

The portrayal of black men and racial hierarchy in within our gates



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Even though *Within Our Gates* was a counterreaction to *The Birth of a Nation*'s portrayal of the black race, Oscar Micheaux's characters represent both the educated and the controversial black men. The portrayal of the educated and criminally driven black men shows how the racial hierarchy influences the standpoint of blacks in the early 1900s. This racial hierarchy takes an important role in the film to build upon the male characters throughout the film, as well as how the black community sees themselves through this social construction. Without these intentional contradictions, the film would have been a total failure in portraying the message to the white population and the white supremacist film *The Birth of a Nation*, as well as the black population who "sold out their race".

Within Our Gates is based around the life of Sylvia Landry, the heroine of the movie. Sylvia is an educated woman from a troubled past. After being abandoned by her fiancé, she decides to head south to a poor, small school for black children founded by Reverend Wilson. Later, financial problems begin to rise at the school and Sylvia decided to take a fundraising trip north in hopes to raise enough money to keep the school open. In her trip, she meets a philanthropist after being hit by a car. The philanthropist then offers her help and tells her not to worry. After getting bad from a southern woman, the philanthropist still decides to help Sylvia with a great sum of money, more than the minimum. Before departing, Sylvia meets with Dr. Vivian, which she had acquainted herself with earlier in the film, says goodbye, and heads back South to save the school. At the school, Reverend Wilson professes his love for her, but Sylvia is focused on her love for Dr. Vivian. After this scene, Sylvia's step-cousin, Larry Prichard is wounded while

committing a crime in the North. Dr. Vivian after finding Larry wounded encounters Alma, Sylvia's cousin, and hears the story of Sylvia's past. The flashback depicts instances of lynching and even a white man raping Sylvia, which is later known to be the father of Sylvia. The film then ends by depicting Dr. Vivian accepting Sylvia's past and married to her in the last scene.

The early 1900s was an era of racial injustice and above all racial prejudice. Surprisingly, racial prejudice was not only present between the white and black communities, but within the black community as well. Throughout Oscar Micheaux's popular indie film *Within Our Gates*, racial hierarchy takes place within the male characters. The first scene that compared two men from different hierarchical positions, Conrad Drebert and Larry Prichard, occurred within the first fifteen minutes of the film. Sylvia helps further build their characters by being in a higher hierarchal position as an educated mulatto woman. Conrad Drebert is an educated man, which Sylvia agreed to marry, but later breaks off their engagement due to a misunderstanding on Conrad's part. Further in the film, Larry Prichard, Sylvia's unrequited love, professes his love for Sylvia, but his proposal is rejected. Prichard is then portrayed as an uneducated man who is criminally driven and even exploits his own race to get what he wants. The portrayal of these men allows us to see how a person's position in the racial hierarchy can affect the way they are portrayed by their peers. An addition to this topic is the presence of Dr. Vivian, a northern African American that falls in love with Sylvia after recovering her stolen purse. Dr. Vivian is the well-educated man who cares for Sylvia and the first bachelor to know her past. After this knowledge, he

confronts Sylvia Landry and states that she must be proud of her country and then asks her to marry him. This educated man is portrayed as someone of a higher position than the rest of the male characters portrayed in the film. His caring and patriotic character both supports Micheaux's claim of equality but, maybe unconsciously, the unrepresented racial hierarchy.

Within Our Gates, even though it was meant to counteract the portrayal of African Americans in the United States, also represented the negative male characters that created the stereotype for the black community. These male characters are constructed through racial hierarchy alone involving colorism and/or racism. Some of these characters have a direct or indirect relation with white folk and are portrayed by Micheaux as people who "sold their race". For instance, Old Ned, a black reverend, is determined to please his white racist "friends" even if it means degrading himself as an individual or preaching in favor of the white people. Old Ned is, as Fanon states in *Black Skin, White Masks*, "...a toy in the white man's hands." Later in the film, we see another character, Efrem, conspiring with the white man for his own personal gain. It can be said that Efrem takes pleasure in exploiting his own race by using Sylvia, who was being educated at the time, as the means for obtaining a favorable aspect in the white men's eyes.

Efrem, in the previous paragraph, becomes the perfect example of Fanon's statement of being disliked by his own race:

When people like me, they tell me it is in spite of my color. When they dislike me, they point out that it is not because of my color. Either way, I am locked into the infernal circle. I turn away from these inspectors of the Ark before

the Flood and I attach myself to my brothers, Negroes like myself. To my horror, they too reject me. They are almost white. And besides, they are about to marry white women. They will have children faintly tinged with brown. Who knows, perhaps little by little. . . . (88)

Even though Efrem is not 'tainted' with white, the meaning still goes the same way from a dark-skinned to a light-skinned. In addition, he not only goes against a mulatto but also towards one closer to his kind, Jasper Landry. When Gridlestone, a plantation owner, is shot by a white male, Jasper was present in the scene, in which he is then framed for the murder. Efrem, being a witness and big gossip, runs to tell the whole town. After his momentary glory within the white population, Oscar Micheaux ends this negative character by having him pay the same price as the innocent, execution.

Conversely to the racial hierarchy within one race or influence of another race, white supremacy is also pictured in this film. However, Micheaux demeans this supremacy rather than amplify the concept. In the film, as stated by Anna Siomopoulos, many comparisons can be made to an earlier film, as previously stated, *The Birth of a Nation*. Siomopoulos states in her article that:

Most significantly, both films incorporated controversial subject matter; lynching, rape, and miscegenation are represented in the films of both Griffith and Micheaux, albeit from opposite ends of the political spectrum. (115)

In *Within Our Gates*, lynching takes presence in Alma's account of Sylvia's past. Alma narrates how Sylvia's family were a lynched by white folk who <https://assignbuster.com/the-portrayal-of-black-men-and-racial-hierarchy-in-within-our-gates/>

believed Jasper Landry had murdered Gridlestone. Micheaux attacks Griffith's portrayal of lynching as heroic by demonstrating how barbaric and unjust this act was upon the black race. This supremacy over the black race can be once again tied to the racial hierarchy present in this time period.

We can also further elaborate that such hierarchy not only affected the portrayal of black men to society but also how the black man saw himself within that society. The racial hierarchy was not only dependent on the socio-economic status of a person but by the outer appearance and origin of their body. Fanon further explains this concept after an experience he had with a white boy and woman on a train. He explains how he had not felt different from the other passengers until the boy saw him and became scared. Fanon explains how he began to see himself through their eyes and discovered his blackness and ethnic characteristics. He further states his thoughts:

The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly; ... the little boy is trembling because he is afraid of the nigger, the nigger is shivering with cold, ... the handsome little boy is trembling because he thinks that the nigger is quivering with rage... (86)

This depiction of racial hierarchy affecting an individual's self-evaluation can be seen throughout Micheaux's film. I believe the most relevant example is, once again, the Old Ned's relationship with his white 'friends'. At the end of the scene, he is kicked in the butt before leaving the room by the white men demonstrating their higher position in the hierarchical structure. He then reflects on his own being stating, " Again I've sold my birthright. All for a

miserable ‘ mess of pottage’. Negroes and whites – all are equal. As for me, miserable sinner, Hell is my destiny.”

Even though racial hierarchy was heavily present in the past, it still is portrayed in modern media and daily life. Black men keep on being connected to this hierarchy in films and still affect the social construction of our society. If we continue with this depiction of racial hierarchy, many would not believe there is another way of life and instead fall into the stereotypes of their racial backgrounds

Works Cited

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