

John Edgar Tidwell: On the Slim Greer Sequence

Slim Greer is both a literary character created by Sterling A. Brown and the term designating his memorable series of satiric poems. In the cycle are five poems: "Slim Greer," "Slim Hears the Call?," "Slim in Atlanta," "Slim in Hell," and "Slim Lands a Job?," all of which were published between 1930 and 1933. These poems reveal Brown's careful study of oral and written literatures, from Molière's satire to Mark Twain's humor, and his absorption of less formal teaching from a gallery of African American raconteurs. After graduation from Harvard University (MA, 1923), he immersed himself in the cultural life and lore of Black folk by frequenting barbershops, "jook-joints," and isolated farms. In these places, "master liars" like "Preacher," Duke Diggs, and an actual Slim Greer transformed mundane, prosaic experiences into performances of high art. The results of their informal instruction are readily discerned in Brown's poems.

The Slim Greer poems represent the principal concern in nearly all of Brown's work: reclaiming the humanity of African Americans to insure the completion of selfhood. To accomplish this purpose, Brown adapts features of the American tall tale, including Vernacular language, "deadpan" manner of narration, development from plausibility to frantic impossibility, and the snapper climax or exposure at the end. As in the best tall tales, these poems achieve their success by laughing the reader/listener into an awareness of practices that prevent the self from attaining wholeness, such as religious hypocrisy and the absurdity of racial segregation. In so doing, Brown makes his Slim Greer do in poetry what Langston Hughes's Simple does in short fiction.

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Links

[1] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism>

[2] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/poet/sterling-brown>

[3] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/john-edgar-tidwell>

[4] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/poem/slim-greer-sequence>