

Langston University Digital Commons @ Langston University

McCabe Thesis Collection


Student Works

5-2005

An Investigation of Contributions Made by Women Writers to the Harlem Renaissance

Doretha Kamaya Rashan Green
Langston University

Follow this and additional works at: http://dclu.langston.edu/mccabe_theses

 Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [Modern Literature Commons](#), [Other History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons](#), [United States History Commons](#), and the [Women's History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Green, Doretha Kamaya Rashan, "An Investigation of Contributions Made by Women Writers to the Harlem Renaissance" (2005). *McCabe Thesis Collection*. Paper 42.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Works at Digital Commons @ Langston University. It has been accepted for inclusion in McCabe Thesis Collection by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Langston University. For more information, please contact jblewis@langston.edu.

The Edwin P. McCabe Honors Program

Senior Thesis

**An Investigation of Contributions Made by Women
Writers to the Harlem Renaissance**

Doretha KaMaya Rashan Green

May 2005

Langston University
Langston, Oklahoma

An Investigation of Contributions Made by Women Writers to the Harlem Renaissance

"If you wanted to write, you went to Harlem. If you wanted to dance, you went to Harlem. If you wanted to effect social change, you went to Harlem. If you wanted to compose music, you went to Harlem. If you wanted the best chance at changing your circumstances and you were Black, you went to Harlem. Harlem was the heart of Black life" ("The Harlem Renaissance" 1). This quote was stated by an anonymous writer about the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance refers to the 1920's and early 1930's when artistic, cultural, and social writings about race and the African-American's place in America were taking place. The people who usually come to mind when one thinks of the Harlem Renaissance are Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, and W. E. B. Dubois. These men were great writers and thinkers and should be world renowned for their work. However, these men had great female colleagues who also wrote great works during the Harlem Renaissance. These women include Zora Neale Hurston, Anne Spencer, Jessie Redmon Fauset, and Gwendolyn B. Bennett, to name a few. These women made contributions of poetry, prose, and magazine articles during the Harlem Renaissance.

The Great Migration is said to be the main cause of the Harlem Renaissance (Goots 1). The Great Migration was when thousands of African-Americans traveled from the South to the cities of the north. Another cause of the Harlem Renaissance is that African-Americans were being educated better and were completing secondary schools and college (*Jone Johnson-Lewis*). The

actual date in which the Harlem Renaissance began is not an exact date because social criticisms, protest, and political advancement were developing for a while. Most critics mark the publication of Jean Toomer's book Cane in 1923 as the start of the Harlem Renaissance ("Harlem Renaissance" 2).

The Harlem Renaissance is a well known era of American history. Many people can name several people who were a part of the Harlem Renaissance. But, few people can name more than one female writer. Many writers like Fauset, Spencer, and Bennett were in writer oblivion until the 1980's (Clark 3). The interest in the Harlem Renaissance writing is commonly focused on men, and the women writers are overlooked. Many books written on the subject, such as Arna Bontemps *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered*, speak about several authors, but Hurston is the only woman mentioned. The fact that the women writers are often overlooked presents a problem when discussing the Harlem Renaissance.

The purpose of this study is to examine the contributions that women writers made to the Harlem Renaissance. By studying these women and their works, their contributions will be exposed.

During this study two questions will be answered. These Questions are:

- Who were the influential writers of the Harlem Renaissance?
- How did women writers contribute to the Harlem Renaissance?

By answering these two questions there will be a better understanding of the contributions made by female writers of the Harlem Renaissance.

The assumption that I make is that women contributed to the Harlem Renaissance in the same way that men did. I also assume that the works and pieces that the women writers wrote are equally enriching and profound as that of their male contemporaries. These assumptions are based on my previous reading of poetry and prose that was written during the Harlem Renaissance.

The rationale for doing this study is to discuss the contributions of women during the Harlem Renaissance. By investigating women such as Zora Neale Hurston and Anne Spencer, a greater spectrum of the Harlem Renaissance can be experienced. There needs to be more knowledge about female writers during the 1920's and early 1930's who were part of the Harlem Renaissance.

This study is important because more emphasis needs to be put on the contributions of female writers during the Harlem Renaissance. Their artistic works need to be studied and displayed in context to the Harlem Renaissance. This study is also important in expressing a small piece of Black history. The women to be studied represent a great part of not only Black history but American history also.

There are a few limitations to this study. One limitation is that all the women writers that will be studied are deceased and therefore can not be spoken to directly. Another limitation is that the amount of information about the women writers is not as abundant when concerning the Harlem Renaissance as information about their male colleagues. The scope of the study is mostly through getting information from the Internet, and some books and articles will be

used. Biographies, Auto-biographies, and publications of works by the writers will also be utilized.

The remainder of the Thesis will be:

- I. Review of the literature.
- II. Methodology
- III. Analysis or Presentation or Findings
- IV. Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendations.

Chapter 2

In this chapter the historical background will be discussed. Summaries of existing research will be included, as well as a report of the literature reviewed. The establishment of possible need for this study will also be stated.

The historical background of the Harlem Renaissance was stated in the previous chapter; however, there is some historical background to the problem of women being overlooked during the Harlem Renaissance. Women have come second to men for centuries. The field of literature is no different. In looking into literature from any period of time, except perhaps for the recent past, there will be few women noted.

African Americans were speaking about their plights in America. The Black man's struggles and progress were topics of discussion in African-American communities everywhere. Because men seemed to have the most problems, women's stories were put on the backburner. When women writers were discussed, their works were often put in the class of women's literature.

Works written by men were read by both sexes. Works written by women were read by women and the enlightened man. Therefore; women seldom received the respect from the masses like men did.

To my knowledge there are few existing studies evaluating the recognition of women authors, collectively, in relation to their male contemporaries. Individual studies have been done on female authors during this period. The most research is on Zora Neale Hurston.

One study is a book written by Cheryl A. Wall which discusses how the works contributed to the Harlem Renaissance by Black women have contributed to the Black feminist movement (Brody).

One can also find biographical information on the aforementioned women in many biographical sources like *Harlem Renaissance and Beyond: Literary Biographies of 100 Black Women Writers 1900-1940*, written by Lorraine Elena Roses and Ruth Elizabeth Randolph. But there are few complete biographies.

Research on authors from the Harlem Renaissance can be found at several universities across the country. These universities include Oxford University, University of Southern California, and University of North Carolina, just to name a few. Research was done on the authors' lives and works.

This study is needed to display the accomplishments and works of women writers during the Harlem Renaissance. The likelihood of obtaining meaningful information is high. The women mentioned did not receive equal attention, not because of their works, but because of their sex.

The bulk of resources that will be used are internet sources. The sources used are mostly from university sites. The writers of the sources are educators or people in connection with the schools. There are also periodical sources used. Books will also be used as useful sources.

The literature reviewed includes biographies and examples of the writers' works. Evaluations by critics and contemporaries were also reviewed.

The exact materials used are as follows:

- Harlem Renaissance and Beyond: Literary Biographies of 100 Black Women Writers 1900-1940* by Lorraine Elena Roses and Ruth Elizabeth Randolph (1970)
- The Harlem Renaissance Remembered* By Arna Bontemps (1972)
- "Fauset, Jessie Redmon" *Short Story Index* (1983)
- "Zora Neale Hurston" *Research Guide to Biography and Criticism* Edited by Beacham, Walton, Ed (1985)
- "African-Americans" *The World Book Encyclopedia* (1996)
- "Gwendolyn Bennett's Life and Career" By Sandra Y Govan (1997)
- "Women of the Harlem Renaissance" By Jennifer De Vere Brody (1998)
- "The New 'New Negro:.' Recasting the Harlem Renaissance" By Allison Berg (1998)
- "Influences of the Harlem Renaissance" By Michelle Goots (2000)
- "About Anne Spencer" By Keith Clarke (2003)
- "Gwendolyn B. Bennett" By Walter C. Daniels (2003)
- "Harlem Renaissance" *Dictionary of American History* (2003)
- "African-American Literature" *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2004)
- "Gwendolyn Bennett" *Voices from the Gap: Women Writers of Color* (2004)
- "Opportunity" *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2004)
- "The Crisis" *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2004)

Chapter 3

This chapter will discuss the methods used in conducting my research. This chapter will also discuss the limitations of the study.

The method used in conducting this study was secondary sources research. I researched articles and papers written about Zora Neale Hurston, Anne Spencer, Jessie Redmon Fauset and Gwendolyn Bennett. I also read many works written by these women along with reading articles written about the works. I also researched information in books and reference materials regarding the Harlem Renaissance and the nation during this period.

The initial thing I did was look up websites on google.com and yahoo.com on the Harlem Renaissance. From there I learned who the major female figures were in the literary field.

Then I proceeded to examine the links concerning Hurston, Spencer, Fauset, and Bennett. Most of these links were education sites.

After reviewing the internet sources, I then went to the G. Lamar Harrison Library to retrieve any books and printed biographies on the subject. I used the card catalog to locate my sources.

Lastly, I researched the online journal indexes provided by Langston University and found periodicals from *Academic Search Elite* and *Literary Resource Center*.

The limitation to this study is that most of the research must be through secondary sources. The authors mentioned in this study are all deceased and

the Harlem Renaissance happened 75 years ago. Most of the people who knew the women are deceased as well. The fact that there is only one first hand account mentioned in this study could be a weakness.

Chapter 4

Through the research conducted, the following questions have been answered:

-Who were the influential writers of the Harlem Renaissance?

-How did women writers contribute to the Harlem Renaissance?

The findings of my research are as follows:

- Zora Neale Hurston, Anne Spencer, Jessie Redmon Fauset and Gwendolyn Bennett were influential writers of the Harlem Renaissance.
- Women contributed to the Harlem Renaissance in the same way that men did. They showed their talent through music, art and literature.
- Women contributed to literature of the Harlem Renaissance through a variety of forms, including essays, poems, and short stories. Many of their works were displayed through the prominent African American magazines of that time.

There were a plethora of influential writers who contributed to the Harlem Renaissance. The most prominent are Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Alain Locke, and Zora Neale Hurston. These people produced works that were popular then and are still being read and critiqued today.

Along with these prominent figures, there were also other Black women who were also very influential in the literary movement. These women include Jessie Redmon Fauset, Gwendolyn B. Bennett, Nella Larsen and Anne Spencer. They are often overlooked, yet they participated greatly in the movement.

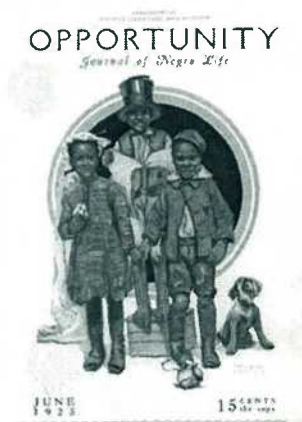
Women contributed to the Harlem Renaissance in the same way that men did. They showed their talent through music, art and literature. Women responded to the call to create literature that would ennoble the African American. Their response, however, may not have been what the framers and leaders of the movement had wanted or expected. As a result, scholars have tended to ignore women who wrote short stories during the Harlem Renaissance (Musser).

Anne Spencer is one of the most overlooked writers of the period. Her works were rediscovered in the book by J. Lee Greene, *Time's Unfading Garden: Anne Spencer's Life and Poetry (1977)* (Clark). She was discovered by James Weldon Johnson who in turn, introduced her to H. L. Mencken who helped her publish her first poem "Before the Feast of Shushan." She published most of her poems in the period's most prestigious collections. Those collections include James Weldon Johnson's *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), Alain Locke's *The New Negro*, and Countee Cullen's *Caroling Dusk*.

Spencer's poems often conveyed a romantic concern for the human quest for beauty (Clarke). She did not write "protest poetry," But she worked diligently for the NAACP. She was a strong Black feminist voice of the movement.

Spencer cultivated a garden at her home in Lynchburg, VA. The garden was a place that many artists went for inspiration. The garden attracted black artists for over fifty years. From W. E. B. Du Bois to Maya Angelou, many found the garden to be a muse.

Gwendolyn B. Bennett displayed a love for writing and art during the Harlem Renaissance. She illustrated a cover for *The Crisis*, the leading magazine during the era which published many of the short stories and poems by young black writers. Her commemorative poem "To Usward" was chosen as the dedication poem to honor Jessie Redmon Fauset's novel at the Civic Club dinner for Harlem's writers in 1924 (Govan). Between 1923 and 1931 Bennett published twenty-two poems in journals of the period. The Journals were *Crisis*, *Opportunity*, *Palms*, and *Gypsy*. Her poems also appeared in Weldon's *The book of American Negro Poetry* (1931) and Cullen's *Caroling Dusk* (1927).

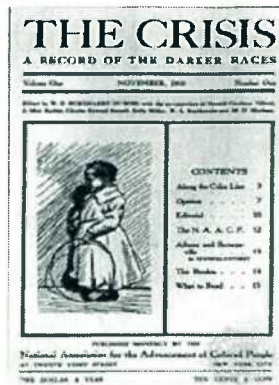


Cover of literary magazine
Opportunity

Besides writing, Bennett contributed in other ways. She was assistant editor of the magazine *Opportunity* from 1923 to 1934. She was also the author of "The Ebony Flute," a literary column which appeared in the magazine *Opportunity*, and she was a co-founder of the literary journal *Fire!* (Voices). Her most famous work, a short story entitled "Wedding Day," was published in *Opportunity* in 1926. It has become a literary favorite.

Jessie Redmon Fauset made great contributions to the Harlem Renaissance. Her works were not as well publicized as even some of the other women, but she played a major role. Fauset was editor of *The Crisis* from 1919 to 1926 ("Jessie Redmon"). With Fauset's literary guidance, *The Crisis*, along with *Opportunity*, was the leading publisher of young black authors. As editor, Fauset contributed many biographical sketches of prominent blacks to enlighten her readers. She felt that black biography was a neglected literary form. In an interview in the *Southern Workman* (May 1932), she stated that "it is urgent that ambitious Negro youth be able to read of the achievements of their race" (Martin).

She wrote her first novel *There is Confusion* in 1924. She encountered great opposition from publishers because the novel did not contain stereotypical characters and plots of Black lives. Her novel did not discuss Harlem bars, race riots, or Blacks in extreme poverty. The publishers did not think the book would sell, but Fauset was determined to show another picture. She wanted to show the Black middle class. Fauset wrote three other novels between 1924 and 1931. These novels were *The Chinaberry Tree*, *Plum Bun*, and *Comedy American Style*. *Plum Bun* and *Comedy American Style* showcase protagonists who are concerned with "passing." The main character in both novels destroy their own lives with their obsession with whiteness. Fauset was also a great poet. Some of her best known pieces included "Enigma," "Oblivion," and "Words! Words!"



Cover of the First Crisis

Fauset was an older figure in the movement. She was not as young as other women mentioned. The writers she discovered and encouraged included the poets Arna Bontemps, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen and Jean Toomer. She was a figure who the young black writers like Hughes and Hurston looked up to. She was responsible for arranging the first publication of work by Hughes (Johnson-Lewis). After Fauset's leaving, *The Crisis* was unable to sustain its high literary standards ("Crisis").

Zora Neale Hurston is the best known female writer of the Harlem Renaissance. She is often included in studies regarding the Harlem Renaissance, yet less is written on her than her male contemporaries. In the last twenty years, there has been a new revival of interest in Hurston.

Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has been studied by many scholars. Recently, Oprah Winfrey produced a film version of the novel starring Halle Berry. This film introduced a younger generation to Hurston's work. Many modern authors such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison credit her as one of their inspirations.

Hurston's greatest love was for collecting African-American Folklore. She published her collection in *Mules and Men*. She also wrote five novels, the first of which, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, was published in 1934. She wrote her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on the Road*, in 1942. It was a profitable success.

Hurston urged Blacks of her time to celebrate the positive aspects of their blackness instead of indulging in what she referred to as "the sobbing state of Negrohood" ("Zora Hurston"). She did not address the issue of racism of whites toward blacks in her works. Some of her contemporaries disagreed with this and belittled her works because of it ("Zora Hurston").



Zora Neale Hurston



Jessie Redmon Fauset

Chapter 5

In conclusion, I have reviewed literature, and done research of my own to believe that contributions made by women writers during the Harlem Renaissance were just as essential to the period as men. I find that they should be given the same respect and recognition.

Women contributed to the literature of the Harlem Renaissance through many forms, including essays, poems, and short stories. Many of their works were displayed through the prominent African American magazines of that time. These women were not just participants, but they were trailblazers. They were active members in the "Harlem Circles" and supported one another regardless of sex. They were organizers, editors, decision-makers, they helped publicize and shape the movement. They wrote about things that affected them and their community, just like the men. They were movers and shakers who haven't received the recognition they deserve. They contributed more than just a few poems.

These women were active visionaries in the literary magnificence which was the Harlem Renaissance. Their contemporaries sometimes saw them as soft. These women did not always focus one hundred percent of their works to oppression, bigotry, racism, and the like. But, they were well aware of it going on and supported the movement which changed a race.

The results of the research do agree with the study done by Wall, women were great contributors to the Harlem Renaissance. I recommend that in

teaching and discussions about the Harlem Renaissance, women writers are mentioned more and given equal time to their male counterparts. There still needs to be more done to publicize the contributions that were made. Only time will tell if women will become more prominent in Harlem Renaissance history.

The Harlem Renaissance was a prolific time in American history as well as African-American history. The movement changed the perception of a race and provided a spark for intellectual Black creativity. Black women intellectuals contributed greatly in the literary field. Women played a pivotal role during the Harlem Renaissance and should be recognized for their role. The movement would not have been as effective without them.

Bibliography

"African-Americans" The World Book Encyclopedia. Chicago: World Book. 1996.

"African-American literature." Encyclopedia Britannica. 2004. Encyclopedia Britannica Online. 8 Dec 2004. <<http://search.eb.com/eb/article?tocId=23255>>.

Beacham, Walton, ed. "Zora Neale Hurston." Research Guide to Biography and Criticism. Washington D. C. Research Publishing. 974-77 1985.

Berg, Allison. "The New 'New Negro:' Recasting the Harlem Renaissance." College Literature. Fall 1998. Literature Resource Center. 7 Dec 2003. <<http://proxy.lunet.edu:15/servlet/LitRC?vrsn=3&locID=lang92550&srchtp=kywr&c=3&s>>.

Bontemps, Arna. The Harlem Renaissance Remembered. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1972.

Brody, Jennifer De Vere. "Women of the Harlem Renaissance." Sign. Summer 1998. Literature Resource Center. 7 Dec 2004. <<http://proxy.lunet.edu:15/servlet/LitRC?vrsn=3&locID=lang92250&srchtp=kywr&c=5&s>>.

Clark, Keith. "About Anne Spencer." Modern American Poetry. 2003. <http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/s_z/spencer/about.htm>.

"The Crisis." Encyclopedia Britannica. 2004. Encyclopedia Britannica Online. 8 Dec 2004. <<http://search.eb.com/eb/article?tocId=90029777>>.

Daniels, Walter C. "Gwendolyn B. Bennett." 2003. 15 May 2003. <<http://college.hmco.com/English/health/syllabuild/guide/Bennett.html>>.

"Fauset, Jessie Redmon." Short Story Index. New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1983.

Goots, Michelle. "Influences of the Harlem Renaissance." Migration Weekly. 29 Oct 2000. 5 May 2003. <<http://www.geocities.com/shortiebh55/>>.

Govan, Sandra Y. "Gwendolyn Bennett's Life and Career." Modern American Poetry. 1997. 15 May 2003. <http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/bennett/life.htm>.

"Gwendolyn Bennett." Voices from the Gap: Women Writers of Color. Literature Resource Center. 8 Dec 2004.
<<http://voices.cla.umn.edu/newsite/authors/BENNETTgwendolyn.htm>>.

"Harlem Renaissance." Dictionary of American History. 3rd ed. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2003.

"The Harlem Renaissance." 2003.
<<http://www.unc.edu/courses/eng81br1/harlem.html>>.

"Jessie Redmon Fauset." Voices From the Gap. 2003. 5 May, 2005.
<<http://voices.cla.umn.edu/newsite/authors/FAUSETjessie.htm>>.

Johnson-Lewis, Jone. "Harlem Renaissance Women: African American Women Dreaming in Color." Women's History. 2002.
<<http://womenhistory.about.com/library/weekly/aa022900a.htm>>.

Martin, George-McKinley. The Black Renaissance in Washington, D.C., 1920-1930s. 20 June 2003. 5 May 2005.
<<http://www.dclibrary.org/blkren/>>.

Musser, Judith, "African-American Women's Short Stories in the Harlem Renaissance: Bridging Traditions." Melus. Summer 1998. 7 Dec. 2004.
<<http://proxy.lunet.edu:15/servlet/LitRC?vrsn=3&locID=lang92550&srchtp=kywr&c=4&s>>.

"Opportunity." Encyclopedia Britannica. 2004. Encyclopedia Britannica Online. 8 Dec 2004. <<http://search.eb.com/eb/article?tocId=9002979>>.

Roses, Lorraine Elena and Ruth Elizabeth Randolph. Harlem Renaissance and Beyond: Literary Biographies of 100 Black Women Writers 1900-1940. Boston: G.K. Hall and Co, 1970.

Smartweed, Charles. "Entertainment in the Great Migration." Migration Weekly. 29 Oct. 2000. 5 May 2003. <<http://www.geocities.com/shortiebh55/>>.

Waznick, Paul. "From the South to Chicago." Migration Weekly. 29 Oct 2000. 5 May 2003. <<http://www.geocities.com/shortiebh55/>>.

"Zora Neale Hurston." Literary Resource Center. 7 Dec 2004.
<<http://proxy.lunet.edu:15/servlet/LitRC?locID=lang92550&ADVST2=NA&srchtp=adv&c>>.