Gwendolyn Brooks was born to Keziah Corine Wims and David Anderson Brooks on June 17, 1917 in Topeka, Kansas. Her family moved to their permanent residence on Champlin Avenue in Chicago when Brooks was four. Shortly after their move (at the age of seven), Brooks began rhyming, and by the young age of thirteen she had her first poem published. She became a weekly contributor to the Chicago Defender and attended Wilson Junior College, from which she graduated in 1936. In 1937, when Brooks was twenty, her work appeared in two anthologies.

Gwendolyn Brooks won her first major award in 1943 at the Midwestern Writers’ Conference. In addition to several other honorariums (among which are two Guggenheim awards, her appointment as Poet Laureate of Illinois, and the National Endowment for the Arts Lifetime Achievement Award), Brooks was the first African-American writer to both win the Pulitzer Prize (1949) and to be appointed to the American Academy of Arts and Letters (1976). Brooks received more than fifty honorary doctorates from colleges and universities. In 1969, the Gwendolyn Brooks Cultural Center opened on the campus of Western Illinois University. After a lifetime of proficient verse writing, Brooks died of cancer in December 2000. She was 83 years old.

Gwendolyn Brooks’ work has undergone several transitions throughout her career. Arthur P. Davis, in From the Dark Tower: Afro-American Writers 1900-1960, states that “... she has changed her style as well as her viewpoint in midcareer. When she first published in 1945, she definitely held [the] position [of a literary integrationist]. In her last two poetical collections, however, she has abandoned that attitude and gone “black”” (Wright 97).
Despite these transitions, Gwendolyn Brooks offers insight into African-American culture, commentary on the impact of racial and ethnic identity on life, and a vision of the pressures of day-to-day existence throughout all of her literature. All three of these themes take precedence in *Maud Martha*, Brooks’ novel. From early in her life, Maud Martha Brown is repeatedly subjected to racial prejudice from within, and outside of, her community. She comes to regard herself as less attractive than other African-American girls because of her darker skin color, and she is repeatedly treated as undesirable by members of other ethnic groups; for example, when she is unable to pay the full price for the merchandise at a hat store, the white sales clerk treats Maud Martha in a belittling manner. The apartment in which Maud Martha and her husband, Paul Phillips, live provides a view into African-American life and daily existence. After moving into their new home, Maud Martha notices that “there was a whole lot of grayness here” (Brooks 64). Day to day life for Maud Martha is an ordeal and offers little excitement and few meaningful rewards. Despite this, a true sense of community among the residents does exist -- Maud Martha’s neighbors come rushing to her aid when she gives birth to her daughter.

This view into African-American culture recurs in several of Brooks’ other works, including *The Bean Eaters* (a view into the life of impoverished yet content elderly African-Americans) and *We Real Cool* (a stream of thoughts of poor inner-city African-Americans who have adopted a hoodlum lifestyle). The most dominant theme in Brooks’ work is the impact of ethnicity and life experiences on one’s view of life. Brooks incorporates this belief into “Young Heroes: To Keorapetse Kgositsile (Willie)” in her collection *Family Pictures*. While most readers may regard Afrika (the focal character of “Young Heroes”) as a “horror . . . in working clothes” (Brooks 15), Brooks looks up to him as the man who will enlighten the African-American race through his teachings.
Many critics say Brooks has been underappreciated. According to James M. Johnson of Ramparts, “No white poet of her quality is so undervalued, so unpardonably unread. She ought to be widely appreciated. . . as one of our most remarkable woman poets. . . .” (Wright 46). While her poetry has been well-received by many critics, Maud Martha has not gained as much praise. Noel Schraufnagel regards Maud Martha as “. . .the type of enduring black woman that has become a stereotype” (Wright 136), essentially revealing his opinion that Brooks has done nothing new in this work. Despite Schraufnagel’s rather negative view of the novel, several other critics have looked upon it favorably; for example, Barbara Christian praises the book’s “[heightening of] our awareness of the wonderfulness of the commonplace” (Wright 136).

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