

What we ain't got



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In the poem "a song in the front yard," Gwendolyn Brooks uses denotation and connotation to depict underlying meanings of specific words and phrases that add to the significance of the poem as a whole. Brooks uses denotation to refer to the reality of the speaker's situation at hand, and connotation to express the comparison between the poem and her view about life.

The setting and title both have specific denotation and connotation. It opens with the line "I've stayed in the front yard all my life" (Brooks line 1). The denotation is a literal front yard with a young girl playing. She plays within the confinement of the boundaries that her mother sets for her. The denotation also functions to lead to imagery. For example, a picture of a little blonde girl in a soft pink dress and bows in her hair comes to mind. The connotation of the yard depicts a way of life that is monotonous and safe. The interpretation of their yard in this way sets the tone for the rest of what is going to happen and expresses the attitude of the speaker about her life.

The first stanza is full of a variety of connotations that immediately show the speaker's feelings toward her surroundings. The line that states, "A girl gets sick of a rose" (line 4) has a denotation that suggests the front yard may have flowers or a well-kept garden. A rose is commonly tied with elegance, beauty, and true love. The connotation of the rose alludes to the innocence and simplicity of the life the speaker is living right now. The connotation also shows the hatred that the speaker feels about her simple life that is meant to be beautiful. She desires more than living simply and being a lady. The speaker has an adventurous side that is being hindered by the limitations set for her. In contrast to the lovely front yard, there is a back yard that is "untended and hungry" (line 3). It is a wild place where the speaker is not

allowed to play. The denotation of hunger is a feeling of weakness caused by lack of food. Weeds do not have literal hunger, though. The speaker uses this word to show how ravenous the weeds are in taking over the back yard. The speaker is filled with discontentment and feels trapped inside the front yard. The connotation of the back yard shows the uncertainty and dangers of life that her mother wants to protect her from. The hungry weed is a representation of a rampant, messy, and avid life. Though her mother wants to protect her, the speaker is extraordinarily fascinated by this different way of life, and she desires "a peek at the back" (line 2). In the second stanza, the speaker made it evident which socioeconomic class she belongs to in order to give background information to other aspects of what will occur: "I want to go in the back yard now And maybe down the alley, To where the charity children play. I want a good time today" (lines 5-8). Calling the other kids "charity children" (line 7) shows that the speaker belongs to a higher class. This point is made in order to hint to the connotations of everything that the mother says to the speaker in the third stanza. The speaker always addresses her mom as "My mother" (line 11, 13). The denotation of mother is a woman in relation to a child to whom she has given birth. The connotation of choosing to call her "mother" shows that the speaker is white. Terms like "ma" or "mama" are often used with an African-American speaker as opposed to the more formal address given by this speaker. The mother shows her disdain for the other children by sneering at the speaker's desire to play with them: "My mother sneers, but I say it's fine" (line 11). The denotation of sneer suggests a condescending outlook on the situation, but knowing the socioeconomic class and race of the mother, it suggests more. This sneer represents that the mother is racist and has true hate for

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the neighboring children. It is meant to show how much she deeply disapproves of them.

The denotation of the bad woman with the “ stockings of night-black lace” (line 19) indicates that she is a prostitute. The connotation behind the woman expresses more about the speaker than the actual prostitute. The speaker makes light of this by calling the stockings “ brave” (line 19). The use of the word brave shows that the speaker somewhat aspires to become like the woman wearing the stockings. The speaker views the woman as powerful. She portrays wearing the stockings as a good thing because of the freedom that woman who wears them has.

Much of the meaning of this poem derives from Brock's use of denotation and connotation. “ A song in the front yard” gives the reader a view into what it was like living as a high-class white child during the time when racism was still evident. The speaker of this poem did not have the same prejudices that her mother did, therefore she deeply desired what she was not able to have.

Work Cited

Brooks, Gwendolyn. “ a song in the front yard.” Perrines Literature: Structure, Sound & Sense Tenth ed. Eds. Thomas, R. Arp and Johnson, Greg. Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2009. 948. Print.