

Race Relations in “Slave on the block”

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1. Introduction

The aim of my research paper is to analyse the race relations in “Slave on the Block“, a short story by Langston Hughes, and to illuminate the self-awareness of Afro-Americans at that time, a topic that is touched in the short story as well.

In order to be able to understand the race relations in the short story and the many references to the situation in those days, one has to know the historical background. Due to the complexity of the Afro-American history, I have tried to mention only those aspects that were important for the development of the Afro-American self-confidence.

Furthermore, I have put emphasis on the depiction of the Harlem Renaissance, an Afro-American cultural movement that serves as the short story’s setting. In this connection I have linked to references in the short story where possible.

2. The short story

Langston Hughes (1902-1967) was one of the most important Afro-American writers of the 1920s and 1930s. His second book “The Ways of White Folks“, a collection of short stories, was mainly written in Russia and came out in Moscow in 1934.

“Slave on the Block“ deals with the way black and white New Yorkers treated and thought of each other in the 20s of this century.

2.1 Race relations as presented in the short story

The short story introduces Anne and Michael Carraway to the reader, a white upper-middle-class couple living in Harlem.

At first glance the Carraways look like liberal, open-minded people who have left the racist behaviour of previous generations behind. They collect Afro-American art, read Afro-American literature, meet Afro-American intellectuals and spend their evenings in an Afro-American district, Harlem – in short, they “*were people who went in for Negroes*” in general. But a closer look reveals that they are not the liberal-minded artists they pretend to be.

In reality their admiration is nothing else than polite condescension:

They saw no use in helping a race that was already too charming and naive and lovely for words. Leave them unspoiled and just enjoy them, Michael and Anne felt.

As the Carraways are quite wealthy, they can afford to hire the young Afro-American Luther, a “*poor, dear boy*” who has been unemployed for a longer time, although they need no additional employee beside their – Afro-American – maid. This deed reflects their attitude once more: they do not employ Luther for brotherly love, but to have a sample of an “*utter[...] Negro*” around. Once their employee, he can serve as a model to be painted by Anne, or as a childlike entertainer when having to sing for guests.

The Carraway’s hidden racism manifests in many details. After discovering that Luther has a sexual relationship with Mattie, Anne condones them: “*It’s so simple and natural for Negroes to make love*”. Although Michael is “*getting a little bored with the same Negro always in the way*”, Anne wants to keep him since Luther serves as an object of sexual fantasies for her: being attracted by the “*adorable Negro*”, she has started to paint Luther as a half nude slave.

But Luther and Mattie do not match the Carraway's idea of "*Dear, natural, childlike people*". Especially Luther realizes his employer's real values very quickly. As he is dependent from them, he stands their "*foolery*", but puts the Carraway's liberalness to the test: he smokes up their cigarettes, drinks their wine, tells jokes on them to their friends or does not appear for three days.

The visit of Michael's mother leads to the revelation of the contrast. Although it is obvious that she dislikes Afro-Americans, Luther does not try to avoid a conflict and frankly tells the elder lady that he "*never liked poor white folks*". Because his mother feels offended by the "*nigger servant*", Michael relapses to old role expectations and immediately discharges him.

In short, the relationship between black and white is characterized by a not obviously racist, but patronizing attitude on the part of the whites and a confident behaviour on the part of the Afro-Americans.

3. Historical background – the Harlem Renaissance

The behaviour of the black characters as well as the behaviour of the white ones is typical for the 1920s in the USA. In order to elucidate why Luther and Mattie are so self-confident and why Anne and Michael Carraway are so interested in Afro-Americans, the historical background is to be shown here.

3.1 The development of black racial awareness as a precondition for the Harlem Renaissance

3.1.1 Black self-esteem before and during World War I

Although the American Civil War had led to the end of slavery, it had not ended racism. In the years from 1865 until the First World War Afro-Americans were still eliminated from social and political life. They had to cope with segregation and had to bear terror from the Ku Klux Klan which made sure they could not speak up for civil rights too loud.

Perhaps nothing symbolizes the black self-esteem more than the main activist of the time, Booker T. Washington. Washington accepted the prevailing power structure; he did not want to change society, but hoped for an Afro-American development in the economic sector.

The black self-esteem of the era becomes clear in Washington's opinion on labour: Women were supposed to learn cooking, sewing and nursing, men were supposed to be manual or agricultural workers. He also advised negroes to keep back from political commitment and to work hard.

As a result of these ideas Washington was popular with whites on the one hand, but had to face criticism on the other hand. One popular critic was W. E. B. Du Bois, an Afro-American civil rights activist who reproached Washington of conforming to white supremacy. In 1905 Du Bois founded the "Niagara Movement", an organisation that demanded the end of race discrimination, freedom of the press and speech and the acceptance of human rights. By 1910 the Niagara Movement was taken over by the "National Association for the Advancement of Colored People" (NAACP) which continued

to stand up for civil rights. Another civil rights organisation was the “National Urban League” (founded in 1911), which tried to find employment for Afro-Americans in the industrial sector.

Despite these first attempts, black resistance before the First World War was confined to small groups of intellectuals. The majority of Afro-Americans could hardly show protest as the racist terror on the part of the whites went on. According to “The Crisis”, the NAACP newspaper led by Du Bois, a total of 2732 Afro-Americans were lynched between 1885 and 1914.

3.1.2 Black self-esteem after World War I

After the First World War protest against white racism dwelled on wide parts of the Afro-American population and could not be suppressed any more.

Several factors are said to be responsible for the emergence of a mass movement.

Since the end of the nineteenth century an inland migration had taken place: Afro-Americans from the poorer south went to the more liberal north, where the industry was in need of employees. Being concentrated in large cities, the Afro-Americans were much more receptive to new ideas.

Black soldiers, returning from the war that was *“to make the world safe for freedom and democracy”*, found that not even the fundamental rights of democracy were granted in their home country. They still had to face racism and were beaten or lynched – the Ku Klux Klan was formally resurrected in 1915.

The labour market served as a further factor. When the war ended, the industrial production greatly decreased and thousands of workers were dismissed. Of course, Afro-Americans were “the last to be hired and the first to be fired”.

They realized that the accommodationism Washington had prayed was not enough to change their place in the *“caste system”*.

The disappointed Afro-Americans found their leader in Marcus Garvey. Immigrated only in 1916, Garvey managed to found and lead the largest black

folk movement to date: by 1924 his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) numbered over six million world members. Other writers have put Garvey's following at between one and two million Afro-Americans throughout the world.

Garvey mobilized the black ghettos with radical slogans. *"He told his listeners what they most wanted to hear – that a black skin was not a badge of shame but rather a glorious symbol of national greatness."* Garvey appealed to black race pride and is said to have created the saying "black is beautiful". In order to stimulate black nationalism, he put up a program to lead Afro-Americans back to their origin, to Africa. Although utopian, this "Back-to-Africa" movement looked like a tempting goal to many poorer Afro-Americans.

The new race consciousness was not without consequences. It led to the emergence of an important cultural movement: the Harlem Renaissance.

3.2 The Harlem Renaissance

The term Harlem Renaissance refers to an Afro-American cultural movement in the 1920s and early 1930s. It was a period in which many Afro-Americans were creative and became famous not only with Afro-Americans, but also with whites.

The new race consciousness manifested itself in art, music, dancing, journalism, research and, last but not least, literature. Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen and Claude McKay are probably the most popular writers of the decade. The main topics these and other artists dealt with were, as a matter of fact, race relations.

The centre of the cultural movement was situated in Harlem:

Nowhere else in America were ordinary people as aware of the doings of their artists and actors, composers and musicians, painters and poets, sculptors and singers and its literary and academic writers than in the Harlem of the mid- and late twenties.

As a part of the new consciousness – and due to the fact that the 1920s were the “Roaring Twenties” – , a whole black night scene emerged in Harlem. Night clubs, dancing halls, theatres and cabarets opened up.

“Slave on the Block“ reflects the spirit of the times very well: New York Afro-Americans went to clubs like the *Cotton Club*, the *Hot Dime* or the *Savoy*. *Carl van Vechten’s* parties were legendary as all kinds of people mixed there. Contemporaries were enthusiastic about Harlem: The journalist Ira De A. Raid wrote that “*Harlem [...] is Black Life perfected*“, Langston Hughes describes it as “*gay and sparkling*“.

But the new cultural movement was not restricted to Afro-Americans. It became popular for whites to spend their nights in Harlem. This applies to the Carraways as well: “*they knew Harlem like their own backyard*“.

Simultaneously, whites began to accept black culture. Not only did the number of publications by Afro-American authors increase, but many white authors began writing about Afro-Americans, too.

Nevertheless, the white’s sudden interest did not mean that their attitude towards Afro-Americans had changed overnight. For many whites Harlem was a place where primitivity and naivity could be discovered in the own country, and with emphasizing this “*delightful simplicity*“, as the Carraways put it, one had an excuse to pass over the prevailing oppression in silence.

In his autobiography “The Big Sea“, Langston Hughes depicts the situation as follows:

The Negroes said: “We can’t go downtown and sit and stare at you in your clubs. You won’t even let us in your clubs.” But they didn’t say it out too loud – for Negroes are practically never rude to white people. So thousands of whites came to Harlem night after night, thinking the Negroes loved to have them there, and firmly believing that all Harlemites left their houses at sundown to sing and dance in cabarets, because most of the whites saw nothing but the cabarets, not the houses.

The world economic crisis in 1929 was the beginning of the end of the Harlem boom. *“Then white America became so busy surviving downtown that it didn’t have the time to go uptown to Harlem.”*

3.3 The significance of the Harlem Renaissance to Afro-Americans

The Harlem Renaissance, which was founded on a positive black self-awareness, was an important factor for the further development of this self-confidence. It was the first time in history that an own cultural standard could be established.

The importance of the Harlem Renaissance becomes clear when a look at the more recent American history is taken. When Afro-American protest had its peak in the 1960s, activists were glad to have a historical basis they could refer to:

Why is it important for us to know of Paul Robeson and Dr. Du Bois and the men and women of the Harlem Renaissance? Because they are a vital and heroic part of our history. [...] We need desperately to know that this generation is not the first to produce artists and writers and historians who identified with Africa and proclaimed that Black was Beautiful.

4. Conclusion

- The 1920s were a decisive decade for the self-awareness of Afro-Americans. A new self-confidence was formed by political leaders like Du Bois and Garvey, but also by the numerous artists who created and established an own Afro-American culture.
- The short story "Slave on the Block" is a document of these times, written by one of the protagonists of the Harlem Renaissance.
- Although interested in the new culture, white Americans nevertheless refused to accept Afro-Americans as equal citizens.
- The new self-confidence was a basis to which the activists of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s could refer.

5. Appendix

5.1 Bibliography

Primary sources

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5.2 Assurance

Hiermit versichere ich, daß ich die Arbeit selbständig und nur mit den angegebenen Hilfsmitteln angefertigt habe.

