

## “the mother” Discussion Guide for Teachers

1. In a 1961 interview with Studs Terkel, Gwendolyn Brooks explains, “Once again I was trying to understand how people must feel—in this case a mother who never really became a mother. This poem was the only poem in the book that Richard Wright, who first looked at it, wanted to omit, [because] he felt that a proper poem could not be written about abortions, but I felt otherwise and I was glad that the publishers left it in” (*Conversations with Gwendolyn Brooks, Do you agree with Richard Wright or with Gwendolyn Brooks? Why?* *In order to take sides on this issue, students will first need to think about what they understand is “proper” to poetry. Is poetry as artistic expression only about what is beautiful and good, or can poetry also be about what is ugly, guilty, raw, and upsetting? If possible, give some examples of poems about the Holocaust that test the limits of what is “proper” to poetic expression.* <http://www.auschwitz.dk/id6.htm>. Accessed 5/3/2019.
2. “The Mother” was included in Gwendolyn Brooks’ first published book, *A Street in Bronzeville*, in which the poet gives voice to people living in an African-American ghetto and provides a vivid description of the sights and sounds and happenings of that place. Does knowing this context make any difference to the reader of the poem? Is abortion a special issue for African-American women and communities? If so, why and how? Here it would be appropriate to direct students to studies that show that the abortion rate is disproportionately high among African-American women and girls. See [www.census.gov/library/publications/2009/compendia/statab/129ed/births-deaths-marriages-divorces.html](http://www.census.gov/library/publications/2009/compendia/statab/129ed/births-deaths-marriages-divorces.html). Accessed 5/3/2019. See also Arthur Goldberg, “Abortion’s Devastating Impact Upon Black Americans,” *Public Discourse*, February 11, 2019. <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2019/02/48594/>. Accessed 5/3/2019.
3. The noun “Mother” in the title of the poem is followed by the noun “Abortions” in the first line. What is the effect of this juxtaposition? What questions does it raise? Can a “mother” have “abortions” or does being a mother exclude having had abortions? Does a woman who has had an abortion remain a mother? If so, how? What is the implication of the plural –s, of “abortions” (versus “An abortion”)? *In Report from Part One, Brooks observes that the speaker is “Hardly your crowned and praised and ‘customary’ Mother, but a Mother not unfamiliar, who decides that she, rather than her World, will kill her children” (184). In a place like Bronzeville, black youth are likely to die because of poverty, drugs, or gang violence, or to end their lives in a prison. In a cruel and unmotherly society, mothers too behave in unmotherly ways. Nineteen million black babies have been aborted in the U.S.A. since 1973.*
4. Notice the repeated use of pronouns of the pronouns “I” and “you” in the poem. Do the referents for these pronouns shift during the course of the poem? How does the “you” of the aborted babies relate to the “you” of the audience? Help the students to understand that the “you” being addressed in the first ten lines of the poem is the mother speaking to herself, but also the mother speaking to other women who, like her, have had abortions. In the second and third parts of the poem, however, the mother defensively addresses and pleads with the ghosts of her unborn children.

<sup>1</sup> Brooks, Gwendolyn. *Conversations with Gwendolyn Brooks*. Edited by Gloria Jean Wade Gayles. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003. 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

5. **How many times does the word “if” appear in the poem? Why does the speaker say “if”, as if she hasn’t done what she did? Is the poem a kind of dramatized “thought-experiment”, an exercise in “as if” wondering? If so, what purpose does it achieve?** *The word “if” appears four times: “if I sinned, if I seized,” “if I stole,” “if I poisoned.” Students may say that in asking the questions the mother plays, as it were, the opposite parts of a prosecuting attorney and of a defense attorney. The prosecuting attorney finds the answer to the questions to be an obvious “yes.” The defense attorney, by contrast, may notice differences between the crime of abortion, on the one hand, and of theft and poisoning, on the other. The mother thus tries to excuse herself, but she is not convinced of her innocence. Lacking words to confess her guilt, she confesses instead her love and asks her children to believe in her love for them.*
  
6. **According to the testimony of Brooks, she was trying “to understand how people must feel” when she wrote the poem. A dramatic dialogue, the poem “The Mother” allows the person reading it to speak “as if” s/he were the mother, to play her part. Does the poem help the reader to empathize with a woman who has had an abortion? If so, how? If not, what are the obstacles to such an empathetic identification?** *Students who answer “yes,” on the one hand, will probably notice the mother’s tormented conscience as she lists the “possible” crimes she has in fact committed. She is haunted by the ghosts, the memories, of her unborn children and by her own lost possibilities as a mother. Remembering them, she suffers; she feels guilty, but she continues to deny her guilt. Her suffering may awaken compassion in students who play her part. Students who answer “no” may say that the mother’s multiple abortions (since the poem uses plural nouns: “abortions,” “births,” “names,” “lives”) and her evasion of responsibility distance the speaker from herself and thus make it hard to empathize with her and to believe in the end that she really loved her children.*
  
7. **Read aloud and analyze the rhyme-scheme and the rhythm of the poem. Does it remind you of anything you’ve ever heard in the world of musical expression? If so, is this poem not just the expression of an imagined woman but of a community? Explain your answer.** *Students may refer to rap music or hip-hop. A 2017 study by A. Premkumar, K. Brown, B. Mengesha, and AV Jackson, “Abortion and contemporary hip-hop: A thematic analysis of lyrics from 1990-2015,” *Contraception* 96.1 (2017): 30-35, points to a decidedly negative portrayal of abortion, revealing “a unique perspective within a marginalized community.” <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/28578149>. Accessed 5/2/2019.*
  
8. **Brooks often make it a point on her speaking tours to read “The Mother” aloud. She also chose to read it in the White House on January 3, 1980, even though the poem was considered “controversial.” Why would it be controversial? Does it point to two different streams in American feminism, or to a conflict between the Women’s Movement and the Civil Rights Movement? Introduce students to the idea that black Pro-Life feminists see legalized abortion as lethal to black Americans and to black culture, whereas black Pro-Choice feminists see “abortion rights” as important to black women’s economic and political advancement. Students may have heard that the Pro-Choice organizers of the Women’s March refused to include Pro-Life women’s organizations on the list of sponsors. See Emma Green, “Women Are Not a Monolith,” *The Atlantic* (January 19, 2019) <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/01/fights-over-womens-march-and-march-life/580816/> Accessed 5/3/2019.**