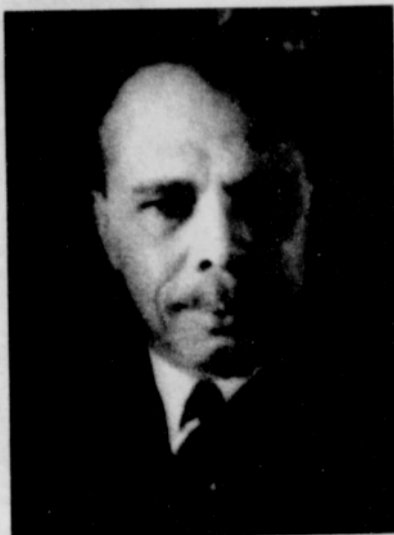


# Black Poetry Revolution: Part I

By Lillian Whitlow CONTRIBUTING WRITER FROM MAYA ANGELOU WRITERS GUILD

Black poets, through the centuries, have expressed their hopes, and fears of their times and their anticipations for the future. During Black History Month I have selected a few male poets to demonstrate some of the changes in literary styles, but maintaining the same theme; the condition of their people from the 1800's to the present.

## JAMES WELDON JOHNSON (1871-1938)



was born just a few years after slavery, but his literary works are timeless. He is best known for his poem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," which was set to music by his brother, Rosamond Johnson, and later adopted by the National Association of Colored People (NAACP) as the Negro National Anthem.

"Lift Every voice and Sing" accomplished the unlikely feat of transcending the age-old antinomies of intergrationism versus

black nationalism. It has served the past and will continue to serve the future generations. WE stand with pride when we sing, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," for this anthem does not dwell on the gloomy past nor the chastening rod, but those who sing it realize that at last we've "come to the place for which our fathers sighed." James Weldon Johnson reminds us that the battle of victory isn't won, but stay "in the path we pray." He concluded with:

*Lest our feet stray from the places,  
Our God, where we met Thee,  
Lest our hearts, drunk with the  
Wine of the world, we forget Thee.  
Shadowed beneath Thy hand,  
May we forever stand,  
True to our God,  
True to our native land.*

## LANGSTON HUGHES (1902-1967)



was born in Joplin, Missouri and was educated in Kansas, Ohio and New York. Mr. Hughes received many awards and honors through his literary works and speeches. He was a prolific writer for more than forty years. One of his outstanding poems is:

*Juke Box Love Song  
I could take the Harlem  
night  
And wrap around you,  
Take the neon lights and  
make a crown.*

*Take the Lenox Avenue buses,  
Taxis, subways,  
And for your love song tone their rumble down.  
Take Harlem's heartbeat,  
Make a drumbeat,  
Put it on a record, let it whirl,  
And while we listen to it play,  
Dance with you till day -  
Dance with you, my sweet brown Harlem girl.*

## CLAUDE McKAY (1890-1948)



was born in Jamaica, the British West Indies. He came to the United States to study at Tuskegee Institute and Kansas State University. He was active in the literary life of New York during the 1920's. Harlem Shadows, a collection of his poetry, was published in 1922 and established him

as an influential Black poet. One of his outstanding poem is:

### IF WE MUST DIE

*If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
Hunted and penned in our inglorious spot,  
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
Making their mock at our accursed lot.  
If we must die, O let us nobly die,  
So that our precious blood may not be shed  
In vain, then even the monsters we defy  
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!*

## MELVIN BEAUNOVURUS TOLSON (1900-1966)

was born in Moberly, Missouri. He attended Lincoln University and Columbia University. He had a long teaching career, first at Wiley College in Texas, and later at Langston University in Oklahoma and finally at Tuskegee Institute. Although his works appeared in numerous anthologies, he was a great poet almost totally unknown until the last years of his life, but some of his critics equated him with such greats as T.S. Eliot and Hart Crane.

Tolson wrote with a style that was unique, such as ALPHA from his collection of poems called Harlem Gallery:

*The Harlem Gallery, an Afric  
pepper bird  
Awakes me at a people's dusk  
and dawn.  
The age altars its image, a  
dog's hind leg,  
And hazards the moment of  
truth in pawn.  
The Lord of the House Flies  
Jaundice-eyed, synapses  
purred,  
Wries before the tumultuous  
canvas,  
The Second of May-  
By Goya  
Vs  
the scimitar of Murat*

## COUNTEE CULLEN (1903-1946)



was born in New York City. He was educated in the public schools there and at New York University. When he was twenty-two years old, he had his first book of poems, "Color", published. It won the Harmon Gold Award for literature and brought him immediate recognition as a significant Black American poet. Most of his works were of a serious nature, but he demonstrate a sense of humor in the following poem:

### FOR A MOUTHY WOMAN

*God and the devil still are  
wrangling  
Which should have her, which  
repel;  
God wants no discord in his  
heaven;  
Satan has enough in hell.*

PRIMUS ST. JOHN (1939-) has taught at Mary Holmes College in Mississippi, and received a 1970 Discovery Award from the National Endowment for the Arts. He was Poet-in-Residence for Tacoma, Washington Public School and instructor of English at the University of Utah, and presently, is instructor of English at Portland State University in Portland, Oregon. He says, "As a man who writes poem, I am growing to see that paper and pencil can be helpful to life if used recklessly." One of his poem expresses an incident in Mississippi in 1970:

### BENIGN NEGLECT/ MISSISSIPPI, 1970

*Suppose you were dreaming about  
your family,  
And when you woke up  
You found a man named Sonny  
Stanley  
Had just shot you (5 times),  
Or justice  
Looked just like the color your  
blood was running-  
Running wild in the world-  
But the world wouldn't see.  
Then  
You read, somewhere  
(I think it's the papers).  
If it's a problem, boy,  
We don't have one here  
We don't ask a man to die  
Like groceries babbling froth to  
flies.  
But bleeding,  
You watch your neighbors  
Write away to their windows  
Hide! Hide!  
"He's not there, He's not there."  
The last sentence is your Father -  
One of the windows...  
"He's not there, He's not there."*



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