



Angelina Weld Grimké

“

And before it was too late, I used to pray that in some way I might change places with her and go into that darkness where though, still living, one forgets sun and moon and stars and flowers and winds -- and love itself, and existence means dark, foul -- smelling cages, hollow clanging doors, hollow monotonous days.

— The Sleeper Wakes

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Quick Facts

- * 1880-1958
- * African-American playwright, poet, and short story author
- * Some critics think she was a lesbian

Biography

Angelina Weld Grimké (not to be confused with her great aunt Angelina Emily Grimké Weld) was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on February 27th in 1880, the only child of Archibald Grimké and Sara Stanley. Archibald Grimké came from a biracial family; his father was a white man and his mother was a black slave. Sara Stanley was from a prominent white family.

When Grimké was three years old, her mother left her father, taking her daughter with her. After four years she returned Angelina to her father and the child never saw her mother again. Archibald, Angelina’s father, was a well known lawyer who was the executive director of the NAACP. Angelina was able to attend one of the finest schools in Massachusetts, the Carleton Academy in Ashburnham.

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Biography continued

After high school, she went to the Boston Normal School of Gymnastics, and graduated in 1902 with a Physical Education degree. After five years of teaching gym classes, she moved to Washington D.C. and became an English teacher at Armstrong Manual Training School, later transferring to Dunbar High School. She finally retired in 1926.

During her teaching career she wrote fiction, poetry, reviews, and biographical sketches. Some of her writings indicate that she was a lesbian, although she chose to suppress her emotions (with a possible exception of a love affair with a coworker at Dunbar High School, Mary Burrill). Grimké died in 1958.

In her lifetime Grimké wrote many works, including poems, most of which were not published. Much of her poetry shows signs of despair, rejection, and thoughts of death and also alludes to her lesbian identity. For example, in “Rosabel” she writes “Winds, that breathes about, upon her/ (Since I do not dare)/ Whisper, twitter, breathe into her/ That I find her fair.” This exemplifies the restraint she used throughout her life in order to live up to her father’s idea of morality. She did, however, express her true emotions at times throughout her life, such as in a letter written to one of her friends at age sixteen. In this letter she wrote, “I know you are too young now to become my wife, but I hope, darling, that in a few years you will come to me and be my love my wife.”

Her most famous work was a play, *Rachel*, which she wrote in response to W. E. B. DuBois’s requests for Black theater by, for, and about Black people. *Rachel* was the first play written for staging, as all previous black plays were not written with staging in mind. This play is about a black woman who vows not to have children because they would become victims of a racist society. She loves children, yet she refuses to marry and have any when she sees the suffering of Blacks in America.

Grimké also wrote several short stories, such as “The Closing Door.” This story reflects the feelings of loneliness and isolation she felt after her mother left her. The main character in the story is a fifteen year old girl who is also left by her mother. She is shuffled from foster home to foster home, ending up with a woman whom she loves as a mother and who loves her. The story does not have a happy ending, however, because the mother figure dies, leaving the main character exactly as she was at the beginning.



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Biography continued

Grimké's writings have been noticed by several critics including Gloria Hull. She writes of Grimké in her book *Color, Sex and Poetry*, saying that "being a black lesbian poet in America at the beginning of the twentieth century meant that one wrote (or half wrote) -- in isolation. . . . It meant that when one did write to be published, she did so in shackles -- chained between the real experience and convention that would not give her voice."

Selected Bibliography

Works by the author

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Works about the author

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