

Minstrel Shows and the Jim Crow Character

From the 1830s to the early 1900s minstrel shows were very popular musical stage shows. In minstrel shows white performers 'blackened up', that is dressed up as African Americans by blackening their faces with paint or shoe polish, exaggerated their lips with red or white make-up, wore woolly wigs and ragged clothes, and spoke an exaggerated imitation of African-American English. The skits and songs satirized blacks as easy-going, ignorant and lazy for the amusement of white audiences.

White actor Thomas Rice (1808-1860) is known as the father of minstrels. Rice performed a very popular song-and-dance act in which he played a character named Jim Crow modelled on a former slave. Later, the laws that segregated African Americans and white Americans from the 1870s-1960s became known as Jim Crow laws.

MINSTREL SHOWS

In class, do the following:

1. Search YouTube for 'Jim Crow minstrels' and check out some of the hits and suggestions.
Discuss what type of racial stereotypes you notice in these shows.
2. Watch the 1941 Universal Pictures cartoon "Scrub Me Mama with a Boogie Beat".
 - A. Describe the stereotypes of African Americans as they are presented in this cartoon.
 - B. How does the choice of music help support the stereotypes?
3. Also Walt Disney's famous cartoon about the elephant Dumbo contains a reference to minstrel shows. Watch the song "When I See An Elephant Fly" on YouTube.
 - A. Why are the birds crows?
 - B. What is the significance of using the cartoon as a medium? Why not real characters?
 - C. Over the years, many people have debated whether or not this song is politically correct. Do you find the song racist or stereotypical? Why/why not?
4. Today, "Scrub Me Mama with a Boogie Beat" is obviously far from politically correct. In the US of the 1940s it was, however, regarded as a rather mainstream cartoon – mainstream enough to be shown in movie theaters. What does this show about moral values and attitudes in American society in the 1940s?
5. Historians often warn against judging the past. Under what circumstances can we criticize people from the past?



Poster for a minstrel show, 1900



Langston Hughes, 1942

Langston Hughes: Merry-Go-Round

1942

James Mercer Langston Hughes (1902-1967) was one of the most cherished African-American writers of his time. Hughes grew up in the American Midwest. His literary output is inspired by the African-American spirit of Harlem, New York as well as by his travels to Mexico and Africa. Hughes cherished his title of "Poet Laureate of the Negro Race" which was bestowed on him by readers and other writers for his versatility and skill as well as for being the founder of modern African-American literature. Much of his writing deals with institutional racism in the American South as well as latent racism in the North.

PRE-READING

In pairs/small groups, read through the examples of authentic Jim Crow laws below and discuss the following:

1. Do any of the laws surprise you or make an impression on you? If yes, which ones and why?
2. How do you imagine that African Americans understood their role in American society in this period of time in American history?

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Jim Crow Laws (1876-1965) collected by the Smithsonian Institute

"It shall be unlawful for a negro and white person to play together or in company with each other in any game of cards or dice, dominoes or checkers."
Birmingham, Alabama, 1930

"It shall be unlawful for any white prisoner to be handcuffed or otherwise chained or tied to a negro prisoner."
Arkansas, 1903

"No colored barber shall serve as a barber to white women or girls."
Atlanta, Georgia, 1926

"Marriages are void when one party is a white person and the other is possessed of one-eighth or more negro, Japanese, or Chinese blood."
Nebraska, 1911

"Any person ... presenting for public acceptance or general information, arguments or suggestions in favor of social equality or of intermarriage between whites and negroes shall be guilty of a misdemeanor and subject to a fine not exceeding five hundred dollars or imprisonment not exceeding six months or both fine and imprisonment in the discretion of the court."
Mississippi, 1920

"Separate free schools shall be established for the education of children of African descent; and it shall be unlawful for any colored child to attend any white school, or any white child to attend a colored school."
Missouri, 1929

be got with child · gravid
 penitentiary (sb.) fængsel
 street railroad sporvogn
 accommodations pladser
 (i togvognene)
 provide tilvejebringe
 partition inddeling
 corporate commission of-
 fentlig tilsynsmyndighed
 vest (vb.) overdrage
 booth telefonboks
 patron (sb.) bruger

kunde
 gæst

"Any white woman who shall suffer or permit herself to be got with child by a negro or mulatto ... shall be sentenced to the penitentiary for not less than eighteen months."

Maryland, 1924

"All railroads carrying passengers in the state (other than street railroads) shall provide equal but separate accommodations for the white and colored races, by providing two or more passenger cars for each passenger train, or by dividing the cars by a partition, so as to secure separate accommodations."

Tennessee, 1891

"The Corporate Commission is hereby vested with power to require telephone companies in the State of Oklahoma to maintain separate booths for white and colored patrons when there is a demand for such separate booths."

Oklahoma, 1915

Merry-Go-Round

Colored child at carnival

Where is the Jim Crow section

On this merry-go-round,

Mister, cause I want to ride?

Down South where I come from

5 White and colored

Can't sit side by side.

Down South on the train

There's a Jim Crow car.

On the bus we're put in the back—

10 But there ain't no back

To a merry-go-round!

Where's the horse

For a kid that's black?

merry-go-round (sb.)
 karrusel
 car togvogn

ANALYSIS

Basics

1. Who is the speaker? What effect does this add to the poem?
2. What has confused the speaker?

Jim Crow

1. How is the difference between North and South portrayed?
2. Which examples of Jim Crow laws are mentioned?
3. What is the significance of the last question?

The message

1. What do you think the message of this poem is?