

## **Kenny Jackson Williams: On Brooks' Life and Career**

Although she was born on 7 June 1917 in Topeka, Kansas--the first child of David and Keziah Brooks--Gwendolyn Brooks is "a Chicagoan." The family moved to Chicago shortly after her birth, and despite her extensive travels and periods in some of the major universities of the country, she has remained associated with the city's South Side. What her strong family unit lacked in material wealth was made bearable by the wealth of human capital that resulted from warm interpersonal relationships. When she writes about families that--despite their daily adversities--are not dysfunctional, Gwendolyn Brooks writes from an intimate knowledge reinforced by her own life.

Brooks attended Hyde Park High School, the leading white high school in the city, but transferred to the all-black Wendell Phillips, then to the integrated Englewood High School. In 1936 she graduated from Wilson Junior College. These four schools gave her a perspective on racial dynamics in the city that continues to influence her work.

Her profound interest in poetry informed much of her early life. "Eventide," her first poem, was published in *American Childhood Magazine* in 1930. A few years later she met James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes, who urged her to read modern poetry--especially the work of Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and e. c. cummings--and who emphasized the need to write as much and as frequently as she possibly could. By 1934 Brooks had become an adjunct member of the staff of the *Chicago Defender* and had published almost one hundred of her poems in a weekly poetry column.

In 1938 she married Henry Blakely and moved to a kitchenette apartment on Chicago's South Side. Between the birth of her first child, Henry, Jr., in 1940 and the birth of Nora in 1951, she became associated with the group of writers involved in Harriet Monroe's still-extant *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*. From this group she received further encouragement, and by 1943 she had won the Midwestern Writers Conference Poetry Award.

In 1945 her first book of poetry, *A Street in Bronzeville* (published by Harper and Row), brought her instant critical acclaim. She was selected one of *Mademoiselle* magazine's "Ten Young Women of the Year," she won her first Guggenheim Fellowship, and she became a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Her second book of poems, *Annie Allen* (1949), won *Poetry* magazine's Eunice Tietjens Prize. In 1950 Gwendolyn Brooks became the first African American to win a Pulitzer Prize. From that time to the present, she has seen the recipient of a number of awards, fellowships, and honorary degrees usually designated as Doctor of Humane Letters.

President John Kennedy invited her to read at a Library of Congress poetry festival in 1962. In 1985 she was appointed poetry consultant to the Library of Congress. Just as receiving a Pulitzer Prize for poetry marked a milestone in her career, so also did her selection by the National Endowment for the Humanities as the 1994 Jefferson Lecturer, the highest award in the humanities given by the federal government.

Her first teaching job was a poetry workshop at Columbia College (Chicago) in 1963. She

went on to teach creative writing at a number of institutions including Northeastern Illinois University, Elmhurst College, Columbia University, Clay College of New York, and the University of Wisconsin.

A turning point in her career came in 1967 when she attended the Fisk University Second Black Writers' Conference and decided to become more involved in the Black Arts movement. She became one of the most visible articulators of "the black aesthetic." Her "awakening" led to a shift away from a major publishing house to smaller black ones. While some critics found an angrier tone in her work, elements of protest had always been present in her writing and her awareness of social issues did not result in diatribes at the expense of her clear commitment to aesthetic principles. Consequently, becoming the leader of one phase of the Black Arts movement in Chicago did not drastically alter her poetry, but there were some subtle changes that become more noticeable when one examines her total canon to date.

The ambiguity of her role as a black poet can be illustrated by her participation in two events in Chicago. In 1967 Brooks, who wrote the commemorative ode for the "Chicago Picasso," attended the unveiling ceremony along with social and business dignitaries. The poem was well received even though such lines as "Art hurts. Art urges voyages . . ." made some uncomfortable. Less than two weeks later there was the dedication of the mural known as "The Wall of Respect" at 43rd and Langley streets, in the heart of the black neighborhood. The social and business elites of Chicago were not present, but for this event Gwendolyn Brooks wrote "The Wall." In a measure these two poems illustrate the dichotomy of a divided city, but they also exemplify Brooks's ability both to bridge those divisions and to utilize nonstrident protest.

Gwendolyn Brooks has been a prolific writer. In addition to individual poems, essays, and reviews that have appeared in numerous publications, she has issued a number of books in rapid succession, including *Maud Martha* (1953), *Bronzeville Boys and Girls* (1956), and *In the Mecca* (1968). Her poetry moves from traditional forms including ballads, sonnets, variations of the Chaucerian and Spenserian stanzas as well as the rhythm of the blues to the most unrestricted free verse. In short, the popular forms of English poetry appear in her work; yet there is a strong sense of experimentation as she juxtaposes lyric, narrative, and dramatic poetic forms. In her lyrics there is an affirmation of life that rises above the stench of urban kitchenette buildings. In her narrative poetry the stories are simple but usually transcend the restrictions of place; in her dramatic poetry, the characters are often memorable not because of any heroism on their part but merely because they are trying to survive from day to day.

Brooks's poetry is marked by some unforgettable characters who are drawn from the underclass of the nation's black neighborhoods. Like many urban writers, Brooks has recorded the impact of city life. But unlike the most committed naturalists, she does not hold the city completely responsible for what happens to people. The city is simply an existing force with which people must cope.

While they are generally insignificant in the great urban universe, her characters gain importance--at least to themselves--in their tiny worlds, whether it be Annie Allen trying on a hat in a milliner's shop or DeWitt Williams "on his way to Lincoln Cemetery" or Satin-Legs Smith trying to decide what outlandish outfit to wear on Sundays. Just as there is not a strong naturalistic sense of victimization, neither are there great plans for an unpromised future nor is there some great divine spirit that will rescue them. Brooks is content to describe a moment in the lives of very ordinary people whose only goal is to exist from day to day and perhaps have a nice funeral when they die. Sometimes these ordinary people seem to have a control that is

out of keeping with their own insignificance.

Although her poetic voice is objective, there is a strong sense that she--as an observer--is never far from her action. On one level, of course, Brooks is a protest poet; yet her protest evolves through suggestion rather than through a bludgeon. She sets forth the facts without embellishment or interpretation, but the simplicity of the facts makes it impossible for readers to come away unconvinced--despite whatever discomfort they may feel--whether she is writing about suburban ladies who go into the ghetto to give occasional aid or a black mother who has had an abortion.

Trying to determine clear lines of influence from the work of earlier writers to later ones is always a risky business; however, knowing some identifiable poetic traditions can aid in understanding the work of Gwendolyn Brooks. On one level there is the English metaphysical tradition perhaps best exemplified by John Donne. From nineteenth-century American poetry one can detect elements of Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, and Paul Laurence Dunbar. From twentieth-century American poetry there are many strains, most notably the compact style of T. S. Eliot, the frequent use of the lower-case for titles in the manner of e. e. cummings, and the racial consciousness of the Harlem Renaissance, especially as found in the work of Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes; but, of perhaps greater importance, she seems to be a direct descendant of the urban commitment and attitude of the "Chicago School" of writing. For Brooks, setting goes beyond the Midwest with a focus on Chicago and concentrates on a small neglected corner of the city. Consequently, in the final analysis, she is not a carbon copy of any of the Chicago writers.

She was appointed poet laureate of Illinois in 1968 and has been perhaps more active than many laureates. She has done much to bring poetry to the people through accessibility and public readings. In fact, she is one of our most visible American poets. Not only is she extremely active in the poetry workshop movement, but her classes and contests for young people are attempts to help inner-city children see "the poetry" in their lives. She has taught audiences that poetry is not some formal activity closed to all but the most perceptive. Rather, it is an art form within the reach and understanding of everybody--including the lowliest among us.

From *The Oxford Companion to African-American Literature*. Copyright © 1997 by Oxford University Press.

**Publication Status:**

Excerpted Criticism [1]

**Author:**

Kenny Jackson Williams [2]

**Review Process:**

Single Review

**Target:**

Gwendolyn Brooks

**Tags:**

Chicagoan [3]

South Side [4]

racial dynamics [5]

American Childhood Magazine [6]

Chicago Defender [7]

Pulitzer Prize [8]

Fisk University Second Black Writers' Conference [9]

the black aesthetic [10]

Black Arts movement [11]

urban [12]

objective voice [13]

Harlem Renaissance [14]

Chicago School [15]

poet laureate [16]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/content/kenny-jackson-williams-brooks-life-and-career>

### **Links**

[1] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism>

[2] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/kenny-jackson-williams>

[3] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/chicagoan>

[4] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/south-side>

[5] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/racial-dynamics>

[6] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/american-childhood-magazine>

[7] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/chicago-defender>

[8] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/pulitzer-prize>

[9] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/fisk-university-second-black-writers-conference>

[10] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/black-aesthetic>

[11] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/black-arts-movement>

[12] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/urban>

[13] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/objective-voice>

[14] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/harlem-renaissance>

[15] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/chicago-school>

[16] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/poet-laureate>