



## POEM ANALYSIS

# “The Bean Eaters” by Gwendolyn Brooks

Essay by Evan Labuzetta

**Author:** Gwendolyn Brooks

**Born:** June 7, 1917; Topeka, Kansas

**Died:** December 3, 2000; Chicago, Illinois

**Country:** United States

**Culture:** American; African American

### ABSTRACT

This essay presents an explication of Gwendolyn Brooks’ poem “The Bean Eaters.” The poem is one of Brooks’ earlier works and does not display the poet’s later overt attention to issues of racial justice. Nevertheless, in this keenly observed and sparsely written poem, we can catch glimpses of an authorial intelligence that is beginning to engage with issues of social justice and racial identity.

### KEYWORDS

- Age
- African American
- Brooks, Gwendolyn
- Children
- Free Verse
- Memory
- Narrative
- Poetry
- Poverty
- Understatement

### TYPE OF POEM

Free Verse; Narrative

### APPEARS IN

*The Bean Eaters* by Gwendolyn Brooks

*The World of Gwendolyn Brooks* by Gwendolyn Brooks

*The Essential Gwendolyn Brooks* by Gwendolyn Brooks

“The Bean Eaters” is the title poem of Gwendolyn Brooks’ third volume of poetry, published in 1960. By the time she wrote this collection, Brooks was already a celebrated figure in American literature, having won the 1950 Pulitzer Prize for her earlier collection *Annie Allen* (1949). Brooks went on to have a long career as a teacher and writer of poetry and to receive numerous awards for her writing. Her early works are characterized by detailed descriptions of the conditions in which she grew up, and are full of celebrations of her cultural identity, though with few overt comment on the struggles that African Americans faced in the United States. Brooks herself cited 1967 as the point at which she started to engage more widely with her social and political environment, but *The Bean Eaters* is often considered to mark the beginning of Brooks’ engagement with racial identity.

“The Bean Eaters” is not a poem with overt references to larger themes; rather, it is a poem that, through careful observation, constructs a troubling portrait of two impoverished elderly people. The poem can be read as both a mini tragedy and as a criticism of the society that would abandon this pair in their impoverished and desperate condition. Like many of Brooks’ works, the poem is difficult to categorize. It does not feature many traditional poetic techniques: the lengths of the lines are irregular, as is the rhyme scheme. Each line contains internal rhymes, which help give the poem a sense of forward momentum, particularly within the first stanza. However, the greatest part of the poem’s power comes from the economy of its characterization and the precision and significance of its images.

The first stanza of “The Bean Eaters” presents a

snapshot of an elderly couple eating beans for dinner in a humble back room. Though Brooks' language is simple, it does subtly imply a number of important ideas. The act of eating beans—a common trope in Brooks' work that stems from her childhood when her family would often eat beans when money was tight (Shaw 16)—suggests the couple's poverty. This suggestion is reinforced by the pair's inexpensive and worn plates and the description of their dinner as a "casual affair" (2). The word "affair" is, perhaps, a sardonic overstatement, since it is clear that anything more than a dinner of mere sustenance is beyond the couple's means. Further, Brooks describes the two as "yellow" (1), a color that can bring to mind the jaundice of an illness, the tint of old paper—which would liken the two to an old, worn book—or a mixed racial origin that would make the two neither fully a part of white American culture nor part of the African American subculture of Brooks' day. Whether because of illness, age, or race, though, it is clear that the couple lives on the margins of society.

The middle stanza introduces a seemingly moral judgment of the two when it describes them as "Mostly Good" (5), with the capitalization of the words suggesting that there is perhaps some part of them that is not good. The two are judged further when the narrative flatly says that they have "lived their day / But keep on ...": in other words, the two continue their activities despite having no compelling reason to do so. However, the very fact that such a judgment is present raises the question of who is making the judgment. Who is it who claims that they have "lived their day," and who is it who describes their remaining life as consisting of the utterly banal acts of "putting on their clothes / And putting things away"? The implicit judgment in this middle stanza is disquieting; it suggests a dismissive or at least unsympathetic attitude toward the couple, though, at this point, it is unclear whether this attitude is the poet's or that of some other person or group.

The final stanza is set apart from the rest of the poem. Its rhyme scheme is not linked to the first two stanzas, and it introduces a new perspective, one that

encompasses the old couple's memories, as the narrator suggests that their chief activity now is remembering their past lives. They remember "with twinklings and twinges" (10)—that is, perhaps, with both happiness and shame or regret. Here, the poem seems to be ascending to a more ethereal subject. The ellipsis at the end of the first line and the sparkling onomatopoeia of "twinklings and twinges" in the second create a different, more abstract and poetical tone, which draws the poem's focus away from the physical confines of the pair's humble setting. That the reader is not told what it is that the two remember moves the emphasis even further away from the concrete and tangible. The poem's astonishing final line (over 30 syllables) juxtaposes this reverie with the utterly mundane squalor of the pair's physical surroundings. The rush of nouns in this line suggests equality among each part of their current and past lives, and it contains some surprises for the reader. We learn that, despite a lifetime of experience and work, the couple lives in a rented room. The room is full of what seems like junk: "beads and receipts," "tobacco crumbs" and "vases," but also "dolls" (11). The inclusion of "dolls" hints very strongly that the pair had a child or children, and yet also creates a deep sense of unease, since it's clear that the child or children are no longer part of their parent's lives. The brief allusion complicates the picture of the pair's isolation by suggesting that they have been abandoned by everyone, even their own offspring. With this ending, the poem completes a troubling portrait of the impoverished elderly and society's attitudes toward them. Left behind by the world and living at its margins, the pair has nothing to do but turn inward and remember.

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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