GIRL (IM)POSSIBLE: GWENDOLYN BROOKS, POETIC STYLE, AND POLITICAL POSSIBILITY

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BY

Khira Hickbottom

APPROVED:

Erin Kappeler
Co-Director of Thesis

Elisabeth McMahon
Co-Director Reader

Ebony Perro
Third Reader
Khira Hickbottom. Girl (Im)Possible: Gwendolyn Brooks, Poetic Style, and Political Possibility.

( Erin Kappeler, English. Elisabeth McMahon, Africana Studies.)

This project seeks to exam the shift in Gwendolyn Brooks’ theorization of black girlhood across the 20th century. Via the tenacious and ever awe-stricken Annie in “Annie Allen” Brooks explores the liminality of the transition from girl to woman as a temporal and spatial realm tied fundamentally to images of possibility. Across the collection, she demonstrates an unwavering dedication to tradition, specifically in emulating ballad, sonnet, and epic forms. However, less than 20 years later, Brooks publishes In the Mecca, which meditates on the same thematic evolution, but frames the process as rooted in limitation. Additionally, she abandons formulaic restriction and toys with convention, writing almost entirely in freeform. This stark contrast comes at the hands of a personal political epiphany at the Second Black Writers Conference at Fisk University in 1967. Though Brooks once envisioned the innocence of girlhood as conceivable, she later positions it as unachievable, alluding to the oppressive impediment of hegemonic factors such as white supremacy and patriarchy. Brook’s rejection of orthodox modes of writing—established and proliferated by a predominantly white base of writers and literary scholars—acts in tandem with her developing revolutionary politic. Via comparative analysis and poetic structural evaluation using primary sourcing from Brooks’ work and secondary sourcing from literary critics, this paper will examine how sentiments and aesthetics of Brooks’ writing relate to notions of black liberation and radical through the destabilization of black girlhood.
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“Godhood is just like girlhood: a begging to be believed.”

-Kristin Chang
INTRODUCTION

Gwendolyn Brooks was one of the most prolific writers of the 20th century, exhibiting a fierce dedication to uplifting the most average of black voices and experiences across her career. This paper examines her work in tandem with the sociopolitical thought and progression circulating across the 20th century. More specifically, it will place Annie Allen and In the Mecca in conversation with one another to detail Brooks’ fluctuating understanding of black girlhood as a temporal, spatial, and political possibility. For the purposes of this project temporal possibility will refer to girlhood’s ability to be achieved within a certain time frame, spatial possibility will refer to black person’s ability to perform girlhood within a certain geographical area, and political and/or sociopolitical possibility will refer to black individual’s ability to be perceived as a girl by their communities and the state at large. Via comparative structural and thematic analysis, this thesis seeks to understand how Brooks’s personal political progression is transformed and refracted across her writing.

The existing literature supports the notion that there is a distinct relationship between the sociopolitical backdrop of the 20th century and Gwendolyn Brooks’ poetry. Over the course of her lifetime, her politics, much like the landscape of the nation, continue to change and unfold, reflected in her ever-shifting writing style. Furthermore, critical analysis of Brooks aligns her development of revolutionary politics with her attendance of Second Black Writer’s Conference at Fisk University in 1967. While it is clear that the broader message of her writing shifts as she develops a deep theoretical connection between art and power, scholars have not yet noted how the intricacies of her form and the aesthetic of the written word change to reflect these sentiments in relation to her ongoing thematic incorporation of girlhood as a sight of political possibility. This study seeks to examine how the micro-level aesthetics of Brooks’ poetry influence the
macro political implications, drawing connections between political environments, art, structure, and revolution.

The first chapter of this thesis, Becoming Annie Allen, focuses on establishing Brooks as a person, writer, and political thinker through the lens of “Annie Allen.” It lays out Brooks’ personal history, placing her poor urban lifestyle in the larger context of American movements for financial, racial, and gender liberation at a time of increased productivity and violent state threat. In addition, there is a discussion of the state of genre and convention at the time Brooks enters the writing world, tying the condition of literature to American politics and citing her self-proclaimed connection to modernism. This contextualization aids in correlating Brooks’ work to larger circumstantial forces. This paper primarily makes these connections using the first section of “Annie Allen,” entitled “Notes from The Childhood and The Girlhood.” It particularly explores Brooks’ use of fairytale motifs, rhyme, and domestic imagery.

Moving further into the collection, the project addresses “The Anniad,” an extended epic style poem which charts Annie’s disillusionment via her lover’s infidelity after his return from active combat. M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham’s A Glossary of Literary Terms aids in evaluating the epic or mock epic status of the poem. After this, selections from “Appendix to the Anniad” and “The Womanhood” illustrate Brooks’ appropriation of sonnet and ballad forms to showcase heartbreak, grief, and parenting in the postwar age. The chapter ends with a discussion of how Brooks subverts European modalities of writing to portray the increased intensity of the transition from girl to woman for impoverished black folks as a result of Western hegemony.

The second chapter, An Epiphany, discusses the connection between Brook’s thematic inclusion of girlhood in her writing and black girlhood scholarship. It uses the work of various black academic scholars such as Sarah Haley and Marcia Chatelain to underscore this
The aper then transitions to a conversation concerning how Brooks’ attendance at the Second Black Writer’s Conference at Fisk University in 1967 was pivotal to the direction to her career. Motivated by a newfound commitment to the Black Arts and Black Power Movements and the cause for self-determination, Brooks abandoned European writing forms for free verse to create poetry that encouraged collective identity and pride.

The third chapter, Poor Pepita: The Lost Promise of Life in the Mecca uses “In the Mecca” to discuss Brooks’ transition into more radical and militant modes of political thought. It begins with a discussion of the Mecca apartment complex in the Bronzeville neighborhood of Chicago and the broader circumstances of the Great Migration happening across the United States. It then transitions into analysis, first of the extended titular poem, discussing the ongoing religious imagery and emphasis on succinct tableaus to underscore the Mecca’s crowded misfortune and lack of state protection. Ultimately, this chapter argues that Brooks’ departure from form represents her changing theorization of girlhood.

The conclusion ties “Annie Allen” to “In the Mecca” to evaluate Brooks’ career and political transformation longitudinally.
CHAPTER ONE

Becoming Annie Allen

Gwendolyn Elizabeth Brooks was born June 7, 1917, to parents Keziah Corine Wims and David Anderson in Topeka, Kansas (Hager 3). Shortly after her birth, the Brooks family moved to the South Side of Chicago, where their shy little girl would grow up against the backdrop of loud, loving urban community.

Wims and Anderson had modest professions and means (the former was a schoolteacher and the latter a janitor), but they maintained that education, specifically reading and writing, was a primary priority. Consequently, Brooks found herself in local publications as early as eleven years old (Hager 3). Her commitment to writing was less of a hobby, and more of a steadfast compulsion, a mainstay in a rapidly changing world.

Brooks graduated from Wilson Junior College in 1936 (Hagar 4). The ravages of the Great Depression left her with meager job prospects, but she continued to write while developing a relationship with local and national black rights movements. At just twenty, Brooks was the publicity director of the Youth Council of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples, or the NAACP (Hager 4).

Twentieth century America was progressive, tumultuous, war stricken, and ridden with tension along lines of social categorization, and a childhood spent at the heart of urban Chicago’s black community left Brooks no stranger to this. As posited by Frank Levy and Peter Temin in their paper, *Inequality and Institutions in 20th Century America*, the time is undeniably defined by the people’s demand for economic mobility. At the turn of the century, increased labor led to increased productivity and therefore broader economic access (Levy). From the fight for (white) women’s suffrage to the Civil Rights and anti-war movements, sociopolitical issues were
encompassed by the looming threat of state violence and propaganda, whether it be internal or external. Levy and Temin make clear these issues find their roots in capitalism, which extracts the value of a man and his community from their ability to accumulate.

While still early on in her radical progression, Brooks’ writing always contained an innate rejection of such evaluations. In her own words, her parents “subscribed to duty, decency, dignity, industry—kindness” (Hagar 3). These pursuits translated to a distinct sense of community connectivity, one which defined not only Brooks’ writing, but her person. For Brooks, place and poem are intrinsically intertwined, creating a body of work that, even in its earliest productions, centers life on the periphery and validates the most average experiences of marginalized persons. For instance, the third poem in the principal section of “Annie Allen” reads:

**the parents: people like our marriage**  
**Maxie and Andrew**

Clogged and soft and sloppy eyes  
Have lost the light that bites or terrifies.

There are no swans and swallows any more.  
The people settled for chicken and shut the door.

But one by one  
They got things done:  
Watch for porches as you pass  
And prim low fencing pinching in the grass.

Pleasant custards sit behind  
The white Venetian blind.

The AABB rhyme scheme creates a feeling of simplicity and sincerity, almost like a nursery rhyme. In the first line, the repetition of the word “and,” as opposed to the use of commas to string the listed items together, establishes an excess of emotion and life which contrasts the candor of the couplet form. In this way, Brooks seems to be coping with complexity by boiling down her subject matter to limited, almost elementary language. These small bites and
baby steps allow her depictions of blackness to vacillate between profundity and plainness fluidly.

The second stanza uses differential bird imagery to describe, in visual terms, a relationship that is no longer miraculous, but maintains its comfort. The last two stanzas take up the language of nuclearity, crafting pictures of traditional domesticity: a porch, a fenced in yard. There is no obvious presence of disappointment, but instead a softer disillusionment based on love’s warm realities. When the fireworks fall to the ground and the stomach butterflies fly off to elsewhere, there is still loyalty, a pie left waiting behind the curtain.

Brooks’ picture of family life is not without capitalist intervention, notably at the onset third stanza. Brooks writes, “But one by one / They got things done,” alluding to an overarching yoke of productivity, a kind of dedication to “making” that unequally imposes on the business of living. Twentieth century America was defined by socioeconomic stratification. Most of the economic growth that occurs throughout the century is concentrated at the top of the economic hierarchy (Levy). In her book, In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th Century America, scholar Alice Kessler-Harris establishes that “no sphere of life was more jealously guarded by the late nineteenth century working man that his relationship to wage work” (Kessler-Harris). At the onset of the 1900s, white men banded together to advocate for wages to deliver them from the confines of blue-collar life and distinguish them from their black male peers in the same line of work (Kessler-Harris). This was accomplished via aligning these goals with patriarchal ideals of manliness, messaging meant to keep women in the domestic sphere (Kessler-Harris). In this way, the worker’s rights movement founded itself based on racial and gendered subjugation in the name of empowered the working white man. Throughout the 20th century, the American people continue to question whom has the “right” to
work, as well as advocate for and receive appropriate treatment and compensation. These ideas are reflected in the sixth poem in the first section of collection:

**downtown vaudeville**

What was not pleasant was the hush that coughed
When the Negro clown came on the stage and doffed
His broken hat. The hush, first. Then the soft

Concatenation of delight and lift,
And loud. The decked dismissal of his gift,
The sugared hoot and hauteur. Then the rift

Where is magnificent, heirloom, and deft
Leer at a Negro to the right, or left—
So joined to personal bleach, and so bereft:

Finding if that is locked, is bowed, or proud.
And what that is at all, spotting the crowd.

Brooks continues to write in a short form stanzas across the eleven poems contained in “Notes from the Childhood and The Girlhood,” underscoring her inhabitance of a perspective which is all seeing, but limited in its understanding by age. This poem briefly takes the reader beyond the day to day lives of the family unit (composed of Maxie, Andrew, and Annie Allen) to offer broader context of the landscape in which Annie is coming of age.

Here, Brooks meditates on the dynamic relationship between a black performer and their white audience. The choice to incorporate clowns is intentional, as it alludes to an extensive racialized history the performance of an exaggerated caricature of blackness by and for white individuals. The audience quickly moves from a shocked stillness to a rumbling mockery. Even in a line of work invented to ridicule and parody blackness, on the terms of white evaluation, a black man falls short. The clown is not in the costume or decoration, but in himself. In this way, Brooks comments not only on race relations in the mid 20th century, but the validity of labor.
During this time, the growing global emphasis on industrialization led to a transition from an emphasis on brute strength to the encouragement of the acquisition of technical skills and education (Levy). This transition comes in part from the world wars, which necessitated international technological development. These concurrent events lead to a stronger presence of women in the labor force, as well as the rise of feminism as an enterprise for white women (Kessler-Harris). This is not to say that women of color are not also advocating for themselves, but that the American people had not yet internalized how systems overlap and intersect, creating separate spaces for gender and race to be examined. As women across the nation took up a feminist rhetoric, they fought for access to labor and government (Kessler-Harris). Many critics of their methods, notably women of color, argue that the fight for access was not liberatory, but a trading in or one type of confinement for another (Kessler-Harris).

As the job market expands in tandem with women’s rights to financial independence, black women such as Brooks were left to reckon with a nation that did not yet see race and gender as byproducts of one another, but as singular factors. Worker’s rights and unionization efforts isolated black men and white women to low paying jobs and the domestic sphere respectively (Levy). These phenomena created a space which black women were “forced into a highly circumscribed market because their male kin often suffered from racist exclusionary practices, [and] they themselves experienced both gender and racial discrimination” (Kessler-Harris 27). She continues, “proportionally twice as many married black women earned wages in the early twentieth century as their white counterparts” (Kessler-Harris 28). In essence, black women shouldered the weight of race and gender simultaneous across the 20th century, resulting in the creation of a duplicitous and conventionally contradictory pressure to mother and care in private while still laboring in the public sector.
“Notes from the Childhood and the Girlhood” places a distinct emphasis on the relationship between mother and child, leaving Andrew Allen almost entirely absent. It can be argued that his labor is almost entirely confined to the financial sector, leaving Maxie to juggle both public life and domesticity. The second poem of the section reads:

Maxie Allen

Maxie Allen always taught her Stipendiary little daughter To thank her Lord and lucky star For eye that let her see so far, For throat enabling her to eat Her Quaker Oats and Cream-of-Wheat, For tongue to tantrum for the penny, For ear to hear the haven’t-any, For arm to toss, for leg to chance, For heart to hanker for romance.

Sweet Annie tried to teach her mother There was somewhat of something other. And whether it was veils and God And whistling ghosts to go unshod Across the broad and bitter sod, Or fleet love stopping at her foot And giving her its never-root To put her pocket-book, Or just a deep and human look, She did not know; but tried to tell.

Her mother thought at her full well, In inner voice not like a bell (Which though not social has a ring Akin to wrought bedeviling) But like an oceanic thing: What do you guess I am? You’ve lots of jacks and strawberry jam. And you don’t have to go to bed, I remark, With two dill pickles in the dark, Nor prop what hardly calls you honey And gives you only a little money.

Throughout the poetry collection there is an ongoing struggle between Annie and her mother to understand one another. Maxie is shrouded not by stalwart pessimism, but a
commitment to raising her daughter within the reality of her social standing and the limited options it provides her. Maxie’s inhabitation of this role is a symptom of the yoke of social expectations, the sacrifice of her person for the burden of motherhood. Alternatively, Annie’s youth allows her to imagine a life beyond social limitation.

Brooks became further incorporated in the Chicagoan poetry scene after her marriage to Henry L. Blakely II in 1938 (Hager). The two attended workshops at the Community Art Center on the South Side of Chicago centered around modernist poetry, leading Brooks to self-identify with modernity.

While the socioeconomic backdrop of the 20th century has been established earlier on in the paper, it is important to accompany those understandings with the state of literary genre and convention in the 20th century. The literature makes clear that the dominant genres of the century (Confessionalism and Modernism) are a direct response to the political environment.

In his paper, With Your Own Face On: The Origins and Consequences of Confessional Poetry, Charles Molesworth argues that 20th century literature is marked by the conception of Confessional writing, which is defined by the rise of capitalism and industrialism, as well as the proliferation of a sense of societal dysconnectivity (Molesworth). It has been called a “degraded” romanticism, which attempts to assuage global feelings of apathy with a newfound emphasis on interiority and introspection (Molesworth). As the lines between the public and private sector are blurred, Confessional writing demands that emotion be reinstated in every arena.

The growth of political discourse and rhetoric on the lines of social categorization, economic inequity, and labor rights, fueled by tumultuous global politics, led to the oversaturation of both public and private spaces, and the individual became larger than life, and in this way, less human (Molesworth). Confessional poetry interrupts this order and repositions the poet at the center of
society, sentiment, and feeling (Molesworth). This results in a recommitment to the ideal of grasping at intangible purpose that cannot be conceived via capital (Molesworth). In an era of unprecedented financial mobility, the American people remain dissatisfied. Confessionalism answers this call, arguing that purpose is not tied to financial gain, but to the realization of self, a process which has the power to both save and destroy (Molesworth).

Modernism rests on similar rejection of capital, but goes about this not via the future, but through the past. Mark Antliff explores this oppositional phenomenon in his paper Fascism, Modernism, and Modernity, positioning modernism as a cultural reaction to industrialism. The writing hinges on a nostalgia for a time in which capitalism was non-existent, or at least less developed (Antliff). A modernist lens views capitalism as a reduction of humanness, and therefore feeling.

Because of this rejection, modernism is associated with Marxist and socialist frameworks, which attempt to de-center capital and reinstate the collective (Antliff). Via writing, modernist authors expand the purpose of person to harden sentiment and deconstruct capitalist ideals that human value is tied to production (Antliff).

Brooks makes practice of using fairy tale imagery and motifs across “Annie Allen.” This is reflected in the modernist notion of turning away from aestheticism and sentiment and towards strong images to elucidate one’s ideas. The first poem in “Notes from the Childhood and the Girlhood” deliberately lays this foundation:

the birth in a narrow room

Weeps out of western country something new.
Blurred and stupendous. Wanted and unplanned.
   Winks, Twines, and weekly winks
Upon the milk-glass fruit bowl, iron pot,
The bashful china child tipping forever
Yellow apron and spilling cherries.
Now, weeks and years will go before she thinks
“How pinchy is my room! how can I breathe!
I am not anything and I have got
Not anything, or anything to do!”—
But prances nevertheless with gods and fairies
Blithely about the pump and then beneath
The elms and grapevines, then in darling endeavor
By privy foyer, where the screenings stand
And where the bugs buzz by in private cars
Across old peach cans and old jelly jars.

Brooks writes with playfulness and youth so akin to girlhood. From birth Annie is shrouded in wide-eyed innocence and scrappy curiosity. This sentiment is compounded with Brooks’ reliance on fairy tale imagery, such as the gods and fairs mentioned above.

While Annie’s sensitivity is positioned as a strength rather than a weakness, there are undertones of consequence in her naivety, notably Brook’s reference to her as a “china child tipping forever” (Brooks 5). China is beautiful, but easily breakable. In this way, Brooks situates girlhood on the precipice of possibility, a time in which Annie could fall just as feasibly as she could fly. This notion continues throughout the collection’s principle section, notably in “old relative,” “the ballad of late Annie,” and “pygmies and pygmies, though percht on Alps.”

Annie’s childlike way of thinking is not without complex contrast. Brooks uses Annie as an observer, one who sees but does not necessarily understand. From this vantage point, she entrusts her audience with the responsibility to enact comparison between Annie’s own jovial thoughts and the context in which they are produced. For instance, the name of the poem itself, “the birth in a narrow room,” uses spatial indicators to allude towards external scarcity. The largeness of Annie’s wonder directly opposes the size of the space she is born into. In other words, her girlhood allows her to dream larger than the life prescribed to someone of her peripheral identity.
These subliminal signals continue throughout the poem. In the second line Brooks declares that Annie is both “wanted and unplanned” (Brooks 2). With just one sentence, she is able to underscore the inadequacy of reproductive education and resources amongst underprivileged populations. The vastness of Annie’s youth is, again, highlighted in the dialogue in the second stanza. By emphasizing the smallness of the Allen home, Brooks is, in turn, able to play up the magnitude of Annie’s astonishment at the mere fact of living.

The secondary section of “Annie Allen” is a long form epic poem called “The Anniad” written in rime royal, an ABABBCC rhyme scheme popularized by Geoffrey Chaucer. Poets use this style to infuse their work, particularly stories detailing some sort of adventure or pivotal journey, with brilliance and passion (Rime Royal). The poem spans 43 stanzas and follows the introduction and disappearance of a lover, the tan man, from Annie’s life. Heartbreak and grief usher in reality and signal the end of her girlhood.

The poem takes inspiration for its name from Virgil’s The Aeneid, a Latin epic poem which follows Aeneas, a Trojan soldier who must overcome trials and establish the foundation for the Roman empire in Italy. Epic stories have a variety of stipulations, and the genre largely centers male heroes, leading to a large debate amongst literary scholars and Brooks’ readers concerning whether or not “The Anniad” is a true or mock epic.

According to M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham’s 11th edition of A Glossary of Literary Terms, an epic has five primary requirements founded on the bases of examples set by Milton, Virgil, and Homer:

1. The hero is a figure of great national or even cosmic importance. In the Iliad, he is the Greek warrior Achilles, who is the son of the sea nymph Thetis; Virgil’s Aeneas is the son of the goddess Aphrodite. In Paradise Lost, Adam and Eve are the progenitors of the entire human race, or if we regard Christ as the protagonist, He is both God and man. Blake’s primal figure is “the Universal Man” Albion, who incorporates, before his fall, humanity and God and the cosmos as well.
2. The setting of the poem is ample in scale and may be worldwide or even larger. Odysseus wanders over the Mediterranean basin (the whole of the world known at the time), and in Book XI he descends into the underworld (as does Virgil’s Aeneas). The scope of Paradise Lost is the entire universe, for it takes place in heaven, on earth, in hell, and in the cosmic space between. (See Ptolemaic universe.)

3. The action involves extraordinary deeds in battle, such as Achilles’ feats in the Trojan War, or a long, arduous, and dangerous journey intrepidly accomplished, such as the wanderings of Odysseus on his way back to his homeland in the face of opposition by some of the gods. Paradise Lost includes the revolt in heaven by the rebel angels against God, the journey of Satan through chaos to discover the newly created world, and his desperately audacious attempt to outwit God by corrupting mankind, in which his success is ultimately frustrated by the sacrificial action of Christ.

4. In these great actions the gods and other supernatural beings take an interest or an active part—the Olympian gods in Homer, and Jehovah, Christ, and the angels in Paradise Lost. These supernatural agents were in the Neoclassic Age called the machinery, in the sense that they were part of the literary contrivances of the epic.

5. An epic poem is a ceremonial performance and is narrated in a ceremonial style, which is deliberately distanced from ordinary speech and proportioned to the grandeur and formality of the heroic subject and architecture. Hence Milton’s grand style—his formal diction and elaborate, stylized syntax, which are in large part modeled on Latin poetry, his sonorous lists of names and wide-ranging allusions, and his imitation of Homer’s epic similes and epithets.

Brooks undeniably attempts to position Annie as a larger-than-life heroic figure. Though she has neither a powerful lineage nor widespread significance, she is one “whom the higher gods forgot, / whom the lower gods berate” (Brooks 3-4). In other words, she is caught amongst social forces which exploit her identity. Brooks uses heavenly metaphor to refer to the systems which entrench impoverished black girls and rule their lives. The immense battle prescribed in Abrams’ and Harpham’s second and third points respectively is not externally combative but internalized in Annie’s quest for love (from another and from herself) as it weighs against her childlike delusions of a grand and fairytale like happy ending:

What is ever and is not,
Pretty tatters blue and red,
Buxom berries beyond rot,
Western clouds and quarter-stars,
Fairy-sweet of old guitars
Littering the little head
Light upon the featherbed. (Brooks 7-14)
The tan man and Annie fall in love quickly and intensely in within the first seven stanzas of the poem, but he is soon stolen away from Annie by erupting transnational conflict. The larger backdrop of World War II augments the stakes of Annie’s search though she herself does not engage in any wartime action:

Throws to columns row on row.
Where he makes the rifles cough,
Stutter. Where the reveille
Is staccato majesty.
Then to marches.
Then to know
The hunched hells across the sea. (Brooks 95-101)

It is arguable that Brooks achieves the glossary’s five demands, but certainly not in any traditional sense. The circumstances of Annie’s life are admittedly average but effectively hyperbolized to emulate an epic journey.

In addition to these rules, the Abrams and Harpham lay out three “conventions” or “formulas” modeled from *Paradise Lost*:

1. The narrator begins by stating that his argument, or epic theme, invokes a muse or guiding spirit to inspire him in his great undertaking, then addresses to the muse the epic question, the answer to which inaugurates the narrative proper (*Paradise Lost*, I. 1–49).
2. The narrative starts in medias res (“in the middle of things”), at a critical point in the action. *Paradise Lost* opens with the fallen angels in hell, gathering their scattered forces and determining on revenge. Not until Books V–VII does the angel Raphael narrate to Adam the events in heaven which led to this situation; while in Books XI–XII, after the fall, Michael foretells to Adam future events up to Christ’s second coming. Thus Milton’s epic, although its action focuses on the temptation and fall of man, encompasses all time from the creation to the end of the world.
3. There are catalogues of some of the principal characters, introduced in formal detail, as in Milton’s description of the procession of fallen angels in Book I of *Paradise Lost*. These characters are often given set speeches that reveal their diverse temperaments and moral attitudes; an example is the debate in Pandemonium, Book II.

These notions complicate *The Anniad*’s achievement of epic status. Annie’s journey is not led by any sort of “guiding spirit” or premonition. She acts entirely independently and as
prescribed by her unsophisticated and idyllic principles. If anything, forces beyond Annie’s control complicate her journey:

Doomer, though, crescendo-comes
Prophesying hecatombs.
Surrealist and cynical.
Garrulous and guttural.
Spits upon the silver leaves.
Denigrates the dainty eves
Dear dexterity achieves. (Brooks 87-94)

Furthermore, the beginning of the poem does not place the reader in the midst of any high intensity action, but rather greets its audience with flowery depictions of “sweet and chocolate” and “folly and fate” (Brooks 1-2). While this contrasts epic convention, it underscores Annie’s inability to internalize the seriousness of her romantic endeavor and the magnitude of the tragedies of war. Finally, though Brooks incorporates extensive details of Annie’s lover, the tan man, there are no other “principal characters,” and the poem largely focuses on Annie’s own interiority. In this way, “The Anniad’s” qualification as an epic poem is feeble and predominantly based in loose technicality.

In their description of varieties of high burlesque, Abrams and Harpham include a definition of mock epics:

A mock epic or mock-heroic poem is that type of parody which imitates, in a sustained way, both the elaborate form and the ceremonious style of the epic genre but applies it to narrate a commonplace or trivial subject matter. In a masterpiece of this type, The Rape of the Lock (1714), Alexander Pope views through the grandiose epic perspective a quarrel between the belles and elegants of his day over the theft of a lady’s curl. The story includes such elements of traditional epic protocol as supernatural machinery, a voyage on board ship, a visit to the underworld, and a heroically scaled battle between the sexes—although with metaphors, hatpins, and snuff for weapons. The term mock-heroic is often applied to other dignified poetic forms which are purposely mismatched to a lowly subject; for example, to Thomas Gray’s comic “Ode on the Death of a Favorite Cat” (1748); see under bathos and anticlimax.

Classifying “The Anniad” as a mock epic implies the intentional degradation of its protagonist by the speaker. This subcategory of the genre relies on a disparity between the use of
heroic language to characterize the subject and the subject’s actual person and environment. A writer can use this distance to highlight a variety of flaws both within the protagonist and their circumstances. If, in fact, Brooks is purposefully travelling into this dissonance, she is critiquing not only Annie’s mislead ideology of love, but the forces surrounding her (poverty, racism, state violence, etc.) which make her dreams futile.

In her paper Gwendolyn Brook’s “The Anniad” and the Interdeterminacy of Genre,” Tracey Walters conglomerates multiple scholarly opinions on the genre classification of the poem. She writes, “George Kent acknowledges “The Anniad’s epic and mock-epic possibilities, but he says that the epic formulas are used only to illustrate the epic proportions of Annie’s dreams. He notes that at the end of the poem Brooks returns to the everyday world to illustrate Annie’s acceptance of reality…Although Kent does not directly refer to “The Anniad” as a mock epic, he argues that the epic conventions are used to accentuate the unreality of Annie’s illusions and thereby mock her” (Walters 351). The argument of Walters paper can be summed up by Kent’s meditated vacillation between the two genres. The answer is in the non-answer. In order to engage with “The Anniad” fully, the reader must take on a “post-structuralist perspective that highlights the interdeterminacy and contradictions of the text…to fully appreciate [its] complexity” (Walters 366).

Whereas “Notes from the Childhood and the Girlhood” section of “Annie Allen” was deliberate in its celebration of childlike wonder and critique of systems which steal this joy as one matures, “The Anniad” pivots toward increased nuance on the subject of girlhood. In the liminal space between girl and woman, Brooks mocks Annie’s continued grasp on girlish notions of true love as she ages. She is still too young to know better, while also being too old to have
shown no signs of relinquishing youth. The speaker celebrates her grandiosity as it relates to her persistence but condemns it as it pertains to her delusion.

Brooks’ depiction of war as it relates to love, pain, and conflict is arguably influenced by *The Iliad*, which follows Achille’s quest for legacy and revenge during the war between the Trojans and the Myrmidons. Both tales position war as a catalyst or exacerbator of issues which lead to the deterioration of love and escalation of internal resentment and irritability. In other words, war does not effectively resolve conflict between humans.

When the tan man returns home from war he is deeply traumatized and dissatisfied. Though we do not hear from him directly (yet another departure from epic tradition), the speaker describes the extent of his discontentment:

> With his helmet’s final doff <br> Soldier lifts his power off. <br> Soldier bare and chilly then <br> Wants his power back again. <br> No confection languider <br> Before quick-feast quick-famish Men <br> Than the candy crowns that were. (Brooks 127-133)

The tan man is inconsolable and without direction. His quest to regain power leads him to infidelity, which seals Annie’s disillusioned fate:

> But the culprit magics fade. <br> Stoical the retrograde. <br> And no music plays at all <br> In the inner, hasty hall <br> Which compulsion cut from shade.— <br> Frees her lover. Drops her hands. <br> Shorn and taciturn she stands. (Brooks 218-224)

Brooks’ use of the word “culprit” implies that someone or something in particular is responsible for the fall of this relationship. She does not blame the tan man’s unfaithfulness, but goes further to the root, citing the “magics” blinding the pair at the beginning of their
relationship. In other words, the fantasy Annie crafted in her head concerning love ultimately leads her to the loss of it.

While the onset of the piece was intensely auditory, mentioning the sound of guitars and the cacophony of war, now “no music plays at all” (Brooks 220). The sterility of the silence contrast earlier characterizations of Annie as a boisterous and energetic young girl. For perhaps the first time in her life, her interior harmony and hopefulness has been disrupted. Larger systems of oppression have limited her externally in terms of access and equity, but it is only heartbreak and the proceeding loss of her innocence that interrupts her center.

The second to last line of the stanza puts Annie in the posture of surrender. Not only does she let go of her lover, but she lets go of her fantastical ideation. The penultimate stanza of the poem reverses the coloration motif prominent throughout the piece:

Think of tweaked and twenty-four.
Fuchsias gone or gripped or gray,
All hay-colored that was green.
Soft aesthetic looted, lean.
Crouching low, behind a screen,
Pock-marked eye-light, and the sore
Eaglets of old pride and prey. (Brooks 288-294)

The opening line of the stanza mirrors the opening line of the poem, “think of sweet and chocolate,” which is repeated throughout the work to underscore Annie’s insistence on holding onto her whimsical desires. This iteration of the line signifies her release, as she is now confronted with the reality of her failed love affair. Further, there is a strong emphasis on color throughout the piece, particularly primary light colors, which include blue, green, and red. When combined, these colors can make almost any pigment of light, instilling the beginning of the poem with a sense of natural levity.

Furthermore, the tan man is without a name, referred to only by his skin color. As Annie is a dark-skinned person, the contrast adds to their relationship dynamic, imbuing her love
interest with the power that comes from increased proximity to whiteness. In this stanza, all the colors mentioned are, like the tan man, neutral or muted, reinforcing Annie’s disenchantment. The mentioned of “pock-marked eye-light” alludes to the disfiguration which can permit eyes from viewing color. Annie’s world is now achromatic and grayed by truth.

After the end of “The Anniad” comes “Appendix to the Anniad: leaves from a loose-leaf war diary,” detailing Annie’s thoughts before the tan man’s return from war. Here, Brooks departs from the epic to ballads and sonnets, sometimes enmeshing the two:

**the sonnet-ballad**

Oh mother, mother, where is happiness?
They took my lover’s tallness off to war.
Left me lamenting. Now I cannot guess
What I can use an empty heart-cup for.
He won’t be coming back here any more.
Some day the war will end, but, oh, I knew
When he went walking grandly out that door
That my sweet love would have to be untrue.
Would have to be untrue. Would have to court
Coquettish death, whose impudent and strange
Possessive arms and beauty (of a sort)
Can make a hard man hesitate—and change.
And he will be the one to stammer, “Yes.”
Of mother, mother, where is happiness?

Visually and auditorily, the poem adheres much more to sonnet form than that of a ballad as it boasts fourteen lines and a loose interpretation of iambic pentameter as opposed to quatrains with alternating four and three stress lines. Despite this, Brooks intentionally names it for both forms. Of this poem, Karen Jackson Ford writes, “the presence of ‘ballad’ in the title marks a yearning for a form that will address Annie’s growing awareness of herself as an ordinary person caught up in life’s daily tragedies. As a sonnet, ‘the sonnet-ballad’ exalts Annie’s grief, longing, and ardor in an elevated poetic form associated with love and elegy; as a ballad, it foretells the deflation of her disappointments into a common calamity associated with the popular form”
(Ford 376). Much like her use of the epic, Brooks subverts orthodoxy for her own purposes. Even this early on in her career, Brooks is aware of the limitations of more traditional poetic forms and seeks to extend their own boundaries by reappropriating their methods. Somewhere between a sonnet and a ballad, Brooks builds space for grief into love, allowing Annie to lament something she has not yet truly lost.

Additionally, the opening and closing plea addressed to her mother marks another early phase of Annie’s growing maturity. In “The Girlhood” she never considered her mother’s advice and direction beyond a brief annoyance. Annie consistently found happiness and enjoyment within herself, but now finds it externalized and exacerbated by physical distance. She worries about infidelity, but in relation to the violence of war and possibility of the tan man’s death. Brook’s personification of death relegates it to flirtation and sensuality, alluding to the adultery revealed in “The Anniad.” These callbacks to previous poems necessitate a reckoning with the past to urge forward her progression “as romantic illusions give way to recognition of adult responsibilities” (Ford 376).

Though originated by Europeans in Italy in the 12th century, sonnet form also boasts a distinctly black history (Robbins). The black sonnet tradition begins with Paul Lawrence Dunbar in the late 1800s and quickly picked up steam at the turn of the century (Robbins). Hollis Robbins tracks this progression in her book Forms of Contention: Influence and the African American Sonnet Tradition. Robbins posits that sonnet form “with its questioning octave and responding sestet, could be seen as a formalized double-consciousness. Sonnets require two voices, two perspectives, two warring ideas” (Robbins 8). As the collection moves forward into “The Womanhood” Annie navigates how to raise her children in impoverished conditions in a post-war America. The section, like the Anniad, is entirely comprised of one poem called “the
children of the poor,” partitioned into separate sonnets. These sonnets reflect Robbins’ claim as Annie converses with and responds to herself while wrestling with the sensitivities of her children. The fourth sonnet in the poem reads:

First fight. Then fiddle. Ply the slipping strong
With feathery sorcery; muzzle the note
With hurting love; the music that they wrote
Bewitch, bewilder. Qualify to sing
Threadwise. Devise no salt, no hempen thing
For the dear instrument to bear. Devote
The bow to silks and honey. Be remote
A while from malice and from murdering.
But first to arms, to armor. Carry hate
In front of you and harmony behind.
Be deaf to music and to beauty blind.
Win war. Rise bloody, maybe not too late
For having first to civilize a space
Wherein to play your violin with grace. (Brooks 43-56)

The octave uses musicality as a metaphor for finding enjoyment and pleasure. The speaker, Annie, places an emphasis on dedication and toughness as extensions of love. She pairs aggressive, magical imagery with musical language to detail how to negotiation between tenderness and fortitude in nursing oneself. In “Maxie Allen,” Annie is distinctly at odds with her mother’s utilitarian and practical approach to life, but here she seems to be campaigning for space for both childlike wonder and mature grit. This sentiment is upheld by the variety of taste-based word choice, including the use of honey and salt. Each of these ingredients in different proportions can make something sweet, savory, or bitter, demonstrating how approaches to preserving whimsy and engaging with reality must be weighed against one another.

The turn at the sestet abandons these ideals, prioritizing security and willpower. Annie urges her children to be on guard at all times and act from initial suspicion rather than trust in order to “civilize a space / wherein to play [their] violin with grace” (Brooks 55-56). The need for civilization suggests a sort of barbarism present within society towards black people in
poverty, particularly children who are unaccustomed with the full scope of their marginalization. Now that she herself is experiencing motherhood, Annie is met with the same protective impulses as her mother. The duplicity present in the sonnet as a whole underscores the plight of black parents as they navigate how to raise children in an environment which pathologizes their wonder and joy.

The finale of “The Womanhood” imbues images of fantasy and youth with inescapable horror:

They toys are all grotesque
And not for lovely hands; are dangerous,
Serrate in open and artful places. Rise.
Let us combine. There are no magics or elves
Or timely godmothers to guide us. We are lost, must
Wizard a track through our own screaming weed. (Brooks 341-346)

The final lines of the collection create a larger call to action based in self-determination. The speaker emphasizes that none of the fantastical creatures of childhood can save marginalized people from the oppressive reality of their existence. Brooks urges her audience to create liberation by and for themselves. Even further, she supplies a route for this promotion: through collective action and community building. Only then can childhood, and more specifically girlhood, be preserved as Annie once experienced it.

In “Annie Allen” Gwendolyn Brooks takes the reader on a journey of a poor black girl becoming woman in the Chicago ghetto. The circumstances of Annie’s life are distinctly unremarkable, entrenched in financial precarity and racial and gendered marginalization. Her girlhood protects her from these realities, transforming her average environment into a world of whimsy, hope, and tenderness. As she grows, these elements become more and more permeable to hegemonic forces beyond her control, and the wonder of youth gives way to harsh disillusionment. Brooks illustrates Annie’s maturation through the use of traditional poetic forms
such as epic, mock epic, ballads, and sonnets. She subverts these orthodox strongholds, contrasting their grandiosity with Annie’s ordinary. This dissonance emphasizes how systemic forces such as classism and racism harshen the transition to adulthood and restrain black girls’ access to sustained joy.
CHAPTER TWO

An Epiphany

As evidenced by her engagement with Annie’s maturation, Brooks has an investment in black girlhood not only as a person whose experience it themselves, but as a writer and an activist. Brooks’ notions of girlhood are deeply tied to her Chicagoan roots as her more formative years were spent amidst the swirl of industrialization and the Great Migration. In her book, *South Side Girls: Growing Up in the Great Migration*, academic scholar Marcia Chatelain explores how the sociopolitical landscape of the early 20th century influenced the fluidity and scope of black girlhood. Her exploration centered specifically around Bronzeville, the neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago that Brooks resided in. In tandem with this is scholar Sarah Haley’s assertion of an oxymoronic relationship between racial and gendered identifiers.

In her book *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crowe Modernity* Sarah Haley spotlights the dissonance in between the words black and woman in relation to identity. She writes, “In the white imaginary, ‘black woman’ was an oxymoronic formulation because the modifier ‘black’ rejected everything associated with the universal ‘woman.’ The black female subject occupied a paradoxical, embattled, and fraught position, a productive negation that produced normativity” (Haley 21). This sentiment can be carried over to black girls, whose blackness and girlhood are socially perceived as incongruent with one another. Chatelain’s research displays how patriarchy and white supremacy capitalize on this dissonance, using black girls as both community guides and sites of exploitation.

Black families migrated from southern America to northern cities such as Chicago to escape the threats of both symbolic and literal violence via oppressive legislation, recurrent lynching, poor employment opportunities, and sexual harassment and assault (Chatelain). The
move presented them with two troubled realities: 1. The violence of the south is inescapable, as threats to black girlhood were entrenched in the systemic foundations of the nation and 2. Their inequitable society revoked the status of “child” from black girls to justify a broader obligation to mothering and respectability (Chatelain). Furthermore, “a black girl’s age often failed to inspire widespread concern or compassion in matters of sexual assault, education, and labor protection” (Chatelain 10). Exemplified in Annie’s varying positionality from the perspective of her mother, Maxie, to that of her environment, black girls are to be protected but also lauded as symbols of the emerging, upstanding black middle class.

In their paper “Disruptive Ruptures: The Necessity of Black/Girlhood Imagery, scholars Kenly Brown, Lashon Daley, and Derrika Hunt use Chatelain’s work to uphold the necessity of interdisciplinary study of black girlhood as a temporal, spatial, and sociopolitical space or possible and/or impossibility. They take up Haley’s examination of language in their intentional use of the forward slash:

“The oblique line—the American English slash—symbolizes the space, the gap, the expectations, the interruption, the omission, the expansion, the theoretical downward slope, the jubilant upward reach, the implicit fall forward, and explicit push back created within and between culture’s reconnaissance of Blackness and girlness.” (Brown 75)

In the advancement of the exploration of the disparity between black and girl, the Brown, Daley, and Hunt take up Chatelain’s work, holding to the light the plight of both the standard black girl and her deviant counterpart. While one has the weight of the amelioration of her people on her shoulders, the other is shunned, leaving both without access to their childhood. In this way, conceptions of girlhood were confined to representations of the black community’s successes and failures, but never their normalities, the average eases of enjoyment and pleasure in the day to day (Brown). Broader progressive movements and “community-based reforms
sought to rehabilitate and/or co-opt their femininity to advance the race” (Brown 78). In other words, there was neither time nor literal or political space for them to just be girls.

Furthermore, the use of “ruptures” in the title refers to the various systems and actions barring black individuals from experiencing girlhood in its totality. From this vantage point, the emphasis on imagination underscores how girlhood as a possibility rests on theorization, not necessarily to bridge this gap, but to create home in it and give space to lived experience. In their words, this academic process is a kind of “methodology [that] is a type of recovery” (Brown 80). In her own way, Brooks is invested in this project via recovering the stories of her fellow Bronzeville dwellers and naming them as something their environment could not: girls. Brooks continues this work over the course of her career, engaging in theorization via poetics. However, as her politics and poetic style morph, then too does her imagination of girlhood.

On January 3, 1961, an interview between American writer and Pulitzer Prize Winner Studs Terkel and Gwendolyn Brooks was broadcast on WFMT Chicago. When asked if she sensed a difference between “Annie Allen” and her later work Brooks responded:

Yes, I think so. By the time I began to write *Annie Allen* I was very much impressed with the effectiveness of technique, and I wanted to write poetry that was honed to the last degree it could be. And I wanted chiseled lines, everything just right, real poetry I wanted to write, and that’s the mood I was in when I began writing *Annie Allen*. I no longer feel that this is the proper attitude to have when you sit down to write poetry, but that’s how I felt then.

When asked to elaborate on why Brooks said:

Well, I feel that my poems at any rate should be written more in the mood that I had when I wrote *A Street in Bronzeville*. I was just interested in putting people down on paper and, although it is rougher than *Annie Allen*, I feel that there’s more humanity in it.

In 1967, just eighteen years after “Annie Allen” was published and seventeen years after Brooks was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her groundbreaking work in the collection, Brooks
attended the Second Black Writer’s Conference at Fisk University, a pivotal event in the Black Power and Arts Movements.

The Black Arts movement began shortly after the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965 (“The Black Arts Movement”). LeRoi Jones, contemporarily known as Amiri Baraka, founded the Black Arts Repertory Theater, which aimed to discover the Black Power Movement’s goal of chartering a path to self-determination for black people with aesthetic pursuits such as writing, musicianship, and visual arts (“The Black Arts Movement”). These aims were centered by promotion black pride and creating and uplifting artistic narratives established by black people for black people (“The Black Arts Movement”).

Amongst the other attendees and speakers at the conference was Amiri Baraka, a foundational leader of the arts movement. On the subject, Baraka said it aimed “to create an art, a literature that would fight for black people’s liberation with as much intensity as Malcolm X our ‘Fire Prophet’ and the rest of the enraged masses who took to the streets” (“The Black Arts Movement”).

Up until this point in her career, Brooks had made a name for herself writing in ballads, sonnets, and other historically established forms, “[depicting] the lives of poor black people in some of the best poems of the century. However, despite having made all these verse forms entirely her own, [she] was persuaded by the revolutionary poets of the new black consciousnesses that traditional Anglo European verse forms could not serve the purposes of black liberation” (Ford 371). Though she had found ways to appropriate these European methods thus far in her career for her own purposes, her shifting politic necessitated a departure from convention. The change was reminiscent of Audre Lord’s seminal claim that the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.
In 1969 George Stavros conducted an interview with Brooks wherein he asked her if she would ever write in ballad form again. Brooks responded:

“I don’t know. I might write other ballads, but they would be very different from the ones that I have written so far. I see myself chiefly writing free verse.”

Tracking this transition, Karen Jackson Ford quotes Brooks’s statements that her previous adherence to European forms of writing highlighting “‘decoration,’ ‘dalliance,’ and ‘idle embroidery’ as techniques of ‘avoidance, avoidance of the gut issue, the blood fact’” (Ford 372). Brooks’ writing after her attendance at the conference changed the trajectory of her career and extending her artistic influence beyond her own writing. She began increasing her involvement in the Chicagoan writing community, leading groups of young radicals and street activists in translating their progressive ideologies to poetry. In terms of her stylistic evolution, from 1967 onward she wrote almost exclusively in free verse, taking on the cultural rhythmic influences of protesting chants and preacher’s sermons. In her own words, the conference “redefined her blackness” as she observed a community which “seemed proud and committed to their own people…the poets among them felt that black poets should write as blacks, about blacks, and address themselves to blacks.”
CHAPTER THREE

Poor Pepita: The Lost Promise of Living in the Mecca

The Mecca Flats were designed by Willoughby J. Edbrooke and Franklin Pierce Burnham in the late 1800s to house individuals attending the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition (“The City Beyond the White City”). Built as temporary housing, the apartment complex was never intended to continue on as a permanent fixture of the Bronzeville neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago. Nestled between 33rd and 34th street at four stories tall and 98 units large, the Mecca was the world’s biggest apartment complex at the time of its opening (“The City Beyond the White City”). The builders created it with the intention of providing provisional tenancy for white middle class families (“The City Beyond the White City”).

What Edbrooke and Burnham couldn’t have foreseen was the long-term sociological impact of the Mecca on the racial segregation in relation to the Great Migration and white flight at the turn of the century. From the early 20th century to around 1970, roughly six million black people moved from the south to northern states in the hopes of escaping Jim Crow legislation and securing employment (“The Great Migration (1910-1970)”). The first wave of the migration centered around midwestern cities like Detroit and Chicago (“The Great Migration (1910-1970)”). As a result of increased black presences in these areas, northern white middle class families fled to the growing suburban neighborhoods on the periphery of their cities.

In 1912 the Mecca opened itself up to Black tenants (“The City Beyond the White City”). The Mecca attracted southern black families as it marketed itself as private, affordable, and well-serviced. By the 1920s, the complex was predominantly black and transformed into a Bronzeville cultural hotbed along “The Stroll,” the land between 26th and 39th streets, home to
various music clubs and restaurants. As the demographic composition of the tenancy changed, so did the quality of the services, and the complex fell into disrepair. It was demolished in 1952 (“The City Beyond the White City”).

The year following her renewed devotion to the project of black liberation, Gwendolyn Brooks published *In the Mecca*, an exploration of the resurgence of black culture against the backdrop of housing deterioration. Brooks capitalizes on the religious implications of the complex’s name. The first page of the collection begins:

> Now the way of the Mecca was on the wise.

Mecca is a city in Western Saudi Arabia off the Red Sea coast, also known as a holy ancient city in the Muslim religion. Muhammad, the prophet at the center of the Islamic religion was born there, and each day, practitioners of the faith bow in prayer towards the city five times (“Mecca”). Extremely ardent followers will complete a journey called a hajj, meaning pilgrimage in Arabic, to the city at some point in their lives (“Mecca”).

The title of the building alludes to a divine and sacred site, one which promises protection and enlightenment for devout chosen peoples. This dual meaning is not lost on Brooks, and it upholds a great ironic metaphor: there is no salvation for working class black Americans, even in the holiest of places in the most promising position.

The titular poem follows Miss Sallie, a tenant at the Mecca, on her trek up the stairs to her unit after work to see her children. As the speaker moves up the complex, there are multiple tableaus of different tenants, highlighting their plights and the dilapidated state of their living conditions. The reader’s first new characters are the religious St. Julia and Prophet Williams:

> Sees old St, Julia Jones, who has had prayer, and who is rising from amenable knees inside the wide-flung door of 215. “Isn’t He wonderful!wonderful!” cries St. Julia. “ isn’t our Lord the greatest to the brim?
The light of my life. And I lie late
past the still pastures. And meadows. He’s the comfort
and wine and piccalilli for my soul.
He hunts me up the coffee for my cup.
Oh how I love that Lord.”

And Mrs. Sallie,
all innocent of saints and signatures,
nods and consents, content to endorse
Lord as incense and a vintage. Speaks
to Prophet Williams, young beyond St. Julia,
and rich with Bible, pimples, pout: who reeks
with lust for his disciple, is an engine
of candid steel hugging combustibles.
His wife she was a skeleton.
His wide she was a bone.
Ida died in self-defense.
(Kinswomen!
Kinswomen!)
Ida died alone.

Brooks continues the religious imagery she implies in the line on the first page. The introduction of faithfulness upon entrance displays how those housed at the Mecca moved into the building under the premonition that the complex would provide them safety from the Jim Crow law reigning in the American South, but quickly found that the spoils of white supremacy were inescapable and systemically entrenched. Moreover, Brooks seems to be making a point about the futility of externalizing one’s ability to achieve deliverance.

After introducing the reader to St. Julia, Miss Sallie moves to Prophet Williams, whom the speaker suggests uses his supposed devoutness as a means to get close to religious women and satisfy his lust. She goes on to speak of his wife who appeared to be starved and died in “self-defense.” While Brooks does not explicitly state her cause of death, the reader can assume she had to defend herself from her husband’s potentially violent sexual advances. The asides within the parentheticals suggest Brooks herself urging other black women to safeguard themselves against patriarchy disguised as nicety. Immediately upon entering the Mecca, Brooks destabilizes religious belief to further the Black Art’s Movement’s project of self-determination.
Ida is just the first in a long line of women whose access to satisfaction has been compromised by injustice.

As the poem continues, Miss Sallie arrives to the fourth and final floor of the building to an unkempt kitchen and the haphazard sight of her children. The speaker introduces the reader to Yvonne and Melodie Mary, both of whom have starkly different characterization than Annie in “Annie Allen.” Brooks shifts her focus from playfulness, animation, and beauty to grit and a worldly awareness.

As Yvonne prepares to meet her romantic interest, she reflects on the importance of gum in relation to security:

Doublemint as a protective device. Yvonne prepares for her lover.
Gum is something he can certify.
Gum is something he can understand.
A tough girl gets it. A rough
Ruth or Sue…

Melodie Mary, on the other hand, is concerned with bugs and foreign affairs:

Melodie Mary likes roaches,
and pities the gray rat.
To delicate Melodie Mary headlines are secondary.
It is interesting that in China
the children blanch and scream,
and that blood runs like a ragged wound
through the ancient flesh of the land.

Both Yvonne and Mary are distinctly more aware of the power dynamics of their surroundings than Annie Allen. If only subconsciously, they understand that their girlhood is not apolitical and they orbit in sociopolitical systems that place them in relation to others. Yvonne has internalized patriarchy to the point of setting up shields for herself, however minute they may be. She recognizes the fallibility of placing her identity and value in the hands of her lover and is altogether unconcerned with his activity beyond their interactions. She also speaks of toughness
as a strength akin to girlhood, something learned in the continual practice of preserving oneself from the onslaught of extractive systemic powers. Meanwhile Mary is amusing herself with roaches and vermin. In her characterization, Brooks seems to be intentionally aligning Mary’s youth with grisly imagery to emphasize the uglier underbelly of juvenility.

In the rush of people and activity, Miss Sallie does not initially notice that her youngest daughter, Pepita, is not at home in their unit. The tone of the piece shifts immediately from the casual tired commentary of motherhood to collective panic. The sentences are shorter and more declarative, and Brooks uses listing with repeated strings of conjunctions to create feelings of chaotic excess:

And they are constrained. All are constrained.
And there is no thinking of grapes or gold
or of any wicked sweetness and they ride
upon fight and remorse and their stomachs
are rags or grit.
In twos!
In threes! Knock-knocking down the martyred halls
at doors behind whose yelling oak or pine
many flowers start, choke, reach up,
want help, get it, do not get it,
rally, bloom, or die on the wasting vine.

Where there was once the nonchalant plentitude of a crowded apartment, there is now a disordered frenzy. The ease with which the children’s adherence to their youthful endeavors was interrupted displays the susceptibility of black children’s life to the intervention of tragedy. Suddenly their minds are rid of “grass or gold or…any wicked sweetness” in the face of bitter reality.

Brooks once again recalls religion in her use of “martyred” to describe the halls of the Mecca. The allusion to sacrifice in the name of faith in relation to the building is reminiscent of the degradation of both the Mecca and its tenants in the name of upholding sociopolitical hierarchies. This is reinforced by the floral metaphor in the following lines. The black families
who migrated from the south to Bronzeville were once hopeful about their prospects but have now been left to the fate of a slow death.

As Miss Sallie’s family works their way down the stairs of the Mecca, they are once again greeted by the fellow residents and their grievances. They recount stories of murder, enslavement, and harassment amongst other things. Between the stanzas of dialogue allotted for other tenant’s, Brooks includes snippets of Sallie’s internal monologue, displaying her fear for her daughter’s safety and immediate assumption of the worst possible consequences.

About a third of the way through the piece, the authorities arrive on site at the Mecca to assist with the search for Pepita. Brooks refers to the police as “the Law,” imbuing the force with a sense of sterility and apathy. They are relatively unconcerned with the measly problems of black and brown folks and do not engage in any intense search. Miss Sallie turns instead to her family:

Aunt Dill arrives to help them. “Little gal got raped and choked to death last week. Her gingham was tied around her neck and it was red but had been green before with pearls and dots of rhinestone on the collar, and her tongue was hanging out (a little to the side); her eye was all a-pop, one was; was one all gone. Part of her little nose was gone (bit off, the Officer said). The Officer said that something not quite right been done that girl. Lived Langley: ‘round the corner from my house.”

Repeatedly throughout the poem, Brooks uses her characters to bring up stories of sexual harassment and violence in the lives of other little black girls, often leading to death. She alludes towards the impossibility of achieving the frivolity and amusement characteristic to traditional
notions of girlhood. Again and again, the perfection of childhood innocence is positioned as impossible as patriarchy, policing, and racial discrimination intervene.

The search continues for Pepita until eventually her family, accompanied by the police, discovers her beneath the bed of another tenant:

She never went to kindergarten.  
She never learned that black is not beloved.  
Was royalty when poised,  
Sly, at the A and P’s fly-open door.  
Will be royalty no more.  
“I touch”—she said once—“petals of rose.  
A silky feeling through me goes!”  
Her mother will try for roses.

In the penultimate stanza, Brooks delivers the crushing, but purposefully unsurprising news. The piece is riddled with foreshadowing and her mother’s concern about the certainty of her death. The speaker mourns Pepita’s inability to experience conscious awareness, the opportunity to learn something as simple as her ABCs. The final line of the excerpt reminds the reader there is inequity even in death as Miss Sallie can likely not afford her daughter’s favorite flowers for her premature funeral.
CONCLUSION

Gwendolyn Brooks’ approach to writing transformed dramatically over the course of her life, consistently and fluidly defined by her shifting conception of her identity and growing politic. Her project remained consistent: achieving the creation of space for black people to be seen, heard, and validated in society built on a white supremacist hegemony. More specifically, Brooks gives space to impoverished black women and girls, holding to the light their triply marginalized existence. Written earlier in her career, “Annie Allen” reflects an idea of black girlhood as sacred and eventually lost. These notions are presented in epics, ballads, and sonnets, European forms of writing which Brooks seizes and subverts for her own purposes.

After attending the Second Black Writers Conference at Fisk University in 1967, Brooks’ poetic style revises itself to serve the larger project of the Black Arts Movement: attainment of the right to self-determination for all black people and the proliferation of black pride via aesthetic pursuits. A facet of this project is pioneering new ways of artistic expression by black people, for black people. For Brooks, this means abandoning the archaic conventions of her early career and writing in free verse. Along with her departure from traditional form comes a shift in theorization, specifically as it pertains to the possibility of girlhood as attainable for black folks. Published just a year after the conference, In the Mecca is significantly more radical and militant than her former work. Girlhood is impossible to perfect for her woman identifying characters. Even further, it is forbidden by a sociopolitical system built on inequity and oppression. Every moment of innocence and whimsy is intervened on by the threat of both symbolic and physical violence which seek to limit agency.
However, Brooks does not leave the reader without a way forward. The answer to the overarching question of liberation lies in her stylistic shift to free verse: we save ourselves when we create by and for ourselves, build community, and reach towards the joy we were denied.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


