Gwendolyn Brooks Explication Essay, Research Paper

love note

I: surely

Surely you stay my certain own, you stay

My you. All honest, lofty as a cloud.

Surely I could come now and find you high,

As mine as you ever were; should not be awed.

Surely your word would pop as insolent

As always: ?Why, of course I love you, dear.?

Your gaze, surely, ungauzed as I could want.

Your touches, that never were careful, what they were.

Surely ? But I am very off from that.

From surely. From indeed. From the decent arrow

That was my clean naivete and my faith.

This morning men deliver wounds and death.

They will deliver death and wounds tomorrow.

And I doubt all. You. Or a violet.

War is a reality that has plagued man for many centuries. It effects all aspects of life and has often been the historical turning point for many movements that have changed the world?s views about race, culture, society, economics, and politics. This is evident in most history books and political records, but the plight of the common man, the solider, the mourning wife, the parent or friend, is often forgotten about except for in literary works. Gwendolyn Brooks? Gays Chaps at the Bar is a collection of sonnets written in reaction to the problems as well as realities of World War II. In it she poetically explores the topics of loss, duty, danger, and love in relation to war, but her poems are not typical sonnets. As a seminal writer, Brooks effectively uses poetic forms such as rhyme and rhythm to enhance the social commentary of her poetry, proving that she has mastered traditional poetic devices. For example, in the sonnet love note I: surely, she takes the love relationship of one couple and shows how it can be changed by the cruelties of war. Their love affair, something that was genuine, is suddenly doubted because of the realities of that which is going on in the world around them. Not only has the war taken the lives of the soldiers that are fighting in it, but it has also taken away the speaker?s faith in love. The use of the sonnet to explore this topic is highly effective. Not only is she able to bring a voice to this topic, but she manipulates the sonnet?s form and structures as well as poetic devices (rhyme, meter, etc.) to exemplify both the romanticism and realism that lie in the ideas of love and war.

love note I: surely has a very unique poetic form. Brooks has combined the English and Italian forms of the sonnet to enhance its meaning. The first half of the poem is written in the traditional English form with the rhyme scheme of abab cdcd, but instead of there being three quatrains there are only two, forming the octave common to the Petrarchan sonnet. The turn in the poem?s meaning comes after the initial octave in which a sestet follows. Using the form of the Italian sonnet, Brooks comments upon the ideas presented in the initial octave. The way in which the poem is presented lends itself to being interpreted from two perspectives. In one instance it can be perceived as a letter from a woman whose love is away fighting in the war, or it could be viewed as a letter from a black soldier who is doubting his country and the events that are unfolding around him. In this paper, the former perspective will be explored in depth.

In the first quatrain, the lovers? relationship is established. ?Surely you stay my certain own, you stay/My you.? In either of their lives, their love is what is certain and constant. War is not a constant state of being. In contrast, the lovers know each other so well that it is undoubted that their love will remain unchanged. The poet goes on to examine her lover?s known characteristics, the things that will never vary. He is honest and somewhat haughty, he is ?lofty as a cloud,? high on himself, life, or both. She finds her lover to be infallible stating, ?Surely I could come now and find you high.? There is a great confidence in her words. He is hers. These are such beautifully romantic thoughts. Love is often something that can be inconstant, but in the case of the poet and her lover it is never ending.

Brooks uses the technique of enjambment in the lines that begin with ?Surely? in the octave. The smooth transitions of one line into another create a light airy movement in the first lines of her poem. She is conveying the ideas of love and romance as she feels them; the poet is in love and carefree. There is an emphasis on the feelings of the speaker instead of the constraints of the sonnet form throughout the poem, hence the fusion of the two forms of sonnet. Also contributing to the rhythm of the poem is the rhyme. At first glance it seems as though the poem does not rhyme at all but upon closer inspection the poem has a near or slant rhyme; some of the consonant and vowel sounds are repeated. This type of rhyme scheme gives the poem a very subtle musical quality and it avoids the brash effect of a feminine or masculine rhyme scheme that can sound very elementary if done incorrectly. True, a sonnet is a ?little song,? but this poem is ultimately about something very somber; a definite rhyme scheme could have made the poem less effective in its seriousness.

In the second quatrain the author echoes the sentiments and techniques introduced in the first. Although the ideas are the same, there is a thematic break in the speaker?s attitude about her lover. Love, though still definite, has become unromanticized. She says, ?Surely your word would pop as insolent/As always: ?Why, of course I love you, dear.? Her lover does not to seem to feel the meaning behind his declaration of love. It seems as though this woman?s lover is so used to saying this that it is almost said in a disdainful way. She goes on to say that his touches were never careful but that they were ?what they were,? marked by the use of three stresses. This also seems like a very manly concept and has hardness in its meaning. A woman is often thought of as being soft and gentle, her touches could never be rough. It is interesting that even though there were so many unromantic things about their relationship, this is what she relied upon and what she wanted. ?Your gaze, surely, ungauzed as I could want.? When he looked at her, he saw her and she saw him. They are unmasked when they are with each other and nothing interferes with the way he views her, not even his love for her. They have a very real relationship. She can honestly identify his faults, as she does in the first quatrain, and he sees her as she really is, without the blinders that love causes so many to have. She wanted this love the way that it was, surely.

With the introduction of the sestet the purpose of the love note changes. This beautiful love that is remembered in the octave is no longer. There is a thematic break from the idea that love, although it is no longer romanticized as shown in the second quatrain, is variable. The tone changes from an attitude of assurance to one of insecurity and doubt. She is telling her lover that this is how their love was ?Surely ? But I am very off from that.? This opening line is very powerful in its meaning. It is as if she was going to write another line about how sure their love is, but then she stops. Their relationship is no longer so sure. In fact, what she is saying in the octave has a very detached meaning. Surely she could go to find him, but she doesn?t, surely he stays certain, but is he certain? Is their love still certain? The answer to both of these questions is no. Her new belief is marked by a change in the rhyme scheme. The scheme of efggfe suggests that the speaker introduces the new concept, supports it with facts, and concludes with the same idea. This is the certainty of doubt. Brooks also uses the device of end ? stopped lines, with the exception of the romantic notion of Cupid?s arrow, to emphasize the speaker?s concrete ideas. Each line represents a brutal truth that is known to the speaker, the lines are abrupt and harsh in nature.

In the first of the two tercets she resolves that their relationship is no longer what it was. She has strayed from the idea of certainty and indeed. She once believed in love, Cupid?s arrow that hit her, making her na?ve to the world. She had a great faith in her love. Though she did not look at her lover with the blinders of love, it did cause her to view the world in a different way. A woman is more apt to having her world change because of love. Women are taught to place their faith in love. Love is definite and tangible; if you have love you are safe. The author of this poem no longer believes that this love is her safe house. She has been exposed to something that has changed her viewpoint: war.

The second sestet is written as a firm resolution, this is what is definite to the author now. Each of the lines is a definite idea; the enjambment used earlier in the work is no longer present. The words that are used to describe war are definite and abrupt. There is no romanticism in these ideas; these are the words of a doubting realism.

This morning men deliver wounds and death.

They will deliver death and wounds tomorrow.

And I doubt all. You. Or a violet.

The war has caused death, destruction, and wounds that might never heal. It has taken men away from their families and put them on the front line to defend their country. It has changed and challenged the identities of many, whether they are personal, political, or social identities. It has made love seem so trivial that it is easy to doubt. How can a person believe in the power of love when their country is at war fighting for the freedom of people to live their lives? There is no longer certainty of life or death either. Everyday men deliver notices of death and wounds to the loved ones of the soldiers. If the poet?s lover is at war, is it certain that he will return home to their love? She can?t be sure. Love is no longer certain, the only reality is war. The meter, which has been very indefinite throughout the poem because of Brooks? use of many different types of feet, reflects the new – found doubt of the speaker. She uses a lot of initial spondees and follows them with unstressed syllables creating a falling meter. In the last line of the sonnet this is very effective. She uses two spondees putting emphasis on the phrase ?And I doubt all,? and follows it with two dactyls. Making use of these devices, Brooks effectively conveys the melancholia of the speaker. She even doubts the beauty of a violet, something that is so simple and harmless.

Love note I: surely can be interpreted as illustrating two very different social commentaries. Using the ?love note? as a device to encompass these different ideas, Brooks is able to speak to many issues in this one poem. On one hand she is able to show love and war from the perspective of two lovers. On the other hand, the lover motif could suggest the relationship between Black people and their country. In this interpretation, ?surely? is a term of doubt and not certainty. ?[T]he use of “surely” in this poem focuses the sarcasm on that about which the Black man would be most secure. Surely the country and its democracy could not be thought of by the Black man as “mine”; surely to him country had not been “all honest, lofty as a cloud”; surely he would not be assured of the country’s love; and surely the country’s eyes were not ?ungauzed?? (Shaw, 136-159).

This poem, which was written during the aftermath of the Second World War, embodies many of the intense emotions that are present during times of war. Wars often make people disillusioned and callous; even their love can become full of doubt. Gwendolyn Brooks takes the constructions of love and distorts them with the realities of war. Though this poem was primarily explicated showing the relationship between two lovers torn apart by the war it can also be seen as a man doubting his country and the reasons why he is fighting. This is what makes Gwendolyn Brooks a seminal writer; she is able to deliver many different voices and perspectives through her work. In her own words, ?["Gay Chaps at the Bar" is] A sonnet series in off-rhyme, because I felt it was an off-rhyme situation–I did think of that. I first wrote the one sonnet, without thinking 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 purposes throughout?(Brooks). By combining the English and the Petrarchan sonnet form and initiating the turn in the poem?s meaning in the sestet, Brooks changes the tone from one of romantic thoughts to one of harsh actuality. Whereas she is very poetic with the romantic ideals, she proves that love, whether it is romantic or nationalistic, does not overcome all. She does this by showing the finality of the effects of war with the abruptness of the speaker?s thoughts in the sestet marked by the end – stopped lines and spondees used for emphasis. She ends the poem with falling meter and the image of a violet being doubted revealing the fact that war can turn the most beautiful things ugly. Surely she is a seminal writer because she is able to bring all of these feelings and representative emotions to her poems. Surely this is true.

Brooks, Gwendolyn. Report from Part One. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972.

Shaw, Harry B. “Perceptions of Men in the Early Works of Gwendolyn Brooks.” Black American Poets Between Worlds, 1940-1960. Ed. R. Baxter Miller. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1986. 136-59.