At the age of fifty he abandoned the writing of novels because he felt that he had nothing more of importance to say. But being an active person and still tremendously interested in the Negro and his acceptance by the white society, he turned to photography [two years later]. After all, while most people had heard and read about outstanding Negroes, few had seen how they looked. At that time the picture of a Negro, no matter how prominent, rarely appeared in the columns of a newspaper or magazine of general circulation. 1)

I. His Activities After the Harlem Renaissance

Despite the poor reception of Nigger Heaven in 1926 and Spider Boy in 1928, Van Vechten started working on what he believed was his best book, Parties. But before its publication, his career as a writer was affected by the stockmarket crash of October 1929. The devastation of Wall Street, which leveled the economy of the entire country and shook the very foundations of the nation, ended the frivolities of the Splendid Drunken Twenties and also killed the Harlem Renaissance.

Loafers loitered about, together with millions of workers who had been thrown unemployed out onto the streets, forming unaccountably long lines in front of the poor-relief facilities. Those who had taken an active part in the Harlem Renaissance were absorbed by the WPA (Works
Progress Administration), which started writing, art, and theater projects. Van Vechten, himself, lost a considerable amount of money in the Crash, but fortunately the million-dollar trust fund he received in 1927, on the death of his brother, Ralph, remained basically intact and he weathered the storm comfortably. Unfortunately, Parties, which was published in 1930 as intended, did not meet so kind a fate, partly because of the emotional climate of the country. Most critics did not like the book, and there were no sales. According to Langston Hughes, Parties was “not nearly so amusing as his [Carl’s] own parties.” In the September 1930 issue of Bookman, George Dangerfield wrote perhaps the kindest review of the book:

...In respect to what it might have been, Parties is a failure because it is incomplete; but a failure significant enough to place Van Vechten once and for all among the more important of contemporary novelists; and significant enough for us to speculate about his future, when we had come to expect nothing more from him than a repetition of his past.

Most of the other critics were more severe, and Van Vechten was extremely disappointed. But although he knew his writing career was over and also felt he had nothing more to say, the fact that he was already fifty did not stop him from starting all over again. An extremely active person, Van Vechten, at that turning point in his life, had the insight and courage to seek a new field of activity. He began taking a serious interest in photography in 1932 after compiling a volume of his essays from earlier collections. (Sacred and Profane Memories, his last book, was published in April, 1932. After that, the only writing he did—except for his voluminous correspondence was an occasional review on
books by and about blacks, about music and about cats.

Strictly speaking, he never became either a commercial photographer or a professional one. At first, photography, in fact, was more like a hobby to him. However, he refined his technique to the point where he eventually amassed a large collection of valuable photographs. His interest in photography had actually started much earlier, when as a cub reporter, he had to take pictures. On his first trip to Europe he had also used his camera frequently.

I took photographs all the time on this ship, and in London I had taken photographs of several opera singers that I'd met before in New York. It's very curious—I took photographs sporadically a long time, but not intensively, and I never kept it up. It was always interrupted. Possibly one of the reasons was that photography is a very expensive device and I wasn't making too much money at this time.4)

By 1932, with no financial problems looming, no Harlem Renaissance, and no desire to write, Van Vechten could afford to spend his time and money in the darkroom. By 1934 he was spending all his time there, developing pictures and learning the art of photography.

Since then, I have never lost interest, because developing and printing are much the most fascinating part of photography, because you don’t have anybody around but yourself and you have to do things in a very skillful way and depend entirely on yourself. When you’re taking pictures, you depend somewhat on the subject, and if you have an assistant, which I have, he does the lighting. But developing and printing are fascinating, are by far the most interesting
side of photography. And without being what you call tricky—I never have photographs retouched or never do tricks of any kind.5)

Van Vechten specialized in portraiture and his range of subjects was incredible. Beginning with Anna May Wong, the Chinese-American actress, a great many famous people posed in front of his camera: Henri Matisse, H. L. Mencken, George Gershwin, Elmer Rice, Clifford Odets, Sherwood Anderson, George Jean Nathan, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer, Evelyn Waugh, Tennessee Williams, William Inge, Eugene O'Neill, Edward Albee, Gertrude Stein, Thomas Wolfe, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Thomas Mann, Marc Chagall, Truman Capote, William Faulkner, and so on. The blacks who sat for him included: Langston Hughes, Bessie Smith, Countee Cullen, Joe Louis, Walter White, Chester Himes, Richard Wright, Marian Anderson, Ann Petry, Ralph Bunche, James Baldwin, W. E. B. DuBois, and so on. What a wonderful collection! The above-mentioned people are just a few of the famous actors, actresses, singers, composers, sculptors, designers, publishers, pianists, dancers, educators, directors, painters, etc., he immortalized on silvered paper. His catalogue of photographs is like a kaleidoscopic pageant, and all his portraits are striking and memorable. According to Van Vechten, his interest in photography was purely documentary. "Not at first, but gradually they [the photographs] were made for certain institutions and for certain purposes."6)

During his later years Van Vechten made two major contributions to black culture—the passing of Harlem Renaissance only intensified his involvement with blacks. The first was the great number of valuable photographs of famous blacks, he left for coming generations. The second was the various special collections he founded for several institutions. As can be imagined, he had many friends in various fields, which af-
forded him a fantastic amount of material including letters. He, himself, was as prolific a letter writer as his father had been. Modestly he had once said of himself, "I guess I was lazy," but in actuality he was a very methodical person, especially as far as collecting was concerned. Over the years he had accumulated loads of clippings of various articles, and he especially never missed articles about himself. His clippings alone were enough of a basis to make him begin founding various special collections. In 1942 he established the first, the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of Negro Arts and Letters at Yale University, for the friend he loved so much. All the material he gave to Yale documented the creative artistry of the black and drew black scholars to a white university. It was a significant beginning for what was to become a wide variety of valuable special collections.

When I founded my Negro Collection at Yale University she (Carita Day) sent me everything she had in the way of programs, letters and photographs ... So I started it then and I named it after James Weldon Johnson because I thought I would like other people to give things to it too and I didn’t want them to think that I was hogging the collections. That turned out to be a good idea; we’ve had any number of gifts, valuable gifts, from other people. Very often on my birthday several people have given me the amount of money that signifies my age and that helps a lot with an endowment fund and nothing gets in a University library without an endowment because after you stop giving the library loses interest but fortunately there’s been so much interest in the Negro since this was started that it’s almost a necessity to have a Negro Collection. Lots of people want to know something about some of these people they read about.
Now the heads of libraries realize it's one of the main subjects of the day.  

To found such collections naturally required a large amount of hard work, but somehow Van Vechten, taking precious spare moments from his photography, made the time for this job also. Fortunately, many black people helped him, especially Langston Hughes and Chester Himes:

As I think I told you, we have so much Langston Hughes that it would almost fill a room by itself. He sent a tremendous lot of material. Several other people—Chester Himes gives me everything; a great many singers gives me everything, all their programs and what-not.

In the same year that he founded the Johnson Collection, he also established the Carl Van Vechten Collection of Books and Manuscripts in the New York Public Library, which catalogued his whole career. Here can be seen many valuable materials, such as clippings of articles about him and a tremendous number of letters from people like Alain Locke, Sinclair Lewis, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, Somerset Maugham, Walter White, Nella Larsen, and so on. The collection also includes his family photographs and his manuscripts.

In 1944 he founded the George Gershwin Memorial Collection of Music and Musical Literature at Fisk University Library. In 1946 he founded the Rose McClendon Memorial Collection of Photographs of Celebrated Negroes at Howard University Library. He also gave his photographs of black celebrities to Wadleigh High School in New York City. The following year he contributed to the Anna Marble Pollock Memorial Library of Books About Cats at Yale University. In 1949 he
founded the Florine Stettheimer Memorial Collection of Books About the Fine Arts at Fisk University Library. In 1955 Fisk University recognized his services and presented him with an Honorary Doctor’s Degree to thank him.

His active association with blacks never ceased, and he maintained his close personal relations with all his friends, black and white. He lost his best friends one after another. His very best friend, Avery Hopwood, died in 1926. In 1938 he lost another dear friend, James Weldon Johnson, who died in a traffic accident. In 1946 Gertrude Stein died, and he became her literary executor. The death of his friends was like a series of jolting terrible shocks to him. In mentioning the death of Johnson, he said:

His death was a great blow to me. I loved him. His birthday was the same as mine and we always celebrated together, along with some other people. Knopf’s son also.¹⁰)

In 1954 Dorothy Peterson founded the Jerome Bowers Peterson Collection of Photographs by Carl Van Vechten at the University of New Mexico. In 1955 his seventy-fifth birthday was celebrated by exhibitions of his photographs at the New York Public Library and at Yale University. At the same time Yale University published Fragments from an Unwritten Autobiography for him. Touchingly, his many black friends held a party to celebrate his third quarter of a century with him.

In 1960 his eightieth birthday was celebrated by exhibitions at Coe College in Cedar Rapids and at the University of Pittsburgh; he was also honored as a benefactor by the New York Public Library. In 1961 he was named to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. In October 1964 he and Fania quietly celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary, a
celebration of great personal importance to him. Two months later he died peacefully at the age of 84 and his ashes were scattered in the Shakespeare Garden of Central Park. A long, multifaceted, valuable life had come to an end.

Dear Langston,

You and I have been through so many new Negroes that we are a little tired of it all. BUT I am really excited about the group you have brought together. LeRoi Jones, who appears to be somebody, I photographed long since. I wonder when he & [James] Baldwin will have a fight! It will be a big one. I am very happy to receive your book with its beautiful inscription.

Much affection to you......

Carlo

It was certainly old home week at Rita's. I had a really wonderful time.

JUNE 2, 1964

II. A Reconsideration; the Man and His Times

Changes may be brought about by social forces and mass action, but all changes begin in somebody's mind and move outward like ripples in a millpond to the farthest shores, once the revolutionary idea has been accepted. Tall, white-maned Carl Van Vechten, still suave and benign at seventy, has done more than any single person in this country to create the atmosphere of acceptance of the Negro.

Looking back on the life of Carl Van Vechten, it can be said that he led a fulfilled, successful existence. His lasting impact on society, how-
ever, was more evident introspect than during the Harlem Renaissance, a drama in which he assumed four major roles. In a sense, each role had revolutionary meaning, considering the situation at that time. The first was writing the controversial novel *Nigger Heaven*. The second was espousing the value of jazz, blues, and spirituals. The third was helping young black writers and poets. The fourth was promoting the association of blacks and whites through his salon.

**NIGGER HEAVEN**

From a literary standpoint *Nigger Heaven* was unsuccessful. It was successful, however, in proving Van Vechten's premise—that black life could be used as material for art—and the ensuing controversy over the book had the effect of strengthening its impact, just as a pebble thrown into a pond makes ripples that reach the farthest shores. At first, the black community into which he threw his little stone had fierce discussions about the book, but eventually the furor died down and in its wake the "New Negro" movement gained momentum. Many black writers turned their attention to Harlem life or black "low-life" and followed the trail blazed by Van Vechten or were at least inspired by it; most of these belonged to the so-called Harlem School. Hugh M. Gloster cites several examples:

...the Van Vechten Vogue exerted profound influence upon American Negro literature. Two years after he had published *Color* (the featured poem, "Heritage," begins thus: "What is Africa to me?") Countee Cullen produced *Copper Sun* (1927), which shows the imprint of the Dark Continent in its title. Partly in awareness of "the traditional jazz connotations" James Weldon Johnson called his versified
sermons *God's Trombones* (1927). Wallace Thurman collaborated with William Jordan Rapp in 1929 to produce *Harlem*, a play dealing with life in the black ghetto. But the emphasis upon jazz, sex, atavism, and primitivism, whether inspired by *Nigger Heaven* or not, is much more obvious in novels and short stories than in poetry and drama. Fictional works that stress these elements are Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928), *Banjo* (1929), and *Gingertown* (1932), Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry* (1929), and *Infants of the Spring* (1932), and Arna Bontemps' *God Sends Sunday* (1931). Excepting *Banjo* and *God Sends Sunday*, the scene of these narratives is laid principally in New York City; and even in these two variant novels there is the same preoccupation with sensual pleasures and instinctive living. Like *Nigger Heaven*, the Harlem-centered works ordinarily depict cabaret scenes, interracial social gatherings, and the Negro literati.  

In later years when black writers like William Attaway, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin extended this basic idea of a true portrayal into a fuller and profounder expression of black life, Van Vechten's efforts achieved their full reward.

**JAZZ, BLUES, AND SPIRITUALS**

We call the 1920's the Jazz Age, and jazz was, indeed, being played at that time. Very few people, however, realized its value as art. Attempts to promote the value of jazz plus blues and spirituals had been made by W.E.B. DuBois in *The Soul of Black Folks* (1905), and by James Weldon Johnson in *The Books of American Negro Spirituals*; and, later, by Langston Hughes in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926). But it was Van Vechten who, because he was white and a well-known music
critic, most significantly influenced American musical tastes by vigorously promoting Black American folk music.

In fact, during 1925 and 1926 he concentrated his efforts on writing about black music. In 1925 he published *Red*, in which he praised jazz highly. During those two years he wrote many articles for *Vanity Fair* on jazz and jazz singers, praising, for example, Bessie Smith and Clara Smith, two black singers not yet known by the public. His contributions in this second role were twofold: he held awaken America, through his *Vanity Fair* readership, to the greatness of black music and, through his musical insight, simultaneously created opportunities for black entertainers.

**YOUNG BLACK WRITERS AND POETS.**

During the 1920's, it was not so easy for young black writers and poets to find publishers. The two famous magazines for black people, *Crisis* and *Opportunity*, "...and their editors, Jessie Fauset and Charles S. Johnson, did yeoman's work for the Negro Renaissance." They devoted their pages to young black writers and poets and even offered cash prizes for excellent work. However, for aspiring young authors with a new spirit, one that departed entirely from the old traditions of Chesnutt and Dunbar, these magazines, along with a third black publication, the *Messenger* were of little value. To meet this situation *Fire* was conceived, but its publication was shortlived.

Several white publishers, stimulated by the black vogue inside and outside the United States, the rise of the New Negro, and the increasing black population in urban areas did accept books written by black writers and poets but on a very limited basis. Among these publishers were Boni and Liveright; Harcourt, Brace and Company; Alfred A. Knopf; and Harper and Brothers. It was Van Vechten who accelerated this inter-
est into a full-blown trend by acting as intermediary between white publishers and black writers and poets. For example, he introduced Langston Hughes to Alfred A. Knopf and helped convince Knopf to publish Hughes first book of poems, *Weary Blues*. He also wrote a biographical note on Hughes for *Vanity Fair*.

With his pen, Van Vechten introduced many other black writers to the public through *Vanity Fair*. He also assisted them in other ways; for example, when James Weldon Johnson reissued his book, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, he wrote the introduction.

ASSOCIATION OF BLACKS AND WHITES

Van Vechten’s salon played an important part in his efforts to promote the social integration of blacks and whites. He invited many young black poets, writers, and artists as well as white writers and notables to his apartment, especially during the Harlem Renaissance, and the atmosphere at his parties was a major force in breaking down prejudice between the races.

Sparkling in the “splendid drunken age” were thousands of parties being held throughout the country, perhaps especially in New York City. Reflecting the stagnant prejudice still holding the country in its grip, no one seemed to notice the gaiety was marred by a rigid segregation. In this light it can be seen that Van Vechten’s parties can be considered unique and actually revolutionary.

Another facet of Van Vechten’s efforts was his association with the N.A.A.C.P., which had begun through acquaintance with black intellectual friends. He freely gave his opinion or help on a wide range of matters when the N.A.A.C.P. requested it. I mention his N.A.A.C.P. activities here because it widens our scope of vision of this man’s life, whose love
and assistance for black people, including artists, became the lubricating oil for the development of the Harlem Renaissance.

Attendance at his parties, needless to say, was helped considerably by his having been a well-known music critic, and at the time a novelist and essayist. The crucial ingredient, however, for the success of his salon was his respect for people, which determined his way of thinking about how to give a party and how to handle race relations. Van Vechten never insisted that people discard their prejudice—he allowed them to overcome their discrimination by giving them an opportunity to meet on an equal basis.

THE INNER MAN

We can point to the development of the New Negro Movement as a crucial factor in Van Vechten's rise to historical note, because the relation of environment to the human being cannot be ignored. However, if we emphasize only the social conditions, we would not have a sufficient explanation. For, while it is true that a man cannot climb to great heights without a mountain of sufficient stature, only the great men make it to the top—the rest remain lost in the mountain's shadow. Thus I would now like to delve into the inner aptitudes that made it possible for Van Vechten to assume the degree of respect he earned during his lifetime.

Perhaps his most apparent trait was the blending of an exuberant free spirit with warmth and sincerity, qualities, it should be noted, he highly admired in others, especially in black people. It would be a huge oversimplification to say this is why he wrote Nigger Heaven, but it definitely explains the profound bond between Van Vechten and his myriad of black friends. As Langston Hughes noted, he lived "with sincerity—and humor."
Nigger Heaven, when the black community raged against his book, blacks stood up to defend it—in most cases rather weakly—and, more importantly, to cite the author's sincerity, the proof of which was, despite this hurtful rejection, his continued devotion and support for his black friends and for the black cause in America.

During the last thirty-odd years of his life, Van Vechten endeavored to immortalize his friends through his photography and to raise the black American's cultural achievements from an enforced obscurity into the academic citadels through funded collections. His efforts were a significant force for the continuing struggle to allow the black people into the American mainstream. Even W.E.B. DuBois, who had vehemently denounced Van Vechten in 1926, nineteen years later stood in front of Van Vechten's camera.

Both Van Vechten's sincerity and exuberance fortunately were tempered by a wonderful tolerance and a surprising unassuming modesty. He had acquired the rare ability to not merely accept himself and people for what they were but to look for and respond to their better natures. He never assumed the righteous air of moral indignation of the crusader. He presented his beliefs, both in words and action, and allowed those who would to support them, for his sense of justice was a justice for and by all. Van Vechten had persevered through several trying times himself, and upon this faculty he had built the confidence that, given sufficient time and understanding, the basic goodness of American people would overcome the apathy to their black brethren.

For lack of a better word, the last characteristic I would like to mention will be called captainship. For example, soon after he began going to Harlem even a black newspaper picked up an article about him. Certainly his quality of drawing attention to himself assisted as well as reflected
his ability to take the lead in everything he did. Another aspect of this characteristic was his sense of responsibility and initiative. *Nigger Heaven* is a perfect example of this quality of captainship. Convinced of the necessity of portraying the vitality of black life, as were others at the time, he was willing to be the first to face the storm of controversy that inevitably would follow. Whether he had been granted the status of “spokesman” for the Harlem School is unclear, but we do know that he had marshaled the assistance of James Weldon Johnson, Walter White, Rudolph Fisher, and Langston Hughes in publishing *Nigger Heaven*. Not only did his effort receive support from many writers during the controversy but more significantly they later followed his lead by writing, from their hearts, freely about Harlem and the people they loved.

I have already mentioned that each of Van Vechten’s major endeavors was revolutionary. The word conjures up a strong image and deservedly so. In this case the implication is not one of violence but of a profound intent to peacefully struggle to achieve radical and far-reaching objectives.

It should be noted that throughout history, generally, methods of revolution attempting to shift from the highest level of a society to the lower levels, or vice-versa, have most often failed in their objectives. In fact, the movements led by Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois could not develop further for this very reason. Washington was attacked because his conciliatory attitude did not appeal to blacks with higher aspirations and DuBois was not accepted by the masses because his movement was Utopian, militant, and based on the superiority of the “talented tenth” of black intellectuals. Such revolutions, detached from either significant sources of power or the masses, were usually doomed to failed.

Van Vechten’s efforts, however, predominantly with the intellectual and
wealthy strata of society, in the long term encompassed the mass of poor blacks as well as the vast majority of his nation as a whole.

Initially, he could be said to have made brilliant successes in the 1920's with the highest levels of black and white society. Frankly the progress of his revolution down to the masses was much slower than he must have first envisioned. His socialite mentality was a limitation, especially during the Great Depression, that made his efforts difficult to connect to oppressed blacks.

Van Vechten's revolution was neither an intellectual tour de force nor an economic coraling of the poor. He didn't fight to unite the minds of blacks and whites, neither did he seek to pool the scanty and overladen wallets into one pocket. No, Van Vechten fought for the only thing he treasured, the heart of every man, woman, and child, black or white, whose life he touched.

The spirit of America has been quietly revolutionized by a "Quite domesticated wild boar." That revolution of good will continues—it is Carl Van Vechten's greatest success.

NOTES

3) George Dangerfield, "Parties," Bookman (September, 1930), p. 72
5) Ibid.
6) Ibid.
7) Ibid.
8) Ibid.
9) Ibid.
10) Ibid.


15) Hughes, The Big Sea, op. cit., p. 255.