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Mrs. Billy

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The Story of Gwendolyn Brooks

Gwendolyn Brooks was born on June 7, 1917 in Topeka, Kansas. Her mother, Keziah Wilms, encouraged her interest in poetry while she was at the Forrestville Elementary School: she attended the Hyde Park High School, but left this mostly all-white school to attend an all-black school; later Gwendolyn transferred again to attend an integrated school. She had already written many poems, and encouraged again by her mother, she came to meet Langston Hughes and James Weldon Johnson. (Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000)). Many of her poems were published, especially in the Chicago Defender, which was aimed towards the black audience.

Gwendolyn Brooks met her husband, Henry Blakely, while working in her local NAACP after she graduated in 1936 from Woodrow Wilson Junior High. After the 2 had their kids, Henry Jr. and Nora, “Gwendolyn took a number of writer's workshops, and immersed herself in the South Side scene, so fertile for her work” (Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000) 1). During her lifetime, “Gwendolyn Brooks wrote hundreds of poems about being black in the 1940s and 1950s, which went into details about how they were treated and how their everyday lives were like” (Griffith, Long 1). She was well known for teaching others about the black culture. She wrote about the poor, the racism, and the horrible drug abuse in the black community. ­ Gwendolyn was the first African American to win a Pulitzer Prize for Literature.

Gwendolyn is quoted to have said that she writes about what she saw and heard on the streets. Since many black people lived in the South Side of Chicago, that’s what Gwendolyn Brooks wrote about in many of her early poems. Most of her poems were inspired by the things she witnessed through the window of her second floor window in Chicago, Illinois. But Gwendolyn’s talent was far beyond just writing about the struggles in the black community, “she was an expert at the language of poetry and she combined traditional European poetry styles with the African American experience” (Griffith, Long 1). In her poems, she named the South Side of Chicago Bronzeville, and her poem collection “*A Street in Bronzeville”* is the poem that gained her the recognition she needed from literary experts in 1945. These poems were the first published collection of hers.

“Employing an artistic structure which bears the impress of nearly every major English-language poet since the sixteenth century, a structure whose potentialities many writers have not felt themselves poets until they have mastered, Gwendolyn Brooks has fashioned poems of remarkable social, emotional, and linguistic range. That structure is the sonnet”(Williams 1). Gwendolyn wrote many short poems, which might be one of the reasons she very much likes the sonnet form. Her knowledge and loving of the African-American folk forms she gained in her childhood days may have an effect on how she wrote her poems. “The blues, the spirituals, and the folk seculars make a quick impression. Just like the sonnet, they’re very intimate” (Williams 1). And just like the sonnet, folk forms are very emotional and Gwendolyn seemed to pour all of her emotions into her poems so you can really feel what she felt while writing the poem.

Words Cited

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