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AN APPRECIATIVE STUDY OF THE VERSE  
OF JENNIE HARRIS OLIVER

By

JULIA LEE STEPHENS

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Central State Teachers' College

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Dean of Graduate School

## P R E F A C E

One is prone to overlook the beautiful things that are a part of his every-day surroundings. In a like manner he is apt to ignore the worthwhile things that are produced in his own community. As one who loves her state and is proud of Oklahoma's record, I decided to make a study of an author who never fails to catch the changing moods of her beloved state, Oklahoma. Jennie Harris Oliver, who lives among us, has endeared herself to hundreds by her charming manner and her verse depicting the beauties of Oklahoma.

The study of the verse of Jennie Harris Oliver has been delightful. As I read her poems, I appreciate anew big, breezy, democratic Oklahoma.

I wish to acknowledge Mrs. Oliver's kindness in supplying me with information useful in the interpretation of her works. I am also indebted for helpful suggestions and criticism given to me by Mr. George White, Dr. Agnes Berrigan, and Miss Myrtle Williams. I desire also to thank Miss Mabel Caldwell and Miss Phoebe Smith, personal friends of Jennie Harris Oliver, for additional information.

J. L. S.

TO MY MOTHER

AN APPRECIATIVE STUDY OF THE VERSE OF  
JENNIE HARRIS OLIVER  
CHAPTER I  
SUBJECT MATTER

Some authors must wander far to glean materials for their work. Others are able to find unlimited resources within the boundaries of their own localities. Jennie Harris Oliver is one of the latter. Endowed with a vivid imagination, filled with love for the beautiful, and blessed with the ability to select and fit together exquisite words and phrases, she pen-paints from the doorstep her beloved "red-earth." She herself once remarked:

Most new writers I find go afar for the straw with which to bind their clay. I had written all of six years before learning to take the red sands, the blackjacks, and the rocks of my own corner of Oklahoma, and bring things to pass.<sup>1</sup>

The red sands of Oklahoma, and especially the long red hill at Fallis, have become familiar to many through the book of poems entitled Red Earth written by Mrs. Oliver. This book was first published by the Burton Publishing Company of Kansas City, Missouri, in 1934. The name of the book was taken from the author's favorite poem, "Red Earth," which appeared in the Literary Digest of June 20, 1925. To those who have been accustomed to thinking of Oklahoma as a state whose rolling hills are swept by the bleak winds of winter and the torrid ones of summer, Jennie Harris Oliver

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<sup>1</sup>Kenneth Kaufman, "Oklahoma Biographs--Jennie Harris Oliver," The Daily Oklahoman, April 14, 1935.

brings a new picture in her verse. This region of red-earth with its red-bud and wild plum blossoms takes on a new beauty. Not content to stay within the limits of Oklahoma, Mrs. Oliver carries her readers to the arid sands of the Southwest. In beautiful imagery she catches the solemnity and mystery of the shifting desert sands, and pictures some of the tragedies that these sands expose. Although Mrs. Oliver roams in fancy, in reality she clings to her Fallis hills which furnish much of the material for her verse and stories.

A survey of the subject matter of the regional poetry of Jennie Harris Oliver's shows that she draws mainly from three areas of experience: her appreciation of the physical environment of Oklahoma, her awareness of people, and her religious study. In her description of the physical environment Mrs. Oliver writes of the desert, the conservation of the forests and animal life, the changing of the seasons, the weather, and the effect of the oil industry upon the landscape. Of the second group her poems about the Indian, negro, and love are good examples. The Bible has also proved a fruitful source of inspiration and thought.

The desert is one of the most popular and numerous subjects for Jennie Harris Oliver's verse.

Her poems to the desert comprise so considerable a part of her book that to those who read her she must ever be identified with this objective style of writing. "Desert Stars," "The Desert," "Lure of the Desert," and others show the fascination this illimitable mystery has for the imaginative mind of this poet.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Caroline Crockett Ellis, review of Red Earth, p. 3.

These desert poems describe the desert at various times: in the glare of a mid-day sun as in "Noon-Trail," in the cool of evening stars as in "Desert Stars" and "God's Night." Others depict the vegetation and animal life, such as "Flower of Thirst," "Night Blooming Cereus," "Reprieve," and "Home Trail." Mrs. Oliver catches the mystery, the beauty, the horror, and tragedy of the desert. In these lines from "Mirage" (itself a mystery) she expresses this feeling of tragedy and mystery.

It holds its own. The thirsty ones that came  
 Across the waste to drain it, there remain.  
 Demented ones that sought its mirrored lake  
 Are there--they have no thirst to slake.

Again, one catches the spell of mystery that seems to surround the desert.

Something, beyond, has laid its spell on me:  
 Something is promised, what I do not care;<sup>3</sup>

In a few of the desert poems, such as "Calling Water" and "Flower of Thirst," Jennie Harris Oliver points out that water is all that is necessary to make the desert blossom. In these two poems she sounds a note of hope for "the sun cursed land" through irrigation projects.

In her regional poetry Mrs. Oliver emphasizes the important subject of conservation. One who enjoys the beauty of the fields and woods, and loves wildlife, would naturally be interested in any kind of plan that would provide for preservation. Coming to Oklahoma when it was first set-

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<sup>3</sup>"Lure of the Desert," ll. 9-10.

tled by the whites, she has seen many fields laid waste by erosion. She has also witnessed the wanton sacrifice of the abundant wildlife that once was there. Her plea for the forest is voiced in "Without Defense."

Forest, green forest, come back in thy splendor!  
Cradle the melting snows, garner the showers.  
Give thy soul-mist to the dry-running meadows;  
Wash with thy weeping the weary dust-flowers.

In the poem, "Haunted," she pleads for the animals slain by the hunter and her heart bleeds for those that are injured or left motherless. She concludes with this colorful but touching picture.

And oh, the deer, that licked its wound, and bled  
Where sumac boughs leaned over half as red'.

Some other poems in this group are: "Bar-Wing," a plea for the quail, "Exiled," the plight of a baby moose, "Orphans," the struggle of a bear cub for existence, and "Survival," the fate of a wolf.

The changing of the seasons and their effect upon the countryside, as viewed from the top of the "red-hill," are ever a source of joy and inspiration to Jennie Harris Oliver. Coming from the state of Michigan, she enjoys the short winter and rapid change to spring in Oklahoma.

Here we have winter as a white face, smiling  
And after it, the warm rain vanishing.  
A night of wind, a day of wild bird singing,  
And flowers spring.<sup>4</sup>

In "The Hounds of Spring" she again expresses the same idea in a striking metaphor.

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<sup>4</sup> "Here," ll. 4-8.



They passed me at the dawn, the hounds of spring,  
All thin and silvery. I heard their drumming feet.

With the coming of spring in Oklahoma the hills are covered with wild plum blossoms and the creeks bordered with the colorful red bud. These blossoms are a source of pleasure to this nature-loving poet, who often sings their praise in her verse.

When red-bud lamps are burning--  
(The rose-red lamps in leafless spring the fods  
go lighted by!)<sup>5</sup>

And where was heaped the deeply-crueted snow  
Appeared long rifts of purest emerald glow  
Thick set with wreaths of plum and violet.<sup>6</sup>

Even the dust storms that have spread misery and destruction and proved such a menace to Oklahoma furnish material for verse. This quotation is from "Dust Storm," one of the author's more recent poems.

I have eaten the dust from the hills of God  
And dust from the bogs of men;

The quiet, cool, summer evenings that follow after the heat of the day are times of musing for Jennie Harris Oliver. Her keen ear catches and interprets musical sounds that pass unnoticed by the average person. "June Woods" gives a sense of solemnity and beauty.

So lone, a hermit-thrush within its leafy steeple  
Tolled out its note of worship and of longing.  
God never made another place for rest and dreaming  
So sweet, so safe, so lone.

The memory of long tranquil June nights is recalled in such

<sup>5</sup> "Red Earth," ll. 16-18.

<sup>6</sup> "Chinook," ll. 12-15.

lines as these:

The scent of roses and dew-wet clay;  
The 'ehur' of locusts in an ivy-vine;<sup>7</sup>

The long, dry, hot days of summer become quite real again  
when one reads "The Sun."

The land is cursed with sun, I said  
And a body might as well be dead  
As to meet all day the blinding glare  
And breathe the flame of the rainless air.

One is reminded of the terrible suffering of the wild  
and tame animals due to the lack of food and water during the  
long dry months of late summer. Man, driven by the drought  
to provide for his own beasts, ruthlessly kills in order to  
conserve the food sought by the wild animals. In the poem,  
"Betrayed," Jennie Harris Oliver is filled with remorse be-  
cause of the killing of the wild ponies.

There was grass for all, and water,  
Till the sun broke into flame;  
Then we whistled in the strangers,  
The wild ones with our tame;  
And we shot them down for buzzards--  
Those shinning ones like silk  
With their leader black as thunder  
And his forehead white as milk.

Then, as is so often the case in the Southwest after a  
long, dry spell, the rains begin to fall and there seems to  
be no end to the downpour. In the poem, "The Sun," the poet,  
after describing the drought, tells of the endless rain. In  
the end of the poem she describes the sudden change from rain  
to sunshine, which is quite characteristic of late August or  
early September in Oklahoma.

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<sup>7</sup>"Homesteaded," ll. 9-11.

Then, suddenly the rain was still  
And a red-bird sang at my window-sill.

With the passing of the colorful Oklahoma autumn, Jennie Harris Oliver seems to catch the sadness of the dying vegetation and the passing of the year. These lines suggest a bleak November evening:

For leafless are the moaning trees,  
The grasses dead about your knees.  
And in the pale, cold autumn sky  
The wild birds wheel with plaintive cry,  
The chill sun sinks with fitful gleams:<sup>8</sup>

Another group of her descriptive poems may be classed as weather poems. These deal with such subjects as rain, hail, wind, and fog. These are highly imaginative and are filled with beautiful word pictures. To this group belong "Fog," "Rain," and "Hail." These lines bring forth striking word-pictures:

The fog arose like sea foam shattered in a fountain.<sup>9</sup>  
It rained till wood-piles sprouted cloaks of silvery lichens,  
And all the shingles bloomed a host of fairy gardens.  
...  
Nothing but rain, and rain.<sup>10</sup>

No portrayal of the Southwest would be complete without some description of the oil fields which have played so important a part in the development of that districts. Jennie Harris Oliver describes the oil fields as they blacken and destroy the surrounding vegetation.

<sup>8</sup>"Frostbitten," ll. 27-33.

<sup>9</sup>"Fog," ll. 7.

<sup>10</sup>"Rain," ll. 9-10-14.

Where shafts bite deep in a home hillside  
 And wounded earth in its flame has died,  
 The trees are tattered and seem to be  
 A-drip with dew, endlessly.

...  
 The grass is shriveled in clots of grime;  
 And flowers, strangled in sheets of slime.<sup>11</sup>

Living in Oklahoma where there are many Indians, Jennie Harris Oliver has observed the tragic outcome of the white man's triumph over the red man. Three of her poems, "Souvenir," "Pueblo," and "Hidden Music," express the sadness and longing of a once proud but now conquered race who must bow to the inevitable. The pathos of an old Indian woman is expressed in these lines from "Souvenir:"

Ah, buy the yellow necklace, fair one buy.  
 It is not amber, but--one cannot die!

The longing and patience of the Indian is set forth in this quotation:

Sit I before my lone hogan  
 Patiently, day after day.  
 I am the ancient jar-maker  
 Moulding my life into clay.<sup>12</sup>

"The Medicine Man," another of her Indian poems, is a tribute to the famous Oklahoma Indian artist, Acee Blue Eagle. The poem was written for the dedication of the murals painted by Acee Blue Eagle in the auditorium of Central State Teachers' College, Edmond, Oklahoma. This poem is quite different from the others in that the theme is a much happier one. Here the white man praises the Indian for his art.

<sup>11</sup>"Black Gold," ll. 1-4, 7-9.

<sup>12</sup>"Pueblo," ll. 13-17.

negroes. She has had the opportunity to observe <sup>negroes</sup> then as they go about their work. The type of negro with whom she is associated is not the educated class but a class steeped in the superstition of their race. However, she deals more thoroughly with the negro in her short stories. Two negro poems are found in the revised edition of Red Earth, "Picanniny O," and "Black Man with the Hoe." Both poems describe the happy, easy-going life of the negro as he tills the soil and eats the fruits of his labors. The sentiment expressed in these poems is quite different from the pathos and tragedy expressed in her Indian poems.

Jennie Harris Oliver came to Oklahoma over thirty years ago. She knows the life of the people who came when the country was first opened for settlement. She understands their long years of struggle to make a living and establish homes on the sandy hills. Some of these people have become wealthy because of the discovery of oil on their lands. It is interesting to note the comparison of the attitudes of the men and women who have gained this sudden wealth.

A women sees through the sting of tears  
 A murky flood on the pride of years;  
 But the man beholds, with exultant eyes,  
 New fortunes made and new cities rise!<sup>13</sup>

Although the greater part of Jennie Harris Oliver's verse treats of nature in an objective manner, yet she has produced some lyrical verses. These lyrics have the themes of romantic and universal love. "Love is a Kingdom Afar,"

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<sup>13</sup>"Black Gold," ll. 19-23.

"Love is the Flower of the World," and "Day That I Love" are examples of her belief in a form of universal love. "Estranged" and "You" are lyrical poems expressing the theme of romantic love.

Mrs. Oliver, the daughter of a minister, is of a very religious nature. She often read aloud from the Bible to her blind mother and learned to love the Hebrew poetry. Some of the verses and phrases suggested themes for both her short stories and poetry. "Hidden Water," "The Desert Shall Blossom," "Consolation," and "Lindbergh" are examples of this influence. A verse from Isaiah suggested the poem on Lindbergh's flight across the Atlantic.

Who are these that fly as clouds, and as doves to their window.

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Bible. Isaiah LX, verse 8.

CHAPTER II  
DICTION AND TECHNIQUE

Jennie Harris Oliver is particularly noted for the excellence of her diction. She describes in beautiful language the everyday surroundings of her Fallis home. Oklahoma sunsets flash in brilliant colors across the pages of her verse. The coming of spring and summer causes her to pour out her joy in words of sheer beauty. The weather, whether it is fog, rain, hail, heat, dust, or cold, is so aptly described that the reader at once derives pleasure from his recognition of fine technique. Words whose very sounds suggest mystery and solitude are used to convey the feeling of mystery and loneliness so often associated with the desert. In mournful but melodious diction she paints the Indian of today. Again, in lines of easy motion the carefree negro moves across the pages. Every hour of the day or night is filled with magic beauty and rhythmical sounds. Things which appear commonplace on the surface are to Jennie Harris Oliver's discerning eye and musical ear endless sources of inspiration. She seems to have the ability of putting anything she sees or imagines into verse.

The phrase "red-earth" has become imbedded in Oklahoma speech because of the appeal of the poem "Red-Earth." These two words immediately bring to mind the picture of red hills and sandy fields that are so much a part of central and western Oklahoma. In order to make the red-earth more red, the

poet describes the waters as "tawny," and then makes the red-bud a background. It is interesting to note Jennie Harris Oliver's love of color. She paints the sunsets in vivid colors; she selects the flowers that are bright in color, contrasting the lighter colors with the darker ones; and she seems to be particularly fond of deep red blossoms, purple shadows, and silvery moonlight. Note the contrast of vivid color in "Here."

If earth and streams are red, we have the skyline,  
and it is blue.

This stanza from "The Red Rose Garden" is evidence of the author's fondness for deep red blossoms.

It was so red, that bleeding hearts stood palely drip-  
ping.  
Wild orioles dreamed in and out as pallid shadows.  
The sulky tulips crisped their lamps with vainly  
flaming,  
And all the poppies fell apart and died of envy.  
The sunset, even, paled within that honied fastness--  
So red! So red!

The redness of Oklahoma soil is intensified by the brilliant sunsets. In "Uncharted" Mrs. Oliver selects colorful phrases and links them together to give a picture of a flaming Oklahoma sunset.

There is a land where Beauty walks alone--  
....  
With mountain peaks of burning rose and gold,  
And violet-ravished valleys. There the bold  
Gray steepes of old cathedral towers  
Drip poppy splendors; and translucent flowers  
Of saffron, on the edge of great lagoons,  
Pour their late gold into the afternoons.  
....  
Black palms against an emerald-painted sea;  
....  
A crystal bridge, in gleaming turquoise laid;  
....



Oh, do not ask me where this country lies:  
For you should know your Oklahoma skies!

The gracefulness of an approaching airplane affects her thus:

It came from out the mystery of vapor mountains--  
A winged shape that sped, yet strangely seemed to linger.<sup>1</sup>

A column of wild geese outlined against a gray wintry sky become:

Wild geese--a wavering spear of clashing, burnished silver.<sup>2</sup>  
One marvels at the simple, beautiful expression of grief on  
the night preceding Easter morning.

Night turned on its pillow of sorrow and wept.<sup>3</sup>

The happy atmosphere and bright coloring of Jennie Harris Oliver's Oklahoma verse changes to one of mystery, tragedy, and whiteness in her desert poems. One feels the heat, vastness, and solitude so vividly described in her verse. These lines from "Flower of Thirst" convey the feeling of mystery and heat:

I am a ghost  
Sheeted in silver 'neath the pallid moon,  
...  
I am the phantom of forgotten days--  
Holding my own upon the rainless ways.  
...  
Here in this furnace land of bones and tears--  
I am a ghost.

This feeling of silence, mystery, and solitude deepens in  
"Desert Stars."

Oh, desert stars, I beg you watch with me;  
For soon will dawn the Silent Mystery.

<sup>1</sup>"Sky Trailer", ll. 1-2.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>"Easter Pageant in the Wichitas'", l. 39.

Wolves are ever a part of the desert. Jennie Harris Oliver uses their hungry howls to add to the atmosphere of tragedy that is usually present in her desert poems. The phrase, "whimpering wind," is typical of her expressive words and further adds to the feeling of stalking death in the desert.

Fierce--hunger-perishing--that voice of night,--  
The wolves,--sent on the whimpering wind, a cry.<sup>4</sup>

The wolf pack starting out in search of its prey presents a weird picture of gray shadow against white sands. The use of words with long "o" such as ghost, host, and low, add to the atmosphere of the shadowy picture. The phrase "sneaked low and gray" completes the uncanny scene.

On a summer night when the sands were white  
As the face of a peering ghost,  
The Night-wind called old Timber-wolf--  
(And Timber called his host)--  
So the wolves went down on a hidden trail,  
And the wolves sneaked low and gray,  
To the silver track of the canyon floor  
And the shack where the hunted lay.<sup>5</sup>

The desert owl is given an air of wisdom and solemnity in this clever metaphor;

If you would see the desert owl  
A friar stand, in his monkish cowl;<sup>6</sup>

These are just a few examples of Jennie Harris Oliver's power over words. Hundreds of these phrases are interspersed throughout her verse to give it a charm and beauty that is especially characteristic of all the author's writings.

<sup>4</sup>"Home Trail," ll. 7-8.

<sup>5</sup>"The Leader," ll. 25-34.

<sup>6</sup>"God's Night," ll. 12-13.

As one reads the desert poems, which have proved so popular, he becomes conscious of the recurrence of certain words and phrases. Among these are: pallid, cower, and mirage. Frequent phrases are: heat-palsied, poppy-bosomed, purple shadows, silver moonbeams, thirst palsied, arid rocks, parched mesa, and furnace land. Another group of words, which are typical of the West and Southwest, are seldom used east of the Mississippi outside of fiction and the western movies. In this group are the words: coulee, pinto, corral, mesa, and dobe. To omit such words of regional significance would be to detract from the glamor and spirit of a district whose civilization is rapidly undergoing a change.

The very names which Jennie Harris Oliver selects for her Indian characters give one a feeling of melancholy and haunting music. In "Souvenir" the name, Woonah, is musical but sad in tone. By the use of words with long "o" and double "o" sounds, the poet produces an atmosphere of sorrow.

Old Woonah's old! Time was when she could gloat  
 ...  
 And work strange dreams on doeskin soft as silk;  
 Memories of wood-smoke, birds, and roaming deer;  
 Of wigwam dance, the hunt, the changing year.

The name of the old Indian woman in "The White Gods," Makteo, is another use of a rhythmical but melancholy word. One notes again the choice of words with long "o" producing a feeling of lonesomeness and sorrow.

Makteo, thy tribesmen have left thee to perish--  
 (Old thou art grown, as the season is old!)  
 Mother of chieftains, now face desolation;  
 Want, at thy shoulder, stands savage and bold.

In "Pueblo" the ancient jar-maker speaks in words made beautiful by the use of soft "a" and long "o".

I am the maker of shadow;  
 Painter of moonlight and stars;  
 Soul of the yucca that patterns  
 Night with its candle-like bars.

The sorrow and pathos of the Indian are forgotten when the singing words of "Picaninny O" are read. They produce at once an atmosphere of an easy-going, carefree existence. The very sound of the title, "Picaninny O," suggests laughter. The negro dialect also lends color and blends with the swinging rhythm. The use of words with "i", both long and short, gives a feeling of sprightliness and happiness in the following lines from the poem:

De rabbit am a-skippin' in de orchard,  
 De whippoorwill am hurtin' wif its woe;  
 But muh honey, honey-chile,  
 He can only blink an' smile;  
 Foh he's a lazy picaninny,--O!

In these foregoing quotations it is interesting to note the versatility of Jennie Harris Oliver's diction, which readily changes to provide the atmosphere of color, coolness, mysteriousness, sadness, and happiness. Her ability to link together words into expressive and musical phrases makes her diction a thing of beauty and delight.

In addition to the music of her words, Jennie Harris Oliver's poetry abounds in striking and beautiful imagery, brought about by the use of many metaphors and similes, much use of personification, some alliteration, and frequent onomatopoeia. These figures of speech, revealing a vivid imagination, make colorful pen-pictures which glide along smoothly and rhythmically.

cally. Caroline Crockett Ellis, when she reviewed the manuscript of Red Earth, wrote:

Even in her prose writings there are whole paragraphs of pure poetry. She knows no way of expressing herself but in poetry. She thinks in poetry, she sees in imagery.<sup>7</sup>

"Pipe Organ" is an excellent example of Mrs. Oliver's ability to produce incomparable figures of speech. The effect of the piper's music upon the different periods of the day is very interesting.

The piper played, and morning stirred upon its pillow:  
A wistful sound, like echoes sighing in a canyon.

...  
The piper played, and noon stood on the peaks to listen.  
It heard the dry lips of the desert huskily pleading;

...  
The piper played and evening leaned to stretch its shadows.  
Night clipped the stars and set the early moon on fire.

...  
Then it was still. Sound died upon the piper's fingers.

Her use of striking metaphors is further shown in this bleak winter scene.

The pines were cemeteries, and in the blue-gum branches  
The stiffened sparrows clung and swayed, pale puffs of  
nothing.<sup>8</sup>

The muck and grime on the surface of the oil field fail to discourage the poet who is able to see the miracles of nature being turned into channels of usefulness for man. The metaphors which she uses to describe oil are geology from a poet's standpoint.

Through veins of iron is pumped away  
Old forest's blood in its rich decay.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>8</sup>"Lost Trail," ll. 3-4.

<sup>9</sup>"Black Gold," ll. 15-16.

Although Jennie Harris Oliver's verse is rich in metaphor, the use of simile is far more noticeable. Often an entire stanza is just one colorful simile after another. The description of a cactus bloom is a good example of this.

Rider in the sage, you found me--  
 Found the star that lured and blinded  
 On a thin and twisted cactus.  
 Like a shred of angel-drapery,  
 Like a disk of silver tissue,  
 With a light that thrilled, yet baffled;  
 Soft as pearl and opal, blended,  
 Keen as emerald paled and frozen,  
 White as snow in deepest winter  
 By the wraith of moonlight haunted--  
 I had caught, and poised, and flowered.<sup>10</sup>

This same plan is used in "Reprieve." It is interesting to note the repetition of the word white in her desert poems.

And all their fine, crisp leaves--are white:  
 As white as sorrow, hallowed; as white as marble, frozen;  
 White as drifting clouds of June  
 Whiter than June lilies.

Sometimes the author likes to produce an effect in color in simile by contrasting light and dark.

As snowy brides who carry sheaves of crimson roses.<sup>11</sup>

The similes are not always beautiful or colorful, but these forms predominate in her poetry. Occasionally a simile may be a little gruesome, but it thus adds atmosphere to the poem. The following simile taken from "Lone Trail" reveals the difficulty of following a seldom used trail in shifting sand.

The lonely trail that trickled through the sage,  
 To wind, at last, about a bouldered spring,

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<sup>10</sup>"Night Blooming Cereus," ll. 19-30.

<sup>11</sup>"God's Night," ll. 3-4.

Was blotted, like the hopeless eyes of age--  
So closed the landscape, like a lidded thing.

As is so often the case of a person endowed with a vivid imagination, Jennie Harris Oliver personifies practically everything. The night beckons, the mountains step, the shadows kneel, the flowers trim their wicks, the wind runs, the sun becomes "the warden of the prism air," and even the oil tanks "squat like gnomes in a world of gloom." The stately yucca casts anew its spell of beauty and life in the arid regions when the poet has it "trim its wicks."

If you would see the yuccas trim  
Their silver lamps at the coulees' rim;<sup>11</sup>

Many people have awakened during the midnight hour and listened to mysterious and weird sounds. Many, too, have wondered about the "things" that set the empty chairs rocking. These experiences come to life in the lines of "Sounds."

I woke as midnight turned upon its purple hinges  
And heard sounds day hides within the core of silence.

...

I heard the attic step, and step, among the spiders.

...

The "things" that rock in empty chairs and set them creaking.

The night-wind assumes a new form and beauty in these phrases from "Windwares."

I heard the wind--  
The narrow, endless body of the night-wind,--  
Running, running, running.

That does not mean city wind which dodges round  
corners and whirls up dirty paper and filthy, worn out  
things, but clean, young wind out on great, wide prairies,

<sup>11</sup>"God's Night," ll. 3-4.

running, with slim young body--running, running, running--<sup>12</sup>

Repetition of sound patterns is common in Jennie Harris Oliver's verse. Sometimes this occurs in an entire sentence given at the first and then at the close of a stanza; sometimes it is a phrase similarly recurring. The latter seems to be one of her favorite devices. "Noon Trail," "The Desert," "Day That I Love," "Survival," "Her Eyes," and "June Woods," are some examples of this form. Assonance plays an important part in the beautiful music of "Noon Trail." A sound pattern of the poem reveals the frequent use of long "o", which helps to produce an atmosphere of solitude.

It was so still, that silence languished for a whisper.  
 .....i.....i.....o.....i.....  
 It was so hot that pale flame cowered on the mesa.  
 .....o.....a.....a.....o.....a....  
 A vulture, in the palsied blue above a lone foothill  
 ...u.....a.....u.....o.....i..  
 Reposed upon its silken couch of ether, dozing.  
 ...o.....o.....i.....o.....e.....o.....  
 And all the twisted desert people mutely smouldered,  
 ....a.....i.....e.....e.....u.....o.....  
 It was so hot--and still.  
 .....o.....i...

Alliteration on the letter "b" is effective in these lines:

Though never his silvered wing, broken and bleeding,  
 Would carry him far in the blue, bending sky;  
 ...  
 Bold, beautiful bar-wing--and so, he must die!<sup>13</sup>

The letter "s" is used in the poem "In the Desert."

Skinny and Sneaky, and old Cripple-toe:  
 Shadow-gray, shadow-black--slunk they all so.

Many expressive words suggest the sounds the poet is try-

<sup>12</sup>Caroline Crockett Ellis, review of Red-Earth, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup>"Bar-Wing," ll. 9-10-16.



ing to convey to her readers. The onomatopoeia is especially pleasing to those who enjoy "singing verse." In the following lines from "Noon Trail" one senses the languid feeling of extreme noon-day heat.

Upon the pallid rock the lizards, flat and soundless,  
Slid slowly eastward toward the promise of a shadow.

Note also how the movement of the lines parallels that of the lizards. In "Death Valley" the poet uses words which are expressive of the restless, moving desert sands.

And its dust of powdered silver  
Is a whirling, floating hair.  
The low, bleached moon, a robe is,  
That sunlight turns to flaming,  
And its furtive feet move restlessly  
In sandals of despair.

The versatility of Jennie Harris Oliver is quite noticeable in the construction of her verse. The stanzas vary in length from two lines to twelve. The number of stanzas varies from one to seven. The number of lines within a stanza differs in the same poem; a long stanza often being followed by a couplet or quatrain.

The poet's use of rhyme varies as widely as do her verse forms. Most of the stanzas have some form of rhyme at different intervals. However, it is difficult to pick out any particular pattern, for the rhyme scheme often varies within the poem. The greater part of her rhymed verse ends in masculine rhyme. There are a few examples of feminine rhyme. This is one of the few examples:

While over me numberless bones are piling,  
And salt dunes ripple, and winds are fleet:  
There will be forests and green fields smiling,

When I and the sunshine meet:<sup>14</sup>

The author's use of meter and accent are as varied as her stanza and rhyme schemes. Frequently this is broken by a trochaic or anapaestic foot. She uses very little blank verse. The meter of the lines also varies greatly. Some of her simple, whimsical poetry if even written in iambic dimeter.

The trail grew wide  
One summer dawn  
The sky was clear;  
The tree was gone.<sup>15</sup>

There are a group of poems of unrhymed, iambic verse, with thirteen syllables to the line, which Jennie Harris Oliver calls her own form of blank verse. "Noon Trail," "Rain," "Sounds," "Lost Trail," "Moon Pictures," "Her Eyes," "The Red Rose Garden," "Hail," "June Woods," "Fog," "Sky Trail," "Gnomes in the Corn," and "Lindbergh" belong to this group.

Much of the pleasure to be derived from her poetry is traceable to the finished artistry with which she clothes her vivid impressions in fitting words musically arranged. She uses a great variety of poetical devices to achieve effect, but the reader is aware only of the effortless grace, the inevitability of her lines. An analysis of such excellence, no matter how painstaking, falls far short of revealing the secret; but the reader need only read aloud such poetry to become conscious of what analysis and study of technique fail to discover.

<sup>14</sup>"Calling Water," ll. 9-12.

<sup>15</sup>"My Wishing Tree," ll. 28-32.

CHAPTER III  
DISTINCTIVE TRAITS

Certain distinctive characteristics in tone and form become apparant as one reads the verse of Jennie Harris Oliver. Realism, although it is not an outstanding trait, is much in evidence in a few of her poems. Some of her verse is of such an emotional nature that it possesses lyrical qualities. Another group of her verse is fanciful in thought and may be called whimsical verse. Her poems show her indebtedness to Kipling and to Longfellow, although, except for obvious similarities in rhythm between some of her poems and Hiawatha, this indebtedness is indefinite. As do many other poets, Jennie Harris Oliver uses poetic license to carry out her rhyme pattern.

It is difficult to associate realism with a writer who is always prone to see the beautiful, and who even clothes ugliness in beauty. Yet, the versatile pen of Jennie Harris Oliver is capable of portraying realism. Kenneth Kaufman in his review of Red Earth made the following comment on the realistic qualities of Mrs. Oliver's poetry:

Not that she is not capable of realism; she can draw as fine a pen picture as anyone writing today, but that she always surrounds even ugliness with a haze of emotion which translates it into beauty.<sup>1</sup>

Realism in her poems is expressed in three ways: the characters are patterned after real individuals; the settings are copied

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<sup>1</sup>The Daily Oklahoman, April 8, 1934.

from places which are real and familiar to her; and she writes about nature as it appears in every-day life. However, the kind of realism which Jennie Harris Oliver portrays is the surface type. She does not penetrate deeply but usually lets her emotions enter into the scene to change the atmosphere of reality. This makes her a subjective realist. The best example of her work in this field is a character study drawn from a heap of bones in the desert sand. This bit of stark, grim realism entitled "Unfit" begins:

So this in you, Jose'; bones white as snow;  
 Those bleached ribs curved to the spine below,  
 This ghastly skull is part of you, Jose';

...

You hated and destroyed. Now you are dead.

But, ah, at last you have a heart, Jose',  
 For one can see it make you cringe, and sway:  
 Within these ribs that warping sunlight locks,  
 A restless rattler, seeking freedom--rocks.

One who loves the beautiful and is disposed to find it every where, as Jennie Harris Oliver does, can never be a realist. For one of her nature must necessarily gloss over the ugliness, and color only the beautiful for the world to see. However, the above poem is an exception.

Although Jennie Harris Oliver is primarily an objective poet, at times her verse becomes subjective in tone. These subjective thoughts expressed in musical lines make up a group of lyrical poems. The poet, herself a lover of beautiful music, has written a number of poems in this group as songs. A few of them have been set to music by Oscar Leher of Oklahoma University. In this song group are: "Love Cannot Die," "Day That I Love," "You," "Estranged," "Love is the Flower of the

World," and "Love is a Kingdom Afar." This group expresses the theme of universal love and the love of woman for man. "Omission," though not written as a song, expresses sorrow because the poet is neglectful in her praise of God. These lyrics are usually written in iambic accent but the meter varies from dimeter to pentameter. They are all short, never exceeding sixteen lines. "Estranged" is one of her most beautiful lyrics. The delicate handling of the difficult subject shows the natural artistic ability of the author.

Oh, often I come when evening is late  
And stand at the shadowy bars of your gate;  
Or walk the dim paths that we trod in past years--  
An alien to hope and a prisoner to tears.

Purely lyrical verse occurs infrequently in Jennie Harris Oliver's poetry. She does not pretend to be a lyrical poet, although she remarked that she would like to be one.<sup>2</sup>

There is a certain whimsical quality in some of Jennie Harris Oliver's verse that at times makes it almost childish in thought and form. Again, one wonders if the author is not laughing as she writes. In "My Windmill" the verse form corresponds to the simple thought.

I wanted a wind-mill--  
I wanted it bad;  
I did not dream  
It would drive me mad.

"I Was Going to Buy a Hat" is another example of this whimsical quality. Here she again uses a very simple verse form.

I was going to buy a hat  
When I spied on a dingy shelf  
A bosom friend, whereat

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<sup>2</sup>Letter to the author, March 19, 1937.

I quite forgot myself.

A beckoning friend, at that--  
I had to stop and look.  
I was going to buy a hat  
But I bought--a book.

In the following lines one feels that the poet is laughing as she writes:

Pegasus, whoa! Come, fly me back.  
My future reels; my fortunes shrink:  
I have my pens, ink, words and plots  
But--I forgot my "think."<sup>3</sup>

At times Jennie Harris Oliver possesses a child-like simplicity which sets her apart from others. One just knows that she believes in fairies.

Where are the trees when the dark rides by  
On a windy coach in the elfish gloom,  
With a purple cloak and a silver plume,  
And a piping voice, like a banshee's cry?<sup>4</sup>

Or:

It was so dark that goblins walked the street with anybody.  
So dark that witches hung their broom sticks on the door-knob.  
Grave judges lost their way and roamed abroad with robbers.  
Mouse trails were blotted, and the cats' eyes scared each other;<sup>5</sup>

Besides dealing to some extent with realism, lyrics, and whimsicality, there are some minor distinctive marks of the poet's verse that are interesting. Caroline Crockett Ellis made the following comment on the Kiplingesque qualities of the poet's verse:

<sup>3</sup>"Miscue," ll. 13-17.

<sup>4</sup>"Masquerade," ll. 1-4.

<sup>5</sup>"Her Eyes," ll. 8-12.

There have been press comments on the Kiplingesque qualities of Mrs. Oliver's poetry. By selecting only a few, these comments might be justified. Her "The Leader," "In the Desert," and "Survival" are a few which remind a little of Kipling. But she is too versatile, too many-sided to be compared to any one writer.<sup>6</sup>

The Literary Digest had this statement when "Red Earth" appeared on the poetry page:

Did Kipling's "Red-gods" dwell in Oklahoma? Something like this belief is implied in this from Harlow's Weekly (Oklahoma City).<sup>7</sup>

When Mrs. Oliver was asked if she were an admirer of Kipling, she replied.

Yes. I used to think Kipling cruel. Still, it is a cruelty one can forgive; even forget because of its perfection.<sup>8</sup>

Just as Kipling was able to catch the many moods of India and portray them for the rest of the world, so Jennie Harris Oliver is able to convey in a marked degree the beauty of Oklahoma and the mystery and lure of the desert sands of the Southwest.

Another interesting feature is that a few of Jennie Harris Oliver's poems have the rhythm of Longfellow's "Hiawatha." These are: "The Desert's Cistern," "The Ruined 'Dobe," and "Night Blooming Cereus." This quotation from "The Desert's Cistern" is a good example:

When the rider on the mesa  
Faint and choking parched and burning,  
Reels and cowers in the long trail,  
Lifts his pleading lips to heaven  
For the cloud that does not blacken,  
For the rains that never whitens,

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<sup>6</sup>Op. cit., p. 3. (June 21).

<sup>7</sup>Vol. LXXXV, (1925).

<sup>8</sup>Letter to the author, May 1, 1937.

I am waiting just before him,  
Ages there I waited for him!

Compare this with:

By the shores of Gitche Gumes,  
By the shining Big-Sea-Water,  
Stood the wigwam of Nokomis,  
Daughter of the moon, Nokomis,  
Dark behind it rose the forest,  
Rose the black and gloomy pine-trees,  
Rose the firs with cones upon them;<sup>9</sup>

The author's most frequent use of poetic license is in her rhymes. However, gifted with an unusual command of words, she does not often resort to this form of rhyme. These lines from "Green Radios" are an example of her imperfect rhyme:

And I, in my garden, was seeking a rose,  
When up tuned the wind, and I heard the trees singing  
A whispering anthem with swelling solos.

This is an illustration of rhyme brought about by accenting the last syllable of one word to make it rhyme with a shorter word in the succeeding line:

The lone pine clung to the arid rocks  
Discomfited--  
The surly, lashing wind went by...  
And shook its head.<sup>10</sup>

The poet's use of imperfect rhyme is not offensive because of the infrequency of its occurrence.

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<sup>9</sup>Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "Hiawatha," Part III, ll. 64-71.

<sup>10</sup>"Courage," ll. 12-16.



## CHAPTER IV

PHILOSOPHY

The philosophy of Jennie Harris Oliver can be condensed into one word, "love." She pours out her love for the beautiful things around her, for her home, for people, and for God. She loves the soil and believes that it has an uplifting influence on the soul of man. In spite of all this love, life sometimes becomes too commonplace, and then she escapes into the dreamland of her youth. Kenneth Kaufman expressed her philosophy in his review of Red Earth when he said:

Her chief characteristic as a poet is a sort of universal love. Like Browning's Duchess:

'She loved what e'er she looked on  
And her looks went every where.'

There is no form of beauty which escapes her eyes; flowers are beautiful to her, and so are mountains, but so also are weeds covered with frost, and rainwater rolling down one of her beloved red hills dyed red as blood with Oklahoma mud.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps this great love and sympathy for others has arisen from Jennie Harris Oliver's own life which has been one of struggle. First, there was the hard struggle against poverty. Her childhood was spent in a poor minister's home; later she became a school teacher and tried to care for her blind mother. Second, sorrow came into her life with the deaths of Mr. Oliver and of the little blind mother. These events instead of crushing Jennie Harris Oliver have only deepened her understanding of the needs of others and made her see that life after all can

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<sup>1</sup>The Daily Oklahoman, April 8, 1934.

be beautiful and happy if one wills it so. Kenneth Kaufman again writes understandingly of her life:

But it has been happy. For there have always been birds and flowers and starshine and sunsets; and the magic of imagination; and more than all else--people. For Jennie Harris Oliver has a heart as wide as an Oklahoma prairie, as tender as a blooming rosebud!<sup>2</sup>

Jennie Harris Oliver loves her simple Fallis home with its beautiful garden; she loves her neighbors and the surrounding red hills. The ties of Fallis are so strong that she seldom travels far away. No matter how enjoyable the little journey has been, she is always very happy to return. This love for home, no matter how humble the dwelling, touches the heartstrings and recalls one's youth, especially if he has lived in the country.

My old road home is just a wooded lane  
 ...  
 And no one knows but those who lonely roam,  
 The sudden keen delight of my road home.<sup>3</sup>

Jennie Harris Oliver loves her friends and in turn loved by them. She does not forget the help that they have given her; frequently she pours out their praises in verse. "The Medicine Man," "To Ida A. Gardner," "To Mary Elano Merten," and "Vingie E. Roe" are examples of this. Vingie E. Roe formerly lived in Fallis and was one of the first to encourage Mrs. Oliver and insist that she sell her stories and poems. Mrs. Oliver pays this tribute to Vingie E. Roe's ability as a writer:

She wrote: a magic thread was found:

<sup>2</sup>"Oklahoma Biographs," The Daily Oklahoman, April 14, 1935.

<sup>3</sup>"My Road Home," ll. 13-14.

Across the page her golden skein unwound.  
 Lo, stories sweet and keen as mountain air,  
 A-throb with mystery and love were there!<sup>4</sup>

Further evidence of the poet's great love for people is that once each spring the Writers' Clubs from all over Oklahoma make a pilgrimage to her home. At this time their various writings are discussed and Mrs. Oliver never fails to add her words of encouragement to any ambitious writer.

In "Love is a Kingdom Afar" one gets an insight into Jennie Harris Oliver's idea of love and God. She points out that everyone, regardless of creed, is striving to attain through love the kingdom of Eden (heaven). Life is full of hope and man feels that the struggle is worth while because heaven is the ultimate goal.

For love is a wonderful kingdom afar!  
 What does it matter which lover you are  
 Life ever beats at a close-fastened portal,  
 Bruising its wings at the bar.

...  
 Eden, itself, is the hope of attaining.  
 Love is a kingdom afar!

The poet finds that the way to earthly happiness is through service for humanity. True happiness comes from making others happy. This idea is expressed in "To Edwin Markham and His 'Shoes of Happiness'."

And let creation's moment walk with me--  
 The rapture of achievement that I knew  
 A surer way to serve humanity,  
 And I will bless my discontent, and you.

Lest I my happiness "for others" lose  
 O, Poet, wise and kind, lend me your shoes!

<sup>4</sup>"Vingie E. Roe," ll. 9-13.

She explains her idea of love further in "Love is the Flower of the World." Love is the fulfillment of the heart's desire for when one has love one has everything.

Beautiful flower, rose of the world  
Crown of my heart's desire;

...  
All things are mine, for I have you dear:  
Love--is the flower of the world.

Mrs. Oliver has quite an interesting philosophy in regard to the love of woman for man. She believes that for every woman there is just one great passion, love, and that in every woman's life there is one particular man to whom this great love is given. She believes that such love complements the woman, who would know life imperfectly without it. True love never dies. It may be tested and tried but some spark of it always remains. In "Love Cannot Die" she says:

And love cannot die--if the loving is true;  
For Love is Hope, dear--and that Hope is you!

One who loves people as Jennie Harris Oliver does is naturally democratic. Combined with this spirit of democracy is one of humility that at times almost borders on timidity. Mrs. Oliver's fame as a writer has come to her rather late in life. She has always been accustomed to the admiration of her friends but not until these late years has she had the admiration of the public. Although Jennie Harris Oliver is frequently praised by the public both as a poet and as a short story writer, she is quite modest and retiring. Her feeling of humility is voiced in "Dust Storm."

I have eaten the dust from the hills of God  
And dust from the bogs of men;  
And never shall I on my bit of sod  
Be vain of myself again.

One whose soul is overflowing with love for others is certain to be bruised when some of these loved ones are taken by death. Jennie Harris Oliver was crushed when her blind mother died. But her faith and hope in the Creator caused her to feel His comforting presence. She tells of this experience in "The Bridge."

And then a sudden sacred glory cast  
A silver bridge across the waves to me.  
I felt God's hand reach down and hold me fast;  
I walked with Him across immensity.

In a few passages of her desert poems Mrs. Oliver reveals that one feels closer to God alone in the vastness of the desert. The following lines have a Wordsworthian flavor in that communing alone with nature has a rejuvenating effect on the soul of man.

I found the valley where men go down  
From the trail of gold, or the trail of fame,  
...  
But I was safe, and fed, and new--  
There, with myself--and God.

In "God's Night" the same thought is expressed:

So, feel yourself grow clean and bright,  
Come out on the dunes  
Where the sands are white.

Having striven against poverty, Mrs. Oliver has the deepest feeling for those who must struggle for their very existence. The poetry of Edwin Markham has long been an inspiration to her. "Man with the Hoe" is one of her favorite poems. However, she disagrees with Markham on part of the philosophy set forth in the poem. She states that she never did believe that the "earth slanted back a forehead or let down a brutal jaw." Mrs. Oliver believes that the earth is good for one. Although

there are different interpretations of the poem, this is an interesting thought, the effect of the soil on people. Jennie Harris Oliver lives in a village; she knows country people both learned and unlearned, rich and poor, and understands them. Many of the people with whom she is associated are very poor; they have been accustomed to doing without luxuries and do not know what it is to have them. They are content to till their soil year after year and in return obtain food and shelter. Mrs. Oliver selects the simplest of the toilers and uses him to answer Edwin Markham's "Man with the Hoe." A negro farmer speaks the poet's idea of the influence of the earth upon man.

Ah drops mah hoe an' gits on muh knees.  
 Ah has no burden on muh bosom, no wrong in muh heart.  
 Fur away Ah hears de hound dawg bay tuh de holler tree.  
 De day am done and Ah rests till mawnin!  
 Ah am de happiest man, and de usefullest man in de  
 whole worl';  
 Ah am de man dat feeds yuh bodies whilst Ah feeds muh  
 soul.  
 Ah am de man wif de hoe.<sup>5</sup>

One concludes, then that Mrs. Oliver believes that the simple life of tilling the soil is a life of happiness in spite of want and trouble.

Jennie Harris Oliver, with all her zest for living, sometimes becomes tired of the commonplace things of life and escapes from them through her poetry into the land of make-believe. "Castles in Spain" describes one of her flights into realms of fancy.

Go to your heaven, young weaver of dreams  
 Leaving the world to complain;

---

<sup>5</sup>"Black Man with the Hoe," ll. 64-72.

Go till you find, on the edge of the world  
Beautiful Castles in Spain.

Instead of roaming into realms of dreamland, she sometimes enjoys journeys into the fairyland of her youth. Here again she reveals in their beautiful flowers and costumes.

Make up your mind that I  
Am sweetly banished  
With elves and nixey's, where I used to be.<sup>6</sup>

Those who know Mrs. Oliver are impressed with her youthful zest for living, her buoyant spirits, and her cheerful nature. She meets age with a smile and refuses to see the marks of time on her features. Perhaps this is the secret of her enduring youthfulness. "My Mirror" expresses her attitude toward age.

My mirror faces open sky;  
Close by a swaying maple tree.

...  
A line or two upon my brow;  
The hollows in my neck and cheeks--  
They do not seem to matter now;  
I haven't seen myself for weeks.

For, framing soft around my face,  
A-toss with birds and scented air,  
In verdant youth and rhythmic grace  
A swaying maple combs her hair.

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<sup>6</sup>"Changeling," ll. 4-7.

## CHAPTER V

REGIONALISM

People of the Middle-West, Southwest, and West are rapidly beginning to realize the importance of their unusual heritage. They are awakening to the realization that European culture is not American culture and can never be such. At the beginning of the settlement of our country, the thirteen colonies borrowed the manners and customs of Europeans. Colonial America was an imitation of Europe. It was impossible to establish the European social order, which was backed by centuries of tradition and culture, in a primitive country without tradition and organization. Those rugged pioneers who blazed the westward trail of civilization developed customs and manners quite unlike those of their neighbors along the coast, who kept in touch with the mother country. As a result, they were frowned upon by their more "cultured" brothers and considered uncouth. Much the same attitude prevails in America today. The great metropolitan areas, with their large percentage of Europeans and their close contacts with Europe and England, are still trying to imitate their neighbors across the water in manners and thoughts. These areas have long been considered the centers of the best in American thought and culture. In recent years, however, people have awakened to the fact that America is an entirely different country from either Europe or England, and as a separate country she has been in existence long enough to have her own



institutions, manners, and culture. These individuals realize that the American people, with their different background, different social customs, different form of government, and a different system of education, can never reach a high form of culture by copying a system that is foreign to them. The result is a decided movement to look with approval upon the things that are decidedly American and to try to preserve them for the future.

This movement of trying to develop a typically American culture is especially noticeable in the field of literature. One of the first to achieve national fame as a writer of typical American life was Bret Harte. His "The Luck of the Roaring Camp" appeared in 1868. This was followed by a number of other stories which used the grandeur of California scenery as a background for the wild and dissolute life of the gold mining camps. In 1871 Edward Eggleston drew attention to a different part of the country, Southern Indiana, in The Hoosier Schoolmaster. This story portrays the manners and dialect of the pioneers in a very realistic manner. A little later Charles Egbert Craddock (Mary Murfree) brought before the public a region that was little known in a group of short stories entitled In the Tennessee Mountains. Other short stories followed in which she continued to describe the strange scenes and eccentric characters of the Tennessee hills. These pioneers in their field of American Literature blazed a trail which has proved popular at various periods. Americans were slowly beginning to appreciate something which was typically

American. Some of the contemporary authors in this field of literature dealing with a particular region are Dorothy Canfield Fisher, who pictures rural New England, Willa Cather, who portrays the pioneers of Kansas and Nebraska, and Sinclair Lewis who uses wider territory, that of the Middle West, as the setting for many of his novels, and who points out the dullness of the small town life, satirizing the attempts to get a veneer of European culture.

In a discussion of literature dealing with a particular region, the question arises what is regionalism. Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines regionalism as: partiality for one's own region or country; sectionalism. Region is defined as a portion of territory or space of indefinite but of considerable extent. Then regional literature may be defined as: that literature in which the author shows an interest in the physical and social characteristics of a particular region and portrays these as distinctive marks of that section of the country.

Regionalism is playing an important role in the history of the Southwest. Here is a district that is, yet, quite unlike anything in Europe or the metropolitan areas of the United States. Class distinction has not arisen, for the people are still engaged in exploring and developing the natural resources. A spirit of democracy prevails, for there has not been time enough to establish family traditions, as many of the early settlers are still living and possess those characteristics of rugged individualism so much a part of pioneer life. The banker rubs elbows with the humblest farmer in the daily

routine. An outsider would have difficulty in determining the social status of either unless he saw the homes in which they lived. They belong to many of the same civic enterprises, their children attend the same schools and associate together, and often intermarry. There are no traditions established, and each man must make his own place in society.

Oklahoma holds a unique place among the Southwestern states. Inhabited by the Indians, crossed by many roaming herds of cattle, settled spectacularly by the greatest "run" on record, this region has no parallel in history. The spirit of independence, daring, and determination so necessary for existence in the frontier days, not so far remote, still exists. Oklahoma writers are aware of the wealth of material in their own homeland and are availing themselves of this before it loses its American flavor. The Oklahoma University is particularly active in this field. Here Dr. Dale, Stanley Vestal, and Kenneth Kaufman through their writings and criticisms encourage work in Oklahoma regionalism. The annual Folk Festival held at Central State Teachers's College is another movement to preserve those things which are characteristic of Oklahoma. The W. P. A. is encouraging native artists and authors. This organization is also responsible for the collecting of many cowboy and Indian tales of the early days.

Among the writers who are aware of this wealth of regional material is one who has seen Oklahoma develop from the pioneer days to the present. Jennie Harris Oliver has within her the qualities of which both pioneers and artists are made; courage, a desire for freedom, and a will to achieve. After a period

of struggle she realized that the best source of material for her writings was her own section of the country. She knew the region, the people, their customs, beliefs, and hopes, for she was one of them. Because of her own struggle against poverty and hardships, she understood what it meant to wring a living from the soil. Against a background of local color she drew her strongest character, Rachel Nash of the Joie Nash Stories, who toiled uncomplainingly for her family and had dreams of success for her children. This character is typical of the hundreds of farm women who settled in the same surroundings. Although life was hard and devoid of luxuries, the courageous spirit of Mrs. Oliver is typical of the pioneers in that she made the most of what she had. She longed for beautiful things and satisfied this longing by drinking in the beauties of her own countryside. The vast expanse of green and the long red hills filled her mind with beautiful pictures which she describes in many poems about Oklahoma. Accustomed to isolation and vastness of Western Oklahoma, which she often visits and which is only a stone's throw from the desert, Jennie Harris Oliver feels the spirit of desert mystery and puts it into her desert poems.

A writer who catches the spirit of a people of a particular district and portrays their lives in such a way as to draw attention to this particular region is a regional writer. Jennie Harris Oliver is essentially a regionalist. She is conscious of the peculiar hold that the landscape and life of Oklahoma exert on its people:

"For red-earth will hold you till you die."

## CHAPTER VI

THE APPEAL OF JENNIE HARRIS OLIVER'S POETRY

The poetry of Jennie Harris Oliver is simple enough to appeal to people in the ordinary walks of life, and beautiful enough to appeal to those who are able to enjoy the finer things of life. It has appeared in the daily papers and many of the lesser and better periodicals. Her verse has received praise from prominent critics.

Verse that is rhythmical appeals to both the uneducated and educated. There is a swing about certain poetry that makes one enjoy reading it aloud. When this rhythm is made up of beautiful phrasing, there is an added pleasure to be derived from the lines. The readers of Jennie Harris Oliver's poetry delight in her musical lines and beautiful imagery. They marvel at her ability to describe ordinary things in such vivid, yet simple words. Many times her readers are filled with admiration because she is able to find so much beauty in ordinary surroundings. The meaning of her poetry is plain enough for the ordinary reader to understand. For those who have a higher sense of appreciation, the poet's simple technique and beautiful imagery are an added joy. Then to Oklahomans who love their state and have struggled along with it, her verse reveals the love which they are unable to express. Her simple philosophy of universal love is one that everyone likes to believe in but does not practice. If a reader wishes poetry filled with deep philosophical thoughts and obscure meaning, he will not read Jennie Harris Oliver, but if he is

searching for something beautiful to enjoy, then he will not be disappointed in his choice of her verse.

Like many authors Mrs. Oliver writes to sell. Writing is her means of livelihood. When she first began to write she was forced to sell wherever she could find a publication that would use her type of verse. Now that she has established her reputation as a writer, her writings have a wider publication. Many of her poems have been published in The Daily Oklahoman, Harlow's Weekly, and My Oklahoma, all state publications. The New York Times, The Delineator, The Literary Digest, Holland's Magazine, and The Good Housekeeping have published her poems. Many of the western poems appeared in The Sunset Magazine and the Munsey publications. Red Earth has seen its second edition, and has been published in Braille. The University of Munich, Germany, recently sent for copies of Red Earth, and copies have been ordered and sent to London.

Among the prominent critics to comment upon Jennie Harris Oliver's verse is John Cowper Powys, the English author and critic. While visiting in Oklahoma City he remarked of "Noon Trail,"

"It is one of the finest American poems that I have read." This same poem first appeared in The Daily Oklahoman. Later the University of Oklahoma awarded Jennie Harris Oliver twenty-five dollars for the poem as the best written by an Oklahoma author. It is difficult to determine what qualities make up the appeal of "Noon Trail." The vastness of the desert sands is still clothed in mystery for many, and this makes an appealing theme for a poem. Upon examination the reader finds

that the sound pattern is very pleasing. The long "o" adds to the feeling of lonesomeness so often associated with the desert. The imagery is very beautiful and colorful and parallels the languidness of the desert life during the heat of the day. These are some of the qualities which make the poem outstanding, but there are others which are intangible.

Critics might find many flaws in Jennie Harris Oliver's poetry. The majority of people are not critics; they read what they enjoy. However, it would be a severe critic, indeed, who would fail to appreciate such lines as:

"Your feet will carry red-earth to the end." (Red Earth)

And this description of a mirage:

"It was so clear that cities swam up out of nothing."  
(Noon Trail)

And the feel of approaching spring in the lines:

They passed me at the dawn, the hounds of spring  
All thin and silvery. I heard their drumming feet.  
(The Hounds of Spring)

These lines so finely expressive of the art of seeing and expressing beauty, are the essence of poetry.

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Mrs. S. J. McCaskill