



## **Before and After: The Interior Renaissance of Gwendolyn Brooks**

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### **Abstract**

*Literary critics have defined Gwendolyn Brooks through her poetry and racial activism to be one of the most influential writers of the twentieth century. This essay analyzes her work by identifying a pivotal shift in her writing and the poetic moves she uses to achieve it. This shift can be understood by contextualizing Brooks's poetry before and after 1967, which pinpoints a clear change in form, subject, and message in her writing. She begins her career avoiding controversial subjects but transforms into an assured and determined poet who freely discusses troubled youth and society's role in creating them, specifically catering her writing to this audience. Brooks redefines poetic activism for a new generation and this research reveals the true extent of her growth as a writer.*

Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry was so moving that an entire generation considered writing an essential part of activism. While majoring in English literature at Wilson Junior College, Brooks became a poetry contributor for the "Lights and Shadows" column in the *Chicago Defender* (*Essential* 137). Her upbringing in southern Chicago heavily influenced her writing, especially in her poems about young Black kids who resort to vandalism in an attempt to get their voices heard. In later years, Brooks made this "troubled youth" the subject of her writing after attending the Second Black Writers' Conference at Fisk University, which marked the greatest turning point in her career. At Fisk, Black writers from across the nation gathered to address a "new Black awareness," which resulted in some disagreements among Brooks's contemporaries (Alexander 369). These writers also discussed the shortcomings of traditional poetics when trying to write authentically about the Black experience. Brooks entered the 1967 conference as an established Pulitzer Prize winning poet. From her many accolades, it seemed that there would be no pressure for her to re-evaluate the way she thinks about writing. Nevertheless, not even Brooks was immune to the demands of young writers at the conference. We see this "grand rebirth of consciousness" in her later collections, like *In the Mecca* and *Riot*, where she addresses, and sympathizes with, young, disenfranchised Blacks (2). After attending the pivotal conference at Fisk University, Brooks makes troubled youth the focus of her writing so her work would resonate more strongly with Black readers. This demonstrates not only her flexibility as a writer but the evolution of what an artist's identity means to her.

The Fisk University conference is so transformative to Brooks as a writer that she consciously shifts the audience to whom she is writing. After the conference, she no longer looked for the approval of whites, stating in her autobiography, *Report from Part One*, "I won't be trying to prove something as I write. I want them to be pictures of black life as I see it today" (159). Instead, Brooks wanted to portray and speak authentically to the Black experience as she had been doing for decades. Jeni Rinner states that Brooks could maintain her established subjects she normally covered while re-focusing her audience to speak more for Black awareness and troubled youth; she states, "While the sense of her audience changed after 1967, her subject did not" (152). While the Black Arts Movement conveyed the message of racial pride, Brooks did not shy away from portraying the troubles that plagued the Black community for decades, specifically Black youth. Analyzing Brooks's poetry and the critical responses to them before and after the Fisk University Conference will allow writers to read Brooks's poems more faithfully and with a conscious identification of her growth as a poet.

### ***Annie Allen: An Accusation of Naïveté and Defining "Troubled Youth"***

Brooks's second book of poetry, *Annie Allen* (1949), was released eighteen years before her arrival at Fisk University and was met with mixed

reactions. Critics saw the value and artistic merit that Brooks brought to her work but believed that there was a sense of naïveté that plagued large sections of the book. This naïveté, they claim, was inflamed by her ongoing use of traditional poetics. Upon its release, Rolfe Humphries wrote, “Her weakness lies in streaks, as it were, of awkwardness, naïveté, when she seems to be carried away by the big word or the spectacular rhyme; when her ear, of a sudden, goes all to pieces” (Wright 8). One year later, Stanley Kunitz wrote, “In some of her poems Miss Brooks confuses simplicity with naïveté. Whenever she is self-consciously naive, as in her ballads . . . she writes badly” (11). Despite these quotes, both critics gave a positive review of *Annie Allen*, but they thought that Brooks was holding herself back by her use of white forms. In his review, Humphries says that these issues were more apparent in the first two-thirds of *Annie Allen* than its final third (8).

Brooks ends *Annie Allen* with a final section she titles “The Womanhood,” in which she explores themes of poverty, gender, and race. “Beverly Hills, Chicago,” included in this final section, sees Brooks identify poverty as an institution that imposes restrictions on Black youth. Indicated in its title, Brooks equates Beverly Hills, California to her home city of Chicago. This juxtaposition is staggering; Brooks refers to a city known for its white-dominated sanctions of wealth and status and places her childhood home—a city unable to attain the same amount of luxury—right next to it, writing:

The dry brown coughing beneath their feet,  
 (Only for a while, for the handyman is on his way)  
 These people walk their golden gardens.  
 We say ourselves fortunate to be driving by today. (*Blacks* 128)

By understanding the critical conversation of Brooks’s style, readers can immediately tell that this poem belongs to a collection predating 1967. This observation is made through an examination of both the poem’s form and subject. Admittedly, the determination of whether the poem is from before or after *Fisk* is more easily identifiable through its form, rather than its subject. “Beverly Hills, Chicago” is one of Brooks’s poems that uses traditional form—the eight quatrains help to establish visually that the poem belongs to a collection published before her interior renaissance. In terms of prosody, the second and fourth line of each quatrain has an end-rhyme, as opposed to the consistent free verse found in Brooks’s later work.

Right from the first stanza, Brooks indicates two very different worlds. “These people walk their golden gardens,” she says, pointing out the lavish lifestyles lived by whites. Drawing imagery of celebrities and fame from Beverly Hills, one can infer that the people she is describing are in large homes reeking of indulgence, probably gated off from the outside world. These gates signify a theme of distance that appears in many of Brooks’s poems. The next line expands

on this motif and even satirizes it. Brooks says, “We say ourselves fortunate to be driving by today” (128). She is clearly being sarcastic as she drives by this community that does not welcome her, except possibly as hired help, here in the form of a handyman. Along with the inference of gated communities, the car in the poem also signifies a distance. Maria K. Mootry says that Brooks taps into another tradition by using this move, saying, “Added to this was tradition of distance between poet and poem, a tradition that downplayed the poet’s own personality and assorted private demons, and demanded instead the type of “verbal scrupulosity” (Distilled 178). This observation is what the aforementioned critics believed to be an issue with Brooks’s early poetry. Her “naïveté,” they claim, is demonstrated by her passive approach to social issues. Even though she has not made the transition to writing solely for a Black audience yet, “Beverly Hills, Chicago” proves that Brooks was not naive in her writing or approach:

Nobody is saying that these people do not ultimately cease to be. And  
 Sometimes their passings are even more painful than ours.  
 It is just that so often they live till their hair is white.  
 They make excellent corpses, among the expensive flowers. . . . (*Blacks*  
 129)

The third line in this fifth quatrain echoes the epigraph that starts the poem: (“and the people live till they have white hair”) *E. M. Price*” (128). Brooks alludes to how whites live long lives and have the privilege of the pains that may come with old age, whereas Black lives are often cut short. This line also gives readers insight as to how Brooks defines a “troubled youth.” Using the earlier stanzas as reference, Brooks establishes class as a major factor in what divides whites and Blacks. “We consider ourselves fortunate to be driving by today. / That we may look at them, in their gardens where / The summer ripeness rots” (128). The sarcasm in these lines serves to reform the reader’s understanding of what creates a troubled youth. Brooks’s language indicates that these people are not juvenile delinquents or gangsters just looking to be troublesome, rather, an oppressed people being forgotten by others. A literal barrier separates those living the American dream and those who are just “fortunate” to have the opportunity to watch them; and because no one is reaching out to help, the troubled youth lashes out in violence and vandalism. Brooks’s distant, though not naïve, observation of these social issues continues until after the Fisk University conference.

In Brooks’s passivity, she comes across as apologetic; after 1967, though, she realizes this is not bringing enough awareness to the issues of troubled youth. Humphries says in his review, “Miss Brooks . . . must realize that the greatest danger to her progress lies in the risk of her being taken up; she needs to be both very inquisitive about and very remorseless to her weaker side” (Wright 8). The criticism that Brooks faced going into Fisk was not new but something she had been grappling with for her whole career. Humphries encourages a

“remorseless” confrontation of her weaknesses, however, misclassifies the way Brooks tackles social issues. She merely employs an alternate strategy, akin to Langston Hughes’s (a poet whom she admired). In a poem like “Beverly Hills, Chicago,” it appears that Brooks consciously employs a passive strategy to talk about racial differences. Critics who imply that she is *totally* naive do not see the whole picture; Brooks had a very good understanding of the forms she used and what she wanted to accomplish with them. This is evident in the final quatrain:

We do not want them to have less.  
 But it is only natural that we should think we have not enough.  
 We drive on, we drive on.  
 When we speak to each other our voices are a little gruff. (*Blacks* 129)

The last stanza exemplifies Brooks’s pre-1967 stance on the racial divide. These lines led so many of her contemporaries to assert that Brooks was only acknowledging racial inequality, rather than trying to mitigate it. Using a collective “we” to speak for all Blacks, she says “we do not want them to have less,” alerting white readers that Brooks is not looking to drag them down but to lift Blacks up. This is the issue that critics had in 1949—a discordant pairing of a white form with Black content. The aforementioned line, coupled with her use of a traditional form, clarifies that Brooks is speaking to a white audience. Haki R. Madhubuti surmises Brooks’s problem with audience in his review of *Annie Allen*; he says, “*Annie Allen* (1949), important? Yes. Read by blacks? No” (Wright 84). If Brooks really wanted to reach out to Blacks, she needed to revolutionize the way she thought about poetry, which did not happen until her arrival at Fisk.

### Adolescent Angst, Rebellion, and the Plague of Passivity in “We Real Cool”

With Brooks’s publication of *The Bean Eaters* (1960), critics saw her handling of social issues as an improvement from *Annie Allen*. The collection contains what would eventually be one of her most famous poems, “We Real Cool,” which explores teenage angst and rebellion, leaving readers to wonder about the causes of this behavior. Brooks writes:

We real cool. We  
 Left school. We

Lurk late. We  
 Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We  
 Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We  
Die soon. (*Blacks* 331)

Inspired by a group of teenagers that Brooks saw gathered outside a pool hall in Chicago, the poem describes adolescent activities, as well as the reactions and consequences to them (*Essential* xxii). Judging by prosody alone, “We Real Cool” sounds like a poem pulled straight out of Langston Hughes’s canon. Hughes, heavily inspired by jazz, gave his poems melody and rhythm which became easily identifiable when they are read aloud. Brooks uses a plethora of literary devices and poetic moves here, from repetition to alliteration to rhyme. This poem is an essential read when trying to examine Brooks’s interpretation of troubled youth, and while *The Bean Eaters* was published seven years before Fisk, it indicates that Brooks was thinking about her audience even before 1967.

“We Real Cool” looks at troubled youth not individually but collectively. Excluding the last, each couplet ends with “We,” signifying the camaraderie the teens have formed. Every reckless move and every poor decision is done as a group. This forged brotherhood enables these teens to behave this way, implying that peer pressure is partially to blame. There is not any explicit illegality in the poem—the boys are not participating in criminal activities, only rebelling against those above them. This rebellion is not a cry for attention; in fact, these lifestyle choices are carried out with a sense of pride. The teens “sing sin” as they stay out past curfew and drink. Brooks sees the irony in their celebratory attitudes, starting the poem off with the boastful line “We real cool,” then proceeding to list all the ways these boys are forfeiting their lives. This is no exaggeration, as the poem makes it clear that the acts of these teens will lead to their own demise. Poet and novelist, D. H. Melhem, a personal friend of Brooks, reinforces this point: “Their ‘coolness’ of alienation responds by dropping out, drinking, debauching, dying. It is this wasteful aggression against the self, this fragile wall of bravado that the poet mourns” (129). Ending the piece with “We / Die soon” is a haunting message about the costs of rebellion. On the surface, the poem looks straightforward in its message and the speaker’s opinion on the pool players; however, Brooks leaves a lot open for interpretation, specifically by never claiming to know exactly who is at fault for creating this troubled youth.

The aim of Brooks’s condemnation for the teens’ behavior is left ambiguous. Despite this, given what readers know of Brooks and how she delivers her message on race and social issues, it is clear that she is not trying to cast blame on the troubled youth in the poem. Melhem speaks about Brooks’s handling of these teens in her chapter about *The Bean Eaters*, saying, “Despite presentation in the voice of the gang, this is a maternal poem, gently scolding yet deeply sorrowing for the hopelessness of the boys” (129). To clarify her point, Brooks indeed gives these teens a scolding for their behavior; however, in no way is she passing judgment or blaming them for their actions—this is proven by

the final line of the poem. Clearly, Brooks takes no pleasure in pointing out the inevitable tragic end for these teens; it merely serves as a warning that even if their behavior is warranted, it will not stop them from dying prematurely. After listing all the things that the pool players are doing, she ends the poem by emphasizing that they will die *soon*, calling to mind Brooks's earlier line regarding whites in "Beverly Hills, Chicago": "It is just that so often they live till their hair is white" (129). Brooks shows in "We Real Cool" that Black youth are in danger by their responses to social issues. Brooks indirectly points out that these actions are rebellions against institutions—the same institutions that discriminate against Blacks. Being published in the heat of the civil rights movement, current events clearly influenced this collection and this poem in particular.

Brooks writes the poem as a warning to society of what the consequences will be if racism is allowed to persist. As mentioned above, Melhem says Brooks "gently scold[s] yet deeply sorrow[s] for the hopelessness of the boys" (129). Yes, Brooks gently scolds; however, the takeaway from the poem is not hopelessness. In an interview with George Stavros in 1969, Brooks discusses her iconic poem. She reveals that above all else, she wants to emphasize the teens' feelings of uncertainty. She states, "The 'We'—you're supposed to stop after the 'We' and think about *validity*; of course, there's no way for you to tell whether it should be said softly or not, I suppose, but I say it rather softly because I want to represent their basic uncertainty, which they don't bother to question every day, of course" (*Report* 156). Brooks points to validation as a reason for her stylistic choice to enjamb each line after "we," which supports the claim made earlier about the camaraderie of the boys being a breeding ground for poor decisions. Their actions are validated when they see everyone else participating in this rebellion. Brooks says that the boys do not question this uncertainty, and the poem shows that this is an issue. What is causing them to rebel against institutions? What are they (consciously or subconsciously) hoping to achieve? Brooks shows in the poem that this uncertainty and the resulting hesitancy to ask questions will only enable the problems that created this troubled youth to continue. It is only a few years later that Brooks realizes that to play her part in the civil rights movement, she needs to be speaking directly to her Black audience. Some scholars even believe that *The Bean Eaters* marked the true beginning of Brooks's grand rebirth of consciousness.

### **Pinning the Turning Point: Why Fisk Affirms Brooks's Poetic Transformation**

While *The Bean Eaters* was critically received better than *Annie Allen* overall, some of the criticism that burdened the earlier collection carried over. In 1960, Nick Aaron Ford thought that Brooks's *Bean Eaters* lacked emotion. Ford compared Brooks's work to T. S. Eliot's credo about poetry, writing, "If she was trying to exemplify T. S. Eliot's philosophy that poetry is an escape from emotions, she has succeeded admirably" (Wright 18). Ford continues in his



review, claiming that Brooks is not hitting the emotional highs that are needed for a collection that wants to inspire social change. In the interview with Stavros, Brooks is asked about the form she uses for “We Real Cool” and whether or not she took inspiration from modernists. Stavros confronts her about the use of literary models commonly seen in the works of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Brooks strongly pushes back on this accusation and detests being inspired by these forms; she states, “My gosh, no! I don’t even admire Pound, but I do like, for instance, Eliot’s “Prufrock” and *The Waste Land* . . . . But nothing of the sort ever entered my mind. When I start writing a poem, I don’t think about ‘models’ or about what anybody else in the world has done” (*Report* 156). Despite admitting appreciation for Eliot’s work, Brooks is clearly aghast that anyone would believe that she took inspiration from any pre-established “models.” The classic forms she previously used were beginning to fade, but controversy still lingered over how Brooks approached social issues.

While “We Real Cool” encourages social change for the betterment of our youth, Brooks’s 1960 collection continues her trend of perceived passivity. Generally, critics were alienated by the distance that Brooks still put between herself and her message. The distance that Brooks creates in “Beverly Hills, Chicago,” mainly through the imagery of gates and cars, seeps its way into “We Real Cool.” Brooks is not overt in the poem; the deliverance of her prediction comes subtly and requires inference. The difference between “Beverly Hills, Chicago” and “We Real Cool” is that the distance created in the former is personified through the poem’s speaker, whereas the distance in the latter is literally between Brooks as a poet and the message she seeks to convey. The penultimate line of “Chicago” reads, “We drive on, we drive on,” which gives Blacks an ambiguous message to keep trying to move forward through institutions designed to keep them impoverished—watching the privileged lives of whites from a car, never disrespecting the distance between the two worlds. “We Real Cool” continues Brooks’s trend of being too safe with her poetry, except this time the barrier is between herself and the poem—on the verge of an epiphany in her quest to find the cause of troubled youth, only to fall just short of revelation. Approaching her rebirth of consciousness, the passivity of both poems indicates that they came from collections published before 1967.

Scholars mostly agree that Brooks’s dramatic shift did not occur until 1967, but some disagree that it ever happened at all, which diminishes the self-admitted impact the conference had on her refocused attention toward her Black audience. Courtney Thorsson, in her article “Gwendolyn Brooks’s Black Aesthetic of the Domestic,” points to comments Brooks makes in an interview with Claudia Tate in 1983. Brooks says, “[*The Bean Eaters*] was a turning point ‘politically,’ if you want to use that much-maligned word” (Gayles 107). Thorsson interprets Brooks’s words to prove that there was never *one* moment when Brooks transformed her consciousness; she says, “Brooks . . . pushes against reading 1967 as a dramatic moment of change. Brooks slides



her “turning point” back to 1960” (155). Even though Brooks says that 1960 could be considered her turning point, she states in *Report from Part One* that Fisk allowed her to enter the “kindergarten of new consciousness” (Flynn 483). Additionally, scholars have her collections to prove that her true rebirth was not until 1967.

*The Bean Eaters* is not Brooks’s turning point, but, as she suggests, she was laying the groundwork in that collection for the transformative moment that came at Fisk. “We Real Cool” proves that this shift has yet to occur since Brooks is still speaking to a white audience in 1960. Despite a gentle scolding of the troubled youth, the poem makes white readers question the institutions they run and the racism embedded within them. More importantly, the poem shows the effect of Black disenfranchisement and how the (misguided) rebellion that follows ultimately leads to their premature deaths. This is how Brooks repositions white readers; she shows them that the Black youth’s defiance of white institutions prevents them from growing “white hair” (*Blacks* 129). This message to white readers, veiled beneath its catchy rhymes, is exactly why critics were mixed on the social aspects of this collection. Maria K. Mootry concludes, “Some reviewers found *The Bean Eaters* sufficient in content and form, while others found it too tame in its protest mission; still, others were upset and put off by what they deemed an unseemly social emphasis” (*Distilled* 177). Brooks may call *The Bean Eaters* a political turning point, but “We Real Cool” proves that she is still writing for a white audience in 1960 and that she was only ready to make this shift seven years later. Fisk is where she stopped trying to prove anything to anyone other than her Black audience, but until then, passivity to social issues became a signature of her pre-1967 collections such as *Annie Allen* and *The Bean Eaters*.

### **A Rebirth and Understanding of the Artist’s Identity in “Boy Breaking Glass”**

*In the Mecca* (1968) is Brooks’s first collection of poetry published after attending the second Black Writers Conference at Fisk University. “The ‘kindergarten of new consciousness’ fostered in Brooks a new Black identity and a new sense of Black people as her primary audience,” says Richard Flynn (483–84). This transformation not only affected Brooks’s poetry but the way she distributed it. All collections released after this were published exclusively with Black presses—inspired by the ongoing Black Arts Movement and her Black audience. As Kathy Rugoff states, “*In the Mecca*, her final book published by a white press, was written for an African American audience” (Mickle 32). This collection revolutionized Brooks’s use of traditional forms; she replaced forms used by European poets and created new ones designed to speak directly to her new audience. The titular poem is Brooks’s longest, spanning 807 lines, and it precedes another batch of poems titled “After Mecca,” focusing on important individuals in Chicago’s history. *In the Mecca* was so successful that printing

could barely keep up; Brooks finally found resounding praise in her revitalized approach to social issues. Her audience changed, but her subject did not, as “Boy Breaking Glass” continues Brooks’s fascination with troubled youth, while taking a more “radical” approach this time.

In “Boy Breaking Glass,” Brooks portrays troubled youth unlike any way she has before. Included in “After Mecca,” her approach to social issues becomes overt and purposeful as a result of her re-focused audience. Instead of pool players skipping school and staying out late, “Boy Breaking Glass” centers on one boy breaking windows around his city, desperately trying to find his place in America. Marc Crawford, to whom the poem is dedicated, asked Brooks to think about how Blacks interpret freedom in the United States, urging her to question how Black youth deals with inequality. In her autobiography, Brooks notes that “Marc Crawford asked me to consider: How ghetto blacks, overwhelmed by inequity and white power, manage to live. Does a black boy, for example, turn his eyes away from the Statue of Liberty? How does he talk to himself, comfort himself? What Beauties are at his disposal?” (*Report* 184–85). Crawford’s suggestion is the foundation of the poem; he mentions “ghetto blacks,” describing an area of a city where ostracized Blacks and other disenfranchised groups are forced to live due to economic and social exclusion. This is not the first time Brooks has ever talked about these groups; however, this book marks the start of a greater transparency with her Black audience. Brooks makes it clear in “Boy Breaking Glass” that the troubled youth at the center of these poems are not to blame for their actions nor their circumstances.

Along with transparency, Brooks uniquely humanizes the troubled youth by relating them to herself. Brooks’s reputation as an artist is an integral part to her identity, and she parallels the speaker in the poem to her own vocation:

Whose broken window is a cry of art  
 (success, that winks aware  
 as elegance, as a treasonable faith)  
 is raw: is sonic: is old-eyed première.  
 Our beautiful flaw and terrible ornament.  
 Our barbarous and metal little man. (*Blacks* 438)

From the first line, Brooks asserts a justification for the boy’s actions. The “cry of art” is akin to what Brooks and her fellow poets do: bring attention to groups and issues that are ignored. The boy wants to emulate the activism of artists, but nothing seems to work. In the penultimate line of the first stanza, Brooks uses language to deliver a message of racial pride but juxtaposes it with the harsh reality of what it means to be a young Black person in the United States. “Our beautiful flaw and terrible ornament,” she says, using oxymorons to describe race. There is elegance in being Black, but the world sees that beauty as an inherent flaw, Brooks says. She upholds Stokely Carmichael’s belief that “Black

is beautiful,” but likens it to a flaw to reveal the boy’s skin color as a disadvantage when navigating the world.

Instead of passively engaging with social issues, Brooks confronts them directly by revealing why troubled youth turn to violence. The boy in the poem desperately tries to find a sense of belonging in his country but cannot find ears that will listen. Brooks continues using imagery that likens the boy to an artist in the next stanza: “I shall create! If not a note, a hole. / If not an overture, a desecration.” (438). An artist’s ability to speak his or her truth is very important to Brooks, as these themes carry over into her other poems like “The Chicago Picasso” and “The Wall.” She claims that all art has something to say but demonstrates its futility if the sought-after change is not realized. Nevertheless, the poem’s speaker still wants to create—if no one will listen to the notes of his music, then he sees reason for creating “holes.” Brooks says, “Today’s young people want IN, want to express themselves, to say what is on their minds” (*Report* 82). A troubled youth is created when you deny them a way “in,” or in other words, deny them a voice. Brooks speaks to her Black audience by assuring them that they are not alone in their fight to be heard. “Boy Breaking Glass” is a turning point for Brooks poetically as she makes her full transition to speaking to her Black audience.

Despite this shift, Brooks still maintained a white readership able to take away lessons from her later work. She holds white readers liable for ignoring marginalized people’s calls of accountability regarding social issues: “It was you, it was you who threw away my name! / And this is everything I have for me” (*Blacks* 439). Brooks finally lets go of any hesitancy to convict whites for their role in creating troubled youth. In doing so, she also establishes that some conversations are reserved solely for the Black community. She repositions white readers by revealing to them that they are merely eavesdropping on these conversations—she enhances this phenomenon by creating protagonists in her poems that readers do not look *at* but look *through* (Rinner 153). Having nothing to prove to her white audience, Brooks justifies her shift to speak solely to Blacks and *their* issues.

In the poem, Brooks discovers a culprit in the creation of troubled youth but sees the cause as something bigger than just race divisions. She sees issues embedded deeply within the country as a whole, turning our attention to American emblems in the final stanza: “Who has not Congress, lobster, love, luau, / the Regency Room, the Statue of Liberty, / runs. A sloppy amalgamation” (*Blacks* 439). These symbols and institutions are symbolic of the American identity, and Brooks includes them to show readers that the boy is deprived of them. Jeni Rinner notices this too, stating, “The boy who breaks windows in his neighborhood is displaced both from the advantages of white privilege and a basic sense of belonging in America” (Rinner 165). Being able to turn to congress to spark change or look up with pride to the Statue of Liberty are things that the boy does not do—feeling ignored by those in power and without any

sense of freedom. “Boy Breaking Glass” presents a boy who desires to use art as an outlet for social justice, ultimately turning to violence, unwilling to be yet another voice left unheard.

### “The Boy Died in My Alley”: When Chaos and Conviction Collide

With the publication of *In the Mecca* and *Riot*, Brooks establishes her voice in the ever-growing conversation of social justice, and she continues her pattern of success in her 1975 collection, *Beckonings*. Brooks approaches troubled youth with the same style as her previous two books, providing a sense of compassion—and more importantly, validation. William H. Hansell says, “*Beckonings* . . . richly demonstrate[s] that Brooks, whether writing about love, religion, blackness, militancy, or racial unity, continues to instruct her audience in the same manner as in her distinguished works in the late 1960s” (66). Brooks’s post-1967 work was lauded by critics, and this transformation after Fisk indicates that the criticism she faced ultimately had a positive role in her growth as a writer. Hansell continues, “Continuing to employ her distinctive, often complex style, she explores and celebrates the essence of blackness and those Blacks who lead or who are only in the process of discovering appropriate ‘life patterns’ in contemporary America” (66). Not only does Brooks write about Blacks discovering appropriate “life patterns” in *Beckonings*, but she also details the harsh reality surrounding the life patterns of troubled youth.

Brooks’s poetry has become so confident and progressive by 1975 that she treads even deeper and darker aspects of troubled youth. This growth translates seamlessly in her poem, “The Boy Died in My Alley,” which offers even more nuance than her previous work after Fisk. Brooks explores institutions in the three previously discussed poems, but nothing compared to the specificity and disturbance of this one:

The Boy died in my alley  
without my Having Known.  
Policeman said, next morning,  
“Apparently died Alone.” (*Essential* 114)

Brooks recreates her earlier distance with this first stanza; the difference now is that this distance is no longer between Brooks and the subject, but is, rather, between the speaker and the boy’s murder. As evident by reading the rest of the poem, the speaker feels culpable in the murder but is hesitant in confronting this conviction. The policeman explains that this boy died alone, implying that not even the speaker is aware of what is going on. This is clarified in the third stanza:

The Shot that killed him yes I heard  
as I heard the Thousand shots before;  
careening tinnily down the nights

across my years and arteries. (114)

This reveals that this violence is not anything new. The speaker has heard thousands of shots before and the internal effects are listed in the last line. Brooks says, “across my years and arteries,” which communicates that this cycle is all too familiar. The stanza reads as if this is all procedure; the speaker is clearly used to having police come to the door to ask questions. There is no outburst or rage, just the observation of a tragedy that has been made in this neighborhood several times. The murder points again to the power of racism and class oppression to make one more Black youth invisible in death as he was in life. Trying to recognize him—to see him—the speaker carries both the injustice of the murder and the individual youth in her very blood, “across [her] years and arteries.”

More than most of her post-Fisk work, the poem demonstrates literary techniques that fully remove Brooks from the criticism she faced for using traditional forms:

I have always heard him deal with death.  
 I have always heard the shout, the volley.  
 I have closed my heart-ears late and early.  
 And I have killed him ever. (115)

Brooks uses anaphora in the first three lines of this stanza; this move is a stylistic way of portraying the repetition that the speaker endures every time an officer comes knocking on the door asking about another young person who has been shot. The repetition is not exclusive to this stanza; this pattern carries on throughout the whole poem. Brooks had already left traditional forms years before *Beckonings*' publication, and “The Boy Died in My Alley” is a prime example of this change. Something unique that sets this piece apart from others is its use of capitalization; Brooks chooses to capitalize “Boy” every time it is used. Despite hearing countless shots before this occurrence, the poet places special emphasis on this boy, which is even indicated in the title. It is not “a boy died in my alley,” but “*the* boy.” These poetic moves are subtle but demonstrate the speaker’s compassion for the lives of troubled youth that end prematurely.

The speaker’s culpability is at the center of the poem. Brooks juxtaposes the poet’s guilt with the apathetic tone and description of the shooting. The speaker states, “And I have killed him ever,” an indication that silence leads to conviction. The poem also displays Brooks’s shift toward her Black audience. Never does it disclose who shot the boy; this takes the focus off of violence and directs it toward tragedy. Reorienting the audience’s attention to the boy’s untimely death makes the poet’s mourning of troubled youth more impactful: “I joined the Wild and killed him / with knowledgeable unknowing” (115). Brooks writes an oxymoron here to capture the speaker’s contradiction. He or

she mourns the loss of troubled youth but has grown too cold to try to prevent their deaths. The speaker's passivity echoes Brooks's approach to social justice prior to 1967, suggesting that he or she may undergo an interior renaissance just as she has.

### **“I have hopes for myself”: Gwendolyn Brooks’s Lasting Legacy for a New Generation**

To read Gwendolyn Brooks's most famous collections is to witness one of the greatest transformations of a writer in American history. The books examined here, *Annie Allen*, *The Bean Eaters*, *In the Mecca*, and *Beckonings* each serve as steps toward Brooks's grand rebirth of consciousness—stepping out of the shadows and taking a forceful yet humble approach to social justice. Examining two collections before and after the Fisk University conference provides a through-line for those interested in Brooks's poetry that indicates specific instances of growth as a writer and activist. In *A Street in Bronzeville* and *Riot*, two equally famous books left largely unmentioned here, Brooks continues writing about troubled youth; with knowledge of Brooks's interior renaissance in 1967, readers can roughly indicate where each book lies on her publication timeline. Poems such as “kitchenette building,” “the murder,” “The Anniad,” “the children of the poor,” “The Sermon[s] on the Warpland,” and “The Near-Johannesburg Boy” all include troubled youth in some way and provide more ways that Brooks uses language to cover this topic.

As discussed earlier, many of Brooks's pre-1967 poems use traditional forms, specifically the sonnet. Comparing forms from before and after Fisk is a reliable way to see Brooks make the necessary changes for her new audience. Remembering Robert Humphries's review of *Annie Allen*, he says Brooks gets “carried away by . . . spectacular rhyme” (Wright 8). This criticism of Brooks's poetics plagued various reviews of her work before 1967, but in a conversation with Eugenia Collier in 1973, Brooks explains how she changed, saying, “I've written hundreds and hundreds of sonnets, and I'll probably never write another one, because I don't feel this is a sonnet time. It seems to be a free verse time, because this is a raw, ragged, uneven time—with rhymes, if there are rhymes, incidental and random” (Gayles 68). After the Fisk conference, Brooks shifted her style to speak more authentically about—and to—the experiences of troubled Black youth in America.

The subject of troubled youth was never something that Brooks just used to produce poetry; she had a genuine interest in, and concern for, the well-being of the country's next generations. Brooks did more than just focus on a new audience for her poetry after 1967. In the years after Fisk, she became heavily involved in the Black Arts Movement, hosting writing workshops for gang members. Similar to “Boy Breaking Glass,” Brooks found troubled youth and introduced them to art as an outlet for expression. She sees an interior complexity in them as surely as she finds it in her own words and blood, which

is what inspires her to make them characters in her poems. By becoming a poet-activist in the 1970s, Brooks encouraged troubled youth to use their complex interior lives to create a lasting change in society, just having gone through her own rebirth of consciousness. In addition to having a heavy impact on youth, Brooks's inspiration spread to many other writers—her influence still visible in today's Black writers in the United States.

Brooks continues to impact writers over two decades since her passing; this influence is most notable in Terrance Hayes. Like Brooks after 1967, Hayes is recognized in the literary world for his innovative forms and unique use of language. His poem, "Golden Shovel," is an homage to Brooks's "We Real Cool," making reference to the poem's epigraph, "The Pool Players. / Seven at the Golden Shovel." Brooks's poem is even included in Hayes's, hidden in the form itself. A "golden shovel" is a poetic form where the last word of each line creates a poem that was written by the person who inspired the one being written. So, in Hayes's "Golden Shovel," the final word of each line spells out the entirety of "We Real Cool." This is not only paying homage to Brooks but revolutionizing poetry by creating an all new form, similar to Brooks's creation of the "Anniad." Hayes cites Brooks as one of his inspirations, but poets do not have to take his word alone for it—especially when he takes her writing techniques and creates a new form specifically to honor the legacies of past poets. Hayes represents a writer who not only borrows moves from his poetic inspirations but is earnestly thankful for these teachings and wants to express his gratitude through his work.

Brooks's impact on the proceeding generation is clear, especially using Hayes as an example. As Poet Laureate of Illinois, Brooks founded the Youth Poetry Awards contest in 1970, a program to recognize new young poets, which she oversaw until 2000. After a twenty-year hiatus, Illinois Humanities in partnership with the Poetry Foundation launched the Gwendolyn Brooks Youth Poetry Awards (GBYPA) in 2020–21 with permission from Brooks's estate. Two decades after her passing, Brooks continues to inspire new waves of young poets and their abilities to bring about social change. She says in *Report From Part One*, "To be able to define one's self from a historically and culturally accurate base and to follow through in your work; keeping the best interest of your history and culture in mind is to . . . give direction to the coming generations" (26). Brooks shows troubled youth and their allies how to talk about issues that matter to them by setting an example. Taking her criticism seriously, she undergoes an interior renaissance that transforms not only her poetry, but her perspective on race and the world at large. Angela Jackson writes, "She had undergone . . . changes at a profound psychological level. It was a change in her idea of identity . . . She was interested in her black consciousness and professing the single-mindedness of that in her writing" (126–27). Brooks was forced to question *why* she wrote, and more importantly, *for* whom she wrote after hearing that fiery crowd at Fisk University. Her grand realization was that there was nothing to prove to



a white audience. By embracing her race and encouraging her newly focused Black audience to do the same, she inspired an entire generation to use language to make a difference. Percy Shelley says that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world, and the life and legacy of Gwendolyn Brooks proves his statement true, both before and after her interior renaissance.

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