



# The Poetry of Anne Spencer

Poet Anne Spencer maintained a beautiful garden, in the back of her home. Her husband Edward built her a small garden house. This sanctuary was called Edankraal: “Edward Spencer aware of his wife’s gift for writing and love of gardening, built a small garden house (. . . ) “ed” for Edward, “an” for Anne, and “kraal,” an African word meaning “place” (Ford 7). In this garden many exotic flowers were planted, and in Edankraal many striking poems germinated. Thus Spencer’s love for the amalgamation of garden and poetic-themed-metaphors sprung forth and became what she is known for. Although it has been over a hundred years since Anne Spencer put her first thoughts onto paper, one may delight in the timelessness her lines evoke. Her poem “God never planted a garden” (108) is a good example of metaphoric inter-change of her garden and her poetic participation, as well as her ageless energy through words:

*God never planted a garden  
But He placed a keeper there  
And the keeper ever razed the ground  
And built a city where  
God cannot walk at the eve of the day,  
Nor take the morning air.*

This poem today could without difficulty express the destruction of our forests, as well as the disappearance of farmlands, giving way to new construction in small towns tempting urban flight. Or perhaps it discusses man who has lost sight of God in nature, leaving nature to take care of itself. One may even conclude that the buildings are the plants in man’s garden--the city. The reader’s imagination may soar. However, just as coal is buried deep within the earth, waiting and unhurriedly evolving, Spencer wrote for herself and did not give into demagogues. As one may derive from J. Lee Greene’s statement, “Anne Spencer is among those writers of the Harlem Renaissance period who chose to limit their publications rather than conform to the dictates of critics and editors and publishers who prejudged for the readers” (140).

*Reviewed by Adrienne Lee*



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In *Time's Unfading Garden*, J. Lee Greene gives the reader a comprehensive and luminous account of Spencer's life, as well as the largest collection of her poetry to date. One would find in reading *Time's Unfading Garden* the complexities of life for a black woman and poet, who knew what she desired from the life she chose to live, and the persons who influenced her, and the ones she influenced. This fascinating bibliography guides one through soil, the underlining derivation, of one of our country's most controversial poets who relied on traditional form and structure for her poems, and many a time used a metaphoric garden, as a poetic theme. Because she was misunderstood by many critics during her lifetime, the literary publication of her poems was limited. Charita Ford writes "The living legacy which Anne Spencer left us in her poetry and other writings, her metaphorical garden, and her literal garden, represent the life of a great and, unfortunately, neglected Afro-American poet" (12). Many critics today are discovering Anne Spencer, through the labor of Maureen Honey's book *Shadowed Dreams* as well as Greene's bibliography on her.

Spencer's first published poem was "Before the Feast at Shushan" which was welcomed by many and misconstrued by some. This poem deals with a biblical account (the Book of Esther) of Queen Vashti who is removed from her position because she refuses to obey the command of her husband the king (Ford 8). This poem rings with the thought that beauty and not brains are acceptable. A theme that Spencer would challenge her entire life, and it is set in an metaphoric garden:

## *Before the Feast of Shushan*

### *Garden of Shushan!*

*After Eden, all terrace, pool, and flower recollect thee:*

*Ye weavers in saffron and haze and Tyrian purple,*

*Tell yet what range in color wakes the eye;*

*Sorcerer, release the dreams born here when*

*Drowsy, shifting palm-shade enspells the brain;*

*And sound! ye with harp and flute ne'er essay*

*Before these star-noted birds escaped from paradise awhile to*

*Stir all dark, and dear, and passionate desire, till mine*

*Arms go out to be mocked by the softly kissing body of the wind--*

*Slave, send Vashti to her King!*



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*The fiery wattles of the sun startle into flame  
The marbled towers of Shushan:  
So at each day's wane, two peers--the one in  
Heaven, the other on earth--welcome with their  
Splendor the peerless beauty of the Queen.*

*Cushioned at the Queen's feet and upon her knee  
Finding glory for mine head,--still, nearly shamed  
Am I, the King, to bend and kiss with sharp  
Breath the olive-pink of sandaled toes between;  
Or lift me high to the magnet of a gaze, dusky,  
Like the pool when but the moon-ray strikes to its depth;  
Or closer press to crush a grape 'gainst lips redder  
Than the grape, a rose in the night of her hair;  
Then-Sharon's Rose in my arms. And I am hard to force the petals wide;  
And you are fast to suffer and be sad. Is any prophet come to teach a new thing  
Now in a more apt time?  
Have him 'maze how you say love is sacrament;  
How says Vashti, love is both bread and wine;  
How to the altar may not come to break and drink,  
Hulky flesh nor fleshly spirit!*

*I, thy lord, like not manna for meat as a Judahn;  
I, thy master, drink, and red wine, plenty, and when  
I thirst. Eat meat, and full, when I hunger. I, thy King, teach you and leave you, when I list. No woman  
in all Persia sets out strange action  
To confuse Persia's lord--  
Love is but desire and thy purpose fulfillment;  
I, thy King, so say!*



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Honey states, “Pastoral beauty is a backdrop against which the ugliness of prejudice, hatred, and domination is effectively juxtaposed . . . Spencer blended her two passions in lyrics whose import may not be clear to those unaware of their context” (26). Critic Walter White writes, “Here is a fragment of a poem by Anne Spencer, a woman who deserves far greater notice than it is receiving. . . . Had Mr. [James Weldon] Johnson done nothing else than introduce us to the work of Anne Spencer in her charming ‘Before the Feast of Shushan’ and her beautiful ‘The Wife-Woman,’ or to the vigor and genuine merit of Claude McKay, he would have done well” (Greene 54).

Stepping back through the garden of time, we may find young Anne composing her sonnet, “The Skeptic.” Spencer states, “That’s the first poem I ever wrote in my life” (Greene 31). Time has lost the words to that poem in the dust of the past. Yet, we have struck an ore of wealth in the collection of poems compiled in Maureen Honey’s book *Shadowed Dreams: (Women’s Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance)*. Here one can explore the many facets of poems written by Anne Spencer and others. From the strong cuts into racism that are sharp and defined in “White Things,” to the clarity of “God Never Planted a Garden,” to the shapely poetic dance through nature in “Substitution.”

Anne Spencer, up until the age of four, lived with both parents, in Martinsville, Virginia. Her mother Sarah left her father, and sent Anne to live with a friend in Winston Salem. Anne states, “My mother had a friend, Mrs. Clark, in Winston Salem North Carolina. When she first left my father, she took me to her friend in Winston Salem and I stayed there that winter” (Greene 9). Later Sarah found the financial means to bring Anne to Bramwell, Virginia. There Anne grew up sheltered from the world and protected from the elements of racial prejudice. Greene writes in *Time’s Unfading Garden*, “This was of course a white restaurant, but Anne never was barred from it. The townspeople indulged both girls; the whites treated Annie as they would one of their own” (13). It was not until Anne left the safe surroundings of Bramwell, to attend school in Lynchburg, Virginia at the Virginia Seminary, that she began to recognize racial hatred. Anne had already blossomed into an intellectual, in all aspects of her life, and knew not to judge others based on skin color or social status. Greene writes, “The seeds of personal freedom-psychological, intellectual, physical, emotional- were firmly planted and nourished during these years and matured during the ensuing years into that defiance, determination, independence, and self-esteem which were the essence of her life and writing” (23).



# *The Poetry of Anne Spencer*

Anne Spencer was forty, when she and her husband Edward, established a local chapter of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) in the town of Lynchburg. It is through this effort that James Weldon Johnson, an official from the main office, would come into their lives and become their lifetime friend. Johnson, while staying with the Spencers, noticed Anne's poems hung on the walls of the kitchen and thus had one published in *Crisis* in February, 1920; that poem was "Before the Feast at Shushan". Anne always took her time with her poems and wrote when inspired. She might have a word or thought as the seed for the poem, and waited calmly for the rain of inspiration to shower her seed into fruition. Spencer states, "I might have an idea for a poem in my head for a long time before something happens to cause me to write that idea down" (Greene 148).

In the book *Time's Unfading Garden* one can explore the working of a woman, who in her lifetime desired to remain true herself at all cost, thus not allowing herself to be forced into writing a style or issue that didn't fit into her mind frame. Anne states, "I react to life more as a human being than a Negro being, but I admit the latter is 1927 model. The Tom-Tom forced into poetry seems a sad state to me" (Greene 139). Hence many of her works went unpublished. In an essay Greene writes, "Anne Spencer is not widely known to readers of the present generation, perhaps because she published few of her poems during her life and never published a volume of her poetry or other writings. Nevertheless, the quality and social circumstances under which she wrote, and her association with and influence on writers and others of the Harlem Renaissance period give her an important place in the literary, social and cultural history of the twentieth-century black America" (Gale 380.) Coal in the ground lay sleeping, allowing time to play its course to bring forth diamonds; in Spencer's works, one can see the sparkling imagination of the past that lay buried, now shine to life as the words burst through the pages as new spring buds upon the soil of our constitution. The reader may pluck the words like jeweled flowers, bursting with seeds from the past to flower a new understanding of tomorrow. Let us conclude then with the words that Spencer used, to implement her connection to her garden, and her glorious employment of what critic Michael Agar might call poetic "languaculture."



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*(Earth, I thank you)*  
*Earth, I thank you*  
*for the pleasure of you language*  
*You've had a hard time*  
*bringing it to me*  
*to grunt thru the noun*  
*To all the way*  
*feeling seeing smelling touching*  
*-awareness*  
*I am here! (Greene 197)*

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