

Sterling A. Brown

Poet Description:

Sterling A. Brown was born and raised in the strictly segregated Washington, D.C., of the first decades of the century. His family was middle class (his father was a professor of religion), and he was educated at Williams College and Harvard. There he read the new American poetry of early modernism and was struck especially by the use of the vernacular in Frost, Sandburg, and others. To this he would add knowledge of black folk traditions sought out in the southern countryside during several college teaching jobs in the 1920s. The result was the stunning debut volume, *Southern Road* (1932), which in many ways revolutionized African American poetry through the rest of the century. The critical issue was Brown's use of black dialect in his poetry. Criticized by James Weldon Johnson and others because of its long association with plantation life and minstrel shows, black dialect was faulted for reinforcing stereotypes, substituting pathos for dignity, and even promoting belief in black ignorance. But Brown's poetry overturned all these assumptions. His revolutionary use of dialect went much further even than crediting the vitality of independent folk traditions. Dialect in Brown becomes an extraordinarily compressed register for an ironic sense of cultural difference, for pride in an alternative knowledge amidst racial oppression. Dialect registers class and race awareness, along with a basic understanding of power relations in America, in a witty form that goes unnoticed by the ruling classes. It is a special form at once of wit and wisdom.

Because Brown's first book of poems appeared at the outset of the Great Depression, it missed the widespread attention it might have attracted but a few years earlier. Brown returned to Harvard for graduate study and produced two groundbreaking critical studies of African American literature in the 1930s. His major anthology, *The Negro Caravan*, appeared in 1941, but his *Collected Poems* was not published until 1980.

Race/Ethnicity:

African [1]

Picture:



Gender:

Male [2]

Sexuality:

Straight [3]

First Name:

Sterling A.

Last Name:

Brown

Birth & Death Dates:

Wednesday, May 1, 1901 to Friday, January 13, 1989

School of Poetry:

[Harlem Renaissance](#) [4]

Birth Place:

Washington D. C. , District Of Columbia

United States

See map: [Google Maps](#) [5]

District Of Columbia US

Group visibility:

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