The Historical and Social Context
of Gwendolyn Brooks’s Poetry

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.1 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).2 Finally, hundreds of critical discussions have appeared on her work, reflecting various perspectives in literary theory, such as femi-
Gwendolyn Brooks is one of the most highly regarded, influential, and widely read poets of 20th-century American poetry. She was a much-honored poet, even as Brooks’s later work took on politics more overtly, displaying what National Observer contributor Bruce Cook termed an “intense awareness of the problems of color and justice.” Toni Cade Bambara reported in the New York Times Book Review that at the age of 50 something happened to Brooks, a something most certainly in evidence in In the Mecca (1968) and subsequent works—a new movement and energy, intensity, richness, power of statement and a new stripped lean, compressed style. A change of style prompted by a change of mind. Gwendolyn Brooks is one of the major American poets of this century and the first black woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for poetry (1950). Yet far less critical attention has focused on her work than on that of her peers. In addition to analyzing the poetic devices used, Melhem examines the biographical, historical, and literary contexts of Brooks’s poetry: her upbringing and education, her political involvement in the struggle for civil rights, her efforts on behalf of young black poets, her role as a teacher, and her influence on black letters. Among the many sources examined are such revealing documents as Brooks’s correspondence with her editor of twenty years and with other writers and critics. From Melhem’s illuminating study emerges a picture of the poet as prophet. The image of Gwendolyn Brooks as a readily accessible poet is at once accurate and deceptive. Capable of capturing the experiences and rhythms of black street life, she frequently presents translucent surfaces that give way suddenly to reveal ambiguous depths. Equally capable of manipulating traditional poetic forms such as the sonnet, rhyme royal, and heroic couplet, she employs them to mirror the uncertainties of characters or personas who embrace conventional attitudes to defend themselves against internal and external chaos. Brooks devotes much of her energy to defining and responding to the elusive forces, variously psychological and social, which inflict this pain.