Dorothy West

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FOR ANTON, with affection
## CONTENTS

**PREFACE**  
 by Deborah G. Plant  
 xiii

**INTRODUCTION**  
 by Joyce L. Cherry  
 xv

**TINA McELROY ANSA**  
 by Evora Jones  
 1

**DORIS JEAN AUSTIN**  
 by Emmanuel S. Nelson  
 6

**JAMES BALDWIN**  
 by Nanette Morton  
 12

**TONI CADE BAMBARA**  
 by Loretta G. Woodard  
 22

**BARRY BECKHAM**  
 by Adam Meyer  
 29

**HAL BENNETT**  
 by Marilyn D. Button  
 36

**DAVID HENRY BRADLEY, JR.**  
 by Suzanne Hotte Massa  
 42

**GWENDOLYN BROOKS**  
 by Samuel B. Garren  
 47

**CECEL MORRIS BROWN**  
 by Charles Tita  
 53

**FRANK LONDON BROWN**  
 by Peggy Stevenson Ratliff  
 58

**ED BULLINS**  
 by Peggy Stevenson Ratliff  
 64
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTENTS</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OCTAVIA E. BUTLER by AnnLouise Keating</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BEBE MOORE CAMPBELL by Joyce Russell-Robinson</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD by Sarah McKee</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALICE CHILDRESS by Terry Novak</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MICHELLE CLIFF by Cora Agatucci</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CYRUS COLTER by Leela Kapai</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STEVEN CORBIN by Terrence J. McGovern</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAMUEL DELANY by Grace Sikorski</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WILLIAM DEMBY by Peter G. Christensen</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MELVIN DIXON by André Hoyrd</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LARRY DUPLECHAN by Emmanuel S. Nelson</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RALPH WALDO ELLISON by Harish Chander</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARTHUR R. FLOWERS by Ymitri Jayasundera</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEON FORREST by Dana A. Williams</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALBERT FRENCH by Jeffrey T. Loeb</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ERNEST J. GAINES by Eberhard Alsen</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MARITA GOLDEN by Loretta G. Woodard</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAM GREENLEE by Adam Meyer</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BILL GUNN by P. Jane Splawn</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. LYNN HARRIS by Grace Sikorski</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHESTER B. HIMES by Bruce A. Glasrud and Laurie Champion</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KRISTIN HUNTER by Rennie Simson</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CONTENTS

WALTER DEAN MYERS by Terry Novak 360
GLORIA NAYLOR by Sarah Wheliss and Emmanuel S. Nelson 366
ANN PETRY by Marlene D. Allen 377
CARLENE HATCHER POLITE by Frank E. Dobson, Jr. 384
ISHMAEL REED by Pierre-Damien Mvuyekure 391
JEWELL PARKER RHODES by Pierre-Damien Mvuyekure 401
DORI SANDERS by Nicholyn Hutchinson 407
SAPPHIRE by Tracey Walters 411
GIL SCOTT-HERON by Suzanne Hotte Massa 416
NTOZAKE SHANGE by Sarah Wheliss and Emmanuel S. Nelson 421
CHARLOTTE WATSON SHERMAN by Bindu Malieckal 427
ANN ALLEN SHOCKLEY by Adenike Marie Davidson 433
APRIL SINCLAIR by Jacqueline C. Jones 438
ELLEASE SoutherLAND by Cherron A. Barnwell 443
JOYCE CAROL THOMAS by Amy E. Earhart 449
DAWN TURNER TRICE by Lean’tin Bracks 454
ALICE WALKER by Molly Roden 458
MARGARET WALKER by Annette Debo 469
DOROTHY WEST by A. Yemisi Jimoh 475
JOHN EDGAR WIDEMAN by Robin Lucy 482
SHERLEY ANNE WILLIAMS by Trela Anderson 491
JACQUELINE WOODSON by Nicola Morris 495
CONTENTS

SARAH ELIZABETH WRIGHT by Linda M. White

FRANK GARVIN YERBY by Louis Hill Pratt

Selected Bibliography

Index

About the Editor and Contributors
DOROTHY WEST
(1907–1998)

A. Yemisi Jimoh

BIOGRAPHY

Dorothy West was born into the successful household of Isaac Christopher West and Rachel Pease Benson West in Boston. West was an only child whose extended family shared the Wests' large home in Boston. Virginia-born Isaac West owned a wholesale fruit business in the Boston Market. Rachel West was from Camden, South Carolina; she made a place for her family among Boston's small circle of successful, black, upper-middle-class families and provided her daughter with the fuel for an ironic literary approach to the issues of gender, race, class, and color consciousness, which inform much of Dorothy West's writing.

By the time West was seven, she knew that she wanted a literary career—after her father showed pride in her writing (McDowell 266–68). She attended the Girls' Latin School in Boston and, later, Boston University as well as the Columbia University School of Journalism. Dorothy West entered the second annual Opportunity magazine literary contest. Her entry, "The Typewriter," shared second prize with Zora Neale Hurston's story "Muttsy." This literary accomplishment drew West—who was just seventeen—to New York for the Opportunity magazine awards banquet, which exposed her to the burgeoning Harlem Renaissance circle of writers and artists.

Dorothy West lived a writer's life for more than seventy years. During this time she published some of her writing under the pseudonyms Mary Christopher and Jane Isaac (Dalsgard 42). West's literary life included membership in the 1920s in the Boston African American writers' group the Saturday Evening Quill Club—some of her stories were published in its magazine, The Saturday Evening Quill; she had a brief stint with the Works Progress Administration—Federal Writers’ Project in the 1930s; as founder of the literary magazines Challenge and...
New Challenge, West sought to nurture new, post-Renaissance literary talent, notably, Margaret Walker and Ralph Ellison; for more than two decades—1940s–1960s—she wrote short stories for the New York Daily News; and she contributed intermittently to the Vineyard Gazette from the 1960s until early in the 1990s, including a weekly column on the social activities around Oak Bluffs.

Dorothy West's father was among the first African Americans to purchase a vacation home in Oak Bluffs on Martha's Vineyard. West returned to her family's vacation home in the 1940s and lived year-round on the island until her death. While living on Martha's Vineyard, she published two novels, The Living Is Easy (1948) and The Wedding (1995) as well as a collection of short stories, sketches, and memoirs titled The Richer, the Poorer (1995). With a grant from the Mary Roberts Rinehart foundation in the 1940s, West began writing The Wedding. She also wrote two other pieces of long fiction that were never published: “Where the Wild Grape Grows” (McDowell 277) and “The White Tribe of Indians” (281), which is about the web of denials concerning ancestry among some African Americans.

In the mid-1990s, she was hailed as the last living Harlem Renaissance writer, and there was an upsurge of interest in Dorothy West as a writer and as a participant in the Harlem Renaissance. Projects such as the PBS film As I Remember It: A Portrait of Dorothy West (Clark, “Rediscovering” 47) and a 1998 film (Steinberg 34) based on her last novel all attest to the growing interest in recovering the literary career of Dorothy West. Into her ninth decade of life, West continued to plan new writing projects. Her latest was a historical book on Oak Bluffs.

MAJOR WORKS AND THEMES

For Dorothy West, short stories “are the most perfect literary form” (McDowell 281). West's first published story was “Promise and Fulfillment” (Ferguson, Dictionary 188). In “The Typewriter,” her story for the Opportunity contest, a janitor dictates fictional letters to his daughter. He feels important and successful during these contrived business sessions, so he creates a fictional persona and begins to live in a fantasy world in which he is a successful businessman. This world crashes for the janitor after he reads in the newspaper that J. P. Morgan—with whom the janitor has had his most intense fantasy correspondence—has gone bankrupt. This story, among others, demonstrates West's inclination toward irony in her writing.

Seventeen of Dorothy West's stories are collected in The Richer, the Poorer. In stories such as “The Five Dollar Bill,” “Funeral,” “The Bird like No Other,” “The Penny,” and others she convincingly presents a child's perspective. Frequently, West's stories, written from the perspective of innocence, are moralistic yet engaging. Through the eyes of a child, West returns to adults the contradictions that children learn from adult examples. In “The Five Dollar Bill,” a little girl named Judy—a name that recurs in West's stories with intelligent girl characters—witnesses and is affected deeply by her mother's duplicity.

West frequently writes about middle-class characters, yet not all of her short
stories are set in a middle-class environment. When West does write about the African American middle class, she often uses irony to present a critique of their “counterfeit bourgeois” (Rodgers 161) attitudes and their “color foolishness” (Dalsgard 32). In stories such as “Jack in the Pot,” however, West situates poverty and its effects on one’s character in the foreground. “Jack in the Pot” is the story of Mrs. Edmunds, a woman who wins money—jack—after she has suffered through hunger and while she is on welfare. She and her husband have lost their middle-class lifestyle because hard times caused her husband to close his business. West says that this story is her “statement on poverty” (Dalsgard 43). When West writes about poverty, she does not sentimentalize the poor. She, in fact, depicts the emotional and psychological impact of poverty. Most of West’s characters, though, are successful or are from the struggling working class that made up much of the African American middle class in its nascent stages.

In a number of West’s stories, especially those that she wrote for the New York Daily News, the author does not describe her characters in ways that would indicate whether they are black people. In other stories—“Odyssey of an Egg” and “About a Woman Named Nancy”—she pushes the boundaries of characterization and setting by eliminating references to skin color. Further, in “Jack in the Pot” West’s references to color are so subtle as to be nearly incidental to the overall story. In West’s story The Richer, the Poorer, she writes about two sisters who take opposite paths in life. Bess lives in the moment, while Lottie is cautious and industrious. In this story, West emphasizes the poverty of Lottie’s “life never lived” (36) and the wealth in Bess’ active life, but little in this story indicates that the characters are modeled after black women West knew. During an interview with Katrine Dalsgard, West comments on the colorlessness in some of her writing. When she began to write two short stories monthly for the Daily News, there was a tacit agreement between West and the publishers: “For their sake, and for my sake because I had to eat, I never mentioned the word ‘black’” (37). West’s own personal survival and the racial politics of publishing explain her silence on color in The Richer, the Poorer, “The Maple Tree,” and other stories. As a writer, West often had had to strike a delicate balance between the demands of publishing and her desire to write from her experiences.

In many of Dorothy West’s short stories, she presents in condensed form several of the issues and themes that are found in her novels. West’s literary corpus demonstrates that she actively engages vernacular qualities such as the black sermonic tradition and music, both of which have informed African American literature; more specifically, though, West is concerned with intragroup issues relating to class and color. These vernacular qualities as well as class and color concerns in her writing are clearly illustrated in “An Unimportant Man,” “Mammy,” “Prologue to a Life,” and “Hannah Byde.” A compelling issue in Dorothy West’s writing, however, is gender. A persistent motif in her fiction centers on the repressed female who dreams of, or connives, a position of power for herself. This quite frequently is a Pyrrhic victory for West’s female characters.

Cleo, the main character in The Living Is Easy, is just such a woman. West
takes her title for this novel from the song “Summertime,” which is from Du Bose Heyward’s Broadway play Porgy. This novel is set in Boston from July 1914 through April 1919. Cleo Jericho Judson is southern and beautiful. At nineteen, Cleo marries a significantly older, hardworking businessman from the South named Bart Judson. West prepares readers for Cleo’s manipulations of her husband and her sisters as well as for her resistance to proscribed gender roles through flashbacks to Cleo’s Southern childhood. An independently minded child, Cleo fights and beats a little boy who taunts her; then she wonders, “What was there to being a boy? What was there to being a man? Men just worked. That was easier than what women did” (21). As a married woman, Cleo wants to create her own domain over which she can rule. In fact, “It had never occurred to her in the ten years of her marriage that she might be his helpmate. She thought that was the same thing as being a man’s slave” (71). In the summer of 1914, Cleo brings her sisters and their children to her home in Boston for a visit, and she effectively manipulates and deceives them until they are living with her and are estranged from their husbands. The Jericho sisters all illustrate the variety of ways that gender and power operate. Lily accepts dependence; she wants to “please” Bart; she will stay quiet to keep his protection (233). Charity feels empty without her husband and substitutes food. Serena wants her own independence—even from her sister Cleo—as well as love. Cleo wants a female domain. Bart, Cleo’s husband, is the means through which she reproduces herself as well as her source of financial support. Judy, Cleo’s only child, observes her mother and resists her control. Judy realizes that Cleo “was the boss of nothing but the young, the weak, the frightened. She ruled a pygmy kingdom” (308). Through Cleo, West complicates two prevalent images of black women. The author revises established representations of black, middle-class, female characters by refusing to create tragic sympathy for her near-white characters. Dorothy West also transforms the concept of the black woman as the enduring, loving matriarch.

Cleo’s world disintegrates after Bart’s business fails, in the same way as other black-owned businesses in the novel that did not respond effectively to the forces of modernity. While West illustrates in The Living Is Easy the small space that black, middle-class women occupy, she also delineates the weakly derivative and obsessively color-conscious base on which her black middle-class characters rest. This small, exclusive group consists in the struggling descendants of tailors and stable owners who prefer light skin color and avoid acknowledging anything as ugly as lynching. Throughout The Living Is Easy West illustrates her ironic stance toward middle-class color consciousness and imitative behavior with poignant narrative commentary. When, for example, a black man “failed in business, and blew his brains out just like a white man, [e]verybody was a little proud of his suicide” (112).

Cleo Judson’s actions in this novel are misguided, but her motive is to situate her vision of the lifestyle and cultural base of the African American South within the economic base of middle-class Boston and to define a space for female power. Cleo is defeated by the broader economic and gender issues of her time as well
as by her own overreaching. Cleo wonders if her sisters—because they are manless—are less like the image of their mother that Cleo remembers. She remembers the face of her mother when their father “was no where in her thinking” (284). Cleo’s dream of a female utopia has become strangely dystopic without Bart’s support. West’s novel demonstrates the power of the dominant discourse on race and gender.

Forty-seven years after the publication of Dorothy West’s first novel, she returns readers—in her second novel, The Wedding—to the complexities of a class and color-conscious environment in an exclusive circle of African Americans. The immediate action of the novel occurs in 1953 on Martha’s Vineyard in the Oval, a fictional neighborhood on the island of Oak Bluffs. West’s narrator, however, supplies readers with more than 100 years of history through flashbacks. The new guard in the Oval has moved away from the entrenched cultural rules. Previously, marrying light-skinned—not white—and marrying well had been the rule. Between them, Shelby Coles and her sister Liz have broken all the rules. Liz’s husband is a dark-skinned physician whose occupation saves him from complete déclassé status in the Oval. Liz and Clark Coles—the sisters’ father—unlike their mother and neighbors, are concerned that Shelby is rejecting black men out of fear. Shelby, notwithstanding everyone’s restrained distress, is planning to marry a white jazz musician. Meade, her fiancé, is not a light-skinned black man; he is not a member of the right socioeconomic class; and his career is unsuitable for a resident of the Oval. Clark is worried about Shelby’s marriage to Meade, because “I’ve never seen you give your respect to a colored man and I can’t help but think that maybe that’s some warped extension of this family’s social snobbery” (201). The only member of the Coles family who has no reservations about Shelby’s marriage is Gram, Shelby’s white great-grandmother who dreams of regenerating the white branch of her family, which was cut off when her daughter Josephine married Hannibal, the son of a woman who was formerly enslaved at Xanadu, the family’s plantation.

With this novel, Dorothy West again interrogates issues of class, color, and, to a lesser extent, gender. She demonstrates the complexities of these issues through a story that illuminates the social construction of desire and race. She further shows the numerous moral and psychological convolutions in behavior and thought that restrictive color/class practices engender.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Dorothy West’s novel The Living Is Easy was reviewed widely when it was first published. These reviews were, for the most part, favorable. Most of the reviewers locate West’s strength in her ability to present unforgettable characters, especially Cleo. Too often, though, these early reviews were concerned with the ways in which Cleo’s actions affected Bart’s male identity. West occasionally has been critiqued—rightly—for her weak ending of this novel. This same, very right complaint has been leveled against West’s second novel, The Wedding. Most
agree, however, that Dorothy West's weak endings do not nullify the value of her novels.

To date, the bulk of scholarship on Dorothy West focuses on The Living Is Easy. In Philip Butcher's 1948 essay, he presents West as one of the then-current "raceless writers." For Butcher, "The trend toward raceless authorship seems a loss to the Negro and to American literature" (15). In 1982 the Feminist Press reissued The Living Is Easy with an afterword by Adelaide Cromwell. Cromwell discusses the ways in which West's novel transforms literary representations of black women as well as the literary image of the lives of black people in the United States. Edward Clark's 1985 essay "Boston Black and White" is concerned with Cleo's failed desire to "be both Southern and Bostonian" (85). Lawrence Rodgers presents one of the most intriguing readings of The Living Is Easy. He does not believe this novel is compromised by the dominant society's middle-class values. For him, West "mocks these values" (161). Rodgers reads Cleo as "a complex archetypal trickster whose resistance to the binary is rooted in the folk tradition" (165) of black people in the South.

Mary Helen Washington initiates scholarly focus on gender in this novel. West, according to Washington, writes a novel that is "in contradiction with itself" because there is a "sisterly community which has deposed the powerful mother" Cleo (350–51). Gloria Wade-Gayles (1984) argues that African American mother–daughter relationships in literature are different from their European American counterparts because the socialization process among black women is rooted in gender and racial struggles. Eva Rueschmann investigates the importance of sister bonds, which allow black women a mirror that reflects a model for "identity formation," which is lacking in the dominant society. For Rueschmann, West's The Living Is Easy "comment[s] ironically on women's pre-scripted fantasies about their own development and underline[s] how standards for white women have shaped black women's self-perceptions and expectations" (130). Cleo, then, tries to find in her sisters just such a mirror of their mother and herself.

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Works by Dorothy West


Studies of Dorothy West


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