



WILLIAM & MARY
CHARTERED 1693

Colonial Academic Alliance Undergraduate Research Journal

Volume 2

Article 9

2011

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Recommended Citation

Mandela, I. Blaze; Balter, Sarah; and Stinson, Scott D. (2011) "Reexamining Gwendolyn Brooks' "A Song In the Front Yard": A Tri-Layered Interpretation," *Colonial Academic Alliance Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 2 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/caaurj/vol2/iss1/9>

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Reexamining Gwendolyn Brooks' "A Song In the Front Yard": A Tri-Layered Interpretation

Cover Page Note

We would like to thank Dr. Chris Kocela for his guidance in completing this paper. Also we would like to give a special thank you to Casey McCormick in the writing lab: we couldn't have done it without you!

Gwendolyn Brooks' "A Song In the Front Yard" was written in 1963. Since its publication, scholars have examined the poem with the assumption that the unnamed narrator of the poem is an innocent naïve girl who is curious about transgressive activities without being aware of their inappropriate nature. However, upon closer examination of the girl's statements within each stanza, one can easily posit her as being intentionally misleading—she strategically exploits the fact that people will inherently assume her naïveté because of her age. In fact, evidence suggests that she is likely involved in some degree of sexual activity. Collectively, the primary approaches of previous scholars are strictly literalist hermeneutical approaches, which may not fully address the implications of the text. A tri-layered method of examining the text, as we will use here, expands the parameters of the discourse: the "epidermal" literalist examination illustrates the girl is not as naïve as she may seem, the "dermal" metaphorical analysis of the literalist examination reveals underlying race and class issues, and lastly "subcutaneously" distinguishing the significance of the symbolism in the poem contextualized in the era it is written offers the poem as an indictment of intra-racial segmentation and preliminary modes of integration. This dermatological framework is used to represent the relative layers of analysis of each lens—ranging from surface level to innermost.

In the first stanza, the girl states "I've stayed in the front yard all my life / I want a peek at the back...A girl gets sick of a rose" (Brooks 141). Using an "epidermal" literalist examination, one can see that the girl attempts to coyly mislead the reader into believing she has never seen the backyard. However, D.H. Melhem writes of the first stanza,

Confined in 'the front yard,' she wants a 'peek at the back,' at the weeds and the roughness of 'untended,' spontaneous existence, because 'a girl gets sick of a rose.' Not without humor, her refractory vision takes in the exciting backyard world. The child's eyes romanticize poverty; they do not see its restrictions. (26)

Melhem seems to operate under the assumption that the child romanticizing poverty is contingent on a lack of awareness of its restrictions. The opening lines "I've stayed in the front yard all my life / I want a peek at the back / Where it's rough and untended and hungry weed grows / A girl gets sick of a rose" (Brooks 141) appear to destabilize Melhem's rationale by strongly suggesting that the child is aware of both the positive and negative aspects of being in the backyard as opposed to the front yard. The lines suggest that she sees the "restrictions of poverty" (Melhem 26), describing the backyard as "rough," "untended" and "hungry" and likening the front yard to "a rose." One could argue that Melhem is overestimating the girl's obliviousness given the evidence of her dichotomous juxtaposition of the two yards. Christopher MacGowan interprets the lines as describing "[a] speaker who wants to break free from respectability and

convention" (106). However, it is clear that the girl has seen the backyard and not just through "refractory vision" as Melhem suggests. Brooks hints at the narrator's lack of innocence through the use of the verb "peek," which inadvertently draws attention to her. Why this word choice? Why not "look" instead? This is because "peeking" instead of "looking" is exactly what the narrator has done in the past. How else would she know that the backyard is "rough and untended" and that "hungry weeds [grow there]" (Brooks 141)? Additionally, the connotational associations of the verb "peek" as opposed to "look" have a more salacious implication. The narrator most likely uses this method of observing the backyard, because an adult proscribes this very behavior. Keith Clark expounds this statement by explaining that "the publicly visible 'front yard' represents a confining space where women's behaviors are proscribed by sexist mores and prohibitions" (81). Leslie Wheeler also points out the tension between the front and back yard using poetic terminology: "[Brooks] contrasts entrapment and freedom through a contrast of rhymed and unrhymed couplets" (94). She notes that Brooks' back and forth alternation between rhymed and unrhymed couplets mimics the arrangement of the front and back yards (Wheeler 94). Clark's and Wheeler's recognition of the significance of the backyard substantiates the notion that one must interpret the text with additional lenses outside of an exclusive literalist approach.

In the second stanza the girl states "I want to go in the backyard now / And maybe down the alley" (Brooks 141). Again, the girl is being misleading, attempting to coax the reader into believing she wishfully wants to go to the backyard, but has never actually been there. However, doesn't this girl know a little too much about the roadways and the inhabitants of a place she has *supposedly* never seen? How does she know that one can go "down [an] alley / [t]o where the children play" (Brooks 141)? Juxtaposition of the first stanza to this one reveals a likely sequence of events. The narrator goes from wanting a peek at the backyard to now wanting to be in the backyard and go down the alley. Her wants inadvertently reveal themselves as actual experiences: she took a peek at the backyard, went to the backyard and then went down the alley to where the children play. Her knowledge that one can "have a good time" (Brooks 141) if one goes to the alley confirms the notion that she has been there before. How else would she know that one can have a "good time" as opposed to a "bad time" unless she has already had the former instead of the latter with the children at some point?

The second stanza presents the first opportunity to examine the text using the "dermal" metaphorical analysis in order to distinguish underlying class relations. The stanza reads "I want to go in the back yard now / And maybe down the alley, / To where the charity children play" (Brooks 141). The use of the phrase "charity children" seems awkward in the vocabulary of an adolescent. The

girl most likely borrows the phrase from her mother, who appears in the subsequent stanza and describes the children in the alley as such. The mother's use of the phrase "charity children" indirectly implies that the girl is not a "charity child" in comparison, thereby creating separation based on class. The girl's use of the word illustrates that she has internalized this class distinction, noting the generational legacy of classism.

Returning back to an "epidermal" literalist examination, the third stanza further affirms the girl's interaction with the children in the alley. She states "They do some wonderful things / They have some wonderful fun," because her personal experiences with them corroborate this claim. Otherwise, how else is she able to reassure her mother that "it's fine [that] they don't have to go in at quarter to nine" (Brooks 141) in confidence? The remaining lines of the third stanza contrast her mother's disapproval of the alley children with the narrator's view of them as "wonderful" while dually "[entwining] iambs with vernacular triple rhythms and subtly inflected African-American phrasing" (Ramazani 56) :

My mother, she tells me that Johnnie Mae

Will grow up to be a bad woman.

That George'll be taken to Jail soon or late

(On account of last winter he sold our back gate). (Brooks 141)

Ronald Jannsen interprets these lines as "the shadow of ... authorities who are trying to establish normative attitudes" (43), Elizabeth Beaulieu notes that they "juxtapose child's play with adult concerns" (720), while Melhem argues that through the opening in the back "the child's dreams can escape her environment" (26). These scholars provide accurate analyses of the implications surrounding the poem in terms of universal themes contrasting the mother and child. The lines in the poem also specifically highlight a strong presence of class discrimination. Her mother's reference to the children by name shows that the narrator knows them. Considering this isn't it curious that George has sold their back gate and that the narrator pines to go to and out of the backyard? By removing the back gate, George gives the narrator access to the backyard, alley and children. Did George randomly choose the narrator's house to remove and sell its backyard gate or did the narrator ask him to do this so she could get out? One can justifiably speculate that she indeed asks him considering her coy, misleading nature in this and previous stanzas. Additionally, there is credence to this notion because by removing the gate metaphorically George would be removing classist divisions created by the narrator's mother, which the narrator is notably unsupportive of throughout the poem.

The third stanza can be reexamined using the "dermal" metaphorical lens in order to see further evidence of classism. This stanza presents the first mention of an adult, the girl's mother, and given her distaste for the children in the alley, it is appropriate to assume that she is the imagistic adult in the second stanza who

calls them “charity children.” The mother’s use of the phrase “charity children” and her predictions of two of them (George will go to jail and Johnnie Mae will be a “bad woman”) mark her attempt to separate herself and her child from them. This attempt is rather curious when geographic proximity and the mother’s dialect patterns in the lines are taken into consideration. The “backyard” is an umbrella term to describe the physical backyard of their house, the alleyway and the charity children. Given that the proximity to the “backyard” is as close as a travel from a physical front yard to a backyard, how different class-wise can the mother be from Johnnie Mae? Furthermore, the mother’s simplistic speech style, along with her use of the contraction “George’ll” and the colloquial phrase “soon or late,” correspond with the syntax of someone from a lower-class background. Thus the mother’s dialect in conjunction with her close proximity to the “charity children” is problematic to her assertion that her or her child can enjoy any true class elitism.

The fourth and last stanza responds to the last four lines of the previous stanza. The narrator states,

But I say it’s fine. Honest, I do.
And I’d like to be a bad woman, too,
And wear the brave stockings of night-black lace
And strut down the streets with paint on my face. (Brooks 141)

The girl not only “say[s] it’s fine” to grow up to be a bad woman, but also acknowledges that she knows what being a bad woman entails. Steven Axelrod interprets these lines as Brooks “insistently [exposing] the limitations of the binary system of propriety/impropriety by which the mother lived her life,” however, he stops short of dismissing the girl’s innocence and continues, “when [the] unnamed mother ‘sneers’ at adolescent sexual activity, her daughter inwardly resists” (30). The “inward resistance” that Axelrod notes does not appear to be restricted to an internal emotional event. The stanza suggests that the girl has also “resisted” her mother by observing or having some sort of direct interaction with the entities that her mother proscribes. The narrator describes with specificity “brave stockings of night black-lace” along with the “strut” these women do with “paint on [their] face” (Brooks 141). Particularly the use of the adjective “brave” implies that she is not naïve, this description shows there is reference, and thus consciousness, to the danger associated with this activity. Additionally, the use of the verb “strut” as opposed to “walk” and the specificity with which she describes the women’s stockings (night black-lace) illustrates that she has seen these “bad women” before. Where? Surely they are not visible from the front yard which the narrator’s mother uses as a protection mechanism to shield her from the transgressive activities of the backyard and beyond. Also, at what time does she have to be out so that she is able to see them? Was it past “a quarter to nine” (Brooks 141)? The narrator is not as innocent as her arguably

intentional childlike description of make-up as “paint on [one’s] face” (Brooks 141) might lead the reader, and Axelrod, to believe.

Considering that at the end of the poem the reader’s perspective of the narrator changes, the reader will likely reconsider the initial predilection to view the narrator’s statements as innocent in earlier stanzas. An example of this is the line “I want a good time today” (Brooks 141) in the second stanza. One may now interpret this as a double entendre with sexual innuendo. Also, the temporality and the urgency of the word “today” implies she has had a “good time” before, whereas a word choice such as “some day” which would seem more wishful. One may even question if she actually wants to go to where the children play: perhaps she wants “a good time” like the “bad women” she idolizes and intentionally misleads the reader into believing she wants to play with the alley children. This speculation is not unwarranted, as the girl inexorably misleads the reader and characters within the poem throughout her narration.

Another example of the girl’s statements that no longer appear to be innocent is the lines “They do some wonderful things / They have some wonderful fun” (Brooks 141) in the third stanza. One may now question the nature of what “wonderful things” and “wonderful fun” refers. Especially considering that the lines appear in a stanza in which the narrator is assuring her mother that staying out past nine is appropriate. The time frame and the narrator’s admission that she wants to be a “bad woman” naturally creates questions of whether or not “wonderful things” and “wonderful fun” refer to sexual activities. After all, the narrator does reflect in the first stanza how “A girl gets sick of a rose” (Brooks 141). Such roses are in the front yard where the girl is relegated to by her mother. Since the girl is “sick” of the rose, one can infer that she would not be sick by the sight of “the rough and untended [backyard where] hungry weed grows” (Brooks 141) even without her explicit acknowledgement of this in the poem. Wheeler substantiates this claim, noting that the narrator’s interest in describing the backyard at length prevents the stanza from being a quatrain (94). In comparison to its preceding line describing the backyard, “‘A girl gets sick of a rose,’ seems to express boredom by its relative brevity” (Wheeler 94). Wheeler provides intriguing insight into the ways in which the poem’s structure both lends to the spatial opposition between the front and back yard and implies the narrator’s comparative interest with both yards. Thus one can make the argument that the narrator’s overexposure to the front yard causes her to become uninterested with it, and subsequently she is curious of the backyard and immerses herself in the transgressive, and likely sexual, activities and experiences it offers. Furthermore, in light of these developments the poem’s title “A Song in the Front Yard” has a new meaning. The title shows that the girl is in the front yard as she sings the lines of the poem. Is she singing the song quietly? Or does she sing the song loudly so that her mother can hear? If it is the latter, the poem is

now more profound: the girl is taunting her mother with her sexual experiences and aspirations and the knowledge that her restriction to the front yard does not preclude her from taking part in activities of which her mother categorically disapproves.

One should also reexamine the poem as a whole using all three lenses (the “epidermal” literalist examination, the “dermal” metaphorical analysis of the literalist examination and the “subcutaneous” distinction of the significance of the symbolism) in order to observe underlying race and class issues, an argument against preliminary methods of racial integration and a promotion of full racial integration. In the previous analyses, “epidermal” and “dermal,” one can only see class as a structural mechanism apparent in the poem. The class lens illustrates that the mother is delusional, advocating class elitist ideas which are rendered fictive when one notes that she is no different from the very children she vilifies. When one takes the time period in which the poem is authored into consideration, one is able to add the additional lens of race into examining the poem as well. In 1963, there are wide economic disparities, which largely are contingent upon race. With little to no racial integration in residential areas, one can describe the narrator and her mother as either Black or White. Due to the low economic means and Ramazani’s description of the language style of the mother being indicative of African-American speech patterns of the time period, one can easily find that the narrator, her mother and the inhabitants of the “backyard” are Black. The separation of the backyard from the front yard also hints at institutionalized racial separation appropriate to the time period: the requirement that Blacks enter and be serviced through the back door of establishments persisted into the early 1960s (Wiese 204). Note that the narrator feels that she has more in common with the “hungry weeds” than with the “roses” in the front yard that she is “sick of.” The roses can be understood as a metaphor for White society. The culmination of these preceding issues of race and class serve as a larger metaphor for the experience of preliminary methods of integration in which one or two blacks are enrolled in all-white schools as human “guinea pigs.” In the beginning of the poem, the girl laments “a girl gets sick of a rose” and longs to be in and around the backyard—she is homesick for her race. With this in mind, one can see the poem as an argument for full integration which will solve this issue: additional black children attending the school will absolve the racial isolation the narrator feels.

Conclusively, Gwendolyn Brooks’ “A Song In the Front Yard” can strongly appear to be a narration by an innocent girl who is naïve of the inappropriate nature associated with the activities of which she is curious. As such, all of the scholars who examine the poem use this framework when analyzing it. This predilection is most likely due to the hegemonic societal norm of understanding adolescents through the lens of innocence and naïveté, coupled

with the notion that parents can shield their children with “front yards.” Janssen supplements this interpretation by noting “[the poem highlights] several forces working against each other trying to find some way to resolve the tension of individual desire and parental and social expectation” (43). The poem destabilizes societal assumptions related to adolescents by illustrating that they are far more cunning and clever than they are assumed to be. Thus, the same lines used to support the “innocent, naïve girl” framework can be alternatively used to describe “A Song In the Front Yard” as a melody laced with equal parts of defiance, manipulation and sexual activity. Additionally, the tri-layered approach to examining the novel brings new meaning to the title of the poem. In the literalist approach, the girl is taunting her mother; however, within the tri-layered lens, her song is far more profound—it serves as a melodic affirmation of racial pride and equality.

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