

Written Task with Rationale

English A Standard Level Language and Literature

Part IV, Literature—Critical Study

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Rationale

Gwendolyn Brooks won the 1950 Pulitzer Prize for poetry for *Annie Allen*. This made her the first African-American to win the prize. My written task, motivated by this fact, is a speech given by a Pulitzer committee member explaining why Brooks deserves the prize, targeting the audience presented in the award ceremony. The speech is a fictional version based on what may likely have been included.

In the speech, the committee member evaluates Brooks and *Annie Allen*. He emphasizes the literary merit of the work by giving specific examples about how the poems develop themes, and assesses the themes in *Annie Allen* in light of different literary genres. Thus, my written task aims to meet the learning outcomes in Part IV of the IB English course - namely, to “analyze elements such as theme and the ethical stance or moral values of literary text.” (Guide). Since this is for Part IV of the course, the speech will focus less on the historical sources about the critical reception of Brooks’ work, and more on the literary features of the text.

I choose speech as my text type as the structure of speech – thesis at the beginning following with arguments supporting it – helps the target audience to follow through each coherent point easily. I maintain a formal register throughout the speech since the Pulitzer prize is one of the highest literary awards in the U.S. and hence formality is appropriate; to fulfill the text type, the paragraphs are relatively short.

*And if the sun comes
How shall we greet him?
Shall we not dread him,
Shall we not fear him?
After so lengthy a session with shade?*

Beginning with a set of rhetorical questions, this is the first stanza of the poem *Truth* which opens *The Womanhood* section of *Annie Allen*, the work (and the poet) we are gathered here today to honour. Four rhetorical questions are used together with the repeated form of “shall we...?” to create a strong atmosphere under a perplexed, flurried, and apprehensive mood.

Brooks puts herself into the community by using the pronoun “we” throughout her poetry. She represents the Black community, suggesting it has been shaded for too long a time to greet the sun. The entangled conflict between “the sun” and “shade” refers to the choice of choosing “light” or “darkness,” via making use of the personification of the “sun”. This reflects the realistic thoughts and struggles of the Black community, among which she has lived all her life.

As we can see, she is an insider.

Brooks incriminates herself in the darkness as much as everyone in her community, using the word “we” to suggest the power that connects her with the group of people she represents. (Parrott 6)

Though it’s hard to confidently perceive light under this social context, Brooks, a Black woman with artistic sensibility, seeks self-awareness, self-realization and self-fulfillment through the perception of light, just as the central eponymous character in *Annie Allen* does. However, Annie Allen is unable to actively face her situation as a dark-skinned person, setting her apart from the norms of beauty, intelligence and morality (Parrott 8) as defined and controlled by the White community.

Annie Allen is arranged in three parts, and each part corresponds to a stage in life: *Notes from the Childhood and Girlhood*, *The Anniad and its Appendix*, and *The Womanhood*.

In *Notes from the Childhood and Girlhood*, Annie’s life is largely influenced by her parents. Lines in the parents: *people like our marriage, Maxie and Andrew*, such as “lost the light that bites or terrifies”, create an upsetting tone, reflecting how the Black community accepts the darkness without thinking or hesitating.

In *the Anniad*, she characterizes Annie as an unaggressive woman, who represents a group of women in her community; satirically, however, Annie is a mock-hero that she didn’t take action even after realizing her dreams (and hence the title is an allusion to Virgil’s *Aeneid*). Facing her husband’s affair and turbulent domestic life, Annie chooses to remain meek by treating her marriage as a religion. She firmly holds the belief that choosing to be a ‘good’ woman as defined by society is admirable. Norms cannot be challenged or changed by anything, and certainly not by the pursuit of selfhood.

In *the Womanhood*, Annie expresses respect and admiration for those who are not confined by society, as clearly seen in “the rites for cousin Vit” and “Truth.” In *the rites for cousin Vit*, Brooks portrays a vibrant and feisty character that is bounded by the mundane life of cousin Vit. A two-part division of thought is developed through a symmetric structure which has a clear shift from portraying the physical body on the funeral to the portrayal of the living cousin in the narrator’s heart. The poem ends with a single word “Is.” This proud, emphatic final word fulfills the goal of all elegies: to depict the dead so vividly that it seems (to us and to Brooks) as if she’s still alive. She has, to an extent, escaped the oppressive environment most women live in.

Each of the poems in *Annie Allen* characterizes different people and how they react in the darkness. Most of them have never realized that they are living under the shade; instead, they have become

used to it and believe that the world simply is that way. Brooks views this as a human sorrow, as implied in the lines that “*The dark hangs heavily / Over the eyes*” in the last stanza of the poem “*Truth*” in final section of *Annie Allen*.

Based on the literary work *Annie Allen*, it seems clear that the search for light and truth is of the greatest importance for Brooks, higher even than searching for herself, or perfection (Parrott 14). Brooks suggests that the search is best pursued by stepping out and getting to know the community; and it is this that triggers the poet to keep writing.

Brooks demonstrates her moral outlook in *Annie Allen* through discarding ignorance while seeking the path to enlightenment (Parrott 8). More importantly, she calls for action throughout the text, suggesting that she not only sees the light herself, but also that she wants to change and to have impact on the Black community.

Annie Allen has drawn wide praise, including (perhaps remarkably) from the White literary community^①. As the critic Lesley Wheeler says, Brooks “*forced her version of the lyric to become a public forum, to sustain the marks of and even participate in political struggle*”. (Lesley 224, Parrott 7)

Looking back at the first stanza of the poem “*Truth*”, the rhetorical questions seem to ask us for answers. Indeed, “*a question itself is an action. To ask a question is to issue a challenge.*” (Hedley 129, Parrott 15)

Now, we must admit that Brooks is an outsider.

She has the ability, the courage, and determination to step out of her community to question the status quo and to recognize the need for change.

There can be no doubt that this fine poet deserves the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, honoring her excellence in *Annie Allen* as a poet, as a woman, and as a person. Gwendolyn Brooks invites us to question ourselves how we should greet the sun; but let us greet her now, as she comes on stage to collect this award.

① inferred from the Pulitzer Prize committee which can partially reflect the White literary community & Jill M. Parrott

Works Cited

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