

Subtle Racism in Edna Ferber's *Showboat*

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Abstract

Edna Ferber is a Jewish- American writer. She won the Pulitzer Prize in 1924. Her novel *showboat* is one of the most interesting and unique musicals ever written. *Showboat* challenged American citizens to evaluate their personal values with regard to the treatment of others, specifically blacks. This paper discusses the origin of the musical, social elements, changes in the subsequent revivals, white stereotypes concerning blacks, the music, and perhaps the single most controversial aspect: the use of the word “niggers.” Besides its groundbreaking focus on racism, another aspect of *Showboat* that made it different from other works of the time was the music. “Ol’ Man River” is perhaps the highlight of *Showboat*. Interestingly enough, it is not performed by one of the lead characters, but by Joe, a black employee of the Cotton Blossom. The song discusses the plight of the black man, just thirty years after the Civil War.

Key words: Racism, nigger, and blues

Edna Ferber is a Jewish- American writer. She won the Pulitzer Prize in 1924. Her novel *showboat* is one of the most interesting and unique musicals ever written. This work is among the first musicals to integrate social elements and the use of song to further the plot. A majority of the shows during this time were revues or ensemble shows whose musical numbers became popular hits heard on the radio. *Showboat* challenged American citizens to evaluate their personal values with regard to the treatment of others, specifically blacks. This paper discusses the origins of the musical, social elements, changes in the subsequent revivals, white stereotypes concerning blacks, the music, and perhaps the single most controversial aspect: the use of the word “niggers.”

Showboat is based on the novel of the same name written by Edna Ferber, a Jewish woman. In her thesis, “Edna Ferber’s *Showboat* as Literature and as Film,” Gwen T. Anderson provides a glimpse into Ferber’s life and the persecution she faced being a Jew surrounded by Christians.

As a child she lived in small towns that were very provincial and predominantly Protestant. She...was extremely sensitive to all forms of snobbery, hypocrisy and bigotry. Her legacy in *Showboat* is the clear presentation of southern life as she saw it in her characters-letting readers draw conclusions for themselves.(1)

Showboats were a fad in the 1800s. However, these boats began to disappear toward the turn of the century. Since the popularity of the showboats was on the decline, Ferber had a difficult time finding one in order to be as historically accurate as possible in her novel. After completing her , the novel was published in segments in the *Women's Home Companion*. There are a few notable differences between the novel and the musical. In the novel, Cap'n Andy, the leader of the showboat, Cotton Blossom, his wife, Parthy Ann Hawks and

Gaylord Ravenal, a local gambler who falls for Andy's daughter, Magnolia, all die. By contrast, all of the characters are living at the end of the musical. Within a few years after their marriage and the birth of their daughter, Ravenal deserts them. Once he abandons his family in the novel, Ravenal never comes back. In the musical version, he returns. In the novel, Kim, their daughter, becomes a leading lady of the theatre, marries a man named Ken and has a son. In the musical, she has grown to be a star of the showboat troupe.

When the story was published as a complete novel (as opposed to a series of vignettes), it was read by composer Jerome Kern. He, in turn, contacted the lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II. They read the work independently, yet sketched the plot using the same scenes.

United in their quest to create a musical from this piece of literature, Kern contacted Ferber requesting the rights to *Showboat*, but she refused. *Showboat* did not fit the mold of a typical 1920s musical. The story unfolds over several decades. The social issues discussed were not in line with the comedic stories of the revue shows. Determined to bring this story to the stage, Kern contacted Alexander Wollcott, a friend of the author. Through Wollcott, Kern met Ferber, who immediately agreed to the project. However, she wanted to hear the music; she later reminisced:

He played and sang "Ol' Man River." The music mounted, mounted and I give you my word my hair stood on end, the tears came to my eyes, I breathed like a heroine in a melodrama. This was great music. This was music that would outlast Jerome Kern's day and mine. I never have heard it since without that emotional surge. When *Showboat* was revived four years after its original production I saw the audience, after Paul Robeson's singing of "Ol' Man River," shout and cheer and behave generally as I've never seen an audience behave in any theater in all my years of playgoing.(6)

After hearing and feeling the power and emotion behind "Ol' Man River," Edna Ferber could not help but love this song:

Since then I've supposed I've heard the *Showboat* music and "Ol' Man River," especially a 1,000 times. I must break down and confess to being one of those whose eyes grow dreamy and whose mouth is wreathed in wistful smiles whenever any orchestra plays "Ol' Man River"...I never have tired of it. I just happen to think that when Jerome Kern wrote the *Showboat* score he achieved the most beautiful and important light-opera music that has ever been written in America. And I consider Oscar Hammerstein's lyrics to "Ol' Man River" to be powerful, native, tragic and true.(7)

“Ol’ Man River” is perhaps the highlight of *Showboat*. Interestingly enough, it is not performed by one of the lead characters, but by Joe, a black employee of the Cotton Blossom. The song discusses the plight of the black man, just thirty years after the Civil War. While blacks had at this point been emancipated for thirty years, they still were not treated with respect. Early on in the song, Joe sings about being drunk. Presumably, if a black man were found drunk and disorderly, he would go to jail. Also, according to the lyrics, black men still held the same jobs as when they were slaves: planting potatoes and cotton. They still had to worry about their white bosses. But one question still remains; Who or what is “Ol’ Man River?”

There can be many interpretations of “Ol’ Man River.” First, one could take the lyrics at face value, understanding it as the Mississippi River. However, if one reads the lyrics closely it becomes apparent that “Ol’ Man River” is time. “But Ol’ Man River, he jes keeps rollin’ along.” Time keeps going. It has no feelings or concerns. Time is time. It is abstract. It does not care if you are mistreated or are the bell of the ball. Despite the years of freedom, blacks remained pigeon-holed by society. Yet time keeps rollin’ along. The importance of this is clear: identifying “Ol’ Man River” with time underlines the musical’s political dimension. After the opening night, *Showboat* continued for four more nights in Washington D.C. The show then moved to the Nixon Theatre in Pittsburgh from November 21-26, 1927. The Ohio Theatre in Cleveland hosted *Showboat* from November 28 to December 3, 1927. The Erlinger Theatre in Philadelphia was next. The show then moved to its ultimate destination, the Ziegfeld Theatre, where the show ran for 572 performances.

Besides its groundbreaking focus on racism, another aspect of *Showboat* that made it different from other works of the time was the music. Ziegfeld was generally more concerned with his performer’s looks than with their singing ability. Here, by contrast, good singing is absolutely essential, for the drama is dependent upon the audience being able to recognize motives that like Wagner’s leitmotifs recur in the service of the plot. An example is Magnolia’s piano playing in Act I, Scene One. The motive is first heard while Parthy Ann Hawks is talking with the townsfolk. It reappears just minutes later when Ravenal enters. Another connection is evident between “Cotton Blossom” and “Ol’ Man River.” The first six notes of “Cotton Blossom” are an inversion of the first six notes of “Ol’ Man River,” only presented twice as fast. This is important to recognize since the songs offer opposing views of the same subject. “Cotton Blossom” suggests life as it glitters mercurially on the stage, while “Ol’ Man River,” as discussed above, offers up the slow and meaningful passage of time in real life.

Showboat incorporated a variety of musical styles and genres, including hymns, spirituals, popular songs, jazz and vaudeville. An example of the spiritual can be found in “Ol’ Man River.” The song is very solemn and reverent. “After the Ball” is the only song in the musical Jerome Kern did not write. It was a popular tune with words and music by Charles K. Harris. Magnolia sings this piece for her job as a club singer since Ravenal has deserted his family. “I Might Fall Back on You” is sung by Frank and Ellie, the comedic couple of the troupe. These characters possess a vaudevillian type of personality. In the context of New York Theater, comedy was primarily the province of the vaudeville stage. *Showboat* was groundbreaking in its incorporation of social elements heretofore absent from the musical. Besides racism (in the form of bigotry and miscegenation), these include gambling, spousal desertion, and alcoholism. Ravenal is a wayfarer who gambles. Sometimes he can control this habit, but often he cannot. This failure as a husband and a father causes him to desert his family; he feels since he cannot regularly provide for them, the family would be better if he left.

Another example of spousal desertion is Steve Baker, Julie’s husband. Years after Julie and Steve have left the Cotton Blossom, we see Julie in Chicago, abandoned by Steve. She now has to support herself. Julie is singing at the Trocadero Night Club. However, more often than not, she can be found drinking, and is quite often drunk. It is Steve’s abandonment that has driven Julie to alcoholism. As stated earlier, the miscegenation scene is this musical’s most controversial one. Pete, an employee of the Cotton Blossom, is in love with Julie, despite the fact that she is married to someone else. He showers her with gifts that she in turn gives away. When Pete sees Queenie wearing the broach he gave Julie, he becomes enraged and threatens to reveal Julie’s secret. Pete locates the town sheriff, who is on his way to the showboat. Steve, having discovered this, decides to cut Julie’s finger and suck her blood. Once the sheriff arrives, he informs them that there is a miscegenation case on board. Julie is half-black and half-white, (This explains why Julie knew “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man”). Steve comes to his wife’s defense when he claims to be black also. All the characters in the scene will swear to the fact that he has “nigger blood” in him. The sheriff believes the group but warns them not to give a show that night with a mixed cast.

Racial issues remain unresolved in *Showboat*. This is most probably because they were still volatile in society at that time. *Showboat* defines problems without giving the illusion of solving them. Raymond Knapp discusses possible solutions to the race problem in the United States:

On one level, then, we might reasonably note that there is no solution to the race problem in America-so that *Showboat* has no option but to leave its related dramatic problems unresolved. But, on another level, we may also note that despite the extended representations of the plight of American blacks in *Showboat*, the show’s dramatic focus remains resolutely on its white population, whose problems are at each turn

placed in the foreground. Thus, the context in which there seems to be no solution to America's race problem is already a closed shop.(15)

For the musical to be anything other than dramatically over-ended would thus be false. *Showboat* is ultimately less about being black at this time than being white. *Showboat* did much to change the public's perception of blacks, according to Kislán:

The [black] race was a victim of much that was tasteless and derisive until *Showboat* revealed a sympathetic treatment of a serious dramatic situation where dignity survives where misery, hard work and suffering waste the body but not man's indomitable spirit.(16)

I believe this was one of Kern and Hammerstein's motives for writing the show. A predominantly white audience needed to be educated regarding a major problem in this country.

Showboat was the first musical to use black and white choruses, even though they were separated. Despite the fact that the musical calls for a black chorus and two black employees (Joe and Queenie), not all the performers in the original production were black. The first Queenie was Tess Gardella, a black-face entertainer. She went by the stage name, Aunt Jemima. She was so popular an entertainer that the program listed her as Aunt Jemima instead of Tess Gardella. Richard Kislán describes the roles blacks played in theatre productions before this show: "Before *Showboat* existed, musicals treated the black person as a comic character in the genre of fool, clown or darkie simpleton"¹⁸. In this work, Joe and Queenie are part of the troupe. They are the fuel that keeps the showboat running. If it were not for Queenie, the troupe would starve. Joe is a Renaissance man who helps whenever possible. Cap'n Andy and his daughter are similar in that they treat Joe, Queenie and any other black character as a member of the family; you would never hear them uttering racial epithets. The use of the word "niggers" is probably the most controversial aspect of the musical, even more so than that of a bi-racial woman being married to a white man. The term "niggers" is never used in any film version. This is due to the fact that black cast members, in many versions of the musical, have objected to the term and have, in fact, refused to sing it. The opening line, which contained the epithet, "niggers", is perhaps the most shocking piece of dialogue:

Thus the progression of euphemistic alterations to which this opening line has been subjected is almost ludicrous. First it was "*Niggers* all work on de Mississippi" in the 1936 film it was "*Darkies* all work on de Mississippi," in the 1946 revival it was "*Colored folks* all work on de Mississippi," in *Till the Clouds Roll By* (a film based on the life of Jerome Kern), it was "*Here we all* work on de Mississippi" and by the 1966 revival it was "*Nobody* all work on de Mississippi" because the Negro chorus was omitted altogether from the opening number.(23)

In reading along with the recording, I noticed something in the dialogue in the pantry scene when Julie and Magnolia are discussing Ravenal while Queenie is cooking. Julie wants a biscuit but is denied by Queenie. Julie suggests Joe help her. Queenie exclaims: "Joe! Dat lazy nigger don't help me-he's always too tired-efdat feller, ever tried to cook, he'd be puttin' popcorn in the flapjacks so dat dey'd turn over by dam selves!" I believe it is the only time in the recording where either Joe or Queenie use and the word "nigger." As suggested earlier, the only characters that use the term outside of a song are Pete and Vallon. A critic noted in the recent PBS special, "Broadway: The American Musical," "Musicals are divided into everything before *Showboat* and everything after *Showboat*." *Showboat* was groundbreaking in several respects.

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