At dinner a funny-looking man sat opposite me. He was about thirty-five years old and his evening clothes looked a little queer to me, maybe because of his shirt, which was frilly, full of little tucks. He had nice brown eyes, full of twinkling, good-natured malice, and there was a squareness in his face, for his brow seemed square and his jowls were square. He had finely textured, red skin, and though the lower part of his face was heavy and unmodeled, he had a very delicate, small nose. His mouth was his most difficult feature, because of the large teeth with slits showing between them that jutted out and made him look like a wild boar, though the rest of him looked quite domesticated. (1)

Carl Van Vechten, journalist and music critic, novelist, and photographer—and a name that once aroused storms of controversy among black intellectuals—is little remembered today, except by scholars for his creative accomplishments. But for those who knew him and have handed down his name as a legend, the great sincerity and humanity of the man lives on.

This is the man who worked for Theodore Dreiser, when Dreiser was editor of *Broadway Magazine*; the man who lived next door to
Sinclair Lewis at one time; the man whose many close friends included such luminaries as Alfred A. Knopf, H. L. Mencken, Gertrude Stein, Avery Hopwood, and Mabel Luhan; the man who associated with Thomas Mann, Eugene O'Neill, William Faulkner, Somerset Maugham, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ellen Glasgow, Thomas Wolfe, Elmer Rice, Sherwood Anderson, and countless actors, actresses, composers, singers, and painters; and the man who was perhaps the only white to have had expansive relationships with such black notables as James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, Rudolph Fisher, Walter White, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, George Schuyler, Paul Robeson, Bessie Smith, etc. This is the man who had a singular impact on the so-called Harlem Renaissance but more importantly a profound effect on the relations of blacks and whites in the United States.

Carl Van Vechten was born on June 17, 1880 in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. His brother Ralph was then eighteen, his sister Emma sixteen, and his parents were almost in their fifties. He was the only child in his house by the time he was six.

It is said that the family environment during childhood has a strong effect on one’s life, and basically there were three important formative factors in Carl’s early youth: one was his father’s character; the second, his mother’s talent and cultural interests; the third, his solitude as an “only child” throughout most of his childhood.

His father Charles who was of Dutch ancestry, was born in New York and graduated from Columbia Law School. At the age of forty-eight, when Carl was not yet born, he lost his lumber mill business in Michigan and went broke. However, a few years later, he achieved considerable success in the insurance field and became a leading businessman in Iowa. Carl partook of this nature of the self-made man
from his father, which later helped him withstand many kinds of trials. His father and brother were also generous, sparing nothing in their efforts to help him. As we will later see, their financial assistance and emotional support were crucial to his development as a writer and, more importantly, as a person of influence who was strongly committed to assisting others.

Carl's mother, whose maiden name was Fitch and who was the daughter of a pioneer, graduated from Kalamazoo College in Michigan. Having musical talent and an old Gilbert square grand piano she gave lessons to Carl in his early youth. He became adept at playing Schubert, Beethoven, Bizet, and Ground. Following his mother's inclination, he and his family soaked up whatever drama, music, or cultural event came to Cedar Rapids. Her efforts were amply rewarded when as a young adult Carl became a music critic.

At a time when black people had only a rare chance to go to school, his father was co-founder of the Piney Wood School for black children in Mississippi. This situation helped Carl to understand the American racial problem and to have a sense of responsibility for altering it. In addition, his mother's friend, Lucy Stone, was an advocate of woman's suffrage, and his mother was under her influence.

My mother had known Lucy Stone in her college days and she espoused the cause of women's suffrage at a time when the movement was most unpopular. The Woman's Journal always lay on our sitting-room table, along with Harper's Weekly and the Atlantic Monthly. She gave talks on oriental rugs at women's clubs throughout the state and perhaps was responsible for a needed improvement in Iowa taste. She was also responsible for the public
library in our town, raising the sum required by Carnegie before he would build a library, and securing from state and city government sufficient income for its continued support.\(^{(3)}\)

It might be said that Carl's parents unconsciously inculcated him with cosmopolitan and humanistic ideals through their activities.

As a result of his rather solitary childhood, Carl developed a habit of reading books and a strong attachment for animals. According to Bruce Kellner, it was an "obstinate penchant."\(^{(4)}\) He took a great interest in animals and found collected various cats, dogs, a baby alligator, chameleons, mice, turtles, and pigeons. His letters written when he was young clearly show his interest in animals:

> Please send me the money as the pigeons are a bargain. One pair alone the boy paid 12 dollars for. Please send it right away because I am afraid some one else will buy them.\(^{(5)}\)

The habit of reading and the obstinate penchant were the basis of some of Carl's publications in his later life, such as *The Tiger in the house* and *Lords of the Housetops*.

Two other aspects of his youth deserve mention. Those were his invention of all sorts of devices with which to play and his parents' indulgent rather than disciplinary attitude toward him. In his later life, the inventiveness was helpful every time he met difficulties, and his parents attitude was probably the cause for successive career changes despite his having good fortune in each of his careers. Cedar Rapids was too monotonous for a young man who constantly searched for new things. The monotony urged him to go out and explore the world.

> I want to know everything, *everything* ... and ... I'm going
to...I want to get away from this town...I want to visit the theatre and the opera and the art galleries. I want to meet people. I want to learn. Somewhere there must be more people like me.\(^6\)

In 1899 he went to the University of Chicago and stayed in Chicago for over seven years. During these years he indulged his taste for music, theater, and the arts. Sometimes he wrote for the *University of Chicago Weekly*, including some articles that dealt with black people. By the time of his senior year he finally became bored with the life of a carefree student. In 1904, he graduated and got a job with a newspaper, *the Chicago American*.

This first job did not keep him long. In the fall of 1905 he was assigned to cover the annual horse show, but instead of describing the show horses he criticized severely the clothes of the high-society people attending the show. Unfortunately, the wife of the business manager of his newspaper had been in attendance, and the next morning she rushed to the newspaper office to protest Van Vechten's article. As a result, he was fired.

In 1906 he went to New York, an "emigration" of great importance for him. New York was his natural element and became his main arena of activity for the rest of his life. Shortly after arriving in the city he heard that *Broadway Magazine* wanted someone to write an article on "Salome". The editor of the magazine, Theodore Dreiser, gave Van Vechten submitted his articles on "Salome" to the magazine and the *New York Times*.

In May 1907 he went to Paris for the first time. In Europe he involved himself with music and the theater, where he met most of the singers on the then-current opera scene. While in Paris he revived
an acquaintanceship with a young woman from Cedar Rapids, who was to become his first wife. Paris prior to World War I was quite different in atmosphere from that which many expatriates after the war—Ernest Hemingway and Ezra Pound, for example experienced. He shared the excitement of this earlier Paris in his first novel, *Peter Whiffle*, published in 1922:

"I was, as a matter of fact, in my twenties when I first went to Paris—my happiness might have been even greater had I been nineteen—and I was alone... For Paris in the May twilight is very soft and exquisite, the grey buildings swathed in a bland blue light and the air redolent with a strange fragrance, the ingredients of which have never been satisfactorily identified in my nasal imagination, although Huysmans, Zola, Symons, and Cunninghame Graham have all attempted to separate and describe them. Presently we crossed the boulevards and I saw for the first time the rows of blooming chestnut trees, the kiosques where newsdealers dispensed their wares, the brilliantly lighted theatres, the sidewalk cafés, sprinkled with human figures, typical enough, doubtless, but who all seemed as unreal to me at the time as if they had been Brobdignags, Centaurs, Griffins, or Mermaids.\(^7\)"

A month after going to Europe he married Anna Elizabeth Snyder in England. In 1908 they returned to Europe, where he became a Paris correspondent for the *New York Times*, and remained there through the next year.

He divorced his wife in 1912 and two months later met Fania Marinoff, an actress in her early twenties who had beautiful dark eyes and who fascinated Van Vechten. Miss Marinoff, who was born in
Odessa, Russia, had come to the United States at the age of five. Like so many other immigrants, she had been forced to taste the bitter fruits of poverty, selling matches for pennies in one of the ghettos, Boston's Salem Street, and serving as a waitress in a boarding house at an early age. Fortunately, at the age of nine, she was able to take drama lessons at the Robert E. Bell School of Oratory. Having a talent for drama, she appeared on the stage soon after. Mabel Dodge, Van Vechten's lifelong friend, described the association of Fania and Van Vechten in *Movers and Shakers*:

That side of him was quite occupied anyway with the young Russian actress, Fania Marinoff, whom he saw every day. I didn't know her at first, but I knew he was in love with some girl. He had been married to an early acquaintance from Cedar Rapids, but her similarity to him and her home association had been too heavy a handicap for a successful marriage. He had been divorced and now he found he could respond to the exotic small Russian because she was so different. (8)

When they got married in 1914, the alimony his ex-wife demanded was still not settled. He could not afford the expense and was sent to jail. His father, always a source of affectionate strength, wrote with pragmatic though warm concern:

There is no use of talking about settlements now. You have nothing with which to settle and Father will not pay any amount which she will consider. It is therefore up to you to take your medicine and after she has had you in jail a few days or weeks, she will be glad to settle on any reasonable terms, but mind you after having gone through that ordeal if I were you I would not think
of settling for more than $1000 or $2000. I have talked with a number of attorneys who tell me that there is nothing serious in . . . going to jail on a matter of this kind and so I am beginning to look at it entirely differently from what I did on the start. I want you to know that really my sympathies are with you and I hope you will brace up and take the matter philosophically. (9)

After four long months the difficulty was negotiated and settled for $1,000, and he was released. However, the newly married couple still had to muddle through the long trying days of struggle. In 1917, for example, Van Vechten and Fania were in serious economic straits, surviving entirely on potatoes for one period and worse "there were no parties, not even one party." (10) At that time his brother Ralph sent twenty-five dollars to Fania monthly.

About their relationship, Van Vechten in later years stated:

We are a mutual admiration society: I am passionate in praise of her acting and she is consistent in her regard for my books. She is more frequently governed by her heart, I by my head. We have been married for forty-six years, and no two people could stay married for forty-six years without feeling generally affectionate towards one another. In a sense we are completely independent of each other. Once, she had her work, and I had mine. Latterly she has her friends and I have mine, but actually this gives us the necessary variety to bring us more closely together. Besides, many of our friends are common to us both. We both are popular with widely divergent groups of people. In short, we adore each other and we look forward to celebrating our Golden Wedding together in 1964. (11)
According to Fania, she told an interviewer in 1932 that her marriage was for a while, at least, an unconventional one:

For a year and a half after Carl and I were married he lived in his apartment and I lived in mine. Did it work? Well I should say. He'd come over to see me, and I'd go over to see him. And sometimes We'd visit each other for a day or so. Carl would run out in the morning and fill his pail with coffee and bring it to me. He got it at a delicatessen store called the Luxemburg, and the trades-people were quite horrified at us. As for me, I was having an affairs with my husband. Living in sin, you know. Oh, I quite miss that. (12)

Van Vechten met Mabel Dodge in February 1913. She had returned to New York after three years at the Villa Curonia in Florence, Italy, and lived in an apartment at 23 Fifth Avenue, where she had her salon and where “arguments and discussions floated in the air, were caught and twisted and hauled and tied, until the white salon itself was no longer static.” (13) Van Vechten depicted Mabel in Peter Whiffle:

Edith was the focus of the group, grasping this faint idea or that frail theory, tossing it back a complete or wrecked formula, or she sat quietly with her hands folded, like a Madonna who had lived long enough to learn to listen . . . She was the amalgam which held the incongruous group together; she was the alembic that turned the dross to gold.

When dullness, beating its tiresome wings, seemed about to hover over the group, she had a habit of introducing new elements into the discussion, or new figures into the group itself, and one day it must have occured to her that, if people could become so
excited about art, they might be persuaded to become excited about themselves too, and so she transferred her interest to the labouring man, to unions.

According to Mabel Dodge, she and Van Vechten began a “long, drawn-out friendship with ups and downs in it and a good deal of sympathy and anger alternating on my part.”

About ten years later, Van Vechten opened his own literary salon, which was modeled on Mabel Dodge’s earlier endeavor. Their friendship was interrupted when she married Tony Luhan and went to live in Taos, New Mexico. They had not heard from each other for sixteen years when, in 1951 they met again in New Mexico and resumed their relationship. Carl reminisced:

I think Mabel had more effect on my life than anybody I ever met. Because she was so experienced in the ways of the world and what you could see and what you could do and so forth. And she introduced me to hundreds of extraordinary people.

If Van Vechten had not met Alfred A. Knopf, who was to become his best friend and publisher, his later career as a novelist might not have met with such success. They came together in 1915 when Van Vechten submitted Pastiches et Pistaches to Knopf:

It is the only book I have ever written which has not been accepted for immediate publication... Among the thirteen publishers who rejected it was Alfred A. Knopf. Unlike the others, however, Mr. Knopf was curious enough to read my first book and interested enough in that to invite me to come to see him. At that time, he occupied a single room, with a cubby-hole for a boy, in an office building on West Forty-second Street. He resembled a
Persian prince and certainly behaved like one. His suggestion was that as I knew a good deal about music and seemed to be able to write about it, for the moment I should stick to that general subject. The result of this encouraging conversation was the planning and execution of Music and Bad Manners, issued in 1916 by Mr. Knopf, who has been my publisher ever since.(17)

Knopf also owed Van Vechten a great deal as he was a vital factor in Knopf’s becoming critically acclaimed and commercially successful during the 1920’s. When he began building, what was to become, his publishing empire, Knopf had three major contributors: H. L. Mencken, Joseph Hergesheimer, and Carl Van Vechten. From 1915 to 1921 he published many of Van Vechten’s collections of musical critiques, essays on the arts, and stories about animals. Besides Music and Bad Manners (1916) he published Interpreters and Interpretation (1917), The Merry-Go-Round (1918), The Music of Spain (1918), In the Garret (1919), The Tiger in the House (1920), and Lords of the Housetops (1921). Only Music After the Great War (1915) was published by someone else (G. Schirmer). Some of these books got good reviews, but Van Vechten early work was not sufficient to support Knopf, who in a sense was exercising patience with Van Vechten. It should be noted, however, that Knopf was only twenty-three when their association started, which is quite young for a publisher even of a small, newly founded, publishing house.

Another significant influence upon which Carl’s success in the 1920’s depended was, as I mentioned before, his strong family ties. Until he succeeded as a writer with publication of his first novel, Peter Whiffle in 1922, his family, especially his father and brother helped him both
financially and spiritually. His father who was a prolific letter writer¹⁸, was a source of great encouragement, while his brother who became to considerably wealthy (later becoming director of six companies including banks) assisted him financially at times.

The obstacles he met, the support he received, and the influence of the people he knew and loved during this first period of his life—from 1904 through 1921—as journalist, essayist, music critic, prepared him for what was to happen next. For while Van Vechten was struggling to become a better writer and more solvent financially, another struggle was taking place in New York, the city he loved—an exciting cultural movement that would become the raison d'être for his life.

NOTES


(2) On Hopwood, Van Vechten says: “He and I became very warm friends. He was a playwright and very successful playwright. He died in 1931 and that’s one of the people whose death caused me to shed tears, because I was fond of him.” [(Carl Van Vechten, “Reminiscences”, Memoirs of Carl Van Vechten, Oral History Collection of Columbia University, 1960 (hereafter called CVV, OH.))] Although he mentioned that Hopwood died 1931, 1928 is the correct date. It slipped Van Vechten’s memory because of age.


(5) Carl Van Vechten Collection, Manuscript Division, New York Public Library. (hereafter called, CVV, NYPL).


(9) CVV, NYPL.

(10) CVV, OH.

(11) CVV, OH.

(12) CVV, NYPL.


(15) Luhan, *ibid*, p. 16.

(16) CVV, OH.


(18) CVV, OH.