

Paul Robeson: Triumph and Tragedy TVUUC April 27, 2019

This is the text of the service which was accompanied by music performed by soloists and the choir. I have added links to YouTube videos of Paul Robeson performing the various songs as well as to three videos that are mentioned in the text.

The literature on Robeson is vast. The most comprehensive biography is *Paul Robeson*, by Martin Baum Duberman, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988.

Prelude “By and By”
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8W59quHjr_A

Opening Words

We begin with Shakespeare. It is the last speech of Othello, Paul Robeson’s greatest stage role. Othello has killed Desdemona and his life is in ruins. When they come for him from Venice, he says

Soft you; a word or two before you go.
I have done the state some service, and they know't.
No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice: then must you speak
Of one that loved not wisely but too well;

In this service we will recount the life and career of a great American, Paul Robeson, someone little remembered today. We will try to do justice to the rich and complex life of this man. Paul Robeson was a great singer, so much of the service will consist of the music that helped define him. The prelude was a spiritual that he often performed as a duet with his friend and accompanist, Lawrence Brown.

Come let us worship together.

Please rise in body or spirit for the chalice lighting song, another spiritual that was part of Robeson’s repertoire.

Chalice Lighting Song Hymn 208 “Every Time I Feel the Spirit”
Chorus, Verse 1 and Chorus
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3iw1VBWKxiI>

Paul Robeson had leading roles in many films, most of which he grew to dislike because the portrayal of African Americans and Africans was at best demeaning. The one film he liked was called "The Proud Valley," in which he plays a down and out American named David Goliath who wanders into a Welsh village looking for work. David hears a Welsh men's choir rehearsing and joins in singing, "Lord God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel." The members of the village choir, who hope to win the national competition, invite him to join their choir and get him a job in the coal mine. They don't worry about race because after all, in the coal mine, everyone is black. (Proud Valley trailer: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2dg055>) This is one of the songs he performs with the choir in the film. Please rise in body or spirit and sing hymn 119 in the gray hymnal, "Once to Every Soul and Nation." Hymn 119.

Opening Hymn "Once to Every Soul and Nation" 119
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrjQcVsqr-o>

Paul Robeson was born on April 9, 1898 in Princeton, New Jersey, the youngest of five children of William Drew Robeson and Maria Bustill Robeson. William Robeson had been born a slave in Martin County, North Carolina, but in 1860 at age fifteen, he managed to escape and make his way north to Pennsylvania. Probably illiterate when he escaped, William obtained an elementary school education and entered the all-black Lincoln University where he earned two bachelor's degrees. At the time of Paul's birth, his father had been pastor of the Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church in Princeton for nearly twenty years.

In 1901, Paul's father was forced out of his pastorate because he was too outspoken regarding social justice for African-Americans. A few years later, Paul's mother died in a tragic accident. Eventually, William transferred his religious affiliation to the African Methodist Episcopal Zion church and became pastor of the St. Thomas parish in nearby Somerville, New Jersey.

As Paul remembered, his father was a model of "rock-like strength and integrity." As a parent, William Robeson was loving, but demanding. He expected his children to excel. He also provided Paul with a deep religious faith. As his brother, Ben, an A.M.E Zion minister wrote, "Who would dare assert that [Paul] is not in the ministry? He is bearing the cross of a despised, oppressed and neglected people."

Paul was one of a small number of African-American students in the integrated Somerville High School. He was well-liked because of his politeness and charismatic personality. For the time, Robeson was a big man, eventually six feet three inches tall and 225 pounds, handsome and charming. He was an excellent student, a star athlete in multiple sports, and an outstanding singer and debater. In Somerville, Paul experienced less overt racism than many African-Americans but despite his

accomplishments he was never fully accepted. As a result, he developed enormous self control, something he exhibited throughout his life.

As a senior Paul learned that there was a state-wide competitive exam for a full scholarship to Rutgers University. He had intended to attend the Lincoln University, but the Rutgers Scholarship would ease the financial burden on his father so he took the exam, and won the scholarship.

As a freshman, Paul was the only Black student at Rutgers. He had been a star on his high school football team so he tried out for the Rutgers team. At his first practice he was viciously attacked by his white teammates who broke his nose and several ribs sending him to bed for more than a week. He was tempted to quit but remembered the words of his father that he was a representative of a "lot of Negro boys who wanted to play football and wanted to go to college and, as their representative, I had to show that I could take whatever was handed out." So he went back and at the next practice, a varsity player stomped on his hand. At that point, a simmering rage boiled over. On the next play, as the first string backfield came toward him, Robeson brought down three men and grabbed the ball carrier and held him over his head, ready to smash him to the ground. The coach intervened by shouting, "Robey, you're on the varsity." Robeson became the star of the Rutgers football team and as a junior and senior was named to Walter Camp's all-American team. It was a different era when players played both offense and defense and there were only eleven players named to the all-American team. Robeson eventually earned eleven varsity letter in football, basketball, baseball and track and field.

Robeson was also an outstanding student elected to Phi Beta Kappa as a junior and was valedictorian of his graduating class in 1919. (I learned recently that Paul's granddaughter, Susan Robeson, was initiated as an honorary member of the Rutgers Phi Beta Kappa chapter this spring.) After graduation Paul moved to Harlem and attended law school, first at NYU and then at Columbia. He supported himself by coaching and by playing professional football. The game was rough and Paul experienced discrimination, but the money was good. In one game he sustained a serious injury and was rushed to New York Presbyterian Hospital for emergency surgery. There he met Eslanda Cardozo Goode, known as Essie, a chemistry graduate who was working in a laboratory at the hospital. Within a year or so the two were married, a marriage that lasted until her death, although often uneasily because of Paul's numerous extramarital affairs.

After earning his law degree, he got a job through his Rutgers connections in a law firm where he was the only African-American. His legal career was short. When a secretary refused to take dictation from him, he walked out of the firm, never to return.

After he left the law firm Essie encouraged him to become involved in both singing and theater. He got roles in several amateur productions around New York and caught the attention of members of the Provincetown Players, an experimental theater company in Greenwich Village which included Eugene O'Neill. Eventually, Paul played the lead in two O'Neill plays, "The Emperor Jones" and "All God's Chillen Have Wings" which launched his theatrical career. During this period he connected with the talented pianist, Lawrence Brown, who was arranging spirituals for the concert stage. Their first concert on April 19, 1925 was sold out, an enormous critical success and started Robeson's career as a concert artist.

Robeson is well known for his performance in Show Boat, a musical by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein. They had written the role of Joe with Robeson in mind but he was unavailable for the New York premier. He did sing the role in the production in London in 1927 as well as in the New York revival and in the film. Joe only appears on stage three times to sing Ol' Man River, but Robeson stole the show with his rendition of the song. In the original version, Ol' Man River is a song of resignation. As Robeson's political awareness grew, he changed the lyrics, with permission of Oscar Hammerstein, and transformed it from a song of resignation to a song of resistance. Many of you are familiar with this song, but listen as Roy Kersey sings Robeson's version.

Song "Ol' Man River" (Use Robeson's revised words)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KWdZ3ZrwW9>

Joys and Concerns and Meditation

The offertory hymn is also from Robeson's repertoire, a lovely setting of a poem by William Blake. The poem is based on the legend that as a young man, Jesus came to England with Joseph of Arimathea and visited Glastonbury. A further lesson is that after Jesus's death, Joseph carried the Holy Grail back to Glastonbury and founded the first Christian church.

Offertory Jerusalem Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KWdZ3ZrwW9>

In 1927 Robeson went to Europe for a concert tour with Lawrence Brown which began in Paris. Although Paul returned to the U.S. for concert tours and movie roles from time to time, he and Essie lived in London for the next decade. They liked London. They experienced little overt racial discrimination and were able to live anywhere they chose. Paul was very popular in Europe and his concerts were generally sold out.

London also provided an opportunity he had hoped for, to play Othello. Unfortunately

it was a flawed production because of a poor director and a weak Iago. Paul's performance had mixed reviews from the critics but was loved by the audience. His powerful and charismatic stage presence made up for his lack of technical acting skill. The play had a relatively short run, but for Paul, it was an important step. As he said in an interview, "Othello has taken away from me all kinds of fears, all sense of limitation, and all racial prejudice. Othello has opened to me new and wider fields; in a word, Othello has made me free."

In London Paul began to study languages in earnest. He was particularly taken with Russian and became quite fluent. He also "discovered Africa," as he said, and studied African culture as well as several African languages. He expanded his concert repertoire to include folk songs from many countries.

In 1934 Paul, Essie and their white friend Marie Seton traveled to Moscow primarily to meet with the great Soviet film director, Sergei Eisenstein about a possible film project. Because there was no through train, they had to lay over for a day in Berlin. Paul had spent time in Berlin four years earlier and had been warmly received. This time it was different. Walking to a hotel, they were viewed contemptuously by storm troopers. Returning to the train station that evening, Paul saw the look of a lynch mob in the eyes of three uniformed men. Fortunately, they were able to board the train without incident but Paul was deeply shaken.

In Moscow he was greeted enthusiastically. By then Paul was fluent in Russian so he was able to communicate without an interpreter. What he saw in the Soviet Union was a country that seemed to have eliminated prejudice and discrimination. Although there was a darker side to the Stalinist regime, Robeson's experience was entirely positive. As he remarked, In the Soviet Union he had "felt like a human being for the first time in his life. . . for the first time in my life, I walk in full human dignity." The contrast between Berlin and Moscow made a huge impression on Robeson. He developed a deep affection for the Soviet Union and a lifelong hatred of fascism.

One of the Russian songs that Robeson added to his repertoire was one he called "Song of the Plains." It is also known as "Meadowlands." When he performed it, he moved seamlessly between English and Russian. Our choir will now perform it, the first verse sung in Russian by my favorite soprano, followed by the English version. (517 words)

Song "Song of the Plains" aka "Meadowlands"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h5PBrFXNQQA>

In 1937 Robeson decided he had to go to Spain. The Spanish civil war was raging and Paul wanted to see the situation for himself and to entertain the Republican troops. In January 1938, He and Essie traveled to southern France where they were met by a car

and driver who took them to various sites including Madrid, just a few miles from the front. He even went to the front and sang for both sides, temporarily stopping the war. The troops were thrilled to see Robeson and impressed with his courage, openly traveling into a war zone. The time in Spain solidified Robeson's position as an anti-fascist.

Back in 1929 Paul happened upon a group of miners from the Rhonnda Valley in Wales who had walked to London to protest the working conditions in the mines. Impressed by their singing, Paul joined the demonstrators and forged a strong connection. Subsequently, he donated proceeds from a concert to a miner's relief fund and traveled to Wales to sing. In 1939 he came back to Wales to film *The Proud Valley* just before returning to the United States. Paul's connection with the Welsh miners was crucial to his developing political perspective as a socialist and a supporter of working people and labor unions.

Back in the U.S. in 1939, Robeson became an enthusiastic supporter of the war effort. He saw fascism as the principle enemy of civilization. Perhaps his biggest success was the radio broadcast of the "Ballad for Americans" a piece for soloist, choir and orchestra written by Earl Robinson and John LaTouche. The broadcast on November 5, 1939 was an instant sensation and made Robeson an international celebrity. There was a second broadcast and Robeson began to perform it in concert. The song which is a patriotic and idealistic summary of American history and values is 11 minutes long, too long to perform in this service, but I encourage you to listen to it. You can find it on YouTube. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KWdZ3ZrwW9>) It includes with the lines

Our country's strong, our country's young,
And her greatest songs are still unsung.
From her plains and mountains we have sprung,
To keep the faith with those who went before.

In 1942, Robeson starred in a production of *Othello* on Broadway, this time with an experienced director and a strong supporting cast. Although the reviews were mixed the play ran for 296 performances a record for Shakespeare on Broadway at the time and then was taken on a nationwide tour. Audiences loved Robeson who dominated the stage and played *Othello* as a dignified Black man who came from an Africa of equal stature to ancient Venice.

In 1945 Robeson was at the height of his fame: the *Ballad for Americans*, *Othello*, sold out concerts, champion of the war effort. It was not to last.

In 1949 Robeson went back to Europe, mostly to perform. But in April he attended the

Congress of the World Partisans of Peace where he gave a fiery speech which was misquoted in the press. The press reported that Robeson had compared the United States government to Nazi, Germany and that American Negroes would never go to war against the Soviet Union. No one checked the accuracy and the misquotation was denounced by both the white and Black press. This was the beginning of the Cold War and that country was becoming increasingly conservative and fiercely anti-Communist and Robeson's misquoted remarks just fed the hysteria. It was the beginning of the destruction of Paul Robeson as a public figure

He visited Moscow in June 1949 to give a concert. While there he tried to see one of his Jewish friends, the poet Itzik Feffer. Near the end of his visit Feffer appeared alone at his hotel. Through gestures, Feffer told Robeson that the room was bugged. Their verbal conversation was superficial but through gestures and notes, Robeson learned that Feffer had been imprisoned and tortured and that another Jewish friend, Solomon Mikhoels, had been executed.

As a subtle but clear protest, Robeson concluded his concert in Moscow with a single encore. Prior to singing, he talked about his friendship with Feffer and Mikhoels and translated the lyrics of the song into Russian. He then sang, in Yiddish, the song of the Warsaw ghetto, "Zog mit Kaynmal." After a moment's silence the audience responded with a burst of emotion. We will now play that song which Robeson here sings in both Yiddish and English.

Song: Zog Nit Kaynmal

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NV0hP9dAApk&index=3&list=RDqs-8Zd4ykmoBB>

Robeson returned to the U.S. in June 1949 and continued to make strong political statements. He had come to believe that American racism and imperialism were grave threats to humanity and he connected the fascism he had seen in Europe to the political system in the South that perpetuated racism. He had developed his political beliefs while living in England so he had a strongly internationalist perspective making connections between colonialism in Africa and racism in the U.S. and between the lives of Welsh miners and African-Americans. All his positions were contrary to the consensus in Cold War America and he was vilified in both the mainstream and African-American press. The House Un-American Affairs Committee held a series of hearings of hearings at which the witnesses, including Jackie Robinson, the first African American in Major League baseball, condemned Robeson.

In 1950, the State Department confiscated Robeson's passport without giving a reason. It went even further and put pressure on countries such as Canada to which an American could travel without a passport to deny him entry. Robeson was unable to

leave the country for nearly a decade. This confinement was a serious financial and psychological blow. Robeson earned most of his income from concerts in Europe. Most of his concerts in the U.S. were cancelled because of his political position. He did what he could to maintain contact with his supporters abroad. For example, in 1952 and 1953 he gave concerts from the back of a flat-bed truck parked one foot from the Canadian border at the Peace Arch near Blaine, Washington. He sang for Welsh miners by a trans-Atlantic telephone connection.

The confinement and the attacks by the press and the public took its toll and Robeson's physical and mental health suffered. In June 1956 he was ordered to appear before House Un-American Activities Committee. His attorney and his friends feared that he would not have the strength to testify but he put on a defiant performance. When asked why he did not stay in Russia, he said, "Because my father was a slave, and my people died to build this country, and I am going to stay here and have a part of it just like you. And no fascist-minded people will drive me from it. Is that clear?"

In 1958 a Supreme Court decision restored Robeson's passport and he was able to return to Europe to sing and to play Othello for one last time at Stratford-on-Avon. He also did a concert tour of Australia and New Zealand. The famous Sydney Opera House was being built at the time. One day at lunch time, Robeson visited the construction site and gave an impromptu concert for the workers. You can see the film on YouTube, men in hard hats sitting on girders listening to Paul.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eg7bPgrosAE>)

One of the songs brought tears to the eyes of these workers, a song we will now hear.

Song: Joe Hill

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qs-8Zd4ykmo&list=RDqs-8Zd4ykmo&start_radio=1&t=0

By 1961 Paul Robeson was a broken man. His physical and mental health continued to deteriorate. He had numerous mental breakdowns and even tried to commit suicide. For the rest of his life Robeson was largely out of the public eye while the causes he had championed such as Civil Rights were taken up by a new generation that barely knew him. After Essie died of cancer in 1965, Paul moved to Philadelphia where his older sister Marian cared for him.

More than 40 years after his death, how should we view the life and legacy of Paul Robeson, one of the most complex men of the 20th Century. As a singer his reputation seems secure. His magnificent voice brought spirituals and other folk songs to the concert stage. As an actor he was largely untrained, but his stage presence and voice made him a more than capable performer. His portrayals of Othello were highly praised and paved the way for other African-Americans to play that role. He came to

disavow almost all of his films, but he was a strong Black presence on screen and played the only roles available to him. He was a great athlete, an All-American football player. There were some who said he was even better at basketball.

It is his politics that are problematic for some. He was clearly a man of the left and a strong advocate for African-Americans. Although he never joined the party, Robeson embraced communism at a time when many thought it was the solution to the depression and to economic inequality. His deep connection with the Welsh miners made him a supporter of workers and trade unions and he made the connection between racism and economic inequality. He was an outspoken advocate for civil rights and an opponent of colonialism. He refused to sing or play to segregated audiences. There are some who regard him as the father of modern pan-Africanism. He was an outspoken advocate for world peace and friendly relations with the Soviet Union.

What concerns many people about Robeson is his refusal to denounce Stalin and to criticize the Soviet Union even after Nikita Khrushchev publicly revealed the horrors of Stalin's dictatorship. One possible explanation is the emotional experience he had in 1934 going from Nazi Berlin to Moscow where he finally felt like a dignified human being. Perhaps he felt that any criticism of the Soviet regime would undermine his pleas for better relations between the U.S. and Russia. We will never know because Robeson kept silent. He never explained his position.

In the end, what I admire about Paul Robeson are his artistry, his courage and integrity, and his radical critique of racism and economic inequality in America and of colonialism around the world. Although his refusal to disavow Stalin is regrettable, I cannot pretend to understand the pressures that he faced in a Jim Crow America, even after reading a half dozen biographies. What was done to Paul Robeson in the 1950s is inexcusable. It seems that the establishment decided that he had to be broken because of his radical politics and because of his popularity, his charisma and his enormous talent. He was certainly the best known African American and perhaps the best known American in 1945. Therefore, Paul Robeson was a dangerous man. Even the mainstream African-American organizations like the NAACP abandoned him but he refused to compromise his integrity and back down from his principles.

To conclude, I return to the last speech of Othello. Paul Robeson "did the state some service." If he had a tragic flaw, it was that "He loved not wisely but too well." He was an idealist who had a deep faith in God and in his fellow humans. He loved this country profoundly, so much that he had to tell the truth as he saw it. In the face of terrible consequences, he used his artistry and rhetoric to make the world a better place. Sadly, in the Cold War era, the country was not ready to hear what he had to say, even when it was accurate.

Paul Robeson died on January 23, 1976. His funeral was held at Mother Zion A.M.E. Zion Church in Harlem, the church where his brother Ben had presided for twenty-sevn years. Thousands attended. As they carried his casket out of the church, the mournful strains of "Deep River" flooded the Harlem street. (697 words)

Song: "Deep River"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9qXBG5BRT3c>

Closing Words

The closing words are engraved on Paul Robeson's gravestone. "The artist must elect to fight for freedom or slavery. I have made my choice. I had no alternative."