

Black Poetry Revolution: Part 2

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● A fro-American Anthologies typically imply that Black poetry began with Phyllis Wheatley (1753-1784), but disappeared for over one hundred years, and reemerged with Paul Lawrence Dunbar (1872-1906). On the nineteenth century, at least 130 black men and women published poetry in America. During the 20th Century, black poets have emerged in countless numbers, and women poets are certainly making their place in history with their verses. I have profiled a few women poets to portray significant points of their lives and to demonstrate their literary styles that have evolved over the years.

PHYLLIS WHEATLEY (1753? - 1748)

Although a slave, she was the first black and second woman following Anne Bradstreet, to publish a volume of poetry in the United States. She was stolen from her homeland by slave traders, and shipped with a cargo of seventy or eighty young girls on a boat from Senegal. Phyllis arrived in the port of Boston in 1761 to be sold in the slave market.



Susannah Wheatley a kind, gentlehearted Christian woman and wife of John Wheatley, a prosperous tailor, needed a young girl to train because her servants were getting old. At the slave market Mrs. Wheatley saw a frail child wrapped in a dirty carpet and purchased her for a small fee. She determined the child's age to be about seven, because her front teeth were missing. She named the child Phyllis, and as it was common during slavery, Phyllis took the surname of her owner; Wheatley.

Phyllis was a fast learner and soon learned the English language. She began writing poetry at an early age. Being in a home of refinement and culture, she developed as creative and gifted.

The Wheatleys soon discovered that "instead of obtaining a spirit born to serve, there had come among them a spirit born to create." Encouraging their young slave poet, they provided Phyllis with paper and pencil at her bedside to jot down verses that she might forget before morning.

Because of her delicate health, she was assigned only light housework of dusting and polishing. Therefore, she had plenty of time to write poetry. One of her earlier poems expressing coming to America:

ON BEING BROUGHT FROM AFRICA TO AMERICA

*Tw'as mercy brought me from my pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a Saviour, too.
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye;
"Their colour is a diabolic dye."
Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,
May be refined, and join the angelic train.*

ALICE DUNBAR NELSON (1875-1935)

She was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, where she attended the public schools. Alice became a teacher in that city. She later taught in Brooklyn, New York, where she met and married Paul Laurence Dunbar in 1898. Her expertise was prose, but she occasionally wrote some poetry. One of her poems is:

SONNET

*I had no thought of violets of late,
The wild, shy kind that spring beneath your feet
In wistful April days, when lovers mate
And wander through the fields in raptures sweet.
The thought of violets meant florists' shops,
And bows and pins, and perfumed papers fine;
And garish lights, and mincing little fops
And cabarets and songs, and deadening wine.*

*So far from sweet real things my thoughts had strayed
I had forgot wide fields, and clear brown streams;
The perfect loveliness that God has made,
Wild violets shy and heaven-mounting dreams.
And now-unwittingly, you've made me dream
Of violets, and my soul's forgotten gleam.*

SONIA SANCHEZ (1939-)

Sonia was born in Birmingham, Alabama. She is one of the influential Black poets of the 1960's. Her lower case style is unique.



GWENDOLYN BROOKS (1917-)

Gwendolyn Brooks was born in Topeka, Kansas. She was raised in Chicago, Illinois and still resides there. She was active in teaching and lecturing in Illinois and was named Poet laureate of the state of Illinois. One of her poems is:



MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

(A man went forth with gifts.)

*He was a prose poem.
He was a tragic grace.
He was a warm music.
He tried to heal the vivid volcanoes.
His ashes are
Reading the world.
His Dream still wishes to anoint
The barricades of faith and of control.
His word still burns the center of the sun,
Above the thousands and the Hundred thousands.
The word was justice. It was spoken.
So it shall be spoken
So it shall be done.*

MARGARET WALKER (1915-)

Margaret was born in Birmingham, Alabama. She received a M.A. Degree from the University of Iowa, and was a faculty member of Jackson State College for many years. Her first book of poetry, "For My People" (1942) won the Yale University Younger Poets Competition.



A poem from one of her collection is:

GIRL HELD

WITHOUT BAIL

*("In an unjust state the only place for a just man is in jail")
I like it here just fine
And I don't want no bail.
My sister's here,
My mother's here,
And all my girl friends, too.
I want my rights.
I'm fighting for my rights.
I want to be treated
Just like anybody else
I like it fine in Jail,
And I don't want no Bail.*

*now poem. for us.
don't let them die out
all these old/blk/people
don't let them cop out
with their memories
of slavery/survival.
It is our
heritage.*

*U know. part/african'
part/negro
part/slave
sit down with em brotha & sistuhs.
Talk to em. Listen to their tales of victories/woes/sorrows.
Listen to their blk/ myths.
Record them talken their ago talk for our tomorrows.
Ask them bout the songs of births. The herbs that cured their aches. The crazy/niggers blown some cracker's cool.
The laughter comen out of tears.
Let them tell us of their juju years so ours will be that much stronger.*

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