

An African American Poet

Common Core Anchor Reading Standard 1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

Gwendolyn Elizabeth Brooks was an American poet. Her grandfather was a slave who fled slavery and later fought on the side of the Union in the Civil War. He was part of a pivotal era in American history.

His son married a teacher, and they resided in Kansas. The family sought the opportunities offered by a growing city and moved to Chicago when she was a baby. Gwendolyn Brooks was educated in Chicago public schools. She grew up in Chicago and stayed here for the remainder of her life. She traveled many places but always came back to Chicago.

Gwendolyn Brooks enjoyed the literary pursuits of reading and writing. She wrote extensively about her experiences, but she also wrote about urban lives -- particularly those in Chicago. When she was just thirteen, a poem she wrote was published in a magazine. In time, she was published in the books of others, but she eventually authored entire volumes of her own poetry. She became an accomplished poet, well known in the United States and abroad. She won numerous awards for her poetry.

It was not easy to get a job in writing, so Brooks worked for a while as a typist, putting the words of others in print. But she continued to write her own words, and these became important poems that inspired people throughout the world.

In addition to being a poet, she taught poetry to college students in the Chicago area. She taught them the importance of clarity in writing poetry. There are hundreds of people who learned from her in those classes, and several of them have gone on to write their own poetry. Most of them also read poems better because of learning from her how to look for the ideas they convey.

Illinois has a special role called Poet Laureate. Gwendolyn Brooks was named Illinois Poet Laureate in 1968, but this recognition didn't come until one year after she had already been named poet laureate for the whole country. She was very clear about her artistic priorities: of greater importance is the ideas a poet communicates—more than the prizes a poet may earn. But she earned many prizes. She is recognized today as a great poet and an important African American whose influence continues to be felt by subsequent generations.

When she was 83, she was diagnosed with cancer. Shortly thereafter, she died. Her death in Chicago in 2000 affected people all over the world. While countless numbers of people mourned her death, she had accomplished much in her life. She's an important part of Chicago history, African-American history, and American history, and her legacy is part of your heritage.

EXTENDED RESPONSE

What do you think is the most important legacy of this African American?

Use information from this biography and your own ideas to answer.