allowed their women to be involved in and co-ordinate

their lives. African-Americans depicted women as traditional and pious whilst ignoring them intentionally.

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