

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

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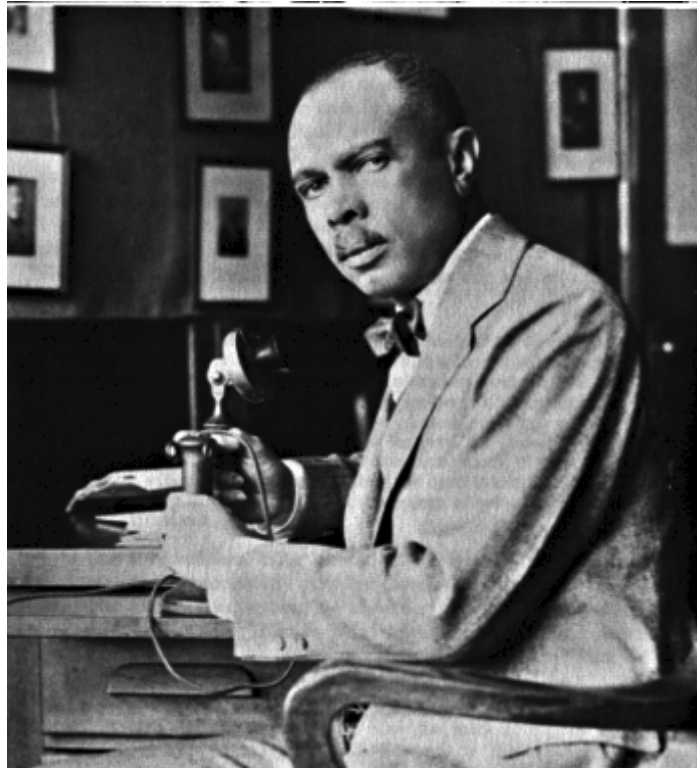
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Chapter 9: James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938)

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"I will not allow one prejudiced person or one million or one hundred million to blight my life. I will not let prejudice or any of its attendant humiliations and injustices bear me down to spiritual defeat. My inner life is mine, and I shall defend and maintain its integrity against all the powers of hell (quoted in Skinner, 237, listed below)."

Awards, Honors: Springarn Medal from NAACP, 1925 for outstanding achievement by an American Negro; Harmon Gold Award for *God's Trombones*; Julius Rosenwald Fund Grant, 1929; W. E. B. Du Bois Prize for Negro Literature, 1933, named first incumbent of Spence Chair of Creative Literature at Fisk University; honorary doctorates from Talladega College and Howard University (Skinner 234).

"The Creation" (from *God's Trombones*, 1927)

And God stepped out on space,
And he looked around and said:
I'm lonely -
I'll make me a world.

And far as the eye of God could see 5
Darkness covered everything,
Blacker than a hundred midnights
Down in a cypress swamp.

Then God smiled,
And the light broke, 10
And the darkness rolled up on one side,
And the light stood shining on the other,
And God said: That's good!

Then God reached out and took the light in his hands,
And God rolled the light around in his hands 15
Until he made the sun;
And he set that sun a-blazing in the heavens.
And the light that was left from making the sun
God gathered it up in a shining ball
And flung it against the darkness, 20
Spangling the night with the moon and stars.
Then down between
The darkness and the light
He hurled the world;
And God said: That's good! 25

Then God himself stepped down -
And the sun was on his right hand,
And the moon was on his left;
The stars were clustered about his head,
And the earth was under his feet. 30
And God walked, and where he trod
His footsteps hollowed the valleys out
And bulged the mountains up.

Then he stopped and looked and saw
That the earth was hot and barren. 35
So God stepped over to the edge of the world
And he spat out the seven seas -
He batted his eyes, and the lightnings flashed -
He clapped his hands, and the thunders rolled -
And the waters above the earth came down, 40
The cooling waters came down.

[Top](#) Then the green grass sprouted,
And the little red flowers blossomed,
The pine tree pointed his finger to the sky,
And the oak spread out his arms, 45
The lakes cuddled down in the hollows of the ground,
And the rivers ran down to the sea;
And God smiled again,
And the rainbow appeared,
And curled itself around his shoulder. 50

Then God raised his arm and he waved his hand
Over the sea and over the land,
And he said: Bring forth! Bring forth!
And quicker than God could drop his hand,
Fishes and fowls 55
And beasts and birds
Swam the rivers and the seas,
Roamed the forests and the woods,
And split the air with their wings.
And God said: That's good! 60

Then God walked around,
And God looked around
On all that he had made.
He looked at his sun,
And he looked at his moon, 65
And he looked at his little stars;
He looked on his world
With all its living things,
And God said: I'm lonely still.

Then God sat down - 70
On the side of a hill where he could think;
By a deep, wide river he sat down;
With his head in his hands,
God thought and thought,
Till he thought: I'll make me a man! 75

Up from the bed of the river
God scooped the clay;
And by the bank of the river
He kneeled him down;
And there the great God Almighty 80
Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,
Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,
Who rounded the earth in the middle of his hand;
This Great God,
Like a mammy bending over her baby, 85
Kneeled down in the dust
Toiling over a lump of clay
Till he shaped it in his own image;

Then into it he blew the breath of life,
And man became a living soul. 90
Amen. Amen.

From *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, Volume Two, Second Edition, 1053-1055.

Primary Works

The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man, 1912.
(Translator) *Fernando Periquet, Goyescas; or, The Rival Lovers* (opera libretto), 1915.
Fifty Years and Other Poems, 1917
(Editor) *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, 1922
(Editor) *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*, 1925
(Editor) *The Second Book of Negro Spirituals*, 1926
God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse (poetry), 1927
Black Manhattan (nonfiction) 1930
Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson, 1933
Contributed articles and poems to the *Chicago Defender*, *Times-Union*, *New York Age*, *New York Times*,
Pittsburgh Courier, *Savannah Tribune*, *The Century*, *The Crisis*, *The Nation*, *The Independent*, *Harper's*, *The Bookman*, *Forum*, and *Scholastic*.

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| [Top](#) | James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938): A Brief Biography

A Student Project by Ana L. Mena

Remembered as the “Renaissance Man,” James Weldon Johnson displayed his multi-talents by being a poet, lyricist, author, editor, principal, professor, lawyer, and secretary of the NAACP. He was born on June 17, 1871 in Jacksonville, Florida to middle class and free born parents, James Johnson and Helen Dillet (Pettis, 179). His father was the headwaiter at the fancy St. James Hotel, while his mother was a teacher at Stanton School (Tolbert-Rouchaleau, 17). In his autobiography *Along This Way (1933)* Johnson recounts how his mother was too ill to nurse him when he was born, that Mrs. McCleary, a white neighbor, breast fed him until his mom was in good health. “So it appears,” Johnson writes, “that in the land of black mammies I had a white one” (9). Two years later, his brother Rosamond was to be born.

Johnson completed eighth grade in 1887 at the same school his mother taught, which was considered to be one of the best black primary schools in the country. Three years later, he completed his high school preparatory courses and finished his undergraduate work in 1894. During his four years at Atlanta University, “he worked in the printing office and taught in black rural schools in Hampton Georgia”(Pettis, 180).

After graduating from the university in 1894, Johnson passed up the chance to study medicine at Harvard University to become the principal of his former elementary school. In his autobiography, Johnson considered this “the time of the psychological passing over from boyhood to manhood” (125). He took on the responsibilities of organization and administration for 1,000 students and twenty-five faculty members at the young age of twenty-one (Pettis, 180).

Soon afterwards, Johnson accomplished one of his early ambitions. In May 1895 along with M.J Christopher, Johnson “ inaugurated *The Daily American*, a black weekly newspaper [and the first Negro daily ever published]” (Pettis, 180). Although having success with the African American community, the newspaper only lasted eight months due to financial difficulties. This particular incident in life, left Johnson as a sadly discouraged man. He writes in his autobiography,

it was my first disappointment at the failure of the masses to respond to what I myself felt to be an important effort towards racial advancement. (139)

The following year, Johnson followed another of his earliest ambitions, which was that of studying law. While holding the position of principal, he “worked a few hours each day [. . .] in the offices of [the white, brilliant and wealthy attorney] Thomas Ledwith,” who encouraged him to take the examination for certification by the bar (Tolbert-Rouchaleau, 33). Despite his recognition for being the first black to be admitted in Duval County, an area that includes Jacksonville and later admitted to the Florida Supreme Court, Johnson became uninterested to the mundane details of his practice.

In 1896 when his brother Rosamond returned from studying music at the New England Conservatory in Boston, Massachusetts, Johnson became inquisitive of the world his brother was involved in (Tolbert-Rouchaleau, 34). After Rosamond discovered some lyrics in his brother’s notebook and to which he composed music, they formed a song writing team. In 1897 Johnson began a seven-year partnership with Rosamond. He journeyed as a lyricist with his brother as the musician, and “Bob Cole as the performer on vaudeville acts that took them to New York and London” (Pettis 180). Johnson was to resign as principal of Stanton School in 1902 to move to New York City.

Johnson enjoyed writing poetry, and it wasn’t until the fall of 1900 that one of his poems in dialect verse,

"Sence You Went Away," would become his first success in *Century Magazine* (Tolbert-Rouchaleau, 38). Also in 1900, Johnson wrote "Lift Every Voice," in celebration of Lincoln's birthday. It was set to music by Rosamond and was sung by 500 Stanton School students" (Pettis, 180).

Moving to New York opened many doors of opportunity for Johnson. He chose to continue his education at Columbia University with an emphasis on English literature and drama and he also served from 1906 to 1914 in the Consular Service, which allowed him to travel to Latin American (Pettis, 181). On February 3, 1910 Johnson married Grace Nail, who was reared in a wealthy New York home and who first met Johnson at a dance in Brooklyn ((Tolbert-Rouchaleau, 55).

The year 1913 also proved to be a successful year for Johnson. Another of his poems that received recognition was "Fifty Years," which was written in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation and which later appeared in the *New York Times* on January 1, 1913(Pettis, 181). The following year, he resigned from the Consular Service to become an editor with the *New York Age*. He founded "Poetry Corner" in 1915 and in 1920 he became the first African American to hold the position of Secretary for the NAACP (Pettis, 181). Two years later, Johnson published *The Book of Negro American Poetry*, in which he introduced poetry of Anne Spencer and Claude McKay (Johnson 375).

At the height of the Harlem Renaissance, Johnson's major poetic accomplishment *God's Trombones* appeared, which consisted of seven poetic sermons in free verse (Pettis, 182). He had written conventional poetry in verse form, meter, and rhyme. His anonymously published novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), which was later credited to him, also proved to be a significant work. Johnson's last collection of original poems, *St. Peter Relates an Incident: Selected Poems* appeared three years after his death in an automobile accident (Pettis 183).

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Study Questions

1. Does Johnson's high degree of Euroamerican acculturation deflect from his African-American altruism?
2. Is he rightfully classed as a Victorian in terms of middle-class prudery and respectability?
3. Do you agree with George Kent's view that "his cosmopolitanism always extends his reach and his grasp" (In *Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture*, 1972, p. 30)?
4. The editors of *The Conscious Voice* (1965) suggest that the poem is the rendering of experience- which also suggests "the intricacy of the poet's involvement in the world." Does Johnson use a suitable aesthetic distance from his subject matter in the poems: "Lift Every Voice" (1900); "Fifty Years" (1853-1913); and "Saint Peter Relates An Incident" (1930)? (Refer to outside sources for the latter two poems.)
5. How can one justify the author's use of the compensatory Christian ethic in "Lift Every Voice," "Bards," "Listen Lord"-- a prayer--and the sermons in *Trombones*, when he himself is an agnostic? (Refer to outside sources for the latter two poems.)
6. Three reigning poets influenced Johnson's development as the second outstanding African-American poet: Rudyard Kipling, English; Walt Whitman, American; Paul Laurence Dunbar, African-American. How?
7. Racial violence in the poem "Brothers" (1916) is attended with a plea for brotherhood. What is its advantage over literary dialect?
8. How does the longevity of the oral tradition substantiate its worth in the use of black idiomatic expression in African-

American literature?

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