

**The Formalist Poets:
The Harlem Renaissance**

Assigned Readings:¹ **Bennett, Gwendolyn B. (1902-1981):** "To Usward" (104), "**Heritage**" (103), "**Song**" (106), "To a Dark Girl" (108), "Secret" (160), "Hatred" (161), "Nocturne" (222), "Fantasy" (160), "Quatrain 2" (223), "Street Lamps in Early Spring" (224);
Dunbar-Nelson, Alice (1875-1935): "**I Sit and Sew**" (74), "The Proletariat Speaks" (75) "**Snow in October**" (186);
Fauset, Jessie (1882-1961): "Stars in Alabama" (156), "Fragment" (157), "**Oriflamme**" (122);
Grimké Anglina Weld (1880-1958): "To Keep the Memory of Charlotte Forten Grimké--1915" (123-124)
Johnson, Georgia D. (1880-1966): "The Heart of A Woman;"
Johnson, Helene (1907- ??): "The Road" (93), "**Sonnet to a Negro in Harlem**" (99), "My Race" (102);
Newsome, Effie L. (1882-1975): "The Bird in the Cage" (67), "The Bronze Legacy" (117)
Spenser, Anne: "White Things" (49), "**Letter to My Sister**" (51), "**Rime for the Christmas Baby**" (115), "**Grapes: Still-Life**," "Creed" (205).

Lecture Notes

I. Introduction

A. Extention of the **Formalist Debate**

1. same criticisms
2. literary history:
 - a. reasonably well appreciated during thier day
 - b. did not receive the atttention afterwards (Cullen, McKay)
 - (1) conventionality
 - (2) imitative
 - (3) sentimentality
 - (4) lack of race consciounsess
3. intersection of gender conventions and genre conventions of reading
4. African-American literary history
 - a. does not start with Gwendolyn Brooks

¹**All selections are drawn from Maureen Honey, ed. Shadowed Dreams: Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989).**

b. poets in particular provide the background for Brooks and Robert Hayden

5. were women a part of the textual universe of Harlem Renaissance?

- a. Gloria Hull's argument
- b. Maureen Honey's argument

6. Significant

a. Jessie Fauset

(1) novelist, poet, salon keeper, literary editor of Crisis

(a) poetry in Crisis half by women²

7. most of the poets were a generation older than the writer's of the Harlem Renaissance

a. women negotiated a different sort of boundaries than the men

(1) did not turn more to the vernacular

(a) did not turn to the strong other women's voices

i) blues women: Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith and others

II. Reading the Poetry

A. Protest

1. defining the protest tradition

B. African-American women as heroine's

C. African-American women as objects of racial construction, and knowledge

D. Nature poems

²"Omitting names whose gender was not clearly marked (e.g., first name omitted in favor of initials), a total of 347 poems appears by men in both journals from 1918 through 1931 and 277 by women. The numbers are nearly even for The Crisis, where Jessie Fauset was literary editor. (Honey, fn 35).

1. nature poems as female personifications (Honey, 8)³

E. Ambivalence of motherhood

1. themes central (Gwendolyn Brooks and Audre Lorde)
2. Anne Spenser's "Rime for the Christmas Baby" (115)
 - a. all themes underlined by notion of **Christ** (i.e. Christmas Baby)
 - b. assume that "Bess" is the mother
 - c. idealic dreams -> bleak future
 - d. tragedy for both mother and child
 - e. interlude

But packed with comfort is the heart
That shares with you what's funny;
So, please, kiss him when he's very bad
And laugh with him in gladness,
 - f. moment of memory/strength

III. Modernist Impulses (Helene Johnson (1907-) and Gwendolyn Bennett 1902-1981))

A. representative of themes and approaches that defined the Harlem Renaissance

B. Gwendolyn Bennett's "Song"

1. could write "raceless" nature poems: "Quatrain 2" (223), "Street Lamps in Early Spring" (224)
2. Define a New Negro Voice "To Usward"
 - a. note dedication to Jessie Fauset
 - (1) defines her own version of New Negro
 - (2) wonderful image of the pot

³"Nature provided a objective correlative through which they [black women poets] could articulate their gender oppression as well as that of race, for nature, like them, had been objectified, invaded, and used by men seeking power and wealth" (Honey, 8)

3. first stanza begins with the poet's voice
 - a. discussion of the source of that voice
 - (1) from sweat and lips of African-American folk
 - (2) draws on the secular and sacred traditions
 - b. like Toomer's "Son of the Son"
4. second stanza
 - a. reproduces and takes issue with the minstrel/dialect stereotype
 - b. restores Du Bois's "sorrow songs"
5. third stanza
 - a. moves on to jazz rhythms

IV. Ending (Helene Johnson's "Invocation" (219))

Let me be buried in the rain
In a deep, dripping wood,
Under the warm wet breast of Earth
Where once a gnarled tree stood
And paint a picture on my tomb
With dirt and a piece of bough
Of a girl and a boy beddeath a round ripe moon
Eating of love with an eager spoon
And vowing an eager vow.
And do not keep my plot mowed smooth
And cleas as a spinster's bed,
But le the weed, the flower, the tree,
Riotous, rampant, wild, and free,
Grow high above my head.

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*** In this short essay, Ferguson identifies the characters in Wallace Thurman's Infants of Spring who represent Dorothy West and Helene Johnson. "This... description of Doris Westmore and Hazel Jamison comports well with the biographical facts available on the early years of short-story writer, editor, and novelist Dorothy West and her lesser-known cousin, poet Helene Johnson" (22).

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* Singh takes issue with the "absoluteness with which he [Nathan Huggin] views the black American's dilemma in self-definition on equal terms with the white American's," (31) arguing that the racial imbalance between black and whites limited the possibilities of equal personal and artistic exchange. On the whole this article adds little new to the discussion of the issue of patronage and black white relations in the 1920's. His singular unique vantage point is based on his claim that V.F. Calverton's views of blacks transcended the typically stereotyped image of primitivism

Hull, Gloria T. "Researching Alice Dunbar-Nelson: A Personal and Literary Perspective." Feminist Studies 6.2 (Summer, 1980): 314-320. [xwrk/author: dunbar-nelson/dis*]

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Hull, Gloria T. "Color, Sex, and Poetry in the Harlem Renaissance." Color Sex and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987. 1-33.

*** In this introductory chapter to her work, Hull reexamines the traditional view of the Harlem Renaissance that centers on the activities of a group of young writers in Harlem. She suggests that this view suppresses the roles played by other geographical areas, older writers, and women during the 1920's. Her particular concern is the women she writes about. Her subjects because of geographical location, aesthetic inclinations, and sex were marginalized during the twenties and marginalized by criticism of the twenties. Alain Locke, one of the major critics of the period, is herein described as a misogynist and a man who favored young males. She says: "Locke in fact, functioned within a homosexual coterie of friendship and patronage that suggests that the literary events were in more than a few instances, tied to 'bedroom politics' and 'sexual croneism'..." (8)

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