

## INTRODUCTION



Gwendolyn Brooks

(1917- )

Gwendolyn Brooks was born on June 7, 1917, in Topeka, Kansas. Shortly after her birth, her family moved to Chicago, where she was reared and where she has since made her home. During the 1930's, Brooks received her associate degree in literature and arts from Wilson Junior College and served as publicity director for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Youth Council in Chicago. She married in 1939 and gave birth to two children. She was later divorced.

A major voice in contemporary American poetry, Brooks published her first book of poetry, *A Street in Bronzeville*, in 1945. It introduces themes that would occupy Brooks for two decades, the first half of her career: the search for dignity and happiness in a society which denies both to many people, the twin oppressions of racism and poverty, life in the American family, and the trauma of world war.

Her early poetry is characterized by a uniform narrative stance. A sensitive observer tells verse stories about ordinary people, many of whom are ghetto dwellers entrapped by social, economic, and racial forces they can neither control nor understand. Brooks catalogs the many ways her characters seek security and hope: through religion, through integration of the races, and through careless and profligate living. Pursued to excess, these misdirected forays, these escapes, have one thing in common--they fail. These activities are used to mask frightful uncertainty and insecurity. Yet they actually extend and intensify the cycle of hopelessness.

Taken together, Brooks's poems about ordinary people produce a vivid and complex picture of America's poor, with poverty both sign and symbol of racism and injustice. The poor are uneducated (or undereducated), victimized by racism and crime, trapped by society and their own inadequacies. The poet-narrator's attitude toward them is one of wistful sympathy; she herself is part of the life she describes.

One of Brooks's main contentions at this point in her career was that political and social freedom for black people would tear down the walls between the races, that such freedom would bring relief from demeaning poverty and ignorance. It must be added, however, that in the most pessimistic moments in her early poetry she suggests that freedom for black people is impossible in American society. Recognition and honors crowned Brooks's early career. She was the first black woman to receive the Pulitzer Prize in poetry, and she was appointed Poet Laureate of Illinois on Carl Sandburg's death.

Beginning in 1968, the direction of Brooks's work changed. In her poetry, essays, and speeches, Brooks launched what she called the "new music," the poetry of black mystique and the black revolution. She explained her new role: "I want to write poetry that will appeal to many, many blacks, not just blacks who go to college but also those who have their customary habitat in taverns and the street....Anything I write is going to issue from a concern with and interest in blackness and its progress." Brooks turned away from the

careful portraiture of her early work to pursue a more emotional and personal type of polemic poetry. She would continue to experiment with new poetic forms and new attitudes to express her commitment to the cause of black unity in the United States.

In 1981, Brooks published a book of poems, *To Disembark*, composed of versions of several previously published poems. The poems serve as a continuing call for blacks to disengage from all that represents the oppressive life of white America. Brooks suggests in "Riot," as well as in other poems, that this disengagement may require violent disturbance and anarchy. The bitter, militant tone of the book cause one critic to label it a "distressing celebration of violence." In 1985, Brooks was appointed Poetry Consultant for the Library of Congress.

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