

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

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## Chapter 9: Sterling Allen Brown (1901-1989)

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### Primary Works

*Southern Road*, 1932; "Negro Characters as Seen by White Authors," 1933; *Negro Poetry and Drama*, 1938; *The Negro in American Fiction*, 1938 ( PS374 N4 B7); *The Negro Caravan* (an anthology, co edited with Arthur P. Davis and Ulysses Lee), 1941 ( PS508.N3 B75); *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown*, 1980.

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## A Student Project by Anne Reiswig

During the Harlem Renaissance, Sterling Brown was considered an eloquent and technically accomplished poet. He was a teacher and scholar of African American folk culture and literature. He immersed himself in a full range of African American expressions in order that his writing could reflect his whole race and not just that of his well educated, middle-class background.

Sterling Allen Brown was born on May 1, 1901 in Washington D.C. His father, Reverend Sterling Nelson Brown, had been born a slave but after the Civil War, he managed attended Fisk University and Oberlin College. His mother was also a graduate of Fisk University. Brown's father was pastor of Lincoln Temple Congregational Church and later became professor of religion at Howard.

Brown grew up on and around the Howard University campus. He attended Dunbar High School and at 17 he received an academic scholarship to Williams College. While at Williams, Brown was introduced to the traditional literature cannon. Outside of his school studies, he explored blues and jazz music still considered to be illegitimate. Brown graduated Williams then attended Harvard University in 1922. He received his master's degree in English in 1923.

Brown's first teaching position was at Virginia Seminary and College from 1923-1926. It was here he met Daisy Turnbull whom he married in 1927. From 1926-1928 Brown taught at Lincoln University in Missouri. After that, he taught for a year at Fisk University. Brown finally settles at Howard University where he began a forty year teaching stint in 1929. Between 1931 and 1932, Brown took a break from Howard to work on his doctorate at Harvard University.

Beginning in the 1920s, Brown's poetry began appearing in anthologies and regularly in Opportunity magazine. In 1932, his first book of poetry, Southern Road, is published. James Weldon Johnson praised Brown for "discovering how to write a black vernacular poetry that was not fraught with the limitations of the 'dialect verse' of the Paul Laurence Dunbar era" (Stepto, 4). Johnson invited Brown to write a teaching guide for his anthology, The Book of American Negro Poetry." This project became Outline for the Study of the Poetry of American Negroes, published in 1931.

Through the 1930s, Brown wrote a regular column for Opportunity. He reviewed plays and films as well as novels and biographies. From 1936 to 1939, he was appointed Editor of Negro Affairs for the Federal Writer's Project. The FWP was a federally funded program that paid for the collection of American Folklore. Because this position allowed him to come in contact with almost all aspects of African American life, Brown was able to contribute a large portion of material for The Negro In Virginia, published in 1940. His work on this volume led to his being named a researcher on the Carnegie-Myrdal Study of the Negro.

Unfortunately for the literary world, in 1935 Brown's second volume of poetry, No Hiding Place, was rejected by the publishers for economic reasons. Brown made no further effort to publish his poetry. Occasionally his poems would appear in magazines or anthologies, but Brown decided to focus on more academic writing. It wasn't until forty-three years later that his next book of poetry, The Last Ride of Wild Bill and Eleven Narrative Poems, would be published in 1975.

In 1937, Brown received a Guggenheim Fellowship which enabled him to complete two books, The Negro in American Fiction and Negro Poetry and Drama, both published in 1937. In 1941 Brown co-edited a massive anthology with Ulysses Lee and Arthur P. Davis entitled The Negro Caravan: Writings by American Negroes. This volume would stand as one of a kind for almost thirty years.

Brown continued to publish essays and commentaries on black folklore, black music, black literature, and the role of the African American in literature. He believed that black vernacular is culturally sophisticated as opposed to primitive. Jazz music, blues and spirituals are all complex forms of expression, and Brown championed them as legitimate art forms. Even Brown's poetry was a way of "calling attention to African American achievements and of deploring American racism" (Byam, 1726).

In 1955, Brown wrote The New Negro in Literature in which he argues that the Harlem Renaissance should have had a different name. A better name would have been a New Negro Renaissance, since most of the participants were not from Harlem and very few of them actually wrote about Harlem. In his opinion, the name was just publishing hype.

Brown retired from Howard University in 1969. His writing was undergoing a resurgence and he was invited for poetry readings, lectures and tributes. He was awarded fourteen honorary degrees from various colleges and universities. His book, Southern Road, was reissued in 1974 and in 1980, Michael S. Harper edited Brown's Collected Poems. In 1984, Brown was named Poet Laureate for the District of Columbia.

The death of Daisy Brown, his wife, in 1979 led Brown to live with his sisters until he moved to a health center in Takoma Park, Maryland. He was suffering from leukemia and on January 13, 1989, Sterling Brown died.

According to Paul Bremen, Brown "singlehandedly changed the concept of 'dialect verse' from the largely literary plantation school of Dunbar's day through poems like 'Ma Rainey' and 'Long Gone,' to observations of folk life recorded with a keen ear, a genuine personal interest, and unobtrusive but all-important technical virtuosity" (Bremen, 66). Brown is thought of as the creator of African American studies in Literature. Without Brown's work, the study of American as well as African American vernaculars and expressions could not have gone forward.

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May 1, 1901 Sterling A. Brown born in Washington D.C.

1918 Graduates Dunbar High School with Honors

1922 Graduates Williams College cum laude, elected Phi Beta Kappa junior year, awarded "Final Honors" in English, BA degree. Earns the Graves Prize

1922-1923 Harvard &mdash; MA in English

1923-1926 Teaches at Virginia Seminary and College

1926-1928 Teaches at Lincoln University in Missouri

1927 Marries Daisy Turnbull

1928-1929 Teaches at Fisk University

1929-1969 Teaches at Howard University

1931-1932 Returns to Harvard for doctoral study

1932 Southern Road, a book of poetry published

1935 No Hiding Place, rejected by publishers for economic reasons

1936-1939 Served as editor of "Negro Materials" Federal Writer's Project

1937 The Negro in American Fiction published, Guggenheim Fellowship

(1938) Negro Poetry and Drama published

1941 editor of The Negro Caravan, an anthology

1956 The Reader's Companion to World Literature published

1969 Retires after 40 years from Howard University

1974 Southern Road reissued

1975 2<sup>nd</sup> book of poetry published, The Last Ride of Wild Bill

1979 Wife, Daisy, dies

1980 Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown published

1984 Named Poet Laureate of the District of Columbia

January 13, 1989 Brown dies of leukemia in Takoma Park, Maryland

1997 Howard University dedicates Founder's Library as a Tribute to Brown's life and writings

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