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you soon!

‘Surprise in the Reader’ An English Literature Masterclass



Dr Lucy Arnold, Dr Sharon Young, Dr Whitney
Standlee



Gwendolyn Brooks
'The Children of the
Poor':
A close reading

Close reading:

Form

- Poetic form / stanza
- Rhyme and meter

Text

- Word choice
 - Ambiguity
 - Etymology
- Sound
- Imagery



What shall I give my children? who are poor,
Who are adjudged the leastwise of the land,
Who are my sweetest lepers, who demand
No velvet and no velvety velour;
But who have begged me for a brisk contour,
Crying that they are quasi, contraband
Because unfinished, graven by a hand
Less than angelic, admirable or sure.
My hand is stuffed with mode, design, device.
But I lack access to my proper stone.
And plenitude of plan shall not suffice
Nor grief nor love shall be enough alone
To ratify my little halves who bear
Across an autumn freezing everywhere.

Sonnet form:

- 14 lines
- 3 quatrains – four line stanzas and a final couplet
- Volta
- Rhyme scheme – regular (4,5 or more)
- Iambic Pentameter, i.e. 5 feet or 10 syllables per line
- Meter – Rhythm of Stressed and Unstressed Syllables

What shall | I give | my chil | dren? who | are poor



Sonnet conventions and themes

Conventions:

- 1st person, dramatically constructed confessional poem
- Figures of speech (comparison, metaphor, oxymoron, hyperbole)
- The blazon

Themes:

- Love (of an unattainable woman)
- Conflict or frustration
- The act of writing
 - The woman is his silent, abstract muse
 - The permanence of poetry

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Iambic pentameter

Rhyme scheme:

ABBA ABBA CDCD EE

3 quatrains + couplet

Volta:

After line 8

What shall I give my children? who are poor,
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Themes:

Love

Frustration / conflict

The power of literature



Gwendolyn
Brooks:

‘The Children
of the Poor’

Reading in Context

Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000)

- Born Topeka, Kansas in 1917; moved at age six months with her family to Chicago
- From a family of modest means: father was a porter for a publishing company, her mother was a maid in the households of several white families.
- Brooks' works 'frequently focus on the lives and experiences of children, adult male and female relationships, and the day-to-day struggle of everyday life in the Black community.' (Tracy 2011, p. 98)



Jim Crow Laws

- Particularly in Southeastern US: state and local laws that enforced racial segregation
- Blacks forced to use separate and inferior public facilities:
 - toilets
 - drinking fountains
 - waiting rooms at railway and bus stations
- Black children could not attend white schools
- In large cities like New York and Chicago *de facto* Jim Crow practices inhaled
- Not deemed unconstitutional by the US Supreme Court until 1964



The Great Migration (1914-1970)

- By the end of 1919, ca. 1 million blacks had left the South
- In Chicago, Black population rose by 138% between 1910 and 1920
- Move north driven by the availability of industrial jobs
- Agricultural work gradually shifted from southeast to western states, esp. California
- Approximately 60,000 Black Americans moved from the American South to Chicago during 1940-44
- During the 1940s, African Americans largely limited to Chicago's "Black Belt".



Chicago's 'Restrictive Covenants'

- “restrictive covenants” = legally binding contracts that prohibited a house’s owner from renting or selling their homes to Black citizens
- Most of the Black population forced to live in the poor and crime-ridden South Side
- Landlords divided apartments into tiny units called “kitchenettes”
- Brooks’ *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945) includes poem ‘kitchenette building’
- Black housing often unheated – portable stoves/lanterns = numerous deadly fires
- Infestations of rats and other vermin
- Tuberculosis and other diseases

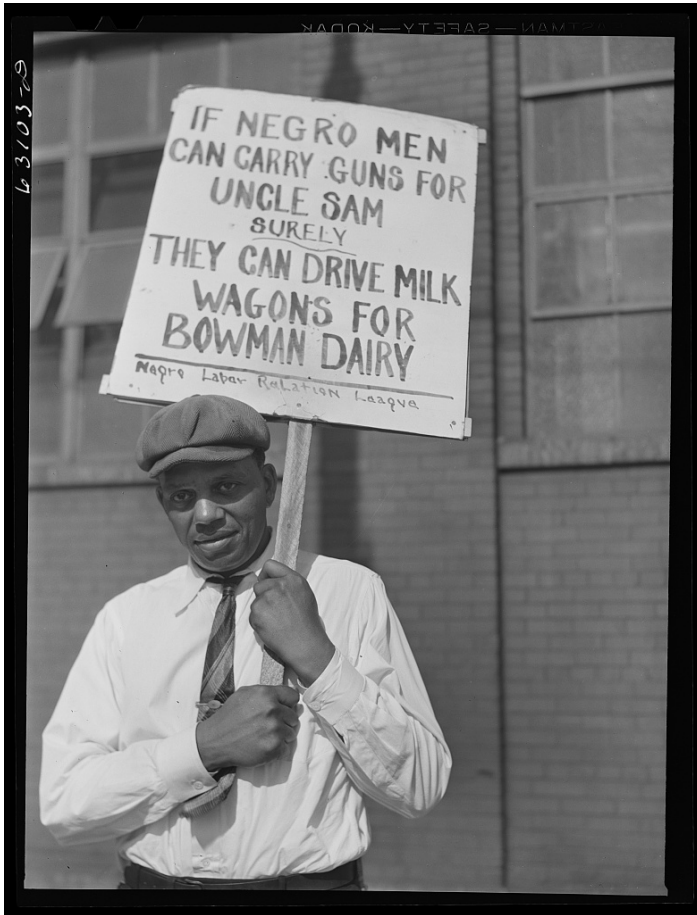


Russell Lee (1941), 'Apartment Building in a Black Section of Chicago'

US Library of Congress

available at: <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017743610/>

Chicago's South Side in the 1940s



John Vachon (1941),
'Negro carrying sign in front of milk company. Chicago, Illinois'
US Library of Congress

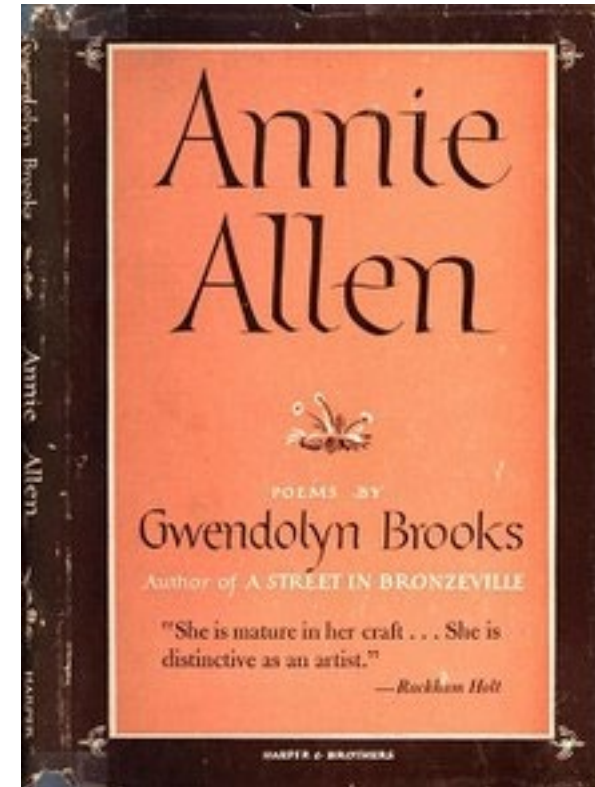
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Annie Allen (1949) & 'the children of the poor'

1950 Pulitzer Prize-winning volume
divided into three parts:

- 1) 'Notes from Childhood and Girlhood' – 11 poems concerned with birth, motherhood, racism, killing and death
- 2) 'The Anniad' – mock heroic poem telling of Annie's dreams of a lover who goes to war
- 3) 'The Womanhood' – Annie's outlook on a world she would like to change (includes 'the children of the poor')



‘the children of the poor’ (in context)

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‘The Children of the Poor’ – Sonnet 2

'A poem doesn't do everything for you.
You are supposed to go on with your thinking.
You are supposed to enrich
the other person's poem with your extensions,
your uniquely personal understandings,
thus making the poem serve you.'

- Gwendolyn Brooks

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Reading with Theory

Ecocriticism

Postcolonial Criticism

Queer Theory

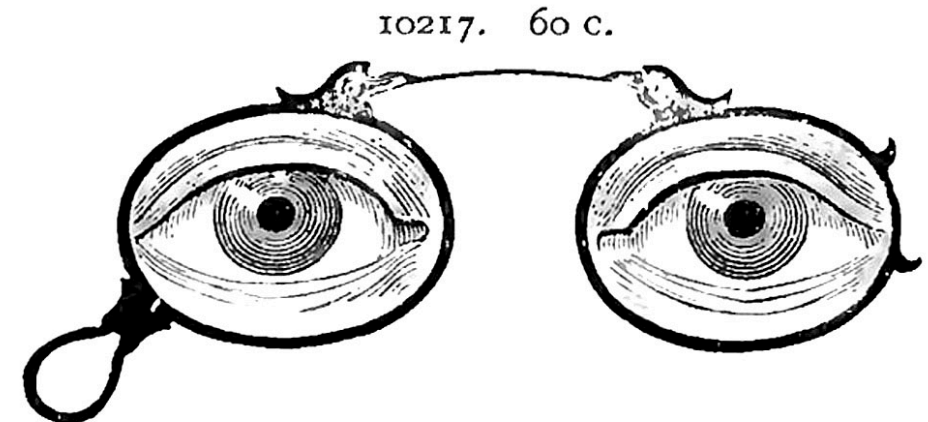
New Historicism

Gender Theory

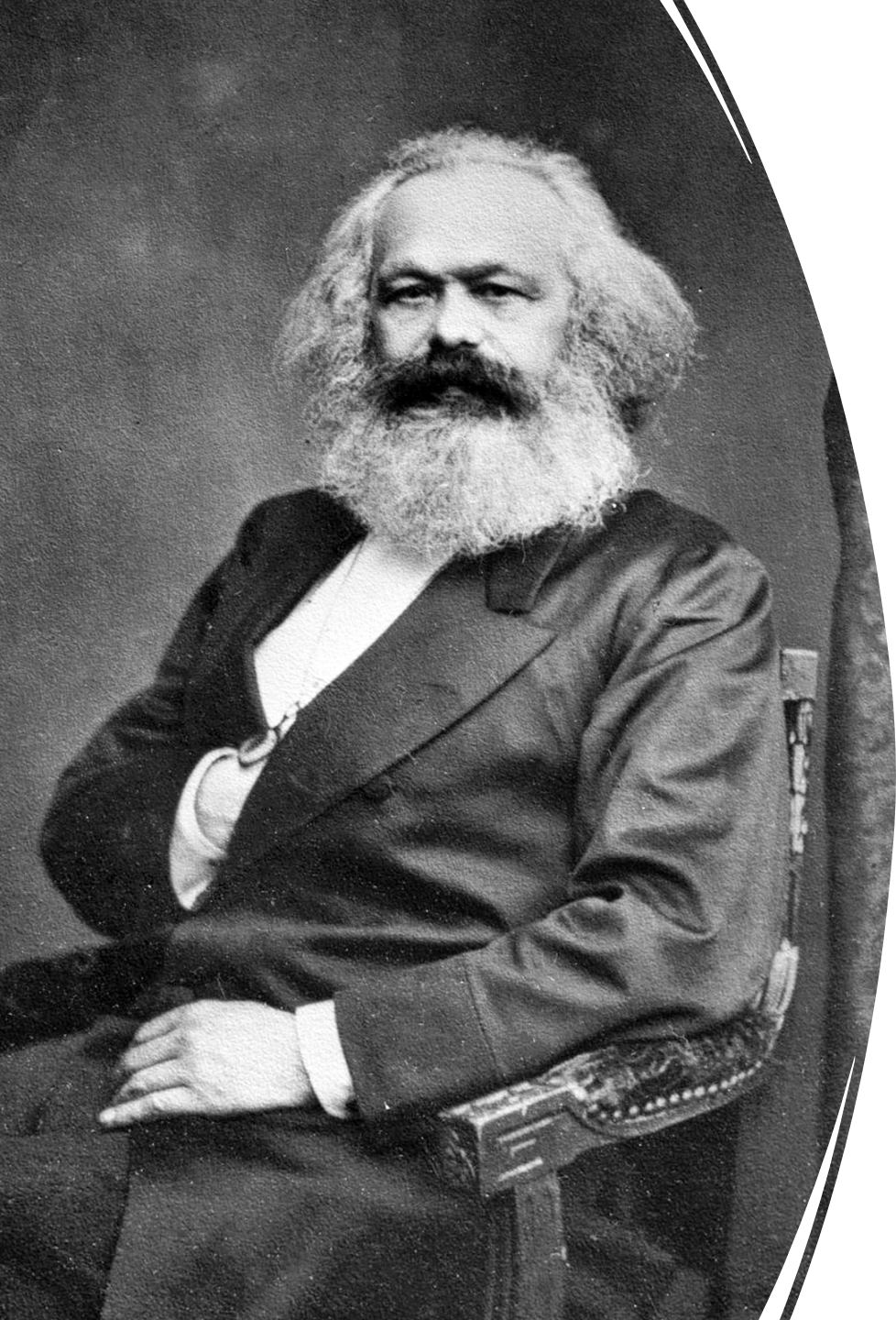
Psychoanalytic Criticism

Feminist Criticism

Critical Disability Studies



‘The ‘L’ Words: A Marxist Reading
of Lack in Gwendolyn Brooks’ ‘The
Children of the Poor’



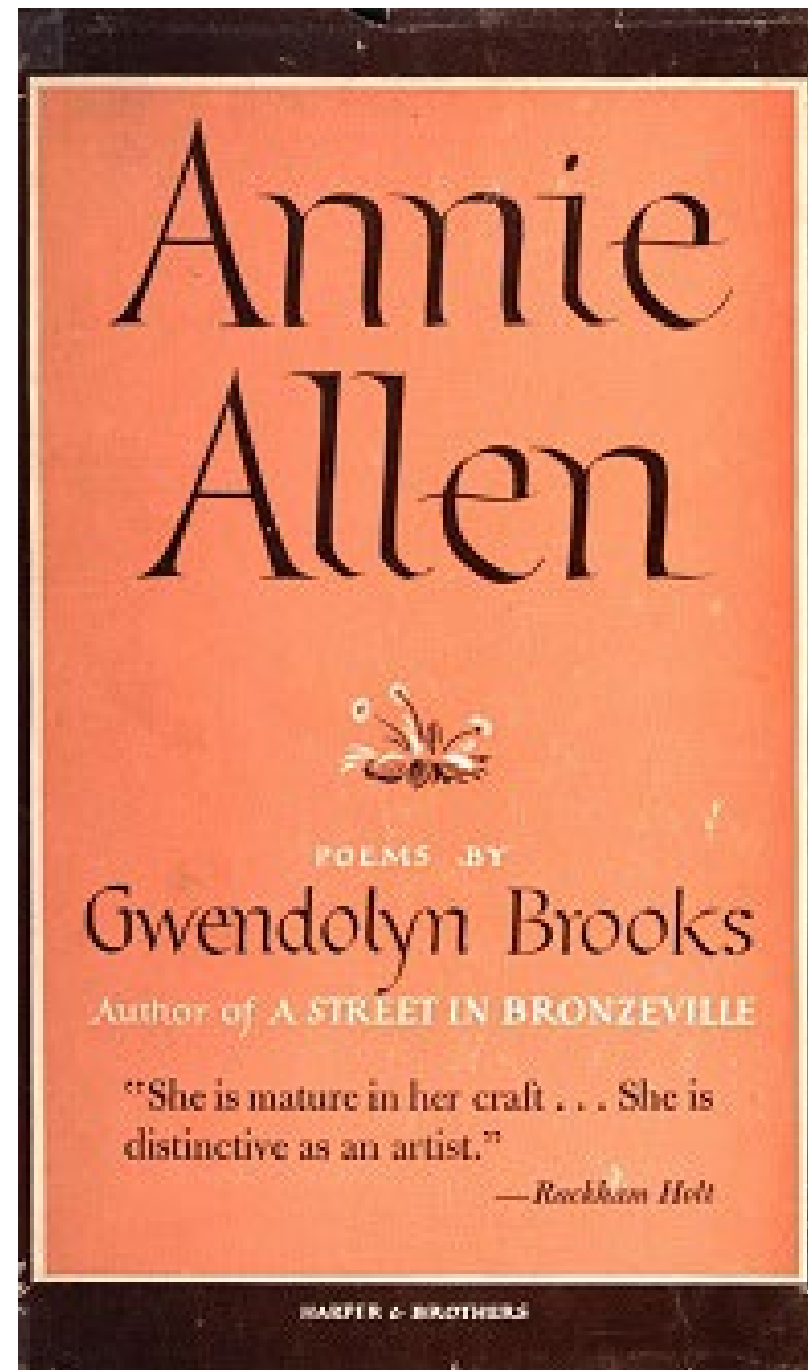
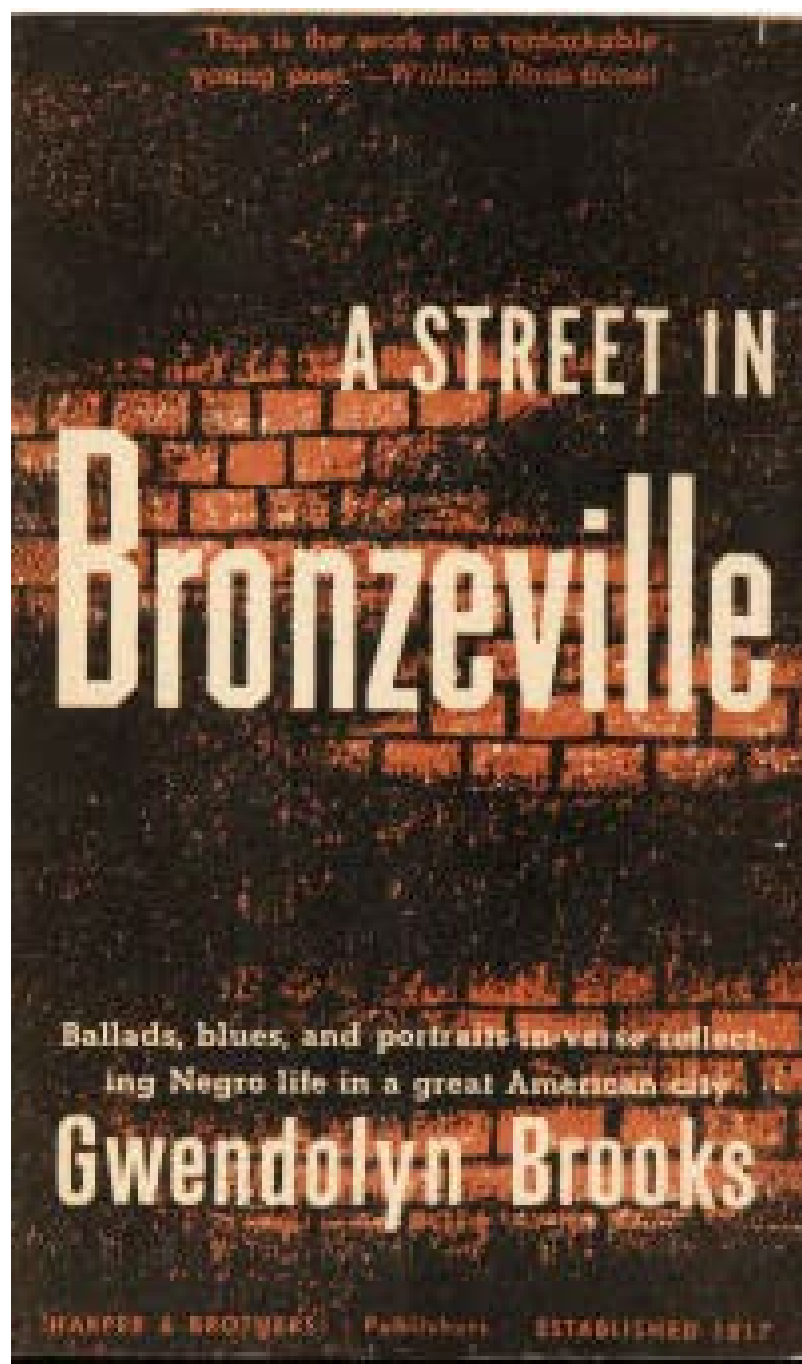
Full Marx: A Painless Introduction to Marxist Theory

- Focus on class struggle
- Marxism = a 'materialist' approach
- Reification
- Overt vs Covert material
- Literary form possesses political significance

Reading the 'L' Word(s)

'The Children of the Poor' – Sonnet 2

What shall I give my children? who are poor,
Who are adjudged the **leastwise** of the land,
Who are my sweetest **lepers**, who demand
No velvet and no velvety velour;
But who have begged me for a brisk contour,
Crying that they are quasi, contraband
Because unfinished, graven by a hand
Less than angelic, admirable or sure.
My hand is stuffed with mode, design, device.
But I **lack** access to my proper stone.
And plenitude of plan shall not suffice
Nor grief nor **love** shall be enough alone
To ratify my **little** halves who bear
Across an autumn freezing everywhere.



Brooks and Materialism

- Literal, physical materials: stone, velvet, velour
- Understanding poetic strategies ('plan', 'mode', 'form', 'device') and emotions ('love' and 'grief') as resources which might run short
- 'Sweetest *lepers*' – leprosy being an illness that is associated with an 'untouchability' of the body
- 'to *ratify* my little halves' - to ratify something is to approve it, to formally acknowledge or sanction it

Presence VS Absence

What shall I give my children? **who are** poor,
Who are adjudged the leastwise of the land,
Who are my sweetest lepers, who demand
No velvet and no velvety velour;
But who have begged me for *a brisk contour*,
Crying that they are *quasi*, *contraband*
Because unfinished, *graven by a hand*
Less than angelic, admirable or sure.
My hand is stuffed with mode, design, device.
But I lack access to my proper stone.
And plenitude of plan shall not suffice
Nor grief nor love shall be enough alone
To ratify my little *halves* who bear
Across an autumn freezing everywhere.

Politicisation of Form

- Poetic Form: The Sonnet
- Rhyme Scheme: Perfectly regular, predictable, aurally comforting – inevitable?
- Line Length: 'Who are my sweetest lepers, who demand/No velvet and no velvety velour'

Questions?