

# Literary response #5



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Literary Response #5 Throughout Gwendolyn Brooks' poetry a compelling portrait of black urban life emerges. For her work, Brooks won the Pulitzer Prize in 1950 and garnered the attention of Richard Wright, who described the way she captured black urban life as, " the pathos of petty destinies, the whimper of the wounded, the tiny incidents that plague the lives of the desperately poor, and the problems of common prejudice" (Watkins, pg. 1). Indeed, upon examining Brooks' poetry, one is drawn to the subtle, yet ultimately powerful means by which she accomplishes this descriptive task. In Brooks' poem ' a song in the front yard' she impressionistically compares her life and childhood as one of growing up the front yard. For Brooks, the front yard represents a conservative take on life, one that is in-direct opposition to the more daring backyard life experienced by other individuals, or members of her neighborhood. In her description one witnesses the subtle references to life as a member of a poor urban culture. Brooks writes, " I'd like to be a bad woman, too,/ And wear the brave stockings of night-black lace/ And strut down the streets with paint on my face" (Brooks, 18-20). While it's definitively unclear if Brooks is referring to street hookers, one can reasonably assume this is the reference that is developed. In these regards, these concluding lines of the poem are effective in demonstrating black urban life; as such imagery is distinct to more cosmopolitan areas, and also poor urban life. Characteristic of Brooks poetry, the lines are simple and easily understood, contributing to their effectiveness in describing her particular milieu.

Brooks' advances her description of black urban life in a more concise and lyrical poem, ' We Real Cool'. This poem adopts a structure that some might indicate is akin to beat poetry, or even jazz inspired. Through short,

descriptive phrases, Brooks offers a satirical look at men who frequent a pool hall in her urban neighborhood. She writes, “ We Sing sin./ We Thin gin./ We Jazz June. We/ Die soon” (Brooks, 4-8). While the descriptive qualities of these lines and indeed the entire poem are sparse, their poetic and impressionistic quality are effective in creating a vision of the true reality of the poor urban landscape, and the perspectives contained therein, that traditional descriptive methods may not be as creatively successful in articulating.

In the ‘ Bean Eaters’ Brooks continues her exploration of the black urban landscape, this time examining what appears to be the life of a retired couple. Brooks writes, “ They eat beans mostly, this old yellow pair./ Dinner is a casual affair./ Plain chipware on a plain and creaking wood,/ Tin flatware” (Brooks, 1-4). In Brooks’ description the reader gains a vivid account of the quiet life of this couple. The beans here function to illustrate the banality of their dinner ritual, as well as demonstrating the couples’ particular idiosyncrasies. It’s notable that Brooks’ poetry doesn’t romanticize or overly dramatize the culture in which she grew up, instead it offers a simple, direct, but wholly accurate representation of this milieu. As Brooks concludes ‘ Bean Eaters’, “ As they lean over the beans in their rented back room that is full of beads/ and receipts and dolls and cloths, tobacco crumbs, vases and fringes” (Brooks, 11-12), the reader understands that perhaps Brooks’ greatest gift as a poet is not overarching insight into broad sociological concerns, but an eye well-attuned to the minutia of the daily life that informs her existence.

## References

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