

JAMES WELDON JOHNSON (1871-1938)
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN EX-COLOURED MAN (1912)

I. Introduction: General

A. DuBois is the “old man” / Johnson is the “young disciple”

1. Had there been no Du Bois, Johnson would have been the leading figure of his day
2. Multitalented
3. Extraordinary social skills
 - a. talented communicator
 - b. Literature and song
4. Not an original thinker
5. Borrowed heavily from W.E.B. Du Bois

B. Life and career a curious fusion of art, politics, and individual ambition

C. Afro-American literary tradition always closely allied and often subordinate to the needs of establishing an effective political discourse

1. struggled with issue of literacy, voice, and authority
2. late 1890's emergence of **additional question of form**

D. Johnson a symbolic figure (delightfully mixed career)

1. comes with all of the **social and political credentials**

- a. High School Principle
- b. First African American admitted to the Bar in Florida
- c. founded Daily American and an editor New York Age (now Amsterdam News)
- d. U.S. consul (Puerto Cabello, Venezuela and Corinto Nicaragua) (1906-1912)
 - (a) position he could not have attained without the strong support of Booker T. Washington
- e. field worker the Executive Secretary of N.A.A.C.P. (1920-1932)
 - (1) distinguished career as first black secretary

2. **always also a writer**

a. first and only novel Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man (1912)
included in Three Negro Classics

(1) marks the first truly twentieth century Afro-American novel

(2) partner in song writing team of Johnson, Cole, and Johnson

(3) poet

(4) anthologist

(a) Book of American Negro Poetry (1927; rev. ed. 1932)

(b) Book of American Negro Spirituals (1925; Second Book of American Negro Spirituals, 1927)

(5) autobiography Along This Way (1933)

(6) critic

(a) one of the first to raise the issue of the vernacular

(b) "[The Afro-American poet] needs to find a form that will express the racial spirit by symbols from within rather than by symbols from without, such as the mere mutilation of English spelling and pronunciation." ("Introduction," The Book of American Negro Poetry)

3. ends his career as **professor of creative writing Fisk University (1932-1938)**

II. The poetic career

A. Johnson pursued what he believed the range of options open to him as a poet

B. dialect poetry

1. "Sence You Went Away"

2. mostly **bad** and designed for **songs**

C. non racial poetry

1. "My City"

2. "The Glory of the Day Was in Her Face"

3. "The White Witch"

a. poem about female sexuality

b. poem about lynching

c. poem about the muse

D. racial poetry

1. "Brothers"

- a. story of racial revenge
- b. use of the dual voice to tell the story

2. "Fifty Years"

- a. rewriting of history to **rebuke Booker T. Washington**
- b. **neo-abolitionist**, a **militaristic** and a **nationalistic history** sanctioned by God
- c. vis B.T. Washington's Southern history
- d. evokes not loyalty but a roll call of martyrs

(1) (martyrs) Crispus Attucks, Elijah Lovejoy, and John Brown and abolitionists William L. Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips, Abraham Lincoln and God

3. "Lift Every Voice and Sing"

a. "Negro National Anthem"

(1) key to Johnson's unfulfilled promise is his understanding of **Afro-American religion**

(2) Johnson captures something of the evangelical faith of Afro-Americans and turns it into a secular context

4. "O Black and Unknown Bards"

- a. poem that launches a thousand anthologies of Afro-American poetry
- b. created a **myth of origins for Afro-American poetry**
- c. lays one of the basis for **Johnson's contribution to an Afro-American aesthetic**
- d. appropriation of a political myth as the foundation of an aesthetic
- e. **aesthetic** that built on the essentially **political metaphor of "racial uplift"** from the line the "How came your lips to touch the sacred fire?" to end "You sang a race from wood and stone to Christ"
- f. note the problematics of the first and last stanza

5. Johnson's use of **religion**

E. reaches an impasse after the publication of his first volume of verse (1918)

1. he had exhausted the various strains of his verse

F. Creation

1. Movement away from dialect
2. attempt to recreate the folk voice
3. begins to write "The Creation"
 - a. returned to the Afro-American Sermonic tradition
 - (1) vis a vis the preacher in the minstrel tradition¹
 - b. poetry in the folk voice
 - c. discover the art in the folk voice
 - (1) simple speech
 - (2) rolling cadences
 - (3) strong imagery
 - d. losses the allegorical power of the sermon

¹"Anticipating a point of view more fully developed during the Harlem Renaissance a few years later, Johnson portrayed the black preacher, and the tradition within which he operated, as standing far above mockery or maudlin sympathy. The preacher had been a favorite object of ridicule in the minstrel tradition; it was this tradition upon which white Americans drew their picture of religion among the mass of Afro-Americans." (Levy, 299-300)