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Eleanor Hardy

*Bath Spa University*, [eleanor.hardy15@bathspa.ac.uk](mailto:eleanor.hardy15@bathspa.ac.uk)

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## **'A Girl Gets Sick of a Rose' (Gwendolyn Brooks, A Song in the Front Yard): Poetry of the Chicago Black Renaissance and the Female Experience**

Eleanor Hardy, Bath Spa University

**Abstract:** This essay explores the Chicago Black Renaissance through Gwendolyn Brooks' poetry. It considers how the movement differed from the previous Harlem Renaissance, but also focuses on the female experience. Using Brooks' poetry, the movement is split into three key spaces, the public, the domestic and the body. The public space looks at Brooks' satirical recreation of a Beauty Salon, an environment solely for African American women. The domestic space asks a reader to consider the topic of domestic abuse and the body space looks at abortion, offering an insight into its physical and mental effects.

**Key words:** Chicago Black Renaissance; African American Women; Gwendolyn Brooks; poetry; beauty salons; domestic abuse; abortion

The Chicago Black Renaissance was a movement that took place during the 1930s to 1960 following the more acclaimed Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. The Great Migration caused African Americans to move from the south to the Northern cities, creating a new environment for them to create art and literature. Yet the Chicago Black Renaissance was more than just a literary movement, which is possibly why it has not received as much critical attention as the Harlem Renaissance. As Anne Knupfer has argued: 'Scholars have not focused on the remarkable creativity of artists in so many disciplines. To illustrate... artists... dancer... Playwright... theatre director... jazz and gospel performers... composers... and journalist'.<sup>1</sup> Despite the interest from large audiences including the wealthy white Americans, African-American women artists struggled to gain the attention men did. Especially within the Chicago Black Renaissance it is incredibly difficult to find a large collection of work created solely by women. Consequently, it is necessary to look to individual creators from the movement, and in this case the focus will be upon Gwendolyn Brooks.

Gwendolyn Brooks was born on the 7th of June 1917 in Kansas, however her family moved to Chicago when she was very young. She started getting her work published in a children's magazine when she was 13 and then continued to publish in the *Chicago Defender*, an African American magazine, starting when she was 17. Her works became particularly renowned when she became the first African American to win the Pulitzer Prize for poetry on the 1st May 1950 for her book *Annie Allen*. She was also appointed the Poet Laureate for Illinois in 1968 until she died in her home on the 3rd December 2000. Further, she was the first African American woman to be inducted to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1976.

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Meis Knupfer, *The Chicago Black Renaissance and Women's Activism*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), p. 6.

As Mildred R. Mickle has show, Brooks successfully mastered the traditional European poetic forms of the ballad, the epic, and the sonnet to write about the lives of African Americans; ‘She used sonnets to express the complexity of the love she felt for black people and black culture during a time when mainstream America vilified those subjects... Her ballads sing in celebration of the ordinary lives and loves of black people. Brooks' use of European forms wedded to black subject matter provided a way for mainstream America and black Americans to view black culture and black art, thereby adding to the richness of those forms and creating a uniquely American way of viewing them.’<sup>2</sup> Mickle argues that Brooks' work did not just document, but celebrated and empowered African Americans in a 'time when mainstream America vilified those subjects'.<sup>3</sup> Through Mickle's description it is possible to understand how Brooks is a good example of a writer from the Chicago Black Renaissance whose work gives an insight to all aspects of the community being built. She experienced so much of black culture in America and Africa, that she was able to 'expose readers to different thinking'<sup>4</sup>.

Therefore, in order to understand this broad understanding and experience that Brooks had, the Chicago Black Renaissance will be divided into three spaces: the public, the domestic and the body.

### **The Public Space: Beauty Salons**

Firstly, the public space of the Chicago Black Renaissance was highly active and exciting like the Harlem Renaissance. However, despite the excitement of the nightclubs and bars, Brooks chose to focus on a different area within the public space: the beauty salons. This environment offers something that not many others can in the public space. It is an area that was solely for African American women. There is so little written about the thriving businesses across America. If African American women could afford to go to salons they would. According to Stephen Robertson, salons ‘served as centres of community life where “one may learn the latest Harlem news, listen to the choicest bits of scandal, hear the private life of one’s neighbours discussed, and collect opinions of all and sundry on the events of the day.”’<sup>5</sup>

There are no statistics for Chicago but according to *The Digital Harlem Blog* there were 103 hairdressers in comparison to 63 tailors.<sup>6</sup> Madam C.J. Walker was an African American entrepreneur who created hair products for black women to easily style their hair and fit the new popular fashions. Products would help with growth, tame dandruff and straighten hair. Her business created new work opportunities for black women that were not domestic service within a white household.

A photograph of Madam CJ Walker's beauty salon in her townhouse (fig.1) shows how salons could look.<sup>7</sup> This is a dramatically different

<sup>2</sup> *Critical Insights Gwendolyn Brooks*, ed. by Mildred R. Mickle (California: Salem Press, 2010), p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Mickle, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Mickle, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Robertson, 'Harlem's Beauty Parlours', *Digital Harlem Blog, News and Analysis of the Website 'Digital Harlem: Everyday life, 1915-1930'*, (2010)

<<https://digitalharlemblog.wordpress.com/2010/09/10/beauty-parlors/>> [20<sup>th</sup> January 2018].

<sup>6</sup> Robertson, 'Harlem's Beauty Parlours'.

<sup>7</sup> Robinson, Mrs., *Beauty Parlors (for Colored People)*, [online], <<http://collections.mcnry.org/C.aspx?VP3=SearchResult&VBID=24UAYW0DGWTD>>, [accessed 16<sup>th</sup> January 2018].

environment to the ones explored so far because there are no men and there are no whites. They became important for a woman's social life and it is possible to see in the photograph how the organisation of the room allowed for this social aspect to run freely. All chairs are facing each other, and there is a circle seat in the centre of the room. There isn't any part of the room that



**Figure 1 - The interior of Madam Walker's beauty salon in Harlem.**

dominates a person's attention, suggesting that everyone is equal.

The salons, despite their popularity, are not prominent in the literary output of black women writers. One poem that does engage with this milieu is 'At The Hairdresser's' by Gwendolyn Brooks. Brooks' poem shows the way these shops worked and also celebrates the businesses. The speaker asks Minnie, whom we assume is the hairdresser, to give her 'an upsweep' to 'show them girls'<sup>8</sup>, hinting at the presence of competitiveness among women.

Language Brooks uses in this poem demonstrates how the salons worked as a place for gossip. 'Think they so fly a-struttin', the speaker here gossips about the women she is aiming to impress and probably embarrass. Language such as 'ain't' and 'jop' em' create this conversational tone. An aggressive banter, often associated with men, takes place between the characters in this space. There is a repetition of the phrase 'I'll show them girls.' This repetition emphasises the ulterior motive for going to the salons; the chance to engage in the conversation being the real reason. The structure of the poem reflects that of the conversation. The lines of the poem mostly follow iambic tetrameter reflecting the rhythm of normal speech; however, the last line of the 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> stanzas change this. Each syllable of the line is stressed creating a more forceful tone. This reflects that previously mentioned forceful banter. It is almost aggressive and argumentative, but the piece is there not to make the environments look bad, but rather satirise the conversation and allow other women to laugh at the banter they enjoy taking part in. As previously mentioned, Brooks is aiming to celebrate these environments in her poetry.

Therefore, Brooks' poem shows the importance of these environments for women. The salons show how African American women would act within these environments. It gives an authentic depiction of the gossip that would take place. Why then was such an important environment for women absent in their literature? Similar to the performances in bars, they had to appeal to a white gaze to earn money and become popular. This is the same as the poetry, for it to become popular it needs to be something that would appeal to this audience. A space dominated by black women acting without pressure of how they are viewed by others, might not appeal to the white audience as much as a stereotypical depiction of African American heritage might.

### **The Domestic Space: 'The Battle'**

<sup>8</sup> Gwendolyn Brooks, 'At The Hairdresser's'.

In The Harlem Renaissance women tackled issues such as the trials of being a housewife and the subjugation that took place as a result of being confined to the home. For example, Alice Dunbar-Nelson's poem 'I Sit and Sew' openly discussed the anguish a woman felt whilst being stuck at home completing what must have felt like meaningless tasks compared to the work the men did out at war.<sup>9</sup> However, Gwendolyn Brooks' 'The Battle' addresses an issue for more taboo than what may have previously been approached: domestic abuse.<sup>10</sup> Brooks openly discusses the abuse a wife receives from her husband and also the fear she feels. There is no hiding the true subject of this poem behind metaphors; she openly discusses her emotions towards this attack and similar ones.

There has been a development from writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Georgia Douglas Johnson poems used what Claudia Tate referred to as 'compensatory conservatism,' which veiled her criticism of racial and gender oppressions behind the demeanor of 'the lady poet,'<sup>11</sup> allowing her to appeal to a larger audience. For example, her poem 'Heart of a Woman' on first read sounds like a poem about heartbreak but actually on closer read it is a painful poem about the entrapment of being black and a woman.

However, Brooks here does not feel the need to disguise the meaning of her poetry behind this conservatism. There has been a development in the way women are able to convey the female experience. Brooks, unlike other female writers, is not concerned about the reception of a white audience but is instead writing to make a reader think and consider what is taking place within the average home.

The second stanza is most shocking where woman is showing her anger and her wishes to murder a man if he attacked her in the same way Moe Belle is abused, going as far as calling the man 'lowly'.<sup>12</sup> As a result, Brooks is creating the opportunity that Mickle originally said she opened. She is making a reader look critically at what is taking place within the poem, presenting them with a situation clearly. Alongside this there is a recognition that what is happening is common knowledge, and is just something that people talk to each other about. 'Her landlady told my ma'. Brooks is making a comment on the way domestic abuse was received. It had become something that people just talk about and no action happens as a result. Consequently, Brooks is able to make a comment and force a reader to consider the way domestic abuse had almost become normality. The poignant final note of the poem emphasizes this. 'And this mornin' it was probably, "More grits, dear?"'<sup>13</sup> All the anger we have experienced in the previous stanza dissipates and instead the tone becomes solemn, as there is a final recognition that despite people knowing what is going on and the anger the speaker has regarding it, nothing will change.

### **The Body: 'The Mother'**

<sup>9</sup>Alice Dunbar-Nelson, 'I Sit and Sew', in *Shadowed Dreams: Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance*, 2nd edn, ed. by Maureen Honey (New Brunswick, N.J. ; London: Rutgers University Press, 2006) p. 89

<sup>10</sup> Gwendolyn Brooks, 'The Battle'.

<sup>11</sup> Georgia Douglas Johnson, *The Selected Works of Georgia Douglas Johnson*, (New York: Simon & Schuster Co., 1997), pp. xvii.

<sup>12</sup> 'The Battle'.

<sup>13</sup> 'The Battle'.

Finally, Brooks frequently addresses the female body, which I will be looking at through her poem 'The Mother'. When writing about the body, women of the Harlem Renaissance look at the body and motherhood as a way of empowering the role of women. For example, Anita Scott Coleman looked at the complexity of raising a child in an often violently anti-black world. Brooks took this a step further and instead created conversation about the less spoken, much like she had done with 'The Battle'. Before she looked at domestic abuse, now we are faced with the issue of abortion. Instead of the difficulty of raising a child, we hear the turmoil a woman goes through having experienced an abortion.

The poem opens by telling the reader 'Abortions will not let you forget'.<sup>14</sup> Straight away the reader is told the difficulty the mother is facing. The act of an abortion stays with you and as the opening line of the poem it hangs over the poem physically and stays with the reader as they continue to read the piece. This first stanza is filled with emotive images as the mother considers what the unborn children could have been, 'singers and workers'.

The free verse form of the poem further emphasizes the tone and the quick changing emotions the speaker goes through when having an abortion and the after affects of it. This is incredibly important for the poem as well; the effect an abortion has is not just physical but demands a continued mental recovery as well, as demonstrated by the past tense when discussing the abortion. In this first stanza the poem follows rhyming couplets at the end of each line but in the following stanzas this deteriorates.

Moving on, the poem completely loses this structure. The second stanza seems to pick up strands of a rhyme scheme for example it opens with an ABAB rhyme scheme but then the jarring unrhymed phrases break this. The poem then reflects the speaker's own ongoing turmoil. It seems to change between the speaker having her thoughts together and then breaking down. The poem quickly changes tone and thus reflects the quick changing emotions the reader experiences, as the speaker changes between anger, guilt and ease.

In particular the couplet 'Though why should I whine, Whine that the crime was none other than mine?' is powerful. The clean rhyming couplet after the disjointed line creates emphasis. Along with this Brooks makes a statement for women going through abortion. She refers to the act as a 'crime' bringing to light the way many women were made to feel when going through the process. Since abortion was still taboo and continues to be looked down on by people today, Brooks captures how a woman feels immoral and criminal for her choice.

Finally, in stanza three we see a complete breakdown in form. Brooks is therefore able to make a bold statement for women. Any pace or speed the poem previously had is completely slowed down through the punctuation. At the end of the first line of the stanza there is a full stop emphasizing the line by creating a pause. Much like the opening line of the whole poem, the full stop creates a statement and a reader is forced to take in the emotion of this statement. Despite going through the act of an abortion, she still has love for the children she has lost, thus here are two contrasting emotions taking place simultaneously and it is complicated for the reader to comprehend. Yet, the

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<sup>14</sup> Gwendolyn Brooks, 'The Mother'.

reader is still able to understand the emotions of the speaker. They too feel the difficulty and complexity of the situation.

In conclusion, Brooks became a voice for many people of the Chicago Black Renaissance and black people in general living in America. However, specifically here she also becomes a voice for African American women experiencing the situations and places she describes. She shows the struggles and difficulties women experience, for example abortions and also offers a social commentary with her comments on the way domestic abuse is perceived. Yet, she does not allow the community to be merely shrouded by negativity and struggles, and she presents an enjoyable environment for women, through capturing the dynamic of the beauty salons. As a result, it is possible to see a progression from the Harlem Renaissance to new examinations of the joys and struggles of African American women.

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- ELEANOR HARDY graduated from Bath Spa University in 2018 with a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature. She found a passion for researching American literature after writing her dissertation on the Harlem and Chicago Black Renaissance focusing, specifically on African American Women. She is now taking time to travel before beginning a masters degree in American studies.