

Finding beauty in beans



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In the poem “ The Bean Eaters”, Gwendolyn Brooks illustrates the image of a simple elderly couple, whose lives have become rather mundane and routine. The first two stanzas in the poem serve as the exposition of the story, as Brooks paints a picture of an impoverished, aging couple living an extremely routine life. In the third and final stanza, however, Brooks challenges the connotations that stem from the previous stanzas. With a change in tone, Brooks transforms the entire topic of the poem into a more romantic and sentimental story. Through careful word choice, structure, and a shift in the overall mood of the poem, Gwendolyn Brooks conveys a story about finding happiness through simplicity and timeless love, while challenging the biases society has about poverty and simple living.

The opening stanza of the poem is essentially a description of what dinner is like for the couple. Echoing the title, Brooks describes that the couple “[eats] beans mostly”, on “ plain chipware on a plain and creaking wood” table (Brooks 1, 3). With very simple word choice, Brooks is immediately introducing the reader to the type of lifestyle the couple is leading. In choosing beans to be the food the couple eats, Brooks is stressing just how basic their lives are. Additionally, through the repetition of the word “ plain” in the first stanza, Brooks is reemphasizing the essence of their everyday life. The first stanza is also structured in a very uniform manner, as the four lines alternate between being long and short—the first and third lines are both eight words, and the second and fourth are four and two words, respectively. By doing this, Brooks is further stressing the consistency of the couple’s life. Brooks conveys the theme of uniformity in the first stanza through a rhythmically uniform structure.

Like the previous stanza, Brooks is continuing to explain who the couple is to the reader in stanza 2. By describing the couple as “ Mostly Good”, Brooks is emphasizing the plainness of the couple, saying that they are essentially average people (5). Brooks highlights their normality again in the next line, as she simply states that they have “ lived their day” (6). This conveys to the reader that not only is the couple aging, but that they have completely settled down. Brooks also describes the routine of the couple’s life in lines 7 and 8, saying that they “ keep on putting on their clothes / And putting things away”. By including this, Brooks is giving the reader supplementary insight into the mundane life of the couple. Additionally, like the first stanza, Brooks uses a consistent structure to mirror the context of the stanza. The lines are very similar in length, as lines 1, 2, and 4 have six syllables, and line 3 has eight. Brooks is again emphasizing the day-by-day sameness of the couple’s life, allowing the reader to gauge who the subjects truly are.

In the third and final stanza, Brooks shifts the mood of the poem, and thereby illustrates the actual theme. Prior to the third stanza, the reader is given the idea that this couple lives in poverty, which naturally connotes a depressing and lonely mood. The couple is painted in a much different light in the third stanza, which results in a completely different perspective of the poem as a whole. Brooks begins the stanza with “ And remembering...”, which immediately slows down the rhythm and thereby shifts the mood of the poem (9). She continues the transition with line 10, where she describes the couple continuing to remember, emphasizing a sort of dreamlike state through fanciful words like “ twinklings” and “ twinges”. In the final three lines of the poem, Brooks reflects on the surroundings of the couple, listing

the miscellaneous possessions in their back room. She includes a reverse indent to separate line 11 from lines 12 and 13, where the listing begins—this is to further delve the readers into the subtext of the miscellaneous items being listed, and to imply internal dialogue among the subjects. The poem ends by drifting off into the list of items that make up the couple's memories, finally shifting the mood completely from depressing to reminiscent and contented.

Through simple word choice and a uniform structure in the first two stanzas, Brooks makes it very easy for the reader to get caught in their own prejudices about poverty and a simple life. In the final stanza, Brooks utilizes the melodic structure and descriptive word choice to challenge the reader on the true essence of the poem. Although the first two stanzas initially connote a sense of cheerlessness and mundane routineness, the third stanza emphasizes the beauty in simplicity—the couple finds comfort in the memories that are scattered around their small, rented room. Through the mood and context of the final stanza, Brooks changes how the reader views the first two. It becomes more evident that there is also an emphasis on words that connect the couple, like “ pair” and “ two” (1, 5, 6). Brooks romanticizes the routine bean dinner in the first stanza, describing it as a “ casual affair”, as opposed to simply calling it a meal (2). The poem suddenly takes on a different meaning, and everything from the uniform structure in the first two stanzas to the initial poetic shift of mood in the third makes this poem lyrical. Brooks writes the poem to take on two different perspectives, separated simply by the understanding of the third stanza. Through attempting to comprehend the true theme of the poem, she pushes the

reader to confront their own misconceptions about what it means to live in poverty.