

ENG 102

July 1, 2011

Identity of a Pool Hall: Evaluation of “We Real Cool” by Gwendolyn Brooks

What are pool halls known for, and what kinds of people hang out there? Stereotypically, pool halls are known for their low lights, smoky atmospheres, and crowded bars; likewise, the people that frequent these establishments are often seen as hustlers, drunks, and people whose futures do not seem very bright. All pool halls and their patrons do not fall into these stereotyped descriptions, but one poet has captured just that identity in her poem “We Real Cool.” Here, Gwendolyn Brooks gives readers a look at seven boys that are skipping school to play hooky down at the local pool hall. In the short poem, readers get a clear picture of the identity of the boys and what they are feeling as they stick their noses up at the establishment that tells them they must be in school. In “We Real Cool,” Gwendolyn Brooks describes this pool hall setting and rebellious characters with the elements of irony, imagery and language in an effort to show that a shady life will only lead to destruction.

Irony in this poem is initially hard to find, but once a reader really looks at the words used, he will see Brooks’ comment on the rebelliousness of the boys. All throughout the poem, Brooks uses very active words to describe what the boys say they are doing. The boys say they “[leave] school” (2), “[l]urk late” (3), and “[s]trike straight” (4). These are all active notions of the boys leaving school and heading down to the pool hall to play a little pool. She has the boys continue to talk about their active endeavors: they “[s]ing sin” (5), “[t]hin gin” (6), and “[j]azz June” (7). It is almost as if the boys are celebrating their rebelliousness. However, the irony

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Commented [a2]: Topic sentence sets up the topic of the paragraph (irony in the poem) and links to the thesis analysis (rebellion and shady life).

Commented [a3]: Brackets are used when writers change the verb tense, punctuation, or clarity of what is quoted

Commented [a4]: When words or phrases from different lines of poems are cited together, each line number will be cited after its contents are quoted.

takes over at this point. Just as it seems the boys are enjoying the benefits of being out of school and having such a good time, Brooks ends the poem with the words “We/Die Soon” (7-8). There is no more action left for these boys; the irony presented here suggests that a life lived in rebellion earns these boys a way to death and not life. The sudden use of irony is just one element used in this poem to illustrate the author’s message.

Commented [a5]: The conclusion sentence sums up the topic and the idea of the thesis.

Brooks further engages readers in the shady pool hall players through her use of pointed imagery that shows their choices will only lead them astray. Several of the verbs she uses to describe the boys’ actions have striking connotations. The term “[l]urk” creates a very sinister image in a reader’s mind (3). From this word, one might picture a dark alley where troublemakers are crowding around hiding in the shadows, lurking. Joe Sarnowski, a literary critic agrees, saying, “the poem suggests that they are sneaking around at night, which leads to the possibility that they are engaged in criminal activities.” This criminal imagery shows readers that the boys’ bad choices will one day catch up with them. There is also a very dark and violent image suggested with the word “[s]trike” (4). Here, both images of either striking a pool ball directly into a pocket or striking another person physically in a fight come to mind. Either of these suggested images are possible in the atmosphere of a pool hall. The use of both “[s]ing” (5) and “[j]azz” (7) also present images of the wild time the boys are having. A reader can hear the boys singing along to some jazz music being played in the background of the pool hall. Overall, one critic notes that these images create “a violation of one of the dominant culture’s primary commandments: one must complete one’s formal education... From here, the seven are seen to be caught in a downward spiral that leads to death” (Sarnowski). The boys’ refusal to stick to society’s standards and the images presented of what they are doing instead illustrates the

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negative spiral they are stuck in. The imagery presented both visually and audibly shows the reader Brooks' comment on what a lecherous past will lead one to.

Building on this imagery, the poem itself is filled with audible language formations that suggest the loudness of the setting, suggesting a loud and violent consequence to bad choices. To begin with, there are many instances of cacophony, or loud letter sounds. There are many hard "k's" and "t's" in words such as "[l]urk late" (3), "[s]trike straight" (4). The further mentioned sound in the two "zz's" in the word "jazz" (7) also gives a voice to the words in the poem. These loud sounds illustrate the attitude of the boys in the poem: they do not back down to anyone. Furthermore, the structure of the poem lends itself to creating a unique rhythm in its reading. The subjects of all the short phrases are not noted at the beginning of the phrase where a normal subject of a phrase would be. After the first line of the poem which begins with the subject "We," the subsequent subjects are placed at the ends of the preceding lines. This creates two different sounds: one is a stressed sound at the ends of the lines and the other is a stressed sound at the beginnings of the lines following. This stressed sound followed by a stressed sound is not typical in normal speech and helps emphasize both the doers of the action (the "We") and the action itself. The boys essentially want themselves to be known as the kids skipping school, but they focus more on the action of what they are doing. Brooks herself explains this positioning of words stating "[the boys] are a little uncertain of the strength of their identity" (qtd. in Lindberg). They are uncertain about who they are, but they know they think the actions they are doing are cool, so the hidden "We" and subsequent action verb that starts the next line illustrates they see more value in the bad they are doing. This sound reinforces the rebellious imagery and the direct irony of the last line of the poem.

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Overall, the poem “We Real Cool” incorporates several elements of poetry to successfully portray the author’s vision of the boys playing at the pool hall as they skip school for the day. She uses irony to illustrate the consequence to the bad choices they are making. She also uses tone in the images presented and sound from the words and structure to reinforce the visual and audio ideas of how bad choices can lead to dire consequences. By using these elements, Brooks has successfully set her readers down amongst the boys in that pool hall to glimpse their lives at that moment in time and see how they illustrate the consequences of the wrong choices.

Works Cited**Commented [a9]:** 8th edition MLA works cited.

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