Kitchenette Building

SUMMARY

We (the residents of the kitchenette building) are defined by our circumstances, which force us to spend time doing things that we might not want to do in order to stay afloat. These circumstances make our lives (and ourselves) feel gray and monotonous. Any dream we might have seems weak and silly when compared to the commanding responsibilities of having to pay rent, afford food, and maintain a marriage.

Even so, we wonder: would be possible for a dream to survive our circumstances—metaphorically, to rise above the sharp smell of cooking onions? Could a colorful dream overcome the stench of fried food and old, smelly trash that's been left out in the hallway, and then thrive—flap its wings and sing a song—in these circumstances?

Even if we decided to let ourselves indulge in a dream, and if we had the time it takes to nurture and tend to that dream, to hope for something and then actually allow it to start—could a dream survive here?

We think about this, but not for very long! The resident in the fifth unit of the kitchenette has just gotten out of our shared bathroom, so having moderately warm water left in the bathtub is our only hope.

THEMES

DREAMS VS. REALITY

"kitchenette building" focuses on the struggle of the impoverished, mostly Black families living in cramped housing complexes in 1930s and '40s Chicago. The speaker paints a vivid picture of life in this environment in order to represent the reality of systemic racism and poverty, and to show how this reality is in conflict with even the *potential* for hope. In "kitchenette building," reality—and all the burdens and responsibilities that reality entails—constantly threatens to smothers residents' dreams.

The speaker never specifies the nature of the dream being discussed; it might a dream for a better life, a bigger home, artistic success, or simply a brief, restful escape from the concerns of daily life. Whatever this dream entails, however, the speaker implies that it would seem frivolous, delicate, and out of place in the drab environment of a kitchenette building. The poem contrasts the colorful nature of the dreams (metaphorically described as "white and violet") with the buildings' residents, who are "grayed in and gray." All this "gray" suggests that the drudgery and monotony of the residents' lives are hardly conducive to colorful flights of fancy.

The poem also contrasts the "giddy"—silly, happy, bubbly—sound of the word "dream" itself with the "strong" sounds of words like "rent," "feeding a wife," and "satisfying with a man." This comparison implies that the demands of daily life overpower dreams. A "giddy" dream seems all the more trivial in the face of more pressing concerns like paying rent, feeding a family, and maintaining a marriage.

Even if one *could* manage to drum a dream here, the speaker wonders if that dream could survive the circumstances imposed by the kitchenette building (and thus, in a broader sense, the circumstances imposed by life in poverty). The speaker suggests that a delicate dream is likely not able to "fight" or "sing" through the stench of reality (the kitchenette building's "garbage ripening" and "onion fumes"). The speaker also wonders how anyone would "keep [a dream] clean" in this environment, with the implication being that the reality of life here taints or dirties even the most pristine hopes (and perhaps that people must compromise on and sacrifice their dreams just to get by). A dream, the speaker suggests, requires the kind of warmth and gentle nurturing that life in poverty simply doesn't grant time for.

The speaker's reverie is itself cut short by the bathroom suddenly becoming available—meaning the reality of life in a cramped, impoverished world directly interferes with her dreaming about dreaming. All the speaker can hope for in the end is "lukewarm" water (water that's not even fully warm). For those living under the weight of poverty, the poem implies, the only dreams that survive are necessarily humble; lofty hopes are out of reach.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-3
- Lines 4-10
- Lines 11-12
- Line 13

THE CYCLE AND DEHUMANIZATION OF POVERTY

"kitchenette building" illustrates how racism and oppression have hindered Black communities' upward mobility in society. The poem is rooted in the historical context of Chicago's kitchenette buildings, which some landlords split up into cramped, often unsanitary units for entire families. Thanks to the de facto segregation and discriminatory housing practices at the time, many Black families were pushed into these dismal living situations. By illustrating the impossibility of

hanging onto dreams in such an environment—including dreams of a better life—the poem shows how society keeps Black communities trapped in a potentially inescapable cycle of poverty.

Beginning the poem with the plural "we," the speaker implies that the inability to break free from this world has nothing to do with an individual lack of will or imagination. Instead, the problem is that residents lack the resources (money, time) and agency to escape dehumanizing circumstances. In fact, the speaker implies that kitchenette residents' entire lives are *defined* by those circumstances.

For example, the speaker describes the residents as "grayed in and gray." This intimately connects residents to the dreary monotony of the kitchenette building itself, as does the speaker's claim they are merely "things of," or belong to, "dry hours and the involuntary plan." The word "involuntary" further establishes the lack of control that the residents have over their lives, while "things" reflects the way that poverty robs people of their individuality and humanity (and, it follows, their ability to envision a better life).

In the last stanza, the speaker even refers to another resident simply as "Number Five" in reference to their unit number in the building—again indicating that people's identities have become inextricable from their circumstances, which, again, are ultimately beyond their control. To that end, when the speaker wonders if a dream could rise up through the "onion fumes" and fight with "fried potatoes" and "yesterday's garbage ripening in the hall," these references implicate the kitchenette building itself in the dream's struggle to survive. In other words, any dream in this world is not fighting against *people*, but rather against an *environment* created through racism and poverty.

Even if people *could* dream a way out of such a world, the speaker implies that people simply don't have the time or resources it takes to nurture that dream. They lack the "time" and resources to provide the metaphorical warmth and care a dream requires to grow and thrive. Any dream residents may have—from owning a business to becoming an artist—thus gets squashed by the stark reality of life in cramped poverty. And without dreams, the poem implies, people will never be able to escape that reality.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-13

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

We are things ...
... in, and gray.

The poem begins with the plural "We," indicating that the speaker is talking on behalf of a group of people. This is not going to be a poem about *individual* failure, or an *individual* struggle, but rather a *collective* experience.

Given that the title of the poem is "kitchenette building" and that the rest of the poem is rooted in a domestic context (with its references to cooking, bathrooms, etc.), the reader can assume that the "we" refers to people who would have been residents of such buildings. And because the poem takes place in Chicago some time around the 1930s, readers can assume that these residents are mostly impoverished Black families.

The poem's first line then highlights the dismal monotony of life in the kitchenette building. The speaker tells readers that the residents' lives are dominated by the demands of "dry hours," which suggests a certain dullness to their quality of life, and "the involuntary plan," which suggests that the residents have little choice in how they spend their time.

The conditions of life in the kitchenette buildings have affected the residents themselves, making them as "Grayed in" and "gray" as the world in which they live. This repetition links the residents to their circumstances, emphasizing that they can't escape the oppressive world represented the kitchenette building.

Also note that, though the phrase "involuntary plan" is not quite an oxymoron, it nearly contradicts itself: the residents are both restricted to a regiment (a "plan") yet cannot decide on that plan for themselves. This near-contradiction helps to establish the tension between the residents' *desires* and the circumstances that prevent them from attaining those desires.

This tension is also present in the way in which the speakers refer to themselves as "things," which further suggests that they are beholden to and/or dehumanized by their environment. In calling the residents "things," the speaker also evokes the way that society has neglected and oppressed them.

LINES 2-3

"Dream" makes a ...
... "satisfying a man."

While the poem's first sentence establishes the residents' circumstances, the second focuses on how difficult it is to *dream* in those circumstances—not in the sense of being unable to sleep (though maybe that too!), but in terms of envisioning a better life and/or future, of having hopes and aspirations that aren't immediately practical.

The speaker says that word dream itself sounds "giddy"—silly or trivial—when compared to "strong" words like "rent," "feeding a wife," or "satisfying a man." These words all refer to duties and responsibilities, which, the speaker implies, will inevitably overpower any silly little dream. Residents have too much on their plate, too many pressing concerns, to entertain "giddy" hopes.

The end of the third line here also rhymes with the first: "plan" and "man." This clear rhyme, in turn, reflects the speakers' point about the comparatively weak "sound" of dreams:

- Lines 1 and 3, which are about the oppressive circumstances of the kitchenette building, rhyme, whereas line 2, which is about the trivial "sound" of dreams, does not.
- The rhyme scheme here thus emphasizes the idea that dreams cannot compete with the "strong," overpowering sounds of worldly responsibilities.

The fact that line 2 is enjambed, whereas lines 1 and 3 are not, adds to this idea that dreams are metaphorically "weaker" than the speaker's circumstances:

> [...] "Dream" makes a giddy sound, not strong
> Like "rent," [...]

The lack of pause after "strong" further reflects the idea that dreams *aren't* strong; there's no firmness after the word, and the flimsy sound of "dream" slips right into the next line.

Finally, note the alliteration, as the hard /g/ sound of "giddy" echoes "Grayed in, and gray" from earlier in the line, almost as though that light giddiness is contaminated by the grayness of the speaker's circumstances.

LINES 4-6

> *But could a ...*
> *... in the hall,*

In the poem's first stanza, the speaker seems to rejects dreams as being simply too silly and trivial to occupy any space in kitchenette residents' minds. Here, however, the speaker decides to consider what might happen it to a dream that managed to emerge in these circumstances. Could such a delicate, "giddy" things survive, despite the odds stacked against it?

The speaker frames this question metaphorically, treating a "dream" something bright and colorful (in contrast to the "gray" kitchenette world). Could such a beautiful, delicate thing pierce through the intense odors of the building, coming from "onion fumes," "fried potatoes," and "garbage ripening in the hall"?

The kitchenette building is a place filled with the thick smells of everyday life, many of which are decidedly unpleasant. Onions and potatoes evoke simple, inexpensive meals (and the work necessary to prepare them), while the fact that there's trash "ripening"—or getting smellier—in the hallways emphasizes the generally poor living conditions of the building. There many be too many residents and too few trash bins, not enough time to take out garbage as it piles up, or a public sanitation system that overlooks impoverished areas. In any case, the speaker wonders whether a shimmering, colorful dream—whose "white and violet" coloring perhaps evokes the delicate scent of flower—could "fight" against such overpowering odors.

Through this comparison, the speaker underscores point that the dream is not struggling against *people*, but rather against the *kitchenette building itself*—which symbolically stands in for the difficult, oppressive circumstances that the speaker faces. In other words, it's not that people don't want to dream; it's that their dreams risk being smothered by their reality.

Still, for a moment, the speaker dares to consider what might become of a dream in this world. These lines are rich and musical, making both the speaker's question and the description of the kitchenette building all the more vivid. Note the assonance throughout, for example; "through" chimes with "fumes," while the long /i/ sounds of "white and violet" match those of "fight with fried." This, in turn, drawing readers' attention to the conflict between the dream's colorful essence and the intense reality of the kitchenette building. The alliteration of "fight" and "fried," meanwhile, adds emphasis to this metaphorical battle.

LINE 7

> *Flutter, or sing an aria down these rooms*

Continuing the thought from the previous lines, the speaker wonders if a dream could rise above all the thick stenches of the kitchenette building and then "flutter." This verb treats the dream like a bird of sorts (or maybe a butterfly), something that moves its delicate wings quickly and lightly. Again, then, the dream is something light and lovely, and which sharply contrasts with the drab colors and thick "fumes" of the building.

This language also links a "dream" to the idea of "rising above" one's circumstances. The speaker is asking if the residents of the kitchenette building could rise above their impoverished living conditions — or rather, if they could even *dream* of doing so.

Next, the speaker envisions a dream "sing[ing] an aria down these rooms" another metaphor that connects to this idea of rising up. "Aria" actually comes from the Italian word "air," and refers to a song or melody (often operatic in nature and sung by a high-voiced soprano). The poem thus again suggests that dreaming has to do with overcoming or rising above one's circumstances—in this case, the oppressive kitchenette building environment. The idea of the dream singing also makes it again seem like a bird.

The second stanza is the only quatrain, or a four-line stanza, in the poem; the rest of the poem is composed of tercets, or three-line stanzas. On the page, then, the second stanza stands out. This shows the speaker lingering while imagining the way in which a dream might fill this world with light and beautiful music. The speaker allows one extra line in which to imagine the possibilities of the dream, despite the restrictions of the poem's otherwise neat and concise tercet form.

LINE 8

Even if we ... let it in,

This line implies that dreams don't exist within the kitchenette building; instead they're something that residents would have to "let [...] in" from the outside world. Again, then, the speaker frames dreaming as foreign to and inherently at odds with the circumstances represented by the kitchenette building (that is, live under oppression, poverty, and racism).

For a moment, the speaker wonders if a dream could survive "even if" the residents were willing to indulge it. The use of the conditional at the start of the fourth stanza ("if") suggests that, in reality, entertaining a dream is not something that residents usually have time for or customarily do—and that "even if" they did, that dream likely wouldn't do well.

The dream seems to take on a life of its own the second stanza, but line 8 shifts back to the residents' perspective. The alliteration in this line emphasizes this perspective; note how the shared /w/ sounds of "we were willing" draws the reader's attention to the reappearance of the pronoun "we," not seen since the beginning of the poem.

The assonance of this line—and, indeed, of the rest of this stanza—works in concert with this alliteration. The repetition of the short /ih/ sounds in "willing" and "let it in" and the long /ee/ sounds in "Even" and "we" propel the line forward, creating a sense of momentum as the speaker continues to consider—to "dream" about—what ifs.

LINES 9-10

Had time to ...
... let it begin?

Lines 9-10 expand upon the poem's extended metaphor, which treats the dream as living creature (more specifically, as a bird—or at least a creature that can "flutter" and "sing"). In stanza 2, the speaker wondered whether a dream could rise above the circumstances of the kitchenette building—that is, if it could even make its presence known amid all the sounds and smells. In this stanza, the speaker builds on this question—wondering whether this dream could survive "[e]ven if" the residents actually had the time and resources to tend to it.

The speaker says a dream is something that needs to be kept "warm" and "very clean," almost like a baby. In treating the dream as a living creature, the speaker also emphasizes how fragile it is—and how even the most wonderful dream can't grow and thrive without someone there to tenderly nourish and care for it. This metaphor also suggests that the reality of life in the kitchenette taints (or dirties) even the most humble of hopes, and the residents would thus have to work hard to keep their dreams pure.

The "[e]ven if" that started this stanza implies that these lines are far from residents' reality; residents *don't* typically have "time to warm" or "clean" dreams. They can't allow themselves time even to "anticipate its message"—that is, to *think* about dreaming—let alone actually "begin" to actually dream. But, the speaker wonders, what would happen if they did? Could a dream survive if residents had the time and resources to give it all they have to give?

The alliteration of these lines again adds to the poem's musicality and helps to evoke its ideas. Note the crisp, sharp /k/ sounds of "keep" and "clean," for example, which suggests the careful attention required to tend to a dream.

LINES 11-13

We wonder. But ...
... get in it.

The speaker dreams about dreaming, but not for long—not even "for a minute," in fact. The caesuras—those exclamation marks in the middle of the line—add a sense of frustrating and urgency to the speaker's tone as the demands of regular life snap the speaker back to harsh reality.

The bathroom has suddenly become available, now that "Number Five"—another tenant—is finally out (different units in kitchenette buildings often shared bathrooms). The fact that this other tenant is simply called "Number five" in reference to their apartment number echoes the language of the first stanza, in which residents were "things" inextricably tied to the kitchenette building. Again, the speaker calls attention to the way that people in this world are stripped of their individual identities and dehumanized by their circumstances.

The building is crowded and demand for the bathroom high, it seems, so the speaker can't afford to waste time "wonder[ing]." All the speaker can "hope" for now to have some "lukewarm"—not hot, or even warm—water left for themselves. The poem thus concludes with an ironic twist on the notion of a dream, which is not a fluttering, singing bird but a humble desire to have basic human comforts. While earlier the speaker wondered about potentially letting a dream "in," now the speaker hopes only of getting "in" a bath that's too cold.

The speaker draws attention to this image through alliteration of the /w/ sound ("We think of lukewarm water"), emphasizing the devastation of this final stanza. There is no hope, in the end, to rise above the circumstances of the kitchenette. Hopes in this world are forced to stay within this oppressive, monotonous realm.

SYMBOLS

THE KITCHENETTE BUILDING

In Brooks's poem, the kitchenette building represents to systemic racism and oppression—the policies and prejudices that prevent Black families from

breaking out of the cycle of poverty and attaining upward mobility.

In Chicago during the first half of the 20th century, greedy landlords began to divvy up small apartments into even smaller units known as "kitchenettes," in which entire families lived in cramped spaces and often shared kitchens and bathrooms with other units. Discriminatory housing policies forced many Black families into such living situations, which the speaker presents here as being totally inhospitable to dreams for a better life.

The physical restrictions and realities of this building—its dismal colors, strong odors, and cramped quarters—represent the ways that society oppresses people of color, entrenching them in a cycle of poverty and discrimination so deeply that they can't hope for anything more than to get by. The "lukewarm water" the speaker mentions at the end ties into this symbolism as well, representing the idea that the only thing residents can really hope for are the most immediate and humble of necessities.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-7:** "But could a dream send up through onion fumes / Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes / And yesterday's garbage ripening in the hall, / Flutter, or sing an aria down these rooms"
- **Lines 12-13:** "Since Number Five is out of the bathroom now, / We think of lukewarm water, hope to get in it."

ONION, POTATO, AND GARBAGE FUMES

The intense smells described in the second stanza symbolize the overwhelming, oppressive reality of life in the kitchenette building—and thus, more broadly, the overwhelming, oppressive reality of life for many impoverished Black families in Chicago during the early to mid-20th century.

The kitchenette building is filled with the scents of domestic life, the sharp "fumes" of "onion" and "fried potatoes" fill the rooms. These smells represent the way that the demands of daily life—such as buying and preparing food—get in the way of residents' dreams; such demands are hostile towards, even "fight with," dreams.

The repulsive scent of "yesterday's garbage ripening in the hall," meanwhile, speaks even more specifically to the dismal living conditions residents had to contend with. Just as it's hard to focus on someone's perfume when standing next to a dumpster, the speaker implies that it's hard to think about dreams when one's world is marked by negligence and decay. How, the speaker wonders, could something as "giddy" as a dream overcome such powerful odors?

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "onion fumes"
- **Line 5:** "fried potatoes"
- **Line 6:** "yesterday's garbage ripening in the hall"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration appears throughout "kitchenette building," adding subtle music to the poem and drawing readers' attention to certain images and ideas. In the first line, for example, hard /g/ sounds draw attention to the dullness of the kitchenette building world and the comparative lightness of dreams:

> Grayed in, and gray. "Dream" makes a giddy sound,
> not strong

The shared sound here actually emphasizes how *different* these two things are—how the "giddy" sound of a dream has no place in the "gray" world of the kitchenette building.

Alliteration works similarly in the second stanza, highlighting contrasting concepts for the reader. The alliteration (and assonance) of "fight" and "fried" pits the two words against each other, evoking the way that dreams go head to head with the everyday realities of kitchenette life. When the word "flutter" then repeats the /f/ sound in line 7, it recalls this earlier alliteration. This adds a touch of lyricism and musicality to line 7, which, not incidentally, is about a dream "sing[ing]" throughout the building.

The final two stanzas feature alliteration of the /w/ sound. Given that this is the first letter of the word "we," this alliteration subtly reminds the reader of the collective nature of this experience—that is, the speaker is talking on behalf of a group of people rather than an individual. Alliteration and consonance also connect this collective "wonder[ing]" to "lukewarm water"—the only real "hope" residents have.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Grayed," "gray," "giddy"
- **Line 4:** "fumes"
- **Line 5:** "fight," "fried"
- **Line 7:** "Flutter"
- **Line 8:** "we were willing"
- **Line 11:** "We wonder.," "well"
- **Line 13:** "We," "water"

METONYMY

The poem uses metonymy in its final stanza, when the speaker calls another resident of the kitchenette building "Number Five." This refers to this person's apartment or unit number in

the building, and this metonymy thus speaks to the way that the residents have become inextricably tied to their circumstances.

Life in the kitchenette building is the result of predatory housing policies and broader societal oppression, and closely linking residents to the building implies that they're totally trapped by these circumstances; a person can't *escape* circumstances that *define* who they are (at least in society's eyes). Metonymy here also subtly dehumanizes "Number 5," denying this person a unique identity with unique hopes and dreams. In this way, metonymy may be meant to reflect how society neglects and devalues people living in poverty.

Where Metonymy appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "Number Five is out of the bathroom now"

IMAGERY

The poem uses imagery to vividly evoke the reality of life in a kitchenette building, and also to juxtapose this reality against the nature of dreams.

Perhaps the strongest and most important example of imagery here is related to smell (making it olfactory imagery). In the second stanza, the speaker describes "onion fumes" and the smell of "fried potatoes," helping the reader imagine the scents of daily life in this world. The smell of food is also a reminder of the practical demands on residents' time (preparing food is more pressing than dreaming), as well as of how cramped these living quarters are (in that whole units seem to smell of cooking).

Even more striking is the scent of "yesterday's garbage ripening in the hall," a repulsive bit of imagery that suggests not only the drudgery of the setting, but also how that drudgery is *overwhelming* to the residents. Garbage might be in the hall because there was nowhere else to put it, because there is no infrastructure in place to regularly remove it, and/or because people are too busy to take it out before it begins to rot. Whatever the case, its "ripening" odor suggests that w world without dreams is a world filled with decay.

Imagery not only makes the poem's setting all the more vivid, but also speaks to the poor living conditions that resulted from housing discrimination. The imagery here drives home the way in which that oppression was a constant, overwhelming presence in the lives of those forced into such conditions.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-6:** "But could a dream send up through onion fumes / Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes / And yesterday's garbage ripening in the hall,"

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker uses extended metaphor and personification throughout the poem, first making a "dream" into an entity with agency in the second stanza. Here, a dream has the ability to "fight" against the domestic smells of the kitchenette building and even to "flutter" and "sing an aria." This dream is like a bird quickly and delicately flapping its wings and letting out beautiful music. A dream, this metaphor implies, has the potential to create beauty and rise above oppressive circumstances.

In the next stanza, the speaker continues the metaphor and explicitly personifies this dream, presenting it as though it were a child—a small creature in need of tenderness, warmth, and nourishment in order to grow and thrive. All this personification makes a dream seem like something very delicate and fragile, something that requires a great deal of time, space, and effort to survive. These are all things that the kitchenette residents don't have to spare, of course; their resources are devoted to contending with their own cramped circumstances. Through personification, then, the poem illustrates how difficult it is to keep dreams alive when faced with a harsh, unforgiving reality; if a dream is something that needs to be taken care of, it's also something that can die.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-7:** "fight with fried potatoes / And yesterday's garbage ripening in the hall, / Flutter, or sing an aria down these rooms"
- **Lines 9-10:** "Had time to warm it, keep it very clean, / Anticipate a message, let it begin?"

JUXTAPOSITION

The poem juxtaposes the beauty and lightness of a dream with the grim, monotonous reality of life in the kitchenette building. In doing so, the speaker emphasizes how out of place a dream feels in this oppressive environment, and how hard it would be to keep a dream alive in such a world.

For example, in the first stanza the speaker describes the kitchenette residents as "[g]rayed in and gray." This refers to the drudgery and monotony of their existence. A dream, on the other hand, is something "white and violet"—a colorful entity that stands out all the more starkly against this drabness.

In the first stanza, the speaker also juxtaposes the "giddy," or silly and trivial, sound of the word "dream" with the "strong" sounds of words related to worldly responsibilities like paying rent and maintaining a marriage. Both in color and in sound, then, the dream and the demands of the kitchenette stand in direct opposition.

Finally, the speaker juxtaposes the intense, and even repulsive, "fumes" of the building with a dream's lightness and beauty. While the building is filled with the odors of daily life—cooking, rotting garbage—the speaker images a dream rising above all this to "[f]lutter" and "sing an aria." A delicately fluttering,

singing dream seems wildly out of place amid the drudgery, practicalities, and more urgent issues of the kitchenette building. Through juxtaposition, the speaker implies that the conflict between dreams and reality for residents is simply unsurmountable.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "Grayed in, and gray. "Dream" makes a giddy sound, not strong / Like "rent," "feeding a wife," "satisfying a man.""
- **Lines 4-7:** "But could a dream send up through onion fumes / Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes / And yesterday's garbage ripening in the hall, / Flutter, or sing an aria down these rooms"

ASSONANCE

Assonance, like alliteration, adds music to the poem and draws readers' attention to certain images and ideas. Take line 4, where the long /oo/ of "through" and "fumes" suggests a kind of smooth, oozing movement. Assonance is even stronger in the next line, with its repeating long /i/ sounds:

> Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes

Assonance is a device that calls attention to itself, essentially turning up the volume of a poem—and it does so here, as the speaker imagines a dream going head to head with the odors of the building. The vowel sounds of the "white and violet" dream butt up against the sounds of "fried potatoes" and "ripening" garbage, illustrating how the realities of life in the kitchenette building may drown out a dream's beauty.

The next stanza features assonance as well. The long /ee/ of "keep" and "clean" couples with the sharp alliteration of the hard /k/ sound to add emphasis to this phrase and evoke the close attention required when caring for a dream.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "through," "fumes"
- **Line 5:** "white," "violet," "fight," "fried"
- **Line 6:** "ripening"
- **Line 8:** "it in"
- **Line 9:** "keep," "clean"

VOCABULARY

Giddy (Line 2) - Silly, dizzy, foolish.

Aria (Line 7) - An operatic song.

Anticipate (Line 10) - Wait for, listen out for.

Number Five (Line 12) - Here, "Number Five" is a metonym for the neighbors who live in apartment five (and share the speaker's bathroom).

Lukewarm (Line 13) - Tepid, between warm and cool.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"kitchenette building" has no consistent meter, regular rhyme scheme, nor standard stanza shape. But it still shapes its sounds and structure thoughtfully, reflecting its ideas in its form.

Stanzas 1, 3, and 4 are tercets (three-line stanzas), while stanza 2 is a quatrain (a four-line stanza). And that makes sense: stanza 2 is the place where the speaker briefly imagines that a "dream" could find its way into the cramped, smelly kitchenette, and the extra line here reflects that glimmer of possibility and spaciousness. That doesn't last for long, though: the stanzas return to their regular three-line pattern right away.

The poem's shape thus matches its subject: the monotonous grind of poverty, and the way it crushes dreams.

METER

"kitchenette building" is doesn't use regular meter. This keeps the language feeling unpredictable and loose, and matches the poem's casual, reflective tone. A strict meter would likely feel too rigid and harsh for a poem in which the speaker is dreaming about dreaming.

That said, there are a few moments in the poem when steady meter emerges. Lines 4 and 5, for instance, use iambic pentameter—meaning they're lines with five iambs, metrical feet that go da-DUM:

> But could | a dream | send up | through on- | ion fumes
> Its white | and vi- | olet, fight | with fried | potatoes

The meter here isn't perfect, but its steadiness stands out as the speaker wonders if a dream could survive in the cramped, oppressive kitchenette building. This lilting, fluid meter—classically poetic-feeling, familiar from the work of Shakespeare—makes the "dream" feel like a creative, liberating, artistic force.

RHYME SCHEME

While this poem doesn't have a completely regular rhyme scheme, it does have some moments of rhyme. Here's how patterns of rhyme look across the whole poem:

> ABA CDEC FGF HIH

Notice that the last rhyme of each stanza is always the same as the first. In the first stanza, for example, the rhymes are:

[...] plan, A
[...] strong B
[...] man." A

This perpetual return to the same end rhymes reflects the confined, monotonous lives of the people who live in the kitchenette building: no matter what, the rhymes, like the people, always end up in the same old place.

The poem also uses a moment of internal rhyme in line 5 ("Its white [...] potatoes"). The rhyme emphasizes the contrast between the ethereal "white and violet" of the imagined dream and the earthy stench of fried food and garbage it would have to "fight" through to touch any of the kitchenette building's residents.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "kitchenette building" is a "we," a collective voice, and that collective doesn't provide much direct information about itself. But considering the poem's setting—a kitchenette building in 1930 or '40s Chicago—the reader can assume that the speaker represents the impoverished Black families who were forced to live in these dismal apartments. Gwendolyn Brooks, who lived in the time and place she describes, is likely writing from her own experience here.

The speaker feels crushed by this environment and their day-to-day responsibilities, and the idea of a "dream" seems far out of reach to them. They're hesitant to even wonder about dreaming, and while they muse for a moment on whether they could even entertain the idea of a dream, they snap right back to the dull reality of "lukewarm water" in a shared bathroom at the poem's end.

The speaker longs for the freedom and possibility of dreams. But ground down by poverty and racism, they're also grimly aware that they don't even have room to "wonder" about dreaming for long.

SETTING

The setting of the poem is, as the title says, a kitchenette building: a cramped, dirty, uncomfortable apartment building common in 1930s and '40s Chicago, the time and place this poem was written. In the context of Brooks's work, readers can guess that most if not all the families who are jammed into this building together are impoverished Black people, forced by racist landlords and bosses into these unpleasant quarters.

This kitchenette building stinks of frying food and old garbage, and it's packed with people who all have to share a single bathroom with limited hot water. It's so confined and dirty that it's hard for its inhabitants even to imagine letting a "dream" in, let alone having the time and space to nourish it.

These circumstances, the poem suggests, aren't just nasty in themselves, but soul-corroding: living in this kind of poverty grinds people down until they're "Grayed in, and gray."

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Brooks published "kitchenette building" in her 1945 collection *A Street in Bronzeville*. The book—Brooks's first—was a critical success, and it paved the way for her much-lauded literary career. *A Street in Bronzeville* painted nuanced portraits of Black Chicagoans and their daily lives. So did Brooks's next book, the Pulitzer-Prize winning *Annie Allen* (1949), for which Brooks won the Pulitzer Prize (becoming the first Black American to do so in the process).

A Street in Bronzeville was part of the lead-up to the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and '70s, which Brooks would support and inspire. This artistic movement championed a distinctly Black style, rather than aspiring to white aesthetic standards, and grew in turn from the earlier Harlem Renaissance. The poets of the Harlem Renaissance were a huge influence on Brooks's work—from Countee Cullen, who stuck to more traditional European forms like the sonnet, to Langston Hughes, who infused his work with the rhythms of jazz and the blues. Hughes in particular wasn't just an inspiration to Brooks, but a personal friend, and one of her earliest champions.

Written at the dawn of Brooks's remarkable career, "kitchenette building" sets a foundation of her work in its complex depiction of Black urban life.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"kitchenette building" was published when Chicago was the midst of the Great Migration, the period between 1910 and 1960 when millions of Black Americans moved from the southern U.S. to the West, Northeast, and Midwest. Fleeing discrimination and violence in the South, many Black Americans found that they continued to face poverty and racism in the rest of the country, too.

Chicago, where Brooks lived and wrote, grew significantly during this period, as hundreds of thousands of Black Americans moved to the city. The city's infrastructure couldn't handle the population boom, and unscrupulous landlords took advantage of the situation by overcharging those who took up residence in their cramped, unsanitary apartment buildings. Discriminatory housing policies and racist attitudes forced Black people into the so-called "Black Belt," and the overcrowding often led to higher rates of illness in the Black population—and tragically high mortality rates among Black children.

But the Great Migration brought about a cultural flowering, too. Chicago, in particular, had a Black renaissance in music,

literature, and art. Gwendolyn Brooks, who grew up on the South Side of Chicago, played a significant role in molding the literary landscape of the time, and "kitchenette building" is very much rooted in this historical and cultural context.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Brooks Reads the Poem — Hear Gwendolyn Brooks read "kitchenette building" in this recording from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/podcasts/75639/kitchenette-building)
- An Essay on the Poem — An essay by poet Hannah Brooks-Motl on "kitchenette building." (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69596/gwendolyn-brooks-kitchenette-building)
- An Interview with Brooks — A 1997 interview with Gwendolyn Brooks, hosted by the Lincoln Academy of Illinois. Brooks talks about her literary inspirations and her work. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lsZJZPm7pt0)
- Gwendolyn Brooks Archive — Explore the Poetry Archive's host of resources on Gwendolyn Brooks, including a brief biography and several recordings of her reading her poems. (https://poetryarchive.org/poet/gwendolyn-brooks/)
- Black Life in Chicago — Learn more about the history of the Black Chicago neighborhoods this poem is set in through this online collection from the Chicago Public Library. (https://www.chipublib.org/chicago-history-3/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER GWENDOLYN BROOKS POEMS

- Sadie and Maud
- The Bean Eaters
- We Real Cool

HOW TO CITE

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