Biography:
Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000)

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Gwendolyn Elizabeth Brooks was born June 7, 1917 in Topeka, Kansas, the elder daughter of Keziah Corine Wims and David Anderson, and the paternal granddaughter of a runaway slave and Union soldier. Shortly after her birth, her family moved to Chicago, where Brooks grew up. Brooks met her future husband, Henry Blakely, at a NAACP Youth Council meeting in 1938. They married two years later. She gave birth to two children: Henry Jr. in 1940 and Nora in 1951.

She published her first poem, “Eventide,” at the age of thirteen in America Childhood Magazine, and went on to author more than twenty books of poetry, including Children Coming Home (The David Co., 1991); Blacks (1987); To Disembark (1981); The Near-Johannesburg Boy and Other Poems (1986); Riot (1969); In the Mecca (1968); The Bean Eaters (1960); Annie Allen (1949), for which she received the Pulitzer Prize; and A Street in Bronzeville (1945). She also wrote numerous other books including a novel, Maud Martha (1953), and Report from Part One: An Autobiography (1972), and edited Jump Bad: A New Chicago Anthology (1971).

Brooks is known as “the chronicler of the commonplace.” Her poetry spanned various forms, including sonnet, free-verse, and narrative models, and she worked with the themes of everyday life of ordinary black Americans in the mid-20th century. Her narrative and dramatic poetry tell carefully crafted stories of the black urban poor whose ordinary experiences transcend time and place and whose heroism lies in their daily struggle to navigate the urban world. She masterfully portrayed the realities of themes of poverty, motherhood, and the struggle for black identity through the prism of particularity. Gwendolyn Brooks was a teacher of poetry and creative writing at colleges and universities around the county, including Elmhurst College and Columbia University. She also earned numerous accolades during her prolific career as a writer and poet.

In addition to the Pulitzer Prize, Brooks was appointed poet laureate of Illinois in 1968, and received fellowships from The Academy of American Poets and the Guggenheim Foundation. She was selected by the National Endowment for the Arts as the Jefferson Lecturer in 1994.

She was invited by President John F. Kennedy to speak at the Library of Congress in 1962 where she read “the mother”. Brooks lived in Chicago until her death on Dec. 3, 2000 at the age of 83.†

I’m very pleased with the way my life turned out. Oh, it hasn’t been all joy and roses and honey and cream. But I’m glad that I wanted to write, and I did write, and I’m glad I stuck with it. … You know, there is no muse whispering in your ear, telling you what to say. You have to work at it. Writing is a delicious agony.

—GWENDOLYN BROOKS

Lesson #2: “the mother” by Gwendolyn Brooks

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Bibliography for Ann Sexton

Primary Texts


Secondary Studies


