Critical Survey of Poetry: American Poets

James Weldon Johnson

by Anita Price Davis

Other literary forms

James Weldon Johnson was known mainly for his poetry, but he also wrote a novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912), and an autobiography, *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson* (1933), as well as numerous essays.
Achievements

James Weldon Johnson was the first African American in his county—and probably all of Florida—to pass the bar through an open state court examination since Reconstruction. Johnson was Fisk University’s first Adam K. Spence Professor of Creative Writing (1932-1938) and a visiting professor at New York University (1934-1937). He earned honorary degrees from Atlanta University, Talladega College, and Howard University. He received the Spingarn Medal for achievement from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He also earned the W. E. B. Du Bois Literature Prize, the Harmon Gold Award for God’s Trombones (1927), and a Julius Rosenwald Fellowship (1929). While he was principal at the Edwin M. Stanton School in Jacksonville, he began offering high school courses; this curriculum enabled African Americans to graduate from high school in Jacksonville for the first time.

Johnson’s writings brought increased respect to him and to African Americans everywhere. His Lift Every Voice and Sing—set to music by John Rosamond Johnson—became the theme song of the NAACP. In 1990, the Congressional Record entered “Lift Every Voice and Sing” as the official African American national hymn. After Johnson’s death, both his “Lift Every Voice and Sing” and his “The Creation” became picture books for children in 1993 and 1994, respectively. Yale University Library opened its James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection in 1950, and the U.S. Postal Service honored Johnson with a twenty-two-cent stamp in 1988.

Biography

James William Johnson (who became James Weldon Johnson in 1913) and John Rosamond Johnson were the two surviving children of headwaiter and minister James Johnson and Helen Louise Dillet Johnson. Johnson’s mother was a musician and was the first African American female to teach in a Florida public grammar school, the Edwin M. Stanton School, where she taught her son. Because there was no local high school for African Americans, the young Johnson enrolled in Atlanta University’s preparatory school in 1887. By 1894, he had a B.A. from Atlanta University, had toured with a male quartet, was the principal at Stanton School, and was studying law. After passing the bar, he practiced law part-time (1898-1901).

At Stanton, Johnson developed a set of courses that allowed the school’s African American students to earn a high school education. In 1895, he started The Daily American, Jacksonville’s—and possibly the United States’—first daily African American newspaper. His “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” written in 1900, became nationally known.
Johnson moved to New York after a fire destroyed the Stanton School in 1901. With his brother, John Rosamond Johnson, and Robert Cole, a performer, producer, and composer, Johnson wrote more than two hundred songs. He studied at Columbia (1903-1906), earned an M.A. from Atlanta University, and completed a European theatrical tour. The two brothers campaigned for Theodore Roosevelt and wrote his campaign song: “You’re All Right, Teddy.”

James Weldon Johnson resigned from his job as internal revenue collector to accept U.S. president Roosevelt’s appointment as Venezuelan consul (1907). While he was the Nicaraguan consul (1909-1912), Johnson married Grace Nail (1910) and wrote his only novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*.

Johnson adopted a new middle name in 1913. He worked as an editorial writer for the African American periodical *New York Age* (1914-1927) and as a member of the staff of the NAACP (1916-1920). After acting as NAACP secretary (1918-1920), he became the organization’s first nonwhite general secretary (1920-1930).

Johnson urged using the press to address inequalities and celebrate achievements. He published his first verse collection, *Fifty Years, and Other Poems*, in 1917. During the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920’s, Johnson edited *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* (1925), and *The Second Book of American Negro Spirituals* (1926). The latter two works were reprinted together in *The Books of American Negro Spirituals* (1926), which included his brother’s piano arrangements. Johnson’s critical introductions offer insights into these often-ignored genres. These works publicized the literary contributions of African Americans in ways other than dialect writings and minstrel shows, enhanced the Harlem Renaissance, and performed a service for all.

In 1927, he published *God’s Trombones*, a poetry collection based on a trip to Georgia while he was in college. That same year, Johnson lectured at the University of North Carolina—an opportunity not often granted to an African American. Later, he lectured at New York University, Northwestern University, Yale University, Oberlin College, and Swarthmore College.

In *Black Manhattan* (1930), Johnson detailed three centuries of African American life and literature, culminating in the Harlem Renaissance. In 1930, he obtained a part-time position in the creative writing department at Fisk University. In the following years, he published an autobiography, *Along This Way*, and his last verse collection, *Saint Peter Relates an Incident*. His book-length essay *Negro Americans, What Now?* (1934) is an argument favoring racial integration.

In 1938, Johnson and his wife, Grace, were in a car-train accident. His wife survived, but Johnson died. His funeral was at Salem Methodist Church, Harlem, and he was buried in Brooklyn’s Greenwood Cemetery with *God’s Trombones* in his hands.
Analysis

James Weldon Johnson had many roles—lawyer, activist, politician, diplomat, journalist, songwriter, and anthologist—but he is perhaps best remembered for his writings, including his inspirational poetry. The lasting popularity and public interest in Johnson’s writings is demonstrated by the numerous reprints of his works.

Lift Every Voice and Sing

Johnson wrote *Lift Every Voice and Sing* to celebrate Abraham Lincoln’s birthday in 1900; his brother John Rosamond Johnson set the poem to music. The rhyme scheme is *aabccdeee*. The popular composition is the voice of free African Americans expressing their hopes for the future of the United States. It served as the NAACP’s theme song and as the African American national hymn. Johnson’s elation each time he heard it is noted in *Complete Poems*.

Fifty Years, and Other Poems


Many of the poems are about racial discrimination. “Color Sergeant” describes a man with “color black” who gives his life in warfare. Although “despised of men” for his color, the sergeant remains true “to his duty.” The poem reminds readers of the military contributions of African Americans. The five-stanza poem uses the rhyme scheme of *abcd*. The unrhymed “Brothers” is a graphic description of a mob’s burning an African American at the stake. The final words of the victim are “Brothers in spirit, brothers in deed are we.” The poem ends with the mob pondering what the victim meant by these words.

The last poems in the volume employ dialect, suggestive of the writings of Johnson’s friend Paul Laurence Dunbar. This writing is offensive to some readers and critics but pleasing to others. Two of the poems employing dialect—“Nobody’s Lookin’ but de Owl and de Moon: A Negro Serenade” and “You’s Sweet to Yo’ Mammy Jes de Same: Lullaby”—were lyrics taken from the songs written in New York by the Johnson brothers and Cole.

God’s Trombones

Johnson wrote the poetic sermons in *God’s Trombones* after having visited many churches. “The Creation,” written in 1920, was the first of the sermons; the remaining six were completed by 1926. Johnson conveys rhythm without strict rhyme schemes. He avoids the misspellings and mispronunciations that
others often use to convey African American speech. Instead, he captures the beauty and the dignity of the sermons he had heard in order to convey the religious spirit of African Americans. He uses standard English and some dialect for effect; for example, Johnson compares God making a person from dust to a mammy bending over her baby.

Johnson duplicates some of the oratorical techniques that an accomplished speaker might use to involve his congregation. In “The Creation,” Johnson uses repetition, using the phrase “That’s good!” again and again. He employs hyperbole; for example, Johnson says valleys were produced by God’s footsteps. The poet uses alliteration: God “spat out the seven seas.” Johnson’s descriptions enable the reader to visualize scenes: lightning flashing when God bats his eyes, lakes cuddling in the hollows, and a rainbow curling around God’s shoulders.

**Saint Peter Relates an Incident**

The title of the collection *Saint Peter Relates an Incident* is taken from the poem “Saint Peter Relates an Incident of the Resurrection Day,” which describes the opening of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on Judgment Day. A crowd waits to see the unknown military hero who emerges; the watchers are astonished when they see that the occupant is an African American. Johnson wrote the poem in response to the unfair treatment that mothers of deceased black soldiers received on a nationally sponsored trip to Europe. As in his other works, he advocates empowerment, pride, self-assertion, communication, and cooperation among all people. The rhyme scheme of the lines in part 1 of the title poem is aabb. Part 4 has fourteen stanzas, and each verse has four lines with a rhyme scheme of aabb. No dialect is apparent. The stanzas in part 2, however, are irregular: One stanza has three lines, one has five lines, and the others have four lines. Parts 5 and 6 have verses with lines of no regular rhyme pattern and no set number of lines. This lack of structure is cited as a weakness by some critics. Interestingly, the soldier sings some lines from the spiritual “Deep River” as he climbs toward heaven. The poem concludes with a description of the emotion from heaven in response to the revelation of the identity of the unknown soldier; the emotion is a mixture of laughter and tears.

Johnson advanced pride in African Americans in his poems, including “O Black and Unknown Bards.” Johnson uses misspellings in some of the other poems in the collection, and some of these poems draw on songs and folklore, such as “Brer Rabbit, You’s de Cutes’ of ‘Em All” and “Sence You Went Away.”

**Complete Poems**

*Complete Poems* includes an introduction, a chronology, and the collections *God’s Trombones, Fifty Years, and Other Poems, and Saint Peter Relates an Incident*. In the third part, “College Years, and Other Poems,” editor Sondra
Kathryn Wilson includes some poems that had never before appeared in print. Most of the poems in this last section were written by Johnson while he was at Atlanta University, but some date from after the turn of the twentieth century. Some of Johnson’s poems from his college years imitate those of other poets. “Moods,” for example, is suggestive of “I Love You” by Ella Wheeler Wilcox. His “Christmas Carol” reminds the reader of other familiar poems about the holiday season. Johnson’s “Ode to Florida” is similar to “Ode on a Grecian Um” by John Keats.

Bibliography


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