



## POSTMODERN MOMENT AND THE WORKS OF GAYL JONES

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### ABSTRACT

*Burst upon the literary scene in the mid-1970s with her two short novels Corregidora (1975) and Eva's Man (1976), she was met by a whole range of critical reactions, celebrations and condemnations of her portrayals of abusive patriarchal oppression, castigation and valorizations of her detailed, gender-conscious renderings of African American lateritic, praises and attacks for her frank and often violent portrayals of African American culture. The success of Jones's early extended fictional work, which includes the dissertation, two plays, and two novels she produced from the time of her dissertation in 1973 until the publication of Eva's Man in 1976, by examining her various applications of the specific components- psychology, egotism, history, linguistic play, music- which collectively from the theoretical standard, the ambitious "all-inclusive structure," she established for herself. Psychology and slavery also come together inform Jones's characterization of problematic relationships between African American men and women, who often teeter precariously between overcoming or being consumed by their traumatic pasts.*

**Keywords:** *Gayl Jones, Slavery, Brutality, Racism, Feminine, Blues, Diaspora, Black*

### INTRODUCTION

The Afro-American novelist Gayl Jones was born November 23, 1949 in Lexington, Kentucky. She came from a creative background; her grandmother Amanda Wilson wrote religious dramas and her mother Lucile was a fiction writer. By the time she was seven years old she had already begun writing her own fiction. In high school, Jones was described by her teachers as brilliant, but painfully shy. After finishing high school, Jones took a

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considerable step away from her hometown and the South when she moved to Connecticut to attend Connecticut College. Her education there was funded through scholarships and in 1971 she received her Bachelor of Arts degree in English. She was accepted into the graduate studies creative writing program at Brown University, where two years later she earned her Master degree and saw her first play, *Chile Woman*, produced. By 1975, she had earned her Doctorate of Arts degree in creative writing. During her years at Brown, Jones studied under poet Michael Harper, who introduced her first novel *Corregidora* (Random House 1975) to Toni Morrison, who became her editor. Following graduation, Jones' second novel, *Eva's Man* (Random House 1976) was published. She then began teaching at Wellesley College and later took a position as an assistant professor of English and Afro-American and African Studies at the University of Michigan. During her years at the University of Michigan, Jones wrote a collection of short stories called *White Rat* (Random House 1977), a volume-length poem *Songs for Anninho* (Lotus Press 1981), and another volume of poetry titled *The Hermit-Woman* (Lotus Press 1983). . During this time, Jones published another novel, *Die Volgefängerin (The Birdwatcher)* in Germany as well as a collection of poetry entitled *Xarque and Other Poems* (Lotus Press 1985) in the United States. Her first book of criticism, *Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature* (Harvard University Press 1991), was published soon after Jones and her husband returned to the United States in 1988. After living very privately in Lexington for ten years, Jones came again into the media spotlight for the release of a new novel, *The Healing* (Beacon Press 1998), which became a finalist in the National Book Award competition. Unfortunately, the success of Jones' new novel was overshadowed by the media attention given to a confrontation involving her husband and the police, which ended in his suicide. Immediately after, Jones was placed in a mental institution under suicide watch for a short time but was soon released without incident. Just one year later her latest novel, *Mosquito* (Beacon Press 1999) was published. Jones' life has come full circle as she once again lives a secluded life in Lexington, Kentucky, and continues to write. Although she has written in genres such as poetry, short stories, and critical essays, Jones is best known for her novels. Her first and perhaps most widely known novel, *Corregidora* was published when Jones was only 26 years old. The plot begins in 1947 and centers on Ursa Corregidora, a blues singer who continues her familial legacy of "making generations," "passing it on," and "bearing witness" through the medium of singing. Charged with passing down her family's history of slavery and abuse, Ursa takes the role of a storyteller. Her character often relates the terrible, bone-chilling events that happened to her grandmothers: the slaves, concubines, and prostitutes of Corregidora, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Brazilian plantation owner. Ursa uses traditional oral storytelling techniques in delivering her stories. Jones herself has commented on her use of this type of narration in an interview with Roseanne P. Bell in *Sturdy Black Bridges*. "One of the things I was consciously concerned with was the technique from the oral storytelling tradition that could be used in writing. The book has layers of storytelling. This theme, specifically of love and



hate, is especially visible in *Corregidora* when Ursa and her mother discuss the Grandmothers' relationships with their former owner and lover, *Corregidora*:

*"I think what really made them dislike Martin was because he had the nerve to ask them what I never had the nerve to ask. "*

*"What was that?"*

*"How much was hate for Corregidora and how much was love."*

(*Corregidora* 131)"

"Jones comments on the use of this theme in an interview with Claudia Tate in *Black Women Writers at Work*: "I was and continue to be interested in contradictory emotions that coexist ... I think people can hold two different emotions simultaneously" (Tate 95). Her next novel was published only one year later and is perhaps the most controversial work she has written. *Eva's Man* is the story of a young woman, Eva Medina Canada, who because of a long history of severe sexual and emotional abuse, ends up in a mental institution for murdering her lover and castrating him with her teeth. The subject of controversy surrounding the novel centers upon positive race imagery. Some African- American women authors have criticized the novel by stating that it creates characters that perpetuate negative stereotypes about African Americans and women. Jones herself responds to this kind of criticism in her interview with Claudia Tate: "I put those images in the story to show how myths or ways in which men perceive women actually define women's characters." She further justifies her position by stating: "Right now I'm not sure how to reconcile the things that interest me with 'positive race images.' . . . For instance, how would one reconcile an interest in neurosis or insanity with positive race image?" (Tate 97-98). Written almost 25 years after her first novels *Corregidora* and *Eva's Man*, one of Jones' more recent novels, *The Healing*, draws on many of the same psychological themes and oral storytelling techniques from her earlier works. This novel tells the story of Harlan Jane Eagleton, hairdresser, rock star manager and horse racetrack gambler turned faith healer, who travels about the world healing and telling people about her gift of healing. (*The Healing* 1998) Jones draws on the African-American oral tradition of storytelling, using Black English and stream-of-consciousness narration that fuses time and place throughout the novel. Earlier themes such as the male-female relationships and references to Brazilian culture are expanded upon in this novel.

Jones' work has often been contested because of her controversial subjects as well as news coverage of her personal life, her work continues to awe readers with its complex style and depth of emotion. She draws many of the themes in her stories from her African-American heritage as well as her own personal life and struggles. Perhaps most important throughout



the psychological developments in the characters are their voices which shout from the pages of her work their story, their song, and their truth. Her readers cannot wait to hear what will come next from this quiet woman who writes out loud.

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