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The social realism of Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown

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THE SOCIAL REALISM OF LANGSTON HUGHES
AND STERLING HUGHES

Introduction

The Negro question has been one of the most controversial problems in American life. In this essay I shall analyze the question not from the point of view of the sociologist, the economist, and the politician but from the point of view of two Negro poets, Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown who through their art have acquainted their admirers with the problems of their race.

The American Negro and his problems date back to their landing in Virginia in 1619. Their numbers have increased from twenty in 1619 to 12,865,518 (1940 Census) or to practically ten per cent of the American population.

They are the largest minority group in the United States. To the sociologist a minority group is an ethnic group, a term which designates a fact of disadvantage or inequality of status. An ethnic group is one having a common biological inheritance.

The American Negro has the same problems to cope with as any other American plus the one of just being a Negro. As producers they are faced with the problems of agriculture, unionism, industrial relations, the service industries, domestic service and the professions. When misfortune overtakes
them there is the question of charity and relief for them for the taxpayer to think about.

As consumers this large number of individuals has a profound effect upon the economic life of the country. For example, Negroes alone buy $12,000,000 worth of tooth paste every year.¹

Ever since the creation of the nation America has had to add the Negro to his plans after he has thought out plans for the rest of the country. Negro rights under the Constitution and the degree to which he should be allowed to use these rights have been the subject of many political battles. In terms of rights Negroes are known today as third-class citizens.

In the field of social welfare no sooner have plans been formulated for improvement of housing, public recreation, better parks, hospitals, relief or veteran's rights which touch the nation as a whole, than the Negro question looms up - segregation or integration, northern altitude or southern influence.

Enough of the social angle of the problem. What is meant by realism?

¹Dept. of Commerce Estimates on Purchasing Power - Page 24.
Realism is a movement in literature that has become increasingly popular in the 20th century. Its purpose is to show real life, not facts, and real people. The realistic poet replaces traditional themes of poetry such as nature and love with concern for the social theme. These poets have accepted a responsibility to play a part in the social struggle. Some of the better known realistic poets are Carl Sandburg, Vachel Lindsay and Edgar Lee Masters.

The period of the 1930's has been called the sociological decade. In the 1920's and the 1930's realism and sociological ideas are dominant in literature and these are the decades in which Brown and Hughes have been most prolific.

The realistic approach to the sociological problem of the Negro through their poetry is to be the main theme of this essay. Whether or not realism is real art or whether it is merely propaganda or both is left to the opinions of the critics. There can be realism combined with art, and realism minus art because literature has always been used as a means of telling the social injustices of mankind.
American Negroes have been writing verses ever since 1760 when Jupiter Hammon, a slave in Queen's Village, Long Island had published "An Evening Thought," and "Salvation By Christ." As a literary slave, Hammon was a curiosity to his age, and he remains a curiosity still. His religious doggerel and pious platitudes have no significance other than historical.

The next Negro poet was Phyllis Wheatley (1753-1784) born in Africa and reared in New England. Her writings are a reflection of her age and not of her race. Her poetry was merely a close imitation of Pope.

Other Negro poets before the Civil War were Daniel Payne, Charles Reason, George B. Vashon, Llymas P. Rogers, Frances E. W. Harper, James Madison Bell and James H. Whitfield. They have been called the mocking-bird school of poetry. They merely imitated the approved American and English writers.

Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906) who died at the age of 34 wrote about his own people in the role of humorous observer rather than reformer. According to Wm. Dean Howells he was the first Negro to "feel Negro life aesthetically and express it lyrically." He wrote more poems in

1 The Negro Caravan - Brown, Davie - Lee - Page 274
standard English than in dialect which he used as a means of depicting rural Negro life.

The first decade of the 20th century produced a type of Negro poet known as the "literary type." For them poetry did not need to stoop to the realities of the race problem. George McClellan, Leslie Pinckney Hill and Benjamin Brawley wrote metrically correct poems. William Stanley Braithwaite wrote lyrics on love and death.

The more recent Negro poets associated with the New Negro Movement have followed largely the lead of the New Poetry Movement sponsored by Amy Lowell, Harriet Monroe, and Louis Untermeyer and the realistic poets, Lindsay, Masters and Sandberg. "The Movement repudiated sentimentality, didacticism, optimism, romantic escape and poetic diction." The better known of these Modern Negro poets are Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Countie Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Sterling Brown.

1 The Negro Caravan, Brown, Davis, Lee, Page 281
Chapter I.

Langston Hughes has been called the poet-laureate of his race. His autobiography, "The Big Sea," gives us the essential facts which are necessary to an understanding of his poetry and his point of view.

(James) Langston Hughes was born in Joplin Missouri, February 1, 1902, the son of James Nathaniel and Carrie (Langston) Hughes. Hughes describes himself as brown in complexion, his father a darker brown, and his mother an olive-yellow.

His grandmother's first husband was Sheridan Leary, a free man, who had taken part in and had been killed the first night of John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry. She afterwards married Charles Langston, Hughes' grandfather. Charles Langston was the brother of John Mercer Langston, an Oberlin graduate, the first Negro to be admitted to the Ohio bar, Congressman from Virginia from 1888-1894 and the first Dean of Howard University Law School.

His grandmother Langston had enough Cherokee Indian blood in her to lay claim to free government land. During slavery she had free papers and travelled about freely at will. She had at one time attended Oberlin College. His mother attended the University of Kansas.
At an early age Hughes' mother and father separated. His father had studied law and had tried to take the bar examination in one of the southern states but due to some Jim Crow law he was denied this privilege. Hughes says that "My father wanted to go away to another country where a colored man could get ahead and make money quicker and my mother did not want to go." So to Mexico went James N. Hughes where he was admitted to the bar and where he practiced law. He soon acquired considerable property including a large ranch in Mexico. During one of the numerous revolutions when all of the white Americans had to flee from the Solucca district of Mexico Hughes' father became manager of an electric light company belonging to an American firm in New York. Money became his God and Negroes who remained in the United States where as he said, "none of them have a chance to be anything but servants" his primary object of hatred. "Hurry up" was his word. He was always in a "hurry" trying to make more money.

After the separation Hughes went to Lawrence, Kansas to live with his maternal grandmother Langston. His mother, who had been a school teacher in Guthrie, Oklahoma, when she married went to work first at one job and then

1 The Big Sea - Langston Hughes, Page 15
1 The Big Sea - Langston Hughes (1940) Page 40
another. Sometimes she had poorly paid teaching jobs and sometimes she worked as a stenographer. His grandmother boasted that she never took in washing or went out to work as did the other colored women of the neighborhood. She earned her meagre livelihood by renting out rooms to students that attended the University of Kansas. However she lived in constant dread of the mortgage man seizing her home.

His mother married Homer Clark and so they went to Cleveland, Ohio to live where Hughes finished high school and was the class poet. During his high school days Miss Weimer, his English teacher introduced him to the writer Carl Sandburg whom Hughes tried to imitate.

After Hughes finished high school he went to Mexico and spent fifteen months with his father. He spent most of his time teaching English to socially prominent Mexican families. His father tried to interest him in going to college in Switzerland and studying mining engineering in Germany in order to prepare for a partnership in the elder Hughes' business. Langston Hughes hated figures and business and loved books and writing. In 1921 he persuaded his father to send him to Columbia University in New York.

He stayed there but one year rooming in Hartley Hall. Hughes says, "I didn't like Columbia, nor the students, nor
anything I was studying so I didn't study. I went to shows, read books, and attended lectures at the Rand School under Ludwig Lewisohn and Heywood Brown. After such an unsuccessful year in college naturally his father declared himself through with Hughes and from then on he was out on "his own."

Getting a job on a freight steamer he sailed to West Africa and from there to Europe. He spent the winter of 1924 in Paris, working as a doorman and later as a second cook in a Montmartre cabaret. The next summer he spent in Italy part of the time as the guest of Alain Locke, the Negro critic.

Some of his relatives back in the U. S. invited him to come to Washington where his mother had taken up her temporary abode and he landed there with twenty-five cents in his pocket. He worked for a while as a clerk in Carter Woodson's office. However he disliked clerical work. Becoming annoyed with Washington Negro Society because they had snubbed his mother he found a job as bus boy in the Wardman Park Hotel.

Here Hughes was "discovered" by Vachel Lindsay. Lindsay was staying at the hotel and when he came down to dinner Hughes laid beside his plate three poems, "Jazzonia," "Negro Dancers," and the "Weary Blues." The next morning

1 The Big Sea - Langston Hughes 1940, Page 85
on the way to work Mr. Hughes read in the morning paper that Vachel Lindsay had discovered a Negro bus boy poet. Reporters were waiting for him at the hotel and he was interviewed and photographed holding up a tray of dirty dishes in the middle of the dining room. The picture, copyrighted by Underwood and Underwood appeared in newspapers throughout the country.

Feeling that it was necessary for him to complete his formal education Hughes matriculated at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania and graduated in 1929. He won the Wytter Bynner Prize for undergraduate poetry while in college and in 1931 the Harmon Award of Literature. In 1935 he was the recipient of a Guggenheim fellowship. In 1937 he went to Spain as a newspaper correspondent during the Civil War.

Mr. Hughes' poems have been translated into German, French, Spanish, Russian, Yiddish and Czech and many of them have been set to music by John Alden Carpenter.

His published books of poetry are the following: *Weary Blues* (1926) *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927) *Dear Lovely Death* (1931) *The Dream Keeper* (1932) *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942) and his autobiography - *The Big Sea* (1940). He has written a novel *Not Without Laughter* (1930) and a book of short stories *The Ways of White Folks* (1934). He has also written a play *Mulatto*, that ran on Broadway in New York throughout the winter of 1935.
His poems are found in many important periodicals, anthrologies and daily papers.

"Most of my poems are racial in theme and treatment derived from the life I know," says Hughes. The people that are used in his poetry are "the low-down folk or the common element. These are in the majority. The people who have their nip of gin on Saturday nights and are not too important to their selves and their community. They live on Seventh Street in Washington or State Street in Chicago. They do not particularly care whether they are like white folks or anybody else. Their joy runs bang! into ecstasy.

Work a little today. Rest a little tomorrow. Play awhile - sing awhile. They furnish a wealth of distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardization."  

Citizenship or the Negro's lack of citizenship is the main subject of the first group of poems. The one that is the most widely known is "I, Too". "I, Too, Sing America" runs the first line. It is a description of the plight of the darker brother who, although he has to eat in the kitchen, nevertheless grows strong and healthy. But tomorrow says Hughes he'll sit at the table with the others and those who see him will note his beauty and become ashamed, for I, too
am America," says the darker brother.

In the same tone he writes "Let America Be America Again." America is described as a dreamland where the pioneer sought a free home. But the Negro's plight as portrayed by Hughes puts reality in the picture with the words ("America never was America to me"). He then describes the opportunities in America, the free life and the equality in the air we breathe. The Negro's reply has to be "There's never been equality for me, nor freedom in this homeland of the free."

Hughes then goes from the picture of the ideal America to a realistic America in "Let America Be America Again." The poor white, the negro slave, the Indian, the laborer contrasted with the capitalist, the farmer, the Negro, servant to them all." "Are these the free?" he asks. Surely these people are not free and have not become a part of the pioneer's dream. But Hughes adds his optimistic note when he says "America never was America to me

And yet I swear this oath -
America will be!"

In "Dear Mr. President" Hughes depicts the plight of the negro soldier. The negro soldier in Alabama wears Uncle Sam's uniform but has to ride in the back of the bus. Referring to the train situation he says:
"It's the Jim Crow car -
That don't seem to jibe,-
With what we're fighting for.
Mr. President, sir
I don't understand
Democracy that
Forgets the black man."

Again, in "The Black Man Speaks" the same subject,

"I still can't see
Why Democracy means
Everybody but me."

Lest we forget the Jim Crow Army and Navy he ends with:

"If we're fighting to create
A free world tomorrow
Why not end right now
Old Jim Crow's sorrow?"

In "The South" and the "Southern Negro Speaks"
Mr. Hughes makes a direct attack upon the South and its attitude of denying Negroes citizenship. In the "Southern Negro Speaks" he says:

"They declare I'm a Fifth Columnist
If I say the word, Free -
Don't have the right to vote.
Let's leave our neighbor's eyes alone
And look after our own mote -
Cause I sure don't understand
What the meaning can be
When folks talk about freedom -
And Jim Crow me."

In "The South" he describes the region as the lazy, laughing South, the sunny-faced South, the magnolia scented South, beautiful like a woman but says about her:
"And I, who am black would love her
But she spits in my face
And I, who am black
Would give her many rare gifts
But now she turns her back upon me."

"Song for a Dark Girl" and "Ku Klux" deal with lynchings. In "Song for a Dark Girl" her lover has been hung to a tree and the poem closes with:

"Way down South in Dixie
(Break the heart of me)
Love is a naked shadow,
On a gnarled and naked tree.

Again in Ku Klux:

They hit me in the head
And knocked me down
And then they kicked me
On the ground."

The mixing of the races is the problem in "Cross" and "Mulatto". The mulatto is characterized by Hughes as the tragic individual of romantic literature. He attacks the problem frankly and realistically. In "Cross" he writes:

"My old man (white) died in a fine big house.
My ma (black) died in a shack
I wonder where I'm gonna die,
Being neither white nor black?"

The poem "Mulatto" was made into his play which ran on Broadway in 1936. The emphasis is on the often repeated line, "I am your son, white man!"

Mr. Hughes has written many poems that pertain to the working conditions of negroes. He goes into the South
and writes about the Negro sharecroppers in "Sharecroppers".

"When the cotton's picked
And the work is done
Bossman takes the money
And we get none."

Then a herd of Negroes
Driven to the field -
Plowing life away
To make the cotton yield.

Still in the South in "Mississippi Level" he describes the Negro as "Workin' on de level - Workin' like a tuck-tail dog.

"Out of Work" goes to Harlem or any big city for its background.

I walked de streets till
De shoes wore off my feet.

Not even the W.P.A. man would give him a job because he hadn't been there "A year and a day." As a contrast The "Sport" does not worry about life nor making a living "and death becomes" for him "An empty cabaret."

"Workin' Man" is the story of the laborer.

"I works all day
Wid a pick an a shovel
Comes home at night,-
It ain't nothin' but a hovel.

I'm a hard workin' man
An I sho pays double
Cause I tries to be good
An' gits nothin' but trouble."
"Brass Spitoons" is the story of the Negro porter, a job very common among Negroes whom Hughes says is always addressed as "Hey Boys". Detroit, Chicago, Atlantic City, and Palm Beach, the Negro porter is found everywhere. But what does he get for his labor? A nickel, a dime, a dollar, maybe two dollars with which he has to buy shoes for the baby, pay house rent, buy gin on Saturday (recreation) and church on Sunday. Sunday clothes, church dues, all of these things mixed up with dimes and dollars, house rent and spitoons. However he says:

"A clean spitoon on the altar of the Lord,  
A clean bright spitoon all newly polished.  
At least I can offer that.

"Song to a Negro Wash-Woman is a tribute to the lowly occupation - engaged in by so many Negro women.

"I know how you send your children to school  
and high school and even college.  
I know how you work to help your man  
when times are hard."  
I know how you build your house up from the washtub and call it home.  
And how you raise your churches from white suds for the service of the Holy God.

For you I have many songs to sing  
Could I but find the words.

Many of Langston Hughes' poems are about the "blues" and are called Jazz poems. When asked why he wrote so many jazz poems his reply was, "Jazz is one of the inherent
expressions of Negro life in America, the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul - the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world - a world of subway trains and work, work, work, the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smite."

In the "Weary Blues" he is describing a Negro piano player on Lenox Avenue.

"He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool
    Sweet Blues!
Coming from a black man's soul
    O Blues

"Minnie Sings" her blues in and of the cabaret.

    Cabaret, cabaret,
    That's where we go,-
    Leaves de snow outside
    An our trouble at the door.

"Cabaret Girl Dies on Welfare Island" is in the same tone.

    I hate to die this way with the quiet
    Over everything like a shroud,
    I'd rather die when the band's a playin! 
    Noisy and loud.

"The Minstrel Man" portrays an old concept with a new meaning:

    "Because my feet
    Are gay with dancing
    You do not know 
    I die."
In "Laughers" he calls his people "Loud-mouth laughers in the hands of Fate", while "Song for a Banjo Dancer" says have a good time while you can for:

"Sun's going down this evening -
Might never rise no mo!"

The last group of poems are those that are pessimistic in their ideology but are nevertheless presented stoically and realistically. Mr. Hughes best known and best loved poem is "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." Hughes was on his way to Mexico to see his father, and the poem was written just outside of St. Louis as the train rolled toward Texas. This is the way it came about:

"All day on the train I had been thinking about my father and his strange dislike of his own people. I didn't understand it because I was a Negro and I like Negroes very much. One of the happiest jobs I had ever had was during my freshman year in high school, when I worked behind the soda fountain for a Mrs. Kitzmiller, who ran a refreshment parlor on Central Avenue in the heart of the colored neighborhood. People just up from the South used to come in for ice cream and sodas and watermelon. And I never tired of hearing them talk, listening to the thunder claps of their laughter, to
their troubles, to their discussions of the war and the men who had gone to Europe from the Jim Crow South, their complaints over the high rents and the long-time hours that brought what seemed like big checks, until the weekly bills were paid. They seemed to me like the gayest and bravest people possible - these Negroes from the Southern ghettos - facing tremendous odds, working and laughing and trying to get somewhere in the world.

"I had been in to dinner early that afternoon on the train. Now it was just sunset, and we crossed the Mississippi slowly over a low bridge. I looked out the window of the Pullman at the great muddy river flowing down toward the heart of the South, and I began to think what that River, the old Mississippi had meant to Negroes in the past - how to be sold down the river was the worst fate that could overtake a slave in times of bondage. Then I remembered reading how Abraham Lincoln had made a trip down the Mississippi on a raft to New Orleans, and how he had seen slavery at its worst, and had decided within himself that it should be removed from American life. Then I began to think about other rivers in our past - the Congo, and the Niger, and the Nile in Africa - and the thought came to me:

"I've known rivers, and I put it down on the back of an envelope I had in my pocket, and within the space of
ten or fifteen minutes, as the train gathered speed in the
dusk I had written:"

"Th Negro Speaks of Rivers"

"I've known rivers:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older
than the flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers. He then
mentions the Euphrates, the Congo, the Nile and then to the
Mississippi where he says:

"I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe
Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and

I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden
in the sunest.

I've known rivers
Ancient dusky rivers.

"My soul has grown deep like the rivers." This poem
is a reflection of his pessimism, his realism, and his
stoicism.

"Isolation in the Crowd" and "Afraid" being out the
loneliness of the Negro which is engendered by segregation.

In "Isolation in the Crowd" Hughes says:

"I wonder if white folks ever feel bad
Getting up in the morning lonesome and sad!"

"Afraid" is bitter but stoical.
"We cry among the skyscrapers
As our ancestors
Cried among the palms in Africa
Because we are alone,
It is night,
And we're afraid."

"Luck" is a realistic little gem.

"Sometimes
A few scraps fall
From the tables of joy
Sometimes a bone
Is flung."

In "Lament for Dark Peoples" he speaks of them as being "caged in the circus of civilization," and in "The Jester".

"I am the Black Jester
The dumb clown of the world
The looted, looted fool of silly men."

Bitterness and frustration supported by stoicism are seen in "Troubled Woman."

"She stands
In the great darkness,
The troubled woman
Bowed by
Weariness and pain,
Like an
Autumn Flower
In the frozen rain
Like a
Wind blown autumn flower
That never lifts its head
Again."

"Mother to Son" is another one of Mr. Hughes' best known selections. It is realistic but hopeful.
Well, son, I'll tell you
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

Life for this mother has had tacks in it, and splinters, and boards torn up, and places with no carpet on the floor.

But - she says - all the time

"I'se been a climbin' on
And reachin' landin's
And turnin' corners
And sometimes going in the dark."

However her advice to her son is:

Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you find it kinder hard.
Don' you fall now -
For I's still going, honey,
I's still climbing
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

In "Youth" is found hope for the future regardless of the bitterness and realism of the past and present.

"We have tomorrow
Bright before us
Like a flame.

Yesterday
A night gone thing
A sun-down name
And dawn today
Broad arch before the road we came.

We march.
The following quotations are excerpts from the various critics' reviews of Langston Hughes' publications. The "Weary Blues" was published in 1926 and the critic in the Booklist says, "This young Negro poet expresses the strange medley of emotions, memories, hopes, and fears of his race in modern Americans. The heavy heritage of slavery, dim radical memories of Africa, the sharp, self-conscious revolt against the scheme of things today - the delirious 'escape' from life provided by Harlem, by music, by syncopation and blues, by dancing, by raw drink and wild love - all these elements are woven through his poems."

Alain Locke, the Negro critic, says of Hughes, "Hughes brings to his portrayal of his folk not the ragged provincialism of a minstrel but the descriptive detachment of a Vachel Lindsay, and a Sandburg and promises the democratic sweep and universality of a Whitman. Race poetry does not mean dialect but a reflection of Negro experience true to its idiom of emotion and circumstances. Through these younger poets, the Negro poet becomes as much an expression of his age as of his folk."

Alfred Kreymborg reviewed Shakespeare in Harlem in the Saturday Review of Literature.

1 Booklist 22:410 - J1 '26
2 Four Negro Poets - Alain Locke - Page 6
3 Saturday Review of Literature 25:9 - (April 25, '42)
"For here is no high-brow verse, no heavy thinking, and nothing low-brow either. The careless reader might casually fall into the error of thinking that these delicate notes and rhythms are funny and gay. It is only the skillful surface that is funny or gay; the heart of the matter is tragic. Rarely in our poetry do we find this subtle blending of tragedy and comedy. It is an exquisite art and a difficult one. The salient character behind the verse of Langston Hughes is social and sociable. He has the perfect gift of writing quatrains with more than one meaning or overtone."

Mr. Calverton in the Saturday Review of Literature says: "Langston Hughes spoke out without hesitation when it came to American mores and lashed into American Bourbons with unabated ferocity. Nothing expresses the challenge of the Negro to the white man better than Hughes' poems."¹

Richard Wright, the realistic Negro novelist has this to say about Mr. Hughes: "The double role that Langston Hughes has played in the rise of a realistic literature among the Negro people resembles the role that Theodore Dreiser played in freeing American literary expression from the restrictions of Puritanism.

¹ Saturday Review of Literature 22:4 (Sept. 21, 1940)
The Negro literature was timid, vaguely lyrical and folkish. The realistic position assumed by Hughes has become the dominant outlook of all Negro writers who have something to say. Hughes' role has been that of cultural ambassador. He has represented the Negroes' case in his poems, plays, and short stories at the court of world opinion.¹

¹ New Republic 103:60 (October 28, '40)
Chapter II

Sterling Allen Brown was born in Washington, D.C. on May 1, 1901. Mr. Brown's early life was quite a contrast to the adventurous early life of Langston Hughes. Brown is just nine months older than Mr. Hughes.

"Sterling Brown is the son of Sterling Nelson Brown and Adelaide (Allen) Brown. Both parents were born just outside of Nashville, Tennessee and both attended Fisk University. His father then went to Oberlin Theological School and was ordained a Congregationalist minister. His first charge was at Mt. Zion Congregational Church in Cleveland. His next charge was at Plymouth Congregational Church in Washington, D.C. and he was the founder of Park Temple Church which later united with Lincoln Temple in the same city.

The elder Brown was a professor in the Howard University School of Religion and was in charge of the Correspondence School for rural ministers. He was the author of a book Bible Mastery which has been used in theological schools. There were six children in the Brown family, five of whom are living and all have been, or are teachers."

1 The Brown family.
Sterling Brown was practically reared on a college campus since his father occupied a home adjacent to Howard University's campus. Mary Louise Strong, supervisor of English in the D. C. public schools says of his early home life that "it was a home where there was music and laughter, stern piety and discipline, diligence, integrity, and courage."²

Mr. Brown attended the elementary schools in Washington, D.C. and also attended Dunbar High School in the same city. In high school he made fine grades, was an outstanding athlete and was extremely popular with his classmates. After graduating from high school he entered Williams College in 1918, was elected to Phi Beta Kappa in his junior year and graduated in 1922. He secured his M.A. from Harvard University the next year (1923).

Before his appointment as associate professor of English at Howard University in 1929 Mr. Brown had taught at Virginia Seminary in Lynchburg, Virginia; Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee; and Lincoln University in Missouri. He has been visiting lecturer at Atlanta University and at New York University. During the academic year 1945-46 he was visiting professor at Vassar College. He won the 1945

² Scholastic 36:25 (April 24, 1940)
Schomberg Award for his zeal in helping to improve race relations in the United States.

Brown has traveled extensively, particularly through the rural sections of the South and Mid-West.

At whatever college Mr. Brown is found he is busy teaching his favorite course "The Negro in American Literature." His main objective is to try to tear down the seven stereotyped characteristics of the Negro which are found in most books about the Negro and to show the Negro character as a normal, average, human being. These seven types that he attacks so vigorously are "The Contented Slave, The Wretched Freeman, The Comic Negro, The Brute Negro, The Tragic Mulatto, The Local Color Negro, and The Exotic Primitive."¹

From 1936 to 1939 Mr. Brown served as Editor on Negro Affairs for the Federal Writer's Project. In 1939 he was a staff member of the Carnegie-Myrdal Study of the Negro and in 1937-38 he was a Guggenheim Fellow. In 1942-43 he received a Rosenwald Fellowship to write a book on The Negro in the Contemporary South and to begin a novel, Three Negro Generations.

Mr. Brown has written poetry, reviews, and essays. His published books are Southern Road (1932), The Negro in American Fiction (1938), Negro Poetry and Drama (1938), and The Negro Caravan (1941) in collaboration with Arthur P. Davis and Ulysses Lee.¹ Journal of Negro Education pp 42-49 (April 1933)
"Mr. Brown's point of view is that underlying every treatment of the Negro in American Literature is a certain treatment of the Negro in American life. His survey of the Negro as a force in poetry, drama, and fiction is, in effect, a history of the Negro in America in terms of race, caste, class relations and social attitudes as expressed in literature. Not only is the history of the Negro in American literature an important part of American literary and social history but the social criticism presented here is a significant part of the growing consciousness of Negroes in common with other writers.

One of the most valuable services performed by Mr. Brown is his distinction of the stereotypes of both Negro and white treatment of Negro life. The medieval plantation and genteel tradition, artificial dialect and local color, the comic Negro of the professional humorists, race glorification, the tragic mulatto and the cult of Harlem are attacked by him. He spares none of the conventions, evasions, restrictions, taboos and preconceptions, black and white, Northern and Southern that stand in the way of a just and realistic portrayal of Negro experiences with diligence, integrity, and courage.

Brown is a social critic and a folk poet, who in his poems uses Southern folk character, themes, forms and speech
to depict a common humanity and struggle.

Because of isolation enforced upon him by social and racial prejudice, the Negro has developed a folk culture and expression which provide rich material for the Negro artist. Mr. Brown has inaugurated a new era in literary criticism in which race consciousness is displaced by a cultural consciousness finely balanced between psychological and sociological factors. The contribution stereotype is dead. Long live participation."

Mr. Brown is a regional poet. He has confined his subject matter to the South. The title of his most important volume of poems is "Southern Road."

Benjamin Brawley in his book The Negro Genius describes Mr. Brown's point of view in this manner: "Of the poets now at work Sterling Brown is in the front rank. He differs from some other writers in the impression of maturity he gives and in his firm handling of any material he chooses to use. Never does he suggest the need of apology or patronage. While he is capable in classic English verse, his chief contribution to the literature of the Negro and the country has been the road-song, the voice of the humble worker, the bad man, the roustabout. For this he has discarded the dialect of 1 The Negro in American Fiction, Negro Poetry and Drama, Pages 184 (June 1939)
a previous generation and employed a racy idiom that is the very speech of the folk. He has been quite as good in his critical articles, one of his chief objections being the building of an audience that will not be deterred by puritanical inhibitions or any question of social implication."

Most of Mr. Brown's poems are concerned with the problems of the southern Negro laborer. In Southern Road he is describing men working on the road in a chain gang:

"Swing dat hammer - hunk
Steady, ho!"

The trials of the road are many as seen in:

"Burner tore his - hunk
Black heart away."

Next comes the picture of the chain gang in:

"Double shackled - hunk
Guard behin',
Ball and chain, bebby,
On min 'min'"

"White man tells me - hunk
Dam yo' soul."

Then the tragic ending:

"Change gang nevah - hunk
Let me go
Po' los' boy, bebby
Evah' mo'."

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1 The Negro Genius, Page 253, Benjamin Brawley.
"Old Lem" is the problem of the southern Negro sharecroppers and ends with the lynching problem.

"And Old Lem said:

"They weigh the cotton
They store the corn
We only get enough
To work the rows.

They run the commissary
They keep the books
We gotta be grateful
For being cheated."

Further on Lem says:

We got to say mister
To spindling boys
They make our figgers
Turn somersets.

The contrast between the races is brought in:

"They got the judges
They got the lawyers
They got the jury-rolls
They got the law

They got the sheriffs
They got the deputies

They got the rope
We git the justice
In the end

And they come by tens.

In "Break of Day" the problem concerns the plight of a southern Negro working as a fireman on the railroad. He meets a death that is caused by the tension between the races.
"Big Jess find on the Alabama Central
Man in full, babe, man in full.
Been throwing on coal for Mister Murphy
From times way back, baby, times way back.

Next comes the conflict:
Cracker craved the job what Jess was holding,
Times right tough, babe, times right tough
Warned Jess to quit his job for a white man,
Jess he laughed, baby, he jes' laughed.

Then the climax:
Mob stopped the train crossing Black
Bear Mountain
Shot rang out, babe, shot rang out.
They left Big Jess on the Black Bear Mountain
Break of day, baby, break of day.

The plight of the Negro farmer is seen in "After
Winter."

"The lean months are done with
The fat to come.

He thinks with the winter,
His troubles are gone;
Ten acres unplanted
To raise dreams on.

The next group of poems are concerned with the back-
ground of the American Negro and shows his stoicism in the
face of cruel realities. One of his best known poems is
"Strong Men".

"They cooped you in their kitchens,
They penned you in their factories
They gave you the jobs that they were too good for,
They tried to guarantee happiness to themselves
By shunting dirt and misery to you."
You sang:

Me an' muh baby gonna shine, shine,
Me an' muh baby gonna shine

What, from the slums
Where they have hemmed you,
What, from the tiny huts
They could not keep from you -

'Thou shalt not this'
'Thou shalt not that'

"Reserved for whites only"

You laugh

One thing they cannot prohibit -
The strong men — — coming on
The strong men gitten' stronger,
Strong men — —

Stronger — — ."

"Bitter Fruit of the Tree" is in a different tone
from "Strong Men." Cold, realistic bitterness is seen in
this poem.

"They said to my grandmother:
'Please do not be bitter'
When they sold her first born and
let the others die.

These are your orders,
'You must not be bitter'
As they left her shack for the porticoed house."

"They said to my brother
'Please do not be bitter'
With so much to be done there's no

time for being bitter
But my brother is bitter, and he does not hear."
The tone of "Children's Children" is in direct contrast to "The Bitter Fruit of the Tree."

"They have forgotten, they have never known
Long days beneath the torrid Dixie sun.

They have forgotten
What had to be endured - - ."

Mr. Brown has not confined his poetry to the idiom of the Negro people but bitterness and realism is seen in his sonnet "Salutamus."

"The bitterness of days like these we know,
Much, much we know, yet cannot understand
What was our crime that such a searing brand
Not of our choosing, keeps us hated so.
Despair and disappointment only grow,
Whatever seeds are planted from our hand,
What though some roads wind through a gladsome land?"

"It is a gloomy path that we must go
And yet we know relief will come some day,
For these seared breasts, and lads as brave again
Will plant and find a fairer crop than ours,
It must be due our hearts, our minds, our powers;
These are the beacons to blaze out the way.
We must plunge onward; onward gentlemen."

This is what the critics have had to say about Mr. Brown's Southern Road which is his only published volume of poetry.

The New York Evening Post's reviewer said: "There is neither mooning or sentimentality but a frank facing of reality. Bitterness is not lacking but it is the bitterness of all men."

1 New York Evening Post - page 7 (May 14, 1932)
Wm. Rose Benét's criticism is as follows:

"Sterling Brown is a new Negro poet to whom James Weldon Johnson introduces us to in his foreword in Brown's book. Brown is of the 'Younger Group' of Negro writers. I myself think that his work has distinctly more originality and power than Langston Hughes or Countée Cullen. The fact Brown is so good a narrative poet has inclined me toward him because of my particular interest in narrative verse. Of the young Negro poets, I consider Sterling A. Brown to be the most versatile and the least derivative."\(^1\)

Mr. Alfred Kreymborg in reviewing The Negro Caravan, the anthology which Mr. Brown edited in collaboration with Arthur Davis and Ulysses Lee says, "This is a great book by a great people. The editors say in a foreword, "The story of the Negro in America has been handled by outsiders - by white men, as it were whose roots are in their own race and who, despite an understanding of the Negro treat him with an unconscious condescension: from a point above to a point below. These men work directly as Negroes and as poets as well as critics.

The dark man has learned a great deal from the white and even borrowed some of his forms of composition. But the dark has enriched these forms with his own experiences and language."\(^2\)

\(^1\) Saturday Review of Literature 8:732 (May 14 '32)
\(^2\) Saturday Review of Literature 25:13 (February 21, '42)
Mr. Kreymborg comments on how the book has been put "together" with some historical and literary events in America together with important events in the history and literature of the American Negro. The "together" shows that the whites and blacks can never be divided in our common genius.

"We know of course of divisions elsewhere of further 'Jim Crows' and so do the Negroes - a tragedy this book portrays. But such segregation is not expressive of our common genius nor of the average American white, but of certain savages or gentlemen who were never truly white in the first place and are not true Americans now. No American culture is complete without the Negro. He is a part of our lives and testaments, Old and New, and he has dug as deeply into faith as he has into labor."¹

Willard Waller in the Survey Graphic calls his review by the title Through Negro Eyes; and says:

"White men have established certain stereotypes about the Negro in their minds. A principle result of these stereotypes is to make the burdens of exploitation rest more lightly upon the conscience of the exploiter. By speech and writing, by movies, novels, plays, songs, and nursery rhymes, we constantly repeat and reinforce these stereotyped ideas.

¹ Saturday Review of Literature 25:13 (February 21, '42)
and then assuage our feelings of guilt. If we are ever to learn the Negro as he is, not as we have imagined him to be, we must turn to Negro writers. The pictures that we get from them do not fit into any of our comforting stereotypes."¹

¹ Survey Graphic 31:602 (December, 1942)
Summary

Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown, two young Negro poets of approximately the same age may be called "social realists." Both of these men through their poetry and other writings have portrayed realistically and without apology the problem of Negroes in America.

Mr. Hughes, who claims no other vocation than that of a writer had a very interesting and adventurous young life which has had a great influence upon his writings.

Hughes was born in Missouri, grew up and went to school in Kansas and Ohio, graduating from Central High School in Cleveland, Ohio. The next year he spent in Mexico as a teacher of English. He then spent an unsuccessful year at Columbia University, at the close of which he secured a job with a steamboat company, threw his books into the sea and spent the next two years traveling to Africa, France, and Italy. At the end of this period during which he engaged in many menial occupations to earn his living he returned to the United States with twenty-five cents in his pocket. Upon an invitation from relatives living in Washington, D. C. he went there to live where he was a clerk for a short time in the office of Carter G. Woodson, the Negro historian. Disliking the routine of clerical work he found a job as a busboy in the
Wardman Park Hotel where he was "discovered" by Vachel Lindsay.

He returned to college after his discovery by Lindsay, matriculating at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania and graduating from this institution in 1929. Since then writing has been his profession. His published works are Weary Blues (1926), Fine Clothes to the Jew (1927), Dear Lovely Death (1931), The Dream Keeper (1932), Shakespeare in Harlem (1942) and his autobiography The Big Sea (1940). He has written a novel Not Without Laughter, and a book of short stories, The Ways of White Folks. His play Mulatto played on Broadway during the 1935 season.

Mr. Hughes' poems are racial in theme. He has a deep interest in his own people and he particularly likes to write about the ordinary, work-a-day folk into which category the majority of Negroes fall. Many of his poems are "jazz poems" and "blues", because jazz to him is the inherent expression of Negro life in America, the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul, the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world. He goes for his jazz themes to the cabarets, to Harlem, to Seventh Street in Washington and State Street in Chicago.

When he touches upon the relations between the races
with their overtones and undertones he speaks out realistically, but stoically without apology. He attacks vehemently the lack of the Negroes right to the exercise of full citizenship in America. He goes into the South and attacks sharecropping, lynching, the Ku Klux Klan and Jim Crowism. The South to him is a region when if a Negro buys a five cent hamburger in an ordinary restaurant it is served to him in a paper bag without a plate, napkin, water or stool at the same price the whites pay - to be eaten apart from the others - without shelter. In the urban North the Negroes problem is one of economic insecurity.

Mr. Oswald Garrison Villard, grandson of William Lloyd Garrison and one of the leaders in the country interested in advancing the position of the Negro race says of Mr. Hughes. "It is Mr. Hughes' absolute intellectual honesty and frankness which moves me. He looks at his white and Negro world with rare objectivity and paints it as he sees it. He is not a propagandist. He is as severe in his criticism of the snobbish Negro intellectual as he is of the condescending proud whites."¹

Mr. Hughes' name appears in the biographical dictionary, "Twentieth Century Authors" and he has a place among other American poets in Louis Untermeyer's Modern American Poetry.

¹ Saturday Review of Literature 22:12 (Ag '31 '40)
Langston Hughes has remained a bachelor and has no fixed residence. He travels, lectures, and writes, his objective being to acquaint the people of America with the problems of the American Negro which he does realistically without being pessimistic.

Sterling Brown is another young Negro poet who is busily engaged in presenting to America the problems of the Negro. Mr. Brown's youth was less adventurous than Mr. Hughes. He was born in Washington, D.C., the son of a Congregationalist minister, and a college professor. He was reared on the edge of a college campus, that being his permanent abode until after the death of his father in 1934. He attended the Washington elementary schools and Dunbar High School in the same city. He made fine grades and was highly respected and loved by his fellow-classmates. Brown went to Williams for his college training where he made Phi Beta Kappa in his junior year. He received his M.A. degree from Howard in 1923.

Mr. Brown then went into the South to teach, teaching at Virginia Seminary in Lynchburg, Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, and thence to Lincoln University in Missouri. While teaching in the South Brown traveled among the people a great deal and collected data for his volume of poems "Southern Road." Mr. Brown is a recognized poet confin-
ing his subject matter to the South. The problems in his poetry are the problems created by the friction between the races in that area. He, like Mr. Hughes, writes of the Negro masses and their problems. The farmer, the share-croppers, lynchings and Jim-Crowism are the subjects which he attacks fearlessly and without apology. His attacks are very bitter and his poems are not written in dialect but in the idiom of the people. He also pictures the ne'er do well, the loafer, the illiterate and the ignorant, again realistically without apology. Mr. Brown's poetry has appeared in various popular magazines and in anthologies.

Besides being a poet Sterling Brown is a literary critic and an essayist. His particular field of interest centers around his course "The Negro in American Literature" which he may be found teaching at either a colored or white school. The main objective of his course is to try to tear down the seven stereotyped characteristics of the Negro which are found in American literature. These seven types are "the contented slave, the wretched freeman, the comic Negro, the brute Negro, the tragic mulatto, the local color Negro and the exotic primitive."

In 1942 Mr. Brown traveled from Massachusetts to Mississippi acquiring first hand evidence of the trend of feelings between whites and colored as it pertained to the
War and the war effort. From this experience he writes "Whether in any camp or juke joints, or dorms or offices or commissaries or cabins or Jim Crow coaches or bus stations, I found more wartime grousing than beatitudes."¹

Brown's essay in the book What The Negro Wants summarizes his point of view. Count Us In is the subject of his discussion and that is, in his opinion what the Negro wants is to be counted in. They want what other men have wanted deeply enough to suffer and fight for. They want real democracy. In his discussion of Jim Crow he says - "On all levels and in all callings - whether an illiterate sharecropper comparing the one room ramshackly school for his children with the brick consolidated school for the white children, or a college president who knows in spite of the new brick buildings, how unequal a proportion of state funds has come to his school, Negroes realize that Jim Crow, even under such high sounding names as 'bi-racial parallelism' means inferiority for Negroes. They have known Jim Crow a long time, and they know Jim Crow means not belonging."¹

Mr. Brown is associate professor of English at Howard University. He is married and resides in Washington D.C.

¹ Survey Graphic 31:480 (November, 1942)  
¹ What the Negro Wants - Rayford Vogan - Page 339
Both Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown through their art are realistically acquainting the American nation with the social problems of the American Negro.
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I wish to express my thanks to Mrs. Smith, Mr. Brown's sister for her kindness in furnishing biographical material about Mr. Brown.