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Gwendolyn Brooks: reformation as practiced in early works

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Gwendolyn Brooks: 
Reformation as practiced in early works

by

Jeffrey Paul Ramsay

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CHAPTER 1: THE CRITICAL DISCOURSE

Before exploring Brooksian criticism's central debate, an acknowledgment should occur. Most Gwendolyn Brooks critics begin their criticisms with the fact that Brooks is Black (virtually every critic follows this pattern; therefore, I shall not list names), and they then make suppositions about what a Black writer "must" be stating in a particular work. My thesis examines what Brooks's text says, not necessarily what Brooks "must" be saying. Influence studies on the complex psyche of an author or a reader are obviously mostly guesswork. Unless a critic offers her/his personal reaction, s/he is not inside anyone's head.

I adopt a reader-response approach that allows one to note what formal, intertextual, and other critical concerns one sees. My text exemplifies what a reader educated in literary devices and criticism might see when reading Brooks's early works "The Anniad," "The Ballad of Rudolph Reed," and "The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith." No set critical lens has been placed over the text. An informed reader's knowledge and analysis are applied and recorded. The observations and commentary's legitimacy are up to my readers to evaluate just as a lecture's points would be to my students. However, my commentary still has structure. I find certain points/commonalities concerning the three Brooks poems examined.

All three works blatantly or subtly recreate literary works from the dominant culture of "white" America. They do so by many methods. They do so by paralleling established plotlines. For example, both "The Anniad" and The Aeneid contain distraught women lovers mourning a man off in a grand, world-shaping war, and both "The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith" and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" contain dreaming protagonists touring impoverished streets. The three works utilize European literary devices such as the epic
format in "The Anniad" and the ballad in "The Ballad of Rudolph Reed." Brooks's works share imagery with poems preceding them: epic heroes, Christ figures, pioneers in strange hostile lands, dandies. The works continue traditions and practices established elsewhere in Continental, British, and American literature. Epics such as "The Anniad" convey a society/culture's story. Ballads such as "The Ballad of Rudolph Reed" in simple whimsical language retell a hero's tragic tale. Poems out of the modernist tradition such as "Satin-Legs Smith" based on the prototypically modernist "Prufrock," "make it new," with Smith being Prufrock's opposite in many ways.

Epics and ballads particularly, and modernist poems in their social actions, are didactic. This didacticism relates to the central debate concerning Brooks's early works. Houston Baker once observed that the poems have "white style and black content" (21). The discourse concerning the fuller Baker quote appears below. But immediately I can state that Brooks's three poems educate readers by using the dominant culture's style to record and analyze the African American experience. Euro-American master narratives are minimized as they simply provide the format for Afrocentric thoughts (Throughout this paper, I use "Afrocentric" neutrally, not pejoratively). One finds this pattern elsewhere in American literature. For example, Ben Franklin's Autobiography becomes Booker T. Washington's Up from Slavery. Horatio Alger perhaps inspires Native Son and Invisible Man. Willa Cather perhaps elicits Their Eyes were Watching God. Giants in the Earth becomes Roots. The Wiz is a "Black version" of The Wizard of Oz. Comically, Dracula becomes Blacula, and High Noon becomes Blazing Saddles.

This re-formation, this placing of Black content upon a white stylistic model, centers
around reformation (I use “reformation” semantically, sans connotation), the changing of a society for the better. In the case of Brooks’s early works, Black content, as well as the African American voice and point-of-view, are presented through a white style, a white format. For African American readers, the works offer dignity and empowerment, especially the empowerment brought by protest, one of African American literature’s greatest themes. A Black reader sees his/her “own” (African American history is American history) story told and placed at centerstage for all to learn from, and the minimization of the dominant culture represents African American literature’s ubiquitous protest theme.

From Douglass to Du Bois to Hughes to Wright, Black literature overflows with texts militantly seeking social change. The Brooks pieces challenge the status quo by providing images such as a woman’s war story or a Black family “intruding” into a white neighborhood. They communicate the anger, irony, and frustration of a great population oppressed. In sing-song language, the text sarcastically describes Rudolph Reed’s murder. Satin-Legs Smith, the iconoclastic alter-ego of Prufrock, presents himself as a zoot-suited king despite his poverty. The protesting Brooks’s poems exemplify protest’s dynamism and call to action. “The Anniad” and its appendix poems communicate how inappropriate apathy is in the face of mass human suffering such as war or African Americans’ plight. “The Ballad of Rudolph Reed” presents a martyr slain because of violent racism and de facto segregation.

For white readers, the poems reach them via white style. The poems’ established formats “allow” editorial and academic offices to consider the works publishable,
“legitimate,” and “intelligible;” therefore, the works reach audiences they would not otherwise communicate with. Once white readers sample these works, the texts can educate, undermine and problematize, and act socially. The Black content is history, philosophy, rhetoric, and pathos that has not been heard due to other literature’s obscuring it (e.g. *Gone with the Wind*), erasing it (where are the Black characters in story after American story?), misrepresenting it (e.g. Chesnutt), caricaturing it (e.g. Sambo and Uncle Remus), censoring it (e.g. Du Bois), or emasculating it (e.g. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Uncle Toms ever since).

The white style with black content debate has many perspectives brought to it. I wish to offer a fuller version of the noted Baker quote and then to survey the critical reaction to it. By surveying the existing criticism, my readers acquire four assets. One, they acquire the debate’s defining quote describing how white style conveying black content functions in Brooks’s early work. Two, they receive the counter-authority to one of my thesis’s essential suppositions: that African American literature using white style can still convey Afrocentric content such as themes, history, and voices. Three, readers encounter those critics who are in agreement with me to various degrees. And four, readers encounter the criticism to which my thesis reacts and contributes.

In the 1972 essay “The Achievement of Gwendolyn Brooks,” Houston A. Baker makes the following statement:

> Brooks writes tense, complex, rhythmic verse that contains the metaphysical complexities of John Donne and the word magic of Appollinaire, Eliot, and Pound. [Her high style] is often used to explicate the condition of black
Americans trapped behind a veil that separates them from the white world.

What one seems to have is white style and black content—two warring ideals in one dark body. (21)

Ever since this comment, the question of whether Brooks's texts contain white style but black content has drawn further commentary from other critics, including Norris B. Clark, Brooke Kenton Horvath, Gertrude Reif Hughes, Dan Jaffe, Joyce Ann Joyce, Haki R. Madhubuti, D. H. Melham, R. Baxter Miller, Harry B. Shaw, Gary Smith, and Gladys Williams.

Some critics believe a Brooks text using white style but containing Black content can neither convey a Black message (prototypically of protest) nor be a Black text. Not surprisingly, Imamu Amiri Baraka is one. He never mentions Brooks's work by name; but in Baraka's 1966 book *Home*, Baraka reacts to her poetry and literature like it. In the chapter "the myth of a 'negro literature,'" he asserts that an African American literature basing itself in European models cannot be an African American literature:

> There are would-be Negro poets who reject . . . 20th-century American poetry in favor of disembowelled Academic models of second-rate English poetry . . . it is this striving for *respectability* that has it so . . . A Negro literature, to be a legitimate product of the Negro experience in America, must get at that experience in . . . its most ruthless identity . . . it is impossible to accurately describe [Negro] reaction [to America] in terms of the American middle class [that includes academia]. (113)

Haki R. Madhubuti specifically comments on Brooks's Negro literature, as being
superseded by her Black literature later. Madhubuti describes Brooks’s early texts as “a result of and as a reaction to the American [white] reality” (81), and he comments, “the force of her poetic song is strained in iambic pentameter, European sonnets and English ballads. Conditioned!” (82). Criticizing Brooks for writing works that appeal to a white and mass audience, Madhubuti writes, “[she] use[s] their language while using their ground rules. . . . But in doing so, she suffers by not communicating with . . . black people” (86) and “distortions and temptations . . . forever [keep writers such as Brooks] from dealing with their African and African American perspective” (86).

Of a similar school, R. Baxter Miller describes the failure of Brooks’s “The Anniad:”

Brooks tried to write a Black epic . . . but failed. Because the style was too lofty for the theme, an unintentional mock epic resulted . . . [she] substitute[d] Germanic mythology for the Black folk life that she knew. If Latin and Greek diction replaced the Black vernacular, the folk voice [was not] evident. (146)

These critics take one side in Brooksian criticism’s most common debate. They believe her text’s usage of the dominant culture’s literary devices and conventions, “white style,” erases and minimizes her text’s social message concerning African Americans. They believe utilizing American/British literature’s dominant tools means her poetry cannot be Black literature. The above voices say Brooks’s early works, the ones examined in this thesis, fail to communicate and celebrate their Blackness.

A scholar taking a neutral position is Brooke Kenton Horvath. In “The Satisfactions
of What's Difficult in Gwendolyn Brooks's Poetry,” Horvath reviews the debate but never takes a position. “[T]hese issues are complex,” she contributes at one point (213), and she argues for both sides at different points in her examination.

Most academic readers of Brooks declare—to a lesser or greater extent—that a broad audience can appreciate her early works. They see a legitimacy, and they believe the texts communicate socially and/or aesthetically. I agree, and I shall discuss my agreement after reviewing the discourse.

Perceiving a successful communication of Black social concerns, Gladys Williams and Joyce Ann Joyce in “The Ballads of Gwendolyn Brooks” and “The Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks: An Afrocentric Exploration” have declared Brooks’s texts speak in Afrocentric voices. Harry B. Shaw assures:

[The] complexity of [Brooks’s] expression allows . . . an esoteric understanding by the readers who share the black experience. . . . [and] an exoteric approach to the statements about and allusions to subjects based on the human experience and having no apparent special connection to the black man’s social predicament. (41)

Gary Smith proposes, “Brooks learned that [the sonnet] could be used as a devastating instrument of social protest and . . . could be used to argue against racism and social injustice,” and further in the text he states Black sonneteers can create “well-crafted and universal poetry” in which race is incidental (166). Norris B. Clark argues that Brooks’s poetry, by poetry’s nature, includes the Black experience. “[Brooks’s art] relate[s] to an
existence in a multicolored world and exhorts others to share in the exhalations of the beauty of blackness,” he interprets (83). Clark writes several paragraphs in “Gwendolyn Brooks and a Black Aesthetic” arguing that all literature carries with it the culture producing it, and he perceives the Blackness preserved within Brooks’s poetry. In his book-length work on Brooks, *Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry & the Heroic Voice*, D. H. Melhem speaks of “the dynamic confluence of black and white poetic energy in Brooks’s work,” and he asserts “‘Black content’ . . . like ‘white content,’ holds properties common to all human experience and is no more exclusive or homogeneous, necessarily, than black or white form” (21). Used in Melhem as support, George E. Kent writes “[Brooks’s] sensibility produces a unified confrontation with life and art” (qtd. 21). Gertrude Reif Hughes finds Brooks’s early texts discuss feminist issues beyond a Black context. Dan Jaffe goes the furthest. His article “Gwendolyn Brooks: An Appreciation from the White Suburbs” problematizes the concept of Black poetry’s existence, and he produces a ten-page argument that Brooks’s texts exemplify craft over cause.

That all readers see interpretable text on the page is perfectly logical. Every English scholar can read English words and combinations of those words. Every English scholar has the capability of asking questions (i.e. performing criticism) about a given work. Every English scholar can see conventions and patterns within any English work. Of all the schools of critical thought, not one—not even deconstruction—claims readers are completely unable to read/perceive a text. Therefore, of course any reader has something to say about Gwendolyn Brooks’s poems. I also solidly believe Brooks’s texts contain an artistry
appreciable and interpretable in various ways by all readers. If they do not, how did I compose the following chapters?

Furthermore, I must side solidly with Shaw, Melhem, and Jaffe. African American and white American experiences are not mutually exclusive. The assertion that the two social groups cannot be scientifically declared the same human species with the same emotions and most of the same experiences is perverse and frightening. That the two groups occupying and developing the same communities throughout one American history share no common culture and engage in no two-way cultural exchange seems rather implausible.

Throughout history, even adversarial groups, when living side-by-side, influence each other.

And, I believe that—once a reader proves the texts concern African American life—Brooks’s texts act socially, for particularly the epic “The Anniad” and the ballad “The Ballad of Rudolph Reed” contain didacticism. They convey the details, lessons, themes, history, and experiences of African American culture. Why lessons and information about Blacks would be strictly for Blacks and interpretable strictly by Blacks is a mystery to me. Even if mine is the outsider perspective to Afrocentric culture—and I do not believe it completely is—the outsider, social science proves, can acquire knowledge and can add insights.
CHAPTER 2: "THE ANNIAD"

When reading Brooks’s "The Anniad," one finds certain substantial themes addressed from the source *The Aeneid*. One obviously is war, which Brooks tries to deglorify in her 1949 postwar poem. Another is that of love and romantic potential. Aeneas is Venus’s son, and he loves many women (e.g. Dido) on his journey westward to establish a great empire, Rome. Annie worships love and believes in miracles, but she loses her divine connection by the poem’s end. And as for her establishing a great empire, she is a Black and a woman in 1940s America. Like Aeneas, the odds are against her, and she will journey to the Underworld, but for her, she shall neither receive saving knowledge there nor forget at the River Lethe (her alcoholic husband might, but not she) nor inherit anything more than her kitchenette box. Let us peruse the above themes in their respective order: war, love, imperialism, and afterlife.

Before delving, however, I must concede or note one thing. Annie does not parallel Aeneas; she mostly plays the role of Aeneas’s lover(s). It is her husband whom she, a miracle/magic worker, perceives as a paladin “prosperous and ocean-eyed” (83) such as Aeneas the exiled Trojan knight/prince/sailor is. It is her husband who goes off to war and sees Annie as a “mistress” (92). On the other hand, the poem concludes with Annie in a sort of underworld, and she is the poem’s protagonist. However, any and all perspective-switching may be part of Brooks’s commentary: imagine these epics from the disenfranchised viewpoint. What if Dido told the tale? What if Aeneas were Annie?

The prominent epic element/theme Brooks undermines is war as a glorious event. “Appendix to the The Anniad leaves from a loose-leaf war diary” comments most openly
upon this. Note, "leaves" and "loose-leaf" are investigatable images. They remind one of the insubstantial such as expendable soldiers to their government, such as inane war. The words remind one of autumn, and many combat troops enter their lives' autumn physically (i.e. the last days of their lives) and emotionally (e.g. Annie's shellshocked husband). On the homefront, people age and rot like leaves, such as the woman yearning for present sexual satisfaction in the second poem. She has green fertility, but her spring (i.e. literal libido and metaphorical vitality and promise) goes to waste. Or, "leaves" can mean departing such as dying, or it can mean humility such as Brooks essentially leaving blatant protest alone. Or, "leaves" can indicate the appendix's source: from a war diary's entries comes this poem. Note, "Appendix" is capitalized, but the other words are not. Thus, "Appendix" could be a formal noun, such as a poem, and the other words could be a sentence with "leaves" as the predicate.

Within the appendix text, one finds counterpoints to Virgil and others' epic war theme. Virgil found war stirring. Much of The Aeneid's later chapters involve a mass bloodbath with long lists of the dead. Virgil wrote The Aeneid to celebrate Rome's legendary foundation. People were to revel in this violent story. The Iliad and the eye-popping, arrows-in-the-air Odyssey similarly promoted the Greeks. Brooks views modern people neither as excited nor as empathetic about such slaughter. Her poem's heading is "thousands—killed in action." She then explores how no one becomes emotionally involved in war without participating in a war. Readers sit at home and watch "the untranslatable ice" (94); an "intellectual [not heartfelt] damn" nurses "your half-heart. Quickly you are well" (94). Sarcastically, Brooks notes, "nothing exhausts you like this sympathy" (94). So, far
from killing (i.e. ending) inaction, the thousands suffering in the war foster it. Sympathy is not empathy, and death of epic proportions fails to reach (i.e. "translate", from Virgil’s Latin to "transfer") us. Possibly this false empathy, this staring at ice, a static that does not flow/convey the events’ water/essence/blood, has been universal, and even Virgil’s listeners were unstirred. The more useful assertion is that Brooks’s readers are not part of this facet of the epic tradition. Socially, epics, societal poems, no longer function as they did. And as we shall see in the imperialist discussion, Brooks and other readers may find *The Aeneid* inapplicable and distant from them.

The third appendix poem switches to personalizing war deaths just as the middle poem personalizes procreative bereavement “created” by mass slaughter. Thus, Virgil’s “dulce et decorum est...” becomes pathetically repulsive. In the sonnet, a form that allows for a problem proposed—usually about a loved one such as this one—and then solved (although this one ends with “where is happiness?”), Brooks’s persona laments her lover going to war where “coquettish death” (96) shall court him away. *The Aeneid* gets flipped in two ways here.

In the original story, Dido is under Cupid’s spell and commits suicide over Aeneas. The woman is magically charmed to her death just as a coquette’s flirtation, specious display like magic, shuts down the intellect (i.e. charms) and leads to a fall. In Brooks, possibly in equality’s name, the man is Dido. And Cupid or Aeneas (symbol of war) plays a coquette Death; possibly for Annie, the war myth, whether presented as a tease or a meddlesome god, should not compete with her. She envies and spites its power. If the persona is Annie of
"The Anniad" (a strong possibility since the poems all appear in *Annie Allen*), perhaps we see Annie giving herself epic hero status. As Odysseus is the great Greek strategist, as Beowulf is the ideal generous Norse strongman, as Aeneas is the blessed Roman empire-builder, Annie is the ideal great American lover. And perhaps Brooks the author thought love should be America's ideal. Epics teach societal values. Following a war and following a life as someone America abuses, love is not a crazy choice of a quality for Brooks to promote. Or perhaps Annie is Dido here. In the original, Jupiter calls Aeneas to continue his journey and leave Dido. Dido protests God stealing her lover away to pursue war. Here, Annie protests to a similar higher power.

Also, in Virgil (and Homer), warriors die, and then readers move on to the next fighter wounded or killed. Some victims, such as most of Achilles's, are unnamed. In Brooks, the poem is about one warrior, and we pause for this death. The entire "Anniad" before this appendix functions on this personal level; we have Annie and her husband, and they hold sufficient matter for an epic. After all, any mock epic actually calls the audience to view overblown material on a vulgar/common level.

In the mock epic proper, Brooks's text denies "The Anniad" warrior his epic glory. Aeneas was Superman; he had an entire poem dedicated to him and his episodes. He shares company with Beowulf, Gilgamesh, Odysseus, Arthur, and the Deerslayer. Within his and other epics, even servant warriors such as Achates, Aeneas's servant, receive names and descriptions.

Annie's husband remains perfectly anonymous. His name never appears. This text even further denies an anonymous man his identity. "Names him. Tames him. Takes him
off./ Throws to columns row on row,” read the lines about the “doomer . . . prophesying hecatombs” who takes the man from Annie (85). This doomer with hecatombs can be the military or an abstraction of war. Hecatombs are originally Ancient Greek mass ritual sacrifices. Now, the term refers to any mass carnage. Brooks reduces her soldier here to an animal’s level as he too gets led away with a musical crescendo (85) to war’s periodic sacrifice. Once in the military, volition and identity leave him. The lower gods, lower powers (i.e. ritual gods or idols), mentioned in the poem’s first stanza rename him. This gains significance in that this tan man (84) is African American and thus already renamed once by “lower gods,” the people running things. They “tame” him, an apt description of breaking someone in boot camp. The hecatomb animal becomes domesticated for whatever task the government would use it. They “take” this man; Aeneas, by his will, would never allow himself to be taken. Fleeing Troy, he did not. And this soldier ends up in limitless columns. He lacks Aeneas’s personality. Virgil never describes war like this for all the nameless Romans lost yet missed by some fool somewhere.

Surely, Virgil never describes such an aftermath. When Aeneas’s fighting ends, he has all of Italy to make into his kingdom as the prophecy predicts. When our soldier returns, he has a great sense of loss: “With his helmet’s final doff/ Soldier lifts his power off ./ Soldier bare and chilly then/ Wants his power back again” (87). No infinite sovereignty here. The combat experience seemingly has no reward. He continues to hunt “a further fervor” in a city that baffles him (87). And woman is not obviously fit “for recompense” (88). Aeneas fought his conclusive battle partially for the right to marry Princess Lavinia. Annie cannot fill that role for him like some Penelope. The epic formula becomes—for an instant—false.
The poem’s protagonist remains Annie, however, so let us explore her major theme: love and love worship. As mentioned, Aeneas’s mother is Venus. Annie also occupies a place in Venus’s house, but she lacks the fruitful relationship Aeneas has (e.g. Venus saves her son in *The Iliad* and *The Aeneid*). As Annie initially ponders her dream lover, readers are told higher gods forget and lower gods berate her (83). Readers see Annie falsely worships in a temple that no gods hear her in anyway. “Western clouds” (83) litter her mind. So, the West and fulfillment promised to Aeneas become refuse (and the unattainable like clouds) for her. But this “thaumaturgic lass” (84), miracle-working immature woman, worships on. In her fantasy, she sufficiently connects to God, like Aeneas, to work miracles.

When her lover arrives, she sees the “godhead” on his brow (84) and “hot theopathy/Roisters through her” (84). Seeing him and his “narrow master” (is he impressive if he is slim instead of thick?) as the godhead is pagan idolatry, perhaps part of the *Aeneid* analogy or perhaps a sign of error. As for “theopathy,” the word can mean the capability to understand the divine. Annie worships this man revealed to her. However, “hot” theopathy may indicate Annie’s intellect/understanding is subverted or overhasty. Possibly, sacrilegious lust cancels the theopathic understanding. Also, “-pathy” can represent disease, so her lover can be her religious affliction. Related to disease, Annie’s “hot” worship of this “narrow master” could connote venereal disease such as syphilis or gonorrhea. Syphilis would involve a crazed brain and blindness; gonorrhea would involve a rotting such as the disillusionment Annie experiences later. “Roister” means to boast or swagger. Again, what Annie feels is an ultimately false zeal such as a boast is to an action.
This tantraism, meditation via organized sexual exploration, continues. He “leads her to a lowly room” (85). “Which she makes a chapel of” reads the next line (85). This line’s position on the page holds significance. The lowly room line concludes one stanza. It is the concluding idea one should note about her lover and reality. Annie’s lover exists in the “lowly,” which is the vulgar, the common, or the real. The chapel begins a stanza in which Annie’s perspective appears. Thus, the space between stanzas operates as a transitional break (graphically and textually). Readers see graphically that the poetic sentence fractures just as Annie’s dreamworld is a fracture from reality. And if her inner world be that of the epic poem, Brooks’s text conveys that epic poetry fractures from reality—such as World War II and such as marriages with neither conclusive happy endings (i.e. the constant project cliché) nor disturbing details spared.

Within this room, Annie worships. “She genuflects to love” (85) while “prayerbooks in her eyes [not before her]/ Open soft as sacrifice/ Or the doolour of a dove” (85). Circumstances are wrong here; Brooks’s text compares the prayerbooks opening to a sacrifice or a depressed dove. Doves represent the Holy Spirit. And with the genuflecting and prayerbooks, I assert paganism, Roman mythology’s religious context, and Christianity mix here (another sign something is wrong?). Thus, a depressed dove indicates a depressed spirit. Using “sacrifice” without an article may indicate it is a concept furthering this depressed spirit image. Sacrifice is a theme for Annie’s life as she loses her dream and her husband later in the poem.

But presently, Annie perceives the scene differently. Within her fantasy, Annie serves as a priest such as Catholics, Greek pagans, and tantraists have. This communion with
her lover (an image also found in Brooks’s “The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith”) involves “the metamorphosis” (85), a Eucharistic image. Three perspectives inform readers this ceremony is all wrong. One, Roman Catholic priests serve celibate lives. Therefore, libidinous Annie taking this role is perverse juxtaposition. That all Catholic priests are male may also be exploited for “wrongness.” Two, Ovid, another great Roman poet, wrote Metamorphosis about heroes such as Theseus. Two commoners lovemaking (especially Annie’s lovemaking) lacks the equal importance. Three, if Annie must metamorphosize anything, she is not dealing with it in reality.

On the page’s bottom, the “doomer” discussed earlier takes the lover away. When he returns, the text potentially enters a more direct criticism of the epic tradition. Annie’s life becomes a tragedy, a circumstance the epic allows for. For instance, in The Aeneid, Troy falls, and Dido dies. However, Brooks’s details promote rejecting the tradition. Certainly, Annie’s ersatz concept of love fades away.

After describing the returned lost lover, Brooks’s text negates the description of the motel room Annie made into a chapel. The text reads, “Not that room!/ Not that dusted semi-gloom” (88). Earlier, the phrase “dusted semi-gloom” (85) appears in the chapel scene. Many illusions depart the perception of this “bacchanalian lass” (88); the “thaumaturgic lass” (84) sobers from her holy drunkenness (Catholicism arises again as readers see she performs miracles with wine. Is Catholic Eucharist as false as Annie’s fantasy? Are Protestants, enlightened like the later Annie, with their wine drunks and pagans?). Brooks’s text tells readers to think of Annie minus passing light and stars (i.e. the glorious but unattainable), minus winds that direct one to southern Europe (i.e. sirocco wafts
carrying to Aeneas’s Italy), and “minus symbol, cinema/ Mirages, all things suave and bright” (88).

Annie discovers through the seasons that “All’s a falling falling down” (89). This line may purposely imitate dialect for emphasis: “Allsa falling . . . .” Or, “falling” may be a noun; the nature of all things is to fall, for they are all essentially fellings. Readers view the entropy of anyone who believes the mythos (i.e. the official lie) around her or him. “Falling falling” may be another way to emphasis. This line relates to Virgil in that The Aeneid concerns Rome’s rise while “The Anniad” concerns one household’s fall. This relation is further an opposite. Aeneas starts at Troy’s fall and goes to Rome’s rise, and Annie starts at love’s summit and returns to earth (especially in all the rotten flora images). Aeneas begets a society. Annie, in repeated reference, winds up solitary.

Annie’s construct of love and beauty continues decaying. The same intellects who formed Greek and Roman thought, the real-life Aeneases, laugh at her love from books. The decorations she thought made her beautiful—as Dido and Lavinia were—are lost. One reads, “Little lady who lost her twill [a patterned fabric]/ Little lady who lost her fur/ Shivers in her thin hurrah” (90). A reader sees Annie, the little lady, is not substantial royalty such as Queen Dido or Princess Lavinia. Annie ranks as a “lady” beneath these people. But, Annie is a “little” lady sarcastically miniaturized by Brooks or at least lower in status than ladies unqualified by additional adjectives (except epithets and titles). She has only her hurrah, a boasting, the thinnest kind of adornment.

Eventually, Annie frees her lover (91) after “the culprit [guilty, evil] magics fade” (91) and no music (ancestors often put epics to music) plays within her hall of shade (91).
As we will see in my underworld section, anyone who manages a hall of shade may be Persephone, queen of a dead spring (e.g. libido, procreation, high green hopes). Plato maintained people never see burning reality, only its shade in the cave. Perhaps Annie still does not see. The conclusion with her memories possibly indicates so. Perhaps she is forever too passionate. This Platonic reference could recall Plato’s dislike for music’s overstimulation of emotions.

Eventually, after much realization that she is a “preshrunk droll prodigal” (91), silly extravagance limited in the first place, Annie’s lover leaves his “mistress” (92), Annie/Dido, and she has only memories (last line), which go well with a person “Stoical [about] the retrograde” (91). These events maintain The Aeneid’s plot. Aeneas leaves Dido, and Dido, even after death, keeps her memories in the Underworld. Later, she speaks to Aeneas when he journeys there. Perhaps Annie, in her world of shade, has now died. Brooks does represent her as a dead plant: “All hay-colored that was green” (93).

One choice to ponder is Brooks choosing the epic The Aeneid over The Iliad. It occurs to me that Paris and Helen capture the love theme much more famously than even Aeneas and Dido. Or if we wish to examine disillusionment over love, would not Menelaus and Helen be more appropriate? Gods meddling in and controlling soldiers’ lives occurs much more in The Iliad than in The Aeneid. Finally, Homer’s poem is more famous and familiar than Virgil’s. So, why pick The Aeneid? Brooks never blatantly indicates in “The Anniad” why Virgil’s work appears. However, The Aeneid’s theme, plot, and significance may pertain more closely to Black history.
Mythology expert Edith Hamilton describes *The Aeneid* as a story written to exalt contemporary Roman rule. For Virgil and his audience, Aeneas is the founder of "the [not "a"] race destined to hold the world beneath its rule" (220). After the war victory for what will be Rome, Virgil's text tells readers the Roman race gave other nations art and science and "ever remembered that they were destined to bring under their empire the people of the earth, to impose the rule of submissive nonresistance, to spare the humbled and to crush the proud" (qtd. in Hamilton 235).

Certainly, a Black American might react to this imperialistic master narrative. One sees *The Aeneid*'s propagandistic purpose. One sees its prominence in Western literature and thought. And one perceives explanations for and parallels with the atrocities the West has committed upon Blacks. Within this text lies an attitude one might try to unseat or at least rebuff.

*The Aeneid*'s purpose was to exalt the West and the race "destined" to rule. If one feels apart from this West, if one is a person subjugated, one's poetry might share this counterperspective. Therefore, Annie is Black and a woman. By the poem's end, she is one of the humbled and the crushed. Her people, once full of dreams and possibilities and beauty (sanctioned by African dogma and practice), are the humbled and the crushed under submissive nonresistance in this West. Readers get *The Aeneid*'s same story, but as noted, Dido or another "victim" tells it. If one is not a privileged Roman or American, one may mock or satirize/criticize anyone who is. Annie, image of the put-upon and the dreaming, mocks Aeneas, image of the rich state actualized. Perhaps Brooks sees a segregated South, a eugenics-loving academic and government community, impoverished inner-cities (e.g.
Bronzeville), and she sees an America still finding itself as “destined” to rule Blacks as it “was” under slavery. She reacts to a work most representing this attitude. If Brooks ever read Virgil’s quote about submissive, humble, and crushed people, perhaps it made her blood quietly boil—and led to a poem.

Another potential reason *The Aeneid* so lends itself for reaction is its plot. Dido is both an African and an unwilling immigrant. Carthage, her kingdom, lies in north Africa. She arrived there after fleeing her murderous brother. Troy falls by trickery, and then Aeneas journeys west through many perils. In real history, Africa was pillaged by trickery. The European imperialists were a Trojan Horse, seemingly harmless and beneficent (e.g. new wares and new experiences) but vile within their vessels. The people sailed west and established an empire they felt was their destiny: missionaries, (chosen) Puritans, fur-traders, investors, royalists, adventurers—everyone who ever practiced Manifest Destiny even before Polk coined the phrase. As in Virgil’s tale, the journey west, for Blacks the Middle Passage, overflowed with monstrosities, but these were real: dehydration, disease, brutality, suicide, et al. Once in this American Rome, only certain people prospered: the Europeans *The Aeneid* depicts.

Possibly, Brooks saw her people in Aeneas’s tale but wanted to establish how this westward journey really went. And her criticism extends to America’s treatment of other people too. Ask any Chicano or Indian how Western Americans can show up with a Trojan Horse and then wage war in the name of westward expansion, nationalistic pride, resources (e.g. Helen, the world’s comeliest woman, and the Great Plains, the continent’s ampest acres), or destinies (some even God-commissioned such as Plymouth).
For a “wench” (91) such as Annie, the West’s “overseas disease/ Rot and rout you by degrees” (91). Brooks calls Annie a lass enough that “wench” might be just another name for this naive whoregirl. Or “wench” may indicate how those bringing a disease over the seas (i.e. the West arriving in Africa, the West bringing slavery to America, or the West literally bringing smallpox to America) define her: again, submissive and humbled. The Aeneid’s ideology and politics may also be a disease brought first over the Mediterranean to the east Atlantic coast or over the Atlantic to America. The disease “rots,” which is to say kills and enervates, and “routs,” which is to say erodes and hollows like a pig digging (that is the definition of “rout”). The disease of the West, the epic tradition in print and in practice, is pernicious and vile.

Potentially, Western war ideology strikes a specific sour chord with Blacks. Annie, and Brooks, if Brooks be Annie’s alter-ego, are upset by the war, a concept celebrated in the influential Roman poem. Joe Louis may have claimed that fighting Germany for America was also fighting for the Black man (“Biography: Joe Louis”), but such thinkers as W.E.B. DuBois have claimed that war is a white man’s activity. Just look at who conquers and oppresses other nations. If Brooks shares this opinion, perhaps the warloving Aeneid made an apt target for criticism.

Throughout this chapter, I have mentioned Annie’s arrival in the Underworld. Her journey to the Underworld comes at the poem’s end, an important position. In the original poem, Aeneas visits Hades before going to victory on the battlefield. For Annie, the only happy ending is her “death.” She is left with her memories in a land of shade: “Kissing in her kitchenette/ The minuets of memory” (93). This is an afterlife. After the life of dreams
she led, comes this narrow kitchenette tomb she haunts. Her former life exists in memories like musical notes, impressions left on a place like ghosts. And note, Aeneas looks forward like the living while Annie looks backward such as we do for the dead or, if ghosts exist, such as the dead do themselves.

The Underworld is clearly her locale. Annie has a Stygian existence. She “lives” in a depressed, dead world resembling Tarturus. Passing her lover’s chair or tavern, she feels a weight in “the indignant dark” (93) as she is “derelict and dim and done” (93), qualities of a wandering shade’s existence. Ancient authors present Hades as vague, shadowy, and miserable (Hamilton 39). Other text confirms her world is Hades: “Harried sods dilate, divide;/ Suck her sorrowfully inside” (93)—like a reverse birth. As with Persephone, Hades comes to claim her, and she resides in the Underworld now. But, thanks to “coquettish Death”’s (96) visit, she is a queen beneath her surface, in memories earthly folk, those in the material world, cannot experience.

Perhaps Annie regains her theopathic connection, her thaumaturgic powers, and her tantraistic celebration but with a thanatological godhead, not a carnal/cupidic one. Perhaps this oxymoron or contradiction again illustrates that Annie’s perception errs with a lot of images.

Other death images confirm the Persephone metaphor. Twice, Brooks mentions rotted flowers such as Persephone’s occasional withdrawals (like daydreams) from earthly life leave. Once, she presents Annie, who—as her lover leaves—has “posies [flowers and poems] at her ear” (92), as a corpse with its “Soft aesthetic [flesh] looted, lean . . . behind a screen [shroud]/ Pock-marked eye-light [fly net or decaying flesh] . . . “ (93).
Four of “The Anniad”’s central themes are war, love, imperialism, and afterlife. Readers examine these themes from the disenfranchised point-of-view. Instead of glorifying a nation’s martial and imperialistic enterprises such as *The Aeneid* does, Brooks’s text problematizes such master narratives. Unlike previous epics, this poem’s handling of war does not emphasize the societal experience but rather the individual’s experience and her/his suffering. For example, Brooks’s poem removes the enchantment from Dido’s suffering in love. Readers discover Dido experiences pain and a type of death. Readers discover love can be foolish/surreal and vulgar. Typifying African American literature’s protest tradition, the text educates readers that wars and imperialistic gains do not benefit everyone. Brooks’s text re-forms *The Aeneid* so that audiences get a different perspective.

My next thesis chapter concerns “The Ballad of Rudolph Reed.” In this ballad, another traditional form for conveying societal tales, readers encounter some of what they encountered in “The Anniad.” Like Annie, Rudolph Reed is a dreamer who pays with his life—in his poem literally—for not facing his African American reality. Rudolph Reed moves his family into a “white” neighborhood, and his neighbors harass and eventually stone him. Like Annie, Reed parallels an epic hero. I assert he closely resembles Christian society’s Jesus and American society’s Natty Bumpo. Like Annie, his individual tale conveys many African Americans’ tales and experiences. From both “The Anniad” and “The Ballad of Rudolph Reed,” readers can learn what the American literary experience looks like from the African American point-of-view.
CHAPTER 3: “THE BALLAD OF RUDOLPH REED”

Elements critics miss surprisingly often in Gwendolyn Brooks’s “The Ballad of Rudolph Reed” are its Biblical intertextual parallels and its intertextual connections to the pioneer tradition. Concerning the Biblical, the poem’s plot parallels and alludes to the Crucifixion.

Doing a close reading, one discovers Crucifixion images appearing line-by-line in “Rudolph Reed.” Immediately, readers discover “Rudolph Reed was oaken/ His wife was oaken too/ And his two good girls and his good little man/ Oakened as they grew” (360).

Readers’ first and possibly primary image for this poem about a martyrdom is a tree made of the finest wood. Furthermore, trees in the English literary tradition prototypically represent the Rood, Christ’s Cross. Certainly, a ballad, a time-honored poetic narrative form meant to teach a society its tales and lessons, might use allegory, a method common to ballads from “The Faerie Queene” to “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” to, well, “Dream of the Rood.”

The name “Reed,” although not etymologically related to “rood,” may resemble “rood” as someone “oaken” resembles an oak. First, perhaps Reed within the world of the poem is a Christ-figure, but not Christ. His taking-up arms, “a beastly butcher knife” (362), may proscribe complete similarity to a Prince of Peace. Second, perhaps Reed cannot be the Rood entirely because Reed dies and remains dead. Sans a resurrection, readers comprehend his, and any other Black hero’s, mortality. As with John Henry, Annie Allen and her husband, and many real-life figures, Reed’s tale must end tragically and not optimistically. The ballad conveys America’s tragic history of Black members residing amongst or joining
into white society only to inherit harassment and violence. By comparing Reed with Christ, Americans learn what royalty is persecuted. White Americans perhaps gain a sense of guilt via this convention, common to Christian philosophy, that persecuting another equals persecuting Christ himself. Black Americans gain a sense of pride when the poem’s text equates a Black man—and his family—to such a figure.

Third, perhaps “Reed” cannot be “Rood” because the text wishes to sarcastically acknowledge most American readers will not accept a Black Jesus. Certainly, if critics such as Baraka and Madhubuti are correct, white style signifies a white audience, which surrounds itself with images of a white Jesus. The poem’s white-neighbor characters function the same way. The overall culture the readers and characters share erases dignified, noble Black messiahs/pioneers and replaces them with caricatures, enervated versions of an original. Easily, a rood, etymologically equivalent to a stiff “rod,” becoming a reed follows this pattern. Fourth, perhaps “Rood” becomes “Reed” because “rood” and “rude” are homonyms. And, audiences receive a “wrong message” if they perceive Rudolph as rude for “intruding” into the white neighborhood. Finally, perhaps “Rood” becomes “Reed” because “rood” can mean a small plot of land, such as the one Rudolph fights for, such as a graveplot.

“His wife was oaken too” (360) complements a pattern seen in Brooks’s “A Penitent Considers Another Coming of Mary” and “The Anniad.” Women can be their society’s epic heroes. My previous chapter reveals how a woman can be compared to an Aeneas or a goddess. This ballad informs readers a woman can be Christ too. “Was oaken” is line one. “Was oaken too” is line two. This Black Jesus and the Black female Jesus epitomize the
re-creation explored within this thesis. Within the poem's critical context, the two new Jesuses' arrival exemplifies the kind of arrival the Reeds make in their white neighborhood. The arrivals both challenge popular schemata and claim a place within white "territory."

If Reed functions as a Christ-figure, "[a]nd his two good girls and his good little man/ Oakened as they grew" (360) contains two Biblical references. One, his children are twice called "good." Word repetition and simplicity of register typify ballads. Thus, repeating "good" may indicate the children's understated saintliness. Such a saintliness would be understated in a white world/culture, for the children are Black. Any saints associated directly with Jesus/Reed are likely the Apostles, those surviving Christ's death and continuing His work in a hostile empire such as the one European-Americans have made, the white neighborhood acting as a microcosm. The second Biblical reference establishes my interpretation of the first. These children "oaken" as they grow. As with the Apostles, Reed's children become more like their leader as they learn from him and survive him. One should note that, ominously, some Apostles and later followers (e.g. Peter and Stephen) were stoned or crucified after Jesus's departure. However, the overall message concerning the children may be one of ironic optimism. Because of Reed's "trespass" and death, his followers become even more strongly rooted, "oakened" perhaps, to their mission. At the poem's end, the Reeds stay, and the line "Oakened as they grew" (360) may indicate the children keep establishing themselves in white-dominated society, as their father did.

Critic D. H. Melhem notes a "reed" being "oaken" is a paradox (115), but he can resolve this paradox by noting, "The resilient reed combines its flexibility with the oak."
[Oaken] [c]olor and character join in a double image of strength and endurance” (115). Melhem’s interpretation significantly supports my own. Having both a mortal and divine nature, as many traditions attribute to Jesus, is a paradox. To be mortal is to be reedlike: short-lived, common, easily swayed, essentially weak. To be godlike is to be oaken: eternal/longlasting, rare, unshakable, absolute.

Moving on to the next lines significant to my exegetical reading, lines five and six read, “I am not hungry for berries/ I am not hungry for bread” (360). These words may make a Last Supper allusion and image.

But first, certain readers may question why “berries” appears instead of “grapes,” wine’s second most essential ingredient besides water. Berries can create certain wines, particularly folk-wines, drinks appropriate to a ballad, a folk-form. And, “berries” in this instance fits the ballad form better than “grapes.” For mnemonic purposes, ballads utilize repetition and alliteration. Thus, coupling “berries” with “bread” conveys the bread and wine image while maintaining the ballad format.

Perhaps ironically, this Jesus does not hunger for his Last Supper of berries and bread. Rather, he is “hungry hungry for a house” (360) that does not resemble a tomb: no rotting plaster, no ravenous roaches, no gloom, no confinement whatsoever (360). Houses represent stability and places to live. Similarly, Blacks throughout America seek a nation in which they may stably reside without white racists threatening them with death or limiting them to gloom. Like Rudolph Reed, American Blacks envision a nation of unlimited social opportunity: “Where every room of many rooms/ Will be full of room” (360). That Reed is hollow, “hungry hungry” (360), for this great house portrays and emphasizes the deep need
for this Black temple within the dominant landscape. And, a temple Reed’s house may well be. “House” is capitalized in line thirty-one. Or, perhaps Reed shunning a Last Supper still parallels Jesus who also asked for the cup to pass over him (Luke 22:42 SJV).

Stanza nine contains a noteworthy pluralization. When white neighbors stare and glare, “the Rudolph Reeds and the children three/ Were too joyous to notice it” (361).

“Rudolph Reeds” suggests universality such as a god(head). It suggests the representation of all the world’s Rudolph Reeds. Harry B. Shaw notes Reed is later “our Rudolph Reed” (362), and he concludes “Rudolph Reed is a black prototype” (145). Shaw, although he never blatantly dubs Reed a Christ-figure, then attributes Christlike (or saintlike) qualities to Reed:

Rudolph . . . chooses physical death over the spiritual death. . . . Furthermore, he sows the seeds of oakenness, for his children [who] . . . will emulate his spirit. . . . The deliberate pressing of his wife’s hand implics that they both know that he must do as he does. . . . her stoic oakenness sets the correct example for her children and pays the highest compliment to her martyred husband while she . . . restrains herself from acts of violent retribution. (145)

Apparently, Shaw sees Reed much as I do. Critic Gladys Williams supports my position somewhat and explains how Reed’s character may function. While quoting Sterling Brown, she states:

[Black balladeers’] chief pursuit . . . is to ‘create ballads narrating the exploits of their own heroes and lives . . . to celebrate the outlaw . . . or the swift fugitive . . . or the hero of strength, courage, and endurance.’ In other words,
Afro-American balladeers make redemptive mythology, disagreeing with the definitions that slavery and second-class citizenship impose on blacks. (206)

Again, ballad hero Reed represents a group. That he may be Christlike appears in the phrase “redemptive mythology.” Possibly, the words “outlaw” and “strength, courage, and endurance” refer to popular conceptions of Christ as well. However, I wish to acknowledge a few possibilities now. No critic I have read does the same exegetical reading I have done. Seeing direct parallels between “The Ballad of Rudolph Reed” and the Bible and seeing Christian religious references in other Brooks works, I maintain my reading’s legitimacy. However, mine is only one conception of Rudolph Reed as an epic or cultural hero. I gladly concede that Reed may be seen from a myriad of angles. After completing this exegetical reading, I shall offer other intertextual possibilities.

One can view Rudolph Reed as Christ in the “silvery ring of glass” (362) that provokes him to enter the streets he dies on. After long enduring the establishment’s harassment, silver brings a hero’s downfall. And, I note a silvery “ring”, a piece of jewelry and a nooseshaped circle and the sound of money, possibly alludes to the coins Judas takes to betray Jesus.

A sidenote to this scene is the possibility that Reed imitates Judas or Peter. As in Judas’s case, Reed may fail to resist silver, the “silvery ring” of a window breaking or the riches a decent home amongst America’s privileged represents, and thus ultimately both condemns himself and commits suicide. The wife left behind becomes the betrayed sacrifice in this schema. Certainly, Brooks’s body of works allows for this image, especially when a scholar considers how many Brooks women are left suffering via men’s violence and wars:
“Ballad of Pearl May Lee,” “The Anniad,” “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till,”
and “In Emanuel’s Nightmare: Another Coming of Christ.”

Related to an inability to resist silver, Reed, like Peter, exhibits an inability to resist violence after silver threatens someone he loves. Upon seeing Jesus seized, Peter grabs a sword and mauls Malchus, a high priest’s slave (John 18:10 SVJ). Upon viewing Mabel (another female Christ figure?) bleeding, Reed takes-up “a beastly butcher knife” (362) and hurts white men (362), slaves to their racist philosophy.

A conclusive thought concerning Reed’s Biblical allegory is the following. Whether Reed, his wife, or his kids fulfill the role of messiah, disciple, or martyr, that a Black character appears as a Biblical figure supports the reformation Brooks’s texts practice. A Black presented as a revered figure ceases to be a caricature. In America, Christian philosophy plays a prominent role. The majority of Americans are churchgoing Christians or at least professing so; thus, a Black Jesus brings Blacks into the rest of the fold. If a Black is Jesus, he ceases to be Other to the dominating white society.

Besides Biblical figures, what other figures can Reed be? What other intertextual relationships does he hold? Gladys Williams informs the poem’s readers:

The image of the oaken Reeds embodies the unique reality this black family endured. . . . stanzas two through five . . . reveal the extent to which [Reed] is controlled by a dream so overpowering that he cannot comprehend any event that would deny it. Stanzas six through nine project the tensions between the real world and the world Mr. Reed dreams of. . . . The dream becomes a nightmare because a man must be oaken and must dream too. (221-22)
Reed exists much as Annie of "The Anniad" exists: surrounded by devastating realities (e.g. infidelity, hatred) yet living in a dreamstate. Both are also alone despite having spouses. After the war, Annie's husband becomes a withdrawn, often absent, stranger. Before entering the streets, Reed squeezes his wife's hand, and then, he faces his battle alone. Such loneness epitomizes cultural heroes such as Williams and Shaw assert Reed represents. Images of Beowulf versus the dragon, Achilles versus the Trojans, John Henry versus the mountain, or Invisible Man versus the electric company come to mind. Achilles, from The Iliad: the Wrath of Achilles becomes particularly pertinent when one reviews stanza fourteen in which Reed enters a battle rage following an assault upon innocent follower Patroclus/Mabel.

That "[he] ran like a mad thing into the night . . . He was no longer thinking" (362) further indicates Reed maintains a surreal view even when a real lynch mob awaits him. Images of King Canute, Richard III, Madame Bovary, Willie Lowman, and of course Don Quixote come to mind. Perhaps this ballad's didactic message, especially for Blacks, involves keeping hard, oaken reality in one's eyes such as "oak-eyed" (362) Mrs. Reed simply removing the bloody gauze, insubstantial material from a stained moment, and advancing to cleaner times as "change[ing]" (362) the gauze suggests. One should not act as her husband who widowed and orphaned his family. Such a message complements other Brooks poems problematizing violence's status as a means to an end. Other critics often call these works her "Anti-war Poems." However, please note, critic Harry B. Shaw would take exception to my suggesting Reed acted crazily or transgressed. Shaw, as quoted above, believes Reed celebrates a physical death over a spiritual one.
One finds other literary icons “The Ballad of Rudolph Reed” reinterprets. Especially in 1960, the ballad’s publication year, Natty Bumpo, politically-incorrect pioneer American epic hero, still holds prominence. He and Reed share much in common. As stated, Reed ultimately lives alone, and in *The Leatherstocking Tales*, so does Bumpo. Bumpo is a pioneer living amongst Indians and Frenchmen who hate and threaten him; Reed resides in similar territory, “a street of bitter white” (361). Bumpo adopts Indian ways yet upholds his white identity. Reed takes on a “white” home yet embodies Blackness. One has Deerslayer to attain a remarkable number of kills while the other has a “thirty-four” (362) he manages to cap four white men with. In *The Pathfinder*, Bumpo loves the innocent Mabel so much he nearly quits frontier life and thus nearly loses his identity. In the ballad, Reed loves innocent “small Mabel” (362), who “whimpered all night long/ For calling herself the cause” (362), so much he quits his life.

A predominant reason for reinterpreting Natty Bumpo, American pioneer paragon, into Rudolph Reed is, firstly, to convey Black pioneers’ fates of erasure (Mr. Reed) or silence and suppression (stoic Mrs. Reed). This pattern occurs both in real life and in literature.

Historically, John Hanson, a Black man, oversaw the Continental Congress’s first meeting under the Articles of Confederation; thus, some scholars declare him America’s first president. Yet, this significant Founding Father disappears amongst non-presidential figures such as Franklin, Hamilton, Burr, Henry, and Hancock (a white man famous only for being first). Later, President William McKinley may have had Black blood, but still few acknowledge his identity. Pedro Alonzo Nino navigated Columbus to America, and Matthew
A. Henson stood before Peary at the North Pole, but both trailblazers are footnotes, not chapter headings, in historybooks. Who were the Black congressmen shaping the nation after the Civil War? Besides Bill Pickett, a figure few scholars know anyway, who were the Blacks sharing the American Frontier with Lewis and Clark, Crockett, Astor, Young, Houston, Earp, James, Twain, and Roosevelt?

Within literature, audiences witness the Black pioneer’s erasure or reduction. Huck Finn shares his Mississippian odyssey, but Jim accounts few of his trials. The Great Gatsby’s exploration through privileged America merits canonization, but the Invisible Man’s more extensive, more iconic trip does not. Ishmael narrates *Moby Dick*’s epic of exploration while “squires” Queequeg, Tashtego, and, lastly-mentioned in the book, Daggoo, a “coal-black Negro savage” (Melville 119), remain quiet as the ghosts the text often compares them to. White immigrants’ trials merit *The Jungle*. Black immigrants have—well—the Slave Narratives perhaps.

Therefore, “The Ballad of Rudolph Reed” educates white readers about prototypical pioneer Rudolph Reed’s fate. Reed, the minority, attempts establishing a home on the dominant landscape, but the dominant society, represented by a street and rocks, hard(ened) geographical objects, harasses and harms him. Reed’s story proscribes his being a Natty Bumpo. Unlike Bumpo, a Black man cannot safely journey amongst historically hostile people with ways different from his own. The situation is as though Manifest Destiny, an American pioneer ideal concerning expansion, does not apply to Blacks. Reed cannot have his “every room of many rooms . . . full of room” (360).
Another way the text remakes the pioneer tradition is by displaying the suppression of Black militancy when Black Americans desire a nation. Whites may use militancy to establish “their” territory, and the dominant literature, the master narratives, may celebrate white aggression. The examples are too numerous; thus, I shall engage in some listing.

William Bradford and the Pilgrims’ *Of Plymouth Plantation* is a treatise and history of anti-Catholic, anti-Indian, imperialist, terrorist, supremacist bigots, and it foreruns Manifest Destiny. Yet, today its events concerning angry Anglos with “God on their side” seizing land are an essential history, a master narrative, taught to elementary school children. And, young Catholics, Jews, atheists, and moderate Protestants are told the Pilgrims are role models and icons. The Iroquois, the non-whites, are portrayed as non-resistant and assimilationistic as they dine and serve their oppressors and murderers. Within “The Ballad of Rudolph Reed,” readers see a pilgrim journey from an uncomfortable land to a new opportunity. But, with a caustic irony, this Black man cannot be a great founder such as a New England Puritan. The masses already on the landscape do not reward and abet his bravery and enterprise.

An even more central example of legitimized white militancy is the *Declaration of Independence*. As educated readers know, slaveholders baldly stated all men are equal and deserve life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The slaveholders and other privileged white men then had the “right” to take up arms and engage in guerrilla warfare. African Americans ever since have found that this document, American culture’s foundation, does not apply to them. And certainly every time African Americans feel the Spirit of ’76, the dominant literature marks the militant resistance negatively if it marks it at all. Of the hundreds of slave uprisings between 1619, American slavery’s beginning, and 1863,
slavery’s ending, only Nat Turner’s Rebellion receives consistent attention, and audiences have the gall to debate its morality. All of this relates to the tradition of the passive Black, a non-threatening caricature. Similarly, whites can be war heroes in literature while Blacks, although strongly part of the United States military since the Civil War, must disappear or die like the female reckless virgin—out of her “place”—of an earlier literary age.

My next thesis chapter concerns “The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith,” a poem containing a protagonist who shares many of Rudolph Reed and Annie Allen’s habits but who avoids death and may experience a resurrection instead. Similar to Reed and Annie, he dreams his way through his harsh reality. This dreaming imitates that of J. Alfred Prufrock, the modernist icon of Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” Unlike his three intertextual siblings, Smith’s dreaming redeems, saves, and frees him to a great extent. Perhaps he is the outlaw or swift fugitive Gladys Williams discusses (206). Unlike Reed, Smith escapes. And, Smith surely represents a group as his text openly discusses.
CHAPTER 4: “THE SUNDAYS OF SATIN-LEGS SMITH”

Gwendolyn Brooks’s “The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith” reinterprets the dominant English literary tradition in its retelling of T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” In Brooks’s poem, one encounters the Black Prufrock, an image-conscious lightweight dreaming himself out of his circumstances.

Before comparing the poems’ bodies, one can examine the titles alone. Both works’ titles contain a similar pattern. In six to seven words each (depending on how one groups), readers encounter—in order in both cases—the article “the”, pleasantly-connoted nouns, the preposition “of”, a pompous two-word and trisyllabic first name, and a family name. “The” indicates singularity and, thus, importance. Both Prufrock and Smith perceive themselves as important. Prufrock may see himself as Michelangelo, an artist of love. Smith sees himself as a king as this chapter’s further text shall prove. “Sundays” and “Love Song” share a connotation of pleasantry, a concept both poems may reveal as ironic to associate with their protagonists. “Satin-Legs” and “J. Alfred” indicate pomp and ersatz royalty. J. Alfred has the name of England’s only “great” king, but “Alfred” is his middle name, which the text does not have him go by. His “real” name is the abbreviated/minimized “J.,” which Prufrock seems too ashamed to publicly acknowledge. Satin-Legs wears a fine cloth, but a cloth that becomes common and “vulgar” when compared to silk and other finer suit fabrics. Often, satin is a fairly cheap fabric that only looks shiny and elegant. Via rare punctuation, both men acquire a higher social status. J. Alfred abbreviates his first name. Most people abbreviate their middle name; therefore, J. Alfred has given himself a rarer appellation. Satin-Legs has a hyphenated name, something of a higher linguistic register. Hyphens are
rarer and more complex than other punctuation marks (at least students learn about them later), and they synthesize words into one. Thus, the hyphen makes Satin-Legs appear more sophisticated and big. "Prufrock" and "Smith" contrast excellently. The former is no one's name most readers have ever encountered; thus, Prufrock stands separate from society. The latter is literally the world's most common name (both the English "Smith" and its equivalent in other languages); thus, Smith may be very much part of his society.

Comparing the poems' bodies, readers find the following. As in Prufrock's fantasy, Smith has women's approval in an ironic manner. Famously, Prufrock perceives, "In the room the women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo" (3, 4). From “The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith”’s beginning, readers know Smith receives similar approval, “Inamoratas, with an approbation,/ Bestowed his title. Blessed his inclination” (26). Women, of the sweetheart or light variety, “inamoratas,” make Smith into a great man by their speech. Smith is Michelangelo, some distinguished person worthy of a title and of religious connotation. Both Prufrock and Smith deserve a high register describing their sexual interactions: “Michelangelo, ““inamoratas,” “approbation.”

The Latinate lexicon at the beginning of “The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith” parallels “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” Eliot’s poem quotes Dante’s Inferno for an epigraph. Brooks’s poem begins similarly. However, one should note Brooks’s first lines offer broader access than Eliot’s. The latter's Latin almost certainly requires a footnote. The former requires only a dictionary or a respectable knowledge of vocabulary.

Potentially, the above word choices introduce the images of the two protagonists as
dressed-up phonies. Few men, other than Michelangelo, deserve to be called
“Michelangelo.” Certainly, someone turning to whores for sexual experiences is not a
“Michelangelo,” great artist, of lovemaking. Nor is balding Prufrock, pants rolled soon (4, 7), the refined, beautiful image an artist would make. Thus, calling him Michelangelo has
irony. Further irony arrives in the fact the Italian master was gay; therefore, women would
not be the partners complimenting his lovemaking. Perhaps Prufrock, like Smith, seeks a
more empowered social position (i.e. heterosexuality).

Smith, amongst his fifty-cent words, is also described in terms he cannot live up to.
Why would any common man deserve such rare language? Why would a common man
receive approbation, a title, and a blessing? The text further in the poem’s body depicts
Smith as a simple man dressed in luxury that does not change his central identity. The text
discusses giving Smith his fineries. “[W]ould you deny him lavender/ Or take away the
power of his pine?” (26) the text asks. It answers one should leave him his fineries “Unless
you care to set the world a-boil/ And do a lot of equalizing things,/ Remove a little ermine,
say, from kings,/ Shake hands with paupers and appoint them men” (27). The “you” is most
likely white readers, the haves most able to set the world a-boil and equalize people, the
haves who do not shake hands with the paupers in Smith’s neighborhood. Therefore, while
the poem overflows with examples of Smith’s facade, the text also asserts his image’s
legitimacy. Just as Annie is heroic and Rudolph is paragon, Satin-Leg’s is regal for his
heritage, alluded to several times.

Eliot’s next stanzas contain the poem’s fog, delirium, and cat king images. Brooks’s
text next reads, "He wakes, unwinds, elaborately; a cat/ Tawny, reluctant, royal. He is fat" (26). Eliot’s poem mentions delirium (3); Brooks’s mentions awakening. Eliot’s poem has a fog “[c]urled . . . about the house” (3); Brooks’s has a man unwind. Eliot’s poem has a cat over the city; Brooks’s has a cat in human form. In each pair, Brooks’s poem reduces Eliot’s images. Within a context of wakefulness, the opposite of an etherized patient and daydreaming Prufrock, Brooks’s poem applies landscape phenomena to a single person, a king who “rises in a clear delirium” (26). Perhaps Smith must be elaborate instead of just being what he is, or perhaps Smith, despite the environment he mentally escapes from, has the clarity to make himself royal. The conception of Smith as false royalty continues. He “designs his reign” (26), and he overdresses such as a king going to war (27-28). Of course, true, legitimate kings need not go to war. Their sovereignty is established.

At the poem’s end, Smith’s lady also appears to be false royalty. She wears “Queen Lace stockings with ambitious heels” (30). The mere fact readers focus upon her feet confirms her as ersatz royalty. Others look at her feet as they would groveling before a queen. However, feet are the lowest and one of the dirtiest parts of a body, and only the lace stockings, a weak substance, make her royal. Also, her heels are “ambitious.” They try to raise her beyond her true height. Lines about her make-up and accessories confirm she possesses only royalty’s mask: “three layers of lipstick” (31) and “the most voluble [convoluted] of veils” (31).

Women in Prufrock’s world can be similarly specious. Prostitutes have “Arms that are bracelet ed and white and bare/ [But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!]”
These women's royal ornamentation appears to be truly the women, but in revealing light, the women are an unattractive brown. This condemnation of brown hair relates to Smith at the movies where he cannot cheer for a blonde woman. Once again, readers encounter Prufrock and Smith as similar but opposites.

Certainly, Smith might function as an opposing answer to Prufrock, an icon of white, Anglo literary tradition. Easily, Smith may resemble Prufrock only enough for readers to identify Smith as Prufrock's altered ego. The epigraph heading Eliot's poem comes from Dante's *Inferno*. The words concern confessing an evilly led life. Smith does not see his life as one evilly led. Sunday after Sunday, as "The Sundays . . ." implies, Smith engages in the same activities of gluttony and lust (30). And, unlike Prufrock, he does not ask "Do I dare to eat a peach?" (7). He goes to Joe's Eats and has platters that fill him. "At Joe's Eats . . . You go out full" (31) read the lines. And those platters hold meat, not fruit. Prufrock acts as though he were Adam resisting temptation and the Tree of Knowledge. Earlier, Prufrock eats toast and tea after dressing-up (27). Smith consumes a hearty meal.

Smith dynamically keeps moving, and he accepts human voices. Prufrock, withdrawn into his imagination, "[has] heard the mermaids singing, each to each . . . Till human voices wake us, and we drown" (7). As Smith tours the street, he hears residents singing the blues. "He loiters . . . out of [vendors] rolls a restless glee./ The Lonesome Blues, the Long-lost Blues, I Want A/ Big Fat Mama" (29) read the lines.

Smith is literally more dynamic than Prufrock. Smith walks, and he goes places: Joe's Eats, the movie theater (where he boos unlike complacent Prufrock), and to bed.
Possibly, challenging white stereotyping, Smith is an active and pro-active Black as opposed to the timid white he parallels. Prufrock compares himself to a pinned bug: “sprawling on a pin . . . I am pinned and wriggling on the wall” (5).

Another Prufrock/Smith relationship leads to an exegetical critical angle. “Would it have been worth while . . . To say: ‘I am Lazarus, come from the dead,/ Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all’” (Eliot 6), read lines in which Prufrock never expresses what he wishes to say about life. Smith is the action to Prufrock’s theory. From society’s ghetto underworld, he is a Lazarus risen to proclaim himself. Before actually mentioning a “vault” (27), “The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith” describes Smith as “reluctant[ly]” (26) awakening, requiring scents and flowers, and “if he should think of flowers/ It is in terms of dandelions or death” (27). Within the vault are Smith’s wraps. However, readers should note that these wraps are not typical drab shrouds. Their loud colors announce the life Smith fervently partakes. The colors resurrect this Black king, as preceding lines describe him. As Prufrock named for Alfred the Great functions as a timid nobody, so Satin-Legs by adorning his resurrection clothes revitalizes—both visually and olfactively (e.g. lavender, flowers) his royal heritage.

And Smith may be more than a Lazarus. He may represent a King of Kings, Jesus. Besides rising from a tomb, Smith resembles a messiah in other ways. One, Smith appears to be a Black man. Biblical description informs readers Jesus may have certain hair and dark skin. The text reads, “His head is pure gold; his locks are palm fronds, black as the raven” (Song Sol. 5:11 SJV). Some scholars, additionally noting that the original Hebrews were
Black, assert the above details mean Christ was Black. Smith, this bridge between the predominant literature/thought and Brooks’s reinterpretation, may function similarly. Or, should a reader assert Christ belongs to all the cultures where the figure has been introduced, a reader discovers Smith has a “variegated” (28) appearance combining many colors. Two, Smith rises on Sundays and puts on his extravagant Easter best. Three, readers encounter coins, gold, “[p]romise piled over and betrayed”, a kiss, and an embrace (28)—Passion images for a Black king persecuted.

D. H. Melhem contrasts Brooks and Eliot’s poems by noting Brooks’s text, “places the protagonist solidly in his environment... Prufrock... lives chiefly in his mind. His account differs from ‘Satin-Legs’... in social attitude... Eliot would improve us morally and spiritually. Brooks... probes social ills at their roots in poverty and discrimination” (34).

Harry B. Shaw and Maria K. Mootry share Melhem’s belief that Satin-Legs Smith’s poem concerns the conveyance of reality. Mootry states, “The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith” “reinforce[s] the designation of Brooks as a realist” (23). However, Mootry adds:

All of [Brooks’s] characters have both ratiocinative and imaginative capabilities; they have the ability to reason, dream, muse, and remember... From the realm of ‘raw and unadorned life’, Satin-Legs creates his own world of bright colors, splendid attire, and soft loves in the midst of a cheap hotel’s odor and decay... Brooks’s characters... are infinitely human because at the core of their existence is the imaginative intellect. (23)
Harry B. Shaw also finds Smith a man using an imaginative mind, spirit, and other means to escape a stark reality of "impotence and inferiority" (66). Shaw asserts that "[Smith] works at being blithely oblivious of the true perspective of the world around him" (66) and that Smith seeks to avoid "the reality of who and what he is" (66) much as he encounters one image after another of his spirit-slaying reality.

To whatever extent Smith perceives his reality, the poem readers encounter him in acknowledges it and discusses it more than Eliot's poem in which readers must ascertain the women coming and going are prostitutes. And readers do not encounter a foggy city in Brooks's poem; the text openly offers urban and African American reality. Discussing denying Smith his perfumes, the text acknowledges "[Smith's] heritage of cabbage and pigtails/ Old intimacy with alleys, garbage pails" (27) and his heritage out of the South. His neighborhood cannot be denied despite Smith's dressing-up and seeking the psychological opiates of eating-out, popular entertainment, and casual sexual gratification. He—and the reader—cannot escape. "He dances down [avoids?] the hotel steps that keep... spat-out purchased kisses [prostitutes] and spilled beer [excessive inebriation]" (28) readers learn. Walking down the street, "He hears and does not hear/ The alarm clock meddling [noise pollution and a wake-up call]... a woman's oath;/ Consumption's spiritless expectoration... Restaurant vendors weeping" (29). Next, readers encounter a stanza explaining why Smith cannot love Prufrock's classical music and art that Smith's neighborhood does not contain. The text explains a person must experience music, the blues, through memories such as punishment, painful mattresses, his father's "little" dream, his sister's prostitution, "all his skipped desserts" (30), all his missed sweet rewards. Finally, a stanza best stating reality's
influence arrives, “The pasts of his ancestors lean against/ Him . . . Fog out his [fabricated?] identity” (30), and the ancestors are a multitude (30). Smith judges, “That everything is—simply what it is” (30). So, Smith, despite the clothes, scents, hearing, and vision altering his appearance and perception, ultimately accepts a base reality or at least has a basic “everything . . . simply what it is” before him to judge. Prufrock perceives through artificial, sense-dulling ether. Smith has natural lavender and other brilliant smells. Prufrock’s classical music is an abstraction. Smith’s blues are lyrical and direct.

Why offer a Black Prufrock who cannot lose his identity and environment in a dream? One answer is, as with many oppressed minorities, myths concerning Blacks abound. Unlike Prufrock’s London, Smith’s Bronzeville (the poem appears in A Street in Bronzeville) fails to be a daydream. Smith’s ancestors, his people, will speak until Smith’s facade breaks down. White readers experience a similar effect. Regardless of any stereotypes, caricatures, erasures, minimizations, or other constructs whites make of Blacks, the history, landscape, and influences of Blacks will act like the poem’s “alarm clock” (29), awakening and disrupting their reverie. As in “The Anniad” and “The Ballad of Rudolph Reed,” harsh realities such as war and racist violence cannot be ultimately avoided. As in the two previous chapters’ poems, Satin-Legs Smith’s story perpetuates didacticism. Brooks’s poem shows readers what a ghetto looks like, how it sounds, how the people feel, and how the ghetto’s society forms and becomes what it is. Who other than Prufrock does Eliot explore?

Another way Satin-Legs converts J. Alfred for an Afrocentric text is by following African American literature’s “we wear the mask” tradition made most famous in Dunbar,
Angelou, and Chesnutt. Blacks in literature, as in real life, often assume a happy face to deal with the public and the society white dominance has created. But, within Blacks, a rage and a sadness exist behind masks. Just as Prufrock feigns royalty and importance to disguise the aging pathetic man he is, so too Smith adorns himself like a gay king to disguise the smell and images of his past and present. Like other African American literary figures, he masks the pain of “all his skipped desserts” (30). Smith is Prufrock but with a Black life and purpose.

A final purposeful way Smith and Prufrock parallel is their involvement in English literature’s wise fool tradition. Prufrock says, “I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be [I] am . . . one that will do/ To swell a progress, start a scene or two,/ Advise the prince . . . but a bit obtuse;/ At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—/ Almost, at times, the Fool” (7). Smith fits this description nearly perfectly. Smith even dresses like a jester. His pants are “variegated” (28), and he wears “zebra-striped cobalt” (27), “ballooning pants” (27), and “hysterical ties” (28). But, he has a different message. Smith is not one of America’s privileged, one of its princes. Unlike Hamlet, Smith will not be a tragedy despite his father’s fate (30), and Smith’s final image is life-affirming lovemaking, not mass death. As covered above, Smith’s text advises the prince, the whites. And, Smith is a bit obtuse when viewing his neighborhood. However, Prufrock is “Almost . . . the Fool” in that he never attains the status of someone influencing his environment/society. The English model asks whether he dare do as he wishes. Smith achieves Shakespearean wise Fool status. As with As You Like It’s Touchstone or King Lear’s Fool, Smith comments on absurd situations/conditions and attempts changing them.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

This thesis’s goal has been to examine three examples of Brooks’s poetry recreating and retelling literary works from the dominant Anglo-American culture. In company with other African American literature, Brooks’s poems exemplify a protesting didacticism that may reform, which is to say improve, overall American society by conveying Afrocentric stories and messages. The poems describe African American life and critique overall American society. And, far from proscribing white readership, the poems actually have much to say to the European-Americans to which such works as *The Aeneid*, *The Bible*, *The Leatherstocking Tales*, and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” “belong.”

Within an epic, a ballad, and a modernist archpoem, readers encounter Black epic heroes, messiahs, fools, and examples. They meet the heroes of the “redemptive mythology” Gladys Williams writes of (206). Rudolph Reed and Satin-Legs Smith are outlaws whose trespasses and indulgences redeem and affirm Reed and Smith and all Blacks. All three protagonists are the swift fugitive capable of overcoming their environments—even temporarily—by using their minds and spirits to escape the oppressive atmosphere white America has created. No one can deny all three individually exemplify “the hero of strength, courage, and endurance” (Williams 206) despite their hostile surroundings disrupted by war, hate crimes, and poverty. When a reader considers that, at some point in their respective poems, each represents all Blacks and that all three are mimetically correct, the works compliment all African Americans.

Potentially, as occurs between Ebonics and Standard American English, the poems communicate to the widest audience when they “speak” the dialect every American has been
taught, the literary forms every American has been taught. As Houston Baker famously points out, the poems have a white style. The poems are an epic, a ballad, and a modernist model, forms that many scholars consider European. However, the poems' source is still Black America. Therefore, the poems necessarily contain a Black content. And they contain a universal human content as D. H. Melhem and Dan Jaffe assert. A reader finds beauty in poems with a white style but Black content communicating with all Americans.

Related to using a common language, another topic for exploration concerning Brooks's texts as recreations and reformations is that of "passing," a prominent African American literary theme. "Passing" refers to the practice of a Black appearing to be a white so as to possess social mobility and power. To what extent are Brooks's three poems examples of passing? And to acknowledge a concern Baraka, Madhubuti, and other Black scholars raise that evolved Brooks's poetry, to what extent should the poems pass? Black critics such as Brooks encountered in the 1960s argue African American literature should remain in the Black community and address a Black audience.

However, I am not sure the three poems do not succeed in remaining openly Black despite the poems' white stylistic elements. All three have plots featuring Black protagonists. The plot is the most open and memorable level a literary work has. All three poems relate African American history and culture.
WORKS CITED


