CHAPTER – IV

MINOR THEMES IN THE POETRY OF
GWENDOLYN BROOKS: YOUTH,
MEN AND COLOUR
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This chapter concentrates on the minor themes that occur in the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks. The label 'minor themes' should not lead one to undermine the importance of these themes. They are as close to Gwendolyn Brooks's heart as are the major themes. An indepth reading of Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry will help us in understanding the emphasis she places on these themes.

Gwendolyn Brooks approaches the minor themes with the same sensitivity and commitment she uses while dealing with her women character. Here also, we observe Gwendolyn Brooks moving from an emphasis on the individual to that of the community or from universal to the specific. Her transformation from a Negro poet is seen in her poetic voice gaining the thunderous resonance of not a mere reporter, but of a prophet, a leader showing the way.

Knowing full well the potential strength of the youths, the nation builders, Gwendolyn Brooks has a special place for them. She addresses many poems to them and speaks to them as a mother, a teacher, a guide, alluding to the problems they face in their transition from adolescence to adulthood.
Before Gwendolyn Brooks emerged as a poet, Inez Boulton Stark played a prominent role in her life. Inez Boulton Stark, a socialite, despite strong objection from well-meaning friends, ventured into the Black Belt Chicago to do something for the youth there. This lady started a poetry workshop and was instrumental in giving Gwendolyn Brooks the proper start in the right direction. Drawing inspiration from one such great lady, Gwendolyn Brooks was always hounded by the desire to do something, contribute something positive to the Black youth.

Gwendolyn Brooks throughout her life time, helped people in many ways. She started workshops in poetry writing, by encouraging writing contests in schools, colleges, her own neighbourhood, in prisons too. Gwendolyn Brooks funded these contests and workshops from her own pocket. It was through conducting these workshops that she showed her concern for the young.

The Blackstone Rangers was a street gang in Chicago. Gwendolyn Brooks had seen the latent talent of this disreputed group when she witnessed the musical show “Opportunity, Please Knock,” directed by Oscar Brown Jr. After spending quality time with them, she came to appreciate the vast talent in some of the group members. What she also realized was that the only thing hindering them from upward mobility and a secure future was their lives in Black Belt Chicago that was steeped in
poverty and total lack of opportunity. Walter Bradford, a social organiser for this teen-aged gang, helped Gwendolyn Brooks start poetry classes for the interested Rangers. This poetry class continued with the more dedicated students meeting at her house, and among them were Don L. Lee (Haki Madhubuti), Carolyn M. Rodger. With the members of this workshop, Brooks came out with an anthology Jump Bad, containing poems by these students.

The wealth of experience she gained with their association not only broadened her poetic vision, but also her perception. It provided her with material to enrich her poetry. She began to view the youths in a totally different light as she proceeded to try to understand why they do the things they do. The reason for their devil-may-care attitude and false bravado set her thinking along new lines.

In her “We Real Cool”, Gwendolyn Brooks tries to present youths of one such gang which, while analyzing their behaviour, shows maternal concern for the wasted youth of the boys. The false bravado shown by the boys is a cry from the sense of insecurity, of things not working their way and lack of opportunities. She remarks that the nonchalant, devil-may-care attitude shown by these boys is but a mask to hide the raw pain behind.
Just eight lines long, the poem "We Real Cool", reads:

We real cool. We
Left school. We
Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We
Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We
Jazz June. We
Die soon. ¹

The human interest contained in the poem could be one of the reasons for the popularity of this poem. Though very small, the poem says much and packs within it a mine of meanings. Of this poem, Gwendolyn Brooks elaborated on the probable meaning and said:

They have no pretensions to any glamour. They are supposedly dropouts, or at least they’re in the pool room when they should be possibly in school, since they’re probably young enough, or at least those I saw were when I looked in a pool room ... ²


This poem highlights the concern that Gwendolyn Brooks had for the young boys who were wasting away.

"We Real Cool" was one of the most favoured poems whenever Gwendolyn Brooks gave public poetry readings. Of the many feedbacks and letters that followed the presentation of this poem, one letter from a teenaged boy was much treasured and appreciated by Gwendolyn Brooks. The letter from sixteen year old Placido Tugo of Chicago's Manley Upper Grade Center School on West Polk Street, read:

Mrs. Gwendolyn Brooks gave me a good lesson that I hope that I will never forget because I was planning to quit school. But now I know that there is no place like school. I would want to tell her how I feel in side of my heart.³

Much heartened by the letter, Gwendolyn Brooks wrote back to him:

Dear Placido, what a happiness to know that words of mine could influence one of the large decisions you will ever make: to stay in school! For this alone, I am most happy that I could come to read to you. Please maintain your decision. Staying in school is overwhelmingly important - even though sometimes it may seem hard to do. I am sure your teachers and principal will do everything possible to help you. They are excited and happy that you are determined to continue. I'm very proud of you. BEST wishes!⁴

Such was Gwendolyn Brooks's influence on the young.

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⁴ Ibid.
Gwendolyn Brooks carries forward her concern for the youths, especially for the youths involved in street gangs.

The second part of *In the Mecca* titled, *After Mecca*, has poems on the Blackstone Ranger, the Chicago street gang. The section is divided into three parts – “As Seen by Disciplines”, “The Leaders” and “Gang Girls”. The poems took their inspiration from the association Brooks had with the Rangers. Many things that these Blacks tone Rangers did, Brooks did not approve. In the poem she makes that point clear, yet is magnanimous enough to acknowledge the influence this gang had on her life and poetry. In the first poem she writes:

\begin{verbatim}
There they are
Thirty at the corner
Black, raw, ready.
Sores in the city
that do not want to heal.\textsuperscript{5}
\end{verbatim}

Though Brooks looks at them as “Sores in the City”, she did not want people to think that this was her own condemnation. Hence, in the subsequent reprinting she wanted the three poems to be printed as a unit, for, the other two poems were more sympathetic.

\textsuperscript{5} Gwendolyn Brooks, *In the Mecca*, (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1968), p. 44.
Gwendolyn Brooks was impressed with these youngsters, especially with their abundant potentiality. She knew well that they formed an integral part of the Black experience that could not be dismissed. “The Gang Girls” beginning with “Gang Girls are Sweet Exoties”, tells of the loneliness of Mary Ann, a Rangerette described as “a rose in a whiskey glass”, is a “snake dancer’s child”. She tries to rid of herself of her loneliness and necessary restraint by making love, the most important thing in her life.

Gwendolyn Brooks’s experience as a teacher stood her in good stead. It was through her teaching assignments that she met many young people other than her own children and their set of friends. As teacher, she could interact with a wider cross section of the society. This helped her understand the mind and spirit of the youngsters. These experiences helped her not only to understand, but also to appreciate, imbibe and contribute to the later encounter she had with the young Black radical writers of the Black Arts Movement of the late 1960’s.

Gwendolyn Brooks’s association with the Blackstone Rangers and the young Black writers brought much inspiration and vitality in her and her works. It was from them she learnt and understood that “we were, all of us, Black . Not “Negroid”, but Black ”.6

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However, this had not been her stance from the beginning. Her approach to the subject of youth gradually underwent a change from the first phase of her poetic career. Of the various youths that Gwendolyn Brooks presented in her first phase, one person who stands out is “Dorrie Miller”, a real-life hero.

“Negro Hero”, a poem on Dorrie Miller, a Black messman, who put his job and life at risk to save his ship from attack. He dared to break the strict rules of segregation that prevailed in the military ranks as did on the ship. He knows why he manned the machine gun, he justifies his action,

I had to kick their law into their teeth in order to save them.

However I have heard that sometimes you have to deal

Devilishly with drowning men in order to swim them to shore.

Or they will haul themselves and you to the trash and the fish

Beneath

(When I think of this, I do not worry about a few chipped teeth).

Miller knows why he took the risk; it was to save Democracy whom he refers to as “my fair lady”.

Their white-gowned democracy was my fair lady

With her knife lying cold, straight, in the softness
of her sweet-flowing sleeve.
Bur for the sake of her dear smiling mouth and the
stuttered promise I toyed with my life.
I threw back! – I would not remember
Entirely the knife.⁷

For Dorrie Miller, the war moves on two levels; his first enemy is the Japanese and the other one the enemy on board his own ship. Dorrie Miller, the integrationist has hopes for his “fair lady” who will soon look at her Blacks with more concern.

In the second phase of her poetic career, Gwendolyn Brooks knew for certain that one could not hope for understanding from the whites, and that it was time for action. The character of Amos from In the Mecca becomes the spokesperson for Gwendolyn Brooks. Unlike Dorrie Miller, America is no longer “fair lady” for Amos. He is a thorough militant. To him America becomes the woman who has to be taught a lesson. He speaks of America thus:

Bathe her in her beautiful blood.
A long blood bath will wash her pure.
Her skin needs special care.
Let this good rage continue out beyond

her power to believe or to surmise.

Slap the false sweetness from the face.

Great-nailed boots
must kick her prostrate, heel-grind that soft breast.
outrage her saucy pride,
remove her fair fine mask.

Let her lie there, panting and wild, her pain
red, running roughly through the illustrious ruin—
with nothing to do but think, think
of how she was so long grand
flogging her dark one with her own hand.

Watching in meek amusement while he bled.

Then shall she rise, recover,

Never to forget.  

Moving from Amos, who is out to take revenge on white America for her treatment of Blacks, we meet Way-out Morgan. He is another youth, militant in temperament, who collects guns and dreams of the days of bloody retribution. “Death-to-the-hordes-of-the-white-Men”, is a maxim which hangs over his bed, a maxim he strongly believes in. It is a constant reminder of what white men did to him. He is reminded of his

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sister "mob-raped", his mates drowned in Mississippi River, and his own
suffering of police-brutality. He is more determined and more
frightening than Amos. According to Murva Furman, Way-out Morgan,
like Alfred, is "a native son whose memory of injustice and wrongs
committed against him renders him incapable of the act of creation except
through death. The poet perceives that meekness and docility are out of
season".9

Gwendolyn Brooks had great maternal concern for the young
Blacks and penned poems addressed to them. One such poem in
Beckonings, titled "Boys. Black", called a preaching for the young.
This poem was to later reappear as another poem in To Disembark, under
the title "Another Preachment to Blacks".

This preaching, similar to the First and Second Sermons on the
Warpland, has the added quality of a prophetic voice clubbed with a
sense of urgency, which, as Kent points out, "reflects anxiety regarding
Black's failure to retain the high level of consciousness they had
attained...".10 This poem calls the young Blacks to action:

Boys. Black. Black Boys.

9 Marva Riley Furman, "Gwendolyn Brooks: The "Unconditioned" Poet", CLA

10 George E. Kent, A Life of Gwendolyn Brooks, (Lexington: The University Press of
Be brave to battle for your breath and bread –

... ... ... .... ...

Up, boys, Boys Black. Black boys.

Involve now where you can or can’t prevail.

Take this:

there’s fertile ground beneath the pseudo-ice.

Take this:

Sharpen your hatchets. Force into the green.

Boys in all your Turnings and your Churnings.

remember Africa.\footnote{Gwendolyn Brooks, \textit{Beckonings} (Chicago: Third World Press, 1975) p. 5.}

To the poet, the young Blacks and their union is compared to “the dwarf magnificent”, which means that it is a replica of Africa on a smaller scale. With the help of this poem, Brooks tried to awaken their consciousness of the young Blacks. She tells the boys that fertile ground underneath, may be covered by ice for now, but it is “pseudo ice”. However, there is much work to be done, ground to be cultivated, hatchets to be sharpened and much more. They need to develop their racial consciousness and be prepared for whatever action that needs to be taken.
In the process of encouraging and urging the Black boys to commit themselves to action Gwendolyn Brooks herself assumes the role of leadership and guides them. Here, her voice becomes “heroic and prophetic”. No longer is Brooks a mere recorder of facts, a mere observer; she is seen here as a leader, telling the Black youth the way to go.

In the concluding lines of the poem, Brooks has this to say:

Beware
the easy griefs.
It is too easy to cry “ATTICA”
and shock thy street,
and purse thy mouth,
and go home to thy “Gunsmoke”. Boys,
black boys,
beware the easy griefs
that fool and fuel nothing.

I tell you
I love You
and I trust You.

Take my Faith.

Make of my Faith an engine.

Make of my Faith

a Black Star. I am Beckoning.13

Here, we notice the blending of the prophetic voice with that of the maternal. The force, passion, urgency can be gauzed in the preceding lines. This woman who is telling her boys to be prepared for action is far removed from mother who in the first phase of Gwendolyn Brooks's poetic career, in "The Children of the Poor", was bewildered and bemused wondering how she could help her children to make a place for themselves in a racist America.

In *Family Pictures*, Brooks carried forward the theme of solidarity. Apart from the change in matter regarding themes, what one notices is a change in the style too. The style is much simpler compared to her earlier works. The poems in *Family Pictures* succeed in capturing the spirit of Black awareness. In "Speech to the Young. Speech of the Progress-Toward" dedicated to her children Henry and Nora, Brooks writes:

Even if you are not ready for day

it cannot always be night.

You will be right

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For that is the hard home-run.¹⁴

In the poems "Young Heroes" and "Young Africans", she addresses the youth. "Young Africans" is a celebration of move towards rebirth of a people and "Young Heroes" are the young Black men who contributed towards the Blacks solidarity. These poems uphold and highlight those of their qualities which can inspire other young Blacks.

"Young Heroes", are the young men who played a prominent role in the Black Arts Movement. Gwendolyn Brooks felt that they would be good role models for the young Blacks to follow. In the poem "Young Africans", with the epigraph "of the furious", she identifies them as those young Blacks "who take Today and jerk it out of joint".

The urgency, the commitment, the command for the youth is seen here.

Taking To day (to jerk it out of joint)
the hardheroic maim the
leechlike-as-usual who use,
... ... ...
And they await,
across the Changes and the spiraling dead.
our black revival, our black vinegar,

our hands, and our hot blood.\textsuperscript{15}

Gwendolyn Brooks's voice in the earlier phase, which was hardly above a whisper, now resonated with pride, purpose and direction for the youth.

Brooks's \textit{Primer for Blacks}, is a chapbook of "Three Preachments". This small volume once again brought to the forefront Brooks's positive attitude. The first poem is a call to all Blacks to come, unite, love and uphold the Black solidarity.

Brooks's \textit{Young Poet's Primer}, that appeared in 1980 is a concise manual for high school and college students. This was followed by "Very Young Poets", which contains twenty "Little Lessons". These "Lessons" are meant to give practical advice to students on art of writing, reading and on subject matter. Her "Eight Poems for Children" carries these lessons forward with an advice to look at the world and at books with love and wonder.

Brooks's commitment to the Black cause, especially to the young Blacks has not been a passing fancy or a fad. Brooks has donned the mantle of maternal care and concern for all the Blacks. It is their unity and solidarity which is foremost in her mind. Her voice which began with soft cadence has slowly picked up speed and volume and has

become the strong, grand and prophetic voice, urging the Blacks to move on, but in unity, towards making their mark on the society.

Apart from stressing on Black unity and solidarity, Gwendolyn Brooks, the ever practical person, wrote on relevant, contemporary issues. Her concern for youth can be discerned in “Early Death”, a diptych, including “To the Young Who Want to Die”. In this poem, Brooks addresses the issue of the tendency among the youth to attempt suicide as an easy solution to problems. Once again, adapting the motherly role, Brooks also touches on the issue of drug addiction. She pinpoints to the grief and loss that follows and addresses the youth as a gentle friend and a caring parent. “In Early Death”, Brooks’s advice to the young is to look forward to tomorrow which holds many promises, a reminder that “Graves grow no green that you can use./ Remember green’s your color. You are Spring”. These poems addressed to the Black youths are also for youth in general, a beacon light to help them in their difficult transition from adolescent to youth.

The most recent volume Gottschalk and the Grande Tarentelle has “Thinking of Elizabeth Steinberg”, which deals with martyrdom of an abused child. Gwendolyn Brooks wants to stress her conviction that torture and murder of children must be stopped. The next poem “Michael, Young Russia”, the last poem of Gottschalk... is a poem
depicting a happy young man of twenty-one. This poem is a contrast to the earlier poem on “Elizabeth” and was written in 1982 in Kiev, when Gwendolyn Brooks visited that city. This poem, Gwendolyn Brooks says, is about Michael who is “representative of a fresh, sincere, loving Russia — youth spirit”.\textsuperscript{16}

These are, in short, the poems on and for youth that can be found in the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks. The youth she portrays are plagued by a desire for action, they have not time waiting for things to happen. The lines from “First fight. Then fiddle...” capture well the militant mood of the Black youth.

\begin{verbatim}
... Rise bloody, maybe not to late
For having first to civilize a space
Wherein to play your violin with grace.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{verbatim}

These poems are handled with care, concern and sensitivity rarely found. In these poems one can witness the human side of Gwendolyn Brooks, yet on the other hand hear her heroic at times prophetic voice.

The next major theme that can be found in Gwendolyn Brooks’s poetry is her concern with the Black man. Gwendolyn Brooks began her career depicting the lower class urban dweller, the Black man. She later


celebrated the vitality, energy, leadership of the Black man who was confident and had come of age. The first man a reader meets is “Satin-Legs Smith” from “The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith”, a simple common man who desires to brighten his drab dull life with bright colours, splendid attire and soft loves in the midst of a cheap hotel’s odour and decay. This man definitely belongs to the integrationist period of Gwendolyn Brooks’s poetic career. A mere observer, Gwendolyn Brooks is happy to stand afar and document Satin-Legs Smith’s life.

Gwendolyn Brooks lays much emphasis and describes the colourful wardrobe of Satin-Legs Smith in a long poem devoted entirely to the fine portrait of this ghetto man. This man is no hero, neither does he have any heroic qualities. He is in fact a very common, ordinary man. Yet, he wants to rise above his commonness, his shabby and ordinary past. One of his greatest joys is his collection of clothes in “the innards of [his] closet”. A description of his wardrobe follows:

Whose glory is not diamonds, not pearls,
Not silver plate with just enough dull shine.
But wonder-suits in yellow and in wine,
Sarcastic green and zebra-striped cobalt.
All drapes. With shoulder padding that is wide
And cocky and determined as his pride;
Ballooning pants that taper off to ends
Scheduled to choke precisely.

Here are hats
Like bright umbrellas; and hysterical ties
Like narrow banners for some gathering war.\(^\text{18}\)

His life is without any direction, yet he has no questions to ask of life. His only intention is to grab whatever pleasures life can offer. He has no one to lead him, no one to follow.

He has his doubts when he goes to bed and he faces the haunts of his past and the reality of who and what he is. Hence, “when “he sheds with his pajamas, shabby days”, his resentments and fears go to bed with him”,\(^\text{19}\) opines Houston Baker.

An ordinary man, Satin-Legs Smith has no claim to glory, nor does he inspire heroic qualities in others. Satin-Legs Smith is Brooks’s presentation of lowly man, who tries hard to make his life more bearable in a poverty-stricken, drab and dull ghetto.

In “Beverly Hills, Chicago”, we meet a group of men who drive past the fine houses in Beverly Hills; they look longingly at the houses in the white neighbourhood. They do not voice their feelings nor longings


openly. Only afterwards, "when we speak to each other our voices are a little gruff".

In "The Ballad of Rudolph Reed", a poem belonging to the second phase of Brooks's poetic career, tells of Rudolph Reed who was brave enough to try to change his lifestyle. He dared to undertake the ordeal of moving into "a street of bitter white", because he was driven by a desire, a hunger:

I am not hungry for berries.
I am not hungry for bread.
But hungry hungry for a house
Where at night a man in bed

May never hear the plaster
Stir as if in pain.
May never hear the roaches
Falling like rain ...
All I know is I shall know it
And fight for it when I find it.²⁰

But his bravado of attempting the unthinkable was rewarded by death. He was shot to death when he had hurt his fourth white man. His neighbours kick his corpse and call him “Nigger”.

Unlike the men of “Beverly Hills, Chicago”, Reed was not satisfied with longing, he dreamed, and saw to it that his dream turned into reality. However, his happiness was short lived.

Through Rudolph Reed, Gwendolyn Brooks presented the changing social climate in America. She chronicled the growing awareness of pride and dignity of self felt by the Blacks. The Blacks, as pictured through Reed, knew that they no longer deserved the marginal citizenship given them by the American Society. They knew that they could aspire for something better, something more. This attempt, because of it being individualistic in character, met with failure. The desire to do better was not felt by the entire community, but by individuals only. With proper leadership and guidance Blacks all over united, and once united proved a formidable force, a force hard to reconcile with.

One can notice that in the second phase of Gwendolyn Brooks’s poetic career during the late 1960’s, her presentation of Black men in her poetry also underwent a drastic change. The Black man no longer looked at the white man as superior, better, stronger and more able.
With growing Black consciousness, the Black man gained confidence in himself and exalted in the rich heritage of his race and drew inspiration, pride and courage from it. The major themes in the second phase are a call for militancy and communal unity; the role of a poet as a guide and a beacon for the community; the celebration of Blackness among others.

In *Family Pictures*, Gwendolyn Brooks showed her pride in the race by drawing the focus of the reader's attention and that of the community's by writing on the Black poets whom she envisioned as heroes of the race. The poem “Paul Robeson” talks of Black pride. Paul Robeson, a Black man who made a name for himself despite many hindrances, was very critical of the treatment of Blacks in America. Though he belonged to the earlier generation, Brooks celebrates him because for her, he is a reminder to the present generation that militancy, fight for rights was not a new thing for the Blacks in America; neither was it born overnight, but did have a long, distinguished, history of struggle. He was a representative of “maleness and adulthood, two qualities denied the Black man by traditional view”\(^\text{21}\) says Harry Shaw. Gwendolyn Brooks refers to Robeson as “The major Voice./ The adult

Voice”. He had to give up many things, to uphold the principles he strongly believed in. He is:

Warning in music-words
devout and large,
that we are each other’s
harvest:
we are each other’s
business:
we each other’s
magnitude and bond.22

The “Young Heroes”, contains three poems — “To Keorapetse Kogsitsile” (Willie); “To Don at Salaam” and “Walter Bradford”. Keorapetse Kogsitsile, a South African by birth, was committed to freedom. Gwendolyn Brooks shows her admiration for his deep understanding of life.

For one so young, he knows:

There is a scientific thinning of our rank.
Not merely Medgar Malcolm Martin and Black Panther,
but Susie, Cecil Williams. Azzie Jane.23

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Willie is aware that not only the Black leader but even common Blacks are being systematically murdered. To counter this threat, the only answer for survival is to unite and resist violently. His advice is Black pride and Black unity. The Blacks did not have to look any longer to the whites to guide them. They had their heroes from among themselves, from whom they could draw inspiration.

In the next poem “To Don at Salaam” is addressed to Haki R. Madhubuti, who is hailed by the poet as a guiding force “Your voice is the listened-for music”. Madhubuti stands out as "epitomizing honesty, integrity, beauty and controlled force of the authentic Black poet”,²⁴ points out critic William Hansell.

The last of the “Young Heroes” is “Walter Bradford”. Gwendolyn Brooks's association with Bradford began when she decided to organise a poetry workshop for the Blacks tone Rangers. He was the social organizer there, and helped her and took charge of the poetry workshop later. A warm and understanding friendship developed between the two. In this poem addressed to him, Gwendolyn Brooks celebrates him as a young, dynamic person who had in him the capacity to jolt the most inactive

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person to action. Gwendolyn Brooks terms him as a “Tree-Planting Man”.

The poem *In the Mecca*, too has many men characters that are stronger, more able and no flat characters. One such character is “Alfred”, a major character, who in course of time discovers wealth in communal relationship. Much as he had tried to ignore it earlier, he learns that his thoughts and actions all derive their strength and origin in racial identity.

He is pictured by Brooks as growing in his awareness of Blackness and Black identity. This growth in the pride of Alfred is the result of his reading the poetry of Leopold Senghor, the African poet and a political leader. Alfred is a young teacher who wishes to write. His God is “to create” but “Alfred is untalented”. He knows this fact.

In the course of the poem, Alfred has changed. He now believes in Blackness which he had earlier ignored. He tells of Senghor’s concern to arouse racial pride and pride in the ancient heritage and Black beauty. He no longer looks to white culture to provide him with values but knows that his own Black culture is rich in values and cultural heritage.

Following Alfred is a passage on Don Lee, who is pictured as a young Black poet. Lee has envisioned a future for Blacks. He wants a clean break from the past, wants freedom, cultural autonomy for the Blacks.
Don Lee wants
not a various America

Don Lee wants
a new nation
under nothing;

... ...

wants
new art and anthem; will
want a new music screaming in the sun.25

Unlike Alfred, Don Lee is sure of what he wants. He is certain of his goals and most importantly, ready to act. Lee is ready to use violence if necessary to achieve his ends, but not unnecessary violence, not violence with vengeful intentions.

The men of Gwendolyn Brooks's second phase of her poetic career are like herself, slowly discovering the importance, the richness and the glory of their race. In "After the Mecca", there are pen-portraits celebrating important Black leaders like Medgar Evers and Malcolm X, whose murders were felt very deeply by the Black people. These men were idealists who had dared to dream the best for their race and instead met death.

“Medgar Evers” commemorates the civil rights leader, his strong convictions and his commitment to the creation of a better, new world. He is described as a man who inspired fear by placing emphasis on social change:

... .... .. he

leaned across tomorrow. People said that

he was holding clean globes in his hand.26

where, “clean globes” signify a world that is free from all ills, social, political and moral.

“Malcolm X” is a tribute to the Black Muslim leader who was also assassinated. The strong, raw power and charm that Malcolm X exuded is brought out. It was he, who in his way led the Blacks to celebrate their Black ness and heritage. Gwendolyn Brooks sees him as:

    Original
    Ragged-round
    Rich-robust

... ...

He opened us –

Who was a key,

Who was a man.  

Gwendolyn Brooks also wrote on Martin Luther King Jr. who was an inspiration, a guiding force, a beacon light to the entire Black community.

When in 1983, Harold Washington became the first Black Mayor of Chicago, Gwendolyn Brooks was amongst the first to lift up her voice and celebrate the recognition of a fellow Black. She read at his two inaugurations. In a poem addressed to him, “Mayor Harold Washington”, she alludes to him as “Mayor, World man, History man”, and continues, “Beyond Steps that occur and close/ your steps are echo-makers”. Gwendolyn Brooks’s heart was gladdened to see Blacks making a mark, leaving foot-prints, surging ahead, claiming and cultivating a place for themselves.

Gwendolyn Brooks writes of other prominent Black men who helped shape the future of Blacks in America, like Haki Madhubuti. Gwendolyn Brooks celebrates his contribution to Afro-American literature and Black life in a poem addressed to him. In “The Good Man”, she asks him to “singe, smile, beguile our own bewilderment away/… In the time of attachment, in the time of cold in this time/ tutor our difficult sunlight”.

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As pointed out earlier in the previous chapter, the second phase of Gwendolyn Brooks’s poetry sees more men than women characters. She saw the young men around her picking themselves up, striding ahead, no longer hindered by lack of opportunities. The men now were not daunted. They created opportunities where none existed. Their earlier fear was replaced with courage and the feeling of inferiority with self-confidence. They were now the “doers”. They surged ahead. Gwendolyn Brooks envisions them as heroes, the confident, sure, “tall walker”, the leaders, the builders of nation.

The men in the second phase of Gwendolyn Brooks’s poetic career are presented as stronger and more able. The men don’t sit back claiming that they are incapable, nor do they look down upon themselves with pity. There is no more of the inferiority complex, not the feelings of longing as seen earlier in “Beverly Hills, Chicago”, where Blacks, driving through white neighbourhood, see everything there as superior to that of their own neighbourhood. Even the most natural and trivial thing takes on a heightened position in their eyes. They feel “Even the leaves fall down in a lovelier patterns here”. Instead the men are stronger, no more longing but equipping themselves to gain what they want. The Black man is presented as a hero, progressing slowly at first, gathering speed, having newer visions for the future and setting for himself higher goals.
He is the leader now, not the led. He can dare to chart his own destiny, not look to others for help.

Gwendolyn Brooks has presented the Black man through all his stages, the dependant to self reliant. She is able to draw her characters with a few, deft strokes and fill them up with thoughts and emotion so that they stand out as individual characters worth notice.

The social climate in America that underwent a drastic change, during the 1960's saw Blacks come together as never before. Presenting a united front, they showed what they were capable of achieving.

In the second phase of Gwendolyn Brooks's poetic career, we no longer see the patient, calm voice that marked the poetry of the first phase. Instead Gwendolyn Brooks who had by the late 1960's realized that integration was no answer to the Black man's prayer began penning such poems that gave a release to the leadings of her heart. Inspired by the young Black radical writers, she chose their path. As her commitment and solidarity for Black cause gained strength and so did her belief in action.

Colour is another predominant theme in Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry. Colour of the skin has been the cross that the Black man has had to carry eternally. It was the colour of the skin that made him hated, despised and looked down upon. It was colour again that made him a
slave. It was the colour black which in turn made the Black man worship “white” and long to be white. He felt white was acceptable, adored and desired while the same could not be said of black.

Gwendolyn Brooks, at a young age was struck by the colour-caste system that existed in America. She did not gather this information through books but through life experiences. No sooner did she enter school to be enlightened and to gain knowledge, than she realised the extreme prejudice she had to face because of the colour of her skin. At school, she was also enlightened on the fact that colour-caste system existed on two levels firstly interracial, secondly intraracial. While the interracial colour conflict though humiliating, was understandable and to some extent tolerable or excusable, the intraracial colour conflict was very painful and confusing. It is but quite natural that the colour theme permeates her poetry. The first phase of Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry highlights both the issues, the interracial and the intraracial colour conflict. What can however be noted in the second phase of her poetry is the intraracial conflict which is marked by its total absence, due to the emphasis of Black unity and solidarity and pride in black colour.

Brooks’s transformation from a Negro poet to a Black one can be witnessed in the decline, almost death of the intraracial colour conflict theme in her poetry. This trend is documented in her poetry which
highlights only the interracial conflict not only in America but also in Africa which translated itself into apartheid.

The colour-caste system which existed in American society was very pronounced. While the colour conflict found within the Black community was not as harsh as the one without, it has still created many problems. At the core of this problem, as always, is the Black woman who is most hit by the emphasis placed on the colour of the skin and the kinky hair. It is very strange and painful to note that rejection is neither based on any great national issue nor cultural, nor on any earth shattering ideology, but only on the basis of the colour of skin and kinky hair.

Most often than not, the Black woman is in love with a “tan” man and is ultimately rejected by him. This conflict is described by Arthur P. Davis as “Black -and-tan” motif.28

Brooks’s first collection *A Street in Bronzeville* has poems on the intraracial colour conflict or Black-and-tan motif. “The Ballad of Chocolate Mabbie”, where a little girl learns very young that the colour of her skin will bring her misery and rejection through out her life.

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Mabbie is rejected by Willie Boone, the boy she loves when he comes out wearing “like a jewel”, a sandy haired “lemon-hued lynx”. Poor little Mabbie is left all alone:

It was Mabbie alone by the grammar school gate.

Yet chocolate companions had she.

Mabbie on Mabbie with hush in the heart.

Mabbie on Mabbie to be.\(^{29}\)

She is left to be consoled by “chocolate companions”. Yet she is hurt and rejected. There is hint of future rejections accompanied by pain awaiting Mabbie.

In “Ballad of Pearl May Lee”, the fate of “Sammy boy” is not as simple as that of “Willie Boone’s” for hankering after white skin. Sammy meets a bitter end and is lynched because of his involvement with a white woman. Like little Mabbie, Pearl May Lee is very much in love with “Sammy boy” who for his forbidden taste has to pay a price. Pearl on one hand is laughing that Sammy deserved such a fate as this, but behind her laughter is pain, pain having lost her Sammy. She thinks hysterically about his fatal taste.

At school, your girls were bright [light coloured]

Little girls.

You couldn’t abide dark meat.

Yellow was for to look at,

Black for the famished to eat ....

You paid for your dinner, Sammy boy,

And you didn’t pay with money.

You paid with your hide and my heart, Sammy boy,

For your taste of pink and white honey...  

Brooks uses the analogy of food to bring home the point and refers to the Black woman as "dark meat". Gwendolyn Brooks felt very strongly about the Black man – white woman relationship which she felt was the worst betrayal faced by the Black woman at the hands of her man. Arthur Davis notes that Gwendolyn Brooks sees in it "symbolically the Negro's desire for acceptance in the white world even at the exorbitant and humiliating price of giving of his heritage and his manhood – a spiritual mutilation as real as the physical one he suffers at the hands of the mob".  

In Annie Allen, there is a small, very telling eight line poem “Intermission 3”, which gives us a clear picture of the rejected Black

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woman, whose worth is unknown all because of the pigmentation of her skin.

Stand off, daughters of the dusk,
And do not wince when the bronzy lads
Hurry to cream – yellow shining.
It is plausible. The sun is a lode.

True, there is silver under
The veils of darkness.
But few care to dig in the night
For the possible treasure of stars.

The intraracial conflict can be seen in “The Anniad” of Annie Allen. Where Annie is described in the opening lines as “Sweet and chocolate” and who with “All her harvest buttoned in,/ All her ornaments untried”, is dreaming and “waiting for the paladin….”. He is a “man of tan”, who after his return from the war finds Annie too mild and gets for himself “A Sleek Slit-eyed gypsy moan…”.

In The Bean Eaters, Gwendolyn Brooks uses Black-and-tan motif in the context of mother-daughter relationship in “Jessie Mitchell’s Mother”. This intraracial conflict brings to focus the hatred between a daughter and her mother because of the colour of the skin.
These poems that bring out the colour problem within the group belong to the first phase of Gwendolyn Brooks’s poetic career. The poems have no trace of the “Black but beautiful” motif that was to be the hallmark of Gwendolyn Brooks’s poetry in the second phase. The intraracial conflict went on the ebb in the latter period of Gwendolyn Brooks’s career and instead, there came the celebration of Blackness. Black is beautiful became the slogan which was hailed and accepted by Blacks. This celebration of Blackness and pride in the race brought the Blacks together as never before. No longer did the Black woman/man hanker to be white, instead they exulted in the colour of their skin.

The women no longer worshipped “good” hair and haunted beauty parlours that took on status of “miracle—working shrines” which gave false promises of beauty favoured by tan men. No longer did she think herself inferior, rather she celebrated and was proud of her beauty and learnt to accept both her positive points as well as her weaknesses.

There are various poems that bring to light the interracial colour conflict. In “Bronzeville Woman in a Red Hat”, Gwendolyn Brooks brings out the hate, disdain and disrespect the white woman has for the Black woman whom she hires as a last resort. Mrs. Miles, the white woman relegates the Black woman to a position lower than that of the wild beasts and looks at her with scorn. She is shocked out of her wits
and repulsed when she sees the maid kiss her child; she feels her neatly ordered world shatters. For her it seems like the:

   World yelled, world writhed, world turned to light
   and rolled
   Into her kitchen, nearly knocked her down.

The white woman thinking that the child is too small to know what is good and what is not, tries to take the child from the Black woman:

   She, quite supposing purity despoiled,
   Committed to sourness, disordered, soiled,
   Went in to pry the ordure from the cream
   Cooing, “Come”. (Come out of the cannibal wilderness,
   Dirt, dark, into the sun and bloomful air.
   Return to freshness of your right world, wear
   Sweetness again. Be done with beast, duress.)

Here we see words like ‘purity despoiled’, ‘sourness’, ‘discarded’, ‘soiled’, ‘cannibal’, ‘wilderness’, ‘dirt’, ‘dark’ are associated with Black, while words like ‘sun’, bloomful air, freshness are associated with white. Even as she is thinking these thoughts and trying to pry the child away, the child, to the white woman’s horror, clings tight to the Black woman and kisses her. The white woman feels:

   Heat at the hairline, heat between the bowels,
Examining seeming coarse unnatural scene,
She saw all things except herself serene:
Child, big black woman, pretty kitchen towels.\(^{32}\)

While this poem highlights a white woman’s misguided, prejudiced conception of the Black people, the next poem carries forward the prejudice. In the poem “The White Troops Had Their Orders But The Negroes Looked Like Men”, Gwendolyn Brooks brings out the preconceived ideas whites have regarding Blacks and the subsequent rude awakening when faced with reality. Awakening of this sort is witnessed in the poem, where the white troop’s attitude is brought out before they meet the Black troops.

They had supposed their formula was fixed
They had obeyed instructions to devise
A type of cold, a type of hooded gaze.

The white men have “obeyed instructions” and therefore their’s is a “hooded gaze”. The blindness that comes with “hooded gaze” has caught them unawares when they meet the Black men.

But when the Negroes came they were perplexed.
These Negroes looked like men. Besides, it taxed

Time and Temper to remember those
Congenital iniquities that cause
Disfavour of the Darkness.

Gwendolyn Brooks, in these very telling lines, brings out the
surprise, the awakening that the white troop had when they saw the Black
men, “These Negroes looked like men”! When the contents of the boxes
marked “for whites” and “for Others” get either “scrambled of even
switched”, there is no great commotion.

Who really gave two figs?

Neither the earth nor heaven ever trembled.

And there was nothing startling in the weather. 33

The next two poems, while dealing with interracial colour conflict,
bring out the desire of the whites “help” Blacks and to have a “taste” of
the low, poor life the Blacks lead. In “I Love Those Little Booths at
Benvenutis”, the whites go to the Black ghettos to get a “taste” of Blacks
and their behaviour. They want to observe their “clamorous”, “colorfully
incorrect”, “amorous”, “flatly brave”, “dirty”, “carmine”, “hot”,
“unpretty” behaviour. But:

They stare, They tire, They feel refused,

Feel overwhelmed by subtle treason!

Nobody here will take the part of jester.³⁴

The whites feels betrayed and let down by the Blacks who behave in a normal, natural way.

In “The Lovers of the Poor”, the white women from The Ladies’ Betterment League, want to “do something” for the uplift of the Blacks dwelling in poor, cheap buildings. When the ladies arrive, they “walk in a gingerly manner up the hall”. The sights, the smell and noise that meet their eyes, nose and ears is too much for them to bear; they retreat from the building in a haste:

Keeping their scented bodies in the center
Of the hall as they walk down the hysterical hall
They allow their lovely skirts to graze no wall.³⁵

Again and yet again, Gwendolyn Brooks focuses on the point that Black people are human, with normal human feelings. It is only lack of opportunities for upper mobility that has confined them to the ghettos. This again is white strategy of pushing the Blacks back.

While these poems highlight interracial conflict, the conflict involves no violence. There are however poems on interracial conflict where violence and bloodshed are featured. One such poem is “A


Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon”, where a young Black boy of fourteen, Emmett Till is lynched for allegedly making advances at a white woman. The boy is killed, the Black mother is left behind to suffer and bear the pain. All she can do is:

She kissed her killed boy.

and she is sorry.36

The Black mother is reconciled to the fact that she is incapable of changing the colour bias and hatred that exists. The only thing possible for her to do is feel “sorry”.

“The Ballad of Rudolph Reed” highlights death as the outcome of interracial conflict. Rudolph Reed is presented as a Black man who has the basic desire that any man would have. He wants to own a house. He buys himself one in a white neighbourhood where he is not welcome. He shows restrain and wants no confrontation in the face of disturbance and violence he has to face. But:

The first night, a rock, big as two fists.

The second, a rock big as three.

hit his house, yet Rudolph Reed stops himself from reacting to these disturbances. But when :

The third night, a silvery ring of glass.
Patience ached to endure.
But he looked, and lo! Small Mabel’s blood
Was staining her gaze so pure.

When his daughter Mabel was hurt, Rudolph Reed’s patience snapped. A usually calm man, not given to violence, he is forced to react violently.

Then up did rise our Rudolph Reed
And pressed the hand of his wife,
And went to the door with a thirty-four
And a beastly butcher knife.

Rudolph acts like a man possessed, wanting to avenge his daughter’s hurt. He rushes into the street, “no longer thinking” of the consequence.

By the time he had hurt his fourth white man
Rudolph Reed was dead.37

The poem “The Chicago Defender Sends a Man to Little Rock” highlights the point of view of a reporter who is assigned to report the happenings in Little Rock at the height of turmoil over public school desegregation. The assignment is to study the nature of the people who

live at Little Rock. The report is that they are “like people everywhere”. This report throws more light on the whites than the Blacks, for the whites go about their work without paying any attention to the Black man. To them he hardly exists. But if the Black man dares to disturb the peace, the whites are justified in using violence against him.

And true, they are hurling spittle rock.

Garbage and fruit in Little Rock.38

Yes, they are “like people everywhere” ready to use violence against the Black man if he dares disturb the existing order.

With the coming of the Black Arts Movement and Gwendolyn Brooks allegiance with the young Black radicals, there was a marked change in the scope and form of her poetry. With Gwendolyn Brooks relocating herself from being a Negro poet to a Black poet, the theme of interracial and intraracial colour conflict that had been present in her poetry was now replaced by themes of Black unity and solidarity. The themes on Black pride, love for the race and African culture now abounded in her poetry.

Though Gwendolyn Brooks felt that the theme of intraracial colour conflict had no place in Black literature, because the Blacks had now come together and there had grown in them a sense of oneness, a sense

of brotherhood and a sense of equality within the race. They now looked at each other with warmth, camaraderie and kinship. They were now united, and they paid no attention to the various shades of Blacks. but celebrated Black. Hatred of the colour of the skin was now replaced with pride.

With the Civil Rights, the social and political climate in America slowly began to change for the Blacks. With his sense of new found pride and freedom, that awareness and solidarity among the race brings, the Black man was no longer daunted by nor did he feel inferior to the whites. He gloried in the rich heritage of his race and strove to uphold the dignity of his community. He no longer cared for the whites or for what the whites thought about him. The Blacks had come of age and he celebrated in the new found freedom from the shackles of not just physical bondage but more important one, the psychological.

The heightened pride and solidarity among the Blacks can be found in poems like “Young Africans”, and “Young Heroes”. Gwendolyn Brooks, though not content, was glad at the change seen in the social climate of America, and hoping for a complete acceptance of her people in America. She now turned her attention to Africa which was in the grip of apartheid.
In *The Near-Johannesburg Boy and Other Poems*, Gwendolyn Brooks assuming the persona of a small boy of South Africa, tells of the conditions that prevail there. The boy has lost his father in an uprising. An uprising for the right to live in their own land occupied by whites and forced to stay outside of Johannesburg.

Having lost his father the young boy is not ready to accept defeat. He intends to fight for his rights, the rights of his people, and the rights of his nation. In the closing lines of the poem, Gwendolyn Brooks brings out the determination and strong will power of the young boy who would rather die than allow his country languish in the hands of whites. The lines:

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Tonight I will walk with
a hundred of playmates to where
the hurt Black of our skin is forbidden

We shall forge with the Fist-and-the-Fury
We shall flail in the Hot Time
We shall
We shall39
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point out to his dauntless courage and pride in his nationhood.

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The latter part of Gwendolyn Brooks’s poetic career is marked by pride and glorification of the race. The Blacks surging ahead with newfound pride in their race, out to conquer the world would not be bothered by minor battles.

These are the minor themes about which Gwendolyn Brooks writes in detail. They are treated with the sensitivity befitting the master poet that Gwendolyn Brooks was. They are handled with a woman’s perception and speak volumes. The growth of her characters, is helpful in tracing Gwendolyn Brooks’s own transformation from an integrationist to militant poet. It also helps one record her progress from a Negro poet to a confirmed Black poet. Gwendolyn Brooks’s emphasis from the individual to the community can also be traced during the study.

The next chapter deals with the forms Gwendolyn Brooks used to bring out the essence of her themes. The chapter tries to focus on the change in use of forms with Gwendolyn Brooks’s evolution from a Negro poet to a Black one.