
GWENDOLYN BROOKS

(1917–2000)

Gwendolyn Brooks was born in Topeka, Kansas, but grew up on the South Side of Chicago, where her parents created a sustaining home life despite economic hardship and fostered her love of poetry. Brooks published her first poem at age thirteen, and by the time she was seventeen had contributed over seventy-five poems to the *Chicago Defender*, an African American newspaper. Before graduating from Englewood High School in 1934, she had corresponded with Langston Hughes, who encouraged her to listen to the blues, and James Weldon Johnson, who led her to the work of Modernists such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.

Brooks graduated from Warren Wilson Junior College in 1936 and joined the NAACP youth council, where she met Henry Blakey II, whom she married in 1939. After the birth of their first child, in 1941 Brooks became a member of a poetry workshop run by Inez Cunningham Stark, a wealthy white woman who, Brooks recalls, “flew in the face of her society tradition, coming among blacks. . . . She gave us an education in modern poetry.” Equally important to Brooks’s poetry was her experience living in Chicago’s South Side ghetto. After her marriage she moved from her parents’ home to a small kitchenette apartment in a crowded building, and the vibrant, complex life of the South Side (christened “Bronzeville” by the *Chicago Defender*) became the primary subject of her work.

Brooks’s poetry is notable for its technical ingenuity, emotional vitality, and nuanced explorations of African American city life. During the early 1940s, the literary world was dominated by “The New Criticism,” whose practitioners wrote poetry characterized by complex forms, dense verbal textures, wit, irony, and allusion. Brooks not only mastered this style, but took it to new lengths, for the poetry of her first three books depends on wordplay, heavy alliteration and assonance, and ease with a variety of forms, both traditional and invented. Whereas much New Critical poetry suffers from overemphasis on wit and technique so that it becomes a form of intellectual gamesmanship, Brooks’s work is invigorated by her passionate portrayals of ordinary African American women and men and by her arguments against prejudice. And because Brooks deploys irony to attack racial

and social inequalities, she implicitly challenges the New Critics’ view that poetry should be disengaged from politics. Yet Brooks also continues the traditions of African American folk forms, especially in her ballads and character portraits.

Brooks soon received national recognition. After she won the Midwestern Writers’ Conference Poetry Award in 1943, Harper published her first book, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), which garnered her the American Academy of Letters Award (1946) and two Guggenheim Fellowships (1946 and 1947). With the publication of *Annie Allen* (1949), Brooks became the first African American to win the Pulitzer Prize. The focus on black women’s experience that she developed in *Annie Allen* continued in her lyrical novella, *Maud Martha* (1953). As the 1960s came to a close, African American protests for civil rights intensified, and Brooks’s third book of poetry, *The Bean Eaters* (1960), became more openly political than her earlier books, although she still favored traditional forms.

During the first half of the 1960s, Brooks was honored by President John F. Kennedy, who invited her to read at the Library of Congress, and by Columbia College in Chicago (where she began teaching in 1963), which gave her the first of the fifty-one honorary degrees she was to receive from American universities over the next thirty years. But Brooks’s most momentous experience of the decade was her participation in the 1967 Second Black Writers’ Conference at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. There, she met proponents of the Black Arts Movement, including Amiri Baraka and Don L. Lee (Haki R. Madhubuti), who espoused black nationalism and argued that African American poets should write strictly for a black audience, view poetry as a vehicle for community building and social change, and use only forms such as the blues or a free verse based on African American speech rhythms. Their ideas reflected her own growing convictions—so much so that, with the publication of *In the Mecca* (1968), she changed her style to make it more easily accessible to an African American audience. Describing her new work, Brooks stressed that, “my aim. . . is to write poems that will somehow successfully ‘call’ all black people: black people in taverns, black people in alleys, black people in gutters, schools, offices, factories, prisons, the consulate; I wish to reach black people in pulpits, black people in mines, on farms, on thrones; *not* always to ‘teach’—I shall wish often to entertain, to illumine.”

In the spirit of community building, after 1969 she broke with Harper and Row and began publishing with African American presses, where she released many small chapbooks of new poems, as well as her autobiography, *Report from Part One* (1972) and *Report from Part Two* (1995), and *Blacks* (1987), a retrospective poetry collection spanning her whole career. Brooks also continued her dedicated involvement in her own community through the workshops and contests for young writers that she sponsored as Poet Laureate of Illinois, a position she held from 1968 to her death in 2000, and through the Gwendolyn Brooks Center for Black Literature and Creative Writing, founded in 1993 by Chicago State University, where she was Distinguished Professor of English. Brooks’s many national honors—including being the first black woman elected to the National Institute

of Arts and Letters and also the first black woman appointed as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress—attest to the broad appeal of her work. When asked in a 1967 interview, “What is your Poet’s Premise?” she responded: “Vivify the contemporary fact,” said Whitman. I like to vivify the *universal* fact, when it occurs to me. But the universal wears contemporary clothing very well.”



THE NEW BLACK

The Field of the Fever. The Time of the Tall-Walkers.

Everybody has to go to the bathroom.

That's good.

That's a great thing.

If by some quirk of fate blacks had to go to the bathroom and whites didn't I shudder to think of the genocidal horrors that would be visited on the blacks of the whole world. Here is what my little green *Webster's New World* has to say about a world-shaking word:

black (blak), adj. (A S *blæc*) 1. opposite to white; see color. 2. dark-complexioned. 3. Negro. 4. without light; dark. 5. dirty. 6. evil; wicked. 7. sad; dismal. 8. sullen. n. 1. black pigment; opposite of white. 2. dark clothing, as for mourning. 3. a Negro. v.t.&v.i., to blacken.—black-out, to lose consciousness.—blackly, adv.—blackness, n.

Interestingly enough, we do not find that “white” is “opposite of black.” That would “lift” black to the importance-level of white.

white (hwit), adj. (A S *hwit*) 1. having the color of pure snow or milk. 2. of a light or pale color. 3. pale; wan. 4. pure; innocent. 5. having a light-colored skin. n. 1. the color of pure snow or milk. 2. a white or light-colored thing, as the albumen of an egg, the white part of the eyeball, etc. 3. a person with a light-colored skin; Caucasian.—whiteness, n.

Until 1967 my own blackness did not confront me with a shrill spelling of itself. I knew that I was what most people were calling “a Negro;” I called myself that, although always the word fell awkwardly on a poet’s ear; I had never liked the sound of it (Caucasian has an ugly sound, too, while the name Indian is beautiful to look at and to hear.) *And* I knew that people of my coloration and distinctive history had been bolted to trees and sliced or burned or shredded; knocked to the back of the line; provided with separate toilets, schools, neighborhoods; denied, when possible, voting rights; hounded, hooted at, or shunned, or patronizingly parted (often the patting-hand was, I knew, surreptitiously wiped after the kindness, so that unspeakable contamination might be avoided.) America’s social

From *Report from Part One* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972) 82–86.

climate, it seemed, was trying to tell me something. It was trying to tell me something Websterian. Yet, although almost secretly, I had always felt that to be black was good. Sometimes, there would be an approximate whisper around me: *others* felt, it seemed, that to be black was good. The translation would have been something like “Hey—being black is *fun*.” Or something like “Hey—our folks have got stuff to be proud of!” Or something like “Hey—since we are so good why aren’t we treated like the other ‘Americans?’”

Suddenly there was New Black to meet. In the spring of 1967 I met some of it at the Fisk University Writers’ Conference in Nashville. Coming from white white South Dakota State College I arrived in Nashville, Tennessee, to give one more “reading.” But blood-boiling surprise was in store for me. First, I was aware of a general energy, an electricity, in look, walk, speech, *gesture* of the young blackness I saw all about me. I had been “loved” at South Dakota State College. Here, I was coldly Respected. Here, the heroes included the novelist-director, John Killens, editors David Llorens and Hoyt Fuller, playwright Ron Milner, historians John Henrik Clarke and Lerone Bennett (and even poor Lerone was taken to task, by irate members of a no-nonsense young audience, for affiliating himself with *Ebony Magazine*, considered at that time a traitor for allowing skin-bleach advertisements in its pages, and for over-featuring light-skinned women). Imamu Amiri Baraka, then “LeRoi Jones”, was expected. He arrived in the middle of my own offering, and when I called attention to his presence there was jubilee in Jubilee Hall.

All that day and night, Margaret Danner Cunningham—another Old Girl, another coldly Respected old Has-been—and an almost hysterical Gwendolyn B. walked about in amazement, listening, looking, learning. *What was going on!*

In my cartoon basket I keep a cartoon of a stout, dowager-hatted, dowager-furred Helen Hokinson woman. She is on parade in the world. She is a sign-carrier in the wild world. Her sign says “Will someone please tell me what is going on?” Well, although I cannot give a full-blooded answer to that potent question, I have been supplied—the sources are plural—with helpful materials: hints, friendly *and* inimical clues, approximations, statistics, “proofs” of one kind and another; from these I am trying to weave the coat that I shall wear. In 1967’s Nashville, however, the somewhat doty expression in the eyes of the cartoon-woman, the *agapeness*, were certainly mine. I was in some inscrutable and uncomfortable wonderland. I didn’t know what to make of what surrounded me, of what with hot sureness began almost immediately to invade me. I had never been, before, in the general presence of such insouciance, such live firmness, such confident vigor, such determination to mold or carve something DEFINITE.

Up against the wall, white man! was the substance of the Baraka shout, at the evening reading he shared with fierce Ron Milner among intoxicating drum-beats, heady incense and organic underhumming. Up against the wall! And a pensive (until that moment) white man of thirty or thirty three abruptly shot himself into the heavy air, screaming “Yeah! Yeah! Up against the wall, Brother! KILL ‘EM ALL! KILL ‘EM ALL!”

I thought that was interesting.

There is indeed a new black today. He is different from any the world has known. He’s a tall-walker. Almost firm. By many of his own *brothers* he is not understood. And he is understood by *no* white. Not the wise whites; not the Schooled

white; not the Kind white. Your *least* pre-requisite toward an understanding of the new black is an exceptional Doctorate which can be conferred only upon those with the proper properties of bitter birth and intrinsic sorrow. I know this is infuriating, especially to those professional Negro-understanders, some of them so *very* kind, with special portfolio, special savvy. But I cannot say anything other, because nothing other is the truth.

I—who have “gone the gamut” from an almost angry rejection of my dark skin by some of my brainwashed brothers and sisters to a surprised queenhood in the new black sun—am qualified to enter at least the kindergarten of new consciousness now. New consciousness and trudge-toward-progress.

I have hopes for myself.

1972

ROBERT DUNCAN

(1919–1988)

Robert Duncan's lifelong fascination with myth, signs, wonders, and hidden meanings that exist as “felt presences” and can be revealed through poetry originated in his childhood, which was far from ordinary. Born Edward Howard Duncan in Oakland, California, in 1919, the poet was put up for adoption at the age of six months. His mother died shortly after he was born, and his father, a day laborer already supporting a large family, could not care for the baby. His new parents, who were theosophists, believers in occult mysteries, chose the baby because they found his astrological chart auspicious. He grew up as Robert Edward Symmes but changed his name back to “Duncan” in 1941. Throughout his childhood, he was surrounded by family members steeped in the wisdom literature of many cultures and who saw cosmic significance in everything. In “The Truth and Life of Myth,” Duncan recalls that, for his family, “the truth of things was esoteric (locked inside) or occult (masked by) the apparent, and one needed a ‘lost key’ in order to piece out the cryptogram of . . . who created the universe and what his real message was.” His awareness of inner dimensions, truths that cannot be apprehended through ordinary means, was also heightened by an unfortunate accident. At the age of three, Duncan injured an eye in a fall. For the rest of his life he was cross-eyed and experienced double vision.

By the time Duncan had graduated from Kern High School in Bakersfield, he had already decided to devote his life to poetry, even though he knew that such a decision went against his family's expectations. In another essay, “Man's Fulfillment in Order and Strife,” he emphasizes the need for “creative strife” and recalls the family conflict that his vocation caused: “Poetry was not in the order of things. One could not earn a living at poetry. Writing poems was not such a bad thing, but to give one's life over to poetry, to become a *poet*, was to evidence a serious social disorder.” Also “not in the order of things” was his sexual orientation, and he came to link his feelings of outsiderhood as a poet with those he experienced as a homosexual. “The structure of my life, like the structure of my work,” he later remarked, “was to emerge in a series of trials, a problematic identity.”

Those trials were pronounced during the next ten years of his life. Although he had entered the University of California at Berkeley in 1936,