



Gwendolyn Brooks

Gwendolyn Brooks (1917 to 2000) was born in Topeka, Kansas, and raised in Chicago. As a writer of colour, Brooks is credited as a trailblazer for future generations. She was the first black writer to win the Pulitzer Prize and the first black woman to be inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1985, she was the first black woman appointed as consultant in poetry to the Library of Congress, a post now known as Poet Laureate. She also received an American Academy of Arts and Letters Award, the Frost Medal, a National Endowment for the Arts Award, the Shelley Memorial Award, and fellowships from the Academy of American Poets and the Guggenheim Foundation. She lived in Chicago until her death on 3 December 2000.

kitchenette building

We are things of dry hours and the involuntary plan,
Grayed in, and gray. “Dream” makes a giddy sound, not strong
Like “rent,” “feeding a wife,” “satisfying a man.”

But could a dream send up through onion fumes
Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes [5]
And yesterday’s garbage ripening in the hall,
Flutter, or sing an aria down these rooms

Even if we were willing to let it in,
Had time to warm it, keep it very clean,
Anticipate a message, let it begin? [10]

We wonder. But not well! not for a minute!
Since Number Five is out of the bathroom now,
We think of lukewarm water, hope to get in it.

Annotations

Kitchenette: a small apartment of a kind often found in African American communities in Chicago, where Brooks lived when she was young; kitchenettes were built by dividing up existing apartments so that more people could be crammed into a housing complex

[1] **involuntary:** done unconsciously or against one’s will

[2] **giddy:** excited and a little out of control

[6] **ripening:** starting to smell strongly and unpleasantly

[7] **aria:** a song sung by one person in an opera

Tease It Out

- The opening line speaks of the ‘dry hours’ experienced by the people living in their tiny kitchenette apartments. In your opinion, does this expression mean:
 - That having a roof over their heads keeps these people from getting wet?
 - That living in poverty and cramped conditions is boring?
 - That many of these people are trying to quit drinking and to remain ‘dry’ in that sense?
 - That people in the apartments are dry and not very friendly in their manner?
- Class Discussion:** The people in the small apartments are living according to an ‘involuntary plan’. How much control do they have over their lives? Why?
- What might the poet mean when she says that she and her fellow tenants are ‘Grayed in, and gray’?
- What might Brooks mean when she tells us that, in these impoverished and restricted conditions, the word ‘Dream’ sounds weaker than the other words and phrases mentioned in lines 2 to 3?
- In what sense are dreams ‘giddy’ rather than ‘strong’ and real to the people in the poem?
- Why would dreams not be as much a part of the kitchenette dwellers’ lives as the other things mentioned?
- In the second stanza, we get the sense that to reach these impoverished people, a dream would have to fight very hard. What would it be fighting against?
- When you read the second stanza, what sense do you get of the atmosphere in the housing complex?
- Why do the kitchenette dwellers not have time to let the giddy dreams into their lives?
- What might be meant by the image of keeping dreams clean and warm?
- What kind of ‘message’ might the people in the poem ‘anticipate’ if they had the time, room and leisure to do so? Would this message be a hopeful or depressing one?
- As the fourth stanza begins, we are told that the poet and her neighbours don’t really get to address these questions about dreams ‘very well’ or for very long. What prevents them from thinking very well or deeply about their dreams? What interrupts them and puts an end to any thoughts about dreams?
- The people in Number 5 have just come out of the bathroom. Why do you think this is so important to the speaker?
- How does the small ‘hope’ mentioned in the closing line contrast with the dreams that these impoverished people can’t afford to think about?

Exam Prep

- Class Discussion:** What does this poem tell us about how hardship in life can affect our dreams? How important is it to keep your dreams alive? Why?
- Exam Prep:** Make a video set in the kind of housing complex that provides the setting for this poem. The video could be either a documentary or a fictional piece.
 - What would the houses, rooms and streets in the video look like?
 - What music might you use, and what other sounds would we expect to hear?
 - How would the people in the film look and behave?
 - What kind of things would they have to tell us about their lives?
- Theme Talk:** Many of the people forced to live in the cramped and uncomfortable apartments that feature in this poem are African Americans. To what extent do you think that racial tensions and injustice may have contributed to their impoverished and difficult lives?

Language Lab

- ‘kitchenette building’ is written in free verse, which means that, instead of being held to very strict rhyming patterns and metre, it has a fairly open and flexible structure. How well do you think that this kind of flexible structure suits the themes of ‘kitchenette building’?
- What elements of rhyme can you find in the poem?
- Pick out some of the striking images that give us a sense of the drab, boring and limited lives that the tenants are living. In each case, explain why you have chosen that image and what it conjures up in your mind.
- In this poem, Brooks skilfully uses the literary technique known as juxtaposition, in which two quite different things or images are placed alongside each other. Pick out some strong examples of this and explain why you find each of them effective.
- Another literary technique that Brooks deftly uses in ‘kitchenette building’ is personification, the depiction of a non-human thing or process as if it were a human being. Write a short paragraph on the personification of ‘Dream’ in the poem.

kitchenette building

Young Black woman in Chicago's 'Black belt' in the 1930s

FIRST ENCOUNTER

In the 1930s, Chicago became a racially segregated city. The white men who ran the city - its administrators, businessmen and landowners - conspired to ensure that Black people could only rent housing in a certain area. This was the so-called 'Black belt', an area that stretched across the city's south side. Such discrimination and segregation was illegal, but the city's leaders were so powerful that no one could stop their unofficial policy of keeping the races carefully separated.

The quality of housing in the 'Black belt' was extremely poor. Houses would be divided into tiny living spaces and rented out to numerous Black families. The families would also have to share bathroom facilities and a single small kitchen area. These houses, which in Ireland would have been called 'tenements', became known in Chicago as 'kitchenette buildings'.

Brooks, whose parents had moved to Chicago before segregation became a reality, was raised in a comfortable home with a porch and a backyard. But after her marriage, when she was 22 years old, she and her husband were forced to move into a kitchenette building. In her autobiography, Brooks recalls her reaction at having to make do with such cramped and miserable quarters: 'I remember feeling bleak when I was taken to my honeymoon home, the kitchenette apartment in the Tyson on 43rd and South Park'.

The residents

This poem appeared in *A Street in Bronzeville*, Brooks' first collection of poetry, which was published in 1945 when she was 28 years old. The poem looks back at years in the kitchenette building, recalling the hardships that the residents endured.

Significantly, Brooks uses the pronoun 'we' rather than 'I' throughout the poem. It's a word choice that brilliantly reflects how she and the other residents were stripped of their individuality. It suggests how the residents, lacking all privacy, no longer felt like individual human beings, how they began to experience themselves blurring into a single mass of humanity. It also suggests how the residents were denied the ability to express themselves, to determine the course of their own lives.

They residents, tellingly, are referred to as 'things'. This suggests how they have been stripped of their personhood, how they are merely objects to be manipulated by a cold and uncaring system. Their lives, Brooks stresses, are determined by an 'involuntary plan', a plan they didn't choose to be a part of and over which they have no control.

Brooks describes how she and her fellow residents were 'things of dry hours'. She may be using the term 'dry' to mean boring, suggesting the dull, repetitive quality of the residents' lives. But she may also be referring to the water stoppages fact that all too often affected kitchenette buildings. The buildings' plumbing, not designed for use by so many families, frequently came under strain or stopped working altogether.

Dreams

Brooks focuses on the 'dreams' of the residents, on their hopes, ambitions and aspirations. There are residents, no doubt, who dream of buying their own homes. Maybe other residents dream of becoming teachers, architects or successful business executives. Perhaps other residents, like Brooks herself, dream of becoming writers or artists.

Such dreams, however, are contrasted with the grim practicalities of life in the kitchenette building:

- The male residents are preoccupied with ‘feeding a wife’. They are concerned with earning enough to put food on the table for their families.
- The female residents, meanwhile, are concerned with ‘satisfying a man’. This suggests that they want to make sure that their male partners are happy and don’t think about abandoning them and their children.
- Both male and female residents, of course, are worried about having enough money to pay the rent.

These grim practicalities seem real, pressing and important. Dreams, on the other hand, seem vague, unimportant and unrealistic.

Brooks emphasizes this point by referring to the sound of the words themselves. To the residents, words and phrases like ‘rent’ and ‘satisfying a man’ sound ‘strong’. This suggests the relevance and importance of these concepts to residents of the kitchenette building. The word ‘dreams’, on the other

hand, seems to have a ‘giddy’ sound. This suggests that to the residents ‘dreams’ seem frivolous, silly and unimportant.

Time enough to dream?

There are moments when the residents ‘wonder’ what it would be like to have and nurture such aspirations. But the residents, according to the poet, are unable to wonder ‘well’ about such matters. We get the sense that they are so worn down that they are incapable of imagining a better life.

And their wondering lasts ‘not for a minute’. They can only manage a few seconds of wondering before they are interrupted by the hectic, stressful life of the kitchenette. Their thoughts might, for instance, be intruded on by the sound of bath water draining in the building’s only bathroom. They might realize that the occupant of unit number five has finished his bath: ‘Number Five is out of the bathroom now’. If they themselves want to have a bath, they must rush to the bathroom before somebody else does. In such a frazzled, fraught environment – where even taking a bath is a challenge that requires quick thinking – there simply isn’t time to dwell on dreams, aspirations and remote possibilities.

A CLOSER READING

POVERTY

‘kitchenette building’ is a powerful study of poverty. It depicts a world where people are concerned, above all, by the struggle to survive, by the need to pay rent or put food on the table. The building’s residents, we sense, are utterly preoccupied by such concerns and can think about little else.

The description of the residents as ‘gray’ reinforces our sense of their misery, suggesting lives that are dull, monotonous and repetitive. The image of being ‘grayed in’, meanwhile, suggests their sense of being trapped and confined. We imagine them being surrounded on all sides by some dull grey substance, which suggests that they can never escape their poverty-stricken lives.

THE POWER OF DREAMS

Brooks presents the dreams of the residents as physical presences, almost as if they were strange, magical creatures.

- These creatures, as she imagines them, are truly spectacular. They have a wonderful aroma, flutter through the air like butterflies and sing beautiful ‘arias’ like opera singers. This suggests the extraordinary nature of hopes and dreams, how they bring joy and colour to our lives.
- Brooks and her fellow residents could ‘let’ these creatures ‘in’ to the kitchenette building. This suggests how the people of the kitchenette building could permit themselves to hope and dream, how they could start to imagine a better life for themselves.
- Brooks and her fellow residents could tend to these creatures, keeping them ‘warm’ and ‘very clean’. This

suggests that hopes and dreams need to be nurtured, that we must work hard in order to make them a reality.

- Some residents, however, are not ‘willing’ to let these creatures in. This suggests that the people of the kitchenette building are unwilling to let themselves dream, perhaps fearing defeat and disappointment.
- Others simply don’t have time to nurture such a creature. This suggests that the people of the kitchenette building simply don’t have time to work on making their dreams a reality. They are too busy attempting to survive in the face of grinding poverty and racial discrimination.

The poet wonders if these creatures would survive and thrive in the environment of the kitchenette building, ‘Even if’ the residents were willing to let them in.

These creatures may emit wonderful aromas, but those aromas would struggle to be noticed in the kitchenette buildings, overpowered by the odour of onions and fried potatoes from the building’s shared kitchen, by the odour of garbage in the hall. These creatures may flutter and sing, but it is hard to imagine them doing so ‘down these rooms’ of the kitchenette building. The poet imagines that these creatures, if introduced to such an environment, would be too depressed to behave in their usual magical manner.

This image powerfully suggests that the kitchenette building is no place for dreams or dreamers. The residents simply lack the resources to dwell upon their hopes and dreams, let alone to make those aspirations a reality.



Percy Bysshe Shelley

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792 to 1818) was one of the major English Romantic poets, and is critically regarded as being among the finest lyric poets in the English language. He was expelled from Oxford in 1810 for writing a pamphlet entitled *The Necessity of Atheism*. He married the sixteen-year-old Harriet Westbrook, but left her after a few years to elope to Switzerland with the equally young Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin in 1814. It was in Geneva in 1816 that Shelley and Mary married and spent considerable time with Shelley's fellow poet Lord Byron. In 1818 the Shelleys moved to Italy, and it was here – shortly before his 30th birthday – that Shelley drowned at sea during a fierce storm.

Ozymandias

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed.
And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair'
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

[5]

[10]

Annotations

Ozymandias: another name for Rameses the Great, pharaoh of the nineteenth dynasty of ancient Egypt

[1] **antique land:** an ancient kingdom or civilisation, in this case Egypt

[2] **trunkless:** lacking a torso

[4] **visage:** face

[5] **sneer of cold command:** describes Ozymandias's facial expression

[6] **well those passions read:** the sculptor understood Ozymandias's emotions and motivations

[7] **Which yet survive:** which still exist

[9] **pedestal:** the base of the statue

[10] **king of kings:** the inscription declares Ozymandias to be the greatest ruler on earth

[11] **ye Mighty:** the inscription may be addressing God or gods, or other great rulers

[13] **colossal:** huge, enormous

[13] **boundless:** unlimited, endless; in this case seeming to go on forever

[14] **lone:** lonely, desolate

Tease It Out

1. The poet describes meeting a man who has just returned from a trip to an 'antique' land. What do you think he means by an 'antique land'? What country has the traveller returned from?
2. The traveller describes seeing two 'trunkless legs of stone'. What does it mean to be 'trunkless'? Can you quickly sketch a picture of what the traveller is describing here?
3. What word does the poet use to tell us that the legs of the statue are enormous?
4. The traveller also came across a 'shattered visage'. What is a 'visage'? What does he mean when he says that this visage was 'Half sunk'?
5. The traveller says that the face had a 'sneer of cold command'. What does this suggest about the kind of ruler Ozymandias was? Do you think he was a kind and compassionate man?
6. The traveller says that you can get a sense of how skilful the sculptor was from the detail on the statue's face. What does he mean when he says that the sculptor 'read' Ozymandias' 'passions' 'well'?
7. What are the 'lifeless things' that the traveller mentions? What is 'stamped' on these things?
8. **Class Discussion:** The traveller says a 'hand' mocked the passions of Ozymandias. Is he referring to the hand of the sculptor, the hand of God, or to the hand of Ozymandias himself?
9. According to the traveller a 'heart' 'fed' Ozymandias's 'passion'. Whose heart do you think the traveller is referring to?
10. In your own words, rewrite the inscription that appears on the statue's pedestal. Who do you think came up with the text of the inscription: the sculptor or Ozymandias?
11. Ozymandias calls upon the 'Mighty' to 'Look on [his] works' and 'despair'. What do you think Ozymandias means by the 'Mighty'? Why does he tell these 'Mighty' people to 'despair' when they look at his 'works'?
12. The traveller describes what surrounds this broken statue. Describe in your own words the landscape as he presents it.
13. What do you think might once have existed here?

Theme Talk

1. **Class Discussion:** 'The poem condemns the hubris of anyone who thinks that their work will last forever'. Do you agree with this sentiment? Give reasons for your answer.
2. **Theme Talk:** The poem holds the sculptor in high regard, praising his work. What does the poem suggest about the power and significance of art? Is there a suggestion that great works of art can endure far longer than kingdoms and empires?
3. Think about the title of the poem and answer the following questions.
 - Why do you think Shelley might have chosen this title?
 - Think of an alternative title for this poem and explain your choice.
4. **Exam Prep:** In your opinion, what does Shelley say about power in his poem 'Ozymandias'?

Language Lab

1. Can you think of any modern buildings or monuments that represent something similar to the statue that the poem describes? Do you think that these buildings or monuments will still be around in centuries to come? Give reasons for your answer.
2. What features of the sonnet form can you identify in this poem?
3. **Class Discussion:** What do you understand by 'irony'? Why might the combination of the inscription and the statement 'Nothing beside remained' be an ironic one?

Ozymandias



FIRST ENCOUNTER

The poet met a traveller from Egypt. The poet describes Egypt as an 'antique land', a place with a long and rich history. The traveller tells the poet that he was making his way across the Egyptian desert when he came across the remains of an enormous statue.

The legs of the statue are still standing, but its trunk or torso are long gone: 'Two vast and trunkless legs of stone/ Stand in the desert'. The face of the statue lies near the legs, broken and half covered by the sand: 'Near them on the sand,/ Half sunk, a shatter'd visage lies'.

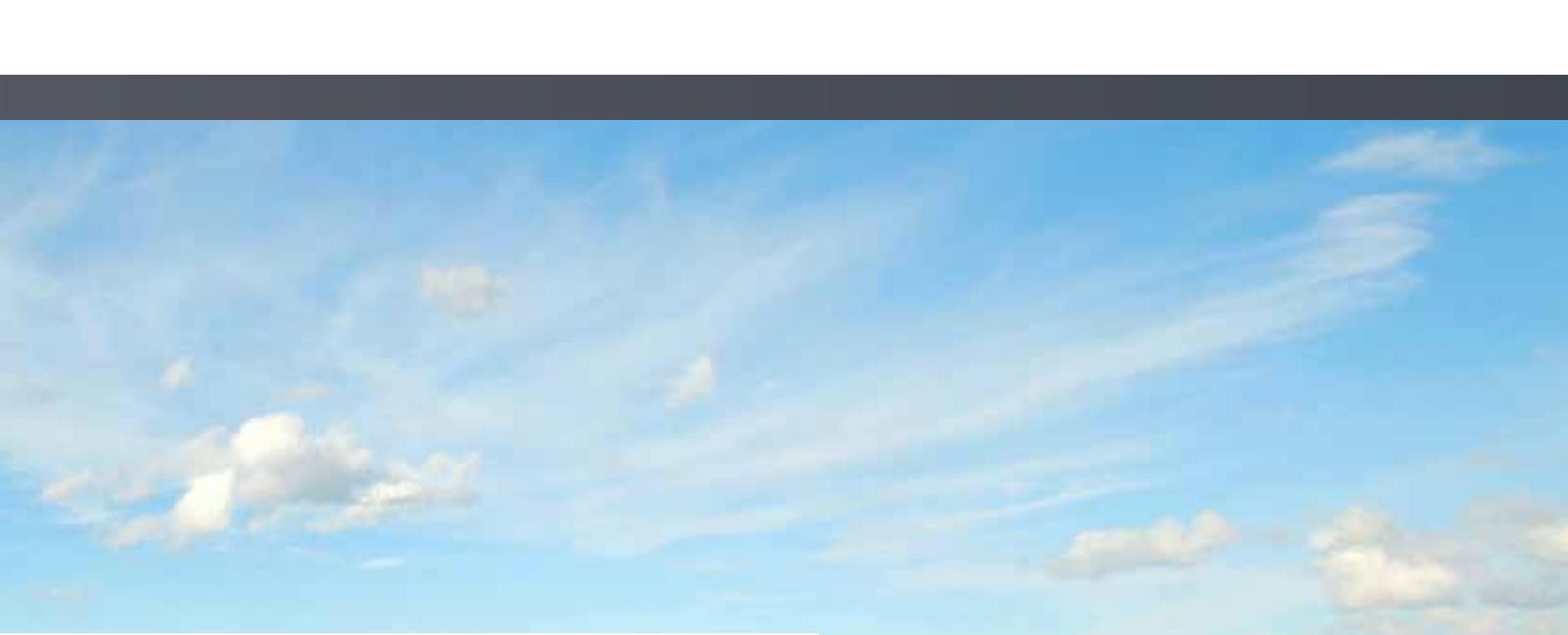
The traveller praises the sculptor who carved the statue. He believes that the sculptor 'read' or understood the 'passions' or emotions that drove Ozymandias perfectly: 'well those passions read'. He captured the personality of this great and terrible ruler and 'stamped' it onto 'lifeless' stone.

The traveller describes how a hand 'mocked' the 'passions' of Ozymandias. This may refer to how the sculptor used his

handiwork not only to glorify Ozymandias but also to make fun of him. For the sculptor revealed Ozymandias as he really is, capturing his cruel and arrogant personality. The traveller suggests that Ozymandias was a truly unpleasant individual, whose cruel 'passions' were 'fed' by his very heart, whose wicked impulses came from the very core of his personality.

Ozymandias was a Greek name for the Egyptian pharaoh Rameses II, who died in the year 1213 BC. Shelley began writing his poem in 1817, soon after the announcement of the British Museum's acquisition of a large fragment of a statue of Rameses II from the thirteenth century BC. Some scholars believe that Shelley was inspired by this statue.

The traveller describes the appearance of the statue's face. He says that it was frowning, and that the lips were curled up in an arrogant and contemptuous smile: 'wrinkled lip and sneer' of cold command'. The expression on the statue's face suggests a cruel and despotic overlord.



The legs of the statue stand upon a pedestal, on which some words have been inscribed. The inscription is a message from the very person the statue represents, the pharaoh Ozymandias. Ozymandias declares that he is the 'king of kings', the greatest ruler to have ever existed.

The inscription calls on the 'Mighty' to look at his great kingdom and envy the magnificence of his achievements: 'Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!' If the 'Mighty' do so, they will be filled with despair, realising that they could never equal Ozymandias. Some readers believe that the term 'Mighty' refers to Ozymandias's rivals and competitors, other great rulers who have come before and since. Others believe that Ozymandias is challenging God Himself.

However, nothing now remains of Ozymandias' kingdom. There are no towns or cities, no forts or aqueducts. Everything he built has long since passed away. The colossal wreck of the statue stands isolated and broken in the middle of a vast desert. The traveller emphasises the flat and featureless nature of this landscape, describing the sands as bare and level. The desert, he suggests, seems to be boundless, stretching without interruption in every direction. All around the remains of the statue, the 'lone and level sands stretch far away'.

FOCUS ON STYLE

Form

The poem is a sonnet. It has fourteen lines. Like most sonnets, it is divided into two parts. The first part of the poem has eight lines, and the second part six. The poet uses assonance in the closing lines to suggest the vast emptiness of the desert: 'boundless and bare/ The lone and level sands stretch far away'. These lines also feature alliteration, with the repeated 'b' and 'l' sounds: 'boundless and bare/ The lone and level sands stretch far away'.

A CLOSER READING

NOTHING LASTS FOREVER

This poem emphasises the ravages of time, reminding us that everything must eventually pass away. Not even great empires such as those constructed by Ozymandias are immune to time's relentless march. Though they might think themselves invincible when they are at the height of their power, kings and tyrants will die, and the kingdoms and empires they create and command crumble and vanish.

The poem ultimately suggests that whereas kingdoms rise and fall and political power is won and lost, great works of art endure. Ozymandias' kingdom has long vanished, yet this artist's sculpture survives. Though commissioned as a statement of power and command, it now lies in the desert, a potent symbol of man's arrogance and mortality.

HUBRIS

This poem is a powerful study of hubris or over-confidence. Ozymandias believed that his empire would last forever. He believed that the vast network of cities he constructed would put the works of any other ruler to shame. He might even have believed that he was greater than God Himself. But Ozymandias's confidence, as we have seen, was terribly misplaced. For his empire, like every empire, has crumbled and disappeared.

The poem, then, centres on a contrast or juxtaposition between two very different statements. In line 12 we have Ozymandias's challenge to the 'Mighty', his declaration that he is the greatest king of all time. In the very next line, we have the simple declaration that 'Nothing beside remains', that the only remnant of his kingdom is a broken face and trunkless legs. Shelley, through juxtaposition, through bringing two very different lines together, highlights the folly of over-confidence, of claiming mightiness for oneself and immortality for one's empire.