

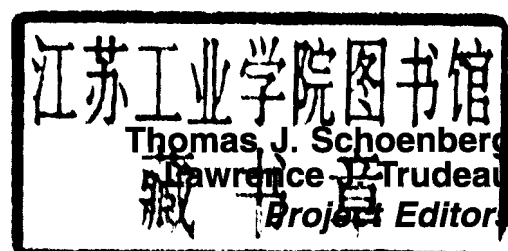
Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC

179

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers
Who Lived between 1900 and 1999,
from the First Published Critical
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**



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Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vol. 179

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Preface

Since its inception *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC) has been purchased and used by some 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. TCLC has covered more than 1000 authors, representing over 120 nationalities and over 40,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as TCLC. In the words of one reviewer, "there is nothing comparable available." TCLC "is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own."

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TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1999 and to the most significant interpretations of these author's works. Volumes published from 1978 through 1999 included authors who died between 1900 and 1960. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of the period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, TCLC helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in TCLC presents a comprehensive survey on an author's career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

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TCLC is designed as a companion series to Thomson Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, (CLC) which reprints commentary on authors who died after 1999. Because of the different time periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between CLC and TCLC.

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
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- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
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In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Thomson Gale also produces a paperbound edition of the *TCLC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Marita Bonner

1899?-1971

(Full name Marita Odette Bonner Occomy; also wrote under the pseudonyms Joseph Maree Andrew and Joyce N. Reed) American short story writer, playwright, and essayist.

INTRODUCTION

Although she is not as well known today as other writers of the Harlem Renaissance, Marita Bonner was versatile and prolific, and her innovative works were widely read and admired during her lifetime. Bonner published twenty short stories, three plays, and two essays, nearly all of them in influential journals. During the 1930s and 1940s she wrote several short stories depicting the lives of African Americans living in Chicago's "Black Belt." Many of her stories, set in the fictional neighborhood of Frye Street, confront issues of class and race and present an ambiguous portrait of isolated ethnic minorities, thereby challenging the prevailing concept of the urban American melting-pot. Bonner also developed a unique multi-part narrative style in her later fiction in order to better convey the complexity of her subject matter. In her plays, all written in the late 1920s but not staged during her lifetime, Bonner employed experimental techniques and presented revolutionary and confrontational material. Many critics consider her work ahead of its time. Writing in 1987, Nellie McKay asserted that Bonner's "political horizon went further than that of many of the militants who followed her," adding that she "deserves to be recognized as a writer who made a considerable contribution to the history of black drama."

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

According to most sources, Bonner was born on June 16, 1899. She lived with her parents, Joseph Andrew and Mary Anne Noel Bonner in Brookline, Massachusetts. She attended Brookline High School, where she contributed to the student magazine, *The Sagamore*, and gained the attention and support of its faculty sponsor, Alice Howard Spaulding. After her graduation from high school in 1918, Bonner applied to Radcliffe College with Spaulding's encouragement, and was accepted. There she studied music, German, and creative writing, earning a degree in English and comparative literature in 1922. While she was a student at Radcliffe,

Bonner began teaching at a high school in nearby Cambridge. After graduating from college, Bonner continued teaching, first in Bluefield, West Virginia, and then in Washington, D.C., from 1924 to 1930. Bonner began to actively pursue her writing career while living in Washington. In 1925 she published her first short story, "The Hands," and an essay, "On Being Young—A Woman—and Colored," in *Opportunity* and *Crisis* magazines, respectively. Her three plays, *The Pot-Maker* (1927), *The Purple Flower* (1928), and *Exit, an Illusion* (1929), were also written during this period.

In 1930 Bonner married William Almy Occomy, and the couple moved to Chicago. Bonner focused on writing fiction after leaving Washington, publishing her stories in *Crisis* and *Opportunity*. In 1934 she won the *Opportunity* literary prize for fiction for her two-part short story, "Tin Can." Scholars have suggested that this short story had a shaping influence on Richard Wright's *Native Son*, published in 1940. Bonner and her husband, with whom she raised three children, joined the Christian Scientist Church in 1941. That same year Bonner stopped writing and resumed her teaching career. She taught high school until 1949 and then worked with mentally handicapped students at the Dolittle School until 1963. Bonner died December 6, 1971, from smoke inhalation when a lamp in her Chicago apartment caught fire.

MAJOR WORKS

In one of her most critically acclaimed works of nonfiction, "On Being Young—A Woman—and Colored," Bonner examines the confines of prescribed gender and racial roles, describing the experience of living in segregated Washington, D.C. The essay reflects Bonner's position of privilege and her advanced education, while addressing readers of similar circumstances. It employs images of entrapment and paralysis to express the situation of an intelligent, creative Black woman in the segregated America of the 1920s. In addition to highlighting the constraints placed on Black women, the essay also criticizes middle-class privilege. Bonner concludes "On Being Young" by invoking Buddhist imagery to describe an inner life of silence, waiting, and understanding.

Of Bonner's three plays, most critics consider *The Purple Flower* the most significant. This one-act drama of racial conflict is a highly original work, employing

elements of surrealism, symbolism, and allegory during a time when most African American playwrights adhered to a more realistic mode. The play focuses on the conflict between two groups, the "Us's" and the White Devils. Bonner divides the stage into upper and lower settings, which are marked by a thin boundary called "The-Skin-of-Civilization." The protagonists of the play, the "Us's," range in skin color from light brown to black and are prevented from climbing the hill to reach the purple "Flower-of-Life-at-Its-Fullest" by the White Devils, who have both angelic and demonic features. The "Us's" try to devise a plan to overcome the White Devils but realize that it will require blood. The play ends provocatively with the question "Is it time?" *The Purple Flower* does not merely lament the oppression of Black Americans, but frames that issue within the larger context of global oppression and looks to a time of revolution and conflict between the races.

Of the twenty short stories that Bonner published in *Crisis* and *Opportunity*, most are set in the fictional community of Frye Street. Bonner uses this setting to illustrate the diversity of culture and the multitude of perspectives in modern urban America. While many of Bonner's characters are displaced Southern Blacks, other minorities—Italians, Jews, Danes, and Greeks—are also represented in her short fiction. In these works, the author developed a multi-layered narrative style that became the hallmark of her mature fiction, one in which the storyline consists of several different parts which serve to contrast different characters and juxtapose the inner and outer impressions of her protagonists. One notable example of this new narrative style, *A Possible Triad on Black Notes* (1933), focuses on issues of "color fixation" and displacement. Bonner's prize-winning story, "Tin Can," details the events of a murder and exposes the effects of poverty and oppression on a young Black man's personality. In "A Sealed Pod" (1936), Bonner illustrates the futility of trying to establish a cohesive community in Frye Street despite the close physical proximity of its inhabitants.

Although her aspiration of creating a map of African American experience in Chicago was never fully realized, Bonner's fiction uncovers the realities of violence, poverty, and racial discrimination that plagued the city in the years between the world wars. In 1987 Bonner's explorations of the intricacies of modern urban growth and its effects on minorities were reintroduced to readers when her published pieces, as well as five previously unpublished works, were collected in *Frye Street and Environs: The Collected Works of Marita Bonner*.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

As a result of her frequent publication in *Opportunity* and *Crisis*, two leading African American journals, Bonner was widely read and recognized as an innovative

and accomplished writer. Her essay "On Being Young—a Woman—and Colored," was praised as a powerful account of a Black woman's sense of identity and her struggle against the racial and gender roles forced on her by society. Her short story "Tin Can" won the prestigious *Opportunity* literary prize for fiction in 1934 and, according to many critics, influenced Richard Wright's masterpiece *Native Son*.

However, despite her wide audience, Bonner received little critical attention during her lifetime, especially compared to other Black American writers Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Toomer, Nella Larsen, and Langston Hughes. When she ceased writing in 1941, her work was virtually forgotten. It was not until 1987, with the publication of *Frye Street and Environs* that her literature and legacy were rediscovered by readers and critics. Since then, commentators have lauded Bonner for her important contribution to the development of Black urban fiction in America, her stark portraits of the struggles of Black women during the 1920s and 1930s, and her sober counterbalance to the male-dominated, optimistic view of African American culture fostered by the Harlem Renaissance.

Carol Allen has described Bonner's short fiction as "one of the first microscopic looks at city life from an African-American writer." Similarly, Judith A. Musser has argued that Bonner was one of the most important literary figures of the 1930s, because she created "stark, unsentimental stories that document the lives of desperate people," and because she was one of the few writers who focused her attention on "the conditions of women during the rise of the New Negro." Bonner's literary stature today has perhaps been best summarized by Joyce Flynn, who stated in her introduction to *Frye Street and Environs*: "[Bonner's] writing has kept alive an entire world—the stories and feelings of the black universe coming to consciousness in northern cities in the decades that separated the world wars. For that act of imaginative deliverance, future generations will be grateful."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- *"The Hands—A Story" (short story) 1925
- †"On Being Young—A Woman—and Colored" (essay) 1925
- †"Nothing New" (short story) 1926
- **The Pot-Maker* (play) 1927
- †*The Purple Flower* (play) 1928
- †*Exit, an Illusion* (play) 1929
- **A Possible Triad on Black Notes* (short stories) 1933
- *"Tin Can" (short story) 1934

*"A Sealed Pod" (short story) 1936

†"Patch Quilt" (short story) 1940

Frye Street and Environs: The Collected Works of Marita Bonner [edited by Joyce Flynn and Joyce Occomy Stricklin] (short stories, plays, and essays) 1987

*These works were first published in the journal *Opportunity*.

†These works were first published in the journal *Crisis*.

CRITICISM

E. Quita Craig (essay date 1980)

SOURCE: Craig, E. Quita. "Afro-American Versatility with Euro-American Techniques." In *Black Drama of the Federal Theatre Era: Beyond the Formal Horizons*, pp. 57-70. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980.

[In the following excerpt, Craig considers Bonner's play *The Purple Flower* "a veritable gem of expressionistic symbolism by a black woman."]

Writing in 1966 about white American playwrights, Brooks Atkinson recalled that they made the twenties "the most dynamic decade the American theater ever had."¹ In marked contrast to this superlative evaluation, the black playwrights of that period had been widely criticized for various and conflicting forms of ineptitude, including too much realism and non-realism. Doris Abramson, also writing in the sixties, recorded the prevailing opinion that they were not considered "ready artistically or intellectually" for experimentation; "they were hardly free of melodrama and the minstrel tradition,"² and of the Federal Theatre era she concluded from the available information that the Federal Theatre did not "live" long enough for its black playwrights to master the sophisticated techniques used by its Living Newspapers.³

But was this presumption, by white critics, of black ineptitude with the experimental techniques of the Euro-American stage, really justified? Were the efforts of the white American stage to master the latest European techniques really that much ahead of them?

Actually, in the first three decades of the twentieth century, realism, as a dramatic mode, dominated the American stage, and it continued to do so well beyond that time. Plays like *Processional* by John Howard Lawson, *The Adding Machine* by Elmer Rice, and *The Emperor Jones* by Eugene O'Neill were strictly in the minority,

and white experimental drama was mostly confined to college drama units, such as the Vassar Experimental Theater over which Hallie Flanagan had presided.⁴ Perhaps the most powerful deterrent to experimental drama was the fact that Broadway had its eye perpetually on the box office, and the eternally optimistic audiences in the land of hope and glory continued to demand euphemistically happy endings that did not disturb the American dream—at a time when most of Europe was already reflecting the sordid and disillusioning facts of life in dramatic modes created to cope with its changed vision. Not even the work of the great Bertolt Brecht, "who changed the face of European drama," succeeded on Broadway,⁵ and black playwrights had much in common with Brecht's failure to scratch the surface of American complacency. They longed to dramatize all the sordid facts of the black experience—to tell it as it really was—but it was sufficiently difficult, sometimes even disastrous, for them to challenge the white American myths and stereotypes, without further indulging in overt efforts to disturb the American dream.

But the black dramatists had an additional handicap. Firsthand experience with European experimental modes and techniques was very difficult to come by except for those few blacks, such as Owen Dodson, who were exposed to it in college drama departments. Audience segregation made their opportunity to observe productions of their own plays, even in the prevailing mode, very uncertain; at best, they were seated too far from the stage for effective feedback. One such example was that of Wallace Thurman, whose *Harlem* was produced on Broadway in 1929; Thurman was denied orchestra seats for his own play and was ushered off into the rafters.⁶

Yet in spite of almost insurmountable handicaps, the same decade that produced *The Adding Machine*⁷ and *The Emperor Jones*⁸ also saw the creation of a veritable gem of expressionistic symbolism by a black woman; *The Purple Flower* was written by Marita Bonner and published in *Crisis* in 1928.⁹ Marita Bonner was educated at Radcliffe College and wrote articles and short stories for *Crisis*,¹⁰ and her play reveals that she was both artistically and intellectually capable of working effectively with European experimental modes. Its theme was unmistakably revolutionary, its technique was a complete departure from the dominant realism of the period, and it was written with the type of Brechtian distancing and symbolism that had been used by only a few white playwrights during the decade.

The purple flower that grows on top of the hill, Somewhere, is the flower of "life at its fullest" which is jealously guarded by the White Devils who live on the hill. The Uses, who are varied shades from white to black, live on the plane below, between Somewhere and Nowhere. They have worked hard to make the valley

bloom, build the roads and even the houses of the White Devils, but are still Nowhere. The Uses would be Somewhere, too, if they could reach the fragrance shed by the purple flower, but so far they have not succeeded in getting to it, for the White Devils are ruthless and tricky. As the curtain rises, the White Devils are seen up on the hillside singing to the Uses to stay where they are, Nowhere. Some of the Uses, below, are having their siesta, with their faces, as always, turned toward Somewhere, while others discuss their predicament: the hard work, so long advocated by their leaders, has got them Nowhere, for the White Devils have rewarded it only with a slap in the face; education has got them Nowhere, since the White Devils wrote the book and censored the instructions for success; religion has got them Nowhere, as they are usually so busy shouting at God that they fail to listen to Him; and the sacks of gold they have earned have got them Nowhere, for the White Devils have refused to sell them even a spoonful of the hill they labored to build. What the Uses need is leadership, and unified action.

As night falls, they are watched by a White Devil who hides in the bushes and amuses himself by pinching an Us who passes by; yet the Us must not defend himself, or even touch the White Devil, for that would surely bring death. Now, an old Us cries out for attention and relates a dream she had last night that she saw a White Devil dismembered, and the oldest Us recognizes that this is the signal for action. Into an iron pot he throws dust for all the generations of Uses who have died trying, followed by the books and the gold; the last ingredient he needs for revolution is blood, for "blood has to be let for births, to give life," and "the New Man must be born."¹¹ As with Abraham and Isaac of old, God has supplied the sacrifice, and Finest Blood is sent to perform the precarious task of enticing the White Devil out of the bushes; whichever of them is killed in the fight that will follow will supply the blood for the sacrifice. As Finest Blood pipes, and calls to the White Devil, all the valley from Nowhere to Somewhere listens; the final curtain falls, and Marita Bonner closes the play with the question: "Is it time?"

This short, compact play combines symbolism, song, rhythm, dance, and fantasy in a single act that ends in a crescendo of silent listening for the signal that awaits only the will of God and the coming of leaders to start the blood revolution; it is Messianic in scope. Technically, Marita Bonner's characters are depersonalized symbols of qualities: they are Young Man, Old Man, Cornerstone, Average, Finest Blood, White Devils, and so on, and her staging directions are a constructionist's delight.¹² The dynamics of social relationships, and of cause and effect, are projected through the skillful use of horizontal levels. On the hillside the White Devils, softly angelic in appearance, but with horns that glow

red and tails decorated with bones—adroit, tricky—dance with acrobatic artfulness, sometimes erect and with dignity and sometimes writhing like snakes. On the plane below, the Uses, who may be any color from white to black, gaze longingly up the hillside and await the time for revolution. The stage is also horizontally divided by the Thin Skin of Civilization on which the main action takes place, and from time to time, when the White Devils and Uses become too loud or violent, the Thin Skin of Civilization breaks, and they tumble through, lying beneath in twisted, broken mounds. The lighting of the two levels also reflects their significance: the lower level is dim, but there is enough light to note that some actions that take place on the upper level are repeated on the lower, and in this shadow world lie the broken bodies of those who could not maintain their thin skin of civilization.

In addition to the dream symbol for action, drum beats supply immediate motivation to the sleepy Uses and they spring into dance to the rhythm that historically inspires black action. Symbolically, also, the drummer is a black Us. The multiple symbolism of the conjuring old Us is an abstraction of Brechtian scope, for not only does he mix the ingredients from which God will make the new man, but as he throws the dust of time and the fruits of effort into the iron pot, and awaits the blood of coming birth, he unites the past, the present, and the future into a Baal-like eternity.¹³

Notes

1. Brooks Atkinson, "No Time for American Drama," *The Critic* 25 (December 1966-January 1967), p. 17.
2. Doris E. Abramson, *Negro Playwrights in the American Theater 1925-59* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), p. 269.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 66-7.
4. Hallie Flanagan, *Arena* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1940), p. 3.
5. Martin Esslin, *Brecht: The Man and His Work*, revised ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1959), pp. 73-9.
6. Abramson, *Negro Playwrights in the American Theater*, p. 42.
7. Produced 19 March 1923 by the Theater Guild at the Garrick Theater, New York City. See John Gassner, ed., *Best American Plays: Supplementary Volume 1918-1958* (New York: Crown, 1961), p. 95.
8. Produced at the Provincetown Playhouse in Greenwich Village, 1920, with Charles Gilpin playing

the lead. The Provincetown Players staged O'Neill's plays in both Provincetown and New York; they represented the Little Theater Movement.

9. James V. Hatch, ed., *Black Theater USA: Forty-five Plays by Black Americans, 1847-1974* (New York: The Free Press, 1974), p. 101.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Marita Bonner, *The Purple Flower*, in *Black Theater USA*, p. 206.
12. For a full discussion of constructivism and other European dramatic modes, see Albert and Bertha Johnson, *Directing Methods* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1970), Stephen Bann, ed., *The Tradition of Constructivism* (New York: Viking, 1974), and Dieter Dube Wolf, *Expressionism*, trans. Mary Whittall (New York: Praeger, 1973).
13. Bertolt Brecht, *Baal*, in *Bertolt Brecht: Collected Plays*, ed. Ralph Manheim and John Willett (New York: Random House, 1971), pp. i-xxi and 3-58.

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Nellie McKay (essay date 1987)

SOURCE: McKay, Nellie. "What Were They Saying?": Black Women Playwrights of the Harlem Renaissance." In *The Harlem Renaissance Re-examined*, edited by Victor A. Kramer, pp. 129-47. New York: AMS Press, 1987.

[In the following excerpt, McKay praises Bonner as "a gifted writer who dared to risk extending her vision beyond the traditional limits of the writings going on around her." McKay concludes that "Bonner deserves to be recognized as a writer who made a considerable contribution to the history of black drama."]

The history of the Harlem Renaissance continues to engage both the scholars of Afro-American cultural and intellectual history and those of literary and aesthetic criticism even now, more than fifty years after that period came to an end. The impact of this brief, exciting interlude in the development of black arts and culture was sufficiently powerful to have influenced every succeeding generation of black writers and critics. In the field of literary studies, a great deal has been said and written about the period, and many of the writers who produced the works have, and rightly so, been heralded, applauded, and given the critical treatment that brings public recognition of their achievements. In our times, the names of Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay have become synonymous with the Harlem Renaissance and the development of Afro-American literature in the early twentieth century. Yet, our ability to name these writers with authority is only the beginning of our knowledge of the Afro-American literary terrain of the 1920s. More work remains to be done to bring others, no less worthy than those with whom we are familiar, into full public view.

The excitement of the Harlem Renaissance was recaptured by the scholarship that emerged in the 1960s and early 1970s. This work, consciously aggressive in its affirmation of black culture, opened up new avenues of awareness of the importance of the early period, and the self-assurance it engendered has led to dynamic revisionings of the meaning of the Afro-American experience and its relationship to the larger American society. In this new awareness, the contributions of some of the women who were prominent in the cultural and intellectual life of black America, from Phillis Wheatley in the eighteenth century to writers and thinkers up until the middle of the twentieth century, have even more recently begun to gain a measure of the merits they de-