

PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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Chapter 9: Gwendolyn Bennett (1902-1981)

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According to Sandra Govan, Gwendolyn Bennett, writer and artist, played an active role in the African-American arts Community for over twenty years. As an artist and teacher, she nurtured and fostered the talents of young African-American artists. Although Bennett never published her own volume of poetry, she was also one of the most revered poets of the New Negro Era. Her poetry reflected themes of the New Negro Era--racial pride, rediscovery of Africa, celebration of blackness--or of personal statement, the romantic lyric. Thus, Bennett gave of herself to the Harlem community and helped energize the Harlem Renaissance. (Govan, Sandra Y. "After the Renaissance: Gwendolyn Bennett and the WPA Years." *MAWA-Review* 3:2 (Dec. 1988): 27-31.)

Primary Works *

Fiction:

"Wedding Day." *Fire!!* (November, 1926): 26-28.

Nonfiction::

"The American Negro Paints." *Southern Workman* 57 (January 1928): 111-112. "The Ebony Flute"[column]. *Opportunity* (August 1926-May 1928). "The Future of the Negro in Art." *Howard University Record* 19 (December 1924): 65-66. "The Harlem Artists Guild." *Art Front* 3 (May 1937): 20. "I Go to Camp." *Opportunity* (August 1934): 241-43. "Negroes: Inherent Craftsmen." *Howard University Record* 19 (February 1925): 172. "Never the Twain Shall Meet." *Opportunity* (March 1934): 92. Review of *Banjo*, by Claude McKay. *Opportunity* (August 1929): 254-255. Review of *The Grand Army Man of Rhode Island*. *Opportunity* (September 1926): 294. Review of *The Lonesome Road*, by Paul Green. *Opportunity* (September 1926): 294. Review of *My Spirituals*, by Eva Jessye. *Opportunity* (November 1927): 338-39. Review of *Plum Bun*, by Jessie Redmon Fauset. *Opportunity* (September 1929): 287. Review of *Salah and His American*, by Leland Hall. *Opportunity* (March 1934): 92. Review of *Sorrow in Sunlight*, by Ronald Firbank. *Opportunity* (June 1926): 195-96. "Rounding the Century: Story of the Colored Orphan Asylum and Association for the Benefit of Colored Children in New York City." *Crisis* 42 (June 1935): 180-81, 188.

Poetry:

"Dear Things." *Palms* 4 (October 1926). "Dirge." *Palms* 4 (October 1926). "Epitaph." *Opportunity* (March 1934): 76. "Hatred." *Opportunity* (June 1926): 190. "Heritage." *Opportunity* (December 1923): 371. "Lines Written at the Grave of Alexander Dumas." *Opportunity* (July 1926): 225. "Moon Tonight." *Gypsy* (October 1926). "On a Birthday." *Opportunity* (September 1925): 276. "Purgation." *Opportunity* (February 1925): 56. "Song." *Palms* 4 (October 1926): 21-22. "Street Lamps in Early Spring." *Opportunity* (May 1926): 152. "To Usward." *Crisis* 28 (May 1924): 19; *Opportunity* (May 1924): 143-44. "Wind." *Opportunity* (November 1924): 335.

(*Primary Works from *Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*.)

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A Student Project by Merrilee Chapman

Though Bennett was not one of the major figures during the Harlem Renaissance, *The Oxford Companion to Women's Writers* says that, "Gwendolyn Bennett was one of the most versatile figures to participate actively in both the 1920s Black American arts movement, which was designated as the Harlem Renaissance, and in the 1930s arts alliance. . ."(101). She was a painter and a writer, but never settled into one avenue and so never truly flourished either.

Gwendolyn Bennett was born to Joshua and Maime Bennett on July 8, 1902 in Giddings, Texas. They lived in Nevada on an Indian Reservation the first four or five years of her life. They then moved to Washington D.C.. Her parents divorced shortly after the move. Gwendolyn's father kidnapped her when she was seven. They didn't stay in any one place for very long, but didn't stray outside Pennsylvania.

Bennett did well in school. She was an honors student in high school. She attended Pratt Institute, as well as taking classes at Columbia University. She was working towards a career in the fine arts. Her studies at both of these institutions led to work as a graphic artist in 1925. She also worked at Howard University where she taught fine arts.

Her first published work was in 1923. The *Opportunity* carried her poem "Heritage." *The Dictionary of Literary Biography* says of this poem, ". . . a piece that tapped Afro-American cultural images ñ Africa, ñthe Negro girls' dancing at dusk,

ésad people's souls/hidden by a minstrel smile' ñ two years before Cullen's celebrated poem of the same title addressed some of the same themes and images" (5).

Bennett's second work to be published, "To Usward," was printed in both the *Crisis* and *Opportunity*. *The Dictionary* says of this, "The poem identifies and sanctions the diversity of vision and the variety of thematic concerns animating the collective muse of Harlem's writers. It celebrates youth and diversity. . ." (5).

Gwendolyn had been introduced to the young authors of the day by Charles Johnson, editor of *Opportunity*, and wrote this poem when Fauset's *There is Confusion* was published.

Gwendolyn's work was looked upon favorably. She got positive reviews from people such as James Weldon Johnson, playwright Theodore Ward, and J. Mason Brewer (6). *The Dictionary* quotes Ward as saying that Gwendolyn was, "one of the ãmost promising of the poets out of the Harlem Renaissance" (6). Oddly enough, she ended up being one of the minor characters of the Renaissance.

In 1926, Bennett began working for *Opportunity* as an aid to the editor. She was given the job of writing a literary and fine arts column. Her column was set up to review Black artists and their work. She titled her column "Ebony Flute." She was the only one writing an article of this kind and so it has become quite an important document of the times. Her poetry was also being published during this time. Some of the poems put in print were; "Hatred," "To a Dark Girl," and "Lines Written at the Grave of Alexander Dumas." Two short stories she wrote were "Tokens" and "Wedding Day."

In 1927 Bennett married Alfred "Jack" Jackson and they moved to Florida. She was extremely unhappy there, as it took her away from the literary world and the lifestyle she so enjoyed. Her marriage did not go well either. She was unable to write while in Florida. "Psychologically the Florida move stifled her creative muse" as *The Dictionary* explains (8). By the time the Jacksons moved back north the Renaissance was over and the Depression had taken its place. Gwendolyn got involved in the WPA's Federal Writers Project and Federal Act Project (8). Alfred died in the early 1930's.

Gwendolyn became the director for the Harlem Community Art Center in 1937. She was highly successful, but was dismissed in 1941 because she was caught up in the "Red Probe" (9). Her next position would be one as teacher and member of the administrative staff at Jefferson School for Democracy. She moved to George Washington Carver School in 1943, but would have trouble there with connections to communism once again. Both schools were investigated. Bennett would not work in the public eye again. She spent her last days as an antique dealer in Kutztown, Pennsylvania. She died on May 30, 1981.

The Dictionary says of Gwendolyn Bennett, "She compounded her problems by being an artist divided, unable to find a center within and unable to secure the ones she built inside" (9). She was a jack of all trades and master of none, so to speak. She was highly thought of among those who knew her and her work. She was active politically and in the literary world. She helped to introduce the great names of the Renaissance through her column, "The Ebony Flute." It would link her name with those stars of the Renaissance, just not as one the outstanding ones.

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