

Gwendolyn brooks's life experience in the bean eaters and we real cool

[Literature](#), [Biography](#)



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The Life of Gwendolin Brooks

Born in June of 1917, Topeka Kansas, Gwendolyn Brooks grew up and lived in Chicago Illinois. Keziah Wilms Brooks was Gwendolyn's mother, a teacher in Topeka. Working as a janitor, David Anderson Brooks was Gwendolyn's father. He was also the son of a runaway slave. Brooks was the oldest of three children in her family. Her parents strongly supported her education. Already writing plays and poems as a child, Brooks was extremely ambitious. Published in Childhood Magazine in 1930, was Brooks's first poem, "Eventide". In an African American newspaper, the Chicago Defender, appeared many more of Brooks's poems. Continuing to support Gwendolyn's passion, her mother organized for Brooks to meet Langston Hughes and James Weldon Johnson, Harlem Renaissance poets.

Brooks graduated from Wilson Junior College in Chicago in 1930. After she trained in an African American poetry workshop, one created by Inez Cunningham Stark. In the 1940's more of Brooks's poems appeared in magazines; Harpers, Poetry, and The Saturday Review of Literature. Brooks

had two children with Henry Blakely, who she married in 1938. They had Henry Blakely, Jr. in 1940 and Nora Blakely in 1951.

In the beginning, Brooks's work depicted people's lives who lived in Chicago's South Side ghettos, describing settings from kitchenettes to pool halls. Being strong through tough times and closeness with family were a few positive parts in the lives of the poor that Brooks highlighted in her writing. She also wrote about African American servicemen who were still discriminated after risking their lives overseas. In 1950, she received the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. President John F. Kennedy invited Brooks to read at a Library of Congress festival in 1962. In 1962, she was named Poet Laureate of Illinois, and in 1985, Poet Laureate Consultant of Poetry for the Library of Congress. The Black Position was released in 1971, a magazine created by Brooks. Brooks received the National Medal of Arts in 1995. Brooks taught at University of Wisconsin, Columbia, Elmhurst, Northeastern Illinois College, and Clay College of New York. When Brooks was fifty, after attending a conference for African American Writers, she set a goal to advance racial justice. From here is when her poetry became more political and bringing attention to racial discrimination. Due to heart problems, Gwendolyn Brooks died on December 3rd, 2000 (Terjesen [EBSCO]).

Gwendolyn Brooks's life was filled with racism and poverty. Attending public school, she was discriminated by white classmates and lighter-skinned African-American classmates. In elementary school, Brooks focused on her lack of friendships rather than schoolwork. She was convinced that the other girls at school did not like her because her father was a janitor. To

additionally support Brooks's parents' income, they rented out the second floor of their house. Brooks often felt upset and left out by the other girls. She started writing poetry about love, nature, and death in her notebooks. This made Brooks feel better about her problems in school. Brooks's experience with poverty and racial prejudice are clearly reflected throughout her poems, particularly "The Bean Eaters" and "We Real Cool".

The Bean Eaters

"The Bean Eaters" is said to be Brooks's first poem to focus on racial identity. This poem represents the poverty and racism in Brooks's life. As the first stanza starts with, "They eat beans mostly, this old yellow pair." This relates to Brooks, as her family ate beans when money got low while she was a child. Another line of this poem that represents poverty is, "Dinner is a casual affair. Plain chipware on a plain and creaking wood, Tin flatware." "Casual affair" and the word "plain" gives the description of something ordinary. A simple and modest dinner the couple is having, in their "rented back room." This is another quote from the poem that supports the idea that the poor elderly couple represents the poverty in Brooks's life.

"Yellow pair" may be conveying an image of sickness and the elderly couple as ill with jaundice for example. It could also be describing the couple to be mixed race, neither fully African American nor Caucasian. Another struggle this couple may be going through is not feeling completely accepted to either community at the time. Being discriminated by both lighter skinned African-American and white classmates, the elderly couple represents Brooks not being accepted by her classmates.

The second stanza of “ The Bean Eaters” focuses on how the couple lives on with their old age. “ Two who are Mostly Good. Two who have lived their day. But keep on putting on their clothes And putting things away.” This section of the poem has a tone of judging the couple, claiming they are “ Mostly Good”, suggesting possibly part of them is bad, too. This quote states the couple has already “ lived their day”, but they “ keep on” and that they will spend the rest of their lives only completing these everyday tasks. This opinion of the couple is not known to be the poets, another group, or people. Brooks may be writing about the judgement by other people in society, just as she felt as a child and in her life.

“ Remembering, with twinklings and twinges” is the beginning of the last stanza. This line is about the couple remembering and reflecting back on their lives. Considering their living conditions now, it seems to be their lives have been lonely, with only each other to depend on. This is another way this poem represents the isolation Brooks felt being a dark-skinned African-American in her public schools with lighter skinned classmates. The last lines from the poem are,” That is full of beads and receipts and dolls”” And cloths, tobacco crumbs, vases and fringes.” These lines in the poem describe the couples home. It is filled with receipts and beads from celebrating holidays and purchasing things. The room also has tobacco crumbs, vases and “ fringes” which give impression of an older and lived in home. Giving character and an image to the room supports the idea of the couple living for a long time and together. Including “ dolls” in the line suggest the couple had children. Although, it does not seem like they visit frequently or have

any connection at all. Society and their own children have turned their backs on the elderly couple. This represents the loneliness Brooks felt in her childhood by being rejected by fellow classmates (Labuzzeta [EBSCO]) (Gwendolyn Brooks [EBSCO]).

We Real Cool

Brooks' experiences with racial prejudice and poverty are reflected in the poem, " We Real Cool." This poem is spoken from the perspective of a group of poor, African-American (it is never specified that they are African-American, but it is generally believed that they are) urban youths hanging out a pool hall in Chicago in the late 1950s.

Brooks said in an interview that, when read aloud, the word " We" is supposed to spoken in a weak and non-affirmative tone. Almost each time the word " we" is used, it is used to begin a sentence at the end of a line, with the rest of that sentence coming in the next line, forcing the reader to hesitate. This repetition of a softly-spoken " we" enforces the idea that the young men have somewhat of a sense of group identity, but reveals that they are not confident with their identity and the situation that they are in. Coming from the perspective of a group of poor African-Americans in the 1950s, this shows a realization of the unfortunate situation that they have been put in simply because of their racial and economic standing. Yet despite these boys' plight, the poem shows the assertion that their lives are just as meaningful as anyone else's. Therefore, the speaker in the poem is representative of the large number of young African-Americans in the mid-20th century who felt that their lives had been stifled by poverty and racial

prejudice. The repetition of the word “ we” in this poem shows the solidarity that these people felt in the face of the great struggles they went through.

Brooks herself was one of these people, helping to inspire her to write “ We Real Cool.” At public schools in Chicago, she endured discrimination from many of her classmates, and her family had to rent part of their house to supplement her parents’ income (Hinton and Day [EBSCO]). Brooks drew on these experiences as she wrote about the struggle of African-Americans in “ We Real Cool.” In “ We Real Cool,” Brooks portrays how life was seen as hopeless for many African-Americans in the mid-20th century. The poem ends with the phrase “ We / Die Soon.” By ending the poem with this dark phrase, it shows the sense of hopelessness that Brooks believed many African-Americans felt due to the racial prejudice and poverty they experienced.

To deal with their harsh circumstances, the pool players in the poem place high value on meaningless activities. The poem says, “ We / Lurk Late,” meaning that they spend lots of time hanging out in the pool parlor. It also says, “ We / Sing gin. We / Thin gin.” To “ sing gin” means to find sinful or immoral activities as pleasurable or good. “ Thin gin” refers to drinking hard liquor. By taking pride in these activities (as they say, “ We real cool.”), it shows that these young African-Americans have accepted their plight and taken to actions that will only make it worse. They have given up their means of advancing in society, such as education (as they say, “ We / Left school.”), and turned to less valuable activities. By ending the poem with, “ We / Die soon.” Brooks may be showing that for these people, death may

have been seen as a way of escaping the harshness of reality, rather than as a truly tragic event (“ We Real Cool: Gwendolyn Brooks, 1960” 243-245).

Clearly inspired by the plight of African-Americans that she experienced in the real world, Brooks may have written in this style to inspire pity for those who suffered from nearly inescapable poverty and racial prejudice.

Conclusion

Gwendolyn Brooks’s life was filled with racial prejudice and poverty. Her writing clearly represented the struggles in her life, specifically “ The Bean Eaters” and “ We Real Cool”.