



## **Satire as Protest: George Schuyler's *Black No More* and Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker The Berry***

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### **ABSTRACT**

George Schuyler and Wallace Thurman are usually regarded as the popular satirists of the Harlem Renaissance Movement. Although satire is both a specific literary genre and a literary manner, in this paper, however, satire is seen as a literary manner in which the follies and foibles, or vices and crimes of a person, mankind or an institution are held up to ridicule in a bid to reform. Thus, while Schuyler's satire in *Black No More* is directed at the larger American society for their discriminatory tendencies predicated on skin colour, Thurman's satire in *The Blacker The Berry* is targetted at the Negroes who discriminate against themselves on slight colour differences. Therefore, the two writers, although from differing perspectives, attack the American "colour-phobia." Hence, satire serves as a protest tool of the two artists.

### **INTRODUCTION**

George Schuyler and Wallace Thurman can rightly be referred to as the popular satirists of the Harlem Renaissance period. While Schuyler in his novel, *Black no More* attacks the American "colour-phobia", Thurman's satire in *The Blacker the Berry* is directed at the Negroes themselves who discriminate against one another on slight colour differences. The two writers, thus, look at the colour question, often termed "the Negro problem." However, they offer differing perspectives. This paper, therefore, examines how these two writers have used satire as a reformist, protest tool of society in their respective works.

### **WHAT IS SATIRE?**

The word, "satire", coined from the Latin word "satura" and meaning "a medley" originated from the Romans. Though the real inventor of satire is Gaius Lucilius, it was his successor, Horace in whose hands the concept

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received a new and exhaustive development. Satire is both a specific literary genre and a literary technique. In its more frequent sense and in this paper however, satire is seen as a literary technique in which the follies and foibles, or vices and crimes of a person, mankind or an institution are held up to ridicule or scorn. Although satire is often comic, its objective is to evoke not mere laughter, but laughter for a corrective purpose. That is why it is regarded as a form of protest, for laughter is “a weapon more exhilarating to its user than anger and more devastating to the sinner (Chambers, 1973, 213). Men, unlike dogs and monkeys cannot bear to be laughed at. Thus, satire is a literary technique in prose, poetry or even drama which blends a critical attitude with humour and wit for the purpose of improving human institutions or humanity. True satirists are, however conscious of the frailty of institutions and of human devising and attempt through laughter not so much to tear them down as to inspire a remodeling. Many a time, satire spares the individual and follows Addison’s self-imposed rule: to “pass over a single foe to charge whole armies” (Holman, 1980, 398). Satire may be humorous or serious but its object is generally made to seem ridiculous rather than evil. The portrayals, generally, are at variance with outward appearance but they contain recognizable truth and it is this truth which gives the satirist his license to attack.

In literature, satire is often distinguished into two major types: formal or direct satire and informal or indirect satire. Formal or direct satire is one in which the satiric voice speaks usually in the first person either directly to the reader or to a character in the satire. Indirect satire on the other hand, is that where the satire is expressed through a narrative and the characters or groups who are the satiric butt are ridiculed not by what is said about them but by what they say and do themselves, thus displaying their folly and the aim is “to let the punishment fit the crime” (Chambers, 1973, 213). However, formal satire is further divided into two types and named after their distinguished classical practitioners: Horatian satire and Juvenalian satire. While Juvenalian satire is biting, bitter, angry and denunciatory, pointing with contempt and moral indignation to corruption and evils of human beings and institutions, Horatian satire is gentle, urbane and witty. Its aim is to correct by gentle and broadly sympathetic laughter.

For effectiveness, satire employs irony, sarcasm, epigram, parody, hyperbole, lampoons, allegory, burlesque, etc. There have been few ages when man has not employed satire to comment on his fellow man. In antiquity, it was present in the invectives of the Greek poet and lampoonist, Archilochus, the animal fables of Aesop, the comedies of Aristophanes etc., as well as in the verses of the Romans, like Lucilius, Horace, Persius, Juvenal and in the dialogues of Lucian. In the middle ages, the beast fables and beast epics such as those about “Reynard the Fox” were numerous. The 14<sup>th</sup> century poet, Geoffrey Chaucer was on occasion a master satirist (his *Canterbury Tales*) as was the 16<sup>th</sup> Century French author, Francois Robelais in *Gargartua and Pantagruel*. The early 17<sup>th</sup> century brought great satiric

works – Cervante’s *Don Quixote* in Spain and Ben Johnson’s comedies in England.

However, the great modern age of satire was the neo-classical period when the satiric spirit was everywhere present and a return was made to formal verse satire. Thus, with the restoration, satire reached its most characteristic use and form. That is why the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries have been called “the golden age of satire in England”. (New Age Encyclopaedia, 1981, 576). Notable among English verse satires of the later 17<sup>th</sup> century were Samuel Butler’s attack on the Puritans in the mock-epic, “Hudibras” and John Dryden’s heroic couplets, such as “Absalom and Achitophel”, on the Titus Oates conspiracy and “Mac Flecknoe” on Thomas Shadwel. The 18<sup>th</sup> century brought such major English verse satires as Pope’s “The Dunciad”, “The Rape of the Lock” etc, and Johnson’s Juvenalian poems, “London” and “The Vanity of human wishes”.

Satiric prose also flourished in the British Isles especially in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. It included Jonathan Swift’s harsh attacks on corruption in Religion in his “A Tale of a Tub” and on mankind in “Gulliver’s Travels” as well as his devastating shorter pieces such as, “A Modest Proposal” and other tracts on the plight of Ireland. Gentle satire found a civilized voice in the essays and periodicals like Addison’s and Steele’s *The Tattler* and *The Spectator*. Satire also flourished in France in the neo-classical age. Examples include La Fontaine’s great poetic work, *Fables*, Voltaire’s philosophical tale, “Candide” and Montesquieu’s critique of French and Persian beliefs, fashions and institutions in “Letters Persanes” (“Persian Letters”).

Although the 19<sup>th</sup> century was not particularly friendly to satire, Lord Byron produced a substantial amount of satire, including his great unfinished *Don Juan*. The satiric spirit was also present in W. S. Gilbert’s comic “Librettas”, William Makepeace Thackeray’s and Oscar Wilde’s essays and plays. 20<sup>th</sup> century England has produced satiric drama by George Bernard Shaw, essays and fiction by Mar Beerbohm and Aldons Hurley and verse by T. S. Eliot. In France, masterful satire appeared in the fiction of Anatole France. As regards America, its chief period of satire paralleled that in England. The essays and verse of such writers as Benjamin Franklin, “the Hartford wits” – (Timothy Dwight, Joel Barlow, and others) and Philip Freneau were harmonious in spirit with the satire of the neo-classic age. Later satirists included Mark Twain, Finley Peter, Sinclair Lewis, etc. Contemporary examples are found in the work of the so-called black humorists such as Joseph Heller’s novel, *Catch Twenty*. But the United States has not had a truly great age of satire.

From the foregoing, it becomes clear that drama has also lent itself effectively to satirical comment upon man’s vices and follies. However, with the rise of the novel, prose fiction demonstrated its suitability as a vehicle for satire. Also, satire is employed through a combination of verbal and visual effects in film, T.V. and theatre. Equally available are satiric paintings and drawings and even satiric music, but the greatest wealth of satire is found in Literature. Many African writers have also proved themselves master

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satirists. Examples include, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, T. M. Aluko, Niyi Osundare, Odi Ofeimuna, Ola Rotimi, Femi Osofisan, etc.

Since social values change and satire lends itself easily to topicalities, much satire has proved ephemeral. The most enduring satire therefore sees the temporary and local in the light of universal and permanent tendencies in human nature, remembering in invective or humour that its purpose is to correct the vices of men while amusing them.

From the above discussions, it is evident that satire is never employed for its own sake but for the purpose of inspiring a remodeling, hence, its being regarded as a reformist, protest tool. In classical terms, George Schuyler's *Black No More* and Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry* could be regarded as Juvenalian satires, though not in the strict sense. While George Schuyler's protest in *Black No More* (1971) is directed at the American "caste" system, Thurman's satire in *The Blacker The Berry* (1970) is targeted at the various forms of colour prejudice which existed in the black community itself. Writing during the Harlem Renaissance period, the two writers, look at the colour question in America, though from different perspectives.

#### **SATIRE AS PROTEST IN *BLACK NO MORE* AND *THE BLACKER THE BERRY***

Briefly summarized, the plot of *Black No more* (1971) concerns the changes – social, political and financial – which come to America after a negro scientist, Dr. Junius Crookman, discovers a process called, "an electrical nutrition" to change negroes from black to white. The colour of the skin, the texture of the hair and other features of the black people are changed in the process, thereby making them all white and disturbing the racial balance of the nation. Our "coffee-brown" protagonist, Max Disher is the first to avail himself of this opportunity, because, he is tired of frustration with "yellow women", coupled with an ambition to feel like an American citizen. A glorious panorama of the future, enrolls itself in Max Disher's mind:

No more Jim Crow. No More insults. As a white man, he could go anywhere, be anything he wanted to be, do almost anything he wanted to do, be a free man at last... what a vision! (26).

However, when as a result of this treatment, practically all negroes have become white, it is announced by Dr Crookman, by now, the Surgeon-General of the United States that, the changed negroes are two or three shades lighter than the original whites. This starts a new panic in the nation, and everybody starts darkening up, just as frantically as they had earlier tried to bleach their skin and hair. It now becomes fashionable to spend hours at the seashore, basking nude in the sun and dashing back home heavily bronzed to lord it over their paler and thus, less fortunate associates. Schuyler

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measures the people's confusion and effect of Dr Crookman's announcement in the last pages of the novel:

What was the world coming to. ...Many people in the upper class began to look askance at their very pale complexions. If it were true that extreme whiteness was evidence of the possession of Negro blood, of having once been a member of a pariah class, then surely it was well not to be so white!...A popular song "whiter than white" was being whistled by the entire nation. Among the working classes, in the next few months, there grew up a certain prejudice against all fellow workers who were exceedingly pale.... Beauty shops began to sell face powders named "Peudre Negre, Poudre le Egyptienne and L'Afrique". (219-221).

Apart from the black and white racial attitudes which Schuyler satirizes, the writer also lampoons most of the major black cultural and political figures of the 1920s, as well as all the others who made their livings out of race differences. The National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) and the Ku Klux Klan are ridiculed, just the same way the Heads of both negro and white organizations are. They are all hustlers, Schuyler suggests, and in no way different in their exploitation of America's "colour-phobia," except in the superficial differences of colour. Dr Shakespeare Agamemnon Beard is W.E.B. Dubois, while the National Social Equality League becomes the NAACP of which Dubois was the founder. *The Dilemma* becomes the NAACP'S Journal – *The Crisis*, while Santop Licorice and the Back-to-Africa Society replaces Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro improvement . Other less important organizations that Schuyler believed were unbecoming of people include: Dunbar University, Dusky River Agriculture Institute, the Uncle Tom Memorial Association, the Ethiopian True Faith Wash Foot Methodist Church etc. Religion (Christianity) also comes under attack in this novel. Mrs. Givens is portrayed in sarcastic terms. Schuyler tells us that:

Mrs. Givens was a Christian. There was no doubt about it because she freely admitted it to everybody with or without provocation. Of course, she often took the name of the creator in vain when she got quarrelling with Henry; she had the reputation among her friends of not always stating the exact truth; she hated negroes, her spouse had made bitter and profane comments concerning her virginity on their wedding night and as head of the ladies auxiliary of the defunct Klan, she had copied her husband's financial methods, but that she was a devout Christian, no one doubted. She believed the bible from cover to cover, except what it said about people with money (73).

Equally satirized are Rev. Mcphule and his activities in the True Faith Christ Church of which he was the founder. In this church, no music is allowed and neither are chairs used. Everybody sits on the ground in a circle, with Rev.

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Mcphule in the centre. At the height of the service, amidst loud singing and shouting, the Reverend, "froth at the mouth" would run around on all fours and embrace in turn, each member of the congregation, especially the buxom ladies. This would be the signal for others to follow his example. The sisters and brothers would therefore, osculate, embrace and roll shouting, "Christ is love", "love Christ", "Oh be happy in the arms of Jesus!", "Oh Jesus my sweetheart!" etc (206). And symbolically, these revivals take place on the darkest nights with the place of workshop dimly illuminated by pine torches. But as these torches always seemed to conveniently burn out about the time the embracing and the rolling started, the new faith "became rapidly popular" (206).

It is also interesting to note that Rev. Mcphule equally holds private audience with the sick, sinful and neurotic in his little cabin and, as expected, the majority of his visitors are middle-aged wives and adenoidal and neurotic young girls. Here, Schuyler remarks that "none departed unsatisfied" (207). Rev Mcphule also visits the women-folk to "comfort" them with his Christian message when their men are at work in the fields. And being a bachelor, we learn that he made these "professional" calls with great frequency. Ironically however, even with the good fortune that has come to him as a result of engaging in "the Lord's work", he is still dissatisfied. He never passes, we are told, a Baptist, Methodist, or Holy Roller Church without jealousy and ambition surging up within him. He wanted everybody in the country to be in his flock for "he wanted to do God's work so effectually that the other churches would be put out of business" (208). Right Rev. Bishop Ezekiel Whooper of the Ethiopian True Faith Wash Foot Methodist Church is also ridiculed. He is described as corpulent and rich, even though his parishioners are poor. He is also said to be an "expert at the art of cuckolds" (98).

However, although *Black No More* (1971) has been rightly described as a "coruscating satire with a voltarean touch and the kind of double-edged irony" in which no one – black or white – emerges unscathed" (Singh 1976, 120), Schuyler's satire seems directed more at the American caste system which denies the African-American the same chances, rights and privileges as his white counterpart. As Amritjit Singh remarks, "being coloured is like being born in the basement of life with the door barred and the white people live upstairs" (1976, 89). It is, therefore, to protest this imposed barrier that Schuyler's satire aims at in this novel, *Black No More* (1971).

In the same vein, Wallace Thurman in his novel, *The Blacker The Berry* (1970) launches a frontal attack on a wrong which has been perpetrated on dark-skinned negro women, not by whites this time, but by negroes themselves. The novel protests against all forms of prejudice found within the black community. The title, taken from the black folk expression, "the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice" immediately establishes the irony and theme of the novel. In much of the folk literature and in a great deal of the street-corner type of joke found among black men, the dark-skinned girl

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was the butt of a great deal of coarse, vulgar and humiliating humour aimed at her colour. Typical of these attacks is the well-known doggerel verse:

Yaller gal rides in a limousine  
Brownskin rides the train  
Black gal rides in an ol ox cart  
But she gits there jes the same (22).

And so, the title as used by the man in the street was a dubious compliment, but the whole import of the phrase makes an excellent ironic title for this novel. The plot of the *Blacker The Berry* (1970) has to do with the cruel experiences and profound despair suffered by Emma Lou Morgan, a dark-skinned girl born into a light-skinned negro family whose motto is: “lighter and lighter every generation, until their descendants might assimilate easily into the white race “so that problems of race would plague them no more” (12). Emma Lou’s mother is light-skinned and had expected that her child would be even fairer than her. Mrs. Morgan and her associates of the “blue vein” circle firmly believe that “white is right”. So, when Emma Lou was born, it was a big blow. The mother, of course, rejected the daughter and made Emma Lou’s life miserable through odious colour comparisons. Neighbours kept exclaiming: “what an extraordinarily black child” or, “such lovely unniggerish hair on such a niggerish-looking child” (15). And so, her family, with the partial exception of her uncle – Joe – rejects her from the very day of her birth. That is why the author tells us that:

Emma, Lou had always been the alien member of the family and of the family’s social circle. Her grandmother, now a widow made her feel it. Her mother made her feel it ... to say nothing of the way, she was regarded by outsiders. As early as she could remember, people had been saying to her mother “what an extraordinarily black child! Where did you adopt it?”... “Try some lye Jane, it may eat it out. She can’t look any worse” (15).

The greatest tragedy of Emma Lou’s life, however, is that she too, comes to believe that “white is right”.

The “blue vein circle” of which Emma Lou’s grand-mother, Maria lightfoot was the founder and leader in Boise is so-called because its members were so fair-skinned that their blood could be seen pulsing purple through the veins of their wrists. The members, therefore, guarded its exclusiveness passionately and jealously. Thurman in a series of rhetorical questions subjects them to ridicule when he says:

Were they not a superior class? Were they not a very high type of negroe, comparable to the persons of colour groups in the West Indies? And were they not entitled *ip so facto* to more respect and opportunity than pure blooded Negroes? (11).

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This ridicule continues when the author says that Emma Lou's maternal grand-parents – Samuel and Maria Lightfoot – “were both mulatto products of slave-day promiscuity between male masters and female chattel” (13) and that only Emma Lou's father seemed to have come from one of the few families originally from Africa who could not “boast of having been seduced by some member of Southern aristocracy, or befriended some member of a strolling band of Indians”(13).

In order to get away from her rejection at home, Emma Lou goes to a college in California, seeking freedom from the burden of blackness, but soon discovers that her light-skinned school mates reject her as decidedly as her family had done. In a bid to escape the misery caused by her colour, Emma Lou pathetically tries all kinds of skin whiteners and cosmetics, some of which accentuate, rather than attenuate her blackness. Even more pathetically, she desires only light-skinned men friends, and is, as a consequence, tricked, abused, exploited, and humiliated by a series of worthless “lovers” and pimps. However, after a final and soul-searing experience with one of her “lovers”, Emma Lou comes to her senses and to terms with herself as she is and ultimately achieves the challenge implicit in the novel's ironic title.

She realizes that she has never been more than a commercial proposition to her so-called “lovers”, and that her attempts to escape herself by flights have not helped. She finds comfort in the philosophy of Campbell Kitchen which says that no one in life need be a total misfit, and that there was some niche for every peg, whether that peg be round or square. She also rejects the possibility of going back home for that would mean starting all over again. She blames mainly herself for her problems and intends to “balance things” (229). Life, after all, was a give and take affair. Why should she give important things and receive nothing in return? She now determines to accept her black skin as “real and unchangeable”, (226) and to begin life a new, not so much for “acceptance by other people, but for acceptance of herself and by herself” (226-227). She plans from now on to “find, not seek” (227) and contends that, life was most kind to those who were judicious in their selections.

### CONCLUSION

Both Schuyler and Thurman have thus, used satire in their works to put across their message. Offering however, differing perspectives, the two writers look at the colour question. While Schuyler's *Black No More* (1971) attacks the American colour shibboleths, Thurman's satire in *The Blacker The Berry* (1970) is directed at the various forms of prejudice which existed within the black community itself. At the turn of the century, W.E.B. Dubois had declared that the problem of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was “the problem of the colour line” (Singh 1976,20). In the same vein, Roger Rosenblatt (1974, 184)

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had remarked that the idea that one day all black men and women may suddenly disappear either from a certain region, or from the face of the earth has been a recurrent theme in black writing. However, although the treatment of this theme ranges from the grim to the hilarious as seen in such works as William Kelley's *A Different Drummer* (1933) Douglas Turner Ward's *Day of Absence* (1970) John Williams *The Man who Cried I Am* (1967), each is inspired in part by the fear that the disappearance of black Americans is a desirable notion to the whites and by the fact that most white people do not recognize blacks, do not see them as people, so that paradoxically, blacks who wish to be seen by whites have to "turn white or colourless" in order to be seen, thereby performing a disappearing act of their own. It is therefore, this imposed invisibility that George Schuyler and Wallace Thurman protest against in their novels, *Black No More* (1971) and *The Blacker the Berry* (1970), respectively.

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