CHAPTER – V

FORMS IN THE POETRY OF

GWENDOLYN BROOKS
FORMS IN THE POETRY OF GWENDOLYN BROOKS

“I like the concentration, the crush; I like working with language, as others like working with paints and clay, or notes”,¹ claimed Gwendolyn Brooks as to why she chose poetry to express her ideas.

The main focus of this chapter is the various forms used by Gwendolyn Brooks. She started her poetic career using mainly the traditional European form, the sonnet. But with her commitment to the black identity and her allegiance to the Black Arts Movement, she gave up the sonnet and concentrated more on ballads, folks, spirituals, lyrics, the blues and the jazz. This chapter concentrates on the change of Gwendolyn Brooks from a Negro poet to a Black poet and the reflection felt on the form, not so much on the subject matter. The subject matter from the beginning of Gwendolyn Brooks’s career has been the common black people and has remained so even in the second phase of her poetic career.

Her poetry definitely is a combination of two traditions – the inherited and the acquired. The first one is that which she inherited from her forebears, the folk tradition, the blues rhythm, the secular and the spirituals. The second tradition, the acquired is from the land in which

she lived. Though critics point out that Gwendolyn Brooks has a white style and black theme, this does not hold true for her. Gwendolyn Brooks has a distinct Black American style that one cannot refute or deny, a style that very carefully blends and incorporates the best from both traditions. The traditional forms that Gwendolyn Brooks used as a tool to make the plight of her people known, was used as that of a mere observer. She observed the Black community at large and recorded the facts. However, we can notice a distinct change in the second phase where she uses the Black traditional forms to be the voice for her people and to show the way to them. Her emphasis has also shifted from the individual portrayal to that of the community

Though Gwendolyn Brooks started penning rhymed verse at the age of seven, her more concentrated and serious tryst with poetry began when she started maintaining notebooks on poetry from the age of eleven. These notebooks containing many juvenile poems allow glimpses of a later master poet. The poems of this period touch various topics like beauties of nature, domestic circles and moralizing poems.

Being an avid reader, Gwendolyn Brooks read many poets during her formative years. The poets who left a lasting impression on her and by whom she was highly influenced were William Wordsworth, H.W. Longfellow and John Keats. Reading gave her another invaluable gift,
the gift of vocabulary. The fruit of this labour was seen very soon in the American Childhood magazine, which carried her poem “Eventide” in October 1930.

As a teenager, Gwendolyn Brooks made it a point to pen one or two poems each day. These poems she collected in notebooks which she named “My Fancy Book”, “The Account Book”, “Blue Book of Verse”, “Book on Thought” and “The Red Book or the Merry Book”. These books contain poems showing Gwendolyn Brooks’s love of and joy in nature. Her love for the ballad form, which was to become one of the most prominent of the forms she was to use later, can be seen in the poem “The Scottish Maid”

“Wither ye to, my faire young maid?
Wither ye to, a trodding so slow?”

“Ime on mye trail to Mother Lon’s
That is wither I go”

“Then let me wak with ye, my faire young maid.
Let me wak with ye this morne!”

“Nay, Nay”. She cry, and wide her eye
"Nay, never 'til Gabriel blows his horne!" ²

This ballad dates from her 1930's notebook when she was hardly fourteen years old.

Gwendolyn Brooks continued to write and very soon experimented with the sonnet. In her notebook entitled "My Fancy Book", she wrote and dedicated a sonnet to her aunt Eppie Small, the eldest of her maternal aunts and called it "My first dedication". George Kent noting her early talent in the use of sonnet form writes that the poem contains the "solemn tread of one of the lesser Shakespearean sonnets".³

At this early stage, Gwendolyn Brooks laid the foundation for her later use of these two powerful forms, the ballad and the sonnet, which in her hand transformed themselves as not only her voice but the voice of her people.

By the time Gwendolyn Brooks was fifteen she had begun to use and had imbibed the 'form' of poetry. The most preferred form then was the traditional form, a variation on the ballad meter, some time even free verse. She was also highly influenced by Black folk tradition used by Paul Dunbar in his lyrics and dramatic poetry and by Langston Hughes's urban vernacular blues and jazz poetry. Highly influenced by Frost and

other coupleteers she at times escaped from the tight frame work of the
traditional form and tried to bringing in some degree of flexibility. Her
greatest delight was juggling with the varied rhyme schemes.

As she grew older and began to read Black writers, she came under
the influence of the Harlem Renaissance writers and like them followed
faithfully the set European traditional forms of poetry, the sonnet.

In 1933, Gwendolyn Brooks sent a few of her poems to James
Weldon Johnson, asking him to evaluate them. Johnson wrote back two
very encouraging letters wherein his advice to Gwendolyn Brooks was
that she read the best of modern poets, not to imitate them, but as a means
of developing the highest standards of self criticism. Gwendolyn Brooks
treasured and valued the advice of one such great poet of the Harlem
Renaissance and promptly went into the act.

The same year she was fortunate to meet another Harlem
Renaissance poet, Langston Hughes who read the poems, congratulated
her and encouraged her to go on writing. Hughes played a prominent role
in her adult life too. He was always a source of inspiration to her. It was
Hughes who convinced Gwendolyn Brooks that a Black poet had enough
material within his own race and experiences and need not look for
material without. The language of the Harlem Renaissance period that he
used influenced her. Drawing inspiration from these two great literary figures, Gwendolyn Brooks began writing in earnest.

Another important person who influenced her style of writing and gave definite direction to her craft was Inez Boulton Stark. This lady, as mentioned earlier, a socialite from the Gold Coast, shunning warnings and threats from well meaning friends decided to start a workshop for Blacks. Inez Stark meant business when she obtained a list of Blacks who wrote from the NAACP office. Gwendolyn Brooks and her husband were among the members for this class. It was Stark who taught Gwendolyn Brooks to look closely at and observe the techniques used by modern writers, to approach language and use it in such a way as to make it work for her. She also placed special stress on seeing and writing about things “uniquely based upon your experience”.4

If it was Hughes who gave Gwendolyn Brooks theoretical advice, it was Stark who did practical analysis of Gwendolyn Brooks’s poems. She led Gwendolyn Brooks through her poems, pointing out where things needed to be said and where nothing was needed, where not to state the obvious and where to leave things unsaid. At the workshop Gwendolyn Brooks learnt to put her artistic ability to the best use, to pay attention and emphasis on form and obtain a proper approach to language, and not to

forget the audience. This workshop proved a platform from where Gwendolyn Brooks could acquire her own distinctive language, from which exercise resulted poems that she sent for publication.

Two prominent American poets, Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost had a lasting impact on Gwendolyn Brooks. Frost, for his use of colloquial speech which led the readers to believe that the theme was simple and easy to comprehend, yet showed many-layered meanings with reading and rereading. Emily Dickinson with her capacity to make poetry out of a restricted domestic life influenced Gwendolyn Brooks to create poetry using supple, delicate and varied verse forms to tell of her domestic life, the life surrounding her in Chicago. Gwendolyn Brooks presents in her works, controlled point of view using precise diction.

Another major influence upon Gwendolyn Brooks’s poetry was Richard Wright, a Harlem Renaissance Writer. The poems that Gwendolyn Brooks sent to Harper and Brothers were sent by them to Wright for evaluation. Wright wrote back to Harper’s full of praise for Gwendolyn Brooks’s poems. The excerpts of his letter read as follows:

.... They are hard and real, right out of the central core of Black Belt Negro life in urban areas. I hope she can keep on saying what she is saying in many poems. ...
She is a real poet; she knows what to say and how to say it. ...America needs a voice like hers ...\(^5\).

Thus, the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance and American poets exerted a significant influence on the writings of Gwendolyn Brooks and showed her the way she should go. On one point however, Gwendolyn Brooks differed from the Harlem Renaissance writers. She did not wish her poetry to be propaganda that Black poetry usually was. She desired to present Negroes as normal human being, not as curios. By doing so, Gwendolyn Brooks transcended overt propaganda that had been the hallmark of Renaissance writers. Her poetry reflects the situation and the climate of her times faithfully.

With the publication of *A Street in Bronzeville*, Gwendolyn Brooks's name as a poet was made. In this collection, Gwendolyn Brooks talks of the common man, in very ordinary situations. She made a good combination of the traditional form and the devices of modern poetry. For instance, her "Kitchenette Building", a short poem which highlights social consciousness, Gwendolyn Brooks uses prosaic language combined with rhythmic pauses and beats, thereby achieving the standard of seeming simplicity, yet conveying a very complex message.

With her very first publications, critics could well observe that Gwendolyn Brooks had successfully combined themes and style from both Harlem Renaissance writers and Modernist poets. Gary Smith notes that Gwendolyn Brooks could “achieve more interesting effects by parodying the two traditions, juggling the pessimism of Modernist poetry with the general optimism of the Harlem Renaissance”.6

It was mainly because of her ability to combine the two traditions that Gwendolyn Brooks was not only accepted by the literary society of America, but also applauded by Harlem Renaissance poets. Two prominent writers of the Harlem Renaissance, Claude McKay and Countee Cullen wrote letters congratulating her and welcoming her into their fold. McKay wrote:

... and welcome you among the band of hard working poets who have something to say. It is a pretty rough road we have to travel, but I suppose much compensation is derived from the joy of being able to sing.7

While Countee Cullen had this to say:

... There can be no doubt that you are a poet, a good one, with every indication of becoming a better. I am glad to be able to say ‘welcome’ to you to that too small

---


group of Negro poets, and to the larger group of American ones. No one can deny you your place there.8

Gwendolyn Brooks approached art with dedication and commitment. Her commitment in doing justice to her subject matter can be gauged through the following essay she wrote. “Poets Who Are Negroes”, wherein she says:

The Negro poet has impressive advantages Ready-made subject - which he may twist as he wills. Great drives. And that inspiring emotion, like tied hysteria, found only in the general territory of great drives.

She cautions that white poets may envy the Black poets of his subject matter. If the Black poet yields to the temptation to rest upon such advantages, it would be an act like throwing raw dough to “the not-so-hungry mob”. Gwendolyn Brooks insisted that:

You have to cook that dough, alter it, until it is unrecognizable. Then the mob will not know it is accepting something that will be good for it. Then it will eat, enjoy, and prosper.

Every Negro poet has “something to say”. Simply because he is a Negro: he cannot escape having important things to say. His mere body, for that matter, is an eloquence. His quite walk down the street is a speech to the people. Is a rebuke, is a plea, is a school.

But no real artist is going to be content offering raw materials. The Negro poet’s most urgent duty, at the present, is to polish his technique, his way of presenting

his truths and beauties, that these may be more insinuating, and therefore, overwhelming.9

Gwendolyn Brooks, always the conscientious writer, placed more emphasis on craft. In an interview with George Stavros, she told about the importance of words. She said “...a poet has a duty to words, and that words can do wonderful things, it is too bad to let them lie there without doing anything with and for them”.10 She also voiced her impatience with those of the “black poets who just put down anything off the tops of their heads”.11

Gwendolyn Brooks approached her art with reverence and expected the same from other poets, mainly the Black poets whom she envisioned as having a duty to their race and community.

Within A Street in Bronzeville, the reader comes across various forms like the quatrains, the free verse, ballads and sonnets that Gwendolyn Brooks is proficient at. Of the various forms she used, two forms stand out predominantly throughout the first phase of her poetic career, the sonnet and the ballad. More so the sonnet, a traditional European form.

11 Ibid.
Before Gwendolyn Brooks showed a complete allegiance to the Black Arts Movement, she stands out prominently as “one of America’s finest sonneteers”. It was to the sonnets, Gwendolyn Brooks turned “to express her dual commitment to socially relevant and well-crafted poetry”.

The fourteen lines of the traditional sonnet form, express a single thought or feeling. The sonnet first developed in Italy as early as the thirteenth century as the favourite poetic form of many notable poets like Dante, Petrarch. The sonnet first appeared in English in the works of Sir Thomas Wyatt, in the early part of the sixteenth century and later developed by the Earl of Surrey. It was then put to use by most prominent English poet like Shakespeare, Spencer, Wordsworth to name a few. The sonnet is divided into an octave and a sestet, where the octave makes a statement and the sestet illustrates it. Usually, there is turn in the thought after the eighth line. Milton, however, did not make a division between the octave and the sestet.

One of the main reasons for Gwendolyn Brooks’s attraction towards the sonnet form could be the use the Harlem Renaissance writers

---


13 Ibid.
put it to. These earlier Black writers had proved how they could use this delicate fourteen lined poem, pack it tight with intense emotions, often of protest and how it could be transformed into an instrument of social protest. Harlem Renaissance masters like Claude Mckay and Countee Cullen were considered as leading sonneteers of their time. They used the English Romantic poets as their models. Their sonnets “If We Must Die” and “From the Dark Tower”, protest racism as well as the socio-economic injustice in America, though in covert manner. These sonnets have inspired many Black poets to voice their opinions and denounce oppressions and racism. Many poets were also inspired to use this form as a vehicle of protest against prevailing condition of the American society. Another very notable point is that these sonnets did not necessarily highlight the race; they were “noticeably colorless”.¹⁴

The sonnet, like the folk forms, the blues and spirituals has emotions poured into it and which seem to overflow. This close connection between sonnet and folk form could be one of the reasons as to why Gwendolyn Brooks chose the sonnet form. The fixed tight structure of the sonnet was an effective medium of expression. It forced the poet to pack into it as much emotion as could possibly fit.

Gladys Williams, points out that Gwendolyn Brooks’s “sensitivity to the authenticity and force of the Afro-American folk forms she learned as a child may be responsible for this penchant”\footnote{Gladys Margret Williams, “Gwendolyn Brooks’s Way with the Sonnet”, CLA Journal, Vol. xxvi, No.2, (Dec. 1982): 215.} to write short, intense poems.

Williams draws a connection between the folk forms and the sonnets and claims that “folk literature with their elegant understatements, wry humor, terseness, voice rhythms, ethnotropic metaphors, sardonic bite were characteristic of such literature... had learnt to mask his feelings”.\footnote{Ibid.} This form of literature had its inception in the fact that the slave was denied the freedom to voice his protest. The via media invented was the folk literature that had the “language of accommodation and concealment, a language of ironic doubleness, a language whose messages were intended to be received in one way by outsiders and in another way by insiders”.\footnote{Ibid.}

With the folk tradition used by the Harlem Renaissance masters to guide her, especially writers like James Weldon Johnson, Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes who masked their real feelings, turned their pain into verse, Gwendolyn Brooks gave a new avenue to the use of sonnet.
Thus, Gwendolyn Brooks took to the established sonnet form, the lessons she had gained from the Harlem writers and put her own charm and magic into it. The result was remarkable sonnets which are not only sensitive but speak volumes through their short, terse lines.

Gwendolyn Brooks used the sonnet with a definite idea of bringing out the beauty as well as the ugliness that makes life, especially seen in the context of “Bronzeville”, the Black Belt of Chicago where the poor Blacks lived. It had been her desire to tell of her people. But hers is not the loud, over-pitched, bitter voice of protest, but the more subtle kind. In the sonnets that follow we can notice how with subtlety Gwendolyn Brooks can speak volumes about the conditions of Blacks in white American society.

In both structure and technique, the sonnets have acquired great distinction in the hands of Gwendolyn Brooks. Her love of language and her in-depth awareness of the social, political and economic situation of the Blacks in America has transformed these sonnets into poems of high craft. Her first sonnets appeared in *A Street in Bronzeville* as a series of twelve under the title “Gay Chaps at the Bar”. These Gay Chaps are Negro soldiers in World War II. The title for the series was culled from one of the many letters addressed by the soldiers to Gwendolyn Brooks.
Documenting the reason for the sonnet sequence, Gwendolyn Brooks had this to say.

I first wrote the one sonnet, without thinking of extensions. I wrote it because of a letter I got from a soldier who included that phrase ... in what he was telling me, and then I said, there are other things to say about what's going on at the front and all, and I'll write more poems, some of them based on the stuff of letters that I was getting from several soldiers, and I felt it would be good to have them all in the same form, because it would serve my purpose throughout.  

The sonnet form was a pliable medium for Gwendolyn Brooks, inspite of its tight form. The war, its ravages, its impact on the soldiers was brought out in this sonnet sequence. The first sonnet “The Gay Chaps at the Bar”, brings out the beat of a march past. The speakers are young man, who knew how to be men:

We knew how to order. Just the dash

Necessary . . . . . .

And we knew beautifully how to give to women

The summer spread, the tropic of our love.  

The soldiers knew many things, “But nothing ever taught us to be islands”. “No stout/ lesson showed how to chat with death”. The octave presents them as “Gay Chaps”, brave, but the sestet brings out their inner

---


selves, terrified of death. They cannot order death like they order other things. Language in face of death is ineffectual.

In the sonnets that follow, "Still do I keep my Looks, my Identity" and "Piano after War" recall within their tight structure the civilian life in contrast to the life on the war front. The soldiers long for civilian life, but the memories of war and lost comrades keep haunting their minds.

But suddenly, across my climbing fever
of proud delight – a multiplying cry,
A cry of bitter dead men...20

In "The White Troops Had Their Orders, But the Negroes Looked Like Men", Gwendolyn Brooks uses the sonnet to bring out the preconceived, prejudiced minds of the whites regarding Blacks. The last two lines beautifully clinch the ideas expressed in the above twelve lines. Even when the contents of the boxes marked "for dark men" got "scrambled" with the "box for Other" nothing much happened. "Neither the earth not the heaven ever trembled./ And there was nothing startling in the weather".

The next two sonnets "First Inclined to Take What It is Told" and "God Works in a Mysterious Way" highlight the theme of liberty. "The

Gay Chaps" find liberty without her old charm in "the modern glare. The sonnet lends its structure for presentation of ideas on liberty.

“My Dreams, My Works, Must Wait Till After Hell”, uses very simple language unlike the cryptic language of the other sonnets. It tells of a soldier's yearning to get back to real life, the civilian life. The soldier describes his longing thus:

I hold my honey and I store my bread
In little jars and cabinets of my will.
I label clearly, and each latch and lid
I bid, Be firm till I return from hell.
I am very hungry. I am incomplete.
And none can tell when I may dine again.
No man can give me any word but wait,
The puny light. I keep eyes pointed in ...

The desire of the soldier to return back to civilian life is expressed in the octave, while the determination is expressed in the sestet.

.... And I resume
on such legs as are left me, in such heart
As I can manage, remember to go home,
My taste will not have turned insensitive
To honey and bread old purity would love.\(^{21}\)

The poet uses the sonnet as the proper medium to bring out the soldiers' feelings regarding war. The fear, the helplessness, the despair and hopelessness that have captured the minds of these soldiers are brought out with great sensitivity. Despite all the negative qualities that are associated with war, there still lurks the ray of hope as envisioned by the poet in "My Dreams, My Work Must Wait Until After Hell", where the soldier is hopeful of his return back to normal life and to his honey and bread which he has "bid" wait.

Gwendolyn Brooks uses the sonnet to bring out the different aspects of war with the "Gay Chaps" remaining constant throughout. It is within the form of the sonnet wherein Gwendolyn Brooks pours her feelings regarding war. There are a myriad of feelings presented through these sonnets, they convey the poet's idea of war that are at times ironic, volatile and pensive. The sonnet in Gwendolyn Brooks's hand gained more fineness and distinction. We are able to see through her vision that soldiers though black or white, are basically men with courage as well as fears, very human in their qualities. They are men who can be brave and at the same time show fear of "lions in this air". Beneath the layers of uniform and bravado, they are still young boys at heart. Gwendolyn

Brooks’s sonnets, a combination of formal and colloquial speech, tell of the effect of war but provide no solution.

These sonnets, George Kent points out, are “given in off-rhyme, reflecting the dissonance of war” and the central idea that runs through these sonnets is “the struggle to sustain what is human in the face of ruthless slaughter”. These sonnets are a combination of both the Petrarchan and the Shakespearean kind.

The sonnet sequence “The Children of the Poor” consists of five sonnets and focuses on the most vulnerable members of the society, the children. The sonnets are a combination of both the Petrarchan and the Shakespearean form. Using the sonnet form, Gwendolyn Brooks examines in fine detail the forces that prevail in the modern society, the forces of poverty, desertion, lack of care and love and their resultant effect on children and women. These are children who are pictured against the backdrop of war and who are affected by war, left with only a mother, herself a victim of war, without adequate means to provide for them. One important point worthy of notice while following the sonnet structure strictly is that Gwendolyn Brooks does not always stick to the formal structure of the sonnet where the last few lines, the sestet, gives the resolution to the octave. She uses the sonnet not to provide answers to but state the dilemmas prevalent in the society.
Gwendolyn Brooks's next sonnet-sequences occurs in *Annie Allen*. In the first sonnet in this series, titled "People who have no Children", Gwendolyn Brooks brings out within the span of fourteen lines, the difference between people with children and people who have none. The octave develops the idea, describing people without children, giving their qualities, their lives and their behaviour. Gwendolyn Brooks notes that people who have no children can be hard:

Attain a mail of ice and insolence;
Need not pause in the fire, and in no sense
Hesitate in the hurricane to guard.

Moving from these childless people, who "... when wide world is bitten and bewared./ They perish purely, waving their spirit hence" Gwendolyn Brooks comes to those with children. A careful reading of the lines brings out the leisurely attitude of the childless and contrasts them with those with children. The people with children, termed as "we others", are bound by the emotional needs of their children. The sonnet does not provide answers to the question which is a better life, with children or without. Gwendolyn Brooks uses the sonnet only to picture "the inconditions of love", not to provide the answer or the proper choice.

The sonnet sequence which begins with people without children attaining "a mail of ice" moves to the struggle of mother with children.
In “What Shall I Give My Children” she develops the feeling of entrapment and helplessness of parents and children in the face of extreme poverty. The persona of the sonnet is a mother who is helplessly asking, may be herself, the question “what shall I give my children who are poor?” Gwendolyn Brooks uses Biblical references when she talks of the children as “my sweetest lepers, who demand/ No Velvet and no velvety velour,”. She makes a reference to the lepers who are contraband. These children are pictured as “unfinished, graven by a hand / less than angelic”. So they are not very worthy, like the stone discarded as worthless, the stone rejected by the builders (Matthew xxi: 32).

We see Gwendolyn Brooks break up the sonnet’s rigidity and bring in the colloquial phrases. A good example of the use of the traditional sonnet is to present the pressures of contemporary issues. Like children for whom there is none to care, are referred to as “less than desirable”. The same Biblical reference is carried forward in the next sonnet, “And Shall I Prime My Children, Pray to Pray?” This sonnet is successful in bringing out the conflict in the mother who desires to give but is unable to do so.

The next sonnet, “First Fight. Then Fiddle” presents a totally new experience. The language used in this sonnet is more forceful. The cadence of the meter brings out forceful emotions of a mother. The
mother, who in the earlier sonnet said “I will hold the deluding bandage ready for your eyes”, is now advising the children to be more forceful, more assertive. Her advice to her children here is:

First fight. Then fiddle. Ply the slipping string
with feathery sorcery; muzzle the note
with hurting love; ...

... ... Be remote
A while form malice and from murdering,
But first to arms, to armor. Carry hate
In front of you and harmony behind.
Be deaf to music and to beauty blind.
Win war. Rise bloody, may be not too late
For having first to civilize a space
Wherein to play your violin with grace.  

This sonnet which packs within itself so much of meaning allows for various and varied interpretations. Gwendolyn Brooks’s own interpretation of this sonnet is seen in an interview with Gloria Hull and Posey Gallagher, where Gwendolyn Brooks states:

That mother is making the statement that such children as hers – black, deprived disadvantaged and besieged – will have to give their attention to civilizing a space for

---

themselves to survive in before they give their attention to such lovely things as the fiddling next to them. Her very use of the word "fiddle" is supposed to be significant.\textsuperscript{23}

The mother feels that before one can turn to the finer arts for pleasure, one should fulfill the demands that are social and economic. Only when the basic needs are met, can one sit back to fiddle. But given the conditions in the American Society, the mother thinks that fiddling will not be possible until things are set right. Things cannot set right by themselves, nor through non-violent means. At times the use of violence is needed. Hence the mother's advise in the sonnet is to "civilise a space for themselves". The sonnet form proves Gwendolyn Brooks's ability to use it with ease and felicity.

The sonnet form is important here and so is her ability to use the form to express her idea. The sonnets with their social theme like war and poverty, very unlike the romantic love they celebrated with in English poets, in Gwendolyn Brooks hand attained a class of their own. They reveal the poet's commitment to art. Unlike the European sonnet, Gwendolyn Brooks's sonnets, intricately crafted, deal with modern issues and belong to the "modernist tradition in that they contain the variety, complexity, indirection and dislocation T.S. Eliot suggests are the

Hallmarks of poets in our civilization" opines Gary Smith. Gwendolyn Brooks is successful in using sonnet as a means of voicing the social climate of her race.

These are some of the most noteworthy of Gwendolyn Brooks’s sonnets. With her association with the Black artists of the Black Arts Movement, Gwendolyn Brooks gave up the sonnet almost entirely, with an occasional sonnet at times. In an interview with Martha H. Brown, Gwendolyn Brooks claimed that the “sonnet was irrelevant to artistic goal of blackening English” and that was one of the main reasons for having abandoned the age old traditional form.

After the two series of sonnet-sequence, one finds a few scattered sonnets like “The Rites for Cousin Vit”. Cousin Vit is another urban woman who has the desire to rise above the sordid conditions that surround and engulf the poor Blacks’s lives. She has tried to make life as colourful and exciting as possible. She has wrung out of it every moment of life and now even in death, she refuses to be confined.

... But it can’t hold her,

That stuff and satin aiming to enfold her.


The octave shows that cousin Vit has had her share of life's joy and sorrow. She wants to continue her zeal for life even in death. The remaining part of the sonnet highlights this zeal.

... Even now, surmise

She rises in the sunshine. There she goes

Even now she does the snake-hips with a hiss,
Slops the bad wine across her shantung, talks
Of pregnancy, guitars, and bridgework, walks
In parks or alleys, comes haply on the verge
Of happiness ...26

The sonnet is successful in bringing out the dual feelings of disappointments and the need to secure joy. Cousin Vit is presented with so much love for life that the poet believes even death would not stop her and she would continue to haunt the places she loved and do the things she did.

The sonnet in Gwendolyn Brooks's hands blossomed and was enriched. It provided the scope for Gwendolyn Brooks to fulfill her love of language and words. Here, in the sonnet form, she had strict frame work wherein she put as much as possible. She made the sonnet work for

her. Gwendolyn Brooks was well-versed in sonnet, with tight structure and strict adherence to rules, went forward and gave her own contribution to the literary field of poetry - the “Sonnet-Ballad” about which she writes “Its one claim to fame is that I invented it”. 27

Appearing in the “Appendix to The Anniad”, this Sonnet-Ballad has to be read in full to be appreciated:

Oh mother, mother, where is happiness?
They took my lover’s talness off to war,
Left me lamenting. Now I cannot guess
What I can use an empty heart-cup for
He won’t be coming back here any more.
Some day the war will end, but, oh, I knew
When he went walking grandly out of that door
That my sweet love would have to be untrue
Would have to be untrue. Would have to court
Coquettish death, whose impudent and strange
Possessive arms and beauty (of a sort)
Can make a hard man hesitate ... and change.
And he will be the one to stammer, “Yes”.

Oh mother, mother, where is happiness?28

Even in this "Sonnet-Ballad" which is a combination of a sonnet with the narrative form of the ballad, Gwendolyn Brooks continues the war theme and highlights the crippling effect of war, not only on soldiers who are on the battle front but also the devastation it brings to women at home. The "Sonnet-Ballad", bringing in the analogy of a wedding ceremony, tells the story of Annie Allen's wonder and bewilderment at the departure of the man she loves. She wonders if he will come back to her and even if he does, would he be the same. Gwendolyn Brooks pictures death as a coquettish woman whose "possessive arms and beauty" have a strangle-hold grip on Annie's man. The balladic qualities that one can observe in this sonnet-ballad are in the repetition of lines. This is a verse-structure that combines the colloquial speech of the ballad with the formal diction that a sonnet demands, following the tight structure of fourteen lines.

Gwendolyn Brooks has dedicated her entire life to her craft. In the first part of her career till the late 1960's, she had concentrated more on the traditional forms and the use of correct language. In the second half of the career which begins with In the Mecca, she has been bolder in experimenting with free verse and trying to "Blacken" English and uses

more colloquial language in order to make her poetry more accessible to the Black readers. Though the language and form have undergone a drastic change, the themes remain similar. Her main focus from the beginning has been the lives of Blacks caught in their struggle against poverty and an even greater evil, racism.

While in the first part of her career, she focused more on family life, women, children, war and the Black man’s search for dignity, respect and a rightful place in the society, the second phase is marked by a forceful voice which prods the Blacks to unite, struggle and fight for what is rightfully theirs. The poetry of the second phase reflects her growing awareness of the social events and consequently one can notice that her poetic style also underwent a drastic change. There is nearly a total absence of the traditional forms of poetry in her later works.

In the second phase of her poetic career, Gwendolyn Brooks wrote poems that could easily be understood by a common Black man. While *Annie Allen* is extremely difficult to understand, and is, to use Gwendolyn Brooks’s own words, an “exercise” in language, for she wanted “every phrase to be beautiful, yet contribute sanely to the whole effect”, the same cannot be said of her later works. In her later works, the excesses

---

which marked her earlier works are completely absent. The poetry of the second phase is trimmer, to the point, precise yet colloquial and easy to understand.

In a much earlier article, “Poets Who Are Negroes”, Gwendolyn Brooks had stressed the point that “Negro Poet’s most urgent duty is to polish his technique, his way of presenting his truths and its beauties...”. After 1967, observing and being a part of the prevalent conditions, she claims that the “world has just turned over since then and the word “Negro Poet” is not longer an accepted word, but “Black is the word”. She further says:

Black people are becoming increasingly aware of themselves and their blackness; they are interested in speaking to black people, and especially do they want to reach those people who would never go into a book store and buy a $4.95 volume of poetry written by anybody”

Gwendolyn Brooks, keeping the commitment she made with herself to reach the common Black man, wrote poems that discarded the traditional poetic form and adopted free verse.

In the anthology Say That the River Turns: The Impact of Gwendolyn Brooks, a tribute to Gwendolyn Brooks on her seventieth birthday, she summarised the difference between her earlier and present

She said “the forties and the fifties were years of high poet intense: the language – flower, were thickly sweet. Those flowers whined and begged white folks to pick them up, to find them loveable. Then – the Sixties: Independent fire!”

The freedom Gwendolyn Brooks gained from not having to confirm to the standards set by the white critics was exhilarating. She swept her mind free from following the traditional poetic forms, conforming to strict rule, trying to appeal to the whites to understand Blacks and their situation. Instead, she started reusing forms that Blacks could well relate to, the spirituals, the ballads, the blues and the free verse. It should however not be misunderstood that before the 1960’s awakening Gwendolyn Brooks made no use of the ballad form. On the contrary, the earlier collections of the first phase abound with poems in the ballad form. Gwendolyn Brooks is at home while handling both the forms, the ballad and sonnet. Yet, after 1967, when she no longer remained a Negro poet but transformed into Black poet, she gave up following the sonnet. She turned more to the ballad form and honed it to perfection.

The ballad, we know, has its origin in the folk literature and is one of the oldest forms of poetry in English. Ballads were originally meant to

---

be sung, to the accompaniment of a harp or a fiddle. This quality can be witnessed in Gwendolyn Brooks’s poetry which is meant to be read aloud in order to bring out the inherent musical qualities. The ballad, as its name implies, is etymologically, a dancing song. The ballad is a short story in verse and its subject matter concentrates more on deeds than on thoughts. The ballad can tell of a feud, a thrilling adventure, a family disaster, of love and war or life in general.

There are various forms in a ballad. Often, in a ballad, a story opens suddenly without any formal introduction. Gwendolyn Brooks makes use this balladic technique in “The Ballad of Pearl May Lee”, wherein the tale of woe begins abruptly in the middle. A ballad is impersonal in treatment, with nothing to show of the writers’ identity or personality. In a ballad same lines are repeated from stanza to stanza as a refrain and there is frequent use of stock phrases. This can be noticed in “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon”, where Gwendolyn Brooks uses stock phrases like the “milk-white maid”, “the Dark Villian”, “that Little Foe”, “the Fine Prince” and “maid mild”.

In a ballad there is no attempt at details of time or place. Ballads are of two kinds, the Ballad of Art or Literary Ballad. While the first one
is of a more genuine kind among primitive race, the other is a conscious attempt at the ballad manner.

The Afro-American writers with their long tradition of folk songs and their ability to tell a story have found in ballad the right form and medium to express their thoughts. The Blacks known for their unique art of story telling, carried this tradition with them from their homeland in far away Africa to their adopted home America. They told stories of their lost glory, freedom, their ancestors and of their dismal state in America as slaves. This art of story telling was ingrained in them as was the art for music and rhythm. It came to them naturally. Ballad seemed the right form that lent itself to these Blacks who had a story to tell. Historically, ballads were narrative lyrics orally transmitted from one generation to the next when there were no written forms.

For a long time, until the Black man had mastered his master's languages, his art form was the oral tradition and the ballad fulfilled his artistic desires. When language came to his aid, he used it to make known his sad state and his pitiable plight. Fearing that education would inspire in the Black man a desire for freedom, the whites debarred the Black man from receiving any education. For a long time the Black man went back to the use of ballads. Thus was born a rich balladic tradition, a
tradition that inspired many Black writers down the line. Gwendolyn Brooks also drew her inspiration from them.

According to Gladys Williams, the ballads, “satisfies another perhaps more basic human need: the psychi-social need of people to sing, dance, to participate in rituals of enactment ... ballads if viewed as they were originally conceived – to satisfy aesthetic and emotional needs...”

Great writers down the ages have turned to ballad because of its simplicity. Ballad with its tale and its simple language fulfills the basic desire in man either to create a story or to listen to one. Wordsworth found in ballads a language that was simple, neutral and very close to everyday speech.

Gwendolyn Brooks uses the ballad, with its unlimited structure and scope, to create grand poetry. She achieves two different levels of meaning through her ballads which are also social vehicles of protest. This mode is used by Gwendolyn Brooks in “The Ballad of Pearl May Lee”. On the superficial level it may be a tale with a simple story line, but on a deeper level, the meaning is more complex and tells of the Black man’s position in white America. They are at times deeply ironic or contain sardonic humour. Throughout her career as a poet, Gwendolyn Brooks went back to the ballad again and again and was able to use it

with grace and ease. Of her many ballads, few stand out as most prominent.

In her first collection *A Street in Bronzeville*, we have “The Ballad of Chocolate Mabbie” where Gwendolyn Brooks takes up the social evil of the intraracial discrimination that existed within the Black society. It tells the story of little Mabbie, a seven year old girl who is at the receiving end of this discrimination. Little Mabbie is in love with Willie Boone, her classmate. She waits for him outside the school gate, hoping he will come out soon. The wait is long, but when Willie appears, he is in the company of white girl who is described as “lemon-hued lynx/ with sand-waves loving her brow”. The opening phrase “it was Mabbie without the grammar school gate”, sets the poem in motion with its narrative character.

The balladic quality of repetition is brought out in the following lines:

It was Mabbie without the grammar school gate
And Mabbie was all of seven.
And Mabbie was cut from a chocolate bar
And Mabbie though life was heaven.

The repetition “And Mabbie” is an old balladic tradition which wants the listeners to remember the protagonist of the tale. Gwendolyn
Brooks uses this technique to let the readers know that the story is of little Mabbie.

The ballad brings out the impatience of little Mabbie

Half hour after the closing bell!

He would surely be coming soon

And when Willie finally comes out, Mabbie’s impatient hopeful waiting is turned to disappointment. For Willie

He wore like a jewel a lemon-hued lynx

With sand-waves loving her brow.33

Gwendolyn Brooks uses the ballad form to bring out the puppy love of Mabbie. The ballad instead of invoking the reader’s pity at the heartbreak of Mabbie, brings a smile on the lips because the heroine is all of seven years. Yet on a serious note, the poet using the ballad form lets the readers know that even small girls are not free from the colour-caste system that exists in America.

“Sadie and Maud” bring out the wide gulf separating the two distinct characteristic of the sisters. Sadie is presented as full of life and zest for living while Maud is presented as the sober one. The ballad lends itself, in its narrative style telling of the lives of these two girls and

progresses very quickly. The quick lines, with economical use of words, give the whole life of Sadie:

Sadie scraped life

With the fine-tooth comb

She didn't leave a tangle in

Her comb found every strand

When Sadie said her last so-long

Her girls struck out from home.

(Sadie had left as heritage

her fine-tooth comb.)

With rapid movement, Gwendolyn Brooks spares a few lines to the other sister too. Maud, is summed up within four lines.

Maud, who went to college

Is a thin brown mouse.

She is living all alone

In this old house.\(^4\)

Another balladic quality is the economy of lines to narrate the story and this too is used by Gwendolyn Brooks here.

There are instances where Gwendolyn Brooks makes a fine fusion of two old traditional forms like the Black spirituals and the ballad. "Of De Witt Williams on his way to Lincoln Cemetery", follows this pattern. The balladic quality of repetition of lines as well as repetition of stanzas is made use of by Gwendolyn Brooks. De Witt Williams, now dead, is being taken to the Lincoln Cemetery to be buried. Even though he is "blind within his casket", he is driven around by his friends to the places he frequented before his death.

He was born in Alabama
He was bred in Illinois
He was nothing but a
Plain black boy.

Swing low swing low sweet sweet chariot.

Nothing but a plain black boy. 35

The ballad here is not telling a story of any great man. Neither is it telling of some heroic deed. Gwendolyn Brooks uses the ballad form to tell of a "nothing but a plain black boy". Yet Gwendolyn Brooks finds in him a theme to elevate to poetic heights. The lines:

Swing low swing low sweet sweet chariot.

---

Nothing but a plain black boy.

is a reminder of Negro spirituals used at funerals. With economy of words, the whole life of the man is presented. As Gladys Williams points out, the lines “He picked his women”; “he drank his liquid joy”; “he loved the city” – “…three verbs evoke a man, skillful at symbolic transformation, … at lifting the moment up, making it glitter”.

The “Ballad of Pearl May Lee” and “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon”, are two ballads which speak of racism and consequent violence. Gwendolyn Brooks in these poems uses ballad form to bring out the interracial conflict. Pearl May Lee from “Ballad of Pearl May Lee” is in love with “Sammy boy” and knows of his relationship with other women, his preference for white, bright females. When a white woman falsely accuses Sammy, Sammy is lynched by the angered men of the town. Pearl May is left behind to mourn the death of her man. Her feelings brought out in the ballad are a combination of love for Sammy on one hand and anger at his rejection on the other.

In this ballad, the poet instead of being the usual observer takes on the part of a person involved, a first-person speaker. This is one of the

---

main characteristic of an Afro-American blues tradition which is followed faithfully by Gwendolyn Brooks.

Another balladic technique observed in this poem is that the poem opens in the middle of the story and the identities of the character is not revealed immediately and are referred to as “they”, “you” and “I”. The poem moves on different levels, from the past, to the present, goes through several scenes, at the speaker’s house, the jail scene following Sammy’s arrest, their school days etc. While Sammy’s seduction scene in the back of a Buick, and his lynching scene, are imagined by the heroine.

Then off they took you, off to the jail,
A hundred hooting after.
And you should have heard me at my house,
I cut my lungs with my laughter,

Laughter,

Laughter.

I cut my lungs with my laughter.

Using repetition of lines, Gwendolyn Brooks takes the readers through the anguish and suffering of Pearl May Lee. Though Pearl says she is laughing, her laughter is hardly any laughter at all. It is a cry of pain. The following lines tell of her plight.

They dragged you into a dusty cell.
And a rat was in the corner.
And what was I doing? Laughing still.
Though never was a poor girl lorner,
Lorner,
Lorner.
Though never was a poor gal lorner.

Employing the balladic technique of narrative, Gwendolyn Brooks goes back in time and Pearl May Lee remembers Sammy’s desire for white skin even from their school days.

Yellow was for to look at,
Black for the famished to eat.

You grew up with your bright skins on the brain.
And me in your black folk bed.

The thought of possessing a white woman is so strong that one day when a white woman propositions Sammy, he cannot resist the temptation.

Then a white girl passed you by one day
And, the vixen, she gave you a wink.

The white woman, after the sexual act, feeling shame at her behaviour, calls the act “rape”. The enraged white community steals
Sammy from the jail and lynches him. There is a slight shift from the traditional balladic form with Gwendolyn Brooks presenting changing scenes. The ballad is not confined to one particular scene. Pearl May Lee’s imagination is also a scene for the ballad. She imagines the sheriff’s voice in the jail.

“You son of a bitch, you’re going to hell!”

’cause you wanted white arms to enfold you,

Enfold you,

Enfold you,

’cause you wanted white arms to enfold you.

Finally, the ballad closes with Pearl May Lee reconciling herself to Sammy’s fate. Gwendolyn Brooks is successful in bringing out the feeling of pain mixed with sarcasm.

But you paid for your white arms, 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,

Honey

Honey

For your taste of pink and white honey.
Gwendolyn Brooks draws a parallel between the two laughters that occur in the ballad. The laughter of Pearl conceals her pain, while the town people’s laughter is at the violence that is wrecked. The poet successfully brings out the two levels of meaning which underline the poem. Pearl may be saying one thing, but she means something other. This is in keeping with the folk tradition of the blues where the mask is in place while in public, only to fall away when in private.

While “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon” tells of a growing sense of agony and despair and realisation of the young white mother whose husband killed a young Negro boy for allegedly making advances at her. The reason for the balladic form is the young woman who recalls the happenings of the previous week and gives them the connotation of a ballad. The protagonist pictures herself as the “maid milk”, who has been insulted by the “Dark Villain” and whom her husband, the “Fair Prince” has killed trying to defend her honour. She is confusing it with a fairy tale but she is not sure whether it is a ballad or a fairy tale she read at school. They appeal to her senses, because they have stories where chastity is defended.

As the ballad moves forward, the white woman comes out of her make-believe world of ballads and fairy tales and analyses the events,
especially now that the husband is back home after being acquitted of the murder. She slowly realizes that what she learnt at school is totally different from the reality in front of her. The "Dark Villain" is but a boy fourteen years old. For the white mother this realization brings a total change in her attitude.

The fun was disturbed, then all but nullified.

When the Dark Villain was a blackish child
Of fourteen, with eyes still too young to be dirty,
And a mouth too young to have lost every reminder
Of its infant softness.\(^{37}\)

Now that the Negro boy is no more the "Dark Villain", the white mother looks at her husband loosing all his fine qualities of the "Fine-Prince". He no longer fits into the story book picture of the perfect hero who leads her to the Happiness-Ever-After. Gwendolyn Brooks shows the movement from romantic notions to reality, making use of very easy conversational style, something very familiar to the stream of consciousness technique.

The ballad with its rapid movement follows the dethroning of the princely qualities in the "Fine-Prince", especially when the white woman sees him looking at his hands that killed the boy and congratulating

himself about having contributed towards the preserving of culture. He falls down more rapidly when he slaps his young child. Gwendolyn Brooks makes use of varying diction in the ballad, the romantic diction is combined with the day-to-day realistic diction. For instance "milk-white maid" is combined with "her bacon burned".

Gwendolyn Brooks is using the ballad form not only to tell real life story of Emmett Till, a fourteen year old boy, but also to give a social commentary on the prevailing interracial colour conflict.

Another ballad that brings interracial intolerance to the fore is "The Ballad of Rudolph Reed". The story is of a Black man, Rudolph Reed, who wants the best for his family. He dreams of a house where the plaster will remain on the wall and where they "may never hear the roaches / Falling like fat rain". He tries his best to achieve the dreams. His dreams are fulfilled when he finds a house in a largely white populated area. In this ballad, Gwendolyn Brooks uses the balladic form to heighten the tension inherent in the narrative.

Reed’s arrival in the white locality is the beginning of the tension. The whites make his life miserable, but Reed does not loose his patience. Though his name is Reed, delicate, he is described as oaken, strong. In the opening stanza, Gwendolyn Brooks describes Reed and his family.
The ballad opens very formally with the poet introducing the characters to the readers:

Rudolph Reed was oaken.
His wife was oaken too.
And his two good girls and his good little man
Oakened as they grew.

The Reed family with their arrival in the white locality is very happy with the house of their own, but fail to see the intense hatred by the whites. The ballad builds up the inherent tension.

For were they not firm in a home of their own
With windows every where
And a beautiful banistered stair
And a front yard for flowers and a back yard for grass? 38

Their dreams do not remain rosy very long and soon turn to nightmare. The stone throwing starts and consequently ends with the death of Rudolph Reed, and their oaken dream comes crashing down.

Another significant ballad is the “Ballad of Late Annie” from Annie Allen. Here, the structure of a ballad is used not to narrate a story but the life incidents of a young girl. The poet uses the traditional rhyme and rhythm of the ballad. But what is missing is the incremental

repetition. The story progresses without repetition or variation of lines as seen in the usual ballad form. This ballad is a slight variation from Gwendolyn Brooks's other ballads. This poem which is basically a dramatic monologue, the poet uses the confessional mode, wherein, there is no reply from Annie when her mother questions her.

"Be I to fetch and carry?
Get a broom to whish the doors
Or get a man to marry".

The ballad begins with the description of Annie who lay in bed for a long time.

Late Annie in her bower lay,
Though sun was up and spinning.
The blush-brown shoulder was so bare
Blush-brown lip was winning. 39

These are few of the most prominent of Gwendolyn Brooks's many ballads. Her ballads are a combination of the traditional European ballads with Afro-American ballad tradition mixed with its blues. Though on the surface the storyline appears simple, the ballads contain a deeper meaning.

With her awakening to Black consciousness, and as her commitment towards her race grew, Gwendolyn Brooks also grew conscious of the forms she used for her poetry to convey her feelings to the Blacks. One of the main reasons as to why she discarded the sonnet was because of its European tradition. Yet another incident that tilted her towards using Black forms is interesting to note.

When Gwendolyn Brooks started a poetry workshop for the Blackstone Rangers, she went to teach there armed with sonnet and iambic pentameter. She took to them a craft that was handed down to her from European models. Gwendolyn Brooks writes of the reaction of the Blackstone Rangers to the European forms thus:

And they told me without telling me that the European “thing” was not what they were about. “Iambic pentameter”, they twittered. “Hmmm. Oh yes, iambic pentameter. Well, now...”. Presently I gave up imposing my exercise – and we became friends.  

This experience made Gwendolyn Brooks realize that she need not follow the white man’s poetic forms. Her race had plenty to give, the blues, the seculars, the spirituals and the folk tradition. Setting aside the sonnet, she got right down with them and joined them in their efforts of “blackening” English, which she used in her poetry of the second phase.

---

With her commitment to the Black cause and with a desire to reach the common Black man with her poetry, Gwendolyn Brooks made a conscious effort to write as a Black, to the Blacks and for the Blacks. She now turned to free verse.

In the first phase, Gwendolyn Brooks apart from the sonnet and the ballad, used a variety of other poetic forms like the blues. The "Queen of Blues", a poem from her integrationist period, is a blues poem that tells of the loneliness of a Black woman, singer of blues in the city. Mame, the singer is called the "Queen of the Blues". As Harry Shaw rightly points out, the poem "presents a "blues" within a blues: both the story about Mame and the story she tells are blues of loneliness".41

Mame is very excited when she is announced as the "Queen" by the "M.C." But wonders why no one tips his hat for her. She does not wish to lead such a life, but she is forced to when no other means of livelihood is available. The blues goes thus:

Mame was singing
At the Midnight Club.
And the place was red
With blues.
She could shake her body

Across the floor
For what did she have
To lose?\textsuperscript{42}

Gwendolyn Brooks uses the Black folk tradition in this poem, where the blues is combined with the narrative style. Using the blues tradition, Gwendolyn Brooks brings out Mame as a victim of sexual and racial exploitation. Gwendolyn Brooks uses the blues tradition as Mame's way as exorcising herself of all her frustrations and pains.

Gwendolyn Brooks had the capacity and the ability to make the language work for her. To get her message across to her readers she did not have to be verbose or have poems that were long winding. One such example is "We Real Cool", where she puts forth her idea within the short span of eight lines, using very simple words, yet conveying a wealth of implication:

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon. 43

This tiny poem made up of monosyllables is a poem that speaks of the intense concern Gwendolyn Brooks had for the young. Within a few lines, Gwendolyn Brooks is able to present the false bravado of the youth and their hidden, lurking fear, the fear of failure, fear of lack of opportunity and the fear of tomorrow.

Gwendolyn Brooks makes use of the language to go deep into the experiences of young Black people. With a few words she makes the readers feel along with her the misery faced by the youths. Gwendolyn Brooks is careful not to evoke pity. She just states the bald facts and leaves the readers to deduce their meaning. Her poems, though speaking less, are powerful vehicles of social protest. Her poems, giving voice to her concerns about race, also exhibit her linguistic vitality and ability.

While working on the subject matter of common life, Gwendolyn Brooks takes the role of an observer, of one stating facts. She takes care not to get involved with her subject matter. If Brooks does not cry with her

character, she does not poke fun at them either. She handles the lives of the urban ghetto dwellers with care and sensitivity.

Another poem where we can witness a range of forms is *In the Mecca*, a long poem filled with many characters. She uses a variety of forms to match the various speakers. She makes use of the African oral tradition of speaking to the readers directly, of calling them and inviting them to be a part of the action or the story the poem is about to present. The opening lines of *In the Mecca* are an example of this tradition.

Now the way of the Mecca was on this
Wise.
Sit where the light corrupts your face.
Mies Van Der Rohe retires from grace.
And the fair fables fall.

Thereby preparing the audience for the story which is to follow and hoping for their active participation.

In *In the Mecca*, Gwendolyn Brooks uses the dramatic monologue, narrative, the ballad and the lyric elements. There is anger, there is pain in the poem. The fear and the ecstasy that the residents of Mecca feel, finds its way into Gwendolyn Brooks’s poetry. The militancy of “Way-out Morgan”, is brought out with great precision, as is the anger of Amos, who wants to take revenge on America, whom he envisions as a woman,
for the plight of the Blacks. In *In the Mecca*, we also have a slave-narrative by “great-great Gram” who gives an account of her life as a slave. When asked about Pepita, the lost girl, Gram’s answers thus:

“I ain seen no Pepita. But
I remember our cabin. the floor was dirt.
And something crawled in it...

... ... Some slaves had beds of hay
or straw, with cover-cloth. We six-uns curled
in corners of the dirt, and closed our eyes,
and went to sleep – or listened to the rain
fall inside, felt the drops
big on our noses, bummies and tum-tums…”.

This narrative contains the qualities, which Gayl Jones points out to as that of “a jazz-blues soloist”. Within few lines and with deft strokes of language, Gwendolyn Brooks is able to capture the anguish, misery, the deferred dreams and nightmares that hound the residents of the Mecca.

Many poems of Gwendolyn Brooks bear the mark of her delicate humour and subtle irony. This quality can be witnessed in Gwendolyn

---


Brooks's "The Lovers of the Poor". Here, the Ladies from the Betterment League decide it is time they help the poor slum dwelling Blacks. Yet when they arrive to give "money to the poor./ The worthy poor/ The very
very worthy/ And beautiful poor.", they are assailed by the stench and dirt there.

The stench, the urine, cabbage and dead beans,
Dead porridges, of dusty assorted grains,
The old smoke, heavy diapers, and, they're told,
Something called chitterlings. ... ...

Gwendolyn Brooks, very artistically brings out the utter filth and also the shock felt by the refined Ladies. Here are no "worthy" poor. The atmosphere is too much for them and their escape is described thus:

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,
Are off at what they manage of a canter,
And, resuming all the clues of what they were,
Try to avoid inhaling the laden air. 46

---

Using sardonic humour, Gwendolyn Brooks makes fun of the ladies to give charity a try, not meaning it, but to gain name.

Another variety of form that one finds is in “The Life of Lincoln West”, a story of a small boy in search of his self-identity from The Family Pictures. The uniqueness of this poem can be noticed in the fact that it is prosaic in voice while poetic in craft. The boy is made to feel inferior because of his uneven features.

... The pendulous lip, the branching ears, the eyes so wide and wild, the vague unvibrant brown of the skin, and, most disturbing, the great head.

The prosaic quality of the poem is clearer as the poem progresses.

One day, while he was yet seven, a thing happened. In the down-town movies with his mother a white man in the seat beside him whispered loudly to a companion, and pointed at the little Linc.

“THERE! That’s the kind I’ve been wanting to show you! One of the best example of the specie. Not like
those diluted Negroes you see so much of on
the street these days, but the
real thing.
Black, ugly, and odd. You
can see the savagery. The blunt
blackness. That is the real
thing".  

Though prosaic, the poem has a narrative quality that elevates it to
greater height.

In “Bronzeville Boys and Girls”, a book for children, we see
Gwendolyn Brooks, the master of language, who can be as complex as
T.S. Eliot with whom she is often compared to, come down to the level of
easy comprehensibility. The language in the poems, though fast paced, is
very easily understood by the children. In most poems, she adopts the
narrative method and the poems have a sing-song, lyrical quality as in
“Timmy and Tawanda” and “Narcissa”. Like in “Narcissa” Gwendolyn
Brooks writes:

    Some of the girls are playing jacks.
    Some are playing ball.
    But small Narcissa is not playing

These lines are evocative of a nursery-rhyme, having a sing-song quality.

Gwendolyn Brooks in her long poem, "The Anniad" from *Annie Allen* uses language and form to take Annie through her youthful epic dreams to prosaic realities. Her's is the story of most Black woman whom "the higher gods forgot and the lower ones berate". Gwendolyn Brooks makes a fine combination of the realistic and the romantic.

In the second phase of a poetic career, Gwendolyn Brooks turned more towards Black traditional poetry, the ballad forms, the jazz and blues rhythms, Black speech patterns and gained the distinction of a unique modern Black poet. She made use of Black English and idioms of the street, which shows that her poetic style is not white with Black content. Rather, her poetry is a combination of poetic techniques from both the cultures.

She used language to bring about a unity among the Black, not the harsh language used by the Black radical poets of the late 60's, Imamu Baraka, Sonia Sanchez or Nikki Giovanni, Welton Smith. Gwendolyn Brooks's language does not tell, it shows. It takes the reader to the subject matter and allows him to feel for himself. Unlike the Black radical writers, she does not believe in hate and violence language, or make use

---

of four-letter explicitives like them to show her anger. She is never the one to force her philosophy on others. As can be seen in her poem *Riot*, she advocates violence, but only when needed.

In the later collection, *Beckonings*, we see her using her craft at blackening English. "Steam Song" is as instance:

That Song it sings the sweetness

like a good Song can

and make a woman want to

run out and find her man.

Ain got no pretty mansion

Ain got no ruby ring.

My man is my only

necessary thing.

That Song boils up my blood

like a good Song can

It makes this woman want to

run out and find her man. 49

The repetition of similar lines recalls the ballad method, while the "Ain" and the simple style is representative of Black English. The language or idiom of the street is mixed with traditional form to achieve a distinct style – the Black American. Gwendolyn Brooks’s use of “Black English” can be seen in *In the Mecca*, when Mrs. Sallie realizes the youngest of her nine children missing – “SUDDENLY, COUNTING NOSES, MRS. SALLIE SEES NO PEPITA. WHERE PEPITA BE?" The “invariant be” is a contribution of Black English.

In the latter period of Gwendolyn Brooks’s career, she became more committed to the Black cause and her poetic voice gained more force. She picks out the youth and addresses them, calling them to unite and to be strong, to have pride for their race and their self. In the three “Sermons on the Warpland” and “Boys. Black”, there is an urgency in her voice. Gwendolyn Brooks’s poetry has also the “tom-tom” beat of the African past. The Sermons, which she calls preachment, have the language to awaken the dormant feelings of Black pride. Her counsels, “My People, black and black, revile the River./ Say that the River turns, and turn the River”. The second sermon carries forward the counsel “This is the urgency: Live! ... conduct your blooming in the noise and whip of the whirlwind".
Gwendolyn Brooks also writes of the various Black leaders, their contributions and sacrifices to prod the youth towards racial pride. Her perception in “Young Africans” is to the youth, “take it Today and jerk it out of joint”. The language and poetic devise used in the second phase is in keeping with her commitment of trying to reach out to Blacks, the common Blacks, the Blacks who are workers, the Blacks in the bar, the simple common Blacks.

Her style underwent further changes with “In Montgomery”, which she calls “verse-journalism”, where she documents the city Montgomery, the seat of the historic bus boycott. Here, she uses colloquial form, combined with journalistic reportage, a realistic style that is direct and contains simple diction:

I came expecting

The strong young -.

This poem, a “verse-journalism” like the “sonnet-ballad”, is another valuable contribution to the literary world by Gwendolyn Brooks.

Towards the end of her career, Gwendolyn Brooks’s voice became not only heroic voice, but prophetic too. The voice takes on a commanding quality, giving directions. At times stern, at times gentle as can be see in “Another Preachment to Blacks”, a slightly transformed
form of the older "Boys. Black". This preachment in free verse advises the Blacks to "Be brave to battle for your breath and bread".

In her most recent collection, "The Near-Johannesburg Boy and other Poems", Gwendolyn Brooks becomes the voice of the little Black boy from South Africa who faces the whiplash of apartheid. The poem, in simple narrative style, moves from the stately to the conversational style, the voice of the little Black boy. Gwendolyn Brooks makes use of the grand heroic style filled with alliterations, hyphenated compound like "the Fist-and-the-Fury". The boy's confident voice brings out Gwendolyn Brooks's heroic style, "I shall flail/in the Hot Time".

Much later, Gwendolyn Brooks's voice, still the kind, maternal, understanding and sympathetic showing concern for the youth, brings them advice. Her advice for them is to stay away from drugs and not to contemplate suicide when the going gets tough. This concern for the young can be seen in the poem "To the Young Who Want to Die". Her style is simple and the diction is precise yet practical. To appreciate the simplicity of the poem, it has to be read in full.

Sit down. Inhale. Exhale

The gun will wait. The lake will wait.

The tall gall in the small seductive vial

will wait will wait:
will wait a week: will wait through April.
You do not have to die this certain day.
Death will abide, will pamper your postponement.
I assure you death will wait. Death has
a lot of time. Death can
attend to you tomorrow. Or next week. Death is
just down the street: is most obliging neighbor;
can meet you any moment.

You need not die today.
Stay here – through pout or pain or pekyness
Stay here. See what the news is going to be to morrow.

Graves grow no green that you can use
Remember, green’s your color. You’re Spring.50

The use of alliteration brings a rhythmic quality to the prosaic poem. The couplet sums up Gwendolyn Brooks’s philosophy to the youth. A poignant poem, though small, it brims with well intentioned

advice to the youth. The poem carries with it the voice of experience and the voice of patience.

In her later poem *Winnie*, Gwendolyn Brooks once again adopts the heroic voice and the grand style to portray Winnie Mandela, as an exemplary Black leader and exhorts Blacks to unite. Gwendolyn Brooks is no longer an observer, stating facts. She dons the mantle of a prophet and leads her people to unity and solidarity.

These are the various forms used by Gwendolyn Brooks to let the world get to know her people and her race in a positive light. There is no pity, nor justification in her art. While in the first phase, Gwendolyn Brooks just stated facts, in the second phase of her poetic career, she uses the Black poetic form to lead her people towards a better future. She no longer remains an observer but dons the mantle of a teacher, a prophet.

So strong was Gwendolyn Brooks's commitment to the Black cause that she stood by it even when she saw others defecting from theirs. For her immense understanding and portrayal of Blacks with care, precision and sensitivity, Haki Madhubuti refers to her as a “Living National Treasure”, and states that:

*It is her vision – her ability to see truth rather than trends, to seek meaning and not fads, to question ideas rather than gossip that endear her to us ... she has the stature of a Queen Mother, but is always accessible and giving. Ms. Brooks is a woman who cannot live without*
her art, but who has never put art above or before the people she writes about.\textsuperscript{51}

This says everything that needs to be said about Gwendolyn Brooks the person, Gwendolyn Brooks the poet and most of all Gwendolyn Brooks’s commitment to the cause of Blacks and to her craft.

By combining the two traditions, Gwendolyn Brooks’s voice and style has become a unique contribution, contributing immensely both to the Afro-American literature and to the American literature.

\textsuperscript{51} Haki Madhubuti, Introduction, \textit{Say that the River Turns: The Impact of Gwendolyn Brooks}. 