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Anne Spencer: A Conventional, Yet Unconventional,
Harlem Renaissance Poet

John C. Anstey

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Anne Spencer: A Conventional, Yet Unconventional

Harlem Renaissance Poet

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Introduction:

Anne Spencer and the Cultural Setting of Her Poetry

Anne Bethel Scales Spencer is one of the most innovative black women poets of the Harlem Renaissance. The quality of the poetry she produced and the cultural and social circumstances under which she wrote give her an important place in literary and cultural history of early twentieth-century black America. During a time when society expected middle-class black women to maintain an image of virtuous womanhood, Anne Spencer disregarded societal pressure and wrote poems about racial and sexual injustice. She addresses the objectification of women and the confines of motherhood, and she even hints at rape in her poetry. In addition, the Lynchburg, Virginia, poet condemns slavery and shows that many Americans were indifferent to the institution. Spencer also personifies whiteness as an immense power that oppresses blacks.

“She always fought for the underdog,” said her son Chauncey Spencer in a 1995 personal interview. Her philosophy of supporting the less fortunate played a role in almost everything that she did, both inside and outside her poetry. She and her husband, Edward, were instrumental in establishing the first National Association for the Advancement of Colored People chapter in Lynchburg. They belonged to a local human relations committee which, in its desire for more positive and immediate results in alleviating racial tension, proposed affiliation with the NAACP by establishing a local chapter in the city, according to J. Lee

Greene's Time's Unfading Garden: Anne Spencer's Life and Poetry, the only complete published biography of the poet (48).

Her quest for equality caused her to wage a battle against Lynchburg's Jones Memorial Library and its "whites only" policy. Unfortunately, Spencer was not successful in integrating the library, but her efforts, according to Lynchburg's Daily Advance, led to the establishment of the city's first library for African Americans ("Biographer" 13). The library, located in a small room in the all black Dunbar School, was very modest, however, and had limited holdings. Nevertheless, Spencer spent more than twenty years there as a librarian. Over these years, she donated many of her own books to the library's collection, according to Greene (Time's 84).

Spencer's own works could probably be found on the library's shelves. During the Harlem Renaissance, her poetry appeared in such prestigious magazines as Crisis and Opportunity. Her work also appeared in anthologies compiled during the period such as James Weldon Johnson's The Book of American Negro Poetry (1922), Countee Cullen's Caroling Dusk (1927), and Alain Locke's The New Negro (1925). Unfortunately, Spencer never published a complete volume of poetry during her lifetime. She claimed to have written more than one thousand poems, but today only fifty-two can be found in Greene's biography. After her death, Spencer's garden house, where she kept most of her writing, was vandalized, and an undisclosed amount of her work was destroyed, according to biographer Lorraine Roses (298). Spencer's method of composing poetry also has made it difficult to collect a complete volume of her work. When

an idea for a poem would come to her, Spencer would pick up any object that was near her and begin writing. Chauncey Spencer said she would write on envelopes, telephone books, and even the walls of her home. In the poet's later years, well-meaning friends who would drop by to straighten up Spencer's Pierce Street home threw out many small "bits" of paper that contained Spencer's musings, according to Greene (Time's 164). Despite the absence of a complete collection of Spencer's poetry, the works that survive today exhibit the poet's mastery of words and offer insight into the period of the Harlem Renaissance--specifically, they indicate that early Harlem Renaissance women were writing protest poetry, despite societal restrictions.

During the Harlem Renaissance, which Nathan Huggins considers to be the time between World War I and the Great Depression (Wall 10), African Americans established a new way of thinking, or, to use Alain Locke's words, a "new psychology." During the Harlem Renaissance, black Americans began to shake off the stigmas of subservience and oppression left over from slavery, and began to rejoice and to give praise to themselves and to their culture. African Americans realized that the "day of 'aunties,' 'uncles,' and 'mammies' is equally gone," states Locke in his 1925 era-defining anthology The New Negro (5).

Writers and artists rejected almost everything that represented the past and a campaign for the new and untried was under way. They did embrace the African past, however, and focused on African themes in art and literature. This general climate of revolt against the past led to experimentation, especially in literature. Experiments in structure, narrative technique and language are found, in varying

degrees, in some of the era's most distinctive literary works. Writers also took traditional poetic forms, such as the sonnet, and used them in unconventional ways. For example, "If We Must Die," one of Claude McKay's most well known poems, uses the sonnet form--typically used for love poetry--to call for a militant response to racial violence.

With the exception of Anne Spencer's works, a noticeable difference exists between the male and female poets of the period--namely, males tended to write unconventional poetry while females adhered to tradition. Most male poets' attitudes about writing were summed up by Langston Hughes' statement in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain":

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter.... If colored people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter, either. (476)

The female poets of the era did not have such bold attitudes, judging from the works of Angelina Weld Grimké and Georgia Douglas Johnson. Most early Harlem Renaissance women poets tended to write conventional poetry, often resembling traditional white bourgeois nineteenth-century American and British poets, including Alfred, Lord Tennyson. They used sonnets, lyric poems, and other conventional forms. The subjects of poems by Grimké, Douglas Johnson, as well as a few works by Spencer, are similar to nineteenth-century Victorian

poets. Many of their poems explore love, death, nature, and beauty. Some of their poems about death resemble Emily Dickinson's works.

As the women poets used traditional forms and subject matter, many male poets of the Harlem Renaissance, however, strayed from traditional poetic conventions. Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, and Arna Bontemps began using dialect within their writing to show the beauty and uniqueness of the African American vernacular. They also used dialect to rebel against traditional poetic conventions. In addition, Hughes incorporated gospels and spirituals into his poetry. Countee Cullen and Claude McKay, however, used conventional forms and diction within their poetry. According to Cheryl Wall, the hesitation of women to explore non-traditional poetic forms, like dialect, has consigned women to the "Rear Guard" of the period (13). During an era in which Alain Locke claimed African Americans were "shaking off the psychology of imitation" (4), many Harlem Renaissance women poets appear too traditional and not representative of the time which Locke termed the era of "The New Negro." According to William Drake, the reluctance of Georgia Douglas Johnson, Angelina Weld Grimké and Gwendolyn Bennett to present themselves as black persons in their poetry and to draw on oral traditions causes readers to see them as "middle-class in upbringing, genteel in outlook, anxious to distance themselves . . . from the stigma of 'low' black origins" (229).

Many of Spencer's sister poets wrote traditional poetry, not by choice, but rather in an attempt to conform to societal dictates. Society relegated most of the period's female poets to the pre-World War I idea that the ideal woman poet was

supposed to be a “refined versifier,” according to Erlene Stetson. These refined versifiers or “lady poets” were forced, she contends, to give the “lyric cry of Negro Womanhood,” a class-conscious philosophy of the time which saw black women as “cultural icons who represented or perpetuated society’s values” (406). In short, how these black women acted or what they wrote about could affect all black women. For example, if Jessie Redmond Fauset wrote a poem about a woman who did not attend church services, then, applying the tenets of Negro Womanhood, one could infer that most black women did not attend church. Although viewing one poem as representative of an entire culture is illogical, many black women poets followed this philosophy of Negro Womanhood and avoided subjects that they considered damaging to the image of black women. The philosophy of Negro Womanhood evolved from the nineteenth-century concept of True Womanhood, described in Barbara Welter’s 1966 essay “The Cult of True Womanhood.” True Womanhood defined the way middle-class white women should act during the post-Civil War era until the close of the century. During the early 1900s, as white women began disregarding the antiquated code of conduct, middle-class black women embraced it, according to Cheri Ross (888).

True Womanhood and its successor Negro Womanhood advocated that women maintain the attributes of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity (Welter 152). Piety, the foremost virtue of True Womanhood, required a devout belief in Christianity. Under this principle, women were considered “helpmates” to their husbands, not equals, and their job was to serve their husbands. Purity,

the second virtue, demanded that women maintain chastity before marriage and fidelity afterwards (155). Submissiveness required that a woman obey her parents, and later her husband, without question. Although submissiveness brought suffering, they were taught to view suffering as part of their lot and obediently accept it (159). Domesticity emphasized that a woman's place was in the home and a man's place was in the world. Women were supposed to focus their energies on the home, which included housekeeping, child rearing, and any other activity that provided comfort to their families (162).

With the exception of Spencer, most of the black women poets of the period, especially those born during the nineteenth century, took seriously their role of representing black women in the most positive way possible. Such writers as Georgia Douglas Johnson, Angelina Weld Grimké, and Clarrissa Scott Delaney seem determined to establish a "lady-like" refinement within their poetry. These women appear to have been more concerned with creating aesthetically pleasing poems than they were with speaking out against racism or defining a racial identity for themselves, as were their male contemporaries. For example, Georgia Douglas Johnson preferred her poetry to reflect the "dreams and longings of the heart Somehow one suffers twice when you connect racial with world sorrow--one cross enough is a policy I adopt" (qtd. in Drake 230).

Grimké, Johnson, Dunbar-Nelson, and other Renaissance women poets not only wrote conventional poetry to adhere to Negro Womanhood; they also wrote in a refined manner in an attempt to combat negative sexual stereotypes that surrounded African American women during the 1920s. Much of society

viewed African American women as exotic, primitive, and highly sexed beings. According to bell hooks, most whites of the period believed that all black women were sexually loose regardless of their accomplishments (580). Advertisements in leading magazines of the era also reaffirmed these stereotypes. For example, a 1923 ad for Nile Queen Perfume in Crisis uses a scantily clad black woman in a suggestive pose to promote its product. “A colored woman, however, respectable, is lower than the white prostitute,” says an anonymous writer in Gerda Lerner’s Black Women in White America (167).

Nella Larsen addresses this misconception about African American women’s promiscuity in her 1928 novel Quicksand, in which the protagonist, Helga Crane, a light-skinned young black woman, becomes bored with Harlem and travels to Copenhagen, Denmark, to stay with distant relatives. During her stay in Denmark she is treated like an exotic tribal queen because of her dark skin. Her relatives also encourage her to wear exotic clothing to “enhance” her pigmentation. The Danes view her blackness as “exotic, almost savage” (78). In fact, a young portrait painter, Axel Olsen, who has asked Helga to marry him, depicts her as a sensual and primitive animal-like being in his portrait of her. “He senses a tiger, an animal within her which he wants to possess--to ravish and be ravished--through marriage if necessary,” Nathan Huggins asserts in Harlem Renaissance (158).

Other sources, in addition to Larsen’s novel, document the disrespect that black women received during the early twentieth-century. For example, Elise Johnson McDougald, a social worker in New York City, records the stereotypical

way society viewed black women in her 1925 essay “The Task of Negro Womanhood.” While the essay primarily deals with economics and social class, she addresses an invisible “mental” and “spiritual” oppression black women suffer, in addition to a visible economic oppression. McDougald claims that black women are not recognized or thought about when the idea of beauty is defined, particularly in the arts. “Instead,” McDougald writes, “the grotesque Aunt Jemimas of the streetcar advertisements, proclaim only an ability to serve without grace or loveliness” (369). No form of drama illuminates the good qualities of black women; moreover, black women are used for the purpose of ridicule or to depict “female viciousness or vulgarity.” McDougald goes on to say that these descriptions were all too familiar to African Americans at the time (370).

Although the majority of Harlem Renaissance women poets wrote about conventional subjects to adhere to the tenets of Negro Womanhood or to combat such negative stereotypes as McDougald describes, some wrote an occasional non-traditional poem. Angelina Weld Grimké explores the daring topic of love between two women in her lesbian love poem “A Mona Lisa.” Jessie Redmond Fauset addresses interracial relationships in “Touché,” and Alice Dunbar-Nelson discusses female passivity in “I Sit and Sew.” But these poems are exceptions to larger collections of conventional works.

Anne Spencer, however, writes more than an occasional unconventional poem. Some of her works such as “Life Long Poor Browning” are traditional, and some of Spencer’s themes, specifically her themes of escape, adhere to the tenets

of Negro Womanhood. But beyond her sheath of conventional poems, Spencer addresses themes of women's freedom and racial oppression. Through poems such as "White Things" and "The Sevignes," she develops themes of racial freedom. Such poems as "Before the Feast at Shushan" and "The Lemming: O' Sweden" discuss gender-based discrimination. She also examines the objectification of women in several of her poems. Spencer even discusses physical attraction in "Lines to a Nasturtium." And other poems such as "Innocence" and "Neighbors" address gossipy, meddling neighbors. Anne Spencer disregards poetic conventions and explores non-traditional topics within her poetry, showing that not all Harlem Renaissance women poets adhered to the tenets of Negro Womanhood and traditional subject matter.

Chapter 1

A Mix of the Conventional and Unconventional

To present Anne Spencer exclusively as a protest poet would be to depict this Harlem Renaissance woman and her work inaccurately. Although Spencer wrote topical poems, she also wrote some conventional poetry. "Life-Long, Poor Browning" stands out as Spencer's most conventional work. This poem, which suggests that English poet Robert Browning never knew heaven because he never saw the beauty of Virginia in springtime, shows what a learned poet Spencer was and establishes her range as a writer. Several of Spencer's other traditional poems contain themes of escape, in which individuals escape a harsh mortal world to enter an ideal eternal world.

But a doubleness exists in Spencer's escape poems. Unconventional topics or unconventional literary techniques underlie these seemingly aesthetic works. In "Substitution," Spencer uses conventionality as a mask to describe a criminal trial. Spencer's "At the Carnival" also extends beyond traditional poetic dicta to reveal a woman who is trapped by the world's gaze. The poem "Ascetic," whose speaker wishes to die to escape life, employs masking, a device found in many African American works to disguise one's true feelings. Spencer also lapses from traditional subject matter to discuss such subjects as jealousy, pride, and destructive physical attraction.

In her most traditional work, "Life-Long, Poor Browning," Spencer laments that the English poet was never able to see the splendor of Virginia

before his death. The beautiful images that she creates in the poem attest to her poetic worth and give basis to why critics such as Margaret Perry call Spencer a “superior” poet (129). From the “soberly, sedately enchanneled” waterways in line six to the “fine-laced vines” in line sixteen, Spencer develops a poem that is comparable in form and diction to the work of Browning himself. Her poem resembles Browning’s “The Last Ride Together,” in which the speaker takes a final horseback ride through the countryside with his mistress. Spencer’s poem depicts “heaven” as the Virginia countryside, while Browning shows “heaven” through a beautiful woman.

Besides being a beautiful, well-crafted poem, this traditional work shows how learned Spencer was. The form of Spencer’s poem resembles a Shakespearean sonnet except for its extra quatrain. The poem contains quatrains rhyming abab cdcd efef ghgh and a concluding rhyming couplet. The work’s sense of order can be compared to the neat hedge rows and sedges described within the poem. Her diction is sophisticated, and she uses complex syntactical structures, including the use of nouns to modify other nouns. For example, in line four she uses the noun “pomander,” a mixture of aromatic substances, to describe a walkway: “Clipt yews, Pomander Walks, and pleached alleys / Primroses, prim indeed, in quiet ordered hedges.” Her allusions also show her intelligence. In line three, she alludes to scientist and mathematician Euclid when depicting asymmetrical evergreen shrubs. Arguably, she challenges the negative stereotypes associated with black women by showing her intellect. During the

1920s, as Donald Petesch notes, many employers doubted the intelligence of blacks and often questioned the degrees of college-educated black women (xxix).

“Life-Long, Poor Browning” also shows Spencer’s range as a poet: she transcends topical subject matter to address other, less divisive issues. The poem describes the beauty of Virginia, a state that once enslaved Spencer’s grandmother. Many Harlem Renaissance male writers depict the South in derogatory terms, as a place of brutality. For example, in Langston Hughes’ “Song For A Dark Girl,” Hughes describes the Southern landscape as “gnarled” and “naked,” a place that hung a “black young lover / To a cross roads tree.” Spencer offers another more pleasing perspective of the South, one that enriches and expands our appreciation of her as a poet.

Spencer’s escape poems also expand our appreciation for her as a poet. At first glance, she resembles other black women of the period and their philosophy of avoiding unpleasant subjects because she often writes about escape within many of her poems. But her escape poems go beyond this basic theme--most contain a double meaning. Her 1925 sonnet “Substitution” explores the notion of mentally leaving a harsh human world and entering into a distant imaginary world. The poem makes the reader ponder the meaning of life and reality. Line one asks: “Is Life itself but many ways of thought.” The speaker of the sonnet uses thoughts to escape a “noisy peopled room / . . . Of brick and frame to moonlight garden bloom.” The poem’s speaker mentally leaves a suffocating room full of people and escapes to walk within a garden where a higher being advises her always to maintain a mental place of escape.

On the surface, this poem seems simple: a woman escapes unpleasantness through daydreaming. The poem, however, is more than a simple escape from reality, especially when one asks from what the speaker is escaping. According to Greene, Spencer based “Substitution” on a criminal trial she attended in which a black minister faced murder charges (*Time’s* 100). Unfortunately, more details about the trial, including its outcome, are unavailable. The crowded room the speaker escapes from is actually a courtroom. Here Spencer uses conventional poetry as a mask to discuss an unconventional subject.

Some thirty years later, Gwendolyn Brooks used masking to present an unconventional subject in “A Bronzeville Mother.” This free verse poem, which was based on a 1955 murder of a black boy in Mississippi, depicts the scene of the killer’s home the morning after his acquittal. Like Spencer, without specifically mentioning the trial or the murder, Brooks creates a sense of dramatic tension within the work. The dead young boy is referred to as the “Dark Villain” and the killer ironically is called the “Fine Prince.” Both Spencer’s and Brooks’ poems contain a sense of doubleness, a consciousness of the reader’s own role in the works. Readers must closely analyze the poems to discover the messages the poets are conveying. Critic Stanley Fish refers to this technique as “reader harassment,” a device in which the reader’s own values are illuminated by the subject (qtd. in Melhem 63).

This technique of reader harassment makes Spencer stand out among her conventional peers. Based on Fish’s concept, Spencer harasses her readers because she supplies them with a minimum amount of information and expects

them to discover the double meaning contained in the poem. This technique not only confounds readers, but it also challenges them, since a clear reading of the work is not readily available. Readers often undergo an exhaustive mental search for the meaning of the work. In the process, they bring their own values and conclusions to the piece of literature. This bold and innovative technique illuminates Spencer's non-traditional side. Most traditional early Harlem Renaissance women poets would never dream of "harassing" their readers.

The two-sidedness of Spencer's poem "Substitution" also connects it to W.E.B. DuBois' concept of double consciousness, outlined in his 1903 book, The Souls of Black Folk. DuBois used the term double consciousness to address the identity problems that many blacks faced from being black and American in the early 1900s:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unrestricted strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body . . . (365)

"Substitution" demonstrates this "two-ness." On one hand, the poem appears to read like any other conventional work. Arguably, since the work seems to avoid racial topics, the poem could be considered "American," available for all to discover a universal meaning, not just a racial meaning. Once the trial information is revealed, the poem exposes a unique racial side, one that makes

the reader think of an unjust, racially biased courtroom hearing. During the early twentieth century, blacks in America, falling between states of being American and Negro, found themselves with an identity crisis: whether to express their American selves or their Negro selves. Spencer appears to fulfill both aspects of this double consciousness. Until the trial information comes forward, the poem appears “American.” Once that information is revealed, the poem shows the conscience of a black writer, one who wishes to express the hardship her race has endured.

“Ascetic,” an eight-line poem with alternating end rhyme, also contains an escape motif. The work expresses the idea of ridding oneself of pain and suffering through death. This short poem, which Spencer enclosed in a May 8, 1924, letter to James Weldon Johnson and never published (Greene, *Time’s* 76), contains a speaker who pleads with God for death. Spencer goes beyond a simple plea for death to end suffering, though. She fills these eight lines with opposing ideas, like strength and frailty, and the notion of doing the opposite of what someone else wishes. In the first stanza, the speaker questions whether, if she wishes to live, God will allow her to die. These opposing ideas continue into the second stanza:

If I love but lose,
 If I laugh . . . but cry
 Full my deeper cruse,
 Willst Thou let me die?

In these lines, the speaker asks the Lord if he will allow her to die if she pretends to love what she hates and if she pretends to be happy in her harsh life. Through death she could escape her difficult life on earth.

Again, Spencer takes a traditional poem beyond the conventional. These opposing ideas that she uses in “Ascetic” are based on the technique of masking, a practice once used by slaves to disguise their true feelings. Donald Petesch describes masking as acting or role playing for others (70). Most slave narratives contain masking and reveal how slaves maintain “public” faces around whites and “private” faces among themselves (75). Frederick Douglass’ Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass recounts the story of one slave, who did not disguise his feelings for his master and who was ““immediately chained and handcuffed; and thus, without a moment’s warning, he was snatched away”” (18). In “Ascetic,” the poem’s speaker is willing to wear a mask of either happiness or sadness to convince her master--God--to let her die.

“Ascetic” also contains elements from blues music, making the poem a distinctively African American work. Like the spiritual, blues reaches inward to the very core of African American life, according to Graeme Boone (84). Spencer’s poem “Ascetic” could double as a verse from a blues song, especially given the poem’s intensity of expression. Line six intimates the common theme of “laughing to keep from crying,” found in many blues songs during the 1920s. Besides Spencer, Zora Neale Hurston, Sterling A. Brown, and Langston Hughes use elements of blues language and images in their writings. Hughes’ poem “The Weary Blues” is probably best known for its fusing of blues style and poetic form

(Boone 86). Through the use of blues elements in “Ascetic,” Spencer develops a distinct African American identity within her work that links her solidly to the Harlem Renaissance. The blues-like quality of the poem once again shows her non-traditional style and distinguishes her from conventional Harlem Renaissance women poets.

Spencer also employs an escape motif in one of her earliest poems, “At the Carnival,” published in James Weldon Johnson’s The Book of American Negro Poetry (1922). Instead of using daydreams to avoid harshness, as she does in “Substitution,” Spencer creates powerful images of beauty to combat ugliness. The “Gay little Girl-of-the Diving Tank” with her “radiant inclusive smile” washes away the ugliness of Spencer’s traveling carnival. The young, innocent carnival worker prevails over the “bull-necked man” and the “unholy” scent of the “sausage and garlic booth.” She redeems and dignifies a world of “games of chance” and the grotesqueness of a booth that contains a “quivering female thing.” Spencer refers to her as the “Gleaming Girl” and attributes to her Savior-like qualities; she describes her in line thirty-one as “intimately pure and free.” In line thirty-five, the speaker of the poem cries forth to the young girl that the “blind crowd” at the carnival needs her goodness and her beauty: “We need you,” pleads the speaker. Without her, the poem would be devoid of beauty and only contain the gross images of the traveling show. Spencer’s use of beauty to subvert ugliness links the poem to the conventions of Negro Womanhood and its philosophy of avoiding subjects that would be damaging to black women.

“At the Carnival” also has a non-traditional side, however. Another way of interpreting the poem would be to see the “Gay little Girl-of-the Diving Tank” not as a savior but as someone who is trapped within this horrible world of amusement. According to Margaret Perry, author of Silence of the Drums, the young girl probably will fall prey to the “human failings” of those around her (131). In fact, the poem’s speaker asks Neptune in line fifty to rescue her. Apart from the speaker’s imagination, the “Gay little Girl-of-the Diving Tank” still remains within this world of the “bull-necked” man and the “limousine lady.” In addition, as a circus performer, she is trapped by the gaze of her viewers, performing only what they want to see. Here the poem touches on the objectification of women. The carnival attendees see the young high-diver, not as a person, but as something that is there for their pleasure. During the early twentieth century, since slavery had been abolished only a few decades before, many whites continued to treat blacks, especially women, as objects.

Beyond Spencer’s escape poems lies a small collection of works that are not quite protest pieces, yet they are not purely conventional either. Within these works, she addresses such topics as jealousy, pride and destructive physical attraction--subjects which were considered unacceptable by most middle-class black women of the day. Spencer explores the issues of jealousy and pride within “Innocence,” an eight-line poem that describes a well-known community woman who makes a mistake, because she “fell against a star,” and as a result, her neighbors are happy and have “lusted” for her fall. Once she commits this undisclosed act, pride overpowers her, and she feels as if she is as low as the

villagers within her town: “Fallen but once the lower felt she.” The woman, who now has less community respect, cannot bear the thought of her tarnished image or of her “hounding” neighbors, and she kills herself. The poem returns to the woman’s original mistake or misjudgment and closes with the image of a “star lance” in her side. What Spencer wishes to impart to the reader is that this woman’s vengeful neighbors drove her to her death. The non-traditional side of this poem can be seen from Spencer’s indirect condemnation of judgmental, holier-than-thou neighbors.

Spencer again strays from traditional subject matter and writes about villainous neighbors in her short 1925 poem “Neighbors.” These four brief lines characterize similar “hounding” neighbors that are also present in “Innocence”:

Ah, you are cruel
 You ask too much;
 Offered a hand, a finger tip,
 You must have a soul to clutch.

Spencer bases the notion of these “cruel” and “clutch[ing]” neighbors on her own experience with judgmental, gossipy neighbors in Lynchburg, Virginia, according to Chauncey Spencer. The poet’s expression of her own individual freedom and fight against segregation often caused much talk around Spencer’s community. In protest of Jim Crow laws, Spencer would not ride segregated public transportation. To get to her librarian job at Dunbar School and to travel around town, she often would ride on the back of grocery wagons or ride up front with the male drivers. Spencer’s neighbors thought her actions scandalous, and some

neighbors went so far as to label the happily married mother a “loose” woman. J. Lee Greene concludes in Time’s Unfading Garden that Spencer, who read Emerson and other Transcendentalists, did many of the these “unconventional” acts to demonstrate her freedom as a human being (89). Spencer’s disregard of societal conventions caused Greene to label her an “unreformed social heretic” (“Biographer” 13).

In “Lines To A Nasturtium,” this “social heretic” uses nature to show the flaw of loving someone solely because of the person’s beauty. Although “Lines To A Nasturtium” can be viewed as a traditional poem that describes nature’s splendor, Spencer’s concept of destructive physical attraction strays outside the bounds of conventional poetry. In “Lines To A Nasturtium,” subtitled “A Lover Muses,” she compares the beauty of an ornamental flower, a nasturtium, to the beauty of a woman. Spencer establishes that physical attraction is transitory and potentially destructive. In the first stanza, a bee, attracted by the flower’s beauty, flies into the “flaming heart” of the nasturtium and the speaker describes “crisp, crinkled laughter / As the furies tore him apart.” A small hummingbird also looks into the “startled depths” of the flower, sees a terrible sight and flees, leaving the “stricken air waves drumming in his flight.” Both the bee and the hummingbird are initially attracted to the flower’s beauty, but once they come close to the nasturtium they each experience the destructiveness contained within the beautiful flower.

Spencer’s use of nature in the poem to describe the destructiveness of love based solely on physical beauty contrasts with the way most Harlem Renaissance

women poets use natural imagery. Many Harlem Renaissance women use nature to create romantic images of love. For example, Angelina Weld Grimké uses natural imagery in “When Green Lies Over The Earth” to describe the beauty of a former love. In the poem, singing “little birds” fly over the lover’s head and “gold-hearted daisies” bloom at the lover’s feet. Spencer departs from these positive images of nature and thus from the conventions of the day.

In the second stanza of the poem, Spencer further departs from conventionality as she writes that she knows a woman like the flower, whose beauty was “born in vain.” Spencer describes the woman’s external features as most Harlem Renaissance women poets would: with pleasing terminology. Her hair is like the “setting sun,” her eyes are like “rising stars[s],” and her motions as “gracious as reeds by Babylon.” But Spencer’s description of the woman’s internal self is not as pleasing. The poem states that the woman’s heart contains the same “furies” that the nasturtium has, the same fierceness that destroys the bee and frightens the bird. To suggest that this woman has a hardened heart goes against the philosophical ideals on which Harlem Renaissance women poets based their poetry. In short, Spencer presents a flawed woman during a time when black women were writing beautiful poems in an attempt to elevate their status from that of coarse women to elegant ladies.

“Lines To A Nasturtium” is like several of Spencer’s other poems that appear to be conventional but contain unconventional subjects or ideas. Spencer’s escape poems, in which individuals escape an ugly mortal world to enter an ideal eternal world, follow a similar pattern. On the surface, the works

seem to be traditional in nature, but beneath the surface of these poems lie untraditional topics. Like Gwendolyn Brooks, Spencer uses her seemingly traditional poem "Substitution" to address a criminal trial. Her escape poem "Ascetic" contains elements from blues music and masking, a practice once used by slaves to hide their true feelings from their masters. The use of these literary devices moves the work outside the realm of conventional poetry and establishes that Spencer was writing non-traditional poetry, especially when she adheres to DuBois' concept of double consciousness. Another of Spencer's poems, "At the Carnival," uses beautiful imagery to subvert the ugliness of a traveling circus, yet shows a young girl who is trapped in this world of amusement. Spencer also strays from conventional subject matter when she addresses pride, jealousy, and destructive physical attraction in "Innocence," "Neighbors," and "Lines To A Nasturtium," respectively. Spencer's themes of women's freedom, discussed in the following chapter, deviate even farther from traditional poetic dicta than the preceding poems.

Chapter 2

Beyond the Conventional: Feminist Themes

Anne Spencer moves farther beyond the boundaries of conventional poetry than her attacks on vicious neighbors as she explores the issue of women's freedom in her feminist poems. Her discussion of women's freedom places her outside the realm of traditional poetry and further establishes her as a Harlem Renaissance woman writing protest works. "Before the Feast at Shushan," "Letter to My Sister," "The Lemming O' Sweden," and "Po' Little Lib" all address gender-based prejudice. Spencer looks at male/female relationships within these poems and illuminates how women often suffer emotional, physical and sometimes sexual, injustice from men.

Spencer's views of women's freedom were far more advanced than those of most black women of the early 1920s. The black magazines of the day reveal that black women saw themselves in traditional roles: as homemakers, as child-bearers and as wives. The Messenger, a socialist magazine edited by A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, ran a monthly symposium for several years entitled "Negro Womanhood's Greatest Needs" and solicited responses from readers. While few contributors stressed the importance of women being on par with men socially, professionally and economically, the overwhelming majority emphasized that a woman's place was in the home. According to Mrs. Ella Phillips Stewart's 1927 editorial, a woman's duty was "to cling to the home

[since] great men and women evolve from the environment of the hearthstone” (109).

Stewart, a resident of Toledo, Ohio, goes on to address the issue of “Negro Womanhood’s Greatest Needs” in her editorial:

The greatest need of our womanhood of today is to train them to make intelligent and efficient homemakers. The actual teaching should begin in the early adolescent when she has her first comprehension of sex The real art of homemaking is to have contentment at home, making the home so attractive and pleasant that the members of the household prefer spending their evenings at home rather than on the street corners, pool rooms, dance halls or other unsavory hangouts. (109)

One of the most telling entries came from an anonymous woman who wrote about racial freedom. While she attempts to address this topic, she reveals that she views herself only in relationship to the black man:

Upon her shoulders rest the big task to create and keep alive, in the breast of black men, a holy and consuming passion to break with the slave traditions of the past; to spurn and overcome the fatal, insidious inferiority complex of the present, which . . . bobs up ever and anon, to arrest the progress of the New Negro Manhood Movement; and to fight with increasing vigor, with dauntless courage, unrelenting zeal and intelligent vision for the attainment

of the stature of a full man, a free race and a new world. ("New Negro Woman" 757)

She implies that men are the only ones fighting for racial freedom and that women need only provide emotional support to them. In addition, she does not see the era of the 1920s as the "New Negro Movement"; instead, she sees it as the "New Negro Manhood Movement," implying that this time of social change was for men only, not women.

Spencer's views of women's roles in society differed greatly from those held by these women and by other women of the day. She supported women's equality and detested any form of societal restrictions or gender-based discrimination against women. "She fought for every woman's rights and freedom," according to Chauncey Spencer, referring not only to his mother's poetry but also to her community role as an advocate of women's freedom. Perhaps Spencer's interest in women's freedom stemmed from her childhood experiences with male domination. Much like the women in her poems, Anne Spencer's mother, Sarah Louise Scales, faced domination from her husband, Joel Cephus Bannister, who would not allow his wife any personal freedom. Anne Spencer's personal notebooks state that her father would not let her mother work or even handle money (Greene, Time's 7).

In addition to dominating his wife's life, Banister also exploited Spencer when she was only a toddler. At his bar in Martinsville, Virginia, he would use her to entertain the customers. She would parade across the top of the bar counter and the bar patrons would give her change for her "performances." The

mistreatment of mother and daughter led to the couple's eventual separation (Greene, Time's 8). Spencer's first published poem, "Before the Feast at Shushan," reflects a situation of male dominance similar to the one Anne and her mother faced with Joel Cephus Bannister. The poem, printed in the February 1920 edition of Crisis, expresses the theme of women's freedom. This dramatic monologue presents a king who neither appreciates nor respects his wife; moreover, he treats his wife as an object rather than as a human being.

Spencer based the poem on the Old Testament Book of Esther, in which King Ahasuerus issues an order for his wife, Queen Vashti, to appear at a court party so that he may display her beauty before his guests. According to the book of Esther, Vashti refuses to obey the king's royal order, and he fears that "the queen's conduct will become known to all women, and they will look with disdain upon their husbands" (2 Esth. 1.17). After consulting with his court officials, the king issues a decree across all of Persia that all wives must honor their husbands.

Spencer uses this biblical-based poem to show a woman--a queen no less--who is trapped in a male-dominated relationship. Although we never hear Queen Vashti speak--a technique Spencer uses to further convey the man's dominance over his wife--we hear her ideas about women's freedom through the King's dramatic monologue. In the biblical passage Vashti's thoughts are not addressed. Through his discourse, we find out that the queen wishes to be treated as an equal by her husband, someone who is not summoned to appear like a servant. She explains that they should, after all, be equals as husband and wife because they

have gone through the sacrament of marriage and are equal in God's eyes. The King, however, rejects such talk: "Have him 'maze how you say love is sacrament / How says Vashti, love is both bread and wine." He refuses to recognize marriage as a sacrament. If he does, he loses control of their relationship. Therefore, he dismisses her sacramental "bread and wine" comparison to regain control of the situation. He says he does not like bread but he likes meat, and he emphasizes that when he wants meat or wine he gets it:

I, thy lord, like not manna for meat as a Judahn;

I, thy master, drink, and red wine, plenty, and when

I thirst. Eat meat, and full, when I hunger.

I, thy King, teach you and leave you when I list.

In these lines, he dismisses Vashti's comparison of "bread and wine" to marriage, and he dismisses any notion that he and his wife are equal partners. King Ahasuerus sees himself not only as king of Persia but as king of their relationship. When speaking to Vashti, he refers to himself as "thy lord," "thy master," and "thy King."

The above lines also contain double entendre. While the King refers to meat and wine in this quotation, his language is sensual and suggestive.

Furthermore, he equates Vashti with the meat and wine. Like the food and drink, he sees his wife as something that exists only for his fulfillment. In the closing of his monologue, he says just that: "Love is but desire and thy purpose fulfillment / I, thy King, so say!" The King views his wife not as a human being; rather he views her as an object.

In comparing the King's jaded view of love with, for example, how Georgia Douglas Johnson treats the topic in her 1918 poem "A Fantasy," one can see that Spencer is more overtly feminist than Johnson. In "A Fantasy," Johnson depicts an idealized version of love, in which a young lover pines away for another. The female speaker recites a "lyric of my love" into the wind and waits for an "answering song to mine." Spencer's "Before the Feast at Shushan" depicts a relationship between a man and a woman that has failed, a relationship in which the woman is treated as property rather than as a human being. In Spencer's poem, there is no such thing as love, only sexual desire. Spencer also hints in the poem at a disturbing image of sexual violence against the queen. The King compares Vashti to a rose and questions, "And I am hard to force the petals wide." The imagery of the flower being forced open conjures up the idea of rape. Despite the subtlety of Spencer's imagery, her reference makes readers contemplate the violent act against women.

Spencer's "Letter to My Sister" also deals with male/female relationships. Because Spencer had no biological sister, the implication is that "Letter to My Sister" is written to all women of "kindred spirit," as T. J. Bryan speculates (108). The poem offers advice on how to deal with dominating men. A female voice speaks forth in "Letter to My Sister" telling women to be careful in their relations with men. The poem outlines the dangers that women face if they "defy the gods." Spencer employs the term "gods" to denote "men," not higher beings. The lowercase use of the word "gods" expresses sarcasm towards men who view themselves as "Gods" and who wish to be treated accordingly. Her use of "god"

to refer to men is reminiscent of the way King Ahasuerus refers to himself as “master” and “lord” in “Before the Feast at Shushan.”

The poem expresses women’s vulnerability to male power. Spencer’s advocacy for women has led writers such as Gloria Hull to describe her as “most modern in her predilection for casting herself into roles, her sense of womankind and her female identity” (13). “Letter to My Sister” depicts men as fickle creatures who dominate women. The poem also outlines the danger of a woman’s “stepping out of line” in front of a man. Line two of the work states that it is perilous for women to speak freely or else the “gods” may feel “taunted” by the “tongue’s thin lip.” Equal risk comes if a woman “struts in the weakness of mere humanity.” Or simply put, it is dangerous for women to gloat at men’s weaknesses or inabilities. Danger is also present if women challenge men and draw a line “daring them to cross.” The poem expresses men’s immense power over women and uses destructive images to depict this power. In line six, these “gods” possess “searing lightning” and “drowning waters.” Spencer portrays men as massive powers that crush anything within their path. A powerful male force, “a Juggernaut / Passing over . . . over . . .,” surrounds women at all times. The repetition of the phrase “over . . . over . . .” further creates an ominous impression of men’s destructive powers as gods.

“Letter to My Sister” insists that no woman is safe from the forces of male domination. Spencer suggests that regardless of a woman’s beauty or marital status, men still dominate women; Ahasuerus allowed Vashti, his wife and queen, no freedom. The female speaker of “Letter to My Sister” says that the situation is

equally bad if women succumb to their fears and “mince timidly / Dodg[ing] this way or that.” The work presents a female’s interaction with a man as a problematic situation: a woman is not safe if she rebukes a man nor is she safe if she “mince[s] timidly.” The tone of the poem is pessimistic and emphasizes that women cannot escape the wrath of men.

After the speaker describes the force and power of these “gods,” she becomes instructive and devotes the third and final stanza to advising women how to survive within the same world as the “gods.” “Lock your heart,” advises the speaker, and then no one may “peer within.” In short, women should close themselves off from the rest of the world, sealing in all emotion, thus allowing for no self-expression. She counsels that they should maintain reserve and aloofness at all times. “Light no lamp . . .” or “Raise no shade . . .,” the poem cautions. Lastly and paradoxically, women must breathe in a “breathless” fashion. Here Spencer conveys the extremes women must go to in order to survive the wrath of the “gods.” A single, almost silent breath could disturb and evoke anger from these “higher beings.”

Spencer continues her exploration of male/female relations within “The Lemming: O Sweden.” She sets the poem up as a conversation between a man and a woman. The poem begins in the middle of the man’s dialogue: “. . . but,” he said, ‘you just don’t / understand politics, no woman ever does.’” Through these two opening lines, Spencer immediately establishes the chauvinism of the male speaker, who assumes no woman comprehends government affairs. He continues his discourse and refers to all women as the “Eves of this world.”

Through the term “Eve,” referring to the first woman and the wife of Adam, the speaker creates a negative image of women, associating all women with the one who, according to Old Testament mythology, was first tempted by evil and caused the fall of humankind. In addition, the man argues that these “Eves” go through life as if it were a game, and every part of this game must revolve around women personally, or as he says, contain the equation “I-Me-Mine.”

When the woman has her chance to speak in the second stanza, she tells the man his way of thinking is very outdated: “Sir, you are very old academy.” This outspoken woman tells him he has no “new sense” or new ideas, and that he speaks only in antiquated “cliches when our earth was square.” Her comments are accurate: the man has a very outmoded way of thinking and speaks only in worn-out phrases. Her response demonstrates her ability to reason as she analyzes the man’s rhetoric and points out the flaws in his logic.

Spencer’s speaker, who uses language to confront the chauvinistic man, resembles the women that Joanne Braxton examines in Black Women Writing Autobiography. According to Braxton, women use “verbal warfare as forms of rebellion” (30-31). She examines how women use “sass,” impudent speech, in slave narratives to achieve power over men. The language of Spencer’s speaker is comparable to that of Harriet Jacobs, who uses words to gain psychological strength over her master in her autobiographical Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Spencer’s use of this literary technique, “sass,” adds to her non-traditional flair and further removes her from the dicta of Negro Womanhood and conventional poetry.

In another poem, "Po' Little Lib," Spencer examines the individual freedom of mothers. Through the use of a spider, Spencer affirms that women cannot be completely free so long as the female has the job of producing children. Although Spencer was a strong fighter for women's equality, she believed that men and women could not be physically, socially, or economically equal since women have the biological role of having children, according to Greene (Time's 147). Spencer does not imply inferiority of either sex because women produce children. She maintains, however, that mothers face more responsibilities and are more confined to the home than men. She expresses this concept of reduced freedom through motherhood as the speaker in "Po' Little Lib" watches a tiny spider walk through the grass. The speaker hopes the spider will run to freedom and leave child-bearing behind:

Run, escape, wee one you are free . . .
 How delicately she re-knits her vast pain
 Chance did set her free
 What bound her again?

Spencer makes the reader aware that women are the ones who face the confining task of carrying and caring for children. Line nine intimates some resentment as the poem describes readying a new web for child-bearing as "pain" for the spider. Spencer conveys that the role of mother as childbearer and parent is not always easy and that motherhood can often be painful, both physically and emotionally.

"Po' Little Lib," originally entitled "Tragedy," creates a confining image of maternity through language that connotes bondage. The speaker encourages,

almost exhorts, the spider to “run, escape” and set herself free. Each line within the final stanza refers to freedom or to bondage directly, and line nine indirectly produces the image of confinement through the spider’s web itself. As a mother spider is confined to her web, many women are confined to their homes to look after children. “Her femaleness binds,” Spencer told Greene in a 1974 interview (qtd. in *Time’s* 147).

Like the spider’s web, children can entangle a woman’s life and limit her freedom. During the early twentieth-century, as William Drake points out, children posed a greater hindrance to a woman’s independence than a husband did (151). Whereas a husband could be divorced, a mother could not simply abandon children, especially since the traditional woman’s role was to care for the children. The title of Spencer’s poem, “Po’ Little Lib,” may have been Spencer’s attempt at word play to create a shortened form of “little liberation,” thus tying in with the overall theme of the poem. Like Adrienne Rich, Spencer questions the confines of motherhood, yet she did so in the 1920s. The thought that Spencer would even imply that motherhood was unfavorable sets “Po’ Little Lib” outside of the philosophy of *Negro Womanhood* and distinguishes Spencer from the conventional women poets of the Harlem Renaissance. Being a good mother was one of the chief tenets of *Negro Womanhood*, yet Spencer rejects this practice in her poetry, despite the fact that she was a mother of three children.

Spencer’s view of motherhood especially contrasts with Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s view of childbearing. Dunbar-Nelson, a member of this group of early Harlem Renaissance women poets, was in favor of women staying at home and

having numerous children. She wrote a lengthy essay, “Woman’s Most Serious Problem,” in the March 1927 edition of The Messenger asking black women to “give pause” because the birth rate of black children had dropped significantly since the nineteenth century: “For this is a most serious crisis.” Dunbar-Nelson attributed the decline in births to women working outside the home: “The inevitable disruption of family life necessitated by the woman being a co-wage earner with the man has discouraged the Negro woman from child-bearing” (754).

While Spencer wants women to escape childbirth and the confinements of the home, Dunbar-Nelson wants just the opposite. She urges women to maintain their traditional roles as mothers and housekeepers. Women who express their freedom and take jobs outside the home are doing so at the expense of their families, according to Dunbar-Nelson. She describes the grim life of a child whose mother works:

For a child to rise in the morning after both parents are gone, get itself an indifferent breakfast, go to school uncared for, lunch on a penny’s worth of sweets, and return to a cold and cheerless house or apartment to await the return of a jaded and fatigued mother to get supper is not conducive to sweetness and light in its behavior.
(754)

In addition, she puts childbirth above social and political issues of the day. She feels young people have become too concerned with the “topic of the New Negro,” and as a result, they have lost sight of raising and caring for children:

Perhaps they may turn their attention from these race-loving slips
 of girls and slim ardent youths who make hot-eyed speeches about
 the freedom of the individual and the rights of the Negro to the fact
 that at the rate we are going the Negro will become more and more
 negligible in the life of the nation. (755)

To Dunbar-Nelson, raising children was more important than making speeches
 for racial change. She points out, however, that fewer children ultimately will
 cause the race to lose clout in its fight for equality.

Although Dunbar-Nelson was adamant about women having children,
 some of her other traditional sister poets devoted a few poems to abstaining from
 childbirth. Their works centered not on feminist issues, but on the cold reality
 that the world was a tough place--one in which children would experience
 undeserved suffering. They advocated not having children to spare the young
 from hardship. Georgia Douglas Johnson explored this theme in several of her
 poems contained in Bronze, a 1922 collection of poetry. "Maternity" is one
 example: "I cannot say with surety / That I am happy thus to be / Responsible for
 this young life's embarking." In Johnson's "Black Woman," the speaker wishes
 to turn back the birth of her child because the world is filled with monstrous men,
 like the men in Spencer's "Letter to My Sister":

You do not know the monster men
 Inhabiting the earth,
 Be still, be still, my precious child,
 I must not give you birth.

Johnson's poems address abstaining from childbirth, not for the sake of women's freedom but for the sake of the child. Spencer's "Po' Little Lib," however, focuses on the freedom of the mother without regard to the children. Like Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin's The Awakening, the speaker in Spencer's poem views motherhood as a bondage that no woman should endure. Johnson was thinking like a traditional, concerned mother in her poems, while Spencer was thinking like an advocate for women's freedom in "Po' Little Lib." The difference between these two women's poems shows how Spencer uses non-traditional themes in her poetry, while Johnson and many of her counterparts maintain traditional poetic conventions. For different reasons, however, both poets advocate abstaining from motherhood, unlike Dunbar-Nelson, who is adamant about women having children.

Whether Spencer is addressing the confines of motherhood or the abuses that women suffer at the hands of men, something unites all of these issues together: strong women and the concept of women's independence. The ideas that the women in Spencer's poems have are far more radical than the thoughts of most black women of the 1920s, especially when compared to primary sources of the day such as the women's editorials contained in The Messenger. Most women concerned themselves with traditional roles such as child-bearing and housekeeping. Primary sources show that women mainly concern themselves with homemaking and supporting their husbands' needs. Spencer's women, however, confront sexual abuse, discrimination and a number of other injustices

that women face. Through her feminist poems, Spencer differentiates herself from the traditional women writers of the early Harlem Renaissance.

Chapter 3

Spencer Speaks of Racial Injustice

Anne Spencer's racial protest poems move farther beyond the boundaries of conventional poetry by women during the period of the Harlem Renaissance than do her feminist poems. She writes about racial issues ranging from the destructiveness of white society to the mistreatment of slaves. Many of the literary techniques that she uses in these poems, including the reversal of black and white color imagery, are similar to the non-traditional male poets of the era. Her poem "Lady, Lady" pays tribute to a black washerwoman, illuminating the beauty of a simple household worker. The poem also critiques sexual and racial oppression. In "The Sevignes," Spencer depicts the hypocrisy of nineteenth-century French-American immigrants who owned slaves in Louisiana. She explores the notion of a universal African ancestry in "Grapes: Still Life" and rebukes those who deny this heritage. Once again, Spencer breaks from convention. This time, she explores the controversial subjects of race and racial injustice within her poetry.

In "Lady, Lady," Spencer pays tribute to a woman who has spent her entire life working for others. The subject of Spencer's poem, a washerwoman, is far removed from the elegance or grace associated with the topics found in many of her sister poets' works. According to T. J. Bryan, Spencer's exploration of a socially insignificant working woman places Spencer and the poem "solidly within the Harlem Renaissance," when poems praising everyday black people

flourished (108). But these poems were primarily by male writers, not by other female poets.

Spencer's description of the woman's blackness also typifies Harlem Renaissance poetry and connects Spencer to many of the unconventional male writers of the period who depict the beauty and pride associated with dark skin. Spencer compares the washerwoman's dark face to a "night withholding a star." Through this natural imagery, she develops a soothing, pleasing image of the woman's blackness and contrasts it with traditional negative associations of the color black. Langston Hughes also develops an affirmative image of blackness in many of his poems, including "Dream Variations." Hughes describes darkness as "tender" and "gentle," and the poem's speaker longs for nighttime because night is "Black like me."

In addition to creating a positive image of blackness, Spencer also creates a perverse image of whiteness within "Lady, Lady." Through the use of reverse color imagery, Spencer depicts whiteness as bad. The poem describes how years of exposure to soapy water has bleached the washerwoman's hands "poor white." Spencer cleverly introduces class as well as race by linking whiteness to the adjective "poor." The poem's speaker seems to feel sorry for the washerwoman because her hands have been turned white, the opposite of black, to which Spencer attributes so much beauty.

Besides the reversal of black and white color imagery, "Lady, Lady" takes another turn away from convention as Spencer examines the washerwoman's worn features. Most early Harlem Renaissance women poets wrote about

beautiful ladies in their poems. For example, Grimké's "Rosable" describes the inner beauty of a woman who has a "rose white" soul and "rose thoughts."

Spencer's description of her "Lady," however, questions whether or not a "chisel fell" upon her face. This image makes the reader wonder how such a tool would have fallen on her face. Her scars suggest that she may have been beaten, or that she suffered a work-related accident. Regardless of where the scars came from, Spencer wishes to paint a realistic picture of this hard-working domestic.

Spencer also shows how a lifetime of hard work has affected the woman's hands:

Lady, Lady, I saw your hands
Twisted, awry, like crumpled roots,
Bleached poor white in a sudsy tub,
Wrinkled and drawn from your rub-a-dub.

The hardship that the washerwoman has endured is evident from her wrinkled hands to her scarred face.

According to Gloria Hull, Spencer's "Lady, Lady" parodies Tennyson's "A Dream of Fair Women," and mocks Tennyson's fantasy of idealized womanhood (viii). Spencer contrasts Tennyson's "daughter of the gods, divinely tall / And most divinely fair" with a worn-out, working-class woman. Hull also points out that Francis Watkins Harper, one of the most renowned nineteenth-century African American poets, also satirizes one of Tennyson's poems in her 1901 work, "Idylls of the Bible." Harper makes fun of the idealized concept of white female purity glorified in Tennyson's Idylls of the King (vii). While most early Harlem Renaissance women poets were modeling their poems

after such great poets as Tennyson, Spencer and Harper chose to show their poetic freedom and mimic his works.

In addition to describing the washerwoman's worn features, Spencer questions whether or not the domestic laborer has "borne so long the yoke of men." The ambiguity of this line suggests two different readings. First, the line may be read in a larger context with the reference to "men" being understood as humankind. This interpretation is fitting since the poem deals with a woman who has spent her entire life working for others. Through her years of hard work, providing domestic service to many families, she has worn the "yoke of men." While the poem gives no indication whether or not the washerwoman is free or a slave, some broader implications of this "yoke" may possibly be connected to slavery. Thus the woman may have also borne the yoke of chattel slavery.

The second way to read line four relates back to Spencer's feminist poems, suggesting an oppressiveness to the washerwoman's bearing the "yoke of men." Spencer makes the reader think once again of tyrannical men and oppressive relationships like the ones depicted in "Before the Feast at Shushan" and "Letter to My Sister." The word "yoke" again connotes servitude and bondage. The woman's hardships may have come from a man in addition to the labors of her job. Through the phrase "yoke of men," Spencer makes the reader contemplate gender and racial roles within society. Moreover, these non-traditional ideas stray from conventional poetry and the philosophy of Negro Womanhood.

Two months before Spencer published “Lady, Lady” in Survey Graphic, Langston Hughes published a poem about a washerwoman in the January 1925 edition of Crisis. While both poems elevate the status of the washerwoman and praise her hard work, Spencer’s poem is more realistic. It portrays the washerwoman and her situation in a more true-to-life manner than Hughes’ “A Song to a Negro Wash-woman.” Despite Hughes’ reference to his washerwoman’s “aching back,” he does not depict the hardship associated with her job as Spencer does, nor does he address any possible abuse that she may have suffered from her work. Hughes takes a more playful approach to “A Song to a Negro Wash-woman.” Although Hughes was a champion of unconventional poetry during the Harlem Renaissance, Spencer’s poem about a domestic laborer is more realistic than Hughes’ poem about the same subject. In the final stanza of “Lady, Lady,” however, Spencer uses positive language and transforms the washerwoman into a “Lady.” Despite these closing lines, Spencer’s poem is still more realistic than Hughes’ song-like work. The ambiguity of the washerwoman’s bearing “the yoke of men” suggests that she suffered from either chattel slavery or from an oppressive relationship, or both. References to these forms of cruelty further differentiate Spencer’s poem from Hughes’ poem. Spencer’s quest to transcend convention in “Lady, Lady” surpasses one of the era’s great unconventional male poets.

Spencer’s divergence from traditional subject matter continues as she confronts American slavery in her poem “The Sevignes.” The piece also demonstrates the poet’s tendency to develop an idea for a poem from her reading

or from her personal experiences. After reading a 1930 National Geographic Magazine article, “Louisiana Land of Perpetual Romance,” Spencer formed the idea for writing “The Sevignes” (Greene, Time’s 135). The article includes a picture of a statue of an “Old-Time Darkey” that had recently been erected in the town square of Natchitoches, Louisiana. The caption below the photograph notes that historians believe that the closing scenes of Uncle Tom’s Cabin were based on a plantation not far from the town (Graves 451).

Spencer interweaves images of a Southern slave statue with a seventeenth-century French aristocrat, Madame de Sevignes. She fuses two seemingly anachronistic entities to create a larger, more unified theme. The subject of Spencer’s allusion, Madame de Sevignes (whose name only appears in the title of the work), concerned herself solely with gossip and social functions of her day. She had no concern for the lower classes, who were literally starving before her. William Somerset Maugham writes that seventeenth-century France was both “a time of high civilization” and a “brutal time.” The wealthy used and worked the poor “as they never would have used their horses or their dogs,” according to Maugham (iv). Madame de Sevignes was no exception. Frances Mossiker, a biographer of Madame de Sevignes, acknowledges that the 1600s writer exhibits callousness and insensitivity toward human suffering. Mossiker also concedes that Madame de Sevignes had an “aristocratic disdain” for the lower classes and their oppression (194). In a letter to her daughter, Sevignes expresses displeasure that only a few men from a recent peasant uprising had been tortured or executed.

Her 1675 letter states: “Fewer men are now sentenced to be broken on the wheel, only one in eight days It is true that the hangings now strike me as a relief” (qtd. in Mossiker 198).

Spencer’s “The Sevignes” suggests that Americans are no more sensitive to human beings than was this French aristocrat. “The Sevignes” urges Americans to go to see the slave statue and to read the plaque in the Louisiana town with “whatever heart you have left,” implying that, like Madame de Sevignes, Americans have become devoid of feeling and sensitivity. The poem also stresses the heartlessness of the wealthy American women who live near the statue. Line eight describes these women as lacking “penance.” These “American Sevignes,” as Spencer sarcastically refers to those who were caught up in social class and image, are apathetic to American slavery.

Spencer maintains this theme of indifference to suffering and closes the poem with a note of subtle irony. Here she makes the reader think that these nineteenth-century Louisiana women, whose ancestors once fled Europe in search of freedom, now have no concern for others without freedom--namely, slaves. She describes them as “. . . callous beyond belief . . . these women who had so lately fled from / the slavery of Europe to the great wilds of America.” These women are no better than the cruel Madame de Sevignes of seventeenth-century France. While the poem is directed at nineteenth-century Louisiana, where many French immigrated (further extending Spencer’s allusion to Madame de Sevignes), the implications of the piece and the question of slavery as a whole extend beyond Louisiana to all of nineteenth- and twentieth-century America.

Spencer moves from the indirect racial allusions in “The Sevignes” to directly confronting racial oppression in “White Things.” Although Spencer wrote in her biographical note in Cullen’s Caroling Dusk that she had “no civilized articulation for the things I hate” (47), she strongly condemns oppression and prejudice in “White Things.” This 1923 poem is filled with negative depictions of whiteness and fiery descriptions of a white race that consumes everything within its path. The poem describes whites as a very unusual lot. They are so bizarre, or, as the poem repeatedly states, “so rare, so rare,” that they appear to have come from another world. Spencer conveys that their whiteness is not only uncommon, but also that their idea of eliminating color from the world is so extreme that they are alien to humanity. “They stole from out a silvered world somewhere,” states line four, reaffirming the alien quality of these whites.

The chief aim of “White Things” is to portray whites as destructive beings. Spencer uses the term “things” to dehumanize this group of people and to emphasize the non-human qualities that they must have in order to commit such horrible acts against others. Spencer depicts them destroying everything which is not white. The “white things” have constructed a hierarchy based on whiteness, according to J. Lee Greene, and they view anything that is not white as inferior or worthless (Time’s 132). The “white things” wield a “wand of power” that takes the color out of everything they encounter. They have “blanched” hills of red soil and forests of “darkened pines.” The whites even turn the “blood in a ruby rose / To a poor white poppy flower.” As the poem discusses the grassy plains and a conversion of red to white color imagery, Spencer makes an allusion to the white

man's crusade against Native Americans. This changing of red to white color imagery conjures up images of government reservations and nineteenth-century Indian wars with United States' calvary troops. Spencer conveys that the "white things" wished to eradicate the American Indians.

"White Things" plainly describes the destruction of human beings in the second stanza of the poem. The work literally becomes fiery as Spencer recounts how the whites "pyred a race of black, black men." These white beings burn the black men until their ashes turn "white." The poem expresses futility and disgust at the thought of killing living beings in order to eradicate their skin color. Spencer also shows that racial intolerance exists within all levels of the society controlled by "white things." Even children have hatred of non-white things. In the poem, a laughing young white boy picks up a skull from among the black men's charred remains and to his amazement the skull is white, "not dull." In the poem's closing lines, Spencer eerily describes the demonic scene of the young white boy holding the skull and his desire for all things to be white:

. . . glistening awful thing;
 Made, it seems, for this ghoul to swing
 In the face of God with all his might,
 And swear by the hell that sired him
 "Man-maker, make white!"

This final scene again expresses the feeling of superiority of "white things," a superiority that extends even over God, as the young man screams for God only to

“make white.” The boy’s demands indicate that he believes that white things are the only items of worth within this world.

Spencer’s negative depiction of whiteness throughout this 1923 poem goes far beyond the reversal of black and white color imagery that appeared in “Lady, Lady.” Her casting of whiteness as a destructive and evil force makes “White Things” a protest poem. Richard Wright’s 1945 autobiography Black Boy and his 1940 novel Native Son also depict the evils of whiteness. The first half of Black Boy personifies whiteness and the color white as an immense force which oppresses blacks in the South and across America. Wright describes whiteness in Black Boy as “a culture, a creed, a religion” which controls the lives of all black people (65). Just as Spencer portrays whiteness as a force more powerful than God, so too does Wright depict whiteness as a force that regulates the life of the young author and his family.

In another poem, “Grapes: Still Life,” Spencer also addresses race and color. Within this poem, she implies that all humans have a universal African heritage. “Grapes: Still Life” discusses four different varieties of grapes and places much emphasis on the color of the different grapes. On a literal level, the poem compares and contrasts different types of grapes, but on a figurative level, the poem contains racial allusions. The 1929 poem is not just about grapes, according to Greene (Time’s 134). Spencer uses the grapes in the poem as an extended metaphor for humans. She gives the grapes feelings and examines how each variety likes its skin color. Most importantly, the poem analyzes how each grape reacts to its dark “stem.” Through these sophisticated metaphors, Spencer

alludes to the idea of a universal African ancestry and some people's attempts to deny these origins.

Spencer's "Grapes: Still Life" was very timely in its discussion of racial origins. During the 1920s, white scientists were trying to prove that "race crossing" could be genetically detrimental to both races. Dr. Jon Alfred Mjoen, a Norwegian anthropologist, proposed that fifth-generation individuals of mixed race would be unable to reproduce ("Race Crossing" 67). In other words, amalgamation would ultimately lead to the downfall of the human race. Spencer's poem attempts to refute such ridiculous studies, claiming that all humans evolved from the plains of Africa thousands of years ago. Her exploration of a universal African ancestry strays once again from the confines of conventional poetry and Negro Womanhood. According to the tenets of Negro Womanhood, women were to remain submissive and to focus their energies on domestic issues. Spencer's promotion of a universal African ancestry is far from submissive but rather a bold statement by a black woman in the 1920s. The poem aligns with the philosophy of the Harlem Renaissance and its sense of dignity and pride that many writers, especially W.E.B. DuBois and Langston Hughes, associated with African heritage.

The poem first describes copper-colored grapes that appear haughty as they rest "snugly" on a platter. The work immediately brings color and heritage forward as it questions whether or not the golden grapes have forgotten their roots. The speaker wonders if the grapes "feel no change / From the ringlet of your stem / To this bright rim's flange." The stem of the grape is black as is the

small, dark ring which encircles the stem, and the poem asks if the grapes acknowledge this blackness upon their bodies. Through the metaphor of these arrogant, light-colored grapes who deny their black stems, Spencer conveys the notion that many light-skinned people forget that their current existence evolved on the plains of Africa. Anthropologists link the first primitive human being, *Homo habilis*, to Africa some two million years ago. Although the link to *Homo habilis* to Africa has come within the last two decades, Anne Spencer, who was writing during the 1920s, would have been familiar with *Homo erectus*, another early human being whose origins also are linked to Africa ("Human Being" 415).

"Grapes: Still Life" carries this idea of a disregarded African heritage on to the next set of grapes. The poem rhetorically asks the "green-white" Niagara grape, described as a "cool dull Nordic," if its "thick meat flinches" from its dark stem and ringlet. Again, the poem places much emphasis on color. Here it hints at a dull white "Nordic" color, suggesting that these grapes represent a fair-skinned ethnic group. The word "Nordic" conjures up the physical characteristics of tall stature, light skin and hair, and blue eyes typically associated with Northern Europeans or Scandinavians. Through this single modifier, Spencer alludes to a particular ethnic group and asks this group how they feel about a prehistoric African ancestry.

As the poem progresses, the grapes become darker, and the language describing these darker grapes becomes more positive. Spencer describes the darker-colored Caco as the "beauty of the vine" with its "stamen red and pistil black." Again stressing the theme of human connectedness and universal

ancestry, she notes that the Caco is “so close to” the light-colored Niagara grape that they could be related. The Concord grape, the darkest of the bunch, receives the most praise, though. This deep purple grape is described as the “peaceful one” who is proud of his skin color: he holds “the colors of his flask . . . high in pride.”

The last stanza clearly expresses the poem’s meaning. These remaining lines speak to the reader directly without the extended color imagery that builds up to the poem’s close: “This too is your heritage / You who force the plight.” The single word “plight” is crucial to the understanding of the poem. The poem states that the people “who force the plight” also have an evolutionary African heritage. Based on the racial overtones of “Grapes: Still Life” and the time period in which Spencer wrote the poem, these “plights” could include slavery, segregation, or any other form of discrimination against African Americans. The plural “you” and “your” within these lines refers to the people who contribute to these “plights.” The people who deny a universal African heritage and who create bad conditions for blacks are most likely whites. As the golden-colored grapes in the poem’s first stanza deny their black stem, so too do many whites. Scientists have linked the origins of the human race to Africa, but Spencer recognizes that some whites are too proud to acknowledge these origins. As the poem closes, Spencer has these fair-skinned people turning frantically to anywhere but Africa to prove their white origins. In the final line, they illogically turn to their white bones and white blood cells for evidence of their white “root,” but the reader realizes how absurd this notion is.

During an era in which black women primarily wrote conventional poetry, an era in which Elise Johnson McDougald said black women were “free neither economically, socially nor spiritually” (379), Anne Spencer produced this topical poem which challenged scientists’ beliefs about amalgamation. For Spencer to even hint at a universal African heritage places “Grapes: Still Life” outside the boundaries of traditional poetry and outside the tenets of Negro Womanhood. Spencer’s other poems contained within this chapter are also non-traditional and can be labeled protest works. “White Things” depicts the destructiveness of white society, and “The Sevignes” shows Americans’ indifference to slavery. “Lady, Lady” also strays from traditional poetic subject matter to praise a hardworking, domestic laborer, who has endured sexual and racial oppression.

Conclusion

During the Harlem Renaissance, many African American women wrote traditional poetry not by choice but rather in an attempt to conform to societal dictates. Most of the era's female poets wrote poems which adhered to the concept of Negro Womanhood, a modern-day version of True Womanhood, a nineteenth-century behavioral code that stressed Victorian values of domesticity and submissiveness. According to Negro Womanhood, how a black woman acted or what she wrote about was supposed to reflect on all black women. Negro Womanhood saw black women as "cultural icons who represented or perpetuated society's values," states Erlene Stetson (406). Because this Victorian philosophy held black women to such high standards, most early Harlem Renaissance female poets wrote conventional poetry about aesthetic topics, including love and nature. In addition, many women, such as Angelina Weld Grimké and Georgia Douglas Johnson, wrote conventional poetry in an attempt to combat negative sexual and racial stereotypes. Much of society viewed African American women as exotic, primitive, highly sexed beings. According to bell hooks, most whites of the period believed that all black women were sexually loose regardless of their accomplishments (58). Grimké, Johnson, and other females often wrote refined poetry to show the world that African American women were ladies, not coarse, bawdy strumpets.

Anne Bethel Scales Spencer also wrote some conventional poetry. Her most conventional poem, "Life-Long, Poor Browning," depicts the pastoral

beauty of Virginia in the springtime and laments that English poet Robert Browning never saw the state before his death. Several of Spencer's other traditional poems contain themes of escape, in which individuals escape a harsh mortal world to enter an ideal eternal world. But a doubleness exists in Spencer's escape poems. Unconventional topics or literary techniques underlie these seemingly aesthetic works. In "Substitution," Spencer uses conventionality as a mask to address a criminal trial. Spencer's "At the Carnival" also extends beyond traditional poetic dicta to reveal a woman who is trapped by the world's gaze. The poem "Ascetic," whose speaker wishes to die to escape life, contains masking, a device found in many African American works to disguise one's true feelings.

Beyond her collection of double consciousness escape poems, Spencer writes about other non-traditional topics like women's freedom. In "Before the Feast at Shushan," Spencer describes a scene of male dominance, complete with disturbing images of sexual force against a woman. "Letter to My Sister" presents men as powerful forces that dominate women. The poem even offers advice for women to survive men's wrath. Other poems, like "The Lemming: O Sweden," address male chauvinism, and "Po' Little Lib" portrays motherhood as a confining institution.

Spencer also addresses racial injustice within her works. She confronts racial oppression in "White Things" as she describes a white race which consumes everything within its path. Like Richard Wright, she personifies whiteness as an immense power that oppresses blacks. Through a sophisticated allusion in "The Sevignes," Spencer compares nineteenth-century Americans,

who are indifferent about slavery, to a cruel seventeenth-century French aristocrat, Madame de Sevignes. Spencer also alludes to possible racial and sexual injustice in "Lady, Lady."

These poems about racial injustice and women's freedom demonstrate that Spencer, as a woman poet during the period of the Harlem Renaissance, explores subjects outside the boundaries of conventional poetry and Negro Womanhood. Spencer and her poetry dispel myths that Harlem Renaissance women were exclusively conventional poets or "refined versifiers." Cheryl Wall contends that Harlem Renaissance women have been consigned to the "Rear Guard" of the period because of their hesitation to explore non-traditional topics (13). Yet Anne Spencer clearly shows that a Harlem Renaissance woman, like many male writers, could disregard poetic conventions and explore non-traditional topics within their poetry.

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