

Valuing the Voices of the Past: Teaching Gwendolyn Brooks's Emmett Till Poems

Kathleen McEvoy, Washington and Jefferson College

On August 28, 2010, Glenn Beck held his "Restoring Honor" rally in front of the Lincoln Memorial, just two steps down from where Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream Speech" exactly 47 years before. Beck has maintained that he was unaware of the significance of the date he chose for his rally but that it must have been "divine providence" that led him to choose the anniversary of one of the most important moments in American Civil Rights history. Beck, whose followers are almost universally white, male, and middle and upper class, asserted that the rally was an opportunity to "reclaim the Civil Rights movement." Beck and others like him argue that American civil rights are being threatened, largely by the socialist agenda of America's first African American president. The irony and hypocrisy of Beck—who once stated that President Barack Obama "has a deep-seated hatred for white people"—was not lost on those who were a part of the Civil Rights movement, many of whom attended a counter rally march to the Tidal Basin.

But the question remains: How can Beck and other white conservatives co-opt the history of the Civil Rights movement? How can they demonize minorities while still claiming to be fighting for the rights of all Americans? How can they take a word like "progressive" and twist it

into something ugly and threatening to so many? And how can they whip people into such a frenzy of fear and ignorance that they weep and scream at rallies, saying things like "This is not my America" and "I want my American back"? People fought and died to help minorities win equal rights, and here is an entire movement cloaking itself in liberty while wishing for a return to a time when women and minorities were deemed second-class citizens. It seems as if the lessons of history are becoming muddied and lost, and the truth of the Civil Rights era and this dark time in American history needs to be re-examined, and one way to accomplish this is through Gwendolyn Brooks's Emmett Till poems.

The first two lines of Brooks's poem "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till" are "after the murder, / after the burial" (lines 1-2). In 2004, almost 50 years after Till's brutal murder, the United States Department of Justice reopened the case, looking into the involvement of alleged co-conspirators. The following year they went so far as to exhume Till's body for autopsy. Little came of this investigation, however. Unlike other famous Civil Rights-era murders, there has never been any question about who killed him; after being acquitted by an all-white jury, Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam confessed to the crime in a 1956 issue of *Look* magazine. Both have since died. Two of the suspected co-conspirators were Carolyn Bryant Donham, Bryant's widow, and Henry Lee Loggins, an elderly African-American who had worked for Milam. It was Till's alleged pass at

Bryant's wife that led to his lynching, and Loggins was said to have helped transport Till and may have assisted in cleaning up following Till's murder.

The fiftieth anniversary of Till's murder renewed public interest in this grim episode of American history, and many newspapers and television channels featured stories about Till. At this time, I was in my third year teaching at (W&J) and Jefferson College. The previous year, I had included Brooks's poem "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till" in my American literature survey course, having previously taught Brooks's poems at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG). As I viewed the coverage on Till's life, his murder, and the trial and acquittal of his murderers, I cynically thought that once this anniversary passed, Till's story would slip once more into the stream of history, studied and discussed only by academics and those with a special interest in the case, known only vaguely by a small percentage of the American population—just as it was before the anniversary. Four years later, while once again teaching Brooks's Emmett Till poems, I would realize how right I was.

I often become aggravated when attempting to teach any piece of literature centered on a specific moment in history. If it happened more than ten years ago, there is an excellent chance that students will know nothing about it. Combine that lack of knowledge with students' general resistance to going above and beyond the minimum effort required—that is, simply reading the works—and teaching historical literature can

become an exhausting exercise in frustration. Yet teachers continue to do it. Why? Because we understand how important it is to teach students to both understand and value the past and because we know that literature helps students to make that leap more easily. In this article, I will chronicle my attempts to teach Brooks's Emmett Till poems, sharing my failures and successes, and offering both theoretical and practical pedagogical advice for those who want to add these two powerful works of literature to their own courses.

The Initial Teaching Experiences

Of all the literary genres, students resist poetry the most, and this resistance makes little sense. James S. Mullican points out, "As children they loved nursery rhymes and stories in rhythmic, rhyming verse, and as adolescents and young adults they retain their affection for verse in popular songs. Yet in the English classroom they profess to hate poetry" (122). However, students do not think of nursery rhymes or popular music as poetry. In 1969, Dan Jaffe explained that "Poetry is the oldest literary form, but somehow most people, even those who rarely read it, continue to regard it as the most cultivated as well as the most subversive, the most difficult as well as the most expressive" (51). Students often have trouble with the elements of poetry, such as meter and figures of speech, and this trouble with the language of poetry can translate into trouble with meaning.

Their frustrations with language exacerbate their resistance to the social, political, and cultural messages in poetry, messages that, once understood, can profoundly transform students' worldviews. James N. Johnson believes that poetry is "the means of implicating us in our own humanity" and argues that the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks does this "brilliantly" (46). In 1960, Brooks published two poems about the murder of Emmett Till, "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon" and "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till," in *The Bean Eaters*. I have used these poems not only to teach literary devices but also to open students' minds to Brooks's messages about race, gender, and the importance of never forgetting the lessons of history.

"A Bronzeville Mother" begins, "From the first it had been like a / Ballad. It had the beat inevitable. It had the blood. / A wildness cut up, and tied in little bunches, / Like the four-line stanzas of the ballads she had never quite / Understood" (1-5). The poem is told in third person: the imagined consciousness of Carolyn Bryant following the acquittal of her husband for Till's murder. Brooks presents Bryant as an ignorant, oppressed Southern housewife who tries to imagine herself into a fairy tale, all the while confronting the horror of both the murder and her husband's part in it. Marilyn Hacker argues that this poem, like others that Brooks wrote, shows "just how dangerous Brooks thought romantic thralldom was for women" (32). The Mississippi mother's pathetic attempts

to fit her experiences into the tropes of a romantic ballad fail, leaving her horrified and miserable at the poem's end. Bryant is shown in a surprisingly sympathetic light—arguably the victim of an abusive, domineering husband and a prejudiced, patriarchal culture. The poem accomplishes what B. J. Bolden calls "the dual task of providing a succinct commentary on the horrors of racism in America while simultaneously addressing the sexism inherent in white male patriarchy and white female silence" (141). Brooks gives us a woman who begins to feel remorse and a deep sense of guilt for her part in the murder of "a blackish child / Of fourteen, with eyes still too young to be dirty, / And a mouth too young to have lost every reminder / Of its infant softness" (26-29) but who proves helpless to act on her feelings.

I first taught "A Bronzeville Mother" in a Spring 2002 UNCG Introduction to Literature course themed around controversial literature. The students read a variety of banned or controversial works, including the poetry of Sappho, stories from *Arabian Nights* and *The Decameron*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. I placed Brooks's poem on reserve for my students. The class before we were to discuss it, I mentioned that "A Bronzeville Mother" was inspired by the murder of Emmett Till. As I was about to move on, a student raised her hand. "Who was Emmett Till?" she asked me. I asked if anyone in the class knew who he was; three students said the name was familiar and one knew he was a black boy murdered by white men "a long time ago." I

was dismayed that more were not familiar with the story, but not surprised. I gave them an abbreviated account to help them contextualize the poem. The next class meeting, after reading the poem aloud, I opened the discussion, not quite prepared for what happened next.

The students were fired up—angry and upset, not just because of the story of Till's murder, but because of what Brooks did in her poem. "How could she make that woman the victim?" one student raged. Another pointed out that, in "real life," Bryant never publicly apologized or admitted any kind of remorse. As another student put it, "She's just as guilty as her husband." Then one young woman claimed Brooks was a racist and said that students shouldn't have to read "white supremacist literature," even in a course on controversial writing. It was then I realized that I had not told the class that Brooks herself was African American, and, with only the poem included in the reserve holding, they had no biographical information on the poet. When I told them Brooks's race, they were stunned. In general, they simply couldn't believe that an African American woman could find any sympathy for a white woman who was complicit in the racially-motivated murder of a black boy. So I hit them with the big question, "Why did Brooks do it?" What followed was one of the best discussions we had in that class, as students dissected the possible motivations for Brooks's sympathetic portrayal of Bryant. We analyzed sections of the poem, talked about feminism and patriarchal oppression, argued about poetic license, and though we did not come to any solid

conclusions, the students went away from that class realizing the power of literature to make people think and question assumptions. One student drew a profound conclusion, for him, when he acknowledged that literature allows people to see historical events in a new way and to feel a passion for the past that mere historical fact can never arouse.

I was pleased with that day's discussion, and, in the Fall of 2003, when I saw "The Last Quatrain" in the anthology I was using for my first American literature survey at W&J, I happily included it in the syllabus, along with Brooks's poem "The Mother," which was also in the anthology.¹ I neglected, however, to give my students any more direction than to read the poems and be ready to discuss them during our next class meeting. At that meeting, we began by discussing "The Mother," and the students performed admirably. When I turned the class discussion to "The Last Quatrain," however, I was met with silence. A few students made half-hearted attempts at analysis, but most confessed they had no idea what the poem was about. I was confused. "The poem is clearly about Emmett Till's murder," I told them. "How does knowing that affect your reading of

1. Like Gertrude Reif Hughes and others, I view "The Last Quatrain" as "a haunting coda" to "A Bronzeville Mother" (193). "The Last Quatrain" follows immediately after "A Bronzeville Mother" in *The Bean Eaters*, and though both can be read and analyzed independently, they were clearly written as a unified pair. At the time, however, I had to work with the anthology I had, which did not include "A Bronzeville Mother." Now, one of my requirements for my American literature anthology is that both poems be included, in the proper order.

the poem?" More silence and uncomfortable seat-shifting. I knew then, but I asked them anyway, "Doesn't anyone know who Emmett Till was?"

This time, a mere two students claimed the name sounded vaguely familiar. I had assumed, since Till's name was in the title, that students would learn what they needed to know about him from the Internet. When I asked why they had not thought to research the name, several students said they thought it was simply a made-up name, like those of the title characters in poems by Edwin Arlington Robinson. I told them Emmett Till's story, immediately after which several students stated that they had heard something about what had happened to Till but had not remembered any details. Once they knew the story, I had them examine the poem again. This time, they were able to analyze it effectively. In addition, they liked it better—the poem had more meaning, more resonance when they knew its context.

In *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, James Loewen argues that contemporary history education works only to make students hate history. The emphasis on dry historical fact in elementary and secondary education fails to make history interesting and teaches young people that recitation of dates takes precedence over true understanding. But literature does something else where history is concerned—it brings the past to life. Like all genres of art, literature has the ability to move people's emotions while also opening their minds. Poet Marvin Bell claims that "Poetry is an emotional approach to thinking, a means to saying what one

didn't know one knew" (17). Poetry gives history a depth that students may not have experienced previously, especially in elementary and secondary settings that are becoming more and more focused on teaching to standardized tests. I am always amazed at how little people seem to appreciate history and dismayed at how little people seem to care about the past, but our past tells us who we are, where we have been, where we are going. The cliché that those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it has been proven true over and over, yet history, like many other liberal arts, remains a maligned subject. Literature has transformative power, and while I am trying to teach my students to love and appreciate literature, I am also trying to teach them to know and appreciate history.

Third Time's the Charm

It would be many years before I taught the American literature survey again, this time in Spring 2009. I found an anthology that included nearly all of the works I wanted to teach in my course, including Brooks's Emmett Till poems. I now had several more years' experience teaching at W&J, and I knew that unless I gave my students a directive concerning these poems, I would run into the same problems I had before. My prior experiences had shown me which elements students had the most difficulty with, as well as which elements I never got around to discussing because historical context always took up so much time. The class meeting before we were to discuss the poems, I gave my students three

additional assignments: research Emmett Till, research Gwendolyn Brooks, and research the "ballad."

One question that students had previously struggled with concerning "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till" was that at first glance the poem does not appear to be a ballad—it looks like it is written in free verse, like "A Bronzeville Mother." "Why is Brooks calling this a ballad?" one of my frustrated students asked. "It's not a ballad—not even close!" Of course, reading both poems together would provide students with several hints, but I was hoping they would uncover some of the answers to this question in their research. Several of Brooks's poems, particularly her early work, were written in standard ballad form, such as "the ballad of chocolate Mabbie," published in her 1945 collection *A Street in Bronzeville*, and "The Ballad of Rudolph Reed," published in the same collection as the Emmett Till poems.

I opened the class with an audio clip of Gordon Lightfoot performing his ballad "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald" so the students could hear what a musical ballad sounded like and as a segue into the ballad's prominence in European and American folklore and music.² I gave a brief

2. Surprisingly, two students actually knew Lightfoot's song. I almost went with the theme to *Gilligan's Island* but decided it was simply too light-hearted to complement Brooks' poetry. There are many popular ballads to choose from. Danny L. Miller identifies "The Beatles' 'Eleanor Rigby,' Suzanne Vega's 'Luka,' Billy Joel's 'Down Easter Alexa,' and Jimmy Buffett's 'Changing Channels'" as four examples (136). In addition to Lightfoot's song, there are also many recordings of "The House of the Rising Sun" and "The Streets of Laredo."

overview of the ballad's history, mentioning the abundance of folk ballads that have been, and continue to be, produced in America. I even told them about the infamous "murdered girl ballads" that flourished in American during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Coffin 118, 122). Then we turned to Brooks's poems. As always, I had volunteers read them out loud. Following the readings, we began analyzing what Brooks was doing with the concept of the "ballad."

My students gleefully attacked that issue. The research they had done on Till, Brooks, and the ballad had more than prepared them to consider what Brooks was trying to accomplish in these poems, not just in terms of content, but in terms of form and allusion. The hour passed in a blur, as my students shared their interpretations and challenged one another, all the while supporting their assertions not just with the poems but with the facts they had uncovered in their research. As I wrapped up, I asked what had become my standard last question, "So, what did you think of the poems?" Almost without exception, the students told me they loved Brooks's poems. They gave varying explanations, but the three underlying reasons I parsed out were that they found the poetry beautiful and moving, that they felt the poems were an important part of American literary history, and that they felt they really understood the poems.

This was, by far, the most productive class I have ever taught on these poems, and my students responded even better than I had hoped they would. What made the difference? It was all about preparation.

Why These Poems?

Brooks's Emmett Till poems offer a wealth of pedagogical potential. One interesting aspect of Brooks's early poetry is her use of traditional poetic forms, most notably the sonnet and the ballad. George E. Kent argues that in *A Street in Bronzeville* Brooks demonstrates "considerable technical resources, a manipulation of folk forms, [and] a growing sense of how traditional forms must be dealt with if the power of the Black voice is to come through with integrity" (71). Kent goes on to state that Brooks's "method of composition provided her with certain rewards and protections as she moved among forms heavy with the vibrations of tradition. An intimate knowledge of traditional forms, for example, can provide an understanding also of their limitations, and thus offer the artist encouragement, assurance, and a further defined ground for experimentation" (71-2). Brooks's ballads adhere both to the form's European tradition and its American reinvention, as well as harkening to the ballad's re-emergence in nineteenth- and twentieth-century American music. In her Emmett Till poems, however, Brooks purposefully distorts the ballad tradition.

"A Bronzeville Mother" makes deliberate and even derisive allusions to the ballad form, from the first lines to the last. As I quoted above, the poem opens with the Mississippi Mother reflecting on how she had at first imagined herself into a romantic ballad: "Herself: the milk-white maid, the 'maid mild' / Of the ballad. Pursued / By the Dark Villain. Rescued by the Fine Prince. / The Happiness-Ever-After" (6-9). However, the poem's first stanza establishes that the Mississippi Mother "never quite / Understood" the ballads she had studied in school. Susan Gilmore explains that "the bulk of the poem charts the Mississippi mother's discursive struggle to 'sew' together a plot she has desperately miscast, to rationalize the turn of events as 'inevitable'" (112). The Mississippi Mother's realization that she has been an integral part of a horrific event grows, until her final revelation: that her husband is himself the villain and not the "Fine Prince" she imagined. In the readers' final glimpse into the consciousness Brooks has created for Carolyn Bryant, they read that "a hatred for him burst into glorious flower, / And its perfume enclasped them—big, / Bigger than all magnolias" (133-135). Brooks's use of the magnolia is both metaphoric and symbolic, as the flower is closely associated with the South and with Southern femininity. These lines act not just as an indictment of these individuals, but of an entire region that insists on framing its bigotry and violence in romantic terminology.

Brooks makes it clear that what happened to Till in Mississippi is not the stuff of ballads and that any attempt to romanticize the situation is

a lie. D. H. Melhem argues that "The inverted romantic lexicon becomes a debasing technique.... In a kind of dialectic, the white woman comes to mourn and reject a false romantic posture, while the black mother, mourning her lost son, is immortalized with him in the next poem" (105, 107). In the last three lines of "A Bronzeville Mother," Brooks writes, "The last bleak news of the ballad. / The rest of the rugged music. / The last quatrain" (lines 136-138). The segue from one poem to the next shows students how poets express ideas not just within poems but also across poems. In addition, "The Last Quatrain" further demonstrates Brooks's manipulation of the ballad form. Despite its appearance, the poem is actually a variation of the traditional four-line balladic stanza. Disregarding the first two lines,³ the main portion of the poem could be seen as a distorted quatrain.

Brooks writes,

Emmett's mother is a pretty-faced thing;

the tint of pulled taffy.

She sits in a red room,

drinking black coffee.

She kisses her killed boy.

3. There is some contention over whether the lines "after the murder, / after the burial" are the first two lines of the poem, its epigraph, or its subtitle.

and she is sorry.

Chaos in windy grays

through a red prairie. (3-10)

Though there are eight lines in this part, each indented line is a continuation of the line before. Brooks also used the traditional ballad rhyme scheme of abcb (Gilmore 113), although students may miss it, as the rhymes are slant: "taffy" and "coffee," "sorry" and "prairie." "The Last Quatrain" is an example of Maria K. Mootry's point that "Brooks goes beyond the mere imitation of ballad themes and techniques to create more varied and complex structures. The result is that while on one level her ballads are simple and direct, on another level they are deeply ironic and complex, both in theme and technique" (279). Brooks's ironic use of the traditional ballad further emphasizes her point from "A Bronzeville Mother": there is no way to romanticize Till's murder or to fit it into America's traditional folk stories and songs.

In "The Last Quatrain," Emmett's mother sits with the body of her "killed boy" (7). There is no one else in the poem. While Emmett's mother is given equal billing in the title of the preceding poem, her actual presence in the poem is limited to two brief references. In the first, the husband/murderer recalls her as "that snappy-eyed mother, / That sassy Northern brown-black—" (76-77). In the next, the Mississippi Mother remembers the "Decapitated exclamation points in that Other Woman's eyes" (130). Although the title makes it clear we are to consider these

mothers in relation to one another, the Bronzeville Mother's limited presence in the poem lessens her importance. Gertrude Reif Hughes sees the Bronzeville Mother's absence from the poem as a "brilliant representation of the invisibility whites can confer on blacks" (193). However, in Brooks's ending to this story, in the ballad's "last quatrain," the most important figure—indeed, the only living person present—is Emmett's grieving mother. The stylistic differences between the poems are also striking. Vivian M. May writes, "Unlike the Carolyn Bryant character's wordy self-pity in the first poem, the brevity of the second poem evokes the Bradley character's grief, disembodiment and disconnection. This emptiness also suggests that no form is adequate to telling this story" (103). The austerity of the poem increases its pathos. Students often see this poem as Brooks's comment on the murder's greatest tragedy: Emmett Till's mother lost her only child and had to sit with that sorrow for the rest of her life.

However, the final lines give pause: "Chaos in windy grays / through a red prairie" (9-10). Melhem argues that "The Last Quatrain" "lifts the narrative from mockery of heroic into myth. Its restraint realizes the noble synthesis portended by the previous poem" (107). Melhem's interpretation rests primarily on the poem's final lines. He writes, "Winds of change and death, in Brooks's symbolic gray of despair and annihilation, blow through the moral aridity" (108). Marsha Bryant expresses a similar view, writing, "While the bursting flower of hatred signified the Mississippi's

mother's emotional response, the chaotic prairie suggests a larger change that will be both powerful and unpredictable" (134). Many critics, notably Melhem, also see apocalyptic images in both poems, and, without prompting, students often share this view. The color imagery in "The Last Quatrain"—red, black, gray, red again—certainly supports such a reading, as does the turbulent time period in which the poems were written and published. I have had students describe this poem as "prophetic," meaning that they felt Brooks was anticipating the racial strife of the sixties and seventies.

Hughes's contention that "Brooks used imagism to render a historical event placeless and timeless, not because it wasn't historical, but because it was" (194) offers another layer of interpretation. Readers cannot escape the fact that these poems capture a moment in history; however, Brooks purposefully obscures time in these poems. The only aspect that clearly establishes the timeframe is the direct references to Emmett Till in "The Last Quatrain" and that poem's mythic, ambiguous ending elevates it beyond the fifties. This timelessness is yet another factor in making these poems so pedagogically satisfying. Many people, particularly today's young people, are tempted to dismiss events of history as things that happened in the past and will not happen again, but Brooks's Emmett Till poems illustrate how the lessons of history remain important. Do women in the twenty-first century still cling to romantic notions so fiercely that they are unable to see their reality? Does America

still offer up stereotyped images of the "maid mild" and the "dark villain"? Is the "chaos" Brooks wrote of still blowing through our country? Or threatening to blow anew? It would be difficult for students to answer "no" to these questions.

While historical facts may be easily forgotten, literature like Brooks's endures. Harriet Pollack and Christopher Metress write, "the story of Emmett Till haunts American memory and imagination. That haunting surfaces in the narratives we tell and the realities we live" (1). Students will remember these poems, and, in remembering, they will never forget the story of Emmett Till.

Pedagogy and Practice

I have many goals for my American literature surveys, most explicit, some implicit. Above everything else, however, I want students to see literature as more alive than dead. In the past ten years, I have seen more and more evidence that American higher education is being overtaken by a consumer-driven consciousness. Students now want every course they take to have "practical" applications. They want to know that what they are learning will help them get a job and be successful in their careers. This attitude naturally causes problems for teachers who believe in the liberal arts tradition and in learning for learning's sake. Those of us in the humanities face the additional burden of a public perception that our fields are relics of the past that offer nothing useful to modern society.

In a 1968 review of Brooks's *In the Mecca*, Johnson wrote, "Poetry in our time has become a cult art practiced and appreciated mainly in the academy, and its estrangement from the average educated man is now... complete" (45). A year later, Jaffee wrote, "American culture has tried for years to still the disquieting voice of the poet by insinuating that what he does has no real value" (50). Here we are, more than 40 years later, and the words of these writers ring as true today as they did then. Students bring these beliefs to college and into the literature classes they take for general education credit or even as part of their major. Even students who love literature may dismiss its "real world" value. As someone who loves literature and recognizes its continued importance in society, I want to share my insights with my students. Literature does have value and relevance in our modern world because it offers deep insights into who we are as individuals and as part of a larger society. It causes us to question our most deeply-held beliefs and pushes us to expand our thinking in new ways.

Consider my students' bafflement over Brooks's depiction of Carolyn Bryant in "A Bronzeville Mother." Ask students to complete a 5-minute free-write response to the question "Why did Brooks choose to portray Carolyn Bryant in such a sympathetic way?" Some students will immediately assert that this was a feminist choice, an assertion of female solidarity. Or, as one of my students put it, Brooks chose "gender over race." Others may see it as a comment on the tragedy of murder and

revenge—that it destroys everyone involved, even the perpetrators. Others may argue that Brooks was working with the most basic of human ideas: that no one can never really know what is in another person's heart and mind. A few who have a good grasp of literature and history may see Brooks' allusions to ballads and fairy tales as evidence that she is condemning the South's tendency to romanticize itself, that through the Bryant character Brooks demonstrates how the romantic fable cannot coexist with reality.

You could also choose to share critics' views of Brooks's motivations. For instance, Bolden claims that Brooks' poetry is "rage-filled" (xv). May writes, "Brooks suggests that hatred alone is not enough: there must be outrage, action, and accountability, on an individual and collective level, for real change to occur, not tentative, pallid critiques, silent hatred, and guilty self-pity" (107). Bryant suggests, "For Brooks, the Till murder was triggered by inherited myths of pure white womanhood, the women who believed them, and the men who reenacted them.... Her poem strikes at the heart of Southern chivalry, revealing the contradictions of a culture that allowed the murder of a child to 'protect' a mother" (132). Bryant also points out that "Brooks violates a taboo by giving voice to the white mother's consciousness, figuratively entering Southern white womanhood's inviolate body" (132-3). Ask students to respond to these and other critical arguments. Do they agree or disagree? Why? Where do their arguments and insights fit in with those of the critics? For literature

majors especially, it is important for them to learn how to make themselves a part of literature's critical conversations.

Depending on how much time you have to devote to Brooks's work, there are other exercises you could use. Have students read one of Brooks's traditional ballads—"The Ballad of Rudolph Reed" is a good choice⁴—then put several questions to them. Why would a poet choose to use a traditional form for one poem and then mock that form in another? How does the traditional form expand or restrict the ballad's meaning? What would have happened had Brooks chosen to write "A Bronzeville Mother" or "The Last Quatrain" in the traditional ballad form? (My students have come up with some truly fascinating answers to that question.) If you are feeling really ambitious, put the students into groups and have them write a traditional ballad on Till's murder. To further prepare for this exercise, they could find, share, and analyze some traditional American folk ballads.

For more advanced students, you could ask them to consider the influence of other poets on Brooks. Brooks admired the poetry of T. S. Eliot, particularly *The Waste Land*, which I also teach in my American

4. Harry B. Shaw connects "The Ballad of Rudolph Reed" to "A Bronzeville Mother": "By contrast to Rudolph Reed, who knows full well the dire consequences of his retaliation, Emmett Till's innocence is emphasized in the thoughts of the 'heroine'... The point is that whether the transgression is done in innocence or awareness, the old formula holds true in making the Black person the scapegoat victim of American society" (141).

literature survey. She was also influenced by Langston Hughes and other poets of the Harlem Renaissance. By linking together these and other poets, students will see the interconnectedness of twentieth-century American poetry. Brooks's work is also important when considered as part of the history of African American literature. Brooks's embrace of the folk arts will certainly remind students of both traditional African American folk tales and the writers who wove those folk traditions into their works. In addition, Brooks' transformation following her immersion within the Black Arts Movement shows the movement's far-reaching influence on myriad African American writers. Many critics, and even Brooks herself, claim that after 1967 Brooks largely abandoned the notion of writing to an imagined, racially diverse audience and began "to speak to an audience that is collective, public and black" (Cummings 9). That does not mean, however, that her later work is inaccessible non-African American readers but sharing with students Brooks's morphing perception of herself as both a person and a poet may show them the importance of considering a writer's oeuvre and of avoiding any attempts to force that oeuvre into a single, neat category.

And there is always that last, gentle nudge: How can they connect these ideas to their own lives? That question can be surprisingly effective, as students are forced to consider what the literature has to teach them about their own existence. The last time I taught these poems followed Barack Obama's election to the United States presidency. The

controversies of that election were still in students' minds; indeed, debates were still raging in the media. Several of my students commented that while more blatant acts of racism like lynchings have become rare, the more insidious types of racism can still be found everywhere in America. They saw in Brooks's "A Bronzeville Mother" a meditation on how society can teach people all the wrong things about race, leading to tragic consequences.

Allison Cummings argues that "Brooks's place within literary history is established and firm, in part because her audiences—critics, teachers, and nonspecialized readers of poetry—are broad and diverse" (13). Cummings praises the accessible and "teachable" nature of Brooks's poetry in terms of its focus on "race, gender, and class" (13). Brooks's Emmett Till poems allow us to teach students so much: lessons concerning the ballad tradition, poets' reinvention of tradition, and the interconnectedness of poets and poems, to name a few. These poems also show students how crucial it is that they know history, that stories like Emmett Till's never be forgotten, and that there is much to be gained from understanding our past. This is particularly important now, as more and more politicians and pundits distort and misrepresent our past and our present for their own ends. Brooks's Emmett Till poems are a beautiful, complex, and moving way to persuade students to reflect on how this particular moment in history, and how one poet chose to write about it, can teach us so much about ourselves, our world, and humanity.

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