



## Duality of identity and alienation in the works of Gwendolyn brooks

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### Abstract

This Research article aims to study the themes of duality of identity and alienation in the works of Gwendolyn Brooks. She is the female poet who has been most responsive to changes in the black community, particularly in the community's vision of itself. The first African American to be awarded a Pulitzer Prize; she was considered one of America's most distinguished poets well before the age of fifty.

The African American identity is something simultaneously internal and presented by oneself, and external and perceived by others. Duality of Identity is therefore characterized as an awareness of the discrepancy that can exist between the internality and externality of such an identity. Because it relies fundamentally on this self-awareness and awareness of others' awareness- regardless of specific identities being connected to and expressed- double consciousness can be applied to forms and classifications of identity other than just the African American identity.

Her works reflect both the paradise and the hell experienced by the black people of the world. Her writing is objective, but her characters speak for themselves. Although the idiom is local, the message is universal. Brooks uses ordinary speech, only words that will strengthen, and richness of sound to create effective poetry.

**Keywords:** duality of identity, Gwendolyn brooks, African literature, poetry, African American writers, alienation, feminism, women writers, diaspora

### Introduction

A powerful voice of black consciousness and social protest in mid-century America, Gwendolyn Brooks is among the most distinguished African-American poets of the twentieth century. With the publication of her second volume of poetry, *Annie Allen* (1949), she became the first black American writer to win a Pulitzer Prize. Noted for her mastery of traditional forms and poignant evocation of urban black experience, Brooks emerged as a leading black literary figure during the 1950s and 1960s. Drawing upon both European models and African-American folk tradition, her lyrical poetry addresses racial injustice, poverty, and the private struggles of young black women with exceptional precision, psychological depth, and authenticity. In addition to *Annie Allen*, Brooks is best known for *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), *The Bean Eaters* (1960), *In the Mecca* (1968), and her only novel, *Maud Martha* (1953). During the late 1960s, Brooks embraced the Black Power and Black Arts movements, marking a dramatic shift in her poetry toward increasingly polemical declarations of black pride and African cultural nationalism.

Gwendolyn Brooks portrayed the stark reality of her limited circumstances as a Black Woman, Wife and Mother in her autobiographical Novel, *Maud Martha*, which were chronicles of Annie's home life, youthful innocence, growing self-awareness and romantic relationships amid the the grim, poverty stricken setting of *A Street in Bronzeville*.

The Novel is centered on the undercurrents of rage and rebellion of the Protagonist, Maud Martha Brown. This rage seethes beneath the surface of the Novel's 34 vignettes of the seemingly common, everyday life experiences of a Black

Woman living in the South side of Chicago in the 1940's.

The conflicts and turmoil that encapsulate Maud Martha's life coalesce into a comprehensive pattern of domestic epic warfare. Domestic warfare precisely describes Maud Martha's struggles to obtain and maintain her home and relationships with family members as she strives to retain a sense of identity within this confining structure.

It was written during the times when the domestic realm was one of tension and flux as women worked to balance their roles as wives, mothers and artists. With World Wars I and II, only recently past, and the Korean and Vietnam conflicts on the horizon, white women workers found their roles in Society changing. They had entered the US workforce during the wartime era, providing the Nation with a much needed source of labour. Yet, after the War, the return of their male counterparts forced working White women's return to the domicile and to domestic duties.

*Maud Martha* is the story of a young black girl growing up in the late 1920s through the 1940s in Chicago. A marvellous Bildungsroman, this novel features its heroine, Maud Martha Brown, as a young, plain black girl acutely aware of how others feel about her.

This is neither the romantic racialism of the Harlem Renaissance nor the "Black is Beautiful" mode of the 1960s Black Art Movement, but rather a Novel of psychological realism that veers towards gentle satire and understated humour that demythologizes, or exposes, many comforting myths about race, class and gender.

Much of the action in *Maud Martha* lies in the description of Maud's thoughts by a third person narrator. WE learn in the

novel's opening chapter, how Maud cherishes plain things such as the Dandelions in her Parent's backyard and how she is painfully aware that it is hard for others to have the same aesthetic appreciation of the common place. These everyday events that make up Maud's story illustrate Brook's theory that art can and should focus on the ordinary.

*Maud Martha* reminds us that the sweeping canvas of social movements – the depression, WorldS War II and racial injustice- must be balanced with attention to the individual who is seeking to make sense of an often baffling world. How do you cope for instance, with the fact that your own family prefers your lighter skinned sister Helen, while you are kindlier, have nice hair and are smarter?

A series of comic visits from well meaning beaus illustrate various aspects of Chicago life. The sardonic visit by a young white student in one example. He is determined to use Maud as proof of his liberal views, while Maud, cleverly aware of this, plays the game, but only up to a point. Brooks narrator shows how, ironically Maud begins to see her surroundings with the viewpoint of her visitor: her beloved home suddenly seems shabby, when graced by the presence of one who is “being so good.” She experiences in herself some of the very superficiality which she struggles in others to come of age as a black woman and person of talent.

Maud's bookish, day dreamy childhood is spent in the safe shelter provided by her Dad, a janitor, who manages to buy his modest home. Approaching womanhood, Maud finds herself drawn to Paul Philips, a man with lighter skin than hers, and even as she understands his “prejudice” against her, she understands that he is attracted to her “goodness”. Paul and Maud set up housekeeping in a drab, crowded kitchenette building and reality soon sets in.

*Maud Martha* also dramatizes Black sociologist W.E.B. Dubois' concept of “double consciousness”- the idea that all blacks are aware that while they are Americans, because of race, they are perceived as different and must live with the consciousness of this difference.

This view into African American Culture recurs in several of Brooks other works, including *The Bean Eaters* (a view into the life of impoverished yet content elderly African-Americans) and *We Real Cool* (a stream of thoughts of poor inner-city African Americans who have adopted a hoodlum lifestyle.)

“*A Song in the Front Yard*”, by Gwendolyn Brooks, illustrates the desire people develop to experience new things and live life according to their own rules. In the first stanza, Brooks uses diction of propriety and unfamiliarity to emphasize the author's desire to change her life. In the first line, the author establishes that she is only familiar with one way of life since she has “stayed in the front yard all [her] life.” The author “stayed” in the front yard suggesting that she was able to leave the yard and experience new things, but she just was not ready. She was raised in the “front yard,” highlighting the idea that the “front” is the proper way for her to live her life. In the second line, the author realizes there is much more to experience in life and she “[wants] a peek at the back.” At this point in her life, she is not ready to abandon the only life she knows, but she wants to look at the other side of things and all of the different experiences she can have.

In the third line, the back yard is described as being, “rough

and untended and hungry weed grows,” again representing how Brooks is only used to one place. In the front yard, everything is neat, properly tended, and no weeds grow. After seeing this, she realizes that life is not always as perfect as she was raised to believe, so she wants a taste of something new. In the fourth line, the author says, “a girl gets sick of a rose,” showing how Brooks has had enough of the front yard life and needs to experience new things. The “rose” is used to represent life in the front yard. A “rose” is usually associated with perfection and beauty, reflecting the author's life in the “front yard.”

In many ways *A Street in Bronzeville* is decidedly non-political. It doesn't take up causes or protests but seeks what is genuinely universal in the human condition. While ostensibly the book's poems are about the urban black poor, on a deeper level they are about that which is universal and true in all humans.

The poem *Sadie and Maud* is a good example of how issues of ethnicity and background First, we note that the poem does not directly compare Sadie and Maud. Instead, this is a poem about Sadie that begins and ends with Maud. Maud is the frame that provides a contrasting border within which we can better see and understand Sadie.

Ask yourself the following question, why doesn't Sadie want to go to college? Why would going to college not be scraping through life with a fine-toothed comb?

*Sadie and Maud* was written in the 1940's during a time when not many women graduated from college. For sure it was only a tiny percentage of them that finally made it to graduation.

Gwendolyn Brooks subtly makes us question the decisions taken by the two sisters.

Why does Maud do it? Does she do it because she thought it was fun? No, she probably did it because she wanted to help her family. Also, is it not implied in the poem that Maud and Sadie live together after Maud leaves college? Does Maud provide financial assistance to Sadie?

When Sadie has children out of wedlock, Maud is ashamed. She identifies with her family and cares about what they do. In other words, she's a good person. How does society reward Maud's accomplishments? The care she provides for her family financially? Given Maud's lonely fate, can we honestly say Sadie made the wrong decision to live life solely on her own terms? Therein lies the problem.

Sadie makes the right decision to live life the way she does, but this throws into question the society and rules around Sadie that makes this the right choice. To quote Shakespeare again, “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.” In its own subtle manner, the poem is a fierce criticism of the society Sadie and Maud grow up in.

While sticking entirely to a universal theme, the poem still manages to become a powerful voice of protest against contemporary society's status quo. Gwendolyn Brooks ability to comment on contemporary issues while sticking to universal themes is what makes *Sadie and Maud* a poem that makes one question the system as it existed then.

*A Street in Bronzeville* addresses Black life in “Kitchenettes” and other enclosed spaces, poems such as “The Sundays of Satin Legs Smith” and the title poem of the collection itself also locate Black life in the Street. Implied is the sense that this world not only borders, but also surrounds and impinges

upon, the privileges containment of white life.

What Brooks book does for Mosby is focus his gaze on the exterior space he inhabits- the street he walks, the other outsiders he knows there and transform that exterior into a privileged site of self-knowledge and a different kind of insight. And what his response to this call reveals is that the poet is not merely a spokesperson addressing whites on his behalf but that she is in an important way speaking to him, to Blacks.

She in all her works emphasizes the inside/outside distinction of race, but suggests it is a social effect rather than an essential feature. The Poet's goal thus becomes to reach all Blacks everywhere with her call to identification as Black, and to convert those who do not as yet understand the "New Black".

Moving on to the concept of Alienation and the dilemma as to whether Brooks is an Insider or Outsider, Brooks social location as interpenetrated space must be taken into consideration.

In the most obvious sense of "location", Gwendolyn Brooks is a Chicago Poet. She was Poet Laureate of Illinois for more than three decades, and the constancy of her geographic identification lends continuity to her long and varied poetic career.

For many years Brooks lived in a series of cramped and damp apartments- basements, garages, and kitchenettes and struggled to make ends meet with Henry Blakely, whom she married in 1939.

As Blacks, they faced both a severe housing crisis in the urban migration "Mecca" of Jim Crow Chicago and a job ceiling that prevented economic advancement.

Brooks lived in the same quarter, frequented the same neighbourhoods, and described the same streets, for a lifetime, and from her earliest published collection, her poetry addressed the realities of poor and working class African Americans in the urban environment.

As many critics note, Brooks possesses an uncanny ability to transmute commonplace subjects into the extraordinary, especially those seemingly insignificant events in the lives of the poor and dispossessed in her native Chicago. According to Cheryl Clarke, "Brooks's entire oeuvre has been studies of black subjectivity, of African-American oral and written traditions, sources of knowledge and faith systems; of the psychic and physical effects of racism on the lives of black and white people; and of the richness of the lyric."

One notices her focus shifting from the individual to the community. Another very important fact noticed during the study was that Gwendolyn Brooks's movement from an observer to a doer. While in the first phase Gwendolyn Brooks presented her characters as they are, in the second phase we see her donning the mantle of a prophet, showing the path her people should take to gain their due place under the sun.

In conclusion we see how Gwendolyn Brooks presented life as she saw it from the windows of her house in Chicago. She writes that one had to only look out of the window and there was raw material just without. She saw life straight and steadily. Therefore, her characters are invested with feelings and emotions and portray the theme of alienation and duality of identity that they all faced in some form or the other.

In a passage she presented again in later books as a definitive statement, Brooks wrote: "I—who have 'gone the gamut'

from an almost angry rejection of my dark skin by some of my brainwashed brothers and sisters to a surprised queenhood in the new Black sun—am qualified to enter at least the kindergarten of new consciousness now. New consciousness and trudge-toward-progress. I have hopes for myself.... I know now that I am essentially an essential African, in occupancy here because of an indeed 'peculiar' institution.... I know that Black fellow-feeling must be the Black man's encyclopedic Primer.

I know that the Black-and-white integration concept, which in the mind of some beaming early saint was a dainty spinning dream, has wound down to farce... I know that the Black emphasis must be not *against white* but *FOR Black*... In the Conference-That-Counts, whose date may be 1980 or 2080 (woe betide the Fabric of Man if it is 2080), there will be no looking up nor looking down." In the future, she envisioned "the profound and frequent shaking of hands, which in Africa is so important. The shaking of hands in warmth and strength and union."

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