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<th>&quot;An English Professor Disagrees On Whitman's Racial Attitudes&quot; [1953 Jul 25], drats, holograph, typescript, carbon, corrected and printed version</th>
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July 13, 1953

Prof. Lorenzo F. Turner,
4036 Ellis Avenue,
Chicago 15, Illinois.

Dear Lorenzo Turner,

John Sengstacke sent me your very interesting letter which I am happy to run in my column so that the other side of the Whitman picture may be presented. Unfortunately, it is a full page too long to fit the space allotted me, but I have cut it as carefully as possible, leaving out (I hope) none of your points, simply condensing here and there. The following week I intend to run my own comment which, if you would care to comment further on, I suggest you do by "A Letter To The Editor" which they can run in the Letters Columns. I'm very grateful to you for adding information not generally known on this subject to our readers' knowledge. (I didn't know it myself, being familiar only with LEAVES OF GRASS, as you gathered.)

A Mrs. Abbott recently wrote me asking for information on the Gullahs for a study she is doing at a Texas college. I referred her to you as the only authority I know on the subject.

I'm just back from the Coast via Texas, New Orleans, and a summer school lecture at Fort Valley. (My vacation.) Now hard at work on some summer deadlines on books, me being just a literary sharecropper.

Very best wishes to you ever,

Sincerely yours,

Langston Hughes
An English Professor Disagrees
On Whitman's Racial Attitudes

Lovemo B. Turner, professor of English at Roosevelt College in Chicago, in an interesting and carefully documented letter, ships to go Africa only.

Whitman was more interested in the spreading of slavery in the South than in the spread of Negroes to the North. He, a & a, a result of the Mexican War been and he is the “abdication” of “magnificence, and the inclusion of Negroes.”

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LANGSTON HUGHES

AN ENGLISH PROFESSOR DISAGREES
ON WHITMAN'S RACIAL ATTITUDES

Lorenzo D. Turner, professor of English at Roosevelt College in Chicago, in an interesting and carefully documented letter, wrote me as follows: "Mr. I have just read Langston Hughes' column in which he praises Walt Whitman. He says, "Throughout Whitman's poems are many references to Negroes, to Africa, to Asians, and to darker peoples in general, and always he includes them in the amplitude of his democracy and his humility. Certainly Walt Whitman is a poet Negroes should read and remember."

From a careful study of all Whitman's published works I am convinced that he was not a friend of the Negro, and had very few contacts with Negroes, and thought that they were inferior to other human beings. Furthermore, he urged that slavery in the South should not be interfered with, and throughout his long career he was consistently pro-southern. In order that readers of Mr. Hughes' column in the "Defender" may not get a mistaken impression of Walt Whitman I should like to cite a few passages from his poems and prose works of which Mr. Hughes apparently is not aware.

In his pro-slavery novel entitled "Franklin Evans or the Inebriate" (1842), Whitman has his hero praise the institution of slavery, in which, he says, the slaves are far more happy than they would be if freed, and the Creole slave girl, who is the villain of the story, is frequently referred to as possessing all the savagery of her African forebears. On November 9, 1857, the people of Oregon adopted a constitution which barred Negroes from the state. In the "Brooklyn Daily Eagle" for May 2, 1859, Whitman praised the new constitution of Oregon in which he saw virtue in its provisions barring negroes from the state because they would not then be in a position to compete with white labor. He says: "Who believes that whites and blacks can ever amalgamate in America? Or who wishes it to happen? Nature has set an impassable seal against it. Besides, is not America for the whites? And is it not better so?" In an earlier editorial
of the "Brooklyn Daily Eagle" (July 17, 1857), Whitman had said that Negroes were far better off as slaves on the American plantations than they would have been in their own country, and he saw nothing objectionable to the prevalent use of their labor in the South. "It is also to be remembered," he said, "that no race ever can remain slaves if they have it in them to become free. Why do slave ships go to Africa only?"

Even as late as 1860, when Whitman went to Boston to supervise the publication of the third edition of "Leaves of Grass", he was surprised at their being intelligent, progressive Negroes there who were not handicapped because of their color, and he was shocked to observe that they were not segregated in public places. "The blacks here," he says, "are certainly of superior order—quite as good to have in contact with you as the average of our own color." (See C. J. Furness, "Walt Whitman Workshop", p. 299.)

Whitman was more interested in preventing the spread of slavery to the new territory acquired as a result of the Mexican War than in interfering with it in the southern states: "With the present slave states," he said, "no human being has the least shadow of a right to interfere... The man who accustoms himself to think...will see the wide and radical difference between the unquestionable folly and wicked wrong of abolitionist interference with slavery in the southern states and the point of establishing slavery in the fresh land." "Brooklyn Daily Eagle", April 22, 1847.

He felt that slavery in the South, if let alone, would become extinct within a hundred years: "In the meantime," he said, "if it should be remembered that the institution of slavery is not at all without its redeeming points, and also there are just as great reforms needed in the northern states." "Brooklyn Daily Times", May 14, 1857.

Whitman had a deep affection for the South. See his poem entitled "O Magnific South."

In the "Brooklyn Daily Eagle" for May 25, 1857, he says: "We like the refreshing openness of the southern character; you know where to find such men—you see what are after, and prepare to meet them and answer them." Earlier he had expressed his admiration for John C. Calhoun: "We like a bold, honest, morally heroic man! We therefore like John C. Calhoun... We believe that a higher-souled patriot never trod on American soil."

"Brooklyn Daily Eagle", May 14, 1846.) Whitman was consistently bitter in his attacks
on the abolitionists. In his poem called "Wounded in the House of Friends", he called
the abolitionists "doughfaces, crawlers, lice of humanity." Note also the following
lines from this poem:

"Vaunters of the Free
Why do you strain your lungs off southward?
Why be going to Alabama?
Sweep first before your own door!.....

Look well to your own eye, Massachusetts—
Yours, New York and Pennsylvania;
I would say yours too, Michigan.
Virginia, mother of greatness,
Blush not for being also the mother of slaves."

During the Civil War, when many Union soldiers, including his brother George,
were held as prisoners of war by the secessionists, Whitman revealed his indifference
to the fate of Negro Union prisoners. He sharply criticized the Secretary of War for
insisting that no discrimination against Negro soldiers be shown in the exchange of
prisoners. (See Charles I. Glicksberg, "Walt Whitman and the Civil War", pp. 178-30.)
"Leaves of Grass" was Whitman's show-piece, and, unfortunately, is the only one of his
works that the average readers sees. But to get a true picture of Whitman one has to
read his writings that are not included in "Leaves of Grass."
Mr. John H. Sengstacke
Editor, Chicago Defender
3435 Indiana Avenue
Chicago 16, Illinois

Dear Mr. Sengstacke:

I have just read in the latest issue of the Defender" Langston Hughes' column, in which he praises Walt Whitman, calling him the great democrat, the Lincoln of letters, and the first great poetic friend of Negroes. He says: "Throughout Whitman's poems are many references to Negroes, to Africa, to Asiatics, and to darker peoples in general, and always he includes them in the amplitude of his democracy and his humility. Certainly Walt Whitman is a poet Negroes should read and remember."

From a careful study of all of Whitman's published works I am convinced that he was not a friend of the Negro, had very few contacts with Negroes, and thought that they were inferior to other human beings. Furthermore, he urged that slavery in the South should not be interfered with, and throughout his long career he was consistently pro-southern. In order that readers of Mr. Hughes' column in the "Defender" may not get a mistaken impression of Walt Whitman I should like to cite a few passages from his poems and prose works of which Mr. Hughes apparently is not aware.

In his pro-slavery novel entitled "Franklin Evans or the Inebriate" (1842), Whitman has his hero praise the institution of slavery, in which, he says, the slaves are far more happy than they would be if freed; and the Creole slave girl, who is the villain of the story, is frequently referred to as possessing all the savagery of her African forebears.
On November 9, 1857, the people of Oregon adopted a constitution which barred Negroes from the state. In the "Brooklyn Daily Eagle" for May 8, 1858, Whitman praised the new constitution of Oregon in which he saw virtue in its provisions barring Negroes from the state because they would not then be in a position to compete with white labor. He says: "Who believes that whites and blacks can ever amalgamate in America? Or who wishes it to happen? Nature has set an impassable seal against it. Besides, is not America for the whites? And is it not better so?" ... So that prohibitions like that in the new constitution of Oregon are not to be dismissed at first as arbitrary.

In an earlier editorial of the "Brooklyn Daily Eagle" (July 17, 1857), Whitman had said that Negroes were far better off as slaves on the American plantations than they would have been in their own country, and he saw nothing objectionable to the prevalent use of their labor in the South. "It is also to be remembered," he said, "that no race ever can remain slaves if they have it in them to become free. Why do slave ships go to Africa only?"

Even as late as 1860, when Whitman went to Boston to supervise the publication of the third edition of "Leaves of Grass," he was surprised at their being intelligent, progressive Negroes there who were not handicapped because of their color, and he was shocked to observe that they were not segregated in public places. "The blacks here," he says, "are certainly of superior order—quite as good to have in contact with you as the average of our own color." (See C. J. Furness, "Walt Whitman Workshop," p. 259.)

Whitman was more interested in preventing the spread of slavery to the new territory acquired as a result of the Mexican War than in interfering with it in the southern states: "With the present slave states," he said, "no human being has the least shadow of a right to
interfere....The man who accustoms himself to think...will see the wide and radical difference between the unquestionable folly and wicked wrong of abolitionist interference with slavery in the southern states and the point of establishing slavery in the fresh land." (Brooklyn Daily Eagle, April 22, 1847.) He felt that slavery in the South, if let alone, would become extinct within a hundred years: "In the meantime," he said, "it should be remembered that the institution of slavery is not at all without its redeeming points, and also there are just as great reforms needed in the northern states." Perhaps there are greater reforms needed in the northern states." (Brooklyn Daily Times, May 14, 1857.)

Whitman had a deep affection for the South. See his poem entitled "O Magnet South." In the Brooklyn Daily Eagle for May 25, 1857, he says: "We like the refreshing openness of the southern character; you know where to find such men—you see what they are after, and prepare to meet them and answer them." Earlier he had expressed his admiration for John C. Calhoun: "We like a bold, honest, morally heroic man! We therefore like John C. Calhoun.... We believe that a higher-souled patriot never trod on American soil." (Brooklyn Daily Eagle, May 14, 1846.) Professor Emory Holloway, a Whitman scholar, believes that Whitman's admiration for the South explains why he chose to serve as a hospital missionary during the Civil War rather than take up arms against the South. Whitman was afraid that the vast accumulation of Negroes in Cuba would lead to an insurrection like that in Haiti: "What a beautiful prospect is here presented for our southern planters! A black republic almost within sight of their shores." (Brooklyn Daily Times, May 7, 1857.)

Whitman was consistently bitter in his attacks on the abolitionists. In his poem called "Wounded in the House of Friends," he calls the abolitionists "doughfaces, crawlers, lice of humanity." Note also the following lines from this poem:
"Vaunters of the Free,
Why do you strain your lungs off southward?
Why be going to Alabama?
Sweep first before your own door;
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Look well to your own eye, Massachusetts--
Yours, New York and Pennsylvania;
I would say yours too, Michigan.
Virginia, mother of greatness,
Blush not for being also the mother of slaves."

During the Civil War, when many Union soldiers, including his brother George, were held as prisoners of war by the secessionists, Whitman revealed his indifference to the fate of Negro Union prisoners. He sharply criticized the Secretary of War for insisting that no discrimination against Negro soldiers be shown in the exchange of prisoners. The Secretary of War would not consent to an exchange of any prisoners unless the secession leaders agreed to give up on "average terms" all the Negroes they captured in military action. (See Charles I. Glicksberg, "Walt Whitman and the Civil War", pp. 178-80.)

Space does not permit me to cite other passages that reveal Whitman's hostility to Negroes. His use of the contemptuous epithet "n----r", or "Negro", is frequent in his works not included in Leaves of Grass. Leaves of Grass was Whitman's show-piece, and, unfortunately, is the only one of his works that the average readers sees. But to get a true picture of Whitman one has to read his writings that are not included in "Leaves of Grass". And even the few favorable references to Negroes in this show-piece should not be taken literally. Nor should Whitman's use of the personal pronoun "I" in this work be taken literally. It is usually the impersonal, theoretical "I" which he uses as a technique for expressing his theory of democracy; but in practice he was surely not a liberal. I doubt seriously that Whitman ever had any contact with Negroes. His being shocked at seeing intelligent, progressive Negroes in Boston would appear to indicate this. There were many such Negroes in New York, where he spent many years. If he had had contacts with them, why was he so surprised at seeing
intelligent and progressive Negroes in Boston?

Very truly yours,

Lorenzo D. Turner
Professor of English
Roosevelt College
LANCASTER HUGHES

AN ENGLISH PROFESSOR DISAGREES
ON WHITMAN'S RACIAL ATTITUDES

Lorenzo D. Turner, professor of English at Roosevelt College in Chicago, in an interesting and carefully documented letter, writes as follows: "I have just read Langston Hughes' column in which he praises Walt Whitman. He says, "Throughout Whitman's poems are many references to Negroes, to Africa, to Asia, and to darker peoples in general, and always he includes them in the amplitude of his democracy and his humility. Certainly Walt Whitman is a poet Negroes should read and remember."

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