

1897

# Johanna Ambrosius

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## Recommended Citation

Hoxie, Bessie B., "Johanna Ambrosius" (1897). *Student and Lippitt Prize essays*. Paper 66.  
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## JOHANNA AMBROSIUS.

The best writers of today are true representatives of their age, and their works are informed with "the spirit of the present". This is an era of freedom in thought, speech and action. Restrictions are no longer laid upon people in humble circumstances, but he who can may stand on an intellectual equality with his neighbor. Ability, talent, genius are sooner or later sure of recognition, and this reward has recently come to a German peasant woman, who has aroused both the sympathy and admiration of all who have read her poems.

Born in that dreary part of Europe called East Prussia, the daughter of a poor artisan, she passed as happy and care-free a childhood as might be expected, in a land from which little could be wrested but food and shelter. With her elder sister Martha, she attended the village school only until eleven years of age. Their mother was an invalid for many years, and so the girls were obliged to give up their school duties, substituting for them the most menial labor both indoors and out. They had one

pleasure, however, to which they both looked forward with joy. This was the coming of the *Gartenlaube*, a popular German periodical.

When twenty years of age, Johanna married a poor but honest peasant by the name of Voight. This act did not tend to better her circumstances, for husband and wife lived in a wretched little hut and had as companions only their inferiors. By means of a small legacy they were able to purchase a house and a piece of land in Grosswersmeniken. Toil and care were now well known terms to Johanna, and for twelve long years she saw neither book nor newspaper, not even a Bible. Her only thought was for her children, to be able to work for them; and no sacrifice on her part was too great, if by this means she could provide them with comforts.

But it was not intended that such a woman as Johanna Ambrosius should remain in obscurity all her life. Better things were in store for her; and by means of the poems, which at first were written for her own solace, she was destined to become known to all the world.

She seems to have gained her literary inspiration

from the Gartenlaube, which as a child, she had read so eagerly, and from a few books belonging to her father. But she was slow in giving expression to the poetic emotions which had thrilled her soul from childhood, for it was not until the autumn of 1864 that her first poem was written. Other poems followed this in rapid succession, and were published in the Gartenlaube, where they were discovered by Professor Karl Weiss Schratenthal, who since then has been her firm friend and appreciative critic.

It is incomprehensible to us, how a person to whom the terms art, science and literature were unfamiliar, surrounded by people in every respect her inferiors and many times deprived almost of the necessaries of life, could write as Johanna Ambrosius has done. How has she, shut away from the world, in that lonely little village, been able to form so broad a conception of life as is given in many of her poems? Johanna herself explains it very simply for us, when she says, "God is good; He had compassion upon my burden and sent me the angel of comfort, the Muse".

Probably her poems now number considerably over five

hundred, nearly all of which she is able to repeat. As subjects she takes the simple things about her the birds, flowers and trees. A great observer of nature, she is continually singing about it. Her responsiveness to nature's moods is shown in the tender verses of "A Summer Night".

"Her soft cool arms extending,  
 Night comes anew;  
 Fields, woods and meadows clasping,  
 Her heart unto;  
  
 With mantle light enwrapping  
 Each tree and bush,  
 While murmuring tones the world  
 To dreams doth hush."

Other poems express her love for her country and her home. She says,

"My native land I will not leave  
 Whatever may be told;  
 Above all other countries it  
 Doth shine like purest gold.  
 Let Fortune smile in other realms

In richer pomp of hue,  
 Nowhere save in my native land  
 Laughs sun from skies so blue."

From the poem, "Village By the Spring", we get an exquisite picture of her own little village, Grossversmeniken.

"From hills so gently sloping,  
 Thy clear eyes widely oping,  
 Thou fronts't the world, O village mine!  
 No walls for thine adornment,  
 Naught save the German peasant,  
 In straw thatched hut of rude design.

Fair art thou always, whether  
 Dewdrops or snowflakes gather,  
 Or in the golden harvest state.  
 Ah! peerless is thy beauty  
 When 'neath the glowing Spring sky  
 Mid thousand blossoms, thou dost wait.

From hills so gently sloping,  
 Long, long, thy clear eyes oping,  
 The world confront, O village mine!

No artist e'er will paint thee,  
 Yet always radiantly  
 A gem in Germany thou'lt shine."

Her lyrics are numerous, and many of them have already been set to music. Among these are "The Sound of the Bell", "I Have Loved", "Open Thy Heart", "Oh! Love Thou too" and "What I Love".

Johanna is no pessimist, although in many of her poems there is a note of sadness and a longing for death. She does not complain at her lot, but accepting life as it is, tries to make the best of it. No one to read her poems, could doubt for an instant that she is a devout Christian. Although she fully realizes that "it costs a great deal to be a Christian", still she is unwilling to give up her faith. Her feeling is, that the troubles experienced here are only a preparation for the world to come.

The poems of this German peasant as a whole, seem to me to express her desire to help her fellow beings, especially those who suffer. Although bowed down by care and trouble herself, still she can find time to pour out

her love and sympathy for them in her songs.

It was not until January 1895, that Johanna really became known to the world. Although people had grown used to seeing verses appear in the Gartenlaube each week, signed Johanna Ambrosius, and these same verses had been copied far and wide, even the Empress in her palace teaching them to the children at her knee, still the writer was unknown. But when "The Last Song" appeared, it took the world by storm and readers anxiously questioned if this were indeed her last song. With a book of her poems, a messenger was sent by the Empress of Germany to East Prussia, to search out the invisible writer. He found her in a poor hut with the fever of pneumonia burning on her sunken cheeks. Medical aid was procured and the patient recovered.

It seems that she had not expected to live, and was anxious to send one more message to the world. So, weak as she was, scarcely able to write, she gave us this poem, to me, the most remarkable of her whole collection, for a world of meaning is expressed in the stanzas of "The Last Song".



\*A song of my creating,  
 A wondrous song I'd sing,  
 Which like the fragrant breeze of May  
 O'er earth its flight would wing.  
 From North to South, from East to West,  
 Away break in a trice,  
 And give to all mankind sweet rest,  
 Joy, Peace, and Paradise.

\*Unto the sick and dying  
 Sweet cordial it should bring,  
 The sound of its soft pinion's stroke  
 Still grief and suffering;  
 Mid clank of arms and conflict hot  
 Fan courage to a flame;  
 For ~~wos~~ men comprehended not  
 Comfort it should proclaim.

And if this song succeeded,  
 Nor fame nor gold to gain  
 I'd wish, but throw my lyre down  
 And sing no other strain.

Unto the pine woods stealing,  
 Lay me for death's repose  
 To no one e'er revealing  
 Who did this song compose."

It is a pleasure for us to think that one who has been so burdened and has tried to accept all her trials patiently, will never experience want again, for with her annuity from the Empress she will be comfortable all her life.

The story of this simple peasant woman is one of continual hardship, and bitter struggle; but she has not envied those more fortunate, and has borne her troubles uncomplainingly, supported by the gift of song, and an abiding trust in God.

*George D. Kofler.*