Brooks, Gwendolyn Poet Essay, Research Paper

Brooks, Gwendolyn

Poet, writer. Born June 7, 1917, in Topeka, Kansas. Throughout most of the twentieth century, Gwendolyn Brooks was a lyrical chronicler of the black urban experience in America. In 1950, she became the first African-American poet to win the Pulitzer Prize.

Brooks grew up on the South Side of Chicago, Illinois. She began writing poetry as a young girl, and by the age of 16 had begun publishing her poems regularly in The Chicago Defender. She attended the Woodrow Wilson Junior College in Chicago before marrying a fellow writer, Henry L. Blakely, in 1939. The couple lived together in Chicago, divorcing in 1969 but reuniting in 1973. They had two children, Nora Brooks Blakely and Henry Blakely Jr.

Brooks earned a good deal of critical attention in 1945 with the publication of her first anthology of poetry, A Street in Bronzeville. (“Bronzeville” was Brooks’ name for the predominately African-American South Side of Chicago.) Over the next several years, Brooks won a grant from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and several fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation.

She published her second volume of verse, Annie Allen, in 1949. The book, which followed a Bronzeville girl throughout the stages of her life, was written in a loose, experimental form that Brooks called the “sonnet-ballad.” Annie Allen won the Pulitzer Prize the following year, catapulting Brooks to a whole new level of literary and popular acclaim.

A novel, Maud Martha (1953), was less successful than Brooks’ poetry, which continued to meet with critical and popular success throughout the next decade. A collection of children’s poems, entitled Bronzeville Boys and Girls (1956), was followed by The Bean Eaters (1960), widely considered to contain some of her finest verse, and Selected Poems (1963).

In the latter half of the 1960s, Brooks’ poetry became mroe radical and took on a more explicit tone of social concern, a transition that coincided with the politically charged atmosphere of the decade and the influence of the black power movement among African-American writers and thinkers. Her next volume of poetry, In the Mecca (1968), told the bleak story of people living in the Mecca, a large, fortress-like apartment building on the South Side that had deteriorated into a slum. The book clearly displayed Brooks’ new political awareness, including a poem entitled “Malcolm X,” after the black militant leader who was assassinated in 1965.

In the Mecca was nominated for the National Book Award. It was also the last of Brooks’ books published by a mainstream publisher, Harper & Row. Her next book, Riot (1969) was published by Broadside Press, a small, black-owned company based in Detroit. With a newly political tone and without a mainstream publisher, Brooks’ later works often received little attention from the critics at major publications. Nevertheless, she remained a major literary figure throughout the next several decades, publishing more than a dozen volumes of poetry, including Aloneness (1971), To Disembark (1981), The Near-Johannesburg Boy, and Other Poems (1986), Blacks (1987), Winnie (1988), and Children Coming Home (1991). Brooks also published many nonfiction titles, most notably Report from Part One (1972), an assemblage of autobiographical writings, letters, and interviews, and Report from Part Two, published in 1996.

In 1968, Brooks succeeded Carl Sandburg as the poet laureate of Illinois. She received a lifetime achievement award from the National Endowment of the Arts in 1989 as well as from the National Book Foundation in 1994. Also in 1994, she was selected by the National Endowment of the Humanities to be its Jefferson Lecturer. She won the National Medal of Arts in 1995 and has received over 50 honorary degrees.

Brooks died of cancer on December 3, 2000, at her home in Chicago. She was 83 years old.