Sadie and Maud

SUMMARY

The speaker introduces two women: one named Maud, who decided to go off to college, and another named Sadie, who stayed behind at home. The speaker says that Sadie used a fine-toothed comb to scrape at her life, a metaphor suggesting that she tried to get as much out of life as possible.

Sadie used that comb to untangle every knot and smooth out every bit of her life. She was one of the most vibrant young women around.

Sadie gave birth to two children out of wedlock, much to the intense embarrassment of both Maud and her parents. In fact, everyone except for Sadie herself felt deeply embarrassed by her actions.

When Sadie finally died, her daughters left home. Sadie had passed that metaphorical fine-tooth comb onto her daughters, which they would be able to use to similarly scrape at their own lives.

Having left home to attend college, Maud is now as meek and shy as a mouse. She lives by herself in Sadie's old house.

THEMES

SEXISM AND SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS

Sadie and Maud both face the many limitations placed on women by society. Their paths in life may be quite different—Maud pursues higher education while Sadie stays home—yet, the poem implies that neither of their paths lead proves easy: Sadie has to deal with her family's deep disapproval after having children out of wedlock, and Maud's ambition leads to nothing but loneliness. The poem thus illustrates the unfortunate lose-lose situation many women experienced in the mid-20th century—a time when there were very few socially accepted lifestyles available to women.

In some respects, the poem implies that Sadie leads a happier life than Maud, since she—at the very least—doesn't end up spending her life alone. But the point of "Sadie and Maud" isn't necessarily to sing the virtues of family life while discrediting female independence or ambition. Because though it's easy to argue that Maud's hard work leads to a drearier, sadder life than Sadie's, it's not as if Sadie has a perfect life either!

In fact, the people around Sadie clearly disapprove of her choices. The speaker hints at this by calling her a "chit," which is a word used to describe young women whose bold or lively behavior attracts disapproval. Her family condemns the fact that she has children out of wedlock, casting judgment on her for deviating from societal norms surrounding motherhood and marriage. Even though Sadie is one of the "livingest" young women around, she still has to put up with other people's ideas about how she should live her life.

Maud, on the other hand, flouts societal expectations differently: by going to college instead of staying home to raise a family. Reading "Sadie and Maud" in contemporary times, it's easy to overlook how remarkable it is for Maud to prioritize her ambition over family life, since it was still out of the ordinary for women to attend college. And yet, Maud's impressive determination doesn't seem to benefit her very much. She ends up living "all alone" in Sadie's old house, basically leading Sadie's life without Sadie's lively attitude or the company of her children.

In many respects, Maude seems to have gotten the shorter end of the stick here. Her achievements, however unusual for a woman of the time, still speak to the desire to play by the "rules"—to be a respectable, upstanding member of society—yet she gets no real reward for doing so. Sadie's ability to "scrape" every bit out of life, meanwhile, suggests she has a more fulfilling existence, even if that existence is met with shame from those around her. That she leaves her metaphorical comb to her daughters implies that they've inherited this desire to live on their own terms—but also that they will face the same social pressures as their mother.

By outlining both Sadie's and Maud's paths, then, the poem ultimately examines the unavoidable obstacles women faced in the mid-20th century (and beyond). Considering that Gwendolyn Brooks published the poem in a collection that mostly focused on Black women, it's also reasonable to assume that both Sadie and Maud are Black—a detail that adds some context to their respective struggles. No matter what these women do, the poem implies, it's unlikely that they'll be able to escape judgment or hardship, and this speaks to the unending challenges women—and particularly Black women—have long been forced to confront in American society.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-22

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Maud went to ...
... a fine-tooth comb.

The speaker begins by introducing the poem's main characters:

Maud and Sadie. Using a very straightforward, matter-of-fact tone, the speaker notes that Maud "went to college" while Sadie "stayed at home." Right away, then, the poem juxtaposes the paths each woman takes through life, establishing a contrast between Maud's attempt to expand her horizons and Sadie's decision to remain behind.

Because "Sadie and Maud" was published in 1945, readers should bear in mind the cultural dynamics surrounding gender roles in the mid-20th century. At that time, it was much more common for women to focus on family life than leave home to pursue higher education. The poem also appeared in Gwendolyn Brooks's *A Street in Bronzeville*, which largely focuses on the experiences of Black women. This adds some context to "Sadie and Maud." It seems likely that both women are Black, making it even more remarkable that Maud goes to college—an opportunity available to very few Black women in the 1940s.

Bearing this in mind, the beginning of the poem seems to set readers up to view Maud as the one who will lead a more fulfilling life, since she leaves Sadie behind to supposedly attain upward mobility. However, the poem will challenge this idea as Sadie and Maud's respective life stories unfold.

Lines 3 and 4, for instance, feature a metaphor that frames Sadie as meticulous and careful: "Sadie scraped life / With a fine-tooth comb," the speaker says. To go over something "with a fine-tooth comb" means to very thoroughly and attentively analyze or consider it. This metaphor therefore suggests that Sadie doesn't stay at home because she leads a passive life and can't be bothered to expand her horizons, but because she's somebody who squeezes everything she can out of life. In other words, her home life is rewarding and worthy of her attention.

This opening quatrain also establishes the poem's ABCB rhyme scheme, as the speaker rhymes "home" in line 2 with "comb" in line 4:

> Maud went to college.
> Sadie stayed at home.
> Sadie scraped life
> With a fine-tooth comb.

This rhyme scheme makes the speaker's language sound cohesive and song-like. It also goes well with the speaker's use of end-stops in lines 1, 2, and 4, contributing to the poem's clipped tone and its rhythmic pulse—both of which make the poem sound almost like a nursery rhyme or even a cautionary tale.

LINES 5-8

She didn't leave ...
... all the land.

The second stanza focuses on Sadie, expanding upon the idea that she squeezes enjoyment out of life. The speaker says that she doesn't "leave a tangle in," suggesting that she never overlooks any kind of imperfection when she goes through life "with a fine-tooth comb." This metaphor implies that Sadie meticulously grooms her own life as if she's carefully combing her hair, making sure it's exactly the way she wants it.

Rather than presenting Sadie as a passive person who stays home because she doesn't want to expand her horizons, the poem implies that she simply does whatever makes her happy. This is why the speaker calls her "one of the livingest chits / In all the land." The word "livingest"—which is a made-up word—suggests that Sadie is more vibrantly alive than other people, as if she's more actively engaged with life than anyone else. Just because she doesn't go to college like Maud doesn't mean she's not taking her life into her own hands. By living life to the fullest, she finds enjoyment in what might—for others—be a relatively quiet, unfulfilling existence.

But the word "chit" has negative connotations. The word refers to young women whose liveliness or confidence attracts disapproval. Although Sadie is one of the "livingest" young women around, she apparently has to deal with society's disapproval. Of course, it's not yet clear why, exactly, society disapproves of her lifestyle, but the mere fact that she has to deal with this disapproval speaks to the unfortunate double-bind many women—and especially Black women—found themselves in during the mid-20th century. Even though Sadie conforms to the societal expectations of the time by staying home, the people around her still seem to judge the way she lives her life. No matter what she does, then, she has to confront adversity.

The speaker uses strong consonance in these lines, leaning heavily on the /d/, /n/, and /l/ sounds. Consider, for example, lines 5 and 6:

> She didn't leave a tangle in.
> Her comb found every strand.

These sounds are bold and forceful, giving the speaker's language a memorable sound that reflects Sadie's strong, unswerving sense of self.

LINES 9-14

Sadie bore two ...
... died of shame.

The speaker continues to tell Sadie's life story, explaining that she has two children. So far, this trajectory aligns with the trajectory one might expect of a woman living in the United States in the 1940s, since at that time it was very common for women to "stay[] at home" to focus on starting a family.

But it becomes clear in line 10 ("Under [...] name") that Sadie's life *doesn't* actually conform to the expectations of 20th-century American society. The speaker notes that Sadie has two children "under her maiden name," meaning that she gives

birth to them out of wedlock. This doesn't align with societal norms, nor does it sync up with the stereotypical image of a woman who stays at home to raise a family. For this reason, everyone in Sadie's family—including Maud, who is most likely her sister—disapproves of the way her life has gone, "nearly [dying] of shame."

The speaker has already made it clear that Sadie lives on her own terms, metaphorically suggesting that she grooms her life with a "fine-tooth comb" to ensure that it's exactly how she wants it to be. Just because she doesn't go to college doesn't mean she has decided to unquestioningly adhere to society's expectation that women must follow a very specific life path.

The form of the poem reflects Sadie's deviation from these societal norms, since this stanza has two extra lines. All the other stanzas in the poem are quatrains, but this one is a sestet—a structural change that illustrates Sadie's independent approach to life. Readers should note, however, that some published versions of this poem don't include lines 13 and 14 ("Every one [...] of shame"). All the same, the message in this stanza is clear in every version: Sadie leads the life she *wants* to lead, not the life she's *expected* to lead as a Black woman in the 1940s.

The speaker uses assonance in this section, adding a pleasing sense of musicality to the poem. Lines 9 through 11, for example, are all quite assonant, as the speaker features the /ee/, /ay/, and /ah/ sounds:

> Sadie bore two babies
> Under her maiden name.
> Maud and Ma and Papa

Each of these three lines uses its own kind of assonance, as the speaker goes from the /ee/ sound ("Sadie" and "babies") to the /ay/ sound ("maiden name") to the /ah/ sound ("Maud," "Ma," and "Papa"). This makes the entire section feel melodic and satisfying, giving the language a rich texture that draws readers through the poem.

LINES 15-18

When Sadie said ...
... Her fine-tooth comb.)

Skipping ahead in the story of Sadie's life, the speaker says that her daughters "struck out from home" in the aftermath of Sadie's death. She has, the speaker says, "left as heritage / Her fine-tooth comb." In other words, Sadie's daughters inherited their mother's desire and strength to squeeze enjoyment out of life and, more importantly, do so on their own terms.

This doesn't mean, however, that Sadie's children will do exactly what *she* did in life. Instead of staying home, they venture off, making the same decision to leave that Maud made all those years ago (though where they're heading is unclear).

These lines are quite sibilant, as the speaker uses the /s/ sound multiple times in lines 15 through 17:

> When Sadie said her last so-long
> Her girls struck out from home.
> (Sadie had left as heritage

This hissing sound softens the speaker's language while also making the words sound as if they're slipping away—slipping away, perhaps, in the same way that Sadie has passed away. And yet, Sadie has left behind a part of herself in the world. By having children who have inherited her appreciation of life, she has managed to make a lasting imprint on the world.

LINES 19-22

Maud, who went ...
... this old house.

In the poem's final stanza, the speaker returns to Maud, repeating that she "went to college" and going on to describe her as a "thin brown mouse." This metaphor suggests that Maud is a shy, solitary person who's afraid of the outside world despite the fact that she was the one who ventured away from home to broaden her horizons.

The juxtaposition between Sadie and Maud now becomes a lot less straightforward—at the beginning of the poem, it seemed as if Maud would be the one to lead a fulfilling life while Sadie led a less rewarding existence at home. Now, though, Maud comes home to live "all alone / In this old house," indicating that she has ended up leading the same life as Sadie. And yet, Maud *doesn't* lead the same life as Sadie, since she doesn't have children to keep her company—nor, for that matter, does she have Sadie's ability to squeeze enjoyment out of life. After all her hard work to attend college as a Black woman in the mid-20th century, she winds up with a less fulfilling life than Sadie, who at the very least did what she wanted to do.

This speaks to the unfortunate fact that Black women were forced to make staggering sacrifices in order to gain an education in the mid-20th century. By going to college, Maud gave up the pleasures of life that Sadie was able to enjoy. To make matters worse, this sacrifice doesn't seem to have benefited Maud in any tangible way. "All alone" in an empty house, she has little to show for her hard work and ambition.

Of course, Sadie didn't have a particularly easy life, either. Staying home, she had to deal with the disapproval of her family, who infringed upon her independence with their staunch disapproval of her life choices. In different ways, then, both Sadie and Maud went against many of the expectations society had for women in the 1940s: Sadie forged her own path by having children out of wedlock, and Maud went to college in a time when Black women rarely had the opportunity to pursue higher education. In both cases, each woman encountered hardship, and this illustrates that women (and especially Black

women) at the time often found themselves in lose-lose situations. No matter what Sadie or Maud could have done, they always would have come up against difficulties that men wouldn't have encountered—a dynamic that will most likely hold true for Sadie's daughters, too.

The speaker uses assonance in line 20 to add emphasis to the metaphorical suggestion that Maud is a "thin brown mouse." The repeated /ow/ sound calls attention to this image while also reinforcing the stanza's ABCB rhyme scheme, as "mouse" rhymes with "house" in line 22. This gives the final stanza a musical sound that makes it feel particularly conclusive and memorable.

SYMBOLS

THE FINE-TOOTH COMB

Sadie manages to create an enjoyable life for herself by going through it with a "fine-tooth comb," which symbolizes of her ability to actively seize happiness and enjoyment. To go over something with a fine-tooth comb is to carefully work through it, searching for imperfections. This is what Sadie does to her own life, brushing through it as if it's hair that needs to be untangled; in other words, she takes control of her own situation and does whatever's necessary to make her life feel rewarding. The comb itself, then, represents her capacity to do this—a capacity that not everybody possesses, as evidenced by the fact that Maud ends up leading a depleting and unsatisfying life.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "Sadie scraped life / With a fine-tooth comb."
- **Lines 5-6:** "She didn't leave a tangle in. / Her comb found every strand."
- **Lines 17-18:** "(Sadie had left as heritage / Her fine-tooth comb.)"

POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

The speaker uses a metaphor that compares Sadie's capacity to enjoy life to the act of going through something—and specifically her own hair—with a "fine-tooth comb." To go over something with a fine-tooth comb is a colloquial expression used to describe any kind of close, meticulous examination. For Sadie to do this to her own life, then, means that she carefully scrutinizes the way she moves through the world.

This *could* suggest that Sadie is uptight and incapable of simply enjoying life, but the speaker's suggestion that Sadie is "one of the livingest chits / In all the land" indicates otherwise. It's not that she runs her fine-tooth comb over her life as a way of neurotically limiting her experience of the world, it's that she actively *grooms* her life so that she can make the most out of it. This makes even more sense when one considers that a fine-tooth comb is a comb used to remove things like parasites other unwanted objects from a person's hair. By running her fine-tooth comb through her own life, Sadie roots out anything she deems undesirable, thus taking control of her existence.

Using another metaphor, the speaker suggests that Maud is a lot less active when it comes to making sure her life is exactly the way she wants it to be. The speaker metaphorically characterizes Maud as a "thin brown mouse," comparing her to a very solitary and meek animal. This adds to the juxtaposition between Sadie and Maud, since Sadie is so intentional and forthright about grooming her life, whereas Maud is shy and hesitant (despite the fact that she ambitiously ventured away from home as a young woman). These two metaphors therefore help readers imagine both Sadie and Maud in more vivid detail while also accentuating the profound differences between the two women.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "Sadie scraped life / With a fine-tooth comb."
- **Lines 5-6:** "She didn't leave a tangle in. / Her comb found every strand."
- **Lines 17-18:** "(Sadie had left as heritage / Her fine-tooth comb.)"
- **Lines 19-20:** "Maud, who went to college, / Is a thin brown mouse."

REPETITION

The speaker makes use of repetition by simply repeating Sadie and Maud's names multiple times throughout the poem. This is especially clear in lines 2 and 3, when the speaker uses an anaphora by repeating Sadie's name at the beginning of each line:

> **Sadie** stayed at home.
> **Sadie** scraped life

This adds to the poem's straightforward, matter-of-fact tone, since this kind of repetition makes it possible for the speaker to create simple and predictable sentence structures—structures in which the subject's name appears at the very beginning of the sentence. This formation has a basic, uncomplicated sound, giving the words an unadorned quality that makes it easy to follow along with the speaker.

On an even more basic level, the repetition of both Sadie and Maud's names makes it clear that the poem is about the story of their lives. They are the most important elements of the poem, as made abundantly clear by the fact that the poem itself

is called "Sadie and Maud." To that end, the immediate repetition of Sadie's name in the first stanza shines a small spotlight on her, hinting that the rest of the poem will primarily center around her instead of Maud.

But this is not to say that the speaker completely forgets about Maud. Rather, the speaker waits until the final stanza ("Maud, who [...] old house") to concentrate on her. To signal this return, the speaker repeats a version of the poem's first line:

- Line 1: "Maud went to college."
- Line 19: "Maud, who went to college,"

The repetition of the phrase "went to college" accentuates Maud's decision to take a completely different path in life than Sadie. It also makes the final stanza feel conclusive, as if the poem has come full circle. This makes sense, since the poem *has*, in some ways, come full circle—after all, Maud comes home and effectively takes Sadie's place in the "old house." The speaker's use of repetition therefore helps readers chart Maud's progression throughout the poem.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Maud," "went to college"
- **Line 2:** "Sadie"
- **Line 3:** "Sadie"
- **Line 7:** "Sadie"
- **Line 9:** "Sadie"
- **Line 11:** "Maud"
- **Line 13:** "Sadie"
- **Line 15:** "Sadie"
- **Line 17:** "Sadie"
- **Line 19:** "Maud," "went to college"

JUXTAPOSITION

The entire poem is built upon the juxtaposition between Sadie and Maud's different ways of moving through life. The first two lines make this abundantly clear, as the speaker spells out the diverging paths they take:

> Maud went to college.
> Sadie stayed at home.

This prepares readers for a poem that will contrast the choices these two women have made. Based on these opening lines, one might reasonably assume that Maud will lead a happy, fulfilling life while Sadie remains lonely and sheltered—but this isn't what ends up happening.

Rather, it soon becomes clear that Sadie lives a more or less rewarding life. The speaker describes her as one of the "livingest chits / In all the land," suggesting that (though she eventually experiences the disapproval of the people around her) she is the kind of person who seems vibrantly alive—the kind of person who makes the most out of life.

Maud, on the other hand, is a "thin brown mouse" who moves back home after Sadie's death. Even though she ambitiously ventured out to expand her horizons, she ends up living "all alone" in the house Sadie left behind. Her lonesomeness stands in direct opposition to the fact that Sadie had two daughters—even though Maud now effectively leads Sadie's old life, she doesn't even have the benefits that Sadie enjoyed when she was still alive.

The juxtaposition between Sadie and Maud's lives therefore helps the speaker underscore the unfortunate reality that, no matter what women—and particularly Black women—did in the 1940s, they were bound to encounter certain hardships. For Sadie, living life on her own terms means enduring her family's disapproval. For Maud, honoring her personal ambitions means sacrificing a rewarding personal life.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Maud went to college. / Sadie stayed at home."
- **Lines 7-8:** "Sadie was one of the livingest chits / In all the land."
- **Lines 19-22:** "Maud, who went to college, / Is a thin brown mouse. / She is living all alone / In this old house."

CONSONANCE

The speaker uses consonance throughout "Sadie and Maud," giving the language a rich, musical sound. Consider, for example, the speaker's repetition of the /l/ and /nd/ sounds in lines 5 and 6:

> She didn't leave a tangle in.
> Her comb found every strand.

Consonance makes the speaker's language feel cohesive and poetic. Combined with the poem's intense assonance and alliteration, the poem is so rich with sound that it feels like a nursery rhyme or fable—like it's imparting a lesson of sorts to the reader.

For another example of consonance, take lines 10-11:

> Under her maiden name.
> Maud and Ma and Papa
> Nearly died of shame.

The /m/ is a closed-mouth sound, subtly evoking the intense embarrassment all these people feel about Sadie's life choices. These words are filled with assonance too (as in "maiden name"), and all this sound play makes the lines more memorable and striking for the reader.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Sadie stayed"
- **Line 3:** "Sadie scraped," "life"
- **Line 4:** "fine," "comb"
- **Line 5:** "leave," "tangle"
- **Line 6:** "found," "strand"
- **Line 7:** "Sadie," "livingest chits"
- **Line 8:** "all," "land"
- **Line 9:** "bore," "babies"
- **Line 10:** "Under her," "maiden name"
- **Line 11:** "Maud," "Ma"
- **Line 15:** "Sadie said," "last so-long"
- **Line 16:** "Her," "girls," "struck," "from home"
- **Line 20:** "thin brown"
- **Line 21:** "living all alone"
- **Line 22:** "this," "house"

ASSONANCE

This is a very musical poem, and much of that musicality comes from assonance. This is clear right away, when the /aw/ and /ay/ sounds ringing out in the first three lines:

> Maud went to college.
> Sadie stayed at home.
> Sadie scraped life

These assonant sounds make the speaker's language seem quite melodic, almost as if the poem is a nursery rhyme or song. Note how each woman's name echoes what they do in life: "Maud" shares the /aw/ sound with "college," while "Sadie" shares the /ay/ with "stayed" and "scraped."

Assonance again pops up in lines 9 through 11:

> Sadie bore two babies
> Under her maiden name.
> Maud and Ma and Papa

The repetition of these sounds again adds a clear sense of rhythm to the speaker's language. It feels here almost like the poem's language itself is mocking or teasing Sadie! And again, Sadie's name gets linked sonically to her life, sharing the long /ay/ sound with "babies," "maiden," and "name." (In face, "Sadie" and "babies" creates an internal slant rhyme.) Those who judge Sadie are then linked together by different sounds; the nasally /ah/ of "Ma" gets echoed by "Papa," while "Maud" and "Ma" alliterate on the /m/ sound (and perhaps are also assonant, depending on how people want to pronounce "Ma"). Through sound, then, the speaker illustrates Sadie's separation from society.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Maud," "college"
- **Line 2:** "Sadie stayed"
- **Line 3:** "Sadie scraped"
- **Line 9:** "Sadie," "babies"
- **Line 10:** "maiden name"
- **Line 11:** "Maud," "Ma," "Papa"
- **Line 13:** "Every"
- **Lines 13-14:** "Sadie / Nearly"
- **Line 19:** "Maud," "college"
- **Line 20:** "brown mouse"
- **Line 21:** "is living," "all alone"

ALLITERATION

The alliteration in "Sadie and Maud" works much like the poem's consonance and assonance, making the poem feel musical and memorable. Alliteration stands out to readers ears, drawing their attention to certain words and phrases. For example, the alliteration of the /s/ sound (a.k.a. sibilance) links "Sadie" to her life choices in the first stanza (as does the assonance of "Sadie," "stayed," and "scraped").

In fact, there's quite a bit of alliterative sibilance throughout the poem:

- Line 2: "Sadie stayed at home."
- Line 3: "Sadie scraped life"
- Lines 6-7: "Her comb found every strand. / Sadie was one of the livingest chits"
- Line 15: "When Sadie said her last so-long"

Sibilance has a hissing, teasing quality that adds to the poem's nursery-rhyme feel and also evokes society's judgment of Sadie's life choices.

Alliteration also gives the language a certain rhythm, as is the case in line 9, when the speaker alliterates the /b/ sound: "Sadie bore two babies." The strong bounce of the /b/ gives the speaker's words a slight rhythmic bump that pushes readers through the line.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Sadie stayed"
- **Line 3:** "Sadie scraped"
- **Lines 6-7:** "strand. / Sadie"
- **Line 9:** "bore," "babies"
- **Line 10:** "maiden"
- **Line 11:** "Maud," "Ma"
- **Line 15:** "Sadie said," "last," "so," "long"

END-STOPPED LINE

The majority of the lines in "Sadie and Maud" are end-stopped, giving the poem a clipped, straightforward tone. Each end-

stopped line feels self-contained as well, which in turn emphasizes the sharp juxtaposition between Sadie and Maud. The first two lines are a perfect example of this:

> Maud went to college.
> Sadie stayed at home.

The use of end-stops here makes these opening lines sound terse, as the speaker gets straight to the point by laying out—in a very simple, declarative way—what the poem will be about: namely, the different paths Sadie and Maud take in life.

There are, however, several moments of enjambment in "Sadie and Maud," like in lines 7 and 8:

> Sadie was one of the livingest chits
> In all the land.

This is the only enjambed line in the second stanza ("She didn't leave [...] all the land"), meaning that the pace of the section momentarily speeds up. The same thing happens in lines 11 and 12, when the speaker's rapid-fire list of names runs into the next line:

> Maud and Ma and Papa
> Nearly died of shame.

The phrase "Maud and Ma and Papa" generates momentum that carries over into "Nearly died of shame," but then the speaker comes to an end-stop, once more controlling the rhythm of the poem. This creates a push-and-pull effect that adds variety to the poem's rhythm.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "college."
- **Line 2:** "home."
- **Line 4:** "comb."
- **Line 5:** "in."
- **Line 6:** "strand."
- **Line 8:** "land."
- **Line 10:** "name."
- **Line 12:** "shame."
- **Line 14:** "shame."
- **Line 15:** "long"
- **Line 16:** "home."
- **Line 18:** "comb.)"
- **Line 19:** "college,"
- **Line 20:** "mouse."
- **Line 22:** "house."

VOCABULARY

Fine-Tooth Comb (Line 4, Line 18) - A comb with prongs that are very close together. The expression "go over it with a fine-tooth comb" means to very carefully scrutinize something, as if brushing out unwanted debris from one's hair.

Livingest Chits (Line 7) - "Livingest" is a made-up word to describe somebody who is spirited and vibrantly alive. Similarly, a "chit" is a young woman whose liveliness or boldness attracts disapproval.

Bore (Line 9) - Gave birth to.

Heritage (Line 17) - An inheritance.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

This version of the poem is made up of 22 lines, though there are some published versions that don't include lines 13 and 14 ("Every one but Sadie / Nearly died of shame"). In the 20-line version of the poem, things are neatly broken up into five quatrains (four-line stanzas). In the version we're using in this guide, however (which appeared in *A Street in Bronzeville*, the first publication of the poem), all the stanzas *except* for the third are quatrains. The third stanza (which begins: "Sadie bore two babies) includes two extra lines, resulting in a six-line stanza.

The fact that the poem is (mostly) divided into quatrains makes it feel orderly and well-controlled. This aligns with the speaker's matter-of-fact tone and short, declarative sentences. By organizing the poem into a simple structure, the speaker is able to focus the reader's attention on the story of Maud and Sadie's respective lives, using a straightforward format that doesn't draw attention away from the poem's primary message.

The inclusion of two extra lines in the poem's original version, in turn, break with the poem's established form and might evoke Sadie's refusal to play by society's rules.

METER

"Sadie and Maud" is written in very loose, irregular trimeter, meaning that the majority of the lines contain three stressed beats. However, the rhythmic patterns vary far too much from line to line to accurately map out the poem using any kind of meter; things feel conversational and casual.

And yet, the poem *does* have a very noticeable beat to it! Lines 2-4, for example, all feature three stressed beats:

> Sadie stayed at home.
> Sadie scraped life
> With a fine-tooth comb.

Part of what makes this line sound so propulsive is the

speaker's combination of sibilance and assonance. The sibilant /s/ and the assonant /a/ in "Sadie stayed" pushes readers through the words. The speaker's strict adherence to an ABCB rhyme scheme adds a song-like quality to the poem that makes up for the lack of a regular metrical pattern.

There is also quite a bit of repetition throughout the poem, as the speaker says Sadie's name several times per stanza. This regularity—combined with the speaker's varied use of trimeter, the rhyme scheme, and other sonic devices—lends the language a certain predictability that mimics the consistency of metered poetry.

RHYME SCHEME

"Sadie and Maud" follows a rhyme scheme in which the second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme with each other. This rhyme scheme can be mapped out like this:

ABCB

For example, in the first stanza, lines 1 and 3 don't rhyme ("college" and "life") while lines 2 and 4 do ("home" and "comb"). Every stanza follows this simple, straightforward pattern, which thus adds a sense of predictability and consistency to the poem's sounds. It makes sense that Brooks would use this pattern. For one thing, this is the rhyme scheme of a ballad—a kind of poem that tells a story. The simple pattern also makes the poem simply feel rhythmic and memorable, as if it's a nursery rhyme or cautionary tale that children might learn to recite by heart.

SPEAKER

There is no identifying information in the poem about the speaker, who simply acts as the poem's narrator. The speaker tells Sadie and Maud's respective life stories, allowing readers to focus on these characters instead of stopping to consider the speaker's own identity.

SETTING

There isn't very much information in the poem itself about its setting, other than that Sadie (and later Maud) lives in an "old house." However, Gwendolyn Brooks published the poem in her book *A Street in Bronzeville*, which detailed the daily experiences of Black women in the 1940s. For this reason, most readers assume that the poem takes place in the United States in the 1940s, when society generally expected women to stay at home and raise families. This contextual information is important because it makes Maud's decision to attend college seem all the more remarkable, since it was unfortunately still uncommon in the mid-20th century for Black women to gain access to higher education.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Sadie and Maud" was published in 1945 and appeared in Gwendolyn Brooks's first poetry collection, *A Street in Bronzeville*. Brooks began writing poetry when she was quite young, publishing a number of pieces when she was only a teenager. She was encouraged by famous Black writers like the poet Langston Hughes and the novelist Richard Wright. Wright eventually spoke admiringly of her work to her first publisher when *A Street in Bronzeville* was under publication review.

Brooks became a prominent voice in the landscape of Black American literature by the mid-1940s, building upon the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance (an artistic and cultural movement that took place roughly between 1918 and early 1930s). However, the vast majority (if not *all*) of the well-known writers from the Harlem Renaissance were men writing from a male perspective. Brooks, on the other hand, was a woman writing about the experiences of working-class Black women in the United States, thus broadening the horizons of Black literature in the mid-20th century.

Because of her prominence as a poet who shed light on the experiences of Black women in the 20th century, Brooks is often read alongside other famous Black female poets like Lucille Clifton, Maya Angelou, and June Jordan (though all three of these authors began publishing significantly after Brooks's initial success).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Sadie and Maud" was published in 1945, the final year of World War II. During the war, the government encouraged women to enter the workforce, which had been largely depleted due to the fact that so many men had left to fight overseas. This opened up new opportunities for American women, who before the war had been expected by society to stay home and raise families.

However, this is not to say that World War II *completely* changed the prevailing expectation that women prioritize family life over their personal or professional ambitions—after all, such expectations lingered throughout the war and beyond. But it *is* true that the war gradually opened the door for women to pursue opportunities outside the home.

Despite the newfound freedom some women experienced in the 1940s, Black women still faced many limitations. The racist segregation laws known as Jim Crow laws were still very much in effect, and would be until 1965. The opportunities that many white women gained during this time were therefore not fully extended to Black women, making it all the more significant that Maud goes to college. Although it wasn't *impossible* to do this as a Black woman in the mid-20th century (the first Black woman to receive a Bachelor's degree was in 1862), it was still

an unfortunately rare occurrence for a Black woman to attend college. This is perhaps why Maud's hard work doesn't actually lead to a happier life—there weren't, at the time, many avenues to success for Black women, since the country remained deeply racist and sexist.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Hear the Poem Out Loud — Listen to a reading of "Sadie and Maud." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K2_ot8J4oj8)
- Gwendolyn Brooks's Life — To learn more about Gwendolyn Brooks, check out this brief overview of her life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/gwendolyn-brooks)
- An Interview with Brooks — Read an interview with Gwendolyn Brooks conducted in the 1960s. (https://poets.org/text/we-asked-gwendolyn-brooks-about-creative-environment-illinois)
- "We Real Cool" — Hear Gwendolyn Brooks read and talk about her most famous poem, "We Real Cool." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oaVfLwZ6jes)
- Remembering Gwendolyn Brooks — A look at Gwendolyn Brooks's legacy 100 years after she was born. (https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/05/29/530081834/remembering-the-great-poet-gwendolyn-brooks-at-100)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER GWENDOLYN BROOKS POEMS

- The Bean Eaters
- We Real Cool

HOW TO CITE

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