

GWENDOLYN BROOKS

Born: Topeka, Kansas; June 7, 1917

Died: Chicago, Illinois; December 3, 2000

Although she has published essays and a novel, Brooks is known primarily for her poetry, which realistically portrays African American life.

BIOGRAPHY

Gwendolyn Elizabeth Brooks was born June 7, 1917, the first child of David and Keziah Wims Brooks. Her birthplace, Topeka, Kansas, was the home of her maternal grandparents, but at the age of five weeks, she and her mother returned to the Brooks's residence in Chicago, the city in which Brooks would live for most of her life. Her brother Raymond was born in 1918.

David Brooks, a janitor, made only modest wages. His children's lack of material luxury, however, was offset by a warm home atmosphere that nurtured culture and creativity. David loved to sing, tell stories, and recite poems, while his wife enjoyed singing, playing the piano, and directing plays for young actors.

As a child, Brooks was encouraged to read and to dream. By the time she was seven, she was expressing her thoughts in two-line verses. This precocity prompted her mother to predict that her daughter would one day become "the lady Paul Laurence Dunbar." Brooks continued to write, producing at least one poem per day, mostly about nature and romantic love. At thirteen, she published her first poem, "Eventide," in *American Childhood*. Three years later, she became a weekly contributor to the *Chicago Defender's* column "Lights and Shadows." By the age of twenty, she had published poems in two anthologies.

Much of Brooks's inspiration came from James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes, two well-known African American poets to whom she had submitted several poems for criticism. Johnson concluded that she was indeed talented but needed to acquaint herself with more modern poets such as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and E. E. Cummings. Hughes also endorsed Brooks's ability and

exhorted her to keep writing—especially about the things she knew.

After graduating from Wilson Junior College, Brooks worked briefly as a maid in a Chicago apartment building and as a secretary to one of its residents, a "spiritual adviser" who sold love potions. The building and its inhabitants would furnish the subject matter for her poem "In the Mecca," published in 1964.

Frustrated by the inability to find more fulfilling work, Brooks started a mimeographed newspaper that sold for five cents per copy. The paper, *News Review*, included stories about local events, discussions of cultural issues, brief biographies of successful African Americans, and cartoons drawn by her brother.

In 1939, Brooks married Henry Lowington Blakely II, another aspiring poet. They had two children, Henry in 1940 and Nora in 1951. Henry supported the family through a variety of jobs, while Gwendolyn wrote poems and reviewed books (both novels and collections of poetry) for *Negro Digest*, *The New York Times*, and *The New York Herald Tribune*.

Brooks's reputation as a poet began with the publication of individual poems in magazines such as *The Crisis*, *Cross-Section*, *Twice a Year*, *Common Ground*, and *Negro Story*. In 1945, however, she produced a volume of poems titled *A Street in Bronzeville*, published by Harper & Row. Four years later, she published *Annie Allen*, the work for which she won the 1950 Pulitzer Prize for poetry. She was the first black writer to win the award. Brooks also wrote poems for children (*Bronzeville Boys and Girls*, 1956, and *The Tiger Who Wore White Gloves*, 1974) as well as several essays, including "Poets Who Are Negroes" (1950) and "They Call

It Bronzeville" (1951). In 1953, she published the novel *Maud Martha*.

Brooks succeeded Carl Sandburg as poet laureate of Illinois in 1968, and in 1985 she was appointed Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress. She was named to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters and received many awards, including the American Academy of Arts and Letters Award, the Shelley Memorial Award, the Anisfield-Wolf Award, the Kuumba Liberation Award, two Guggenheim Fellowships, the Frost Medal from the Poetry Society of America, a National Book Award nomination for *In the Mecca* (1968), and the National Endowment for the Arts Lifetime Achievement Award in 1989.

Although she was reputed to be shy and introverted, she was eager to share her work and the art of writing poetry. She gave readings at many universities as well as in prisons and taverns. Moreover, she conducted a number of poetry workshops and organized writing contests in elementary and secondary schools, paying the prizes, which ranged from fifty to five hundred dollars, from her own pocket.

Despite her lack of an advanced degree, Brooks taught courses in literature and writing at Chicago's Columbia College, Northeastern Illinois State College, the University of Wisconsin at Madison, Elmhurst College, City College of New York, and Chicago State University, where she held the Gwendolyn Brooks Chair in Black Literature and Creative Writing. In 1969, however, health problems forced her to resign from teaching, and she devoted herself to the work she most loved: the production of poetry.

ANALYSIS

Critics have called Brooks's poetry "elegant and earthy." While she portrays black life in Chicago in realistic detail, she blends realism with lyricism, giving her poems beauty as well as truth. For Brooks, realism for its own sake is not enough; beauty is the essential ingredient that enables a poem to move its audience.

Brooks's style is characterized by its diversity. She employs a variety of poetic forms, including the sonnet, the ballad, the blues, free verse, and blank verse, sometimes in combination. Her language is also varied. In "We Real Cool" (from *The Bean Eaters*), she writes in black English; in some

works, such as "The Anniad" (the second part of *Annie Allen*), she uses language reminiscent of the Renaissance and Middle Ages; in still others, she creates compound words such as "whimper-whine," "heart-cup," "wonder-starred," and "oak-eyed," producing the flavor of Anglo-Saxon poetry. In all of her works, she strives for one central image and gropes painstakingly for the exact words to convey her message. In an interview with writer Brian Lanker, she cautioned that if a line entered a poet's mind too spontaneously, it probably was not original; quite likely, the poet had read it in the work of someone else.

Although Brooks's poems depict black life, her themes (at least in the works written prior to the mid-1960's) are universal. The characters are black Chicagoans, but their problems and experiences are shared by people of all races and in all localities. An example of Brooks's universality is seen in "Gay Chaps at the Bar" from *A Street in Bronzeville*. In this poem, the black and white soldiers fighting in World War II are united in a cause. They have common fears, common disillusion, and common concerns about the future—if they survive. Even though the soldiers' caskets are designated for black or white bodies, a corpse sometimes ends up in the "wrong" box, but, the poet asks, "Who really gave two figs?"

During the 1960's, Brooks gradually became more interested in black identity, her African heritage, and the need for unity among African Americans in the struggle for equality. She had always advocated black solidarity but had also believed that achieving rapport with whites was the answer to racial inequality. Her poems of the 1940's and 1950's present African Americans simply as people; in "Gay Chaps at the Bar," for example, she notes the surprise of the white soldiers when the blacks look and behave like ordinary men. Another poem stressing the humanity of blacks is "I Love Those Little Booths at Benvenuti's" in *Annie Allen*. Benvenuti's was a restaurant in the black section of Chicago; white diners frequented the establishment, however, in the hope of seeing the black patrons clown or eat in a comical manner. In the poem, the whites are disappointed when the blacks' table manners and general decorum are as "normal" as their own.

Near the end of the 1960's, Brooks changed her mind about the effectiveness of racial inte-

gration. Undoubtedly, she was influenced by the Civil Rights movement, the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., and a growing unity among young blacks. In an interview with Ida Lewis, a writer for *Essence* magazine, she admitted her belief that blacks should work together for equal rights, independent of white aid, rather than hope for understanding and help from whites. Although Brooks never expressed hatred of whites (as did some of the students in her poetry workshops), she commented in her 1972 autobiography *Report from Part One* that it is rare for blacks and whites to establish true rapport.

Nevertheless, Brooks's later views of the racial situation did not change her from a poet into a prophet or a preacher. In *Report from Part One*, she counters critics who accuse her of sacrificing lyricism for political activism. She maintains that she still regards poetry as an art and still writes lyrically of the things she sees about her. In her maturity, however, she notices phenomena she overlooked in her youth. Two poems reflecting Brooks's growing awareness of racial conditions are "The Ballad of Rudolph Reed" and "Riders to the Blood-Red Wrath," both written in the early to mid-1960's. Rudolph Reed is a black man who purchases a home in a white neighborhood, only to be harassed and killed. "Riders to the Blood-Red Wrath" illustrates the pent-up anger of African Americans. Although he has learned to hold his tongue—as have most members of his race—the narrator of the poem implies that the era of black submission is coming to an end, for he concludes with the words, "We extend, begin."

Brooks's poetry reflects her attitude toward motherhood as well as racism. In her autobiography, she confides that she always wanted children. Not only did she desire offspring for their own sake, but she also wished to utilize the reproductive function of her body. Unlike some highly talented women, she did not view procreation and childraising as impediments to art. For Brooks, motherhood represents wholeness in a woman's life. In "Sadie and Maud," a poem about two sisters from *A Street in Bronzeville*, Sadie, "one of the livingest chits," has two children out of wedlock, to the disgrace of her family. Maud, the respectable sister, attends college. It is Maud, however, whose life is empty and who ends up living alone "like a thin brown mouse." "The Empty Woman" echoes

the theme of futility in a life without children. The "empty woman" takes great interest in her nieces and nephews, but her life is unfulfilling, as she has no children of her own. In "Children of the Poor" (from *Annie Allen*), Brooks begins by saying, "People without children can be hard." Brooks's poetry, then, presents the life she knows in stylistic beauty and also serves as the means of conveying her philosophies.

"KITCHENETTE BUILDING"

First published: 1945 (collected in *A Street in Bronzeville*, 1945)

Type of work: Poem

Brooks wonders whether dreams can germinate and survive amid the details of everyday life—especially in a small tenement apartment.

The efficiency apartment described in "Kitchenette Building," the first poem in *A Street in Bronzeville*, recalls the apartments in which Brooks and her husband lived prior to the early 1950's, when they purchased a house. Bronzeville, so named by the *Chicago Defender*, was a black ghetto consisting of forty square blocks on the South Side of the city. With its cross-section of people and lifestyles, Bronzeville provided Brooks with a wealth of subject material.

Written in an irregular rhyme scheme that moves toward pentameter, "Kitchenette Building" bears stylistic traces of the work of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and John Donne, while its message is reminiscent of that in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden, Or, Life in the Woods* (1854), which Brooks had read and admired. Discussing the need for simplicity, Gwendolyn Brooks Thoreau states that "our life is frittered away by detail." In a similar vein of thought, the narrator of the poem muses about whether dreams and aspirations can compete with the mundane details of life—onion fumes, fried potatoes, garbage rotting in the hall—especially in a cramped ghetto dwelling. She does not muse for long, however; another tenant has just vacated the communal bathroom, so she must scurry down the hall to use what is left of the hot water before someone else beats her to it. Practicality must supersede dreams.

The first line in “Kitchenette Building” suggests the wryness of Eliot: “We are things of dry hours and the involuntary plan/ Grayed in and gray.” After this introduction, however, the poem moves into a lighter mood, as the narrator begins to wonder about dreams, which she describes as being violet and white. At age eleven, Brooks began writing her poems and reflections in notebooks; she noted that she associated colors with particular characteristics and images. These associations are found in some of her adult poetry. When the narrator says that she and her spouse are “gray,” she means that they are gloomy, depressed with their surroundings. Violet, on the other hand, is a delicate shade of purple, which Brooks connects with art and beauty. In referring to the violet of dreams, she may also be thinking of the flower. Although its blossoms are fragile and short-lived, like many dreams, the violet is an independent, self-pollinating plant. Its independence suggests the individuality of dreams.

Brooks associates white with purity. In “Kitchenette Building,” she may be wondering whether any dream can avoid becoming contaminated by the bustle and sordidness of a tenement apartment. In addition, “white” may refer to the white race, implying that only Caucasians have the time and opportunity to dream of the future.

Obviously, Brooks was able to dream and write in her small apartments, but her ability stemmed from her upbringing and innate talent. In the poem, she seems to be asking whether most people living in such places can nurture an aspiration amid the petty details of daily life.

“THE CHILDREN OF THE POOR”

First published: 1949 (collected in *Annie Allen*, 1949)

Type of work: Poem

A mother gives advice—her only gift—to the orphans of war.

“The Children of the Poor” is contained in the third part of *Annie Allen*. Partly autobiographical, *Annie Allen* consists of three sections: “Notes from the Childhood and Girlhood;”

“The Anniad,” a poem of forty-three stanzas, in which the central character, Annie, attains personhood; and “The Womanhood,” in which Annie reaches maturity. In general, *Annie Allen* requires more concentrated reading than *A Street in Bronzeville*, as Brooks makes more obscure implications regarding human nature and uses more complex language marked by symbolism, figures of speech, twists of diction, and unusual combinations of words.

In “The Children of the Poor,” Brooks looks at the ravages of World War II from a mother’s standpoint. To her, the most vulnerable survivors were the children left fatherless, especially those whose widowed or abandoned mothers were economically impoverished. The poem consists of five sonnets in the Shakespearean and Petrarchan styles, each sonnet examining a different aspect of life from a maternal view.]

In the first sonnet, Brooks describes the nature of motherhood by combining positive and negative images. For example, children’s “softness” makes a “trap” and a “curse” for their mothers. Nevertheless, youngsters provide “sugar” for the “malocclusions” of the love that produced them. Motherhood is confining, yet fulfilling.

In the next sonnet, Annie declares the need to give her children something that will lend shape and meaning to their lives. Lacking material resources, she concludes that her gift will be a few lessons in coping with the world.

Sonnet 3 proceeds to examine the issue of religion. Having come from a Christian home, Annie retains a core of faith along with a degree of skepticism. Therefore, she advises her children to hold their faith in “jellied,” or pliable rules; to “resemble graves,” that they might bury doctrines that do not conform to their personal beliefs; and to become “metaphysical mules,” stubbornly refusing to accept church teachings without first scrutinizing them. At the same time, she tells them that should their faith falter, she will be there to rebuild it, even if rebuilding involves reinterpreting Scripture or blinding the eyes of her young to disturbing doctrines.

In the following sonnet, Annie sets priorities: Although aesthetics are important, politics must come first. That is, if her children are to be productive, they must first attain a strong sense of self as well as a sense of the dignity of the black race.

In the final sonnet, Annie ponders whether her children will achieve justice for themselves and their race or succumb to “the universality of death.” Ironically, Brooks presents dying in a positive light. By referring to death as completion and the grave as “familiar ground,” she may be implying that for the poor, death is a release from the hardships of life and the only thing poor children really have to look forward to.

“THE LOVERS OF THE POOR”

First published: 1960 (collected in *The Bean Eaters*, 1960)

Type of work: Poem

Two women from the Betterment League visit a tenement apartment and are overwhelmed by what they see.

“The Lovers of the Poor” is one of thirty-five poems in *The Bean Eaters*, a collection that moves beyond the descriptive and autobiographical to show Brooks’s growing social awareness. A satire on people with neither respect nor genuine charity, the work was inspired by a visit Brooks received from two wealthy white women who wanted to see how the black winner of the Pulitzer Prize looked. In Brooks’s words, they behaved “rather sniffingly.” The women barge into Brooks’s apartment, apparently without warning, and silently criticize, while their hostess copes with the usual business of the day. The women feel it their duty to step outside their affluent environment and help the less fortunate, but they are totally unprepared for the raw, teeming poverty that they encounter.

Brooks uses several devices to help the audience perceive the women’s true attitude toward the poor. First, she employs sensual images that repel the visitors, such as the stench of garbage, urine, and rotting food. The women are also put off by the myriad “Children, children, children—Heavens!” To the sheltered visitors, there is something repugnant in the prolific reproduction of the poor. Brooks reveals their genuine feelings regarding the poor through references to their “love so barbarously fair,” their “loathe-love,” and their intent to refresh with “milky chill.”

Brooks’s use of capitals, lowercase letters, and italics is also noteworthy. Words beginning with capitals imply a dry objectivity. Thus, the capitalization of “Ladies,” to refer to the visitors, suggests a crushing, dehumanized force, without individual identity. (Brooks does not reveal until the end of the poem that there are two women.) Other capitalized words include “Slum” and “Possibilities.” To the Ladies, the Slum is simply a geographic area, not a human community. Similarly, “Possibilities” is an abstract concept, having no connection to specific persons with potential.

Finally, the italicization of “heavy” in “heavy diapers” and “general” in “general oldness” accentuates the difference between the Ladies’ experience and the present situation. The phrase “heavy diapers” suggests that the busy mother in the apartment is less meticulous in child care than the Ladies are or would be, and the “general oldness” of the building is not picturesque, like that of the Ladies’ mansions, but signifies decrepitude.

In her youthful writings, Brooks associated pink with a mountain maiden, an image connoting innocence and remoteness from the world. Twice, she refers to the pinkness of the Ladies in their makeup and their “rose nails”—thus emphasizing their naïveté. She also mentions their “red satin hangings,” associating red with the quiet anger they apparently feel, and “hangings” with slave punishment. Finally, she describes a rat as gray, the color of gloom. It is the rat that induces the Ladies to leave, feeling useless in this atmosphere of despair.

“WE REAL COOL”

First published: 1960 (collected in *The Bean Eaters*, 1960)

Type of work: Poem

Seven pool players at the Golden Shovel are immortalized in eight skinny lines totaling twenty-four words.

Gwendolyn Brooks said this in *Report from Part One*: “The WEs in ‘We Real Cool’ are tiny, wispy weakly argumentative ‘Kilroy-is-here’ announcements. The boys have no accented sense of them-

selves, yet they are aware of a semi-defined personal importance. Say the 'We' softly."

These young men should be compared to Jeff, Gene, Geronimo, and Bop in "The Blackstone Rangers," who were a gang of thirty seen by the "Disciplines" (the police) as "Sores in the city/that do not want to heal." Yet despite the police officers' contempt for the adolescents on Blackstone Street and Helen Vendler's description of "We Real Cool" as a "judgmental monologue" that "barely conceals its adult reproach of their behavior," Brooks's insistence on a soft "We" suggests sympathy for lives at an impasse. The "basic uncertainty" of the "We" reveals no bold swagger but instead an awareness of the plight that circumstances have landed them in and represents a brave assertion that though their lives are short they are somebody too. The poem is an elegy for thousands of young black men whose growth has been stifled by prejudice and its resulting poverty and social confusion.

Placing the "We" at the end of the end-stopped lines results in a gaping hole at the end of the last line, a visual emphasis on the truth of how they "Die soon" and nothing follows. That is all for these truncated lives. The sound effects are conventional alliteration and rhyme. One critic has suggested that "Jazz June" includes a sexual image and that "Die" carries an old Renaissance metaphor for a sexual climax, but this interpretation may strike some readers as strained and out of place.

MAUD MARTHA

First published: 1953

Type of work: Novel

This short novel in shimmering language apparently derives in great part from Gwendolyn Brooks's own early life.

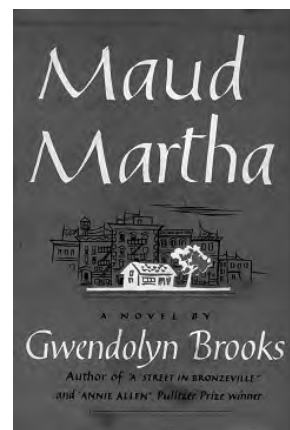
In the first of the novel's thirty-four brief chapters, the seven-year-old Maud Martha Brown yearns to be "cherished" in the way that she perceives her sister Helen, two years older, to be. The same motif of sibling envy pops up late in the novel when Maud Martha's mother, Belva, reveals that Helen wants to marry the family doctor, a

man much older. This revelation (the girls' father is thinking of changing doctors) leads to Maud Martha's musing that "It's funny how some people are just charming, just pretty, and others, born of the same parents, are just not." The best answer that Belva can muster is "you make the best cocoa in the family."

These passages reveal something of the insecurity that Maud Martha feels, but her sensitivity to race and class issues troubles her much more. Her "first beau," Russell, is "decorated inside and out," but he is dismissed in favor of the "second beau," who longs to be an English country gentleman and envies the chaps who have mastered Vernon Parrington's classic work of intellectual history, *Main Currents in American Thought*. Maud Martha comes to an understanding, however, with Paul Phillips, who admits "I'm not handsome," and their generally contented marriage produces Paulette, who arrives in the world in comic confusion.

Some of Brooks's best chapters are stinging portraits of pretentiousness. When she goes to hear a popular black author speak, to his annoyance she tags along with him afterward toward the Jungly Hovel. His tone changes immediately when they meet up with a white couple, and Brooks's contemptuous portrait of this "rash representative from the ranks of the intellectual *nouveau riche*." Equally cutting is the sketch of Mrs. Burns-Cooper, an elegant white lady who interviews Maud Martha as a potential house maid. Mrs. Burns-Cooper struggles to achieve the common touch as Maud Martha is peeling potatoes, but her tedious chatter about her imported lace, her sister-in-law's Stradivarius, and the charm of the Nile convinces Maud Martha never to return.

Maud Martha is a novel of acute observation of human behavior, and it is written in the bright language of a major poet.



SUMMARY

Writing from her own experience, Gwendolyn Brooks captures black life in both its poverty and its beauty. Her ability to portray beauty comes from her use of varied poetic forms and linguistic devices such as diverse rhyme schemes and diction from earlier eras. In her three best-known collections of poetry, *A Street in Bronzeville*, *Annie Allen*, and *The Bean Eaters*, she shows personal growth. In the first collection, she is objectively descriptive, in the second, reflectively autobiographical, and in the third, more consciously aware of widespread social and racial problems. Her poetry has touched many readers, regardless of their color.

Rebecca Stingley Hinton; updated by Frank Day

BIBLIOGRAPHY

By the Author

POETRY:

A Street in Bronzeville, 1945
Annie Allen, 1949
The Bean Eaters, 1960
Selected Poems, 1963
We Real Cool, 1966
The Wall, 1967
In the Mecca, 1968
Riot, 1969
Family Pictures, 1970
Aloneness, 1971
Black Steel: Joe Frazier and Muhammad Ali, 1971
Aurora, 1972
Beckonings, 1975
Primer for Blacks, 1980
To Disembark, 1981
Black Love, 1982
The Near-Johannesburg Boy, 1986
Blacks, 1987
Gottschalk and the Grand Tarantelle, 1988
Winnie, 1988
Children Coming Home, 1991
In Montgomery, 2003

LONG FICTION:

Maud Martha, 1953

NONFICTION:

The World of Gwendolyn Brooks, 1971
Report from Part One, 1972

DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How does Gwendolyn Brooks present the poor in her works?
- What is Brooks's attitude toward the young men in "We Real Cool"?
- Children appear prominently in Brooks's poetry. How would you characterize her treatment of them?
- How does Brooks treat racial differences?
- What formal devices—such as rhyme, meter, figures of speech—can be discerned in Brooks's works, including *Maud Martha*?
- Discuss how Bronzeville becomes for Brooks a sort of microcosm, like William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha and Thomas Hardy's Wessex.
- How does Mrs. Burns-Cooper offend the narrator in chapter 30 of *Maud Martha*?
- Chapter 25 of *Maud Martha* ends with the sentence "She kept on staring into Sonia Johnson's irises." Explain.
- Brooks is superb at catching people's personalities with a few striking phrases, as in chapter 23 of *Maud Martha*. Identify examples of this skill in both the poetry and the prose.

Young Poet's Primer, 1980

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE:

Bronzeville Boys and Girls, 1956

The Tiger Who Wore White Gloves, 1974

Very Young Poets, 1983

EDITED TEXT:

Jump Bad: A New Chicago Anthology, 1971

About the Author

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

Bryant, Jacqueline, ed. *Gwendolyn Brooks' "Maud Martha": A Critical Collection*. Chicago: Third World Press, 2002.

Kent, George E. *A Life of Gwendolyn Brooks*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990.

Lanker, Brian. *I Dream a World: Portraits of Black Women Who Changed America*. New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1989.

Madhubuti, Haki R., ed. *Say That the River Turns: The Impact of Gwendolyn Brooks*. Chicago: ThirdWorld Press, 1987.

Melhem, D. H. *Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and the Heroic Voice*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1987.

Mootry, Maria K., and Gary Smith, eds. *A Life Distilled: Gwendolyn Brooks, Her Poetry and Fiction*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987.

Washington, Mary Helen. "Plain, Black, and Decently Wild: The Heroic Possibilities of Maud Martha." In *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*, edited by Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland. Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1983.

Wright, Stephen Caldwell, ed. *On Gwendolyn Brooks: Reliant Conversation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996.

Copyright of Critical Survey of American Literature is the property of Salem Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.