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JAMES WELDON JOHNSON: BLACK AMERICAN POET

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major Subject: English

Approved:

Iowa State University
Of Science and Technology
Ames, Iowa
1970
As a man James Weldon Johnson is fascinating if only for his many careers: lawyer, counselor to Latin America, founding father of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, lecturer, teacher, elementary school principal, novelist, essayist, song writer, translator, and poet. However, it is as a poet that he most fascinates me, and as a poet he has not received attention proportionate to his accomplishments. In this paper I wish to trace his development as it moved through four rather distinct stages from his early dialect poetry to his later religious poetry (as represented by God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse.) I believe my summary will show that Johnson gradually developed skill in handling problems of rhythm, imagery, and diction, as well as other poetic elements. As a Black poet he confronted additional problems such as the following:

a. The role of the Black poet in achieving social equality for Blacks.

b. The importance of the Black religious experience in achieving social equality.

c. The seeming paradox inherent in writing either to a Black audience or to a White audience.

Johnson discussed these problems directly in essays published late in his literary career—after he had published his last collected volume of poetry. Before turning to the central point of this paper (i.e., discussion of Johnson's
poetic development), I would like to discuss briefly Johnson's essays and mention specific poems which speak to the problems which he surmounted as a poet.

In the essay "Negro Americans What Now?" Johnson treated the problem of achieving social equality for Blacks. He said, "The solving of our situation depends principally upon a process along two parallel lines: our own development and the bringing about of a change in the national attitude toward us." In an attempt to develop pride in Blacks Johnson wrote poems such as "0 Black and Unknown Bards," "Lift Every Voice and Sing," and "Fifty Years." These poems treat the glorious accomplishments of Blacks. Similarly, Johnson tried to change the national attitude toward Blacks by showing the inequalities which had plagued Black people for centuries. Poems such as "The White Witch," "The Black Mammy," "Fragment," "Brothers," and St. Peter Relates an Incident of the Resurrection Day point to these inequalities.

Johnson was also conscious of the importance of the Negro Spiritual and other aspects of the unique Black religious experience in developing a pride essential to Blacks in their struggle for social equality. In his essay "Race Prejudice and the Negro Artist" Johnson said the Spirituals "soothed down the rougher edges of prejudice against the Negro." In his Book of Negro Spirituals he explained,
"Once that power [creation of Spirituals which were sensitive and beautiful] is conceded, the ideal of absolute inferiority cannot hold." Johnson also felt that the Spiritual broke down white stereotypes of Blacks as savages who brought no culture with them from Africa, thus the Spiritual "induced a favorable state of mind" in Whites towards Blacks. This interest in the Spiritual and in the religious experience of Blacks shows clearly in St. Peter and in God's Trombones.

Finally, in "The Dilemma of the Negro Author" Johnson discussed the problem of audience. If a Black writer chose to write to a White audience he was forced to write in stereotypes—either the peasant-child stereotype or the passionate-savage stereotype. If he broke away from these stereotypes his work would not be given credence by Whites. As Johnson said, the Black's character "has been established as a happy-go-lucky, laughing, shuffling, banjo-picking being, and the reading public has not yet been prevailed upon to take him seriously. His efforts to elevate himself socially are looked upon as a sort of absurd caricature of 'white civilization.' A novel dealing with coloured people who lived in respectable homes and amidst a fair degree of culture and who naturally acted 'just like white folks' would be taken in a comic-opera sense." On the other hand, if an author chose a Black audience he could not criticize the race in any way without alienating his audience.
answer to this dilemma, according to Johnson, was to fuse the audiences "and so when a Negro author does write so as to fuse white and black America into one interested and approving audience he has performed no slight feat, and has most likely done a sound piece of literary work." It seems to me that Johnson accomplished just this in his last book of poetry, *God's Trombones*. The poems in that volume not only chronicle important elements in the history of the Black race—the Black preacher and his congregation—but they also are Johnson's attempt to capture the religious experience of the Blacks without using dialect, which, he felt, immediately invoked stereotyped images in the mind of the White audience.

II

I have found that much of Johnson's poetry seems to fall naturally into four thematic divisions which represent his development from early dialect poetry to later religious poetry. The latter I think is his best contribution to literature. I have chosen the terms "dialect" poetry, which is self explanatory; "laudatory" poetry, in which Johnson seems to be praising the Black race for its historic accomplishments; "racial grievance" poetry, in which he expresses the injustices done the Black race; and "religious" poetry, in which he treats the subject of the Black religious experience. In this paper I would like to consider fifteen
poems which show his poetic development as well as his solutions to the problems of achieving social equality for Blacks, realizing the importance of the Black religious experience, and writing to either a Black or a White audience.

Johnson's first book, *Fifty Years and Other Poems*, was published in 1917 and, according to Arna Bontemps in an article entitled, "The Negro Contribution to American Letters," it "ended what had begun to seem like a mournful silence by Negro poets in the wake of Dunbar's passing."¹⁰ (Johnson's book was published eleven years after Dunbar's death.) According to reviews of the book it was well received. One reviewer mentioned Johnson's "restrained sincerity of treatment."¹¹ Another reviewer said the book contains strong passages and has also some good dialect pieces."¹² Professor Brander Matthews in his introduction to *Fifty Years* spoke of "the superb and soaring stanzas" of the title-poem and described it as a "poem sonorous in its diction, vigorous in its workmanship, elevated in its imagery, and sincere in its emotion."¹³ I do not agree that Johnson's abilities as a poet deserve this much praise. The majority of the poems are pedestrian—comparable to the poems of many of the distinctly minor twentieth century poets. Johnson often lacked not only poetic skill but also poetic insight in many of these occasional pieces of verse. However, this book
is valuable because it contains some poems which are good in themselves, and a few poems which contain the germ of Johnson's later talent.

Some of the poems included in Fifty Years under the section "Jingles and Croons" belong to this latter classification. All of these poems are in dialect, and they represent an attempt to capture the flavor of the Black language and cultural habits. For example, in "De Little Pickaninny" Johnson used dialect which later in 1935 he deplored because it was "either based on the comic minstrel traditions of Negro life—traditions that were extremely exaggerated and that often had no relation at all to actual Negro life—or [was] permeated with excessive sentimentality." Yet his use of dialect in this poem suggests neither the comic minstrel nor excessive sentimentality. The poem is a monologue of a father who is crooning his little boy to sleep with a lullaby. It shows the life of the Black family and the humanness of the father who promises his son a ride on the father's back. The third verse suddenly turns the warm and secure family scene into a tragedy as the father realizes that his son is not asleep, but dying. He sees the "Far off light dat's in his eyes" (perhaps a view of heaven) and then folds the child's hands and says, "Let de little pickaninny res!" The dialect of the poem adds to the poignant account of the child's death by making the speech of the father...
extremely warm and human.

On the other hand, "A Banjo Song" is an attempt to portray the light and carefree stereotype of the Black that Johnson talked about in the quotations above. It is in the tradition of a folk rhyme—a rhyme packed with truths, common sense, drollery, and nonsense; written in dialect; and oftentimes sung to the accompaniment of a banjo and a fiddle.

An' how we'd dance, an' how we'd sing!
Dance tel de day done break.
An' how dem banjoes dey would ring,
An' de cabin flo' would shake!

A third illustration of Johnson's use of dialect poetry to portray Black language and culture is "July in Georgy." In this poem the dialect lends an air of authenticity to a Black man's description of life in Georgia in July. He picks typical, almost stereotyped, images to describe his life—corn tasseling, cotton, sugar cane, a mule, a camp meeting, and watermelon. These obvious and stereotyped images are in direct contrast to the original and emotionally charged images which Johnson later uses in "The Creation."

Also included in "Jingles and Croons" are several humorous dialect poems in which Johnson tried to capture the Black love of laughter and humorous situations. In his novel Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man Johnson showed his concern with dialect and Black humor. Upon seeing rural
southern Blacks for the first time, his protagonist says:

I had read some Negro dialect and had heard snatches of it on my journey down from Washington; but here I heard it in all of its fullness and freedom. I was particularly struck by the way in which it was punctuated by such exclamatory phrases as "Lawd a mussy!" "G'wan, man!" "Bless ma soul!" "Look heah, chile!" These people talked and laughed without restraint. In fact, they talked straight from their lungs and laughed from the pits of their stomachs. And this hearty laughter was often justified by the droll humour of some remark. 19

"Answer to Prayer" is a delightful illustration of the Black's love of funny situations. 20 In this poem the persona gives a homely bit of philosophy about prayer. "You got to use ezzac'ly de 'pressions an' de words / To show dat 'tween yo' faith an' words, you 'tends on works two-thirds." Then he proceeds to pray, "'Lawd, sen' me a turkey" yet he receives no turkey. Finally he says, "'Lawd, sen' me to a turkey.' I know that prah was right, / An' it was sholy answer'd; I got de bird dat night."

All of these dialect poems reflect the tradition out of which Johnson was working. As has been mentioned previously, Paul Laurence Dunbar immediately preceded James Weldon Johnson. As Johnson himself said, "Dunbar's fame rests chiefly on his poems in Negro dialect. . . . Dunbar was
the first to use it as a medium for the true interpretation of Negro character and psychology." Thus, I think it is unquestionable that Dunbar was an important influence on Johnson—an influence which naturally led to Johnson's use of dialect in his poetry. Although in a later book of poetry Johnson included his earlier dialect poetry as he said, "reluctantly," I think he began using dialect as the only way he knew to transmit the unique Black language and culture to his audience. Therefore, in this dialect poetry we see Johnson concerned with the problems of creative expression and transmission of pride in the Black race.

III

Johnson attempted to show this pride in another way by writing occasional pieces of non-dialect verse which lauded the Black race for its contributions to American culture. "O Black and Unknown Bards," written before 1900, is one such piece which lavished praise on the creators of the Spirituals. I find this poem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," and "Fifty Years" contain heavy-handed and artificial passages which mar the poems. For example Johnson wrote of the bards:

How came your lips to touch the sacred fire?
How, in your darkness, did you come to know
The power and beauty of the minstrel's lyre.

You sang not deeds of heroes or of kings;
No chant of bloody war, no exulting paean
Of arms-won triumphs; but your humble strings
You touched in chord with music empyrean.

It seems to me that these passages are heavy-handed attempts to copy the more flowery and artificial poetry of the Romantics.

In the same way, trite and artificial language seems to destroy "Lift Every Voice and Sing," a poem written for the Jacksonville, Florida, school children to sing in celebration of Lincoln's birthday. For example, the following lines:
"Let our rejoicing rise / High as the listening skies,
"Facing the rising sun of our new day begun / Let us march on till victory is won," and "Till now we stand at last /
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast" lack the freshness of imagery characteristic of Johnson's better poetry.

"Fifty Years," written for the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, suffers the same fate as the preceding two poems because of such lines as:

And yet, my brothers, well I know
The tethered feet, the pinioned wings,
The spirit bowed beneath the blow,
The heart grown faint from wounds and stings;

Courage! Look out, beyond, and see
The far horizon's beckoning span!
Faith in your God-known destiny!
We are a part of some great plan.\textsuperscript{25}

These poems are mediocre poetry with little redeeming value beyond the occasion for which they were written.

IV

Johnson attempted to treat race and the problems of race in a third type of poetry which differs from dialect and laudatory poetry—racial grievance poetry. In this poetry Johnson took race as the main subject, and attempted to show some of the inequalities that existed in the United States between the races. Johnson saw himself as a spokesman for his race in "Envoy" when he said, "Or injustice, brutishness and wrong / Stir me to make a weapon of my song" may my words "speed like arrows swift and sure to the mark."\textsuperscript{26} These poems are as a whole pointed attacks upon the White race. Johnson wrote much of this poetry at the same time that he was writing his laudatory poetry, but it is superior to the laudatory poetry in poetic technique and complexity.

One example of this racial grievance poetry is "The White Witch," written about 1915.\textsuperscript{27} Unlike the laudatory poetry, this poem is uniform in quality and tone. Johnson combined good characterization with a dramatic situation and created a poem which harbors several complex meanings. In this poem the Black persona warns his brothers:

O brothers mine, take care! Take care!
The great white witch rides out to-night,
Trust not your prowess nor your strength;
Your only safety lies in flight;
For in her glance there is a snare,
And in her smile there is a blight.

The great white witch rides out to-night,
Trust not your prowess nor your strength;
Your only safety lies in flight;
For in her glance there is a snare,
And in her smile there is a blight.

The brothers are characterized as youth with "strong young limbs," "laughter loud and gay," and "primal passions." The witch is a young and very appealing woman who tries to seduce the youth. The persona himself has been seduced by her and he says:

For I have seen the great white witch,
And she has led me to her lair,
And I have kissed her red, red lips,
And cruel face so white and fair;
Around me she has twined her arms,
And bound me with her yellow hair.

I felt those red lips burn and sear
My body like a living coal;
Obeyed the power of those eyes
As the needle trembles to the pole;
And did not care although I felt
The strength go ebbing from my soul.

This dramatic situation can be read on several levels. For example, the white witch can be seen as a symbol for the White race which seduces the Black race into believing that
it is harmless while it sucks the life-sustaining blood (economic power) vampire-like from the Black race. The poem can also be read as an expression of the age-old prohibition forbidding Black men from having relations with or marrying White women. Johnson may have had this in mind when he had the speaker say:

O, younger brothers mine, beware!
Look not upon her beauty bright;
For in her glance there is a snare,
And in her smile there is a blight.

"The Black Mammy" is another example of Johnson's racial grievance poetry. The poem moves smoothly along describing the maternal scene of the Black mammy nursing the White babe. Then suddenly it twists as the question is posed, "Came ne'er the thought to thee, swift like a stab, / That it [the White baby] some day might crush thine own black child?"

This poem has merit aside from being a powerful piece of protest literature. The simile of the White baby lying on the "broad dark breast" like a cameo is fresh and exciting. Johnson describes the mammy and the child very convincingly. The term "infant days" works well to show the passage of time in the poem. The poem is concise, unified in tone, and seems to be a good piece of work. I would agree with Bernard Smith who says this poem indicates "the rise of emotions new in Negro poetry—protest instead of supplication, bitterness
instead of self-pity."\textsuperscript{29}

These themes are also apparent in "Fragment" written about 1912.\textsuperscript{30} In this poem Johnson railed at the White nation and promised it eternal punishment in much the same way as did the evangelist David Walker, who wrote an appeal to incite the slaves to riot in 1829. Johnson said to the White South:

\begin{quote}
Not all the glory of your pride,
Preserved in story and in song,
Can from the judging future hide,
Through all the coming ages long,
That though you bravely fought and died,
You fought and died for what was wrong.

'Tis fixed--for them that violate
The eternal laws, naught shall avail
Till they their error expiate;
Nor shall their unborn children fail
To pay the full required weight
Into God's great, unerring scale.

Think not repentance can redeem,
That sin his wages can withdraw.
No, think as well to change the scheme
Of worlds that move in reverent awe;
Forgiveness is an idle dream,
God is not love, no, God is law.
\end{quote}
When these stanzas are compared to a typical selection from David Walker's Appeal, a type of evangelical pattern is seen to exist in Johnson's poem. To illustrate, Walker said:

> Never make an attempt to gain our freedom or natural right, from under our cruel oppressors and murderers, until you see your way clear—when that hour arrives and you move, be not afraid or dismayed; for be you assured that Jesus Christ the King of heaven and of earth who is the God of justice and of armies, will surely go before you. And those enemies who have for hundreds of years stolen our rights, and kept us ignorant of Him and His divine worship, he will remove.\(^3\)

Here Walker railed at the White race for its injustices, threatened Whites with eternal damnation, and used the inverted word order and slightly archaic language which characterizes prayer or prophecy. All of these elements can be seen in Johnson's poem, which is again one of his better poems, technically. In the poem Johnson built a powerful metaphor for the Black race in the image of the Blacks being a wedge "sharpened to a cruel edge / By wrong and injustice fell / And driven by hatred as a sledge" to split the nation in civil war. Just as the nation is split in half, so also the poem is split in half, the first half being a development of the wedge idea and the second half being a development of the justice of God, who will bring His wrath down
upon Whites for their evil crimes against Blacks.

"Brothers," a poem depicting the burning of a Black man by a gang of White men, is an example of a powerful racial protest poem. Its effectiveness as an intense dramatic presentation is most obvious when the poem is contrasted with a lynching scene which Johnson described in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912).

Several similarities can be seen between both accounts of the lynchings. In the fictional work the victim was chained to a sunken railroad tie. "There he stood, a man only in form and stature, every sign of degeneracy stamped upon his countenance. His eyes were dull and vacant, indicating not a single ray of thought. Evidently the realization of his fearful fate had robbed him of whatever reasoning power he had ever possessed. He was too stunned and stupified even to tremble." The flames leaped up to his head. "He squirmed, he writhed, strained at his chains, then gave out cries and groans that I shall always hear. The cries and groans were choked off by the fire and smoke; but his eyes, bulging from their sockets, rolled from side to side, appealing in vain for help." Members of the crowd reacted by cheering or by becoming "sickened at the sight." The persona said, "Before I could make myself believe that what I saw was really happening, I was looking at a scorched post, a smouldering fire, blackened bones, charred fragments sift-
ing down through coils of chain; and the smell of burnt flesh--human flesh--was in my nostrils."36

The poem "Brothers" is like this fictional account in several ways. This victim also stands "with an air of sullen stupor." He is chained before he is set aflame. After the flames reach head-high, "He squirms! He groans! His eyes bulge wildly out, / Searching around in vain appeal for help!" Then, after the victim has died, the persona says:

Watch how the flesh
Grows crisp and hangs till, turned to ash, it sifts
Down through the coils of chain that hold erect
The ghastly frame against the bark-scorched tree.

On the other hand, the two renditions differ in marked ways. First of all, the victim in the novel is never really characterized. The reader never knows what led up to the lynching, and the victim never speaks to clarify the issue. In contrast, over half of the poem is devoted to events which precede the actual lynching and characterize the victim. To illustrate, the poem is a dialogue between the victim and his persecutor. The victim is an enigma. He is not necessarily a Black man as he answers the question, are you not from the race "which through three wars / Fed our dear wives and nursed our helpless babes," with the words, "I am, and am not." He later says, "I claim no race, no race claims
me," and "The bitter fruit am I of planted seed." He is an embodiment of the pent-up hate of fifteen generations of Blacks: "In me the stifled cry / Of children for their bartered mothers' breasts." Finally he says, "I am / No more than human dregs; degenerate; / The monstrous offspring of the monster, Sin." Thus the victim in the poem becomes a symbol for all slaves—Black and White—and for all sin. This is enough to lead the crowd to lynch him.

Secondly, both the fictional account of the lynching and the poem differ in the reactions of the personae who had each experienced the same situations. The fictional account of the lynching was described by a young Black man who was visiting the South for the first time. After rather objectively describing the lynching he came away dazed. However, soon "a great wave of humiliation and shame swept over me. Shame that I belonged to a race that could be so dealt with; and shame for my country, that it, the great example of democracy to the world, should be the only civilized, if not the only state on earth, where a human being would be burned alive."37

Contrary to expectation, in the poem the White persona (the persecutor who engages in the dialogue with the victim) feels no shame at all after committing his horrible act. Rather, he is immediately engaged in dividing the spoils: "You take that bone, and you this tooth; the chain— / Let
us divide its links." With that taken care of he ironically states, "And now his fiendish crime has been avenged." The irony of this statement lies in the fact that the victim committed no crime--he inherited his guilt--rather the fiendish crime was committed by the White man in the name of justice. Johnson makes this White man even more fiendish by having him say, "Let us back to our wives and children." Here the juxtaposition of the roles of husband and father with the role of torturer emphasizes his insane hypocrisy and prejudice.38

Therefore, in the fictional account of the lynching the victim is not characterized. The persona begins with a wordy description of the burning of the victim and then progresses to a lengthy didactic discussion of the moral issues involved--his account tends to emphasize the intellectual and moral sides of the question.

On the other hand, in "Brothers" the victim is characterized before the lynching, thus allowing the reader to get emotionally involved with him. In describing the lynching, Johnson creates suspense which turns to a rising crescendo of horror as images crash together, building to a climax at the last shriek of the victim. He uses horrifying images--the shrieks of the burning man, his terror and agony, the crisp flesh turning to ashes, the scorched tree, the dividing of his bones--to shock the reader into seeing the
horrible inhumanity, the waste, the stupidity of this injustice. Therefore, the poem is a condensed drama which engages the reader in the tense situation, has him vicariously participate in the burning, and elicits from him an emotional reaction.

St. Peter Relates an Incident of the Resurrection Day is a racial grievance poem of a very different nature from the preceding poems. In 1930 Johnson published for private distribution two hundred signed and numbered copies which he prefaced with the following: "Written while meditating upon heaven and hell and democracy and war and America and the Negro Gold Star Mothers." He wrote the poem in response to the United States Government's sending mothers whose sons were killed in the war to France to see their sons' graves. The White mothers were sent first class while the Black mothers were sent second class.

I think the poem was patterned directly upon a poem which Johnson wrote before 1912 called "And the Greatest of These Is War." In this poem a meeting in hell between Satan, Gaunt Famine, Pale Pestilence, and the red monster War is recounted. The poem ends with the lines:

And Satan smiled, stretched out his hand, and said,—
'O War, of all the scourges of humanity, I crown you chief.'

And Hell rang with the acclamation of the Fiends.
St. Peter in Johnson's poem begins with a description of the monotony that has settled upon heaven. Then St. Peter tells the angels a story of the resurrection of the Unknown Soldier. At the end of the tale we are told:

The tale was done
The angelic hosts dispersed, but not till after
There ran through heaven
Something that quivered 'twixt tears and laughter.

The forms of these two poems seem closely aligned. Both poems recount the words of Satan and St. Peter respectively. Similarly, both end with the reactions to these words in hell and heaven respectively.

St. Peter differs markedly from Johnson's other racial grievance poems. For example, Johnson has established a light tone throughout this poem in contrast to the heavy, intensely emotional tone of "Brothers." This light tone is established by the rhyming couplets which create a simple sing-song effect, and by the humorous way of telling the tale—having St. Peter regale the bored angels of heaven. The poem also differs from "Brothers" in that it is built upon irony—when the Unknown Soldier rises from his grave, contrary to the expectations of the reader, he is Black. Therefore, in St. Peter Johnson again uses the theme of injustice to Blacks; however, he no longer lashes out at the White audience forcing it to react emotionally to raw injust-
tice as he did in "Brothers"; rather he disguises the theme with humor and irony to make it more acceptable to the White audience.

I find myself defending St. Peter as a worthy piece of racial protest poetry against the loud denunciations of critic Harold Rosenberg, who says it is too bad that the poem does not show the indignation which inspired Johnson to write it. He goes on to say that in this poem Johnson idealizes, engages in sentimentality, appeals to justice in the abstract, and has written a very mediocre poem. I feel that Rosenberg has lost sight of the problem of audience that Johnson mentioned in his essay "The Dilemma of the Negro Author." It seems to me that Johnson is writing to a White audience in valid protest against an injustice done to his race. However, the very nature of the injustice will not allow the heavy and serious treatment that he use in "Brothers"--the difference between a first class and second class ticket cannot be treated with the gravity of the burning of a man. Although a sympathetic Black audience might accept a serious treatment of this subject matter, a White audience would surely be derisive; thus Johnson used humor and irony to establish his grievance.

V

Johnson used the Negro Spiritual in this poem to emphasize the Unknown Soldier's Black origin and culture. The
soldier climbs his way to heaven and sings as he climbs,
"Deep river, my home is over Jordan / Deep river, I want to cross over into camp-ground." In "Listen Lord a Prayer" and "The Creation," the Spiritual and other aspects of the Black religious experience are dominant themes.\(^4\) In these poems Johnson tried to capture the feeling of the Black religion, the Black preacher, and the Black congregation.

Both poems show the influence of the Spiritual upon Johnson's poetry. He discussed the rhythm and form of the Spiritual in Along This Way and The Book of American Negro Spirituals. He said the African will "take the fundamental beat and pound it out with his left hand, almost monotonously; while with his right hand he juggles it."\(^4\) He said of the creation of the Spiritual: "Upon this fundamental throb of African rhythms were reared those reaches of melody that rise above earth and soar into the pure, ethereal blue."\(^4\) In "The Creation" Johnson captured this pounding, thumping rhythm, which could almost become hypnotic:

Then he stopped and looked and saw
That the earth was hot and barren,
So God stepped over to the edge of the world
And he spat out the 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,
The cooling waters came down.
Here Johnson reproduced the preacher's intoning--the rise and fall in intensity of his speech. This intensity mounts until it reaches a crescendo at the fourth, fifth, and sixth lines where each of the dashes shows a pause, a quick intake of breath, and a resumption at a more feverish pitch. The longer lines point to important climaxes of emotion.46

Johnson described the form of the Spiritual as a complicated verse sung by an intoner with a repetitive chorus sung by a congregation.47 This form is suggested in "Listen Lord a Prayer," when a line such as "Lord God, this morning" is repeated throughout the poem. In "The Creation" Johnson used repetition with the line, "And God said, 'That's good!'" 46

Most Spirituals were sung in dialect, and Johnson said it would be a sacrilege to make "'What kinda shoes you gwine to weah?'" "'What kind of shoes are you going to weah?'"48 However, he saw some problems inherent in using dialect in poetry--namely that it elicits a stereotyped response from the reader who immediately concludes that the poem must be either "humorous or pathetic."49 Johnson saw the need to find a form that would express the feeling of race "by symbols from within rather than by symbols from without, such as the mere imitation of English spelling and pronunciation. He [the poet] needs a form that is freer and larger than dialect, but which will still hold the racial flavor; a form expressing the imagery, the idioms, the peculiar turns of thought
and the distinctive humor and pathos, too, of the Negro, but which will also be capable of voicing the deepest and highest emotions and aspirations, and allow of the widest range of subjects and the widest scope of treatment. For this reason Johnson did not use dialect in any of the poetry in God's Trombones; rather he tried to suggest the Black dialect through rhythm, as has been discussed, and through dramatic imagery. Johnson saw this dramatic imagery in Spirituals containing concise, condensed, vivid, and dramatic word pictures. The fact that these word pictures were Hebraic paraphrases meant "something Hebrew—austerity—was lessened and something Negro—charm—was injected." These same dramatic word pictures can be seen working together in "Listen Lord a Prayer" to portray the religion of the Blacks: a personal God, "red hot hell," and heaven. In the poem the speaker begins by impressing the congregation with its worthlessness in an image packed with emotional appeal. "We come this morning-- / Like empty pitchers to a full fountain,/ With no merits of our own,". He then speaks of hell and sin in personal, graphic terms asking God to keep man "out of the gunshot of the devil," and to

Wash him with hyssop inside and out,
Hang him up and drain him dry of sin,
Pin his ear to the wisdom-post,
And make his words sledge hammers of truth--
Beating on the iron heart of sin.
He also asks God to "turpentine his imagination," and to "Fill him full of the dynamite of thy power." All of these images would be very familiar to the congregation and very powerful in evoking emotions from the congregation. Then the poem ends with a picture of heaven:

When I'm done traveling up the rough side of the mountain--

When I start down the steep and slippery steps of death--

When this old world begins to rock beneath my feet--
Lower me to my dusty grave in peace
To wait for that great gittin' up morning--Amen.

Thus the poem contains a religious theme composed of the warring elements: evil and salvation.

It was the function of the preacher to aid the congregation in its struggle against sin and evil. Johnson described this man in the preface to God's Trombones:

His discourse was generally kept at a high pitch of fervency, but occasionally he dropped into colloquialisms and, less often, into humor. He preached a personal and anthropomorphic God, a sure-enough heaven and a red-hot hell. His imagination was bold and unfettered. He had the power to sweep his hearers before him; and so himself was often swept away. At such times his language was not prose but poetry. It was from memo-
ries of such preachers there grew the idea of this book of poems.

The preacher was extremely imaginative and creative in his sermons. He knew his congregation intimately, so he was able to adjust his sermon to his people. For example, in "The Creation" the preacher seems to be speaking to an uneducated congregation. He uses no large words or complex images; rather his speech is simple, direct, and colloquial. To illustrate, he uses such idioms as, "he set that sun a-blazing in the heavens," "by the bank of the river / He kneeled him down," "great gittin' up morning," and "this Great God, / Like a mummy bending over her baby." This poem also shows that the preacher's Black congregation cannot abstract deeply. They understand God, not as a concept, but as a person who can step out on space, smile, fling light, hurl the world, tread on the earth, spit out the seas, bat His eyes, clap His hands, and, most importantly, feel loneliness which caused Him to create man. Furthermore, the preacher capitalizes upon nature images because these are things with which his congregation is familiar. For example, the image "blacker than a hundred midnights / Down in a cypress swamp" affects the congregation immediately. They understand how black midnight is, and they are familiar with a cypress swamp which, as they well know, is a very dark and eery place; therefore, for them this image communi-
cates well. Other examples of nature images are the oak
tree spreading out his arms, and the pine tree pointing his
finger to the sky. All of these dramatic images show how
Johnson tried to capture the Black turns of phrase without
going so far as to use dialect, which he felt limited him.

"Listen, Lord, a Prayer," "The Creation," and the other
poems in God's Trombones mark the culmination of Johnson's
poetic development. In these poems Johnson captured the
unique old-time religious experiences of Blacks, including
such facets of religion as Spirituals, preachers, sermons,
and congregations. The poems exemplify an attempt by
Johnson to develop pride for the Black heritage in Blacks
and Whites. Both races have enjoyed and profited from
these poems, a fact which suggests that Johnson solved the
problem of audience which the Black writer faces. These
poems also mark a break with the creative forms of the past.
No longer was Johnson mimicking Dunbar's dialect nor the
more flowery poetry of the Romantics. He developed a style
of poetry which met his needs as a Black writer. Finally,
these poems illustrate Johnson's refined skill in using
poetic and dramatic devices.

VI

God's Trombones has received more recognition and
praise than any other work by Johnson. When it was first
published in 1927 reviewers said such things as, "There is
sensitivity, artistic judgement, and a sustained emotional beauty in his work." In 1954 Allen Tate said, "This book is perhaps the highest imaginative achievement of Negro literature in our time." In 1965 August Meier called *God's Trombones* a "unique work of art." Finally, in 1967 Robert Hayden said that this work showed "originality and boldness of design." This continuing praise of and interest in *God's Trombones* through the years suggests that is a work of considerable merit and appeal as I have previously shown. However, Johnson's other contributions have been too long overlooked by scholars.

Many of Johnson's poems are attempts to surmount the problems which he faced as a Black poet. When he talked about the problems of achieving social equality for Blacks; chronicling the unique Black religious experience, which was tied up with the rapidly vanishing Black evangelist preacher and the vanishing Negro Spiritual; and writing to an audience which would not limit his creative expression by its prejudices, he was voicing the problems that many Black writers were beginning to grapple with. Johnson found his own answers to these problems. Through his dialect, laudatory, and religious poetry he tried to develop an appreciation for the Black man's contributions to the American cultural store—contributions such as his folk imagery, which colored the language; his feeling for rhythm and dance; his delightful
sense of humor; his sense of pride coupled with humility; and his intensely emotional spirituals. In his racial grievance poetry he tried to make Whites aware of the injustices which they were perpetrating upon the Black man—enslaving him, lynching him, and dehumanizing him. Surely some of this poetry fed the antilynching sentiment which soon grew and culminated in antilynching legislation. Thus Johnson voiced the problems of the Black writer and tried to solve these problems in his own poetry, which gradually developed and culminated in God's Trombones.
After a thorough search of literature, I have found a need for a critical scholarly discussion of James Weldon Johnson's contributions to American literature. Eugenia Collier's article, "James Weldon Johnson: Mirror of Change," is the major creditable scholarly article on Johnson's work, and it is limited to a discussion of several of his early dialect pieces and their influence on God's Trombones. The rest of the literature consists of minor brief references to Johnson's life or his specific works in anthologies and books such as those of Fred B. Millett, ed. Contemporary American Authors (New York, 1940), p. 410; Francis L. Broderick and August Meier, John P. Davis, ed. The American Negro Reference Book (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1965), p. 875; Elizabeth Lay Green; John Hope Franklin; Bernard Smith; and Benjamin Brawley, The Negro in Literature and Art in the United States (New York, 1930), p. 99.


James Weldon Johnson, "The Dilemma of the Negro Author," American Mercury, XV (December 1925), 480.


"Dilemma," p. 480.

"Dilemma," p. 480.


16 *Fifty Years*, p. 74.


18 *Fifty Years*, p. 73.

19 *Autobiography*, p. 56.

20 *Fifty Years*, pp. 75-76.


22 *St. Peter*, pp. 69-70.

23 *Fifty Years*, pp. 6-8.

24 *Fifty Years*, pp. 19-23.

25 *Fifty Years*, pp. 1-5.

26 *St. Peter*, p. 103.

27 *Fifty Years*, p. 12.

28 *Fifty Years*, p. 12.


30 *Fifty Years*, pp. 17-18.


32 *Fifty Years*, pp. 14-16. (The poem was written about the same time as the fictional account.)


He is last seen contemplating the scene and asking, "What did he mean by those last muttered words, / 'Brothers in spirit, brothers in deed are we?'" This question is one that has troubled me since I first read this poem. It also seems to have bothered critic Harold Rosenberg, "Truth and the Academic Style," Poetry, XLIX (October 1936), p. 50, who asks: Why are the victim and persecutor brothers in spirit and deed? Did the victim lynch himself? Did he lynch the mob? It seems to me that the question resolves itself when, as I have suggested, the victim is seen as a symbol for slavery, evil, and sin. The self-righteous White persecutor through lynching the victim thinks that he has eradicated evil; however, the victim reminds him that they are brothers in spirit and deed—sin and evil also exist in the White persecutor and he has not eradicated sin from the world by lynching the victim.

James Weldon Johnson, St. Peter Relates an Incident of the Resurrection Day (New York, 1930).


Fifty Years, pp. 37-39.

Harold Rosenberg, "Truth and the Academic Style, Poetry, XLIX (October 1936), 49-50.


I have chosen "The Creation" because, being very adaptable for oral reading, it is Johnson's most published poem; yet I have never read a detailed analysis of it. "Listen Lord a Prayer" was included for reasons of dramatic unity. As Johnson explains on page 11 of the preface to his book, this poem is a typical preliminary prayer which was given by a prayer leader in order to "set the scene" for the preacher.


Book of American Negro Spirituals, p. 43.

God's Trombones, p. 11.

55. Broderick and Meier, p. 100.
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