



# The Mother

by Gwendolyn Brooks

## Content Synopsis

Gwendolyn Brooks' "The Mother," was first published in 1945 in a set of poems called "A Street in Bronzeville" within a book of the same title. Like many of the other poems in the set, "The Mother" is presented through first-person narration from the perspective of a resident in a public housing project. The title itself introduces the ironic conflict: the speaker is not literally a mother, for her pregnancies have ended in abortion, yet she addresses the children who were never born as if they were present to hear her meditation. Through this monologue, the speaker reveals her powerful feelings regarding her choices.

The first ten-line stanza sounds less personal than the rest of the poem because the speaker uses the second-person "you" to generalize, starting with the straightforward: "Abortions will not let you forget" (1), and continuing with a series of conflicting images that reflect a sense of loss and hint at the reasons for having the abortions. These are "the children you got that you did not get" (2). At the time of the abortion, they were "damp small pulps with a little or with no hair" (3), but had they been allowed to "[handle] the air," they could have become "singers and workers" (4). Not all the missed opportunities are positive: "You will never neglect or beat / Them" (5-6). However, most of the motherly activities suggest affection, such as "wind[ing] up the sucking-thumb" (7) or

"scuttl[ing] off ghosts that come" (8). Lines nine and ten use positive connotation and metaphor to suggest the mother's powerful desire to have had what she did not have: "You will never leave them, controlling your luscious sigh/ Return for a snack of them, with gobbling mother-eye."

Starting with line eleven, the tone turns more personal as the speaker shifts from "you" to "I," and the conflicts become even stronger than before: "I have heard in the voices of the wind the voices of my dim killed children." The word "killed" indicates the powerful sense of guilt the speaker feels. In her imagination she has given birth ("contracted") and she has breast-fed the "dim dears" (12-13). Her confused feelings are then illustrated through a series of "if" clauses that leads to a paradox. First, the speaker reveals that she has previously said, "Sweets, if I sinned, if I seized/ Your luck/ And your lives" (14-16), and "If" she has deprived them of the good and bad experiences of life, including their "births" and "names" (17) their "baby tears" and "games" (18), their "stilted or lovely loves," "tumults," "marriages, aches," and "deaths" (19), and "if" she has "poisoned the beginnings of [their] breaths" (20), then "Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate" (21). In other words, she deliberately chose to end the pregnancies, and with those decisions, she ended the potential for life with all its turbulence and pleasures, but she did not intend to do

harm. Nonetheless, her sense of guilt is there, and she accepts responsibility: “Though why should I whine, / Whine that the crime was other than mine?” (22-23). Whoever is responsible, the children, if they are to be seen as children, are “dead” (24), or they “were never made” (25). However, even her attempt to make that distinction torments the speaker:

But that, too, I am afraid,  
Is faulty: oh, what shall I say, how is the truth  
to be said?  
You were born, you had body, you died.  
It is just that you never giggled or planned  
or cried. (26-29)

The poem concludes with a final message to the children who never became children:

Believe me, I loved you all.  
Believe me, I knew you, though faintly, and I  
loved, I loved you All. (30-32)

The repetition shows the power and sincerity of the voice, and setting “all” onto the last line by itself suggests not only that the speaker has had multiple abortions but also that each had an identity for her, and an impact on her life.

### Formal Qualities

The first ten lines are in couplets, after which the rhyme scheme becomes irregular. Despite the irregular pattern, all but four lines rhyme with a line next or near to it. Brooks asserts her freedom to vary line length and rhythm for effect.

### Interpretation

While this poem has been criticized for its ambivalence toward the subject of abortion, some commentators argue that women who have had abortions know that Brooks’ sympathies lie with the mother and the difficult choices she has had to make because she knows she could not have properly provided for the children (Guy-Sheftall 157).

More important than whether the poem is for or against abortion rights is the depth of the conflicts faced by the speaker as expressed by the ironies, paradoxes, and repetitions in the poem.

### Historical Context

In most states, abortion in the early stages of pregnancy was legal until the period of 1860 to 1880, when prohibitions were enacted forbidding all abortions except for “therapeutic” reasons, usually defined as a threat to the mother’s life. However, abortions remained common. They were performed by midwives, by physicians in their offices, or in hospitals. Family physicians who did not perform abortions themselves often referred patients to colleagues who did. In many cases, the women seeking abortions already had several children, and could not see how they could afford to raise another (Reagan 158-159).

With the Great Depression of the 1930s, abortion rates increased as many men and women lost their jobs, family incomes decreased, and more and more women who could find work had to help support their families. Women would frequently be fired if they were pregnant. “Since black women lost their jobs in disproportionate numbers,” Reagan adds, “their need may have been greater than that of white women” (135).

Because it was illegal, midwives and physicians performing abortions when the mother’s health was not clearly endangered could be arrested, but most arrests and trials occurred only when the patient had died after a procedure. Around 1940, police began raiding doctors’ offices or taking in women for questioning as they left from having abortions. One effect of this was “the destruction of a system that had worked well for both women seeking abortions and for physicians. This system had created a space in which thousands of women obtained safe abortions from skilled physicians” (Reagan 161). Police and prosecutors frequently compelled the patients to testify in open court,

which resulted in public embarrassment. Reagan speculates that this “new repression of abortion was a reaction against the apparent changes in gender and growing female independence. During the Depression, women had cut their fertility and appeared to be leaving the home and motherhood for the workplace. World War II accentuated these trends” (162) as women often took jobs in the war industry while men fought overseas. It was near the end of the war that Brooks wrote her poem.

Another change in the early 1940s was the establishment of hospital committees that evaluated whether an abortion met the definition of “therapeutic.” These committees would sometimes require a second opinion before allowing the procedure, thereby adding to the cost to the woman as well as the time required. Consequently, abortions became more and more difficult for poor women to obtain (Reagan 172-178).

### **Societal Context**

As Leslie J. Reagan explains in her study, “When Abortion Was a Crime,” “Most doctors encountered women patients seeking abortions who told similar stories of poverty, excessive childbearing, and illegitimacy. Numerous individual physicians violated the official medical norms that condemned abortion because they could not ignore the dilemmas described by their patients” (158). As is noted in the Historical Contexts section, the Depression of the 1930s added to the economic and social pressures already faced by many women. Poverty, unemployment, the threat of losing a job due to pregnancy, the financial strains of having too many children, and the shame of being an unmarried mother in a society that stigmatized out-of-wedlock births, fueled these pressures.

### **Religious Context**

The speaker in this poem explores moral issues from a personal standpoint without reference to religion. At the time the poem was written,

abortion was generally seen as a social problem rather than a religious one. Of the major organized religions in the United States, only the Catholic Church took a stand against all abortion, condemning the general practice in 1869 and specifically opposing therapeutic abortions in 1895. Protestant churches tended to accept the law of the time, permitting abortion when the mother’s life was threatened. Jewish tradition had long held the life of the mother to take precedence over that of the unborn child (Reagan 7).

It was not until the 1950s and 1960s that organized protestant denominations became major voices against abortion.

### **Scientific & Technological Context**

Abortion had always involved certain health risks, but until the twentieth century, so did childbirth. Common abortion procedures often involved injecting chemicals into the womb in order to induce a miscarriage. In the early 1900s, doctors increasingly used curettes, spoon-shaped scraping devices, as part of the process, which increased chance of perforating the uterus and causing infections.

By the 1930s and 1940s, abortions had been made safer, and when infections did occur, they could be better treated with new sulfa drugs and antibiotics. The increased use of blood transfusions in case of hemorrhage further reduced the rate of mortality following abortions.

### **Biographical Context**

“The Mother” is not autobiographical. Like many of Brooks’s poems, it employs a first-person speaker to give voice to an underclass that is traditionally rarely heard in poetry.

Gwendolyn Brooks was born in Topeka, Kansas, on June 7, 1917. Within months, her family moved to Chicago, which remained Brooks’s home for the rest of her life. She was the oldest child of three in a loving but strict family.

She was a shy child, and at a young age showed an interest in poetry, which her mother encouraged. She was writing poems at seven, and published her first poem in 1930. In her youth, she had the opportunity to meet Langston Hughes and James Weldon Johnson. Through her reading, she was influenced by modern poets, such as Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and E.E. Cummings. By the age of seventeen, she was writing a weekly poetry column for a newspaper. She also became involved in the civil rights movement, serving as publicity director for the Chicago NAACP.

In 1938, she married Henry Blakely, and had her first child, Henry Jr., in 1940. Her daughter, Nora, was born in 1951. While living in a kitchenette apartment on the south side of Chicago, she continued writing poetry, and in 1945, she published her first collection, “A Street in Bronzeville,” which included “The Mother.” The book was well received, and Brooks was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship to help fund her as she continued her work. Among her other honors was a fellowship to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Brooks’s next collection of poems, “Annie Allen” (1949), earned her even more praise and

honors, including a Pulitzer Prize (the first awarded to an African American woman) in 1950. Her work continued to win her awards and honors through the rest of her life. She taught at a number of colleges, including Columbia College in Chicago, Columbia University, University of Wisconsin, and Chicago State University. In 1968 she was named Poet Laureate of Illinois, and in 1985 the Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress. She died at the age of 83 on Dec. 3, 2000.

*Michael L. Schroeder, Ph.D.*

### Works Cited

- Brooks, Gwendolyn. “The Mother.” *Selected Poems*. New York: HarperCollins, 1963.
- Guy-Sheftall, Beverly. “The Women of Bronzeville.” *A Life Distilled: Gwendolyn Brooks, Her Poetry and Fiction*. Ed. Maria K. Mootry and Gary Smith. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1989. 153-161.
- Reagan, Leslie J. *When Abortion Was a Crime: Women, Medicine, and Law in the United States, 1867-1973*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1997.

### Discussion Questions

1. Consider the many different ways in which the “children that you did not get” are referred to in the first stanza. What is the effect of listing such a range of activities and experiences?
2. Identify paradoxes in the poem and discuss how such apparently contradictory statements can convey powerful meaning.
3. Examine the metaphor in lines 9-10 and discuss what it implies about the speaker’s feelings.
4. Note the shift from second-person in the first stanza to first-person in the second. Discuss the ways in which this shift affects meaning.
5. The poem includes a number of examples of alliteration and assonance. Discuss whether such repetition of sounds adds to the meaning and effectiveness of the poem or not.
6. Discuss the environment and time period in which this poem is set. How did factors like the Depression, the Women’s Rights Movement, and scientific advancements influence the instance of abortion?
7. Discuss how this poem makes you feel. How do you think Brooks feels about abortion? Has the poem changed your view on it?
8. Abortion remains a hot topic in our culture today; discuss the aspects of the poem that you feel are still relevant today, as well as those that were time-specific.

### Essay Ideas

1. Some critics have complained that the poem does not take a clear stand on the abortion issue. Write an essay in which you use details from the poem itself to argue that the poem does suggest that safe and legal abortions serve a social need, that abortions are wrong, or that the ambiguity itself poses a powerful statement about the issue.
2. Write an essay exploring the ironies of the poem, starting with the title and considering the implications of other examples of situational irony.
3. Write an essay that describes how the poem transcends a solely personal experience. How does it reflect on society as a whole and go beyond the voice of the narrator? Cite examples from the poem, keeping in mind the social and historical background of the time.
4. Write an essay that discusses the possible reasons and motivations behind this poem. Why would Brooks write on such a sensitive topic? Keep in mind how the poem made you feel, as well as how critics and audiences have received the poem in the past.
5. Compare “The Mother” with Lucille Clifton’s “Lost Baby Poem.” Discuss how the poems convey similar or different sentiments regarding abortion. Also, focus on the tone, scope, and settings of the poems.

Copyright of Introduction to Literary Context: American Poetry of the 20th Century 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.