

ISSN 0910-500X

# 英文學思潮

THOUGHT CURRENTS IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

VOLUME LXXXII

2009

THE ENGLISH LITERARY SOCIETY  
OF  
AOYAMA GAKUIN UNIVERSITY,

青山学院大学英语学会

## Gwendolyn Brooks: Making Those "Fair Fables Fall"

Melody Elliott

### Introduction

Gwendolyn Brooks (1917–2000), the first African American to win a Pulitzer Prize for poetry (1950), was an important poet and writer until her death in 2000. Although Brooks consistently wrote for at least fifty years, her genius and versatility as a poet and novelist have been inconsistently acknowledged in classrooms across the U.S. In fact, it has been mostly African American scholars who have "accorded her poetry its due" (Melhem 1). When mainstream academia has bothered to direct critical attention her way, the focus invariably falls on her early collections of poetry [i.e. *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), *Annie Allen* (1949—which won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1950), and *The Bean Eaters* (1960)]. Unfortunately, most literary criticism outside of the last two decades has been complicit in the intentional or unintentional act of silencing Brooks's work.

This silencing has taken two different but equally insidious directions, one which revolves around Brooks's use of traditional Anglo poetic forms. Thus, even critics that think they are praising Brooks's work by showing how she mastered these forms, relegate her to the literary oblivion of someone who writes only 'in the tradition of' another author (e.g. T.S. Eliot, John Donne, etc.) (Hovarth

606). This myopic view inadvertently squeezes the freshness out of her approach while at the same time praising it. Other criticism has either ignored or found fault with Brooks's work for precisely the aforementioned reason—because they feel that she merely imitates other poets in the canon regarding form, rather than creating something uniquely innovative (Taylor 130). Both approaches ignore the fact that Brooks melds two poetic traditions (Anglo and African American) together into something greater than the sum of its parts. Critics, for whatever reason, have fixated on her use of traditional Western forms, failing to recognize the black arts elements present in her work, and then they either choose to dismiss her for failing to surpass the (white) 'masters,' or they denounce her for bothering to try in the first place. Houston A. Baker, Jr. summarizes these minimalist critical tendencies in his article, "The Achievement of Gwendolyn Brooks" (1987) in which he says that

This apparent dichotomy (white style and black content) has produced a confusing situation for Gwendolyn Brooks. The world of white arts and letters has pointed to her with pride; it has bestowed kudos and a Pulitzer Prize. The world of black arts and letters has looked on with mixed emotion, and pride has only been one part of the mixture. There have been troubling questions about the poet's essential 'blackness,' her dedication to the melioration of the black American's social conditions. The real duality appears when we realize that Gwendolyn Brooks—although praised and awarded—does not appear on the syllabi of most American literature courses (21–22).

It is Baker's last point that is the most chilling—that Brooks's sophistication has been used to erase her from criticism and from

future generations of readers.

On the other hand, one can argue that Brooks explains her own complex poetic technique to readers, who, if they pay careful enough attention, can find it. Brooks's epic poem, *In the Mecca* (1968), opens with:

Sit where the light corrupts your face.

Miës van der Rohe retires from grace.

And the fair fables fall.

(lines 1-3)

This stanza can be said to embody both Brooks's artistic intent and technique. Ludwig Miës van der Rohe (named Maria Ludwig Michael Miës at birth) (1886-1969) was an important German architect who immigrated to the United States during the 1930s. He has been hailed as one of the founders of modern architecture because of the cool elegance of composition in his functional skyscrapers that made his name synonymous with twentieth century design (Janson 786). Brooks, a Chicagoan, most probably refers to the Illinois Institute of Technology buildings designed by Miës van der Rohe in the above quote. The balanced construction of steel, glass, brick, and light still stands as a monument to the architect's 'less is more' philosophy and his belief in the refinement of details and proportions rather than innovation for its own sake. I believe that this same aesthetic is reflected in Brooks's poetry through her use of existing poetic forms. In actuality, the Miës buildings were located just across from another famous, or rather infamous, piece of construction, the ironically named Mecca (apartment) Building, which, when it was completed in 1891, was a showplace of Chicago. Twenty years later, the black elite lived there; however, by the Great Depression, this showcase of the American Dream ('a fair fable')

had fallen to become a notoriously run-down and violent slum full of poor minorities until it was demolished in 1951 (Alexander 2). Ironically, it is from the elegant Mies building in Chicago that one could have clearly viewed some of the extremely ugly public housing projects nearby. Thus, the first two lines of Brooks's poem urges the reader to position himself/herself within this structure (poem) "corrupted by light" which on the one hand, creates a new Western ideal of elegance, and on the other hand, forces those same "fair fables" to crumble in juxtaposition with the surrounding slums (Melhem 156-161).

It can be argued that these three lines, often overlooked by critics who see *In the Mecca* merely as a 'failed' epic, in fact, encapsulate Brooks's early poetic techniques. The lines indicate that Brooks recognizes the extreme irony of mingling what is considered to be 'high' art (the poetic forms she uses) with 'low' subject matter — the ordinary African American men and women in her community, hardly the usual subjects of formal poetic verse in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s in the U.S. It is also interesting to note in her poetry that the very elements which are deemed insignificant by the majority culture ultimately have the power to make its glorified cultural constructs fall.

It is this idea of corrosion, or making "fair fables fall," which appears to be the central thread running throughout Brooks's early work. For far too long, Brooks's complexity has been simplified into an unproductive polarization of form (white) vs. content (black), with little attention devoted to exploring how Brooks manipulates and plays with both to make "fables fall." She imbues Anglo forms (e.g. the sonnet and ballad) and techniques (e.g. apostrophe) with elements from Afro-American culture such as jazz, blues, spirituals, etc. in ways that undermine the cultural connotations that accompany the European forms and privilege elements from

African American culture. Although it appears superficially that Brooks uses Anglo forms that are well defined in terms of their formalistic elements, the ease with which she appropriates them indicates that the forms themselves are extremely malleable, as are the elements from the African American tradition which she weaves into them, which like African Americans themselves, are the result of a melding of the African with the European. I would argue that these seemingly disparate traditions (European and African) share some characteristics on a basic level that allow Brooks to appropriate them and create something truly African American.

To return to the metaphor of Miës van der Rohe, the same construction materials (steel, glass, and brick) that were used to make the elegant Illinois Institute of Technology buildings also were used on the nearby inner city projects. The two differ only in the proportion of materials used and, of course, expense. The following paper will examine two ballads ("Ballad of Pearl May Lee" and "of De Witt Williams on His Way to Lincoln Cemetery") and one sonnet by Brooks ("First fight. Then fiddle"), discussing the ways in which the poems blend and manipulate different artistic elements which allow Brooks to undermine those "fair fables."

### Brooks and the Ballad Tradition

The European ballad is a folk art form of considerable antiquity. M.H. Abrahams defines "ballad" in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (1988) as "a song, transmitted orally, which tells a story" (11). Although ballads have a whole repertoire of themes including unfaithful lovers, shocking murders, deeds of chivalry and valor, and political oppression, heroism is the favored motif. Whatever the substance of the story, the details chosen for the narrative of a ballad are generally the most exciting and dramatic. Ballads are both

participatory and communal, characteristics shared by the blues and African art forms, and at one level, they are simple stories which usually employ several conventions (Williams "The Ballads..." 206; Baker *Blues, Ideology...* 68). Ballads tend to use simple diction and meter with inversions of syntax; they also tend to use refrains that are repeated with sometimes only a slight change (incremental repetition) (Abrams 12). While the epic customarily begins *in media res*<sup>1</sup>, the ballad often "employs stock opening phrases to establish its narrative structure," and it generally finishes "with some kind of summary stanza" (Mootry 281). A good example of a European folk ballad is the well known "Ballad of Robin Hood" who "stole from the rich and gave to the poor" (Mootry 280). In Western written literature, ballads are typically comprised of ballad stanzas, which are quatrains (four-line stanzas) in which the last words in the second and fourth lines rhyme. Undoubtedly, this rhyme pattern is a remnant of the ballad's origins in the oral tradition since it made the story easier for bards to remember and pass on.

Gladys Williams, in her article "The Ballads of Gwendolyn Brooks," distinguishes between European and Afro-American folk ballads. She finds that although the two are similar in many respects, African American balladeers work to create a "redemptive mythology" to undermine the damage that slavery and long-term disenfranchisement have imposed upon African Americans. She cites Afro-American ballads such as "John Henry," "Bad Man Ballad," "Stackalce," and "Railroad Bill" in which characters demonstrate their value and worth in situations in which their fundamental humanity is denied (206). Furthermore, this constant confrontation with the absurd treatment of African Americans in the U.S. often causes Afro-American ballads to contain wry humor, sarcasm,

---

<sup>1</sup> in media res = Latin meaning "in the middle of things"



hyperbole, and irony, which are often absent from European ballads (206–207).

### Explication of "Ballad of Pearl May Lee"

Given the above characteristics of the European and Afro-American ballad, it is clear that Brooks manipulates both traditions in her poem, "Ballad of Pearl May Lee" (Appendix 1). The poem begins *in media res* with Pearl May Lee's vituperation and lamentation of her lover, Sammy, who had been dragged off to jail because he wanted "white arms to enfold him" (stanza 3). The narration of what happened to Sammy is then interrupted by two stanzas (4 and 5) which describe the effects that Sammy's desires to sleep with white women ("to taste pink and white honey") have on the speaker. Apparently, his appetite causes Pearl May's heart to be broken so she needs to be pulled out of "don't-despair" and "poor me" (stanza 5). The story returns to Sammy in the sixth stanza, but it goes back to the beginning, starting with Sammy's childhood and his obsession with light-skinned women ("bright skins on the brain") (stanza 7). According to the poem, Sammy had a history of using black (dark-skinned) women like one would food or drink—for sustenance when he was "famished to eat" (stanza 6). On the other hand, he worshiped light-skinned women ("yellow was for to look at" stanza 6) (Mootry 291; Williams "The Ballads..." 214).

Stanzas 9–12 digress from the 'facts' of the story yet again, as the speaker imagines what must have taken place between Sammy and the white woman he bedded. Notice the description of the white woman as "white like milk" with breasts that "were cups of cream" (stanza 10). These associations are found in Western fables and stories of virtuous young maidens tending their flocks of sheep, encountering a villain, and being rescued by a hero. The



introduction of the white woman's vindictive and spiteful voice in stanzas 11 and 12, however, immediately topples the image of her as a 'maid mild.' This woman certainly does not seem to be a maid nor does she seem mild. She hurls racial epithets at Sammy, curses, and threatens Sammy's life because of the "shame" (stanza 11) she feels over actions that she initiated with a wink (stanza 8) in the first place. This is a pivotal point in the poem since everything prior to stanza 12 (e.g. Pearl May Lee's depressed state, loneliness, and Sammy's history of fascination with light-skinned women) places the blame squarely on Sammy's shoulders. Pearl May Lee, and indeed the reader, tend to blame Sammy for what happens to him because no other villain is named. With the introduction of the malevolent white woman, however, the burden of blame shifts from Sammy to her, and her vindictiveness is emphasized by the repetition of "I'll get your body tomorrow" (stanza 12) (Williams "The Ballads..." 214-215).

Stanzas 13-16 therefore function as revisions of stanzas 1, 4, and 5. The laughter in the first stanza that "cut" or burst from Pearl May Lee's lungs, seemingly with glee because Sammy got what he deserved, becomes bitter to the point that it is "fit to kill" her by stanza 14. The "having to pay the bill" analogy that seems to be sarcastic in stanza 4 becomes pathetically ironic in stanza 14 when it is modified by "You got what you wanted for dinner." The addition of the new phrase makes Sammy's choice to sleep with the white woman as arbitrary a decision as what a person would choose for dinner, yet this whim costs Sammy his life. Furthermore, the repetition of "honey" in stanza 15 seems different from its usage in stanza 4. In stanza 4, the "honey" has the quality of an angry invective, whereas in stanza 15, it seems more a mournful endearment. The repetition of the speaker's depression in stanza 16 ("don't-despair" and "poor-me"), first mentioned in stanza 5, makes Pearl May Lee seem even more hopeless and sad at the end of the poem. When the word

"surely" is repeated the last three times in stanza 16, each time it is followed by a period rather than the comma that was used in stanza 5. The grammatical change reflects the shifting theme of this ballad. In stanza 5, the commas following "surely" indicate that Sammy's story is not finished yet, and they signal the shift back into Sammy's history. The final set of "surely" in stanza 16 are all end-stopped, indicating that Sammy's story, like his life, is over. When reading the poem, a speaker will see the comma and it will signal that the voice should pause briefly, but not come to a full stop. At the period, however, the pitch of the voice drops significantly, which contributes to the more somber tone that occurs at the end of the poem. Thus, although the poem appears to tell the story of an unfaithful lover (a common European ballad theme), it is really about the system that encourages Sammy to believe the 'maid mild' myth and then kills him for trying to attain this ideal, which for him as an African American man is out of reach (an African American ballad theme) (Williams "The Ballads ...").

The stanzas of the poem contain complex variations of the ballad stanza (in which the second and fourth lines rhyme—*abcb*) rather than blues phrasing (*aab*), although incremental repetition gives a "bluesy" feel to the poem because of the impression that the speaker is improvising as she goes along (Bolden 31). Stanzas 1–5, 8–9, and 11–16 all contain three lines followed by an extended refrain which acts as the fourth line of the quatrain and repeats the rhyme of the second line. Thus, stanza 1 rhymes as follows:

- |   |     |
|---|-----|
| Then off they took you, off to jail,      | (a) |
| A hundred hooting after.                  | (b) |
| And you should have heard me at my house. | (c) |
| I cut my lungs with laughter,             | (b) |
| Laughter,                                 | (b) |

Laughter. (b)  
 I cut my lungs with laughter. (b)

Stanzas 6, 7, and 10 also consist of a mutated quatrain; however, here, lines three and four are repeated again:

At school, your girls were the bright little girls. (m)  
 You couldn't abide dark meat. (n)  
 Yellow was for to look at, (o)  
 Black for the famished to eat. (n)  
 Yellow was for to look at, (o)  
 Black for the famished to eat. (n)  
 (stanza 6)

These variations in the form signal and complement the deviations in the content of this ballad from that of a typical Western ballad.

The "Ballad of Pearl May Lee" shifts from the third-person narrator typical of the European ballad tradition to the more intimate first-person narrator more characteristic of the Afro-American blues tradition (Mootry 287). While shifts—from episode to episode, from immediate past to far past to immediate present—do reflect the Western ballad tradition, they also reflect blues techniques. In fact, as Maria Mootry points out in her article, "'Chocolate Mabbie' and 'Pearl May Lee': Gwendolyn Brooks and the Ballad Tradition," Sammy's presence in jail recalls other jailhouse blues songs in which the man is locked behind bars, and the black woman seems trapped and imprisoned by her despair (288). This poem is infused with language from the black vernacular and blues ideology; however, this language is always mingled with standard English. For example, in stanzas 5 and 16, when Pearl May begs "Oh, get me a garment of red to wear," the lines seem to have come right out of a blues song—

except for the choice of the more formal word "garment" instead of the more vernacular word "dress." Likewise, the poem contains very contemporary colloquial phrases like "Honey" (stanzas 4 and 15) and also obsolete words such as the word "lorner" (stanza 2) which is from Middle English (Mootry 290).

#### Explication of "of De Witt Williams on his way to Lincoln Cemetery"

The poem, "of De Witt Williams on his way to Lincoln Cemetery" from *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945) (Appendix 2), is another ballad in which Brooks manipulates forms to make "fair fables fall." The poem adheres more closely to the traditional stanza pattern of the Western ballad through its use of quatrains. The first (stanzas 1 and 2) and last two stanzas of the poem (stanzas 6 and 7) serve as a frame which encloses the body of the poem and summarizes it as a whole:

He was born in Alabama. 1

He was bred in Illinois.

He was nothing but a

Plain black boy.

(stanza 1)

Swing low swing low sweet sweet chariot. 5

Nothing but a plain black boy.

(stanza 2)

Born in Alabama.

Bred in Illinois. 20

He was nothing but a

Plain black boy.

(stanza 6)

Swing low swing low sweet sweet chariot,  
 Nothing but a plain black boy.  
 (stanza 7)

24

Stanza 6 therefore is an incremental repetition of stanza 1 since it omits the words "he was" that occur in the first stanza.

Once again, Brooks's poem contains additional musical qualities other than those inherently imbedded in the ballad form. Notice that in the poem, the frame/refrain (stanzas 1-2 and 6-7) consist of three lines: "He was born in Alabama/He was bred in Illinois/He was nothing but a/Plain black boy" (lines 1-4 and 19-22) plus one line from a well known Afro-American spiritual, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," in lines 5 and 23. It is interesting that the line from the spiritual has been deliberately altered and that certain words ("swing low" and "sweet") are doubled in the poem. The effect of the repetition adds to the sonorous lulling quality of the poem. The blended tri-musical (=ballad, spiritual, repetition) quality of the poem adds to the impression that the poem is a dirge or a communal spiritual that laments De Witt Williams (Bolden 21).

In the tradition of Western literature, the ode or elegy would be the typical poetic form in which to honor a fallen hero of national cultural importance [e.g. John Milton's "Lycidas" (1637), Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Adonais" (1821), Alfred Tennyson's "In Memoriam A.H. Hallam" (1849)]. The ballad has more commonly been used to honor folk heroes more typical of common people (e.g. Irish ballads). Seemingly in keeping with this tradition, Brooks chooses to honor Williams—this "plain black boy"—with the less lofty poetic form of the ballad. However, the key question is who was this De Witt Williams and if he "was nothing but a plain black boy"—not a hero of any kind—then why should the reader care that he is dead and why is he worthy of remembrance at all in poetic form?

Perhaps the only way to answer the above question is to look at the effect that the juxtaposition of form and content have on the poem. Tension lurks beneath the language, seething and veiled, but nonetheless present. It is the inevitable result of pitting form against content. Answers to the question, 'Who was De Witt Williams?' are remarkably scarce in the poem; or rather, the answers are plentiful, but they all reinforce the sparseness of Williams' existence. Williams' whole life is summed up in four short lines:

He was born in Alabama.

He was bred in Illinois.

He was nothing but a

Plain black boy.

(stanza 1)

Yet those short, simple lines do contain a host of rich connotations in the context of African American culture and history. "Alabama" (lines 1 and 19), for example, is a state which for African Americans conjures the deep South and its history of hostility and atrocities: slavery, Jim Crow, lynchings, the Ku Klux Klan. "Illinois" (lines 2 and 20), on the other hand, home state of Abraham Lincoln, connotes the North, freedom, equality, and opportunity. The fact that Williams is "born" in the South and "bred" in the North alludes to the great urban migrations of African Americans (the First Great Migration 1910 – 1940, the Second Great Migration 1940 – 1970) when millions of black people uprooted their families from the agrarian South in the hopes of making better lives (e.g. better education, better employment opportunities, less racism) in the industrial North and in the West (Lemann, 1992). Brooks was very much a regional urban poet, unconcerned with the pastoral or even with other location icons in African American poetry such as Harlem (Bolden 11). She wrote



about what she saw around her on the South Side of Chicago. The reference to Williams as a "plain black boy" indicates how he could have been any young black male; or more specifically, it establishes a literary kinship between Williams and Richard Wright's trapped and confused protagonist in his novel, *Black Boy* (1945) (Williams "The Ballads..." 212). Although no precise cause of death is given in the poem for Williams, one could easily assume that it was through violence.

The overly brief description of Williams also prevents the reader from identifying with him or getting to know him—a point which approaches one of the central issues of the poem: audience. To whom is Williams only a "plain black boy?" The obvious answer would be to a white audience who did not know him and would have never heard of him if it were not for Brooks's immortalization of him in her poem. This is the audience, who at the time that Brooks was writing, would have recognized the formal ballad stanza structure of the poem but just as easily overlooked the important Afro-American elements, in much the same way that they overlooked Williams himself.

The only appearance of space in the poem (literal and figurative) occurs in the three middle stanzas (stanzas 3, 4, and 5); the remaining stanzas of the poem (1–2 and 6–7) form a frame. The middle stanzas, rather than allowing the reader to better know Williams, describe the journey of his coffin around the familiar landmarks in his life to the cemetery where he is to be buried. These three brief stanzas are the only place in the poem where Williams' life is described by more than just one or two lines; however, any sense of the fullness of his life is undermined by the fact that these stanzas describe the entire extent of Williams' short life in his small world: the "Pool Hall" (line 7), "the Show" (line 8), "Forty-seventh Street" (line 11), "the L" (line 12), "Northwest Corner, Prairie" (line 13), and "Warwick and Savoy"



(line 10). It is interesting to note that even nouns that are not strictly proper names (e.g. "the Show" line 8) are capitalized to indicate their importance in Williams' world. Also, of course, there is limitation in the fact that Williams' journey in the poem, which is in fact his funeral cortege, takes place while he is within the confines of his coffin on the way to the cemetery.

The entire poem is very tightly controlled right down to the words themselves which do not occupy much space visually or aurally, as most of the words are only one or two syllables long with a few exceptions (e.g. "Alabama" lines 1 and 19, "Illinois" lines 2 and 20, "Forty-seventh" line 11, and "Underneath" line 12). All of the lines are roughly of an equal length visually, with the exception of the spiritual refrain, which give the stanzas a rectangular shape—not unlike the shape of a coffin. Also, most of the lines end with punctuation (a comma or a period) so that the motion of the poem is slow and halting. It is interesting to note that the lines from the spirituals (the black musical vernacular) are also the longest in the poem. Perhaps this indicates that it was only within the context of his own community that Williams' existence had any depth of meaning.

Looking at Brooks's poetry, it is obvious that she knew and appreciated the Western poetic tradition; however, it is also clear that she had equal or greater respect for the black arts (Madhubuti 88). In "of De Witt Williams," for example, those black art elements appear in the frame of the poem and serve to sing Williams (the anti-hero) to his rest (Hughes 194–199). The ballad form is merely the mold into which Brooks pours content about African American people, places, and life. By taking the unimportant De Witt Williams and showing in verse how negligible his life was, yet still making him the center of a 'heroic' form, Brooks was writing firmly in the Afro-American ballad tradition, reclaiming Williams from obscurity and

insignificance. Even the title of the poem, "of De Witt Williams on his way to Lincoln Cemetery," is given in language that seems lofty and majestic because of the syntax, which is a European poetic tactic. The poem set a trap for Brooks's literary critics who often obsessed over her use of poetic forms, while disregarding the black arts elements, in much the same way that they would have disregarded Williams.

### Gwendolyn Brooks and the Sonnet Tradition

The sonnet is another inculcated and lauded Western form that Brooks worked with. This fourteen-lined lyric poem, at times written in iambic pentameter, has a complex rhyme scheme. Sonnets are generally categorized into two varieties. The first, the Italian or Petrarchan sonnet (named after the 14<sup>th</sup> century Italian poet Petrarch), divides the poem into an octave (eight-lined section) and sestet (six-lined section). The original context of the sonnet was within medieval Western courtly society in which male courtiers would write poetry that professed their ardor and dedication for their ladies and patrons (Levin, intro). Later, the sonnet form was notably used by poets such as John Donne, John Milton, and William Wordsworth for a variety of subjects including politics, religion, and nature. Another variation of the sonnet arose in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Elizabethan or Shakespearean sonnet is typically divided into three four-lined stanzas (quatrains) and includes a couplet which typically either reverses or concludes sentiments in the poem. Following in the tradition of Petrarch, many sonneteers composed sonnet sequences or cycles which contain sonnets linked by a common theme (Abrahams 175-176).

There is also a respected Afro-American sonnet tradition which includes 1940s poets such as Claude McKay, Robert Hayden,

and Countee Cullen who appropriated the poetic form to express an unrequited desire for social justice and equality rather than unrequited love. Although African American sonneteers clearly used the form to underscore and protest against a social reality of inequality and discrimination, they usually avoided specifically mentioning race in their poems. Houston A. Baker, Jr. interprets this omission to be the result of the integrationist mindset of the period in which black poets desired to shift the focus from their race to their artistic ability ("Generational shifts..." 1345). The appropriation of the sonnet form by African American poets is subversive: to make the "fair fables" of white Western artistic and cultural supremacy "fall" by using the 'master's own tools' (poetic form and language) against him.

Although the sonnet is often viewed as a more structured and restricted form than the ballad, on a basic level, it can be argued that the sonnet does contain similar characteristics fundamental to black folk art forms, which allow poets outside of the tradition to appropriate the form. The very shortness of the form requires the sonnet to make its impressions quickly, like the blues, spirituals, and folk seculars. All of these are lyric forms which "share a sense of intimacy, of the poet-singer speaking-singing directly to another" (Williams "Gwendolyn Brooks's Way..." 215). In her article entitled "Gwendolyn Brooks's Way with the Sonnet," critic Gladys Margaret Williams observes:

The folk literature forms seem to be simple, as simple as the sonnet can be complex. They *are* simple. And they are more than simple. Certain elements of their styling create ambiguity and, therefore, complexity: elegant understatement, wry humor, terseness, voice, ethnotropic metaphor, sardonic bite, the arrangement of the poetic line. The ethnic community that

produced a folk literature with such characteristics was one that had to learn how to mask its feelings about the restrictive slave trade... (and create) speech habits that would be acceptable in rituals of communication between its members and members of the dominant white culture. The product was a language of accommodation and concealment, a language of ironic doubleness, a language whose messages were intended to be received in one way by outsiders and in another way by insiders. (215)

Thus, Afro-American literature is in itself a language of accommodation and concealment, a language of ironic duality whose meaning was intended to be received in one way by outsiders and in another way by insiders.

#### **Explication of "First fight. Then Fiddle."**

Brooks's well-known sonnet, "First fight. Then Fiddle" from *Annie Allen* (1950) (Appendix 3), reflects both an understanding of the essential malleability of the sonnet form and its suitability to issues within the African American community. The poem opens succinctly with two clear mandates: "First fight. Then fiddle;" yet, it promptly proceeds to do the opposite by discussing that which should have been the least important ("fiddling") first. Thematically, the poem can be divided neatly into two sections that would make it a Petrarchan sonnet with the octave or eight-lined section discussing "fiddling," and the sestet or six-lined section devoted to "fighting." While the end rhymes of the words in the octave (abba-abba: "string," "note," "wrote," "sing,"— "thing," "Devote," "remote," "murdering") do conform to the Petrarchan rhyme pattern, the ones in the sestet do not. Rather than the expected two tercets (three-lined sections

of cde-cde) typically found in the sestet of a Petrarchan sonnet, the sestet in this poem contains a quatrain (cddc: "hate," "behind," "blind," "late") and a Shakespearean couplet (ee: "space," "grace"). The combination of elements from both sonnet types (Petrarchan and Shakespearean) in one poem causes the form to writhe in a sense, mirroring the struggle in the poem's content. Brooks's choice to use a form that has its origins in love poetry for a call "to arms, to armor" both firmly places her within the Afro-American poetic tradition and foretells of a more militant future. The militancy of the poem is incongruous with many other protest sonnets of the 1940s; but instead, it foretells the coming militancy of the Black Power movement and Black Arts movement of the 1960s and 70s.<sup>2</sup>

Looking even more closely at the poem, it becomes apparent that the competing themes of war and art are likewise reflected in the specific diction (words, phrases, sentence structures, and figurative language) of the poem. "Fight" in line 1 is a one-syllable, accented word, while "fiddle" contains two syllables, the first of which is stressed and the second which is not. As a result, "fight" has a much harsher sound than "fiddle," but the alliteration of the "f" sound connects them both together. The rest of the octave continues the light and rather playful sounds introduced by "fiddle" primarily through alliteration, particularly through repetition of the "s" sound. Alliteration is, in fact, the prevailing poetic device in the first eight

<sup>2</sup> The Black Arts movement (1965?–1975) – the cultural outshoot of the Black Power movement which focused on recovering, nurturing and promoting African American music, drama, literature, and visual art for the purpose of self-empowerment in the black community.

The Black Power movement (mid-1960s–early to mid-1970s) – a political movement that expressed a new racial consciousness among African Americans of the time which rejected racism and imperialism domestically and internationally and emphasized the need for black Americans to be more self-reliant and self-empowered politically and economically (Smethurst 1–22).

lines of the poem. The "s" sound from "slipping string" (line 1) is repeated by the words "sorcery" (line 2), "sing" (line 4), "salt" (line 5), and "silks" (line 7); while the "b" sound of "Bewitch" (line 4) is echoed by the word "bewilder" in the same line. The repetition of the end rhymes, consonance (alliteration of consonant sounds), and musical terminology all contribute to the "fiddling" quality of the first section in which the words become music rather than merely describing it.

In the octave, Brooks continually introduces an image, and then refines and modifies it with another word not usually associated with it. This is in a way reminiscent of blues singers who often vary their lines as they sing them and string together contradictory images and themes. For example, the "note" (line 2) is "muzzled" with "hurting love" rather than any concrete physical action. "Sing," at the end of line 4, has a sort of grandiosity which is immediately shrunk down to the size of a filament with the subsequent introduction of the word "threadwise" (line 5) to describe it. The placement of the verb, "ply" near the end of the first line rather than at the beginning of the next, allows the "slipping string" to enjamb or stride over into line 2. Every subsequent line in the "fiddling" section repeats this technique—the placement of a caesura or pause, signified by punctuation (e.g. comma, period, semi-colon), in the middle of a line rather than at the end so that the combined momentum of the enjambed lines and alliteration pull the reader from one line to the next until line 8 in the octave. Line 8 is end-stopped so that the pause in between lines 8 and 9 mirrors the division between octave and sestet and signifies the upcoming change in content from art to war in line 9. Likewise, the alliteration of the heavy "m" sounds in "murder" and "malice" at the end of the fiddling section prepares the reader for the section on war.

In contrast to the meter in the first section which is generally



iambic, the first four lines of the sestet have a preponderance of spondees, two strongly accented syllables next to one another. Examples of this include "Win war. Rise bloody," in line 12. The change in meter adds a heavy bellicose quality to the rhythm of the poem, not unlike the staccato beat of a drum. The images of violence and blood in the sestet contrast with the "love" (line 3) and "silks and honey" (line 7) mentioned in the octave. Alliteration is also used in the sestet; however, the light and cheerful repetition of the "s" and "f" sounds from the octave are here replaced by the harsh repetition of the sounds of "h," "b," and "w." For example, the "h" sound is repeated in "hate" (line 9) and "harmony" (line 10) while the "b" sound is repeated in "Be deaf," "beauty," "blind" (line 11) and "bloody" (line 12); the "w" sound is found in "Win war" (line 12). All of these elements contribute to the impression of a martial song in the sestet.

In the last two lines of the sestet, a rhyming couplet appears in which Brooks again creates tension by reversing the harsh sound pattern previously established and bringing back light and airy sounds which mirror a return to the topic of art. These final two lines, which refer back to fiddling, contain alliteration of the cheerful "s" sound again ("first" line 9, "civilize" and "space" line 13 and "grace" line 14). In comparison with the enjambed lines in the octave, lines 10, 11, and 14 of the sestet are end-stopped so that movement of the poem is more restricted beginning with line 8. In contrast, lines 12 and 13 are again enjambed, promoting movement at the end of the poem.

Brooks's choice to devote more lines to the folk artistic elements (i.e. "fiddling" in lines 1-8 and lines 13-14) is ironic because it contradicts the statement made in the first four words of the poem, "First fight. Then fiddle" (line 1). On the one hand, the poem is a call to the African American community to get its priorities



straight — art is a luxury that is subordinate to tangible civil and economic freedom and rights. On the other hand, by letting the artistic aspect have the final word in the poem and restricting the line flow in the places of the poem which involve fighting, Brooks seems to advocate art itself as a way to escape constraint. Art, made out to be a luxurious “fair fable” is, in fact, a necessity and a weapon. It is energy in the face of stagnation. One should keep in mind the struggle for equality, but not lose sight of the sweetness, or “silks and honey,” that initiated the struggle in the first place. Although the poem appears race neutral superficially, the content, as well as certain poetic devices, can be seen as racially inflected. The symbol of the fiddle and the terseness, irony, and tension created by the poetic devices are especially pertinent to African Americans — a group in the U.S. which historically has been required to “civilize a space” (line 13) and “qualify” (line 4) before they are allowed to make art. One of the most important words in the poem is the word “they” in line 3 because it signals a distance between those who composed the music (music meaning art and art meaning poetry) and the actual musician/writer/speaker (Brooks) who is playing it.

Fiddling is a metaphor for Brooks’s art. The fiddle is a folk instrument which stands at a cultural crossroads since it has a history in both the European and African American tradition. Although fiddling was probably first introduced to the Americas by folk singers who immigrated to the new world from Ireland and England, it was quickly incorporated into early black music on southern plantations. Fiddling alludes to how slaves sometimes played the fiddle to entertain the white master and his guests, and sometimes to entertain themselves. Fiddling has always been ascribed to the category of folk art, as opposed to playing the violin, which is considered to be more classical and refined although the two instruments are closely related. When one listens to fiddle music, notes often seem to be

manipulated and bent off the traditional music scale, not unlike the notes of the blues. A parallel can be seen in the manner in which Brooks manipulates and bends the forms of the ballad and sonnet in her work.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry reveals her gift to accommodate seemingly disparate forms, traditions, and styles. Her poetry reflects and blends diverse poetic and artistic traditions and melds them into a cohesive, powerful whole. It defies simplistic analysis based solely on an examination of the Western poetic forms used in her work. Regardless of form, the foundation of her work is essentially folk — lyric, resistant, bluesy — in nature. The black art elements are of equal, or perhaps greater, importance since they are the parts most often overlooked by critics. From an examination and explication of the ballads "Ballad of Pearl May Lee" and "of De Witt Williams on His Way to Lincoln Cemetery" and the sonnet "First fight. Then fiddle," it becomes apparent that Brooks was not interested in preserving the 'sanctity' of the lauded Western poetic forms she used. Rather, her intent was to warp, meld, and manipulate these "fair fables" into more pliable art which can accommodate more than one tradition, more than one race, and more than one artistic sensibility. First and foremost, Brooks's artistry centered on the African American community in Chicago where she spent most of her life. Her work can be viewed as a lens into the black community's changing vision of itself (Kent 110). Although critics like to emphasize the change in Brooks's aesthetics following her 1967 encounter with the Black Arts movement as being a turning point in her writing, after which she 'abandoned' the use of Anglo forms to embrace an all black aesthetic, examination of her early poems show

clear evidence that her work *always* had an Afro-American centered aesthetic. As D.H. Melhem puts it in his book *Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and the Heroic Voice* (1987), "Brooks meets the criteria for major status on all four levels: craft and technique, scope or breadth, influence of the work in style, content, or productivity, upon others; and influence of the poet upon others (237)." Any meaningful exploration of American literature should therefore include a study of Gwendolyn Brooks's work and all its complexities.

Appendix 1: **Ballad of Pearl May Lee**

Gwendolyn Brooks

from *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945) reprinted in *Blacks* (1981)

## 1

Then off they took you, off to jail,  
A hundred hooting after.  
And you should have heard me at my house.  
I cut my lungs with laughter,  
    Laughter,  
    Laughter.  
I cut my lungs with laughter.

## 2

They dragged you into a dusty cell.  
And a rat was in the corner.  
And what was I doing? Laughing still.  
Though never was a poor gal lornier,  
    Lorner,  
    Lorner.  
Though never was a poor gal lornier.

## 3

The sheriff, he peeped in through the bars,  
And (the red old thing) he told you,  
"You son of a bitch, you're going to hell!"  
'Cause you wanted white arms to enfold you,  
    Enfold you,  
    Enfold you.  
'Cause you wanted white arms to enfold you.

## 4

But you paid for your white arms, Sammy boy,  
And you didn't pay with money.  
You paid with your hide and my heart, Sammy boy,  
For your taste of pink and white honey,

Honey,  
Honey.  
For your taste of pink and white honey.

## 5

Oh, dig me out of my don't-despair.  
Pull me out of my poor-me.  
Get me a garment of red to wear.  
You had it coming surely,  
Surely,  
Surely,  
You had it coming surely.

## 6

At school, your girls were the bright little girls.  
You couldn't abide dark meat.  
Yellow was for to look at,  
Black for the famished to eat.  
Yellow was for to look at,  
Black for the famished to eat.

## 7

You grew up with bright skins on the brain,  
And me in your black folks bed.  
Often and often you cut me cold,  
And often I wished you dead.  
Often and often you cut me cold.  
Often I wished you dead.

## 8

Then a white girl passed you by one day,  
And, the vixen, she gave you the wink.  
And your stomach got sick and your legs liquefied.  
And you thought till you couldn't think.  
You thought,  
You thought,  
You thought till you couldn't think.

## 9

I fancy you out on the fringe of town,  
The moon an owl's eye minding;  
The sweet and thick of the cricket-bellied dark,  
The fire within you winding...

Winding,

Winding...

The fire within you winding.

## 10

Say, she was white like milk, though wasn't she?  
And her breasts were cups of cream.  
In the back of her Buick you drank your fill.  
Then she roused you out of your dream.  
In the back of her Buick you drank your fill.  
Then she roused you out of your dream.

## 11

"You raped me, nigger," she softly said.  
(The shame threading through.)  
"You raped me, nigger, and what the hell  
Do you think I'm going to do?  
What the hell,  
What the hell  
Do you think I'm going to do?"

## 12

"I'll tell every white man in this town.  
I'll tell them all my sorrow.  
You got my body tonight, nigger boy.  
I'll get your body tomorrow.  
Tomorrow,  
Tomorrow.  
I'll get your body tomorrow."

## 13

And my glory but Sammy she did! She did!

And they stole you out of the jail.  
They wrapped you around a cottonwood tree.  
And they laughed when they heard you wail.  
    Laughed,  
    Laughed.  
They laughed when they heard you wail.

## 14

And I was laughing, down at my house.  
Laughing fit to kill.  
You got what you wanted for dinner,  
But brother, you paid the bill.  
    Brother,  
    Brother,  
Brother you paid the bill.

## 15

You paid for your dinner, Sammy boy,  
And you didn't pay with money.  
You paid with your hide and my heart, Sammy boy,  
For your taste of pink and white honey,  
    Honey,  
    Honey.  
For your taste of pink and white honey.

## 16

Oh, dig me out of my don't-despair.  
Pull me out of my poor-me.  
Get me a garment of red to wear.  
You had it coming surely.  
    Surely.  
    Surely.  
You had it coming surely.



**Appendix 2: of De Witt Williams on his way to Lincoln Cemetery**

Gwendolyn Brooks

from *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945) reprinted in *Blacks* (1981)

He was born in Alabama. He was bred in Illinois. He was nothing but a Plain black boy.	1
Swing low swing low sweet sweet chariot. Nothing but a plain black boy.	5
Drive him past the Pool Hall. Drive him past the Show. Blind within his casket, But maybe he will know.	10
Down through Forty-seventh Street: Underneath the L, And Northwest Corner, Prairie, That he loved so well.	
Don't forget the Dance Halls- Warwick and Savoy, Where he picked his women, where He drank his liquid joy.	15
Born in Alabama. Bred in Illinois. He was nothing but a Plain black boy.	20
Swing low swing low sweet sweet chariot, Nothing but a plain black boy.	24

## Appendix 3: Sonnet 4 of "The Womanhood"

Gwendolyn Brooks

from *Annie Allen* (1949) reprinted in *Blacks* (1981)

First fight. Then fiddle. Ply the slipping string	1
With feathery sorcery; muzzle the note	
With hurting love; the music that they wrote	
Bewitch, bewilder. Qualify to sing	
Threadwise. Devise no salt, no hempen thing	5
For the dear instrument to bear. Devote	
The bow to silks and honey. Be remote	
A while from malice and from murdering.	
But first to arms, to armor. Carry hate	
In front of you and harmony behind.	10
Be deaf to music and to beauty blind.	
Win war. Rise bloody, maybe not too late	
For having first to civilize a space	
Wherein to play your violin with grace.	14

## Works Cited

- Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Orlando, Florida: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1988.
- Alexander, Elizabeth. "Meditations on 'Mecca': Gwendolyn Brooks and the Responsibilities of the Black Poet. *The Black Interior*. St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 2004. Retrieved July 1, 2009  
<<http://www.elizabethalexander.net/Meditations%20on%20Mecca.pdf>>
- Baker, Houston A. "The Achievement of Gwendolyn Brooks." In *A Life Distilled: Gwendolyn Brooks, Her Poetry and Fiction*. Eds. Maria K. Mootry and Gary Smith. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987, pp. 21-29.
- . *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993.
- . "Generational Shifts and the Recent Criticism of Afro-American Literature." In *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*. Ed. David H. Richter. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989, pp. 1344-1373.
- Bolden, B.J. *Urban Rage in Bronzeville: Social Commentary in the Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks, 1945 - 1960*. Chicago: Third World Press, 1999.
- Brooks, Gwendolyn. *Blacks*. Chicago: Third World Press, 1981.
- Hovarth, Brooke Kenton. "The Satisfactions of What's Difficult in Gwendolyn Brooks' Poetry." *American Literature*. 62 (December 1990): pp. 606-616.
- Hughes, Gertrude Reif. "Making It Really New: Hilda Doolittle, Gwendolyn Brooks, and the Feminist Potential of Modern Poetry." Reprinted in *On Gwendolyn Brooks: Reliant Contemplation*. Ed. Stephen Caldwell Wright. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001, pp. 194-199.
- Janson, H.W. *History of Art: Volume II*. (Fourth Edition). New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1991.
- Kent, George E. "The Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks" (1971). Reprinted in *Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture*. Chicago: Third World Press, 1972, pp. 104-137.
- Lemann, Nicholas. *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America*. New York: Vintage Press, 1992.
- Levin, Phillis (ed). *The Penguin Book of the Sonnet: 500 Years of a Classic Tradition in English*. New York: Penguin Books, 2001.
- Madhubuti, Haki R. "Gwendolyn Brooks: Beyond the Wordmaker—The Making of an African Poet." (1973). Reprinted in *On Gwendolyn Brooks: Reliant Contemplation*. Ed. Stephen Caldwell Wright. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001, pp. 81-96.
- Melhem, D.H. *Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and the Heroic Voice*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1987.
- Milton, John. "Lycidas." *The Norton Anthology of Poetry, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition*. Eds. M. Ferguson, J. Stallworthy, and M.J. Salter. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2005, pp. 232-236.
- Mootry, Maria K. "'Chocolate Mabbie' and 'Pearl May Lee': Gwendolyn Brooks and the Ballad Tradition." *CLA Journal*. 3 (March 1987) pp. 273-293.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "Adonais" *The Norton Anthology of Poetry, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition*. Eds. M. Ferguson, J. Stallworthy, and M.J. Salter. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2005, pp.

478-489.

Smethurst, James Edward. *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s (The John Hope Franklin Series in African American History and Culture)*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005.

Taylor, Henry. "Gwendolyn Brooks: An Essential Sanity." *The Kenyon Review*. 13(4) 1991 Fall pp. 115-131.

Tennyson, Alfred Lord. "In Memoriam A.H. Hallam." *The Norton Anthology of Poetry, 5th Edition*. Eds. M. Ferguson, J. Stallworthy, and M.J. Salter. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2005, pp.548-554.

Williams, Gladys Margaret. "The Ballads of Gwendolyn Brooks." In *A Life Distilled: Gwendolyn Brooks, Her Poetry and Fiction*. Eds. Maria K. Mootry and Gary Smith. Chicago: U of Illinois Press, 1987, pp. 205-223.

———"Gwendolyn Brooks's Way with the Sonnet." *CLA Journal*. 26 (2) (December 1982) pp. 215-240.

Wright, Richard. *Black Boy*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945.

### Works Consulted

Blain, Derrel. "A Mathematical Model for Alliteration." *Style* 21(4) 1987 Winter pp. 607-625.

Bowles, Juliette (Ed.) *In Memory of the Spirit of Frances, Zora, and Lorraine. Essays and Interviews on Black Women and Writing*. Washington, D.C.: Institute for the Arts and Humanities, Howard University, 1979.

Brooks, Gwendolyn. "Interview." *Tri-Quarterly*. 60 1987 Winter pp. 405-410.

Dawson, Emma Waters. "Vanishing Point: The Rejected Black woman in the Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks." *Obsidian II*. 4(1) 1989 Spring pp. 1-11.

Hansell, William H. "The Uncommon Commonplace in the Early Poems of Gwendolyn Brooks." *CLA Journal*. 30 (3) 1987 March pp. 261-293.

Johnson, Barbara. "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion." *Diacritics*. 16(1) 1986 Spring 29-47.

Kent, George E. "Gwendolyn Brooks—Portrait, in Part, of the Artist as a Young Girl and Apprentice Writer." *Callaloo*. 2 October 1979 pp. 74-83.

Miller, R. Baxter. "'Define...the Whirlwind:' Gwendolyn Brooks's Epic sign for a Generation. 160-173 In *Black American Poets Between Worlds, 1940-1960*. Ed. R. Baxter Miller. Knoxville: U of Tennessee Press, 1987.