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Dorothy West: The Richer, the Poorer: Stories, Sketches, Reminiscences

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The Richer, the Poorer: Stories, Sketches, and Reminiscences

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West, Dorothy
(1995)

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Genre: Autobiography (literary), Essay Collection, Story Collection. Country: United States.

Dorothy West was propelled into the world of literature as a schoolgirl in 1926 when her story “The Typewriter” took second prize in the *Opportunity* magazine competition and subsequently was published in the July 1926 edition. This story, along with sixteen others, was re-printed in West's collection *The Richer,*

the Poorer, published in 1995 during the revival of interest in the literary career of the only remaining writer of the New Negro/Harlem Renaissance era of the 1920s.

Dorothy West's characteristic irony is evident in her first important story: in “The Typewriter” a janitor helps his daughter practice her typing by dictating fictional letters. The janitor feels important and successful during these contrived business sessions, so he creates a fictional persona and begins to live in a fantasy world in which he is a successful businessman. This world crashes for the janitor when his daughter finds a job and returns the typewriter on the same day the newspaper reports that J.P. Morgan – with whom the janitor has had his most intense fantasy correspondence – has gone bankrupt.

West often writes ironically about the aspirations and attitudes of middle-class characters, yet not all of West's short stories are set in a comfortable middle-class environment. In stories such as “Jack in the Pot”, first published in 1940, poverty and its effects on character are in the foreground. West's “Jack in the Pot” is the story of Mrs. Edmunds, a woman who wins money – jack –

after she has suffered through hunger and while she is on welfare. Mrs. Edmunds and her husband have lost their middle-class lifestyle because the Great Depression has caused her husband to close his business. Mr. Edmunds is forty-nine, unemployed, and unsuccessful in his search for work. His wife finds that she is unable to be honest with him as well as with others – neither those who wish to exploit her poverty nor those whose need is more dire than hers – about the money. Mrs. Edmunds' conscience, finally, does not allow her to persist in her selfishness. In another story, “The Penny”, West illustrates how economic privilege allows some people to disdain others simply because they are poor. When West writes about poverty, she does not sentimentalize the poor; rather she explores the emotional and psychological impact of poverty. Most of West's characters, though, are successful or are from the rising laboring-class that comprised much of the African American middle-class in its nascent stages.

In a number of West's stories, especially those that she originally wrote for the *New York Daily News*, she does not describe her characters in ways that would indicate whether they are black people. In other stories –

“Odyssey of an Egg” and “About a Woman Named Nancy” – she pushes the boundaries of characterization and setting by eliminating references to skin color, while situating the story within a context that suggests ethnic-cultural ambiguity. Further, in “Jack in the Pot” West's references to color are so subtle as to be nearly incidental to the overall story. In West's title story, “The Richer, the Poorer” – which was published in the *New York Daily News* – she writes about two sisters, Lottie and Bess, who take opposite paths in life. Bess lives in the moment, while Lottie is very cautious and so industrious that she never marries. Indeed, West's Lottie also goes to work instead of finishing school. Bess, however, marries a musician and travels. When the women are older and alone, Bess – a widow – moves in with Lottie, because her “gypsy” lifestyle has left her without a home of her own. Bess's stories help Lottie see that her own existence has been “a life never lived.” West's “The Richer, the Poorer” emphasizes the poverty of Lottie's miserly life and the wealth in Bess's active life.

Dorothy West's book *The Richer, the Poorer* also includes a number of stories—“The Five Dollar Bill”, “The Funeral”, “The Bird Like

No Other”, “The Penny” – that convincingly present a child's perspective. The perspective of innocence is moralistic, yet engaging. In “The Five Dollar Bill”, a little girl named Judy – a name that recurs in West's stories with intelligent girl characters – witnesses and is affected deeply by her mother's duplicity. West's narrator comments that adults rarely “profit by childhood experiences”, because they forget the “suffering and tears” as they view the past through a “sentimental haze” of memory.

In many of Dorothy West's short stories, she presents in condensed form several of the issues and themes that are found in her novels. Her stories actively engage vernacular qualities such as the black sermonic tradition and music, both of which have informed African American literature. More specifically, though, West is concerned with intra-group issues relating to gender, class and color.

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