Intraracial conflict in Harlem in the fiction of Rudolph Fisher

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Intraracial conflict in Harlem
in the fiction of Rudolph Fisher

by

Grant Burns Jr.

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INTRODUCTION

Harlem--The Black Mecca

During the 1920s and 1930s the consciousness of black America was raised to newer and higher levels of self-worth and social importance. A number of events led up to this awakening, or, more appropriately, reawakening. Large numbers of blacks had streamed into the northern cities in the first years of the new century, in a movement that historians call the Great Migration. These blacks were forced by bigotry to leave the south. They were drawn north by, among other things, the promise of better vocational and educational opportunities.

Research compiled by Frank A. Ross revealed that immediately following World War I, the proportion of the Negro population in urban areas increased from 22.7 percent to 48.2 percent. Between 1900 and 1930, about two and a quarter million Negroes left the farms and small villages of the south for the cities.1

During the first decade of the present century the volume was somewhat over a third of a million, during the second decade nearly three-quarters of a million, and between 1920-1930 nearly one and one-quarter million. (p. 191)²

While there were many factors contributing to the mass migration north--educational, religious, social--the overriding factor was undoubt edly economic. The war took away northern white laborers to fight abroad. In addition, the war caused many immigrants from abroad to return to Europe, while immigration from Europe to the United States ceased.
Louise Kennedy's research revealed that nearly half a million Negro migrants left the thirteen southern states during the twelve month period ending August 31, 1923. The effect of these movements was seen in the growth of the Negro population in northern cities. Between 1920 and 1930 the Negro population in New York City and Chicago increased 114 percent.

Among this mass of Negroes migrating north were a number of talented black artists. The migration of these artists in the years before the world war precipitated the evolution of Harlem as the center of Negro cultural, intellectual, and political life. In The Harlem Renaissance, Nathan Huggins tells us that there were "darktowns" before and along with Harlem, yet it was the "time" and the "circumstances" of its creation that made Harlem a symbol of the Afro-American's "coming of Age." Huggins states that "What distinguished Harlem from the several other burgeoning black metropolises were changes seemingly in Harlem, in the character of Negro protest and thought."

Using culture--i.e., literature, art, music--as the "true measure of civilization," Huggins describes the black artists' aim as to establish themselves as "thinkers, strivers, and doers," who sought to lay the foundation of a respectable culture. If culture, particularly in the arts and literature, was the most important aspect of being civilized, then white America must be shown the presence and reality of the culture of the black American. "The Negro was in the process of telling himself and the world that he was worthy, had a rich culture, and could make contributions of value."
Young black artists migrated to Harlem for several reasons. New York City abounded in white patrons who could finance their works. In addition, Harlem provided three major vehicles for black thought and expression: Crisis, Messenger, and Opportunity. These magazines sought to encourage black writers by sponsoring literary contests and publishing their works for whites and other blacks to see.

The following is an excerpt from an article in the Negro History Bulletin concerning a dinner sponsored by Opportunity Magazine for young black artists, to acknowledge their debut into the literary world.

A significant dinner of the New York Writers Guild was held at the Civic Club on March 21, 1924. Charles S. Johnson, Editor of Opportunity Magazine, a journal of Negro life, was responsible for arranging this dinner. He called it a debut of young Negro writers.8

Perhaps even more of an attraction was the invaluable experience of living among, borrowing from, and trading ideas with the most prominent black writers and artists of the decade. Young black artists milled together and acquired rich ideas for their particular depiction of black experience not only in Harlem, but also in the whole of America.

Men such as W.E.B. DuBois and James Weldon Johnson served as the major vanguards of the Harlem influx. Marcus Garvey, and his black nationalism, instilled a reinforced black pride in the black Americans. Following them to Harlem were a host of writers; among the major ones were Jean Toomer, Wallace Thurman, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, and Langston Hughes. These writers came to live among and to learn from each other.
It would be unfair to conclude that only the major writers of the Harlem Renaissance contributed to and recorded the story of this period and the people who made it a reality. There were minor writers, whose works also reflected the character, customs, struggles, and human conflict of the black masses.

One such minor writer was Rudolph Fisher. He was not a writer by trade, but a physician, and that, in part, perhaps prevented him from receiving widespread and serious attention. Further, Fisher died when he was thirty-seven, before his literary career had a chance to mature. Yet, prior to his untimely death, as well as afterward, his fiction found its way into some of the most noted and widely read magazines—American Mercury, Redbook, Crisis, Opportunity, McClure, and Atlantic Monthly, to name a few. His short stories have frequently been included in anthologies of Afro-American literature, while his two novels have been reprinted—The Walls of Jericho (1969), and The Conjure-man Dies (1971). So although he has not been judged to be a major writer, he, nonetheless, remains a minor figure whose contributions were of genuine significance.
RUDOLPH FISHER--HIS LIFE AND CONTRIBUTIONS

His Life

Rudolph Fisher was relatively young when he died. Perhaps his untimely death precluded him from writing any type of comprehensive autobiography which biographers could draw from in compiling any kind of detailed account of his life. (No full-length biography of his life and career has, as yet, been published.) While I have uncovered several biographical sources, all provided only a brief sketch of his life, concentrating mainly on his academic and professional success.

Fisher was born in 1897 in Washington, D.C. His father was a minister who pastored churches in New York and Providence, Rhode Island. Fisher was reared in and educated in those two cities. He graduated from Providence's Classical High School with honors in 1915.

While Fisher's life may have been short, his academic pursuits were not. He obtained a Bachelor's Degree in English and Biology, and a Master's Degree in Biology, both from Brown University. He was an outstanding student, earning admittance to Phi Beta Kappa, Sigma Xi, and Delta Sigma Rho honorary fraternities. One year after achieving his Bachelor's Degree (1919), he received his Master's Degree from Brown.

Fisher was an extraordinary student. From Brown he went on to Howard Medical School in Washington, D.C., where he completed his M.D. degree in 1924. In that same year, he married Jane Ryder, a Washington school teacher. Following a year's internship at the Freedman's Hospital, Fisher and his wife moved to New York, where he served as a fellow
at the National Research Council of the College of Physicians and Surgeons while specializing in Biology. Two years later, in 1927, he began the practice of medicine.

Fisher later ventured into the field of roentgenology and subsequently opened an X-Ray laboratory as part of the X-Ray department of the New York Health Department. He also served as superintendent of the International Hospital before it closed.

Pursuing several careers almost simultaneously took its toll on the young Fisher. He became ill, and eventually had to be removed from his Jamaica, Long Island home and taken to the Edgecombe Sanitorium, where he died in December 1934, at the age of thirty-seven.

His Role

Fisher is primarily known for his novel *The Walls of Jericho* (1928). However, his contribution to prose fiction also consisted of seventeen short stories, as well as the first black detective novel, *The Conjure-man Dies* (1932). His works excelled in "charting the physical and moral topography of Harlem during the renaissance period as no writer has ever done."9 And while the themes of his writings may not have been uncommon themes among his contemporaries, Fisher, more than any other, succeeded in establishing a happy medium between serious intensity and folk humor, often with satire.

Langston Hughes wrote:

*The wittiest of these New Negroes of Harlem whose tongue was flavored with the sharpest and saltiest humor was Rudolph Fisher.*10
Fisher believed it essential to show the broad range of Negro life and culture within the Negro community, not merely the black man lost in a white society, but also the one lost within his own community. His uniqueness lay in the manner in which he portrays the "human conditions" and human experiences" of black Americans--"he writes of them basically as people." Henry asserts that the theme of class consciousness is predominant in Fisher's works. Unfortunately, this class consciousness produced conflict within the Negro community. Fisher excelled in exploring the human problems of the lower and upper class blacks. Yet, he not only revealed the conflict that existed between these classes, he also interjected a stern admonition for the need to reconcile this conflict.

During an era when the so-called New Negro was coming into vogue—a Negro who was asserting his boldness and blackness at every turn—Fisher, braving constant criticism from his peers, endeavored to depict more than just the militant side of black life. He did not view this strategy as undermining the status of the "New Negro," or as contributing to the stereotypical views often held about blacks. Rather, he saw his writings as revealing that the everyday life of the Negro wasn't always engrossed in protest. He was interested foremost in portraying the everyday struggles of the Negro within his community.

The criticism against Fisher by his contemporaries was his failure to adhere to the New Negro concept. Alain Locke, the founder of the New Negro ideal, states that "The days of 'aunties,' 'uncles' and 'mammies' is equally gone." Although Fisher did use the "mammy"
characters in a number of his stories, he used them in the context of Locke's "New Negro" concept, showing them as the strength of the Negro family, not the weakness. Indeed, he seemed to have borrowed from Locke the very purpose of his writings:

The development of a more positive self-respect and self-reliance; the repudiation of social dependence, and then the gradual recovery from hyper-sensitiveness and "touchy" nerves.13

In fact, Fisher probably portrayed Locke's "New Negro" with as much sincerity and boldness as any of his contemporaries. When Locke stated that

The Negro to-day wishes to be known for what he is, even in his faults, and shortcomings, and scorns a craven and precarious survival at the price of seeming to be what he is not,14

he issued a challenge that few other than Fisher accepted. In portraying the everyday life of black Americans as they really struggled, without sensationalizing it, Fisher met Locke's challenge head-on.
INTRARACIAL THEMES IN FISHER'S SHORT FICTION

The advent of the Harlem Renaissance brought with it the emergence of the "New Negro," a Negro no longer acquiescent or accommodating. The "New Negro" was a bold and militant Negro, who sought a cohesive solidarity among the mass of black people. The strength of black people now lay in their being recognized as an indistinguishable unit—with one common thought, one common way of life, and one common goal. To a remote and racist white American society, the "New Negro" felt it imperative to convey this particular image of black people. Only the strength and most cohesive characteristics of blacks were to be revealed to the outside world. Such an approach, it was believed, promoted an image of respectability, which the "New Negro" so valiantly sought.

Although Rudolph Fisher felt the same sense of militancy, he viewed the strength of black people from a broader perspective than did most of his peers. To Fisher, the strength of a people lay in their ability to express (even to take pride in) their negative as well as positive qualities, for both were part of any and all races of people. The main focus of this thesis examines Fisher's exploration of the human experiences of his people—their jealousies, contempt, and personal prejudices for each other—not merely to uncover their weaknesses, but to show the parallel to the human experiences that all races encounter.

Fisher took pride in revealing the human side of his people. Many of his stories have as their main plot the prejudices within the black community. In those stories and sketches, Fisher revealed that black
people's everyday thoughts and aims were not mainly concentrated on protest against the white establishment. There was also another side—a sympathetic side. It was a side that struggled to survive, learn, and grow among their own people, and within their own framework.

"Ringtail" is a story that reveals one of several kinds of conflicts that existed within the black community. In this story, Fisher presents prejudice, not from an interracial perspective, but, ironically, an intra-racial one. He explores the antipathy that existed between American and foreign blacks.

The social conflict that pervaded Harlem during the 1920s and 1930s among American and foreign blacks was real and not merely a product of Fisher's imagination. "Nearly 25 percent of the Negroes in Harlem have come from British, French, Dutch, Portuguese, or Danish civilizations in the Caribbean region. These are referred to generally as West Indians."16 Cyril Sebastian Best, the central character in the story, is a British West Indian who has migrated to Harlem.

Smith's descriptions of West Indian Negroes is not unlike those in Fisher's story. According to Smith the West Indian Negro was "more serious," "more ambitious... Sometimes he considers himself as rather above the American Negro."17 In comparison, in "Ringtail," Red, an American Negro, says of foreign blacks:

They're too damn conceited. They're too aggressive. They talk funny. They look funny... An' they stick too close together an' get ahead too fast. ("Ringtail," p. 657)18
Foreign blacks, such as Cyril Best, are described as possessing excessive "self-esteem," "craftiness," "contentiousness," and "acquisitiveness" (p. 653).

Cyril had come to possess a negative general opinion of American Negroes:

And when two years of contact convinced him that the American Negro was characteristically neither self-esteemed nor crafty nor contentious nor acquisitive, in short was quite virtueless, his conscious superiority became downright contempt. (p. 653)

Fisher tells us that Cyril "became fond of denying that he was 'colored,' insisting that he was a British subject,' hence by implication unquestionably superior to any merely American negro" (p. 653).

It was this "superior-minded" attitude of Cyril that caused him to overreact to a harmless prank and shout obscenities to Punch Anderson, an American Negro, feeling that such a prank was demeaning to his British status.

Foreign blacks tended to be exclusive in their social involvement as well. Cyril Best mistakenly believes Hilda Vogel to be referring to him when she exclaims, "Who knows I may be in love," because like him, she, too, was foreign (p. 658). However, later he learns that it was not him she was referring to, but rather, ironically, Punch Anderson, an American black. Likewise, when Hilda tells Punch "I'm a Bermudan," she is surprised at his response and exclaims: "You're not prejudiced?" (p. 659).
American blacks, equally as exclusive, saw no need for the presence of foreign blacks in Harlem: "Hope Marcus Garvey takes 'em all back to Africa with him. He'll sure have a shipload" (p. 656). Smith describes the American Negro, ironically, as "sharing the white American's scorn for foreigners of any kind."19

Because he was the one to initiate the prank, Punch normally would have laughed off any comments directed at him; however, his prejudice for foreign blacks causes him to react violently to Cyril's profane outbursts, and he hits him. Yet, Punch's physical assault on Cyril was not so much in response to the obscenities shouted at him as it was a reaction to the type of person shouting them. His intense dislike for foreign blacks compelled him to attack Cyril and call him a "ring-tailed monkey-chaser," a derogatory term used by American blacks to refer to West Indian blacks (p. 654).

Smith's article also states that the American Negro had "a gift of humor and derisive laughter, which the West Indian often lacks."20 Cyril's inability to overlook Punch's prank is a prime example of his lack of humor. Red claims that "He can't help it--he's just made that way, like a spring" (p. 656).

Fisher did not attempt to bespeak the view of all Harlemites. All American blacks did not share Red's contempt for foreign blacks. Eight Ball, another American black reminds his friends:

You jigs are worse 'n ofays. You raise hell about prejudice and look at you--doin' just what you're raisin' hell over yourselves. (p. 656)
Perhaps Eight Ball serves as the conscience of the American Black.

By contrast, Cyril Best was in no way the average British West Indian--neither in character, philosophy, nor attitude. In fact,

There were British West Indians in Harlem ••• who frequently reproved their American friends for judging all West Indians by the Cyril Sebastian Best standard.

(p. 652)

Still, intraracial hostility did exist. "Ringtail" exposes the pathetic irony of intraracial prejudice--i.e., blacks ostracizing blacks. The story serves as a strong argument for Fisher's message being as crucial to the progress and advancement of black people as the militant message expressed by his contemporaries.

The theme of intraracial conflict also is evident in Fisher's first published short story, "The City of Refuge," although it is not the central theme of the story.

In a confrontation between Uggam, an American Black, and a West Indian black, Uggam refers to the latter as a "nigger." While the average American Negro would not have been bothered by the term, the West Indian replied: "Who you call nigger, mon? Ah hahve you understahn." To which Uggam replies: "Oh well, white folks den" (p. 191). It is obvious that the West Indian black saw himself above certain American black customs.

Fisher seems to be making a real, albeit ironic, point about the prejudice that existed against blacks--by blacks, even to the point of killing each other. "Any time y'can knife a monk [derogatory term for
a West Indian black] do it. There's too damn many of 'em here. They're an achin' pain," Uggam exclaims (p. 182). Uggam's attitude is similar to that of Red in "Ringtail" where Red comments "An' there's too many of 'em here" (p. 656).

The intraracial conflict among blacks was not exclusively American Negroes versus "foreign" Negroes. The conflict also existed among American Negroes themselves. Here it took on the form of color, status, lifestyle, or occupation.

While the main theme of "Blades of Steel" centers around violence, it also includes an emphasis on color. The plot of the story involves the conflict between the two characters Eight Ball and Dirty Cozzens. Fisher describes Cozzens in the following manner: "Heredity has managed to withhold his rightful share of pigment, even from his hair, which was pale buff." Hence "his complexion has won him the nickname, 'Dirty Yaller.'" Eight Ball, by contrast, got his name because his skin was "as dark as it is possible for skin to be." The author tells us "the two make a striking contrast" (p. 184).

While Fisher does not belabor the issue of skin color throughout the story, the strong reference to it is nonetheless evident. "I can't stand anything yellow," exclaims Eight Ball's girlfriend, Effie, referring to Dirty Cozzens (p. 188).

There is also a line of demarcation in social topography. This geographic division between upper and lower class blacks served to create the same conflict within the black community that existed between the black community and white community, and for the same reason.
Lenox Avenue is for the most part the boulevard of the unperfumed—"rats" that they are often termed. But Seventh Avenue is the promenade of high-toned "dicties" and shrivers. It breathes a superior atmosphere, sings superior songs, laughs a superior laugh. (p. 183)

Fisher describes the avenues as "two highways, frontiers of the opposed extremes of dark-skinned social life" (p. 183).

While "Blades of Steel" presents color consciousness in a more subtle manner, "High Yaller" confronts the matter in a more direct way. The story serves as a classic example of the tragic mulatto theme. It culminates with the sad and tragic escape from reality of a young black girl who succumbs not only to the prejudice of those around her, but also to her own prejudices, which her skin color has fostered.

Evelyn Brown, the central character of the story, is so light that she is sometimes mistaken for a white woman. Indeed, her initial reaction to the behavior of dark-skinned blacks often seems to be that of a white:

Looking down from a balcony on that dark mass of heads, close together as buckshots, Evelyn Brown wondered how they all managed to enjoy it. (p. 281)

Fisher tells us that "the dance floor sank beneath a sounding flood of dark-skinned people"; however, while these people showed their approval with "an explosion of applause," Evelyn "hated it" (p. 281).

Color often divided the black community. A light-complexion was often associated with upper class blacks, with their superior-minded attitude, while darker skin was more closely associated with the lower
class blacks. This conflict between dickties and rats influenced the overall attitude of dark-skinned blacks concerning light-complexioned blacks within the lower class as well as outside of it.

Thus, Evelyn Brown was symbolic of a constantly recurring conflict within the black community--i.e., color cliques and social pressures. Her preference for associating with light-complexioned blacks serves to confirm the belief among dark-skinned blacks of the superior-minded attitudes of these "mulattoes":

Evelyn Brown?--Hmph!--got yellow fever--I know better--color struck, I tell you--girls she goes around with--all lily whites--even the fellows--Mac to-day--pass for white anywhere. (p. 281)

Many dark-skinned blacks held the belief that some member of the family tree of all light-complexioned blacks was white. Two characters in the story converse about Evelyn Brown:

"Daddy was white, so I understand!"
"Huh. An' her mammy, too, mos' likely. 'At's de way dese rich white folks, do. Comes a wile oat dey doan want, dey ups an' gives it to one de servants to adopt."
"Oh, I dunno. . . ."
"... Seem like to me--dey's a white man in de woodpile some wha'." (p. 284)

Gunnar Myrdal tells us:

There is even some tendency to regard a light skin as a badge of undesirable illegitimacy. This negative attitude was often caused by the belief that light skin resulted from bad biological effects to miscegenation.21
In one scene, Jay and Evelyn go to a Harlem cabaret, where Evelyn is mistaken for a white woman, and refused service by a dark-skinned waiter. "I'm not sure but--I believe that bird thinks you're ofay," Jay tells Evelyn (p. 285). This incident served further to show just how distant these two groups had become and how little they actually know about each other.

Even Jay, confronted by his own subconscious, expresses the same general opinion that dark-skinned blacks held toward light-complexioned blacks: "Don't you get to liking Evelyn, see. She's too damned white" (p. 34). The tragic consequences of this color conflict created a social pressure that becomes too great for Evelyn to bear, and she ultimately gives up on her own people and crosses the color line. "I think she's jumped out of Harlem," Jimmy MacLeod tells her friend Jay. And sadly Jay concludes, "That girl was white--as white as anybody could be" (p. 37).

The intraracial conflict concerning color was deeply ingrained within the black community. It was a situation that could erupt and could have genuinely tragic consequences. "High Yaller" warns the black community of a need for greater unity to avert greater tragedy, possibly resulting in many Evelyn Browns deserting the black community.

In "The Promised Land," Fisher presents another type of intraracial conflict, one caused by economic disparity. The conflict centers around Sam and Wesley, two cousins, and their personal jealousies and competitive envy, induced by their new urban environment. The author tells us that: "These two boys ... until they had come to New York, had
been equally fond of each other" (p. 38). They had been lured north by the Great Migration and the economic opportunities it presumably promised.

Sam persevered and found some modest economic security, becoming a mechanic and earning sixty dollars a week. Wesley, by contrast, was less patient, and not wishing to be controlled by others, became self-employed, washing windows at fifteen cents a window. This economic disparity in the occupations of the two cousins created a hostile competition that led to their estranged behavior.

The conflict surfaced over their mutual attraction to a city girl named Ellie. "Ellie? Ellie yo' gal? What business you got wid a gal? You could n' buy a gal coffee 'n' a san'wich," Sam tells Wesley (p. 39). Wesley responds, "'F I ketch you messin' roun' Ellie, I'm sho go'n turn yo' damper down" (p. 39). Later, only the intervention of their grandmother, Mammy, averts a physical confrontation between the two cousins over Ellie.

The nature of this conflict stems from the ill effects of "city-breeding." While the city offered more opportunities, it also bred unhealthy competition. The competitive lifestyle of the city caused strife within the black community on all levels. The "Promised Land" makes it clear that it is the urban environment that creates this conflict: "So Harlem . . . had furnished them thus with taunts that had not been possible back home" (p. 39). Even Mammy, herself, muses: "to accustom yourself to the philosophy of the metropolis, to its ruthless opportunism--that is hard" (p. 40).
For these two cousins, the conflict led to a tragic conclusion. In an argument over Ellie, Sam accidentally causes Wesley to fall to his death. In that way, Fisher paints an alarming picture of the more tragic consequences of intraracial conflict, whether it be of color, or in this particular story, because of love and money and the competition for both.

In "Fire by Night," Fisher again explores the intraracial hostility that existed between the lower and upper classes within the black community. The story opens with the geographic "swift change of complexion" as one crosses Lenox Avenue from the white section into the black section. Yet, the author tells us that this change is "more than merely a change of color--for these sudden dark faces belong not to Negroes simply, but a distinct group of Negroes" (p. 64).

In his study of the Negro intraclass structure, Gunnar Myrdal observed of the lower class: "Aggression and violence are neither rare nor censored much by community disapproval." Fisher, likewise, describes the lower class blacks as "bad," possessing a violent nature. They are the "heirs" of those "skilled with pistols and knives and fists" who direct their violence, in part, toward the "dickties--the high-toned hated ones" (p. 64).

Fisher paints a very dismal picture of the lower class section. Upon entering into this section, the author tells us that it is an atmosphere of "hopeless calamity," "a tameless corner," and a "quivering wilderness" (p. 64). The imagery is clearly one of violence: "Ugly, cheap little shops attack it," "trucks crush blindly, brutally over it,"
and "sewer-mouths gape like wounds in its back" (p. 64).

The difference between the two social extremes is clearly evident in occupational status and social activities. The author describes the patrons of the lower class cabarets as "mostly young men, war vets, consciously hard, the mostly worldly-wise and the most heedless Negroes on earth" (p. 65). In contrast, through one lower class character the author describes the white collar patrons of an average upper class dance:

Dis is a dickty dance. Rich uppity boogies. Plenty bucks. Doctors, lawyers, and undertakers, what I mean. With nothin' but sweet an' pretty pinks. . . . Big-time niggers, see. (p. 99)

The story shows the possible consequences when lower class blacks attempt to participate in upper class social functions. When three lower class blacks attempt to enter an upper class dance without an invitation, a fight erupts. Consequently, one lower class black who works at the dickty dance, runs back to the cabaret in the lower class section of town and tells them:

Gravy, you boogies! Yassuh! Le's go! Gravy an' I doan mean maybe! . . . Dat dickty dance what I'm checkin' coats fuh at d' New Casino is 'bout to break up in a row. . . . Rich niggers, packed up fo' cabaret parties . . . all y' got to do is mix in an' grab it. Dey's fat rolls cryin' fo' a home! (p. 67)

The ensuing fight scene shows the lower class blacks venting their resentment on upper class blacks. Yet, their resentment was not without ambivalence. On the one hand, they wanted the wealth of the upper class blacks, as evidenced by their looting, and their elitism, as their trying
to enter in the first place indicates. But on the other hand, they did not want their characteristics. "Dickties dance well, but fight poorly," one lower class black exclaims (p. 100). Indeed, the rift between the two classes seemed irreparable. As Fisher stated at the outset of this story, the feeling that lower class blacks possessed for their upper class counterparts was one of hate, not above violence.

However, Fisher did not just show the problem that existed in the Negro community, he also provided a solution, as well. These two social extremes were lacking a common ground upon which to seek a compromise. Fisher provides this "common ground." In doing so, he relies on the black man's strong religious heritage: "This middle ground... Harlem's one tradition, the church, has its firmest foundation; and most of the remnant that still fears God will be found..." (p. 67).

If the "New Negro" was to grow and flourish in creative thought, he must first mend the rift that existed within his own community, before venturing out to mend the rift that separated the races.

The church has always been the spiritual foundation of the black man in America. Historically, it has been his source of inspiration. In Negro Harlem, during the 1920s and 1930s, the church was the central institutional stronghold—that place which provided the Negro community some source of common ground. However, E. Franklin Frazier discovered:

The migrations of Negroes to northern cities affected the character of their churches as well as other phases of their life. (p. 352)23

He also asserted that:
The religious behavior of the Negro and the character of his church organizations have been shaped throughout their development by white patterns as well as the social and cultural forces within the more or less isolated social world of the Negro.24

Rudolph Fisher examined this very stronghold of the black community and discovered probably the most crucial of conflicts, and probably the one that serves as a catalyst to all other conflicts--disharmony within the church. He first wrote of the struggles of the transplanted southern church in "The South Lingers On" (a story consisting of five sketches). The first sketch centers around Ezekiel Taylor, a southern minister called up north to carry on the southern gospel of the old time religion. As he walked down the streets of Negro Harlem looking for the church, he sees how the city has divided the black community and changed its Christian values. He reflects on how the young men were "brought up from infancy in his little Southern church." Yet, now as he looks around him he sees "children turned into mockers ... who knew not even the simplest of the commandments" (p. 644).

As the Baptist church was divided so was the Negro community divided. Those who considered themselves of upper class status, generally, left the Baptist church and joined congregations which emulated the white churches. This served to intensify the hostility that constantly divided lower class and upper class blacks. Frazier discovered:

In northern cities, as in the South, most upper-class persons form the majority of the comparatively small congregations of the Episcopal, Presbyterian, Congregational churches. The ministers in these churches are educated men and their sermons are generally of a scholarly
character... But in the numerous smaller Baptist and Methodist churches the church-centered elements of the lower class are concentrated.

The diversified lifestyle and oftimes corruptive influences of the city divided the church. Many blacks felt compelled to readjust their religious values to accommodate the social and economic demands of the city. In "The Backslider," Fisher makes it clear that the conflict that plagues the church is caused by the new urban environment and its philosophies.

Ebenezer Grimes, the central character, about to be cast out of his church for twice visiting a cabaret, reflects on the cause of his impending fate:

Eben contrasted himself—brought up down home, in church from infancy; Sunday-school as far back as he could recall; finally conversion and baptism, years of faithful attendance; but now, in New York, instead of advancing to high office, miserably falling from grace, a sinful backslider. (p. 16)

Deacon Crutchfield, in searching for the appropriate message with which to condemn Ebenezer, "turns too many pages" (p. 16). This searching symbolized the uncertainty with which the southern worshipper sought answers to the threats of their urban surroundings.

Upon returning to the cabaret, Ebenezer talks with Lil, the club entertainer, who asks what's troubling him. When Ebenezer tells her what has happened and why, she calls his church members hypocrites. Then she inquires, "What kind of a church is this?" (p. 102). When Ebenezer answers "Baptist," she tells him to "find another kind of
church, see? One that's not so tight--one with a broader mind" (p. 102). She suggests to him that he change to "Episcopalian or Utilitarian or something. They don't care what you do" (p. 102).

This was indeed a crucial conflict within the Negro community, inasmuch as the church was the common ground of all the diversified human elements that existed within the Negro community: "If the Lord dwelt anywhere in Negro Harlem, surely, he dwelt in this place" (p. 16). Should it become divided and weakened, then the unity of the Negro community would be in jeopardy. Fisher showed the detrimental effect that the city had on the church, when Senior Deacon Crutchfield is arrested for gambling. Upon witnessing his arrest, Ebenezer is relieved of his guilt feeling. "'Twas jess dem narrer-minded niggers," he exclaims (p. 104).

Each such conflict led to the defection of church members to seek a church with a more liberal perspective. Convinced that the members of his church are too narrow-minded, with their southern values, Ebenezer looks up to find himself in front of St. Augustine, a Catholic church, and enters.

"The Backslider" does not leave the reader with a positive feeling about the unity within the Negro church. Instead, here Fisher abandons his light, witty touch, to convey a very serious message. The Negro church was being threatened as the stronghold of the Negro community. Indeed, there was a grave need for the Negro church to maintain its unity and adhere to its traditional values. In truth, the downfall of the Negro church meant the downfall of the Negro community.
Although Fisher conveyed the theme of "Miss Cynthie" from a light and humorous perspective, the story nonetheless contains a serious message. The Great Migration brought the Southern Negro many new challenges in the North. Southern values and philosophies often clashed with the new urban values. In this story, the values between generations are tested. This conflict also threatened the Negro community. David, the grandson of Miss Cynthie, brings his grandmother North to his place of business and lets her see him performing his trade. He feels that it would be easier for her to accept what he does if she sees for herself. However, the conflict comes in Miss Cynthie's idea of what a respectable job is and her belief that her grandson is in one of those professions. "I tole him 'fo' he left home," she tells the baggage clerk, "be a preacher or a doctor... And if you don' get that fur, be a undertaker" (p. 4). She felt that those occupations would "Keep you acquainted with the house of the Lord" (p. 4).

David's girlfriend, Ruth, warns him: "Think of the shock she's going to get--at her age. . . . She's got the same ideas as all old folks" (p. 9). Surely enough, when Miss Cynthie sees David dancing on stage, her reaction is one of "surpassing shock" and "unbelief" (p. 12). This negative reaction of Miss Cynthie was due to her traditional southern values which conflicted with David's modern, urban values. She sees her grandson as having "turned tool of the devil, disciple of lust, unholy prince among sinners" (p. 12). The author tells us: "To her, the theatre had always been the antithesis of the church. As the one was the refuge of righteousness, so the other was the stronghold of
transgression" (p. 11).

Although Fisher reconciles the conflict of values between the generations in "Miss Cynthie," with her eventual acceptance of her grandson's profession as a dancer in the theatre, still this conflict continued in and did much to divide the Negro community. The younger blacks were more willing to adapt to city lifestyles and values than were the older, and more traditional blacks. In "The South Lingers On," the more somber effects of this conflict are revealed. In one sketch, in particular, young Jutie sneaks out to join her boyfriend at the cabarets, despite her grandmother's wishes that she not go out so late or visit such places. "Grandmother was such a nuisance with her old fogeyisms," she muses to herself ("The South Lingers On," p. 646). By contrast, her grandmother had her own ideas about Jutie's young ideology: "It was Harlem--those brazen women with whom Jutie sewed, who swore and shimmied and laughed at the suggestion of going to church" (p. 646). The sketch ends with her grandmother contemplating, through tear-filled eyes "Harlem, this city of Satan. It was Harlem that had changed Jutie" (p. 646). Ultimately, she kneels by her bed to "pray to God in heaven for Jutie's lost soul" (p. 646).

Here we see the theme of the "generation gap" presented from a more serious perspective than depicted in "Miss Cynthie," where the differences in values caused no harmful consequences. "The South Lingers On," reveals the more solemn consequences that result when northern and southern values between the old and young clash in the urban Negro community.
Fisher's *The Walls of Jericho* includes a number of themes that depict many of the problems faced by the newly-transplanted southern blacks. Although they fled the South to be rid of prejudice, ironically those same prejudices obstructed themselves in the North. Most ironic of all was the fact that the prejudice did not come from a hostile and racist white society; it also came from within the black community itself. Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s provided Fisher with a classic example of the intraracial conflict that plagued the Negro community.

In *The Negro in the United States*, E. Franklin Frazier observed:

*It is in the large Negro Communities in northern cities that a complex class structure based upon occupation and income as well as social distinctions is emerging.*

Fisher's *The Walls of Jericho* explores this complex structure and the social extremes it produced. At one end were "dickties"—the high-toned and well-to-do blacks—and at the other end, the "rats," defined by Fisher as being "the very antithesis of the dickties" ("Glossary"). The dickty section of Harlem was described as containing "proud streets" while the rat section was the "backwoods—a city jungle ... peopled largely by untamed creatures that live and die for the moment only" (p. 4). The fact that these two classes chose not to recognize each other is indicated at the beginning of the story. The opening lines tell us that "Despite the objectives of the Dickties, who prefer
to ignore the existence of the so-called rats, it is of interest to consider Henry Patmore's Pool Parlor on Fifth Avenue in New York" (p. 1).

Not only did the rats have the feeling of being ignored by the dickties, but they also believed that the dickties were deserting the black community. Fred Merrit, a black lawyer, who has an extremely light complexion, is about to move into a white neighborhood—a neighborhood that is unaware that he is black. In a discussion between Jinx and Bubber, two lower class Harlemites, concerning Merrit's move, Jinx exclaims, "Hyeh's a dickty tryin' his damnedest to be fay--like all d'other dickties" (p. 8). Throughout the novel Fisher's lower class characters emphasize their opinion that the average dickty considered himself more white than black. Bubber says of Merrit: "Throws big parties and raises hell jus like d'fays" (p. 49).

There was as little social contact between rat and dickty as there was between black and white. When the two did interact, it was not without apprehension and reluctance. When Shine, a lower class black, abruptly changes the nature of his conversation with Merrit, Fisher explains Shine's abrupt tone: "And because he disliked dickties and wanted no talk with any one of them, he changed the subject rudely" (p. 49).

Surprisingly, Merrit, although upper class, is very down-to-earth and cordial. This atypical attitude of a dickty toward the three—Jinx, Buber, and Shine—causes Shine to wonder: "What manner of dickty was this? He greeted you like an equal..." Shine concludes: "If this bird wasn't a dickty he'd be o.k." Yet he maintains his contempt for dickties by reasserting "there never was a dickty worth a damn" (p. 51).
Distinctions according to occupations also existed within the Negro community. Frazier tells us that "Negroes with superior education and in certain occupational and income groups have achieved an upper class status within the segregated Negro world." Consequently, occupation tended to influence each class's social environment. The story tells us that at the upper class clubs, "you would find chiefly doctors, lawyers, and undertakers," while at the lower class clubs you find "bootleggers, big-time gamblers, tonsorial artists, chauffeurs, and headwaiters" (p. 71). Fisher states that while anyone could attend any of those social gatherings, at each "the crowd somehow remains in large measure distinct and characteristic" (p. 71).

Even at the General Improvement Association's Annual Costume Ball where the guests range from "the rattiest rat to the dickliest dickty" (p. 70) social barriers remain. The seating arrangement was deliberate. There was a low terrace and an upper tier of boxes. Those on the terrace "were either just ordinary respectable people or rats," while "those who mounted the stairs and crowded into or about the boxes . . . were dickties and fays" (p. 72). Only on the dance floor did the groups mix. Even Patmore, one of the more self-assured lower class blacks, felt that "it would be bad business tonight to mount the stairs and try to mingle with his many liquor patrons in the boxes" (p. 77). In addition, even the economic disparity between the two groups is easily evident at the Ball: "Of the people downstairs, a few of the girls wore 'inexpensive costumes,' but of the dickties, the women were 'all' extravagantly dressed" (p. 73).
Throughout the novel, the attitude the rats expressed toward dickties was consistently negative, so much so that even when a dickty conveyed a warm and friendly attitude, the rats remained suspect. In the scene where Shine, Jinx, and Bubber move Merrit's furniture into his new house, and Merrit greets them very cordially upon their arrival, the author tells us that "all three stared," for such cordiality in a dickty was nothing short of astonishing, and it put the suspicious workers immediately on guard" (p. 48).

Conflicts in behavior and lifestyles often resulted from contrasting philosophies. While the dickties discussed ways of integrating into white society, the rats, by contrast, had a more pessimistic view—one more segregated in nature. In discussing Fred Merrit's move into a white neighborhood, Jinx tells his partner Bubber, "I don't think no shine's got no business bustin' into no fay neighborhood" (p. 7).

Intraracial conflict within the black community stemmed from many sources. While Jinx's dislike of upper class blacks was general in nature, another lower class black, Henry Patmore's hostility, by contrast, was for personal reasons—i.e., revenge. Five years earlier, Patmore had hit a pedestrian while driving. Merrit, a lawyer, threatened Patmore with a damage suit, unless he settled out of court for $10,000. Now, with Merrit moving into a white neighborhood, Patmore seized the opportunity for revenge. Drunk and shooting off his mouth, while engaged in a card game, Patmore confesses: "Five years ago, I tell y' this dickty--dickty, mind y'--put it on me, see... Cost me damn near all I had... Hah, thought I'd forgot it, see?" (p. 267).
Patmore sets fire to Merrit's home knowing that Merrit's white neighbors will be blamed. Fisher, who never fails to point out the irony of any intraracial conflict, shows the pathetic irony of Merrit's fate. Upon discovering that it was Patmore, and not his white neighbors who had burned his house, Merrit exclaims: "Can you imagine it? A Negro--using white prejudice to cover what he wanted to do..." (p. 279).

The line of demarcation between upper class and lower class pervaded virtually every aspect of the Negro community. Ironically, "rats" tended to ostracize dickties, as well as whites. In particular, lower class blacks did not like upper class blacks socializing among their ranks. Both Merrit and Shine are attracted to Linda, the black maid who works for Merrit's neighbor. However, Shine becomes disturbed by Merrit's interest in Linda. His reaction bears a tone of jealousy over what he regards as Merrit's trespassing: "Figgerin' on a jive already--the dog-gone dickty hound. Why the hell dickties can't stick to their own women 'thout messin' around honest workin' girls" (p. 54).

Perhaps Fisher is exposing still another reason for the rift between the social classes. Shine refers to Linda as an "honest" workin' girl, implying that upper class work values may be less than honest, probably because of their less than honorable tactics in trying to win favor in white society.

Fisher also explored the intraracial conflict from the upper class perspective, revealing some of their feelings and obstacles. While the lower class "rats" generally talked about their dislike for the
"dickties" and the "fays," and exhibited a belief that theirs was a permanent state of segregation, the upper class blacks' conversation indicated a more integrationist tone.

At the annual G.I.A. Ball, several dickties gossip about Merrit's move to a white neighborhood. Their conversation reveals three philosophies of upper class thought. J. Pennington Potter, the President of this dickty club asserts: "Progress is by evolution, not revolution. This Negro colony should extend itself naturally and gradually--not by violence and bloodshed." "The extension of territory by violence and bloodshed strikes me as natural enough," replies Merrit (p. 36). Later, a third dickty, Todd Bruce asserts: "Nowadays, we grow by--well--a sort of passive conquest. The fays move out, and the jigs are so close no more fays will move in" (p. 43).

Perhaps we should explore a very significant element affecting the differences in philosophies between the two classes concerning the fate of the Negro race--physical features.

Gunnar Myrdal discovered that physical features affected both black and white attitudes on integration and segregation. His study revealed that in white society "blackness of skin remained undesirable and even took on an association of badness." By contrast, "a Negro with light skin and European features has in the North an advantage with white people when competing for jobs available for Negroes" (p. 697).28

Jinx is so dark that he is described as "bordering on the invisible" (p. 6). Patmore, another lower class black, is described as having "tan skin" (p. 76), while Shine was a "bronze" dark brown (p. 13). By
contrast, Fred Merrit was described as "fair as the northernmost Nordic" (p. 38). Todd Bruce "too was fair" with skin "uniformly pallid," and "his face was lean, his features prominent severe ... the nose large and narrow, the chin advancing, the mouth wide, straight, and 'thin-lipped'" (p. 40).

In the novel, we can see how this contrast in physical features influenced each group's opinions as to where their social and economic position existed in society. The light-complexioned blacks were more accepted by whites than were darker-skinned blacks. The latter tended to isolate themselves from both upper class blacks and whites. At the G.I.A. Costume Ball, the seating arrangement placed "Ordinary Negroes and rats below; dickties and fays above. ... Somehow, undeniably a predominance of darker skins below, and as undeniably, of fairer skins above" (p. 74).

The fact that "dickties" socialized with the whites instead of their darker lower class brothers clearly indicated the serious conflict that existed within the Negro community. In fact, the conflict was raised to such a pathetic irony that there were dickties who were sometimes mistaken for whites and threatened by their darker brothers. Todd Bruce and Fred Merrit relate similar experiences:

"One night a bunch of bad jigs--like these over on Fifth Avenue now--mistook me for a fay--and I had a devil of a time proving I was a Negro, too!" "I had the same experience," added Fred Merrit, "you should've seen me exhibiting my kinky head." (p. 41)
Intraracial conflict between upper class and lower class blacks was real. Even more important, Fisher was trying to tell the black community that it was not necessary. Indeed, how could the "New Negro" hope to establish himself and be heard and noticed when he was a divided entity. Underneath the story's satire and wit is a very serious message concerning the obstacles the black community had to overcome before it could tackle the mainstream of society.
CONCLUSION

In *The Walls of Jericho*, as well as his short stories, Rudolph Fisher exposed the internal problems of the Negro community. While his contemporaries might have frowned upon his exposing the weaknesses of the black community, Fisher saw it as a vital part of understanding Black American life, as well as an important contribution to Negro literature and American literature. Black people were human, too. While they did struggle for equality and opportunity in a society that constantly strove to ostracize them, they also led human lives and encountered human situations--hate, jealousy, and competition. Ironically, Fisher presents a candid picture of blacks who struggle among their own people against the very same prejudices they might encounter outside the Negro community.

Yet, Fisher did more than describe the division within the Negro community; he also provided, through his light and witty touch, and skillful use of irony, an ethical solution to achieve better unity within the Negro community, and create an atmosphere of hope for reconciling these problems.

In his very first short story, "The City of Refuge," Fisher explores two forms of intraracial conflict within the Negro community--the conflict between urban blacks and newly adjusting southern blacks, and that between American born blacks and newly migrated West Indian blacks.

King Solomon Gillis, a newly arrived southern black falls prey to a slick Harlemite. Gillis reminds himself, " Didn't have to come to
Harlem to git cheated. Plenty o' dat wha' I come fum'" (p. 181). Later when Uggams, a Harlemite, condemns foreign blacks, Gillis reminds him, "Jess de way white folks feels 'bout niggers" (p. 182).

Robert Bone discussed Fisher's use of the pastoral mode in many of his works. Despite criticism, Fisher's primary aim was not to expose the Negro community, but, as Bone tells us, "to exorcise the demons of disruption and cement the ties of racial solidarity." Throughout Fisher's works we find evidence of this reconciling theme.

In "Ringtail," hostility exists between American born blacks and British West Indian blacks. Yet, the irony of this prejudice is candidly revealed: "You jigs are worse 'n ofays. You raise hell about prejudice and look at you--doin' just what you're raisin' hell over yourselves," the character Eight-ball says (p. 656).

"Blades of Steel" is a story of violence within the Negro community. Still Fisher finds a way to reconcile the division that breeds this violence:

Accordingly, 135th Street is the heart and soul of black Harlem; it is 'common ground,' the natural scene of unusual contact, a region that disregards class. It neutralizes, equilibrates, binds, rescues union out of diversity (p. 183).

Similar to "Blades of Steel," "Fire by Night" is also a story of violence within the Negro community. The author tells us that the lower class rats "directed their violence toward the high-toned hated ones" (p. 67). In this story, the Negro community is divided geographically and socially. Yet, Fisher offers a common, "middle ground": "Here
Harlem's one tradition, the church, has its firmest foundation; and most of the remnants that still fear God will be found in these mountains of flats" (p. 67).

"The Backslider" and "The South Lingers On," expose the conflict within the very stronghold of the Negro community--the Negro church. These stories are more somber in tone, as Fisher spared his light and witty touch, alluding to the serious nature of this conflict. Indeed, religion was a strong heritage among the Negro people. Religious rifts, therefore, meant the division of the Negro community, as well. Thus, the conflict between southern values and northern, urban values dominate these stories. Both explore the effects of city lifestyle in altering the religious practices of those within the Negro church. In an attempt to reconcile the factions within the Negro church, Fisher shows the danger of straying too far away from the old-fashioned values. In addition, he shows the strength of that old-time religion, which not even the corruption of the city can destroy. "Dam' 'f I know what it is . . . but--hell--it just sort of--gets me--" says one long-time Harlemite ("The South Lingers On," p. 647).

Religion also serves as the reconciling vehicle in "The Promised Land," where two cousins have been torn apart by the temptations of the north. "'Hit's sin. Dat's whut 'tis--sin. My people done fo'got day God, grabbin after money," Mammy laments (p. 41).

In "High Yaller," the conflict centers on color and the social prejudices it breeds. Evelyn Brown, the tragic mulatto in the story associates with fair-complexioned blacks, exclusively. Her stark
realization of this fact is also black America's realization of it:

But I can't just shut myself away from everyone who happens to be a little darker than I am. . . . I'm just drawing the color-line, and that wouldn't be right. (p. 35)

Fisher makes it clear that both sides must reach out to each other. While Evelyn Brown realizes her prejudice, the dark-skinned blacks must realize their alienation of light-complexioned blacks. "Can you imagine what it's like to be colored and look white," she asks her friend Jay (p. 282). The reconciliation of this conflict will come about when dark-skinned blacks, too, come to a realization. In the case of Evelyn Brown, it is that not all light-skinned blacks considered themselves superior. "I wish I looked Mayme (a dark-skinned black). . . . Why doesn't someone learn how to turn light skins dark?" she cries (p. 282).

The Walls of Jericho is an admixture of all the selective themes in Fisher's short stories, particularly class consciousness. In this novel, the hostility between lower class and upper class is constantly emphasized. Yet, at the closing of the novel, the author presents what can be called a race proposition: Fred Merrit, upper class, and Joshua "Shine" Jones, lower class "drank, rat and dickty, as equals" (p. 282). This "race proposition" is a reconciling message that Fisher sends out to the entire black community:

What kind of a social structure can anybody have with nothing but the extremes--bootblacks on one end and doctors on the other. Nothing in between. (p. 282-83)
ENDNOTES


2 Ross, p. 191.


5 Huggins, p. 18.

6 Huggins, p. 5.

7 Huggins, p. 59.


13 Locke, p. 10.

14 Locke, p. 11.

15 Only a few scholars have attempted any kind of analysis of Rudolph Fisher's fiction. (Possibly the most comprehensive works about him are the unpublished thesis by Eleanor Claudine Queen, "A Study of Rudolph Fisher's Prose Fiction" [Howard University, 1971], and the unpublished dissertation by Souleymane Seydi, "Rudolph Fisher: The Man and His Work" [Rennes, France, 1977]. Neither of those works are used in
this paper; only published sources are referred to.) While most critics make the reader "aware" of the intraracial conflict in Fisher's fiction, few provide any detailed analysis of this theme. At best, some do point out a few distinctive aspects of Fisher's works. In his article, "Dicties and Shines," Amritjit Singh, The Novels of the Harlem Renaissance, [University Park, Penn.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976], pp. 83-88 explores the issue of walls within the Negro community, which he feels are the major source of conflict. John McCluskey ("Aim High and Go Straight: The Grandmother Figure in the Short Fiction of Rudolph Fisher," BALF [1982], pp. 55-59) examines the conflict within the Negro community through the eyes of the grandmother figure, who represents not only the conflict between generations, but also between northern and southern values. Meanwhile, Robert Bone ("The Versions of Pastoral," in Down Home [New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1975], pp. 150-59) explores Fisher's use of pastoral language in depicting the conflict that existed within the Negro community, asserting that a pastoral setting provides an atmosphere of reconciliation. Still other critics, such as Leonard J. Deutsch ("The Streets of Harlem: The Short Stories of Rudolph Fisher," Phylon, 40 [1979], 159-71) and Henry Louis Oliver ("Rudolph Fisher: An Evaluation," Crisis, 78, No. 5 [July 1971], 149-54) see the conflict more as an individual struggle than an intraclass conflict. Although Deutsch does discuss the hostility among the social classes in the Negro community (in "Fire by Night") still he does not explore the nature of this conflict. At best, these critics make the reader conscious of the conflict that existed within the black community between the various colors and classes of blacks, but do little more than that.


17 Smith, p. 128.

18 References to Fisher's stories and novels are cited parenthetically in the text of this paper. Full citation of each work is given in the bibliography.

19 Smith, p. 128.

20 Smith, p. 129.


22 Myrdal, p. 701.

24 Frazier, p. 335.


26 Frazier, p. 289.

27 Frazier, p. 292.

28 Myrdal, p. 697.

29 Bone, p. 154.
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