

Juli Grace

Professor Martin

English 102

19 April 200X

The Tides of "We Real Cool"

For such a seemingly spare and sinewy poem, "We Real Cool" by Gwendolyn Brooks does not want for the ornaments of critical and artistic insight offered by competing and often conflicting academic suitors. From how it should be read aloud to whether or not it proposes judgment on its subjects -- even thoughts of the way it might dabble in sexual innuendo -- the essence of "We Real Cool" labors under interpretive baubles aimed at fleshing out its hidden complexities.

Is this a poem akin to what Hortense Spillers describes as a drunken revelry song? Is it a foray into the disturbed and disillusioned minds of youth, a pungent reduction of *Catcher in the Rye* poured into verse? Does Brooks imbue her own self-righteous piety into the "We" of her lines, or does she summon the unadulterated celebration and lyricism of the "Seven at the Golden Shovel"? Do the players suddenly become enlightened to their impending doom in the last line and a half, realizing the bad end to truancy and mischief, or is it a statement without motive or conclusion, a vessel of thought for an audience who will all really "die soon" too?

This "less than lean" poem probably has enough sustenance for its many interpretations to feed on. Poetry is, after all, so often equal parts writer and reader.

And if there is a communal agreement, it is that "We Real Cool" is deceptively small in appearances only.

Perhaps one of the most compelling (and least cumbersome) ways of reading and exploring this poem is by digging through and past the words, beyond the typical intellectual ways of "knowing" verse. By diving in and experiencing "how" the message is being delivered rather than focusing on "what" the message might be -- by immersing into the movement of the poem -- the real beauty of Brooks' eight short lines becomes clear. What seemed to sit there on paper with the tough and tiny reticence of frozen shrubbery, lets loose in the mind's eye, dancing with all the grandeur and fluidity of the ocean.

The poem begins as the first wave comes in, with three slow, steady beats (*We real cool.*), and starts to recede with the second "We" in the first line. The first line folds back on and into the second line, continuing to recede, as it folds in on itself again and starts to advance once more with the third "We" of the second line. It continues this rhythmic undulation through the last three beats of the poem where it retreats into the final statement "We Die soon." As much as Brooks' poem appears to be harshly broken sentence fragments on a page, the natural rhythm of "We Real Cool" is ultimately smooth and flowing, an interconnected series of movements woven together to form a singular mood. By understanding that the powerful and present rhythms of Gwendolyn Brooks' "We Real Cool" greatly impacts interpretation, new possibilities for delving into the words and meaning become clear.

"We Real Cool" is not such a tough and morbid poem. Yes, the players have made decisions not embraced as model by society as a whole. But they know where they've been and what they're doing and where they're going. They have made choices and understand that those choices will have consequences. These are not students who dropped out of school yesterday, boasting in a menacing manner about how admirable it is to be a high-school drop-out engaging in crime. These are youth that have already been enlightened about the realities of their choices and the perceptions others have of them. This is clear in their choice of words like "lurk" and "sin." The players are owning and manipulating descriptors that others use to describe them. They do this, they do that, they do this, they do that. It is a rhythmic relay of how things are, like waves bringing in information and then gently sweeping it all back to where it came from.

They make no excuse for themselves and apparently invite no one else to do so. The poem is their situation as they see it. In eight (could be nonstop) lines, here is their total destiny.

What "We Real Cool" does boast about is action. Every line in the poem begins with a capitalized verb. Consciously and with feeling, but somehow simply and in a matter of fact way, the rhythm and the actions of the poem complement the perspective that this poem is about clarity rather than judgment. Even the "death" at the end seems less than final. "Die" is a verb weighted like all the other verbs in the poem, in the beginning of the line and in capital letters. And because of the strong rhythm the poem catalyzes, the poem seems to continue its

undercurrent even after the last line. It's an attitude of youth that is part of a larger collective. The continued "We" of youth doesn't die; it gets passed on.

The striking impact of "We Real Cool" reverberates by embracing a rhythm that is at once beautiful and dangerous, quiet and powerful, thought provoking and simple. This dualism of feelings provides the perfect medium for an equally dualistic message about life and death. What Gwendolyn Brooks wraps in the advancing and retreating lines of her poem is the rhythm of an ocean undulating in the consciousness of youth. Not good. Not bad. Just in flux.

Copyright (c) 2005, Pearson Education Inc., publishing as Pearson Longman. All Rights Reserved.

Work Cited

Brooks, Gwendolyn. "We Real Cool." An Introduction to Literature. Ed. Sylvan

Barnet et al. 13th ed. New York: Longman, 2004. 685-686.