



Lorna Goodison

Biography

Lorna Goodison was born in 1947 in Kingston, Jamaica. She grew up in a home with eight siblings and her father and mother, who operated on the belief that “if you have nine children you can just as easily care for ten, eleven, or twelve.” As a child, Goodison was exposed to books; her mother loved books and her sister loved books. “So we always had books in my house. I read most of those books and magazines that my sister brought home. So from a very early age, I read.” One of Goodison’s older sisters was a very good student, and so, as Goodison went through the public school system, she was regularly told, “You don’t write like your sister...” Though Goodison continued to write creatively, she began to hide her writing.

As an adolescent, she attended St. Hugh’s High school and anonymously published her work in the *Sunday Gleaner*. Goodison went on to study painting at the Jamaica School of Art and then at the School of the Art Student’s League in New York. She continued to write in secret, but, by her twenties, poetry began to take her over like a “tyrant.” As Goodison gave in to her poetic voice, she began to share and publish work under her own name in the *Jamaica Journal*.

For a while, Goodison’s main focus was on a career that would financially support her so that she could later continue writing. She worked in advertising and public relations and even taught at Jamaica College and St. Andrew High School. Goodison then had opportunities to travel and read her poetry to an audience. At first, reading publicly was a challenge for the shy poet, but she grew to love it. While reading for an audience, Goodison suddenly realized, “I am a poet.” Thereafter, she began to work more seriously as a professional writer.



Quick Facts

- * Born in 1947
- * Jamaican poet and short story writer
- * Her first published book of poetry is *Tamarind Season* (1980)

This page was researched and submitted by Kara Olson, Jason Hubbard, and Ayme Almendarez on 5/5/05



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Goodison's first full collection of poetry, *Tamarind Season*, was published in 1980. "'Tamarind Season' means hard times...when a lot of other food doesn't grow." The tamarind is a brown colored, sour tasting tropical fruit that is segmented in pods. Goodison's invocation of the tamarind season in her first published collection has come to symbolize her writing career. Goodison has revealed in interviews that it is hard for her to believe painting is not her main creative crop, although she paints the covers for most of her books. When she thinks of her younger artistic career as a painter, she feels nostalgia, though in poetry she has found "a woman's tongue," a way to blend the rhythm of words with the brush strokes of history.

Since publication of *Tamarind Season*, Goodison has continued to create poems and books that critics hail. She has published eight collections of poetry and two collections of short prose stories. She has lived in the United States and taught as a visiting fellow at the University of Michigan (1992), Radcliffe University (1991), and, in Canada, the University of Toronto (1991). She is a member of the Jamaican National Commission to UNESCO.

Lorna Goodison currently lives part-time on the North Coast of Jamaica, where she writes "with her back against the wall," and part-time in the United States, where she works as an Associate Professor at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor in the department of English and at the Center for African American Studies. Goodison makes Jamaica her home and is quick to point out that "she is always in Jamaica, even if just at heart, and her work testifies to that" (*Jamaica Observer*). Her newest publications include a book of short prose fiction stories entitled *Fool-fool Rose is Leaving Labour-in-Vain Savannah* (2005) and a collection of poetry entitled *Controlling the Silver* (2005). Goodison has received numerous awards, including the Musgrave Gold Medal from Jamaica (1999), and has also received favorable criticism as a reader/performer. Her work appears in the *Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces* and other international anthologies, such as the *HarperCollins World Reader* and the *Vintage Book of Contemporary World Poetry*. Kwame Dawes, fellow Jamaican writer, has recognized Goodison as the third link of the Caribbean trinity of writing. "It is now, officially, Walcott, Braithwaite and Goodison" (*Caribbean Writer*).



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The themes literary critics analyze in Lorna Goodison's work include: her artistic career before venturing into writing, her view of motherhood in terms of Afro-Caribbean and U.S. experience, the interaction of Westernized notions of life with those of the Caribbean, and, finally, the political and personal miracles of everyday life. The issue of motherhood has received the most attention, but other issues, such as the cross-over of language and cultures, are of similar importance considering that motherhood and the latter intersect in everyday life. As a result of interweaving these particular themes, it is apparent that Goodison has the superb quality of using language to poeticize and interrogate the sharply polarized binaries existing in the Afro-Caribbean experience, especially in the lives of women. Goodison explores avenues of women's roles as both creator and destroyer. At the same time, she highlights the connections between Old World and New World roots, while utilizing Standard English and Caribbean dialect to poetically examine these avenues.



Kuwabong's scholarly articulation on the mother-daughter relationships in the works of Afro-Caribbean literature emphasizes the "poetics of matrilineage" (105). The politics surrounding views of motherhood in terms of an African heritage and those of a Westernized history remain in tension, resulting in a critical debate on Goodison's own view of motherhood. He says, "Goodison does not see motherhood as a male-inspired construct that binds women to biological determinism" (111). He reasons that Goodison's poetry is "grounded in the representation of [her] mother as an archetype of [herself]." Not only is this archetype a 'super-mother,' but she also maintains her humanity in "hands grown coarse with raising nine children." This celebration of mothers sets the "tone for a revisionist historical narrative that recovers and redeems all of those Afro-Caribbean women who were/are vilified by patriarchal historians." While Kuwabong is interested in working through the debate of how motherhood is viewed and its political consequences, Salkey is more interested in the literary pleasure he obtains from reading Goodison's "mother-poem." Salkey also praises Goodison's heart-and-mind-concerns for language, history, racial identity, and gender rather than primarily focusing on Goodison's motherhood themes (876). Goodison's works also address issues of womanhood along with motherhood.



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Likewise, Alexander is interested in Goodison's poetry in terms of feminism and her ability to break down binaries that situate women in male-dominated societies. Alexander elaborates on the "Woman as Creator/Destroyer" in three of Goodison's poems by arguing that Goodison accomplishes portraying both the creator and the destroyer, the desires and spiritual aspects of womanhood. She asserts that the "Wild Woman" of Goodison's poems is a metaphor for the wild nature of woman embodied by her sexuality, which must be avoided or hidden because of the "threat to those in power." Alexander describes the need for these issues to be addressed in poetry much like Goodison does: "The innate relationship between the erotic and the spiritual, the sacred and the profane, is often looked upon with suspicion in Western thought and thus, must be discretely dealt with" (442). Goodison's poetry is praised because she has the ability to communicate the area between the sacred and the profane by using language of the "in-between," or cross-over language.

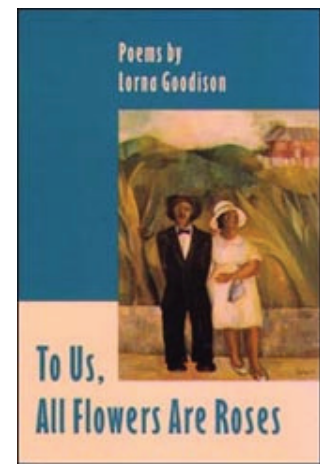
Woodward comments on her talent in using, "...the rhythms and fluency of Caribbean dialects in a particularly fluid version of a more standardized English" (23). The aspects of her cross-over language in her works of poetry aid in the creative destruction of binaries like Old World/New World and East/West. Dawes finds that "most Caribbean authors writing in English today have been influenced by the work of the colonizing powers." This theory disputes the general analysis that "writing from countries formerly colonized by the British, the French, or the Spanish constitutes literature that can only be defined rather innocuously as 'the literature of the clash of cultures.'" Dawes posits that many Caribbean artists have attempted to forge a non-colonial base of literature while others have tried to recreate traditions that existed before colonialism, though both strategies resulted in the "privileging of European culture (at least in terms of form and prosody)." Nasta emphasizes that the process of crossing over from one dialect to the next is observed in literary works, including Goodison's. This intersection of language can be observed in the everyday speech of most Jamaicans. "What artists have done is to select to write about situations requiring the use of the different codes available..." Nasta goes on to say, "the rendering of complex behaviors and the sound of complex voices in a single statement by the deft manipulation of lexicon and syntax of the different codes is, I believe, Goodison's major contribution to Caribbean literature."



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Goodison also captures the ability of language to create images. Both Newson and Dabydeen comment on the influence of her career as a painter in the works of *To Us*, *All Flowers Are Roses* and *Turn Thanks*. Dabydeen looks at not only the influence of her artistic career on her poetry, but also the allusion to other artists in her work. Dabydeen states, “This section, one of four here, includes acknowledgement of other artists, seen in ‘Letter to Vincent Van Gogh,’ and poets such as Yeats and Akhmatova, toward truly expressing her personal, continuing journey” (224-225). Comparatively, Newson is more interested in how Goodison’s visual aspects of language work within cultural differences and the ways in which these visual effects connect with Jamaica (750). Art functions as a pathway into the cultural pluralities of Jamaica and also as a way for Goodison to express her admirations.



While the majority of the literary criticism on Goodison's work focuses on her ability to reconcile aspects of life that come up in tension with each other, she continues to bring a redeeming quality to the struggles of history, such as issues of womanhood, Old World and New World roots, and the overlooked spiritual occurrences in everyday life.

For example, in “Mother, the Great Stones Got to Move” Goodison addresses the untold history of slavery in Jamaica and the consequences its silence may have on future generations. Goodison's loyalty to her fellow Afro-Caribbeans is quite clear in that this poem serves as a declaration for re-writing a people's history into existence. Goodison not only addresses the history of oppression, but also delivers it with a sense of courage and hope: “Speaking for small/ dreamers of this earth, plagued with nightmares, yearning for healing dreams/ we want the stone to move” (*To Us, All Flowers are Roses* 4). In *Turn Thanks*, Goodison rekindles the past by invoking her genealogical experiences which carry over into the broader experience of Jamaican lifestyles. For instance, in “The Domestic Science of Sunday Dinner,” Goodison describes the inheritance of cooking rituals passed down from familial traditions through personal narrative.



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Towards the beginning of this poem Goodison explains the passing down of rituals:



*“Put the peas on after breakfast,” my mother said,
turning her domain, the kitchen, over to me
so that she could become his nurse at the end. Their cooking requires close
careful attention,
no long water will do, just enough to cover
and cook them till they sink to the bottom. Then add enough water to buoy
them again. It’s a game, this cooking of the peas. Sometimes you allow
them to cook down
until they almost burn. It is that cooked-down
near-burned state which produces that taste
of redeemed and rescued richness. Repeat this boiling process over and
over
until the hard red legumes soften. Some of them will break open early
provided you do not cook them with salt. The salt you add later when all
peas have softened. Flavor them again with more pressed garlic pearls.*



Within these stanzas Goodison's reflection on the Sunday Dinner offers in itself a basic Jamaican recipe, which in turn also serves as an example of the everyday occurrences in which rituals are handed down. The repetitive process of boiling the peas can be interpreted as a metaphor for the ways in which rituals like cooking function as meditation on the hardships of Jamaican experience. Goodison personifies the ingredients to make a broader comment on the “softening” of these hardships through rituals. At the end of this poem, Goodison comments on the “softening” of hearts, which have been “nearly-burned” through numerous struggles in Jamaican history—bringing a redeeming quality to future generations.



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Goodison has mastered the art of touching up the overlooked aspects of life by rendering them ritualistic and extraordinary. Whether contemplating the unity of all bodies of salt-water or giving a voice to the Afro-Caribbean experience, Goodison can bring a cosmic vibrancy to almost every aspect of life. This is especially true when looking at her poetry on the lives of women. In “From the Book of Local Miracles, Largely Unrecorded” Goodison writes about her mother’s friend who had no food but had faith enough to start boiling water as if there were food. By boiling this water, the friend of Goodison’s mother watches a miracle unfold as each of her friends stops by to add ingredients to continue this meal. The women in this poem share a spiritual connection strong enough to provide one another with comfort when any one of them is in need. Without having to verbally communicate with one another, each woman knew what was needed to complete the meal. By the end of the poem, readers feel as if they had themselves experienced a miracle:

“ “

*All that she needed
was salt. And widows have that.
Prophets and widows,
self-replenishing
measures of meal,*

*never ending cruse of oil. Bright angels appearing
to meet believers
at points of need*

*come again
when these women
call out for miracles.*

— To Us, All Flowers are Roses

” ”



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Goodison compares these women with angels and prophets to demonstrate the strength of their spiritual connection. This connection among the women is shared without overtly expressing each other's needs. Moreover, this spiritual connection grows among the sisterhood as an inherent discourse that defies the boundaries of communication. The challenges brought by poverty are nourished through the community of women, which self-replenishes and redeems the friend of Goodison's mother.

"Turn Thanks to Miss Mirry" is another poem in which Goodison acknowledges the strength and healing powers of women from both the Old World and New World. At the beginning of this poem, Goodison describes one of her caretakers she had as a child who represents the bridge between African heritage and Caribbean culture:

“

Turn thanks to Miss Mirry

ill-tempered domestic helper who hated me. She said that she had passed through hell bareheaded. and that a whitening ash from hell's furnace

had sifted down upon her and that is why she gray early. Called me "Nana." Nanny's name I have come to love. She twisted her surname Henry into Endry

in her railing against the graceless state of her days.

She was the repository of 400 years of resentment for being uprooted and transplanted, condemned to being a stranger on this side of a world where most words would not obey her tongue.

”



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In the third stanza, Goodison briefly addresses the history of Miss Mirry's displacement, therefore addressing the history of slavery in Jamaica specifically through language. The following stanzas show Miss Mirry's response to the alienating forces behind the English language:



*She said that she came from "Ullava"
in the parallel universe of Old Harbor. She could not read or write a word in
English
but took every vowel and consonant of it*

*and rung it around, like the articulated neck
of our Sunday dinner sacrificial fowl. In her anger she stabbed at English,
walked it out,
abandoned it in favor of a long kiss teeth,*

*a furious fanning of her shift tail, a series of hawks
at the back of her throat, a long extended elastic sigh,
a severing cut eye, or a melancholy wordless moaning
as she squatted over her wooden washtub soaping*

*our dirty clothes with a brown wedge of hard key soap. To Miss Mirry who
subverted the English language
calling Barbara, Baba; my father, Tata; who desiled her mind
that I was boofuttoo, a baffan and too rampify.*

*Who said pussbrukokonatinnadalikkegalnanayeye. Miss Mirry versus
English against the west
once assured me that for every sickness
there exists a cure growing in the bush.*





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While Miss Mirry is making English her own, she also construes the English language in defiance of Western imperialism. Because of this process, the English language was transformed into a language which makes and has made cultural space for future Jamaican generations who are faced with Western oppression. Miss Mirry's defiance is the healing power, "the cure growing in the bush," for generations of Jamaicans. The redeeming quality within Miss Mirry's creative rebellion against the English language is the fact that she can have cultural autonomy, which presents a model for other Jamaicans encountering displacement. For example, Goodison has captured the ability to take in the New World language and mix it with the Old World language in order to create "the new voice, the new poetry" (Turn Thanks, 89).

Lorna Goodison continues to amaze readers by making the ordinary extraordinary and giving inspiration to those challenged by the struggles of living in a country with a tragic history. Her work is the focus of struggle and celebration. Many of Goodison's narrators explore the hardships of the past to place value on the present. Tender praise is given as imagery shifts from struggle to the more redeeming qualities of resistance, love, and hope. As part of a larger group of female Caribbean writers, Lorna Goodison believes that Caribbean poetry lies in the hands of those who will inscribe the future, "It's just their time, nobody can stop it. They are the ones that have to tell the half that has never been told, and they will tell it" (Dawes 106).



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