

Gwendolyn Brooks



Pulitzer Prize Winner

Gwendolyn Brooks was born in Kansas in 1917, with what she has described as two handicaps: she was both female and African American. Yet, even as a child she was determined to succeed. She began to write and send her poems to various publishers. At eleven, she was a published poet! Gwendolyn received almost no encouragement from her teachers and instructors, but she continued to write.

After the publication of her first book in 1945, Gwendolyn became a recognized writer. The American Academy of Arts and Letters, the National Academy of Arts and Letters, and the Guggenheim Foundation gave her grants and fellowships.

In 1949 Gwendolyn wrote the book *Annie Allen*, which describes a young girl's growing up and the many problems she faces. *Annie Allen* earned Brooks something no other African American woman had ever earned: the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry; Columbia University in New York has presented this award each year since 1922. Only five women—none of them African American—had ever received the award. This was a remarkable achievement for Gwendolyn Brooks.

Also the state of Illinois conferred a great honor on Gwendolyn Brooks. Carl Sandburg had been the Poet Laureate for the state of Illinois. When he died in 1967, Illinois named Gwendolyn Brooks to succeed the great poet as Poet Laureate.

Brooks has written for children and for adults. Her books of poems and her one novel can be sources of inspiration to the young people who read them. One of her poems is about Marian Anderson, a world-renowned singer and, in the words of Eleanor Roosevelt, “a magnificent...human being.” Brooks's poem “Gertrude” is her tribute to Anderson. (You can read more about Marian Anderson in this book.)

Brooks has not ceased work after achieving fame. She has written, traveled, and spoken to groups of prisoners and would-be writers, encouraged others to be aware of the African American heritage, and helped those who are interested in writing through the Poet Laureate Awards she initiated and her monetary awards. One of her books (1983) is *Very Young Poets* which contains “Little Lessons” for the young poet. In *Young Poet's Primer* (1980) Brooks names useful books and also gives some basic suggestions to help beginning writers. Brooks is truly an important woman to discover.

Suggested Activities

1. Discussion Questions

- *Knowledge:* When was Brooks' first poem published?
- *Creative Thinking:* Gwendolyn Brooks was able to write convincingly about a African American girl's growing into adulthood. Why do you think this was true? What subject might you be able to write convincingly about? Why?
- *Application:* Write a paragraph about attending school, a subject with which you are familiar.
- *Analysis:* After all that Gwendolyn Brooks has been able to do with her life, why do you think that she said that being born female and African American made it difficult to succeed?
- *Synthesis:* If Gwendolyn had been born in 1985 instead of 1917, what suggestions would you give her for "getting ahead" in a different time period?
- *Evaluation:* In her poem, "The Sermon on the Warpland," Brooks encourages others to include love in their building and planning. Why do you think she stressed love? Are there other things that you would include?
- *Affective:* Brooks stated that she received little encouragement from others. She managed to succeed. She has made a conscious effort to help others succeed. Why do you think she has done this? Would you do the same? Why?

2. Skills Focus

- *Language and Communication Skills:* Pretend you are Gwendolyn Brooks and have just received the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. Describe how you feel in words. Now use colors to show your feelings.
- *Independent Study Skills:* Are there other African American poets? Search the library and discover!
- *Manipulative Skills:* What is a warpland? Draw it.

3. Poetry

Shape Poetry: Shape poetry is when your poem is written inside the shape of the object about which you are writing. The lines do not have to rhyme. Choose an object from nature. (Brooks wrote one poem about rain.) You might choose a snowflake, a raindrop, or even a plant or an animal. Draw an outline of that object, and fill in the outline with your thoughts.

4. Social Acceptance

Overcoming Handicaps: Brooks worked to overcome the handicaps and unpleasant things in her life. What are the unpleasant things in your life? What can you do to overcome these unpleasant things? List the actions you can take. If you cannot think of a way to overcome these unpleasant things, talk to your parents, other relatives, or religious counselor.

Recommended Reading

Teacher Reference

Brooks, Gwendolyn. *The World of Gwendolyn Brooks*. Harper and Row, 1971.

Kent, George C. *A Life of Gwendolyn Brooks*. The University Press of Kentucky, 1990.

Student Reading

Brooks, Gwendolyn. *Bronzeville Boys and Girls*. Harper and Row, 1956.

Write Your Own Description

One of Gwendolyn Brooks's poems is titled "Skipper." In it she tells what she sees one day when she looks into her fish bowl. In the space at the top of the fish bowl draw the water life and objects of your choice. On the lines provided, describe what people would see if they looked into your fish bowl. (You may continue on the back of this sheet.)

