

COLLECTIONS > AFRICAN-AMERICAN

ADS BY GOOGLE

Get 6
Images
FREE

sign up now

BIGSTOCK

Helene Johnson, Poet of Harlem, 89, Dies

By ERIC PACE
Published: July 11, 1995

Helene Johnson, one of the Harlem Renaissance poets who flourished in the 1920's, died on Friday at her home in Manhattan. She was 89.

Ms. Johnson, a descendant of slaves, was reared in Boston and in Oak Bluffs, Mass. She came to New York City in 1927 and became, as the author and longtime librarian of Fisk University, Arna Bontemps, once put it, "the youngest of the young poets and writers who brought about the Negro renaissance, as it was called in Harlem in the 20's." That cultural flowering wilted in the Depression.

In an essay in "The Harlem Renaissance Remembered" (1972), Ronald Primeau wrote that Ms. Johnson and other relatively unsung poets of that day helped establish the Harlem Renaissance's "validity as a movement."

"Helene Johnson combines an expression of unquenchable desires with realistic description of ghetto life and a discovery of the roots of her people," he added. "In her most famous work, 'Poem,' the speaker praises the whole way of being of a 'little brown boy,' calling him 'a jazz prince' and celebrating her participation in his heritage."

ADS BY GOOGLE

More Like This

THE ANNOTATED LIST;
Women Box, Men Dive, Dogs
Preen and a...

Repository Of Black Past Is
Reopened

Streetscapes/The Walker Town
House; The Grand Mansion of
an...

Find More Stories

African-american

Prince

Harlem Renaissance

"Poem" begins with these lines, which are some of what the poet Countee Cullen called her "colloquial verses":

Little brown boy,

Slim, dark, big-eyed,

Crooning love songs to your banjo

Down at the Lafayette --

Gee, boy, I love the way you hold your head,

High sort of and a bit to one side,

Like a prince, a jazz prince . . .

In the book "Notable Black American Women," edited by Jessie Carney Smith (1992), T. J. Bryan writes: "In African-American literary history, Helene Johnson's works are models for aspiring poets -- especially for African-American women poets who have long been led to believe that no tradition of achievement exists among black American women in this genre prior to the 1960's.

"Additionally, in African-American literary history, Helene Johnson is a transitional poet whose works of the 1920's and 1930's signal a striking out in new directions among black American women poets, who began to abandon romantic themes and poetic conventions at this juncture."

Her work was published regularly for a decade beginning in the mid-1920's and much less frequently in subsequent years. It appeared in a variety of magazines, including Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life and Vanity Fair, and in Cullen's "Caroling Dusk" and other anthologies, among them "The Poetry of the Negro" (1949), "American Negro Poetry" (1963) and "Voices From the Harlem Renaissance" (1976).

Ms. Johnson is quoted in "Notable Black American Women" as having said that by the mid-1930's she lacked "a certain laxity" that she required to write and to seek publication for her writings.

"On her silence since then," the book continues, Ms. Johnson explained: "It's very difficult for a poor person to be that unfastened. They have to eat. In order to eat, you have to be fastened, and tightly." She married in 1933, had her daughter in 1940 and worked for some years for Consumers Union in Mount Vernon, N.Y.

A book of poetry by Ms. Johnson, "Inklings and Trinkets," is to be published in the spring of 1996 by Off-Center Press. It will include new poems and perhaps some poems that have already been published.

Ms. Johnson's daughter, Abigail McGrath, recalled that her mother had continued writing "for herself because she enjoyed writing," and, until she was crippled by osteoporosis, "she wrote a poem every single day, sometimes tossing out yesterday's piece, sometimes rewriting."

Ms. Johnson was born in Boston. Her mother was a domestic worker; she never knew her father. She went to public schools in Boston and attended Boston University and Columbia University.

In 1933 she married William Warner Hubbell 3d, a motorman. The marriage ended in divorce, her daughter said.

In addition to her daughter, of Manhattan, she is survived by two grandsons and a great-granddaughter. A Voice of Youth From a Renaissance

Ah, little road all whirry in the breeze,
A leaping clay hill lost among the trees,
The bleeding note of rapture streaming thrush
Caught in a drowsy hush
And stretched out in a single singing line of dusky song.
Ah little road, brown as my race is brown,
Your trodden beauty like our trodden pride,
Dust of the dust, they must not bruise you down.
Rise to one brimming golden, spilling cry!

"The Road" ("Caroling Dusk: An Anthology of Verse by Negro Poets," edited by Countee Cullen, Harper & Row, 1927)

Upstairs on the third floor

Of the 135th Street Library
In Harlem, I saw a little
Bottle of sand, brown sand
Just like the kids make pies
Out of down at the beach.
But the label said: "This
Sand was taken from the Sahara desert."
Imagine that! The Sahara desert!
Some bozo's been all the way to Africa to get some sand.
And yesterday on Seventh Avenue
I saw a darky dressed fit to kill
In yellow gloves and swallow-tail coat
And swirling a cane. And everyone
Was laughing at him. Me too,
At first, till I saw his face
When he stopped to hear a
Organ grinder grind out some jazz.
Boy! You should a seen that darky's face!
It just shone. Gee, he was happy!
And he began to dance. No
Charleston or Black Bottom for him.
No sir. He danced just as dignified
And slow. No, not slow either.
Dignified and proud! You couldn't
Call it slow, not with all the
Cuttin' up he did. You would a died to see him.
The crowd kept yellin' but he didn't hear,
Just kept on dancin' and twirlin' that cane
And yellin' out loud every once in a while.
I know the crowd thought he was coo-coo.
But say, I was where I could see his face,
And somehow, I could see him dancin' in a jungle,
A real honest-to-goodness jungle, and he wouldn't have on them
Trick clothes -- those yaller shoes and yaller gloves
And swallow-tail coat. He wouldn't have on nothing.

And he wouldn't be carrying no cane.
He'd be carrying a spear with a sharp fine point
Like bayonets we had "over there."
And the end of it would be dipped in some kind of
Hoo-doo poison. And he'd be dancin' black and naked and gleaming.
And he'd have rings in his ears and on his nose
And bracelets and necklaces of elephants' teeth.
Gee, I bet he'd be beautiful then all right.
No one would laugh at him then, I bet.
Say! That man that took that sand from the Sahara desert
And put it in a little bottle on a shelf in the library,
That's what they done to this shine, ain't it? Bottled him.
Trick shoes, trick coat, trick cane, trick everything -- all glass --
But inside --
Gee, that poor shine!
"Bottled" ("Caroling Dusk")

[Home](#) | [Times topics](#) | [Member Center](#)

[Copyright 2012](#) | [The New York Times Company](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Index by Keyword](#)