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## Renaissance Woman: Gwendolyn Bennett

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# RENAISSANCE WOMAN

# Gwendolyn Bennett

1902- 1981

## FROM THE EIGHTH WARD TO PARIS



A portrait of Bennett as a young girl.

Gwendolyn Bennett was born in Giddings, Texas in 1902. Her parents divorced when she was a child. Although Gwendolyn's mother was granted custody, her father kidnapped her and kept her on the east coast. In Pennsylvania, Gwendolyn lived with her father and stepmother in Harrisburg's Eighth Ward. While attending Harrisburg schools from 1913-1918, Gwendolyn was an honor student, excelling in art, drama, and writing. Throughout her collegiate years at Columbia University, Pratt Institute, and the Sorbonne in Paris, Gwendolyn remained passionate about the arts.



Bennett (far left) dances the Irish Lilt with some of her classmates at the Lincoln School in Harrisburg.

*Oh, little brown girl, born for sorrow's mate,  
Keep all you have of queenliness,  
Forgetting that you once were slave,  
And let your full lips laugh at Fate!*

- Excerpt from "To a Dark Girl" by Gwendolyn Bennett

## THE RENAISSANCE BEGINS

While she was still an undergraduate, Bennett established her reputation as a poet when her poem "Nocturne" was published in *The Crisis* (the journal of the NAACP), and her poem "Heritage" was published in *Opportunity* (a magazine published by National Urban League). Just a year later, Bennett read "To Usward," her tribute to novelist Jesse Fauset, at the now famous Civic Club dinner in New York. The gathering of African-American creative talent launched the Harlem Renaissance, the flourishing movement of African American writers, artists, and musicians.

Bennett was not only a contributor to the Harlem Renaissance, but she also she nurtured other voices in the Renaissance by starting a support group for artists and writers, including Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Zora Neale Hurston.



Bennett drew this cover of Opportunity Magazine.

## ARTISTRY AND ACTIVISM

In the midst of this artistic revolution, Gwendolyn taught courses at Howard University, where she met and married her first husband, Dr. Albert Jackson, who died in 1936. Four years after his death, Gwendolyn married Richard Crosscup, a writer-educator who was white, establishing an interracial marriage that would have been controversial at the time. Even in marriage, Gwendolyn was a leader against discrimination.

Later in Bennett's life, unfounded government investigations into possible communist connections, led by the notorious J. Edgar Hoover, caused Bennett to step back from the public eye, work for the Consumers Union, and eventually move back to Pennsylvania. In 1981, she passed away not far from Harrisburg - in Reading - due to cardiovascular complications.

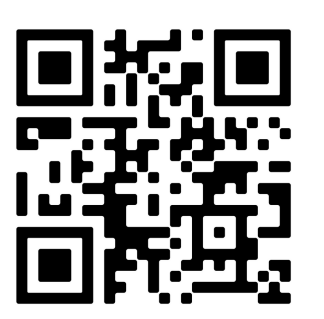
Despite the untimely end to Gwendolyn's career, her artistic spirit must "laugh at Fate" as her poetry continues to be read all around the country - her final word.



Bennett painting in her studio.



How does poetry move you? Read some of Bennett's poetry here!



Learn more about the Harlem Renaissance.