

Within Our Gates

- 1920
- Black and white, silent
- Running time: 79 minutes

Producer and Director: Oscar Micheaux

Screenplay: Oscar Micheaux

Distributor: Micheaux Book and Film Company

Cast:

Sylvia Landry	Evelyn Preer
Alma Prichard	Flo Clements
Conrad Drebert	James D. Ruffin
Larry Prichard	Jack Chenault
Detective Philip Gentry	William Smith
Dr. V. Vivian	Charles D. Lucas
Mrs. Geraldine Stratton	Bernice Ladd
Mrs. Elena Warwick	Mrs. Evelyn
Jasper Landry	William Stark
Jasper's Wife	Mattie Edwards
Philip Gridlestone	Ralph Johnson
Efram, Gridlestone's Servant	E. G. Tatum
Emil Landry	Grant Edwards
Armand Gridlestone	Grant Gorman

The Story: is actually four stories, two set in the North and two in the South.

The consistent character throughout all four stories is Sylvia Landry. *Within Our Gates* is her story.

The first northern story involves Sylvia Landry; her cousin, Alma Prichard; Prichard's stepbrother Larry, a criminal; Conrad, Landry's fiancée when the story opens. (15 min.)

The first southern story follows Sylvia's work as a schoolteacher at a school in Piney Woods founded by Rev. Wilson Jacobs and his sister. (5 min.)

The second northern story's principal characters are Sylvia Landry; Dr. V. Vivian; Mrs. Elena Warwick, a wealthy white philanthropist; Mrs. Geraldine Stratton, a southern white woman who is visiting Boston; Old Ned, a black preacher. (24 min.)

The second southern story is that of Sylvia Landry; her mother, father, and younger brother; a white plantation owner, Philip Gridlestone and his brother, Armand; Efram, a black man who secretly relays information about the black families on the plantation to Gridlestone; and the white townspeople. (35 min.)

00:00-01:40 — explanation of the reconstruction of "Within Our Gates" – The film was unavailable and considered lost for over 70 years. Where was a copy of the film located? How was this film reconstructed?

02:03 How does the film's opening title card describe race relations in the North?

02:17-12:27 The film opens in the North with Sylvia Landry living in the home of her cousin, Alma Prichard, and awaiting her fiancée's return from his work in Canada.

In the viewer's first introduction to Sylvia Landry, what do we learn about her? What is she doing? Pay attention to the setting and the dress: where is she? How is she dressed? How is the room furnished? Think about the photographs Du Bois assembled for the Paris exhibition: what were the visual symbols of respectability, education, and status in those photographs? in the opening of this film?

Who is Conrad Drebert: what do we learn about him from this opening? Think about Micheaux's own life and his first film as they help you understand the image of Conrad, Overall, what are the visual elements that are important to our understanding of the characters? Are there any things that seem contradictory when comparing the visual representations to what else you learn about any of the characters?

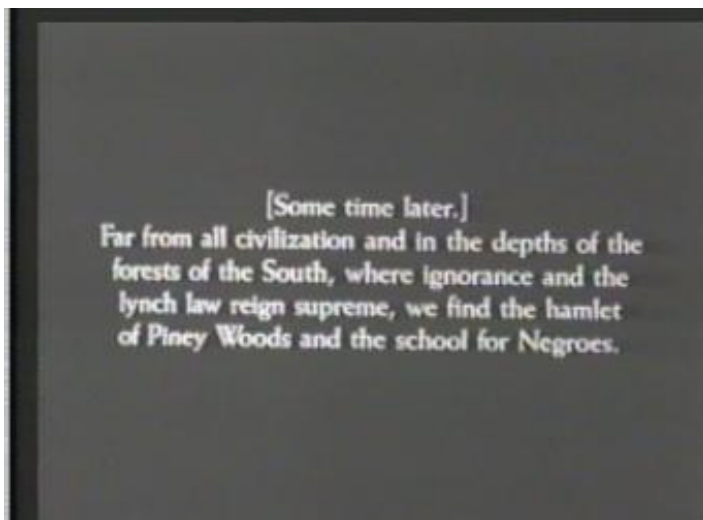
Micheaux presents a number of views on black life in the North; are there any aspects of his depiction to which 1920s black film critics or community leaders might object?

12:27-15:12 -- Conrad arrives in the city

How does Micheaux then complicate our understanding of Conrad Drebert?

15:15 – Some time later. [A scene is missing in which Conrad leaves for his position in Brazil, having refused to hear Sylvia's explanation.] Then the story moves South.

Micheaux sets the stage for the southern parts of this story with this title card. When you have a sense of the whole film, return to this and consider what Micheaux means by "far from all civilization," to whom does he refer when he speaks of "ignorance"? How might the audiences seeing Micheaux's film in 1920 have a different idea about this at the end of the film than at this point in the viewing? How might black and white audiences have understood this title card differently?



15:28-18:20 The school at Piney Woods

Compare the image of Sylvia Landry at Piney Woods to that which you have previously seen. Does Micheaux signal any changes?

How does Micheaux represent Piney Woods? What do you learn about the school? About the town? How does he use the film to educate audiences about the economic and political conditions of black southerners? How does he represent the poor black farmer and his desire for education for his children?

Why does Micheaux use dialect here? Is this have the same meaning as when minstrel and vaudeville shows used dialect? How might black and white audiences viewing the film in the 1920s have different interpretations of the use of dialect?

18:50-20:17 The story begins to move back North

What is Sylvia's struggle? Why does she decide to travel north?
What is our visual image of Sylvia as she returns north?

20:17-23:50 meeting Dr. V. Vivian

Again consider how Micheaux introduces a character—what is the setting, the dress, what is Dr. Vivian doing, what do we learn about his political interests? Micheaux signals that Dr. Vivian is an intellectual but also that he athletic; what images of masculinity/manhood does Micheaux give the audience throughout the film?



The *Literary Digest's* cover is an image of President Theodore Roosevelt who died in January 1919.

23:57 Mrs. Geraldine Stratton

Opposes woman's suffrage because it might mean the enfranchisement of black women

Audiences in 1920 would have been very familiar with [Senator Vardaman's](#) views on race

24:47 Micheaux has already introduced Sylvia Landry as heroic in her devotion to improving the education of black southerners. We see her as heroic in other ways as well.

28:18 The home of Mrs. Elena Warwick

What do we learn about Mrs. Warwick from her home? From her meeting with Sylvia in the hospital and in her home?

30:15 Why does Mrs. Warwick seek Mrs. Stratton's advice? What attitudes shape the advice Stratton gives?

Old Ned and Efram

Old Ned and Efram are Micheaux's response to D. W. Griffith's "faithful souls." Think back to how D. W. Griffith characterized what he referred to as the loyal, "good" black people – how did he represent them in his film and how did he talk about them when he answered critics of his film?

In *Old Ned and Efram* Micheaux presents two black men who seem to fit the stereotypical image of the faithful black, more loyal and concerned about the powerful white men in their lives than about themselves or other African Americans. But Micheaux used these two characters to complicate and critique Griffith's representation.

Old Ned is the embodiment of Paul Laurence Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask," a poem that most African Americans would have learned in church or school in the early 20th century.

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!

[Paul Laurence Dunbar, Lyrics of Lowly Life (Dodd, Mead & Co., 1896)]

With **Efram**, Micheaux points out that even truly “faithful souls” are not safe from the lynch mob.

In the character of Old Ned Micheaux challenges the idea of black people who are happy in their subservience and with Efram he undermines Griffith’s argument that it is only aggressive blacks who don’t know their place that need fear the lynch mob.

Think also of what Micheaux suggests about white’s understanding of what they imagine as their loyal servants; after all, Old Ned tells the white men to their face that white people are going to Hell and black people to Heaven. Not imagining that he could be laughing with them and critiquing them at the same time, they hear this as compliment.

Additionally, think about the performance style of the actors who play Old Ned and Efram. How is it different from the performance style of all the other characters in the film? What performance tradition are Old Ned and Efram drawing from? Why?

- 40:48-44:00** Sylvia Landry’s mission in Boston is successful. Her arguments are eventually more persuasive than Geraldine Stratton’s.
- 44:15-45:20** But if she loves Dr. Vivian, why has she returned to Piney Woods? Is it solely a dedication to her students?
- 45:20** And what evil from the North has followed her? Clearly, not all African Americans are “race men” and “race women,” dedicated to uplifting others.
- 48:00-50:00** What could Larry, “the Leech,” tell the school about Sylvia that would mean she could not continue to teach there? What is she afraid people will know about her past?
- 53:11-end** **Sylvia’s Story.** The last half of the film is a direct response to *Birth of a Nation*. What is the significance of Micheaux doing this through the character of Sylvia?
- 53:29** Who is Jasper Landry? How does Micheaux characterize the Landry family? Pay attention to the title cards but also to the visual representation. Describe the Landry home; this is a rural cabin, are there ways that Micheaux visually signal’s respectability? How/why is this important?
- 56:25** Introduction of Efrem (see above discussion of Old Ned and Efrem). How does Micheaux represent Efrem—visually?
- What is the financial relationship between the Landry family and Philip Gridlestone?
- 1:02:00-1:15:17** Who makes up the lynch mob? -- race, gender, age, occupation?
- 1:08:38-1:09:50** How does Micheaux critique the press? How does the press collude in the lynching of Efrem? Of the Landrys?
- 1:10:34** On what day of the week are the Landrys lynched?
- 1:12:00-** Micheaux juxtaposes Sylvia’s fate with that of her family, intercutting scenes from

1:15:50

the cabin with scenes from the bonfire. The common justification of lynching was to argue a connection between lynchings and rape; Micheaux here also argues a connection between lynching and rape.

How does Micheaux challenge the mythology around lynching?

How does he insist upon understanding a range of kinds of violence against African Americans?

At the core of Thomas Dixon's play and D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* was the danger of miscegenation. How does Micheaux reread miscegenation and its dangers?

A central scene in *Birth of a Nation* is Silas Lynch's effort to force Elsie Stoneman to marry him. Compare that scene to Micheaux's depiction of the confrontation between Sylvia Landry and Armand Griddlestone—pay particular attention to camera angles and specific shots as well as each character's actions. In what ways is Micheaux reproducing Griffith's scene? Why would he do that? In what ways is he writing a wholly new scene? Compare Sylvia Landry's and Elsie Stoneman's response to these respective men's efforts to take them by force?

1:15:50

How might one understand the closing scene between Sylvia Landry and Dr. Vivian? Does any of it seem out of place? Does it change the representation of Sylvia? Some film historians wonder if the ending is an effort by Micheaux to appease the censors; can you see the argument that could be made for that.

Parallel Editing:

Rev. Jacobs paces, Mrs. Warwick paces – his fate is intertwined with her decision even though they have never met

Dr. Vivian reads, Sylvia Landry reads – two educated African Americans with a dedication to their people; the audience expects and wants their acquaintance to blossom; Micheaux presents them as equals in intelligence and political commitment (though Sylvia does daydream about Dr. Vivian a lot when she is reading).

The most important of the parallel scenes are Micheaux's juxtaposition of the lynching and the attempted rape.

What other film techniques are common to *Birth of a Nation* and *Within Our Gates*?

James K. Vardaman, Governor of Mississippi, 1904-1908; U.S. Senate, 1913-1919. Vardaman was a southern Progressive who advocated child labor laws and greater government regulation of railroads and corporations. Under his governorship, a state department of agriculture was created to better look after farmers' interests.

Vardaman also strongly opposed African American voting rights and public funding of education for African Americans beyond the elementary levels. He maintained that African Americans were "lazy, lying, lustful animals, which no amount of training can transform into a tolerable citizen." He declared himself "just as opposed to Booker T. Washington as a voter, with all his Anglo-Saxon re-enforcements, as I am to the coconut-headed, chocolate-colored, typical little coon, Andy Dotson, who blacks my shoes every morning. Neither is fit to perform the supreme function of citizenship." Regarding education, Vardaman ran for governor on a platform that called for the abolition of all state aid to schools for African Americans. While unsuccessful at totally eliminating that aid, under his administration funds for the education of black Mississippians were severely decreased. Vardaman argued that only the minimum of an education was necessary or even advisable for African Americans as their mental development naturally stopped at the age of puberty; therefore, it would be "a positive unkindness" to educate them further: "The negro isn't permitted to advance and their education only spoils a good field hand and makes a shyster lawyer or a fourth-rate teacher. It is money thrown away." He not merely opposed state aid for black education but also he opposed northern philanthropists 'funding of private black colleges: "What the North is sending South is not money buy dynamite. This education is ruining our Negroes. They are demanding equality." A strong advocate of lynching, Vardaman declared "we would be justified in slaughtering every Ethiop on the early to preserve unsullied the honor of one Caucasian home." Comparing African Americans to predatory animals, he argued, "We do not stop when we see a wolf to find if it will kill sheep before disposing of it, but assume that it will."

"The Negro as a race, in all the ages of the world, has never shown sustained power of self-development. He is not endowed with the creative faculty. . . . He has never created for himself any civilization. . . . He has never had any civilization except that which has been inculcated by a superior race. And it is a lamentable fact that his civilization lasts only so long as he is in the hands of the white man who inculcates it. When left to himself he has universally gone back to the barbarism of the jungle."

--**Sen. James Vardaman** (D., Miss.), 1914
Chairman, Committee on Natural Resources, 1913-19

Upon his arrival in Washington to begin his term as Senator from Mississippi, Vardaman became a leading proponent of segregation of civil service positions. A poster advertising a meeting to organize around this issue:

SHALL THE NEGRO RULE?

All other questions are minimized under the shadow of social equality and preference for Negroes in the employ of the government of the United States.

SENATOR JAMES K. VARDAMAN

And other prominent speakers will address the people at a public meeting to be held under the auspices of the National Democratic Fair Play Association which stands for segregation of the races in government employment and "reorganization of the civil service" as declared in the National Democratic platform of 1912.

At this meeting the policy of appointing Negroes to government positions
will be fully and freely discussed.

**AT OLD MASONIC TEMPLE
COR. 9TH AND F STS. N.W.
WASHINGTON, D.C.
WEDNESDAY NIGHT, AUGUST 6, 1913**

Speaking at this August 1913 meeting, Vardaman railed against black men sitting next to white women in the streetcars and called for segregation in transportation. He also called upon Congress to pass a law segregating black employees in the federal service and putting them under the supervision of white men. Addressing himself to the question of how Northern and Southern whites understood African Americans, he argued, “The people of the North have great love for the negro—at a distance. They love him as a race and hate him as an individual.” Urging white Americans to unite, he said, “Let the South and North stop this hating each other for we will need all the love at our command, all the intellect and all the patience and Christian forbearance to save this country from the black race.” Following his speech the meeting endorsed a resolution to “fight for race segregation here and for the protection of white women from negroes.”

(Recall your reading on President Wilson’s support for segregation in the federal government offices.)

Vardaman served only one term in the Senate. President Wilson campaigned against his re-election because of his opposition to the draft and to U.S. entry into WWI.