



Georgia Douglas Johnson

“

*Your world is as big as you make it
 I know, for I used to abide
 In the narrowest nest in a corner
 My wings pressing close to my side
 But I sighted the distant horizon
 Where the sky-line encircled the sea
 And I throbbed with a burning desire
 To travel this immensity.
 I battered the cordons around me
 And cradled my wings on the breeze
 Then soared to the uttermost reached
 with rapture, with power, with ease!*

— “Your World,” from Share My World

”

Quick Facts

- * 1880 (?)-1966
- * African-American poet, playwright, and writer
- * Influential Harlem Renaissance writer

Introduction

Georgia Douglas Johnson is one of the most well known Black women writers of the early 1900s who pioneered the Harlem Renaissance, a period where Black social thought and artistic expression flourished. Many artists and writers of this time focused their work on civil rights and equality, thus making The Harlem Renaissance one of the most significant chapters in African-American history.

This page researched and submitted by Alyssa Atkins, Theresa Crushshon, Chanida Phaengdara on 12/15/05.



Georgia Douglas Johnson

Introduction continued

Taking part in this historic chapter, Georgia Douglas Johnson was an innovative writer, poet, and playwright. Her work stressed important themes of motherhood, love, and nature, as well as institutionalized racism, social determination, and racial pride. She worked within the social and political confinements of her time but also wrote with a strong voice against the inequalities that she faced. Johnson is known for her popular volumes of poetry and anti-lynching plays which elicited a tremendous response following their publications. Johnson understood the issues that were central to her time and wrote about them with strength. She became an intellect who used feminine passion to express literary freedom.

Biography

Biographical information on Georgia Douglas Johnson's early years and birth date is not completely certain. The information here based on various literary and personal documents.

Georgia Blanche Douglas Camp was born on September 10. The year in various sources ranges from 1877 to 1887, although 1880 appears to be the commonly accepted year of birth. Her place of birth is also a disputed matter: Marietta and Atlanta are the most often mentioned locations, with the latter being the most commonly accepted. She was born to George Camp and Laura Douglas. Her light complexion revealed her Native American, African American, and English roots. Little is known about the poet's early life. She did live as a young child in Rome, Georgia at some point. Her parents had separated by the time Johnson moved back to Atlanta with her mother. Her mother remarried and became Laura Spaulding. In a written autobiographical sketch, Johnson's childhood is described as being filled with neglect and loneliness, and her mother seen as being "estranged and resentful" (Tate, xxviii) of Johnson and her half sisters. Johnson's difficult childhood full of family issues and racial identity became thematic within her literary works.



Georgia Douglas Johnson

Biography continued

After completing her musical studies, Johnson returned to teaching, eventually rising to the level of assistant principal in the Atlanta school system. During this time, she met Henry Lincoln “Link” Johnson, a known political figure and attorney from Georgia. Georgia and Henry were married on September 28, 1903. When they married, Johnson kept her mother’s maiden name and dropped Camp, her father’s last name, changing Georgia Douglas Camp to Georgia Douglas Johnson. Within the first four years of their marriage, the Johnsons had two sons, Henry Lincoln, Jr. and Peter Douglas. Within the restraints of maintaining this new family, Johnson made time to write, and in 1905 her first poem was published in *Voice of the Negro*. According to Johnson, her husband was not very supportive of her writing and felt her role should be a homemaker. In 1910, the Johnson family moved to Washington, D.C. where Henry Sr. opened a law firm, and in 1912, President Howard Taft appointed him as Recorder of Deeds. Henry Sr.’s appointment ultimately made the Johnsons a part of D.C.’s elite Black society.

While in Washington D.C., Johnson became acquainted with scholar William Stanley Braithwaite, who edited and critiqued some of her poetry, which led Johnson to take herself seriously as a poet. Soon, three of her poems were published in the Black literary journal *The Crisis*. In 1918, she published her first collection of poetry called *The Heart of a Woman*, which dealt with femininity, desire, and love.

Encouraged by the positive response to *The Heart of a Woman*, Johnson published three more prominent collections of poetry: *Bronze: A Book of Verse* (1922), *An Autumn Love Cycle* (1928), and *Share My World* (1962). In addition to her poetry, she became a playwright. In her plays, Johnson stressed themes of maternal emotions, post-Civil War Black identity, unjust institutionalized racism, and lynching laws. She wrote approximately 28 plays, with recognition in *Opportunity* for her 1926 one-act play *Blue Blood*, written about miscegenation in the post-Civil War era. Johnson also won first prize in the same journal contest the next year for her 1927 play *Plumes*, submitted under the male pen name John Temple, was about Black poverty in the South and a mother’s love for her child.



Georgia Douglas Johnson

Biography continued

Recent discoveries of Johnson's unpublished works and little known published works have helped to further define Johnson as a writer. An estimated 31 short stories about Black life of the South, such as "Gesture" and "Tramp Love," were recovered under the male pen name, Paul Tremaine. According to literary scholar Claudia Tate, Johnson's use of male-narratives was due to the belief that "... her readers would be more likely to treat her works seriously if she disassociated her Black and female self from them" (Tate xxxiii). Johnson also wrote empowering articles in various journalistic publications, and produced her own weekly editorial syndicate column called "Homely Philosophy," from 1926 to 1932.

Outside of her professional work, for forty years, Johnson hosted weekly "Saturday Salons" at her home, where well-known Black artists and intellectuals gathered and inspired each other by their literary works. In private conversations, they could freely discuss politics and personal opinions. Johnson would later call her home the "Half Way House." For many of Johnson's friends, the Johnson household served as a resting stop between travels. Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, Jessie Angelina Weld Grimké, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, and others were often present, and nicknamed themselves "The Saturday Nighters." Many of these artists contributed to Professor Alain Locke's book *The New Negro*.

After the height of her career, Johnson continued to maintain the weekly Saturday salon. In 1962, Johnson self-published her final volume of poetry, *Share My World*. Georgia Douglas Johnson died in her Washington D.C. home on May 14, 1966. After her death, Johnson continued to serve as an essential piece of the Harlem Renaissance era, and as a trailblazer for mainstream African American literary culture into American history as a whole.



Georgia Douglas Johnson

Literary Review

Modern literary scholars of women writers such as Gloria T. Hull and Claudia Tate review Johnson's creative writing style within the social and patriarchal frames of her time. During the 1920s and 1930s, Johnson's intellectual contemporaries such as William Stanley Braithwaite, Jessie Redmond Fauset, W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Effie Lee Newsome, Anne Spencer, Marita Odette Bonner, and Benjamin Brawley critiqued her work and held her works up as a pinnacle of the genre. Alain Locke praised Johnson in a foreword to her book, *An Autumn Love Cycle*, noting:

“Greater sophistication would spoil the message. Fortunately, to the gift of a lyric style, delicate in touch, rhapsodic in tone, authentic in timbre, there has been added a temperamental endowment of ardent sincerity of emotion, ingenuous candor of expression, and happiest of all for the particular task, a naïve and sophisticated spirit” (Alain Locke, Foreword to *An Autumn Love Cycle* by Georgia Douglas Johnson, 1928).

Within the interpretations of her contemporaries, themes of motherhood, love, women's liberty, race, oppression, and hope were explored. It is clear that through her poetry and plays, her creative talent in both expression of thought and classical craft became greatly influential and essential to later scholars of African American literature and history - from Toni Morrison to Judith L. Stephens. Altogether, these criticisms and in-depth analyses of Johnson's literary work have allowed Johnson's voice to be better remembered and understood.

In contrast to the abundance of reviews of her poetry during the Harlem Renaissance, Johnson's anti-lynching plays have become a source of great interest among recent literary critics. Critics like Judith L. Stephens, Kathy Perkins, Megan Sullivan, and other modern scholars of Black literature further analyzed the sociopolitical ramifications these plays had during the early 1900s. Johnson's contributions to the African-American theater and her relentless dedication against institutionalized lynching laws were exceptional during the Harlem Renaissance. She utilized theater as a tool of social protest and revolt that added texture and dimension. Her artistic palette grew as her voice continued to fight oppressive conditions of her time. Theater historian James V. Hatch adds, “The anti-lynching dramas, comparable only to the passionate appeal in anti-slavery plays, became the second form of American protest drama” (Stephens 87).



Georgia Douglas Johnson

Literary Review

Judith Stephens, co-author of *Strange Fruit*, a book about anti-lynching drama, found Johnson to be one of the most prolific African-American women playwrights of all time. In a recent article, “Plays on Lynching by American Women,” Stephens stressed the value of Johnson’s lost plays:

“The recovery of the lost lynching plays of Georgia Douglas Johnson brings to light a vital part of African American culture that is continually under the threat of erasure. These plays also provide scholars with a newly complete unit of Johnson’s work that commands a central position in a distinctly American theatrical genre, a type of drama that is only now beginning to gain recognition. In addition to their value as a unique contribution to American dramatic literature and theatre history, the dramas provide a new site for studying relations among race, gender politics, and aesthetics; they permit us to see more clearly the impact of racism and to understand art as a force of resistance as well as a force of renewal.” (“And Yet They Paused,” and “A Bill to be Passed”; *Newly Recovered Lynching Dramas by Georgia Douglas Johnson*; *African American Review*, Fall 1999).

Johnson had struggled to get her anti-lynching plays published. Stephens wrote that they were rejected from publisher Walter White, Executive Secretary of NAACP, and executive publisher Samuel French. Johnson’s anti-lynching plays were characteristic of ending in inevitable defeat and in various forms of lynching torture. White and French believed these endings showed weakness, and therefore should not be published. This was a misinterpretation of Johnson’s intent to show the reality of African American lives and their fears and hopes for civil rights, such as an anti-lynching movement.

Although Johnson was not recognized as a revolutionary playwright during her time, recently she has been viewed by many scholars as an activist of social determination against institutionalized racism. Johnson believed in herself as someone who courageously continued to express her anger toward racial injustice which plagued her fellow Black communities. Johnson’s plays served as a culmination of voices that protested the ideologies of white supremacy. Stephens adds, “Georgia Douglas Johnson contributed more plays to the lynching drama than any other playwright in history,” beginning with *Sunday Morning in the South* (1925), *Blue Blood* (1926), *Safe* (1929), *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* (1930), and ending with *A Bill to be Passed* (1938) (Stephens, 90).



Georgia Douglas Johnson

Literary Review

Johnson seemed motivated to write these plays against the highly held belief that after the Civil War, white planters thought that they would lose power over blacks. According to Martha Bower, author of *Color Struck Under the Gaze: Ethnicity and the Pathology of Being in the Plays of Johnson, Hurston, Childress, Hansberry, and Kennedy*, an “estimated 723 Whites and 3,220 Blacks [were] lynched in the South between 1880 and 1930” (Bower, 42). This was especially difficult for Johnson to write about when lynching was at an all time high. During the 1920s and 1930s Johnson vented her frustrations over the horrendous acts of lynching that became a socially acceptable outlet for aggressive whites by writing these plays.

Johnson incorporates various techniques into her plays (music, prayer, and verbal description) as she focuses on the feelings of the black family and the injustices of lynching. In *Sunday Morning in the South*, she uses hymns and spirituals as a backdrop as she tells the story of a young black man kidnapped from his home, falsely accused of a crime and lynched. In *Blue-Eyed Black Boy*, a script about race violence in America, the main character, a Black woman, convinces a lynch mob that her son’s father is the governor, who is white. Finally in *And Yet They Passed*, she focuses on the United States refusal to pass anti-lynching legislation.

Through reading Johnson’s work, scholars have investigated the mentality of those who attended lynchings and church burnings and who watched human beings being barbarically terrorized. What scholars discovered is that those who attended a lynching in the South were like an excited crowd attending a pro football game today. These sociable lynching events had drinks, hotdogs, and postcards which were sold to spectators on the sidelines who watched the murders and mutilations. Whether it was a pregnant black woman or a teenage black male, mobs were eager to see gruesome injustices of innocent people. Unfortunately, to Johnson’s dismay, Congress never enacted any federal anti-lynching legislation. Therefore, Johnson’s plays became invisible during her time as she exposed the enemy. The government’s actions towards anyone who spoke out on lynching were to silence or erase his or her work.

In “Folk Plays, Home Girls, and Back Talk: Georgia Douglas Johnson and Women of the Harlem Renaissance,” Megan Sullivan looks specifically at Johnson’s plays *Plumes* and *A Sunday Morning in the South*. Johnson gives a voice to the females in the Harlem Renaissance who bind together in hard times and silences. Seeing her work as an attempt to “talk back” to the male-dominated Harlem Renaissance, Sullivan describes the prominence of women’s relationships and feelings in Johnson’s writing.



Georgia Douglas Johnson

Literary Review

In a scene from *Safe*, one can see the demonstration of the relationships of Black females when a pregnant mother expresses her hope for her child's gender:

“LIZA: What's little nigger boys born for anyhow? I sho hopes mine will be a girl. I don't want no boy baby to be hounded down and kicked 'round. No, I don't want to ever have no boy chile!

MANDY [Liza's Mother]: Hush, honey, that's a sin. God sends what he wants us to have-we can't pick and choose.

HANNAH: No, we sho can't. We got to swaller the bitter with the sweet” (“Safe,” Georgia Douglas Johnson, *The Selected Works of Georgia Douglas Johnson*, p. 380)

Soon after this scene, an innocent Black boy is taken from the custody of the police by a mob, and is lynched. During this tragedy, Liza, the pregnant mother, is going into labor. After news of the lynching, Liza falls into a panicking state while her baby is born. Once Liza learns that the baby is a boy, she strangles him to death while saying that her child is in a safer place away from the race violence.

Aside from recent critiques of Johnson's plays, acclaimed modern literary scholar Claudia Tate has become one of few critics to analyze all of Johnson's poetic works and her literary style in depth, questioning them within the controversial social and political issues of her time. Johnson's three famous collections of poetry - *The Heart of a Woman* (1918), *Bronze: A Book of Verse* (1922), and *An Autumn Love Cycle* (1928) - were mainly written in ballad stanzas focusing on love, lost youth, and inevitable death. Though Johnson had broken traditional conventions confined by her persona as the “lady poet” through works such as *Bronze* and her lynching plays, she was labeled by her critics as “... a traditionalist and an advocate of genteel culture, who adhered to the Romantic conventions of the nineteenth-century Anglo-literary establishment” (Tate, xviii). Johnson resisted marginalization by fellow contemporaries of her expected role: to address feminine ideals such as love and motherhood. She was one of the few writers of her time to go beyond these accepted norms.



Georgia Douglas Johnson

Literary Review

Tate suggests that Johnson's accepted poetic style became a method of "compensatory conservatism," which gave her the freedom of creative writing as a form of maintaining her subjectivity as a Black woman writer. Tate believes that Johnson wrote accordingly to the experiences of her life and the ways to accept these experiences. Thus Tate offers an appreciative understanding of Johnson's lyrical style on the subject of love within her poetry. Love became a tool for her reflection on herself. Tate writes:

"...what she praised, she also undercut with interrogating whimsy and thereby inscribed a furtive critique of the gender conventions of her day. Thus, beneath the veneer of Johnson's traditionalist verse and genteel public persona, labored a 'bold modernist imagination' that used erotic desire to idealize disappointment and irony to cushion the pain" (Tate, xviii).

According to Tate, "Erotic desire" is termed as an experienced empowerment of feminine passion and emotion that Johnson successfully connotes in her poetry. Through this technique, Johnson was able to display an expression of literary freedom outside the conventions of her perceived persona as a "lady poet" to a defined Black woman writer.

Johnson's main intent throughout her literary expression was to expose two relevant issues: the issue of race and gender and the relationship of the two in confined socio-political America. She sought to heal these problems through voicing her views in the most intimate ways, and offered that the wounds of the world be mended by the natural instincts of women alike. In an undated letter to fellow colleagues Theresa Davis and Charles Freeman at Fisk University, Johnson said to "remember that others judge us by our past performances ... but we judge ourselves by that which we dream and hope to do -- our possibilities" (Tate, xvii). Johnson understood that her most renowned published work would be used as evidence of her as a writer, but what she personally believed to be of significance is how people would actually consume the full capacity of her hopes and dreams expressed through her literary work.



Georgia Douglas Johnson

Literary Review

In the understanding of Johnson's literary expression and the freedom that she occupies as a writer, we must grasp the constraints of the institutionalized racism and sexism that she was held to. Tate believed that Johnson wrote within her own literary goals and fought against the molds of being a woman, black, and a writer in her time. Before understanding her work, Tate informs us in her introduction to Johnson's book of selected works that, "as we shall see, for Johnson art was also a means to recuperate shattered hopes. Johnson's volume of poetry *Bronze* and her folk plays were her defenses against the reentrenchment of institutionalized racism whereby black Americans alone would define the terms of emotional interdependencies" (Tate, xxvi).

It is essential for readers and scholars alike to realize the many cultural constraints Johnson was held to. Once these constraints are realized, we are able to read and accept her great literary works as a way for us to define Johnson not only as a writer, but as a Black woman writer. During Johnson's time, she accepted her social expectations as a feminized writer and used this awareness as an ambitious way to freely express her female emotions, social goals, and as well as art in a form of literature.

Selected Bibliography

Works by the author

The Heart of a Woman and Other Poems (1918).

Bronze: A Book of Verse (1920).

An Autumn Love Cycle (1928).

Share My World (1962).



Georgia Douglas Johnson

Selected Bibliography continued

Works by the author continued

Stage Works

Sunday Morning in the South (1925).

Blue Blood (1926).

Plumes (*Opportunity*, 1927).

Safe (1929).

Blue-Eyed Black Boy (1930).

William and Ellen Craft (1935).

And Still They Paused.

Midnight and Dawn.

A Bill to Be Passed.

Camel-Legs.

Heritage.

Miss Bliss.

Money Wagon.

New Day.

One Cross Enough.

Red Shoes.

Well-Diggers.

Scapegoat.

The Starting Point.

Sue Bailey.

Awards

Honorable Mention: Opportunity Contest Award of 1926 for *Blue Blood*.

1st Prize for Opportunity Contest Award of 1927 for *Plumes*.



Georgia Douglas Johnson

Selected Bibliography continued

Works about the author

- Bassett, John Earl. *Harlem in Review: Critical Reactions to Black American Writers, 1917-1939* (Associated University Presses, Inc., 1992).
- Bower, Martha Gillman. *Color Struck Under the Gaze: Ethnicity and the Pathology of Being in the Plays of Johnson, Hurston, Childress, Hasberry, and Kennedy* (Praeger, 2003).
- Brown-Guillory, Elizabeth, ed. *Wines in the Wilderness: Plays by African American Women from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present* (Praeger, 1990).
- Fletcher, Winona. "From Genteel Poet to Revolutionary Playwright: Georgia Douglas Johnson" (*Theatre Annual*, 1985).
- Hull, Gloria T. *Color, Sex, & Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance* (Indiana University Press, 1987).
- Honey, Maureen. *Shadowed Dreams: Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance* (Rutgers University Press, 1989).
- Johnson, James Weldon. *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922).
- Perkins, Kathy A. *Strange Fruit: plays on lynching by American women* (Indiana University Press, 1998).
- Stephens, Judith L. "Art, Activism, and Uncompromising Attitude in Georgia Douglas Johnson's Lynching Plays" (*African American Review*, 2005).
- Sullivan, Megan. "Folk Plays, Home Girls, and Back Talk: Georgia Douglas Johnson and Women of the Harlem Renaissance" (*College Language Association*, 1990).
- Tate, Claudia. *Selected Works of Georgia Douglas Johnson* (G.K. Hall & Co., 1997).
- Tolson, Melvin B. *The Harlem Group of Negro Writers* (Greenwood Press, 2001).
- Wall, Cheryl A. *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* (Indiana University Press, 1995).
- Wintz, Cary D. *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance* (Texas A&M University Press, 1988).