

# Southern Mansion

Arna Bontemps



▲ **Critical Viewing** Does this southern mansion appear to be deserted or inhabited?  
How can you tell? [Deduce]



Poplars<sup>1</sup> are standing there still as death  
And ghosts of dead men  
Meet their ladies walking  
Two by two beneath the shade  
5 And standing on the marble steps.

There is a sound of music echoing  
Through the open door  
And in the field there is  
Another sound tinkling in the cotton:  
10 Chains of bondmen<sup>2</sup> dragging on the ground.

The years go back with an iron clank,  
A hand is on the gate,  
A dry leaf trembles on the wall.  
Ghosts are walking.  
15 They have broken roses down  
And poplars stand there still as death.

1. **Poplars** (păp' lərz) *n.* trees of the willow family, with soft wood and flowers.

2. **bondmen** (bānd' mən) *n.* slaves.

### Literary Analysis

**Tone** What details indicate a condemning tone toward the time period described in the poem?

## Review and Assess

### Thinking About the Selection

1. **Respond:** Were you surprised by the descriptions in the poem? Why or why not?
2. (a) **Recall:** What is the scene described in Bontemps's poem? (b) **Infer:** What is strange and extraordinary about the scene?
3. (a) **Recall:** What words does Bontemps use to describe the poplars? (b) **Infer:** Why might he describe them in this way?
4. (a) **Recall:** How are the roses broken in the last stanza? (b) **Interpret:** What does this breaking of the roses represent?
5. (a) **Contrast:** What is the difference between the two sounds the speaker hears? (b) **Compare:** What do the sounds have in common? (c) **Interpret:** Explain how the lifestyle represented by one sound is maintained by the suffering represented by the other sound.



### Arna Bontemps

(1902–1973)

Born in Louisiana and educated at the University of Chicago, Arna Bontemps was a university

librarian for more than twenty years. Bontemps also had a career as an editor, a writer, teacher, and literary critic.

Bontemps wrote one of the most important records of African American life in the South during the Depression: *The Old South*. This collection of short stories combines fiction and personal memories.