

**Fremont Great Books Discussion Questions**  
**“Selected Poems” by Gwendolyn Brooks**  
**April 30, 2022**

1. Did any one poem or group of poems stand out to you? Which was your favorite and why?
2. Themes include black pride and black identity. Historically, racial discrimination; the civil rights movement of the fifties (“A Street in Bronzeville” and “Annie Allen”); black rebellion of the sixties (“The Bean Eaters” and Others). Did you notice a shift in topics or tone? Would you consider any protest poetry?
3. Brooks’ early work featured the sonnet and the ballad, and she experimented with adaptations of conventional meter. Later development of the black arts movement in the sixties turned her toward free verse and an abandonment of the sonnet. Did you notice the shift in style from “A Street in Bronzeville” to “Annie Allen” and back to “The Bean Eaters?” Did you feel yourself reading them differently or drawn to read certain ones more aloud than others?
4. A little reference for Kitchenette Building:  
*Single-family houses and houses meant for two and three families were converted to more intensive use. Brick buildings with medium and large apartments rented on a monthly basis were divided into one-room units, using beaver-board partitions. The resulting units were often rented out by the week as furnished rooms, although the amount of furniture offered was marginal. Entire families occupied single rooms, sharing with other residents an inadequate number of bathrooms and kitchens, exceeding the plumbing capacity, and leading to a serious deterioration in sanitary conditions. During the 1940s, more than 80,000 conversions of this type had occurred in Chicago, leading to a 52 percent increase in units lacking private bath facilities.*

Based on this poem, do race and socio-economic status have anything to do with whether or not you can fulfill your dreams? How do you think this has changed since the ‘50s?

5. Brooks often makes it a point on her speaking tours to read “The Mother” aloud. She also chose to read it in the White House on January 3, 1980, even though the poem was considered “controversial.” Why would it be controversial? Does it point to two different streams in American feminism, or to a conflict between the Women’s Movement and the Civil Rights Movement?
6. “The Mother” was almost omitted from print in 1945, deemed controversial in 1980. How do you think it would be viewed in 2022?
7. In many of her poems, Brooks focuses on mothers and motherhood. Is being a mother a positive experience to Brooks?

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8. “We Real Cool” is covered in many poetry classes. Why do you think this poem has so much power? Why do you think the word “We” is used and emphasized so frequently in such a short poem?
9. Brooks poem “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi.” Meanwhile, a “Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon” and “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till” — Till being the 14-year-old black boy who was lynched in the 1950s for supposedly flirting with a white woman – were controversial and unnerving to readers. Her poems focus on mothers. Why do you think Brooks chose this perspective? Does it make it more personal to the reader?
10. Brooks often referred to her style as “verse journalism”. Do you agree or disagree? Is there a particular poem that resonates most with this term?
11. Brooks says she prefers her poetry from “A Street of Bronzeville” over “Annie Allen.” In “Annie Allen,” she focused on perfecting her poetic style but in “A Street in Bronzeville” and again in “The Bean Eaters,” she focuses more on what she calls humanity and personal experiences. Do you agree?

#### Other items of interest:

- A Poetry comparison between Gwendolyn Brooks and Langston Hughes  
<https://studycorgi.com/gwendolyn-brooks-and-langston-hughes-poetry-comparison/>
- A Current Gwendolyn Brooks Exhibit at The Morgan  
<https://www.themorgan.org/exhibitions/gwendolyn-brooks>
- Celebrations of Gwendolyn Brooks, other readings
  - o Revise the Psalm by Quraysh Ali Lansana  
<https://www.goodreads.com/en/book/show/29633836-revise-the-psalm>
  - o The Golden Shovel Anthology by Peter Kahn  
[https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/30757909-the-golden-shovel-anthology?from\\_search=true&from\\_srp=true&qid=4Hqp5eqiZm&rank=1](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/30757909-the-golden-shovel-anthology?from_search=true&from_srp=true&qid=4Hqp5eqiZm&rank=1)