



POEM ANALYSIS

“We Real Cool” by Gwendolyn Brooks

Essay by Rebecca Stingley Hinton; updated by Frank Day

Author: Gwendolyn Brooks
Born: June 7, 1917; Topeka, Kansas
Died: December 3, 2000; Chicago, Illinois
Country: United States
Culture: African American

ABSTRACT

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.

KEYWORDS

- African Americans
- Inner cities or Inner-city life
- United States or Americans
- Youth

TYPE OF POEM

Lyric Poem

APPEARS IN

The Bean Eaters by Gwendolyn Brooks

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 themselves, 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.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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