

## The Historical and Social Context of Gwendolyn Brooks's Poetry

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Kathy Rugoff

Kathy Rugoff provides an extended biographical essay on Brooks, discussing how some of her works participate in the Civil Rights movement's fight for equality within Chicago as well as within the United States at large. Rugoff reviews Brooks's interactions with Harlem Renaissance writers James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes and also examines how Brooks's studies of works by Countee Cullen, T. S. Eliot, E. E. Cummings, and Thomas Hardy, to name a few, inspired her to incorporate in her poetry a variety of literary forms, from the sonnet to modernism. She discusses how Brooks did not shy away from using her poems to denounce intraracial gang violence and interracial violence brought about by racism and how in her later works Brooks brought attention to racial injustices that extended beyond America and into Africa. Rugoff concludes with a call for more scholarship on Brooks's works. — M.R.M.

Gwendolyn Brooks is one of the most important poets of twentieth-century America. She was a fiercely independent writer who borrowed from both European and African American literary traditions to write poetry that would cut her own path and inspire writers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Her poetry, novel, autobiographies, and short prose works are characterized by an intense awareness of the African American experience, women's roles and feminist perspectives, and literary tradition. Brooks responded to major events during her lifetime, including World War II, the struggle for civil rights, the murders of African American leaders, race riots, and daily life in segregated urban America. Brooks's poetry received numerous prestigious awards and, less formally, has been celebrated by other poets. For example, Haki R. Madhubuti (Don L. Lee), a central figure in the Black Arts movement, wrote in 1972: "Gwendolyn Brooks is the example for

us all. . . . she is the continuing storm that walks with the English language as lions walk with Africa” (Brooks, *Report from Part One* 30).

From her first book, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), to her final publications, Brooks’s primary focus was on the lives of African Americans in the context of evolving social, cultural, and political events in the United States. Her portraits are most often based on people from the South Side of Chicago, her home. While it is universally observed that her poetry underwent a transformation in 1967 after she attended the Second Black Writers’ Conference at Fisk University, Brooks’s work is remarkably consistent in the brilliance of her wit and in her subtle treatment of sound and its impact on sense.

It is the marriage of politics and poetics in Brooks that Elizabeth Alexander—an important twenty-first-century writer and the fourth inaugural poet—admires in her work.<sup>1</sup> In a thought-provoking essay, Alexander maintains that Brooks’s *In the Mecca* serves as a model. It reminds her that “none of us lives outside of historical moments” and that Brooks “never feared or shirked what she fervently believed was her responsibility; that sense of responsibility shaped her very aesthetic.” Alexander concludes: “Few poets walk with such integrity” (378-79). Brooks’s poetry is inextricably grounded in the mid-twentieth-century social and political transformation of the United States and in art’s potential to engage with the complexity and variety of experience in African American life. Rita Dove has also responded to Brooks’s aesthetic. Like Brooks, but with a focus on earlier events, her collection *Thomas and Beulah* (1986) and other poems include portraits of people in daily life, and *American Smooth* (2004) presents poems in the voices of African American soldiers.

As a writer and teacher, Brooks had a major impact on many writers and scholars. Various anthologies of poems include tributes to her, and she edited and introduced important collections, including *A Broadside Treasury, 1965-1970*, and *Jump Bad: A New Chicago Anthology* (1971).<sup>2</sup> Finally, hundreds of critical discussions have appeared on her work, reflecting various perspectives in literary theory, such as femi-