

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Racial Violence and Domestic Space in *A Sunday Morning in the South*

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### ABSTRACT

One of the most significant anti-lynching plays of the Harlem Renaissance is Georgia Douglas Johnson's *A Sunday Morning in the South* (1925). The play delineates the proximity of quotidian African American family life to the pervasive threat of racial violence. Johnson employs the setting of a Black household to underscore the tension between racial oppression, familial traditions, and the imperative of safety. The morning routine of Sue Jones and her grandson serves as a central narrative element within the play, exemplifying how acts of white violence disrupt quotidian activities such as preparing breakfast, getting ready for church, and fostering familial bonds. The domestic space, traditionally characterized as a site of care, stability, and security, becomes tenuous when influenced by the external threat of racial terror. This intrusion underscores the profound psychological ramifications of lynching, engendering pervasive fear that infiltrates spaces ordinarily associated with comfort and communal belonging. Drawing on studies of space, race, and performance, the paper argues that Johnson's play blurs the line between private and public life. It shows how lynching shaped even the most personal parts of Black existence, making daily life insecure. In the end, Johnson not only criticizes racial injustice but also shows the strength of Black families who endure and resist, even within their most private spaces.

Keywords: race; violence; domestic space; Black families

## FULL PAPER

The Harlem Renaissance was strongly connected to Georgia Douglas Johnson (1880-1966), a well-known African American poet, playwright, and teacher. She was born in Atlanta, Georgia State. She became famous as one of the most widely published African American women poets of her time and as a strong voice against racial injustice. Johnson wrote over 200 poems and several plays that often focused on the struggles of African American women and the issue of lynching. Her home in Washington, D.C. became known as the “S Street Salon,” a meeting place for Black writers and artists. Through her work, she supported racial justice and women’s empowerment.

This research paper examines *A Sunday Morning in the South* one of the key anti-lynching plays of the Harlem Renaissance, written by Georgia Douglas Johnson. Johnson shows how racial violence disrupts the everyday lives of Black families by setting the play inside a home. The story highlights how the threat of white supremacy overshadows simple daily activities like cooking breakfast or going to church. Using ideas of space, race, and performance, this study argues that Johnson’s play blurs the line between private and public life, reveals the deep psychological impact of lynching, and shows the strength of Black families in facing racial injustice.

The one-act play *A Sunday Morning in the South* shows how racist violence shapes the daily lives of Black families. The narrative is set on a Sunday morning within the residence of Sue Jones, an elderly Black woman, and her grandson, Tom Griggs. As they undertake their morning routines—preparing breakfast and getting ready for church—their tranquil domestic environment is disrupted when neighbors alert them to the possibility that Tom may be accused of assaulting a white woman. Despite his innocence, Tom confronts the peril of racialized violence, exemplifying the pervasive threat that racial prejudice poses to Black families. The play thus elucidates how even ostensibly safe and nurturing spaces are susceptible to the influences of white supremacy, while concurrently highlighting the resilience and strength inherent in Black familial communities.

In the contemporary theatrical work by Georgia Douglas Johnson, the playwright explores the paradoxical nature of the domestic sphere for African Americans during the Jim Crow era. The setting—specifically the modest residence of Sue Jones and her grandson, Tom Griggs—represents love, care, and stability. However, as the narrative unfolds, the threat of racial violence, particularly lynching, transforms this sanctuary into a site of pervasive fear. Johnson elucidates that

African American families were unable to attain a genuine sense of security, even within the confines of their homes. By illustrating the incursion of white supremacy into spaces traditionally associated with comfort and belonging, the play underscores the fragility and vulnerability of Black domestic life under systemic racism.

By depicting Sue and Tom's typical Sunday morning—complete with breakfast preparation and church planning—Johnson underscores the precariousness of everyday life amid pervasive fear and violence. The depiction of the home, a symbol traditionally associated with intimacy and security, is destabilized by systemic racism. Johnson confronts the artificial division between public and private spheres, asserting that, for Black families, the threat of racial injustice is omnipresent. Consequently, even the most private settings are rendered unstable and vulnerable. In this connection, the following dialogues are most significant in the play:

SUE: “Tom, Tom, you and Bossie better come on out here and git your breakfast before it gets cold; I got good hot rolls this mornin!”

LIZA: “The police are all over now trying to run down some po Nigger they say that’s tacked a white woman... if they ketch him they’ll make short work of him.”<sup>1</sup>

Sue’s call to Tom and Bossie for breakfast shows the warmth and routine of daily home life, where sharing food gives comfort and security. But Liza’s warning about racial violence quickly shatters this peace. Her words show how easily fear from the outside world could enter the home, a place meant to be safe. The contrast between Sue’s caring act and Liza’s troubling news highlights how fragile Black homes were during the Jim Crow era. Johnson uses this shift to show how racism invaded and disrupted even the simplest, most private moments of African American family life.

Johnson shows how racism and the threat of lynching could suddenly break into the daily routines of African American families. In the play, Sue Jones is seen making breakfast for her grandchildren, Tom and Bossie, in a warm, loving scene of a typical Sunday morning. Their talk about food, work, and church reflects the comfort and stability of family life. But this sense of peace is quickly broken when Liza arrives with news that the police are searching for a Black man accused of attacking a white woman.

The safe atmosphere of the home is immediately replaced by fear, and the intrusion grows worse when white officers arrive, wrongly suspect Tom, and take

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him away. Johnson shows how ordinary activities like eating, cooking, or preparing for church were overshadowed by the constant threat of racial violence. The play makes clear that Black families during the Jim Crow era could not fully enjoy even the simplest moments at home without the fear of intrusion. By contrasting the warmth of family life with the sudden terror of white supremacy, Johnson reveals how fragile everyday life was and how deeply racial injustice unsettled African American households. Sullivan, Megan notes: *"Most critics note that A Sunday Morning in the South calls attention to the hypocrisy of church-going people who kill their fellow human beings. Equally obvious is that even Tom - a young black man from a respected family- is safe."*<sup>3</sup> Most critics agree that *A Sunday Morning in the South* reveals the deep hypocrisy of a society where white people, who attend church and claim strong Christian faith, still take part in or approve of lynching. This contradiction is made even sharper by the contrast between the peaceful hymns drifting from the nearby church and the violence entering Sue Jones's home. The play also shows that Tom, a young Black man from a decent and respected family, is not safe from racial violence. His innocence, good character, and family status do not shield him from suspicion or persecution. Through this, Johnson makes clear that under Jim Crow, no Black person, no matter their reputation, was ever truly safe from racism and injustice.

Johnson's work elucidates the detrimental effects of lynching on African American families, highlighting not only the physical violence inflicted but also its profound psychological ramifications. The play illustrates how pervasive fear, anxiety, and a sense of helplessness infiltrate even the most intimate aspects of private life, driven by the persistent threat of racial violence. For instance, the dissemination of accusations against Black individuals transforms previously safe spaces—such as Sue Jones's kitchen—into zones of dread. The family's mounting terror is exacerbated when Tom becomes a suspect, and the intervention of white law enforcement officers eradicates any remaining semblance of security or agency. The emotional toll is further exemplified through Sue's desperate entreaties, Bossie's expressions of fear, and Tom's confusion amidst false accusations, collectively underscoring the severe psychological impact wrought by racial violence. Johnson makes it clear that lynching traumatized not just the victims but also their families and entire communities, who lived in constant fear of sudden, unjust violence. Even when no crime was committed, suspicion alone destroyed peace and stability. By showing this emotional devastation, Johnson demonstrates how lynching was used as a weapon of terror to control and destabilize Black life. The following dialogues in the play are most significant in this regard:

SUE: "Say Mr. Officer, whut you tryin to do to my granson. Shore as God Amighty is up in them heabens he was right here in bed..."

TOM: "Granma, don't take on so. I'll go long with him to the sheriff. I'll splain to him... I never laid eyes on that white lady before in all my life."

BOSSIE: "Grannie, grannie, whut they gointer do to my brother? Whut they gointer do to him?"

MATILDA: "They — they done lynched him."

SUE: "Jesus!" (Screams and falls limp in her chair)<sup>4</sup>

Sue's cry to the officer shows her helplessness as she tries to protect her grandson, even though she knows that truth and innocence mean little in a racist system. Tom's words reflect his confusion but also his hope that honesty will prove him innocent, though the audience realizes this hope is useless. Bossie's fearful questions show the pain of a child seeing his brother taken away, proving that lynching hurt whole families, not just the victim. Matilda's news of Tom's death and Sue's collapse capture the depth of their shock and grief. These moments reveal how lynching caused lasting emotional and spiritual pain, leaving families broken and traumatized.

Johnson shows how the supposed boundary between private and public life collapses under racial violence. The play begins in the safety of Sue Jones's kitchen, where she and her grandsons share a typical Sunday morning routine of breakfast and plans for church. This domestic space represents intimacy, care, and normalcy. The intrusion of neighbors' warnings, coupled with the subsequent arrival of White law enforcement officers, significantly disrupts the sense of security within the domestic sphere. What is traditionally regarded as private—namely, home and family life—becomes subject to public scrutiny and potential danger. When officers interrogate Tom within his own residence, the home forfeits its function as a sanctuary, instead transforming into a space emblematic of racial oppression. Moreover, the ambient hymns from the church's exterior underscore the stark irony that Christian moral principles often coexist with systemic violence and injustice. The fragile division between the personal and the political disappears, showing how Black families could not keep racism outside their doors. Johnson emphasizes that the threat of lynching made no space truly private or safe. By collapsing the boundary between the domestic sphere and the hostile public world, the play highlights how deeply racial terror infiltrated African American life during the Jim Crow era. Miller, Jeanne-Marie A states:

The brutal act occurs on a peaceful Sunday morning, with hymns from a nearby church in the background. This Christian music underscores the brutality of the crime; the innocence of the victim who believed in both Christ and democracy; and the hypocrisy of the murderers, whose behavior conflicts with one of the major tenets of Christian brotherhood.<sup>5</sup>

The play's violence unfolds on a calm Sunday morning, while church hymns play in the background. This contrast highlights the cruelty of the crime. The hymns symbolize faith, peace, and brotherhood, yet at the same time, an innocent young man is being targeted. Tom's trust in both Christianity and democracy makes his fate even more tragic, as neither offers him protection. The moment also exposes the hypocrisy of the white community, who claim Christian values but participate in or allow murder. Johnson uses this contrast to show how racism corrupted both religion and justice.

Johnson depicts the destruction caused by racist violence while also emphasising the African American families' fortitude and defiance in the face of discrimination. Even though she is old and physically weak, Sue Jones fights valiantly to protect her grandson Tom from unfounded charges. Her fervent entreaties to the cops, her resolve to enlist powerful white allies, and her unceasing prayers demonstrate how Black women used their spiritual beliefs and communal connections to fight against injustice. Sue uses her voice and perseverance to demonstrate resilience even in the face of tremendous force.

The audience is aware that the system is biased against him. Still, Tom exhibits calm resistance by clinging to his innocence and dignity and expressing his faith that honesty and truth should prevail. Bossie, despite being a child, stands in for the next generation by challenging the status quo and exposing injustice. Johnson utilizes these characters to demonstrate that resistance could be found in faith, perseverance, and camaraderie as well as in confrontation. The family's effort, despite the tragic conclusion, is a testament to the tenacious nature of Black communities, which persisted in resisting and surviving in the face of institutionalized racial terror. The following dialogues in the play explain it more precisely:

SUE: "Say Mr. Officer, whut you tryin to do to my granson. Shore as God Amighty is up in them heabens, he was right here in bed. I seed him and his little brother Bossie there saw him..."

LIZA: "Sweet Jesus, do come down and hep us this mornin. You know our hearts, and you know this po boy ain't done nothing wrong. You said you

would hep the fatherless and the motherless; do Jesus bring this poor orphan back to his old cripple grannie safe and sound..."<sup>6</sup>

Sue's words to the officer show her courage and determination to defend her grandson, Tom, even though she is powerless against the racial prejudice of white authority. By swearing on God's truth and insisting that both she and Bossie witnessed Tom at home, Sue resists the officer's attempt to criminalize him. Her appeal exemplifies the resilience of Black women as they work to safeguard their families amid systemic injustice.

Liza's prayer exemplifies a form of spiritual resistance. Recognizing the limitations of human justice, she invokes divine intervention, explicitly appealing to Jesus as the protector of the fatherless and vulnerable. This act signifies both an expression of faith and an assertion of emotional resilience. Her prayer functions as a form of resistance against despair, articulating hope and fostering solidarity amidst pervasive fear. Collectively, these dialogues illustrate how Black families derived strength from both spiritual faith and truth in their efforts to withstand the traumatizing effects of racial terror.

Johnson's *"A Sunday Morning in the South"* critically examines the pervasive influence of racial violence under Jim Crow, illustrating its infiltration into every facet of Black life. By situating the narrative within Sue Jones's household, Johnson underscores how private spaces traditionally associated with love, safety, and comfort are rarely immune to external intrusion. Ordinary domestic activities, such as preparing breakfast or getting ready for church, are depicted as being frequently interrupted by pervasive fear, thereby exemplifying how systemic racism infiltrates even the most routine and personal aspects of daily existence.

The play additionally underscores the profound emotional trauma inflicted by lynching, not only upon the direct victims but also on their families and communities, who lived in pervasive fear. Furthermore, Johnson constructs a narrative of resilience, exemplified through Sue's vigorous defense of her grandson, Liza's devout faith, and Tom's unwavering trust in truth. These elements collectively embody the perseverance of Black families in the face of systemic injustice. Consequently, the play functions both as a critique of institutionalized racism and as an homage to the resilience inherent within African American domestic life. By illustrating how public acts of violence infiltrate private spheres, Johnson compels the audience to recognize the extensive ramifications of white supremacy and the pressing demand for justice.



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