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## Helene Johnson

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About this Person

**Born:** July 07, 1906 in Boston, Massachusetts, United States

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Helene Johnson (Helen Johnson Hubbell) was one of the youngest of the Harlem Renaissance poets. In AfricanAmerican literary history, Helene Johnson's works are models for aspiring poets--specially for African-American women poets who have long been led to believe that no tradition of achievement exists among black American women in this genre prior to the 1960s. Additionally, in AfricanAmerican literary history, Helene Johnson is a transitional poet whose works of the 1920s and 1930s signal a striking out in new directions among black American women poets, who began to abandon romantic themes and poetic conventions at this juncture.

She was born July 7, 1906, in Boston, Massachusetts, in New England Women's Hospital, the only child of Ella (Benson) Johnson and William Johnson. Born to a mother whose family had migrated from the southeastern United States to New England, Johnson counted among her ancestors Benjamin Benson and Helen (Pease) Benson.

Born a slave in Camden, South Carolina, located near the Sea Islands, the twice-married Benson was a carpenter by trade. Helen Pease Benson was his second wife and the mother of his three daughters--Ella, Rachel, and Minnie. Since Benson was a slave, Helene Johnson assumed that her grandmother was a slave as well. After his three daughters sought to improve their lots by moving north, Benjamin Benson followed them to Boston. Later he bought property in Oak Bluff on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, and moved there, earning a living by building houses. While residing in Oak Bluff, Benson incurred the scorn of his neighbors--primarily because of his southern, non-Yankee origins and only secondarily because of his race. Unhappy in the North, Benson returned later in his life to his beloved South, where he lived out his final days. The family continues to own property in Oak Bluff, where black American writer Dorothy West, Helene Johnson's cousin, currently resides on land originally purchased by Benjamin Benson. (Most of the details of Johnson's life presented in this biographical sketch were provided by the poet herself during interviews conducted in 1986.)

Named in honor of her maternal grandmother, Helen Pease Benson, Helene Johnson felt parentless as a child. From her own perspective, she was a "Tennessee Williams child." She never knew her father; she had no idea what he looked like, having never seen a photograph of him. All she had been told was that he was a Greek, that he and her mother were incompatible, and that he probably lived in Chicago. She never determined whether he was actually of Greek origin or whether the designation "Greek" meant something else with regard to him. Neither she nor he seems to have attempted to locate the other.

Ella Benson Johnson was a domestic worker who was at her places of employment almost constantly. Among the families by whom Ella was employed were the Dwights, who lived at 14 Apian Way, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the Badgers, who lived at 1688 Beacon Street, Boston, Massachusetts. Mr. Dwight was affiliated, Johnson recalled, with Harvard University, and the Badgers owned vast amounts of New Hampshire real estate. Respected by her employers for her forthrightness, Ella Johnson cooked for these wealthy families and performed other household tasks. Though she was not formally educated, she had an active mind and was interested in world happenings to such an extent that during their outings together, Ella and Helene Johnson attended events to which parents in the early twentieth century rarely took their children. Not only did her mother make sure that Helene saw male newsmakers such as the Wright brothers but also, a feminist of sorts, she took pains to accompany her daughter to events that featured women prominently. In spite of Ella Johnson's native intelligence and curiosity, she was never able to improve dramatically

her lot in life, largely because of color bias, her daughter believed.

During her childhood, Johnson lived primarily at 478 Brookline Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts, in a household that was largely female dominated. She remembered that her mother once had a male suitor who was a dentist but that the only male she normally encountered was Isaac Christopher West, Dorothy West's father, a produce dealer who was known during the early twentieth century as Boston's banana king. The other residents of 478 Brookline Avenue were Ella's sisters, Minnie and Rachel. Each of the sisters gave birth to a daughter within a single twelve-month period that spanned part of 1906 and 1907. Minnie gave birth to Jean; Rachel, to Dorothy; and Ella, to Helene.

Of her two aunts, Rachel was the one Johnson remembered more vividly. She recalled that Rachel disliked her and speculated that perhaps Rachel's disdain might have been a result of their similarity in personality. In spite of the friction between them, they occasionally conversed at length about the theater, which was Rachel's passion. Interestingly, Rachel dubbed the poet Helene, a name that appealed to Rachel because it had a fancy ring to it; the poet's legal name is Helen. Although the writer preferred Helen and used this name in most contexts, she signed the name Helene Johnson to all of her published poems, and she is known as Helene Johnson in literary circles.

During her childhood, Johnson's family went back and forth between Boston and Oak Bluff. She recalled that her Aunt Rachel was rather erratic and registered her and Dorothy in an Oak Bluff school at one point and then later enrolled them in a Boston school. In Boston, Johnson attended the Lafayette School, next the Martin School, and finally Girls' Latin High School. Additionally, she and her cousins took piano lessons at home and were tutored at home by Bessie Trotter--the daughter of Monroe Trotter, the politically active editor and founder of the black American newspaper *The Boston Guardian*--and Maude Stewart. Their tutoring was not like the tutoring that children of wealthy parents received but was instead supplemental to the education they received in school. In Johnson's view, she was bright in all subjects but was not ambitious enough to earn high grades consistently. She required challenges to excel. Without challenges she was, by her own admission, an indifferent student. Although she did not aspire to a degree, she enrolled in classes at Boston University after she graduated from high school.

## Poetry Prize Brings National Recognition

In 1927 Johnson moved to New York City, ostensibly to attend Columbia University, where again she never seriously considered pursuing a degree. The chief reason she went to New York was that she believed that it was a more exciting place than Boston. She had first gained a sense of how thrilling the city could be during a brief visit in 1926, the year before she moved there. She had gone to the National Urban League's *Opportunity* dinner with acceptance speech in hand--a speech she prepared after having been informed that she had won a prize. The prize was First Honorable Mention for her poem "Fulfillment" in the *Opportunity* literary contest, a competition that attracted 1,276 submissions that year in its various categories. It is the young Helene Johnson of this period that Wallace Thurman describes in his 1932 roman à clef, *Infants of the Spring*, in which the young poet, fictionalized as Hazel Jamison, is depicted as a rarity in Harlem Renaissance literary circles: she had "a freshness and naivete which he [the protagonist Raymond Taylor] and his cronies had lost," and "surprisingly enough for Negro prodigies," she "actually gave promise of possessing literary talent" (231).

When Johnson returned to New York City in 1927, she was to remain in the city for more than half a century. Initially, she resided at the 137th Street YWCA. Later she moved to 43 West 66th Street in Manhattan off Central Park West. This building was at the time, Johnson recalled, the only apartment house in this section of Manhattan that allowed blacks to rent units. It was during this period that she became acquainted with a number of prominent Harlem Renaissance literary figures, some of whom resided in the same building. One of her fellow apartment dwellers was Zora Neale Hurston, who became a close friend who chastised Johnson for not exerting herself enough to reach her goals. Of all the Harlem Renaissance writers, Wallace Thurman was the one Johnson knew best. Brilliant and outspoken, Thurman, whom she loved dearly in a platonic sense, was always "Wally" to her. One of Johnson's earliest published poems, "A Southern Road," appeared in his short-lived *Fire!*; she is the only black American woman with a poem in the one and only issue of the periodical. Also, Johnson knew Langston Hughes, who always seemed Latin and not black to her. She met James Weldon Johnson, who seemed old and stern to her. And she knew Countee Cullen, who was a cultured individual who "fit in" in her perspective. His "fitting in" struck her because she sometimes felt like a misfit.

Johnson's first national recognition had come in 1925 when her poem "Trees at Night" won Honorable Mention in the *Opportunity* literary contest and when her poem "The Road" appeared in the landmark anthology *The New Negro*. By then Johnson, who was nineteen years old in 1925, had been writing for at least a decade. All her life she had aspired to be a writer, although whites such as the Dwights, her mother's employers, had encouraged Johnson to become a schoolteacher in the South--the chief vocation, the writer said, that whites recommended to intelligent blacks at the time. As a student at Girls' Latin High School, she remembered that when she was called upon to read one of her works, she habitually denied authorship and ascribed the pieces to her cousin, Dorothy. She attributed her denials to "some sort of psychotic thing." She recalled that it "almost killed" her "for somebody to recognize something" she wrote. When she wrote, she always wrote for herself--because she enjoyed writing. She was amazed that anyone ever read her poems. She credited her early interest in writing to her mother, who provided her with new experiences; to the supplemental education she received at home; and to her exploration of library books. She cited two literary influences on her writing: poet Richard Le Gallienne, the father of actress Eva Le Gallienne, and poet Edna St. Vincent Millay, who was extremely popular in the 1920s, especially with young women who saw her as symbolic of the period's "free woman." Neither of these writers is black. Johnson's identification with white role models is not surprising, given the dearth of black poets whose works were being published during her formative years.

From 1925 through the mid-1930s, Johnson's poems appeared regularly in periodicals. In some of her works, she conformed to literary conventions that governed black women writers of the early twentieth century. These poems are decorous lyrics in traditional forms that treat themes such as love, death, and nature. In the remainder of her published canon, Johnson experiments with free

forms, uses black urban argot, and addresses topics such as race pride and female sensuality.

Most of her poems appeared in *Opportunity*, which published six of her poems in 1926 alone; also, her poems appeared in periodicals such as *The Messenger*, *Palms*, *Vanity Fair*, the *Boston Saturday Evening Quill*, *Harlem*, and *Challenge*. Additionally, Johnson's poems appeared in anthologies such as *Caroling Dusk* (1927) and James Weldon Johnson's revised edition of *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1931). In his anthology, Johnson praised Helene Johnson's early poetry, that "bore the stamp of a genuine poet," he wrote (279). Granting that she possessed genuine lyric talent, he judged her best poems as those she wrote in the colloquial style, a style that many poets assumed, he indicated, to be easy but which Johnson realized required as much craftsmanship as conventional poetic forms.

A small number of Johnson's published poems do not belong to the group of colloquial poems that James Weldon Johnson applauds; rather this handful of poems adhere to traditional poetic standards. In the main these works are her least successful works. Among these poems, "Metamorphism" is a commentary on the vicissitudes in human affairs; the poem's stale images and jarring rhythmic devices are liabilities. Another poem, "Mother," is a melodramatic paean to a self-sacrificing madonna who loves her child so much that she would abandon Christianity to make her progeny happy. "Vers de Societe" is a love poem whose central image does not communicate a sense of passionate love.

## Poet Writes of Love, Sensuality, and Race

In most of Helene Johnson's poems, she forsakes convention in part. In the works in which she abandons poetic tradition, she has recourse to sexually-charged language as the basis of metaphors. Among her themes is youthful sensuality. "Night," "What Do I Care for Morning," "Futility," and "Fulfillment" contain traces of these elements. The references in "Night" to the universally feminine moon's "pale bosom" and the "bower of her [the moon's] hair" suggest female sexuality. In "What Do I Care for Morning," the night is "yielding and tender." "Futility" suggests that society's laws prevent individuals from behaving naturally. Their natural desire is, the poem asserts, not for love in a parlor but for love that is "singing up and down the alley / Without a collar." "Fulfillment" is similar to the vibrant poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay; this poem is a catalog of experiences that sate the speaker's lust for life. These experiences include leaning "against a strong tree's bosom, sentient / And hushed" and melting "the still snow" with her "seething body" before kissing "the warm earth tremulous underneath." Interestingly, the catalog in this poem includes most of the themes that recur in Helene Johnson's *oeuvre*--nature's splendor; Western society's constraints, specifically on women and blacks; and her speakers' zest for life.

Joie de vivre is the theme of "Summer Matures," which placed second in the Holstein Poetry Section competition sponsored by *Opportunity* in 1927; the poem encourages love and mating in a mythological setting. "Invocation" and "Widow with a Moral Obligation" suggest a desire for life that transcends death. "Remember Not" encourages lovers to seize the day and love while they may.

Poems on youthful sensuality and joie de vivre constitute approximately one-third of Helene Johnson's published canon. Many of her other published poems are racial in theme. In the racial works, she took as James Weldon Johnson wrote in the revised edition of *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, "the very qualities and circumstances that have long called for apology or defense and extolled them in an unaffected manner"(279). Helene Johnson's racial poems show how blacks are attuned to rhythms and values that differ from those of Europeans and suggest that this dissimilarity causes displacement among blacks in the Western world.

Thematically, Helene Johnson's racial poems fall into three categories: protest poems, racial-pride poems, and poetic indictments of Western civilization. The poems in the last two groups repudiate literary exoticism, which flourished in the Western world during the early twentieth century.

In her protest poems, Helene Johnson--a member of the black bourgeoisie when she wrote her published works--is generally polite, even when she relates the horrors of a lynching, as in "A Southern Road," one of her most powerful poems, or when she tells of the whipping of a black woman in "Fiat Lux," a melodramatic poem that evokes thematically some of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's racial poems. The politeness reflects not only the poetic limits imposed upon black American women writers who had little choice but to write ladylike protest poems but also the facts of Helene Johnson's life, which was characterized by relatively little overt racial discrimination and few economic hardships as she grew up in Boston.

Helene Johnson's racial-pride poems include "The Road," "Poem," "Sonnet to a Negro in Harlem," and "My Race." Largely because of her poems on this theme, she is viewed by some literary critics as the woman who wrote poems that most reflect the perspectives associated with the Harlem Renaissance. In the racial-pride poems, she celebrates the beauty of the collective black race and the inherent majesty of "ordinary" black individuals--who were not in the foreground in earlier black American literature, which tended to portray middle and upper-class achievers who were evidence of blacks' intellectual and moral strengths.

The poet's speakers indict Western civilization in "Magalu," "A Missionary Brings a Young Native to America," and "Bottled." These poems and others by Helene Johnson imply that blacks are closer to nature than whites and thus accept partially the myth of the noble savage. Further, these works suggest that Western society destroys blacks.

After the early 1930s, Helene Johnson's poems rarely appeared in periodicals, but anthologists--especially those who had been themselves participants in the Harlem Renaissance--sporadically included her works in their collections of black American literature. Among the anthologies in which her poems appear are Sterling A. Brown, Arthur P. Davis, and Ulysses Lee, *The Negro Caravan* (1941); Arna Bontemps, *Golden Slippers: An Anthology of Negro Poetry for Young Readers* (1941); Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, *The Poetry of the Negro: 1746-1970* (1970); and Arna Bontemps, *American Negro Poetry* (1974). Additionally, her poems are included in Arnold Adoff, *The Poetry of Black America*; Lindsay Patterson, *Rock Against the Wind* (1973); Nathan Huggins,

*Voices from the Harlem Renaissance* (1976); Erlene Stetson, *Black Sister* (1981); and Maureen Honey, *Shadowed Dreams* (1989).

These anthologists have had only the poems published during the 1920s and 1930s to select from when they chose works by Helene Johnson for their collections. By the mid-1930s, she did not have "a certain laxity" she needed to write and to seek publication. On her silence since then, Helene Johnson explained, "It's very difficult for a poor person to be that unfastened. They have to eat. In order to eat, you have to be fastened and tightly." Helene Johnson became fastened partly as a consequence of her marriage during the 1930s to William Warner Hubbell, a motorman she met in New York City. Prior to marrying, she had beaux. Though she believed she was never pretty in the conventional sense, she was popular with men because she was attractive, she modestly indicated, "in a sort of ordinary way." William Hubbell liked her poems and tried to help her so that she could write. After a number of years of marriage, the couple separated, neither partner feeling the need to obtain a formal divorce. From this union was born Helene Johnson's only child, Abigail Calachaly Hubbell, on September 18, 1940. The baby was named "Abigail" because Helene liked the name. "Calachaly" is a name Helene's mother made up for a doll her daughter owned. A graduate of Bard College, Abigail Hubbell owns New York City's Off-Center Theater. Twice married, she is the mother of two sons--Jason Rosen, born to her and her first husband, Leonard Rosen, and Benson McGrath, born to her and her second husband, Anthony McGrath.

Not only did marriage and motherhood fasten Helene Johnson tightly from the mid- 1930s on, but also the demands of full-time employment left her with little time to write as the years passed. Helene Johnson's succinct analysis of the impact that employment has on writers' creativity is based on her own experiences:

Writing a little, we [writers] usually got jobs writing... . [Y]ou don't have too much time to go in another direction. And to write anything (it can be poetry or anything at all), you have to have time. You have to sit and rock like a fool or look out the window, and something will come by (Interview with Helene Johnson).

Following this employment pattern herself, Helene Johnson worked for a number of years as a correspondent at Consumers Union in Mount Vernon, New York, where she composed individual responses to subscribers' queries when form letters would not suffice. While at Consumers Union, she toiled alongside correspondent Gwendolyn Bennett, another Harlem Renaissance poet.

Impulsively, Helene Johnson left Consumers Union to pursue a lifelong dream of becoming an advertising copywriter--a dream that never became a reality. During the 1980s, after more than half a century in New York, she returned to the region of her birth--to New England--where she lived for a few years in a modest apartment in Onset, Massachusetts, a small town on Cape Cod. Although she suffered from osteoporosis and thyroid disease, her mental faculties remained unimpaired. Wise and alert, she still wrote poetry because writing was for her a necessity. In her view, her late poems are not, however, of the same caliber as her early poems; indeed, Helene Johnson referred to these late works as "inklings" or "trinkets." In the fall of 1986, she returned to New York City, where she lives with her daughter's family in Manhattan. She continues to write poetry, which she aspires to have published.

In spite of the merits of Helene Johnson's poems of the 1920s and 1930s, recent scholars and literary historians have generally tended to ignore her works. There seem to be two chief reasons for her obscurity. First, like most women poets of the Harlem Renaissance, Helene Johnson had no volume of poetry published. She attributed her failure to have a collection published to the racelessness of many of her poems. During the 1920s and 1930s, publishers were primarily interested, she believed, in racial works by black writers. Second, Helene Johnson and her contemporaneous black American women poets might have been forgotten because many of their works were grounded in the romantic tradition, which was passé even in the 1920s, a period during which American poets were in the main rejecting traditional forms and themes.

Regardless of the reasons that critics and literary historians have forgotten Helene Johnson's poems, the result is that a poet whose works warrant reading is deprived of a place in African-American letters. As a racial poet, she is the best kind--a writer who uses the specific problems of a distinct group to make statements about the human condition in myriad contexts. One of the points she makes in these poems is that racial love and pride are crucial to the psychic health of members of oppressed groups.

Her raceless poems treat sensuality in such a manner that these works remain resonant. Vivid and immediate because of their images, these portraits of passion--which express their speakers' thirsts for life--transcend time and place.

For her poems' social messages, their universal statements about human desire to experience life fully, and their role as literary models, Helene Johnson's poems merit inclusion in chronicles of black American literature.

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