Blacks Study Guide

Blacks by Gwendolyn Brooks

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Blacks (1987) is a 512-page collection of Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry and prose, written between 1945 and 1986. Brooks is one of the most influential black writers in contemporary American literature. An accomplished and prolific writer of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, Brooks has the distinction of being the first African American writer to win a Pulitzer Prize. Critics recognize her as writing in two distinct modes: her early work is formal, characterized by a strict use of rhyme scheme and established poetic forms, while her later work is less controlled and more vernacular, meaning it uses more common, everyday language. Both styles are represented in *Blacks*. The majority of her writing explores the experiences of blacks within her community, who encounter racism and poverty as part of their everyday lives. Brooks regularly turns to the South Side of Chicago, which she calls "Bronzeville" in many of her books, as a source of inspiration for her work.

Blacks encompasses many of the issues that affect the black diaspora (native Africans and their descendants living outside of Africa), using a variety of distinct perspectives. The book contains selections from eleven of Brooks's books of poetry and an autobiographical novel called *Maud Martha*. Brooks's approach varies in each section, ranging from the succinct portraits of *A Street in Bronzeville* to the more political "preachments" of *To the Diaspora*. Her characters include children, preachers, soldiers, entertainers, the mentally ill, squirrels, and even ghosts. References to historical figures, such as writer Langston Hughes and Black Nationalist leader Malcolm X, interweave with more personal poems that recount the speaker's experiences with prejudice. Many of her poems capture an important moment in a character's life. Together, these voices reflect the black community's diversity as it continues to resist damaging racist stereotypes.

The detailed array of characters and experiences that Brooks captures helps to dismantle stereotypes and makes *Blacks* more than a mere literary concept piece. In a way it is a tribute, a far-reaching testimony to the variety of events, influences, and perspectives that occur in the black community. The poems in *Blacks* explore the abstract idea of blackness (as perceived in the larger social context), using concrete events and specific individuals. This approach affects the reader powerfully—*Blacks* becomes an archive, a definitive history, an encyclopedia, and a collective portrait of a people who have long been stigmatized by others' misperceptions. Brooks's book manages to validate and consolidate the vast experience of blackness without sacrificing the artistic intensity of good poetry.

Author Biography

Gwendolyn Brooks

Gwendolyn Brooks was born June 7, 1917, in Topeka, Kansas, to Keziah and David Brooks. Her six-decades-long writing career began when she wrote her first poem at age seven; by sixteen, she had already amassed a portfolio of seventy-five published poems. In 1945, she published her first of collection of poetry, *A Street in Bronzeville*, to great critical acclaim.

Over the years, Brooks's style changed, as did the lives of those she represented in her poetry. Critics locate an important shift around the time her fourth book of poetry, *In the Mecca* (1968), was published. The American political climate was transforming during this period, reacting to the impact of the civil rights and black power movements. Brooks reacted by abandoning the traditional poetic language and forms that characterize her earlier work, favoring instead the more improvisational sounds and rhythms of urban black language.

Her accomplishments include twenty-one books of poetry, more than seventy honorary degrees, a lifetime achievement award from the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Book Foundation Award for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, and induction into the National Women's Hall of Fame. Brooks was the first African American to win a Pulitzer Prize, which she received for her 1949 book of poetry, *Annie Allen*. She died December 3, 2000.

These poems adopt various perspectives on life in Bronzeville, a world that includes overcrowded apartment buildings, unfaithful and abusive spouses, abortion, neglect, and widespread poverty. Brooks steers readers away from purely emotional responses, focusing them on moments that expose what is really at stake for her characters. Bronzeville is not represented in a fixed way; it evolves and responds to various stimuli in the community. Bronzeville and its inhabitants spring to life in these poems, some of which are sonnets (a four-teen-line poem with a specific rhyme scheme). Among complex discussions of beauty and identity, the characters' voices remain open, accessible, and even familiar to readers.

Annie Allen, 1949

In 1950, Gwendolyn Brooks won the Pulitzer Prize for *Annie Allen*. Most of the pieces in this part of Blacks follow familiar rhyme schemes and poetic forms, demonstrating the style often associated with Brooks's earlier work. Overall, the effect is nostalgic, recalling the musicality of childhood nursery rhymes. However, the subject matter is far from idyllic, as Brooks describes a youth spent on the fringes of society. These *Annie Allen* poems read like a *bildungsroman*—the story of a young person's journey from innocence into experience. For example, in the poem "The Ballad of the Light-Eyed Little Girl," a young girl deals with the death of a pet: "Sweet Sally took a cardboard box,

/ And in went pigeon poor. / Whom she had starved to death but not / For lack of love, be sure."

The section is organized into four parts. "Memorial to Ed Bland" begins the section, followed by "Notes from the Childhood and the Girlhood," in which the speaker observes how poverty erodes children's innocence. In this realm, everything to which one might look forward is already decaying and spoiled. The following section, "The Anniad," shows that even love is temporary for Annie Allen, whose affair with a soldier leaves her asking, "Oh mother, mother, where is happiness?" In poems like "The Sonnet-Ballad," Brooks suggests that Annie's fleeting love is typical of her life, in which sources of joy are uncertain and fragile.

The final section of *Annie Allen*, "The Womanhood," contains tightly structured poems. Brooks can thus delve into concepts such as love, loss, redemption, and faith, while remaining firmly anchored in forms and language that both demand attention and resist sentimentality. As a whole, the *Annie Allen* portion of *Blacks* does not offer solutions to the practical or philosophical problems threatening the central character. Instead, the reader must try to accept the often unforgiving, painful world that Annie inhabits.

Maud Martha, 1953

The novel *Maud Martha* is Brooks's only long prose work, in which she uses the autobiographical character to explore her own experiences. Maud Martha reappears in several poems in *Blacks*, as well. The novel is a series of scenes tracing Maud Martha Brown's complicated transition from childhood into maturity; it is not a single storyline with a central climax and resolution. Brooks's story exposes the emotional and psychological impact of global and local events, on the black community in general and on the Brown family in particular.

Set in the early 1950s, *Maud Martha* relates the experiences of the title character, a dark-skinned black woman barely escaping poverty on Chicago's South Side. Despite these challenging circumstances, Maud Martha's story presents a balanced view of African American daily life at the time. As a child, she confronts racial prejudice both inside and outside her community. She begins to consider herself less attractive than other black girls who have lighter skin color and "better hair," like her sister Helen. Part of Maud Martha's evolution is in learning to assert and define her own identity in the face of prevailing ideals of physical beauty. Other scenes in the novel focus on different aspects of the human experience, including economic woes and social strife, as well as family, parenting, and suffering.

The Bean Eaters, 1960

Many of Brooks's best-known works are part of *The Bean Eaters*. The thirty-five poems in this section of *Blacks* return to Bronzeville, examining its atmosphere of poverty and the attitudes that grow out of deprivation and hardship. One political poem, "The Chicago *Defender* Sends a Man to Little Rock," deals with the controversial decision to

desegregate public schools. Another, "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon," addresses the grievous acts of racially motivated violence typical of that period.

The Bean Eaters marks the beginning of a shift in Brooks's poetic style. Turning from the strict forms and structures of her earlier work, Brooks can comment openly on racial issues affecting America's political climate. Published in the midst of the civil rights movement, *The Bean Eaters* vividly depicts the dire circumstances in which the black community found itself. Many of these poems offer a grimly detailed picture of life on society's edges, including "The Ballad of Rudolph Reed":

I am not hungry for bread.
But hungry hungry for a house
Where at night a man in bed
May never hear the plaster
Stir as if in pain.
May never hear the roaches
Falling like fat rain.

The poem's narrator relates the story of a black man who strives to provide a home for his family, but loses his life while protecting his dignity. Poems in *The Bean Eaters* acknowledge the widespread violence often associated with racism, criticizing those who seem to be ambivalent. They also offer several disturbing examples of prejudice inside and outside of the black community.

1963

The five poems in this section are more abstract than others in the collection. The verbal complexity of "Riders to the Blood-Red Wrath" at times threatens to overwhelm the emotional impact of lines like, "They do not see how deftly I endure. / Deep down the whirlwind of good rage I store." But, unlike "The Empty Woman" (which follows it), "Riders to the Blood-Red Wrath" reads more like a personal declaration of purpose, with a tone that is consistently determined and enraged. The majority of Brooks's poetry seeks to capture an individual's particular experience, but this poem's scope includes the entirety of African history, including slavery and parallel references to historical oppression around the world.

In the Mecca, 1968

Published the same year that she succeeded Carl Sandburg as poet laureate of Illinois, *In The Mecca* (1968) was nominated for the National Book Award for poetry. It is still considered to be one of Brooks's greatest works. The thirty-page title poem uses playful irony and Biblical themes to evoke the often-dreadful conditions of humanity, relating a mother's frenzied quest for her daughter, who has gone missing in a Chicago apartment

building called the Mecca. This section of *Blacks* exhibits the definitive transition in Brooks's form and subject matter, moving away from what many consider to be a more literary framework toward a more informal one. She uses shorter free verse lines (unrhymed and without fixed rhythm), innovative word patterns, and disjointed rhyme to frame her social concerns.

Fourteen poems from *In the Mecca* are included in *Blacks*, divided into two sections: *In the Mecca* and *After the Mecca*. The latter includes poetic dedications to figures like Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, and the "Chicago Picasso," a large sculpture given to the city by the renowned artist Pablo Picasso in 1967.

Primer for Blacks

The only poem from *Primer for Blacks* (1980) included in *Blacks* is "To Those of My Sisters Who Kept Their Naturals." It is a poem of validation and camaraderie addressed to black women who have made the somewhat controversial (and certainly political) decision to keep their hair natural: "You have not hailed the hot-comb recently. / You never worshipped Marilyn Monroe. / You say: Farrah's hair is hers. / You have not wanted to be white."

Brooks writes to black women who do not use chemical products like lye, alkaline, or heated appliances (hot-combs, hair irons, etc.) to change their hair's natural texture. When Americans and white Europeans held slaves, it was not uncommon for slave-owners to give preferential treatment to slaves who had some European physical traits, such as straighter hair. This practice laid the foundation for an identity crisis among those of African descent. In 1905, Madame C. J. Walker's hair softening products were embraced by mainstream black consumers, making it common practice for black women to straighten their naturally kinky or curly hair—a practice that is still widespread today. Black women tried to change themselves to satisfy a white society's ideal of beauty. Many hoped they would thus become more acceptable or appealing to the white majority, as well as to those within their own communities.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, the "black is beautiful" movement proposed a distinctive black ideal. In this social context, it became increasingly difficult for educated black women like Brooks to continue shaping and judging themselves according to white notions of beauty. By including this poem in the collection, Brooks expresses solidarity with her self-proclaimed "sisters," who are reclaiming what Brooks refers to as their "Afrikan" identities by resisting the dominant white culture.

Beckonings

Brooks's collection *Beckonings* (1975) was published by Broadside Press, a now-renowned black press in Chicago. *Blacks* includes two poems from *Beckonings*: "Horses Graze" and "A Black Wedding Song." The latter takes the form of an epithalamium, a poetic ode to a bride and groom.

In "A Black Wedding Song," Brooks again deliberately targets a specific, external black audience. The speaker addresses the reader directly, "Strong hand in strong hand, stride to / the Assault that is promised you"—calling for black unity in the face of turmoil.

To Disembark

To Disembark (1981) was originally published by Third World Press, another esteemed independent black publishing house. This section is made up of three subsections —"Riot," "Family Pictures," and "To the Diaspora." The first two sections contain selections from Brooks's books by those names, while the third draws from a later poem.

Riot (1969), a long three-part poem published as a book, is a collage of images and voices emerging from urban centers in crisis. In this piece, Brooks delves into the chaos and violence of a race riot with explosive images and language, suggesting that rioting and other militant responses to localized oppression may be warranted and necessary. *Riot* was originally published by Broadside Press in Chicago, amid the real tumult of the 1968 Chicago riots following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Family Pictures (1970) includes six poems. "The Life of Lincoln West," which appears in *Blacks*, is a long poem detailing Lincoln West's birth and troubled childhood. He is depicted as being unusually ugly, having an appearance that sets him apart from others, including his own parents. The poem is narrated by an outside observer, allowing the reader to see how Lincoln's ugliness leads to his neglect and isolation. It seems that nearly everyone finds him repugnant; the few who can stand him care for him only out of pity or from a sense of obligation. The climax occurs when a white man at a movie theater comments loudly to his companion about Lincoln, saying:

> THERE! That's the kind I've been wanting
> to show you! One of the best
> examples of the specie. Not like
> those diluted Negroes you see so much of on
> the streets these days, but the
> real thing.
> Black, ugly, and odd. You
> can see the savagery. The blunt
> blankness. That is the realthing.

The cold, anthropological tone of these remarks offend Lincoln's mother, but surprisingly, Lincoln finds them comforting. Later, when he is mistreated or otherwise made aware of how people see him, Lincoln thinks of the man's words and reminds himself that he is "the real thing."

"Young Heroes" I, II, and III are poetic odes to people Brooks admired, including Keorapetse Kgositsile, a poet and early South African nationalist. The emphasis in

these pieces is outside the narrative realm—instead of continuity, the reader finds emotion and rhetorical language. These poems are followed by "Young Afrikans," a tribute to the "furious" flowers who commit themselves to "chimeful / poemhood," and "Paul Robeson" an ode to "The major Voice"—a famous actor, singer, and civil rights activist.

The section concludes with "Speech to the Young. Speech to the Progress-Toward," a poem that calls the reader to act: "Live not for battles won. / Live not for the-end-of-the-song. / Live in the along."

To the Diaspora, the third part of *To Disembark*, includes three poems related to the theme of the African diaspora. The most controversial of the three is "Music For Martyrs," dedicated to Stephen Biko, a noted South African anti-apartheid activist in the 1960s who died in police custody in 1977 at the age of 30. "Music for Martyrs" is a classic lament, a song or poem expressing grief. It begins, "I feel a regret, Steve Biko. / I am sorry, Steve Biko. / Biko the Emerger / laid low." The poem's overall tone is melancholy, tinged with a pervasive mild sarcasm. Brooks suggests that America's support for the anti-apartheid movement arrived too late, made up of no more than "shapely American memorials" and "organized nothings," things too meager to save Biko from the South African government that killed him.

The other poems in this section are "A Welcome Song For Laini Nzinga" and "To Black Women."

The Near-johannesburg Boy and Other Poems

The last section of *Blacks* includes five poems from the collection *The Near-Johannesburg Boy and Other Poems* (1986): "Whitney Young," "Tornado at Talladega," "The Near-Johannesburg Boy," "The Good Man," and "Infirm." These poems address the apartheid regime that governed South Africa from 1948 to 1990 and black South Africans' efforts to resist that oppression. From the image of the "wise, arch, and precise" civil rights activist Whitney to the "Fist-and-the-Fury" of Father in "The Near-Johannesburg Boy," readers confront the history of resistance and violence that gripped South Africa under apartheid. Both Whitney and Father are remembered in death for their courage and pride. These poems speak to a community on the move in the struggle for freedom, one that can survive to overcome South Africa's corrupt and racist regime.

Plot Summary

The forty poems in this section are mostly individual portraits of people who live in Bronzeville, Brooks's name for a neighborhood on Chicago's South Side. In poems like "The Murder" and "Patent Leather," Brooks rejects romantic notions of struggle and triumph, while avoiding the tricky territory of labeling and classification. "Matthew Cole" gives readers a spare portrait of a sixty-six-year-old man growing old alone in a tenement flat: "He never will be done / With dust and his ceiling that / Is everlasting sad." The characters portrayed in the poems are realistic, entirely believable in their words, behavior, and experiences. The poet suggests a reverence for all of these perspectives, from the very young and hopeful to the old and resigned.

Themes

Identity, Racism, and Double Consciousness

Gwendolyn Brooks's collection *Blacks* presents a sampling of her wide-ranging work made up of poems and prose written during a period stretching from the 1940s through the mid-1980s. The lives of people in the black community are her primary subject matter, a topic that requires Brooks to document and comment on slavery, segregation, and social stigmas in terms of their lasting effects on black awareness and self understanding. Brooks's work thus illustrates the important idea of double consciousness.

The term "double consciousness" was coined in 1897 by W. E. B. DuBois, an African American civil rights activist and scholar, who wrote in *The Souls of Black Folk*:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world.

Prior to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, many blacks would have identified themselves by tribal or ethnic affiliations, rather than by the color of their skin. Arriving in America from Africa, blacks immediately became *colored* by interacting with a society that was predominantly white, in which black people were recognizably different from what was considered "normal." The double consciousness that DuBois discusses works in three distinct ways. First, blacks must constantly check themselves against pre-existing stereotypes and evaluate whether or not their behavior confirms these damaging representations. Second, the American racism that has historically set blacks apart from whites (slavery, segregation, etc.) continues to shape blacks' awareness of themselves as separate. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, African Americans identify culturally and physically with both their "African-ness" (as experienced in their physical difference from whites) and their "American-ness" (as experienced in their post-slavery incorporation, rather than absorption, into American society).

Many of the poems included in *Blacks* reflect an awareness of double consciousness. In "I Love those Little Booths at Benvenuti's," Brooks reveals the speaker's sense of stereotypes that shape white perceptions of blacks as well as shaping blacks themselves. At Benvenuti's, "The colored people will not 'clown.' / […] / Handling their steel and crockery with no clatter, / Laugh punily, rise, go firmly out of the door." The poem examines the speaker's awareness of herself as it is altered by her desire to "hide … while observing tropical truths." This play on perspectives—"us" versus "them"—is characteristic of Brooks's work and recurs throughout the text.

Brooks also exposes double consciousness and its corresponding effect on identity in the three-part poem *Riot*. The poem opens with a quotation from Martin Luther King, Jr.:

"A riot is the language of the unheard." An omniscient narrator relates the events that lead to the death of the central subject, John Cabot. Seeing the group of "'Negroes' … Poor[,] sweaty and unpretty … coming toward him," John Cabot begins to itch "beneath the nourished white / that told his story of glory to the World." In a moment of hysteria, the narrator captures Cabot's reaction, quoting his panicked cries of "Don't let It touch me! the blackness! Lord!" and, "Lord! / Forgive these nigguhs that know not what they do." In *Riot* and elsewhere in her work, Brooks looks beyond the confines of her own life to explore the duplicity and multiplicity of the black experience.

Outsider Status

Brooks creates an insulated world in *Maud Martha*, one that focuses on the black experience and makes few references to whites. In this way, Brooks heightens the reader's own double consciousness as either an outsider or an insider relative to the black community described in the novel. In a chapter called "We're the Only Colored People Here," Maud Martha and her husband go to the World Playhouse, an upscale theater in Chicago. Maud Martha narrates the events, relating how she, "the Negro woman" is seen by the whites around her:

The people in the lobby tried to avoid looking curiously at two shy Negroes wanting desperately not to seem shy. The white women looked at the Negro woman in her outfit with which no special fault could be found, but which made them think, somehow, of close rooms, and wee, close lives. They looked at her hair. They liked to see a dark colored girl with long, long hair. They were always slightly surprised, but agreeably so, when they did. They supposed it was the hair that had got her that yellowish, good-looking Negro man.

In this passage, Maud Martha's physical appearance becomes the focal point. As she experiences being "the Negro woman" as opposed to merely "a woman" or "a human being," she relates the ways that her presence affects those observing her. Maud Martha's description of what transpires is her own view in her own words—it is not presented as objective or absolutely true. Even though she speaks from only her own perspective—as we all do—she has a narrative authority that lends credibility to her interpretation of her experience. Her reality is double-sided: she is at once an insider and an outsider.

Social Class

Most of Brooks's work raises the issue of class, both directly and indirectly. In particular, *In The Mecca* employs many interwoven voices and images to paint a picture of lower class blacks surrounded by urban decay in Chicago's South Side. In John Lowney's essay "'A Material Collapse that is Construction': History and Counter-Memory in Gwendolyn Brooks's *In the Mecca*," quotes a 1950 *Harper's* magazine article calling the Mecca "one of the most remarkable Negro slum exhibits in the world." The poem

focuses on the lives of Mecca residents, but their abject poverty stands in sharp contrast to the building's lavish design.

Historical Context

Civil Rights Movement

The civil rights movement occurred during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, as black community leaders and their supporters made headway in a crusade to eliminate legalized racial discrimination. Two milestones that sparked the civil rights movement were the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision that integrated public schools, and Rosa Parks's 1955 arrest for refusing to yield her seat to a white passenger on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Her actions led to the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the subsequent desegregation of that system. At this time, many black writers began to write about the struggle for equal rights. Brooks's poetry increasingly conveyed her responses to political events during this time. Emmett Till, a black teenager from Chicago, was lynched in 1955 for supposedly flirting with a white woman while visiting Mississippi. "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till" reflects a mother's loss when her child dies in appalling racially motivated violence; more broadly, the poem calls attention to the many racist, violent acts threatening to divide the country then. Brooks's piece added yet another voice to the political firestorm in America. Because of poems like this one, the literary community began to view Brooks as a militant black voice, one whose political philosophies increasingly resembled those of Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, and Bobby Seale, prominent figures of black power and resistance.

Apartheid in South Africa

In the 1980s, after achieving significant legal victories at home, many Americans began to focus on issues of racial discrimination elsewhere, particularly in South Africa. Apartheid, an Afrikaans term that means "separateness," was an elaborate social and political system enforced by South Africa's white minority government beginning in 1948. Under apartheid, races were separated from each other by law and convention, and the ruling minority denied many civil rights to the black majority. The government moved blacks to settlements outside cities, usually poorly constructed slums lacking jobs, social services, and educational opportunities. Many blacks thus had to find work in nearby cities, but a black person leaving settlements or entering white areas had to carry an identifying pass, a sort of internal passport. Government-sanctioned oppression and brutality were commonplace, and riots in places like Sharpeville (1960) and Soweto (1976) left hundreds of black citizens dead. Activists who called for an end to apartheid were often jailed with no trial and no prospect of release. Nelson Mandela, who would later become South Africa's first black president, spent twenty-seven years imprisoned at Robben Island for his involvement in the anti-apartheid movement.

Brooks speaks to her audience in the voice of a black South African boy in the poem "The Near Johannesburg Boy," which appears in the last section of *Blacks*. After watching how people close to him suffer under the oppression of apartheid, he decides to join a protest march to Johannesburg—a city where, as Brooks explains in an

epigraph, "He is not allowed to live" because of the color of his skin. The poem ends with the determination: "we shall forge with the Fist-and-the-Fury: / we shall flail in the Hot Time: / we shall / we shall."

South Africa's brutal policy of apartheid came to an end in the early 1990s under the leadership of President F. W. de Klerk. In February 1990, de Klerk freed political prisoners who had been held for opposing the oppressive apartheid system, including Mandela, who was elected president of South Africa four years later.

Critical Overview

Gwendolyn Brooks emerged on the literary scene in 1945 with her first book, *A Street in Bronzeville*. In his article, "Gwendolyn Brooks's 'A Street in Bronzeville'," the Harlem Renaissance and the Mythologies of Black Women" Gary Smith quotes a *New York Times* review that discusses Brooks's style:

If the idiom is colloquial, the language is universal. Brooks commands both the colloquial and more austere rhythms. She can vary manner and tone. In form, she demonstrates a wide range: quatrains, free verse, ballads, and sonnets—all appropriately controlled. The longer line suits her better than the short, but she is not verbose. In some of the sonnets, she uses an abruptness of address that is highly individual.

Smith goes on to suggest that although critics of the period were quick to recognize Brooks's stylistic successes, not many went beyond the formal aspects of her technique to examine the social commentary in her work. In the 1940s, Brooks's work moved closer to an emerging style known as urban realism, emphasizing political and social awareness. As William L. Andrews notes in *Encyclopedia Britannica's Guide to Black History*, "Brooks's tribute to the vitality and rigours of black urban life" was significantly affected by this particular "decade of creative experimentation."

In 1950, Brooks received a Pulitzer Prize for *Annie Allen*, which established her as an esteemed poet. Smith notes that the American political climate generally produced reviews of Brooks's work that were at least somewhat favorable, if not entirely complimentary. Given the widespread view that race relations have improved since the 1950s, one might expect that by 1987, when Brooks published *Blacks*, critical analysis of her work would be plentiful and positive. However, a review of the book in *Black American Literature Forum* by Houston A. Baker Jr. indicates that the book was received "with less than exultant fanfare."

Critical response may have been influenced by Harper & Row's publication of a similar compendium entitled *The World of Gwendolyn Brooks* (1971). Baker notes that unlike *The World of Gwendolyn Brooks, Blacks* was published by Brooks's own imprint, The David Company, without the marketing and fanfare associated with large, international presses. The use of a small press was part of Brooks's continuing tradition of supporting black publishers, an effort that began with *In The Mecca*, published by Broadside Press, a small, Detroit-based company operated by African American poet Dudley Randall.

In her essay, "Whose Canon? Gwendolyn Brooks: Founder at the Center of the 'Margins,'" Kathryne Lindberg addresses another potential reason for Brooks's less-than-exuberant critical reception. Lindberg quotes from a 1969 *Contemporary Literature* interview by George Stavros, in which Brooks answers charges of having "abandoned lyric simplicity for an angrier, more polemical (purposely controversial) voice" in her later work: "No, I have not abandoned beauty, or lyricism, and I don't consider myself a

polemical poet. I'm a black poet, and I write about what I see, what interests me, and I'm seeing new things."

Lindberg goes on to explain that beyond the stylistic shifts in her work, Brooks's own existence as a politically engaged, black, female artist would have had an observable effect on the analysis offered by her "white, mostly male, academic" critics. Lindberg argues "There is no reason to assume that a particular political commitment must turn one toward or away from artistic experiment or accomplishment." Interpretive questions still arise today about whether Brooks abandoned her focus on poetic artistry after *Annie Allen*, but critics' varied responses to her work have done little to hinder her lasting impact on American literature.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

In the following excerpt, literary critic Cummings offers an overview of the stylistic evolution of Brooks's poetry.

Critics, white and black, argue over the racial politics of Brooks's early and later work. In the first stage of her career, Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry was praised by a largely white critical establishment for its formal virtuosity, its verbal complexity, and its "transcendence" of racial themes. In the sixties and seventies, however, many African American critics admired and focused on Brooks's welcome treatment of racial themes, violence, militancy, and the new Black Aesthetic. These critical viewpoints are much less segregated now, though as late as 2003, in a critical edition devoted mainly to her later work, Harold Bloom admitted his preference for Brooks's early work, its "wry turn upon the universal" and "imaginatively rich … enigmas."

A recording of Gwendolyn Brooks reading her poetry is included in *Poetry Speaks: Hear Great Poets Read Their Work from Tennyson to Plath*. This three-CD set includes a book edited by Elise Paschen and Rebekah Presson Mosby, and is available from Sourcebooks Mediafusion.

The *Gwendolyn Brooks CD Poetry Collection* is an audio collection of Brooks reading her own work. It is available from HarperAudio.

In its second stage, Brooks's poetry was praised by many critics for its political engagement, though more radical poets and critics found it insufficiently revolutionary. Houston Baker finds that Brooks's earlier poems negotiate and "equal the best in the black and white American literary traditions," though the "white" tradition (reflected by "the syllabi of most American literature courses") regards her as a "black writer." Meanwhile, some spokesmen for the Black Arts movement found her work rather pale: Baker notes that Amiri Baraka calls Brooks's work characteristic of "Negro literature," which is to say, not revolutionary or black enough. In an essay tracing the changes between Brooks' early and later poetry, John Callahan calls Brooks' "newish voice" an "evolution" rather than a revolution, noting that her later work, especially from *In the Mecca* (1968) to *Primer for Blacks* (1980), is less distant, more direct, "chiefly oral," and more apt to "celebrate and, therefore, intensify the integrity of African American life quite apart from the crises of white America." George Kent argues that, after 1967, "Brooks's poetry became far more attentive to blacks as an audience than it had previously." Brooks also more often used European poetic forms, such as sonnets and ballads, as well as allusions and complex diction, in her poetry before 1967 than after. Most of Brooks's critics accept her announced change after 1967 as a given, though they differ in their interpretation of the shift: some say her work moved from a private to a public realm, from white to black audiences, from apolitical to political, or from emotional distance to openness.

The Black Arts movement strongly influenced Brooks's thinking and rhetoric about her work, even if it left ambiguous marks on her work itself. After her legendary

radicalization at the Fisk Writers Conference of 1967 and her involvement in the Black Arts movement, Brooks expressed a wish to speak to, for, and about black readers and thereby to forge an audience called to awareness of racial identity and politics. Her statements about her intended audience drew their focus from black cultural nationalism and have influenced numerous writers after her. Within the Black Arts movement, many spokespeople—Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, Ron Karenga—called for a recognizably "black" voice to hail and forge a newly positioned, newly politicized black audience for art. As Karenga formulated it, black art must be unifying, collective, speaking for, about, and to the people: "Any art that does not discuss and contribute to the revolution is invalid." Gwendolyn Brooks heard the call to "the New Black, the Tall-Walker" at Fisk, and, inspired by the new aesthetic, left Harper & Row in 1968 for Dudley Randall's Broadside Press, founded in Detroit in 1965. Thereafter, she directed her work more specifically toward black readers: "I want to write poems that will be non-compromising … [and] meaningful to … Black people…. True black writers speak as blacks about blacks to blacks…. The new Black is understood by no white, not the wise, the Schooled, the Kind White." Brooks referred to her poetry of the forties and fifties as "high poetincense; the language-flowers were thickly sweet. Those flowers whined and begged white folks to pick them, to find them lovable." After Fisk, she viewed her work as "Independent fire!" In her autobiography, she announced her aim "to write poems that will somehow successfully 'call' all black people: black people in taverns, black people in alleys, black people in gutters, schools, offices, factories, prisons, the consulate."

The notion of "calling" to an audience, which will unify itself politically and spiritually as it hears, is useful for conceiving of the generational shift from Brooks's era to the present. In this call, African American artists hoped to interpolate audiences into the ideology of Black Power. The call that Brooks heard enabled her to recognize her "essential African" heritage, and recognizing that heritage gave her a new, deeper sense of "black fellow feeling." She felt immediately at home in her new self-conception, perhaps because the new self was comforting in its coherence, collectivity, and currency. However, followers of the Black Aesthetic became subject to certain political goals and intentions. After her "conversion," some critics judged Brooks's art according to its fulfillment of revolutionary ends, ends that might have encouraged her to unify her hitherto ventriloquial voice and project it as one steady chord, or to subordinate her previous focus on gender to one on race.

In sum, there are discernible shifts in Brooks's form from her early to late work: after 1967 she less often used complex diction, traditional forms and rhyme, and more often used personal pronouns in poems that speak more directly to her audiences. However, it is worth noting that Brooks's publicly announced awakening after Fisk encourages readers to discern more radical shifts than her work necessarily displays. The role of critics in her makeover is key; critics may have emphasized the changes in her work to recuperate a sufficiently politicized Brooks for her literary descendants. Critics who wanted to define and preserve a more militant province for the Black Arts movement regarded her work's changes as minimal. And later, in the 1980s and '90s, feminist critics regarded Brooks's poetry, early and late, as a major milestone in women's poetry. No doubt Brooks's dependable, if too brief, presence in American literature anthologies

is due to multiple factors: her importance as the first African American Pulitzer winner and her role in American literary history, including decades of public activity and lecturing, and her poems' accessibility and (teachable) focus on race, gender, and class.

Source: Allison Cummings, "Public Subjects: Race and the Critical Reception of Gwendolyn Brooks, Erica Hunt, and Harryette Mullen," in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 2, June 2005, pp. 7-13.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Baker offers an overview of Brooks's poetry and a favorable evaluation of Blacks.

When a compendium of her poetry entitled *The World of Gwendolyn Brooks* appeared in the 1970s, the Poet Laureate of Illinois seemed fitly rewarded for a life of creative labor. The collection represented more than three decades. And its very name seemed proper and patently personal—a tribute to the genius behind its assembled offerings. "The world of Gwendolyn Brooks," one thought. "Yes, that is certainly appropriate for a Pulitzer Prize winner, a Poet Laureate, a guardian, model, and mentor in the world of American and Afro-American letters."

Yet, in 1987, with less than exultant fanfare, "the world of Gwendolyn Brooks" gave way to the unadorned, firmly bound, and privately published compendium *BLACKS*. Issued under her own publishing imprimatur, The David Company, the new collection bears strikingly large gold letters on its cover which spell *BLACKS*. Beneath, and in smaller type, the poet's name appears.

From the proper "world" of Gwendolyn Brooks, we move to the common denomination BLACKS. A reading of *BLACKS* reveals the striking appropriateness of the retitling.

The poet's uniqueness resides most decisively in her clear rejection of glorifying ideologies of the common man. Her people have neither the blues temperateness of Sterling Brown's strong men getting stronger, nor the *joie de vivre* of Langston Hughes's black urbanites, who want to dig and be dug in return. They are not proponents or exemplars of obtainable egalitarian goals. They are not blessed with a consciousness of mission—a sense of manifest destiny or a surety of predestined roles in the unfolding of a mighty national enterprise. They live always at the limits of a bitterly tested tolerance.

Implicit in the poet's portrayals, in fact, is a grammar of dissent. Frontal irony and subtle antagonism are directed against all romantic ideologies of progress and metaphysical salvation. Race, class, gender, and nationality are the grounds of divisiveness and conflict that put such ideologies to shame. Skin color as a sign of race in America, for example, can cause unappeasable anguish. Maud Martha thinks: "… it's my color that makes h[er husband] mad…. What I am inside, what is really me, he likes okay. But he keeps looking at my color, which is like a wall. He has to jump over it in order to meet and touch what I've got for him." Class causes white women who are putative "lovers of the poor" to grow sick with fear and disgust. Philanthropically entering narrow halls of poverty, they are overcome by sights, sounds, and smells of the lower class. Possibilities for heroism are few in a world overdetermined by race, class, gender, and nationality. The bleakness of this universe is in part a function of Brooks's modernism. Commencing her career during "The Great War," she seems to have absorbed a healthy dose of the artistic malaise that prompted somber reveries of a Godless and irreversible universe of atomic fission. But her grammar of dissent is not entirely a by-product of the era in which she began her career.

Her antagonism to glorifying ideologies is also a product of a distinctive artistic credo—a signal aesthetics. Her creative orientation is designed, in fact, to match a world that guarantees the "commonness" of blacks through its restrictive codes of race, class, nationality, and gender. Adornment, embellishment, flamboyance, and proclamations of heroism are as anomalous in such a world as (to summon the poet's own image) "a rose in a whiskey glass." Stability, sanity, physical and mental development, and day-to-day safety survival depend upon an almost brutal refusal of self-deception and artistic idealism.

Brooks's own poetical naming often *situates* itself within a common order rather than employing the vocabularies of such an order for names. Her polysyllabic verse with its taut syntax and her grammatical substitutions of adjectives and adverbs for nouns often make her poems anything but idiomatic. Her grammatical acrobatics produce memorability and subversion. It is difficult to forget a "thaumaturgic lass," a vaudevillean of "magnificent, heirloom, and deft," or a hipster whose title is bestowed by "inamoratas, with an approbation." Subversion results from the appropriation of the full weight and heft of the King's English to portray lives of common subjects.

A notion of the ever altering thingness of the commonplace—a shiftiness that requires and is a function of ceaseless naming—is the truly distinguishing notion of Gwendolyn Brooks's art. Her poetical portraits alter each time we call their names. They assume a different thingness each time she, as a brilliant and accomplished public reader, sets them eloquently before us. Their alteration, however, is not merely a result of our willed and continuous naming. An elusive and always expanding space called "context" also causes them to shift—to change in unaccountable ways "behind our backs."

For example, the lackluster and whimpering populace of Bronzeville that was "not brave at all" in the 1940s transformed itself, quite miraculously, in the United States during the 1960s and assumed the common name BLACKS. Thunderstruck as she was by this behind-the-back evolution of her bean eaters and gar-bagemen dignified as any diplomat, Brooks maintained her aesthetics of two decades' standing. She assumed that her task was to provide a common ground and denomination for these new BLACKS.

When BLACKS became bold, heroic rioters jerking the times out of joint, Brooks energetically relinquished her direct and implicit condemnations of nationalistic grandeur. She became a namer of the militant struggle that not so long ago comprised a common ground and cause for BLACKS in the United States. She came to know in her own life what she had always claimed in her aesthetics: Common denomination can sometimes be a matter of dramatic alterations. The job for the poet facing this continuing drama of transformation is to:

> Live not for battles won.
> Live not for the-end-of-song.
> Live in the along.

To live in "the along" is to inhabit the everyday. It is to confront race, class, national, and gender restrictions with a common lexicon. For Brooks it is to do exactly what she has done in offering a newly retitled volume of her work; it is to provide and share in the common denomination of BLACKS.

Source: Houston A. Baker Jr., "A Review of *Blacks*," in *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 24, No. 3, Fall 1990, pp. 567-73.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

"Night." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

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Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on "Winesburg, Ohio." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

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Malak, Amin. "Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition," Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. "Richard Wright: "Wearing the Mask," in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

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The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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